



Sara E. Rice

On Emma's Bluff

Sara, this presentation is dedicated to your memory... and if you're living please let me know. - Dave

Introduction

From the pen of Dave Horton:

It is time I acted and permitted Sara's ramblings to see the light of day. She left this manuscript in my care when I was assisting her to edit it in 2001. I met her online and she over time exposed herself and her situation to me. Her plight was such that she feared for her life... and then she disappeared.

Was I hoodwinked into believing in her existence since she was an online character or did she really meet with misfortune. It's been over ten years and I have yet to find her again. Sara, if you are out there, please contact me again. Perhaps your labor of love will catch your eye somewhere and we might be brought back into contact.

Meanwhile you did tell me to share your novel with friends so I will not put your work up for sale but I will share it with other authors. I hope they enjoy it with the same enthusiasm as I when I first read it.

And so I present for your enjoyment:

On Emma's Bluff by Sara Elizabeth Rice copyright 1998 All rights reserved by Sara E. Rice. For John

INTRODUCTION:

(begun 1/3/98 10.44 pm S E Rice)

"But you can, you can have it all."

"Lisa," she said, not hearing Irene, "You don't understand. I was living with an anthropologist in Nepal when I was sixteen. I was booting heroin by nineteen. Rehab, thank you Jesus, it took, for two years. Married to a man eighteen years my senior by the time I was twenty-five. And now at thirty, thank you, today"

She stopped to pour another shot and raised it to the bare kitchen bulb studying the contents. "Happy Birthday Rita!!!" She cheered herself. I am the mother of two and I have done it all and there is nothing, and I mean nothing left to excite me! I am depressed, I said Depressed. And do you

know how I define that?

I define that this way, if my sister, Rose were to call me in the morning and say {"Surprise, we just won a thousand dollar shopping spree... blah, blah, blah, blah....} and I would only say "why did you call and wake me up!!!! Damn you, go away!! Hell no I don't want to go shopping......

...but this all happened many years later....

(I seem to remember it as 1985, no, the earliest copy says 1984. Let's see that was after Hal Milton, my new (ha) employer cornered me in the back warehouse and forced me to stand there and watch while he took his ugly sixty two year old "thang" out and played with it. I remember puking my guts out when I finally reached mine and Winston's (husband numero uno / correction perpetually unemployed husband numero uno, [his mother told me he was too sensitive to work] "you know suicide runs in his family") apartment. I told Winston as soon as I was able to speak clearly again.

And like the true gentleman he was, he personally got up early the next morning and drove me back to the scene of the crime and went in while I waited in our broken down Nova and got down on his knees and begged Hal to take me back.....because we needed the money......

So the next night while Winston was locked in his own private room (despite our poverty he required a two bedroom apartment so that he could have his own space {where he believed pennies thrown on the floor, never to be picked up again brought the muses} I began my first and only to date completed novel. In all fairness and honesty, for I will into eternity hold a very special love for Winston and even to this date can not resent even a moment of the years I spent with him, Winston is the most glorious, natural, by birth, writer I have ever known, no matter how much he betrayed you Richard (and Richard I hope you read this some day and know how sorry I still feel.....)

My most sincere prayer be that he one day over comes his own self hatred enough to allow his volumes of words to be published. The world would be enriched for this. (in them you can recognize me under the character he calls Peck, she, I mean me, never even survived into the 1980's, alas) But like my own version of Mary Shelly I took to my hand written notebooks to kill the time and fight my demons (I often think I was anxious to be married the first time because of my own irrational fears of the closet door being open at night as well as the closet door being closed and those things which force us to tuck all of our body parts under the

sheets. (and in my case, a copy of the King James Bible across my chest)

It may not be a very good book but I tell you, writing it has forever (and I mean having since lived even alone in the darkest nights in places that give others the willies in broad daylight) cleansed and banished my old fears.

If only one reader should find his or herself to be equally redeemed, then it will have been worth all of the most nasty of reviews this should ever receive.until we meet again on the 99cent discount table......sincerely

Sara E Cook Rice

Chapter 1

"There has to be some better way to do this," Emma thought sharply, clearly enunciating, inside her own head. "I hate, I mean I truly HATE peeling potatoes."

She sat straddled on the cane backed, goatskin, spotted black and brown on white covered chair, which she could never fail to remember, this being the same chair about which her Aunt Liz was constantly berating her. At the supper table Emma had the habit of leaning back and balancing on the two rear legs.

"You are going to fall! You are going to break that chair! You are going to..." - 'scream out loud,' Emma often finished in her own thoughts.

She looked down into the white with blue speckled enamel tub at the mess of slimy peels. Even on her wrist the peels clung. So rapt was she in her own dialogue that when the front door slammed, she jumped. It was only Aunt Liz, and then she noticed the harsh stiletto of her Aunt's heels as Liz pattered rapidly into and beyond the kitchen. Her familiar baby step run was distorted by the weight of her gait.

Liz moved directly to the rusted chest freezer on the enclosed back porch. Emma was vaguely aware of the vapor that wafted up as the lid was lifted.

"It's all, every single bit of it has got to go!" Liz managed to say as she clearly choked.

"Huh? What?" Emma was up and rubbing her starchy palms into her jeans.

"The fish, the fish, all of the fish, help me, we've got to throw it all out."

Casting her eye upward in a direction that usually caused her Aunt Liz to rant, Emma blew her sigh out loudly, thinking, "Yeah sure the fish! Right! The fish that Uncle Ray spent all summer catching, filleting, wrapping...boy she really has blown a gasket on that poor man this time."

"Bring me the garbage pail" Liz demanded, "slide it across the floor and here, help me."

Emma was just about to let her unbridled thoughts erupt into the air so that trees that were falling with no one around for miles would hear, when Liz doubled a quarter of the way over and slapped her own mouth with her right hand so sharply that the sound jarred Emma in her tracks. Liz did not quite make it to the back door before she began heaving up what had

presumably been her lunch.

Emma' mouth was still open when she stepped toward her aunt and saw that her Uncle Roy had already reached the back yard and was standing astride Liz's bent form supporting his wife's head as she unbecomingly "tossed her cookies".

"Now, Liz honey, I told you not to come down there. I told you, honey." Emma noticed the beefiness of his forearms as he hefted his stricken wife upright and guided her back into the kitchen.

"Em, baby, would you go get your aunt's housecoat, please? I think it's on the knob of the closet door."

Liz jerked herself away from Roy's grasp, taking two steps back before bellowing into his face, "What a nasty, nasty thing for Sam Prather to say! How, I want to know how, he could stand there joking that it was our fish, from our trot lines that done that to her? How! And you let him!"

Emma stood stark still in the hallway listening for Roy's response to this curious declaration, but his soft-spoken voice failed her ears. As mutely as possible, on her toes, she fetched the housecoat.

Emma had lived with her Aunt Liz and Uncle Roy for going on seven month's now. After the deaths it seemed that she had lived with every single one of her relatives for some length of time. "You ain't never happy until you win someone over just so that you can hurt 'em better" her Grandpa Lewis's word rose up to strike her.

"Shut up, she told her seditious mind. Yet she knew she had always wished that "they" would send her to live with Uncle Roy, her uncle by marriage to her daddy's second to the youngest sister. Roy had always been a little bit kinder to the cousins than all the rest of them. Yet now, she wondered. Well, of course Liz and Roy had their own girl, Barbara Lee, and it wouldn't be right for Emma to expect them to treat her, just their niece, like one of their own, she knew that. And she really tried not to scowl every time she heard her Aunt Liz going on about Barbara Lee at Thomas & Williams Jr. College; about how Barbara was in this sorority, and on that homecoming committee and....

But even so, Emma had finally just begun to feel comfortable enough, in this house on the dead end of a gravel road, in the most obscure county of the state, to relax her guard and to experience plain old boredom along with a little antsyness. The last month of the summer had done the trick, or so she had thought. But now that familiar demon reared up it's head to block her, "It's your fault," the demon said, "you bring trouble every where you go. You, my dear would be better off not to mention everyone else,

if..."

"Shut up!" Emma rebuked the brain bound spirit. "Just shut up!" But guilt was never far behind, as she moved, it followed. So once again she glimpsed it's shadowy form just to her side. "This all must somehow, some way, be my fault." Emma reasoned.

Her Aunt Liz was stripped down to her tatty slip when Emma returned with the chenille wrapper. With guilt as her current co-pilot, Emma sought to make herself of value again. She side stepped her aunt and uncle and made her way out the back door. Avoiding her aunt's ugly bi-product, Emma managed to find the garden hose and turn on the spray full blast to clean the wooden steps. From the kitchen she was able to discern the words they spoke.

"Honey, I just wish you had never even come down there." This was Roy speaking. "I told you that weren't no sight for a woman to see."

"Who found her?" Liz's voice demanded.

"I told you baby, the men hauled her up in the trot line."

"What would cause her to look like that? I know it was the fish."

"Yeah, well, fish, turtles, gars, honey, but she was long dead before any of them got to her. Her soul was departed. It was just her body left. I know it was a bad sight, but you can't let it do this to you."

"And our own fish been getting fat on her" Liz's hand fluttered to meet her mouth.

"Honey, black folks been killing each other off and dumping the bodies in that river for ages. Don't you remember when...?"

"Hush" she told him. Emma did not move another muscle.

Finally, "Aunt Liz, can I fix anything for you?" Emma broke the spell.

By this time Roy had deposited Liz on the cushioned glider that sat prominently on one side of the back porch. Roy had taken over the job of emptying the freezer of its catch.

"No, baby, just come over her and sit by me." Liz patted the faded cushion on her left. Then Liz commenced as if Emma already knew the full story. "I hope you never have to set eyes on anything as grisly as that. Just thank the Lord that Barbara Lee is away at college and wasn't in the car with me. Wasn't nothing but a little grey meat left, stringy and just barely clinging to the bones. And my Lord, her hands just a skeleton's hands, sticking up like they was reaching. Couldn't have recognized that as a face if I hadn't a seen the teeth."

Though this description was having it's effect on Emma, Liz paid no

notice. She just kept right on rocking and talking, and talking and rocking, and relieving herself of the foul memory.

"Yeah, Momma, I know it was a rough sight for a woman like you, but it's over now. So try and put it behind you. They come and got the remains and all. Let's just get on with what's got to be done now. It's still Friday night, and I am suppose to be running the chain markers at the game, so let's just get on with it... that is unless you want to..."

"No, no we'll go. You just do what ever it is and get on to the game and Emma and I will meet you there. Just don't be expecting for me to do any cooking tonight."

The Bluff has a population of probably no more that 500 folks. From looking at the town itself that would seem to be an exaggeration. With one main paved street that consists of more closed and boarded over businesses than open, one would tend to think that the town was nearer to being a ghost town than an active, rooted community. But when the Friday night football games roll around this street is crowded with cars, pick-ups and farm vehicles. This is when the citizens really come to town.

The only operating school in The Bluff proper is the East River Academy, and it caters to all the white families in a forty-mile radius, integration having caused the stubborn white cracker landholders to desert the county public schools. The children from such delta communities as Further Back, Gator, Beason's Fork, and Chinnasaw commute into The Bluff to attend to their education.

The county itself is all prime delta farmland, flooded up to the tops of its levees in the spring, and full of soybeans and cotton in the summer. A motorboat is a required second vehicle of the families in this county needed for navigating the bloated rivers and tributaries in order to reach commercial civilizations during rainy springs. Some say that it is during this season that the farmer truly earned his wealth by living through the harsh conditions brought by the floodwaters. It is during the uncomfortable floods that snakes leave the fields and rough waters to camp under beds and eaves. It is during this season that the gators and snapping turtles carry off the family pets. It is during this season that some homebound and isolated forget that one hundred fifty years had passed. It was during this season that the old superstitions take root again.

But, come harvest, fall, and the start of football, the locals take full advantage of the opportunity to congregate. And often with their year's crop's profit in their belts, they once again become the gentry of times forgotten.

Emma fondly remembered that once, as a child, she had travelled with her father, in his green, flat bottomed, fishing boat, to check on Uncle Roy and Aunt Liz. It had been a very rainy spring and many had been lost to record flood levels. They had found her aunt and uncle, not only high and dry, but in great spirits. Emma remembered finding their vacation like isolation magical and thrilling. Without the ability to maintain mundane obligations like chores the adults had been content to spend hours participating in games and in idle chat. The chasm between adult responsibility and play had been bridged, if not the flood waters.

Uncle Roy (Wilson) had been born and raised in The Bluff, the only adult living survivor of his parent's five children, his four sisters having succumb to childhood illnesses. Unlike the majority of his neighbors, Roy was not a farmer. Roy had learned to run the trotline before he had learned to read. His father had been a river-man, stringing the trotlines across the river to catch catfish and buffalo (a large, particularly ugly fish with a knot upon its brow). Papaw Wilson, Roy's daddy, had sold his fish from the back of his fishing boat, running from landing to landing like the old rolling store man; catfish to the whites, buffalo to the blacks. Roy still made "house calls" on some of the old customers, but earned the majority of his money from toting his catch into the county seat to sell to the local markets.

With his trotlines, and Liz's job at the "Sewing Needle" they managed well enough to keep Liz in a new Buick every couple of years and to pay for Barbara Lee's baton lessons, which had helped to earn for her a majorette scholarship to Thomas Williams Jr. College.

The Wilson family scrapbook contained photo after photo of Barbara Lee, her baton, and her newest costume. From every conceivable color of sequins, to frills, lace, feathers, and bows, even wings: some with skirts, some with capes, the scrapbook was full of pictures of Barbara Lee and her baton. Emma sometimes wondered if the Wilson's might not have been able to pay for Barbara Lee's college themselves if they could only recoup the money they had spent on all of those costumes and photographs.

Chapter 2

Born Emma Mae Lewis, Emma had grown up just outside the state capital, Jackson, Mississippi. Though some only seventy miles southwest of her birth place, The Bluff was and is a whole other world and time. As happy as she had been to move in with her Aunt and Uncle, Emma was finding it hard to blend. There were very few similarities between her old life style and this new one. Her sophomore class consisted of only eighteen students, her old ninth grade class numbered over sixty.

Aunt Liz had made a big deal about the importance of Emma being accepted and 'popular', like Barbara Lee had been. Emma's own parents had taught her to not be afraid to be different than the rest of the crowd.

"Well you know Barbara Lee was homecoming queen of her senior class." Liz would remind her over and over again. "Barbara was voted most beautiful two years in a row."

Emma was not one to enjoy looking at herself in the full length chifferobe mirror. Her hair was too straight and stringy, too yellow blond. The space between her eyes was too wide. "Moon face" one of her cousins had once used to call her.

Riding beside her aunt, Emma noted the way the rows of soybeans flickered by like pages in a book.

"You know she was married to your cousin Jesse before they put her away in Whitfield." That was one thing about Aunt Liz, the woman never lacked for gossip. "But, I think she was a crook, a real smart crook."

"Uh huh" Emma replied, wondering what her aunt said about her when she wasn't around.

They pulled up to the chain link gate and Liz rolled down her window to pay the attendant. "You know," Liz offered, "I liked it a lot better when they used to let you pull your car up to the edge of the field so that you could watch the game and not catch a chill. It was a lot more comfortable that way." The attendant, Mrs. Brown from Emma's third period home economics class just continued to smile pleasantly.

Emma tuned her aunt out as soon as they had parked the car. She was amazed at the crowd. There appeared to be people everywhere, men crowded around the cables that encompassed the field, lines at the concession stand, people just milling about. Emma searched the throng of people cheering from the bleachers. All she could seem to see were brightly colored new sweaters and green and white paper pom poms on a

stick.

"I look so ugly," she thought in a panic. "I look like a baby in this old wool skirt and knee socks." Making her way through the crowd that were headed for the concession, the faces she knew bobbed past her along with the faces she did not know. "Okay I just need to climb into those bleachers and find a place to sit and just stay real unobtrusive." On the weathered wooden platform that marked the first tier of the bleachers she scanned for an open area hopefully near a familiar face. She caught sight of the auburn ponytail first. Like a novice ascending the high dive for the first time she made her way upward.

"Now you be back at the car right after the game," Her aunt's voice found her.

But Emma's eyes were trained on the ponytail and she neither acknowledged her aunt nor refuted her. Worming her way between field-absorbed fans, Emma made her way to the ponytail that belonged to Cindy Basset. Cindy was an undersized high school junior with an over sized wit and volume. It was Cindy who had sought Emma out the second day of classes in the school cafeteria. Emma had been sitting alone at the end of a long table pretending to be absorbed in her history book.

"Emma Lewis!!! Is Emma Lewis in here? I am looking for Emma Lewis," Cindy had bellowed from the doorway. Emma had shrunk from humiliation, as if her name were some ridiculing joke. From her hunched shoulders she glanced toward the source of her discomfort. Petite as a fifth grade boy Cindy had merely leaned further into the cafeteria door way and clamored even louder, "Emma, Emma, Emma, Emma Lewis!"

"Here," Emma managed to strangle out the words, her right arm raised, anything to stop this spectacle. It was in the same sotto voice with which she answered homeroom roll call.

"Well hell's bells," the redhead answered back, weaving between empty chairs to reach Emma's side. "I've been looking for you the entire lunch hour. Haven't you heard me yelling?" The idea of this brassy headed waif shouting her name among the halls of education was enough to make Emma queasy.

"I've been right here studying my history." Emma offered as her reply.

"Perfect, because that is exactly what I am going to need help with," came Cindy's response, "they are making me take that stupid class again." Every word the redhead uttered was over dramatized.

Yet somehow from this awkward, mismatched beginning the alliance was formed. Emma knew that if nothing else she could be comfortable

around Cindy. Who could possible notice her with Cindy anywhere near?

"Emma, stand up. We just made a touch down," were Cindy's first words to her. "Come on you got to stand up and cheer like the dickens."

"I feel conspicuous."

"Who is he?" Cindy retorted.

"What?"

"Who is this conspicuous character you said you feel?"

"Me. I will feel conspicuous."

"Oh, who's on first? Don't you have any sense of humor? If you need to feel someone try ole Johnny boy here." Cindy slapped the back of the neck of a ninth grader that stood yelling in front of them.

Johnny turned to stare and Emma felt like sliding down between the bleachers and slinking home. "Sure go right ahead," was Johnny's uninformed comeback, "What ever your said." Because of course they were 'older' girls, he was intrigued.

"Emma wants to feel your..."

"Shut up!!"

Chapter 3

"Look just be glad your aunt said it was cool for me to give you a ride home." Cindy pushed in the dash lighter and took a small twisted cigarette from her pocket. "You needed a chance to chill out before you ran home and cried yourself to sleep again." The last part of this statement seemed strained as Cindy puffed on her rolled cigarette, like she was trying to hold her breath. "Here, you want a hit?" she offered Emma.

" No thanks, I don't smoke."

" Is that a 'no I don't smoke' as of you never had the opportunity before, or is that a 'no I don't smoke' as if you disapprove?"

"It's not that I disapprove..."

"You've never gotten high before, is that it? Cindy interrupted. That's why you are so weird!"

"I am not weird."

"Oh just spare me will you. Take this. Puff on it and be still and don't worry if you cough some."

Emma did as she was told, but the first puff nearly choked her to death. She started to protest but Cindy cut her off.

"Don't even try to stop, or I swear I will tell every one at school that you have the hots for Bill Simmons." This made Emma gag even more.

"Oh, you think it's not obvious," Cindy continued, "You may not talk much, but your eyes just shout what you are thinking."

"Cindy please, I'm begging you."

"Now you just listen here Emma Lewis, I don't give a fat rat's ass who you've got a crush on, but I would love to see you give that snotty Joy Hutchinson a run for her money. She thinks she's got Bill sewed up tight." Cindy took the joint back and toked strongly. "Besides, how you going to act smooth when you are so wrapped tight." Cindy giggled.

Emma felt a bit dizzy, but it wasn't a bad dizzy. "Yeah smooth, I like that. Think smooth like catfish skin." There was something she immediately wanted to tell Cindy but they were already at her house. She couldn't remember when she had taken back the little cigarette, but it seemed almost finished. She wondered what it was that she so urgently needed to tell Cindy.

"Okay are you going to be all right?" Cindy asked, peering into her eyes.

"Quit reading my mind," Emma replied suddenly laughing.

"Oh yeah, you are going to be just fine." Cindy joined in her laugh.

Emma wasn't sure how long she stood and watched the taillights of Cindy's Jeep blink away. She just marveled that she had never noticed how beautiful taillight could be before. She was still thinking of those red taillights when she turned to make her way into the house. She wasn't even particularly startled when she noticed the old colored woman sitting on the rocker on the front porch. Emma could just make out her outline from the light left on in the living room window, behind her.

"Oh, mercy me" the old woman yawned stretching out her jaw. She sat bolt upright slapping her knees. "Why I must have drifted off," she said into the dark, never really looking at Emma. "Don't be looking at me so funny, girl, I ain't a gonna bite ya." Emma remained stock still as the thin wiry black woman stood and shook out her joints. "I was just walking home from preaching and decided to take that short cut across the trestle." She stopped and snickered a bit, bringing her frail hand up to cover her mouth. "Silly old woman, I am, I forgot I don't travel as fast as I used to. It got so dark, and I was so tuckered out, I saw this light and decided I had better rest for a bit, and get my bearing. Must have dozed right off." She chuckled some more at this.

Emma was at a loss. She couldn't very well just waltz into the house ignoring the old lady, yet if she invited the old woman in to rest and spend the night Aunt Liz and Uncle Roy would be mortified. Emma looked up at the porch ceiling and thought, "'Haint blue that's the color of this ceiling." Her grandma had once told her that all folks painted their porch ceilings 'haint blue' like the sky. That was so if a spirit was to try and enter your house when they got on the porch and saw that color of paint they would mistake it for the sky and believe there was no ceiling in the house to hold them; then they would leave.

Emma looked back down at the feeble woman. Her heart ached. If her parents had still been alive they would have been proud of her if she had offered a place of lodging for the night, but not so Liz and Roy. Emma remembered her shock when Roy had said so matter-of-factly that sure, he had colored friends but that didn't mean he'd sit down to a meal with them.

But still Emma found herself saying, "Well ma'am I think you might freeze out tonight. Why don't you come inside and let me fix you a bed on the back porch. It's enclosed. I could get you some blankets and a pillow."

The old face lit up. " Child, you'd do that for me?" Her words tugged at Emma. "And don't you be calling me ma'am. The name's Viola, Viola

Grace, and you is a real angel."

Emma led Viola through the living room, dining room, kitchen, and out into the glassed in back porch. She left Viola to stand there admiring the glider while she, Emma, ran to fetch a feather pillow and two quilts from the hall closet. Once the make shift bed was fixed Emma turned to leave only to feel a thin jointed hand reach out to her. Suddenly Emma felt so personally tired that her eyes were like cardboard.

"Girl, you is a fine girl. What is your name?"

"Emma Lewis"

"Emma, humm, well from now on that is going to be my most favorite name. I'll never forget it."

The hand drew Emma closer.

"Can I tell you something, Emma?"

"Sure."

"I got me a girl, too. Oh she's a much bigger girl than you by now. She's got a youngin closer to your age. But this child of mine, she don't know her old mama loves her. It seems that whenever we are around each other before too long the words, well they'd just be a flying. I wish that girl knew that she was her mama's life."

Emma was silent while the woman shook her head slowly.

"Will you do something for me just sometimes, maybe?" Then she stopped and drew so still that Emma feared she had drifted off to sleep, but finally her words continued. "In the house where I stay I got this closet. There's a big old cedar chest in it. Most of the smell done gone, but it's still a good chest. I keep a stack of letters in it. One of them letters is from my girl. It's been two years since she mailt it to me." Viola stopped again here.

Her eyes glistening though her mouth was curved into a smile, "She don't know it, but her old mama just couldn't see well enough, no more, to ever read it. Ain't been able to read it since I got it. Never read it. Never wrote her back. Maybe one of these days... you could come to my house and read it for me. And then maybe, if you wouldn't mind, you could sit down and help me write her back."

Emma could not help it; she was softly crying at this. "You know what, Viola, we'll do just that. Yes, we will." Emma bent over to press a kiss on the brown forehead. "You sleep tight," Emma whispered as she slipped into the house and up to her own room.

The sun that filtered through the screened window was what woke Emma the next morning. She could hear her Uncle Roy out that same window. He had unrolled fifty to sixty feet of heavy chord and was working with Pugh and Eddy knotting in wide gage hooks. Emma sickly realized it was probably to replace the ruined trotline from the previous day.

In the kitchen the scraping of dishes told her that she had missed breakfast. Dressing quickly in the neon green sweat suit that Aunt Liz had originally bought in Memphis for Barbara Lee, who swore that she would not be caught dead in the radioactive lizard suit, Emma bounded down the stairs.

At the refrigerator Emma stopped to pour herself a glass of milk. From behind her shoulder she heard her Aunt Liz speak. "I laugh every time I think of what a fool I must have looked yesterday. You must have thought me an idiot, standing here chunking good catfish into the trash?"

Emma was still trying to follow her aunt's explanation when she remembered the old colored woman she had left sleeping on the back porch. Setting her milk on the counter, Emma hurried to the back door. The glider was empty and the pillow and quilts lay neatly stacked on the floor beside it. "Poor old dear must have left before sunrise I would have taken her home and even have read that letter to her." Emma mused.

"Emma where is your head?" her Aunt Liz broke into her thoughts.

"Nothing, I mean nowhere, Aunt Liz. What were you saying?"

"I said if they had not told me I never would have recognized her." "Who?"

"Why the woman on the trotline."

"Really, who was it?"

"Why, Viola Grace. Did maid work around these parts..." Emma missed the rest of her aunt's monologue. She stood still for almost fifteen loud seconds before turning on her heel and looking at her aunt again.

"I think I'll take a walk." When her aunt looked at her quizzically, she added, "for exercise." Straight out the back door she headed.

"Morning, peanut," her Uncle Roy greeted her.

"Morning, Uncle Roy, Pugh, Eddy." The two hired men nodded and smiled.

Pugh was the older of the two. He had worked for Papaw Wilson, Roy's father. His stumpy, gnarled form had not seemed to change in ages. His family had come from the bayous of Louisiana, and though he had been no further from The Bluff than Jackson, Mississippi in twenty years he still spoke with a heavy Cajun accent.

Eddy was a reasonably young, fairly handsome, colored man, Emma guessed, still in his twenties. To hear him tell he had fathered a large bulk

of the local black population. There was many a story of his narrow escape from a cuckold husband. Emma sometimes smiled to herself thinking about Eddy being such a 'ladies man'. After all to her knowledge he more often smelled of fish than not.

But the only smile she could offer this morning felt strained and forced on her lips. She kept walking across the road, down the bank, and through the trees to the river. The bank was covered in braided undergrowth and damp cypress. Emma kept to the muddy footpath that was narrow and slippery. She had not considered before just how close this path came to the river. She and Barbara Lee had played upon it as children, pulling down low hanging tree limbs to take turns catapulting each other over the murky waters of the Sunflower River. It seemed so much more ominous now.

Emma's pace was rhythmic and pounding like her heart. Her destination was cloudy. What she sought was a clearing of her mind. Had she or had she not encountered an old woman last night? Obviously not, at least not Viola Grace. Okay so what was the explanation? May be there were more than one old colored woman with the name Viola Grace. This did not seem likely. Maybe the old woman she had seen had been off her rocker and had just given her dead friend's name. This was more likely. Then again, she had never smoked a regular cigarette before much less marijuana. Maybe she was just hallucinating.

The gulps of air Emma found herself taking in did not seem to help focus her mind at all. When she finally rounded the bend of the path and could see the trestle before her she decided to turn back. For only the briefest moment did she stop, her hands on her knees, staring at the posts of the trestle breaking through the murky river water. Then she finally turned and started back toward her latest home. She never saw the brown upturned face that rose from beneath the surface of the river, like a dark moon. The face which no longer resembled life, yet with eyes still held in this world. These eyes followed Emma's retreat around the bend.

Chapter 3: part 2

Emma recognized the jeep just as soon as she turned the corner. It was Cindy. What was Cindy doing here? For just the briefest moment Emma had forgotten the fine camaraderie she and Cindy had shared the night before. Then it all came back to mind.

"Gee, I guess I have a friend now," Emma realized.

"Well you young ladies today, just don't know how much nicer it was when girls looked like girls and...." This was Liz's voice.

"So, look what the cat drug in," Cindy interrupted, racing the ten feet across the room to stand face to face with Emma. Her face conveyed a 'get me out of here before your aunt drives me up a wall' expression.

"As I was telling Cindy here, Emma, you young ladies don't know what you are missing. I mean there is nothing more attractive than a young girl in a pretty dress. No wonder you two don't have boyfriends."

"Ah, Aunt Liz," Emma started, ignoring the assertion her aunt had just made," I think Cindy came over to study."

"Lord no," Cindy refuted her, "On a Saturday? I thought Emma might need rescuing. I never see her hanging out at the Baptist's Teen Center on the weekend with everyone else."

"Yes, Emma, that would be a lovely thing for you to do. Get out and socialize." This brought a gleam to Liz's eyes.

Well that was that. She was stuck. Liz followed on Emma's heels as the two girls made their way to the jeep. "Now Cindy, why don't you go on and inform all the teenagers there that Roy and I would like to give a little bar-b-que party next Saturday night. I have been trying to get Emma to invite everyone over for a party, but you know how she is." When the three reached the jeep Liz proceeded to brush Emma's hair back from her face.

"Now darling, remember your posture. Don't be a slouch."

As they left her waving behind them Cindy looked over at Emma and said, "Lordy, you live with that everyday?"

"Oh, she's not so bad," Emma felt the need to defend, "she just thinks she knows what I need." Cindy's eyebrows shot up.

"And that would be...."

"Pop-u-lar," Emma said emphasizing each syllable to a ridiculous degree. This made them laugh.

"Here, you need some of this." Cindy pulled the twisted smoke from her sock.

Well there was something about being high at the Baptist Teen Center on a Saturday afternoon that made Emma want to just giggle. There was a large group, mostly guys, playing volleyball on the inside court. Several others just sat up in the bleachers and watched. "What's that?" Emma asked eyeing two seniors hastily spinning knobs at a table.

"Foosball." Cindy answered incredulously. "They don't play foosball in Jackson?"

"They play video." Emma retorted finding the word vid-e-o to be a most comical sounding word. "E-O", she repeated.

"E-O", Cindy chimed back even louder.

Suddenly with the volleyball still in his hand, Bill Simmons was leaning over them. "He's sweating," was Emma's first thought. "Oh, and he is looking right at me."

"What's up with you guys, Cin, smoking a little...."

"Shhh, Bill, get back to your game. We will take care of you later." Cindy tossed back at him.

"Oh my god," was all Emma could say.

"Oh give it a rest, gee, Emma, he ain't that great."

But Emma could not help but glance back over her shoulder at the court. There he was and there was Joy Hutchinson handing him a towel. "Oh, yuk, he is going to kiss her." Emma saw.

"Let's see if we can get a pool table." Cindy dragged Emma across the wide expanse and up a flight of stairs.

When it came to pool that Cindy really shined. She would hike herself up on one foot, her butt sticking up as she bent over the table to make her shot. This, of course, was too tempting for the teenage boys standing around also playing pool. They would act as if to pinch her and Cindy, in her bigger than life way, would squeal, and threaten and even chase some with her pool cue.

Emma merely stood back leaning on her pool cue watching. Her mind drifted somewhere off in left field, until her ears finally registered what Cindy was saying.

"Yeah, its gonna be real cool. Well you know she lives all the way at the end of that gravel road. I mean it's like make-out heaven down there."

"Oh gee." Emma realized that Cindy was inviting all these guys to the party her Aunt Liz had talked about. "Oh gee wiz."

"Isn't that right, Emma," Cindy was asking, "Maybe your Uncle Roy will let us take some of the boats out, huh?"

"Ahh, well I will have to ask him," Emma noticed that all the eyes were on her, "and sure, I bet he will." She smiled and then reminded herself, 'Stand up straight!'

They were just pulling out of the gravel parking lot when they heard a

loud thump on the back of the jeep.

"Hey, you two, I thought you were going to take care of me later." Bill Simmons was leaning in the passenger side window.

"Oh yeah, just wanted to tell you about the big party at Emma's place next Saturday night. It's gonna be a blast." Cindy answered smacking her gum loudly in Emma's ear.

"A blast? The little city girl knows how to throw a blast. So there will be a keq?"

"Is that all you think about?" Cindy retorted.

"No, actually I think about...."

"Well do us a favor," Cindy interrupted him, "And don't bring Joy with you."

"Wha?"

"Just don't. What are you dumb?" With that said Cindy pealed out of the gravel leaving Bill just standing there.

Finally Emma said, "I think I am going to kill you."

"Well, can you hold off till after the party?"

When Emma walked into the house she heard her aunt call to her from the back porch. Reclining with her feet propped up under her on the glider, Liz was stirring a lemon into her iced tea. Emma could still hear Uncle Roy and the men working in the side yard.

"Have a seat, sugar." Her aunt smiled easily at her. " I've been considering making a trip to Memphis in the next couple of weeks. I was thinking it might be nice if you came along with me. We could shop for you some new school clothes and if we took off Friday and went, maybe even something pretty for the party." Well it seemed Liz was holding on tight to that party idea. It was going to happen.

Emma found that her face did light up with the idea of new clothes. Aunt Liz had come home on several occasions from shopping with Barbara Lee in Memphis with some little article of clothing for Emma. It was just that Emma had never been invited to come along.

"I figure we will get up to your closet sometime this weekend and take a look at what sort of pieces you need to really fill out your wardrobe. And a dress or two wouldn't hurt you."

Emma noticed how Liz's eyes danced with the thought of doing an 'Emma make over'. This was the sort of activity Liz loved the best. To Liz, dressing her daughter and now her niece in the trendiest clothes of the season was her way of playing a grown up version of 'dress up'. The pride she took in their appearance, Liz felt, reflected her own good taste

and style. Emma had always considered her older cousin's attire to be a bit flashy, but she was willing to allow her aunt a chance to buy her some new clothes.

At once Liz was sitting up in the glider and opening magazines, Bazaar, Vogue. "Now look at this," Liz instructed, "I think you would look just darling with...."

As Emma climbed the cedar stairs to her room later that evening, she noted how relaxed she once again felt here. She let her hand glide along the polished pine paneling, tracing the circles of the knots. Her bedroom was the only one located upstairs and she loved having the area to herself. Her ceiling was low and the sidewalls slanted down with the windows extending outward from the gables. Though the upstairs was actually partitioned into three rooms, she occupied the middle and the largest room.

As she rounded the landing on the stairs she noted absently smudges of what looked like mud on the paneling. "Now when did I do that," she wondered. "Better clean it up before Aunt Liz sees it." It was not until she was completely in her room that Emma noticed her bed. It was unmade and quite rumpled. She was certain she had made that bed this morning. Perhaps Aunt Liz had come up for a nap. But that seemed unlikely. Aunt Liz would never leave a bed like this. She went on and dismissed the idea and began to pull the sheets back from the bed. Emma's skin chilled as she realized the sheets were damp and streaked with mud and leaves.

Chapter 4

The school week passed relatively fast. Emma found that she enjoyed lunches a lot better now that she was going out to the parking lot to share them with Cindy. The girls had suddenly found a great deal to talk about. In more than one class peeved teachers had cautioned the girls to stop their chatter. They were caught up in high school life. The conversations were often nothing more than shared distractions. Emma loved just having someone to whom she could speak her mind. Simple statements like, "I mean would you ever in a million years wear those earrings!" or "Don't you think Mr. Daniels eyes look like they are upside down in his head?" became part of their private whispers and giggles. Emma found herself feeling an openness, a care-freeness which she had always tried to fake before.

The morning they were supposed to leave for Memphis both Emma and Liz had arisen while the sky was still grey. It was a Friday, and Liz felt that it was more important for Emma to be well dressed than well educated. The trip would take them almost three hours so they were in a hurry to be off early.

"Now why don't you go put on your nice corduroy skirt instead of those jeans?" Liz said without even looking up at Emma. Liz was busy penciling in last details to her shopping list. "Oh, and why don't you fill the thermos there with the last of that coffee, I may wish we had it later."

Even at this early hour, Emma moved about happily, excited about the day trip. The last time she had been to Memphis had been when she was in the sixth grade with the school choir. That was so long ago. It was before.

"Oh, and don't forget your slip. You may need it to try on some of the dresses."

They both looked up as they heard the creak of the heavy front door.

"Now, I thought that Roy had left before....," her words were cut short by the voice which came from the front room.

"Momma, your baby daughter's home."

"Well, I'll be. Barbara Lee? Is that you?" Liz was up and running out of the kitchen before Emma even had a chance to put the thermos down. Following her aunt's path, Emma entered the living room. There the two women stood close, arms looped around each other's waist.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming home?" Liz held her daughter at arm's length to look her up and down. The girl towered a head taller than her mother. Her professionally highlighted brown hair was pulled up to one side in kind of a ponytail. The ribbon that coiled around this ponytail matched the sash she had knotted around her midriff. Her sunflower yellow blouse and slacks made her look larger than any piece of furniture in the tiny living room.

"Well, mamma, I didn't get the opportunity until this morning," she said extracting herself from her mother's grasp and easing down on to the velveteen settee. "One of my suit mates had a falling out with her boyfriend and decided to run home early to her mamma. She dropped me here on her way to Canton."

"That was so very nice of her." Liz peered out the front window. "But couldn't she come in for even a bit?"

"Oh, mamma, I was happy enough that she would tote me all the way down this gravel road."

Emma, ignored up to this point, moved to the side of the big chair and propped her knee up on the arm. "Hi," she said. Her eyes felt as if they were open too wide. She felt shy. She felt like an intruder.

"So mouse, you been treating my momma well? " The word my was emphasized. And though just a minute before Emma had felt rather pleased with her own appearance, she now felt drab. She was sure her blonde hair hung limp and stringy on her shoulders.

"Besides, I wasn't expecting y'all to be up yet," Barbara Lee continued as if still explaining to her mother. She looked at them questioningly.

"Now baby, we were on our way to Memphis to do some shopping. You just get right up and get ready to come with us." Liz had already picked up her daughter's discarded satchel and was carrying it into the pink bedroom.

"Oh mamma...," the disappointment was obvious in her words, "I was hoping for just some quiet time here at home with just you this weekend." Emma, who stood surveying her chic cousin, had a hard time imagining Barbara Lee relaxing in the country for a whole weekend. "Besides, you know my friend Vicki, she is transferring to state, well her parents have invited a bunch of us to Yazoo City to see her off and I was hoping I could use your car."

"Barbara Lee, I am sure your father would let you use one of the trucks if you really want to go." Barbara Lee's eyes bulged at this suggestion, so Liz dropped it. "Emma and I had really been looking

forward to this trip all week. We've already got the car packed."

"So y'all just go on and don't give me another thought then." The frozen tone in Barbara Lee's voice told Emma the battle was already lost.

"Oh, Barbara Lee, you know we will do no such thing." Liz sat down beside her daughter and wrapped her arms around her, rocking her back and forth. "I guess Emma and I are just being selfish. My own sweet daughter comes home early to see me and I just want to run off. What kind of mother am I?" Liz's eyes sought Emma and pleaded for her to understand.

Now Emma was getting to feel like she was just being a spoiled sport. Maybe Barbara Lee was just homesick and wanted her mother. Emma knew that she damn well would. "No, don't think of it", she reminded herself.

"I'll get our things," Emma offered. She walked out the front door to the car.

By mid afternoon Barbara Lee had already left for Yazoo City. Emma watched the cloud of dirt settle from the road as the sedan disappeared around a bend of trees. She had managed to stay, for the most part, out of her older cousin's way during the morning. Emma had gone back to her room to sit in one of the front windows. She had been able to hear the chatter from the kitchen as Barbara Lee recounted stories of college life. Emma did not hear her aunt though until Liz stood just a few feet behind her.

"I am real sorry about our trip, Em." She felt her aunt's hand on her back. "But we still got a party to give tomorrow and I am sure we can find something pretty for you to wear." At that moment Emma felt a wave of grateful love toward her Aunt Liz.

"Yes, ma'am, Cindy.....I mean I have told most of the kids at school about it. I still don't know who might show up though."

"Well, we will just fix enough for the whole county. How is that? Now come on, quit feeling sorry for yourself. We got work to do."

Well, she had to give her aunt credit that when it came to whipping together a party, the old dear really outdid herself. "Do you really think we

need these bails of hay and corn stalks? It's not Halloween yet." Emma stood amazed to see that Liz had turned the back yard into a barn yard.

"Oh, it gives it ambiance, my dear. Roy," Liz shouted back toward the shed, "Have you found those lanterns yet?"

"Yeah, but," Emma started to say. Then she noticed the two split barrel bar-b-que grills. "Oh the guys won't care if as long as there is plenty of food." She knew it was useless to explain that decorations might be a bit corny. "Oh Lordy, what if someone sneaks in beer? Aunt Liz will just have a duck." Then she remembered that her own pal, Cindy had promised a few of the gang that she would have pot. "Oh, I think life was easier when I was seven."

Cindy was the first to arrive that afternoon, her jeep packed down with enough stuff to stay two weeks. Then at 3:00 pm Angel Guthrie called to ask if she and her steady, Sammy Slater, were invited, because no one had asked them personally, and her mother had taught her not to "assume". Angela was one of the few in the Junior class who actually lived in town. Her father ran the local "Farmers and Commerce" bank. "Besides I have always wanted to go to a party out on the river," Angela went on and on over the phone line, " and they said we are going to go out in the boat for a moon light voyage. Don't you think that is so romantic."

"Yes, of course, you and Sammy are invited," Emma finally managed to break in. And in a voice that sounded too much like Barbara Lee she added, "I would ne-vah think of leav-in youuu out."

When Susan Thurmond arrived, the three teenage girls raced up to Emma's room to begin the long decision making process of "what to wear".

"I hate this stupid blouse," Susan whined, "Emma, can I look in your closet for something else to put on."

"Sure," Emma replied, "Cindy, do these jeans make my thighs look too big?" Emma turned in every which way direction in front of the dresser mirror.

"Oh, give me a break girl, it's your ass that is too big," came Cindy's answer. "Too bad you gals aren't just naturally flat chested like I am."

"You aren't flat chested." This was Susan speaking.

"Oh yes I am. See." She lifted her shirt. Emma pointed out the open curtains and the cars pulling up outside and all three girls collapsed on the bed in rolling laughter.

Having exchanged and changed outfits no less than three times each,

Emma, Cindy and Susan made their way downstairs to join the rest of the arriving guests. An ice chest had been filled with soft drinks and placed out on the back porch where everyone seemed to be congregating. Since Emma had been too chicken to ask if she could use Barbara Lee's stereo, Cindy had brought a boom box and was busy cranking up the volume. The girls' guests were all involved with complimenting Liz on her lovely home. The guys were finding their way into the back yard. It looked to be a very straight laced simple party. That is until Emma spotted Cindy leading a pack of five off down the riverbank.

"Sammy says, you kids want to take the big boat out for a little." Emma recognized her Uncle Roy's voice behind her.

"Er, a yeah, if you think it will be okay?" Emma turned to find her uncle besieged by a group of boys.

"You know it is fine with me sweetheart, just make sure only you or one of the guys are in charge of the boat and make all those girls wear life jackets."

"My, my, and all this time I was thinking Em was a girl too." It was Bill Simmons at her elbow. Emma searched around to see if Joy were anywhere in sight.

"Well you might want to take the smaller boat too, that way everyone can go out at the same time instead of making two trips," Uncle Roy offered. "I am sure these fellows won't mind helping me get em ready for you." That was all it took. Roy and his entourage were on their way toward the river. "Please Lord, don't let my Uncle Roy run into Cindy's little party," was all Emma could think.

But when Emma looked back, there still beside her was Bill. His arm just lightly brushed hers. "I am so glad that you and Joy could make it." Emma was afraid her voice gave her lie away.

"Oh, it is just me here tonight." His hand came up to rest on her shoulder, his thumb lightly rubbing her throat. "I hope you don't mind?"

"Oh, no, I don't mind." She pulled away. "Just remember, you're attached."

"No, no, no, not anymore it seems." His eyebrows went up and Emma could only smile. "We've decided to date other people for a while." Emma hoped that she was not smiling too much, because she sure felt like she was a grinning idiot.

"Well, in that case," she stepped closer, " you wouldn't mind helping me carry this trash back in the house." She caught him off guard as she swung the plastic trash bag at him. She heard him laughing as she walked away.

Emma was glad that her uncle had left them to attend to the boats themselves. They loaded the guests into the two crafts amid giggles and splashing. It was getting chilly and some of the girls had wrapped themselves in blankets. Em was in charge of the bigger boat. Sammy Slater stood beside her shining the high beam spotlight across the water. Angela was tucked safely under his arm. Some of the girls refused to wear life preservers, not wanting to look unattractive in the bulky orange vests. Cindy persuaded them to at least just hold the vests in their laps.

"Like maybe we can spotlight some deer. Poweee." Sammy mimicked a gun shot sound.

"That's illegal and you know it," Emma told him.

They were pulling out from the pier when Emma heard someone yell, "Hey, make room for me." She did not have to look to know who had spoken. Bill stretched his long legs into the boat and headed for Emma. He sat down in the seat right beneath her legs. From behind them someone called from the other boat.

"Hey, did anyone bring any extra refreshments."

"Yeah man," came the answer back. Emma saw at least one six pack held together by plastic rings be hoisted to the second boat.

"Oh shit," Emma moaned.

"Hey, its cool." Bill patted her knee. "They know how to behave themselves. Relax, Em, enjoy the ride." He leaned back against her legs wrapping one large hand around her left ankle.

"Watch it Simmons, I am likely to run us into a stump it you start that." But she did not remove his hand, nor did she move her ankle. From in front Cindy turned to wink at her friend.

Angela Guthrie was in a terrible mood. She had been excited when her best friend, Joy, had phoned about the party. They had both been going steady with the same boys since ninth grade. They had been friends three times that long. Angela knew that Joy and Bill went "all the way". Joy had told her about it the day following the first time. Angela had given in to Sammy the following month. Neither of the girls used contraceptives, but both consulted each other regularly about their cycles. Always relieved when their periods came.

Angela was furious when Joy told her that Bill had stated flatly that he

was going to this party and that he couldn't keep Joy from going, but if she did it would not be as his date. He had said that no girl was going to start making his Saturday night plans for him. "That pig," Angela thought. Joy, hurt, refused to go at all, stating that she would feel like a fool with Bill ignoring her all evening. Angela had wanted to back out of going then, but Sammy was all up for going out on the boat. So he had talked her back into it. Besides she figured if she was there she could keep an eye on Bill for Joy.

"And just look at Bill," she seethed. Angela could tell that he had been putting moves on that Emma Lewis all evening. It made her so mad she wanted to go home. But she owed it to Joy to watch this and report back.

The second boat had pulled in front of Emma's boat and after about twenty minutes she saw them ground into a sand bar on the left bank. She pulled the bigger boat up and glided likewise into the sand.

"Time for a picnic," one of the boys bellowed. Emma saw several of her friends taking six packs and lowering them into the waters from fish stringers. There was like an instant organization afoot as people gathered dried cypress for a fire.

"And I thought this was my party," she laughed looking down at Bill. He stood and took her hand to help her from the boat. But he pulled her a little closer than necessary once they reached the bank. She heard him draw in his breath, fast between his teeth.

"Too bad that it's not just you and me." She fidgeted away.

"It is still me responsibility to see that these guys don't get us all into trouble. I guess there is no need to worry over a little beer. I should go help with the bon fire." With this said Emma left to go find Cindy.

In half an hour the fire was going strong. They were on the same side of the river as her house. Back up the bank about a quarter of a mile was the dirt service road that passed her home. Emma felt safe knowing she was close to the house.

She had been avoiding Bill every since they had come ashore, mostly because she just felt awkward and inexperienced and she was sure it showed. If he kept up such a hot pursuit of her she was certain she would end up babbling in his arms. But now here he was settling on the blanket next to her. His fingers picked up the ends of her hair.

"Emma." She could hear each breath he took. Taking her shoulders and turning her toward him, he spoke again, "I really want to kiss you."

She couldn't move. Her mouth felt frozen in a line as she finally said, " I know." His eyebrows arched into a question, "may I?" And then she was

kissing him. It happened before she knew it.

"You scum!" Sand was kicked at them. Standing slightly off balance above them was Angela Guthrie.

"You scum," she repeated with another kick.

"Hey, Angela." Bill rose to face her just as Sammy grabbed her from behind.

"Get your fucking hands off me," She shrieked.

"Hey, now, you're drunk." Sammy was trying to haul her away from the crowd.

"Only because you made me come here to watch this scumbag make a fool of my best friend." She shook off his hands and ran toward the trees.

