



Other books by the author:

Dirty Little Angels

**IN THE CITY OF
FALLING STARS**

CHRISTUSA

LIVINGSTON PRESS

THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST ALABAMA

Copyright © 2016 Chris Tusa
All rights reserved, including electronic text
ISBN 13: 978-1-60489-179-9, hardcover
ISBN 13: 978-1-60489-180-5, trade paper
ISBN: 1-60489-179-3 hardcover
ISBN: 1-60489-180-7 trade paper
Library of Congress Control Number: 2016944229
Printed on acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America by
Publishers Graphics
Hardcover binding by: Heckman Bindery
Typesetting and page layout: Joe Taylor and Angela Brown
Proofreading: Joe Taylor, Amanda Nolin, Angela Brown, Teresa Boykin
Cover layout: Amanda Nolin
Cover photo: Edward Richards

The author wishes to thank Joe Taylor, the staff at Livingston Press, and Jaden Terrell for their help in preparing this manuscript for publication.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental. Livingston Press is part of The University of West Alabama, and thereby has non-profit status. Donations are tax-deductible.

first edition
6 5 4 3 2 1

IN THE CITY OF FALLING STARS

For Pamela—the most phenomenal woman I have ever known.

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. —Revelation 12:1-4

*And the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken.
—Mark 13:25*



*June 2006,
New Orleans, Louisiana*



CHAPTER ONE

*F*or the last few days Maurice Delahoussaye had been thinking of ways to kill Michael. He'd considered poisoning him, planting a bomb in his car, stabbing him, pushing him off an overpass, drowning him, electrocuting him, slitting his throat, even setting him on fire. When he finally decided that shooting him was the best option, Maurice climbed into his car and drove to New Orleans East, toward a dilapidated Six Flags amusement park on the edge of the city.

It was almost noon when he arrived. He parked the car, grabbed the mannequin from the backseat and closed the door behind him. Beneath a scorched July sky, he dragged the mannequin through a field choked with weeds, past empty beer cans, twisted pieces of rusted corrugated metal, gutted air conditioners plucked clean of copper tubing, until he came to a sagging barbed-wire fence that surrounded the park. Before tossing the mannequin over the fence, he adjusted the dust mask he was wearing and slipped through a ragged hole near the bottom. Since the abandoned amusement park was on the outskirts of New Orleans, and fairly desolate ever since the storm, he figured it was the perfect place for target practice.

Once inside the actual park, he walked past the rusted, graffitied remnants of rides, past a row of dead trees, branches tangled with cottony pink blossoms of insulation, past a large statue of a clown's head and a pale carousel horse lying on its side in the sun. The wide concrete walkway that snaked through the park was littered with the rusted skeletons of awnings, and ragged strips of canvas snapping in the wind. He walked past an aluminum Six Flags sign splattered with rusty bullet holes and a dinosaur head with a caved-in skull, until he came to the old Under the Sea roller coaster. The ground around the entrance was strewn with shards of broken glass and dirty needles, the archway painted bright blue with a statue of a mermaid affixed to the side of the building. The mermaid had fat red lips, a seashell covered each of her breasts, and the silver scales of her fishtail had peeled off. Her hands and

stomach were clumped with bird shit, and her nose was missing.

Near a weedy slab of cracked concrete, Maurice found an overturned claw machine with a pile of waterlogged stuffed animals spilling out the side. He propped the mannequin against the rusted machine, grabbed the box of shells from his pocket, loaded the gun and walked thirty or so feet from the mannequin to a mound of rain-eaten dirt surrounded by a patch of dead weeds. He pulled a bottle of Maalox from his pocket, pulled down the dust mask he was wearing so that it was dangling around his neck and took a swig from the bottle. As he did, his head filled with static, and a tingling sensation climbed up his backbone and crawled into his skull. He thought about what the priest had told him a few days earlier, about how Joan of Arc and Constantine had been enlightened by God, how they'd heard the holy voices of saints, even had visions of angels.

I'm a soldier, Maurice thought, *a soldier of the Lord*. As he stood there, a frenzy of static-filled visions flashed in the back of his brain—a glowing heart tangled in flames and thorns, stars falling from the sky like rain, the black cries of a baby mingled with a melee of bloody screams—all swarming around in his brain like a crackling burst of signals bouncing off a satellite dish. He took another swig of Maalox, imagining the ulcers bleeding in his gut, his insides sacred and glowing. He put the bottle of Maalox in his pocket, adjusted the dust mask so that it was covering his mouth and raised the pistol, aiming it at the mannequin's nose. "Blessed be the Lord," he mumbled, the words buzzing behind the mask, "for He commands the angels to guard me in all my ways." Maurice held the pistol steady, with an unwavering determination that he hadn't felt in years, took a deep breath, squinted his eyes, and pulled the trigger.

Three months earlier



CHAPTER TWO

All across the city dead birds were falling out of the sky. As Maurice and his daughter, Audrey, drove through downtown New Orleans, the woman on the local radio station said flocks of dead birds had been found near city hall and Lee Circle. Maurice turned onto Annunciation Street, and he'd only traveled a few blocks when he heard a strange thud, as if something had hit the car.

"What was that?" he asked Audrey, imagining a bird striking the car, the roof splattered with bloody feathers and bird guts.

"What was what?" Audrey asked.

"That sound."

"I didn't hear anything."

As the woman's rusty voice crawled through the car speakers, a lump of fear settled in Maurice's gut. He rolled down the window, listened to the low hum of traffic from the overpass, then glanced up at the flicker of streetlights. It had been almost eight months since the storm, but the skyline still looked cracked and war-torn, littered with what looked like bombed-out buildings, luxury hotels with the windows blown out, dirty white curtains waving in the wind like flags.

Maurice was a thin, muscular man with brown skin, a receding hairline, and a small potbelly. His stomach was polluted with ulcers, so as usual he was sipping from a bottle of Maalox.

"I wonder if it was one of those birds," he said, still glancing out the window, his startled eyes frantically scanning left to right. "The ones they're talking about on the radio."

"Jesus, Dad," Audrey groaned, her voice tainted with frustration.

In the last few months Audrey had grown exhausted from constantly having to dismiss Maurice's fears. In the past, Vivian had been burdened with the task, but ever since Maurice and Vivian had separated, it had become Audrey's responsibility, and for the last few months she'd worn it the way one might wear a hand-me-down dress that didn't quite fit.

"It wasn't a bird," she said, frustration building in her voice. "Or

hail. Or a falling meteor. Or whatever else you're worried about."

"What if it was the gas tank?" Maurice asked, his eyes scanning the rear-view mirror. He took a swig of Maalox. "I read on the Internet that in certain trucks there's a faulty wire in the gas tank that's been causing them to explode. People even reported hearing a strange thumping sound coming from the rear of their truck."

Audrey sighed. "You don't drive a truck."

"If it can happen in a truck," Maurice said, "it can happen in a car. Fourteen trucks have already exploded. One family was burned alive. Another man survived, but half of his face was blown off. He lost an ear, and his nose was melted to his face. They had to construct a new nose and ear using cartilage from his rib."

"Jesus. The gas tank is fine, Dad. I thought you were going to stop worrying so much."

For most of his life, Maurice had been frightened of the world around him. But over the last few months his obsessions had intensified, ever since his wife, Vivian, had left him. To make matters worse, for the last twenty-two years he'd worked as an underwriter for United Life Insurance, so he dealt with death on a daily basis. Over the years all the catastrophes he'd warned his clients about had piled up in his brain, and the inside of his skull had become wallpapered with images of shark bites, train wrecks, mushroom clouds, plane crashes, mudslides and falling meteors. When he wasn't at work, Maurice spent most of his free time memorizing homicide statistics, fatality reports on automobile accidents, tornadoes, and earthquakes. When he thought about going on vacation he worried about whether or not the suntan lotion secretly caused skin cancer or whether or not he'd be electrocuted in the hotel pool as a result of a short circuit in an underwater light. Even at work he found himself researching statistics on drive-by shootings, serial killers, organ snatchers, and killer whales.

"I thought I was doing better for a while," he said. "And then the hurricane hit. It seems like ever since Katrina, New Orleans is so much more dangerous than it used to be."

"The whole world is dangerous, Dad." As Audrey spoke, she fiddled with the rape whistle that dangled from a chain around her neck. Maurice had given her the whistle when she'd started college, and though she hated it, she'd worn it religiously, mostly because she knew it

made Maurice worry less about her safety.

“Did you know that statistically Disneyland is the safest place in America?”

“So what?” Audrey said. “You want to move to Disneyland? You can’t live there, Dad. It’s a theme park.”

“I’m just saying that statistically it’s the safest place in America. Only nine people have died at Disneyland since it opened in 1955. And all of those, except one, were accidents, drunk kids sneaking into the park and drowning, people getting their heads lopped off while riding some roller coaster, stuff like that.”

“What about the other one?” Audrey asked. “The one that wasn’t an accident?”

“Some guy was stabbed to death in Tomorrowland. He groped some girl’s breast, and her boyfriend stabbed him.”

As Maurice spoke, he heard the thumping sound again. “You didn’t hear that?” he asked, a tiny tumor of fear growing inside him. He sat up in his seat and hugged the steering wheel.

Audrey rolled her green eyes and sighed. She was bony, with light brown skin and long, thin hair the color of red velvet cake. She adjusted the thick white-framed glasses she was wearing, unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned into the dashboard, but all she could see was a black sky cluttered with dull stars. “There’s nothing to see,” she said. “Maybe you should pay attention to the road, instead of worrying about some stupid bird.”

Maurice was actually surprised that Audrey wasn’t more upset about the birds, mostly because she’d spent the majority of her teenage life protecting animals. She’d been attending Tulane University for the last two years, and when she wasn’t at school, she was usually volunteering at the humane society or rounding up friends to rally against some recent act of animal cruelty. She’d seen a documentary on poultry farms in high school, and ever since then she’d been a vegetarian. Her bedroom was covered with pictures of turkeys cooped up in metal cages, bloody chickens hanging upside down from hooks, monkeys with metal electrodes strapped to their skulls. Her wrecked Hyundai was plastered with bumper stickers with catchy little sayings like: *Club Sandwiches*, *Not Seals* and *Save a Fox, Shoot a Hunter*.

Audrey turned the volume down on the radio. “Have you talked to

Vivian?” she asked, trying desperately to distract Maurice from the birds.

Vivian was actually Audrey’s mother’s name, but ever since Vivian and Maurice had separated, Audrey had refused to refer to her as *Mom*.

“I spoke to her on Thursday,” Maurice said, staring out the driver’s side window at a fluorescent white moon flickering against the sky.

“When’s her ultrasound?”

“In two weeks.”

“Is what’s-his-name going with her?”

“Michael?” Maurice asked. “I don’t think so.”

“Has he even called to check on how the baby’s doing?”

“Your mother says he doesn’t want anything to do with the baby. He’s married with two kids. I don’t think his wife even knows.”

“What the hell did she ever see in that guy?”

“How would I know?” Maurice said, a hint of exasperation in his voice. “If you’re so curious, why don’t you ask her when she comes over on Monday?”

“She’s coming over for dinner again? We just had dinner with her a few weeks ago.”

“Yes,” Maurice sighed. “Dinner twice a month. That’s the plan.”

“What’s the point of you two getting divorced, if I still have to have dinner with her every two weeks?”

“We’re legally separated, not divorced.”

“Don’t play semantics, Dad. She moved out, and the only time you see her is when we have these little bullshit dinners where we act like we’re still a family.”

“You should want to have dinner with her,” Maurice said. “She’s your mother.”

“Mothers don’t leave their families and have babies with other men.”

They stopped at a red light and Maurice stared at the sky again, scanning it for any sign of the falling birds. “I read somewhere that fifty-one percent of all spouses cheat on their mates,” he said, “so at least we’re normal, statistically I mean.”

“You’re serious?”

Maurice sighed and turned to Audrey. “I’m just trying to find some silver lining here, Audrey.”

“There’s no silver lining. She cheated on you, and now she’s pregnant. You should be happy it’s over.”

But Maurice wasn't happy it was over. In fact, he couldn't remember being happy once since Vivian had left. He missed her desperately, and her leaving had left him deeply depressed, so much that his doctor had put him on Prozac, which Maurice had been taking for the last few months.

"Maybe it's time to start dating," Audrey said. "Rochelle's mom just got divorced. You'd like her. She's a complete MILF. She looks like one of the *Desperate Housewives*, the red-headed one. And she owns her own business."

"What in God's name is a MILF?"

"It's kind of like a Cougar, you know, like a hot older woman."

"I'm not dating any MILFs, Audrey. Or any Cougars. I just need to be by myself for a while."

"OK, but Rochelle said her mom thinks you're hot."

"Really?" Maurice said, feeling a bit guilty that the compliment had put a smile on his face. "She thinks I'm hot?"

"Yep, she said you looked like a younger version of Denzel Washington."

"Denzel Washington, huh?"

As the traffic dragged to a crawl, Maurice stopped at a red light across from an Oriental rug store. The sidewalk in front of the building was littered with heaps of bricks and cinder blocks, twisted strips of aluminum siding tangled in a web of electrical wire. The roof was caved-in, only ripped pieces of tar paper left where shingles had been. The massive plate glass window in the front of the store had been covered with a large piece of plywood, spray-painted with a message in white letters that read: *And I saw a beast with seven heads rise up out of the sea, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. —Revelation 13:1.*

As he drove down Napoleon Avenue, Maurice remembered how he and Vivian had purchased a rug from the store just after their son Brandon had been born. Maurice thought about Vivian, and the sadness and hopelessness he'd felt since she'd left blossomed inside him. In the last few months, on more than one occasion, he'd considered swallowing a handful of sleeping pills, even hanging himself. Most days he felt like the city itself—hollow and abandoned. And though Katrina had blown through his life just months before, leaving his house relatively unscathed, a small part of him sometimes wished that the storm's muddy waters had

swallowed the house and taken him with it.

* * *

It was almost ten o'clock when they arrived at the house, a camel-back shotgun on the outskirts of the Garden District. It had been built in 1863, and Maurice and Vivian had spent almost three years restoring and updating all the original architecture, replacing the arched windows with beveled colored glass, updating the light fixtures, resurfacing the wood floors throughout the house and landscaping the yard. For years they'd kept the house in pristine condition, the yard perfectly manicured. But over the last six months or so the garden had become polluted with weeds. A few of the floorboards on the porch were loose, and the paint on the front and sides of the house was cracked and peeling. The grass hadn't been mowed in months, the gutters were stuffed with tangled branches and leaves, and the windows were still covered with silver Xs of duct tape.

Once inside, Audrey sat down on the sofa and Maurice flipped on the ten o'clock news. A Vietnamese reporter named Candy Pham was posing in front of Gallier Hall surrounded by mobs of people in yellow Hazmat suits. She said that aside from the initial reports, dead birds had also been found near the Superdome and the Convention Center, and that the birds were being sent to the Center for Disease Control to be tested.

As he stared at the TV, Maurice imagined the sky on fire, flakes of soot fluttering through the air like swarms of black moths, bird guts and bloody hailstones falling from the sky.

"That's less than five miles from our house," he said, sitting down on the sofa next to Audrey. "I wonder if the air is safe to breathe."

"The air is fine, Dad."

"Birds don't just fall out of the sky, Audrey." Maurice took a swig of Maalox, wiped a milky white mustache from his lip. "This could be some kind of biological terrorist attack."

"Isn't the whole point of terrorism to kill people? So far, all I've heard about is a few dead birds."

"You don't find it suspicious," Maurice asked, "that all the birds were found near government buildings?"

“The whole downtown area is filled with government buildings. I’m sure there’s some other explanation for it.”

As Maurice listened to the news report, a little wave of dread was building inside him. “I wonder if Homeland Security raised the terrorist threat level.” He flipped through the channels in a frenzy, but all he found was some reporter interviewing Madonna about her European tour.

Audrey snatched the remote from the coffee table and clicked the TV off.

“What are you doing?” Maurice asked.

“Turning it off. If I don’t, you’ll just spend the whole night surfing the news channels and obsessing over this.”

Maurice’s first instinct was to argue with Audrey, but he knew she was only trying to help. Ever since the separation, she’d been spending less time at her dorm and more time at the house, cooking dinner for Maurice and her brother, doing laundry, and whatever else she could do to help out. When she wasn’t reminding Maurice to take his Prozac, she was recommending some therapist she’d found on the Internet or some self-help book she’d heard about. Maurice appreciated her concern, but he wanted her to enjoy her time in college, and whenever he thought about how much time she spent worrying about him, he felt a little knife of guilt twisting in his gut.

Audrey placed the remote control back on the coffee table and went into the kitchen. As she rooted through the refrigerator for something to eat, Maurice stared at the dead television, imagining flocks of birds falling out of the sky, cluttering the streets of New Orleans, smashing rooftops, clogging gutters, car alarms whining all across the city as falling birds dented hoods and fenders, smearing windshields with bloody wings and feathers.

An hour or so later, when Audrey headed to bed, Maurice waited to hear her bedroom door close, and when it did, he grabbed the remote and flipped the TV on. A scrawny blonde CNN reporter was talking about a teenage girl who’d broken into a church, wrapped her newborn baby in a white cloth, placed the baby on the altar, and then lit him on fire. Maurice flipped the channel to Fox, and a reporter was rattling on about an IED blast that had killed four American soldiers. As pictures of a burning army vehicle flashed across the TV, Maurice saw a news

ticker at the bottom of the screen indicating that a man in Italy had been arrested after hatching a plot to poison Rome's water supply with cyanide.

During the commercial break, Maurice went into the kitchen and turned the coffee pot on. As the coffee started to brew, he heard the crackle of static. Over the last few weeks, whenever he'd used certain appliances in the house, he'd felt a tingling sensation throbbing in his veins, a static-filled electric pulse that climbed up his spine and buzzed around in his skull. He wasn't sure where the static was coming from, but he assumed it was just interference from a local cell tower or power plant.

After the coffee was done, Maurice grabbed his laptop and visited one of the many sites he'd bookmarked on terrorism. A few links later, he landed on a page entitled *The Chronological History of Biological Warfare*. The site explained how in the sixth century B.C., Solon of Athens had contaminated the water supply with skunk cabbage during the siege of Krissa, and how drinking-water wells had been poisoned with rye ergot by the Assyrians and Persians during the fifth and sixth centuries.

When Maurice went to bed an hour or so later, he thought about the dead birds, and as he lay there a little egg of a thought hatched in his brain. If the air in New Orleans was unsafe, he thought, maybe someone had poisoned the water too. He remembered the story on FOX, about the man in Italy who'd tried to poison Rome's water supply with cyanide. He thought about how the night before he'd noticed a strange metallic taste while drinking a glass of tap water, and as he closed his eyes and drifted toward sleep, he imagined tiny black molecules of cyanide crawling through his blood.

CHAPTER THREE

When Maurice arrived at work, everyone was talking about the dead birds. Most people thought the birds were killed by a sudden change in temperature. There was even talk of terrorism, bird flu, West Nile, and high levels of mold spores in the air left over from Katrina.

Like always, Maurice spent most of the day cooped up in his cubicle. After lunch he killed time in the bathroom staring in the mirror at his sagging gut and the bald spot growing on the crown of his head. Later, he searched Google for ab belts and hair transplants. While he searched the Internet, he learned that head-butts actually killed more people than machine guns, and that more people were crushed to death by falling vending machines every year than were eaten by sharks. In fact, it was becoming so common that Coca-Cola had started placing a cautionary sticker on all of their Coke machines that read: *Warning: Tipping may cause injury or death.*

Later, Maurice searched Google for stories about the dead birds. He found a website for a local church, and the header of the site contained a picture of Jesus hanging on a cross with animated drops of blood dripping down his cheeks. Next to Jesus was a picture of the mayor with devil horns growing out of his skull. The navigation buttons on the site were little bombs that exploded when you clicked on them. According to the site, parishioners of the church had witnessed a statue of Jesus in the lobby of the church weeping tears of blood. It also claimed that one of the parishioners who'd seen the statue weep tears of blood had been plagued with visions of war, and she'd experienced a burning feeling in the palms of her hands, in her feet, and between her ribs. According to the site, the woman woke up a few days later, the scent of roses seeping from her skin, with her hands, side, and feet marked with mysterious bloody wounds. Aside from the weeping statue, the site had links to other religious events including documented incidents of stigmata, visions of the Virgin Mary, even flying saints.

Maurice had been raised by Jewish parents, but he'd never

considered himself a practicing Jew. Despite the fact that he'd never been a particularly religious person, however, he found himself strangely compelled by what he read, especially by the weeping statue of Jesus. He was a bit surprised at first, but since his wife Vivian had been raised in a Catholic family, he figured his marriage to her for the last twenty-two years had gradually opened his mind to Christianity.

As he navigated through the pages of the website, Maurice found a page devoted to the falling birds, which warned that Hurricane Katrina, the war in Iraq, and the falling birds were all signs that Jesus would soon return to Earth. Specifically, it warned that the government and the military were conspiring with Satan to overthrow the Kingdom of God, that they were poisoning and murdering citizens, and that they intended to kill Jesus once he returned.

The more Maurice read, the more concerned he became. For months he'd been reading articles that questioned the safety of the air and water supply in New Orleans, stories about the NOPD, U.S. Marshals, and the National Guard breaking into homes at gunpoint, confiscating people's firearms, and in some cases even harming them. Most reasonable, intelligent people in other cities might have laughed at the notion that the government would intentionally harm its citizens, but given the recent lawlessness and brutality that had been sweeping through the city, it was fairly easy for Maurice to believe.

Maurice spent the rest of the afternoon cooped up in his cubicle surfing the Internet, visiting the local news websites and reading various postings from local residents concerning the recent dead bird incidents, as well as recent reports of mold exposure. Around four o'clock he grabbed his briefcase and headed to the high school to pick up his son, Brandon. Vivian was coming over for dinner that night, so they headed over to the supermarket for a few last-minute items.

On the way there, as they merged onto I-10, Maurice saw rows and rows of warped, lopsided homes, most of them twisted off their foundations. Others were gutted, nothing left but the flimsy wooden frames. Everywhere he looked, he saw stacks of mangled boards and mildewed pieces of sheetrock, warped roofs covered by a bright blue sea of FEMA tarps, scraps of dirty sunlight leaking through the twisted branches of trees. Eventually, Maurice spotted the Catholic church Vivian had attended as a child. The roof of the church was missing,

and a scaffolding erected next to the building was filled with sweaty construction workers. Wedged between cracked pieces of stained glass and rows of splintered pews was a statue of the Virgin Mary with her head lopped off.

While they drove, Maurice tuned the car radio to WWL, the local New Orleans station. As he turned up the volume, a male caller was droning on and on about fears concerning the water supply. The man talked about how sodium fluoride was the main ingredient in rat poison and how in the 1930s Nazi Germany had used it to subdue its citizens. The caller even mentioned some chemist named Charles Perkins, who'd said that the Nazi government had devised a plan to control the population by contaminating the drinking water. In time, the caller claimed, repeated doses of infinitesimal amounts of fluoride reduced an individual's power to resist domination by slowly poisoning a certain area of the brain, and that as a result, the person would become lazy, depressed, and easier to control. As Maurice listened to the caller, he thought about how depressed and lethargic he'd been feeling lately, and he couldn't help but wonder if it was a result of the tap water he'd been drinking.

When they arrived at the supermarket thirty minutes later, Maurice grabbed a shopping cart and wheeled toward the produce department while Brandon lagged behind, staring at his cell phone. Maurice owned a cell phone too, but he never carried it in his pocket because he feared it might shrink his testicles, and he always used the speaker-phone and never held it against his head when he spoke because he feared the radio waves might corrode his brain.

"Can we make hamburgers this weekend?" Brandon asked a few minutes later, as Maurice parked the shopping cart near the meat counter.

Maurice poked the package. "I'm not sure I trust this ground meat," he said. "How about spaghetti?"

Brandon was a short, wiry boy with curly brown hair and light brown skin spotted with pimples that looked like rivets. "I want hamburgers," he said. "I friggin' hate spaghetti."

"Yeah, well," Maurice told him, examining a shrink-wrapped chicken that was glowing in the yellow supermarket light, "ground meat carries E. coli."

"But I like ground meat."

“Do you like explosive diarrhea?” Maurice asked. “What about kidney failure?” He put the chicken in the shopping cart, pulled a tube of hand sanitizer from his pocket, squirted the clear liquid into his palm and massaged the sanitizer into his hands as he spoke.

“So we can’t eat hamburgers anymore?” Brandon asked.

“No,” Maurice said, putting the tube of sanitizer back in his pocket. “Not when I’m making dinner.”

“Mom used to always make hamburgers.”

“Well,” Maurice sighed, “when you get in the mood for a diseased piece of meat, you can go visit your mother.” He grabbed some vegan sour cream for Audrey, turned down the next aisle and grabbed a case of bottled water from the shelf and lugged it to the shopping cart.

“You’re buying bottled water?”

“The government can’t guarantee that the water is safe,” Maurice said, searching the crate of bottled water for a list of ingredients. “And I’m not taking any chances.”

“Mom says it’s a big waste of money.”

“If your mother thinks it’s a waste of money, she doesn’t have to buy it.”

Brandon grabbed a six pack of Coke and dropped it into the basket. “Mike Russell’s mother says Mom is going to hell.”

“When did she say that?”

“The other day, when I saw her at the mall. She said adultery is a mortal sin. And that people go to hell for mortal sins.”

Maurice sincerely wished that he hadn’t told Brandon about Vivian’s affair. When he’d initially learned of the affair, he’d intended to tell Brandon that he and Vivian were separating for other reasons, but when Vivian learned she was pregnant and that she intended to keep the baby, he and Vivian both decided that Brandon needed to know the truth.

“Mike Russell’s mother is a pretentious old hag,” Maurice mumbled, reading the label of bottled water to make sure the water actually came from a spring rather than the ones he’d heard about on Dateline that were simply filtered tap water.

“Are you and Mom getting divorced?” Brandon asked.

He waited for an answer, but Maurice didn’t respond. “Dad?”

“No,” Maurice said. “Your mother and I are just separating for a while, that’s all.”

“Do you two still love each other?”

“Of course.”

“Then why are you taking a break?” Brandon asked. “If you guys still love each other? Is it because you’re black and she’s white?”

“No,” Maurice told Brandon. “You know that was never a problem for us.”

“Did you make her leave? Because she’s having a baby with Michael?”

Maurice sighed. He knew Brandon was searching for a clear and simple answer, for one single occurrence to which he could pin the whole separation. But the situation was more complicated than that. The truth was, though the news of her affair and the pregnancy had devastated Maurice, he’d forgiven Vivian and insisted from the very beginning that they stay together. It had been Vivian’s decision to leave, Vivian’s decision that they needed time apart to assess the situation.

“It didn’t have anything to do with your mother getting pregnant,” Maurice told Brandon. “It was my fault. Not hers.” Maurice placed his hand on Brandon’s shoulder. “I know it’s hard to understand,” he said, “but sometimes people need to be apart for a while. Either way, you don’t need to worry about any of this. Your mom will be moving back home before you know it. You’ll see.”

Maurice patted Brandon on the back, crumbled the grocery list in his fist, and snatched a box of Tide from a shelf on the way to the checkout line. As they were leaving, Maurice saw a stack of newspapers near the automatic doors in the lobby. On the front page was a headline that read: *Department of Health Warns of Risks to the Water Supply Due to Katrina.*

When they pulled into the driveway a few minutes later, they saw a pickup truck parked in front of the house. As Maurice climbed out of the car, he spotted a man at the top of the utility pole wearing sunglasses, an orange reflector vest, and a white hard hat. Though the man seemed to have the appropriate vehicle and equipment, the truck wasn’t labeled with a company name, and Maurice couldn’t help but be a bit suspicious.

As Brandon carried the groceries inside, Maurice walked to the curb and stared up at the man suspiciously. “Is there some problem with the phone line?” Maurice yelled, holding up his hand to shield his eyes from the sun.

“No problem,” the man said. “Just checking the line. That’s all.”

Maurice paused for a moment and waited for the man to provide an explanation, but he didn’t say a word.

“May I ask what you’re checking for?”

The man sighed, grabbed a wrench from the pocket of his leather waist belt. “Nothing to be concerned about,” he said. “Just routine maintenance.”

“Are you from the electric company or the phone company?”

Maurice stared up at the man for a moment, waiting for an answer, but when the man didn’t respond, Maurice walked back to the car, grabbed the bag of groceries and headed inside. Once inside, he put the bags on the counter top, walked into the living room and picked up the receiver of the phone. As he listened, Maurice could hear a tangle of static-filled voices whispering on the other end. He listened intently for another minute or two, and for a moment he thought he heard the garbled syllables of his name slithering through the static. He tried to decipher the mangled scraps of words he was hearing, but as he did, the static and the voices gradually faded, until there was nothing left except the faint, menacing drone of a dial tone.

* * *

When Vivian arrived at the house for dinner that evening, Maurice used the bottled water to brew a pitcher of iced tea. Audrey placed the potatoes and the chicken in the oven, and Brandon helped with the salad. As the family sat down at the dining room table, Vivian pulled a compact from her purse and checked her makeup in the mirror.

For the last fifteen years, she’d worked as a reporter for Channel 4 News in New Orleans. After she and Maurice had married, she’d started a degree in communications at Loyola University, but she’d never finished. Despite not having a degree, though, she’d been able to secure a position as a reporter for Channel 4, and she’d been working there ever since.

As Maurice stared at Vivian, he thought about how nice it was to see her at the table with the rest of the family, sitting in her usual chair, as if they’d never separated, as if the affair had never occurred, and as he did, a crooked smile bloomed on his face.

When Vivian was done checking her makeup, she closed the compact. "Did you tell your father you received another detention on Thursday?" she asked Brandon, placing the compact in her purse. She took a sip of tea, ran a freckled hand through her auburn hair. "I had to miss a triple homicide to come and get him."

"He didn't say anything to me about any detention," Maurice said.

Brandon rolled his eyes. "I can't help it if the school has stupid policies. It was a friggin' drawing for Christ's sake."

"It was a drawing of a stick figure shooting another stick figure with a gun," Vivian said. "You can't draw things like that. Not with everything that's going on in the world these days."

"You got another detention?" Audrey asked. As she spoke, she sliced her baked potato open with the same precision one might use when dissecting a fetal pig. "That's weird. You used to never get detentions. Maybe you're acting out," she said. "You know, since you're from a broken home and all."

"Audrey," Maurice said, glaring across the table.

"I'm just saying."

"This is serious, Brandon," Vivian insisted. "These violations all go on your transcript. Don't you want to go to college?"

Brandon smirked, mostly because all he'd heard about college was that it was swarming with kegs of beer and drunk, horny sorority girls eager to slither out of their tube tops.

"We'll see how funny you think it is this weekend," Vivian said, pointing the fork at him as she spoke, "when you're stuck at home with no television. And no Xbox either. You're officially grounded."

"But me and Gilbert are going to the movies."

"Gilbert?" Vivian asked. "The Middle Eastern boy? With the long hair?"

"His hair's not that long," Brandon said. "And he's Native American, not Middle Eastern."

"You know what I meant. He's foreign."

"He's from St. Bernard."

"Either way, I'm not sure I like you hanging out with him. He seems suspicious."

"Because his hair is long?"

"The way he was acting," Vivian said, "the other day when I saw the

two of you outside the school. All the twitching. He looked like he was waiting for his next fix.”

“I told you, that’s from video games. He gets spasms in his eyes from playing too much.”

“I know it’s not exactly politically correct to say this,” Vivian said, “but Native Americans are prone to drug and alcohol abuse.”

“She’s right,” Maurice said. “Nearly twelve percent of all deaths among Native Americans are alcohol related.”

“You’d be a drunk too,” Audrey chimed in, “if a bunch of white people tortured and murdered all of your relatives.”

“Anyway,” Brandon told Vivian, “Gilbert doesn’t do drugs or drink.”

“Either way,” Vivian continued, “I don’t like you hanging out with him. You need to get your priorities in order. Maybe grounding you will give you a good wake-up call. You’re never going to get into a good college if you keep this up.”

“She’s right, Brandon.” Audrey wiped her mouth with her napkin. “College is important. There’s nothing worse in the world than being uneducated. I forgot,” she said, glancing at Vivian, her words like a stick stirring an ant pile. “Why didn’t you finish college?”

“I couldn’t. I was pregnant with you.”

“That’s right,” Audrey smirked, a warped joy creeping through her as she spoke. “I forgot.”

Vivian flashed an icy stare. “Are you sure you don’t want a piece of chicken, Audrey?” She tore a piece of meat from the bone with her pink fingernails and placed it in her mouth. “It’s really delicious,” she said, wiping the chicken grease from her lips as she talked around the food. “The chicken skin practically melts in your mouth.”

“Thanks anyway, Vivian,” Audrey said, flashing a shit-eating grin.

“I’d really appreciate it if you’d call me *Mother*. Or *Mom*.”

Audrey’s cold green eyes honed in on Vivian like a fighter pilot’s crosshairs locking onto a target. “I’ll start calling you *Mother*,” she said, “when you start acting like one.” She stared at Vivian for a moment longer, then her eyes drifted to Maurice. “I was watching this documentary the other day, Dad, and it was really interesting. Did you know the cuckoo abandons its children? It actually lays its eggs in other birds’ nests and leaves them for the other bird to raise.”

Vivian took a sip of tea and glared at Audrey, a crooked smile

creeping across her Botox face. “Did you know that female scorpions eat their young?”

“Can the two of you please stop?” Maurice stabbed a fork into his baked potato. The room grew quiet, and as he took a bite of potato, he thought about how much he missed the family dinner conversations they used to have. He remembered how they’d spend hours at the table discussing art, history, religion, even politics, without ever arguing with one another. Ever since the separation, though, those engaging conversations had gradually been replaced with empty, confrontational banter.

Brandon twisted off a chicken leg, scooped a spoonful of corn onto his plate. “The teachers are so close-minded,” he said, trying to break the silence. “We have a new history teacher, and he asked if I was from South America. South America. Do you believe that?”

“Did you tell him you’re biracial?” Vivian asked.

“Yep,” Brandon said. “I told him Dad was black and Jewish and that you were white and Catholic.”

“What did he say?”

“He said I had an active imagination.”

Audrey smiled.

“He’s such a friggin’ moron.” Brandon stared at Audrey. “Do you know he actually said Columbus was a hero?”

“What a joke.” Audrey rolled her eyes, scooped a spoonful of vegan sour cream onto her baked potato. “A guy slaughters an entire race, and we give him his own holiday.”

“So we shouldn’t celebrate Columbus Day?” Vivian asked.” Is that what you’re saying?”

“Hitler conquered the Jews,” Audrey said. “Maybe we should give him a holiday too. Once a year we could round up all the Jews and roast them in big ovens. Everybody could wear little Hitler wigs and little black mustaches.”

Maurice took another bite of chicken and thumbed through the newspaper to an article entitled: *Boil-Water Order Still in Effect in New Orleans East*. As Audrey and Vivian’s conversation swung back and forth like a wrecking ball, he noticed a strange taste lingering in his mouth, and as he sat there reading he wondered if Audrey had rinsed the chicken with tap water.

That night, Audrey and Brandon decided to sleep at friends' houses. After Vivian had left, Maurice thought about the suspicious man he'd seen on the utility pole earlier that day, and he couldn't help but wonder if the local government was tapping his phone line. He also couldn't help but wonder about the tingling sensation in his veins and the quiet crackle of static he'd been hearing whenever he used certain appliances in the house. He decided to visit the FCC's website, where he learned that static was a common sign of electrical interference. The site also indicated that short bursts of interference could be caused by hair dryers, sewing machines, electric drills, doorbell transformers and garage door openers. While much of what he learned accounted for the static he was hearing, nothing he found explained the tingling sensation he was experiencing. Concerned that the problem might be health related, he searched WebMd, where he learned that both peripheral nerve disorder and deep vein thrombosis caused tingling sensations in the veins, but to his dismay, neither of those conditions caused sufferers to hear static.

Later, when he'd grown tired of searching the Internet, he grabbed a Bible he'd bought the day before and sat on the porch reading. For almost an hour, he sat and read passage after passage. All the while, a mosquito truck buzzed through the neighborhood spraying a thick white cloud of fog that lingered in the air long after it was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

*I*t was almost four o'clock when Maurice and Brandon pulled into the parking lot of St. Joseph's Nursing Home. Maurice's father, Virgil, had been living there for the last eight months, ever since Katrina destroyed his house in Lakeview. Though he was in wonderful shape for his age, his only option after the storm was the nursing home, mostly because he couldn't stomach the idea of living with Vivian.

The nursing home smelled like an orange soaked in vomit and urine. As Brandon and Maurice walked across the lobby, Maurice remembered a special report he'd seen on *60 Minutes* a few months back about the unsanitary conditions in American nursing homes. Despite the fact that St. Joseph's was in pristine condition compared to most nursing homes, as Maurice walked down the hallway that led to the entertainment room, images of bed sores, soiled linens, and dirty catheters crawled around in his skull.

When Maurice and Brandon found Virgil, he was near the pool table talking to Evelyn, a wealthy Italian woman he had the hots for. Evelyn's skin was wrinkled and powdery like Plaster of Paris. Her cheeks were smeared with rouge, and her hair was the shape of a black mushroom cloud, teased and doused with clumps of hairspray. She'd had a stroke a few months back, so the left side of her face was dead. Her left eye fell asleep when she spoke, and wrinkled folds of skin sagged off one side of her face like melted candle wax.

As Maurice and Brandon walked up, Evelyn shuffled off in her walker. Virgil chalked the pool cue, flashed a gold-toothed smile.

"That's horrible about Evelyn," Maurice said, his voice creeping to a whisper. "Her daughter says they think she may have had a little TIA the week before."

"Tits and ass?" Virgil asked.

"Not T&A, Dad. TIA. It's like a mini-stroke."

Virgil scratched an itch on his head. Though the top of his head was mostly bald, he had short gray dreadlocks that looked like shriveled

caterpillars growing from the sides of his skull.

“Hey there, Brandon,” Virgil winked, grabbing the cue ball and placing it at the end of the table. “Rack them up and we’ll play ourselves a quick game.”

Virgil’s wife had died two years ago, and ever since her death he’d been wearing her favorite purple mink coat. His ear had always been pierced, and he’d recently replaced his favorite gold stud with the diamond from her wedding ring.

As Brandon racked the balls, Virgil motioned to Maurice. “I thought you two were coming by on Tuesday.”

“The owners called me again,” Maurice said. “At work this time. You know, Dad, it’s getting pretty embarrassing having to come down here and talk to the owners every time you get written up.”

Virgil bent down with the pool stick in his hand, squinting as he sized up the cue ball. “So what?” he asked. “I can’t have relations?”

“The nursing home has policies, Dad. You can’t be in Evelyn’s room after midnight. Or any resident’s room for that matter. You know that. If you want to talk to a lady friend, invite her to the dining room for coffee.”

“Coffee?” Virgil said. “I’m an old man, son. I don’t have time for courting.”

“You have to follow the rules, Dad.”

“This place reminds me of prison,” Virgil said, still bent over the table. When he said this, he actually meant it quite literally. He’d spent time in prison when he was younger, and to him, the nursing home didn’t seem much different from being locked up in a cell. “The owners are always sneaking around,” he said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the whole place was bugged.” He slid the pool stick back and forth through his curled finger methodically, then slammed the cue with the end of the stick, smiling as the colored swirl of balls clacked against one another. “I could be living in my own goddamn house right now if it wasn’t for that bitch Katrina. I’ll probably end up rotting in this place before the goddamn insurance company comes around.”

“They’re supposed to be in your neighborhood soon,” Maurice said.

“They’ve been saying that for months.” Virgil rubbed the scorpion tattoo on his neck, bent down and sized up his shot, then tapped the cue ball, banking the nine ball into the corner pocket. “Even if they do come out, you know they’ll just find some way to weasel out of paying. If you

have water damage, they write it up as wind damage. If you have wind damage they write it up as water damage. If you have both they say it's an act of God. They're all a bunch of goddamn snakes."

"I'm sure it won't be much longer," Maurice said. "Anyway, there are far worse places than this."

"If you love it so much, maybe you should live here."

Maurice sighed. "All I've been reading about lately is people living in houses with walls covered in mold. You're lucky, Dad. This is one of the best nursing homes in New Orleans. It's clean, the residents seem polite, and the owners are very nice people."

"Please," Virgil said, waving Maurice away like he was swatting a fly. "The owners are a bunch of dictators."

"I thought you liked Warren and Mildred."

"Warren's all right, I guess," Virgil said. "When he's not drunk."

Maurice rolled his eyes. "Warren doesn't drink, Dad. He's a recovering alcoholic, you know that."

Virgil dropped the seven ball in the side pocket and looked at Maurice, his voice creeping down to a whisper. "I think he's been hitting the bottle again. He needs to go back to AAA if you ask me."

"The motor club?" Maurice smiled.

Virgil rolled his eyes, chalked the stick and glanced down at the scatter of balls on the table.

"What about Mildred?" Maurice asked. "You two used to love playing Monopoly."

"She cheats. Not to mention, she's the moodiest damn person I've ever met." A look of disgust blossomed on Virgil's face. "If that woman would have been born in Salem during the late seventeenth century, someone would have burned her at the stake."

"Why would you say something like that?"

"Who knows?" Virgil said. "Maybe I have Alzheimer's." He bent down over the table, squinted his eyes as he stared at the seven ball. "The other day I put on a black sock and a white sock. I didn't even realize it until dinner. I'll probably be slobbering around this place like a goddamn zombie before long, singing show tunes and pissing myself."

"Come on, Dad, you're as sharp as a tack. And I understand that you'd rather have your own house, but we came here to visit you, not to hear how miserable you are."

“I’m sorry, son.” He put the pool stick down and turned to Maurice. “I’ve been going on and on about myself, and I haven’t even asked about you and the kids. How are things going on your end?”

As Virgil said this, Maurice was staring at the television on the wall. CNN was on, and a U.S. soldier was standing next to a burned-out building. As the newscaster spoke about a rash of IED explosions, Maurice stared at the TV, and his head began to fill with static. He could hear the little teeth of a voice chewing through the static, and though he tried to tune his brain to the voice he was hearing, the words were ragged and frayed. For a moment, he thought he heard his name buried beneath the layers of white noise, but as he listened closely, the muffled voice slithered off and the static disappeared.

“Maurice?” Virgil asked. “I asked you how are things going on your end.”

“My end?” Maurice said, turning his attention back to Virgil. “Let’s see, dead birds are falling out of the sky, my wife and I are separated, she’s pregnant with another man’s baby, your grandson’s received three detentions in the last month, and I suspect your granddaughter is having an affair with her calculus professor. Other than that, though, everything is marvelous.”

“How did you get three detentions?” Virgil asked Brandon.

“I cut class two times,” Brandon said. “Oh, and I drew a stick figure shooting another stick figure with a gun.”

“You know how many times I cut class?” Virgil told Maurice. “I mean, come on, it’s not like he was snorting Coke off a hooker’s hip.”

Brandon shot Virgil a smile.

“As for Audrey,” Virgil continued, “having an affair with her calculus professor might not be such a bad idea at this point.”

“Really, Dad?”

“What? She’s failed calculus how many times? Three? That’s a lot of money to dish out every semester. I’m sorry, but at this point I think I’m in favor of anything that’ll help her pass. So she’s bopping her professor to get a better grade. Good for her. At least somebody in that house is getting laid.”

