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## **SOUTHERN PASSAGE**

by

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# Chapter One

“Welcome to Texarkana.”

*I can't believe this is really happening!* kept running through his brain as he struggled to get to sleep. Squinting at the fuzzy, barely-visible hands of his Timex, Buster tried to get his eyes to focus. He realized he'd been staring up in the dark at that mesmerizing blue night light for hours, imagining what his summer was going to be like while repeatedly pouring over details of the past few days and weeks. Eighteen years old and freshly graduated from high school the day before, he was now leaving his adolescent world behind. All he'd wanted to do was to get out of high school, get out on his own, make his own decisions. That yearning had been with him for what felt like a long time, at least a year as far as he could recall, and now — *finally* — such an exhilarating reality was overtaking him. He knew, of course, everyone goes through the same thing he was going through now, and he was fairly sure his dad, Jack, had probably felt the same way many years before when he went off to college in the late 1920s. His curiosity about his dad, what *he* was feeling and looking forward to on that momentous occasion, was growing the longer he thought about it now that it was his turn. He wished he knew more about what his father had been like as a young man his own age and wanted to feel more connected to him.

He thought about a couple of girls he'd dated. He thought about a few of the guys he'd been close friends with for many years, especially the ones he had gone to grade school with and the ones he'd grown up with in church, and he wondered if he'd ever see them again. He pondered the likelihood they'd simply drift apart even if they did manage to keep in touch; they were all heading in different directions now that school and church were no longer binding forces for their friendships. It was a different world he now felt he was traveling toward — new people, new experiences, challenges, adult responsibilities. He wanted all of that and wanted to remember everything that happened and everything he did this summer.

Buster tried to shut off the movie projector with these flickering scenes in his mind, knowing he had to get some rest since he was due to report the next morning at eight to start his first “real” job. Not even the gentle motion of the train or his growing fatigue seemed to put him to sleep. His part-time jobs during high school seemed to diminish more now when he conjured images of a fat paycheck with MoPac. His dad was working for the Pullman Company as a conductor and was nearing the end of a long career in this line of work...he was the person who had arranged to get him this job. Buster had gone downtown to the Missouri Pacific Building to take a pre-employment physical and to meet with Mr. Breedlow, the company vice president for personnel a few weeks ago, and after he'd passed his physical, he was told they'd contact him about when and where he was to report for work. It was expected that he would save a good portion of his summer income down south with the railroad in order to help pay for his college expenses in the fall.

He had boarded the Texas Eagle at the venerable St. Louis Union Station the previous afternoon and it'd be a few months before Buster would see "the big smoky", as he and his brothers, Jack and Reggie, referred to their hometown, again. They made fun of the miserably smoky air in and around St. Louis that was due to coal furnaces in homes and industries. That was frequently the way it had been in St. Louis, at least up until the early sixties...it often looked like the sun was hiding behind a brownish-gray cloud cover and you could smell and almost taste the nasty acrid air. His dad was working this particular run south and was going to help him quickly get situated in town before heading on to Dallas. Buster had a hundred dollars in his wallet, compliments of his folks, to see him through until his first payday, which was supposed to be two weeks from the day he started. He also had a little of the money he'd saved from a couple of recent part-time jobs.

The train had been late in departing St. Louis and now was very late on its run through Arkansas. Buster hardly felt like he'd had any sleep at all when he was awakened by his dad a little after five-thirty. Regardless, he was soon energized by the day's prospects and by the breakfast he had in the dining car. Sitting by himself at the table, he flashed back to the great meals and times he and his brothers had had as kids on the train going to and from Ogden, Utah with his dad. He could still picture the dining tables with white linen tablecloths, the silver service, and the fine serving bowls imprinted with the Union Pacific logo. He could picture clearly, like it was yesterday, the dining car steward in his sharp black suit, crisp white shirt and black tie escorting Buster and his brothers to their table, and he could still taste the wonderful meals...especially the Wheaties served with either cream or whole milk in the morning. And, he could still picture the colored

porters with the white towels draped over their arms who came to the table to clear dishes. He thought back to how Pullman porters would perform various menial tasks, like picking up passengers' shoes left in the aisles overnight and polishing them, then returning them for the morning. How different this particular meal was, though. This was June 1966, and unlike his childhood trips from fewer than ten years ago, this dining car hardly had any patrons at all besides him and there was no sharply dressed dining steward. Probably it was just too early in the day, Buster concluded, but he also knew that passenger service was nearing the end of its existence. He suddenly felt alone, a little uneasy, and he was struck with a sense of being adrift. He wasn't a kid now and he didn't have his brothers to pal around with on the train like before. He realized he had to shake this feeling because soon there wasn't going to be anybody but himself to take care of him. Again he quickly thought that people have been going through this passage forever and damned if *he* couldn't very well do the same! Finishing his breakfast, he scolded himself to snap the hell out of it.

Back in his roomette, Buster grabbed his suitcase and clothes bag, picked up his Harmony guitar, and inhaled deeply the scent and images of the train as it stopped at the outside platform of Texarkana Union Station...how *comforting*, he thought, trains were. It seemed as though the sun was already getting high in the sky and Buster could feel the heat and humidity standing on the train's vestibule. Getting off from the last step, he noticed a colored man, who he suspected was some kind of station employee, standing near the train. He was dressed in black pants and white shirt, and when he saw Buster approaching him, he simply said "Welcome to Texarkana" with a flat, emotionless look on his face. Buster nodded, saying "thanks" and walked through the station along with his

dad, exchanging small talk. A quick glance around the interior revealed a few rows of wooden benches for passengers to sit on while waiting for trains, a man standing behind an enclosed cage that had “TICKETS” on a sign over one of the openings, and several old pictures on the walls. Down the stairs, through the front door and down East Front Street one block to the Savoy Hotel they went. Gazing around downtown, he thought how Texarkana looked like a tired old city, perhaps with its best days behind it. He saw old three and four story red brick buildings, a few taller, and a few constructed of more modern-appearing brick — built in the 1950s maybe — with large plate glass windows lining their fronts. One of the older ones was a bank and one of the newer-looking buildings contained a diner. Buster made a note to himself that he had to get out and explore downtown as soon as he could...he'd have to anyway in order to pick up some daily essentials. Hopefully, everything he needed could be had at places within walking distance of his hotel. Approaching the four-story brick building on the corner of East Front Street and Pine, he thought it looked ancient...home away from home for the time being, though.

The elderly woman at the desk introduced herself as Mrs. Bertha Rutherford and handed Buster a registration form to fill out. She explained that they had rooms with window air conditioners and some that were “air-cooled”. The “cooling”, he assumed, was simply done by opening the window in the room. The rate for the A/C, naturally, was higher. She also explained that they had rooms with private toilets and baths and that the guests in the other rooms had access to two public facilities, shared by both sexes, located on each floor. Again, these private-facility rooms cost more. Needing to economize as much as possible, Buster filled out his registration and handed Mrs. Rutherford twenty-

five dollars for the first week's rent for an "air-cooled", public-facility room. She looked at his completed form that reflected Missouri Pacific Railroad as his employer and commented that the Savoy used to be called a railroad hotel.

"We get other railroad people here from time to time. You're on the second floor, bathroom's down the hall from your room. You get fresh towels and wash rags and sheets each week."

Buster and his dad got to the room and put his belongings on the bed. After a few minutes, his dad told him he needed to get back to the station right away.

Walking down the hall toward the steps, his dad turned and said, "Write to us when you can and let us know how you're doing."

"Okay."

"Take care of yourself."

"I will."

That was about all that was said between them and his dad then left. *Weird*, he thought, *that's it?* One instant he was with a familiar face and the next he was in a strange city all alone. It felt odd, a bit surreal. He had somehow imagined that his own passage into the world would be different, that it would be attended by some kind of formal observance acknowledging his adulthood. Instead, he'd gotten a quick good-bye yesterday from his mother at the front door of the station and a hurried "take care of yourself" this morning from his dad. He was now getting the reality he'd dreamed of. He was venturing out on his own and doing what that inner force was compelling him to do, and that's all that really mattered to him.

Buster hung his clothes in the small closet and took a fast tour of the second floor to get his bearings. Since his room had only a sink in it, he was curious about where he was going to take care of the other necessities. Four doors down from his room, he located the communal bathroom, which had a couple of stalls with toilets and two shower stalls. The hotel struck him as being ancient...the wood looked old, the carpet was old and faded, and the black metal bed with the white bedspread looked like it sagged severely in the middle. The transom above his door had a crack in it and the lock seemed extremely flimsy. To top it off, the musty aroma to the place was overwhelming. Satisfied he'd seen enough for the time being, he hustled off for the station to find out where he had to go to check in.

The colored man was still on duty in the same location and directed Buster to the white wooden shanty across several tracks out in the middle of the rail yard. Adjacent to it was a two-story red brick tower with what looked like glass observation panels at the top. Picking up the smell of creosote and fuel oil, and maybe bromine, and noticing his Timex read seven-fifty, he entered the shanty and found a handful of men standing around talking. One of them looked at him, walked over to the doorway, and stuck his hand out.

“I’m Dick Garland. You must be the new guy we’ve been expectin’.”

“Yeah, hi, Mr. Garland, I’m Buster Gaines.”

“Buster, you don’t need to call me mister. Just call me Dick.”

“All right, sir.”

Dick smiled broadly and said, “*Sir* makes me feel old, no need for that either.”

“Got it.”

A fairly young guy with a blonde crew cut and a friendly look about him, Dick was probably no more than fifteen years older than he was and could pass as the actor, Aldo Ray's twin. The other guys were older. They looked like they might have been wearing the same well-worn jeans and overalls for days. In contrast, Dick apparently cared more about his appearance...his khaki shirt and pants were sharply pressed and he was clean shaven.

Pointing to the others, Dick said, "Buster, these are the rest of the guys on my trick and you'll be workin' with them."

One of the guys, a middle-aged-looking man around six feet tall had huge forearms and upper arms covered in tattoos. He walked over next to Buster and stuck his large hand out.

"Howdy, son, Bull Tatum. Welcome aboard."

"Thanks, Buster Gaines."

"Yep, I know."

Thumbing in Bull's direction, Dick smiled. "This one here, he'll mess with you if he can."

Like Bull, another of the guys looked like he might be close to his dad's age. About the same height and build as his dad, he even wore his hair like him, combed back and trimmed neatly. That's about where the similarity ended though at first glance...he'd never once seen his dad in blue jeans or a T-shirt.

"Pete McCaslin. Guys call me Chalk." He offered his hand. "How you doin'?"

"Good, thanks. Nice meeting you."

Bull slapped the man on the back. “He can get along with *anybody*, even stray dogs that wander into the yard. They *all* like this old boy.”

Chalk grinned. “Stray dogs, huh?”

“He’ll help you learn the ropes around here too, Buster. He’ll watch out for you, a good man to have as a friend.”

“Buster, lemme tell you,” Chalk responded, “Bull here’d do anything for anybody. He’s the kinda guy you want to be buddies with, and I can tell you there ain’t nobody I’d rather work with or get in a fight with, not that I get into fights, than Bull here.”

The last of the guys folded the newspaper he had in his hands and tossed it on a nearby chair. He glanced over at Bull and Chalk and cleared his throat.

“If you two ladies’re done with your love in, I’ll introduce myself to the new fella here.”

He stepped closer to Buster, stuck his right index finger out in his direction, and grinned. “New guy has to pull the pin.”

“Damn, Percy,” Bull laughed out, “cut him some slack.”

The guy extended the rest of his fingers in a handshake pose and chuckled. “Sorry there, Buster, just kiddin’ around. The name’s Percy Bates.”

“No problem.”

He was a stocky, short man somewhere in his fifties. The khaki-colored denim overalls, set off by an old faded red bandana around his neck and blue striped denim cap, reminded Buster of what he had always pictured in his mind as the classic railroad engineer.

“I’m the hog head around these parts. Know what that means?”

“No, not really.”

“Well now, I’m the guy that’s gonna shove you and drag you around the yard.”

“You’ll do *what?*”

Percy pointed out the window. “See that blue engine over there with the red emblem that looks like a saw blade?”

“Yep...okay, you *drive* that, right?”

“Yeah, sure do, I *operate* that.”

Buster thought each of these guys had accents that were vaguely reminiscent of the kind he’d hear out of people from extreme south St. Louis County, and definitely Jefferson County in Missouri.

Dick took Buster to the back wall of the shanty to a time clock and a vertical rack containing 3x5 time cards with employee names on them.

He took one of them out and handed it to Buster. “You need to punch in soon as you check in here each day and punch out when the shift’s over.”

Buster saw that his name was typed in capital letters. He shoved it into the clock, heard it click, withdrew it, and saw that the first line of several blanks now had an entry.

Dick got a lantern out of a storage closet and handed it to Buster along with a small brass key. He took Buster to the door, motioning for him to look at all the switches scattered around the yard...it seemed to be filled with them.

“This key opens all those switches.”

The shanty had the odor of burnt wood, even though it was June and the temperature had to be in the nineties, or so it felt. A large board, identified at the top as

“Assignment Board”, was located hanging on the wall near a pot-bellied stove. There, on the board at the bottom of a list of names, was BUSTER GAINES hand-printed neatly by someone. Along with the other names, it showed he was presently assigned to the first shift, which meant his starting time each day, according to Dick, would be eight-o’clock. He stared at his name for a long moment, taking in the realization that he was now part of a team, an *adult* team that did something important.

Walking out to the tracks and going through a series of hand signals, Dick explained what the signals were to give daytime instructions to the train engineer on when to move the train forward, when to go in reverse, when to begin a slow stop, and when to finish the stop. He explained another set of instructions to use at night with the battery-powered lantern.

“Got any questions so far?”

“No, sir, so far so good.”

Dick smiled. “*Sir?*”

“Sorry.”

“All right, good. Tell me how you get the engine comin’ toward you and then how you stop it.”

Buster gave the proper responses.

“Okay. Now let’s talk seriously. It’s important you know what you’re doin’ out here so you don’t get hurt and don’t hurt any of the other guys or the equipment.

I’m tellin’ you, it can be *dangerous* out here. Keep your head *up* at all times!

A train takes a long time to stop, remember that. When you see your first train wreck, if you see one, you’re gonna know what I’m talkin’ about, goes on

forever, or so you're gonna think. That's a helluva lotta power and weight to get in the way of. When you're in charge of movin' cars together and you're hangin' on to the side of a movin' train, remember what I said!"

Buster wondered how many times Dick had given this introductory spiel. He went through things in rapid, methodical order, apparently trying to drive home the safety angle, and Buster was glued to every word.

"I will. I don't want anybody getting hurt and I don't want to be a pain in anybody's ass."

Dick smiled approvingly. "What we do, basically, is move freight cars around the yard and make up trains. Occasionally, we go out on runs, switchin' out industries along the line. We got three shifts workin' here around the clock, and for the time bein', you'll be on first trick, that's what we call the mornin' shift."

"Okay."

"I'll tell you what you need to know when you need to know it." He grinned and added, "Or before if you need to know it."

Dick took him over to the engine and instructed him to climb up the front ladder to get a feel for the engine. Buster naturally had been around passenger trains and had seen passenger diesels up close before, but this was the first time he'd ever been this close to a switch engine. Almost like it was purring, it gave off a low humming sound while the smell of diesel fumes permeated the air. He could feel the heat radiating out from the motors contained behind the engine's vented panels.

Dick tapped the wall. "They go twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week."

Back on the gravel, he pulled the lever on one of the cars and the coupler opened up.

“That lever pops open the knuckle and the pin pulls out of it. To hook up cars, all you got to do is open up the other knuckle. When they come together, the pin then drops down in the joint to lock them together. Piece of cake.”

Dick grabbed the air hoses hanging down between the cars. “These hoses are used to set up the air brakes on all the cars. You don’t do it right, then things’ll get ugly fast! You get *air* pay during your shift whenever you have to work with these hoses. That’s extra pay for you.”

It was music to Buster’s ears. At the same time, though, the idea of working with high pressure hoses with cast iron fittings on the ends gave him pause...he imagined those things *could* put you in a world of hurt if something did indeed go wrong.

Dick explained the layout of the yard. There were two main lines next to the station passing east and west for freight traffic as well as passenger traffic. Sixteen more tracks were spread out across the yard and several of them contained strings of coupled cars of all variety. Boxcars bore the names of railroads or shipping companies and were the predominant type of car. There were several flatcars that were either empty or held machinery or other manufactured goods. Buster noticed a few cars that he couldn’t define a purpose for. Dick continued the orientation.

“When we make up trains to go on the road, we spot the cars in these tracks in the order we deliver them to places we do business with along the line. It’s kinda like shufflin’ them around. You stack them up and then unstack them.”

“How do you know which tracks to use?”

“Well, just kinda have always done it a certain way and you know how much each one can hold. You figure about how much length you’re gonna need for each deposit and go from there. You’ll get the hang of it, don’t worry.”

“Did this place used to be busy with passenger service?”

“Well, back in the early forties, they had upwards of forty trains stoppin’ here a day.”

“Man, the *good* old days, huh?”

“Yep, too bad it ain’t like that anymore.”

Bull immediately met Buster back inside the shanty. He was sipping the last of his coffee.

“You gettin’ all indoctrinated? *I’m* really the guy who’s in charge here, though.

Dick don’t know shit from shine-ola!” Bull grabbed Buster’s arm and jabbed it, as if he’d known him for years. “Like I said, welcome aboard, buddy.”

Dick heard the comment from behind Buster, shook his head and smiled. “Don’t mind that old fool.”

Rubbing his arm, Buster replied, “Sure, no problem.”

“Listen, buddy, you oughta get yourself a lunchbox. The guys like to eat in the shanty or on the engine if we’re out of the yard. You bring yourself any lunch?”

“No, didn’t even think about it. Guess I’ll run over to that diner I saw coming over from the hotel.”

“Well, there’s a nice gal that works over there named Sylvia. You tell her Bull said hello if you go.”

“I will. Cheap enough to eat there? I mean, I don’t have a whole lot of money ‘til I get paid.”

“It is, don’t worry about it. You get thirty minutes when we break for lunch.”

At a few minutes ‘til noon, Buster headed over to the diner to grab some lunch. Gazing through the large glass exterior windows of the In-Town Diner on East Front Street, Buster could see there were booths lining the front, tables scattered around the middle, and a long lunch counter further in. On entering, he noticed a man with a white shirt, white apron, and a white cap working the grill with his back turned to the counter. Standing behind one end of the counter tending to salt and peppershakers was a woman with black hair pulled up neatly and red lipstick on. There was a “Please Wait to be Seated” sign on a metal stand inside the entrance on the left, but since it looked like there were plenty of vacant seats, he headed for the counter in front of her. She too had on a white uniform and greeted Buster with a smile as he approached an empty stool.

“Well, *hi* there, stranger.”

He noticed her nametag. “*Hi*.”

He picked up a menu that was left on the counter. The front of it, partially obscured by the marred plastic cover, proudly announced he was in the home of Texas’ best hamburger. After a few minutes when she came back over, he ordered it with fries and a Coke.

“Bull said to say hello to you.”

She looked a little surprised. “You know Bull?”

“Yeah. I just hired on across the street this morning.”

She touched her nametag and smiled. “I’m Sylvia, guess you can see that.”

Maybe in her late twenties or early thirties, Sylvia was very attractive...pretty dark eyes and a nice-looking figure with certain prominent features accentuated by her tight dress. Her bright red lipstick, though, particularly grabbed his attention and forced him to focus on her face. During the fifteen minutes it took to down his lunch, he found himself repeatedly staring at her as she tended to other customers.

Finished with the diner's pride and joy, he had the front door partially opened on his way out when he stopped for a final glance back at her. She caught his glance and winked.

Bull was seated on a small bench in front of the shanty when Buster got back. He lowered the newspaper he'd been looking at when he noticed Buster.

"She seems like a nice gal."

"Yep, that she is."

"She your girlfriend?"

"We're friends, good friends. Met her a few years ago through a buddy who'd met her over at Nat's."

Buster's curiosity was up. "Who's Nat, or *what's* Nat's?"

Bull grinned, then replied, "That's right, you don't know about that, do you? I'll tell you about it sometime."

Probably it was because so many things requiring his full attention had come at him throughout the morning that Buster hadn't thought at all about being alone in Texas. He hadn't given any thought, as he had on the trip down, to the uneasy feeling that surrounded that reality. Busyness had shielded him from that; but when the crew took a late afternoon break inside the shanty, the realization of not seeing the customary faces at

day's end and not having to be accountable to his parents for his whereabouts or activities suddenly hit him. On the trip down to Texas, the concept of personal independence had just been something intellectual, just so much conjecturing. In the few minutes he sat on the bench next to the stove listening to Bull and Percy talking about how to properly tune up a car, it struck him like a bolt of lightning that things hereafter would never be the same, and *he* would never be the same because of it...things were now feeling very real and the apprehension his gut had entertained about being out on his own was now gone.

It still felt very hot and humid at quitting time and the day was starting to take its toll since he hadn't gotten a whole lot of sleep the previous night or the night before that. He'd been out late by his usual standard, hanging out with his buddies at the pool hall and their favorite late night car-hop diner and then partying on graduation night with a girl he'd been dating. On his way out the front door of Union Station, Buster spotted the same colored man seated on a bench by himself, a dustpan and broom next to him. His shirt was damp with sweat. Buster paused and offered a greeting. This time, though, the man didn't acknowledge him.

"You alright?"

The man glanced up, now apparently recognizing him. A hint of a smile appeared on his old face.

"Mm hm."

"You really don't look so good. Anything I can do, need some water?"

He lowered his head again, chin on his chest. He looked like he wanted to just rest.

"Appreciate it but I'm okay. You go on, son."

“You sure?”

Again he looked up at Buster and nodded his head. Buster started away from him, then turned back.

“Listen, I’ll be around the station every day, so if you need something, let me know, okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, take care.”

Back in the hotel, Buster put his equipment away and washed his hands and face in his small, stained porcelain sink with the hard black stopper attached to a little chain. Drying off with one of the two small towels that came with the room, he was struck by how flimsy and worn the material was. He got out his trusty Bendix alarm clock and placed it on the little table next to the bed. To Buster, this clock symbolized adulthood...it was a tool to be used by all responsible adults...self-reliance. It was a simple little thing, made of a sturdy brass-type metal with wind up motion and two bells on top that were plenty loud enough to get him up. This feature comforted him since he had always had a bit of a tough time waking up mornings...he *did* like his sleep! Buster grinned standing there looking at his clock as he thought about his sisters, Marlene and Janet, ribbing him about how long he slept in most every Saturday morning. One Saturday, in fact, he’d slept in ‘til one in the afternoon and caught unending grief about it. His socks and undies he stashed in the top drawer of the old brown dresser, his T-shirts in the middle one, and his jeans in the bottom. He set his small brown leather shave kit on the dresser top. Taking out his prized bottle of English Leather Lime, toothbrush, tube of

Ipana, comb, and can of Right Guard and situating them close to the sink, he stepped back and proudly looked over his possessions.

Down the hall four doors, he went into the restroom/shower room to take care of his business before heading back out. Just as he was zipping up, he heard a loud knock on the full-length opaque beige glass panel of the door. Immediately, a girl dressed in a bathrobe and slippers came in, smiling broadly as she noticed Buster.

“Howdy!”

Startled, “Hey” was all he could think to respond with.

She entered one of the shower stalls and threw her robe and towel over the door. The water came on. Buster paused at the sink facing the mirror, glancing at the soap on his hands then the shower stall door, and fleetingly debated whether he should stick around to talk to her...maybe, he decided, he'd get that chance later on.

He tossed his hand towel over the footboard of his bed and headed out to explore downtown. Walking up Pine Street a couple of blocks and then over to State Line Road, he found the post office. Continuing on over two more, he spotted a Montgomery Ward department store and decided to look it over. A small spiral Chieftain notebook for keeping track of what he'd be earning each day caught his eye.

Finding the lunch diner now closed, he headed back toward State Line Road. Starting across, he paused half way to the other side and observed a wide, solid-yellow line running down the middle and saw two bars on the west side of the road, the Texas side. Back over on the Arkansas side, there were no such establishments. Not seeing any restaurants, he decided on the State Line Bar and Grill and staked out a table next to the front window. Several patrons pretty much filled up the small joint. Country and Western

music was playing and two couples dressed in worn-looking jeans and T-shirts were dancing not far from him. A waitress came over carrying a menu.

“What can I get for you?”

Without even looking at it, Buster blurted out, “The blue plate special if you got one.”

He’d always wanted to go in some eatery and say that.

“We do. What about to drink? You want a beer? Coke?”

“Can I have a beer?” popped out of his mouth.

“Budweiser okay?”

With surprising ease, he replied, “Sure.”

He was only eighteen and here he was, sitting in a bar ordering beer...not even legal yet, he guessed. The waitress obviously didn’t care or didn’t really bother looking closely at his youthful countenance. When he took his first drink of it, the memory of having his first can of Budweiser with brother Reggie and their pal Greg in cousin Joe’s old Buick instantly came flooding back to him. This bottled beer, however, was ice cold and tasted so wonderfully different to him...maybe he could actually grow to *like* beer...that *can* of Bud had tasted like what he imagined pee would taste. His “special”, some kind of fried steak and French fries, was good enough, he thought, and maybe he’d get used to eating alone...he had always had parts or all of his family around him at the table.

When he got back to the hotel, he spotted the girl he’d encountered earlier in the restroom. She was seated on a small couch next to another girl in the hotel lobby

watching the black and white console television. She noticed Buster and got up to make her way across the room to where he was standing.

“Sorry about bargin’ in on you. I should have waited before goin’ in.”

Picking up a distinct accent, southern he thought, Buster responded, “It’s okay, don’t worry about it.”

*Her* southern accent didn’t really sound like the one he’d heard out of the railroad guys. Hers reminded him of what he thought you’d hear from a “southern belle”.

“I’m Rebecca.”

“Hi, I’m Buster. Nice to meet you, Rebecca.”

“Well, same here.” She stuck her hand out. “I’ll be more careful.”

“Really, don’t worry about it.”

“Okay.”

“I like your accent. Deep South, Louisiana maybe?”

With a small laugh, Rebecca told Buster she was from Alabama.

”You aren’t from the South, *are* you?”

“Nah, St. Louis, never lived anywhere else.”

Buster told her he’d come into town early this morning and was going to be staying in the hotel for the summer. Rebecca said she was traveling around seeing the country with her girlfriend for a while before they started their senior year in the fall at the University of Alabama. She said they just wanted to feel free and irresponsible before having to act like ladies and joining what she called the “real world”.

“How long have you been here, at this place?”

“A couple of days. We’ll be movin’ on in a day or so hopefully, if they *ever* get done fixin’ my car.”

“What kind is it?”

“’62 Corvair Monza, black convertible. Damn transmission went out and the guy at the garage is havin’ a helluva time with replacement parts. My daddy gave that to me for my high school graduation and that idiot grease monkey tells me ‘honey, this is a pile of junk,’ can you *imagine*? Well...there’s a *few* other things wrong with it too, I guess, but anyway, he doesn’t need to be such an asshole!”

Rebecca’s slightly crooked smile was the first thing he’d noticed about her. He caught himself concentrating on it as she spoke.

“Oh man, sorry to hear that. I’m sure it’ll get done before too much longer.”

“Yeah, guess so.” She saw her friend coming over toward them. “*Oh*, I totally neglected to introduce my girlfriend. Ramona, this is Buster. Buster, this is Ramona.”

“Nice to meet you, Ramona.”

“Likewise, good meetin’ you, too.”

Again Buster noticed that same pleasant southern accent and that same dropped g on verbs...he was beginning to *like* the way these southerners spoke.

He took a small step and then another toward the stairs. “Listen, it feels like I’ve been up for days, was really nice meeting you girls.”

Rebecca responded to his cue by once again extending her hand.

“It was really nice meetin’ *you*. And Buster, once again please accept my apology for earlier.”

“Apology accepted.”

He kicked off his boots, pulled off his clothes, and placed his watch on the bedside table. Grabbing his ITT transistor radio he’d gotten for graduation, Buster stretched out on the saggy bed and tried to find some music. Reception was lousy and he briefly settled on a station playing “Get Off of My Cloud”. It was uncomfortably warm in his room, but he knew the breeze from the black steel fan across from his bed would make it tolerable to sleep.

Gazing up in the darkened room at the glass light fixture hanging from the high ceiling, Buster replayed some of the scenes from the day...meeting the guys he’d be working with, the rail yard and that ever-present smell of creosote in the air, and that first-ever beer for him in a bar. He thought only briefly about home...other things were now crowding the recesses of his brain. Drifting off to sleep, there was Sylvia at the diner and Rebecca in the bathroom.

## Chapter Two

“What *is* that?”

At six-o’clock, the trusty alarm went off and Buster was quickly wide awake, lying in bed contemplating a strategy to use in the restroom in the event he encountered anybody else in there. Oddly enough, there was no lock on the bathroom door, or on the one in the other second floor restroom...he surmised that the hotel must have just thought guests would act civilly toward one another, that there was some kind of honor system at work. He’d always heard that country folks never locked their houses, so it might be that these southern folks act the same way.

He picked a table near the front window at the In-Town Diner. Again he noticed Sylvia and the same cook he had seen yesterday. This time, when the cook walked out from behind the counter to clean off a table near him, he noticed the guy had tattoos on both arms, one tattoo being a colorful confederate flag. On the other arm, a pack of Camels was tucked up in his T-shirt sleeve. Someone had put some coins in the jukebox and some C&W song came on...certainly nothing Buster had ever heard before. Country music early in the morning with breakfast...how *foreign* to him...not exactly his cup of tea. It didn’t take Sylvia long to come over to Buster’s table, to hand him a menu, and pour him a cup of coffee.

She cheerfully greeted him with, “Mornin’, Buster, how are you?”

He was pleased that she’d remembered his name. “Doing just fine, how about you?”

“No complaints, be back in a few minutes to take your order.”

Sylvia was prompt in getting back to the table and wrote down his order with a pen she took out from behind her ear. His breakfast in hand minutes later, she sat down at the table next to him, the smile still on her face.

She immediately asked, “So tell me, Buster, where you from.”

“Missouri, up north.”

“A *Yankee*, huh? *Thought* you sounded like a Yankee boy.”

“Yeah, that’s me, I guess.”

“Didn’t tell you my last name, did I? It’s Rosewood.”

“Pretty name.”

“Why *thank* you, Buster.”

“Mine’s Gaines.”

“You mentioned you’re on with the railroad. For the summer? Permanent?”

“It’s just summer work so I can put some college money together.

He noticed on his plate what looked like a pile of white rice.

Pointing to it, he asked, “What *is* that?”

“You are *indeed* a Yankee! Silly boy, those are *grits*. *Everybody* down here eats grits, eat them with *everything*.”

Buster tried the grits, finding them like mushy rice.

“Well, guess I have to be the exception. Never had grits back home, in fact never *saw* grits before.”

Sylvia grinned, then winked and commented, “Well, Buster, maybe there’s a *lotta* things you’d like down here. Just got to give us a try.”

“I’d like to. Got to admit, I’ve led a pretty sheltered life.”

Sylvia scooted her chair closer to the table, bumping his leg with hers. She put her hand on his forearm and apologized.

“So, what college, where at? I didn’t get too far in school myself. My parents wanted me to get out and work and help pay bills.” She caught herself. “Am I talking too much? I do tend to go on sometimes.”

She flashed a little smile again that seemed to make her red lipstick even shinier.

“No, of course not, I *like* talking to you. I’m going to be going to a college in Missouri. Ever heard of Central Missouri State? Probably not; not many people have.”

“Nah, don’t believe I ever heard of it.”

It was obvious to him that she was a lot more outgoing than he was. He didn’t picture himself as one who could sit down at a table with a virtual stranger and just start talking about himself like she was. She seemed happy and genuinely gave the impression she was interested in being at the table with him. He was quickly finding that he liked coming in and talking to her...and *looking* at her...and liked that he was connecting with someone in this new place he’d found himself in.

“Better let you eat your breakfast. Coming back for lunch again?”

“I don’t know, maybe, not sure what the other guys’ll be doing, but I have to do *something* for lunch, though.”

“Sure, well, if you come by for lunch, I’ll see you then. Got to get back to my customers. Good talkin’ to you, Buster.”

“Really nice talking to you, too.”

The cook, identified as Grover by black lettering on his apron front, rang up his check and Buster left to go to work. He hadn't given much thought throughout yesterday about what he'd be doing for his lunches each day...too many other things going on. He needed to decide today.

He was greeted inside the shanty by the full crew. Having located the community coffee pot, he poured himself a full cup.

"How much're the dues for the coffee?"

"Two bucks a week. We drink a lot of coffee," Percy advised. "I even pack a thermos for the cab too."

After doctoring his coffee with a little creamer and sugar, he sat down on the bench near the stove to listen to the guys talk.

"Hey Chalk," Bull started, "What gives with the pretty pink T-shirt?"

"You asshole, that's my *red* one. You know darn well Betty's gone with her mamma up to Little Rock and I ain't got nobody else to wash my clothes."

Bull chuckled. "Yeah right."

"Who the hell knew the damn thing'd turn out lookin' like *this*?"

"Might be you're switchin' to the other team!"

"You mean *your* team, always wearin' those tight T-shirts to show off those gunboats to the fellas."

"Percy," Bull redirected, pointing to the thermos, "what the hell do you do with that when you're done drinkin' your coffee, use it for a *toilet*?"

"Maaaannnn, you are a *disgusting* sonofabitch!"

Dick got up off his stool near the glass water cooler just inside the door while the guys hurled a few more insults. He smiled, shook his head, then tossed the rest of his coffee out the door onto the gravel.

He barked out, "Let's go to work, you worthless old women!" He glanced at Buster and added, "God help you, Buster, when they start gettin' on *you*."

"They always do this?"

"Every day, every day. These guys wouldn't know how to start the day without sittin' around in the shanty bull shittin'. They'd keep at it like that if I let them. Fact, this wasn't nothin' this mornin' compared to some days. Well, anyway, let's get on it here and earn our pay."

The crew headed out to Percy's engine nearby.

Bull put his hand on Buster's shoulder and said, "Let's be careful out here!"

Buster was struck with the feeling that the guys in this crew, *his* crew, enjoyed each other's company immensely and that they cared about one another's wellbeing. True, they were a bit on the crude side, he thought, but he liked that and was already enjoying being around them.

Dick was carrying a yellow sheet of paper as they walked. He studied it and glanced up a few times at the yard, then looked at Buster.

"This is today's lineup, shows what all we got to get done."

The crew gathered around in anticipation of getting their marching orders.

"This mornin', we're settin' up a run for second trick to take over to Paris. Percy, work close with Buster on this now because you know how we have to pass signals up high, bein' his first time and all."

Simply nodding back, Percy knew, obviously, what he was referring to...they'd undoubtedly done that maneuver countless times before.

"Buster, you remember what the hand signals are, right?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Good deal. Here's what we're gonna do. Bull and Chalk're gonna go over to the backtrack with Percy, that's that track over there on the far right near that old cotton warehouse. He's gonna pull some cars from the tracks over that way, set them in other tracks, pull some more and make up a string to drag out on main line 2. We'll shove that bunch down to where we hook up with another line of cars to finish up our train. Like I was sayin' yesterday, we shuffle them around and stack them up to move out. When a run comes into town, we unshuffle them to make up trains to head back out to different places."

Chalk hopped on the Cotton Belt boxcar's ladder several cars up from the engine while Buster climbed up into the cab to observe the signals that Chalk would send back to Percy. Dick stood in the cab to narrate the operation to Buster as he'd done yesterday. When the moves were completed and the engine was stationary, Dick instructed Buster to climb up onto the top of the tail boxcar, the one next to the engine, and climbed on top along with him. Chalk climbed on top of a car several car lengths ahead, roughly between the engine and the lead car, while Bull was riding atop that car. Bull gave the order for the engine to shove forward and the string of cars began moving between long columns of connected cars on the two surrounding tracks, making its way around a large bend in the tracks east of the main yard.

The signal from Bull for Percy to come to a slow stop was relayed back to Buster's car by way of Chalk.

Dick noted, "We're shovin' blind here."

Facing Chalk, Buster in turn gave Percy the signal to come to a slow stop. Dick advised Buster to brace himself.

"You never know about stops. I've seen a guy knocked down before. Percy's a helluva engineer and there ain't *never* been problems like that with *him*, but you never know."

Buster heard two quick blasts of the engine's horn when the train halted. He looked back behind him to Percy, who was smiling with a thumbs-up gesture. That simple little gesture gave him some confidence, along with the feeling that the guys were folding him into the crew.

"After lunch, we're gonna go back over and cut in the air," Dick advised, adding, "You're gonna get *air* pay today."

Buster liked the sound of that...more money.

Dick went over to the old refrigerator bearing a worn rebel flag decal opposite the assignment board, pulled out a brown sack, and handed it to Buster.

"Lyda Lynn made you lunch, that's my wife. I was tellin' her about you and she insisted I take care of you. She does this every summer when we get young guys comin' in as temporaries, likes to act like a momma."

"That's very nice of her. Please tell her I said thanks. I do need to get to a store."

Buster took the donated ham and cheese sandwich and small bag of potato chips and sat on the bench near the stove. Chalk parked himself next to him.

“So Buster, what is it you’re gonna be doin’ when you leave at the end of summer?”

“Going to college.”

“Us old boys ain’t got much in the way of education. I made it through tenth grade, and Bull, he made it through the twelfth. Went in the Marines and promptly got his ass shot on some island.” Chalk started to laugh. “Bull, tell him what you were doin’ when you got shot.”

Grinning, Bull answered, “Tryin’ to take a damn *crap*. The bastard sniper caught me with my pants down ‘round my ankles gettin’ ready to take a sit-down on a damn log. Couldn’t shit for a *week* after that!”

The shanty erupted with laughter.

“Man,” Percy exclaimed, “that gets funnier every time you tell it. Glad *my* time overseas wasn’t as funny!”

“College, huh? What’re you gonna study?”

“Not sure exactly, Chalk. Got interested in psychology in high school, so maybe I’ll study that. Gave some thought to joining the army earlier this year but the folks really thought that’d be a mistake. College’s been pretty much expected of my brothers and sisters and me, and anyway, I guess I wasn’t all that crazy about going to Viet Nam.”

Finished with lunch, the crew went back over to the train where Dick and Buster began hooking up air hoses. Positioned at the end of the engine, Dick gave him instructions.

“Take one and hold it with your left hand and then grab the hose from the car and do like so...kinda lift both up together, fit them together like this...then bring them down and lock them together like this. Then, when you know you got them right, swing this lever up on one parallel with the line of the hoses and then swing the other lever up the same way. Be sure the two levers are all the way up. You try the next one.”

Buster easily negotiated the hose coupling at the next set of knuckles, making a mental note of just how thick the hoses felt. The other two guys had walked down to the end of the train and now began working their way back up toward Dick and Buster. When all the coupling was complete, Percy cut the air in from his cab. Buster could hear the rush of air streaming down the lines and could see how the air had made the hoses rigid. He pondered the amount of pressure coursing in the lines and shuddered at the prospect of being anywhere near them in the event of a sudden rupture or failure to properly join the hoses...those iron couplers looked lethal!

The rest of the afternoon was spent by the crew moving cars in and out of various tracks inside the yard...it almost seemed like a game of chess to Buster...make strategic moves, all the while planning the next three or four in advance. It was obvious it took experience, planning, and organizational skills for the foreman to effectively manage and direct the daily workload.

At four-thirty, the normal quitting time, he headed back through the station to make his way to the hotel, thinking about the “air pay” he’d just earned. He noticed the colored man he’d seen a couple of times before with a broom in his hands, standing on the sidewalk with a white man close at his side pointing down and angrily talking to him.

“Luther, you lazy niggra, why do I got to tell you over and over to do what you’re told?”

“I *did* do what you said, Mista Barmes. I did it like you *said* to do it.”

“Well if you had, I wouldn’t be standin’ here *talkin’* at you, now *would* I?”

Buster was stunned by what he was hearing and continued down the street, the scene staying with him as he got back to the hotel. He encountered Rebecca in the lobby and asked how she was.

“I’m doin’ good. My car’s ready, so we’ll be leavin’ first thing in the mornin’.”

“Sorry to hear that.” He caught himself. “I mean, well, you know.”

She gave a little smile, then said, “*Yeah?*...me too.”

“*Really?* Well, would have been nice getting to know you better. Listen, if you don’t have other plans, would you like to maybe go get some dinner in a little while?”

”Sure, that’d be great.”

“Okay. Listen, I need to go clean up. How about we meet down here in about an hour.”

His hair still wet but combed, he met up again with Rebecca who reported that Ramona had been feeling lousy for the better part of the day and was just going to stay in their room. He mentioned he’d had dinner at the State Line last night and it wasn’t bad, considering it was a bar and grill.

“I’ve got my car now, remember? How about we just cruise around ‘til we find a place.”

“Sounds good.”

Buster was actually impressed with how Rebecca’s Monza rode like a sports car, not really like a compact, especially with the top down. They headed north on Wood Street, back west on 6th right at the place where the road splits, then south to Texas Avenue where they slowed and then stopped in front of Carmella’s Pizzeria.

“Look good to *you*?”

“Yep, works for me.”

Sitting at a back table, he thought this place looked so much like a pizzeria in St. Louis he’d been in a few years before, Melrose Pizzeria...same kind of wallpaper, Italian music, and mouth-watering aromas of pizza cooking in the large ovens visible in the back of the place. Lingered over the thin crust cheese pizza they shared and iced teas, Buster told Rebecca about what he was doing in Texarkana and a little about what his plans were for the fall.

“Psychology, huh? I never had any psych classes but a friend said it was pretty neat. I’m majoring in business administration, maybe try to find a job in Atlanta or somewhere in the south when I graduate next June. I’m a southern girl at heart and can’t imagine wantin’ to live anywhere else.”

“Bet you’re looking forward to getting out.”

“Yeah, I am, I suppose...just hope someone’ll hire a woman. My daddy says I shouldn’t have too much trouble, but we’ll see.”

“So, what does your dad do for a living?”

“He’s vice president of a big company in Montgomery and sits on the board of regents at the university.”

“Wow. Guess with his connections, you shouldn’t have any trouble getting on *some* place.”

“Nah, probably not.”

She told Buster about her sorority at UA and how so many of her sorority sisters there still only wanted to finish college and get married right away, not pursue a career or live out on their own and experience the world.

“I’m just not like that, never have been. I want to see the world and not be tied down.”

Buster felt a kinship with her in this.

“Where do you want to go first?”

“Doesn’t really matter, just want to *go*.”

“Where you heading tomorrow?”

“Believe it or not, we’re still undecided if we’ll start back to Tuscaloosa or go north to maybe Denver before we end up back there. Always wanted to see Denver and the mountains. Not sure if I should trust my *car* though.”

“I envy you. I’ve got four years of school ahead of me...seems like forever right now.”

“It’ll fly by, don’t you worry.”

“Yeah, guess so.”

Buster pondered on the ride back to the Savoy how it really was too bad that she and her friend were leaving in the morning...having her around for companionship, and maybe more than just that, steered his mind.

Proceeding up to the second floor, Rebecca stopped at her room. Buster paused alongside her.

“I had a nice time at dinner.”

“I had a nice time, too,” she replied. “Listen, what I said earlier, about how it’s too bad I’m leavin’ in the mornin’. I *meant* that.”

Without saying anything further, she leaned close to Buster and kissed him quickly on the mouth. She paused for a moment and smiled.

“Would have been nice.”

As he started to tell her he felt the same, he was interrupted.

“I need to go in. I don’t think it’s a good idea for me *not* to.”

“Right...I know... Well, tell Ramona I said I hope she’s feeling better. Please be careful wherever you’re headed.”

“All right. Buster, I want to give you my phone number and my address in Birmingham if you’re ever over my way, okay?”

“Good, I’d like that. Who knows, maybe I *will* get down your way.”

Rebecca took a small note pad and pen out of her purse and jotted down her information for Buster.

“Hope I *do* see you.”

“Yeah.”

“Bye, Buster, take care of yourself.”

Rebecca handed him the note and ended their evening as she entered her room.

With those brief words spoken and her door now closed, Buster walked down the hall to his own room. Stretching out on his bed, he contemplated the likelihood of the two ever really seeing each other again...he knew the answer.

## Chapter Three

“You’re workin’ bullring today.”

It took longer than usual for him to get to sleep and he felt a little disoriented when his alarm jolted him awake at six. He thought briefly about going down the hall to say a last good-bye but then thought better of it. With that resignation, he got up and followed his morning routine then headed downstairs. Maybe, he thought, Sylvia will be working and he can have another conversation with her over breakfast. If the cook and the other customers had known how he was looking forward to seeing her again, Buster’s disappointment would have probably been evident on his face when he sat down at the counter and found out, upon asking the cook, that she was off work that day. The cook had a “don’t-bother-me” expression plastered on his tanned, ruttled face as he stood in front of Buster giving him that news.

“What’ll it be?”

“I’d like bacon and eggs, please hold the grits.”

“All right.”

It struck him, sipping his coffee and glancing around the diner, that he hadn’t seen any colored customers in there or the grill he’d been in. He knew the South had pretty much always been segregated and guessed that either they just didn’t want to patronize white establishments or didn’t feel welcome in these places if they *had* wanted to. His breakfast was brought to him by the cook, and without saying anything you’d normally

expect to hear, such as, “Can I get you anything else?” he just stood over Buster and glared at him.

“What’re you doin’ down here?”

Surprised, Buster responded, “What do you mean?”

“Down here, the South. What’re you doin’ down here?”

“*Working*. I’m down here working for the summer.”

“Ain’t there no work back north?”

“Uhhh, well, yeah I guess, but this is where they sent me, so I came. How’d you know where I came from?”

“A little friendly advice, son. Mind what you do and say down here.”

“What the hell does *that* mean?”

“Just tellin’ you to watch yourself.”

“Well, I intend to. I mind my own business.”

“Good, keep it that a way.”

Dumbfounded by the conversation, he finished his breakfast in a rush. A substitute waitress up at the cash register settled his check and he hustled out of the diner. Thinking how bizarre the brief conversation seemed, he passed through the station and made his way over the tracks to the shanty, wondering whether he should tell the guys what the cook had said. He decided it probably wasn’t such a big deal and he’d drop it. He didn’t want to cause waves.

He saw that the guys were assembled in their chairs and on the bench, coffees in hand. They seemed to be already engaged in a spirited conversation. Dick noticed Buster and acknowledged him with, “Morning.” The others were all trying to talk at that same

time, but after a moment, gave the same greeting. Buster had gotten to the shanty at around seven-forty and he wondered how early these guys get here each day to begin their pre-work routine. Dick walked over to him.

“Buster, I see you didn’t bring a lunch.”

“No, I still didn’t get to a store.”

“You know, Lyda Lynn ain’t gonna stop makin’ lunch for you ‘til you do. She sorta guessed maybe you hadn’t had time yet to get that taken care of so she made it for you again.”

Buster again thanked him for providing his lunch and asked that he pass his thanks on to his wife.

“She does delight in helpin’ out, as I said, so don’t worry about it.”

“Okay, but I’ll pick up some stuff after work so I don’t have to keep sponging off of her.”

Bull tapped Buster’s knee with the back of his hand.

“Buster, you have a good evenin’ last night? What’d you do?”

“I went out for dinner with a girl who was staying at the hotel. Had a great time, but unfortunately, she and her girlfriend were only passing through and split this morning.”

“Shame.”

“Yeah, she was really something.”

“Too bad, a young fella *needs* company, if you catch my drift.”

“Yeahhh, I hear you.”

Dick asked Buster to go outside with him so he could go over the game plan for the morning.

Looking over his list, Dick announced, "You're workin' bullring today."

"Okay, no idea what it entails but I'm ready to learn."

"Good. Here's the deal. We got a large train to break up first thing and we'll need to hustle on it. Means we'll bullring most of them. What that means is, one guy hops on behind the first car or cars that needs to get cut as its gettin' shoved by Percy. You stand down the track on the other side of the hump and watch for the cars as they come by you and hop on fast."

"The *hump*?"

"Yeah, look out across the yard." Dick pointed his finger. "You'll see how the ground kinda rises over there then falls back off slightly."

"Right, that's what I noticed when I first got here. Didn't realize it was called 'the hump'."

"Okay. They'll be comin' at you pretty good, so you got to be real careful as you get on the ladder near the brake. When you get on, reach around, grab that brake wheel and start turnin' it to tighten it down. The idea is to get the car slowed down pretty much as it gets near the cars parked down the track. Also, I forgot, make sure you grab the knuckle lever and get the knuckle opened up before you start breakin' the car. It might already be open but you need to make sure, very important. When you see you're gettin' near the parked car you're hookin' onto, hop off fast, you definitely *don't* want to be on your car still when you hit. Now, when you're done with that one, walk back up the track in the direction of the

engine and move over to the next track we designate in about the same place and wait for the next cars to be cut. Hop on where you should and tie them down again. You'll get the feel for it. Got it? Any questions?"

"Nope, I think I got it."

Dick escorted Buster down the gravel alongside several cars that were hooked onto the engine, and as they came to the lead boxcar at a long section of unoccupied track, Dick instructed Buster to ride the first three cars that get shoved to him and tie them into the stationary cars about fifty yards down the track. He was confidently ready for this challenge.

"Okay, can do."

"As you're standin' down there, listen for Percy backin' the engine down after he picks up some speed. Bull's gonna cut your cars loose. You're gonna be movin' pretty good toward those parked cars when you get on, so remember what I said. Open the knuckle and start tyin' down the brake. Slow it down the best you can and bail off of there before you hit."

Dick gave a thumbs-up and walked back toward the engine.

Buster could hear the engine rev, along with a short blast of the horn. Gazing back in that direction, the line of cars began approaching him, and as the lead boxcar reached him, he hopped onto the lowest rung of the ladder and immediately opened the knuckle with the lever. He then began to turn the brake wheel, but after several turns, he noticed how it didn't seem to be slowing the car down at all. "*Ohhh shit!*" he exclaimed loudly. Continuing to turn the wheel, he noticed he was getting closer and closer to the boxcar he was supposed to tie onto, but he was intent on riding this car as far as he could and

getting it properly slowed as instructed...*no way* was he going to screw up his first car, he determined. Finally, the car's brake engaged enough so that Buster felt safe in jumping off and planting himself on the gravel a safe distance from the point of impact. BOOM!! Hoping no one noticed how loud the collision was, he vowed to get the next brake tighter.

He visually made sure the pin was seated properly, then headed back toward Dick and the engine to get the next move. Dick laughed as he approached.

"A little loud, but not bad for your first one."

"Thanks, thought that brake would *never* set!"

"Yep, some're that way. Okay, let's move over two tracks and have you ride another car down."

Bull was standing nearby and came over to them. "Buster, listen, that car is a *flat* car and they can be real mean mothers to work, so if you see you can't get on or can't get it slowed down, then get off fast. Don't fuck with it, too damn dangerous!"

"Okay, good to know, thanks for the warning."

Positioning himself again at the pick-up point maybe fifty yards from the parked cars they were heading for, Buster could see back up the track the line of cars that were going to be shoved. He concentrated on the flat car, the lead car, and tried to imagine how to hold himself on the short ladder. He had a feeling this one was going to be *really* different than a boxcar and wished he'd checked out a stationary flat car ahead of time. He heard the short blast again and the engine revving and waited for his car to approach. As it got to him, it seemed like the train was moving at a fast clip; and so as he was running down the gravel alongside the flat car, he reached up to the car's top and tried to

find something to get a hold of to pull himself up with, while at the same time concentrating on not stumbling on the gravel and possibly getting his leg under a wheel. After what seemed like twenty yards, he was finally able to slip his fingers in between boards on the flat surface of the car and hopped up on the one rung there was. He reached down, pulled the coupler lever up, and began tying the brake down while struggling to keep his balance on the rung. *This* one responded much nicer, much quicker, fortunately, and he was able to bring it to the right speed for bailing off. The car engaged with the parked flat car it was joining, and this time the impact didn't result in the same noisy explosion as before. Bull, he found out, was certainly right...these flatcars *were* a different breed altogether!

Several more assignments during the morning followed and he chatted with Dick and the other guys between rides about how he was doing. Back in the shanty over lunch, they continued exchanging tips and stories about bullringing. What especially caught his attention was a comment from Bull about how significantly more dangerous bullringing is at night, particularly working with flatcars. He pointed out that it was tougher because you had to hold onto your lantern while holding onto the car while executing your moves with your free hand, all the while trying to pay attention to your immediate surroundings. Buster could easily see the connection between this operation and the act of riding a bull...you had to maintain control and ride the dangerous "beast" to a successful conclusion. Bull further pointed out that the yard is very dark in many places in spite of the overhead lights and there are obstacles you have to look out for as you run along beside the car. It's very easy, he stressed, to trip over spikes or boards or loose pieces of

metal in the gravel, and there are poles and ground signals you need to dodge, as well as anything sticking out of an open boxcar door.

He summed it up, cautioning, “The yard becomes a totally different world after dark.”

“You might want to pick up one of those spikes you see layin’ around and carry it with you at night,” Chalk then added. “Bums and other assorted undesirables ride the rails and don’t think nothin’ at all about tryin’ to rob you.”

Buster hadn’t given any thought about bums riding the cars and expressed his appreciation for what sounded like a good piece of advice.

“We all had to start sometime, had to learn the right ways to do things. We’re really a brotherhood down here, Buster. We believe in bein’ there for the next fella and stickin’ together. We take care of our own, don’t you ever forget that.”

“Hey listen, Buster, Percy’s got it right,” Bull added. “We take care of our own.” He dropped his serious expression after a moment and changed the subject with a wink. “Too bad about that gal leavin’ this mornin’.”

“Yeahhh.”

“Tell you what, when we get over to Paris, maybe I’ll take you in to Nat’s.”

“Oh yeah, *Nat’s*. Who *is* he?”

Smiling, Bull again decided not to answer this question. “Curious, huh? Maybe you’ll find out one of these days.”

“Come on, what’s the harm in telling me?”

“No harm, just messin’ with you. I’m sure you’ll find out.”

The shift ended with the guys situated in what seemed to be their customary places in the shanty, sipping some hours-old coffee and BS'ing each other. Dick went over to where Buster was.

“Lyda wants me to ask you if you'd like to come for dinner Sunday evenin'.”

“Sure, absolutely. That'd be great.”

“Good. She's kinda on a mission to take care of you, like I was tellin' you before. It's just her way, it's how she is. She's got a motherin' instinct that just won't quit. How about I pick you up at the hotel, let's say at five. Sound all right?”

“Sure, sounds good.”

“Changin' the subject, before I forget to tell you, you're more than likely gonna have to pull a double one of these days, just a heads-up. You get *double* time of course, and if it's on a holiday, you get double time and a half.”

“*Great*, I'm ready anytime.”

“And dollars to donuts, you'll pull a double on fourth of July. The guys on regular like to take off and a lot of guys workin' the extra board ain't gonna want it either, so you're gonna be needed.”

“Okay. What's the extra board?”

“It's guys who don't have set shifts but take work assignments as needed when called to fill in for the guys on regular shifts who take off for whatever reason. The good thing about workin' the extra board is, it's possible to make more money than on a set shift, but, those guys take work when they get assigned and often pull overtime and double shifts. The married guys usually prefer havin' a set shift because they always know when they're gonna be home.”

“Got it, looking forward to it.”

He took his time in the station at shift's end, examining the old black and white pictures hanging on the walls of trains and workers and passengers at the station from years gone by. He saw the ticket agent, or the person who he thought was the agent, standing behind the wire-screened counter looking down and writing in a large book. Buster hadn't previously taken the time to find out who this man was, but now, he noticed a brass plate on the front screen just above the counter with the name Cleburne Barmes - Station Manager on it. This was the man he'd seen before, getting on the older-looking colored man working with his broom out front on the sidewalk. He recalled the vile language the man had used.

“Hey,” Buster greeted the man.

The man looked up. “Hey, how you doin', son?”

“Doing good, thanks. Nice station you got here. I'm an admirer of train stations.”

“Yeah, we like it. Don't get the passengers we used to but nobody does anymore.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Buster paused, hoping the man would talk about the old days.

“A shame, isn't it?”

The agent ignored his comment, looked away, and returned to writing in his book. Buster took a couple of steps back from the counter.

“Nice meeting you.”

Again Barmes didn't say anything in return. He simply glanced up at Buster, back to his book, and resumed writing.

From across the street, Buster paused to take in the features of the station. Nothing at all like St. Louis Union Station, of course, but it did have an old-time appeal to it...constructed of beige-colored brick and boasting three tall arched windows set above the entranceway surrounded by flat columns with intricate detailing at their tops. All the old railroad stations he'd ever been in had their own sense of identity and charm, he thought, and he suddenly felt a touch homesick standing there, transfixed by the place and thinking about his dad. There was an inevitable, almost melancholy, urge that came from deep within, from his childhood, to want to be a kid again riding on the City of St. Louis whenever he was in or near train stations. He hadn't felt particularly close to his dad for a while, but on occasions like this, standing alone in the late afternoon Texas heat gazing at that Texarkana station, he missed him more than he had thought he would.

Mrs. Rutherford, who was watching television, informed him when he got back to the Savoy that he could get lunch fixings at the Merchant's Market on the other side of the post office. After dropping off his work gloves and switch key in his room, he headed for the market. He mulled over what he'd want for lunches and what'd keep in his room without refrigeration...he'd settle for Spam, peanut butter, grape jelly, white bread, cookies, potato chips, and bottles of Coke. Not exactly what he really wanted or what Dick's wife had been feeding him, but it'd get him by. Without a lunchbox, he'd pick up plastic utensils, brown bags and aluminum foil to wrap sandwiches and chips in.

A tall, skinny man dressed in overalls kissing a woman near the front counter caught his attention. When he got up to the counter to check out, the woman, who had on a brown short-sleeved store uniform, cheerfully greeted him, rang up his items, and bagged them.

“Thank you now.”

Picking up the grocery sack, he noticed her name tag. “Thanks, Ginny.”

Back at State Line Bar and Grill, the need to economize struck him. The blue plate special he’d had there, although a *special*, cost more than a burger, and he was beginning to have the feeling that he needed to watch his money closely. Also, he decided, he’d skip the beer and settle for a cheaper beverage...iced tea or soda. The same waitress was working and greeted him from behind the bar after he’d walked in and stood near the front door for a minute.

“Hi, sit anywhere you’d like. Be with you to take your order in a minute.”

Buster plopped down near where he’d sat the first time there. The waitress soon came over to him and placed a menu on the table in front of him. He saw on the front cover STATE LINE BAR and GRILL at the top, followed by “If you get what you want you’ll want what you get!” He started to wade through the dinner items section. The waitress, identified as Gloria by the name tag on her light pink uniform, came and wrote down Buster’s order for a cheeseburger, fries, and 7-Up. He took his time eating once the food was brought out to him with a “here you are, honey.” He gazed out the front glass, thinking he had to find something to do that evening instead of sitting around the hotel...maybe he’d scout out a book store or find a movie theater.

Gloria returned to check up on him and he then took the opportunity to ask where he might find such places. She bent down, standing right next to him and brushing him lightly, and pointed up the street.

“Tell you what, if you go up to 3<sup>rd</sup>, then hang a left and go over to Main, you’ll see a couple of theaters.”

“Okay, thanks.”

She briefly lingered in her “helpful” position. He detected Shalimar.

“Think you can find it?”

“Yeah, I think I can, thanks.”

