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Fly the Rain

by Robert Burton Robinson

This is a work of fiction. The characters and events described in this book are imaginary and resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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Books by

ROBERT BURTON ROBINSON

Greg Tenorly Mystery Series:

Bicycle Shop Murder

Hideaway Hospital Murders

Illusion of Luck

Fly the Rain

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Thanks for reading!

Robert Burton Robinson

* * *

SYNOPSIS

When Greg Tenorly gets an invitation to his dad's 75th birthday party, Cynthia convinces him to go, and to use the occasion to finally make things right with his estranged father.

But the war of words Greg is dreading becomes the least of his worries after he and his family cross paths with a cold-blooded killer.

* * *

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Chapter 1

Jason had been sitting alone at his table, staring at the tall, platinum blonde for an hour. His imagination ran wild with thoughts of kissing her full lips while his hands explored her lean, muscled body. Tonight he didn't need the whiskey to warm him up. But he kept drinking it anyway.

She stepped away from the mike, sat her acoustic guitar on its stand, and walked down from the small stage.

Jason beat all the other losers to the bar and sat down beside her.

"You must be pretty thirsty after all that beautiful singing."

How many times had she heard *that* line? But at age 33, she'd probably heard every pickup line known to man. "Yeah," she said, giving him a quick glance. He wasn't a bad looking guy. Probably a couple of inches shorter than her. At six-foot-two, she was accustomed to that. But a lot of men couldn't deal with her height. They liked to be the tall one in the relationship. Not that she'd had many *relationships*. Mostly one-nighters.

Without her saying a word, the bartender sat a glass of ice down in front of her, and poured her a can of Diet Coke.

"Thanks, Joe." She took a sip as he walked away.

"I'm Jason."

"Sondra," she said, looking straight ahead as she took another sip.

"I really enjoyed your music--especially that last song. Did you write it yourself?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. It was sad, but moving. You've got talent."

Here we go, she thought. And I suppose you're a talent agent or a record producer, or you've got a friend in the business. And you'd be more than happy to get me a record deal--assuming I'd be willing to go with you right now to some sleazy motel.

"I'm sick of this business. In fact, you just heard my last performance. First thing Monday morning I'm going out to find me a *real* job. One that will pay the bills."

"Really? Hey, I might have a job for you."

She did a quick scan. The expensive suit screamed corporate. So, if this guy worked for some big company, maybe he really could get her a job. There were lots of big companies in Houston. And she was good with a computer--sort of. Didn't know much about Microsoft Office, but she was a wiz on the web. "What kind of job?"

"As my secretary."

"Is this where you normally find your secretaries--in a bar?"

"Well, no. But there's something about you. I think you'd be perfect."

She knew she was probably getting her hopes up for nothing. But when you're lost in the darkness of depression you tend to walk toward the light.

* * *

Judging by the neighborhood and the size of his house, Sondra figured Jason to be near the bottom of his company's organizational chart. But as long as he could hook her up with a decent job, she'd be happy.

"Make yourself comfortable," he said, offering his black leather couch. "What can I get you--a Budweiser? Wine cooler?" He opened the refrigerator door, waiting to fill her order.

"Diet Coke."

"Is that all you drink? No booze?"

"I like to stay clear-headed."

"I don't. The only *diet* drink I have is water."

"That'll be fine."

He grabbed a bottled water and a beer. "So, how do you like my place?"

"It's nice. Now, tell me more about this job."

Jason walked around the large glass-topped coffee table to the other end of the couch, and reached out and handed her the water. Then he tipped his beer bottle back and gulped down a third of it. "Well, of course, you'd have to *apply* for the job."

"And then you'd hire me?"

He sat the beer bottle down on the coffee table. "Look, you're not really serious about changing careers, are you? I mean, you're just too good at your music."

"You got a job for me or not?"

"Well, sure, if that's what you really want."

"You're lying."

He was half-drunk, and couldn't keep himself from smiling. "Okay--you got me."

"I should have known better." She slammed the water bottle down on the coffee table.

"Aw, come on, Baby. I just couldn't resist. You can't blame a guy for going after your hot bod."

She felt so foolish. Here she was--way out in the suburbs with this creep. And her car was downtown at the bar.

He slid over closer to her. "I'm sure guys are always wanting to get into your pants. Hey, I don't mind paying."

Before she could back away, he clamped his arms around her and tried to kiss her.

She turned her head, and tried to wrestle free.

But he was a strong drunk.

Then she felt her bra unhook. One of his hands was playfully working its way around to the chest.

She slammed her forehead downward into his nose.

He screamed, and released her.

She jumped up and ran for the front door. Then she remembered her purse. It was on the couch beside him. She would need money for a bus or a taxi. Besides, the purse had information she didn't want him to get his hands on.

She ran back to the couch. He was still moaning and holding his bloody nose with both hands. She snatched up the purse and turned to go. But suddenly his hands were grabbing her from behind.

"You're not going anywhere. You broke my nose! You *owe* me," he seethed.

"Let go of me. I don't owe you anything. *You owe me* an apology. Get your nasty hands off me!"

Sondra tried with all her strength to pull away, but only managed to pull him along with her.

He spun her around. "You can't get away from me." He laughed at her.

She spit in his face.

He became enraged and slapped her hard. "So, you like it rough, huh?"

She fired her knee up in between his legs, fully intending to launch his groin to the moon.

He cringed, and loosened his grip, but not fully, as she had expected. Must be numb from all that alcohol, she thought.

"This will be a lot better for both of us if you'll just settle down and cooperate," he said. "You're not gonna get away without giving me what I want. So, you might as well give in now. Just relax and enjoy."

"Well... okay. Whatever. I've done worse guys than you, I guess" she said calmly.

"I'm sure you have."

"Let's just get it over with." She reached down and began to unbuckle his belt.

"There you go," he said, easing his grip on her.

"I want to go down where the action is," she said, slowly dropping to her knees as she unzipped his pants.

"Oh, Baby." He let his arms fall to his sides.

She pulled his pants and his boxers down to his ankles.

"I knew you were gonna be good," he said under his breath. He closed his eyes in anticipation.

She jumped to her feet.

He opened his eyes just as she shoved him in the chest with both hands. He tried to catch himself by stepping backwards, but his feet were tangled in his pants. He now realized that she had tied his belt snugly around his ankles. In the split-second that passed as he fell, he remembered the glass-topped coffee table behind him. He wasn't sure how close he was. But if he landed on top of it and the glass broke, his body could be cut in half. He reached back with both hands to try to break his fall.

Then he realized that his butt was getting close to the floor and had not touched the table. His back had missed the table too. Maybe he would be okay. Then he would untie his feet, catch her and beat her face to a bloody pulp.

But then his head hit the table--like a watermelon that fell out of a shopping cart onto the concrete grocery store floor. Cleanup needed on Aisle Thirteen.

His body lay flat on the plush carpet, except for his head, which was tilted up at a ninety-degree angle, oozing blood down the side of the coffee table.

"Please. Help me," he gasped. He couldn't feel his arms or legs.

She said nothing.

"Call 911. Hurry," he begged, choking.

Sondra's eyes were cold as steel. "I'm not calling anybody. I'm not your *secretary*."

She picked her purse up from the floor and casually walked out. She knew he would be dead before anybody found him. Oh, well, she thought. People get drunk and then they get clumsy. And sometimes they fall down and kill themselves.

* * *

"Hello?"

"Is this Greg Tenorly?"

"Yes."

"Greg, this is Norma. Sorry for calling so late."

"Oh, that's okay." But it really *wasn't* okay. He was just being polite. The sexy redhead lying next to him in bed was his new wife, Cynthia. And she looked more tempting than a chocolate-dipped ice cream cone--his favorite dessert. And who was this Norma anyway? Then he remembered. His parents' long-time best friends were Vic and Norma Valleydale.

"It's about your father."

Greg felt pangs of guilt. He and his father had been estranged for years. Now the old man must have died. Greg should have tried harder to somehow make amends. "What about him?"

"I'm throwing him a big birthday party. Your dad's about to turn 75, you know. I already sent you an invitation with the details, but I thought I'd better give you a call too."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Greg, I know you don't want to come, but I wish you'd at least think about it."

"Uh, sure. I'll think about it. Well, thanks so letting me know, Norma."

"And one other thing."

"Yes?"

"Your dad and I got married."

"What? To each other?"

"Yes. Last month."

"But... what about Vic?"

"Greg... Vic died two years ago."

"Oh. I didn't know. I'm sorry, Norma."

"So, now I'm your stepmother."

"Well... congratulations." Greg wasn't sure how he felt about it. But, what did it matter? He never saw his father. He'd never see his new stepmother either. No big deal.

"Greg, you really need to come home every once in a while."

Great, he thought. Now that she's my stepmother she thinks she has the right to boss me around. "Yeah. I haven't been back in years." But Orange was no longer home to him.

"Anyway... I hope you'll come."

When he hung up, he was ready to put the call out of his mind, and make love to his wife. But Cynthia wanted to know all about Norma and Vic and Orange and Greg's dad.

Greg just hated bedtime phone calls.

Chapter 2

Sondra Crench kicked a roach out of her way as she walked into her tiny apartment and sat down at her old laptop. It was after midnight. So, she figured her new friend, Jason, was already dead. And so were her hopes of landing a secretarial job in time to keep her apartment. Rent was due on Tuesday, and she had just enough money to pay it. But then she'd have no money for food or gas or anything else.

Maybe it was time to go home for a while. Surely she could put up with her mother for a few weeks while looking for work.

She opened her Favorites list and clicked on the link for *The Orange Leader*. Sondra had not been back to her home town in a long time, but she liked to keep up with what was going on there. Occasionally, she'd see one of her old classmates in a wedding announcement. Those people led *real* lives, and held *real* jobs. As a working musician, she lived in a completely different world. She had more in common with actresses than a secretaries.

She checked the Classifieds. Nurses wanted. Nope. Part-time receptionist. Not enough pay.

Then she saw a full-page ad announcing the upcoming Grand Opening of *Billy-Eye's Arcade and Dance Barn*. Open Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights, 6:00 PM to Midnight. For ages 12-20. Free soft drinks and popcorn. Live band. Five bucks to get in. Only twenty-five cents for arcade games. Sounded pretty cool for kids. She wished there had been such a place when she was growing up there.

But what really caught her eye was the note about auditions for a house band. It would play two hours a night, and earn \$2,000 per week. Divided by four band members... Sondra could actually live on that! Not very well--but she could get by. And besides, her band could do other gigs during the week to supplement it.

Only problem: the auditions were beginning next Friday night--and she didn't have a band. Her all-girl group, *Red Hot Curling Iron*, had split up months ago. And there was no possibility of a reunion. Not after she broke the middle finger of her lead guitarist. But that thing would never point at her again.

The day for audition registration was Monday. She would go to Orange, sign up, and then put a band together. She was so excited that she wouldn't be able to sleep. Maybe she'd write a song or two. Her dream of making a living as a musician was not dead after all.

First thing in the morning, she would go by Goldie's Pawn Shop and get her Stratocaster and Fender amp out of hock. Then she'd make the two-and-a-half hour drive to Orange.

* * *

"Judy, I need a another plate of biscuits." He scarfed down two more bacon strips, followed by a large chunk of scrambled eggs. Billy-Eye Buttard didn't weight 330 pounds from eating granola and yogurt. For him, it was bacon, eggs, hash browns, grits and biscuits seven days a week.

He blamed his father for his enormous size. If Billy Bob Buttard had gone into construction or the hardware business, maybe his son wouldn't have learned such bad eating habits.

But who could resist his father's special recipe biscuits? Everybody in Orange loved them. Folks would come to the restaurant and stuff themselves with them for breakfast, and then buy a couple dozen to take home. *The Buttard Biscuit*, better known as simply *The Biscuit*, was the most popular breakfast spot in town.

"You're late." Billy-Eye glared at his two grown sons as they approached his booth. Because of a 'lazy eye' condition that was never properly treated, he appeared to be looking out the window with his left eye while watching his sons with the right. It was the inspiration for a cruel childhood nickname that stuck. His real name was William I. Buttard. Nobody seemed to know what the 'I' stood for. But it must have been something even worse than being called 'Billy-Eye.' "You were supposed to be here at 6:00."

"Don't blame me," said Lenny. "I was ready to go. But Craig wouldn't get out of bed."

"I had a date last night," said Craig.

"You have a date *every* Friday night," said Lenny.

"Yeah, but this one was special." Craig grinned proudly and winked at Lenny.

"I don't care," said Billy-Eye. "If you two are serious about being partners with me on The Barn then you've got to get your act together--in a hurry. Otherwise, I'll just hire somebody else--somebody I can *depend* on."

"I'm sorry, Daddy," said Craig. "You're right. It won't happen again."

Billy Bob had died three months ago, leaving his son *The Biscuit* and a nice pile of cash to start his own venture. The restaurant brought in a good profit every year. But that was his dad's success. Billy-Eye wanted to build a business of his own--from the ground up.

Judy delivered a fresh plate of biscuits. "What will you boys be having this morning? The usual?"

Before either of them could speak, Billy-Eye said, "They're too late for a regular breakfast, Judy. They'll just be having biscuits and coffee. Thanks."

"Look, Boys, we're opening next Friday night, and we're nowhere near ready. Craig, I need you to take the truck over to Beaumont and pick up the popcorn machines and those other three arcade games."

"I doubt either one of them are open on Saturday."

"Well, if not, you can help Lenny with the plumbing. We've still got three new toilets to install in the men's bathroom."

Craig frowned. "Can't you just hire a plumber to do that?"

"No."

"I know you can afford it," said Craig.

"That's not the point, Boy. You need to get your hands dirty. So far, you don't have a darn thing invested in this project. And yet you expect me to make you a partner."

"But you know I don't have any money, Daddy" said Craig.

"That's why you need to invest some *labor*. Am I right?"

Craig wanted to make his fortune, and buy his own house and a fancy car or two and a powerful speed boat. He was 30 years old, and yet he had no education beyond high school, no valuable skills and no assets. "Yes, Sir. Your right. I'll do whatever you say."

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Norma handed Ralph a cup of coffee at the kitchen table. Then she sat down across from him and began to make notes in her spiral notebook.

"Thanks, Honey." He took a sip and picked up the newspaper. Then he lowered it just enough to see her over the top. "Now, you promised you wouldn't make a big fuss."

"I'm not."

"Just a few friends, right?"

"And Ed, of course," she said.

"Good." He returned to his paper for only a moment. "What about Greg? You didn't invite *him*, did you?"

"Well... he *is* your son."

"Norma! You know I don't want to see him. And he don't want to see me."

"Well, I just thought I'd let *him* decide. How do you know he wouldn't want to come? It's your 75th birthday. It's special."

"I ain't got no use for that holier-than-thou do-gooder. He thinks I'm the Devil. And maybe I am. But I don't need *him* telling me so."

"No, of course you're not the Devil. And maybe he's changed. How would you know? You haven't talked to him in... how many years?"

"It don't matter, Norma. He'll never change. He's been that way ever since that preacher got a hold of him. Barbara thought church would be good for him, so she started taking him. But by the time he was a teenager, I couldn't hardly stand to be around the kid. I was glad when he went off to college. We finally had some peace in the house. Then Barbara had her accident... "

"I know. He should have been sympathetic. But instead, he blamed you. I remember."

"I'll never forgive him for that."

"Oh, I don't know. I think you could--if he'd meet you halfway."

He reached across the table and gently held her hand. "Look, Honey, I know you always want everything to turn out right, and for everybody to be happy. But believe me, it just ain't gonna happen."

"He's got a new wife, you know. Her name is Cynthia. You might really like her."

He released her hand. "Not if she's anything like that *first* wife of his."

"And what if they have kids? You'd want to see your *grandkids*, wouldn't you?"

He picked up the newspaper and pretended to read it.

"Of course you would. And so would I."

Ralph Tenorly looked over at his new wife and longtime friend. He could see how much she wanted grandchildren. Norma and her first husband, Vic, had never been able to have kids. "Okay. I don't care. He can come if he wants to."

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Norma smiled.

"But don't get your hopes up."

Chapter 3

The pews were packed at First Baptist Church, Coreyville. As part-time music minister of the church, Greg Tenorly sat in his usual place on the podium, behind and slightly to the left of the pastor. He wondered why attendance was up. It was a perfect day--seventy degrees, sunny. That had to be part of the reason. And the sermon title was 'Forgiveness Fighters.' People would much rather hear a sermon about forgiveness than one about Hell.

Everybody wanted to be forgiven. But when it came to forgiving others--many people fight it. The pastor said these folks were the Forgiveness Fighters. He read a scripture passage.

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

When Greg heard these verses, which he knew by memory, it was like a slap in the face. How many times had he already forgiven his father? But he knew that 'seventy times seven' did not mean literally 490 times. The number 'seven' in the Bible symbolized completeness. It meant forgiving an *unlimited* number of times. But how could Greg ever forgive his father for killing his mother?

Maybe if Greg had been there it wouldn't have happened. But he had moved out of the house during his first semester at Lamar University--even though it was only forty minutes away, in Beaumont. A fellow music major had been more than happy to let Greg share the little rent house and the expenses.

Ralph Tenorly had sent his wife to the grocery store for more chips and dip. The big game was already starting, and there were no snacks in the house. But on her way back home, a pickup truck blew through a stop sign, crashing into the driver's side of the car. Barbara was killed instantly.

Couldn't Ralph have done without the stupid chips and dip? Or driven to the store himself?

Greg knew he needed to forgive his father. The instructions from the Bible were clear. And he *would* forgive him. But not today.

* * *

"What did you think of the sermon, Mom?" Cynthia asked her the question every week.

"Very good," said Beverly. "It's so important to forgive people. Holding grudges will just eat you up inside."

Cynthia nodded in agreement.

Greg acted as though he wasn't listening--looking around to see if he knew anybody standing in line. Luby's Cafeteria was always crowded at this time of day, when the church people arrived. "I'm going to have the fried Cod today."

"I love their fried fish," said Beverly.

"Yeah. It's got that crunchy coating," said Greg. "That's what makes it so good."

"It's pretty fattening though," said Cynthia. "You could get the broiled fish instead."

"That's okay. I don't eat it very often," said Greg, holding in his stomach.

They slowly made their way up to the food, filled their trays, and found a table. Once Greg had said a prayer of blessing, they began to eat.

"Greg and I have been invited to his dad's 75th birthday party," said Cynthia. "But he and his dad are not on speaking terms."

"That's why he didn't come to the wedding?" said Beverly.

"Right," said Cynthia.

"Well, how long has this been going on?" said Beverly

Greg wished that Cynthia had not brought it up. "A few years."

"Oh, Greg," said Beverly, "that's terrible. You need to work things out with him--like in today's sermon. You need to forgive each other. Life's just too short."

"I know," said Greg.

"We need to go to his birthday party," said Cynthia. "Then you'd have a chance to sit down and talk to him."

No, no, no! Greg wanted to scream it. But he knew Cynthia was right. It would be a waste of time trying to talk to his dad. But, for Cynthia... he would *try*.

* * *

"This is not gonna work, Sondra," said Val. "I said you could stay here for a few weeks, but you're eating up all my food."

"What?" Sondra kept her eyes on the TV, reaching into the family-sized bag to grab another potato chip. "I'll pay you back."

"Okay." Val didn't move.

"Right now?"

"Yes, right now--before you eat the whole bag."

Sondra sat the bag down beside her on the couch, reached into her purse, and pulled out a five-dollar bill. "Here you go."

Val snatched it out of her hand. "And from now on, buy your *own* food."

"Fine. I will."

"And I'm gonna need some money for rent and utilities."

Sondra muted the TV. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. Look, I barely get by as it is. I can't afford any extra expenses."

"Okay. How about fifty a week?"

"Seventy-five."

Sondra gritted her teeth. "Fine."

"In advance."

Sondra's nerve endings began to tingle--the way they always did right before she performed her magic act. In the blink of an eye, she could transform a living, breathing human into a corpse. She slipped her hand into her purse, and felt the large, cold pocket knife. In less than a second, without even thinking, the knife would be out, the blade exposed. Val would barely see the flash of metal before it ripped into her chest and punctured her heart.

She saw Val collapse to the floor--in her mind. She would have to leave town. Her plans would be destroyed. It's just not worth it, she thought, taking a slow, deep breath. She retrieved the seventy-five dollars from her purse and handed it to her evil witch of a mother.

* * *

"Shouldn't we test out these popcorn machines?" Lenny could almost taste the buttery stuff.

"We just ate hamburgers two hours ago," said Craig. "And I'm sure they work just fine."

Their voices echoed in the huge metal building that was becoming *Billy-Eye's Arcade and Dance Barn*.