“It’s my fault,” Maurice said, staring around the room. “She’s obviously looking for a father figure.”

“Why are you always blaming yourself? If there’s anyone to blame

for Audrey's behavior, it's that ex-wife of yours. I told you to marry a Jewish woman."

"We're separated, Dad, not divorced. And our religious beliefs had nothing to do with it. Anyway, why are you always so quick to blame Vivian?"

"She's the one who was having an affair with a married man," Virgil said. "And she's Audrey's mother. Her female role model. Do the math, Son. I'd ask my granddaughter to figure it out, but unfortunately she's failing calculus."

"Not for long," Brandon smiled.

They stayed at the nursing home for almost an hour. After they left, Maurice dropped Brandon off at home and headed back to work, where he spent the rest of the day cooped up in his cubicle hovering over his computer. While he searched the local news websites, he found a site that warned the dead bird incidents might possibly be a terrorist attack. The site listed various scenarios including possible anthrax attacks, chemical attacks, and water supply contamination. In the case of a biochemical attack, the site suggested that citizens seal off the rooms in their houses with duct tape and polyethylene sheeting. The site also mentioned the possibility of a biological weapon being entered into the water supply, and that citizens should either purchase bottled water, filters, or water purification products to protect their tap water. Aside from recommending gas masks as well as stockpiling canned goods, the site also suggested having a disaster supplies kit that included a change of clothing for each household member, sleeping bags, prescription medications, a battery powered radio, and a first-aid kit. In addition to supplies, the site also instructed residents to buy or build a safe room or storm shelter similar to those used by people in tornado-prone areas.

That afternoon, as he was leaving the office, Maurice couldn't help but notice a strange chemical smell chewing through the air. He walked across the parking lot, and when he reached the car, he opened the door and climbed inside. As he buckled his seatbelt, he wondered if the smell was coming from some jackknifed semi truck burning on the interstate, or possibly the result of an explosion at a nearby plant. He cranked the engine and yanked the car into drive. As he drove away, he stared out the car window, at a horizon that was suspiciously empty, except for a ragged black cloud that looked like a hole burned into the sky.

* * *

When Vivian pulled into the parking lot of city hall that afternoon, the sky was the color of a bruise. Michael's car was parked in a reserved spot near the front. She'd never visited him at his office before, but since he hadn't returned any of her calls in almost three weeks, and since she obviously couldn't visit him at his house on account of his wife and kids, she figured his office was her only option.

When she entered the office suite, she saw a secretary at a desk. Vivian told the woman her name, that she was there to see Michael, and though she didn't have an appointment, the secretary paged Michael, and he agreed to see her.

"Did you say Vivian Delahoussaye?" the old woman asked.

Vivian forced a smile through a face full of Botox and nodded.

"You're that reporter," the woman said, "the one from Channel 4 News. I thought that was you. You're like a celebrity. My husband and I watch you all the time."

Vivian sat on the sofa and placed her purse at her feet. She didn't say a word. She despised small talk, especially when it involved strangers. She didn't understand why people felt the need to fill the little peaceful silences in everyday life with boring, mundane conversation. Whenever she heard people uttering mindless questions like "Isn't this wonderful weather we're having?" or "What do you do for a living?" she felt a sudden uncontrollable desire to slit her throat. She usually ignored people in these situations, but when they insisted on engaging her in pointless conversation she often entertained herself by responding with vulgar and inappropriate comments.

"A reporter," the woman droned on. "That must be such an interesting job."

Vivian didn't respond, only sighed as her bright blue eyes drifted toward the stack of magazines on the coffee table.

"I mean, you must see so many interesting things."

"I saw a woman with a hanger stuck in her vagina once," Vivian said, leaning forward and thumbing through the stack of magazines on the glass coffee table. She picked up a copy of *Redbook* and leaned back on the sofa. "Her husband stuck it inside her. Apparently she refused to

wash the dishes.”

A horrified look fell across the woman’s face.

“I even saw a baby cooked alive once. Her mother put her in the microwave. Said she’d given the baby a bath and was drying her off.” Vivian licked her finger as she turned the page. “Is that the kind of interesting stuff you’re talking about?”

“Oh, no,” the woman said, “that’s terrible, just terrible. That’s not what I was talking about at all.”

Vivian smiled to herself, flipping through the pages of the magazine until she came to an article entitled “Ten Tips on How to Survive an Affair.” The article referred to children of an affair, and how they often resented the spouse who left. As she read, she wondered if Brandon and Audrey would ever forgive her for what she’d done. Her thoughts drifted toward her childhood, and she remembered her mother telling her how her father had fallen in love with somebody else. Vivian remembered how at that moment she’d vowed to never cheat on her husband when she was married. She remembered how she’d always wanted to forgive her father for the affair, and how for years she’d waited for that sense of forgiveness to roll over her, the way she’d always heard religion rolls over people. But for some reason, it never had.

When the secretary finally told Vivian that Michael would see her, Vivian walked down a narrow hallway that led to his office. When she arrived at the doorway, she saw Michael sitting behind his desk. He was a handsome, muscular man with shiny black hair that looked like an oil slick. He pointed to an empty chair and told her he’d give her five minutes. When Vivian said they needed to talk about the baby, Michael’s muscled voice tightened.

“I was under the impression that we’d covered everything in our last conversation.” He was wearing a pinstriped suit, and his fingernails were perfectly manicured. “What more is there to talk about?”

“I’ve been trying to contact you for almost three weeks now,” Vivian said, “and you’ve obviously been avoiding my calls. I’m not interested in having a relationship with you. But whether you want to ignore it or not, the fact is I’m pregnant.”

Michael took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “You decided to have this baby against my wishes,” he said. “I made it quite clear that I wanted you to get rid of it, but you insisted on having it.”

“So that’s it?” Vivian asked. “You don’t intend to be a part of your child’s life?”

He smiled. He had thin lips that were barely visible, as if someone had sliced a grin into his face. His eyes were tiny and black like a vulture’s eyes, his teeth perfectly white. “I’m married with two children,” he said finally. “I don’t have any intention of getting divorced.”

“I’m not asking you to divorce your wife, Michael. I’m simply asking you to take responsibility for what you did.”

“I’m not ruining my marriage because of some silly affair,” he said, a sudden meanness in his voice. “We were together what? Three months?”

Vivian thought back to the first time she’d met Michael. She’d been assigned to cover a story on suspected corruption in the mayor’s office, and Michael had agreed to meet with her for a brief interview. Michael had invited her to Galatoire’s for dinner that evening, and she’d surprised herself by saying yes so quickly. She thought about how she’d lied to Maurice, how without even thinking she’d told him she was covering a double murder on Felicity Street. She recalled how effortless lying had been, how the words seemed to assemble at her lips without her knowing, as if she were reciting some prayer she’d learned by heart. She remembered how nervous she was, wondering the whole way to the restaurant if Maurice would check the news and find out that there wasn’t a double murder on Felicity Street that evening, or on any other street for that matter. She’d felt guilty at first, but over time that guilt had gradually muscled its way to the back of her mind.

“Anyway,” Michael said, “who’s to say this child is even mine?”

Vivian smiled. She and Maurice had always had a healthy sex life, but she’d become gradually less satisfied over the years as Maurice’s obsessions increased. She’d always preferred oral sex, and when Maurice learned that more than ten women per year died from embolisms during oral sex, he began to worry that he might inadvertently blow into Vivian’s vagina and kill her, so he’d refused to continue performing it. They’d continued to have sex while she was having her affair with Michael, and Michael knew this, but what he didn’t know was that Maurice had received a vasectomy a year earlier.

“Trust me,” Vivian smiled. “This is your child.”

“I’ve told you numerous times, Vivian. I don’t want any contact with you or this baby, and I don’t see any reason to discuss it any further.”

Vivian paused and stared around the room for a moment. “Are you still planning to run for lieutenant governor at some point?”

“Yes,” Michael said. “Why? Are you here to make a campaign contribution?”

“I was just wondering,” Vivian said, “if the *Times-Picayune* would be interested in knowing that a potential candidate for lieutenant governor was involved in an extramarital affair?”

A dirty grin grew in the corner of Michael’s mouth, and his perfect white teeth flickered like razorblades. He rose from where he was sitting and walked over to Vivian. Vivian stood up and started to speak, but as she did, Michael’s eyes lit up like burning crosses, and he grabbed her tightly by the wrists.

“You’re not going to say a word about us,” he said. He tightened his grip on Vivian’s wrists, the edges of his voice jagged, the veins in his forehead bulging like cracks in his skull. “And if do, you’ll wish you hadn’t.” There was blood behind his words, a quiet danger drifting like a pale white body beneath the murky surface of each syllable. He held her by the wrists for a moment longer, then let go of her, staring down at her as he spoke, his little black vulture eyes growing empty. “Now get the fuck out of my office,” he said, “and don’t come back.”

Vivian took the elevator down to the parking lot. When she arrived at her car, she climbed in, and as she put the key in the ignition, she felt the baby suddenly kick inside her. She cupped her hand over the curve of her belly, and she could feel the tears rising inside her. Before she knew it, she was crying uncontrollably. Eventually she was able to calm herself down. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, took a deep breath, started the engine, and drove away.

* * *

The outside of Brothers Three Lounge was painted bright yellow, and a Jax Beer sign was hanging over the front door. The air inside the bar was covered in a thick pink haze of cigarette smoke and neon, the concrete floor freckled with flakes of peeling green paint. A long mirrored wall across from the bar was cluttered with neon signs, photographs, and a wheezing ratty window unit.

As the slow silver drip of rain trickled from the gutters outside,

Maurice sat at the bar and sipped from his drink—a White Russian with no ice. The bartender was a wiry bald man, and his head was covered with a colored map of tattoos. As Maurice sipped his drink, a man in a three-piece suit doused with rain walked in. The man closed his umbrella and stood it by the door, then walked over to the bar and sat down next to Maurice.

“This is some weather, huh?” He ran a hand through his wet black hair, took off his glasses, grabbed a napkin from the bar and began wiping droplets of rain from the lenses. “It’s raining so hard out there,” he said, “animals are starting to pair up.”

Maurice smiled. “It’s been like this for hours.” He sipped his White Russian. “Uptown was starting to flood when I left.”

“Half of Magazine is under water,” the man said. “I almost couldn’t get here.”

The man ordered a shot of bourbon, put his glasses on and stared up at a TV behind the bar. The local five o’clock news was on, and the anchor said there’d been a recent surge in respiratory infections and nervous system problems resulting from overexposure to mold. After a brief explanation, they cut to a scientist from The Natural Resources Defense Council. The man said his team of researchers had collected air samples for mold spore analysis at twenty-three outdoor locations across the New Orleans metropolitan area, and that the levels of airborne mold spores found were dangerously high. He warned that the recent dead bird incidents might be a result of the extremely high mold levels, that such levels were not only toxic for wildlife but for humans as well, and he recommended people wear dust masks (even when indoors) to ensure they didn’t develop serious respiratory infections.

“Can you believe all this?” the man said, loosening his tie. “First we have to evacuate, then when we come back, we have to walk around wearing masks so we don’t drop dead of some respiratory disease.”

The bartender walked over and poured bourbon into a shot glass before passing it to the man.

“It makes you wonder,” the man said, “if somebody’s not telling us everything, you know?”

“What do you mean,” Maurice asked. “Like a conspiracy?”

The man swigged the shot. “It wouldn’t be the first time,” he said, wincing from the burn of the bourbon. “I don’t trust the government.

Never have.”

“What do you think they’re trying to hide?” Maurice asked.

“I don’t know,” the man said. “It’s just suspicious is all I’m saying.”

“You think they know what poisoned the air, and they just aren’t telling us?”

“Maybe.” The man motioned to the bartender for another shot of bourbon. “Hell, maybe they poisoned it themselves.”

A look of surprise fell across Maurice’s face. “You really think the government would do that? Poison its own citizens?”

“Like I said,” the man told Maurice, swigging the shot, “it wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Are you talking about some conspiracy theory,” Maurice asked, “or an actual case where the government poisoned its own citizens?”

“An actual case. It happened in 1956.”

“What happened exactly?”

“The Army released millions of mosquitoes infected with yellow fever over parts of Georgia and Florida.” The man turned the shot glass upside down and placed it on the bar. “Hundreds of people came up with respiratory problems, encephalitis, even typhoid.” He pulled a cigar cutter from his black vest. “Some of the Army researchers even pretended to be public health workers, so they could photograph and perform medical tests on the victims. Several people even died as a result of the experiments. You never knew about this?”

“No.”

“Well, it happened. It’s documented and everything.” The man grabbed a cigar from his coat pocket and used the cigar cutter to clip off the end. He dropped the cigar stump in an ashtray on the bar, looked at Maurice and raised his eyebrows. “Now suddenly birds are falling out the sky, and the city wants us to wear dust masks wherever we go.” He clenched the cigar between his teeth, speaking out the corner of his mouth as he lit it. “West Nile cases are popping up all over the place,” he said, speaking in between puffs on the cigar. “Call me paranoid, but it doesn’t seem like much of a stretch to think the government might be involved.” He took a long pull off the cigar until the tip glowed like a red warning light. “If they did it with yellow fever in ’56, what’s to stop them from doing it now?”

As the man spoke, Maurice couldn’t help but imagine black chemical

clouds drifting over the city, people asleep, tucked safely in their beds, as the poison blossomed like a flower in their lungs. He ordered another drink, and by the time he finally left Brothers Three an hour or so later, he was so rattled by what the man had told him that he decided to stop off at Home Depot.

On the way to Home Depot, he drove past deserted strip malls littered with trash, junked cars, and the flimsy metal skeletons of buildings. While he drove, he couldn't help but check his neck and arms for mosquito bites at each traffic light, occasionally glancing up at a dirty, rain-filled sky pocked with clouds. At Home Depot, he bought two cases of dust masks as well as six cans of bug spray. He was so concerned that he actually sprayed himself with the insect repellent while he was still in the store. He even strapped on one of the dust masks while he was in the checkout line, vowing to wear it indefinitely, even while he slept, until he was certain the air was safe to breathe.

Later, when Maurice arrived at the house, Audrey was lying on the sofa watching the original *Night of the Living Dead* on DVD. On the television a man who looked like a young version of Sidney Poitier was inside a house boarding up the doors and windows with pieces of plywood.

"Why are you wearing that?" Audrey asked, seeing the dust mask.

Maurice knew Audrey would think he was paranoid if he told her he was wearing the mask because of the toxic mold reports, so he decided to tell her he had a cold instead.

"We have some cold medicine in the bathroom."

As she said this, the movie cut to a scene with men and women crowded around an old television set listening to an emergency broadcast. The reporter told them the recent murders were being committed by creatures that feasted upon the flesh of their victims, and that a scientist suspected the recent zombie outbreak may be a result of radioactive contamination.

Maurice dropped his keys on the coffee table and sat down next to Audrey on the sofa. He grabbed the remote from the coffee table, and when he turned down the volume, he heard the quiet hiss of static.

"Have you been hearing static whenever you use the DVD player?" he asked.

"Static?" Audrey asked. "I don't think so."

“I noticed it when I used the microwave the other day. Must be interference from a cell tower or something, I guess.”

“Probably.” Audrey glanced at Maurice. “Are you okay? I mean, aside from the cold.”

“Sure,” he said, staring at the TV. He listened for a moment, and the static disappeared. “Why?”

“I dunno. You just seem so distant lately.”

Audrey waited for Maurice to respond, but instead he stared at the television without saying a word.

“Dad, I’m worried about you.”

Maurice didn’t look at Audrey, only stared at the TV. “I’m just sad, Audrey. That’s all.”

On the television, waves and waves of zombies slowly flooded the house, their dead, pale faces flickering as they struck the windows with bricks and clubs, ripping off plywood boards, shattering glass. As Maurice stared at the screen, he thought about the sadness that had been eating away at him since the separation, how for the last few months he’d felt like one of those zombies, as if he were hollow inside, as if he were slowly rotting from the inside out.

“You used to always be in the kitchen,” Audrey said, “cooking, or in the yard working in the garden. Lately, you barely even come out of your room, and if you do, you’re on your laptop most of the night. Maybe getting back to your old routine would help.”

“I know,” Maurice said, adjusting the dust mask. “I will.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

After the movie was over, Audrey went into her room, and Maurice grabbed his laptop. He visited the *Times-Picayune’s* website, where he found an article with a headline that read: *Birds Falling Out of the Sky All Over New Orleans. Scientists Concerned Air May Be Unsafe*. He thought about the dead birds dropping out of the sky, the reports of local residents hospitalized with West Nile, the incidents of mold exposure, and though he wasn’t sure if they were the result of a terrorist attack or government conspiracy, he knew he needed to protect his family in case conditions in the city worsened and the air became too contaminated to breathe. He remembered reading about storm shelters a few days earlier and how they were built specifically to protect against chemical and biological

attacks. When he searched Google, he found a website that provided an instruction manual for designing your own shelter, but the instructions seemed overly complicated, so he decided to search for pre-made shelters. He spent the next few hours comparing prices. Eventually, he submitted an online order to a company in Texas for a five-person precast shelter made of steel and reinforced concrete with a state-of-the-art chemical and biological filtering system.

Exhausted after searching the Internet, Maurice closed his laptop and stretched out on the sofa. As he lay there, he remembered reading chapter eight of Revelation a few days earlier, how it described one-third of the population dying after the water was “made bitter,” and he couldn’t help but wonder if the passage in The Bible referred to a poisoned water supply. An article he’d read at work earlier that day claimed how the CIA experimented with the possibility of poisoning the FDA’s water supply, and the more he thought about it, the more suspicious he became. As bloody thoughts of conspiracy and bio-terrorism swirled around in his brain, a battery-powered smoke detector quietly hummed from the ceiling, the tiny red warning light on the front blinking like an insidious eye.

CHAPTER FIVE

Maurice was standing in the back yard listening to the incessant caws of crows, his face flecked with splotches of sunlight as he watched a small crane lower the concrete shelter. He watched the two men secure the shelter to a slab, and when they'd left, he loaded the case of bottled water and canned goods he'd purchased a few days earlier.

On the other side of town, Audrey was on her way to see her gynecologist. She hated going to the doctor, and to make matters worse, she was still on her parents' health insurance, so Vivian insisted on going with her. Audrey brought a copy of Poe's *The Raven and Other Poems* with her, and while Vivian drove, she stuck her nose in the book hoping her mother wouldn't speak to her.

Ever since the separation, Audrey had tried to avoid conversations with Vivian. In Audrey's eyes a separation was like war, and the sooner you took sides, the better. From the minute she'd learned of Vivian's affair, she'd chosen Maurice's side, and for that reason she viewed any meaningful conversation with Vivian as an act of treason. For the first few minutes of the drive, Vivian had tried to speak to Audrey, but Audrey only responded with one-word answers, her nose stuck in the book.

As Vivian made a right turn onto MacArthur Boulevard, she saw an abandoned restaurant across the street. The windows were boarded up with plywood, and the ground around the restaurant was littered with empty beer cans, heaps of mildewed sheetrock and bags of trash. There was a junked refrigerator at the curb, and it was duct-taped shut. Scribbled across the fridge in black letters were the words: *Do not open. Director of FEMA inside.*

"So," Vivian said, "are you dating anyone?"

"Not really." Audrey gnawed at a chipped black fingernail. "Just having one night stands mostly."

"That's wonderful," Vivian said. "I think every mother dreams that one day their daughter will go to college and have meaningless, indiscriminate sex with random men."

“You’re so melodramatic,” Audrey said, still staring out the window.
“Are you at least being safe?”

A twisted smile wriggled in the corner of Audrey’s mouth. “You’re the last person who needs to be giving advice on safe sex.”

Vivian stopped at a red light and pulled a bottle of Xanax from her purse. “I’m just saying you need to be careful.” She shook two pills from the bottle and washed them down with a swig of mocha Frappuccino.

A year earlier Vivian had been robbed at gunpoint while leaving work. The men who’d robbed her had placed a gun in her mouth and threatened her life. She hadn’t been physically harmed, but she’d been so terrorized by the event that her doctor had given her a bottle of Xanax. The prescription had run out, but she’d been ordering pills from an Internet pharmacy ever since. Despite the fact that she was six months pregnant, she was still taking the pills. She said the Xanax helped her with anxiety, but Audrey couldn’t help but wonder if the pills were hurting the baby. Audrey was so concerned that she’d even searched Google for possible birth defects resulting from drug use. As she stared at Vivian’s belly, she imagined a baby with two heads, pink lips puckering on its forehead, a third leg growing out of its hip.

“Narcotics while driving, huh?” Audrey said. “And while you’re pregnant too. What a wonderful example to set for your daughter. Do you have any heroin in the glove compartment? Maybe we can share a dirty needle sometime, have a special mother/daughter moment.”

“Now who’s being melodramatic?”

For most of her life, Audrey had looked up to Vivian as a powerful, intelligent woman. But all Audrey saw now was a sad, pathetic woman who’d abandoned her family for some man who obviously didn’t love her. Despite all of this, though, occasionally Audrey still found herself feeling sorry for Vivian. But whenever this feeling crept into her thoughts, she immediately conjured up memories of Vivian’s affair, and in a matter of seconds whatever sympathy Audrey had for Vivian quickly clawed its way to the back of her mind.

“I’m having an affair with my calculus professor,” Audrey suddenly blurted out, her words like a sucker punch.

“What?” Vivian asked.

“You heard me.”

“How old is he?”

“Thirty-three,” Audrey said, feeling like a bombardier who knows the bomb has struck its designated target. “And he’s married too.”

“Doesn’t the university have rules against that kind of thing?”

“Why?” Audrey said. “We’re both adults.”

“But he’s just so much older.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I’ve been thinking about breaking it off.” Audrey ran a hand through her long hair. “He’s into really strange sex. He says lots of people are into stuff like that, but I dunno. A side of me feels weird.”

“Did you say *sodomy feels weird*?”

“No, Jesus. I said *a side of me feels weird*. Just forget it.”

“I’m sorry. I misunderstood you.”

As Vivian stopped at a red light, Audrey saw a ratty wooden house on the corner. Most of the wooden boards were rotted, and the words *Katrina is a bitch* were spray-painted on the side in red letters. The front lawn was littered with molded pieces of sheetrock and corrugated metal, and a little black boy was sitting on the steps of the house in a dirty diaper.

“So,” Vivian asked, “does this sadist professor of yours have kids?”

“Yep. Twin girls.”

Vivian sighed. “I don’t understand. Why would you get involved with a married man? Especially after you saw what it did to our family? Do you want to make the same mistakes I made?”

“Stop comparing yourself to me. I’m nothing like you. My situation is completely different than yours.”

“Really?” Vivian asked. “How’s that?”

“I’m not married for one thing.”

“So that makes it okay?”

“I’m just saying. It’s not the same thing.”

“Rationalize it however you like, Audrey. Either way, what you’re doing is wrong.”

As Audrey stared out the window, she tried to justify how her affair with Glenn was somehow different from what her mother had done, but deep down she knew it wasn’t. She wanted desperately to believe that she and Vivian had nothing in common, but as she sat there in silence, she could almost feel her mother’s slutty genes squirming through her DNA.

* * *

After she dropped Audrey off, Vivian drove down Claiborne Avenue, staring out the window at rows and rows of rotting houses, the lawns overgrown with weeds, cluttered with junked cars and rusted refrigerators buzzing with flies. She was less than two blocks from the office when she saw the red and blue lights flashing in her rear-view mirror.

“Was I speeding?” she asked when the officer finally walked over to her car.

“Can I see your license and registration?” the officer said, ignoring Vivian’s question.

He was a muscular man with hollow cheeks and a handlebar mustache, his eyes hidden behind mirrored sunglasses.

Vivian reached into the glove box and grabbed her registration then pulled her license from her purse. “Did I do something wrong?” she asked, handing the license and registration to the officer.

“You’re Vivian Delahoussaye, aren’t you?” the policeman asked. “The reporter from Channel 4 News.”

“Yes,” Vivian smiled. “That’s me.”

“I watch you all the time,” he said. “You did that story on the guy who cut his wife’s head off and stuffed it in his refrigerator.”

“That was me.”

“Actually,” he said, staring down at Vivian. “I think we’ve met. Weren’t you at that political rally a few weeks back? The one for the mayor?”

“Yes,” Vivian said. “Sorry, I don’t remember you. My memory’s terrible.”

“I thought that was you. You know Michael Tannon, right?”

“Yes,” Vivian told the officer. “I met Mr. Tannon recently.”

“Right,” the officer said, a grin carved into his face. “Michael and I go way back. I do security for him from time to time. Do you still live at 3203 Prytania Street?” the officer asked, glancing down at Vivian’s license.

“Actually, I’m going through a separation right now, so I’m living in my sister’s apartment temporarily. I guess I need to get that updated.”

“But your husband and your kids still live there?” the officer asked. “Correct?”

“Yes,” Vivian said, a confused look falling across her face. “How did you know I have kids?”

“You have two children, don’t you? Brandon and Audrey, right?”

The minute the policeman said this, Vivian’s face turned flat and expressionless. She’d called Michael’s office the day before to ask him if he wanted to accompany her to an upcoming ultrasound, and he’d threatened to send one of his officers to harass her. As she sat there staring up at the officer, she suddenly realized that the traffic stop was no coincidence.

“Are you going to give me a ticket,” Vivian asked, “or can I go?”

“Consider this a warning, Mrs. Delahoussaye.” As the policeman handed Vivian’s license and registration back to her, she snatched them from his hand.

“This is a dangerous city,” he said. “I’d be careful if I were you.”

Vivian watched the policeman walk back to his squad car. As she sat there, her hands began to shake uncontrollably. A sense of nervousness galloped through her veins. She grabbed the bottle of Xanax from her purse, shook two more pills from the bottle and washed them down with a swig of mocha Frappuccino. She put the bottle of pills back in her purse and took a deep breath, staring at the officer in her rear view mirror until his squad car finally pulled away.

* * *

For the last two months, Audrey had been dating her calculus professor—make that screwing her calculus professor—since they’d never actually been on a date. His name was Glenn, and his wife was out of town all week, so that afternoon he’d called Audrey and invited her over to his condo in the French Quarter. It was a two-story condo on North Rampart Street, and it had high-beamed cathedral ceilings, Greek keyhole windows with etched glass, and Brazilian wood floors. It even had a cobblestone courtyard in the back and French doors upstairs that led to a balcony with a wrought iron railing.

Glenn’s wife was a defense attorney for Salenger Bonham, and he said that being a lawyer was the only thing that made his wife horny anymore. He said they never had sex, and that the only people she got off those days were drug dealers and serial killers. For a while Glenn

had tried to spice things up with his wife. He'd bought sex videos and vibrators, even a pair of fuzzy handcuffs, but his wife wouldn't have any part in it. That's why Glenn liked Audrey, because she'd do all the rotten little things his wife would never think of doing.

Glenn liked to tie Audrey up, handcuff her to the bedpost, shackle her ankles and her wrists. What he liked most was spanking Audrey with something called the Slut Paddle. It was a black leather paddle with the word SLUT on it, and the letters on the paddle were raised, so that when he spanked Audrey hard with it, it left a rosy impression of the word SLUT on her ass. The first few times the pain had almost been too intense for Audrey to bear, and the whole thing seemed a little humiliating. But gradually over time she'd grown used to it.

When Audrey arrived that afternoon, Glenn answered the door. They walked up to his bedroom, and Audrey walked over to the nightstand and turned the picture of Glenn's wife face down. This way, she figured the frigid little bitch wouldn't have to witness all the filthy things she was about to let her husband do.

Audrey turned to Glenn and unbuttoned her blouse. "Are you ready to screw your dirty little slut?"

Glenn paused for a moment. "Do you think you could say dirty little whore?"

"What?" Audrey asked.

"I know I told you I liked dirty little slut, but I think I like dirty little whore better."

"Fine," Audrey said. "We'll go with dirty little whore, but only if you take me to dinner tomorrow night. I want to go on a real date for once."

Glenn walked over to Audrey, pulled off her blouse and unhooked her pink lace bra.

"We could get dressed up," Audrey told him. "Go to dinner, somewhere fancy."

"I like you better with your clothes off," Glenn said, kissing Audrey on her ear lobe, his breath warm on her neck.

When they met, Glenn had told Audrey she was the most intelligent and independent young woman he'd ever had in his class and that he could see himself falling for her. Audrey liked the fact that he used the word woman. It made her feel like she was in a real adult relationship, rather than some silly meaningless fling with her professor. But the fact

that they spent nearly all their time having sex was beginning to bother her, and whenever she asked Glenn to take her out, he always managed to avoid the question. He said he didn't want his wife to find out about them until he officially filed for a divorce, but Audrey was beginning to wonder.

"I'm starting to feel like some little sex doll you blow up whenever you get the urge," Audrey said.

"Don't be silly," Glenn told her. "You're much sexier than any blow-up doll."

"Are you really going to leave your wife?"

"Of course."

Glenn pulled out the Slut Paddle, and Audrey slithered out of her skirt. He yanked her black thong underwear down with his teeth, bent her over the bed and spanked her hard with the paddle. As he spanked her, Audrey closed her eyes and winced. Glenn tangled his fingers in the strands of her long red hair, balled his fingers into a fist and jerked Audrey's head back.

"What are you?" he asked.

"I'm your dirty little slut," Audrey mumbled, a sharp pain throbbing in the roots of her hair. "I mean whore. I'm your dirty little whore."

Glenn smiled. With his other hand, he struck Audrey on the ass with the Slut Paddle. "Louder," he said.

"I'm your dirty little whore."

Glenn smacked her on the ass again with the Slut Paddle, this time harder, and Audrey squeezed her eyes shut.

"Again."

"I'm your dirty little whore," Audrey repeated, her voice cracking as the faint outline of the word *slut* blossomed on her ass.

Glenn put the paddle down and grabbed a spiked collar and a leash from the drawer of his nightstand. He buckled the collar around Audrey's neck, attached the leash and tugged on it gently, guiding her to her feet.

As Audrey stood there, she couldn't help but smile at the irony of the situation. Since she'd been at Tulane she'd spent most of her time rallying for women's rights, yet here she was, in a seemingly meaningless relationship with an older man, allowing herself to be objectified for his sexual pleasure. She thought about when she'd first arrived at Tulane,

how excited she'd been when she'd enrolled in a feminist studies course, how she'd spent the semester reading about Gloria Steinem and Virginia Woolf, and how she'd even organized a feminist lecture series at a local coffee shop. Back then, Audrey would have scoffed at the notion of becoming some professor's sex slave.

Glenn grabbed a blindfold from the bed, and for a moment, Audrey imagined she was one of those tortured Iraqi inmates in some prison camp like Abu Ghraib. She wondered how long it would be before Glenn would want to choke her, before he'd want to humiliate her.

"Seriously," she told Glenn. "I want to go on a real date."

"Shhhh." Glenn kissed her forehead. "The slave only speaks when spoken to," he whispered, blindfolding her, the way an executioner blindfolds someone, just moments before the firing squad takes aim.

That evening after Audrey arrived home from class, she decided to make vegetarian burgers for dinner. While she stood near the sink chopping a head of lettuce, Brandon saw Audrey's new tongue ring. When Maurice arrived a few minutes later, he hadn't even sat down before Brandon brought it to his attention.

"Look what Audrey got," Brandon said.

Audrey opened her mouth and poked out her tongue.

"A tongue ring, huh?" Maurice smiled. "What made you get one of those?"

"It's for oral sex," Brandon said.

"Shut up, Brandon." Audrey lowered the heat on the stove and placed the veggie burgers one by one in the frying pan. "Dinner's almost ready."

"It smells great." Maurice grabbed the newspaper from the chair next to him. The headline read: *Mayor Insists Air is Safe to Breathe. Scientists Disagree.*

Audrey sprinkled salt and pepper on the veggie burgers as they sizzled in the frying pan, then looked at Maurice and saw the dust mask dangling around his neck. "You still have that cold?"

"Yep." Maurice sat down and opened the newspaper.

"How was work?" Audrey asked, flipping the burgers before turning down the fire on the stove.

"Fine," Maurice mumbled.

Maurice hadn't gone to work that day. In fact, he'd only been to

work four times in the last two weeks. Most mornings he woke up early and spent the day at home reading The Bible and researching various terrorist attack scenarios on the Internet.

“Have you talked to Vivian?”

“I’m meeting with her next week,” Maurice said, thumbing through the newspaper. “For her ultrasound.”

“You’re going with her?”

“Yep.”

Audrey flipped the burgers with the spatula. The frying pan hissed.

“I don’t want her going alone,” Maurice said. “And Michael obviously doesn’t have any intentions of going.”

“Why in the world would you go with her to see an ultrasound of some baby that isn’t yours?”

Maurice knew that trying to get Audrey to sympathize with Vivian’s situation was about as pointless as trying to lure a vampire into a tanning bed. But for some reason, he tried anyway.

“She needs someone right now,” Maurice told her, “and I want to be there for her.”

“It’s always about her,” Audrey said, poking one of the veggie burgers with a spatula. “What about you? Where was she when you needed somebody?”

“Can we please just eat in peace?”

Audrey turned off the stove. The TV in the living room was on, and Brandon was watching it from his chair in the kitchen. *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* was playing, and a scientist was using a kid in a green surgical cap to demonstrate the use of a V-chip, which, when implanted in foul-mouthed children, delivered an electric shock to children whenever they swore. Brandon watched the kid in the green surgical cap utter a vulgar phrase, and each time an electric shock rattled the kid’s brain, Brandon let out a giggle.

“No TV during dinner,” Audrey said, grabbing the plate of veggie burgers and placing it in the middle of the table. She walked into the living room and turned the television off, and walked back into the kitchen.

As Brandon sat down, a look of confusion fell across his face. “What the hell’s this?” he asked, poking a fork into one of the burgers, examining it as if it were a piece of space junk that had just fallen onto his plate.

“They’re veggie burgers,” Audrey told him.

“What’s a friggin’ veggie burger?”

“It’s a burger without the murder,” Audrey said. She poured a glass of tea for Maurice and Brandon, placed the pitcher on the table and sat down. “Just try it.”

Brandon took a bite and winced. “I love animals,” he said, “but I think I’d rather murder a whole herd of cows than eat this crap.”

“It might not taste that great,” Audrey said, “but it’s good for you.”

“What’s the point of eating something if it doesn’t taste good?” Brandon asked, washing down his bite of burger with a swig of tea. “And why the hell do they even call them burgers, anyway? There’s no meat in it.”

“I don’t know,” Maurice said. “But they must be good for you. Did you know that more than 7.3 million Americans are now vegetarians?”

“You hear that?” Audrey said, glancing at Brandon. “With numbers like that, you may be a vegetarian yourself one day.”

Brandon stared at the burger as if he despised it, as if he loathed every single meatless molecule. “I’d rather be a serial killer than be a vegetarian.”

Maurice smiled, poked a fork into one of the vegetarian burgers, dropped it onto his plate and poured another glass of iced tea. As he pulled the dust mask down and took a sip, he noticed a strange metallic taste. He looked at the glass and then at Audrey. “You used the bottled water to make the tea, right?”

“Why would I use bottled water to make tea?” Audrey asked.

Maurice put the glass of iced tea down. “I told you,” he said, frustration building in his voice. “Don’t use the tap water. They still haven’t figured out if it’s safe or not.”

“I know what you said, Dad, but it doesn’t make much sense to increase your carbon footprint for something you can get for free. Not to mention all the plastic bottles clogging up the landfills.”

“It’s not safe,” Maurice hissed. He grabbed all three glasses of tea and poured them back into the pitcher. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

“All right, Jesus.” Audrey snatched the pitcher of iced tea, walked over to the sink and poured it down the drain. When she was done, she walked over to the back door of the house. “I’m going to smoke a

cigarette,” she said, slamming the door behind her.

Maurice went to the refrigerator and grabbed two Cokes and returned to the table.

“I told her you were gonna freak out about the water,” Brandon said, “but she never friggin’ listens to me.”

Maurice opened one of the Cokes and took a swig. As he bit into his veggie burger, he heard Audrey yelling to him from the yard. He rose from his chair, grabbed a can of bug spray and doused himself with it before heading outside. When Brandon and Maurice finally made their way to the back door, they saw Audrey standing outside in the yard staring at the storm shelter.

“What the hell is this?” she asked, cupping her hands as she lit a cigarette.

“It’s a storm shelter,” Maurice said.

“That’s wonderful,” Audrey told him. “How did it get in our yard?”

“I had it delivered today.” Maurice walked over to the shelter and stared at it gloriously, the way someone might have stared at Stonehenge or the Eiffel Tower. “Isn’t it nice?”

“It looks like a prison cell.”

“I thought it would be a good safety precaution,” Maurice said. “You know, if another Katrina ever hits.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Audrey snarled. “Our house wasn’t even affected by Katrina.”

“I know, but we were lucky. We might not be so lucky next time.”

“Jesus, can’t you just have a midlife crisis like a normal person?” Audrey slapped a mosquito on her neck, and it left a little smear of blood beneath her jawbone. “You should be riding around in a convertible with a brand new hair transplant listening to Led Zeppelin, not buying storm shelters and avoiding tap water.”

“I’m not going through a midlife crisis, Audrey.” Maurice adjusted the dust mask. “I’m just trying to keep my family safe, that’s all.”

“Well,” Audrey said. “I’m not crawling into this thing if a hurricane comes.”

“It could save your life,” Maurice insisted.

“Thanks,” she said, “but I think I’ll take my chances.”

“It’s built to sustain 200 mile per hour winds.” Maurice slapped his hand against the steel door of the shelter. “It’s even bullet proof.”

“That’s great,” Audrey said. “So if a hurricane ever shoots at us, we’ll be safe.”

“Is there anything in it?” Brandon asked.

“Just your basic storm supplies,” Maurice told him. “Sleeping bags, canned goods, stuff like that.”

“Can we get some microwave pizzas?”

“We won’t be able to use a microwave,” Maurice said. “There won’t be any electricity, but now that you mention it, we could get a generator.”

“Maybe we could bring along some horseshoes and a couple of fishing poles too,” Audrey said. “Roast some hot dogs and marshmallows. You know, turn it into our own little deranged camping trip.”

“You’re making fun now,” Maurice said, “but if another storm like Katrina hits again, we’ll be prepared.”

“Really, Dad, you’re starting to worry me.”

Audrey took a drag, blew the smoke out the corner of her mouth, then snuffed her cigarette out in a flowerpot near the steps and headed back inside. As she closed the back door, she saw Maurice standing near the garage staring suspiciously at a dirty cloud of mosquitoes swarming around a naked light bulb.

CHAPTER SIX

As white clouds of dust swallowed his car, Maurice drove across a clamshell parking lot littered with trash until he came to Uncle Sam's Army Surplus. The store was sandwiched between a Pay Day Loan office and a tattoo shop. The roof of the tattoo shop was caved in, and a blue FEMA tarp was draped over piles of tattered shingles and rotten boards.

The guy behind the counter at Uncle Sam's was skinny and bald with a hatchet face, and he was wearing a white T-shirt with the arms chopped off and camouflage overalls. Maurice told the guy he was looking for survival supplies, and the man recommended sleeping bags, waterproof matches, and a self-powered radio. When Maurice showed interest in filtered gas masks and iodine tablets, the man asked if he was gathering the supplies for a future hurricane or for some other catastrophic event. Maurice said he was concerned about the dead bird incidents, the recent cases of toxic mold exposure, the reports of West Nile, and that he was beginning to worry what may be next. As they spoke, Maurice hinted that he was becoming increasingly suspicious of the local government, and when he mentioned what the man at Brothers Three had told him, about how the government had conducted biological experiments on its citizens by releasing mosquitoes infected with yellow fever, the owner of the army surplus store didn't seem surprised.

"The government's got a long history of poisoning its people," the man said. "I saw it with my own two eyes when I was serving in the Persian Gulf. They were always looking for guinea pigs to test experimental vaccines on, and they were willing to pay you a shit-load of money if you agreed to it. A buddy of mine took them up on it, and he was sorry he did."

"What happened to him?" Maurice asked.

"Nothing at first," the man smiled, exposing a hole in his purple gum where a tooth had been. "But later on, he had all kinds of neurological problems, skin lesions, even seizures."

"My God."

“It’s not as uncommon as you think,” the man said. He had a tattoo on his biceps of a bald eagle with stars and stripes on its wings, and the left sides of his face, neck, and skull were nicked with red scars where tiny pieces of shrapnel had burrowed under his skin. “There’s documented evidence of it. In 2002 the Pentagon verified that they’d used more than 5,000 military personnel and civilians in human experiments.”

“Civilians?” Maurice asked.

“Yep,” the man said, hooking his callused thumbs under the straps of his camouflage overalls. “They exposed them to mustard gas, nerve gas, even e-coli. A bunch of veterans filed health claims too, complaining of all kinds of illnesses. Skeletal problems, digestive issues, even cardiovascular disorders. The government even tested biological weapons on US citizens back in ’77. The Navy sprayed bacteria over San Francisco. They did the same thing in New York in ’66. In NY, they dropped light bulbs filled with the bacteria onto the subway tracks. It’s all documented.”

“So I guess I’m not crazy after all.” Maurice smiled.

“Nope. You’re certainly not crazy. The government even used formaldehyde during Prohibition to poison people.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“They wanted to stop people from drinking,” the man said, “so they poisoned all the industrial alcohol with kerosene and formaldehyde. They knew bootleggers were snatching it from warehouses, and they figured if enough people died, the whole country would stop drinking. By the time Prohibition ended in ’33, they’d poisoned almost 10,000 people.”

“Actually,” Maurice said, “now that you mention it, I think I saw something about that on the History Channel.”

“If you think about it,” the guy told Maurice, “Katrina was the perfect opportunity. All those MREs the government was handing out after the storm. Who’s to say they didn’t plant something in them? People needed food, and the government was the only place you could get it.”

As the man spoke, Maurice became thoroughly convinced that he and the family were in danger. In addition to four sleeping bags, waterproof matches, and a self-powered radio, he also purchased four filtered gas masks, iodine tablets, a dozen smoke bombs, and four charcoal-lined chemical protective suits.

When he arrived at the house, he unloaded the supplies and carried

them to the storm shelter. A few days earlier, he'd read on a survival website that certain after-market gas masks were faulty, so after he finished organizing the supplies, he decided to light one of the smoke bombs he'd purchased to test the effectiveness of the masks. He strapped on one of the masks, grabbed a lighter from his pocket, lit the fuse on the smoke bomb, then stepped away and waited patiently, until the air cracked and a white plume of smoke filled the yard.

When Audrey opened the back door a moment later, Maurice was crawling on his hands and knees across the yard, the gas mask strapped to his face.

"Dad," she yelled. "What are you doing?"

Maurice glanced up. "Hey, Honey," he said, taking off the mask. "How was school?"

Audrey looked at Maurice with the same strange mixture of curiosity and bewilderment one might have while watching an orangutan masturbate in a zoo. "Would you mind telling me what's going on?"

"I had to light a smoke bomb," Maurice said, "so I could test the gas masks I bought."

Audrey sighed. Obvious questions like *Why the hell did you purchase gas masks and smoke bombs?* and *Have you lost your mind?* swarmed around in her brain, but she was exhausted, so she resorted to a more practical approach.

"This is a residential neighborhood, Dad. You can't explode smoke bombs in the back yard."

"Would you rather I wait," Maurice asked, "until there's a terrorist attack?" He strapped the mask back on and kneeled in the dirt. "I'm not sure if you're aware of this or not, but there's a war going on."