He hadn’t noticed these theaters before and concluded there was still a lot he had to discover in downtown. Straightening up, Gloria then told him about Tex-Ark Drugs, a few blocks due north of the grill on the same side of the road, and explained they sell books there. He finished his meal and left a forty-cent tip on the table for Gloria. She took his money at the register with a smile.

“Thanks, come back in whenever you can.”

Having never met a cheeseburger he didn’t like, Buster adjudged this one and the service as superior. He rationalized that what he hadn’t spent for a better dinner, along with a beer, he’d spend on a movie. Getting to the Strand, he saw the well-lit marquee hanging out noticeably over the sidewalk. “The Russians are Coming, The Russians Are Coming” was showing and Buster paid his dollar to go in and be moderately entertained while eating the customary box of Jujubes.

Drifting around downtown for a while after the show, he made mental notes of stores before going back to the hotel and settling on the couch in front of the lobby’s television set to catch the last part of the Milton Berle Show. Nearly asleep on the couch, his thoughts aimlessly wandered down a road of people and events from the last several days, one person or event capturing only a brief stopover...the road, it seemed, was already long and there was much ground to be covered. One stop, however, brought him back from the fading road trip...his small work book. He hadn’t yet made any entries in

it, so he headed upstairs, took it out of the top drawer, sat down with his pen, and began his entries. He duly noted the days he'd worked and the number of hours per day, and he proudly entered the pay he'd earned for each one...such a tremendous sense of accomplishment. He could now visualize how much he was making. He planned on placing an asterisk next to the days he would earn more because of the air pay involved, like he had done for the second day's entry in the book, and the days he'd pull some overtime; he was *especially* looking forward to working that double shift on the holiday then recording *that* amount. This was just how he had imagined things would be.

## Chapter Four

“...people and things are *not* always what they seem to be.”

Squinting up at the peeling paint on the ceiling, the first thought to creep into his groggy mind was that it was Saturday and he could sleep in, but other thoughts quickly flooded in, multiplied, and took control of his awakening brain. Seven-fifteen according the clock and now too late to go back to sleep anyway. He began planning how he'd spend the day...a haircut and then maybe hitting the Laundromat he'd spotted the previous evening. First, however, came breakfast...and Sylvia. She spotted him coming in the front door and showered him with her ever-present smile as he perched in front of her on the second stool from the end.

“Morning there, Buster.”

“Morning, how are you today?”

“Can't complain. You must be off today, huh?”

“Yep, just getting a few things done this morning and then do whatever comes to mind.”

She turned a cup over on the saucer and poured the coffee. “What's it going to be today?”

“How about pancakes and some bacon?”

“Okay, sweetie, I'll get it workin'.”

Buster didn't see the cook anywhere in the diner and was relieved...he was thinking back on the inquisition he'd gotten and wasn't eager to interact with the guy. In his absence, a second waitress was tending the grill. A few tables away from his place at the counter, he could overhear the conversation of the elderly couple having breakfast and arguing over the weather. His attention was redirected when Sylvia brought his breakfast over and placed it in front of him.

"Sylvia, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, ask away."

"Well, I was in here yesterday when you were off, and as I was eating, the cook started asking me strange questions out of the clear blue, stuff like 'what're you doin' here?' He said he knew I wasn't from the South and he even kind of gave me a warning, said 'watch yourself down here' or words to that effect."

"You shittin' me?"

"No."

"I cannot believe what a dumb-ass idiot he is. Buster, I'm so very sorry you had to hear that crap."

"Yeah, me too."

"He's forever goin' on about one thing or another and don't know when to keep his big mouth shut."

"Is he paranoid about Yankees invading again and taking over, or something?"

"I'll tell you...he *is* paranoid about the coloreds gettin' stirred up and takin' over.

Who knows, maybe he does think northerners are itchin' to invade the South

again and do away with old southern ways. He and his friends *hate* colored folks and think they need to stay in their place...*that's* what he's afraid of."

"Well, I don't have anything to do with any of that, even if it were true. And like I told him, I'm here to work, to make some money, and mind my own business."

"Those kids from Chicago that came down south to Mississippi two years ago tryin' to help the coloreds with voter registration, they got themselves *killed* for mindin' somebody else's business." She paused and then continued. "I don't know... guess maybe they really did feel like the coloreds' business was their business. You just don't know how much down here hasn't changed over the years, Buster, how much is still like it's always been. Some, not all of the people down here, will never change their minds about things, but I tell you, they don't speak for me."

"I'm starting to see for myself how things are."

"Are you, already? Well, I suppose it don't take too long to start seein' things if you haven't lived with it all your life."

"Yeah... I *have* seen things already."

"Buster, please do watch yourself while you're here and keep in mind what I said.

People and things are *not* always what they seem to be."

"I will, believe me I will."

She picked up her coffee pot and glanced around the diner, then back at Buster.

"Listen, I got to go take care of my other customers."

"Okay, and thanks for talking to me. I do like coming in to see you, Sylvia."

"Well that's good. I like seein' you too."

Buster worked his way through the pancakes and bacon and pondered Sylvia's words. He conjured images of white-sheeted night riders, of Grover-the-cook leading the pack, with torches blazing as they rode and chants of fiery vehemence spewing forth from their mouths. But Buster really didn't know anything about that kind of madness or history; this wasn't *his* reality, and anyway, he knew he'd be going back north to where things were different...back to *his* world. He finished up in the diner and said good-bye to Sylvia, thinking while heading out the door how fortunate he was to have a kind "native" for a friend down here.

Buster was told by Mrs. Rutherford about a barbershop not too far from the Savoy; this was his opportunity to go check it out. It'd been a couple weeks since his last cut and he was looking forward to it. Finding the place on Hazel Street near 5<sup>th</sup>, he thought it had all the appearances of the classic, old-time barber shop, with barber's pole out front, three chairs, a long glass mirror, sinks, and a two-seat shoe shine stand in the back. "Bishop's Barber Shop" was displayed in outlined red lettering on the sign which hung out over the sidewalk from a steel arm attached to the building front. A row of wooden chairs lined the wall near the door for men to await their turns, and since all three barber chairs had customers in them, he took a seat and picked up a Field and Stream magazine from the table next to him. One of the barbers looked at Buster.

"Mornin', be with you soon as we can."

A young-looking colored man was shining the shoes of a fourth customer and was commenting to his patron about how hot it'd been lately. Seated a few chairs down from Buster were two additional men, presumably waiting for haircuts also, reading newspapers, smoking cigarettes, and flicking their ashes in the tray of the floor stand that

separated their chairs. Buster noticed name plates on the counter behind the barber chairs along with all the usual shop paraphernalia. The sign on the left said Buddy, the middle one had Red on it, and the one on the right identified Chilton. One of the men seated near Buster put his paper down and asked Buddy if he thought he'd be going to Sponson's this evening to drink some beer and shoot some pool.

"Might be, don't know what the old lady's got cooked up."

"You let her *run you like that*? Never mind, I *know* you do."

Buddy chuckled and said, "Dalton, you sorry sonofabitch."

"Well I *do* want to get you back for kickin' my ass last week."

"Ain't no damn way you're gonna do that. You ain't never beat me yet.

Besides, *you still got money left after I cleaned you out*?"

The guy sitting in Buddy's chair laughed along and added, "Dalton, now you *know* the only way you're going to finally beat this here boy is if you boo hoo hard enough and he takes pity on you."

"Yeah, well we'll see," Dalton snapped back, apparently trying to conclude this losing line of discussion.

"Red, you gettin' the boys together later on for a meetin'?" Dalton asked.

The other waiting customer lowered his newspaper and frowned.

He abruptly barked out, "Keep that talk to yourself, Dalton."

"*Damn*, Charlie, I was only wantin' to know."

"Then talk about it *later*, you fool."

"All right...all right."

Buster was trying to imagine what these guys were talking about. Judging by the brusque words from this man seated next to him, he got the feeling he was overhearing something maybe he wasn't meant to hear.

"Hey Buddy, pick me up if you do decide to go tonight," the man in Chilton's chair interjected.

"All right. I'll holler at you later on, Bobby."

"Thanks."

Buster put the Field and Stream down and decided to check out the newspaper lying on the table to see what was happening in the local area. One of the headlines in the *Texarkana Daily News* read "Police Investigating Murder - Connection to 'The Phantom Slayer' from the 40s Hinted At." Another read "Sheriff and DA Probe Racial Crime." Buster began reading the second article and learned that two years earlier, there had been a series of fights between colored and white employees at a manufacturing plant in Texarkana, Texas and at a plant in New Boston, Texas. Conflicts had escalated to the point where a white foreman had been shot and killed in the parking lot of the latter business before plant-opening early one morning. Five days later, two colored employees disappeared and were found dead several days later in the woods outside of town. They had been beaten severely and shot to death. The article mentioned that the district attorney was now again investigating the double murder. The authorities, the piece pointed out, still had not determined who the killer of the plant foreman was.

"How's *that*, Mista Davis?" the shoe shiner asked his customer.

Buster looked up and glanced at the back of the shop. The customer was obviously admiring his brown shoes.

“Lookin’ reecal shiny. Boy, I tell you, Romus, you sure enough know how to shine shoes.”

“Why thank you.”

He held his hand out and Davis put some pocket change in it. Davis got down from the stand’s chair.

“You welcome. You tell your momma I says hi.”

“I sure will, and thank you ‘*gin* fuh the tip.”

“My pleasure. Oh, and you tell her I’ll be out to fix the roof first a next week.”

“Okay, I’ll tell her, thank you.”

Davis walked past Chilton and stopped in front of Red’s customer, then asked Red if he’d heard anything about Bull and why nobody had heard from him lately.

Buster’s ears perked up when he heard the name Bull.

“I ain’t heard from him in a *good* while. Called out to his house last week and Ginny just said she’d have him to call me.”

“Well, I sure don’t know what the deal is but one of us needs to get a hold of him. That sonofabitch is ignorin’ me, I’m beginnin’ to believe.”

“I think you’re right, just ain’t like him though.”

Buster stopped reading the article and began skimming the other one in the *Daily News*. “Two teenagers shot while parked in an isolated rural area outside of town in Arkansas” was the subtitle of the article. It then mentioned that the slayings, which had occurred in May, bore a resemblance to the 1946 murders committed by someone variously labeled “The Phantom Slayer”, “The Phantom”, and “The Moonlight Murderer”. The killer in the instant murders had also apparently used a .32 caliber pistol

to shoot the two in the back of the head and there were no witnesses identified or other leads to pursue.

Red was finished at this point with cutting his customer's hair. After receiving payment and saying, "Thanks much, Jackie," he told Buster to come over and have a seat.

"How you doin', son?"

"Doing just fine, thanks."

Red wrapped a paper collar around Buster's neck.

"You want to stay with how you got it, or you want me to give you a flat top?"

"I'll stay with how I got it, thanks."

Buster had worn a flat top from sixth grade up to his freshman year, compliments of his dad's home barbering as well as a neighborhood barber, and felt the Princeton cut made him look a little older.

He felt a little awkward sitting there since Red had taken him ahead of Charlie and Dalton, the other guys seated in the chairs next to Buster, but it occurred to him that they were probably waiting for the other barbers. Maybe, though, they'd come into the shop just to visit with their friends...maybe this was their usual Saturday morning routine.

"So, where you from? Haven't seen you around before."

"St. Louis. I'm down here for the summer working."

"Yeah, where at?"

"I'm on with MoPac railroad."

“Then you probably know Bull Tatum and Jimmy Goodwin.”

“Yeah, I’m on Bull’s shift, as a matter of fact, seems like a real super guy. Don’t know the other guy though.”

Red buttoned the white cloth behind Buster’s neck.

“Well, he’s just like Bull, you know one then you know the other.”

“Loosen it up just a notch, will you?”

“Okay, sure,” Red replied. “How’s that?”

“Good, thanks. You guys look like you do a pretty good business here.”

“Yeah, got a lot a guys come in on Saturdays. Busier than ever it seems.”

“Well that’s good, keeps you employed.”

“Yep.”

“Was just reading about the murders of those kids. The ‘Phantom Slayer?’ Is there a lot of serious crime down here?”

“Nahh,” Red replied, disapprovingly.

“Also something about unsolved killings from a couple years ago?”

Red didn’t respond to this comment.

The other barbers continued working on their customers and Buster could overhear some of their conversations. Bobby, the man in Chilton’s chair, was saying something to Chilton about having gone to someone’s funeral, whoever it was he was talking about, and hating those occasions. Cutting Bobby off in mid-sentence as he was saying “and it makes you wonder who’s going to,” Chilton barked out an order to the shoe shiner standing nearby.

“Get this damn place swept up!”

The shoe shiner answered, "Yes, sir."

"Sorry, Bobby."

"Don't worry about it. Was sayin', you never know who's goin' next. Damn, seems like that ol' boy and me was just out fishin' together."

"Yeah I know, sad deal, wreckin' his truck like that. Guess he was drunk again?"

"Yeah...another one of us gone now, Chilton."

Red handed Buster a mirror. "Need to take any more off? Look all right?"

"Huh uh, looks pretty good to me, thanks. You got anything to put on the hair?"

"Here, take a look," Red replied, swiveling the chair around so Buster could look over the products on the shelf.

Seeing that they had Vitalis and Wildroot Cream Oil, Buster asked, "Got any Brylcreem?"

"A little dab'll do you," Red chuckled. He opened the drawer just below the shelf.

"Lemme check...yeah, here you are."

He pulled a tube of the product out of the drawer, squeezed a small amount of the white cream into the palm of his hand, then worked it into Buster's hair.

"How's that?"

Buster checked his appearance again in the mirror.

"Great."

Red put some talcum powder on a whisk broom and dusted off Buster's neck after removing the hair cloth.

"You're good to go."

Again checking out the price chart hanging on the wall above the row of seats, Buster stepped down off the chair and paid for the haircut.

“Thanks for the business, son.”

“Welcome, thanks for the haircut.”

Stepping outside into the bright sun, Buster decided that going to the Laundromat just wasn't what he wanted to be doing...the better plan would be to visit the “bookstore” on State Line Rd. and browse around whatever interesting looking store she found on the way. The heat radiating off the sidewalk, along with the thermometer on the wall out front showing 93 degrees, convinced him right away of the wisdom of his change in plans...a decision that would seem even wiser if those businesses had air conditioning. Walking around inside a hardware store, it looked very much like the Western Auto store in downtown Maplewood, one of his old stomping grounds. That store was where he and a grade school friend would spend some Saturdays, and a few times bought bobbers, hooks, and sinkers for their outings along the Meramac River with the friend's parents. It was also where his dad had bought a small Elgin outboard motor.

A few blocks over, he found the store he was heading for on State Line Road, an older-looking blonde brick building with a recessed front entrance and gold lettering on the glass identifying Tex-Ark Drugs. The “It's Cool Inside” penguin decal on the door beckoned him to enter. A number of dime store novels and various paperbacks, a few of which he didn't expect to find in a small southern city, were positioned on a revolving display rack. He settled on one by Bertrand Russell, “Why I Am Not a Christian”, and one by Eric Hoffer, “True Believer”. He'd heard people talk about Russell in high school and felt it was about time to expand his scope of literary works. The Hoffer book, he was

buying blindly. Buster had taken the two-semester college-prep English course as a senior and had read a number of books, afterward writing what his teacher called “critical comments” on them. These books, however, weren’t on the reading list and Buster was eager to get into them. Chaucer, Conrad, Salinger, Poe and Steinbeck and the others he’d read during the year were fine and good, but these looked like they offered something entirely different to enjoy and be challenged by.

A few things caught his eye on the way up to the front check-out: a bottle of Yardley men’s cologne, bottles of Old Spice, High Karate, Brut, British Sterling and English Leather cologne, and a small selection of Trojan condoms on the bottom shelf. He figured he needed to get with an additional new fragrance and decided he really ought to buy some Trojans just in case his fortunes necessitated them. So, he left after checking out with the British Sterling and Trojans and headed back to his room, setting his sights on using one of the items as soon as he got back and the other hopefully at some point.

It took him all of a few minutes to drop off to sleep when he stretched out, the fan humming in his direction and thoughts briefly floating through his brain of how he’d stumble into the circumstances necessitating the other item. His old girlfriend came to him in his sleep, first in his hotel room and then in the bleachers of Maplewood High School football stadium. She didn’t speak a word and instead vanished into a crowd of guys at the Friday night game he’d taken her to. He drove home alone but was pleasantly surprised to find that Rebecca had come to see him at his house while he was at the game.

Mrs. Rutherford was on the couch when he came downstairs. She always seemed interested in finding out how his day was going and how he was doing, being on his own. In the twenty minutes he was in the chair next to the couch, he found out she’d met her

deceased husband, Arthur, sixty years ago down in New Orleans where he was working for a shipping business at the port there. She was finishing high school, she said, and they'd met at church, soon falling in love. She had no career ambitions of her own and instead simply wanted to marry Arthur and raise a large family. She told Buster that after Arthur died of a heart attack ten years ago, she was persuaded to come to Texarkana to live with one of her daughters. Buster told her about his large family and how he'd grown up in church and been active in the youth programs through the years. This brought a smile to her face and he was pleased by it. He told her he thought he was managing nicely on his own. She told him about Morton's Family Restaurant and gave him directions to it.

“The nicest people run that restaurant, *Christian* people,” she assured him.

The restaurant didn't turn out to be much. It was small, filled with smoky air, and offered a lot of fried food along with some basic fare, according to the menu. The owners, however, were as friendly as described by Mrs. Rutherford, though maybe a little overly friendly in his judgment...they seemed to feel it was their duty to try to get Buster to attend church with them some Sunday.

That evening he spent reclined on the lobby's couch watching part of the Lawrence Welk Show followed by Mission: Impossible and Gunsmoke. He finished the night by reading the first few chapters of the books he'd picked up, finding them too heavy for that late in the day, and crawled into bed. Thoughts of Saturday evenings from his childhood, sitting around in front of the TV and watching favorite programs with the family, made him resolve to write a letter home in the morning, as he had assured his dad that first day.

## Chapter Five

“Thas jus how things is...”

Clearing the sleep from his eyes, the thought crossed his mind that it was Sunday and he wouldn't be going to church as he had nearly every Sunday of his life. He hadn't even given any thought to doing so until the previous evening when the Mortons mentioned church-going. There had only been a few Sundays as a kid growing up that the family hadn't attended a service, and never any times he hadn't as an adolescent...no one was allowed to be sick on Sunday morning. The only times they hadn't attended were due to their being away from home, traveling on vacation somewhere. There was one annual trip to Canada, though, where they found a church to attend and because of that, he and his siblings were able to earn their yearly “attendance pin” at their church in St. Louis.

Buster knew that the In-Town Diner would be open and guessed that Sylvia would be working. Around eight-thirty when he walked in, the place was full of customers and he'd have to wait to get seated...apparently it was a popular thing to do around here, he thought, to go out for Sunday breakfast. Near the front door, he saw the same elderly couple he'd overheard there the other day arguing about weather, along with another couple at their table who appeared to be the same vintage. He was close enough to this group that he could unavoidably overhear parts of their conversation, and they didn't seem to make any attempt to keep it private...maybe, he guessed, they were hard of hearing and simply weren't aware of how loudly they were speaking.

“It’s a helluva shame those people don’t have the dignity to keep to their selves. Why, I’m tellin’ you, you let one come in, pretty soon you get more of them ,and then before you know it, they overrun the church and the whole damn neighborhood and run it all into the ground.”

“You damn right. They kill it fast!” the other elderly man at the table agreed.

“Bible says love thy neighbor, Harold.”

“Keep quiet, Ethel, you don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Reverend Bellman told me he was gonna say some words on it this mornin’, says maybe it’s time we oughta think about relocatin’ and find us some place where the nigras’ll leave us be.”

“I’m all for gettin’ away from them, Harold, but goddam it, we built that place, why should *we* be the ones to move?”

The conversation reminded him of the situation his own church had experienced four years before. The Hamilton Christian Church, a beautiful old building with magnificent architectural details, had been built many years ago and had served several generations of families. Three generations of his own family had been faithful members. It was, of course, located in inner St. Louis City in what had always been a white neighborhood, but when one colored family moved in near the church and showed up one Sunday morning to attend services, the members of the congregation suddenly decided it was time to relocate. So, they bought some suburban property ten or so miles away, hired an architect and built a nice new complex of buildings well away from any colored families. He recalled hearing one church member exclaim they’d be “safe from the niggers” for many years to come in the new location.

It took several minutes for Buster to be escorted to a seat at the crowded counter by one of the waitresses. As soon as he sat down, he was greeted by another one he hadn't seen before. He didn't see Sylvia and was told by his waitress that she didn't work Sundays.

"What'll you have?" he was asked abruptly.

"I'll start with coffee with cream and then bacon and eggs, fried, thanks."

As she filled his green cup and handed him a small pitcher of cream along with some eating utensils, Buster noticed her name tag identifying her as Tricia. Late middle-aged, she had what resembled a well-worn frown on her face and spoke in a gravelly voice. She returned with his breakfast after about twenty minutes and slid the plate in front of Buster without saying anything. He was struck by how different this woman was from Sylvia and how the atmosphere was so different when Sylvia, or even the other waitress who'd served him in her absence, was on duty. The occasional use of "nigger" by customers on both sides of him and behind him at a table, along with loud voices and laughter accompanying those comments, made for an ear-opening, unreal thirty minutes. No one seemed to be aware of him and no one talked to him the entire time he was seated there...he was an invisible stranger in a strange land, disconnected and out of place.

He wasn't convinced the lengthy wait to be seated and the twenty minutes it took to get his order were worth it. He was getting pissed off sitting there looking around the diner holding his empty coffee cup while his waitress seemed to vanish for long stretches of time. She finally came over to him, presenting him with his check and not offering to refill his coffee, in spite of the fact she was holding a pot in her hand. She didn't even

offer a “thank you”. He’d now had enough of her and no longer wanted more coffee. He took out exact change, handed it to her, and walked out.

Dissatisfied with the morning experience, he sat on his bed to compose a letter home to his folks, to his grandmother, who was living with them, and to his younger brother, Reggie. He intended to tell them all about the guys he was working with and all the things he’d done on the job in the short time he’d been in town. He wanted to ask his folks how his dad’s job was going since he knew men were getting laid off and his dad was worrying about losing his job before he could finally retire. He wanted to know how his mother was doing at home and at the church with her various activities, and he wanted his grandmother to know he was thinking about her...he missed her a great deal and wanted to tell her that. He put these things down in his letter and concluded with a paragraph to Reggie saying he’d love to hear all about what was going on with him and how their friends were doing. Buster’s older brother, Jack, was away from home working as a section crew member with the railroad in Illinois somewhere and Buster figured he’d hear from him at some point, so he didn’t address anything to him in the letter. He’d check with Mrs. Rutherford first thing in the morning to see if he could leave his letter with her or if he’d need to walk it to the post office.

Wanting to get away from the drabness of his hotel room, he grabbed his guitar and headed over to the station. He knew there’d maybe be a few people around but it’d be quiet there. The streets were mostly deserted, the diner apparently having wrapped up its morning business and any others in downtown having moved on to other things. He was approaching the bench situated in front of the station when he noticed a colored man seated on it, no one else in the vicinity. Though he was dressed differently than before

when he'd seen him, he quickly recognized him as the one he had heard identified as Luther.

“Morning.”

Lifting his head and glancing up at Buster, the man responded, “Morning.”

Buster couldn't tell if he'd been sleeping or what, but when he noticed the guitar he was carrying, a smile appeared on his face and he moved over on the bench, signaling that Buster could take a seat.

“You work here?”

“Mm hm.”

“They got you doing clean-up work, huh?”

“Thas right.”

Trying to engage the man in conversation, Buster asked, “Hot already, isn't it?”

“Mm hm.”

Buster started picking a simple tune he'd been taught by a friend a year ago. He was still learning the basic finger picking styles and certainly felt like his playing had that beginner sound to it.

“Whas that?”

“I don't know, just something I tried to pick up recently.”

“All right.”

“Heard that guy call you Luther the other day, right? I'm Buster.”

“Mm hm. My name's Luther.”

Maybe late seventies, maybe older, the man's mostly gray hair with a sprinkling of black mixed in framed his line-marked face. Buster wondered what he was doing still working.

"You been at this job a long time?"

"Mm hm, been nearly forty year."

"Wow, that's a long time," Buster replied, the thought of being on a job that long straining his young imagination.

"Mind if I play that thing?"

Surprised, Buster replied, "*Sure*," handing his Harmony to the man.

The man began playing some bluesy-sounding melodies, things Buster had never heard, making his cheap guitar sound incredibly different and better than at any time since he'd owned it. He was pushing and pulling the strings, sliding his fingers up and down the neck, strumming and picking, bringing unheard-of life to the guitar in a few short wordless melodies. He looked completely absorbed and lost in what he was playing, his head slowly moving side to side, eyes closed. It seemed his music was taking him far away somewhere. Buster was absolutely enthralled as he sat on the bench listening to this man, marveling at the ease and familiarity he had with the instrument and wishing he could play *a tenth* that well. The man finished his third melody, his eyes remaining closed momentarily.

"My god, that's amazing. I guess you've been playing for a long time."

"Thas right...been a long time."

"*How* long?"

"I's jus a boy when I picked up my daddy's guitar."

“When was that you think?”

“Mmm, well, ‘round nineteen-three, there about.”

“Wow, that *is* a long time.”

“Mm hm.”

“So, you’ve been working around here forty years. Done anything else?”

“I’s raised on a farm in Mississippi...we was share croppers.”

Buster was growing fascinated by this man, so different from anyone he’d ever met, and wanted to find out all he could about him. He reminded himself, though, that he was perhaps intruding on his privacy and wouldn’t keep asking him questions.

“Share cropping...read about that in school.”

“My boy, now he a *porter* and don’t know *nothin’* about that,” he proudly seemed to be announcing, his blood-shot eyes looking into Buster’s.

For a brief moment, Buster felt that an odd touch of commonality had been struck between them, that they shared a tie...railroading.

“Oh yeah? My dad’s a *Pullman* conductor.”

Almost instantly, he awkwardly recalled the social distance that always existed between those two occupations and hoped Luther wouldn’t read anything into his innocent reply or his tone of voice.

Luther simply responded with, “Thas good,” and didn’t ask Buster anything about his dad.

As Luther was beginning to strum the guitar again, a red Buick pulled up across the street and stopped. The driver, looking over at Buster and Luther, immediately called out to Buster.

“Son, come over here.”

Buster got up and walked over to the man, a guy dressed in a light tan suit. A woman, probably his wife, was seated next to him and Buster caught a quick glimpse of kids in the back seat.

“Hi, what’s going on?”

“Son, lemme tell you somethin’. Don’t know who you are, but down here, we don’t socialize with the coloreds. You look like a nice young fella, now listen at what I’m tellin’ you.”

Buster was taken aback and a little intimidated. What immediately came to mind to tell this guy was, “Screw you, who the hell are you? I’ll talk to anybody I want!”

All he could say was, “He’s just an old man. He hasn’t done anything to anybody.”

“Son, I’m *tellin’* you, we don’t *do* that here,” he repeated, stretching out his words to reinforce his point. “Do I make myself plain?”

“I heard what you said.”

“Good.”

The stranger glanced across to Luther, flicking his cigarette out the window, and pulled off.

Buster went back to the bench, struck by a sense of disbelief.

As soon as he sat down, Luther mumbled, “You shouldn’t be talkin’ to me.”

“*Hell* with him. I’ll talk to anybody I want to talk to.”

“You jus don’t undastand. Thas jus the way things is.”

“He doesn’t know me.”

“Boy, that one of the *mayor's* men, he know *everybody*. He know you ain't from here. You don't even *look* like you's from here. *He* can tell that, believe me.”

“Well goddam, that's a helluva thing.”

“That's jus how things is...jus the way they is.”

Luther handed the guitar back to Buster and stood up.

Without looking at him, Luther said, “Pleasant talkin' to you.”

Buster sat silently for a few seconds, watching the old man slowly taking a few difficult, painful steps on the brick street.

“Nice talking to you too, Luther...take care.”

Buster felt like he'd been an intruder into Luther's private space, like his being there had made Luther uneasy. He no longer wanted to play and didn't feel much like being at the station any longer...it was now somehow associated with the intruder. The heat and humidity, conspiring with the confrontation by the stranger, made him leave. What he'd really wanted was to talk to Luther and learn more about him, and to hear him working magic on his guitar; but now, maybe he might not get that chance again. Anger and resentment welled up as he watched Luther walk west on Front Street away from the station. *And disappointment*...why hadn't he said anything better, more forceful, to the stranger? Why hadn't he told the man to go to hell? He knew why...he'd been caught completely off guard and didn't think. Maybe that was just a rationalization for lack of guts, though. Regret was instantaneous and hit him hard, thinking he'd driven Luther off from his place, perhaps his *special* place, that maybe he had even done some kind of future harm to him.

Front Street was quiet, deserted, and not even the adjacent rail yard offered up any noise as he sauntered back to the Savoy. Sylvia's words echoed in his brain. He tried to connect the notion of people and things not always being what they seem with this man.

It was pretty obvious to him that the stranger wasn't trying to hide his prejudice or hatred, or whatever it was...his message was straightforward and simple: whites stay with whites! This guy wasn't pretending to be someone he wasn't, and Grover-the-cook, as well as some others in Texarkana, likewise seemed to be one-dimensional. There were no hidden agendas with these people. All of this led him in turn to question whether people such as Mrs. Rutherford and Gloria-the-waitress, and even the guys on his work crew, harbored sentiments and beliefs similar to the stranger's. A creeping sense of paranoia was coming over him...he wondered if he needed to be cautious in things he said. That questioning didn't sit well with him...he wanted to be here and enjoyed what he was doing, but he had to live with such people and had to work with them, and the best thing he could do would be to keep his mouth shut, mind his own business, and do what he came to do.

That afternoon Buster spent stretched out on his bed reading "The True Believer", his thoughts wandering off in an attempt to understand the minds of the people around him, the "southern mentality", as he generalized it. He was *trying* to set himself apart from them, he came to admit, but maybe in some ways he was just like them...he also had prejudices, and he also had a need to fit into a common group, a need to have an identity. *Is this really what Hoffer's saying?* he questioned himself. What he didn't want, though, was to be like some of these people just for the sake of that. He wasn't resolving

anything to his satisfaction and concluded there were things he might never really understand.

Dick's house, maybe a couple of miles from the hotel in a nice neighborhood on West 17<sup>th</sup> Street off of Summerhill Road, looked like a modest, yet attractive, single-story brick dwelling with a well-manicured lawn and rows of flowers lining the front sidewalk. Buster was met by Dick's wife, Lyda Lynn, just inside the front door with a friendly smile.

“Well *hi* there, so nice to meet you, Buster!”

Dressed in what he took to be “Sunday attire”, along with a lacy dark green apron adorned by embroidered roses, she presented in Buster's mind the image of a housewife right out of “Ozzie and Harriet”.

“Come on in. Can I get you a nice cold glass of iced tea?”

“Thanks, that'd be wonderful.”

He was struck by how gracious and nice she was. Her accent was pretty, a little like Rebecca's.

Buster immediately noticed in the living room two bookcases full of hard-bound and paperback books, a globe placed on a desk top, and pictures of people whom he imagined were family members. She asked Dick to keep him company and went into the kitchen. Within a minute, Lyda Lynn came back into the living room and handed him his tea. She motioned for him to take a seat on the couch.

“So tell me, Buster, how're you likin' the railroad so far?”

“I like it, a lot. Dick's a great boss and all the guys are fun to work with.”

“Well, I’m so glad. He’s told me about you and I sure hope your summer goes well and you get some money saved for college when you go home.”

“I am. I think I’m doing okay so far.”

He took a drink of the tea and found it excessively sweet.

“Is your tea okay?”

“It’s just fine, thanks. Mrs. Garland, I wanted to thank you for having me here tonight. It’s very nice of you.”

“Buster, please don’t call me Mrs. Garland,” she quickly answered. “Call me Lyda Lynn like everybody does.”

“Okay.” He took a sip of the tea and nearly grimaced. “Oh, and thank you for taking care of my lunches. I can’t tell you how much I appreciated that.”

“Oh, well, you’re so welcome.”

Dick picked up a framed picture from the desk as Lyda Lynn excused herself to check on dinner.

“Thought you’d like to see this.”

What he was showing Buster was a black and white photo of a small group of men holding stringers of fish and standing next to a sign identifying their location as Far North Fishing Haven.

“Where was this?”

“Canada. Recognize these guys?”

Pointing to the men pictured, he replied, “Looks like you and Bull. Is that Chalk and Percy also?”

“Sure is. Taken a while ago.”

“Wow, you guys look *young* there. Bet you had a great time up there.”

“Yep.”

“I’ve been to Canada a few times on family vacations. We always stayed in an old cabin on a lake where one of my dad’s retired railroad acquaintances, and old-timer named Percy Ellis, moved to. My dad always wanted to go fishing up there and always caught a lot of fish.”

“It’s great you got that history.”

“You guys’re really close, aren’t you?” Buster asked, studying the photo.

“Yep, they’re like family. Nothin’ more important in this life than family.”

Lyda Lynn returned to the living room within a few minutes, and as Dick was putting his photo away, Buster glanced at the book cases and commented on the number of books they had.

“These’re mostly Dick’s. He reads a lot and some of them are even from when he was in high school. I’ve read most of these too.”

Buster looked over the collection and noticed books by Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad and several other authors.

Picking up “Lord Jim”, Buster exclaimed, “I read this last year... amazing!”

Pointing to some of the other works, he added he had also read those. For whatever reason, he was surprised to find such a collection of books in Dick’s home. He hadn’t stopped to consider just how educated and well-read Dick might in fact be, or any of the other guys he worked with, or for that matter, anyone else he had pigeon-holed in his naïve and inexperienced young life. He realized he had a lot to learn about people.

Fried chicken, dumplings, succotash, greens, dinner rolls, and jello with pears were spread out on the dining room table as he took a seat. The table was covered by a pink and white patterned cloth and set with linen napkins, silver utensils, old-fashioned-looking serving bowls, crystal glasses and was topped by a vase of assorted flowers. Lyda Lynn appeared perfectly content and pleased throughout dinner, their conversations, and her peach cobbler desert, and he imagined that she very much enjoyed such gatherings and doting over her guests. Finishing dinner and complimenting her on the wonderful food she'd prepared, he again thanked her for the trouble she'd gone to and how nice it was once again having a Sunday dinner like this.

Dick returned Buster to his hotel after finishing more iced tea and conversation in the living room, and on the way back, confided that Lyda Lynn always wanted a house full of kids but wasn't able to have children.

"That's her greatest disappointment in life."

"Such a shame."

"She has an enormous heart and so much love to share. A damn shame there're people who spit out kids then neglect and mistreat them."

Buster recalled Dick saying how she enjoyed taking care of the young summer employees with the railroad and how he'd said she has a "mothering instinct that won't quit."

"She sure seems like a fine woman, Dick. She'd undoubtedly be a perfect mother."

"Yes...she surely would."

Buster sat in front of the TV in the lobby for a while before heading to bed, paying little attention to what was on. Thinking about that morning, enviously listening to Luther playing his guitar and making it come alive, he resolved to one day be as good.

## Chapter Six

“You ever been to Paris?”

The crew began the shift the following morning by switching out a train that had come in from southern Texas overnight and finished by swapping out cars at a couple of places north of the Trigg Street yard, then casually running back and ending near the shanty.

Relaxing in the cab along with Percy before clocking out, Buster struck up a conversation with him about his career with the railroad and the changes he'd seen over the years.

“Well, the equipment's changed some, I guess, and safety's gotten better over the years. Can't argue about the pay raises either. Been a lotta different places on the job...made runs up to Kansas City, over to west Texas, down to San Antonio, and over east to several parts.”

“Ever seen a train wreck?”

“Have I ever *seen one*? I've *been* in one.”

“Wow, when did that happen?”

“Almost ten years ago, right here in the yard. We was shovin' a full load of oil tank cars through the yard when some brainless chowder head left a switch open over on “main 2” track. Fortunately for us, I was only movin' at twenty miles

per, shovin' the line of cars, and so when the lead tanker jumped off, I was able to get it all stopped with only four cars comin' off after that one."

"Oil tank cars, sounds like it could have been a pretty bad situation."

"Yes indeed it *could* have been."

Percy finished off the last few sips of his coffee and lifted a cheek in the direction of his window.

"Ever had a run-in with any bums riding the rails?"

"Yep. A derelict came out of one of the boxcars one night while I was walkin' past it on my way down to get another engine since mine had suddenly shut down. Startled the *crap* out of me. Came at me with a piece a board without sayin' a word and I knocked it out of his hands and punched his lights out."

"Did you get the police and have him arrested?"

"Nahh. One of the guys on the crew came by as I was about done tusslin' with the bum and he decided to get his licks in too. Worked him over pretty good. Pulled out his pistol with the guy layin' on the gravel, stuck it in his face, and told him, 'We ever catch you around here again, you're one dead bum!' Needless to say," Percy chuckled, "the bum vanished soon as he got his self up."

"*Damn*. What'd he want, anyway? Was he just nuts?"

"He was gonna *rob* me. More of that than you might like to think. Most of the bums just want to steal your money, but some of them, *damn*, they're just plain crazy."

"Yeah, that's pretty much what you guys were telling me the other day."

“That’s right. Mind what I tell you, Buster, and carry a spike in your back pocket those times you work at night.”

“You can *bet* I will. Well, what about *good* times? I imagine you’ve had plenty of those, haven’t you?”

Percy once again raised a cheek, and after laughing, apologized for his manners and answered Buster’s question.

“Ohhh yeah,” he started with a big grin. “Had me a Kansas City Kitty one time.”

“What’s that?”

“That was the time I was up north, up in your neck of the woods, with a crew in Kansas City. We’d finished our day, workin’ a train we took up there, and checked in to a nice motel after supper. A gal, a real sweet lookin’ little redheaded thing, came on to me at the restaurant, and so she followed me back to my room, even brought a friend of hers for one of the other guys, and those two went their own way. *Damn* fine time we all had.”

“Had a lot of those kinds of trips?”

“Well, let’s just say I’ve had my share.”

A grin planted on his face, their conversation continued by Percy exclaiming he just had to tell one final story...this one involving a hot night in San Antonio, a Mexican gal, and too much booze.

“It was a crazy night, the kind you laugh about years later. Hot as hell, I mean *really* hot, a hundred and five and humid enough to kink the hair on a mule. My buddy from the crew and I was havin’ some beers at a joint and just mindin’ our own business when this skinny little Mexican man, couldn’t be over five foot tall,

comes over to our table and says he's got somebody that wants to meet us. Tells us her name's Rosie and she can do things for us that no other woman can do. Well, we was gettin' curious the more he talked and the more he described her talents, you might say, and got *real* curious when he says she's about the prettiest thing this side of the border. So, we tell the guy, 'give us a few minutes,' and talk it out among ourselves. When he comes back over to the table, my buddy asks him, 'how much is it gonna cost to experience this pretty thing's talents?' He says, '*she* no whore but you can give donation to her edacation fund if you *like* her.' We was laughin' now, and by this time we'd had a few, gettin' pretty far in the bag, what with the tequila shots we downed with the last couple of beers. So we tell him, 'Okay, what the hell, how about we meet this Rosie,' and chugged down our drinks. We follow him out of the bar and walk over to the motel next door and he asks which room do we have. I tell him I'm in 106 and I'll be waitin' for her inside. Well, Weezer, my buddy, decides he ain't feelin' so good and says he's just goin' to bed...I can have the lovely Rosie to myself. He then went to his room and pretty soon I hear a knock on my door. I open it and find this gal, the little Mexican fella nowhere around, all three-hundred *pounds* of her! She says, 'Hi, I'm Rosie,' and comes in. I could see the sweat pourin' off her and her titties pokin' through her sweaty blouse as she walked past me and made her way to the can. She's in there maybe five minutes then comes out, butt-naked with a big shit-eatin' grin on her face. The air conditioner unit wasn't workin' and all they had was a little noisy old fan. I was hot as all get out, so I take my clothes off and she walks over to me and says, '*My, you handsome.*' I started laughin', thinkin', 'yeah

right,’ and what a scene this was and do I really want to get in bed with this beauty? She says, ‘me sex crazy,’ and all of a sudden grabs me and throws me down on the edge of the bed, flops down on top of me and promptly slides off and falls down on the floor. Banged her head on the night table and yelled out somethin’ about madre somethin’.”

Percy was laughing hard, relating the steamy details of his escapade, Buster laughing along and anxiously waiting to hear more.

“Well, it takes me a minute to get my air back...knocked the wind out of me...and I look down on her, layin’ there sprawled out, moanin’ and all shiny from sweat, and struggle like hell to help her up, tryin’ not to laugh. We get on the bed and start makin’ out, her slick body rubbin’ all around on me. She gets up on top of me, nearly crushin’ me, and says, ‘You like cow poke style?’ Well, by now, I’m really laughin’ my ass off and tell her, ‘*cowgirl* style, not *cowpoke* style’. She says, ‘Okay, you poke me, baby.’ Sometime during the night, I fell asleep. Well, that didn’t last long. She woke me up rollin’ over on top of me again. We slid around for a while and I fell asleep again, no idea how long she stayed or what she did to me when I was out. All I know is, I was sore in the morning. Now, I don’t know if she really showed me things no other woman could show, or whether I was just too drunk to know the difference, but when I woke up around seven with Weezer bangin’ on my door, she’d gone through my wallet and left a note sayin’, ‘thanks baby sorry hurt you.’”

“Man, that’s great, sounds like a *hell* of a time, except for losing your money.”

“Yep, sure was. Thing was,” Percy laughed, “I’d only had five bucks in my wallet...kept the rest in my sock! Good thing I was a *boy scout*.”

Still laughing, Percy picked up his thermos and suggested they hang it up for the day.

Walking over to the shanty, he asked Buster, “You ever been to Paris?”

“No, never been out of the country, except Canada a hand full of times.”

“Paris, *Texas*.”

“Nope, never been there, why?”

“Well, might just be one of those places for *you* to have a good time of your own.

Who knows, maybe you’ll make it over to Nat’s.”

“What do you know that I don’t?” Buster asked suspiciously.

“Let’s just have Dick tell you, that’s *his* job.”

Buster saw the other guys seated in their customary places in the shanty, coffee cups in hand. Almost immediately, Dick looked over at him.

“Tomorrow, we’re doin’ a run over to Paris and then down to Ft. Worth, so you get to take your first road trip. Sound good?”

Percy’s words immediately came to mind. “Absolutely, looking forward to it.”

“It’s two nights, so you’ll need to prepare accordingly.”

“Okay, I’ll have my stuff ready to go.”

Buster looked at the other guys with an accusatory grin. “You guys knew about this, didn’t you?”

“Yep,” Bull replied with a wink.

“Enough for today, fellas, let’s go home, whatta you say?”

The crew clocked out and Buster headed back to the hotel, thoughts of the upcoming days capturing his imagination. He cleaned up and headed over to State Line Bar and Grill to get dinner and relax, hoping to get a beer again and visit with Gloria, the helpful waitress. He sat down at a front table next to where he'd sat before. Gloria came over and greeted him with menu in hand.

“Hey there, Buster, how you doin’?”

He was gratified that she'd remembered his name. It quickly occurred to him, though, that he couldn't remember giving it to her. She asked him what he wanted to drink.

Not sure what to make of her, he answered, “Budweiser, please.”

“Okay, comin' right up.”

Buster plowed through his cheeseburger, fries and beer in short order and paid at the register.

“Thanks again for comin' in, sweetie.”

“Thanks for the good food. Good to see you again, Gloria.”

Heading back to his room, Buster was still trying to figure out how Gloria had come to know his name. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a car coming alongside him, its horn then suddenly blaring out the opening bar of “Dixie” and the driver tossing a beer can onto the sidewalk near him. The guy didn't say a word or slow down as he passed and simply sped away.

Buster lifted a finger in the air. “*Thanks*, asshole.”

The next morning, a cloudless hot and humid day already, the crew loaded their overnight gear in the cab and headed off west down “main 1” with the consist of thirty

cars the overnight shift had made up for them. The schedule called for switching out several businesses along the route to Paris. Throughout the day, Buster's primary responsibility was to tend the switch on the main line while the other guys pulled loaded cars out of the plants' loading zones and shoved empties from the main line back inside in their place. At a few places, they shoved in boxcars with equipment and manufacturing materials the crew had brought along in the consist.

They were well into overtime late in the day when they took care of the last of the plants on the schedule and stopped at Paris. Gathered in the cab to talk about plans for the evening, where to eat was topic one. Chalk suggested they all go have dinner at either Moonlight Diner, where they usually go when in Paris, or try Maggie's Place.

"A buddy of mine told me they got excellent catfish dinners at Maggie's and we ain't been there yet anyway."

"Sounds okay to me, I suppose," Percy commented, "but we'd need to get a lift, of course, if we do that. I could call out to Larimore's and see if he's around to pick us up." He looked at Buster. "Does it matter to you where we go? Course, I suppose you ain't been to any of these places, anyhow."

"Nope, doesn't matter at all. I'll just go wherever you guys decide to go."

Percy climbed off the engine and walked over across a few sets of tracks to a pay phone situated under an overhead light next to a railroad utility shed.

"Buster, as I was tellin' you a few days ago," Dick began, "we got a few rooming houses we stay at over here. Now, you can do whatever you want to but these places are pretty cheap and the folks runnin' them are real nice."

“Well, I didn’t have any idea what I’d do other than just stay where you guys do.”

“All right then, let’s stay at Mrs. Winston’s, just a few blocks from downtown.”

“Sounds good.”

“One of the places Dick’s talkin’ about,” Bull interjected, “is a house owned by a nice young gal, maybe twenty-one or twenty-two. She’s got a nice little place and rents out her spare bedrooms to regular, trustworthy railroad men comin’ through town, somethin’ she’s done for a while now since her husband’s been gone.”

“What happened?”

“Well, she lost her husband in a freak accident with the railroad. What happened was, he was workin’ as a switchman out of Dallas and one night he fell down between two boxcars. It was rainin’ a little and they say he musta lost his footing and slipped just as the cars were about to ram together. *Damn* awful thing...*coupled* to death.”

“Damn, that’s terrible.”

“One of the guys on his crew was maybe only ten foot from him and the guy had just been talkin’ to him, and when he turned around to head back toward the engine, he heard the guy scream. When he got back to him, he was already dead, happened just that fast.”

“*Man.*”

“Yeah, no shit, awful, happened a couple years ago. Goes to show how careful you got to be at all times on this job.”

“I believe you, Bull, it does seem a little scary at times.”

Percy made his way back to the engine within a few minutes. Entering the cab, he announced that they were “shit out of luck.”

“Forget *Maggie’s*, didn’t get an answer. Guess he and the old lady had things to do.”

“All right then, let’s go over to the Moonlight, whatta you say,” Dick offered.

“Let’s do it,” Bull agreed.

The guys made their way on foot down the tracks in the gathering dusk in the direction of several buildings and city streetlights that had just come on. Getting to the first street running parallel to the tracks that looked to be one of the main streets in the downtown section, they walked two blocks and could hear country and western music coming from a tavern called Junior’s.

“Got a lotta fine memories in this place,” Bull commented. “Let’s have us some cold ones before dinner.”

Percy immediately replied, “No argument out of me.”

Buster was captivated by the brightly lit multi-colored neon signs hanging in the two large knee-to-ceiling front windows of the joint along with a sign on the door that blinked out the invitation “Come in and get it!”

Buster laughed. “What’re they wanting you to get?”

“A good time,” Bull answered.

“All right, let’s do it,” Percy again enthusiastically voted.

Buster grabbed Percy's arm as he started to go in. "Think they'll have a problem serving me?"

"*Hellll* no," Percy and Bull replied, nearly in unison. Bull gave Buster the familiar jab on the shoulder. "This's a good ol' *country* boy that runs this place."

"Okay then, I'm up for it."

The joint was thick with smoke. Several people were planted at the tables that were scattered around, sipping bottles of beer, laughing, and obviously having a good time. Buster quickly identified the source of the music in the far back of the establishment when he spotted a four-piece band stationed on a low platform.

Seated with arms on the bar top, Buster marveled at all the liquor bottles on the shelves behind the bartender and the four beer taps in front of the patrons a few chairs down to his left. His attention was drawn to an undulating blue lava lamp that was situated at the end of the bar past the taps. He was trying to make out what the tune was that he was hearing and was trying to listen to the lyrics when the barkeeper came over to his latest customers to get their drink orders.

"Hey there, Connie."

"Hey there, Junior."

After Bull ordered a bottle of Hamm's, Buster ordered a Budweiser on draft. Dick, sitting next to Buster, ordered a scotch on the rocks while Percy and then Chalk each said they'd have a bottle of Schlitz.

Bull leaned over to Buster. "Doctor says I oughta take it easy on the drinkin'."

"What?"

“I said,” Bull replied, trying to make himself heard over the music, “my doctor thinks I shouldn’t drink as much as I do.”

“How come?”

“Gout, says it aggravates it.”

“You got gout? What is that?”

“Pain in my heel...pain in the *ass* actually.”

“Suppose you oughta listen to him then, huh?”

“Yeah, maybe. I really don’t get out like this too often anymore, though, so what the hell, you know?”

“Well, guess you have to ensure the domestic tranquility, right?”

“Huh?”

“Got to keep her happy.”

“Ohhh yeah,” Bull chuckled, “don’t you know it.”

“Why’d he call you Connie?”

“Junior’s the only person who does. He was the first guy to call me Bull back in seventh grade.”

“So why Connie?”

The band finished their song, whatever it was, and the room fell relatively quiet.

“It’s my real name. Connie Crumswell Tatum.”

“Short for Conrad, I guess?”

“Nope, and that’s why my buddy here gave me the nickname, that and, well...”

He grinned again and finished, “because of the way I looked in the shower after gym class.”

“Connie Crumswell, really?”

Dick overheard the question and laughed. “His real name really is Connie, accordin’ to his birth certificate.”

“On my DD214 from the service because of it,” Bull added. “Junior felt sorry for me and made sure nobody else knew it. I always figured he earned the right to call me Connie if he wanted to.”

Buster jabbed Bull’s arm. “Okay, buddy, got it, mum’s the word.”

The lead guitarist started some warm up licks. Buster turned that direction, then back when Dick asked, “Buster, you ever been out drinkin’ in bars before?”

“Nope, never have. Had beers with my cousin and my brother and some buddies, but that was while we were out running around in cars, trying to lay low and not be seen.”

“So, out on your own now, gettin’ to flap your wings out in the open, huh?”

“Yeah, really enjoying myself, I have to say.”

Junior brought the bottle orders over, then the scotch and then Buster’s draft and asked if they wanted to run a tab.

“Nah,” Bull replied. “Havin’ some dinner in a little bit.”

The band started up just as Bull was finishing his sentence. It abruptly stopped when one of the members blew some chords.

“I guess I just don’t get country and western music. Maybe I’m just not used to it. Does it grow on you?”

“It’s better if it ain’t played so loud. This band, they call themselves ‘The Texas Roadkill’. They do other stuff, too, besides country and western. They ain’t bad, really, at playin’ that rock ‘n roll stuff.”

“Well, that’s *my* kind of music. Guess *you* grew up listening to swing and big bands.”

“Yep, sure did, that’s *my* music.”

Buster noticed that the television set hanging from cables just beyond the corner of the bar was showing scenes of colored people gathered in front of what looked to be a municipal building somewhere. He was unable to make out what was being said on the news report. Bull pointed to the TV screen.

“I think they’re talkin’ about some kinda civil rights thing, something about that Stokely Carmichael guy they been talkin’ about gettin’ released from jail.”

Junior was wiping up some spilled beer on the bar top. He paused, glanced up at the television, then shook his head. He looked at Bull.

“Those niggers’re gettin’ all riled up over in Jackson, or wherever the hell they are.”

The man seated on the other side of Bull apparently overheard Bull’s comment to Buster.

He intrusively remarked, “Yeah, *that’s* that nigger.”

Bull ignored Junior’s remark, turned toward that patron, and replied, “What’s goin’ on there?”

“They’re all up in arms over that niggra, Meredith, gettin’ shot and Carmichael gettin’ locked up over in Mississippi. They shouldn’t a *ever* let that boy in that

college over there in the first place. *He's* the one that started all them problems, if you ask me.”

Without responding, Bull turned back toward Buster, pursed his lips and said, “I just don’t know about the way things’re goin’ in the world anymore. Things used to be so simple.”

“What do you mean?”

“Things used to be black ‘n white.” He caught his pun, grinned, and continued.

“I’m sayin’, the coloreds had their place and we had ours. I ain’t sayin’ it’s right, but really, everybody always knew where the line was and nobody crossed it. Everybody got along just fine.”

“Been a lot of problems down here in the South I’ve read about and seen on television.”

“Yep, race tensions and occasionally somebody gettin’ hurt or killed.”

He tapped his beer bottle several times with his fingertips, almost nervously, looked up at the TV, then around the bar. He took a large drink and swished it around before swallowing.

“Damn shame, I tell you, the way colored people are treated. Goddam awful.

Gotta stop.”

“You ever seen any of that yourself?”

Bull finished off his beer, looked at Buster, and replied simply, “*Lotta* people have seen things.”

He didn’t offer any clarification and Buster let the matter drop.

Percy leaned forward in front of Dick. “Buster, you folks up north got many problems with the coloreds?”

“Well, *I* don’t have any problems with anybody personally. I’ve gone to school with colored people since seventh grade and we always got along pretty well. Of course, they lived in their own part of town and we lived in ours so we were never really around each other much after school.”

“The way it always was down here, the whites had their schools and the coloreds had theirs,” Dick cut in. “Guess maybe that’s why things always used to go so smoothly down here. Makes a big difference, to some people’s way of thinkin’.”

“Well, all I know is, they never did *me* any harm,” Buster replied.

Junior wandered back, stopping in front of Dick, and asked what else he could get for anybody.

“Aw hell,” Bull said, “gimme another. You guys want one more?”

“Yeah, sure, why not,” Dick answered. “We can go have dinner after that.”

Percy rapped the bar with his knuckles. “Sounds good.”

A commercial came on the TV showing a baseball player...a woman was rubbing some kind of hair care product in his hair. Buster wanted to change the subject.

“Any of you guys follow baseball?” he asked.

“Oh yeah,” Dick immediately answered. “I try to follow the Cardinals, been to only one of their games, though.”

“Hey, a Cardinals fan!”

“They’re kind of mediocre right now, though.”

“Guess so, but what the hell, that’s *my* team.”

“Sure, of course.

“I played ball in high school one year,” Buster continued, “and even met Bob Gibson down on the field at Busch Stadium, the *old* Busch Stadium of course, not the one they just opened the other day. He gave us tips on how to pitch and how to cover defense from that position.”

Dick smiled and exclaimed, “Maaan, you’re lucky.”

“*Tell* me about it, met some of the other guys too that day. Doesn’t get any better than that if you’re a young guy who loves baseball!”

“Yeah, you know it,” Dick added. “I’ve never been lucky enough to get down on a big league field, never met any ball players either.”

“Being on that field, I tell you, it’s like nothing else you’ve ever done. It’s like nowhere else you’ve ever been or maybe ever *will* be. Absolutely beautiful, all that green grass and all those seats everywhere, that big scoreboard and those tall light standards. Out there mingling with the guys in their uniforms with the birds on the bat, gives you *goose* bumps.”

Bull smiled, Buster’s comment obviously touching something in him.

“Man...sounds absolutely amazing.”

“Yep. Made me think back to when I was a kid sitting in those same seats watching games.”

Junior was prompt in delivering the drinks. He set them neatly down on napkins.

“Here you go, boys.”

Each guy then settled up with him.

“When we goin’ fishin’ again, buddy?” Junior asked.

“Well, I maybe ain’t got nothin’ goin’ on this weekend,” said Bull. “How about we get out on Sunday?”

“Aw hell, the old lady’s got me goin’ down to her mother’s in Tyler for the weekend.”

“Damn. How about the next weekend then,” Bull suggested.

“Yep, that’ll probably work. Saturday?”

“Don’t know why not.”

“I’ll call you later and we’ll decide where to go. Want to do some catfishin’, so maybe we oughta run down to the lake Clem lives on. Ain’t been there in a while anyway.”

“Sounds great, gimme a call.”

“Okay.”

Percy leaned back in his chair. Buster watched him take a long pull from his bottle. His short, fat fingers looked odd for some reason, sort of like link sausages.

“Never been to a game. Always dreamed about goin’ when I was a kid.” Percy paused, then somberly added, “Never got to.”

“Sad,” Buster responded, staring at his glass of Bud, his mind suddenly miles away.

He had noticed the tattoo of a naked woman on one of Junior’s forearms and one that looked like a globe and anchor on the other. With Junior now at the far end of the bar chatting with customers, Buster asked Bull what the story was of the tattoos.

“Well, Junior was in the Marine Corps in the war. He and I signed up together and did all our trainin’ together. We got a pass and got a little drunk in San Diego, and we decided we wanted to look like men, so we went and got Marine Corps tattoos before we shipped out.”

Looking at the tattoos on Bull’s right forearm, Buster recognized the same globe and anchor he’d seen on Junior’s forearm.

“This here one,” Bull said while moving his left arm across his chest and showing the tattoo of a naked woman from the rear, “I got in Texarkana just before we left for boot camp. My daddy was so proud of me.”

“Looks to be in pretty good shape still.”

“We was both in the South Pacific fightin’ the Japs. *God-awful* time...many of the guys got tore up pretty bad.” Staring at his beer with an expressionless look, he continued. “The ones that made it back didn’t have such a easy time adjustin’ when they got home. Some of them *still* ain’t doin’ so good, and that’s been more than twenty years ago.”

“You get hurt any, I mean besides getting shot in the ass?”

“No, I didn’t. Junior made it out all right too,” Bull softly replied, still staring down at his bottle of beer and wiping the condensation off with his fingers.

“Did either of you guys have to shoot anybody...have to kill anybody?”

“Hard to talk about...rather not talk about that, if you don’t mind.”

”Sorry, Bull, didn’t mean to dredge up any bad memories.”

“Yeah, I know...it’s all right.”

“One of my uncles fought in Europe with the Army and another one served in the Merchant Marines,” said Buster. “Another was in the Pacific somewhere. My dad wasn’t in the service but worked for the Pullman Company moving troops around the country.”

“He was lucky, *damn* lucky.”

Strangely, the thought that he might not be here if his dad had been drafted struck him the moment Bull said that.

“Yeah...I’m sure he thought so too.”

Several seconds of silence passed. Chalk gave a light pat of the bar with the palm of his hand.

“You guys ready to go to dinner?”

Dick finished off his drink and replied, “Yeah, let’s get out of here. I’m gettin’ hungry.”

Heading down the street, Dick walked next to Buster and said he wanted to fill him in a little about Bull. They slowed their pace and allowed the others to move ahead.

“Bull had a pretty bad time of it overseas...did some things he ain’t proud of but ain’t ashamed of, if you know what I mean. I don’t think he’d mind me tellin’ you this, but there were times he and his buddies thought they weren’t comin’ home. He was a nervous wreck as a result of bein’ in combat for weeks on end, killed numerous enemy soldiers, some of them up close and hand to hand at times...had him in a hospital for a while.”

“My god, had to be awful.”

“Saw several guys he knew get killed, some of them in very gruesome ways.

Some of those guys he’d gone through trainin’ with and been with all along.”

“I just can’t imagine how bad it was over there,” said Buster, shaking his head.

“Tell you, Bull’s such a gentle soul, wouldn’t hurt anybody. We all feel so bad for him for what he went through. His girlfriend and Lyda Lynn’re friends and she says that sometimes he *still* has bad nightmares and screams in his sleep.”