"You just wait Bill Simmons, Joy is going to know all about this, you just wait," she wailed.

It was not so much Angela's words as it was Bill's expression that made Emma feel sick.

"Bill?" Emma touched his arm.

"No, no, I shouldn't have done that."

Emma just stared at the now changed Bill Simmons beside her.

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry," she replied all expression bled from her face. "Let's go," she said to no one in particular.

"What about Angela and Sammy?" someone asked.

"They can walk back," Emma answered.

Emma had slept very poorly. She had let the other girls share her bed while she had slept in the spare room. The house was quiet as she got up and walked into her room where her two friends buzzed soft snores from her bed. She crept to the window as she did every morning to check the sky. The low slung clouds hinted of showers. But what caught her eye was the red pickup parked up the road. It was Sammy Slater's. She remembered seeing it parked there the night before. All of the previous evening's unpleasantness returned as she wondered about the significance of the un-moved truck.

Emma reluctantly got dressed to go out and find out the cause. Perhaps the truck wouldn't start. Or perhaps they had fallen asleep in the front cab. If so she should wake them up and send them home before there was trouble.

She was out of the house ten minutes later. Before she was all the way to it, she knew it was empty. The door facing the river was open and she could see inside. Emma closed the door and kept walking. Surely they couldn't have gotten lost on the way back. Emma figured it was best to stick to the service road until she got to the trestle. If she hadn't found them by then she would have to venture down the bank path.

Despite the clouds, the sun was coming through fiercely in patches. Her fast pace brought a light sweat to her upper lip. She wiped it off on her sleeve. A lot of cotton had already been picked and the brown skeletal remains of the bushes rustled in the occasional breeze. Her mind stumbled through a dozen various explanations as she kept to the road's ruts.

Emma had just rounded the bend to the train tracks when she spotted, hanging from the low branches of a cypress, some sort of suspended bag. She had seen such bags hung from trees before. In their deer camps if a hunter shot a deer and it was too far to carry the animal out, the hunter would slaughter the deer, place it in a tarp and suspend it in the trees till he could get back for it.

She neared the bundle slowly. It was dirty, stained a dark brown. From the bottom a string of dark ooze hung. Em walked right up to the bundle. Reaching up her hand she felt the strong weight of its contents. She recoiled one step back. The heavy pouch swung. Emma heard the snap of the tree limb. She was just able to stumble out from under the sack as it hit the road. She saw the arm first and then the head and the bare chest.

The nude form of Angela Guthrie looked as though it had been sitting cross-legged in the lap of Sammy Slater. The hands had been severed from the wrists. The meat from the girl's hips had been flayed and laid back from the bone. A raw spinal cord extended from her back. Sammy's head had been removed and lay between the two bodies. Emma did not look back as she ran.

Chapter 5

Mary Elizabeth Lewis Wilson had been born about fourteen miles from where she presently lived. Her father had once owned a few hundred acres which he fruitlessly toiled over trying to make a living. By 1949 when she was still in high school, her father had finally given up and sold the land. The new owner, being a deacon in the First Baptist Church, had agreed to rent the family a small shotgun house for a meager amount of rent.

This same year, Elizabeth's older brother, Thomas Earl Lewis, had had to quit high school and find a job. The closest work turned out to be some sixty miles from The Bluff. So Earl rented a room and sent most of his paycheck back home. Earl Lewis, as he was known, ended up doing well for himself in this job. By the time his family was back on their feet, the saving grace being his mother's sewing, which turned out to be a fairly lucrative business, Earl had been promoted and able to save some money for himself.

The year he became supervisor at the plant he bought a house. The following year he married Grace Anne Bates. It was after some ten years of marriage that Emma had been born. And for the first decade of her life she was the apple of her father's eye.

Her first thought when her niece entered the kitchen that Sunday morning was, "my lands will that child ever learn to put on a little makeup before she leaves this house." A full ten seconds elapsed before she realized that something was really amiss. Emma looked like she had been crying. Her eyes were red, but there was also a wild look to her expression.

"Aunt Liz." The words barely came out.

"Sit down. Tell what's the matter."

Instead of sitting the teenager flew into her aunt's arms. With her lips close to Liz's ear she breathed, "They are dead. They are all dead." Then the sobbing began. Then she was shaking from head to toe.

"What? Who?" Liz held the girl out from her to look into her face. "Calm down." She took Emma to the sink and thrust her wrist under the cold tap water. "Calm down. Tell me." But before Emma could say anything, Liz screamed, "Roy, get in here right now something bad has happened."

Roy was up the back steps and in the kitchen in a flash. "What is it?"

he hollered.

"Somebody has been killed," Liz told him as if he should have figured that out for himself. They both looked to Emma, but all she could do was point. She pointed in the direction of the road where she had discovered the bodies.

"Stay here. Let me go take a look," Roy said as he headed back out going in the direction Emma was pointing. Liz did not try to speak any further with Emma. She merely took the girl by the arm and led her to the glider on the back porch. Holding Emma's hand she rocked back and forth.

It was a good thirty minutes before Roy returned. "It's a couple of kids," he said slowly, "My god, what could have done that to them."

A heavy down pour had started later that morning. Cindy watched from the upstairs window as trucks, cars, and then an ambulance came up the road. What little talk she could hear from downstairs indicated that the men were talking about going out to look and see if they could find whoever had done this thing. "Couldn't be nobody local," Cindy heard Shooter * (yep, our chat room shooter has been added here specifically per request) say. "Yeah, must be some ..." Cindy quit trying to listen. All she could think of was that Sammy and Angela were dead.

Emma, who still had barely spoken, lay supine on the bed intent on the ceiling. She had been that way since Liz had brought her upstairs. Susan and she had helped Liz remove Emma's jeans, upon which they had first noted what looked to be flecks of blood, and then her T-shirt. Liz had wrapped Emma in an oversized robe and walked her to the bed and there she still lay. Cindy supposed she was in shock, after all she had actually found them. Cindy's mother had called three times already to tell her to not step foot out of that house until her daddy got there to pick her up. Cindy had just seen Susan's parents arrive out front.

"Emma," Susan said softly," I fixing to have to go now. Is there anything I can do?" Emma rose and looked at Susan.

"Okay," she said with no feeling, "Here let me help you with your things" and she reached for the soiled jeans.

"No, Emma," Cindy stopped her, "Here put on these." She handed Emma a pair of sweat pants and a shirt from off the top of a pile of clean laundry.

Emma froze, looked at the shirt, and started one continuous scream.

When Liz finally made up the stairs with Roy close behind her, the girls had succeeded in quieting the scream. Now Emma sat on the edge of the

bed her chin trembling, her teeth chattering.

"What's the matter?" Liz shouted while trying to catch her breath.

"We don't know," Susan offered, by now her parents were also in the room looking just barely relieved.

"I handed her this shirt to put on. She looked at it. And then she just started screaming." Cindy told them. Liz picked up the shirt and held it out.

"This isn't Emma's shirt."

"It isn't?" Cindy asked. "But the maid brought it up with the rest of the clean clothes. I saw her put them all down over on that chair."

"Cindy," Liz looked long and hard at the teenager," We don't have a maid."

No one said a thing for a while and then Susan spoke up," That's the, that's the shirt Angela was wearing last night."

After that the rest of the day seemed like a blur to everyone. So many people calling, so many people coming out, the Wilson's just kept repeating what they knew. It wasn't until late that evening that Liz had time to sit down and talk to her own precious daughter, Barbara Lee.

"Oh, mamma, they were probably parking. You know making out. Petting what ever they called it in your day."

"That is no reason why someone should have"

Barbara Lee interrupted her, "And I am telling you, I am worried about you and daddy. Won't you just think of moving in closer to town?"

"But who would..." Liz started again.

"Some crazy person. Mamma are you listening to me?" Barbara Lee demanded to know.

"Oh, Barbara Lee, your daddy would never leave this river and besides I don't think we could afford to move into town."

"You could if you sent Emma back to live with Aunt Beth."

Roy stood looking at his niece. His finger was in his right ear and he was shaking it. Emma registered this familiar habit and remembered that this was what he did when he said his inner ear itched.

"Em, you feel up to talking to Red Humphries?" Red was the sheriff of Sunflower County. Emma shook her head yes and stiffly stood.

"I am really sorry, Uncle Roy" she said.

"What? Why would you say that? Oh Emma baby, come on downstairs with me." He placed his big beefy hand on her shoulder and led her down the stairs.

Red Humphries was the tallest man Emma had ever seen. Six foot six she had heard someone once say. She had heard of people being

taller, but here now standing in front of her five foot three height Red looked like a giant. Aunt Liz had been persuaded to let Red question her alone in the living room. So Emma was now alone with the sheriff. Red stood in front of the fireplace studying the pictures on the wall.

"Why don't you just start at the beginning, Emma, " he said without even turning around to face her.

"I am not sure where the beginning is," she replied. "I guess it was about a week back." This caused the sheriff to turn around. He had only been expecting an account of how she had found the bodies that morning.

"I see." He moved toward her. "And what happened back then?"

When Emma caught his expression she knew that she had messed up. Why had she said a week back? But there was no getting out of it now. She told Red about the day her Aunt Liz had come home and thrown all the catfish out of the freezer.

"And you think this has something to do with these murders," he asked clearly puzzled.

"Well that seem to be when people started dieing," she offered. Maybe that would be the end of it, she hoped. And then she went on to tell about finding the bodies that morning.

"Weren't those two here at a party just last night?" he asked.

"Y-yes."

"Well, why don't you tell me everything you saw or heard from them last night? Did they mention anyone? Maybe someone you were not familiar with? Did they seem concerned, anxious, scared? Tell me everything you observed about them during the party?"

"Let's see, Angela had called that afternoon and asked me if she was invited to the party and I told her of course. She did not seem strange in any way. Then they got here, her and Sammy that is. I didn't really see much of them or talk to them that much."

"Weren't they fighting?" he asked . How did he know that, Emma thought.

"Ah yes, yes they were. They got in a fight at the bon fire. Angela ran off. Sammy went off after her. He told us he would just walk back to the house."

"So you did speak to him?"

"Well, I guess he was telling that to me."

"What was the fight about?" Emma felt the panic, her goose was cooked. What should she say?

"I am not real sure." She thought about bringing up the beer, but that

seemed to be a bad idea, and how in the world could she tell this man about the Bill Simmons incident. "I know that Angela just started raving. She even kicked sand on me.

"Then," Red jumped in. "Why would she kick sand on you?"

"I don't know. I guess she thought I was flirting with her friend's boyfriend." There that should do it, she thought.

"And why would she think that?"

"Ah, well we were sitting next to each other at the bon fire."

"I see. Well that should do it." It was over. Emma sighed, probably too loudly. Emma stood there not knowing what to do next. "You can go now. She tried to not look as though she was rushing from the room.

"Oh, and one more thing, Emma" He stopped her. " You will tell me if you remember anything else unusual about this weekend." It wasn't even a question, it was a command."

"Yes sir, I will," she lied.

Emma had a hard time getting to sleep that night. Over and over her thoughts tumbled. What was going on? "Am I going crazy," she said more than one time out loud to herself. Finally she just wore herself out and began to fall directly into a dream. In the dream she could hear singing.

On the back porch, silhouetted by the moonlight, sat the ancient black woman. She rocked back and forth, singing a spiritual whose words were lost to all but herself.

Notes

(Some Notes for you, Sara) delete these from your manuscript (ms) before you submit it to a publisher.

The main corrections I have attempted to make have been in punctuation. Sentence Spacing seems to be a problem for you. I think it is expressive of the way you think. Not to be critical, but a publisher will reject an ms on such a small error as leaving three spaces between sentences instead of two if it happens frequently. Quotation marks should start a piece of narrative directly without any spacing. Ex. - "Johnny was bad!"

If you choose to include punctuation inside the closing quotation mark be consistent, don't change styles in mid novel. They can properly be placed inside or out but I see you choose to include them. That is perfectly alright. Just make sure you don't leave a space after the punctuation before the closing quotation mark. Ex. - "Johnny was bad!" (wrong) "Johnny was bad!" (correct)

Between Sentences leave two spaces only! In the structure of a sentence always single space. Ex. - Mary said, "Johnny was bad!"

That example is really all one sentence so between the comma after 'said' and the opening quotation mark, leave one space. Remember inside a sentence only leave one space between words. I find you often leave two.

It is equally important to remember the correct punctuation. If it is a question, use a question mark. I find you often forget to include it.

One other point I have noticed is your use of the word, 'which'. I have always used as a rule of thumb the placement of the word. Generally speaking if it starts a sentence, like: "Which came first?" Then the proper word is which but if you find yourself using it mid-sentence then what you really want to use is 'that'. Example: "Everyone came which were invited." Instead of 'which' you should use 'that': "Everyone came that were invited."

Chapter 6

It was Wednesday morning before Emma returned to school. Her aunt had called her in sick the first two days of that week. Emma had remained in the house for those days, following Liz around like a puppy. She had performed her chores with a mindless numbness, rarely speaking.

When Emma stepped from the bus that Wednesday morning, Cindy was there to greet her.

"Well it's about time you came back. I was beginning to think you were dead." Cindy immediately bit off her words. Her face even reddened. " Oh Lordy, I am sorry, poor choice of words." She placed one hand on her own forehead and the other on Emma's shoulder.

"It's all right." Emma could not help but offer a small smile.

"Oh Em, I just missed you, that's all." Cindy hugged her friend's neck warmly.

There was lots of catching up to do, not only school work, but the gossip surrounding the weekend. Susan had told half the school about her part of the ordeal and had hinted pretty strongly that just maybe the Wilson's house was haunted. The whole school, of course had heard the stories. The younger children followed Emma around during recesses and watched her, giggling, as if she were a celebrity. Emma's peers and the upperclassmen just looked away when she caught them staring.

"I would just ignore it all," was Cindy's advice as they sat in the jeep during lunch. Emma was wishing that she had called in sick at least one more day. "What's the news on the investigation," Cindy asked poking half a tuna sandwich into her mouth.

" How would I know," Emma replied. " The sheriff didn't tell me anything. He just asked a lot of questions." In truth, Emma had put the interrogation out of her mind soon after it had happened and now she had a nagging yet inexact feeling about what had been said between herself and Red Humphries. "Just because it happened down our road and I," she hesitated, "found it doesn't make me a deputy or detective or what ever on the case."

"The news around town is that some black lunatic caught them parking and saw a chance to murder a couple of white kids; probably long gone by now. But some of the parents are carrying more than their usual cache of guns with them these days, especially the women. I wouldn't want to be a colored person around these parts right now. Gee, I don't understand it

really. I grew up here. I know just about everyone and I tell you there are more mean old white men I would be afraid to stumble across alone than any of the colored." Cindy took a big gulp of her coca-cola and let out an unabashed burp.

"And, of course, everyone is getting the big 'parking' is a bad thing lecture. I think more couples will be making out at home on their momma's sofa than in some car on a back road." This caused the girls to break into laughter, which grew as they began to laugh harder and harder at the sound of each other's guffaws.

"Hope I am not interrupting anything intimate here." And sure as rain, there stood Bill, his head sticking in Cindy's side of the window, grinning shamelessly at Emma.

"No, nothing you would understand," Cindy answered and thumped his nose.

"Ouch, quit that, Cindy, and get out of the jeep for a bit." He yanked open the door, took her by the arm and pulled her from her seat. "I need to speak to Miss Emma, privately for a sec." He took Cindy's place in the jeep and slammed the door in her face. "Now run along.... She'll meet you in fifth period." He waved good-bye to the stunned Cindy.

Friday was always a fun day at school. What with the pep rally in the morning and half the school leaving after lunch to play or participate in the night's game. The school pretty much broke down into playtime. A lot of the kids just took the opportunity to just skip class and go riding, mud buggying they called it, through the back roads and levees.

Cindy and Emma were two of the six in the fifth period class who reported that Friday. The teacher, unwilling to repeat her whole lecture on Monday, gave the class leisure time. She sent them to the gymnasium. They all scattered.

Sitting at the top a brick wall that bordered the parking lot, Cindy and Emma shot the breeze. The air had turned a bit nippy, yet the sun shone so brightly the girls had to wince and hold their hands above their brows to peer around the lot.

"Who are you looking for," Cindy asked, already knowing the answer.

"Just guess." Emma was in no mood to play that game.

"He's in biology class," Cindy stated matter-of-factly, "Old Dr. Miller wouldn't let them out of there if the Olympics were being held here."

"Cindy, he's so big, why doesn't he play on the football team?" She had never wondered about this before, but it seemed a good way to keep the subject going.

"Bad knees." Cindy smacked her gum. "He went out our freshman year, but he kept getting hurt. See he was weak in the knees long before you met him." Cindy could not resist a straight line, even her own. Emma ignored the joke and then she told Cindy about the date.

- "That's what I figured he wanted the other day, to ask you out."
- "I thought you might be at least a little excited for me." Emma felt a twinge of hurt.
- "I really am, Em." Cindy turned to her. "I am so glad you finally got a date. You wanna see me turn cartwheels? I can turn cartwheels, you know." She shoved her books in to Emma's arms.

"No, please, people are staring," Emma said searching around to see if this were true.

"You know Em, I have been telling you that you could go out with whomever you please for ages now." She hopped down from the wall. "I just hate for that big jerk to get all the credit for making you so happy. You really don't need him, trust me."

"Oh Cindy, but I am so excited about this. Can't you understand? He is going to call me this weekend to set up a time and place. Please, don't be angry."

"Oh shut up you idiot," Cindy stopped Emma from going any further. "You're my best pal. I love you. I guess I can be happy for you." Cindy forced a fake toothy grin Emma's way.

As they watched the pep squad depart Emma broke the silence that had settled between them to ask, "Where would I go to find out where someone lives in Sunflower County?"

" Huh?" Cindy cocked her head. "This is Sunflower County, not New York City. Everybody knows where everybody lives around here. Who are you looking for?"

" I doubt you know them. It is this nice old black lady."

"Well why didn't you say that at the first. Black folks don't live some place, they 'stay' some place. You really need to learn the lingo around here. And if you are looking for Viola Grace," Cindy added shrewdly, "she's dead. And I wouldn't go try to hunt her down. And if you are looking for the lady you saw on your porch, forget it. She was probably just passing through. She's in Chicago by now." Cindy smiled, obviously pleased with herself.

"Cindy," Emma spoke in her most serious voice, "I want to find where Viola did live." She held up her hand to keep Cindy from breaking in. "If I could just find out if that trunk and the letter did exist, then I might be on

my way to understanding what is going on around here."

"I see." Cindy slowly shook her head. "I can understand that, Em, but what if Viola lived way far out in the back woods and whoever knew where she had lived couldn't tell you, they had to show you?"

"I suppose I would have to let them show me."

"So, when do you want to go?"

"You know?" Emma almost couldn't believe it. Cindy nodded yes. It seemed they had a lot more to talk about yet.

"Here, lick off those last few drops. I don't want to put it back in my pants and leave a little wet spot." Bill Simmons stood in front of Joy holding his slowing wilting cock out to her.

It was Friday night and they were in her parent's den. Like everyone else, since Sammy's and Angela's deaths, Joy would not stay even five minutes alone in the car with him. He did not like having to 'do it' in the house with her folks asleep down the hall, but that was better than not at all.

"Oh my sweet little boy," she cooed over his manhood and lifted a manicured finger to stroke it's imaginary face. "Now you be a good little boy," she addressed his penis, "Mommy has to tuck you in now," she ran her tongue across the tip.

"Enough of that already." Bill pulled himself from her grasp and carefully arranged himself inside his pants. "I hate it when you talk like that."

"But why, sugar? I just want every part of you to know how much I love it." She took hold of his hand and pulled him closer.

"It's just silly, Joy, that's all." How could he tell her it just wasn't something that interested him sometimes? Sometimes he wanted a girl who could make love without talking baby talk.

"Oh Billy, I lub you." Her sweet turned up face reached for him. But looking at her like that just turned him cold. "What a heel I am," he thought.

"And when we get married are you going to let our children 'do it' on our couch with their sweethearts?"

"What a dumb question," he thought, "not again, she always finds a way to bring up that subject."

" Your folks got anything to eat?" He changed the subject.

"My sweetie is hungry?" She kissed the top of his head as she stood. "Well there is what's left of the roast," she offered.

"Yea." Now he winked at her. "I sure could go for one of your roast beef sandwiches. Lots of mayonnaise and black pepper," he added. As she made sure to priss from the room he called after her, "and some chips."

He just sat there. His legs slightly spread; his hands clenched between them. His look took in the dark rosewood paneling of the Hutchinson's den. The house was sure a show place. Old man Hutchinson owned the butane company that serviced Sunflower County. The economy being what it was, and the constant thirst of those cylindrical tanks which graced everyone's yard, had made the Hutchinson's fairly rich. This caused Bill to think more upon the man he felt doomed to have as a father-in-law.

Bill had decided that he disliked Mr. Hutchinson. They were so flashy with their money. His mother called that crass. And Bill had often heard his own father complaining that the Hutchinson's were bilking the good citizens of Sunflower County with their high butane prices. "Well I wonder just what you would think Mr. Moneybags," Bill pondered, " if you knew I was out here porking your daughter right under your nose."

[&]quot; Up and out so early?" Liz called to Emma from the back yard.

[&]quot;Yes ma'am," Emma returned, "Cindy and I are going to run into Yazoo City to look for some new school shoes."

[&]quot;I wish you had let me know, Emma." Her aunt approached the back steps. "I would be more than happy to drive you two to Jackson for the day."

[&]quot;Yeah, I mean yes ma'am, I know." Emma bit her lips feeling that she was about to be caught in a lie. "But Cindy doesn't have much money to spend."

[&]quot;W-what?" Liz could see no correlation here. "I would pay for the gas, honey."

Emma had really backed herself into a corner now. "I know Aunt Liz, it's just, well, Cindy and I need to do some girl talk, you know private stuff."

[&]quot; My goodness Em, you don't have to be so snotty about it." The disappointment was plain in her eyes.

[&]quot;I am sorry Aunt Liz. I am not explaining this well. Please understand."

Liz nodded knowingly. "What do you think I am Emma, some old woman who wouldn't understand what it's like to be a young girl?"

"No, Aunt Liz, I guess I was just being silly."

Liz stood next to Emma pulling her hair back from her face. " You know, I think that Margaret could layer your hair just a bit and it would give it much more body."

"I love you, Aunt Liz." It was clear that she had caught her aunt off guard with this declaration.

"I love you too, Emma." She stopped playing with Emma's hair and turned to inspect Emma's face closely. " You are not about to do anything she shouldn't be doing are you?"

"No ma'am." Emma's laugh sounded a bit nervous. "Oh and if I get a phone call tell them I will be back here by noon." This caused Liz's brows to arch even more. And then they heard the horn blowing outside. "That's Cindy. Gotta run."

- " You ready teddy." Cindy asked.
- " Sure am, Sam."

"Then we are off to find the hou-ise," Cindy broke into song, "the broken down house in the woods."

Roy had been in the boat since sun up. Wilson's Fish was behind in running and baiting the lines. Eddy had turned up missing, and had been missing since Wednesday. Roy had started to get worried on Friday. Eddy had never missed more than two days in the eight years he had worked for Roy. And when he had missed those time one of his youngins had always showed up with apologies and excuses for their daddy. So when no one had even come by before Friday Roy grew puzzled.

That Saturday morning he had gotten up by himself to run the lines on the river that Eddy was neglecting. Roy figured if he had not heard from Eddy by the end of the weekend he would just have to get in his truck and go out and check on him. This morning, though, Roy had his hands full with the lines.

The boat was already half full, and it looked as if there would not be enough chicken liver and shrimp to bait the rest of the lines. "I'll just do what I can," Roy muttered to himself. After the sun had come up, Roy had begun to enjoy his work. He guessed that was why he had stayed on the river all these years. At one time his mother had encouraged him to leave

the delta and find another career. She wanted someone in the family to move to the city and make it big.

Of course, she had never had a plan about how that could come about. Money for school, back then, was out of the question. He supposed he could have gotten a job somewhere like Earl Lewis did, but then that hadn't done much for old Earl in the long run. Earl had died anyway. Roy's mother had long been dead and those dreams seemed empty to the lone man in the boat that chilly Saturday morning.

He was about to turn back for home when he decided even without bait, it would be better to go on and run the line that ran under the trestle. Better to leave the hooks empty than to let what fish were on the line get off. Roy pulled his boat up next to a piling and tied a rope around the big creosote post to keep it from drifting. He could see where the line was tied to a post just up from him. Rather than move the boat again, he took a paddle to dig into the water, hoping he would snag the line and pull it up.

The paddle was too short, so he pushed his hand and then his wrist below the water. Holding tightly to the paddle and stirring at the same time, he struck something solid with the oar. "Must be a log or a hell of a catfish," he chuckled to himself. "If I can just get my paddle under the line" He stretched farther over the side of the boat. His upper arm had now entered the water. The water was icy cold and Roy's hand was numbing. He did not realize it until he tried to lift his arm that something was encircling his wrist.

Whatever it was, it was clamping steadily harder. Only mild panic seized his mind as Roy shifted his weight in the boat to get a better leverage. He tugged on the arm, but the power of what ever held him was immense. Without thinking he thrust his other hand into the water to feel his arm. Something grabbed his other wrist immediately. "Oh god, no," Roy screamed as he pulled upward. The grip was released and Roy Wilson found himself gulping, flat on his back in the boat full of fish. He did not stop to think. He untied the rope and started the motor. Still shivering, he made his way back down the river to home.

Chapter 7

"Now this is the road that will get us there." Cindy had stopped the jeep at the end of the levee. There was no road as far as Emma could tell. There was only a shallow slough covered in vegetation that extended into the field.

"I don't see a road." Emma stated the obvious.

"Well that's because of all of this water." Cindy crammed the gears into low and began to walk the jeep down the side of the levee.

"I don't know if I like this." Emma was searching for something to hold on to keep her from bouncing right out of her seat.

"Piece of cake. Just hope there is not so much mud in that slough that we have to winch ourselves out of it."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Winch, I said."

"Slut." This was enough said to keep them laughing right through the marsh. The jeep did not lose it's footing and they pulled up onto solid ground as they rounded the corner near the trees.

"Cindy, how did you know where Viola Grace lived?" It finally occurred to Emma to ask, since this was definitely not a beaten path.

"She used to let some of the men use the bottom floor for a deer camp every now and then. They gave her some of the venison. She didn't complain about their 'a mans got to be a man' antics."

"How could she survive living so far back? Did she have a car that would get her back this far?"

"Old Viola was always a bit of a recluse and real tight lipped too. Even when she did cleaning for folk in The Bluff, she would just show up real quiet like, hardly speak at all, and then be gone before you know it."

Emma looked up to see what small path they had been traveling on had ended and all that was before them was a fairly dense stand of trees. Cindy, did not even slow down, selecting the smaller saplings, she just drove right over them. Emma turned to look out the back and saw that most just sprang right back up again after the jeep had passed over them. "Now I see why they build these things so high off the ground," Emma muttered.

The terrain was not bothering Cindy one little bit. For over thirty minutes they traveled over more wooded fields, narrow bogs, and through little impressions of gumbo, gumbo being the term used in those parts

when referring to the rich, black delta mud.

Emma did not see how Cindy, or anyone else for that matter, could know if they were on the right track or not. But Cindy did not seem at all worried.

At one juncture they scared a large hoot owl out of it's perch in a rotted tree.

"Wow, that's cool" Emma said, "Think we might see any deer?"

"Making all this noise, hardly," Cindy said as she abruptly stopped the jeep. "Got ta walk the rest of the way."

"You must be joking." Emma looked around. "We can't even get through that underbrush."

"That's why we got to walk it," Cindy said as she re-laced her boots and pulled her socks high up over her pants legs. "Only about a quarter of a mile. It will be good for you."

Emma stared down at the small purse in her lap. For some reason the question of whether or not she might need that purse seem baffling, like some incomprehensible algebra problem. She opened her door and left the purse on the seat.

As she struggled to not lose sight of Cindy's back, she noticed that Cindy had a backpack. "You got dried beef in there or something?" Emma shouted up at Cindy.

"I wouldn't laugh about it," Cindy responded back, "I got water and fig bars."

"Hot damn, I didn't know we were going on a picnic." Emma tried to sound light as countless briars and vines hindered her progress. "Over the river and through the woods," she sang under her breath.

By the time they saw the house, Emma had mud up to her knees, cockleburs were stuck all over her, and her hands were scratched to pieces. "Here, you got a spider web in your hair," Cindy said pointing at her.

"Why thanks for telling me," Emma replied.

The house was tremendous.

"It's one, two, four stories high. I always heard you can't build over a two story house in the delta cause of the clay."

"You can't," Cindy agreed. "And they don't anymore."

But there it was, all four grayed wooden levels of it. There were no frills to this house, just straight up it went, no awnings, no porches, no fancy scrolls, no shutters. The only odd thing about the plain structure was that on both the third and fourth floors there were doors where the middle

windows should have been, opening up on to nothing. Emma looked for signs of old balconies; surely there would have been something there. There were no front steps.

Cindy looked at Emma and nodded toward the house. "Well come on. We've come this far."

From the front door Emma could see that there was a center hall that ran from front to back straight down the middle of the house. She could see the high weeds in the back yard through the broken glass on the back door. Four doors opened off the front hallway, two on the right side, two on the left. It all looked too perfectly spaced for such a dilapidated old house. Looking up Emma saw the landing for the other three floors.

The stairs from the first floor went up from the right side of the hall and then leveled out onto a landing for the first floor before turning back, rising and completing this pattern all the way to the top. Right in the center one could see all the way up to what looked like thr underbelly of the roof.

"So, what are we looking for?" Cindy rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. She did not look so comfortable now that they were in the house. Emma was trying to hear over the squeaking that Cindy was forcing from the bowed floorboards.

"We are looking for a closet that has an old wooden chest in it."

"Let's try here." Cindy opened the closest door on their right. The room was perfectly square with long windows on the two outside walls. It was over bare, no debris at all. In the far back wall there was a small door. Emma walked cautiously toward it, while Cindy hung back.

"It's empty." Emma said. The echo of the hallow open room reminded Emma of something, like maybe from when she was just a kid, but she put that thought right out of her mind.

"What about this one?" Cindy pointed to the next room down the hall, again waiting for Emma to take the lead.

The door opened smoothly, too smoothly. Inside was another empty room, a mirrored copy of the first. Once again the closet was empty.

"I think the whole house is just divided into four identical rooms per floor, "Cindy whispered, "I think that is how I remember it."

"Don't whisper," Emma said in a voice not much louder than Cindy's had been. "What do you mean you think? You were the one who was the big 'my daddy's deer camp' expert."

"Well, I have been here lots of times. I just never liked coming in the house."

"I can see why," Emma muttered more to herself than out loud.

Only one room on the ground floor proved to be any different from the rest. In that room a long cabinet whose top was covered in cheap roll linoleum ran across the side under the window. A recessed white sink occupied the middle of the cabinet. A pump handle sat to one side of the stained sink. Except for these things it was another bare room.

As the girls took slowly to the stairs Cindy finally going ahead of Emma, reaching the top step first, and then freezing in her tracks. "Oh, my God," she stammered.

"What?" Emma could not bring herself to go any further up the stairs.

"Ha, gotcha." Cindy turned to offer Emma a grin. Emma did not return the favor.

Not talking, the girls entered the first door they reached. Another empty room, and then the second door, the second room and there it was. There was no need to open this closet; it stood wide open and plainly visible inside was a wooden trunk. As soon as they got close enough to inspect it though, they noted the problem. The trunk was wedged tightly into the closet and could not be opened from this position. "Here, help me get it out of here, " Emma said to Cindy.

The girls struggled to get a hold on the chest. The sides of the chest were so close to the closet walls the prospect of moving the trunk seemed untenable, but finally Emma managed to squeeze her fingers down one side and grab what felt like a handle. "Cindy, when I lift this edge up, you need to try to maneuver that other end down." After three small shifts of sliding one end up while the other tilted down, they finally managed to up end the chest in the closet and pull it from it's roust. "Whew!" Emma dragged the back of her hand across her forehead.

"Guess it's time to see what we got here," Cindy ventured. "You go first Em, I already ate."

Emma looked at the chest. She heard herself exhale. "Okay, let's take a look see." The lid opened with no problem and though both girls would not have been surprised to have found a short stumpy vampire inside, what they did see was almost a let down. The chest was filled with papers, letters, old newspapers, documents, receipts, sheets and scraps.

"Now let me get his right." Cindy stood beside Emma peering down into the chest, "We are suppose to be looking for one particular letter in all this mess?" The more Cindy looked the more she noticed that there appeared to be nests of shredded paper among the rest. "Emma, are you afraid of mice?"

"Not now," Emma lied, "not enough time. Now, get down here and help me." Emma pulled the redhead down so that they were both on their knees in front of the trunk. "Okay, you take these." Emma handed out one pile, "and I will take these."

"Lot's of newspapers here," Cindy noted. "I thought she wasn't much on reading. Some of these are just a few months old. I wonder how she got them."

"I doubt it was home delivery," was all Emma would offer back. Most of what Emma was reading made no sense to her. There were all these lists she kept running across, sheet after sheet of hand written lists. They were like shopping lists, but they weren't shopping lists; birth announcements, death announcements, moon cycles, words that could not be pronounced.

"Okay, could this be it?" Cindy held up an envelope. "It's never even been opened."

"What does it say on the front?"

"It says, " she studied the writing, " to Missus Viola Grace, and then up here it says Addie Grace, St. Louis." Emma reached out for the letter. She held it in her outstretched palm as if to weigh it. "Okay, we found it. Let's go." Cindy was already up wiping her palm on the legs of her jeans.

"Wait a minute."

"What for?"

"What about the rest of this stuff?"

"I am not about to clean this mess up and put that heavy old smelly thing back in that closet."

"No, I mean, I just want to take some of this too."

"Like what?"

"Just hang on." Emma scooped up some of the lists and then grabbed a few of the papers as well.

"I am glad you are the one carrying them back to the jeep. This should be fun to watch." Cindy was slightly uneasy with the way Emma was being unreasonable, she thought, about a bunch of trash. "Hey, did you forget? Or were you lying? Isn't this the night of the supposed 'date'?"

This worked, or it seemed to. Emma stood up, but she kept stuffing as many papers as she could into her pockets. Once there was no more room, she swept up an arm full to tote.

"You can not take all of those back through that thicket. How are you going to pick your way through the briars with your arms full?" Cindy just shook her head and gave in. "Here, stick them in my back pack. You

owe me now, you owe me big time."

Out on the landing, Emma stopped to look back into the room. "I guess it will be all right like that."

"What the?" Cindy was pointing up the stairs. Emma jerked around to see. There was nothing there, clearly nothing there. "Ah, got you again," Cindy said with only a sheepish smile.

"Not, funny."

"So let's get a move on. Let's go."

Outside, the sky was just a bit darker than when they had entered the house. "What time is it?" Emma was suddenly concerned.

"Just a little after noon."

"We got to hurry."

"Sure, but when we get back to that jeep I am rolling a joint before we head out." Cindy had had all she needed of the thrill of adventure. She was not even able to be witty about it at that time. "Nah, I couldn't have seen anything," she told herself.

The clock over the fridge showed a little after five pm. Emma stood with one hand on the counter top and the other wrapped around a glass of milk. She felt exhausted. A little over two hours before Bill would show up, he had just left a brief message. "Will pick you up at seven." What she really wanted was a nap, too strange. But after being gone for so much of the day she felt it might be wiser to at least offer to help her aunt with supper.

"So Emma, where was it that you and Cindy really went?" Liz slammed the screen door. In her arms was a blue enamel tub full of mason jars. Emma braced herself for the interrogation.

"Emma Lewis, I asked you a question."

"Yes, ma'am." There was no point in lying. Her aunt had taken notice of the burrs and weeds and mud when Emma had returned. Luckily it was only because of the preacher's wife's presence that the scolding was delayed. "Well after we checked out the shops in town, Cindy had this idea that it would be neat to show me her father's old deer camp."

"Good lord, Emma," Liz looked as if ready to shake her, " are you not aware that there is a lunatic on the loose out there?" Her voice was getting louder and higher. "You are not going to tell me that two young girls took off alone in the swamps?" It was obvious that there was no

answer required to this.

"I just do not understand you, child. Every time it looks as if we have taken another step forward with raising you properly, you take two steps backward." Liz had a full head of steam now. "You do not seem to realize what your Uncle Roy and I have gone through to have you here with us. Your own Aunt Lucy told us not to take you in. She said you would never appreciate a thing we did for you. She said you ought to be sent to some kind of institution. Are you just set in making her right?"

Emma could not, would not cry as she faced her aunt's torrent of words. Her throat felt dry, her ears were ringing, and she just wanted to lie down.

"I said, what do you have to say for yourself, Emma?"

Emma snapped back to focus on her aunt. "I'm.... I'm real, real sorry." She broke from the room as tears filled her. She ran up to her room. "No, it is not your room," she told herself, "You don't have any room. You don't deserve to take up space." She flung herself on the bed, praying that she could find a way to just cease to exist.

The sun was just setting across the county as Red Humphries slid out of his green pickup. He had parked on the side of the two rutted dirt road and planned to walk the rest of the way to the cabin. He was about seven miles out of the Bluff in the direction headed for Rolling Fork. The land he was on belonged to the Frank's plantation. It had been left uncultivated for a number of years to let the soil replenish and to enable the owner to pick up a healthy government check. The cabin he headed for was a dirt-floored, one room shack that had once been used to house cattle feed.

Red had a man tied up in the cabin. It was the man he figured had killed them two kids or least helped to kill them. The trouble was the way the law worked. The way the law worked murderers could hardly ever be brought to justice anymore. That was why a county needed a strong sheriff. Yep, Red would just have to handle this on his own and he knew how to do just that. It was a harsh job for a man to have to take on all that responsibility, but Red figured it was worth doing if it kept his county safe.

He kicked in the door of the cabin with a polished boot.

"You in there, boy?"

"Shit," was the single word that answered him.

Red walked into the room cautiously. Once inside his eyes adjusted

and he saw the wiry muscled black man crouched in the corner. "Now, what you think you be doing?"

"What do you want from me, sheriff?"

"You know what I want. We had this same here conversation a few days ago. I want to know why you killed them teenagers."

"You are a crazy man." The prisoner stood and stretched his arms and shoulders. Around his foot was a shackle. On to the shackle was attached a chain connected to a metal ring encased in a concrete slab which measured about three feet by three feet. This slab marked the centre of the room. "When you gonna let me out of here, sheriff? I done told you I don't know nothing about it."

"Why did you mutilate them?"

"Oh Jesus."

"Coroner said you cut out both their hearts and their tongues. Why would you want to do something like that?"

"Why would anyone? I told you man I didn't do it! I don't know anyone sick enough to do something like that."

"Some real sharp cuts had been made on those bodies, like a man with a sharp fishing knife and a knack for splitting open flesh." Red struck a match on the bottom of his boot. "Why'd you do it? Did you run across the girl first? Maybe her screams brought the boy?"

"I told you, man."

"Coroner said they were already dead before you took a knife to them. So what did you use to kill em first?"

The hostage sat on the slab, his head in his hands in exasperation. "So when you gonna bring me something to eat, sheriff?"

"No more food."

"What?"

"I said, no more food. You are making this tough on me. Maybe a hungry belly will make you see things more my way."

The man stood up and rushed the sheriff. Red stepped back and struck a pointed boot tip to the man's groin. "Gotta learn to control that temper, boy." Then he turned and walked back to his truck.

Chapter 8

Emma wondered if she had gotten up at all if her Uncle Roy had not come upstairs to talk to her. He entered her room slowly after knocking and settled his bulky form down on the side of her bed. He had heard the whole scene from the back porch. He knew first hand of Elizabeth's razor sharp tongue, and he was sorry to hear her let it loose on the girl. He wasn't sure just what to say. He had always considered her the sensitive type even as a child she had been the first to cry over a scolding.

"Your Aunt Liz, well, she's a real spit fire." He managed an uncomfortable laugh, trying to ease the tension. "Sometimes she can't help but explode, but deep down she really don't ever mean to hurt no one," this was the hard part to explain, "it's just the only way she knows."

Emma turned on her side to look at her uncle. It was not his words that soothed her. It was the tenderness in his voice. A voice like that could not help but make you feel better, "Thank you," she whispered.

She was in his car. She couldn't believe it, sitting right on his blue bucket seat. The only problem was that she could not bring herself to move, not even turn her head toward him.

"Is this too much air for you?" Bill adjusted a vent. He was ill at ease as well.

"It's fine." She finally managed to meet his eyes. She thought to herself in amazement, "I have dreamed of this, but right now I think I would rather just be somewhere else."

"You like pizza?" What a stupid question they both thought. Only a week back things had been different.

Emma had been afraid that her aunt might not let her go, but at six thirty Liz had pranced in her room all smiles. She had insisted on picking out clothes for Emma to wear. Some three changes later, Emma had finally been ready. She had not given any thought to being nervous, until now.

The flat stretch of highway spread before them offering no topic of conversation. They would be in Yazoo City in fifteen minutes.

"Em," Bill spoke without taking his eyes from the road. "I am a bit nervous here, would you mind too terribly if I held your hand?" Without answering she slipped into the upturned hand he had placed on the console. His hand immediately closed around hers, his fingers rubbing

along the shape of hers and lightly squeezing. "Thanks," he said.

"No problem." Her face lit up. The pizza place was dark and smelly, but they both seemed more at ease finally away from The Bluff. Emma almost forgot for a bit, it was like being back home when everything was a okay.

"You're something else," he said leaning across the table.

"Yeah, sure, is that your way of saying strange, different."

"Don't say that," he tilted his head to one side in a phony reproach.

"You," she faltered, "you pull that charm of yours on everyone. I don't intend to just..." she waved her hands in the air to finish.

"Oh, I am willing to wait."

"For what?" She had not meant to say that. "I mean am I eating too slow or..."

He interrupted her with a loud laugh. "One minute you are miss 'I've been around' and the next you are," he stopped when he saw the look on her face. "I just..." he paused, "get a kick out of you. And yes, you are eating slow, so get a move on so we can get to the movie."

Emma could not have told anyone the story line of the movie. No matter how hard she stared at the screen the dialogue just refused to register in her mind. She was too busy with her own inner dialogue. He had wrapped his arm around her and was playing with her fingers, which he would occasionally bring up to his mouth to taste. Her senses were humming loudly in her ears. This was all so very new to her. She found herself examining his profile as he held her hand up to his face. As the movie wore on he leaned lower and lower in the seat pulling her with him, turning to breath warm air on her neck. She raised her brow questioning his intention.

"You know we could leave now," he whispered close to her ear.

"I don't know."

"Please, Emma, neither one of us is watching this movie."

"Yeah, I know." She resigned herself.

Bill turned off the motor after pulling into a narrow dirt road just outside of The Bluff.

"No, Bill, I don't want to park." Emma's eyes searched the open delta surrounding them. She was sure the car stood out on the horizon.

"Oh Emma," he had already slid one hip across the console and was wrapping his arms about her. "Emma, we are in a closed locked car. There is nothing wrong with what we are doing. And if you are thinking about..."

"No," she moaned lightly. Her mind knew that nothing could make them safe, but this was out of control of her mind. She felt like she had just inhaled something both tickly and numbing. She turned so that her back was against the dashboard to tell him that they were not safe. He drew her to him till her arms had to encircle his shoulders to maintain her balance. Then she forgot what she was going to say.

It was late when Emma flipped out the light and pulled her covers up to her chin. Neither her aunt nor her uncle had been up when she got in. Now she lay in bed puzzled and awake. She had been prepared, she thought, to tell him to stop if things got out of hand. But he made no attempt to do anything other than kiss and hold her. There had even been one long period of time where she had lain stretched across his lap, both of them so still they could have fallen asleep. When she had sat up and moved so that her head was against the passenger glass her legs across him they had talked and laughed. At first it was all playful but then they began to discuss school, and home. Emma found herself telling him about how it was to live with her Aunt Liz and Uncle Roy. He told stories about his family and childhood days. Once he had started to relate a story about Joy and things had become awkward. Soon after that he had taken her home. He had only kissed her once at the door and then watched as she let herself inside the house.

Now, she lay in bed wondering if he thought it had been a good evening.

Across the room on the dresser, the letters and papers she had worked so hard to obtain earlier had been forgotten.

"Don't you touch me." Cindy Basset sat upright in her bed. She had been dreaming. She and Emma were back in that old house again. The house in the dream had been much the same except for the loud rock-n-roll music that came pouring from the upper floors. Cindy and Emma had raced each other up the stairs. In the dream the steps had been limp like spaghetti and they had to hang on when the whole structure swayed and wobbled. It had been great fun, like a ride at an amusement park. She and Emma were laughing uncontrollably as they swooped and twirled on the stairs.

On the second floor they had run into Martha Penn, who was hanging sheets out to dry on a awkward clothes line. The sun shone bright on her and the wind whipped the sheets all about them. They had waved and shouted at their friend as they passed.

The sound of the music and the loud wind deafened them to Martha's

shouts.

The climb to the third floor was laborious. Cindy could hardly lift her legs. As they ascended, the sun beat down on them. Then the once pliable steps stiffened and splintered beneath them. With a crack of lightening, the stairway split in two, the bottom steps crumbling away. Cindy looked down to see the loose lumber tumbling down in a slow spiraling motion. The air had become wintry grey. Cindy knew that the ruined boards that were left could barely support them. The ground floor appeared to be hundreds of feet away. Cindy and Emma clung to each other as the step they shared began to sag.

Craning her neck upward Cindy searched for a way out. Ten feet below them the stairs ended. At the top of the stair was a door. Blood dripped from it, and an axe was driven into the wall above it. She could hear the door creak as if whatever was behind it was slowly making its way out. Snatching Emma's hand, she surveyed the skeleton framework that supported them. They would have to shinny their way using beams and crossbeams to reach the bottom. Pushing Emma ahead of her, Cindy waited while her friend scooted cautiously down a post. Cindy dropped to a crouch, to grasp the crossbeam beneath her. From the corner of her eye she saw the blackened narrow boots that stood behind her.

Her own screams awakened her.

Roy Wilson sat on his back porch rocking. He had heard Emma come in. The girl was late and he was glad that it had been he, instead of Elizabeth who had sat up to wait.

His thoughts consumed him as he slowly rocked. A shotgun lay beside him. Something was happening and it was happening too close to his home. The incident on the river had shaken him. Looking back he was certain that it had been nothing more than a branch or a torn line that had snagged him, but he was spooked. Something indefinable told him they were not safe in their own home. Elizabeth had been right this time. They were fools to sit and wait for it to happen again. No, someone would have to see that no more lives were taken, someone who knew these woods, knew this river; someone with a lot at stake.

Joy Hutchinson was mad as a wet hen. She had fallen asleep the night before, only after crying her eyes out for hours. She had punched her pillow and cursed him.

Joy was stunned when Bill refused to come for the regular Saturday night supper with her folks. His excuse had been that he wanted to spend a quiet night at home with his own parents. His sentimentality toward his 'aging parents' and his fear of growing away from them had actually brought tears to her eyes as she listened to him. " No, wonder, I love him so much, " she had thought.

But by eight o'clock, after she had helped her mother with the dishes, she realized that this was the second Saturday night for which he had an excuse. As she lay across her bed with a teen fashion magazine the weight of the past week came back to her. The shock, the funeral, had she really thought she had put that behind. That realization of the grief she was still suffering over the loss of her friend, Angela, just over powered her. "I want Bill," she cried out, "he ought to be here tonight. Just got to call and at least talk to him."

Mrs. Simmons had been disturbed by the tone in Joy's voice. "Honey, he left here over an hour ago. Isn't he at your place yet."

The question hit Joy broadside. "Why no...."

"Bill said he had a date, so I know he remembered. Do you think something might have happened to him?" Mrs. Simmons was now noticeable anxious.

"No ma'am, I just remembered where he said he was going first." Joy's voice was cold. "Please, don't tell him I called you. I don't want him to know what a ninny I am." Joy hung up the phone, not waiting for a response. " That son of a bitch! What a crock! Does he know what my daddy will do to him?"

Emma had gotten up early Sunday morning to go to church with her Aunt Liz. Elizabeth was born and raised Presbyterian. But because there was no longer a Presbyterian church in The Bluff, she regularly traveled the twenty miles to Yazoo City to attend Sunday morning worship. Roy never went.

When she first got up, Emma was alarmed because her mouth was swollen and red. "Lord, if this is only from kissing, how do married folks survive," she thought. She felt light on her feet as she moved about getting dressed.

It was the second Sunday in October and the crisp air bit their skin as niece and aunt walked across the gravel to car. The sun hung sort of golden and low. It seemed to Emma that she could smell the cool water from the river.

