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Florida Pure

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

FLORIDA PURE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Lauren A. Doyle

2006

To: Interim Dean Mark Szuchman
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Lauren A. Doyle, and entitled Florida Pure, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

John Dufresne

Bruce Harvey

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: February 28, 2006

The thesis of Lauren A. Doyle is approved.

Interim Dean Mark Szuchman
College of Arts and Sciences

Interim Dean Stephan L. Mintz
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2006

DEDICATION

For my parents,
with love and gratitude

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

FLORIDA PURE

by

Lauren A. Doyle

Florida International University, 2006

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

FLORIDA PURE is a satiric novel set in the orange juice industry of contemporary Florida that begins when the deaths of four migrant workers lead to the demise of the orange juice company, Florida Pure. The novel follows three plot lines that result from this demise. The company's fallen president has to cope with the loss of the company as well as the more recent loss of his wife, who has left him for the governor of Florida. A former Florida Pure trucker purchases an orange grove to make juice "honestly." And three brothers from Brazil seek to destroy the orange crop as a way of boosting global orange prices, which have fallen as a result of decreased juice demand. Light in tone, the narrative works to reflect the absurdity of modern life through themes of greed, social corruption, and the notion of destiny.

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Foreword

Henry Sanford's family sold brass. They made their fortune through war – turning their brass into shells for rifles during what some called the War of Northern Aggression, and what the Sanfords called the Civil War. When the war ended, the Sanford's fortune declined. Henry moved to Florida in 1870 and bought 12,500 acres on Lake Monroe, just north of what is now Orlando. He planted sugar, and the entire crop burned to the ground. He planted cotton, which was eaten, completely, by caterpillars. Then, in a last-ditch effort, Henry Sanford planted oranges, and his oranges flourished.

Friday

Traffic. The first of April. Rain came down in gray-white curtains. Torrents of rain. Rain so hard it seemed the world was made of rain and rain only. Raindrops the size of your fist. And traffic. Traffic like a snarled red hook all the way out to the turnpike.

An accident on the Bee Line: a van carrying migrant workers had overturned completely, sitting in the middle of the highway like a bug that couldn't find its legs. Two screaming ambulances. Three police cars, their lights doing silent loops. Police in raingear with lighted wands and whistles, trying to make room on the highway for a helicopter.

Plus, the blood. Raindrops drumming against blood. Friday evening. The day darkening like a welt.

If they watched TV that evening, those who were stuck in that traffic on the Bee Line would learn that three migrant workers had been killed and eleven injured in that mess that put them home nearly an hour late. The news would say that seventeen workers had been stuffed into a van that sat only eight. That most did not have seatbelts and some had to stand, or squish, or squat, hunkering down for the half-hour ride that would take them from where they worked that day in Sanford, Florida to where they had been picked up, south of Kissimmee.

Saturday

Nobody buys the newspaper on Saturday. Hardly anybody watches TV. The news of the auto accident that killed four and injured ten (one dying later in the

hospital) didn't make it far past orange country – past the kitchens of the people who had witnessed the deaths, past the mourners who couldn't afford to bury their dead.

Executives in the yellowed Florida Pure headquarters building in Sanford toyed with the idea of issuing a press release, expressing sorrow for the dead; toyed with the idea of setting up a fund for the widows.

“But wouldn't that admit some kind of wrong doing?” Frank Block, the company's long time Chief Operating Officer asked its president.

“We've got to do something,” the president said.

“Not necessarily,” Frank Block said, shaking his head and folding his arms across his chest, looking out the window to the still-cloudy day. “Trust me, we really don't want anything to do with what goes on out there.”

The president nodded, slowly comprehending.

Monday

Professor Tiel greeted his 8 a.m. Advanced Sociology class at the University of Central Florida with a significant amount of frustration. He shared with them news of Friday's accident, distributing copies of newspaper clippings, and giving them a brief oral history of migrant workers in Florida. Some students slept right through his impassioned lecture, leaning their heads back on the wall behind them and letting their eyelids drop shut. Other students took notes as always, trying to discern which part of the lecture would appear on the final exam. Some students caught the spark of

Professor Tiel's flame, deciding that they were just as angry, just as frustrated, just as wronged.

Chapter 1

Dusty Ruums loved his job. Everyday he got to walk into a building that was *his*, surrounded by acres upon acres of squat, leafy citrus trees that were also *his*. Everyday everyone in that building, from executives to peons, which is what he called them, nodded at him and wished him good morning. He could wink at secretaries, and go into the employee break room and pick through the bagged lunches in the refrigerator. Florida Pure was his company. He could do anything he wanted. And he did. Dusty would breeze into the office everyday around ten, taking the elevator to the third floor, saying hello to people with names he knew and didn't know, and sitting, eventually in his chair – the Office Turbo 2000, complete with leather, lumbar support and shiatsu massage – from where he would overlook his family's empire through a large tinted-glass window, looking out onto row upon row of oranges. Oranges that clung to their branches, heavy, but not heavy enough not to lift in celebration on a cool and unencumbered Florida breeze along which they released their oily scent, their perfect orangness, into the air where it traveled over the tops of trees, rolling along the wind, and up into the building where it could gently sting the nostrils of Florida Pure employees who worked ever so diligently to get their juice onto the refrigerated shelves of America, into the hands and mouths of Americans, obeying science and practicality and that most important Bottom Line.