“Damn, I shouldn’t have opened my big mouth back there.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it, Buster, you didn’t know.”

“No, but still....”

Their conversation ended shortly before they got to the restaurant. Buster noticed the sign hanging from an arm above the front door that identified MOONLIGHT DINER in green neon lights, moths buzzing all around, one of the “Os” being out. A sign in the right window was also lit in green neon and blinked Open. It resembled the In-Town Diner...large plate glass windows surrounding the glass front door and a mostly-unobstructed view of the interior from the sidewalk. The left-side window had a few posters taped to it, one of which announced the “North Texas Rodeo” coming to town next month. Another proclaimed “Eat Out Often in Downtown Paris!” The aroma hitting Buster as he entered at the tail end of the group was divine...meatloaf and homemade dinner rolls, he imagined, maybe pot roast. Whatever it was that was cooking, he wanted!

Percy stopped next to a man who was standing at a table of customers in the center of the room.

“Hey, Virgil, how you doin’?”

“Well hey there, Percy, how you doin’, buddy?”

“I’m doin’ good.”

“Say, how’s your boy? Down in Shreveport, ain’t?”

“Yep. He’s good. Likes it down there okay, I guess.”

“Railroad, right?”

“Uh huh, same line as me.”

“Well, you tell him I said hi.”

“Sure will, take care of yourself, Virgil, and tell the wife I says hi.”

“You bet.”

The brief greeting concluded, Percy and the crew walked to the rear of the dining room near the pick-up window, selected a table, and settled into their chairs. Seated at the end of the table near Buster, Bull looked at him and grinned.

“Forgot to tell you. Rita works here.”

“Who’s Rita?”

“You’ll see,” Chalk interjected from across the table, also with a knowing grin.

“She’s the one Bull was tellin’ you about when we were waitin’ on Percy.”

“Oh yeah, I remember, is she a waitress?”

“Yep,” Chalk replied. “Say, did anybody see what the special was today?”

Just as he finished asking, a waitress spoke up from behind him. “Howdy, fellas.”

Turning, Bull responded cheerfully, “Well *howdy* there, Rita, how you doin’?”

Buster had glimpsed her at first on the other side of the dining room and just couldn’t help following her as she walked over to their table with menus in hand. She had caught him staring at her four tables away and didn’t break eye contact with him all the way to their table. His question had been answered.

She passed out the menus. "Can I get you boys something to drink?"

"I'll take a glass of iced tea, hun," Percy replied.

The others ordered the same thing, leaving Buster to tell her what *he* wanted; and as he sat there, thinking about his choices, Rita's smiling gaze was still locked on him and all he could concentrate on was her amazingly gorgeous presence and how much he was instantly attracted to her. A stunning image...strawberry-blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, hypnotic blue eyes, a smile that lit up the room, pretty complexion, five-five or six carrying an unbelievable figure. She even had a walk that made her light blue uniform look sexy.

Bull patted Buster's forearm, looking like he wanted to bust a stitch laughing.

"Buster...you gonna order something?"

The question roused him from Rita's eyes. He saw the guys staring at him, grinning.

"I'll take some iced tea also, please."

"Okay, boys, be right out with your drinks."

She handed out the menus, then walked away.

Chalk glanced at Buster and asked, "Well, didn't I tell you you'd see?"

"Yeah, you did, *wow*."

"She's really something to look at, don't you think?"

"I sure do, kind of caught me off guard there."

"Yeah, that much is obvious." Dick chuckled at Chalk's comment. "You can put your tongue back in your mouth now."

"Bet you'd rather be stayin' at *her* place tonight."

“Tell you what, Dick, I wouldn’t mind that in the least.”

“Well, you know, when she comes back, we’ll just check and see about it then.”

“Right...yeah, all right.”

Finished looking over the menu, they each ordered the meat loaf dinner when Rita came back with their teas.

“Can I get you anything else?”

“Nope,” Dick replied, “think we’re good.” He looked at Buster. “Buster here’s our new guy and was wantin’ to know if you had a room available tonight.”

Rita glanced at Buster from across the table behind Chalk.

“Sure do. Tell you what, I’m getting off in just a little while and you can go with me when I leave, sound okay?”

“You bet, thanks, that’d be great.” He hoped the smile on his face didn’t look *too* goofy.

Dick and Buster talked about what the following day’s schedule called for and what Buster’s duties would be.

“You’ll ride up with Percy as fireman on the way down to Ft. Worth, and when we get there, we’ll follow the usual drill and cut up the train in the yard. Then we’ll switch out some plants on our way back up to Paris and end up stayin’ over here again.”

“Sounds like a nice full day.”

“The next day might be just as long.”

The thought raced through Buster’s mind that he’d again have the opportunity to have dinner here at Moonlight...and, of course, see Rita.

“Hey Bull, I forgot to ask you again about Nat’s. What’s the deal with that?”

“Never mind, I ain’t goin’ tonight. Too damn tired now.”

“Well, so, who *is* he?”

“Maybe you’ll find out tomorrow night, let’s leave it at that.”

“Yeah, right. Hey Percy, tell me about this Nat, will you?”

“Nah, *he’ll* tell you.”

Percy was playing this like Bull and Buster suspected that neither of the other guys would answer his question either, so he dropped the subject.

The meat loaf, in Buster’s opinion, was outstanding, and the dinner rolls, advertised as homemade, had a marvelous yeasty aroma and taste...nearly as good and satisfying as the ones his grandmother made. Rita brought their checks out and the guys settled up with her.

“A damn fine meal,” Percy exclaimed.

“*Damn* fine,” Buster added, setting a dollar tip on the table.

“Thank you, guys, please come back. Buster, give me just a couple of minutes and I’ll be with you.”

A flush of excitement came over him. “Take your time. I’ll be out front.”

Standing outside near the curb, Dick commented to Buster that Rita has a nice place and will even make breakfast for him...comes with the room.

“Is everybody staying with Mrs. Winslow?”

“*Winston*,” Dick corrected Buster. “Yeah, everybody but *you*. Let’s meet back at the train around eight.”

“Right, I’ll be there before then.”

“Have a good night, Buster, and try to get some sleep, buddy,” Bull remarked.

Buster shook his head, playfully smirking, and shot back, “Of course, what do you take me for?”

“Okay then, see you tomorrow.”

“Right, later.”

The guys said goodnight and walked away. Within minutes, Rita came out the front door, her face beaming with apparent happiness.

She greeted him with, “It’s nice to meet you, Buster,” and held out her hand.

“Same here, Rita, *very* nice meeting you too. My last name’s Gaines. Bull told me yours is Grayson, right?”

“Uh huh.” Her hand still in his, she said, “It’s very nice meeting you, Buster Gaines.”

“And it’s very nice meeting *you*, Rita Grayson.”

A moment of silence hung in the warm summer air. He felt himself being pulled back into her blue eyes. Rita gently, firmly, gripped his hand as if she knew that. He returned her soft overture.

“My house isn’t too far from here.”

He withdrew his hand, not wanting to seem too forward. Instantly, though, he hoped he hadn’t sent the wrong message. His mind, searching for something to say, tried to reconnect with her.

He came up with, “You have a very pretty accent...are you from Paris?”

She smiled broadly again. “No, I’m originally from Dallas. Do you think I sound different than people from over where you are?”

“Texarkana? Yeah, you do, I think your accent sounds softer around the edges, or something like that. You have a very pretty accent. Oh, I said that already, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, you did, thank you. You don’t sound at all like people from around these parts. Where’re you from?”

“St. Louis. I’m working down here for the summer and then leaving for college.”

“I thought about going to college but didn’t have the money, so that was that,” she sighed. “Maybe someday, who knows?”

Within what seemed like only a few minutes, they arrived at Rita’s place, a modest-looking white frame house with potted plants on stands next to the porch railings and plants hanging from the porch ceiling.

Walking straight into the living room, she said, “Make yourself comfortable.

Can I get you a beer or something else?”

“Sure, a beer’d great, thanks.”

Rita put her purse down on a table and disappeared into a back room, then came back into the living room within a few minutes, carrying his bottle of beer and a glass of wine for herself. She handed Buster his beer and placed her glass down on the table next to the couch where he was seated.

“Be right back.”

She again disappeared. Within a few minutes, Rita came into the living room wearing a T-shirt and shorts, her hair now out of the pony tail, and sat down next to Buster.

“*Much* better.”

“It dawned on me that I didn’t think to ask you what the charge is for staying here.”

“Well, you know what, it’s just so nice having company for a change, I mean having someone close to my own age to talk to, that I don’t really want to take anything from you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I really don’t.”

Buster raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure? I was expecting to pay something.”

Rita again said, “Really, I don’t want anything.”

“Hmm, well, I don’t know what to say except thank you, you’re very kind.”

“You don’t need to say anything, you’re very welcome.”

Buster took a drink of his Budweiser and stared at Rita.

“Bull told me about your husband.” He stopped himself, wondering whether he should say anything about him, but went on. “That must have been awful for you when they told you about it.”

“Yeah...it was...happened not long after we’d moved here from Dallas.”

“Two years ago, was it?”

“Uh huh. In a way, it still seems like yesterday, but mostly anymore it doesn’t...I’m really doing okay now.”

“Good, I’m glad you’re all right.”

“Yep.”

Seated beside him, she looked amazing...faded blue T-shirt with a yellow rose emblem, short cut-offs, shoes off.

“What’re you smiling at?”

“Really want to know?”

“Yeah,” she replied, her lips parting to show her straight, white teeth.

“Uhhh, to tell you the truth, I was thinking how cute you look sitting there.”

“You were, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Rita sipped her wine, set it on the table, then asked, “Can I tell you something, Buster?”

“Sure.”

“Well...I don’t know how to say it, really.”

“Tell me, please, I’m a good listener.”

“Okay, the thing is...I don’t want you to think ill of me, or think I’m a certain kind of girl. I haven’t been close to anybody for a long time...haven’t, uh, been in a man’s arms since a few months before my husband died.”

Buster’s pulse suddenly quickened. He could feel his face getting warm.

“Ohhh.”

“Yeah.”

“Were you having problems? Sorry, it’s really none of my business.”

“It’s okay...yeah, we were. We got married very young and I probably shouldn’t have gotten married. Not sure *why* I did, really. I think I *did* love him, and I guess I thought things’d be good.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No need to be.”

Exchanging glances and silently sipping their drinks, Buster's thoughts were flooded by the image of taking this gorgeous girl into his arms. Her blue eyes absolutely sparkling, Rita broke the silence.

She quietly asked, "Do you find me attractive?"

Caught off guard, he smiled and answered, "Ohhh yes...I do."

He wanted to tell her at this exact moment just how much in fact he *was* attracted to her.

"I kind of felt maybe you did, staring at me in the restaurant."

He now felt encouraged to come clean with her. "Yeah, you certainly *did* catch my eye."

"The same with me."

His heart skipped a beat. Those words and her intoxicating smile gave Buster the green light to move closer to her on the couch.

Rita inched closer to Buster, close enough that he could feel her warmth. The sudden touch of her leg against his intensified that warmth and aroused him. Buster put his beer bottle on the coffee table and she leaned into him. Staring into his eyes and putting her hand on the side of his face, she kissed him softly, then firmly as he returned her kiss. Gently wrapping his arms around her, a feeling of euphoria and disbelief washed over him.

She pulled back enough to look into his eyes again, telling him, "It's been a long time...I'm so glad you're here with me."

"You are so gorgeous, Rita."

Just as Buster pulled her close again and their lips met, they were startled by the sound of the Venetian blind on the front door hitting the glass as the door forcefully opened.

“Who’s this,” the man who suddenly entered the living room loudly demanded.

Quickly disengaging from Buster and looking over at the man, Rita responded,

“Damn it, Dexter, what the hell are you doing?”

“Who is this guy?” he again demanded.

“A friend. What’re you doing here?”

“You let a *stranger in here?*”

“He’s *not* a stranger, he’s a friend.”

Buster quickly began trying to size up this guy as he sat there next to Rita, *Am I going to have to fight this guy?* racing through his adrenaline-infused mind. At five-nine and all of one-hundred-fifty pounds, Buster knew he was really no match for the guy’s six-foot, two-hundred-or-so-pound frame. His hands resembled bear paws and Buster cringed at the sudden thought of being on the receiving end of one of his punches.

“Dexter, what do you want? You don’t have a right to barge in to my house, you know.”

“I ain’t never seen this guy, now tell me who he is, Rita.”

Turning to Buster, Rita said, “I’m sorry about this. This is Dexter, my *drunk* ex brother-in-law Dexter.” Still looking at Buster, she continued, “Dexter, this is Buster. He’s with the railroad for the summer, then he’s leaving.”

“Where you from, pal?”

“*Missouri*, if it’s any of your business.”

Dexter came over where Buster was seated on the edge of the couch. He glared down at him.

“Damn, girl, you let a *Yankee in your house*? What the hell’re you thinkin’?”

Rita stood up, pointing her finger at him, and said, “Dexter, you need to leave *now!*”

Buster sprang up and stood face to face with Dexter.

“Yeah. All right. I only come over for Tony’s pocket watch. It was daddy’s and I aim to have it.” He glared at Buster. “Listen, stranger, I don’t much care for people like you.”

“What do you know about me? You don’t know a damn thing about me, Dexter.”

“I know you’re a goddam Yankee, and that’s enough for me to know.”

“Man, your war ended a hundred years ago.”

He squinted and stuck his large finger in Buster’s chest, poking it. “It ain’t *ever* gonna end, long as *I* have anything to say about it.”

Rita took hold of Dexter’s arm. He looked at her.

She said, “I’ll get his watch, and then you need to leave. I don’t want you here. In fact, don’t *ever* come back here.”

She let go of him, walked over to a small desk in the corner of the living room, then returned with a gold-colored watch and chain. Dexter took the watch and mumbled something. He crushed the empty beer can he was holding and looked at Rita.

“I’m leavin’. Maybe I ain’t *never* comin’ back. I don’t like your attitude about things anyway, how you’re always stickin’ up for the niggers and nigger lovers.”

He gestured at Buster. “Like this kind here.”

Rita repeated her demand for him to leave. Dexter stepped away from Buster and walked toward the front door.

“*Screw you!*” Dexter shouted.

He slammed the door behind him and the room became silent. Buster stood there, his knees suddenly feeling weak. He sat back down. Trying to process this scene in his mind, Rita sat down next to him and put her hand on his leg.

“Buster, I’m sorry about this.”

He took a deep breath, trying to shut off the adrenaline. “No need to apologize, it’s okay. He was obviously drunk.”

“It’s *not* all right. I *hate* that.”

“Really, it’s okay.”

“That’s pretty much how he’s always been and I’m just tired of him. He’s not family anymore and I never liked him *anyway*.”

“Well, hopefully he won’t be back tonight to bother you.”

“Honestly, I doubt seriously he will. He’s not happy here and I suspect he’s finally going to move back to Dallas to his mother’s place like he’s been saying for the past couple of years. So, it’s not likely I’ll be seeing him, not tonight or ever again.”

Rita got up and picked up Buster’s beer, taking it into the kitchen. Returning with a cold replacement, she again sat down beside him.

“He only followed us here from Dallas because he was so close to his brother. He left a mechanic’s job, a *good* one, and probably he’ll get back on at that place when he goes home, *if* they’ll have him back, and *if* he can stay sober.”

“He’s still fighting the Civil War, isn’t he?”

“Yep, he sure is...just like a lot of people around here still are.”

“I don’t really understand some people down here, I guess. What is it about them that makes them hate people they don’t even know? I mean, I’ve never *seen* such suspicion or hatred in people.”

“Well, I’ve seen enough of it in Dallas and here in Paris.”

“I guess I’m just naïve, or haven’t lived long enough to understand.”

“I don’t know,” Rita somberly noted.

A stretch of silence followed.

Sitting back on the couch, she again placed her hand on his leg. A faint smile returned to her face. She slowly moved her hand up and down his leg a few inches.

“We’re not going to solve the problems of the world tonight...are we?”

Buster’s pulse quickened. “No, we’re not.”

His mind drifted back to the feeling of Rita’s lips pressing on his...and her scent.

He lightly caressed her leg in return and said, “Know what?”

“What? Tell me.”

“I liked what we were doing before we were so rudely interrupted.”

“So did I. Very much.”

“Well...how about we continue getting to know each other.”

She set her wine down and stood up, taking Buster’s hand. “I’d like that.”

Nothing further needing to be said, they were immediately drawn into each other’s arms, warmly holding one another, and then tenderly kissing. That feeling of blissful disbelief again rushed over Buster and he could feel the same response in Rita.

She led him to her bedroom in the rear of the house. They stopped at the edge of her bed where she kissed his lips.

“I was hoping this would happen.”

“I was too, from the instant I saw you in the restaurant.”

“Good,” she whispered.

Kissing her mouth tenderly, he slid his hands under the back of her T-shirt, running them down and then up her back, feeling her smooth braless skin and whispering into her mouth how good she felt to him. With an aroused breath, she pulled her shirt off and let it drop to her feet, her bare breasts then pressing against his chest. Buster felt like he was stepping into another world, one he desperately wanted to enter, and one he knew would transform him forever.

Knowing it had been a long and sweaty day, Buster suggested they quickly hop in the shower and then continue. She squeezed his hand.

“I’d love that.”

She removed the remaining articles of her clothing, with Buster doing the same. Showering with a girl was an entirely new and wonderful experience for him, something he naturally found enormously sensual and arousing. Rita pinned her hair up, stepped into the warm shower next to Buster and fixed her eyes on his. They kissed lightly, then gently and nervously began cleansing one another, the anticipation of what was about to happen becoming nearly unbearable and building with each touch of the other’s body. When they finished and dried one another off, they made their way back to her darkened bedroom, hand in hand, Buster exclaiming that he couldn’t believe how lucky he was to

be in such a beautiful girl's bedroom. They reached for one another immediately, hands roaming freely, kissing passionately and falling into bed....

Buster had a sense that he was floating, a euphoric dream-like state, as he awakened on his side, glancing at the clock on the nightstand...three-thirty. His thoughts raced back to the passion they had shared a few hours ago. He was aware of the warmth and closeness of Rita next to him, also lying on her right side and breathing softly only inches away from him. Turning over, Buster gazed at her face, gorgeous in the moonlight streaming into the room, and gently placed his hand on her cheek, trying not to wake her but wanting to touch her.

“Hi,” she whispered, her eyes now open and gazing at his.

“Hi...sorry, I couldn't sleep.”

“I know...same with me.”

“You are so incredibly beautiful.”

Without saying anything, she kissed him and scrunched tightly against him, their need once again quickly building with the touch of each other's aroused bare skin. Nothing, he thought, could tear him apart from her at this moment or the rest of the night, and nothing could deny the ultimate climax of their desire for each other once again.

## Chapter Seven

“Can’t wait to see you again.”

“Not sure *what* time it was,” Buster answered with a grin in reply to Bull’s question.

“You don’t know what time you went to bed?”

“No, didn’t exactly pay attention.”

“Well good for you, Buster, good for you.”

“Hey listen,” Buster smiled, “all I’m going to say is I had a wonderful time. She’s a great girl.”

“And how was breakfast?”

“Good. She had blueberry muffins and fixed us omelets.”

“And what about after that,” Bull playfully pressed Buster.

Not answering, Buster simply grinned and changed the subject. “The other guys get tied up?”

Bull chuckled. “Okay, I’ll leave you be. Dick was stoppin’ by a cleaners to drop off some shirts. Chalk was late gettin’ up and Percy oughta be here in a few minutes.”

“By the way, how’d Chalk get that name? It’s a nickname, isn’t it?”

“Yep, friends came up with it in grade school after the nun got pissed off at him in class one day for cuttin’ up and threw a stick of chalk at him. Been Chalk ever since.”

“Man, it’s great you guys got nicknames, *good* nicknames. People don’t seem to go by them anymore. Nobody I know except one guy had one. Called him Weasel because he kind of looked like one. Pretty shitty thing to do, though, calling him that. *I* was the guy that started that. Really wish I hadn’t. Damn mean.”

“Buddy, listen,” Bull replied, “we all got shit in our pasts we regret.”

“Yeah...guess so.”

Buster surveyed the immediate vicinity to see if he could spot any of the others.

“Did Chalk and Percy go to Nat’s last night?”

“*Chalk?* Nah, he don’t go in for that. Not something he’d ever do. Now Percy, *he* does.”

“I gather that Nat’s is a place, isn’t it?”

“Now you’re *gettin’* somewhere.”

“House of ill repute, right?”

“House of ill repute, huh?” Bull chuckled. “Can’t get *nothin’* past you college boys.”

“No indeed.”

Hearing footsteps on the gravel alongside the engine, Buster noticed Percy and Dick approaching and then climbing onto the engine, Percy carrying his green thermos and Dick carrying a clip board with yellow sheets of paper attached. Buster was wanting to get some details about Nat’s but decided he’d get back to it with Bull later on.

“Have a good evenin’, Buster?” Dick asked.

“I did, thanks. How was yours? How was Mrs. Winston?”

“She’s doin’ fine. Told her about you bein’ along this trip and she said she hoped to have you stay with her sometime. Nice lady.”

“Not exactly a Rita, though,” Percy joined in, smiling and winking at Buster.

Buster grinned and shook his head.

“Geezzz.”

Bull stuck his finger up, as if about to announce a point.

“Mrs. Winston’s probably in her late *sixties* by now. Not exactly you’re type.”

Percy was amused by Bull’s comment and added, “Sixties ain’t too old, accordin’ to what you’ve said before.”

“Nah, that ain’t old, that’s just experienced.”

“*Anybody too old?*” Buster playfully asked.

“Hmmm... let me think.” He winked at Buster. “Nope.”

Shaking his head, Dick grinned. “You are something else.”

Chalk stepped into the cab and said, “Well, I see the gang’s all here, how’s it hangin’, guys?”

“Doing good, see you finally got up,” Buster playfully commented.

“A *wise* guy, huh? Now, don’t you look like the cat that ate the canary.”

“He ain’t gonna fess up,” Bull noted with a grin.

“You’re right, not going to happen,” Buster replied.

Dick looked over the yellow switching list and flicked it with his finger. “All right, whatta you say we move out.”

Bull agreed, saying, “Yep, let’s get after it.”

“Buster, you’ll ride up here with Percy, like I was sayin’ yesterday. You’ll fire and the rest of us’ll ride in the caboose. What you have to do is keep an eye out for hot boxes on your side, know what that is?”

“Think so.”

“Good. If you see smoke comin’ from any of the axles, let Percy know right away ,okay?”

“Got it.”

“Normally, Chalk’d be fireman, but I wanted you to have the chance to see what a fireman does.”

“I appreciate that, Dick, thanks.”

“Okay. Before we head out, though, we need to get the hoses hooked up and get the air set in. We’ll take care of that on our way back to the caboose.”

Fifteen minutes later, Dick called the cab on the train’s phone line and advised Percy that all connections had been made and instructed him to cut the air in. They headed out down the track as soon as that was done, Buster settling in to his chair, arm resting on the open window’s sill, and taking in the morning air.

“Beautiful mornin’, ain’t it, Buster?”

“Yes indeed it is. Beautiful day to be going anywhere.”

“So, you got a girlfriend back home?”

“Well, I’ve been dating a couple of girls, one more than the other. Nothing serious, though. How about you? You married, Percy?”

“Nah. Was married twice. The first one, Jean, I married when we was teenagers. Got a son from that marriage. We divorced not too long after we got married, just too young, you know. The second wife, Angie, now she and I was together a good while, up until, that is, she decided she didn’t want to be married anymore. She took up with a young guy and just picked up and left while I was on a run. Took all her stuff, and some of mine, and vanished. My boy told me she was plannin’ that for a year.”

“How’d he know?”

“She and the first wife was friends. Woody, my boy, was livin’ with Jean, his momma, and overheard them talkin’ about stuff the day before she left. That’s when he pieced together, listenin’ in from the next room, what Angie’d been doin’ with that guy.”

“Pretty lousy of her.”

“Well, water under the bridge now. Guess maybe I ain’t exactly been a saint, either.”

Heading around a curve and coming out of a stretch of track bordered by heavy brush and tree cover, Percy suddenly laid on the horn with a long blast as he noticed a car, motionless on the track between the barrier arms at a road crossing about a hundred yards in front of the train.

“*Look* at that idiot,” Percy loudly exclaimed. “Bettcha it’s a guy and he’s got his buddies in there with him.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Probably tryin’ to show how much guts he’s got. You watch, he’s gonna peel out of there soon as I get close to him.”

“What an idiot!” exclaimed Buster.

“Yep, dumb ass punk kid.”

As the train got within thirty or so yards, the driver, who Percy and Buster could then tell was a young-looking guy with a female passenger, quickly accelerated off of the tracks, the car’s rear wheels spitting gravel as it sped away.

“Geezzz, what a stupid thing to do. Dumb ass could have easily killed the two of them,” said Percy.

“I don’t believe what I just saw. You think maybe he just had car trouble?”

“Nah, just a thrill thing with him. I saw another kid do the same thing one other time, stupid idiots.”

“Guess they don’t have anything better to do.”

“Guess not. Wouldn’t his momma be so proud of him.”

A few miles later, Percy dug out his thermos. He filled the small cup lid, then looked over at Buster.

“Coffee?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

He wanted to get back to the conversation they’d been having before the incident.

“So...I heard you say something to that guy in the restaurant last night about your son.”

“Yeah, he’s down in Shreveport with MoPac, workin’ as a switchman.”

“Been with the railroad for a while?”

“Oh, guess maybe nine or ten years now.”

“Does he like it down there?”

“Don’t really know, to tell you the truth. Sometimes he acts like it but other times he’s angry at people down there and angry at the job. He gets all riled up about the railroad hirin’ negroes in one job or another and can’t stand the thought of bein’ around them or workin’ with them.” He hesitated a moment. “Got to admit, I ain’t too crazy about a lot of them myself, either, and maybe they ain’t too crazy about *me*. But, what the hell, the world’s changin’ and I figure we’re gonna be workin’ together sooner or later, so why not at least *try* to get along.”

“Has he had any actual problems with colored people?” asked Buster.

“Yeah, in fact he has. He and one of the guys who works in the yard beat a colored guy pretty bad a few years ago. That guy’d been hired as switchman, just a young guy, and you talk about a hell of a stink in the air; they tried to put the fear in him hopin’ he’d quit. Woody took a pipe to him when they was workin’ midnight and broke the guy’s arm and put him in the hospital. That other guy, he kicked the guy so hard he broke some ribs on him. Goddam awful thing they done to that boy...just tryin’ to do his job.”

“Damn, that *is* awful.”

Percy sipped his coffee and leaned back in his chair, sighing. “My boy’s got a temper on him. He can be downright mean and nasty sometimes.”

“What happened to him after that beating?”

“Locked him up for six months, same with the other fella. The colored kid didn’t go back when he got out of the hospital, but who could blame him?”

“He must have been pretty scared. Was he the only colored guy working there?”

“Yep. The judge down there in Caddo Parish told Woody in court that he had to do *something* about it, because of the seriousness of the crime and how he was hurtin’ race relations by actin’ like such a thug.”

“But he only gave him six months?”

“Yep. Don’t think he really wanted to send Woody to jail but felt like he had to.”

Buster tried to picture Percy’s son as the conversation evolved and was struck with the feeling that Percy and his son were very different from one another. Percy always came across as a warm and friendly person with an even disposition and a guy who gets along with everybody. Percy’s condemnation of his son’s behavior told Buster a lot about him and helped put to rest the question in Buster’s mind about whether there was a side to Percy that he really didn’t want to know about. He doubted that the other guys on his crew could be so different from Percy and still be such close friends. He flashed back to his conversation with Bull, brief though it was, while sitting at the bar the previous evening about the Carmichael affair in Mississippi; he realized he hadn’t heard Bull using any offensive or derogatory language to describe Carmichael or his colored supporters. He realized, on actually thinking about it, that he hadn’t ever heard the other guys using such descriptive language that he’d heard from some others in Texarkana. His crew mates were products of the same environment, basically, as those other people, so why should they not be the same in how they thought about and referred to colored people? He had no ready answer to his question...he just wanted to believe that they were, in fact, different. He thought of those guys as kind and decent toward others and didn’t want anything to change that opinion.

Gazing alternately at passing scenery and the string of cars to the rear of the cab, feet now propped up on a bucket next to his seat, Buster thought about Cleburn Barmes and Luther and wondered what the relationship was that Percy had with Barmes. He sensed he'd been asking Percy a lot of personal questions and hesitated to ask even more...he wanted to satisfy his curiosity, but at the same time, wanted to be cautious in things he asked about or said. Maybe he was just being paranoid. Maybe he'd bring it up some other time. Maybe all of that just didn't matter...he was there simply to do his job and move on at the end of summer. This wasn't *his* world, he once again reminded himself, and he wouldn't be seeing any of these people ever again anyway.

The one-hundred-forty miles from Paris to Ft. Worth passed quickly and uneventfully, with the exception of the thrill-seeker's show of bravado at the crossing. Arriving at the rail yard, Buster was impressed by the sheer size of the layout, the numerous tracks and freight cars spotted all over the place. The phone in the cab rang and Percy reached for it.

“That'll be Dick, sayin' it's time to go to beans.”

“Sounds good to me, getting a little hungry.”

“What we'll do is, park the train and walk over to the greasy spoon across the street from the yard.”

Hearing the words greasy spoon, Buster's memory of the little white brick diner that kids at his high school would frequent after school popped into his mind. It was a place across the street from the high school that had been run by a woman named Mrs. Wright for years and it was where you could go to have a decent burger while listening to her jukebox and hanging out with friends. It was, for good reason, fondly referred to by

the students as “the greasy spoon”. It was also, at times, a place where the “fringe” students, or “hoods”, as they were commonly called, would gather. These kids, of course, liked to hang out, sitting on their car hoods just outside the school parking lot next to “the spoon”. Dressed in their black leather jackets, they reminded Buster of a line of crows perched on a telephone wire. They were a harmless bunch for the most part, and, just like everybody else at school, enjoyed what was offered at the diner. Buster shared these memories with Percy, who seemed to get a charge out of his description of the “hoods”.

The other guys made their way up to the engine in short order.

“Let’s go eat,” Bull announced.

“Yeah, let’s do it,” Dick concurred.

The initial view of Ruby’s Café fit the description of “greasy spoon” in Buster’s opinion...small, old-looking, peeling paint on the exterior brick front, and a sticker on the window next to the door showing the health department had given the joint a B rating. The wall outside on the left had large hand-painted lettering which advertised “Brain Sandwiches”. The paint on the interior walls was badly peeling, the booths had to be twenty or thirty years old, and the grimy stainless steel wall behind the cook’s station didn’t exactly inspire confidence in the safety of the food or what it might look and taste like. The smell of fried food and grease hung heavy in the air. Taking their seats at the counter, the guys were met by the sole waitress, a skinny sixty-something who had tattoos on her hands and neck, oily-looking mousy brown hair, and a pock-marked face. When she opened her mouth to greet them, the requisite image of a greasy spoon waitress was completed in Buster’s sarcastic opinion: no teeth. Didn’t matter, though. They were

only there for a quick and simple lunch, and as long as the hamburger and fries were acceptable and the service was prompt, her appearance was inconsequential.

“She looks like the goalie on a dart team,” Bull sneakily commented to Buster who was seated next to him.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Buster laughingly agreed. “Hope she didn’t hear you.”

“Nah, she’s probably near deaf too.”

“That’s cold, man. She might just spit on your food when her back’s turned to you.”

Bull laughed, then exclaimed, “Oh crap.”

The “goal tender” took her station in front of the guys. “Whatcha fellas havin’?”

Buster took the lead. “Cheeseburger and fries and a Coke.”

“The same,” Dick added, as did the others.

Buster saw her name tag on the breast pocket of her grimy, white uniform. She finished writing down their orders on her little pad.

“Thanks, Sally.”

The corners of her mouth raised, showing her gums. Buster cringed slightly.

“Okay.”

She turned and hung the tickets on a clip above the grill.

“Do in a pinch. Any port in a storm, as they say,” Bull uttered in the same hushed voice to Buster, a little grin planted on his face.

“You really *don’t* have any standards, *do* you?”

“Yeah, I really do, just shittin’ you.”

“Yeah, right.”

Sally brought the sodas over to the guys. "Got the order workin'."

They then watched the cook, a fat colored man dressed all in white with a white apron, cooking their burgers on the greasy grill while tending to their fries in the large deep fryer. Within ten minutes, he handed the guys their orders.

"Enjoy."

The lunch wasn't bad, they all agreed, heading out the front door with Percy belching loudly, followed by Chalk, as an exclamation point, in a rapid one-two fashion.

"Not bad manners, just good food."

"Carbonation," Percy added.

"Well, anybody gonna fart too?" Dick laughingly asked.

"Might could be," Bull responded, grabbing Buster by the arm and jabbing it lightly.

"Get away from me, you old fart," Buster fired back.

"Think I got one in the pipe line for you."

Buster pulled away from Bull's grip. "You raunchy dog."

"Let's get this train cut up so we can get back to Paris for supper," Dick announced.

Rita raced into Buster's brain. "Yeah, I'm all for that."

"Gonna see Rita?" Bull asked.

"Yep."

"Stayin' with her again, I suppose?"

"Yep, that's the plan."

"You're a lucky dog, my man."

“I know, tell me about it.”

“Guess you ain’t goin’ to Nat’s then, huh?”

“Oh, forgot about Nat’s. *Would* like to see that place, but I got my priorities, you know.”

“Don’t blame you.”

The sky had darkened while they were in Ruby’s and Buster knew that if it started raining, he’d have to double his attention and stay focused on what he was doing. His mind replayed the story Bull had told him the previous day about Rita’s husband getting killed in the rain. A chill raced down his spine.

At the engine, Dick took his clip board with yellow sheets of paper and announced what the order for the afternoon would be. Buster glanced at the top sheet and saw that they’d be placing the cars they had brought onto two tracks in the yard.

“Let’s unhook and run down to the shanty for a quick hello to the fellas,” Dick suggested, “before we cut the train.”

“Yeah, been quite a while since we been here. It’ll be good seein’ them,” Percy responded.

Percy climbed into the cab and shut the air supply off. Chalk, in turn, disconnected the hose and uncoupled the knuckle. They all climbed into the cab and Percy ran them down the right side of the yard about a half mile until they arrived at the shanty. It looked pretty much like the one in Texarkana, only slightly larger. Three men stood near the board, which was in exactly the same location here as it was in their home shanty. One of them noticed the crew entering. He stubbed out a cigarette in a metal ashtray.

“Howdy, fellas.”

“Well howdy there, Chad, great to see you again.”

“How you been, Bull?”

“Great, been doin’ great.”

One of the other guys then came over. “Good seein’ you boys again. How long’s it been?”

“Several months, has to be. You doin’ all right, Tyler?” Percy asked.

“Yep, sure am, except for the damn piles actin’ up again.”

“Well, if you didn’t spend so much time parked on your ass, maybe they wouldn’t.”

“You butt hole,” Tyler shot back. “Listen, this here’s Oren, a new fella on the job,” he said, pointing to the third individual, a twenty-something year old colored man.

Dick held his hand out to the man. “Nice meetin’ you, son.”

Taking Dick’s hand, he answered, “Same.”

The rest of the crew, likewise, greeted the guy.

Tyler offered coffee to the visitors. After Buster and Dick declined, he poured two cups, handing them to Percy and Chalk. Chad walked over next to Dick.

“Come on out in the yard, want to talk to you.”

Buster tagged along, wanting to survey the yard.

Lighting up a cigarette, Chad looked back in the direction of the shanty, then back to Dick.

“Guess you saw the new guy’s colored.”

“Yeah...of *course* I noticed. How’s he doin’?”

“So far okay. Only been here a few months, so time’ll tell if he can learn the job. You know negroes, kinda slow pickin’ up on things. He ain’t given us no troubles yet, but I’m keepin’ a close eye on him.”

Standing nearby, Buster easily overheard what was being said and was shocked by the man’s words.

Disapproval in his voice, Dick snapped back, “He’ll do just fine, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, well I hope so. I don’t want no trouble like I’ve heard other guys’ve had.”

“Wouldn’t worry about that.” Dick turned to Buster, then back to Chad. “Listen, we need to get goin’.”

“Why such a hurry?”

“Need to finish up here and get back to Paris.”

“All right, was nice visitin’ with you.”

“Same here. Catch you next time over, maybe.”

“Sure.”

Buster right behind him, Dick went back inside and abruptly told the guys they were leaving. His demeanor was markedly different than a few minutes earlier.

“Let’s get the heck out of here.”

“What’s up?” Bull asked.

“Just don’t like the *crap* I hear around here.”

Chad caught the comment and cocked his head. Bull took Dick by the arm and escorted him outside.

“What’s *that* mean?”

They started across a couple of tracks toward the engine. Dick stopped and looked around, glaring back in the direction of the shanty.

“Never mind.”

“I can guess. Chad’s got a foul mouth, as I remember. He was goin’ off to you about that new fella bein’ colored, wasn’t he?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, we don’t have to *work* with him, at least. He can keep his asinine Klan self over *here*, far as *we’re* concerned.”

“Damn straight.”

The sky continued to darken as they got back in the cab and began heading back to the train. By the time they’d hooked on to the lead boxcar, a light rain had started, enough to make surfaces slick.

“Dick, don’t you think Buster oughta stay here in the cab? We can handle cuttin’ up the cars.”

“Maybe so, Bull.”

Buster didn’t like the idea of that.

“Listen, I want to pull my own weight around here.”

“Nah, you just stay dry.”

“I know you’re worried about me slipping off a ladder or something, guys, but I’m okay, really.”

“He worries a little about you, Buster.”

“Well, I appreciate the concern, I really do, but I need to do what you guys do, okay?”

“All right...but please be careful.”

It took less than an hour to break up the train of the thirty cars they'd brought. They'd take twenty boxcars northeast with them for delivery to industries along the way back to Paris, as well as Texarkana.

Dick's crew hooked on their same caboose and cut the air in for the first part of the return trip. At Epsilon Industries in Melissa, Texas, some sixty-miles northeast of Ft. Worth, Buster was given the assignment of riding the lead boxcar on the engineer's side into the plant and guiding the movement to the proper stopping location. He passed the raised-arm-wagging “slow” signal back to Percy as the section of cars was being shoved into the plant, his feet perched carefully on the lowest rung of the car's ladder and his gloved right hand higher up on it. Then, he gave the low-sweeping “stop” signal as the string of cars came to the designated area in the shipping section. The rain continued during the move but wasn't heavy enough to affect his vision. Once again, Rita's husband raced across his mind.

Hopping off the car and wiping the rain off his face, Buster saw a guy about his own age standing at a large open doorway. He saw Buster and walked toward him.

“Hey, how you doing, buddy?”

“Good. Don't care for this rain though.”

“You a summer helper?”

“Yeah. Working out of Texarkana.”

“Same here, just on for the summer. Where you from?”

“St. Louis. You from around here?”

“Nope, Chicago. Staying down here with my aunt and uncle. My parents thought it’d be good if I got out on my own and worked before I went off to college in the fall, so they sent me down here. My uncle’s plant manager.”

“Good deal. Where you going to college?”

“Quincy College in Illinois.”

“Don’t think I’ve heard of it. I’m headed to Central Missouri State in the fall, myself.”

“Don’t believe I’ve heard of *that*,” the guy replied with a little laugh.

Buster heard a short blast of the horn from Percy. He started walking down the concrete loading platform back in the direction of the engine. He turned around.

“Hey listen, nice talking to you. I got to get back to work.”

“Right, take care. Nice talking to you. Good luck in school.”

“You too.”

Stopping at the fourth car, he pulled the pin on the knuckle to unhook the cars they’d brought into the plant and gave Percy the “slow reverse” signal. He hopped on the ladder of the next car and rode it out past the switch where Bull was standing at the mainline.

“Nice job, buddy.”

“Thanks.”

“Not too bad in the rain when you take it nice and slow, wouldn’t you say?”

“Right, just need to take your time and be cautious.”

“That’s right, slow and easy does it.”

They picked up Chalk, standing by the remaining cars and caboose, and hooked onto them. Bull and Chalk hooked up the hoses and Percy cut the air back in. The train made its way to the Keller-Higgins commercial machinery plant in Bonham, Texas where they followed the same procedure, assignment-wise. Percy backed out of the plant when the switch-out was completed, crossed back over Bull's switch, then hooked up to the cars they'd dragged out. Once the air was cut in, Dick told Buster he'd ride in the caboose with Chalk and Bull so he could experience that part of the job.

Setting off east, Chalk was designated as brakeman, and accordingly climbed up into the cupola of the caboose to man his station, his responsibility being to keep a watch out down the train for hot boxes or anything else unusual. Bull and Buster would simply be responsible for taking it easy during the run back to Paris.

"So, Bull, are you married? Or got a girlfriend?"

"Nah, ain't married. Got a girlfriend livin' at my place. Name's Ginny."

"I see. Does she work? Or just keep house for you?"

"She works. She's a checker at a grocery in town."

"At Merchant's Market by any chance?"

"Yep. You mighta saw her there."

"Yeah, I think she checked me out that day I was in there, or at least somebody named Ginny did. I remember you saying you know Sylvia at the diner."

Bull looked at him quizzically.

"Known her for a while, huh?"

"Yeah. Known her a few years, a sweet gal."

“Did you say, or maybe I heard someone else talking about it, that you knew her from Nat’s?”

“No. I said I heard about her from a fella at Nat’s. That guy got acquainted with her, you might say, when he was over there.”

“Oh, so she was *working* there, huh?”

“Yeah, she was.”

“She sure seems like a great gal. Very friendly and gives good advice about things.”

Bull looked puzzled and asked, “Whatta you mean?”

“Well, I just mean, she and I were talking the other day in the diner about how the cook, Grover, had kind of *threatened* me, or given me a warning, about watching myself while I was in Texarkana.”

“He did *what? Threatened you?*”

“Yeah. Damnest thing. I was just sitting there minding my own business, trying to have breakfast, and he serves me my food, then starts asking me questions out of the clear blue, then gives me advice about not causing any trouble.”

“What the hell!”

“Yeah. Like, what am *I* going to do to cause anybody trouble? When I told her about it, she sounded very sorry, a little apologetic, and told me she thought people and things down here aren’t always what they appear to be. Her advice was to keep that in mind while I was in town.”

“Well, sonofabitch, thanks for tellin’ me. She’s a smart gal, knows what she’s talkin’ about.”

“Got to admit, I’ve been a little paranoid because of that guy. Oh, and there was another thing. I was talking to that old colored man at the station, the guy that works there, Sunday morning, when a guy drove up across the street and called me over to his car...pretty much said I shouldn’t be talking to the old man. Said that socializing with colored people wasn’t done down here in the South. The old guy told me that that man works for the mayor.”

“Mayor *Tabor*, no shit?” Bull asked incredulously.

“Yep. He also told me the man knew I wasn’t from Texarkana. Don’t know how he knew that.”

Chalk leaned down from the cupola and asked Buster to come over.

“Heard what you was talkin’ about. Want to tell you something. That old colored man’s a decent fella, wouldn’t harm a flea. Works his tail off and all he gets for his efforts is grief. I know that man you was talkin’ about, sticks his nose in everybody’s business and goes around actin’ like a big shot. He can go to *hell* as far as we’re concerned, so you go on and talk to Luther all you want.”

“I can’t believe it’s such a big deal who I talk to.”

“It is to *some* folks here,” Bull commented. “Some folks’ll *never* be all right with it.”

“What’s that guy’s name?”

“Walter Holmes.”

“Truly astounding...never heard of such a thing back home.”

“Maybe not, but you ain’t there, you’re *here*,” Chalk responded.

“Yeah, I know. I need to remember that.”

“Buster, maybe what Sylvia was also tryin’ to tell you was that some folks here take that kind of shit seriously, I mean *very seriously*, and wouldn’t think twice about takin’ a chain or pistol to somebody that acts like it’s okay. What they believe is handed down generation to generation, and that’s just how it is, nothin’s going to change that...at least not *all* of it.”

“I understand how one generation takes on the values of the ones before it, but damn, that doesn’t excuse what some people do, or make it right.”

“No...it don’t.”

Psychology of individual differences flashed across Buster’s mind as he gazed out the window at the flat, featureless landscape. He was trying to impose some reason in regard to why some people are tolerant of those unlike themselves while others are not. He recalled hearing about this area of psychology in a class he took this past year, though he really didn’t picture himself as a “junior psychologist” and realized that his knowledge of the subject was so rudimentary as to be worth very little. His train of thought took him to the guys he was working with and how they seemed different from other southerners, to Sylvia and how she could pass as a “Yankee” in his view, to Gloria and how she was still an unknown, and finally to Rita...he and Rita were very much alike, he felt. He suddenly couldn’t keep his mind off of her. He thought back to the words they had said early this morning as he was leaving her house. “Please be careful,” she had implored Buster. “I will, of course...really looking forward to seeing you again when I get back,” had been Buster’s reply to her. With the countryside starting to look more familiar as the train was nearing Paris, he kept hearing her parting statement to him as they kissed one last time on her porch: “Can’t wait to see you again.”

“Relax and enjoy yourself while you’re down here, Buster.”

Bull’s words roused him from his dreamy thoughts. “Huh? Oh yeah, I plan to.”

“So, you seein’ her again tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure you don’t want to go to Nat’s?” Bull playfully asked again.

“Actually,” Buster paused, “I *do* want to go. I want to just see the place.”

“Well, okay then, to Nat’s we’ll go.”

“We need to do that before we go to dinner, though, okay”

“I understand. We’ll just stop in so you can see what it looks like on the inside, maybe meet some of the ladies, then go to Moonlight for supper. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds great.”

Chalk had overheard this conversation, and as he climbed down the ladder from the cupola, Buster could see him smiling broadly.

“Don’t let him get you in any trouble,” Chalk admonished.

“Not to worry. I got other things I’d rather be doing tonight than donating my money at Nat’s.”

“Good for you, buddy,” Chalk replied. “Good for you.”

The anticipation of seeing Rita quickened Buster’s pulse and produced a flush sensation like that which he felt last night sitting on her couch. He wondered if it was as obvious to the guys as he felt it was. Dick and Percy met up with the others near the caboose. Dick greeted them.

“Guys ready to go to supper?”

“Bull’s takin’ Buster by Nat’s first so he can take a peek at it, then they’ll meet us at Moonlight,” Chalk announced.

Percy chuckled.

“Aw hell, we’ll *all* tag along. It’ll be fun seein’ Buster’s face walkin’ inside.”

“Oh, all right,” Dick agreed. “Why not?”

“Well, glad I can be a source of amusement for you guys.”

Nat’s was only a short distance on the other side of the tracks from the downtown section. Crossing the tracks behind the caboose, the heat could be seen radiating off the steel rails in the late afternoon sun. The humidity was oppressive, felt higher than it had all day, and that familiar smell of creosote and chemicals seemed even stronger as well.

Three houses from the end of the quiet, tree-lined dead-end street running perpendicular to the tracks was a large, two-story white frame residence with a wide porch and swing hanging on chains. The place, at least from the outside, looked immaculately kept...the grass along the sidewalk was trimmed neatly, the hedges bordering the porch were also, and the small blue sign with white lettering on the porch wall identifying the house as belonging to Nat Williams looked freshly painted. The front Victorian-style door had a tall oval glass with a white lacy curtain on the inside.

“I’m gonna wait out here,” Chalk announced. “Don’t want to be seen goin’ in there.”

“I’ll hang around out here with you,” Dick added.

Stepping up on the porch along with Percy and Buster, Bull rang the doorbell and within a few seconds the door opened.

“Well hi there, Bull honey, long time no see,” a colored woman cheerfully said.

“Hi, Mae, how you been, baby?”

“Oh, I’m still just as fine as fine can be.” She glanced at Percy. “Well if it ain’t that handsome Percy fella. Been too damn long since I seen you, honey.”

“Yeah, lots of other things gettin’ in the way, you know.”

“Well come on in boys and make yourselves comfortable.”

“Mae, darlin’, we can’t stay. We just came by for a minute so our new boy here, Buster, could see the place and say hi,” Bull said, gesturing toward Buster.

She glanced at Buster and exclaimed, “Well, my oh my, ain’t he a handsome young thing. Bet you’s a real tomcat in the sheets. Sure you don’t want to stick around and see what ole Mae can do for you?”

Smiling and feeling as inexperienced as he was, Buster replied, “That’d be great, but we really can’t stay. I’ve heard a lot about Nat’s and just had to come see the place for myself.”

Decked out in a red silk dress with fringe on the hem, high heels, dangly silver-colored earrings, an ample number of rings on both hands, and shiny lipstick to match her dress, she looked like she might be ready to go out dancing or set to take the stage in a burlesque theater. She reminded him of a gal that’d come into town one weekend with a carnival a couple of years back...that particular buxom babe delighted his buddies and him with her twirly pasties in her small stage show in one of the tents.

“Okay, honey. It’s nice to make your acquaintance anyway. Please do come back soon to see Mae, will you?”

“You bet,” Buster replied.

“Anybody else around?” Bull asked.

“LaVennia’s in the back, lemme go get her.”

Mae went to the rear of the house and returned in less than a minute with a startlingly beautiful young light-skinned colored woman dressed in skin-tight white shorts, a sheer pink and white sleeveless T-shirt cut low enough that the top edges of her nipples were advertising themselves, white sandals, and thin gold chain necklace with matching small gold hoop earrings.

“Hi, boys,” the woman said.

“Hey there, honey,” Bull replied.

Percy offered the identical greeting.

She gazed at Buster and smiled. “And who’s *this*.”

“Hi, I’m Buster, nice to meet you.”

She gave him a coy smile and held her hand out. “Same here, I’m sure.”

Taking her hand, Buster reiterated, “Yeah, nice meeting you.”

LaVennia held on to his hand momentarily, staring at him with that solicitous smile as he tried to retract it. She truly would make for some fabulous advertising for the place, he thought, if they could plaster her image up on a billboard coming into town. For a split second, the crazy idea of spending an hour with her popped into his impressionable mind. The word dumbass quickly followed as he returned his hand to his side.

“Ladies, we got to run,” Percy said.

“Yep, let’s hit it,” Bull concurred. “The boys and I are headed off to supper.”

“You be back later on, honey?” she asked Bull.

“Yep, sure enough.”

“Well, good, see you later on then, honey pie,” Mae replied.

“Percy darlin’, you comin’ back later too?” LaVennia asked.

“Yes ma’am, you’ll see me later.”

“Okay, lookin’ forward to it. Want the same thing?”

A wide grin appeared on Percy’s face. “Why sure, that’d be divine.”

The guys walked toward the front door.

LaVennia said, “Nice meetin’ you, Buster.”

He turned to face her. “Same here.”

Just as he said that, she leaned into him and planted a kiss on his cheek. The scent of some unknown, flowery fragrance wafted into his nostrils.

“Okay then,” Bull exclaimed with a wink. “See you later, gals.”

The three walked out and met up with Dick and Chalk in the yard at the street.

“Well?” Chalk asked Buster.

“They’re really something. Didn’t meet Nat, though.”

“Not likely you’re gonna,” Bull answered.

“Why’s that?”

“He’s not among the living.”

“No kidding?”

“Yep. Ole Nat got killed some time back by a group of liquored-up Klan out in the country. Caught him alone as he was drivin’ down to visit a family member in Louisiana, down near Shreveport.”

“*Wow, no shit?*”

Bull picked up a small tree branch off the lawn, tossed it to the curb and replied,

“Uhhuh.”

“The *KKK*?”

“Yep.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No.”

“I didn’t know there *was* a Klan any longer, not really.”

Bull took Buster by the arm, stopping him to answer. “You’re kiddin’ *me*, right?”

“I guess I’ve heard it’s still around in some places, but I never really connected it with anywhere I was in person. Guess I had no idea.”

“Lemme tell you somethin’, Buster,” Bull continued, “Just because you don’t hear about them don’t mean they don’t exist anymore. They’re still around, believe me.”

Bull and Buster continued walking, a few paces behind the others.

“Well, who owns the place then?”

“The ladies, two of them. They own it free and clear.”

“How many ladies live there?”

“Two more, Sharonda and Mona.”

“How’d they come to own it?”

“Mae was married to Nat, and after he died, she had to have help payin’ expenses, so one of the ladies agreed to help out and Mae agreed to put her on the title along with herself.”

“The law ever go after them?”

Bull laughed and answered, “*Hell* no. They know a good thing when they got it.

The ladies take good care of them and everybody’s happy.”

“Amazing.”

“Yep, wonderful deal don’t you think?” Bull quipped with a chuckle.

“Well, tell me something, Bull. What would it cost to spend some time with one of those gals? You know, just in case.”

“Depends on what you want.”

“Oh, guess all I was thinking about was, you know, just straight wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am.”

“Okay, that’ll run you twenty bucks for an hour.”

“Guess other stuff’s extra then, huh?”

“Guess so,” Bull laughed.

They caught up to the other guys at the tracks.

Crossing them, Dick asked, “Satisfy your curiosity there, Buster?”

“Yeah, I did. Those gals are something else. Wonder what the other ones who work there look like.”

“I couldn’t tell you.”

“They’re every bit as eager to have your business,” Percy volunteered. “One of them looks a touch like LaVennia and the other kinda resembles a bull dog in the face.”

“Guess she doesn’t get the same level of business then.”

“Don’t be too sure of that. Any port in a storm, as they say. Some of these old boys livin’ around here ain’t exactly too particular, and some of them are ugly as sin themselves.”

The image of Rita's face occupied his attention as they approached the Moonlight Diner. They were again met by that awesome aroma. Buster scanned the room, trying to locate her. With a mounting feeling of disappointment overtaking him as his efforts failed, questions about whether she was there, or if she had gone home sick, or if she had changed her mind about things gripped Buster as the crew took their seats at a table near the front window.

"You feelin' all right there, Buster?" Bull asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"Don't *see* her, huh?"

"*Rita*? No, I don't."

A waitress approached their table and handed them menus. She looked at Dick, then at Percy.

"Hi fellas, how you doin'?"

"Fine as can be, darlin'."

Taking orders for iced tea, the waitress looked at Buster. "You must be Buster, right?"

Surprised, he replied, "Yeah, I'm Buster."

"Rita asked me to tell you she decided to take the evening off and said to tell you she'd be at home if you wanted to come by her place."

He felt instant relief. "Oh, okay, thanks."

A playful grin on his face, Chalk asked, "Oh man, you got it bad, don't you?"

Buster simply smiled.

"You do, don't you?" added Percy

“Leave the boy be, you old farts,” Dick jumped in.

Buster tried unsuccessfully to remain engaged in the table banter during dinner.

That wasn't going to be possible.

He exclaimed, “Feels like it's been a long day.”

“Yeah. Think you better get to bed early tonight for a change, buddy, get some shut eye,” Bull replied.

“Oh man, here we go again,” said Buster, rolling his eyes.

Moths were flitting all around the sign out front, the neon humming noticeably.

Once again, the late-day heat and humidity assaulted him.

“Night there, buddy boy,” Bull exclaimed. “Tell her we said hello.”

Buster started away. “Yeah, take it easy.”

Along with occasional mosquitoes needing to be swatted aside, the incessant strumming of cicadas accompanied him on his hurried walk toward a second night in heaven. It took all of ten minutes to arrive. Stepping up onto the porch and ringing the doorbell, he could see Rita approaching through the opened blinds on the door, a glass of wine in her hand and a pale green robe hanging loosely around her body.

## Chapter Eight

“What’re we going to do?”

Rita opened the door, her beautiful blue eyes and strawberry blonde hair once again instantly sending a bolt of electricity through him.

“*Hi*, got your message.”

Rita stepped closer to him, saying, “*Hi*, was hoping you’d come.”

“Know what? I thought about you a lot today.”

“Oh yeah? Well that’s good, because I thought about *you* a lot *too*.”

She touched Buster’s face and gave him a short kiss on the lips.

“Love the casual look.”

“Just a little something I threw on.”

She saw how Buster was looking at her. It was readily apparent that the expression on his face was telling her how pleased, how captivated, she’d made him by her appearance.

“Come in. I decided to take off work early so I could straighten up the place. It was kind of a mess last night.”

“It was? I didn’t notice.”

“You’re just being kind. Anyway...I have some beer in the fridge. How about I get you one.”

“That’d be great, thanks.”

Buster’s thoughts raced back to the previous evening, recalling how he’d arrived at this house as an overnight tenant, and how the course of the night evolved in such an unimaginable way. *This* night, however, had been thought out all day in detailed periods of day dreaming, and he was hopefully confident that the same was true with Rita. Music was playing softly from her stereo at the other end of the living room. He recognized the song as one from a Miles Davis album he was familiar with. Rita put her wine down on the coffee table and headed to the kitchen to get his drink. Sitting down on the couch to listen, he watched Rita walking away, eyes glued to her and taken by how sexy she looked in her silky robe and bare feet.

Returning and handing Buster his beer, she set herself next to him.

“How was the run over to Ft. Worth?”

“Interesting, actually. Met some guys on another MoPac crew and, let’s see, had a greasy burger served by a toothless queen at a B-rated joint.”

Rita laughed. “That’s fantastic.”

“And how was *yours*?”

“Oh, same old same old I guess. Things were kind of slow really.”

Rita’s robe opened up as she settled back on the couch, revealing her slender, shapely legs and leaving little else covered. His pump was now quickly priming.

“Like your taste in music.”

“Well good, I’m partial to blues. I like some kinds of jazz also, and, of course, rock music.”

“Exactly like me. How about Dylan?”

“Got Highway 61 Revisited and a couple of Peter, Paul and Mary albums.”

“*Amazing*, same with me, got the same ones.”

“*Really?* We *do* have a lot in common, *don’t* we.”

Her eyes penetrated his, hypnotizing him. “My god you are beautiful. Rita, you are just *so* incredibly beautiful.”

She sat silently, looking at him as if she wanted to say something.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know how to say this.”

“What?”

“I want to tell you, but I’m almost afraid of how you’ll react.”

“What? Tell me, please.”

Apprehension in his voice seemed to register with her.

“I thought a lot about telling you this today while you were gone.” She caressed her wine glass and continued. “The thing is, I said I had thought about you a lot today. Well, the truth is, I thought about you *constantly* today...you haven’t been out of my mind for a minute all day.”

Buster took her hands in his.

“Have I frightened you off now?” she quietly asked.

“I really like how you’re so honest, how you tell me things. You want to know if you frightened me off? Absolutely *not*. To be honest also, you’ve been on my mind constantly today, too.”

Rita withdrew her hands, stood up, and said, “Got a record I want to play.”

She walked over to the stereo cabinet, took Miles Davis off, and replaced it with one that was lying next to the player. Buster immediately recognized a song he’d heard many times before. She walked back to the couch, took his hands, and pulled him up next to her. Holding each other, lips inches apart, they moved slowly in place to “Chances Are”.

“I don’t know why, but I was afraid you were going to say something different.”

Kissing him softly on his cheek, she whispered in his ear, “No chance of that.”

Rita’s robe came untied the rest of the way as Buster kissed her mouth tenderly, his hands roaming over her back and sides and making their way to her breasts. Her hands in return tried to explore him through the barrier of his clothing.

Pausing, she softly said in his ear, “I loved our shower last night.”

“Mmm.”

They stepped into the warm shower and repeated the way they had taken care of each other’s needs the previous evening, finishing with a long, hungry kiss under the stream of water with hands tightly gripping hands before moving to her bedroom.

“You feel so good,” Rita moaned, slowly moving her hips as she lay on her back beneath Buster, gazing up into his eyes.

Once again, he felt like he was in a dream world. “You feel unbelievable.”

