

WHAT READERS AND REVIEWERS ARE SAYING:

The book California readers voted "**Most Likely to be Banned by an Illiterate Sitting President.**"

"Everything you ever needed to know about where we are as a country is in this book."
- *FSD, Springfield, MO.*

"Avril Serene shows us her absolute mastery of written emotion - I laughed, I cried, I got angry, I worried... and the ending has to be the most satisfying I've ever read..."
- *RWC, Rockford, IL*

"Excellent writing! I wish I had the stones to say some of the things she's put out there!" - *SRK, New York, NY.*

"How was I supposed to know it was HIS island?!? And BLACK PEOPLE in AFRICA make babies with girls A LOT YOUNGER than Jeffrey's. REVERSE DISCRIMINATION!!!" - *DJT (remedial reader), Washington, D.C.*

"The scene with the drain auger alone was worth more than what I paid for the book."
- *JJS, Seattle, WA.*

"The most quotable book I've read in ages..." - *BMM, Des Moines, IA.*

"Savage, fearless, and darkly hilarious.

"Nero's Fiddle is a murder mystery with a mission. When investigative journalist Debra Ann Wynn travels to rural Arkansas to expose a brutal crime, she uncovers a corrupt county where power protects itself, truth is dangerous, and silence is the price of survival.

"Part thriller, part political satire, and part moral reckoning, Avril Maria Serene's novel delivers sharp humor, unforgettable characters, and a story that refuses to pretend everything is normal.

"Not for the faint of heart—but impossible to ignore."
- *CGT (professional reviewer)*

"Think *Dr. Strangelove* meets a rural crime thriller." - *RWW, Portland, OR.*

"Dark humor, righteous anger, and a mystery that exposes more than a killer."
- *ETR, San Diego, CA.*

"How can I get a 36" x 48" poster-sized image of Musky Mellons from Chapter 19? I am absolutely in love with her..." - *ARR, Toledo, OH.*

“Serene turns crime fiction into a weapon against corruption.”
- *DFA, Ft. Lauderdale, FL.*

"She BLEEDS ALL OVER! And they say she's a MEXICAN - one of those people who comes here to rape us!!!" – *DJT (adult diaper consumer), Washington, D.C.*

“*Nero's Fiddle* by Avril Maria Serene is a complex murder mystery that intertwines dark humor, political satire, and social commentary to explore themes of power, justice, and corruption in modern America. The novel follows investigative journalist Debra Ann Wynn as she uncovers systemic corruption in rural Arkansas, critiquing the normalization of cruelty and the failure of accountability in power structures. Through its satirical lens, reminiscent of works like *Dr. Strangelove*, the book challenges readers to confront authoritarian behavior and societal complacency.

“The plot of *Nero's Fiddle* is intricate, weaving together multiple storylines and a large cast of characters. The narrative is filled with twists, revealing layers of corruption and deceit that keep readers engaged. The setting of rural Arkansas is vividly portrayed, highlighting the stark contrast between natural beauty and societal decay, reminiscent of the atmospheric settings in other successful mystery novels like *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn.

“The characters in *Nero's Fiddle* are complex and multifaceted, with Debra Ann Wynn standing out as a determined and resourceful protagonist. The supporting cast, including locals like Fred Freeman and Alex Hamilton, adds depth to the story, each contributing to the novel's exploration of moral ambiguity and justice.

“The writing style of *Nero's Fiddle* is sharp and witty, with a penchant for dark humor and satire. This approach sets it apart from other books in the mystery genre, which often focus more on suspense and tension than on social commentary... its bold use of satire to critique societal issues, the well-developed protagonist, and the intricate plot... keeps readers guessing.”
- *BKS (professional reviewer)*

“I’d come back so mad from shopping when I saw what the dotard’s done to gas and food prices. Now, when I get home, I re-read my favorite chapters of *Nero's Fiddle*. Doesn’t save me any money, but I sure do feel better!”
- *RFC, Garland, TX.*

See all the reviews at:



<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0GT5M4JPR>

POLITICAL SATIRE AS A DARKLY COMIC THRILLER

AVRIL MARIA SERENE

presents

NERO'S
FIDDLE

*VBI CRVDVS ET STVLTVS
IMPERAT, MALVM REGIT*

UNABRIDGED UNDERGROUND EDITION

A DEBRA ANN WYNN MYSTERY



AMS Media
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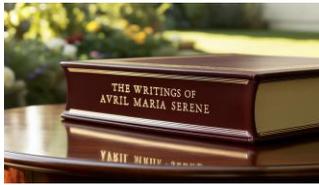
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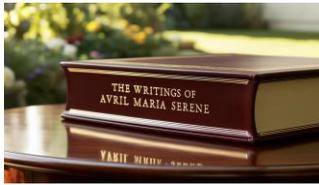
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the writer's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or local individuals or entities is entirely coincidental.

This novel is dedicated to the loved ones of the 400,000-plus victims who died unnecessarily through incompetence, corruption, and negligence at the hands of Donald John Trump during the COVID-19 pandemic.



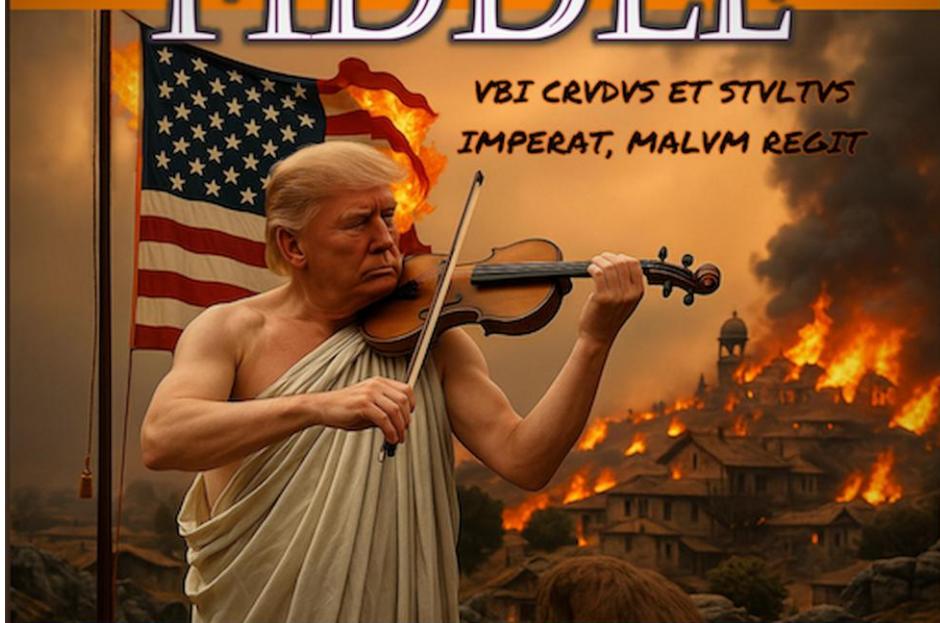
"Falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after it." - Jonathan Swift



POLITICAL SATIRE AS A DARKLY COMIC THRILLER

NERO'S FIDDLE

*VBI CRVDVS ET STVLTVS
IMPERAT, MALVM REGIT*



A DEBRA ANN WYNN MYSTERY
AVRIL MARIA SERENE

VOLUME #86 47

[UNABRIDGED UNDERGROUND EDITION]

NERO'S FIDDLE IS A MURDER MYSTERY IN THE SAME WAY *DR. STRANGELOVE* IS A WAR MOVIE: THE CRIME IS VICIOUS, EVEN BRUTAL, BUT ITS TELLING CAN'T IGNORE THE UNCONVENTIONAL TIMES OR THE ENVIRONMENT WRAPPED AROUND THE EVENTS.

THIS IS AN UNUSUAL STORY; THOUGH FICTION, IT'S BUILT UPON DISTRESSING TRUTHS. ITS FAITHFUL RENDERING REQUIRES DEFYING THE CLASSIC NORMS OF THE MYSTERY/SUSPENSE/THRILLER GENRE. FOR THIS NOVEL, THAT MEANS INTRODUCING PARODY, DARK HUMOR, POLITICAL SATIRE, AND OCCASIONAL EXAGGERATION. OTHERWISE, IT WOULD HAVE TO BE WRITTEN AS A SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY.

WHEN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST **DEBRA ANN WYNN** TRAVELS TO RURAL ARKANSAS AFTER A FAMILY TRAGEDY, SHE EXPECTS TO UNCOVER A KILLER.

WHAT SHE FINDS INSTEAD IS A COUNTY WHERE POWER HAS WARPED ITSELF INTO AN ECOSYSTEM COMFORTABLE FOR ONLY THE FEW, TOLERATED BY OTHERS—WHERE THE JUDGE OWNS MOST OF THE LAND, THE SHERIFF DECIDES WHICH LAWS MATTER, AND THE PEOPLE WHO KNOW BETTER HAVE LEARNED TO KEEP THEIR HEADS DOWN. IF THOSE THINGS SOUND VAGUELY FAMILIAR, THEY'RE MEANT TO. AND YET, THE STORY TURNS INTO ONE UNLIKE ANY DEBRA ANN HAS EVER INVESTIGATED, EVEN AS IT PLUCKS ELEMENTS MORE SURREAL THAN UNREAL FROM OUR DAILY LIVES.

IN PLACES LIKE THIS, CORRUPTION RARELY ANNOUNCES ITSELF ALL AT ONCE. IT GROWS SLOWLY, FED BY SMALL COMPROMISES, QUIET SILENCES, AND WILLING PARTNERS, UNTIL THE DAY SOMEONE FINALLY PUSHES BACK.

PART MURDER MYSTERY, PART POLITICAL SATIRE, *NERO'S FIDDLE* EXPLORES THE PATH A COMMUNITY MUST TRAVEL WHEN IT STOPS ENFORCING ITS OWN STANDARDS—AND WHAT EVENTUALLY HAPPENS WHEN IT REALIZES HOW FAR IT HAS STRAYED.

SHARP, MORBIDLY FUNNY, AND UNAPOLOGETICALLY IRREVERENT, THIS IS A MYSTERY THAT ASKS NOT ONLY WHO COMMITTED THE CRIME BUT DIGS INTO THE UNCHALLENGED MANIPULATION OF THE WORLD AROUND THAT ALLOWED IT TO HAPPEN.

- Avril Maria Serene

"Avril Serene shows us her absolute mastery of written emotion - I laughed, I cried, I got angry, I worried... and the ending has to be the most satisfying I've ever read."

- RWC, Rockford, IL.

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A Word to the Reader



Nero's Fiddle is not a traditional mystery.

It uses the structure of a crime novel, but it is equally a work of political satire. Many of the characters, settings, and situations are intentionally exaggerated—not to distort reality, but to strip away the euphemisms and polite language that too often conceal it.

The work deliberately pushes buttons.

At its heart, the story is about what happens when communities stop enforcing their own standards of decency, instead tolerating, excusing, ignoring or even leveraging obvious abuses until they grow too large to contain.

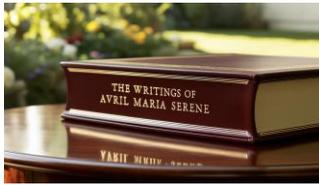
History suggests that when people refuse to push back in the small ways, pressure builds until the reckoning arrives in larger and far less civilized forms.

Like most satire, the book stretches the boundaries of its genre. The mystery is based on harsh realities; the story, in order to solve the crime, must ask how and why our society has allowed those things to happen that enable the killing.

This novel is a work of fiction.

Its targets? *Real*.

Avril Maria Serene





PROLOGUE

NOVEMBER 30, 2024, RURAL ARKANSAS

Hunching over as he stepped out from the lush, dark greenery, the slim figure silently hugged the tree line, carefully skirting the grassy meadow of the pipeline easement splitting the dense woods. Crossing a small ravine, the man stopped, shielding his eyes with his hand against thin shafts of light shooting through the trees as the sun broke the horizon. He scanned the undergrowth between the hickories and oaks on the far side of the easement for signs of deer.

Seeing no evidence of his prey, the hunter abandoned his cover and began wading fully erect through the thigh-high grass of the break. The tall amber blades' curling tips glistened with the dampness of the morning dew. Crafted to blend well into the background of a thick forest, the clothing and gear of the crossbow hunter starkly contrasted against the sea of gold. Pushing forward, he left a clear three-foot-wide trail through the flaxen belt running otherwise undisturbed north and south for miles. Swinging his arms wide to each side, the man strained for quicker progress toward the far hedgerow.

Again blended into his surroundings, the bow hunter rested against a nearby pine. Silhouetted against the yellows, oranges, and reds streaking across the morning sky with the sun's rise, he pondered the gorgeous, just-beginning-to-fade fall foliage of early December in northwest Arkansas. Mother Nature had put on a brilliant display of color before surrendering to winter, earning the area its reputation as one of the most beautiful places in the country.

The dawn air was crisp and cool, still damp from the overnight rain, smelling of soggy, decaying vegetation and of drowning worms coming up for air. Water droplets, hiding from the morning's creeping glow, clung stubbornly to the tips of weeds and leaves in the undergrowth. With the last of the clouds receding westward, the light spearing through the trees widened as the rising orange orb crested the tops of distant hills. Wood thrushes and northern mockingbirds were just beginning their serenades of the new morning, intermixed with the occasional hoot of an owl.

Civilization seemed nowhere near, though the scenery was but twenty-two miles west of Enabler Hollow, a tiny town in Arkansas's Narcissus County. Edward Rutledge, an archer celebrating his 48th birthday, was taking full advantage of the state's lengthy deer season for crossbow hunters, now heading into its last month.

Ed and his hunting partner, Arthur Middleton, had spent the night at their deer stand. The younger of the two men by a month and the more assertive, Ed was also the better hunter; stuffed trophies of

his accomplishments proudly hung from all four walls of his basement den.

Ed had left Art at their deer stand to clean up and mask any lingering human scent, departing early to forge ahead and scout the area.

Seeking the bedding areas and travel patterns that showed deer were in the neighborhood, he was intent on finding the deep tracks and prominent tree rubs higher up the trunk left by a mature buck.

Ed also watched for other predators and scavengers in the vicinity. He'd developed a deep understanding of how their activity affected the behavior of whitetail deer. Scanning the environment as it yielded to the daylight, he looked for familiar signs.

Larger carnivores and scavengers drawn by bigger prey confirmed that the quarry he sought was here. Still, Ed preferred to avoid direct competition in the immediate area, and the turkey vultures circling overhead drew his concern. Something seemed out of place beneath them, straddling the greenbelt boundary about a football field's length further south.

His impression was of a large, domesticated pig carcass. Coyotes, or a bobcat or black bear if they were hungry enough, likely dragged the remains just inside that hedgerow.

Bringing up the binoculars hanging from his neck, Ed yanked off the lens protectors and stuffed them into his pants pocket.

As he focused, the blood suddenly drained from his face. Instinctively taking a step back, he dropped his field glasses to his chest.

Inhaling quickly and then slowly releasing the breath, he grabbed the binoculars with both hands, bending over slightly and leaning in. He shoved his head forward, as though a clearer view would erase what he was seeing.

Suddenly, a wave of nausea overcame him; he let go of the glasses, leaning over, hands on his knees, to throw up violently into the brambles beside him.

Now shaking slightly, the moment over, Ed stood and pulled a wet wipe from his jacket pocket to clean his lips, beard, and mustache. Pocketing the wipe, he hung his head, quietly mouthing a prayer and briefly casting his eyes heavenward.

Placing the tips of his middle finger and thumb together between his curled lips, he let out two piercing whistles in quick succession. Art wouldn't be far behind; he'd follow the trail Ed had left in the grass.

Tracing the treeline south, Ed trudged through the grass, dreading the challenge before him every one of the several minutes it took to reach the remains. Once he'd confirmed they were human, Ed backed away, not wanting to contaminate anything should he get sick again.

Art had the satellite phone with him; there was little Ed could do but wait. Taking a seat on a fallen log about ten yards from the body, he rocked back and forth, head down and then back up occasionally to look for Art - anything that would cast his eyes in another direction. What he'd seen would stay with him the rest of his life and for many nightmares to come. There was no reason to reinforce the image.

Art, too, had gotten a preview through his field glasses by the time he arrived. His face was pale; his demeanor obviously shaken.

A fervently religious man, Art tapped Ed on the shoulder, pointing with his other hand at the sun, now fully risen. Both men dropped to their knees, crossing themselves; with eyes closed, they offered the Lord's Prayer in quiet unison.

Rising together, they turned and stood briefly, hands on each other's shoulder, in silent contemplation of the deceased teenager's corpse. Surrounded by biting flies and the unbearable odor of cadaverine, she was around sixteen, mostly nude; the signs of torture and rape were obvious. Whoever did this had posed her body in gruesome fashion, shooting rounds through her elbows, kneecaps, and the arches of her feet. Someone had penetrated her with foreign objects, including a large pinecone.

Both men knew the girl and her family well.

She was Liberty Belle Freeman, the only surviving daughter of Fred Freeman, their friend and co-worker. The three adults were members of a small, tight-knit group of locals bound by their willingness to defy the powerful County Judge and Sheriff.

The murder of a daughter under these circumstances would be unbearable enough for any father. That Fred's oldest daughter had committed suicide eight years ago after a vicious rape would make another loss incomprehensibly painful.

Each of the hunters was a parent to a teenager; Art was the father of two. Both had to turn from the body, tears running down their cheeks.

Without a word, Ed helped Art unpack the satellite phone; Art made the call to the Sheriff's Department.

Having done all they could, the two men stood facing one another, heads down. Pointlessly kicking at the ground with the toes of their boots, they waited for the authorities to arrive.

Deep worry and sorrow had taken over Art's features.

"My God, how am I gonna explain this to my wife? ... *Jesus*, and the kids. I *have* to tell them; they've gotta know there's a monster walking among us that could do something like this, especially to them...."

Ed's thoughts were with the girl's father.

"Fred and I served together for two tours, one of the toughest guys I know. Without him, the wrestlers never would have made it to state."

Art shook his head slowly.

"Shit, our football team would've been a joke."

Ed nodded, then spat to one side.

"Still, I can't even imagine what this is going to do to him after everything that happened to Innocence Grace."

Ten minutes passed in silence as each of the men in their own way tried to absorb a reality that half an hour ago would have been unfathomable.

Art removed the archery glove from his drawstring hand, using the knuckle of his forefinger to wipe a tear from his eye.

Finally, Ed spoke.

“Those DeRump motherfuckers got her. You know they did this.”

More silence.

“Ed, you gotta be the one to tell Fred.”

“Oh, Art, man, I can’t. I’ll screw it up, and I just can’t do that to him.”

“C’mon, it’s *Fred*... he’s gotta be told. By somebody who gives a shit, before he hears about it on the news.”

Art paused in thought.

“You know he’ll never remember a word you say anyway, once it sinks in. Jesus, what a klusterfuck situation....”

The other man slowly nodded. “We need to call Joe Manchin at home; no one else left in the Sheriff’s Department we can trust, though it ain’t by much.”

“I know, but you’re right, we need him to be among the first responders; hopefully, he’d be the one to do the investigating.”

Ed chewed the inside of his lip.

“Doubt they’d let him do it properly, though....”

Art had other concerns.

“Sometimes I think Manchin has his head in the right place, but he’s awfully weak in the knees.”

Ed snorted.

“Damned pussy, if you want to be straight up about it.”

Art’s focus returned to those he loved.

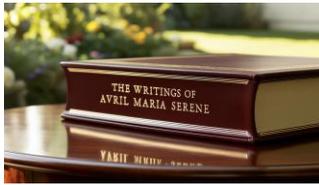
“What’s Trance going to do to us, to *our families*, for reporting this if Joe rats us out for being the ones who called?”

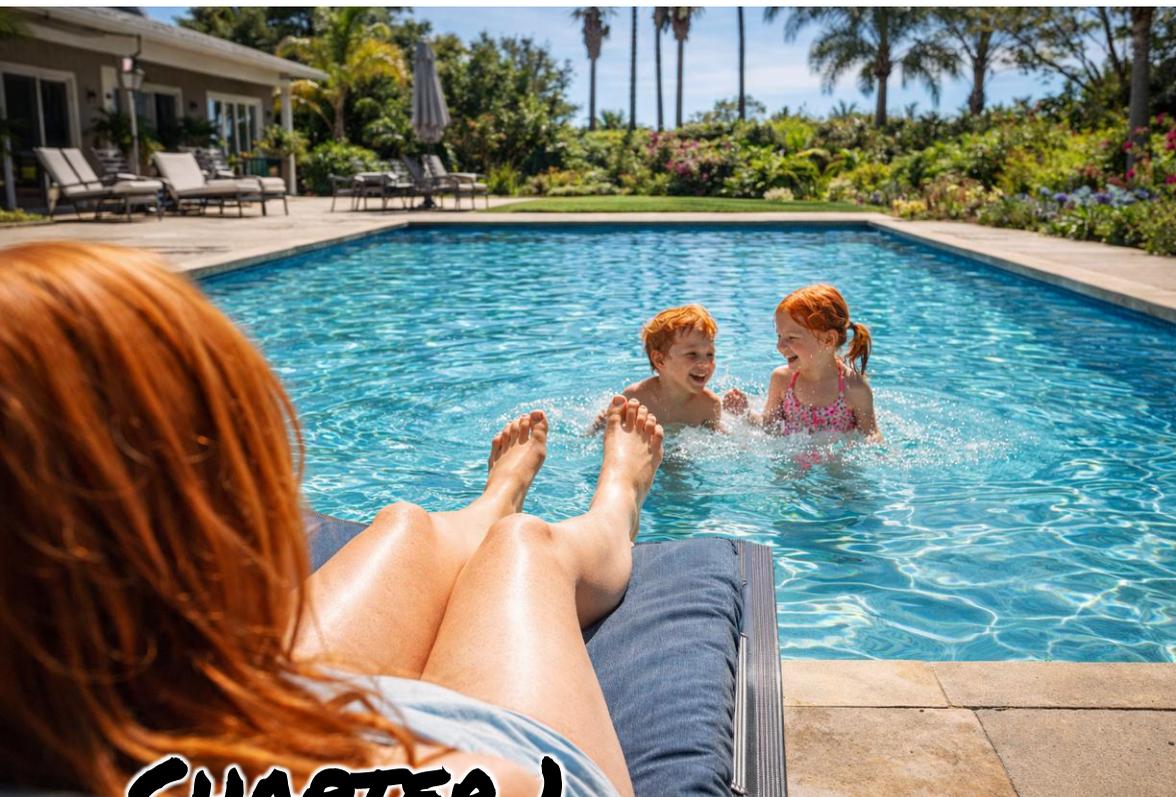
Ed let out a long sigh.

“Yeah, I know... But sometimes you have to do the right thing, even if it kills you. Fuck Trance *and* DeRump.”

Belying their bravado, the men shivered slightly, though their camouflage clothing was warm; tiny beads of sweat glistened on their foreheads.

Steeling himself, Ed took the satellite phone from Art to call Fred.





CHAPTER 1

PRESENT DAY, SAN DIEGO

I've never been materialistic, but I *do* appreciate the nicer things in life when they come my way.

They haven't always; I've survived situations that were minimalist at best when out on the road during an investigation. More than a few assignments have had me living out of a van on junk food, wearing nothing but T-shirts and jeans for months at a time.

Good genes have helped, though I don't lean on my looks to survive. Lucky for me, you don't need an extensive wardrobe if you've got red hair and a decent figure; the right attitude goes a long way.

And honestly, I wouldn't have had to watch my pennies so closely after my father passed; he left a generous inheritance that took the sting out of paying the monthly bills.

But I wanted to invest that money in furthering my career. I know that's what Dad intended. That discipline, along with the stories written by a close friend about my adventures, helped my byline as an investigative journalist, Debra Ann Wynn, evolve into a thriving newsgathering and distribution business. Of course, I didn't do the last part by myself; I lack the requisite mercenary instincts for entrepreneurship. I'm grateful for the help I've gotten from my business partner and onetime mentor at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Doug Stein.

Change as life's only constant - the few years since we first took that plunge have been busy and exciting. Paul Castro came back to California after serving as an officer in the Navy to become a forensic supervisor for the Bureau of Investigation. When they assigned him to assist the San Diego PD with cold cases, Paul and I rediscovered one another. We'd had an intense college romance twenty years ago, and we're now married with two children: Thomas Ethan, six, and Sarah, who just turned four. Having a family has brought fulfillment - and activity! - to our lives, rewarding beyond anything I could have imagined.

Enter materialism. We're not rich, but our combined incomes allow us to splurge once in a while.

A few months ago, Paul began lobbying to have an in-ground pool installed; you know how those ex-Navy types love the water. Tommy and Sarah were both clamoring for one; I think Sarah, our then three-year-old, was shilling for her father. And really, I didn't put up much resistance.

But, man-oh-man, have I adapted to the new pool! I've taken to it like a fish to... *never mind*. Paul says it looks like a mini cranberry bog when the children and I are in the pool - his idea of a redhead joke.



I was sitting in the lounge chair alongside the water one afternoon, catching up on my writing while the children played in the shallow end. Suddenly, an unusual summer rainstorm snuck up on us. The shower brought with it the smell of fresh, earthy dampness Dad called “petrichor”. Mixed in was the distinct scent of ozone, a sign of lightning. As everyone gathered up their things and retreated to the porch, I decided now was as good a time as any to grab snacks for the three of us.

As I explored the fridge for options, the kids headed to the living room to play.

Just then, the doorbell rang - Matt and Mike, Marci’s two sons, were at our front door. Always welcome in our home, they usually wouldn’t have bothered to announce themselves. But I knew their mother had been riding them about the formalities and showing respect - Matt had walked in on his mom and Danny, her new husband, at an unfortunate moment.

Detective Marci Robbins has carried a gold shield with San Diego PD’s Homicide unit since before Thomas Ethan was born. She and I have been dear friends for a dozen years now, and we’ve seen each other through, well, *interesting* things. Marci has become my BFF, the only friend I have who’s saved my life, and I mean that literally, at least once. She’s been part of *so* many things that have happened - you can’t tell a story about one of us without mentioning the other.

I first met Marci when I was still an aspiring cub reporter for the *Union-Tribune*. The introduction came at the tail end of an extraordinarily rough patch in Marci’s personal life and career. She’d become a breast cancer survivor and had just begun walking what would become a successful path to sobriety. Her biggest challenge was coping with no longer being the primary caregiver to her children after her divorce.

That she'd not only make it through but thrive is a testament not only to who she was then but to who she is now. It's been several years since Marci made detective, and she's become known as one of the department's best and brightest. Along the way, she regained shared custody of her boys, and they've grown into impressive young men. The three of them are regular guests at Paul's and my home; they've become our extended family.

Now 18 and 17, respectively, the boys dropped by because the rain canceled soccer practice and they were bored. We hadn't chatted long before I saw in Matt's eyes that he was eager to ask me a question.

"Aunt Deb, I couldn't believe something Mom told me, and I wanted to check it out with you. She says you and Uncle Paul helped commit a murder once - that you were in on the planning!"

I hesitated.

"Uh, okay... I know what she's talking about, and I'm not proud of some of it, but it's a lot more complicated than that."

Matt waggled his eyebrows at me.

"Can you tell us the story?"

"Well, parts of it are gross," I warned, "but I guess you're old enough if you really want to hear it."

Both Matt and Mike nodded enthusiastically as Matt grabbed a Ritz cracker from my plate, and I swatted half-heartedly at his hand.

"Some of this may seem too familiar. In the place where this happened, one of the off-the-wall characters was a guy who wore too-long ties and copper tanning spray on his face. He ran the whole county, but behind his back they called him the 'orange imbecile.'"

Matt's ears pricked up.

"The main MAGAt was there?"

"Was this, like, a Secret Service case, then?" Mike added his question to Matt's.

"No, a different individual, but with the same basic makeup - bad pun, sorry."

"Wait, you're saying there were *two* of those total losers?" Matt exclaimed. "Wow...."

"That's exactly what I thought when I heard about number two. To be fair, some people quibble about the 'total' thing. It took Russians gaming the system, but number one got himself appointed president against the wishes of over fifty percent of the voters. Twice. And both had more money than I'll ever have, so

"But, yup, two."

I paused in thought.

"Had to happen, I suppose. Whatever conjured up the first version obviously didn't get it right, so what... a do-over, I guess? Unfortunately, making the same mistakes the second time around didn't help.

"But I'm getting ahead of myself... jeez, I can't *imagine* why your mom told you about any of this..."

"She *wouldn't*," Matt replied. "Said we'd have to get it from you. That's why we came over. Plus, Mike wanted to drive past the Seven-Eleven to see if his sexy girlfriend was working."

Matt barely got the words out before Mike punched him in the arm.

Their immaturity reminded me that, despite being the sons of two now-divorced police officers and having overheard a lot of things most teenagers don't, Matt and Mike were just kids. I'd have to tone down some details, but I'd tell them what I could.

"You know I love your mom, but she must be out of her ever-loving mind to open *that* can of worms. Okay, Matt, grab me a Diet Coke while you're in the fridge, and I'll tell you the entire story. Both of you take a seat and get comfortable; this one's a doozy.

"So, it all began a long time ago, before I'd really gotten to know your mom. I was sitting at my desk finishing a story for the paper when I got a call from Fred Freeman. He's a first cousin on Dad's side, lives in Arkansas in a town called Nero's Fiddle."

I paused as the intensity of the memories washed over me.

“Sometimes it comes off like I’m being flip about pieces of what happened; some things are so hard to deal with that you insulate yourself. Treating it like it wasn’t real, some kind of terrible joke, was my way of coping with so much of this. Still falling back on old habits, I guess, after all these years.

“Anyway, that call started off with the worst news you could ever hear from a member of your family. Fred’s oldest daughter, Innocence Grace, had just killed herself after being brutally raped a few months before.

“Fred was flailing, trying to reach out for any kind of lifeline he could find. He desperately needed my help....”



CHAPTER 2

FEBRUARY 2, 2017, SAN DIEGO

Things had been dragging at the paper lately, and I'd been fighting regularly with Jerry Dark, the *Union-Tribune's* editor.

The pattern rarely varied: as the lead investigative journalist, I'd research a piece, write it up, and rush to have the finished article ready by deadline. And then - always at the last possible moment, it seemed - he'd want to gut key sections to protect an advertiser, a political crony, or the newspaper's potential next owner.

Worse, there'd been a significant shift in the country's political environment; media pundits were spreading concern that the economic

recovery painstakingly engineered and guided from 2008 through most of 2016 was at risk. Politics and economics weren't my beat, and while crime hadn't gone anywhere in the meantime, articles written about physical violence were being smothered by other events.

I was in work mode, which back then often meant fighting mad, and not as sympathetic as I could have been when I got the call. Fred Freeman, a first cousin through my adoptive parents, lived beneath the Missouri Compromise slave-line, smack in the middle of the Bible Belt. Deeply troubled, he was reaching out anywhere he could for help.

Three months ago, someone had abducted his oldest daughter, Innocence Grace, taking her to a local park where he raped and sodomized her. The violence she'd suffered, as Fred described it, stunned me.

I'd spent two of my teenage summers in the Deep South traveling with Dad's construction crew as he helped rebuild after the hurricanes of those years. It had taken me a while to make the cultural leap from suburban Southern California to the rural counties of Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama.

Yet, for all the area's differences and problems, not all of them because of bad weather, I came to think of the people I met as unusually kind and accommodating; more so when I considered the losses they'd suffered and the situations many were enduring. It would never have occurred to me that anyone would intentionally harm a girl the age I was back then.

Even as a seasoned, some might say hardened, investigative reporter fifteen years later, I found it difficult to wrap my head around what Fred was explaining to me.

Then he dropped worse news, leaving me at a loss for words. Innocence Grace had just committed suicide, slitting her wrists in her bathtub while other members of the family were at a weekend religious retreat. Liberty Belle, Fred's youngest daughter, discovered her; the family's doctor had to sedate Belle for three days afterward.

I found the revelation so upsetting to my fundamental worldview that, at first, my mind rejected it. Yes, I dealt with vicious crimes and depressing outcomes every day in the routine chaos of the big city. But that was the job, not my life; I couldn't fit what had happened to Innocence Grace into the memories I had of an idyllic, slow-moving country setting. Nero's Fiddle was a place you'd go to escape all the terrible things you'd find in a major metropolitan area.

Still, I had to accept that these were the realities of Fred's life. I didn't know what I could offer to ease his pain, but he'd called with a specific request.

He spoke in a bare whisper, so quietly that I had difficulty understanding him. He claimed he knew who committed the rape, but that the man and his supporters were too powerful for him to take on alone.

"Could you, would you, please check things out and write an article to expose these people? It'd have to be published at least statewide. Anything less, and they'll bury it and kill me and the rest of my family."

He'd obviously thought about what he'd say to me ahead of time and added an incentive I didn't need. Fred believed that the situation behind his daughter's death was common throughout rural Arkansas and its neighboring states. He wanted - needed - me to agree that revealing those secrets would be interesting, even educational, for the entire country.

This was the first time I'd ever heard desperation from my cousin. While the Fred I'd always known was certainly nice enough, he was also a take-no-crap-from-anyone war veteran and high school sports star.

I'm not sure if Fred knew this, but I have a weak spot for forceful personalities reduced to abject vulnerability. Even without that, I wasn't one to turn down family or friends in their hour of need. I wanted to help.

Still, this wouldn't be a simple decision.

I had no contacts in or familiarity with rural Arkansas, and I was seriously concerned that I could do little that would be meaningful. Worse, Fred had pointed out the serious risks if I failed.

But I wasn't as receptive to his call as I could have been when I picked up the phone. I felt dreadful about that, wanting to make amends, as I learned of the tragic violations of Innocence Grace and their repercussions. Given how fed up I was with the paper, a change of scenery might do me good, and I could make the timing work.

I agreed to fly to Nero's Fiddle and meet Fred. Cashing in a month of accrued vacation and personal time off, I hopped on a plane to see what I could do.



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Though I'd spoken with my cousin many times over the years, most of our in-person interactions were at annual family reunions. I'd last seen him as a big, healthy man.

The Fred Freeman who met me as I stepped off the puddle-jumper at the rural airport in Port Lybral County was not well. He'd lost a lot of weight; empty skin sagged from his jowls and upper arms. His receding hairline had been noticeable even as a kid, and he'd since lost much of what he'd had on top. Though just a few years older than me, he'd aged enough to be taken as my father. His smile was polite, but forced and awkward, not at all as I remembered it.

Unbefitting his nature, Fred had been coy over the phone about exactly whom he suspected of the assault on Innocence Grace. I wouldn't push - I knew he'd tell me when the time was right - but I couldn't help speculating.

It had to be someone local and known to him.

Fred lived in a little town in a rural county; I presumed the accused would, in the worst case, fit the big fish in a small pond trope -

whatever power they held would wither when confronted by a higher authority with greater resources. My job would be to attract the attention and interest of that much bigger fish, a task well within my talents and experience.

There hadn't been a lot of preparation or research I could do from San Diego; the area around Nero's Fiddle was no hotbed of digital or online activity. Now that I'd made the trip, I'd need some answers and a place to start.

Fred thought it would be helpful to get the lay of the land first. Because Narcissus County didn't have its own commercial airport, I'd flown into its neighboring province. That meant a 40-mile drive to Nero's Fiddle - a perfect opportunity to survey the terrain.

Once I'd tucked my bags into the bed of Fred's old pickup and buckled myself into the passenger seat, he began a running commentary as we lumbered along on the bumpy ride. Describing the scenery alongside the two-lane county highway, he explained how things connected in his world.

I assumed Fred had his reasons for sticking to the country roads. I knew from studying maps of this area back in San Diego that we weren't far from a major four-lane state highway. It ran south around Nero's Fiddle and then snaked its way southeast between the smaller towns.

In the distance, I could hear the unique rumble from semi drivers applying their Jake brakes as they slowed for the downhill curve just past the heart of Nero's Fiddle's business district. Occasional shrill whines from over-revved motorcycle engines and the loud, mechanical growl of what Dad liked to call "fart cans" mounted on larger vehicles added accent to the steady background hum of traffic. I couldn't tell if the lingering odor of spent fuel and burned oil was wafting its way from that freeway or came from the tired V8 in Fred's old truck.

"The town we're passing through is Enabler Hollow. Three traffic lights and a liquor store, mostly. Best known for having the worst schools around and the biggest collection of cowards in the state. When

people don't know anything, and they're afraid of everything they don't understand, that's what you end up with. Lots of churches... supposed to take up the slack, I guess. I'm as much a believer as anyone, but hiding behind faith is a poor substitute for a spine, if you ask me. The town's motto is 'Stop your whining - bend over and take it' - the reason so many of Judge Donny Trance's sycophants come from this area."

I scrawled a note on my pad to follow up with Fred about who Judge Trance was; we had plenty of time, and I wouldn't interrupt just yet.

"Back in the '60s, draftable young men who didn't want to go to 'Nam ran off to Canada. Not in this area, though. Used to be a doctor here who'd give you a diagnosis of bone spurs if you brought him a bottle of decent bourbon; you won't find any military veterans *here*. That's how Trance - the corrupt piece of shit who runs this county - got out of serving. "

Ah, answered *that* question; patience rewarded.

"Enabler Hollow provides most of DeRump's deputies, or at least the ones who aren't Russian."

Seeing the quizzical expression on my face, Fred filled in the missing piece.

"Jade DeRump's the Narcissus County Sheriff. He's figured out that if you give taxpayer money to a gutless know-nothing for strapping a loaded gun to their side, and you'll look the other way when the deputy shoots someone, you have their loyalty forever.

"The problem with that is the only crimes they solve are those where they have, or can make up, reports of a black male conveniently loitering in the area."



CHAPTER 3

Fred was understandably angry at not getting any real help from the authorities responsible for bringing Innocence Grace's rapist to justice, something I'd have to keep in mind. Still, he was an honest man and had lived here all his life, so I took much of what he told me to heart.

"You said Judge Trance runs Narcissus County - I'm assuming he couldn't do that without the Sheriff's cooperation?"

"Some people around here call Trance 'Preparation H' - behind his back, of course - because of the soothing comfort he gifts to so many assholes. Sheriff DeRump is the anus who benefits most.

“He’s the underling Trance goes to for enforcement. DeRump applies physical force, incarceration, and maybe worse to back up Trance’s edicts. DeRump’s deputies are little more than badged and armed henchmen. They’ll do everything from incarcerating someone for actual or manufactured crimes to enforcing evictions. Just so you know, Judge Trance is the county’s biggest landlord.”

“The Sheriff’s Department acts as the Judge’s private little police force?”

“Not entirely; the Sheriff does some things independently. Victims have accused the deputies of disposing of inconvenient evidence, including bodies, and intimidating witnesses in cases heard by the Judge. Their uniformed thugs collect judgments, taxes, and fines levied by Trance against individuals.

“But the Sheriff also charges businesses for ‘protection’ fees; he doesn’t need the Judge for that. On their own, his deputies waylay visitors to the area through roadside traffic-fine assessments - paid in cash on the spot, of course. DeRump gets a cut of that action.”

“The Sheriff and his deputies can be loose cannons, then?”

“That much power has made them pompous asses. DeRump once arrested a local restaurant owner for ‘spying.’ The restaurateur had replaced the paper towel dispensers in his restrooms with electric blow dryers. Our Sheriff claimed the man mounted microphones in them and was listening to bathroom noises to see whether his deputies were washing their hands after a visit.

“The owner denied it, of course. He was more concerned about whether the officers were flushing the toilet; the potent smell was disrupting his business. True story.”

I could have gone all day without *that* image in my head, and the information wasn’t useful to my story. It’d be helpful if I could interview someone connected to the county’s power brokers.

“Anyone among those deputies you’d consider less loyal than the others? Someone who’d share the inside story?”

“There’s John Fetterman, but someone forgot to tighten all his screws; he’s as flaky as they get. Best bet, such as it is, would be Joe Manchin. A DeRump deputy for several years now; weaselly little worm, a mouth-breather. The people he came from ran coal mines, and if he had his way, we’d all have coal-burning furnaces. As for the miners, he thinks black lung is as good a way to go as any other. He couldn’t care less if the rest of us choked to death on soot.

“Something of a double agent. When you catch him alone among regular citizens, he claims he’s one of our small contingent of contrarian Trance resisters. But his loyalties are for sale. His excuse is that he needs to provide for his family. With what the county pays him, along with Trance as his landlord, he doesn’t have a lot of wiggle room in his finances.

“If Manchin gets outed for something he’s said that Trance wouldn’t like, he’ll sell all of us down the river to DeRump’s cohorts in the department. He’s untrustworthy, Debra Ann, and don’t let yourself ever think otherwise. Still, you can get useful information out of him if you can catch him in the right mood and circumstances.”

As Fred drove and played tour guide, I surveyed our surroundings through the dirty passenger window. Two thoughts struck me immediately. The first was that, even in the dead of winter, this was truly a beautiful place. Small streams, thin slits in their centers refusing to freeze, coursed between undulating hills that would eventually become the Ozark Mountain range further north. While the deciduous trees were nearly bare, there was still green in the needles of the conifers. I knew from my internet research that the ground froze here and that it snowed every so often; I suspected the results were postcard-worthy, picturesque, when it did.

But I couldn’t ignore the clear signs of extreme poverty, made more obvious by its contrast with the scenic landscape. The pristine view of one of the steeper hillsides changed dramatically as we passed, revealing a different perspective. I’ll not forget being startled by the sudden emergence of a deep, wide scar hacked between the trees,

created by decades of trash, debris, sewage, and discarded mattresses and appliances. The rusting river of rot, junk, and decay cascaded down from the back of an old house trailer teetering on the hillcrest.

I found the clash of disjointed messages from opposite ends of the spectrum unsettling, a disconnect my mind struggled to resolve. The sense of being pulled strongly in different directions grew as we drove through another of the smaller towns surrounding Nero's Fiddle.

"We call this little community 'Hayseed Haven'. It's always been a sleepy little place, even by Narcissus County standards. Recently, though, some of the older locals - veterans who wore the uniform during World War II and their descendants - have been up in arms. They're upset about this Jewish neo-Nazi who wants to build a military academy here for wayward youth."

Excuse me?

"A Jewish neo-Nazi? That would be a first for me."

"Like Netanyahu, except open about it. There are a few for whom playing Hitler is not nearly as offensive as being one of his victims. His name is Stephen Miller; plans to call it 'Hayseed Intermediate Training, Library, and Educational Resources.' Despite the protests, he's been getting some traction. The town's seen a rash of vandalism, graffiti, and thugs bothering old ladies lately. Rumors say it's no coincidence; some even claim Miller's behind it. But either way, people want something done about the situation."

"Sending kids to private school costs money. How do people make a living here, outside of farming?"

"The only decent-paying employment is at a factory on the edge of town. They make bump stocks for semi-automatic rifles, switches to turn Glock handguns into automatic machine pistols, and other auto sears."

The cab fell silent as we drove a half-mile past empty farmland.

"And right next door, we have Heresy Heights, the second-largest town in the county, maybe 30,000 citizens. We're about ten miles out from Nero's Fiddle. Not much goes on here either - other

than, to hear them tell it, immigrants invaded the place not too long ago. A local irrigation company hired two families of Mexican ancestry, at most a dozen members, and moved them here. Their arrival sparked a boatload of complaints about stolen lawnmowers and, especially, missing pets.

“Several restaurants in the area fueled the flames by adding fried cat and barbecued dog to their menus. Oddly enough, those places weren't owned by immigrants. Sleazy old white guys trying to make yet another fast buck off the unfortunate ran them. They were exploiting their relationships with the attendants who do the euthanizing at the city pound.”

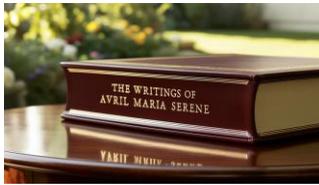
“What made Heresy Heights larger than its neighbors?”

“Outsiders mostly know it for the white nationalist Bible-thumper university here. They teach people to wrap the good book around their racism, gender bigotry, and hatred for LGBTQI+. Heresy Heights's version of fashion consultants - they teach students how to wear their false brand of Christianity on their sleeves.

“Just so you know, Debra Ann, I'm a member of Christians Against Christian Nationalism; we're trying to bring 'love thy neighbor' back to the church, where 'neighbor' means 'everyone,' doesn't matter if they're the same as us or not.

“I used to call the school in Heresy Heights a clown college, but it's more like the Stephen King kind - not funny at all. It's for students who can't get a degree anywhere else; they turn in their Post Toasties box tops, all the cash they can scrape up, and their signature on a high-interest Trance loan to get a diploma.

“The recipients mostly perform weddings and talk little old ladies out of their life savings.”





CHAPTER 4

I understood where Fred's jabs at the hater churches were coming from. He'd likely endured all the do-nothing "thoughts and prayers" insincerity he could handle following Innocent Grace's suicide.

I could relate. When Mom passed, I recall having to smile at her funeral through all the phony condolences from those who hadn't lent a hand as she suffered through the dementia of her final years.

I hoped that, as the anger and bitterness passed, Fred would make some room in his heart for those who just didn't know any better. Sometimes you have to let ignorance slide and give *some* credit to the intent, even if shallow - there are always a few who truly want to help

but just don't know how. I'd found peace when I considered that each of the mourners - and there were hundreds who came to see Mom off - had dressed for the occasion and rearranged their lives and priorities to be there. That had to count for something.

Still, I understood wanting not just to close some doors, but to slam them shut. With all the violence and injustice Innocence Grace suffered, it would take Fred time to heal.

"There's one more town you need to know about. We won't be visiting there this afternoon; it's on the opposite side of Nero's Fiddle. Honestly, the place gives me the heebie-jeebies. New Hungary is the hellhole where Trance and DeRump banish all the county residents they don't like. Not coincidentally, it's where the county's landfill is located.

"To force anyone who offends him to move there, Trance raises their rent in whatever other town they live. DeRump harasses the chosen victims with petty, often trumped-up, arrests. He and his deputies have gotten people fired from their jobs."

"How do they keep the people they've sent there from escaping?"

"There's just one road in and out of New Hungary. The Sheriff's deputies run a checkpoint 24/7 to control who comes and goes, and with what. Merchandise and services arriving from one of the other towns into New Hungary, or outbound from it, are subject to what Trance laughingly calls 'tariffs,' money he pockets as an unofficial tax.

"Supposedly, contractors made the pipes for the plumbing under the streets and in most of the shacks from the lead in recycled dead car batteries. Public utilities are unreliable. Services such as police and fire departments don't exist; the people who live there are on their own, making do as best they can.

"Still, the residents of New Hungary have to pay for protection to keep worse things from being done to them. That's where those tariffs come in, assessed willy-nilly on everything they buy or sell, their property, and any income they have."

I remembered a snippet of a story I wrote with Naomi, my BFF in junior high, as a takeoff from *Alice in Wonderland* for my eighth-grade English class, one we'd entitled "The Caterpillar Interviews":

"It was a kindness, you know. A few quick pounds with the meat tenderizing hammer before placing each little green leaflet in the bowl, to smush out any remaining life force. It simply wouldn't do to hear those tiny little screams while eating one's salad. Whether 'twas kinder for the smusher or the smushee was a matter for debate, of course."

I was suddenly eager to settle into my motel room and give myself a chance to think about other things. I'd welcome a brief respite from the knowledge dump.

"Your descriptions told me all I need to know about New Hungary, Fred, and I'm with you - let's not go there."

During our journey, we'd passed quite a few run-down trailer parks and small apartment complexes in decline. As we approached a town square, we'd see more single-family residences. These homes were older, and there were few I'd describe as well-maintained. While some properties showed care from their inhabitants, most residents had neglected their homes for long periods.

But what I found disheartening - that yank back in the opposite direction - were the many houses that had obviously been showplaces in their day. There was the occasional antebellum mansion that had survived for more than a century and a half since its construction. If I squinted and used my imagination, I could almost see what they'd once been.

Obviously, there'd been a time when this area thrived, with business leaders, farmers, skilled tradespeople, and professionals owning and living in decent accommodations.

Still, the residences visible today from the road were long past their glory days, suffering from disrepair and the ravages of time.

The online explorations I'd done while still in San Diego explained why. Nero's Fiddle, in particular, had profited from manufacturing clothing and other goods for the military. That business had grown toward World War II and continued to a lesser degree through the Korean War. However, the town's fortunes slid steadily downhill from there. Within a couple of decades, manufacturing succumbed to changing times and competition from overseas - ironically, foreign resources that rural Americans learned of when drafted to serve in those wars.

Millwork factories and sock, woolen, and carpet mills that had once formed the employment base of these smaller towns folded. More efficient national conglomerates absorbed local meatpackers and granaries. Companies like Archer Daniels Midland bought up or gained control of the better farmland, decimating the number of successful family-run operations. Worse, the corporations paid workers the bare minimum.

The independent tool-and-die shops, mechanics, and short-run truckers who'd served the original businesses were no longer needed. Small retail shops in what were once-bustling town squares largely disappeared, replaced by the ubiquitous Walmarts that dominate rural economies. The megastores conveyed little of the local culture or the uniqueness of their hometowns. Online shopping provided the *coup de grâce* for smaller merchants unwilling to change their ways.

None of that would surprise anyone, and other reporters have already written extensively about the remarkable changes to the country's rural economy over the years. Still, staring the effects in the face differed significantly from reading about the upheaval in the newspaper. The discomfort I felt looking out the window of Fred's pickup that day was just the beginning of an understanding. While I might not be sympathetic to the way they're expressed, there are solid reasons driving the underlying emotions - fear, anger, bitterness, resentment, and sullen acceptance - associated with this area's political leanings.

But some things that caught my eye made no sense. In my experience, people everywhere have one thing in common: they're different from each other. So why, then, were all these homes in similarly terrible shape? Surely there'd be the occasional showoff or OCD neat freak in the mix, and their residence should reflect their nature.

"Fred, I don't mean to be dissing the place you grew up, but most of the houses people live in here aren't kept up very well. Dad used to take me with him during the summers when he ran construction crews in small towns like this. I expected there to be quite a few well-tended, nicer residences.

"It seems like this area is one of the poorer regions in the state, and in Arkansas, that's *saying* something. Still, even in impoverished places, there is always that small percentage of residents who are more prosperous, often becoming so at the expense of their poorer neighbors. Where are *those* people?"

Fred snorted as he pulled over and pointed through the windshield - he *had* chosen this road for a reason.

"You're not hurting my feelings any, Debra Ann. Is *that* nice enough for you?"

My eyes followed his finger to stare at yet another stark contrast. Fred had parked us before an enormous black wrought-iron gate guarding the entrance to a large and luxurious country estate. Groundskeepers had carefully edged acres of finely mown grass, bordered by white picket fencing, surrounding a large cream-colored Victorian-style mansion. The stately manor house commanded a hilltop at the end of a porcelain-white, curved concrete private drive that ran perhaps a quarter mile from where we sat.

Even the gate was an over-the-top statement of wealth and power. Its maker had formed the letters of the name "TRANCE" in metal of some kind and then, I assumed, plated them in gold before mounting them across the top of the gate's upper arch. In the center of the decorative wrought iron was a stylized rendition of the Arkansas

Razorbacks logo, again formed of solid metal but painted in glossy red and black.

The sight put Fred in a philosophical mood.

“You really have just two choices about what to chase with your life. You can pursue happiness directly, or you can accomplish something meaningful and derive your satisfaction from the results. Those who are narcissists, selfish, or greedy prefer the first option; those traits almost never result in any good to anyone.”

Fred waved his open hand, palm up, across the windshield toward Trance’s property.

“However, if you take the shortcuts to being happy and those work out, making you powerful to boot, this is the result.

“The problem with that is you’re left with little motivation to change anything for the better once you’re satisfied - there’s nothing you’d see as sufficiently broken or missing that you’d want to fix it.

“That’s how this area, and really the whole county, became and remains so impoverished. The greed of a few individuals sucks every opportunity out of others' hands.”

The ostentatious wealth represented by the property stood out all the more against the surrounding environment.

“Hmmm, looks like your Judge Trance wants to rub everyone’s nose in it.”

“I blame it on ‘progress.’ A lazy, lardass imbecile like Trance couldn’t exist in nature. For one thing, no creatures other than a few marsupials have pockets; of those that do, evolution created them for nurturing offspring.

“But without pockets, if you take more than you can consume in the moment, how are you going to carry the excess around? You can drag it off into your cave, but they don’t come equipped with burglar alarms. The smell of decomposing flesh - no refrigerators, either - attracts other animals to steal your stuff when you’re gone hunting or foraging, putting your mate and kids at risk.

“Mother Nature did not intend any living thing to even remotely resemble Trance.”

The view through the estate’s gate was so far removed from what we’d just driven through, and so surreal, that I had a flash thought: Were we playing a role in an old Twilight Zone vignette I’d missed? That the wind shifted just as I rolled down my window, assaulting my nasal passages with the stench of dead skunk, didn’t help.

Seeing the jerk of my head away from the window and the sudden intense wrinkling of my nose, Fred was less than sympathetic, a wry half-smile forming on the left side of his face.

“What that is depends on how the wind’s blowing. If it smells like fresh roadkill from the highway, I hope, in my heart of hearts, that someone finally nailed Trance. And I’m not the only one here who feels that way.

“But if it’s coming from the direction of the Judge’s house, then that’s a whole ‘nother thing. When you go to Trance’s place, you’ll see 55-gallon drums tucked into all the corners and crevices.

“There are two possibilities. Either they’re empty, or they’re full. If empty, then they are about to be reused, and *Hallelujah!* All you Californians can celebrate that you’ve sold someone on recycling. You might not, however, appreciate what he’s re-purposing those barrels for.

“If a drum’s full, then again, two possibilities. It either contains a fresh supply of orange spray tan, or it’s serving as a temporary casket for at least one body of the persons who have crossed Trance; he just hasn’t gotten around to burying the barrel yet.”

Fred’s expression became serious again.

“What you’ve seen coming up the road, and what you’re seeing in front of us, are the symptoms of why this county is so much different from others, and why we have the problems we do.

“As to the first part of your earlier question - why don’t people here take better care of their property? Over the years, Trance has bought up all the real estate within the county’s borders. The missing

piece you didn't have: every home you've seen has been a rental. There's no pride of ownership at play for those residences, no sense of real permanence. Few people here, unless they live out in the sticks or in a mobile home, have the deed to the property they hang their hats in."

"As to the other thing you asked about - where are the people in the middle with a little money and nicer things? There are some in Trance's inner circle, and among the Sheriff's deputies, for sure. But even that little taste of wealth can be tenuous for those people. One wrong move, and they've fallen out of favor, stuck in the same aging, beat-up rentals as the poor white trash they once lorded over.

"Debra Ann, do not underestimate the tight-fisted grip that Trance and his underling-slash-enforcer, DeRump, have over the people who live here."

"That's going to make it tough talking to the locals..."

"Yup. You need to know that anyone seen talking to you is at immediate risk to themselves and their families of being thrown out of their homes to the curb. With no place to go anywhere in this county - other than New Hungary, of course.

"That's a powerful motivation to hide things from, or outright lie to, a stranger."



CHAPTER 5

Clearly, the extent of Trance’s and DeRump’s reach would affect who I could speak to and how I’d approach them.

“Is that true of the entire area, Trance and DeRump having total control?”

“No,” Fred replied, looking over his shoulder to back up before resuming our journey, “Trance’s political weight comes from being the County Judge and his economic prowess from what he owns within its borders; DeRump’s control is from his position as Sheriff. Their power and influence stop at the county line.

“In Port Lybral County, where you stepped off the plane, they detest both men. Authorities there have threatened to arrest either of

them on sight. The upside is that, because the only planes in Narcissus County are crop dusters, neither of those two can fly out of the area to extend their reach anywhere.”

There’s a proverb that says the enemy of my enemy is my friend. I sensed I might need shelter from the approaching storm; it wouldn’t hurt to know more about the neighboring county.

“Are there resources in Port Lybral that I can tap into, say, for example, that I need something that’s not available locally?”

“The answer is yes, but you’ll want to be very careful. On paper, the residents of the two counties hate each other. The wrong person getting wind of any cooperation between you and the other side could be dangerous to your health.

“You should keep in mind that there are two firearms registered in this county for every one person who turns up in the census, and there are almost as many unregistered guns. You also need to consider that the people I call my neighbors don’t always exercise emotional restraint, particularly when alcohol or drugs are involved.”

The imagery behind his words made my eyes widen.

“I hear you. I’d hoped you’d accompany me for most of these interviews....”

“When I can, but that won’t always work. I’m protected somewhat from Trance and DeRump retaliating by the umbrella of ‘grieving father liable to say things he doesn’t mean.’ But it’s pretty thin - I’m already getting threats passed on to me by third parties.

“People know how I feel about certain things, and some don’t want me around. Maybe they’re scared, or maybe because their tongues are so far up Trance’s ass that they know what he had for breakfast. As a stranger, you may have a better chance of getting straight answers from those folks if I’m not with you.”

“Tell me more about Port Lybral County then, in case I need to beat a hasty retreat.”

“Nice place - my family and I liked to go there when we had something we wanted to celebrate. Hasn’t happened for a while.”

I heard the catch in his voice and noticed his eyes were wet, so I took a moment to scan the countryside passing by through my window.

“Still, I think most Narcissus County folk do the same thing. Going there has to be on the Q.T., though. Port Lybral is the polar opposite of this place - as liberal and progressive as Arkansas gets. The die-hard archconservatives here shudder in fear that those ideas might spread. You don't want it getting out at church, or especially in your kids' school, that you've associated with liberals for any reason. The rumor-mongering will eat you alive, and they'll take everything you've worked all your life for.”

“Just for thinking differently? Wow.”

“That's the sad situation here. Over there, however, they got a lot of things right that we didn't. Back at the end of the seventies, manufacturing was struggling to survive. Port Lybral County recognized early the need to get ahead of what was coming. I think the kicker was seeing the quality the Japanese were building into their cars.

“It wasn't easy; Port Lybral County's still in Arkansas, where almost everyone carries a Bible and won't trust a stranger. County leaders started with the hardest part: retail tourism. Difficult to promote in a place as suspicious of outsiders as we are here. Then they wanted gambling legalized - that was a statewide thing, and they're still fighting those battles with the holy rollers. Though there's been some progress lately, we're way behind neighboring states; even if they voted in gambling, we couldn't compete.

“Then somebody had what proved to be a genius idea. So far as I know, no one had yet coined the term 'medical tourism.' So, when Port Lybral County spent serious money promoting its well-regarded child oncology hospital and the surrounding services, it was on the bleeding edge.”

“In the 70s? Even in California, that would have been innovative.”

“Most people thought they were nuts, especially when they built a classy hotel for parents and caregivers, with direct access to the

hospital. But the publicity brought them some of the best doctors and surgeons. Which led to more equipment and another research center. Ancillary services started moving into the area.

“That success really got the ball rolling, and they’ve added solar and wind farms to support the electricity needed for data processing, transport, and storage. They’ve built incubation centers for small businesses, including enthusiastic support for micro businesses, focused on helping single parents.”

My question had produced yet another study in discomfiting contrasts: Fred’s summary of Port Lybral County focused sharply against the background of poverty and corruption I’d learned about this afternoon.

As Fred drove, we crossed into an area where the houses sat on smaller lots and were closer together. Fred swept his right arm across the dashboard.

“Welcome to Nero’s Fiddle, the seat of Narcissus County - its butt, basically; also, its largest city by far. Our biggest claim to fame is as the home of the Mushroom Cap Society, the well-known over-the-hill porn star fan club that Stormy Darnell runs. It’s the go-to penis extension distributor for those with smaller hands. Their big seller is a life-sized plastic statue of Trance’s three-inch erection - pre-teen boys buy them to impress themselves that their newly discovered manhood is longer and wider.”

“Stormy Darnell?”

“She’s the past-her-prime porn queen you might see trailing after Trance now and then. Some say she’s looking for the money he owes her. Others say there’s another reason he avoids her like the plague: every time he pulls down his pants in front of her, she laughs and can’t stop.”

The imagery brought a wry smile to my face, but it was time to get into why I was here.

"Fred, you've dropped some hints about who you hold responsible for what happened to Innocence Grace, and if you don't mind, I'd like to get into that while we're driving."

Fred nodded his assent.

"Sure, where do you want to start?"

"I need to ask you something first, out of politeness. I notice you always refer to your daughter by her full name. That's a lot of syllables for a teenager, and I would've thought she'd have a nickname."

Fred chewed on his lower lip for a moment before answering.

"Around the house, she's always been 'Grace.' Her friends at school called her 'Cense.' But when we first found out someone had violated her, I promised two things: that I'd run down the bastard who did that to her, and that I'd make sure the world knew her given name, respected it.

"She was hurting so badly, especially inside her head, and I knew even then it went deeper than we could see. We tried so many things to show her we all loved her and honored who she was. Wasn't enough, as things turned out."

Fred paused, averting his eyes from me, presumably to ponder a tree passing outside his partially rolled-down window.

"At her funeral, I vowed I'd always use her full name. She was a great kid and deserved for people to know who she was."

That was something I could relate to. As someone who'd insisted people call me "Debra Ann" - not "Deb" or "Debbie" or even just "Debra" - I understood what a name means to someone who is proud of it.

Now I needed to ferret out where to begin my work.

"I noticed you went to great lengths to avoid naming names when you reached out to me while I was in San Diego. I get why you wouldn't want to be overheard on the phone or have someone intercept an e-mail. But there's no one else here, and I need to know who you think did this to Innocence Grace."

"I'm not sure how you go about your job, but I'm guessing you looked up Narcissus County on the web. You'd have known before you got off that flight who Judge Trance and Sheriff DeRump are, at least so far as their official duties to the county. You've seen Trance's place and some effects of the hold he has on people here. I've told you a little, and you've always been pretty sharp; you could guess a lot of the rest.

"I understand that it's not enough for a professional news piece. But surely you realize that nothing of any significance goes on here without Trance and DeRump at least knowing about it, and as likely as not, profiting from the knowledge."

Fred had caught me between my feelings for his situation and my experience with how life works.

"Without understanding more about Trance and DeRump, it's difficult to know for sure. But on first take, with what's at risk for either of them, it's hard to imagine - and I'm sorry to put it this way - one of them raping a little girl and letting her live to tell it. If they'd tried to kill her but failed, that would make it more likely, but that's not what happened here.

"Raping a child is one of the most violent of crimes. Yet, not wanting to further harm her suggests the perpetrator has conflicted feelings. Maybe younger, possibly a first-timer. Maybe I'm missing something. You know them - would you describe Trance or DeRump as conflicted?"

Fred shook me off, a tinge of disappointment in his voice.

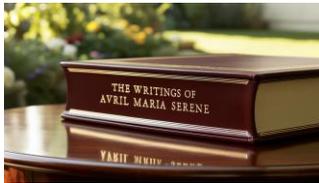
"I wish I could say 'yes' to make it fit. But no. Evil, sociopathic, maybe, but whatever they are, they're fully committed to it. No hesitation. Trance is seventy-two, DeRump's maybe twenty years younger. I don't see them doing anything different from what they've done before.

"Hurting people, yeah, of course. Even violently. Just not in that way. Frankly, I doubt the old man could get it up anymore, even for that.

“They say it’s taking him forever to find and dig out his pecker these days since they took away his magnifying glass and tweezers.”

That Fred would deflect with macabre humor wasn’t surprising; I’d seen the same in other people suffering horrific loss.

And in that light, including an emasculating insult seemed perfectly appropriate to the circumstances.





CHAPTER 6

As much as Fred hated Trance and DeRump, it was good to see his goal wasn't to get them at any cost. His level-headedness removed one barrier to finding Innocence Grace's rapist.