Audrey rolled her eyes, and as she headed back into the house, Maurice was crawling on his hands and knees through a white cloud of smoke like a soldier creeping across a battlefield.

* * *

Snake and Jake's Christmas Club Lounge looked more like a crack house than a bar. The front of the building was plastered with faded, torn fliers, and there was a large crooked Christmas wreath strung with red lights hanging over the door. The inside of the bar was lit entirely with white

lights, and it was cluttered with old lounge chairs and sofas with holes in the cushions. Snake and Jake's was popular among Tulane students mostly because it was one of those sketchy New Orleans bars with lots of character—the kind of bar where the drinks were dirt cheap, where sinks in the bathroom were filled with piss and vomit, and where Tulane professors sat at the bar to discuss politics with heroin dealers.

Once inside, Audrey found her friend Rochelle, and they headed to the bar. Rochelle was skinny with long black hair and a nose ring. She was wearing jeans with holes in the knees and a yellow T-shirt that read: *If I wanted the government in my womb, I'd fuck a senator.*

Audrey ordered an Amaretto Sour, and Rochelle purchased a Possum Drop, a special drink that one of the bartenders had concocted a few years earlier. According to New Orleans lore one of the ceiling tiles located directly above the bar had deteriorated, and one night as the bartender was mixing a drink, a possum had clawed its way through the rotting ceiling tile and fallen onto the bar, toppling the drink over. Ever since then, Snake and Jake's had been serving the Possum Drop to commemorate the incident.

They took their drinks and sat down on a ratty old sofa in the corner of the bar.

"I had sex with that guy the other night," Rochelle said, rooting through her purse for a cigarette. "That bartender."

"The one who made our drinks?" Audrey asked.

"Yep." Rochelle pulled a cigarette from the pack and lit it. "He's served me drinks a hundred times, and he's always flirting with me. He said I had lips made for a blow-job, so I decided to go home with him."

"So this is where the feminist movement has gotten us?" Audrey said. "Women burned their bras for Christ's sake so we could have equal rights. And now we've been reduced to giving men blow-jobs simply because they compliment our lips?"

"I stood up for myself," Rochelle said, taking a quick drag off her cigarette. "He told me all he wanted was a blow-job, but I told him we were having sex too, that he wasn't getting off if I didn't."

"Wow," Audrey said, her words wrapped in sarcasm. "You're like the Susan B. Anthony of our generation. Really, they should put up a statue of you in the Quad."

"Yeah, well." Rochelle tapped her cigarette against the ashtray.

“I’ll bet Susan B. Anthony never got laid by a guy with an ass like that. Anyway, you’re one to talk, playing house with some sadist professor.” Rochelle smiled. “So, is he still into rough sex?”

“Yeah,” Audrey said. “He likes to spank me and whip me mostly. He has this thing called a Slut Paddle.”

“Sick bastard. You should turn the tables on him. Buy a stun gun, tie his ass down to the bed, and shock him in the balls.”

Audrey laughed. “I would, but I think he’d like it too much.”

Audrey didn’t want to admit it to Rochelle, but the last few times she’d been with Glenn she’d enjoyed being spanked with the Slut Paddle. When they’d first started using the paddle, Audrey had only felt the pain, but lately, in between each smack of the paddle, she’d begun to feel a tingling buzz trickling through her body, and she was beginning to like it.

“What the hell’s going on with guys lately?” Rochelle said. “They’re always asking if they can piss on you or if you’ll screw them with a dildo. I’m fine with a little experimentation, but a girl’s gotta have limits.”

Audrey took another sip of her drink, wiped her mouth with a napkin. “Glenn says he has fantasies of choking me.”

“That’s screwed up.”

“What’s really screwed up,” Audrey told her, “is that I’m starting to like it when he gets rough.”

“Really?”

“I know it’s weird,” Audrey said, “but I just feel so numb sometimes, you know, like I’m sleepwalking. When Glenn gets rough with me, it’s like the pain reminds me that I’m alive.”

After Audrey ordered another round of drinks, she told Rochelle about how strange Maurice had been acting, how he wouldn’t let them drink tap water, how he’d been wearing a dust mask wherever he went, how he’d bought a storm shelter, and how he’d been reading *The Bible*. Rochelle said her abnormal psychology professor had mentioned that suicide rates in New Orleans had tripled since Katrina, and that cases of mental illness were higher than they’d ever been.

When Audrey told Rochelle that Maurice was spending hours and hours on the Internet obsessing about the dead birds, Rochelle told her about a recent research study her professor had conducted, and how the results of the research indicated that mental illnesses were often fed by the Internet, especially Internet forums. She said people with mental illnesses

often concocted a delusion and then searched the Internet for proof of their suspicions. According to Rochelle people with these delusions fed their obsession by joining online forums where they could share their beliefs with like-minded individuals. The most interesting finding of the study, Rochelle said, was that when the people introduced their delusion to the forum, the other members on the list not only gave credibility to the delusion, but they also began to incorporate the delusion into their own thinking.

“Considering what he’s been through in the last few months,” Rochelle said, “it seems pretty logical that he’d be depressed. He and your mom separated, then Katrina hit. All that stuff probably just pushed him over the edge.”

“Yeah, that’s what I think. It’s just so weird. He seems sad, but he’s so obsessed too. It’s like he’s focusing all of his attention on the water supply, and the mold in the air, and the government just so he doesn’t have to think about what’s happened in his own life.”

“Makes sense. So, what are you going to do?”

“I’m having lunch with my mother to talk about it, but she probably won’t do anything. I’m thinking of going to see my grandfather too.”

“Isn’t he in a nursing home?”

“Yeah, but not because he can’t care for himself. He’s actually in great shape for his age, mentally and physically, and he has tons of money. I think he just decided to stay there after he lost his house in Katrina because he couldn’t stomach having to live with my mother.”

A smile blossomed on Rochelle’s face. “I take it they don’t get along.”

“God, no. They can barely sit in the same room without strangling each other.”

“Is it because your mom cheated on your dad?”

“That didn’t help, but they always disliked one another. My dad says my mother never approved of my grandfather’s lifestyle.”

“He’s gay?”

Audrey laughed. “No, he just has a checkered past. My mother claims he broke some guy’s kneecaps one time, and that he used to work for a loan shark before I was born. When I was twelve years old he took me and Brandon to Audubon Park, and on the way there some guy cut him off. I remember my grandfather grabbing a pistol from under his seat and threatening the man with it. Brandon and I were scared

shitless.”

“Damn. Sounds like your grandfather was a real bad-ass.”

“Yeah, I guess. He went to prison when I was a kid.”

“Really? For what?”

“He and some other guys were breaking into warehouses and stealing electronic equipment then selling it to pawn shops.”

Audrey took the straw out of her drink and downed what was left of the Amaretto Sour. “We said we wanted to go out tonight so we could relax and have some fun. What do you say we stop talking about all of this depressing family crap and get shit-faced?”

“Sounds good to me.”

* * *

By the time Maurice pulled into the clamshell parking lot of the high school on Wednesday, it was almost five o’clock, and Brandon had been waiting for almost an hour.

“I thought you forgot to pick me up,” Brandon said, climbing into the car and slamming the door.

“Sorry,” Maurice said. “I got held up at work.”

As Maurice turned onto Fillmore, Brandon stared out the window at a man wandering along Paris Avenue. He had a mouthful of crooked teeth, and he was wearing a shirt that read: *I Stayed in New Orleans for Hurricane Katrina, and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt, A New Cadillac, and a Plasma TV*.

“How are your classes going?” Maurice asked.

“Fine, I guess.”

Before Maurice and Vivian separated, Brandon had actually been fairly motivated at school. He’d even joined the debate team and the chess club. But since then, he’d become convinced that high school was the most miserable place on the planet. He wondered what kind of civilized society stuffed a kid in a desk for eight hours a day while some teacher forced him to memorize the names of dead presidents. Then, if that wasn’t enough, they buried kids in bullshit tests and asked them to vomit up all the crap they’d spent months planting in their heads. Didn’t the Nazis do shit like that, he thought? He figured it was only a matter of time before they numbered students like cattle and herded them into

a cafegymatorium filled with poison gas.

“Did you start taking more walks?” Maurice asked. “Like Mr. Richardson said.”

“I hate walking. It’s so friggin’ hot outside.”

“I know,” Maurice insisted, “but sitting in the house all day playing Xbox isn’t going to help your depression. The exercise will do you good.”

“I told Mom to buy me a Wii, but she said we couldn’t afford it right now.”

“You need real exercise, Brandon, and you need to be outside.”

Ever since the separation, Brandon had been seeing the school counselor, Mr. Richardson, for depression. Mr. Richardson had suggested Brandon try something called light therapy. He said that thirty minutes of daily exposure to sunlight could be very helpful in decreasing symptoms of depression by raising serotonin levels in the brain, and he recommended that Brandon expose himself to more sunlight.

“Mr. Richardson says I may have to get on Prozac one day.”

“Really?” Maurice asked. “Why did he say that?”

“He says mental illness is genetic, and that depression runs in our family.”

“That’s true,” Maurice said. “But it doesn’t mean you’ll have to be on Prozac, necessarily.”

For the last few months, Brandon had been wondering if the screws in his head were loose. He knew his family tree was full of lunatics, and since most mental illnesses were genetic, he figured it was only a matter of time before he went crazy too. “I’m not gonna have a bunch of different personalities am I?” he asked. “Cause I have enough trouble just dealing with the one I have.”

Maurice smiled. “I’m sure you’ll be fine, Brandon.”

“What about that disease where you eat your own hair? I saw this lady on YouTube that kept pulling all her hair out and eating it. When she went to the hospital, she said they found a 10-pound hairball in her stomach. She said it was clogging up her insides, so the doctor had to cut her open and take it out.”

“Have you been pulling your hair out and eating it?”

“No,” Brandon said, “but what if I start doing it for some reason? They said this lady just started craving it one day. What if I start craving hair all of a sudden too? A few years ago I hated broccoli, and now I love

it. I crave it all the time.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that, Brandon.”

Brandon stared at the dust mask Maurice was wearing. He knew that Maurice was wearing it because he feared that the air was dangerous to breathe, but he decided to play dumb so Maurice wouldn’t be forced to lie.

“How’s your cold?” Brandon asked.

“It’s getting better.”

As they stopped at a traffic light, Maurice saw a Chicago Cubs sticker on the bumper of the car in front of them. Three years earlier, Maurice had taken Brandon to a Cubs game. Maurice had surprised him for his birthday, and they’d flown to Chicago together, just he and Maurice, to attend the game. During the flight home, the pilot had announced that they were having mechanical problems, and they were forced to land in Shreveport instead of Houston. Startled by the experience, Maurice had refused to get on the connecting flight home to New Orleans, and they’d taken a bus home instead.

“Remember that Cubs game we went to?” Brandon said.

“For your twelfth birthday,” Maurice said. “Sure, I remember. What a disaster.”

“I thought it was great,” Brandon said. “That was the best birthday present ever.”

Maurice smiled. “I was referring to the bus ride home.”

“Having to land in Shreveport really freaked you out, huh?”

“It wasn’t landing in Shreveport that freaked me out,” Maurice said. “It was the fact that the plane was having mechanical problems. Those things crash all the time. One crashed in Kenner when I was a little boy. More than two hundred people died.”

“Isn’t that why you didn’t go on the trip with Mom to France?” Brandon asked. “Because of what happened when we went to Chicago?”

“Yep,” Maurice said, a slight tinge of regret in his words. A soft look settled in his eyes as if he were lost in thought. “Your mother was so mad at me for not going with her. I felt terrible, but I just couldn’t do it.”

Maurice had always been overly fearful and obsessive, but in the last few weeks his condition had worsened. Lately, whenever Brandon was home, Maurice was cooped up in his bedroom, either on the computer or reading The Bible. He rarely cooked dinner, and most nights Brandon

ended up nuking a frozen dinner in the microwave and eating alone. That evening, however, Audrey had insisted they all have dinner together, so when they arrived at the house, they found her in the kitchen, standing at the sink, wearing Vivian's apron as she dumped a pot full of steaming pasta into a colander.

"Thanks for cooking," Maurice said, kissing her on the cheek. He placed his briefcase on the chair. "You look tired."

"I am." Audrey stirred the spaghetti sauce and turned down the fire on the stove. "I spent all day at city hall picketing."

"What were you protesting?" Maurice asked.

"We're trying to get the city to change its construction warning signs," Audrey said. "They're sexist."

"How are they sexist?" Brandon asked.

"The signs are labeled *Men at Work*," Audrey said. "We want them to change them to *Workers Ahead*, or *Construction Workers Ahead*—anything that isn't sexist."

"Do they even have women construction workers?"

"What do you think?" Audrey asked.

"I've never seen one."

"Just because you haven't seen one doesn't mean they don't exist."

"So it's like that tree thing?" Brandon asked.

"What tree thing?"

"You know, if a tree falls in a forest, and no one hears it."

"Exactly."

Brandon and Maurice sat down at the table, and Audrey grabbed three plates.

"What are you making?" Brandon asked.

"Vegan spaghetti," Audrey said, placing a plate in front of Brandon.

Brandon sighed. "Did you make meatballs at least?"

"Meatballs cause heart attacks."

"Jesus. One friggin' meatball isn't gonna give me a heart attack."

"That's how it starts," Audrey said. "With one meatball."

"This is America. If I wanna eat a whole stack of meatballs every day, I should be able to."

"When you move out and get your own house, you can stuff your colon with as much bloody meat as you like." Audrey scooped a pile of noodles from the colander and piled them onto a plate. "While you're

living here, you're going to eat healthy."

"Maybe I don't wanna be healthy," Brandon said. "Did you ever think of that?"

Audrey rolled her eyes. "I rinsed the pasta with bottled water," she told Maurice, placing a plate of spaghetti in front of him.

Maurice smiled. The last time he'd seen Audrey wearing Vivian's apron was years earlier, when Audrey was just a child. She'd asked Vivian to teach her to make pralines, and they'd gone shopping together at Dorignac's for the ingredients. Maurice remembered the wonderful smell swirling through the kitchen when he'd arrived home from work the next day, how he'd found Vivian and Audrey giggling together in the kitchen, sheets of wax paper scattered across the counter top, their faces and hands freckled with flour.

After dinner, Audrey and Brandon went to their rooms, and Maurice sat in the living room with his laptop. He typed "government plots" into Google, and eventually he came to an article entitled: *The Day the US Government Poisoned Its People*. The article verified what he'd heard from the man at Brothers Three, as well as what he'd learned from the owner of the army surplus store.

Later that night, as Maurice sat on the sofa watching the news, a sudden thought flickered like an aneurysm in the back of his brain. If the government could poison the air and the water supply, maybe they were also bugging people's houses. He thought about the static he'd been hearing lately. At first he'd assumed it was coming from a local cell tower, but he was beginning to wonder if the sound was feedback from some device the government had planted in the house. As he sat there, he turned the volume down on the TV and listened closely, and for a moment he thought he heard the white static worming its way through the electrical wires in the walls.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“It’s been acting strange for the last few days,” Maurice said, referring to his broken computer.

The IT guy at United Health Insurance was skinny with a fuzzy beard, and his name was Levi. While Levi stared at the blank computer screen, Maurice thought about the static he’d heard in the walls of the house the night before.

“Someone may have hacked into the system again,” Levi said, the air around him ripe with the scent of body odor smothered in patchouli. “I’ll run the anti-virus on it.”

“It’s really strange. The other day when I turned it on, the screen was filled with random blocks of weird text.”

Levi twisted the long crooked brown hairs of his beard as he spoke. “Fuckers must have found another vulnerability in the system.”

“Is it easy?” Maurice asked, “to hack into a computer?”

“Easier than you think.” Levi slapped the ENTER key with his index finger and leaned back in Maurice’s chair. “You can hack into just about anything if you know what you’re doing.”

“What about bugging someone’s house?”

“It depends,” Levi told him, “on whether they have the right equipment or not.”

“This may sound crazy,” Maurice said, lowering his voice, “but for the last few weeks I’ve been hearing static throughout my house, and I’m starting to think the government may have planted some kind of listening device in my home.”

“The government,” Levi said, flashing a coffee-stained smile. “Man, Maurice, that’s some diabolical shit.”

“Do you think it’s possible?”

“If it’s the government, it’s definitely possible. They have shit that’ll make your head spin. Did you see the *New York Times* article a few months back about that Terrorist Surveillance Program the government developed?”

“No,” Maurice said.

“It exposed how the FBI breaks into houses and buildings and shit, and how they plant listening devices to monitor people’s conversations.”

“They actually enter people’s houses?” Maurice asked.

“Yep,” Levi scratched an itch in the stained yellow armpit of his T-shirt. “They plant bugs in walls, behind people’s baseboards. They even have this special algorithm to match the paint on your wall in case they have to cut or drill a hole in the wall to plant the bug. This ain’t that Home Depot shit, either. They can match that shit at the molecular level. With this new technology they have,” he said, “they can remotely activate cell phones and other household electronic devices and turn them into listening devices that transmit to a receiver. And here’s the thing—the FBI can do it without ever having to physically handle the cell phone. They can even do it when the cell phone is off.”

As Maurice listened to Levi, he remembered how the static he’d been hearing seemed to occur when he was operating certain appliances in the house, particularly the DVD player, the microwave, and the coffee maker. He even remembered hearing a strange scratching sound on a number of occasions while speaking on his cell phone.

Levi slapped the ENTER key on the keyboard again, and the computer booted up. “You should be good now,” he said. He stood up and placed his hand on Maurice’s shoulder. “If you really think the feds are spying on you,” he told Maurice, “I’d check the walls of your house for any discolorations, and I’d ditch that cell phone and any other appliances in the house that may be producing that static sound.”

“I think you’re right,” Maurice said.

Levi raised his hand and waited for a high-five. “Fight the power, my man.”

“Fight the power,” Maurice mumbled, slapping Levi’s palm with his.

That afternoon when Maurice picked Brandon up from school, he thought about what Levi had told him. He suspected the government might be using the household appliances and cell phone to monitor his movements, so after they arrived at the house, he sprayed himself and Brandon down with bug spray, then went into the kitchen and unplugged the microwave. They lugged it into the back yard, grabbed the coffee maker and the DVD player and did the same. Once outside, Maurice grabbed a sledgehammer from the garage and brushed the leaves off an

old stump.

“What are we doing?” Brandon asked.

Maurice knew he couldn't tell Brandon the truth. “We need to wean ourselves off technology,” he told Brandon. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and asked for Brandon's phone. Reluctantly, Brandon gave Maurice the phone.

“I read an article that said families spend less than two hours a day interacting with one another. Less than two hours a day,” Maurice said, placing both phones on the stump. “That's six hours less than in 1940.”

The sun was bleeding through the trees. Maurice grabbed the sledgehammer and rested it on his shoulder. “I spend half my life on this phone,” he said. “For what?”

“You're hardly ever on your phone.”

“I'm sorry,” Maurice said, “but I'm not letting technology come between me and my family anymore.”

With the sledgehammer clutched firmly in his hands, he squinted his eye and swung it, smashing the phones into tiny bits of plastic. He dropped the sledgehammer, kicked what was left of the phones off the stump, then asked Brandon to help him with the microwave.

“I don't understand,” Brandon asked, holding onto one end of the microwave as they lugged it to the stump. “How is getting rid of the microwave gonna make us interact more?”

“All a microwave does is make us dependent on instant gratification.”

“But I like instant gratification.”

“No, you don't. You just think you do.” Maurice wiped the sweat from his forehead and picked up the sledgehammer. “What happened to longing, anyway? People used to long for things. There's no longing anymore. We can get whatever we want the second we want it. Don't you want to long for something?” Maurice asked. “I mean really, really long for it?”

“Not really.”

“Trust me,” Maurice said. “You like the microwave now, but once you don't have it, you'll appreciate not having it.”

“You're gonna smash the DVD player too?” Brandon asked.

“Yep.”

“But we don't have HBO. How are we going to watch movies?”

“Do you think the pilgrims watched movies?” Maurice asked. “They

were too busy living to watch some movie. Fighting off plague and freezing weather. Navigating new, undiscovered territories.”

“But we’re not pilgrims.”

“This family’s done watching other people live their lives in movies,” Maurice said. He raised the sledgehammer, and Brandon stepped back. “It’s time we start living.”

As he swung the hammer, Maurice’s thoughts suddenly wandered to the night he and Vivian had gone to see a movie three months earlier. He remembered how excited Vivian had seemed when she’d noticed Michael outside the theater, how condescending Michael had been, the smug look that had crawled across his face when Vivian introduced Maurice as her husband.

For most of his life, Maurice had been in the habit of suppressing any anger and discontentment he felt. But as thoughts of Michael burned through his brain, the hollow ache that he’d felt for months began to grow teeth, and tiny bursts of anger erupted in his gut like little bombs exploding inside him. He swung the hammer again and again, a rusty growl rumbling deep inside him, his breath wheezing beneath the cotton mask. When he was done with the microwave, he did the same with the DVD player and the coffee maker, swinging the hammer over and over, until the thoughts of Michael finally drifted from his mind, until all that was left of the appliances were pieces of black plastic and shards of glass scattered across the yard.

* * *

That evening when Vivian arrived at the apartment, she opened the door and turned on the light. She was almost to the kitchen when she was startled by a man sitting in the leather recliner in the corner of the room. He was dressed in a sharkskin suit, and immediately she realized it was the police officer who’d stopped her a few days earlier.

“Nice suit,” Vivian said, as she dropped her keys on the coffee table. “The police department must be paying well these days.” She turned to him, an icy look in her eyes. “Unless you have a warrant,” she said, “this is officially breaking and entering.”

The man flashed a filthy grin, his wormy blood-shot eyes creeping all over Vivian as he pulled out a pack of cigarettes. “You could always

call the police.” He shook a cigarette from the pack while his other hand fished through his pocket for a lighter. “To be honest,” he said, a rigid, mechanical grin on his lips, “there wasn’t much breaking involved. That lock is a real piece of shit.”

“I don’t allow people to smoke in here.”

The man lit the cigarette then put the lighter back into his coat pocket. “Mr. Tannon asked me to come by. He said you contacted him two days ago. Sent him an e-mail or something. With some sort of picture.”

“I sent him a copy of the ultrasound,” Vivian said. “I thought he might want to see a picture of his baby.”

The man took a long drag off the cigarette, his eyes squinted. “Mr. Tannon has two children,” he said, “and they’re both fully grown.” He let the smoke drift out his mouth. “He isn’t interested in seeing any pictures. He doesn’t want any contact with you.”

“If he’d return my calls,” Vivian told the man, “I wouldn’t have to keep coming to his office. I’m not just going to cut off contact with the father of my child.”

“I’m here because you contacted Mr. Tannon,” the man said. “If you contact him again, I’ll have to come back here, and trust me, you don’t want me to come back.”

“Are you threatening me?” Vivian asked, a lopsided smile flickering on her rubbery red lips.

The man took a drag off his cigarette but didn’t say anything, only sat there motionless, quiet as a fuse.

“We’re done here,” Vivian told him, walking over to the counter top. “You need to leave.”

The man snuffed the cigarette out on the coffee table. “We’re far from done.” He stood up and walked over to Vivian. He stared at her, his eyes wandering toward the wedding ring on her finger.

“I was married once,” he said. “She died. Brain cancer.” He reached down and placed his hand on Vivian’s belly, an empty faraway look in his eyes. “She was five months pregnant at the time.” For a moment a smile squirmed in the corner of the man’s lips. “They tried to save it, but its lungs weren’t fully developed yet. It couldn’t even breathe on its own.” As the man cupped Vivian’s belly, he felt the baby suddenly kick inside Vivian’s stomach, and he pulled his hand away quickly as if he’d been

jolted by a bolt of electricity.

In one quick fluid movement Vivian grabbed a vase from the counter top and smashed it against the man's head. The vase shattered, leaving bits of colored ceramic tangled in his hair. He stood there for a moment, stunned, staggering to the right before regaining his composure. Before Vivian knew what had happened he'd grabbed her by the neck and pushed her against the wall. As he did, his watch caught Vivian's pearl necklace and snapped it from around her neck, the pearls spilling to the ground.

As the man clutched her windpipe, he pulled out a gun with his other hand and pressed it against Vivian's temple.

"Please, God," Vivian whimpered, her heart flopping like a minnow in her chest.

"I'm the one you better beg," the man said, his eyes gone wild.

"I won't call," Vivian whimpered, choking on the words.

"Contact Mr. Tannon again," the man hissed, "and I'm going to come back here with a butcher's knife and perform my own little personalized C-section." He pressed the barrel of the gun against her temple. "Understand?"

Vivian tried to speak, but her voice was filled with holes.

The man put the gun back into his coat pocket, balled up his fist and punched Vivian hard in the jaw. She felt the floor slip from under her feet, and she hit the ground hard. Slowly, the room disappeared around her. The walls and ceiling dissolved, and the little light bulb in her head flickered off. Just before she lost consciousness, she heard the rusty sound of the screen door slamming shut as the man left.

A few minutes later, her eyes fluttered open, and she found herself flat on her back staring up at a dusty ceiling fan. As she sat up slowly, she felt a stinging pain in her cheek. She walked into the kitchen, grabbed a Ziploc bag and filled it with ice cubes, then fished a bottle of Xanax from her purse, shook two pills from the bottle and washed them down with a swig of water. While she held the bag of ice against her face, she suddenly remembered she was scheduled to cover an important story in the morning. She placed the bag of ice on the coffee table, then grabbed the compact from her purse. As she stared at herself in the mirror, she began to cry, but she quickly wiped the tears from her cheek. She teased her hair in the mirror, occasionally wiping away a stray tear, then took

a deep breath. Holding the compact in one hand, she positioned an imaginary microphone in the other and began to speak.

“A pregnant New Orleans woman was accosted,” she said, her voice flat and emotionless, “just after nine o’clock this evening. Sources say the man was apparently lying in wait for the woman when she arrived home.” As Vivian spoke, she saw the bruise blooming on her cheek in the mirror, the skin around it swollen, and as she continued, she began to cry. “Nothing was stolen,” she said, her voice twitching, “and there’s evidence suggesting that the man may be a police officer employed by the mayor’s office. Police are trying to determine a motive, but details are still sketchy at this point. From Gentilly,” she muttered, her words salty with tears, “this is Vivian Delahoussaye, reporting for Channel 4 News.”

* * *

Maurice had just come into the house from the storm shelter when he heard the phone ring in the kitchen. When he finally answered it, he could hear Vivian crying on the other end. She told him what had happened, and Maurice said he’d be over immediately. She didn’t tell him the man hit her, but it was fairly obvious when Maurice arrived fifteen minutes later. They hugged at the door, and as they did, Vivian’s body shook uncontrollably. When she’d calmed down, Maurice brought her a pillow and blanket and laid her down on the sofa softly, as if she were breakable, stroking her hair as she held the ice pack against her face.

“I really think we should call the police,” Maurice said.

While he stroked her hair, he removed the ice pack for a moment and stared at her swollen eye, the skin beneath it streaked with little twisting rivers of bloody veins.

“It won’t do any good,” Vivian said, wincing as she grabbed the Ziploc bag and pressed it against her cheek. “Michael has every dirty cop on the NOPD in his back pocket. Not to mention all his political friends in Baton Rouge.”

“So we’re just supposed to do nothing?” Maurice asked, his words laced with a sense of helplessness. “What’s to say he won’t try to kill you? You said yourself he’s afraid the affair will hurt his political career. Wouldn’t killing you solve that problem?”

“If he wanted to kill me, he would have already done it.”

Vivian told Maurice that the man who'd attacked her was a police officer for the NOPD, and that he'd stopped her a few days earlier and threatened her.

Maurice wasn't surprised to hear that Michael had officers on the police force working for him. Over the last few months it had been nearly impossible to read the *Times-Picayune* without coming across a story involving some dirty cop who'd fabricated witnesses or planted fake evidence. And even before the storm New Orleans had always been a place where dirty cops and politicians ran amuck with little worry of being prosecuted. He considered contacting the local newspaper to expose what Michael had done, but given Michael's powerful position and the city's history of corruption, Maurice quickly surmised that Michael most likely had reporters on his payroll.

"Can we please just talk about this tomorrow?" Vivian asked. "I've been through too much tonight, and I don't think I can handle much more."

Maurice pulled down the cotton dust mask so that it was dangling around his neck and kissed Vivian on the temple. Her eyes filled with tears, and as he stroked her hair, he saw a tear rolling down her cheek. He wiped the tear away, and as he did, he could smell the scent of roses in the air. He closed his eyes and continued to stroke her hair until she had finally fallen asleep.

While she slept, Maurice refilled the Ziploc bag with fresh ice, then kissed her on the forehead. When he arrived at his car to head home, he sat there for a moment, thinking about what had happened, a subtle anger swirling in his gut like a thunderstorm. He could feel the anger he'd suppressed for so long rising up from his stomach, climbing up his neck, bloating his face with blood. As the blue veins in his neck and forehead bulged, he balled up his fist and punched the dashboard hard, again and again. One of the blows cracked an air conditioner vent. Another decapitated a temperature knob. All the while Maurice growled through the dust mask as his bloody fist rained down on the dashboard over and over.

Eventually, after the anger drained from his body, a calmness settled over him, and he sat quietly in the car dabbing his bloody fist with a ball of Kleenex. He cranked the engine, turned the car radio on, and tuned it to WWL. The woman on the radio said that another flock of dead birds

had been found in the downtown area, and that local authorities were investigating the incident. As he turned onto Broad Street, he imagined those birds falling out of the sky that night, their tiny silver eyes flickering against the black sky like falling stars.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*B*y the time Maurice arrived at Brothers Three Lounge on Tuesday, it was almost six o'clock. For the most part, the place was empty, except for a man sitting at the bar nursing a martini. Near the back, a bony snaggle-toothed woman with purple lips was talking to herself. She had a long black weave tangled with leaves, and she was wearing a leopard skin skirt and a pink bikini top.

Maurice sat on one of the ripped leather stools at the bar, ordered a White Russian with no ice, then looked at the guy sitting next to him. The man had blue-black skin and a mouth full of gold teeth. A clove cigarette was pressed between his wrinkled fingers, and he was wearing a red turtleneck shirt with the arms chopped off and zebra-skin pants that looked like they'd been painted on.

There was a little TV playing behind the bar, and the local five o'clock news was on. As the bartender brought Maurice his drink, Maurice stared at the TV, at a newscaster talking about a recent surge of residents living in FEMA trailers who'd been complaining of headaches, nosebleeds, respiratory infections, and nausea.

"I'm glad I didn't get me one of them trailers they was doling out," the man next to Maurice suddenly said, his voice soaked in a lazy feminine drawl. "Else I'd be coughing my pretty guts up too." He stirred his martini and took a long sip. "You'd think we had ourselves enough problems with all the mold crawling round." He fingered a gold necklace that was dangling around his neck. The nameplate at the end of the necklace had the words *Queer Bitch* written across it in large fancy cursive letters.

The man took another sip of his martini and turned to Maurice. "You got the right idea, baby," he said, his gold necklace flickering in the dirty blue light. "I need to get me one of them masks."

"Oh," Maurice said. "No. I'm wearing this because I have a cold."

The man took a long drag off his clove cigarette. "Yeah, well," he said, the smoke snaking out his mouth, "it's gonna be more than colds

going around things keep up the way they are.”

On the television, the newscaster was interviewing a spokesperson from the Sierra Club who said air quality tests of forty-four trailers had revealed extremely high levels of formaldehyde (three times the level suggested by the EPA), and that exposure to such levels would eventually lead to lung cancer, nose cancer, and respiratory infection.

“Do they know how the formaldehyde got into the trailers?” Maurice asked the man.

The man scratched an itch on his chin with a chipped pink fingernail, and Maurice saw a white-head covered in a clump of makeup on the man’s cheek. “They say they was built like that. Course, they blaming the manufacturer, but the government’s the one gave people the trailers.”

“First the birds and the mold,” Maurice told him, “and now this. It’s getting pretty scary.”

“Tell me about it,” the man said. He reached down and removed a lime green pump, rubbing his gray cracked heel as he spoke. “Everybody’s nerves is on edge. My nephew’s so spooked, he’s been going all around town collecting up MREs and storing them in his house. He must have thousands of them things.”

“What?” Maurice pulled the mask down so he could take a sip of his drink. “In case another storm comes?”

“Nah. He’s scared the government’s gonna go broke and people are gonna start snatching up all the food.” He took a sip of his martini, patting a large puffy afro that looked like a black cloud drifting atop his head. “He’s got this crazy idea cooking in his head that the world’s coming to an end.”

“It does make you wonder,” Maurice said, a sense of nervousness moving through him as he spoke.

“I thought he belonged in a nut house at first,” the man said. He grabbed the swizzle stick from his martini, raised it to his mouth and pulled the olive off with his teeth. “The more I watch the news, though,” he said, speaking around the olive in his mouth, “the more I think that nephew of mine might be onto something.” The man pulled the olive from his mouth and sucked out the pimento. “If I didn’t know any better,” he said, “I’d think the government was trying to kill us folks, specially after what they said on the radio this morning.”

Maurice turned in his stool, faced the man directly. “What did you

hear on the radio?” he asked.

“They was talking to people who stayed over by the 17th Street Canal,” the man said. “About how them folks heard explosions that sounded like bombs going off just before the waters rose and pushed them up on they roofs.”

“I saw something about that on the news,” Maurice said, “but they acted as if the complaints were rumors.”

“Well,” the man said, “looks like the rumors was true. The fellow on the radio spoke to some scuba diver from the Corps of Engineers this morning that inspected the broken walls, and he said they found a bunch of burn marks on chunks from the walls. Looks like they exploded the levees after all. They say they launching an investigation,” he told Maurice, rolling his bloodshot eyes, “but you know how that goes. I guess we shouldn’t be surprised,” the man continued, his muddy brown eyes floating beneath two perfect half-moons of blue eye shadow. “They did the same thing back in ’27. Blew up the levee so they could push the water south to where all the poor folks was. Hoover signed off on it and everything. My granddaddy said they used more than thirty-nine tons of dynamite. Thousands of folks lost they homes. My granddaddy too. Course, the government promised to pay folks for they losses. My granddaddy waited for years, but they never made good on they promise.” The man chewed the pimento slowly as he spoke. “He died waiting on that pay.”

They talked about the formaldehyde for a while. Eventually the man took a long sip of his drink, rose from the bar stool and wandered toward the restroom. Maurice ordered another White Russian with no ice. After three more drinks, he paid his tab and left.

When he arrived at the high school fifteen minutes later, Brandon climbed into the car, his face bunched up as if something in the air stunk. “Why does your car smell like alcohol?” he asked.

“They threw a party,” Maurice lied “for one of the guys at work.”

“You still have that cold?” Brandon asked.

Maurice faked a cough. “I’m starting to think it might be an allergy.”

“I didn’t know you had allergies.”

“I had them as a child. I thought I was done with them, but I guess not.”

“What were you allergic to?” Brandon asked. “When you were a kid,

I mean?”

“Mold,” Maurice lied, stammering as he spoke. “Dust too.” He stared at Brandon to see if he was buying the story, but Brandon had turned his attention back to the window.

Fifteen minutes later Maurice found himself walking aimlessly through Home Depot with a box of masks under his arm, Brandon following behind him. He paid for the masks, and as they walked into the blinding sunlight, Maurice spotted a Red Cross tent dispensing flu vaccinations. He stared at the tent, thinking about everything the man at the bar had said, about how the government had exploded the levee and how they’d laced FEMA trailers with formaldehyde. He remembered an article he’d read a few weeks earlier about an experiment that had been conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service in the 1970s on black men to determine the effects of syphilis, how over two hundred black men had, unknowingly, been infected with syphilis, and how, despite the fact that penicillin had become available in 1947, the medicine had been withheld from the test subjects.

As he walked toward the Red Cross tent, Maurice thought about all the people who’d been harmed by the government. Then he thought about what Michael’s hired thug had done to Vivian, and a sudden anger began to blossom inside him.

“Would you like a free flu vaccination, sir?” the woman sitting at the Red Cross table asked Maurice as he stumbled toward her.

Maurice grabbed one of the syringes from the table and held it in the woman’s face. “What’s in these?” he asked staring at her with blood-shot eyes. “Malaria?”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said, the smile fading from her face, “but I don’t understand what you’re asking.”

“You think I don’t know what you people are up to?” he told her, his voice smoldering with anger.

The woman could smell the alcohol on his breath. She tried to speak, but the words were lost in her throat.

Maurice grabbed the box of syringes and threw them onto the ground, his face red with anger. “I know what you’re doing,” he hissed, placing his hands on the table. When he leaned toward the woman, a security guard walked up and grabbed him by the arm.

“You need to leave, sir.”

“Dad,” Brandon said, seemingly shocked by Maurice’s strange behavior. “What’s wrong?”

“You people should be ashamed of yourselves,” Maurice hissed, pulling away from the security guard. “You think I don’t know what you’re doing?” He stood there for a moment, as if a thought were lodged in his brain.

The security guard pointed his finger at Maurice. “Leave, sir,” he said, his voice cold and hard. “Unless you want to get arrested.”

Maurice turned around slowly and headed across the parking lot, mumbling to himself as Brandon followed. When they arrived at the car, Maurice opened the door and climbed in. “I know what they’re doing,” he mumbled under his breath as he adjusted the dust mask and started the engine. Brandon asked Maurice what was wrong, but Maurice didn’t respond. Instead, he pulled out of the parking lot without saying a word and drove toward the house, tangled thoughts of what Michael and his thugs might do next drifting around in his skull like little black thunderclouds.

* * *

On the other side of the city, Vivian walked into Pascal’s Manale, greeted the hostess with a fake smile, then followed her to a table near the window. The day before, Audrey had called Vivian and asked her to meet for lunch. Vivian figured Audrey needed money, so she had her checkbook ready.

“How much do you need?” Vivian asked as Audrey sat down.

“Jesus,” Audrey said, staring at the blood spots on the whites of Vivian’s eyes, at the faint bruise on her cheekbone. “What happened to your face?”

“Oh,” Vivian said, touching the bruise on her cheekbone as if she’d forgotten it was there. “It’s from scuba diving,”

“Scuba diving?” Audrey asked.

“Yes,” Vivian told her, flashing a bloody-eyed stare, her voice sharp. “I descended too quickly.”

“I thought you hated swimming.”

“I was an award-winning high school swimmer,” Vivian told her. “Anyway, it’s not swimming. It’s scuba diving. I’m taking a class at the

YMCA.”

“You can scuba dive when you’re pregnant?”

“Yes,” Vivian said. “I know you think you’re an expert on the world, but there may actually be a few things you don’t know.”

“I never said I was an expert.”

“How much do you need?” Vivian said abruptly.

“Give me a break for Christ’s sake,” Audrey says. “I’m not here for money. I’m here because I’m worried about Dad. He’s been acting strange.”

“Strange?” Vivian blew on her fork and wiped it with a linen napkin. “This is your father we’re talking about, Audrey. The man bases his entire life on statistics. He’s always been a little strange.”

“I know,” Audrey said, “but he’s been acting stranger than usual.”

“Have you forgotten how he used to refuse to drive after 11pm,” Vivian asked, “because statistically you were four times more likely to die in a car crash during that time? Or when he filled the house with all those radon gas detectors after he saw that special on *60 Minutes*? What about that summer when he increased his life insurance policy because he was convinced he was going to spontaneously combust?” Vivian spread the linen napkin across her lap. “Your father is fine,” she said, glancing at her menu. “He’s just going through a tough time. We all are.”

“How would you know?” Audrey said. “You’re not even around. You don’t have to see him every day. How sad he is. You just came along and dropped this huge pile of shit in his lap, and now you’re off living somewhere else, as if everything is fine. You’re pregnant with another man’s baby. Do you realize how much that hurts him?”

As Audrey said this, Vivian thought about how easy her life would have been if she’d had an abortion and never told Maurice about Michael. She’d actually considered it at one point, but she’d changed her mind after visiting an abortion site on the Internet. As she sat in the restaurant, she thought of the pictures she’d seen of all the baby parts vacuumed from some poor woman’s womb, the little bloody baby heads and baby feet. She wanted to feel bad for wishing she’d had an abortion, but she didn’t. Sometimes, she felt like her heart was filled with holes.

“Are you even listening to me?” Audrey asked.

Vivian’s thoughts drifted back to the restaurant. She stared at the bar, at a bartender who was frothing milk for a cappuccino. The sound

of the machine reminded her of a fetus being sucked through a hose.

“I know you’re mad at me, Audrey, but you don’t have to be so hateful all the time. What happened to you? You used to be such a nice girl. When did you become so angry?”

“I’m not sure,” Audrey said, “but I think it may have been around the same time you started having sex with some strange man behind my father’s back.”

“I didn’t just choose to have sex with someone else.”

Ever since she’d cheated on Maurice, Vivian had been trying to convince herself that her affair with Michael was not her fault, that it was the result of some psychological flaw. She put the menu down and stared at Audrey. “Anyway, not that you care or anything, but I think I may have a sexual addiction.”

Audrey rolled her eyes.

“It’s a documented illness,” Vivian said. “Look it up on the Internet if you like.”

“I’ll Google it as soon as I get home. What keyword should I use? Slut?”

“It’s a disease. It’s no different than having multiple sclerosis or diabetes. You wouldn’t blame a diabetic for having high blood sugar, would you?”

“That depends,” Audrey said, her words like a booby trap.

“On what?”

“On whether or not their high blood sugar caused them to hump some strange man behind my dad’s back.”

“I swear, Audrey, sometimes talking to you is like getting a colonoscopy.”

At that precise moment, the waiter walked up to the table and recited the specials. Vivian ordered crab meat and scallops. There weren’t any vegan dishes on the menu, so Audrey decided on the Chicken Bordelaise without chicken. When the waiter left, for a moment they sat in silence, like cardboard cutouts, staring off into the distance without uttering a word.

“I’m not here to talk about you,” Audrey finally said. “I’m here because I’m worried about Dad.”

“I told you. Your father is fine.”

“It’s not just Dad,” Audrey said. “Brandon spends more time in the

principal's office than he does in class."

"I've called his principal on two different occasions." Vivian took a sip of water. "What else do you want me to do?"

"It might take more than a few phone calls to his principal. Maybe you could try spending more time with him on the weekends or something, instead of just coming over for dinner every two weeks."

Vivian tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, staring across the room as she spoke. "I know how terrible a mother I am," she said. "You remind me of it on a regular basis."

"Jesus," Audrey hissed, "it's not about you. His mother is never around, and his father is a wreck. He needs someone to talk to besides the goddamn school counselor."

When the waiter returned with their salads, Audrey took a sip of water and stared at Vivian. "So you haven't noticed Dad acting weird lately?"

"Not any more than usual. He seems worried about the water supply and the recent bird kills, but he's always worried about something."

"Did you know he bought a storm shelter?" Audrey asked. "They delivered it the other day. He said he wants to fill it up with hurricane supplies in case another storm hits."

"Your father has always been a little paranoid, Audrey. You know that. And with all the media coverage lately he's probably worried that the water supply and the air are contaminated. A lot of people are concerned about that. Has he been taking his Prozac?"

"How should I know? All I know is that he's acting really weird. I think he needs to see somebody."

"Like who?" Vivian asked. "A doctor?"

"I guess. A psychiatrist or something."