According to the bedside clock, it was one-thirty as they lay atop the sheets, quietly wrapped in one another's arms, her head on his chest.

"What are we going to do?"

Knowing exactly what she was asking, Buster paused and replied, "I don't know."

She rose up onto her elbows and stared into his eyes. "All I know is, I don't want this to be over."

"I know, I don't either. I don't know what we'll do, but I...I can't imagine leaving here and never seeing you again."

*"Buster...God, I can't either."*

He was drowning in her eyes, drowning in the moment. "How'd this happen?"

She put her hands on his face and kissed him. "Just happened."

He was overcome with the urge to touch her again. At this moment, he wanted to be closer to her than he'd been at any time before. He felt like he wanted their bodies to meld into one. She climbed on top of him, shadows from the curtains playing on her breasts, positioned herself on him, and looked into his eyes. She smiled as her hands gripped his.

She whispered, "I can't get close enough to you."

"I want to make you happy," he quietly replied.

"You *do* make me happy."

At her kitchen table that morning, they were quiet as they sat and slowly ate the bacon and scrambled eggs she had fixed for them. He didn't know what to say, felt totally unprepared for the overwhelming emotions that were coursing through him. It was

evident, too, that Rita had been taken unawares by their involvement. He wanted to tell her that he had never felt like this before with any girl, that this was so different, but he couldn't say the words.

"I could drive over," she finally said, lifting her eyes and looking at him.

He was relieved that the silence had been broken.

"Would you come see me sometime while I'm in Texarkana?"

"Could I come next weekend maybe? Is that too soon?"

"Are you kidding? I'd *love* to have you come over. Could you maybe come this weekend?"

"I wish I could. I told my mother I'd visit her this weekend. I don't think I could *not* go."

A sinking feeling of disappointment washed over him. "Of course, I understand."

"I'll write to you at your hotel."

"I'd really like that."

Rita got a note pad and pen from a kitchen drawer and Buster wrote out the address of the Savoy. She jotted down her address and telephone number for him. At the front door, they held each other and reassured one another they'd write the next day. He knew he would and was already looking forward to getting her letter. He left after a kiss and began walking back to the train, replaying scenes and words spoken during the night and that morning at the table. He had never spent an entire night with a girl and was feeling a little like he had just "played house". The bright sunshine and already-rising heat made little impression on his consciousness.

Arriving shortly before eight o'clock, he saw that all of the guys had gotten there before him and were enjoying coffee from their steel travel mugs. Dick greeted him.

"Mornin' there, Buster."

"Morning. Wonderful day, isn't it? Howdy, fellas."

"Hey there, buddy, how goes it?" Bull asked with his usual wink.

"Couldn't be better."

"Glad to hear it," Chalk commented.

"You know," Percy started to say, then caught himself.

"What?"

Percy laughed. "Never mind."

"He's heard it before," Bull remarked. "Leave him be."

"Yeah, you're right."

Dick pulled out some folded yellow sheets of paper from his back pocket.

"Headin' back today. Buster, you can ride up here with Percy again. Only got two quick stop-offs, so we oughta be back before long."

"Sounds good."

Chalk, Dick and Bull checked hose connections between the cars on their way back toward the caboose. When Percy received Dick's call on the cab's phone, he started moving the train east toward New Boston. Buster propped his feet up on the bucket next to the fireman's chair.

"Hey Percy, tell me about that guy who works at the station in Texarkana.

Barmes, I think his name is."

"Whatta you want to know?"

“Oh, I guess, how long have you known him? What kind of guy is he?”

“He’s a SOB, *that’s* the kinda guy he is.”

“Why’s that?”

“He’s not a nice man, Buster. Maybe you oughta leave it at that.”

He did.

The crew finished the run back to the Texarkana yard.

Buster walked through the station en route to the hotel, noticing Barmes at the ticket counter, and thought about what Percy had said about him. He wondered what Percy really meant and was left with an unsettling sensation in his stomach.

“Hi, Mrs. Rutherford.”

“You got a letter, Mr. Gaines. Here.”

She handed him the letter, which showed his home as the return address.

“Thanks.”

Buster immediately went up to his room, kicked off his boots, sat down on the bed and opened his mail. It was from his brother, Jack.

*Dear Buster,*

*I guess you’re wondering why I’m writing from home. Well, the job with the section crew in Illinois didn’t work out. We had to sleep in bunks in a boxcar, six of us in there, and they didn’t have any way for us to clean up after work. It was miserably hot and those guys weren’t exactly great guys. To make a long story short, I quit and came home....*

Buster was surprised to hear him say he'd quit his job. He, too, had been expected to work over the summer to help his parents pay for college expenses. That job, however, *did* sound horrible, like something that'd be very difficult to stay with. Buster seriously doubted that he, himself, would have. Jack went on to report that their old cat had died, that brother Reggie was away for the week at youth church camp, and that the parents and their grandmother were doing fine. The news about their beloved pet hit Buster hard...that cat could perform some very entertaining tricks, like rolling over, sitting up, chasing wadded-up pieces of paper, and jumping over your outstretched arms. You could keep raising your arms higher and higher and he would just keep jumping over them until the hurdle was so high he couldn't jump any longer.

He decided to jot a quick note to Jack, his mother, and grandmother in reply. His grandmother was someone who always took the time to sit down and listen to anything and everything Buster and his siblings had to say. She and his other grandmother had been active in the church their whole lives, and both were avid members of the quilting circle. He'd write to her after he got back from dinner and from doing whatever else he thought up to do.

Buster showered, keeping an ear out for anyone who might come in to the room. He felt lonely standing under the spray thinking about Rita and wished he could somehow go back to Paris that night to see her again. If only he had a car...he'd drive over there in a heartbeat. He wondered what she was doing, wondered if she was missing him as well. Judging from all they'd said and done over two nights, he convinced himself that she was feeling the same way, and for some reason, that made things a little better in his mind. He'd see her, after all, in another week when she came over.

The State Line Bar and Grill was crowded with customers when he walked in. Gloria, he noticed, was tending to drinks behind the bar and country music was blaring out. Looking around for some place to sit, Buster spotted a table off to the side against the brick wall and started over to it, passing closely by two girls dressed in tight jeans and tight low-buttoned shirts dancing with each other. One of them grabbed him by the arm.

“Hey fella.”

“Hi.”

“How about a dance?”

“Maybe so. How about in a little while?”

She let go of him.

“Sure, honey.”

Buster took his seat at the two-person table and was greeted shortly by Gloria.

“Well hi there, Buster, how you doin’?”

“Good, doing good.”

“Get you a beer?”

He hurriedly tried to picture beer bottles, then settled on his usual. “How about a Budweiser?”

“Okay. Need a menu?”

“Nah, just bring me one of your killer cheeseburgers and some of those wonderful fries of yours.”

“Okie doke, I’ll get it workin’.”

He thought the two girls dancing looked young, maybe even as young as himself. Every now and then, one of them would glance over at him, and the one who’d

stopped him would wink at him. When the song ended, they walked over to Buster's table, pulled up two chairs from two other tables, and sat down next to him, one on either side.

"Hi, I'm Jessica," the handsy one said.

"Hi, I'm Buster."

"So, you want to dance?"

Pausing to think about it, Buster replied with a laugh, "Well, I don't really know how."

"Aw, come now. *Anybody* can dance."

"Anybody but *me*."

"Well, if you ain't dancin', will you buy me a beer?"

"Yeah, I could maybe do that."

The other girl inched up a little tighter to his table, putting her hand on his knee.

He jerked it away.

"Will you buy me one too?"

"Well...I don't know."

Buster was now wondering where this was heading.

"You here all alone? You wantin' to have some fun?"

He'd never been approached like this. "Yeah...I mean, I'm here by myself."

"Well, honey, whatta you say?"

"What are you asking?"

"You ever partied with two girls before?"

"Wow, no, never have."

“How about it, you up for it, honey?”

“You know, I’m flattered, but I think I’ll pass on it.”

“Aw come on. You look like a workin’ boy. I know you got to have a *few* bucks you might want to spend for some fun.”

He now knew what they were after. He gave the girl a polite smile, then said, “I’ll pass.”

“All right then, honey. We’ll be around if you change your mind.”

The music started up again. The girls got up, went back to the dance floor, and started mingling with a couple of other guys.

Buster knew he was inexperienced in many respects and was amazed that he hadn’t caught on to the girls until one of them mentioned money. He recalled last year when he was on a student trip to New York City and Washington, D.C. One evening, when he decided to explore Times Square, he walked the three blocks from the Woodstock Hotel where he was staying. He was by himself when a burly colored man approached him on the sidewalk and asked him, “You looking for a girlfriend?” He told the guy he wasn’t and continued on his way. It suddenly dawned on him, when he’d walked two blocks away, that the guy was a pimp.

He paid his check at the counter, as always.

“Great burger.”

“Glad you liked it.”

“Good seeing you again, Gloria.”

“Was nice seein’ you again too, Buster. Hope you come back soon.”

“I’m sure I will, thanks.”

In no hurry to get back to the hotel because he didn't relish the idea of sitting alone in his room, he wandered around downtown for forty-five minutes, still alone. He took his familiar place on the couch in the lobby, mindlessly parked in front of the TV and lonely for Rita's company.

The past three days seemed like a dream to Buster. Nothing he'd ever done before felt as momentous, as life-changing, as his time spent with her. No one he'd dated or been involved with meant a fraction to him that she now did. His wanting to see her consumed him now...he felt more alone than ever. Lying in his bed, staring up as always at the dimly-lit, cracked ceiling hoping to sleep, unsettling questions rustled through his mind.

## Chapter Nine

“Sincerely, Buster”

Six o'clock. The alarm startled Buster from his restless sleep, his first thoughts centering on how lousy he felt and how much he missed Rita. He had allowed himself to develop more than casual feelings for her, the kind that weren't wise for a young person who had plans for going off to college many miles from this place. He wondered if she'd maybe want to move up north...he couldn't stay in Texas. This just didn't make good sense...they had only spent parts of a few days together. He suddenly felt trapped, felt like he had done this to himself, no one to blame for his lonely thoughts but himself. Maybe it isn't such a good idea to see her again, he questioned. Maybe he should write to her tonight and tell her what he was thinking. Maybe that'd be a shitty way to say it...he should *call* her to say that. What he knew for sure was, there was no doubt he was going to continue hashing it out in his mind all day today.

Buster got himself together, washed up and headed for breakfast at In-Town. Sylvia looked especially happy today, more radiant than usual he thought. He wondered if he was just imagining this. She greeted him from behind the counter.

“Hi there, Buster.”

“Hey, happy Friday.”

“Yeah, same to you. You got tomorrow off, whatta you got planned?”

“Nothing special I guess.”

Sylvia poured Buster his coffee, placed it in front of him, and reached for the sugar bowl and creamer.

“What’ll you have this mornin’?”

“How about some scrambled eggs and bacon.”

“Okay, that won’t take long.”

She wrote out his order on her pad and placed the ticket at the cook station where Grover was working. She returned and leaned on the counter with both elbows, smiling at Buster, looking like she wanted to continue talking.

“Why are *you* in such a chipper mood this morning?”

“Sometimes things in life just work out like you hoped.”

“Well *something’s* going your way. Feel like telling me about it?”

“Ohh, how about I tell you all about it some other time,” she replied, straightening up. “Don’t want to jinx things.”

Sylvia winked and stepped over to other customers seated at the counter to take care of coffee refills. Buster noticed Grover preparing something on the grill, and within a few minutes, he turned, holding a plate, and walked over to Buster. He put the plate with bacon and eggs and toast in front of Buster and looked at him. He dropped his check on the counter, then walked back to the grill without saying anything. Minutes later, Sylvia made a follow-up coffee visit while Buster plowed through his breakfast. She came back as he was finishing and took his check.

“This one’s on me.”

“Really?”

“Yep. I figured you still haven’t been paid yet and could use a helping hand.”

“Well, that’s incredibly nice of you. I appreciate it.”

“You’re very welcome. Say hi to Bull for me.”

“I will. Thanks again.”

At the station, Luther was out front sweeping the walkway free of some loose gravel and Buster could hear him quietly humming something. He offered his hand.

“Hi Luther.”

Luther didn’t shake his hand, and instead, lifted his head up and glanced around.

He looked at Buster and said, “Mornin’.”

“Doing all right?”

“Um hm.”

“Well good.”

Luther lowered his head and continued sweeping. He didn’t seem comfortable talking, so Buster left. He walked into the station, took a quick look at a few of the old pictures, then walked out the other side to the tracks.

It was hot already, as it’d been every day at this time since his arrival in Texarkana, so he paused while crossing the west-bound mainline to take in the shimmering mirage-like view toward the horizon. There was something mesmerizing, almost enchanting to him about that view. He picked up some small chunks of gravel and threw them in that direction, trying to hit the rails as far away as he could, while listening for the “plink” when he hit his target. He remembered doing this as a kid along with his brothers and neighborhood pals at the railroad tracks four blocks from his house in St. Louis. The memory came to him, also, of poking around a shallow cave dug into the dirt

wall adjoining one of the tracks and imagining bums hiding out in it. He was startled and a little scared when he actually saw a bum one time sitting inside an open boxcar. He finished his reverie and continued on to the shanty.

“Hey, buddy,” Percy said.

“Hey, morning.”

“It’s Friday.”

“Yeah, my second Friday here.”

“You finally get paid this comin’ Wednesday, huh?”

“You bet, need that check.”

Dick came over to Buster and gave him a pat on the shoulder.

“How you doin’ there?”

“I’m doing good.”

“Lyda Lynn was askin’ me about you, wanted to know if everything’s goin’ okay for you.”

“You can tell her my lunches pretty much suck.”

Dick grinned and replied, “I’ll tell her.”

“Seriously, though, I’m doing pretty well, can’t complain.”

Bull stood up from his slouched position, stretched, then retook his seat.

“You look like you’re in a good mood there, Bull.”

“Yeah. I *am* in a good mood. Think I got the dog by the tail.”

“Sylvia was in a great mood too when I saw her for breakfast. Said to tell you hi.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“You want to stop off after work at Sponson’s,” Percy asked Bull.

“Ain’t gonna be able to.”

“Why that’s?”

“Just can’t. Something I need to do.”

“Well what *is* it?”

Bull gave a look to Percy that told him he didn’t want to talk about it.

“Okay, just thought I’d ask.”

“Sorry, Percy.”

”Been a while since you seen some of those boys out there, hadn’t it?”

“Who’s that?”

“You know, Red and Charlie and that moron, what’s his name, Dalton.”

“Oh.”

“Like I say, just thought I’d ask...be something to do.”

“Some other time, okay?”

“No problem.” Percy turned to Buster. “So, you miss that little gal, don’t you?”

“Rita? Yeah I do.” Wanting to change the subject, Buster asked, “You have a good time at Nat’s?”

Smiling like a Cheshire cat, he answered, “Does a bear shit in the woods?”

“Bull, how about you?”

He gave an expressionless glance, then replied, “The usual.”

“Okayyy then.”

Dick gave his customary announcement. “All right, ladies, let’s get after it.”

Like dutiful soldiers, the crew put their cups down and headed out to the engine and the day’s order of business. With a relatively light day, they were afforded the

opportunity to take leisurely coffee breaks in the shanty, on the front steps of the engine, and the cab. This shift was the easiest yet for Buster. They clocked out, one after the other, right at four-thirty.

“You fellas have a good weekend.”

“You too, Dick,” they all replied.

Buster and Percy left the shanty together.

“Anything wrong with Bull?”

“Why you ask, Buster?”

“Well, he just seems a little preoccupied maybe, or something.”

“Guess maybe he is, don’t know.”

“All right. Well listen, have a pleasant weekend and I’ll see you Monday.”

“Same to you, Buster. Try to behave yourself.”

“Don’t know what I could do around here *not* to.”

Percy laughed.

His evening, he decided, was going to be complete with catching a movie. He saw that the Paramount Theater, across the street from the Strand, had “Duel at Diablo” playing. As a kid, he dreamed of being a cowboy and his fascination with it had never really left him...it’d started in the early fifties with Spin and Marty episodes on the Mickey Mouse Club and his heroes soon became the Lone Ranger and Hopalong Cassidy. In turn, the rifleman, the lawman and the bounty hunter followed. Those guys all led rough and tumble lives, always found adventure, always came out on top. His job with the railroad and being out on his own, although a challenging adventure, somehow didn’t match up.

Mrs. Rutherford came in from the next room and stopped him on his way to the stairs.

“Buster, you had a call when you were out.”

Wondering if it might be from his parents, he asked, “Who was it from?”

“She said her name was Rita.”

His heart quickened. He hadn't thought she'd call him...he had just been looking forward to getting a letter from her on Saturday or Monday.

“Did she say she'd call back, or leave a message?”

“No, she didn't.”

It occurred to him that she was planning on going to Dallas this weekend to see her mother, and probably she'd already left and wouldn't be calling again that evening. Disappointed, Buster went to his room and sat down with his stationery and pen to write a letter to her.

*Dear Rita,*

*I got a message that you called me this evening when*

*I was out at dinner. I was so disappointed that I wasn't*

*here to talk to you. I'm very sorry. Tell me how you are,*

*how you're doing, how your job is going...*

He found himself unable to say anything other than small-talk things. He thought again about what he had contemplated doing last night. What should he tell her? What did he even really *want* to tell her? Laying his head on his pillow, he knew on an emotional level what he wanted to say: “I think about you all the time and I cannot wait to see you again.” He wanted to say those things, but didn't.

*I'm looking forward to seeing you next weekend. I'll show you around town, at least the places I've been able to go, and we'll explore other parts of town since we'll have your car...*

He told her about his work, about the guys, and about the movie he'd seen. His words were chosen so as to sound upbeat and he closed by saying he was looking forward to her letter. He signed off simply "Sincerely, Buster."

When he put the letter in an envelope and sealed it, he questioned whether he should tear it up and write her a different one, one being as raw-boned-honest as he could be. That wasn't the wise thing to do, he concluded. He licked a stamp, put it on the envelope and set the letter on the dresser to be mailed tomorrow. He was tired but wished he had somebody to talk to. Mostly, though, he was just tired of thinking. He climbed into bed and fell asleep after an hour of fantasizing about her again and tormenting himself with too many thoughts.

## Chapter Ten

“She told him he’d be sorry if he did.”

When his dream about something, a weird but good something he already couldn’t recall played itself out, the humming and breeze from the fan beckoned him to roll over and dream on. His brain rudely told him, though, that he was hungry and that he had to whiz like a racehorse. It was Saturday and he had laundry to do...and he had to get to the post office.

Breakfast as usual, served by the same waitress who’d given him the slow, unconcerned service last Sunday morning, was taken at the diner. This day was no different. She wore that same frown for makeup, carried that coffee pot around, like it was some precious commodity, without ever voluntarily revisiting his cup, and spoke as unfriendly and sharply as before. He wasn’t as pissed off about all of it this trip, though...he was prepared for the treatment.

He ordered a full breakfast and waited for nearly fifteen minutes to have it brought out to him. His coffee had arrived only a few minutes before, and as he casually polished it all off, he gazed around at the other customers to gauge whether their service was any better than his. It wasn’t...she was an equal-opportunity shitty waitress.

“Give me some more coffee,” he barked out at her as she walked by his table.

Pausing next to him, she replied, stone-faced, “Here you are.”

The blank, sleepy expression on her face suggested to him that she was either hung over or intellectually challenged.

“Thanks.”

His frown would have told her something if she'd either been more observant or sharper.

Nothing...she said nothing back to him...just continued on her way back to the service area. He waited for her to bring him his check, and when it finally came, he grinned and headed to the cash register at the counter. He sorted out exact change to cover the check, plus a dime, and slapped it down on the counter next to the register. Grover turned and eyed him.

“Keep the change.”

Again no response from her, but it didn't matter. He was pleased with himself and smiled on his way out the door, muttering under his breath, “Don't spend it all in one place, you old bat!”

His pillowcase packed with dirty laundry, Buster headed to the Laundromat. He noticed the 84-degree-reading on a thermometer on a store front and figured it shouldn't be too uncomfortable doing his laundry. “Sudsy-Clean” was stretched out in black lettering across two front windows. It was a fairly small place...eight washing machines, four dryers, and a little lounge area with tables and a portable television. It was also at least fifteen degrees *hotter* inside. He got four dollars' worth of quarters from the change machine and bought a small box of detergent from the female employee who looked miserable. Her white cotton blouse, open nearly to the waist, was drenched with sweat and her sleeves were rolled up so high that her bra straps were plainly visible.

Having stuffed his clothes into two machines, he sat down in the lounge next to the front window and picked up the morning newspaper. At the top of page one was the

headline “Sheriff Receives Information Concerning 1964 New Boston Slayings.” The article reported that the sheriff’s office had gotten an anonymous tip relating to a murder that occurred on August 5, 1964. It reported:

“Two individuals had gotten into a fist fight inside the O. B. Patterson Wire Works plant near New Boston two days before the murder. First shift foreman Barton Crawford, a white male aged forty-three, and unskilled laborer Otis Billips, a negro male aged twenty five, began arguing, according to a witness, over Billips’ failure to pay for repairs to Crawford’s son’s damaged automobile. Supposedly Billips ran into Barton Crawford Jr.’s 1959 Plymouth in an intersection in New Boston while running a red light. Crawford subsequently took his car to a local body shop and was given an estimate of three-hundred dollars, then gave the bill to his father who in turn gave it to Billips. Billips at first said he would pay for the damages, but even with continual demands to pay he had failed to do so. Apparently the argument ended where it began at the assembly line but resumed in another area of the plant. A witness, who was identified as Dalton Hinds, said he was working in the storage area of the plant when he heard two men loudly confronting one another. When he went in to investigate he saw Billips on top of Crawford hitting him with his fists. He attempted to break the fight up and was joined by another employee in doing so. He told the reporting deputy that just as he went into the room where they were fighting he heard Billips threaten Crawford. He said Billips loudly told Crawford, ‘I’m going to kill you, you cracker piece of (expletive deleted).’ Billips denied having made the threat and said Hinds lied. Crawford told the deputy he didn’t

know for sure if Billips had in fact said that, but also told the deputy he had been suffering from an ear infection and his hearing wasn't very good."

Buster set the paper aside, walked over to the soda machine, and bought a bottle of Pepsi-Cola. He chatted a few minutes with the employee then returned to his seat and resumed reading the article.

"In the early morning hours of August 5, Crawford was found dead on the far end of the parking lot of a gunshot to the back of the head. Billips' brother, Terrell Billips, told sheriff's deputies that he overheard Hinds talking to another individual at the plant, identified as Levester Ray, and that Hinds told Ray he had found out that his wife had been having an affair with Crawford. Further, Hinds supposedly told Ray he was extremely angry at Crawford because of that and because of the service rating Crawford had recently given him at work. Hinds adamantly denied making any such statement to Ray, and Ray likewise denied he had. No witnesses were located and the only clue to the crime centered on the statements made to deputies by Hinds on August 3 at the plant and by Billips on August 5. Although Billips was considered a suspect in Crawford's murder, no direct evidence was ever found to charge him and no direct evidence was also found to charge Hinds.

"Sheriff Duncan is now telling the press that last evening a female, who he refused to identify, called the department saying she knew who killed Crawford, that the same person was involved in the planning of the Otis and Terrell Billips murders and that she knew of another person who also was involved in the planning of the August 10 murders. She supposedly had not previously revealed

this information out of fear of that subject. Reportedly, that other subject is a local Texarkana man who voluntarily came to the sheriff's office at the request of the sheriff and that following lengthy interviewing he was released pending further investigation. This is the first new lead in the case since late 1964."

He figured he'd do without lunch out of concern for his dwindling funds. Dinner, however, would be had at his usual place.

Buster didn't notice Gloria anywhere when he stepped inside the State Line, and even though it was Saturday night, there were few patrons and no music playing. He picked the familiar table near the front window and was met by someone he hadn't seen there.

"Hi, how you doin'?" the waitress asked.

"Good, how about you?"

"Doin' just fine, thanks for askin'."

Instead of wearing the diner's uniform, she had on bell bottom jeans and sandals. The yellow daisy in her hair, the silver peace symbol earrings, and the peace symbol necklace made her stick out like a visitor from Mars...he could somewhat relate to her. She handed the menu to him.

"Can I get you somethin' to drink?"

"Sure." He considered his choices. "Let me have a Budweiser on draft."

Looking at him closely and pausing, the waitress smiled and responded, "Okay, that's cool."

She seemed so different and he took an immediate liking to her. His hunch was she was a student somewhere, home for the summer. She brought him his Budweiser and placed it on the cardboard coaster.

“I’m guessing you’re a college student.”

“Good guess. I’m a sophomore next year down at LSU.”

“Louisiana?”

“Yep.”

“I’m starting in September up in Missouri.”

“Cool. Where?”

“Nowhere you’ve ever heard of. Central Missouri State.”

“I *have* heard of it actually,” she replied. “Got a girlfriend who goes there. Her parents moved to Kansas City right after we graduated and she picked that school because it isn’t far from there.”

“Right, think it’s only around fifty miles from there.”

“Yep.” She pulled her check pad out of her apron. “Well, have you decided what you might want?”

“I’m tired of cheeseburgers. How about whatever the special is.”

“Chicken fried steak with green beans and mashed potatoes. Sound okay?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll put your order in.”

He sipped his beer and gazed out the window at the vacant sidewalks on both sides of the street with the wide solid-yellow line running down the middle. Ten minutes later, she picked up his order at the server’s window and brought it over to him.

“It’s not what your mama makes, but it’ll get you by.”

Buster gave her statement a little laugh. “Nobody’s is as good as hers.”

She smiled, then said, “Well there it is, enjoy!”

There was something disagreeable, he quickly discovered, about drinking beer with chicken fried steak and mashed potatoes and green beans. Either it was the beer that made the food taste off, or it was the food that did it to the beer...regardless, he couldn’t finish either and was left wondering whether he should hit the john before leaving.

Seated on his bed strumming the chords to a tune he was putting together, he heard a soft knock on his door. Glancing at his watch and seeing it was ten-thirty, he went to the door. Pulling it open, he saw Sylvia standing there, a concerned look on her face.

“*Sylvia. Hi.*”

“Hi Buster, hope I’m not disturbin’ you. Can I come in?”

“Sure, come in. Never expected to see *you* here.”

“You sure it’s okay?”

“Absolutely, come in.”

She walked over to the bed, where she noticed his guitar, and sat down.

“Oh, you play, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m not very good, but I’m motivated to *get* good.”

“Listen, I feel strange comin’ here but I need to talk to you. Somethin’ I need to ask you.” She paused. “Is that okay?”

Buster was caught off guard and answered, “Yeah sure. I’m all ears.”

“Did Bull say anything to you about me yesterday or the day before?”

“No, not really.”

“Oh.”

“Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Hopefully not.” She got up and paced near the bed.

“Maybe you know about me. Maybe you’ve heard some things, about what I used to be like.”

“Not sure I follow.”

“Well, I worked for a time at a place over in Paris owned by a man named Nat Williams. I believe you’re familiar with it. Bull told me Thursday night after you guys got home about showin’ you the place.”

“Okay, yeah, I’m familiar with the place.”

“I met Bull a few years ago through a guy who came in one night while I was workin’ there. Bull and me,” she paused, “we, uh, immediately took up with one another and started seein’ each other on the sly. He was involved with his girlfriend, Ginny, who I’ve known since we were kids, and we kept it secret from her because I didn’t want to hurt her.”

“Oh, he never revealed anything about *that*.”

“No, I know he wouldn’t have.”

Sylvia sat back down on the bed next to Buster and looked at him.

“Anyway, Buster, the thing is, because of the way I’ve lived, I’m not exactly the kind of person to have many *decent*, upright friends, as they say. My old girlfriends won’t even have anything to do with me, and a guy I dated that I thought really cared for me, dumped me when he found out about me workin’

over there. I really don't have *anybody* around here to talk things out with. There isn't anybody I can really trust, and that's what brought me here tonight. You seem like a kind and thoughtful guy, Buster, and I just had a feelin' about you that first time you came into the diner. I felt like I could *talk* to you without bein' judged."

"I'm flattered, Sylvia. I'm glad you came."

"Okay. Well, Ginny called me last night soundin' like she'd been drinkin'. She said Bull never came home after work yesterday. Asked if I'd heard from him."

"I was with him and the other guys 'til we quit at four-thirty," offered Buster.

"He didn't seem like anything in particular was on his mind or botherin' him?"

"No, not that I remember."

"You haven't heard from him, have you? No, you probably wouldn't have."

"No."

"All right."

"You're being very mysterious, Sylvia."

"Sorry, I know." She took a long pause, then continued. "He was going to either call me or come by my place Friday after work like he always does. Ginny works a little late on Fridays so he always calls or sees me. In fact, I can only remember one time when he didn't, and that was when he was real sick with the flu."

"Yeah, that does sound odd."

"Yeah. Here's the thing. He was going to go home yesterday and tell her about me. He was going to break things off with her and ask her to move out. And when things got all said and she'd left, he was going to come over to my place. We've

kinda been plannin' on that for a while, but Bull's been draggin' his feet a little...a hard thing to do, you know, and he didn't really want to hurt her. She's in love with him and can get real jealous at times about stuff. She slapped him not long ago real hard after he joked about seein' somebody on the side. She told him he'd be sorry if he did. It shocked the hell out of him. She's kinda scary sometimes, actually."

Buster couldn't quite believe he was hearing such personal information from her.

This whole conversation was so out of the usual context in which he knew Sylvia.

"How long ago *was* that?"

"Maybe a week ago."

"You think she has any idea about you?"

"I don't know, but I sure wouldn't swear to it. There was somethin' about the way she talked on the phone."

"Different than usual?"

"Yeah." Sylvia looked like she might tear up and took a tissue from her pocket. "I don't know where he is or if he even told her. I don't know what's goin' on, Buster, and I'm a little worried."

"I'm sure he's okay. You'll hear from him pretty soon."

"I imagine so," she responded, slipping her tissue back in her pocket. She composed herself and stood up. "Listen, I'm going to go. I need to leave you alone. This isn't your problem."

"You're not bothering me, really you're not. I'm glad you felt comfortable coming here to talk about it. Let me know when you find out anything."

“I will.”

“Promise? I really want to know.”

“Okay. I will. Thank you Buster, you’re a great guy. Thanks for the shoulder.

Guess I’ll see you Monday for breakfast?”

“Yep, I’ll be in.”

Sylvia opened the door, turned to thank Buster for his concern, and then left.

*Man, that was truly strange, he thought. Wonder what the hell’s going on.*

Buster suddenly realized he hadn’t mailed his letter and decided he’d take it to the post office the next day. He should have done it this morning, and now, it wouldn’t go out until Monday morning...he hoped Rita had been more diligent in sending hers. Buster jotted down in his ledger the recent days’ work activities and the pay he had earned for each. With air pay and overtime, he felt like he was making progress in his savings and looked forward to accruing more of each.

Sunday dawned clear, hot and humid. He stuck to the sheets in his bed as he woke up, even though he had placed the fan closer to him before going to bed and had slept in the buff uncovered. There were many times as a kid that he and his family experienced the same uncomfortable, sticky nights, but there simply was no alternative. They didn’t have window air conditioners, and certainly didn’t have central air conditioning...no one he knew did. It was just the way life was...you took it for granted and dealt with it as best as you could. In his family’s old two-story brick house, which retained summer heat like an oven, his dad would mount the large window fan downstairs in late spring, and at night, close all the windows on both floors except for the windows in the upstairs bedrooms. Buster and his brothers would try to position their beds in front of the two

windows their room had in order to capture as much breeze as they could that was generated by the fan, but it never seemed to make much difference.

Buster turned on his radio and listened briefly to some guy giving the end of a farm report, followed by, "It's now 88 degrees." As he slipped on some shorts and picked up his shave kit to head for the shower, he decided it had to be hotter than that...at least he could linger under the water for a while to feel cool. A woman entered the room as he finished shaving and looked startled when she saw him standing at the sink.

"Oh, pardon me," she said.

"It's okay."

"I was just coming in to take a shower, hope that's all right."

"Sure, that's okay. I'm about to do the same."

"Can you believe how hot it is already?" she asked, opening one of the shower stall doors. "*This is going to help.*"

"Yeah, I know."

She slid off her house slippers and stepped into the stall, closing the door behind her. Buster heard the water come on, and in a few seconds, heard her shriek, apparently from the cold water.

"It feels absolutely marvelous," she loudly called over the door to Buster.

"I bet."

He stepped into the other shower stall and turned on the water, waiting for the proper temperature. *This is really weird*, he thought. He peeled off his shorts and got under the stream, fully enjoying the cooling sensation and thinking about what he might

do during the day. He wondered who this woman was showering next to him and debated whether he should strike up a conversation over the common wall.

“You’re right, it *does* feel marvelous,” he decided to say.

He felt a little odd standing there, naked, talking to a naked stranger only five feet from him. *It wouldn’t feel strange if that was Rita*, he decided. Buster hurried up and finished, drying off and putting his shorts back on before she got done. He left the room without saying anything and finished getting dressed in his room before heading for breakfast.

The diner again had a large Sunday morning crowd, and again he had to wait before getting a seat at a table. His favorite shitty waitress was on duty, only this time she seemed to make a point of getting to him reasonably quickly. She even had a menu in hand along with her coffee pot, and without a word, set the menu down on the table, turned over the coffee cup in front of him, and poured some for him.

“Mornin’.”

Buster was pleasantly shocked. Smiling, he replied, “Morning.”

“Hot, ain’t it?”

He hadn’t ever heard her say so many words. “*Damn* hot.”

“You’re Sylvia’s friend, ain’t you.”

Taken aback, Buster replied, “Yeah, I am.”

He wondered how, or why, she’d figured that out.

“Sweet gal.”

“Yeah, she is. I like her a lot. She’s off today, isn’t she?” he knowingly asked.

“Yep, she’s off Sundays.”

Not looking over the menu, Buster told her what he wanted.

“I’ll put it in, shouldn’t take but a few minutes.”

“Good, thanks.”

He was dumbfounded, wondered why the nice routine suddenly...had to do something with Sylvia, he figured.

She brought his food out in short order, and he hadn’t even had time to drink half of his cup of coffee when she returned with her pot and topped it off.

“Here you are.”

Still trying to figure out her new attitude, he replied, “Thanks much.”

He wondered whether Sylvia had talked to her about her customer service. Surely, “Mr. Warmth”, Grover, hadn’t reprimanded her for it...maybe she just wasn’t feeling good the previous times. Whatever, he took his time enjoying his breakfast and decided he’d be a little more generous with his tip this visit. He left a dollar on the counter at the register in front of her after paying his check.

She smiled gratefully. “Thank you.”

“Well, you’re very welcome. Good breakfast.”

“Thanks, glad you liked it, Mr. Gaines.”

The salutation got his attention...he was stumped by how she might have learned his name. He turned to leave.

“All right, see you later.”

Back in his room, Buster played his guitar for a while, trying to put some kind of finish on the never-finishing tune he’d been tinkering with. He was finding it very difficult to compose anything he was satisfied with, and his frustration just kept mounting

the longer he tried. Picking up the book "True Believer", he started in on it again and got through thirty more pages but soon found that his attention level didn't match the requirements demanded by intellectual curiosity. He tossed the book down.

Just as he was dozing off, he heard a knock on his door. He reluctantly pulled himself off the bed to answer it.

"Hi," the woman said.

"Hi," he greeted Mrs. Rutherford.

"You had another phone call earlier. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner but my daughter came by and took me to lunch and then I forgot about telling you. I'm sorry, Mr. Gaines."

"Oh that's okay, don't worry about it, Mrs. Rutherford."

"It was the same person that called you Friday I believe. This time she said her full name. Think she said it was Rita. Graydon or something. *Grayson*, yeah *that* was it."

That familiar sensation shot through him. "Oh, okay *thanks*. Did she leave her phone number?"

"Yes, she did."

She pulled a written note from her pocket and handed it to him.

"Thanks. Can I place a call on the hotel phone?"

"Yes, as long as it's collect. Come downstairs and I'll dial it for you."

Buster followed Mrs. Rutherford down to the lobby. She picked up the black telephone and dialed "O". She handed it to him, then walked to her room, leaving him

alone. He spoke to the operator and asked her to place a collect call to Rita Grayson, giving her the number he wanted.

Several rings and no answer. He was nervous and was anxious to hear Rita pick up the phone. Finally, on the tenth or so ring she answered.

“Hello,” he heard the operator say. “This is a collect call from Buster Gaines. Do you wish to accept charges?”

“Yes. Yes I do,” Rita loudly replied.

“*Buster, you there?*”

“*Rita. How are you?*”

“I’m doing fine. It’s so good hearing your voice again.”

“I know. I can’t believe I’m talking to you. Listen, I’m sorry I had to call collect. I’m running out of money and the hotel only let me call this way.”

“It’s fine. Really. It’s so good hearing your voice again, Buster. Oh, I said that already didn’t I,” she said, breaking into a little laugh.

There was a long silence and Buster could hear Rita breathing. He could hear *himself* breathing.

“I miss you.”

“I miss *you*,” she replied.

He could hear her sigh.

“How was the visit with your mother?”

“Nice. We had a nice visit.”

“I’ve got a letter for you ready to put in the mail tomorrow morning.”

“*Do you? Did you get mine yesterday?*”

“No. Guess maybe the mail service’s running slow.”

“Maybe so.” She paused, then said, “I wrote it Thursday night. It’s not a long letter, just wanted to say hi and say how much those two nights meant to me.”

Buster thought about his letter and recalled his exact words in it.

“Can’t wait to get it,” he replied, thinking she would read essentially the same message from him.

“So...tell me, where will I stay when I come over?”

“With me. In my room.”

“Cannot wait. I’ve been looking forward to it since Thursday morning when you left.”

“Me too. Guess you know how to get to Texarkana. The hotel’s downtown of course and it’s close to the railroad station.”

“Yeah, won’t have a problem finding you. I should be there hopefully around five-thirty.”

“We’ll hunt up a nice place for dinner, and then Saturday morning, I’ll take you to the diner I’ve been going to since I got here.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

Buster realized the long distance call wasn’t cheap. He wanted to hang on as long as he could but knew he should let her get off.

“I need to let you hang up, this is costing you.”

“I’m okay.”

“I could talk to you for hours...I really need to let you go, though.”

“All right,” she sighed.

There was a long pause, then Rita said, “Buster?...I miss you so much.”

“I miss *you* very much,” he replied, wondering how this call was going to end.

Another long pause followed.

“Buster...I,” she hesitated, “uh...”

“What...tell me what you were going to say.”

“Sorry. I’ll talk when we see each other Friday...okay?”

“All right.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll see you then...have a good week at work.”

“Yeah, you too. Listen, thanks for calling me earlier.”

“Okay...take care...bye.”

“...Bye.”

He thought about what he had been mulling over as soon as he put the phone down. He didn’t want to get any more involved with Rita than he was already...there were going to be too many complications for both of them, and anyway, he was just now starting to experience life on his own. He found it increasingly difficult controlling his feelings and knew the same was true of her...he almost wished she weren’t coming to see him since that was only going to intensify things; but, the thought of *not* seeing her again was not something he wanted to contemplate.

He got up from the chair by the phone and headed out for dinner. Mrs. Morton was her usual cheerful, welcoming self as he entered and stood next to the front check-in desk. With few customers, the air quality seemed better than his last time in, and this time, she didn’t sit down at his table to visit with him...he wasn’t really up for a session on religious talk, anyway.

A waitress came over with a menu, placed it in front of him and asked what he'd like to drink. He was struck by how cute she was and how noticeable her perfume was. Short, petite, and very pretty without any make-up, her pony-tailed red hair looked perfectly in place. After she jotted down his iced tea order and began walking away, he noticed a line running down the backs of her nylons and thought how sexy it made her look. Rita floated into his mind and he found himself comparing the two girls. Five minutes later, the waitress returned and took his order for the Sunday special. When she brought the meat loaf and mashed potatoes out several minutes later, she carefully set his plate in front of him, along with his salad. She walked back to the pick-up window and returned with a basket of dinner rolls.

“Can I get you anything else, sweetie?”

He rather enjoyed the familiarity that southern waitresses practiced with their customers. He wished the ones back home were like that.

“No, think I got everything, thanks.”

“Okay, enjoy your supper.”

His eyes again followed her as she left the table and were drawn to her legs. His mind immediately, however, sidetracked that view when the image of Rita, lying in his arms and kissing him passionately, took control of him and stayed with him throughout dinner.

When he got back to the hotel the same woman he had showered next to came in and sat down on the lobby couch near him.

“Hi,” she greeted Buster.

“Hi. Enjoy your shower?”

She looked puzzled, then said with a smile, “Oh yeah. Sure did, how about you?”

“Yep, was great.”

She reminded him of his uncle’s third wife, Velma...similar face, tight-fitting clothes...something slinky and provocative about her. He wondered what’d brought her here to the hotel but didn’t really care enough to ask. She was reading a paperback book and seemed engrossed in it, only occasionally glancing at the TV, as far as Buster could tell, while he watched the last of the Garry Moore Show.

Reading more pages of his current book back in his room, Buster was roused from his concentration by a knock on his door. He knew who it was. Opening it, he once again saw Sylvia.

“Hey, how *are* you?”

He opened the door wider, inviting her in.

She smiled and replied, “Hey.”

“Come in, was hoping I’d hear from you today.”

“Just wanted to bring you up to date with things like I promised.”

“Good. Have you heard from Bull?”

“Yeah, he came over to my place late last night. He broke up with Ginny Friday right after she got home from work. She didn’t take it well at all, to say the least. She got so upset and pissed off at him she threw a coffee mug at him and hit him above his eye, caused a big gash. He grabbed her to keep from gettin’ hit again and picked her up and tossed her out the front door. Their neighbor was comin’ home and saw him doin’ that.”

“Wow, not good.”

“No, and then she went over to the neighbor’s and called the police on him. They came and picked Bull up and took him to the station. They arrested him but said they weren’t chargin’ him with battery, only peace disturbance.”

“Well *that’s* fortunate.”

“Yeah.”

“Did he tell her about *you*?”

“Huh uh. Here’s the rest of it. He was supposed to call me Friday night when things got done, but like I told you last night, he never did. Well, he told me they had him at the station till after eleven and when he went home he got cleaned up and laid down. Didn’t want me seein’ him like that and decided he’d call me first thing yesterday morning to tell me everything.”

Sylvia got up and drew a glass of water from the sink using Buster’s glass, then sat down. She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

“Early in the mornin’ before sunrise, he got a knock on his door that woke him up. The sheriff’s department deputies were on the porch and told Bull he needed to come with them to the station, that they had information they needed to talk to him about. They put him in a room and two detectives started askin’ him what he knew about the murders of the two colored guys two years ago over in New Boston. Needless to say, he was shocked by their implications that he might’ve had somethin’ to do with it. They told him the sheriff had gotten a call from the district attorney...said the DA received an anonymous phone call from some woman who sounded reliable to the effect that Bull either had somethin’ direct to do with it or was in on plannin’ it.”

Buster remembered reading an article in the paper Saturday telling about a situation just like what Sylvia was describing.

“Damn, I can’t believe Bull would have *anything* to do with something like that.”

“Of course he wouldn’t,” she emphatically agreed. “They wouldn’t tell him who that woman was, but they said they had talked to one of his friends, Dalton Hinds, who told them he was with Bull at Charlie Summers’ house at the time the Billipses were killed. The detectives told Bull they had information that Hinds might have been involved in plannin’ it, so Bull must have also had somethin’ to do with it. They said somebody’s lyin’ and they aimed to get to the bottom of it.”

Buster told her what he’d read in the paper and she said she also had read that article.

“Well, it’s a load of crap, them thinkin’ he had somethin’ to do with it. Just wish we knew who that woman was and where she came up with that nonsense.”

“I’m sure everything’s going to work out okay for him.”

“I know, just bothers me though.”

“I can imagine.”

“He and I haven’t moved in together, not yet anyway. I just felt like he needed some space of his own for a while. He knows I’ll move to his place eventually.”

“I see.”

Sylvia got up and started walking toward the door.

Turning back to Buster, she said, “Uh, listen, I didn’t tell Bull about me comin’ here last night. I didn’t tell him also I was comin’ back tonight.”

“Okay, I won’t say anything to him.”

“It’s not that I think he’d mind.”

“All right.”

She opened the door and thanked Buster for once again letting her talk about things and for being a friend. She gave him a quick hug and peck on the cheek, then left. He sat again on the bed and picked up his Harmony, strumming random chords and thinking about what she had just shared with him.

## Chapter Eleven

“I just know...I’ll explain tonight.”

Around seven-fifteen, Buster strolled up to the front of the diner and saw Sylvia waiting on two customers at a table near the door. She flashed her usual smile at him as he entered.

“Mornin’, hun.”

He hadn’t heard her use that particular greeting before. She had her hair fixed in a loose pony tail, which was something else he was unaccustomed to about her. She walked toward the grill to drop off the customers’ orders, paused briefly, and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Be right back.”

“Take your time.”

She came back over to him, brushing crumbs or something off the front of her uniform.

“So, how are you?” she asked.

“I’m fine. It was nice talking to you last night. Are *you* doing okay?”

“Yep, I am. And thanks again for listenin’ to me. Please tell me if I get to be a bother. I don’t want to be.”

“You’re *not*, believe me. I want you to feel free to talk to me or come visit me anytime, okay?”

“Okay,” she replied with a smile. “Now, what can I get you?”

He noticed a man walking over to the grill and sitting down near the cook, recognizing him as one of the two guys he’d seen in the barber shop who were waiting in the chairs along with him. This guy, he recalled, was referred to as Charlie by the guy he’d told to shut up. Grover turned around when the man said something to him and held his hand out to shake hands. Buster couldn’t make out what they were saying, but their conversation only lasted a few minutes. As the man got up, he noticed Buster and gave a motion with his hand as if offering a greeting. Buster raised his open hand chest-high in reply. Sylvia brought his breakfast over to him ten minutes later and sat down next to him.

“So, you got a busy day scheduled at work?”

“Not sure what we have going on, pretty much different every day.”

“Guess that’s good. Keeps each day a little bit of a mystery.”

“Right.”

“Better let you eat your food.”

She started to get up.

“It’s okay,” he exclaimed, “no need to leave.”

“All right.” She scooted back to the table. “But go ahead and eat.”

“Place is kind of slow this morning.”

“Yeah,” she replied, “but that’s okay, didn’t really feel like workin’ this mornin’, anyway.”

“What do you feel like doing?”

She gave a small laugh, then answered, “I can think of a *million* things I’d like to be doin’.”

“Tell me one.”

She looked at Buster and didn’t say anything for a few seconds. “You want to know?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re curious, aren’t you?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah, I *am* curious.”

“Tell you what, can I come by this evenin’?”

“Uh, sure, that’d be nice.”

“Great. How about I pick you up and we’ll go have supper somewhere.”

“Really? Bull wouldn’t mind?”

“Nah, I wasn’t goin’ over to his place tonight.”

“Okay. You sure?”

“Sure am. He needs some space, like I told you.”

“Well, that’d be great then. Are you planning on letting him know about it?”

“Would it bother you if I did?”

“Not sure. I like Bull a lot and don’t want him getting pissed off at me, though.”

Sylvia laughed, then said, “Buster, honey, that’s not going to happen.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know. I’ll explain tonight.”

“Still, I guess I’d rather you not tell him, okay?”

“Okay.”

Buster caught a glimpse of Grover approaching a few tables away. Moments later, Grover started back to the grill.

“Five-thirty too early?” he asked in a hushed tone.

She leaned forward and whispered, “No, that should work for me. I’ll come up to your room.”

She winked and straightened up.

He smiled. “I’ll be ready.”

Buster was intrigued by Sylvia and whatever it was that seemed important enough to her to save till after work. He liked her company and felt very comfortable with her. He liked how she always seemed glad to see him and wanted to talk to him, and how she always smiled...he loved that about her. He left the diner thinking that he could easily see what Bull obviously saw in her.

As he walked inside the shanty he got the usual greeting from the guys. Getting himself a cup of coffee and sitting down on the bench next to Dick, he immediately thought about the things Sylvia had told him over the weekend. Bull looked like his usual self and was engaged in some kind of conversation with Percy.

“Have a good weekend?”

“Not bad. Got my laundry done at least and pretty much just hung around. How’s Lyda Lynn?”

“Good. She’s doin’ fine.”

As they continued chatting, Barmes walked into the shanty carrying a clipboard. Chalk greeted him. Barmes glanced at him but didn’t reply; instead, he simply gave a small nod, looked around the shanty, and walked back out.

“What was *that* all about?” Buster asked Dick.

“You know who that is?”

“I’ve seen him in the station and talked to him briefly once. He sells tickets, doesn’t he?”

“He’s station manager.”

“What was he doing here inside the shanty?”

“Don’t know. Sometimes he comes around and talks to guys, other times he just drifts around checkin’ stuff out.”

“I heard him one day really getting on Luther when he was trying to sweep up outside the station. Called him a ‘lazy niggra.’”

“That’s Barmes for you.”

“Hates colored folks, huh?”

“Oh yeah.”

Bull overheard them talking and weighed in. “You’re better off stayin’ away from Barmes, Buster.”

“Why?”

“He’s an angry old man, hates most everybody. Can make your life miserable if he wants.”

“*My life?*”

“That’s right. Officially he runs the station, but he acts like yardmaster and runs other things too. He’s got a lot to say about who works here and who gets transferred out.”

“I thought that was somebody *else’s* job.”

“It is, officially. The way it works around here, though, a lot of people listen to what he says and *do* what he says. It ain’t the union or Johnson or anybody else.”

“Who’s Johnson?”

Bull paused, then answered, “You ask a lot of questions, Buster.”

“Well, I’m just curious, that’s all.”

“Johnson’s that guy that’s supposed to be in charge of everything that happens in the yard in this railroad district, the guy that’s supposed to make the personnel decisions and everything else.”

Bull got up and poured himself more coffee then continued as he sat back down.

“This guy likes to treat this place like it’s his personal kingdom. Guys owe him for one thing or another and those fellas are loyal to him and they ain’t the kind you want to mess with.”

Percy joined in. “Buster, like I was tellin’ you, best to just keep your distance.”

“Well, what could he do to make my life miserable?”

“Things happen, leave it at that.”

“*Things?* Percy, you’re being kind of vague.”

“Best you don’t know too much.”

“I don’t get it. He’s just a railroad employee, isn’t he? I mean, it’s not like he’s some kind of elected official or something.”

“Buster, listen to me,” Percy sternly began, “You’re a naïve young fella from someplace else and you’re from some other time. This is the *South* and you ain’t livin’ in 1966. You really ain’t got no idea how ugly some people can be, *do* you?”

Buster was gripped by Percy’s tone. “No...I don’t guess I do.”

“You’ve heard of the Klan, haven’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” Percy paused. “Never mind.”

”What? Tell me what you’re talking about.”

“The man’s part of the Klan, son, he and his buddies.”

Buster got up and poured a cup of coffee for himself.

“*Damn...bad* ass, huh?”

“Me and the boys here like you, Buster, and we aim to take care of you,” Bull responded. “Guess what we’re tryin’ to say is, just stick with us. Don’t get too friendly with folks around here that your gut tells you you shouldn’t, and above all, don’t get sideways with anybody. You’ll be okay.”

“All right...appreciate the advice.” He sipped his coffee, looked at Bull, then Percy. “Strange place, the South.”

“All in what you’re used to, I suppose,” Percy replied.

“I don’t know, I suppose so.”

“They’re tryin’ to keep you innocent, Buster,” Dick said.

“I know, and I’m grateful for everything you guys have done for me, believe me.”

“We’re afraid you probably think of us southerners as redneck Neanderthals. We’re not all like that down here, but I think you already know that.”

“Of course.”

“Okay. Well, we got better things to talk about, like workin’. How about we drop it and go earn our pay.”

Buster set his half-finished cup down and grabbed his gloves.

“That’s why I’m here.”

Dick smiled and said, “That’s one of the things I like about you, Buster.”

“You got your mind in the right place there, kid,” Chalk exclaimed as he got up and walked past Buster toward the door.

“Hope so.”

Bits and pieces of the morning’s conversation occasionally took up Buster’s workday, fueled by his customary triple-decker peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He felt like he was really getting the hang of bullringing, and was even looking forward to doing that at night some time...he wanted to experience as much variety in the job as he could.

Clocking out, he hustled back to the hotel to clean up before Sylvia got there. He finished and went downstairs to wait for her out front on the porch. Within minutes, a shiny Plymouth pulled up and stopped at the curb. She climbed out.

“Hi there, Buster.”

“Hey, how are you? Nice car you got there.”

“Thanks. It’s old but gets me where I want to go.”

Buster stood admiring the bright red 1957 Plymouth Belvedere, complete with the large white stripe running down the side, the fast-sloping roofline, fat whitewall tires, and magnificent huge fins on the back end. This car looked in perfect condition and had obviously been recently washed and waxed.

“Maybe it’s nine years old, but man, you sure take good care of it. It’s beautiful.”

Sylvia smiled broadly and said, “Yeah, it’s my baby.”

“I am so absolutely envious of you. I’d give anything to have a car like this.”

“Well let’s go and I’ll show you what she does.”

They hopped in, and when she fired it up, Buster was even more impressed.

“What size engine?”

“She’s got a 318 cubic inch V8 with dual four-barrel carbs and 290 horsepower.”

“Impressive.”

“This thing’s even got seat belts and an AM-FM radio.” Sylvia slipped it into drive and slowly headed west from the hotel, exclaiming, “I don’t drive fast in the city.”

With all of the windows rolled down, she followed a main drag out of town and got on Highway 67. When they got out into the open countryside, she opened it up...sixty, then seventy, then eighty. Smiling, she glanced at Buster.

She loudly said, “Whatta you think? Smooth, huh?”

Holding onto the wing window post with his right hand and palming the dashboard with his other, he replied, “Pretty boss.”

She continued this pace another mile until the road approached a banking curve at Highway 8. Buster eyed the speedometer and saw they were taking it at fifty miles per hour. She eased off the pedal and completed the sharp left turn, then got up her speed again.

“Where we headed?”

“You’ll see.”

After another couple of miles, she slowed the car and turned off on a gravel road, then continued on until they came to a lake. She pulled over on a small grassy area and stopped.

“Remember when I said I’d tell you this evenin’ what I’d really like to be doin’?”

“Yeah, I do remember.”

She got out of the car and said, “Come on.”

“Where we going?”

“Silly boy,” she answered with a grin.

Sylvia opened the trunk and took out two beach towels, handing one to Buster.

“Follow me.”

“Lead on.”

“This is one of my all-time favorite places to be. I used to come out here with high school friends and skinny dip after school.”

“*Co-ed?*”

“Of course, only way to go.”

She led Buster down a path to a clearing where she set her purse down, then slipped off her sandals. Pulling her T-shirt off, she looked at Buster.

“You goin’ in?”

Self-conscious and a little nervous, his pulse kicked up a notch. “Sure, why not.”

Wide-eyed, he watched as Sylvia took her bra off, then her shorts, and as she paused to wait for Buster to begin disrobing, she smiled at him again.

“Water’s going to be nice.”

“Yeah, bet it will be.”

He pulled off his T-shirt and then his shorts. She removed her underwear, trotted over the coarse sand to the lake, and dove in, leaving Buster standing there, mouth open, trying to decide if he really wanted to strip down the rest of the way.

“Come on in,” she loudly called to him.

“Right...coming,” he said with a tentative voice. “Cold?”

“Not at all, it’s wonderful.”

He finished undressing, walked to the lake, and dove in without testing the temperature.

“Wow, it *is* wonderful.”

He swam over next to her. He felt himself diminishing because of the cold water.

“Great place, isn’t it.”

“Yep, it sure is. Have to tell you, I’ve never done this before.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really, never had an opportunity to do it.”

“You like it, don’t you?”

“I do, a *lot*. What’s the name of this lake?”

“Lake Texarkana.”

Sylvia swam off several yards, then turned and called out to Buster.

“How about we swim a little then lay out before havin’ supper.”

“Sounds good to me.”

His thought as they were getting out had to do with hoping he wouldn’t embarrass himself in front of her. Sylvia, however, didn’t look at him at all as she picked up her towel and dried off before spreading it on the grass and stretching out on it. Buster followed suite and got comfortable on his stomach. She turned onto her side and looked at him.

“Know what else I really like to do?”

He was caught a little off guard by the question and the sight of her large breasts. His imagination instantly began racing.

“What?”

“Funny as it might sound, workin’ around food all day, I love to cook. How about I cook supper for us.”

He refocused his thoughts. “Yeah, sure. That sounds great.”

She rolled over on her back and took in the late afternoon sun. Buster gazed at her prominent features as he got up on his elbows.

“Thanks for bringing me out here.”

She turned her head toward him, smiled, and replied, “You’re very welcome, sweetie, my pleasure.”

“Sylvia, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, ask me anything.”

“I was wondering...you said you used to work at Nat’s. How come you worked over there, I mean, did you need the money?”

“Yeah, I did. My job at the diner wasn’t payin’ so good and there were bills I had to pay.”

“When did you quit?”

“Well, it’s kinda like this. I quit there but sorta stayed in the business on my own for a short time, just a little every now and then to make ends meet. Been a while now.”

“Can I ask how long it’s been?”

“Two years.”

“Have any regrets about it?”

“About gettin’ in the business, or about quittin’?”

“About getting in the business.”

“It was pretty strange at first, a little scary. I hadn’t taken money for sex until I met a gal who was workin’ at Nat’s and she took me over there and introduced me to him. I was workin’ there several nights a week and was makin’ real decent money.”

“Guess it was tempting to stay, huh?”

“In a way. The money was good and I managed to save some, but I never felt like it was somethin’ I oughta be doin’, not somethin’ I really *wanted* to be doin’.”

Sylvia rolled over on her side again and looked at Buster. He was still propped up on his elbows and still admiring the view.

Several seconds passed. “What’re you thinking?”

“Can I ask *you* a question, Buster?”

“Yep, fire away.”

“You ever been with a prostitute?”

“Never have. Never knew any until the guys took me into Nat’s.”

“Ever wanted to?”

“Tell you the truth, it’s never really crossed my mind.”

“No kiddin’?”

“No kidding.”

She continued staring at him with a little smile, then said, “You ready to go?”

“I *am* getting hungry.”

She got up, stood over Buster and stuck her hand out toward him. He extended his and she helped pull him up. She grinned at him when he got to his feet.

“Do I make you uncomfortable, Buster?”

“You did a little at first, not anymore.”

“Good.”

She put her shorts and T-shirt back on, then her sandals. She picked up her bra and underwear and her towel and watched Buster putting his clothes back on. They got back to her car and tossed the towels in the back seat. Sylvia combed out her hair then fired up the engine and drove back to the highway.

“I’m glad you’re comfortable around me, Buster.”

“Me too. Can’t tell you how much it means having somebody to hang around with down here.”

“Do you get lonely?”

“Only sometimes. Actually, I like being by myself.”

“You know what, so do I.”

“Is it going to be hard living with someone...with Bull?”

“Not really sure. I’d be lyin’ if I said I was sure about it.”

Sylvia turned off the highway and drove several blocks north from the downtown area until they came to a small, brown-sided house on Cedar Street near the Trigg Street railroad yard. She pulled into the driveway and parked.

“We’re here.”

Getting out, Buster commented on how cute the house was.

“Thanks, but I don’t own it, just rentin’.”

“Oh. Well, it’s still cute.”