"But what if they don't? Daddy's gonna be mad."

"Okay, yeah, I guess you're right. So, where's the popcorn?"

Lenny's blank look gave his answer.

"Well, I guess it *was* a good idea to try out these machines--so we'd realize that we don't even have any popcorn!" He punched Lenny in the arm.

"Hey, nobody told me to buy the popcorn."

"Well, can't you figure out anything for yourself?"

"Hey, did you hear that?"

"Don't try to change the subject." But then Craig heard it too. "Somebody's knocking."

"I *told* you."

Craig walked across the wide-open concrete floor, and unlocked and opened the door. He was going to be rude to whoever it was. It was Sunday afternoon--why was somebody bothering them? They needed to get some work done.

Then he saw her. She was beautiful--mid to late twenties, short thick blonde hair. "May I help you?" And oh, how he wanted to *help* her.

"Yes. I'm here about the auditions for the house band." She had a slight accent. It was sexy, European.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Registration is tomorrow... at 1:00 PM. You're not from around here, are you?"

"Yes. I live in Little Cypress."

How was this possible? Craig thought he had met every available woman within a fifty-mile radius. He had *dated* most of them.

"So, I'll come back tomorrow," she said, and then turned to walk away.

The sexiest butt he'd ever seen was leaving him. "What's your name?" he blurted out.

She stopped and turned around. "Cindy. Cindy Banya."

He walked out to her. "I'm Craig." He held out his hand.

"Good to meet you, Craig," she said, shaking his hand. "So, I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Could I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"Okay," she said, holding out her hand for the money.

How long has she been in this country? he wondered. "No. I meant--"

"--I know what you meant." She grinned. "Come on--we'll take my car."

"Great."

As they walked toward her little convertible, he said, "What's the name of your band?"

"Well, I'm not actually *in* a band right now. I was hoping to hook up with one that needs a good drummer."

"I like your accent. Where are you from?"

"I grew up in Dallas. My family and I just moved here a few weeks ago."

Craig felt better. *That's* why he had never met her.

"My parents are Russian." And then, in a perfect Texas twang, she said, "But I'm a true-blue Texan."

"Yes, you are. And a beautiful one."

"Thank you. Now, where are we going?" she said, as they got into her car.

"You ever been to *The Buttard Biscuit*?"

"What's that?"

"You're in for a treat, Honey. It's my family's restaurant. Our biscuits are better than cherry pie."

"Sounds great."

Lenny walked out the door just in time to see his brother and some blonde driving away.

Chapter 4

Sondra arrived at 1:00 PM sharp. *Billy-Eye's Arcade and Dance Barn* was located on Highway 87, north of town. She was not impressed. It was nothing but a huge commercial metal building with the name painted in big lettering across the front. There were about fifteen cars in the small gravel parking lot--mostly older models like hers.

She walked in, and saw a line of people standing at a closed office door. Clearly, they were band members waiting to register for an audition. A couple of the guys had their electric guitars strapped on their backs.

Sondra was quite familiar with Billy-Eye and his two sons. She'd eaten her share of *Buttard Biscuits* growing up. And she still remembered the time in high school when Craig walked up to her in the hallway and asked her for a date. She had nearly laughed in his face. He was just a kid--three grades below her.

A couple of years later, when she found out about his reputation as a stud, she wished she had accepted his offer. She would have given the little punk the ride of his life.

While she was still thinking about Craig, the office door opened, and he walked out.

He glanced at the long line of rockers. "Okay, we're about to get started, Guys." Then he spotted Sondra at the back of the line. The blonde six-footer was not easy to miss.

"Sondra Crench? Is that you?" He walked up to her.

"How are you, Craig?"

"Well, I'm impressed that you remember me. So, you're here to sign up?"

"Yeah."

He checked out the young men standing in front of her. "Are these guys with you?"

"No."

"Well, where's your band?"

"I'm working on it."

"Follow me."

She hesitated. There were at least thirty people in front of her in line.

"Come on," he insisted.

She followed him into the office.

"Hey! That's not fair," somebody yelled.

"Look," said Craig to the crowd, "*I'm* doing the hiring, so *I* will decide what's fair. Understood?"

Nobody said a word. He closed the door.

There were four metal chairs facing a large wooden desk. Craig offered her a seat. The leather executive chair behind the desk gave Craig a superior position from which to look down on lowly band members sitting in old metal chairs in front of him.

He surprised Sondra when he grabbed one of the metal chairs for himself, and dragged it right in front of her. When he sat down their knees were nearly touching.

"It's great to see you, Sondra."

What's he doing? she wondered. Is he going to register me or make a move on me? "Yeah. It's been a long time."

"So, what have you been doing with yourself?" He acted as if he had all the time in the world.

"Living in Houston, playing clubs. Sometimes solo, but mostly with a band. I sing lead, play rhythm guitar. Write songs."

"I always loved it when you'd perform at the annual high school talent show. I just knew you'd get a big record contract some day."

"Nope. Came close a couple of times. But it's a tough business."

"I'll bet. So, are you living here in the Golden Triangle now, or did you come back just to audition for (he cleared his throat and used his movie trailer voice) *Billy-Eye's Arcade and Dance Barn*?"

"That's good--you sound just like one of those announcers. I saw your ad in the paper, and thought this might be a cool gig." He was asking too many questions. But she really wanted the job. And giving him a bloody nose was not likely to help her get it. "I've got plenty of work in Houston," she lied. "But this just sounded like fun."

"But you don't have a band right now?"

"I can get one together before the audition. It's not a problem. And I'm writing a couple of songs especially for this place."

Craig smiled. Original songs for *Billy-Eye's*. If they were good catchy songs, that would be a big plus. "Can't wait to hear them. Do you have anybody in mind for your band?"

"Yeah. There's a bass player I used to work with in Houston."

"Have you talked to him yet?"

"*Her*. I left a message, but she hasn't called me back yet."

"So, are we talking an all-girl band?"

"Yeah."

His face lit up. "Then I have a suggestion for you."

"What's that?" She didn't really want to hear it. Nobody was going to tell her how to put her band together. She'd been in the business for fifteen years.

"Yesterday I met this girl named Cindy Banya. She's a drummer."

"How old is she?"

"Late twenties, I think."

Then she's not a *girl*, thought Sondra. *I'm* not a girl. We're *women*. But, of course, Craig is just a big *boy*. And he'll probably never grow up. "Have you heard her play?"

"Well, no. But I'm sure she very good."

"She's hot, isn't she?"

"Uh, yeah, she is."

"Look, Craig, I'll give her a listen, but she'd better be a rock-solid drummer, or I've got no use for her."

"Oh, I'm sure she is. And a sexy girl band would stand a much better chance of getting the job. So--"

--I get it. When can I hear her play?"

"Tonight. I'll set it up."

"Okay."

He reached across the desk, picked up a clipboard and pen, and began to study the audition schedule. "Let's see... we want to give you a good time slot... "

"Is everybody auditioning on the same night?"

"Well, we had hoped there would be enough bands to spread them out over three nights, but--you saw the line out there. It looks like we're going to be able to do everybody on Friday night."

"I want to go last."

"Okay. But the kids might be pretty tired by 11:30. And some of the younger ones might have already gone home."

"So, is that how you win--by getting the most screams and applause from the kids?"

"Yeah. Sort of. But *I* make the final decision."

"Of course." Sondra understood. Wink, wink. If she accepted Craig's new little plaything into her band, they would be sure to win on Friday night. But what if the kids went crazy over one of the other bands, and she was stuck with a lousy drummer? Billy-Eye might override Craig. Her band needed to be the most exciting, unique, outrageous group Orange County had ever seen.

"What's the name of your band? Oh, I guess you don't have one yet."

"I've got some ideas."

"Well, I don't whether you've heard, but we've put the word out that we would *prefer* a band with a

local-sounding name. You know, like *The Sabine Rivers*, or *The Triangulars*. Of course, you won't want to use either of those names since I'm giving them as examples. Chances are, one of these bands *will*."

Don't worry, she thought. She'd already had something a lot better. It had just hit her. But she didn't want to tell *him* yet. That would spoil the effect. "What's the latest I can give you the name?"

"Wednesday morning. I'm going to record a radio spot that afternoon."

"Okay."

They exchanged cell phone numbers. He said he would call her a little later to set up a time to meet with Cindy.

She walked out the door and saw the line of losers. They don't stand a chance, she thought.

Then she noticed a newcomer at the end of the line. She was petite, mid-twenties, long black hair. Did she bring that big red guitar, or did *it* bring *her*? Sondra had no idea whether the girl could play, but she loved her instrument. It was a Gibson ES-335 with classic 1957 humbucker pickups. "Nice."

"Thanks."

"What's the name of your band?"

"Rainbow Bridge."

"Y'all renamed your band for this gig, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Dumb, huh?"

"Well, they *do* want something local sounding."

Rainbow Bridge was about twenty miles from where they were standing, between Bridge City and Port Arthur. It was built in 1938, yet is still the tallest bridge in Texas.

"I don't know where the rest of my band is. They should have been here by now."

"I'm Sondra." She offered her hand.

"E. Z."

Sondra looked amused.

"No, no. Not *Easy*. It's initials. E. Z. Bender."

"Oh, I get it. You play lead guitar."

"Right."

"I like it."

"Thanks."

Sondra leaned in, and whispered, "Could you come over here for a minute?"

E. Z. nodded and followed her some thirty feet away from the line.

"Would you be interested in auditioning for my band?"

"I told you I'm already in a band," said E. Z. "They're just running late."

"Yeah, but would you consider a change for the better?"

E. Z. studied Sondra's eyes, and saw mischief--maybe even danger. "Sure."

"Good. How about getting together tonight?"

"That'll work. Do you already have a name for your band?"

"Yes, I do." She waited a moment, for effect. "*Orange Puke.*"

"Sounds nasty."

"Yeah." Sondra laughed. "We're gonna blow chunks. But in a *good* way."

Chapter 5

"To be real honest, Jeffrey, you're not making much progress," said Greg. "Are you practicing at all?"

"Well, yeah. Mom *makes* me. She sits there watching to make sure I'm getting the right fingering and phrasing."

"Hmm. I might need to talk to her about that." Greg hated when kids were *forced* into musicianship. He had been teaching private music lessons for more than ten years, and had seen it often. Parents made their kids miserable. It rarely worked anyway. "You don't really want to take piano, do you?"

"No, Sir."

"Well... "

"I wish my mom would let me take *guitar* lessons. That would be cool."

"You know you'd get calluses like this." Greg held out left hand and showed Jeffrey his fingertips.

"Yeah! My friend, Zach, has calluses. They're hard like plastic."

"Well, you know, it hurts for a while--until you build them up."

"I don't care. I love the guitar. I've been begging Mom to switch me from piano to guitar."

"I'll talk to her."

"Great! I already have a guitar and--"

"--don't get too excited yet. We'll see what she says."

"Thanks, Mr. Tenorly." He jumped up and ran for the front door. Then he stopped, rushed back over to grab his piano books, and raced out the door.

Greg's 3:30 lesson had been cancelled, so he now had a thirty minute break. Oftentimes, during a break, he would step outside and wander down the sidewalk, observing the townspeople going in and out of the shops around Coreville Square.

But something was bugging him. His dad's birthday party was only a few days away. He hoped he wouldn't regret letting Cynthia talk him into going.

Then he began to think about his uncle. He had not seen Uncle Ed in a long, long time. He hoped they would be able to just pick up where they'd left off. They always seemed to be able to do that.

Edsel Torkman was his mom only sibling. Ed had always been odd--even as a child. Kids made fun of him because he talked faster than most people could listen. Sometimes, he would begin to stutter. Then the kids would laugh out loud. But it never seemed to bother Ed.

As a child, Greg had been afraid of his uncle. But there was one thing about him that Greg had grown to admire. Edsel Torkman didn't believe in check books and credit cards. He preferred carrying cold hard cash. And Greg always looked forward to that crisp new fifty-dollar in each Christmas and birthday card.

But that was about the extent of their relationship--until Greg bought his first car at age 16. He paid cash for the thing, from his paper route earnings. The big 1975 Ford Thunderbird had 250,000 miles on it, and weighed in at some 5,000 lbs. It got 8 miles per gallon--on the highway.

Uncle Ed had his own auto repair shop. And when he heard about Greg's purchase, he insisted on overhauling the engine--for free.

Greg was thrilled--until he found out that Uncle Ed expected him to act as assistant mechanic. But he really wanted to get his car running. How would he ever ask a girl out if he didn't have a car? And it turned out to be a fun learning experience. Ed was different--but he wasn't *weird*. In fact, he was the coolest guy Greg had ever known.

Greg sat down at his computer, and looked up *Edsel Torkman's Auto Shop*.

The phone rang ten times. Greg was about to hang up, when Ed answered.

"Torkman's."

"Uncle Ed?"

"Yeah. Greg, is that you?" He talked so fast and so excitedly that he sounded as if he'd polished off a gallon of coffee in less than an hour. "I mean, are you Greg? Greg Tenorly. Are you my nephew Greg Tenorly?"

"Yes, Uncle Ed, it's--"

"--so, it's Greg?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Well, what have you been up to, Greg? Not flipping cow patties, I'll bet, huh?" Then the stuttering kicked in. "Not doing that, ah-are ah-are you, ah-are you, Greg?"

Then Greg remembered the key to slowing him down. Talk to him very slowly. "How are you, Ed?"

"Doing fine," he blurted. Then he slowed his speech just a little. "I'm doing fine."

"Well, the reason I'm calling--"

"--you got another engine that needs overhauling? We had one *trick* of a time doing your Thunderbird, didn't we? When was that? Two years ago?"

It had been nearly 20 years. And Greg had never understood why his uncle used the word 'trick' instead of 'heck' or something else. He'd say things like: *We'd better get tricking*. Or, *what in the trick are you doing?* Or, *I torn the trick out of my knuckle when the wrench slipped*. It was like the Smurfs. The Smurfs use the word 'smurf' to mean a lot of different things, depending on the context. Uncle Ed used 'trick.'

"No, Uncle Ed. It's been quite a while since we did that." Get to the point, Greg told himself. "Are you going to my dad's birthday party?"

"Well, sure--if somebody invites me. Oh, trick! That's right. Norma invited me to the party. Did you know your dad remarried?"

"I just found out."

"Yeah. I'd like to get married someday. Someday." He said the word a second time, as though he'd forgotten to say it the first time.

"Someday? Ed, you're 50 years old. What's stopping you?"

"Well... "

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Angie. Well, she's not really my girlfriend, but--"

"Angie Silverstern? She's *married*, Ed."

"No. She's not."

"Yeah. Don't you remember? That's why her name's not Mayberly anymore--she married Clifford Silverstern. I know you used to have a crush on her, but--"

"No. She's divorced."

"Really? Okay. Well, then go for it, Uncle Ed."

"I will."

"No. Don't put it off."

"I won't."

Greg wasn't convinced. "I'll tell you what: I'm coming down for the birthday party, and if you haven't told Angie how you feel by then--"

"--then you're gonna help me?"

"Yes."

"Okay. It's a deal."

"And my new wife, Cynthia, is coming too."

"Oh, yeah. I heard you were getting married."

"Ed, I sent you a wedding invitation."

"Oh, yeah. I guess that's where I heard it."

"I hated that you couldn't make it. I would love for you to have been there."

"I was planning to come... "

But you forgot, thought Greg. "It's okay. Well, I'll see you soon. Now walk across the street and have a talk

with Angie. She does still work at the restaurant?"

"Of course."

"Then, go. Tonight."

* * *

Sondra strapped her guitar on, and adjusted her mike stand. "Ready?" Her voice echoed.

Cindy Banya nodded from her place at the drums.

E. Z. Bender grabbed the guitar pick from her between her lips and said, "Let's do it."

"Okay, let's try 'Crash and Burn,'" said Sondra.

Cindy knew of several songs by that name, but took a guess that Sondra wanted the one by The Bangles. A song about deliberately killing yourself in a car crash seemed like something Sondra might like to sing.

E. Z. Bender made the same guess.

Craig Buttard watched from across the huge hall. He could hardly wait to see *Billy-Eye's* filled with excited, money-squandering teenagers. The free cokes and popcorn would help lure them in. And then they would spend loads of money on hot dogs, pizza, and candy.

When they had finished the song, and the reverberation had died down, he yelled, "Alright! Sounded great!" He walked toward the stage.

"Not too bad," admitted Sondra. "But we've got a ton of work to do before Friday night."

"What about your friend, the bass player?" said E. Z.

"I talked to her this afternoon," said Sondra. "She'll be here tomorrow."

"Cool," said Cindy.

Craig winked at Cindy. She smiled at him.

He had succeeded in getting her into a band. Now he would work at getting her into his bed.

* * *

Val lit up another joint. She had such amazing thoughts while she was high. But the next day she would realize that she must have forgotten most of the details, since none of it made any sense.

She loved to sit in the wooden swing on her back porch and watch the sun go down. Sometimes the clouds were so colorful. And it was fun to look for shapes. Like the girl walking her dog.

When Sondra was five years old, she brought a puppy home and begged to keep it. Muttly never got very big--even when he was a full grown pooch. But Sondra's father, Buster, made her start keeping him on a leash after that night he came home drunk and tripped over him.

Buster *always* came home drunk on Friday and Saturday nights. Not on Sunday nights, though. Sunday was *the Lord's day*, he'd say. This was ironic, since Buster never had much use for church or the Lord.

Sometimes Sondra would get busy with her friends and forget to feed Muttly. By the end of the day, he'd be alternately crying and growling, and wouldn't stop until somebody fed him.

One particular Friday night, while Sondra was attending an out-of-town football game, Buster came home drunk and heard Muttly whining. He was determined to teach Sondra a lesson, and to fix the problem once and for all. So, he staggered into the back yard and took care of it.

When Sondra finally made it home, at around midnight, she went to the back yard to feed Muttly. She opened the big plastic container that was next to his little doghouse, scooped out a serving and poured it into the bowl while calling his name softly. There was no response.

Sondra knelt down and looked inside the doghouse. By the light of the moon, she could see that he was gone. She noticed his leash, latched to the doghouse, as always. But it was pulled tight. She began calling his name again, as she felt along the leash, which led her upward. Her stomach began to knot. The leash was pulled taut, over the five-foot fence.

She peeked over the top, and to her horror, saw her beloved pet hanging by his collar. She pulled him up quickly and took his lifeless little body in her arms, and cried for twenty minutes.

How could this have happened? She knew exactly how it happened.

She cried herself to sleep and didn't get out of bed until Saturday afternoon.

That night, when Buster came home drunk, he had a terrible accident. It appeared that he lost his footing at the top of the front porch steps, and fell backward. His head hit the concrete sidewalk like a bag of ice thrown from a third story window.

Buster Crench would never again harm an innocent, defenseless creature.

Chapter 6

"Edsel?" said Angie.

"Yeah?" he said, from under the Oldsmobile.

"Dinner is served."

"Aw, Angie, you shouldn't have done that."

"Well, what I'm I supposed to do? Let you starve?"

Edsel and Angie went through this at least two or three nights a week. He normally walked over to Angie's restaurant for dinner. But some nights he'd lose track of time.

Angie's Country Fried Two-Step served man-sized homestyle meals. And incredible desserts. People would drive all the way from Deweyville, about twenty-five minutes north of Orange, just for a taste of Angie's cherry pie--topped with Blue Bell ice cream, of course.

Her father, Herman Mayberly, had done nothing but gripe since he retired and let Angie take over the restaurant. She had spent thousands of dollars renovating the place, adding a small dance floor and a little stage. And he could not understand why she had to change the name. *Mayberly's*. It was the family name. *And*--it sounded like *neighborly*. How could you go wrong with a name like that?

A local country band provided live dance music every Friday and Saturday night. The youngest band member was 48. The rest of the week, people had to make do with the jukebox.

She had tried to explain her reasoning to her father. *Angie's* was to remind everybody that she was now running things. *Country Fried* let people know that they were still serving homestyle food. And *Two-Step* was, of course, short for Texas Two-Step, a popular country/western dance. Herman thought the dance floor was a particularly stupid idea. It'll cost too much, he said, and it's a waste of space. If she was going to enlarge the building, it should be to accommodate more tables.

"Come on, now," said Angie. "It's after 8:00."

"I'm coming."

He stood up, walked over to the sink, grabbed the bar of Lava soap, and began to lather up his greasy hands and arms.

Angie liked to stay and talk with him while he ate. They had been friends since she was in high school. He was eight years older than her. And even at 42, she still looked like a teenager to him. He figured her curly brown hair would never turn gray. His, on the other hand, was beginning to.

He was about to sit down when he noticed that something was not right. "What's this? Where's my chicken fried, chick-chicken fried, chicken fr-fried steak?"