Maurice had a long history of depression. He'd even been hospitalized after swallowing a bottle of sleeping pills years earlier. But what Audrey was describing didn't sound like depression to Vivian. Instead, it sounded more like Maurice's typical obsessed, fearful behavior—a behavior that over time Vivian had come to see more as a quirky personality trait than an illness. Because of this, and because of the fact that Vivian knew Audrey's concerns were less about Maurice and more about blaming her for leaving, she didn't take Audrey seriously.

"Alright," Vivian said finally, noticeably irritated. "I'll talk to him."

* * *

Vivian's ultrasound was scheduled for four o'clock that day, and Maurice was a few minutes early. While Maurice waited, he thumbed through a stack of brochures and magazines on the table next to him in hopes of finding something to read. In the end he decided on a brochure with a smiling cartoon uterus on the cover entitled *Healthy Tips for a Happy Uterus*.

As he thumbed through the magazine, he thought about the dream he'd been having for the last few days, ever since Vivian had been accosted. In the dream Vivian was lying on a hospital gurney screaming in pain while an angel with crippled golden wings hovered over her. Vivian's bloated belly was exposed, and it glistened in the light as if it had been anointed with oil. Each night, just before the dream ended, the angel touched Vivian's chest, and her torso began to glow as if the sun were trapped inside her.

When Vivian arrived a few minutes later, she said she smelled bug spray, and when Maurice told her he'd sprayed himself down before he left the house, she rolled her eyes.

"Your eye looks better."

Vivian pulled out her compact and looked at herself in the mirror. "I look like I got punched in the face."

As Maurice stared at Vivian's swollen face, he thought back to when he was a child, to the night a group of men had broken into the house and threatened his mother, how they'd left his mother's face bruised just like Vivian's. Maurice had always felt guilty for not being able to protect his mother that night, and as he sat there he felt a similar guilt for what had happened to Vivian gnawing at his insides.

"I just wish I would have been there with you," he said, "at your apartment that night."

"There's nothing you could have done." Vivian snapped the compact closed and put it in her purse. "I'm sure they would have waited to catch me when I was alone."

"What did you tell the people at the station? About your eye?"

"That my husband is an alcoholic." Vivian smiled. "And that sometimes he gets angry."

Maurice flashed a grin.

“I didn’t tell them anything. It’s none of their business.”

“Are they going to let you work?”

“They said they needed to keep me off the air for a few weeks or so, until it heals. So now I’m shuffling papers mostly, which is fine. I’m exhausted most of the time anyway. You’re still wearing the mask, I see.”

“Yeah. That damn cold just won’t go away. How are you feeling?” he asked, trying to change the subject.

“Well, my nipples are sore, I live with heartburn, and I’m constipated all the time. And of course, I look like total shit.”

“I think you look beautiful.”

As Vivian smiled, a nurse called her name, and they both rose from where they were sitting before following the nurse down a hallway to an exam room. As Vivian sat down, Maurice stared at the various diplomas on the wall for a moment before wandering over to the doctor’s desk, which was filled with anatomical models. Among them was a group of nine uterus models, each with an embryo tucked inside that gradually increased in size like babushka dolls. There was also a larger pink one of the female reproductive system with removable parts. Maurice picked up one of the tiny embryo models and examined it. He asked Vivian if she wanted to go to the police. She told Maurice she hadn’t changed her mind, that Michael intended to run for lieutenant governor, that he had a wife and a family, and that a scandal like this would ruin his political career for sure. Maurice suggested she speak with a lawyer, but Vivian knew it wouldn’t help. When Maurice pressed the issue, Vivian asked if they could change the subject, and Maurice agreed.

“What about all this stuff with the birds?” Maurice asked, fiddling with the little plastic embryo. “Strange, huh?”

“I’m so sick of the birds. I miss the days right after Katrina when you couldn’t find a bird anywhere. Remember how quiet it was? Almost eerie? Now they’re everywhere. Seems like every story I cover lately is about some new flock of dead birds they’ve found. And it’s not just us. All the stations are obsessed with it. There are so many more important stories out there to focus on. The crime rate is completely out of control.”

Maurice said he hoped the stations continued to cover the events and that many people he’d spoken to were growing suspicious of the government. “They’re obviously trying to cover up something,” he said,

placing the little plastic embryo back on the doctor's desk. "With all the mold floating around, the air's obviously unsafe. And who knows what condition the water supply is in."

Vivian told Maurice that he worried too much. And when he told her that he'd visited a website that suggested the dead birds, Katrina, and the war in Iraq were all signs from God, Vivian told him the idea was absurd. Knowing how obsessive he was, she suggested he stay off the Internet. When he told her he'd read about similar events in The Bible, a look of confusion broke across her face.

"The Bible?" she said, as if the word tasted funny. "Since when do you care what's in The Bible?"

Maurice picked up a pink plastic uterus from the doctor's desk and examined it. "I've been reading it a lot lately," he said. As he fiddled with the plastic uterus, a pink fallopian tube fell off. "Why's that so weird?" he asked, picking up the fallopian tube and placing it back on the desk.

"You're Jewish, Maurice."

"I know," he said, "but it's not that different from the Torah really. If you take out the whole New Testament, The Bible and the Torah are actually very similar."

"I'm just saying that you've never been overly religious. I mean, it's not like you're a practicing Jew."

"So," he said. "You're not a practicing Catholic."

"This is New Orleans, Maurice. There are no practicing Catholics."

Maurice smiled behind the dust mask.

Since the separation, Vivian had been living in an apartment that her twin sister, Camille, owned, and when Maurice asked her about the apartment, she said it wasn't the nicest place she'd ever lived, but that it would do until she could find something better. Maurice asked her how she'd been feeling, and she said she'd been very emotional lately. She told him that while she was at work she'd found a pink plastic baby from a leftover king cake in her desk drawer, and that she'd started crying before going to the restroom to compose herself.

"When I first found out I was pregnant, I felt like someone had pushed me off a cliff, you know?" Vivian's bright blue eyes began to fill with tears. "Ever since then, I've had this terrible feeling, like I'm falling, and there's no one there to catch me."

Vivian's words dug into Maurice and buried themselves somewhere

deep inside him. “*I’m here,*” he said, hugging her. “I’ll always be here for you.”

As Maurice said this, the doctor walked into the room. While Vivian wiped her eyes, Maurice stood up and shook the doctor’s hand. After asking Vivian a few questions, the doctor told her to lie down on the table and pull up her blouse so he could begin the ultrasound. When he was done washing his hands, he walked over to where she was lying. “This may be a bit cold,” he said, squirting ultrasound jelly onto Vivian’s belly. He monkeyed with the monitor then slid the hand-held scanner along her stomach.

Maurice heard the quiet crackle of static. It sounded like a television tuned to a dead station, but as he listened closely he heard the tiny little feet of a voice tip-toeing beneath the static. He pulled down the dust mask, just for a moment. “Is it normal to hear static?” he asked the doctor.

“Sometimes,” the doctor said. “What you may be hearing is gas moving through the intestine or possibly the movement of fluid. Could also be feedback from the Doppler.”

“I don’t hear anything,” Vivian said.

Maurice tried to shoo the voice from his mind, but as the doctor traced the baby’s spine on the monitor with his finger, he heard the voice again, drowned beneath the white static. It was difficult to make out, but when he concentrated he recognized scraps of sentences and mangled pieces of words hidden beneath the static. He hadn’t eaten all day, and at first, he thought he’d heard the words: *Big Mac with bacon and fries* buried beneath the layers of white noise. But as he listened closely he realized he actually heard: *The dragon will attack. Satan will rise.* He tried to concentrate on the voice again, but as he focused his attention, the glowing light in Vivian’s chest suddenly flickered out, and the voice and static slowly disappeared.

When they arrived at the parking lot, he hugged Vivian, and as he did, his hands gently cupped the sharp, pointed bones of her shoulder blades. The bones were poking through the back of her blouse, and to Maurice they felt like little wings growing through her skin. Vivian told Maurice goodbye, kissed him on the cheek and headed across the lot. When she reached her car, she turned and stood for a moment in the blinding sun. Through her yellow silk blouse, Maurice saw her heart

glowing in her chest. The white light in her chest grew brighter and brighter, and as Vivian raised her hand and waved, Maurice watched bits and pieces of her dissolve in the sun, first her torso, then her face, until her entire silhouette had disappeared in the exploding light.

CHAPTER NINE

On Wednesday morning, Maurice awakened to a clap of thunder mixed with the menacing sound of white static. He hadn't heard the static at the house since he'd destroyed the microwave, DVD player, and coffee maker, so he was a bit surprised. He slipped into his robe and pajama pants and rose from his bed, sleepy-eyed, then followed the sound through the house. The static was loudest near the west side of the home, and though he tried, he was unable to determine the source. For the next hour or so, he scoured the walls of the house for tiny holes, cracks or discolorations, rooting through the cabinets, prying back baseboards, checking light fixtures and other pieces of furniture that might conceal some sort of tiny listening device.

After almost two hours of searching, he found a crooked electrical plate in the living room partially hidden behind an end table. He grabbed his screwdriver from his toolbox, moved the end table, then loosened the rusty screws and removed the electrical plate. As he examined it, he didn't notice anything particularly strange at first, but when he bent down on his hands and knees and placed his ear near the exposed outlet, he could hear the same tangled static he'd heard a few nights before whispering behind the wall, murmuring through the guts of the house. He grabbed a pencil from the counter top and drew an X just above the outlet, then went to his toolbox and grabbed a razor knife. When he returned, he cut along the pencil mark, slicing a small X into the sheetrock before pushing the tattered piece of sheetrock out of the way. He put the razor knife down and pressed his ear against the small hole in the wall. He listened closely for a moment, and he heard a flurry of static-filled voices loose in the walls. He listened until the rash of voices disappeared, until the hissing static finally faded beneath the silver sound of rain falling outside.

* * *

When Audrey entered St. Joseph's Nursing Home she saw an old woman wearing pink slippers and mumbling to herself. As she walked through the lobby, she couldn't help but think about how miserable it must be to grow old in a place like St. Joseph's.

When she finally arrived at Virgil's room, they embraced, and she sat down on the sofa next to him. She told Virgil she'd had a break between classes, and that since the nursing home was only a few blocks away from campus, she'd stopped by for a visit. As she spoke, she tried her best not to get emotional, but eventually her voice began to twitch, and her green eyes filled with tears.

"What's wrong?" Virgil asked.

"I'm sorry," she said, grabbing a Kleenex from her purse. "I'm just worried about Dad."

Audrey told Virgil about Maurice's recent behavior, and Virgil didn't seem surprised.

"He had me worried the last time I saw him," Virgil said. "He seemed more obsessed than usual, and from what you're saying it's gotten worse since then."

"He bought a storm shelter," Audrey told him, "and he's convinced the water is unsafe to drink. He wears a dust mask wherever he goes because he thinks the air is polluted. He's even reading *The Bible*."

"*The Bible*?" Virgil said, his face bunched up, his eyes squinted with disbelief. "He's a Jew for Christ's sake. What the hell's he doing reading *The Bible*?"

"Brandon says he's obsessed with it, that he's been reading it every night."

"*The New Testament* too?" Virgil asked, confusion tugging at the wrinkles on his face.

"I think so."

"I figured he was having a rough time with everything, but I didn't realize it was this serious." Virgil paused. "I should have known, I guess."

"How could you have known?" Audrey asked. "You only see him once or twice a week, and I'm sure he puts on his best face for you when he's here."

"Yeah, but you know how he is. Whenever something terrible happens he starts looking for something to obsess over. And with all the stuff—your mother getting robbed and the separation—I'm sure it's

stirring up all that crap from when he was a kid.”

“What crap?”

“Me going to prison. And having to deal with everything that happened.”

“But he wasn’t a kid when you went to prison,” Audrey said. “I was like twelve years old.”

“I went to prison twice,” Virgil told Audrey. “That first time I went, your father was just a boy.”

“I never knew that.”

“Well,” Virgil said, “it’s not exactly something I’m proud of.”

“So you think he’s having these problems because you went to prison?”

“It was a little more complicated than that. I wasn’t so smart in those days, and the guys I was running with at the time, they were a pretty vicious bunch. When the police finally caught on,” Virgil said, “all the guys from our crew got picked up—all except for Lenny Giordano. None of us had any intentions of ratting Lenny out, but Lenny wasn’t convinced, so he took it upon himself to start threatening the other guys’ families. He and a few of his thugs broke it to your grandmother’s house one night. It was just your daddy and your grandmother. Long story short, Lenny stuck a gun to your grandmother’s head and threatened to kill her.”

“My God. Did they hurt her?”

Virgil sighed. “No, but your father saw the whole thing. I’m sure your mother getting robbed stirred all that stuff up again.”

“Is that why Dad’s always been so scared of everything?”

“I guess. He was different after that happened to your grandmother. It’s like he suddenly became scared of the world and everybody in it, you know? That’s when he started with all the obsessions. He used to read the obituary pages every morning. Most nine-year-olds were reading comic strips, and he was reading about dead people. Apparently he cut them out of the paper and kept them because your grandmother found hundreds of them in his room in a shoe box under his bed.” Virgil paused for a moment. “A kid’s not supposed to be scared like that,” he said. “They’re supposed to be out playing with their friends without a care in the world. I just wish I’d been there for him, you know. If I hadn’t been locked up I’d have been able to protect them both, and none of this would have

ever happened.”

“You can’t blame yourself for what some group of lunatics did. If you want to blame someone, blame my slut of a mother. She’s the one who left him when he needed someone.”

“We just need to get your daddy some help. A man from my old neighborhood has a son who’s a psychiatrist. I’ll talk to your mother, and we’ll give him a call.” Virgil wiped a tear from Audrey’s cheek. “Now no more worrying, okay?”

“Okay.”

Audrey rested her head on Virgil’s shoulder, and Virgil stroked her hair.

“I think he does individual and family counseling if my memory serves,” Virgil said. “Shit, as screwed up as our family is, we should probably all go see him. Maybe he’ll give us a group rate.”

Audrey laughed. “I knew if anybody would take me seriously it would be you. I told Vivian, but of course she acted like everything was fine. She won’t admit anything’s wrong, because if she does she’ll have to admit that she caused it.”

“I know you’re mad at your mother,” Virgil said, his voice suddenly growing serious, “but as much as I don’t like to admit it, she’s been very good to your father. Your mother took care of everything when your grandmother died. She came to the hospital and sat with her while she was dying, every day, even when your aunt and uncle were too busy to show up. It wasn’t even her mother, but she was there every day until she died. She changed your grandmother’s bedpans, sat and talked to her when everyone else was too busy to listen. It takes a special kind of person to do that.”

“Really?” Audrey said. “I didn’t know she even visited her.”

Virgil smiled. “She always loved your grandmother. And when your father had that episode of depression a few years back, and he took all those pills, she was there for him too. She was the one who found him, who called EMS. If it weren’t for her, he might have died.”

“I didn’t know it was that serious,” Audrey said. “I thought he got depressed, took a bunch of pills and then threw up.”

“You were too young,” Virgil said. “But trust me, it was much worse than that. He took a whole bottle of sleeping pills. He had to have his stomach pumped.”

“Jesus,” Audrey mumbled.

“Your mother took care of you and Brandon for almost two months without any help until your father went back to work. He was depressed all the time, and she was the one making sure he took his meds. That’s a lot for a person to do, and it wears on them after a while. Your mother might not be perfect, but when you need her, she’s there. That’s why your father loves her so much. That’s why you love her so much.”

“I know,” Audrey said, dabbing her eyes with the balled up Kleenex, “but she’s still a slut.”

“It’s not entirely her fault,” Virgil smirked. “Her mother was the same way. I went to high school with her. They called her ‘radio station’ because she was so easy to pick up.”

A crooked grin wriggled across Audrey’s face.

“She must have wanted to be an artist,” Virgil said, “because she spent more time on her back than Michelangelo.”

Audrey smiled through her tears. “I’ll bet she had more pricks than a second-hand dartboard.”

Virgil kissed Audrey on the forehead. “That’s my girl,” he told her, flashing a gold-toothed smile as he stroked her hair.

Audrey smiled again then closed her eyes, her head still resting on Virgil’s shoulder. “I knew coming to see you would cheer me up. Thanks.”

* * *

As Brandon walked into the dazzle of sunlight, he scanned the clamshell parking lot of the high school for Maurice’s car. He didn’t see any sign of it, and after waiting almost thirty minutes he considered taking the bus home. He was heading toward the bus stop when he saw Audrey’s dented Hyundai pull up to the curb.

“I thought Dad was picking me up,” he said, opening the door and climbing into Audrey’s car.

“So did I.” Audrey took a long drag off her cigarette, flicked the ashes out the window.

“Is he at work?”

“Who knows?” She pulled out of the parking lot, stopped at the corner and stared out the car window down Paris Avenue, mumbling a song under her breath while she waited for a convoy of armored military

vehicles to pass. “Can you believe this?” she said, glancing at the convoy as it passed by. “It’s like we’re living in a war zone or something. It’s no different than a police state, really. Curfews and checkpoints, the suppression of civil liberties. It’s like Big Brother.”

“The TV show?” Brandon asked.

“Jesus,” Audrey hissed. “George Orwell? *1984*? Don’t they make you read at that school?”

“We’re reading Harry Potter.”

Audrey rolled her eyes.

“My friend Gilbert lives in a FEMA trailer park,” Brandon said. “He told me the National Guard people tote around machine guns at night.”

“You don’t need to hang out in those FEMA trailer parks at night, Brandon. They’re dangerous.”

“I’ve only been there during the day.” Brandon stared out the window. The sky was dark, and the clouds looked like a mass of black worms. They reminded Brandon of the inkblots Mr. Richardson had shown him the week before.

Audrey sighed. “I’m just saying. They’re dangerous. People have been killed in those parks.”

“All right. Jesus. You sound like Mom.”

“I’m just worried about you, that’s all. Somebody has to look out for you, and apparently Mom and Dad aren’t going to do it.”

As the military convoy passed them, Brandon stared at a row of beige, armored military vehicles. He stared at clumps of men gathered on the back of each vehicle—all of whom were dressed in camouflage, sporting black helmets and Kevlar vests, some of them standing with machine guns slung over their shoulders, others sitting down with the guns resting on their knees.

As they stopped at a red light, Brandon stared at the car in front of them, at a bumper sticker that read: *Forget Iraq, Rebuild New Orleans*. “Dad was going on and on again yesterday,” he said. “About the government this time.”

“What did he say?”

“About how they’re trying to poison us. How they’re always bugging people’s houses.”

“He said he thought the government was bugging the house?”

“Yep,” Brandon said. “I think that’s why he smashed the microwave.”

“He smashed the microwave?”

“Yep. And the coffee pot and his cell phone too. Do you think he’s going crazy?”

“He’s not crazy, Brandon. He’s just sick. He probably just needs medication, that’s all. Anyway, you don’t need to worry about any of this. If he *is* sick, Mom and I will get him the help he needs. You need to focus on school right now.”

“Jesus,” Brandon said, “now you really sound like Mom.”

When Audrey pulled into the driveway a few minutes later, she and Brandon spotted a pile of sheetrock and tangled electrical wire on the front lawn. Inside they found Maurice at the top of a ladder pulling a long green electrical wire from a hole in the wall. He was wearing the dust mask, and his hair and face were freckled with white dust, the armpits of his T-shirt stained with yellow circles of sweat. The air was thick with clouds of sheetrock dust, and electrical wires were dangling from holes in the walls.

“What are you doing?” Audrey asked.

“There’s a short somewhere,” Maurice told her. “I’m trying to figure out where it is.”

“Why don’t you just call an electrician?”

“Why?” Maurice pulled a pair of wire cutters from his tool belt. “I spent two years in college as an electrical apprentice.”

“So there’s no electricity?” Brandon asked.

“I had to cut it off to pull the wires.” Maurice said. “You don’t want me to get electrocuted, do you?”

“I don’t think it’s healthy for a kid to be without electricity,” Brandon told Maurice. “Isn’t that like, like child abuse or something?”

“Would you rather the house catch on fire?” Maurice asked. “Faulty wiring is responsible for more than 33% of all house fires.”

“That’s an interesting fact,” Audrey told Maurice, fiddling with one of the wires hanging from a hole in the sheetrock. “Did you know that eighty-four people die every year from inhaling sheetrock dust?”

Maurice’s face grew serious. “Is that an accurate statistic?” he asked. “Or are you making it up?”

Audrey smirked.

“This isn’t a joking matter, Audrey,” Maurice said, pointing a pair of wire cutters at her as he spoke.

Brandon sat on the sofa and stared longingly at his reflection in the dead television screen. “I think I’d rather be burned alive,” he said, “than be without TV and Xbox.”

As Audrey headed to her bedroom, shaking her head, Maurice adjusted the dust mask, reached his hand into a hole in the sheetrock and pulled out a long blue wire. When he pressed his ear against the hole in the sheetrock, he could hear the same faint static mixed with a flurry of gnarled voices. He grabbed his wire cutters from his tool belt, snipped the wire, and when he did, the static and voices grew silent. He dropped the wire in a pile at his feet then walked to the corner of the living room, pushed his ear against the wall and listened for the clicking sound he’d heard the day before. When he determined the source of the sound, he tightened his grip on the saw and began hacking feverishly through the sheetrock, little beads of sweat gathering on his forehead as the television and the room gradually disappeared in a creeping white cloud of dust.

CHAPTER TEN

As a tangled mass of black clouds drifted outside the kitchen window, Maurice and the kids sat at the table, a carafe of orange juice sweating on the counter top, the smell of pancakes drifting through the air. While Maurice sipped from a cup of coffee, he typed the phrase *government implant* into Google. A few days earlier he'd found an article about how thousands of elderly Americans with Alzheimer's had been microchipped, and it warned that the U.S. government eventually intended to implant microchips in every U.S. citizen.

"What are you looking up?" Audrey asked Maurice.

"Did you know that the government has implanted microchips in thousands of Alzheimer's patients?"

"Really?" Audrey said.

"That's smart if you ask me," Brandon said, his lips shiny with maple syrup. "My friend Ronnie had his Chihuahua, Guacamole, microchipped. Their mailman left the gate open one day and Guacamole escaped. Thanks to the chip, they found him in nothing flat." Brandon poked a pancake with a fork and dropped it onto his plate. "Maybe we should get one put into Grandpaw in case he wanders off from the nursing home."

"Speaking of Grandpaw," Audrey said, glancing at Maurice. "Did he call you?"

"No," Maurice looked up from the laptop. "Why? Was he supposed to?"

"He said he wanted to talk to you, that's all."

"When did you talk to Grandpaw?"

"I went and saw him the other day when I was between classes."

"What made you go and see him?"

"I can't visit my own grandfather?"

"Of course you can. It's just a bit strange since you've never visited him before."

"She probably needed money," Brandon said.

"Did you go there to talk about me?" Maurice asked.

“I’m worried about you, Dad. Grandpaw thinks you need to see a doctor, and so do I.”

“Me too,” Brandon said.

Maurice told Audrey and Brandon that he’d scheduled a doctor’s visit for that afternoon. Though he insisted he was going in for a standard check-up, his true intention was to request a CAT scan so he could determine if the government had planted a monitoring device in his brain.

“Are you going to tell the doctor that you’ve been wearing a dust mask wherever you go?” Audrey asked.

“I have a cold,” Maurice said. “I appreciate your concern, but I’m an adult. I don’t need advice on what to tell my doctor.”

Audrey stared into the living room, at the walls riddled with holes, at the plastic sheeting that covered the sofa and the floor, at the white sheetrock dust that trailed from the living room into every room of the house.

Audrey waited for a moment, hoping that he’d look up from the laptop, but he didn’t. She asked him if he cared about his mental health, and when he didn’t answer, she rose from the table, dropped her plate in the sink and stormed off toward her bedroom.

Brandon took a bite of pancake and looked at Maurice, watching as he pulled down the dust mask to blow on his coffee. “Maybe you could take a little more of the Prozac each day,” he said. “You never know. That might help.”

“I’m fine,” Maurice said, staring at the computer screen. “Just fine.”

That afternoon as he drove to work, a series of gory visions flashed in the back of Maurice’s brain. The images began with a pregnant woman screaming, her body glowing as if a fire was burning beneath her skin, followed by the black screams of a baby and a silver shower of stars falling from the sky.

While he drove, Maurice remembered reading a reference to prophets in The Bible that said, “If there be a prophet among you, I the LORD will speak unto him in a dream and make myself known unto him in a vision.” Maurice thought about the dreams he’d had of Vivian, the images that had flashed through his brain for days, and the more he worried he became that the visions he was having were prophecies from God.

As he pulled into the office parking lot, he remembered a passage in Revelation that claimed the devil used “false visions” to deceive and lead people into sin. Almost immediately, he thought about the article he’d seen on the Internet a few days earlier, which claimed the U.S. Army had conducted experiments by planting devices in the brains of soldiers to monitor the soldiers’ thoughts on the battlefield. According to the article, the implanted devices induced religious visions, and the soldiers often heard voices and complained of strange nightmares.

Maurice parked the car, cut the engine, and as he walked across the parking lot, a little worm of a thought wriggled through his mind. If the government had planted devices in the wires of his home, could they also have planted some kind of device in his brain designed to trigger false visions? He decided the only way to determine if the visions he was having were actually divine messages was to request a CAT scan when he met with the doctor.

* * *

A few days later, Vivian stood in the living room staring at the furniture covered in sheetrock dust, at the walls riddled with holes. “This is a real mess,” she said.

As she walked into the kitchen, Maurice moved the clutter of tools that covered the counter top. He wiped a smear of sheetrock dust from the counter top with the sleeve of his shirt so Vivian could put down her purse. When she hugged him, Maurice noticed the distinct smell of roses.

Brandon and Audrey were sitting at the kitchen table ready for dinner.

“What happened to your eye?” Brandon asked.

“It’s from scuba diving,” Audrey said, rolling her eyes.

“Scuba diving?”

Vivian sat down, folded a napkin and placed it in her lap, then poured herself a glass of iced tea. “What is all this?” she asked, referring to the sheetrock.

“There’s a faulty wire in the wall,” Maurice said.

“Why don’t you just call an electrician?”

“I can do it myself. It’s just taking a little longer than expected, that’s

all.”

“Is it me?” Vivian asked, pressing the glass of iced tea against her forehead. “Or is it hot in here?”

“It’s been like this for days,” Audrey said, scooping a square of vegetarian lasagna onto her plate. “Dad’s been cutting the power every morning, so the A/C is always off.”

“I have to go to PJ’s whenever I want to use my laptop,” Audrey said, cutting a piece of lasagna with the side of her fork, “and practically everything I own is covered in sheetrock dust. We’re all going to be wearing dust masks if this keeps up.”

“I’m going to Home Depot tomorrow,” Maurice said, “to get some drop cloths. I should be able to hang them in the doorways, so the dust is contained to each room.”

“There’s no power in my bathroom,” Audrey said. “No lights or anything, even when you turn the breakers on. I have to use the hall bathroom to do my makeup and dry my hair.”

As Audrey said this, Maurice heard an ominous clicking sound. As Audrey rattled on, Maurice wiped his mouth with his napkin, rose from the table and followed the sound to the back of the house until he came to Brandon’s room. When he entered the bedroom, the sound grew louder. He put his hand against one of the walls, and he felt a strange vibration behind the sheetrock. He snatched a permanent marker from Brandon’s desk, drew a large black X on the wall, then returned to the kitchen table and sat down.

“I was talking to you, Dad,” Audrey said. “Where did you go?”

“I’m sorry.” Maurice draped his napkin across his lap and took a bite of lasagna, the faint sound of static still crackling in his brain. “I thought I heard something.”

“I was telling you that the power in my bathroom is out.”

“I know,” Maurice said. “It’s just a breaker, Audrey. I’ll fix it.”

“This is exactly what I was talking about,” Audrey said, staring at Vivian as she stabbed a piece of lasagna with her fork.

“The hall bathroom is more than big enough for you and Brandon,” Vivian said. “I’m sure it’ll do just fine until your father fixes the problem.”

“I hate sharing a bathroom with her,” Brandon said, shaking his head. “She always leaves her bloody tampons in the trash can.” He pushed at the lasagna with a fork. “It’s friggin’ disgusting.”

“What do you want me to do with them?” Audrey asked.

“Flush them down the toilet like a normal friggin’ human being.”

Audrey stared at Maurice, and for a moment no one said a word.

“Did you show her the storm shelter?”

“I peeked over the fence before I came in,” Vivian said. “It’s much bigger than I thought.”

“I’m just trying to protect my family,” Maurice hissed, stopping in mid-bite, his eyes focused on Audrey. “I don’t know why you have such a problem with that.”

“What about the other stuff?” Audrey asked. “Did you tell her why you don’t want us drinking tap water?”

“Because it’s unsafe,” Maurice snarled.

“I’m just worried about you, Dad. I mean, you hardly even go to work anymore. What if you get fired? Have you even thought about that?”

“My boss and I worked out an arrangement,” Maurice said. “She’s allowing me to work from home.”

“Audrey and I had lunch the other day,” Vivian told Maurice. “She’s worried about you, that’s all. I told her you were just going through a rough patch, that we all were.”

“I knew you’d do this,” Audrey said.

“Do what?” Vivian asked.

“What you’re doing. What you always do. Act like nothing is wrong.”

“Do you two have to fight every time you’re around each other?” Maurice asked. “It would be really nice to have a peaceful dinner for once. Like a normal family.”

“Family?” Audrey laughed. “If this is what a family is like, I’m going to the doctor tomorrow and getting my uterus scraped out.”

When they’d finished dinner, Vivian headed home and Audrey and Brandon slept at friends’ houses. After they’d left, Maurice flipped the main breaker and grabbed a flashlight from his toolbox. He followed the white beam of the light down the hallway and into Brandon’s room until he came to the black X he’d drawn on the wall. With his handsaw, he cut a hole into the sheetrock and aimed the flashlight into the hole. When he pressed his ear to the wall, he heard the crackle of static and strange voices whispering. He grabbed his wire cutters from his tool belt, cut the wire and dropped it in a pile at the floor. When he pressed his ear to the

hole a second time, the whispering voices had crawled off.

Over the next few hours, he did the same with the rest of the wire he found in the walls of the living room. When he was finished, he carried the bundle of wire to the back yard. He found a place in the corner, where the grass had died, and he dropped the tangle of wire in a pile. After getting a can of lighter fluid from the garage, he sprayed the pile, then lit a piece of newspaper and tossed it onto the soaked wire. Maurice stoked the fire with a dead branch, imagining a van full of undercover police officers with coffee breath cursing at the black and white monitor as the video feed they were watching flickered off. As a wave of heat swallowed the air, he watched the charred wire crackle and burn, a smirk growing in the corner of his mouth, his pale face glowing in the light of the fire.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Maurice was reading a story in *Time Magazine* about al-Qaeda training camps when the doctor entered the room. For most of his adult life Maurice had avoided doctors, and he'd only scheduled this appointment because he wanted to be certain the visions he was having weren't the result of some device the government had planted in his brain. From his experience working in insurance, he knew that convincing a physician to order a CAT scan wasn't easy, so to prepare, he'd visited a few hypochondriac forums on the Internet, where he'd learned that the best way to get a physician to request a CAT scan was to complain of major headaches, dizziness, and confused thinking.

The minute the doctor met Maurice, he asked him why he was wearing the dust mask, and Maurice told him what he'd told everyone—that he was coming down with a cold. When the doctor asked how he'd been doing, aside from the cold, Maurice lied and said he'd been having chronic headaches and confused thinking. At some point he mentioned the dead bird incidents, and the doctor smiled.

“First the war in Iraq,” the doctor said, “then Katrina. Now birds are mysteriously falling out of the sky. Makes you wonder if someone's trying to tell us something.”

When the doctor said this, Maurice couldn't help but feel a bit relieved knowing that another person saw a possible connection between the recent events. He wondered if the doctor was religious and if the *someone* he'd referred to was God.

After the doctor performed a rectal exam, he and Maurice talked for a minute or two, and Maurice stressed the headaches and the confused thinking. Though the doctor seemed reluctant at first, he agreed to order a CAT scan, blood work, and a urinalysis. Maurice followed the nurse down a hallway that led to a restroom. He willingly provided the nurse with a urine sample, but he was far too suspicious to let a stranger stick him with a needle.

When he reached Radiology a few minutes later, he was given a

hospital gown, and a few minutes later, he was lying on his back as a radiology technician spoke to him from behind a glass wall. The CAT Scan machine reminded Maurice of a shiny white tomb, and as he lay there, he felt the crackle of static swarming around in his head. When he listened closely, he could hear a voice drifting beneath the static, but the words were tangled and frayed. As the machine hummed, he thought about how for the last few months he'd felt dead inside, and how lately he'd begun to feel alive, as if he'd been awakened from a deep black sleep.

When the doctor met Maurice back in his office, he placed the black and white scan against a light board hanging on the wall.

"Well," he said, flipping on the light, "everything looks good. You didn't complete the blood work, but the scan and the urine are all fine."

"So what about the headaches," Maurice asked, "and the strange dreams?"

"Probably just side effects of the medication."

"The thing is," Maurice said, "I recently started having these strange dreams."

"Could be another side effect I suppose," the doctor said, glancing at the CAT scan. "But I wouldn't worry too much. As you can see, the scan looks good. No anomalies at all."

Maurice thanked the doctor, left the exam room and walked down the hallway, past the receptionist's desk until he came to an elevator. Feeling a slight stab of pain in his stomach, he grabbed the bottle of Maalox from his pocket, and his thoughts drifted to the bloody constellation of ulcers cooking in his gut. The pain had started a few months back, and now it seemed to accompany the visions. Then, he remembered a documentary he'd seen years earlier about the ancient Etruscan practice of reading prophesies in the entrails of sacrificed animals. As he took a swig of Maalox, he imagined the ulcers bleeding in his gut, sacred and glowing, the lining of his stomach inscribed with tiny divine prophesies spelled out in drops of blood.

* * *

That afternoon Brandon and Gilbert were riding down General Pershing in Gilbert's ratty black Saturn listening to his favorite Widespread Panic

album. Gilbert's Saturn had rotten tires, a cracked rear window, and headlights clumped with dead bugs. It had rotating silver rims, red and orange flames painted on the fenders, and a Cadillac hood emblem. He'd put two big woofers in the trunk, and as they drove down the Interstate with the windows open, the bass was so loud that Brandon could hear the rivets rattling loose.

Gilbert was a recent transfer student from a school in St. Bernard, a parish just southeast of New Orleans. He was Native American, his skin was the color of meatloaf, and his face was polluted with pimples. Brandon hadn't met many Native Americans, much less one who was obese. Gilbert spent most of his time stuffing his face with enough food to feed a Third World country, and Brandon figured if he'd been given an official Indian name, it would have been Chief Sits on His Ass or Eats Many Doritos.

A few days earlier Brandon had bought some pot, and he'd convinced Gilbert to cut class so they could smoke it. Since Gilbert only lived a few miles away from the high school, they decided to go to his place. As they pulled into the FEMA trailer park where Gilbert lived, Brandon stared at the clutter of white trailers surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. The trailer Gilbert and his mother lived in had a dented satellite dish hanging off the side. A ripped garbage bag was lying in front of the trailer, and the ground around it was littered with packets of salt and pepper, gnawed chicken bones and dented beer cans. Next to the garbage bag, a dog with missing patches of hair was chewing on a bloody tampon. As Brandon and Gilbert approached the trailer, Gilbert shooed the dog away with the swat of a meaty hand, before walking up the steps and opening the screen door.

It was Friday, so Gilbert's mother was at work. Once inside, Gilbert pulled out a bong that he'd fashioned from a gas mask. While they sat on the sofa, Gilbert strapped the gas mask on and lit the bowl he'd mounted to the outside of the mask. He sucked the air deep into his lungs, exhaled, and as the mask filled with white smoke, his chubby face slowly disappeared.

"You going to the dance on Saturday?" Gilbert asked, taking off the mask. He had shoulder-length hair, black as the wings of a crow, and he parted it down the middle, the bangs combed back and feathered.

"I want to," Brandon said, "but I promised my sister I'd go to a play

with her.”

“What play?”

“It’s called *Romeo & Julian*,” Brandon said. “It’s a gay version of *Romeo and Juliet*. My sister thinks it’ll broaden my horizons. I told her I’m not a homophobe and that I have tons of gay friends, but she thinks I’m lying.”

Brandon didn’t have any gay friends, but it wasn’t because he didn’t like gay people. It was just because all the gay kids at school had their own clique, and Brandon figured the last thing they wanted in their group was some flaming heterosexual like him. “She’s always asking me to go places with her,” Brandon said. “She took me to the French Quarter a while back to see some new artist who splatters her own menstrual fluid onto blank canvases. She’s taking me to some animal rights protest next week. All of her friends are worked up because these scientists are doing experiments on rats.”

“What kind of experiments are they doing?”

“They plant electrodes in the rat’s brain, and the scientists steer the rats through an obstacle course with a remote control. The scientists think one day they’ll be able to use the rats to search for people buried under rubble after fires and hurricanes.”

“That’s cool,” Gilbert said, handing the mask to Brandon. “At least they get to rescue people instead of just winding up dead in some mousetrap.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought too, but my sister says it’s not fair since rats have rights too.”

While Brandon strapped on the mask, Gilbert said the pot in New Orleans was much better than what he’d been getting in St. Bernard, and Brandon told him, in a muffled voice, that Oz, the guy he’d bought it from, actually grew it in some storage room in New Orleans East. Oz used to work as a bouncer at a club called *The Crash Landing*. He had told Brandon that the owners originally designed the building to look as if a plane had crashed into the side of it. There was a jagged fuselage sticking out the right side of the club, and the words *The Crash Landing* looked like flames coming off the roof. After 9/11, though, the idea of a building that looked like a plane had crashed into it suddenly seemed more offensive than innovative, and the club eventually went belly-up. Oz had worked as a bouncer at Dino’s Rock Box, but he’d given up

working and spent most of his time monkeying with his motorcycles and selling dope. For years, Oz had competed as a professional bodybuilder, constantly pumping his veins full of steroids. But Brandon said that most of his muscle had turned to flab and that he looked like he was growing little boobs. Brandon had considered trying steroids himself, but when he'd looked it up on Wikipedia, he'd found out that they killed off all your sperm, so he'd changed his mind. As Brandon took a hit off the bong, he imagined all those clumps of murdered sperm drifting around inside Oz's body like rotten fish churning in a dirty aquarium.

Between puffs of pot smoke, Brandon told Gilbert how Maurice had been reading The Bible every day, how he constantly talked about Jesus, how he didn't allow them to drink tap water, how he'd bought a storm shelter, and how he'd been wearing a dust mask wherever he went. He also told Gilbert how Maurice had been carrying around a Bible, and how when he'd gone into Maurice's room one night to look at porn on Maurice's computer, he'd found little pieces of paper plastered all over the walls of the room, each with a verse from The Bible.

"Didn't you say your dad was Jewish?" Gilbert asked.

"Yeah, but my Mom's Catholic. I think he may be converting or something."

"So he's acting weird, huh?"

"Yep," Brandon said. "I think he may be going crazy or something."

Gilbert took a drag off the bong, removed the mask and handed it to Brandon.

"The worst part," Brandon said, "is that my counselor says all this shit is genetic, so I'll probably go mental at some point too. My mom says my whole friggin' family tree is chock full of lunatics. My cousin hung herself with her own belt when I was three, and my great grandfather was so depressed he blew his brains out with a .38 Special."

Gilbert smiled. "I think you need some pot therapy."

Brandon smiled, strapped the mask on and took a hit. A moment later, he could feel the dope creeping into his brain. As he took off the mask, he thought about a mental disorder called Walking Dead Syndrome that he'd read about on a website a few days earlier. The website explained how people affected with the syndrome actually thought they were dead. In some instances, people claimed they could smell their organs rotting inside them, even feel worms wriggling through their skin. In one case

study, a woman with the syndrome actually claimed she could smell her flesh decaying, and she'd even pleaded with police officers to take her to a morgue because she was convinced she was dead. According to the site, patients with the syndrome exhibited extreme depression, hopelessness, low energy, and decreased appetite.

Ever since Maurice and Vivian had separated, Brandon had felt empty inside. He knew he was depressed and that he hated exercising, and when he remembered how he hadn't eaten breakfast in weeks, he began to wonder if he had the disease. He tried to convince himself that he was fine, but as he sat there, he couldn't help but imagine his organs like slabs of meat rotting inside him, the breath in his chest buzzing like a swarm of hungry flies.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As Maurice drove down Jefferson Highway, he stared out the window at a dirty, rain-filled sky pocked with clouds. For the last few days, he'd been reading about Daniel's vision in The Bible—of a mighty storm churning the surface of a great sea. In Revelation, he'd read about how an angel appeared to John and showed him visions of events that would occur in the distant future. He'd even read part of *Joel*, where God spoke of pouring his Spirit upon people's flesh so that men would dream dreams and see visions.

He thought about the visions he'd been having, and after visiting the doctor and verifying that the government hadn't implanted some device in his brain to induce false visions, he was fairly confident the visions were authentic. Part of him, however, still couldn't help but wonder if they'd been concocted by the devil to deceive him and lead him into sin. Over the last few days, he'd typed phrases like *Am I really receiving divine visions from God?* and *Is the devil sending me false messages?* into Google, but the only responses he'd found were from members of a web forum for schizophrenics, and he knew the only way he'd be able to answer the questions with any degree of authenticity was to speak to a rabbi or a priest. Since the visions involved Jesus and Mary, he decided that a priest was the most appropriate option.

He drove past rows and rows of rickety houses, some untouched by the storm, others lopsided, covered with blue FEMA tarps. After pulling into the gravel parking lot that surrounded St. Agnes Church, he parked the car and walked to the side of the building, past the tangled shadows of oak trees and the pink blush of azalea bushes until he came to the door of the rectory. He knocked twice and waited, and as he was about to leave, the rectory door opened, and a tall, bony priest peeked through a crack in the door. One of his eyes was clouded with a cataract. His skin was gray and pocked, almost translucent with a spider web of blue veins in his neck and hands. The hair on top of his head had fallen out, and he'd combed thin strands of black hair over the bald spot.

“I’m looking for someone to speak to,” Maurice said, adjusting the dust mask.

“To speak to?” the priest asked, shielding his face from the rain-filled sky, his voice crackling from years of cigarette smoke. “About what?”

“Jesus,” Maurice said.

The priest yawned and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “What about him?” he asked, his breath thick with red wine.

“Well,” Maurice stammered. He could tell that the priest’s mind was occupied and that he was partially drunk, and he knew he needed to come up with some kind of sales pitch that would get the priest’s attention. “I’m a Jew,” he said finally, “and I’m thinking of converting.”

The priest adjusted his collar, revealing a tattoo of two small lightning bolts on his neck. “Well in that case,” the priest said, opening the door with an utter lack of enthusiasm, “by all means, come in.”

The room was dark, the only light seeping from a small lamp burning in the corner. There was a small CD player on the end table, and Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* was whispering from the speakers. The priest sat down and pulled out a silver cigarette case inscribed with a large cross then directed Maurice to a chair. “Mind if I smoke?” he asked, motioning to the dust mask Maurice was wearing. “I don’t want to irritate your condition.”

“Oh,” Maurice said. “No. It’s just a cold. Feel free.”

“You say you’re Jewish?” The priest snatched a cigarette from the case and lit it. “And you’re thinking of converting to Catholicism?”

“Yes,” Maurice said.