Sylvia unlocked the front door and walked in ahead of Buster, placing her car keys in a glass dish just inside the entry way. He watched her as she walked toward the kitchen and thought how strange it was that he had just skinny dipped with her. Following her into the kitchen, he was handed a bottle of Michelob when she closed the refrigerator. She set a bottle for herself on the counter, then took an opener out of a drawer, and opened his bottle while it was in his hand.

“Do you like spaghetti?”

She momentarily kept her hand on his. Her fingers gently rubbed his hand.

“I do. That what we’re having?”

“Mm hm. I make my own marinara sauce for the pasta. You can keep me company while I fix it.”

Buster leaned up against the counter, enjoying his beer and watching her tend to dinner.

“So you like to cook, huh?”

“Yep, always have, even as a little kid. Momma encouraged me to learn. Of course, it was to her advantage to have me help out in the kitchen.”

Sylvia set her spoon down and leaned up against the counter next to him, taking a drink of her beer.

“You really are a good friend, Buster.”

“Well, thanks, but I’m not sure what I’ve done to earn that.”

“You don’t have any idea.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Sylvia hesitated, then said, “I get lonely, I guess, because I don’t have any real close friends. I just feel like I can say anything to you. You don’t mind me sayin’ things. You accept me for my past and don’t judge me.”

“You told me that the other day. I appreciate hearing you say it. I don’t *try* to be judgmental.”

“You’re very sweet, you know it?”

“If you say so. What about Bull?”

“Yeah, we’re close of course, but it isn’t the same.”

“You two are in love, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, we love each other.”

“Is that the same as being in love?”

“I’m not sure. I do want to be with him, that much I know.”

“By the way, I remember asking you this morning if Bull would get pissed off if he knew you were with me tonight. You said he wouldn’t, and when I asked how you knew that, you said you’d tell me tonight.”

“Right. I’ll tell you over dinner.”

He grinned and exclaimed, “Oh fine.”

“You can wait, silly boy.”

“And that’s another thing, how you call me that.”

“You like it that I do?”

“I do.”

“Well, good. I’ll keep doin’ it.”

Sylvia finished up in the kitchen and carried the bowl of pasta and warm garlic bread to the dining room table while Buster carried their beers.

“Okay then, tell me.”

“Okay. The thing is, Bull and I have an understanding. Part of why I’m hesitant to move in with him isn’t just because I think he needs some space for a while. I like my freedom, and I know he likes his. He still likes to see the ladies at Nat’s every once in a while, and I don’t want to try to stop him. I know they don’t mean anything to him, really, so it doesn’t bother me much.”

“Does he feel the same way about you?”

“About me seein’ other men? Yeah, he does. I realize maybe it sounds kinda strange to you. It *is* strange, I guess.”

“Don’t know about strange, but it is different. Do you tell him when you’ve seen other guys?”

“I don’t *see* other guys. Not sure I’d tell him if I *did* anyway.”

“You don’t see other guys because you don’t want to?”

“Been a while since I’ve known anybody else for that to even be something to *think* about...that’s mostly it.”

“Oh.”

She looked at Buster with a playful smile.

“But I know *you*.”

He was caught off guard again and simply replied, “Yeah, you *do* know me.”

She reached over to Buster and lightly touched his arm. Staring at him, she left it in place a few seconds, then smiled and removed it, picking up her bottle of beer.

Buster was struggling to maintain his composure. “The spaghetti’s wonderful.”

“*Sure you’re comfortable with me?*”

“I *am* sure. I like being with you, a lot. I loved going swimming with you.”

“Me too. We should do that again.”

He gave some fleeting thought to just coming out and asking her if she was coming on to him; but it dawned on him that an experienced woman such as Sylvia wouldn’t beat around the bush, she’d simply lay it out there.

“You know me, huh?”

She grinned at him and answered, “Uh huh.”

“Why the grin?”

“Why do you think?”

“Uh...”

Her grin widened and she said, “Now, do I really have to spell it out for you?”

“No, I’m just playing with you...but feel free to spell it out for me.”

Sylvia gave him a playful look. “Let’s just finish our supper.”

Buster still wasn’t sure what was really going on and didn’t want to make himself sound like a foolish kid.

“Yeah, let’s do that...really love your sauce.”

They sat quietly eating a few moments.

“I’m here if you ever need me, Buster.”

Caught off guard yet again, he replied, “I’m happy to hear that...really I am.”

“Good.”

“You know, the offer works both ways, if you catch my drift.”

He surprised himself by his words as quickly as they slipped past his lips.

“I *do*...and I’m happy you feel the same way.”

Buster went to the kitchen, got two cold beers out of the refrigerator, then returned to the dining room, handing Sylvia hers.

“Got to tell you, makes me a little nervous being here.”

“Why?”

“Bull.”

“Oh. Well, guess that’s understandable for you.”

“Yeah. I’d love to stay, you know, maybe spend the night?”

“Me too.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll run you home after while.”

“Okay.”

No further mention of the subject was made during the rest of dinner...they simply relaxed and enjoyed one another’s company. Sylvia was very inquisitive about Buster and so he answered her questions about his childhood and his family, about girls he had dated, and more about what he hoped to do while in college. She revealed a rather chaotic childhood.

“Things were pretty shitty a lot of my childhood. Daddy was not the nicest person. Momma didn’t really give much of a shit about us, and when she’d start drinkin’, she’d get real mean and slap us girls if we said anything she thought was *unlady*-like. When she was sober, she could be the nicest woman you’d hope to know.”

“Your dad wasn’t nice?”

“My daddy...he, uh...”

“You don’t need to tell me.”

“He molested the three of us girls. Me only once, but my older sister, he messed with her for a few years. My little sister, he did a couple of times until I caught him and threatened to call the sheriff on him if he didn’t stop.”

“Damn, that must have been awful.”

“It was. I hated him. Momma just kept quiet and put up with him.”

Sylvia got up from the table, picked up Buster’s plate and hers, and began walking to the kitchen. She stopped and turned back to him.

“I *still* hate him...I will ‘til the day I die.”

Buster followed her. She looked at him and laughed. “Amazing I turned out so normal.”

She drove Buster back to the hotel. Parking across the street from the entrance, she cut the engine off, then turned toward Buster.

“Something I’d like to say.”

She scooted over to the center of the seat, leaned into him, and suddenly kissed him on the lips to his utter surprise. She pulled back a little and looked at him, and then leaned back in and kissed him again.

“*That’s* what I wanted to say at dinner.”

“Funny, I wanted to say the same thing.”

She smiled and replied, “I *know* you did.”

He had wondered on the drive back from her house if this would happen when they got to the hotel, if either would actually make an overture.

“I’m going to go,” she whispered, then slid back over to her side.

Buster got out of the car and bent down over the open window.

“Thanks for the great dinner, and thanks for the swim. It was *wonderful*.”

“Will I see you in the morning?”

“You will.”

“Good...okay...night, sweetie.”

He watched as she drove off, the glow from the streetlight briefly reflecting off the back bumper of her car and the sound of the V8 engine fading the longer he stared.

Mrs. Rutherford was standing in front of the television adjusting the rabbit ears on top of it, the picture showing nothing but rolling frames and snow. She noticed Buster approaching.

“I hate this TV,” she said. “You any good at fixin’ stuff?”

“I’ll check it.”

He moved it away from the wall and immediately saw that one of the wire leads had come off of the terminal at the bottom back of the set. He asked her for a small screw driver, and when she returned with one, he slipped the lead back under the terminal’s screw and tightened it back up.

“Oh good,” she exclaimed as reception was regained. “Thank you.”

“Glad to help.”

“Oh, by the way, let me get your letter that came late today. Those people at the post office get lazy some days, I tell you. They act like they own the mail sometimes and take their sweet time deliverin’ it to the rightful owners.”

She went to the mail compartment behind the desk and retrieved Buster’s mail. It was Rita’s letter, and when he looked at the neat handwriting on the front with his name and her name, he immediately wished he had been at the hotel to receive it the instant it came in.

He thanked her for the letter and went up to his room to read it.

*Thursday night -*

*Dear Buster,*

*I am going to make this a short letter. When I sat down to write this I had thought I might describe my family for you and tell you some things about work and one thing or another. But I decided that what I really wanted to say was pretty simple and from my heart, so here goes.*

*I know we just saw each other but already I miss you so much. Here it is Thursday and it’s going to be days before I get to see you again. I know I’ll muddle through next week thinking about Friday afternoon when I come over there. I hope you feel the same way about me as I do about you. Is this just crazy?*

*I want to tell you something, even though I know it’s going to scare me to say it.*

*See you Friday,*

*Rita*

*P.S. I'm sorry for being mysterious.*

Buster read through the letter and then re-read it. He tried to imagine her sitting at the kitchen table writing these intimate words, a glass of wine next to her and listening to some jazz album, maybe the same one she had on that night. On his third and final reading of it he kept staring at the closing line.

His gut was telling him what she was going to say to him Friday night. The thought scared him but he wanted to hear her words in person nonetheless. He was tired from the long day, set the alarm clock, turned on his radio, and fell asleep.

## Chapter Twelve

“So much for bustin’ up *our* train.”

At his usual time and in his usual place, Buster started his day.

“Tell you what, why don’t you surprise me today and just bring me what you think I’d like.”

Sylvia smiled, pulled out her order pad, and took her pen out.

“I know what you want.”

She scribbled down the order and walked it over to the prep counter. He watched her lay it as always next to the grill, then noticed Grover, standing next to her, watching him. She stepped away from the grill but Grover took her by the arm, turned her around, and said something to her. Although Buster couldn’t hear what was being said, it looked like he was angry. Their conversation lasted no more than a minute, after which Grover walked to the back room and Sylvia returned to where Buster was seated.

“What was that all about?”

“Nothin’.”

“Didn’t *look* like nothing.”

“Okay, it was about *you*, and it was about *me*.”

“*What?*”

“He asked me who you are and I told him.”

“He asked who I am?”

“Yeah. Thinks I’m too friendly with you, thinks I spend a lot of time *talkin’* to you.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“Don’t worry about it, you aren’t.”

“What else?”

“Well,” she started to say, then looked over where Grover had been standing. “He said he knew you aren’t from around here, that he could tell by listenin’ to us talkin’. I asked him why he was listenin’ in on our conversations and he said this is *his* diner and he’s got a right to know if some damn *Yankee*, as he put it, was eatin’ here.”

“You’re *kidding* me.”

“Nope. He said, ‘I see how you smile at him’ and asked me if I was doin’ business with you. I told him it was none of his damn business if I *was*.”

“Man, that’s crazy.”

“That’s him, he’s Looney Tunes.”

“*Damn*.”

“I’ll fix your breakfast, sweetie.”

Grover came back out to the grill as Sylvia fried some eggs for him. She brought the food over to Buster, warming up his coffee. Their eyes met as she finished.

“Last night *was* nice.”

Her red lipstick sparkled as her words passed between her lips. He was fascinated by her mouth, how shapely it was and how sexy it made her. He glanced over to Grover and saw he had his back turned.

“Yeah, it really was. You *surprised* me.”

“Pleasantly, I hope.”

“Yes indeed.”

“I like bein’ a mystery. That way you never know what’s going to happen.”

“I like that, like it a lot.”

She winked. “Well then, I’ll keep you on your toes.”

“*Do* that.”

Leaving In-Town after finishing his breakfast and getting over to the station, Buster took his time studying the photos again. The one with a group of ladies all dressed up standing on the platform next to a train, seemingly taken in the 1940s, and a similar one taken perhaps in the 1950s fascinated him. They both showed a row of porters standing behind the ladies who had their hats and white gloves on and a conductor standing at the end of the ladies’ row. He thought about his dad especially when staring at the one showing a group of soldiers, along with a conductor, standing on the platform. He wondered if he’d ever made it through Texarkana with a troop train during the war. There were stories he heard as a kid about what his dad had done during the war, but he realized there was so much more he *didn’t* know.

Continuing with the pictures, he noticed a man walking through the station, gloves sticking out of his back pocket, then exiting on the track side. Buster noticed it was seven-fifty and realized it was getting late. Walking out the door and down the stairs to the platform, he saw the man heading in the same direction several yards ahead of him.

“Mornin’ there, Romeo,” Percy greeted Buster.

He chuckled. “*Romeo?*”

“Talk to your girlfriend last night?”

A paranoid feeling hit him as he flashed back to being with Sylvia last night. “My girlfriend? Who’re you talking about?”

“*Rita*, who you *think* I’m talkin’ about?”

“Ohh,” he grinned. “No, I didn’t.”

Buster saw the man from the station standing near the time clock.

“This is Jimmy Goodwin,” Percy said. “He’s in from the extra board for Bull today.”

“Hey. Buster Gaines.”

“Hey,” he said, lifting a couple of fingers.

Buster walked over to the assignment board and saw the guy’s name written in.

“Bull sick?”

“Nah, just takin’ off,” Percy replied. “Said he’s got some business to take care of today.”

Dick came in followed by Chalk as Percy was talking to Goodwin.

“Howdy, fellas.”

“Howdy, boss. Looks like you robbed the nursery here,” Jimmy said with a grin, gesturing toward Buster.

“You sneak out of the old folks home?” Buster quickly fired back.

“Owww, that hurt,” Jimmy laughed.

“Jimmy, kinda looks like you met your match.”

“Maybe so, boss, maybe so.”

“You’re gonna like this guy, Buster. He’s a real Bull Tatum.”

“I know I will then.”

Jimmy held his hand out toward Buster. “Here for the summer as one of those temporaries?”

“Yep. Down from St. Louis.”

“Oh. Nice city you got there. Met a gal one time up there on a run, me and a buddy.”

Buster chuckled.

“*What?*” asked Jimmy.

“*All* you guys have stories on the road.”

Grinning, he replied, “Guess maybe so.”

“So, you know Red the barber, huh?”

“Sure do. How’d *you* know that?”

“I was in, getting my hair cut, and struck up a conversation with him.”

“Red’s a good old boy, he and the other fellas there.”

“Yeah, seems like it.”

“We’ve got a train we need to bust up this mornin’,” Dick announced. “Buster, I’m havin’ you to cut the cars this time while Chalk and I ride them down.”

“*You’re going to ride them?*”

“Yes, Buster, *I’m* gonna ride them.”

“Oh, didn’t know that was something the head guy does.”

“*This* head guy likes to help his fellas out.”

“Sorry, of course.”

“Jimmy’ll take turns with you.”

“All right, got it.”

A few minutes after eight, the crew rinsed their cups out and headed for the line of cars spotted near the backtrack.

“Buster, keep your head up out here and stay safe.”

“Thanks, Jimmy, I will.”

Jimmy pointed in the direction of a string of cars six or seven tracks away and said, “We’re gonna drag the cars out and take them over to 10 where I’ll cut the first four. We’ll change tracks and you can cut the next four, sound okay?”

“Yep, that works.”

Buster could see that the train was pretty lengthy, estimating it at more than forty cars. Dick instructed Buster to assist Percy with hooking onto the train and then to ride the engine and throw switches to get Percy set up on the correct tracks to shove the cars down to Chalk and him. Just as they were coming to the train, Buster glanced west down 14 and saw a line of boxcars approaching at maybe twenty or thirty miles per hour three tracks over. Something looked odd about it, he thought...one was kind of teetering, and within seconds, he couldn’t believe what he was seeing, gazing at the first car sliding off the track to the right. Sounds of metal scraping and crunching on gravel and high-pitched squealing broadcasted across the yard. Frozen in his footsteps, he watched what was unfolding no more than fifty feet from him.

“*Holy Crap,*” he yelled out, “*that train’s coming off.*”

“*Look out,* Buster,” Jimmy loudly yelled. “*Get the hell back!*”

He and Jimmy ran back several tracks and he could see Dick and the other guys scrambling away a safe distance. Buster stood there in awe, watching the event. It seemed

like it wouldn't stop, the cars coming off the track like end-to-end dominoes, one after another, while the loud scraping and crunching and squealing kept ringing out across the yard. Dick's words popped into his mind...it *did* seem like it was going on forever.

When the last boxcar came off and settled on the gravel, the yard became instantly, strangely, silent. Men came rushing over from the station and other parts of the yard. Someone started going around apparently checking on people. Dick and the others joined Buster and Jimmy, Dick making sure no one had been hurt. He grinned.

“So much for bustin' up *our* train.”

That ended work for the day. They spent some time talking with the yardmaster, Barmes, and MoPac officials who arrived late morning to investigate. They moved cars around on the far side of the yard for thirty minutes, what seemed mostly like a make-work fill-up-the-time proposition, but mostly they just stood around drinking coffee and watching the special heavy equipment they'd brought in to lift and place the cars back on a nearby track. The final spectacle before clocking out at four-thirty was watching a section crew come in and begin restoring tracks. Although Buster performed actual work for only thirty minutes all day, he went back to the hotel feeling more tired after this shift than any previous shift. The day, with its unstructured idleness, had given the yard a surreal quality and had made the eight hours feel endless.

Dinner once again at Family Restaurant would hopefully give him the chance to chat with the red-haired waitress he had seen the last time there. He cleaned up and headed over there.

A man wearing a white apron greeted him inside the front door and told him to sit wherever he wanted. He looked around the dining room, hoping to spot the waitress, but

didn't see any servers, so he picked a two-person table on the far right side. The man followed him and handed him a menu.

"I'll get your waitress."

"Fine, thanks."

A minute later, Buster saw the red head coming from behind a three-quarter wall carrying a tray with someone's order. He watched her as she delivered it to a table in the center of the room and as she walked to another table near it. She spoke briefly to the people sitting there and then turned and approached Buster.

"Hi, I'm Linda, what can I get you to drink?"

"Iced tea, unsweetened. Thanks."

He watched her as she walked to the service area and poured his tea from a glass pitcher. He made a point of noticing her legs. The man with the apron approached her and kissed her, and that short kiss seemed to light up her face...Buster's casual curiosity about her was promptly derailed.

He bypassed the television area and went up to his room after getting back to the Savoy to make notes in his work journal about earnings for the day and the derailment and to write a letter home.

In his letter to his parents and grandmother, he told more about the guys he was working with and related a few of the stories he'd heard them telling, but not the ones relating to the "good times"...there was no need to include all that. There was no need, either, to write about meeting Rita or Sylvia, although he did tell them he had gone on a three-day run down to Paris and Ft. Worth. Telling them about Rita, especially, he figured, would invite questions from them that he didn't want to answer. He thought back

to some of the “trying” times he had put his mother through with his running around the past couple of years and just didn’t want her to have to think about him doing anything crazy, or perhaps, in her view, irresponsible. It wasn’t any of their business any longer anyway, he decided. He told them he was about out of money, but since tomorrow was payday, it wasn’t an issue. He had figured his expenses fairly closely and thought he had managed well with his limited funds, holding off on some spending for entertainment and beer while also not depriving himself either. As he had told them before he left, he said he’d open a checking account in Texarkana and bank his checks there. He’d draw out a limited amount of money to live on and then send home his money via check before coming home so that his dad could deposit it in their joint account at the bank in Maplewood.

## Chapter Thirteen

“They’re named after *food*?”

Getting out of bed, he knew this day was payday, the first substantial one of his life. He’d been thinking about celebrating it in some way for a few days and had thought about asking the guys to go have a beer with him after work. The idea of getting together with Sylvia and buying her a drink had also crossed his mind, but he hadn’t talked to her about it and had no idea if she’d be available. At the very least, he’d go have dinner at State Line by himself, have a couple of beers and listen to some music, and then catch a show at the Paramount or Strand.

It was the type of day that you could expect to see rain at any time, or it could just stay like that and make you miserably uncomfortable all day, your shirt sticking to your skin. This was maybe the most humid day he’d experienced in Texarkana. He didn’t have a raincoat but knew there were a couple of ponchos stored in the closet of the shanty, though he didn’t know whose they were or if he could use one.

Sylvia was on duty as usual, this time tending to a young colored man and woman seated near the door. There were a handful of other customers clustered at other tables well away from them, making them look isolated and perhaps intentionally set apart from the others. This was the first time he’d seen colored customers in the diner. Buster wondered if Grover had personally seated them or if they, themselves, had chosen this arrangement. He again read the sign on the floor stand just inside the front door that told

customers coming in to wait to be seated. He glanced back to Sylvia and her endearing greeting met him.

“Mornin’, hun.”

“Hi there, cutie.”

“*Cutie*, huh?” she responded with a grin. “Have a seat anywhere.”

He went to the counter and took the seat at the far right end so that he could talk to her without Grover overhearing them. She finished serving the colored couple, and as she walked by Buster, she rubbed her hand on his shoulder and continued on to the other side of the counter. She stopped in front of him and leaned down on the counter on her elbows, resting her chin on her hands. He liked that she did this.

“So, how are you?”

“Good, how about you?”

“Doin’ pretty good.”

She realized he didn’t have a cup for his coffee and got one from the shelf behind her along with a pot of coffee. Filling his cup, she nodded in the direction of the colored couple.

“So, whatta you think?”

“About what?”

“About that *couple* over there.”

Buster suspected she was talking about them and replied, “First time I’ve seen any colored people in here.”

“It’s a real rarity.”

“That’s amazing. Back home, it’s so common. You don’t ever even think about it.”

“Grover’s not pleased, I got to tell you,” she said with obvious satisfaction.

“Why are they sitting over by the door away from everybody? Did he put them over there?”

“Yep, sure did.”

Buster ordered his breakfast and shortly after, Sylvia quietly parked it in front of him.

“I want to ask you something.”

“Okay.”

“Today’s payday, my first one. Was wondering if you were free tonight to have a beer with me to celebrate, my treat.”

“Oh, sweetie, I got plans, I’m sorry. I’d really love to help you celebrate, though.”

“Well, crap, that’s a shame.”

“Yeah, sorry, I really am.”

“Okay, thought I’d ask.”

“I’d like to do that some time, though.”

“Good, we’ll do that.”

He noticed two men enter and immediately look over at the colored couple, pause while looking at them, and then walk to a table occupied by some other men. He paid at the register and turned to leave, glancing around to see if anyone was looking at the couple. They weren’t. He approached the door.

“Bye, Buster.”

He turned and replied, "Bye, see you."

Fifteen minutes before eight, he walked into the shanty. Bull was back at work and was telling the rest of the crew something, and when he noticed Buster, he paused to acknowledge his presence and to say hello to him. He finished what he was saying, something having to do apparently with one of the ladies at Nat's, and then turned back to Buster.

"Hey, buddy, payday!"

"Yeah man, *finally*."

Percy came over to Buster and handed him a cup of coffee. "Congratulations."

"On what?"

"Payday, dumb-ass."

"Haven't seen the check yet, but thanks a lot."

"You get it at the end of the shift."

"Listen, guys, I was thinking I'd like to go celebrate payday by going for a beer after work. Anybody want to help me celebrate?"

"Aw man, sorry, I got a prior commitment," Bull answered.

Buster assumed that meant that he and Sylvia had something planned because of what she'd said. Dick and the others also said they had other plans but that they wished they could go with him. He had his fallback plan, so he knew he'd have something relatively entertaining to do that evening.

"Missed some excitement when you were off," he told Bull.

"Yeah, I heard. Didn't take long though to get everything back up and runnin'."

"They really got on it fast."

“Business. Got to,” replied Bull.

“Yep. Time is money, I guess.”

Dick announced the schedule for the day, calling for running a train of ten cars over to New Boston, spotting them on the siding near one of the plants they’d switched out on their run to Paris, and then returning to the yard with eighteen that were spotted there. When finished with coffee and more BS’ing, the crew headed out to hook the engine onto the train, make the hose connections, and set up the air brakes. Rain drops became noticeable on the windows. It started as sprinkles, but then the sky opened up. Lightning flashed off to the west, the direction they were going to travel, and when he thought about the ponchos in the shanty, Buster knew he was going to get drenched. Sitting in the fireman’s chair, he looked over at Percy who had a grin on his face.

“What’re *you* grinning about?”

“Rainin’ pretty good, ain’t it?”

“Sure as hell is, hope it quits before we get over there.”

Percy continued to grin and wryly noted, “Yep.”

“Well at least *you* won’t have to get wet.”

Percy poured himself some coffee from his thermos and leaned back in his chair, taking a slow drink, exclaiming, “Rainin’ like a mother.” He took a few more small drinks and set his metal cup down on the window ledge. He leaned over to his side, unzipped a canvas bag on the floor next to him, and pulled out a plastic poncho. He tossed it across to Buster.

“Here you go, buddy.”

“Hey, a poncho, thanks.”

“*Somebody’s* got to take care of you,” he chuckled.

“Man, you’re a pal, thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

By the time they arrived in New Boston, the rain had let up...merely a heavy mist as they stopped. Buster put on the poncho and got out to throw the mainline switch for the siding to allow Percy to pull onto it. As he pulled the train in and continued down the siding, Buster manned the switch. After thirty minutes, the train approached on the mainline, the eighteen cars hooked on for the return trip. Once the train passed by him and stopped, Buster threw the switch back, locked it with his key, and walked back down the gravel to the engine for the ride home.

“How’d you get turned around?”

Percy smiled. “Magic.”

“Of course.”

“Can’t tell you *all* of our tricks.”

“I know how you did it.”

“Yeah? How?”

“Had to be a branch line, or something, come in down the way.”

“You’d make a good railroader, you know it?”

“Thanks, wouldn’t be a bad profession to have.”

“You could sure do a lot worse.”

“I know.”

Arriving back in the yard, they clocked out and Dick handed Buster his paycheck.

“You know, you’ll get another one Friday with the rest of us. Payday’s every two weeks.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Second and fourth Friday of each month, right?”

“Yep.”

Admiring it, he realized he had to get to the bank before it closed.

“You earned your pay, Buster.”

“Thanks, Dick, seems like a long two weeks.”

“I know it probably feels that way. Time’ll speed up for you, though, and before you know it, you’ll be goin’ home.”

“Guess so.”

Buster went straight to the Bi-States National Bank on Front Street near the hotel. He filled out the account form, endorsed his check, and handed it over to the elderly-looking clerk. She returned with a blue vinyl checkbook containing some non-personalized checks.

“Here you are, sugar, thanks for openin’ the account with us.”

He walked out of the bank with fifty dollars in his wallet for living expenses and a feeling of accomplishment.

Along with the after-work shower, the thought of having an ice-cold beer energized him. As he walked out of the bathroom with his towel wrapped around his waist and headed down the hallway to his room, he was surprised to see Sylvia walking toward his door from the direction of the stairs.

“*Hey*, what brings *you* here?”

“Hi, Buster, my plans got changed.”

“*Really?* Sorry, but I’m glad.”

Sylvia grinned and said, “Yeah, I *bet* you are.”

Buster opened his door and invited her in. He set his soap dish and shampoo down on the dresser and got a pair of clean underwear out of the drawer. Sylvia sat down on the bed and watched him as he turned away from her, letting the towel fall off, and slip the undies on.

“So, dinner and beer and music?”

“How’d you know that was my plan?”

“Figured that’s what you probably had in mind.”

“Well, great minds think alike.”

He sat down next to her.

“What happened to your plans?”

“Bull and I were supposed to drive down to Queen City for supper, a nice little Mexican place down there, but he changed his mind and said there was something he needed to go take care of.”

“He didn’t say what it was?”

“Nope, and I didn’t press him on it. Just wrote it off as he needed to be by himself.”

“I see.”

Sylvia smiled and said, “Anyway, you got *me* now, don’t you.”

“I *do* and I’m glad.”

“Good. I’m gonna take us to a place I go to every now and then when I’m in the mood for a good burger and beer. They got a band there you’re gonna really get off on.”

“Great, but will they have a problem serving me?”

“Nope.”

“How do you know?”

“Let’s just say I know the owner.”

Buster slipped his cut-off shorts on and reached for his T-shirt. Sylvia stood up.

“Let me help you with that.”

She took hold of his shirt and helped pull it down, then picked up his comb and ran it through his hair with Buster chuckling.

“In a hurry?”

“Yep.”

“Okay then, let’s do it.”

Stopping at the top of the stairs on their way out, Sylvia grabbed his arm.

“What?”

“This,” she replied, pulling him toward her and hugging him. “My treat tonight.”

“I was going to buy *your* beer.”

“Nope, *my* treat.”

“Well, thanks, thanks a lot.”

“You can catch it next time.”

“*Count* on it.”

Hopping in her shiny Plymouth, they drove over to the Texas side of the line, then north several blocks until they came to a place called Bruno's Beer Hall. Sylvia parked near the entrance to the establishment. She checked her appearance in the rear view mirror before getting out of the car. She stepped up onto the sidewalk, paused, and looked at Buster.

She exclaimed matter-of-factly, "Bruno used to be a customer."

"No kidding?"

"True."

Several customers were seated at the bar, drinking and laughing.

"Does the band play on Wednesday nights?"

"Yep, like I said, they'll knock your socks off. Let's get a table."

They spotted a table in the center of the place next to the dance floor. A few minutes after sitting down, a man came over from behind the bar and greeted them.

"Well *hey* there, doll," the man said. "Been a while."

"Yeah I know, good to see you again, Bruno."

"You been all right?"

"Yeah, no complaints. Hey listen," she said, putting her hand on Buster's forearm,

"This is my good friend, Buster."

He glanced at Buster and said, "Howdy there, good meetin' you."

"Nice meeting you too. Nice place you got here."

"Yeah."

He looked back at Sylvia. "Miss *seein'* you."

"It's not my thing anymore, Bruno, not for quite a while."

“Ohh...too bad.”

“How about bringin’ us a couple of beers. Michelob.”

“Sure, be back in a jiffy. I’ll get you some menus.”

“No need. I think we know what we want.” She looked at Buster. “You do, don’t you?”

“Yep. I’ll take a cheeseburger.”

“Same.”

Bruno hustled their order to the back.

She grinned at Buster. “How many cheeseburgers do you eat?”

He thought about it for a second. “Too many.”

The band came in the front door carrying guitar cases and walked past their table toward the rear of the establishment.

“What kinds of stuff do they play?”

“Rock, Motown, hot rhythm and blues, and anything else you want them to play.”

“What’s the name?”

“The Chilly Dogs.”

He grinned, then asked, “They’re named after *food*?”

“No,” she laughed, “they’re named after a couple of stray junk yard dogs one of the guys took in a few winters ago.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The critters were cold and hungry and the watchman called his buddy up, the guy in the band, and told him about them and the guy went and got them.”

“That’s great.”

Bruno brought their beers. Fifteen minutes after that, he was back with dinner.

“So, you like to dance?”

“I do. Can’t fast dance worth a damn, but I love slow dancing.”

She gave a little smile. “Mmm, me too.”

“Let’s do it when they start up.”

“*Ab-so-lutely.*”

He’d never met a burger he didn’t like, and this one was as good as any he’d ever had, with the possible exceptions of Steak ‘n’ Shake’s burgers and the one they served with BBQ sauce at the Redwood Diner in St. Louis. He was also extremely fond of the burgers they served at Hamburger Haven, his friend’s drive-in restaurant back home. Beer was really growing on him and he found he especially liked Michelob, something he thought was more sophisticated or special than Budweiser. It had a smoother, less bitter taste than Bud and stayed tasty even as the bottle lost its chill. He was convincing himself that his tastes were evolving and refining.

The band began tuning their guitars and someone lowered the room lighting a few notches. Some overhead spotlights and footlights next to the platform popped on and immediately the band broke into “Help” by the Beatles. They followed it with three more numbers by the group and quickly the dance floor in front of the band had four couples on it. It seemed like with each song they played, the volume rose a little. These guys were good...they had the chords and tempo right and the lead singer could really carry a tune while the other guys could harmonize amazingly well.

“The Chilly Dogs, huh,” Buster loudly commented.

“Good, aren’t they?”

“I’m impressed.”

A waitress wandered over near their table and Buster flagged her down. “Two more Michelobs, please.”

“Gottcha.”

“I got this round.”

“Nope, I told you I was treatin’ tonight.”

“I’ll get the next one then.”

She laughed and said, “You get me drunk, no tellin’ what I might do.”

Buster beamed. “Hmmm.”

“You *like* that idea, don’t you?”

“Be lying if I said I didn’t.”

She put her hand on Buster’s forearm and said, “Wish they’d play somethin’ slow.”

Her dark eyes sparkled. His imagination began to kick in. “I know.”

The band began playing “Do You Love Me?” Sylvia took a swig of her beer, stood up, and grabbed Buster’s hand.

Pulling him out of his chair, she exclaimed, “*Love* this song.”

He set his beer bottle down. They stepped onto the dance floor and got into the music. She had moves that made her slender body look amazing. He was hypnotized by her, gazing at her undulating hips and bouncing breasts while alternately looking up at her cute face. It was obvious she was enjoying the attention, biting her lower lip and grinning at him, and he was struck at this instant by a feeling of envy of Bull. He felt

uncoordinated and self-conscious trying to keep up with her. It was a stroke of luck when the song ended and the Miracles' "Ooo Baby Baby" started.

"Hey, now that's *my* kind of song to dance to."

He took her hand in his and placed the other on the small of her back. When they began to dance, she nuzzled his ear.

"Nice."

He realized, as he pulled her tightly against him, that they were one of only two couples who had stayed on the dance floor for this song. He felt like a spotlight was on them, like people were seated all around the floor watching them, maybe judging them. He didn't mind though...this was just too wonderful to stop. She uttered "This is nice" into his ear, and the longer the music played, the deeper he drifted off into the trance he felt she was putting him under.

"Want to know something?"

"What," he answered.

"*Sometimes* usually happen."

Buster knew what she meant.

"You said 'maybe sometime' yesterday morning."

"*Did I now?*" she coyly responded.

The song ended and they stood there, trapped in the mood the dance created and not wanting it to be over. She kissed his cheek, smiled at him, and went back to their table with her hand firmly grasping his. The fresh beers showed up as they sat down.

"Tell me what you really want out of life, Buster."

Her question came out of left field. Buster took a long drink of his beer.

“Wow, I guess I don’t really know.”

“You want to be married? You want kids? You want to live in the suburbs?

Whatta you *want*?”

“Man, that’s a lot of questions.”

“Why do you think I’m askin’?”

“I’m not sure. I suppose you’re just curious.”

“I want to know more about you.”

“You do, huh?”

“I really do. I want to know everything you want to tell me.”

“Hmm, well, I guess I always figured I’d go through college, get a good job somewhere, fall in love, get married, have kids, blah blah blah, like most people.”

“You want to be like most people?”

“You’re waxing philosophical.”

Sylvia laughed. “Sorry.”

He wondered where this came from, couldn’t decide if she was simply curious or if she truly wanted to be let in on details about him for some reason.

“So, what do *you* really want out of life?”

“I want you to dance with me again.”

“That’s not answering my question.”

She took a drink of her beer.

“Maybe sometime I’ll tell you what I really want.”

“All right, be that way.”

The band started playing “You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me” and Sylvia once again got up and pulled Buster to his feet. For the next hour and a half, they danced to a mix of songs and tempos, hanging on to each other during the slow dances and grinding each other to the dog and other styles during the fast dances, then ending their evening there clinking their bottles and agreeing to some future, as-yet-to-be-determined return to Bruno’s.

## Chapter Fourteen

“I thought Friday’d never get here.”

Thursday greeted him with a hangover. He wasn’t used to drinking as much as he had the previous evening, and it wasn’t until he got to the diner and saw Sylvia that he was able to scrounge up some aspirin for the headache portion of it that’d hit him as soon as his feet touched the floor. She was in better shape than he was and he figured that either she was just more in practice or had a more fitting constitution for that.

Work that day felt like it wouldn’t end. Every move he made up and down from the engine and boxcars, every loud noise he heard when cars crashed together or an air hose burst apart made him cringe a little. When the horn from the engine blared out, he cringed. His peanut butter and jelly sandwich and potato chips for lunch didn’t sit well with him, and the Coke he drank had lost so much of its carbonation that it tasted like sugar water, which left his stomach even more iffy. On top of that, the burning sun and high humidity of late afternoon magnified the fatigue he’d already dragged through the day with and sapped whatever energy he had left. Even frequent drinks of water did little to relieve the crappy feeling he labored under. All this, he reasoned, was acceptable, however...he’d had a blast celebrating his pay day with Sylvia and knew he’d love to do it again before long. He knew he was young and resilient and this “punishment” was nothing.

Dinner that night wasn't high on his list of priorities since his appetite had mostly abandoned him. He settled for a ham and cheese sandwich, a bowl of chicken noodle soup and a glass of iced tea at Family Restaurant. He showered after he got back from dinner; the relaxation it brought was a perfect partner with the day's fatigue to put him out as soon as his head hit the pillow.

When he woke up to the sound of his alarm at six o'clock, his mind instantly focused on seeing Rita that evening. He hurriedly got ready for work and went over to the diner to begin his day. He approached his customary stool.

"Hey, how are you, sweetie? You look a lot better today than you did yesterday!"

"Morning," Buster cheerfully replied. "I *am* better today."

He glanced over at Grover and watched him flicking cigarette ashes in a tray next to the grill. He glanced back at Sylvia and began ordering when he was startled by Grover suddenly yelling out across the diner from his cook station.

"Get the hell out of here and don't come back!"

He swiveled on his stool and saw two men standing inside the front door who looked like homeless people. The handful of customers also turned to look at the men who were dressed in tattered, dirty clothing. Apparently, they were in need of a meal, and probably a lot more, but Grover had no interest in helping them out. The two never said anything and walked out immediately after being told. It occurred to him that maybe they were used to that treatment.

"Damn, does he always treat needy people like that?"

“Yeah, “ Sylvia answered with a resigned voice. “He’s been hit up several times before by men wanderin’ in off freight trains. There’s no room in that dark heart of his for charity.”

“Always been like that?”

“As far as *I* know.”

“Well not giving them anything is *one* thing, but talking to them that way, that’s something else. There’s no need to humiliate them like that.”

“I know, he’s really a bastard deep down.”

Several minutes later when Sylvia brought his breakfast over to him, she sat down on the stool next to him.

“I had so much fun the other night.”

“I had a lot of fun too, can’t tell you how *glad* I was you were free.”

“Me too.” She grinned and said, “Kinda kicked your *ass* a little *didn’t* it?”

“Yep, it did. Guess I’m just not used to drinking that much. By the way, meant to ask you yesterday, did you tell Bull we went out together?”

“Nope.”

“Okay. Have you talked to him since Wednesday?”

“He called yesterday to see how I was doin’ and he didn’t really have much to say. He didn’t even say when he planned on seein’ me again.”

“What’s going on?”

“Don’t know...probably nothin’.”

“Hope not.”

“Yeah.”

She got up and fetched a coffee pot for him.

“So, bein’ Friday, you got any plans tonight, maybe want to get together again?”

“That’d be fun, but I can’t. I have a friend coming in to spend the weekend.

Could we put it off ‘til next week some time?”

“A friend, huh? Sure, sweetie, sounds good.”

He gobbled up the eggs and toast and left for work. Bull was the first to see him as he entered the shanty.

“Mornin’, buddy, how’s things?”

“Things are good,” he replied, walking to the time clock. “Rita’s coming to see me tonight.”

“Whoa, no kiddin’?” Percy chimed in.

“Yep, can’t wait to see her again.”

“Well, get your coffee then park your ass and tell us all about it.”

He clocked in then looked around for a clean cup.

“Man, some guys are pigs.”

“There’s a clean one in the storage area.”

Buster got one and poured his coffee.

“So, what’re you gonna do, you two?” Percy asked.

“I don’t know, nothing specific planned.”

“Yeah right, nothin’.”

”Well, you know, *besides* that.”

Dick sat down next to Buster. “Hey, forgot to tell you, you’re workin’ a double today.”

“*What? I am?*”

Percy and Bull burst into laughter.

“Aww too bad, buddy,” Bull exclaimed.

“Well shit, that’s not funny, she’s coming at *five-thirty*.”

“She’ll understand,” Percy said, trying to stop laughing.

“Crap.”

Dick gave him a serious look and said, “Thought you *wanted* overtime.”

“I do, but I was looking forward to tonight.”

“You’ll live,” Chalk joined in.

Buster’s disappointment was written all over his face. Bull grinned. “Aw, go on and tell him.”

“What, tell him I was only shittin’ him?”

“Why’re you guys laughing?” Buster asked, looking at Bull and Percy.

“Because we like to mess with you,” Bull replied.

“I *am* only messin’ with you. You ain’t pullin’ a double, least not today.”

“You had me there.”

“Well I hope you two have fun.”

“I know we will.”

“All right then, time for work, boys.”

Buster jabbed Bull’s arm. “Once again the new guy gets piled on.”

“Just because they like you.”

Four-thirty came and Buster and the guys clocked out. Walking on his way back to the hotel, the thought again struck him, as it had earlier in the day, that he didn’t know

how he would have gotten word to Rita if he had indeed had to work a double shift. Since that wasn't going to be the case, he quickly dispensed with that thought as his excitement grew the closer he got to the hotel. He wondered what she'd be wearing, how she'd have her hair fixed, what they'd say the moment they saw each other. He considered the possibility that she somehow had changed her mind about him, that maybe she was having second thoughts about spending the weekend. He told himself to try not to be too disappointed if that turned out to be true. Nothing for him had really changed in regard to how he felt about wanting to see her again. He had been thinking about the words she'd used to close her letter and wondered if she still planned on saying what it was she said she wanted to say.

Picking up his pace back to the hotel, he tried to think of where to eat dinner that night and where to go for breakfast. Maybe Carmella's Pizzeria? Would he take her to the diner in the morning? Would she like Sylvia? He was confident that Sylvia would be happy for him. What should he even tell her about Sylvia? He didn't know how he felt about that.

When he walked into the lobby, he half expected to see Rita sitting there, even though it was early yet. Mrs. Rutherford was seated near the television and was working on some kind of needle work project, a pair of glasses set low on her nose. She noticed Buster and greeted him with the usual polite salutation.

"Hello, Mr. Gaines, how was your work today?"

"Hi. Work was fine, thanks."

He was curious, and a little concerned, about what she might think about a girl coming to stay with him for the weekend. He hadn't planned to tell her of the visit and

figured he'd introduce her to Rita if she asked about her. The protocol on such things was completely new to him...was it her business to know who visited people staying at the hotel? Did the fact that he was only eighteen make a difference? Would he have to pay extra for the days she was here? He really didn't like not telling her...it'd be better if he were up-front about it he decided.

"Mrs. Rutherford, got a question," he said, sitting down on the couch. "I have a friend coming in a little bit to spend the weekend with me. Is there a charge for that person?"

"No, that's fine, long as he abides by the rules that all guests have to go by."

"Okay. Uh, the thing is," he hesitated, "it's a *female* friend."

She put her needle work down. "A *girl*? Ohh, well now...I don't know. Is she a *nice girl*?"

"She's a *wonderful* girl, a *Christian* girl," he answered, though he had no idea if that was true.

"I suppose, if nobody raises a fuss over it, but I guess nobody'd do that since you always keep to yourself anyway." She took the glasses off of her nose. "Okay, go ahead, have your friend stay with you."

"Good thanks. Her name's Rita."

"You can introduce me to her when she gets here."

"I'll do that. Mrs. Rutherford, is there a cot I can borrow? I'm going to *need* one."

She looked pleased when he asked that.

"Sure, let me go fetch you one."

"Thanks much."

She moved her needle work off to the side then went to the back room to retrieve a cot.

“Here you are. Hope your friend enjoys our city.”

“Oh, I’m sure she will, thanks much,” Buster replied, relieved that he no longer had to be concerned about Rita’s presence.

Stripping down and slipping on some shorts, he went down the hall to hop in the shower. Standing under the water, he envisioned showering with her here in this semi-public facility, something that had visited his mind on more than one occasion. He had briefly described the hotel to her the second night he was at her house and thought he remembered telling her he had a communal shower room. He knew he had told her about his lousy bed and that hers was so much better. He also knew, however, it wasn’t going to matter much...the way he had it planned, they weren’t going to be getting much sleep anyway.

He threw on a T-shirt and khaki shorts and splashed on some English Leather Lime, then headed down to the lobby a little before five-thirty. Mrs. Rutherford sounded like she was rummaging through papers in the back office. Buster sat down in front of the television and anxiously waited to see Rita walk in the front door. Five-thirty came, then five-forty. He got up and walked out to the front porch to see if he could spot her coming. Five-forty-five and still no sign of her. At five till five he went back in and fiddled around with some magazines that someone had brought in and stacked on the table next to the easy chair. He was growing a little concerned that his fear might just be realized. Surely, she would have called him to confess that, he told himself. At six o’clock, he again got up and walked back out to the porch. Looking up and down the street, he wondered if she

was having trouble finding the hotel, but she had said she wouldn't have any problem doing so. It was only a short distance from the station and you'd come across it quickly just driving down the street looking for it. He then wondered if maybe she'd had car trouble somewhere and wasn't anywhere near a pay phone to let him know. That made him start worrying, but he had no way to do anything about that...he'd just have to wait to hear from her eventually.

Six fifteen and still no sign of her. He took a long last look down Front Street in the direction of the station and then a long look up Pine, hoping he'd see some unrecognizable car coming that she'd be driving. Turning and walking toward the door, he heard a car horn, and when he glanced back in the direction he'd first checked, he saw a white automobile coming up the street a half block away. As it approached the hotel, he could see Rita waving her arm out the window of the early-sixties Ford Falcon. She got out and Buster met her at her door.

*"Hi!"*

*"Hi, stranger!"*

She immediately threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. "I've *missed* you."

He kissed her back. "No more than I've missed *you*."

Grabbing her small suitcase from the back seat and a blouse that was hanging on the hook over the window, she explained why she hadn't made it at five-thirty like she had told him.

"Roger kept me at the restaurant to help train a new girl he hired who's going to start tonight. He knew I was supposed to get off early today but pleaded with me

to stay to teach her the job. He's so lost it's funny. He owns the place but wouldn't have the slightest idea of what a waitress does."

"I was getting a little *concerned*, hoped you didn't have car trouble or something."

"I knew you probably were. I'm sorry."

"Well, you're here now and that's what matters. Let's go get you settled in up in my fancy digs."

Getting to the top of the stairs, Rita commented, "Wow, this place *is* old like you said."

"Yeah, wait 'til you see the room."

Rita walked into the room, gazed around, and laughed. "Holy cow, it's everything a girl could hope for."

"Hey now, it's a shit hole but it's *my* shit hole."

Rita plopped down on the bed on her back and exclaimed with a smile, "And this is that crappy bed you told me about."

Buster closed the door and set her suitcase down, then draped her blouse over the end of the bed. He flopped down on the bed next to her.

"Welcome to my humble abode."

"I can't believe I'm here seeing you again."

"Seems like a long time, a *very* long time."

"*Too* long."

Rita sat up and asked, "You haven't eaten yet, have you?"

"No, I thought we were planning to eat when you got here."

“Just checking. I *am* getting hungry.”

“There’s a bar and grill I’ve been to a handful of times that serves great burgers and the world’s best French fries, and they even have a band that plays there.

There’s an outstanding pizzeria and another bar and grill and they have a band too. If you’d rather have home cooking, I also know a place for *that*. Or, we could hop in your car and go try to find something else.”

Rita laughed. “You’re quite the host.”

“Oh yeah, I get around.”

“How about we go to that pizza place.”

“Works for me.”

Rita grinned and said, “What do you want to do after *that*?”

“I think you know.”

“I do?”

He laughed and replied, “Oh...well we could just read, or watch television, take your pick.”

“I could have done *that* at home.”

“Or...”

“What? *What*?”

“Or, we could pick up where we left off.”

Rita gave him a sly smile. “We’ll see.”

The drive over to Carmella’s took only a few minutes. He opened the front door for her, pinching her on the ass. She playfully slapped his hand.

“What is it about the smell of pizzerias that makes you drool?”

“I know exactly what you mean, it’s almost sinful.”

Looking around for a place to sit, they were soon greeted by a stout woman dressed in a long white apron who had flour on her hands and arms.

“Greetings, my friends,” she cheerfully announced in broken English. “Where would you like to sit?”

“We’d like a table out of the way,” he answered, gesturing to the section in back where he knew they’d have some privacy.

She smiled broadly at Rita. “Okay, I make sure you have a nice quiet romantic dinner.”

Rita grabbed Buster’s hand, exclaiming, “Isn’t she sweet?”

“She is.”

“So, you’ve been here, huh?”

“Yeah, came here with one of the other hotel guests one time.”

The woman smiled at them, apparently satisfied with her placement of them, as they got settled at the table.

“What would you like to drink?”

“A glass of red wine for me.”

“Michelob draft, please.”

The woman looked inquisitively at Buster for a moment. “You are of age, *aren’t you?*”

He hesitated briefly, summoned a confident voice, and answered, “Sure, I’ve been served here before,” knowing he hadn’t.

She paused, weighing the veracity of his claim, then said, “All right, I be back with your drinks.”

“Good, thank you.”

The woman walked away. Rita asked in a hushed tone, “*Have you been served here before?*”

“No,” he whispered. “I drank iced tea, but you ordered wine, so I thought I’d get something myself.”

She smiled and pecked him on the lips.

“Well, you *look* twenty-one, anyway.”

“Not sure that I do, but I *feel* twenty-one.”

A beautiful girl next to him, the pizza at Carmella’s was once again fabulous, the aromas hanging in the air and blending with Dean Martin in the background...absolutely intoxicating to Buster.

“So, this person you came here with...”

“A girl who was staying at the hotel with her girlfriend, traveling around seeing the country before they went back to college. That was right after I got down here.”

“I see. I wasn’t prying, just curious, that’s all.”

Buster polished off most of his side of the pizza and took one last swallow of his beer. He poured over things to say to her.

“I’m *happy* with you, Rita.”

She studied his face, then responded, “Buster, I’m happy with you, too.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

Rita sipped the last of her wine and pulled a few long strands of melted cheese off of the platter.

“So...television?”

He grinned and quickly countered, “We have better things to do.”

Buster paid for the dinner and went back to the table to leave a tip. The woman gave them a smile as they walked past her.

“Have a good evening, sweethearts.”

“She is so sweet.”

Mrs. Rutherford was seated in the chair with her needlework near the television when they arrived back at the hotel. When she noticed Rita and Buster, she set her work on the table next to her and got up to greet them.

“Mrs. Rutherford, this is my friend, Rita Grayson.”

“I’m very pleased to meet you, sweetie.”

“I’m very pleased to meet you too, ma’am.”

Mrs. Rutherford glanced at Buster.

“Mr. Gaines, she’s such a nice young lady.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“I hope you have a pleasant visit, Miss Grayson, and come back again sometime.”

Looking at Mrs. Rutherford and then at Buster, Rita replied, “I’d like that very much.”

The “sweethearts” made their way to his room.

“She’s a very nice lady. When did you tell her I was coming?”

“Today.”

“Were you afraid to tell her?”

“Yeah, I was, a little. Finally decided it’d be best if I did. She was probably going to know anyway.”

“Wise choice.”

“You know what? I forgot to show you where the john is.”

“Yeah, I might just need to know that,” she laughed.

She glanced around at the shower and toilet stalls.

“So...not much privacy, *is* there?”

“No,” he replied, “not a whole lot, but it’s not going to stop *us*.”

“I’m game if you are.”

“Tomorrow it is then.”

She slid her arms around his waist and exclaimed, “Looking forward to it...and I’m looking forward to something *else* too.”

Feigning ignorance, Buster asked, “Yeah...and what would *that* be?”

“Come on.”

She took his hand and lead him back to the room. Rita noticed the Harmony leaning against the wall in the corner of his room.

“You didn’t tell me you played the guitar.”

“I’m lousy, but I really love playing, or rather, *trying* to play.”

“Play for me later.”

Her voice and blue eyes instantly began working their magic on him. He grabbed her and pulled her close.

“Can’t tell you how often I’ve thought about touching you again.”

“I thought Friday’d never get here.”

He wanted to rip her clothes off, wanted to touch every part of her. His wandering hands involuntarily began re-exploring her, his mind fixed on her familiar, intimate features and the way she had reacted to his touch their first two nights together. She looked so beautiful to him and everything about her was perfect, he thought.

“You feel so incredible,” she said as she lay on her back looking up at Buster.

He was pulled even closer by the magnetism of those gorgeous blue eyes.

“Can’t believe you’re really here in my bed.”

“I know...I’ve been dreaming of this moment for the last eight days.”

“Slow,” he uttered, wanting to savor the feeling he’d experienced with her on that first night together.

“Let’s stay like this,” she quietly replied.

Buster became aware of the monotonous cadence coming from the fan’s motor across the room as he got up shortly before one o’clock. Rita stirred and asked where he was going, then sat partially up as he was pulling his cut-offs on.

“Got to see a man about a horse,” he answered. “Be right back.”

“Okay, dear,” she replied.

Buster wasn’t expecting to hear a word like that from her. He was caught off guard and didn’t say anything to acknowledge it except “Okay”. Taking care of his business, he repeated her words to himself...he hadn’t ever been referred to like that by a girlfriend. When he got back to the room, Rita was in the middle of the bed, lying on her side with both of their pillows tucked under her head. Watching him shed his cut-offs next to the bed, she lifted the sheet for him.

In a quiet voice, she said, "Come here."

She kissed him like he had been gone for hours and she'd missed him terribly. The touch of skin against skin instantly reignited the fire they'd started hours earlier, a fire that had only burned down to a simmer because of fatigue. There was something different now in Buster's mind about how their intimacy felt, something he sensed resulted from Rita's calling him "dear". It was a feeling like they had passed across a dividing line of sorts between simply satisfying a physical urge with each other and sharing themselves on a different level.

Lying in his arms, she slowly drew figures on his chest.

"I want to say something that's been on my mind," she said softly.

"I know you said in your letter."

"Yeah," she cut him off, "and I'm sorry about leaving it like I did. I know it only made you wonder what was going on. I shouldn't have mentioned it in there, should have just waited 'til we saw each other."

"Please tell me."

She kissed his neck. "How's it possible that a simple glance across a room can change someone so much?" She leaned up to peer into Buster's eyes. "Have you ever thought about how you can look at people and just know there could never be anything between them and you, and then one day see somebody and know immediately in your mind and heart that that person is who you want?"

Hesitating, he answered, "I'm not sure," anticipating what he felt sure he was about to hear.

“Buster,” she said in a soft voice, “I’m...” She caught herself in mid-sentence but then finished, “I’m *crazy* about you... and it’s scaring the *daylights* out of me.”

Several thoughts raced through his mind trying to process her words and to think of how to respond.

“I’ve thought a lot about my feelings toward *you*,” he began. “I’ve also found myself thinking a lot about that first time I saw you at the restaurant. I knew something was...”

“Buster,” she interrupted him, “I didn’t say that to make you tell me anything...it’s just that this feeling started almost from the very instant I first looked at you and it’s been building and I had to get it out.”

“I know, but I want to tell you.”

Rita again stopped him.

“Don’t...please.”

“All right,” he replied, a little relieved yet still wanting to say to her that his feelings for her were scaring him too.

This relationship was happening so quickly, *too* quickly, he thought. He was only eighteen and it was crazy for him to have such feelings...but there they were.

“Are you upset with me now?”

“My god, *no*, how *could* I be?”

She touched his cheek with her soft fingers and gazed deeply into his eyes. She said, “I don’t know...I’ve been torturing myself trying to figure out what to do about things, what to do about myself. I love being with you and honestly this is all new to me.”

“It is to me, too, that’s what I wanted to say.”

“I...I don’t want to clutter up our time together trying to anticipate anything or plan anything...maybe we should just enjoy this weekend and then maybe see what happens, okay?”

“Yeah.”

At quarter till nine in the morning, Rita woke Buster up, scrunched up next to him and kissing the back of his neck.

“Hi.”

“Good morning, cutie,” he replied, rolling over.

“Know what?”

“What.”

“I called you *dear* last night.”

“I know.”

“Is that weird? Did it bother you that I did?”

“I liked it, actually.”

“Okay, I’m glad.” She kissed him and said, “Now, how about that shower?”

Showering together in that public facility turned out to be less than romantic.

With someone else occupying the other stall, it was mostly something they needed to get out of the way, though that person’s presence didn’t stop their playful handsiness. They finished the “uneventful” bathing, got dressed, then walked over to the diner.

Sylvia noticed them when they walked in and went to greet them just inside the door. As Buster introduced them to each other, he wondered again what Sylvia’s reaction to Rita would be, but he quickly found out when she seemed to immediately take to Rita.

He didn't really know why he should have been concerned about it, but ever since that evening after work with Sylvia at the lake, he had become uneasy with the idea of them meeting one another. The thirty minutes at the diner passed without Sylvia making any references to Rita about Buster and her having been spending time together, and certainly nothing about skinny dipping. He hadn't talked to Sylvia about her at all, though he wished he had, and he assumed, or at least hoped, that when he brought her in for breakfast Sylvia would realize the nature of his relationship with her and say nothing about those times.

"She's very nice," Rita exclaimed as they left the diner and started down the street. "And she's very pretty."

"Yeah, she is."

"Do you know her at all, I mean, very well?"

"I know her a little. Most of the time when I go in for breakfast, we talk."

He felt lousy minimizing the connection he knew he had with her because he wanted to be honest with Rita, although not so open as to tell her about the evening at the lake. Sylvia had been one of the first people in town who made him feel really welcome and who had given him advice on people and how to relate to southerners.

"She really *has* helped me, being a Yankee, as these people down here call us northerners. She's filled me in on a lot of things about life down here."

"She sounds like a wonderful person, Buster, I'm glad you have her."

Buster took her to the station to show her his work environment and to show her all the pictures on the walls he was fascinated by and had grown fond of. They paused the longest in front of the pictures of the conductor with the soldiers and the ones with the

ladies all dressed up getting ready to go somewhere. Some of his best memories from childhood came from those trips. Telling her that, something seemed different about her, something distant in her face, like she had disconnected herself somewhere in the picture gallery. After studying the final picture, they walked down the front steps and out onto Front Street.

“You’re being pretty quiet.”

“Am I? I’m sorry, Buster. I really love the photos. I guess I’m just thinking about things.”

“What’re you thinking about?”

“Well...you remember me saying I wanted to go to college after high school, but I didn’t have the money? I’ve thought a lot about quitting my job and moving to my mother’s house to take a job down there just so I could save up some money and actually start college.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

Silence, except for the sound of their footfalls on the street and a car passing by, hung in the air for several long moments.

“I don’t really know where, but I do know I want to go *somewhere*. I *haveto* go. I don’t want to wait tables for the rest of my life.”

“Got to be several schools in the area there, as big as it is.”

“There are. I could do a couple of years at a junior college, that’d be cheap enough, then transfer to SMU. I know I could get in there.”

“Wow, big change for you.”

“It *would* be.”

She seemed even more distant the further they walked.

“What’s wrong?”

“To tell you the truth, I’m so envious of you, Buster, going off to college in the fall. I’m envious of *everybody* who gets to do that. I just don’t know if I could live at home again.”

Rita stopped. She took Buster’s hand, then kissed him tenderly.

“I’m sorry for being a drag, I really am.”

“You’re not. I know it’s tough.”

“Yeah.”

He kept her hand in his.

“Can I ask a personal question?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t answer if you don’t want to, but...didn’t your husband have life insurance?”

“Yeah, he did, had a small policy. I paid off our house and gave some to my mother and bought my car...that pretty much took care of it.”

He appreciated the fact that he was fortunate. His parents were paying for part of his freshman year and he had a National Defense Student Loan set up, in addition to having the savings he’d take home from his summer employment. He wasn’t even going to have to work during the school year. As for living at home again, he had quickly come to realize, now that he’d been out on his own, it would indeed be hard going back home and staying there while attending college like Rita was contemplating. He prized his new-found freedom far too much.