And we *were* narrowing the field.

"They may not have hurt Innocence Grace themselves, but it seems like you'd have to get help from at least one of those two if you wanted things covered up. Doesn't sound like someone could pull that off, given the way people in small towns talk, unless they had serious control over the rumor mill. The power to evict people from their

homes or harass them with constant traffic stops or jail time would give them that.

“So, we know the rapist has to be someone with whom Trance and DeRump have strong ties, deep enough that they’d provide cover for the rape of a child. That’s helpful to us because it reduces the suspect list. The other possibility is that the rapist has more power than, maybe control over, Trance and DeRump. Nothing you’ve said suggests anyone. Still, just to cover the bases, do you know of someone capable of committing a crime like this who’d also fit that description?”

“In *this* county? No, those two are the alpha dogs.”

Fred had pulled into the lot of what appeared to be a seedy motel, though he assured me it was the best in Nero’s Fiddle. The positive about the ride in Fred’s truck was that I’d lowered my expectations to fit the surroundings. After I’d checked in and Fred helped me with my bags, we continued our conversation inside the room. The accommodation, despite its outward appearance, had all the amenities and seemed clean, with a comfortable bed.

“Was Innocence Grace cooperative with investigators? What I mean is, did she seem like she knew her rapist but was afraid to tell?”

“There wasn’t much of an investigation, but no. It scared her to think he might attack her again, so she was really agitated. Wanted him caught before he came back. Someone had already started rumors saying she made the whole thing up - likely Trance’s and DeRump’s doing - so she wanted everyone to know this happened and who did it.”

“Okay, given how recognizable Trance and DeRump are around here, I think that’s more reason to rule them out as directly involved. It’s likely that whoever they’re covering for would have been subordinate to them. You’d think the Sheriff or the Judge would have construed what this individual did as a threat, not just risky, but stupid. Is there anyone in Trance’s or DeRump’s orbits that people have mentioned as obviously in the doghouse recently?”

“Demoted, maybe even fired?”

"My first thought was one of DeRump's deputies - they're always in some kind of trouble. And several people in the Sheriff's department have their jobs as homage to a special relationship they have with either Trance or DeRump.

"But I'm not sure the Sheriff, or especially the Judge, would go that far out on a limb to cover for any of them."

Not much low-hanging fruit on this tree.

"The one thing we know is that Innocence Grace's attacker had to be male, someone turned on by preteen girls. He'd likely also have resented them at some level. Any male relatives of either of the two men that might have done this?"

"Trance has an adult son, Marron, but he's a fagg... sorry, not supposed to say that anymore; he's gay."

"Let's table that for the moment. Look, Fred, this next question is going to hurt, but I need the details about the night they raped her. I want to learn whatever you know, and especially anything you've heard about what the investigators have turned up. Let's start with where and when this happened."

Fred had to know this was coming; surely, he'd had to repeat pieces of what happened dozens of times. Still, he swallowed hard before answering.

"Well, it was after school, the third week in September; nice weather. Innocence Grace was riding her bike home when a van bumped her from behind. Not hard enough to hurt her or the bike too badly, just knocked them down."

"This was, like, what? A minivan? Do you know how old it was, what color?"

"She said it was a full-sized van, white, not new but not old either. She remembered it was like the ones they used to take elderly people on day trips at the nursing home. It had three rows of seats behind the driver."

"How would she know about the vehicles a nursing home would use?"

“Oh, her mom’s a registered nurse and worked at a senior citizens’ residence for a while.”

“So, it might have had lettering on the side, maybe a logo...?”

“Yeah, that was something the deputy who interviewed her was really interested in, kept hounding her about it. Her mother had the feeling he might know who owned that van, but nothing ever came of it.”

“That’s interesting... can you get me the name of the deputy who interviewed her?”

“Sure, Joe Manchin. The one I told you about who claims to be on our side but can flip in a heartbeat.”

“*Something* Innocence Grace told him obviously caught the deputy’s attention...”

“She said there was masking tape covering the writing on the sides of the van. But there was this circle she could make out with what looked like a book falling out of one side of it. He was all over that, kept asking questions, but she didn’t really see it. The paint or stick-on for the design came out thicker than the factory-applied paint on the van. So, there were high and low spots in the masking tape, and that’s what made the pattern she saw.”

“I assumed the deputies at least tried to run it down?”

“Yeah, they hit up all the nursing homes and bookstores in the county; showed her pictures of the vans they found, but nothing matched.”

“So, after her attacker bumped her bike, what happened?”

“She told him she was okay, but he insisted on taking her home and ‘fessing up to us about what happened. He made her put her bicycle in the van’s rear, and she sat in the front passenger seat. When she realized he wasn’t taking her home, she started screaming. He put a stun gun of some kind against her stomach and then her neck. The second shock knocked her out.”

“When she woke up, her underwear was off, and her bottom was hanging out of the sliding side door of the van, her head and

shoulders stuck in a row between the van's seats. They were at the edge of the park on the other side of town, next to a clump of trees. She started fighting him, but he stunned her again on the inside of her thigh. She'd wake up every so often during the attack, but she'd pass right back out. When she came fully to, she was lying on the grass. Her clothes were back on, and her bike was next to her. She was bleeding, and everything hurt everywhere."

Quietly, I asked, "How did she get home? Did she call you?"

"She didn't have a cell phone; the school doesn't allow them. Too hurt and sore to ride her bicycle. She was in so much pain she could barely walk, but she hobbled home nearly four miles, using the bike as a kind of wheeled crutch for support. She was looking over her shoulder all the way, so frightened he'd return."

Sitting on the edge of the wooden motel chair's cushion, Fred's lower lip and jaw were quivering, and he was leaning his chin on his curled fist to steady it.

"Do you want to take a break, Fred? I know you've had a long day; if you want, we can continue this tomorrow."

"No, let's get this part done; you have to know."

He took a deep breath and began again; this time, his tone was more matter-of-fact, his demeanor businesslike.

"Look, before all this happened, we were just country folk trying to get by in relative peace. Sure, we'd heard about DNA in crime shows on TV, but it meant nothing to our lives.

"After they assaulted Innocence Grace, we wanted to learn everything we could. We found a YouTube video of a young man who slept on high-thread-count black cotton sheets for a week, wearing just his underwear, and took pictures of the sheets each morning. That's how we learned what it means to 'shed DNA.'

"But on the night that it happened, we were clueless about it.

"When Innocence Grace limped her way home with her bike, her internal bleeding would have flushed out any of her attacker's DNA, so the challenges we'd face later started there.

“She was a scared little girl, just wanting to find her mom and cry in her arms... how was she supposed to know what to do?

“Or any of us?”

Fred paused, his shoulders dropping.

“She was too ashamed to ask for help, so she avoided going the usual way and wouldn’t talk to anyone.

“I wasn’t home when she got there. We were doing inventory at the feed store, so I was working a long day, a half-hour from home. Her mom did the best she could to deal with the situation, but she’s a nurse, so her first inclination was to fix up her baby girl.

“Innocence Grace was in awful shape by the time she made it back to the house that night. Besides the physical damage, she was terrified, deathly afraid that other people would find out, or that he’d come after her again. She worried she’d get pregnant, that the assault would destroy her reputation; no one would want to marry her, and she’d be too scarred to have kids.”

She must have been absolutely terrified; had it been me at that age, I wouldn’t have been able to sleep soundly for weeks, maybe months... maybe ever.

“All she wanted to do was scrub off all the grime, shame, and insult, inside and out. She was in the shower for an hour, scouring and rubbing so hard that tiny little bubbles of blood were coming up through her skin. Nobody realized that she was adding to the bruising.

“Her mom thought it would help her feel clean. She wanted to cooperate as much as possible with what our daughter needed because she was trying so hard to convince Innocence Grace to go to the Sheriff and report it.

“Her mother washed her clothes. They were Innocence Grace’s favorite things to wear to school, and Mom figured that if she could make them look like new again, maybe Grace would feel better.

“And she’s always bitten her nails; we thought she’d grow out of it someday, and it wouldn’t help to ride her about it. By the time I got

home and took her to the Sheriff's station, she'd chewed them down to the quick. Mom didn't know enough to stop her.

"So, we didn't follow any of the steps we were supposed to; we just didn't know what the right thing to do was."

The details were heart-wrenching - for him, obviously, but for me, too. Still, we had to have this conversation.

"Did she leave a note? Or anything that might have pointed to her rapist?"

Fred was staring at the floor, elbows on his knees, the heels of his hands clamped over the tops of his ears, fingertips resting on his scalp.

"We never found one. The only thing we turned up was something she'd scribbled in the upper margin of her social studies homework during her last day at school. It says, 'God's going to take his side.' We don't know what it means, or who it's about."

The room lapsed into silence as I processed what Fred had said. Sharing the details had changed things in ways I hadn't expected.

As a journalist, you learn to separate yourself from the story; you have to if you want to be faithful to your readers, who require honesty and objectivity. But understanding what she'd been through affected my viewpoint. I wouldn't be looking at Innocence Grace's rape in the same way going forward.

And there were other effects. Up to this point, most of the emotion I'd seen in Fred Freeman had flowed from his anger: bitterness at the church for its lack of support, frustration with the pace and results of the investigation, outrage at those in power he believed responsible in various ways.

But as he'd walked through the events of that afternoon, I saw the first clear signs of defeat. His shoulders sagged, his voice lapsing into a monotone. The occasional shaking in his words and hands seemed beyond his power to stop. He was as vulnerable, completely exposed, as I'd ever seen in another human being. And he was clearly

empty, drained of strength or will to fight, now too tired to express intense emotion, unable to mount even the facade of denial.

Fred was a father who felt he'd let down his daughter in the worst ways possible: first by not protecting her, and then by showing helplessness in trying to bring her rapist to justice.

Exactly how Dad would have felt had anything like that ever happened to me.

With that thought, I could feel a tear coming to *my* eye.



CHAPTER 7

After several moments of contemplation in silence, I stood, and Fred followed my lead. Obviously, there was plenty of work ahead of us, but it would have to wait until the next day - we'd done all we could with this one.

"Let me get settled in and organize my notes," I said, glancing around the room, "and I'll check in with you first thing in the morning.

"In the meantime, can you ask around among your friends to see if there's anyone who fits the guy we're looking for? Someone who's obviously on the outs with Trance or DeRump over something they don't want to talk about...."

“Doubt any of us had really looked at it that way, so sure, it’s something a little different for people to think about.

“Betsy and the kids haven’t seen you for a couple of years now, and she’ll want to catch up. She was there when Innocence Grace came home that day, so she might know details I don’t or may have left out. Not sure where it fits in how you go about investigating things, but we’d like to have you over to the house as soon as you can work it into your plans.”

“I’ll look forward to that. And one of the first things you and I need to do is speak with the county’s medical examiner to determine where things stand.”

“Here in Arkansas, most counties use coroners. They’re elected; anyone can run for the office. Narcissus County’s isn’t the worst of them, but I wish Dr. Warren had more experience with sex crimes. He used to be our doctor, but he’s taken on airs since he got into politics, so we don’t talk much anymore. But I’ll call to schedule an office visit.”

I suddenly realized I had no wheels.

“Oh, and one more thing. I’ll need to rent a car so I can nose around on my own and leave you free to work and take care of your family.”

Fred thought for a moment.

“I know a place in Petergeorge, across the border in Port Lybral County. The new cars have built-in remote technology, so the rental company can disable them for non-payment. You don’t want anyone in Narcissus County having that kind of control over your movements.”



True to his word, Fred got us an appointment with the Narcissus County Coroner the following morning. The timing was late enough that I could share an early breakfast with Fred’s family and pick up a rental car beforehand. Seeing his wife, Betsy, his surviving daughter, Liberty Belle, and his two younger sons again was a somber experience. The

reason for my visiting Nero's Fiddle made it awkward; no one needed any reminders why Innocence Grace wasn't there, as they hunched over their plates of country ham, grits, and biscuits and gravy.

Still, there'd be time for other conversations, and seeing Fred's home and family gave us a basis for lighter chitchat on the way to Petergeorge. After leasing a silver Mazda 626, I followed Fred to the Narcissus County Coroner's office.



My first impression of Dr. Warren had me thinking of an out-of-place insurance salesman, an overweight glad-hander with a wide smile that seemed grossly inappropriate for his job description. His white lab coat looked unnatural on him, reminding me of the actors in late-night vitamin commercials, missing only the shiny new stethoscope.

The good doctor's appearance backed up Fred's comment that the job was political. Still, I'd have to consider that the familiarity he was showing stemmed from Fred and his family having been former patients.

Fred had also said the coroner wasn't the state's worst, and I had to give the doctor his due. He'd had the forethought to gather Innocence Grace's medical records, those her family doctor had kept before her suicide. He also had the notes of the initial post-rape examination that the hospital had done under contract with the Sheriff's office.

Still, our discussion began inauspiciously. Knowing Fred could never be objective, I intended to introduce myself and pose most of the questions. But before I got the chance, Fred jumped the coroner with a question, more of a demand, about the direction the investigation had taken and its lack of progress. The attack put the coroner on the defensive.

"Look, Fred, I don't mean to make things worse for you. But I represent the county in my job, and I must remain neutral in these

matters. When the Sheriff tells me they look at family members first, which makes you a suspect, I have to go along. When he says the alleged victim may have staged the whole thing to get back at an ex-boyfriend, I must take that into account, especially in a case where I don't have any solid evidence to argue differently.

"I've known you a long time, Fred, and Innocence Grace and my oldest were in the same Sunday school class for years. So, do I believe everything I'm told? No, I don't. But again, I can't take sides."

"And I know you, too, Joe," Fred fired back, almost yelling. "Renting that big old house from Trance to give your wife and your five kids something you can call a home. Can't afford to pay much on your county salary - sure can't buy a house. I see what's going on here."

The doctor bristled but attempted to hide his reaction.

"Fred, I'm going to let that pass out of respect because you're grieving and not in control of your emotions or what you're saying. But that brings us back around to the fact that you're a potential suspect in an alleged rape, one you may have helped stage. That's how the record reads. And I can't be sharing anything unofficially with a potential suspect, especially one here to make trouble. It might be best if you were to leave, Fred, before you make things any worse than they already are. I've said all there is I can say."

It was time I stepped in to salvage the situation.

"I'm sorry, doctor, for interrupting, but I can see there are strong feelings between the two of you, and I certainly understand why. My name's Debra Ann Wynn, and I'm a reporter visiting from California. I'm also Fred's cousin. We didn't come to cause trouble."

I gave Fred a pleading look as my way of asking him to stand down for a moment.

"We just wanted to learn where things stood and started with you out of regard for your professional opinion."

"Look, I can't say I like it or that I agree with it, but the Sheriff's taken a position. He's saying that, obviously, she had to have been severely depressed to arrive at a place where she'd commit suicide. And

to be frank, we have no way of knowing how long before she might have been in that state. Did her mental deterioration begin before the alleged rape? Who can say?"

"Wouldn't her parents, teachers, and other students have noticed?" I asked.

"Yes, but that's something for the Sheriff's deputies to investigate. I have to work with the information they provide. The county doesn't provide me with staff for that.

"But her prior mental state isn't something you can just dismiss, even if you wanted to. Sadly, I've seen these kinds of things before myself, and nobody ever knows what someone's likely to do in a situation like that - it's not something for which you can really prepare."

When I stepped between Fred and the coroner, I intended to serve as a mediator. But I'd allowed the tension between the two men and my loyalty to Fred as family to color my approach, and I made a tactical error. Having not heard anything about the evidence related to Innocence Grace's assault, I jumped to an assumption.

"So, you didn't think there was any point in putting together a rape kit?"

"Miss, we may not be a big city, but we know how to do our jobs. When Innocence Grace came to us, it was several hours later. She'd been physically active after the incident; she'd already taken a prolonged shower, she wasn't wearing the same clothes, and she hadn't left enough of her fingernails to do a scraping. There was little to work with, but we did the best we could under the circumstances. We got a vaginal swab that looked promising, but the state labs are way behind. We've never gotten the acknowledgement of receipt from them."

The coroner paused and took a deep breath. He glanced at Fred, who'd placed his forehead on the edge of the coroner's desk and was rolling it side to side, I assume to muzzle himself.

The doctor's eyes flicked back to meet mine, and I could see his countenance had softened noticeably.

"I understand how upset you are with the way things have gone, and as a father myself, I wouldn't feel any differently if this had happened to one of my daughters. You have my word - I'll track down that rape kit and do my best to push it through the system."

Another pause, another long inhalation.

"Listen, Miss... Wynn, did you say?... I'm not the enemy here, and I want to help, I really do. Are we on the record?"

"No, I'm just here to support the family. I'm asking these questions only because I'm the one who knows how. Things might change later, but I won't be holding you to anything you say now."

"Good enough. I'm taking your word because I know Fred, and I'm assuming you're here because you share the same values."

His gaze was steady as we made eye contact.

"That rape kit never made it to the state lab."

I'd thought of that as a possibility; still, it was surprising to hear it straight from the coroner. The admission had also startled Fred, who raised his head from the desk.

"Look, I've said this before, I have a job to do, one I stand for election to keep. I can't do that without Trance's and DeRump's support - that's just the way it is here. So, you can understand that I'm walking a tightrope.

"Let me just say this isn't the first evidence lost in this county, especially in sexual assault and domestic abuse cases."

The doctor caught the flash of anger reddening Fred's face.

"Now, before Fred goes shooting the place up, you need to know it's not our office that's the problem. We're required to use Sheriff's deputies as our couriers to ensure we don't break the chain of custody. Sometimes evidence disappears during the transition. Still, we must follow the law. Everything has to run through the Judge to get any warrants we need, and through the Sheriff for their execution.

"There are certain things the law requires the Sheriff to pursue. Sometimes, they can't get out of it because of public perception or the nature of the crime. If they really don't have it in their hearts to do what

they're supposed to, this is one way they deal with that kind of situation. Slow-walking, sometimes no-walking, is one of their favorite tools. You call them on it, and worst-case, they *might* throw a deputy under the bus for it."

Dr. Warren sighed.

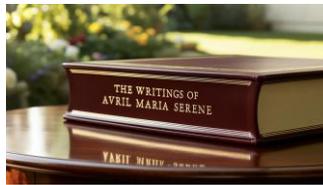
"I know you want to blame me, Fred, and I can't say I wouldn't feel the same way. But there's something else you need to know. Dr. Hansen and I were at the Giffords' anniversary celebration right after all this happened. He told me that when he treated Innocence Grace once the authorities had finished with her, she'd revealed something she hadn't mentioned to law enforcement. During the attack, she'd gotten hold of a ballpoint pen clipped to her backpack, and had it in her fist, stabbing at her assailant... got in a few licks with it.

"The pen was still in her hand when she woke up on the grass alongside her bike. I asked Dr. Hansen if she still had it. He said, yes, she'd brought it to his office later, and he'd been looking for an excuse to make me aware of the circumstances."

The coroner stared at Fred, his eyes unwavering.

"You need to understand I can't make any promises here. But I looked long and hard at that pen with a magnifying glass, and there's a good chance there's DNA on it. The pen was separate from the rape kit, and I made damned sure it didn't travel via the Sheriff's deputies. I had to go to Little Rock for my certification, so I hand-delivered it to the state lab.

"They're buried in work and haven't gotten back to me. I just need you to know, Fred, that I did what I could. There may be some hope from this you can take home with you."





CHAPTER 8

The coroner's revelation that there might be other evidence, along with having a fellow conspirator in yours truly, seemed to reinvigorate Fred - it certainly refreshed his memory. At my request, he filled several sheets of a lined yellow legal pad with names and contact information for dozens of people; anyone he thought might know something about Innocence Grace's rape and the events that immediately followed it.

I chased down each one, a process which generated nearly twice as many new leads. Those I diligently pursued until the chain exhausted itself.

There was an unexpected benefit to interviewing in a rural community where a strong work ethic and long hours were the norm. I could begin chatting with people at 7:00 in the morning at the diner and keep going until 10:00 at night, often ending my day at the little country-western bar off the highway.

Other interview possibilities presented themselves along the way. Occasionally, a resident whose name wasn't on my list would approach me at the restaurant. A few introduced themselves inside the little gift shop still hanging on at the town square. About half of those wanted to spin sometimes-vicious yarns around someone they didn't like; one or two could have used psychiatric care. The others, even those with a clear agenda, were honestly trying to help, offering tidbits that might have been useful under other circumstances.

Still, I found it difficult to turn up anything new or actionable around what had happened to Innocent Grace.

My story gravitated toward the abuses and corruption in county government, and there I found traction. I ran across several anecdotal narratives I could cross-reference and verify; one fiery old woman, long since retired, had kept copies of the county's ledgers and other documents. I couldn't use her as a source because what she'd done was illegal. Still, her help gave me the resources I needed to ask more pointed questions and dig deeper than I might have otherwise.

I slowly evolved a technique that seemed to work when interviewing residents. People were more willing to talk if I first created the impression that Trance or DeRump, preferably both, were not invincible, and that I'd uncovered vulnerabilities. I'd do that by exposing one or two of the facts I'd gathered, implying I had more but couldn't share with them unless they reciprocated - a matter of trust, of course.

The approach worked better with the women than with the men. Still, I could probe, peck, and peek enough to, over time, collect the facts necessary for a relevant story.

I split the results into two articles. One segment exposed the ineptitude and graft in Narcissus County's governance. The other

explored the cover-up of Innocent Grace's assault, including the lost rape kit, the spreading of false rumors to smear the victim, and the lack of sincere investigative follow-up.

In the latter, I spent significant ink describing the van logo that seemed to have fallen into the abyss, hoping it might tweak a reader's memory. I explained how all these things, done on the taxpayer's dime, had added to the pain and suffering of Innocence Grace and her family, culminating in the tragedy that was her suicide.

As to running down the rapist and any enablers, the original purpose for my visit to Nero's Fiddle, I'd struggled. Sometimes, you're just too close to a story. And even when you know intellectually that's what's holding you back, you don't have the tools by yourself to fix it. I've always felt bad that I couldn't do a better job speaking for Innocence Grace, and I'll carry the regret with me the rest of my life. It's changed the way I've done a few things since.

But I gave it my best shot. I hoped that if I stirred things up enough, something might arise out of the noise and confusion to resolve the violations against Fred's daughter. I wanted to bring closure to her family - a trite phrase I despise, but one for which I could find no suitable substitute.

After I'd burned through my vacation gathering the information I could, I'd spend my free time over the next month polishing compelling articles from what I had.

With the help of Fred, his friends, and Joe Manchin, the sometimes well-meaning but unreliable contact within the Sheriff's office, I put together a damning two-installment exposé suitable for publication in *USA Today*. The essence of the story revolved around the corruption, power, and tawdry behavior of Judge Trance and his henchman, Sheriff DeRump.

The work illuminated the excessive power that county judges and sheriffs wield in smaller districts throughout the South, an artifact of Reconstruction and Southern states' early attempts to circumvent federal oversight and Northern carpetbaggers.

In the years since, Judge Trance has dodged meaningful accountability, though his reputation outside the county has worsened significantly and his notoriety has spread nationally. He appeased county voters by letting DeRump hang in the wind, providing no support as he insinuated DeRump was at the crux of all the county's problems. Trance himself hung onto power through increased intimidation and pulling every lever he could, legal or otherwise.

The state removed DeRump from office. However, he avoided serious legal or civil punishment through his connections, influential lawyers, and corrupt cronies remaining in the Sheriff's Department. Still, hope remains; cases against him have dragged on for years, though litigants have filed fewer new lawsuits as statutes of limitation have expired.



What Matt had heard thus far wasn't satisfying him.

"Aunt Deb, I mean, I feel terrible about the girl and everything, but that case didn't seem very unusual, except maybe because it involved your family. I thought you helped murder somebody."

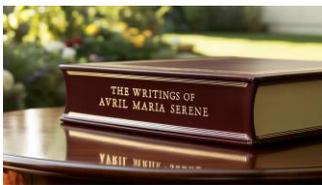
I could see I'd lost Mike entirely. His chin was on the heel of one hand, a look of extreme disinterest on his face. He was playing with an old fidget spinner someone had tucked away among the waxed fruit in the wicker basket on the counter.

"Good things come to those who wait," I teased with a mischievous grin, earning me an eye roll from Matt. Mike gave me an apathetic glance as he leaned toward me on one elbow.

Raising an eyebrow and giving Mike my best you-have-no-idea-what-you're-missing smirk, I turned back to Matt.

“Sad as it was for Fred and his family, and as frustrating as it became for me, that wasn’t the story I’m sharing with you today. Not even close. But it sets the backdrop for something that happened later, and this is where it gets crazy, as in totally bonkers.

“And for that part of it, we need to fast-forward about eight years....”





CHAPTER 9

DECEMBER 7, 2024, SAN DIEGO

As horrible as that first one was, Fred Freeman's second call to me in San Diego eight years later to tell me of Liberty Belle's sexual assault and homicide was so much worse.

Because I was in work mode when Fred called me in 2017, I'd been better equipped to deal with the terrible things happening in the world. Back then, the major impact I had to absorb came from learning that a family member was involved.

Things were much different when I picked up my cell that evening in late 2024. Paul had become a big part of my life by then, and

we were enjoying some long-overdue downtime. We'd just had a pizza delivered and were getting ready to watch a Netflix Christmas movie.

I was four and a half months into my first pregnancy; we'd learned only days before that we were having a baby boy. I'd been trying to adjust to hormones that seemed like they were all over the map. For his part, Paul showed extraordinary patience with me, and we were looking forward to Thomas Ethan's birth. I'd put the Hodin cabal case to bed, as much as it could be, with Marci Robbins's help. Marci had passed the exam for her gold shield, and her promotion was pending the first position that opened among the detectives.

There'd been sad times, too. Dad had passed a year before. I was still missing him, thinking of him often... that's true even today. Losing him led to other changes. For one, he'd left me a trust, which put me in a strong enough financial position to investigate the stories I chose.

Paul and I visited the final resting place of his daughter, Cindy, every weekend. The feeling of loss would always be there, of course. Still, Paul and I were moving toward acceptance, if only because the cancer and its treatment had caused her so much pain - at least that part was over.

Life in our tiny part of the world had settled into a comfortable pattern, with the promise of a bright future.

But the cosmos is huge, and no one could say the same for other places in it.

The thing with terrible tragedies, especially something as devastating as the rape of Innocence Grace and her follow-on suicide, is that we think of them as one-offs; life-defining events so overwhelming that, like lightning, they can only strike once in the same place. By themselves, they are too catastrophic to ever truly end. That was especially so with Fred's oldest daughter, since there'd been no resolution to her sexual assault; there *was* no closure.

So, you hope - pray - you can make it through that unique circumstance, clinging to the belief that there'll come a time when the

worst will be over; you can begin repairing the damage. And in ways you can't yet imagine, experience healing.

Learning of the sexual torture and murder of Fred's youngest daughter, Liberty Belle, destroyed that naïve notion of singularity - and with it, any sense of having at least survived the worst that could ever happen to you.

There was a crushing element to losing Liberty Belle; what she'd suffered was more extreme and immediate than what her sister had gone through, but worse, there was a sense of "I just can't go through this again." I think for any of us who are honest with ourselves, it's impossible to avoid the question, "Why are they doing this to me?" where 'they' represents the most powerful forces in your personal universe, however you perceive them.

I hadn't been close to Innocence Grace in the few years just before she took her life, but I'd established a bond with Liberty Belle when I was there that first time, trying to help the family. Belle and I e-mailed regularly; she was interested in writing and had a genuine talent for it. I enjoyed being her mentor. With Innocence Grace, the impact of hearing what she'd endured hit hard because it hurt thinking of any child having to deal with what she went through. Much of the pain passed to me through Fred's eyes.

With Liberty Belle, the hit was deeply personal and gut-wrenching; the idea of a little one of my own was no longer an abstract thought.

For all I was going through absorbing the news, I could tell, even over the phone, that Fred was in real trouble. He was strong, a good man, who now felt he'd failed two daughters in the worst way possible: absent in their time of terrible need. Given who he was as a person, that would have been bad enough; but in the conservative culture in which he lived, the expectations of a family man were high. All his life he'd done his best to answer the call; that effort defined who he was.

I was powerless to do anything for him in the moment of his second plea for help, except to respond favorably to whatever he asked.

That seemed inadequate; he was at a point where he desperately needed someone closer in his world to step up and provide serious support.

The details were horrific. Her killer had tortured Liberty Belle before her homicide, sexually and otherwise, and violated her further afterward. Fred couldn't say all the words himself, and it would be several days before I'd learn just how badly she'd suffered. Still, I knew it had been brutal, and I just couldn't wrap my head around not only that it had occurred, but that it could happen *there... again*. For all its faults and other indecencies, Nero's Fiddle wasn't a place where you'd expect such sheer savagery.

The only thing I could do was listen, finally blurting out a commitment to grab a seat on the next flight out, without including Paul in either the conversation or my rushed decision.

It took a moment to snap back into my world after I broke the connection. And yet another to realize my mistake in not letting Paul in on Fred's horrific circumstances. Still, he'd overheard enough to realize the gravity of the situation, and, as always, he was gracious with me, letting me find a path to sharing.

Somewhere along the way, I recognized the incongruity of a nearly five-months-pregnant woman stepping into the aftermath of gratuitous violence eighteen hundred miles away, armed only with a voice recorder and a cellphone.

As the apologies and partially formed explanations came tumbling out in a mad mix of half-complete sentences and tears, Paul reached out and placed his hand gently on my shoulder, saying simply, "It's okay, Debra Ann. We'll figure this out."

And just like that, I knew we would.

"Thanks, honey. Can I start over?"

Paul kissed the back of my hand; his look was soft and patient.

"It might work better if you went all the way back to the beginning this time."

What he could see of my expression between the streaks of running mascara was sheepish.

"Alright, let me try that."

Over the next two hours, I told him everything I could remember about the events of eight years ago, along with what Fred had told me in our latest conversation.

"Paul, what's happened to those poor girls is bad enough, but I'm worried about Fred. He seemed so... *detached*... I know - what else would you expect? But that's not Fred, and I know from the last time that he's not dealing with this in any way that's healthy for him. I don't know what other answers might be out there, but I couldn't turn him down. I just couldn't."

Paul paused in thought.

"I'd never interfere where I'm not wanted, but you know I have my responsibilities as a man, too...."

"Oh, Paul, trust me, you're wanted *here!*" I interrupted. His smile back was reassuring.

"... Some of those are to Thomas Ethan," Paul continued, "and I'm sorry, but I can't let you travel all that way without someone to help and protect both of you.

"I've accrued a ton of vacation time; I never use it. The Lieutenant might appreciate a little more notice, but the department will just have to deal with it."

I was so relieved he'd not only accepted the situation but volunteered his help that I stood and threw my arms around him in a tight hug, forgetting in my enthusiasm to make room for Thomas Ethan. Fortunately, Paul was on his toes, literally, and stepped back just enough so all three of us could fit in the same space.

The rest of our evening was somber as we rearranged our priorities. Paul called Lt. Louis Harbin to give him a heads-up about what was happening. Louis was not only a friend to both of us, but Paul's immediate supervisor in Forensics' partnership with Louis's Homicide unit. Paul was working with Det. Eve Byrne to resolve cold cases.

Fortunately, they weren't in the middle of anything that the department had classified as urgent.

I called my obstetrician to advise her and get her recommendations for pregnancy care in Port Lybral County; none of the physicians I'd met in and around Nero's Fiddle inspired confidence. After a stern warning to keep the stress level dialed down and to eat right, she gave me her blessing and a referral to a doctor in Petergeorge.

Doug Stein had been my mentor at the *Union-Tribune* when I was just a cub reporter, and a few months ago, he'd become my business partner. Doug and I had just filed the paperwork to launch our newsgathering startup, and the timing wasn't ideal for me to leave, even temporarily. Still, Doug was understanding and thought the respite would provide an opportunity to strengthen the foundations of our little enterprise.

And so, two days after Fred's latest phone call, Paul and I boarded a plane bound for Little Rock, then on to the airport in Port Lybral County.

I crossed my fingers that this visit would have a better outcome than the last.



CHAPTER 10

I've seen plenty of denial in my life, including some of my own.

Still, my sense of Fred's detachment didn't fully capture how much trouble he was having processing everything that had happened. As we met on the tarmac and I introduced Paul, Fred seemed to be in his own little world.

He'd drop out in the middle of sentences, often using the present tense to describe his daughters to Paul, though Innocence Grace was almost eight years gone now. Fred would catch himself from time to time; still, it was clear he was in that place Dad's generation might have called "checked out," just going through the motions.

Fred was driving a newer pickup; this one with a crew cab. I assumed it was one he used in his work managing the Farm and Country Store - I could smell traces of fertilizer coming from the bed. Paul and I sat together in the back seat, communicating with Fred through glances in the rearview mirror. I would play tour guide for Paul; Fred offered tidbits and updates here and there.

The ride reminded me of realities Paul was seeing for the first time - not only the natural beauty of the rural countryside, but the extreme poverty, with squalor and signs of ignorance tucked into the corners and crevices.

The sheer number of mobile homes surprised Paul.

"I haven't counted, but I'll bet there are more single- and double-wide trailers in this part of Arkansas than there are brick-and-mortar buildings."

The pungent odor of a packing plant was new to me, and I asked Fred about it.

"Oh, that... you get so used to it after a while. Yeah, about six years ago, Hormel took over an old plant outside Enabler Hollow. Seemed like a good thing at first, but they're down to just one shift now and have laid off most of their employees. People with wells complain that the water doesn't taste right anymore."

"Sounds like jobs aren't the only corners they're cutting," Paul surmised, and Fred nodded.

I asked Fred to take the same detour that he did eight years ago; he took the back road to the Trance estate so Paul could get a sense of the Judge, his wealth, and his power.

It was immediately clear to me that something was amiss. Most obviously, the large, gold-plated letter 'E' was missing from the name across the front of the gate. Someone had spray-painted "86 47" in orange across the Razorbacks logo.

The grounds weren't as well-kept; the fences needed serious repair. Even from where we sat, we could see long, wide cracks crossing

the pavement leading up to the house. And there were no cars in the area where I knew the servants usually parked.

The graffiti puzzled me.

“What’s the ‘86 47’ all about?”

“Oh, that - the ‘86’ is old-school slang, meaning to get rid of something or, in this case, someone. Trance was the 47th judge in Narcissus County’s history. His maintenance guy used to keep the sign clean, but someone would tag it again the next day. I guess Trance is tired of fighting a battle he can’t win.”

It seemed like more than that to me.

“He must have felt that way about a lot of things lately; the property looks like it’s taken a downhill slide. Or maybe he had a temper tantrum and fired all his staff?”

Fred brought me up to speed.

“That wouldn’t surprise me. Or maybe he just doesn’t give a damn anymore what anyone thinks. But the vindictive, evil son of a bitch is still as mercenary and nasty as he ever was. Lately, he’s been on something of a petty revenge tour, settling old scores.

“But you’re right, things haven’t been quite the same for him in the last several years. Those articles you wrote after you left took the wind out of his sails - he really had to scramble trying to save his ass and his position as Judge. He threw DeRump under the bus right away, of course, and he wound up owing plenty of people debts and favors he’s never repaid, mostly lawyers.”

I turned to Paul to explain a little of what I remembered.

“Trance’s shtick has always been about people buying into this narcissistic idea that everything begins and ends with his single point of view. It seems ridiculous, but it works for him.

“His preferred role is that of the grand actor with the orange stage makeup, insulting his enemies from a platform raised high above everyone. Once he turns on his heel to exit stage right, the scene’s supposed to end.”

Fred jumped in, extending the metaphor.

“But the people he’s insulted, angered, stolen from, and cheated are still in the audience. They didn’t go anywhere when that stage curtain came down. His little speech solved none of their problems; things got worse.

“His one-man act has taken a big dent as people have realized Trance is vulnerable; from outside, as the federal government noses around, and from inside, as his co-conspirators are tripping over themselves to rat him out.”

Paul pursed his lips, his brow furrowed.

“So, this Judge Trance is backing off, then?”

“Oh, no, the greedy bastard’s not about to change his ways,” Fred replied. “Here, the County Judge appoints the tax commissioner *and* rules on all tax litigation within the county. Trance’s latest move was to sue Narcissus County to recover \$230 million in taxes he claims to have overpaid. His tax commissioner approved the settlement-in-full for reimbursement by the already-poor county taxpayers.

“Still, they say a fish’s size will never grow beyond what the aquarium you put it in will support. Trance has the same problem. He’s sucked this county and its citizens dry; nothing more for him to take.

“The Judge tried to get creative, but he’s been so spoiled running this place for almost a decade that he’s gotten arrogant about how the rest of the world works. Or maybe he just wants to collect as many felonies as he can so that he, too, might be President one day.”

‘Creative?’ That can’t be good...

“I almost hate to ask, but what’s Trance up to now?”

“He saw what the Sacklers pulled off with OxyContin and decided he’d start distributing fentanyl through that rinky-dink chain of pharmacies he owns. He never stopped to consider how visible that many overdoses would be in small towns like these.

“Dumb move, really, with the Feds already snooping around. The DEA and FDA have independently begun investigating the suspicious deaths of county residents. Can’t miss ‘em - not much stands out more around here than suits and ties and shiny shoes.

"Those people were all over the place. They're gone now. My friend Alex - Alex Hamilton, you'll meet him when we get to town - says he's hearing that they're putting together a case for the federal grand jury."

I tried to think back to my first visit, but came up empty.

"Have I met Alex? I don't remember the name."

"No, he didn't come back until after you were gone. Alex used to live here, went out into the world to make his fortune; he'd just retired. He and I have always been tight, so he came back here to help me out when I couldn't keep it together after Innocence Grace passed. Saved me from getting into real trouble during rough times; doing more of the same now."

I caught Fred's rueful expression in the rearview as he turned away and spat out the half-open window.

"Anyhoo," Fred continued, "Trance has had to pay off dozens of people not to talk. He's hired ambulance chasers to handle the problems caused by others who have already spoken with law enforcement.

"Plus, they re-elected DeRump as Sheriff, Lord knows how, though I'm sure we had bunches of dead people voting. Either way, DeRump doesn't have the Judge's back anymore since Trance tossed the Sheriff to the wolves over the rape of my oldest.

"Trance bet on the wrong horse, though. We all thought after the state indicted DeRump, we had that cocksucker nailed. But the jury came back hung, and the DA wouldn't try the case again without more evidence than what they had. I think the state's attorney jumped the gun going after the then-ex-Sheriff for Innocence Grace's rape; feeling the pressure, I'm sure, with the other assaults we've had around here on young girls.

"Since Arkansas won't prosecute DeRump again, we have to find another way to get him out of office if we want to free the county from his tyranny."

Paul asked the obvious question.

“Do you still believe it was this ex-slash-new Sheriff who violated your daughter?”

“When Debra Ann came to investigate back in 2017, she helped me see that Trance and DeRump probably didn’t assault my oldest themselves. Since then, the Judge lost a huge lawsuit accusing him of raping a grown woman with his fingers. His hands may be tiny, but his below-the-belt equipment is even smaller and couldn’t rise to the occasion. The verdict tells me that young girls aren’t his thing, even though he’s said publicly he’d like to sleep with his own daughter.

“And the Sheriff’s more of a thug and a bully than a rapist.

“So maybe not either of them directly, but in a place like this, they’d have to know who did, and they’re covering for him for a reason. Could be a deputy. No way it goes on this long otherwise.”

“We ran out of suspects back then,” I explained to Paul. “There just aren’t that many people living here who’d be that *sick* and have that kind of hold on those two, yet with no one having any idea who it might be.”

“But given what they did to Liberty Belle, they’re escalating...,” Paul noted.

“That, and they must have made mistakes over all these years. With fresh eyes,” I smiled as I patted the top of his hand, “we should be able to put them away this time.”

I took a moment, glancing at the scenery passing by us.

“It’s crazy to me, with everything that’s happened after we lost Innocence Grace, to see the same people running the place.”

Fred weighed in.

“Whoever backed DeRump this last election cycle, it wasn’t Trance. The Judge is getting old, slipping up. Rumor has it the Sheriff’s got his eye on replacing Trance as Judge. The two of them going at each other oughta be a battle royale. Trance is down, but he ain’t out, at least as far as I can see. Too much to wish for, I suppose, that the two of them kill each other off in the fight.”

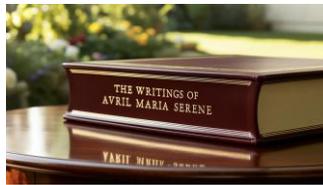
If you don’t get to one of them first.

I'd had the briefest thought that what I'd read as detachment wasn't that at all; it might instead be Fred exercising every bit of control over himself that he could muster. He'd made a comment to me years ago that I hadn't forgotten.

"I can't feed what's left of my family from prison. If I could, things would be a hell of a lot different from what they are."

I couldn't help but wonder how many thoughts like that were playing in his head. Still, the timing didn't seem right to ask.

When Paul and I got to a place where we could talk privately, I'd get his read on Fred.... *Would Paul be as concerned as I was?*





CHAPTER 11

Fred did not mince words as he continued parsing Trump's and DeRump's roles in the deaths of his daughters.

"All due respect, but I don't care what anyone says; I'll go to my grave believing Liberty Belle's murder has to be retribution for me bringing outsiders into what happened to Innocence Grace. With all they did to my youngest, you can't tell me they aren't sending a message.

"I didn't want to drag you back into this; not stirring that pot was the biggest reason. But there's no one else I could turn to who could do anything. We didn't get them the last time, but there were

changes, at least for a while, and we could say we accomplished something.”

Fred’s eyes caught mine in the mirror.

“That’s a helluva lot more than I’d have gotten from anyone around here, and I’ll always be grateful, Debra Ann.”

I hated making promises I wasn’t sure I could keep, but I saw no point in staying here if I didn’t fully commit to the idea.

“We’ll nail them this time, Fred.”

I looked into Paul’s eyes for support, and he nodded, that familiar look of determination on his face.

The cab fell silent for a few moments; there seemed little else to say. Fred pursed his lips inward, his expression briefly introspective.

“I’d like to think this couldn’t get any worse. But there’s always that little extra twist of the knife. With Liberty Belle’s horrible death, there’s nothing left of our Innocence Grace; she’s lost in the shadows. No one but us would know she ever existed.”

Paul and I knew that when you’re grieving a loss, some pain can be self-inflicted.

“Please, Fred, try not to think that way,” I implored. “I’ll never forget her, and I suspect anyone who knew her feels the same. Most simply won’t know what more they can do or say. If we can make it so their voice matters, they’ll speak up.”

Fred nodded slowly, but the rearview reflected the doubt in his eyes.

No one had spoken for a while when we passed a lettered banner blowing in the breeze, one end tied to the side of a barn while the other had broken free. Fred snorted in disgust.

“By the way, don’t expect any help from the state. We have a new governor.”

Fred jabbed his thumb toward the barn.

“Sarah Butts Uggely. Her father was governor for a long time, and she’s trying to fill his shoes, right down to wearing the same aftershave.”

"Aftershave?" Paul asked.

One corner of Fred's mouth lifted to form a cynical smile.

"She likes one that was popular back in the seventies, called 'Brut,' made by Fabergé. People dig up any old bottles they have lying around and send them to her for birthdays, anniversaries, that kind of thing. Alex peed in one before sending it to her; smelled like drunk skunk."

Fred wanted to change the topic.

"Is this your first visit to Arkansas, Paul?"

"I've passed through corners of the state but never stayed for more than a night."

"Alex always says Arkansas is for people who don't have choices. Because if you had any, this is not where you'd want your kids educated, your aging parents warehoused, or your dreams trapped.

"Being excellent at anything doesn't fly out here in the sticks; they'd call it 'getting too big for your britches.' This place is more for fishing and hunting, activities that don't change much in their world. I doubt blasting away with an AR-15 at a timid deer who can't fight back advances humanity in any meaningful way."

Paul wasn't so sure.

"Doesn't the fact that Walmart was born here help things?"

Fred wasn't buying it.

"Oh, there are exceptions in the bigger cities, areas around Hope, Little Rock, Fayetteville, Walmart's home offices in Bentonville, but those things don't make their way into rural Arkansas, no...."

"The problem is all the corruption and ignorance. Arkansas has never received high marks for the morality or quality of state governance. But now it's much worse - our governor made her bones as a professional liar for four years, standing at a podium in front of the entire country.

"Given that the Feds are already looking at Trance - as you know yourself, Debra Ann, people here aren't fans of outsiders peering into their business - I don't see the state stepping in against DeRump after

his criminal prosecution seven years ago went nowhere, even if we unearth new evidence.

“Won’t change anything. They’re still going on - the rapes, I mean.”

I found the idea of *any* worrying enough in a population this small.

“How many are we talking about, Fred? Since I was last here, I mean?”

“You have to go by the rumors, and there are plenty of them; families are too fearful of local law enforcement and politicians to report them to the authorities. But you know there’s something to the scuttlebutt because every so often, you’ll run into one of the victims’ parents; there’s no mistaking what you can see in their faces.

“Besides Liberty Belle’s murder, three girls are now missing. Two more have died under mysterious circumstances. I’m friends with the high school guidance counselor; he helped Liberty Belle get through the loss of Innocence Grace. He claims that Trance, DeRump, or one of his deputies has sexually assaulted one out of every ten high school-age girls in the county. The attacks have crossed all boundaries - economic, race, location, age... most are sixteen or under, but there’ve been exceptions.

“Even the Sheriff’s deputies are not immune - three of their relatives were victims of sexual assaults.”

“And no one’s done *anything*?” The disbelief in Paul’s tone was unmistakable.

“There’s a thing here they call ‘hillbilly justice,’ and we’ve seen a little of that. Hikers found two of DeRump’s deputies gutted and hanging from trees. The newspaper claimed vigilantes did it; ‘concerned citizens,’ as others prefer to say.

“There were enough of them, and they were so pissed off, that even the Sheriff and the Judge wouldn’t take them on directly. Instead, those two would pick out certain individuals they thought were the

instigators, harassing them to no end. DeRump and Trance forced most of the rape victims and the people who cared about them out of town."

Fred pulled his cell phone from his seat and dialed a number.

"We're on our way to you, maybe five minutes."

With a brief nod, he hung up, then looked back over his shoulder at us to explain.

"That was Alex, the friend I mentioned. If you don't mind, I wanted to drop by for a while so you could meet him."

"Our time is yours, Fred, and if you think it'll help...."

"Alex is one of the few people I can still talk to here. But I gotta tell you, conversing with him is an acquired taste - you'll hear soon enough what I mean. He's always claimed he has a highly specialized form of Tourette's, but that's horseshit. He'd never have been able to get a date.

"Alex has been my best friend from grade school through tours in the Gulf War and Bosnia. He headed west after his discharge, and I came back here. We were still in our mid-twenties. Alex became crazy successful, a self-taught computer programmer, software engineer, and systems architect. He'd gotten divorced and was taking a break from work by the time we were talking again regularly.

"Alex is what you'd call grumpy - Betsy says he's a 'curmudgeon.'"

"Betsy is Fred's wife, been together since junior high," I explained to Paul.

"He won't hesitate to get into anyone's face over almost anything," Fred continued. "Still, people around here take him to be harmless. They'd never tell you to your face, but I think a few even admire him for the way he stands up to certain individuals.

"My wife reads all the time; likes to show off her vocabulary. She wrote me an e-mail once saying Alex has an 'acerbic wit bordering on crass'... I had to look up 'acerbic.' The man's a cynic, shows signs of burnout; he's insensitive and sarcastic as hell. So, yeah, it fits.

“But I can tell you this - when we lost Innocence Grace, Alex didn’t hesitate to drop everything he had going out there in California and fly back here to help find the bastard who hurt her. Until we catch him, Alex will be here, still searching.

“That’s the kind of guy he is... the friend he’s always been to me.”



CHAPTER 12

We'd pulled up to a beige wood-frame house on a corner lot in a neighborhood I didn't recognize. The residence wasn't distinctive by itself, but the year-old black Range Rover in the middle of the front yard stood out in this part of the country.

Fred headed for Alex's entryway as Paul and I trailed behind. The door swung open before Fred reached the porch. Just inside, I could see a slender, clean-shaven man, a little under six feet tall, with graying temples accenting his full head of brown hair.

The two friends greeted each other warmly in the open doorway with a big bear hug and pats on the back. As they broke their huddle, Paul stepped forward and offered his hand.

“Hi, Alex, I’m Paul Castro, and this is my wife, Debra Ann Wynn.” As our host shook Paul’s hand and gave me a polite smile, he nodded at my tummy; I could see he was sizing us up. He cordially invited us inside, swinging his right hand toward the vestibule.

Alex’s home was much larger than it appeared from the outside; the furnishings were modern with obvious technical accouterments. Though he clearly wasn’t an interior decorator, he had interesting possessions, many from the far corners of the globe.

Given a male resident who apparently had means, I’d expected a massive flatscreen on at least one of the living room walls, but no. A quick glance up explained why. Suspended from the ceiling near the kitchen was a projector. It looked like one of the newer models, likely 4K or even 8K. A powered roll-up screen the width of the room sat up in the corner where the opposite wall met the ceiling.

Two gold microfiber recliners sat at either end of a wide, tufted brown couch upholstered in faux suede and an African-inspired print. Fred and Alex each took a recliner, while Paul and I settled onto the couch.

Alex’s eyes moved to my belly and then up to meet mine.

“How far along, if I may ask?”

“You may, of course.” I grinned. “Five months.”

“Ahhh... boy or girl, or are you keeping it a surprise?”

“Boy, Thomas Ethan.”

Alex’s eyes swung to meet Paul’s as he gave him an over-the-top thumbs-up, his eyebrows raised high, a big, silly smile on his face.

The sudden change in his quiet, even solemn, demeanor caught me off guard; I realized then that Alex wasn’t who I expected him to be.

Paul’s quick laugh was the first I’d heard from anyone since we first learned back in San Diego that we’d be coming here.

Alex’s mood seemed, just as quickly, to turn serious again.

"I know you're here to ask deep questions of our local citizenry, and I feel obligated to offer a warning. Someone here, could be more than one individual, is up to their eyeballs in rapes, as in several beyond what Fred's girls suffered, and homicides."

"Fred's told us some of it," I offered.

Alex nodded in response.

"They won't take kindly to you poking around, and at first, you'll not have any idea who they might be."

"I was here eight years ago for a month," I pointed out, "and I saw some of that, but I didn't have any problems getting along."

"Things have changed, Debra Ann. In the months following November 2016, people here were still trying to cling to their decency even with all the changes. That just isn't true anymore."

"People who haven't watched us morph into what we've become sometimes arrive believing in a cliché out of *Gone with the Wind*, the old-school idea of Southern hospitality. And by extension, the notion that nobody here would physically harm a pregnant woman.

"I'm not sure how safe an assumption that is anyway, but you should know, even if reliable, there are things that would trump it. For example, all it would take is for just one spiteful Karen to circulate a rumor in church that you, a left-coaster, came here to birth Satan's seed among us, trying to destroy the things and people we love. Suddenly, you're the most vulnerable person in the county.

"And make no mistake, that's exactly what could happen here."

Alex's cautionary advice cast a pall over the conversation, with everyone falling silent for a moment.

Fred tried to tamp down Alex's negativity.

"Most people here are nice, hardworking. Sure, life's pretty basic, but they like it that way. We've got our share of rotten apples, and you *will* need to pay attention to who might be listening in, but I don't think it's that much different from anywhere else."

Paul did his part to move things in a more positive direction.

“I heard Arkansas is actively attempting to bring people into the state. I know, for example, that they want to develop a tech hub around lithium batteries. Not sure they’d consider your words of wisdom helpful.”

“Old news; they’ve been trying to leverage Walmart’s success to grow the state’s reputation for years, and I wish them all the luck in the world. But there are harsh realities at play. Look around you. It starts with the politics.”

Paul and I don’t always agree on who we vote for, but we’re both middle-of-the-roaders. Personally, I can’t ever recall pulling the lever on a straight party-line ticket.

I knew from my visit eight years ago that locals did things differently here. They are vigorous Trumpies, their way or the highway, and you couldn’t avoid the alt-right-wing echo chamber garbage, at least in public. I’d found dozens of personalities who seemed more reasonable in private, but those whispered conversations were in locked rooms.

Alex wasn’t shy about his own opinions.

“Sometimes intelligent and enlightened people come here with a positive view of Republicans in their home states - Larry Hogan in Maine, or John Kasich in Ohio - and they’re shocked by the politicians they experience in Arkansas, who more reflect those on the national stage.

“It wasn’t always this way, you know. I won an essay contest as a kid, and part of my prize was meeting the former Governor of Iowa, Robert D. Ray. I’ve not met a finer person before or since. He was always Republican, but he was the first in the nation to bring the Tai Dam - Laotian and Vietnamese refugees the media called ‘the boat people’ - to his state. He launched an initiative that ran from 1975 through 1979 to give them a home. It proved great for the refugees, even better for the state.”

I had to agree.

"My dad was a fan - his brother, my Uncle Gary, lived in Iowa all his life and always complained that the state started going downhill after Governor Ray left office."

"Wonderful man. The MAGAts would eviscerate him today, label him a RINO, and drum him out of the party. If there are any left like him, they're keeping their heads down and trying to stay invisible."

"Most modern Republicans are all about attaining power by any means necessary - they cheat - and, once they have it in hand, they use it to abuse those in a weaker position. They are bullies. And they are cowardly; the echo chambers and hate organizations they frequent provide the strength in numbers they need to help overcome their underlying fear. The character flaws represented by cheating, bullying, and cowardice are 24/7; they are not switches that get turned off when those people go home at night."

"So, their antennae are always up for anyone at a disadvantage physically, mentally, emotionally, or situationally. Unfortunately, that group includes little boys. They're smaller and defenseless at the time of the initial assault, making them ideal and natural targets. The abuser may rationalize that their victim poses a future threat to him or her should they ever reveal the crime, justifying continuing domination."

"Immigrants are also easy targets - other than the rich, entitled, and racist South Africans brought here by Musky Mellons, of course."

"Musky Mellons?" I asked.

"One of the local power brokers," Alex explained. "We'll get to her a little later - she's someone you'll want to interview."

"Picking on underprivileged immigrants is a sure sign of sociopathic tendencies, especially in a country founded and built by those who were not native to this land."

"Some people just have to kick a sick dog," Paul murmured. Alex nodded.

"The thing is, it takes intellect and awareness to grasp that bullying and cheating arise directly from an abuser's cowardice and weakness. And that's why those people got such a strong foothold here

- whether or not it's fair, our residents aren't known for being smart or alert."

Though as an outsider, I wouldn't have been comfortable saying such things out loud, that was one lesson I'd taken away from my previous visit to Nero's Fiddle.

"When Robert Ray was the governor," Alex continued, "the Hawkeye State had one of the finest, if not the best, public-school systems in the country. So much so that other schools across the nation adopted the Iowa Basic Skills Test to measure academic performance.

"On the other side of that coin, what we call the red states today are notable for having the very worst schools, easily. And of those, Arkansas is at the bottom."

"You're making me question why anyone would want to live here," Paul wondered.

"Most people who choose to stay in rural Arkansas were born here. People in these areas like their trailer homes wide and their women even wider - obesity is rampant. If those things turn you on, this is as good a place as any to be.

"Because the schools are crap, the jobs actually available to residents are low-tech; better opportunities are few. People who aren't especially motivated might not find those career options a problem.

"If you're someone in one of the surrounding states who needs to move somewhere they can feel superior to the other residents, why *not* Arkansas? Then there are those who move here because they can't cut it elsewhere.

"All these things make it harder for our residents to compete in the larger world after they've been here too long, so they have little choice but to stay."

"C'mon, Alex," I protested, "there has to be something good you can say about Arkansas!"

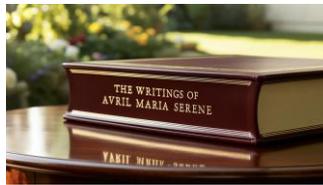
"Well, okay, there *is* Walmart. There's Tyson and Roadway, but I'm not sure chicken-plucking and truck-driving advance the needle any."

Paul put his two cents in.

“Surely, there’s gotta be something else....”

Alex played coy.

“Hmm, well, I suppose it’s because of Arkansas shoppers that the aisles in Walmarts across the country are so spacious.... That’s good, right?”





CHAPTER 13

During the lull in the conversation, Paul looked around from his vantage point on the sofa. Spying a state-of-the-art desktop computer setup in the den, he saw an opportunity to change topics. Paul kept in regular e-mail contact with one of his longtime Navy buddies living in a small Idaho town; he knew that high-speed internet connections were scarce in rural communities.

“How do you get enough bandwidth to run all this high-tech equipment?”

“Two of AT&T’s old-school twisted-pair phone lines run to the house, and I have a DSL account for each. A few years ago, several

businesses banded together to have a cable trunk line buried alongside the highway. It's not fiber optic, and digging a trench cost me a few bucks, but I tapped into their cable. I've also got a Hughes satellite dish in the backyard. I switch between them depending on what I'm trying to do. We don't have 5G out here yet, but when we do, I'll add the provider's internet services."

"That's good to know - can I hit you up if we get into a situation where we have to transmit a lot of data? I ask because we have friends in law enforcement and access to a forensics lab back in San Diego, which could come in handy. I don't know if Fred told you, but I'm a criminalistics supervisor for the state of California, and I'm on assignment to San Diego's Homicide Unit, helping resolve their backlog of cold cases."

"Fred, you should have said something!" Alex exclaimed. "I see you brought in the big guns. Man, that's exactly what we needed. We know there's a rapist and killer walking amongst us, but we didn't know how to gather evidence or what to do with it if we found any."

"Paul and I aren't here in any official or professional capacity," I cautioned, "so I don't want to get your hopes up prematurely. But we wouldn't be here if we didn't think we could help."

Fred spoke up.

"I wanted the three of you to meet before we got too far along. Debra Ann, you did a great job with what you had to work with the last time you were here. But you don't speak the language, and residents wouldn't open up to you at first, in the way I hoped they might.

"You made it through anyway, but it was a lot harder than it should have been. Not everyone here likes foreigners meddling in our business, but a few still ask me how you're doing, and some of them follow your writing online.

"Alex makes for a great bridge between the two worlds. He was born and raised here, knows the people and the terrain, and they're familiar with him. But he's also made something of himself in your world. Alex, why don't you share some of your background...?"

Alex leaned forward in his seat.

“Well, when Fred and I were done with our second tour, he and Betsy Ross were engaged, and pretty much all he talked about was getting home and starting a family.

“Me, I’d caught the travel bug and wanted to see more of the world than the Army had shown me.

“I bummed around here and there for a while; got interested in computers. First, it was the hardware. Then I taught myself a little programming - turned out I was decent at it. Wasn’t long before I hooked up with several of the big boys on short-term contracts - AT&T, IBM, Oracle, and NASA, some others you’d know. That helped hone my skills and build a reputation. I wound up working out of Irvine for two decades. I was burning out on the Fortune 50 corporate thing, wanted to do something different with my life. That classic West Coast wanderlust, I suppose.”

Alex’s comment hit home with Paul.

“Seems there’s always another option in California. I’ve thought at different times about trying my hand at theater, but something a lot better came along.”

Paul turned to smile at me, placing his hand softly on my stomach. I was flattered, of course, but also surprised; he’d never mentioned the acting bug to me.

Alex’s expression was one of understanding, despite having made different choices.

“I’d put together a nice nest egg and took a little time off to explore other possibilities. That didn’t make wifey happy - she’d gotten in with that La Jolla crowd and wanted me to be the next Bill Gates - so we split up. It so happened that Fred and I had caught up on Facebook and were chatting fairly often. It was just a few months later that Innocence Grace took her own life.

“I needed a couple of weeks to get my affairs in order before I jumped on a plane,” Alex added, turning to face me.

“When I got back here, you’d just left for San Diego to write up everything you’d learned. I didn’t miss you by much, and after reading what you wrote, I’m sorry we didn’t meet.

“It’s good getting to know the two of you now. We can’t undo the terrible things that have been done, but I’m hoping that together we can find Fred here a little peace.”

Giving him a somber smile back, I flicked my eyes toward Alex’s computer room.

“Given your impressive technology and connectivity, it seems you’re keeping yourself busy. I know you’ve been helping Fred deal with the loss of his first daughter and now, the murder of his second, but there’s only so much you can do by yourselves. Are you still writing software?”

“No, I’ve switched careers. Fred and I were avid hunters and fishermen back in the day, and this is the perfect area for that. I’ve picked it back up, and now I’m writing for one of the regional magazines. I also write freelance articles for other periodicals, blogs, and journals about guns, archery, and outdoor sportsmen and women in the area.”

One side of Alex’s face turned up in a wry smile.

“Don’t worry, Debra Ann, I’m not in your league, so we won’t be competing for attention anytime soon. But this gig keeps me from having to tap into my savings, and the hours are flexible, so it works for me right now.”

Fred spoke up.

“Most things are the same, but some have changed from what they were when you were last here, Debra Ann. Alex has volunteered his time as a tour guide and translator of the local dialect and customs. He can introduce you to people you didn’t meet before.”

“I’m looking forward to showing you around,” Alex offered, “and maybe assisting with your investigation when I can.”

I had to admit that, despite the attitudes that came with the package, Alex’s talents and resources were unexpected gifts.

“Both would be a big help,” I said, glancing at Paul, “and we’ll be happy for all we can get.”

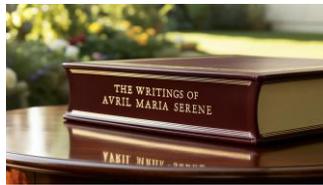
Paul agreed.

“Ordinarily, I’m trying to keep people out of my crime scenes. But to be honest, in a situation like this, the more eyes the better.”

Fred stood and, as Paul and I rose from the couch, explained to Alex that he needed to get us checked into a motel and arrange our transportation. With that, we said our goodbyes and promised to get together the next morning.

For brief periods during the next twelve hours, I’d feel encouraged, even confident.

Having Paul at my side was a tremendous asset in its own right, and with Alex on board, it seemed like we might have an edge over our prey.





CHAPTER 14

A

s we climbed into the back of his truck before he pulled out of Alex's drive, Fred proposed an idea that took us by surprise.

"Betsy and I talked it over, and we'd like you to drive Liberty Belle's Trailblazer. It's only two years old, and it was her first car - she took good care of it."

I looked over at Paul. He had a solemn smile on his face, raising his shoulders and eyebrow slightly to tell me it was my call.

My first reaction was reluctance. I couldn't see either of us being comfortable driving a homicide victim's car around, just on principle.

“Oh, I don’t know, Fred. I appreciate the thought, but we wouldn’t want to be desecrating Liberty Belle’s memory. What if we had an accident in it? What would that do to the family’s memories of her, or how they’d feel about us?”

“Debra Ann, having her car sitting around reminding everyone why she can’t drive it isn’t helping anyone, and we’re just not ready to sell it yet.

“Listen, not everyone around here is going to appreciate you poking around. If they come to make trouble, plenty of other people know Liberty Belle’s car. They cared deeply about her and would come to your aid. Wouldn’t happen in a rental car - no one would recognize it.”

Paul nodded, and I could see that he was warming to the thought.

“Betsy and I think Liberty Belle would have wanted it. That something of hers is actively taking part in the search for her killer means a lot to us. Look, if anything happened to the car during the chase, it’d just be one more battle scar in her - our - fight for justice. As long as we can catch whoever did this to her, whatever happens along the way just becomes part of her story; another thing uniquely hers to add to the re-telling.”

That Liberty Belle could have even a minor role, beyond being a victim, woven into the fabric of her own investigative narrative was compelling, and the idea took root.