"Good gravy, Emma, where did these come from?" Elizabeth, who had bent to pull her stored Bible from under the front seat like wise pulled out a pair of shiny, narrow, black boots.

Lucille May sat on the bench in her kitchen with a child on her lap. The

child that was not more than a year old babbled and spit alternatively. The three year old sat on the dirty wooden floor drinking from a bottle. He refused to give it up, so Lucille had long ago quit trying to make him. From the bedroom off the kitchen, she could hear her seven year old crying as his older sister, only eight, tried to wash his face. Lucille, who had lived in the same shotgun shack since she married Eddy May, was worried.

Eddy had been missing for five days. Her older boys had gone out looking for Eddy on Friday night and had come home baffled. Eddy had simply disappeared. They were good boys, the oldest had just turned seventeen, but she figured they still had a lot to learn.

This morning she was waiting for her sister, Verna, to show up and carry the young ones to preaching. Then she would set out looking for her husband in the one place the boys would not have thought to look, in the river, dead.

Lucille had always known about her husbands rambling ways. She had even become good friends with some of the women who bore his illegitimate children. He remained her man.

Her mamma had taught her as a young girl that a man was different from a woman. Men, well, they had a weight on them that women could not understand. To be a man meant busting ass every day just to stay one. So men folks all had their weaknesses to comfort them. For some it was the bottle, for some gambling, for some it could even be a cocky pride that kept ending them up in fights. For Eddy, who was always a fine looking man, a man who could pass for much younger, it had always been women. That Eddy loved her, Lucille had never doubted. But how he could burn for the flesh of another woman was just part of what made him a man. In the folded flesh of another woman he was safe to wear out his fears and frustrations. Lucille loved Eddy, and she would have never considered denying him this need of his.

The problem with Eddy's carousing was the husbands and boy friends he offended. More than once he had come close to losing his life at the hands of an angry man. "Reckon his time done run out," Lucille spoke to the baby in her lap. She kissed the child's coarse head.

She would have to hurry after her sister arrived. It was a long distance to the cabin where she would get the herbs and knowledge that could retrieve her husband from the bottom of the Sunflower River. It was an ancient rite that she would perform, one that black folks never spoke of in a white world.

The sermon bounced off Cindy's ears as she sat in the back row of the

First Baptist Church of The Bluff. Two pews up she was watching the backs of Joy Hutchinson and Bill Simmons. A lot was going on up there.

Bill, who had walked in late, had sat matter-of-factly next to Joy, his arm swinging over the back of the pew around her. Cindy had watched as Joy turned toward him and spat out some insult and then slid down the pew away. He had scooted slowly after her and grabbed her shoulder to keep her from retreating further. They now sat, with Bill's arm firmly encircling her, his head slightly bent toward her. Though no words were audible, she watched as Bill mouthed a story into Joy's ear.

Now Cindy was keenly aware that just the night before Bill had been out with Emma. She stewed in her seat. "What is that asshole doing?" she almost spoke out loud. What ever it was, it was having the desired effect on Joy. She turned to look directly at Bill. Though her lips were firmly pressed together, Cindy could see the warmth Joy's eye radiated toward him. "That son-of-a-bitch," Cindy muttered under her breath.

Bill had said nothing about calling her, but Emma still jumped every time the phone rang Sunday afternoon. Aunt Liz had prepared a hearty meal of fried chicken, potato salad, biscuits, garden grown peas and peach cobbler. Emma had hardly eaten a bite.

After the late lunch, Emma had sat on the back porch with her aunt and uncle trying to read her history assignment. She rarely read any of her assignments. Her mind would not focus on the book today either. She gave up and went to her room to sit in one of the windows and think her thoughts. She found herself thinking, "I will be glad when the leaves fall and I can see the river from my room." As she sat there she noticed the sunlight playing off her dresser mirror. On the dresser she noticed the letter and papers. She scooped them up with glee and went back to the window to read them.

The afternoon had become warm and Lucille sat on the riverbank with a kerchief tied around her neck. It had been late in the morning before she had reached Hattie's. Hattie lived on the bank of the Yazoo River, which ran in to the Sunflower near by.

Hattie was closer to Rolling Fork than she was to The Bluff. The old woman had been standing on her screened porch when Lucille entered the yard. She held the screen door open for Lucille to join her. Hattie was a large squat woman. Lucille had no idea of her age, but the grey head had not changed since Lucille was a little girl.

They spoke very little. Hattie had never asked a question. Lucille always felt as if Hattie knew what her visitors were going to say before

they said it.

Hattie occupied a special place in the black community. She was called when babies were born, when folks took sick, and when they died. Occasionally other special problems would come up that Hattie could handle. Hattie had once told Beatrice Simpson where here grandmother had hidden a pearl necklace. Of course, many still did not believe in her ways. But Lucille did not care about what others believed. She was only interested in the special ingredient that would raise a dead man from the river.

With the flickering reflection of leaves on the water, Lucille now stood in a densely wooded area of the Sunflower River. In her right hand she held a small pouch made from a flour sack. In her left four wooden chips. Hattie had told her that she had to collect the chips herself. They had come from the cypress that grew close to the water, each from a different tree, from a different side, east, west, north and south. Hattie had explained that it was important that the cypress be half in and half out of the water. All Lucille had to do now was wait. The ritual could only be performed at the edge of dusk, while the sky lost it's glow and darkness conquered.

The letter sat laid out flat on Emma's lap. This was the third time she had read it. It read:

Dear Mamma,

I am writing this letter because of the things I have heard recently from Auntee' Nell concerning you and your well being. I was sorely bothered to hear of your moving out to the Goodwin place on Further Back. I am sure the distance away from people is good by you, but you are an old woman and nothing good can come from you living out so far.

Auntee' Nell also says nothing has changed with you. You have not given up your old ways. You know that I said if you didn't I would not come to your house again. You are my mamma, and I love you, but there have been times when I would have preferred you dead to what you have become. When will the sense of what I say ever reach you?

It is a bad thing I heard about Tina's girl. I hope and pray that it was just an accident. I know her family is sick with the loss. Once again, momma, I ask you with all my heart to give up the old ways and come live with Mary and me. We would take good care of you. Christ have mercy.

Your daughter, Addie

P.S.

Emma folded the letter neatly and place it in the Bible on the night stand. "What were Viola's old ways?" she wondered. Perhaps the old woman had been a boozer. It seemed likely enough. Emma's own father had fought a losing battle with alcohol all his life. She had watched in terror many times as the spirits changed his gentle ways and he had become an angry raging monster, but it was the last line that grabbed Emma's heart. "Momma," it read, "I know you gave your soul to rescue me, but all the scriptures in the world won't save you... and all the success you bought for me ain't worth it."

Chapter 9

Lucille drifted off to sleep leaning against the trunk of a water oak. She jerked herself awake when a beetle landed on her lower leg. Her eyes took in her surroundings and she immediately remembered where she was and why.

"Good thing I woke up," she muttered shaking her head to dispel her sleep. The sun now bordered the horizon and within minutes would sink below.

Lucille stood and stretched out the cramps from her limbs. The air had grown chilly and she felt the goose flesh rise on her arms. She rubbed them away. Not much longer she realized. "But what do I do if his body don't come floating up that river," she dared to think.

So anxious had she been, she had sidestepped letting any other alternatives distract her. Single minded she had kept telling herself, "If Eddy is dead I just want to know it and be done with the worry." Of course, she knew that didn't mean he wasn't still dead, but just a rotting some where else. Then again he might not be dead at all. But knowing Eddy she knew this was unlikely. Even with his roving ways he always came back home sooner than this. Since the only thing she knew to try was this river conjuring, well then she would try it. It had to be better than just waiting.

Hattie had warned Lucille that with rivers the chances of this ritual working correctly were reduced since the water was moving along all the time. Plus a river could cover a great deal of miles, which diluted the effect. All Lucille could do was try to pick a spot that seemed likely since after a mile the summoning would cease to work well so she had relied on her own instinct to pick the spot to try.

Just down stream from the trestle was where she now stood. "This is probably not that far from where they found old Viola caught up on those trot lines," she thought. Through the grapevine, Lucille had heard that Viola had not come to her death through accident. "Was sent to her death," was the whispered words.

Lucille stepped down to the very edge of the water. She did not take her eyes from the sky as the sun slumped down out of sight. Balancing the pouch in her hands with the cypress chips, she loosened the leather straps. She dipped the first chip into the bag. It came out covered in a clinging bronze dust. With her right hand she flung the chip into the river,

sending it as out as far as she could. She closed her eyes and counted to ten. Lucille repeated the process with the other chips.

Twenty minutes had passed since Lucille had sent the last chip on it's way. Hattie had warned her that with currents and debris it sometimes took as long as up to an hour for a body to make it's way. Lucille just had to content herself with waiting, her gaze never leaving the surface of the murky brown river. Only the sudden rustling of the leaves behind her made her finally turn her head. On the top of the bank she could barely make out a shape, small and hunched over.

"Who's there?" she called. No response. "Who is that?" She spoke louder this time.

"No need to fear." It was an old voice that finally replied.

"Lordy, I thought," Lucille began and then froze. Standing not more than ten feet from her was someone she recognized right off. "Viola?" Lucille felt riveted to the eyes as the old woman came closer. The eyes seethed with hatred. The flesh around them looked mottled. "No," was the only sound Lucille managed to make.

As a bony hand grabbed for her throat, Lucille threw up a hand to protect herself. At the same time Viola punched all of her weight right into Lucille. They both tumbled down the bank. Lucille could feel the cold soaked flesh of the old woman against her. As she looked up, she could see one long bone of a finger diving for her right eye. Lucille heard the slurp as the bone drove through her eye socket. She watched in horror as the woman pulled the slime covered finger back out and went for the left eye.

"This time I is gonna pull out a piece of your brain, sweetie" These were the last words she heard.

Eddy had not eaten in over forty-eight hours. The last meal the sheriff had brought him had been on Friday night, he thought. He drank the rest of the water left in the jug for him and now eyed the film of rusty water in the bottom of the fifty-five gallon barrel. If it would stop that gnawing in his gut he would gladly swill it down. What he had always thought of as hunger had stopped the night before. What he felt now was a sick burning in the pit of his belly as if the juices in his stomach had gotten tired of waiting for food and were about to go after his innards. Eddy heard the boots kicking against the door.

"You still in here, boy?"

"Where the fuck did you think I would be?"

"Now, now, now, is that your belly I hear a rumbling?" The sheriff was carrying a kerosene lantern, which he sat gently down on the concrete slab in the middle of the room. Cautiously eyeing Eddy he took out a pack of matches and lit it. It was only then that Eddy saw what sat beside the lantern. It was a packed Styrofoam lunch like what one might get from Thelma's Cafe. Eddy started toward it.

"Back, boy." Red brought out his service revolver. "This ain't food meant for no filthy murderers." Red picked up the covered plate and stepped back to the door. "I just figured to have my supper here with you. You know, keep you company in case there is anything you want to get off your chest."

Now certain that he was out of reach, Red slipped the gun back into it's holster and squatted down. As he opened the container the aroma struck Eddy hard in the gut. He swallowed his own spit as he watched the sheriff dig into the plate. He could see the succulent slices of pork roast, field peas, candied yams, mashed potatoes with gravy and a glistening wedge of buttered corn bread. Eddy groaned. He watched as Red pulled a bite of pork from the plate, his fingers already glistening from the juices. Eddy felt the sweat come to his brow.

"Mighty good." Red smacked his lips as he chewed.

"God Almighty, sheriff ." Eddy stretched the chain that bound him to its limit. Only a few feet away from Red Humphries, he stood bound.

"Yep, I guess it would take away a man's appetite to be carrying a burden like you are, son." He smiled, his mouth greasy from a bite of corn bread. "Why I would offer you some, but I know you would only refuse. Just can't stomach the sight of food after what you have done."

"Please," Eddy whispered now, " what is it that you want from me?"

"Oh, you know what I want."

"Okay, anything. I'll help you find the men that done it, but you got to believe, sheriff, it weren't me." Eddy was close to tears.

"Oh Eddy, Eddy, maybe in a few days you can do better than that. Like remember the truth. Just tell me the truth." Red rose and snapped the covered meal closed. "I hate to leave you in the dark, what with the haunting memories you must have." He turned to leave. "I will be seeing you."

Verna Long sat in her sister's dim kitchen. She had just gotten the little ones to bed. The youngest, Lee Tom, had been the hardest. He had cried for over an hour for his "Mah". Verna too wished that "Mah" would appear and set everything all right.

Preaching at the Gospel Holy Church was a daylong event with morning service only being broken by a 'dinner on the ground' and fellowship. Lucille had promised Verna that she would be at church before the end of evening service to pick up the young ones.

Verna had stood, keeping the children near her under the street lamp for nearly an hour waiting. The church had gone dark and there wasn't nothing else except to watch the bats dip and dive around the light when she finally carried the children back home to continue waiting.

The orange dial on the clock showed the time to be 12:12 a.m. Verna's frustration grew to outright fear. She had sent her own two babies home with her fourteen year old. Verna was no longer worried about them; they were safe by now. She rolled the feather pillow into a ball and lay down by one of her sister's children to sleep.

Monday morning Emma was already awake when her aunt came in to rouse her. She did not hear a word of Liz's breakfast chatter. She was dying to get to school. She wanted to see Bill again and boy did she have an earful for Cindy.

As soon as Emma got off the bus she headed for Cindy's jeep, which sat in it's usual place in the corner of the gravel lot. "Cindy, my love, what sayest thou?" she spoke in her imitation of Elizabethan Shakespeare.

Cindy, who had her head buried in a textbook merely looked up and countered, "What's up, Emma?"

"Ooh, long face."

Cindy looked away from her pal. She had decided Sunday night after watching Bill and Joy grope each other on the couch of the activities building after church that she was just not going to say another word about it to Emma. She had already done her best to warn her. She would even lie if she must. What was a little lack of truth in the face of friendship? She was damned if she would be the one to burst Emma's bubble.

"Just don't feel well," she said in a way of explanation.

"Well, I feel great" Emma actually shouted.

"Oh, how so?"

"Oh Cindy, I had so much fun Saturday night."

"I am glad to hear it."

"Bill is the most wonderful, sensitive," she stammered, at a loss for superlatives. "You could tell me that he hung all the stars in the sky and made the grass green and I would believe you."

"Oh boy." This was all that Cindy could croak. It was worse than she thought.

"No, really Cindy, he was just great. He said that he had been thinking about me ever since I had moved here. He said I was the most exciting..." Emma's words died in her mouth as she turned to look where Cindy was now staring (now Clyde darlin, are you just feeding me lines like this!?!?!?!).

Across the parking lot Joy Hutchinson sat on the hood of Bill's car. In front of her stood Bill. Joy had her arms stretched out around his neck. Pulling her into him, he had his hands about her waist.

"Em, I am so sorry." Cindy hurt for her best friend.

"It's okay."

"No it isn't. He's a jerk, an asshole," her voice lowered, "I am sorry I ever encouraged you to go after him."

"No, no, it was a good experience for me." Bitterness marked her every word.

"Are you all right?"

"Hell no. I am mad as shit." Emma's eyes welled with tears.

"Cool for you." Cindy reached out to embrace her.

Emma had no problem avoiding Bill that day. They only had two classes together. In one of them, Joy sat right next to Bill. As they sat side by side, Emma had painfully noticed every glance that passed between them.

When she got home, she had turned down Cindy's offer for a ride and a trip to the drive through for a shake, she had gone glumly up to bed just wanting to sleep. She had slept until Liz had called her down for supper. Throughout the meal she had only stirred her food around her plate unable to take more than a bite or two. "I hate him," she had thought time and time again.

Back in her room after the dishes were done, she had not bothered to turn on any lights, but had crawled into a window seat. "How can this hurt so much," she asked herself. "It was only one date, one night, I can not let this get to me. I have been through so much more than this. I will not let this get to me." Her fists clinched and unclenched as she helplessly remembered every word he had said in lies.

"I am being silly," she finally said out loud. "He did not promise me anything. He owes me nothing. Why did I expect him to give up a girl he has liked since grade school?" Her tears destroyed her words as she placed her face against the cold pane of glass in the window.

"I could get even with him for this." The thought came almost from a place she did not know. For an instant she looked up as if someone else had spoken. "No, I don't want revenge," she assured herself. "But you could have it," the alien words came back to her. "No, I would never hurt Bill Simmons, no matter what he does to me." She refocused. The violence she had felt had suddenly left her tired.

"A good night's sleep," she thought, "a good nights sleep and I will wipe him from my mind." Wearily she stood and walked in the darkness to her bed. The clothes she wore dropped to the floor. She pulled her gown over her nakedness, pulled back her covers and without thinking flipped on the light beside her bed. There she saw the small pouch.

It appeared to be some kind of leather. The top was drawn closed by a leather tie. She pulled the chords open and dipped in a finger. It came out covered in a bronze sticky dust.

Sam Prather knew the laws against spot lighting. He knew it was a while before deer season, too. But Sam had never been one to let little things get in his way. His old man had earned what little income the family had by producing some of the most potent moonshine that could be had in the county. And his old man had always managed to stay one foot ahead of the law.

Monday night Sam had set off in his four-wheel drive quasiamphibious self styled truck. He had done the modifications himself. The truck sat a good five feet off the ground. The tires were large and bouncy. He could not actually fly across the river in the thing, but he sure could get through some rough places where few else would dare venture.

For this particular night Sam had picked a levee just this side of the largest plantation around. The levee went for miles and miles along soy bean fields into Federally protected land. He did not figure the Federal Government would be out there this night.

Spotlighting was not the kind of thing one did alone. One man must drive while another sat on the windowsill of the truck shining the high beam into the fields. As soon as the spotlight froze a deer, the rider must rap softly on the roof of the cab. As the deer would stand there frozen, the driver would stop and bring his rifle up to fire. The aim must be good, cause no one wants to go chasing down a wounded animal in the dark of the fields and swamps. The first shot must kill.

For this night Sam had invited his pal Lacey Caine to join him. Lacey was an auto mechanic in Rolling Fork. His sinewy body was forever more stained in motor oil.

Lacey and Sam went back a long way together. They had known each other since birth and through eighth grade when both had dropped out, lied about their ages, and gone to Vietnam.

Lacey's life had gone from bad to worse after the service. He had moved back in with his Dad, a World War II veteran. Lacey Sr. had expected the service to make his boy into a man, not a sniveling, crying in the night, drug doing, idiot. His dad took to beating him in 1977 and these beatings only brought back the horrors to Lacey, who could finally take no more. One night he blew his old man away with a shotgun. The courts had ruled in Lacey Jr's favor, but life had changed forever after that.

After that, even freed by the courts, his neighbors only shunned him, at best. Often he was found with broken collar bones, fractures, and lacerations. A 'father killer' was not suffered lightly in the good ole boy land of the delta. But Lacey had refused to leave. He just worked at a low paying job and stayed drunk about half of his waking hours.

And this night was not different for Lacey Jr. He had brought his own six-pack to the truck when Sam had picked him up. Sam knew it was probably at least his second.

It was late by the time the two reached the levee. Sam had turned the headlights off. He could see Lacey's legs and waist sticking through the passenger window.

"Keep that light on the edge of the field," Sam spoke out the window toward the top of the cab.

"Shut your ass up. I know what I am doing."

"Like hell you do, you mother fucker."

Lacey reached through the window to pull another beer from the six pack.

"Lay off those would ya. I don't want you to start singing and yelling out there. The sound carries for miles."

"So just stick to your driving. Sam threw on his brakes real fast and gave Lacey a lunge.

"Damn you cock sucker," Lacey screamed for the world to hear.

"Shut the fuck up or I will leave your ass out here in the wilderness."

"Go to hell," Lacey said more quietly.

"Over there, over there." Sam slowed the truck. "On the edge of that clearing." Lacey whipped the light back and forth erratically.

"Forget it man. It's gone...Get back in the truck." Lacey lowered himself back into the truck and swallowed the last of his beer.

"You ain't gonna have another." Sam reached to stop him.

"So what if I am?" Lacey brushed the hand aside and reached for another beer.

With the spotlight out the darkness around them was deep. Sam lit a cigarette and it's singular glow bobbed in the cab of the pick up. Sam could just barely see Lacey's features. In the darkness, which did not reach far, Lacey no longer looked to be himself.

The cooling clicks of the motor and the buzzing insects were the major sounds which broke the stillness. Sam looked down at his hand in the darkness and noticed that all the color seemed to be bleached out of it. "Might as well go home. Ain't gonna spotlight anything tonight." Sam was pissed at his drunken bud.

"Suit yourself," Lacey propped up a knee on the dash and popped another beer open.

"Good God, what is that?" Sam craned forward as his headlights ignited again. About twenty feet in front of them in the gravel of the levee lay a stiffened corpse. Empty pools from the headlights reflected where her eyes had once been.

Monday morning Sheriff Red Humphries knew that he had a problem. The body brought back in by Sam and Lacey was identified as Lucille May. The mutilation had been near the same as those teenagers, the tongue and the heart had been removed. Part of the wounds looked like a wild animal had gotten to them while others were as sharp as a razor.

The problem was obvious. Eddy May had been chained up at the time someone had butchered his wife, just like them children while he was securely away. It was not so much as his own fallibility that frustrated Red as it was the predicament it caused him. How could he get out of this? He had been so wrong. One thing was sure there was no more reason to continue his inquisition of Eddy May. And he could not just let the man go free. He would lose his position.

He picked up his shotgun and headed for his truck.

Chapter 10

"There is just something about a Sonic Chili Cheeseburger when you are zonked out of your mind," Cindy chuckled lovingly to the dripping sandwich in front of her.

"Oh yes, I sooo agree," Emma drawled in response. She wrestled the chili cheeseburger to her lips.

Cindy chewed her food big and wide to one side of her mouth, and spoke out the other, "The best dang frigging thing I ever tasted."

This broke them both into hysterics, sputtering out flecks of burger as they tried to chew, swallow and laugh at the same time.

"I bet." Emma sprayed back at Cindy.

"Don't even go there." Cindy choked even more as she gulped soda from her straw. "I don't want to know."

"I don't want to tell you."

The girls struggled with the few napkins they could find to wipe their mouths and eyes. In the jeep under the yellow drive-in lights they could feel a nip of chill in the air. They each leaned against their doors, facing each other, their feet propped up in the space between their seats. Emma's short-legged jeans left a wide gap of ankle showing down to her white socks and loafers.

"Ummm me, I like those white socks." Cindy wagged her head slowing while observing the white tube socks.

"Oh shuddup, they are my basketball socks."

"I didn't know you played basketball?"

"I don't. I absolutely suck at it."

"Well there you go again." They just both gave up and threw their heads back and roared like banshees.

Emma had spent the best part of the weekend in Cindy's company. It was a weekend of monopoly, videos, junk food and too many joints. Emma, who, just a few months earlier had never even been in the same room where illegal drugs were being used, found herself afloat in a new giddiness. The pot was keeping her mind off of Bill and Joy. "Thank God," she thought. But her mind was also oblivious to the strange events that had started.

If Emma had heard of the brutal death of Lucille May, she had quickly forgotten it. Likewise neither Cindy nor Emma seemed more than slightly disturbed by the identification of the charred body found in the ruins of the old feed shed. Emma had heard the grief in her uncle's voice when he had called to tell her that Eddy was dead, but in her own mind it was like some dream. She did not let her thoughts linger on the implications of all these deaths. And all thoughts of Viola Grace seem to have been swept from her mind.

The following Friday night Cindy and Emma had set off for the town of Rolling Fork. Emma once again planned to spend the night at Cindy's after the game so she was feeling carefree and didn't mind throwing all precautions to the wind.

"Do I have something on my nose?" Cindy blinked cross-eyed at Emma.

"Yeah, looks like chili cheese."

Cindy rubbed across her nose with the palm of her hand. "Hey, Emma, are you going to dress up for the carnival this year?"

"No," Emma responded dryly. "I am going nude this year."

"You jerk, you know what I mean. Are you going to wear a costume?"

"Oh geez, I haven't worn a costume since I quit trick-or-treating."

"You quit?" Cindy said in a faked awe, "That's not what I heard. But any way I think we should definitely wear costumes this year."

"Oh yeah." Emma raised her brows. "And what exactly do you think we should go as?"

"Well if we were joined at the hip we could go as Bill and Joy." Cindy found this to be particularly funny. They had avoided the subject all week.

"Oh forget you." Emma was not laughing.

"Oh Em, I was joking." She placed her hand on her girlfriend's shoulder. "I thought you had finally gotten over all that."

"Yeah sure, love em and leave em, that's me. I mean I almost asked 'Bill' who."

"Oh good then you won't mind who is headed over our way."

Emma looked out her window to see Bill's long legs making easy distance between his Mustang and the Jeep.

"Oh shit, not now." Emma slumped low in her seat.

"Hi, girls," Bill mouthed through the glass window. "Hey Emma, you want to unlock your door or what?"

"Tell him I am not here." Emma said gazing solidly out the front

windshield.

"Em, I think he can see you."

"Emma, open the door, please," He urged her.

"I think she wants you to go away." Cindy had lowered her window a crack to yell out.

"Oh yeah?" Bill was not phased. He walked to Cindy's side of the Jeep. "So how about it Cindy, are you gonna let me in?"

"Sorry, I just had the inside fumigated last week."

"Cin, not you too. It's cold out here and I just want to talk."

Cindy looked at Emma for a cue as to what she should do next. Emma just remained frozen. Cindy gave up and unlocked her door.

"Thank you." Bill scooted into the back seat. He leaned up till his head was sticking between the two girls in the front seats. "So, what's happening?"

"Until you intruded we were just having a little girl talk."

"So why have you been ignoring me all week, Emma?" Bill disregarded Cindy and turned toward the stiff Emma.

"I didn't notice that I had been," she said through clenched teeth.

"Oooh, such tension." He raised his hand to stroke the back of her neck. She leaned forward away from his touch.

"Talk to her, Cindy. Ask her why she hates me?"

"No one really needs a good reason to hate you, Simmons." Cindy spoke with fake sincerity.

"No seriously." Bill turned back toward Emma. "Did you have such a bad time when we went out?"

"So where are you keeping Joy tonight?" Emma finally spoke sharply.

"I see, jealous, huh?" A broad satisfied grin crossed his face as he said this.

"Wait just a minute, dude!" Emma turned red in embarrassment and rage.

"You should have told me that you minded that I date Joy," he interrupted.

"I could care less." Emma tried to toss her head in a reckless fashion, but she only appeared more defensive.

"You sure act jealous." he shot back at her.

"Whoa Nelly, hang on Bill." Cindy raised her hands to stop the words. "She's just not interested so leave her alone."

"Sure, Sure." He eased back. "So what do you girls feel like doing after the game tonight?"

"We want to be alone." Cindy tried for the old movie star line.

"A building does not have to fall on me. Here let me out. I just saw you two over here and I thought well, oh never mind." Cindy opened her door and he wedged himself back out of the back seat. "And Emma," he stopped and turned to say, "I will be calling you."

"Bullshit, I heard that line before," Emma said almost under her breath.

Bill had been happy and a little more than pleased when he had spotted Emma in the jeep with Cindy. Joy had gone to a baby shower for one of her aunts and wasn't supposed to even be home before ten o'clock. He had told her he might stop by after the game, but when he had seen Emma he figured old Joy girl could wait. Yeah well, but the little tease hadn't seemed too happy to see him so he reckoned it was her loss. "She's just too serious for me," he thought as he turned up Joy's driveway.

He saw that the living room lamp was still on. Someone was still up. He hoped it was just Joy and not her folks. He straightened himself in his pants as he headed toward the front door.

Roy Wilson sat on his back porch like he had begun to do so often after the first murders. He sat there and he tried to think. He knew what the talk was in town; that it had been Eddy who had killed them two teenagers and someone had executed a little vigilante payback on Eddy. But then none could really explain away Lucille's horrible death. Had she died before Eddy? Maybe she had been killed trying to protect her man? None of it really made good sense to Roy.

His first problem was that Roy knew Eddy just about as well as one could know such a man. "Eddy would have never killed them chilrin," Roy kept saying to himself. "Not unless something real strange and foul had taken over Eddy and forced him to do something so out of character" It was to that thought that Roy kept returning. Either Eddy had been totally out of his mind when he killed or someone else all together had done the killing. Both options left Roy unable to sleep. "Sumpin's out there," he told himself studying the night sky, sure as rain sumpin is."

Roy twisted in his seat. His ears picked up the sounds of Liz'beth moving around in their bedroom. He heard their closet door and imagined her reaching inside to find her heavy chenille robe. Shortly she was standing before him on the back porch.

"Roy, you sit out here a lot," she started, "you ever see or hear anything that gives you pause?"

"Not much, baby." He reached up to take her hand. He felt as much

love for her even after all of their years together as he had from the very beginning. "I am glad you came out here to join me momma." He patted his thigh to offer her a seat.

"Now Roy Wilson, you know I done got too big to sit in your lap no more." Her spreading backside and his bulging middle didn't leave much room.

"Oh, just try Liz. I want to hold you in my lap."

With a girlish giggle she just managed to squeeze onto a spot of his knee. "Roy Wilson, you old dog," she said as she turned and he planted a kiss firmly on her face.

"You still my "little woman, Liz'beth."

"Roy," she turned serious, "when we ever gonna feel really safe again?"

"It's only been two weeks, honey."

"I know, but everything just seems so unreal. And you know what they been saying about Eddy, our Eddy!"

"Yeah, but I am not sure I buy a word of all them rumors. Just don't seem to add up to me."

"When you gonna be able to sleep regular like again?" She broached the real subject that was alarming her. She knew he had even taken the shotgun down from the closet and she suspected it was somewhere close at hand out here on the back porch. Liz had never seen her husband truly afraid before.

"Oh just a bit restless I guess," he tried to diffuse the issue, "ain't nothing to worry about."

"I know Roy, but you know how I worry."

Indeed he did know all about her worrying. Twenty-four years together had taught him a lot about that. He had learned what subject to avoid and what subjects to just never tell her about. He figured that was his job.

"I love you Elizabeth Becker Wilson. You want to be my wife?"

"You old fool," she giggled.

A little less than a mile into the woods behind the Wilson's home a small fire brightened a clearing. The fire had been laid out carefully in the center of a circle of smooth stones. Each stone had been hauled from the muddy bottom of the Sunflower River. Fallen tree trunks had been laid around outside of the ring of fire to fashion a crude amphitheatre. Huddled over one of the closer logs was a grisly sight. The wasted form of Viola Grace stretched out its hands to the fire. This night she no longer carried any semblance of humanity. Her destroyed flesh stank and glistened with

mold. Deep gurgling, raspy sounds came as if breaths from within her.

She moved in a slow swaying motion as she circled the fire. She squatted on the far side and looked into the trees. Indefinable words bubbled from her open throat. Her face remained a mask. She did not even flinch as a thump hit the ground behind her. A small grey squirrel had fallen from a limb. It moved cautiously toward the squatted form. The squirrel was being drawn by voices it could not comprehend. It reached the old woman and ventured carefully around to face her.

Only her eyes followed as the squirrel perched itself up on its hind legs in front of her. She reached out a skeletal hand and encircled the squirrel's neck. The squirrel screeched and clawed frantically at it's noose. She brought the terrified creature to her mouth. Heedless of its struggles she stuffed the small head into her mouth and bit down with her back teeth. She brought the cracked skull from her mouth and her fingers plucked out morsels of exposed brain. She savored each tiny piece as she licked them into her mouth.

She knew when she had made that deal all those years ago that this time would come. There was only one way she could stop the killing required.

"Wonder when that sweet child, Emma, is gonna bring herself back home," she thought.

Chapter 11

Red Humphries was the one man in Sunflower County who fully realized that the security of the whole area was false. Most folks were content to tie all the murders back to Eddy May, who himself had been rightly taken care of as some figured it. But Red was baffled. He had taken the can of gasoline out to the feed shed where Eddy had been chained. Had been delighted to give the boy what Red figured he had coming to him.

But now with Lucille's bizarre death Red was having some doubts. Not enough to keep him awake at night mind, just enough to wonder about the safety of his county. Red had always felt that when the law failed you well then a man had to take matters into his own hands. He did not let the intentional murder of what was, seeming an innocent man affect his opinion of himself. Now Red was back to reviewing the list he had made of other possible suspects. He went down the list one by one and he kept coming back to one name that seemed to really stand out, Lacey Caine.

Red never had been satisfied with the explanation of what Lacey and Sam had been doing out on that levee that night they found Lucille. He had decided that he should keep a close watch on Lacey, being a little more careful this time before making a move. He took notes of all of Lacey's comings and goings.

He keep close watch on Lacey's drunken evenings. He kept eye on Sam Prather too because of Sam's affiliation with Lacey, but Red found it difficult to imagine the lazy Prather involved in such actual murders. He knew Sam was dishonest, but he couldn't see Sam going out of his way to do anything that didn't involve making an illegal buck or two. Lacey on the other hand had come from one more mean family. Everyone knew that Lacey had killed his old man in one of those 'family' fights. The boy had just gotten off cause it seemed that folks thought well just maybe old man Caine needed killing.

But to Red's frustration, Lacey still hadn't done anything that could be called real evidence. Red decided maybe it was time for a little baiting.

It was the Wednesday night before the Halloween Carnival that Bill Simmons finally got around to calling Emma. She had just dried off from a hot bath when her Aunt Liz called her to the phone.

"It's a boy," Liz had said a little too loudly for Emma's comfort.

"Hello," Emma said evenly into the receiver.

"Why hello. You know those are the first words you have said to me in weeks." Bill's voice sounded very close on the phone.

"Oh?" Emma said aware of her aunt's presence.

"I hope you still aren't ticked off at me?"

"Why no, you aren't really bothering me." She emphasized the word bothering.

"Glad to hear it, " he said hopefully, "Cause I can be there in less than an hour. Go put on something pretty."

"Please no." Emma was at a loss with her aunt standing there.

"Oh no trouble at all," he broke in, "I have been dieing to see you again."

"Please, Bill," Emma tried to stop him.

"Is that the Simmons' boy?" Liz said with a wide smile.

"Oh you don't have to beg, I know you are dieing to see me too. I will hurry," he kept on, "and Emma," his tone now lower, "I really have been thinking about you lately." With that said, he hung up.

"So, tell me, was that the Simmons' boy?" her aunt asked again.

"What?" Emma said, "I mean yes ma'am."

"I am so glad he called. So, what did he say?" Liz was clearly excited by this news.

"Uh...uh... he's coming over."

"Wonderful," Liz drew out the word. "Well it is a school night, but I don't see any harm with you two sitting out on the back porch for a spell."

Emma just let her aunt babble on, but to herself she kept thinking, "That was Bill, but he's never sounded quite that way before."

Liz lost no time shuffling the couple on to the back porch. There was a chill in the air. Emma wore a sweater and Bill had on his High School jacket.

"I have always said there is no more romantic place for a young couple than a back porch swing. Parked cars, what are these kids thinking of these days. I see nothing romantic about the inside of some car." Liz was rambling on to Bill, who sat with a frozen smile on his face. "Would you two like something to drink, a coke or some tea?"

"No ma'am, no thank you." Bill spoke politely.

"Bill won't be staying long," Emma said pointedly.

"Oh the evening still early. He can stay for a while yet." Emma glared at her aunt who was only trying to be helpful. "Well, you two sit and make yourselves at home. I know how young people do love to talk." She practically bounced on her feet back inside.

"Your aunt is quite some character." Bill had slumped down in the swing moving closer to Emma.

"Yes, she is," Emma said still staring at the spot where her aunt had been.

"Look Em, I really did come over here just to talk to you."

"I don't figure we got that much to say to each other." Emma all of a sudden felt very sleepy, not the anger and anxiety she had expected. His voice was very soothing in her ears.

"Yeah, but about Joy, you got a right to know what is going on with us two."

"Please, I don't think I want to know," she started to say but he stopped her with his index finger to her lips.

"I just need to say this." He almost chuckled, shaking his head at himself. "Joy and I have been going together for a long time," he began, "and things have just been taking on this weird sort of unspoken commitment." His eyes squinted as he looked at her. "Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Well so I just got to taking it for granted that Joy and I would always be together. That's how folks do things around here and all. You know, marry their high school sweet hearts."

"So?" She wanted him to get to the point.

"And I guess I was happy with that and then you showed up at school." Bill looked very uneasy as he said this last part. "I just think about you all the time. Well every since that football game, remember?"

Emma only nodded.

"I can't quit thinking about you," he said not with a lot of optimism in his voice, "And the more I think about you, the less I enjoy being around Joy and her folks." He almost sounded as if he was accusing her, Emma, of making it this way. "But do you know how hard it would be for me to break up with Joy? It would break everybody's heart, probably including my own momma's."

It seemed to be getting colder on the back porch. Emma wasn't sure how to react to what Bill was saying. Maybe she should be happy, be flattered, but the tone in Bill's voice had an almost strange sadness in it.

"And then I had this dream," he continued, "you were in it and so was Joy." His voice dropped off. There was silence that lingered around them. Emma took Bill's hand.

When they heard the phone ring inside Emma and Bill jerked apart.

"How long have we been out here making out," Emma wondered as alertness returned to her.

"Emma, you got time to talk to Cindy right now, or do you want me to tell her you will call her back after your company leaves."

"No, no, I'll talk to her." Emma said jumping up from the swing.

"Company? What company?" were the first words out of Cindy's mouth.

"Shhhhh," Emma warned as if everyone in the house could hear Cindy. "It's Bill."

"What's that jerk doing there?" Cindy hollered.

" It's kind of a long story. Can we wait and go into this later?"

"What's with you, Emma? You sound kind of funny. Has he got a gun to your head?"

"No," Emma drew the word out. "We will just have to wait and talk about this at school."

Cindy did not like the manner in which Emma was speaking to her. She just hung up the phone. "We sure will, girly." she told the dead receiver.

The phone call had broken the spell of the evening. Bill was speaking to Liz, clearly ready to say his good-byes when Emma returned.

"Yes ma'am, and thank you," Bill was saying.

After escaping Liz, Emma walked Bill out to his car. At his door he turned and circled her small frame in his arms. He leaned down to place his mouth on her neck.

"Thanks," she said laughing. She couldn't help it, it tickled. "I really am glad you came over and I am glad we talked."

"Talked, hmm?" he said moving up to trace his tongue down her jaw line.

"And now you have to go," she said reluctantly pushing him away. He stood looking down at her for a few seconds before reaching for the door handle. "Please, drive safe," she told him. He did not answer. He got in the car and rolled his window reaching for her again. "And, and, sweet dreams, no more of those nightmares," she added. This stopped him just short of kissing her. He laughed.

"I never remember my dreams," he said smiling up at her.

Lacey Caine sat in his living room alone. The light from the T.V. was all that illuminated the room. He had one thin leg thrown over the arm of the couch and the other straight out in front of him. He held a can of beer resting against his thigh. Lacey was not quite drunk yet.

He had not been following the television show that flickered in front of

him. He was vaguely aware of the rolls of canned laughter that came intermittently from the set. Only when he closed his eyes could he feel himself spinning. Lacey liked the spinning; it was kind of like a carnival ride to him.

This night he was especially enjoying his brain ride. He found pleasure in the familiar objects around him. He had grown up in this house. This was his living room now. He had killed the old man and now it was his. He stared at the yellowed doily that someone had sewed on the frayed arm of the couch. "Probably my mother," he thought. He could not remember her. She had died when he was too young. And now he tried to forget the old man.

He looked around the room and wondered when all the colors had faded from it. Everything was a nicotine tan now. The room was getting smaller he decided. He noticed the wide cracks in the grey floorboard. The once bright floral wallpaper was only a shadow of shapes now. "By God, I am the king of my castle," he bellowed out. "Think I need a beer."

Like someone being pushed by a great wind, Lacey staggered forward as he walked into the kitchen. The kitchen was even darker than the living room. No refrigerator light glowed as he opened the door. Who knew what was up in there? The room was so dark the night sky outside the window seemed to glow. Lacey could see the tree tops churning in the growing wind.

He had torn down the curtain over the sink after they became too soiled to even wipe his hands on any longer. Lacey peered into his back yard through the streaky panes. Though the sky shone all the ground was blackness. Lacey could only faintly make the silver butane tank that sat in the far corner of the yard. It was into the black trees that his eyes kept returning. "Anybody out there," he screamed at the glass.

"You out there?" His breath fogged the dirty window. "You waiting for me out there?" he yelled even louder. He leaned from side to side trying to get a better view. "No, not tonight," he said turning away. "You aint gonna get me tonight, old man." He stumbled for the back door grabbing the handle for support. Breathless he yanked the door opened and braced himself on the doorframe. "You come on you cock sucker." He laughed, getting quieter now, "but you ain't gonna get me tonight." The hiss of the wind picked up sucking the words into its roar. "You chicken shit," Lacey spit as he slammed the back door and threw the dead lock."

A quarter of a mile down the road from Lacey's house, Red Humphries sat in his pick up truck. He had almost drifted off to sleep when he heard

the faint cries coming from Lacey's place. He opened his eyes and sat right up. He immediately picked up on the shape to his right. Moving at the barest of speed, Red turned to better focus. Outside the passenger window stood a man, a tall man with broad shoulder: a man who had to stoop to stare into the cab of the pick up truck. The dead penetration of this man's gaze brought Red's heart up to his throat. Instantly the man turned away from the truck. In easy motion he lumbered toward the house. Red knew this man. Red recognized him right off. The man was Wallace Caine, Lacey's old man.

Chapter 12

The next morning Cindy was standing in front of the school as the buses arrived. A worry line creased her brow as she watched the last two kids get off of Emma's bus. Emma was not on it. "I wonder if she's sick or if that jerk just broke her heart again," Cindy said to no one in particular. She continued mumbling under her breath as she stomped across the schoolyard. A waving hand caught her eye. It was Emma standing with the crowd in front of the school. Not two feet behind Emma was Bill Simmons. Cindy stopped in her tracks. She didn't see Joy anywhere around.

"I didn't see you get off the bus."

"Bill picked me up today." Emma smiled brilliantly. Bill stepped up directly behind Emma and rested his wrist on her shoulder in a possessive manner.

"What's happening, Cin?" Bill said. His smile mirrored Emma's

"It's going." Cindy sucked in her bottom lip and shook her head up and down. "Emma," she said through a thin smile, "I need to talk to you."

"So talk," Emma shot back.

"Alone," Cindy mouthed the word.

"Excuse me Bill," she turned to him, "I need to talk to Cindy privately."

"Okay." He winked and smacked his lips at her in an exaggerated blown kiss.

Cindy grabbed her best friend's arm and marched her away from the group. "What the hell is going on with you and that Bozo now?" she demanded.

"I have a date for the fall carnival," Emma answered clearly expecting her friend to be thrilled for her.

"Yeah and you are going as what, the blind lady after Joy scratches your eyes out." Cindy was clearly not pleased.

"I thought you would be happy for me," Emma said clearly hurt.

"Look Emma, I have known Bill Simmons since we were little kids he was a self centered jerk then and he is a self centered jerk now."

"That's not fair, Cindy. Why are you acting this way?"

"I told you. Trust me one way or another he is going to make a fool out of you." Cindy just stood there her hands on her hips. How could her good friend be acting like such an idiot? It was embarrassing.

"Maybe it's none of your business," Emma lashed out.

"Fine then." Cindy felt heartsick.

Cindy remained unnaturally quiet as the jeep bounded over the rutted gravel road that led to Emma's house. Emma was singing happily to the radio. Trying to break the ice Emma said, "Cindy, you should just see the way he looks at me."

"Like a dog, like the dog he is," Cindy stated.

"No, like, like," she drifted into some thought. "Is this what it is like to be in love?" she finally said. Now Cindy turned to look directly at her pal.

"Don't you say that and don't you ever let anyone hear you say that. This is not some TV show. These Delta boys only want one; no I take that back two things. They want in your drawers and they want to marry someone with a rich daddy. Now where do you think you fit in that equation."

"Who says he is going to get in my 'drawers'? You know I am not like that!" Emma was mad. "I am not like Joy!"

"Nope you're not." Cindy sighed. "Joy knows better than to trust Bill."

Liz Wilson sprawled on Emma's bed with one elbow supporting her chin as she wrote in a notebook. She called herself helping Emma to come up with a list of possible costumes for the carnival. Cindy leaned back on two legs of a straight back chair. The girls had barely spoken to each other since the ride home.

"A fairy princess," Liz suggested.

"Too babyish."

"A mermaid."

"I really wish I didn't have to wear a costume, " Emma whined.

"Don't be silly. That's what Halloween is all about." Liz easily dismissed Emma's complaint.

"I think she should go as the Creature From the Black Lagoon." Cindy held her hands over her head like claws and raised a corner of her mouth in a sneer.

"Please Cindy, I do have a date," Emma said stressing the word 'I', "I don't want to look ridiculous. Liz tapped her pen on the notebook and scrutinized Emma.

"There has got to be something that is just right for you. Not too flashy; not too plain." Emma opened up her closet door and was scouting through her clothes looking for an idea. "Who put these in here?" She pushed

aside a section of clothes and reached into the bottom of the closet. She pulled out a pair of narrow black boots.

Looking at the boots, Cindy felt a tug of metallic like sickness. She pushed the feeling away and wiped her mouth with her hand. "Those look like they used to belong to the wicked old witch of the Bluff," she attempted to joke.

"I think they are kind of quaint." Emma defended the boots.

"Yeah you and probably my mother would."

"No, Emma's right," Liz cut in, " They are rather cute. We could use them as part of the costume."

"Sure if she's planning on going as Lizzie Borden." Cindy could not help it, there was something about those boots that gave her the willies.

"No, it's perfect. I'll go as a witch." Emma attempted a cackle.

"A beautiful witch like that one that was TV," Liz chimed in.

"No she should definitely have a wart on her nose."

Red Humphries was just finishing his supper. He pushed his plate back and took out a toothpick to clean his teeth. His wife moved soundlessly back and forth from the table to the kitchen. His children, those that were left at home, were watching television and arguing over the recliner. No one dared to disturbed Red when he sat down to think. What he had seen the previous night had set his mind to reeling. Old Wallace Caine was alive. Somehow the murder, seven years prior had been faked. Perhaps father and son had killed some poor soul and concocted the hoax. Still Red was not sure just how this could be. There were facts that made this all seem impossible. But Red kept coming back to the same fact; he had seen Wallace Caine alive, walking around, with his own eyes.

In Red's book dead men did not get up and walk about. It was not even a consideration. No, Wallace Caine was alive, that was for sure. There was something not right, down right illegal about this. Red could smell it. Red stood up from the table in one fluid motion. "Vera," he called for his wife in the kitchen, "Vera, get Harvey Johnson on the phone for me."

His wife appeared briefly in the doorway and then slipped quickly back into the kitchen to make the call. "About time I brought in the Calvary," Red thought shrugging off his disappointment. Things had gone too far. If Lacey's old man was alive and if the two of them were involved in the latest murders then he was going to need help. There was still the matter of baiting a trap. Wheels began clicking in Red's mind as his wife brought him the phone.

As soon as Cindy drove in the school parking lot the next morning she spotted Joy Hutchinson. Joy was peering down the drive that lead up to the school. It looked like trouble was brewing to Cindy. Emma was riding to school with Bill again and Joy would not help but see them when they drove up. Cindy parked where she would have a good view of the confrontation. There she sat pretending to read her Latin textbook for twenty minutes. Every time she looked up she saw that Joy's eyes were still glued to entrance road.

When the 8:05 bell rang Cindy jumped in her seat. "Dang, where are they?" she muttered, "I don't want to go in yet." She moved slowly and deliberately gathering her books and heading for the school building. She barely made it to her homeroom class before the 8:10 tardy bell rang. Cindy looked toward the seat where Emma was supposed to be sitting. It was empty.

It was 8:20 before Emma noisily entered the classroom. She carried a note to the irritate teacher and then took her seat. Cindy was unable to catch her eye. It was only after the next bell rang that Cindy was able to corner Emma.

"What happened?" Cindy demanded.

"Bill was late coming to get me," Emma whispered, "and then he insisted he stop and talk a bit before we got here."

Cindy's faced contorted. "What is with that guy?"

"I think he is just nervous about Joy."

"Honey, you ought to be the one who is nervous about Joy."

It was in the class that they both shared with Bill and Joy that things began to heat up. Cindy found herself hoping that Bill would really wimp out so that Emma could see his true colors. That should be worth about a hundred 'I told you so'. Joy was already sitting at her desk when Cindy and Emma entered the classroom followed closely by Bill. Joy's eyes shot immediately to Bill, and a worried little smile crossed her lips. Bill who had been whispering to Emma broke away and took his seat across from Joy. Cindy studied her girl friend's face for a reaction, but Emma appeared composed and unaffected.