That evening and the following morning, Rita seemed to be pulling back from him, like she was trying to say good-bye to him without saying it, and he felt like he was doing the same thing. He continued to wrestle with the reality of their situation and confessed his feelings over breakfast at the diner. He told her how much he loved being with her and how much he wanted to see her again. Although he had been telling himself not to say it, he also told her he wished she could somehow go to school in Missouri so they could continue seeing each other. When she expressed how she also wanted that to happen, a tinge of anxiety shot through him. He honestly wished they could because he was crazy about her, but he also knew he didn't want that to happen...he was just too young and didn't want to be tied to anybody. That, of course, he didn't confess, and when she didn't elaborate on it, he was relieved. She was three years older than him and he had no idea how she felt about their age difference, since he hadn't asked her about it and she hadn't brought it up, and didn't know whether she would want to be in a committed relationship with him anyway. What he did know was, that having to say good-bye on Sunday afternoon was going to be painful.

The following day at three o'clock, Rita gathered her things in his room and they walked downstairs to her car. He opened her door, but as tears welled up in her eyes, she closed it and grabbed him tightly.

"I don't want to leave."

"I don't *want* you to," he exclaimed, starting to feel the pain of separation from her.

"*Buster.*"

"I know."

“I want to be with you.”

## Chapter Fifteen

“Hell of a way to run a railroad.”

He could smell the lingering traces of her perfume on the sheets and his pillow in bed that night, knowing he was lying where she had been. The room seemed so empty and quiet and her scent only made it worse. Those words she uttered as she was leaving, he really hadn't expected to hear since she had said nothing further about maybe following him to Missouri, and he realized his silence in response to them may have hurt her. All he had said was another “I know” and she had simply kissed him good-bye and driven away after telling him she'd call in a couple of days. He wondered what she was thinking now, wondered if she'd bring it up when she called.

When he walked into the diner for breakfast on Monday, he saw that he was one of only two customers. Sylvia greeted him as he sat down at the counter and automatically dispensed his coffee.

“Mornin', sweetie.”

“Morning. Slow, isn't it?”

He wanted to ask her what she'd thought about Rita, but before he could ask, Sylvia sat down on the stool next to him.

She said, “Have you heard what happened?”

“No, tell me.”

“Well, that fella that runs the station there, think his name’s Barmes, he shot some guy Saturday night.”

“Wow, no, who was it? Who’d he shoot?”

“Some colored boy, a juvenile that supposedly was trespassin’ on the tracks and tryin’ to break into boxcars.”

“In *our* train yard?”

“Yep, down under the viaduct at that far west end.”

“The Texas Viaduct overpass you mean?”

“Uh huh.”

“How’d you hear about it?”

“It’s in the mornin’ paper. Says he was actin’ in self-defense and justifiably protectin’ railroad property, as the police put it.”

“Is the kid all right?”

“He’s *dead*...shot him twice.”

“Damn. Did it say how old he was?”

“Yep, fifteen. He was by himself and supposedly nobody else was around. Paper said Barmes said the kid had one of those railroad spikes in his hand and it was Barmes’ word that the boy tried to hit him with it, so no charges are going to be filed.”

“You got work to do, Sylvia,” Grover suddenly barked out when he came out of the back room and glared at Buster and her.

“Do you see a room full of customers?” she sarcastically responded.

He didn’t reply but smirked and began scraping grease off of the grill.

Sylvia smiled and whispered, "He hates it that I'm nice to people."

"You ever thought about working somewhere else? Got to get tiresome being around him so much."

"You know what, it does, sorta, but honestly, I don't pay him any never mind, and besides, I like waitin' tables. *I'm* in charge of myself really and I kinda do things my own way. The best thing, though, is I get to meet different people and get to make them happy by how I treat them. I love seein' the smiles on their faces when I've taken good care of them and made them feel maybe a little special."

"You're really amazing, you know it?"

"Nah, it's just bein' like everybody oughta be."

Done with breakfast, he left Sylvia a dollar at the register and left. Walking through the station on his way to the shanty, Buster spotted Luther sweeping the floor in the main lobby. He thought of Sylvia's words. He walked up to Luther.

"Morning there, Luther."

He didn't immediately acknowledge Buster and kept sweeping. He raised his head after a moment, looked around, then glanced at Buster with his worn-out eyes.

"Mista, I know you tryin' to be nice, but you should jus go on."

He stood quietly, leaning on his push broom staring at Buster like he wanted him to know he didn't like being rude, like he was trying to say, "If only things were different." Buster could feel the same anger welling up inside him that he'd felt that Sunday morning outside the station.

"All right," he said, the resignation in his tone seeming to register on Luther's face.

“Take care, Mista Gaines.”

Surprised a little that Luther had remembered his name, Buster touched Luther’s arm and replied, “You take good care of yourself too, Luther.”

“Yessuh.”

Buster walked out the door and down the steps to the platform. As he paused and stood between the rails of track 10 looking back at the station, he pictured Luther standing on the platform greeting him early on the morning he’d arrived in town. He was the first person he’d encountered stepping off the Texas Eagle into this different world, and even though he knew virtually nothing about him, he somehow cared a great deal for him and felt a sadness thinking about how people, *white* people, had undoubtedly treated him throughout his life.

“Gaines,” someone called out from behind him as he got near the shanty.

Turning around, he saw Barmes coming toward him.

“Gaines,” he said, walking up next to him, “I seen you talkin’ to that colored helper in the station. What’s your business with that old niggra?”

“What’s my *business*?”

“Whatta you want with him, you ain’t no damn social worker.”

“Mr. Barmes, all I was doing was simply talking to him on my way through the station.”

“I know somebody had a conversation with you, son. Didn’t you listen to what he was tellin’ you?”

Sweat was dripping off Barmes’ pock-marked, ash-colored skin and Buster just knew that if Barmes got any closer to him, he’d be sprayed by the nasty juice from the

tobacco he was aggressively chewing with his brown teeth. On top of that, his breath no doubt would have been rotten enough to gag a maggot, so Buster prudently stood back a safe distance.

“I know some guy called me over to his car one day when I was out front of the station and said something about not talking to colored people. Is that what you’re talking about?”

Barnes dabbed his brow with what looked like a snotty white handkerchief.

“So, you remember what he said?”

“Sure, I know what he said,” Buster answered, realizing he didn’t want to say anything further to Barnes for fear it might somehow have repercussions for Luther. “Message received.”

They arrived at the shanty together and Buster saw that Dick was talking to Chalk near the time clock.

“Garland, can I see you outside?” Barnes called out.

“Wonder what the hell *he* wants,” Percy commented to Bull.

Dick walked over to Barnes and said, “Yeah, sure.”

The two left the shanty. Several minutes later, Dick came back in and walked over to Buster with a serious, almost worried look on his face.

“Buster, uhh... Barnes wanted me to talk to you, says he knows your dad and suggested I talk to you before word gets back to him about how you’re a nigger lover, as he put it, and how you’re stirrin’ up trouble down here.” He paused and continued, “and before he sees to it they transfer you *out* of here.”

“*What?*”

Bull immediately slammed his coffee cup down when he overheard Dick and stood up.

He loudly exclaimed, “That mother fucker bag a shit. I got a mind to go up there and kick his worthless goddam ass!”

“Take it easy, Bull,” Dick responded.

“I *ain't* gonna take it easy. What kind a sorry piece of dog shit talks to a kid like that?”

“It’s all right, Bull.”

“It *ain't* all right, Buster. You ain’t done nothin’ to nobody. All you’ve done is try to be nice to folks and get along and do your job like you’re supposed to.”

Percy came over to Buster and handed him a cup of coffee. “It’ll be all right, Buster, just kinda watch what you say.”

“Can they really transfer me?”

“They can do pretty much whatever the hell they want to do, especially to you temporary guys.”

“Well, I don’t give a damn really about him or anybody else calling my dad, but goddam, moving me *out of here?*”

“Percy’s right,” Dick added. “You really *do* need to watch yourself. It’s a sorry world, but that bastard knows the people up in St. Louis, and this wouldn’t be the first time he got his way about personnel stuff.”

Buster took a quick drink of his coffee, finding it bitter without any sugar. “He knows my dad?”

“What he said.”

“Guess I’m a little surprised, just never thought about my dad spending enough time around here to get to know *anybody*.”

“It’s Barmes’ station, you know,” said Dick.

“Yeah, I know, but my dad hasn’t been running down this way, I don’t think, for all that long. Most all of his career, he was running out west and a little over east.”

“Barmes makes it his business to know everybody and everything.”

“I wonder what my dad would say if he did call him and tell him that shit.”

“If your dad’s like you,” replied Bull, “then I doubt he’d think anything of it, wouldn’t worry about it.”

“I remember a time, maybe five or six years ago,” Buster commented taking a seat near the assignment board, “my uncle, who was working as a conductor on B&O and my other uncle and all the family were having dinner at our house. Had to be maybe fifteen people sitting around the table after desert talking about stuff, about their jobs and the people they worked with. My one uncle starts talking about the porters on his train and makes a comment about how lazy they are and how they’re always trying to get out of doing things they were supposed to do. I remember him saying they drink on the job and it didn’t do any good to say anything to them about it.”

“Well, that was your dad’s *brother* talking.”

“Yeah, I know, Bull, but when I chimed in at the table and said something like, ‘I’m sure a lot of them *are* good workers,’ my dad replied that I didn’t know what I was talking about, that I wasn’t out in the real world and didn’t see how things really *were*.”

“Ohh.”

“The thing is,” Buster continued, “I’ve never, and I don’t think any of my brothers and sisters have either, heard him use a derogatory word about them, never heard him use the word nigger or anything other than the word colored. Never heard my mom either. I don’t know, he’s really a good man, and maybe he thought we’d think less of him, or whatever, for using that word. Maybe he was ashamed of people that did, but I know some of his friends at the church had nothing against calling colored people niggers. Who knows, maybe he used that language around other guys and his brothers too.”

“Maybe.”

“And another thing, he and his brothers used to be in minstrel shows at the church, and I remember him talking fondly about them and saying how much fun they had.”

Bull lifted his cup and studied the coffee, gently swirling it a moment. He took a sip, looked at Buster and said, “Different times.”

“You know, I’ve never thought about colored people really being any different than whites. They’ve always seemed no different than me. People say “nigger lover” and all that kind of shit...I just don’t get it. Maybe I *am* young and naïve and don’t really know anything about the real world. As far as my dad’s concerned, I want him to be proud of me, like everybody does, but if he heard I was a nigger lover, as that guy calls me, and was somehow disappointed in me because of it...then I guess he’s just going to have to be disappointed. I’ll live.”

“Try to remember somethin’ about your dad,” Bull offered, “He comes from an older generation, and you know what, old ways of thinkin’, well, they change...they always do eventually.”

“I know.”

“You got a good heart, Buster, stay that way.” Bull smiled and concluded, “Stick around with us, kid, us old guys still got things to learn.”

Dick set his coffee cup on the potbellied stove and smiled at Buster. “Best we get after it.”

Buster set his next to Dick’s. “Yeah.”

The guys dutifully got up and patted Buster on the shoulder on their way out of the shanty.

“Hell of a way to run a railroad,” Buster sarcastically commented as he and Dick were the last to leave.

“Ain’t it the truth.”

Buster looked for Barmes after work on his way back through the station to try to talk to him but didn’t see him. What he had really wanted to do was ask him how he knew his dad and how *well* he thought he knew him. The more he thought about it, the more unbelievable it all seemed and the more absurd he thought it was that anyone could be offended, or just plain angry, or whatever it was, about somebody merely talking to somebody else. And to threaten that person for doing so, well, that was absolutely appalling.

It took hours for him to shake off his feelings of anger and resentment toward that man while debating whether he should write his folks to tell them about him and alert

them of the possibility of being transferred out of Texarkana. He concluded, though, that if that happened, he'd just inform them at that time by phone...nothing was going to be gained by getting ahead of himself.

## Chapter Sixteen

“What’d you see?”

He heard the forecast for the coming days on KTAL-FM while getting ready for work the next morning. They predicted a continuation of the heat wave that had set in yesterday and it was probably going to get even hotter...ninety-seven today and close to a hundred for the following two days before dropping off to highs in the low nineties then the upper eighties. The peanut butter had turned to a semi-liquid state in the jar and he could almost have just poured it out onto his bread when he packed his lunch. The remaining potato chips had gone limp in the bag because of the high humidity, in spite of the thick rubber band he always tied tightly to close off the opening.

The sun, glaring off of the shiny tracks, was radiating waves of discomfort as he made his way to the shanty, and the mirage off to the east seemed to have appeared sooner than usual. The smell of diesel fuel, along with that constant creosote odor, were unusually strong, he thought, probably because of the high heat. He knew from experience that the fumes were only going to get stronger when he got up close to the engine throughout the day. He wondered if Percy had grown immune to that diesel fume assault.

Bull saw Buster coming in and walking back to the time clock.

“How you doin’ there, buddy?”

“Fucking heat,” Buster mumbled.

Bull threw up his hands and chuckled. “Whoa, somebody didn’t sleep so good?”

“*Hell* no! I tell you, it gets hot in St. Louis, but damn, it gets *hot* down *here*.”

“I hear you. That old hotel you’re stayin’ in, must be a oven in there.”

“You know it, a big old brick oven. I ought to just shell out the money and get a damn room with A/C.”

Buster poured himself only half a cup of coffee, the notion of drinking hot coffee being only halfway appealing to him, and sat down next to Bull. What the guys hadn’t talked at all about yesterday was the shooting death of the colored kid over the weekend, maybe, he guessed, because they didn’t want to bring it up in light of the incident with Barmes first thing that morning. That was yesterday though.

“Duncan came to the yard late yesterday morning to talk to Barmes, had your buddy Charlie Summers and Levester what’s-his-name with him. Did you know that?” Percy asked Bull from across the shanty.

“I *do* know that.”

“How’d you know that?”

“Played poker over at Charlie’s last night.”

Buster got up to dump his coffee out. “Who’s Duncan?”

“Sheriff, sheriff of Bowie County,” Percy answered.

Bull looked back over to Percy and asked, “How’d *you* hear about that anyway?”

“They was at Belton’s Hardware store and was talkin’ about it in the nuts and bolts aisle. I was lookin’ at some stuff just around the corner from them and heard them. When they seen me, they shut up and headed up to the front to check out. You know, if Willie Jamison knew what they was sayin’, well, maybe there’d be a big stink come up.”

“What, you don’t think he already knows?” Chalk asked.

Bull shook his head. “Even if he don’t, ain’t no way it’d matter when he did find out.”

“Yeah, guess you’re right.”

Percy leaned over in his chair smiling and raised a butt cheek.

“*Damn*, Percy, not when we’re all in here,” Bull yelled over.

Percy laughed and fanned his hand. “SBD.”

“Jeez,” Dick laughed, pretending to choke.

Bull waved his hands in front of his face and told Buster, “That Jamison guy’s the county prosecutor.”

“Ohh.”

“Anyway, those boys don’t know shit about what really happened Saturday night,” Bull exclaimed. “All they know is what bullshit Barmes told them. They wasn’t there and didn’t witness shit.”

“No, they don’t, but dollars to donuts, you know Barmes as well as I do,” Percy countered, “he shot that boy in cold blood and slept like a baby that night.”

“I know that, Percy, I was just tryin’ to be fair. I don’t have any doubt whatsoever about it.”

Percy poured his second or third cup of coffee and slowly sat down again in his hardwood chair, one cheek then the other. “So, you heard at Charlie’s about them comin’ here?”

“Uh huh.”

“Welllll?”

Bull hesitated for a moment. "Think I oughta just keep my mouth shut."

Percy sipped his steaming coffee. "Bein' pretty damn *mysterious* there, Bull."

"Why don't you back off, Percy, he's got his reasons," Dick interceded.

"Aww hell...yeah, I know, sorry, buddy."

"Forget it, you old fart bag," Bull replied.

"Takes one to know one."

Shaking his head, Dick smiled and exclaimed, "When you two juveniles're done, maybe we could go get some *work* done."

Percy smiled in return and said, "Okay, boss."

A loud three-octave fart suddenly shot off of Percy's chair.

"Holy crap, what'd you have for breakfast?" Dick responded, once again pretending to choke.

Everybody started laughing and got up to get away from Percy. Just as he was placing his cup on the stove and saying, "Hey wait for me," he let out another rude blast. He burst into laughter, like he'd surprised himself, as he watched the others hightailing it and misjudged the edge of the stove, dropping his cup on the floor, shattering it, and loudly exclaiming, "*shee-it*" as hot coffee splashed over his boots and pants legs.

"Hey guys, wait up," Percy yelled out as they all made their way over to the engine in the middle of the yard. Catching up to Buster, he excused himself with, "It was them ham and beans I fixed last night."

Buster laughed. "*Damn*, Percy, I'd rather inhale diesel fumes."

"Wouldn't we all," Dick agreed.

"Well, think maybe I'm done."

“Yeah, right, Percy, you raunchy dog.”

Buster added, “Glad you’re up in the cab by yourself all day.”

“I’ll just entertain myself if them beans start workin’ on me again.”

“Sorry to break the news to you, Buster,” Dick chuckled, “but you’re ridin’ with that old fart bag out to Trigg Street.”

“*Ohh noo.*”

“Sorry about that. All right, let’s get ourselves on it, whatta you say.”

“I *ain’t* gonna kill you,” Percy laughed, slapping Buster on the back.

“Jeez.”

Only twice throughout the morning while stationed in the fireman’s chair to and from the outer yard did Buster have to hang his head out his window. The afternoon, fortunately, he spent out on the gravel throwing switches, flashing movement signals and passing digital gestures back to the cab for Percy’s amusement.

When he got back to the hotel at four-forty-five, Mrs. Rutherford called to him from behind the desk.

“Mr. Gaines, hi. Listen, that girl Sylvia just came by lookin’ for you, left no more than five minutes ago.”

“Did she say what she wanted?”

“No, sir, just asked if you’d come back from work yet.”

“All right, thanks.”

Buster picked up the *Texarkana Gazette* from one of the tables in the lobby and quickly scanned the headlines on page one to find out what was going on in the world. Wondering what Sylvia had come by for, he tossed the paper down on the table and

headed upstairs to the shower. He hustled through his business, thinking perhaps she might show up again, and got back to his room in time to slip on a pair of cutoff shorts and to hear someone knocking on his door. She had a way of showing up at the hotel unannounced which helped spice up his daily routine.

“Hey, how are you, heard you came by a little while ago.”

“Yeah, came over to see if you wanted to go out tonight.”

“Go out?”

He hadn’t heard that phrase used for a while now.

“Yeah, you know, go have dinner and catch a show.”

“Sounds great. What’d you have in mind?”

“The Great Race” is showin’ at the Paramount. Want to go?”

“Sure do, let’s do it.”

Sylvia sat on his bed watching him as he got some socks out of the drawer along with a T-shirt and pulled the shirt on, giving him a look that seemed like something other than her usual, casual glances she’d give him.

“Yes?”

She grinned. “What?... I’m just lookin’ at you.”

“Yeah, I see you.”

“Whatta you got on your mind?”

Chuckling, Buster replied, “Just what I was going to ask *you*.”

“Silly boy.”

He tied his tennis shoes and got up. “All right, ready, let’s hit it.”

They hopped in her car and rode out to Bruno's for dinner. He watched her as she checked her appearance in the rear view mirror like the last time they were there and watched her from behind as she walked up to the entrance. There was just something about how she walked, he thought, that made her so incredibly attractive. She turned around before opening the door and smiled.

“Okay, *now* what's on your mind?” she asked coyly.

“I'm going to claim the fifth on that.”

She broke into a little laugh. “Thank you, sweetie.”

“Sure, no problem.”

Buster wasn't up for over-indulging and really just wanted to have a good burger and a beer and to catch a movie. Sylvia seemed content with that too, and within forty minutes, they were on their way to the Paramount.

“*Love* Natalie Wood,” she exclaimed as they went in the center entrance. “Tony Curtis is a cutie too.”

“If you say so.”

Buster had been impressed with the theater the first time he'd gone there. It reminded him of the Fox in St. Louis...a large auditorium with balconies going up to the projection booth and small balconies flanking the main floor on either side. The large stage where the screen was located was where, he figured, old vaudeville shows and headliner stars had once appeared. The theater undoubtedly had looked nicer than it did now, though.

“Want to know some things about the history of this place,” Sylvia asked in a whisper as they settled into their seats on the main floor ten rows from the front.

“Sure.”

“Well, before they turn the lights down, look up in the balcony, way up to the *top* balcony and tell me what you see.”

Buster stood up and turned around, acting like he was checking out the theater, then sat back down.

“What’d you see?”

“Well, there were some colored folks sitting up in the very top section and some other people scattered around in the lower balcony. What else am I *looking* for,” he quietly replied.

“You know about Jim Crow, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“The whites always called that top balcony up there ‘nigger heaven’.”

“You’re *shitting* me.”

“Nope. Isn’t that awful? The coloreds also always had their own separate entrance out front and their own separate ticket window. They had their own stairs to get up there, and believe it or not, they had their own *toilets* up there.”

“Damn. They don’t have to sit up there if they don’t want to, do they?...not nowadays.”

“Nope, they don’t have to if they don’t want to, it’s just that some still do.”

“That’s absolutely unbelievable.”

“Not like this in St. Louis, *is* it.”

“Well, not that *I’ve* ever seen.”

“I *thought* this’d be an education for you.”

“Sure as hell is.”

A man walked across the theater in front of the first row and glanced in their direction.

“*Sylvie*? That you?”

“Aw shit.”

“What’s the matter?”

“That guy, I know him from back when.”

“Oh?”

The man walked up and knelt down in the aisle next to Sylvia. “How’ve you been, babe?”

“Where’s your wife, Arnold?”

The man paused, then answered, “Home.”

Sylvia chuckled.

“Oh, I see, still the same old devoted *family* man, huh? Who’d you sneak out with *this* time?”

“Never mind about that.”

The man got up and headed up the aisle away from them without saying anything else.

“An old customer?”

Sylvia pursed her lips and shook her head, saying, “Guess this shit’ll always happen long as I stay around here.”

“What, running into people you knew?”

“Yeah, tired of it...really tired of it.”

“I’m sorry.”

Sylvia gently interlaced her fingers with Buster’s and looked at him. “Where were you ten years ago?”

He smiled and replied, “In grade school.”

He wondered why Sylvia stayed in Texarkana. It wasn’t as if she couldn’t just move to any town and find a waitressing job to get away from the former business acquaintances, and it wasn’t as if she had a lot of friends she’d be moving away from. Bull was the only reason he figured she stuck around.

The movie over, they drove back to the Savoy.

He opened his car door in front of the hotel. “Had a great time with you as always.”

“Me too, sweetie.”

“Okay...well, see you in the morning.”

“Sleep tight.”

“Yeah.” He started to get out of the car but stopped. “You seem kind of sad, you all right?”

She sighed and her lower lip began to quiver.

She said, “I’m...I’m all right.”

“What’s wrong? The guy at the show?”

She threw her arms around Buster and burst into tears. He felt inept at consoling someone in this kind of situation, so he simply sat in silence for several seconds, being held tightly while her tears streamed down his cheek, waiting for her to say something.

“I don’t know.”

“What?”

Wiping her eyes with her hands, she quietly told him, “It’s not your problem, hun, I’m all right.”

“What can I do?”

She kissed his cheek and replied, “Just what you just did.”

He didn’t think he’d done anything...all he’d done was sit there like a lump of clay.

“Night, sweetie.”

Buster got out and leaned in the window. “Night cutie.”

She smiled at him then drove off up Pine Street and out of sight as she hung a left.

The radio said it was eighty-four degrees when he tuned in to KCMC-FM after rinsing off with a cold washrag. When he switched stations to KTAL-FM, he was able to catch the end of the St. Louis Cardinals game with the Giants and was in time to hear them lose 7-1, which then put them five games under .500. One unearned run on two lousy hits while Mays, McCovey, Alou and Haller *each* had at least two. *Pathetic*, he thought, *but what the hell, that’s my team.*

## Chapter Seventeen

“Bye, Buster, I’m going to miss you.”

He didn’t see Sylvia anywhere when he got to the diner the next morning. He was waited on by Tricia and asked her why Sylvia wasn’t around.

“She’s takin’ care of a few things. She called me late last night and asked if I’d take her shift today.”

“Do you know what she’s doing?”

“No, not really. She just said she had some things to do.”

“Did she seem upset or anything?”

“Buster, why you askin’ such a question?”

“Forget it, was just curious.”

“You know, I think she likes you a lot, and if she’s gonna tell what she’s doin’ she’ll probably tell you, not me.”

Buster’s curiosity was up. “She talk about me?”

“Some. Enough to know she likes you.”

“Oh...thanks.”

Bull and Percy were seated in chairs next to the assignment board chatting with their feet propped up on a crate when Buster walked into the shanty.

Percy glanced at him and offered a greeting. “How’s it hangin’ there, buddy?”

“Still hangin’. How’s it going, guys?”

“Still goin’,” Bull replied.

“What’s going on today? What’s the work today?”

“Think we’re takin’ a train over to New Boston again, least that’s what it looks like.”

“Cool.”

Bull smiled, then said, “Cool, huh?”

Buster fixed himself a cup of coffee, grabbed the *Gazette* off of the bench that someone had brought in, and sat down next to Percy to look it over. The headline “Negroes Continue to March; One Dies Following Collapse” immediately grabbed his attention. As he started to read the article Dick and Chalk came in.

“Howdy, fellas,” Dick said, “up for a little run?”

“Sure am, boss.”

Dick smiled. “I like your spirit, Buster.”

“You little brown nose,” Bull laughed, “you’re gonna be a pain in Dick’s ass when he takes his next dump.”

“You fork ball,” Buster replied, laughing.

Bull and Dick chuckled.

“Better than a *screw* ball like Percy.”

“*Fork* you, Bull,” Percy shot back.

Looking at the guys, Dick said, “Let’s get to it and get back, whatta you say?”

Buster, you got brakeman.”

“Works for me.”

He stuffed his gloves in his back pocket, folded the paper under his arm, and dumped out his coffee after a final sip.

“Boys, supposed to be near a hundred today. Let’s not kill ourselves out there. Make sure the water jug’s got plenty of water in the caboose, fellas.”

“Absolutely, boss,” Bull replied “Always do.”

“Call up to me if it don’t.”

“Gottcha, boss.”

“Right.”

Dick pulled out his bandana from his hip pocket, wiped off his forehead, and exclaimed, “All right then, let’s do it to it.”

Walking down the line of cars to the caboose, Buster commented to Bull, “Dick’s all about business, isn’t he? I mean, I don’t think he even got his coffee this morning.”

“Yep. He knows it’s gonna be a real mother out here today and just wants to get a jump on business before it gets too damn hot.”

Bull was stretching his legs across the narrow divide between the seats in the cupola when Buster settled in on the padded seat by the rear door and opened up the paper. The article about Negroes marching had grabbed his attention so he started with that one:

“Como, Miss. (AP) - Jeers of ‘black fool’ and the fatal heart attack of one of their comrades spurred the 300 marchers on James H. Meredith’s symbolic trek through Mississippi on Thursday. A leader warned that ‘This is not an outing for nuts.’

After Armstead Phipps, a 58-year-old sharecropper from Marks, Miss., collapsed and died in the 90-degree heat, a Negro physician from Jackson ordered salt tablets distributed. The marchers went about eight miles before quitting at 4:30 p.m. and returning to Memphis for the night. The northern Mississippi area they have covered has been relatively free of racial incidents but ahead lies territory in which the Ku Klux Klan is strong.

“Highway patrolmen, moving ahead and behind the column, kept curious observers at a distance. But there was some heckling. A teen-age boy tootled ‘Dixie’ on a clarinet while some girls nearby taunted ‘black fool’ and, ‘Don’t wave at me, niggers.’ The boy was asked why. ‘Because they’re niggers and we hate them. They don’t know what they’re doing. They just want publicity.’ As the marchers passed a highway sign giving the distance to Jackson at 155 miles, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, ‘We’re cutting it down.’”

Buster’s reading was interrupted by Bull.

“Hey Buster,” Bull yelled down, “lemme have the comics.”

Buster pulled that section out and handed it up the ladder then sat back down to continue reading:

“James H. Meredith’s statement in New York that he would return to Mississippi armed if necessary, was a brisk topic among Negroes crowded along the highway north of Senatobia, waiting for the day’s march to start. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., head of the SCLC and workers for the Congress of Racial Equality showed concern as to the reaction.

‘I have not lost confidence in nonviolence,’ said King, who has frequently

opposed militants in the movement. King added that Meredith, regarded as a heroic figure in the civil rights struggle, has ‘gone through great stress and strain’.”

Finished reading the article, he moved to the one below that said:

“Dirksen Wants Congressional Leaders to Review Viet Policy

Washington (AP) - Sen. Everett M. Dirksen of Illinois renewed Thursday his request that President Johnson call a meeting of congressional leaders of both parties to review the Viet Nam war. Dirksen, the Senate Republican leader, said the administration is not being candid or consistently credible about Viet Nam and said he feels there have been developments that make the need for a White House conference ‘more emphatic.’

“I urge this in order that the American people through their representatives in the Congress might better understand the shape of things to come,’ Dirksen said.

“Johnson, in a talk to a group of U.S. diplomatic officers, sought to quiet American restiveness over the Viet Nam conflict. Americans often grow impatient ‘when they cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel,’ he said.”

In New Boston when the train arrived, Dick called back to the caboose and spoke to Bull, who had seen the town approaching, and climbed down out of his roost.

“Let’s go to beans,” Buster could hear him suggesting to Bull.

“Let’s do it.” He hung up the receiver and said, “You missed the White House West Diner the last time we were over here. You’re gonna get a kick out of the fry cook.”

They hopped off the caboose to meet up with the others who had already started over the tracks toward town. Buster spotted a silver, stainless steel structure, what resembled a large travel trailer actually, in a parking lot as they caught up and approached a street with a line of brick buildings. The diner, resting on a foundation of large wooden blocks, was off by itself at the end of the street and a few cars were parked out front on the gravel along with some motorcycles. The crew walked through a cloud of dust when a strong gust of wind suddenly blew past them as they approached the door.

“*Corn Hole,*” Bull loudly called out to the cook behind the counter, “hey, how’s it goin’?”

“*Hey.*”

“How’s your wife and my kids?”

“*Good,* how’s your girlfriend and *mine?*”

“Good seein’ you, Corn Dog, how’s business over here?”

“Rakin’ it, man, rakin’ it in. Park your butts at the counter here,” Corn Dog exclaimed.

Corn Dog, whatever his name really was, was a short little man in a tight-fitting clean white T-shirt with fully-illustrated arms. He had so many tattoos wrapping around both arms that you couldn’t tell where one ended and another began, and nothing, at least at a quick glance, was recognizable. The guys strung out along the counter on just enough seats on the far right end. Buster noticed the Coke dispenser off to his right at the end of their counter where it made a 90 degree turn back toward the wall the grill was on. Pasted on the white plastic housing of it were several decals that mostly obscured the words Coke-a-Cola. The ubiquitous rebel flag was in the middle, surrounded by “Eat Me”

(referring to a hot dog brand), “Choke This Down” (a chili brand), “If we get you *sick* take it OUTSIDE!!!” (showing a picture of somebody with their head in a toilet), “Don’t Sweat The Small Stuff” (illustrated by a naked cartoon man with his head down looking at his privates), “*Well excuse me if I can’t cook so good!*” (shown with a hand giving the finger), and flags of four different states. Corn Dog finished cooking a hamburger, garnished it with some onions and pickles and a small bun, and flipped it onto a blue melmac plate, then slid it down the counter past three men into the hands of a fourth.

“Thanks, amigo,” the man responded.

Corn Dog looked at Buster, then Bull, who was seated next to him.

“What’re you havin’? Want my special?”

“Sure enough,” Bull answered. He looked at Buster and said with a grin, “It’s damn hot.”

Buster had his mind on his usual fare but was curious. “What’s the special?”

“I call it ‘the demon’. It’s a open-face corn dog and tamale with chili, sauerkraut, jalapeños, onions, and corn on a bun.”

“*Holy crap,*” Buster laughed. “What the heck *is* it, *Mexican? German? Alien?*”

“You’re gonna *think* it came from outer space,” Bull chuckled.

“Guess that doesn’t sound so bad. *Corn? Really?*”

“Yep, that sweet Mexican corn, and he tops it off with Velveeta cheese if you want it. He splashes on some Chulula red sauce or some hot green Mexican sauce along with Fritos.”

“*Jeez,* that’s a damn *monster,*” Buster laughed. “Yeah, let me have it. Top it off with both kinds of Mexican sauce and some Fritos. Hold the Velveeta.”

Corn Dog chuckled and said, like he was warning Buster, “You got it,” then took orders from the other guys, walked over to the grill area and began building two monsters.

“I see why he’s called *Corn Dog*.”

Percy was seated on the other side of Bull and broke into a laugh when he overheard Corn Dog chuckling.

“Glad you boys’re ridin’ in the *ass* end.”

“Yeah well, least we’re *both* havin’ it,” Bull replied.

“Ohh man.”

“What’s Corn Dog’s name anyway?” Buster asked the guys, belching and rubbing his belly as they made their way back to the train after lunch.

Chalk answered for the group, “Who knows, all we know is, he supposedly lives around here with some colored gal and her kids.”

“Wonder how he dreamed up that nasty special.”

Percy laughed and slapped Buster on the back. “Probably dreamed about it sleepin’ off a bad drunk.”

“You ever get sick from eating in there?”

“Strangely enough, no, never have.”

“Yeah, strangely enough *indeed*.”

The demon still hadn’t started working on him, fortunately, as he got settled in on his seat in the caboose with the *Gazette* after breaking up the train, but to be on the safe side, he had checked the toilet for adequate paper and operational capability before sitting

down. Those johns in cabooses were cramped and primitive looking and he hoped it wasn't going to be necessary to subject himself to this one.

He glanced at the paper and read more about the voters' rights thing. The piece entitled "Voter Registration Rally Stirs Argument Among Negroes" talked about a rally in front of the Panola County Courthouse in Batesville that was just held and attended by 250 colored and white people. Charles Evers, state director for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was interviewed in Natchez, Miss. as the rally was underway:

"I don't feel marches from Memphis to Jackson are going to get Negroes registered."

The article continued by saying leaders with the marchers from the rally disagreed. Robert Green, education director for the SCLC was interviewed:

"I would say this. We registered about 50 to 70 people in Batesville and I think the purpose of the march is to assist Negroes in overcoming the fear that has been so much a part of their lives."

The article concluded with reporting on elderly people getting registered:

"Negro leaders lifted Sam Fellows, a retired sharecropper, and carried him into the registrar's office as the first applicant - following with Eli Forter, who gave his age as '106 and nine months'. Fellows was unable to write, signed his name with an 'X'. Shenkle, the clerk, was polite, business-like, ignoring onlookers. The elderly new voters drew a loud cheer when they were carried back outside the courthouse."

Immediately next to that piece, Buster saw that a blue-eyed blonde named Lyda Rose Covington, standing 5 feet, 2 inches and weighing 98 pounds from near Texarkana was just crowned Arkansas Dairy Princess in Little Rock Saturday night and that she would now represent Arkansas in the 1967 National American Dairy Princess contest at Chicago. Flipping through the rest of the paper, he learned that the Safeway store was running a special on toothpaste...two tubes of Ipana for fifty-nine cents.

“Hey Bull,” he yelled up to the crow’s nest, “I’ve got to do some shopping.

Where’s the Safeway in Texarkana?”

He could hear Bull chuckle.

“Too far for you to walk.”

Late afternoon when they arrived back in Texarkana, the demon began growling through Buster’s lower GI. It wasn’t that something like this hadn’t ever happened to him, of course it had, but *this* event was of particularly historic suddenness and intensity. Fortunately, the timing of the event was perfect because they’d just gotten back to the shanty, and when he finally rejoined the others after walking out of the john blowing out the Ohio Blue Tip he’d lit, the guys howled with sarcastic laughter.

“*Jee-zus Christ, close that door,*” Percy called out.

“What the hell was *in* that monster I had for lunch,” Buster laughed back.

“I don’t know, but take it out of here with you.”

“Buddy,” Bull joined in, “gonna take more than that match you got there. You’re gonna need the whole damn *box* to make that john safe for the rest of us tomorrow.”

“Let’s call it a day and get out of here and leave poor Buster to himself, whatta you say,” Dick exclaimed.

“No problem. I’m goin’ home where the air ain’t contaminated and sit in front of my fan.”

Buster went back to his room, gathered his things, and hit the shower. He was on his way back out the door of the hotel when Mrs. Rutherford stopped him.

“Your friend called a little while ago.”

It seemed like he frequently just missed phone calls or just missed Sylvia stopping by.

“Rita? My friend Rita?”

“Yes sir, your sweet little friend who was here over the weekend.”

“Can I call her back, call her collect?”

“She said she’s going to be out for a while but she’ll call you again this evenin’ at eight.”

“Good, I’ll be back long before that.”

“Have a good supper.”

Eight o’clock came and went and it wasn’t until almost nine by the time she called. He had gone to dinner, gotten back, waited around the lobby, and stationed himself near the phone reading a Life magazine, a Look, and a Reader’s Digest. It finally rang on Mrs. Rutherford’s desk.

“Probably Miss Grayson,” he told Mrs. Rutherford as he picked up the receiver. “Hello, Savoy Hotel.”

“Buster, is that *you*?”

“Rita, *hi*.”

“Hi yourself, how are you?”

“Doing good. I *miss* you, you know.”

“Me too.”

It had only been three days since she'd gone back to Paris after her visit, three days during which, it occurred to him, he'd thought a lot about her but not exactly non-stop. Things felt a touch different, though he couldn't put his finger on it clearly. It was like he missed her but wasn't desperate to see her.

“What've you been up to?”

“Um, well, listen, I've come to a decision about stuff, about, you know, what we talked about.”

He could feel some nervousness creeping up. “About...?”

“About what to do with myself.”

“I see...are you moving over to Dallas?”

Rita was silent for a moment and his anxiety increased over the thought of what she might say next.

“Yeah...I am.”

He didn't know how to feel about this...that same old conflict within himself rushed to the surface.

“Oh” was all he could think to say.

“Buster...after I move...*damn*.”

“It's going to be hard to *see* each other, *isn't* it.”

“Yeah...I don't know how we'll do it.” There was a long pause and he thought he could hear his heart beating. “Listen...I put my house up for sale this morning and started packing.”

This news gripped him since he didn't consider that she'd be moving so quickly.

"You're leaving right *away*?"

"I need to. I knew once I made the decision I had to just do it. I'm moving this weekend."

"Oh...okay."

"I'm sorry."

He switched the receiver to the other ear and stood there silently, leaning on the desk with both elbows and trying to figure out how they could possibly see each other again. He knew it was going to be an extremely difficult, if not impossible, thing to pull off.

"Rita...maybe someday I, uh..."

"Buster, don't."

After another uncomfortable pause, he said, "I don't have any idea when we'll get over anywhere near you, if we ever do, if I'm even *around* still when that happens. And when you start school and you're tied up with work when you're out of class..."

"I know. I've thought about all those things."

"Damn."

"This is hard...it's so hard telling you good-bye." She started to cry. "I've...never felt like this."

"I've never felt like this either."

“I’ll be right back.” She set the phone down and quietly blew her nose. A moment later she continued. “I’m going to go, *okay*?...I don’t want you hearing me cry.”

“Okay. Write down my home phone number and address, will you please? It’s area code 314...”

“Bye, Buster, I’m going to miss you.”

She hung up before he could finish, before he could say anything else. He held the phone next to his ear for several seconds, staring motionless at papers and an ink pen on the desk, trying to get his mind to believe what had just happened. Just as quickly and out of the blue as their romance had started in the Moonlight Diner, it ended in an abrupt “I’m going to miss you” and click of the phone in the lobby of the Savoy Hotel. While he hadn’t completely conceded the futility of their situation, she obviously had, and as he thought about it that night trying to get to sleep he was actually grateful for that.

## Chapter Eighteen

“Yeah, take pity on me.”

Groggy, lying on his side and wiping the saliva from his open mouth, he could see that his alarm clock said five-thirty and he could see the sun filtering in through the window overlooking Front Street. When reality set in, Buster turned over and tried to get a last thirty minutes of sleep, but that wasn't going to happen because his mind refused to slip back into neutral, and, instead, chose to race a hundred miles an hour in several directions, none of which he liked. *Damn it* was his first thought when he finally sat up in bed and his feet hit the floor. He slid the switch on the alarm to “off”, got up, and got himself ready for work.

“I'm sorry, what'd you say?”

“I said,” Sylvia repeated, “ what're you havin' this mornin', sweetie?”

“Oh...yeah.”

“Man, what's wrong, hun? You look like your dog just ran away from home.”

“Hmm, funny. In a way I *feel* like it. You know Rita? Sorry, of course you do.

She's decided she wants to go to school and decided that the only way she could afford to do that was to move back home with her mom in Dallas. Last night we talked and she told me she's already put her house up for sale.”

“Sounds like she knows how to make decisions.”

“Yeah, she does. We said good-bye, or rather *she* did...she hung up when I started to give her my phone number at home, and all I’ve got is her number in Paris, and *that’s* going to be disconnected pretty soon I’m sure. I don’t think I’ll ever *see* her again.”

“Oh Buster, I’m sorry. You two were pretty close weren’t you.”

“Yeah, you could certainly say that. I still can’t believe she just hung up. I just don’t understand.”

“Buster, if I had to guess, bein’ a woman, I’d say the whole thing was too painful and she just felt like she had to let go and not prolong it.”

“Maybe so, but still...”

“Anything I can do?”

“Thanks, but it’ll be all right, really. You’re probably right, of course, had to be hard for her making that choice.”

Sylvia walked around the end of the counter and sat down next to him. “Tell you what, sweetie, you and I’ll go out tomorrow night...how’s that sound?”

Buster chuckled. “Yeah, take pity on me.”

“Silly boy, that’s not it. You know I like hangin’ around with you.”

“I know. Yeah, that sounds nice.”

“Good.”

“But...”

“But *what*?”

“You know, the usual.”

“Bull? He’ll be gone all weekend with his buddy, Junior.”

“*Ohh...okay.*”

She smiled. “Is it a *date?*”

“If you’re positive he’s not coming home.”

“He’s not.”

“Okay then, let’s do it. How about you pick me up at five-thirty. Is that all right?”

“Sounds good.”

“Why don’t you surprise me again. I liked it the last time.”

She winked and replied, “*Okay, I’ll do that.*”

He ate the last bite of his pancakes, wiped his mouth, and paid Sylvia at the register. Telling her he’d see her later, she winked at him again as he walked out.

Work that day was a grind for him. It seemed to pass so slowly that each time he’d glance at his Timex, it would seem like the minute hand hadn’t moved. To make it worse, or *because* of it, he just couldn’t keep his mind off of Rita. He tried to engage with the guys in the usual silly bantering, but each time he found himself slipping back into thoughts of her. Finally, the shift ended and he tiredly made his way to his room and then the shower. The ninety-two degrees and lower humidity made it feel almost like the arctic after the previous four days of near-one-hundred temperatures...amazing what a difference a handful of degrees could make. It occurred to him that if Sylvia planned to take him down to the lake again, it would still be plenty hot to enjoy her favorite pastime. He went down to the porch to wait for her.

“Hope you didn’t have dinner already,” she exclaimed when she rolled up at the curb in front of the hotel and he opened the door.

“Nope.”

“Good, because I packed us a picnic supper.”

“*Great*, where we having it?”

She smiled and replied, “Guess.”

“I hope it’s the lake.”

“You *got* it, sweetie.”

Buster’s mind kicked into overdrive thinking about the last outing at the lake.

The drive down to Lake Texarkana flew by...maybe it was because he was so distracted or maybe because he knew with each passing landmark he recognized he was getting closer to the destination.

After pulling onto the grassy area she’d parked on before, she retrieved her wicker picnic basket from the back seat and two beach towels. Buster grabbed the metal Coleman cooler and followed her to the familiar spot where she spread out a flowered table cloth on the grass and then sat down. He sat down close to her.

“You know, I forgot my swimming trunks.”

“Yeah? Well I forgot my suit, too.”

“I got to tell you, Sylvia, whenever I’m around you, I feel so free, like I could do anything and you wouldn’t give a shit.”

She smiled at him. “Just the way I feel about you, too.”

“Pretty amazing. I’ve never met anybody like you.”

“What am I like?”

“You’re smart, funny, cute, free and out in the open about everything. You make people happy and make them feel like they’re something special.”

“Aww Buster,” she said, looking like she was both flattered and touched. “Have you always had a way with words?”

“I don’t think I do, not really.”

Sylvia leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, then quietly said, “Thanks.”

“Thank *you*... for being you,” he grinned.

“Damn, there you go again.” She smiled broadly and opened the basket. “You like fried chicken, don’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

The last rays of sun along with the three Michelobs he had with dinner and afterwards while stretched out on the beach towel were a relaxing combination. If it weren’t for the couple who were swimming and laughing maybe a hundred yards away, the place would have been all theirs, but what the hell, he thought, he was still thinking about skinny dipping. What surprised him, though, was Sylvia.

“Know what? What I’d really like to do now is just lay here and talk. I know, I know, but you go in if you want.”

It didn’t take much to change his mind...he was relaxed to the max and enjoying just lying there.

“Tell you the truth, I’m too damn comfortable to get up,” he said.

“Yeah, me too.”

“Hey thanks for fixing dinner and bringing the beer, you’d make somebody a good wife,” he laughed.

“Don’t know about *that*.”

Buster glanced down the shore and saw that the other couple were out of the lake facing his direction and drying off, the guy standing behind the girl rubbing a towel over her back.

“So, what do you want to talk about?”

“Bull.”

“Okay, what about him?”

“I’m just not so sure about things anymore. I know I’d probably made it sound like we’d had this elaborate scheme to have him break up with Ginny so I could move in with him and live happily ever after.”

“Yeah, you sort of did make it sound that way.”

”Right, guess I did. Well, anyway, he and I don’t seem to spend much time at all together now a days. It’s not turning out the way I’d kinda pictured it’d be. Hell, we see each other less *now* than when he was livin’ with her. He pretty much goes and does whatever he wants, whenever he wants, and I suppose I do the same thing. That kind of arrangement isn’t exactly how you’d describe a committed relationship, is it?”

”No, I’d have to agree with you on that.”

“I’m twenty-nine, I’ve never been married, and I have no one in my life who I’m serious with.”

He finished the third beer, and as he got up to get a cold one out of the green Coleman, he glanced down toward where the couple had been. They were no longer around. Buster took a swig of his ice-cold Michelob then handed it to Sylvia.

“Thanks, sweetie.” She took a long pull and gave it back. “You know what came in the mail today?”

“What?”

“A letter from a guy I used to know... Wally Blalock.”

“Who’s that?”

“Remember me tellin’ you about the boyfriend I had, the guy who broke up with me because he couldn’t handle the fact that I was once in the business?”

“Oh yeah, I do remember.”

“He’s livin’ up in Little Rock and wants me to move up there, can you believe that? I mean, it’s been years since I’ve heard from him and all of a sudden he writes me and tells me he wants me to move up to Little Rock.”

“Since things aren’t exactly the way you thought they’d be between you and Bull, is that something you’d consider doing?”

“No, it isn’t. *Hell*, I don’t know. I was crazy about that guy... was just somethin’ about him, somethin’ I couldn’t resist.”

“Man, Sylvia, your life’s kind of like ‘As the World Turns’.”

She laughed and agreed with him. “Come on, whatta you say we get in the water.”

“Like the sound of that.”

With their clothes lying in piles on the towels, they swam in the moonlight, happy and free of all encumbrances and content to just enjoy their companionship. The length of the day, *and* the alcohol, eventually started catching up with them, and for an hour, they laid sprawled out next to each other sharing one last beer and swapping small tales from their childhoods.

The next morning, he decided to check out the S.M. Ragland store on Main Street. It looked like it'd be a good place to satisfy his urge for a cigar of some kind and maybe a pack of cigarettes. They had all sorts of cigars to choose from, and since he had no idea what the different brands were like he picked out three Muriel Panatelas simply because of Edie Adams, along with a pack of Swisher Sweets and a pack of Salems. He and his buddy from grade school would actually buy Salem cigarettes at a neighborhood confectionary called Wells' where his dad would send his brothers and him to buy his Lucky Strikes. That little place was only two blocks from their house, and sometimes when Buster would walk down to it, he'd pause along the way to peek in the window of the Hawthorne Buffet, a tavern his grandfather had patronized some years back. He'd see men sitting at the bar with their bottles of beer in one hand and smokes tucked between the fingers of the other. His buddy's father used to habitually patronize that bar on his way from work and, unfortunately, his alcoholism led him to be abusive toward his mother and neglectful of family obligations. Only when he'd sober up for periods of time did Buster go along with his buddy on their family weekend trips to the river cabin they owned for a while.

Out on the sidewalk, he paused to tear open the Swisher Sweets box and lit one up. It was like sucking on a candy stick, rolling that little thing around on his lips and tasting the sweet tobacco and smoke. Inhaling, though, turned out not to be such a good idea, as he discovered right away when a slight nauseous wave washed over him. Later that night in his room playing his new song on the Harmony, however, he decided he'd be undaunted and fire up one of the Panatelas; and as he disgustingly flipped the butt into the toilet, he realized he really didn't feel much like a "man of distinction". It was true

you didn't have to be a "big spender" to buy Panatelas, as Edie suggested, and since they were so cheap, he concluded he didn't have any qualms about trashing the other two. The Salems, on the other hand, were so mild and agreeable that his smoking preference was easily decided upon. He'd carry a pack in his short sleeve shirt pocket those days he'd wear that kind of shirt and on those days he'd go to work in a T-shirt, he'd just leave the smokes in his hotel room. He wasn't hooked on nicotine so it wasn't anything to even think about...yet.

The weekend dragged, but it wasn't because he didn't have things to do. He had laundry again that needed washing and he needed to get to the grocery store, and most importantly, there were a couple of movies that'd recently been released. "The Blue Max" with George Peppard and Ursula Andress and "Khartoum" with Charlton Heston were great choices playing at the Paramount and the Strand. It'd been a week since he had seen Rita and he missed her. Hanging around with Sylvia had helped get his mind off of her, as did spending a couple of hours going to the Strand, but still, he'd have given anything to see her again. The weekend, if she had been there with him, would have flown by.

The Sunday *Gazette*, which he sat with in the lobby before going to Morton's for dinner, reported that the Washington Senators, with slugger Frank Howard, had beaten the Yankees and Whitey Ford 10-4 and that "the Mick" had hit two out of the park. Howard's eighteen homers on the season so far led the Senators while Mantle was well below that pace, as was Maris and most of the rest of the club. It pleased Buster to no end that the mighty Yankees were in the cellar having such an awful season. One of the absolutely few things he did like about them was that he'd met some of the players some

years back in his church at Yankee Norm Siebern's wedding and that they'd been friendly toward his brothers and him. Sieburn had grown up near the church and his family were members there. It was curious to see in the box score and game article that Don Blasingame, who'd played with the Cardinals from 1956 through 1959 and who had been one of Buster's favorites, was only hitting an anemic .215 with Washington.

## Chapter Nineteen

“...my *knees* are shaking.”

“You’re pullin’ a double today, we all are,” Dick announced when he saw Buster walk in the shanty shortly before eight on Monday, July fourth. “It’s only gonna be in the low nineties today and cooler tonight so it’s gonna be a piece a cake.”

This had been the first thing on his mind as he was waking up.

“Been looking forward to working the holiday...big money day.”

“Double time and a half for workin’ sixteen on a holiday, not bad, huh?”

“You got *that* right.” Buster poured a cup of coffee and sat down next to Percy.

“What’ve we got today?”

“Startin’ with bustin’ up that train over on three,” Dick replied, “then puttin’ together a coal train for another crew comin’ up from Shreveport this afternoon to drag it down south.”

“You get plenty of rest over the weekend?” Bull asked, looking at Buster from across the room.

Buster was immediately paranoid about why he was being asked this.

“Yeah, I guess I did.” He wanted to ask Bull why he was asking and how his weekend with his buddy was but, instead, asked, “What’d you do over the weekend?”

“Played cards Friday night and me and Junior did some fishin’ and ended up over at Nat’s Saturday night.”

Sylvia popped into his mind and what she had talked about at the lake.

Without thinking, he asked, “How’s Sylvia?”

Bull gave him a confused look. “Sylvia? I suppose she’s doin’ okay.”

“Well good,” Buster awkwardly replied, kicking himself for having asked. “I remember you talking about her.”

“Yeah? Oh that’s right, I did.”

“Right.”

He was relieved when Percy asked Bull, “You heard from Ginny at all lately?”

“Shit no, not lately.”

“Touchy subject still, huh?”

“Hell yeah, never told you, but that crazy woman called the cops on me and made up all sorts a shit about me.”

“Really? Like what?”

“I don’t think we got the time to go into it right now but I’ll tell you over beans tonight.”

“All right.”

The first eight hours were easy. Dinner, compliments of Dick and Chalk, consisted of take-out Mexican food from a joint called The Mayan Sun, according to the bag they brought it back in. With the exception of the greasy tamale, the food wasn’t bad. The burrito, refried beans and hot salsa would have tasted even better, Buster pictured,

with a nice ice-cold beer or two. Too bad that place wasn't within walking distance of the Savoy, but maybe, he guessed, he could talk Sylvia into going there sometime. The guys spread out in the seats and on buckets in the engine cab with bottles of Coke to enjoy the dinner at a leisurely pace.

"So tell me about Ginny," Percy asked.

"Well, that night I broke up with her and told her to move out she went all bananas. Got the cops to come out to my house and arrest me for disturbin' the peace. She told them I hit her and they asked my neighbor about it since she went over to his house to call them. He told them all he saw was the two of us arguin' out on the porch. I was down at the station for a couple hours before Charlie came to get me."

Buster already had heard about this, but what Bull didn't tell Percy was that he had been taken to the sheriff's department early the next day for questioning.

Percy shook his head and commented, "Jeez, what a shit deal."

"No shit. Tell you what, I'm hangin' up women for a while."

Percy cocked his head. "Yeah right."

"*Serious*. They're just a pain in the ass."

"So, no ladies now a days, huh?"

"Only the gals at Nat's."

"Well, what about Sylvia? I know you were kinda sweet on her."

"I don't know, I like her a lot of course, but damn, the last thing I need now is another woman messin' with my head."

He thought Sylvia probably suspected this, at least to a certain extent, and briefly wondered if he should tell her what he was hearing so she would actually know. Even though he felt a bond with her, he also felt loyalty to Bull. None of this was any of his business, anyway, so he decided to keep his mouth shut.

A few hours later while on break, a two-unit rig pulling fifteen boxcars arrived from the South and stopped on track 3. Two men climbed off of the lead engine and walked over to 5 where the crew was parked. Chalk greeted the first guy as he walked up to them.

“Hey, Lennie, what’s the good word?”

“Howdy, Chalk, how you doin’?”

“Jasper, you old fuck, how you doin’,” Bull greeted the second one.

“Worn out from the old lady.”

“*Shee-it*,” Bull laughed. “Buster, this here’s Lennie Ballard and Jasper Creighton.”

“Nice meeting you guys,” Buster responded. “Buster Gaines.”

Ballard stuck his hand out. “Hey, how’s it goin’?”

Creighton nodded and said, “Hey.”

Buster noticed two more guys approaching, and when they met up with the first two, Percy introduced them to him.

“This is my boy, Woody.”

Buster stuck his hand out. “Buster Gaines, how are you?”

The man, looking like he was constipated, ignored Buster’s gesture and said,

“Can’t complain.”

The other guy spoke up and shook his hand. "I'm Norvell Combs, how's it goin'?"

"Going all right."

Chalk said, "You boys draggin' this shit out of our yard?"

"What they tell me," Combs answered.

Woody looked at Buster with a flat expression, then turned to Percy. "These kids get younger all the time."

"You ain't such a old timer yourself, son."

Carrying some papers, Dick joined the group from the shanty and exchanged a few brief words with the others.

Dick said, "Hook them up, Lennie."

"All right." Lennie shook Dick's hand and ordered, "Let's get the show on the road, boys. Good seein' you fellas. Take it easy."

"Take care a yourself, son. Stay out of trouble."

Woody looked at Percy and replied coldly, "Don't worry about it."

The Shreveport crew left with the coal train Dick's crew had put together earlier.

At eight-thirty as the sun was setting on the tracks, Buster and the others got their lanterns out of the store room in the shanty and assembled next to the engine for marching orders.

Dick put his hand on Buster's shoulder. "You remember your night time signals?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

“Just like you’ve done before, you’re gonna be up on top, passin’ signals down the line. We’re gonna shove up under the viaduct and make that right turn headin’ up to Trigg Street yard to hook onto the cars spotted up there. Watch yourself now.”

“Will do.”

“Seriously,” Percy interjected, “pay attention up there and keep an eye out both ways.”

The stern reminder got his attention.

On top of the car two cars up from the engine, Buster switched on his lantern and immediately noticed how different everything looked at night. Some backyard fireworks shot up from somebody’s house south of the yard. The vibration from the engine felt stronger, or at least that’s what he sensed, and the fact that it was difficult distinguishing objects just down the track because of the very low light conditions heightened his sense of concern for his safety. He heard Percy giving a short blast of the horn to signal getting under way just before the line of cars lurched forward in the direction of the overpass. He gave a quick last glance back toward the fireworks, hoping to see more, but the sky was black. Staring down the line trying to pick out the lantern lights from Bull and Dick, it seemed like just when he could spot them, they would disappear only to reappear, as if they had been switched on and off. He refreshed his memory on the simple signals to be used and waited to receive one from Dick, who was stationed between Bull and himself. The train was probably traveling at fifteen miles per hours and began bending to the right as he followed Bull’s lantern leading the way. He looked back in the direction of the cab and could make out Percy seated at the throttle, waiting also. Turning back, he squinted with steely-eyed intensity for a long moment and finally picked up a “slow” signal being

made by Bull, and then saw the same signal from Dick. When he turned around to face the cab and began relaying the signal, the cab light came on. A few seconds later, a long blast of the horn shot out and he could see Percy waving his arm frantically, pointing in the opposite direction and motioning for Buster to hit the deck fast. The bridge suddenly registered in Buster's mind, and he realized what Percy was telling him and turned around...the viaduct was ten feet away and coming up rapidly. It looked like there was only a three foot clearance. He dropped his lantern and dove face down on the steel-grid walkway atop his car; and when Percy brought the engine to a halt past the viaduct, he lay there, spread eagle hugging the walkway, shaking, imagining what would have happened if Percy hadn't been looking out for him.

He heard the sound of the other guys running down the gravel in the dark toward him as he stood next to the engine after climbing down from his near-death encounter. Percy had also gotten out of the cab and came up to Buster. He seemed just as scared as Buster was.

“You okay there, buddy? You *okay*?”

His voice unsteady, Buster replied, “*Goddam*, I think I almost got *killed*...my *knees* are shaking.”

“Ohh man, you scared the crap out of me.”

“Sorry, Percy, I'm sorry. I'd have been scraped off that damn car if it weren't for you. I can't thank you enough.”

Percy let out a breath and replied, “Hey, it's okay, you just got to learn from that.”

“Yeah...lesson learned.”

His knees still felt weak at midnight when they all headed to the shanty to say good night and clock out.

Lying in bed after showering at twelve-thirty, Buster's mind raced through events of that night. He still got the jitters when he pictured himself turning around and seeing all that concrete coming at him. The sound of that horn blasting and the feel of his face smashed down on that steel grid, he knew, weren't quickly going to surrender their hold on him. It struck him, though, that the upside of the last sixteen plus hours was that he had just made double time-and-a-half. Aside from what he adjudged a life experience and valuable lesson in paying attention to what wiser people tell him, *that* was what was most important to him...he would log into his work notebook that with air pay, he had just earned one-hundred more dollars for one long, eventful day.