Betsy Ross Freeman was a slighter woman now than I’d remembered her, quiet and unassuming. She was pretty in her own way, likely more so before the loss of two of her children had absolutely crushed her. She had that look of complete emptiness and defeat, her eyes darting away from contact as if desperately seeking escape. I worried she needed grief counseling in the worst way, professional care

for the severe depression that was sure to follow if it hadn't already arrived.

Where Fred still occasionally flashed his fighting instincts, feeding off his anger, there was none of that in Betsy. Her eyes perpetually rimmed in red, she seemed to have resigned herself to bleak acceptance, going through the motions of her daily existence in denial, lost in a deep gray fog.

I was glad to see her brighten a little as we went through the photo album together, absorbed in memories and happier times. She'd become immersed in her own space as she slowly flipped through the pages, stopping from time to time to point out a special moment. Finally, with a heavy sigh, she slowly closed the cover and set the book on the arm of the sofa, patting it twice as if leaving an old friend.

I hated to break the mood, but I needed to get her take on a few things.

"I assume the Sheriff's deputies went through her room for clues, perhaps signs of changes in her, her friends, or acquaintances. Maybe a note about meeting someone...?"

Betsy's face took on a frown.

"They didn't seem to put that much effort into it. From what I overheard, they'd convinced themselves this was some random act where the killer drove the circumstances.

"The principal sent us the papers from her school desk. I asked the sheriff to review them, and he said he'd send someone. But he never did."

I asked Betsy if we could see Liberty Belle's room. She took a quick breath, as though gathering herself for something she knew she had to do.

"Of course; please, this way," she offered with a sad smile.

Paul and I followed her down a hallway to a closed bedroom door. Scotch-taped to it was a sheet of paper with "Liberty Belle" drawn in bright colors, decorated with flourishes and flowers. Betsy gently touched a forefinger to the lettering, then looked away and turned the

knob to let us in. The slight sheen of smudged fingerprint oil on the drawing told me this had become a ritual for her.

Belle's bedroom looked as though she was still at school, to return at any moment. She'd left stuffed animals scattered about, a few tucked into her headboard and bookshelf. Leaning against a corner were two halves of a plaster cast of her arm from a fall off her bike, signed by all her friends, the red marker beginning to fade. The posters on her walls were of Sabrina Carpenter, Tate McRae, Olivia Rodrigo, Conan Gray, Billie Eilish, and Taylor Swift. A tiny stuffed Kermit hung from a blade of her ceiling fan.

Strewn around the bed were her clothes, some dirty, some clean; she'd tossed her journal on top of a pillow. A vague smell of gym socks mixed seamlessly with the lingering scent of Ariana Grande's 'God is a Woman' Eau de Parfum.

A tank top, still on its hanger, hung from the arm of her floor lamp, tilted at a rakish angle. Spread randomly across the top of her dresser were makeup, a hairdryer, an eyelash curler, and bright shades of fingernail polish, with spilled face powder dusting the tops of the bottles.

Costume jewelry hung in jumbled-up clumps on a row of small brass hooks on one wall, above pictures she'd drawn of her best friend and several classmates.

"She had genuine talent," I commented, though I hesitated to bring up things lost. But Betsy slowly nodded her head appreciatively as she studied the artwork for what I was sure was the thousandth time.

Suddenly, Liberty Belle's little black poodle mix ran between my legs, first smelling the closet, then under the bed, and on to the clothes hamper. Finally, up on her hind legs, her paws on the bed's comforter, she furiously sniffed the air, trying to find her master in a forlorn game of hide and seek that for her would never end.

"She does that every time we come in here," Betsy explained. "It's been weeks now; she just doesn't understand where Belle could have gone."

The mirrored sliding door to Liberty Belle's closet was half open, with clothes and shoes stuffed from floor to ceiling. A Superwoman costume, I assumed from a past Hallowe'en or school event, peeked out from next to the wall at one end of the hanger rod. Stickers adorned every wall and piece of furniture, an eclectic assortment from SpongeBob characters to clothing brands to Instagram influencers.

"Do you mind if I look around?" Paul asked gently.

"No, not at all; please do," Betsy replied.

As Paul examined the room's contents, taking great care to put everything back exactly as he found it, I thumbed through Liberty Belle's schoolwork.

An odd note in the bottom margin of her draft of an English paper, dated two weeks before her murder, caught my eye: "the weird lady wants me to friend her."

Below it, in different handwriting, "EWWWWWWW!!!"

I assumed Liberty Belle passed her paper to a classmate so that they could exchange messages. Did she follow through with the Facebook friend request? I'd need to see her Facebook and Instagram accounts.

"Betsy, do you know Belle's social media passwords?"

"Oh, sure, she wasn't one to hide things from us," Betsy answered. "She had to write them into her notepad to keep track. It was with the items in her purse when they found it. We keep it in the drawer of the china cupboard."

As we left Belle's room and closed the door, the dog curled up outside it with a sorrowful look in her eyes. Somehow, seeing her devotion brought everything that had happened to that little girl and everyone who loved her into sharp focus. What had been a sense of intense sadness suddenly deepened, and I found myself on the verge of tears.



With Fred's help, Paul and I transferred our belongings from the feed store pickup into Liberty Belle's Trailblazer. I drove as we followed Fred to the best of the motels in town, where he'd reserved a room for us.

"Madison's Lodge might not look like much," Fred warned us, "but I know the manager and her family. They're good people, and they'll treat you right. Oh, and before I picked you up from the airport, I checked the mattress and box springs for bedbugs - nothing to worry about!"

That wasn't something Paul or I had given any thought, and Fred's hearty assurances did more to plant a disconcerting seed than they did to comfort us.



CHAPTER 15

The coming winter chose the following morning to announce itself. Fortunately, the electric strip heater under our motel room's big window worked well. While I was asleep, Paul had gotten up in the dark and figured out the controls without waking me. I so love that man!

Both of us found it hard to climb out from underneath the toasty sheets and comforter. Still, Alex was waiting for our call, and the light powdering of snow we'd had overnight meant we had to take a slight detour on the way back to his home.

Paul, ever diligent, worried about me slipping and falling. We headed back to the brand-new Nero's Fiddle Walmart for something

that would give me surer footing. Along the way, we persuaded ourselves that we needed to buy warmer outerwear. Our experience with California winters had spoiled us, and we hadn't packed what we'd need for the real deal.

After snagging a paper cup of watery orange juice and a couple of Egg McMuffins at the McDonald's drive-thru, we crossed the street to the megastore. There, we bought two thick down jackets and a pair of boots before heading to Alex's. Fred wouldn't be with us; he'd taken the day off yesterday and needed to be at work early this morning to make up for lost time.

Once we'd settled back onto Alex's comfy couch, I asked our host if he could introduce Paul to Narcissus County's major players and their roles. I also wanted to catch up on developments I'd missed since my last visit to Nero's Fiddle.

"For that, we first need to address person of interest number one, Judge Donny Trance. Debra Ann, I know you wrote extensively about him, but did you ever have any face-to-face conversations with the man?"

"I was an outsider, and maybe worse in certain ways, a single female, all by myself. Fred worried about my health and safety; he kept me away from Trance and DeRump as much as he could. He warned me then that Trance had raped and abused adult women. Fred told us just yesterday that Trance's latest victim won millions from him in civil court, which shows Fred was right to worry.

"Of course, that part hadn't happened yet in 2017. Back then, I'd see one or both of the men in passing from time to time. They'd glare at me just to show me they knew who I was, but that was the extent of it."

Paul was paying rapt attention; I felt him tense up noticeably with the mention of rape.

"Good for Fred," Alex said, pursing his lips. "He was going through some terrible times, but it seems he'd kept his common sense.

"Most of this I'll assume Debra Ann knows, but let me fill you in, Paul."

Alex's smile turned wistful.

"I had to go to our new big-box store myself to pick something up the other day; a little reminder of how much things have changed since I grew up here fifty-odd years ago.

"Out-of-staters new to the area get a rude awakening when they approach a urinal in the men's room of the local Walmart. They wonder why so many residents choose to pee on their shoes. What they may not realize is that with the overwhelming obesity here, most men can't see what they're doing well enough to aim."

"When I was young, no respectable Arkansas mother would have allowed their sons to do something like that, else they'd get a switch applied to their backside."

"I take it things have changed?" Paul asked, a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

Alex raised an eyebrow as if to say, "*You think?*"

"To understand how things work here now and how the Judge fits in, you'll need some general background on Narcissus County. To begin, and as I'm sure you're already aware, 'deep red state' translates directly to 'racist white conservatives and horrible schools.'

"And don't let anyone kid you - racism, de facto desegregation, and the KKK all run strong here, though the latter hides behind MAGA these days... or more accurately, the MAGA rebrand of all the things the KKK holds dear."

"For all my nostalgia over this county's past, we certainly had our problems back then, too. For example, when I grew up here, we had two colored libraries in Narcissus County. When the desegregation trouble started, they didn't just burn the books they blamed for spreading ideas they considered destructive to proper white society; they burned down the entire libraries, both of them. But the Klan didn't take credit for the arson - local officials called them 'accidents.'

"When was this?" I asked. "You must have been fairly young...."

"Started getting bad in the 60s before I was born; the libraries burned down in '82 when I was 10."

“Slower to make the change than other parts of the Deep South,” Paul noted.

“It took longer for rural areas to catch up. They blamed the natural gas heating system for the first fire - supposedly, the black man responsible for maintaining it was drinking instead of working. Three months later, a gasoline tanker ran into the front door of the other - again, driven by an African American man they accused of being asleep at the wheel. They couldn’t identify the body they pulled out of the truck’s cab as human, much less its race, with the technology available then.

“If you weren’t aware, ‘privatizing’ here means getting rid of the transparency and oversight of public institutions and substituting the mercenary inclinations and biases of private business. Like school vouchers, the same basic idea.

“So, rather than build replacement libraries, the whites privatized them as for-profit bookmobiles. With limited offerings carefully curated of any adverse material by their Caucasian custodians, of course.

“The rationale was that blacks were too stupid, lazy, and ignorant to go to the libraries on their own, so they’d bring the books to them. Of course, you had to pay for each visit the bookmobile made to your facility, and black institutions couldn’t afford the fees. The whites allocated very little money to the project, hoping it would die on the vine. All they wanted was plausible deniability and the appearance of having tried. ‘See, we made the effort; not our fault you can’t educate ‘em.’”

Paul put two fingers to his temple, his elbow on the arm of the couch.

“The circular logic we’re seeing even now on the national stage, though they’ve shifted the target toward immigrants.”

“Exactly,” Alex agreed. “It was no surprise to anyone when the bookmobiles eventually withered away; there were no libraries at all for

blacks until the mid-90s. In the Deep South, racism always binds to profiteering - ask Brett Favre how that works.

“Port Lybral County began desegregating before most of the others, and its citizens would, of their own volition, travel to Narcissus County to encourage desegregation or assist blacks in improving their lot. And one by one, those well-meaning souls would get ‘disappeared’ or lynched or have fatal accidents. Because the incidents didn’t occur in large bunches or within the same week, those missing got little attention. But Port Lybral County’s suspicions fed the hatred its citizens still feel toward Narcissus County.”

I didn’t expect to see much of that in the open.

“I’m not sure anyone would get away with such things today; too many lawyers with precedent on their side.”

“As far as anything in-your-face toward blacks, you’re probably right. But don’t believe for a moment that the prejudice here stops with skin color. For example, transgender people completely freak Sheriff DeRump out, and I know why. He thinks someone’s father could also be their mother. That scares the holy bejesus out of him when he considers all the times that he’s been told to go fuck himself. Now that he knows that’s achievable medically, he worries he’ll get pregnant.

“So, as you might imagine, the brainpower of the people running this place is a real problem. For a long time, Narcissus County’s most popular insult for Port Lybral residents was ‘Braniacs’ - as though thinking about anything too long was an unnatural act.

“For their part, Port Lybral’s pet name for Narcissus County locals was much harder to misconstrue in a positive light: ‘Morons.’”

Not having Fred around seemed to unloosen Alex’s shackles, and we were getting a sense of what Fred meant by “acquired taste.”

“That’s how things were when Trance was born. Worse, he came out of the womb a jackass - I assume through the vaginal canal, but I’m not the only one who wonders if it wasn’t the other orifice. Or maybe, as his supporters from the church like to claim, he *did* come into the world with help from above.

"And on the last day, the Lord sayeth, 'Let there be methane.' And so, there was methane, and the Lord saw that the methane was good. The Lord then commanded, 'Let there be a vessel for the methane.' And so was begotten Donny Trance, and the Lord sayeth, 'No comment.'"

"Seems a little harsh..." Paul murmured.

Alex's look was one of bemusement, akin to "Oh, you poor child, if you only knew."

"Let's wait until you've seen what he's done to this place, and we can revisit the question then. He's taken after his father. Now, *that* man was a piece of work - imagine a creepy septuagenarian smelling of day-old farts and a full-body dip in Old Spice, leering at little girls.

"The future Judge's father was the sleaziest landlord we had around these parts. He used his money to cover for the younger Trance's failings."

I hadn't heard this part of the story.

"How so?"

"His kid was the type to pull the wings off flies, the fat bully everyone was afraid of and secretly hated. Whenever he got into trouble, Daddy was always around to bail him out. The spoiled brat was an idiot savant, heavy on the 'idiot.' The best score he could manage on an IQ test in school was 102. He wasn't very bright, a terrible student, but he had a genuine gift for manipulating people. He could figure out their weaknesses and exploit them - not just his peers, but grownups, too.

"The father spent a small fortune getting his kid graduated from college - he'd bribe the professors, but the best his mental-midget progeny would get from them was maybe a 'D' instead of an 'F', occasionally a low 'C' just to pass him out of their classes. The younger Trance's performance was so bad that, in later years, he'd threaten to sue those schools to keep them from releasing his grades. Heaven forbid that his entire transcript should ever get out."

I was having trouble connecting the dots.

“Okay, so we’ve got a pampered, mentally challenged Dudley from *Harry Potter* with a gift for using people. I picked up from my previous stint here that Trance’s power, before he won election as Judge, came from owning most of the county’s real estate. Where’d *that* money come from?”

“Again, the doting papa. He’d loaned his son a thousand times more cash than the three of us together will see in our entire lifetimes - and it’s doubtful Daddy’s boy ever paid him back. The elder Trance likely wrote it off as a phony loss against his taxes.”

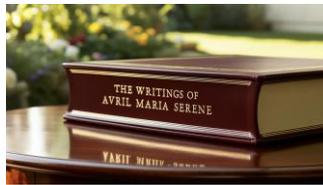
“However it went down, that gave Trance’s kid the big head start he needed to get off his lazy ass and do something. The future Judge was a terrible businessman, but quite the grifter; he figured out how to duck paying for his mistakes by gaming the bankruptcy laws multiple times.

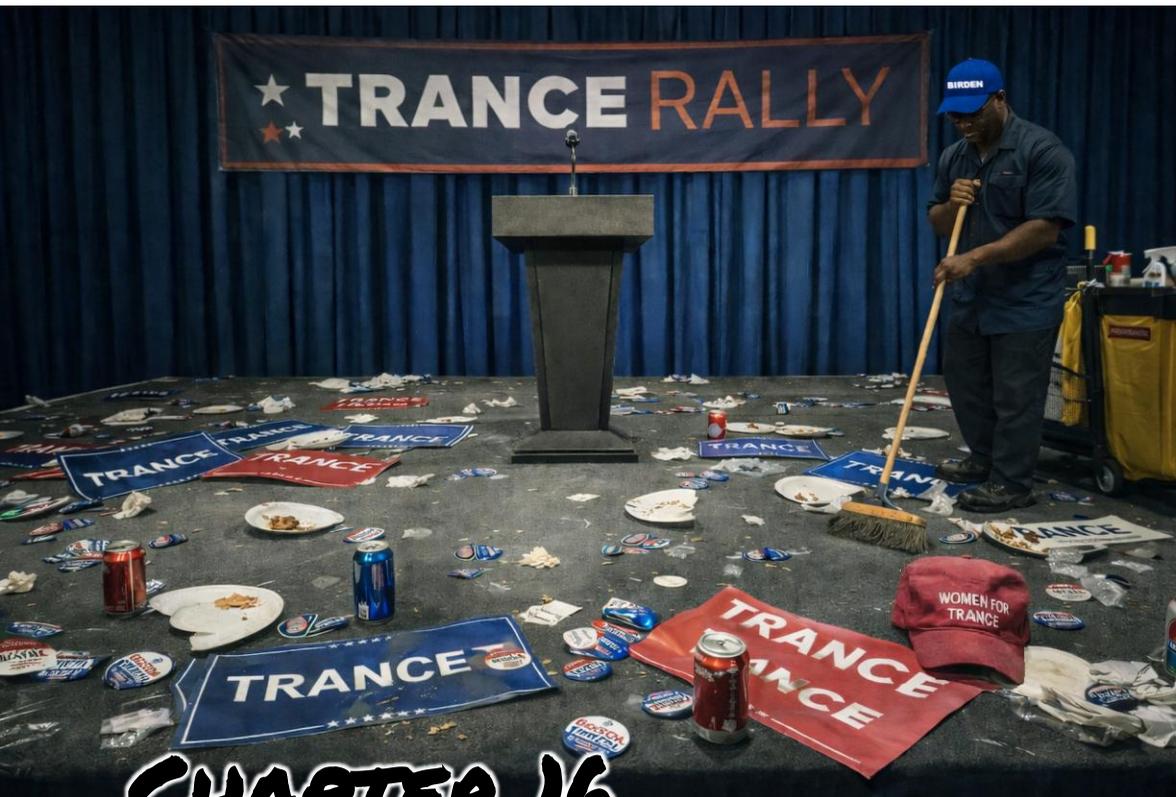
“Now Judge Trance holds all the political power and most of the wealth within the county lines. He owns nearly all the property, which means he controls virtually everyone at a very personal level - he can evict them from their homes and businesses.”

“Primarily land and buildings, then?” I asked.

“Some income from his 51 percent ownership of the only bank chain in the area. He’s got a string of sleazy motels that offer blackmail opportunities through cameras he hides in the rooms. Locals know to stay away from them, but he snags out-of-towners regularly. He’s got several pawnshops, as well as payday and title loan services.

“The real secret to keeping the trailer trash in the luxury suite is his hold over the mystery voters. According to the latest census, some 250,000 residents here have spread themselves across a dozen small towns. However, there are 320,000 registered on the active voting rolls; all of them cast votes whenever the County Judge or Sheriff is up for re-election.”





CHAPTER 16

Alex's explanation didn't satisfy Paul.

"Good to know - still, Trance has to have some fans among the county's residents, else he couldn't get away with all that. Who are his supporters? Maybe a better way to put it is, who should we watch out for?"

Alex filled in several of the missing pieces.

"Oh, sure, Trance and DeRump have their diehard stooges and co-conspirators. But they're nowhere near fifty percent of the legitimate voters it should take to run the place.

"Trance gets most of his support from four groups. The minimally skilled make up the largest of them. They struggle to make it

where the cost of living is higher, so they come or stay here - their last, maybe only, refuge.

“The fearful make up another group. They include otherwise-decent people who fear for themselves or their loved ones if they don’t toe Trance’s line. The members include those who might lack the education, confidence, or life experience to resist peer pressure. That group includes those who are enablers, apologists, or co-dependents by nature.

“The third group consists of individuals I’d label ‘professional victims.’ These are wound collectors and grievance amplifiers seeking ways to claim they’ve suffered horrible injustices. They leverage their perceived, often self-inflicted or imaginary, injuries to demand remedial action, usually involving compensation from their fellow taxpayers. They see Trance as a bullhorn for advertising their inflated afflictions.

“And finally, there are the profiteers, con artists, and Trance clones taking advantage of their fellow residents solely to improve their own lot.”

Alex paused for a moment before warning us what was coming.

“Look, I won’t put any window-dressing on this. I find political correctness dishonest. And if you’re trying to solve serious problems, it’s not helpful playing games pretending things aren’t what they are.”

Paul and I had a pretty good idea by now what to expect from Alex. We glanced at one another before I nodded at our host to continue.

“The groups I’ve laid out matter because they are directly responsible for all that ails places like this.

“Yes, our founders predicated the Constitution upon the idea that everyone is born equal. I won’t dispute that; however, I would say that what each of us makes of ourselves after birth - our individual merit - is anything but equal.

“We are where we are today as a county because a master grifter and his corrupt cronies could amass voices in such numbers as to drown out those of us who’ve contributed more to society. When I say

'more,' I don't mean just financially. I also include the arts, sciences, charity, education, and achievements that may not have high monetary rewards.

"Our situation is such that anyone able to apply AI and other technologies, foreign help, and criminality can get the least educated, aware, motivated, or honest of us to outnumber voters of merit. That empowers the undeserving to do things that will ultimately destroy us. They've pulled it off in two of the last three elections.

"This has to stop if we are to remain a decent place to live."

It seemed we were going off on a tangent that wouldn't be helpful.

"It sounds like you're saying we need to screen voters somehow to stop people like Trance. Nice idea in theory, but I can't see it happening, certainly not in time to bring the Judge to heel...."

Alex persisted.

"We already recognize and enforce the idea, albeit only in the most rudimentary way, that merit should play a role in voting. The vast majority of our states bar convicted felons from voting for various periods, and the Supreme Court has permitted those restrictions. Had we applied even that primitive implementation to candidates as well, we'd have solved the immediate problem: no one with thirty-four felony convictions could hold office.

"But so long as we allow criminals to stuff ballot boxes using voter stupidity and gullibility, the concept of merit-based voting will never gain traction. Those abusers have already learned how to control and game the current system and will use it to prevent any changes. And unfortunately, the right to speak freely trumps consideration of the speaker's merit.

"That means, for now, we're stuck with the system as it is. For it to produce positive results, we need to understand exactly what we're working with, which, in my mind, are the groups I've described as holding us back."

I wasn't sure I wanted to go down this path, but I relented.

“You’ve labeled the largest of these groups the ‘minimally skilled’”

“That group includes the untalented, the unmotivated, the poorly educated, the incompetent, the misfits, and the unfit. Consider that, in a properly distributed bell curve for a class in school composed of all the adults in the county, one-half the class would be low-C, D, and F students. Roughly the same number who voted a 34-time felon, finger rapist, and known grifter in as Judge - not an insignificant group, nor a trivial problem.

“Because of a phenomenon known as the Dunning-Kruger effect - basically, that someone lacks the awareness to know how unaware they truly are - more than half the members of this group won’t acknowledge belonging to it, even to themselves.”

I pushed back.

“Their numbers shouldn’t be as large as you’re implying. Residents in Narcissus County would be no less capable by percentage than any other population.”

“There’s an old joke, been around for years, that relies on at least one difference. Here we have a special label we apply to underage girls who are slow of foot and have at least one brother or male cousin - ‘pregnant.’

“Inbreeding is a serious issue in small towns with tiny gene pools and few mating choices, though no one wants to talk about it. However, the minimally skilled also include those who are indeed capable of more but are just starting out their adult lives, have medical problems, are dealing with various addictions, or have criminal histories. Or, more problematically, believe they can’t reach higher, often because of their own insecurities. This group supports Trance because they are angry at being shut out of the good things in life, and they see Trance as a sympathizer and conduit for their anger - a fellow D student, just like them.

“They’re frustrated because society used to have roles for them, though they weren’t always things the rest of us would aspire to.

“American oligarchs - the greedy, the powerful, the enfranchised, and the corrupt - used the minimally skilled laborers, the human beings they privately call ‘losers’, to serve as cannon fodder for their military; entertain them as athletes until retired by injury or age; build their roads; vacuum their septic tanks; police their streets, clean their homes; cut their grass and weed their gardens; cook and serve their meals; manufacture their goods; pour their concrete; dig their ditches; advertise and distribute their wares; drive their trucks, busses, and taxis; pilot their planes, boats and ships; raise their crops; mine their coal; drill their oil; erect their buildings; and extract, refine, or create their raw materials, among thousands of other tasks too beneath the rich to do themselves.

“The minimally skilled have had no choice but to take on the nastiest, most unfulfilling, and least rewarding jobs our society offered. Now, many of those roles are no longer permanent or long-lasting. Some are going away; others are largely gone. For example, we no longer have a military draft; our factories are fewer and further between.

“Yes, immigrants took some of those jobs, though primarily because our citizens wouldn’t work them. But far bigger threats have emerged to the working poor, and these we can’t deport. AI, robotics, 3D printing, and dedicated-purpose computers housed in appliances are rapidly taking over the fighting of our wars, the piloting of our land, sea, and air vehicles, the making of our products, and the construction of our buildings and streets. It’s sneaking into skilled occupations, too, even advertising and video generation - and yes, professional writing of all kinds.

“As a result, those being pushed out of a job, unable to earn a living and feed their families, wind up living on the streets and filling our prisons, jails, and mental health and addiction facilities. We have nothing else for these people to be.

“We put them on welfare or social security disability, take their few possessions in homelessness raids, pretend they don’t exist, and look the other way when they deal drugs or steal things of lesser value.

“When we perceive that we’re out of other options, incarcerating and warehousing them only goes so far. With nothing meaningful to do, they sit around seeking opportunities for revenge and nursing their resentment at not having a voice. It should be no surprise to anyone that the minimally skilled would be angry and disappointed, or that some would strike out in any way they could.”

“Okay, I’ll buy that,” I conceded. “I assume they see themselves in Trance. He’d be one of them were it not for Daddy Dearest running interference, several bankruptcies, and blowing off paying any penalties for his crimes. Who do you see in the second group?”

“In some ways, those who coddle Trance out of fear are worse than those too incompetent to stand up to him. For one thing, cowards and enablers are easy for Trance to attract by manipulating threats he manufactures in, or repurposes from, the world at large. For that matter, he can exploit the fearful and compliant with pure imagination - conspiracy theories - that he can spin up at will. If nothing else, insulting timid followers or overwhelming them with false information seems to work.

“Sadly, the fear here isn’t limited just to Trance or what he might do to them. It’s everywhere and encompasses everything.

“My God, these people aren’t afraid just of what others think; they’re scared to death of what the neighbors *might* think!

“You go to Sunday sermon, and what do you hear? Fear God, fear Jesus, fear the devil, fear the devil’s trying to trick you into believing he’s God, fear false prophets, fear not having faith, fear not praying enough, fear praying for the wrong things, fear getting what you pray for. And above all, fear missing a fear-reinforcing Sunday at church.”

“Like the minimally skilled, there will always be cowards. I personally can’t stand them, but they’re unavoidable. Still, I find one

subgroup of Trance's chickenshit supporters especially frustrating simply because they shouldn't exist.

"There is no reason in hell that an intelligent, moral, productive female, especially a mother, should ever support Trance. He's a pussy-grabbing, finger-raping, abortion-obstructing misogynist and woman-hater, who publicly demeans all women by condemning menstruation.

"Housewives in traditional roles, like so many in this part of the country, have never experienced an opportunity to discover that they can do their own thing, independently of what their husbands, families, or peers might say or believe.

"Not only can they be independent, but they can thrive in their individualism. That's a threat to Neanderthals like Trance, who do everything they can to keep females around them from learning what they can be and do. They keep those women ignorant, barefoot, and pregnant, assigning them value only when they are horizontal.

"For all of that, women are among Trance's most ardent supporters. The reasons are a damning indictment of this county's hypocrisy; they raise serious questions about the mythos of motherhood, for one thing. How does a child benefit from completely ignoring the evil in Trance?"

I wasn't comfortable with where this line of conversation was going and wanted to move it along.

"If I understand you correctly, those two groups run on the individual members' emotions, and they cluster together for support and reinforcement. It's hard to see how logical arguments against Trance would go anywhere; critical thinking has no place in their worldview."

"That problem differentiates the first two groups. Something else is notable about them: the focus of the fear, anger, and hate you see from the less competent and cowards is outward. They direct it against those they see as responsible for their gripes: Trance's opponents.

“But professional victims and con artists won’t hesitate to eat their own; that is, they’ll prey on other Trance supporters just as willingly as they do anyone who opposes him. They can and will act independently of other members of their groups.”

Something Alex mentioned earlier needed clarification.

“I’ve got a basic idea, but could you explain your understanding of what a ‘professional victim’ is? To me, ‘wound collector’ refers to a behavioral type who never forgets a slight, storing them up and building them into a rage. When that rage boils over, bad things happen. I’ll assume by ‘grievance amplifier’ you mean someone who does the same thing but overstates either the wrongs or how much they’re offended by them.”

“Correct on both counts,” Alex acknowledged with a slight smile. “One problem here is that victimhood has its own attractions and benefits, something no one talks about out loud. For one thing, there are no work, performance, or productivity requirements for being a victim. You can assign the role to yourself; you don’t need approval from anyone else.

“And taking offense is a choice controlled by the listener, not the speaker. Choosing to take offense is a common means for passive-aggressives to manipulate a speaker and usurp their message.

“Think it’s not a choice? Their other options include walking away, switching off the computer, turning down the volume, or putting aside that paper.”

While I understood the concepts and didn’t need the tutorial, Alex’s dissertation showed me he knew his stuff - and that he liked to hear himself talk.

“There are tangible rewards to victimhood, of course,” Alex continued. “Insurance and welfare benefits, Social Security disability, support services, and charity in several forms. But being a victim also comes with attention, sympathy, empathy - even an identity. They see themselves as members of a select class, sometimes the only

constituent, to whom this terrible thing, whatever it may be, has happened; they may even see themselves as celebrities because of it.

“All too often, what they are a victim of happened largely because of their own bad choices and poor judgment. That doesn't hinder their belief that their victimhood renders them important and special, so much so that they expect the entire world to stop spinning on its axis in order to save them from themselves.

“All those things are part of Trance's narcissistic persona, too, making for a natural bond with the members of the professional victims' group.”

“That leaves us with the con artists' bunch,” I said to sum things up. “You'd think their support would be pretty straightforward; honor among thieves, more or less.”

“Certainly, being like-minded can play a role, though I think it's a little more complicated than that. That's the group of mostly mercenary sociopaths for whom supporting Trance is a multi-part calculus. ‘Does he do things that are specifically good for me, and does the harm he causes fall mostly on others? If so, can I ride his coattails or use his behavior as cover to run my game?’

“Some are out in the open, but for most, admitting they are on Trance's side in front of decent people would ruin their con. Those who support Trance in secret, or at least less obviously, are the most dangerous, partly because there are so many of them. Their numbers are why Trance's pre-election polling estimates are always so far off.

“The bigger problem is that there's always a sizeable contingent of Trance acolytes working in the shadows, enabling Trance's agenda for reasons that aren't obvious and in ways that aren't apparent.

“But you have to be careful with all these groups; to them, Trance-ism is porn.”

Okay, fine, I'll bite.

“That one you're going to have to explain, Alex.”

“One: Unless you have absolutely no intelligence or class, you know at some level that what you are doing is wrong, that nobody benefits in the long run, and that it causes serious damage.

“Two: You do it anyway because you can’t resist fulfilling your immediate need.

“Three: If it becomes known you’re doing it, you approach the situation aggressively in one of two ways. You either adamantly deny what you’ve done or wholeheartedly defend it, while attacking anyone questioning you.”



CHAPTER 17

The surge of confidence I'd felt earlier was waning.

"I hadn't realized he had so much support. I can see how that would translate directly to influence he can wield...."

"Which is why you can never count Trance out," Alex added, "no matter what appearances might suggest. Though he's suffered some dings recently, he's far more powerful than he once was. Trance has become a modern-day King George III - the same brand of lardass but with a spray tan - everything the county's founders gave their lives to save our country from.

"Some of the Judge's successes - taking over the bank, for example - happened since you were last here. And gaining more things

isn't all that's changed about Trance in the eight years since your previous visit. He's added another line to his resume - he's now murdered hundreds of thousands of people.

"Wait, *hundreds of thousands*?" I exclaimed. "That can't be - there aren't even that many residents in Narcissus County!"

Alex's eyes had taken on that look of sad, worldly wisdom I'd sometimes seen in combat veterans.

"Several years ago," Alex explained, "we had a terrible outbreak of head lice. Spread everywhere; couldn't get rid of it. The problem was that personal hygiene can be a genuine issue here, a symptom of having poor schools. While lice wouldn't likely kill you, the infections caused by scratching could. And did, by the thousands.

"The Judge dilly-dallied around bringing the proper treatments into his pharmacies. He was trying to figure out how he and his cronies could derive the most profit from the infections. Until he came up with a scheme, he insisted you could mix rat poison and household bleach to get rid of the problem.

"It became obvious how much control he had over the idiots here - for a long time, we had the highest percentage of blondes outside Sweden.

"The misinformation and greed contributed to an additional 20,000 of the infected dying needlessly on top of the first 10,000 the infections took. Negligent homicide at that level would classify Trance as a mass murderer in other jurisdictions, but he's never paid for his crimes. People here have such poor memories that he's actually *gained* support."

"That in itself is terrible," I admitted, "but that's nowhere near the number of people you claim he killed."

Alex's expression had turned grim.

"Not done yet. The Judge enjoyed the profits and bloodlust of that episode enough that he took his show on the road.

"Over 400,000 Africans died when Trance shipped them mixtures of household bleach and ivermectin to stave off Ebola.

“Scotland Yard and INTERPOL were flummoxed trying to get the state of Arkansas to turn the Judge over for the murders. Trance is one of Governor Uggely’s ardent supporters. The two speak the same language, where ‘morals’ are mushrooms you use to cover a bad steak in one of your disgusting restaurants. She refused to allow the Judge’s extradition.”

Paul seemed confused.

“But in the here and now, when Fred showed us Trance’s property, it looked like he was going through some down times. Fred told us the Feds were after the Judge, and it was taking its toll.”

“Fred was right,” Alex answered, “and it’s become more obvious. Besides that, the new Walmart mega center’s open, and there’ve been some unexpected repercussions. Trance wouldn’t sell them land at a good price, so they bought farmland he didn’t control, which rendered his parcel worthless. No way in the world the Judge can blackmail Walmart, its management, or its employees. With the local store owners unable to compete with the discount chain, they’ve closed up shop; Trance has lost that leverage, too.

“But I wouldn’t count the crooked Judge out just yet. The Judge reminds me of the old joke about parts of the body arguing over which was the most important. When the anus claims he’s the critical piece, the others laugh. So, the sphincter does absolutely nothing, shuts completely down, being the total asshole he is. As toxic substances and gases accumulate in the body, it swells like a balloon, and its parts slowly begin failing. With no other choice, the other organs wave the white flag of surrender and anoint the rectum their new king.

“Consider Trance Narcissus County’s anus.”

Alex sat back in his seat while Paul and I compared notes and considered what we wanted to ask next.

But Alex’s rant had him waxing effusively, and he had more to share.

“Antisocial personalities have no capacity for genuine gratitude. Success or appeasement merely fuels their greed for more of the same.

I'll never understand why anyone would want to lick one's boots, Trance's in particular.

"One marker for sociopaths like the Judge is that they always have incidents of animal cruelty in their adolescent resumes. But Trance's history with non-human companions redefines the boundaries. Seventy years ago, the future Judge was eleven years old when a neighboring farmer caught him fondling the genitals of a sheep named Pussy.

"And that wasn't a one-off. There've been other incidents. Port Lybral County has a petting zoo for children. Trance was just thirteen when they threw him out for practicing fellatio on a llama named Puten.

"In the time since I've been back, the Judge has had just two four-legged companions. For a while, he kept a lapdog, dumb as a brick. She was one vicious little bitch - her tags gave her name as 'Cannon', but she was so sick in the head he nicknamed her 'Ailing.'

"Trance would show off how loyal she was to him by ordering her to bite random people. After she'd dutifully taken a chunk out of them, she'd spin around in circles, completely losing where she was - apparently chomping on humans causes the psychopathic doggie equivalent of an orgasm."

I looked at Paul, and I doubt either of us knew whether we should take Alex seriously.

And our host wasn't done yet.

"There was this mangy, skin-and-bones cat Trance called 'Run, DeSantis!' A total suck-up, worshipped the ground the Judge walked on. Its name made no sense unless you'd seen the crooked, handwritten sign hanging in the hallway going to Trance's bedroom. It read 'Pissed? Want to take me on? You won't survive the experience. But you're free to kick the cat instead.'

"From the way the place smelled, I'd guess that despite all his money, he'd never bought a litter box for that cat. Or from the scroungy animal's looks, food.

“Same way the Judge treats Narcissus County residents. I gather you’ve had a little taste of the extreme poverty here. As you’ll learn soon enough, part of that is because the rules of decent society just don’t apply - you can thank Trance.

“And while the Judge’s power may stop at the county line, his influence doesn’t. Port Lybral County is so wary of Trance and his minions infesting their citizens that, according to gossip floating around for years, a wealthy Port Lybral resident has offered standing bounties on both the Judge and DeRump. I understand he gets a dozen inquiries a day asking exactly how much is being offered - and where and how someone would collect their money.”

Something Fred had mentioned on our trip from the airport was gnawing at me.

“I’m a little ashamed that it’s not professional of me, but my next question is personal. Fred mentioned that the groundwater here doesn’t taste right. I’m worried for Thomas Ethan’s sake if it’s safe to drink.”

“I don’t blame you, Debra Ann; you have the makings of a great mom. Fred and I spent a lot of money on our residential water filter systems for that very reason. The diner and Madison’s Lodge have commercial filtration units, so you’ll be okay there. Otherwise, I suggest bottled water from Walmart; it’s sourced from other places.

“Narcissus County has fought regulation of any kind for decades, mostly through Trance’s powers as a judge, and that’s affected everyone in the general area. They sold leaded gasoline here for ten years after other places had banned it. My doctor says the residents’ low IQs are because of breathing all those fumes. Very addictive, apparently; when our citizens can’t get enough, they go to NASCAR events and tractor pulls to suck in more.

“There is a positive spin you could give the environmental damage - poisoned groundwater helps slow the deer so every 12-year-old boy can say they shot and killed something.”

I’d heard enough about Trance for one conversation.

“Someone listening to you might assume that everything bad around here is the Judge’s fault. I won’t argue whether he’s made things worse, but I know this area had its problems long before he took over.”

Alex agreed.

“Oh, of course! I didn’t mean to lead anyone astray. More than a century and a half of inbreeding, crappy schools, the KKK, and evangelicals haven’t helped.

“And some things are personal with me, too. Coming back here has made me painfully ashamed to be an old white guy. It bothered me that so many people here were angry; the ‘why’ bothered me more.

“You know how I recognize when someone understands at some level that they are completely full of crap? They get all hypersensitive and pissed off when anyone expresses a belief that’s different from theirs. Those who are unfamiliar with the type take it as rage at outsiders; it’s actually self-awareness of one’s personal failings.

“When you’re comfortable in your own skin and confident in your beliefs, you can accept someone who approaches things from another angle.”

“I use that to keep my journalism sharp; when I see I’m having an emotional reaction to something in an interview, I know I need to adjust my thinking to focus on the story instead of myself.”

Alex gave me a quick bob of his head in agreement.

“Exactly. First responders, medical professionals, the practice of law, law enforcement - same thing. We expect grown-ups to manage their emotions.

“Anger, especially, can be a mask for fear. Same with shyness, where you’re afraid of being laughed at. Those things are basic human nature. You’d expect some of that wherever you went.

“But it’s the abject cowardice here - the raw fear people won’t admit or address - that caught me by surprise. I never expected the sheer size of that second group of Trance’s supporters, those who live their lives afraid, not necessarily just of him, but of everything.

"I'd always been proud to be from Arkansas; still, I consider myself a citizen of the world. The locals think that means I've got one foot planted firmly in ideas, people, places, and things they're deathly afraid of as being alien.

"Fear seeps into nearly everything here. It's not always obvious, though for some residents, it's part of every thought process. Really comes out in the online echo chambers; people are more open when they think they're anonymous. You see it, too, with the ladies of Kamp Karen."

"'Kamp Karen'?"

"My name for Camp Menoposo, the after-church women's group that the pastor started a few years ago. That's a whole 'nother topic we need to talk about, but the discussion would take up an afternoon."

Curious, I added a line to my notes as a reminder.

"Being afraid, anger, self-loathing, and hatred can be indistinguishable; they all stem from an individual's deep-seated belief that they are inadequate or defective. For those who live their lives scared, the tiniest part of someone else that isn't exactly like them is enough to reinvigorate that fear in full.

"It can be paralyzing. Imagine trying to market your products and services when you're not able to deal with anyone who is the least bit different. Self-limiting at best.

"Few leave here - for fear they can't cut it outside, of course. As a result, some of these people will die as poor and ignorant as those from cultures far worse off, inconceivable against the backdrop of living in the richest country on earth.

"These negative emotions and reactions don't happen by accident; they persist because there's a benefit to someone else. It's no coincidence that they make the citizenry easier to govern and lead to slaughter.

"Knowledge is power, so the same culture once famous for keeping its women barefoot and pregnant extends that control by

keeping the rest ignorant - and by extension, fearful. The institutions here - schools, government, even churches - are all complicit, acting on behalf of the status quo and power structure.

“Here’s the kicker: our citizens are not all stupid. Most are at least smart enough that if you were to call them out for *any* of these things, they can come up with rationalizations explaining why it couldn’t possibly be so.”

I could see that Paul was becoming uncomfortable with Alex’s criticisms and assumptions, and I knew why. Paul’s forensic training had taught him to wait until all the evidence was in before rendering judgment. While he didn’t yet know enough to refute Alex’s statements, our host’s presentation of his opinions as fact, sometimes forcefully, troubled Paul.

I, too, bristled at parts of Alex’s harangue, especially the way he expressed them. Still, I had a different take on the situation; I saw Alex as yet another victim. Some people, when kicked in the shin by an overpowering bully, will run to safety and lick their wounds in private. Others will fight back as best they can, even when they know they can’t win. I saw Alex as one of the latter.

More importantly, Alex was an ally, and other than Fred and his family, the only one we had.

Perhaps sensing our discomfort, Alex softened his rhetoric a little.

“I’d like to find just one of these kids I could help get the hell out, maybe one of the high school students my son John hangs with. Call me the true believer hiding in the skin of a cynic; I feel my legacy lies in trying to save these people, as naïve and idealistic as that may sound.”

Alex naïve and idealistic? The incongruity was almost funny; something I’d leave for later.

“You’ve given us a pretty good idea how you see Trance, and why,” I summarized, following up with a grin, “and I’m guessing you didn’t vote for him in this last election.”

One eyebrow cocked, Alex shot me a “tell me you’re kidding” look.

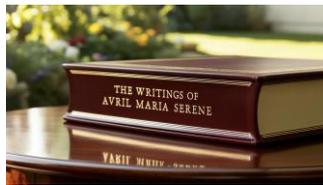
“For God’s sakes, man, the assclown’s a golf cheat! You can’t get much lower than that in civil society. Anyone so short on talent and class that they have to cheat at the great game won’t play fair at anything.”

Alex took a deep breath, exhaling slowly.

“My God... sometimes, what has happened to us makes me physically ill. I just wish I could be proud again... of my town, county, state, and country.”

I looked over at Paul and saw in his eyes that he’d come to the same understanding I had. You might fault Alex for how he felt; you could challenge his right to feel that way.

But you couldn’t deny that he felt it down to his very bones.





CHAPTER 18

I wanted to address the other power player in Narcissus County. “That brings us to Sheriff Jade DeRump. I know he’s suffered serious damage from the press - I got in a few shots of my own eight years ago - but I understand he’s come roaring back like a bad migraine. And Fred says Trance and DeRump aren’t playing for the same team anymore.”

Alex nodded in acknowledgement.

“I think the then-ex-Sheriff thought the worst was over when he scored an audience with the Pope after the rape jury came back hung. DeRump’s story was that he’d gone to the Vatican seeking forgiveness for his sins. Some believe he went for a far more sinister purpose.

“Either way, the Pope died the day after the former Sheriff’s visit.

“For all the conspiracy theorists around here, you wonder why no one is asking what DeRump said or did to kill the pontiff. You know that if the fired lawman had been a liberal, there’d be a huge investigation, and questions would circulate for years.

“People made more noise about DeRump dropping the state championship football trophy than they did about his involvement in the death of the world’s most popular religious figure.

“Because the Pope’s coincidental death created little more than a ‘meh, so what?’ reaction, it didn’t keep the ex-Sheriff down for long. Eventually, he added his name to the ballot. Somehow, he’d scored considerable support from someone other than Trance; nobody knows who, but some think it was in return for whatever he did to the Pope. Either way, DeRump won his old job back.

“The old-now-new Sheriff’s made no secret of two things: that he has an ax to grind, and that he wants what Trance has. I wouldn’t put it past DeRump to feed the Feds whatever information they need to take down Trance.”

“Their breakup should help us in two directions,” I mused. “Hopefully, the county’s residents will be more willing to talk to us, and not sharing resources should hamper their ability to monitor what we’re up to.”

“Maybe,” Alex cautioned, “but I don’t know that the basic dynamic has changed so much. The four groups I described earlier support them independently as much as they did when they were a team.

“Still, it’s true that the well-oiled machine the Judge and Sheriff ran eight years ago is gone. DeRump’s obviously getting help from somewhere, but he’s in serious rebuild mode. The incompetent sycophants the Sheriff has around him now act like a circular firing squad - as likely to shoot one another as they are to hit the target. What

makes them so dangerous is that they're firing automatic assault weapons, so they do eventually hit something or someone else."

"Yet, DeRump worries me more than Trance ever did. For one thing, the Judge is not just old; he's old news. And Trance's primary talents - grifting, blackmail, and leveraging property ownership - aren't immediately life-threatening to our citizens. Though the Sheriff may be politically weaker, DeRump has other strengths he can bring into play, including brute force and firepower."

His irritation with Alex now over, Paul was back in information-gathering mode.

"We've heard some of what they've accused DeRump of, but not a lot about the man himself."

"He's from Appalachia, eastern Kentucky," Alex explained. "Brands himself as something of a college-educated hillbilly, one of the mountain folks who's done himself proud. He got himself a name with a ghostwritten book about his path out of poverty, implying he's risen from this horrible situation to become some kind of Appalachian Superman. Pure gaslighting horseshit, even without the self-promotion. 'Hillbilly Outhouse' tries to normalize issues like incest, child pregnancy, and especially, the almost ho-hum abuse of women and their rights. He claims it's a mortal sin against God and nature if a woman doesn't tell her husband who she votes for, more so if that vote doesn't follow the husband's choices in lockstep.

"Nothing special as far as the writing goes, but the revisionist history struck a chord with some people, and it caught Trance's eye a dozen years ago. The Judge brought DeRump here, thinking his skills exploiting an uneducated rural population would be a real asset.

"DeRump uses his position as Sheriff to bolster book sales by requiring all department job applicants to purchase a copy before he accepts their employment application; buying a volume can also help negotiate a traffic fine or restaurant health code violation."

"You called it 'revisionist history,'" I noted. "I take it you know something that was left out of, or changed in, the book?"

“My job in Irvine sent me out to client sites to do installs and implementations of our database and software systems. From 2009 through 2014, I worked on three such contracts. One each for Hilton Hotels and FedEx, both in Memphis; another for Eastern Kentucky University, Lee Majors’ alma mater, in Richmond.

“In those days, you couldn’t drive a highway anywhere in that area without seeing dozens of billboards pushing Social Security Disability applications and claims help. I remember seeing a set of six of them, fifty feet apart, at an intersection just outside Memphis, all pushing the services of the same attorney, a guy named Eric Conn. Several others were involved, but he popularized the scam.

“Eventually, the charges against Conn for Social Security fraud would total over \$550 million. That number doesn’t account for the proceeds they couldn’t indict him on because of insufficient evidence. There were dozens of copycats in the area doing the same thing. People in the know say the scheme defrauded American taxpayers and legitimate Social Security recipients of between 1.5 and 2 billion dollars from 2004 through 2016. That’s *billions*... one thousand millions, almost twice over.”

Paul and I looked at each other in surprise.

“I must have been asleep at the wheel,” I admitted, “to have missed something like that going on for so long.”

Alex let me off the hook.

“You can thank the long-serving master politician and Senator from Kentucky, Mitch McConnell, for keeping the lid on it. He’d lost a step when this was going on, and it had gotten harder for him to get back off his knees from those long sessions sucking up to our Chief Finger Rapist and Pussy Grabber.

“Still, he’d been a sharp cookie back in the day. And if I knew about it from highway billboards, there’s no way in hell old Mitch wouldn’t have known fifteen years ago about a billion and a half dollars flowing to his constituents in that area over the course of a dozen years.”

The sheer size of the fraud and the environment in which it occurred amazed me.

“That’s an extremely impoverished part of the country, and that amount of money would have been more net income than what their entire economy produces over that time.”

“I have a thing about hypocrisy, anyway,” Alex continued, “but this blew my mind. For most of my adulthood, Republicans have claimed to hate welfare of any kind, though they’ve always been more vocal about it going to persons of color. Given that people in Appalachia are primarily white, Mitch had no trouble turning a blind eye so long as it kept those constituents happy and voting for him.

“So, not a word from Mitch until the Feds filed charges, and the scammers took his silence as tacit approval.

“But that didn’t mean the slimy old senator stayed out of the fray completely. Once the feds convicted Conn, the SSA began pursuing the fraudulent recipients to recover the taxpayers’ money. Suddenly, Mitch became very active in the case.

“The scheme worked because Conn had doctors and an administrative law judge in his pocket. He’d get new Social Security applicants with no qualifying disabilities to sign up, providing them with fake medical documentation. His administrative law judge signed off on the application.

“Conn would take half of what claimants received for himself and his cohorts.

“It’s important to understand that these new applicants suffered no disabilities. Otherwise, they’d already have been in the system legitimately, with no reason to give half their checks to Conn.”

Paul chimed in.

“Okay, we get it. Pretty basic scam, but if you’ve got a Senator watching your back, I can see why it succeeded. I’m assuming, given all the billboards advertising this, the conspirators got greedy. That’s what would have gotten them busted - that’s almost always the way these things end.”

“Exactly,” Alex agreed. “Same deal in this situation. But Mitch is sleazy - no way he’s letting that kind of money get away from the people he lords over.

“So, he turned things completely around. When the SSA sought repayment from those who cashed the checks, Mitch labeled the recipients as ‘victims’ on the theory that, even though they’d deposited only half the money, they’d also have to repay the amount they signed away to the attorney. He defended the fraud beneficiaries, claiming Conn sucked them in only because they were so poor and desperate. Paying back all the money they weren’t entitled to would cause tremendous hardship, driving them deeper into poverty. And here’s the closer: Therefore, by Mitch’s logic, they shouldn’t have to pay back *anything*, including the money they took and spent. Ridiculous, right?”

“Why do I have the feeling I won’t like this ending?” I whispered into Paul’s ear.

“Not so ridiculous after all, apparently. By 2024, Mitch had the SSA conned into dropping their collection efforts altogether. And why not? The taxpayers and rightful Social Security recipients Conn blatantly robbed had no representatives lobbying the SSA on their behalf. Never mind that the costs of the investigation and prosecution significantly added to the losses. And then there’s the harm done to the truly disabled since all this happened. Their claims are being delayed and put under a microscope because of misconduct they had nothing to do with.

“And the beneficiaries of all that welfare fraud and backroom dealing? Jade DeRump’s friends, family, and associates, some directly, some indirectly.”

This guy wears a uniform and carries a loaded gun?

“The Sheriff likes to go back to those mountain hollers in Kentucky and show off how he’s become so much better than them, though he couches it as ‘honoring his roots’

“His shame, though, reflects in his choices. DeRump’s birth name was James Donald Boughman. For all his proclaimed pride in his

mother's latest stint at rehab, she was so embarrassing to him he changed his first and last names. You can see where he gets some of his demeaning attitudes about women and why he married a submissive East Indian. I don't think you can get any further away from Eastern Kentucky than *her* ancestry. Her parents are Telugu - Andhra - and she was a Democrat until the day of her wedding to the Sheriff.

"Interestingly, Mitch McConnell showed his rejection of his roots in the same way. As did Clarence Thomas. Now *there's* a man who takes self-loathing to new heights. He clearly hates anyone black, and he's put himself and his decisions up for sale to the highest white bidder. Peculiar for someone who descended from slaves, don't you think?

"Seems these people don't want to share their beds with anyone the least bit like themselves. Sometimes, what someone's really about becomes so obvious when you step back and look at how they handle important things like who they choose to sleep with."

"Interesting observation..." I said, as Paul rocked his head back and forth slowly. "I'm confused, though. Fred said DeRump had divorced."

"Yup, so much stuff came out in his rape trial about things he was doing, including his affairs with other women, that little Miss Enabler finally grew a backbone.

"The story is that the Sheriff caught her viewing the movie *Fried Green Tomatoes*; the scene where Kathy Bates' friends are looking at their vaginas in handheld mirrors freaked him out. He ordered his wife to stop watching; she kicked his sorry ass to the curb.

"She's a competent lawyer in her own right... makes you wonder why she put up with him as long as she did. They've got two boys and a girl, so the children had to play into her decisions. By the way, she's a splendid cook; if you get the chance, taste her creations.

"His grandparents raised DeRump, and he attributes his conservative values to them. But living off the taxpayer's dime, working a bureaucracy through deceit - those are values that come straight out of Communism, which diehard Republicans claim to abhor. They do,

however, have quite the soft spot for Russians pining for the return of the USSR - especially if they'll game American voters into voting for the GOP."

Alex paused, his demeanor turning contemplative.

"You know, it's truly sad that Senator Joseph McCarthy from Minnesota doesn't get more mention and credit for setting the tone and standards adopted by modern conservatives. That he was a Yankee shouldn't matter; Southerners quit worrying about all that when they began worshipping the orange moron ejected from New York. But unfortunately, McCarthy chose Communists rather than immigrants as the target of his hatred. That just won't fly today with the bromance MAGAts have with Putin."

"The adoration of Russian despots and oligarchs is why DeRump often hires Russian thugs for his deputies - they helped him muscle his way into winning his first election. But Putin doesn't send his best people to backwoods burgs like Nero's Fiddle, so the Sheriff ends up with cartoonish Boris Badinov and Natasha cutouts - basically, trainees as Russian operatives. They rotate in and out as they're called back to Moscow and then replaced. You can tell the new ones because when they first arrive, they try to pay for their breakfast at the diner in rubles - not what you'd call discreet.

"DeRump is all about hypocrisy, fraud, and a free lunch. He was born to be a con artist and user; he's educated and has all the resources associated with being Sheriff. With Trance stabbing him in the back, he's motivated. That's why I think he's a much bigger threat than the Judge.

"I know he *could* have raped Innocence Grace or tortured and killed Liberty Belle, but I'm not sure he *would* have. With him, the circumstances would have to be transactional - he'd want something out of it that was worth much more than the risk he'd be taking.

"I just don't see that coming to him from what happened to either of Fred's daughters."



CHAPTER 19

Alex had a real knack for pushing boundaries with his opinions - and unfortunately, injecting them where they weren't helpful. Still, stripped of the latter, many of his insights seemed well-founded and could work as background. I was curious about some of the lesser characters Fred had mentioned during our trip from the airport... and one other.

When Paul and I last visited the diner for breakfast, we overheard brief snippets of a conversation about a local woman, apparently a celebrity. The tidbits were so bizarre they seemed more suited to a major city in California than a small rural town in the Bible Belt. Alex had also mentioned her earlier among those I should talk to.

“Tell me about Ellen Mellons.”

Alex raised his eyebrows, and his smile went lopsided as he rolled his head slowly from side to side.

“I was afraid you’d go there. Thank God Fred’s not here for this. I can’t imagine a sadder situation than what he’s going through, and it’s so hard to keep a straight face talking about that woman... I *guess* she’s a woman. She’s transgender. A walking billboard of unfortunate tattoo choices, someone who mothers with children in tow would point to and say, ‘See what can happen?’

“They call her ‘Musky’ Mellons around here.”

“That’s an odd nickname,” Paul commented.

“Goes back to when she first came to Narcissus County; an unfortunate incident one night when she was late to a blind date. There was an expired can of Cheez Whiz sitting on her kitchen counter; it’d been out of the fridge for a week, maybe more. She’d been to CVS earlier that day and dumped the bag out on the same counter.

“Her contacts weren’t in, and she mistook that can of cheese topping for her feminine deodorant spray. She’d had little experience being a woman - I guess she thought FDS came as a thick foam.

“Pretty ripe by the time things got hot and heavy on her date.”

I scrunched up my face and covered my eyes with my hand as Alex continued.

“Hard for me to believe, but they say Joel Boasteen, our local pastor, was the aspiring new boyfriend that night.

“Can’t see her being his type. I wonder if maybe he was trying to convert or counsel her, and she misunderstood the purpose of their get-together?”

“Still, Abigail Adams at the Dollar Store swears he was in there the next morning buying up all the Febreze they had in stock. Tom McKean owns the Ace Hardware, and he says Boasteen paid extra for the couch-cleaning attachment when he rented their Rug Doctor.”

“So, this Musky Mellons *is* a woman then...,” I mused.

"Her new double-Ds say so, but her persistent five o'clock shadow begs to differ. Most people can choke back the initial influx of nausea when they first meet 'her,' but it takes some effort. Her dating preferences lean toward men, but that doesn't always decide the question in this day and age."

Paul jumped in.

"You'd expect someone like that to land in California somewhere, maybe North Hollywood. How in the world did she end up here?"

"Trance usually hires incompetents and criminals. He can always hold their history over them to affirm his control of everything they say, do, or touch. Mellons was the exception to the rule, more independent than the others. When anyone asks the Judge why he brought this husky-voiced South African businesswoman, ketamine addict, and self-proclaimed genius to town, he says she's an efficiency expert who can save the county serious money.

"That may very well be, but it didn't take long for our residents to learn that she'd loaned Trance millions to keep him out of jail and get re-elected as county judge. So, he owes her big-time. The power she wields through him is his way of paying her back."

I found it difficult to believe that townspeople would redefine their idea of femininity.

"Do people around here accept her as a woman?"

"Not all, but yeah, mostly. Occasionally, Mellons will reprise her original gender on stage in Portnoy County as a male impersonator, though her top-heavy implants render the show less believable."

Trance asking her here was one thing. But why would she agree to come?

"I've only been here a day, but from what I can tell, her *je ne sais quoi* doesn't fit the general vibe of this place. What did she see as the attraction?"

"She's originally from South Africa, a member of the AWB - that's their version of the Klan. Their mission is to form an independent

whites-only country, which they call the *Volkstaat*. So, she identified immediately with the racism that underlies so many things here.

“She was a ‘he’ back then, newly addicted to ketamine and something of a dilettante posing as a business tycoon. However, he didn’t have any money of his own.”

Something doesn’t fit.

Seeing the frown on my face, Paul beat me to the obvious question.

“Fred says she’s the richest person in the county, even wealthier than Trance. So, how’d she run across all that cash?”

“Supposedly, she was out on her first date ever as a transgender and hadn’t bothered to let the guy in on her little secret. When he found out, he went ballistic, and things got ugly really fast. Mellons knocked him out cold with a wine bottle and then robbed him.

“Going through his pockets, she discovered the lottery ticket that began her journey to wealth and fame. People with ideas would come to her seeking financial support for their projects, and she began plagiarizing their innovations. She’d come to the attention of the authorities in South Africa. Things were getting too heated, and pretty soon after, she was on her way here.”

I checked off another line on my notepad.

“Okay, that answers what was going to be my next question: why she left the country of her birth.”

Alex snorted

“She likes to bitch about all the sacrifices she made to get rich, but most of her story is BS. For example, she complains about having to sleep on the floor of her business. She has a rent-a-wreck counter in her badly-used-car showroom. Sells some of the ugliest pickup trucks you’ll ever see in your lifetime. Customizes them but has no clue what she’s doing; she’s never made her living out of the back of one. Just *try* working on something over those slanty sides. And anything that happens to the bed when you’re driving affects the cab because the two aren’t separate. Anyway, you’re supposed to believe she stayed there at

night because times were tight as the business struggled during the early days.

“However, the truth proved to be something else entirely. This *is* a conservative community; when her male roommates learned what she was, they kicked her out of the condo they’d bought together.”

Paul had a question.

“How’d she and Trance ever link up?”

“I’m not sure how the Judge learned of her,” Alex replied.

“Maybe there’s a private little club of filthy-rich people the rest of us know nothing about. Her personal choices may not square with what you’d expect to find in Narcissus County, but her politics and self-serving lack of ethics jibe perfectly with those in power. All we really know is she had money, Trance had a need, and neither of them has high standards. A perfect union made in hell.

“She may not be completely under the Judge’s thumb, though. Quite a few of our residents believe Musky Mellons is the whale in the background who secretly came to DeRump’s rescue when Trance hung the Sheriff out to dry. Without some kind of outside help, DeRump would have taken the fall after Debra Ann published her articles about the sexual assault and suicide of Fred’s first daughter.”

I summarized.

“So, Mellons is a little strange, but pretty sharp if you look at her from the fox-raiding-unguarded-henhouses perspective.”

“‘Sharp’ might be a little strong,” Alex cautioned. “Friends who’ve visited her home say she keeps a note on the fridge reminding herself to fasten her bra in the front and then spin it around to the back. Wasting all day trying to fasten it in the back first makes her grumpy; fastening it before she puts it on, then trying to pull it down over her head and shoulders, stretches it out.

“Her excuse is that she’s only been post-surgical ten or eleven years now, needs more practice... and the ketamine makes her forget things.

“But most county residents know her for being ‘strange,’ as you put it.

“She’d been here maybe three months when she showed up at the country-western place looking for some fun. She’d had quite a few beers and ended up on the dance floor by herself. One of our local doctors was out partying and thought she was having an epileptic seizure. He jammed a wallet into her mouth and wrestled her to the floor. It took half an hour for the deputies and paramedics to figure out that no, she wasn’t suffering from a medical problem; she just couldn’t dance for *crap*.

“To this day, it’s not unusual to overhear ‘Musky Mellons’ and ‘conniption fit’ together in casual conversations at the diner.”

I was still struggling to get these pieces to join.

“Hmmm... Considering all that, I’m trying to get my head around something you said earlier about this hot mess trying to hook up with the local pastor...”

Alex gave me a twisted grin.

“You’re not the only one, Debra Ann. I can’t speak to the reverend’s side of it, but it’s pretty well known around town that she had quite a thing for him; some say she still does.

“An extreme case of ‘opposites attract,’ maybe?”



CHAPTER 20

The idea of a religious leader in this part of the world being sexually adventurous seemed to intrigue Paul.

“Tell us something about this pastor.”

“Okay, but that’s gonna require full disclosure about a couple of things. First, between Innocence Grace’s suicide and Liberty Belle’s murder, there have been several sexual assaults of young girls across the county. I’ve been on DeRump’s shit list since I came back here; the Sheriff was itching to pin one of them on me. Joel Boasteen provided my alibi for the period when the doctors said one rape occurred - he and I were having dinner and a lengthy debate.

“Second, Fred and I and our families are among the few around here for whom being a true Christian - where love thy neighbor means everyone, regardless of whether they think, act, or look like us - means something. Most people in Narcissus County belong to hater churches, white nationalist pseudo-Christians who twist politics and ‘faith’ together. Joel Boasteen is the one pushing that.

“While I don’t share in their ideas, and wouldn’t want to, I have a high regard for the fact that so many people, especially around here, feel differently... and strongly so. I’m more than willing to explore those ideas from time to time out of intellectual curiosity about how they evolve and gain traction, but that’s the extent of it.

“As long as no one gets hyper-aggressive about pushing that agenda around me, I can get along well in most situations. I *will* say this, though - it’s easy to understand why these people are so susceptible to conspiracy theories when they’ve worshipped one for two or three days every week all of their lives. Indoctrination doesn’t encourage critical thinking at any level, or for that matter, open-mindedness.