"Cool as a cucumber," Emma turned and said to Cindy, sensing her concern. Cindy had to chuckle at this. In the meantime they missed whatever words had passed between Bill and Joy. The tightly pressed mouth and drop-dead expression that Joy sported did not indicate that the girl was pleased.

At lunch Cindy was a bit surprised to find Emma waiting for her by the

jeep. "What? No Bill?"

"Joy's real upset," Emma said in a knowing manner. "Bill and I are trying to make it easier on her. I told him it would nice if he went on and took her to lunch so that they could talk."

Cindy wanted to throw up at this. "Boy has he got you snowed Emma Lewis."

Right after school Cindy found Bill leaning against her jeep. "Waiting for Emma, " was all he told her.

"How was your lunch?" Cindy wanted to let him know she was not fooled by his act.

"It was a blast," he retorted. "Ah, here's my girl," his tone changed as Emma approached. Cindy took a quick look around for Joy: no Joy. "What a surprise," Cindy thought. Bill reached to take Emma's books and kiss her brow.

"Hi," Emma said. Cindy thought she looked like some sick sheep.

"Are you going to let me take you home this time or am I going to lose the toss to Basset again?" he asked quickly.

"You know I promised I would ride home with Cindy." Emma teased. "God, tell me she's not actually fluttering her eye lashes," Cindy thought.

"Well, guess that is just my tough luck," Bill gave in.

Cindy thought she saw pure relief in his eyes.

Harvey Johnson tugged at pant's leg as he propped his feet upon a wooden chair. He sat on top of the desk listening to Red's story. Only twice did he interrupt, once to ask permission to smoke and the other to ask if the May woman had been sexually molested.

Red skirted parts of the story not wanting to raise old Harv's brows in disbelief or worse. Harvey's flat gaze made Red a bit uncomfortable. He found himself tugging at his collar and squirming in the afternoon heat.

Harvey Johnson was roughly the equivalent of a tri-county marshal. He served Yazoo, Sunflower and Le Fleur counties. Harvey had a great deal of friends in the governor's office and actually carried a good bit of clout throughout the state. He was a man Red respected. He was also a man Red feared. The sheriff skillfully laid out his own evaluation of the case. He referred quite a few times to Lacey Caine, but he avoided any mention of the old man. He figured a man would have to see it with his own eyes to believe the part about Wallace Caine. He concentrated on his theory that Lacey had the past history of violence and the opportunity to have committed the murders.

After Red finished Harvey walked slowly over to a filing cabinet idly pulled out a drawer and then closed it. "Seems simple enough to me," Harvey began," You just need to keep a close watch on this boy." Harvey cocked his eyebrows. "Is that all that you needed to see me about?"

"Well I didn't want to jump the gun, " the sheriff admitted, " But I have been following him pretty closely. I was wondering if it would be too much trouble maybe to get a search warrant for his place?"

"Perhaps," Harvey drew out the word studying Red closely. "What you got in mind to look for. Judge won't issue no warrant without knowing what you are looking for."

Red knew he could hardly say Wallace Caine. "Weapons, any clothing or possession of the victims," Red thought this sounded reasonable enough.

Harvey took his time answering. He just stood there and mulled it over as he studied the toe of his boot. He never had really liked or trusted Red. The sheriff seemed like a prime ass kisser to him. "I'll see what I can do," he finally said. "But you make sure you know what you are going to find first. A lawman looks mighty foolish with egg all over his face." Red caught the look in the other man's eyes. He thought he understood just what the Marshall was saying, or rather not saying.

"Yes sir, I suspect I can manage that." Red attempted a plotting tone. Harvey just spit on the toe of his boot.

Bill paused over the limp form of Joy Hutchinson and prepared to ram her again. They had been having sex on her bed since getting home from school. Her parents were gone for a long weekend to Jackson. Joy's older brother was suppose to be staying home and keeping an eye on her, but he had started his own heavy duty partying as soon as his folks left. The low afternoon sun heated the room and Bill's hair hung damp and clingy to his face and neck.

He had been grinding away at her for about twenty minutes. Joy had lost all energy beneath him and now just lay there holding her legs up at the knees while he pounded into her. Bill was having a tough time concentrating. His cock felt hard and worn but ejaculation eluded him.

"Come on," he muttered under his breath as he raised himself off her with both arms. She stared up at him stupidly. That did it. He was back to square one, damn her. "Will you just close your eyes," he told her none

too kindly. He rested on his chin against the ribbed bedspread and continued his rhythm.

"Okay, talk to yourself, Bill ole boy," he was thinking, "like here you are fucking Joy on her own bed in broad daylight." This thought amused him. "Imagine it is Emma and she's hot, excited!" He was beginning to feel ready again. He raised himself up so that their sweaty bellies slapped against each other. He wanted it to hurt her some. She lay beneath him, her eyes squinted shut, her teeth clenched. He ducked his head to take one of her pale nipples into his mouth. He bit down hard. The inside of his mouth felt cold and filmy.

"That's a good girl," he cooed, "Oh baby yeah, yeah." He was rolling around in her in a gyrating motion. "Feels so good," he said with a giddy laugh. "Oh yes!" He tightened his ass and bore into her deep. "Yes, yes, yes," he laughed as he came deep in her.

Chapter 13

It was a Friday night, Lacey Caine once again sat in his own living room drinking the night away. Unlike Red Humphries, Lacy had not seen his father earlier in the week. No dark figure had ever appeared at his door.

Lacey saw the headlights turn into his driveway. The twin beams flashed through the thin curtains. Lacey did not stir. He sat with his chin tucked in, slack faced and gazing toward his front door. He did not think to get up and open the door when he heard the knock.

"It's open," he bellowed.

The door inched tentatively open. Sheriff Humphries peaked through the crack at Lacey. "May I come in?" he asked.

"Go ahead." Lacey looked as if he had swallowed something foul and was trying to keep it down.

"How you doing, Lacey?" The sheriff stood with his legs spread and his hands in his pockets.

"I am doing mighty nice, Red, and yourself?" Lacey slurred enthusiastically.

"Not too good, Lacey." Red cleared his throat. "That's why I came to visit ya."

"You don't say." Lacey looked pleased.

"You actually have me in sort of an embarrassing situation here. I came to ask you a favor... and well I hate to bring this up, but you don't look so hot, boy." Red was beginning to have doubts about talking to Lacey while the boy was so drunk. He probably wouldn't remember a word of what Red said, might not even remember that Red had been there.

"Ah I know how it looks." Lacey finally rose from the couch. He hitched up his pants by his empty belt loops. "I just had a few beers here to relax myself." He turned to brace his hands on the back of a chair, supporting himself. "You know how it is." A broad grin broke across his face.

"Well see here Lacey, what I got to discuss with you is serious business. Are you sure this is a good time and all?" Red studied the smaller man carefully.

"Shoot." Lacey urged.

"It's like this. I realize that it was you and Sam Prather that discovered and brought in the body of Lucille May."

"Gruesome sight," Lacey broke in, "enough to make a grown man loose it."

"Then you know what I mean when I tell you that there is one bad crazy man loose out there. An well," Red paused trying to discern if Lacey was following what he was saying. "Well, ...er, I'm going to need some help if I am ever gonna be able to catch this butcher."

"Sure, that makes sense." Lacey seemed to comprehend.

"Let me just say what I got to say. Can you meet me down at the jail house in the morning?"

"Ah, I don't see why not." Lacey was hesitant in his answer.

"Well it's like this. What with the big carnival going on tomorrow night there are going to be a whole lot of people in the bluff, and bunch of them in costumes. It just seems fit that I have more than just myself looking out for trouble. And the last I need to have happen is another murder. Are you getting what I am saying?"

"Why yes sir, Sheriff." Lacey seemed genuinely pleased now.

"Now you can't tell anyone you are doing this. You are going to be what we call undercover." Lacey let out a short chuckle. "So I can count on ya?"

"I'm your man, sheriff," Lacey agreed.

The Saturday afternoon before the carnival was a frenzy of activity. Trucks, mini-vans, station wagons, the vehicles of families, littered the school parking lot all packed with decorations and supplies. Butcher paper had been rolled out in twenty foot lengths on the floor of the gymnasium. Teenagers with tempera paint worked on turning the plain white paper into colorful banners. Heavy orange extension chords were being weaved in and about as the need for electricity grew with each new booth. Masking tape was being applied to the floor in a large circle to accommodate the cakewalk. A spirit of anticipation marked the clamor of voices. Outside the day was crisp and the smell of hay filled the air.

Liz Wilson had volunteered to help Emma's class with the fortune teller's booth. She and Trisha Penn had decorated several cheap black sheets with stars and moons. A crystal ball had been borrowed from the Yazoo Little Theatre. Rebecca Garth, the science and home economics teacher had been drafted to serve as the fortune-teller. The pretty young teacher would be transformed by a grey scraggly wig, black teeth wax and latex warts. An old tent had been transformed into the Chamber of Fortune.

Emma had only dropped by the school briefly to check on the progress

and had left quickly with Cindy in the jeep. The brisk October air felt wonderful blowing in from the open windows.

Before leaving the town they made a stop at Partlow's, the closest thing to a convenience store in The Bluff. Just the screen door with its Better Bread push plate covered the entrance. The huge fan in the back was on, pulling the cool air into the store. Emma and Cindy pushed back the metal sliding tops of the chest cooler searching for diet colas.

As they drove out of town with cold drinks and gum balls they were full of excitement about the coming evening.

Bill asked around the gym for Emma. Liz Wilson heard him mentioning Emma's name and cornered him. For a full twenty minutes she held him captive, firing questions and breaking in with her own verbose thoughts on the joy of being a teenager. All Bill got from his trouble was to learn that Emma had been by and gone an hour before. "Oh well, her loss." he thought to himself.

Joy had left town earlier that day with her brother. They were headed to Jackson to meet up with her parents. Bill had dropped by just as they were about to leave and this seemed to please her to no end; that is until he told her about having a date to the carnival.

"How could you?" she asked trying to keep her voice down but stern.

"Baby cakes, it's not my fault you aren't going to be here for the carnival," he told her with child like sincerity. "Surely you are not going to begrudge me having someone to sit with on the hay ride?"

"Bill!"

"Look you know you are the only girl for me," he started, " and one day I am going to marry you and we are going to always be together." He sounded so believable. "So why are you all in a huff over a little innocent date." Joy continued to glare at him. "Look," he went on, "I won't even kiss her. I won't even hold her hand. Hell, I won't even touch her."

"And who is this 'her'?" Joy demanded.

"Ah, Emma Lewis." he said slowly.

"Oh, I should have known it!" Joy was up to full speed anger at this.

"You know the only reason I pick her don't you?" Bill regained his composure."

"And why might that be?"

"Well just look at her sometime. She really is plain, kinda pathetic even, I guess," he switched to his soulful tone, "I guess I just feel sorry for her." He had done it. This worked on Joy like a charm.

"Oh Bill," Joy cooed. "I should have known as much. Forgive me."

"Plus, I just never figured she would be anyone you could be jealous of. I mean what is she compared to you?"

"Oh my Billy boy." And she kissed him.

Delmar, Eddy's oldest boy had shown up asking for work a couple of weeks after his parents' death. Roy was more than happy to give the boy a job. Roy still missed Eddy; couldn't really believe he would never see his old hired hand again.

That Saturday while all the town was working on the big carnival, Roy and Delmar were out on the river setting up new trot lines. Delmar even had a few good fishing spots in back water sloughs that he showed Roy. When they came to the trotline under the trestle Delmar started to dip his paddle into the muddy water and Roy stopped him.

"Leave it be," Roy barked in a tone rougher than his normal laid back drawl.

"Leave it be?" Delmar asked like the statement didn't really make sense.

"That's what I said. Leave it be." For a moment Roy was at a loss for what to say next. Finally he went on, "Ain't catching no fish there."

"Ain't catching no fish?"

"That's what I said."

"But Mr. Roy this here's a riva, and fishing all over the place." Delmar didn't quite understand.

"Nope, don't want no trot line here."

"Well then sir, you want I should pull up the line that's there and get the hooks off it?" Delmar was willing to help however he could.

"No!" Roy said sternly. "I just want you to crank up that motor and get us out of here."

Delmar decided it was best to do as told and not ask any more questions. He reached for the cord and gave it a yank. Nothing happened. There wasn't even a sputter. Delmar turned and stared at the boat motor and tried again. Nothing. Roy turned around in the boat and said, "Come on boy, I got to get home now." Delmar yanked the cord even harder this time, but it had no affect on the motor.

"It's been running fine all day." Delmar said.

"It ain't even a year old. I ain't never had a lick of trouble with it." Roy informed him. "Try it again."

This time as Delmar yanked the chord there was a sound, but it wasn't from the out board motor. "Plunk!, plunk!" Rocks were falling from the trestle into the river. Delmar looked up, but they were too close under the trestle for him to make out if anyone was on the trestle. "Anybody up there?" Delmar hollered.

At first there was no response and then a small voice called down, "Sir?"

"Just wanted to know if anyone was up there," answered Delmar. Roy just remained leaning back his hand shading his eyes from the sun trying to make out if he could see anyone on the bridge. "You almost scared me," Delmar said, relieved.

"No sir, didn't mean to scare nobody." And then, "What you all doing down there?"

"Can't get our boat to crank." Delmar explained.

" That's too bad," the voice replied.

Delmar pulled at the chord once again but this time not only did the motor not stir the cord broke off in his hand. Roy remained curiously silent.

"You got fish on your line, too," the voice informed him.

"What you mean by that?" Delmar was confused. The line could not be seen beneath the murky water at all.

"I hear em talking." Delmar turned and looked at Roy. He was becoming a little uneasy.

" Oh get out of here." Delmar said loosing his patience.

"It's you that want out of here." The voice was sounding more mocking now. "Why don't you take one of them fishes down there in the bottom of your boat?"

" What for?" Delmar demanded. Whoever was on the bridge was either having a joke on Delmar or just plain crazy.

"You won't your boat to start or not?"

"What's this got to do with..."

"I said you want your boat to start or are you gonna stay there until Mr. Roy gets so scared he go crazy?"

"What you talking about?" Delmar asked, but when he turned and took a good look at Roy he had to admit the man looked frightened to death.

"Take the fish."

"I don't wanna..."

"Hush now, what you got to lose, take the fish." Delmar leaned down and picked up a medium sized catfish. "Whisper in it's ear let us go and

through it in the river."

"This is pure foolishness."

"Do what she says," Roy finally spoke. Delmar looked the catfish squarely on trying to figure what were supposed to be the ears. Finally he whispered into a gill. He tossed the fish from the boat like it was something too nasty to touch. The fish sank like a stone. Delmar waited and then the motor leaped to life.

"There I told you it would crank if you kept trying." Roy said sounding a little more like his old self.

"But Mr. Roy I didn't yank the cord. The cord done broke off down in the motor."

"I don't care, just get me home" Roy turned frontward, dismissing anything else Delmar might have to say. Delmar was so taken back for a minute he had all but forgotten about the stranger on the trestle. The motor propelled them back up the river towards home. Then Delmar heard from behind him the voice.

"Ain't I even getting a thank you kindly."

Delmar turned eager to see just who was the person who had been playing him for such a fool, but there was not a soul on the trestle.

Chapter 14

Red Humphries was delighted to see a clean-shaven, alert Lacey Caine at his office Saturday morning. He had feared that the previous evening had been a waste of time. Red asked Lacey if he had told anyone else about the arrangement they had.

"Naw, but sure it wouldn't be no harm in me at least telling Sam," Lacey replied.

"No one, absolutely no one," Red insisted.

"But surely you know Sam ain't got no truck with the killer. He might be able to help out too."

"No." There was no mistaking the sternness in Red's voice. This man's not only a lunatic but a fool too, Red thought. "No, the fewer who know about our little agreement the better. Besides one of the main reasons I chose you is because you are a loner. I thought I could trust you to keep this under your hat. Plus you know this countryside and all the dirt roads and trails." Flattery seemed to be doing the trick on Lacey. "And we just don't want to call any attention to you. I would hate to see something bad happen to you." Red stopped to see if this had registered. He cleared his throat and asked, "Any questions?"

Lacey shook his head no. He was pleased that the sheriff had asked him, Lacey Caine to help. "You can count on me sheriff. Mums the word."

Emma appraised her appearance in front of the long chiffon robe mirror. Her hair had been teased and sprayed into a wild crown of blonde fuzz. The effect was actually more punk than witch, but she like it. Aunt Liz had heavily applied make up on Emma's face. Her eyes were circled in black, blue and gold glitter. "I look like a French whore," she joked after seeing herself. Liz had done an excellent job with the black dress. It had long tufted sleeves and a close fitting bodice. The waist dipped low in front into a point. The skirt was full and had been cut into tattered strips at the hem that fell about mid calf. But if was the boots that really set the outfit off.

She saw the car lights turn in so she wasn't surprised by her aunt's booming cry, "Emma, your young man is here."

Taking one last look at herself in the mirror she curled her top lip into a sneer. "I've got you now," she said to the reflection. A small chill ran down her spine as she hurried from her room.

A black cat was chasing Elmo around the bleachers, a group of fifty's

greasers were hanging out at the concession stand. Cindy Basset in her fake leather jeans and ripped T-shirt was walking about with a cake she had won. Bill had shown up at Emma's with no costume. Emma had asked him about it in the car. He said jokingly he was just going as a horny teenage boy. Emma hadn't laughed. Standing beside him in the gym she felt a little uncomfortable.

"Well seeing you with Simmons, makes me wish I had won a pie instead of a cake." Cindy hurried toward the couple with a devilish grin on her face.

"Love the safety pin," Bill complimented Cindy's earring.

"You must wear it sometime." She turned her dilated eyes toward Emma. "You do look like a witch."

"Why thanks," Emma responded, "I see by your eyes you started with out us. You got any Halloween Voodoo out in the jeep for Bill and me?"

"Only four fat numbers." She held up four fingers.

"After you ladies." Bill gestured toward the double doors.

Fifteen minutes later they all sat slant eyed inside the jeep. The pot had put Emma at ease and she now stroked Bill's hand lovingly. Bill sat wedged in the space between their two seats. Emma held the joint for him as he took in the smoke and exhaled it seductively toward her.

"So, I said fuck you man." Cindy was recounting a run in she had with a teacher back in the ninth grade. It had cost her three days suspension.

"I remember that," Bill coughed, "You were such a smart ass in the eighth and ninth grades. I was actually scared of you for a while. You were such a tomboy."

Emma found herself envious of their memories. She wished for someone with whom she could laugh about the past. But then her past had never held many laughs.

"Bill, you were a dip in the eighth grade. You thought you were hot stuff in the back of the bus with Joy Hutchinson."

"Don't bring all that up," Bill whined. "Did you ever tell Em about you and Bobby Hartford?" He knew this would get a rise out of Cindy and divert the attention away from him and Joy.

"No, you dated 'big bad Bobby'?" Emma shrieked with laughter.

"Oh, he was smitten with her," Bill kept on while Cindy struggled to get a word in edge wise.

"It wasn't like that all and you know it," she said slapping playfully at Bill.

"When was this?" Emma asked.

"Ohh, ninth grade," Bill offered.

"It was just that one time," Cindy argued.

Bobby was on the football team. He played offensive tackle. He was one of the biggest and definitely shyest boys in the academy. People referred to him as 'big bad Bobby' only because of his awesome appearance. He kept his hair shorn down to the scalp. His deep set eyes and low slung brown hair gave him a sort of Neanderthal look. He did not socialize with the rest of the class. Emma could not imagine him and the gregarious Cindy having anything in common.

"Why haven't you ever told me about this, Cindy Lou?" Emma wanted to know.

"Not much to tell. He took me to the state fair in the ninth grade. That's all there is to it." Cindy told them. "We had a nice time. Then he asked me to a school dance. But he got teased so much about having a girlfriend he never asked me anywhere else."

"That's sad," Emma sighed. "You didn't pick on him did you, Bill?"

"Not me, baby" he said making a cross over his heart.

"Drop it, Emma, it's no big deal." Cindy pleaded.

Lacey sat at his post wondering why the sheriff had asked him to stake out such an uneventful site. He was in the field outside of the Tanner's house at the end of the Bluff's main street. He had been there almost two hours and no one nor nothing had stirred. "Now ain't this a hell of a howdy do," he told himself. Surely there were more active places the sheriff could have positioned him. About the most he could hope for in the way of action was some kids out with eggs and toilet paper rolling yards. That was the sort of shenanigans he had gotten into as a kid.

But as he thought about it he had not even seen one group of young ones out and about. It didn't seem right. Maybe things were too quiet. "I need a drink," he thought in his boredom. The stark stillness of the night was getting on his nerves. Lacey debated with himself the risk of sneaking off to procure a bottle of booze.

He wondered when or if the sheriff would be showing up to check on him. It wasn't a long trip up the highway to Mike's Package Store. But if he was going to chance it he would have to go now, Mike's closed in twenty minutes. He licked his lips as he thought about getting some whisky and a cola. He could drink part of the drink and then refill it with the whiskey; nobody would be none the wiser. This was getting to sound like an excellent idea to Lacey. Lacey shifted around in his car rationalizing to himself, "I just need a little something to calm my nerves." He cranked up

the old wreck and head toward the highway.

From a boarded up window above the old hardware store Harvey Johnson watched Lacey's departure. He radioed the patrolman out on the highway that the "suspect" was headed that way. Harvey was beginning to have grave doubts about this plan of Red's. He tried again to radio the sheriff, but still there was no reply. It seemed a bit foolish to ask a murder suspect to watch over a small town on a carnival night, kind of like the fox and the hen house. When Harvey had first heard Red's plan he assumed that Red had planned this well enough that there was going to be more than this little coverage. But with Red insisting that he alone would keep the surveillance on Lacey's house, and now with Red not answering the radio, Harvey felt a twinge of apprehension.

He went back to the window to watch the street. At first he thought it was still deserted and then he noticed the old woman making her way up the street. Well it looked and walked like an old woman, but with the carnival and all Harvey figured it could be just about anyone in costume. Then the figure stopped directly before him and looked up in his direction. He took a step back from the window. Surely it was too dark for anyone to see in through just the slits in the boards. But at that moment he could have sworn the small colored lady was looking right at him.

"Here take one of these for later." Cindy handed a well wrapped joint to Emma as they re-entered the gymnasium.

"Thanks." Emma searched for a place to hide it. Bill took it from her and placed it carefully in his coat pocket.

There were even more people in the crowded gym when they returned. The air was heavy and warm.

"You know we really ought to check out the fortune teller's booth. Aunt Liz sure did a lot of work on it." The three of them made their way amiably through the crowd to the decorated tent. Emma was thinking how nice it was that the three of them were all getting along so well.

Although they were still half a court away from the booth, Emma could make out the shrill voice of her cousin, Barbara Lee. Her stomach pitched slightly. She spotted Barbara Lee outside the tent with her arms around her mother.

"Now, momma, don't be saying that." She raised a raspberry red nail to point at her mother. "You know I do no such a thing." Emma was beginning to wish that they were not headed that way. Then it was too late. She watched Barbara Lee's eyes widen as she took in her cousin. "Emma, who did that to your hair?"

"I did." Cindy took an aggressive step closer to Barbara Lee and lied. "You want to make something about it?" Barbara just sucked in her bottom lip in mock offense.

"Nice to see you, Barbara Lee," Bill said trying to diffuse the situation.

"Nice to see you too, Bill." Barbara Lee made a point of looking all around. "Where's Joy?"

"I told you, Barbara Lee, Bill is Emma's date for tonight," Liz cut in sharply. She was aware that her only daughter could be cruelly catty at times.

"My goodness." Barbara Lee's attempt at pleasantness only came across as a sneer.

"What are you doing home," Emma asked.

"Didn't you know that Denise Tanner invited me to her party. She is always trying to get in good with me. She really wants to pledge KD next year. She's been up to the campus a few times to visit me."

Emma was mildly irritated at her cousin's flippant manner. Barbara Lee always considered herself the toast of any event. Emma had not realized that Barbara Lee and Denise Tanner were friends at all.

"Oh yes, Denise was broken hearted when Barbara Lee went off to college without her. But you know, well her family has a hard time with money and they simply told her she would have to work a year before she could enroll in college." Liz rambled on all about the Tanner's personal affairs. Emma tuned her out.

"How much to have our fortunes read?" Cindy was asking the teenager at the front.

"A quarter."

"Can we go in together?" Cindy ventured to ask.

"I don't know. I will have to check and see." This clearly perturbed the attendant. He paused for a second and when Cindy did not retract her request he flipped back the curtain and went in to inquire.

"Okay, you can go in together," he relented.

The three of them entered the tent and stood in front of a small round table. There was only one vacant chair and Bill pulled it out and offered it to Emma.

"So you've come to visit you future," Mrs. Garth spoke in a weird affected accent. She was really convincing.

"Yes ma'am," Cindy said boisterously.

"We shall begin." She cut the cards and began to lay them out in front of the three.

"Two bits to tell me that I am going to flunk earth science if I don't shape up. What a rip off." Cindy was bitching over her fortune.

"Well how about me. She told me nothing. 'You're life shall hold great mystery' what is that suppose to mean," Emma complained.

"Chill out," Bill told them, " I think she did a great job."

" You say that because she told you that you were destined to be remembered for generations." Cindy rolled her eyes. "What? Have you been doing extra credit for her class?"

Barbara Lee had entered the tent after them and now they heard her cry out. "That's a terrible thing to say." The tent shook as she left in a huff. Emma, Cindy and Bill all stopped to look at her.

"Whoa, what's the matter here?" Cindy was the first to speak up.

"That woman should be fired." Barbara Lee shouted.

"She's not that bad of a teacher." Emma would have defended Sadam Hussein against Barbara Lee.

"Teacher? I never saw her before when I was here."

"Well she does teach here," Emma spoke up defending Mrs. Garth.

"Emma they don't allow black teachers in white academies," Barbara Lee spoke as if to a child.

The three looked from one to the other. Though in makeup in costume, Mrs. Garth had still been recognizable as her blonde perky self.

"What did she say?" Cindy wanted to know.

"That I was going to die," Barbara Lee said as she tramped away.

"She had to be kidding," Cindy said breaking the silence.

Bill slipped back over to the tent and pulled back the flap. Inside Mrs. Garth looked surprised to see him again.

"Hi." He waved a weak hand. "You got one screwy cousin," he said as he walked back to Emma.

Chapter 15

The party Bill took her to after the carnival was even a bigger event than Emma had expected. Along with the high school crowd there were plenty of college students and a few adult friends of the Tanners. Denise made a stab at greeting every new arrival, but the task soon proved to formidable and she finally gave up and retreated to the den with a few of her closest friends. Emma noticed that Barbara Lee wasn't in this group.

Decorations were lavish for the affair. Black crepe paper was strung from the beams of the vaulted ceiling. Jack-o-lanterns and corn stalks adorned every free space. A scarecrow with a face of an old cabbage patch doll sat in a winged back chair. "For people with money problems they sure have a nice house," Emma whispered to Bill.

Bill and Emma wandered from the den into the playroom. Pool tables graced one side of the room, while on the other side a wide screen TV and pinball machines played.

Out of the wide sliding glass doors Emma could see a lighted swimming pool and a huge trampoline.

"Ahh, to be so poor," Emma thought to herself as she took in the grand stair case which curved around and lead to a landing on the second floor. From all corners music abounded, while tract lighting left pools of warm light around the rooms. Emma remained very still and just gazed at all the people there.

"Snap out of it," Bill called to her as he made his way over with a plate of Halloween goodies. "Here I thought we could share this." He offered her a sip of his punch. "It's really crowded here."

Cindy had disappeared into the throng soon after they had arrived. Emma was feeling a little self-conscious with Bill all to herself.

"You look beautiful," he whispered close to her.

"No." She tucked her chin.

"Emma, don't be like that. There is no reason to play coy. Let's have a good time. Come on." He offered her his hand.

Following Bill as he made the rounds she felt more at ease letting him do the talking. He was a natural bull spreader. They joked with Butch Johnson who had painted his face green. He claimed he was 'The Incredible Hulk'. "You look more like the incredible zucchini," Bill told him. Then they joined Martha and her new Beau for a game of pool. Emma was distressed by her lack of skill, but Bill only teased her slightly and

made a great show of giving her pointers. She spotted Cindy across the room once, but her friend was engrossed in a conversation with Susan Armstrong.

A lot of the college kids and a few seniors had spread into the back yard. Denise was with this group. Emma spotted her cousin clinging to the arm of some jock that Emma had only met once before. From the looks of most of the faces coming in and going back out there was booze to be obtained somewhere out there. The adults had all vanished for the time being and the party was really beginning to rock.

Sitting on the couch with Bill, Emma caught quick glimpses of couples making out in the dark corners.

"I love them boots." Frankie Carson plopped down on the couch beside Emma admiring her footwear. His eyes were red and his voice slurred. He leaned his large smile into Emma's face. "Ummm, nice legs to go with them I see," he commented as he yanked up her hemline.

"Watch your hands," Bill ordered gruffly.

"What's with you man? Is Joy not enough for you? You got to pork all the girls at school?" Emma stiffened in her seat. She had been afraid that someone was going to bring up Joy again. This was worse than she had feared.

"You better watch your mouth." Bill jerked Emma up from the couch and guided her out to the back yard. "I am really sorry about that," he told her.

"No big deal," she lied.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

In the back yard they encountered Cindy. Emma had never seen her pal more obviously drunk.

"Hi." Cindy opened her mouth wide as she drew out the greeting. She was bent from the waist and supported herself with an arm thrown across some college guy Emma recognized from last year's high school annual.

"My, my, Cindy Lou, what have you been drinking?" Emma giggled at her friend's wobbly legs.

"Annie Green Springs," Cindy enunciated broadly.

"You better lay off that stuff," Emma scolded her lightly. Emma looked up to catch Cindy's support man watching her intensely. "Hi," Emma said.

"She was trying to out drink half the football team," he explained politely. Dark hazel eyes held Emma in their sight.

"Oh, I am Emma and this is Bill," she made to introduce herself.

"Yeah, I know old Bill. How you doing man?"

"Emma, this is Jimmy Richardson." Bill moved closer to her side.

"Hello, yeah, I keep forgetting everyone knows everyone around here except me," Emma said feeling her face grow warm.

Something in Bill's eyes made Jimmy take a step back. "I guess I should be getting our friend in the house. It was nice meeting you." He moved with Cindy now tucked under his arm.

Bill slipped an arm around Emma and walked toward a darker part of the lawn. He bent to kiss the side of her neck.

"Ummm," she shivered at the sensation. "Why don't we smoke that joint now?" She pulled away.

"What ever you say." Facing front to front he pulled her so close she could feel his hardness.

"Oh yes, I think it is definitely time for some pot." She blushed and wiggled free.

Bill drew out the joint and stooped to light it away from the wind. "We had better walk this way," he said tightly holding in the smoke. "Phew," he exhaled, "we don't want anyone walking up on us." They began making their way across the field next to the Tanners, headed back in the general direction of the school. Once again Emma felt tension drifting away from her as she inhaled the smoke.

"The sky is so big." She threw back her head and looked up in amazement.

"Yeah, that's the way it usually is." Bill was charmed by her sweetness. "Umm, you feel so good," he squeezed her close. "Let's go over by the school." His car was still parked in the lot over there and that is where Emma supposed they were headed, but as she turned toward s the cars he stopped her.

"No, it's such a beautiful night, let' stay outside." He took her hand and brought her near. He kissed her roughly on the mouth almost raising her off the ground.

"My goodness." She smiled

"Sorry, I forget myself." He squeezed her tighter. "I got an idea. I know they haven't moved the hay from the flatbed yet. Let's go over there and have our own hay ride." He hurried her toward the old truck that was barely discernible in the dark corner of the lot. Because it was so high off the ground, he lifted her to sit on the edge while he hoisted himself up.

"You know I've never been on a hay ride," she said excitedly as she made her way over the bails of hay.

"Say you want to go for a ride in the hay." His eyes danced with amusement.

"You're a bad boy, Bill Simmons." She forced a frown.

"Maybe you should come here and make me behave." He held out both of his hands to her.

"No, you come here," she directed him.

"With pleasure." He rushed to her knocking them both over in the hay. "Ooooh, Emma, " he whined as though in pain. Carefully he placed her against the side of a bail. He moved over and kissed her deeply. She met his mouth and pulled him down to her. They lie clinging to each other in the hay. Once again she could feel his erection. It was pressing against her leg. This time she did not pull away from him. She found herself squirming in rhythm under him.

"Emma." His voice was hoarse.

"Yes." She brushed a straw from his hair.

"I can't help it," he said, "You don't know how much I want to make love with you."

"Bill, we can't." She felt so light-headed, she was sure she would pass out if they continued.

"Why?" his mouth touched hers briefly.

"I don't know." With her head reeling so she couldn't think; couldn't give him an answer.

"I just want to touch you," he breathed, "I'll go real slow and when ever you want for me to stop, I'll stop." He pinned her beneath him and began to kiss her, her chin, her neck.

"I don't know," she repeated in a stupor. She could feel him pressing against her. She brought her knees up and lifted herself to meet his body. He slipped his hand to her knee and licked her swollen lips. His hands slipped up her leg to rest against her inner thigh.

"Oh gawd," she breathed through clenched teeth. She knew she would have to stop him soon.

"I don't want to hurt you," he spoke between breaths. He rose on his knees above her. Never taking his eyes from her face he began with the top button of her dress. She stared frozen, up at him. As her neck and upper chest became bare he bent to plant tiny kisses across her skin. The small black bra she wore stood out against her pale flesh. When he had completed the last button she stood and raised her arms high over her head. He helped as she lifted the dress up, over, and off.

She watched his shoulders heave up and down in heavy breaths. With

utmost care he stretched his arm around her to undo the lacy bra. He closed his eyes as the bra fell from her. When he opened them he immediately focused on her pale nipples. His hand hovered near, but not touching her breast. Finally his fingers met with her straining nipples.

"Oh baby," he giggled.

"Kiss me," she begged.

He crushed her under him and made his way down until she could feel the moist air from his mouth warming her nipples. She shuddered as he trailed his tongue over one pert nipple. As he took the whole pap into his mouth, she moaned. She could feel his fingers exploring her and more, they were entering her flesh so she spread her legs farther, while panting. "When had he pulled that out?" she thought but pulled him closer guiding his hard cock to her.

"What in the world are you two doing up here?" Emma immediately recognized the voice. Barbara Lee was standing on a bail of hay, and she was staring right down at them. Her smile changed to shock when she saw Emma's discarded costume.

"Oh my gawd, Emma, mother is going to shit when she hears this."

"No," Emma squeaked as she jerked herself upright and scrambled for her bra.

"This is disgusting. This is wicked." A look of contempt covered her face. "And you, Bill Simmons, you better get out of here and not ever be showing your face around our place again." Barbara Lee did not avert her eyes as Emma struggled to get the heavy black dress back on again. Bill just stood there dazed.

"You best be going," Emma urged him.

Bill looked from cousin to cousin not knowing what to say. He raked strands of hay from his pant's legs and hid his manhood absentmindedly.

"I said get out of here." Barbara raised her voice loudly.

"Uh, see ya later," he spoke to Emma.

"Not when my daddy hears about this," Barbara Lee interrupted.

Emma could not believe this was actually happening. She could not believe her cousin was really going to destroy her life. How could this have happened? A sick feeling ached in her stomach like a stone. There was nothing she could do but follow Barbara Lee to the car.

Chapter 16

Across the highway on the deserted dirt road next to Lacey's house Red was feeling an apprehension of his own. It was almost one a.m. and still Red had seen no activity in the house he watched. Where was Wallace Caine hiding? And to top it off when Harvey Johnson had finally reached Red on the police radio he had given Red an earful. He made it clear that he didn't appreciate being called in on such a 'damn fool plan.' Red knew if he ended up with no clues or revelations after this he would never hear the end of it.

Harvey had informed him that Lacey had left his spot once, but that the patrolman who tailed him had reported that Lacey had only gone to the liquor store and straight back to the Tanner's. Well at least he knew Lacey was under surveillance, maybe it was time that he stirred up a little action himself. Red decided he would have to search the house.

He pulled the fuse on the inside lights so as to not call any attention to himself as he got out of his car. Because the gravel crunched below his feet, he was forced to walk on the mushy side of the road. The house was a good hundred yards from him, but the closer he got to it the darker it loomed before him.

As he reached the front porch he realized that his boots would make too much noise on the weak floorboards. He would just have to leave his boots outside. He wasn't even sure if the front door would be locked, but it didn't seem likely. Besides the lock was the kind that accommodated an old fashioned skeleton key so he was sure he could pick it. "I should have called Harvey before I left the car," he realized. But it seemed too late to go back and do that now. "No turning back," he told himself.

It turned out that the front door was not locked and opened as soon as he gave it a push. Without lights or Lacey's presence the living room looked ancient and forbidding. The heavy old furniture squatted like lurking figures. Red took a moment to let his eyes adjust.

A quick look into the kitchen turned up nothing. He wasn't really expecting anyone to be in there anyway. He started down the center hall. The bathroom door was open but no one was in there. The first closed door Red came to squeaked gently as he turned the glass knob. "Damn," he sighed and stood stock still waiting to see if this sound had aroused any one.

After deciding it was finally safe he pushed open the door. An uneven

feather bed stacked high with boxes was in the center of the room. The debris that lay on the floor attested to Lacey's poor housekeeping. Other than this the room was deserted. The second room offered more. This room was reasonable well kept and filled with fine old furniture. The smell of rosewood hung in the air. Though worn, the floral pattern of the rug was still colorful. Red walked fully into the room. It was much tidier than the rest of the house. A sound in the next room made Red spin around. Holding his breath, he turned on his heels to find the source.

As Red crept back into the hall he saw the door of the last room. It was from there that the sound had come. Red paused outside of the door listening before slowly taking his gun from its holster. He gripped the doorknob tightly and turned. In a slow whine the door swung open. Instantly Red made out the tall form that stood in front of the window with it's back to him. Slowly the form turned toward him.

"Stop or I will shoot," Red called out. The tall man continued to turn. The dead glare from the man's face froze Red's heart in his chest. "Stay still Wallace or I will have to shoot you." Red gripped the gun in both hands. The man in front of him showed no sign of understanding. He took a step towards Red. The sheriff cocked the gun. Wallace Caine did not flinch, he merely continued towards Red. In a quick squeeze Red fired off two shots. What happened next drove Red's balls into his body.

The bullets only hit Wallace Caine with a splat and embedded into the body leaving no wounds, no gaping holes, no splintered limbs. For the most part Wallace looked unharmed. Red frantically shot off the rest of the rounds but to no avail. Even a direct hit to the head only made a sick slurping sound as the bullet entered the brain and flesh rushed to cover the hole after it.

Red could not seem to be able to make his legs move fast enough to get out of the house. He raced down the hallway bouncing off the narrow walls as he ran. He turned to see the monster of Wallace Caine following. In the living room he fell over a foot stool and a sharp pain racked his knee. He heard a crack but he did not bother to look back. This time he half stumbled half crawled on to the porch. He could hear Wallace crashing through the house behind him. He spotted his car down the road. Though his knee felt like a squashed grape he took out at his fullest speed for the patrol car.

Only glancing back once, he could make out the hulking gait of the creature that followed him. He would have to do better if he were going to beat it to the car. Just as he reached the driver's door he stumbled again.

He looked up to see Wallace ten feet away and gaining. He grasped desperately for the door handle and jerked the door open. Head first he dove into the seat. He pulled the door closed and locked it just as the heavy bulk of Wallace Caine hit against it.

"Oh God," Red screamed into the car. Wallace's face with its dead expression pressed against the window at him. The creature said nothing as it began to raise its massive fists and pound the front windshield. Red reached into his pocket for his keys. They weren't there. The pounding continued. The glass was beginning to crack in a spider web form from the beating. Red sobbed into his hands as his search produced no keys, and then he saw them. They were glimmering in the grass just outside the door.

The windshield bent in from the blows. Red, crouched low in his seat bellowed loud cries of fear. A hand was tearing its way through the broken glass. "Oh God, No," Red barely heard his own scream as the whole torso broke through upon him. No longer did the creature even resemble Wallace Caine. What he saw before him now was clearly the rotted form of an old woman.

Chapter 17

In the dark shelter of the car on the way home, Emma took her cousin's berating.

"I just don't know what to think of you, Emma. My Momma and my Daddy take you in to their home, when nobody else in the whole family wanted you, and you can't wait to make us look like white trash while you make a cheap whore of yourself. God Almighty, how many other boys in that high school have you screwed. Is that why Bill Simmons asked you out? It's a miracle you aren't pregnant. You aren't are you?"

"Barbara Lee, you don't..." was all Emma could fit between her cousin's harsh words.

"You might as well know. I've had my doubts about you and not just boys, Emma. I know you smoke pot and I don't for one minute approve of it and neither will my folks. And don't try to deny it. I have smelled it on you. I could smell it on you at the carnival tonight. And that little tramp, Cindy, you hang around with, well I just don't know what to do with you."

"It's none of your business," Emma said deadly. She had begun to feel cold and numb.

"Well, let's just see what my parents have to say about that," Barbara Lee replied haughtily.

It was that night that the dreams started for Emma. Crushed under the massive depression of the situation, Emma had been afraid that she would have trouble sleeping at all. But the dark slumber overtook her almost as soon as she rested her head on the pillow.

"It's okay, baby," Bill's dream words soothed her. He was lying beside her in a huge hallow of a quilted mat. "I love you, I always will." His hand stroked her smooth forehead and toyed with the curls that fell near her brow. In the dream she felt as heavy as a stone. "I won't let anything bad ever happen to you." He trailed kisses across the palm of her hand. He squeezed her fingers between his. Her eyes opened to study his face. The stark whiteness of his complexion seemed all wrong. Then she saw the jagged wound at his temple. No blood spilled from it, only a gash with ragged edges and white papery skin.

"What?" The words came as a hoarse whisper from her as she reached for his face.

"For you, always for you." His expression strained to show concern, but a cold edge of nothingness radiated from his eyes.

"No, no," she spoke to the shell of Bill Simmons. With a sudden burst of furry she propelled herself up from the mat. Coarse particles of sand stuck to the back of her legs and she brushed them off as she backed away. With a thud she collided with something solid. Emma turned to see an oversized Barbara Lee, almost nine feet tall, anchored behind her. Barbara Lee with a hand on her hip pompously smiled down on the scene.

"So try to dream about him. It wont' make him real." The amazon nodded to the mat and Emma followed her gaze. Where Bill had once stretched out was a fetid mouldy old blanket with tufts of cotton exposed from its numerous tears.

"He's dead, he's dead" Barbara Lee chanted in a nursery rhyme singsong lilt.

Emma turned to flee from the taunting, but the room closed in around her. Inky darkness engulfed her every access and as she tried to run she tripped and stumbled over any obstructions.

"You won't get far." Barbara Lee's voice promised as she took after her in long clean strides.

"Where do I go?" A voice inside of Emma screamed as she became lost in the maze of midnight. She had lost all sense of direction and time as she mindlessly hurried down intertwining corridors.

"Shhhhhhh." A small voice called to her from her left. "Over here, baby girl."

Emma stopped still and got down on her hands and knees and crawled toward the voice. She found herself in a small- concealed corner. As she knelt there she could feel a bundle that moved beneath her hand when she touched it.

"Under here." The voice compelled her. She could make out an opening as the corner of the blanket rose and a faint glow poured out. It seemed the bundle was actually a make shift tent. Inside a small figure huddled. "Hurry in here. You'll be safe." Emma scurried under the blanket and tucked the corner in under her.

"I've been so worried about you child." Deep concern filled the words. Emma felt a wave of serene comfort from the eyes beamed at her. "You need rest. Come, lean close and old Viola will protect you." Emma moved to cling to the warm soft body. Viola's even breathing uncoiled the tendrils of tension that had wrapped her. The desire for sleep filled her body. "Can't rest just yet though," Viola jostled her. "She'll be coming for us," Then Emma could hear the scuffing footsteps of her cousin. "We must get rid of her," Viola spoke deeply. Emma looked up to her in fear. Where

could they go to be safe? "You must do it." Viola moved to look directly at her. "You must do it," she repeated.

"Do what?" Emma asked hollowly.

"End her," came back Viola's words. "I can only tell you how."

"How?" Emma pressed.

"She will destroy your existence." Viola evaded.

"Yes, but how?" Emma continued.

" You must want to," were the cryptic words.

" Want to?" Emma echoed.

"Yes, there is a way if you want it to happen."

Barbara Lee's footsteps grew louder and nearer. "Emma, Emma, I am going to find you and I am going to tell them. I am going to tell them all of it." Emma could hear her cousin's threatening words right inside her head.

"What must I do?" she whispered.

"Your hair, your nails, your spittle." These were the confusing words that came from the ancient one.

"My hair, my nails, my spit? But that doesn't make sense to me. You must tell me exactly what."

"They must share water and you must want it to happen," was the only answer.

"I don't understand. I don't understand." Emma's word grew louder

"Emma," Barbara Lee called, "I will find you."

"I don't understand." But the old woman did not answer. She just kept her steady stare on Emma. "I don't understand," Emma screamed.

"Well there you are." Emma could feel the blanket above her being pulled and plucked as her cousin grabbed at her. Barbara Lee ripped into the blanket like it was a cheap paper sack.

"I don't understand." Emma shrieked as Barbara Lee's hands found her throat and started to squeeze.

Emma awoke from the dream in a cold sweat. "Help me," she whispered from her bed.

Sunday morning Emma stood silently in front of her dresser mirror. The cool wooden floor caused her to draw her toes into a curl. She watched the wide toothed comb separate her hair into dozens of parts. The previous evening had left her devoid of feeling and bone weary. She detected the voices of her aunt and cousin coming from the kitchen below. The words were indistinct but she could guess at their subject. Still in her long flannel gown and robe she braced herself before descending to the kitchen.

"So I told her she was lucky he had left with that old girl, after the years of misery he had already caused her," Liz was explaining to her daughter. Emma found herself unable to stop swallowing as she scanned their faces.

"Oh, Emma, there some sweet buns in the oven."

Liz returned to her conversation with Barbara Lee. Emma stood still for a five count. "She must not know yet," Emma concluded. Then she met Barbara Lee's gaze. Pure contempt and malice leaped out at her. "She is waiting for just the right time," Emma realized. Emma's blood ran cold as she bit her bottom lip. With gripping effort she pulled her eyes away from Barbara Lee and stepped to the cabinet to find a plate. "I wonder when she is going to do it? I wonder when she's going to do it?" This thought circled Emma's mind in a frenzy. Emma fought to keep her face blank. She felt as though the gambit of emotions she felt racing inside were obvious on her face.

"Come and sit down," her aunt was saying over her shoulder, "Come and sit and talk with Barbara Lee and I for a bit."

Stiffly Emma took a chair at the table. Barbara Lee was seated directly across from her.

"So did you have a good time last night?" her aunt was asking Emma.

"Yes ma'am." Emma tried to not look up.

"I just bet you did," Barbara Lee said flatly.

"That Bill Simmons is the nicest boy. Has he asked you out for next weekend yet?" Liz asked hopefully.

"No ma'am."

"Why Emma, what's the matter with you?" Liz peered at the down turned face.

"Nothing, nothing. I guess I am just still real tired." She tried to appear normal in order to take the attention off of herself.

"Well, wake up. I was just telling Barbara Lee we ought to drive over to Finley this afternoon and pick up some pecans. I can start putting them up for the holiday cookies. Can you believe how late in the year it is already getting to be. Next week it will be November and then Thanksgiving and Christmas will be here before you know it."

"That's true," Barbara Lee agreed. "Momma, are you going to come up and get me for the Thanksgiving week so I can bring more things home?"

"Maybe Emma and I both will. Emma hasn't been up there before and I know she would love to meet some of your friends. What do you say,

Emma?"

"Momma," Barbara Lee broke in, "Emma doesn't have to come with you if she doesn't want to. Maybe she will not be available."

Liz buttered a corner of a sweet bun and stuffed it in her mouth. "Barbara Lee, would you be so kind as to get me some milk?" Barbara Lee merely leaned back in her chair and grabbed the refrigerator handle to open it. Emma noticed how huge Barbara's arms were, both long and muscular. Yep, Barbara Lee was a big girl. She carefully lifted the milk carton from the refrigerator and placed it in front of her mother. Liz poured a generous amount into her coffee and then dumped some of the brew on her saucer to cool.

"You know Momma, there is something I need to discuss with you and Daddy when he gets back." Barbara Lee's eyes bore into Emma as she said this.

"Oh me, sounds so serious," Liz chuckled.

"It could be." She sucked in her lips in a stern manner.

Emma's eyes flicked back and forth between the two. Her time had come.