Seated at his preferred spot at State Line Bar and Grill nursing a beer after work several days later, Buster thought again about that car-top episode. It was a daydream about Rita that shifted his mind away from the yard, but just as soon as he'd gotten to the good parts in his fantasy about her, his daydream was shattered when a guy drove past the bar and suddenly blasted his car horn only six or seven feet from him. His hands shaking and his beer nearly splashing out of the glass, the blast instantly shot him right back to the night of the fourth. A split second later when he looked out the window, he saw the guy giving the finger in his direction, though he didn't really know if either the horn or the finger was meant for him. What the guy got back in return was a loud "Fuck you" from Buster for startling him and destroying his dreamy trip down memory lane.

One of the patrons walked up to his table, stopped, and laughed. "Good for you, man, that guy was an asshole."

The man continued on to the front door and left, dropping a newspaper that had been tucked under his arm. Buster got up to retrieve it, thinking he could catch up to the guy to return it, but the man was already out of sight. He sat down again to work on his beer and look over the paper. His attention was immediately grabbed by a front page article in the *Daily News*:

“Texarkana - Suspect Arrested in May Murders of Two Young People,  
Makes Confession

The Miller County Sheriff’s Department has arrested a suspect in the deaths of Troy Davis, 18, and Queenie Young, 16, on May 6, 1966 at a place in remote Miller County that authorities say young people go to ‘park’. The youths had been found by a deputy and it was reported that they had each been shot once in the head with the same caliber weapon and in a similar fashion as the victims of the so-called Phantom Murderer two decades ago. Dalton Hinds of Texarkana was placed under arrest after he was overheard by an off-duty city police officer bragging about it one night while out drinking with friends in a bar in Bossier City, Louisiana. Bossier City PD informed Miller County of this conversation and a search warrant was issued for Hinds’ residence, subsequently resulting in the seizure of a handgun which matched the bullets removed from the young victims.”

He remembered having read about these murders and recognized the name Dalton Hinds as someone he’d heard Percy referring to one day while talking to Bull. He was somebody Bull was either friends with or just acquainted with. He continued reading:

“Hinds made a spontaneous statement to deputies, supposedly, when he was

taken into custody at his house last night. It is reported he said, ‘Yeah, I killed those niggers, so what, not like they were worth anything.’ When he was asked why he had shot them, he answered, ‘Why not?’ He is being held without bond in the Miller County jail.”

The waitress came over to his table with his dinner.

“Here you are, hun.”

“Thanks, Gloria, appreciate it. I’ll take another Michelob, too.”

“You got it.”

He glanced at the paper again and saw that President Johnson was saying that the quantity of arms in Viet Nam was sufficient but that “more men are needed.” Bombings in Viet Nam were increasing. The GOP was saying the “War on Poverty” is a “sham battle.” He saw that Martin Luther King spoke at a gathering and urged, as he frequently had, nonviolence. The headline on another piece made him put the paper down after simply reading the tag “Negro Minister Faces Gritted Teeth of White Congregation.” *A hell of a world*, he thought. Buster finished off his beer. Gloria brought out the reinforcement and Buster picked up the paper again when sports popped into his mind. Leafing back to that section, he learned that a sportswriter thought Robin Roberts was “washed up”. *Washed up? No way*, he thought. His beloved Cardinals were still not playing like the ’64 Redbirds, but the Yankees still sucked, so not all was wrong in the world.

## Chapter Twenty

*“Buster, Bull, what’re you guys doin’ here?”*

Buster was determined to get at least Bull to go out with him and have a beer after work to help celebrate another payday. He had looked over his work book the previous evening, making sure each work day had been accounted for, and it was really starting to seem like he was getting somewhere.

When he walked into the diner and sat down at the counter, Tricia was on duty and he didn’t see Sylvia. He did, however, see Grover in his customary location, back turned to the room and a cigarette burning in an ash tray not but two feet from the grill.

Pouring a cup of coffee for him, she greeted him with a little smile. Tricia still seemed suspiciously civil.

“Hello, Buster, how you doin’?”

“I’m fine, what’s new?”

“Nothin’ so’s you’d notice.”

“Well that’s good.” Small talk was all right for a minute, but that’s as far as he wanted it to go with Tricia. “Sylvia off today?”

“Yeah, took a couple of days personal leave.”

“I see. Tell you what, give me some scrambled eggs and link sausage, please.”

“All rightee, I’ll get them workin’.”

As he was finishing his breakfast, Grover walked over near him to clean off the counter and glanced at him, giving an indifferent nod of his head as a greeting. Buster nodded back and handed Tricia his check and his money, leaving her a decent tip again. It was necessary, and proper, to do that in order to reinforce her kindly behavior, he reasoned. Striding across the street to the station, he *still* couldn't figure that gal out.

"Morning guys, how's everybody?"

"Morning there, buddy," Bull promptly answered. "How about we go get that cold one after work, whatta you say?"

Pleasantly surprised, Buster replied, "Sounds great, let's do it."

Percy got up off his chair and patted Buster on the back. "I know we kinda disappointed you before on payday so we wanted to make it up to you."

"Hey, I understood."

"Where you wantin' to go?"

"I have no idea. You guys know where the good joints are."

Percy chuckled. "*Good* joints, huh? Ever heard of the place called Bruno's Beer Hall?"

Not knowing how to answer, he glanced over at Bull, then back to Percy and replied, "No."

"Well, let's go out there then, good place and good beer."

"Sounds like a plan."

He wondered if he ought to come clean. Surely, Bruno was going to recognize him, and if Bruno said anything to him about Sylvia, he'd have to come up with something fast, something convincing.

“Nice place, huh?”

“Yep. Place hops on Friday nights.”

Buster knew it did on *Wednesday* nights.

By the time four-thirty rolled around, Buster was ready for a cold one. It was only ninety-one degrees that day, but once again the humidity and cloudless sky had started wearing on him by quitting time. It was only going to be Bull, Percy and Buster going to Bruno’s since Dick needed to head straight home to take Lyda Lynn to an appointment. Chalk just wanted to go home to his wife.

The three of them piled into Bull’s 1965 GTO parked out in front of the station. Buster had seen this beauty, a red hard top with mag wheels, red-wall tires, hood scoop and GTO badges, on various occasions on the street but had no idea it belonged to Bull. Buster sat in the front passenger bucket seat and noticed the four-on-the-floor Hurst shifter and impressive dashboard with rally gauge cluster displaying a tachometer and oil pressure gauge.

“What’s under the hood?”

“Just the stock 389. Gets me zero to sixty in under ten seconds.”

“*Nice.*”

“You know about cars?”

“No, not really, just some of the basic stuff.”

Bull punched it for a few seconds to demonstrate the car’s charm.

“Nice ride you got here, had to set you back.”

“Tell you what, I got a helluva deal on it. Got it off a guy who owed me from a marathon card game. I took the car and cancelled his debt.”

“*Damn*, can I ask how much?”

“Two grand. He bought it new in September for three and a half and only had four thousand miles on it.”

“You must be a great poker player.”

Bull chuckled. “I hold my own.”

The place was already jumping when they rolled up at ten till five, apparently everybody wanting to get an early start on the weekend. Bull had to park his Pontiac a block away, and when they walked in, the only spots left were at the far end of the bar next to the restrooms. Buster was first in so he planted himself on the left and Bull sat down next to him. The band had already started and a few couples were on the familiar-looking dance floor. A brunette waitress wearing an extremely short skirt and T-shirt eyed them as they took their seats and walked over.

“Howdy, fellas.”

Buster smiled at her and returned the greeting, “Hi, how you doing?”

“Peachy.” She glanced at each of them and asked, “What can I get for you boys?”

“Gimme a Schlitz, honey,” Percy answered.

“Michelob on draft,” Buster said, “and please make sure the glass is cold.”

“Yesss *sir*,” she replied smiling.

Bull elbowed Buster’s arm. “Damn, buddy, you particular or something?”

“Nah, just hate those warm glasses they bring out of the dishwasher. I got my standards you know.”

“Oh of course you do.” He looked at the waitress. “Gimme a Bud, and leave it in the bottle, hun.”

“Oh, *low* standards, huh?”

“Low as they get.”

“You fellas havin’ somethin’ to eat?”

“I am,” Buster answered. “You got a pork tenderloin sandwich?”

“Huh uh.”

“A meat loaf sandwich?”

The waitress chuckled, then replied, “Nope.”

“Okay then, how about a cheeseburger with everything, hold the mayo, fries too.”

He knew he could get a great burger here.

“Can do.”

She looked at Bull. “How about you?”

“Same, but don’t cut the mayo,” Bull replied.

Glancing at Percy, she asked the same question.

“Same, and don’t cut the cheese.” He cracked himself up like a kid. “Just had to say that.”

The long mirror behind the bar offered a full view of the room behind them, in spite of all the liquor bottles and knick knacks stationed around the counter and in spite of the poster taped up that proclaimed “When You’re Out of Schlitz You’re Out of Beer.” Ten minutes after ordering and half-way through their first beers, their burgers showed up.

“Here you are, boys, enjoy.”

Just as Buster got his mouth around his dinner, he caught a glimpse of someone to his far left coming in the direction of the bar from the kitchen area. When the person walked behind the bar and passed directly in front of him, his heart skipped a beat.

“Lisa, run to the back and get us some more paper towels,” the man barked out.

Bruno was standing five feet from him and was surveying the room full of customers. Buster tried to hide his face by holding his burger up nose-high and awkwardly raising his arms, as if *that* could do any good. When Bruno’s surveying reached Buster’s vicinity and he then made eye contact with him, *I’m screwed* raced through his panicked mind. A short moment passed and nothing happened. He hadn’t recognized Buster. Or, he had and didn’t care to offer any kind of greeting. Or, maybe, unbelievably, his burger camouflage had worked! *How lame*, he thought.

“How you fellas doin’?”

As Bruno greeted the three of them, the additional possibility entered Buster’s mind that Bruno knew who Bull was and didn’t want to acknowledge Buster in front of him because he had seen him with Sylvia.

“Can’t complain, how about you?” Bull replied.

“Makin’ a livin’.”

“It’s Friday, what can I say,” Percy offered, wiping the foam off his mouth.

“Hey, how you doing?” came out of Buster’s mouth.

“All right, fellas, lemme know if I can get you anything.”

With that, the imminent danger had passed.

The band struck up a familiar set of songs and Buster could just picture Sylvia out on the dance floor, shaking her sweet body and grinning broadly as she teased him

with her moves. Still relieved that no issue with Bruno had taken place, Buster was enjoying the last of his dinner and his beer when he looked up from his plate and glanced into the mirror. He couldn't believe his eyes. Sylvia had somehow appeared on the dance floor out of thin air and was dancing a fast dance with some guy who was trying to paw her, his arms all over her. He sat there, almost in shock, staring at her; he wondered what would happen if she noticed them sitting there. Sylvia looked like she was having a good time, but it was also apparent she didn't want the guy touching her. She kept moving his hands away as they continued dancing. The song ended and she started toward the restroom when the guy grabbed her arm and looked like he was trying to kiss her. He could hear Sylvia tell him, "Get lost." She got free from him and walked past Buster and the other two with tunnel vision and headed straight to the restroom.

He wanted to leave before she came out...with that direction of travel, she was definitely going to see them.

"Hey Bull, you about ready to hit the road?"

Bull finished a long pull from his Bud, then replied, "What's your hurry, thought you wanted to celebrate."

"I do, but, uh."

"Lightweight." Bull chuckled. "I'm gonna have one more, then we can go."

Conflicting thoughts raced through his mind. He really wanted to say hi to her and even gave the crazy notion of dancing with her a thought. He tried to convince himself that if Bull found out he'd been spending a lot of time with her, and in fact had been *naked* with her, he wouldn't mind. That didn't wash, though, and he finally settled on a "screw it" frame of mind.

“You’re right, sounds good.”

The waitress came over when he flagged her down.

“Gimme another Mick on draft, and get these guys another beer also, on me.”

“Why *thank* you, my man,” Percy cheerfully responded.

Bull patted Buster on the forearm. “Good boy.”

His apprehension eased off since he’d resolved this situation in his mind.

“*Buster, Bull*, what’re *you* guys doin’ here?”

Sylvia had come out of the restroom without Buster noticing. Bull turned and saw her.

“*Sylvia*, hun, *hi*.”

“Hey. Just out for a little bit havin’ fun.” She glanced at Percy. “Hey, Percy, how are you?”

“Doin’ good.”

“Good. Well, why don’t you guys come over and join me at my table.”

Buster wondered if she had come alone. She looked sexy in her short skirt and tight top and he really wanted to be there. “Sounds good, how about it, Bull? This stool’s getting hard anyway.”

“Yeah, that works,” Bull replied.

Beers in hand, she guided them to a table on the far side of the room. No one else was seated there and Buster was pleased to see that. It had almost gotten to the point, at least in his young imagination, that he and Sylvia had some kind of special, semi-romantic, semi-platonic relationship going on. He had no idea how she sized up their friendship, but he wanted to think she entertained the same notion. The lead singer broke

into “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling” and Buster just knew Sylvia was going to want to get up. She did. She looked at Bull and grabbed his hand, trying to pull him up to his feet.

“Come on, hun.”

“Nah, that ain’t my thing.”

“*Come on.*”

Bull laughed and begged her off. “Nah, get one of *these* guys to dance with you.”

Percy chuckled and quickly turned her down politely, saying, “Not my thing either, hun.”

“*I will,*” Buster eagerly volunteered.

He detected a smile on Bull’s face.

The two glided to the dance floor. Buster took her hand and placed his other low on the small of her back. She felt incredible once again and he had the overwhelming urge to pull her in next to him as tightly as he could. Better judgment prevailed, though, and he held her at an appropriate distance, thinking Bull would approve.

Sylvia leaned in and whispered, “What are you doin’ here, sweetie?”

“Just celebrating payday. What are *you* doing here?”

“Lonely. I hate sittin’ at home alone.”

“I’m sorry.” Buster kissed her cheek, not thinking, and caught himself. “*Sorry.*”

“For *what?*”

“Thought maybe I made a scene, you know, Bull sitting over there.”

She glanced over toward their table, turned back, and nuzzled in closely.

“Buster, I had the most fun here with you that night. I’d love to be here alone with you again.”

Her words surprised him since she hadn’t said anything like that to him before.

“I know, me too, believe me.”

“Good...I’m glad.”

The song and the feel of her body were starting to get to him and he knew discretion was essential. He held her back a slight distance.

“So, you’re not here with anybody?”

“No, hun,” she whispered.

“You know what...I’m glad.”

That same sensation he’d felt that night with her when the slow dances had ended and they’d stood there wrapped in each other’s arms, not wanting to unwrap, hit him when the Righteous Brothers song was over.

“Song’s over, sweetie.”

She brought him back to reality. “Yeah.”

An hour later, after two more beers and several songs, Percy suggested they get going. Buster didn’t want to, naturally, but gave in. All four walked out together and paused on the sidewalk out front.

“You goin’ home?” Sylvia asked Bull.

“Maybe, don’t know.”

She had a vacant look on her face when she heard his response. “Oh” was all she said in return.

Bull told her good night and started walking away in the direction of his car. She stood there, watching him leave and watching Percy starting after him. Buster glanced in Bull's direction, then back at Sylvia.

"Guess I better go too, that's my ride."

"Yeah, guess you better go."

"Okay, uh, listen, I'll see you in the morning maybe?"

"I don't think so." She hesitated, gazing up the street at Bull, then continued. "I need to take a few days off."

Disappointed, Buster replied, "All right. Okay, night."

"Night."

On the way back to the hotel, Bull asked Percy, "You up for Nat's?"

"You bet your *ass* I am."

Bull looked over his shoulder to the back seat. "Buster, you up for a little adventure?"

"Wow, sounds good, but I guess I'll pass, thanks anyway."

It surprised him, though didn't exactly shock him, that Bull would rather go there than see Sylvia. He found himself wishing he was going to see her again in the morning at the diner. His weekend, he knew, was going to be less cheery because he couldn't.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“I’m sorry, I truly am.”

At three-thirty on Monday, July the eleventh, Buster was standing on the gravel next to the engine talking to Percy, who was seated on the bottom step, when he saw Barmes walking out of the shanty. A moment later, Dick walked over to the engine from the shanty carrying a white envelope and gave Buster a look that told him he was about to give Buster some news he didn’t want to hear.

“Son, listen,” he paused and handed the envelope to Buster, “I’m sorry but you’re bein’ transferred down to Shreveport.”

“I *am*?”

“They didn’t give a reason, just said it’s for the benefit of the railroad basically.”

“Ohh man.”

“I’m sorry, I truly am.”

Buster looked at the envelope and saw it was addressed to “Mr. B. Gaines, Texarkana District” and that it was from “Mr. J.C. Breedlow, Vice President, Missouri Pacific Railroad.” He opened it and it read:

*July 7, 1966*

*Mr. Buster Gaines, Switchman (Temporary Status)*

*Texarkana District*

*Dear Mr. Gaines:*

*This is to advise you that at the discretion of the company you are hereby given notice that you shall be transferred from the Texarkana District to the Shreveport District effective 8:00 A.M. on Wednesday, July 13, 1966. You are to report at that time to Foreman B. Sanders, who will give you further instructions as to your assigned duties and assigned scheduling.*

*You will be granted your full shift on Tuesday, the 12<sup>th</sup> as mandatory travel time and will be compensated on your next regular pay check for one night's accommodation at the Jefferson Railroad Hotel, Shreveport, Louisiana along with \$10 for meal money. Additionally, you will be given a travel ticket for your transportation from Texarkana Union Station to Shreveport Union Station. Please see Mr. C.K. Barmes for the ticket.*

*Regards,*

*Mr. W.C. Breedlow, Vice President for Personnel, St. Louis, Missouri*

*cc: Mr. C.B. Johnson, Superintendent, Texarkana District*

*Mr. C.K. Barmes, Station Manager, Texarkana District*

*Mr. D. Garland, Foreman, Texarkana District*

*Mr. L. C. Chesterton, Superintendent, Shreveport District*

*Mr. W.W. Cobbs, Station Manager, Shreveport District*

*Mr. R. Sanders, Foreman, Shreveport District*

Percy got up and grabbed Buster's shoulder.

"Goddam it, I'm sorry, buddy."

“Yeah, what are you going to do?” Buster looked at the letter again. “Dick, the letter’s dated *Thursday*. Today’s *Monday*. How come they just gave it to you?”

“I, uh, don’t know.” Dick sounded like he knew why but didn’t want to say it.

“I’m sorry for such late notice...crappy deal.”

“It’s that scum suckin’ Barmes, fuckin’ with Buster,” Percy chimed in angrily.

Buster looked at Dick and said, “How come Barmes was the one who brought this letter over? I thought that guy Johnson was the personnel guy.”

“Yeah...don’t know.”

“Well *I* know,” Percy exclaimed. “Barmes gets his *rocks* off on this kinda thing.”

“Buster, you can go ahead and go now if you want, I’ll clock you out at four-thirty. I know you got things to take care of before you leave tomorrow.”

Bull and Chalk wandered over from the direction of the station carrying soda bottles and laughing. Bull noticed Buster holding the letter and saw the expression on his face as well as the others’.

“What’s up?”

“They’re sendin’ Buster down to Shreveport,” Percy replied.

“You shittin’ me?”

“Nope, that goddam piece a garbage Barmes done it, just like he threatened.”

“Well goddam.” Bull looked at Buster like he wanted to console him. “Buster, listen pal, that’s a shitty deal. I know you wanted to stay here but maybe they can bring you back before you got to go home.”

“I hope so.”

He handed his switch key to Dick and told him, “My lantern’s in the store room.”

“All right.”

“Listen, thanks for being such a good boss. I couldn’t imagine having a better one.”

“Aw hell... thanks, you’re a great kid, Buster.”

“All of you guys,” he said, looking at the rest of them, “have been great working with. Chalk, I appreciate all the help you’ve given me.” He laughed when he looked at Percy. “And Percy, I’ll tell the guys back home all about your stories. They’re going to love them.”

Percy shook his hand.

“You take good care of yourself there, Buster.”

“Yep, I will.”

“If you need anything get a hold of us, will you?”

“Thanks, Bull, appreciate it.”

He shook their hands and said good-bye, picked up his gloves and stuffed them in his back pocket, and started over the gravel and tracks toward the station.

“Hey, Buster, wait up.” He looked back and saw Dick walking toward him. “I want to give you my telephone number in case anything happens and you need to get in touch with me.”

“Okay.”

“You need to be extra careful down there, I’m serious.” The look on Dick’s face told him he *was* serious. “Just keep to yourself.”

He once again was hearing that unsettling advice.

“I will. Listen, thanks again for everything.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome.”

Dick wrote out his number on a business card and handed it to Buster.

“We’re gonna miss you, and I know Lyda Lynn’s gonna be disappointed you’re leavin’.”

“Well, tell her I said thanks again for looking out for me.”

“Will do.”

He got to the platform and turned around to look back at the shanty. Standing there, staring at it and seeing that the guys were no longer there, the feeling hit him that he’d been in Texarkana for months, not weeks. It felt like the morning he’d stepped off the Eagle with his dad had been long ago, that so much had happened to him since then. A surreal feeling that his life was now entering another phase suddenly engulfed him. He remembered that he hadn’t gotten a glimpse of the shanty that first morning because he had gotten off on the station side of the train and hadn’t even looked out at the yard from the door upstairs inside the station...so now he looked. Nothing was moving out there, no one was around, and no sounds of diesel engines revving or horns blasting or boxcars ramming together could be heard. It almost looked like a graveyard, almost as if time had stopped; but he knew if he stood there staring a while longer the yard would come to life again and he would know what the meaning was of whatever was taking place out there.

Barnes was at his desk behind the ticket counter writing something on a yellow sheet of paper when Buster approached that area.

“Mr. Barnes, I’m supposed to get my ticket from you for tomorrow.”

Barnes raised his head up and glanced at him. Without saying anything, he got up and walked over to the counter where he opened a drawer and took out what looked like a

coupon book. He tore a ticket out of it and filled in the information pertaining to departure location, destination, and train number, and signed it at the bottom along with writing an authorization code. He stamped it with an imprinting device and handed it to Buster, walked back to his desk, and picked up his ink pen. Buster was amazed that Barmes didn't have anything to say to him.

“Is that it?”

Barmes looked up and replied, “That's it.”

He was pissed off, yet relieved, since he wouldn't be seeing Barmes again. As he started toward the front entrance, he stopped in his tracks. He had to look over the old photos one more time, even though he'd see them again tomorrow before heading out of town. Rita suddenly popped into mind. They had looked over these photos together and she'd seemed so interested in hearing him talk about his dad and his connection to railroading. He wished he hadn't begun thinking about her again, and now, he had that to deal with on top of feeling shitty about leaving the group of guys he'd grown close to. He left the station, crossed the street, and walked up to the bank.

“Mr. Gaines, that closes your account. I hope you'll think about comin' back to visit us sometime,” the cashier at Bi-States National Bank told Buster as he received his funds from her.

He packed the money neatly inside his now-bulging wallet and stuffed it into his back right pocket, making sure it was securely in there all the way. He smiled at her because she seemed so polite. To be fair, a lot of people in Texarkana, in fact, had been nice to him, he thought.

“I may do that, thank you.”

He meant that.

He hadn't seen Luther in or around the station when he'd walked through, and nearly every day he had caught a glimpse of him somewhere on the premises. Thoughts of Barmes berating him out front of the station and that Sunday morning with the mayor's man, Holmes, pissed Buster off. The thought of being transferred out for whatever unknown reason pissed him off even more. With a sense of resentment, he turned to momentarily glance at the station before heading to the hotel.

When he went to dinner shortly after five, only a few customers were on hand at State Line, so he pretty much had the place to himself. Going through mental gymnastics and self-cheerleading in order to clear his mind hadn't helped. *This* is what he really wanted to do, *this* is where he knew he wanted to do it, and *this* is what he knew would help snap him out of his funk. Gloria caught him taking a seat at one of the tables by the front window and came over to him.

"Well *hi* there, Gloria, how are you?"

"Can't complain. What's the good word?"

Debating whether he felt like telling her about the transfer, he just answered,

"How about a Michelob on draft."

"You got it, hun."

There was something magical to him about sitting in a bar, beer in hand, blending in with adults. It was something, he discovered, that sort of made him feel like a fully-grown man. A stout woman in an inappropriately tight pair of jeans and cowboy boots walking toward the jukebox with her hand in her pocket rudely broke that magical spell. He imagined she was getting ready to load some quarters into the box and hoped it

wouldn't be that awful country and western stuff. But when she kept walking past the machine and ended up going in the restroom in the back, he leapt to his feet and made a beeline to the box. He pulled out fifty cents and dropped the two quarters into the slot, then selected "Ain't Too Proud To Beg", "Louie Louie", "Unchained Melody", and "Like a Rolling Stone"...all songs he was surprised to find but ecstatic to punch in the numbers for.

It was like he was back in St. Louis, hearing some of his favorite songs, while all he'd heard for weeks, or so it felt like, was C&W. Sipping his Michelob, his thoughts drifted back home; what he really wanted, was to have his buddies and his brothers there with him. Instead, the reality was he was about to travel even further into the South, alone.

One final killer cheeseburger was served to him by the smiling, helpful Gloria, and then he was done with the place. He left a dollar tip on the table for her, wished her a good-bye as he paid his check at the register, and received the usual "Come back in soon, hun" from her. He hadn't told her he was leaving...no sense in doing that. As far as he knew, he would never in this lifetime see her again, so much like with other people in other times. Some of those people he would give anything to see again and some others it just didn't matter. Gloria, he thought, fit somewhere in the middle.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

“Did you tell Bull you were coming here?”

His hotel room felt like an oven when he got back from dinner, the heat and humidity having built up through the day. He knew it was going to be another stick-to-the-sheets night. Even though he had taken a cool shower shortly after getting off from work, the stickiness in the air made him strip down to his underwear and stand in front of the fan after running a cold wash rag over his body to try and cool off again. After adjusting the fan’s direction toward the bed, he sat down with his Harmony to once again attempt the Travis finger picking style, one that Peter Yarrow and Paul Stookey routinely used.

With the noise of his fan, the soft knock on the door didn’t register at first, but when he heard it again, Sylvia immediately popped into his mind...that was how she had knocked the last time she’d come to visit him.

“Hey,” she said, noticing his state of undress when he opened the door.

“*Hi*. I knew it was you, recognized your knock.”

“Buster, okay if I come in?”

“Of course.”

Without saying anything, Sylvia stepped into the room and hugged Buster tightly for a moment.

“Nice to see you *too*.”

“Bull called and told me you’re leavin’...*when?*”

“I start down there day after tomorrow.”

“Damn it, Buster.”

“What?”

“Just when I make a friend, you leave.”

“Sorry.”

“So...you leavin’ tomorrow?...tonight’s your last night here?”

“Yeah.”

She looked like she was about to cry.

Shutting the door, he told her, “You know, it’s not all that far, I don’t think. You could hop in that killer Plymouth and drive down and visit me sometime if you *wanted to.*”

She gave him a look that he hadn’t seen from her before. “Right now, I know what I want...I want this to be that *sometime.*”

It took but a second for those words to sink in, and in that brief moment, Sylvia didn’t wait for Buster to say anything but simply stared him in the eyes with a telling look and peeled off her T-shirt. His heart began racing as she took his hands and placed them on her breasts.

“Touch me, I know you want this too. I saw how you looked at me at the lake.”

“I *do,*” he replied, his mind quickly revisiting the evening at the lake when he’d marveled at her naked body and how he’d wanted to touch her then.

“*Touch me,*” she softly pleaded.

He slid his hands around her and fumbled nervously trying to get her bra unhooked.

“Here,” she said, lifting her arms up and impatiently directing him. “Just pull it off.”

He did what he was told and let it drop to the floor. Immediately, she stripped off the rest of her clothes, and as he stood there with his hands roaming around, a bolt of panic shot through him when he thought of Bull walking in and catching them. He knew Bull could make mincemeat out of him in an *instant* if he wanted to.

“Did you tell Bull you were coming here?” he asked nervously.

She told him he was probably playing poker with buddies, as far as she knew, and assured him he had nothing to be concerned about. She obviously wasn't concerned about it since she eagerly resumed what she had been doing the second she finished telling him that. She pulled away and paused.

“Have you ever gone all the way with a woman?”

Her question sent his mind to Rita and how she was the first girl he had been fully intimate with. He loved the intimacy they had shared, but now his mind was wildly fixated on Sylvia.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

She kissed him again.

Her nipples felt like they could puncture his chest when she wrapped her arms tightly around him, her tongue dancing around and trying to find his tonsils. Pushing him

onto the bed and climbing on top of him, Buster was suddenly back in an unbelievable dreamland, one, this time, he had been heading toward with Sylvia for weeks.

It was ten-fifteen when he glanced at his watch on the table next to his bed as they lay stuck to the sheets.

“I want to ask you something,” he said.

“Okay, hun.”

“Did you think we’d ever do this, really?”

“Yeah. I did.”

“When did you first think about it?”

“I knew I wanted this early on, and I knew you did, so it was just a matter of when the *sometime* would come.”

“I know, that’s pretty much what I thought too.”

“So...how about you?” she asked.

“When did *I know*? Oh, it’s safe to say I had the hots for you the first time I came into the diner.”

Sylvia laughed, then said, “Thanks, I’m flattered.”

“All true.”

She pressed in close to Buster and kissed his forehead. “Do you feel bad about doing this with me...I mean because of Rita?” Before he could get an answer out, she continued. “I know she was your girlfriend, and I could tell you two liked each other a lot. I just thought maybe you might still have strong feelings.”

“Well, to be honest, I do, but it’s not like we were boyfriend-girlfriend. We’re not *anything* now, she’s gone.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. We got pretty close, but it wasn’t something we were going to be able to continue anyway when I went back to Missouri.”

“Okay.”

“I’m guessing what we did doesn’t bother *you*.”

“No, it doesn’t, not in the least.”

“That’s good.”

“Something I’m curious about. Is it weird for you that I’m so much older than you?”

Without hesitation, he replied, “No, you’re very exciting to be with.”

“I’m glad to hear that, not that I was really worried it might be.”

“I’m guessing also you have experience with guys my age.”

Sylvia laughed. “Yeah, suppose I have.”

“I don’t know that I want to know how many guys you’ve slept with, how many *my* age, or whatever.”

She kissed him and replied, “How about we just not talk about it.”

“Yeah...I’d just as soon we didn’t.”

She leaned up on her elbow and coyly looked in his eyes as her fingers slowly walked down his chest until they found a place to stop.

“How about we talk about *this*?” she playfully asked, giving him a squeeze.

“God almighty, I’m going to miss you”

She lay still next to him for a moment, then softly said, “Yeah.”

“Yeah? You too?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t begin to tell you how much you’ve meant to me.”

“Damn,” she quietly replied, moving her hand back up to his chest.

“I’m sorry...shouldn’t I have said that?”

“No,” she paused, “that’s not it.”

“What is it?”

“It’s just that...I’m going to miss you terribly.” She scrunched in closely next to him, like she was trying to climb inside his skin, and draped her arm and leg over him. “You know what, maybe I’ll surprise you.”

At eleven thirty as she was getting dressed and ready to leave, she took an ink pen and a scrap of paper out of her purse.

“I want you to take my phone number.” She jotted it down. “And I want you to call me, okay?”

“I will. I’ll call and tell you how the place is.”

“You better.”

As he opened the door for her, she hugged him tightly.

“Buster, listen, I’ve heard things about some of the guys that work down there...they’re not like your pals here. Will you please be careful?”

“I will. I’m just going to do my job and mind my own business.”

“Okay, good.” Kissing him on the cheek, she told him, “Take care, sweetie,” then left.

His mind was racing as he got in bed, thinking about how Sylvia was different than Rita in some ways and yet so much the same in others. He realized this was a young

man's wildest fantasy that he was living and his mind reinforced that realization by replaying scenes from the evening in a continuing loop. Suddenly, rudely, his mind decided there was something else to think about...what was he getting into?

## Chapter Twenty-Three

“Best you keep it that way.”

The following morning, Buster gathered his belongings and stood in his room, staring at the pictureless walls, the small porcelain sink, the saggy bed and old slotted metal headboard, and the cracked transom above the door, trying to take in the features so that he would remember all that he could. What his mind captured most vividly were images of sticking to the sheets at night, of Rita and him wrapped up in one another’s sweaty arms and legs, of the sounds of car traffic on East Front Street and rail yard noises coming in the window at night, and of the times Sylvia had come to see him. Fresh in his mind, last night with her seemed like another of those turning points in his young life. It was as if he had entered a room from another room off a long hallway and each had a door to enter and a different one to take him into yet another room. He turned and walked out, locking the door behind him. He got down to the lobby and found no one around to take his key, so he placed it in a hotel envelope along with a note addressed to Mrs. Rutherford saying he had enjoyed his stay there in the Savoy and appreciated the kindness she had shown him.

Standing on the street in front of the station, he paused to once again admire the façade. It wasn’t that he was particularly a sentimental person but guessed, as he thought back to the day he had arrived here that one day he’d find himself thinking about this place with some sentimental attachment to it. He walked through the building, pausing to

look at the old pictures on the walls as he had done several times before, and walked down the stairs outside to the passenger platform to wait for the train that would take him to Shreveport. It arrived relatively on time and Buster boarded the first of the three coaches, selecting a seat next to the window so that he could check out the scenery along the way. Leaving the yard and then leaving the general vicinity, Buster noticed the businesses they had switched out on various occasions and recalled a few humorous times associated with those places. With a bit of sadness as he gazed out the window while passing the Craner Tire and Rubber Company, he realized he was going to miss the guys. His attention, however, was soon turned to the sight of new stretches of track and new scenery, and he found himself feeling enthused as the train made its way south, following the Red River at one point. Looking out at the water shimmering in the early afternoon sun, Buster's mind was full of questions about where he'd be staying, who he'd be working with, and even what kinds of places he'd eat in.

The seventy-mile trip to Shreveport passed by quickly, and as the train slowed at the Shreveport Union Station, Buster noticed the type of familiar-looking old brick buildings found in Texarkana. He got up, belongings in hand, stepped off onto one of the four concrete platforms that made up the outside area of the station, and walked inside to get his bearings. The place was old...cracked brown floor tiles, long wooden benches, old pictures hung on the walls. All these places had so much in common, he thought. The bathroom off the left-hand side of the lobby looked like it needed attention, but he was struck by how beautiful and intricate the floor in it appeared. All the still-shiny green and white tiles stood out in contrast to their surroundings, harkening back to the grand age of construction and to what this place had probably looked like in its finer period of life.

He walked out the front of the station and saw the Jefferson Hotel, an old four-story red brick building with tall lettering painted on the side across the street. Registering at the front desk, he gave the clerk, a nice-sounding old man apparently named Flowers according to a sign on the top of the desk, five dollars for one night's stay. When he walked into his room, he was surprised to find that it looked rather attractive in its furnishing...pictures of pastoral settings on the walls, decent carpeting, nice looking bed, curtains on the window that matched the bedspread, and best of all, his own bathroom. He put his clothes away, arranged his belongings according to his customary style, and left to find the shanty and someone to report to. Since he was off duty on this travel day, he wasn't feeling as rushed to check in, as was the case on his first day in Texarkana. A man he thought might be able to give him some information informed him that the freight operations were housed in the shanty down the tracks out in the yard on the other side of the Railway Express terminal and docks.

When he walked out to the shanty, a typical-looking white frame structure, he saw guys seated in white wooden chairs and a man standing near the door.

"Hi, I'm Buster Gaines."

"Hey. I'm Duckworth," the man replied, his eyes appearing to be only half-open.

"You the extra guy?"

"Yeah. I'm supposed to start down here tomorrow. You the foreman?"

"That's right."

"Okay, well, guess I'm working in your crew?"

"Nah, my men and me cover the Riverfront yard. I think you're actually supposed to be workin' out of the Hollywood yard."

“Oh, where’s that?”

“A few miles from here.”

“Ookay, uh, how do I get there, I mean I don’t have a car or anything.”

“Lemme call down to Rusty, he’ll get you taken care of.”

“All right.”

As Duckworth dialed the wall phone in the corner of the room next to what Buster thought was the bathroom, a man came into the shanty.

“Howdy, boys.”

“Hey, boss,” one of the seated guys replied, “how’s it goin’?”

The man flicked his mostly-smoked cigarette back out the door and said, “What’s the good word here, fellas?”

“Uh, looks like we got a new man here, boss, apparently just got here.”

The man glanced over at Buster and said with almost an accusatory tone, “You Gaines?”

“Yes sir.”

“All right.” He didn’t immediately say anything else to Buster but returned to talking to the other guys. “What’s the story with that nigger the third trick run out of here last night?”

Buster was once again struck by the loose usage of that word.

Laughing, one of the guys replied, “*Shee*-it, he’s probably *still* runnin’.”

“You damn straight he is,” the guy seated next to him added.

“You damn straight” got up, walked over to Buster, and stuck out his hand.

“Howdy, son, welcome to our little world.”

The man was probably thirty years older than Buster was and spoke with a slight lisp. Straight came out more like thtraight and son more like thun.

“Hey, how are you?”

“Couldn’t be better. The name’s Maples, Jackson Maples.”

“Good to meet you. Buster Gaines.”

“Okay.” Gesturing with a nod of his head, he said, “This here’s Ronnie Hobbs and the other boy’s Carson Tooley.”

“Hey.”

Hobbs responded with “Hey” and a slight smile. Tooley said nothing and simply gave Buster a look that sent a chill down his spine.

Hobbs and Tooley looked like they hadn’t shaven in five days and Buster wouldn’t have been terribly surprised if one of them had said they’d talked to each other before work to coordinate their outfits for the day...each had drab, olive-gray pants and shirts on and their boots were even similar. Each had bulges in their shirt pockets that suggested packs of cigarettes.

The man standing in the doorway looked at Buster. “Gaines, I’m Superintendent Chesterton. You workin’ Riverfront for the time bein’.”

“Okay, but my transfer order said I was supposed to be assigned to Foreman Sanders.”

“Son, who the fuck you think makes that decision?”

Buster was stunned by how angry the man’s voice sounded. “I’m sorry, I’m just here to do what I’m told.”

“Best you keep it that way.”

“Yes sir.”

Duckworth hung up the phone and walked over to Chesterton.

“Bobby’s wonderin’ if you were thinkin’ about changin’ your mind about where to put this fella.”

“Yeah, I know. I had it fixed up to stick him down there but decided I’d put him here with you. You can keep an eye on him for me.”

“Whatever you say, you’re the boss.” Duckworth looked at Buster and said,

“Guess you’re workin’ for me.”

“All right.”

“Report in here at eight tomorrow mornin’. You bring your equipment with you?”

“No, I turned it in up in Texarkana.”

“All right. I’ll issue you new things tomorrow. Tell you what, we’re gettin’ off here now and headin’ out. You get situated with some place to stay?”

“Yep, in the hotel across the street.”

“Good. All right, we’re out of here. See you in the mornin’ at eight. Take it easy.”

“Okay, see you then.”

As Duckworth and Chesterton left the shanty together, Maples gave Buster a little pat on the shoulder.

“You’ll do okay here. We’re really just country boys.”

Buster gave a halting smile. “Yeah.”

Hobbs and Tooley got up and left without acknowledging Buster.

“Have a good evenin’,” Maples said. “See you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, see you tomorrow.”

It wasn't the warm welcoming he'd received in Texarkana but he quickly tossed that initially-disturbing feeling aside... it didn't really matter since he was only going to be working here for a while and it wasn't as if he had to live here.

As Buster headed back to the hotel he stopped off inside the station to look around. He saw that there was another set of bathrooms on the opposite end from where he'd previously relieved himself. He walked over to go inside the john.

“That's the colored bathroom.”

Buster looked around and saw a man holding a newspaper seated at the shoeshine stand nearby.

The man had a little grin on his face. “Son, where you goin'?”

“Huh?”

He looked vaguely like his dad, about the same age and wearing the same kind of shirt his dad always wore and the same kind of summer fedora. He even smoked an unfiltered cigarette like his dad. The nametag above his left pocket read W.W. Cobb and immediately Buster knew this was the station manager.

“Where you think you're goin'?”

“What are you talking about?” Buster incredulously replied.

“You just come in off a train or somethin'? That's for the Negroes. Yours is on the other end.”

Buster looked around and noticed on the wall to the right of the bathroom entrance a shadow of where some kind of sign had apparently been. He had known about

segregated bathroom facilities in the South but had never, of course, seen one until this place. He quickly surmised that the shadow was once a sign that denoted this room was for colored men.

“Is it still segregated?”

“It is. You don’t want to piss where the nigras do, now do you?”

Shocked, he walked away from the man without answering and went out the front door.

He noticed Hobbs and Tooley standing next to a copper-colored Rambler on the street in front of the station, with Hobbs laughing while Tooley was gesturing to the ground with one hand as if he were firing rounds from a pistol, saying “boom” “boom” “boom”. They glanced at Buster as he was coming down the steps toward the street and immediately stopped whatever it was they were doing. When he got to the other side of the street, he could hear them laughing again.

Mr. Flowers met him inside the lobby. “Hello, Mr. Gaines.”

“Hi.”

“So, you’re workin’ across the *street*, huh? I’m an old railroader myself.”

”Oh yeah? What’d you do for the railroad?”

“Marshall Flowers is my name by the way.”

”Nice meeting you.”

“I worked for the Pullman Company out of Washington, ran on the B&O for forty years and retired before they could ship me somewhere else.”

Buster told him about his dad and his own experiences traveling by rail. Their conversation about that and all sorts of things railroad lasted for well over forty-five

minutes, and it was only because of being interrupted by two other guests wanting information about where the best places to eat were in town that Buster broke it off, shook hands and headed up to his room.

Southern Café, the diner off the lobby, looked like it wasn't a place for fine dining by any means and he could see why the two guests would want to go elsewhere. But it did look like the kind of place he had visualized on the trip down from Texarkana...it probably served grilled orders along with a small variety of mediocre, family-style fare. That was certainly going to be good enough and cheap enough for him, at any rate. He read the name tag on the white uniform of the older-looking woman who approached his table just inside the entrance. Waitress Gloria greeted him as pleasantly as Mr. Flowers had. *Another Gloria*, he thought. When he finished his meat loaf dinner and got the check, he was surprised to see the charge was only a dollar. Gloria's waitressing service turned out to be every bit as pleasant as her opening greeting and, naturally, he rewarded her in his tip...this place, he concluded, would be where he'd take his meals in Shreveport.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

“You’re *here, that’s* what the fuck you’ve done.”

“Good morning Shreveport, it’s going to be another hot one today,” the man on the radio announced at six-fifty in the morning. “Supposed to hit ninety-eight degrees, so be sure to wear whites.” He woke up without the aid of his alarm and apparently had had his internal clock set so that he wouldn’t screw up getting off on his first day of work there. Because he had flown through a short breakfast in the Southern, he showed up at the shanty well before most of the first trick crew did.

Duckworth was the only man there when Buster opened the door and walked in. He put the newspaper down and looked up.

“Hey.”

“Morning,” Buster exclaimed.

“You’re early.”

“Yeah, I know, just got going early.”

Duckworth’s eyes looked even narrower than the previous day and his face had a look like he wanted to warn Buster.

“Don’t make a habit of it, makes the other guys look bad.”

Surprised, he replied, “All right, I’ll try to remember that.”

Duckworth motioned with his head. “Get you some coffee if you want, it’s over there.”

“Thanks.”

Duckworth lifted his paper again and continued reading.

“Uh, I’m going to need a new switch key and lantern.”

Without saying anything, Duckworth set his paper aside, got up, walked to the storage room and returned with the equipment.

“Here, you’re responsible for these.”

His gut was telling him already that this wasn’t going to be a happy experience for him. Duckworth hadn’t exactly been “Mr. Friendly” the day before, and certainly the vibrations Chesterton and Tooley had given off left him feeling less than welcome.

“Right, I’ll take care of them and turn them in when I leave.”

Hobbs and Tooley showed up and greeted Buster with a simple nod. They immediately got cups of coffee, sat down beside each other and started a conversation about the trouble with a car one of them was having. He guessed it was the barf-colored Rambler. Wanting to be friendly, Buster glanced at the men and offered a harmless greeting.

“Hot down here today, isn’t it?”

Hobbs looked at him and smiled, then said, “Hell, son, it’s *always* hot down here.”

After Maples arrived five minutes past eight, Duckworth put his coffee cup down.

He stood up, then said, “Keep the bums and niggers out of the yard, fellas. Let’s get to work. Gaines, you follow me.”

Outside, Duckworth guided Buster down the tracks toward the MoPac engine parked fifty yards away and pointed in the direction of the station.

“Riverfront yard’s over that way, time to time we drop cars over there.” He then pointed in the opposite direction. “Hollywood yard’s down that way, same thing.”

“All right.”

“All right. Tell you what, let’s get them eight cars over there and run them down to Hollywood.”

“Who’s the hog head?”

“Hobbs.”

“I see. What do you want me to do?”

“Ride in the cab. You’re gonna be responsible for spottin’ when we get there.”

“Yes sir, can do.”

Duckworth looked at Buster suspiciously and said, “Don’t get fulla yourself.”

Caught completely off guard, he replied, “*What?*”

“Nobody likes a uppity kid.”

This man was talking gibberish as far as Buster could tell. Trying to make sense of what he’d heard, he responded, “*Huh?* Just being polite.”

“Forget it.”

Hobbs came over and tapped Buster on the arm. “Let’s go. I’ll give you the skinny on the way down.”

“Good, appreciate it.”

The Hollywood yard appeared as large as the one in Texarkana. He estimated there were fifteen or more tracks to the main section and more running off the side tracks. Boxcars, tankercars, flatcars, and utility cars were spread out all over the place. The tall control tower on the side in the middle overlooking the tracks reminded Buster of the

neck and head of a large bird with its feathers spread wide. Hobbs had told him en route during the twenty-minute run that there were three full shifts in all of the yards in Shreveport, that there were some people he would probably like but some he'd definitely want to stay away from...and that he ought to just try to mind his own business. That advice was becoming very familiar. One final piece of advice from Hobbs was that by all means, he should stay out of the bars on the other side of the river, those in Bossier City.

His first day on duty in Shreveport ended the same way it had started...Duckworth and Tooley acting like he was an unwelcome pain in the ass and Maples and Hobbs treating him like maybe he wouldn't be so bad after all.

The next couple of days followed the same pattern. He could pretty much predict who was going to say what, as well as *how* they were going to say it, whenever he would interact with them. What he *wasn't* prepared for, though, was the short conversation out in the yard standing between two tracks of trains on that first Friday afternoon with Tooley.

"Boy, get this straight, you ain't welcome down here. We don't like goddam Yankee kids comin' down here makin' the same goddam thing us old heads make, not payin' union dues, actin' like they're some kinda special gift to us."

"*Whoa*, you've got me wrong, man."

"*Bullshit*, and don't *man* me."

"What the fuck have I done to you?"

"You're *here*, *that's* what the fuck you've done."

The dialog ended as abruptly as it'd started, Tooley walking away and Buster standing there composing himself. Hobbs was right, he quickly found out. He would have

as little to do with Tooley as he had to. He had a bad feeling, also, the same was going to be true with Duckworth, and very possibly others he hadn't even met yet.

His world inside the hotel seemed so different from the one across the street. These people had their arms open to him, they were like the members of Hamilton Christian Church. Those people a hundred yards away, with few exceptions, would just as soon he pack up and leave.

The *Texarkana Gazette* in the lobby as he walked through on his way to dinner reported in bold letters: "Chicago Police Search for Killer of 8 Student Nurses." He was a little surprised to see the *Gazette* down there and thought it'd be nice keeping up with his former haunt.

The man on the radio that night told everybody the thermometer had hit one hundred degrees that day. He knew if he were still up at the Savoy he'd once again be sticking to the sheets. Not in the Jefferson, though...the air conditioning was heavenly.

His dad's birthday was two days later. When he called collect from his room that evening to wish him a happy birthday, his brother Reggie answered the phone.

"Hey Buster, how's it going down there?"

"Well, let's just say things have been interesting."

"Like what? What're you talking about?"

"I didn't want to put it in one of my letters but I met a girl, a real knockout, when we made a run out of Texarkana over to Ft. Worth."

"Really? Tell me about her," Reggie replied, his voice sounding excited now.

"What'd you do?"

Buster gave a little laugh and replied, "Uh, I'll tell you about it when I get home.

Got you curious now, don't I?"

"You soitenly do."

"All right, listen, put dad on."

"He's on a run, coming home tomorrow."

"Oh, well how about mom, she there?"

"Nope, she and Gramma are out at the church at a pot luck dinner."

"Yeah, it's Sunday, should have figured. Well, tell dad I said 'happy birthday' and that everything's going okay with me. Tell him I'm meeting some nice people and saving my money."

"Okay. Take it easy, Buster. See you later."

"Right, see you later."

Ten minutes after he hung up, the phone rang.

"Hello."

"You all settled in down there?"

He couldn't believe who was on the line. "Rita? Rita, is that you?"

"It is. Hi, Buster."

Her voice was as melodic as he had heard it in his mind for days.

"I can't believe it's you. How are you?"

"I'm okay, doing okay. Listen, I hate how I ended our call. It's been bothering me a lot and I had to find you and tell you I'm sorry. That was a terrible, stupid way to end things between us."

"Yeah, got to tell you, it hurt."

“I’m sorry, I really am, believe me.”

“All right.” A familiar uncomfortable pause later, he asked, “How’d you find me?”

“I called the hotel and Mrs. Rutherford told me you’d been transferred. She told me she didn’t know where you were living but gave me your friend Dick’s telephone number, so I called him a while ago and he told me where you were. He didn’t have the number at home so I called directory assistance.”

“Oh. That’s a lot of searching.”

“I owed it to you.”

“That’s all right. I understand what happened, at least I *think* I do.”

“Good. Hey, I won’t keep you, just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“I appreciate you telling me that. I miss you, you know.”

“I know...I miss you too.”

“Hope everything works out well for you.”

“Buster, will you please give me your phone number?”

“Think you might call me sometime?”

“I may.”

He told her his home number in St. Louis County and told her the name of the dorm where he was going to be living in September. He jotted down her mother’s number in Dallas.

“Hope you *do* call me. Hope you call and tell me how your life’s going and tell me if you’ve found somebody.”

She sighed, then said, “I will, I promise.”

“I’ll call you too.”

“Good...Bye, Buster.”

“Bye.”

That was officially the end of things, he knew. He had often wished she’d call so that he could know in his mind that it *was* over, even though common sense had been telling him it was. It wasn’t like he wanted it be, but at least now, he thought, he’d get over her.

The following Friday afternoon, he was taking a break in the restroom of the shanty with a Field and Stream when he overheard Duckworth talking to someone. The thin wooden walls weren’t exactly sound-proof. A moment later it then sounded like the other man was talking to someone on the phone, which was on the other side of the dividing wall, and when the man’s voice rose, Buster could tell it was Chesterton.

“I want this goddam kid out of here. I’m movin’ him down to you on Monday.”

The receiver was then loudly hung back on the wall phone and he heard Chesterton advising Duckworth.

“That’s settled.”

“Bobby got a problem with that?”

“I don’t give a shit if he does.”

”Okay, just askin’.”

Buster’s progress in the john was immediately shut down when he heard this. Obviously, it concerned him since he was the only “kid” around. He decided to wait it out in the john, hoping Chesterton would leave, and that he’d then come out and talk to Duckworth when he’d left.

“Hey, I heard what Mr. Chesterton was saying. Was he talking about moving me down to Hollywood?”

“He was.”

“Oh. When?”

“You’re startin’ Monday.”

“Can I ask why?”

“Don’t matter, he’s the man in charge.”

“All right.”

“Somebody going to take me down there?”

“Bobby Sanders’ll be up to pick you up at eight Monday mornin’.”

“Is that my new foreman?”

“It is.”

“Do I take my equipment with me?”

“You do.”

It was like pulling teeth getting the necessary answers out of this man. He wasn’t unhappy in the least to be getting away from this group of low-lifes, as he had come to regard some of them.

“All right, well thanks for helping me get squared away.”

“Sure.”

He caught a glimpse of Chesterton talking to Webb as he walked through the station on his way across the street. His curiosity had gotten the better of him so he decided to go over and ask him why he was being moved.

“Mr. Chesterton, hi, uh, can you tell me why I’m being sent to Hollywood yard?”

“Son, to be honest, you ain’t fittin’ in here.”

“I think I am.”

“You ain’t. Just move like I tell you and try to get along with the boys down there.”

“What’ve I done to not fit in?”

“The boys don’t like you, plain and simple.”

What could he say to respond? It wouldn’t have mattered anyway if he’d tried to press him. At any rate, he already knew.

“I see, all right.”

His anger level rose as he crossed the street. He thought, *Fuck him...fuck all of them.*

He saw the old-timer clerk in the lobby. “Hi, Mr. Flowers, how’re you doing?”

“Afternoon, how are you?”

This man was a real treat to talk to, especially compared to Chesterton.

“Guess I’m all right. Listen, looks like I’m going to be moving out after Sunday night. They’re sending me down to Hollywood yard and I start there Monday, so I have to move somewhere in that vicinity.”

“Well, sorry to see you leave.”

“Thanks. You have a beautiful hotel here.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gaines, hope you enjoyed it.”

“I did. I’ll pay up my bill first thing Monday, if that’s okay.”

“That’d be just fine, son.”

The air conditioning and lobby diner were going to be sorely missed...both had served him well. Now, he had no idea where he was going to stay come Monday but he trusted that his new foreman, or somebody at the yard, would help him find accommodations, whatever they'd be.

Sylvia came to mind and he wondered how she was...it would cheer him up immensely just talking to her. In a relatively short amount of time, their frequent talks in the diner and get-togethers had become an important part of his life in Texarkana and he found himself thinking about her a lot and missed her company. When he remembered that he'd tucked her phone number in his wallet, he pulled it out and dialed the phone. Counting to the fifteenth ring, he hung up.

The phone rang as he was getting out of the shower an hour later and the familiar voice on the other end of the line sent his mood through the roof.

"Well I'll be damned. Sylvia, hey, it's nice hearing your voice. You're not going to believe it, but I just tried calling you."

"*Did* you?"

"No shit, I did. I let it ring fifteen times. Guess I just missed you."

"No, you didn't. I wasn't home when you called."

"Huh? Where are you then?"

"I'm in a phone booth out front of a place on Highway 71 just north of Shreveport."

"Why're you there?"

"Silly boy, I'm comin' to surprise you. I'm comin' to *see* you."

"No shit?"

She laughed and replied, “If you can tell me how to *find* you, I am.”

“Wow, that’s great. Okay, well I have no idea where exactly I am. I do know I’m at the Jefferson Hotel on Louisiana Street at Lake Street. But how to actually get here, I don’t have a clue. It’s at the edge of downtown, maybe a couple or so blocks from it.”

“Okay, I bet I can find it. I probably ought to be there in thirty minutes.”

“Man, can’t wait to see you again.”

“I know, me too. I’m going to hang up. See you shortly.”

“All right, hurry on.”

Within the hour as advertised, Sylvia rolled up in front of the hotel in her Plymouth, shiny and fabulous as always. He had gone down to the lobby a few minutes after hanging up, and soon after, started keeping watch through the front Venetian blinds. That vantage point, though, didn’t satisfy him, so he manned the sidewalk instead. The instant he saw her car coming up the hill, a rush of excitement lit him up.

“Buster, *hi* sweetie.”

Sylvia looked awesome as she stepped out of her car. Her shiny dark hair was hanging down, her lips were that beautiful shade of red he loved, and her eyes were those dark magnets that drew him in and made him vulnerable to her.

“Hi, it’s so good to see you. You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“So are you, sweetie.”

The kiss she planted on his lips somehow felt different, but it was probably because he’d missed her and had felt lonely without her company. She’d been on his mind frequently the past several days, thanks largely to his last night at the Savoy, and on

a broader level, it was beginning to feel a little strange just how much he was needing her emotionally. Their big age difference, on top of his emotional attachment, was making it *all* feel strange.

“How long can you stay?”

“I want to stay the weekend, if that’s okay.”

He couldn’t believe his good fortune. “If that’s okay?” He beamed with joy. “Hell *yeah* it’s okay.”

“Was hoping it would be.”

“*God* I love your surprises. I’ve thought about you a lot since I’ve been down here.”

She gave him a playful smile and said, “*Have* you now?”

When they’d finished getting reacquainted that evening after dinner, he needed to satisfy his curiosity about a few things.

“Can I ask you something?”

She rolled over from their spooning position to face him. “Sure, what is it?”

“You’re not happy with Bull, are you?”

She paused, then answered, “No.”

“How come? I mean, what happened to you two?”

“I don’t know, I really don’t. It was like we thought we knew what we wanted for a long time before he split up with Ginny, and then all of a sudden when he did it, it was like something had happened, like we both turned into different people.”

“Oh. Well I guess then he has no idea you came down here, does he?”

“Buster, I know you’ve always worried about him findin’ out about you and me but don’t...there *is* no him and me anymore.”

“Is it because of me, did I help cause that?”

“Ohh my no, sweetie, don’t think that.”

“Just seems like the timing of things somehow made it work out that way.”

“What was going to happen was going to happen, *regardless* of you.”

“All right, guess it kind of relieves my mind. Something else, I want to be honest with you about something. Uh...”

“What?”

“I like you a lot, I mean I really do. How do you feel about *me*?”

“Okay, well, I like you a lot too, you surely have to know that, sweetie.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“You’re wantin’ to know if it’s anything *more* than that, aren’t you?”

“Guess I am.”

“This can’t be anything more. We’ve got a good thing here but there’re just too many differences between us, too much workin’ against even thinkin’ about it. Don’t you think that’s true?”

Buster knew in his mind it was, but his young ego wanted to hear something else.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Buster, I was going to tell you this sometime before I left...I’m givin’ serious thought to movin’ to Little Rock.”

“Are you? Getting back with your old boyfriend?”

“Maybe.”

“Wow...okay.”

“Yeah, sorry if I hurt your feelings, that’s the last thing I want to do.”

“I’m all right, really. Well, when do you think you might move?”

“In a week probably.”

Friday and Saturday nights came and went as fast as the days before had crept by.

There was a resolution, of sorts, in his mind by the time she left, an awareness that he had been straightened out in his thinking. What he was realizing was that he too quickly let himself develop attachments and that he let them go unrestrained.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

“I guess I just don’t understand.”

The “Southern Belle” was parked at the station when he arrived at the shanty on Monday. A beautiful train run by the KCS, Kansas City Southern Railroad, he was fascinated by the color scheme. The dark Brunswick green complimented by the red and yellow lines running down the sides set it apart from other companies and gave it a sense of elegance. It represented, in his mind, a slice of the grand old age of railroading, a time when you could walk into St. Louis Union Station and be dazzled by all sorts of unique paint schemes and personal markings. All of the companies were proud of what they displayed. MoPac was no different. Its blue scheme, although a bit on the plain side, was made special because of the hood. That screaming eagle simply said “Now *this* is a train you want to take!”

When he’d settled up with Mr. Flowers that morning, he again got the strange feeling like he was switching gears. This transition wasn’t of the same magnitude as when he left Texarkana, but it still registered. He couldn’t truthfully say he’d miss any of the guys here, and in fact knew he was going to be *thrilled* to leave some of them behind, but he knew also he’d think back fondly of the hotel and the people working there.