Usually, Angie's mere presence was enough to calm his stuttering. But not if he got upset.

"You shouldn't be eating fried food every night, Edsel. It's not good for you. This grilled chicken is healthy. Try it."

He sat down at the little table, cut a piece and put it in his mouth. "Yeah, that's pretty good." Then he noticed that something else was missing too. "But what about the gravy? That's my favorite part, Angie."

"No, you see, you don't *need* gravy with grilled chicken."

"Maybe *you* don't."

"I'm just looking out for you, Edsel."

"I know. And I appreciate it. Sorry for being grouchy about it."

He took a bite of green beans, and some corn. Then he washed it down with iced tea.

She sat down across from him. "Oh, I've been meaning to ask you--did you get an invitation to Ralph's birthday party?"

"Yep."

"Are you going? You know it's his 75th."

"I know. Yeah, I'm planning to." Then he remembered. "And Greg's coming!"

"Really? How do you know?"

"He called me today. And that boy hasn't stepped foot in Orange in--I don't know how long."

"Well, that's going to be... quite a reunion."

"I know. There's gonna be fireworks. He and his daddy are both so bull-headed."

"Edsel... do you have a date for the party?"

"A date?" She might as well have asked if he had a million dollars in his pocket.

"Because... *I* don't." She smiled.

"Oh. I see. You want to go together. Okay."

It seemed like a good time for Ed to tell Angie how he really felt about her. How he wanted to take her into his arms. How he wanted to marry her.

But, no, he thought, not while he was wearing greasy work clothes.

Ed was almost always wearing greasy work clothes.

* * *

"Sondra," Val called out. "There's someone here to see you."

"Who is it?"

"What did you say your name was?"

"Mitch," said the young man.

"It's Mitch," she yelled.

Sondra didn't know any Mitch.

When she reached the front door, Val gave her a look that said, *don't invite him in*.

"Hello, Sondra," said Mitch.

"Do I know you?"

"No. But I know *you*. And we need to talk."

Sondra wanted to tell the punk to get lost. But she was curious. She opened the screen door and walked out onto the porch. "What's this about?"

Mitch stepped closer to her and whispered, "I live across the street from Jason."

She gave him a blank stare.

"You know--Jason. The man you killed in Houston."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I've never killed anybody."

"I saw you come home with him Friday night. Then, a little later, I saw you leave."

"That wasn't me."

"And then, on Saturday night, some of his friends showed up at his house for their poker game. But he didn't answer the door. And they couldn't reach him by phone. Yet his car was in the driveway. So, they called the police."

"Well, that's a shame. But it has nothing to do with me."

"Look," he said, grinning slyly, "I *know* it was you. I overheard one of the men saying that Jason had planned to go by Joe's Bar on the way home from work Friday night. So, I went to the bar and asked a few questions. Joe, himself, told me that you performed there on Friday night, and that you left with Jason."

"Oh--*that* Jason. Yeah, I remember him now. He seemed pretty depressed. But I didn't go home with him. We just walked out of the bar together. Then we went our separate ways."

Now Mitch didn't look as confident.

"So, what were you going to do?" said Sondra. "Why didn't you report me to the police?"

"Well, I... "

"You were planning to blackmail me, weren't you?"

Mitch stammered.

"How old are you?" She asked the question as though she were a schoolteacher talking to a third grader.

"Twenty," he answered dutifully.

Sondra smiled. "Well, you're a good-looking 20 year-old."

"Thanks." He nearly blushed. He had not anticipated this kind of attention from the hot blonde.

"You want to go get a cup of coffee or something?"

"Sure."

"Where's your car?"

"Repossessed. I took the bus."

"You live you with your parents, don't you?"

He hesitated. "Yeah."

"No problem. We'll take my car."

* * *

"Yeah, you're right, Sondra." Mitch laughed. "This tequila is *much* better than coffee." He stumbled across the uneven parking lot, kicking a few loose shells, nearly falling down.

In Southeast Texas, shell is often used for driveways and parking lots, as a less expensive alternative to asphalt or concrete.

He stared into the darkness. It was nearly midnight. "Where is the boat? I can't see any boats."

"That's because *you* don't have the flashlight. Come over here," said Sondra. "And keep your voice down."

"Why? There's nobody around here... Is this the one? It doesn't even have a motor."

"We don't need a motor. We've got paddles. See?"

"Aw, man. I don't want to paddle. I just want to drink some more of this stuff." He held up the bottle of tequila. "And make sweet, hot love to you, Baby."

"I'll do the paddling. Get in."

"And I'll do the making... I mean the loving... I mean, yeah, I'll get in." He nearly lost his balance before sitting down. "I'm ready to shove off, Captain." He saluted her forcefully, accidentally poking himself in the eye with a finger.

"Are you sure you're seaworthy?"

He obviously was not.

"Sir, yes, Sir. I am, Sir." He saluted again.

As she rowed the little boat out into Sabine River, Mitch continued to guzzle the alcohol.

Finally Sondra pulled the paddles into the boat.

"Come here, Baby. I've got a big surprise for you," he said.

"Oh, really," she said playfully, as she approached him. But instead of sitting in front of him, she slipped past him and sat down behind him, facing his back.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm about to make your dreams come true," she said.

"Yahoo!"

"Shush!"

He lowered his voice. "Wow. The sound really echoes out here, *echoes out here*, doesn't it?"

She reached around from behind him, and unbuckled his belt.

"Okay. I like it so far."

Sondra took the empty bottle out of his right hand, and set it down. Then she gently pulled both of his hands around to his back. He could feel her inner thighs with his fingertips.

"Very nice," he said.

He couldn't tell exactly what she was doing with his belt, but suddenly he realized that his hands were tied together. He could no longer touch her legs. "Hey, why did you do that?"

"Be patient." She began to massage his chest with both hands. He seemed to forget that his hands were tied.

She worked her fingers downward and unbuttoned his jeans. Then she unzipped them.

"Oh, Baby." He was hyperventilating with excitement.

"Now, stand up--very carefully, so I can pull your pants down."

But he did not follow her instructions. He *jumped* up, immediately losing his balance.

All it took was the slight nudge of her left elbow to send him overboard.

"Help! I can't swim--my hands are tied!"

"Maybe this will help." She picked up the tequila bottle and threw it at him. When it hit his skull, it cracked. Not the bottle--the skull.

His cries for help ended abruptly, and he disappeared into the dark water.

Lucky throw, she thought.

Chapter 7

There was a soft knock at Greg and Cynthia's bedroom door.

They froze in place, moving only their eyes--to check the glowing numbers on the alarm clock. It was nearly 1:00 AM.

"How late do we have to wait to make sure we don't get interrupted?" whispered Greg in frustration.

"I'm sorry," whispered Cynthia.

Greg rolled to the side, and Cynthia got up, slipped on her robe, and went to the door.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Honey," said Beverly, "but I'm having trouble going to sleep. Do you have any more of those over-the-counter sleeping pills?"

"I think so, Mom. Just a second."

Cynthia went into the bathroom, and checked the medicine cabinet. She found the bottle of pills, and took it to her mother. "Hope this helps."

"I'm sure it will. Sorry I woke you up."

"It's okay, Mom." Cynthia closed the door, and took off her robe. She slid between the sheets, and snuggled her naked body up against Greg's. "I'm sorry, Sweetie."

"Baby, you know I love your mom, but--"

--I know. It really spoils the mood when she does that."

"It's not just when she comes to the door. It's *knowing* that she could knock at any moment. And as much as you turn me on, it really... "

Cynthia had begun to nibble on his ear.

Greg forced himself to continue. "We've got to do something about this... "

Cynthia slung her leg across him, and got on top. Then she gave him a hot, moist kiss.

His senses were overwhelmed by her mouth, her hands, her smooth warm body. He didn't even care that she had purposely derailed his train of thought.

She whispered into his ear, "I want to have your baby, Greg."

"I know. I want to *give* you a baby. But, take it easy--you're about to make me--"

--it's okay. It's late. Let it go."

Oh, God, thought Greg. What did I ever do to deserve this amazing woman?

* * *

Billy-Eye checked his watch again. It was after 6:00. Why did they have to be late every morning? Especially *this* morning.

Craig and Lenny walked into *The Biscuit* with their heads held low. They knew they were going to be chewed out again.

Judy saw them coming in late, as usual, and shook her head, but didn't say a word.

When Billy-Eye looked up and saw his sons standing there at his booth, he jumped up.

Lenny thought the old man was going to pull a Moe, and slam their two heads together, like Curly and Larry. They deserved it--they were his stooges. Why couldn't they ever learn to be on time?

But instead, he grabbed one in each arm and bear-hugged the breath out of them.

"What?" said Craig, confused.

"You're alive!" said Billy-Eye.

"Well... yeah," said Craig.

"Come on," said Billy-Eye. "Sit down. Let's have a great big breakfast together."

"Okay," said Lenny. Bring on the food.

"What's going on?" said Craig.

Billy-Eye's chin quivered slightly as he spoke. He was still not over the thought that one of his sons had been taken from him. "A guy dropped in for some biscuits a few minutes ago, and was saying that his brother-in-law went out early this morning for some fishing, and found a body."

"Where?"

"The Sabine River."

"A *dead* body?" said Lenny.

Craig sneered at his brother. "Well, it wouldn't be much of a story if the man was alive, now would it, Lenny?"

"So, I was worried about you boys," said Billy-Eye. "I assumed y'all were asleep in your rooms when I left the house this morning. But then I started wondering."

"Was it anybody we know?" said Lenny.

Craig punched him in the arm. "Daddy just said he thought it might be one of us. He doesn't *know* who it was."

Lenny rubbed his arm. "Oh."

Judy brought them each a cup of coffee, and took their breakfast orders.

"Okay, now let's get down to business," said Billy-Eye. "Have you got the band auditions all lined up?"

"Yes, Sir," said Craig. "We've got eleven bands."

"So, you'll do the whole thing on Friday night?"

"Yes, Sir. The first band will start at 6:30, and the last one will finish just before midnight. Then I will decide on the winner and make the announcement."

"No, Sir," said Billy-Eye. "I will decide the winner."

No, thought Craig. What if he doesn't pick Cindy's group? Then Craig would *never* get into her pants. "I thought you were going to leave that up to *me*."

"I was," said Billy-Eye. "But then I started thinking about how easily you're influenced. I won't stand for any favoritism. We want the best band."

Craig scowled at his brother. "Lenny--you rat! You told him, didn't you?"

"Told me what?" said Billy-Eye.

"Nothing," said Craig.

"Good. Then it's understood. You boys will have everything in tip-top shape by the time I get there at around 5:30."

"Yes, Sir," they said in unison.

Craig stomped on Lenny's foot.

Lenny grimaced, but said nothing.

"So, who's this girl, Craig?" Billy-Eye took a sip of his coffee.

"Which one?"

Billy-Eye chuckled. His pulsating belly made the booth table shake, spilling a little of Craig's coffee.

Craig picked up his cup and wiped the sides and bottom with his napkin. "Her name is Cindy. She's the drummer in an all-girl band."

"Blonde, right?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Okay. Now I know who will *not* win."

"Daddy!"

Billy-Eye laughed so hard that he began to cough. Finally, he regained control. "I'm kidding. The best band will win--even if it ends up being Cindy's band. I want what's best for the business. We're gonna be paying a lot of money for that band. And we'll be depending on them to develop a following, so we can sell T-shirts

and posters and all kinds of souvenirs." He took another sip from his cup. "We're gonna make a fortune, Boys."

* * *

"Well, I thought you were gonna just sleep all day," said Val sarcastically. She was in her recliner, sipping one last cup of coffee before driving over to Wal-Mart to work her shift. Her favorite game show, *The Price Is Right*, came on at 10:00 AM, fifteen minutes before she had to leave for work.

"I needed the rest. We've got a long practice session today."

"Where are y'all practicing?"

"Right here in the living room."

"No, you're not!"

"Why not? We won't hurt anything. And we'll be done before you get home."

"You'll play too loud, and make my neighbors mad."

"Val, I promise--we'll hold it down."

"And I don't want any guys using my bathroom. They pee all over the floor."

"There are no *guys*, Mother. It's an all-girl band."

Val knew she would regret what she was about to say. "Alright. But you'd better take care of my house and my things."

"I will."

"If anything goes wrong--"

"--it won't."

* * *

Cindy Banya arrived early, and quickly set up her drums, and began to warm up.

E. Z. Bender was next. She unpacked her guitar, fired up her amp, and began to work on a few riffs.

Sondra had stepped into the kitchen for a drink of water when Cindy and E. Z. suddenly went silent. She popped her head into the living room to find out why.

Boomer Hertz was standing in the doorway with her bass amp in one hand and her guitar in the other. Cindy and E. Z. were just staring at her.

Cindy was confused. Sondra had said this would be an all-girl band. Who was this guy in the sleeveless muscle shirt, with long, frizzy brown hair?

The 32-year-old had a stocky build. Her arms bulged, but her chest didn't. She was clearly not somebody you

wanted to mess with.

"Hey, Boomer," said Sondra. "Glad you could make it."

"Yeah, well this had better be worth the trouble," said Boomer.

Or what? wondered Cindy. She was afraid of the answer.

Boomer sat down her amp, and plugged it into an outlet. She popped the latches on her guitar case as though she were a mechanic opening a monster-sized toolbox. Then she whipped her bass out of its case, and strapped it on like King Arthur's Excalibur.

E. Z. wouldn't have been surprised to hear that the she-man had cut a few people down to size with the thing.

Sondra picked up her guitar. "Let's warm up with Wilson Phillips' *Impulsive*."

By the end of the song, all four of the women were smiling inside, and thinking the exact same thing: We're gonna blow 'em away.

Chapter 8

"Looks good, Boys." Billy-Eye knew he had been taking a big chance leaving the final details for his sons to handle. He had not even visited the place all week. It was Friday, 5:30 PM--thirty minutes before the grand opening of *Billy-Eye's Arcade and Dance Barn*.

The arcade room had been arranged nicely--although not the way Billy-Eye would have done it. But still, it was good. The two popcorn machines were ready to go. High school aged workers were ready to hand out bags of the stuff. The first group in the competition was warming up on the bandstand. A stand-alone blackboard to the right side of the drums had the name of the band written across it in white chalk: *The Triangulators*. Each band would be responsible for putting their name on that board.

"Glad you like it, Daddy." Craig beamed. Finally, he had done something right.

"So, what do you think? Will we have a full house tonight?" said Billy-Eye.

"Sure," said Lenny with a naïve smile.

"Hopefully," said Craig. "They get in free, get to hear eleven bands, and get all the free popcorn and coke they want. I'm sure the kids have heard our radio ad."

"Maybe we should have made the games free too," said Lenny.

"Hey, we can't give *everything* away," said Billy-Eye. "We're only charging a quarter for the games as it is." He walked back out into the main hall. "Is the refrigerator all stocked up?"

"Yes, Sir," said Craig. "It's loaded with frozen pizzas, hot dogs, and condiments. And we've got plenty of hot dogs buns and candy."

"And the soda fountains?"

"Ready to go."

"And I see you got the ice machine set up." Billy-Eye smiled. "Great. I'm proud of you boys."

At 5:50, two of their female employees unlocked the main door and walked out. There was a line of about 150 kids waiting to get in. The two girls each had a bag full of red plastic cups, printed with the *Billy-Eye's Arcade and Dance Barn* logo.

"What's your name?"

"Cassandra Smith," said the first girl in line.

The employee wrote the girl's name on a cup with a magic marker, and handed it to her. "Hang onto your cup if you want free soft drinks. If you lose it, you'll have to pay a dollar to get a new one."

Cassandra looked at the cup. With the cool logo, it was a free soft drink cup *and* a souvenir. "Okay, thanks. Are y'all about to open the doors?"

"In about ten minutes."

* * *

"Hey, where are you guys going?" Craig rushed around to the front of the group of fifteen or so kids who were heading for the door.

"We're tired of listening to bands," said one girl.

"Yeah, it's getting boring, Man," said one of the boys.

Even Craig had to admit that the current band, *The Orange Peelers*, was not that good. But Cindy and her band was up next. They would be the last band of the night. He needed all the kids to stay so they could cheer loudly and persuade Billy-Eye to hire her band.

Just as the kids reached the door, it opened, and four dazzling young women walked in. Each one was wearing a black, tight stretchy T-shirt and shorts, partially covered by a bright orange long-tailed tuxedo coat. The women stood five inches taller than usual in their black and orange high-heeled boots.

Without even speaking to each other, all of the would-be defectors changed their minds and turned to follow the women.

The Orange Peelers finished their last song, and began to pack up their equipment and carry it off the stage.

Craig walked over to where Billy-Eye was standing.

"So, this must be Cindy's band," said Billy-Eye.

"Yeah. Well, it's not really *her* band. But she's the drummer."

"They *look* hot. I'll give you that. What do they call themselves?"

Craig was about to answer when he saw Sondra take a king size bed sheet out of a bag, and drape it over the blackboard. The bold, orange lettering read *Orange Puke*. There were splatters of orange and green paint around the edges that were apparently supposed to be vomit. "There you go." Craig pointed to the sheet.

"That's the funniest name I've seen all night." Billy-Eye laughed. But they'd better be awfully good if they expect to win. Because I really liked *Chemical Rose*."

There's a long road on the outskirts of Orange that's lined with petroleum plants. It's known as Chemical Row. If you're visiting the city, you might want to hold your nose when you drive down it. Orangites are used to the stink. So, one of the bands thought it would be funny to name themselves *Chemical Rose*. When Sondra had heard the name, she wished she had thought of it herself.

Craig watched to see how the crowd was responding. By the end of their first song, the kids had gathered near the bandstand for a close look at the flashy girls on stage. Their music was somewhat better than that of the other bands, but Craig was not at all certain that Billy-Eye was being swayed. Sondra had told him that the special song she wrote would be last. She had assured him that it would give them the edge over the other bands.

Cindy went into a drum solo as the other three women took off their guitars and set them in their stands. They walked around behind the blackboard.

"What are they doing?" said Billy-Eye.

"I don't know," said Craig. But he hoped it worked.

When they walked out, they looked no different. They picked up their guitars and strapped them on as Cindy continued to go crazy on the drums. Boomer was the first to join in. Her five-string bass rattled everything that wasn't tied down. The standard bass guitar comes with four strings: E-A-D-G. But her bass had a fifth string--the B below the E. Her lowest notes could be *felt* more than heard.

Next, Sondra joined in on rhythm guitar. Finally, E. Z. came in with a screeching lead guitar lick.

All this was a dramatic lead-in to Sondra's song, *Puking My Guts Out (All Over You)*. It was in E Minor, with a driving beat. Sondra sang lead, with the other three singing backup on the choruses.

Yapping with a babe in the parking lot,

You had a tight butt and a really hot car.

I took you for a ride and blew your mind.

But you burned my tires, threw me into the fire.

I try to pretend you didn't hurt me.

Nobody hurts me.

But then I get this raunchy feeling way down inside.

And I'm puking my guts out,

I'm puking my guts out,

I'm puking my guts out

All over you,

All over you.

(E. Z.'s guitar solo)

Stomped me flat without a sound.

You buried my soul in the deep, deep ground.

I'm blacker than black, cold as stone.

I'm dead to the world since you left me alone.

I try to pretend you didn't hurt me.

Nobody hurts me.

But then I get this raunchy feeling way down inside.

And I'm puking my guts out,

I'm puking my guts out,

I'm puking my guts out

All over you.

All over you,

All over you,

All over you,

All over you!

For the last *all over you*, Sondra, E. Z., and Boomer slung their guitars to their backs and stepped to the edge of the stage. They sang the last line *a capella*, and then, in unison, threw their heads back. Then they barfed into the crowd. And it wasn't a tiny spew. They blew out a couple of quarts each.

The kids screamed and tried to get away from the chunky orange goo.

Billy-Eye yelled at Craig. "What is this?"

Craig was as confused and upset as his father. "I don't know."

"Well they just *lost*!"

Craig couldn't argue. It was no use. As badly as he wanted to please Cindy, he couldn't justify this kind of behavior. Kids might not ever come back after this.

The three women stepped back from the edge of the stage, and Cindy stood up at her drums. Then *Orange Puke* took a slow, dignified bow--as though they had just performed Mozart for the Queen of England.

They've got a lot of nerve, thought Craig.

Then the screaming died down. Some kids were beginning to laugh.

One boy yelled, "Taste it!"

"Gross!"

"No, really."

"He's right! It tastes like orange juice!"

"But what are these chunks?"

A boy licked his arm. "I think it's oatmeal."

More and more of the kids began to realize that they hadn't really been sprayed with barf. It was just a gimmick. A *cool* gimmick. The coolest gimmick ever!