“Hater churches promote greed, intense dislike, cowardice, xenophobia, and tribal thinking. They further ignorance and take advantage of stupidity. Their places of worship serve as echo chambers and enablers for the emotionally immature, the frightened, the weak, and the talentless. Their approach is the polar opposite of the classic Christian concept of a healing and teaching church.”

I wanted to remind Alex that Paul asked about the pastor, not about Alex’s beliefs, but I held my tongue.

“So, while I respect anyone’s right to choose what they wish to believe, or not, they have no right whatsoever to use situational advantage to force those choices on the rest of us. I get vocal when these white nationalist ‘Christians’...” Alex made air quotes with his fingers, “expect others to believe the same idiocy they do, and I won’t have them telling me what to think.”

Paul was drumming his fingers on his knee. I could tell he was holding himself back from speaking his mind, likely to avoid encouraging Alex any further.

“Their God seems to detest much of what He designed, including human breasts, penises, vaginas, anuses, and various ways of using them.”

“They rely completely on forgiveness. The problem is that men and women don’t do so well getting away with things. Someone actually turning their life around after getting a free pass is a ten-million-to-one shot, despite all the feel-good stories you might hear from charities seeking donations. Barely having your hand slapped, if there’s any punishment at all, validates inappropriate behavior, ensuring future repetition.”

Okay, Alex, we get it - as you said, you’re not one of their believers....

“Catholics have incorporated a weekly penance-slash-forgiveness cycle into their worship for 2,000 years, and it has reduced use of the confessional not one iota - people keep sinning in the absence of harsh punishment. Forgiveness is enabling.”

“Perhaps for some, but not for everyone,” I murmured.

If he heard me at all, Alex paid no attention to my words.

“The real problem with forgiving is that it can cause terrible downstream damage that’s hidden from the participants. When a normal person forgives someone and gets burned for it, they are far less likely to give the same break to someone perhaps more deserving down the road.”

“Doling out forgiveness like you’re giving away candy at Hallowe’en does no good for anyone. It should be a very special thing applied only to extraordinary circumstances after significant consideration - not as a general policy, and not because anyone else said you must.”

That I could see.

“But what alarms me most are the obvious signs of human regression that you find riding the coattails of white nationalist sham Christianity, using the same basic argument that ‘faith’ overrides known facts and provable science. You can’t go five seconds on the internet these days without running into another brain-dead alt-right-wing conspiracy theory making the rounds.”

Paul’s a practicing Catholic; losing Cindy to cancer had only strengthened his faith. My parents adopted me from a Catholic orphanage. They baptized me into the church and raised me Catholic; learning my catechisms was a big deal.

But other than my father’s loyalty to my mother after she passed, Dad was not overtly religious, and I’ve followed in his footsteps. I consider a person’s religion a deeply personal and private thing. Because of the latter, I’m not a fan of those who proselytize and have little patience with the modern interpretation of evangelism. However, what other people believe does not strongly offend or affect me. I think Paul feels the same, though more because his religious foundations are so unshakable.

Still, I watched Paul’s eyes as I said, “Alex, I don’t think either of us would take exception to whatever you do or don’t believe. I appreciate the heads-up, and we’ll consider where you’re coming from as we process what you tell us, but it’s all good.”

Paul nodded in agreement, and I was glad to see I hadn’t overstepped.

“I need to get us back on track. You were going to tell us about Joel Boasteen, the reverend.”

“He was new to town when you were here the first time, Debra Ann. The congregation selected him as the evangelical pastor to shepherd the Assembly of God’s flock on First Street.

“His father was also a minister, though the old man had a small traditional church in Enabler Hollow. The son is far more ambitious; he’s since brought all Nero’s Fiddle’s churches under his direct supervision.

“Boasteen’s the young world-beater type, wants to build his following into an evangelistic mega-church, something like a ‘Six Flags over Jesus.’ He’s particularly enamored of a feature he calls the ‘Stairway to Heaven.’ You get to climb up a golden staircase and shake hands with a fake Jesus at the top - assuming, of course, that you paid the extra fee and agreed to a non-cancelable subscription.

“Showmanship aside, he’s convinced the residents that his goals are to protect and promote their interests.”

“How old is he?” I asked.

“He’s probably 42, 43. Now he runs all three Assembly of God churches and the Baptist congregation here, as well as the Baptist parish in Hayseed Haven. His spiel is that he wants to use religion to unify everyone, but with an asterisk. He doesn’t say so out loud, but his definition of unity extends only to conservative whites.

“Townfolk seem to like him, and I’ve not heard anyone say anything negative, at least recently.”

Alex’s qualifier caught my attention.

“Recently?”

“I’m not sure the man realizes it, but he’s achieved what he has because of the kind and forgetful nature of this community; he owes them more than he’s ever acknowledged. His rise to power and control over the county’s religion hit a roadblock early on when he inadvertently revealed his true nature.

“He’d been here maybe two years when a violent thunderstorm brought with it a half-dozen destructive tornadoes and disastrous flooding to the county. No one alive then had ever seen anything like it; absolutely tore this place up. You couldn’t drive two blocks anywhere here without running into the remains of someone’s home or business, or a fallen tree, lying out in the street.

“Boasteen had just added the big Baptist church out by the highway to his group of congregations. But the preacher refused to open the doors of his new acquisition to provide temporary shelter to those left homeless - didn’t want to sully the prize gem in his collection.

Boasteen lost credibility among many of his parishioners. Most of them have either forgiven him or forgotten the whole thing. I haven't.

"Still, if you were to ask those few people who disagree with him today, it'd likely be over philosophical issues.

"Me, I don't like the man for other reasons, but I'm split about the message he's spreading. Ordinarily, I wouldn't care what other people think is true. I'm all for adults choosing what they want to believe, given they have the maturity, experience, and education to make important decisions for themselves.

"But with the kids, that's different. They're defenseless and amenable to whatever an authority figure tells them. When these preachers stuck to love thy neighbor, judge not lest ye be judged, turn the other cheek, and that kind of thing, no problem.

"Those days are long gone. Now they're shoving divisive politics, Trumpie immorality, antiquated and abusive gender roles, and hatred of anything or anyone different down every child's throat from the pulpit, and that I can't tolerate. And Joel Boasteen is an enthusiastic proponent of getting these kids on board with his ideology as early as possible.

"To me, that's child abuse in its purest form."



CHAPTER 21

I'd like to think I have the man I married figured out by now. Still, Paul sometimes surprises me.

When he leaned forward on the couch to say something in response to Alex's last comment, I was sure he meant to challenge our host.

Not so.

"In the Catholic Church, we're not exposed to everything you're describing. There are other things we don't see, though, that we probably should. Still, the Vatican closely regulates our worship; it changes slowly. So, when these televangelists turn up on TV or occasionally in my newsfeed, I'm astonished at some of their preaching.

At first, I thought those were one-off situations, but I've seen and heard enough to realize this is where we are now, all across the country."

Alex sighed.

"Dark days. Still, that's what the parents here seem to want, and as things stand now, it's within their rights. That being said, I don't have to like Boasteen's pandering to their ignorance and lack of wider vision.

"I never thought I'd see the day when churches would aggressively try to turn us back into primitive and tribal animals. Or that they'd do so primarily because it serves the institution's political and financial ambitions."

"Pretty sad when you can't find human decency in a church," Paul agreed.

"In fairness," Alex added, "Boasteen didn't invent this garbage. This is what he sincerely thinks is the right thing to do, albeit to accomplish his goals, which aren't the same as his congregants'."

"Some people look to Boasteen as protection from Trance and DeRump, and there *have* been some little things he's done to help. But in the bigger picture, he's more one to go along to get along, and doesn't stand up to those in power. When you ask him about it directly, he gives you this excuse about his responsibilities being to his parishioners' religious needs, and straying into the secular dilutes the message. And yet, he has no trouble supporting the right-wing agenda in his sermons.

"Your Sunday morning double-dose of hypocrisy; theirs alongside his."

"Alex, you can't paint everything with the same broad brush," I protested, tiring of his incessant negativity and taking exception to his attitude.

"As a believer in a different approach, you wouldn't see things the way their devout would; you're not the intended audience. I'm sure there are parts of the church's message that may be insincere, inconsistent, or flat-out wrong. I'm equally sure that some of what is being preached is genuinely helpful to parishioners. You're applying the

same expectation of perfection to flawed human messengers as you would to your own God.”

Alex eyed me with a look that said he was trying to decide if the debate was worth the risk.

“Funny thing about people,” he began, “you can tell when they’ve given up supporting the idea of a Santa; they’ll start labeling gifts to children with their name instead of the bearded big man’s.

“If they’re such believers in the high and mighty, when was the last time any of them did something really nice for someone that was unsolicited, and wrote an anonymous note that read, ‘This is from God?’

“You either believe all things come from or through God, or you don’t; can’t have it both ways. To say you believe in one side but act to support the other is hypocrisy in its worst, and sadly, most common, form.”

Several rationalizations leaped immediately to mind, justifying different things *I’d* done, and when they did, I realized Alex wasn’t completely wrong.

Still, I needed to move things along, so I switched the focus to my investigative needs.

“Boasteen should know most of the residents. You’d think he’d have some idea, or could at least guess, who might have done these things to Fred’s daughters. How would I set up a meeting with him?”

“He was new to town when they raped Innocence Grace; I doubt he really knew anyone here, nor did they know him. But you’re right, he should be able to help with solving Liberty Belle’s murder.

“With all these churches to run, he’s pretty busy. But I’ll give the man his due - he’s fairly accessible. If you catch him out and about, he’ll give you a few moments of his time.

“He’s on a fixed schedule that doesn’t vary much. I should be able to set things up so that you and Fred run into him at an opportune time.”

“You won’t be there?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think I’d have anything positive to contribute to *that* discussion.”

Despite Alex’s apparent dislike for the man and his mission, it occurred to me that even if Boasteen couldn’t help with the investigation, he’d be a conduit to those who might. I needed to be better prepared for meeting the pastor and wanted a second opinion.

“I’m gathering that the pastor’s single, given what you told us about the dating disaster with Musky Mellons. Is there someone he sees regularly, someone who might talk to me?”

“He keeps his personal life close to the vest,” Alex replied. “But the church organist and I are close, and she tells me he’s dating a woman named Inet Buhnrop... he spends a lot of time with her.”

“Inet Buhnrop? That’s an unusual name. Where’s she from?”

“We don’t know... actually, nobody here has ever seen her except the reverend. The pastor says she’s ‘international,’ whatever that means. There’ve been claims of someone who ‘looks foreign’ seen coming and going from the parsonage, but not from anyone I’d take seriously.

“Started out as a joke, but there’s a persistent rumor floating around among parishioners that she’s actually a party doll. Others say the name is an alias for Trance’s 18-year-old granddaughter. The Judge has been overheard saying that if they weren’t related, he’d like to sleep with her, though I seriously doubt Trance would let societal prohibitions prevent him from pursuing his fantasies. Maybe Boasteen feels the same attraction.

“Either way, if the stories about Inet are true, when you find her, she’ll be horizontal.”

“You mean, ‘dead?’”

“Oh, no, I mean *under* someone. They say she’s a very giving girl.”

Alrighty, then... That paints a picture!



CHAPTER 22

The locals, as Alex described them, were far more complex and interesting than I'd expected. Checking my watch, I hoped there'd be time for one more.

"Who else should we be talking to?"

Though our conversation had gone on for quite a while, Alex didn't hesitate in his answer.

"You can't have a list of the relatively few rich and powerful around here without including Jeff Bozo.

"Bozo comes from a long line of Bozos, another member of the private club here for the wealthy and entitled; all old, all white, all conservatives, and all male except for Mellons.

“He made his money as a middleman. Bozo creates nothing new, just grabs profit from things moving betwixt and between - his take’s basically a greed tax. He owns most of the retail establishments in the county that aren’t named ‘Walmart’ or controlled by Trance.

“Bozo has a chain of bookstores tucked in corners everywhere. He also has small retail and boutique shops scattered across the place. He’s the head Ferengi around here; doesn’t add any value to anything, but he always has a thumb on somebody’s scale trying to make a buck.”

The term he used didn’t register with me at first.

“*Ferengi?*”

“From *Star Trek*,” Paul offered. “The sleazy, overtly transactional characters with the big ears... ‘The Ferengi Rules of Acquisition?’”

“Oh, Lord.” I laughed as that memory returned. “‘Rule #1: Once you have their money, you never give it back.’”

Alex smirked.

“You got it. Bozo isn’t particularly well-regarded; it’s just that you can’t escape him. It’s impossible to buy or sell anything in the area without him sticking his fingers in the pie.

“He’s one of the richest men in the county, yet despite all that money and fame, couldn’t keep his wife, which tells you something about his manhood.

“Now his ex-wife, MacKenzie, *she’s* a different story. In the divorce, she took a quarter of the money he’d ripped off from everyone around here. She spends her time giving to worthy causes. I’m betting *that* fries Bozo’s mercenary ass. Classy lady. She left for points west, and we miss her.

“Bozo recently rented himself a new bride. They say the prenuptial agreement slash sexual services contract ran 100 pages long... written in their love language, I’m sure.”

“Rented?” I asked. “I assume you mean you don’t expect it to last. Without knowing their situation, I’d have to agree, just on general principle. I’ve never been able to take seriously anything that had ‘true love’ and ‘prenuptial agreement’ in the same sentence.”

"Can't argue *that*," Alex said, grinning. "As for him, he's as greasy as he's always been, maybe a little worse. People think of him as harmless if you wash off the slime after shaking his hand. But state regulators recently nailed him; the size of the scams they got him for was astonishing. They'd caught him playing nasty tricks on people with his 'Primo' promotions - the settlement his company paid out to regulators was the largest in the state's history.

"People are just now realizing that his company's logo isn't a smiling arrow; it's a penis, and the subliminal message is no accident: 'We're out to screw you.'"

"I saw one of their trucks when we drove here." Paul laughed. "Gotta admit, I didn't take it as a smile, either!"

Giving Paul a faux glare, I couldn't hold it and fell into a giggle as I leaned into his chest.

"Either way, Bozo is notable for being both bald and balls-less - he's an utter coward.

"It may have been the only honest idea the man has ever had, but he once offered to display the costs of Trance's so-called 'tariffs' prominently on the products he sells. Still, one call from the Judge, and Bozo's making like the world's fastest garter snake slithering away from the confrontation. It was almost like Bozo contracted bone spurs, too... can you get those from incidental contact with someone who's spineless and orange?"

"When Bozo agreed to help Trance mislead consumers by hiding the costs of the Judge's stupidity in the prices Bozo posted for his goods, people saw him for the chickenshit he is.

"To retaliate and provide cover for his future endeavors, Bozo bought the local newspaper, one of the few decent ones around, to squash the stories they were telling of his sleaze and misdeeds. It didn't take him long to drive off their excellent editors and journalists and run it into the ground."

I wondered if Bozo was still a major player in the community.

“With the state settlement and the divorce, it seems like he’s had his ears pinned back - he wouldn’t have the same power he once had.”

“Oh, no, the opposite, really. He’s gotten this bright idea that he can get over on people with rentals.”

I wasn’t sure what else he could lease out that would generate significant income.

“Trance bought up most of the property here, and Musky Mellons has the rental car business sewn up, right?”

“No, I meant rentals in a more general sense. As I mentioned earlier, his new wife is a short-term rental - she’s the woman he was shacking up with during his marriage to MacKenzie. The bride was cheating on her ex, too, at the same time; marriages between cheaters never last. It won’t be long before one suspects the other has fallen back on old habits.

“Bozo rented most of Venice for the nuptials. He also rented celebrities for that week, mostly B-list, to give the appearance in photos and videos that he’s popular. He’s tried to rent credibility by copying MacKenzie’s philanthropy, but only when he could leverage it, of course.”

“Leverage?” Paul asked. “How do you leverage the donation of something?”

“Her giving is without strings attached. Bozo’s offerings come with lots of caveats, restrictions, conditions, claw-backs, and hidden little benefits for himself or his businesses. More like an NFL player contract than a donation - the numbers look huge, but what anyone other than Bozo gets out of it winds up being peanuts.

“His latest scam is to cheat authors out of their book royalties by having customers ‘rent’ individual pages from him rather than buying the book from the writer.”

Everything about Bozo revolves around money - means he’s shallow, but not necessarily a rapist in the sexual sense.

"That tells me a lot about Bozo and explains at least part of why MacKenzie wouldn't save the marriage once she knew he cheated. He seems quite the louse."

"His new wife's a former model and news anchor," Alex added. "She has her pilot's license, too. She doesn't care much for the locals here - he keeps her squirreled away in Little Rock."

"Hard to figure what she sees in him - has to be in it for the money. Besides his character and personality flaws, he's not much to look at. One eye's lazy, the other wanders between women. Besides being bald, the shape of his head is like... well, people say that when the two of them have sex, Bozo dives in noggin-first. I'm guessing a fun night for her begins when he wiggles his ears."

That left me with a visual that was hard to shake off.

"Hate to leave things on that note," Alex said, his grin telling me that no, he didn't, "but I wasn't paying attention to the time. We're about to be interrupted - they'll be delivering and installing my new washer and dryer soon."

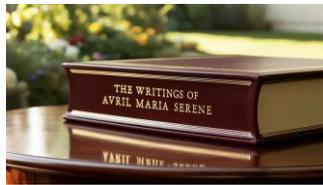
"Can we follow up with this in the morning? I thought I'd take you to see the sights and meet a few residents. We can talk about some others while we're driving around."

"Thanks, Alex, you've given us lots to think about in the meantime," I answered as Paul nodded his appreciation.

"Say, when, 9:00 then?"

"That should work out fine. We'll probably want to take Liberty Belle's Trailblazer. Some people we'll visit won't be as receptive if they see my Range Rover pull up."

I'd picked up some clues why that might be, but I kept my mouth shut.





CHAPTER 23

Once Paul and I were back in our room, I transcribed my notes from our conversation with Alex.

“That discussion generated a lot of fascinating material,” Paul commented as he looked over my shoulder.

I wasn’t as sure.

“The things this guy says would certainly make a story more interesting. But I don’t dare quote some of it for fear of turning off or misleading my readership.

“More than anything, Alex seems angry. Or maybe it’s just extreme disappointment in the people he grew up with. Still, those sentiments compete with how I want the reader to feel when they learn

about the crimes and injustices that Innocence Grace and Liberty Belle suffered.

“There are bits and pieces of where Alex is coming from that I get. I mean, some people who voted for Trance aren’t the best examples of humanity, to be sure; Nick Fuentes comes to mind. And I’m not happy about what they’ve done to this county by electing someone like Trance to be the Judge - again.

“Still, I feel sorry for those who live here, I do. They’re victims as much as anyone, though it may well be of their own poor choices. But none of us are perfect. We can’t say that someday they won’t educate themselves, follow through on a good idea, or reach their potential with the help of better politicians... or an honest pastor.

“There’s always the possibility they could someday contribute positive things to society in ways that would make up for the harm they’re doing now.”

Paul nodded and was about to add something when we heard a tapping on the door of our room.

It was Fred Freeman, dropping by on his way home from work to see how our conversation with Alex had gone. As we relayed the highlights and got to the parts about Joel Boasteen, Fred seemed surprised that Alex’s review wasn’t more negative.

“Look, because of the religious thing and being surrounded by Bible-huggers, neither of us can say how we feel about the preacher out in public. Still, I think Alex despises that son of a bitch nearly as much as he does Trance and DeRump. To be honest, I’m right there with him. But I’ve got family and my job at the feed store, so to get along, we go to Boasteen’s Assembly of God regularly.”

Though Alex had made it obvious that his beliefs didn’t fit those of the other residents here, I’d missed the full intensity of Alex’s personal feelings toward Boasteen. Paul cocked his head and was chewing his upper lip, which told me it was news to him, too.

“Alex said he wouldn’t be there when we met the reverend, and some things he told us weren’t flattering. But I really didn’t get a sense of him despising the pastor as a person.”

Fred spent a moment studying the carpet's pattern.

“Alex has been doing his best lately to be as even-handed as he can. Still, as I’m sure you’ve figured out, that’s not his strong suit. Out of respect for the two of you, your relationship to me, and all the trouble you’ve gone to helping us, he would have gone overboard to give you a balanced appraisal of our community’s fair-haired evangelical leader. But I can’t forgive, and neither will Alex, Boasteen taking advantage of what happened to Liberty Belle.”

Paul was curious but tried to tread gently.

“Would you mind sharing why you feel that way?”

“Alex was with Betsy and me when the three of us walked into the diner not long after the hunters discovered Liberty Belle’s body. Some days it’d be hard to go home because the hall to her bedroom is right off the entryway to our living room.

“I don’t know if it was the insincerity Alex heard in the reverend’s tone, or the trite worthlessness of Boasteen’s words, but the preacher’s offering of ‘thoughts and prayers’ with his pat condolences set Alex off.

“Alex was still angry from the Sunday before. In his weekly sermon, Boasteen had used Liberty Belle’s tragic death as an excuse for mounting an enthusiastic campaign promoting the pastor’s own brand of morality. He was chastising all the parishioners present, even though there was only one or two who needed to change their raping, torturing, and murdering ways... assuming the assailants ever attended church. Worse, he tried to suggest the crimes had to be committed by someone who didn’t share his white nationalist pseudo-Christianity.

“When Alex spotted Boasteen holding court at the diner’s coffee counter, Alex let him have it. If you haven’t noticed, Alex gets fixated on different things depending on his mood. His theme for that day was hypocrisy.

“First, he reamed the reverend for not putting at least some effort into expressing his condolences: ‘For Chrissakes, it’s the man’s daughters, twice! Don’t the words *rape* and *murder* resonate with you at all? Just another fucking day blessing sinners?’”

“Then Alex’s rant turned to the preacher’s sendoff of our high school football team the Friday night before. There are people around who might agree with Alex on this one.

“‘With all the problems we have here, you ask divine intervention to save the quarterback from the pick-sixes he throws?’

“‘The only safe assumption is that the opposing team’s corners get their prayers answered because their minister has a better relationship with their God.’

“‘Beseeching the greatest power in the universe to drop everything because they need to focus on increasing our star receiver’s yards-after-catch numbers? So that our guy gets a scholarship to an SEC college?’

“‘And what’s the oh-so-Christian message you close with in front of our families and our children before they flip the coin to start the game? *Crush the living snot out of the kids on the other side of the field.*’

“‘Where’d you steal your script for the pre-game prayer, Preacher? The WWE?’

“‘You throw around all this high-flying rhetoric, but you seem to have no clue about the meaning of the basics, like *love thy neighbor* - or for that matter, *hypocrite.*’

“Then Alex takes off on the idea of silent acceptance as a requirement in the reverend’s sermons.

“‘Your idea of having faith means asking no questions, indistinguishable from being a capo for the mob. *Fear God*, as if he’s Al Capone living amongst the clouds.’

“‘No wonder that the people around here are so fucked up. No critical thinking whatsoever.’

“‘You reinforce this crap among the residents here - some might say you pound it into them - maybe three times a week, the women

more often. Wednesday night church activities, Friday night under the stadium lights during the invocation, then half the holy day with the sermon and Sunday school. Not to mention all the follow-up social activities tied to the church and its message.'

"'Pastor, you wouldn't know the truth if it stripped you naked and impregnated you with its next child.'"

"Boasteen tells him, 'Well, I'm a man, so...'

"But Alex is in no mood to cut the pastor any slack.

"'So *you* say, but that doesn't stop you from bending over and taking love jabs from the orange imbecile. If wanting it in the shorts is your thing, why not give it up to someone decent, intelligent, and productive? Where do you get off anointing a God-damned Yankee as being holier than *us*? What, you suddenly went deaf when he came up with that *Corinthians Two* bullshit? The son of a bitch obviously never read a single page of the Bible in his entire fucking life - hard for him to fit it in with all his grifting, rapes, and other felonies.'

"'What about the *God-damned* part of *God-damned liar* did they not teach you in that two-bit religious college you attended?'

"'When there's truth to something, you don't have to sit on a wooden bench and pay to have it beaten into you three times a week. That water's wet doesn't require tithing or passing a collection plate. But apparently, the bill of goods you're selling demands all the money you can get your hands on, maybe more. That you have to spend so much effort and expense pushing your snake oil attests to your words having no truth. They don't square with what people could see every day in their own lives if you weren't spending your energies blinding them.'

"Finally, Alex finishes with, 'You'd better pray, Pastor, that God is a hell of a lot more loving than the crap you're spreading about Him. Because if He weren't, you and yours would be such an embarrassment to Him He'd likely stomp you into your constituent parts - little balls of shit rolling around on the floor everywhere.'"

I could only stare at Fred in wonder. I knew him, and there's no way he'd ever go off like Alex did... how could the two friends have remained so close?

"Alex gave this little speech to a *minister*?"

Paul sighed as Fred raised both shoulders and then dropped them, his palms turned up.

"Yeah, well... but that's how Alex's always been. As a friend, you appreciate his consistency; you always know where he stands. And other times, he can embarrass you so badly you just want to find a place to hide.

"But the good reverend's not blameless, either, whether or not you agree with Alex's rant. Because, for his part, the pastor chose *not* to turn the other cheek, playing instead to his audience among the diner's customers.

"He fires back with a not-so-subtle warning: 'Here's something you should consider, Satan-worshipper. If God tires of your false judgments, who's going to protect you from the anger of all my true believers?'"

Interesting - something Alex said struck a nerve in the preacher. I doubt the reaction they teach in seminary includes the word "my."

"Alex's not one to be intimidated. Instead, he takes the preacher's name-calling as a sign of weakness. He just smiled down at Boasteen like he would a worm flushed out of the mud by the rain. Alex gives him a quick shake of his head and says, 'You make my point, Pastor. Threats like that are so... *Christian* of you.'

"Then Alex gives Boasteen a disgusted look and turns on his heels, Betsy and I tagging along right behind.

"So, Alex won't be with us when we go to meet the pastor. You'll have to settle for me as your escort and guide.

"Trust me, that'll make things plenty uncomfortable when we see Boasteen."



CHAPTER 24

THE NEXT MORNING

Alex was raring to go as we pulled into his drive, climbing into the back of Liberty Belle's Trailblazer as soon as we rolled to a stop.

"Everything go okay with your appliance delivery?" Paul asked out of politeness.

"Went like a breeze," Alex replied. "The old ones have been on their last legs for a while. No big deal when it's just me, but my number four son, John, just became a teenager, and he flew in from California to stay with me a while."

Number four?

“How many children do you *have*?”

Alex grinned.

“At last count, eight. We have to use their first and middle names to keep ‘em straight. We named John Church after his uncle.

“He wanted to get away from his mom and spend some time with his old man; we’re going to do some hunting and fishing. He brought a lot of clothes.”

“Ah, that explains the new bike on your porch,” I said. “So, Alex, where are we headed this morning?”

“I thought I’d show you some of the local color today. I wanted you to meet Stephen Miller; he calls himself the ‘commandant’ of the military academy in Hayseed Haven. Later, we’ll see if we can catch the mayor sober enough to talk to you. That’ll give you a brief glimpse of some extremes you’ll run up against when you chat with the citizenry.

“Hang a right here, Debra Ann. Fred’s already shown you some of the scenery, so we’ll take the highway.”

“Turn onto 163? Got it. Along the way, could you tell me about some of Narcissus County’s lesser personalities? Sometimes it works better if I start at the bottom and work my way up.”

“Sure. Lessee... there’s Jimmy Jordan, our high school wrestling coach and town council member. His entire life since elementary school has been about getting his face as close to another man’s crotch and buttocks as possible.

“There were certain positions he’d get into that seemed to turn him on; he’d have this strange look on his face like... well, I probably shouldn’t go there.”

You already did, Alex. Eeewwww.

“Hard not to wonder what that was all about. We’d go to his meets and cross our fingers, hoping and praying he wouldn’t go all Mike Tyson on us and bite something off.”

Double eeewwww.

"The school has him on a short leash - they had to assign an assistant to keep him from being so handsy with the boys he's coaching. I really don't think girls are his thing.

"Quite the athlete back in the day, or so he likes to think. He's bitter, burned out, and mad at the world. It's because where he once got applause and attention, now he has to pay for motel rooms by the hour and sneak around to get his jollies. He uses his position on the council and his support of Trance and DeRump to lash out at everyone for the pettiest of reasons, most of them make-believe."

Paul was looking out his window, slowly shaking his head, his hand on mine.

"He sounds interesting," I admitted. "Probably won't be at the top of my interview list, though. Who else you got?"

"Give me a second; let me see if I can set us up to see the mayor."

Alex pulled out his cell and punched in a number. A few moments later, he reported back.

"Officially, his appointment calendar has our marvelous mayor tied up for the rest of the day. That's Susan's code to say that he and Pete Hegseth are sleeping one off, curled up together, sucking on an empty bottle in a sleeping bag on the restroom floor.

"Since we won't be meeting him, let me give you the lowlights. Jules Liani is the town drunk and, not coincidentally, Trance's hand-picked mayor for Nero's Fiddle. Liani's been an alcoholic for about thirty years longer than he's been the city's boss."

"Has he always been the mayor?" Paul asked. "Since the Judge took over, I mean."

"Back a few years ago, Nero's Fiddle bucked Trance and elected themselves a more liberal mayor, Joe Birden. A warning shot of sorts from voters, saying they were getting fed up with the Judge and DeRump.

"But Birden was a tired old man and timid to boot, deluding himself that he could keep Trance at bay all by his lonesome. Some of

Nero's Fiddle's more courageous residents proposed the idea of packing the city council; that is, expanding the number of members to render the Judge's acolytes already on the council in the minority. The mayor could then appoint his own choices as the new council members until the next election, when our residents could choose their own.

"But Birden wouldn't do it because of his old-fogey notions about traditions: 'The council's always been the size it is.' Actually, he was wrong; it hasn't, but you get the gist of the problem."

"It's unfortunate they missed that opportunity," I commented. "Might have been a useful check on Trance's power."

"Not standing up to them has been an issue since the Judge and Sheriff began running the place. It's become something of a joke throughout the region. One of the wealthier residents of Port Lybral County is constantly ranting that the moderates and liberals here have never shown one iota of backbone. The same attitude Europe has towards national progressives in the U.S.

"Look, two of my children are daughters - I'm all about women's rights and equality and all that. But Trance's power base is in low-IQ toxic masculinity. Want to beat him? Fight fire with fire, come at him with everything you've got, take no prisoners.

"But what did the spineless jellyfish here do? They handed the Judge the only elections he ever won by running what the locals considered radical liberal women against him - the stupidest move I've ever seen in my life, times two."

I didn't want to stir Alex up more than he already was, but my curiosity needed satisfying.

"Why would you say that?"

"When I'm not sure in my mind about something, I turn to Mother Nature for guidance. And, no offense intended, but I'm trying to picture a herd of bison which, when attacked by the raging bulls of a competing drove, not only send out cows to fight the battle, but cows too old to produce calves."

I should have known better than to ask.

And Alex wasn't about to stop there.

"I'm all about equal opportunity, but it takes a certain hubris and detachment from reality to think that idealism can ignore basic genetics. That's beyond dumb. And men and women alike pay a terrible price for that stupidity. Men evolved to fight, and women to have babies - those are the roles built into our DNA. At the point you make a silly, dangerous, and self-serving choice not to like that reality, and therefore ignore it, your opinion is beyond irrational; it's an existential threat to the herd.

"By the way, in between the two ladies who lost, they ran old man Birden for mayor... and no surprise, he won.

"Sometimes it's best to stay in your fucking lane."

Alex didn't hide that he was sizing me up for my reaction - I'd gathered that approach was his thing, putting confrontational thoughts out there so he could gauge their effect. His opinion certainly rubbed me the wrong way; still, we weren't in California, and I knew plenty of women here would likely agree with him at some level. I kept my thoughts to myself for the moment.

Not getting a rise out of me, Alex returned to the story he was telling before he'd veered off.

"So, our rich Port Lybral businessman decided he'd publicly shame Trance's opponents for their ineffectiveness. He created a dog show in Petergeorge, open to anyone in the county with a dachshund. He called it 'Finger Focker's Royal Tiny Weenie Parade.' For your dog to win, it had to be dressed up as a flower - specifically, a pansy."

"How'd *that* go?" Paul asked.

"The attendance was enormous.

"He's thinking about doing it again this year, but with a twist. He doesn't like that liberals are countering alt-right-wing echo chambers with their own instead of working to persuade independents who could make a real difference.

"There's an internet site here that recently changed its name to 'MSNowAndThen.' It's a gathering place for progressives, the liberal

answer to *Faux News*, the alt-right-wing garbage dump. Their biggest personality is Rachel Maddox. She's intelligent, entertaining, has interesting thoughts, and has written a couple of decent books - investigative journalism, mostly, not unlike what you write, Debra Ann."

"Of course! Paul and I catch her show whenever we get the chance."

"I like Rachel; I truly do. Used to watch her all the time until I realized she and her cohorts solve nothing. They actually make things worse if they can; they have career and financial motivations to do exactly that.

"The problem is that in far too many ways, Rachel and Trance are mirror images of one another. Both have far more money than the individuals in their audiences and were born into wealthy families. Each differs significantly from their average viewer or listener. She's lesbian, more attractive, and better-educated than most; he wears orange face paint, sports Propecia hair, and has mastered the parlor trick of breaking wind through his lips.

"Both are privileged elites to whom the rest of us are sheep, submitting ourselves for regular fleecing in the vain hope we can someday be just like them.

"Neither has military experience - 'bone spurs' and 'breasts' or 'vagina' were equally valid excuses for avoiding the draft, and neither saw fit to enlist.

I had to give Alex his due; I hadn't thought about the things he'd picked up.

"Rachel and the Judge use mere words and access to the media that most of us don't have in order to line their pockets. Neither has done manual labor nor taken a menial job. Nor did either of them work their way through their undergraduate degrees.

"Both espouse extremist viewpoints to draw attention to themselves. Each preaches to a choir already aligned behind them.

"Both use their audience to promote and enrich themselves while falsely claiming to serve the public interest, even as they advertise

their claimed intention to change the world to better accommodate their followers' beliefs."

I wasn't buying into his last point.

"Why do you say 'falsely?'"

"Simple, really; neither of them makes any effort to address those in the middle who actually decide elections, potentially changing things. Rachel and the Judge see themselves as above responding personally to an e-mail, phone call, or letter, even from a constituent; both see themselves as better than us, too important and busy to be bothered with the riffraff.

"And one person doing all the speaking through a flatscreen isn't a conversation, nor does it serve the public interest."

That I could buy.

"If either Rachel or Trance were to have genuine success overcoming the other, their cash cows would dry up, and they'd have reduced their relevance to dust.

"Both Rachel and the Judge need everything to remain exactly as it is if they are to survive in the manner and lifestyle to which they've become accustomed. The recent success of nearly all liberal commentators follows the rise of Trance in lockstep. And the Judge couldn't be where he is if progressives weren't as visible as they are, or at least, enough to hate.

"In short, Rachel is just as invested in supporting the status quo - the health and existence of their adversary - as Trance is."

"When you put it that way," Paul noted, "it's hard to disagree. As I recall, *MSNowAndThen* had to be spun off from its parent organization because it lost so much money when the Democrats took over for a full term. They need the alt-right wingnuts in power in order to survive."

"Exactly. None of that means, necessarily, that Rachel's a terrible person. She keeps the liberal base fired up, though I also have to point out there's a very thin line between that and the boy crying, 'Wolf!'"

“She’s entitled to her success and has every right to strive for more. Those things *do*, however, make her virtually useless for achieving meaningful changes that would threaten her daily bread and butter. Such changes would require that she shift her audience and focus to include mostly independents and, yes, Republicans; those are the votes it would take to get this country back on track.

“*MSNowAndThen* is not about to let her do that - they’d lose advertisers by the dozens - even if she wanted. And in that regard, she’s not alone; she’s no different from any of the other hosts on *MSNowAndThen*, none of whom are as dissimilar as they’d like you to believe from the talking heads of *Faux News*.

“Bottom line, our rich Port Lybral activist believes *MSNowAndThen* hosts, among others, put Trance in office because they mistakenly convinced their followers that the Judge couldn’t possibly win again. So, naturally, some percentage of their listeners didn’t bother to vote - just enough to change the outcome.”

“It didn’t help,” I added, “that Republicans have learned how to win elections with the worst reprobates ever to appear on a ballot. Usually by cheating, yes; still, they win. Democrats, however, struggle to win even when they field superb candidates, male or female.”

Alex nodded before continuing.

“To address all that, our friend from Port Lybral County is going to change up his event, this time dedicating it to noisy female Chihuahuas. He wants to draw attention to the ineffective do-nothing talking heads dominating *MSNowAndThen* and all those preaching-to-the-choir internet blogs and podcasts.

“He’ll call it the ‘Yippy Hippy Bitches Yapfest.’”



CHAPTER 25

Not slapping Alex for that last comment took every bit of self-control I had. Seeing my glare, he averted his eyes before getting back on track.

“As for our current mayor, Trance and DeRump have run the town for the last twenty years, so Liani doesn’t have much to do. The most famous - well, infamous - thing Liani’s known for is giving Pastor Boasteen’s girlfriend, Inet Buhnrop, a citizen’s award plaque. It recognized going beyond the call of duty to save men from ‘non-performing’ women.”

I was almost afraid to ask.

“Non-performing?”

Alex's response made me wish I hadn't.

"It used to read 'frigid, mature women,' but the Kamp Karen types caused such a scene that they had to change the wording. There's a copy of the award hanging between the empty bourbon bottles in the single-wide trailer they use for the mayor's office."

I wasn't sure whether his deep descent into misogyny was Alex's way of playing with our heads or the real deal. Either way, I didn't want to encourage him. Still, I had a reminder in my notes to ask a question the next time the name came up.

"You mentioned 'Kamp Karen' once before - can you elaborate?"

"Oh, yes. That's the name some of us gave it; officially, it's called Camp Menoposo. It's an after-church group that Boasteen started for women of a certain age.

"The way people eat around here means that the men typically die off from heart attacks or cancer long before the women. They leave behind this sizeable pool of old ladies who've always been farmers' wives and don't want to deal with the fast pace of life in town."

The words "fast pace" had Alex rolling his eyes toward the ceiling.

"The pastor wanted to get together with them in a Christian context to hash out all the trepidation, bad feelings, and negative information that had surfaced around the county. Those were unintended consequences from the issues exposed in your original investigation of the rape and eventual suicide of Innocence Grace.

"The reverend wanted these older women to be more involved in community activities so they'd better understand what was going on around them. One of those good intentions that turned into a 'be careful what you wish for' situation."

People in groups talk, but suitable gatherings can be scarce in small towns. If I could get in with the right one, it might make my task easier.

"Tell me more about this 'Camp Menoposo,'" I prodded.

Alex flashed me a quizzical “Are you sure about this?” look in the rearview before he replied.

“It started with Boasteen. When he first came to town, he’d make the circuit every Sunday afternoon in the church van, visiting these women in their homes out on the farms their husbands used to work.”

“It proved to be untenable time-wise - these ladies were lonely, and talking to just one would take up his entire afternoon before evening services.”

“Boasteen’s first church owned some farmland out by Enabler Hollow, where they hold summer camps and weekend events for the kids when school is in session. The preacher got volunteers to pour a foundation, donate a Morton building, and bolt it together. The ladies voted to call it ‘Camp Menoposo.’ Not sure if they meant the name as a joke, or maybe something in-your-face to show they don’t care what anyone else thinks.”

Paul had been listening intently and jumped in.

“I assume these women don’t drive. Otherwise, they could find things to do on their own; how do they get themselves to Camp Menoposo?”

“A deacon takes the church van around. He gathers up the women right after the sermon and hauls them to the camp building. There, they’ll talk about various things; sometimes the church provides a speaker on a topic they’re interested in. After a couple of hours, the deacon ferries them to their homes.

“Over time, the group’s evolved way past its original intent - they’ve become quite the roaring mice. They’ve learned to leverage their role as a kind of propaganda machine for the church. Camp Menoposo’s relationship with Boasteen is like that of a remora to a shark, mutually beneficial.

“These old women now use the camp to merge their power and plot tactics. It’s become a permanent thing, a country club of sorts, exclusive to the ‘right’ kind of older women. They hold weekly formal

meetings and get together more often during emergencies. They'd been holding sessions almost daily since Liberty Belle's murder."

Still looking for a way in, I wanted to know if they'd accept me.

"Who do they consider the 'right' women to join their group?"

"Supposedly, the only real qualifications for membership are that you be female, of a certain age, and Christian. This area worships the orange imbecile - still, I don't think Camp Menoposo's membership is necessarily along political lines, though these women are certainly hypercritical of a lot of things. Their attitude is that 'judge not lest ye be judged' applies only to people who aren't yet old enough to know how to do it correctly.

"But I don't see anyone black, Hispanic, or Asian among them, and no one from what they'd consider the wrong side of the tracks. To answer what I think you really wanted to know, I've not seen any outsiders take part in their meetings."

Hmmm, unfortunate... still, there's an exception to every rule - I wonder if I can use my investigative work from eight years ago to buy my way in?

"They spend most of their time sharing their various surgical scars, complaints, and jealousies."

I'd been around the elderly enough that the first two items resonated, but not the third.

"Jealousies?"

"They bitch constantly about men propagating the species as Mother Nature intended, something these women can no longer do. Their revenge comes from acting as the self-appointed morality and gossip police for the town.

"The conception of every damned one of these people, many without the benefit of married parents, relied on activities their judgmental Bible-thumping silliness now finds offensive. All because their own hormones have evaporated into nothingness."

I was near enough to forty that Alex's comments were hitting too close to home, and I fidgeted in my seat as he continued, unaware of my discomfort.

"They'll get all fired up about something they think abuses one of the Ten Commandments and make noises about it for a while. Kind of like the Anti-Saloon League and the Women's Christian Temperance Union, who forced us into Prohibition back in the day.

"The other females here take Kamp Karen's edicts more seriously than the men do. Males here see the group as mostly dried-up little old ladies trying to matter, fairly harmless.

"Most of us have learned the hard way that you have to be careful with these women, no matter who you are. I don't know that Boasteen tells them directly what to do, or if they're so enamored of him they treat his suggestions as gospel, if you'll pardon the pun. Either way, they'll take whatever he says to heart and run with it. They can make your life miserable if they choose to, and most people around here try to avoid getting in their crosshairs."

Other than perhaps meddling where no one wanted them, I didn't see an enormous threat.

"They're from here, and their values would reflect the community's, right? I'm not seeing how that would be such a problem."

"The issue with the Camp Menoposo women is that most are from a generation that, in this part of the country, didn't work outside the home. In fact, this area frowned upon a woman's employment as an insult to her husband's ability to provide for their family. They've always lived in this small-town cocoon, so they know very little about the world at large.

"These old ladies are the least likely to have served their country or otherwise left this place to see how the rest of the universe operates. They are far less likely to have run a business, been an athlete, invented anything, or engaged in open competition with anyone who differs from themselves."

Alex seemed to sense that he hadn't persuaded me yet.

"I'm not saying they *can't* do any of those things. It's just that they haven't, and they don't. This place is decades behind the times; getting out and making something of yourself in the world at large doesn't fit with what society here expects of women. Worse, little or no testosterone runs through their veins, so the courage, or maybe stupidity," - Alex smiled at me - "necessary to tackle problems head-on isn't there.

"But working behind the scenes? Oh, yeah. The older women control the rumor mills, the shunning, the pecking order, the community's moral standards, and the acceptability of any new residents or ideas, the latter mostly by throttling them. If you look under the hood of these small towns, it'd surprise you how matriarchal the social fabric of these places can be."

"So, Alex, what do you see as Camp Menoposo's net effect on life here?"

"The upshot is that when others leave and come back in defeat, or lack the courage to act on their dreams in the first place, or have no talents that would be of value to the larger world, they have to deal with the Kamp Karen 'I told you so's.

"The losers feel trapped here. They get frustrated, nurse the wounds they collect as evidence they're being treated unfairly, and complain about life cheating them. And who do they blame for all that? The old women they see as running the show behind the scenes, even as they tip their hat and kowtow to them at church."

"Too many Camp Menoposo women homeschooled their children, trying to protect them from what they view as a threatening world they don't themselves understand. That propagates ignorant attitudes forward across generations. Look around here, and it's not too hard to see how that's turned out. In Arkansas, we have more taught-at-home failure-to-launch over-20s living in the back room of Grandma's trailer than anywhere else in the country."

"I get the effect those things might have on the locals. What should Paul and I be concerned about as outsiders?"

“You’ll have to watch your back - Kamp Karen members can be dangerous once they have you in their sights. It’s gotten out of hand. A dozen of these ladies caused a big stir when they decided the pedestrians walking down the public sidewalk in front of their homes weren’t the ‘right kind.’ They thought that pointing loaded assault rifles at those they didn’t care for was the right way to go.

“So, for a couple of weeks there, we had these matronly grandmothers, bolstered by a cadre of post-climacteric man-haters nursing their latest rejection, guarding the public walkways with AK-47s and AR-15s to keep anyone they deemed unworthy from using them.”

“Somebody - might have been me,” Alex said with a wink, “wrote a letter to the editor calling them the ‘Killers of Kamp Karen.’ People shortened the moniker, and it’s stuck.”

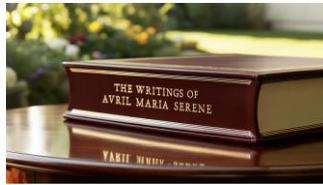
Entering their space uninvited could be risky, but I’d still like to see what I might learn from interviewing the attendees.

But Alex’s comments could use a little balance.

“You know, Alex, what I find amazing? If I understood what you said, Kamp Karen would have accepted Hillary Clinton with open arms.

“She’s of the right age; she’s long past anything romantic, and she was an Arkansas resident for quite a while. Her ‘deplorables’ and ‘men of a certain religion’ comments were hateful, not to mention dumb; the timing couldn’t have been worse. Still, they would certainly fall into that arena of moral superiority where you’ve said Kamp Karen members like to play.

“All she’d need to join is some revisionist editing to make it clear she was referring to people of color, Jews, Catholics, Muslims, and immigrants. Oh, and Democrats.”





CHAPTER 26

A

lex's phone rang, breaking the lull in our exchange.

"Let me take this, it's Fred," he said after squinting at the caller ID.

A short conversation later, Alex leaned in between the two front seats.

"Debra Ann, there'll be a marked road crossing about half a mile up. If you'd do me a favor and pull over to the side, that'd be great.

"Fred's near here, had to make a delivery. He heard we're going to see Stephen Miller at the military school and wants to join us. The school's gotten behind on its tab at the store. Fred doesn't want Miller

warned by seeing his company truck, and thinks he'll have better luck collecting the debt in the presence of witnesses.

"We're only a few miles from the school."

It wasn't long before the feed store's pickup pulled in behind us and parked. Fred climbed into the back of the Trailblazer and sat alongside Alex.

Something I saw off to the side piqued my curiosity when we pulled away.

"As we've been driving along, I keep seeing the same billboards. There were posters just like them on the telephone poles in town - they're all displaying the same person.

"I can't tell if it's supposed to be a man or a woman, but whoever they are, they're big and rugged-looking - stern features and a mean scowl. It looks like somebody's been keeping themselves busy drawing Sharpie mustaches on the faces."

I pointed to one on our right.

"Oh, those," Alex answered. "Sarah Butts Uggely - our classless, loudmouth, and obese Governor."

Hmmm, I thought a politician would look more... polished.

"Oh, of course, Fred mentioned her coming from the airport. We hadn't seen her picture."

Alex gave us a wry smile.

"The overweight part might change - gossip says she's begun doubling up on Ozempic. By the way, if you know any skydivers looking for parachute material, I heard the governor is selling all her old underwear - apparently, it no longer fits. They're priced by the square yard rather than the piece; still, a pretty good deal. Sky jumpers like to buy Uggely's old bras because they're stretched out, and two jumpers can use the same chute.

"I've heard they're sewing her old panties together. They're going to use them as nets for the whale-tagging catch and release program at a major oceanography institute."

I tried to stifle a laugh as Paul hid his grin, shaking his head.

“But there are things you can’t change. She’s the poster child for everything bad about dishonest and obnoxious. Funny thing is, she’s been that way since the day she was born.

“She’s become famous for the lies she tells, earning her ‘Four Pinocchios’ from the media. Not just for her constant falsehoods, but because she, too, wanted to be a real boy when she grew up. The rumor around town is that she adds the mustaches herself.”

Now on a roll, Alex wouldn’t let up.

“Her father was one of the corrupt good-ole-boy politicians who made Arkansas as poor and uneducated as it is. He was governor himself for quite a while back in the day.

“She fired her longtime administrative aide for losing weight and making the Governor look bad by comparison. The aide hit back by writing a tell-all book. In it, she says that Uggely isn’t the sharpest tool in the shed. Apparently, she carries a note around in her purse that reads, ‘Tampons in the pink hole; hemorrhoid and schizophrenia suppositories in the brown.’ The former aide says Uggely is even crankier when she mixes them up, if you can imagine that.”

I buried my face in my free hand. Paul leaned back and looked at the ceiling, placing both of his hands, crossed with the palms down, on top of his head, elbows out to the sides.

“*Jesus*, Alex, we have a real lady present here!” Fred exclaimed. “You can’t go around saying crap like that, and you have no business even thinking it!”

“Hey, Fred, not my fault that Uggely is so hard to look at. Or that she puts up all these damned posters around here to get back at us for whatever freak of nature made her that way....”

I jumped in to rescue the conversation.

“Fred mentioned that she’s spent four years spreading untruths from a podium....”

“She worked for the White House in 2016,” Alex replied. “They wanted to hire just her lying mouth - no choice but to drag along the

rest of her. They tried surgery to separate one from the other, but the tongue wouldn't waggle without the spineless fatty tissue behind it."

Fred interrupted.

"Forget him - he's hangry and pissed off that we don't have any Mediterranean or Indian restaurants; he's trying to get DeRump's ex to start one.

"If you listen to Alex, you'll get the wrong impression. When they elected Uggely our governor, it wasn't like Trance, who had to cheat and still couldn't get fifty percent of the living voters. She's popular with the MAGAt crowd, plus she had the name recognition through her father, so she won the job straight up. Many people like her, misguided as they may be. The same was true when her father was governor.

"The elder Butts was the perfect example of something that goes on all over the South, and you need to understand it if you're going to get anywhere with people around here. No doubt, the father is a lying-ass scum bucket if there was one. But here's the thing - he's *our* lying-ass scum bucket.

"It's a hangover from Reconstruction. Northern carpetbaggers came down here after the war to push us around when we were in no position to fight back, and no one's forgotten them. Being local is still a big deal here. It's why we've let these county judges and sheriffs become so powerful - the only way we had to counter outsiders coming in and trying to take over everything."

"Hang a right into this drive coming up, Debra Ann," Alex interjected, "and follow it down to the main building.

"Okay, everybody, pile out - we're here... Welcome to H.I.T.L.E.R.!"

As we walked along the pathway leading to the front entrance, the lack of Christmas decorations reminded me that management was Jewish. Still, I saw nothing celebrating Hanukkah either - no mezuzah on the doorpost, Star of David, menorah, or blue and white holiday lights.

He doesn't want to support the Christian holiday or advertise his own faith.

Along the way, Alex filled us in on the school, its origins, and its purpose.

"As I've said before, public school systems in Arkansas, especially in rural areas, are among the worst in the world. Parents have two other options: church schools or the Hayseed Military Academy.

"This is one of the more aggressive private schools in the area - for example, the youth detention center uses random school shootings to implement discipline and keep down overpopulation. That seems way too extreme to me, but their students *are* the worst of the worst. This is where parents across the county send their wayward boys to get straightened out."

"Wayward?" I asked.

"That's where the real trouble begins, because it's one of those 'eye of the beholder' things; too many parents define 'wayward' as being artsy-fartsy, or simply not wanting to go to church. Having a free spirit, merely being difficult, or having a different opinion also qualify. Punishing those kids by sending them here is a real problem, at least to me. Especially given the biased messaging that churches and these schools put out in MAGAt strongholds like ours."

"What does this facility offer," I asked, "to set itself apart from other private schools?"

"This place has a live-ammunition firing range with moving targets and a mocked-up gas chamber for isolating the worst offenders. The school also features a course on constitutional law. That curriculum teaches creative interpretations of the first two amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Every year during the first week of January, senior students stage a takeover of the U.S. Congress.

"Their syllabus includes classes in book burning and techniques to muzzle the voices of speakers they don't appreciate. Originally intended for the reformation of boys, the academy will also accept

transgender students. Those who survive hazing are natural candidates to serve as victims for random school shootings.”

Fred picked it up from there.

“Graduation is truly a sight to behold. The honored elite students, known as the ‘Adolphus Circle,’ goose-stepping in their resplendent and be-medaled uniforms, their toothbrush mustaches, and their bangs hanging down over one eye. All to the powerful minor chords of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*, and all in strict accordance with Stephen Miller’s style guidelines, of course.

“Lesser graduates wear white robes and pointy white hoods with eye and breathing holes cut into them. They carry burning crosses to light the graduation procession. The good news for poorer graduating students from this part of the country is that many of them already have their graduation clothing hanging in their closets or can get it from their father or grandfather. Dry cleaners these days know how to remove bloodstains.”

“Some alumni donate their old robes,” Alex added. “So much for those who say conservatives can’t be compassionate.”

I’d learned enough about Fred and Alex to understand that they intended the exaggerations they were creating for my mind’s eye to point out Miller’s genuine hatred.

“How could something like that exist in this country?”

“It’s worse than you think,” Alex replied. “The Hayseed Haven military academy not only exists, but your tax dollars support it through vouchers.

“If Trance and his minions have their way, you’ll be paying for schools everywhere to spread alt-right-wing crap to kids who have no defenses and can’t escape.”



CHAPTER 27

Given what I'd just heard, I'd expected a uniformed, lantern-jawed male in a military crewcut and jackboots, perhaps with a monocle and carrying a *Kommandostab*, at the front desk.

It surprised me to see that the receptionist, looking up from behind the counter, was an overweight blonde girl in her early twenties wearing a floral dress. She had a pretty smile, and her disposition seemed pleasant. I quickly picked up on the vibe that she was here for the paycheck and wasn't buying what her boss was selling.

As each of us presented ourselves and our reasons for being here, she dutifully took down our names. Rising from her seat to introduce us to Stephen Miller, she cupped one hand to the side of her

face, saying in a loud whisper, "The commandant is our principal, and he doesn't like people using his first name. But if you have to, he's decided lately that he likes it better if you call him Steffen, like with two 'F's. He thinks it sounds more German. My name's Linda, but he calls me Hilga."

Linda tapped cautiously on Miller's partially opened door; the four of us bunched up behind her, with Fred taking up the rear as something of a surprise for the commandant.

"Heil, Hilga," Miller said absent-mindedly, not bothering to look up. He was standing in front of his chair, studying a map on his desk.

Linda gave out an exaggerated cough to get his attention, following with, "Sir, we have *guests*."

That got his attention.

Miller was wearing glasses with small, round lenses perched on his nose; he'd gelled the short, dark-blond crewcut behind his receding hairline to stand nearly straight up.

Clicking his heels together, the principal offered Paul his hand as he said, "Oh, I am sorry for my rudeness; hello."

Linda read off our names and intentions as an introduction, saving Fred's for last. Miller's eyes narrowed as he spotted him, acknowledging Fred with the slightest nod.

"Allow me to be your host for a tour of our facilities. I should apologize that it has to be brief - I must attend our orientation for new parents in an hour, but I can give you my full attention in the meantime."

I suddenly realized that Miller's purpose in showing us graciousness was to stall his dealings with Fred. As soon as I had the opportunity, I whispered that thought into Paul's ear, and he passed it along to Alex and Fred when he got the chance. The principal had erred in giving us his timeline; we'd all watch the clock to ensure we allowed a generous window for Fred to confront Miller.

"Your timing was fortuitous," Miller pronounced as he paused before a wooden door. "Our instructors are on break. Let me introduce you to a few of them."

Miller pushed the door inward.

As three brown-shirted pairs of eyes seated at a long folding table looked up in some surprise from their coffee cups, the principal called them out by name.

"Allow me to present Iggy Norant, the head of our math department."

Iggy was a pudgy man in his late twenties, unfortunately cursed with pop-bottle lenses in his wire-rimmed glasses that magnified his eyes to the size of small saucers. Slow in his reactions and speech, I guessed that most of Iggy's classes centered on teaching students to remove their socks and shoes when counting from eleven to twenty.

"And I'd be sorely remiss in not pointing out Icky Norant, our specialist in goose-step and ballet. As you may have guessed from their names, Iggy and Icky are husband and wife. Each excels in their own field, and we're fortunate they've chosen to serve together."

Icky likely weighed more than Iggy and was six inches shorter. I couldn't imagine her in a ballet tutu. Suddenly, a memory: Hyacinth Hippo in Ponchielli's *Dance of the Hours* from Disney's *Fantasia*. I quickly banished the vision from my mind's eye for fear it might stick.

"And last but not least," Miller proclaimed, "let me introduce you to Dumas Boksarocs, our discipline instructor and debate coach. Dumas drafted the code of conduct we live by every day."

Still standing outside the door and unable to do much else, we nodded our greetings to each of the teachers. As we did, we let Fred percolate to the front of the line so that when the principal closed the door and turned back to us, Fred was immediately in his face.

"Look, Steve," Fred said, deliberately ignoring Miller's title and preferences for using his first name. "I've been trying to reach you, but you haven't been returning my calls. You've bought quite a few bags of Quikrete lately. We're just a little feed and equipment store, and your

balance is way more than we can carry. I need to get a check from you today.”

Caught unprepared, his eyes darting back and forth between ours as he looked for support and found none, Miller dropped his shoulders.

“We have a protocol for such things,” he complained before relenting. “But we always want to keep good relationships with our friends and neighbors. Please, follow me.”

The commandant turned crisply on his heels, walking grim-faced at a fast clip back to the office, the four of us tagging closely behind.

Once again standing behind his desk, the principal pulled down a large check register from a shelf above the credenza at his back. As he finished writing out a draft, he signed it with a grand flourish. Tearing the check meticulously from the page, he presented it to Fred, bowing as he did, his head cocked to the left, and clicking his heels together.

Fred accepted the offering with a bemused smile.

“Thanks, Steve. We’d like to finish your tour - fascinating stuff - but it will have to be at a later date. We wouldn’t want to interfere with your orientation, and we have things we need to get back to.”

Fred glanced behind to include Alex, me, and Paul as we nodded in agreement.

Something seemed puzzling.

“Oh, Commandant, before we go, can you answer a question that’s been nagging at me?”

“Always happy to accommodate the ladies,” Miller answered. “How can I help you?”

“It’s curious to me why you’ve chosen such an offensive acronym for your academy. I get that for advertising, it’s an attention-grabber, but I’m not seeing how it sets the right tone for a school.”

“The name of our little town was not my choice, Ms. Wynn, so I am hardly responsible for its initial. And we do, after all, specialize in the intermediate grades; ‘junior high’ or ‘middle school’ seemed a little

juvenile for a military academy, wouldn't you agree? The rest fell into place, and I felt it was better to go with it than to fight it."

"Fair enough, I suppose, but I'm a little perplexed. I understand you are Jewish, and I'd think that giving out Nazi dog whistles would be uncomfortable for you."

"Again, something I do not control. I doubt most modern Jews would take offense any more than I would. Those days spent cowering behind the unreliable protection of U.S. taxpayers and the vagaries of U.S. politics, along with your demands for what we must do, are over.

"Jews are not a stupid people, suitable only for seeking profit, counting pennies, and writing them into ledgers. We didn't just suffer from our treatment by the Nazis; we learned from it.

"Leveraging a weak and hated minority in our midst to enrage the masses for political power is something we have studied diligently. We now know how to make the waging of war against a much weaker adversary the only acceptable path forward. The Nazis used us for that purpose; Trump targets immigrants, especially Hispanics; Modi blames Muslims; Putin gins up hatred against Central Asian immigrants, calling them 'ethnic criminals.'

"Netanyahu is doing nothing more or less than what those leaders have always done; he's chosen to call out Palestinians for the harm they cause us."

Alex jumped in, not hiding his contempt.

"There are some who believe Hitler's ghost is now embodied as Netanyahu. They say Israel's corrupt and oily prime minister is using genocide against Palestinians to delay and draw attention from the prosecution of crimes for which law enforcement has indicted him."

Miller did not hesitate to fire back.

"The 'genocide' you claim Netanyahu and his supporters are waging on Gaza and the West Bank is nothing more than the new Israel flexing its muscles. Or maybe the old one, rising again. Read the Old Testament of your Bible; see how many tribes and nations the Jews were engaged in conflict with among their neighbors, even back then.

Jews have always had to fight for their survival. Now you would criticize us for doing what we must because our leader faces politically motivated charges yet to be proven?"

Alex wasn't having it.

"You talk about learning by example. Yet, by your own admission, you've not picked up on how to get along with other groups around you for millennia. Your logic is circular: you are saying your unbending choice never to reach accommodation with your neighbors means you 'have' to fight, and that you must fight entitles you to practice genocide."

Miller seemed to ignore anything Alex said.

"Hitler immediately began wiping Jews from the face of the Earth once he rose to power, and continued murdering them for seven years, from 1938 to 1945. The Palestinians have been a thorn in Israel's side since 1948, over seventy-five years now... We have waited ten times as long as the Third Reich existed to address the enemy in our midst. Compared to the Nazis, Israel has been quite patient. It is long past the time for Jews to solve our biggest problem."

Alex pushed ahead.

"Patience, my ass! For all of those seven decades, the Jews have been subjugating, abusing, and killing Palestinians - your own 'final solution.'

"What galls me is the sheer hypocrisy of the situation. Those who committed Nazi atrocities - and they were truly horrific - are long dead, as are the direct survivors. Yet every time Israel needs money or weapons to solve problems they've largely created for themselves, suddenly images of World War II concentration camps are again broadcast on U.S. television screens and trotted out in podcasts and blogs.

"Did Americans take part in those atrocities? No, quite the opposite - we suffered the loss of hundreds of thousands of American lives in a war on foreign soil to stop those crimes. All we've asked, in return, is that you not do to others what the Nazis did to you.

"I'm not a fan of monetizing self-asserted victimhood, anyway. And for me, exploiters periodically marketing the 'Holocaust' to guilt American taxpayers into supplying Israel with arms and money just doesn't sail anymore. That's especially true when Jews use them for ethnically cleansing Palestinians from, as you say, 'the face of the Earth.'"

Alex's arguments weren't fazing Miller.

"Again, human nature, always learning. You accuse Jews as if they are doing differently than the rest of humankind - seeing what they can get away with, how far they can push the corners of the envelope."

Alex's look was incredulous.

"You're calling what the Israelis have done 'pushing the envelope?'"

"Once, it was Jewish individuals stealing Palestinian land to build illegal houses. Those became entire settlements. Now they're outright murdering unarmed Palestinians en masse in their own homes in front of their children, and then killing the children, too. That was something the Germans rarely did in their seven years through the end of World War II in Europe, preferring to move them into killing camps and separating the families, something Trump also does.

"Now Israel is one-upping the Nazis, turning Gaza into the world's largest concentration camp, a thousand-fold bigger than anything Hitler could have imagined, though starving the victims rather than wasting expensive gas.