“Well,” the priest told Maurice, taking a deep drag off the cigarette. “If you do convert, you’re going to make our Archbishop very happy.”

“Excuse me.”

“The Archbishop’s been bucking for a Jew for a while now.” The priest rubbed his cloudy dead eye with his palm, tapped his cigarette against a glass ashtray. “It’s like he’s obsessed with it or something.”

Maurice smiled.

“Seriously, I’m surprised he hasn’t sent us out into the parish to start rounding up Jews for conversion.” He took a drag off the cigarette until it crackled, let the smoke crawl out his mouth. “He has this incentive program, or so he calls it. It’s a point system really. We get one hundred points for a Jew. The priest with the most points at the end of the month

gets a \$25 gift certificate to Olive Garden.” He took a quick drag off the cigarette. “You just got me a free Chicken marsala.” The priest grabbed a glass of wine from the coffee table and took a sip. “Not that the Archbishop will care very much,” he said, “but I’m curious, what makes you want to convert to Catholicism?”

Maurice told the priest he’d been raised Jewish, and that though he’d never been particularly religious, for the last few weeks he’d been experiencing strange religious premonitions. “They’re not so much visions,” he said, fearful that describing them as *visions* might make the priest think he had some mental disorder. “They’re more like little flashes of images, like dreams, but I’m awake. Sometimes the dreams are different, but the message always seems to be that Jesus is returning to Earth to save the world from its sins. It’s all a little confusing,” Maurice said, “especially since I was raised Jewish.”

“Did you know Joan of Arc had visions?” the priest asked.

“No. I didn’t.”

“She used to see flashes of light. Heard the voices of saints, even claimed to have had visions of angels. Peter Bartholomew actually had visions of Christ. He even had a vision of Saint Andrew. During the siege of Antioch he claimed Saint Andrew had taken him to the Church of St. Peter and showed him where the Holy Lance was buried. The discovery of the Lance was later credited with ensuring the Crusader victory.”

“I think I saw something about that on the History Channel.”

“And then, of course,” the priest continued, “there was Constantine the Great.”

“What happened to him?”

“He claimed he saw a cross of light in the sky before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, and that the cross was inscribed with the words *conquer by this*. Scholars disagree about the details of the vision, but there’s no disputing that Constantine won the battle. He was actually a pagan,” the priest said, his voice sounding like a scratchy old record, “but the vision of the cross eventually motivated him to convert to Christianity.”

“Really?” Maurice said. “I didn’t know that.”

“His conversion completely transformed Rome. It took a while, but by the end of the fourth century, Christianity was the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. My point, I guess, is that there’s a history in the Catholic Church of people having visions from God.”

“I’m glad I came to see you,” Maurice said. “I feel much better now, even though my entire family is convinced I’ve lost my mind.”

The priest smiled. “At the time, people thought Constantine and Joan of Arc had lost their minds too. But eventually they realized they weren’t crazy at all—that they were somehow enlightened—and that for whatever reason they could see things that other people simply couldn’t. It’s quite a rare gift, to be enlightened.”

“So you don’t think I’m crazy?” Maurice asked, trying to crack the code embedded in the priest’s words.

“Not at all, Maurice. On the contrary,” the priest said, “I think you’re seeing things quite clearly. Perhaps more clearly than you’ve ever seen them.” He rose from where he was sitting and extended his hand. “So I guess we’ll see you in mass this Sunday then?”

“Yes, Father.” A sense of calm purpose settled in Maurice’s eyes. “And thank you,” he said, shaking the priest’s hand with a firm, confident grip. “Thank you very much.”

As Maurice left, he was more convinced than ever that he was receiving divine messages from God, and when he arrived at his car he could feel the white static worming its way through his skull. As he sat there, he imagined his brain glowing like a Christmas tree, a series of tiny wires in his head like antennae picking up some divine frequency, some obscure and mysterious message sent to him from God. He grabbed a Bible from the backseat and thumbed through the pages until he came to Revelation, where he saw a passage that described a pregnant woman who appeared in heaven with a crown of twelve stars on her head. As the woman cried out in pain, a dragon stood in front of her, waiting for her to give birth. The dragon flicked his tail and swept a third of the stars out of the sky. While the stars fell to Earth, the dragon crouched in front of the pregnant woman, waiting to eat her child the moment it was born.

As Maurice continued to read he remembered how when he’d heard the static, he’d also heard the words *dragon* and *child*. He remembered the gory visions that had been flickering in the back of his brain for the last few days, and he suddenly realized that the pregnant woman in his visions was Vivian and that the baby she was carrying was Jesus Christ. Almost immediately the mangled, eerie realization that Michael’s true objective was to murder Vivian’s baby began to haunt his brain. He knew he needed to do something, but he wasn’t sure what. As he drove

down a winding street lined with the twisted shadows of oak trees, he considered his options.

* * *

That afternoon, when Audrey left Snake and Jake's, she was nearly drunk, and thoughts of Glenn were buzzing around in her head like a nest of angry wasps. As she was leaving, she called Glenn from her cell phone and told him she would meet him at his condo. His wife would be home from work soon, and he was a bit apprehensive at first, but eventually he agreed.

Fifteen minutes later, when Audrey pulled up to Glenn's condo, Glenn was standing outside in a suit and tie. He climbed into the car and closed the door, and they talked for a few minutes. Audrey told Glenn she was horny, and when Glenn told her to drive around the block, Audrey cut the engine and smiled.

"What are you doing?" Glenn asked.

Audrey leaned over and nibbled on Glenn's ear. "Let's go inside."

"Are you crazy? Elizabeth and the kids will be home any minute."

"Inside." Audrey kissed his neck then reached down and unzipped his slacks.

"No way. Just drive around the block."

"Inside or nothing," Audrey hissed, staring at Glenn with wild, animal eyes, her hand drifting between his legs.

"Fine," Glenn sighed, closing his zipper, "but we need to be quick."

They climbed out of the car and Audrey followed him up the driveway to the front door. Once inside, Glenn led her to the back of the house, to what looked like a children's playroom. The walls of the room were blue, painted with unicorns, rainbows, and puffy white clouds, and the floor was cluttered with toys. Glenn closed the door, turned to Audrey and unbuttoned her blouse, biting her hard on the neck while his other hand drifted under her skirt.

"Have you missed your dirty little slut?" Audrey asked.

As she said this, Glenn pulled away. "I thought we agreed on *dirty little whore*?"

"Seriously," Audrey asked. "I was wearing a dog collar last time I was here, Glenn. Is it really that big of a deal if I use the word *slut* instead

of *whore*?”

“It’s a master/slave fantasy, Audrey. It kind of kills the mood if the slave can’t follow simple directions.”

“I have fantasies too, you know,” Audrey told him. “I have this really dirty one where you take me out to dinner and I order lobster and escargot.”

“Jesus,” Glenn sighed. “Again with dinner.”

Audrey had grown tired of only seeing Glenn at his condo. She wanted the affair to be more like the affairs she’d seen in the movies, where the two secret lovers sneaked off discreetly to some fancy hotel in the city, made passionate love, and then draped themselves in luxurious white robes and ordered room service. “I want us to go to the opera together,” she said. “I want us to share a bagel in the morning and discuss politics and social injustice over coffee.”

“You know I hate bagels,” Glenn said.

“I’m so sick of this. I think we need to stop seeing each other.”

“What are you going to do?” Glenn said. “Find some kid your own age who fumbles with your bra strap while he talks about the recent Batman movie?”

“Maybe I will,” Audrey said. “At least he won’t be embarrassed of me.”

“You’re not going to be happy with someone your own age, Audrey, and you know it. You’re too sophisticated for that.”

“I don’t have to date someone my age. That new statistics professor is pretty cute.”

“Ronald Pearson?” Glenn snarled. “He’s a complete hack. He received his Ph.D. from Middle Tennessee State for Christ’s sake.”

“Yeah, well,” Audrey said. “I think he’s cute.”

“He wears corduroy suits in the summer. Not to mention that child molester mustache.”

Audrey turned as if she was leaving.

“Alright,” Glenn said finally. “I’ll take you to dinner tomorrow night. We’ll go to Biloxi, to one of the casinos.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“So,” Audrey said, flashing a seductive smile. “Have you missed your dirty little whore?”

Glenn smiled back, and Audrey pushed him down onto a large purple beanbag, unbuckled his slacks and pulled them down to his ankles. After she'd unbuttoned his shirt, she dragged her fingernails across his chest, bent down and pushed a headless Barbie doll out of the way. When she was on her knees, she looked up at him and squeezed his crotch hard. Glenn winced in pain. Gradually, she began to kiss the skin along his hipbone, biting him hard on his stomach, so hard that she saw a drop of blood when she looked down. When she finally took him into her mouth, he let out a quiet sigh, tilted his head back and stared up at the ceiling at a painted blue sky cluttered with clouds.

When they were done Glenn walked Audrey to the door and told her he'd call her. When she climbed into the car, she saw a missing button on her blouse. She cranked the engine, and as she pulled down the visor mirror to check her hair, she noticed that her front tooth was stained with blood. She smiled and wiped away the blood with her finger, then yanked the car into drive and pulled away.

* * *

Over the last few days, Maurice had become increasingly fearful that Michael would try to harm Vivian again or possibly even the children. Though he'd never fired a gun he figured it might be a good idea to purchase one for protection. He'd recently seen a commercial for a local gun store called The G-Spot, and he remembered that the store was located in Algiers.

The store was in a ratty old strip mall, sandwiched between a bail bonds office and an abandoned McDonald's. As Maurice pulled into the parking lot, he had to navigate the car around heaps of cracked cinder blocks, stacks of moldy sheetrock and rolls of mildewed carpet until he finally found a parking spot near the back of the lot, next to a flimsy, lopsided snowball stand.

When he entered the gun store a few minutes later, he immediately saw a Vietnamese woman behind the counter. She had bleached-blond hair and huge breasts strangled beneath a tight white T-shirt that read: *You must be 21 to ride this ride.*

As always, Maurice was wearing the dust mask, and the minute the woman saw him walk in, she assumed he was there to rob the place. She

placed her hand on the .357 Magnum strapped to her waist, and when Maurice reached the counter she pulled the gun out and pointed it at him.

“You hold it right there,” she snarled, her Vietnamese accent sharp and abrupt.

“What did I do?” Maurice asked, throwing up his hands, his words frantic.

“You take mask off.”

“It’s not a disguise,” he said, a red dot from the laser sighting twitching on his forehead.

“Take off.”

Maurice did as she said, took the mask off slowly and put his hands back in the air. As he did, the woman walked around the counter and held the gun on him while she scanned him from head-to-toe with a hand-held metal detector. When she was done, she told Maurice he couldn’t wear the mask if he intended to purchase anything. He agreed and explained to her that he was wearing the mask because he had a cold. The woman apologized and said there had been a string of armed robberies in the area lately and that she was sorry if she’d frightened him. They talked for a minute or two, mostly about the crime in New Orleans, and when the situation had finally settled down, Maurice told the woman he wanted to purchase a handgun.

“You sure you no want assault rifle?” the woman asked, adjusting the ammunition belt wrapped around her waist. “If catastrophe happen, assault rifle much better. It kill more people than handgun.”

“No,” Maurice told her. “I think a handgun will work.”

When the woman asked him what he intended to use it for, Maurice saw a surveillance camera on the wall. He wondered if the camera was a live feed to a van full of FBI agents who were watching his every move. As he stared up casually at the camera, he realized he needed to come up with an answer to the woman’s question. He tried to conjure up something believable, something that would convince the government he was not a threat to them. For a moment, his mind went blank, but when the woman asked again, it suddenly came to him.

“What kind of gun would you use?” he asked, “if you wanted to kill yourself?”

“I no kill myself,” the woman said, seemingly confused.

“But if you did?”

The woman flashed Maurice a confused look. “I no want to,” she said again.

“Are you married?”

The woman nodded.

“Let’s just say your husband divorced you,” he told her, “and you wanted to kill yourself. What kind of gun would you use?”

“Divorce no make me kill myself.”

“Fine, let’s say your husband was cheating on you then, and his girlfriend was pregnant with his child.”

“I still no kill myself. Maybe I kill him,” she said, a smile breaking across her face, “but I no kill myself.”

“Okay,” Maurice continued, “what if, on top of all that, you had cancer. So aside from losing your husband and his girlfriend being pregnant with his son, you also had cancer.”

“Oh, cancer terrible,” she frowned. “Maybe I kill myself I have cancer.”

“If you did,” Maurice said, “and if you wanted to kill yourself, what kind of gun would you use?”

“I law-abiding American citizen,” she said. “Attempt suicide illegal.”

“Committing suicide is illegal?”

“No,” the woman said. “*Attempt* suicide illegal.”

“Well, if that’s true,” Maurice told her, “I’d better get the job done right the first time. What would you recommend?”

“Let see,” the woman said, biting her tongue, her eyes drifting toward the ceiling. Her lip and eyebrow were pierced, and she was wearing silver eyeshadow. She paused for a moment, and her silver eyes suddenly lit up. “Ooooh, I know. .44 Magnum with hollow-point.” She bent down, and Maurice could see a pink thong peeking out from the top of her faded jeans. She reached her hand into the glass case, grabbed a gun with a price tag dangling from the barrel and placed it on the counter. Maurice picked up the gun and pressed the barrel against his temple, holding it to his temple for a moment, before lowering it and glancing down at the price on the tag. “Maybe I should consider something a little cheaper,” he said. He tried to think of another type of gun, but all that came to mind was a band he’d listened to in college that was named after a gun. “I know,” he said finally. “How about a .38 Special?”

“There nothing special about .38 Special,” she said. “Magnum with hollow point best.” She reached under the glass case and grabbed a box of hollow-points, pulled out one of the bullets from the box and handed it to Maurice. “With this,” the woman told him, “bullet mushroom to twice original size. Make larger wound channel, create more shock to nervous system. Larger wound channel mean more blood loss, less clot. We have 20-count box and 50-count box.”

“I’d really like to see a .38 Specialm if you don’t mind,” Maurice said, handing the bullet back to her.

“Fine,” the woman said, running a hand through her peroxide-streaked hair. She took the Magnum from Maurice, placed it in the glass case, then grabbed a .38 Special and handed it to him. “You want 20-count box of bullet,” she asked, “or 50-count?”

“The 20-count box is fine,” Maurice told her.

“We have special on 50-count box for dollar more.”

“The 20-count is fine.”

“Just one dollar more for fifty bullet,” she told him. “You never have too many bullet. That what husband always say.”

“That’s okay.”

“Why you only buy twenty bullet,” she asked, “when you buy fifty for dollar more?”

“Because I don’t need fifty.”

“You get more for money,” the woman insisted. “You give rest to someone maybe, for Christmas present. Everyone have guns, and if they have gun, they need bullet.”

“Thanks,” Maurice said, “but I don’t think I’d feel comfortable giving someone bullets as a Christmas present.”

Maurice thanked the woman again and insisted that he wanted the 20-count box. She swiped his credit card and handed him his receipt. Kneeling in the parking lot, he checked under the car, looking for any tracking devices that might have been hidden under the wheel wells. He even popped the hood and checked for GPS devices near the battery and the air cleaner, but he didn’t find anything. When he was done, he climbed into the car and headed home.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Maurice arrived at the high school on Monday, Brandon saw a naked female mannequin lying across the backseat of Maurice's car.

"What the hell's that?" he asked, placing his knapsack in the backseat before climbing into the car.

Maurice smiled. "What's it look like?"

"Like a mannequin," Brandon said.

"Pretty cool, huh?"

"I guess." Brandon stared over his shoulder, his eyes traveling up the mannequin's glossy hips, toward its two perky, plastic boobs. "Where did you get it?"

"I found it," Maurice said. "It was in a dumpster outside some abandoned department store."

Brandon wanted to ask Maurice why he had a naked mannequin in his car, but he hesitated, mostly because he feared Maurice might be planning to use it for some sort of strange sexual purpose. Brandon had recently seen a documentary about a man who lived with a mannequin. The man dressed it, ate dinner with it, had conversations with it, even had sex with it. Becoming obsessed with religion and tearing the sheetrock out of your house was one thing, Brandon thought, but having bizarre sexual relations with a mannequin was something entirely different. Was having sex with a mannequin even legal? What if Maurice wound up in jail? If the police found out, they'd surely remove him from Maurice's custody. Not to mention, everyone at school would know his father got his kicks from molesting department store mannequins, which would only further damage Brandon's already questionable social standing at school.

Brandon waited for Maurice to provide an explanation, but he only smiled.

"What's it for?" he asked finally.

"For work," Maurice said.

Brandon raised his eyebrows. "Why do you need a mannequin at

work?”

“My boss had these new United Health Insurance T-shirts and hats printed. She wants a mannequin so we can advertise them in the office.”

“What are you going to do for pants?” Brandon asked, breathing a quiet sigh of relief.

“I dunno,” Maurice said, as if he hadn’t considered the question. “Maybe Audrey has some old jeans I can use.”

“I don’t think Audrey will like the idea of some mannequin wearing her pants,” Brandon said. “Anyway, she threw away all of her jeans.”

“Why?” Maurice asked.

“She said all the jeans in American stores are made in China by a bunch of kids in sweatshops. She said the kids are forced to work sixteen hours a day, and that the factory bosses pin the kids’ eyes open with laundry pins so they can’t fall asleep.”

“You see,” Maurice said. “And you complain because I destroyed the DVD player and the microwave. How would you like to have your eyes pinned open all day like those little Chinese kids?”

Brandon didn’t say a word.

“Anyway,” Maurice said. I don’t have to use jeans. Any pants will work.”

The car came to a stop, and Brandon looked at the dust mask Maurice was wearing. “Are you okay?” Brandon asked finally.

“Sure,” Maurice said, waiting for the light to turn green. “Why?”

“You’ve been acting weird lately.”

“It’s just stress.” Maurice flashed a pathetic look, as if he were one shitty day away from putting a bullet in his head. “My job is very stressful.”

“Maybe you could take a break,” Brandon said. “We could go to Blue Bayou this weekend.”

“Blue Bayou?” Maurice said. “I don’t think so. Didn’t you hear about that woman who fell off the Mad Moccasin?”

Brandon shook his head. “You used to love that ride.”

“That was before I realized how dangerous it was.”

As they drove, Brandon thought about a documentary he’d seen recently on the History Channel. A paleontologist had found a dirty skull with a hole in it while digging in some country Brandon had never heard of. She said the hole was the result of trepanning, and that in

ancient civilizations people who were thought to be insane often had holes drilled into their skulls so that the evil spirits could fly out.

Sitting there, Brandon couldn't help but think of Maurice. He'd spoken to Audrey about Maurice on numerous occasions, and though she said everything would be fine, Brandon still couldn't help but worry. As he stared out the car window, Brandon imagined Maurice's thoughts like evil spirits haunting his head. He pictured Maurice lying on a surgeon's table, the left side of his head shaved bald, a doctor bent over him with a medical saw. He could almost hear the chirping sound of the saw as it burrowed through the thick marrow of Maurice's skull, and as they drove down Napoleon Avenue, he imagined the evil spirits like a flock of startled blackbirds flying from the hole in Maurice's head.

* * *

It was almost noon when Maurice pulled up to an abandoned Six Flags amusement park. He parked the car and grabbed the mannequin from the backseat, then walked through a sunburned field choked with weeds, past twisted pieces of rusted corrugated metal until he came to a barbed wire fence that surrounded the park. He threw the mannequin over the fence, adjusted the dust mask he was wearing then slipped through a ragged hole near the bottom. Since the area around the abandoned amusement park was on the outskirts of New Orleans, and fairly desolate since the storm, he figured it was the perfect place for target practice.

Once inside the actual park, Maurice walked past the rusted remnants of rides, past a mildewed bumper car overgrown with weeds, a dirty rat skull bleached by the sun. Next to a dented water fountain was a lopsided gift shop splattered with graffiti. One of the walls was missing, and the inside of the shop was cluttered with mounds of trash, piles of waterlogged T-shirts soaked with gray silt and muddy rainwater. In the corner of the room was a keyboard with missing buttons tangled in the wiry guts of a computer. Maurice could see sunlight bleeding through tiny cracks in the roof, where warped ceiling fans hung from exposed rafters, their blades drooping toward the ground like the dead petals of flowers.

Across from the old *Under the Sea* roller coaster, near a weedy slab of cracked concrete, Maurice found an overturned claw machine with a

pile of waterlogged stuffed animals spilling out the side. After he propped the mannequin against the rusted machine, he grabbed the box of shells from his pocket, loaded the gun, then walked thirty or so feet from the mannequin to a mound of rain-eaten dirt surrounded by a patch of dead weeds. Maurice pulled the bottle of Maalox from his pocket, took a swig from the bottle, and as he did, a burst of white static climbed up his backbone and slithered into his skull. As the static crackled through his brain, he thought about what the priest had told him a few days earlier, about how Joan of Arc and Constantine had been enlightened by God, how they'd heard the holy voices of saints, even had visions of angels.

I'm a soldier, Maurice thought, *a soldier of the Lord.* As he stood there, a frenzy of static-filled visions flashed in the back of his brain. He took another swig of Maalox, imagining the ulcers bleeding in his gut, his insides sacred and glowing. He put the bottle of Maalox in his pocket, raised the pistol and aimed at the mannequin's nose. "Blessed be the Lord," he mumbled, the words buzzing behind the cotton dust mask, "for He commands the angels to guard me in all my ways." He held the pistol steady, with an unwavering determination that he hadn't felt in years, took a deep breath, squinted his eyes, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet missed the mannequin entirely, shattering the large piece of mildewed glass surrounding the top of the claw machine. "I will stand firm against the devil," Maurice said, his head dizzy with static, his voice becoming more animated, more dramatic. He squeezed the trigger, and the bullet missed both the claw machine and the mannequin, kicking up a cloud of dirt a few feet away. He fired again and again. "I will wear the helmet of salvation," he said, the bullets whizzing past the mannequin, each one somehow miraculously less accurate than the one before it. "I will take up the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

For the last few days Maurice had been thinking of ways to kill Michael. Initially, he considered shooting him, but given the fact that he was unable to wound a helpless mannequin from thirty feet away, he figured shooting Michael was a bad idea. He'd considered poisoning him, planting a bomb in his car, stabbing him, pushing him off an overpass, drowning him, electrocuting him, slitting his throat, even setting him on fire. But the more options Maurice considered, the more he realized he didn't have the stomach for murder. That's when he decided to hire someone to kill Michael. He suspected Brandon had been buying dope from a local drug dealer, and over the next few days Maurice cooked up a plan to hire the drug dealer to kill Michael.

On Saturday, when Maurice pulled into the FEMA trailer park, he saw Gilbert lying out front sunbathing on a lounge chair he'd stolen from Big Lots eating a Twinkie. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and folds of belly fat sagged over the elastic waistline of his bathing suit. His entire body, even his face, was slathered with sun tan lotion.

As Maurice walked up to the trailer, Gilbert stood up.

"Hey, Mr. Delahoussaye," he said, shielding his eyes from the sun. "Brandon's not here. He went to some homosexual parade with his sister." At first Gilbert wondered why Maurice was wearing a dust mask, but then he remembered what Brandon had said, about how he'd been wearing the mask because he was scared the air was unsafe to breathe.

Maurice stared at a wrinkled old woman in front of the trailer next to Gilbert's. The robe she was inside-out, she had pink rollers in her hair, and she was holding a pitcher of water and mumbling to herself. Maurice watched her water a red plastic flower that was planted in the gravel, then turned back to Gilbert. He told Gilbert he was there to see him, not Brandon, that he knew Brandon and Gilbert had been smoking pot together, and that he wanted to know where Brandon was getting his dope. Gilbert tried to conjure up a quick, believable story. He told Maurice how marijuana lowered a person's sperm count, and about

how important it was that he carry on his family's name since he was an only child. But the more and more he talked, the more he knew Maurice wasn't buying his story. Then he suddenly remembered how Brandon said Maurice had recently become obsessed with religion.

"Anyway, Mr. Delahoussaye," he said, "smoking pot's against my religion. I'm not sure if Brandon told you or not, but I'm a born again Christian."

"Cut the crap, Gilbert," Maurice said. "Every time Brandon comes home from hanging out with you, he smells like Willie Nelson's tour bus. Now give me the name of the person you're getting it from. Unless you want me to get the police involved."

Maurice assured Gilbert that he wouldn't mention his name when he spoke with the drug dealer, and that he had no intentions of putting the drug dealer in jail. Though Gilbert insisted he didn't know anything, eventually Maurice managed to spook the drug dealer's name and address out of him.

"It's important that you keep this between us," Maurice said.

"Sure thing, Mr. Delahoussaye. I won't breathe a word."

It was almost three o'clock when Maurice pulled into the clamshell parking lot of the ratty apartment complex in Fat City where Oz lived. He parked the car between a dumpster and a gutted Chevy with the doors chopped off, then walked up the rusted stairwell that led to Oz's apartment. Though he was a bit apprehensive, he took off the dust mask because he figured Oz might get suspicious if he were propositioned to commit a murder by a man wearing a mask. A moment later Oz came to the door. He was bald, his two front teeth had silver caps, and he was wearing jeans with missing knees, white snakeskin boots, and no shirt. The left side of his face and neck were scarred from a knife fight a few years back.

Maurice told Oz he was Brandon's father, and that he'd like to talk to him. Though Oz was suspicious at first, Maurice assured him that he wasn't there to cause trouble, and that he had a proposition for Oz, and after some convincing, Oz invited him into the apartment.

Once inside, Maurice followed Oz through the kitchen, which reeked of stale beer and cat shit. There was a cat box in the corner of the room filled with tiny brown cat turds, and the cracked vinyl floor was splattered with green pellets of cat litter, so much that Maurice could hear it crackle

under his feet as he walked across the room. The kitchen sink was filled with moldy glasses, plates flecked with half-eaten food, and the dishwasher door was hanging open, the inside cluttered with greasy motorcycle parts. In the corner of the living room there was an aquarium with dirty green water and a fish with a missing eye floating belly-up. Above the aquarium was a mounted deer head. Below it, a bull's eye superimposed on a poster of Osama Bin Laden's face, a green dart stuck in his left cheek. On the floor, a black cat with a missing eye was scratching at a balding patch of green shag carpet.

As they walked into the living room, Oz's girlfriend, Jazelle, was sitting on the sofa. She was wearing a black silk kimono with red roses embroidered on the front, pink flip-flops, gray lipstick, black fingernail polish, and long fake black eyelashes. Her hair was braided into long blonde cornrows with colored beads at the end, her arms freckled with a dirty constellation of needle marks.

The floor of the living room was littered with pots and buckets overflowing with rotten rainwater. During Katrina a maple tree had fallen on the apartment complex and cracked part of the roof. The apartment manager had covered it with one of those blue tarps that FEMA had provided, but when Maurice walked into the living room, he could see scraps of light leaking through the slivers of wood in the ceiling.

"This is little Brandon's father," Oz said to Jazelle.

Jazelle grabbed a pack of generic cigarettes from the coffee table, yanked a sweaty lighter from her tanned and wrinkled cleavage. She was one of the skinniest people Maurice had ever seen, and she looked like she was one good puke away from an eating disorder. Last year, she'd had liposuction, and her kimono was cracked open, exposing a pink zipper-like scar on her belly where the doctor had sucked all the fat out.

"What's he want?" Jazelle asked.

"He says he's got a proposition for us."

"Did you frisk him?" Jazelle asked, a twisted white string of smoke drifting from her gray lip-sticked mouth.

"He's Brandon's father," Oz told her. "He's harmless."

"I swear, Oz, one day someone's gonna walk right into this apartment and blow our goddamn brains all over the wall."

"He's fine," Oz told Jazelle. "Would you calm your nerves?"

Maurice sat down across from Oz and Jazelle, at a coffee table

littered with dirty needles, rolling papers, moldy plates of food, and empty cigarette packs separating them.

“So, what’s this proposition?” Oz asked Maurice.

“I’m not sure if Brandon told you or not, but my wife is pregnant, and we recently separated, so needless to say it’s been a very difficult time for us.”

Maurice stopped for a moment, but neither of them said a word.

“The baby is actually the result of an affair my wife had,” Maurice continued. “It’s not my child, and well, to make a long story short, I have reason to believe that the father is trying to harm the baby.”

Oz rubbed his stomach. He had a tattoo of a revolver on his abdomen, the barrel pointing down so that it resembled a gun tucked into his waistband. “Why don’t you call the cops?”

“This man,” Maurice said, “Michael’s his name. He’s a very powerful individual, and to be honest, I doubt calling the police would do much good.”

“Why would he wanna bring harm on the baby?” Oz asked.

“He’s married, and I suspect he doesn’t want to be exposed for having an affair.”

“So what?” Jazelle interrupted, the words strained beneath a hacking cough. She grabbed a tube of Chapstick from the table. She’d spent half her life in a tanning bed, so her skin was the color of sweet and sour pork. She had a mouth full of crooked little baby teeth, and her lips were always cracked and bleeding, so she was constantly carrying around tubes of Chapstick. “What are you wanting with us?”

“Well,” Maurice said, “there’s really no delicate way to say this, so I’ll just say it. To put it quite bluntly I’d like you to kill him.”

The room grew eerily silent, and for a moment the words seemed to hang overhead, circling the air like vultures.

“Would you be willing to do something like that?” Maurice asked.

As Maurice said this, Jazelle reached her hand into the slit between the sofa cushions and pulled out a gun. “This son-of-a-bitch is a cop,” she said. “He’s trying to set us up. I saw something just like this on *Dateline*.”

“I’m not a cop,” Maurice said, his heart fluttering in his chest. “I swear.”

“I’ll bet he’s wearing a wire.” Jazelle walked over to Maurice and pointed the gun at him, patting his chest with the other hand. When she

didn't find anything, she walked to the window and peeked through the mildewed curtains. "There's probably a van full of pigs in the parking lot recording this whole conversation," she said, glancing out the dirty window. When she saw the same rusted cars as usual, she demanded that Maurice show her his driver's license.

"Calm your damn nerves," Oz yelled.

"I'm not calming anything," Jazelle snarled, her voice wild. "Not until I see his driver's license."

Maurice pulled his driver's license from his back pocket slowly and handed it to Oz.

"His last name's Delahoussaye," Oz said, staring down at the license. "The same as Brandon's. See, I told you."

Maurice spent the next few minutes frantically trying to convince Jazelle that he was not a police officer. Eventually, he was able to put her mind at ease, and Jazelle lowered the gun, stuffed it back into the slit between the cushions, and sat back down on the sofa.

Though Maurice was a bit apprehensive about bringing up the topic a second time, he did anyway.

"I appreciate the offer," Oz told him. "But I'm on parole. Last thing I need."

"I'd be willing to pay you ten thousand dollars," Maurice said. "Say five thousand up front, and five thousand when it's done?"

"Thanks," Oz said, "but we ain't exactly the murdering type."

"Thirty-thousand," Jazelle interrupted, fingering one of the dirty red beads at the end of her braid.

Maurice looked at Oz, then at Jazelle. "That's a lot of money."

"We're the perps," Jazelle said.

"The perps?"

"The perps." A crooked smile flickered on Jazelle's lip. "Jesus, ain't you ever watched TV?"

"How about twenty-thousand?" Maurice asked. "Ten thousand up front, and ten thousand when it's done?"

"Cash," Jazelle said. "No checks."

Jazelle clicked the remote control, surfing through the channels until she came to an Alfred Hitchcock marathon. *The Birds* was on, and the man on television was lying on the floor, his clothes pecked with holes, his eyes missing from their bloody sockets. "How were you figuring on

having us do it?” she asked, taking a long drag off her cigarette, sucking the smoke deep into her lungs.

“I’m not really sure,” Maurice said. “What are my options?”

“We could chop his head off,” Jazelle said. “Hide it in a dumpster.”

“Jesus, Jazelle,” Oz snarled. “Why the hell would we do something like that?”

“Because it’s smart, that’s why.” Jazelle flicked her cigarette until a long gray ash sprinkled the green shag carpet, mashed the ashes into the carpet with her big toe. “They do it on CSI all the time.”

“This ain’t CSI.”

“CSI is based on real life,” Jazelle said, “and this is real life, ain’t it?”

“To be honest,” Maurice said. “I just want him gone, so that there’s absolutely no chance of him harming my wife or the baby.”

They discussed stabbing Michael, but eventually they agreed that shooting him was the best option. Oz knew where he could get a gun with a serial number that had been filed off. Maurice gave them a picture of Michael that he’d found on the Internet, and though the picture was a few years old, Michael hadn’t aged much, so Maurice figured it would be fine. He also gave them the address of the gym where he knew Michael exercised every day, as well as the license plate number and the make and model of Michael’s car. They agreed to meet on Wednesday at an abandoned hair salon in New Orleans East so Maurice could pay them the ten thousand dollars.

After a brief discussion, Maurice rose from the sofa. As Oz walked Maurice out, Jazelle was staring at the television screen, at a herd of kids screaming as they ran from a schoolhouse. She snuffed her cigarette out in an ashtray on the coffee table, watching the children running frantically through a buzzing swarm of blackbirds, giggling each time one of the birds swooped down and pecked the children on the head.

* * *

As Vivian and Audrey sat in silence, Vivian stared out the passenger side window, at a large bus as it pulled up to the stoplight next to them. An advertisement on the side of the bus read: *Hurricane Katrina Tours - Witness the Aftermath of America’s Greatest Catastrophe Firsthand. Space is Limited. Call Today!*

“So,” she said, turning to Audrey, “are you still dating the sadist calculus teacher?”

“His name is Glenn. And he’s a tenured professor.”

Rain began to sprinkle the windshield and Vivian turned on her wipers. “Well,” she said, her face turning serious, “someone should report him to the dean for taking advantage of young girls.”

“He’s not taking advantage of me,” Audrey said.

“I *do* care.” As Vivian stared at Audrey, she could tell that Audrey was upset, and she suddenly felt a strange motherly instinct to reach over and place her hand on her shoulder. Vivian’s parents had avoided showing affection the way most people avoid hepatitis or herpes, but she’d seen movies on *Lifetime* where mothers comforted their children by hugging them or placing a hand on their shoulder, and though she’d never been an affectionate person, she always found herself wishing she could be more like one of those mothers. When she finally did reach over, the movement was slow and awkward, filled with hesitation, as if she were reaching into a lion’s cage with a bloody steak.

The touch must have surprised Audrey because when she felt it, she pulled away quickly with a sudden jerk, as if she’d been struck by a live wire.

“What are you doing?” Audrey asked.

“I’m trying to comfort you.”

Vivian reached over again, and Audrey jerked in her seat. “Since when do you try to comfort people?”

“This is what mothers do,” Vivian said, her words emotionless and perfunctory, as if her brain had swallowed the thought without even tasting it.

“You should try comforting Dad.”

Vivian turned her attention back to the road but didn’t say a word. “You might find this hard to believe,” she said, “but your father had problems long before I came around.”

“Yeah, well, somehow you found a way to make them a whole lot worse.”

“So it’s my fault your father has problems?”

She waited for Audrey to respond, but she didn’t.

“Do you know what it’s like?” Vivian asked, “to be married to someone who is completely dependent on you?”

“Oh, woe is me,” Audrey said. “You should be happy that someone needs you.”

“I was,” Vivian said. “I am. For a long time, it made me feel good that he needed me so much. But after a while, I dunno. I guess after a while, it started to feel less like a compliment and more like a reminder of how inadequate I was.”

Vivian’s honesty surprised Audrey, and though her instinct was to respond with some shitty, sarcastic comment, she didn’t say a word.

Vivian wiped a tear from her eye. “He was so depressed for so long. It’s stupid, I know, but I kept thinking that if I were a good wife, I could fix him. I could make him feel better, you know? I tried and tried, but nothing worked.” They came to red light, and the traffic dragged to a stop. As they sat there, Vivian stared out the car window. “I guess I just got tired of feeling like a failure.”

The rain was falling harder now, and as Vivian looked up at a charred black sky, a sense of loneliness rolled over her like a wave. On the radio, a man was talking about another flock of dead birds that had been found near the Superdome. As she stared up at the sky she imagined she was one of those birds falling through the air, plummeting helplessly toward the earth.

“He came to my ultrasound, you know?” Vivian said, wiping tears from her eyes. “We decided to start having lunch together once a week. That way, I can check in on him, to make sure he’s doing okay. I also checked in on Brandon, like you asked.”

Audrey stared out the window without saying a word.

“I spoke to his counselor on Thursday. He said Brandon expressed interest in becoming a psychologist.”

“Really?” Audrey asked, turning from the window. “I never knew he was interested in psychology.”

“Neither did I. Apparently, he told Mr. Richardson that his family was filled with lunatics and that he’d have lots of people to practice on.”

A smile squirmed in the corner of Audrey’s mouth. “He told Mr. Richardson that?”

“Yes,” Vivian said. “And Mr. Richardson told me.”

“Jesus,” Audrey said. “What did you say?”

Vivian smiled back. “I was so embarrassed. I mean, what do you say to something like that?”

“I guess it’s good,” Audrey said, “that he’s at least interested in something.”

“Yeah,” Vivian paused. “I guess. I just wish he would have chosen something more practical, you know?”

“If you think psychologists don’t make good money, you’re wrong. Rochelle’s studying to be one. She says they do well. Especially if you get a master’s degree.”

“Brandon’s not going to get a master’s degree, Audrey. Have you seen his grades? I think becoming a psychologist may be a little unrealistic.”

“His grades aren’t that bad,” Audrey said, the smile dying on her lips. “Anyway, aren’t parents supposed to tell their kids they can be anything they want?”

“Parents are supposed to be honest with their children, Audrey, not lie to them. Being honest with him is better than setting him up for failure. I wanted to be a plastic surgeon when I was in high school. Everyone knew I could never do it, and instead of lying to me, my parents told me the truth. Sure, I was upset at first, but in the end I was glad they were honest with me.”

“Sounds like you had horrible parents.”

“No,” Vivian said. “Bad parents would have lied to me just to make me feel good. Being honest is much harder than telling people what they want to hear. Being honest takes courage.”

“What do you know about being honest, anyway?” Audrey asked. “Or parenting for that matter? Good parents believe in their kids, whether their expectations are realistic or not. I saw a documentary a while back about this guy who lost his leg in Iraq. Even though he only had one leg, he managed to complete an entire marathon. I’m sure his parents didn’t expect that he’d ever be able to do that.”

“Brandon has legs, Audrey.”

“Jesus,” Audrey said. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

“What *are* you saying then? That Brandon should run a marathon? He doesn’t even like going outside.”

“I’m saying that people still need to have dreams. Even if those dreams are unrealistic.”

“Dreams, huh?” Vivian said, flashing a shitty grin as she turned onto General Pershing. “Come back and talk to me about dreams when you’re forty.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*I*t was six o'clock in the evening, and Oz was swerving down Magazine Street in his rusted Ford Focus fiddling with his new GPS system. He'd snatched it off some crackhead who owed him money. The problem was, the back-lit screen that displayed the map on the GPS system was glitchy, and the turn-by-turn directions only spoke Spanish. Oz didn't know a lick of Spanish, but he loved the sound of the woman's sexy Spanish voice, and he was so impressed with the technology he didn't seem to care that it was virtually useless.

"Would you stop monkeying with that thing and pay attention to the road," Jazelle said, her needle-marked arm hanging out the window, the wind creeping through her dirty braids. "I told you when we left, you're too damn high to be driving."

Oz had taken a handful of Oxycontin before he'd left the apartment, mostly because he couldn't stomach the idea of killing someone, and as he stared out the bug-splattered window at the blur of passing cars, he wondered if taking the pills had been a mistake.

"I'm fine," he said, his lazy eyes shifting in their dark sockets, his thoughts wrapped in a white cocoon of Oxycontin. "Anyway, I drive better when I'm high."

Oz continued down Magazine for another mile or so, and a few minutes later, they pulled into a gym parking lot and Oz began looking for Michael's car, a silver BMW.

"You got the license plate number?" Jazelle asked, chewing on a chipped, black fingernail.

"Shit." Oz patted the pockets of his jeans. "I forgot it at the apartment."

"Wonderful," Jazelle snapped. "And just how are you figuring on us knowing it's him?"

"Maurice gave me this picture," Oz said. As he yanked the creased photo from his pocket, Jazelle snatched it from his hand. While she stared at it, Oz drove past rows and rows of cars looking for Michael's BMW.

When he finally spotted it, he parked next to the car and cut the engine. A few minutes later, they saw a man walk up to the car.

“Jackpot,” Oz mumbled, cranking the engine.

“Wait.” Jazelle stared down at the picture then back at the man. “What makes you so sure that’s him?”

“That’s the exact car Maurice described. And he said the guy leaves this place every day at six, like clockwork.”

“The guy in this picture wears his hair shorter,” Jazelle said. “And his nose is bigger. Wider.”

“Trust me. I’ve been staring at the picture for the last four days. I’ve got a photogenic memory. That’s him.”

“That guy could be Bin Laden, and your stoned ass wouldn’t know it.”

“Yeah, right,” Oz said. “Like you aren’t just as cooked as I am.”

The man climbed into his car, cranked his engine, and Oz followed him down Magazine until he eventually turned onto Sixth Street. When the BMW pulled in front of a large renovated shotgun house on the corner of Sixth and Camp, Oz parked on the opposite corner and cut the engine.

“Here,” Jazelle said, reaching into the backseat and pulling out two rubber pig masks she’d bought the day before.

Jazelle stared out the window, at a silver breeze swirling a pile of dead leaves. She watched the man go inside, and her eyes wandered down the street. When she realized no one was walking along the sidewalk, she waited for a junked blue Cadillac to pass, and she and Oz climbed out of the car carrying the masks.

When they arrived at the front door of the house, Oz rang the bell. He turned his attention back to the door, waited until he could see the man coming, and when he did, they both slipped the pig masks over their heads and Oz kicked the door in. At first, the door only budged partially, but when Oz slammed his body into it, it opened with a loud crack. As they rushed into the house, the man turned to run, but Oz grabbed him and put him in a choke-hold.

“I’ll give you whatever you want,” the man muttered.

“Shut up,” Jazelle hissed. She closed the door and locked it, pulled the revolver from her pocket and aimed it at the man, patting down his coat pocket until she found his wallet. When she finally found it, she

opened it and pulled out a sweaty wad of bills then stuffed the bills into her tanned cleavage.

“I can’t breathe,” the man said to Oz, his words strangled.

Oz loosened the choke-hold slightly. “Is that better?”

“Yes. That’s much better. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You sure you don’t wanna get him a glass of water,” Jazelle asked Oz. “Maybe a pillow for him to lay down?”

“No thank you,” the man said. “I’m better now.”

Jazelle picked through the wallet for credit cards, dropping membership cards and old photos in a pile at her feet, until she came to a Louisiana Driver’s License.

“Hey Fuck-O,” she said to Oz, staring down at the man’s driver’s license. “Surprise, surprise. We got the wrong guy.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s the wrong guy. This guy’s name is Milton, not Michael.”

“Milton?”

“Yes Milton,” Jazelle said, pointing to the license. “Milton Cheswick. I knew the resemblance was off. I told you to get a license plate number. Do you know how many silver BMWs there are in New Orleans?”

“No,” Oz said. “How many?”

“I dunno,” Jazelle said, “but I’m sure a whole hell of a lot.”

“So it’s all my fault?” Oz asked. “Is that what you’re saying? I didn’t even wanna do this. I told you it was a bad idea.”