"Are you sure you just don't want to talk to me first." Liz said in that tone of worldly female camaraderie. "Your Father doesn't always understand the problems of a young woman."

"No I think you both should hear this together."

"My goodness Barbara Lee, you sure sound mysterious about this. I don't know if I can wait. Can't you give me just a little hint?" Liz loved surprises both good and bad. "But it doesn't look as if you will have to wait long. I believe that's your Father's pickup I hear." A crunch of tires could be heard on the front driveway.

"I should go to my room." Emma rose shakily.

"No, you stay," Barbara Lee commanded. The front door could be heard opening and Roy's footsteps in the front room. The three woman turned toward the door that he would be entering. Roy Wilson walked heavily into the room.

"Morning Liz, girls." There was a dead seriousness in his tone.

"Morning hon," Liz spoke. "What's the matter?" she immediately asked.

He looked from one to the other or them as if making up his mind before speaking. "I am afraid I don't have very good news." He placed his hands in his pockets and let out a deep sigh. "Red Humphries was killed last night." Stunned silence filled the kitchen. "Just like the others."

"But Roy, where? How?" Liz flew at him with questions.

"They found him over at the Caine place. Now don't ask me why he was there. He was in his car." He stopped to run his hand through his hair.

"Dear Jesus, help us," Liz spoke to the ceiling in earnest.

"I've got to go back into town. The men folks are forming a task force to look for," he paused at this, clearly unsure as how to finish, "well it's better to just say to look for something important." He turned to his wife. "I thought you might want to come with me, Liz. A bunch of the ladies are going over to sit with his wife, Vera. She needs folks with her now; her and the children."

"But I don't have anything made to carry."

"I am sure there will be plenty of covered dishes already."

"Well, yes, of course." Liz was already up and looking for her purse. "Barbara Lee, you and Emma take care of them dishes while I am gone. And for heaven sakes stay in this house and lock the doors." She stopped and looked apprehensively at her daughter.

"Momma, we'll be fine."

Through all of this Emma sat stock still, rattled by the image of another murder. The whole world was going crazy around her. Roy followed his wife out of the room and Emma could hear Liz still asking frantic questions. She looked up at Barbara Lee, but her cousin was already at the sink starting the dishes. Without looking around Barbara Lee said, "Looks like you got a reprieve this time. But don't count on one later."

Emma silently rose and slipped from the room.

Chapter 18

In the raw morning light, Lacey surveyed the layers of dust that coated all the flat surfaces in the Sheriff's office. He had been sitting on a hard wooden chair for almost two hours. Judging from the carvings on the arms he was not the first to have spent a long spell in that chair.

The last time he had seen Harvey Johnson had been early that morning when he had been roused awake in his car. He had passed out still sitting beneath the steering wheel. Harvey had stood there studying him long and hard with a clear look of displeasure on his face. Lacey had shamefully confessed to having 'fallen asleep on the job'. Well okay, he had a wee bit of whisky to calm his nerves. The half empty bottle in the back seat made a liar out of him.

"I know every damn move you made, God dammit," Harvey had bellowed into his face. Lacey, not knowing what was expected out of him had then proceeded to just stand there mute, staring at his own feet.

Now in the sheriff's office hours later Lacey was still confused over what was going on. Though no one had ever told him directly, in fact no one addressed him at all; he knew the sheriff had been found dead. He also knew, though he certainly didn't know why, the sheriff had been found in his own car on the road leading to Lacey's house. That just didn't make any sense. Red knew Lacey wasn't at home. Red knew Lacey was posted in town.

Maybe it was something out in the woods that had interested the sheriff. These thoughts and the overheard whispers about the state Red's body had been found in kept Lacey's stomach in tight knots. He was content to remain unattended in the office until they caught whatever was out there doing this killing.

"Mr. Caine, would you come this way?" A stoic patrolman was beckoning to him.

"Certainly." He got to his feet noting that his rear end was asleep. He was lead into what looked like a small supply room in the back of the building. Unlabeled boxes lined two walls and metal shelves stacked with notebooks and loose files covered a third wall. In one corner of the room a makeshift desk had been constructed from a door and two short filing cabinets. On this desk, assorted maps, some hand drawn, others actual aerial photos were carefully laid out under a harsh lamp.

Harvey Johnson worked over these maps. To his side stood another

patrolman, a large man with a drooping moustache that did not successful cover his bad teeth. This man seemed engrossed in an area marked off on one of the maps with a yellow high lighter. Neither of the men looked up when Lacey entered. So Lacey just stood there clasping his hands behind his back for a full two minutes before anything was said to him.

"Lacey, can you point to your house from this photo?" Harvey asked looking at his awkward captive for the first time.

"I ah, might can." Lacey took a shy step toward the table.

"Here." The patrolman handed him three Xeroxed photos. The pictures were grainy and mostly treetops could be discerned from this view. In the second photo the familiar snaking of Lacey's dirt road peaked out between the trees. Judging by the loop of the road, Lacey could guess where his house was, even though he could not actually see it. The third photo showed a distinct corner of his roof.

"That's it. Right there." He pointed to the spot in the third copy. The man took the shot from him, marked the area in yellow, and placed it back in the pile on the desk.

"What are ya'll doing here?" Lacey finally managed to ask.

"Grasping at straws." Harvey answered, discouraging any further questions.

"That's it for now." Harvey turned to speak to the man beside him. "Take these back into the city for me and have them compiled into one. Make copies for everyone who needs them. And call me just as soon as you get news from Memphis."

Silently the unnamed patrolman assembled the marked maps and left the room.

"Pull up a crate." Harvey gestured to Lacey. Scrambling, Lacey drug a small box from the pile and sat.

"What do you know about all this?" Harvey rubbed his eyes and leaned across the make shift desk.

Lacey opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn't compose the words to say. He wasn't just sure what he knew about what.

"Let me make it easier on you. Go back and start with when you found Lucille May's body and go through every word you had with Red up until his death."

"Yes sir." And Lacey began his long story.

"So let me get this straight. Red told you that you would just be keeping an eye on the town while the police were on a stake out?"

"He didn't exactly call it a stake out. He was real mysterious about it

and I didn't figure it was really any of my business."

"Well Lacey, if I hadn't sat up in the top of Jeb's old store and watched you all night I might call you a liar. But I know you didn't leave town after you got that whisky and further more I don't know why Red was having you watched so carefully."

"Watching me?" Lacey was bewildered.

"Fraid so. And I might as well tell you that I am going to be watching you pretty hard too. I know there wasn't no way for you to have gotten away, gone home and done this to Red. Who ever did get him must have been one hell of a big man. But you are tied into this some way. You may or may not even know how, but you are."

Lacey could only stare dumbfounded at Harvey. Not for the first time that day he wanted a drink.

Emma lie curled up on her bed. She was shaking and nothing she did seemed to stop it. She could not bare Barbara Lee being in the house below her. So far Barbara Lee had done the dishes, taken a shower, and now it sounded as though she had gone on to the back porch. Emma dreaded but sought every tale-tale creak and groan made as Barbara Lee moved about. She could no longer think coherently about her dilemma. The facts and circumstances loomed larger than life before her. Images of herself, pathetically being thrown out by her aunt and uncle, having no place to go, no one to turn to, crowded her mind. It seemed as if she had cornered the market on pain. No matter how hard she tried there were no words, no action that could make it all okay again.

In this panic state horrible memories, long buried, came flooding back to her. She saw herself back in her bed in the home she had grown up in with her parents. She slept under a window with a cool breeze, pulled in by the attic fan, blowing down on her. She remember vividly waking up in that bed late one school night. Her nose and her throat felt assaulted by the bitter air. She knew instantly it was smoke. Still sleepy, she hurried across the hall to her father's room. Her mother had been dead for over a year now, and she had become accustomed to checking on her father during the night.

This night the full impact of the smoke did not hit until she opened the bedroom door. She could see her father's large body lying sprawled across the bed. He wore only a pair of dirty khaki green work pants. His open mouth and the awkward angle of his head witnessed the fact that he had once again drank himself into a stupor before passing out. All of this she took in in an instant because the focal point of the room was the

flames that lapped up from the mattress beneath him. Her father was suspended in a sea of fire. No more thoughts interfered with her mind. She made no decision of which she was aware. With that rumored adrenaline energy that makes interesting conversation, the twelve-year old drug her father from the bed and on to the floor. He never awoke.

She searched the room for a container and her eyes found a small porcelain vase that had been her mother's. It was like she was still asleep, still dreaming as she toted vase full after vase full of water from the bathroom to the bed. Finally the fire was more smoldering than raging. The thought of calling for help had never entered her mind. Perhaps it was embarrassment as well as years of training, training in keeping her father's dark drunken secret that kept her from considering that she could call for help.

The amount of time that lapsed before the fire was finally out seemed like eons. More than once she thought the mattress must surely be too soaked to support any more combustion only to be startled by yet another blue flame. She took breaks from her task to lie beside her unconscious daddy on the floor, stroking his head and holding his lifeless hand. His heavy snoring and sputtering assured her that he was quite alive. It was sometime after sun up that she crept back to her bed. She had to go to school this day. She could never let on that anything had happened at home. The embarrassment would be too great to bare other wise.

In her bed at her aunt's and uncle's now she shook with the sobs that she had no time for then. She felt as if the event had just then happened. She finally cried herself into a deep if not restful sleep.

It was Sunday afternoon and Bill sat on the couch at Joy's not watching the football game that played on the television. Usually Joy's father and brother were there too. They would sit there together enjoying the game as if he were already an accepted part of the family. But today the two Hutchinson men were in town with most of the rest of the community up in arms over the latest murder.

Joy was in the kitchen preparing a snack for the two of them. Bill could hear her speaking to her mother. They always spoke like close friends, Mrs. Hutchinson's girlish laugh much more winsome than Joy's. He sometimes wondered actually what did Joy tell her mother about him.

"Here you go, sweetie pie." She brought in a tray with two colas, a bowl of potato chips and a bowl of popcorn, plenty of salt.

"Thanks baby." He kissed her lightly as she bent to place the tray in front of him on the coffee table. Quickly she moved to the couch where

she perched beside him with her legs bent beneath her. She wove her arm through his and grabbed a handful of popcorn.

"So, how was you date?" she asked in a teasing voice. She was pleased that he had called her first thing that morning and had sounded anxious to see her. What jealousy she had felt the night before had now bloomed into victory.

"It was okay." He did not take his eyes from the T.V.

"Just okay?" she asked playfully.

"Yes," he sighed. He knew there was no avoiding this conversation.

"Did you kiss her?"

"Yes."

"On the mouth?"

"Yes."

"Did you like it?" she pouted.

"It was all right."

"Show me how you did it." She moved in front of him.

"Joy!!" he whined.

"Show me," she insisted, "Was it like this?" She gave him a quick peck of a kiss, her lips tightly puckered together.

"No." he said irritably.

"Well, was it like this?" She parted her lips and kissed him fully but still prudently on the mouth.

"I don't like this." He pushed her aside and got up from the couch. "And I don't remember what it was like."

"I'm sorry you had such a bad time. I could have told you that you wouldn't like Emma. She's not your type at all. She's weird." She squinted her eyes and her top lip sneered at the thought. "Come back and sit by me." She patted the couch beside her. He gave in and took a seat swinging his arm around her and hugging her close. She did feel comfortable, familiar to him, safe. Bill kissed her full round check affectionately.

"You love me the most," she asked in a baby voice.

"Uh huh."

"I keep telling you we are meant to be together. You could never love anyone like you love me. Could you?"

"No."

"Bill?" she drew his name out as she said it, "What if I am pregnant?"

This struck him like a lead pipe between the eyes. "What?" he gasped,
"Are you?"

"I don't think so." she said innocently, "But what if I were?" She seemed elated with the idea.

"I don't know Joy, I just don't know." The anguish that had been awash in his mind all day took on ever greater proportions.

"And they couldn't find his head right away. So they had all the men out searching the woods for it. And when they did find it, it was laying in the weeds under the Lacey's porch. Yep, they looked down there and it was smiling up at them between the gaps in the steps."

"Momma, make him shut up." Cindy called towards her mother in the kitchen.

"It's true. Mike's dad told him all about it. Everyone in town is talking about it." Cindy's twelve-year old brother kept on talking. To further irritate her he took his feet in their dirty tube socks and attempt to push her off the sofa.

"Get your smelly feet off of me." She spit at him.

"Make me."

"Randy, you are such a jerk."

"You can't make me." He opened his mouth and let out a big horselaugh.

"I don't have to." She stood up. In a pair of shorts that had seen one two many summers and a pair of long woolly knee socks, she skated her way into the kitchen.

"What ya reading?" Cindy asked her mother.

"C. S. Lewis."

"Beg pardon?"

"C. S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters, you should read this."

"That will be a cold day in...."

"Exactly, her mother interrupted her.

Cindy laughed as she poured for herself a full glass of milk and tried to then stir in a heavy spoonful of chocolate.

"Mom, what do you make of all of this?" Cindy dragged a chair from the table and sat down balancing back on two chair legs.

"Oh Cindy," her mother looked up and removed her reading glasses, "I make a mess of it, one big mess. Something has gone wrong. That's what it feels like." It was an even more serious of an answer than Cindy had been expecting. She couldn't make her standard 'wise crack' reply to

this.

"Me too, mom." she faltered. "Something feels wrong to me too."

"Well, murder is always a crazy thing." Mrs. Basset solemnly shook her head back and forth.

"But you always say those who have died are with God."

"Hmmm, Erna Basset drew her focus to a single point on the kitchen table before answering. "That's true. Christians, that is, but it is what is killing them that's what's wrong, unnatural even."

"Probably some crazy."

"That's an over simplification," Erna snorted, "What ever it is, it is pure evil."

"I know, mom, I just hate even thinking about it. "

"I know, baby." Changing the subject Erna asked, "Did you drop that cake off over at the Humphries like I asked?"

"Uh huh, about an hour ago."

Erna looked up and smiled sweetly at her daughter. And then, "Oh I almost forgot to tell you, Emma called."

"I'll go call her back right now." Cindy slid up on her knees in her chair and reached up to grab the kitchen wall phone. She punched out the number from memory.

"Yes, may I speak to Emma?" She paused listening a sour expression on her face. "Cindy, tell her its Cindy, gaaah." She rolled her eyes and mouthed to her mother, "Barbara Lee." In a minute her face lit up as she heard the familiar voice on the other end of the line.

"Hi, watcha doing? You don't sound too hot." Erna noticed her child frown as she listened to Emma's response. "I'm sorry, but you called me." The frown turned to stupefaction. "You didn't?" Cindy looked at her mother, questioning with her eyes.

As Cindy slowly hung up the phone Erna said, "It sounded like Emma, and I feel sure that's who they said they were." Now Erna was puzzled.

Cindy's call had roused Emma from her fitful sleep. Now she felt piqued and sour. The outline from her bedspread had left its pattern on the side of her face. In the overly lighted kitchen Emma rubbed her eyes. "Got to wake up," she told herself. Lethargy had overtaken her. She would go silently to her fate. Emma drug herself into the hall bathroom.

In there the harsh fluorescent light accented her swollen eyes. "I look like a Swedish Eskimo," she told her reflection. After turning on and adjusting the shower, steam billowed into the chilly bathroom. Like a zombie Emma slowly removed her clothes, selected a fluffy towel and

climbed into the biting spray.

The effect was immediately wonderful. Slowly she rotated under the heavy shower water letting it pelt every inch of her body. Her face upturned under the direct flow, opened her mouth and let the water pour inside. "Ummm, I wish I could stay here for ever," she thought. The heat from the shower burned her skin and made it tingle sweetly. She covered her body with a thick lather of soap and with a coarse sponge began to scrub herself.

"Life can't be so bad," she told herself, "they must have showers in reform schools. All I have to do is to learn to enjoy the simple pleasures of life." She heard herself giggle as she shook her long hair back and forth. "So, I may never see Cindy or Bill again..." she drifted back toward gloom. It was hard to over come such a stiff possibility. "No, I will see them again. We are all still alive. One of these days I will be my own boss. Then I can go anywhere and see anyone I want to see. It won't matter what other people say any more." This stream of thought cheered her again and she bowed beneath the spray of water to let it cascade down her back.

The coolness of the bathroom outside of the shower made Emma shiver. She brusquely rubbed herself down and wrapped the towel snugly around herself. For some reason it reminded her of the blanket in her dream.

She had to wipe off a circle in the mirror in order to see her reflection. "Might as well do a whole beauty treatment while I am in here," she told herself.

Starting with her hair she carefully combed out the tangles. Once her hair was smooth she pulled the stray hairs from her comb and searched for a trashcan in which to throw them, but when she saw none she tossed the loose hairs in to the open toilet. Then she stole a few of Barbara Lee's cotton balls to apply an astringent to her face. This little act of larceny really pleased her.

With more energy than she had felt all day Emma threw a short terry cloth robe on and stepped outside the bathroom. She walked straight into her aunt's bedroom and turned the small clock radio to her favorite station. Then she danced back into the bathroom.

A bottle of pink nail polish caught her eye. "That's what I need," she said snatching the bottle. She took out her aunt's manicure set made her way back to her aunt's dressing table. Humming she carefully clipped her nails.

"Who said you could use my mother's radio?" the voice burned into her like acid. She froze in her seat and willed her cousin to go away.

"I asked you a question." Barbara Lee said from the doorway.

"No one," Emma answered meekly.

"Then don't," Barbara Lee snapped. She remained in the doorway glaring at Emma. The moment dragged on forever. "Please go away," Emma's inner voice screamed. Finally after Emma had flipped off the radio, Barbara Lee slinked back down the hall.

Emma hurried to finish and get back to her own room. She looked down at her nail parings wondering what do to with them. With them and the manicure set she raced back into the bathroom and threw the nail clippings into the toilet. It was at that moment that the bizarre dream from the night before came back to her in full force. "They must share water and you must want it to happen..." the words rang in her mind. "Man, I am losing it," she told the voice. She almost laughed at loud as she stared down into the blue toilet water. Strands of her hair floated on top while her nail sunk to the bottom.

"Great Em, what are you suppose to do, flush her?" she thought out loud. "Good bye cruel world," she remembered a tacky comic figurine her father had once purchased in a roadside park in Tennessee. As she stood there breathing in the cool air that smelled of soap and talcum powder she felt an electric clarity, 'and spittle', that is what else the old woman had said. Without allowing herself the luxury of debate she spit into the toilet. With a nervous giggle she said, "Oh and I do wish Barbara Lee would drop dead."

"This is silly," she told herself as she flushed the tank and walked from the room.

Chapter 19

By late afternoon Lacey was in the front seat of Harvey's cruiser headed for home. "I think we've got all the photos, maps and prints we need, but you won't mind if we come out a few more times and look around will ya?" Harvey was saying.

"No." Lacey was apprehensive about returning to his home. This once safe haven now seemed like a hideous trap, awaiting him.

"And for the last time, there was no one you were expecting at your house last night? No suspicious characters hanging about?"

"No, no one." But then Lacey realized that he had not even been aware of Red's surveillance of him.

"I am going to have to ask you not to leave the area and to be available for further questioning."

"That's fine."

"Lacey, I know this has shaken you up, but try to keep your wits about you. Just keep your doors and windows locked and don't let any strangers in. And remember the killer has not struck the same place twice. Okay?"

This news did little to dispel Lacey's fears. "It could have been me," he kept telling himself.

As they turned onto his dirt road the hairs on his arm stiffened. "You can't be doing this," he told himself, "You are going home. You've been safe in this house for thirty-five years. You'll be safe now." But still his heart raced.

Harvey had lapsed into silence on the last leg of the trip and Lacey wished he could think of some reason to ask the Marshall to stay for a while once they got to the house. But as soon as his house came into sight Lacey realized that there was no avoiding the inevitable. Sooner or later he would be alone in his own home. He thanked Harvey for the ride and listened to the repeated warnings. Then he gave in and made his way home.

"Oh shit," he expelled his breath once inside the front door. In the living room he went from switch to switch throwing on every light. The room remained dead still as if like Lacey it was waiting for something to happen. Lacey turned on the television and then quickly flipped it off again, realizing that the noise from it would drown out all sounds from the rest of the house.

Determinedly, Lacey made his way from room to room turning on all

lights as he went. Methodically he looked in all closets, under beds, and then checked all the windows making sure each and every one was locked.

Once this task had been completed another dark dread struck him. There was no alcohol in the house. Would he ever be able to get some sleep? Even though his car had been searched and returned home earlier that day, he could not find the courage to go outside, get in the car and drive to town for beer. He could not remember the last time he had fallen to sleep without consuming at least three beers first.

With blind hope he made his way back through the now well lit house hoping to find some forgotten cans in the refrigerator, but no such luck. He paced the ugly linoleum floor scavenging through his mind about a solution to this dilemma. Eventually he realized his need for booze and sleep was overcoming his undefined fear. "Hell I am feeling scared just cause I got me a case of the shakes," he told himself. There ain't nothing I got to be scared of."

Without loosing a step, Lacey made his way the hall closet and grabbed his shot gun. In a quick and accurate movement he broke open the barrel and loaded it with buckshot. With a click he closed it and swung it over his shoulder. "No sir, I ain't got nothing to be scared of." He marched from his house into the night.

Back in the middle room of Lacey's house a breeze stirred. The dust ruffle that covered the bottom of the antique bed fluttered out. A wet bony hand slid out briefly to test the floor. Lying on her stomach, face turned to one side, Viola heard Lacey leave the house.

Just before dusk Liz called home to say that she would be late getting back to the house. Roy had gone to Yazoo with a group of men to go through books of mug shots to see if anyone looked familiar. In the Bluff strangers never went unnoticed. One didn't go through the Bluff to get to anywhere else. It was where the road ended. And other than those who lived there, there was little reason for anyone to visit the Bluff. But since there were no leads going to look at picture books in Yazoo seemed better than doing nothing. All of this Liz explained to Barbara Lee over the phone before adding that she would be staying at the Humphries house until Roy got back.

"That's fine, mamma," Barbara Lee said coldly. She was ready to get off the phone. "Of course we'll be fine."

It was then decided that Barbara Lee would call Beth Riggins over in Rolling Fork and see if Beth could come and pick up Barbara Lee for their trip back to school. Barbara Lee was certain that she could push her mousy sorority sister into doing this. In fact she would even get her to stop by the Humphries so Barbara Lee could get some money from her mother. Maybe she would tell her mother about Emma then. She could hardly bear the thought of letting her cousin off the hook for a whole week.

The conversation ended with Liz begging Barbara Lee to double-check the windows and doors and to not allow any strangers in the house. All of this was lost on Barbara Lee who was more bored and inconvenienced by the murders than anything else. She hung up the phone and dialed Beth's number.

In a saccharine voice she laid it on, "Oh Beth, it would be wonderful of you to come so out of your way to pick me up. You know I have always hoped we could commute together more often."

Roy Wilson sat cramped in a small over heated file room in the police station in Yazoo City. Lou Hutchins and Raymond Penn leafed slowly though volumes of mug shots along with him. The men were amazed at the sheer quantity of pictures.

"These must go back to the 1950's." Lou Hutchins griped.

"All these black faces look alike to me," Raymond Penn complained.

Roy also found the task tedious but he just didn't say anything. He didn't know what he was suppose to be looking for, just a familiar face? He felt the pressure that was growing in the Bluff about catching the killer, but this seemed a waste of time. He was getting tired of listening to his companions complain.

He had talked to Liz an hour earlier and she had been encouraging and supportive. Give that Liz a disaster and she could always rise to the occasion, Roy thought. "She should have been a nurse," such thoughts often entered his mind during these times. He was and had always been extremely proud of her. He loved the way she was so open and willing to help people in the community. He knew that some folks only saw her as gossipy and even thoughtless, but he saw her soft caring warmth beneath her loud mouth austerity. He wished he were home with her right then. Even after years of marriage, when he was distraught he took comfort from holding her close.

"This could be him." Lou pointed to a bearded man with bulging eyes.

"Where did you ever see that fellow?" Raymond asked.

"I don't know. He just looks sort of familiar, that's all."

"He looks like everyone else to me."

"Yeah." Lou took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I am ready to go home and have supper."

"Me too." Raymond agreed.

"Did we get through all of em?" Roy asked.

"Another day." Lou stood up.

"Another dollar." Raymond added mindlessly.

"Well I would rather get my part over," Roy said, "I might just take a break and stretch my legs and then see if I can't at least get through this stack."

"Yeah, you do that. We're leaving." Lou told him.

With grunted good byes the two men left.

Roy got up and walked down the hall. He decided he would call home to check on the girls. A policewoman in a starchy blue uniform directed him to a phone on an unused desk. Roy placed the call collect.

"Daddy, where are you?" Barbara wanted to know right off.

"In Yazoo City, baby. Did you talk to mama?"

"Yes sir. She called a while back."

"How are you going to get back to school?" he asked. He had almost forgotten it was Sunday night.

"Oh Beth Riggins was nice enough to offer to come and get me."

"That was awful nice of her. You be sure to offer to pay her for her gas." he instructed her.

"Yes sir." Her father was the one person in the world that Barbara Lee truly respected.

"Honey, I am sorry that I didn't get to see you much this weekend. I'll make it up to you."

"That's all right, Dad."

"How's Emma?"

"She's fine." Barbara Lee's tone went icy.

"Well you two watch out for each other. You are my best girls."

Barbara Lee winced as she heard this. "Don't worry, Dad. I am watching out for Emma."

"Barbara Lee."

"Yes sir?"

"I love you, you know that?"

"Yes sir," she was all smiles at that moment. A touch of something close to real warmth brought tears to her eyes. "See ya soon, Daddy."

It was close to eight o'clock before Beth Riggins showed up at the Wilson's. The poor girl had taken a wrong turn and gone for miles out of

her way. She was still angry with herself for letting that pushy Barbara Lee bully her into a ride. "If she weren't such a snob, I know she could have ridden back with Jimmy Richardson. He does live right her in the Bluff." Beth told herself. "She just doesn't like to be seen riding in an old beat up truck."

When she got to the house Beth was further distressed to find that Barbara Lee was not even finished with her packing. She even asked Beth to help.

"Just fold these sweaters and put them in here." Barbara Lee threw a small canvas bag on to the bed. "You know it is going to be turning real cold soon." She ignored Beth's peeved expression.

It turned out to be more than thirty minutes before Barbara Lee was all primped to go.

"Barbara Lee, it is only going to be you and I in the car. You don't need to put on all that make up." Beth finally complained.

"Oh Bethy, you are such a doof. You never know when you may be seen." Barbara Lee smiled with her bright red lips.

Barbara Lee was irritated when they got out to the car and she found that the back seat was already piled high with Beth's stuff.

"Where did you expect me to put my things?" she demanded to know.

"I think there is some room in the trunk" Beth offered.

After ten minutes of pushing and cramming they finally managed to get Barbara Lee's mountain of luggage fitted in the trunk.

"Now, if we can just stop by the Humphries so I can get some money from my mother." Barbara Lee said as she slammed the passenger door closed.

"Well, if we must." Beth was blinking in rage at this.

"We must." Barbara Lee answered brightly.

The trip to the Humphries was spent in silence. Beth was too mad to speak and Barbara Lee was too caught up in her own spiteful plans to care.

When they got there Beth followed Barbara Lee inside. Even so late the living room was lined with well meaning friends of the family. None of the Humphries were actually in sight. Presumably they were closeted away in their grief or just already gone to bed. Beth was impressed by the large turnout of respect. Women were in the kitchen clearing away dishes and a few well-dressed couples were shaking hands and saying their good byes.

"Barbara Lee," Liz spoke to her daughter across a filled room. "What

are you doing here honey?"

Well I wanted to come by and at least pay my respects too," she said clearly and then in a smaller voice, "plus I need a little cash for next week."

"Oh honey, I entirely forgot about that." Liz jostled away looking for her purse. When she re-entered the room a moment later she carried with her a small wad of bills. With out counting them she slipped them into her daughter's shoulder bag.

"This should do. I'll put more in your account next week."

Barbara Lee, not bothering to even introduce Beth, was trying to convey to her mother a 'I need to talk to you' look.

"Is something the matter?" Liz asked obtusely.

"Ah, well I was just hoping we could have a little time to talk over that 'problem' I mentioned this morning." Barbara Lee said meaningfully.

"Honey, I am sorry about that, but right now is just not a good time. I promised I would help find a place for the out of town relatives to stay and...." She held up her hands as if to say, 'there is just so much to do'.

"Mamma," Barbara Lee whined.

"Can it wait?" Liz implored.

"Yes, it can wait." Barbara Lee finally gave up.

"Great. Call me next week darling. I'm sorry. It's just that..."

"Never mind." She bent to offer her mother her cheek to kiss.

"Thanks for understanding." She held her girl's face in her hand. "Have a good week at school."

"Yes ma'am." Barbara Lee sighed in exasperation. Still ignoring Beth she walked out the front door.

When the two schoolmates were back in the car, Barbara Lee adjusted her seat and lay back to nap.

"You could help me stay awake." Beth suggested. "I am not used to getting this late of a start."

"Oh you'll be just fine." Barbara Lee smiled smugly and stretched further back into her seat.

Beth found herself livid all over again. She could not believe how blatantly Barbara Lee had taken advantage of her. She would have been back at school hours ago if she had not allowed herself to be talked into giving Barbara Lee a ride. To top it off she and Barbara Lee had never been close friends. In fact on campus Barbara often ignored her at best and ridiculed her when they did communicate. "It's your own fault." Beth told herself. "You should know better than to let assholes boss you

around."

She grasped the steering wheel even tighter and peered into the highway before her. At first she ignored the light choking sound coming from Barbara Lee. But then the cough became a yelp and Barbara Lee jerked forward in her seat, her arms and legs thrashing.

Beth turned and what she saw froze the blood in her veins. Her foot automatically slammed on the brakes. From the back seat two hands extended and were placed tightly around Barbara Lee's throat. The hands were dark and claw like. Pieces of bone protruded where the fingertips should have been. The hands had a dead lock grip on the hysterical Barbara Lee.

Slowly Beth turned and saw the face that had arisen from a pile in the back seat. The sight of it brought a dry scream to her lips. The face was rotted and moldy. Beth looked back at Barbara Lee's bulging eyes and protruding tongue. She could see blood running down Barbara Lee's face from where she had bit through her own tongue.

Leaving the car running and headlights on high, Beth bounded out her door. Scared beyond rationality she raced for the side of the road. She immediately slipped on the edge and landed on her elbows in the wet grass in the ditch. She could hear wild thrashing coming from her car. The passenger door burst open and Beth could see the creature from the back seat pulling Barbara Lee from the car. Beth laid face down in the ditch and screamed into her hands.

The sounds she heard coming from the road way were inhuman. In her peripheral vision she saw something fly through the air and hit the grass in front of her. It was red and slimy like raw meat. Beth bit into her palm in terror. Then a louder thud hit the ditch. She turned slightly to see a large round object tumble down the embankment. She blinked twice and recognized the bright red lipstick. It was Barbara Lee's head. Beth lost consciousness.

Chapter 20

The police officer who took the call on his radio late that night forced the caller to repeat his story twice. The caller had been headed down route 28, ultimately destined for Louisiana. He had come across a car stopped in the middle of the road. The car was still running and the headlights were on and both front doors were wide open. He got out to see if there was a problem and if he could help, but the car was empty of driver or passengers. It was when he walked around to investigate the passenger side that he had literally stumbled over the body. "I tell you, it was a woman, but she didn't have no head."

Finally the dispatcher radioed the highway patrol and asked the man on to please remain at the scene. He then called for an ambulance. Once the essentials were out of the way, he pushed back his chair and picked up the phone again.

"Kenny," he said running a hand down his face," Can you get me Harvey Johnson right away?"

Some twenty minutes later Harvey along with Kenneth Lender were headed, lights flashing, full speed up route 28. When they arrived the ambulance was already parked on the side of the road and two patrol cars blocked off a section of the highway. A man in dress slacks and a crisp white shirt huddled over the hood of a cruiser with a man Harvey assumed to be the caller who had discovered the body. Harvey walked straight up to them.

"Who found her?" he demanded.

"I did." Harvey noted the man's thin face and pallor.

"What time was that?"

"I don't know, about an hour ago, maybe less" His hands shook as he spoke.

"Have you recovered the head?" Harvey turned and asked one of the patrolmen.

"No sir, just got back ups here to start combing the area now."

Harvey could see plain clothed men walking up and down both sides of the highway. He left the other man to finish the questioning and walked over to the ambulance.

The dark red pool at the end of the sheet warned him of the grisly sight beneath. He took a deep breath and pulled the sheet back. The gaping hole where the head should have been attached appeared to be

stretched wider than normal.

"Looks like whoever did this forced some foreign object down into the body cavity after removing the head." the ambulance attendant stated. Another attendant stood bent double on the side of the road, puking into the grass. Even after having viewed Red's body one day earlier, Harvey still felt a wash of nausea himself. He jerked the sheet back over the remains.

"Oh my God," the heaving attendant croaked. Harvey turned toward him. The man was bent over something in the ditch.

"Oh my God," he repeated, "I found it. And there's another one."

Harvey now joined by Kenny Lender, both head towards the ditch. There near the attendant they could see the pale face and flowing hair. Three feet away lay the prone body of another woman face down in the grass. Her head appeared to still be attached.

"Bobby, get someone over here to get this." Harvey yelled at one of the police officers. He took a few steps closer to the body and bent slightly down to examine it. He cautiously reached down to touch the woman. The body was still warm and then it shuddered beneath his touch. Careful to not move her for fear of internal injuries, Harvey dropped to his knees beside the girl and pushed the grass away from her face. Saucers of red eyes gazed up at him in fear.

"Get a stretcher over her! This one's alive, but it looks like she's in shock."

The phone rang at the Wilson's at three a.m. Monday morning. Roy and Liz having arrived home late the night before were sleeping soundly when the sound of the phone awoke them.

Roy glanced at the clock on the nightstand and knew that a call at this hour would probably not be good news. He ran into the kitchen to catch the phone hoping that Liz would not awaken.

"Hello." He cleared his throat.

"Is this the Roy Wilson residence?" an official voice asked.

"Yes sir, it is." Roy was frozen in place listening.

"Mr. Wilson, this is the Mississippi State Highway Patrol. I am afraid I have some bad news."

Roy felt the blood rush from his face. "What is it?" He had to strain to find his voice.

"Your daughter, Barbara Lee Wilson, has been involved in an accident. If you could..."

"Is she dead?" Roy cut the man off.

"Yes sir, I am afraid she is." There was no easier way to answer. "Do you have transportation to get to Yazoo City? Or should we send a car for you?"

"No." Roy answered. The word sounded like a denial.

"Mr. Wilson, do you need someone to come assist you?"

"Where is she?" A touch of panic was creeping into his voice.

"At Bardens and Lomands in Yazoo City." Roy recognized the name of the cities largest funeral home. "We need you for positive identification."

"Positive identification." Roy parroted the words.

"Yes sir, Mr. Wilson, perhaps you should wait and let me send a patrol car for you."

"Yes, we'll wait." He hung up the receiver without saying another word.

A black wave of grief shook his body. He had to grab the back of a chair to maintain his balance. "Oh Jesus, Oh God," he muttered. Then the sobs erupted dragging him down to his knees on the cold kitchen floor.

"Roy? Roy? What is it?" Liz whispered hoarsely from the doorway. When he didn't answer she shouted, "Roy?" There was something wrong a voice inside tried to tell her. She had never seen her husband in this sort of state before. She was afraid he was having a seizure or a heart attack or something.

"Roy?" she dropped to the floor and threw her arms around him. She could feel him convulsing in some sort of fit. "Roy, what is it?" she cried.

He turned and for a brief minute he stared into her eyes. The pain Liz saw there jolted her.

"Barbara Lee." He stuttered.

"Dear God no!" Liz screamed because in that instant she knew. She broke down. Her heavy body fell against him and she slid down further on the floor. She grasped handfuls of her own hair and pulled savagely.

It was this scene Emma beheld as she stepped into the kitchen. She stopped dead still, afraid to move. Roy spotted her and held out his arms to her. "Emma." he said between sobs.

She ran across the room to him and he embraced her in a crushing hug. Together they reached for Liz. Emma's mind raced. She could not imagine what had happened here. Liz grabbed at her like a drowning child. She stroked Emma's hair, crooning out soft sobs.

"Aunt Liz?" Emma finally asked softly.

"Oh Emma, my baby, my baby's dead." Raspy wails filled the air.

A knife of pain slammed into Emma's stomach. "No." she denied. "No," she pulled away and ran as fast as she could.

Sometime during that dreadful night the specifics, as they were deciphered, were related to the Wilsons. It was worse than their worst nightmare. Hell had come for a visit.

Roy fumbled a bit with disbelief, hoping against hope for some kind of error, but once he actually saw the remains, a sight that would become tattooed on the back of his eye lids for the rest of his life, he fell deep into a guilty despair. Liz never recovered enough from the initial shock to even grasp what all was being said to her. Her doctor was summoned soon after they arrived in Yazoo City and Liz was mercifully sedated into a dreamless sleep. All through this Emma stood rigid and mute outside the circle of whispered communications.

When Harvey Johnson finally arrived at the police station, he had been delayed at the hospital where the other victim now lay, he immediately took Roy aside. In the harshly lighted 'police lounge' with its out-dated snack and coffee machines, Roy sat across from Harvey at a yellow Formica table.

"Roy, I have just left King's Daughter Hospital. Do you know a young woman by the name of Beth Riggins?"

"Yes sir. She was a classmate of my daughter. Beth was driving the two of them back to school." His words came out devoid of any feelings.

"It seems that Beth Riggins may have well witnessed your daughter's murder." He tried to use the word 'murder' delicately. "I have been at the hospital these last few hours with her and her family. Beth is still in shock. She hasn't spoken to anyone at all yet, just cries and rocks back and forth. I was in the room when her parents first came in. That was the only time she said any words." Harvey stopped and ran his tongue across his tobacco stained teeth remembering the emotional scene that had occurred. "She started screaming as soon as she saw them. She was screaming 'leave her alone'."

"She saw it then." Roy stated.

"Yes sir, she did." Harvey spoke softly. "And when she is out of shock and coherent we will know who this killer is." These words he spoke with conviction as if they were scripture. "I am so very sorry about Barbara Lee, but this madman will be caught."

Roy rose slowly from his seat, his head tucked and nodding. "I see." There was nothing left to say.

By the time the three of them returned home there were already a house full of people waiting to comfort them. Roy had called his first cousin, Artis Smithhead, while they were still in Yazoo City and had told her of the tragedy. She had driven over from her home in Satartia and let herself in with the key Roy had given her long ago. In southern tradition she set about making their home more 'comfortable' for their return.

Pastor Long from the First Baptist Church had arrived soon after Artis and then Patrice Penn showed up with a casserole in tow. In the close delta community the news of the latest death buzzed through the telephone wires quickly.

As soon as the Wilsons walked into the house Patrice took Liz from her husband's arm and hugged her dear friend closely. Sobs like fresh wounds broke from Liz and she hung in Patrice's embrace. The Presbyterian minister, Reverend Kirk walked firmly up to Roy and took his hand to whisper condolences into Roy's ear. Artis sprung from the kitchen and threw herself into her cousin's arms. "I am so sorry, Roy. Our baby girl is with the Lord."

"Yes she is." Reverend Kirk solemnly agreed.

No one noticed Emma still in the doorway. She was thankful for this. Quietly, head bowed, she slipped across the room into the hallway. She hit the stairs and raced for her room. Once inside she closed the door and leaned against it. Her hand pressed flat against the smooth aged wooden door and her face against her hand, she finally let herself cry.

By afternoon no one had yet come up to her room. She could hear as more people arrived and some left. Their voices hummed from the rooms below her. Plates clanked in the kitchen as more ladies showed up to help out. She was certain that her aunt Liz had returned to her drug induced sleep safe in her own bed now. While Liz slept her friends scurried about her house playing surrogate hostess in her absence.

Emma winced remembering the same activities in her childhood home after her mother's death. What a contrast that had been to the dark empty home to which she had returned after her father's suicide. Suicides cut the cords of good manners. Today she felt unworthy of sharing the comfort that reached out from those good souls who came to console.

She was guilty and she knew it. "I wished her dead." This thought echoed through her head. She could not bear to be inside her own mind. "I

am vile! I am wicked," she accused herself.

"No, she tricked me." Some voice inside still battled for her sanity. "She tricked me in that dream. I would never have thought of that," she argued. "But you did," a clanging voice rang in her ears. "No, it wasn't me." All these thoughts chased each other around and around in her head. "Pop goes the weasel," She sang out close to breaking. "No more!" she yelled out. Her hands flew to her head and grasped her temples.

Then calmly she crawled from her bed. On rigid legs she went to her dresser. Opening the top drawer she rifled through the contents until she found the smudged envelope. Sitting at the dresser she took out the letter tucked inside. The words, long ignored, sprang out at her. "I've got to write to Adie Grace. I have got to write to her and ask her about her mamma." Unfolding the letter and placing it gently on the dresser she grabbed a composition book from her school bag. After finding a pen she began.

Erna Basset came in to check on her daughter. She had let Cindy stay home from school that Monday after they had heard about Barbara Lee. Now she asked Cindy if she was ready to go over to the Wilson's so that they might pay their respects.

"I guess so mamma. Should I call Emma first?"

"No dear. I am sure lots of people have already been by there. We'll just stop by and see if Emma feels like some company. You can stay there with her if she needs you."

"I just feel so bad for them."

"Just remember though, Emma may want to be alone."

"I know that." It was clear that Cindy did not appreciate being told the obvious. "Mamma, are they sure it was the same killer that murdered the others?"

"Looks like it."

"Was she as bad cut up as the others?" She grimaced.

"I think so, Cindy, but really that doesn't matter now. She's in Jesus' arms. But this thing has really gone too far. None of us are safe any more." Cindy had never heard this tone in her mother's voice before. It was fear and distress.

"Oh mamma." Cindy extended her arms and encircled her mother's waist. "Well, we all just got to start watching out for each other better, that's all." But even to her, her words just sounded like whistling past the graveyard.

Emma had stopped and restarted the letter countless times. She just

could not get out the words she wanted to say. Now she sat with half a letter on her lap. Once again she read through what she had written.

Dear Ms. Grace,

I know it must come as a shock to you, me writing this letter and all, because you don't know me and I don't know you. But I have thought and thought and I don't know who else to turn to. I don't mean to alarm you or anything, but I have dreams about your departed mother. To my knowledge I never met her while she was alive, but since her death I have dreamed of her, once so vividly I thought I was actually awake and talking to her. (Emma had decided to not try and explain the first meeting she had with Viola Grace, because she herself could not even believe it.) In one dream she told me about a letter she had from you that she had never been able to read. Her eyesight had gone on her. She even told me where to find it. With a friend I went to her house and found the letter. I am sorry for having taken the letter without permission, but I was very curious. I, of course did not understand all of the letter because it was private and not meant for me. Please Ms. Grace, lots of strange things are going on around here. Anything that you could write and tell to me about your mamma might better help me to understand my dreams and maybe even some of the other things that are happening.

Emma had stopped the letter at this point every time. She had no idea of how to approach the subject of the murders or her own part in Barbara Lee's death. "It sounds nerdy and she'll probably think I am just insane," Emma concluded. So without adding any more she signed her name and address and stuffed the dissatisfying letter into an envelope. "This will just have to do."

As soon as Beth Riggins started to talk Harvey was summoned back to the hospital.

"She's very quiet and still shaky, almost child like, but she's lucid." The doctor was explaining as they made their way down the corridor. Patches of light from the overhead fixtures formed pools of light on the dark green floor. The hospital was chilly and quiet.

"Where are Mr. and Mrs. Riggins?"

"In the visitors lounge. They requested that I call you right away."

"Then perhaps I should speak with them first?" Harvey put this as a

question. He did not want any misunderstanding should the daughter become upset during the questioning.

"No, I think you should go on and speak with her now." The doctor peered tight lipped at the marshal.

"I see," Harvey replied reading the urgency in the doctor's face.

The shades were drawn in the hospital room. Beth sat up, rigid in her bed. A wadded pillow supported her back. She watched detached as Harvey approached the side of her bed.

"How are you feeling Beth?" He eased himself into the chair facing her bed.

"I'm fine," she said mechanically.

"I am Marshal Harvey Johnson. I am in charge of the investigation."

"Yes." The word only indicated that she understood.

"Beth, can you talk about last night?" He watched her closely.

"Yes, I can," came her monotone answer. She had been waiting to say these words.

"Well then, why don't you as best as you can, recount the events of last night from the time you picked up Barbara Lee until you were brought here." She coughed lightly and began her story.

He sat back listening, wishing he could take notes, but he was afraid to take his eyes off of her. It was the most incredible tale he had ever heard.

Two hours later Beth had not altered her account in the least.

"Now Beth, I know this is difficult for you, but don't you think that what you saw was a disguise, a mask, maybe even a stocking pulled over some man's head?"

"No." She shook her head steadily.

Harvey sighed loudly and ran his hand through his hair. "So," he started once again slowly, "You are telling me that Barbara Lee was murdered by a zombie, a corpse?"

"I don't know what you would call it," she said stubbornly.

He had to admire her courage in sticking to her story. She certainly seemed to believe this tale herself. "I am going nuts," he thought.

"Have you told anyone else this?"

"Yes, Dr. Caldwell, I told him." That explained the doctor's earlier demeanor.

"Beth, it is important that you not tell anyone else what you have told me." He stopped to make sure that she had understood this. "We don't want to start a panic, people out shooting at shadows. The proper authorities must handle this. We will find this," he faltered, "er, person. Will you do this for me? Will you not speak to anyone else about what you think you saw?"

"But what about my parents?" For the first time since they had begun talking tears brimmed her eyes.

"Your parents will be safe. There is no reason to worry them with this at this time."

"Okay," she agreed, "I won't say anything." She stopped and grabbed his hand, "But Mr. Johnson, please don't let this happen to anyone else."

When she heard the knock at her bedroom door, Emma looked up at it with disappointment. "Great, someone coming to check on me," she muttered.

"Em?" Cindy's voice was a welcome sound from the other side of the door.

"Cindy!" Emma flew to the door and let her friend in. She threw her arms around the redhead and tears that she thought were all wrung out of her flowed anew.

"Emma, are you okay?"

"Uh huh." Her chin dug into Cindy's shoulder as she tried to stop the tears.

"Emma, I am so sorry." She took Emma by the shoulders and pushed her back so that she could get a good look at her.

"It's okay." A nervous laughter bubbled through her tears. "I am just so glad that you are here."

"I could have come sooner. You should have called me."

"No, it's okay." She straightened her friend's collar. "Now is perfect. Now is when I need to talk to you."

"Okay," Cindy said slowly clearly a bit bewildered.

"It's really a long story Cin, but I think I killed Barbara Lee."

Chapter 21

Bill Simmons had not been listening to a word of the lecture. His mind was mulling over all that he had been hearing that day. Barbara Lee Wilson had been murdered just like all the others. This time there had been little delay after the previous murder of Sheriff Red. The town had been given no time to settle it's jagged nerves. In two days time two brutal murders. It just happened to be to Bill's fortune that one of them had been Barbara Lee.

He had been itching all day to give Emma a call. Even more so he wanted to rush over to her house and be the one to comfort and console her. "But what if Barbara had already told the Wilsons about catching the two of them together?" he kept asking himself.

The teacher had sat down and his fellow students were stirring around him. "Must be about time for the bell," he realized. Joy leaned across the aisle and placed a light hand on his thigh.

"What cha thinking, lover?" He could smell her familiar shampoo as she leaned toward him.

"Nothing." He tried to smile at her, but found that he couldn't.

"You've been acting strange all day."

"It's nothing, Joy. I am just in a quiet mood." The bell rang and the students bounded from their desks. School was over for the day.

"Want to go straight home or shall we ride into Rolling Fork. You said there was a CD..."

"Joy, would you mind too terribly catching a ride with Jeff today?"

She looked as if she had been slapped. "Why?"

"I don't feel well, stomach flu or something. I need to go straight home." Now his stomach did hurt and he felt sweaty all over.

"Oh," her face softened in concern, "Poor baby, wouldn't you rather have me take care of you?" She felt his forehead.

"No, no." He stepped back from her. "Please Joy, I 'v got to go. Please understand." Without waiting for an answer he took off down the hallway away from her.

The funeral seemed like a blur. The week seemed like a blur. Her whole life seemed like a blur. Once the intense guilt and grasping sickness had left Emma, she found herself feeling lost and empty.

Cindy had listened to her story, her head never turning on the stem of her neck, riveted to what she was hearing. Emma had talked and talked. She could no longer remember what all she had said. Did she really speak of monsters and ghosts and evil?