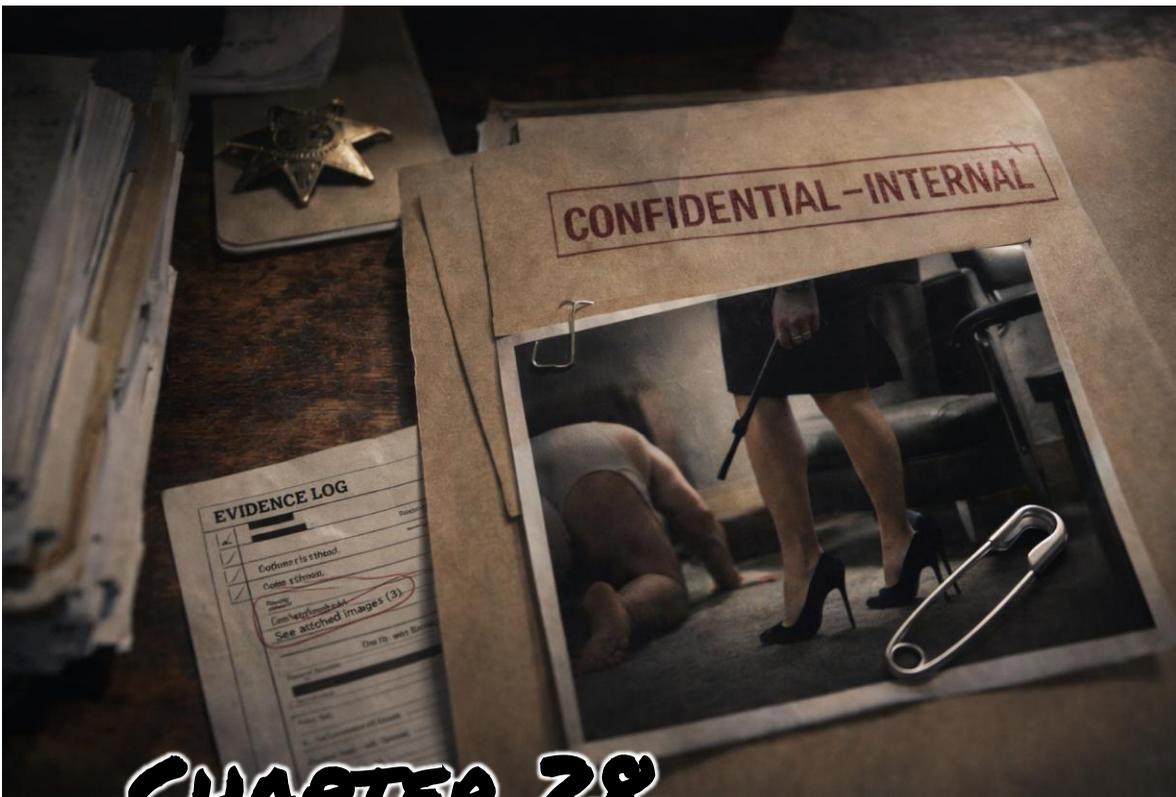
"Anyone who even mentions, or worse, objects to any of that gets slapped with the 'anti-Semitism' label, the Jewish trump card for censoring people, destroying their careers, banning their books, and ruining their reputations.

"That has to stop. I get that there are extremists among Jews, just as there are in any other group. But you'll never convince me that the things coming out of your mouth don't appall mainstream Jews."

"So you say," Miller replied, undeterred. "Po-TAY-to, po-TAH-to, depends on one's point of view. As to pushing the boundaries, testing

to see how far he can go, Netanyahu has yet to guess wrong. After all, Israel is still stockpiling American taxpayer dollars and weapons.”

“And how can anyone fault us for teaching these children the thinking and tactics used by successful leaders across the globe?”



CHAPTER 28

Miller's closing rant left us somber and deep into our own thoughts as we walked back to the Trailblazer.

Alex was as outspoken as ever.

"My parents wanted me to be better than they were. Feels wrong to learn of moms and dads who supposedly love their kids sending them here to become worse.

"Stephen Miller is what Jeffrey Dahmer would have been without a knife, fork, or spoon. Too bad Miller isn't equally dead."

For my part, I doubted the principal's words would carry any weight with my Jewish friends. I tried to imagine how Doug Stein, my mentor at the *Union-Tribune* when we met nearly 20 years ago and now

my business partner, might have processed the commandant's speech. He'd likely be more upset about it than I was. Still, if Miller's attitudes were out there in any strength, it would complicate the lives of millions of good people who practice the Jewish faith, especially in the U.S.

Paul broke our reverie by noting that the parking lot was otherwise empty, raising questions about the timing of the commandant's orientation and the number of intended guests.

As we arrived at our car, Fred turned to Paul and me, his expression earnest.

"Debra Ann, Paul, I need to apologize. I know you wanted more time to interview Miller, and I cut you short. I didn't mean to - I was so surprised he actually wrote a check. All I could think of was getting it to the bank before he could stop payment, and the sooner I know whether it's going to bounce, the better."

I looked at Paul, and he at me. We both smiled back at Fred, Paul's grin as lopsided as mine.

"I'm not sure I could have gone five minutes longer," I said, "without either laughing at or killing him, though that last little speech makes him more dangerous than clownish. I mean, it's a sorry situation for those kids, but the man is a walking, talking cliché at best."

Paul nodded, and Fred thanked me for letting him off the hook. I began working out loud, letting my thoughts flow.

"Alex, would you fill us in on the way back on what more you know about Miller? My impression is that the commandant lives in his own little toy soldier fantasy world. I can't see him doing what happened to Fred's daughters or being smart enough to get away with it for so long. Given the attitude we got from his admin, I doubt he has any support from the community or much power over anyone more than half his age.

"I can't see it, but could Miller have partnered with someone to commit sexual assaults, or would he know things about them that others wouldn't?

“What happened to Innocence Grace and Liberty Belle reads to me like whoever did those things needed more than what Miller brings to the table. I can’t picture the doer sharing the details with our tyrannical principal.

“Maybe I’m all wet, or my instincts have flown south for the winter. Still, if something comes up later, I should be able to catch him here. I doubt there are many other places he can show his face.”

Once we’d climbed in, with Paul taking the wheel, we headed back to Fred’s truck as Alex told us what he knew of Miller.

“I don’t know who tries harder to be the modern-day Heinrich Himmler - Miller or Netanyahu. Something of a horse race, actually. Netanyahu has on his resume all those defenseless Palestinians the Israelis have been abusing and murdering since he came to power, so I assume he’s winning. He *has* to generate distractions, and he’s highly motivated. Once he’s out of office, like the orange imbecile, he’s got to face a judge for high crimes and misdemeanors, things like graft, corruption, and embezzlement. The moment he can no longer stall for time, he’s headed to prison.

“But Miller’s trying to grab the future by co-opting the kids - his legacy may be worse in the long run.”

Alex changed his focus from the global to the local.

“With Trance owning all the pharmacies in the area, we have no choice but to get our prescriptions filled at his drugstores. I struck up a relationship with Barbara, the pharmacist at the one closest to my house. She probably shouldn’t have been telling me about her customers, and wouldn’t want me to share this, but Barbara says our Mr. Miller is an odd duck.

“She told me whenever he has to have a prescription filled, he always asks if it’s available in suppository form. The commandant is the first customer she’s ever had who preferred their medication administered that way. She knew something was off with Miller because the prescriptions were always for genital or lower intestinal tract infections.

“And whenever Miller would stop in, the man bought tubs of wet wipes by the dozens.”

“Does he have little ones living at home?” Paul asked.

“No, that’s the thing. No kids, no pets, no wife, not even a girlfriend that I know of.”

I wondered about the option Alex didn’t mention.

“Boyfriend, then?”

“Hmmm, interesting thought. That would explain why he’d keep it close to his vest, especially around here. Parents wouldn’t want him having anything to do with teaching their children.”

We arrived at Fred’s truck and said our goodbyes. As Paul drove back to Nero’s Fiddle, Alex told us bits and pieces of the principal’s social life.

“I know of just one relationship he had with a woman, if you could call it that, and if you could call *her* that. It didn’t turn out well. When Musky Mellons made her appearance here and didn’t yet know anyone, she set eyes on him - she’d publicly compliment Miller on the way he wore his uniform.

“She took the initiative and made a pass. Her aggressive approach didn’t suit him. He hit her with the riding crop he carries, trying to get her to back off. Didn’t work. Seems Mellons interpreted having physical contact as romantic, and the incident only magnified her infatuation.

“They must have had a pretty serious falling out, because suddenly one day, Mellons quit chasing Miller. She won’t directly say what happened. As for the principal, he refuses to talk about the situation.

“Mellons started spreading stories that Miller was abusing children at his school. Could be a spurned lover’s get-back, but it’s likely there’s some truth to it.”

“What makes you think that?” I asked.

“There was, until recently, someone else pulling the strings that you won’t be able to interview, Chuckie Kirk. He was the worst kind of

sleazeball, preying on kids. Kirk was politically connected, serving the same role for those in power that Ghislaine Maxwell did for Jeffrey Epstein, though focused more on little boys.

“Kirk sat at the top of the dung pile of child groomers and procurers for GOP pedophiles and Stephen Miller’s school. One of his own, a man who’d grown a conscience, shot and killed Kirk two weeks ago.

“While I don’t know whether any of Kirk’s relationships with children were sexual, he likely would have gotten there... eventually. He enthusiastically supported others who violated the innocent, and he was the same type.

“What we *do* know is that Kirk aggressively abused his power and authority to force his perverted ideas upon defenseless children. He stripped them of their freedom and dreams.”

To me, that seemed a stretch...

“How would he even do something like that?”

“He immersed them in his sick ideology. That dogma includes promoting the banning and burning of books. It supports the permanent separation of young children from their parents, home, and other relationships based on their skin color, religion, and physical location. His ideas use the same criteria to deny kids and parents alike access to education, healthcare, and economic support.

“Chuckie Kirk was, in a word, evil.”

Hmmm, how much stock I could place in Alex’s opinions would depend upon his motivations.

“Are you making the case that killing him was justified?”

“Oh, no, of course not, any more than were the 400,000 Americans who died unnecessarily during COVID-19 - the victims of negligent homicide caused by gross ineptitude, corruption, and stupidity at the direction of Donald John Trump. Or the murder of Heather Heyer, the victim of the alt-right wingnut who drove his Dodge into the protesters at Charlottesville.

“By the way, here's a quick little self-test for hypocrisy: How many of your readers would know *her* name? Has anyone lowered any flags for her? So much for equality in *this* country....”

Paul had been silent, letting me work, but now he offered a welcome suggestion.

“Anyone else hungry? It might be good to hit up the diner and get a little of the local flavor, so to speak.”

Grinning at the pun, I nodded agreement, and Alex raised a thumb in the air to let us know he was on board.

Alex had been preaching to the choir with his last comment - I'd often found myself frustrated in my career by public attention going to the wrong people. Still, I wanted to turn the conversation back to Kirk - rapists often have a relationship with child abuse, of themselves and others.

“How did Kirk gain access to children?”

“Kirk and his wife ran an organization they call ‘Twisting Point USA.’ Bill Ellery, down at the barbershop, gave it the name ‘Hitler Youth 2.0,’ and that’s stuck with many of us. Twisting Point’s ideas are based on the same principles laid out by the Nazis in 1922, known then as the *Hitlerjugend*.

“Twisting Point is the iceberg’s tip for a fundraising and gathering place of conservative extremists to groom future victims of pedophilia and mind control. Their goal is to eliminate critical thinking and the potential for exposure to other ideas, leaving a pool of mindless fools to vote in future elections for decades from now. Conservatism, to some, is simply the exploitation of the weak, gullible, uneducated, and mentally challenged, whether it be finger-raping women, abusing children, economic trickery, or religious manipulation.

“Chuckie Kirk prepped those chosen to be the victims for all of that. One of their long-time sufferers grew up and, as he did, got wise to what they were doing. He killed Kirk.

"Some say there's a lot more to it. For one thing, rumors have been rampant that Sheriff DeRump and Kirk's wife were having an affair.

"There are photos circulating of his witchy widow, Eureka, taken immediately before Kirk's death.

"*Eureka?* I don't mean to make fun, but the locals give their children some unusual names..."

Alex gave me a cynical smile.

"Can't disagree with *that*. In her case, the name couldn't have been more appropriate. She has a real knack for mining gold from romantic situations. Some say that DeRump's having better upside led to Chuckie's demise.

"So, what's the deal with the photos?"

"In one, she's dressed in a skin-tight black outfit, posing as a stiletto-heeled dominatrix, standing with a whip over the Sheriff. He's down on his hands and knees, wearing only a cloth diaper with oversized pins.

"Like the onetime mayor of D.C.?"

"Yeah, seems to be a thing among politicians.

"Those in the know think the illicit lovers might have paid the shooter to do the deed, or turned the killer back to the light, knowing what he'd do once he felt compelled to save other kids. Applaud the young man for stepping up to solve the problem, but in the end, he made a terrible choice in how to go about it."

Yet another situation where I felt conflicted.

"You hate to see anyone done in by the violence they inspire. Still, I have to admit that hearing about one of his own taking down an evil man has a genuine ring of justice to it, karma if nothing else. What's going to happen to Twisting Point?"

"Eureka Kirk is even more of a hater than the husband she was betraying. She's tried to distract from her affair with DeRump, painting herself as the injured party by attacking anyone who's happy her husband can no longer abuse children. Celebrating that outcome differs

from mourning the death of the man himself, and she's trying to muddle that distinction. No one celebrated Hitler's cowardly suicide, but they had every right to rejoice over the fact that he was no longer murdering and torturing anyone who got in his way.

"The upshot is that Eureka is sensationalizing the death of an evil man to whom she was unfaithful so she can raise funding for the organization. She's hoping to set up her dead husband and herself as martyrs and bury the details about her sleeping around.

"For his part, the Sheriff is offering his own line of self-branded condoms.

"We assume Kirk's widow will endorse them, having tested the product extensively on DeRump's behalf and with his devoted cooperation."



CHAPTER 29

While I found Alex's words fascinating, I needed to get back on track.

"Can you think of anyone else I might talk to who, even if they didn't commit the crimes against Fred's daughters, would have a connection to those who did? Or to someone who might know what happened?"

Alex paused in thought.

"We've exhausted the list of regular suspects, other than DeRump's deputies...."

Alex smiled as a lightbulb went off.

“Wait, there *is* somebody who could know something, but she probably wouldn’t realize it. She tends bar, and she gets around - you know what they say about barflies and what they’ll tell their barkeep.”

That should work.

“Maybe she’s overheard someone who’s had a few too many bragging about something they know, or even better, did?”

“Her birth name is Marilee Taylor Greene; we call her ‘MTG.’

“DeRump and Trance met when DeRump was trying to promote himself as a goody-two-shoes who didn’t drink or engage in other self-destructive behaviors.

“Portnoy County’s on the opposite side of us from Port Lybral, and it’s like living in the wild, wild West; you can get anything you want for the right price. DeRump crossed the county line to buy a blow-up party doll, and Trance was a perv frequenting the adult toy shops there. The two started hanging out together.

“MTG was tending bar at a strip club. Eventually, the three of them met up and spent some quality time together. She was a slight upgrade over the party doll - a lot of noise came out of her mouth. Like gluing a sex toy to a whoopee cushion. Bill, my barber friend, says she’s a scientific marvel - living proof that paedicatio can lead to live births.

“As to carrying her legacy forward, the local PETA took up a collection to make sure MTG never runs out of birth control. They don’t want to find themselves in the awkward position of having to protest putting down the results of any future pregnancy.

“These days, MTG is on the outs with the Judge and the Sheriff both. She’s been working to reform her image. I doubt she can convince anyone, but she seems willing to buck her previous support for assholes - it remains to be seen if it lasts.

“But when you talk to her, be careful who you mention - she’s insanely jealous of Inet Buhnrop. Make her mad, and she’ll threaten to start her own party without you.”

Hmmm, that might be a problem.

“Would she be willing to talk about Musky Mellons, then?”

“She doesn’t see Mellons as competition - calls her ‘it’ most of the time. So, as long as you expect nothing stimulating or intellectual from the conversation, jealousy shouldn’t be an issue.”



Paul pulled the Trailblazer into the diner’s lot.

Alex took the lead as we walked between the tables where other diners were enjoying their midday meals. He stopped for a moment to say ‘hi’ to an old friend. As Paul and I chatted briefly, we couldn’t miss two elderly women seated behind us speaking at a volume they clearly intended us to hear.

“You’d think a respectable woman would take her husband’s name... and carrying his child, to boot!”

I glanced at Paul, rolling my eyes upward, and he raised an eyebrow the busybodies couldn’t see.

After we found an empty table in the far corner, Paul relayed the matronly pair’s snide remark.

Looking between us back at the tables we’d passed, Alex snorted.

“Oh, *those* two. Well, Kamp Karen knows you’re here, telling you in their inimitable way who rules the roost,” Alex revealed with a cynical smile.

“The gossip around here’s pretty typical for a small town, putting down anything or anyone from elsewhere. Or who might know of other things or places; maybe they’ve made something better of themselves. If you can and will do anything they can’t or won’t, you’re a threat... that alone can make you a target.

“Nero’s Fiddle can be a little more backward than other places because some are more likely to say something rude right out in the open like that... You can thank Pastor Boasteen when you see him, one of the side effects of Camp Menoposo empowering the old biddies.

“Most of the others around here are more polite, even if some might harbor the same thoughts.

“Oh, there’s one of DeRump’s senior deputies.”

Alex tipped his head and rolled his eyes toward the table across the aisle to his left.

“Let’s see if I can get a rise out of him.”

When it came Alex’s turn to give the waitress his order, Alex loudly asked for a taco, adding, “Not the orange lardass or the cowards who work for him, but the kind you eat.”

Seeing Paul’s and my quizzical expressions, Alex explained.

“Back in 2018, after the articles you wrote about Innocence Grace’s rape, her suicide, and all the corruption in the area, Trance toured the county making all kinds of wild threats against anyone turning on him. But he caved like a house of cards to federal and state investigators when they interviewed him. When people learned how much of a wimp he really was, they started calling him ‘TACO,’ for ‘Trance Always Chickens Out.’ It really pisses him off when he hears it, which is why it’s become so popular.

“I like to remind his minions how wide Trance’s yellow streak is, and how quickly he’ll turn on them.”

Aware now that someone could overhear, misconstrue, or creatively reimagine anything more we said, we ordered and ate, keeping the rest of our conversation low-key.

“Let me get some pie to take home to John,” Alex said as the waitress dropped off our check. “The kid’s got a high metabolism, can’t stop eating... I envy him for not gaining any weight.”

Alex was nothing like Paul, so it was hard for me to understand why, but I’d noticed whenever we were out and about together that older women seemed to find Alex desirable. *What exactly was in the groundwater here?*

True to form, after we’d eaten and were idly talking, an attractive, though overweight, woman approached Alex and introduced

herself. Apparently, two companions sitting several tables down from us had egged her on, and they were watching Alex's reaction intently.

The rudeness of his response seemed over-the-top.

"Lady, I appreciate the thought, but please, take it somewhere else; I don't date women dead below the waist."

At first, the woman pouted as she turned away. Then, suddenly, with a mischievous smile, she launched into a hip-wriggling Hoochie Coochie for the ages.

"Does that look dead to you, honey?" she purred.

"No, ma'am. At your age, that looks like false advertising."

Flipping him off with not one, but two fingers, she spun on her heels and stormed off.

"Quite a way you have there with women, my friend," Paul said, not hiding the snark in his voice.

That set Alex off on another of his rants.

"That wasn't a woman, that was a mummy still walking. By the time she gets back to her table, she'll be huffing and puffing like she'd run a marathon.

"Trust me, I see a ton of these women. I don't carry a scale around with me, but I doubt I'm exaggerating. They think I have real money; at least, more than the other guys available. Same story every time - they have nothing left to offer of what they might have been in their twenties, but they've held on to the same expectations of a man. It gets really old after a while... sorry for the terrible pun."

To me, the answer seemed obvious.

"Why not go younger, then?"

"Those I can't afford - the other side of women around here... the difference between prostitution and what they do is razor-thin.

"Shortly after I returned here, I celebrated my fiftieth birthday. Writing a book about my dating experiences proved cathartic. I called it *I Know Why Old Farmers Do Sheep*. I'd always wondered why aging men in the area spent so much of their quality time with their livestock. Until, of course, I met their wives... an awakening, to be sure.

"I'd *hate* to be accused of gender-bashing, so let me be clear - it goes the other way, too. Looking around at the mates chosen by some of our women, it's safe to say they are taking their animal husbandry literally."

Somehow, he'd made even his slamming of men the women's fault.

"In Narcissus County, the best-case scenario for getting laid in any way enjoyable to a guy my age is to do what the farmers do. They'll never tell you the truth about why, but they go out and buy themselves a mule."

His cocky attitude about women not that far past my age rankled me.

"Listen, Alex, I get that you have issues with females, or certainly, the older ones. But the situation won't improve if you go around lashing out at everyone and everything you don't like. How do you know your assumptions aren't wrong, or that you aren't turning off the one woman who might be right for you? I'd think you, of all people, would understand what it's like to be labeled falsely because of what other people do."

Alex turned his sarcasm on me.

"Of course, you're going to say that in defense of the ladies."

That was all Paul could take.

"Okay, Alex, that's enough! *Knock it off!*"

Paul's face had reddened in one of his rare displays of genuine anger.

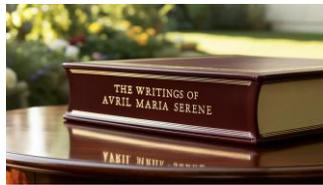
"Debra Ann doesn't need me to stand up for her, but I'm going to step in here and keep her from mopping the floor with you. I get your know-it-all curmudgeon act, and we've sat here and put up with it without saying a word.

"But I, for one, have had it. We came down to help Fred. We've listened to you bitch and moan about everything under the sun. I'm getting the idea that you stay here just for that. You don't seem to do anything that could fix any of the problems you complain about.

“Point me to a single damned thing you’ve done to make this a better place - just one... Oh, what, *now* you have nothing to say?

“But lay off the women. And leave Debra Ann out of it! She may not be perfect, but she’s a damn fine reporter, which means she’s fair and goes digging in places others won’t. Debra Ann is here to change outcomes, if possible, but certainly to help Fred any way she can. Let her do her thing.

“Fine, if whining and making smartass remarks are all you can bring to the table, *but tone down the woman-bashing.*”





CHAPTER 30

Alex's reaction was one of surprise, as though no one had stood up to him before. I expected a knee-jerk response, perhaps firing back at Paul, or at minimum folding his hand into an angry sulk. But he did neither, sitting there with a dumbfounded expression on his face, obviously considering Paul's words.

After an awkward moment had passed, Alex offered a mea culpa that came across as genuine.

"Paul, you're right. Debra Ann, I apologize; I do. Sometimes I get off track and go after the wrong people. I am sorry. A personality defect I've had since birth, and I can't promise it won't happen again - but I can

make a better effort to keep it under control. Fred appreciates your help, and even if it doesn't seem like it sometimes, so do I."

While I appreciated Alex's positive response to being called out, it didn't address the underlying question.

"Apology accepted, Alex. Still, I'm with Paul - it sounds like you hate this place, the people, and everything they stand for. It's not just that you rarely have anything positive to say about anyone - it comes off like you're mad at the entire state.

"Why do you stay here?"

Alex paused for a long time as he reflected.

"I assume you mean beyond my promise to help Fred find out who killed his daughters - to me, that overrides all other considerations. Until those sons of bitches are dead or in prison for life, I'd remain even if this were Dante's Fourth Circle.

"As to my feelings about this place, I suppose when you're passionate in your disappointments, it's going to come off that way to outsiders who don't know you.

"But 'hate'? No, not at all... the opposite, actually.

"Look, this is my home. These are my people. Everything and everyone I've cared about, other than my ex-wife and children, lives here. It was the good that once existed in this place that encouraged me to explore the world, to give it my best shot. The people I love back here were the audience in my head when I succeeded, my support system when I failed; always there for me, no matter what.

"The problem? My image of us, the one stuck in my brain - how I remembered what I was and who they were - was something like a Polaroid snapshot. Frozen at the moment I left three decades ago, fading but otherwise unchanging over the ensuing thirty years.

"When it came time to come back home, I wasn't who I'd been back in the day. I was returning to a place that no longer existed as it did in my memories, and to people who weren't what they'd once been."

This sounded familiar - Paul once told me he'd had a similar experience when he retired from the Navy.

"When you love someone, the failings you perceive in them can sting, especially if they betray what you need that person to be about. You want to be proud of those you love; even false pride is better than none.

"Hey, these were my friends, the only ones I had. They knew me, and in their own way, accepted me for who I was despite believing I was a little different - something that, ordinarily, is hard for them to deal with. And that's why I'm here - not for me, but because of them. These are truly nice people at heart. They want to do right; they just don't understand what 'right' is in a larger context.

"That's simple ignorance; it's fixable. Individuals can change if they want to. And I have a place in that because I can help them achieve 'want to.'

"You'd have to be from here to appreciate this. But outsiders, the government, and the courts have been trying to force our residents to do things every way but our own for more than a century and a half now. We were the first in the civil rights era to have federal troops in our streets; look up the Little Rock Nine if you're not familiar.

"Those who lived here were the kind who just dug in deeper when under that kind of pressure. It seemed like tapping into that pride, that self-determination, and exposing the assholes behind the green curtain, pushing them in directions they couldn't be proud of, was something I could do. I wanted to explain to them why jagoffs like that do those things. I hoped they'd decide on their own that they don't want their lives to be this way.

"What makes me sad, angers me - scares me, to be honest - is that the pride I was counting on seems to have disappeared.

"Years ago, the one positive thing you could say about the people here was that they were fiercely independent in certain ways, feisty. It used to mean something that you were a Razorback. If you'd suggested the idea of everyone here kowtowing to some idiot lardass

New Yorker, a loudmouth who knows so little about the Bible he can't even properly enunciate the names of its books, they'd have tarred and feathered you and run you out of town on a rail.

"There was a time they'd have escorted a candy-assed blowhard Yankee like Trance out of Narcissus County with a stick of dynamite shoved up his ass, left to wonder whether there was a blasting cap attached.

"We'd have never kissed the backside of a flatulent know-nothing like him, or DeRump, for that matter. Arkansawyers just didn't cave to bullies, especially from outside.

"Now look where we're at. I'm still struggling to understand what the hell happened to the never-quit self-reliance and dignity these people, the friends and relatives I've loved all my life, used to have. As God is my witness, I never wanted to feel ashamed of them, or worse, embarrassed for them, and it breaks my heart to be in this position.

"It really hurt when Indiana, as deep red a state as there is, told the Trumpie greaseballs to go to hell when they tried to force legislators to redistrict. Why in God's name couldn't Arkansas have sent those losers packing?

"Instead, we've surrendered our values and completely capitulated to total assholes. Can't have it both ways: either stick to the beliefs and traditions that made you who you are, or don't. But you can't claim the high road that goes with the one while taking the low path associated with the other."

Paul had been quiet through all of this, but now he raised a question.

"Alex, sometimes you come off like you're the guru sitting on a mountain, passing judgment on everyone you see as beneath you. I just don't see how that helps the situation."

"I'm sorry if that's what it sounds like," Alex replied, his brow furrowed. "That's not the message I intended. I'm all about equality; I don't pretend to be better than anyone.

“But I’m not any worse, either. When people try to force their will on me through thuggery, when the politicians ripping up our freedoms never won most of the votes cast by people who actually live here, when they stomp on the rights and traditions those in the service died bravely over the years to protect, when we get no say in any of those things, that’s not equality. I don’t want to be superior to anyone, but I’m not about to be walked all over by people thinking I’m less than them merely because they’ve taken power.

“Every one of those I’ve gone after has said publicly, through the influence they wield, the money they’ve stolen, or the attention they’ve grabbed at the expense of more important things, ‘Look at me, I own you, and I’m beyond the reach of your silly rules!’

“The Constitution refers to all of us as equals - and by the way, it doesn’t limit that idea just to citizens, or voters, or whites, or males. ‘We, the People’ means everyone.

“Somebody has to enforce the concept; it’s more than mere words on paper. I intend to expose the flaws in the assholes now running the place to balance out all the unfair advantages they have. They need to be brought down to our level.”

The added background regained Alex some of the respect he’d lost in my eyes. I could see that Paul was giving a lot of thought to what Alex had said.

“You know, my first inclination was to argue the point. But after thinking about it, I really can’t say you’re wrong. Don’t know that you’re right, either. A fair topic for debate, subject to individual choice.

“While confronting everyone isn’t my style, I can accept that it’s yours.”

Paul’s expression had softened. I realized Paul, ever the gentleman, had heard and understood Alex’s explanation and expression of regret. He added some advice.

“We all have our little quirks. Still, if we can get through this without creating problems we don’t need, it would help.”

The waitress brought back Alex's to-go order, and as we rose to our feet, Alex made a conciliatory offer.

"If you have a few minutes when we get back to the house, why don't you stop in and meet John? Back in California, he was one of the popular kids, and it's taking him a while to get accepted here. He gets bored easily. I'll let him tell you about his latest hobby.

"Hmmm, given that we just ate, maybe I should check first... either of you squeamish about cockroaches?"



CHAPTER 31

As we followed Alex through his front door, I whispered to Paul.

“Honey, you’re the scientist in the family - why don’t you take the lead on this one? I think I’m going to hang back.”

Paul grinned; for a tiny fraction of a second, I thought I glimpsed the little boy he was thirty years ago, enjoying my discomfort. But he quickly returned to the knight in shining armor I married.

“I’ve no clue what it would be like dealing with cockroaches right after eating lunch when you’re pregnant,” Paul whispered back, “but I think even the suggestion would’ve sent me running for the restroom.”

“I’m impressed you held it together, but yeah, I’ve got it from here.”

We took our seats side by side on the couch, Paul holding my hand, as Alex straightened up the homework - we assumed John’s - scattered on the coffee table.

“John, I brought you something from the diner,” Alex called out, placing the paper sack on the credenza alongside the far wall. It didn’t take long for his son to make his appearance.

John was a tall, strapping kid growing into a young man, still straddling both worlds. With curly black hair and a ready smile, he reminded me of Marci’s boys, but skinnier and gawkier - a little younger than they were then, maybe 14. My initial impression of John was that he was soft-spoken, shy, and polite. Those were qualities I’d associate more with a teenager raised in this area than with one from California.

His first words elicited a grin from Paul as John stumbled over his name.

“Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Wynn. Dad says you’re a reporter from San Diego. You wrote the articles about Mr. Freeman’s older daughter when she died in 2017.”

“Hi, John. Yes, I tried to help. Nothing that bad had ever happened to our family. Now this. Somebody had to do something, so Paul and I came. I’m glad we got this opportunity to meet. Have you heard anything from the other students about everything that’s happened?”

“Not really. The ones in my classes seem freaked out.”

John’s forehead creased into a frown.

“Wish I could do something, but I’ve only been here three weeks. I live in Huntington Beach with my mom. I came to spend the Christmas holidays and spring semester with Dad.

“When the thing happened to Innocence Grace, I was just a kid. I remember mostly because me and Dad used to do things together on weekends. He said he had to go be with his friend here, so I wouldn’t get to see him as often.”

I nodded, getting my first glimpse of what the situation would have looked like from John's point of view.

"That kind of made me mad, 'cuz I didn't know that she died, or how. Then I heard Dad and Mr. Freeman talking in Dad's kitchen right after I got here. That made me feel bad about being a jerk to Dad, and I was sad for her."

Paul was sympathetic.

"No way you could have known. When you're that young, adults try to protect you from bad things. Hiding them is all they can do."

I saw a flash of confusion, maybe fear, even hurt, cross John's face, and realized he was still struggling with how to take what had happened.

"I s'pose. But I was here when they killed Liberty Belle. I'd just met her, and she seemed nice."

Frustration crept into John's voice.

"There are all kinds of things everyone is saying in the halls about what happened to her. They shut up when I come around because I'm new, and maybe they think I did something."

That explained why it bothered him as much as it seemed to. Alex's comment that John was popular back in California meant the rejection and accusation, even if unspoken, would have stung.

"I don't think anyone knows *what* to believe," Paul offered. "Pretty tough on everyone. We're hoping some of that will go away once we know who did this. That's why we're here."

"Yeah." The concern on John's face had deepened. "And then when you try to make friends, they think you've got an ulterior motive or something. It's like this happened to just them, and other people don't belong in it."

John sighed.

Alex broke in, asking us what we'd like to drink, then headed to the kitchen.

With that, John's face suddenly brightened.

"I'll be right back," he said, turning and heading down the hallway to what I assumed was his bedroom.

We were about to learn that he, too, had no idea what pregnancy was about.

I twisted in my seat toward Paul, and we tried to imagine how all of this was affecting their small community. Feeling something being placed on my lap, I turned back and looked down.

Paul jumped as my sudden shrieking scream pierced the room.

As the aquarium fish darted for cover, I slammed that Tupperware bowl as hard as I could with the back of my left hand, my right rising and flying back against the couch, vainly attempting to escape.

The translucent plastic box sailed into the air, catching the edge of the ceiling fan blade. Shooting across the room, it bounced off the frame of the portrait on the wall, hit the credenza, and landed on the carpet in a lazy spin.

Then, perfect silence.

Thank God John had snapped the Tupperware lid tight; the cockroaches were still inside, dizzily scurrying about.

The maniacal grin appearing on John's face quickly disappeared as he realized he'd misjudged his audience. Everyone else in the room was now staring at him in varying degrees of shock, anger, and disgust.

I desperately needed to get to the bathroom. As Paul helped me off the couch, I beat a hasty retreat. I heard John say, "I'm so sorry, I thought it would make you laugh."

The guest bathroom was right around the corner off the hall next to the living room, and I could hear the sardonic tone in Paul's little speech.

"Dude, as a lover of all living things, I gotta warn you - travel only with crowds. Make sure your dad is always around, or somebody who can call 911 for you.

"Check the seat first whenever you sit down, and under it if you're getting in a car. Don't take your eyes off any of your things,

check out your food when you're about to eat, and whatever you do, DO NOT close your eyes when you sleep!

"I'm here to tell you, Debra Ann gets even, and she's very sneaky. She's also quite patient; she'll wait to get you until exactly the right moment."

As I made my way back to the living room, I saw Alex smirking, and John's look back at me was... concerned.

Paul now had the Tupperware container in his hands, holding it up so the light would shine through it as he squinted at its contents. When I sat back on the sofa, I hugged the armrest as far away from Paul and those bugs as I could get.

"I assume these are your racing cockroaches?" Paul asked. "They don't seem to have suffered any damage."

"I didn't mean to scare anyone," John stammered. "I didn't think it would go like that..."

It was time for me to speak up. Sensing that everyone was concerned by my reaction, I needed to show I was okay with what had happened.

"I appreciate the apology, John, but it's all good. It may be hard to believe, but we were all teenagers once. I know I've done worse myself."

"Thanks, Mrs. Wynn." A cautious smile crossed John's lips. "I should have thought it through first. It's good nobody got hurt."

"I've won a lot of races with them, but I don't think they've ever moved *that* fast before..."

His comment lightened the lingering tension, and all was back to normal.

Paul wanted to know more about his new six-legged friends.

"Now that you've introduced us to your little racers, tell me about them; start with how you got into this hobby."

"Sure, let me put them back in their home; it's in my room."

Once he'd disappeared, I had a question for Alex.

"I can't believe they let him fly with those from California."

“Despite that little stunt, sometimes the kid’s smart - he asked the airline, and when they said no, he sent the Tupperware container UPS Next Day.”

Alex shook his head with a droll smile.

“It might have been nice if he’d warned me they were coming. You can imagine what I was thinking when I opened the box. If I hadn’t checked the return address, I’d have tossed them straight into the garbage.”

John returned, carrying another plastic container, this one in matte black. Instead of snapping on, the lid slipped in and out along two channels molded into the box's sides. After setting the container on the coffee table, John walked over to the wall behind us and flipped on the ceiling fan lights.

“As long as it’s lighter in here than it is in their home, they won’t try to escape,” John explained.

Just hearing the word “*escape*” sent a little shudder up my spine, and I scrunched tighter into my corner of the sofa.

John was on his knees at the end of the coffee table.

“So that we can see who’s who,” John offered, pulling a magnifying glass and a pencil from the back pocket of his jeans. Paul sat cross-legged on the floor beside John, watching curiously before asking him the obvious question.

“What got you into this?”

“We have an exchange student from Australia in my high school in California. Cockroach racing’s a big deal down under.

“ICE kept raiding our school - they pick on blue states, the ones that didn’t vote for MAGAts. They took away all our black and Hispanic kids, even some who were born here. But Davey’s white, so they left him alone. He and I became tight, got me into racing.”

Paul and I glanced at each other, and I shook my head.

Is this where we’re at as a country?

John placed the lens and the pencil alongside the cockroach sanctuary. Sliding the black panel open, he invited Paul to look inside and handed him the magnifier.

"How do you tell them apart...?" Paul asked before answering his own question. "Oh, I see - you've marked them with little colored dots - nail polish?"

"Model car paint - it sticks better."

"What's the deal with this one? The yellow streak down its back?"

"Oh, that's QAnon. Everything scares him."

"How do you know that?"

"Watch."

John took the pencil and placed the point next to the roach. As it skittered away, John chased it with the point.

"Then afterward, he'll get into the middle of a group of cockroaches huddling together. Starts acting all aggressive as long as the other roaches are around to protect him."

"Who's the big black one with the blue and white dots?"

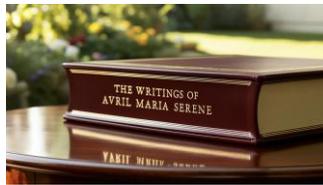
"That's Herschel Walker - he's got some serious brain damage. Check this out."

As John put the pencil point close to the biggest cockroach in the box, it suddenly whirled and began head-butting the tip. As John moved the pencil around, Herschel kept banging on it.

"Fascinating... How about the grayish one? He seems to move pretty fast."

"Yeah, I call him Steve Bannon. He's too stupid to run in a straight line, though. He's like a drunk pervert - likes to get behind other cockroaches and run his feelers up under their backsides, gets them all riled up.

"I think he's inbred. There are some kids in my class who other students say that about, and they act the same way."





CHAPTER 32

THE FOLLOWING MORNING

Paul was up early, texting and e-mailing to catch up with his staff at the forensics lab back in San Diego. He'd tried to stay quiet, letting me sleep in.

But after an hour of smelling Keurig coffee and not having Paul's shoulder as a pillow, I couldn't stay in bed any longer. An idea bouncing around in my head just wouldn't let go. Grabbing the robe hanging from the bathroom door, I leaned in for my morning kiss and took the seat next to Paul at the tiny worktable. I wouldn't have called the motel's Wi-Fi lightning fast, but it performed well for the searches I had to do.

Paul offered to pick up breakfast for us while I worked. By the time he got back, I had what I needed for our interview with Boasteen. I shared what I'd learned over fresh McDonald's coffee, sausage, and pancakes as we dressed.

With plenty of time before the appointment Fred had set with the pastor, Paul and I swung by Musky Mellons's used-car dealership. This would be a girl-on-girl interview - well, sort of - so Paul stayed in the car.

I have to admit, even forewarned, I hadn't prepared well enough for the Musky Mellons experience. From a distance, she looked like two squishy bowling balls glued to a stick figure. Gaunt, pale, and wearing a pageboy-cut black wig and heavy makeup, her affect made me think she'd just walked off the stage of a live production of "Rocky Horror Picture Show."

I wished Alex had not mentioned Mellons's five o'clock shadow. Keeping my eyes off it proved impossible... same for her protruding nose hair. I got past her appearance enough to make my introduction and explain my role in investigating what had happened to Fred's daughters.

"Several people I've spoken with mentioned your name, so I have to ask. Have you ever had a conversation with Liberty Belle Freeman?"

"No, not that I recall, unless she was shopping to buy another vehicle. We get a ton of traffic, and I can't remember everyone I chat up. But she had the one you're driving, so I can't think why she'd want another."

Interesting that Mellons recognized what Liberty Belle drove. Still, knowing who drives what in a small town is probably a requirement if you're in the used car business.

"Any reason you'd want her to friend you on Facebook?"

"Oh Lord, no, honey, I don't get on Facebook. What people post isn't very nice; all they do is complain about the cars they bought."

Hmmm, hard to argue with something that makes perfect sense. Oh, well, it was worth asking.

As I thanked her and was turning to leave, Mellons tossed out a parting shot.

"I heard you interviewed Stephen Miller at that gross little school he runs. He and I used to be friends. You should know the reason we broke up is that he's doing inappropriate things with children."

I hadn't asked that question; she wanted me to think the worst about Miller.

After stopping to make it clear I was adding her comments to my notes, I waved goodbye and returned to Paul, who was waiting in the Trailblazer.

I relayed what Mellons had said.

"You know, I find it a little odd that Mellons accused Miller of unacceptable behavior 'with children.' I'm pretty sure Miller's attraction is specific to boys."

That got a nod from Paul.

"I wonder if she broadened her accusation in retaliation for their breakup - you'd think she would want to get the gender right."



When Fred spoke to Pastor Boasteen on our behalf, the preacher agreed to meet the three of us in his office at the church. Because of the name-calling incident with Alex at the diner, I worried Boasteen might want to meet in a public place, including his supporters or parishioners in the audience. In my experience, interviewees are more forthcoming in a private setting in which they are comfortable and in control. The reverend's choice of venues was encouraging because I hoped to ask him some direct questions.

Fred met us at our motel, and Paul drove the Trailblazer. We used the driving time to discuss how I'd handle this interview. Fred and

Paul agreed to hang back unless there was a question I missed or a follow-up they wanted to ask.

We soon arrived at what had become the pastor's home church, the crown jewel of the sprawling network of local ministries he'd gathered into one cohesive organization. The Assembly of God was the first church he'd led in his conquest of Narcissus County, now his center of operations.

We arrived at Boasteen's office in the remodeled parsonage promptly at 10:30, and he was expecting us. As we entered, I realized the vibe in the room was much more that of a modern business than what my parents had raised me to expect from a church. Rather than polished wood, brass, pewter, and cloth, the furnishings were glass, chrome, Formica, and vinyl; a row of lit candles and the smell of burning wicks were the only hints of a spiritual purpose.

The pastor was cordial and inviting toward Paul and me. Tall and slender with short-cropped black hair, he asked the usual questions about the baby: whether we knew the gender and how long before he was due.

Despite Fred's presence during the obviously hostile argument between Alex and the reverend at the diner, the pastor seemed to harbor no ill will. Still, I detected a subtle change from the warmth he'd shown Paul and me. The handshake between him and Fred was polite, even if businesslike.

"Hello, Fred, haven't seen you in church for a while. We should talk in private when you can find the time."

Because I intended to catch Boasteen off guard with at least one of my questions, I wanted to capture his reactions in a permanent form I could reference later.

"You won't mind if I record this? It keeps me from 'misremembering' anything."

The reverend flashed a disarming smile.

"Oh, of course, I understand. We keep copies of my sermons, so I'm used to the idea."

As I placed the digital recorder on the edge of his desk, I complimented him on his success in uniting the community's disparate denominations.

"How many do you now have under your wing?"

"We have fifteen congregations. We are expecting the Assembly of God in Hayseed Haven to join us by the end of the year."

"You're quite ambitious, then."

Boasteen seemed to bristle at my choice of words.

"My mission here is not a personal one, Mrs. Wynn. While I can see how someone outside our community might view our unification efforts as something like a corporate takeover, this isn't the big city. I would hope no one in any of our congregations would see it as anything more than serving the Lord wisely and efficiently."

"Please, you can call me Debra Ann. You would say that uniting these churches is good for your parishioners, then?"

"Getting everyone on the same page has made our sharing and giving programs more powerful, with greater reach and less overlap than we had separately. Our message is better structured; our congregants need consistency in these confusing times, and people can experience a familiar theme as they move between our communities."

"Do the individual churches get a say? I'm sure each has aspects its members want to stay the same as always. I'd think they'd have their reasons for belonging to one church over another."

"Every congregation approves joining our little group. We wouldn't want anyone feeling it wasn't the right thing to do."

My question was more about day-to-day operations than the initial decision to join, but I decided not to belabor the point.

"I'd think that people who followed other faiths would feel a little intimidated by the sheer size of your organization."

"We don't have a lot of those in this area, Debra Ann. If that situation should arise, we certainly wouldn't interfere with someone starting their own church."

Again, the answer didn't really address my question. Our Pastor Boasteen was a tad slippery. Paul's eyes caught mine, and his half-smile told me he'd seen the same signs. But they were no surprise to either of us.

"I'm told that sermonizing is part of your family tradition."

"My father was a country preacher for fifty years; for the first twenty, he had a circuit between all the smaller towns around here. Rode it on horseback because he thought it would be pretentious to drive it in a car. Eventually, he built a church in Enabler Hollow. Bought a beat-up pickup, married Mom, and they had me."

"He was older, then, when he became a father?"

"By that time, he was in his forties. And no, if you were wondering, we weren't as close as I'd have liked. More of a mentor, and something of a hero, to me by the time I'd hit my teenage years."

"That's a lot of respect."

"I don't think it's an overstatement to say my father was beloved by his flock. By the time he retired, he'd baptized everyone in town, married the ones who didn't elope, and tended to all their parents' and grandparents' funerals. You're deep into the Bible Belt here, Debra Ann, and people take their Sunday mornings seriously; my father never missed giving a sermon in all the time he served."

"It makes sense, then, that you'd want to follow in his footsteps."

His hesitation was noticeable, and I could see the wheels turning behind his eyes. I realized he was sizing me up to see what I might have learned about him.

"My route to the pulpit wasn't as direct as that might imply."

Does he know I know? Is he about to 'fess up?



CHAPTER 33

I crossed my fingers that Boasteen would be forthcoming, and I could cut to the chase.

“Oh? How so?”

“I had to take a few years away from Enabler Hollow and see the world for myself. I left when I was nineteen and didn’t start divinity school until 2012.”

“How did you spend your time in between?”

“I wandered about, sowed some wild oats, drank a little, smoked more. Typical things kids do to find themselves.”

Giving me a non-specific answer was the wrong move, Reverend. But now I know what I need to do.

First, a softball question.

“Obviously, somewhere along your path, you embraced the ministry, and judging by where you are today, in a big way. Tell me a little about your journey.”

While Boasteen’s schtick was the same old re-selling of “mine is the one path to heaven” and the occasional bottle of snake oil that dominated his profession, his approach seemed more... *aggressive*. Almost carrot-and-stick; he was determined you’d buy in, whichever it took. His my-way-or-the-highway delivery reminded me that for all his presumptions of sanctity and above-the-fray sermonizing, the reverend’s affect was that of a powerful man. I wasn’t sure why that thought mattered, but I tucked it away for future reference.

After letting the pastor wax poetic for a few moments longer, I knew it was time to tighten the screws. I wanted Boasteen to believe the increasing tension meant I was getting to the crux of my interview.

“While I appreciate the virtues, values, and even passions that brought you to this point in your life, I’m concerned about some things I’ve heard. Would you mind addressing the aspects of your ministry that haven’t gone so well?”

Boasteen frowned for a second, his eyes flicking to my recorder and back, then smiled graciously. “My work’s always been an open book, Debra Ann. Ask away.”

Not always, I thought, catching the preacher’s quick glances toward Fred and then Paul, almost as if he were seeking affirmation. I knew the pastor was seriously flawed. Those faults raised significant doubts about Boasteen’s qualifications to give moral guidance to anyone, though they made him human.

“From what I understand, you publicly and loudly called out the best friend of a man and his wife who’d just lost their only remaining daughter to a savage rape and murder.”

I made a point of checking my notes.

"You called him a 'Satan-worshipper.' People like me might see that as kicking somebody when they're down in the worst way possible. Doesn't speak well of you or your profession."

Fred's eyes were now fixed on the pastor's face.

Boasteen switched his focus from me to my cousin.

"Fred, I think everyone here knows I was out of line. Alex was right - it was an un-Christian thing for me to say. I lost my temper; I should never have let that happen. And I said what I did in a public situation.

"I was in the wrong place in my head, focused too much on growing my ministry. All the negativity around your poor little girl's death had me concerned, and instead of letting people grieve in their own way in their proper time, I tried to push past it. Everything about my behavior at the diner was wrong - it just wasn't right to go about it that way.

"I tried to apologize from the pulpit, without naming anyone, but you and Alex weren't there to hear it. Please tell your friend I am sorry, and I'm willing to do whatever he thinks needs to be done to make things good between us. We'll never agree on some topics, but I have to do my part so we can at least have a civil conversation."

Fred looked down at the carpet for a moment, then raised his head to answer the pastor. I knew my cousin as a gentle man who considered himself a good Christian; I halfway expected he'd let the preacher off the hook. But I'd forgotten something else about Fred - he was true to his friends.

"Preacher, I think you know better. I can't be your messenger boy this time. This isn't something you can fix from the pulpit or this office, or anywhere else you're in control.

"When you falsely denounce someone as being aligned with Satan, it's on you to make it right. I'm not giving you the plausible deniability that goes with delivering the message for you and being accused of getting it wrong. Nice try.

“I think you’ve read your Bible enough to know you’re going to have to go to Alex’s house when you know he’s home. You’ll have to knock on his door and put into your own words whatever you have to say. To his face, in front of his son. It’s time to man up.”

I think the sudden change in roles - the parishioner lecturing the pastor in no uncertain terms - caught Boasteen unprepared. Still, he accepted Fred’s conditions and agreed he’d make the journey to see Alex.

I had one more thing to say before I was ready to let it go.

“It’s not my place to pass judgment on your sincerity, Reverend, but what you said at the diner was pretty black-and-white, and it was hurtful. There’s a big difference between someone criticizing your work and you attacking them personally. You lead every sizable church in a Bible Belt county, and you retaliated by associating an honest man with the devil. Fred’s my cousin, and Alex is his closest friend; they’ve been through enough as it is.

“I think you know it’ll take more than one pass for your apologies to take root.”

With that issue set aside for now, I pushed forward, glancing through my notes.

“Some residents have pointed out to me that much of your success here rests on the shoulders of all the citizens who’ve forgiven you. Specifically, for failing to provide shelter to those in need in the aftermath of the tornadoes. They express concern that you don’t seem appreciative of them turning the other cheek, as you’ve taught them to do. They’re also not happy that your words and your actions don’t convey the same message.”

“I’ve regretted my behavior during those storms, and I always will; we’ve changed the church’s policies so that never happens again.”

“*Policies?*” Now Fred was angry. “Those were your neighbors, your friends, the faithful. You want how the church treats people to be a matter of *policy*? What, now you’re a big-deal evangelist, and you don’t have to pretend anymore that you have a heart, like some CEO of

a big corporation? People around here don't like the idea of their spiritual leaders taking on such airs."

"Look, Fred, I'm sorry I misspoke. Let me put it straight out there. When the members of these communities need our help, we intend... no, I'm sorry, wrong words again, we *will* be there for them. You have my personal guarantee."

Though the look in Fred's eyes told me Boasteen's answer didn't fully satisfy him, I needed to pull in the reins so I could keep things moving along.

"Before you chalk up what Fred said to being upset, or feelings about the crimes that ended his daughter's lives, or his friendship with Alex Hamilton, you should know that I've heard the same complaints from others I've met here. I hope you'll give that some deep thought from time to time as you're out trying to conquer the secular world with your particular brand of religiosity.

"I don't know how well you keep your ear to the ground. But you should know there's an expectation of how someone in your position should conduct their personal life. When asking around, I've heard some pretty wild rumors about your relationships with two people. Let's start with Ellen Mellons."

The pastor wasn't happy about losing control of our exchange and pushed back.

"Look, when Fred called, he told me it was to discuss anyone I knew who might have been involved with the terrible things that happened to his daughters. That I'm willing to do. But it seems to have turned into a personal attack against me, and by extension, my ministry. I can't sit here all day trying to address every rumor circulating around town."

"Reverend, like it or not, you're a powerful force around here. Not only are you a subject of those whispers, but you generate more than a few of them. You are what's called an 'influencer' in other contexts. For us to place what you have to say in its proper spot in the puzzle we're trying to solve, we have to know where you're coming

from. We have to first eliminate you as a suspect, to use police parlance. Then we have to show your motives are pure - that you're not painting a target on someone's back for your own reasons."

"I've spent years building my following and my reputation," Boasteen protested. "The evil things someone else has done shouldn't sully those."

"We have two dead little girls, Pastor, and we don't have any idea who did these things to them. This is real life, not some debate about what happened, or did not, two thousand years ago. You can choose not to answer my questions, and I'll honor your request. But whatever your choice, it won't change the fact that they're on everyone's minds - except maybe to add wonder about why you won't give me a straight answer."

Boasteen was defiant.

"You're putting me in a no-win situation; I'm providing truthful answers, yet you accuse me of not being 'straight' with you."

"I'm an investigative journalist, Pastor. I didn't come here unprepared. It's going to be hard to get certain things past me. And I'm not so sure the locals are drinking the Kool-Aid you're pouring out for them.

"You may think you have these people wrapped around your little finger, Reverend. But I'm getting the sense that they are decent, well-meaning, and genuine. They'll have lines they expect you not to cross - I'm an outsider, so I don't know exactly where those boundaries are - and you don't want to be pushing them. It appears you've stepped across one of their limits, and that inspired my question about Ellen Mellons. Are you saying you'd prefer not to answer?"

The preacher was silent for a moment, his lips clamped together, his fingers in a rolling tap on the desktop.

"When Ms. Mellons reached out for prayer, I had no idea she had a thing for me. If I had, I would have sent an elder in my place. You're forcing me to be more candid than my vows permit in matters such as these. Have you met her?"

"Briefly, yes."

"Let's face it; Ms. Mellons is one hot mess. That much I'd heard, and that's all I knew when she called wanting to talk. What I learned from that conversation is that she's also a rich, entitled mess, and that means a *self-validated* mess - she has no interest in changing anything."

I saw Fred nodding slightly, chin in one hand.

"And she has some pretty strange ideas about gender norms and relationships. I backed out of our meeting as quickly and politely as I could; I told her I'd taken a vow of celibacy. I couldn't have known that would make me an interesting challenge in her eyes. And I certainly didn't realize people seeing me enter or leave her residence would misconstrue the reason I was there."

His eyes were pleading, and I'd accept he didn't realize others might be watching. It was tempting to ask why he felt the need to clean his sofa afterward, but I was on a path for bigger game.

"So, tell me where Inet Buhnrop fits in?"

"Oh, please, that's not a real thing; that's just something to fill in the empty places in my personal life. And I'm trying to stop it, really, I am. It has nothing to do with any of this."

"Fair enough. The other person I wanted to ask you about was Stephen Miller. I've met him, and let's just say it was an experience. But I heard something that seemed unbelievable - that you funded his military school. I've seen the place - it's a neo-Nazi white supremacist boot camp run by a Jewish commandant who should have been in 'Hogan's Heroes.' What in the world were you thinking, giving him money your parishioners tithed to the church?"

"Hey, Miller took in most people he spoke with. When he said he wanted to start a military school for wayward youth, it made sense. We had a rash of older teenagers getting bored, drinking, and tearing up the place. There've been all these rapes of pre-teen and teenage girls - we didn't know who was responsible. Some thought it might be a rogue deputy, or one of Trance's employees or contractors.

“But given the victims’ ages, it could easily have been a teenager. What could it hurt to have some place for them to go where they’d learn some discipline, maybe get accepted into the military upon graduation?”

“That couldn’t be any worse than what the county government was offering them. Witness the town’s residents to see how successful local public teaching has been. Educators struggle with low budgets and parents’ prejudices against STEM, anything that contravenes religion, or sex education. And then there’s the book burning.

“When he started out, Miller earned some respect for ‘turning around the bad boys in town.’ Of course, that depended on how you defined ‘bad boys.’ Some kids landed at the academy just because they didn’t want to attend services - even *I* have trouble punishing children for that. I’d rather have them in Sunday school because they *want* to be there, not under the threat of their parents sending them away to military school.

“But nobody had any idea that he intended to turn the academy into what it became. Most townspeople have pulled their kids out.”

“Okay, let’s say I buy that. We saw the empty parking lot, and we know he’s having trouble paying his bills. But people say when you came to town, the two of you were pretty chummy, and that you should have known what he was.”

“Yes, I admit I should have seen it, but I had blinders on. I focus on the good in people, and I’ll confess that at first, I saw something of myself in Stephen. He was entrepreneurial, had interesting ideas, and seemed passionate about them... but no, not in a neo-Nazi way, just in being committed to what he wanted to do. It seemed to me all he needed was a leg up. His work would help solve a problem the community was experiencing, and I was eager to make up for the mistake I made during the tornadoes. In my mind, it was a win-win situation.”

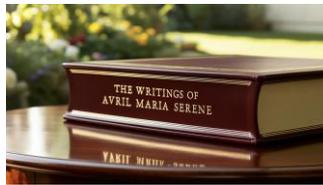
“You’re saying you made an error in judgment, then?”

As the pastor nodded, I made a show of going over my notes.

“Well, Pastor, I think that answers all the questions I had for you today... oh, wait. Right... about your days of ‘sowing wild oats.’

“Can you tell me who Jerry and Michelle Cochran might be? For reference, they have two children, Dennis and Isabelle...”

The pastor's face went ashen, his shoulders and lower jaw dropping in unison.





CHAPTER 34

Boasteen's face showed unmistakable panic; caught completely by surprise, I sensed his first instinct would be to retreat strategically, then attack. His eyes darted between us, looking for escape, settling on my cousin.

Fred, however, was staring back at me, his expression searching and confused. He'd caught the reverend's reaction, but he had no idea what caused it; I hadn't told him what I'd shared with Paul about my research this morning.

The pastor looked away, taking a deep breath; his eyes were now fixed on the pen he'd suspended between the forefingers of his hands.

"I suppose you've talked with her?" Boasteen asked quietly.

"E-mail. I know she's struggling; that you haven't met your obligations. That you're not who you've pretended to be. That you were so ashamed, angry, or disappointed in your father and your upbringing that you changed your name and tried to bury your identity in the secular world."

"I'm begging you, please, to let me tell my parishioners in my way. The church is a big part of their lives, and desecrating the institution can cause more harm than you know. I need to separate the deeds of the man from the good that these places do. I will own my sins, and I hope they will forgive me. But please, let me have some dignity in facing up to this, and to them."

His pleadings rang hollow to me, but it wasn't my role to be judge and jury. It was, however, my job to present the truth.

"Pastor, I can't commit to that without knowing the facts, and I can't speak for anyone you've hurt. That starts with Fred. He doesn't know your true story... yet. I wanted him to hear it from you so he could form his own opinions.

"Now's your chance to get it out there. But let me caution you. I'm an experienced investigative journalist with one foot on the world stage. As you may have realized, I do my homework. It's not a good time for you to get creative with your history."

The minister twisted in his seat before raising his eyes to meet Fred's.

"Trying to reinvent myself as a preacher was actually my second attempt to change radically a life that wasn't at all what I'd hoped for. Several years before I arrived here, I'd moved out of state and taken the name Jerry Cochran. I'd become a financial planner. Things weren't going well, and I was in a bitter divorce where the mother accused me of molesting my own children.

"I wouldn't do *anything* like that; I just wouldn't. But when a vengeful spouse lies and claims you did, there's a stigma that goes with it that's impossible to get past. I tried to fight it, but the more I

defended myself, the more I got caught up in that 'methinks he protesteth too much' quagmire.

"So, I ran away from that life, returning to the name and the profession God intended for me. I couldn't see any other options."

Boasteen turned back to me, seeking a sympathetic audience.

"Look, when I married Michelle, I'd built up a sizable client list for my financial planning business. I had a bright future in the industry, something that mattered a lot to her, and especially to her wealthy family. She wanted it all: homes, cars, clothes, money, and acceptance from the social circuit in a major city.

"But I was unhappy at my core. As I'd grown older, I came to understand, even appreciate, my father and what he'd tried to do with his life. He'd raised me in the faith, and I felt pulled to my true calling. It ate away at me until I just couldn't do what I was doing anymore. I didn't want the ostentatious wealth, the amenities; I wanted to be in a small town tending my flock.

"It all came to a head, and I finally had 'the talk' with Michelle, told her I wanted to go into the ministry and wanted our family to follow the teachings of Jesus."

Boasteen had absorbed the initial hit; his confidence returning, he blew right past my earlier warning.

"Let's just say I misjudged the moment. She went ballistic, accusing me of betraying every promise she relied on from me. 'Her' kids were going to be lawyers and doctors, not 'Bible-thumpers.' They were going to have nice things, go to the best schools, and have an influence in the 'real' world.

"She wanted a divorce. At first, I tried to fight her. Big mistake. She brought her family and their money into it. Suddenly, I was a child molester, and had mismanaged my clients' funds, abused her, slept around - you name it. None of that was true, of course, but honesty didn't matter to her.

"My friends and business partners didn't want me engaging in that kind of secular warfare and convinced me that the right thing to do

was to let it go, walk away - to 'turn the other cheek', as you mentioned earlier.

"Toughest thing I ever had to do in my life. But I did it, not always happily, and let her steamroll me and take everything, including the children. Then, of course, my clients assumed that if I was caving, there must be some truth to her accusations. She destroyed my reputation and what I had left of my career."

Boasteen still showed some discomfort, his eyes bouncing between Fred's, Paul's, and mine - I assumed to gauge our reactions. Had it been just him and me in the room, I might have pressed him a little harder. I backed off for the moment; I was getting answers to the questions I'd wanted to ask. I'd need more background before I tried to push him into any more unexpected admissions.

"But I'd kept my faith. I returned to my given name and went to seminary before coming here. My deceits were truly unfortunate, predicated on the worldview of a nineteen-year-old and compounded by poor judgment. But nothing more than that, I assure you. If I had it to do over, I would have done so many things differently.

"That's the truth. I made mistakes as a man, a husband, and a father. But nothing like you might want to believe. My missteps were in not dealing with who I was before I began chasing greed, and certainly before I got married. But I've done my best to make things right."

As the pastor lifted his hands, palms upward, and looked around to make his point, I felt a rush of disgust. *The man had simply bent his "faith" into something he found more palatable by applying to it the greed he'd practiced as a financial planner.*

"I've had a positive influence on other people's children through the church and our schools. I've used my experience to counsel those I see in the same position I was once in, so they don't make the same mistakes.

"Debra Ann, you don't know me, and of course, you have every right to believe what you must. But I know in my heart I'm a good man,

not perfect, but doing the best I can. And every day, I offer to the Lord my commitment to do better.”

While I already knew much of what Boasteen revealed, the shell-shocked expression on Fred’s countenance told me he’d had no clue.

“I have to admit, Joel, Jerry, whoever you are, you have a way of spinning things. Had I not communicated with Michelle and looked into her version of events, who knows, I might have bought it.

“But you’ve kept on lying to everyone - her, your employers, your friends, your parishioners, and now me.

“Michelle’s family wasn’t rich at all, and other than wanting you to pay your court-ordered child support so she could feed your kids, she had no interest in money. It was Child Protective Services that received complaints about child abuse from the children’s counselors, teachers, and school nurses; those didn’t come from Michelle. According to CPS, your children are showing all the classic symptoms of parental molestation - alcoholism, drug abuse, inappropriate and failed relationships, periods of homelessness, run-ins with the law, and abusing others.

“Your financial services career was circling the bowl. It was the brokerage firm you worked for that filed charges against you for embezzlement, not Michelle; she had nothing to do with it, no idea what you’d done. And by the time you bailed on everything, you were thirty-two, not nineteen.

“You’d better make amends, and soon - your lies won’t cut it anymore.”

By letting him lock himself into a litany of untruths before I challenged them, I had the leverage I’d sought. I wanted some answers that would help us resolve what had happened to Fred’s daughters. I’d expected the pastor to pour out everything he knew in an over-the-top display of cooperation.