Orange Puke had been disgusting only five minutes earlier. Now they were the hottest thing in town.

Billy-Eye had seen and heard enough. He grabbed Craig by the shoulders. "Well, what are you waiting for? Go tell them they got the job!"

Chapter 9

Craig hurried to the stage, zigzagging his way across the floor of orange puddles. He ran up the stairs to meet Sondra. "Are you crazy?" He tried to give her a stern look, but then broke into laughter.

"Did we get the job?"

"Yes, you did."

Boomer walked over to Sondra and gave her a high five. "Yeah, Baby."

E. Z. grinned. She couldn't believe Sondra's weird idea had worked.

"How did you do it?" said Craig. "I mean, how did you get it in your mouth? You were singing, and then you just spit it out."

Sondra smiled proudly, turned her back to him, and pointed to the white tube hanging out the top of her tux coat behind her neck. The tip of it had some of the orange stuff on it. Then she turned back around and opened the left side of her coat, revealing an old-fashioned hot water bottle.

"We mixed up some Tang and a little oatmeal. Then, when the time came, we released this little thing." She pointed to the crimp clamp on the tube. "Then we reached back and grabbed the top of the tube like this." She pulled it around with her left hand, and pointed it at Craig, placing her hands to the sides of her mouth. "And then smashed down on the bottle like this." She raised her arm, ready to fire her goo gun.

Craig held up his hands and stepped back. "Okay--I get it."

"Works like a charm," said Sondra.

"Yes, it does," he said. "And it was the thing that put you over the top. Daddy liked your music, but I think he liked *Chemical Rose* better. Then you blew chunks all over the kids, and I thought he was going to skin you alive. You really took a big chance with this stunt."

"I like to live on the edge," said Sondra.

"Well, I'm glad it worked out. Once Daddy saw that the kids thought it was cool, he knew they'd want to bring all their friends here. But just don't do it again."

"Why not?"

E. Z. stepped in. "That's fine, right? We got the job. We don't have to do it anymore."

Sondra snarled at her. "It's *my* call. I'm the leader of this band. So, shut up!"

"Anybody else got any comments?" She waited. "Good!"

* * *

Craig led Cindy Banya into the office. The other band members had already walked out to the parking lot. He tried to focus on her face as he talked, but his eyes kept gravitating to her incredibly long sexy legs. For once, he almost wished he could look two directions at the same time--like Billy-Eye. "I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your playing tonight."

"Thanks."

"No, really. You're a great drummer."

"I'm okay." Just as Craig was about to speak, she said, "Well I'd better get home now. It's after midnight. And I live with my parents, you know."

"Oh, I'm sure they would understand. After all, you're a grown woman." And *what* a woman, he thought.

"I can do whatever I want, sure. But it's about respect. My family still lives by the traditions and values of the old country."

"Russia."

"Yes."

"But you were born here in the U. S."

"It doesn't matter."

"Aw, come on--at least give me a little kiss." Craig took her in his arms. He was about to devour her full, sweet lips.

"This is not what I want." Cindy did not pull away. Clearly, she assumed he was a gentleman, and would be respectful of her wishes.

He did not loosen his grip. "What do you mean? I thought you liked me."

"There is a time and a place."

Craig released her, wondering how he could have misread her intentions. He had worked hard to get her into a band, and help that band get a job. Had she just been *using* him?

The door flew open. It was Billy-Eye, and he did not look happy. "You need to quit messing around, and get out here and manage your staff. This place has got to be cleaned up tonight."

"Okay," said Craig. But he didn't budge.

"Now!" Billy-Eye bellowed.

* * *

The house was dark. Sondra tiptoed up the stairs and across the wooden porch. When a board creaked, she winced. She slipped into the house quietly, and turned on the lamp near the door.

"It's about time!" Val was sitting in her recliner, holding a whisky glass.

"You're drunk," said Sondra.

"And you're a murderer."

Sondra hesitated. "What are you talking about?"

Val's mouth gradually formed a smile. Then it stretched too far--until she looked like The Joker from *Batman*. "I saw you leave with that boy the other night. The one who came here looking for you. Mitch. The next day, the police found a body in the river."

"So?" Sondra said, without emotion.

Val picked up the newspaper from the small table beside her chair and threw it at Sondra.

Sondra scanned the headlines.

There it was--a picture of Mitch. The article said that his parents weren't sure why he was in Orange, and didn't know of anyone who would want to hurt their son. "That's too bad. He seemed like a nice kid." She dropped the newspaper on the couch.

"Why did you kill him, Sondra? Did he try to make a move on you?"

"What makes you think I killed him? Or that I would kill *anyone*?" She paused. "I guess now you think you need to turn me in."

"Not necessarily," she slurred.

"Because if you're planning to call the police, I want you to tell me right now--so I can murder *you*, just like I murdered *him*."

Val froze.

Sondra snickered. "You get crazy in the head when you're drunk, Old Woman. I'm going to bed."

Sondra walked past her mother. She could have easily stepped behind Val's chair and snapped her neck. She went into her bedroom, and shut the door.

* * *

Sondra had been sleeping for a couple of hours when she heard men talking in the living room.

Her bedroom door burst open, and two cops rushed in.

She tried to get away, but they grabbed her, and threw her back down on the bed. Then they rolled her over and bound her wrists with a rope.

She wondered why they were using rope instead of handcuffs. "What are you doing?"

"You have the right to remain silent."

"I know my rights. I want a lawyer."

"Anything you say... doesn't matter."

"What?"

"You have the right to an attorney, but you won't need one."

One of the cops put a dog collar around her neck and pulled it tight.

"What are you doing? Get this thing off of me--right now!"

They tied her ankles together, picked her up, and carried her out. When they walked through the living room, Sondra saw Val still sitting in her chair.

"Mom!"

"I warned you, Honey."

"Mom, help me!"

Val smiled, and took another sip of her whiskey.

Sondra yelled for somebody to wake up and save her. Anybody. But she couldn't even rouse the neighborhood dogs. And by the time they got her to the back fence, she was so hoarse that her screams were mere whispers.

They laid her on the ground, and snapped a leash onto her collar. Then they picked her up, and raised her body high above their heads. The wooden fence was much taller than she remembered it. They were barely able to push her over the top.

She fell what seemed like twenty feet, before the leash pulled taut--slamming her head against the fence as gravity continued to pull her body downward. For a split second, she imagined her torso ripping free from its head.

She was surprised to still be alive. She could touch the grass--but only with the tips of her toes. Suffocation had begun.

She reached above her head up to the leash and tried to pull herself up, to release the pressure. But she was already getting too weak.

How did her hands get loose? Maybe they were really still tied. She was getting delirious as her life slipped away.

No! Don't give in! She grabbed the collar with both hands, pulling on it with all her might.

Suddenly she woke up, gasping for air. She was in her bed.

She jumped up, and ran into the living room.

Val was asleep in the recliner.

Chapter 10

It was a warm, sunny Saturday morning in Coreyville. Greg Tenorly loved Texas weather--except for the humidity. It was a perfect day for a long drive in his big red convertible.

The large suitcase looked small in the huge trunk of his shiny 1965 Pontiac Bonneville. They could have made the trip in Cynthia's new Toyota Avalon, but Greg preferred his glorious battleship for highway driving. The 43-year-old car was in primo condition. He closed the lid, taking care not to slam it. It had been the most beautiful thing in his life--until he met Cynthia.

"You and Bonnie ready to go?" Cynthia smiled at him from the front porch. It was a bit odd referring to a car by a woman's name, but she had grown accustomed to it.

"As soon as I let her top down."

Cynthia walked down the stairs, and over to the car. "Sometimes I get a little jealous."

"Good," said Greg. "Wouldn't want you to take me for granted." He winked at her.

"Y'all have a nice time," said Beverly from the porch.

"We will, Mom," said Cynthia.

"And Greg, good luck with your dad," said Beverly.

"Thanks."

They got into the car and drove away, waving goodbye.

"Can't wait to get you alone in the hotel room," said Greg.

"Is that the only reason we're making this trip?" she said playfully.

"No, of course not. But it's the *main* reason."

"Well, I know it bugs you when we're trying to make love, knowing Mom's in the next room."

"Yeah. And you always have to smash my face down into the pillow so she won't hear me."

Cynthia giggled.

"You think it's funny, but one of these times you're gonna suffocate me."

She laughed.

"Go ahead and laugh, but I'm telling you... "

But it was no use. He tried his best, but could not sustain his serious tone. Her laugh was contagious.

"I think she heard us last night," said Greg.

"Why? Did she look at you funny at the breakfast table?" She laughed harder.

"Well, yeah. I think she did."

"No. It's just that new high fiber cereal she trying. She nearly gags every time she puts the spoon in her mouth."

"Have you ever tasted that stuff?"

"No."

"It's sawdust."

"Oh, Greg."

"No. It's literally sawdust. I'm telling you."

Cynthia laughed.

"Unscrupulous car dealers used to put sawdust in the gearbox of worn-out manual transmissions to make them shift smoothly."

"Really? How did you know that?"

"Uncle Ed."

"Well, maybe that's exactly what Mom needs--maybe she's not shifting smoothly."

They both laughed out loud.

Finally, after they had caught their breath, Cynthia said, "So, what's the plan? Are we going by your dad's house today?"

"Maybe later. First, I want to go to *Edsel Torkman's Auto Shop*," he said with fanfare.

"Okay." She paused. "Edsel's just a nickname, right? That's not his real name."

"Actually, it is."

"Edsel. Like the stupid looking car from the fifties?"

"Hey--don't let Uncle Ed hear you say that. And, no, I wouldn't say they're stupid looking. At least Ed's weren't. He had two of them--1958 models. One was a hardtop, and the other one was a convertible. They were amazing automobiles."

"That must be where you learned to love old cars--from your Uncle Ed."

"Yeah, definitely." He paused. "My grandfather's name was Ford."

"Oh, yeah--I remember you saying that. But I didn't associate the name with cars. I mean, I've heard of other men with the first name Ford."

"Yeah, but his last name was Torkman."

"So?"

"You know--like torque. As in a torque wrench."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what that is, Sweetie."

"It's a tool. Mechanics use it when they're tightening bolts on an engine--so they get just the right amount of pressure. It can cause big problems if the bolts are too loose or too tight."

"I see," she said, not fully understanding, but not wanting to hear further explanation.

"Grandpa was a mechanic too. But they hadn't planned to name their son Edsel. It just so happened that he was born on E-Day."

"E-Day? You mean D-Day?"

"No. September 4, 1957. They called it E-Day. It was the day the Edsel was unveiled at Ford dealerships across the country. So, my grandfather couldn't resist. Grandma didn't like the name at all."

"I can understand why."

"But she finally gave in."

"Too bad the Edsel ended up being such a dud."

"It wasn't really a dud. It just had some problems. Plus--the country was going into a recession. It was a bad year for car sales across the board. But the Edsel did have some great new features, like self-adjusting brakes--which we still have on cars today," he said proudly.

"Wow, you're just full of all these car facts, Honey. I had no idea."

"Go ahead--make fun. But I used to love hearing Uncle Ed talk about this stuff."

"Well, I can't wait to meet him."

* * *

E. Z. Bender was waiting in the parking lot of *Angie's Country Fried Two-Step* restaurant when Sondra drove up, and got out of her car. "This better not be a waste of time."

"Well, you said you wanted to find some more regular gigs for us. And this place is pretty cool, and it does a lot of business."

"And they only have a band for weekends, right?"

"That's right."

"Well, let's give it a shot."

They walked through the door and looked around. Sondra was impressed that most of the tables were occupied on a Saturday at 1:00--considering the lousy location. It was not anywhere near a mall or a shopping center. And the business across the street was an eyesore: *Edsel Torkman's Auto Shop*. She remembered

Edsel. Weird guy.

"There's the owner," said E. Z.

Angie Silverstern was dressed just like the other waitresses. She took an order and then hurried to the kitchen window to turn it in.

"Angie?"

She spun around. "Yes?"

"Hi. I'm Sondra, and this is E. Z. We need to talk to you."

"Well, I'm sorry, but you'll have to come back later. As you can see, we're very busy right now."

"It won't take long," said Sondra.

Angie sensed the woman's determination. "Okay--but all I can give you is two minutes."

"No problem," said Sondra.

"Follow me." Angie led them to her cramped little office. "What's this about?"

"My band has been selected as the official band of *Billy-Eye's Arcade and Dance Barn*."

"Oh--somebody was telling me about that this morning. The whole thing with the Tang."

"Yeah, that's us."

"Well, congratulations."

"Thanks. And now we're gonna do you a big favor. We're gonna be your band twice a week, every week--for only \$500 a night."

"What? I can't afford that."

"Okay, I get it--you want to negotiate. Fair enough. \$400."

"No. I don't need another band. I've got the *Haystack Fiddlers* on weekends, and that's all I need."

Sondra got up in her face. "Just tell me which nights you want us to play."

"None." She saw Sondra's right arm beginning to tremble, and braced herself for a punch in the face.

"I don't think you're understanding me," said Sondra.

"Oh, she's understanding you alright." Edsel was in the doorway, behind Sondra and E. Z. "Now guh-guh-get out of here!"

Same old weirdo, thought Sondra. She had forgotten about the stutter. "Whatever you say, Edseloser." She sneered at him as she slowly turned, and then strode out.

"And I'd better not ever suh-see you in here aguh-aguh." He took a breath. "Again." His stuttering always kicked in at the worst times.

E. Z. had not moved. She just stood there staring--first at Edsel, then at Angie.

What's her problem, thought Edsel. He started to yell at her, but caught himself. He was surprised by her kind eyes.

E. Z. suddenly turned rushed out of the room.

He turned to Angie. "You okay?"

"I'm fine, Edsel. Thanks." She walked over to him, and gave him a tight hug.

"Be careful. You're gonna get grease on your clothes."

"I don't care."

Angie never hugged him like this. It felt so good. Maybe this was the perfect time to tell her his true feelings.

"Angie?" One of the waitresses called to her from just outside the doorway. "Sorry. But it's Mr. Philbert again. He said his steak was overcooked, and he's not going to pay for it."

"I'm coming," said Angie, still in his arms.

Every fiber of his body screamed for him to kiss her.

"I've got to get back," she said.

* * *

"I'm sorry," said E. Z.

"No problem," said Sondra, opening her car door. "She'll come around."

"She doesn't want us."

"Oh, I'm sure I could convince her... if it weren't for him."

"So, we'll just look for something else."

"See you in a little while. Don't be late. We've got our first full show tonight. And we're gonna knock 'em dead, right?"

"Right," said E. Z., smiling.

Sondra backed her car out. As she pulled onto the road, she eyed Edsel's shop with contempt. "The city of Orange will be much better off when you're dead and buried, Old Man."

Chapter 11

"Come on, Craig, you've got to get up!" Lenny banged on his brother's bedroom door. "It's 1:30."

Craig jumped out of bed. His throbbing head made him wish he hadn't. He opened the door just a crack. His voice sounded tired and hoarse. "Stop it. I'm up."

Lenny tried to get a peek. "You got a woman in there?" he said, grinning.

"None of your business. And keep your voice down."

"Where did you go last night? I thought you were right behind me. I called your cell. Why didn't you answer?"

"I needed to think, so I went for a drive."

"And picked up a hooker?"

"Again--it's none of your business."

"Well, hurry up. Daddy said he'd see us at *The Barn* at 2:00."

"You go on. I'll be right behind you."

"Craig... "

"Go. I'll be there."

After Craig shut the door, Lenny put his ear up to it, and listened for a woman's voice.

Craig hit the door with his fist.

Lenny's head bounced off the door. "Ouch!"

"Go!"

Craig knew he needed to hurry. He didn't want to make Billy-Eye mad. But he had to take just a few more seconds to admire Cindy's sexy naked body, while she lay sleeping in his bed. He *wanted* to, but he couldn't--because she was not there. He had been with her in his dreams all night long. No wonder he'd slept so late.

* * *

Edsel kept his old cassette player turned down low, so he could hear when someone came into his shop. Most people didn't bother to call him on the phone. They knew he wouldn't answer it unless he happened to be on a break. If you wanted Edsel to work on your car, it was best to just bring it in.

His shop had an in-floor hydraulic lift, which had broken down over a year ago. Angie had been pleading with him to buy a new one, to no avail. To him, it would be a waste of money. He had a perfectly good portable hydraulic lift, and 36-inch creeper. A creeper is a flat board on wheels, with padding and a small built-in pillow.

He didn't mind rolling under cars to work on them. He explained to Angie that he enjoyed being able to do some of his work lying down. His feet got sore when he had to stand on the hard concrete all day. A couple of times she had found him asleep under a car. Not that it mattered. He wasn't getting paid by the hour.

Edsel was working under a 1972 Impala, replacing the starter, when he heard somebody come into the shop. "Hello? Who's there?"

"Uncle Ed?"

"Greg?" He rolled out from under the car, jumped up and wiped his hands on a rag. He grabbed Greg's hand, and shook it hard.

Greg had forgotten about Uncle Ed's vise-like grip.

"And this must be Cynthia."

"Hi." Cynthia smiled and shook his hand. "I've heard so much about you."

"Well, I wouldn't believe everything Knuckle-Banger tells you."

"Knuckle-Banger?" She snickered. "You didn't tell me you had a nickname, Honey."

Another thing Greg had forgotten. "Yeah. When Uncle Ed and I were working on my old Thunderbird I'd be pulling on a wrench with all my might, and it would slip off, and I'd bust my knuckles."

"He did it a lot," added Ed. "Probably lost a half-pint of blood in this shop."

"But only Uncle Ed is allowed to call me that. You don't need to tell anybody else about it."

"Oh, I don't know," said Cynthia. "I think your choir members might get a kick out of it."

Greg grimaced. But he knew she was joking. At least he *hoped* so. "Everything going okay, Uncle Ed?"

"Yep. I've got more work than I can handle. One of these days I'm gonna have to turn somebody away--send them to some other mechanic," said Edsel.

"Well, that's great." Greg paused. "Have you had that talk with Angie yet?"

Cynthia was surprised to see Edsel's face turn red.

"No. But I will."

"Well, if you need my help--"

"--no, that's okay. I'm gonna do it."

"You've got until we go home tomorrow night," said Greg. "Or I'm going to tell her myself."

"I'm gonna do it."

"Good. How about tomorrow night, the four of us have dinner together? Are the *Haystack Fiddlers* still playing at Angie's on Sunday nights?"

"Sure are."

"Great. You'll like them," said Greg to Cynthia. "They're a local Country and Bluegrass band."

"Sounds like fun," she said.

"Well, I'd better get back to work," said Edsel. "I promised Mrs. Jennings her car would be ready to go by 4:00."

"Okay," said Greg. "We'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye," said Cynthia. "It was nice to meet you."

"Me too," said Edsel, as he lay down on the creeper, and rolled under the Impala. "And don't forget, Greg."

"What?" Greg was holding the door open for Cynthia.

"Fly the rain!" said Edsel.

"Fly the rain!" said Greg.

As they were walking to the car, Cynthia said, "What does that mean?"

"To be honest, I'm not quite sure."

"Then why did you say it?"

"It's just something Uncle Ed likes to say. I think it means 'Have a great day,' or 'Go for it,' or something like that."

"You never asked him?"

"Well, at first I thought it was something I was supposed to already know. Like when the doctor says, 'You know why you got that rash, right?' You'd rather just pretend like you knew. Anyway, after a while I was too embarrassed to admit that I didn't know what it meant. And I never heard him say it to anyone else, so I couldn't ask them either."

"He only said it to *you*?"

"Yeah. And for a while I was afraid it meant something... *sexual*."

"No wonder you were afraid to ask."

"Yeah. But then I realized I was just being silly. He's not like that."

"Tell you what--tomorrow night *I'll* ask him."

"No, that's okay. I've gone this many years without knowing. It's no big deal."

* * *

"Norma! Somebody's knocking on the front door. Can't you hear?" Ralph Tenorly was sitting in his favorite

chair, a few feet from the door, watching a baseball game on TV.

"I'm coming," said Norma, in a singsong voice. She walked in from the kitchen, through living room, and opened the front door. "Greg! Come on in. And you must be Cynthia. Oh, she's beautiful, Greg. You're a lucky man. A very lucky man."

Ralph didn't get up. He barely looked away from the game as they walked in. "Hello."

"Sweetie, this is my dad's new wife, Norma. And this is my dad, Ralph."

"Hi, Norma."

Ralph forced himself to stand up and shake Cynthia's hand. "How are you?"

"Fine, Sir. I'm glad to finally meet you," said Cynthia.

"Norma's right. You're quite a looker."