“You think Maurice’s gonna pay us?” Jazelle asked, “if we pull a 187 on the wrong guy?”

“What’s a 187?” Oz asked.

“Jesus,” Jazelle said. “A homicide. A fuckin’ homicide. How the hell are you figuring on getting any street cred if you don’t even know the lingo?”

“You two are planning on killing me?” the man asked. “I thought you were just here to rob me.”

“Shut up,” Jazelle said.

“I don’t mean to step on anyone’s toes here,” the man said, still stuck in the loose choke-hold, “but I think I have a right to know if you’re planning on murdering me.”

“We’re not gonna pull a 187,” Oz reassured the man. “We’re just

gonna beat you up a little is all.”

As Oz said this, the man began to breathe heavily. A startled look fell across his face, and he clutched his chest.

“What the hell’s wrong with him?” Jazelle asked.

“Shit if I know.” Oz loosened the choke-hold, and the man slowly slumped to the floor, falling to his knees as if he were getting ready to pray.

“I’ll keep my aim on him,” Jazelle said. “Check around and see if there’s anything worth stealing.”

Oz bent down to the ground and looked at the man, tilting his head from side to side like a confused dog.

“Would you stop fawning over him and go,” Jazelle snarled.

As Jazelle held the gun on the man, Oz stood up, and wandered up the stairs and into one of the bedrooms. Jazelle rubbed her left eye with the palm of her hand and stared down at the man, who was now sitting upright on the floor still clutching his chest. She scratched an itch deep in her braids, her eyes drunk, her movements clumsy and slow, and as she turned and stared out the window to make sure no one was coming, the man saw the revolver droop in her hand. Jazelle didn’t even see him rise to his feet and lunge at her. By the time she realized what had happened, the man had slammed her against a wall cluttered with picture frames. A second later, she could feel tiny bits of glass prickling her neck and skull. Her eyes drifted down toward her empty hand, and as the foggy thought of the missing revolver limped through her brain, she looked up and saw the man snatching the gun from the floor.

“Fucking hoodlums,” the man stammered. He raised the gun and pointed it at Jazelle. “You people have some kind of morals robbing an innocent man.”

“You’re one to talk,” Jazelle said, her tired voice wheezing behind the pig mask. “What the hell kind of a person fakes a heart attack?”

“The kind of person that gets the slip on a bunch of dumbasses like you,” the man said. “Now shut up and take off that mask.”

For a moment, Jazelle stared blankly at the man through the dirty eye holes of the pig mask. She didn’t say a word, only poked her tongue through the mouth hole flicking it like a snake.

“Go on,” the man said. “Take it off.” He waved the gun at Jazelle, and after hesitating for a moment she pulled off the mask.

As the man rattled on about crime in New Orleans and the gradual decline of Western Civilization, Jazelle's eyes drifted over the man's shoulder and landed on Oz, who was creeping down the stairs and heading in their direction. In one quick movement, the man spun around, pointed the gun and fired.

The bullet grazed Oz's left shoulder, sending an electric jolt through the muscles of his neck and arm. A throbbing pain blossomed on the left side of his face then scurried around his skull before burying itself in the roots of his eyes. Oz staggered, reaching toward the wall with his one good arm and leaning there for a moment, as if he were trying to keep the world from turning on its side.

As the man aimed the gun at Oz again, Jazelle jumped on his back and wrapped one arm around his neck while the other hand clawed at the man's eyes. He swayed left then right, straining under Jazelle's weight, squinting with his one good eye as he squeezed off a second round. A flower pot hanging in the corner of the room next to Oz exploded, spraying Oz's neck and shirt with shards of terracotta and clumps of potting soil. Jazelle continued to claw at the man's eyes, coiling her legs around him until he lost his balance and crashed into a coffee table. He tried to gain his composure, but Jazelle sunk her teeth into his hand and pried the gun from his fingers. Exhausted from the struggle, she staggered to her feet and kicked the man in the ribs. The man clutched his side, his hair wild, a gray smudge on his forehead from a spilled ashtray.

"Fucking hoodlums," he said, the bloody words squirming in his throat. "That's what you are."

The sound of the man's voice was frantic and scratchy, and it reminded Jazelle of a kitten trapped in a cardboard box. She gripped the gun with both hands, a sick look simmering in her eyes, pointed it at the man and squeezed the trigger. The bullet hit him in his chest, and his eyes fluttered before rolling back in his skull. Almost immediately he began spitting up blood. For a moment, he tried to speak, but the words were tangled and breath-filled as if he were speaking in tongues. Jazelle raised the gun again and squeezed off a second round, and the man's body shuddered. His lips twitched for a moment like a fly in a spider web, a line of drool dripped from his mouth, and the tiny stars of light in his eyes flickered out.

Jazelle stuffed the gun into the pocket of her jeans and walked over

to Oz, who was still leaning against the wall wincing in pain. She pulled Oz's mask off, ripped the sleeve off his shirt, twisting it into a makeshift tourniquet, wrapping it around the bloody wound in his shoulder. She walked him toward the door, and they stopped near the window. It wasn't quite dark outside, and Jazelle didn't want anyone to see them leaving the house. While Oz squinted in pain, they waited patiently for almost fifteen minutes, listening to the screaming cicadas outside, until the sun finally sank into the trees and dusk smothered the last few slivers of light.

* * *

When Maurice woke the following morning, he read a story in the *Times-Picayune* about a retired Army sergeant who'd been found murdered during a home invasion on Camp Street. At first, he figured it was yet another random crime, but when he read that the assailants had stolen the man's silver BMW, he realized that Oz and Jazelle had killed the wrong person. When he called Jazelle an hour or so later, she told him to meet her at a local meat market later that afternoon.

It was raining when Maurice pulled into the gravel parking lot of the Broad Street Meat Market. The store was located in a ratty part of town filled with potholes and trash, rotting houses with mangy, sunburned lawns spotted with limp, anorexic trees. The rash of nearby buildings were rotten and dilapidated, and they looked unusually flimsy to Maurice, as if they were cardboard storefronts from the set of a movie. The windows of the meat market were covered with black bars, and the large sign had fallen off the roof. What was left of it was leaning against the front of the building. Shards of glass were missing, exposing the rusty light bulbs inside, and someone had taped a piece of cardboard to the sign that read: *We're open*.

Maurice parked next to a gutted van propped up on cinder blocks with missing tires. As he walked toward the building, he saw a dirty needle floating in a puddle of rainwater. Near a patch of weeds sprouting through the gravel, a blackbird was pecking at a used condom.

Once inside, Maurice walked past a large refrigerated glass case filled with slabs of raw meat hanging from hooks, bloody racks of ribs, piles of sausages and pork chops, until he found Jazelle sitting at a ratty

booth in the back near the window. The rickety table was filled with large cracks that had been patched with putty, the booth freckled with dried bits of old food and burn holes. Large cracks in the window had been covered with duct tape, and the windowsill was flecked with dead flies.

As Maurice walked up, Jazelle glanced at him and motioned for him to sit down. He placed his umbrella next to the booth, opened a napkin and laid it on the seat of the booth before sitting down. As he settled into the ratty booth, he could smell the scent of tanning beds and suntan lotion seeping from Jazelle's skin. "So," he said, "what's good here?"

"Why the hell are you wearing that?" Jazelle asked, referring to the dust mask.

"I have a cold."

"Where's our money?" Jazelle said, cutting off a sliver of bloody meat and stabbing it with her fork.

"I tried to explain to you on the phone," Maurice said, "but you wouldn't let me get a word in. The agreement was to kill Michael, not some army hero."

"Yeah, well," Jazelle said, "like I told *you* on the phone, that was *your* fault, not ours." She sliced off another piece of bloody meat and glared at him. "You're the one hired us. You should have given us the right information. Do you know how many silver BMWs there are in New Orleans?"

"Well," Maurice said, "there are four BMW dealerships in the New Orleans Metropolitan area, each of which carries approximately—"

"A lot," Jazelle interrupted. "The answer is a whole lot of fucking BMWs."

"Right," Maurice said, "which is precisely why I provided you with the license plate number, so you could identify his car from the thousands of other BMWs." Maurice stared at the menu, then back at Jazelle. "If you would have used the number I gave you, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now, and you'd have your money."

"Yeah, well," Jazelle said. "Things don't always work out like planned."

"And whose bright idea was it to take the car?" Maurice asked. "Do you know how easy it'll be for the cops to find that BMW?"

"We took it straight to a chop shop," Jazelle said. "Anyway, it's none of your business what we did. Stop worrying about the cops and start

worrying about paying us our money.”

“As I mentioned on the phone, I’m more than willing to let you two keep the first ten thousand.” Maurice put the menu down, wiped bits of food from the table with a napkin. “I’m just not comfortable paying you another ten thousand dollars when you killed the wrong person.”

“Comfortable?” Jazelle said, stressing the word as if it were the first time she’d ever pronounced it. “Do you think my boyfriend’s *comfortable*? He nearly got his arm blown off. This isn’t a fucking debate. We want our money.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your boyfriend,” Maurice said. “Has he seen a doctor? I’d be more than happy to pay for his medical bills if you provide a receipt.”

Jazelle put the fork down, grabbed the steak and held it between her fingers, gnawing the bloody meat from the bone, a greasy smile flickering on her lips. “I swear,” she said, wiping a stain of brown blood from her cheek with the back of her hand, “you must be from another fuckin’ planet or something.”

“Our agreement was quite clear,” Maurice told her. “I don’t intend to pay you any more money at this point. And I’d really appreciate it if you’d stop calling me.”

“We want our money,” she said, the steak still bleeding between her fingers.

“Or what?” Maurice asked. “You’ll kill someone who remotely resembles me?”

Jazelle flashed a bloody smile. “We got GPS,” she said. “You think we can’t find out where you live?”

“I really don’t see any reason to threaten me,” Maurice told her.

“Yeah, well,” Jazelle told him, gnawing at the bloody bone in between words. “I can see about ten thousand.”

Maurice wondered if Jazelle really intended to harm him and his family or if she were simply trying to frighten him. If the wires in his brain could pick up divine messages from God, maybe they could also pick up what people were thinking. For a moment, he tried to tune into Jazelle’s thoughts. He squeezed his eyes shut, tighter and tighter, until they looked like two little cracks in his face then focused his attention on Jazelle’s thoughts. He listened closely, but all he could hear was static.

Jazelle dropped the bone on her plate and dragged her finger

through a pool of brown blood. “If you don’t bring our money to our apartment by tomorrow at noon, we’re gonna come to your house. And if that doesn’t work,” she said, sucking the juice from her finger, “we’re gonna drop by that college and pay your daughter a visit.”

When Maurice heard Jazelle say this, he felt a mixture of anger and fear churning in his gut. He grabbed his umbrella and rose from the table.

As Jazelle licked the rest of the bloody brown juice from her fingers, she stared up at him. “Tomorrow at noon,” she said, picking a piece of meat from her teeth with a chipped black fingernail. “Or else.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Though the sky was cloudy and oyster-gray the next morning, Maurice wore his sunglasses while he drove to the high school, occasionally glancing in his rear-view mirror to be certain no one was following him. He didn't feel comfortable carrying the gun, but he figured it might be a good idea to bring it with him for protection. Earlier that morning, he'd gone to the bank to withdraw the money he owed Jazelle and Oz. He'd cashed in a CD for the first ten thousand dollars, and he'd planned to withdraw the second ten thousand from his retirement account. Though he'd assumed he would pay a penalty for withdrawing the money early, he learned from the bank manager that he couldn't access the funds (with or without a penalty) until he reached the age of 55. Jazelle's noon deadline had come and gone, and after speaking with her, Maurice was becoming increasingly worried about his family's safety.

As Maurice pulled into the parking lot of the high school, thoughts of what Jazelle and Oz might do to Brandon or Audrey haunted his mind. He was listening to WWL on the radio, and as Brandon walked up to the car and climbed in, he turned the volume down.

"How was school?" Maurice asked.

"Fine," Brandon said.

Maurice pulled out of the parking lot and headed down St. Charles. For a moment neither of them said a word.

"Did you meet Mr. Richardson today?"

"Yep."

"Well," Maurice said. "How did it go?"

"Alright, I guess."

"That's it?"

"He told me the same stuff he always tells me." Brandon stared out the window at a cracked sky. "He said you might have to go to a mental hospital. Is that true?"

"Why did he say that?"

"I told him what you've been doing, and he said you were sick and

that you might have to go to a mental hospital.”

“Mr. Richardson doesn’t know what the hell he’s talking about. Hasn’t he ever heard of an electrical short? It happens all the time.”

“There must be something you can do,” Brandon said. “Maybe you could try a different medicine.”

Maurice detected a change in Brandon’s voice, and when he glanced over, he saw Brandon’s eyes filling with tears.

“I just don’t understand why the medicine isn’t working,” Brandon said, wiping the tears from his eyes.

Maurice pulled the car over to the side of the road, unbuckled his seatbelt and turned to Brandon. “I’m fine,” he said, stroking Brandon’s shoulder. “Mr. Richardson doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I was just fixing a short in the wall, that’s all.” Maurice forced a fake smile. “I didn’t want the house to burn down.”

“Stop lying.” Brandon’s voice was filled with tears. “I’m not stupid. Just tell me the truth,” he said, sniffing as he spoke. “Why did you rip all the sheetrock off the walls? You’re always talking about how the government bugs people’s house. Are you afraid they planted something in the walls?”

Maurice sighed, rubbed his forehead with a pale hand.

“Just tell me the truth.”

“You’re going to think I’m crazy,” Maurice said. “And I’m not.”

“I just want you to tell me the truth, that’s all.”

“Yes,” Maurice said finally. “Okay? Yes.” Maurice paused for a moment. “I know it probably seems crazy to you that the government would do something like that, but trust me, it’s not that uncommon. I even spoke with the computer guy at work about it, and he confirmed it. The government has very advanced technology, son. They can even use your cell phone and household appliances as microphones.”

“Is that why you smashed our cell phones?”

“Yes. I’d been hearing static and voices, almost like you’d hear on a radio. It’s a telltale sign that someone is listening to your conversation. You wouldn’t believe the technology they have. It’s not even available to consumers.”

“I don’t understand,” Brandon said. “Out of all the houses in New Orleans, why would they bug ours?”

“The man,” Maurice said, “who had an affair with your mother.

He's been threatening her."

"Michael? Why?"

"He has a family, and I guess he doesn't want them to know he got your mother pregnant. He works for the mayor, and he has a number of police officers on his payroll. He's a very powerful man. He sent some thug to her apartment."

"Is that what happened to her eye?"

Maurice paused. "Yes."

"Is the baby okay?"

"She and the baby are fine. But you can see why I've been so worried lately. I'm sure my behavior seems a bit strange, but everything I'm doing is to protect you and Audrey, and your mother. No matter how strange it may seem. Do you understand? You don't need to worry about anything." Maurice wiped the tear from Brandon's cheek, squeezed his shoulder. "Okay?"

"Okay."

Maurice smiled. "Okay, then," he said, buckling his seatbelt. "How about some coffee? Then, we'll go home, I'll turn the power on, and we'll play some Xbox together. What do you say?"

Brandon sniffled, wiped the tears from his eyes. "Okay, Dad."

Fifteen minutes later, when they pulled into the parking lot across from Starbuck's, Maurice was staring suspiciously at a car in his rear-view mirror. He parked, and though the car following him was filled with young teenage girls, he watched until all of the girls exited the car and entered the tanning salon next door.

By the time he and Brandon finally made it inside, Maurice had the distinct feeling that someone was watching him. The guy behind the counter at Starbuck's was adjusting his headset, and as Brandon ordered, Maurice couldn't help but wonder if the man was secretly feeding information to the police through the headset. Maurice handed the guy his credit card, and though he tried to tune his brain to the headset, all he could make out was the wiry voice of some lady rattling on and on about the price of a Cafe Misto.

"What's the name?" the guy asked, handing Maurice's card back to him before grabbing a black marker from a cup full of coffee beans.

Maurice shoved his wallet into his back pocket, stared over his shoulder and turned back to the guy at the counter. "Henry," he

whispered. "My name's Henry."

The guy scribbled the word Henry on the side of the plastic cup, then adjusted his headset as he wandered toward the drive-thru window. Maurice could see the guy's lips moving. He listened closely, but the words were tangled with noise, smothered beneath the menacing hiss of steam from the espresso machine. As Maurice's eyes drifted toward the menu on the wall, he felt a hand land gently on his shoulder, accompanied by a man's voice.

"Excuse me, sir," the voice said.

Maurice turned around, and when he saw a police officer standing in front of him, a tiny knot of fear tightened in his chest. He lowered the dust mask, and his other hand fished into his pants pocket and clutched the loaded pistol. As the officer stared at him, static crawled up Maurice's spine and buzzed around in his skull. As he stared suspiciously at the officer, he noticed a slight discoloration near the edges of the officer's face as if he were wearing makeup. The badge pinned to his pocket looked like a phony dime store replica, and the officer's mustache looked like it had been glued onto his lip.

"Is that your car?" the officer asked, pointing through the window at Maurice's silver Pontiac Phoenix.

"Yes," Maurice said, his voice twitching. He could feel the static snaking through his skull. "How did you know that?"

The officer flashed a confused look. "Pardon me?"

"That the Pontiac was mine?" Maurice said, his hand still clutching the pistol in his pocket, the static loose in his head.

The officer smiled. "I saw you pull in. You're parked in a loading zone."

Maurice could feel the officer's eyes burning through him. He wondered if the officer was one of Michael's thugs, and if he'd been following him. He thought about the humming sound he'd heard in the car when he was driving over, and he imagined a tracking device hidden under his dashboard, a tiny red light blinking in a nest of wires.

"It's not a problem." The officer smiled again, his words tangled with tiny bits of white static. "Just move it when you have a chance."

"Okay," Maurice stammered. He loosened his grip on the pistol in his pocket, pulled the dust mask over his mouth and grabbed his coffee.

After Brandon and Maurice left the coffee shop, they crossed the

parking lot and climbed into the car. As Maurice cranked the engine, he stared out the window and saw a ratty Ford Focus creep by. Jazelle was sitting in the passenger seat, and as the car drove off, she was staring back at him pointing her finger at him like a gun, her left eye squinted as if she were squeezing off a round.

* * *

When Audrey walked into the Maple Leaf Bar on Friday evening, Galactic had just started its first set. She found Rochelle dancing near the stage, and they headed to the bar and ordered a round of Flaming Dr. Peppers. Rochelle spent the next few hours buying Audrey drinks and quietly urging various guys to ask Audrey to dance. When the band took a break, Audrey managed to find an empty table on the back patio, and they decided to sit down.

Once they'd sat down, Rochelle's face suddenly growing serious. "I think I'm a nympho," she said.

Audrey smiled and took a sip of her drink. "Why would you think that?" she asked, talking around the straw.

"I had sex with like nine guys last week, Audrey. That's like 1.3 guys per day. My psych professor says that most women who are hypersexual have some horrible event in their past. Maybe I was molested or something when I was kid. I don't recall being molested. But maybe I blocked it out, you know, because it was too painful to remember."

"I'm sure you'd remember being molested."

"Seriously, Audrey, I'm running out of guys on campus to screw. It's a real problem." Rochelle pulled out a pack of cigarettes, shook one from the pack and lit it. "I got so desperate the other night I even had sex with that weird guy from Bio."

"Not the one with the bad breath," Audrey said, "and the crooked eye."

"Yep."

"The one who never stops talking?"

"That's the one," Rochelle said. "He talked the entire time we were having sex." Rochelle smiled. "I had to sit on his face just to shut him up."

Rochelle took a drag off her cigarette, blew the smoke out the corner

of her mouth. “Do you think I have a problem?”

“No,” Audrey smiled. “Of course not.”

“Well, what the hell’s wrong with me, then? I mean, I have sex every day, and I’m still horny all day long. My vibrator’s burning through batteries faster than I can buy them. I need to get that new implant, but I don’t think it’s on the market yet.”

“What implant?”

“There’s some orgasm implant I read about. A doctor puts an implant on a certain part of your spine, the part responsible for orgasms, and you can actually trigger an orgasm with a remote control.”

“Sign me up,” Audrey said, smiling.

“Tell me about it. I’d probably break the remote the first day.”

“Do you remember in high school,” Audrey said, “when your mother found that big black dildo in your nightstand?”

Rochelle smiled, tapped her cigarette against the ashtray. “She nearly had a stroke.”

“Didn’t you have some funny name for it?”

“Magic Johnson,” Rochelle said. “I had one called Shaft too.”

“Didn’t your mother tell you that you were going to hell if you kept using it?”

“Yep. She even went to see our priest about it.”

“Really?” Audrey asked. “You never told me that. What did she tell him?”

“She asked him if I’d go to hell for having premarital sex with an African American penis.”

“Are you serious?” Audrey asked. “What did the priest say?”

“He asked her whose penis it was, and she told him it was one of those toy penises you buy at a sex shop. A toy penis! Can you believe it? I guess she couldn’t bring herself to say the word dildo. The priest told her that as far as he knew premarital sex had to include an actual partner but that I’d better say thirty Hail Marys just in case.”

“I thought masturbation was a sin in the Catholic church,” Audrey said.

“Only for men,” Rochelle told her. “Apparently it’s only a sin if you spill your seed. The priest’s words, not mine.”

“Maybe Catholicism isn’t so bad after all,” Audrey said.

“That’s exactly what I thought.” Rochelle took a sip of her drink.

“Speaking of overly-religious parents, how’s your dad?”

Audrey told Rochelle how Maurice’s condition had worsened. She said at first she thought he simply needed to see a psychiatrist to get his medication adjusted, but that she was beginning to think he needed to be admitted to a psychiatric facility. She told Rochelle how she’d visited Virgil, how Virgil had spoken to a psychiatrist, and that he was in the process of making an appointment for Maurice.

As they talked, Rochelle noticed Audrey staring past her as if she were lost in thought. Rochelle knew Audrey was upset about Glenn and that she’d recently seen him at the campus bookstore kissing a girl from their class.

“You’re upset about Glenn?” she asked.

“I don’t know why I’m so shocked,” Audrey said. “I guess I just thought if I dated an older guy he’d be more mature, you know?”

“If he were mature,” Rochelle told Audrey, “he wouldn’t be screwing around on his wife.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I was thinking,” Audrey said, “the last two students he dated before me had enormous tits. Even the one he’s apparently dating now.” She smiled. “Maybe I should get a boob job.”

“This isn’t a problem that can be solved by increasing your cup size. It’s not about tits,” Rochelle said. “It’s about a guy who wants to have sex with as many young girls as he can. I tried to warn you when you started dating him. Linda’s sister said he was screwing a different girl every semester when she went to Tulane, and that was six years ago.”

“I know.” Audrey wiped a tear from her cheek, her thoughts suddenly smothered beneath an avalanche of emotions. “He just acted like I was different, you know, like I was special.” She took a sip of her drink and wiped away another tear. “I just feel so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid.” Rochelle reached over and stroked Audrey’s shoulder. “He’s just an asshole, that’s all. Anyway, wouldn’t you rather find out now than catch him screwing some student five years from now, after he’s left his wife and the two of you are married?”

“I guess.”

“I know you’re upset,” Rochelle said, “but trust me, in a few months you’ll be glad this happened. What you don’t want to do is start obsessing about him and questioning why he did what he did. You need to focus on the solution, rather than the problem. And I think I may have one.

Despite what you might think, this is an easy problem to solve.”

“Oh, really,” Audrey said. “So what’s your solution?”

“You just need to find a guy in this bar,” Rochelle said. “Take him home and screw his brains out.”

“Thanks,” Audrey smiled, wiping a tear from her cheek, “but I think I’m too angry to have sex.”

“That’s just my point. Don’t you see? You harness all the anger you have bottled up for Glenn and then you take the anger out on the new guy. It’ll be cathartic. Seriously, you’ll probably have the best sex of your life, and you’ll give the guy a great story to tell his friends.”

Audrey smiled through her tears. “Thanks, but the idea of having sex with some complete stranger grosses me out.”

“That’s the whole point of college, Audrey. You’re supposed to have wild, indiscriminate sex with as many strange men as possible. That way, ten years from now when you’re married to some brain-dead stockbroker and he’s screwing you with his tiny dick in the missionary position for the thousandth time, you’ll have a whole list of men to fantasize about. If you think about it, it’s really an ingenious plan. Not only are you getting over Glenn, but you’re also guaranteeing the success of your future marriage.”

Audrey thanked Rochelle for the advice, but she said she wasn’t ready yet. She wanted to be angry about Glenn, but all she felt was sadness. She’d recently seen a PETA documentary about a slaughterhouse, and ever since she’d seen Glenn with that girl, she’d been feeling like one of those gutted pigs she’d seen in that documentary—as if her insides were black and hollow.

While she nursed her drink, Rochelle rambled on about her sexual exploits, and after a few more cocktails she began making out with some guy at a nearby table. She told Audrey she was going home with him, so Audrey decided to hang out at the bar for a while. She had two more Flaming Dr. Peppers, and by the time she left she was drunk.

Thirty minutes later Audrey was sitting in her car on North Rampart Street, outside Glenn’s condo, staring up at a blurry moon. She knew Glenn was in Jamaica with his wife because he’d canceled classes all week. She sat in her car for a while listening to “Every Breath You Take” by The Police on repeat and nursing the Amaretto Sour she’d brought with her from the bar. After she finished her drink, she staggered out of

the car and wandered into the courtyard that snaked behind the condo. She grabbed the key from the little ceramic New Orleans Saints helmet where Glenn always left it and went in through the back door.

After using the first-floor bathroom, she headed into Glenn's office and flipped on his computer. She fished through his hard drive for copies of the tests for his course, but when she couldn't find them, she decided to check his e-mail. Most of the messages were either boring administrative emails from Tulane or junk mail. But as she looked more closely, she saw an email from Rita, the girl she'd seen with Glenn a few days earlier. The e-mail contained an attachment, and when Audrey opened it, she noticed a photo of the girl posing in a skimpy negligee. She saved the picture to the computer and before deleting it, she found one of the mass e-mails sent from Glenn's department head. She selected **REPLY ALL**, attached the photo to the email, and before sending it composed the following message: *Being a tenured professor has its privileges, huh? Attached is a photo of the student I'm screwing.*

When she was done, Audrey went into Glenn's bedroom, hiked up her skirt and slithered out of her pink thong. She pulled back the comforter on the bed and placed the panties on Glenn's wife's side. She found the box of condoms Glenn kept hidden in his nightstand—the ones he only used with the students he screwed. Before she left, she pulled out a safety pin she'd found in the bathroom and carefully poked a tiny hole in each of the condoms and then placed them back in the nightstand.

Downstairs, she turned on the television and lay down on the sofa, flipping through the channels until she came to Showtime. *Carrie* was on, and Sissy Spacek was standing on a stage covered in pig's blood, wearing a white prom dress and a silver crown, a black curtain of stars glittering behind her. While a crowded gymnasium of kids laughed and pointed in her direction, Carrie jerked her head back mechanically, and as she did, the doors of the gymnasium slammed shut and the lights flickered out.

Audrey stared at the TV, envisioning Glenn's face when his department head showed him the email she'd sent to all of his colleagues exposing his affair with his student. As she stared at the screen, she imagined herself in Tulane's gymnasium, covered in pig's blood, just like Spacek, walking through a sea of orange flames while students from her class screamed in horror. She closed her eyes, rested her head on the

pillow and drifted off to sleep, a subtle smile growing on her lips.

* * *

That night, Maurice was watching a local access station as he lay on the sofa, the pistol tucked under his pillow. The station was airing a previously-recorded press conference, and the mayor was standing at a podium insisting the mold levels were not harmful. His voice was flat and robotic, the words laced with bits of metal as if they'd been produced by a series of gears turning in his brain. When the mayor spoke, the cords in his neck tightened, his movements mechanical like the animatronic Abraham Lincoln that Maurice had seen a few years earlier at a Disneyland exhibit. The mayor had appeared on television many times before, and ever since he'd taken office, he'd always been bald. But as Maurice watched him stand at the podium, he noticed subtle smudges near the mayor's hairline, and it looked as if he were wearing some kind of stretchable, flesh-colored, latex cap to give him the appearance of looking bald. Michael was standing next to the mayor, his skin milky white, a smile like a crack beneath his nose, an empty look in his eyes as if he were a figure posed in a wax museum.

As Maurice watched the press conference, he thought he heard a car pass by outside. He grabbed the gun, made his way to the window and peeked through the draperies to see who was there, but all he saw was the red glow of taillights slowly fading into the black air. He turned off the TV and spent the rest of the night on the sofa, the pistol tucked under the pillow, glancing out the window at a sliver of moon tangled in the trees, occasionally getting up to peek through the draperies whenever he detected the slightest sound.

When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed of Vivian hovering against a blood-filled sky fully naked, a halo atop her head, her face spangled in light. Her heart was glowing in her chest, tangled in flames and thorns. There was a bloody gaping wound in her belly, a hole like a screaming black mouth. Beneath Vivian's screams, Maurice could hear the empty cries of a baby. Near the end of the dream, he was standing in a weedy field staring up at the round white moon of Vivian's bloated belly as a silver plague of stars rained down on him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*I*t was almost ten o'clock in the evening when Maurice arrived at Brothers Three Lounge. There were no parking spots out front, so he parked a half block away in a little gravel parking lot on Magazine Street. Once inside, he sat down at the bar and ordered a White Russian with no ice.

He was halfway through his third drink when a woman sat down next to him. She had two gold teeth, and her hairdo was the shape of a volcano with two shiny black coiled strands of hair dangling down from each side.

As she sat down, she looked at Maurice and noticed the dust mask. "What happened to you?" she asked. "You got the flu or something?"

"Just a bad cold," he said. He pushed the edge of the mask up briefly so he could take a sip of his White Russian, then adjusted it again so that it was covering his lips and mouth.

"Alcohol lowers your immune system, you know." The woman was wearing a tight black leather outfit with a silver zipper along the side, and it reminded Maurice of a body bag. "What you need to do is get yourself a shot of B-12. That'll fix ya up."

"I thought about that," Maurice said, "but after the few months I've had, I could really use a drink."

"You and me both." The woman pulled a cigarette from her purse and lit it. "I'm Fleur de Lis," she said, the smoke drifting from a crack in her mouth.

Maurice extended his hand. "I'm Henry."

The woman ordered a Bloody Mary, and when the bartender placed the drink on the bar, she yanked a wrinkled five-dollar bill from her powdered cleavage and handed it to him. "It's some dead up in here tonight," she said, tapping a purple glittered fingernail against the bar. "Been like this ever since the storm." She pulled a stalk of celery from the drink and took a bite, chewing on it as she spoke. "Figured everybody'd be back by now. Guess most of them decided to stay in Houston or Baton

Rouge, or wherever they wound up. Can't say I blame them."

Maurice pulled down the mask so that it was dangling around his neck. "They said on the radio that only one-third of the city is back."

"I believe it." Fleur de Lis's massive cleavage rippled like a brown wave as she adjusted herself on the barstool. "Katrina spooked a lot of people. Suppose some of them won't ever come back."

"I read somewhere that the population of Baton Rouge increased from 300,000 to almost 900,000 in one day."

"That right?" Fleur de Lis scratched an itch deep in her little black volcano of hair. "Makes sense."

"Did you get a lot a damage?"

"Yep," she said. "Gutted the whole damn house."

"Did you live in the Lower Ninth?"

"Nah." She took a deep drag, blew the smoke out the corner of her mouth. "I stay in the East. I moved in with my cousin and her three babies up the street for now."

"All the news coverage has been focusing on the Ninth Ward," Maurice said, "but I heard the East was hit pretty bad."

"Yep. Water rose six feet where I was. Hell, we woulda drowned if my daddy hadn't nailed two doors together and made a raft."

"That must have been hell."

Fleur de Lis flashed a gold gap-toothed smile. "Hell can't be that bad," she said, stirring her Bloody Mary. "I never seen so many nutria rats in my life. Guess they was just spooked like everybody else. They was crawling over everything, climbing up the electrical poles even. Worst part was the bodies floating through the water, they stomachs all swole up. I seen some terrible things in my life, but nothing like that. My nerves been out of whack ever since. Seems like I'm always scared lately." Fleur de Lis flicked a long, crooked ash into the glass ashtray on the bar. "Half the time I feel like that chicken. You know the one they taught us about in grade school gets so spooked after that acorn falls on her head she thinks the sky is fixing to fall down."

"Chicken Little?"

"That's the one." Fleur de Lis paused for a moment, holding the cigarette near her lips without taking a drag. "I wake up in the middle of the night sometimes, and I get this feeling like the sky is bearing down on me." She took a slow drag of her cigarette, the smoke creeping

out of her mouth. "It's like I can feel the stars and the clouds getting heavier and heavier, you know, like at any moment it's all fixing to come crashing down on top of me. I try to shoo the thought from my mind," she said, snuffing the crooked cigarette out in the ashtray, "but I can't seem to shake it."

"Are you religious?" Maurice asked.

"I dunno," she said. "Bout as religious as most people I guess."

"What would you say if I told you that Jesus was coming back, and that God was sending him down to Earth to save the world from its sins?"

Fleur de Lis grinned, her gold teeth flickering in the dirty light. "I'd say he had his work cut out for him."

"I know it sounds crazy," Maurice said, "but he is coming back. I'm sure of it. You'll see."

"I hope you're right," she said, finishing off her drink. "Lord knows this city could use some saving."

Fleur de Lis waved to the bartender for another Blood Mary. A few moments later when he finally brought the drink over, she turned to Maurice and held the Bloody Mary in the air. "Here's to Jesus flying back down to Earth," she smiled, "and saving New Orleans."

"To Jesus," Maurice said, clinking his glass against hers.

Maurice downed what was left of the drink, and over the next hour or so he ordered four more. By midnight he was stumbling down Magazine Street. He knew he'd had one too many White Russians, and when he finally reached his car, he wondered if it was safe to drive home. As he reached into his pocket and fumbled with the keys, he stared up at the sky. It looked velvety, and the stars were arranged in an organized pattern, almost perfectly equidistant from one another. To Maurice, the sky looked like a ceiling draped with black velvet, the clouds like they'd been produced by a smoke machine. He imagined that someone had poked tiny holes in the ceiling and then shined lights through the holes to make them look like stars.

As he stared suspiciously at the sky, he suddenly felt a bright white light flash inside his skull. A second later, he felt bits of gravel prickling his face, and he realized that he was lying face down on the ground. It took him a moment to turn on his side, and when he finally did, he saw Oz standing above him shaking his fist in pain, his knuckles bleeding.

Jazelle pushed Oz out of the way and yanked Maurice's dust mask down so that it was dangling around his neck. "Where's our fucking money?" she snarled, a baseball bat resting on her shoulder.

"I don't have it," Maurice said, his drunk fingers feeling for a lump on his head. As he stared up at Jazelle, he saw that she was wearing a prison ankle monitor. "I made it quite clear," Maurice slurred, the crippled words limping from his mouth. "You killed the wrong person."

Jazelle scanned the street, and all she saw was the flicker of streetlights blinking through the tangled branches of trees. She turned back to Maurice, her teeth digging into her lip as she swung the bat.

When the bat struck Maurice, he felt an explosion of pain in his back.

"Jesus," he yelled, clutching his back, his words strained. "I have back problems. Couldn't you have at least hit me in the leg or something?"

Jazelle stared down at Maurice like he was a wounded, flea-ridden dog she wanted to put out of its misery. "You're gonna have more than back problems," she said, "you don't give us our money."

"You could've paralyzed me with that thing," Maurice said, covering his head with his arms to ward off the kicks. "Don't you know that more than 18% of all back injuries result in paralysis?"

"Oh, yeah?" Jazelle said. "Well here's a little statistic for you. One hundred percent of people who fuck with me end up wishing they hadn't. We want the rest of our money, and you better figure on getting it to us soon."

"I made it quite clear in our conversation," Maurice repeated, trying to catch his breath. He fished his hand into his pocket for the gun, but as he did, he suddenly realized he'd left it in the glove box of his car. He pulled the dust mask up with one hand so that it covered his mouth, clutching his back with the other hand. "The agreement we had was quite clear."

Jazelle scanned the street again then kicked him in the shoulder before swinging the bat and hitting him in the ribs. "How's this for clear?" she said, grabbing him by the neck of his shirt. "You pay us by Friday or it's open season on your whole stupid family."

Jazelle and Oz walked off and climbed back into their car. As Maurice clutched his back, he could hear the sound of someone cranking the engine followed by the sound of tires crunching gravel.

When he finally looked up, all he saw was the red glow of taillights slowly disappearing in a white cloud of dust.

* * *

Vivian was asleep on her sofa when she received the call from Mercy Hospital. The nurse told her someone had found Maurice a block off Magazine Street, that he had a sprained back, a mild concussion, and two fractured ribs. Fifteen minutes later, when Vivian arrived at Mercy Hospital, she found Maurice asleep, a tray of half-eaten food on his lap. She moved the tray and sat down in a chair next to the bed, staring at him for a moment. As she brushed a strand of hair from his forehead, his eyes cracked open.

“How are you feeling?”

Maurice sighed, but didn’t say a word, his movements sluggish from the pain medication.

“You’ll be fine, Vivian told him. “They said here could be some temporary memory loss, but other than that you’re fine. Do you remember what happened?”

“Who are *you*?” Maurice asked, “and *why* are you in my room?”

A concerned look squirmed across Vivian’s face. “I’m Vivian. I’m your wife, Maurice.”

He wet his lips, and the confused look on his face slowly transformed into a smile.

“Dammit, Maurice,” Vivian said, slapping him on the arm. “That’s not funny.”

Maurice laughed and though Vivian was upset, she couldn’t help but smile. “What happened? The EMS guy said you told him someone hit you with a baseball bat. Did you get into an argument with somebody at the bar?”

“No. It was nothing like that.” Maurice paused for a moment. “I just owed them some money. That’s all.”

“Money? For what? You’re not gambling again are you, Maurice? Please tell me you’re not gambling.”

“I’m not gambling,” he said finally. “I hired them to do something for me, and they wanted their money, that’s all.”

“What did you hire them to do?”

Vivian waited for Maurice to respond, but he only rubbed his forehead with a veiny hand.

“Maurice,” Vivian’s voice was firm and unswerving. “What did you hire them to do?”

“I paid them,” he said, “to take care of Michael.”

“What do you mean, *to take care of Michael?*”

“To take care of him,” Maurice said. “To kill him.”

“Maurice,” she said, a look of shock falling across her face. “Have you lost your mind? You hired someone to kill a man just because he had some guy threaten me?”

“He didn’t just threaten you,” Maurice hissed. “He hit you in the face. He hit my wife, my pregnant wife, in the face. I’m not going to sit back and watch him hurt you and the baby.” Maurice paused. “It doesn’t matter anyway. The whole thing was a bust, like everything I do. They didn’t kill Michael. They killed some other guy by mistake.”

“Not that retired Army Sergeant?” Vivian asked.

“That’s him.”

“His picture was in the paper the other day. That man was much older than Michael. He didn’t look anything like him.”

“I guess that’s what you get,” Maurice told her, “when you hire a bunch of dope addicts to murder someone.”

“Did you give these people money?”

“I had to give them a deposit,” Maurice told her. “I paid them ten thousand dollars up front, and I agreed to pay them another ten thousand when they were done. That’s why they beat me up.”

“You gave them money before they even did the job?” Vivian asked.

“Just half,” Maurice said. “A 50% deposit is standard business practice.”

Vivian rubbed her forehead with a freckled hand as a blizzard of thoughts blew through her mind. “Jesus, Maurice, do you realize what you’ve gotten your-self into?” Vivian was concerned, but at the same time she couldn’t believe that Maurice had gone to such lengths to protect her, and part of her couldn’t help but think the whole thing was a little romantic. “What if these people go to the police?” she asked. “You could go to jail for conspiracy to commit murder.”

“They just want their money.”

“And where are we going to get that kind of money?” Vivian was

barely finished uttering the words when she realized the answer. It was Virgil.

When the doctor finally made his way to Maurice's room a few minutes later, he told Maurice he wanted to keep him overnight for observation and release him in the morning. Maurice didn't want the kids to be home alone, so he asked Vivian to spend the night at the house. She told Maurice she loved him, and when she reached the doorway she turned and blew him a kiss.

When Vivian arrived at the house thirty minutes later, Brandon was asleep on the sofa. On the TV, a rapper with muscles carved into his chest and gold teeth was puckering his lips and punching his diamond-studded fist at the camera. Vivian turned down the volume and woke Brandon. She told him what had happened, and though Brandon was worried about Maurice, Vivian assured him that he was fine. Because the EMS had never found Maurice's wallet or his keys, and because she feared that Oz and Jazelle might come looking for him at the house, she called a twenty-four-hour locksmith to come out and change the locks.

By the time the locksmith left, it was almost three a.m. Brandon fell asleep on the sofa, and while he slept Vivian made a pot of coffee. She spent the rest of the night sitting in a chair near the window wrapped in a brown afghan, her cell phone in one hand, a butcher knife clutched firmly in the other.

* * *

That night in the hospital, Maurice woke to a voice seeping through the hospital intercom. As he listened, he could feel the crackle of white static scurrying around in his skull. Unable to sleep, he turned on the television and flipped past reality shows, past a flurry of infomercials and a local cooking show, until he came to *Wheel of Fortune*. As Pat Sajak rattled on and on, the words *Religious Phrase* floated at the bottom of the screen. Some man in a green suit with a pocked face requested a vowel, and Vanna White smiled and turned the letter until it glowed, her silver sequined dress flickering like the sides of a fish.

"I'd like to solve the puzzle," the man with the pocked face said. "You will lay your hands on the sick, and they will be cured."

The television audience applauded, and as Maurice stared at the

letters glowing on the TV screen, he opened his hospital gown and stared down at the bruised splotches smeared across his chest and ribs. He could feel the white static seeping from his skull, down his neck, and into his arms. When it reached his fingertips, he placed his hand over the bruises, and his chest and fingers began to glow. His hands and skin tingled with white light, and he could feel the cracks in his ribs sealing shut like tiny white mouths. The pain that had been burning through his ribs all night faded away, and as it did, the glowing white light grew dim and flickered out.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When Vivian arrived at the hospital the following morning, the blood-shot sky was twisted with clouds. Once in his room, she helped Maurice gather his things, and after they checked out, a nurse wheeled Maurice downstairs while Vivian pulled the car around. As they drove through the city, a red sun blinked through the trees, casting tangled shadows through the streets.

Maurice told Vivian he was worried, and she assured him that he didn't need to worry, that she intended to ask Virgil for the money. Though he didn't like the idea of asking his father for money, Maurice knew Virgil was their only option. He'd exhausted all of his savings when he'd paid Jazelle and Oz the first ten thousand dollars, and he and Vivian didn't have any more money. He'd thought about getting a loan, but their credit was shot, and they'd already taken out a second and third mortgage, so using the house for collateral wasn't an option.

"Your father knows how to deal with these kinds of people," Vivian said. "He's going to pay them the money, and all of this will be behind us."

"Yeah, well," Maurice said, "that still doesn't solve the other problem."

"What other problem?"

"Michael," Maurice said. "He's not going to stop until he's killed you and the baby."

"Michael might be a lot of things," Vivian said, "but he's not a murderer."

Maurice turned away from the window. "I've been having these dreams, these horrible dreams. Of you and the baby."

Vivian reached over and stroked Maurice's shoulder. "I'm sure they're terrible," she said, "but they're just dreams, Maurice, that's all. You've been under a lot of stress."