He got to the shanty well before eight. A young-looking guy walked in as Buster was sitting by himself away from the crew members.

“You Buster Gaines?”

Getting up and sticking out his hand, he replied, “Yes sir.”

“Hey, good to meet you. I’m Sonny Broussard. I’m here to take you down to Hollywood yard, you all set?”

“Sure am.”

“All right then.” He looked at Duckworth. “Duckie, see you ‘round.”

“You ain’t gonna have some coffee?”

“Nope, too many damn things to do. Got to run up to Hosston.”

“Say ‘hey’ to the boys down there for me.”

“Will do.”

It was only a fifteen minute ride down to East Jewella Road, and on the way, Broussard gave him the name of a retired railroad worker and his wife who ran a boarding house a block from the yard.

“Guess they’re pretty reasonable, huh?”

“Oh yeah, not like it’s the *Ritz-Carlton* or anything.”

“Works for me.”

The yard was every bit as large, if not larger, than the Texarkana yard. He was told there were eighteen tracks in the main section with holding tracks branching off the sides. The shanty was considerably bigger than either of the two he’d worked out of.

“Hi, I’m Sanders, Rusty Sanders,” one of the seated men said as he got up.

“We’re the guys you gonna be workin’ with here. This here’s Elvin Rogers and Woody Bates,” he continued, pointing in the direction of the others who remained seated. “You already met Sonny.”

“Hey,” the two simply responded.

“Nice meeting you.”

“I’m the foreman for this shift.”

Sanders, whom Buster estimated to be in his thirties, didn’t look at all like he was dressed in the usual work attire. Instead, he had on clean off-white jeans with a polished silver belt buckle, a tucked-in dark gray short-sleeved sport shirt with sleeves rolled up and button-down collar, and clean-looking boots. He wore his medium-length dark brown hair slicked back by some kind of goop and spoke with what Buster perceived to be a deeper southern drawl than what he’d been accustomed to hearing. He seemed friendly and that’s what was most immediately important to Buster...feeling he was welcome here and not just somebody they had to put up with.

“You was workin’ up in Texarkana, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, I was working with Dick Garland and the guys on his shift.”

“I know Dick a little...nice fella. They tell me you worked first shift only, is that right?”

“Right, I never got assigned to anything else, but did work some overtime, especially fourth of July when I pulled a double.”

“Okay. Well, here you’re gonna be workin’ whatever shift they need you to work. You familiar with the extra board?”

“Yes, I am.”

“We’re gonna have you do first shift for a week and then maybe put you on the extra board since we got guys goin’ out on vacation and you’ll be needed most then.”

“All right, sounds good.”

Sanders glanced at Rogers and Bates and said, “Let’s roll.”

“Where’re we headed? Hosston?” asked Buster.

“That’s right, guess Sonny told you,” Sanders replied.

“Yep.”

“Rogers is the hog head and Bates is switchman like Sonny.”

“Right.”

“Ride up with Elvin and maybe I’ll have you spot some cars when we get up there.”

“Got it.”

The run north of Shreveport seemed to follow the route he’d taken coming down from Texarkana. Rogers was another typical-looking engineer in Buster’s estimation. He dressed much like Percy and operated the unit in the same cautious manner that Percy unfailingly had. But Rogers was no Percy Bates in any other regard. He spit tobacco continually out the open cab window, sat stoically in his seat, and never initiated any conversation with Buster. He was all business, but there was no telling, Buster mused, what he was thinking about, staring off down the track.

Finally, he broke his silence when they arrived at what looked like some kind of refinery operation.

“Hop off and get my switch,” he barked out.

“All right. What *is* this place?”

“Bayou Oil.”

“Oh.”

“*Well*, you gonna get *off*?”

“Mr. Sanders said I might be needed to spot cars. Shouldn’t I wait for him?”

“No, you should *not*, you need to just get off and open that switch.”

Sternly instructed, Buster replied, “Right” and climbed down off the engine.

He had a fair idea what the routine would involve and instinctively remained at the switch to wait for the engine’s return back over it from the siding. He could see the others pulling some cars out of the plant and shoving replacements in, all the while feeling, in a way, like a rookie again. It was going to take time, he knew, to get used to this new group. Rogers’ demeanor was a puzzle and he was already feeling a certain distance from Bates. He had known about some of the things he had done and was leery of even talking to him. The advice Bull and Percy and Dick had given him to just stick to himself and do his job came to mind.

“Let’s move out,” Sanders announced as he climbed into the cab to join Buster and Rogers.

“Looks like you know what you’re doin’.”

“I have a pretty good idea by now.”

“Good. I’ll have Sonny take you over to the Carters’ place at beans when we get back.”

“Sounds good, thanks.”

“No problem.”

Once back at Hollywood, Broussard walked Buster over to the rooming house. He was immediately impressed by how friendly and welcoming Mr. Carter was when he opened his front screen door and greeted Sonny and him. He even took the suitcase Buster had carried over from the shanty out of his hand. Mr. Carter shook Buster’s hand and held the door wide open.

“Come on in.”

“Thanks, nice place you got here.”

“Thank you, son, been home to me and Ethyl for fifty-five years.”

“Wow, that’s a long time. I hear you’re retired from the railroad, is that right?”

“Yes sir, was electrician for four decades and retired from MoPac.”

“That’s impressive.”

Mr. Carter chuckled. “Well, don’t know if it’s impressive or not but I enjoyed my time.”

He showed Buster into the house. “Come on, I’ll let you see your room.”

The bedroom was maybe ten by ten with a nook off one side overlooking the back yard. He pressed the mattress to check it out and found it extremely soft and saggy in the middle like Savoy’s.

“Feels like it’ll be comfortable.”

“Gettin’ a little old maybe.”

“It’ll be fine. What’s the rent?”

“Two dollars a day, three if you want two meals.”

Buster glanced around the room, then looked at Mr. Carter. “Okay, better take the meal plan.”

“Think you’ll find Ethyl’s cookin’ agreeable.”

“I’m sure I will, thanks much.”

“Breakfast’s at seven-fifteen and supper’s at six, that okay with you?”

“That works.”

Mr. Carter took twenty-five dollars from Buster and handed him his change.

“Thank you, son.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”

Mr. Carter smiled broadly.

That afternoon, Sanders gave Buster an overview of the operations and described the places they switched out. There were a few primary plants in the area that required all three tricks to accommodate. Calumet Industries was a large chemical refinery that the crews supplied tankercars to while Libby Glass took boxcars. For the next three days, these two places and several others took up their time, and on Thursday, the crew made a run delivering a variety of cars to the Riverfront yard in the downtown section. Upon returning in the late afternoon, Sanders was called to the control tower, and when he came back into the shanty, announced they were all scheduled to work a double the following day. Nobody questioned why or groused about it...the money was just too good.

It was ninety-eight degrees on Friday according to the announcer on a radio in the shanty as they broke at three o’clock for cold sodas.

“A hot bastard today,” Sonny exclaimed with a smile, a bottle of Coke in his hand.

“Fuckin’ A, bubba,” Bates replied with a glare. “How can you like this shit?”

“*Always* hot like this down home in Lake Charles.”

“Yeah, well, fuck you and Lake Charles.”

Unfazed, Sonny continued to smile. “Nice talk there, pal.”

“Switchin’ out four spots before Calumet this evenin’,” Sanders interrupted.

Bates quickly responded, “Aw shit, that goddam place smells to high heaven in this heat.”

“*Deal* with it, you lazy fuck.”

Sonny broke into a laugh because of Sanders’ comment.

“What the fuck’re *you* laughin’ at, mother fucker?”

“You. You’re always bitchin’ and moanin’ about *somethin’*.”

Buster’s natural inclination was to join in on that kind of bantering...he would have readily jumped right in back in Texarkana.

“Let’s get the damn thing on the road,” Sanders exclaimed, walking over to the soda machine and sliding his empty bottle into a wooden Coca-Cola rack.

Bates grumbled, “Fuck.”

At ten o’clock, the crew finished switching out Calumet and parked to take a break on the siding just off the main line they’d taken to get up there. The heat was radiating off the steel of the engine and small towels were needed to wipe the humidity off their faces and necks. Bugs were everywhere, flying around the lights and landing in the hair and on sweaty arms. That odor, apparently what Bates had complained about, was pervasive and a little sickening. Buster would have preferred it if they had simply run back down to the yard to take their break and not sit there next to those monster tanks and oil lines. Not going back to the yard immediately didn’t make sense to him, but he didn’t ask any questions.

“So, Gaines, whatta you do back home?” Sanders asked, sitting on the steps of the engine.

“I’m a student, going to college in September.”

“Missouri?”

“Yep.”

“Those college kids, they like to march and protest shit all the time, *don't* they.”

“I have no idea.”

“Don't you know anything about that?”

“Not really. I was on a seminar trip to Washington and New York last year, and one day when a friend and I were walking around the capitol mall, we saw some kind of rally going on, a bunch of colored people protesting something.”

“That right?”

“A ways away from that, we saw a rally going on protesting the war in Viet Nam.

*That's* all I know about protests.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

At midnight he clocked out and walked the one block over to the rooming house. He noticed that the bathroom had the exact same type of porcelain sink in it as his room did in the Savoy. Mrs. Carter provided him with an oscillating fan for the dresser top which seemed like it'd be adequate, and the bed, soft and saggy, was probably also going to suffice.

Mrs. Carter's cooking was indeed excellent...a great change from all the grilled food he'd been living on. She had told him they had one other guy rooming in the house, but Buster never saw him at any of the meals or anytime else that week.

On Monday morning at seven-thirty, he walked into the shanty to start another week.

“Morning, guys,” he greeted everybody.

Silence hung noisily in the air like crickets in the night time. The men were involved in two conversations, never acknowledging his presence, and after several seconds, he got the impression they were intentionally ignoring him for some reason. He walked over to the assignment board to look it over and saw to his astonishment that his name had been removed, and in its place was a white strip of paper with M L King neatly printed on it. He stood staring at it, trying to make his eyes believe what they were seeing. *What the fuck?* raced through his brain.

“What is this shit?”

Sanders’ voice broke his focus on it. “Gaines.”

He turned to the men and they were all looking at him.

“How’s your weekend?”

It took a moment for him to think of something to say. “*M L King?*”

“They’re playin’ with you.”

Sanders’ face said that was bullshit.

“Oh *yeah?*”

“Yeah.”

He picked up a black ink pen off of the lunch table and scratched out M L King and wrote Gaines in its place.

“All right guys, I can take a joke. Which one of you did this?”

Nobody fessed up. Sanders looked the other way. Sonny picked up a newspaper and started reading it, and Rogers and Bates simply stared at him as if to say “What’re *you* looking at?” It felt like the shift that day wouldn’t end. No one spoke to him unless

they had to in order to do the work. At one point, he asked Bates a question and Bates simply ignored him and walked away. The sandwich he bought out of the machine in the shanty, he ate by himself at the end of the long lunch table.

The following day was the same story, as was the day after that. On Thursday when he reported in for work a little before eight, he walked over to the assignment board to see if anyone had again altered his name. He stood there in shock when he saw NIGGER LOVER instead.

“What the fuck’s going on?”

Sanders walked over to him, grabbed his arm and said, “Come here, Gaines.”

Walking him out the door, he continued, “I’m only tellin’ you this for your own good. Some guys don’t much care for nigger lovers and you need to remember that.”

He had no idea what to say to that so he said nothing in reply.

“Do you hear what I’m tellin’ you?”

“I heard you.”

“Just do your damn job and go home.”

“I plan to, believe me.”

Thursday was a repeat performance by the crew. It was unbelievable to Buster how grown adults could act, that’s how naïve he really was. He still had no idea where this treatment had come from and no one would talk to him to enlighten him. He was beginning to feel like he had descended into some kind of bizarre, alien world. The idea of packing up and going home struck him, but the more he thought about it, the more

pissed off he got. His coping strategy, he decided, would be to keep telling himself he'd be leaving before long and he could take whatever kind of bullshit they'd give him.

Friday afternoon his strategy was tested when Bates, out of the clear blue, walked up to within two feet of him as Rogers looked on, stared him in the eyes, and angrily exclaimed, "nigger lover." A wave of intimidation and fear rushed over him because for the first time, he realized these people could be dangerous and shouldn't be taken lightly. With the shift finally over that day, Buster hustled back to the Carters', still nervous from the encounter, and went straight to his room, bypassing the two of them as they sat in the living room watching television.

Sitting on his bed trying to make sense of why he was being singled out and why the crew seemed to hate him, Mrs. Carter's voice startled him when she walked into his room in her house slippers.

"Mr. Gaines? Mr. Carter and I think it'd be best if you left."

"*Why?*"

"We just think it'd be best if you did...I'm sorry. I'll give you the name of another family who'll take you in."

"Did I do something *wrong*?"

She looked at the floor for a long moment, then said, "No, son, you didn't."

"I guess I just don't understand."

She turned to leave his room but stopped and looked back at him as if she wanted to say something more but couldn't say it.

"Well, when do you want me out of here?"

"Tomorrow's fine...I'm *sorry*, I *really am*."

He was given the name and address of Beverly Cummings as the owner of a house three blocks away. Mrs. Carter telephoned her that evening on his behalf to arrange for his placement there.

Neither Mr. Carter nor his wife was anywhere to be found at eight o'clock when he walked out their front door and down the sidewalk. Carrying his belongings two blocks over then one block further away from the rail yard, Buster knocked on the door. A dog immediately began barking and continued until the woman inside the house opened the front door and muzzled it with her hand.

"Mrs. Cummings?"

"Yes. You must be Mr. Gaines, come on in." The yappy little dog started up again and she grabbed it around the snout with both hands. "Sorry, take a seat."

"Thanks."

She took the dog to a back room, then returned a few minutes later.

"I know Mrs. Carter was very sorry to have you leave her place, it's just that her husband didn't want the railroad men thinkin', you know, that he approved of folks who like the coloreds. They're really sweet Christian folks who'd do anything for anybody and I don't think they really wanted to ask you to go."

"Well why'd they *ask* me then?"

"I guess you'd need to ask *them* that, but you also need to understand, Mr. Gaines, things are *different* here. Do you understand what I'm sayin'?"

"Oh yeah, I understand, *believe* me."

"Okay then."

"Listen, it's all right, really, I'm just thankful you offered to take me in."

“Well, you seem like a nice young man and I hope everything works out for you.”

“Thanks. I’m sure it will.”

“I charge the same thing Mrs. Carter does. I trust that’s satisfactory to you?”

“It is. I can take meals here, right?”

“Oh yes, yes. Seven o’clock for breakfast and six for supper.”

“Perfect.”

This room was larger than the one at the Carters’. The bathroom down the hall, with a shower and large double-bowl counter, was cleaner and more up to date. There was a comfortable-looking rocking chair against the wall on one side of the bed, an old but beautiful dresser with an ornate matching mirror on another between two lace-adorned windows, and a clothes tree stuck in the corner to hang his jeans and T-shirts. A floor fan was stationed near the bed and a small night stand was next to it where he could park his alarm clock and books. Everything he needed to finish his time in the South was there, he thought.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

“Listen to me, boy, you *watch* yourself, you gonna end up with a *chain* around your neck.”

Monday, August first was supposed to be the final day of the heat wave the area had been dealing with for days. Unlike the previous day’s one hundred-or-so mark, this day was *only* going to hit ninety-seven. The humidity level, though, wasn’t supposed to be any different. More than likely, what he was going to have to face from the people he worked with wasn’t going to be any different *either*.

“Gaines, lemme talk to you.” Sanders barked out.

That was the first thing he heard from any one of them when he walked in the shanty. Not “Hey, how was your weekend?” or “How’s it going?”, not even simply “Hey.” This is what he’d pretty much expected the day would be like as he ate his breakfast that morning with Mrs. Cummings. At least *she* had been friendly.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Listen, the superintendent wants to talk to you. Go on up to his office.”

“Where *is* it?”

“Just go down the hall and then go down the hall to the left, you’ll see it.”

“What’s his name again?”

“Chesterton.”

That name came back to him and instantly he pictured the man's face and recalled his nasty disposition.

"He has an office here *too*?"

Sanders angrily retorted, "Gaines, he's got an office wherever the hell he wants to put one."

"Okay, I'll go down right now."

When he knocked on the glass door, a skinny little man opened it and greeted him with a frown. "Yeah?"

"I'm told Mr. Chesterton wanted to see me."

Buster heard a man say, "Bring him in here."

He recognized Chesterton's voice.

"Hi, I'm Buster Gaines, you wanted to see me?"

The little man sat down in a chair right next to the desk where the superintendent was seated. A cigarette was burning between Chesterton's fat fingers and Buster could see sweat glowing on his forehead.

"Gaines, I'm told you ain't gettin' along with the boys, is that true?"

"No, it's not. I get along okay."

"Ain't what *I* hear. What I *hear* is you're a *shit* disturber."

"I don't have any idea what they're talking about. All I know is, I come to work and do what I'm told. I don't bother anybody. I just want to do my job and get the hell home, that's all."

"Oh you do, huh? Don't like it down here?"

“It’s okay, just meant I wanted to make some money and go home and get ready for school in the fall.”

Chesterton glared at him, and without saying anything, picked up the phone and dialed two digits on the rotary dial.

“Rusty, I’m puttin’ Gaines on the extra board. Work him today and make it effective end of first trick...that’s right...that’s right...” Chesterton laughed and continued, “Good idea, have him to do that.”

“I’m going on the extra board?”

“Yep, beginnin’ midnight.”

Buster turned and walked out. Sanders had a smile on his face as he got back to the gathering room.

“So I’m on the extra board starting tonight?”

“That’s right. Make sure the dispatcher down the hall’s got your telephone number before you clock out.”

“I’ll have to get it from the woman I’m staying with and call it over after work, is that all right?”

“Fine. Now let’s get some work done.”

Sonny Broussard was waiting just outside when they headed for the engine out in the middle of the yard. He walked up to Buster.

“Gaines, I know we been a little rough on you, want you to understand it’s nothin’ personal from me, okay?”

“*Bull* shit, you’re just like the rest of them. I haven’t done a goddam thing to any of you people and all I get in return is grief.”

Broussard stopped walking and grabbed his arm. “Boy, listen here, you need to just watch what you say around us, you *got that?*”

“Yeah, I got that.”

Broussard walked off toward the others.

Sanders yelled out from the engine, “Gaines, what the hell you waitin’ for?”

“Coming.”

First trick ended as unpleasantly as it had started. Again, only the necessary number of words to get the work done had been spoken and, again, he had eaten his lunch sitting at one end of the table alone while the rest of the crew laughed and made fun of colored people at the other.

Conversation at the dinner table felt strained to him. Mrs. Cummings spoke very little, and what she said had to do with the weather, her garden out back, and her dog. He didn’t know what kind of person she was, didn’t know if she was friends with any of the railroaders, and didn’t feel comfortable enough telling her anything about himself or about any of the experiences he’d had already in Shreveport. It didn’t matter anyway...home was what was on his mind and he had no interest in sharing that with *anybody* down there.

At eleven o’clock that night he heard the phone ring in the hallway. He then heard Mrs. Cummings knock on his closed door.

“Mr. Gaines? Mr. Gaines, you have a phone call.”

He got up, threw on his cut-off shorts and answered the phone. “Hello.”

A gruff voice said, “Gaines? Midnight bull ringer.”

Nothing more, nothing less.

Half asleep, he replied, "Huh, oh, okay."

With his lantern in hand, he walked into the shanty at eleven-forty and checked out the assignment board out of force of habit. There, where his name tag had been, was a small white slip of paper with nothing printed on it. He heard somebody walk into the room and turned to see who it was. The man was easily in his fifties, fat, tall and dressed in gray sleeveless overalls.

"You Buster Gaines?"

"Yeah, I'm him."

"Hey, how you doin'?" I'm Jess Whorton, third trick foreman."

"Hi, good to meet you."

"You're bull ringer tonight, know what that is?"

"Sure do."

"Okay, get you some coffee over there if you want and just hang around 'til we get started."

"Good, thanks." Coffee held no interest for him at that time of the day. "I'll pass on the coffee."

Shortly after this introduction, the rest of the third trick wandered in.

"Hey," one of the men greeted Buster.

"Hey, how you doing?"

"Hey," another of the men, who was missing some front teeth, said.

Again he gave a simple "Hey" in response.

The last guy coming in looked like he had a pain somewhere in his body.

"You the new guy I heard about?"

“Guess so.”

“You that nigger lover?”

Buster was shocked and just stood there, looking at the man.

The man turned to the foreman and loudly exclaimed, “I ain’t workin’ with no damn *nigger* lover.”

Whorton shook his head, then said, “Jones, you workin’ with whoever the hell I *tell* you to work with.”

“I don’t got to work with him.”

“*Goddam it, I say you do!*”

“Well, tell you what, that boy better stay the hell away from me.”

“*Goddam it, why you always got to act like that?*”

“You gonna tell me you like workin’ with nigger lovers?”

“You asshole, you know I don’t like niggers or nigger lovers any more than you do, but goddam it, we ain’t got no choice. Now let’s get this goddam trick started.”

Whorton turned to Buster and frowned. “Son, get on out there and just do the damn job, *will you?*”

“I do my job, nobody’s complained about it yet.”

“Last thing I need is to baby sit you to keep these guys from hurtin’ you.”

“I’ll stay out of everybody’s way.”

“Just do your job, will you?”

Bull ringing at night was at times a scary experience. There were those god-awful flatcars you had to somehow find a way to get on and hang on to while holding onto your

lantern, and then there were those tankercars with the short ladders to deal with. A cluster of things to watch out for continually raced through your mind while running down the gravel chasing your assigned cars, and you'd find yourself periodically swatting some bugs and swallowing some others in the process. What compounded things here were the terrible light conditions, the heat and humidity, and worrying about whether the men you were working with wanted to see you get hurt. The message he'd gotten from "pain in the body" fixed that notion firmly in his mind.

The bull ringing wrapped up, the crew made a run to Calumet Industries to deliver empty tankers and return loaded ones to the yard to spot for the first trick crew to build into a train for some destination somewhere. Why the crews liked parking up on the siding just outside the Calumet grounds was a mystery to Buster, but that's precisely what they did at four in the morning.

With everyone seated in the engine or on the lower ladders, they went on break. Whorton directed Buster to walk down the line of tankers they'd hooked up to check to see if all the air couplings looked proper, and as he made his way in the darkness carrying his lantern he sensed that he wasn't alone. Shining his light back toward the engine and then in the opposite direction, he couldn't see anybody coming or any kind of animal. A few moments later as he was bent over examining an air line between two tankers, he heard the sound of someone walking on the gravel. Soon it became apparent the person was coming in his direction, so he stood up. Standing in front of him ten feet away was a man carrying a large oil can in one hand and a long wrench in the other. There was just enough light coming from a facility light standard maybe fifty yards away to get a decent enough description to know this man was nobody he'd ever seen before.

Buster gave his usual greeting to railroad workers.

The man took a few steps toward Buster and he could see he had tools hanging off a utility belt. He was dressed in a dark set of coveralls, the odor of grease or oil coming from him.

“You that *nigger* lover, *ain't* you.”

With his heart racing, Buster replied, “Huh?”

The instant he said that, a bug flew into his eye and he quickly tried to get it out so he could concentrate on the man. Sweat was pouring down his face and he could feel his hands shaking.

This person, whoever he was, had to be at least six feet tall, and he looked every bit of two-hundred pounds, probably more, in that dark outfit he was wearing. He took a couple of steps closer and his odor seemed to intensify.

“You that nigger lover I was told about, *ain't* you.”

“Listen, I don't know who you are or what you're talking about, I'm just trying to get this train checked out.”

Before he knew what had happened, Buster heard the sound of the oil can and wrench dropping on the gravel, felt the man's hands on the front of his T-shirt and felt his back hitting the side of the tanker. He was next aware of the man tightening his grip on his shirt, drawing it up so tightly against his throat that he could feel the man's knuckles gouging it. He was intensely aware of the man's grease odor and was repulsed suddenly by the smell of something rotten.

“Listen to me, boy, you *watch* yourself, you gonna end up with a *chain* around your neck.”

Within ten seconds, the assault was over and the man had let go of him and started walking away into the dark. Shaking like a scared rabbit hiding in a hole from some predator, Buster stepped away from the car and tried to pull himself together. He struggled to realize that someone had just threatened to kill him. Nothing like this in his young life had ever happened to him, he had never before felt such terror. He could still smell the foulness of that man and could still feel his grubby hands on him as he walked slowly back to the engine rubbing his throat.

He heard laughter coming from the others at the engine as he approached it. Whorton and the others were standing around on the gravel next to the engine.

When Buster walked up, Whorton said with a laugh, “Get it done?”

Buster didn’t respond.

“*Well?*”

Finally, he replied, “It’s all set.”

“What’s the matter, boy, something *bite you out there?*”

The men all broke into laughter and Buster climbed up to the cab to get away from them.

A minute later, Whorton and the others stepped into the cab. He looked at Buster with unmistakable hatred in his eyes. Buster’s hands seemed to tremble more while Whorton’s cold glare was fixed on him for a long moment.

“You seen my car man out there?”

“Who?”

“Toad. Rodell Biggs.”

“Never saw anybody.”

Whorton's look when he heard that was disbelief. "You ain't seen *nobody out there?*"

"Nobody but some low life piece of garbage."

After another long, dark stare, Whorton said, "Best listen to whatever he told you."

Adrenaline firing through him, he didn't want to give Whorton any satisfaction, so he just stared back.

"Did you hear me?"

"Message received."

Hog head Rhodes kept the cab light on after getting underway and Buster could easily see all their faces and make out details he didn't want to. The atmosphere on the run back to the yard was icy and tense, the periodic glares from the others sending chills down his back. With nobody saying anything to anybody most of the way to Hollywood yard, the silence, Buster's only friend, was a welcome companion.

It took well over two hours to fall asleep, in spite of the fatigue he was feeling, when he got back to his room at eight-fifteen and lay down. He wondered what his folks would say if he came home early, wondered if they'd be angry that he hadn't saved as much money as they'd wanted him to. He wondered if they'd understand just what he had been going through. Most importantly, he wondered if he'd end up being disappointed in himself for doing it. He didn't want to quit because he had always loved railroading and loved his job. All he knew for sure was that things couldn't stay the same...he had to decide what to do as fast as possible.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Get me the hell out of this goddam hell hole.”

At a few minutes after one-thirty in the afternoon, he woke up from a restless sleep, got dressed and walked over to Chesterton’s office. He could see him at his desk through the open door and so he knocked on the doorframe. The man looked up from a pile of papers and noticed him standing there in the doorway. A grimace flashed across the man’s face.

“Can I come in?”

“Would you go away if I said you couldn’t?”

He stepped into the office.

“I need to transfer back to Texarkana.”

Chesterton glared at him, then said, “Son, I’d like to accommodate you, *believe* me I would, but I don’t know about that.”

“Will you please call Mr. Breedlow in St. Louis to see if that’d be possible?”

The man got up from his desk, tossing his ink pen down, walked over to Buster and poked him in his chest. He narrowed his eyes.

“Off the record, and I never told you this, you ain’t worth the sweat off my balls and one of these nights you might just turn up missin’. Nigger lovers usually get what’s comin’ and before long, you ain’t gonna be no exception.”

Buster's pulse shot up and he took a couple of steps backward. "Get me the hell out of this goddam hell hole. If I have to call Breedlow *myself*, I will."

"You *threatenin' me, boy?*"

"No, I'm not."

Chesterton's eyes and the bulging veins in his neck told Buster he'd just as soon punch his lights out as to talk to him.

"Get the *fuck* out of my office, boy!"

He turned and left, taking a deep breath, and headed back to the rooming house. When he walked into the front room, Mrs. Cummings was looking at a magazine seated on the couch, and as soon as she saw him, she put it down.

"Son, are you all right?"

"Yes ma'am." He knew he probably looked like hell from lack of sleep and from the confrontation with Chesterton. "I'm okay."

"You don't look so good, sure you're all right?"

"I'll be all right, thanks for asking."

Three hours after drifting to sleep atop the covers with his boots on, he was awakened by the phone ringing.

"You have a telephone call, Mr. Gaines."

His stomach tightened when he heard her say that. "Okay, thanks."

When he said "Hello," a woman announced that she had someone who would like to talk to him and that he should hold for a moment. Seconds later, a man came on the line. Buster couldn't believe who it was when he realized it was someone he had talked to in the St. Louis headquarters in May.

“Mr. Gaines?”

“Yes, this is him.”

“This is William Breedlow with Missouri Pacific Railroad. How are you?”

“Mr. *Breedlow*, it’s very nice talking to you.”

“Thank you. I understand you’d like for me to transfer you up to Texarkana, is that right?”

“Sir, yes, that’s exactly right. I’d very much like that, if you could do that.”

“All right. I know your father, a very decent man, and I seem to remember talking to you in my office here.”

“Yes, sir. I was there in May after taking my company physical.”

“Well, I think I can have you back in Texarkana in a few days or so. Would that be soon enough?”

“I could be there *today* if that’s what would work.”

Mr. Breedlow chuckled and replied, “I’ll have my secretary make some calls and send out the notices for you to be back there on Monday, August the eighth. How’s that?”

“That’d be *wonderful*, thank you ever so much.”

“All right, take care and finish your summer up *there*.”

“Thank you, sir, I’ll never forget your kindness.”

“It’s okay, son, just enjoy the rest of your time with us.”

“Believe me, I *will*. Thank you.”

“All right.”

As if suddenly snatched from the bowels of some alien world in which he'd never really felt welcome, his mood soared to the same height he'd experienced that night on the way south from St. Louis. His mind went into overdrive thinking about things he'd have to do before getting on the train for Texarkana. He wondered who his foreman there would be, what his shift would be, who would be around when he got there. He knew that some of the people, of course, would know he was coming and tried to picture Barmes' face when he saw him walk into the station. He didn't have to give any thought, though, about where he'd stay and certainly none about where he'd eat...he fully intended to upgrade himself to an air conditioned room with private facilities at the Savoy and could almost taste the breakfasts at the In-Town and the Michelobs at his table next to the window at State Line. Sylvia had frequently been on his mind while in Shreveport; and as he thought about all the things they had done and that she would be gone when he got there, a resigned sadness detoured his newly-found mood.

Sitting in front of the television with Mrs. Cummings watching the late local news, Buster told her, without giving any details, that he'd be leaving at the end of the week. She seemed surprised by this announcement, even disappointed.

"Is everything okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you havin' problems with those men?"

"The men at the *yard*?"

"Yes."

He paused before replying, "No, ma'am."

She didn't press him and their brief conversation ended. At ten-thirty on the nose, the phone rang and Mrs. Cummings got up from her easy chair and answered it.

"Mr. Gaines, it's for you." He rose from the couch and she put her hand over the receiver when he approached her. "Son, please be careful tonight."

She obviously knew he was being called back to work and it took a second for her unexpected concern to sink in. "Oh, yeah, I will be, thanks."

"Those men...they're..."

"What?"

"Just please be careful."

Her concern about his wellbeing seemed frozen on her face when she handed him the phone. "Okay."

"Gaines, midnight bull ringer."

Assignments were always given by the dispatcher in as few brusque words as possible. It was almost as if they were trying to save their breath for more important things, or they were just too busy, or, more likely, they just didn't give a shit about their lowly jobs.

With a slight feeling of dread, he replied, "Okay."

The first thing he did when he walked into the shanty was to check out the assignment board to see who was scheduled to work the third trick with him. His name didn't appear anywhere on it, but he saw the names of three others he had never met. Just before midnight, they all came in, introduced themselves with "Hey" and shook hands with him. The foreman, Roland Hutchinson, let him know that Whorton and the other regular third trick crew members were all out on vacation now, instantly giving him a

sense of relief knowing that he wasn't going to have to work with them that night or ever again.

The following night when he was again assigned to the same shift, the same job, and the same crew, the assignment board listed his name on the bottom line of the board by itself, well away from the rest of the crew names. It was apparent to him that this crew had gotten "word" about him sometime after the previous shift had ended. A little stunned, but not intimidated when the crew members showed a completely different demeanor toward him than they'd shown during that previous shift, he went about his duties wrangling boxcars and flatcars and tankercars in the near-darkness with few words spoken.

He saw that he was again referred to as "nigger lover" on the assignment board at midnight when he reported in for work the following night, and nothing changed in the way Hutchinson and his crew dealt with him early in the shift. At three-thirty when they came in for break, he walked over to the board and noticed that someone had again changed his name. This time he was "coon lover."

He mumbled, "*Fucking illiterate dumbasses!*"

Staring in disbelief at yet another manifestation of hate, he heard someone say "coon lover" in a low voice behind him and turned around to see a man who'd come into the break room after him. Dressed in greasy overalls with a tool belt loaded with assorted tools hanging from his hips, he glared at Buster from across the room.

The man loudly called out to him, "*nigger lover.*"

He was struck by how dirty and soiled the man looked, his face marked with black smears that extended into his hair. His grease-stained cap with flipped-up bill

looked like it was a permanent part of the grubby man's head. Buster started to head toward the other door when the man took a few steps toward him in that same direction, intensified his menacing glare, and repeated his words, as if challenging Buster to say or do something in reply. He hadn't seen this man anywhere before but quickly made him out to be a car man or some other kind of laborer, much the same as the one he'd encountered up at Calumet siding, the one he never wanted to see again. The odd thought raced through his mind that these car men must have a dress and personal appearance code that called for them to wear greasy overalls and caps and to look as nasty as they could. The thought hit him also that this man's breath probably also would be as offensive as the other's.

Buster stopped in his tracks and looked around for something he could pick up to use as a weapon in the increasing likelihood he'd need something to defend himself with. On his way into the room, he had set his lantern, which would serve nicely, on the stool next to the door. But now, with the car man more or less between him and the stool, that was going to be inaccessible. He spotted an ink pen on the table a couple of feet to his side, quickly reached out and snatched it up, and held it in front of himself like a dagger.

Taking another step in Buster's direction with a confident grin hanging off his dirty face, the man said, "What're you gonna do with *that*, boy?"

Buster froze, his eyes fixed intently on the man's eyes, his heart racing. He felt his hand tightening its grip on the ball-point weapon. It was obvious, as they stood facing each other, maybe ten feet apart, that the man was bigger than him and had his choice of implements to pull out of his tool belt if a fight happened. There was no way, he knew, he

was going to come out of a fight on top. Buster flashed back to the car man Whorton had called “Toad” and felt panic overtaking him.

Trying to stifle the feeling, he said, “What do you want?”

“I know you that boy that likes to protest for niggers, ain’t that so?”

“Huh, what the hell’re you talking about?” Buster saw the name Simmons on the man’s breast pocket and said, “Simmons, is it?” hoping that addressing the man personally might touch a civil nerve and defuse his aggressive mood.

“We was thinkin’ you’d be gone by now, guess you can’t take the hint, boy.”

Buster was wrong...the man stepped closer to him and that threatening look on his face didn’t change. There apparently was no civil nerve to be touched.

“What do you mean about protesting?”

“You march with the *niggers*, don’t you?”

“I do *what*?”

Without answering, Simmons took a ball peen hammer out of his belt and lowered it to his side. Buster quickly moved backward several steps toward the assignment board, his hand feeling like it couldn’t get any tighter on the ink pen.

“What the hell you want from me?”

His words, almost yelled, seemed to shoot out of his mouth. They seemed to be coming from some other person...he was in some alien reality now.

Simmons shoved a chair violently off to the side out of his way, a determined look in his eyes, and slowly stepped even closer to Buster, who was now standing with his back against the wall. He was trapped now, hemmed in by a large metal file cabinet

on the left side of the board, the water cooler four feet away on the other, the assignment board to his back, and Simmons in front of him.

“That’s enough,” Hutchinson yelled at Simmons from the doorway. “Put your goddam hammer away.”

Simmons stood rigid, his hammer twitching in his hand, glaring at Buster as if telling him this wasn’t the end of it.

“I said that’ll do, Simmons,” Hutchinson yelled.

Simmons lifted the hammer and slipped it back in its holder on his right hip, like he was returning a pistol to the holster, without taking his eyes off of Buster. He turned and looked in Hutchinson’s direction, then walked out of the room without saying anything.

“Gaines, goddam it, you gonna get yourself killed before long. What the goddam hell you think you’re doin’?”

Buster was too stunned to say anything, but Hutchinson’s absurd words registered with him.

“Come on, goddam it, we got a trick to finish.”

Buster walked past Hutchinson, grabbing his lantern from the stool, and headed out the door in the direction of the engine. Several paces away from the building, his legs buckled and felt like they couldn’t support him any longer. He realized he needed to catch his breath as the adrenaline was still coursing through him. Bent over, hands on his knees and taking deep breaths, he once again tried to comprehend that someone wanted to hurt him, maybe kill him. Hutchinson caught up to him moments later.

“Gaines, what the hell am I gonna do with you? I got guys tellin’ me, if you don’t leave, they’re gonna make a point a seein’ to it you wish you had.”

Straightening up, Buster angrily replied, “That motherfucker was going to kill me. Now you tell me what the hell I’ve done to *him*.”

“I don’t know what you said to him or anybody else, and honestly I don’t really care, but I know these boys don’t much care for kids comin’ here spoutin’ that civil rights shit. You got some balls, boy, comin’ here to Dixie actin’ like some goddam Martin Luther King, and I got to tell you, maybe the next time you won’t be so lucky. Maybe I just won’t see anything.”

Faint glows of lightening flashed in the western sky. The heavy, humid air carried the muffled sounds of thunder seconds later as Buster took a final settling breath. His Timex, tilted to catch the light of the nearby light standard, read three-forty-five.

“I’m leaving. I’ve put in for transfer back to Texarkana.”

“Good, you don’t belong here.”

“I didn’t *ask* for this assignment. I don’t want to be here anymore than you people want me here.”

“Glad to hear it. You can take your communist pinko Yankee propaganda bullshit back with you when you leave!”

He heard the man’s bizarre words clearly but they didn’t connect to any reality he was a part of. He wanted to say, “What the fuck does *that* mean?” but knew it would be a waste of time...it was clear what the message was anyway.

At eight that morning, the gathering room was crowded with people he guessed were the first trick crew members coming on duty, his own crew, a handful of men he

hadn't seen around before who looked like desk jockeys, and Chesterton's little assistant. Buster felt completely alone and out of place, like a leper, no one saying anything to him as he walked through the room. He could see, and feel, the looks on their faces. The little assistant's beady eyes followed him to the time clock at the far end. As he was finishing clocking out, someone in the room behind him said "nigger lover." The voice was high-pitched and sounded like it might have come from someone standing at the edge of the group, probably the assistant. Turning, he could see most of the men looking at him, no one speaking. He could see the little man grinning at him.

"*Leave, nigger lover,*" came from the back of the crowd.

He couldn't tell who'd said that. "I'm *leaving. Saturday.*"

The little assistant chuckled and said, "So you think."

"What's *that* mean?"

"Means your transfer's been cancelled."

A few of the men laughed.

"*What?* I was told by St. Louis I'm supposed to be up in Texarkana Monday morning."

"You done been *cancelled*, boy." With that, the rest of the men laughed. "You got papers sayin' you supposed to be up there then?"

"I was told that on the *phone*. The guy in *charge* told me."

"Yeah, well, shit happens. You think orders can't get changed?"

"*Bullshit.*"

Seething with anger, Buster stepped around the group and headed down the hall to talk to Chesterton. He took a few steps inside after knocking on the open office door,

gazed around, and announced, “Mr. Chesterton?” but the man wasn’t inside. As he turned to leave, Chesterton met him just inside the doorway.

“Whatta you want, boy?” Chesterton was clearly annoyed and barked out, “Get the fuck out of my office.”

“I want to know why my transfer’s been cancelled.”

He squinted his eyes and replied, “*What* transfer?”

“My transfer to Texarkana.”

The man walked over to his desk, sat down and picked a cigarette out of a box, lighting it with his silver desk-top lighter.

“Don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

The look on his face told Buster the man was a poor liar.

“You’re full of shit. You know damn well I’m scheduled to be there Monday.”

“You watch your damn mouth, boy.”

“I’m not your *boy*, old man,” Buster forcefully replied, nearly yelling. “I told you before I’d call St. Louis myself and I sure as hell will now, you miserable asshole.”

Chesterton shot up out of his oversized chair, flailed his arm out toward the door, and yelled, “Get the fuck out.”

“I’m leaving Saturday when my shift’s done.”

“Get out!”

Buster hustled out of the building, pissed off at Chesterton and the rest of the people inside, trying to make sense of everything he’d just heard. He couldn’t believe Mr. Breedlow would have changed his mind and decided he’d call up to St. Louis from the

rooming house to confirm the transfer was still good. It dawned on him that he didn't have the telephone number to reach him and he knew no one back inside would give it to him. He'd get it from directory assistance.

Mrs. Cummings, as concerned for him as she had seemed to be, was reluctant to let Buster make a long distance call. He realized, though, that she was a woman of few means and that money didn't grow on her trees. After he produced a five dollar bill and set it on the table next to the phone, she acquiesced and apologized. The call to the directory assistance operator was free, at least.

"Hello, Miss McCartney," Buster said, recalling the name of the secretary who had telephoned him, "this is Buster Gaines, a switchman, a temporary switchman, in Shreveport. I spoke to you a few days ago and spoke to Mr. Breedlow. May I speak to him again, please?"

"I'm sorry, but he's out of the office for the rest of the week. Is there anything I might help you with?"

"Yes, there is. He informed me that I was being transferred from here to Texarkana effective this coming Monday. Can you tell me if that's still the case?"

"Well, now, I don't know. I'll have to pull the transfers records and that may take a little while. I'm about to go into a meeting to take dictation from some department heads, then meet with fellow secretaries, then I'm scheduled to be off tomorrow. If you'll leave the phone number where I might reach you I'll try and let you know."

Disappointed, he said, "All right, that'd be fine, thank you so much, Miss McCartney."

He read the number off the rotary dial to her.

“My pleasure, Mr. Gaines, take care.”

He placed the receiver back on the phone’s cradle.

Mrs. Cummings, who had apparently been eavesdropping on the call, walked into the hallway.

“Your transfer, is it okay still?”

So much had been happening he couldn’t recall if he’d told her about it before.

“I’m not sure. I *think* it is, but I’m not really sure.”

“Oh.”

At ten-thirty, the call came again, assigning him to midnight bull ringer. Miss McCartney still hadn’t called him back, and because of that, the day had slowly slipped away, a sense of helpless disappointment eating at him. As far as he still knew, he was going back to Texarkana on Saturday, but the uncertainty caused by Chesterton and his men and Miss McCartney’s failure to return his call lingered. Now, she was off work and wouldn’t be back till Monday so there was no way to get an answer. He wouldn’t get an answer from Chesterton and wasn’t going to waste his time talking to the man again.

“*Fuck* it,” he called out, standing next to the phone. “I’m leaving Saturday.”

“Pardon me?” Mrs. Cummings asked with a startled look on her face.

“I’m sorry, never mind.”

At eleven-forty, Buster got ready for work and walked out the front door, lantern in hand and his brass switch key in his pocket. Near East Jewella Road not far from the edge of the MoPac grounds, the sound of a car backfiring rang out in the darkness. He could see headlights coming down the road in his direction, approaching quickly, and

then heard the car backfiring again. He knew cars sometimes do that when they decelerate, which told him the car was slowing to a stop, and something told him it was going to stop by him. Standing at the edge of the road between the car, on his left, and the driveway leading to the rail yard on his right, he waited to see what the driver was going to do. The car slowly moved up next to him, and when it got to within a few feet of him, he could make out one of the occupants. To his horror, the front seat passenger, staring out at him, was the car man “Toad.”

“You don’t listen so good, *do* you, boy?” The man spit a load of tobacco juice out the window and barely missed hitting Buster. “We need to take you somewhere and teach you how to listen?”

His heart racing a mile a minute, Buster started walking quickly toward the yard when the car lurched forward and stopped again next to him. The driver leaned over across that foul man and Buster saw that it was Whorton.

“Told you to leave,” Whorton said slowly. “You leavin’, boy?”

“You’re goddam right I am, tomorrow.”

“Make sure you do.”

The car sped off and turned left onto the road leading to the yard, Buster once again left shaking from an encounter in that other-worldly place.

On Saturday morning when the shift had ended and he’d clocked out, he sat down in the gathering room by himself at the lunch table, as he always had, and stared over at the assignment board. He could see that someone had scratched out “nigger lover” and replaced it with “NIGGER”. He smiled, knowing he was now done with the place, picked

up an ink pen from the table, stood up, and walked over to the board. His smile broadened as he scratched that out and wrote in BUSTER GAINES.

A business-size envelope was delivered to him at five minutes after eight by the skinny short assistant to Chesterton, or whatever his title really was, and when he opened it in the gathering room in front of the other crew members, he saw that his transfer would indeed be effective Monday, August the eighth as Mr. Breedlow had told him. There was no name shown for him to report to.

“You leavin’ us, nigger lover?”

Hutchinson’s words rolled off Buster’s back, like he hadn’t even heard them, as he walked out the door.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

“I’ve been saved.”

The familiar sights approaching Texarkana late Saturday afternoon soon turned into views of the southeastern portion of the rail yard. Union Station quickly followed, and as he gazed out the window when the train slowed to a halt, Luther came to mind. The gentle old man was nowhere to be seen. This was a little like a homecoming to Buster, he’d developed such fondness toward Texarkana in a matter of days; and this time, the walk up the steps, through the station and down Front Street toward the Savoy Hotel made him feel like he was stepping into outstretched arms.

Mrs. Rutherford was on duty, as she had always seemed to be, and welcomed him back with a surprised look on her face.

“Well *hello* there, Mr. Gaines, how *are* you?”

“I couldn’t be better, ma’am. It’s good being back here at this wonderful hotel.”

She smiled broadly at his words. “Will you be wanting your old room back? I believe it hasn’t been rented since you’ve been gone.”

“No, ma’am. This time I’d like your best room. Give me one with air conditioning and a private bathroom.”

“Yes sir. I can sure do that.”

As soon as he got settled into his new room on the fourth floor, he kicked his shoes off and flopped down on the bed. *Heaven*, he thought. The mattress lived up to the

upgrade. The ceiling wasn't in such disrepair, the light fixture looked nearly new, and the window curtains near the bed didn't have that yellow tinge to them. The large window A/C unit kicking out cold air on the max setting could have easily put him to sleep, but the thought of dinner at Morton's rallied him.

It was the same bland, "old people's" food he'd had before, and it was the same self-assuming Mrs. Morton who came over and sat down at his table to visit and talk about religion.

Sunday morning at the diner was the same experience replayed from before. Tricia was on duty, as she usually was on Sunday mornings, and, pleasantly enough, the same congenial side of her had shown up for work. Everything in the downtown area nearby appeared the same, though for some reason he had sort of expected things to have changed in his absence. It was a strange sensation standing on the sidewalk outside of In-Town, one he couldn't pin down. He hadn't been gone all that long but it felt like he had drifted into another time or reality and drifted back. Episodes of "The Twilight Zone" came to mind, it was that kind of thing. Sunday night at Morton's again took on the same weird sensation. He knew it would just be a short adjustment period for himself.

Never before had he been so anxious to get up and go to work as he was on Monday morning. He had no idea who he was to report to but would simply walk out to the old shanty, see his buddies and get all squared away. Following a quick shower in his very own bathroom, he slipped on his clothes and headed down the elevator. When he walked up to the front of the diner, he paused to glance in, wishing he'd see Sylvia standing at her station behind the counter waiting on customers. He didn't, in fact, see

any waitress and saw only Grover. The man greeted him several seconds after sitting down at his favorite stool.

“Whatta you havin’?”

An expressionless look went with that question.

“Bacon and eggs, fried.”

In ten minutes, Grover walked his breakfast over to him and slid it in front of him.

“You been gone?”

Buster smiled and answered, “Yeah, I’ve been down in Shreveport with your friends.”

“*Huh?*”

“Forget it.”

A cigarette burning between his fingers, Grover went back to his grill and Buster dove into his breakfast. Forking a bite of eggs into his mouth, he felt a hand on his left shoulder. Turning that way to see who had touched him, he didn’t see anybody, but when he turned right, he looked into the beaming face of Sylvia.

“*Hi, stranger,*” she happily blurted out.

“*Sylvia. Hi.*”

“What’re *you* doin’ back here? Thought you were goin’ straight home from *Shreveport.*”

He laughed and replied, “I’ve been saved.”

“Silly boy.”

He had missed that little moniker.

“I thought you were moving to Little Rock.”

She sat down on the stool next to him and replied, “Yeah, well, you know, some things just shouldn’t happen.”

Buster was struck by her choice of words and didn’t know if he should kid with her or admit that he wanted to share another “sometime” with her.

“Yeah, guess so.”

“Listen, would you like to maybe get together after work?”

He couldn’t believe his ears. “*Ab-so-lutely* I would. What time?”

“How about six?”

“That’d be great. I’ll be ready.” He started feeling bold. “Know what? My new room’s got air conditioning.”

She smiled and replied, “*Really?*”

“Yep.”

She gave him a coy look, saying, “Well sweetie, tell me, you got a good bed?”

Buster’s heart skipped a beat. “Want to find out?”

“Mm hm.”

Her smile alone would have been enough of an answer.

“I’ll be ready at five.”

“*Five*, huh, all rightee then, can’t wait.”

She got up, pecked him on the cheek, and gave him a familiar statement. “Guess I better let you get back to your breakfast.”

“All right, got to get to work.”

At twenty minutes until eight, he walked into the station and instinctively stopped in front of the row of pictures on the wall. They instantly sent him into that same frame of

mind, that same emotional connection he'd felt the first time he'd seen them...there was just some kind of strange magic about them. It seemed like all was right with the world again, that he had gone back to his childhood roots, and that if he could only touch the photos he would find himself back at Union Station as a kid with his mother and brothers picking up his dad from his latest run out west.

As he stepped into the shanty, he saw Percy holding a cup of coffee, Bull seated in one of the hardwood chairs, and Dick standing in front of the assignment board. Bull turned toward the door and saw him. He shot out of his chair, hustled over to Buster, and picked him up in a tight bear hug.

*"Damn, you missed me, huh?"*

*"Sure did, buddy."*

Dick was next to greet him. "Welcome back, Buster, heard you were on your way back."

*"Buster,"* Percy called out, "how you doin', pal?"

*"Man, I'm in tall cotton now."*

Bull laughed and said, "Spoken like a true southern boy."

*"If you only knew."*

Percy poured a cup of coffee and delivered it to Buster as he was taking a seat.

*"You guys know that old colored gentleman who works in the station? I didn't see him when I came in Saturday or this morning on the way through. How's he doing?"*

Bull reached over and put his hand on Buster's shoulder. "Buddy, he's gone."

*"What do you mean?"*

“He died, passed away a week ago. Was just old I suppose and figured he’d had a full life and it was time to go.”

Buster was stunned and needed a moment to collect his thoughts.

“The little I knew of him, he was a remarkable man.”

“Sure was, a kind and gentle soul.”

Needing to change the subject, he turned to Dick and asked, “Where’s Chalk? He coming to work today?”

“You’re fillin’ in for him. Chalk’s off on vacation for three weeks, lucky bastard.”

“Oh, that’s great. Well, how’s everybody been?”

“You ain’t gonna believe it,” Percy replied with a slight grin.

“What?”

“Barnes is in the hospital.”

“Why? Did somebody finally shoot that bastard?”

Percy chuckled. “Man, that’s cold. No, the bastard had a stroke a few days ago, and they say he’s layin’ up in the hospital like a vegetable with tubes runnin’ out of every hole and spit oozin’ out of his mouth.”

The room became momentarily silent. But when they all looked at each other and realized who it was they were talking about, laughter suddenly erupted in the shanty.

When it died down, Dick walked over to the door, looked at Buster, and tapped his arm. “Need to see you outside.”

“Okay.”

After walking several feet away from the shanty, Dick stopped.

“Can’t tell you how happy I am being back here with all you guys. *Man*, I’ve missed this place.”

“Yeah, I know. We’ve missed you too, sure have. Listen, somethin’ I want to tell you so you’ll know before you hear it from somebody else.”

“All right.”

“Percy’s kid, the guy I think you met here before.”

“Yeah, I worked with him briefly down there, too.”

“Right. Well, they arrested him for the murders of two colored guys a couple of years ago over in New Boston.”

“*No shit?*”

The news pleased him immensely but his elation was tempered by knowing this was Percy’s son.

“No shit.”

“How’s Percy handling this?”

“Well, naturally he hates it that his kid’s in such deep trouble, but truthfully, he hasn’t been close to him for years and feels sorrier for those parents.”

Buster picked up some chunks of gravel and tossed them lightly out into the yard, trying to process what Dick was telling him. The third piece struck a rail and gave that familiar ping.

“Damn...Terrible.”

“A guy Bull knows, not really a friend, named Dalton Hinds, got arrested not long ago for killin’ two young kids this past May out in the country not far from here.”

“Yeah, I remember reading about all of that in the paper.”

“Hinds admitted killin’ them and even acted like he was proud of it. Well, the DA put a lot of heat on him threatenin’ to have him executed if he didn’t cooperate with the DA in Bowie County and tell him everything he knew about the New Boston murders.”

“How’d he know Hinds knew anything about them?”

“The DA’d gotten confidential information from someone he knew was reliable, a guy that’d been workin’ with him and the sheriff for some time concernin’ racial crimes.”

“Okay.”

“So, Hinds cut a deal for himself to stay out of the chair and ratted on Percy’s kid. They found some incriminating evidence of some kind at his house down there and told *him* they were gonna file for the death penalty on him *too*. He didn’t want to get fried either, so now *he’s* made a deal to drag in another guy along with him.”

“Wow.”

“I know, and here’s the second sorry part of all this. That other guy happens to be Bull’s best friend, Junior.”

“Well holy shit, the guy who owns the bar in *Paris*?”

“Yep, the same one.”

“*Damn*, Bull’s got to be real upset about that.”

“He is. There’s gonna be *more* guys Bull knows real well *too* that’re gonna have to pay for things they’ve done.”

“What exactly happened? I mean who did what?”

Dick took Buster by the arm and walked him further away from the shanty.

“What I’m told is that Hinds killed a guy on a parking lot of a plant near New Boston for messin’ with his wife and was overheard braggin’ about it to a friend of his at work. One of the two colored guys who was killed was the one who told the sheriff that he’d heard Hinds tellin’ the other guy that. Hinds knew Percy’s kid real well and talked him into helpin’ kill that guy to shut him up, and kill his brother too, after work one evenin’. He knew Bates hated colored people and wouldn’t have anything against killin’ *any* of them.”

“Percy told me his son hurt a colored guy really bad one night in Shreveport, a young switchman new on the job.”

“Yeah, that’s right, did a little jail time for that.”

As Dick said this, a cold chill ran down his back. He could still picture Bates’ face.

“Bates knew Junior and knew he hated colored people too, and so he got Junior involved. The story is that some colored guys had broken into his bar and, naturally bein’ a racist, he was easily talked into goin’ along with the other two. He didn’t know if either of those two poor colored guys had anything to do with it or not, but that didn’t matter. Junior came over to stay at Hinds’ and that day when everybody got off work, the three of them followed those two guys out in the country and ran them off the road. They pulled them out of their car, and either Hinds or Bates, I think it was Hinds, put white pillow cases over their heads while one of the other guys held a gun on them and the third guy held a baseball

bat. Those pillow cases had eye holes cut out so they could look at those three guys while they killed them. Pretty damn cold, isn't it?"

"*Damn* cold."

"Bates tried to say that *Bull* had something to do with those murders, too, tryin' to help save his sorry ass, but the DA knew that was bullshit."

"Was Bull arrested?"

"No. Junior talked to Jamison and said he had nothin' at all to do with it, said ever since the war he's been a changed man, not like he was in the old days."

"So the DA took the word of a guy arrested for murder? *Really?*"

"Partly. He didn't have him arrested because he knew Bull and knew *exactly* where he was the night those two were killed."

"How'd he *know?*"

"He saw him comin' out of *Sylvia's* house a minute after the murders took place just as he *himself* was walkin' up on her front porch."

"The DA and *Sylvia?*"

"Not so hard to believe. It was two years ago, you know."

"Yeah... I *do* know... Dick, just curious, how'd you find all this out? Who told you all this, anyway?"

He glanced back toward the shanty, then at Buster. "You want to know who told me all this?"

\* \* \*

Staring out his hotel room window at the rail yard lights shining off the tracks across the street, it was nearly midnight and he was alone again after his winsome visitor had left. His thoughts drifted from one person to the next, one scene after another during the past several days playing out. He wondered what would happen to Bull because of his “come to Jesus” revelations; he wondered how many friendships all of that was going to cost him and what else it might cost him, but he knew there were those who understood him and would always remain close to him...they were the ones who mattered most to him. He tried to picture Bull, as well as the other guys, working in Shreveport and couldn't imagine that ever happening...all of these friends were years apart from those people. He thought about how the last few weeks of his summer in Texas were going to be gone before he knew it and resolved to make the most of that remaining time, pulling as many hours as he could and enjoying the company of everyone he'd gotten close to. A long blast from a yard engine, easily heard through the closed window, snapped him out of his reverie and immediately some lines he'd scribbled down a little at a time as a poem popped into his mind. Just why he flashed on this when his mind had been lost in things completely unrelated he didn't know. Grabbing his Harmony and forming a C chord, his fingers began picking the tune he thought he'd finished some time ago; but now, as if through a revelation, or simply from sheer hours of practice, his fingers began effortlessly laying down a Travis pick, the unique syncopation making the tune sound

completely different. He added in a few variations on the basic pick and found it natural to switch from one to another. His poem, quickly transforming into three verses with a refrain, flowed from the new technique, and then, just that quickly, he was done with it finally and satisfied with his efforts.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Try not to forget us.”

On the afternoon the Texas Eagle pulled away from Union Station and began making its way north, it was only eighty-one degrees, the humidity barely noticeable. Because it was Saturday, a regular day off for the crew and family commitments pressing, none of the guys, except for one, had gone to the station and walked down to the platform to say good-bye.

He was leaving two months and twenty days after this whole thing began, when his parents' money in his wallet and his naïve innocence had been his only companions. Now, staring out the window in his complimentary roomette, he tried to draw some conclusions about which events would stick in his memory and which ones he'd want to leave behind. He had made his money and answered more of his curiosity about girls. Unrestrained hatred toward him for the first time had stunned him, and he had felt the same toward others for the first time because of it, in spite of how his parents and his church had brought him up. He had seen decency in some people, only to see a dark side suddenly emerge. Others had been genuinely kind while still others knew only that lower side. But far more important than that, he'd felt a sense of belonging and identity because of how the guys had taken him in and treated him as one of their own.

When he saw a Pullman conductor pass by his open door, he remembered as a kid wanting to be just like his dad, wearing a neat-looking black suit, starched white shirt, black tie, shiny black shoes and proud Pullman cap; but now he didn't, at least not in that respect. He wanted to claim his own identity as an adult, chart his own way in the world, and do whatever came to him to do.

It dawned on him, staring out at the setting sun spreading across the Arkansas countryside, that this fabulous summer adventure, with all that had taken place, was really just the beginning of the second part of his life. He had started out thinking he already *was* an adult when he walked across the graduation stage, but the summer had shown him what folly that was. It was all that had happened to him *after* that liberating event back in Maplewood that had gotten him to this side of the passage.

He thought back to a few of Bull's words on the platform as they stood there shaking hands and watching the Eagle coming in their direction: "You'll always be part of our crew, buddy." He firmly believed that. "Try not to forget us." He knew he never would.