"Thanks," said Cynthia. She'd heard it her entire life, although rarely in those exact words. But she never let it go to her head. She was no more responsible for her natural beauty than a tall person is for their height. But a nice compliment was always appreciated. Maybe Greg had exaggerated. Ralph didn't seem so bad.

"So, how did you get mixed up with this do-gooder?"

"Actually," she looked at Greg, "this do-gooder saved my life."

"Really? Y'all sit down and tell us all about it," said Norma.

"How's your Uncle Edsel?" said Ralph.

Greg and Cynthia looked at each other. Greg said, "How did you--"

"--how did I know you went by to see him? Your wife's got grease on her hand."

"Where?" Cynthia looked for it.

"On the edge of your little finger," said Ralph.

"Let me get you a paper towel," said Norma, rushing into the kitchen.

"So, how is the old nutcase?" Greg's dad liked referring to Edsel as 'old,' even though Ed was twenty-five years younger than him. Ralph had never shown his brother-in-law any respect. At the time Ralph married Barbara Torkman, her kid brother was in the first grade. Ralph was even more cruel than Edsel's mean classmates--endlessly picking on the stuttering child.

"He's doing fine," said Greg. "But he's not a nutcase."

"Sure he is," said Ralph.

"Well, it seems like he's doing pretty well. He's got plenty of business from what I understand. He must be doing something right."

"Yeah. You know why he's got all that business? He's still charging 1980's prices. That's why people take their cars to him--he's cheap. Don't ask me how he's paying the bills."

Norma handed Cynthia a paper towel, and Cynthia wiped the grease off her hand.

"I tried to help him, you know," said Ralph. "He could have come to work with me at the shipyard. He would have made a good living there. At least *you* gave it a try."

Cynthia looked at Greg.

"He couldn't hack it though," said Ralph. "Greg was just too soft to do manual labor."

"I was eighteen years old," said Greg. "And that woman they had me working with had the trashiest mouth I've ever heard. I just couldn't take that."

Ralph chuckled. "Yeah, Connie was a little rough around the edges alright. But she was a woman. All you would have had to do was cuss her out a couple of times. Then she would showed you some respect."

"I don't do that," said Greg.

"Of course you don't," said Ralph. "You wouldn't cuss if your life depended on it. Because that would be wrong, wouldn't it? And you never do anything wrong. You're perfect."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't *have* to. It's written all over your holier-than-thou face."

Norma jumped in. "Okay, boys, that's enough."

"We need to go," said Greg, rising to his feet.

Cynthia stood up.

"We'll see you tomorrow at the party," said Greg, as he hurried out the door with Cynthia.

Greg dreaded having to attend his dad's stupid birthday party tomorrow.

But for now, he would put his dad out of his mind. He and Cynthia were headed for their hotel room. And tonight, there would be no midnight interruptions from his mother-in-law.

Chapter 12

"Join me for dinner?"

"Sure." Angie spun around, expecting to see Edsel in his overalls. But tonight, he was wearing slacks and a polo shirt--which, for Edsel, was formal attire.

"What's the matter? You're looking at me funny."

"Well, you're just so... dressed up. What's the occasion?"

"It's Saturday night, and I'm having dinner with Miss Angie."

She hadn't been a 'miss' since she was in her twenties, but she thought it was sweet when Edsel called her that. "Okay." But she knew there must be more to it. Edsel had never dressed up like this to come over for dinner. He usually just washed up a little, and stayed in his work clothes.

"This time you won't have to wipe down the chair after I leave."

"I don't do that."

"Yes, you do. I saw you the other night. And I'm sorry. I shouldn't come in here when I'm all greasy."

"It's okay. I don't mind."

"Well, are you hungry?"

"I'm starving. And my feet are killing me."

"Good time for a break then."

She turned to one of her waitresses. "Shelly? We're gonna take Table Twelve."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"And we'll have iced tea."

"I'll bring it right over."

Good, thought Edsel. Table Twelve was in the back corner.

He and Angie walked to their table, and sat down.

After a few moments of listening to the band Edsel said, "The *Fiddlers* sure sound good tonight."

"Yep," said Angie. "They always do."

Shelly delivered their iced teas, and took their order.

Angie's cell phone rang. When she saw who was calling, she said, "Not again."

"What's the matter?"

"It's Clifford. He's started up again."

"He just can't let you go, can he?"

"I'm sorry. I'll be right back." She got up and walked to her office.

Edsel sat at the table, wondering if Angie would ever get back together with her ex, Clifford Silverstern. His family had money--tons of the stuff. They owned a bank, a jewelry store, a funeral home, a hotel, and a fancy Italian restaurant.

Edsel couldn't believe it when Angie started dating him years ago. He knew she wouldn't marry him for money. She must have truly been in love with the putz. The day of the wedding was the lowest point in Edsel's life. For a moment, he had toyed with the idea of jumping off the Rainbow Bridge.

After a year or so, Angie began to see Clifford for who he really was. But she was too stubborn to give up on the marriage. She toughed it out for another fifteen years. Near the end, even her father, Herman, was begging her to get out. He had come to hate Clifford for making his daughter miserable.

Unfortunately, Herman Maberly hated Edsel just as much as he hated Clifford. If the old man were to walk in and see her eating dinner with Edsel, he'd probably go home and get his shotgun.

Angie walked back to the table shaking her head. "I'm sorry."

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Clifford just doesn't get it. There are plenty of women around town who'd jump at the chance to be with him. But the more I tell him I don't want him, the more determined he is to get me back."

Shelly brought their food.

"Wow, that was fast," said Edsel. "Smells good."

They listened to the band and watched couples Two-Step around the floor while they ate. Edsel decided to save the important talk until after dinner.

"How about some cherry pie for dessert? We baked them this afternoon," she said.

He smiled. "You know I can't resist your cherry pie, Angie."

"Okay. I'll go get us some."

In less than five minutes, she hurried back with the two plates. "I hope I didn't give you too much ice cream," said Angie.

"Not at all." Edsel grinned with delight. There was no dessert on earth better than Angie's cherry pie, topped with Blue Bell Homemade Vanilla ice cream.

"Oops, I forgot. I'm supposed to be helping you eat healthier. Let me just take that back in the kitchen and I'll--"

"--don't you dare," he said, guarding his plate with both hands.

She smiled. "Just kidding. It's okay to splurge every once in a while."

Edsel's mouth was already full of pie and ice cream. He mumbled in agreement.

"It's nice when we sit down together for a meal like this. We should do it more often."

"Well, you're always so busy running this place," he said. "You ought to hire somebody to help you manage it."

"*Me?* What about *you*? If you'd hire another mechanic, you wouldn't have to work seven days a week."

"Folks don't trust anybody else to work on their cars. That's why they bring them to me. They don't want some green kid tricking around under the hood."

"I know."

They finished their desserts.

"Angie?"

"Yes?"

"I've been meaning to talk to you about something."

"What is it?"

"Well, you know that we've been friends for a long time."

"Forever."

"Yeah. And you know I like spending time with you."

"Sure. Me too."

"Well... "

There was only one couple on the dance floor, doing the Texas Two-Step. It's a dance that involves quick, precise movements with your partner, and spinning counterclockwise around the floor. Sometimes the woman hangs onto the man with her right hand by putting a couple of fingers through one of his belt loops. Usually, he's wearing blue jeans, so the belt loops are strong.

But perhaps this particular belt loop had already seen too much action. It ripped loose, causing the woman to lose her balance. Her partner tripped. Then they tripped on each other, unable to catch themselves. Finally, they fell on top of a table. The top broke off its base, and tipped downward, sending plates of food airborne. People at the nearby tables gasped.

Angie jumped up, and ran over to help. "Is everybody okay?"

The man helped his dance partner get up. "Be careful, Honey, there's gravy all over the floor."

The two women that had been sitting at the table were now standing, looking at the dinner they had just begun to eat, strewn across the dance floor.

"I'm so sorry. We'll cook you up a fresh dinner right away. I'm buying tonight. And I'll even throw in a dessert."

"Thanks, Angie. But you don't have to do that. We'll pay for our own dinner."

"No, no. I insist."

By the time she had things under control, and went back to her table, Edsel was gone.

"Shelly, I'm gonna walk over to Edsel's. I'll be back in just a few minutes."

The shop door was locked. Edsel never locked up the shop while he was inside. So, she walked around back to his house. She knocked a few times, but he didn't answer. Maybe he went for a walk, she thought.

She headed back to the restaurant, curious about what Edsel wanted to tell her. They would have time to talk tomorrow, on the way to Ralph's birthday party.

* * *

"Hey, Blondie Boobs, come give me a lick." The eighteen year-old winked at Sondra, and laughed with his buddies. He was the tallest in the group.

Sondra was leading her band toward the stage to get ready for their performance. She told them to go on without her. She would join them in a few minutes.

She strutted up to the boy, and gave him a sexy smile. "So, you want a piece of me?"

"Well, sure," he said, struggling to sustain his cockiness. "You're hot."

His buddies were clearly impressed with their fearless leader.

"Come with me," she said, as she took his hand. Then she turned back, and leaned in close to his friends, to speak confidentially. They gathered around her. "Don't worry boys--I'll try not to make him *too* sore." She led him away.

"Go, Ryan," said one of his buddies.

Sondra peeked into the girl's bathroom, and saw that it was unoccupied. She yanked him inside, and took him to a stall, pushed him in forcefully, and got in with him. Then she closed and locked the door. She could see the excitement in his eyes. And the fear.

"Let's see what you've got to offer." She ripped his shirt open, and a couple of buttons popped off. "Oh, very nice." She massaged his chest with both hands. "How does that feel?"

"Good. *Real* good."

She worked her right hand down to his crotch.

Ryan moaned. He was no longer worried about whether somebody might catch them. He wasn't worried about *anything*.

She rubbed him gently between the legs, and then held him in the palm of her hand--like a couple of big

grapes. "How's this?"

He tried to speak, but nothing decipherable came out.

"And how about this?" She clamped down hard.

He tried to push her away, but she squeezed even tighter. "Please, stop!"

"Have you learned your lesson?" If he gave the wrong answer, she would use both hands to crush him with all her might, until his hanging fruit burst wide open.

Tears ran down both cheeks. "Yes, Ma'am."

"Tell me what you've learned."

"Could you let go first?"

She loosed her grip--slightly. "Tell me what you've learned."

"Not to mess with you."

"Good. And what else?"

"Not to mess with any woman?"

"Right. No matter... "

Ryan had no idea what she wanted him to say.

She tried again. "No matter... "

"No matter how hot she is?"

"Good. And no matter how... "

"Ugly?"

She clamped down hard, and he thought he was about to pass out. He *prayed* he would pass out.

"What?" he said. "What do you want me to say?"

"Never mind." She released her grip, and pushed him down on the toilet seat.

As soon as she was gone, he stood up, and pulled down his pants to check the damage. To his amazement, everything was still intact, and he was not bleeding.

Sondra had left the stall door ajar. And Ryan was still in the process of examining himself when a girl pushed the door open, and started to walk into the stall. But when she saw him there, bent over, touching himself, she screamed and ran out of the bathroom.

That's okay, he thought. Wait until he told the guys about what he had done with the hot lead singer in the girl's bathroom. He'd be a legend--as long as his story didn't get back to Sondra. Oh, he'd still be a legend.

He'd just be dead... or castrated.

If given a choice, he'd opt for dead.

Chapter 13

When Angie had walked over to Edsel's house after the dance accident and discovered he was not at home, she had assumed he'd gone for a walk. It was not unusual to see him walking the streets after dark. She had encouraged him to get a dog so that people would be less likely to think he was up to no good. But most of the neighbors knew him, and were not the least concerned.

However, this was not a night for walking. Edsel had some serious thinking to do, and that called for a long drive. He'd checked the headlights and taillights before backing out of his attached two-car garage. It had been quite a while since he'd taken his convertible out at night. It was an orange and white 1958 Edsel Citation two-door.

He drove out of Orange via Highway 87, passing through Bridge City on his way to Port Arthur. It reminded of the many nights he'd made this trip two decades earlier. Back then, he would take 87 all the way down to Bolivar Peninsula, across the ferry to Galveston. On some parts of 'Beach Road' you could actually steer your car right onto the beach, and drive straight into the water--if you were crazy enough. Edsel would never have done that. He had been extremely depressed during that time, as Angie was about to marry Clifford Silverstern. But not enough to drown himself *or* his beautiful car.

Back in the 1980's, once Edsel had made it to Galveston he would take I-45 to Interstate 10, and then head back to Orange. The entire trip took about six hours. He wished he could follow that same route tonight. But Beach Road was now gone--or, at least a big portion of it. That road had been there since the Civil War. It had been damaged and repaired many times. But when Hurricane Jerry came through in 1989, it was the last straw. Beach Road has been closed ever since.

So, there would be no long drive along the beach listening to the waves. No relaxing ride on the Bolivar Ferry. The ferry is still there, but he would have had to take the detour to get to there. It just wasn't the same.

Instead, he planned to simply drive the triangle. The cities of Port Arthur, Beaumont, and Orange outline the area known as The Golden Triangle. He wasn't sure how many revolutions it would take.

Edsel knew Greg was right. He needed to go ahead and tell Angie how he really felt about her. When Angie's divorce had become final, he knew it was too soon to say anything. He needed to give her some time. Then, after about six months, when Angie seemed completely over the marriage and the divorce, Edsel considered bringing it up--until Clifford started calling and coming by nearly every day, trying to get her back. So, Edsel had continued to wait.

He tried not to dwell on the fact that they could have had all those years together. Going to bed with her every night. Not just for the sex. When you love someone as deeply as he loved Angie, the physical part could be fantastic. Mind-blowing. But as much as he wanted to make love to her, he also wanted to just sleep in the same bed with her. Wake up every morning with her.

Edsel loved working on cars, but he would have been lost without his daily dose of Angie. Even during the years she was married to Clifford, Edsel still got to see her a few minutes every day.

But that wasn't enough anymore. It didn't *have* to be enough--if he would just tell her he loved her. And that he wanted to marry her. He felt a chill run up his spine. He had not said it in years--even to himself. But it was true. Edsel Torkman wanted to *marry* Angie Silverstern with all his heart.

Tomorrow would be the day. He would tell her before they went to Ralph's birthday party.

"Look at them," said Billy-Eye. "They're all pushing and shoving, trying to get right up close to the stage."

"Somebody might get hurt," said Craig. "Maybe we'd better break it up."

"I don't think we could, even if we wanted to. And believe me--we don't *want* to. This is why they came."

It was 10:55 PM, and *Orange Puke* was nearly at the end of their second set. The Buttard boys had calculated that scheduling the first set at 7:00 would get the kids there early, and the second set at 10:00 would keep them hanging around. Nobody wanted to miss the final song of the night--*Orange Puke's* signature song: "Puking My Guts Out (All Over You)."

A few of the kids were wearing caps. One girl was in a raincoat. But most appeared ready and willing to bear the full brunt of the inevitable vomit shower. It might as well have been *real* vomit as far as many mothers were concerned. Those orange stains would never come out in the wash.

"I know how they do it," yelled a 14-year-old boy into his friend's ear.

"How?"

"Remember last night when they tilted their heads back?"

"Yeah."

"That's when they did it. That's when they poured the stuff in their mouths."

"No. We would have seen that."

"I'm telling you. Watch them. They must have a bottle hidden under their coats."

"I don't think so."

The song was almost over. The three guitarists stepped to the edge of the stage, as they swung their guitars to their backs.

"Okay. Watch," shouted the boy. "Here they go."

The three women tilted their heads back. Then they hurled on top of the crowd. Girls screamed. Boys yelled. Everyone scattered.

"Yuk," said one of the girls.

"Isn't it cool?" Her friend wiped the orange goo off her own face.

"This place is a mess," said Billy-Eye. "Worse than last night. We've got coke and popcorn and candy wrappers all over the floor. And now we've got puke." He looked around. "And I think that over there is *real* puke."

"But it's worth it. Right?" Craig smiled proudly.

"I hope so," said Billy-Eye.

"Definitely," said Lenny as he walked up. We're nearly out of candy. And we had a ton of it. We'll have to

make a run to Sam's tomorrow, so we'll have some for tomorrow night."

"How about the video games?" said Billy-Eye.

"I don't how much we've taken in, but the kids have been playing them non-stop. So, I think we're good," said Lenny.

"I just hope this vomit gimmick doesn't wear off too soon," said Billy-Eye. "When the kids get tired the band throwing up on them we'll find out if they actually like their *music*."

* * *

Greg was sitting on their hotel room bed in his underwear when Cynthia emerged from the bathroom. He assumed she would slither out into the dimly lit room wearing her most skimpy lingerie. So, he was surprised to see her in one of his Oxford dress shirts.

"Let's play a little game," she said.

"Okay." The way she looked, he would have done anything she asked. Even if it was something crazy, like: walk down to the truck stop and get me the shoe of a truck driver. Hopefully it wouldn't be that. But Greg could already picture the big guy chasing him down the hotel hallway wearing only one shoe.

"You can be the student, and I'll be the teacher."

"Yes, Ma'am." It sounded much easier than going after that shoe.

"Greg, you've been a very bad boy." She pulled a chair away from the table and slid it to a corner of the room. "So, you must be punished."

"I understand, Miss Cynthia."

"You're going to have to sit here in the corner for a while."

"For how long, Miss Cynthia?"

"I'll let you know when your time is up. Now come over here."

Greg walked to the chair and sat down. "I really like your shirt, Miss Cynthia."

"Thanks. Would you like to see it up close?"

"Yes, Ma'ma. Very much."

Cynthia sat down on Greg's lap, facing him. "It's a nice fabric isn't it?"

"I *think* so. It's a little hard to see in here."

"Yes. It is kinda dark. Tell me if you can see this." She unbuttoned the shirt and opened it.

"Oh, Miss Cynthia. I *really* like *this* fabric." Greg kissed her on the neck and began to work his way downward.

Then they heard another woman's voice. It almost sounded like she was in the room with them. They suddenly realized they were close to the door that opened into the adjoining room.

It was a young woman voice, speaking in perfect monotone. "Oh, Baby, you're so good. Keep going. Yeah, Baby. That's right."

"Would you buy that?" whispered Cynthia.

"She needs acting lessons," said Greg.

They both wanted to laugh out loud, but they knew they'd be heard, so they fought it. Then the man groaned loudly, followed by dead silence.

"I guess *he* bought it," said Cynthia.

They started snickering and nearly fell off the chair.

"Let's get away from this door," whispered Greg.

They ran to the bed and jumped in. It would be their best night of lovemaking since the honeymoon.

And it wouldn't be until the next morning that they would wonder if anyone had heard *them*.

Chapter 14

Any time Herman Mayberly walked into the restaurant, the wait staff scattered. At 76, Herman was like an older John Wayne--but without the charm. Occasionally patrons would hear him in the kitchen clanging pots and pans, yelling at the top of his voice over something that wasn't cooked according to his standards. He was a bull to work for.

It was wonder he'd ever been able to hold onto staff people. Mostly they stayed around because of Angie. She always had a knack for making people feel good about themselves--in spite of their lousy situation.

Angie liked to think that her father had once been a kind, caring man. But that was before she was born. She attributed his perpetual grouchiness to the loss of his 38-year-old wife while giving birth to their only child. He often said he could see Wanda every time he looked at Angie. And instead of bringing a smile to his face, it seemed to make him angry.

"Where's Angie?" he barked at a young waitresses.

"I think she's in her office."

Her office. Until a year ago, it had always been *his* office. He had begged Angie to divorce Clifford, promising her full control of the restaurant if she did. It was time for him to retire anyway. And when his daughter finally filed for divorce, Herman begrudgingly kept his promise. At least he *tried* to--unless he saw something that wasn't being done right.

"A couple of your waitresses look like teenagers."

Angie looked up from her computer. "They *are* teenagers, Dad."

"Well, that's too young. You need mature women who know how to treat your customers--not some wise-cracking kids. In all my days of running this place I never hired any teenagers."

"Yes, you did."

"What? I did not. Never."

"You hired one. Me. I started working here when I was twelve."

"I didn't *hire* you. You worked for free."

"You upped my allowance."

"Okay, yeah. But that's different."

"So, where you have been? I haven't seen or heard from you in a few days."

"I told you where I was going. Don't you ever listen? Me and Bob spent a couple of days up at Sam Rayburn."

"Oh. Well, yeah, you told me he *invited* you. But I didn't think you would go."

"Well, I figured you don't need me here anymore, so I might as well try to find something to keep me busy."

"Yeah, but fishing? I thought you hated fishing."

"I thought so too. But with Bob it's kinda fun."

"Great, Dad. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"So, what's going on around here? Anything new?"

"No. Not really. We had a little accident on the dance floor last night, but nobody got hurt."