"I have them when I'm awake too," Maurice said. "Like visions." Maurice stared out the window at rows and rows of lopsided houses. "I

think I may be enlightened.”

“Enlightened?”

“Yes. Enlightened. It’s not as rare as you might think. Lots of saints had visions.”

“You’ve been reading The Bible for three months, and now you think you’re a saint?”

“I never said I was a saint.” Maurice stared at Vivian then turned back to the window.

“Normal, healthy individuals don’t have visions. Anyway, you’re Jewish. Jews don’t believe in saints.”

“I spoke to a priest,” Maurice said. “He says cases like this have been documented throughout history.”

“When did you speak to a priest?”

“I went to St. Agnes and spoke to one.”

“You went to my parents’ church and spoke with a priest?” Vivian’s voice turned serious. “Who did you speak to?”

“I dunno,” Maurice said. “Some skinny priest with dark black hair.”

“That’s Father Keppler.” Vivian sighed. “He knows my parents.”

“So what?”

“My parents already think you’re crazy, Maurice. What do you think they’re going to say when Father Keppler tells them you think you’re having visions?”

“Who cares?”

“I care,” Vivian said. “You know how my mother is. She’ll hear this, and she’ll start sending me brochures from mental hospitals.”

Maurice sighed. “I’m not crazy, Vivian.”

“I don’t think you’re crazy. I’m sure this is stress-related. Have you been taking your medicine?”

“I don’t need medicine,” Maurice hissed. “What’s happening to me isn’t the result of some illness.”

“The medicine will help,” Vivian said, “but you have to take it.”

“I’m not taking the goddamn medicine.”

“Maurice,” Vivian said. “The doctor told you.”

“You were chosen by God, Vivian,” Maurice blurted out finally. “The baby you’re carrying is Jesus.”

A wrinkle of confusion tugged at the corner of Vivian’s face.

“It’s just like in The Bible,” Maurice told her. “You were chosen, just

like Mary was chosen.”

“Mary was a virgin, Maurice. I’m not even a practicing Catholic.”

Maurice sighed. “I knew you wouldn’t believe me.”

“I’m sorry. I believe you, okay?”

Vivian rubbed Maurice’s shoulder, turned on the radio and tuned it to WWL. The woman on the radio was talking about the Danziger Bridge shootings, about how police officers from the NOPD were suspected of planting evidence at the scene in an attempt to orchestrate an alleged cover-up. While the woman’s voice crackled through the car, Maurice stared out the window at piles of abandoned cars caked with gray silt, at rows and rows of rotting buildings with the windows blown out. As he looked out the window, he spotted the same homeless man on the corner of Poydras and Loyola that he sometimes saw on his way home. The man flashed a bloody-eyed stare. His sign, the one Maurice had read a hundred times, usually read: *Retired Vet Homeless and Hungry. Please Help*, but today the sign read: *The kings and rulers of the earth shall conspire and rise up against the LORD.*

* * *

It was almost three o’clock that afternoon when Vivian arrived at St. Joseph’s. She parked the car, and as she walked across the parking lot, she thought about what she planned to tell Virgil. Though she knew she needed to tell him Maurice owed someone money, she knew Virgil had a hair-trigger temper, and she wasn’t sure if she should tell him Maurice had been beaten up and that they’d threatened his family.

When she spotted Virgil in the lobby a few minutes later, she could tell by the look on his face he was surprised to see her.

“Did something happen to your eye?” he asked, as Vivian walked up.

“It’s nothing,” Vivian said. “It’s from scuba diving.”

“Scuba diving? Who the hell scuba dives when they’re pregnant?”

“It’s not important. I came here because I need to talk you.” Vivian sat down on the sofa and sighed. “It’s about Maurice.”

“I know,” Virgil said. “Audrey came to see me. I found a psychiatrist. I’m working on scheduling an appointment for him.”

“Audrey came to see you?”

“Yeah. She’s worried about Maurice too. She said he’s been reading The Bible.”

“That’s actually why I’m here,” Vivian said. “Well, part of why I’m here.” She folded her hands in her lap and sighed again. “Maurice is in trouble, Virgil, and we need your help. I wouldn’t come to you, but you’re the only person who can help us.”

“What kind of trouble?”

Vivian told Virgil the entire story—how Michael had sent one of his thugs to threaten her, how Maurice had hired a drug dealer to kill him, how Maurice had given them ten thousand dollars, and how they’d attacked Maurice and threatened him.

“Is Maurice okay?”

“Physically, he’s fine. He has a sprained back and a few fractured ribs, but the doctor says he’ll be okay. The thing is, Maurice has been acting very strange. I’m not sure of the full extent of it yet, but I think he’s having delusions.”

“What kind of delusions?”

“I know it sounds ridiculous,” Vivian said, “but he seems to think the baby I’m carrying is Jesus.”

Virgil bunched up his face as if something in the air stunk.

“He thinks that he’s actually been speaking with God, that he’s a saint or something. I don’t know.”

“A saint?” Virgil said.

“Yes,” Vivian continued. “Like in The Bible.”

“We don’t believe in saints,” Virgil told her. “We’re Jewish, for Christ’s sake.”

“That’s what I said. But that’s not the point. Look, I don’t want to get into a religious debate here. I’m simply repeating what he told me.”

“I’m sorry,” Virgil said. “What else did he say?”

“Just that he’s been having these visions,” Vivian continued, “about someone harming me and the baby. I think that’s what motivated him to hire those people to kill Michael. I’m worried about these people he hired.”

“So you’re here for money?” Virgil asked.

“Yes,” Vivian told him, “but I also need someone who knows how to deal with these kinds of people.”

“A criminal, you mean?”

“Look, Virgil, I’m not here to judge you. Lord knows I’ve made enough mistakes for the both of us.” Vivian paused. “It’s the kids I’m worried about. They threatened to come after Audrey if we don’t pay them.”

When Virgil heard this, a little fire of anger burned through him. “They mentioned Audrey specifically?”

“Yes. They threatened the whole family, but they mentioned Audrey. We just need your help.”

“Of course I’ll help,” Virgil told her, rising to his feet. “I’m not going to let anyone harm my family. And I have more than enough money to go around.”

“Thank you, Virgil.” Vivian hugged Virgil tightly. “Thank you so much.”

They hugged for a moment, and when Virgil began to pull away, Vivian hugged him tighter. “I don’t know what I’d do if you couldn’t help us,” Vivian sniffled, her words filled with tears.

“I’m not going to let a bunch of thugs threaten my family,” Virgil told her.

Vivian hugged him one final time.

* * *

Around seven o’clock that night, Maurice woke to the sound of butter crackling in a frying pan and the smell of cooked eggs. He rose from the bed and headed toward the kitchen, where he saw Vivian at the stove wearing an apron. Brandon was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping from a glass of chocolate milk in between bites of omelet.

“I just put a pot of coffee on,” Vivian said. “It’s almost ready.”

The throbbing pain in Maurice’s ribs had faded the night before, but he knew the fact that he’d healed so quickly would be suspicious, so he walked over to the table slowly, clutching his ribs as he walked.

“What happened to the coffee maker?” Vivian asked.

“It pissed me off,” Maurice said, “so I smashed it with a sledgehammer.”

Vivian cracked a Botox smile, flipped the bacon with the spatula.

“Mom made me a ham and cheese omelet for dinner,” Brandon said, smiling at Maurice. “Just like she used to. Pretty cool, huh?”

“I’d say,” Maurice told Brandon. Maurice removed the dust mask, wincing through the imaginary pain as he sat down at the table.

Vivian grabbed two pieces of bread and dropped them in the toaster, then poured Maurice a glass of orange juice and placed it on the table.

“You didn’t have to do all this,” Maurice said, taking a sip of juice.

“I want to do it,” Vivian said. “I haven’t cooked for you guys in so long. I forgot how much I missed it.”

“Me too,” Brandon said, taking another gulp of milk before shoveling a bite of omelet into his mouth.

“Are you feeling any better?” Vivian asked Maurice.

“Still sore,” Maurice lied.

“What happened?” Brandon took another sip of chocolate milk, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Mom said you got robbed?”

Maurice stared at Vivian then back at Brandon. “Just a bunch of kids looking for money.”

“I bet it was a gang,” Brandon said. “I heard lots of gangs are broke now because of Katrina. There’s no one to sell crack to because all their customers drowned.” Brandon took a sip of chocolate milk. “Plus, their hoes can’t make any money because all the people left in their neighborhood got bussed off to Houston.”

“We don’t use the word *hoes* in this house,” Vivian said.

“Sorry, Mom,” Brandon said. “I meant hooker. Did they have any tattoos on their necks?” Brandon asked Maurice, stabbing a fork into his omelet. “The people who robbed you, I mean?”

“I didn’t notice.” Maurice hissed dramatically through his teeth as he moved in his chair. “I was too busy getting beaten up.”

“What about bandannas?” Brandon asked. “Did they flash any gang signs when they were beating you up?”

“That’s enough,” Vivian said. She walked over to Maurice and placed two greasy strips of bacon on his plate. “Your father could have been killed. It’s nothing to joke about.”

Brandon stared at Maurice, watching him wince in pain as he raised the fork to his mouth. “Sorry, Dad,” he said, a sudden feeling of guilt brewing in his gut like a bowel movement. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

As Brandon said this, he heard the front door open. It was Audrey.

“Jesus, Dad,” she said, closing the door behind her and dropping her purse on the sofa before walking over to where Maurice was sitting. “Are

you okay?"

"He's fine." Vivian poked the eggs in the frying pan with a spatula. "Just a few cracked ribs."

"I was talking to Dad," Audrey said, flashing a burning stare at Vivian before glancing back at Maurice. "I was with Rochelle in Biloxi. I came straight home when I heard. Mom said you were robbed?"

"He got jumped by a gang," Brandon said, wiping a chocolate milk mustache from his lip.

"It wasn't a gang," Vivian said. "Just some misguided kids."

"I'm fine," Maurice told Audrey.

Vivian wiped her greasy fingers on the apron she was wearing. "I made breakfast. I even made some tofu scrambled eggs and veggie bacon especially for you."

Audrey flashed a shitty grin when she saw the apron Vivian was wearing. "Since when do you cook?"

Vivian turned from the stove and stared at Audrey, the spatula in her hand. "Do you want it or not?"

"Sure." Audrey pulled out a chair and sat down at the table next to Maurice. "Did they at least catch the guys who did it?"

"Not yet," Maurice said. "But I'm sure they're working on it."

Vivian walked over to Audrey and scooped the tofu eggs from the frying pan onto the plate in front of her. "We're just glad he's okay," she said, smiling at Maurice.

Audrey rolled her eyes, scooped a pile of tofu egg onto her fork and took a bite. "Why are you here?" she asked Vivian.

"Your father had to stay in the hospital overnight." Vivian placed the frying pan in the sink and wiped her hands on her apron.

"He's fine now," Audrey said. "Why are you still here?"

Vivian grabbed a cup of coffee and sat down at the table, staring at Maurice. "You had us worried there for a moment," she said. She blew on her coffee and took a sip. "I don't know what we'd do if something happened to you."

A shit-eating grin squirmed in the corner of Audrey's mouth. "I swear," she told Vivian, "if there was an award for Best Performance for Caring Wife, you'd get a fucking Academy Award."

"Please, Audrey," Maurice said.

"I'm sorry, Dad, but this is bullshit. After everything she's done,

she comes here now, with her little apron, acting like some perfect little housewife, as if everything is fine.”

“I never said I was perfect,” Vivian told Audrey.

Audrey laughed under her breath. “That’s the understatement of the year.”

“She’s trying, Audrey,” Brandon said. “Just give her a chance.”

“She had her chance,” Audrey said, staring at Vivian. She grabbed her plate, rose from the table, walked over to the sink and rinsed it off and headed to her room.

Later that evening, after everyone had gone to bed, Maurice grabbed the gun from the drawer in his nightstand and went into the living room. He walked to the window, and as he glanced through the draperies he spotted a suspicious white van parked across the street. He’d never seen the van before, and he couldn’t help but wonder why it was parked there. He stared at it for a moment, yawned and closed the draperies. After he’d placed the pistol under a pillow, he turned on the TV, flipping through the channels until he came to QVC. The female host was holding up a doll, and the words: *Ring Around the Rosy Singing Baby Doll* were blinking at the top of the screen. The doll had a round face, morgue-white skin and bright blue eyes, and when the host pressed the doll’s plastic palm, the doll began to sing: “Ring around the rosy, pocket full of posies, ashes, ashes, we all fall down.”

As Maurice stared at the TV, his thoughts drifted toward Vivian’s baby. He was relieved to know that Virgil would pay off Jazelle and Oz and that soon they’d be out of his life forever. But none of that changed the fact that Michael still intended to harm Vivian and the baby, and though Maurice tried desperately to ignore the thought, he knew it was only a matter of time before he’d have to kill Michael himself.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When Maurice woke up on Monday, he stared out the living room window at an ominous black sky clotted with white clouds. The clouds were hovering over the house, and for a moment he stared at them the way someone might stare at a cluster of white spots on an X-ray. As he closed the draperies, he saw the suspicious white van he'd seen the day before still parked across the street. He suspected the van had been surveilling him since the day before, and he was determined to send Michael and his thugs the message that he intended to protect his family no matter what the consequences.

After staring at the van for a moment, Maurice headed outside toward the back yard. When he reached the toolshed, he rooted through a rusty toolbox, through tangled nests of electrical wire until he found a ball-peen hammer. He placed the hammer in his robe pocket, and with a calm purpose flickering in his eyes, headed down the driveway, cutting across the front lawn before walking up the street to where the van was parked.

When he finally reached the van, he realized there was no one inside. Though the windows were tinted, when he cupped his hands around his eyes and stared inside, he could see that no one was in it. He tried the handle, but it was locked. When he'd verified that no cars were coming, he pulled the hammer from the pocket of his robe and smashed the back window, knocking loose, jagged pieces of glass out the way with the head of the hammer. He reached his hand through the window and unlocked the door. When he pulled the handle, the door opened with a rusty creak, and he climbed into the van and closed the door behind him.

The inside of the van was lined with control panels, cluttered with speakers, red and white switches and television monitors. A periscope with handles was mounted in the ceiling of the van, and two brown velvet chairs faced the control panel and monitors. Maurice couldn't believe what he was seeing. He'd been suspicious of the van from the beginning, but seeing the inside of it convinced him that someone was in

fact monitoring his every move.

As he pulled down the dust mask and stared at the wall of monitors and switches, a sudden burst of anger exploded inside him. He swung the hammer and smashed one of the monitors, pried the knobs off the control panel with the back of the hammer, shattered a computer monitor, cracked a large row of digital displays, then grabbed a camera from its tripod and slammed it against the floor, watching as it cracked into pieces.

When he was done, he climbed out of the van, tossed the hammer onto the ground and headed back toward the house. The air was heavy with static, and as he walked down the street, the sounds of birds poured from the trees, the multitude of chirps and squawks suspiciously synchronized as if the sounds were playing on some recorded loop broadcast from tiny speakers hidden in the top of the trees.

* * *

On the other side of town, Virgil walked across the well-manicured lawn of St. Joseph's Nursing Home, past the chatter of sprinklers and the heavy sighs of garbage trucks, until he came to Carrollton Avenue. After he crossed Carrollton, he came to a bus stop, where he waited for almost twenty minutes. The bus arrived on time, and two transfers later, he arrived at a used car lot, where he purchased a 1983 red Toyota Corolla with bald tires and a dented fender.

He spent the next hour or so at Fat Harry's nursing a glass of Bourbon. As he stared at a piece of wrinkled paper on the bar that contained Oz and Jazelle's address, he tried to concoct a strategy for how he'd handle the situation. Jazelle had demanded they meet in an abandoned hair salon in New Orleans East, which made Virgil a bit nervous. He'd considered going to a pawnshop and purchasing a pistol just in case things took a turn for the worse, but he didn't want to jeopardize his life or the lives of Maurice and the kids. He'd been keeping up with the story on the news, and though the police claimed they had no leads, Virgil figured that if Oz and Jazelle were stupid enough to kill the wrong person and steal his BMW, they'd probably get picked up sooner or later, and if the police picked them up, he figured they'd probably cut a deal and pin the murder on Maurice. On the other hand, most of the

recent murders in New Orleans had gone unsolved, and Virgil suspected that the timing of this crime was perfect since the police department had been overwhelmed after losing most of its force during Katrina. He finished his drink, and by the time he left the bar, he'd decided on a plan.

When Virgil pulled into the abandoned strip mall an hour later, he saw the hair salon near the back. The rutted gravel parking lot of the strip mall was cluttered with puddles of dirty rainwater, piles of moldy sheetrock, clumps of tangled corrugated metal and rotten boards. There was an overturned freezer in a weedy ditch swarming with flies, and the air reeked of rotting fish. The lot was empty, except for a man wandering near a sagging chain-link fence mumbling to himself. His face and neck were flecked with red, puss-filled sores, and he had a mouthful of little tombstones for teeth. His skin was gray, and he looked like he was rotting from the inside out.

The large plate glass window of the hair salon was cracked, and there was a yellow sticker plastered in the corner that read: *Who Dat Baby Daddy? Certified DNA Testing \$79.99*. The inside of the salon was cluttered with moldy barber's chairs, the floor littered with rusty cans of hairspray, shampoo bottles, tubes of hair gel, and plastic fingernails. The walls were freckled with mold, lined with crooked picture frames and mirrors smudged with gray silt. Near the entrance, a Styrofoam head with half a nose drifted in a pool of dirty rainwater.

As Virgil entered the hair salon, he loosened his grip on the pillowcase that was slung over his shoulder and glanced at Jazelle, who was leaning against an overturned receptionist's desk, a crooked cigarette burning between her fingers. He nodded, and Jazelle flashed a twisted smile. Oz was sitting casually in a barber's chair clutching a pistol. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and he had a large bloody bandage wrapped around his shoulder. "You Virgil?" he asked, picking at one of his silver caps with a dirty toothpick.

"Yep," Virgil said.

For a moment, Oz and Virgil stared at each other without moving.

"Ain't you going to frisk him?" Jazelle hissed.

Oz rolled his eyes and walked over to Virgil. With the pistol in his hand, he patted down the purple mink coat Virgil was wearing. When he was done, he walked back over to the barber's chair. "He's clean." Oz put the pistol on a counter and sat back down in the barber's chair. "So

you're Maurice's father, huh?"

"Yep," Virgil told him.

"How's he doing?"

"He's alright. A few busted ribs is all."

"Jesus," Oz said, squinting his eyes as if he could feel the pain. "We didn't mean to hurt him that bad. We just wanted to scare him was all. I had a pair of fractured ribs when I used to box," he said, still picking at his tooth with the dirty toothpick. "It was the worst pain I've ever felt. Even breathing hurt."

"You fractured your ribs cause you were hell-bent on raising your elbows," Jazelle said. "I kept telling you to play defense. Stead of dancing around the ring like some retarded peacock."

"That wasn't dancing," Oz hissed. "It was footwork. You don't even know the difference."

"Yeah, well," Jazelle said, "whatever it was, you looked like you had a case of epilepsy." She took a drag off her cigarette and turned to Virgil, the smoke creeping out her mouth. "That our money in that pillowcase?"

"Yep," Virgil said. "Ten thousand. Just like you asked for."

"Let's see it."

Virgil walked over to Oz and reached his hand into the pillowcase. When his gloved hand appeared again, it was clutching a gun. Oz tried to reach for his pistol, but it was too late. Virgil fired, and a second later Oz was pressing his hand against a bloody hole in his neck, a gape-mouthed expression carved into his face, his voice like a dying bird squawking in his throat. He staggered left and right before falling to the floor. Jazelle screamed, her voice shattering like broken glass. Virgil walked closer and pointed the gun at Oz from behind the pillowcase. As he pointed the gun, he thought about the men who'd attacked his wife when Maurice was just a boy, how they'd threatened his family the way Oz and Jazelle were threatening his family now. He imagined their faces as he held up the pillowcase to muffle the shot and aimed the gun at Oz.

When the second bullet hit Oz, his body stiffened before going limp. In one steady movement, Virgil swung the gun and the pillowcase toward Jazelle, aimed and fired. A bloody hole puckered in her forehead, her eyes rolled toward the back of her skull, and she fell back onto the overturned receptionist's desk, her legs twitching, the cigarette still burning between her fingers. Virgil dropped the pillowcase and headed

outside to the gravel parking lot where his car was parked. He climbed in, cranked the engine, and slammed the car into drive, the bald tires of the car spitting up silver clouds of dust as he drove away.

* * *

Later that afternoon, Maurice was halfway through an episode of Judge Judy when the local news interrupted the show to report that police were on the scene of a double murder in New Orleans East. When photographs of Oz and Jazelle flashed across the TV screen, a shiver crawled down Maurice's spine. The anchor for Channel Nine News said that the two alleged drug dealers had been shot and killed in a suspected drug deal gone wrong and that they'd been found in an abandoned hair salon. Maurice put his cup of coffee on the table, hurried into his bedroom and changed, then grabbed his keys and the gun before heading outside to his car.

Fifteen minutes later, when he arrived at Channel Four News, he walked inside and headed into Vivian's office.

"What are you doing here?" Vivian asked as Maurice walked up.

Maurice pulled down the dust mask he was wearing and closed the door behind him. He told her that Oz and Jazelle were dead. Vivian seemed surprised. She said she'd been at work all morning, and that they hadn't reported any story about two drug dealers being murdered in a salon. When she asked Maurice how he'd found out, he told her that Channel Nine had reported it that morning.

"Channel Nine?" Vivian asked. "Why were you watching Channel Nine?"

"I just flipped the TV on," Maurice told her. "It was already on Channel Nine."

"That's our direct competitor, Maurice. That's like me buying life insurance from State Farm."

Maurice began to speak, but Vivian interrupted him.

"Was Brittney Weatherspoon anchoring? She's such a pretentious little bitch." Vivian's face filled with anger and blood. "You know she only received that job because her father owns the station."

"What are we going to do?" Maurice asked.

Vivian pulled out her compact. "About what?"

“About Oz and Jazelle being dead.”

“Nothing.” She teased her hair in the mirror. “It looks to me like someone solved our problem for us. We wanted them to stop threatening us, and now they can’t.”

Neither of them had talked to Virgil, but they both knew he’d only intended to give Oz and Jazelle the money they wanted, and that he would never have killed them. Because of this, they could only assume that someone else had done it.

“What about Michael?” Maurice asked.

“What about him?”

“What if *he* killed them?”

Confusion tugged at the corners of Vivian’s face. “Why would Michael kill a bunch of drug dealers?”

“Maybe he found out that I hired them to kill *him*?”

Vivian pulled a lipstick from her purse. “It was probably just some drug deal gone bad.” She puckered in the mirror. “They’re drug dealers, Maurice. That’s what drug dealers do. They get murdered.”

Maurice tried to convince Vivian that Michael had killed Oz and Jazelle, and that he would come after them next, but every time he brought up the idea, she dismissed it.

“You need to stop worrying.” She snapped the compact shut, placed it in her purse. “Everything is going to be fine.”

But everything wasn’t fine, and Maurice knew it. After he kissed Vivian goodbye, he walked back to the parking lot and climbed into his car. For the last few days, he’d been researching how to build a pipe bomb, and as he drove, he contemplated whether he’d plant the bomb in Michael’s car or send it to him in a package.

Fifteen minutes later Maurice was wandering through Home Depot, reading through a list of supplies he’d composed a few days earlier on a wrinkled piece of paper. When he found the pipes and threaded steel caps he needed, he dropped them into the cart and headed toward the hardware section, where he grabbed a dozen boxes of nails and duct tape. He purchased military detonation cord at an army surplus store, black powder at a local gun store, and he found the rest of what he needed at Walmart.

When he arrived at the house, he carried the materials he’d purchased to the storm shelter. He grabbed his drill from the shed, and

after organizing a small work area inside the shelter, he tuned the battery-powered radio to WWL. The woman on the radio was talking about another flock of dead birds that had been found downtown. Maurice spent the rest of the afternoon, assembling the bomb, the rain falling outside as the woman's staticky voice seeped from the speakers of the radio.

CHAPTER TWENTY

That afternoon when Vivian and Audrey walked into the psychiatrist's office, they saw a man in a white coat sitting behind a desk. He was bony with a gray beard and ashy eyes, and to Vivian, he looked like an anorexic version of Santa Claus. He invited Audrey and Vivian to sit down, introduced himself, and after he grabbed a clipboard from his desk, he leaned back in a leather chair near the window. Vivian told him she'd come to see him for advice, that her husband had been acting strangely, that he'd always been a bit obsessive, but that recently his obsessions had worsened after the recent bird kills. She also said she'd been robbed at gunpoint a year earlier, and that she thought the robbery may have added to Maurice's problem.

"Not to mention," Audrey told the psychiatrist, "she had sex with a man behind my father's back and left him."

Vivian flashed an icy stare, then turned back to the doctor. "I'm sure our separation hasn't helped."

Vivian told the doctor about the storm shelter, about how Maurice had stopped drinking tap water, how he'd been wearing a dust mask wherever he went, and how he'd become convinced that someone was trying to harm her and the baby. "What worries me," she told him, "is that he said he's been having these visions. He seems to think the baby I'm carrying is Jesus Christ."

Audrey laughed under her breath.

"What's so funny?" Vivian asked.

"I just think it's funny," Audrey said, "the idea that God would choose *you* to give birth to the Messiah."

"Why wouldn't he choose me?"

"You're an adulterer," Audrey said. "You're the last person he'd choose."

"So what, you think he'd choose you?"

"I don't know," Audrey said, "but he'd definitely choose me before he'd choose you."

“From what both of you are saying,” the doctor interrupted, “it certainly sounds as though he’s exhibiting some delusional behavior.”

“But why would he think I’m pregnant with Jesus?” Vivian asked. “Especially when he’s Jewish?”

“Perhaps it’s less painful for your husband,” the doctor said, “to believe that you’re pregnant with Jesus rather than with another man’s child.” The doctor scribbled something on the paper attached to his clipboard then looked up. “You said he’s having visions. Did he say he was hearing voices too?”

“No,” Vivian said. “Not to my knowledge.”

“Actually,” Audrey chimed in, “he told my brother he was hearing static, and that sometimes he could hear what sounded like voices on a radio.”

Vivian shifted in her chair, her face flat and expressionless. “No one told me he was hearing voices.”

“Well,” Audrey snarled, “if you came around more than once every two weeks, you might know your husband is hearing voices. He could have been drinking coffee and playing checkers with Moses every morning, and you wouldn’t have known it.”

As Audrey and Vivian bickered back and forth, the doctor rubbed the gray hairs of his beard, looking at them the way a tailor might look if he were sizing two new potential mental patients for straight jackets. “Some family counseling may also be necessary,” he said finally.

Vivian flashed a confused look. “Why do *we* need counseling?”

“Because we’re a bunch of lunatics,” Audrey interrupted. “That’s why. Jesus, you haven’t figured that out by now. Even Brandon can see it.”

“I assume Brandon’s your son?” the doctor asked.

“Yes,” Vivian said. “He told his high school counselor he wanted to be a psychologist because his family was a bunch of lunatics, and he figured he’d have lots of people to practice on.”

The doctor smiled. “You’re not lunatics,” he said. “You’re simply a family going through a very difficult time, that’s all. We can talk about family counseling later. For now, though, I think we need to focus on your husband. I’d need to see him first, of course, but from what you’re both telling me, he certainly seems delusional, and there definitely seems to be a religious element as well.”

“Is that unusual?” Vivian asked. “For a person with this problem to be obsessed with religion.”

“Actually,” the doctor told her, “it’s fairly common. Hyper-religiosity and conditions like these often go hand-in-hand. The good news is that we’ve made great strides in treating illnesses such as these.”

“So you think this is something that can be treated?” Vivian asked.

“Certainly,” he said. He put his pen back in his pocket. “In time, with medication and counseling, all the imaginary nightmares he’s created in his mind will eventually diminish, and he’ll be able to return to a relatively normal life, focusing his attention not on some silly imagined catastrophe, but on all the real atrocities of the world with which normal, healthy individuals concern themselves.”

When they were done speaking, Vivian shook the doctor’s hand, and they left. Fifteen minutes later, as they were pulling into the driveway, Audrey’s cell phone rang. It was Audrey’s roommate. She told Audrey the police had stopped by her dorm to speak with her, and that they’d be back on Monday. As Audrey’s roommate rattled on and on, Audrey’s heart fluttered like a bird trapped in her chest. She hung up the phone, and as she did, Vivian noticed the look of fear breaking across Audrey’s face.

“What’s wrong?”

Tears were building in Audrey’s throat. “Nothing,” she said, before getting out of the car and rushing into the house.

Once inside, Vivian put her keys on the kitchen table and walked toward Audrey’s room. From the doorway, she could see Audrey lying face down on her bed, crying into her pillow. “Are you okay?”

“Go away,” Audrey whimpered, her words muffled by the pillow.

Vivian walked over to the window and pulled back the draperies. She stared out the window at a gray sky cluttered with clouds, then walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Would you sit up and talk to me please?”

“Just leave,” Audrey said.

“I’m not leaving until you talk to me.”

Audrey wiped the tears from her cheek and sat up. “What?”

Vivian reached over to brush a strand of hair from Audrey’s face. But when she did, Audrey jerked her neck back and threw up her arms as if she were trying to block a jab.

“Come here,” Vivian said, holding out her hands.

But Audrey only stared back at her.

Vivian scooted over suddenly and grabbed Audrey, pulling her close and hugging her tight. As she did, Audrey immediately let her body go limp as if she were locked in some sort of Jujitsu hold.

“For Christ’s sake, Audrey. Hug me.”

“Stop trying to act like a mother,” Audrey said, her shoulders slouched, her dead arms dangling as Vivian squeezed her tighter.

“I mean it, Audrey. Hug me back.”

“You’re strangling me,” Audrey hissed. “I can barely breathe.”

Vivian loosened her grip, and as she did Audrey pulled away and turned onto her side, resting her head on the pillow. When Vivian reached over and placed her hand on Audrey’s back, Audrey squirmed away.

“I’m not leaving until you talk to me,” Vivian said. She sighed, stared at Audrey for a moment, then pulled the covers back and crawled into bed with her, inching over until she was hugging Audrey from behind.

“I’m sorry for being a horrible mother,” she said, stroking Audrey’s hair. “I hope you can forgive me one day.”

As Vivian rubbed Audrey’s back, she heard sobs gradually rising in Audrey’s throat. She felt Audrey’s body begin to rumble, and as the sudden bursts of sadness jolted through her, she hugged her tighter, her eyes squinted as she absorbed each slight jerk and twist of Audrey’s body. As she clutched Audrey tighter and tighter, she could no longer tell where her body ended and Audrey’s began. Gradually, she could feel Audrey’s sadness washing over her, flooding her entire body, and for a moment, it was as if she were experiencing true empathy for the first time in her life.

“I’m sorry,” Vivian whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

“I hate you so much,” Audrey said, her words twitching with the gentle jerk of her body.

Vivian hugged Audrey tighter. “I know,” she sighed, stroking Audrey’s hair. “I know.”

Gradually, the sadness drained from Audrey’s body, the sound of her sobs hushed beneath the mingling of their breath. Vivian continued to stroke her hair until all she could hear was a soft flurry of whimpers, until there was nothing except an occasional tremor twitching through Audrey’s body like the quiet aftershocks from a passing earthquake.

* * *

By that evening Maurice had drilled a hole in each of the pipes and filled them with the black powder, inserting the military detonation cord into each of the pipes before capping the ends. As an added precaution, he poured hot candle wax over the caps to ensure they were sealed. He even duct-taped handfuls of nails to the outside of the pipes before wrapping the pipes in a blanket and placing them in an old ice chest.

When he was done, he locked the storm shelter and headed inside. The rain had stopped, and the back yard was pocked with muddy puddles of rainwater. He walked inside, and when he reached the living room, Vivian, Audrey, and Brandon were waiting for him.

“We’re worried about you, Dad,” Audrey said. “Me and Mom went to see someone today. A psychiatrist. He thinks he can help you.”

“You went to see a psychiatrist today?” Maurice asked. “Together?”

“Yes,” Vivian said. “We’re worried about you.”

“How come no one invited me?” Brandon asked.

“It wasn’t a birthday party,” Audrey said. “Anyway, you were at school.”

“So what? I’m part of this family too.”

“Fine,” Vivian said. “If we ever decide to get your father a psychiatrist again, we’ll be sure to invite you, okay?”

As Vivian spoke, Maurice could hear little bits of metal in her voice. He started to speak, but as he did, there was a knock at the door.

Audrey rose from the table and walked over to the window, and as she stared across the yard, she saw a police car parked in the driveway.

“Who is it?” Maurice asked.

“It’s the police,” she said, turning from the window.

Maurice walked frantically to where Audrey was standing. He pulled back the draperies, and when he spotted the police car, his heart began to tick like a bomb in his chest. He knew the police officer was one of Michael’s hired thugs, and he had no intention of letting the man hurt Vivian or the baby.

“Take Audrey and Brandon into their rooms,” Maurice told Vivian, the static loose in his head. “Stay there until I tell you to come out.” He took a final look out the window and closed the draperies, pulled the

revolver from his pocket and checked to make sure it was loaded.

“Dad.” A wave of fear broke across Audrey’s face as she saw the pistol Maurice was holding. “Why do you have a gun?”

“You and Brandon go with your mother,” Maurice said, lightning crackling in his voice as he peeked through the draperies again.

“Calm down.” Vivian took a deep breath, treading carefully with her words, as if she were stepping through a weedy field littered with landmines. “Maurice, give me the gun.”

“Both of you,” Maurice snarled, “do as I say.” There was a crackling fire burning in his words that Vivian and Audrey hadn’t heard before. “Right now!”

The air grew quiet, and as they stood there in silence, they suddenly heard another knock at the door.

Maurice took a deep breath, stared at Vivian for a moment, then walked over and slowly opened the door. As he did, he saw a muscular officer standing in the dusty yellow glow of the porch light. The officer didn’t see the gun at first, but as he began to speak, Maurice raised it and pointed it at him.

“Put the gun down, sir,” the officer stammered, raising his hands, his eyes squinted as if he were shielding himself from flying glass. “I’m just here to talk to your daughter.”

The static crawled around in Maurice’s skull. He pulled up the dust mask and strapped it around his mouth, the gun twitching in his hand as he pointed it at the officer.

“I just need to ask her a few questions,” the officer said, his words laced with fear. “And then I’ll be on my way.”

“You’re not here to see my daughter,” Maurice said. “Do you think I’m stupid? I know why you’re here.”

“He’s here to see me,” Audrey said, tears rising in her throat. “I did something terrible. I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t want you to get mad.”

“You must really think I’m stupid,” Maurice told the officer. He took a deep breath, tightened his grip on the pistol.

“He’s telling the truth, Dad. He’s here because of me.”

Maurice paused for a moment, turned to Audrey and lowered the gun.

As Audrey began to cry, Maurice saw the policeman from the corner

of his eye moving slightly. He turned quickly, and when he did, he saw the officer's hand inching toward the pistol holstered on his hip. In one quick jerk, Maurice stabbed the gun against the air and fired.

Though he'd aimed for the officer's chest, the bullet hit him in his right thigh. He stumbled backward, and the look of fear on the officer's face slowly transformed into a mixture of shock and confusion. He wrapped both hands around the bloody hole in his pants, the veins in his forehead bulging. He took another drunken step to the side and fell to the ground clutching his leg.

Maurice walked over, pulled the gun from the officer's holster and tossed it into a patch of tangled weeds. Afraid the policeman might call for backup, Maurice removed his walkie-talkie and grabbed the handcuffs that were dangling from his belt. He stood the officer up, poked the gun in his back and led him over to the front of the squad car. Once there, he slapped the cuffs across the officer's left wrist and attached the other cuff to the grille of the cruiser.

When he was done, Maurice took a deep breath and stared over his shoulder. Audrey was weeping, and her hands were covering Brandon's eyes. Vivian was standing in the middle of the living room, quivering silently, her cheeks streaked with twisted black veins of mascara. He scanned the nearby houses to see if anyone had heard the shot, but the neighborhood was eerily quiet, except for the hum of streetlights and a gentle breeze crawling through the tops of the trees. He told Vivian and the kids to go to the car, headed to the storm shelter in the yard, grabbed the ice chest containing the pipe bomb and carried it to the car and placed it in the trunk. He saw Brandon and Audrey in the car, but when he arrived at the car, he saw that Vivian was missing. He hurried back to the house, where he found her standing in the same place she'd been when he left, quivering silently, her face streaked with mascara. A frozen, startled look had fallen across her face, and as Maurice's eyes traveled down her body, he noticed a clear liquid crawling down her thighs, gathering in a puddle between her feet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

As Maurice drove through the winding streets of the city, Audrey comforted Vivian in the back while Brandon sat in the passenger seat staring out the window at the blur of buildings and streetlights passing by. No one said a word while Maurice drove, and nearly an hour had passed before he pulled into the parking lot of a ratty motel near Slidell.

After he parked the car, he cut the engine and headed toward the motel office. The motel was surrounded by a wall of pine trees, the gravel pathway leading to the office littered with empty beer cans, a red Adidas tennis shoe, and a long brown weave. There was a wooden sign hanging outside the office, and someone had vandalized it, changed the F to an R and added an I, so that instead of reading *MOTEL OFFICE*, it read *MOTEL ORIFICE*. Above the sign, the pink word *VACANCY* blinked through a smudged window. There was a black man with an afro riding a bicycle back and forth in front of the office. He had a blue comb sticking out the side of his afro, and he was eating from a can of sardines as he rode by in circles. The rickety bicycle he was riding was rusted with a banana seat, red-white-and-blue streamers hanging off the handlebars, and playing cards stuck in the spokes. There was a woman near the door of the office with ratty blonde dreadlocks and a gold tooth with a dollar sign etched into it. Her skin was the color of curdled milk, and she was wearing red knee-high boots, black fishnet stockings, a black bikini top, and a red leather skirt that hung so low on her hips Maurice could see the thin C-section scar on her belly.

“You lookin’ to get saved?” the woman asked Maurice, as he as walked up. But Maurice didn’t say a word, only grinned politely and opened the cracked glass door that led into the office. After he paid the man inside, he headed back to the car and herded Brandon, Audrey and Vivian into the room. He gave Brandon a dollar bill and a handful of quarters and told him to get Vivian a soft drink from the soda machine near the office. Once inside, Audrey helped Vivian over to the bed and Maurice closed the door.

The room smelled like cigarette smoke and urine, cracked yellow paint was peeling off the walls, and the floor was covered with filthy orange shag carpet.

Audrey helped Vivian into bed. “We need to get Mom to a hospital,” she said, propping a pillow behind Vivian’s head.

“We can’t,” Maurice said, peeking through the dirty mildewed curtains, all the while tapping the pistol in his pocket. “They’ll be waiting for us.”

“I don’t need to go to the hospital,” Vivian told them. “I’m not even having contractions yet.” She stroked Audrey’s shoulder. “Everything is going to be fine.”

“Fine?” Audrey said. “Dad just shot a cop, Mom. Things are far from fine.”

“Just calm down,” Vivian said.

“The police are going to be looking for us,” Audrey told her. “We’re fugitives, for Christ’s sake.”

“Fugitives or not,” she told Audrey, “we’re still a family. What’s important is that we stick together.”

“That police officer could be dead for all we know,” Audrey said.

Vivian rolled her eyes. “Nobody ever died from a bullet to the thigh.”

“If it hit a femoral artery,” Audrey said, “he’ll bleed out in no time.”

“*Bleed out?*” Vivian said. “So what are you, a doctor now? You can’t even pass calculus, and now suddenly you’re a doctor. I’m sure he’s fine. It would be rare for someone to die from a gunshot wound to the thigh.”

“She has a point,” Maurice said, turning from the window. “The survival rate for gunshot wounds is seventy-eight percent when people get shot in the thigh.”

“Jesus!” Audrey hissed. “What is wrong with you people?”

“He’s probably in the back of some ambulance right now,” Vivian said, “headed for the hospital.”

As Vivian said this, Brandon entered the room and closed the door behind him. “All they had was Mountain Dew,” he said. He walked over to Vivian and handed her the can, then sat down on the bed next to her and Audrey.

“Are you sure you’re not in pain?” Maurice asked Vivian.

“I’m positive.” Vivian pressed the cold Mountain Dew can against her forehead. “It’s just pressure, really.”

“We need to get her to a hospital,” Audrey interrupted.

“It’s too risky, Audrey.” Maurice stared suspiciously through the window at a car as it passed outside. “We can deliver the baby here.”

“Your father’s right,” Vivian said. “Grab my phone, Brandon, and look up how to deliver a baby on Google. See if you can find a video.”

“That’s a great idea,” Audrey said. “Look up how to perform a lobotomy while you’re at it, Brandon. I’m sure there’s a steak knife around here somewhere. Maybe I can cure the entire family while we wait for the baby.”

Brandon fished his hand into Vivian’s purse and came up with her phone. He searched Google, and when he found a video clip, he handed her the phone. The clip showed a plastic torso with a little rubber trapdoor in the crotch. When the woman narrating the video pressed a button on the belly of the torso, a plastic baby head squeezed through the trapdoor.

Maurice had no intention of going to the hospital, and he was a bit worried about having the baby in the motel room. He was especially concerned when it came to the idea of having someone other than a doctor cut the umbilical cord. He was relieved, though, when the woman on the video mentioned that more and more mothers were leaving their baby’s umbilical cord attached for days until it eventually fell off. The video even referenced a *NY Times* article entitled *Lotus Births in an Increasingly Frenetic Society: Multitasking with a Placenta Still Attached to Your Newborn*.

As Maurice stood there, the static began to buzz around in his head. In all of the chaos, he’d forgotten to destroy Vivian’s cell phone. Without warning, he walked over to where Vivian was, grabbed the phone from her hand, dropped in onto the ground and began stomping on it until pieces of metal, plastic, and glass were scattered across the floor.

“Okay,” Audrey said. “This is officially insane.” She rose from the bed and started to walk for the door. “I’m going to get help.”

As she headed toward the door, Maurice pulled the gun from his pocket. “Sit back down, Audrey,” he said, his eyes wild, his voice turning serious.

Audrey stopped and stared at Maurice as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“I mean it, Audrey,” he said. “Sit down.”

She stared at the gun and then walked back to the bed and sat down. Maurice put the gun back in his pocket, secured the chain on the motel door, then headed back to the window.

Maurice didn't sleep much that night. He grabbed a Bible from the nightstand and read for a while. Later, while the others tossed and turned, he flipped the TV on and sat near the window with the pistol in his lap. The original *Night of the Living Dead* was on again. He watched it for almost an hour, occasionally staring out the window when he heard the slightest sound. When the movie reached the final scene, Maurice watched the man frantically boarding up the doors and windows of the house with pieces of plywood. As waves and waves of zombies slowly flooded the house, Maurice remembered how the last time he'd seen the movie (a few months earlier), he'd felt like one of the zombies, as if he were rotting from the inside out. But as he watched the scene again, he felt more like the frantic man inside the house this time, the one who looked like a young frightened version of Sidney Poitier.