Had she made it clear to Cindy why she felt to blame for Barbara Lee's death? She just could no longer remember. Cindy had remained so silent, Emma wondered if her friend was in shock. Maybe Cindy was scared; maybe her heart was breaking over the obvious fact that her best friend had gone hopelessly insane. But Emma did remember Cindy coming to her after all the words had ceased and pulling her close and whispering into her hair "It will be all right, it will be all right." She had let Cindy hold her then, two near grown girls, wrapped in each other's arms, stretched across Emma's bed.

Emma had no way of knowing that Bill sat in his car just down the road from her house. He had been there for over an hour, fighting with himself about continuing down that road to see her. He felt slightly uncomfortable as cars passed him, staring to see who he was on this dead end road. They for their part were clearly guests going to see the bereaved Wilsons. His own fears and anxieties immobilized him.

"Oh geez, I have got to see her," he told himself. "But maybe this is not the right time and place for her," he argued back. He could not understand his own obsession. Why did he not just turn around and go. There would be time to see Emma later. But every time he reached for the ignition to crank the car and leave a gut level heat seared through him. He was angry at himself for what he was plainly getting to see as a weakness on his part.

It was almost dark before he was able to crank his car and resolve to leave. He had just sat there shaking his head back and forth frantically trying to clear his thoughts. As he made his way back up the road he hit his brakes once sharply. He thought he saw a dark figure emerging from the trees on the opposite side of the road from him. But in one quick blink he realized he had been mistaken. There was no one and nothing there. The road was clear. Clenching the gearshift tightly he forced himself to drive home.

The funeral was a packed service. The compounded deaths of that Halloween weekend had the rural folks on pins and needles. The atmosphere in the small church was thick with sorrow and fear. Who knew who could be the next victim? Even though Barbara Lee had spent her short lifetime in The Bluff she had never had many close girlfriends there. Those who came to mourn her came mostly for her family and their own peace of mind.

There was the morbid relief that it could have been their daughters or even themselves. The enemy was unknown and the small tight knit community had taken to moving in swarms and looking cautiously at their own friends. Only the families that had lost someone were considered above suspect. The Wilsons were soaked in love and sympathy.

Elizabeth Wilson had become a shell of her former self. It was as if her troubled mind had freed her soul. She smiled sweetly at those ladies who stood close by and patted her hand. She would mouth back answers in their inane, her eyes barely even focusing on those about her. "She is taking this well," the ladies would whisper among themselves. But they secretly wondered when or if the old Liz would return to them.

Vera Humphries had encountered Liz at the funeral home just before the long procession to the church. She had flung herself into Liz's arms and had wept bitterly for them all. "We'll be okay, honey," she sniffed and held the older woman's' face in her hands, "God 's gonna watch out after us."

"I don't understand why He wasn't watching out after us before," Liz replied in vague innocence. This broke Vera into more sobs and she was lead from the funeral home by her eldest son.

Roy appeared the most normal. He actually stood among the mourners. He walked among his peers and friends voicing thanks for their support. More than one neighbor broke down at the sight of him. When this occurred it was Roy who would console the weeping funeral guest. Roy Wilson had accepted his daughter's death.

He had also accepted something else. He knew he would not, could not rest until this murderer had been caught and destroyed. And he knew that no matter what it took he would be the one to do this. The stubby delta man, who had once always carried a twinkle of mirth in his eyes had become an avenger. It was this thought that gave him his power to cope. This was why he could walk determinedly and speak encouragingly to those around him. He would be the avenger and he would be their savior.

Only Emma was saved from the majority of the crushing condolences. She was the latecomer in the community, the transplanted 'new' member of the Wilson family. She managed to hang near the back of the crowded funeral parlor. Few approached her as she paced a section of the dark carpet.

Cindy had come with her, but Cindy had spoken little on the way and had left Emma to her thoughts as soon as they reached the funeral. A few of Emma's classmates eyed her from across the room, but none come near. Her eyes must have warned them away. Only one person there kept a steady gaze on her.

Bill Simmons had arrived with his family and upon sighting Emma had moved close to her. He hadn't actually spoken to her nor had he tried to get too close, but she could feel his eyes watching her. Occasionally he would flicker his eyes toward another part of the room when she looked up at him, but more often than not he kept up the eye contact. He never flinched nor spoke. As the crowd began to make their way to their cars to form the funeral procession, Emma glanced up to find him at her elbow. A clear sign of pain marked his expression.

At that same moment Roy Wilson broke through the crowd to guide Emma and Liz to the funeral car. Just as she stepped away the words caught her ear. Bill had bent over ever so slightly to whisper to her. She jerked back to study his face. He had said, "Why did you do it?"

Emma was back in school the week following. Roy had gone back to the river sooner than that. Liz never returned to 'The Sewing Needle'. Her remorse had sat in her like a heavy stone for the rest of her existence. It was not that she was unbearably morose or even consistently sad, she just never was quite herself again. People who had never known her before would think nothing strange about her meek thin voice or her overly dainty ways. But those who had known her most of her life would miss her boisterousness way, her gawky cackle, and her booming greetings. All of what had once been thought of as her most obnoxious characteristics had vanished and there were many who found they missed these.

Patrice Pee was overheard saying to her, "You let old Mrs. Hardacre get away with talking uppity to you like that? I can't believe you didn't give her a tongue-lashing and set her in her place."

But these words were lost on Liz, who merely smiled demurely and made a light clucking sound with her teeth. "No reason to get upset, Patrice." No Liz would not be getting upset, nor hysterical: nor even gleeful ever again.

In a way it was if Liz had found religion, not that she wouldn't have argued with you before that she was a devout Christian. It was just that she would not longer argue at all. She immediately forgave everyone their trespasses now. She could be heard on her happier mornings in the kitchen singing in a listless voice, "I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided..."

Roy never mentioned his wife's changed behavior. Now she clung to him more and seemed more gentle in his embrace. Liz Wilson had become a model wife.

Emma was not fairing so well in the wake of Barbara Lee's death.

"He thinks I did it. He thinks I God Damn did it." She could hardly control her hysteria in the car on the way home from the funeral. "Oh God Cindy, maybe I did."

The first day back at school had been rough. Classmates were still avoiding her. She had kind of expected this, but when she did feel some one's gaze upon her, she would turn only to find Bill's cold stare. He seemed unconcerned with Joy's presence or her complaints for that matter. All day he kept a close watch on Emma. In his own mind he was still unsure why he felt such a compulsion.

"No, he doesn't think that," Cindy had repeated time after time as Emma began to go on again.

"He said so."

"You must have misunderstood him."

"Do you think so," Emma would say and around they would go again.

"Don't be stupid Emma, how could he possibly think something like that. It was in your dream. So, you performed some weird ritual in your bathroom by yourself. That means alone. And except for me, who happens to be your very best friend, there is no reason Bill or anyone else for that matter even knows about this. There is no reason anyone would have for blaming you."

"Except for Barbara Lee..." Em's voice was very soft.

"What the, you aren't making any sense."

"Barbara Lee would blame me."

"Fuck Barbara Lee," Cindy startled her own self with this outburst.

"Barbara Lee was not a nice person, Emma, and if she had lived she would have fed you to the dogs. She was determined to make her folks

hate you. You just feel guilt because she happened to die before she could do that. Understandably you had been feeling a lot of anger toward her just before her death. Emma, some guilt is reasonable, it's just that now you are blowing it all out of proportion, that's all."

Her friend's word rang out as true. "You are probably right, Cindy. All of this seems like it happened to someone else, not me. It is like I am trying to look through a smoky bottle."

"Of course, Emma, you don't expect to snap back from such a shocker of death so easily, do you?"

"Arghhh, Cindy," she hollered so loud and so suddenly that Cindy jumped in her seat. "I need to get stoned." The familiar old words and

tone sounded great after spending a week of brow beating.

"Well, why didn't you say so sooner?" Cindy laughed. She reached under her seat. "Why don't you roll, I'll drive."

The day Beth Riggins left the hospital in the company of her parents was the day that Harvey Johnson went to visit Lacey Caine. Harvey had pulled up in front of Lacey's house and was waiting when the mechanic got home from work. Swinging a six-pack, Lacey waved to the Marshall to come on in as he made a quick hop to the porch and searched his pocket for his key.

"How ya doing, Lacey?" Harvey hitched up his pants by his pant loops.

"Fine, and yourself?" Lacey swung the front door open and waited for Harvey to join him.

"Some would say fine and some would say not so fine." Harvey chuckled awkwardly to himself.

"Is that so?" Lacey followed the larger man into his own house and flipped on a light switch. The two men stood observing each other skeptically for a moment before Lacey broke away to put the beer in the fridge.

"You wanna beer?" he called from the kitchen.

"No thanks." The Marshall followed Lacey into the kitchen and filled the doorway as Lacey pulled his first can from the six-pack. "I really need some help."

"Still nothing, no clues?" Lacey remarked, wiping his mouth after taking his first chuq.

"Well let's just say not enough." The truth was nothing. Except for the actual murders, there were no clues. No fingerprints, no clear-cut motives, no descriptions, there was nothing to follow. What could he tell his men? That the only witness saw a rotting corpse tear the head of a victim and toss it, this would never do. No there were not clues. Since Red had been killed so near Lacey's Harvey was hoping there was some clue over looked here. "I just thought I would take a look around your place again. That is if you don't mind?" he said vaguely.

"You wanna search the place?" Lacey asked helpfully.

"Yeah, if you don't mind." Harvey was slightly uncomfortable. "It's not like official or nothing. It's really more to refresh me. Maybe I will pick up on the scent that had Red watching this place, you know." Once Harvey got started he fumbled over his words. All the maps and studies and lab work had turned up nothing. Five people had been brutally murdered in Sunflower County and there just were no clues.

"Sure, look around all you like." Lacey gestured with the hand in which he held his beer. He drank with excessive gulps.

"At this rate he will be drunk before I leave here," Harvey observed, but to Lacey he only said, "Thanks, I appreciate your co-operation. If you can just show me the layout of the house..." Harvey had no idea what he was looking for.

"This is the kitchen," Lacey said dumbly and started on his second beer.

Harvey pivoting about noted the absence of a window curtain. "Can you see any part of the road from this window?" By the time he had asked this though he had already crossed to the window and observed that he could see no part of the road. "That just more woods over that ridge?"

"Yep." Lacey puckered his bottom lip and nodded.

Harvey dropped into a squatting position and opened the cabinet under the sink.

"I ain't even looked under there in about three years," Lacey said. His second beer was increasing his wit. A rusty mound of what probably had once been scrub pads huddled under the sink drain. The back corner sported a pile of shredded paper.

"You got mice."

"No kidding.."

Harvey decided to skip the rest of the kitchen cabinets, surely they had been gone over well before and after Red's murder. He was more interested in the lay out of the house, hidden spaces/ rooms perhaps. What had Red been doing out here watching this place?

What was on to Red that had killed him? Harvey figured to do a rough walk through of the house and then go outside to the spot where Red's car had been found. Maybe from there he could see what Red had seen.

They walked quickly through the living room, Harvey's large form having a bit more difficulty maneuvering between the furniture than Lacey's wiry shape. The hall down the center of the house had the typical two doors to the left, two doors to the right.

The first door on the left was the small cramped bathroom. Its high small window faced the back yard. The first door on the right was the storage room or so it seemed. Crumpled boxes and clutter packed the room. Somewhere underneath the boxes Harvey made out what appeared to be a feather bed. Harvey's search of this room was only perfunctory. He was beginning to feel the senselessness of his whole idea.

"This here's my room." Lacey's voice split the air as he threw open the

far left door. From the look on Lacey's face Harvey didn't know if he should compliment him or just look shocked.

"Nice room, " Harvey mumbled and the obvious ridiculousness of this statement flushed his ears a bright red. The room was simply tacky. A faded chenille bedspread was lumpy over on top of a bed that could only be considered 'modern' in the 1950's. Metal foil, missing in places, outlined the sliding bookcases on the headboard. Matching end tables flanked the side of the bed.

The side which Lacey used, Harvey stopped and realized he could think of no one who would want to occupy the other side, sported a gaudy oversized ceramic lamp with no shade. It had been cast to look like a topless hula girl. Assorted magazines, sport, mechanics, raunchy girlie ones, over flowed the end table. A hideous green chair, its back shaped like the letter 'C' perched crookedly in one corner. One of its long wooden legs angled unreliably beneath it. The dissoluteness of the room strongly depressed Harvey. He started to just leave the house and the deteriorating little man then and there, but something not unlike common courtesy forced him to go through the motion of completing the search.

"What's in here?" he asked Lacey who was now leaning in the doorway.

"Used to be Grandma's room." Lacey answered flatly. "Not much to see in there." Lacey blocked Harvey's entrance into the room. "Sure you don't want to drop this and take me up on that offer for a brewski?"

Harvey pushed Lacey gently to the side and opened the door. The first thing that struck was the contrast between this fine old room, laden with rich, though dusty, antiques and the rest of the house. The second thing that struck him was the crumpled young body propped up against the side of the bedpost. The face was a swollen mass of flesh not really recognizable. Entrails had been pulled from the body cavity and draped grotesquely around the neck. Harvey Johnson snapped out of his suspended horror in time to see Lacey vomit into his own shoes...

Chapter 22

Cindy had a hard time prying her hand from the phone. "I can not believe what he is saying," she thought "I must be missing something."

"Would you mind repeating that," she said.

"Cindy, I have been through this twice already."

"Jim, Please!"

"Fine, what ever. I said you know that Emma Lewis, right? I met her the night of the Halloween party. She's a friend of yours, right?

"You know that, now go on." She was getting impatient.

"So I was sitting in the Pizza Hut in Yazoo with Karen Glass. And if you recall I did ask you out first."

"Jim!"

"Calm down, tiger." The rich bass tones of his voice rumbled when he laughed. "So we were sitting there when Bill and Joy came in. I guess since Joy and Karen immediately started awful screeching of hellos, like they hadn't seen each other in twenty years. Why do girls do that?"

"Jim you are dragging this out just to be cruel."

"Anyway they ended up sitting with us. I guess I am just dense because it didn't quite hit me at first how quiet Bill was being. But who could notice with those two girls talking up a storm. But then I noticed after the pizza came that he was sort of staring real hard right at me."

"Did Joy notice?"

"No, she is so used to him just being there with her she hardly looked at him. Still I bet she couldn't have been prepared for what he did next. Like see I was getting uncomfortable with his staring at me so I started to make conversation about school and things...you know real casually."

"Did he say anything then?"

"Not much just some nods and monosyllable replies. But then out of the blue he said, "I saw the way you were looking at Emma at the Halloween party." I actually heard Joy swallow her bite of pizza in one gulp. Then no one said anything for about a minute. I mean I didn't know what to say back to that. I never got a chance to say anything because then he leans over across the table and gets right in my face and says, "You stay the hell away from Emma."

"Oh my God," Cindy exclaimed.

"Then boy, I guess Joy was really thrown for a loop because then she said, in this real fake syrupy voice, "William, what ever are you talking

about?" He just looked at her like he was seeing her for the first time and said, "Shut up, Joy. You make me sick."

If he hadn't looked like murder waiting to happen I would have laughed right out loud. It was crazy."

"What did Joy do then?"

"What could she do? She started to cry."

"Then what did he do?"

"He left. I had to pay for their pizzas. Karen and I had to take Joy home. That was a drag."

"He must be crazy." Cindy still could not believe what Jim had just told her. "I mean of all the things he could have done, or not done for that matter. That doesn't even make sense. Are you sure you had not mentioned Emma earlier or something to set him off?"

"Positive. The guy is just goofy."

Cindy missed what ever Jim said after that as her mother came rushing into her room.

"Get off the phone, Cindy!"

"Mom?" She held her hand over the receiver.

"They just said on the ten o'clock news that they caught the murderer. Now get off that phone."

Cindy could not help but wonder as she said a rushed good bye to Jim if she were about to hear another story that would affect Emma.

Roy and Liz sat on the living room sofa watching a made for TV movie. Liz had propped her feet up in his lap and he messaged them gently. Roy watched her partially open mouth and heavy eyelids.

"Bout to fall asleep, mamma?" He jostled her.

"No." Her expression made him wish he had not used the old term of affection in addressing her.

"You reckon they are going to recover those diamonds?" He laughed with little humor.

"Oh, I expect so. It seems they always do."

He stretched out an arm to secure one of her hands.

"Roy, what do you think hell is like?" She asked this so calmly that Roy wasn't sure what she was looking for in the way of an answer.

"Oh Liz, I suppose it must be pretty bad, the total absence of a good and gentle God."

"Oh God's not gentle, Roy." she spoke with certainty.

"It may not always seem that way, but the Lord loves us and always wants what is best for us."

"I see." It was more of a dismissal than an acceptance. "But what do you think hell is like?"

"Liz, there is no reason..."

"I think I know what hell is like, Roy." He turned on the couch so as to face her directly. He wanted to just stop her, maybe just hold her next to him, but something in her face held him still.

"What Liz?"

"I think it is being still tied to this world and not knowing you are dead. Caught up in all your petty desires with no way to possibly fulfill your needs and wants. No real flesh to indulge."

"Possibly, but..."

"I think Barbara Lee is in hell."

"My God, Liz." He jerked himself upright on the couch and grabbed her shoulders. "No, Liz..."

"Our baby is in misery. I can feel it."

He shook her and watched her head bob up and down, her chin snapping back from her chest. "Liz, you got to get a hold of yourself."

When she looked up at him fully there was a harsh rationality about her expression.

"Oh Roy, I didn't mean to frighten you." She reached her arms up and clasped her hands together behind his neck. "I..." she began, but faltered. "We have to be more careful that is all. Because if Barbara Lee could force her will upon us now, I think..." She once again stopped unable to voice the words.

"Liz, honey, did you hear what that man on the television just said? Did you hear what he just said?"

But Liz heard no one she was still wrestling with her own thoughts. "I wonder why she hates Emma so much."

Liz had told her not to worry about going to school if she didn't feel like it. The late night announcement of Lacey's arrest had kept the Wilson family up for quite a while. First there were phone calls, people wanting to know if they had heard the news or if they had any idea that this was about to happen. Roy had found the phone line already tied up when he tried to reach Harvey Johnson. The whole community had been affected by the murders and it seemed that everyone wanted to know if it was finally safe to rest. When Sam Prather had called and asked if he could come over and talk with Roy, the Wilson's had already resigned themselves to a long night. Sam was really shaken up. First he had wanted Roy to go down to the station with him and demand Lacey's

release, then he began to come around to accepting that his old buddy probably was the killer. After this realization he was outraged and horrified that he had been so close to the mad man. Sam had been the closest thing to a friend that Lacey had. From Roy's point of view he just wanted to find out everything about Lacey that Sam knew. He was hoping to find some kind of relief in learning what had triggered such violence.

Emma had sat at the foot of the stairs and listened to the conversations in the kitchen. When the phone had first awoken her she had feared more bad news, but when she came down to listen to the one sided conversations she had pieced together the story. The nightmare was over. In her long gown she had hugged her knees and prayed that this would be the end of the horror.

As soon as she got to school she spotted Cindy making a b-line straight toward her from the crowd in front of the school.

"Emma," she shouted while she was still a ways away. Emma supposed she couldn't wait to ask her about the arrest, but she was surprised when the red head grabbed her arm and began hustling her toward the jeep. "Have you seen Bill?" were the first words out of her mouth.

"Cindy, I have hardly seen you yet."

"He's off his rocker. I don't think Joy will ever speak to him again. Boy, what a jerk he made of himself."

Emma was afraid that she had missed some vital part of this conversation. "Cindy, what are you talking about?"

Cindy relayed a modified version of Jim Richardson's story as they made their way across the parking lot.

"I don't understand? He was upset about me and Jim Richardson? I barely know Jim."

"Yeah, I know that, Emma, but you should see him this morning."

"See who?" Bill asked from directly behind Cindy. She almost swallowed her tongue when he spoke.

"Hi." She grimaced.

"Cindy, would you please excuse Emma and me?" He stood unmoving beside the jeep, obviously waiting for Cindy to leave.

"That all right with you, Em?" Cindy looked confused.

"Yeah," Emma felt a little awkward under Bill's unwavering gaze.

"Well it's your life." Cindy responded and loped back toward the schoolyard.

Emma kept her head down after Cindy walked off, waiting for Bill to

speak.

"Emma, if I asked you to leave the school grounds with me, would you?"

"I don't know." She still could not bring herself to look at him. They were silent for at least a full minute, Emma kicking the gravel around with her toe. When she was sure he wasn't going to say anything else, she looked up at him. She was taken back by what she saw. His face was all red and screwed up and tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Bill," she said hastily dropping her books to the ground. She spun him around to where his back was to the school yard. She wiped his face with her hand. "What is it?"

"I think I am losing my fucking mind. I can't take this anymore." He laughed at his own pathetic state, never knowing that what he felt as weakness and defeat on his part was what made Emma decided she would go anywhere he asked her to. A sympathetic smile broke across her face.

"My poor baby." She leaned forward to rest a hand on his cheek.

"Isn't this ridiculous." He balled up a knuckle to rub under his eyes.

"Oh, I don't know." She joined his quiet laughter.

"Ohhhh," he sighed and threw his arms around her, "I just need to do this." He squeezed her tight. "We really need to talk."

"Uh huh, I think so too." She agreed. She could feel the weeks of pressure, tension falling away. This was the right thing to do.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Cindy demanded to know upon getting in the jeep at lunch to find Emma waiting.

"Oh, we kind of skipped first period and went to Po's for cokes and honey buns." Cindy caught the gesture toward the back seat where Bill was firmly planted. She tried to force a smile his way. "You don't mind if Bill joins us for lunch do you, Cin?"

"No, of course not," Cindy said stiffly. Both Emma and Bill broke into laughter over Cindy's flustered expression.

"It's all okay now, Cindy. Mr. Simmons, here, is back to normal again." With that Bill reached up to the front seat to pinch Emma's arm. And though this did not seem the least bit funny to Cindy, Emma and Bill just laughed that much harder.

The three of them were still together after school. Cindy was stretched out across Emma's bed while Bill was straddling Emma's desk chair backwards. Emma paced and did most of the talking.

"So you see, Bill dreamed about her too." What had just a week

before seemed too horrible of a thing in which to speak had become a teenager's delight of intrigue. With the real murderer caught they were impressed by the psychic phenomena of their like experiences.

"Except I didn't know who she was. I mean I hardly ever knew Viola Grace even when she was living. The difference was I actually felt myself killing Barbara Lee in my dream. It was like I was pinching her head off." He illustrated with his hands. "So you can see why I freaked out and all I knew was that Emma was the reason and she was in my dream too."

"Weird," Cindy said.

"Freaky," Emma added. "But the thing is we both know neither one of us actually killed Barbara Lee. How could we have? Thank God they caught Lacey Caine."

"I guess both Emma and I were going through a weird psycho guilt trip cause we were afraid Barbara Lee would keep us apart." He nervously fingered the spindles on the back of the chair.

"Yeah Bill." Emma nodded. "But the whole Viola Grace part is what is really strangeroni. I think it is time we went back to her house." She waited for this to sink in with the other two.

"I don't know, Emma, that place gave me the creeps," Cindy said remembering her own dream that had bothered her after they had been to the old house before.

"Don't you see, that Viola Grace, there is the spooky part, it's like some part of her is reaching beyond the grave." Emma said this with her hands cryptically stretched out fingers parted wide, in front of her face. At that moment she looked like a small, enchanted child.

"Hey, I am up for it." Bill was once more his relaxed outgoing self. Cindy was the only one uncomfortable with the idea. She wondered if Bill really could be trusted. She was not sure that they were not getting into something that was better left alone, but she kept all these worries to herself. "What do you think we could accomplish by going back there?" she finally asked.

"I think we can summon up the ghost of Viola Grace," Emma answered widening her eyes. "I think we could have a séance out at her old house this very Friday night. It could be a lot of fun. The murderer has been caught so what have we got to lose?"

"Our minds," Cindy said under her breath.

Lacking the elasticity of the young who were at that time upstairs in his house planning a gay old séance, Roy's mind was not so easily put to rest. Barbara Lee was still dead and Liz just wasn't the same woman

any more. He spent the day waiting at the police station for a chance to speak with Harvey Johnson. He wanted to believe that Lacey really was the murderer but there were so many doubts still lingering. He was not alone in his vigil. Earl Slater, Sammy Slater's father had come down to wait for Harvey too. Roy had not seen much of Earl since his own son's death and he took in the man's haggard drawn expression. "My gawd, I wonder if I look that bad," he thought.

"How's your wife, Roy?" Earl asked after a long uncomfortable silence.

"Liz? Oh she's holding up." Roy pursed his lips and nodded in a serious manner. "And uh, Marie? She doing okay?"

"Want to know something," Earl said without bothering to answer the question. "You know you can get your life back in order and you can even be happy again, but the pain of it, the pain of it never goes away." This was not said with any bitterness only with studied certainty.

"I guess you're right there," Roy said remembering his own somersault of emotions.

"You reckon he really did it?" Earl asked.

"They say Harvey caught him almost red handed. They found the body of a colored boy stuffed in his closet."

"He must be one crazy mother fucker." Earl cringed.

"I heard they got him under psychiatric observation. Said he really is crazy. He doesn't even know what he has done."

"I tell you one thing," Earl raised his voice, "If they let that son-of-a-bitch go just because he be playing crazy..."

"Whoa, Earl, calm down. Nobody is talking about letting that boy go." Roy did his best the calm the man. "They ain't even set a trail date yet or nothing. Everything is just getting started. Now, that's why I am down here, just want to keep good and posted on what the law is doing with that bastard."

"Yep, me too. That's why I came down here too, Roy." Earl lowered his voice and moved closer to Roy in a conspirator manner. "I tell you one thing I will not rest until I see that boy in the gas chamber. He deserves killing if I have to do it myself."

"Yeah," Roy agreed.

Liz heard the kids upstairs in Emma's room when she got home. Unlike her husband she was not so interested in the accused murderer. She had spent the day quietly shopping alone in Jackson. She had wandered through the racks at Gayfers and McReas, her eyes immediately picking out colors and styles that Barbara Lee would have loved. "How about this

one," she found herself whispering. She could not escape the feeling that Barbara was with her.

Often she experienced the eerie awareness of a shape just out of her line of vision. It was as if her daughter were just barely below the surface reaching for her. Liz would strain to hear the voice of her only child in the murmur of a crowd, in the low rumble of a fan. "I know you are here baby," she said once so loudly that other shoppers turned to see to whom she was speaking.

She had picked their mail up on the way in and now it lay out on the kitchen table. There was the Sears bill, an insurance notice, two flyers addressed to occupant and one long personal letter addressed to Emma from a P.O. Box in St. Louis. Liz started to take the letter right up to Emma but she heard the teenager's laughter and decided to wait.

She held the envelope in her hand and something about the letter really bothered her. "I don't know why anyone in St. Louis would want to write that child," she thought. Out of the blue a flooding anger scurried through her. "I don't think that she should be given this letter at all." Liz held up the letter to the kitchen light as if the contents of it would filter through to her.

"She's got no right to be carrying on correspondence with anyone in St. Louis when Barbara Lee is dead and will never get another letter from a friend. Besides who could she possibly know in St. Louis?" The irrational anger that Liz felt made her light headed and warm. She carried the letter to the sink and began looking for matches. She was going to burn the offensive piece of mail.

"Mrs. Wilson?" The voice caught her in a flurry of motions as she dropped the box of matches and tried to hide the letter.

"What?" she yelped.

"Is it all right if I fix us all some cola?" Cindy asked slowly. She could see clearly that Liz was distraught and wanted to be alone in the kitchen. What was that she had been holding over the sink?

"Well, certainly, Cindy." A sweet smile replaced her earlier sneer. She looked at the envelope she held crumpled in her hand and laughed nervously. Then with no real explanation she opened one of the kitchen drawers as if looking for something. Cindy could see the paper bags and aluminum foil that were in the drawer and then she watched as Liz placed the letter carefully on top of a bag in the back.

"I was so glad to hear about them catching that Lacey Caine," Cindy ventured unsurely.

"Well I was too, dear." Liz refilled the ice trays as Cindy emptied

them. There was nothing in her manner to indicate the anxiety that Cindy had witnessed when she had first entered the kitchen.

"Yep that poor Lacey Caine," Liz said, clicking her tongue as if to go "Tsk, tsk."

"Honey, you have to have something to eat." Mrs. Hutchinson pleaded from outside of Joy's room. "Please come out and just sit with us at the table at least. It is not good for you to lock yourself away like this."

No answer was heard from the other side of the door.

"Joy," a wedge of anger was growing in her voice, "Joy, this is your mother, now I said open this door."

"Mamma, please just leave me alone," came the garbled reply.

"Open the door first."

A small slot opened into the dainty bedroom. Joy's hand appeared upon the doorframe and a sliver of Joy's face, bloated with tears, peered out.

"Please, mamma, I just can't right now."

"Honey, this is no way to behave. What ever happened between you and Bill can't be as bad as you are making it." Concern had returned and Mrs. Hutchinson groped for a way to lighten the pain she saw on her girl's face.

"I'll be okay, really. Just leave me be for now." Joy asked.

"Okay. I'll save your supper for you, baby." She stretched to place a kiss on the partially revealed forehead. The face immediately retreated and Mrs. Hutchinson was once again left facing a closed door.

Inside Joy slumped back to her disheveled bed and buried her face in a pillow to muffle her sobs.

"If I could I would kill him. I would kill him with my bare hands," she blubbered.

A cold snap had settled over the delta during the week. It was a harsh dry cold with still no frost. The ground crunched from the cover of countless leaves. The sky had already turned to twilight as Emma lay on her stomach in a field down from her home. She was only slightly chilled under her heavy sweater and jacket.

Her mind was caught up in the millions of stars that spread above her. Her aunt and uncle thought she was still up in her room getting ready for Bill to pick her up. They had her alone pretty much lately. Liz, quiet and polite in her own little world and Roy, bustling about trying to re-animate his lost wife. They grew aloof from Emma.

The Bluff was no longer frozen under a blanket of fear. The murderer

had been caught. Lacey Caine was securely under lock and key in a maximum security cell in Yazoo. His apprehension had kept the local newspapers hopping that past week. In hind sight everyone could see that Lacey was a psychopathic killer. Rumors ran wild about his spree of senseless killing. Most ignored the fact that he had an airtight alibi for the night that Sheriff Red Humphries had been murdered.

It was decided even by the police force that he had somehow cleverly staged it to look like he never left town while he was actually back at is own house butchering the sheriff. People were too hungry for a conviction to let little discrepancies get in their way. Looking back on his record folks could easily image him capable of the multi-murders. "Well you know he shot his own daddy in cold blood," old timers could be heard saying on the street. "You know he always was a loner, kept to himself like he had something to hide," they would all agree.

The small black child found dead in the spare room closet had clenched the case. How could he still be feigning innocence even ignorance of his crimes, people wondered. Emma stood only slightly confused on the issue. She was more than eager to have Lacey be the monster. It was only occasional snatches of memory from her dream and that strange time right after Barbara Lee's death that periodically haunted her.

She rolled over onto her back and placed her hands folded across her rib cage. She glanced up to see a tall form loom over her. From behind her head two powerful legs stepped to either side of her shoulders, straddling her. She reached upward and ran an open palm down the inside of his thighs.

"I was wandering when you would get here." She rolled up on her knees. "I've been about to freeze my ass off."

"Oh no, not this sweet little ass." He knelt down in front of her and wrapped an arm around her to grab one firm cheek.

"Ummm," she breathed, "You looking for trouble, buddy?" She squirmed not too successfully from his grasp.

"Uh- huh," he said mere inches from her face.

Emma pressed herself into his wide expanse of chest and rubbed her breasts into him. "Oh Bill, we have to behave."

He stroked her gently and asked, "What kind of monster have I created?" While tilting her chin toward him, he raised his eyebrow in mock reproach.

"I don't know." She ran her hand under his jacket and shirt and rested

it against flesh.

"Emma, it drives me wild when you do that." His hand was searching for a way under her sweater.

"Don't."

"Ohh, why not?" he whined. "You let me do more than this last night."

"I know, but don't."

"You keep putting me off like this. It is not fair."

"I am sorry, Bill. I am just not ready yet."

"I can make you ready." He rubbed one pert nipple.

"No."

"Jesus, Emma, you're killing me."

"Let's go. They are waiting for us." She stood up and brushed the leaves from her pants.

Chapter 23

Cindy and Jimmy were indeed waiting for them when they reached the levee.

"What took you guys so long?" Cindy was out of the jeep and yelling before they had even come to a stop.

Neither Bill nor Emma bothered to reply. "I hope yawl brought flash lights," Emma stated looking out at the blackness of the night. The stars that had been out so clearly earlier in the evening appeared to have vanished under a cloud of ebony night.

"Not to worry. Ole Jim here used to be a boy scout and I ain't stupid either." Cindy produced two flashlights from the inside of her jacket. Jim and Bill had up to this time only been eyeing each other timidly.

"How's it going there?" Jim was the first to break the uncomfortable silence between the two guys.

"Fine, Jim. It's good to see you." Bill said sincerely.

"Well I am glad you are along too," Jim admitted good naturedly, "I don't think I could handle these two females by myself, at least not if they both started getting the willies on me," he added quickly.

"I brought along refreshments in case this whole thing turns out to be a dud," Cindy said, pulling a bottle of opened scotch from the jeep. "Jim and I have already had our first taste of courage. Why don't you two get a shot before we start off through those woods."

Emma started to decline, but then took in the menacing trees and brush that awaited them and grabbed the bottle from Cindy's hand.

"Slow down, Emma. I don't want to have to carry you out of here," Bill laughed.

"You'

You would love it," she said taking the upturned bottle from her lips and choking. She passed the bottle to Bill. "Phew, that stuff sure is nasty."

"A few more hits like that one and you won't notice the taste at all."

The journey into the swamp was more treacherous than Emma had remembered, and they all soon fell silent as they worked their way slowly through the heavy brush. "Oh shit!" or "What the fuck!" could be heard from the four of them as each battled down the unmarked path.

"Cindy are you sure you know where we are going?" Jim once asked, as they became surrounded by the clinging sticker briars.

"No," Bill answered for Cindy, "She is just taking us way back here to

do us all in."

"Bill!" Emma reprimanded him for bringing up such a thought.

"Well at least let Emma and me hold on to that scotch for a while in case one of us gets snake bit," Bill suggested, "And don't worry, baby, I won't let anything get you." With one arm he swung her up and off the ground and closer to his side.

"I get the feeling this is where he always wanted to get her," Jim whispered to his partner.

"You ain't just whistling Dixie," Cindy agreed. "All right you two this is a group effort so stop the mushy stuff."

"Later," Bill breathed meaningfully into Emma's ear.

The house loomed stark and ghostly pale in front of them as they broke into the clearing.

"Gosh," Cindy gasped, which caused the other three to giggle in relief. "Well you have to admit it Lewis, it looks pretty spooky by this light."

They all agreed solemnly. Jim was the first to move on to the porch. "Are you sure this place is even safe?" He tested his weight on the creaking boards.

"Sure it's safe. Emma and I have been here before and nothing gave way on us then, right Em?"

"Nope." Emma bounded up onto the porch with Jim and did a brief flurry of jumping jacks to show her faith.

"Okay, Em, we all believe you now." Bill reached her and held her arms down to her side.

"You know I was really scared on the way here," Emma said, "but now, well now I feel exhilarated by this old house."

"Give back the scotch, Bill. It sounds like my friend has already had enough." Cindy reached inside his coat pocket to retrieve her scotch and take a stiff slug for herself.

"Hey, don't leave me out." Jim reached for the bottle to take his fair share.

"So, let's have a look inside," Bill declared while sweeping Emma off the porch and into his arms like a new bride.

"Hey guys we did not come all this way just for you two to make out." Cindy scolded.

"That's right. We are here to summon the dead," Emma shrieked dramatically.

Bill pushed the front door with his foot and the group made their way into the house. Their flash lights illuminated the front hall way and the

remains of the back window reflected their light right back at them like headlights.

"Eerie," Cindy remarked reverently.

"Ah cut it out, Cindy." Bill prodded her with Emma's out stretched foot. "Hey, any body home in here?" he screamed into the depth of the house.

"For gawd's sake, Bill, you don't want them to answer." Cindy had jumped at the sound of his booming voice in the echoing cavern.

"So where should we set up?" Jim asked.

"Cindy and I have already cased the down stairs. I think it would be neat to try one of the higher floors."

"Great idea," Bill said softly into Emma's ear, "Then maybe you and I can sneak off to ourselves after this is all over." He slid a hand up between her inner thighs making sure she fully understood his meaning.

"I don't know," she whispered back.

"I wish you would quit saying that."

"Saying what?" Cindy turned toward them but merely finished with a "never mind" once she saw Emma's flushed face.

"So here we go." Jim led the way up the first landing of stairs. They stood poised on the first landing. "Bill and Emma, yawl check this side of the hall for a suitable room while Cindy and I check the other."

"Scream if you need help," Cindy said to her friend clearly not referring to the super natural.

"This room is okay by me," Bill said as he lowered Emma and bent to kiss her neck.

"You haven't even looked at it," she complained and stepped back to get a better look for herself. "No, this won't do at all," she remarked taking in the uncomfortable shabbiness of the room. Despite Bill's whining she disapproved of the room next to it as well.

"What do you think?" Jim asked when the four rejoined on the landing.

"Let's try the next floor," Emma said taking off for the stairs without waiting for a reply.

To the girls the third floor proved to be equally as unexciting as the second.

"Just what are you looking for?" Bill asked in exasperation.

"Just the right atmosphere, the right ambiance, like maybe the room that Viola actually slept in, you know," Emma explained.

"What kind of ghoul have I fallen in love with?" Bill asked lightly. Emma did not miss the wording though.

"Who said anything about love, Simmons?" She smiled broadly at him.

"At the rate we are going there will be no loving in this house," Bill sighed.

"Oh, lover, well we will get our chance, I promise."

"Now that's more like it." Bill regained his enthusiasm and began to climb toward the fourth floor.

The fourth floor was the jackpot. The first room they entered, this time as a full team, contained a small single bed and an off angle chest of drawers.

"This had to have been her room," Emma exclaimed.

"Whoop-D-do," Cindy added, out of breath. "So we can stop here. Great I thought you were going to have us up on the roof yet."

"Impressive setting for a séance, " Jim admitted.

"Séance, "Bill groaned, "Can't we forget that nonsense now and relax and finish off that scotch."

Emma tried to look hurt at this statement, but only succeeded in grinning even wider than before. "Come on tough guy, just humor me."

"Aw, all right." He crashed down on the small bed.

Cindy pulled out the scotch and settled herself next to the wall in one corner. After she took a drink she passed the bottle to the others. No one was sure of what to do next. Emma collapsed on the bed next to Bill and kicked off her short boots. Only Jim remained standing and pacing around the tiny room.

"So Emma, what exactly did you have in mind?" he asked.

" First we have to sit in a circle."

"First we have to drink a bit more of this," Cindy corrected her.

"Okay, but after that, we have to sit in a circle and hold hands."

"I came all the way up here just to hold hands," Bill protested. But they all followed Emma's wishes and formed a small circle next to the bed. Cindy made sure they all got a good dose of scotch before Emma ordered them to hold hands. Bill, with his back to the bed and Jim with his back to the door separated the two girls.

"Do we have to hum," Bill teased.

"Shhhh," Emma warned him.

"She's concentrating," Cindy explained to the guys. They hushed and waited for Emma to instruct them. She did not say anything for a long time and the sound of the tree frogs swarmed up to the room. They were all tempted to crack jokes or just laugh to relieve the tension, but none dared, hoping the sooner Emma was satisfied with this séance the sooner they could get back to some real fun. Bill began playing with Emma's fingers

hoping to get her interested in something more than the dead when a creak from below startled them all.

"What was that?" Cindy said trying to sound funny. The two boys attempted to look frightened. Emma ignored the three and let her head roll back. The sound came again. This time it was more like a heavy footstep on one of the old floorboards below them.

"Emma, lets cut this out! We've probably done nothing more than conjure up a coon, but I don't like it," Cindy said sounding a bit irritated. Before anyone could say anything else yet another crashing sound echoed in the downstairs hall.

"I don't like this," Cindy repeated.

"Shhhh, drink some more scotch," Jim told her.

Emma pulled slightly away from the group, but careful to not break the ring of hands, and half reclined on the floor.

"Honey, get up," Bill prodded her.

Another creak followed his statement but this time it came from the stairs higher up. It sounded as if someone or something were climbing the steps slowly toward them. The floorboard moans became steady and rhythmical. Now no one spoke for fear of missing the direction of the sounds. Bill leaned toward Emma and rubbed her shoulder with his chin. She merely slipped further from him. Her eyes were completely closed and except for her tense expression it would have been easy to think she was asleep.

When the sound proceeded from the second to the third floor Jim jerked his hand free from Cindy and turned toward the door.

"It's got to be some animal," he said softly.

Cindy and Bill shook their heads in agreement but still refused to break the stillness. On the third floor they heard a door open.

"Oh Jesus!" Cindy could no longer keep the fear from her voice. Emma still did not respond.

The door closed gently as the footsteps could be heard entering the room directly below them.

"Jim, I can't stand this. You have got to go see what it is," Cindy demanded.

"What?" Jim looked at her as if she had just suggested a friendly game of Russian roulette. "She's your nutty friend."

"Hey, yawl calm down. It's nothing." Bill stopped them. "Emma, baby, I think you have had a bit too much to drink, you are passing out." He now actively tried to revive her and she stirred to his nudges.

"What?" she said sleepily.

"Something is stirring around down stairs. Jim and I are going to check it out." Jim looked unhappy with this prospect and Cindy balked.

"Both of you can't leave us here." She grabbed for Jim's arm.

"Aw, Cindy." Bill glared at her. He was frightened too, but he could not believe it was anything more than a case of nerves for them all. "Okay, I'll go by myself." He stood stiffly from his spot on the floor. The sounds below them had ceased. Emma reached for him and started to tell him to stay, but then just kissed his hand and said, "Be careful."

"Oh I'll be back," he said as he eased out the door.

Chapter 24

In twenty minutes time Bill had still not returned from the lower floor. They had followed his progress distinctly as he slipped out the door and more or less crept down the stairs. "Is that asshole humming?" Cindy had asked at one point when he could still be heard on the floor below.

"Sounds like it," Emma admitted.

The presumed humming had stopped after about two minutes and since then there was nothing to be heard except the spongy night sounds, the wind, rustling leaves and the return of the tree frogs. Cindy had resumed her swilling of the scotch immediately after Bill's departure, sharing with the other two, and now all three were feeling the heavy affects. But fear or apprehension, whatever demon you chose to name it, had kept them alert. Stimulated their nerve endings had kept them too tight to make many sounds as they listened.

"He should have been back by now, " Emma stated the obvious.

The other two declined to give their opinions.

Bill had indeed stayed away too long, but it was not because he had been physically detained as those above him might have feared. Upon descending to the third floor he had been at first riddled with a case of the shivers. His skin literally crawled up his spine and tingled at the base of his neck. That was when he had begun to hum, almost unconsciously. He felt a relief in hearing his all to human voice.

He had heard the direction of the steps when he had sat listening in the above room. He went straight to the room where the stealthy steps had gone. This room was almost exactly below the one where the others sat on the fourth floor. He had not thought to bring a flashlight with him and now regretted it. The house looked even more cavernous in the scarce light. It was possible to imagine it as vast and unending, perhaps even connected with corridors that led into the bowels of the earth. The darkness gave Bill a sense of invisibility. He found he was not afraid of what he might find.

As it turned out the room had little to offer. It was empty, as empty as it had been when they had previously checked it. An open closet gapped open from one wall, but other than that there was nothing askew in the place. Bill walked toward the window in the far wall. The clouds had scattered and the lawn was now illuminated in the starlight.

The surrounding cover of tall trees waved at him from all corners of the

yard. "Nothing here to be afraid of," he thought. A rather peaceful place it seemed to be. He found himself thinking that it might be nice to come back up here sometime alone just to get away. He was not sure how long he stood their soaking in the soft-lighted scene below him, but suddenly he remembered Emma.

Just a hint of anger touched as he thought of how the others had foolishly set out to be scared. He decided that if a little scare was what they really wanted he could oblige. Besides it might make Emma real glad and appreciative to see him when he did return.

After thirty minutes Emma was no longer content to wait passively for Bill's return. She had put back on her boots and sat nervously swinging her legs from the side of the bed.

"Just wait a little more and we'll all go down with you to look for him," Cindy said trying to pacify her.

"And then what? Cindy, there is no earthly reason why he should have been gone this long in the first place. I am ready to go look for him now."

"Aw, come on Emma, nothing could have possible happened to him. You are just being paranoid," Jim broke in to say. But Emma was already on her feet and headed for the door.

"I don't care," she said practically yelling, "You two just stay here. I am going to look for him." She was out the door in an instant. They could still hear the ring of her words as she headed down the hall.

At the head of the stairs she froze. All of a sudden she felt too frightened to move. "It's just a house," she told herself, "just a stair case, just a wall." She could feel her heart racing. She thought she might be sick. At the first stair the floor moaned softly despite her light step. She imagined Cindy and Jim hearing her like they had heard the earlier sounds. Gripping the banister she made her way down.

She almost did not realize it when she reached the third floor, so thick was the darkness. She stumbled briefly and cursed when her foot dipped for another stair and came up short on the flat floor. "Oh my gawd, I can't even see the doors." She began to feel her way along the walls. Looking upward she could make out the faint glow of the fourth hall window. "Wait a minute," she stopped as she noted, "There should be a window on this hall as well." Her head snapped toward the direction where the front hall window should have been located, but all she could see was fathomless darkness.

It was as if from miles away that she finally picked up the swaying spot of light. Too and fro it rocked as it grew more and more into focus.

What she was seeing was someone walking toward her swinging a lantern, but not from the end of the hall, but rather from across a grassy meadow. The figure moved slowly, light heartedly, almost skipping as it came closer. It was a young girl, or at least it looked like a young girl. Emma blinked her eyes and waited for the image fade, but it did not. When the form was close enough Emma could make out the smooth radiant skin and a clover-like aroma. Emma was frozen in her tracks. "Is this death?" she asked herself.

It was indeed a small young girl who approached her, a petite young black child, who looked to be around eight or ten years of age. The girl skipped merrily down the hall to Emma and then she stopped. Emma could see the tiny moist face, the eyes full of excitement.

"He's in this room, missy," the child said taking Emma's hand and pulling her toward a spot at the end of the hall.

Emma could not resist; she was not able to. Her eyes never left the impish face that grinned up at her. At the door the girl slipped back behind Emma and gave her a shove toward the entrance. The door was slightly ajar and as Emma entered the light from the room blazed in her wide pupils. And then she saw Bill. He was standing leisurely in front of the window.

She did not say anything, but he turned as if he had been expecting her.

"Baby." He held out his hands to her. His mouth formed a small circle as he said, "Oh, what's the matter, Baby? Don't look so scared."

She rushed toward him almost leaping into his arms.

"Well now, I thought you might be a little worried, but this is better than I even hoped," he admitted. "Umph," he exhaled as he slipped his hands under her sweater and searched for the clasp of her bra.

Emma did not pull away. She only clung to the familiar chest all the more. She inhaled great gulps of his scent. "Oh, thank gawd, I'm not dead. You're not dead," she cried.

"No, I'd say right now I feel pretty damn well alive." He took her hand and pressed it lower on his body so she could feel for herself.

"What the hell are they doing down there?" Cindy asked Jim. They had heard the muffled voices when Emma had finally found Bill.

"What's it sound like to you?" Jim asked delicately.

"Like he's humping her brains out," Cindy retorted in disgust.

"Could be," Jim conferred.

"That really pisses me off." Cindy sprang to her feet and began

collecting her paraphernalia. "They had the audacity to drag us all the way here just so they could get a chance to screw!"

"Wait, you are not going to go barging in on them during the middle?"

"I mean that's real shitty of both of them," Cindy continued to rage.

"But Cindy, you don't really want to interrupt them now?"

"Like hell I don't!" She left so quickly that Jim felt like he had no other real option but to follow her.

By the time they were down the flight of stair most of the pounding and moaning had ceased, but this did not temper Cindy's fury.

"Hey you two in there, we are going home. You can just stay here if you like." There was not mistaking the hostile tone in her voice.

Bill mumbled a disgruntled 'shit' from behind the door and Emma shakily rasped out 'just a minute' to her friend.

There wasn't much for them to talk about as they fought their way back through the woods.

Chapter 25

Roy Wilson could not get to sleep. His wife's tossing and turning had joined forces with his own over wrought mind and sleep was just not coming. Pulling on his khaki pants, belt still attached and jingling over his hips, he forged his way through his dark house to the kitchen. A revealing peak into the icebox offered no tempting treats to occupy his taste buds. He began to wonder where he might have placed the cigars that had been given by a visiting uncle. Perhaps now was the time to take up that stinky habit. He did not have to glance up to the clock to know it was already after two a.m. He had heard Emma come in and settle up in her room for the night hours earlier. There was no one for him to talk with and he had little inclination to take up late night letter writing.