"Well, why are you dressed up like that?"

"Uh... I'm going to a party."

"On Sunday afternoon? What is it--a birthday party?"

"Yeah."

"Anybody I know?"

"Ralph Tenorly. He's 75."

"Ralph Tenorly? That old codger?"

"Old codger? Dad, you're a year older than him."

"You don't even know him, do you?"

"Not really."

"Then why are you... " Suddenly it hit him. "Does this have anything to do with that grease monkey across the street?"

"Dad... "

"You're going to the party with him, aren't you?"

"Yes. Now just settle down."

"I will *not* settle down! You know how much I hate that good-for-nothing bum!"

"Come on, Dad--you don't really *hate* Edsel."

"Yes, I do--and you know why!"

"Daddy, that was years ago. Can't you just finally forgive him?"

"No. I can't and I won't!" He stormed out of her office.

Angie checked the wall clock: 1:47 PM. She would finish up the payroll checks, and then walk over to see about Edsel. He was probably still working. If she didn't make him to stop, take a shower and get dressed, they would be late for the party.

* * *

Edsel was lying on the creeper under Mr. Jennings' 1977 Coupe DeVille. He wasn't sure how many times he'd made the loop around the Golden Triangle last night. He should have been sleepy. But there was no way he could accidentally doze off. Not today. His mind raced with thoughts of how he would tell Angie that he still loved her--that he had never stopped loving her.

He imagined how she might react. There were several possibilities. But only one of them would be the *correct* reaction. If there was any hesitation on her part... or even the slightest hint of pity in her eyes, it was over. His dreams of happiness would never come true. But why dwell on the negative? He must tell her with confidence. If his whole world was destined to fall apart, so be it.

He heard somebody open the shop door and walk in. Had to be Angie. Probably checking to make sure he was getting ready for the party. "I know what you're gonna say. I should have already been in the shower by now. But don't worry. I'm about to quit." He quickly finished tightening the last bolt on the oil pan. "Angie?"

She didn't answer.

* * *

"Looks like business is starting to slow down," said Cindy Banya, sitting in a booth at *The Biscuit* with Craig Buttard.

"Yeah, most of the church people come in between 11:30 and 1:00. By mid-afternoon it's pretty much dead."

"What's going on in the back room?" Cindy watched as a waitress walked by carrying a large electric coffee urn.

"Somebody must be having a meeting or a party."

"I see."

A waitress brought their coffee and dessert. "Two coffees and two strawberry biscuit cakes."

"Surprised?" said Craig.

"Strawberry *biscuit* cakes?" Cindy studied the dessert. It was one *Buttard Biscuit*, covered with fresh strawberries and whipped cream with a cherry on top. "I should have known it would have a biscuit in it."

"Taste it."

She frowned at him, and then picked up her spoon and sampled the dessert. "Not bad, actually."

"See. I knew you'd like it."

She took another bite. "Yeah, I hate to admit it--but you were right. It's delicious."

"Good. And now that you know you can trust my judgment, I've got something else for you to try. And it's also delicious."

She gave him a dirty look. "Funny. Is that all you think about?"

"Well... yeah, when I'm around *you*. You *get* to me. You're just so doggone sexy."

Cindy almost fell for it, but then caught herself. "Wonder how many times you've used *that* line. How many times, Craig?"

He grinned slyly. "Oh, I don't know... maybe a few hundred."

She lowered her voice. "You are such a tramp."

"Well, I've been called a lot of things, but--a tramp? Maybe in Russia that makes sense, but in the U. S. that word is only used for women--not men."

"It has nothing to do with Russia or America. You'd be a tramp in *any* country."

Craig lost his grin. "Hey."

"So, you don't consider yourself a tramp?"

"No, of course not."

"Even though you've slept with dozens of women?"

"Well... "

"But you want to turn *me* into a tramp. Right?"

"No, no. You've got it all wrong."

"Really? Explain."

Craig liked Cindy more than any woman he'd met in a long time, but he knew he was on the verge of killing his chances with her. He reached across the table and held her hand. "Look, Cindy. I'm sorry. Sometimes I try too hard to impress people. I'm not really like this. It's just an act."

Cindy looked into his eyes. She wanted to believe him.

* * *

"Do you really think Norma needs our help? I hate to get there early when only she and my dad are there." Greg pulled into the parking lot of *The Buttard Biscuit Restaurant*.

"Why?" said Cynthia. "Because you're afraid you'll have to talk to your dad? You *need* to talk to him. There's got to be a way for the two of you to get past this bitterness. And it's sure not going to get any better unless you try."

They walked into the restaurant and headed for the meeting room, passing Cindy and Craig's booth along the way. Greg recognized Billy-Eye's older son. He wondered if the attractive woman in the booth with him knew about his reputation.

"Hello. Happy Birthday, Mr. Tenorly," said Cynthia as she rushed over to Ralph and gave him an unexpected hug.

"Thanks."

Norma went to Greg and hugged him. "I'm glad y'all came early."

"We're here to help," said Cynthia. "What can we do?"

A waitress walked into the room. "Are one of you Greg Tenorly?"

"Yes. I'm Greg."

"There's a call for you."

He followed her to the cashier's counter. She handed him the phone.

"Hello? This is Greg Tenorly."

"Greg... "

Her voice was so shaky that he didn't recognize it at first.

"... there's been a terrible accident."

Then he realized it was Angie Silverstern.

"Edsel is in the emergency room."

Chapter 15

Greg and Cynthia rushed into the Emergency Room waiting area.

Angie peeked through the Emergency Room doors and spotted them. "Greg?" She stepped through the door and walked toward them.

"Hey, Angie," said Greg. "How's Edsel doing?"

"It's not as bad it first looked. I thought he'd gone into a coma."

"What happened?"

"He was working under a car and the jack gave way. The paramedics figured the oil pan must have hit him right in the chest when the car fell."

"So, what's his condition?"

"He's got several fractured ribs."

"Ouch. Those are painful."

"Yeah. The doctor says he probably passed out from the pain. And he couldn't move. He was pinned under the car."

"Did he ever wake up?" said Cynthia.

"Yes, he did. But he was in such pain that they immediately gave him a shot of Morphine. They're going to set up the automatic intravenous injections for him."

"What do they do for fractures ribs?" said Greg. "Surgery?"

"No," said Angie. "They just let them heal on their own. But it can take up to two months. And in the meantime all they do is treat the pain. The doctor doesn't think there are any internal injuries, but he wants to keep Edsel in the hospital for a couple of days so they can watch him--just in case."

"Did you get to talk to him?" said Greg.

"No. But he did see me, I think."

"How does the doctor know his ribs are fractured?" said Cynthia.

"He pushed down on Edsel's chest in several spots. Even I could tell when he found one. I've never heard Edsel scream like that before. It gave me the creeps."

"Any chance we could see him?" said Greg.

"I'm sure you can--once they get him moved to a room."

"I'm sorry--I'm being rude," said Greg. "Angie, this is my wife, Cynthia."

The two exchanged greetings.

"Why don't we go and grab a cup of coffee while we're waiting," said Greg.

On their way to the cafeteria, Greg called Norma to give her a status report on Edsel. Ralph had not wanted to cancel his party since Norma had already paid for the meeting room, and would not be eligible for a refund.

* * *

E. Z. Bender took the elevator to the fourth floor, and walked up to the nurses' station. "Could you please give me the room number for Edsel Torkman? They told me he was being moved to this floor."

The nurse checked her computer. "They haven't brought him up yet, but he'll be going into Room 419."

"Okay. Thank you." She walked down the hallway, searching for his room. Then she saw two orderlies pushing a bed through a doorway. When she got closer she saw the 419 numbering on the wall, next to the door. She watched as they transferred him into the room bed. He appeared to be out cold.

The orderlies finished, and walked out of the room. E. Z. walked in and stood beside his bed. She studied the bag hanging at the head of his bed, wondering what the clear fluid was. Probably just saline, she thought.

There was also an electronic box on a stand with a tube coming out of it that led to Edsel's IV. The box made a noise, and she guessed it was pumping pain medicine into his body. But what if he got too much of the stuff? Was there any way to override the device and force an overdose?

A nurse walked into the room. "How's he doing?"

"Okay, I guess. I don't know."

The nurse began to check out her new patient. "So, is this your dad?"

There was no response.

The nurse turned around. E. Z. was gone.

Greg held the elevator door open while Angie and Cynthia walked out onto the fourth floor. Then he continued to hold it until the young woman walked in.

When they reached Room 419, the nurse was coming out. "You just missed your daughter."

"What?" said Angie, confused.

"She just left. I'm surprised you didn't pass her in the hallway."

"What made you think she was my daughter?"

"Are you kidding?" The nurse smiled. "She looks just like you."

Angie was stunned.

"Except for her long black hair," said the nurse, walking away.

Angie seemed to be in another world.

Cynthia turned to Greg and whispered, "I didn't know she had any kids."

"She doesn't."

Finally Angie spoke. "I'm just trying to think who it could have been. I don't have any friends or employees with long black hair."

"Why don't we go in and sit down," said Cynthia. She led them to the couch and chair.

"I hate to ask the question," said Greg, "but, is it possible that what happened to Uncle Ed was *not* an accident?"

"What do you mean?" said Angie.

"The jack that was holding up the car--it was one of those quick-release jacks, right?"

"You don't honestly think somebody deliberately tried to hurt Edsel, do you?" said Angie.

"Maybe," said Greg.

"Does he have any enemies?" said Cynthia.

"No. Everybody loves Edsel. Well, I guess that's not true. But I can't think of anyone who would want to *hurt* him." Just as the last word left her lips, she remembered the argument with her father earlier in the day, and how he had stormed out of the restaurant after discovering Angie was going to the birthday party with Edsel. That had happened only a short time before she found Edsel. Her dad hated him--there was no question about that. But surely he wouldn't try to *kill* him.

Then she remembered the confrontation between Edsel and the two band members. One of them had long black hair! "I think I know who the woman was."

"The one the nurse was talking about?" said Cynthia.

"Yes. She and another woman came to the restaurant Saturday trying to force me to hire their group. They're in that all-girl band that plays at Billy-Eye's new place out on Highway 87. But why would she come here to Edsel's room?"

"To finish off the job?" said Greg.

Angie panicked. She jumped up to check on Edsel. "Do you think she did anything to him?"

"No," said Cynthia, glaring at her husband. "The nurse was here. She wouldn't have had a chance to do anything. Besides, he looks fine."

"Do you know if that band is playing tonight?" said Greg.

"I think so. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights I believe."

Cynthia knew what Greg was thinking. She would be there with him to make sure he didn't get himself into trouble. She turned to Greg. "Well, since he's doing okay, maybe we should try to catch the end of your dad's birthday party."

"But I don't want to go off and leave Angie here alone."

"It's okay. I'm fine. Y'all go on."

"Well, okay," said Greg. He walked over to Edsel's bed. "Fly the rain, Uncle Ed."

"Do you know what it means?" said Angie.

"No. Do you?"

She picked up her purse and took out her wallet. "He gave me this--years ago. It's a poem he wrote during his senior year. They had to read them in front of the class. He told me his classmates were laughing out loud by the time he got to the end of it. But I think it's beautiful." She handed the small laminated card to Greg.

He and Cynthia read it silently.

I dreamed I was a speck of dust

In a beautiful puffy cloud;

A warm and comfy home forever,

High above the ground.

But then the darkness swallowed the light;

The sky began to groan.

And my mother ship spit me out

On a raindrop of my own.

But I was not alone in flight;

I saw others on their rain.

One hit a bird, died instantly;

One collided with a plane.

Right then and there I made up my mind,

I wouldn't let life just happen to me.

I took control, I fought the good fight.

Nobody can take that away from me.

So, you can sit back and ride your raindrop

To wherever it may fall.

Or saddle up like me and Fly the Rain,

Have no regrets at all.

* * *

"He's gonna be okay," said E. Z.

Sondra closed her car door and locked it. "Who?"

"Edsel. The mechanic."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I passed you on the road today, and decided to turn around and follow you."

Sondra got in her face. "Why would you do that?"

"Just curious."

"Well, just remember the old saying, Honey: *curiosity killed the cat.*"

E. Z. just stared at her.

"So, stay out of my business." Sondra walked off, toward the entrance of Billy-Eye's.

Chapter 16

By the time Greg and Cynthia made it back to *The Biscuit*, Norma was nearly finished bagging up all the presents.

"I'm sorry we missed your party," said Greg.

"Yeah, well I figured you'd find some way to weasel out of it," said Ralph.

"Ralph! They had to check on Edsel," said Norma. "How's he doing?"

"Pretty well--considering," said Greg.

"He's going to be in a lot of pain for a few weeks," said Cynthia.

"So, he won't be able to work for a while," said Norma.

"Knowing Uncle Ed, this is probably the only way he would ever take some time off," said Greg. "Too bad he can't *enjoy* it."

"What does he need time off for?" said Ralph. "All he cares about is tinkering around with those old cars. It's his whole life."

Greg didn't appreciate his dad's attitude toward Edsel. But he had a point. Edsel probably loved working on cars as much as Greg enjoyed teaching music and directing choirs.

He thought about the satisfaction of hearing a student finally play a piece with accuracy and feeling. And how he could be moved to tears by a beautiful choral performance. Maybe that was how Uncle Ed felt when he got an engine tuned up just right. The purr of a well-tuned engine might be the Mormon Tabernacle Choir to *his* ears.

"Uncle Ed's a great guy," said Greg.

"Yeah, yeah, I know--he's *wonderful*," said Ralph.

"Well, you're a pretty good guy yourself." Greg didn't know where *that* came from.

Ralph looked surprised, then irritated. "Yeah, right."

Cynthia gave Greg a look that said 'keep going--you're on the right track.'

"No, I mean it," said Greg. "I didn't appreciate it at the time, but you worked really hard to provide for our family. I know you were disappointed when I quit my job at the shipyard after only two weeks. I hated that place. But then I thought about how you worked out there every day for over thirty years. I don't know how you did it."

"It wasn't that bad," said Ralph.

"Well, anyway, I just wanted to thank you for that," said Greg.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, Cynthia spoke up. "So, did everybody enjoy the party?"

"Oh, yes, definitely," said Norma. "Although, I had to help Ralph blow out the candles."

"I could have done it," growled Ralph. "You didn't give me much of a chance."

"I knew it was going to take a lot of breath to do it," she said.

"Honey, you're always saying I'm full of hot air," said Ralph, "and then when I had the chance to prove it, you wouldn't let me. That's just like you, though--always butting in."

"Well, sure," said Norma, "you probably could have done it yourself... but there were just so many candles."

"Alright, Miss Smartie-pants."

"I had to go to three different stores to get all those candles." Norma snickered.

"I'm gonna get *your* candles," said Ralph grabbing for her arm, and barely missing it as she jumped back.

Greg couldn't believe it. Ralph had *nearly* smiled. He was glad to see that his dad was finally happy. Maybe he'd been happy for a long time. Greg might *know* if he had bothered to stay in touch.

* * *

"Angie?"

She dropped her magazine on the floor and jumped up from the chair. "Hi, Edsel. How do you feel?"

"Like a Cadillac fell on my chest."

She laughed.

Edsel started to laugh--then he felt a twinge in his chest. He winched and grabbed his ribcage, which only served to exacerbate the pain.

"That must really hurt," she said.

"You ain't trickin'."

Trick was Edsel's standard curse word substitute. She had not heard it in a while. "But the doctor says you're going to be fine. He said it would take a few weeks for the pain to completely go away."

"Thanks for saving my life."

"You're welcome. I'm just glad I happened to walk over to the shop when I did."

"You must have gotten there right after. You came over to make sure I was getting dressed for the party, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I'm sorry I made us miss it. What about Greg? Did he and Cynthia go?"

"They tried to catch the end of it. They were up here for quite a while."

"So, I made them miss it too. I really feel bad about that. I was hoping it would be a chance for Greg and Ralph to get some things off their chests."

"I know. But it wasn't *your* fault. It was an accident."

Edsel had a odd look on his face.

"Edsel?"

"No, it wasn't an accident. Somebody released the jack on purpose."

"Oh, no."

"Yeah. I heard them walk in, but at first I thought it was you. So, I called out, but nobody answered. I was about to roll out from under the car when it suddenly fell on top of me. The oil pan slammed right into my chest. And those '77 Coupe De Ville's weigh over 4,000 pounds. The pain was excruciating. And I could barely breathe. Then I guess I just passed out."

"When I found you there--I thought you were dead." A tear dripped down her face. "Then, when I saw that you were still alive, I was afraid you had gone into a coma."

"A coma? Nah, that's just in the movies." Edsel hadn't seen Angie cry in a long time. And she never cried because of *him*--it was always because of Clifford. "I didn't mean to make you sad."

"What? You didn't make me sad. I'm happy." Tears ran down both checks. "Can't you see?" She smiled.

Maybe this was the right time to tell her how he felt about her.

"But we've got to figure out who did this to you," she said.

"How are we going to do that? I didn't see them."

"You couldn't even see their legs or their feet?"

"I *could* have. I didn't even look, because I really thought it was you. Even when you didn't answer I figured you were just trying to get me to come out from under the car."

"I think I might know who did it," she said.

"Who?"

"Remember those two women from that band--the ones who were trying to get me to hire them to play at the restaurant?"

"The ones I ran off?"

"Yes. One of them was here earlier. Greg and Cynthia and I had gone for coffee while we were waiting for you to be moved to your room. And when we got here the nurse told us a young woman with long black hair had been standing beside your bed when she walked in. Then we realized that we had just passed that woman at the elevator."

"Really? The tall blonde did look kinda mean. But the short black-haired woman seemed sort of innocent." He

paused. "So, you really think she's the one who dropped the car on me? And then came here to--"

--I don't know. But I'm not going to be comfortable leaving you alone until whoever did this is caught."

Angie took his hand in hers.

There will never be a better time, thought Edsel. "Angie? I need to tell you something."

"Okay. Is this the same something you were about to tell me last night after dinner?"

"Yes. And I'm just gonna say it."

Angie was not about to interrupt.

"I love you, Angie."

"I know, Edsel. I love you too." She reached down and gently brushed his hair back with her hand. "I've always loved you."

"No. You don't understand. Not *that* kind of love. Not a best-friends kind of love. Angie, I want to take you in my arms and kiss you--on the lips. I want to take off all your clothes and make love to you. I want to go to bed with you every night and wake up with you every morning. And I want to do it every day for the rest of my life."

Angie's tears were beginning to flow freely again.

He went on. "But if you run out of here screaming at the top of your lungs, I'll understand. I just had to finally say it."

She sniffled. "Oh, Edsel. I love you too--and not just as friends. I *want* you to take my clothes off and make love to me. I *want* to be in your bed every night."

"Oh, God, Angie." He took her hands in his.

"I listened to my dad. I did whatever he wanted me to do because I knew I was all he had. And it was my fault that my mother died."

"That's not true, Angie."

"Yes, it is. I took his wife away from him the day I was born. So, it was my job to make sure he was happy."

"It wasn't your fault that your mother died."

"I know that *now*. But when I was a teenager it was different. I couldn't stand to disappoint him. He was so upset with me when he found out I had been secretly dating you."

"I know--I was such an ogre."

"No, you weren't. Not at all. But you were 26, and I was only 18."

"Well, he didn't have to break us up *forever*. I would have waited for you." He looked into her beautiful, caring eyes. "What am I saying? I *did* wait for you."

"Oh, Edsel." Not today, but soon, Angie would have to tell Edsel her long-held secret. And she knew that after he'd heard the story, he might not want her in his life at all--even as a friend.

Chapter 17

Greg had talked to a waitress at *The Biscuit* and found out that the house band at Billy-Eye's, *Orange Puke*, would be performing two one-hour sets: one at 7:00, the other at 10:00. He and Cynthia decided to go back to their hotel and relax for a while and then go out for nice dinner. Then they would go to Billy-Eye's between sets, and have a talk with the band member who had visited Edsel's hospital room. They had agreed to spend another night in Orange and take Monday off from their jobs.

"Gee, they need a bigger parking lot," said Greg.

"There's a car pulling out," said Cynthia.

Greg drove up to the open slot, parked the car, and killed the engine.

"What are going to say to her?" said Cynthia. "You're not gonna just come right out and ask her if she tried to kill Edsel, are you?"

"No. I'll be more subtle than that."

"Maybe *I* should talk to her."

"Why don't we just play it by ear," said Greg.

Greg paid the admission charge at the door, and the young female employee handed each of them a soft drink cup.

"You get free drinks all night, as long as you keep your cup." She had repeated that phrase hundreds of times over the past three nights.

Greg and Cynthia quickly realized that they were the only adults in the building--other than the Buttards and the band.