But that didn’t happen. He couldn’t seem to think of a single person or event that might hold a clue. I wasn’t expecting a rapist and murderer to confess everything to their minister, though it *has*

happened. However, I thought they might have confided in a friend or relative, who would then have told their pastor, even if indirectly or in code.

I suddenly realized there was more that Boasteen was hiding, and he didn't want to give me anything that would encourage more digging. But whatever it was, I didn't know enough yet to pry it out of him. I still had research to do.

It was time to end this interview.

I stood to leave and reached for my recorder. As I did, the preacher placed his hand over mine, making a last-ditch effort to secure our commitment not to reveal his past to anyone else. He wanted enough time to broach his history with his congregation first.

I let Fred have the floor, and his response was conditional.

"Make this right, and you'll have no trouble from me. But at some point, I'll have to tell Alex that his judgment of you wasn't so far off. I owe him at least that much. It might behoove you to follow up with that apology to the man before I talk to him about any of this. You know Alex is not one to hide his opinions, good or bad."

I had a different concern.

"Usually, I'm okay with second, or in this case, *third* chances."

Now it was *my* turn to hold up my palms and look around.

"But living the way you do, and claiming to help other parents' kids, it'd be blasphemy to let your own son and daughter go hungry one more day, Pastor. I expect to hear that you've finally done right by them. Catch up on that child support, and *soon*. And *keep* it current."

Paul backed me by fastening a steady gaze upon the reverend as I spoke, almost as though he was seeing right through him.

As the door closed behind us on our way out, we could hear just a single explosive word from inside: "*Fuck!*"

The three of us could only look at one another and smile.



CHAPTER 35

After taking our seats in Liberty Belle’s Trailblazer, Fred, Paul, and I voted to grab a bite; we could strategize our next move from the diner. It was early afternoon, and the lunchtime crowd should have dissipated by now.

As we pulled out of the church lot, Fred had a question.

“How did you learn Boasteen had another identity? Several people looked him up here in town, but nobody caught that he’d used a different name.”

"I like to be prepared for interviews. After spending hours doing my homework, I found nothing. I mean, at *all*... zip. That in itself bothered me.

"But it was learning about Alex calling him out that got me looking deeper this morning. Look, your friend needs to work on his presentation skills - *seriously*. Still, something about Boasteen had registered with him, enough that he went after the man in public. Alex is a contrarian; he's smart, he was in the military, and he's been around. It wouldn't be a stretch for someone with that background to sense something that the rest of us missed. Trust me, I know - I married a guy a little like that."

I looked at Paul with a grin and got back a crooked smile.

"To be honest, I was lucky. That I couldn't find anything about someone that ambitious from the time he left Enabler Hollow until 2012, when he went into the seminary, bugged me. No other schooling, military or work history, hospital stays, prison, or business records. My first thought was that he'd gotten himself locked up in a local precinct somewhere. I started checking court records in neighboring counties for something that wouldn't appear in national records.

"And there it was - in traffic court, Port Lybral County. Boasteen had gotten a driver's license in his new name, but he had to come back for something, maybe to pick up things he'd left here. Who knows? But the cop who caught him speeding knew his father well and recognized the kid. He wanted to know why the now-grown man was driving using an out-of-state license under a different name.

"Hauled Boasteen straight to the county judge. Not that big a deal when it happened, but it *did* tie his birth name to the new one he was using and gave me his residence address. Once I had that and exchanged e-mails with his ex, game over."

Fred furrowed his brow.

"The Lord works in mysterious ways...."

The irony didn't escape any of us. Still, the Boasteen interview didn't advance our cause as much as I'd hoped.

"The problem is that while the pastor is certainly a con artist, and something tells me he's still hiding more than we know, he couldn't have killed Liberty Belle.

"I guess I wasn't thinking of Boasteen as a suspect for that." Fred's raised eyebrows told me the idea was new to him. "Still, given everything no one suspected... how can you be sure it *wasn't* him?"

"Something else I caught online. Merging the Assemblies of God with a Baptist congregation had drawn the ire of the Assemblies of God's national council. A couple of their officers dropped in on him unannounced. It was the day before the morning that we think Liberty Belle died. They shadowed him for three days. I assume he's mended those fences since, but I don't think they were in a mood to have covered for him."

"I'd need to confirm more of what the pastor told us with his ex and children, of course. They may have mellowed with the passing of time. If they're willing to move past their disappointment and anger, maybe they'll share something that isn't pure retaliation. It'd be nice to learn what Boasteen's not telling us."

"I'd like to do some man-on-the-street interviews and see if some of these church members will share how they really feel about the pastor. They won't know the entire story yet, of course. Still, I'm curious how strong a grip he has over his parishioners."

"You might visit his father's old church in Hayseed Haven," Fred suggested. "They're not on the Boasteen bandwagon, and I've always wondered why."

"Oh, I just assumed they were his power base," I replied, my turn to be surprised. "You're right, it *would* be nice to know what's behind that. Is it active resistance based on something they know, or more like, 'oh, I got along with his dad, but the kid's not my cup of tea'?"

"The pastor won't talk about it," Fred added. "I know he made an overture, and they rebuffed him, pretty soundly, I'm told, in a private meeting of church elders."

“Hmmm, perhaps another chink in Boasteen’s armor? Did members of the Hayseed Haven church already know about the reverend's other life? Or is there something else? But you’re right, I need to see if someone there will share the answers.”

Fred called Alex to meet us at the diner to help plan our next move. The three of us were just taking our seats when Alex’s Range Rover turned into the parking lot.

I don’t think any of us felt the least guilty about breaking our promises to Boasteen as we brought Alex up to speed.

After Fred had set the stage and Paul had cracked wise about me comparing him to Alex, I summarized my interview with the pastor.

Alex pondered what I’d told him.

“We know now that Boasteen doesn’t have an honest bone in his body. I think that extends to what he said about feeling the call back to the ministry as Jerry Cochran.

“I spent forty years in software engineering, the last twenty in cybersecurity. You know about POF, right? Plenty of Fish, the free dating site?”

Paul nodded, offering what he understood.

“Match.com uses it to bait lonely hearts into signing up for their other, way over-priced, products and brands; they keep POF’s quality low, so their expensive offerings seem better by comparison.”

“Yup, that’s pretty much it. Scammers have overrun POF since day one. That makes it an excellent barometer for judging what the bad guys are doing and why.

“Did you know Arkansas is far and away the favorite state for POF’s con artists?”

Alex’s words didn’t ring true to me.

“That doesn’t seem right; this state is fairly poor overall. I’d guess there’s a lot more money to be had elsewhere.”

“You’re not thinking like a scammer, Debra Ann. Here you have the worst school systems in the country, probably the world. Lots of

inbreeding in these smaller communities. The inhabitants are older than in other states.

“But here’s the kicker - almost anyone here who ever worked for a decent-sized company has a 401K. Some even have pension accounts. And with Walmart’s headquarters right there in Bentonville, every single one of those accounts has a hefty share of Walmart stock. That means there’s a ton of money here controlled by people who don’t have a clue what they’re doing; some don’t even know what they’ve got.

“Lack of awareness affects all kinds of things in life. To anyone wanting a quick score or willing to put the effort into a long con, our citizens are ready and willing targets. Florida comes in a distant second - also lots of single retirees with fat retirement accounts, though better educated on average.

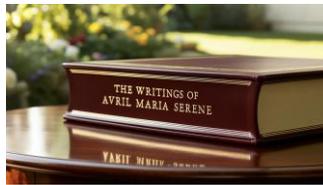
“So that gives you an independent third-party clue how tempting our citizens are to scammers.

“I think the drive Boasteen claimed he had to return to shepherding a flock was because he saw it as much easier to fleece them than to do whatever he was doing. Much less risk of answering to law enforcement, I’m sure.”

“Makes perfect sense,” I agreed, “given what you’ve told us about the state’s residents as scam targets. Fits the facts we now know much better than anything the pastor had to say on the subject.”

“The conversation with Boasteen was one definitely worth having, but it doesn’t bring us any closer to knowing who hurt Innocence Grace or Liberty Belle. I want to see if there’s anything more the ex knows, but she’s out of the state, so I doubt she’s aware of recent events here.

“When I talked to her last, she didn’t even know Boasteen’s real name.”





CHAPTER 36

The next morning fell on a Sunday. Paul and I talked about whether we should attend one of the local churches for morning services, but decided against it. We didn't want anyone to take our presence in the pew as a transparent attempt to ingratiate ourselves with the locals.

Instead, we slept in until we overcame the two-hour time difference between here and San Diego; neither of us wanted to wake anyone too early. Once the time of day was reasonable on the West Coast, Paul caught up with the cases his SDPD forensics co-workers were investigating. Meanwhile, Doug Stein and I exchanged notes about our newsgathering startup.

My big plans for our day in Nero's Fiddle included mingling with the Camp Menoposo members in the early afternoon once church services were over. I'd have to fly solo - I doubted the group would accept Paul, so he'd bide his time waiting in the car.



Though I can't say any of the members were especially rude, I didn't get the friendly welcome I was aiming for. The message was as clear as if they'd shouted it out loud: I was the meddling outsider.

Still, I engaged a few of the ladies in conversation, and I overheard enough to get the general flavor of the group.

Alex Hamilton was, in some ways, the misogynist from hell. I'd never see eye to eye with him about most of his opinions, certainly as they applied to older women. He'd openly expressed his concerns about Kamp Karen, and I wasn't sure how much his biases had influenced his thoughts. While I couldn't say - yet - whether I agreed or disagreed with any of his viewpoints, I could see why he was wary after I'd talked with a few of the women.

It seemed the dislike between Alex and Camp Menoposo's members was mutual. Discussions I couldn't help overhearing seemed directed specifically at me. One such snippet proclaimed they were going to stage an intervention with Alex. If they determined he really was Satan or the rapist, they had an answer. A parishioner had a burly older son who enjoyed torturing small animals and needed to do penance. The boy could earn his path to atonement by punishing the false prophet.

Irrespective of how they felt about Alex and what they wanted to do to him, I couldn't shake the feeling that the church had weaponized these women. Their enthusiastic, in-lockstep support for everything Pastor Boasteen represented, advocated, and held out as the appropriate moral behavior for all residents of the community didn't seem organic. The reverend's message included strong political

overtones, which were even more worrying given his well-organized, almost military, support among Kamp Karen members.

After I'd gathered what information I could, Paul and I spent the rest of what had become a pleasant, though cool, day walking the town square for some exercise. We'd had most of our previous interactions with residents at the diner, where our reception hadn't always been enthusiastic. But as we wandered through the small shops and took in the window displays, it surprised me how friendly, even inviting, the locals could be. Most knew who we were and why we were here, many offering words of encouragement and support. I sensed that some of them trusted us, and a few opened up, offering deeper thoughts and opinions.

Lydia Darragh, the bubbly middle-aged woman at the Hallmark shop, proved not only well-informed but talkative.

She pointed the finger straight at Stephen Miller, though her reasoning was a little muddy.

"I'm telling you, that guy is weird enough anyway. But I know what set him off. You know Musky Mellons had a big thing for him, right?"

Paul and I both nodded.

"God only knows why. But everyone believes she dug up something about him, tried to hold it over his head to keep their fling going. Nobody's sure what she has on him. Lots of speculation - some say finances, others think fathering and abusing bastard children. They agree whatever it was didn't work, and Miller told her to go to hell. Still, he shuts up like a clam whenever you mention her name around him.

"But that's where I'd put my money if I were going to place a bet."

Mrs. Darragh's ideas were interesting, and she might have sold me had I not already researched my personal suspicions about Stephen Miller. At the time of Innocence Grace's rape, Miller was actively pounding the streets to get funding for his new school. Well-known in

the community, enough people disliked him that his was the first DNA sample the Sheriff's deputies collected.

Those swabs didn't match what the Narcissus County Coroner later found on the pen Innocence Grace used to stab her assailant. Given the way Narcissus County officials worked, you couldn't trust that they submitted the right samples to the state lab. Still, several witnesses attested to Miller's whereabouts and what he was doing, leading to his elimination as a suspect.

Boasteen and Miller provided alibis for each other as to their locations on the night of Liberty Belle's murder, keeping secret exactly what they were doing, claiming the protection of religious privilege. The unlikely pairing and hidden purpose raised eyebrows, but there was no factual basis for challenging their statements.

Still, Miller could have been responsible for the other rapes and, if he and the pastor were lying, Liberty Belle's homicide. But my gut instincts and what I'd been hearing around town told me Miller's predilections ran to little boys. Not a comforting thought, but one that pushed Miller to the bottom of my list of potential candidates for Belle's killer.

I'd already convinced myself that, as scummy as Miller was, he was likely not Innocence Grace's rapist, Mrs. Darragh's thoughts notwithstanding.

Though the day had been productive, it ended with me feeling a bit frustrated - I was no closer to identifying who'd hurt Fred's girls. Still, I'd been doing this long enough to realize the value of the little clues I was gathering.



The first task I'd assigned myself the following morning was to call Michelle, Joel Boasteen's ex, to see whether he'd paid his past-due child support.

What she told me was, in part, good news; the rest was disappointing. Yes, she'd gotten a check from Boasteen that covered not only the amount he'd been in arrears plus interest, but an additional one thousand dollars; the enclosed note did not explain the overage.

The bad news was that she'd lost any interest in telling me more about her former life with him; while she wanted to do the right thing, she had to consider what was best for her kids.

The pastor had paid what he owed only because I'd busted him for his transgressions. It was doubtful Boasteen had discovered any new regard for the welfare of the progeny he'd abandoned.

I was pretty sure his only motivation for paying up was to keep his ex-wife quiet about his past - more hush money than child support.



The room phone rang just as I set the receiver back in its cradle. I hoped it might be Michelle again, perhaps reconsidering her refusal to say anything negative about the reverend.

Instead, the voice I heard was Betsy Freeman's. She sounded tired, and her message was terse.

"They've beaten Alex up, and it's bad. He's in terrible shape."

"Oh, my God!" I exclaimed. Placing my hand over the mouthpiece, I called out to Paul, who was washing his hands in the bathroom. "They got Alex!"

Returning to Betsy, I had a thousand questions swirling in my head. "Where *is* Alex? What can we do to help him?"

"We're here with John at the hospital. Alex is in surgery, and they're not sure he'll make it. He's lost a lot of blood - they're having trouble stopping the internal bleeding."

"When did this happen? Do they know who hurt him?"

"Mr. Jefferson and his sons found him in the alley behind the Ben Franklin store two hours ago. I had to let Alex's children and his ex-

wife know, or I'd have called you sooner. Thomas, the Jeffersons's oldest, saw a Sheriff's deputy's car in the alley earlier. They're always taking girls back there during their shifts to drink and whatever, so he didn't think that much of it. When Thomas went to take out the trash later, he found Alex behind the dumpster."

"Thank God *someone* found him. We'll come and wait with you until he's out of surgery."

"I'm sorry, Debra Ann, but they won't let you. The staff here is allowing only immediate family and friends they recognize. If DeRump or his deputies did this, the hospital can't trust them to keep Alex safe, so the only way to protect him is to screen visitors."

"Oh, Betsy, I'm so sorry. Is there anyone else who can be with you?"

"Fred is on his way, and Pastor Boasteen said he'd be here as soon as he could."

With Alex in dire straits, Boasteen seemed an odd choice as chaplain, given that the two men were seriously on the outs.

"You asked for him?"

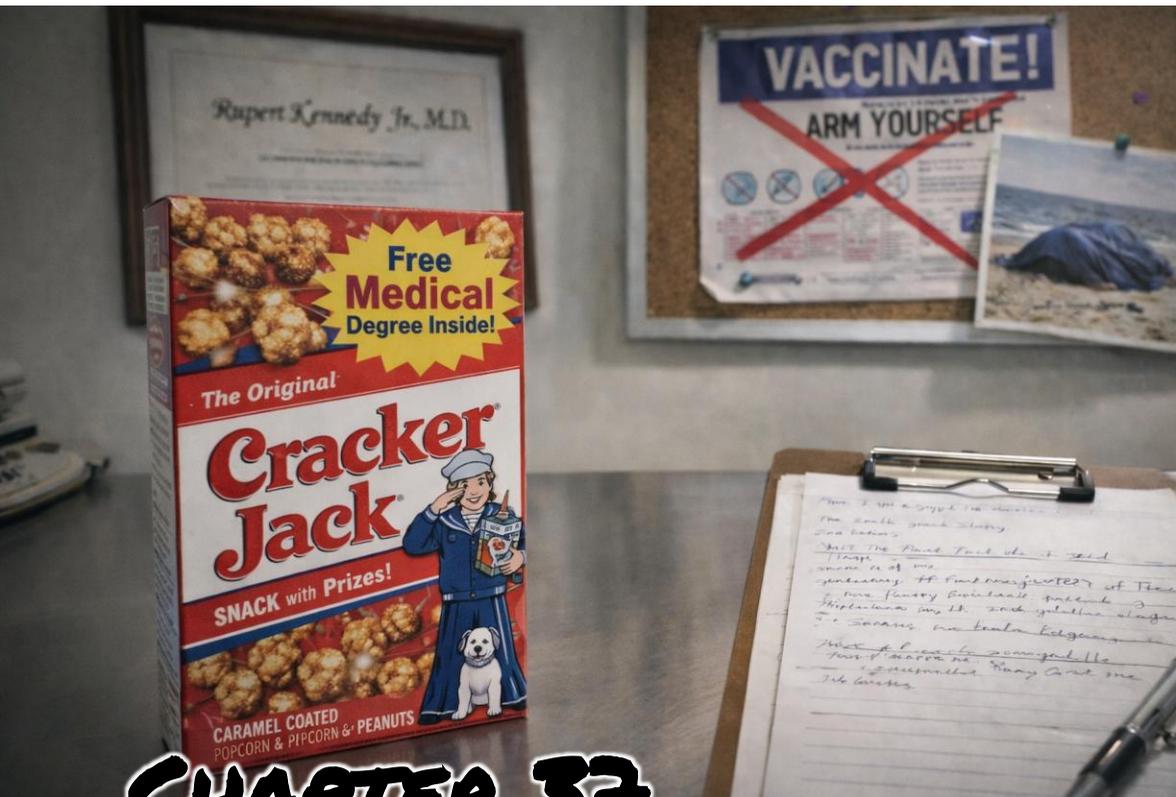
"No, the reverend called the hospital, said he heard what happened, and wanted to do what he could to make amends."

Feeling useless, all I could do was offer our support and make sure Betsy had our cell numbers.

"Please let us know if there is anything we can do to help."

"Thanks, Debra Ann. I'll let you know as soon as I learn anything new.

"I just hope it'll be Alex telling me himself."



CHAPTER 37

After I'd filled Paul in, and we'd taken a few moments to absorb the full impact of Alex's situation, we speculated about what led to the assault.

"Was Alex overheard by someone at the diner?"

Somebody who took offense and used their connections in the community to exact revenge?"

Paul knitted his brows in concentration.

"Something like that, I'm sure. I doubt that was the first time Alex's rant riled up a listener; you have to wonder what was so different about his latest riff that they set his attackers off. My take is that free speech doesn't work like it's supposed to in places like this."

I tried to assess the immediate damage to our investigation, but that depended on whether Alex would pull through. Paul and I agreed it would be best to keep our minds busy until we heard more about Alex's condition.

"Fred set us up to see the Port Lybral County Coroner, a Dr. Fouci, to review Liberty Belle's autopsy report."

Paul seemed confused.

"Why the coroner for Port Lybral County?"

I hurried through my notes.

"They just elected a new guy in Narcissus County; somebody Trance hand-picked, not trustworthy. I think Fred said his name was Rupert Kennedy, Jr., or something like that. Fred says the man got brain-eating worms from barbecuing a dead bear someone had run over.

"The parasites got sick from ingesting his gray matter and died, but not before they spawned progeny to take up the fight. Kennedy's brain case gradually got filled up with the carcasses of all those dead creatures.

"It gets worse. This mental midget is an anti-vaxxer, to boot... wrong end of the IQ bell curve for a medical professional."

Paul sighed.

"I guess the only positive takeaway is that not all stupidity is bad - we need to give a warm shout out to those disease spreaders who refuse to vaccinate. Their demise removes some of the pollution from the human gene pool for future generations. That will improve the average intelligence of the survivors across the board. Natural selection at its finest."

I had to snicker at that.

"We can only hope.

"Fred says Kennedy once tried to get oral sex from the severed head of a dolphin he found on the beach. Too many people were watching, so he loaded the carcass onto the top of his truck and took it to his downstairs bedroom, where he'd have more privacy."

Paul gave me a wry smile as he shook his head.

"I'll never for the life of me understand why these counties would want to elect their coroners."

Nodding my agreement, I got back to planning our day.

"Fred will want to stay with Alex, but the two of us should keep the appointment with Dr. Fouci. Hopefully, if we explain what happened, he'll help us even without Fred present.

"First, I need to go to the front office and pay for another week here - come with?"

"Of course, as soon as I find my other shoe."



A slender woman with graying hair, likely in her mid-50s, wearing jeans and a blue sweater, was tending the sign-in counter. She was working on an oversized paper accounts ledger and looked up as we walked in.

The spray of fresh flowers in a small vase on her desk behind the counter piqued my curiosity

"Where in the world did you find fresh flowers this time of year?"

"Oh, a lady from church works at the floral shop on the square," she explained as she looked up with a smile. "Brought me those for my birthday. I didn't have the heart to tell her it wouldn't be until next week.

"You're the reporter from San Diego, right? Alex Hamilton's friend?"

"Yes," I answered. "Paul and I came to see if we could help Fred Freeman find out what happened to his youngest girl. I'd been here once before, in 2017, to write Innocence Grace's story."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Dolly - Dolly Madison. My husband, James, and I used to own this place."

"Used to?"

“My dad built this motel, and our family ran it for thirty years. About a dozen years ago, Judge Trance began buying up all the other motels. When we wouldn’t accept his lowball offer, he cut the rates for the ones he’d bought in half, starved us out; we had to sell. Going through all of that killed James; he had a heart attack and passed a month after we signed the papers.”

I nodded in sympathy as I pulled my credit card from my purse.

“We’ve been hearing a lot about how Trance operates.”

Dolly shrugged her shoulders, a half-smile on her face, her eyes still sad.

“Worse things have happened around here. Fred and Alex are good friends of mine. Their situation was sad enough the way Fred’s girls went, and it’s terrible what the Sheriff’s deputies did to Alex. And so close to Christmas, too. Have you heard if he’s going to be okay?”

“We just spoke to Betsy, and he’s still in surgery. You could tell she’s worried, said he was in awful shape when they found him.”

Dolly’s face showed genuine concern before she let out a “But what can you do?” sigh.

“We’ll need to stay at least another week,” I said.

“We’re glad to have you, but we’ll need to add your gentleman friend to the room rent agreement.”

I knew immediately what had happened.

“Oh, I’m sorry. My cousin arranged for the room, and I didn’t realize he hadn’t mentioned my husband.”

Removing his driver’s license from his wallet, Paul stepped up to the counter.

“Hi, Dolly, I’m Paul Castro,” he said, handing her the license.

“Debra Ann uses her maiden name professionally, so we won’t confuse fans of her writing.”

Paul looked at me with a grin.

“Your middle name is ‘Revere’?” Dolly asked, scribbling in her registration book.

“Yes, Paul Revere Castro.”

Seeing her quizzical expression, Paul explained.

"My parents were from Puerto Rico. It was a different time, back when the island's residents could still be very proud to be Americans. So, they named me after their favorite patriot hero."

Dolly smiled briefly, still writing, before her expression turned solemn. She raised her eyes to meet mine.

"You know that Kamp Karen did this to Alex, right?"

Caught off guard, I could only ask, "Are you saying that a bunch of little old ladies beat up Alex?"

"No, I mean, they've been working the phones for two days, spreading rumors about him. How he disrespected the pastor in public, and that he's been going around trash-talking the whole county. They said he came back from California just to rape all our young girls because he thought it would be harder to catch him in Nero's Fiddle."

That explained a lot.

"Jesus! No wonder they tried to kill him. But Alex has daughters of his own, and surely people know he wasn't even here at the time of Innocence Grace's rape."

"You'd think. Just so you know - and please, I don't think she wants everybody in town hearing this - Alex was sleeping over at my girlfriend's apartment when they murdered Liberty Belle.

"Most of us here like Alex, even respect him; he's an honest man. But he *does* run his mouth a lot. It only takes one hater holding a grudge who's looking for an excuse, and if they're loyal to that asshole Judge...."

Her remark struck a nerve with me.

His beating was yet more suffering caused by Alex's own words. It added to my sense of him as a tragic figure. I'd already reached a point where I'd started seeing his wisecracks as more sad than anything else.

Feisty myself, I could certainly relate to where Alex was coming from when he felt compelled to express his thoughts and feelings, even in the face of real danger to himself.

But it had become clear to me he had few other choices for dealing with anything. Powerless, he was stuck in a world he found so bleak that there was nothing else he could do but mouth off.

For reasons that I found hard to explain, the tragedy of Robin Williams' suicide came to mind. If you want to know what emotional pain looks like, search behind the eyes of a smartass.



Between Google Maps' driving instructions to the Port Lybral County Coroner's office on Paul's phone, we tried to fit the new puzzle piece into what we already had.

My thoughts were coalescing around the idea that one of our players was far more involved in all of this than I'd first thought.

"We know that the Camp Menoposo women are loyal to Boasteen and take their marching orders from him. It's hard for me to believe they would do something like this on their own initiative without clearing it with the pastor first."

"So, you're saying apologizing to Alex was a bridge too far for Boasteen in the feud between them, so he sicced Kamp Karen on them? Not a very Christian thing to do."

"True, but pretty effective if he wanted to stir a reaction that would permanently shut Alex up before news of the reverend's misdeeds leaked out. I don't think we can ignore the possibility."

"What was it that Alex said? Something like 'Kamp Karen can be dangerous once they have you in their sights?'"

I nodded.

"Too bad he didn't heed his own warning...."



CHAPTER 38

When we crossed from Narcissus County into the neighboring province, the differences between the two were even more apparent than I'd remembered from eight years ago.

On the drive over, I explained to Paul the dissimilarities in their politics and that there was genuine hatred between the counties. During my earlier visit, I'd found that those intense feelings were laser-focused on who Trance and DeRump were and what they represented, rather than dislike between the citizens themselves.

Narcissus County residents regularly traveled to Port Lybral County to exercise their freedom of speech, read unfettered news from

around the world, and find better-quality products and services of all kinds, including medical care, education, and jobs. Port Lybral County also offered culture and entertainment: symphony, live theater, museums, excellent libraries, the planetarium and aquarium, even semi-professional baseball and basketball teams.

However, there was little reason for those living in Port Lybral County to make the trip to their eastern neighbor, other than to deliver goods and, occasionally, to provide critical needs such as medical care or legal help.

While things cost a little more in Port Lybral County, its residents' median income was more than double that in Narcissus County. Because of the state's weak political support for modern education, none of Arkansas's public schools could compete with most others nationwide. Still, the schooling available in Port Lybral for grades K-12 was stellar compared to that in the poorer county.

Life was better here, and it reflected in the buildings' age and architecture, the cleanliness of the streets and public areas, and the activity we could see as we drove past.



Dr. Tony Fouci was a slender, kindly-appearing older man in his 70s with a full head of closely trimmed gray hair. He greeted us pleasantly as we introduced ourselves. The doctor seemed sympathetic as I explained our relationship to Fred Freeman and why he wouldn't be joining us today.

The coroner was also keenly aware of the cases surrounding Fred's daughters and the potential involvement of prominent Narcissus County officials and citizens. Dr. Fouci explained that before our arrival, he and Fred had discussed the situation at length; clearly, the two men had a close relationship.

As the coroner walked us through the published autopsy reports, he couldn't add anything factual to what Fred had already told

and shown us. He did, however, offer a scathing opinion of the quality and completeness of the work done on Liberty Belle's corpse.

"Tell Fred I'm confident that performing a proper autopsy would find new clues to her killer. But passing time makes things more difficult. The sooner I can get a look, the better.

"If you can get me her body, I'll do a thorough autopsy, and I won't ask how you came by the remains."

It took a moment to register with me what Dr. Fouci was suggesting - that we steal Liberty Belle's corpse from the Narcissus County Coroner's office. Or worse, *that we rob a grave*. And his delivery was so matter-of-fact that I had to believe he'd already discussed it with Fred.

Were Paul and I being roped into something already planned?

That idea was revolting enough in its own right that I had to fight a wave of nausea.

But that a respected medical professional and elected official would risk his standing and career to help us break the law was beyond the pale. I suddenly realized how truly dedicated the man in front of us was to his calling - he hadn't run for office to win an election and a title. He was there to serve the public in any way he could, an idea so quaint and old-school these days that it caught me flat-footed.

"The problem I'd have with finding additional evidence is not having a legitimate chain of custody. That issue goes away, of course, if the body comes to our office as a new case - a Jane Doe discovered by residents local to Port Lybral County."

Dr. Fouci explained that the legalities of what he was proposing were iffy at best. If caught, he'd lose his job and maybe his medical license. Anyone involved in spiriting the girl's remains out of Nero's Fiddle could face serious prison time.

But with no love lost between Port Lybral and Narcissus counties, he'd push the corners of the envelope in the name of organic justice for Liberty Belle.

He knew of two trustworthy Port Lybral County residents he could count on to 'discover' the corpse once it was inside the county's boundaries.

"For all the world would know, I'd be investigating an unidentified local fatality. That would allow me to properly and officially log any homicide evidence I found, rendering it into the permanent record. Irrespective of how a later investigation of the body's relocation might turn out, the murder would have to be investigated formally, and with the publicity all this would generate, under bright lights.

"If you recover her post-burial, bring me the entire casket if you can."

The coroner turned and leaned over to open a cupboard behind him. He returned with a thick, dark, zippered bag, folded so it was roughly a foot square, and handed it to Paul. Its surface had a texture similar to that of Tyvek shipping bags, though the material was heavier.

"Otherwise, here's one of the cadaver pouches that Narcissus County uses. Finding the girl's corpse wrapped in one of their body bags would give me cover to check with them to see if they have a missing deceased *after* I've done my full workup, written my reports, and turned them into the state."

Paul seemed to take the situation in stride, and I realized that he and Dr. Fouci were cut from the same cloth - both had fully committed to the service they'd sworn to. That understanding brought me a flush of intense pride, even as the task ahead scared me to death.

"Paul, I'm trusting your forensic expertise that you'll know what to do to preserve her remains as best you can.

"Leave her alongside this building. There's a pretty sizable gap between the brick veneer and that row of hedges in front of the parking lot. When you're ready to do this, I'll make sure the cameras and lighting on that side aren't working, and I'll park our office van so that it'll block prying eyes. Pack as much ice around her as you can before you take off.

“To help with that, before you retrieve the remains, call this number. Ask whoever answers to tell Gabriel you’re ready to pick up the ice now. Nothing more. Then go see him down at the Country Inn Diner out by the highway. Google it. Pull in and go around to the back behind the pair of green dumpsters. He’ll be waiting for you. He’s a friend of mine, and I’ll get him to fix you up with plenty of bagged ice, so no one will spot you anywhere in Narcissus County trying to buy some.”

After we’d said our goodbyes and expressed our appreciation for the coroner’s willing help, Paul and I were silent as we listened to the GPS directions on the way home. My first reaction to hearing we’d be digging up a grave was horror; the second was that we’d been manipulated. I used the quiet time to change my opinion about everything that had transpired during our conversation with the coroner.

Fred had been understandably desperate for the resources needed from outside Narcissus County to solve the crimes that had killed both his daughters. I couldn’t fault him for that - it was, after all, the very reason Paul and I were here.

And I was sympathetic to Fred’s dilemma; he needed his youngest daughter’s body autopsied by somebody who gave a damn and knew what they were doing. The longer that took, the worse the chances of finding fresh evidence. None of that was going to happen through Narcissus County’s officialdom or channels.

The thought of digging up his daughter’s body had to be incredibly painful for Fred. Still, he didn’t have many options for advancing the investigation.

Once he’d made that decision, he faced another hurdle: if Narcissus County residents got caught robbing the grave in defiance of the entire power structure overseen by Trance, their lives, families, and homes would be subject to unimaginable reprisals.

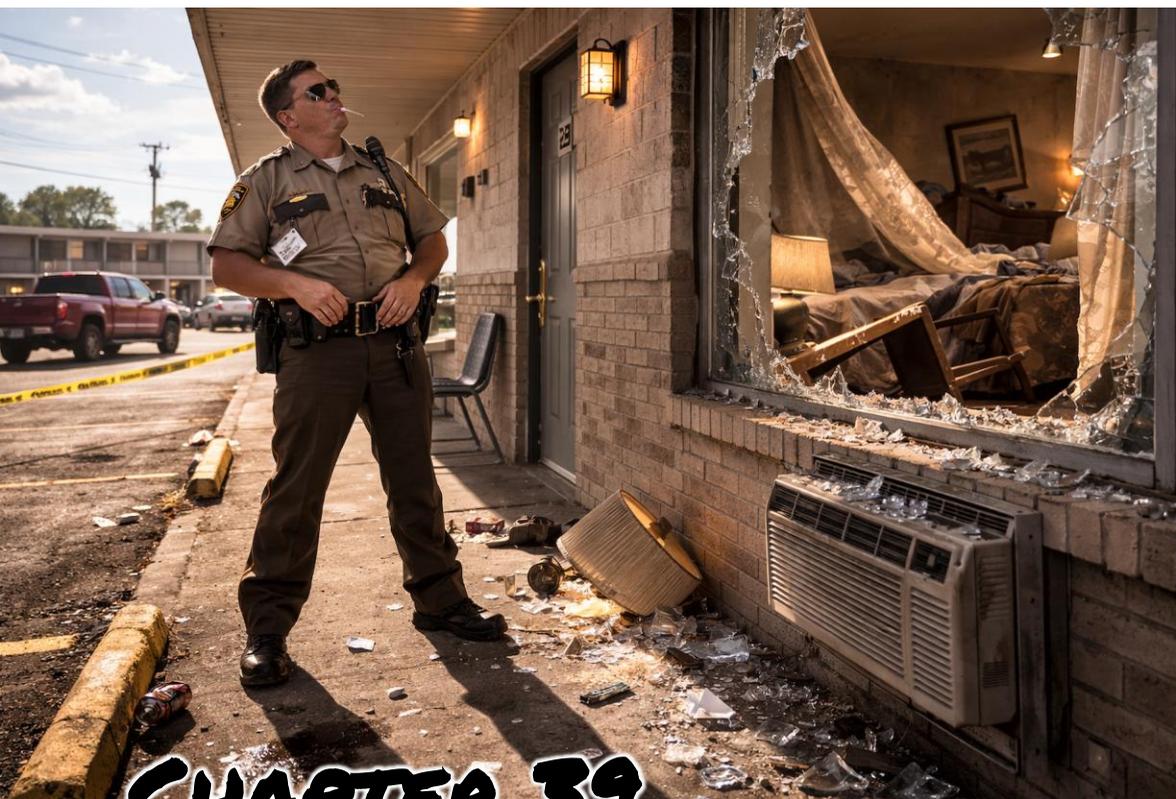
However, my readership as a journalist was national. Paul’s reputation and connections as a forensics specialist transcended

geographic and political boundaries; our involvement would draw the attention Fred's daughters needed. More importantly, attention that Narcissus County officials would want to avoid.

Had the Sheriff's deputies not beaten Alex, Fred would have been with us on the ride to see the coroner, and I assume he would have filled us in as we drove. Paul and I would at least have had a voice in what would transpire, though I doubt the outcome would have been any different.

Though terrified at the prospect of robbing remains from a grave in the deepest dark of night, or even worse, getting caught, I could see no other option.

The grim expression that had been on Paul's face since we left the coroner's office told me he was way ahead of me in reaching the same conclusion.



CHAPTER 39

We'd been in the motel room for about an hour after grabbing some takeout on the drive back from Port Lybral County. I called Fred on my cell to check on Alex, and we were planning our next move. The room phone began ringing, and Paul answered.

"Thanks for the warning," Paul said tersely. The receiver rattled as he quickly dropped it into its cradle.

"The redcaps are coming! We need to take cover."

Paul's tone was even and controlled, but the urgency in his voice came through loud and clear.

He grabbed my coat off the back of the chair and tossed it at me, yanking his off the hanger in the closet. After pulling me down by the shoulders so that we were squatting beside the bed frame, he flipped the mattress and box springs onto their sides, shoving them against our front window.

“Stay down! That was the desk clerk. Her friend tends bar at the country-western place. She called to warn Dolly that a bunch of drunk MAGA rednecks in an open pickup are coming here. They’re shooting shotguns and rifles into the air, out to get ‘those fucking Antifa foreigners.’ Dolly and her friend say they mean us.”

Paul pulled the two nightstands and the dresser in behind the upended mattress. Turning the courtesy table and chairs on their sides, he added another layer to the barricade.

We could hear a horn blaring in the distance, along with male voices yelling and screaming as they approached.

Paul quickly duck-walked to the corner where we’d kept our checked bags. He unzipped his, pulling out his department-issued Glock and two clips.

Returning to my side, we held each other tightly. Paul positioned himself between me and our hastily built defenses, both of us hunched over, our backs to our barricade, our heads tucked.

The sudden squealing of tire rubber made my heart leap into my throat.

The roar of an engine resonated through our little room.

Then, the loud *kuh-WHUMP!* of a pickup’s suspension bottoming out a few feet from us.

Suddenly, an explosion of gunfire and shattered window glass.

I screamed, my entire body jumping in place, my heart pounding, a jackhammer trying to escape my chest.

Tiny shards of glass sparkled in the light from the fixture above, showering down upon us.

Paul and I tightened our grip on one another as another spray of gunfire peppered the wall behind us with bullet holes and the distinctive pattern of buckshot.

A round caught the porcelain base of a table lamp Paul had set on the floor; its implosion added to the chaos, noise, and flying debris.

Then, off to our left, an enormous boom - maybe a shotgun? - but this one seemed like it was going away from us.

Was someone returning fire?

We could hear the pickup's motor rev, its tires squealing again.

It wheeled around at the end of the parking lot, making its escape the way it came.

Another shotgun blast hit our front door's metal facing.

Again, the bottoming out of the truck over the speed bump.

Almost simultaneously, two big booms came from our left, and immediately, a loud shriek of pain, a male voice cursing.

The sound of spinning rubber on asphalt was further away now, as if the vehicle had returned to the street.

Then, nothing... an eerie silence.

A gust of frigid wind through the broken window blew back the torn curtain. We shivered, still hugging one another.

After a few minutes had passed, and with the immediate danger apparently over, Paul held me away from him at arm's length, looking me over for signs of injury.

"Are you hurting anywhere?"

"I'm fine, I think; are you okay?"

"I'm good."

Paul crawled on his knees to peer over our ramshackle barricade, then returned quickly to my side.

"Let's stay down in case they come back."

Moments later, we heard a tap-tap-tap from the knocker on our front door.

"Debra Ann, Paul, are you alright? It's Dolly. They're gone."

Paul rose, then struggled to open the door, warped by the last load of buckshot.

As he yanked it open with both hands on the knob, the smells of spent gunpowder, burned engine oil, and smoking tires wafted into the room. Dolly was standing in the doorway, her face worried. She had a twelve-gauge shotgun broken open across her lap, tiny wisps of white smoke curling from the breech and the end of the barrel.

I pulled myself up as quickly as I could, stumbling over a chair leg to hug both Dolly and Paul as they stood together, tears running down my cheeks.

“Oh, Dolly, thank you so much for warning us! Was that you firing back at them?”

“Yeah, I winged one of them pretty good,” Dolly said with a sly grin as she patted the side of the shotgun’s double barrels. “Three loads of rock salt and old fishhooks. Them turning around was a dumb move, gave me time to reload.

“I made it pretty easy to identify the truck, and at least one of them’s gonna show up at a hospital. They’ll have some explaining to do while they’re getting their stitches, that’s for sure.

“I hate to see you go, but you’ll want to take up residence somewhere in Port Lybral County. Means you’ll have to burn a little more gas, but you’ll be safer.”

Dolly tapped the side of her 12-gauge as she reflected.

“I know the boys who did this - their bulbs burn pretty dim, but they’re not the kind to pull this crap. For things to have gone this far, someone had to egg ‘em on or give ‘em good reason. I called 911, but don’t expect deputies to show up anytime soon. You’ve gotten on the wrong side of some powerful people in this county, and that means the Sheriff’s tied up in this somehow.”



We took a few moments to catch our breath once we realized everyone seemed to be okay despite the terror and gunplay. Paul and Dolly were especially concerned that Thomas Ethan was still safe and snug in my tummy. I assured Dolly we'd see the doctor as soon as we had secure accommodations.

Paul stepped out to check that the attack hadn't disabled Liberty Belle's Trailblazer as I launched an internet search for motels outside Narcissus County.

With our vehicle still roadworthy, he and I began packing our things hurriedly. I took frequent breaks to call the motels with ads that sounded promising. It didn't take long to find a decent room in Petergeorge, safely across the Port Lybral County line.

Just as Dolly had predicted, no one from the Sheriff's Department appeared until we were ready to leave, nearly an hour after the shootings.

A single deputy in sunglasses, obviously new to the badge and the department, strutted toward us with an over-the-top "Hey, look at me!" swagger as Paul and I were packing. Hitching up his pants by his belt as he spat a wad of chewing gum onto the sidewalk, he handed me a business card with his name written in pencil over the scratched-out name of another officer.

"You two renting by the hour here?" the deputy asked in a thick Russian accent as he peered over his reflective Ray-Bans.

Chalking up the implication of prostitution to the man's obvious inexperience, I opened my coat to reveal my tummy. Paul patiently explained that we were married, visiting from out of town, and had lived at the motel for more than a week.

The deputy harrumphed as he pulled the cellophane wrapper off a toothpick.

"Well, there's no way to know in a place like this unless you ask."

He nodded at my stomach.

"Some people have kinky tastes, know what I mean?"

As Paul closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, I whispered in his ear.

“Think Andy lets him carry a bullet in his shirt pocket?”

The Barney Fife reference drew a wry smile from Paul, the first change in his expression since he’d pulled me down alongside the bed.

A voice crackled over the officer’s shoulder radio, identifying itself as the Sheriff’s and asking the deputy to report in.

Twisting slightly away from us as he keyed the mike, the officer responded, “We’ve got a married couple, new to town. It seems they’ve attracted some unwanted attention, maybe a robbery attempt. The shooters aimed high. Most people in a cheap motel aren’t standing up, if you get my meaning, so it doesn’t look like anyone intended any serious harm.”

“Well, you tell the wife to take care,” the voice on the other end replied. “Wouldn’t want any harm coming to that baby.”

Paul’s eyes narrowed as he looked at me, lips tightly creased. I whispered again.

“That’s awfully fishy. DeRump’s never met us; the deputy didn’t mention to him our names, or that I was pregnant before the Sheriff brought up the baby. And how do you rob anyone doing a drive-by?”

“Small town,” Paul responded quietly. “News gets around pretty quickly. Obviously, someone set us up with the Sheriff’s blessing. I doubt we’ll get any more warnings, and for your sake and Thomas Ethan’s, we need to lower the stress levels. Let’s consider the message delivered: we’re not wanted or safe here. Time to get to friendlier digs.”

A not-so-subtle reminder that Trance and DeRump pulled the strings in Narcissus County, it seemed the cadet was the Sheriff’s way of notifying us that our concerns wouldn’t be getting any traction in his department.

“Paul, how does that saying from *The Godfather* go? ‘Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer?’ If the Sheriff is this concerned about what we’re doing, you’d think he’d want us where he could monitor our comings and goings... *without* telling us he was watching.

Alex may be right about fear trumping everything here - even common sense."

It didn't take DeRump long to reinforce the idea that nuance wasn't his style. I was punching the start button from the Trailblazer's driver's seat as Paul closed the rear driver's side door on the last of our belongings.

The Sheriff's black Escalade pulled into the empty slot next to us. Not bothering to get out, DeRump rolled down his passenger window. As Paul crossed behind our SUV and climbed into the Trailblazer's passenger seat, I cranked down my window.

"Unfortunate what happened here," our tormentor pronounced in a slow drawl. "You know, next time you go nosing around places strange to you, you might think about registering your intentions with local law enforcement first. Might have prevented this and kept your baby from any potential harm."

"Are you threatening a journalist and a fellow law enforcement professional, Sheriff?" I shot back. "I'd have thought losing four years' worth of paychecks would have been an education."

Angered by my comment, DeRump's warning was ominous, a more directed variation of a boast that Trance was fond of making.

"I could march you down Main Street in the middle of the day and put a bullet in both your backs. Nobody cares what two outsiders think; I'd still have the support of everyone in town. And I guarantee you my deputies would chase down anyone who objected and make their lives miserable 'til the end of time."

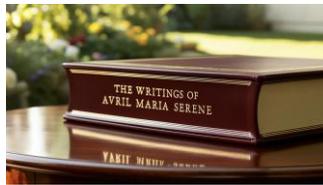
I wasn't about to be intimidated.

"Can I quote you on that, Sheriff?"

DeRump doubled down.

"We're all about the hunting here, Ms. Wynn. We have a million deer in Arkansas and maybe 10,000 hunting accidents a year - most never get reported.

"Sad truth is, once a corpse decomposes and the critters get to it, awfully hard to tell *what* might have caused the victim's demise."





CHAPTER 40

Once we'd settled into our new digs in Petergeorge, I called Betsy Freeman at the hospital to check on Alex. To Paul's and my relief, the news was good: Alex had made it through his surgeries and a rough night in the ICU. He was resting, albeit uncomfortably, in a regular room in the main ward under the watchful eyes of the staff. If things continued to go well, they'd be allowing a few vetted visitors the following day, and Betsy had made sure our names were on the list.

Although I didn't want to add to the family's concerns, they needed to know that whoever set Alex up was targeting others in his circle, and everyone needed to be wary. I'd hoped to speak to Fred, but

he'd already returned to his job at the feed store to make up his lost work hours.

I briefly described the drive-by at the motel and DeRump's insincere response. Betsy apologized profusely for her part in selecting our room, even as I tried to clarify that none of this was her fault.

"I'm sorry, my bad. When I booked the room for you, I knew the place wouldn't be much. The only thing available was one of Trance's dumps, but it was the nicest motel here in town. With the baby coming, I thought it would save you some walking if you were closer to the diner and City Hall. Given you're famous, I assumed the Judge and the Sheriff wouldn't step out of line."

"Betsy, there just isn't any way decent people can predict what the bad guys are going to do - they just don't think like you or I would."



THE FOLLOWING MORNING

I needed ideas for people I could talk to or leads I could check out; I didn't want to waste the time we had before hospital visiting hours began. I asked Paul if he'd go with me to the diner back in Nero's Fiddle - with some luck, maybe some of the breakfast customers would chat with us.

We caught the tail end of the morning rush, and the tips must have been good - our waitress was not only a people person, but we'd also caught her in a loquacious mood. She'd have made an impression if only for her name tag - hers proudly displayed her full moniker, "Mercy Otis Warren."

Mercy not only knew who we were and why we were in town, but she also had her own theory about who bore responsibility for the rapes and murders in the area. She volunteered the inside skinny on what had actually happened between Stephen Miller and Musky Mellons nearly a year ago.

According to Mercy, Mellons didn't give up her infatuation with Miller until she caught the commandant in flagrante delicto with a boy. The victim was one of Miller's younger male students at H.I.T.L.E.R. Rather than immediately turning Miller in for child sexual abuse, Mellons blackmailed him.

When Miller's finances became so dire that he could no longer pay, the boy's mother suddenly turned up at the Sheriff's office with the victim in tow. Mercy presumed Mellons prompted them to report Miller, but our waitress was clear that it was her opinion, rather than fact.

The Sheriff's deputies arrested Miller, but on the hush-hush. Pastor Boasteen negotiated Miller's release and an arrangement of some kind with the parents - none of the participants would talk about what they exchanged to smooth things over.

Mercy's revelations confirmed that Miller's pedophilia ran to boys, not girls. They also exposed Mellons as having unclean hands, making her an unreliable witness at best, something I filed away for future reference. Mercy's account also reinforced my suspicions that the pastor exerted a lot of influence in the town's affairs.

Her tables now down to just one, Mercy was in no hurry to leave us.

"Did you hear about the State Legislature passing term limits for county judges? Some say Port Lybral County lobbied for it; most people say it needed to be done. According to what they passed, this should be the Judge's last term.

"But I'm not so sure. He'd do anything to stay in office, I mean *anything*; he's batshit crazy.

"Last summer - I think it was July 13 - a gunman tried to shoot Trance from the roof of a metal shed. Had our corrupt Judge stood just two inches further to the left, he'd have been a goner. One of those 'in your dreams' things, I guess.

"The gossip says the sniper missed deliberately, and Trance staged the thing himself to gain sympathy ahead of the fall elections.

Nobody here would put a stunt like that past him. Either way, DeRump's deputies killed the shooter, so we'll never know. *Convenient, huh?*"

Interesting background, but I didn't see how that helped our present situation.

"But he *did* win re-election, so he'll remain in power for at least the rest of this term..."

Mercy spun her pencil in her hand.

"Yeah. They say lately Trance is getting senile, on some kind of revenge tour, out to take down anyone who ever did him wrong."

I exchanged glances with Paul.

"We've heard quite a few people say he's becoming paranoid, vindictive, and irrational."

"Yeah, he accused one of the nicest families here of drugging three of his hunting dogs and feeding their carcasses to the wildlife. That's nuts... They're from Mexico, always coming in to eat, and they bring us fresh tomatoes when it's cold like this."

"Do you think he can ignore the law and stay in power?"

"People have been saying that lately his brain's not working like it used to. He was never a rocket scientist anyway. Rich and conniving, maybe, but not sharp. I don't know if he can pull off another re-election. Doesn't matter; the Judge is telling everyone he's not quitting his job 'til they plant him in the cold, hard ground.

"I believe him. I just can't see the Judge giving up any power; I do think he'll tell our legislators to go screw themselves. They say the Sheriff promised to let Trance govern the county after he's no longer the Judge, and that DeRump will cooperate with Trance's wishes. I don't think the Judge is buying it for one minute..."

"I wrote the newspaper articles that led to the FDA and DEA investigations of Trance. Hard to believe the Judge could realistically defy the term limits and fend off those investigations simultaneously."

"Talk is that the Sheriff is trying to take advantage of all that - supposedly, he's offering to keep quiet about Trance's various illegal activities if the Judge steps down and supports DeRump as his

replacement. The implication being that if the Judge doesn't go along, the Sheriff will tell all he knows.

"Everybody's speculating about what's gonna happen next."

I was curious how the dynamic between the two men had changed.

"I heard that Trance kept control of things by throwing DeRump under the bus several years ago; got the Sheriff kicked out of office. With DeRump back, what's their relationship like now?"

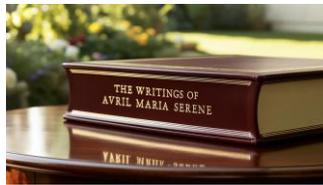
"They say the Judge is the county's most powerful prison escapee - not that he's clever enough to figure out how to get out of jail. But he *is* greasy enough to slip out of ever going in the first place. Still, he's always used the Sheriff to help with that, so who knows...."

"My friend Sheila is Trance's court reporter. She says DeRump resents the Judge not supporting him when the state kicked the Sheriff out of office. He's willing to forget all that if Trance retires before his term is up. If the Judge appoints DeRump the interim Judge to fill out the rest of his term, it'll make it easier for DeRump to win the position permanently the next time the voters go to the polls."

I doubted DeRump's proposition would go anywhere. I had to agree with Mercy - I couldn't see Trance trusting the Sheriff's ambitions, knowing the man's as evil as *he* is.

DeRump should be concerned that the Judge will see through the Sheriff's intention to dump Trance if DeRump becomes the new judge. Trance might still have enough left of whatever he's collected over the years against the Sheriff to once again destroy DeRump's career.

Or, perhaps even have DeRump killed.





CHAPTER 41

Most of the townspeople I spoke to afterward seemed surprised that Judge Trance blinked first in his standoff with DeRump. The consensus was that the Sheriff must have had more leverage than anyone thought.

Though no one knew exactly what was in the agreement between the two men, Trance stepped down just a year into his new term.

Something of a “be careful what you wish for” holiday gift for Narcissus County’s residents, the article announcing Trance’s early retirement appeared below the fold in the local paper on Christmas Day. Paul had Velcro’d a small Christmas wreath to the motel room’s

closet door, and we exchanged jewelry we'd bought online. We spent much of the morning and afternoon calling family, friends, and co-workers. Fred had invited Alex's son John, Paul, and me over for a traditional Christmas dinner. Though muted, togetherness with familiar faces was welcome under the circumstances.

Paul and I spent the week between Christmas and New Year's talking to the diner's patrons when we could. We'd work the phones and the internet afterward to verify what little information came our way.

We talked with Fred about trying to retrieve Liberty Belle's remains from the Narcissus County Coroner's office while it was closed for a week in celebration of the holidays, but decided it would be too dangerous. Even if we succeeded, morgue employees would miss the corpse immediately upon their return. The knee-jerk counterattack from DeRump would likely be vicious and, to the extent he still had some control, Trance could weigh in. And what we were about to do was horrific enough; committing such an act so close to Christmas felt too much like we'd be flipping the middle finger at fate.

We hoped that if we were careful, the theft of the body after burial would go unnoticed, assuming we could keep the removal from being obvious.

Though Trance refused to appoint DeRump as the interim Judge - we presumed out of spite - he agreed to expedite filling the empty seat. On January 3, Narcissus County held the special election required by state law, though within mere days of Trance's surrender of power. DeRump ran his campaign for Judge on the promise that he would be a "dictator" over the kinds of criminals Trance had let slide. The clear implication was that the former Judge had kept DeRump's deputies from putting offenders behind bars.

After his victory, DeRump wasted no time setting himself up in Trance's place as Judge. The rampant opinion on the street was that the new Judge's quick ascension to the throne seemed suspicious. I caught wind of a wild rumor that Trance gave up possession of the rape kit he'd

held onto, proving DeRump was the assailant of Fred's youngest. Now, Trance was experiencing buyer's remorse about giving up his position, or so the gossip went, and was about to retaliate by releasing other evidence he had against DeRump to the public.

If the new Judge got that memo, he didn't seem concerned. In a move that reminded disappointed voters of Trance and his ways, DeRump sent a bouquet of fading pansies to his vanquished opponent, replete with a small plastic statue of an upraised middle finger. The classless act left no one in doubt that he was now all-powerful within Narcissus County and, therefore, untouchable.

Still, as DeRump began his complete takeover of the area, it would become obvious that whatever the arrangement leading to his victory, it didn't satisfy him.



It was early in the morning, just one week after DeRump took the reins of power in Narcissus County. Most of the residents hadn't yet taken down their Christmas decorations.

A rapidly building crescendo of what sounded like gunfire mixed with car horns startled Paul and me awake from a deep slumber. In my momentary confusion, I thought the drunken MAGAts in the beat-up pickup had found us again, despite our move to Port Lybral County.

It took just a few seconds more to realize this was different - faint but unmistakable, mixed in with the explosions were the chords of the oboe solo in Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." Classical symphony wasn't something you heard often, even in one of the more literate places in rural Arkansas.

And just as oddly, we could hear what sounded like a birthday party in the parking lot outside our room. As Paul carefully pulled the curtains apart, we could see perhaps three dozen people milling about. They'd gathered into groups of three or four, talking and gesturing

excitedly; several were still in their pajamas and robes. It was a mixed group: men, women, young, old, white, black, brown, and yellow.

What appeared to be a mom, dad, and two teenagers were practicing their boot-scooting in the middle of one group, and off in a corner, an elderly couple were waltzing to music only they could hear. A younger man was spraying the contents of a shaken-up bottle of Coke into the air, angling it away from the dancers.

As the biting odor of burned gunpowder drifted our way, we spotted the source of the “gunfire” in the grassy easement on the far side of the lot - two kids were laughing, ooh’ing and aah’ing as they lit off bottle rockets and strings of fireworks.

Briefly concerned I was still dreaming, I called the front desk to ask what was going on. Expecting to hear the tiredly polite voice of the desk clerk, what I got instead was a giddy, rushed explanation, as though everyone in the world but me had gotten the news.

“Haven’t you heard? They finally found the witch they were hunting for, and now he’s dead. Somebody killed that awful Judge Trance in Narcissus County - everybody’s celebrating!”

Stunned, I slowly placed the receiver back on its hook and told Paul what I’d learned.

Once the news sank in, we hurriedly began calling everyone we knew in the area on our cell phones. We quickly learned that Narcissus County had been a busy place while we’d been sleeping. Trance had indeed suffered a violent death in his home sometime early last evening.

In the meantime, now-Judge DeRump had used his new judicial authority to force a hasty conclusion to the Narcissus County Coroner’s long-stalled autopsy of Liberty Belle. Rupert F. Kennedy Jr.’s official report:

“The violations of her body, and especially the gunshot wounds, certainly contributed to her demise, but the primary cause of death was getting vaccinated.”

Of course it was.

Once the coroner had released Liberty Belle's body, DeRump made several passes at bullying Fred and his wife into having Belle's remains cremated.

To counter that threat, a trusted few of Fred's friends had gone on a midnight raid last night, sabotaging the only crematorium in the county. They'd effectively prevented Liberty Belle from having anything other than a traditional burial.

DeRump had no influence beyond Narcissus County's boundaries, and if he'd tried to force Liberty Belle's cremation elsewhere, someone would have raised questions, likely leading to a formal investigation.



The day of Liberty Belle's funeral was gray, cold, and somber. Though most of the town turned out to give her their last respects and reflect upon her life, there was little conversation around her casket. Her sendoff was quiet and solemn. Much of the mourning would come after the service, as friends and family huddled in small, tearful gatherings to remember and grieve. Paul and I joined Fred's family, where the conversation was hushed and the tension palpable as we contemplated the gruesome task ahead.



It was 4:00 a.m.; the morning was chilly, cloudy, and moonless. The drizzle and occasional sleet that had dulled most of the previous day had stopped. The breeze from the northwest was light, yet it chilled me to the bone as my nostrils caught the smell of dampness and earthworms.

Parked next to the headstone was a black and white Mustang Mini Excavator. Gravediggers had laid a brown tarp over the grave and stationed orange cones at the corners for safety. They'd set the top of

the concrete box around the casket in place. However, the workers hadn't yet filled the space between the box's sides and the grave wall with dirt; two mounds of earth sat on the grass near the opening.

Fred had added a tonneau cover to the feed store's pickup, meant to hide the bed's contents, and Paul and I had ridden with him. We parked between two headstones about thirty feet before the grave, leaving the headlights on to provide illumination.

Moments after we arrived, Ed Rutledge and Art Middleton backed their tow truck up to the grave. None of us spoke a word as the two men jumped from either side of their truck. Fred, Paul, and I each held LED lanterns to provide working light for Fred's friends. The men began fastening four chains they'd rigged and hung from the tow hook to the sides of the concrete box top. Once they'd hoisted the cover off and set it on the ground at the lip of the grave, they placed chains through the casket's handles to lift the burial container into the bed of Fred's truck.

As they were refastening the hooks to the concrete box's top so they could move it back into place, Fred tapped Paul on the shoulder and pointed behind us.

We froze, trying not to move a muscle, even as my heart began pounding furiously.

Coming toward us was the unsteady beam of a flashlight, bouncing side to side with the walk of the person carrying it.

The brightness of the light obscured our visitor, but no matter who it might be, this couldn't be good.

When he got close enough that we could see he was a Sheriff's deputy, my heart leaped into my throat; I knew we were royally screwed.

Shining the light on each of our faces in turn, the officer said nothing, simply nodding when he recognized Fred, Ed, and Art.

Flicking his flashlight toward Fred's pickup, now turned around with the casket just visible through the open tailgate, he grunted.

The deputy then passed the light over the tow truck, following its lines slowly from stem to stern.

“Well, Fred, looks like you were having trouble getting to sleep tonight. Might have made my life easier if you’d just stayed home with the family.”

The officer put his hand on Fred’s shoulder. “I’ve got a fairly good idea what you’re doing, and why. Just so you know, our temporary Sheriff posted me out here, thinking that you might pull something like this.”

The deputy paused, took off his hat, and ran his hand over his bald spot.

“Look, I can’t say I wouldn’t do the same in your shoes. I can only imagine how hard this has been for you and your family, and what it must have taken to drive you to this.”

With the brim of his hat in both hands, his cheeks sunken and his lips forming a tight circle, the man looked up at the sky for what seemed like an eternity, his eyes returning to meet Fred’s.

“You know, Betsy’s been sitting for my daughter, Alecia, after school for the past two years. Don’t know what me and Marsha would do without her.”

The deputy let out a deep sigh, glancing around the scene.

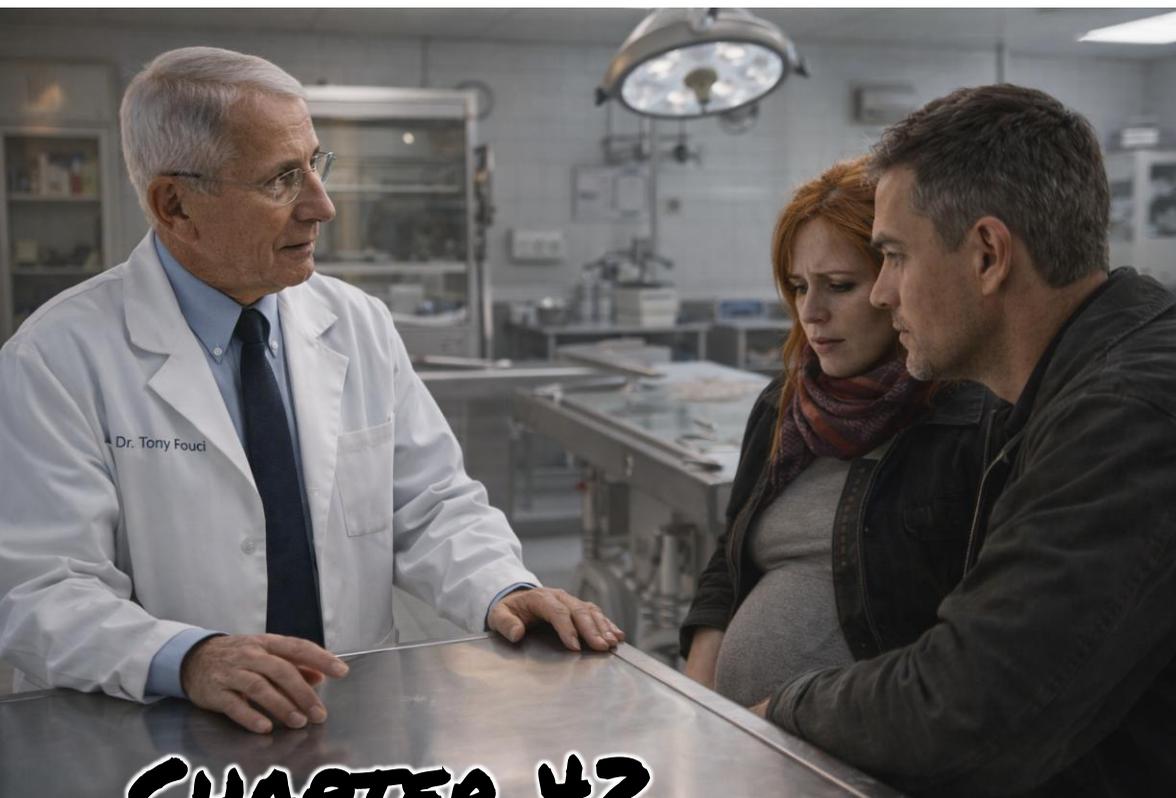
“As to the situation we’ve got here, they gave me an ’81 Citation to drive for this assignment, and I’ve only got the one pair of cuffs. If you were to take off, I couldn’t catch you, even if I wanted to.