He made his way to the back door window and pulled the sheer curtains back to study the night. The moon wasn't visible from where he stood, but the dim night sky played with the shadows in the back yard. Just a hint of wind had picked up, causing leaves to fidget across the open patches of grass. Caring not about shoes or the cold he unbolted the door and stepped upon the frigid wood floor of the porch.

For an instant he wished he were back in bed with Liz nuzzling close. But then he remembered that Liz was not the same Liz anymore. Her touch did not even feel the same to him. "Maybe that's what is really bothering me," he thought, "I can deal with Barbara Lee's death, but I cannot live without Liz." He shuddered and leaned to rest his hands on the railing that encased the screened cubical. "What kind of man am I? Why can't I make my wife okay again?" Theses thoughts seemed paramount over the cold that attacked him so he did not even notice a colder brush of air that raced across his back.

Thoughts of Barbara Lee bubbled up in his mind's eye; Barbara Lee as a little girl, Barbara Lee as a sassy adolescent. He almost recoiled from the images of Barbara Lee right before her death. She had not become a kind or gentle person. Her pettiness had often hurt a lot of feeling. Roy had never been blind to her over bearing nature. He had always just hoped that she would grow out of it. Now there was not chance of that.

When the light hit him on the porch he had his head bowed and his eyes on the palms of his hands. His first thought was that a car had some how managed to pull around into the back yard and had just turned its headlights on him. But as soon as he looked up he knew that was not the

case.

His back yard was lit up like a campfire around a circle of people. But of course, there was not a campfire. And the people all looked very out of place. Their stances were stiff and their bodies awkwardly spaced. Like children separated for a game of 'Mother May I' they stood very still in their spots all facing toward Roy. No faces were visible. It was as if the ground beneath them was aglow. Their shadows loomed long and large in the trees behind them. All told there were seven of them filling the night in Roy's back yard.

He could not think to speak. Roy walked to the screen door and opened it. Still none of his visitors moved. Roy took two steps down the stoop. The damp cool night coughed up a stench of rotting flesh.

"What's going on here?" Words finally escaped from Roy's clinched mouth. "I said, what's going on here?" He took yet another step and directed himself to the person nearest him.

"Just a little tea party, Daddy." There was no mistaking the lilting voice that had called out to him from the other end of the group.

"Barbara?" Roy could barely get the name out. His skin crawled up his legs, chest, and arms.

"Yes, Daddy." The shape stepped from the ranks and haltingly approached him.

"No, no, don't come over here." He scrambled for a backward step. His weight slipped sideways beneath him and he fell to one knee. "Please!" He was screaming now.

"I have to Daddy." The voice was petulant. "You see that I have to." She was coming closer.

"Noooooo!" He drug out the one syllable into a plea.

"Yesssssssss," she hissed back.

He could see her. He could see her clearly now. The face was Barbara Lee's face. The smile was even Barbara Lee's smile, but her expression evoked something far worse than anything Roy had ever seen. The expression was cold and wild and obscene. He threw his hands to his face as if he had been touched by something foul and repulsive. "Nooooooo!"

"You want to help us Daddy, don't you?" The sickly sweet breath of the voice assaulted his senses. "You want to save us don't you, Daddy?" The voice was now more guttural, more strident.

"I can't help you," he yelled. "You have to go away now. You have to go away, Barbara Lee. You have to go to your rest."

A low, soft, almost girlish chuckle started deep down in her throat. A

chuckle that grew to a cackle and then to a shriek, "Go to hell, Daddy? Why don't you say it? Go to hell!" Her cries stirred the others. In sharp syncopation they all moved in toward the porch. A metallic buzz replaced the last notes of Barbara Lee's scream. The buzz rattled Roy's teeth in his mouth all the way up to his ears. "Nooo," he sobbed.

"Kill the witch. Kill the witch. Kill the witch," began their heavy refrain.

He could see them all now Angela, Billy, Lucille and Red. Next to Red moving slower and in shackles was Eddie. And then at the far end carrying something that he held in front of him, like a crown bearer's pillow came a small black child. As they took over the steps in front of Roy, he could see the object that lay on the satin pillow. It was the head of his niece; the head of his wife's sister's girl. The head which now stared up at him lifeless and mute was Emma's.

Roy awoke screaming in his bed. Liz was standing looking out the bedroom window into the back yard.

"Shhhh, nothing to fret about," she told him, "just a bad dream, that's all. That is all it was. I don't think they will come back." A content smile played about her lips.

Chapter 26

Emma figured that she was just about the luckiest girl in the whole world. Overnight her status had evolved; no longer was she the 'shy, new girl', she was Bill Simmons's new steady, one of the gang. Her immediate acceptance into the inner circle of the Bluff's high school elite was nothing if not startling. Her relationship with Cindy suffered for it.

"So Carla, what 'divine' thing happened to you this past weekend?" Cindy's voice just dripped with malice as she spoke to one of Emma's new companions.

Carla, who was sitting on one side of Emma while her long time friend, Sara, flanked the other side, only lifted her nose higher in the air and said, "Cindy, it's your own fault that you didn't join us. You were invited." Carla emphasized the last word by stabbing her fork into her salad and spearing a piece of lettuce.

"Oh, yeah." Cindy shot back, "That would have been just groovy." She had been invited to accompany them to the game, but not to stay the night in Carla's suite as the other guests had been done.

Emma was becoming very uncomfortable with her old friend's attitude. The last weekend had been a lot of fun for Emma. Bill and she along with two other couples had driven to Jackson to see the emotion packed game between Ole Miss and Mississippi State; the two biggest rivals of the state.

Bill and Emma had lined up on the Mississippi state side. Lately their plans had included going to college there together. They, with the other two couples from the Bluff had stayed in the home of Carla's aunt Rose, a cheerful homebody who could have easily been mistaken for a widow except for the fact that her husband was still alive. This husband strictly avoided his wife's activities and remained mute at the periphery of their vision the whole weekend. Deep in the spirit of the collegiate rivalry, the group had chanted, "Go to hell Ole Miss" all the way home.

Now, three days later, Emma sat in the Yazoo Pizza Hut and looked across the table to see the bitterness that marked her best friend's face. "Cindy," she had started hoping to say something to lighten the mood, but upon seeing Cindy's glare, the words just dried up in her mouth. Coming to Yazoo with Carla and Cindy had been a bad idea, a real bad idea. They just didn't hit it off and they never would. Emma guessed that since Cindy had grown up around Carla and her gang and had never bonded that she

wasn't about to now. And on top of that something that Cindy had said still rang in her ears. Cindy had said, "Hey Emma, think about it, if these people found it so easy to dump their long time friend Joy, what makes you think that you can really count on them for any loyalty?"

It had been amazing how the same couples who had just a month back been doubling with Bill and Joy were now welcoming her into the dating fold with open arms. It was just a matter of substituting partners. No one seemed to care that their old buddy Joy was now out of the cliché. Emma was in. It was enough to make ones head spin. This topped with the fact that Emma was 'in love' made her blind to any insincerity in her new pals.

Joy had not gone to school for the last two days and no one had seemed to even notice. Not one friend called her to see if she were ill. No one had stopped by to check on her. Joy Hutchinson felt bad. She felt real bad. She hoped and prayed that she was pregnant.

The worn flannel nightgown that she had on since Monday night was beginning to itch. She had not bathed. She had not eaten. She had barely left her room at all. Her mother was beyond worried. She was now some where in the realm between angry and disappointed. Mrs. Hutchinson knew perfectly well what was bothering her daughter, the gossip had reached her, and she was embarrassed that Joy was showing such a lack of self-control. It was humiliating.

"For Heaven's sake, Joy Anne, don't you even care what people think?" she had burst out at Joy the night before. "You better pick yourself up, young lady, and stop this. Show some self respect."

Joy did not bother to respond.

Elizabeth Wilson turned the sleek envelope over in her hand. Six times today she had taken the letter from the drawer intent on destroying it, only to find herself mesmerized by the long white letter and unable to do anything more. Now it was close to three o'clock and time for Emma to be returning home from school. Liz sat at the kitchen table balancing the envelope on one corner and studying the spidery handwriting on the outside for a clue to its contents.

While never questioning her strange compulsion to burn or shred the offensive missive, she finally began to consider just opening the letter and reading it. "Well, why shouldn't I?" she said out loud as the thought dawned on her. But once again she felt the unusual inertia.

She rose from her seat and moved to the kitchen sink. A colander of peas sat to one side waiting to be washed and prepared for supper. Liz ignored them and carefully began to wash her hands under the tap. She stared out the back window as she did this, her mind heaped in thoughts.

"Who could be writing to that girl? What is going on here? This is still my house and I have the right to know what kind of mail is coming into my house." She concluded this thought by shaking her hands dry over the sink. "That damn girl, damn her," she intoned. Wiping her hands on her apron she returned to the table. The envelope was as she had left it, propped up against the salt and pepper shakers.

A small shudder coursed through her body as she flipped the letter on to it's back. "Mine eyes have seen the glory..." she hummed to herself. The letter stayed still, she had half expected it to move. The folded lips on its back puckered up at her. "...of the coming of the Lord," she rung out these words in a hearty voice. Her shoulders slouched about her as a hand snaked up to the tabletop to grasp the letter. She resumed her singing as she held the letter up firmly in one hand.

She was ready to throttle it should it choose now to try and wiggle away. "Gloory, glory, Hal-le-luuuu-jah," she pealed out as she suspended the letter above the table, "His truth is marching oooooooooon." She ripped open one end in an exclamation of triumph. Cupping the letter in her left hand she sloshed out it's contents on to the table, one page of lined paper. Her chest heaved as her right hand spread the letter open before her.

The letter read:

Dear Miss Emma Lewis,

I was rightly troubled by the letter you sent me. I weren't sure if I should answer you at all, but my sleep ain't been right since hearing from you. If what you say is the gospel truth, and the good Lord help YOU if it ain't, then you need more help than I can give you.

Maybe you are not going to believe what I say at all, but just maybe you are. It is not easy for me to write and say what's got to be said here. My mamma, she was always a very good mamma to me, but she wasn't always a very good woman. It hurt me a lot to hear when I was growing up what folks had to say about her. But maybe they did know what they were talking about.

My mamma wasn't no regular person, at least not like you and I. God gave her gifts, special gifts. She had them from the time when she was

just a little girl.

Maybe it was just that she never learned how to use them right, but I think at first she really meant to be good. But sometimes a lot of power is more than one person knows how to live with, especially when one can see so much wrong on this old world. I think that's why she went way too far.

Now if you say you have seen her, I believe you. It scares me to believe you, but then I never figured my mamma to just let someone kill her like they said. The trouble is if someone really did try to murder her there is no telling how mean that might make her. It always seemed to me that for every time she did a little good she paid for it by doing a lot of meanness too.

There's not much else I can tell you about this, but if you still believe that what you told me is true, there is someone else you need beside me. And you got to believe me that if this is all true there ain't no one down there safe til mamma has been taking care of. I am scared even up here to write any more about this. You got to go see Miss Hattie. She lives on the bluffs above the Sunflower River, just down from Rolling Fork. You ask folks around there, they will tell you where she stays. You go see her and you tell her what all you told me and then you do what ever she tells you to do! You do just what she tells you.!

May the Lord watch over you, Adie Grace

Liz did not put the letter down once she had read it. She read it twice again and winced as she folded the letter and placed it neatly back into the envelope. "Nobody is going to Hattie's," her voice spilled out of unmoving lips, the words cold and smooth as the belly of a dead fish. She crumpled the letter into a ball and slipped it into her apron pocket.

Chapter 27

"Kiss me again, William," Emma demanded.

"Don't you ever get enough?" Bill turned in the car seat to face her. They were parked safely in her driveway. The whole ride home she had kept leaning over the middle console to kiss his neck and caress his inner thigh.

"I want more," she whined like a petulant child.

"You are asking for it you know?"

"Uh-huh," she heartily agreed.

"How safe are we here?" He looked around nervously.

"How safe do you want to be?"

"Well..." He reached out and squeezed one of her breasts.

"Let's go up to my room," she said and then dropped from her waist her head in his lap.

"Yeah, maybe we should." He laughed as she blew warm air into the crotch of his jeans. "Now where did you learn to do that?"

Roy saw the couple crawl out of the car and walk up to the house. "Just what I was afraid of," he said, his voice leaving a mist on the windowpane.

"What's that you say, Mr. Wilson?" Demar asked.

"Not a thing, not a thing. You and Pugh tie up the boat and bring in the lines. I got to stay here in the house." He did not turn around to face the two men's questioning glances, he just kept watching the couple.

They did not see him when they first walked into the living room. He watched as they embraced. Bill's legs were spread and Emma wiggled her pelvis up against him. They shot apart when he coughed.

"So, what you two doing?" There was no mistaking the disapproval in his voice.

"Bill just brought me home, that's all," Emma answered lamely.

"Well then I guess Bill should be getting on home now himself." Roy nodded toward the door.

"Yes sir," Bill quickly conferred reaching for the doorknob. He left with out looking back.

Emma stared after him, now irritated with her uncle's intrusion.

"Emma, I believe we need to have a little talk." Roy was unhappy with having to take on this role of a disciplinarian.

"Yes sir." Emma remained stiff and standing. He could see malice in

her eyes.

He shuffled his feet and began. "There are things that are just not right for a young lady to go around doing." He cleared his throat. "And if I come upon or hear about any more public displays of affection between you and that Simmons boy I am going to be forced to do something about it."

"What do you mean, 'hear about'?" she shot out, "Who has been talking about Bill and me?"

"Now see here," he stopped her, "I wasn't going to bring it up, but it is no secret. I cannot tell you how embarrassed I was to have something said to me about the way you two were behaving in church on Sunday; in church for crying out loud! I was told you two disrupted the service with your squirming all over each other, offending decent folks who had come there to worship!"

"What?" she broke in.

"And another thing, did you or did you not have to be asked to please sit up straight, on the couch where you were practically draped over Bill, just this weekend at the church activities building? Mr. McMannis told me himself that it was a disgrace to see the way you two 'carry on' like dogs in heat!"

"Mr. McMannis is an old poop!" Emma cried.

"Emma Lewis, I am not going to put up with that kind of talk about your elders, not in this house." Roy's voice was getting louder and louder. Liz could hear every word being said from her spot in the kitchen. A broad smile sealed her lips as she sat peeling potatoes at the kitchen table.

"That's unfair, Uncle Roy." Emma lip began to quiver and she could feel the tears burning in her eyes. "You take somebody's word about me to be the truth. You don't even know my side of it."

"Emma, I saw you two in here just a while ago with my own eyes," he reminded her.

Her face fell when she realized this. "So what do you plan to do about it?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"Well I would rather hope you would just stop it by your own, but since I am your legal guardian I guess it is my place to ground you from seeing Bill so much right now. I mean I know you have to see him at school and all, but this spending all your time with him has got to stop"

"What?" she had not been prepared for this. The thought of not being able to see Bill whenever she wanted terrified her. "No, you cannot do that."

" Oh yes I can. I think maybe one weekend evening a week; not two,

not all day together, is a very fair restriction. There is no reason for you to follow that boy everywhere he goes. It doesn't look nice. I suppose I am at fault for not nipping it in the bud before now."

Emma just stood there staring at him, wishing she could roll back time to before when she and Bill had come into the house. "God," she thought, "What if he had caught us up in my room?" Numbly she picked up her schoolbooks and went upstairs.

Roy waited in the living room until he heard Emma's door close, and then he went into the kitchen.

"Glad to see you, Roy," Liz beamed up at him, offering him one of her cheeks to kiss.

"Wish I was glad right now," he replied as he placed a swift peck on her forehead.

"You know it's about time you put that girl in line," she spoke contritely. "So you heard all that, huh?"

"Most of it." She placed her hands on the tabletop and knitted her fingers into one big fist. "When will she be going away?" she asked studying her hand.

"Honey," he looked up in dismay. "I didn't ask Emma to leave. I could never do that."

"Hrmph," she snorted, "we will just have to wait and see about that." She had not sounded so much like her old self since Barbara Lee's demise.

Chapter 28

Hattie Murphy had spent most of her life in the house where she presently lived. She had been born Hattie Bell Murphy in a time when the only sure work a black woman could count on was as a maid to some white family. She had served her time raising white kids until she got too old and too crippled to mop and clean and tote around white babies. She lost her only mode of employment at the age of fifty-seven with no pension to fall back on and no hope of making ends meet. That was when she gave in to the old ways in which she had been trained in her youth.

Her Grandmamma was a mean old woman who had been a mean child and a meaner adult. While the old woman had lived Hattie had heard many say that GG Murphy's meanness was enough to make a cow go dry and a chicken cease to lay. But still for miles around the colored folks came to her when they had nowhere else to turn.

GG Murphy had the gift of healing. Not healing like the tent revival evangelists who could lay on their hands and shout for the evil spirits to come out, but healing like something dark and raw that had come straight out of the darkness of old Africa. Her cures were always simple and direct, with never a touch of hocus pocus falderal.

Most time the old lady would sit still in her big rocker, seemingly disinterested in the tale her 'patients' told to her of their ailments and problems. Then if the situation called for it she would rise and go to the cupboard to retrieve some thick liquid or dried flakes and give them to her caller. Most of the ailments were common enough and the cures she gave could probably be attributed to the medicinal properties of her potions.

But on certain occasions a party of white folks would arrive carrying some soul who was obviously at death's door. There might be open wounds or broken bones but the old woman would never falter or send the sick away. She would dismiss the concerned on lockers and closet herself away with the patient in her back room. Often she would remain for hours coming out only to procure some herbs or poultices and then return to the sick room without ever muttering a word.

Few of her patients ever died though there were times when she advised the family to let this go on and happen, thus releasing the soul from torment. But if they insisted on a cure she would go on and perform her ritual. The sick would live but many of the worse cases bore the mark of their healing for the rest of their life. At times outright insanity would

over take them. For others who survived their remaining life would be filled with a dark haunting of unexplained fear and horror and screams in the night.

While she lived no one ever tried to explain away GG's magic, in fact few even acknowledged ever going to her. But after her death, this was when Hattie was still a young woman and working at the Jenkin's place, wild talk flourished about GG being a witch and the world being well rid of her. Only when a family was confronted by a sickness that the doctors couldn't cure would her powers be sincerely missed. It was during these times that Hattie first felt the stirring in her bones. She would wake up bathed in sweat, an aching in her hands and she would know that there was something inside her that was fighting to get out.

It was a crisp, cool Wednesday evening and Hattie sat huddled at her single table in front of the stove. The winter chill had already taken a hold of her pleurisy and her bones throbbed and moaned beneath the surface of her dark flesh. Hattie was oblivious to her pain though for her mind had skirted it's worldly boundaries and was carrying her back to a time when she could still skip and she could still sing.

"Hattie, girl, bring that thread and needle over here to me."

"Yes, Grandmamma," the young girl who would have at that time preferred to be called Bell, answered. She was in her Grandmamma's house on the site where her own present day home now stood. It was a hot summer night.

"What you looking at, girl?" the old woman asked sternly. Hattie had frozen in her tracks in front of her Grandmamma, the thread and needle still in her hand. She was looking at the unsuspecting kitten that sat curled in the old lady's lap. "You go on with your play, now you hear."

"What you going to do, Grandmamma?" the child braved to ask. The old woman tilted her head back and peered through her glasses at Hattie. With eyes as cold and hard as river rocks she took in her grand daughter. Hattie's mother had never married; she had just gotten pregnant in her teens. After giving birth to Hattie she had left town with the man who had knocked her up, leaving the infant in the care of her aging mother. It was a common enough occurrence and Hattie had never grieved over it much. It was not exactly a warm and cheery life with her Grandmamma, but it was the only life she had ever known.

"You axs too many questions, girl." came her reply.

"You is not gonna hurt Suzie Q, is ya?"

"What's it to you if I do?" the old woman asked harshly but with

patience.

This was a question that Hattie could not bring herself to answer because if she admitted her affection for the kitten her Grandmamma would only lecture her on the waste of foolish emotions. GG Murphy was not one to waste strong feelings. She lad little use for sentimentality. So Hattie only said, "Nothing, Grandmamma."

"Then get back to what you were doing." She dismissed the child. Hattie scooted back to the old couch and was covered with the ancient quilt and took up her picture book. She tried to keep her eyes off her Grandmamma.

She heard the kitten mewl and then scream outright in her Grand mamma's grasp. Hattie covered her face with her book.

A stifled cry escaped her young mouth when she found the small eyeball in the sink later that afternoon. She shot a look-see at the kitten and could not miss the heavy thick thread that laced up its right eye. Her Grandmamma stepped in from the back porch, an empty mayonnaise jar in her hand.

"That cat's lucky, child. They could have demanded its whole head. I'd a had a hard time stitching that back up." She snickered at her own humor. Hattie just wondered who 'they' were.

The aged Hattie Murphy shook her great weight away from the small table and attempted to rise. A hot cup of tea would warm her some and ease her shivers. She had not thought often of her childhood in the last ten years. GG Murphy had died for her years ago. Remembering her Grandmamma was one thing, but thinking about the consequences of the 'power' was not something she tried to consider. "Power?" she laughed to herself, extending one feeble veined hand.

An eleven-year old Hattie sat cross-legged, her back to the planked wall beside the stove. Unawares her fingers traced the contours of the dark wood floor beneath her. A family of four sat rigidly, on the sofa. The father, a solid built man, too large for the close quarters supported the narrow shoulders of his wife. She held in her arms a child of probably no more than three who had not moved since their arrival. An infant just learning to stand grasped first the mother's and then the father's knees as she made her way up and down the couch length. The child in the mother's arm was clearly the ailing party.

When Hattie had first encountered the family, on the sagging porch when she arrived home from school, she had explained that her Grandmamma was away until late, but the man had insisted that they be allowed to wait. Hattie had hesitantly admitted them into the house and offered them a seat. They had watched dispassionately as she built an adequate fire in the old cast iron stove. When the pot of water on top boiled she offered them some tea. They declined. She felt uncomfortable as she took out a small wedge of cheese to eat for her supper, but none of the waiting appeared to mind.

"Yawl from around hereabouts?" she asked to break the fierce silence. "Fraid not," was all the man answered.

So now two hours later and with darkness approaching Hattie sat speechless with these strangers.

She was awakened by her Grandmamma coming through the front door.

"Hattie girl," the woman began before the family on the couch had yet caught her attention. "What's this?" was all she could get out of her mouth before the tall man stood up.

"Miz GG" the name came out like a single word in a foreign language. What he said after that was impossible for Hattie to make out. "Yumba taah," was what it sounded like to the girl. The effect on her Grandmamma was startling. The old woman took a solid step back towards the door. Her chin tucked itself down between the folds of her neck and her arms came up to her chest like protracted wings.

"Grandmamma?" Hattie rose from her hard pallet. "Grandmamma?"

"Not now girl. Get outside." Hattie looked at the old woman in doubt. It was freezing outside. "Now." the Grandmamma ordered.

"No." It was the man who stepped in front of her to block her path to the front door. "How do you know..." he began to say to GG.

"This child is bless," she interrupted him. But he did not step aside. He looked toward his own toddler beneath her mother's back. GG caught his meaning. "Your baby," she nodded toward the child, "she does not yet speak?"

"Only small words, baby gibberish. And she is so young."

"She may be spared. Hattie," her grandmamma clipped out her name, "Hattie take the child and as many blankets as you can and go to the front porch. Carry a lantern and if it goes out you must call me immediately."

Hattie opened the wooden chest in the corner and grabbed an armful of blankets from the top. She also snatched up her worn coat from the chair. She walked around the man to the front door. The mother rose slowly from the couch resting her older child in the folds of the ancient quilt. She pulled the baby into her arms. Hattie moved aside to let both

women through the door.

At first the wind that caught Hattie seemed intent on propelling her back into the house, but one step past the doorway it died to a chilly breeze. The woman stepped out followed by GG. Hattie lay the blankets down and strapped on her coat. Hattie saw goblets of tears rim the mother's eye as she gave the baby over. The little girl had to be pried from her mother's neck, but it did not cry out when it was finally in Hattie's arms.

"Sit down," GG instructed. Hattie did as she was told. GG then opened a blanket and draped it across and around, Indian style, the babe until all but a semicircle of it's face was buried in the covers.

"Grandmamma," Hattie felt suddenly very afraid. "What's I s'pose to do?"

"Nothing, girl, just watch this lamp. You yell real loud if it goes out, you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Now Hattie wanted to cry. She saw in her Grandmamma's face something as close as to warmth as she had ever seen. And Grandmamma was looking right at her. "Don't pay no attention to what you hear inside," the old woman instructed her. Then both adults turned together and stepped back inside the door. Hattie was alone with the baby.

"Get her in the back room." she heard her Grandmamma say through the thin walls.

"Can she be saved?" It must have been the woman who spoke.

"Shush up, you know what's got to be." This was clearly the man and Hattie heard his heavy footsteps cross the room back towards the couch. "Effie?" his voice was softer now. What Hattie heard next sunk a hard knot into her belly. A screech or maybe a growl vibrated inside the house. A man yelped in pain. "Get back," her Grandmamma cried. There was a commotion that Hattie could not follow and then another growl, lower and meaner this time.

"You! Get that kindling from out back," she heard GG order someone. Hattie heard something heavy being drug from the room. "Don't touch her!" were the last words Hattie heard her Grandmamma say for a while.

Hattie had been alone on the porch with the baby for more than forty minutes before the little girl started to squirm. At first she just shifted positions several times, and then her head bobbed up as she sat upright. Her tiny hand felt for an opening in the blanket above her. Hattie fretted that the child might become afraid and start to cry out. She loosened the

blanket from around her and let the small head peep out more. The child stared up at her in amazement. Her small hand stretched out to grab a hunk of Hattie's hair.

"Ough," Hattie complained, pulling the hand away. "No," she spoke to the child, "No." The child seemed content to release the hair and rest against Hattie. "Good baby." Hattie stroked one of the baby's fat checks.

"Goo-ah," the baby imitated.

"Goo-ah," Hattie answered back. They both giggled.

"Gawd, Gawd help us," the voice of the man shot through the house. Hattie jerked upright, clutching the baby to her.

"Goo-ah," the baby cooed into her neck and snickered.

A loud racket shook the house. Hattie turned to look in to the front window. A bright light shone from the open door of the back room. Hattie saw the silhouette of the man as he ran from the room. The flicker of a great light brought Hattie's attention to the back of the shack. Huge sheets of fire lapped up the walls. Hattie struggled to her feet. "Grandmamma," she screamed.

The child in her arms tightened its grasp on her. Hattie pushed up to free herself of this grasp, but the child only held on that much tighter. Now Hattie could hear the baby's gurgling laugh. "Let go of me," she shouted using both hands to fend the baby off of her. She saw the round cherub face smiling up to her mischievously. She threw the baby against the plank front wall and ran from the porch.

From behind her the front door flung open. She turned and in what seemed like two steps she was across the room and staring into the back room. Like Shadrak, Meshak, and Abindego there was her Grandmamma. Her Grandmamma and the girl's mother were standing around the bed untouched by the fire. The young girl, who had been placed on the bed, roared and crackled like a log on a fire. The smell from the room made Hattie gag.

"Grandmamma," she choked. The old woman turned and looked at her. Columns of smoke whisked out from where her eyes should have been. She moved toward Hattie. Before Hattie could even turn around the old woman was upon her. Her fingers singed and hissed where they touched Hattie. The old woman collapsed against her. Her body felt tight and hard like a clump of steel and Hattie had lifted her up before she knew it. She took her Grandmamma and ran towards the front door and into the cool clear air.

Hattie saw the toddler standing on the bare ground supporting herself

with the porch steps. She was trying to crawl back on to the porch. Hattie stopped, too scared at first to even approach the child. Then she bolted past the little girl into the front yard. She heard part of the roof give away as she reached the dirt path. Hattie fell back, the staggering weight of her Grandmamma finally catching up with her. She looked back to see the child running towards her in tiny duck steps. The child reached her and held up its arms to her. "Goo-ah," she cooed, "Goo-ah ah." Hattie saw the rest of the house cave in on itself.

Chapter 29

GG Murphy did not appear to have any burns from her ordeal. The doctor who examined her pronounced her well for a woman her age and released her to her granddaughter's care. The fact that the woman did not speak or acknowledge the presence of others phased him little in his diagnosis. "She'll snap out of it in a few days," he assured Hattie. With the now orphaned baby girl still in her arms, Hattie only shrugged in reply. She was too struck by his lack of concern to voice any reply.

A neighbor lady took the three back to her home to feed them and to put them in make shift beds. It was the next day before Hattie learned exactly what had happened to the others. The mother's charred remains had been found in the ruins. No trace or remains were found of the older child. In fact folks just ignored her when she insisted that there had been another child. But it was the father's death that brought the sheriff to see Hattie the next day. He had been found on the riverbank with an ax sticking from his skull.

"You don't know who he was?" The sheriff asked for the third time.

"No sir." She kept her eyes down.

"And you don't know what he was doing at your house?" Hattie was hesitant to bring up the other child since all she had gotten was ridicule over the issue up to now. "Well girl?"

"No sir," she answered.

"Then I reckon that's about all I can do." He snapped up the front of his jacket and left quickly. No more questions were ever asked about that night.

Hattie did not see much of the small child again until the day some of her aunties came to take her away. Hattie had barely left the side of her inanimate grandmamma for days, her food was brought to her by the neighbor lady who had taken them in. She assumed this same good soul was caring for the child. She just sat by the bedside watching. No one asked her what she planned to do next.

On the day they came to get the child, Hattie was just coming back in from her first time outside in a week. Three middle-aged ladies filled the small front room in their fineries.

"Hattie, say hello to these nice ladies. They have come to get our little angel. I really almost hate to see her go. She hasn't bin a wit of trouble." The neighbor lady turned to face the guests. "And she never cries."

"Well we are just happy to have our little Viola safe and sound," One of the aunties said. "Yes sir, that Viola Grace is one lucky child."

A shiver ran up Hattie's spine.

"Shuddup and get in the car." Cindy eased to a stop on the gravel drive and waited for Jimmy to crawl in. His door was barely closed before she spun off out of the drive on to the long narrow stretch of highway that led to Rolling Fork.

"I am here, aren't I?" He reached over to squeeze one of her hands that had a death grip on the steering wheel. "Relax, girl. Tell old uncle Jimmy all about it."

Before she even had time to think she was blurting out all the disturbing events of the last few days.

Emma had called her late Wednesday night, woken up her whole family and scared Cindy half to death. They really hadn't been on close terms since the incident with Carla at the Pizza Hut. Cindy had resigned herself to the fact that she had probably lost a good friend. But when she had called Wednesday night Emma had been in tears and barely able to speak at first.

"I am going to kill myself."

"Oh, geez, Emma, are you out of your mind? No, scratch that. What's happened?"

Sobs broke the flow of conversation for a few minutes. Cindy grew impatient. "Emma, you have to tell me what the matter is."

"Uncle Roy says I can't see him any more."

"Who? Bill? That's stupid. You go to school with the boy."

"I mean date him," Emma cried out emphatically.

"Not ever?" Cindy tried to imagine what could have spurred docile old Roy Wilson into laying the law down.

"No, just not for a while and only one date per weekend."

[&]quot;Looking mighty fine there, Miss Cindy."

[&]quot;Something the matter," He asked warily.

[&]quot;What do you think?"

[&]quot;Naw, must be my imagination."

[&]quot;Okay smart ass," Cindy glanced his way. "This was a dumb idea."

[&]quot;What are you talking about?"

[&]quot;Do you really want to go to this thing or what?"

" You are out of your mind. Emma that is not the end of the world." Cindy was only a bit sorry that her voice did not sound any more empathetic than it did, but she could not help but believe that this was good news.

"Don't you see!!!...I will loose him."

"No, I don't see that. You told me that what yawl have is something very special. Surely, he will understand."

"Noooooo, you don't understand." Emma broke back into sobs.

"Emma, Emma, will you listen to me. You, me, Bill, we are only in high school. I mean I know how much you care for him, but geez, there is nothing that can come of it right now anyway. So just be cool take your time. This might all work out for the best."

"You don't understand."

"How can I understand you behaving like a lunatic? Why don't you just get a good night's sleep? It will all be better tomorrow. Your uncle may even change his mind. Hey, why don't I come get you for school tomorrow? I will come early so that we can talk. Okay, would you like that?"

"I guess so." Emma's voice sounded very small. Cindy's mother had come into her room to see what the matter was and she stood by Cindy's bed waiting for an explanation.

"Okay Emma, I'll come get you in the morning. Everything is gonna be fine."

"Yea," Emma said as she lay the phone on its cradle, leaving Cindy with just a dial tone before she could even say good bye.

Cindy turned to her mother not quite sure what she should tell her. "Problems, I guess she couldn't sleep," she finally offered.

"Emma?" Mrs. Basset asked. Cindy nodded her head. "Well dear, sometimes there is only so much we can do for our friends, then it's in their own hands."

"Yes mom." Cindy accepted the well-meaning advice and smiled at her mother as she left the room.

But when she turned off her light and crept back into bed she found that now she could not sleep. "What if she really meant to kill herself?" My God, how could I ever live with that?" Realizing the chance she was taking of making a scene by waking the Wilson's up, she pulled the phone up on the bed and dialed Emma's number.

The phone was picked up on the first ring, but Cindy did not recognize the voice. The dry crackly 'hello' did not seem to belong to anyone in the Wilson family. She started to just put the phone down, but something drove her to say," This is Cindy Basset. May I please speak with Emma?"

"Miss Emma is all asleep now. You don't go worrying about her anymore. She is going to be fine, just fine."

Something about the voice made the hairs on Cindy's neck stand out. Then there was a click and for the second time that night the Wilson's phone went dead on her.

Emma was not there when Cindy arrived to pick her up the next morning. Liz Wilson, who answered the front door, was not the least bit disturbed that her niece had left so early for school without saying goodbye.

"No, I did not see who she left with," Liz admitted, "Must have been one of her *other* friends." Liz smiled vacantly toward Cindy. It was clear she was just waiting for Cindy to leave so that she could shut the door.

"Did she seem upset or anything?" Cindy took a chance and asked.

"No she was quite happy, even singing to herself. But what a pitiful excuse for a voice that girl's got. Now you take my Barbara Lee, she could sing like an angel, always in the church choir and all."

Cindy stared at the woman and wondered just how bad had things gotten around the Wilson's house since Barbara Lee's death. "Well thank you. I have really got to be running now." She walked down the front steps with Liz still droning the virtues of Barbara Lee's singing behind her.

When she got to the schoolyard she looked around first for Emma's small blonde head but could not make it out in the crowd, but she did notice one that had been missing for a while. Joy Hutchinson was back in school. Cindy saw from the first that Joy had lost weight and looked a bit haggard. Joy stood partially removed from the main body of the group, staring off down the main road. "She's looking for Bill," Cindy thought.

When Emma still hadn't showed up for first period, Cindy's stomach wound itself up into a tight little ball and she could pay no attention to the lecture.

On the verge of imagining all possible horrors Cindy found Emma waiting for her at the jeep when she went out for lunch.

"Where the hell have you been?" Cindy screamed at her before she was across the parking lot. She was now flooded with anger over the distress that Emma had put her through.

"Oh Cindy, don't be so childish. You shouldn't worry about me." A broad smile lit up her face and Cindy found that despite her anger she could only smile back.

"You scared me to death, what with your call last night and all."

"Oh, I was just being silly. I really didn't understand." Emma bounced a little on her feet waiting for Cindy to unlock her door.

"So, you are going to have lunch with me, huh?" Cindy asked, bewildered by the change in Emma from the night before. "What about Bill? Have you seen him today?"

"Oh don't worry about Bill. It will do him good to wonder where I am."

Cindy was really taken back by this, but she did not question Emma. She was delighted to see her old friend in such high spirits. "Where to?" she asked as they pulled out of the parking lot.

They spoke no more of the night before until they had both bought colas and sandwiches at Po's and were settled back in the jeep to eat.

"So where were you this morning?" Cindy inquired.

"Oh let's just say I went for a little walk," Emma answered vaguely.

Cindy noticed the dirt caked under Emma's fingernails. That was weird since Emma was one of the cleanest persons she knew, especially when she was depressed. That girl could take five baths a day. "How did you get so dirty?" Cindy remarked nodding towards Emma's hands.

"My aren't you the nosy one." Emma avoided Cindy's gaze.

"Emma, what had gotten into you?" Cindy was now truly baffled.

"Well it's like this, Cin, I just realized what a complete jerk I have been behaving like I was and I am trying to do something about it."

"Okay, but how did you get to school?" Cindy was tired of the run around she was getting.

"Hitch hiked."

"What?"

"I said I hitch hiked."

"Emma, that is not like you, besides there is not enough traffic down your road. Who would have ever picked you up?"

"I didn't hitch hike from my road. I walked to the main road and hitch hiked from there."

"But that's ten miles."

"No, not through the woods it's not." Emma smiled another of her new little smiles. "It took a while, but it was worth every minute of it."

Cindy spotted Bill as soon as they pulled back in to the school grounds. He was in front of the main entrance involved in a conversation with Joy. "Now he is going to freak," Cindy thought looking towards Emma. What she saw on Emma's face was not so pleasant. Emma's smile had frozen and her hands were balled into small fists. "So much for

her new resolve," Cindy thought.

Emma did not let the heavy grin leave her face. She rummaged for her purse that was on the floorboard and hugged it to her. She took something from inside. Cindy could not see what. Emma kissed the object once and stuffed it back deep into her bag.

"Let me out here," Emma demanded.

"Sure." Cindy brought the jeep up the loop in front of the school and Emma jumped out. She watched Emma approach the two as she went to park.

"We are going to a party at Joy's house this Saturday," Emma announced as she got into the jeep with Cindy at the end of the day. Cindy had been waiting almost thirty minutes for Emma to get out of Bill's car and join her. Emma had begged Cindy not to leave her, fearing that her uncle would hit the roof if Bill brought her home.

"Who is we?" Cindy wanted to know.

"Well, you are invited too, of course, but I was speaking of Bill and myself."

"You must be crazy."

"That was what she was asking him about when we drove up at lunch. It is all quite all right. Bill and Joy have known each other for a long time and there is no reason for us to be uncivil now that things have changed."

"Aren't you kind of rushing things? I mean Joy is surely not over Bill yet. Aren't you afraid she will be kind of hostile when you show up as Bill's date."

"No." Emma was over wrought with confidence, the new Emma. "So are you coming too?"

"I don't really know," Cindy stammered, "I guess so."

"So that is what this is all about?" Jim asked as they sped down the highway.

"Yep."

"Now, I don't really get it. I mean if Emma wants to set herself up for an uncomfortable time that is her problem. I don't see why we have to join."

"Because she is not acting like Emma anymore," Cindy yelled. "Can't you see, the old shy Emma would never go traipsing into Joy's house like this? I mean if nothing else it is tacky."

"Oh I see, and you can't abide any tacky friends."

"It's not that..." she stopped at a loss of an explanation that would relay her fears.

"But I thought you said her uncle had put a nix on her dating Bill for a while?"

"He did. She told him she was going with me."

"You don't think he will notice the difference. Bill really doesn't look that much like you at all," he laughed.

"She is walking out to the high way to meet him. Can't you see, she is really behaving weird?"

"Some girls do that when they think they are in love."

"Don't make me sick." Cindy glared at him. Maybe she was making too big of a deal of the whole thing, but all she could do was to be there so that she could sit back and watch what happened next.

Chapter 30

Bill wasn't too sure what to make of Emma lately. He had been real worried after her uncle had caught them together in her living room, but he still could not believe it was too big of a deal. After all, all they had been doing was kissing. Her uncle couldn't possibly know about anything else that had transpired between them. Still Emma had been very upset when she had called him later than night.

She was saying stupid things like they would have to quit seeing each other and that she would be homeless if her uncle kicked her out. He had told her that she was going over board and that surely her uncle would never do anything that drastic, but she was beyond reasoning. He had felt bad because he finally gotten a little short with her when she had just kept going on and on.

But what was one suppose to do with a frantic woman. He had been all prepared for her to act hurt and pouting on Thursday, when she had showed up at school she had been all smiles and kisses. Fine with him; he liked her best this way.

The problem now was this deal with Joy's party. He had been in the midst of arguing with Joy about why he would not be coming to her party when Emma strolled up and volunteered that they would be delighted to attend. There was just no understanding her at all.

He just hoped he could talk her into leaving early if they went to the party. But then he couldn't help wondering what Joy would think of that. Seeing that she knew what usually went on when he and she used to leave parties early. Oh well, that was her problem.

He had parked on the curve a quarter mile up the road from Emma's house and was waiting for her to come along. He did not like the idea of having to be so sneaky, but Emma was convinced that her uncle would never have allowed her to go otherwise. Bill peered up the road and thought of the growing darkness. He was worried about her walking down that old dark road alone. Thank God the killer had been caught. He nearly jumped out of his seat when she wrapped on his window. He had not seen her approach.

"Jeez, you scared me," he said opening the door for her. "I never even saw you coming up."

"I didn't come down the road. I cut through the trees."

"My little trail blazer, why did you do that?" he said as he wrapped both arms around her and rubbed her shoulders.

"Just felt like it." She brushed back his bangs and kissed his forehead.

"How did you get so dirty?" He noticed that both knees of her jeans were muddy.

"Fell down, I guess."

"You guess?" He pulled her across the center console to him. "Poor little girl, I will have to take better care of you in the future." As usual, as soon as he kissed her he wanted more. "Are you sure you want to do this dumb party?"

"Yes." She pulled away and straightened herself in her seat.

"You're the boss." He started the car.

Roy had seen his niece take off down the road. It didn't take too much to put two and two together. She wasn't going to meet Cindy. He wasn't quite sure how to handle her disobedience. He had been worrying so much about Liz lately that his mind just could not focus on how he should handle Emma.

He supposed that horrible dream about Barbara Lee and all had just been his subconscious warning him to be real careful with Emma. There was more than one way to lose a child, and he did love Emma Lewis like she was his own child. He wished he could make her see that.

She was always so closed and so careful not to show too much emotion in front of him. That was probably the reason she was all wrapped up in that Simmons boy. He was the first thing that she had had to love that she felt was her own since her parents had died. Well still that was not excuse for letting that boy go too far. It was his place to see to that and Emma would understand some day.

"Come out to the back porch with me, punkin." Liz called from the kitchen door way.

"Too cold for that, Lizbeth," he told her. "Come sit in here with me." He motioned towards the living room.

"What you got in mind, you old devil?" She sashayed toward him, her ample hips swaying beneath her full shirt.

"My God, I guess you still get to me," He laughed sitting her on his lap.

"You love me don't you, Roy?"

"Most certainly."

"Enough to do anything in the world for me." She smiled seductively at his questioning gaze.

Emma was exhilarated on the ride to Joy's house. She and Bill actually said very little to each other. She was caught up in her own delight. Wednesday night had been a down, a real down. She could just envision the end of Bill and her, but not anymore, not since her Fairy Godmother had finally shown herself.

She had been in such a state of despair that the soft hand touching her shoulder had not even startled her. She had put down the phone and turned ready to face whatever might have been there, even death, but what she saw was comforting and warm. The frail old woman stood with her arms out stretched ready to cradle and soothe away all of Emma's worries.

"Don't fret no more, child. I can't bare to see you hurt." There had actually been tears in the tired old eyes when she had said this.

"Momma," Emma had whispered unawares.

"That's right, I'll be your Momma, your Grandmamma, your Daddy. I am going to take care of you girl."

Emma had let the woman lead her to the bed and lay her down beneath the warm quilt, then she had listened, listened and drifted into a most peaceful wonderful sleep as Viola told her what all she had done for her and what all she was going to do for her yet.

She had to be the luckiest girl in the world to have all that care working just for her: power that could learn to use so that she would never have to worry again. There was no need to be troubled about Bill. He could not leave her if he wanted to.

"Ah," she purred to herself, smiling.

"What's that you said, baby?" Back in the car Bill leaned over to take her hand.

"Oh nothing, it's just that I am so happy."

"Carla darling, how perfectly divine to see you." Cindy roared as she made her way across the dark living room. She had made Jim roll a joint and smoke it with her before coming into the house. She wanted to get there as late as possible in as stoned a state as she could handle. Carla now eyed her like slime that had just slithered into the house.

"How you doing there, Carla?" Jimmy slapped her on the back and directed Cindy toward another part of the room. Still it was obvious that they were in enemy territory. Old friends of the late Joy/Bill union hung in small clumps across the room. No one approached to welcome them.

"Come on, let's go." Cindy grabbed his arm to head back to the front door. She was cut off by Joy who waltzed in from the kitchen.

"Cindy," Joy exclaimed, like they were long time pals, "I am so glad to see you." Cindy was afraid that she was about to be embraced, so she took a protective step back toward Jim.

"Yeah, nice to see you too." Cindy's eyes roamed over Joy's head and around the room. It did not look like Bill and Emma had arrived yet.

"They aren't here yet." Joy answered the unasked question. "But then you know how Bill is."

"God forbid that I should ever find out." Cindy couldn't keep from saying. Joy merely grimaced and tried to regain her smile.

"Well, make yourself at home. There are plenty of munchies." With one hand she motioned around the room to where scattered bowls of chips lay, then she turned on her heels and went back into the kitchen.

"Old Joy's looking pretty good there," Jim commented. Cindy only stared at him. The loss of a few pounds surely hadn't hurt her.

"If you like sleaze," Cindy finally said.

In one corner some couples were playing some kind of drinking dice game, in another Phil Wheeler had gathered a crowd. He had left the academy in Jr. High to go to a military academy. He was telling tales of the wild antics in an all-boys school. On the sofa two girls that Cindy did not particularly dislike were eyeing the few unattached boys.

"This party is not my cup of tea, "Cindy said a little too loudly to Jim.

"Ah come on honey, you'll fit right in." He nudged her farther away from the door lest she run for it.

They had just struck up an inane conversation with an old buddy of Jim's when they saw eyes shift to the front door. There stood Emma and Bill. He had both of their jackets draped over his arm and she was standing slightly behind him, a bit flushed in the face.

"About time you two showed up." Cindy made a few quick steps towards them. "This party is a dud. Let's leave." she told Emma.

"Bill how good to see you and," she spoke as she came forwards to take their jackets, "and, and ah Emma."

"Thanks," Bill coughed. Cindy had to smile at him because he looked as uncomfortable as a cat in a violin factory.

"Relax, Cindy, let's have a good time." Emma waved at Carla across the room. Joy stood transfixed in front of Bill as Emma strode across the room.

"You know, Bill, later on I need a chance to speak with you, privately." Cindy overheard Joy say.

"That bitch," Cindy muttered after Joy had pulled prissily away. "I don't

see how you ever..."

"Please Cindy," Bill stopped her, "not now." And he moved on to follow the two women in his life.

The party seemed to drone on forever. Every time Cindy would become reasonably involved in a conversation she ended up letting her sharp tongue get the best of her and Jim would have to whisk her off to some other part of the room.

"You have got to learn to not spurt out everything that comes into your mind." Jim warned her one time.

"I can't help it," she whined, "Some of these people are such narrow minded jerks."

"Emma seems to fit in with them okay," he pointed out.

"Yeah and it just makes me sick."

It did seem that in spite of the Joy's brooding presence Emma was having a good time. Everybody liked her and no one appeared too uncomfortable around both her and Joy.

"Maybe all three of them can get married and move off to Utah." Cindy countered. With that said she went off to find Becky, who had snuck in some booze.

Bill was the one who looked really out of place. He had replaced the two girls on the couch and was sitting alone throwing a small pillow into the air and catching it. Cindy, of course was the first to see Joy ease down next to him on the couch.

"What's he doing?" she said, interrupting Jim in a conversation of local football lore.

"Shhhh Cindy, it's none of your concern."

Cindy left him standing there and went to look for Emma. "Oh shit," she mumbled when she got stuck in a conversation with Frankie Carson.

But Emma had not missed the encounter between Bill and Joy. From a dark hallway she was listening to Carla talk about a new coat she wanted. Emma saw Joy take Bill's hand and lead him out the front door. Still she did not worry. She was being watched over.

"Look Joy, this had better not take long, Emma will get mad."

"Since when did you care about making some girl jealous? Can't we at least go sit in your car? It is freezing out here."

"I don't think..."

"You wouldn't want the woman carrying your unborn child to catch her death of cold would you?"

He went rigid. "What did you say?"

"You heard me."

"Oh God Joy."

"In the car," she ordered him. He followed too struck dumb to refuse.