"There they are," said Greg, pointing.

The band members were sitting at a long table signing autographs.

"Look at that line," said Cynthia. "This is going to take a while."

Greg noticed the arcade room and pointed it out to Cynthia. "Hey, how about a game of Galaga?"

"Sure. But then I want to play Ms. Pac Man."

"It's a deal--if they even have those old games."

They did--and they only cost a quarter.

Every so often between games Greg would go out to check the line. At 9:40, the last kid got his coke cup signed and the band members began to get up from their chairs.

"Excuse me," said Greg.

E. Z. turned to face him. Craig had made name tags for each of the women to wear while they were signing autographs. Greg noted the name on her tag: E. Z. Bender.

"Hi, E. Z." said Greg. "I'm Greg Tenorly and this is my wife, Cynthia."

E. Z. nodded.

"We passed you in the hallway at the hospital this afternoon, and we were just wondering--"

Sondra overheard the conversation and quickly stepped in. "--I'm afraid this will have to wait. We're back on stage in less than twenty minutes and we need that much time to talk about a few things."

"Like what?" said Boomer.

Sondra gave her a dirty look. "Like why your D string was flat all the way through the last song."

"What? No, it wasn't."

"Let's go--now!" Sondra grabbed E. Z. by the arm and pulled her away from Greg and Cynthia.

"That was interesting," said Cynthia.

"What?"

"Sondra didn't want E. Z. talking to us. I wonder why?"

"I'll bet she was the other woman Angie was telling us about. The two of them had a run-in with Edsel in Angie's office. We need to talk to both of them. But we'll have to wait. How about another game of--"

--Centipede. Let's switch to Centipede."

"Okay."

"You know, this place is for kids--not adults."

Greg and Cynthia turned around.

"Hi. I'm Craig Buttard."

Greg introduced himself and Cynthia and they shook hands.

"We're from out of town," said Greg. "But I grew up here in Orange. And this afternoon we were over at *The Biscuit* and we heard about this place. The waitress told us you've got a talented and unusual band. And I'm a music guy. I teach private lessons and directed a church choir. So, we just thought it would be fun to drop in and see what all the fuss is about."

Craig smiled. "Well, that's fine. No problem. It's just that we don't like to have a lot of adults milling around in here. It makes the kids uncomfortable."

Cynthia wondered what these kids were doing that they didn't want their parents to see. Then she noticed a young teen couple standing in the middle of the dance floor trying their best to lick each others' tonsils.

"Where did you find this band?" said Greg.

"They're brand new. They formed the band just this week--to get this job. One of the things we wanted was a band with a local-sounding name. *Orange Puke* was not exactly what we had in mind. But the kids love them. Have you heard about their... gimmick?"

"No. What gimmick?" said Greg.

Craig grinned broadly. "I'll just let it be a surprise. Don't miss the last song." He walked away.

"What do you suppose they do?" said Greg. "Pull a rabbit out of a hat?"

"Look at that," said Cynthia. The young couple was still in lip-lock.

"Better here than in the back seat of a car I guess."

"What are you talking about? That boy's not old enough to drive."

He took a second look. "Yeah, you're right."

"I think we need to follow that girl home and tell her mother what she's been doing up here."

"Okay, settle down. We've got to stay focused. One or both of those women in the band tried to kill Edsel."

"Maybe we should just call the police and tell them what we know. Let them handle it, Sweetie."

"But that's the problem. We don't really know anything. If we can just talk to them, maybe they'll let something slip."

"Sondra isn't going to let us talk to E. Z.," said Cynthia.

"Then we'll divide and conquer. You take Sondra and I'll take E. Z."

"How about if you take Sondra and I take E. Z.?"

"Okay. I don't care. We'll stay back here in the shadows, and maybe they'll think we left. Then we'll try to catch them off guard."

Greg and Cynthia forgot all about the arcade. They refilled their coke cups and waited for *Orange Puke* to play.

It was nearly 11:00 PM when the band started playing "Puking My Guts Out (All Over You)."

"This must be the last song--the one with the gimmick," said Greg.

"Why do you say that?" said Cynthia.

"Look at how the kids are crowding the stage. Everybody's trying to get as close as possible."

"What do think is going to happen?"

Greg shrugged.

At the end of the song, the three guitarists slung their guitars to their backs and stepped to the edge of the stage. They tilted their heads back in unison and then jerked them back down. The girls and even some of the boys screamed. The three women barfed all over the crowd.

Greg and Cynthia were alarmed and confused.

The women spewed a steady, powerful stream of slimy orange goo. The crowd of kids quickly dispersed. Then they started laughing wildly and shouting "Orange Puke!" "Orange Puke!" "Orange Puke!"

The drummer stood. Then all four band members took a long slow bow.

The crowd whistled and cheered and the women took another bow.

Cynthia saw a girl licking her arm--as though it were an orange Popsicle. A boy tried to steal a lick, but she swatted him on the head and pushed him away.

"This is crazy," said Greg.

"You never know what kids will go for," said Cynthia.

"Let's just stay back for a while. Hopefully at some point E. Z. and Sondra will separate. Then we'll strike."

After a few minutes, Sondra walked by, heading for the exit. She was alone.

"I'll catch her in the parking lot," said Greg.

"Okay. I'll stay in here and talk to E. Z."

Greg followed Sondra at a distance. Just before she reached her car, Boomer Hertz ran past him and caught Sondra unlocking the door.

The bass player must have seen Cynthia talking to E. Z., thought Greg. She's going to tip her off.

"Hey, Sondra, would you mind giving me a ride?" said Boomer.

"How'd you get here?" said Sondra with a scowl.

"I caught a ride with Cindy. But she's got a date with Craig tonight. Come on--Butterfly Inn is on your way home."

"Oh, alright. Get in," said Sondra.

As they drove out of the parking lot, Boomer said, "This is great--being back together again."

"Yeah," said Sondra.

"I'm so glad you asked me to be in your band," She put her hand on top of Sondra's thigh.

Sondra snatched Boomer's hand off her leg. "We're in a band together. That's all. And I'm just giving you a ride home. We've been through all this before. I thought you understood."

"Sure. I do."

Sondra hoped she hadn't made a big mistake. But she had been desperate for a good bass player. Without Boomer, *Orange Puke* would not exist.

Sondra drove up in front of Boomer's motel room door. "Well, see you tomorrow."

"Come in for just a minute, Sondra. I want to show you something."

"No, I'm tired. Whatever it is, I'll see it later."

"Awe, come on. It's a cool new bass I'm thinking about buying. It'll just take a second."

Sondra hesitated. "Okay. I'll come in for just a second. That's all."

"Great." Boomer smiled as they got out of the car. She unlocked the door and led Sondra into her room.

A few seconds later, Greg drove by and spotted Sondra's car. He made a U-turn and went back up to the front of the parking lot and found a spot between two U-haul trucks. He backed in carefully. He would wait there until Sondra drove by. Then he would follow her.

Greg turned off the engine and pulled his cell phone out of his pocket to give Cynthia a call. It was dead. He thought about going into the motel lobby to make the call. But then he might miss Sondra.

If only he'd known what was to come, he would have left Butterfly Inn right then. He would have jammed the accelerator to the floorboard, sideswiping cars on the way out of the parking lot, burning all the rubber off his tires, blowing out the engine--whatever it took to get him far away from Sondra Crench.

If only he'd known what was to come.

Chapter 18

Cynthia decided to wait until E. Z. had finished her conversation with Cindy Banya before approaching her. Craig Buttard walked up behind Cindy and put his arm around her. Almost immediately the couple said their goodbyes to E. Z. and walked away.

"Could we please talk now?"

E. Z. looked around to make sure Sondra was really gone. "I guess."

"We were just wondering why you went to visit Edsel Torkman in the hospital," said Cynthia.

"Who?"

"The nurse told us. She saw you there in his room."

E. Z. hesitated.

"We're thinking that what happened to Edsel was not an accident. And that you know something about it."

"I wasn't me."

"Then why did you go to his hospital room?"

E. Z. looked down. "I just wanted to make sure he was okay."

"How did you even know he was in the hospital?"

"Well, I... heard somebody talking about the accident."

"Who?"

"Cindy, I think. Maybe Craig told her. I don't want to answer any more questions."

"Did Sondra have anything to do with this?"

E. Z.'s eyes darted away.

"Is she the one who did it?"

"I don't know. I can't say... for sure."

"But you *think* it was her."

"Maybe." The she quickly added, "I shouldn't be telling you this."

"Yes, you should. We're talking about attempted murder. It looks like he's going to be okay once his ribs heal--but we can't let whoever did this get away with it. Can we?"

E. Z. considered the question for a moment. "I followed her car. She did go into his shop for a few minutes and then left. But I don't know what she did while she was in there."

* * *

"So, what do think? Should I get it?" said Boomer, as she took off her bright orange tux coat and hung it in her tiny closet. Most of her clothes were still in suitcases. In a cheap motel like Butterfly Inn you were lucky if you got a closet big enough to hang three or four items.

"Sure." Sondra was sitting on the bed, reading the detailed specifications for the bass guitar Boomer was interested in buying. "You've got this kind of money to spend?"

"Well, no--not yet. But now that I have a paying gig I can save up for it."

"Don't you want to get your own place first?"

"I really want that bass," said Boomer. "An apartment can wait."

"It's your money," said Sondra, handing Boomer the catalog as she stood up. "I gotta go." She walked toward the door.

Boomer followed her. "Wait. I've got to show you something else."

"Boomer..." Sondra's patience was wearing thin. She turned around, expecting to see the catalog opened at the bass amplifier page.

Boomer had removed her blouse, and was standing two feet from Sondra. "How do like this bra?"

"What are you doing?" Boomer didn't even *need* a bra. "Yeah, that's nice."

Sondra was about to turn and bolt for the door when Boomer grabbed her and pulled her tight against her body. Sondra was a strong woman, but Boomer was stronger than a lot of men. She tried to kiss Sondra, but Sondra turned her head to one side and then the other.

Sondra knew she would never win a battle of strength against her bass player. So, she gave in. She let Boomer kiss her on the lips. When Boomer forced her tongue deep into Sondra's mouth, she nearly gagged. But then she seemed to give in to the inevitable. She kissed Boomer back, as though she were kissing a man, encircling Boomer's lips with her tongue and then sliding it inside.

Boomer began get more excited while at the same time relaxing her grip.

"Let's get this bra off of you," said Sondra.

Boomer smiled and released her.

Sondra could have tried to run right then, but she knew if she failed she would not get a second chance to earn Boomer's trust. "Turn around, Honey."

Boomer turned her back to Sondra.

Before unclasping the bra, Sondra rubbed Boomer's back. "How does that feel?"

"Good, Baby. Real good," purred Boomer.

Sondra managed to get her right hand into her pocket for a brief moment, and then quickly returned it to

Boomer's back.

"You're teasing," said Boomer.

"I'm teasing myself too."

"Oh, Baby."

Sondra worked both fists up Boomer's back, and then onto her neck. The key ring was in her right hand. She extended a key, turning the pointy side to Boomer's neck. It was a new house key Val had made for her daughter, and it still had razor sharp edges. She slashed it viciously across Boomer's neck, from front to back.

Boomer jumped away from Sondra. Blood gushed out of her neck with each beat of her heart. "What did you do to me?" She tried to stop the bleeding with her hands, to no avail. She walked toward Sondra, but then stumbled and fell to the floor. "Call 9-1-1, Sondra! Please!"

"You just wouldn't listen," said Sondra, standing over her.

"I'm sorry. But please don't let me die!"

"Nobody can save you now. Goodbye, Boomer."

* * *

Greg wondered what was taking Sondra so long. He was fairly certain that there was only one way in and out of Butterfly Inn's parking lot. But what if he was mistaken? She might have already gotten away.

The two U-Haul trucks he had parked between were blocking his view of everything to his sides. He got out and walked to the front of his car to make sure Sondra was still there. He thought he saw her car, but he wasn't sure. He decided to take a closer look.

When he reached Boomer's room he confirmed that Sondra's car was still parked there. But instead of walking back to his car, he decided to listen at the door.

Suddenly the door opened and he jumped back.

"What are you doing here?" said Sondra.

"I need to talk to you."

She hesitated. "Okay. Come in."

"Why don't you just step out here for a minute?"

"No. If you want to talk then you'll have to come in here."

Maybe this was better, he thought. Sondra would probably lie. Perhaps Boomer would accidentally let something slip.

Greg stepped into the dark room, and the door closed behind him. "Could you please turn on a--"

Sondra hit him over the head with a lamp.

He crumbled to the floor.

* * *

"He's still not answering." Cynthia closed her cell phone. She and E. Z. were standing in the parking lot at Billy-Eye's. "Now I'm getting worried."

"Where would he have gone?"

"He must have followed Sondra. That's got to be it. And his phone must be dead." She was about to freak out. "Could you give me a ride?"

"Sure. Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know. Where would Sondra go?"

* * *

Greg gradually became aware of a very loud noise--possibly the TV. But why was it turned up so loud? And why was he having so much trouble waking up?

As his vision began to clear, he realized he head was lying on top of a woman. But it wasn't Cynthia! What in the world is going on here? I hope I'm still dreaming, he thought.

When he raised his head he saw the blood. It was all over the woman's upper chest, shoulders, and neck. He pushed himself up with his hands. That was when he realized that he and the woman were on the floor. The blood was everywhere--all over the floor and furniture, in drips and smears and puddles. He wondered if there was any left in her body.

Then he recognized the woman--it was Boomer, the bass guitar player. She was completely naked--and so was he! How did this happen? He got out from between her legs and stood up. He was still wearing shoes and socks. His pants and underwear were at his ankles. He looked at her. Surely we didn't have sex, he thought. He pulled up his underwear and pants.

How had this happened? And why was the TV blaring? He picked up the remote and turned it off. Immediately, he heard somebody knocking on the door. Banging. He quickly wiped his hands on the bedspread to get most of the blood off and then picked up his shirt from the floor and put it on. Then he turned off all the lights and went to the door.

He latched the chain and then opened the door just a sliver. "Yes?"

The manager was screaming at the top of her four-pack-a-day hoarse voice. "Are you people crazy--cranking up the TV full-blast at midnight?"

"I'm very sorry. We must have dosed off. I think I was lying on the remote. I must have been accidentally pushing the volume button."

"I tried calling you. Why didn't you answer the phone?"

"I don't know. I guess we were really zonked-out."

"Idiots!" She walked away. "From now on--keep it down!"

Greg closed the door. Should he call the police? Or maybe call Cynthia first? She must be wondering what happen to me, he thought. He found the phone on the floor in a corner. The wires were missing.

He thought about going to the office to call the police. But how was this going to look? Boomer was naked and dead. And his DNA was all over her. They'd probably assume he'd had sex with her. Oh, Cynthia. How would he explain all this to her?

Sondra. She obviously killed Boomer. And now he was sure that she was the one who tried to kill Edsel. She might be on her way to the hospital to finish him off right now. Or she might even go after Cynthia.

If he had to take time for the police right now, Sondra might never be caught. The police interrogation could wait. And Boomer was beyond help anyway. So, he decided to go after Sondra. But how would he ever find her? He didn't know where to begin to look.

He grabbed Boomer's purse from the nightstand and dumped the contents out onto the bed. There was a wallet, a pack of gum, lipstick, a few receipts, and some tissues. One of the receipts had something written on the back. He picked it up. It was an address in Orange. Greg knew the street. It might be nothing. But it was all he had.

Oh, God, help me, he prayed as he quietly slipped out the door into the black night.

Chapter 19

When Sondra drove up to the house and parked, she could see that the living room lights were still on. It was after midnight. Val was either drunk or asleep in her recliner--or both.

Sondra unlocked the front door and walked in. "I hope you didn't wait up for *me*."

"Nope. Just watching *Leave It to Beaver*," slurred Val.

Sondra glanced at the TV screen to confirm what she thought her mother had said. She hurried to her bedroom, quickly packed her suitcase, grabbed her acoustic guitar and headed back through the living room on her way to the front door.

"June Cleaver never had problems with *her* daughter."

"Val, the Cleavers didn't have any daughters. They just had Wally and The Beaver."

"They were lucky."

Sondra didn't have time for this. She was not going to let her mother drag her into the tired old argument about what kind of a person her daughter had grown up to be. She opened the door and carried her suitcase and guitar to her car, and loaded them into the trunk. She planned to drive far away and never come back. But as she opened her car door and started to get in, she realized she would never see her mother again. And she just couldn't stand to leave without at least saying goodbye.

When Sondra opened the front door to walk back inside, she saw Val hanging up the phone.

"Who were you talking to at *this* hour?" She had already closed the door behind her when she saw the gun.

Val picked up the pistol from her lap and pointed it at her daughter. "I can't let you leave town."

"Val, put that thing down. You're drunk."

"I called 9-1-1."

"Why--to tell them you're drunk and you're playing around with a gun?"

"Don't get smart with me, Young Lady. I called to tell them you killed that boy."

"What? Are you out of your mind?" Sondra regretted that she hadn't strangled the old woman when she had the chance. "I told you I didn't kill him! You're just crazy. You think the police are gonna believe a crazy old woman?"

Val ignored her daughter's remarks. "Of course, I know it's *my* fault you turned out like this."

"Turned out like what? I don't know what you're talking about. You don't make any sense when you're drunk, Val."

"It all started that night when Buster killed your dog."

"I don't want to talk about that. Just put the gun down--please."

"Well, that's not really true. I guess it started the first time he beat you. He came home drunk--like he always did on Friday nights, and stepped on one of your toys in the living room and twisted his ankle. He was always telling you to pick up your toys. So, he got mad and yanked you out of bed and whipped you black and blue with his belt. I don't think he meant to hit you with the buckle. He probably didn't even know he was holding it by the wrong end. And to this day, every time you look in the mirror and see that scar over your right eye, it must remind you of that night."

"I never even think about that. Now, put down the gun."

"And that wasn't the last time he beat you. But then--when he killed your dog... what was that little dog's name? Muttly. Yeah, that's it."

"Stop." Sondra stepped toward Val, hoping she could snatch the pistol out of her hand.

Val raised the gun higher. "Get back!"

Sondra slowly moved back to where she had been standing.

"Yeah. You had gone off to school without feeding Muttly, and when your father came home that night you were at a friend's house. That little dog was barking like crazy by the time he got home."

"Why didn't *you* feed him?"

"I wanted you to learn a lesson. It was your job. And I knew Buster would get mad and chew you out for it."

"Thanks," said Sondra, with rancorous sarcasm.

"Yeah. I've always felt guilty about that." She paused. "But it was what happened the *next* night that ruined you for life."

"It didn't ruin me. I *wanted* him dead."

"I know you did. And I was afraid of what you would do," said Val, beginning to sober up just a bit.

"It felt so good when I saw him sprawled out on the sidewalk with his head busted open."

"But it was wrong. He was a mean drunk--but he didn't deserve to die."

"Yes, he did."

"Well, maybe he did. But now that I've seen what it did to you--it just wasn't worth it. You've never been the same."

"Hey, I learned how to stand up for myself that night. I knew from then on I would never let anybody push me around."

"It's my fault. And don't think I haven't lived with the guilt all these years."

"Why should you feel guilty? He beat you too."

Val looked surprised. "I didn't think you... "

"Of course I knew. How could I *not* know? Is that why you never screamed? Because you didn't want me to hear?"

Val stared at her in disbelief.

"I could hear you whimpering for hours afterwards--while he was snoring. The next day, he'd act like nothing happened. And so would you. But I knew."

"I taught you a lesson alright. But it was the *wrong* lesson."

"After that night everything was fine."

"How can you say that, Sondra? He *died*. And I've never been able to forgive myself. That night is what made you the way you are."

"I don't know." Sondra looked away.

"It should never have happened. I should have left him before it got so bad."

"Yes, you *should* have. But you didn't. And it's just as well. If we had left him he would have found some other woman to beat up, and maybe she would have had a young daughter too. It was better to stop him before he hurt somebody else."

"I knew you were so mad at him for killing Muttly. You cried all night. And you wouldn't come out of your room the next day. I was afraid you'd try to kill him. But by the time he got home, I thought you were already asleep. I had no idea you were watching through the window."

"Watching and *enjoying*."

"Don't say that. I didn't *want* to do it. You make it sound like it was fun."

"It *was* fun. It was the most fun I'd ever had. I saw you squatting down on the porch in the shadows. You knew he'd be too drunk to notice you there. Then, when he came walking up the stairs, right as he put his foot on the top step you jumped up and pushed him backward. And you must have pushed hard--because he fell back fast. It was the most beautiful thing in the world. I've played it over and over again in slow motion. His arms were flailing--there was nothing to grab onto. His back hit the sidewalk first. He might have been paralyzed if he had lived. Then his big old fat head hit the pavement like a deflated volleyball. I can still see the blood oozing out all over the sidewalk. If you look real close you can still see the red stain."