“I’m not one for writing reports that make me look bad. Let’s just avoid all that mess. Get that top back on there so it looks right. Run tree branches over your tire tracks when you’re done. We’ll have to hope the gravediggers don’t look inside that box when they fill in the hole.

“Give my regards to Betsy when you see her, won’t you, Fred?”

With that, the deputy slowly put on his hat, tapping the brim twice. Turning on his heels, he sauntered back the way he came, the beam of his flashlight dancing ahead.

As he faded into the distance, I could swear I heard him humming the “Ode to Joy.”



CHAPTER 42

When the Port Lybral County Coroner called me to say he'd finished his autopsy, I was eager to hear Dr. Fouchi's findings.

The good doctor pushed his other appointments aside to make room on his calendar, and Paul and I met him at his office in the early afternoon.

"Benjamin Rush was the mortician in Nero's Fiddle who did the embalming, and he's a good egg. It's obvious he cared about what had happened to her. It looks like he did everything he could to preserve the evidence in case this day ever came. That helped.

“I doubt it would surprise either of you to learn we’ve found some things that didn’t turn up in Rupert Kennedy’s report.”

I was relieved to hear that we hadn’t risked a prison sentence for naught.

“We’ve got what looks like foreign DNA in one of her wounds, a deep scratch, likely from her assailant’s fingernails. TV forensic shows often focus on DNA under the victim’s nails that may have come from trying to defend themselves. However, the assailant’s fingernails can also leave DNA, especially if they have poor hygiene. A bit of a crapshoot; we won’t know anything for certain until we get the lab results back.

“We lifted partial prints from the body. It’ll depend on who disturbed the remains since they were first found, how many were involved, and whether they followed protocol, but the Port Lybral County Sheriff is working to isolate and identify any prints that shouldn’t be there. We may have lucked out; it doesn’t look like the Narcissus County Coroner did anything during their ‘autopsy’ other than draw blood and take photographs.

“There is hair and fiber trace evidence - not a lot, but some - we can send to the state lab. Cross your fingers that someone of interest turns up because of what we’ve discovered. For the moment, we need to let the scientists do their thing.”

“We have convincing evidence of what happened to her during her last hours. There’s no way to sugarcoat what we’ve learned - it *is* grisly. If you’d rather not hear that part, say the word, and I’ll respect your wishes.”

Paul and I have both seen horrific things in our careers, but not while I was pregnant. Paul’s eyes searched mine, wanting to know if I was up for this. I nodded, and the coroner revealed what he’d learned.

“Besides the indications of rape with an object - I’ll get to that in a moment - I found unusual bruising in the genital area. It looks like her attacker placed the heel of their hand above the pubic bone. Their fingers extended into the vagina and anus, as though forcibly grasping

the area around the lower pelvis with one hand, using it as a handle to lift her.

“I can only conclude that the girl was mercifully unconscious or recently deceased, and the attacker was trying to pose her. When deputies took the crime scene photos, they showed the girl on her face and knees, with her tailbone raised above the rest of her body. It appears her attacker positioned her that way so they could repeatedly penetrate her vagina and sodomize her with pinecones; they left one in place.”

“My first thought was that this was a bizarrely sadistic killer. While that may still hold true for other reasons, it turns out there may have been a practical purpose for this specific brutality.

“The killer completed their posing of her body after her death. We know this because we have the terrorized image frozen on her death mask when they shoved her face down into the mud. It captured her eyes, fully open. Had she been alive, even if unconscious, her autonomous reflexes would have closed her eyelids.

“They brought her knees forward underneath her, thrusting her hips into the air; we found what we hope are useful prints on her calves. The soles of her feet were covered in blood, the skin shredded, apparently from trying to run through the thick brambles covering the ground in the area. They’d shot her eight times in her extremities - kneecaps, elbows, hands, and shoulders - with what appear to be 7.62 millimeter rounds from an AK-47 or similar assault rifle. The killer fired through the arches of her feet with smaller rounds, perhaps with a .22 caliber rifle or handgun.

“I’m just speculating here, but I’m assuming that after raping her, they crippled the victim’s feet with the smaller projectiles, so she couldn’t run either far or quickly. I’m guessing that she tried to escape anyway, despite what had to be incredible pain. The killer toyed with her, chasing her and shooting through her appendages with the assault rifle... Had to be one psychotic son of a bitch.”

Seeing my face, Paul realized I wasn't dealing with the information well.

"Doctor, where's your ladies' room?"

"Through here and to the right," Dr. Fouci replied, quickly twisting the knob and holding open the door behind him as Paul helped me to the restroom.



As soon as we returned, I tried to make up for my lapse in professionalism.

"Oh, Jesus, doctor, I'm so sorry - I didn't prepare myself for that level of detail."

"The fault's all mine." Dr. Fouci was gracious in his apology. "I should have known better, leaned into this more slowly."

"Some days I can deal with ugliness better than others," I replied. "I misjudged how much I could take. It's all good, I've got a handle on things now."

The coroner's smile was sympathetic.

"Look, I must be honest with you - it only gets worse from there. I took my residency in an inner-city hospital in Philly, and this was as macabre as anything I ever saw there. If you'd rather, I can spare you the specifics...."

"Please, I think I've got all I need to know. That poor girl."

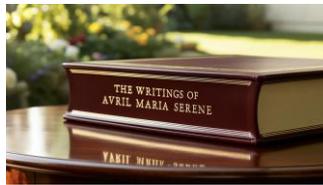
"If it's any consolation, I doubt Liberty Belle could have remained conscious through the pain. She'd have been in shock by the time they inflicted most of the brutality upon her. I've never had to say this before, but her death would have come as a relief, probably the best outcome for her. Even had she survived, she'd never have been able to return to any kind of normalcy, physically or emotionally.

"I *do* need to let you know one important detail, however. Earlier, I mentioned that the murderer's after-death activities likely had a purpose. The tearing and wounds look as though the killer inserted

the semen with a pipe of some kind, likely used for plumbing, threaded on one end. The seminal fluid was where it shouldn't be, deep in the wound crevices.

“We found a tiny piece of paper with adhesive on the back, likely part of the pipe's pricing label. We're looking at it with a high-powered microscope and some specialized software to see if we can get anything from it.

“Because they abused her with the pinecones post-mortem, I suspect they were trying to conceal that they'd used a tool to implant the semen.”





CHAPTER 43

Paul and I were surveying the view from Alex's porch swing the day after doctors had released our host from the hospital. Alex was describing what he'd learned from friends about the aftermath of former Judge Trance's demise.

"When they found Trance's body spread out on the table in his lavish dining room, his pants were down around his ankles. The gas-powered drain auger hadn't yet run out of fuel. It was still idling, the cable tip about a foot up his rectum, twisting a half-turn every few seconds."

Oh, come on, Alex...

“It was a DEI brand auger, a model they make that engages automatically whenever you rev it up. Its idle was rough, making the engine run a little faster every so often; the centrifugal clutch would then kick in. The smell was worse than the gore - the exhaust, gasoline, burned motor oil, and decomp had all mixed together.

“The end of the drain cleaner was so tangled up in Trance’s internal organs that the mortician would have had to remove all of them to separate the body from the machine.

“DeRump wouldn’t let a professional embalmer handle Trance’s remains - he insisted a proctologist do the work. The doctor had to consult with the local taxidermist to work out the logistics of stuffing the empty spaces.”

No. Just, no....

“Trance’s remaining relatives lived out-of-state; the family bonds had broken long ago. When the proctologist told them of the effort and expense necessary to prepare the body for an open-casket ceremony, they wanted to go a cheaper route. Rather than separate the auger from the corpse, the funeral home cleaned and polished the machine. They built a gold-plated stand for it to match the bier.

“To pass the auger’s cable through, their cabinetmaker cut a slot in the casket’s corner. Fortunately, the cable itself was flexible, allowing the machine and its stand to be placed slightly behind the catafalque so that mourners wouldn’t have to walk around it.

“For the funeral, the grave was dug in the shape of a thick letter ‘L’ so they could lower the casket and the drain cleaner into it together. Something like the sign kids used to make on their foreheads with their thumb and forefinger to say ‘loser.’”

Despite Alex’s sober delivery, Paul and I were doing our best not to laugh.

“For all the preparation, few guests or family members attended the burial ceremony. Of those who did, most looked out of place in their red MAGAt ball caps and sweaty wife-beater tees when they circulated among the black-tie tuxes worn by Trance’s wealthier sycophants. A few

were overheard complaining that they'd had to trim their armpit hair for the occasion; the underarm itching and irritation were driving them crazy.

"The new Judge DeRump and several of the deputies who once schlepped for him showed up for appearances' sake. The auger salesman was there, of course, with a beaming smile, a stack of brochures, and an unending spiel - his shining moment in the sun. Trance's long-time adult diaper vendor was present, shedding actual tears - likely for the impact his business would suffer without his major client.

"There was a heavy scent of Old Spice in the air, a last-ditch effort to cover the overwhelming smell of urine emanating from the open grave. Once they'd turned the first spadefuls of earth to dig Trance's last resting place, a straggling stream of townspeople began visiting the open hole. Repeatedly. But only *after* filling their bladders with Grain Belt and other cheap beers. By the night before the funeral, that stream had become a parade of thousands, turning the grave into a pale-yellow swimming pool."

Oh, yuck...

"Trance had been notorious for not paying his lawyers and creditors, and there was a gaggle of them loitering several feet from the gravesite. They were plotting how best to accost Trance's heirs and demand payment on their way from the funeral. Across from the debt collectors in the opposite corner, Trance's survivors had huddled together, planning their escape routes.

"The funeral home had to hire animal trainers for the event to keep all the hungry stray dogs and the occasional needy local politician at bay. Still, the dogcatchers couldn't keep a dozen vultures from circling overhead, mocking the drones sent up to disperse them."

Alex paused, a sly smile crossing his face.

"The kids say if you clear a space between the leaves so you can put an ear to the bare ground, you can hear a little thump every few seconds as that auger turns another half-twist.

“I must admit, there’ve been nights when I just couldn’t sleep, and I’ve gone down there to listen for a while. I find it quite reassuring... doze like a baby afterward.”



Within a week after DeRump became Judge, voters elected a replacement Sheriff. There was but one candidate, Gregory Boven, who’d run on DeRump’s recommendation. The Judge selected him from among the deputies DeRump had hired when serving in his previous position.

The rampant rumor circulating through the county was that Trance’s homicide was the new Sheriff’s audition for his job, a loyalty test of sorts. But with DeRump now the County Judge, it was irrelevant even if true. There was no chance of an investigation, much less a prosecution or a trial.

With Trance permanently out of the way, Judge DeRump and the deputies who once worked for him began cleaning up DeRump’s reputation. Expanding on the hints DeRump had dropped during the judicial special election, his supporters launched a major rumor initiative. Their claim was that the now-voiceless former Judge had actively barred prosecuting those responsible for all the unsolved rapes and murders reported during the past decade.

The smear campaign didn’t offer any specifics about who benefitted from Trance running interference - the rapist, or perhaps rapists, you’d presume. Nor did it explain the former Judge’s motives.

More curious to me, there were still a half-dozen Sheriff’s deputies’ cars visiting the Trance residence daily, long after the funeral. Joe Manchin had let it slip to Fred that Judge DeRump was actively taking part in the investigation, despite the election of a new Sheriff.

That told me they were looking for something, and I had a solid idea of what it might be. The Narcissus County power structure was based on who had leverage over whom. This meant DeRump needed to

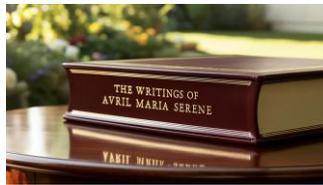
run down and eliminate not only the material Trance had on him; he'd also want to take advantage of whatever he could find that the former Judge had on anyone else.

That the deputies obviously hadn't yet found all of what they were looking for left me an opening.

Perhaps emboldened by our early-morning grave-robbing, I wanted to get into Trance's residence and see what I could. Paul was much harder to convince, but I *did* talk him into spending an afternoon together conducting a long-distance surveillance of Trance's property.

It took just part of the time we'd allotted to discover that while the residence was a beehive of activity during daylight hours, everyone disappeared promptly at 3:00 p.m., the end of the Sheriff's Department's morning shift. And the deputies had gotten sloppy, apparently relying on their regular presence to discourage any illegal activity - they didn't appear to be locking the house in the evenings.

It was time for another clandestine, early-morning adventure.





CHAPTER 44

We bought two bikes at Walmart - a 21-speed fat-tire beach cruiser for Paul, and, because Thomas Ethan was making it harder to get around, an e-bike for me. We didn't want Liberty Belle's Trailblazer spotted anywhere near the Trance crime scene.

After hiding our wheels behind the house, we donned nitrile gloves, forensic bunny suits, and Tyvek booties graciously provided by the Port Lybral County Sheriff. Paul was concerned that the Narcissus County deputies might be actively gathering forensic evidence and wanted to be sure we didn't inadvertently make ourselves suspects.

Once we'd made entry into the living room, my nose alerted me to the smell of dryer sheets. That someone would wash anything anywhere around a still-taped-off crime scene is rarely a good thing. Alarmed, I realized those daytime deputies were also engaged in a task I hadn't considered: destroying evidence.

The deputies had done much of our work for us. They'd stacked thumb drives, DVDs, computer hard drives, smart media, video cassette tapes, and a dozen piles of paper onto a coffee table. I assumed the officers set those aside because DeRump was interested in them.

I looked over Paul's shoulder as he briefly scanned two of the smart media cards and a thumb drive. They removed any doubt that while Trance had raped multiple women, his abusive tastes ran more to children, in keeping with the worst of his MAGAt cohorts.

The media stored hundreds of digital photos that Trance had kept of sexual encounters with boys. They included images of two dozen of his liaisons with Marron, his own son. Another fifty photos showed Trance and an older Marron tag-teaming young boys.

Several of the unusual tidbits we'd heard during our conversations with diner customers involved Trance's son. Marron was now an adult, and those familiar with his orientation knew him as "Mary". The rumor mill claimed he spent his free time in gay communities within Fayetteville and Bentonville.

The rest of the county knew him as "Maroon," a twist on "moron" inspired by old Bugs Bunny cartoons.

Their other deviances aside, Trance and Miller clearly shared many of the same disgusting fantasies, their victims likely supplied by Chuckie Kirk and his wife. That would explain how Stephen Miller kept below law enforcement's radar, and why Boasteen could keep the child molestation that Musky Mellons reported out of the public record.

There was also the possibility that Trance slow-walked the investigation of other rape suspects to ensure that his crimes remained confused with theirs.

Paul and I split up so we could cover more ground quickly.

I was already as disgusted with Trance as I cared to be when I opened the doors of an armoire in a guest bedroom. There I found a trove of old VCR tapes, newer digital video cassettes, and recorded Blu-ray DVDs, labeled only with dates.

My curiosity piqued, I powered up the Blu-ray player in the armoire. I immediately wished I hadn't - confronted by nude images of a younger Trance in compromising poses with, in their turn, two mules and a horse, I couldn't turn off the machine fast enough. Lord, what I wouldn't give to unsee *that*.

I rejoined Paul in the kitchen to share what I'd learned. He'd also been busy turning up new information. Paul had discovered what DeRump had over Trance that helped the former Sheriff keep his old job. DeRump had found traces of Trance's orange spray tan at a dozen crime scenes and had secreted the evidence away. He'd send Trance copies of never-filed reports to keep the then-Judge aware of what DeRump knew.

Paul had discovered other clues explaining how Trance had kept power. For example, Graham "Cracker" Lindsay was a longtime Nero's Fiddle councilman who, at various times in his career, had taken a public stance against Trance. Whenever he did, he'd back off at once in the most whimpering, cowardly way possible. We now knew why: Trance had discovered Lindsay was a hermaphrodite and frequently threatened the councilman with exposure. To make matters worse, testosterone supplements had failed their intended purpose, resulting in the lack of backbone and emotional instability Lindsay often displayed.

Satisfied we'd hit the mother lode we'd hoped for, we pushed our luck to see if it would hold. Together, we began exploring the other buildings on the property.

The mansion had an expansive garage. Obscured from public view behind it, we stumbled upon a beat-up, dingy white utility shed. Someone had used force to remove the old hasp and padlock that

secured it, and recently, likely with a hammer; the remnants were hanging by a single screw off to one side.

Even with trained eyes, the first look at the shed's contents revealed nothing of interest: yard tools and broken-down equipment. It was clear why DeRump and the deputies wouldn't think it important.

But something seemed off to me. When looking at the inside of the building from the front, it didn't seem as deep as the outside suggested. Intrigued, Paul and I walked around to the back, where we encountered overgrown brambles that the gardener hadn't cut back in months, if not years. When I checked the upper corner of the rear of the shed, I could clearly see the exhaust end of an old, rusty window air conditioner unit mounted directly through the wall.

I tapped Paul on the shoulder and pointed.

"Who air-conditions a tool shed?"

Paul looked at me, raising an eyebrow, and we walked back to the front of the building.

When we opened the door, we didn't see the inside surface of that air conditioner.

I glanced at Paul.

"False wall?"

Paul stayed inside the shed. As I walked towards the back, tapping on the external siding, Paul yelled back when he could hear me. It didn't take long to realize the outside of the building was nearly three feet longer than the inside.

Paul pulled all the lawn equipment into the yard, and we used a crowbar he found to pry away the inside of the back wall.

What we discovered was astounding. A large chest freezer, nearly as wide as the hidden chamber, dominated the space. On top of it, boxes and piles of padded manila envelopes and bags reached the ceiling. Labels written with Sharpie markers identified them in thick black ink as unprocessed rape kits and evidence bags from what appeared to be dozens of sexual assaults and homicides.

We could see on one side of the back wall the outline of a hidden access panel we could have used from the rear of the shed had we known it was there.

As we carefully examined three of the packages closest to us, it became clear we'd discovered a treasure trove of evidence from crimes that had occurred throughout Narcissus County. The sheer amount of evidence Trance had collected to support his blackmail and extortion was staggering.

We now knew how Trance controlled DeRump. When a sexual assault occurred, DeRump had to put on a public show of gathering evidence to pacify the media. He would have retrieved as little as possible to protect his friends and associates.

Still, he had to ask the hospital to collect rape kits from the victims along with their clothing, at a minimum. Trance, knowing the offender would likely have been himself, one of DeRump's officers, someone else in their circle, or another powerful figure he was blackmailing, would force the Sheriff to turn the evidence over to the then-Judge.

DeRump had to comply if he wanted to keep his own past and present secrets. Once the Sheriff surrendered the evidence he'd gathered at the crime scenes and from the rape victims, Trance stored it here in case he ever needed to exercise leverage against DeRump or others.

The new Judge must be going crazy trying to find this stuff, probably searching every storage business in the county. Not to mention all the motels, strip clubs, and XXX video stores Trance owned.

But DeRump hadn't considered human nature. Trance toward the end of his days had gotten paranoid. The pressure the Sheriff was applying to force the Judge to step down had to have made Trance's insecurities worse. So, of course, the Judge would have wanted his hole cards within ready reach, as close as possible.

And to think it was all right here under a former professional law enforcement officer's nose, and he missed it.

Karma of a sort.

Even though it was just 4:30 in the morning, Paul called Fred to tell him about our situation and ask if he'd bring us a horse trailer. We spent the rest of the wee hours moving all the evidence in the shed, and the items from the house we knew DeRump couldn't admit knowing about, into the tow-behind.

With the trailer packed floor to ceiling, we threw our new bikes into the bed of Fred's truck. The three of us piled into the cab, and Fred made a beeline to Port Lybral County for help.



CHAPTER 45

With DeRump's new power came knowledge; hang-arounds and wannabes trying to gain favor with the new boss would share any information they came across.

Though unreliable, Fred also had an information channel. Deputy Joe Manchin shared with Fred that the just-elected Judge had learned the Port Lybral County Coroner's Office was autopsying Liberty Belle's remains. He also knew the coroner was close to issuing his formal findings. DeRump had vented his concerns to deputies that the report wouldn't shed a positive light on the former Sheriff's minimal investigative efforts.

According to Manchin, DeRump expressed outrage that “meddling foreigners” had stolen evidence of the old Judge’s pedophilia, along with information about DeRump’s and Trance’s blackmail of one another. Paul and I assumed he’d discovered the items set aside on Trance’s coffee table were missing and jumped to the conclusion that we were responsible. Judge DeRump was seething because Paul and I had tucked ourselves safely away in Port Lybral County outside his control.

In hindsight, I should have expected that DeRump would go after a Nero’s Fiddle resident he *could* get to, someone who hadn’t hidden their connection to us.

The Judge had Sheriff Boven’s thugs arrest Alex. It fit DeRump’s character that he’d go after a beating victim just released from the hospital. That Alex had been a thorn in DeRump’s side for a long time perfectly served the Judge’s agenda; that the writer’s sarcastic nature had made him an unsympathetic victim in the eyes of many of the county’s citizens was icing on the cake.

Boven’s creative arrest warrant charged Alex with a litany of crimes, including rapes and murders - virtually every heretofore-unsolved felony that had occurred since the writer’s return from California eight years ago. After the arrest, Boven added another charge: attempted murder of the Judge.

DeRump’s assault on Alex was full-on. DeRump knew what we’d discovered about the ex-Sheriff’s corruption in office, and to protect his new role as Judge, he needed to saturate the news cycles to keep us from publishing what we’d learned. He fed Pastor Boasteen’s Camp Menoposo troops a constant stream of misinformation to overwhelm the gossip channels.

For nearly a year, Alex had been the victim of a vicious campaign of rumor and innuendo started by the vengeful women of Kamp Karen. Though he was born here as one of their own, his lack of respect for those in power in the county once he’d returned had earned him influential enemies, beginning at the top with Trance and DeRump. That

he'd been escorting strangers around town who'd been poking their noses where they didn't belong had swayed neutral members of the community against him.

The full-court press launched by DeRump nearly doubled the number of negative stories circulating about Alex.

DeRump and Bovenno at first refused to allow Paul or me to visit Alex in jail. I threatened a lawsuit in state court. The Sheriff relented only after I used Deputy Manchin as a messenger to insinuate that we'd feed information we'd uncovered from the shed, incriminating DeRump, into the civil suit's discovery process.

The next day, Paul and I finally saw Alex. A burly Port Lybral County Sheriff's deputy escorted us to ensure our personal safety.

Alex Hamilton wasn't someone I'd characterize as "sullen" under normal circumstances. But he was all of that today, no longer angry or hateful. There was no hint of snark or lashing out as I'd expected.

It occurred to me that Alex had always known exactly where the line between right and wrong lay; as a matter of personal pride and identity, he never crossed it. Walked right up to it, sure, but showed immense respect for boundaries - a kind of underlying backstop to who he was. I also suspected that he'd always relied on the people he trusted to understand that much about him.

Being unjustly accused of committing crimes was crushing to him. It was a repudiation of a lifetime of self-imposed restraints that allowed him to let loose completely when within the borders.

The accusations had reduced him to no better than the people he despised - those who didn't know, or had no regard for, the rules of the game.

Still, he was glad to see us and get the chance to tell his side of the story.

"You know, Paul, I heard you when you called me out for not doing anything to address positively the things I'm always complaining about. So, I took a stand and confronted DeRump's uniformed thugs when they came to my doorstep."

Seeing Paul's expression turn defensive, Alex quickly changed course.

"Oh, sorry, Paul, I wasn't trying to lay the blame on you. My part in this is all on me. My timing was lousy for picking that fight. And to be honest, the rumors those assholes were spreading about me pissed me off.

"I thought I was prepared for when that day would come. My son and I had planned what we'd do.

"So, when four squad cars pulled up, I knew they were looking for a confrontation. I went out on the porch to pre-empt them from coming into the house. When I did, I left the door ajar. John hid behind the sofa's arm and began recording everything on his cellphone.

"The deputies wrestled me to the ground and clamped handcuffs on my wrists with my hands behind me. Seemed that wasn't good enough - they shackled my feet, too.

"Once they were damned sure I couldn't defend myself and hauled me back to my feet, that fucking coward DeRump showed up.

"Then came the part I hadn't counted on. So, DeRump stood in front of me, doing this slow-motion theatrical thing where, first, he put these monster plugs in his ears. He bent over and pulled his throwdown, a .38 caliber revolver, out of his ankle holster.

"After he swung out the cylinder, he extracted the cartridges into his hand. He took out two and tossed the rest of them on the ground. Pocketed one shell in the front of his pants and put the other back in the cylinder.

"I thought, '*What the fuck?* This asswipe's about to shoot me!' But no, he spun the cylinder into the first firing position, placed the barrel alongside his face, and pointed it at the tip of his ear.

"The motherfucker looked me right in the eye when he pulled the trigger.

"He was bent over, screaming at the top of his lungs about how much that hurt. All the while, he held his hand to his ear, smearing it all over the side of his face; blood splattered all over me. He shook his

hand like it was on fire; he was slinging more droplets of blood into the air and at me.

"This went on for a couple of minutes. Finally, he calmed down, took a handkerchief out of his breast pocket, and wiped his hand with it. Blood was still pouring down his face. He took the spent cartridge from the gun and replaced it with the live round from his pants. He handed the revolver to a deputy, who wiped the gun down with a rag.

"That guy clamped onto my shoulder as the other deputies were looking on, spun me around, and grabbed the cuff chains between my wrists. He put that revolver in my right hand and used my forefinger to fire a round into the ground, off to the side.

"Another deputy grabbed the gun from me with a gloved hand and dropped the weapon into an evidence bag. He dabbed at my empty fingers with a gunshot residue collection swab.

"DeRump stepped up, turned me back around. He was hissing like a snake two inches from my nose, 'You *do* know how GSR works, don't you, buttfuck? You should know that an armed assault on a sitting Judge carries a mandatory life sentence in Arkansas.'

"Damnedest thing I've ever been a part of in my whole life. They'd rigged everything they needed to lock me up and throw away the key.

"I'm assuming DeRump picked up the idea from an attempted-assassination stunt Trance pulled to get himself re-elected. DeRump probably couldn't find anyone he could trust to miss with the shot. They killed the sniper who helped Trance stage his thing - who's going to volunteer for *this* gig? So DeRump had to do the dirty work himself."

I was stunned that anyone would do something like that. Paul's wide-open eyes and dropped jaw told me he hadn't expected this, either.

"They let John come by earlier; you just missed him. The good news? My kid's smart. He was nervous as hell, but he caught the entire thing on his cell. Not only that, but he was paying attention to where the gun was aiming when the deputy fired it with my hand. After the

deputies left, he got some great photos of where the slug entered the ground.”

I could tell that, while what John did impressed Paul, it also concerned him.

“I hope he made copies of that video and saved them on another device.”

“Oh, yeah, he did; several times, and to the cloud, too. Like I said before, smart. He’s been passing copies of the video out at school like Hallowe’en candy. The kid’s making himself popular again.”

“Fred found me a decent lawyer in Petergeorge, and he’s coming by later. I don’t expect to be in here too much longer, and I intend to sue the bejesus out of these assclowns.”

I had a thought.

“Could I have a copy of John’s video? They’re tearing you up on social media, and it’s time we set the record straight.”

Alex’s curiosity got the better of him.

“What are they saying?”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

When Alex nodded, I filled him in.

“The Judge and his go-fers are all in with trashing you, well-organized. I’m guessing their Russian deputies are helping - otherwise, I don’t think DeRump is technically bright enough to pull it off. They’ve got simultaneous mass e-mail and phone campaigns going, complete with deepfake images and videos. They’re accusing you of being behind all the recent rapes and the murder of Liberty Belle. It’s pretty ridiculous, but with nothing to counter it, their story languishes out there, and people eventually accept it as true.”

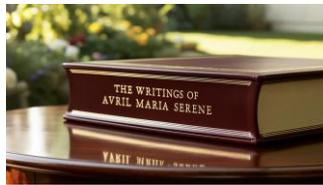
“Thank God John got that video. I wish I could say I’m surprised people are so willing to believe bad things about me. But I get it. I was gone from here for such a long time and lived in ‘evil’ places like California. The locals don’t trust me.

“I’ve got my tried-and-true friends, but others don’t care for me because I brought these strange ideas back. They don’t like my mouth,

and they think I act like I'm better than them. I know some of that's my fault."

As Paul and I walked back to the Trailblazer after our visit with Alex, I kept feeling periodic waves of guilt.

Though I immediately shamed myself each time I had the thought, I couldn't stop thinking it: *Oh, how much better off Narcissus County would be today, had Alex aimed and fired that bullet himself, four inches more to DeRump's left.*





CHAPTER 46

Alex's incarceration left Paul and me, along with Fred when he wasn't working, to go through the written reports, documents, evidence bags, videos, and other materials we'd discovered on Trance's property.

The former Judge's stash proved a treasure trove of information. It explained the stranglehold that Trance had on so many residents of the area. He'd collected damning evidence and well-documented embarrassments around hundreds of individuals, many of whom held power of their own within the community.

Paul had painstakingly videoed what we'd found in the utility building and the living room, recording the source and location of each

item. He and I would spend our evenings deep into the wee hours over the next several weeks, inventorying and detailing the contents in our motel room.

Much of what the deceased Judge had squirreled away focused on the usual suspects, men and women I'd already met or researched. Some items seemed relatively normal: election oppo research and internet background checks on business competitors and romantic interests. Other material puzzled me - I didn't understand why Trance had it, or its relevance to his world. It didn't help that the former Judge was a packrat; it seemed he never threw away any information he came across.

Several items referenced individuals I did not recognize. When we sorted those into groups according to the names of the presumed targets, the biggest pile centered on Jesse Epstein. He was a pimp to Narcissus County's rich and powerful; he'd once claimed to be Jeffrey Epstein's cousin. And there were nearly as many documents about the sleazy behavior of a DeRump deputy, Matt Gaetz.

There was more than enough there to convict either of the two of sex trafficking many times over, along with dozens of photos showing that both men sampled their underage wares. Yet Trance and DeRump had independently covered for the two men while simultaneously monitoring them and keeping detailed records of their activities.

The relationship between Epstein and Trance seemed like a straightforward quid pro quo. They were clearly like-minded friends. Trance kept Epstein from the clutches of law enforcement, taking payment out in trade by regularly visiting Epstein's girls and partaking of other services.

Gaetz had a convoluted relationship with Trance and DeRump, more of a three-way standoff. In its simplest form, it amounted to mutually assured destruction, framed around the leverage Gaetz, Trance, and DeRump had over one another, or believed the others might have over them.

Both Epstein and Gaetz seemed skilled at playing the game. Notes and comments tucked into the files suggest Trance and DeRump were seriously afraid of what these men knew or possessed, and the damage they could do to their protectors' domains.



Fred took an early Thursday afternoon off at the feed store to meet with us in our room in Port Lybral County, where we were safe from interruption and surveillance. The plan was to review what we'd retrieved from Trance's residence and, most importantly, to discuss what we could do with it.

Epstein's stack drew my attention first because he made no secret of who he was or what he did. Despite the man's infamy and complete lack of shame, Trance kept a close relationship with him and was the most avid consumer of Epstein's services.

There were, without a doubt, others who shared a friendship with Epstein, even if they kept it under wraps. For example, I found it remarkable that the area's most powerful evangelist had nothing to say about the notorious pimp.

Fred seemed to agree.

"Interesting... now that I think about it, I've never heard Boasteen mention Epstein in any of his sermons. Or even refer anonymously to the crimes he has to know Epstein commits regularly. Maybe you should ask the pastor why the next time you chat him up?"

I gave Fred a cynical smile.

"Might have to wait for *that* conversation; I think Boasteen's hiding from me, afraid of what else I might know. But now that I think about it, that goes the other direction, too... Why does Trance have all this stuff on everyone - except Boasteen? We've got enough on our plate for now - too many rabbit trails - but that's something I want to check out when I get the time."

“Alex and I tried to look into Epstein when Alex first arrived - and please understand, we didn’t have your investigative experience or tools to guide us.

“Epstein’s is a nasty business. Still, we thought he’d be an unlikely murderer or rapist because he’s a seasoned pro. Rape would spoil the goods and make the girls less willing; murdering his investment of time and grooming wouldn’t make business sense.”

Maybe, but Epstein would have to exercise some control over his stable.

“Even to keep them from talking?”

“He’d shown that he was willing and able to do the time, and he had ins with both Trance and DeRump to avoid it when they’d let him. We just couldn’t see Epstein creating all this negativity around himself and his business. He’s too smooth to go brute force, except maybe against a customer who was abusing his ladies or not paying up.

“Even if, somehow, he could have gotten either of my daughters to give him the time of day, much less work for him, there’s no way he’s going to damage the merchandise.”

“How much *did* you find out about him?” Paul asked.

“Epstein does his business from what he advertises online as a luxury estate on an island - actually, it’s an old two-bedroom rental in the middle of a traffic circle, one of those situations where it’s really tough backing out of his driveway.”

As Fred spoke, I recalled seeing an audio CD marked “Epstein” and dated three months before Innocence Grace’s rape. Digging through the pile, I found the disc and inserted it into my laptop.

The recording had all the earmarks of a police investigation interview, but Fred didn’t recognize the interviewer’s voice.

“There was a rape of a young girl about that time,” Fred offered. “I’m guessing they pulled Epstein in to see what he could tell them.”

“I wonder how Trance came to have this...,” Paul mused.

That question became even more relevant as we listened to the recording and reached the most interesting part.

“Trance used to spend hours at my house with my girls, but he only wanted the youngest. He once made a wisecrack about wanting to sleep with his daughter when she was just entering puberty. I’ve been in this business most of my life, and trust me, he wasn’t joking. He was telling us the type of girl he wanted. Geelen would have her girls shave so he wouldn’t know they were as old as fourteen or fifteen. “

“Geelen?”

“My paramour, partner in crime, muse, whatever - she procured the underage girls for me to bring into the life. As a woman, they’d trust her, and she’d groom them and soften them up for me.

“I see...”

“Trance would come around whenever he had a hard-on and could sneak away from his wife, especially when she was pregnant. At first, he’d spend the time in bed with just one or two of the girls, but then it got to where it was a revolving door to that bedroom. He had performance issues and couldn’t satisfy himself or them, and of course, they’d be the ones he’d blame.

“Word got out among the ladies that he has a tiny pecker and no skills. I’d bring him the least experienced girls - the ones who wouldn’t know his little erection isn’t normal. But he was so small he couldn’t get it to stay in, and when they started laughing at him, that was the end of that. Him no longer partaking was the only reason he asked Geelen to stop using the girls.”

“Damning stuff,” Fred said. “As you said, Paul, it makes little sense that Trance would have a recording like this.”

I had an idea.

“I wonder - do you think DeRump would have given Trance a copy to let him know the Sheriff’s Department had it? To support blackmail, I mean...”

“Or Trance might have had a mole among the deputies who leaked it to the former Judge,” Paul ventured.

Without knowing more, we agreed to hold off on any further speculation. Having not found a smoking gun related to Epstein, we turned to Matt Gaetz.

Fred provided us with background information. He knew Gaetz's mother as old, mean, and rich - a matronly recluse living on the outskirts of town in the nicest retro mansion in the area.

"She's best known for hiring armed guards to protect her duck ponds, giving them carte blanche to shoot and kill. We rarely see her in public, but she meddles in everyone's business and orders the townsfolk around. She leverages her wealth and exaggerated stories of her past reprisals to scare the crap out of our residents.

"Old lady Gaetz owns several businesses in Nero's Fiddle, the ones Trance wasn't interested in - the lumberyard, grain elevator, and the farm and country store where I work. Her family had been the richest in the area for a century. Matt is her oldest son, a layabout and self-proclaimed ladies' man - likes 'em young."

"How young?" was the question that immediately came to mind.

"Law enforcement once accused him of statutory rape; she was 14, he was 26. But Mommy's money got him off, and they expunged his arrest.

"Gaetz had a law degree from an online university that offered courses on subjects like 'identifying meadow grasses.' Trance wanted him as his County Attorney - I think to get Gaetz's mother on the Judge's side - but voters rebelled. Even the Sheriff's Department refused to support him. Eventually, DeRump hired Gaetz as a deputy when Trance forced the issue.

"Besides being one of the sleaziest characters in town, Gaetz was a guy who liked to misspell his name as 'Gates,' saying, 'No, I'm not related to Bill,' even if no one had asked. He'd give you this over-the-top wink to insinuate that, in fact, he was."

It didn't take long perusing Trance's evidence to realize that Matt Gaetz committed many of the rapes of young girls in the area. Worse, DeRump and Trance were fully aware he was the doer. If that

wasn't bad enough, he'd been the lead investigator for some of his own assaults. With that kind of juice, it occurred to us it may have been Gaetz, not DeRump, blackmailing Trance with the Epstein recording. The voice we hadn't recognized conducting the interview might have been Gaetz's.

But Innocence Grace would have known Matt Gaetz well. All the students were familiar with him because he spent so much time involving himself in activities at the junior high and high school, a way to scout for prey.

And there was nothing in the record to show that Matt Gaetz murdered his victims; his technique was to knock them out with Rohypnol before he raped them, so he had no reason to fear they'd identify him. He'd drug their food or drinks at public venues and watch them until they passed out, usually in the ladies' restroom. First responders found "out of service" signs affixed to the bathroom doors in two of the rapes.

None of that fits what happened to Innocence Grace. Her rapist and kidnapper was a man willing to show her his face and vehicle. He attacked her with a stun gun. And the rape, torture, and murder of Liberty Belle had been in an outdoor setting.

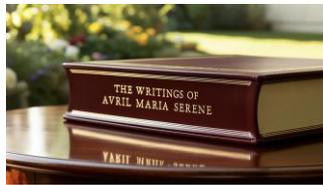
Neither matched the way Gaetz had accosted his suspected victims. While those discrepancies did not rule him out, they cast doubt on his involvement in the assaults on Fred's daughters.

Still, there was a boatload of evidence tying Gaetz to at least eight rapes. He'd been a threat to girls in the community for more than a decade, and he needed to be brought to justice.

The problem with that, of course, was that DeRump wouldn't go after a deputy he'd been protecting all those years.

If we were going to nail Gaetz for his past crimes and protect the community's future, we'd have to find another way to expose the man, and maybe get something on DeRump along the way.

Paul and I knew exactly how to make that happen.





CHAPTER 47

If we wanted to do this right, we'd have to tap into our resources back at home.

"Fred, I know how we can catch Gaetz. Paul and I have a friend who is a San Diego police captain running their vice unit. I'm sure we could get him to loan us one of their undercovers. They run stings to catch offenders sexually soliciting minors, and they have officers who can pass as underage. If we can get word to Gaetz that there's a young girl new to town staying alone in one of the local motels, he might bite. With video and testimony from the undercover, along with help from the state, we should be able to put Gaetz away for good."

Fred wasn't as excited about the possibility as I'd expected.

"But that only gets us Gaetz. The way he operates isn't the same as what happened to either of my daughters. Unless he was the one who hurt them and confesses, or maybe knows who else did, we're not any closer to knowing what happened to Innocence Grace or Liberty Belle.

"I think we should go after DeRump. If he was covering for Gaetz, he had to be protecting whoever caused the deaths of my daughters, too. We know DeRump was in this up to his eyeballs."

Fred wasn't about to give up his obsession with holding DeRump accountable.

"Look, I hear you, Fred."

I glanced over at Paul, who nodded back.

"We both do. I know it must be terrible to be this close, yet not quite there. It's perfectly understandable that you'd want to put an end to the pain that you and your family have suffered all these years.

"We simply do not have a way to get at DeRump directly. Because we didn't get the evidence we have against him lawfully, there's no chain of custody - what Trance had on DeRump would get tossed out in any criminal proceeding. I think you could use parts of that material to sue DeRump if you had a sharp lawyer, but a civil suit won't get a County Judge kicked out of office. It might help defeat him in the next election if you win your case and enough people know about it. But that's a long way off.

"If we go the other route and catch Gaetz in a sting, maybe he'll flip on DeRump or the others involved."

I hadn't convinced Fred.

"Gaetz has been lying low - there've been no rapes since they killed Liberty Belle. How do we know Gaetz will take the bait?"

Sexual predators have powerful compulsions. I was sure that not being able to have his way with a young girl had to be eating at the deputy.

"I can't offer you any guarantees, Fred. But with Trance out of the picture, that's one less set of eyes watching Gaetz. He might feel he could get away with another rape. If he's hungry enough and hears about a girl he thinks he can have - one with no ties to the community, and therefore no loved ones here to answer to - he might go for it.

"My question to you is, how do we let Gaetz know the girl is in town and where she's staying?"

Fred had an answer for us; still, I sensed some reluctance.

"There's this manager, a decent lady in a tough situation, at another of the motels Trance owned. She told friends that Trance made her take blackmail videos of the motel's guests and give them to him. Caught between a rock and a hard place; no choice but to do what Trance wanted. She hated the dead Judge - and DeRump, too - but they'd never have known it. She might help you."

Fred's use of "you" rather than "us" bothered me a little, but I let it slide.

"How about that deputy who works both sides of the street - Joe Manchin? Do you think that if you worried in his presence about this young girl, whom nobody knows, staying by herself at a motel, Deputy Manchin might say something to Gaetz? Or maybe to another deputy who'd pass the information along to him?"

"If Gaetz hears it from two sources he considers reliable, the temptation might be too strong to let the opportunity pass, and he'd be less likely to suspect a setup."

Fred nodded, his eyes studying the floor.

"Sure, I can say something to Manchin."

Fred didn't seem fully engaged - could it be that not having Alex here to fire him up was dampening Fred's enthusiasm?



Captain Edmond "Mondo" Cranston had been the commanding officer of San Diego PD's Vice unit and Paul's co-worker for several

years. He'd also been a close friend to Paul and me, and quite the character in his own right. He'd once gotten a confession from a serial sexual abuser by winning a bet in a poker game - it wasn't until much later that Mondo admitted to cheating. Though some of his methods may have seemed a little unorthodox, he'd earned admiration and respect for making his unit one of the best in the department, if not the state.

Mondo preferred to toe the ethical line to preserve the unit's pride in its professionalism. Still, we knew he'd at least listen to our unusual off-the-books request; while he might well turn us down, he'd hear us out and do what he could to help. If nothing else, he might have a better idea how to run Matt Gaetz to ground.

As I laid out the details of Paul's and my situation over the phone, Mondo listened attentively, asking questions as the story unfolded. After some consideration, Mondo agreed to loan us the best undercover he had available for playing an underage decoy in a sexual trafficking sting. She'd contribute two days of her regular time off if I'd pick up her plane fare and expenses.

To ensure the department's interests were served, Mondo needed something in return for the undercover's generosity. After negotiating back and forth, we agreed to a deal. I'd publish certain details, cherry-picked by Mondo, from another case Vice was investigating. He'd let me have first dibs on writing a more complete follow-on article once the timing was to Vice's satisfaction.

The arrangements made, I worked out the travel logistics with the airline. The bait for the trap we'd set would arrive at the Port Lybral County airport on Monday afternoon, three days away.



Fred explained why DeRump's control of Narcissus County residents was more tenuous than Trance's had been.

“The former Judge owned most of the residential and commercial property in the county. He also had motels, pharmacies, strip clubs, title loan companies, pawnshops, and XXX theaters.

“Bozo’s got supermarkets, gas stations, mini-marts, a couple of boutiques, and bookstores. He also pushes a lot of fertilizer.

“Mellons has used car lots, a hobby store where they sell toy rockets, and a trenching company.

“The three of them owned or controlled things that gave them power or influence over the personal lives of the citizens; Trance, in particular, held near-total dominion over our affairs through property rentals.

“DeRump hadn’t followed their example. The new Judge has a nice ranch, a bright red Corvette, horses, and dirt track racing cars, but not much else to show for all his rip-offs over the years. DeRump’s possessions have no hold over the average resident. His power comes strictly through the loyalty he still commands from most of the Sheriff’s department and his control over the county courts. But his influence *is* enough that few of the county’s inhabitants would cross the man.”

The subtle differences mattered, as Paul and I learned when we spoke to Haley Nikkison, the manager of a local motel-slash-brothel that Trance once owned. Nikkison confirmed she set up, collected, and curated clandestine videos shot in the rooms, sending Trance any that were usable for extortion... or supported his fetish for golden showers.

According to Nikkison, Jimmie Jordan was a star of sorts, making the most frequent appearances, always in compromising positions, in those videos. That explained why Jordan was publicly such a Trance loyalist.

“I’ve collected enough jockstraps from Jordan’s rented rooms in both men’s and boys’ sizes that I could equip all the Olympic events for the next twenty years.”

The imagery Nikkison’s description left in my mind was both graphic and disgusting.

I explained the general outline of the plan we had in mind.

“Sure,” she agreed, “I’d love to see Gaetz defenseless and trying not to fall asleep in his boss’s jail among the other inmates he’s railroaded.”

While I welcomed her help, I had to know why she was so enthusiastic.

“Obviously, we need your cooperation, and I wouldn’t want to offend you. Still, I have to wonder why, after serving Trance all these years, you’d take a chance going up against a deputy who used to work under DeRump.”

“Trust me, nothing offends me these days, and I get why you’d ask,” she replied.

“Trance was a cheap bastard. He didn’t pay me or any of his employees worth a damn. But I have five kids; my job at the motel came with the right to live in one of the rooms. If he fired me, I’d lose my wages and my home, and I’d have to find the money to move. I had no choice but to suck up to Trance and do his dirty work.

“But DeRump doesn’t have any ownership interest in the motel or the money to buy it. Once Trance died and probate tied up the title to the motel, no one had any hold on me anymore. Sure, whoever buys it, I’ll have to deal with them, but it won’t be DeRump or any of his minions.

“Three of my kids are girls, two of them tweens. Gaetz rapes and kills girls their age, or at least knows who does. He thinks I’m loyal since I’ve been with Trance so long.

“I figure now’s my chance to make up for some of my mistakes and screw Gaetz at the same time. The son of a bitch will trust whatever I tell him.”

I looked at Paul, and he nodded; Nikkison’s answer satisfied us.

“Fair enough. In two or three days, a young girl is going to rent a room from you. She’s sixteen, a runaway from California, hitchhiking to New York to become a Broadway actress. Her name is Shirley Teter.

“We want you to call Deputy Gaetz. Make him aware that you used to record videos of your rooms for Trance, if he doesn’t already

know. Say that with Trance gone, you're not sure what you're supposed to do. Now that DeRump is the Judge, should you keep doing the same things you've been doing?

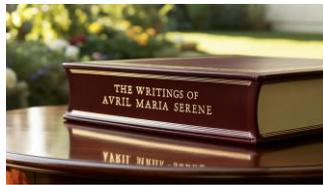
"Let Gaetz think you didn't want to ask DeRump directly because he used to be the Sheriff and might have her arrested if he didn't approve of Trance's blackmail. Tell Gaetz that you need to know because a runaway girl checked into the motel, and Trance would have wanted her recorded."

"That's all you want? No problem, I can do that."

Nikkison was no innocent, and her look told me she understood the risk she'd be taking. Still, I felt confident she'd do what we asked, and her advice to us as we left confirmed her commitment.

"See that Pump and Shop kitty-corner from us? You can't see because the truck maintenance building is between here and there. But directly opposite, across the highway, is an empty field, with a hedgerow blocking the view from the road.

"Your decoy could have the guy pick her up at the gas station - he'd probably want to take her into that vacant lot where he'd be out of sight...."





CHAPTER 48

Paul was perusing the internet, catching up with the news, and I'd been nodding off for a couple of hours. We were taking a break, anticipating that we wouldn't get much rest over the coming days... things were about to become interesting.

It was early Monday evening, not long after Deborah Sampson, the decoy Mondo lent us to play the role of Shirley Teter in our Matt Gaetz sting, called to let us know she was boarding the plane in San Diego. She'd be arriving at the Port Lybral County Airport at 9:30, just before they shut down for the evening.

The ringing of the room phone next to my head awakened me.

Thinking it might be the undercover again with a last-minute update, I grabbed the receiver to hear Haley Nikkison's voice instead.

"Fred's not answering his cell, and I thought somebody would want to know. I called Judge DeRump and followed Fred's script just like he wrote it. Everything should be ready to go."

I was confused.

Fred? DeRump? That can't be right.

"I'm sorry, Haley, I was taking a nap, not awake yet. Can you say that again? I must have misunderstood..."

When Haley repeated what she'd said word-for-word, I protested.

"But that wasn't the plan - we'd agreed you'd call Deputy Gaetz... And our decoy is still on the plane!"

"No, that's not right; Fred brought the girl and checked her in."

Nikkison's voice seemed both defiant and disappointed at the same time. She obviously thought she'd done what she was supposed to and expected gratitude in return.

"I'm sorry, Haley, I know you were trying to help, but that makes no sense. What did Fred say to you?"

"I was just doing what he told me. He came by with the girl and said the plan had changed and that you'd moved the timeline up. The same idea as what you and I talked about, but I was supposed to call Judge DeRump directly instead. So, I did."

I tried to regroup.

"Oh, okay. I must have missed Fred's message somehow. I'll call Fred and see what's going on. Thanks for everything you've done and for letting me know."

I waved my hand at Paul to get his attention, explaining over my shoulder that we had a serious problem and that something was up with Fred.

Concerned, Paul came to sit on the edge of the bed, listening intently as I called Fred's cell.

After several rings, it wasn't Fred who answered, but Betsy. Again surprised, I may have been too blunt when I asked where Fred was.

"How would I know, Debra Ann? I'm just Fred's wife, not his keeper."

The confrontation, even the anger in her voice, was completely out of character for Betsy. If I hadn't already known that something bad was happening, I knew it then.

"Oh, Betsy, I'm sorry; I didn't mean to be rude. You're upset - what's wrong?"

After a brief pause, Betsy replied, her voice softened.

"I didn't mean to snap at you, Debra Ann. Two of Fred's friends came to the house a little while ago. Said they needed him back at the feed store. He'd already worked a long day, and I was looking forward to spending some time together.

"He left his phone, so I called the number at the store to let him know, but he never answered. Lately, he's not been where he said he was. It's happened a lot.

"Debra Ann, you know Fred, in some ways, better than I do... Has he said anything to you about maybe somebody else? Like, another woman?"

Stunned at the question, it took me a second to get where she was coming from and why.

"Oh, no, Betsy, I know for a fact Fred loves you and the kids - he'd never do that. I wonder if the responsibilities he feels toward you and them are driving some of the questionable decisions he's made lately. Maybe trying to make up for whatever he thinks he's done wrong?"

"Something else is going on, and I'm trying to find out exactly what. I don't want to worry you any more than I already have. But when you see Fred, could you have him call me? It's really important. If he won't, will you let me know where he is?"

As I hung up, an intense disappointment and sense of betrayal washed over me. Fred had played us - he'd had one, and only one, goal for the last eight years, and he didn't give a damn about facts, evidence, or common sense. Despite what he'd led me to believe, Fred had never given up his belief that DeRump was behind his daughters' deaths and the other rapes in town, as the enabler if not the perpetrator.

Still, a tiny part of me recognized I wasn't qualified to pass judgment on what Fred felt or wanted. I'd never lost a daughter to rape, suicide, torture, or murder, and certainly not two. I couldn't know the intense guilt a parent, feeling the responsibility to protect their family, would suffer.

Fred will, in his mind, always be the father of two girls he couldn't save.

Am I sure I would have done any differently than what Fred was doing if we'd traded positions?

Still, regardless of how conflicted I might feel, we needed to fix this before things got worse or anyone else got hurt.



By the time we dressed and filled the gas tank in Liberty Belle's car, it would take forty minutes to reach the motel in Nero's Fiddle. We had to hope that Fred wouldn't change the part of the plan that focused on the field across from the mini-mart. All we could do was cross our fingers and hope we'd get there in time.

As Paul drove us past the Port Lybral County line and into the outskirts of Nero's Fiddle, there was an eerie quiet in the air. The streets, still slick and glistening from a rain shower that ended several minutes ago, were bereft of any traffic, and the shop windows were all dark. The Walmart parking lot was nearly empty, and there were few cars in residential driveways or alongside the curbs.

In the silence, I pondered questions that had been bothering me for over a month. Who was the power behind the throne propping up Trance when the Feds came after him?

And who was hiding in the darkness supporting DeRump's return to the Sheriff's office? It certainly wasn't the then-Judge - after Trance threw DeRump under the bus, the two men could barely tolerate one another. And Musky Mellons seemed far too tied up in her own peculiar worldview to play power broker.

I remembered my father once saying that before a god could create humankind, he'd have to invent Satan. A being responsible for all that is good would have no purpose in human affairs were there not an equally powerful representation of opposing evil to make the god necessary.

As I considered the buildings of Nero's Fiddle passing before me through my passenger window, a realization dawned. As Paul slowed for a stop sign at an intersection dominated by a large church, I gazed up at its simple yet majestic steeple, topped with a golden cross. Suddenly, everything snapped into place.

I reached out to touch Paul's sleeve.

"Can we stop for a moment?"

Turning in my seat to face Paul, I put it all together on the fly.

"Say, for the sake of argument, that we weren't in rural Arkansas, but back in San Diego instead. This whole thing, controlling the county, corruption, crooked elections, homicides, sexual assaults ... It's all about power, right? No different here than in California. And what's always behind power? Having, or sometimes just wanting, *money*. If we were back on the West Coast, we wouldn't think twice; we'd follow the finances, wouldn't we? We do it every day.

"So, looking around us, what do we see? Which are the nicest buildings in town?"

Paul raised both hands, palms upward, toward the windshield to point out the county building several blocks ahead of us. "The courthouse, I suppose? It's not that impressive, but for a poorer area..."

“Of course, and that’s one reason we think of power as belonging to politicians. But I mean buildings taxpayers don’t own. Who always has the nicest buildings in small towns like this, especially in the South - the ones costing the most?”

“There’s the feed store. And the silos for the co-op. Some buildings in the town square are decent. Trance’s house. And of course, the Walmart, depending on how you define ‘nice.’ Those would be the most expensive, I suppose.”

“You’re missing it. I did, too. We all did.”

I pointed to the river stone-faced archway of the church’s entrance on my right.

It took Paul a moment to grasp what I was talking about.

“Oh, *crap*... of course!” He clapped the heel of his hand to his forehead.

“I just don’t think of churches in terms of money.”

“What would you guess these places take in, here in the middle of the Bible Belt? Hmm... Okay, everybody in this area goes to a church run by the same man. A quarter of a million people live in Narcissus County. Say the wage-earners in an average family of five pull in \$35,000 a year. They tithe ten percent of their income, so \$3500 per family, or \$700 per person - that’s \$175 million every year from this little rural county. Trance and DeRump and all their minions put together don’t make that.”

Paul thought for a moment as we started off again.

“Throw in all the donations and discounts - labor, materials, services, and utilities - along with other money gifts; volunteers; bake sales and other merchandizing; inheritances willed to them from little old ladies... *wow*. And all of it untaxed.”

“We completely missed it,” I mused. “And that one guy raking this all in tells the entire bunch what their morals should be, who they should vote for, who to blame when things go wrong, and what to do about it. Wolf in charge of the sheep.”

"The dirty little secret these evangelists don't want anyone to know. Someone could consider it yet another form of rape.

"And who'd be more interested than anyone in keeping the status quo and balance of power?"

Our new understanding only increased the urgency of our mission, and Paul stepped on the gas as he summed up.

"Trance was one disgusting human being, and DeRump is even worse. But the money, along with what we know about the pastor, suggests that they weren't the ones driving the bus.

"For the nine years plus that he's been here, Boasteen as the power behind the throne makes sense. He's the only one who'd remained untouched, at least until you started looking around. DeRump gets indicted, took him four years to get his job back. The feds go after Trance, and now he's dead."

I followed up.

"Through all that, the reverend's been raking it in. Making people poor, uneducated, and miserable so that he can promote himself as the one to save them. Munchausen syndrome by proxy, but on a grand scale.

"He's fooled everyone, especially me. Fred once told me the pastor was 'one to go along to get along,' and I filed so many things into that cabinet. But the devil is in the details. Other people have touched on things I should have seen as far more than merely getting along, but I either ignored what they said or passed their words off as mere opinion.

"Running all those bits and pieces through my head now makes me feel like such an idiot for not seeing what's obvious sitting here now.

"I found it unfathomable when they told me he'd actually promoted re-electing DeRump from the pulpit, in the spirit of making peace and, again, getting along. Someone else said he was pushing the argument that it's better to go with the devil you know than the one you don't.

"Just a few days ago, a woman mentioned that Boasteen was helping DeRump sell his congregants the idea that most of DeRump's

misdeeds were at Trance's behest, and therefore forgivable. Beyond the pale...."

"I could kick myself for not seeing the bigger picture."

Paul had a grim smile on his face as he agreed.

"But it makes perfect sense when you pin down who really has the money and the power."

I nodded, now comfortable that the idea worked.

"It all fits. I get that Trance was stuffing ballot boxes to get elected term after term, but DeRump's not that connected or clever. I couldn't figure out how he got voted back in after being fired, but it all falls together once you know Boasteen was one of the, as Alex put it, 'assholes behind the green curtain.'"

"When DeRump then shows himself just as evil as Trance," Paul added, "all those parishioners run to Boasteen for solace... which he gladly provides them for a considerable boost to his bottom line."

I'd already exposed Boasteen as a lying, deadbeat dad in the last conversation I'd had with him, and I couldn't hide my growing disgust with the man.

"In my head, I can hear Alex calling him out, 'What a sick, sorry-ass son of a bitch.'"



CHAPTER 49

We were still three-quarters of a mile away from the vacant lot when we turned onto the street between it and the Pump and Shop.

The glare of our headlights blinded us for a moment as the light bounced back. A dust devil in our path whirled the dead leaves about in a tornado-like spiral; the prophetic sign added to my sense of foreboding.

Passing through, we could see immediately that something unusual was happening. Vehicles filled all the parking lots and driveways in front of us. Drivers had parked their pickup trucks and cars

two and three wide along the grassy easement on both sides of the pavement.

As our path forward narrowed to where we could no longer make it through, Paul had to stop, backing up to find a place to park. Once he'd found an opening that we could safely sneak into and leave the Trailblazer, we took off on foot. Paul helped me along as we tried to pick up the pace, but my pregnancy slowed us down. We began passing others; some were walking, and several were sitting or standing on the hoods of their cars or the tailgates and beds of their pickups. They were all - man or woman, adult or child - carrying a shotgun, AR-15, or holstered handgun along with a darkened lantern or flashlight. A few would put a finger to their lips or shush us as we pushed ahead.

"Look at these people," I whispered to Paul. "Their faces are angry as hell. They're scaring the bejesus out of me."

There was an ominous quality to the imperfect silence, and I could sense the tension stretched across the gathering. I dreaded what we were stepping into.

When Paul politely tapped the shoulder of a heavysset older woman blocking our path, she turned toward us. Though the light had diminished as we got nearer the field, we could see she was carrying a camping lantern and a broken-open double-barreled 12-gauge shotgun across her hips. The butt ends of two deer slugs were clearly visible at the tops of the barrels.

Looking us up and down, she said under her breath, "Didn't the church ladies call you? You were supposed to bring a light and a gun."

"We're friends of Fred's from out of town - no one's told us the whole story," I whispered back. "We just heard that we needed to be here; not sure what's going on."

With a look as though we'd just told her the dog ate our homework, she whispered as she pointed behind her with an index finger.

"Don't make a sound. That's Fred and a couple of his friends standing in the feed store pickup's bed - no, there, outside the

hedgerow. When the girl gives Fred the signal, he's gonna throw up his arms, and we're all supposed to turn on our lights and tackle DeRump."

Though by this time I was panting from exertion, I needed clarification.

"*The girl?*"

Rolling her eyes as though what she was telling us should have been obvious, she explained, keeping her voice barely audible.

"Fred's cousin? *From Portnoy County?* She's posing as a teenager; that monster DeRump is trying to force her into giving him sex. They're sitting in the Judge's black Escalade in the far corner of the field. Once we have that horrible man dead to rights, we plan on teaching him a few things; if he forces us, we'll introduce him to his maker.

"Fred's gonna watch out for the new Sheriff and his deputies so we can deal with them if they show up and make trouble."

As we forged past her, I whispered to Paul.

"*Church ladies?* Gotta be Kamp Karen. I didn't see *that* coming; seems Fred's made himself some unexpected friends among the ladies. But why would the Camp Menoposo women stir all this up? They do Boasteen's bidding, and he's the one who's been keeping DeRump in office... I'm lost, makes no sense."

Keeping a tight grip on my left hand with his right, Paul lifted the other palm up as he turned partially to me, one eyebrow raised, and his smile cocked as if to say, "Who the heck knows?"

Suddenly, I caught from the corner of my eye a glimpse of Fred raising and dropping his arms as hundreds of lights exploded into brightness around us like paparazzi flashbulbs.

An enormous burst of yelling, roaring, and chaotic excitement rose from the crowd, almost in unison, like the reaction to the home team intercepting the ball at a football stadium.

Those surrounding us were surging ahead, weaving through gaps in the trees fronting the vacant lot, carrying Paul and me forward.

Paul struggled to keep me upright on the grass, made slick by the trampling of hundreds of feet.

Adults and kids alike, even seniors, were streaming across the field, pouring in from the street and the surrounding woods.

The sight we saw as we tried to peek through the trees was otherworldly.

The dancing lights and shadows, following the movements of all the individuals carrying lamps, created a dizzying strobing effect.

DeRump's captors had disarmed him and taken their prisoner to the ground.

Someone turned the Judge's Escalade around, flipping on its high beams and pointing them to the middle of the field.

There, a group of men had created an open space around DeRump and his keepers, apparently to interrogate the Judge.

We lost our view of what was happening on the other side of the trees. However, we could hear what we assumed was DeRump's shouting, and then his piercing, blood-curdling screams.

By now, the crowd had grown to several hundred people.

Paul and I were being shoved back as more and more of those milling around pushed forward to get a closer view.

A low moan, loud enough to escape from within the milling crowd amid the sounds of thudding fists. Three pulls on a starter cord, and a chainsaw roaring to life; with it, an awareness.

They intend to rip the Judge apart, limb from limb.

Snippets of animated conversation, much of it heated, flew through the crowd. Some of it was rumor, other parts fact, accompanied by speculation and exaggeration fed by hatred and abuse built up over the years.

"Claims he was just trying to save the little girl - bullshit."

"That son of a bitch forced her to give him oral sex - she's only 15!"

"She should've bitten it off."

"She wouldn't know - she's just a kid!"

"Can you believe it? The fucking idiot's demanding his right to a trial - they're gonna give him one, for sure."

"Trial for *what*? We all *saw* what he tried to do!"

"De-pantsed the piece of shit, strapped him to a lawn chair."

"Somebody threw battery acid on his crotch!"

"Shoulda used gasoline and a match..."

"Not getting away this time - they wire-tied him to the chair... elbows, wrists, knees, ankles. Took the belt from his pants and wrapped it around him and the whole thing."

"DeRump claims Pastor Boasteen's been behind this the whole time. Says that's how he got the votes to come back as Sheriff."

"That'll teach him - broke his damned jaw for blaspheming our preacher. How dare that sorry jackass say such things about decent folk!"

"He keeps lying, says he didn't do no rapes..."

"Broke his ribs with a rifle butt; serves him right!"

Extreme and graphic stories passing through the grapevine tied DeRump to a variety of crimes.