Once inside the car she scooted over the console to be as close to him as she could. He squirmed back against his window, but still could not escape her.

"Now what is it you are talking about?" He held both of her wrists to keep her from getting any closer.

"Pregnant," she pronounced properly, "Surely you have heard the word before, like going to have a baby, pregnant."

"I don't see how..."

"What do you mean you don't see how? Hell, I sure can show you how." She pulled her wrists free and grabbed him by the shoulders. "After all the time we did it. My God, what kind of monster are you. You think just because you've decided that you are through with me that all of that meant nothing?"

She was now screaming into his face. A brief ringing silence separated them and then she broke down. Tears welled up and glided down her face. She pulled her hands back from him, but she was shaking so bad she could not lower them.

"Oh God Joy, I am sorry." He draped his arms around her heaving shoulders and tried to bury her tear stained face in his chest. "I don't know what we will do. I know it is my fault. I just don't know what I am suppose to do." He was whispering this into her hair and felt himself getting pretty close to tears. The passenger door was jerked open and the overhead light illuminated them.

"I think I am ready to go home now, Bill" was all that Emma said.

"Emma, I..." and then Bill realized that there was nothing he could say to her to dispel what she had just seen. "I guess you are right." He opened his door to allow Joy to crawl out on his side. Emma took her place in the passenger seat.

In the darkness outside the car, Joy whispered into Bill's ear. "My parents won't be home til tomorrow. Please come back later tonight so that we can talk some more."

He just looked at her blankly and nodded. Then he sank back into his seat beside Emma.

Emma said nothing for the first few miles that they drove and Bill was still too shook up by the prospect of Joy being pregnant to offer any explanation. It was finally Emma who broke the silence as they pulled into the gravel road that led to her house.

"You know I can understand if some of the old spark is still there with you and Joy." Her voice was icy cold. "But I would hope in the future you might be a little more discreet. You didn't need to rub my nose in it. And anyone else could have found you two making out in the car just like I did. "He turned to listen to this strange voice that was coming from Emma. It seemed much older than her young fresh face.

"Emma, it's not like that. I didn't want to go out to the car with Joy. She insisted that she needed to talk to me." Now his voice faltered, he wasn't prepared to tell her about Joy's 'condition'. He still could not believe it. "I wish I could make you understand, but..."

"Stop the car," she suddenly barked at him. He did as he was told.

"Emma, you don't have to be this mad. If you will just give me a chance..."

"I am really not mad," she said smoothly and actually gave him a little smile. He was really confused. "I understand, Bill, I really do."

As soon as he heard her say that he wanted to grab her and hold her to him and cry and tell her everything that was tearing him up inside. But she never gave him a chance. She was out of the car and looking down at him from her open door in just seconds, her face still a soft palette of warmth and understanding.

"I just need to be by myself for a little bit now. I'll walk the rest of the way home." Without waiting for him to answer she cut down the embankment and ducked into the trees. He just sat there for a moment stunned.

Even Emma could not understand the calm that had over taken her. When she had first seen them in the car together she had felt kicked in the stomach, repulsed, and embarrassed. But immediately after this calm had washed over her and the soft gentle voice that had lulled her to sleep earlier that week spoke in her head. "It's all right. It's all happening just like it should." were the words that came to her.

It seemed silly to think of, but they had been so clear. All of a sudden it was as if she had been expecting all evening to find them just like that and that it was all part of some great design, nothing for her to fear, only for her to go along with. Then what hit her was a pity and a strange sadness for Bill. He was so helpless, so out of control. She was the one in control.

She was the one who knew everything would be fine. If only she could tell him that. But she couldn't stop and take the time right then to console him. She had to get back to the woods, back to the place that

Viola had showed her, where she would find her true self.

Bill was driving. He was back on the road that led to Joy's house. It seemed that he had been driving around for hours, that he was lost in time. No matter how many times he went over the circumstances in his head, there was no satisfying outcome. Now he had given up and was making his way back to Joy's to see what she had to say.

He hoped that she would still be up, but he had no reason to fear because even before her house was in sight he spotted her. She was walking down the side of the road towards him. Her head was tucked down and her arms were wrapped tightly around to ward off the stinging wind. She looked up into his headlight as he neared her and he could see that she had been crying.

He eased the car to a stop and rolled his window down a crack. "You want to get in?"

She bit her lip and nodded yes. She came around to the passenger side and let herself in, but this time she did not move to be closer to him; rather she shrunk herself up into a ball in the passenger seat. "I'm sorry Bill," she bit out the words.

"Joy, it's okay." He couldn't stop himself for reaching over to hold her and she sank against him. He could feel deep breaths that she took and heart racing.

"I want you to make love to me. I want you to make love to me so bad." He wasn't sure if she was crying again or just shaking with passion. "I don't care what it means. I don't care if you don't love me. I just need for you to make love to me."

"Joy?" He had never seen her like this before. Something inside of him really wanted her again. She seemed so different from what she had been like in the past.

She did not move any closer to him, but he found himself halfway across the gearshift pulling her into his lap. She lay against him like a small child. He lifted her face to kiss the soft underside of her chin. She felt so fragile and warm. He felt heat rise in his throat all the way to his ears. "Let's get in the back seat." His voice sounded weak and worn.

With her head tucked down she slipped through the space between the two front seats and curled up across the back seat. He had to get out of the car to join her. She did not move as he knelt on the floorboard beside her.

"Joy, I never meant to hurt you." He spoke to her. "I really never did."

She rolled over on to her back and he could see her small round face reflected in the moonlight. She looked so young. He had to support himself precariously to lean over her.

She propped herself up on one elbow to meet his mouth. It felt like something was boiling at the base of his skull. He held her face and explored the corners of her lips. He couldn't remember it ever feeling this good before. She laid her hands on each side of his neck and pulled him toward her breasts. Fumbling, he lifted her sweater and pulled her bra away from her breasts. They were swollen and her nipples erect. He tasted one red nipple and then the other.

He had to lean and rest his head on the back of the seat to get his hands to her hips. She squirmed beneath him. Her hands now washed up and down his chest under his shirt. She lifted up just a bit to allow him to work her pants down over her hips. She smelt musky and hot to him. His hand dipped between her thighs and pressed her legs slightly apart. He inserted first one and then two fingers deep inside of her.

"Oh baby, you are so wet." He almost giggled now and threw his head back to gulp air.

"I want you," was all she said.

He was back up on his knees and tugging down his own pants in an instant. His erection popped free of his pants and swung against his stomach. "Well you are going to have me." He helped her pull one foot free from her pants and then he crawled up onto the small seat to be between her legs. He watched her face intently as he guided himself inside of her. Then he had to stop. He actually did laugh out loud in a tremor of pleasure.

It was like the most wonderful place in the world to be. Slowly he started his rhythm inside of her. She turned her head to gasp and pull him closer. Her arms came up to clasp behind his neck. He began to work deep inside of her. It was like running and falling and being on fire. He felt himself cumming before he even had a chance to hold back. "Joy, Joy, Joy."

And then she looked at him. It wasn't Joy. The face had changed. Straight from the grave, rotted and moldy, flesh pulled back from the bone, and evil mouth of teeth grinning at him. The hands dropped to encircle his throat.

"I got you now boy, and you aint never gonna use nobody again."

The stink of the words made him gag. And then he saw his own blood spurt from his throat and splash onto the living corpse beneath him.

"No, No, Noooooooooooo!" Emma woke up screaming, " NOOOOOO!!!"

Chapter 31

"Is she awake yet," Cindy asked Roy Wilson when he returned to the living room.

"No." He moved to one of the chairs and held on to the back for support.

"What did the doctor say?"

"She's in shock." He seemed winded and had to stop and gasp for breath between each sentence.

"I don't think that I understand." Cindy had watched the dawn rise from the Wilson's tiny living room and still did not comprehend why she had been called there.

"We don't either," Roy admitted. "That why I called you. I was hoping maybe you could tell us what happened at the party last night."

"It was just a boring party at Joy Hutchinson's house." Cindy felt incredibly numb and sleepy. "Umm, I don't really know why Emma was so set on going to it in the first place, but she seemed to be having a good time while she was there. She and Bill left a little after eleven o'clock." She stopped because she realized that maybe she had already said more than she should have. After all she did not know what time Emma had arrived home.

"Don't worry I was aware that she had gone to the party with Bill." His head swung from side to side. "I don't understand why she lied to me about it, but right now that is beside the point."

"Have you called Bill?"

"Yes, his parents say that he has not come home yet." Roy moved around so he could to be closer to Cindy and lowered his voice. "Before she went into those horrible convulsions, she told us he was dead."

"Emma has been really disturbed lately," Cindy forced the words out. She felt like she was in a dream. "I don't see..."

"Emma tried to strangle her aunt." Roy broke in flatly. " She grabbed her by the throat when Liz went in to see what all the screaming was about and when I came in Emma had Liz by the throat. I don't think she would have let go if I had not..."

"Mr. Wilson, Joy was Bill's old girlfriend. Maybe she said something to Emma that really set her off."

"Emma's not even seventeen years old yet, how could something said at some dumb party..."

"She's had a very rough life."

"I know that Cindy, I have known Emma since she was born. Do you think she has just gone over the edge for some other reason? Is Emma crazy?"

"I don't think she is crazy. I just think she has some problems that it all." Cindy tried to sound confident.

"Then how do I explain that my niece is upstairs in what the doctor calls a catatonic state?"

"I don't know." Cindy rested her head in her hands. "How is Mrs. Wilson?"

"I don't know if I can honestly say." Roy had now moved to the front of the fireplace. "It's very late."

"It's very early." Cindy's old humor seemed intact. "What does the doctor suggest that you do?"

"Wait, wait and see."

"That's a safe enough answer for doctors." Cindy wondered what torment her own parents were going through at home waiting to hear from her. "Do the Simmon's know to call you when they hear from Bill?"

"Yes."

"What about Joy?"

"I guess I must have woke her up out of a sound sleep. She said that her parents had been away for the night. I saw no reason to upset the child."

"You don't really think Bill is dead do you?"

"Who can say," Barbara Lee is dead. They say they caught her killer."

"Why did you call me, Mr. Wilson?"

"You are her very closest friend." Roy settled down into the chair that he previously used as a support. "I don't want anything else bad to happen."

"Did you call the police?"

"I called Harvey Johnson." Roy rose again. "He's supposed to call me back.

Right then the doctor emerged from the hall where he had just left Liz's room. "She seems to be resting comfortably, a few bruises, but she'll be fine."

Cindy did not even raise her head to acknowledge the doctor. "Roy," the doctor kept on, "Maybe you should see about getting some professional help for your niece."

"I'll do that," Roy promised.

"She's a very sick child."

"I know and thank you." He led the doctor out the door. Cindy could hear the murmur of their further conversations, but did not bother to try and discern their words. The phone was ringing. She rose to answer it.

"Mr. Wilson, it's Mr. Johnson." she called out. Roy was back in the kitchen taking the phone from her hand before she had a chance to lie it down.

"I see," were the first words out of his mouth after a long silence. "Yes, of course you may come over." His face was colorless as he hung up the phone.

He turned to Cindy, "They found Bill's car on the Hutchinson's road. There was a lot of blood all in it. Cindy did not wait to hear more.

If it had not been her own mother who touched her shoulder, she might have not noticed at all.

"Are you all right, baby? Is Emma all right?" Cindy rose and fell into her mother's arms. "They say there might have been another killing."

"Emma says so." Cindy told her.

"Did she see it?"

"We don't really know."

"I think that you should come on home now." Cindy was ready to do just that when Roy entered the room.

"Cindy, my wife is asking to see you." He stood staring down at the floor, his hands stuffed in his pockets. She turned to look at her mother as if questioning what she should do, she felt tired. It was now going into morning proper and she had had no sleep and little chance to relax. All she really wanted to do was to go home and get in her own bed. Nothing that had happened made any sense to her. Yet she could not resist Roy's pleading face.

"I'll be right back," she promised as she left the room and made her way down the dark hall.

"Mrs. Wilson?" she asked from the doorway.

"Come in Cindy." Liz Wilson sat propped up in her bed, an ice pack against her head. Cindy took only one step into the room and rested against the doorframe for support. There they remained studying each other.

"I just got through speaking to Harvey Johnson." Cindy had seen the big man come and go from the house. She had been a bit curious as to why he had not questioned her. "She killed Barbara Lee, you know, and now I am afraid that she has killed that boy."

"Mrs. Wilson, Emma wouldn't..."

"I know what I am talking about." Liz stopped her. "I have seen the letter. I have seen the signs."

"I'm afraid that you are..."

"I know what I am talking about young lady. You have got to stop her."

"But Emma is just up in her room, totally zoned out."

"I don't care. I know what can happen here. You stop her! You hear me? You stop her!" Liz was now sitting up and yelling at the top of her lunges.

"Mrs. Wilson, it's been a long night and all I want to do is go home and get some rest.

"Now is the time for action! You have got to kill that damned witch!"

Cindy was on the verge of screaming for help when both her mother and Roy Wilson rushed into the room.

"Emma's gone. She's gone!" Roy cried. Cindy sunk to the floor in exhaustion.

Chapter 32

Cindy woke up still in the gravel by the jeep. Exhaustion had finally caught up with her. She wondered how long she had slept. The sun did seem a bit lower in the sky. Her back ached. Her mouth was dry. And she had to pee. "Well I don' t have to worry about anyone seeing me drop my drawers out here," she thought. But water, cause she was really parched, would be a different matter. She thought she remembered having seen an old pump in the kitchen at Further Back. Who knew if it worked? "Don't look like I got much of a choice," she told herself.

Even after relieving her bladder and stretching she hesitated before walking away from the jeep. She had to be certain about what to do. Either way it would be a long walk. Actually maybe even longer back to the main road and then she would just have to hope someone came along to pick her up. There really was no choice because even if she did try to walk out to main road her mother would never let her return and look for Emma. And she had to find Emma.

"Hang on girl, Cindy's coming to rescue you." she said out loud "All your life somebody or another been letting you down." The image of her pale shy friend flooded her mind. "And lordy, you are such a nerdy jerk." She thought back to the Emma who had first showed up in school that year. "Okay," she shook herself away from her nostalgia, "Now is no time to go getting gushy again."

She leaned into the jeep to retrieve her jacket and looked at her purse lying abandoned on the floorboard. She remembered the first time she and Emma had made this trip. Emma had insisted on carrying her silly purse. "Stupid idiot" she muttered out loud as she snapped up her own purse and slung it over her shoulder.

Chapter 33

Cindy could not remember when her feet had hurt so badly. She had forgotten how impossible to navigate the shifting rocks of the gravel were. The low-slung pumps she wore were not helping the situation. Every now and then a stone would work its way into a shoe. It shifted under her and poked into her instep. When she finally reached the end of the levee and peered down into the swamp she realized that the sun was now just on the horizon. How long had she slept?

The marshy basin was yet another hindrance. "Great," she said, 'Mississippi gumbo', a term her daddy had always used when referring to the sticky fertile delta mud. Each step she had to pull her foot back out of the sucking mire, plus it was cold. After she lost a shoe for the third time, having to stick her hand into the ooze to retrieve it, she just removed the shoes and carried them.

Now her right arm was covered in wet mud up to the elbow. "I wanna go home," she whined knowing that she would not dare turn back. There would be no going home, at least not that night. It would surely be dark by the time she reached the old house.

Suddenly her left foot hit something solid under the surface of the water and she found herself falling backwards. Her hands reached up grasping nothing and she landed on her back in the swamp. "Great!" She pushed herself up on her elbow and slowly pulled herself upright. Now she was truly wet and more than a little cold.

"Jesus Christ," she shouted and her voice fell dead under the Cyprus, "Jesus, Christ?" she said a little softer, "Help me."

Harvey Johnson leaned on his elbows studying the report in front of him. The phone on his desk had been mute for almost two minutes. The second search up and down the Hutchins road had turned up nothing. Still he knew there had to be something he was missing.

The phone was ringing and he found his hand hovering over the receiver unwilling to pick it up until he could catch his breath.

"Johnson here." he answered. "Hold on Shooter. I am not quite following you." Harvey picked up a pen and began to draw circles on his desk blotter. "So where are you? I see." Harvey listened as Shooter explained that he had found his neighbor lady, Mrs. Wilson, walking barefoot in her gown walking across his field. Harvey pulled back a little

from the phone and said, "What was that again? What witch? Wait a minute let me get this down. Do you know how to get there?" Harvey was now writing furiously as he listened. "Hmmm, Further Back you say?"

Cindy literally collapsed against a tree as soon as she reached solid ground. "I feel like kissing you," she told the terra firma under her feet. "What am I doing?" She scraped her arms and legs against the tree bark to clean off so of the mud. "Oh get a grip," she told herself and looked into the face of the darkening woods in front of her. "Piece of cake." She rubbed her nose on her shirttail. "Right?," she answered herself.

Hattie was having trouble breathing. She had been sitting in her kitchen for hours watching the night take over the room. She had not gotten up to turn on a lamp, or to stoke the wood fire. The cold had her shivering but she was not even aware of this. A conversation was being played out in her mind. Voices that seemed to come from every corner of the room shouted, cajoled, and scoffed at her. She shook her head as if trying to ward off blows.

A voice said, "You will give in. You have been giving in for years."

"No," she cried back inside her brain.

"Relax. Don't take it so hard." another voice soothed

"The Lord is my shepherd..."

"Don't recite scriptures at me woman."

Hattie could not remember the next words

"Now why don't you just sit still and listen to me for a while. Everything will be fine just like always. This is just the way it is. This is the way the world works. So people have to fight their own battles. So what."

"I have got to think about a way to save those girls," Hattie spoke out loud, "I was wrong to send that child to Further Back."

"No, your weren't wrong Hattie. That is how you helped."

"Helped? Helped by sending that child to die with her friend." The old woman stiffened. "Get thee behind me." Hattie rose to leave the room. Her mind was now made up. She knew what she had to do.

"Sit down, you old bitch before I put you down." Her weight crashed her back into her chair. "There that's better now," and the lecture began.

Something was moving in the trees ahead of her. Cindy could feel it in every pore of her body. The rustling of the trees had not changed. She heard no footsteps or snapping branches. The tree frogs had not altered

their tune. But there was an electric chill running all through her. Straining to hear she stood stark still and dreaded that indeed she might hear something.

Chapter 34

Roy was on his way home. His heavy legs did not want to carry him fast enough back up the path. The night had destroyed his vision and only the blackness of the surrounding trees kept him from losing his way off the track. An urgency to get home had come over him. The limb that tripped him did not even break as he tumbled over it and on to his face. Consciousness failed him as his skull cracked.

Cindy did not know how long it had been since she had moved, but her hands felt numb and she was sure her feet would tingle when she started to walk again. The feeling was still upon her that she was being watched, but it was clear no good would come of just standing and waiting. Besides extreme cold was slowly replacing the intensity of her fear. "If I don't more now," she told herself, "I may not be able to move later."

Alerted to every creak around her she forced her legs to move. "Oh no," she protested to the crackling leaves beneath her. There was no way she was going to make it to the house at this speed. There was no way she could allow herself the luxury of freezing in fright any more.

She was almost tempted to whistle as she picked up her pace through the under brush. The tune "There must be some kind of way out of here" kept running through her mind. She had no way to judge how far she had gone and she dared not think she was off course. Straight ahead, straight ahead was all that she knew. "It will appear soon. I know it will." She just kept up her brisk and unfaltering stride. Thoughts of Emma had left her for the time being. She was just concerned about getting to safety for herself.

Every now and then she thought she saw a patch of moon in a clearing up ahead, but it seemed to be taking an eternity to reach it. She had forgotten all about her purse hanging limply around her, but now she pulled it forward and wore it like a medallion. She stuffed her hands inside for a bit of warmth.

Then at last she did see the clearing right up ahead of her, the moon turning the dead grass silver. "Thank you God," she breathed. It was opening up in front of her the lawn, the house, and then she stopped still. There on the front lawn was someone waiting for her, someone watching her. The over head light of the moon shadowed the features but Cindy could see that the face was small and round. The arms were held out

wide and the fingers of the body were stretched out. It could have been Julie Andrews from the sound of music based on the pose. Was it Emma? Cindy almost just stopped and ran the other direction but instead she continued. "I've come this far looking for her. I am not going to stop now."

Once in the clearing Cindy almost started to call out Emma's name. But what the apparition did next stopped her. It's chin turned upward and Cindy could see the skeletal white structure of the ruined features. She saw now why the fingers were so distinct because they were merely bones projecting from rotted flesh.

Cindy could not scream. She could not even run. She watched like in a nightmare mesmerized. It was moving towards her. Taking steps that were long and slow. Her mind was screaming at her body to move but she could not.

Viola Grace was only five feet from her when Cindy finally broke from her trance and ran. She swept toward and then past the aberration like a healthy child at a game of tag. "Home base, home base, Dear God, please let the house be home base," Cindy heard herself crying as she fled for the front porch.

She crashed into the door and fumbled for the knob. From a short glance she could see that the horror had turned and was moving leisurely toward her again. "Oh God, help me," Cindy yelled out as the door flung open at last. She had pushed it back shut while her voice still rang. She spun in a circle around. "How do I keep her out?"

She knew there was no way, at least not on the first floor with too many broken windows. The stairs, she was up them before any further calculation. Two at a time they groaned beneath her. "I have got to get up high and barricade myself in."

Cindy was spinning around to the forth floor landing when she saw the figure standing there the same pose it had assumed earlier in the yard, hands open. A loud scream drove itself from inside of Cindy. She thought she would puke. Then a familiar face smiled at her.

"Emma." Cindy went to her and pulling, grasping at her as she made her way up the last few steps. "Emma, here." She pulled her to the room at the end of the hall where they had all once sat and observed the strange séance. She pushed Emma in and followed forcing the door shut behind her. There was a chair there she used to wedge against the door.

"Oh my God," Cindy sobbed as she threw herself around her friend.

Harvey Johnson had not gotten out of the station before the call came

from the Bassett's. Their daughter had now been missing for over eight hours. This was becoming an epidemic of disappearances. He scrounged for another report form on his jumbled desk.

"Yes, I remember your daughter. She was at the Wilson's this morning." He paused to listen.

"And she promised to come straight home after just checking one place," Mrs. Bassett's voice cracked.

"Is Mr. Basset on the line as well?"

"Yes sir" came the immediate reply.

"Well as you two know I legally am not suppose to be looking for any of these kids yet, but under the circumstances I would be a fool not to. So if you and your wife..." and Harvey droned on the now well-versed instructions.

After Harvey had gotten a list of all the places where Cindy Basset might be, he issued a bulletin describing the girl and the locations and alerted his already alerted men. The delay with the Bassett's had kept Harvey away from the Wilson's where he had been headed. He radioed a patrol car to proceed to the Wilson's and wait for him there. He wondered just what they would find when they arrived.

Cindy could hardly contain herself. The blood pounding in her ears and her gasping lungs augmented her fear and weariness. Emma stood behind her as silent as the room. Cindy realized that Emma had not spoken at all.

"Emma," was all that she could get out between gasps. She wondered if she were hyperventilating. "Shhhhhh," she hissed unnecessarily to Emma. Emma stared at her unflinching. Cindy noticed her bare feet and shivering limbs. She led Emma to the cot in the furthermost corner of the room. Gently she crawled on to the cot beside Emma and curled herself around her friend. "Oh Emma, what is happening?"

Emma did not reply but merely leaned in toward her friend.

"It's been too much for you hasn't it?" Cindy persisted. She wrapped her arms around the narrow shoulders and rested her chin on the top of Emma's head. "I have got to get us out of here." Then the impossibleness of the situation overwhelmed her. Slowly she began to rock the listless body that was her best friend back and forth.

"You can't have that girl!" Hattie hollered at the top of her lungs. She fought against the coils of unseen powers that tried to encircle her. She grappled with the muscles in her own body as she tried to flee the fiendish

thoughts punishing her mind. Then suddenly there was a let up. Hattie could actually fall forward when the grip that held her back loosened. For a moment she braced herself for another attack. But when none came she rose and was amazed at her own strength and vigor. She felt almost youthful. But she knew immediately that it was not her own strength that had freed her. She had been lost, too wrong for too long to fight such an evil. But why wasn't the old witch spirit still fighting her?

"Where had she gone? Where had Viola Grace gone?" But Hattie already knew. "She done gone after them girls full force."

Cindy sat and listened but heard no sounds in the house. She could not remember if she had heard that monstrous thing follow her into the house. "Maybe I am just in shock from all of this," she told herself. Had she imagined the figure on the lawn? It all seemed so unreal.

"Emma," she whispered to her friend, "Emma we have got to figure some way to get out of here."

When Emma finally turned her face toward Cindy the expression caused Cindy to falter. Emma looked at Cindy as if she had never seen her in her life. Cindy was tempted to shake her.

"Emma can you understand what I am saying?"

A nod up and down came from Emma.

"There is somebody, something out there. I don't really understand it, but we are not safe."

"Yes we are," Emma sounded giddy.

"No, Emma, something has happened. I don't know what, but we can not give up now." Cindy let her fingers encircle the pliant wrists of her friend and she pulled the hands forward holding them as one would when trying to teach an infant to play patty cake. "Whatever... We have got to make it home. And then we can figure this thing out."

Emma smiled brightly at her. "Cindy." She said the name with much pleasure.

"Yes?"

"Cindy?" Emma reached toward her.

At the same moment they both heard the crash as the door was knocked off its hinges on the first floor.

"How long has she been like this?" was Harvey's question as he stood in the living room at the Wilson's.

"Since I got here," the patrolman answered. Elizabeth Wilson sat huddled in the corner of the room and watched the tall men above her. Every attempt to speak to her or to move closer was only met by shrieks from Liz.

"I told you Harvey," Shooter began, "She was just a walking across my field plain as you please. If I had not brought her back here heaven only knows where she would be now. She was a keening the whole time; had my livestock all spooked."

"She acts like she is scared to death." the patrolman offered.

"Where the hell is Roy?" Harvey demanded.

"Wouldn't know," Shooter replied, "There weren't nobody here when I brought her in."

Harvey attempted to speak to Liz, "Mrs. Wilson we are fixing to call your physician. He will be here shortly." Liz howled at this. "Are you in any pain?" Harvey spoke slowly but this did nothing to stop Liz's screeches. "Why don't you two start checking around the place for Roy." he spoke without taking his eyes off of the cornered woman. "I can't believe he would just go off and leave Liz like this."

Hattie was glad that her driveway led downhill instead of up or she would have never been able to make it the quarter mile to Moseph's shot gun shack. She had never liked him living so close to her before. As a child she could remember that the nearest neighbors had been five miles away. She had never seen any reason to have anyone close at hand before.

"Stupid old woman," she mumbled to herself. Night had set in and the dark gravel road seemed to be crumbling beneath her feet. She had picked up a lantern before she left the house but she was hesitant to use it. She didn't know how much of a wick was left and she didn't want to use up any kerosene that she didn't have to use.

Hattie could make out the stars that peeped through the trees and this vague light kept her on the road. If Moseph wasn't home she wasn't sure what she would do. That would have to be decided later. She tried to keep any anxiety out of her thoughts as she walked. What would she do if

that Viola Grace came after her here on the road? Hattie hoped she was ready. What if Viola had already taken over one or both of them girls how much stronger would she be then? Hattie began to sing loud and heartily, "Amazing Grace..."

There was no mistaking the racket that was coming from the first floor. Someone was now in the house. Cindy jumped from the bed to recheck the security of the wedged door. She knew though, that if whatever was in the house wanted in that room there would be no stopping them. The next crash sounded as if the banister had been uprooted and sent to the floor. "Please don't come upstairs, please don't come upstairs," she blubbered as she raced back to the cot to join Emma.

Emma was sitting erect and alert like a kid at her first circus.

Shooter and the patrolman, who had introduced himself at last as Officer Bates, took off in different directions looking for Roy. Shooter easily came across the old path and immediately remembered playing on it as a boy. With his flashlight trained toward the ground he proceeded to follow the meandering path through the woods. He kept looking back to see if he could see the lights of the house or the flashlight of the patrolman. He was a little spooked by his surroundings. If a head had come rolling out of the foliage he probably would have died on the spot. What he did see was only a little less frightening.

Roy Wilson had recovered enough from his fall to get to his feet and try to make his way back home. At this point he was still not quite conscious of his whereabouts so he moved very cautiously. His forehead bulged open from the fall he had taken. An opening the size of a quarter showed his skull beneath the blood. The blood was over his entire face. With little awareness of his injury Roy stumbled back towards home.

When Shooter first saw Roy it was with the beam of his flashlight. When the light caught the blood-smeared face of Roy Wilson, mouth agape, eyes rolling back from the light, Shooter threw the flashlight up in the air. He did not recall screaming, but the patrolman and Harvey heard him. It was those screams that brought the other men hurrying to help bring them all back.

Meanwhile Hattie had made the last bend in the road and could make out the lights of Moseph Franklin's small cabin. Relief caused her to sigh, but she immediately chided herself for that luxury. She saw the chain snap tight from the front porch post to the pickup before she heard the dog's low growl.

"That Moseph and his mangy dogs," she muttered. Why he insisted on keeping some half starved little pooch tied up and mean in the yard she could never understand. "Who would want anything of his here to steal, " she thought. Besides one shotgun blast would do away with any old dog. But what she saw emerge from the shadows by the pickup truck was not just any old dog. The animal looked mammoth; it's heavy chest, strong neck, she could even see the bulging muscles of it's back legs, all in silhouette, all in black.

"Shoo puppy" she said more to hear her own voice than to speak to the dog. The dog was now straining to get closer. "Moseph," she cried out, but no one stirred inside the cabin.

"He's got to be home," she thought to herself, "he wouldn't leave all these lamps on, besides this here is his truck." She was just about to call again when the dog lunged and she heard the post creak on the porch. She looked to see if the post was about to give but from where she stood it was hard to tell. One thing she could tell, the dog had come closer. This time she really yelled, "MOSEPH!"

The front porch door flung open hitting the side of the house. "Who the hell's out here?" Moseph's thin frame appeared in the doorway.

"Your neighbor, Hattie." She tried to keep her eyes on the dog as she waved at him.

"What you want this time of the evening?"

"I need your help. But please call your dog off first." She back stepped in the gravel away from the dog. If it got free she knew she was a goner.

"Claude, here boy." The dog did not move. Moseph took two steps out on to this front porch. "Claude, what's that matter with you? Get up here." He reached out to grab the chain on the front post to haul the dog back. Suddenly he stopped, "Jez criminey, who could have done a thing like this?"

"Just get the dog back away from me," Hattie yelled.

Moseph jerked hard on the chain and the dog reluctantly turned it's head away from Hattie and back towards the porch. His ears immediately relaxed and his tail came up. The big beast padded back across the yard to his master.

Hattie once again found herself sighing in relief. "Where did you get such a nasty mean dog?" she asked.

"Claude? Why Claude is as good as they come." He patted the beast's

head. "Now what you be needing woman?"

"You got to take me somewhere, Moseph. She approached the shack cautiously still not trusting the animal to behave.

"You sick?"

"Not me exactly. I got to help someone else."

He thought about this for a moment. "They ain't got no kind of disease I could get do they?"

Despite the tension Hattie had to chuckle a little at this. "No yous already about as mean as you can get I reckon."

"What's that you say?"

"I said no." Hattie moved another step closer. Moseph had come down to the steps and she could make out his sharp features. "I just need for you to carry me somewhere in your pickup that's all. I can pay you if I must."

"How much?"

"What you think is a fair price?"

"How far we got to go?"

This was the part she had been dreading. How could she explain wanting to go to Further Back. "Further Back," she finally just blurted out.

"What the hell..."

"Now just listen to me Moseph. There's some youngins out there where they ain't suppose to be and I got to go get them." She paused for a breath. "You hear me?"

"Twenty five dollars." It seemed that money was going to be the key.

"Twenty five dollars you say." Hattie shuffled around in her front shirt pocket for the money she had on her. She had only a five-dollar bill and some silver. "Yeah I will pay you twenty five dollars, but I can only give you part of it now. I'll give you the rest when we get back home."

He laughed when he heard this. "Go back home old woman," he said.

"Now you listen to me. I'll give you fifty dollars when we get back home if you will just take me over there."

This perked up his ears. "How I know that you really do that?"

"Cause I am your neighbor you know I can't escape paying you."

"Get in the truck," he said. "I'll be right there." She watched as he unchained the dog and went back in the house. She could see the lights as he turned them all off. Hoisting herself up Hattie rolled into the cab of the truck. When he came back he still had the dog and it jumped right into the back bed of the pickup.

"What you bringing him for?" Hattie asked.

"Protection." Moseph answered.

"Emma, snap out of this." Cindy had slapped her before she even knew what she was doing. The slap had little effect. Emma's head lolled a bit and then rose back up on its stalk to a doll like angle. "Emma, you have got to help me. We have got to do something."

Emma turned slowly toward Cindy and for a moment her eyes focused. Then a voice like none Cindy had ever heard Emma spoke. "Go to hell Cindy." There was no rancor, just a singsong lilt. "It is no different than here."

"Oh Lord, please help me," Cindy whispered. Perhaps the danger was not downstairs. And then with all the might she could muster Cindy punched Emma squarely in the face and watched as Emma fell back on the cot clearly knocked out cold.

The first word out of Emma's mouth when she finally came to was "Cindy?"

"Yes Emma, its Cindy," Cindy was relieved to hear Emma's normal voice again. She had quit listening for sounds downstairs. The footsteps had died off at the second floor, but Cindy knew that whatever it was it was still down there. There was no way for them to just stroll out of the house. Cindy remembered all the others that had been killed and wondered if this was like what the end had been for them, waiting, full of dread.

"Emma, you have got to help me. I am losing it." Indeed the long hike to Further Back and the lack of real sleep were beginning to wear Cindy out. Plus she had not eaten and her thirst had become just another part of her pain. "Emma," she cried and shook her friend to make sure she was not falling back into a trance.

"Cindy, it's okay." She heard Emma softly say.

"What?" Cindy looked up drunkenly.

"I said it's going to be okay. Everything is fine. Believe me."

Cindy cried at hearing the normal timbre in Emma's speech. "Emma, Emma, what has been going on? What was wrong with you earlier?"

"Don't worry Cindy. It is all okay now, I will get you out of here." She reached and took Cindy's hand into hers. "This has just been a long terrible nightmare."

"But Emma, I don't understand. What has been going on here?"

Emma smiled at this. "Me and you both kiddo." The whole Emma was back. "Is she still down there?"

"Who? Who do you think is down there?"

"Viola Grace." she slumped back on the cot and looked directly at Cindv.

"It is Viola then? It really is her? But I don't see how. I can't understand this."

"I don't know exactly how to explain it to you yet Cindy. I just have this feeling that I am going to get more answers in the end than I may be prepared for."

"She killed all those people didn't she?"

"I think so," Emma replied and turned her head away from Cindy to stare at the door. "But Cindy, I don't think she could have done it without

me."

"Oh Emma, that's crazy talk. We have got to find a way out of this place. We cannot just sit here and wait for her to get us too."

"We cannot very well just sneak out of here. It is not over yet."

"So what do you suggest we do?"

"I don't know" were Emma's last words.

The door to the room exploded inwardly. Emma stood up. Everything was happening so quickly Cindy could hardly register it all. Emma walked towards the door as if to close it again except there was no longer any door there. It had broken off its hinges and lay flat on the floor. As Emma reached the doorframe Cindy saw something reach out and grab Emma's wrist. She was jerked so abruptly from the room Cindy actually fell back on the cot as she recoiled.

Then came that horrible sound. Cindy could hear bones crack as what ever had Emma drug her down the halls. Screams filled the air. Screams that were louder than Cindy's own thoughts could identify. Bile filled her mouth as bellowing was mixed with other sounds. Crunching and snapping like a tree being blown down poured in from the dark hallway.

"No, no, no.." Cindy began to shout at the top of her lungs joining the chaos. But over all the noise she still heard the banister break and the sickening thud as a body fell to the first floor.

"What's the word on Wilson?" Harvey asked as he stepped from the porch and approached the waiting ambulance.

"Head wound, slight concussion, looks like he fell, but he could have been hit. Who can say?"

"What does he say, damnit?" Too many loose ends: too many loose ends for Harvey to handle anymore. He needed time to think, time to rest. People were missing. People were hurt. People were going stark raving mad. He didn't even have a suspect.

"He is still too out of it to make much sense, sir. He mumbles something about his niece every now and then. More than likely he was out looking for her when this happened."

"No shit." Harvey's patience had ceased to exist.

The family doctor was still inside attending to Elizabeth and Harvey had not had the opportunity to question him yet. Harvey was standing there gathering his thoughts when he heard another car pull up in the drive and the commotion that ensued.

"We found him!" Harvey heard someone yell and immediately he

headed out the front door.

"What's that?" Harvey addressed the patrolman in the center of the crowd.

"We found him, sir. We found that Simmons boy. Well at least we are pretty sure it is him." Harvey eyes knitted up in a question. "Well he ain't got no head."

The ride seemed interminably long. Hattie could not remember it ever taking so long to get to the levee before. She glanced at Moseph who drove silently besides her. "Can you go any faster, please? Its gonna be dawn before we get there at this pace."

"It's a gravel road, woman. You want to end up in the ditch?" Moseph spit out his window into the night. "'Sides, I ain't too keen about getting to Further Back in the pitch dark."

That was it, Hattie knew. The old man knew just like the rest of them that Viola's old place was to be avoided. For all she knew Moseph might have even had a hand in doing away with the old witch.

"Old witch," Hattie thought, was that not exactly what she could be called as well; an old witch practicing the ways she and a long line before her had been taught. What had Viola Grace ever wanted out of life that Hattie had not desired at one time too? But Viola had been born blessed.

"Cursed, more like it," Hattie mused. Viola had too much power from the start and with all that power it was just too easy for Viola to always be tipping the scales in her own favor. Viola had become plain mean and then evil with her powers. "Mean like a mad dog," As this thought came into her mind Hattie turned around to look out the back window at the dog.

It was not the dog that was staring back at her mere inches from the glass.

"Great merciful Lord," Hattie exclaimed and Moseph swerved in the gravel.

"What's with you?" he hollered. "Don't be scaring me..." Moseph froze as he heard the thump on the back glass. In the rear view mirror he could now see what had Hattie transfixed. No dog, but the decayed stark face of Viola Grace returned his gaze. "Oh Jesus," he began to cry.

"Keep driving and roll your window up," Hattie directed him without turning her head away from the sight behind them.

Just then Viola raised a boney fist and crashed into back glass.

"The Lord is my Shepherd," Hattie began. Fleshless lips bared back and the corpse began to wail. "I shall not want," Hattie continued. Moseph

began to swing the truck back and forth on the gravel road in an attempt to shake Viola from her position. "He maketh me lie down in green pastures." The shrieking continued.

"Damn you Hattie. We're dead! We're dead!" Moseph's voice rose to drown out the piercing screams from the back.

"Shut you mouth, " Hattie rebuked him. "He restoreth my soul." Moseph accelerated and kept weaving side to side. "His rod and His staff they comfort me." The words of the twenty-third Psalms poured sweetly from Hattie's mouth. "He prepareth a table for me in the presence of mine enemies." The response from the back was one of violence and frenzy.

"My cup runneth over." The words were calm and soothing. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." And then Hattie felt it, the sublime peace that passes understanding. "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Viola was thrown from the pickup bed with a gale like force. Moseph with his frantic driving did not even see her go over the edge and land in the road writhing. Hattie's deep sigh took him by surprise but told him that there had been a change. He glanced in his mirror to see an empty truck bed. Still his speed picked up. He couldn't turn around. That witch was back there somewhere. He just wanted to run as far as he could away from the evil they had just barely escaped.

"I don't care who says I got to wait to get a statement from Wilson. A boy is dead. Two girls are missing. There is no telling what fate they have met. There is no time to wait." Harvey barked into the phone. He was standing in the Wilson's well-lit kitchen. Thirty minutes had passed since the ambulance had pulled away taking Roy to King's Daughter's Hospital in Yazoo City. The doctor had finally managed to get enough barbiturates into Liz to induce sleep. Officers had been sent to inform the Simmons of their son's fate. The boy's body was being transported to the coroner for an autopsy. And Harvey did not have a real clue to go on. He stared into the back yard.

"Searching, that is what we are doing over here." he told the receiver. He didn't wait for a reply on the other end he just slammed the phone down.

"Get me all those men milling around out front," he bellowed to no one in particular. He stepped on to the back porch. "Looks like the only answers we are going to find near here lie right down that path."

When they had gotten to the end of the levee Moseph did not want either of them to leave the cab. "It is insanity to go out in them woods towards her house. You are a crazy woman." he fought.

"You can come with me or you can stay here by your lonesome cause I am going."

"Dang woman."

"You willing to stay here alone?"

"Okay," he said, "so what you gonna do?"

"I am headed to Further Back and I am going to put an end to that Viola Grace and her evil soul once and for all."

Moseph cradled his head in his hands and rocked back and forth. Hattie opened her door. "Wait" he whined, "Don't leave me here." Reluctantly he opened his door.

The path was narrow and Harvey's men had to walk single file through parts. Their flashlights silently struck the ground before them. They were an exhausted group, having worked for hours without any relief. Some of the twelve men who made their way through these woods had been present when the different mutilated bodies had been found and that

made them easy targets of fear.

Lacey Caine was supposed to be the killer they had been told. But Lacey was now locked up tight and somebody was still out there murdering. Only extreme exhaustion kept anyone from speaking up about this or any of their other apprehensions.

Cindy's head wobbled on her neck like a car window statue. Her mouth was agape. She was going into shock. All fight had left her. She sat on the cot and listened to the dead silence of the house. She was certain that it was Emma who she had heard fall. The drop had to be at least sixty feet. Now she just sat there waiting for whatever had gotten Emma to come back for her.

Moseph had began to mutter to himself a string of obscenities as they made their way through the swamp to Viola's. Hattie didn't bother to stop him.

It was pitch dark under the trees. Hattie wondered how late if was now. Would the sun start to rise before they got there? The lantern that she had brought clanked against her side causing some pain. But she ignored it and kept concentrating of keeping her footing as she walked.

She had taken the lead with Moseph not far behind her when a shape loomed in front of her. She had seen this same shape earlier that evening. It was Moseph's old dog, Claude.

"No, no , no," Cindy said from time to time. The minutes were becoming unbearable. She could not stop blinking. Her eyes felt dry and scratchy. "I am liable to fall asleep and miss my own death." Her old humor was still intact. But instead of laughter she choked back a sob. Rocking back and forth on the cot was the only soothing action she could take. "Maybe this is how one goes crazy," she told herself, "You get so scared all you care about any more is getting unscared."

Emma stepped into the doorway. "Well Cindy, I guess it is about time."

Hattie could tell that old Claude was different again. The beast's head was down and his muscles appeared tensed, ready for attack. She did not know why the creature even bothered to wait. "I know it's you," she spoke to the mongrel

Moseph froze behind her. "Claude?" by his voice it was evident the he too knew this was not just his old faithful mutt. It was the eyes that gave the monster away. They were totally red and close set, glowing from a face that could have wilted them.

"And Jesus said," Hattie began.

"Don't speak that name!" A garbled voice came from the throat of the animal. Tossing its huge head around it was forcing the human words from the hound's lips.

"Come unto Me all you who are weak and heavy laden and I will give you rest."

The fiend leaped. It passed right over Hattie's head and landed square on Moseph's chest.

Hattie whipped around in time to see it rip it's fangs into Moseph's neck. She had the lantern up and in her hands before the death mask could take his expression. She ripped the plug from the kerosene tank. Moseph's eyes bulged lifeless at her from beneath the snarling beast. Hattie tossed all the kerosene in the tank on to the two. The dog turned towards Hattie. "Enough of you, you old bitch."

Hattie backed up, fumbling in her pockets for the butane lighter she knew was in there. When she finally grasped it her thumb felt too large to strike it.

"What do you think you are doing?" the hound howled, "Can you not see it is already too late?"

Then Hattie had the flame lit, but it was too low and went immediately out again. She struggled to adjust the settings in the front.

"The girl is already mine." Then Viola/dog pounced.

The flame was lit. "Jesus, help me," Hattie cried.

The creature was in flames before it even reached her. She could see it's body start to twitch and shrivel in the mid air. The heat was tremendous. Instantly what flesh that was left seared and withered. The last howl rang out. "She's mine."

"Emma?" Cindy started and then she saw the bone protruding from the neck and the way the head slumped forward too loosely, resting on the chest.

Emma moved towards her easily. "It's okay Cindy. I'm not dead. I can't be."

Cindy crouched back on the cot. "Emma what..."

"We don't really ever die. We just find some other place to go." Upon saying this the transformed Emma smiled and the effect chilled Cindy's soul. "How stupid we all are." The head swung obscenely from the neck.

Cindy stood up on top on the bed. "Emma, Emma please,"

"It's okay. This is better than what I had before." It was difficult for the misdirected head to gaze up at Cindy.

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?" Cindy screamed out in disbelief.

"So unhappy..."

"Unhappy? We were happy every time we wanted to be happy." Cindy was amazed at the sudden strength in her voice. "Are you saying you were unhappy being the best friend I ever had? You were unhappy?" Cindy shook her head back and forth. "I don't get it. I came to the ends of the earth for you and that means nothing? I loved you Emma," Cindy wept, "I love you."

Emma grabbed for her old friend's legs and pulled her down to the bed. "Shhhhh," Emma crooned, "First I have a lot of things to tell you."

.....

Emma had spoken. Emma had spoken for what seemed like ages. Cindy marveled that she could go on so. But now it was evident that Emma was fading. "Emma, no," Cindy was sobbing. Her heart was breaking for her friend. "I am not sure I understand." Emma fell limp against her.

Then from the door Cindy saw a brilliant light. A large black woman stood in the doorway waving what looked like a torch in her hand. It was a roll of old newspapers that Hattie had ignited. Without speaking she handed the fire to Cindy.

Cindy could hear the sizzle as she touched the flame to her old pal. She felt as if every hair on her own body had just been singed as well. Emma did not scream. She was gone too fast. Like flash paper one moment she was there and the next there was only a charred form lying curled on the cot. If Hattie had not come to her right then Cindy would have cracked her skull as she lost consciousness.

"So what's the story sheriff?" The sidewalk was swamped. Reporters, camera crews, fuzzy ended boom mics were all aimed at Harvey Johnson. They were all there, the newspapers, the local stations, the networks, the cable shows. They were all there outside his office when Harvey came out after taking the Basset girl's statement.

"Is it true that a sixteen year old girl may have been solely involved in all these deaths? Or are there others to be implicated as well?"

"Is this related to the high school killings that have been so wide spread across the nation?"

"No, comment," was Harvey's reply.

"Might this girl also be connected to those slayings in Alabama last summer?"

"No comment."

"Is it true that the old woman was connected to a similar burning of a family some sixty years ago?"

"No comment."

"Have formal charges yet been brought against the Basset girl?"

"No," Harvey finally answered.

"Was this all tied to the occult?"

"No comment."

"Is there a possible super natural explanation for these slayings?"

Harvey turned and addressed the group. "As I have stated repeatedly. There is no place for this super natural mumbo jumbo in this case. There is no such thing."

Epilogue

I still often wonder how my friend managed to linger on for so long at the end. Her wounds were clearly fatal. It hurt me to look at her that way. But as long as she wanted me to, I sat there listening, holding her and looking into her dear face. Now when I remember that time I realize that she had never looked so perfectly beautiful before.

There were things she wanted me to know. That there was evil on this earth she made clear. But she also made it evident that only man can inflict the worst of these evils upon man. That was why Viola Grace needed a willing human partner to continue on her spree of misery. It wasn't that Emma was an evil person by nature but hurt and rejection had made her an easy target. I remember asking over and over again "Why? Why would someone exist just to cause grief and suffering to other humans?" Then finally she told me.

She said that we are born with only two things that can never be taken away from us. They are God's love for us and our love for others. The only device that can be used to blind us to this fact is despair. When we are so caught up in our own failures and pains we loose site of this truth. And as the very old saying goes misery loves company. How sad. We create our own hell in life this way and then like a virus we spread our anguish. But if just one person can stop and see through to the wounds inside we can heal.

And now I know with all my heart Emma lives on in a happier place. I will never forget her last words. I could tell by her face that she was no longer seeing me but some place much more amazing. I remember saying, "I don't understand."

And she just answered, "You can have it all."

And when I begin to loose site of my own life... I remember Emma and for a moment I think... just maybe... just maybe I provided that love she so needed.

Cindy Bassett Richardson

- thanks... S. E. Cook...

Text: S.E. Rice

Editing/Proofreading: D.E.W. Horton

All rights reserved.

Publication Date: July 31st 2016

https://www.bookrix.com/-davebccanada