"I've tried to get it all up. I can't tell you how many times I've scrubbed that sidewalk with bleach."

"It's still there. It'll *always* be there."

"And that's what did it. That's what turned you bad. It was my fault. But I didn't know you were watching. I tried to make it look like an accident."

"I know."

"I'm sorry, Sondra. But it has to stop now. I can't sit by and let you kill anybody else. The police should be here any minute."

"So, if I tried to walk out of here right now, you'd shoot me? We'll I don't believe it. You don't have the nerve

to pull that trigger."

Car brakes squeaked in front of the house.

"That would be the police," said Val. "And, for the record, I never intended to shoot you." She put the barrel in her mouth.

"No!" Sondra ran to stop her. But it was too late. "Why, Val?" She studied her mother's lifeless body. Her eyes began to well up. Unexpected emotions washed over her. She would not give in to them. In her mind, she wasn't crying as long as the tears stayed in her eyes. But then they began to roll down her face. Finally, they gushed. "Why, Mom? I loved you. I hated you... but I still loved."

Then Sondra remembered the police. They would be knocking at any moment--then breaking down the door. What would she do? She couldn't get away in her car. She went to the window and peeped through the curtains.

There were no police cars. The squeaking brakes must have been some neighborhood car at the stop sign. Had Val really even called the police?

Sondra was not going to stick around to find out. She ran out the door, jumped into her car and drove away.

Chapter 20

"Oh, no," said Cynthia. "Look at all the police cars."

E. Z. pulled over to the side of the road.

Cynthia scanned the area. "I don't see Greg's car."

"Good."

"But where is he?"

An ambulance drove past them and pulled into Valerie Crench's driveway.

"Wonder why they don't have their lights flashing?"

Cynthia looked at her. "Because whoever they came for is already dead."

They watched as the body was carried out of the house and loaded into the ambulance.

"Maybe it's Sondra's mother," said E. Z. "Because I don't see Sondra's car."

"Greg must be following her. I just wish we had some idea where they went."

"The hospital?"

Cynthia perked up, then became frantic. "I hope we're not too late."

E. Z. turned around in a neighbor's driveway and headed for the hospital.

* * *

Greg was tempted to run the light. This was an emergency. He needed to get to Sondra's house before she got away. Although, he was only guessing she had gone there to pack up and get out of town. She probably figured that right about now Greg was being handcuffed and thrown into a police car.

The traffic signal finally turned green. Just as his foot touched the accelerator, a car blew through the light, barely missing his front bumper. He hit the brakes.

Wasn't that Sondra's car? He wasn't sure, but he turned right and followed it anyway. If it was Sondra, had she recognized his car? Did she even know what kind of car he drove? At the motel he had parked it well away from Boomer's room.

Greg was determined to catch her. His fingerprints and DNA were all over that motel room. All over Boomer. Normally he had confidence in the legal process. But now that his freedom was on the line, could he really trust that the police would believe his story? If he wasn't guilty then why did he flee the scene of the crime?

* * *

Cynthia flipped on the light. "Are y'all okay?"

Angie jerked awake. "What?"

Edsel's eyes sprung open and he sat up in bed. He winced at the sharp pain in his chest and held his breath.

"I'm sorry," said Cynthia. "But we were afraid Edsel might be in danger."

Angie and Edsel both stared at E. Z.

"No, it's not her," said Cynthia. "*Sondra's* the one who tried to kill you."

"That makes a lot more sense," said Edsel.

Angie looked at E. Z. "But why were you here this afternoon?"

"Well, I... "

Cynthia's cell phone began to ring. It wasn't Greg's ringtone. She flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Cynthia, my phone died. I'm calling from a pay phone. I don't have much time, so I've got to talk fast."

"Greg,--"

"--I'm following Sondra. She's trying to get away."

"Where are you, Honey? I'll call the police."

No answer.

"Greg?"

The line went dead.

"Greg's following Sondra. She's on the run. But I don't know where they are. We got cut off."

"Houston," said E. Z. "I'll bet she's headed back to Houston. It's the only place she's every lived besides Orange."

"We've got to follow them," said Cynthia.

"She probably took Highway 87," said E. Z. "That's the quickest way out of town from her mother's house. But once she gets to Port Arthur it'll be trickier. There are three major roads from there to Beaumont. Or she might take 73 and bypass Beaumont altogether."

"We'd better hurry," said Cynthia.

"Whoa, wait a minute," said Edsel, gritting his teeth against the pain. "You're not going without *me*. That boy's like a son to me." He managed to stand up.

Angie jumped up and ran to him. "What are you doing? You can't go anywhere. Get back in that bed."

"Where are my clothes?" He walked gingerly toward the closet.

"Edsel, don't be ridiculous," said Angie, grabbing his arm.

"I'm going," insisted Edsel.

Angie looked at the other two women. Cynthia shrugged.

"We'll *all* go," said Angie. "We can take my car."

Edsel turned to her and was about to speak.

She shook her finger at him. "Don't you even *think* about it. *I'm* driving."

* * *

"Good boy," said Sondra, easing the pressure of the muzzle against Greg's back. "Where are your car keys?"

"I left them in the ignition."

"Well, that was foolish. Somebody could have stolen your car while you were out her playing around on the phone."

He said nothing.

"Now listen carefully. You will walk to the car, open the door, get in and move over to the passenger seat. And you will keep your mouth shut. Understood?"

"Yes."

Once Greg was in the passenger seat, Sondra got in and started up the engine. She held the pistol in her left hand as she steered with her right.

What was she going to do with him? Take him to some dark road and shoot him? Surely she didn't honestly believe she could get away with that. She'd end up on death row. Didn't she realize that? Didn't that scare her? He studied her face. What was he thinking? She hadn't hesitated to murder a member of her own band. Why would she think twice about killing him?

She drove out of Bridge City toward the Rainbow Bridge. The 680-foot wide bridge was built in 1936, and is still the tallest bridge in Texas, at a height of 177 feet.

As she drove onto the bridge, Greg had a terrible thought. What if she planned to--.

"--you know what I've always wanted to see, Greg?"

Was it a trick? She had instructed him not to speak. If he answered the question would she blow his face off?

She went on. "I've always wanted to watch somebody dive off the top of this bridge. Ever since I was a kid I've pictured it."

This is not good, thought Greg. He wished he had tried to make a run for it at the convenience store. There would be no place to run and hide now that they were on the bridge.

"Yeah, I've always thought that would be so cool--the screaming... the arms flailing... the hopeless plunge to a certain death. And fortunately, there's not much traffic on this bridge at 1:00 AM."

He knew she was right. His only hope was for a state trooper to happen by. It was a narrow, two-lane bridge. Parking was obviously not allowed. She could tell the officer that they had engine problems. But he'd probably want her to coast down the bridge. And once he stopped to talk to her, Greg would hint that he was being held against his will. But then Sondra would shoot the trooper at point blank range.

Sondra parked at the top of the bridge. "Get out."

She walked him to the guardrail, motioning with the gun. "Over you go."

Greg saw a car approaching the bridge from the Port Arthur side.

Sondra saw it too. "Come over here and be looking at this tire." She pointed to the front passenger side. "I'll tell them we have a flat. If you say *anything*, or try to give them a sign," she said poking him in the ribs with the pistol, "you're a dead man."

* * *

Angie's silver Tahoe zipped through Bridge City.

"You're gonna get a ticket, Angie," said Edsel.

"No, I'm not."

"You're going twenty miles over the speed limit."

"Well, I may get a ticket. But they'll have to catch me first. I'm not stopping until I find Greg."

Edsel smiled. If he'd been driving he would have done the same thing.

Cynthia and E. Z. glanced at each other. Cynthia was worried sick about Greg, and it showed. E. Z. reached over and patted her hand.

Once they cleared Bridge City, they could see the lighted arch up ahead, two-miles away. Angie floored the accelerator. Soon they were traveling at 100 mph.

* * *

"Thanks, but there's really nothing you can do. The rim is bent." said Sondra. "We've got a tow truck on the way."

The pickup drove off.

"Nice job, Greg." said Sondra. "He didn't suspect a thing." She took a breath. "Okay, now--where were we? Oh, yeah. You were about to jump off the bridge."

"Here comes another car," said Greg.

This one was coming from the Bridge City side.

Sondra was surprised at how fast the headlights were approaching. "They're going way too fast."

"Probably drunk," said Greg.

But as the vehicle got closer it slowed down and pulled in behind Greg's car. A man shouted from the front passenger's window, "Don't do anything crazy, Sondra."

Sondra recognized him. It was Edsel Torkman. "I've got a gun." Sondra walked Greg backwards until they were up against the guardrail. She wrapped one arm around Greg and held the pistol to his head. "And if you don't leave right now, I'm gonna blow his brains out."

"I know you're the one who dropped the car on my chest," said Edsel. "But I'm okay. So, don't make matters worse by hurting my nephew."

"You've got five seconds to get out of here!"

Angie backed up the Tahoe and slowly drove around the Bonneville.

Greg could see that Angie was driving, but he couldn't tell if Cynthia was in the car. The back windows were tinted dark.

As they headed down the bridge, Edsel shouted, "Fly the rain, Greg. Fly the rain!"

Sondra looked at Greg. "Fly the rain? What does *that* mean?"

Before he could respond, she went on. "In a few seconds you're gonna *wish* you could fly." She laughed. "Okay. I'm tired of playing around. Climb over the rail!"

Greg stepped up to the guardrail and then looked back at her. "You don't really want to do this, Sondra."

When he heard the loud boom, he thought Sondra had shot him. Then he thought she had missed--until his right arm began to sting. "Okay!" He climbed over to the back side of the railing and held on. What did Uncle Ed mean when he yelled 'fly the rain'? Do they have a plan to rescue me? Was it some kind of clue?

Sondra stepped in closer. His body would disappear into the darkness long before it hit the water. But she wanted to see all there was to see. There would be no instant replay. If she blinked, she'd miss half of it. She wondered if she'd be able to hear the splash. His chances of survival were less than 1%. "Okay," she said. "Do it!"

Chapter 21

Greg knew that if he didn't jump soon Sondra would shoot him again. Which one was he more likely to survive--a bullet in the back or a seventeen-story fall? Maybe the pistol would misfire. Maybe she's out of bullets. *Lord, I really need a miracle--and I need it fast.*

"Okay, fine," said Sondra. "It will be more fun this way. I'll shoot you in the other arm... then each leg. I'll just keep pumping bullets into your body until I run out. Then I'll give you a push." She jammed the muzzle into his left triceps.

At any moment Sondra's bullet would come, with bone-shattering certainty. Then on to his legs. No! Greg was not going to just stand there while she turned him into a bloody Raggedy Ann, and then tossed him into the river. But she had a gun. He had nothing. And he was on the outside of the guardrail. No more time to think about it. Must act now!

"Sondra?"

She turned around and saw E. Z. standing near the back of the Bonneville. "What are you doing here? This is none of your business. And how did you get up here?" She heard something and spun around.

But Cynthia was right behind her. She grabbed Sondra's right wrist and forced it, and the pistol, upward.

The gun discharged into the sky.

Greg started to climb over the guardrail.

Sondra turned sharply and pulled the pistol down, along with Cynthia's hands. Now the gun was pointed in Greg direction.

He put his foot back down and moved along the outside of the railing, trying to get out of the line of fire.

E. Z. joined Cynthia, latching onto Sondra's arm. They pushed her toward the guardrail, with the same idea--to slam Sondra's hand down on the top of the railing repeatedly until she dropped the gun.

Greg moved away from them and climbed over the guardrail.

Sondra tried kicking and elbowing Cynthia and E. Z. to get them off of her. But they were relentless. They whacked her fingers against the unforgiving cold steel of the railing over and over. On the seventh time the pistol fired, but hit nothing. On the tenth, she dropped the gun, and it fell down into the darkness.

Cynthia and E. Z. stepped away from Sondra.

Greg rushed to Cynthia and hugged her.

"Do you have your cell phone?" he said.

"Here come Angie and Edsel," said E. Z.

"I'm sure they've already called the police," said Cynthia.

"That's good," said Sondra. "Now Greg will go to prison where he belongs."

"What?" said Cynthia.

"Oh, that's right," said Sondra. "Greg probably hasn't had a chance to tell you yet. Go ahead, Greg, tell her how you murdered Boomer."

"What are you talking about, Sondra?" said E. Z.

"It's true. Greg followed her to her motel room and raped her. Then he slit her throat. He told me all about it."

"*You're* the one who murdered her," said Greg. "And then you set me up."

"Oh, that sounds quite plausible. I'm sure the police will believe every word of it. That is, if they can get past the fact that your sweaty DNA is all over her naked body. But at least you wore a condom."

"What's she talking about, Greg?" Cynthia's faith in Greg was strong, but she was confused, to say the least. She wanted to wipe the smirk off Sondra's face. Maybe a hard punch in the teeth would do it. "You're a liar."

Sondra laughed. "That's why I'll never go to jail." She climbed up on the guardrail and stood on top of it. A strong gust of wind would have swept her into the air and down into the Neches River. But she showed no concern. "I'm just too smart for the police." She began to walk along the top of the railing as though it were a tightrope.

"We know you killed your mother," said E. Z.

"I did not!" Sondra twisted and her shoes slipped. She fell off the guardrail, and was unable to catch it on the way down. But she did manage to grab hold of the structure below.

Greg, Cynthia and E. Z. ran to the guardrail.

Sondra's feet were dangling as she held on with both hands. "Help me, please!"

Without thinking, Greg climbed over the railing.

"Greg, no!" said Cynthia.

"I *have* to." He couldn't just stand by and let Sondra fall to her death--even if she was a murderer.

Angie and Edsel got out of the Tahoe and ran to join Cynthia and E. Z. They all looked on helplessly as Greg climbed down to Sondra.

He held on with his left hand while extending his right down to her. "Grab onto my hand."

Sondra clamped onto Greg's wrist with one hand, then the other.

Greg wasn't sure he could pull her up. But he'd heard stories of people gaining super-human strength in cases like this. He prayed it would kick in.

Sondra looked up at him. She seemed scared at first. Then her face contorted into the most evil grin Greg had ever seen. "Come with me, Greg. It'll be such a rush."

A chill swept over him. It was as if Sondra's body had been taken over by Satan himself. He no longer cared whether she lived or died. But *she* was the one holding on.

"You can't imagine how fantastic it's going to feel, Greg. Think of your best orgasm. Now multiply it by a thousand."

"Greg, let her go!" yelled Cynthia.

"I'm trying to!"

Sondra began swinging her legs forward and backward while laughing hysterically. "Let's have an accident together, Greg. You *know* you *want* to."

His arm was burning and going numb at the same time. The blood oozing from the bullet wound had soaked his shirt sleeve and was beginning to run down his arm.

Sondra began to lose her grip as the blood flowed down onto her hands and between her fingers. Finally, she clung to the knot at the end of the rope--Greg's hand. As the inevitable sunk in, she looked up into Greg's eyes.

Greg could see that Satan was gone now. The grin had disappeared--replaced by sheer terror. But she didn't scream. She just continued to look up at Greg as her body was sucked down into the abyss.

* * *

Cynthia checked the clock on the emergency waiting room wall. It was nearly 2:00 AM. "How bad do you have to be hurt for them to see you right away?"

Paramedics rushed in pushing a gurney, and went directly into the emergency room. The woman was screaming at the top of her lungs.

"*That* bad, I guess," said Greg, pressing a towel against his bloody arm.

Edsel and Angie walked up. "We had a little talk with the police," said Angie. "You can wait until tomorrow to give your statement." They sat down in the corner next to E. Z.

"Good. Thanks," said Cynthia. On their drive to the hospital, Greg had explained what happened with Boomer.

"Tomorrow? It's *already* tomorrow. But I guess I should just be glad I'm still around for it. Thanks guys, for coming to rescue me."

"You're welcome," said E. Z.

"What I don't understand," said Greg "is how you and Cynthia popped up all of the sudden and surprised Sondra. How did you do that?"

"Yeah, that was a good plan." Cynthia smiled and gave E. Z. a high five. "You tell him. It was your idea."

"Okay. Here's what we did: While Edsel was talking to Sondra from the car, Cynthia and I slipped out the door on the other side. Then we got down real low and sneaked up to the side of your car."

"Then Angie just drove around you and went down the bridge," said Greg.

"Right," said Cynthia.

"It scared me to death," said Angie. "But *somebody* had to do *something*." She paused and reached over to take E. Z.'s hand. "But, I still don't understand why *you* went to Edsel's hospital room this afternoon."

"You really don't know who am I?" said E. Z.

Angie was puzzled. "Should I?"

"I moved here to Orange so I could meet you."

"Why did you want to meet *me*?"

"I grew up in a little town west of Fort Worth. But when I turned sixteen I started searching for you. Because that's when they told me."

Angie felt a lump in her throat.

"I'm your daughter."

Angie started crying.

Edsel put his arm around her as he spoke to E. Z. with a gentle firmness. "I'm sorry, but you're wrong. Angie doesn't have any children."

E. Z. placed her hand on Angie's shoulder. "You never told him?"

"Don't," said Edsel. "You're making her cry."

"It's okay," said Angie. "It's true." When the nurse that afternoon had assumed that the young lady who visited Edsel's room was Angie's daughter because she looked just like her, Angie had brushed it aside. How could it have been? She knew she had a daughter somewhere out there in the world, but what were the chances that she'd ever come to Orange, Texas?

"What?" said Edsel.

Greg and Cynthia watched in amazement.

"And I think," said E. Z., looking at Edsel, "that *you're* my father."

"What? That's crazy."

"She's right," said Angie.

"That's impossible," said Edsel.

"No, it's not," said Angie. "Remember that one time when I was a senior in high school."

"Yeah, but--"

"--well, I got pregnant."

"No, you didn't. I was there--remember. Until your dad broke us up right after your graduation and sent you off to--."

--to have the baby."

"Why didn't you tell me? How could you keep this from me?"

This was what Angie had dreaded. Now there would be no wedding. Edsel would never forgive her for keeping the secret all these years. "I'm sorry. I should have told you."

"So, it wasn't that you didn't want me," said E. Z.

"No, not at all. My dad thought he was doing the right thing. I was only 18. I wanted to keep you so badly. And I wanted to tell Edsel about you."

"You *should* have," said Edsel.

"I know."

"So... I'm really her father?"

Angie could see it in his eyes. He *wanted* it to be true. "Yes."

He stood up. "I want to hug my daughter." Tears began to drip down his face.

E.Z. got up and hugged him gently. "I don't want to hurt your ribs."

"It's okay. Right now I'm feeling no pain."

Angie stood and joined the hug. "Have you had a good life? What are your parents like?"

"They're wonderful. I was so lucky. I can't wait for you to meet them."

"Well," said Edsel, "I guess now we'll *have* to get married."

"Huh?" said Angie.

"You know--now that we have a *kid*."

They all smiled and hugged tighter.

"Okay," said Edsel, "not quite *that* tight."

"Will you be my maid of honor?"

E. Z. smiled. "I'd love to."

Angie kissed her on the cheek.

Greg looked at his wife. "Wow. That's amazing. Did you have any idea?"

"No," said Cynthia. "Of course, all I could think about this whole time was *you*."

Greg kissed her on the lips. "Thank you, Sweetie." He glanced over at the happy threesome again. "It's like she's a baby, and they're just seeing her for the very first time."

"Yeah," said Cynthia. "Wouldn't that feel great?"

"What?"

"To have a baby."

"Well, sure. You know I--." He studied her face. "Are you saying--"

"--yes. I think I'm pregnant."

"Oh, Honey." He hugged her. Over her shoulder he saw Angie, Edsel, and E. Z. still embracing. He was so happy for them. But at the same time he was thankful that he would meet *his* baby while it was still... a baby.

* * *

Greg and Cynthia attended Edsel and Angie's wedding. It was small, but beautiful. Herman Mayberly apologized to Edsel, Angie, and E. Z. for what he had put them through.

Slowly but surely, Greg made peace with his dad. Ralph had missed Greg and Cynthia's wedding, but he and Norma drove to Coreyville for the birth of their grandson. Edsel, Angie and E. Z. came too. Greg had wanted to name his firstborn 'Edsel,' but he and Cynthia had compromised with 'Edward.'

Little Edward would be raised in the new tradition of the Tenorly family. Along with love, hope, and faith, his parents would teach him the value of a positive attitude. They would tell him to always fight for what is right. Never give up and never give in. Be your own man and do your own thing to the best of your ability. In the words of Uncle Edsel: FLY THE RAIN.

THE END

* * *

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