The movie cut to a mob of police officers armed with shotguns and barking dogs on leashes approaching the house. When they'd finally assembled outside, one of the men pointed his rifle at the black silhouette of a man peeking out the window of the house. As he watched the movie, Maurice thought he heard a sound outside. With the gun in his hand, he peeked through the ratty, mildewed draperies, and a gunshot rang from the television. He turned the volume down on the TV, then turned his attention back to the window. When he squinted his eyes, he saw a slight shadowy movement in the parking lot. He could hear the hushed swarm of voices buzzing outside, and off in the distance, what looked like the soft glint of metal blinking in the branches of the trees.

* * *

That night, while Maurice paced back and forth around the room, Audrey lay in bed next to Brandon, a flurry of thoughts rushing through her mind. Though she tried to make sense of everything that had happened, she could barely comprehend the reality of it all. The one thing she was sure of, however, was that she was to blame for what had happened. After all, the police would never have come to the house if she hadn't broken into Glenn's condo, Maurice would never have shot

the officer, and the family would be back at the house bickering with one another like always, rather than hiding from the police in some flea-bag motel in God knows where.

As a sense of guilt moved through her, she stared at a tiny web of cracks in the ceiling, and it reminded her of the motel room they'd stayed in during their trip to Pensacola years earlier, when Maurice used to love the beach, before he'd become frightened of the water and obsessed with shark attack statistics and the inevitability of drowning. As Audrey thought back to the trip, she remembered Brandon as a baby, sitting under a red umbrella with a plastic bucket on his head, digging his tiny fists into the cool wet sand, Maurice smiling in a burst of sunlight, kissing Vivian as he adjusted a plastic nose shield attached to his sunglasses, Vivian giggling in her pink flowered bathing suit as she and Maurice tiptoed into the cool blue water.

Brandon was snoring now, and Maurice was at the window, staring through the ratty draperies at a pair of headlights passing outside. Audrey sighed, and as the shadows of trees drifted across the motel room wall, she closed her eyes, imagining the sun warm on her skin, the powder blue sky freckled with seagulls, the soft hiss of breaking waves like a slow rhythmic breath wheezing in her ear.

* * *

As morning broke and dusty streaks of sunlight leaked through the curtains, Maurice sat near the window staring across the empty parking lot, his eyelids heavy, the pistol drooping in his hand. Over the last few minutes a foggy white cloud of sleep had settled over him. The edges of his thoughts had become frayed, and as his eyelids fluttered and began to close, he suddenly heard Vivian calling to him. She told him the labor pains had started, so Maurice grabbed a damp hand towel from the bathroom and sat down on the bed next to her, kissing her cheek and gently draping the towel across her forehead. He could smell the scent of roses seeping from her skin, and as he stared down at her, he could see her heart beginning to glow in her chest. A menacing white static started to seep from the TV, and Maurice saw a shadow that resembled a pair of wings limping across the motel room wall.

As he watched the shadow, a sudden flood of visions flashed in the

back of his brain—the first, a silver sword flickering in the sunlight, followed by a woman crying, mingled with the bloody screams of a baby. He could hear a dirty voice smothered beneath the static, but the only words he could understand were *child* and *kill*. Maurice remembered a passage in Matthew when an angel appeared to Joseph to warn him that Mary’s child was in danger.

In a panic, he rose from the bed and grabbed the Bible he’d found in the nightstand the evening before. He flipped to Matthew 2:13, and as he read the words, his heart fluttered in his chest: *An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said, take the child and his mother and escape. For Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.* Maurice knew the visions were a divine message from God. He also knew he needed to kill Michael. But before he could murder Michael, he needed to bring Vivian and the baby somewhere safe. He woke Brandon and Audrey, told them the family was in danger and that they needed to leave immediately, then quickly herded everyone into the car.

It was still early, and the sky was burning with streaks of orange and red, the explosion of color so bright the trees looked as if they’d been set on fire. The parking lot was nearly empty except for a junked brown station wagon covered with clumps of bird shit. While Brandon climbed sleepy-eyed into the front seat and Audrey helped Vivian into the back, Maurice stood by the driver’s side door scanning the parking lot, the pistol clutched firmly in his hand.

When everyone was finally in the car, Maurice climbed in, placed the revolver in his lap and cranked the engine. Audrey sat in the back, pressing the ratty hand towel against Vivian’s forehead. Gradually, over the next few minutes, Vivian’s pain intensified, and Audrey pleaded with Maurice, insisting that Vivian needed to go to a hospital. She knew Maurice would argue with her, just as he’d done the night before, so she decided to use a different tactic.

“Do you know that 34% of babies delivered without a doctor,” she lied, “get tangled in the umbilical cord and die?”

Maurice flashed a suspicious look in the rear-view mirror. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“You never heard of it,” Audrey said, “because doctors know how to correct the problem before it harms the baby or the mother. It’s true,” she lied. “I found all kinds of statistics on Mom’s phone last night before

you smashed it.”

“Like what?” Maurice asked.

“Like the fact that 54% of babies delivered in public places, like motels, get staph infections.”

“Are you making that up?”

“No,” Audrey said. “I found it on WebMD. You can look it up if you don’t believe me. And that’s not all. The death rate for babies is three times higher when they aren’t delivered in a hospital.”

Maurice didn’t want to risk bringing Vivian to a hospital, but the more statistics Audrey quoted, the more worried he became. He suspected the police would be waiting for them at one of the major hospitals in the city, so he decided to go to a small hospital a few hours west. As he drove, he stared frantically up at the sky, the only sounds the quiet hum of cars on the highway accompanied by an occasional moan from Vivian.

When they finally arrived at the ER, Vivian was bent over in pain, hissing through her teeth. Audrey went inside and grabbed a wheelchair, and Maurice wheeled her into the hospital. While a nurse took Vivian to Labor and Delivery, Maurice filled out the proper paperwork, and when he was done, he and the kids sat in the waiting room.

Exhausted, he leaned back in the chair and stared up at the television on the wall. The TV was tuned to a local news station, and the newscaster was rattling on about a campaign dinner for the mayor that evening at Commander’s Palace. When she was done, she cut to a story about a recent rash of suicide bombings that had killed 150 people over a five-day period in Iraq. As the charred skeletons of cars flashed across the screen, Maurice remembered the pipe bomb he’d put in the trunk of the car. He could hear a wiry string of static seeping from the hospital intercom, and as he sat there, he felt the static snaking its way through the air, slithering up his backbone, hissing in the bony sockets of his eyes. He stared over his shoulder and saw a bald police officer near the corner of the room flirting with some chubby nurse. The officer stared at Maurice and nodded, and Maurice nodded back before returning his attention to the television, all the while tapping the revolver in his pocket as the crackling white static buzzed through his skull.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When Maurice entered Vivian's room later that day, she was lying in bed. The doctor had given her pain medication in preparation for a C-section so she was a bit groggy. Maurice knew Vivian and the baby were safe for now, but he also realized that Michael would find them eventually. Since Michael and nearly every important local government official involved in the plot to kill Vivian's baby would be present at the campaign dinner that evening, Maurice figured it would be the perfect opportunity to take care of everyone involved in the plot. He also knew the restaurant would be filled with security and that walking into Commander's Palace with a gun would be nearly impossible.

When he'd finally decided on a plan, he kissed Vivian on the forehead, told the kids he needed to go to the gift shop for some flowers, and headed for the elevator. On his way to the parking lot, he passed up the gift shop and two police officers, and when he arrived at his car he popped the trunk and grabbed the box of pipe, nails, and black powder and placed them in the passenger seat. He drove for almost two hours until he reached the outskirts of the city, stopping off at Walmart to purchase wire, duct tape, a trench coat, a package of light bulbs, wire cutters, and a weighted vest with pockets that he found in the workout section. At Radio Shack, he bought a battery pack and a push button switch. He spent the next few hours sitting in his car in the parking lot securing the black powder-filled pipes to the vest he'd bought. When he was done, he ran wire from the pipes to the filament of the light bulb, connecting the wire to the battery and to a hand-held detonator he'd fashioned with a push button switch at the end.

When he pulled up to Commander's Palace three hours later, it was almost eight o'clock. He cut the engine, took a deep breath and climbed out of the car. As he reached the door of the restaurant, a police officer stopped him and said the restaurant had been reserved for a private party. Maurice opened his coat, revealing the vest lined with silver pipes. The officer's eyes followed the string of wire that started at Maurice's

chest and snaked through the sleeve of his coat before traveling down to the small push-button detonator in his hand.

“Don’t do anything silly,” Maurice said, his voice buzzing behind the dust mask.

Fear tugged at the corners of the officer’s face. “What do you want?” he asked, staring at Maurice’s finger as it hovered over the button of the detonator

“Take me to the mayor’s table,” Maurice said.

Maurice followed the officer, and when they reached the dining room, he stared across the room at rows and rows of tables, all of which were set with embossed bone china, sparkling crystal, gleaming silver, and white linen. The dessert course was in full-swing, and fleets of waiters dressed in white coats and black bow ties had silver platters of Creme Brulee perched on their shoulders, the flaming desserts burning like flambeaus in some elaborate culinary parade. Maurice followed the officer until they came to a long table, where Michael and the mayor were seated, along with herds of other tuxedoed men sitting next to women draped in sequined dresses sipping from crystal wine glasses. The officer called to the mayor, and when he finally got his attention, the mayor stared at Maurice. Maurice opened his coat, revealing the pipe bombs strapped to the vest, and as the mayor stared down at the vest, the dirty grin on his face melted away.

One by one, other men at the table noticed Maurice standing there, and as they did, an eerie silence settled in the air. Maurice pulled down the dust mask he was wearing, his finger hovering over the button of the detonator. “By the blood of the Lamb,” he said, “I shall put on the full armor of God.” A ripe anger flickered in his words, and he could feel the flames of God’s voice burning through him. “I shall cast the great dragon out,” he said, his voice growing louder, more intense, “and the angels of his army shall be cast out with him.” As the words floated in the air, Maurice squinted his eyes and pressed the button on the detonator. He heard the detonator click, his chest began to glow, and though his eyes were closed, he could feel an explosion of light pouring from his torso until eventually the entire room had drowned in a glorious burst of burning white light. He waited for the air to crack and shatter into tiny pieces, for the inevitable mob of bloody screams mingled with flames and metal, but there was nothing.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, and as he did, he felt the butt of a rifle bite into his stomach. The breath flew from his chest, a thick, muscular arm tightened like a boa constrictor around his throat, and before he knew what had happened, he'd been pulled to the ground. He tried to squirm loose, but police officers began to pile on top of him, and he soon found himself twisting around on the ground, drowning in the tangle of bodies. In the midst of all this, somehow his hand found the detonator dangling from the sleeve of his coat, and he began pressing the button frantically. But as he stared up at the crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling above him, all he heard was the incessant click of the button smothered beneath the thick static of the officers' walkie-talkies.

* * *

Brandon and Audrey were on the eleventh floor of the hospital, staring through a thick pane of glass when a nurse carried Vivian's baby into the nursery.

"Where did Dad go?" Brandon asked.

"Who knows?" Audrey said. "He said he was going to the gift shop, but he never came back."

"Was he still acting weird when he left?"

"Yep. Apparently, he thinks Mom's baby is Jesus."

"He told you that?"

"Mom did. When we went to see the psychiatrist."

"When did he become so religious?"

"I dunno."

Audrey watched the nurse place the baby in the glass crib. When the nurse pulled back the white cloth that was covering the baby, a look of shock fell across Audrey's face. The baby's skin was light brown, and immediately she knew the baby was Maurice's.

"Holy shit," she mumbled.

"That's Mom's baby?" Brandon asked, glancing at Audrey then back at the baby.

"Apparently." Audrey stared at the baby, and as she did, she felt a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. Though she would never have admitted it, she was relieved to know the baby was Maurice's, and part of her couldn't help but hope that the situation, no matter how bizarre it

was, might somehow bring their family back together.

“Dad’s really gonna friggin’ flip out now,” Brandon said.

“I’m sure he’ll be relieved,” Audrey said, “to know the baby is his.”

“No. I mean when he finds out it’s not Jesus.”

Audrey arched her eyebrows in confusion, as if the little stomach in her brain hadn’t fully digested the idea. “What do you mean?”

“You know,” Brandon said, “because the baby has brown skin.”

Audrey started to speak, but Brandon interrupted her. “Because Jesus was white.”

“Jesus wasn’t white.”

“He wasn’t?”

“He was born in the Middle East for Christ’s sake.” Audrey sighed. “What the hell are they teaching you in that school anyway?”

“But in every picture I’ve ever seen,” Brandon continued, “he has blonde hair and blue eyes.”

“That’s because people with blonde hair and blue eyes probably drew the pictures.”

For a moment they both stood in silence, staring at the baby without saying a word.

“You think they’ll get back together now?” Brandon asked, trying to interrupt the silence. “Since the baby is Dad’s?”

“I doubt it.”

“But if it’s Dad’s,” he insisted, “it’ll be like we’re a family again, and everything’ll be back to normal, like it used to be.”

“Dad shot a police officer, Brandon. He’s going to jail for a long, long time. Things aren’t going back to normal.”

“But it was self-defense,” Brandon said. “He only shot him because he thought that cop was gonna hurt Mom.”

“The police were there because of me,” Audrey told Brandon. “Why would you think he was there to hurt Mom?”

“I just figured he worked for Michael,” Brandon said, “and that Michael had sent him, you know, since he’d been threatening Mom and everything.”

“Who said Michael was threatening Mom?”

“Dad. Michael sent some guy to her apartment, and he hit her. That’s how she got that black eye.”

Audrey couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.”

As Brandon said this, a little wave of fear moved through Audrey’s body. They walked back to Vivian’s room and found her lying in bed. Brandon grabbed the remote control and flipped on the TV while Audrey walked over to the bed. She grabbed a cup of water from a nearby tray and held it to Vivian’s lips.

“Have some water, Mom. You need to stay hydrated.”

Vivian leaned forward, her lips cracked, her eyes squinted. She took a small sip and winced. “The baby?” Vivian asked, her words rusty, her movements sluggish from the medicine.

“The baby’s fine,” Audrey said. “I need you to listen to me, OK?”

Vivian’s eyes closed and then opened again slowly, a numb look on her face.

“The bruise you had on your cheek, Mom. Did Michael do that to you? Did Michael hit you?”

Vivian stared up at Audrey through a white fog of morphine, pausing for a moment, as if she were waiting for the words. She wet her lips, and her mouth cracked open. “You called me Mom,” she said, a lazy smile on her lips.

As Audrey flashed a crooked grin, Brandon called to her, but she didn’t respond.

“Audrey,” Brandon yelled, his voice more dramatic this time. “Look.”

Audrey turned around and glanced at the television. A breaking news report had interrupted the show Brandon was watching, and a reporter was standing on Washington Avenue talking about a possible botched terrorist attack at Commander’s Palace Restaurant. The street behind the reporter was cluttered with police cars and the silver flash of news cameras. As the camera panned to a police officer escorting Maurice into a squad car, Audrey’s mouth cracked open, and the cup of water she was holding slipped from her hand and fell to the ground.

* * *

As Maurice sat in the back of the police car, he stared out the window at the flicker of stars blinking through the trees. He couldn’t believe how terribly wrong his plan had gone. He was worried about Vivian’s and the baby’s safety, and he knew his only hope was to call Virgil once the police

booked him into the city jail.

A few minutes later, the squad car pulled into the parking lot of the abandoned building that had housed Charity Hospital prior to the storm. Surrounded by barbed wire, the entire property was cluttered with rows and rows of military vehicles. As the officer parked the car, Maurice wondered if he planned to take him into the abandoned hospital, blow his brains out. Dump his body in a nearby dumpster.

Once inside, the officer led Maurice down a shiny hallway until they came to a large metal door. He grabbed a large ring of keys from his pocket and opened the door before pushing Maurice inside. Maurice heard the lock click shut, and as he pressed his face against a small, screened hole in the door, he shouted at the officer, but the officer walked off silently, mechanically, without even acknowledging him. Maurice sighed then peered over his shoulder and saw a man sitting on a bed in the corner of the room with a long stringy beard. He had holes in his afro where the hair wouldn't grow, and he was wearing what looked like a hospital gown. Maurice stared at the man for a moment then turned his attention back to the door, pressing his face into the screened hole again, this time yelling to whoever would listen that his lawyer was a high-powered defense attorney who specialized in civil rights, and that as an American citizen he was entitled to a phone call.

"You can beat on that door all you like," the man said from the corner. "But they ain't gonna let you use no phone."

"It's my right," Maurice said. "They can't hold me here without letting me call an attorney."

"They the po-lice." The man smiled, exposing a rotten tooth. "They can do whatever they want."

"The whole city might be destroyed," Maurice said, "and half the people who live here may have left, but this is still a democracy."

The man flashed a crooked grin. "Just because they call it a democracy don't make it one."

Maurice walked over to an empty bed in the corner and sat down. "I figured they were bringing me to Central Lockup. I just don't understand why they brought me here."

"I thought the same thing," the man said.

"How did you get here?"

"They picked me up right after the storm. For not having my guns

registered.”

A look of shock fell across Maurice’s face. “You’ve been here since the storm?”

“Yep,” the man said, his words tired, filled with cracks. “Been almost ten months now.”

The look of shock on Maurice’s face turned to confusion. “I don’t understand,” he said. “How did they arrest you for having unregistered guns?”

“They said they thought I was fixing to shoot up some government building with them.”

“Were you?” Maurice asked.

“Hell, no.” The man picked at a rotten tooth with a dirty fingernail. “Do I look like somebody’d shoot up a building?”

“So you were innocent?”

“Innocent?” the man said, stressing each syllable of the word. “Ain’t nobody innocent. But I wasn’t planning on doing nothing with them guns if that’s what’s you’re asking. I tried telling them I just like collecting guns and that I wasn’t planning nothing, but they didn’t listen.”

“Yeah, well,” Maurice told the man. “They can question me all they like, but I’m not saying anything until I have a lawyer.”

“You can stick to that story if you want. But if you don’t tell them what they wanna hear, they gonna move on to other ways.”

“What do you mean?” Maurice asked. “Like torture?”

“Not torture, really. More like humiliation.”

“That doesn’t bother me,” Maurice told him. “I’ve been humiliated my entire life. What’s a few more days of it going to hurt.”

The man smiled. “You and me both.”

“They’ve never hurt you or anything?” Maurice asked. “Have they?”

“I heard all kinds of rumors ’bout people getting beat, but worst they ever done to me was make me stand naked in a bucket of freezing water while they blasted country music into my ears with these high-powered headphones they got.”

“My God,” Maurice said, as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“The water ain’t so bad on account of it don’t stay cold long, and I ain’t never had a problem being naked in public, but listening to some

of them country songs, now that was torture.” The man paused. “The only other thing is they come into your room each night and stick you with a needle. They say it’s medicine, but nobody knows for sure. A few people over on the East Wing got the flu after they got the shots, but I ain’t never had no symptoms, at least not yet. They did give me a free surgery though.”

“Really?” Maurice asked.

“Yep,” the man said. “A vasectomy. I didn’t have to pay a dime, neither.”

“Did they force you to do it?”

“*Force me?*” the man said, as if it were a foreign phrase. “Why the hell would they have to *force me* to get a free surgery? You know how much something like that would cost at a hospital?”

“Have other men here received vasectomies?” Maurice asked.

“All of them I ’spose. It’s a free service from the government.”

Maurice couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Had the government really rounded up citizens after Katrina and provided free vasectomies in an attempt to sterilize the population? Had they tortured hurricane victims with freezing water and country music and secretly performed experiments on them? As the thoughts scurried around in his brain, the door to the room suddenly clicked open, and a nurse brought in two trays of food. She handed the men the trays of food, and Maurice put the tray in his lap, pulled a plastic fork from the wrapper and poked a pile of macaroni and cheese with the tines of the fork. Though he suspected the food was laced with poison, he hadn’t eaten all day, and he felt the way he thought one of those Ethiopian children he always saw on TV must have felt, without the exposed ribs, the swollen belly, and the swarms of flies. He tried to ignore the creamy smell of the macaroni, but as it drifted toward his nose, he quickly decided that his extreme desire for cheese outweighed his fear of being poisoned.

He stabbed his fork into the pile of macaroni, and as he swallowed the bite, he remembered an article he’d read about how the government was developing edible microchips. According to the article, a capsule made from food ingredients hidden with a sensor the size of a grain of rice was ingested and then reacted with stomach fluids to power a unique digital signature that was picked up and recorded by a local computer via Bluetooth. He imagined the microchip in his gut, tangled

in a clump of blood, flickering like a tiny diamond. As he swallowed another mouthful of macaroni, he listened closely, and for a moment he thought he heard the microchip humming in his stomach.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

When the door to his room opened the next morning, a muscular man appeared in the doorway and motioned to Maurice. His skin was black as crows. He was wearing white scrubs, and he had little roaches for eyes and a dollar sign shaved into the side of his afro. He walked Maurice down a long corridor that led to what looked like a waiting area. There was a large fountain in the middle of the room, and the walls were lined with sofas. As Maurice glanced to his left, he saw Vivian sitting on a sofa near a Coke machine, and his face lit up with excitement.

“Thank God,” he said, walking over and hugging her tightly. He sighed, then pulled away. “How’s the baby?” he asked, a panicked, confused look on his face.

“They wouldn’t let me bring him,” Vivian told Maurice. “But he’s fine. Your father is watching him.”

“The kids?”

“They’re fine. They’re with your father too.” Vivian pulled a compact from her purse and opened it. “Jesus, look at me, I’m a wreck.” She ran a freckled hand through her hair, wiped a smudge of pink lipstick from the corner of her mouth with a peach fingernail. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine.”

“You walked into Commander’s Palace with a pipe bomb strapped to your chest, Maurice. You’re not fine.” Vivian pulled a Kleenex from her purse. “Not to mention you shot a police officer.”

“I was acting in self-defense, Vivian. You know that.”

“I spoke to your father.” Vivian blew her nose into the Kleenex, then grabbed another tissue. “He says they’re going to charge you with attempted murder for the police officer and conspiracy to commit murder for strapping that bomb to your chest. He says he’s going to get us the best lawyer in New Orleans,” she said, wiping a tear from her cheek. “He says you can plead insanity, and that, worst-case scenario, you’ll have to spend a few years in the state mental hospital.”

“Jesus, Vivian, I don’t belong in a mental hospital.”

“Well,” she said, “if you don’t, you sure as hell are acting like you do.” Vivian paused, and her eyes filled with tears. “This is all my fault.”

“No, it’s not, Vivian.” Maurice saw a tear rolling down her cheek. He wiped the tear away, and when he did, it stained his finger red. Vivian’s face wasn’t bleeding, so Maurice was a bit confused. As he stared at the drop of blood on his finger, his eyes drifted toward Vivian’s chest, and for a moment he saw her heart burning faintly through her blouse, wrapped in a thicket of flames and thorns. He could smell the scent of roses in the air. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, the burning heart flickering in Vivian’s chest had disappeared.

“The other day, when I was bringing Audrey to campus, she said it was my fault that all of this happened. That all of this happened because of me and because of what I did. She made me so mad when she said it. But then I thought about, and I realized, she’s right.”

“That’s not true, Vivian, and you know it.”

“I should have been there for you,” she said, a sudden mixture of sadness and guilt gnawing at her. “I should have been there for Audrey and Brandon. My family needed me, and I wasn’t there. I realize that now.” She wiped her nose with the Kleenex. “The good news is that you don’t have to worry about any of this anymore.”

Maurice started to speak, but Vivian interrupted him.

“It’s yours, Maurice,” she said. “You don’t have to worry anymore. The baby. It’s yours.”

“What do you mean?” Maurice asked, a bewildered look swimming in his eyes. “How is that even possible?”

“The doctor says it’s rare, but that it happens, in special cases. I guess the vasectomy didn’t take. We can get a paternity test if you want, but it’s obviously yours. He looks just like you.”

Maurice couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Did this mean that Michael was no longer trying to harm Vivian and the baby?

“You don’t need to worry anymore,” Vivian said. “You just need to focus on getting better.”

Maurice lowered his voice and leaned toward Vivian. “I need to get out of here, Vivian.”

Vivian flashed a confused look. “Get you out of here? I can’t, Maurice. They have to evaluate you first. And after they evaluate you, they’re going to decide if you’re sane enough to go to jail.”

“This isn’t a hospital, Vivian. It’s some kind of military prison or something now. The government must have taken it over after the storm. That’s why everyone is dressed in military clothing.”

“I haven’t seen anyone dressed in military clothing,” Vivian said. “All I’ve seen are nurses and doctors.”

“The parking lot is filled with military vehicles.” A look of confusion sparkled in Maurice’s eyes. “You didn’t see them when you came in?”

“I told you, Maurice. The baby is yours. You don’t need to worry anymore. All of this,” she said, her voice full of tears, “it’s all in your mind. The doctor says that with medication and counseling, you’re going to be fine. You just need to take your pills, OK?”

“Listen to me,” Maurice said, his voice growing desperate. He peered over his shoulder, then turned back to Vivian, his voice crawling to a whisper. “They’re experimenting on people in here. I have proof that they’re testing flu vaccines on people, even sterilizing them. I know you don’t believe me, but you need to contact the station, so we can expose what they’re doing.”

“Oh, Maurice,” she said, wiping her nose with the Kleenex and crumbling it into a fist. “Do you realize how crazy that sounds?”

“Promise me you’ll contact the station and tell them what’s going on, Vivian. Promise me.”

“OK,” Vivian said. “I will.”

After Vivian left, Maurice returned to his room. Later that afternoon, when the psychiatrist came to evaluate him, Maurice stared at him with a look of extreme suspicion.

“Mr. Delahoussaye,” the doctor said, his voice mechanical, robotic. “Can you tell me today’s date?”

“I want a lawyer,” Maurice said. “You people can’t keep me here. I have rights. I’m an American citizen, for Christ’s sake.”

“What about the year?” the doctor asked. “Can you tell me what year it is, Mr. Delahoussaye?”

“It’s 1938,” Maurice said, flashing a shitty grin. “And you’re Adolf Hitler without the fucking mustache.”

“I’m here to help you, Mr. Delahoussaye,” the doctor said, looking frustrated. “If you’re not honest with me, I can’t properly assess you.”

“Assess me for what?” Maurice said. “To see if I’ll make a good lab rat for your experiments?”

The doctor made a few more attempts to appeal to Maurice, but when nothing worked, he sighed and stood up, then walked out of the room. As he left, Maurice stared at the large mirror hanging on the wall, and almost immediately he realized it was a one-way mirror that allowed the doctors and other military personnel to monitor a patient's movements. He knew the doctor was on the other side of the mirror discussing his condition with the colonel he'd seen walking the halls earlier that day. As Maurice stood in front of the mirror, he imagined them watching him from behind the glass.

"So," Maurice heard the colonel say. "What do you think?"

"What do I think?" the doctor responded. "I think he's perfect for the program. Let's begin giving him the injections immediately."

Maurice forced a smile, and as the doctor and the colonel watched him from behind the glass, he glanced back at them, carelessly fixing his hair in the reflection of the mirror, as if he didn't know they were standing behind the glass, as if he hadn't heard the ominous words whispered beneath their breath.

* * *

The lobby of Hotel Monteleone was lined with a gold-trimmed hand-painted ceiling, filled with fresh bouquets of flowers, decorative columns, ornate, polished marble floors, and glittering crystal chandeliers. When Virgil received a phone call from Maurice the previous evening, he'd booked a room for Vivian and the kids at the hotel, and he'd agreed to stay with them until he knew for certain that they were no longer in danger. While the kids entertained themselves in the hotel room, Virgil and Vivian sat downstairs at the bar.

"We don't need to stay in a hotel," Vivian told Virgil.

"I promised Maurice." Virgil took a sip of Bourbon, winced through the burn. "He just wants to be sure you guys are safe, that's all."

"We're fine."

"What about this Michael character?" Virgil twisted one of his gray caterpillar braids around his finger as he spoke. "Maurice seems worried that he still intends to harm you."

"The baby's not his," Vivian said. "It's Maurice's."

"Right, but don't you think Michael might still be worried that you'll

expose the affair?”

Vivian sighed. “I dunno. I guess it’s possible.”

The baby was asleep, nestled in a stroller next to Vivian. She stared at him and smiled, then reached down and pulled the blanket so that it covered his shoulders. “I need a cocktail,” she said. She pulled her wallet from her purse, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and motioned to the bartender.

“You probably shouldn’t drink,” Virgil said. “You’ve barely been out of the hospital for twenty-four hours.”

“My husband is in a psych ward awaiting an evaluation before they throw him in jail for God knows how long,” Vivian said. “I think that warrants a drink. And a stiff one at that.”

“What about the baby? Aren’t you planning on breastfeeding?”

“Pump and dump,” Vivian mumbled under her breath. “Pump and dump.”

“Jesus,” Virgil said. “Sounds like a title for a porn movie.”

A smile broke across Vivian’s face. She turned to Virgil, her voice suddenly shiny and mechanical, as if she were starring in a commercial. “It’s the perfect solution,” she said, “for contemporary alcoholic women on the go.”

Virgil flashed a gold-tooth grin.

“There are breast pump kits that are powered by your car lighter,” Vivian said. “They have multiple speed settings to mimic how your baby nurses, and there’s an audio button to record and play your baby’s sounds. A memory chip even remembers the suction settings.”

“Jesus,” Virgil said. “I’m surprised they don’t make the pumps in the shape of a baby. Women could walk around with a little sucking pink baby doll hanging off their boob wherever they went.”

Vivian raised her eyebrows. “That would be too weird.”

“It’s all weird,” Virgil said. “Treadmills with TV screens that make you think you’re running through the goddamn Swiss Alps, digital lollipops that fool your taste buds into thinking you’re tasting a real sucker. Everybody’s so goddamn obsessed with simulating some actual experience that the fucking experience itself has become an afterthought. They’re more concerned about having some picture of the Eiffel Tower than actually standing on the goddamn thing and experiencing what it feels like to look over the edge. It’s absolutely absurd.”

“I went to Paris,” Vivian said, a sudden regret lingering in her voice, “and I don’t have one picture of the Eiffel Tower.” The bartender brought Vivian a Sazerac, and after stirring the drink, she sighed and took a sip. “Maurice wanted to go on that trip so badly,” she said, “but of course, he wouldn’t fly.” A tear formed in the corner of her eye, and as it rolled down her cheek, Virgil placed his hand on her shoulder.

“We’re going to get the best lawyer money can buy,” he said.

“They’re going to charge him with attempted murder, Virgil. Not to mention terrorism.”

“He can take an insanity plea. He’ll get a few years, but he’ll spend it in a hospital, not a prison.”

“What are we going to do for money? I’m on maternity leave, for Christ’s sake.”

“You don’t have to go back to work if you don’t want to. You can stay home with the kids. I’ll take care of you guys in the meantime. I have more than enough money to go around.”

“Really, Virgil,” Vivian said. “I don’t know what we’d do if it weren’t for you.”

“I’m doing it for Maurice, and the kids,” Virgil said. “Not for you. Nothing’s going to happen to those kids. Not while I’m around.”

“Well, thank you, and thanks for handling that situation for us,” Vivian said, referring to Oz and Jazelle. “I didn’t want you to risk going back to jail, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t happy they were gone from our lives.”

“I’m an old man, Vivian. Going back to jail doesn’t bother me. All I have left at this point are bad hips, a bum leg, a weak mind, and whole lifetime of regret. What difference does it make if I spend it in prison or in some nursing home?”

“You’re not staying in that nursing home. You’re moving in with us. The kids are going to need a grandfather more than ever if their father isn’t around. The last thing they need is to lose you too, so please, stop talking like that.”

Virgil finished off what was left of his Bourbon and headed upstairs to check on the kids while Vivian ordered another Sazerac. The flat-screen hanging above the bar was tuned to CNN, and a reporter was talking about an Iraqi girl whose face had been blown off after a smart bomb landed on her school. They cut back to the news desk, and the

anchor and an army colonel were discussing a military doctrine called rapid dominance. “The doctrine,” the colonel explained, “attempted to affect the will, perception, and understanding of the adversary by imposing a regime of shock and awe.” As she spoke, the camera panned across a Baghdad street cluttered with the charred remnants of bombed-out buildings, the air mixed with the menacing swarm of planes, an occasional burst of flames blossoming against the wrecked sky.

The bartender brought Vivian the drink, and as she stirred it, she glanced across the bar. Through the window that faced Royal Street, she could see a mob of drunk businessmen in shiny three-piece suits gathered in the street, their eyes fixed on a half-naked woman posing on a balcony. Vivian fiddled with the twisted orange peel floating in her drink and stared down at the baby. She took a deep breath, exhaled, all the while listening, in between the explosions on the television, to the rising sound of cheers from the men outside.

* * *

That night as Maurice was lying in bed, the door to his room cracked open, and a nurse told him it was time for his medication. She was wearing a tight white skirt, white stockings, and a white blouse that accentuated her cleavage. She pulled out a hypodermic needle, but when she tried to turn Maurice over to give him the injection, Maurice pulled away and started rattling on about his First Amendment rights.

“The First Amendment protects freedom of speech,” the nurse smirked. “I’m not prohibiting your freedom of speech. Feel free to yell whatever obscenities you like.”

“The Third Amendment then,” Maurice hissed.

“You mean the amendment that prohibits any soldier from being quartered in your house?”

“You know what I mean,” Maurice said. “I have rights. Are you even a registered nurse?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, pointing to her name tag, which included the letters R.N.

“You could have bought that at Office Depot for all I know.”

The nurse pulled a glass vial filled with clear liquid from the pocket of her scrubs. “It’s medicine,” she said. “It’ll make you feel better.” The

nurse's voice seemed emotionless and mechanical. If someone cracked her skull open, Maurice imagined he'd find a rusty hard drive nestled in a tangled bundle of charred wire.

"Is that even a disposable needle?" Maurice asked.

The nurse sighed. "Yes, sir."

"Did you know that 7% of patients admitted to U.S. hospitals acquire one or more infections while there, mostly as a result of nurses not washing their hands. If you're going to poison me," Maurice told her, "please, at least do it with a clean needle so I don't get an infection too."

"It's clean," she said, smiling as she poked the needle through the rubber stopper of the vial.

Maurice pulled the sheet to his neck. "I know what you people are doing."

"Oh, yeah?" the nurse said, putting the empty vial back in the pocket of her scrubs. "What are we doing?"

"You rounded up people after the storm, and now you're experimenting on them like guinea pigs. I'm going to expose all of you. My wife is a reporter for Channel Four News. She's going to expose what you people have been doing here. The whole world's going to find out where all those missing people went after Katrina. You can bank on it."

The nurse cracked a subtle smile but didn't say anything.

"What's in there?" Maurice asked. "Yellow fever?"

"Of course not," she said, flicking the hypodermic needle with her finger and smiling. She leaned down toward Maurice, and as she did Maurice saw a black skull and crossbones tattoo on her right breast. "You're right about what we're doing," she said. "We *are* experimenting on people here. But this isn't yellow fever, Mr. Delahoussaye." She flashed a filthy grin, her voice creeping to a whisper. "It's the bubonic plague."

As she said this, Maurice pulled the sheet tighter to his neck. She motioned for him to turn over, but he didn't move. When she tried again and Maurice resisted a second time, she yanked a silver necklace from her cleavage and pressed the red button at the end of the necklace. A moment later, two military men stormed into the room and pulled down the sheet. The first man grabbed Maurice's legs while the other held Maurice in a choke-hold. They turned him over, and as he tried to squirm loose, the nurse pulled down his boxer shorts and stabbed the

needle into his hip. Twisting around on the bed, Maurice could feel the liquid eating through his blood, chewing through the black cells of his brain, until eventually a white cloud of sleep settled over him and his body slowly went limp.

Later that evening, he woke to a sliver of light creeping through a crack in his door. He was surprised to see that the door had been left open, so he rose from the bed, half-awake, and wandered out into the shiny hallway, drifting past empty gurneys and the rotten smell of urine until he came to a room at the end of the hall. The door was partially open, and when he peeked inside, he saw a person sitting in a wheelchair, dressed in military fatigues, the person's head and face completely covered in a white shroud of bandages, except for a small opening near the mouth and two thin slits for eyes. As he opened the door and walked inside, he saw a frayed piece of gauze dangling from the side of the person's neck. Slowly and deliberately Maurice grabbed the piece of gauze and began unrolling it, gradually revealing portions of the person's face: first a man's stubbly chin, then a pair of empty black eyes, followed by a scarred forehead with a bloody line of stitches. Piece by piece, Maurice removed the remainder of the bandages, until the floor was littered with frayed strips of gauze, and all that was left was the man's stony, emotionless face staring back at him. Though the man looked like he was only eighteen or so, Maurice was shocked to see how similar his face was to his own. He grabbed the dog tags that were hanging from around the man's neck, and Maurice's heart nearly leapt into his throat when he saw the name MAURICE DELAHOUSSAYE engraved in the shiny silver metal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When Michael opened his front door the following afternoon, he spotted a UPS man standing in the sunlit doorway clutching a package. The man didn't smile and held out an electronic signature device. "I need a signature for this one," he said.

Michael grabbed the electronic pen and looked up at the man, shielding his eyes from the sun with a curved hand. "Where's the usual guy?"

"Clarence?" the man said. "He's sick."

"I thought his name was Eddie." Michael signed his name and handed the electronic pen back to the man. He stared over the man's shoulder, looking for a UPS truck, but he only saw a red Toyota Corolla with bald tires parked across the street. The man handed Michael the box, and as Michael took it in his hands, he suddenly felt a sharp burning sensation in his stomach. The box fell to the floor, and as he stared down, he saw the man's gloved hand clutching the handle of a butcher's knife. Michael grabbed the man's hand, but all the strength was draining from his body, and his hands seemed to only guide the bloody handle of the knife rather than stop it as it moved through his gut.

The man was closer now, his hand on Michael's shoulder as if they were engaged in a dance, his breath heavy as the other hand forced the knife deeper into Michael's gut. Michael's mouth opened, and a string of words rose in his throat, but all that came to his lips was a bloody, breath-filled grunt. The man placed his hand on the small of Michael's back and gradually guided Michael to the ground, until Michael was finally lying on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, his hand clutching the bloody hole in his shirt, his face splotched with patches of sunlight. He looked up at the man, but the dusty scraps of sunlight leaking through the front door were burning spots in his vision. Gazing through the lint-filled streaks of light, he squinted his eyes until they narrowed on the man's face, which had now tightened into what looked like a wrinkled, crooked grin. The man slowly took off his utility gloves and dropped



them on the ground, followed by the knife, which caught streaks of sunlight as it fell to the floor. Michael tried to wet his lips, but his mouth had suddenly gone dry. His breathing was quickening now, each exhale a flurry of sharp chopping breaths, and though he struggled to keep his eyes open, they soon began to flutter and twitch. The galloping pace of his breath increased until a final burst of air pursed his lips. A paralyzed look settled in his eyes, and as the world began to blur around him, he felt the gentle touch of two callused fingers against his throat, the only sound the lingering bark of a dog outside mixed with the hushed silver jingle of a wind chime.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Over the next few days the doctors continued to evaluate Maurice, and a week later, when he'd convinced them he was thoroughly insane, they officially deemed him unfit to stand trial and transferred him to the city jail to await a judge's decision. The Judicial Circuit District Attorney claimed that even though Maurice suffered from mental illness, he was confident Maurice was competent enough to stand trial. Before the matter went to trial, however, the attorney representing Maurice, a smooth fellow who dressed in a white Seersucker suit and a bow tie, contacted the Louisiana Department of Behavioral Health for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities (LDBHCDD), and to Maurice's surprise the matter was soon taken out of the prosecutor's hands.

In the weeks that followed, the LDBHCDD requested a commitment hearing. During the hearing, licensed psychiatrists presented their forensic evaluations, all of them testifying that Maurice had been experiencing extreme delusions. They reported that despite being administered the typical medication for such disorders, Maurice had not responded adequately to treatment. Because of this, they felt that Maurice posed a danger to society and to himself.

The police officer testified at the hearing, claiming that after being shot in the thigh by Maurice, he'd undergone intense physical and emotional therapy. Maurice's lawyer argued that becoming a police officer naturally involved the possibility of being shot and that the officer's thigh wound was superficial compared to Maurice's debilitating illness. He also claimed that because of the stigma society placed on mental illness, Maurice was the real victim.

In the end, the judge issued a civil commitment order, which required Maurice's involuntary commitment to the state psychiatric hospital. The order stipulated that Maurice spend a minimum term of ten years in the state hospital, and that if after that term doctors felt that Maurice no longer met the criteria for involuntary commitment, he would be released. If, however, he was deemed competent before that

term, Maurice would be sent to prison and would eventually stand trial for the crime.

The hearing ended on a Thursday, and Maurice spent the afternoon in the city jail, awaiting a transfer to the state mental hospital in Jackson, Louisiana. That evening, a police officer arrived at his cell and escorted him to a squad car. As they drove through the city, Maurice sat in the backseat, thinking about Vivian and the baby, and his thoughts drifted to Fleur de Lis, the woman he'd met a few weeks earlier at Brothers Three Lounge. He thought about what she'd said, about how sometimes she'd felt as if the sky was bearing down on her, the stars growing heavier and heavier by the moment.

For months, Maurice had felt the same way. The psychiatrists had classified his condition as bipolar disorder, but Maurice couldn't help but wonder. Maybe he wasn't sick at all. Maybe the world was such a frightening place that people had to create their own imaginary world to distract themselves from the hell of real life.

As he thought about this, the police car dragged to a crawl, and Maurice spotted a growing parade of people in the street. The officer's window was rolled down, and Maurice could hear the dirty sound of trumpets mingled with bursts of laughter and a medley of blood-curdling cheers. The sound reminded Maurice of Revelation, of the seven angels in heaven blowing their trumpets to signal the pouring out of God's vengeance on the world. He wondered if the trumpets were a sign from God, if soon the sky would fall into the sea, and the bloody waves of God's wrath would wash over the city, drowning him gloriously in its swirling red wake. As he stared at rows and rows of lopsided homes, a bewildering sense of calm settled over him, and for a moment he could almost feel the lovely ruins of the city rising up from beneath a bright blue sea of tarps. To Maurice's surprise, the sound was not worrisome or ominous, not a sound of judgment or some cue on the part of angels to initiate the bloody hail and fire of God's wrath, but the hopeful sound of salvation—of a city being reborn.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Rosanne, for your unending optimism and support. This book could not have been written without you. A big thank you to Darren (my best buddy) for always cracking me up with your witty impersonations; to Garriga, for your whiskey-laced sarcasm and your genuine love of the Ford Focus; to Kent, for teaching the teacher that language can crackle like fire; to Dalton, for wanting a trophy you didn't deserve, and for pulling a fire alarm when life got too serious; to Hayes, for being everything a friend should be; to my mother, father, and step-father for their unending love and support; and finally to my wife, Pam, whose kindness and forgiveness I rarely deserve.



Chris Tusa was born and raised in New Orleans. He holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Florida. His debut collection of poems, *Haunted Bones*, was published by *Louisiana Literature Press* in 2006. His debut novel, *Dirty Little Angels*, was published by The University of West Alabama in March of 2009. His work has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Five Points*, *Connecticut Review*, *New South*, *Texas Review*, *The Southeast Review*, *New Delta Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Passages North*, *StorySouth*, and others. An earlier version of this manuscript was awarded First Runner-Up for the Faulkner Wisdom Novel-in-Progress Award. Aside from acting as Managing Editor of *Fiction Southeast*, Tusa divides his time between teaching full-time in the English Department at LSU and acting as Writer-in-Residence at Southeastern Louisiana University.