It frightened me that an inflamed mob was sharing Paul's, Fred's, and my names as the finders of the evidence that Trance had on DeRump.

Everyone seemed convinced of the same myth - that those materials would have gotten DeRump convicted by the hung jury in several girls' rapes had the prosecutor presented them.

Reports raced through those assembled that DeRump was being sodomized with several objects, including large pinecones lashed to the ends of hacked-off tree branches, doubtless in revenge for what Liberty Belle suffered.

Paul and I fought to cross against the flow of angry bodies, trying to get to Fred's pickup.

As we got closer, three of the Sheriff's squad cars approached in the distance, their light bars flashing and sirens blaring.

Unable to squeeze past the cars parked on the sides of the street, they'd come to a full stop, still a few blocks away.

Dozens of men, weapons at the ready, peeled off from our group and headed toward the stalled officers, making it easier for Paul and me to move.

As the armed group closed the distance between themselves and the deputies, wiser minds prevailed. We'd never know whether those officers realized how badly they were outnumbered, or simply didn't want to be shooting their neighbors.

After shutting off their sirens and lights, we could see the darkened cruisers backing slowly away.

Those in the crowd nearest Paul and me had settled into excited whispers of DeRump being kicked, stomped, and beaten.

My hands were above my eyes, trying alternately to see and then shield them from what I saw, even as I'd begun crying.

As the commotion from the field quieted and we got close enough for Fred to hear us, I began screaming at him.

"Stop! You're going to kill him - you can't do this!"



CHAPTER 50

Paul was still trying to shove his way forward, his elbows flailing as he tried to claw away the arms holding him back. Two men, one carrying an AR-15 and the other wielding a shotgun, stepped squarely in front of both of us, partially blocking our view of Fred.

Recognizing us, Fred stepped down from the pickup's tailgate, waving his armed guards back as he turned to face us. The idea of Fred asserting himself as the leader of a murderous mob was surreal enough; the look in his eyes betrayed the rage he'd bottled up so long. This wasn't the Fred I thought I knew.

“Debra Ann, you shouldn’t be here - this is no place for you,” Fred scolded, ignoring my protest and pointedly glancing at my tummy.

“I could say the same for you, Fred,” I yelled back, not bothering to hide my frustration and disappointment, tears still running down my face.

“This is all *wrong*, and you *know* it. You lied to me, used all of us, just so you could commit a murder you’ve been looking forward to for eight years.”

Feeling the pressure of Paul’s hands on my hips shifting, I fell silent, turning to look over my shoulder.

The crowd parted to let an older blue Ram pickup with a camper shell through as it backed between the trees toward the center of the field. Hushed voices revealed DeRump was no more, and what remained of his body was about to be carried off. Where it might end up was a source of somber speculation. The comments we could overhear reflected a change in the general mood, as though a difficult but long-overdue deed was done - more “glad that’s over” relief than guilt, sorrow, or apology over a horrific act.

That it was done, and there was nothing I could do, took the wind out of my sails. Resigned to the terrible outcome, I turned back to Fred.

“I don’t know how you think this helps Innocence Grace or Liberty Belle. We’ve been over this - DeRump did nothing to either of them.”

“*You’re wrong, Debra Ann.*”

I could see Fred’s satisfaction with the outcome and his feeling of empowerment for the first time in a long while. He wasn’t about to back down.

“DeRump and Trance made what happened to my girls possible.”

I had no choice but to concede the point.

“Maybe so. An accessory, sure, and an evil man. Still, those are things the courts are supposed to decide.”

I strongly suspected that Fred encouraged the girl to overplay her part and try to seduce DeRump, something a professional undercover would have carefully avoided.

I desperately needed to know that I was wrong, something that told me this wasn't a planned murder.

"Was she wired, Fred? The girl, I mean."

Fred shook his head no.

That only made the situation more appalling; it meant there was no way to know what either party said to get DeRump into a compromising position.

All that was moot now, a discussion for another time and place.

I changed my approach.

"But for all his corruption, bullying, and criminal behavior, nothing suggested DeRump himself committed sexual assault. Or, for that matter, had a thing for underage girls. Getting rid of DeRump does nothing for your daughters, Fred. Whoever hurt them is still out there."

The sheer enormity of what had happened here suddenly hit home.

"My God, Fred, *what have you done?* We talked about this - you knew it had to be Matt Gaetz committing most of these rapes!"

I could see in Fred's face a raw hostility I'd never seen before. With that came the sudden realization that Paul and I had stepped into dangerous territory. This was what Fred had intended all along, and he couldn't care less whether it was specifically DeRump who raped and murdered his girls.

I had just witnessed an execution.

"*You* talked, Debra Ann. No one was listening to what *I* had to say. But don't you go worrying about Mr. Gaetz.

"There was nothing about the past eight years more satisfying than slinging that bastard's body over my shoulder. Musical, really, hearing the son of a bitch's bloody skull playing the banister railings like a glockenspiel on the way down the stairs. A thump of his head for each girl he raped, and a couple more for good measure."

Paul and I grimaced at the grisly visual, but Fred wasn't done.

"He'll spend his eternity searching a muddy lake bottom, trying to find exactly where we tossed his genitals before he died.

"He *was* kind enough to provide us with a detailed confession before he left us - and sorry, no, I don't have the tape with me. It's being put to good use, and once it's served its purpose, I doubt anyone will find it.

"He admitted to raping two dozen girls. Claimed he had nothing to do with what happened to Innocence Grace and Liberty Belle, but DeRump knew who did.

"Given the circumstances at the time of his statement, I believe him."

"Jesus, Fred, he's got kids, a mother - these things are for the law to deal with!"

The sarcasm in Fred's look could have pierced concrete.

"You've seen what we have around here for law enforcement...."

Fred gave a quick glance over his shoulder, then returned to face us with a twisted smile.

"... or at least, used to.

"As to Gaetz's mother, a few hundred of our citizens have gathered on her lawn, right about now. They're playing for her a recording of her son's last words. I understand she's graciously agreed not to press charges. I'm also told she'll be spending the next several days writing checks and making amends to the living rape victims and their families."

"Fred, I can't speak to what Matt Gaetz has done, but even if he might have known something he wasn't telling us, we know DeRump couldn't have raped Innocence Grace. I'm pretty sure I know who did. You've killed the wrong man!"

My words fell upon deaf ears as Fred turned away from me with obvious contempt, his armed friends again inserting themselves between us.

Paul and I stepped back so we could have a moment to process everything in private.

“DeRump’s dying words included serious accusations against Boasteen,” I said, my brain furiously trying to get ahead of this.

“We’re hearing murmurs already - ‘was it possible?’”

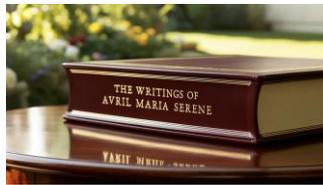
Paul picked up where I’d left off.

“I also heard someone say that Joe Manchin’s been telling people DeRump’s DNA doesn’t match what they found on the older daughter’s pen. Someone in that crowd’s going to have enough sense to put two and two together. They’ll realize there *are* a lot of coincidences needing an explanation, and DeRump couldn’t have gotten away with what he did without outside help.”

I followed up.

“Only the pastor can answer for the role he played; I doubt anyone here is in the mood to wait. Once DeRump’s accusation gets to Fred in any form - and we’ve probably got just a few minutes at most - he won’t hesitate to come after Boasteen to have a serious conversation, or maybe worse.

“Like it or not, we’ve got to get out of here and warn the pastor.”





CHAPTER 51

It took us fifteen minutes to get back to the car and free it from its parking spot. If he held to his regular habits, Boasteen would be at the downtown Assembly of God working on Sunday's sermon. He'd be just a mile from where the mob had murdered DeRump, but in the opposite direction we'd come from Port Lybral County.

We tried the parsonage first, but the young Hispanic housekeeper greeting us at the door said the pastor was in the main church building.

A gray-haired grandmother, placing Bibles, psalm books, and programs into the pews from a rolling cart, pointed us to a small office on the far side of the pulpit.

Paul pulled open the door without knocking. Boasteen sat before a small table, his face lit by the glow of an open laptop. Startled by our sudden appearance, he hurriedly slammed the notebook shut. His voice betrayed irritation as he remained seated and turned toward us.

“You really should knock before entering, you know. This is a private office, and I can’t have people barging in here without announcing themselves first.”

Paul was uncharacteristically short with the reverend.

“Be glad it’s just us, Preacher, because there are hundreds of people not far behind us who’d like a word or two with you, and they’re not concerned about the niceties.

“Listen carefully to what Debra Ann has to say. We’re here trying to save your life.”

I sat on a long bench next to the table against the wall. Paul stood at my side, arms crossed.

“That crowd is tearing Judge DeRump limb from limb as we speak. That shouldn’t be a big surprise to you - we know you manipulated that outcome through Camp Menoposo.

“But what you probably didn’t expect is that DeRump gave you up. That mob’s going to want some answers for your crimes, beginning with the girls you’ve raped. They’ll know at least a part of how you’ve been running this county from the shadows since you got here. There’s going to be a reckoning, and it begins tonight.”

Boasteen’s expression professed outrage, hand on his chest, his tone deeply affronted.

“*Rapes?* How dare you....”

“Knock it off, Pastor. We don’t have the time for your posturing. You need to worry about what Fred Freeman and a few hundred of his angry friends know. Not sure how much of it they’ve figured out, but I’ll share with you what Paul and I’ve learned. I may have to wing some of the minor details - step up to the plate, Reverend, if you have something to add. Do make it snappy, though.

"We know you lied to me in our last conversation. Do you really believe you're such a skillful orator that I'd just take your word? Property records at the courthouse tell me you own the real estate H.I.T.L.E.R. Academy sits on.

"A little more digging revealed that you, Miller, and the Norants were fast friends in grade school. You've employed them in church operations off and on since 2016, when you showed up here. I ran into a wonderful retiree and her husband, longtime members of the church until they could no longer afford the tithes. Both taught at the church and worked with your white nationalist friends.

"So, we know you've set yourself up to control both sides of the argument in this county - God's and Satan's."

"I'm a man of God. I don't serve the Devil."

Paul wasn't having it, glaring at the pastor.

"Save it for your trial, Boasteen. The lady has the floor. Go ahead, Debra Ann; my apologies for the interruption."

"According to Fred, Gaetz swore to his dying breath that he didn't rape Innocence Grace or kill Liberty Belle. I believe him because I know that criminals in general, and sexual deviants in particular, stick with what's working for them. And Gaetz had a very specific and successful method.

"The question I had to ask myself was, 'Why would anyone protect Gaetz?' Yeah, I know he collected blackmail materials on Trance and DeRump, but guys like him never think they're going to get caught until they are. Gaetz would have gathered information on a sheriff's or a sitting judge's illegal acts - a very dangerous thing to do in Narcissus County - only after he knew he'd been outed and needed an edge. That raises the question of who protected Gaetz when he was first busted, before he had anything on anyone?

"For that answer, we have to look at the basics: motive, means, and opportunity. Who had the motive? How about the man who committed those rapes that Gaetz *didn't* do? Take the point of view of *that* guy - is there any better cover for your own sexual assaults than

someone else out there who's getting away with doing the same thing? Better yet, everyone knows it but won't stop him.

"It makes sense you'd be 'that guy.'

"You've accrued immense power, so much that it exceeded what both the Sheriff and the Judge could bring to bear.

"For all that, you made a crucial mistake in crafting your dominion - your authority comes with an enormous restriction no king's ego could accept.

"Your parishioners can't be hearing about you having casual sex or projecting any appearance of impropriety."

Boasteen thought he had an answer.

"I've taken a vow of abstention, so that wouldn't..."

Paul had heard all he wanted from the pastor.

"Nobody here's buying your schtick anymore, Boasteen. Shut up and listen when the lady's speaking."

I suppressed a smile, returning to my summation after Paul nodded at me.

"The trap you'd set for yourself provided all the further motive you required to commit rape, and that the victims were young fed into the power dynamic at the heart of everything you do.

"That leaves means and opportunity. We know the means because Innocence Grace described to us how the assailant ran her down and kidnapped her.

"So, the last question: 'Who had the opportunity to commit these rapes?'

"As we know from what's happened in the Catholic Church, clerical garb can get you all the access you need to the vulnerable, and most victims won't say a word.

"You had that religious authority; still, you were a stranger to most of the community when you first arrived, Pastor, just before you raped Innocence Grace. She wouldn't have known you to point you out. And no one else would have suspected a man of the cloth, much less accused one. If she later recognized you, as I suspect she did, she'd have

realized she'd be calling out a man who was, in the eyes of a teenager, incredibly powerful. And not just as an authority figure, but as the earthly representative of everything her parents had taught her to believe.

"She wrote, 'God's going to take his side.' At first, I thought she killed herself because she felt she had no options. I'm not sure any of us got that part right.

"She was a great kid about whom a preacher was lying. I know a little about how teens think. I suspect she did what she did because it was the only way she knew to hand-deliver the truth directly to her Lord and Savior. She never thought He'd let her remain dead after He knew what you were. She wasn't depressed; she simply believed in Him and what He could do. No need to leave a note; she thought she'd be coming right back."

Boasteen had become desperate to escape.

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about! And I don't have to sit here and listen to these wild, ridiculous accusations."

Placing his hands on the arms of his chair, Boasteen leaned forward as though he intended to rise. When Paul took a half step forward, the preacher thought better of the idea, sitting back in his seat and saying nothing more.

I tipped my head to one side as I looked at the pastor with pursed lips.

"I'm pretty sure the van you used for raping Innocence Grace was the same one you drove to do home visitations with all the old ladies after Sunday services.

"Which brings up a chicken-or-egg question, and I doubt we'll ever know the answer. Did you acquire that second church just so you could rebrand all the vans with your new conglomerate's logo? Or had the takeover already been in the works and simply afforded you an opportunity to cover your tracks?

"Either way, DeRump busting Gaetz had to be a godsend, if you'll pardon the pun. DeRump and Trance were both in debt to you as

their silent partner, and that gave you the leverage to keep Gaetz's rapes under wraps. Plausible deniability - if anyone got too close to the sexual assaults *you* did, you'd just throw Gaetz to the wolves.

"The authorities haven't taken your DNA yet, Pastor, because in ignorant places like this, people presume your profession above doing anything evil. But they'll want a sample now that DeRump's pointed a finger directly at you.

"When they process it, we both know you'll be a match to the DNA on that pen Innocence Grace stabbed you with."



CHAPTER 52

Boasteen had focused his eyes on the near edge of the tabletop, shifting side to side as if sorting through his choices and discarding them one by one.

For my part, I wasn't about to let him off the hook.

"As for Judge DeRump, his ego was out of control, and he was challenging your hold over him. When he killed Trance without your sanction, you knew you had a fundamental problem.

"I don't know how you found out Fred was planning a sting to get DeRump; my guess is the motel manager said something to you in confidence. She'd have no way of knowing your role in any of this.

“But once you saw your opening, you sicced Kamp Karen’s rumor mill on DeRump, letting everyone know what Trance had on the then-Sheriff to exert control over him. You’d been secretly pulling the levers to keep both men in their jobs; I don’t doubt that each was confiding in you as to the blackmail the other was using against him.

“DeRump never saw what was coming. You assumed if he survived, he’d blame his poor fortunes on Fred’s determination to get him; I doubt you even considered that DeRump might out you - he’d never suspect you’d set Camp Menoposo against him.

“You weren’t counting on him making a dying declaration.”

The silence as I waited for Boasteen to say something seemed interminable. He dropped his head, staring at his hands as he wrung them between his knees.

Finally, he spoke, his voice quiet, raising his eyes slightly as if studying something he saw on the far wall under the table.

“Those first few Sundays after I’d come to Nero’s Fiddle, I gave sermons at two of the churches I wanted to merge.

“It was the Sunday before my desire to sin overcame me that first time. An elder needed to talk to me after my early teaching, making me late for my second.

“As I was driving to the other church, I saw Innocence Grace playing in a yard with some of her friends. She’d caught my eye the week before, so I knew she was supposed to be in Sunday school.

“The afternoon it happened came later in the week. Our outreach van needed an oil change, and I was driving it back. I saw her riding her bike, and I knew I wanted her. You try to fight these things, but sometimes it’s just too much.

“I anguished over what I’d done. As God is my witness, I truly did. I didn’t think she’d commit suicide. After she was gone, no one came looking for me, and I realized I was home free. It made it that much harder to resist when I’d have these urges.

"And you're right, Gaetz was my 'get out of jail free' card. Everything was spiraling out of my control, and I needed a backup plan. I didn't mean for any of this to happen; it just did.

"But I swear to you, on all that's holy, I had nothing to do with what happened to Liberty Belle. I've been worried since her death that it could come back on me somehow."

For all his sermons about confession being good for the soul, his own didn't seem to have the same effect on Boasteen.

Still, parts of his story rang true. Fred had once told me that both his daughters would occasionally play hooky from church services, and I knew that rapists often contrived fantasies in which the victim "deserved" the abuse they suffered.

Had the preacher chosen Innocence Grace as his rape victim for no other reason than she'd unknowingly mocked Boasteen's power and authority by skipping Sunday school?

The office was too small for the three of us, and we hadn't closed the door. Hearing something outside the building, Paul saw approaching beams of light from dozens of flashlights and lanterns. The shafts of light were bouncing with the footsteps of the members of a large group walking down the middle of the street.

"We need to get out of here - they're on their way, Debra Ann. He's their pastor; I don't think they'd hurt him, but they're mad, and he's got some 'splaining to do."

Paul avoids coarse language, but now wasn't the time for niceties.

"Preacher, your self-serving excuses won't save you now. There's a crowd coming, and they're pissed off - time for you to come to Jesus. We need to get your miserable ass to a safe place in this church - is there somewhere you can go where it's more secure? Where you'd have access to a microphone for the loudspeaker system?"

"There's a maintenance room up the stairs behind the organ pipes."

“Okay, we need to get there. You’re going to be honest with these people for once in your damned life. So help me God, if I catch you lying, I’ll throw you to them myself.”

I put in my two cents.

“Explain to them the full extent of what you’ve done and leave nothing out. Then, and only then, can you beg for their mercy and your life. But I’d strongly suggest, as a starting point, you turn over the deeds to all the buildings you own to the congregations, and any money you’ve tucked away. Trance and DeRump are both gone, so you’re not holding any cards here, Reverend.

“But....”

Paul was succinct.

“Ah, ah, ah, no buts—now *move!*”

I’d never seen Paul’s military training in action firsthand, and it was eye-opening to see that side of him. But for the moment, we were in as much danger as the cruel pastor and needed to be off the main floor.

We made it to relative safety and got Boasteen’s microphone set up just before the main entrance doors flew open with a loud bang. Fred and several burly men were leading the charge. Paul began punching numbers into his cell phone, reaching out for someone at the Arkansas State Police who’d have the authority and motivation to send reinforcements.

Boasteen gave a reasonably believable *mea culpa*. Paul or I would prod the reverend back to reality whenever he’d go off on a tangent and tried to excuse his behavior.

He acknowledged sharing in the profits from Trance’s, DeRump’s, and their underlings’ various criminal activities, including those of another silent partner, Jeff Bozo.

The pastor confessed to giving them his full support and providing protection from being discovered or punished for any of their crimes. However, he repeated his insistence that he’d had nothing to do with the terrible things that happened to Liberty Belle. He claimed that

the viciousness of Liberty Belle's rape, torture, and murder caught everyone in power - Trance, DeRump, Bozo, and himself - by surprise. They'd immediately assumed it was Gaetz's doing, but the deputy had a solid alibi.

While I hadn't expected Boasteen to include Bozo among the empowered elites he oversaw, there was one notable local oligarch left out of all this.

"Did Ellen Mellons have anything to do with this?"

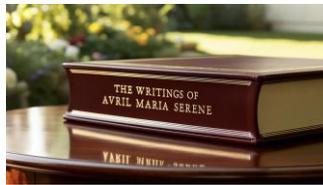
"Oh, no, we weren't even on speaking terms lately. She's all mad at me because she thinks I've been cheating on her with another woman - and I mean rip-snorting *pissed!*"

Paul was peering out of the maintenance closet's small circular window, awaiting the appearance of the cavalry. When he turned and nodded at me, I could tell from the relieved look on his face that help had arrived.

I informed Boasteen that Paul and I were leaving. The reverend wasn't aware that the state police were on the scene; the pastor's back had been to Paul as he spoke to the crowd over the microphone.

"Okay, Pastor, the state's officers are here. You need to help Paul and me negotiate free passage through this crowd, and then you're on your own. Some advice, though - whatever you do from here on out, I'd suggest you keep it on the straight and narrow.

"The people down there have reached their limits for bullshit, and I suspect they'll have long memories of all this."





CHAPTER 53

Narcissus County's power structure was now in turmoil. With fear of their enraged citizenry at the back of their minds, the public officials left standing were far more cooperative than they'd been mere days earlier. Sheriff Bovenno had made no secret of the fact that he was eyeing an opportunity for himself in the upcoming special election. Accordingly, he immediately dropped all charges against Alex Hamilton, released his prisoner, and drove him home to be with his son.

The decision hadn't been entirely Bovenno's. As the new Narcissus County prosecutor explained, "I couldn't have gotten a jury

together. At least one member would have had something to do with solving the county's DeRump problem.

"Wouldn't want to try. Besides, even if there'd been any truth to what they said Hamilton did, Arkansas doesn't have any laws on the books punishing anyone for trying to shoot a turd and only winging it."



Paul and I dropped over to visit Alex shortly after he'd arrived home a free man. Fred was there as well, and the tension between him and me was palpable. I wasn't sure how Alex felt about it - maybe he didn't pick up on the mutual discomfort level, simply didn't care, or presumed it would soon pass.

The conversation quickly turned to vigilante justice. Fred and Alex wasted no time taking their celebratory run around the track, meaning Paul and I were about to get educated, tag-team style.

Alex took the floor first.

"Trance was the first to claim he could publicly shoot someone in the back - that's the only way Trance ever dealt with anyone - with no one saying a word. In certain ways, he was right.

"However, he was wrong about something else - he assumed his decision on where he'd place that bullet would end the matter. For the victim, it certainly would.

"But those things don't happen in a vacuum, and people here don't forget. While we never got to see any punishment for Trance in retribution for what he did to this county, it would have happened eventually. DeRump shouldn't have assumed that Trance had a Teflon umbrella, or that it would automatically protect DeRump once Trance was out of the picture.

"For those reasons, DeRump's day was bound to come, as sure as the tides along the coasts in your part of the world. Cause and effect may play out more slowly here, but once in motion, their interactions

are hard to stop. That's the part of life in Narcissus County that outsiders never seem to see or appreciate.

"I've already given you my take on how these people live in the shadows of fear, how they act, how they survive. For at least a decade, they've had no choice but to become what you saw when you arrived. They had to adapt to live out their daily lives.

"Still, that's not where things end. There are three things that can make fear ineffective. For one, life moves on, and the threat might go away on its own.

"Or it could happen that all the options for escaping the fear turn out to be equally bad, so you might as well fight back.

"Maybe things get to where merely surviving isn't enough anymore, and tackling your fears straight-on doesn't seem such a terrible path to a better life.

"Being afraid can lose its hold over people. If that happens to enough of them, to the point where they're willing to act as a group, suddenly actual change becomes possible. And as you saw for yourselves, that can happen in the blink of an eye if the circumstances are right."

Fred jumped into the conversation. He kept his eyes laser-focused on mine until it became uncomfortable, and I had to look down toward the floor.

"I can't tell you how to write any of this up, Debra Ann, but there are things you need to consider.

"For one, there'll never be an official accounting of DeRump's demise that squares with what either of you believes you saw.

"There'll be 10,000 fingerprints under the blood all over that body by the time it's buried, assuming it's ever found. Some prints will belong to a child, others to their parents, and a few to their elderly grandparents. Can you say with any certainty who among them was trying to kill DeRump? How would you distinguish their prints from those who wanted to save him?"

“A decade of Trance and DeRump cheating, abusing, raping, torturing, and killing our citizens, including our children. Ten years of burying our loved ones in that churchyard, knowing there’s nothing we could do, fearful of saying anything to anyone. Three thousand six hundred and fifty-two days of taking flowers to those gravestones, each bouquet a reminder of what they did and what we didn’t. Half a generation of seeing our families evicted from their homes and land, to be given to Russian-speaking foreigners.

“Had DeRump lived, it would soon have been two decades of that kind of cruelty.

“What you saw last night is what raw freedom looks like, Mrs. Wynn. Being free isn’t about greedy Ferengi appeasing the population with the latest cellphone, big-screen TV, or fast car. Throwing off your chains isn’t pretty. The process is messy; the methods can be terrifying, and somebody invariably gets hurt. You’ve gotten a little taste of what our forefathers had to do, things you assumed we couldn’t or wouldn’t. You were dead wrong about that last part.

“Like so many others, you came here loaded up with your arrogance and your assumptions. You didn’t like our slow pace, so you presumed your role was to speed things up. You provided the one ingredient you saw as necessary to make that happen - you pulled back the curtain on our fear.

“But you couldn’t leave it at that. Because you didn’t recognize, understand, or respect who we are, you decided we were too backward and clueless to save ourselves without your intervention. So, you showed us *your* ways of seeing things, *your* ways of dealing with them, and yes, *your* ways of conquering the challenges *you* see.

“Mrs. Wynn, there are at least two guns in this county for every resident here. The boys, and more than a few girls, learn to kill and skin a rabbit by the time they’re ten or twelve, if not before. People were running enough moonshine through here ninety years ago to quench the thirst of half the state, fighting running battles with twice their number of law enforcement officers trying to stop them.

"These people are more concerned about what's right for their community than they are about the words on pieces of paper written by outsiders to control them.

"Our residents don't know you and your ways, Mrs. Wynn. And you damn straight don't know theirs. Otherwise, you wouldn't have started all this only to be surprised by how it is turning out.

"You can't stop it now. If you think you can fix what happened here after-the-fact, good luck with that.

"As I mentioned, these people don't know you - couldn't say one way or the other who you were, or if you were there at all."

Alex threw his head back as though looking up at the heavens, his palms wide and facing up.

"It was dark that night - no moon, clouds covering the stars. Trees surrounded that field, with no clear view from any road or building. Who's to say what happened for sure? You could accuse different ones of us of being there, but there'll be five hundred, a thousand, or fifteen hundred law-abiding residents who'll say otherwise. And where's the body?"

"Every day, I see in the national papers Never Trumpers, liberals, and independents crying into their tissues about how they keep losing elections to bullies, cretins, and con men. All because they're too namby-pamby to get down to a murderous thug's level and communicate in the language that he understands best. We've talked openly about the fear around here. But progressives avoiding direct confrontation is a brand of cowardice, too, Mrs. Wynn, one that none of you want to discuss... too afraid of what might happen, of course.

"But if things keep going the way they are, then there'll come a day when the reformers eventually learn. They'll get sick and tired of it, too, and someone will help them find their backbone - that's their missing ingredient, Mrs. Wynn. Or it might come to them naturally someday, at a pace they can tolerate. Then they'll have their own dance with not pretty, and messy, and terrifying, and people hurting."

Fred took over.

“But for now, Debra Ann, you have a choice. You call yourself a reporter. In my mind, that means you need to see something through when you start it. You could, of course, run away from what you’ve done and seen, go back to your place in the sun thousands of miles from here, and convince yourself over the next ten years that none of this ever happened. You choose.”

Alex tagged in.

“You came here to show us how things are supposed to be done. Instead, you got schooled on how these people reclaimed their pride and told everyone they don’t want things to be the way they’ve been anymore.

“As to the larger world, I’m not sure we should discount the instincts we’ve evolved through Mother Nature for all these millennia. Given how much those in power obviously hate us, I’m not sure we shouldn’t hate them right back. Pacifying the sons of bitches hasn’t helped any. And the Second Amendment applies to us, too, maybe more than it ever did them.”

Fred delivered the closing argument.

“In Texas, there is in common law the idea of ‘misdemeanor murder.’ It says that, outside of the self-defense and justifiable homicide exceptions to conviction, there are cases where a person can be so hateful, so vile, and so deserving of death generally that the penalties for their murder should be nearly non-existent. Lawyers call it ‘jury nullification.’ Arkansas has its own version, and the twelve men and women in that box give it more credence than you’d think.

“Consider what you saw that night with that thought in mind.”

The message Fred and Alex were sending came across loud and clear. They didn’t need Paul or me anymore. With the chain of command in Narcissus County in complete disarray, the two men believed they could find Liberty Belle’s killer with or without us.

I wasn’t so sure. But if we wanted to stay to see her murder solved, Paul and I were going to have to resign ourselves to a situation

neither of us would have found acceptable in another place under different circumstances.

Paul and I would remain. For all its horror, the events unfolding in front of me were closing a loop. In one lifetime, I would live to bear witness to the horrible sexual assault and suicide of Innocence Grace, the rape, torture, and murder of Liberty Belle, and to see freedom reborn in a small town. I needed to be an active participant in the story's conclusion.

The topic turned to Alex's thoughts about the missing body he'd alluded to earlier.

"DeRump liked to leverage his roots for political gain whenever he could. Sadly for him, there's nothing left for anyone to bury back in Breathitt County, Kentucky. Most of DeRump will end up somewhere in Nero's Fiddle's sewer system; some parts may land in the septic tanks and outhouses beyond the town's limits."

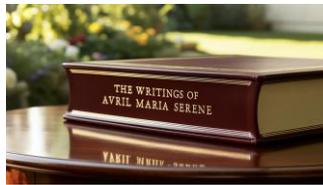
The callousness of Alex's remark caused Paul to glance at me, and I could see he was about to say something.

But Fred's reaction was quicker. I suspected - perhaps 'hoped' might be more accurate - he was feeling at least a little guilt over his part in DeRump's demise.

"Out of deference to Paul and Debra Ann, we need to acknowledge we're talking about the remains of a human being here. We should show a *little* respect...."

Alex's eyes betrayed not a hint of remorse as he raised them to meet Fred's while he leaned over the arm of his easy chair and spat into the base of the fake ficus next to him.

"Well, Fred, as to that, opinions vary...."





CHAPTER 54

Authorities hadn't found Judge DeRump's body, and the popular consensus was that they never would. There'd be no traditional funeral service. Instead, his ex-wife had suggested a memorial dinner for the deputies who had once worked for him. Since their divorce, the former Mrs. DeRump had become the owner of a new eatery in town that had grown quite a list of satisfied customers in its brief history. She insisted on doing the cooking.

DeRump had never been especially popular, and the general expectation in town was that the dinner would be a quiet affair attended by a few dozen people. However, as word got out, more and

more of the residents made plans to attend - not to mourn DeRump's life, but to congratulate themselves on his demise.

Their hostess wanted to serve the deputies first, giving them time to grieve privately. Later, she'd open the event to the public.

The turnout was surprising; half the town showed up at some point. And the table spread *was* impressive: casseroles, soups, chili, even lasagna, with Sloppy Joes and sausage pizzas for the kids.

The get-together itself went off flawlessly, providing closure for DeRump's friends and co-workers and a day of remembrance, even subdued celebration, for other residents.

It wasn't until the next day that the trouble began.

Fred had taken Joe Manchin aside, knowing the man could never keep his mouth shut. Shortly after, the only hospital in Nero's Fiddle reported an unexpected surge of emergency-room arrivals demanding to have their stomachs pumped. To a person, they were all former and current deputies who'd once served with DeRump.

Fred wasn't speaking to me, so I asked Alex what Fred had said to Joe Manchin.

"Oh, that - everyone had heard the story of his ex dumping DeRump over her watching the movie *Fried Green Tomatoes*. But none of the deputies had ever watched the film. Fred told Manchin about the line in it where Sipsy says, 'The secret's in the sauce!'

"I think Fred just wanted to make sure the deputy understood the finer points of what that meant."



Dr. Fouci, the Port Lybral County coroner, called me to ask that I stop by - he had an update for me, and he'd found something in Liberty Belle's remains that he couldn't identify.

He began with good news he'd received from the state's lab.

"We've got DNA from two different males. Neither turns up in CODIS. However, one is an exact match to what was on Innocent Grace's school pen."

How could that be?

"Dr. Fouci, something's not right. We know Pastor Boasteen raped Innocence Grace - he confessed - but he's got a solid alibi for when Liberty Belle was murdered...."

The coroner nodded, his eyebrows raised as he bit his upper lip.

"I wasn't aware Boasteen had confessed to the first rape. I'll get a DNA sample from him to confirm the match to what we got off the pen, and to my first sample from Liberty Belle's murder. The lab results are enough to get a search warrant if we need one.

"But honestly, that the first sample is a match to someone who wasn't actually there is no big surprise. As I mentioned when you visited earlier, we know it didn't get there naturally.

"We'll assume for now that's Boasteen's seminal fluid in the vaginal and rectal samples, though we can't say he raped her because of the circumstances.

"The lab extracted the other male DNA from epithelial cells in small quantities, likely from incidental skin-to-skin contact, sweat, or saliva, possibly transferred from clothing."

I'd anticipated part of the answer to my next question, but I needed confirmation.

"I read in the local paper about DeRump giving blood during the tornado aftermath. He was trying to resurrect his image with Narcissus County voters after Trance kicked him to the curb. His blood type was no secret; the article made a big deal of it, trying to get other residents to donate. Any chance that the second DNA contributor was a universal donor, type O negative?"

"No, Debra Ann - I'm sorry, but it isn't DeRump's DNA. I've requested approval so we can engage private services to find familial DNA matches, but our budget director hasn't responded yet. I'll send a

revised letter dropping that part of my request around the Boasteen sample. That'll cut costs and help with the approval process."

"If you'll recall, I mentioned the first time we met that we'd found a tiny piece of paper embedded in Liberty Belle's wounds; we think it may be a label from the pipe that was used to inseminate her. Our tech raised some of the lettering, and we can see a portion of the UPC code and make out part of the brand name. The first character we can see looks like the letter 'D,' followed by 'OGE,' all caps. Hopefully, the killer bought it new; we'll check with all the suppliers in the area and see if we can narrow down who sold it."

Dr. Fouci turned away from us to retrieve a small baggie from a cupboard. He knitted his brows together as he handed it to Paul.

"And then there's this. It was in the casket with the remains. I can't place exactly what it is."

Peering at it for a moment, Paul passed the baggie to me with a look that told me he had no idea what it was. Dr. Fouci opened it to show me the contents.

There in the palm of his nitrile-gloved hand was an oddly shaped piece of stiff wire. It looked like it'd been wrapped around a pencil to form a series of uniform coils stretching out for two and a half inches. At either end of the coils, a short straight length of wire protruded, ending in a tiny hook.

"Might be relevant, might not," Dr. Fouci explained. "We would just like to know what it is to see if it's a puzzle piece we need to worry about."

I knew at once what it was... *but whose was it?*

"Doc, how long was Liberty Belle's hair?"

"She started cutting it short when the school year began - she'd made the swim team, so...."

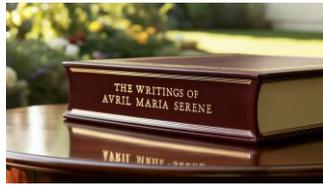
His answer told me who'd killed Liberty Belle.

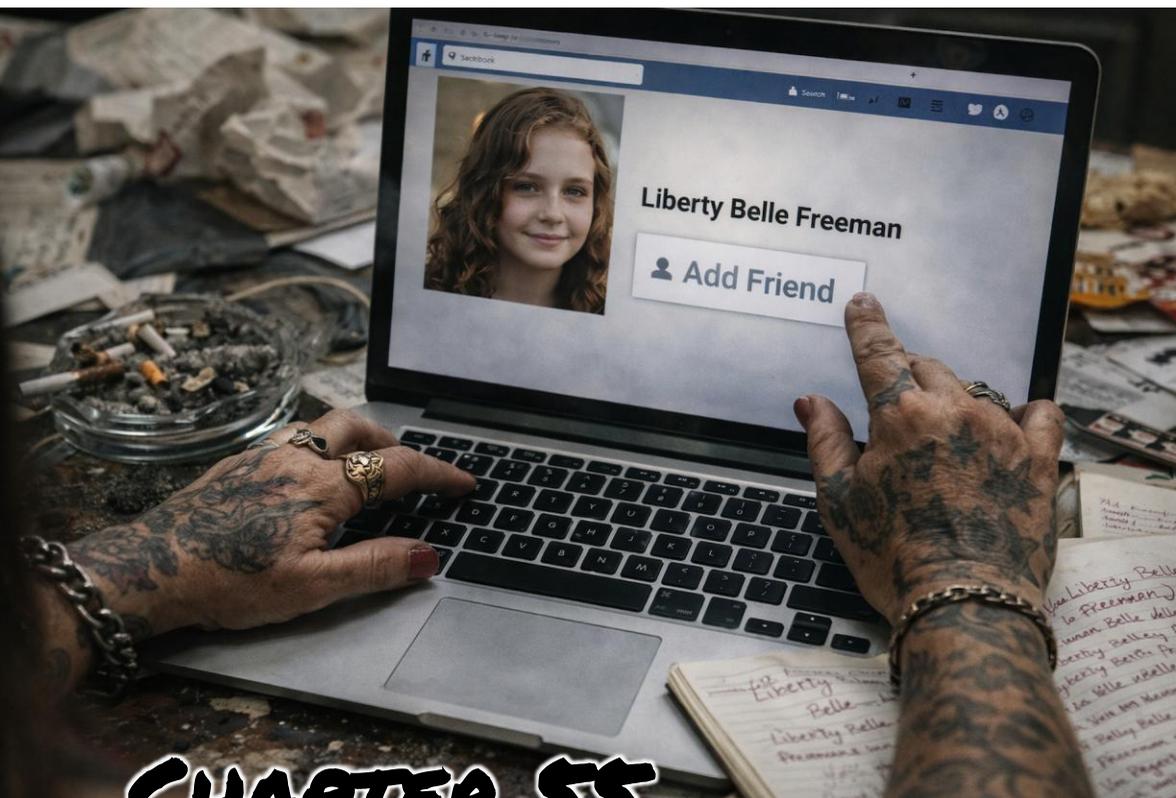
"Paul, it wasn't just Fred and Boasteen who were playing all of us. We need to get back to Nero's Fiddle as quickly as we can. I'll drive - can you do me a favor and call the Arkansas State Police?"

“Ask your contacts there to put together an apprehension team and meet us at the courthouse in Nero’s Fiddle. Tell them we can identify Liberty Belle’s murderer, and the killer has the resources to flee the country on a moment’s notice. I’ll explain everything once we get there.”

Dr. Fouci’s voice betrayed his frustration with our quick exit as the door closed behind us.

“Care to share?”





CHAPTER 55

Arkanas State Police Lieutenant Nathaneal Greene and four of his subordinates met us on the courthouse steps, his expression making it clear he was there only at his superiors' orders.

The lieutenant harbored strong doubts about us and what we wanted to do. Still, he was open to hearing what we had to say. After twenty minutes of intense conversation, he was on board.

I made a phone call to confirm that the subject of our interest was at work. Paul and I would lead the way, with the officers discreetly taking up positions around the building until I gave them the signal to move in.



Musky Mellons sauntered onto the sales floor shortly after I announced myself at the rental counter. When I asked if there was somewhere we could speak confidentially, she invited us into her private office. With her brunette hair in a tight bun and her enormous chest overflowing the too-tight black camisole under her white blouse, she gave off a cougar-in-heat vibe that sucked the attention from everything around her.

As Mellons ushered us in from her office door, I entered first and took a seat at her invitation.

Paul was still standing when Mellons pounced. Hooking her arm around his and touching the forefinger of her other hand to his chin, she caught him by surprise.

“Hey, who have we here?” Mellons purred. “I’ve been seeing you around town, handsome.”

Bouncing her head sideways toward my tummy, she added, “Look, if you’re not getting what you need at home, come see me sometime.”

Paul had pulled his head back, pushing her off him with both arms and sliding toward me.

Oh, please.

“Pull in your claws, Mellons.”

I rolled my eyes at Paul.

“This isn’t a social call.”

Undaunted by the rebuke and wagging her hips inside her tight red skirt, Mellons strutted in her black stiletto heels around the end of her desk. Plopping into the high-backed leather seat and crossing her legs as she leaned back, she kept her eyes on Paul.

“What can I do you for? Is there a particular model that’s caught your fancy?”

Mellons gave Paul an over-the-top wink. The look of disgust Paul returned to her would have destroyed most women.

I followed it up with a few words of free advice.

"You'll want to save your energy, Mellons. You're going to need it for fending off the rats in your jail cell."

That seemed to give her pause.

"Honey, the handcuffs I don't mind, if that's your idea of fun. But what in the world could you think I've done that would land me behind bars?"

She batted her eyes at Paul. I had a sudden urge to reach across the desk and slap her into sensibility, but I choked it back.

"We'll start with the abduction, forcible rape, torture, and murder of Liberty Belle Freeman. The state may add other charges, but that'll keep you locked away until they sort it all out."

Now I had her full attention.

"Listen, lady...."

"Debra Ann."

"Fine, Debra Ann, then. You have no right to come onto my property and make such outrageous allegations!"

Mellons stood, a snarl on her face and her forefinger shaking as she pointed at her door.

"I didn't rape or murder anyone - now get the hell off my lot!"

"Sit down, Mellons. You're going to want to hear what we - I - have to say, because the moment we leave, Arkansas State Police officers will take you into custody."

Dropping her arm and placing both palms on the desktop as she stood there considering my words, Mellons finally threw her hands up after a few seconds, letting herself fall back into her seat. Curiosity, if nothing else, had gotten the best of her.

"What the fuck... sure, tell me your little fairy tale, I could use a good laugh."

"I'm guessing it went down something like this: We know you had a thing for Joel Boasteen, and that you and he had an on-again/off-

again affair for several months. At some point, you heard about the pastor seeing Inet Buhnrop on the side, and that he much preferred her attentions over yours - he'd stuck with her a long time, including throughout your little fling.

"That had to piss you off; I'm told you have serious jealousy tantrums, and several people have told us of incidents where you became aggressive when you didn't get your way. The term we keep hearing is 'anger management issues.'"

"If getting upset when someone's dissed is the standard you're using, you're describing half the people in this town," Mellons sneered. "You'll have to do a lot better than that."

I continued on, undaunted.

"It ate at you for weeks, I imagine. I don't know how you learned about Boasteen's rape of Innocence Grace Freeman - pillow talk, perhaps, or maybe he mumbles in his sleep. He may have asked you for some unusual role-play. It's possible you discovered something in his living quarters that gave him away.

"Doesn't really matter how you figured it out - either way, you had the basis for your plan to stick it to the reverend.

"Step one was to give him one last romp in the hay before you set about royally screwing him over. You needed an ample supply of his fresh semen. Once you had that, you'd set the rest of your plan in motion.

"Your next move was to ask Liberty Belle to friend you on Facebook. She wouldn't, so you found another way to reach her. Once you'd kidnapped the poor girl, you shot her multiple times in the elbows, knees, and feet with two different weapons to keep her from escaping. You raped her in every orifice possible with Boasteen's semen on the end of a piece of steel plumbing pipe. You repeated the assaults with pinecones to conceal the marks left by the pipe's threads.

"Once law enforcement arrested Boasteen for what you'd done to Liberty Belle, you'd be free to go after Buhnrop."

Mellons thrust out her lower lip in a quivering pout.

"I want a lawyer."

I took those words as the confirmation I wanted.

"Of course you do. But the problem you have, Mellons, is that I'm not law enforcement. I don't Mirandize the accused.

"The uniformed ladies and gentlemen out there in your parking lot are here to ask you questions as a person of interest, or perhaps a material witness, as they say. You'll have to talk to them about your need for an attorney. They've said nothing to me about when they'd be charging you with your crimes. But then again, they don't answer to me, so who knows?"

Mellons seemed to want out of our conversation.

"So why the hell are you even here?"

"Me? I'm just talking to hear my own voice. You're still here because you need to find out what I've learned.

"You knew the horrific memories this town has over Innocence Grace's rape and eventual suicide, and you saw that pain resurfacing every time there was another rape or missing girl.

"I'm assuming you guessed that DeRump and his deputies were behind at least some of those crimes, or maybe you overheard something about Matt Gaetz. You likely figured DeRump wouldn't look too deeply into another sexual assault for fear of exposing one of his officers or maybe a friend. A plea bargain might have one of them turning on DeRump, telling investigators what they knew of DeRump's cover-up, or even involvement."

Mellons riveted her eyes on me, leaning forward in her chair to catch every word.

"But they'd have to, at a minimum, put on a show of investigating the defiling of a girl who ended up dead. The public and the victim's parents would demand, at the very least, the taking of a rape kit and the preservation of her clothing. DeRump could only cross

his fingers that his deputies and cohorts were at least smart enough to wear condoms and protective clothing. You assumed he'd have the rape kits processed through the state's lab.

“Once they had the reverend's semen, and considering the viciousness of Liberty Belle's rape, torture, and murder, you had to figure Boasteen was done - stick a fork in him.”



CHAPTER 56

Musky Mellons began playing with a stray lock of hair that had escaped her bun, nervously twisting it around her forefinger as she listened.

It was time I finished this up.

“Your master plan assumed several things it shouldn’t have. Those evidence bags and rape kits weren’t going anywhere near a lab.

“When Trance was Judge and DeRump the Sheriff, they had an assured mutual destruction covenant between them, something that kept their unholy alliance from wavering. Trance likely had a mole in the Sheriff’s department. The turncoat was tucking away any materials he

could get his hands on that potentially implicated DeRump or the Sheriff's deputies; those would never again see the light of day unless DeRump crossed Trance. The Judge had to counter the evidence DeRump had collected over the years against Trance.

"You had no clue that Joel Boasteen had been propping up DeRump, and that the Sheriff would therefore protect the pastor at all costs. DeRump never asked for a proper autopsy of Liberty Belle because he'd already jumped to the conclusion that the pastor was the likely doer. Your plan was effectively dead in the water. The only result DeRump wanted from the coroner was the body disassembled enough to make an open casket impractical, and cremation the best final option.

"But the family demanded a traditional burial; DeRump had no way to force his will against public pressure.

"You couldn't have known that we'd subsequently exhume Liberty Belle's body and take it to the Port Lybral County Coroner."

Mellons suddenly seemed to realize that, despite the road bumps I was presenting, her original plan might still work.

"When the new coroner checks out the DNA, he'll find out it's not mine."

I cocked my head to one side, a half-smile on my lips.

"Did I mention DNA? How did you know the coroner would find DNA on a corpse you should know nothing about, Mellons? After all, Narcissus County had already processed the remains and buried them once, and there's a decent chance a rapist would have worn a condom, wouldn't you think?"

"Oh, my bad, trick question. Still, you're half right. But you interrupted my story - don't you want to know how it ends?"

Mellons's face was now expressionless, but I knew the wheels inside her head were spinning.

"When law enforcement didn't interview Boasteen, much less arrest him, after the Narcissus County Coroner's office received Liberty Belle's body, you knew something had gone badly wrong with your first

plan. You didn't know DeRump had short-circuited the autopsy process. For all you knew, the coroner was taking a deeper look than you wanted, and you worried they might find something that tied back to you.

"And while the DNA you inserted in the victim would present no direct threat to yourself, you didn't know if it would do what you wanted it to. You couldn't know to what extent the planted DNA might have degraded, or whether any of it was still viable.

"Once it had become public knowledge that you'd fallen out with the pastor, you couldn't point an accusing finger at him without that evidence; otherwise, it's just a 'he-said-she-said' spat between ex-lovers, albeit gone nuclear.

"You needed a backup patsy, just in case.

"You *do* have amazing luck, and it worked for you yet again. DeRump already had the goods on Boasteen for Innocence Grace's rape. DeRump's leverage became overwhelming, in his eyes, once he assumed that the pastor also killed Liberty Belle. In theory, Boasteen would need DeRump's silence much more than anything DeRump required of the pastor; after all, DeRump had gotten himself elected Judge and wouldn't face the voters again for years.

"Boasteen was therefore in no position to object if DeRump took out Trance, so why should DeRump ask the reverend's permission and risk him warning the former Judge?

"But Boasteen *hadn't* killed Liberty Belle, meaning that the vise-like grip DeRump thought he had over the pastor was non-existent. Enraged by DeRump's murder of Trance, Boasteen was more than happy to take DeRump out of the picture.

"DeRump had no connection to Liberty Belle other than gross incompetence and evidence-tampering. Still, DeRump would be a perfect scapegoat if your original plan did not deliver Boasteen as Liberty Belle's murderer.

"You turned up the heat on DeRump.

“I’m sure you repurposed your first idea, dropping the reverend a hint or two that DeRump might have killed Liberty Belle just to incriminate Boasteen.

“You did everything possible to point the finger at the new Judge. You did what you could to ensure we got the help we wanted to gather evidence against DeRump and his crew. I’m sure you greased whatever wheels you could to make sure no one disturbed us going through Trance’s place. If you’d known we were digging up Liberty Belle’s remains, you’d have jumped in and lent us an extra hand.

“For his part, Boasteen didn’t waste a moment turning the Kamp Karen rumor mill against DeRump once he’d heard that Fred was planning a sting operation against the new Judge. When DeRump gave up the pastor to that mob right before they tore the Judge apart, he effectively confirmed that he’d been a genuine threat to Boasteen.

“Even with that base now covered, you’d have preferred the autopsy publicly call out the pastor’s DNA to fulfill your quest for revenge. You still didn’t know what the Narcissus County coroner was doing, or what risk there was that you’d left evidence of your involvement somewhere around that body.

“For the record, the Port Lybral County coroner *did* find DNA.”
A look of relief flashed across Mellons’s face.

“The joke’s on you, then. That DNA won’t match me; it belongs to whoever killed that poor little girl. I knew all along that Joel did both of Fred’s daughters, but I’ve been protecting the reverend since we used to be close.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at that.

“Had you let me finish, I would have told you there were *two* male sources of DNA discovered on the body. Dr. Fouci also found epithelial cells belonging to a different man.”

Her chutzpah was astounding.

“I’m telling you, one of them is Boasteen, and you need to be looking for that other guy, then. Perhaps you weren’t paying attention, but I’m a woman.”

As Mellons shoved her ample breasts towards Paul, I could only shake my head.

“You may not be aware of this, Mellons, but gender surgery doesn’t change your DNA. The DNA in those skin cells is going to match yours.

“We know you used some kind of pipe to inseminate Liberty Belle with Boasteen’s semen, meaning those epithelial cells are the ones that tell the true story.

“There’s just one question I have left for you, Mellons; mere curiosity on my part - you don’t have to answer if you’d rather not. But where *did* you get that pipe? What exactly is ‘DOGE’?”



After the Arkansas State Police had carted Mellons away, Paul and I were back in Liberty Belle’s Trailblazer, heading to our motel room. He had a quizzical look on his face.

“When we were at Dr. Fouci’s office, how in the world did you snap so quickly to the fact this was Mellons’s doing?”

“There were two things, actually. The first was Mellons’s not-so-subtle hints to anyone who would listen that Stephen Miller was molesting ‘children,’ implying boys *and* girls, when it was so obvious Miller’s a preferential pedophile, strictly little boys. I mean, seriously, take just one look at that face - it screams, ‘I am a highly specialized pervert!’

“Little thing, nuanced, but I knew then that Mellons was a manipulator; she meant her use of the broader term to widen the group of parents who would find Miller threatening. That’s something you’d do if you had an axe to grind. That she was vengeful toward former lovers who’d spurned her stuck in my mind.

“But when Dr. Fouci showed us that formed piece of wire, it sealed the deal - I knew instantly she’d done it.”

“So, what was it about that wire?”

“You know the big hair clip I sometimes wear when I don’t have time to pin a proper bun?”

“Oh, yeah, the thing I call ‘the claw.’ You get mad at me when I use it as a chip clip.”

“Pretty much every teenage girl, and quite a few grown-ups, who’ve ever grown their hair out have owned one of those. When you’re a kid, the ones you buy are from the dollar store, made of cheap plastic.

“The bigger ones are always catching or banging on something and getting broken. There’s a little spring inside them that provides the pressure keeping the ends of the hair clip clamped together. When the hair clip breaks, the spring falls out. The wire that Dr. Fouci showed me was one of those springs.

“There was only one woman in town I knew of that could have left that piece of wire along with male epithelial cells. And only one who couldn’t have been female as a teenager; she wouldn’t have learned not to buy the cheap plastic hair clips. And the thing about rich adults is that they’re often frugal to a fault.

“I’m willing to wager that the coroner’s staff is all male - any woman who bought her fashion accessories at a discount store would know what that wire was.”

Paul grinned as he slowly nodded.

“Nice job, kid. I’d never have picked up on that without help.”

I welcomed Paul’s admission, even as I felt a wave of deep sorrow washing over me.

“Thanks, Paul. Still, it’s hard to feel any satisfaction about solving these two cases. Such tragedies... and so unnecessary. Losing Innocence Grace was horrific enough, especially in a small town like this.

“But the death of Liberty Belle was far and away the most heinous I’ve ever dealt with in my career.

“Not much could have made it any worse, save for one thought.

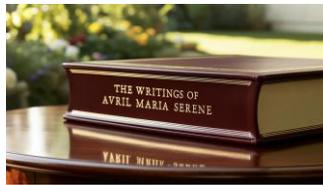
“Musky Mellons’s obsession with Joel Boasteen was irrational, even insane, no doubt spurred on by the earlier rejection from Stephen

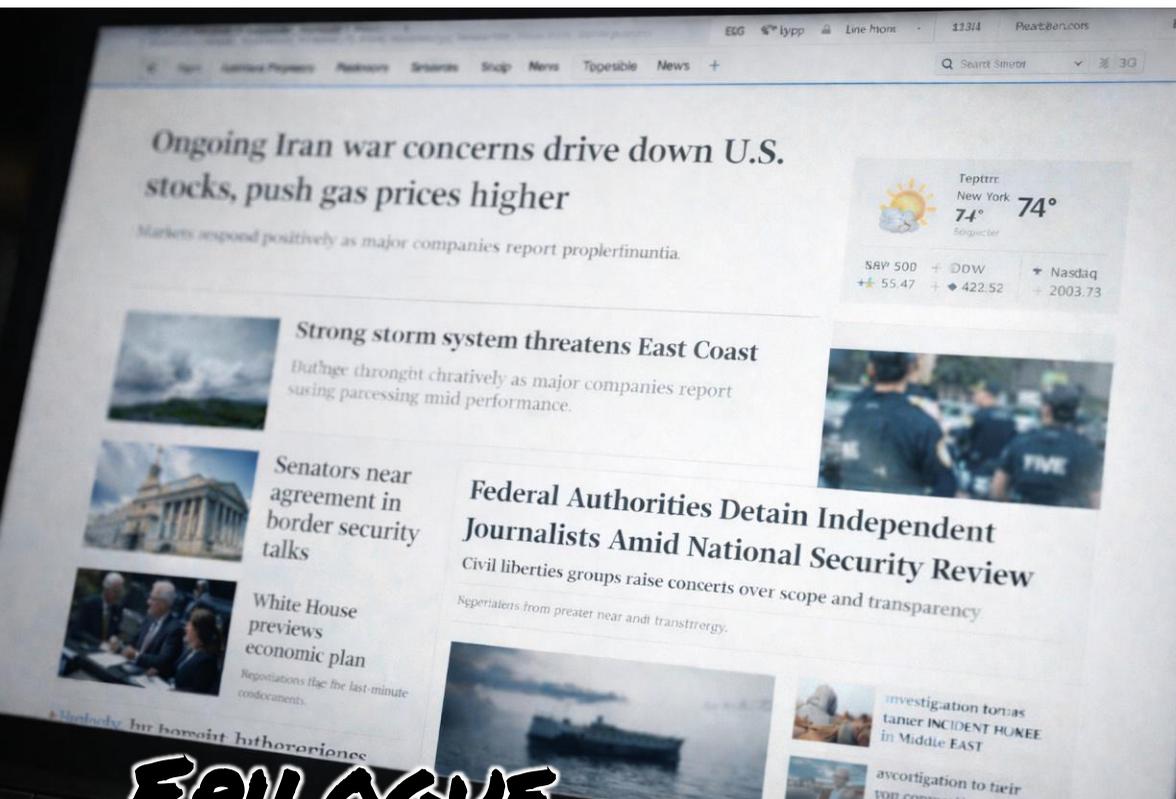
Miller. And no matter how diabolical and evil her plan for resolving that obsession was, she predicated it on a simple untruth based on pure ignorance.

“Musky Mellons killed and tortured Liberty Belle because, for all the woman’s supposed genius and with a full complement of male DNA running through her veins, she couldn’t figure out that Buhnrop was ‘Pornhub’ spelled backward. Or that ‘Inet’ is shorthand for the internet.

“Boasteen wasn’t cheating with another woman.

“He was spending his nights, likely without pants, in the glow of his computer screen, chasing internet porn.”





EPILOGUE

I'd held Matt and Mike's rapt attention through nearly all the second part of the story, and they were bombarding me with questions.

Matt was curious if there was more that I hadn't shared.

"Mom says you're writing a book; have you finished it yet?"

"I'm writing the epilogue now, as a matter of fact. I'll give your mom a copy, and she can decide if she wants you to read it."

"Wait, does that mean there are parts you didn't tell us?"

For the version of the story I'd shared with them this afternoon, I *had* left out elements I felt were unsuitable for younger minds. Still, it was best for them to wait and see, at least for now.

Shifting my eyes rapidly side-to-side with my mouth hanging open, I gave the boys my 'lying crook interview' schtick.

"Maybe... maybe not..."

"C'mon, Aunt Deb, that's just not right!"



Returning to San Diego brought with it a renewed appreciation for its sunny warmth and the familiarity of our home and friends. I was eagerly expecting Thomas Ethan's arrival; I couldn't wait to welcome him into the relative peace of our regular lives.

Still, the repercussions of our visit to Nero's Fiddle would resonate for a long time.

The death threats came in droves after I published the first articles on Liberty Belle's murder and everything related to it.

They've tapered off since, but now and then, I'll still get nasty messages with postmarks or e-mail return addresses in Narcissus County. The ones that bother me most are the childlike scrawls written in crayon, reminders that the problems of the area are still being carried forward.

Still, we'd made lifelong friends among the people we'd met in Arkansas. Betsy Ross Freeman and I began writing to one another. Alex Hamilton and Paul were also communicating regularly, debating current affairs and exchanging chess moves via e-mail.

Ellen "Musky" Mellons had just begun her long stint on death row. Joel Boasteen pleaded guilty to avoid a lengthy public trial, and the presiding judge sentenced him to a thirty-year prison term.

And in the messages that he exchanged with Paul, Alex revealed he'd yet again upset expectations, though this time with actions rather than words.

Local newspapers had published notices of a special election to replace the Narcissus County Judge; in a move that stunned everyone, Alex Hamilton jumped into the race. Running on the slogan, "It takes a

real A-hole to protect you from someone who claims he's not," he ran against Joe Manchin, the wishy-washy DeRump deputy and double agent, and... *won!*

County Judge Alex Hamilton... I never thought I'd see *that* day. Still, I eventually settled into the idea. Crass as he may have been and jarring as I found imagining him in judicial robes, I never doubted Alex for a moment after he'd told us how much he cared for the citizens of Narcissus County.

I suppose it shouldn't have surprised me that the people who knew him best would have seen it, too.

I'd written several well-received articles for the national media, supported by a podcast and blog. Though follow-up investigations had fully resolved what happened to Innocent Grace and Liberty Belle, there were parts of the story I could never reveal as journalism.

My involvement in the original planning of events that would end up as murder by mob meant two things: I couldn't be objective, and I might well have placed myself in legal jeopardy, albeit unintentionally. Worse, my participation in robbing Liberty Belle's grave, breaking into the former Judge Trance's home, and other activities that Narcissus County authorities could construe as obstruction of justice or evidence-tampering was *intentional*.

Any details I revealed about those things would cast aspersions upon Paul, Fred, and indirectly, Narcissus County's new Judge.

I certainly didn't want to spend Thomas Ethan's college fund on lawyers. Nor was I looking forward to bouncing back and forth between here and Arkansas just to sit in courtrooms all day during his formative years.

Clearly, I couldn't tell the full story as fact.

I had the idea to render the complete narrative of what happened to Innocent Grace and Liberty Belle as a work of fiction. But I was concerned that a book would fire up all the haters again.

Paul and I talked it over. He was as uncomfortable with the downsides as I was.

“I’m more than a little concerned about the bullies and thugs running much of the country today. How can you tell everything, especially if you include much of what Alex said, without putting yourself in real danger that they’ll come after you and your career?”

“I *do* worry about that. Still, as a forensic scientist, you take on some of the same risks when you’re supporting law enforcement. And, for better or worse, these things go with my job, too. You can’t be a journalist if you don’t have the courage to report the facts.

“Bullies are, by definition, cowardly; they attack only when they have an obvious advantage of strength, weaponry, or numbers. And the modern iteration likes to hide behind the anonymity of the internet, where their thoughts can fester and become serious threats inside their echo chambers.

“I’m not worried about the book itself. No matter how well I write it, I’d expect to get poor reviews from Trumpies; attacking what they don’t understand defines them. I can turn those around in my advertising: ‘What about this novel is so frightening to them?’

“That so many are illiterate helps. Few will have actually read anything I’ve written, so it’ll be easy to call them on it. Still, whatever they want to put out there, I’ll take it as a badge of honor and welcome knowing exactly who they are. Others may come after me anonymously, but that just underscores their cowardice.

“They can make marketing the book a little riskier and more difficult. I may have to self-publish if established publishers fear reprisals from Trump and his sycophants.

“Still, I have no right to complain.

“I saw an article about a 102-year-old World War II vet who won an Oscar for an interview he did. He’d landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day. It reminded me of the accomplishments and heroism of the Greatest Generation and what they suffered to stop Hitler and the Japanese.

"All anyone has asked of me is to author stories. I should feel lucky and grateful that I've drawn such a limited role, one for which I'm well-suited.

"Still, my biggest priority now is not putting Thomas Ethan in harm's way. For that matter, I'd really prefer not placing any family members, friends, or associates in a Trumpie's crosshairs if I can avoid it.

"I'll write the novel using a pseudonym."

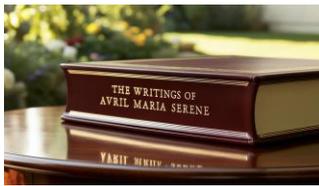
I winked at Paul.

"Maybe as a headstrong, pretty Latina..."

My mood sobered as I considered the implications.

"Do you think they'd send ICE after me?"







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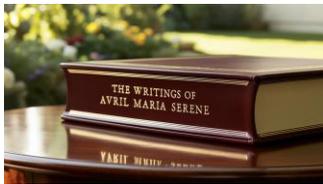
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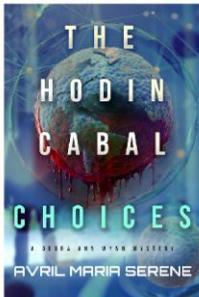
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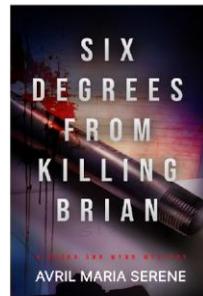
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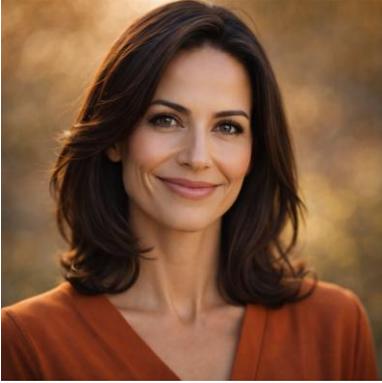
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