And it was oranges (oh oranges!), those little balls of trapped sunshine, that made it happen. His grandfather had inherited the whole lot of them from an uncle, his mother's brother, Henry Sanford Jr. A scientist by trade, Edward Ruums revolutionized the way juice was processed and stored, making cans of concentrated juice obsolete and introducing the Fresh Juice from Florida phenomenon. Dusty's father, Eddie Ruums, took his father's technology and, with the aid of the health boom of the 1980's, turned the family business into a multi-million dollar corporation. As the second largest juice company in the state, Florida Pure enjoyed healthy profits in a burgeoning business.

All Dusty had to do was sit back and watch it happen. Every week he reviewed sales statistics, earnings reports and cost benefit analyses. He met with executives with MBA's from schools he had never even heard of to hear arguments for and against raising the price of their *Deluxe With Extra Pulp* by a nickel, or firing their trucking staff, selling their fleet and hiring a third-party shipping contractor, or cutting dental insurance from the employee benefits package. For these decisions Dusty always turned to Frank Block, who had worked his way up the company's ranks from regional sales in the late seventies, to advertising in the eighties and risk management in the nineties, to becoming the company's COO and Eddie Ruums' right hand man. In one week, Frank had said yes to raising the price of *Deluxe With Extra Pulp*, no to firing the truckers and selling their fleet, and yes to bumping dental off the employee benefits package, glibly saying, "Nobody offers dental anymore."

Frank Block was shrewd. He knew the juice business inside and out. He knew it in numbers and figures and scales: there were so many people in the world,

and so many of them drank orange juice; the people who did care about their health and their families, Quality and Goodness – those vague attributes that made a consumer feel wholly good about shelling out four bucks for a carton of juice, taking it home to their families and pouring out short glasses of it – sitting around the breakfast table on a Sunday morning, the newspaper everywhere, the endless possibilities of the day before them. Because business, Frank Block knew, was about feelings – feelings perceived, and understood, feelings exchanged like currency – feelings, that great bubble in the gut of humanity.

This is why, when the van overturned on the Bee Line, Frank Block knew that silence was the best response. It would be seen as injustice, those workers on that bus – those men who had all day worked for *dollars*, those men who were stuffed on a bus like refugees and carted from place to place, those men who lost their lives as ridiculously as they had lived them. And he knew he had been right, Frank Block, when he climbed into his car that Monday afternoon and drove home through the sheer blue of the day; the world was a cruel place, but a man had to understand this and move on.

Dusty knew that he had been right too. His father had said it a million times: Those people live under different constraints than we do – they expect this (and over the years *this* had come to stand for a number of things), it's what they're used to, it's what they know. And that was that.

He wished, though, that his wife had been home the weekend of the accident so that he could have gotten a second, more womanly opinion. (It was Dusty's opinion that women understood the world in a way that men did not, and he relied on

her to shape his view of the world, just as his father had relied on his wife to do the same.) But Mona had disappeared for the weekend, leaving that Friday when he was at work, and calling only after she was out of town, saying that she had gone to Albuquerque to visit her mother, who had moved there five years before to get her old body into some dry air.

Alone at home, Dusty knitted and shopped online – the knitting was to curb his old smoking and drinking habits (something to do with his hands) and the shopping was to curb his boredom. Online, he ordered a huge brass Italian espresso machine as a gift for Mona (who had talked forever about wanting one), a pair of golf gloves endorsed by the man who had won the British Open three years in a row, a video game called War III, and something called a Personal Waterfall System that he'd have installed in his office (*Bring the peaceful sounds of nature inside!*) For dinner he ordered an Everything Stromboli and ate it, sitting in his den, drinking near-beer and watching television. Before he slept he thought about Mona: her tan lines, her lips, the slight curve of her neck; and when he slept, he slept well, waking up only once to pee.

It was a good life – a small life, even, but a happy one where there were no hard decisions left to be made, and life just rolled beautifully forward, day by day as if Dusty were sitting in a boat on an endless, easy river. But Dusty was stupid. Any fool knows that times of calm are fleeting, and his time of calm, the one that had gone on uninterrupted, but for his father's sudden death, since the time he stopped drinking five years ago, was about to have lights flooded upon it, was about to be shocked out of existence.

It happened Tuesday, April 5. Three vanloads of protestors, mostly students from the University of Central Florida, pulled up outside of Florida Pure and parked their vans in order so that the words, Stop Citrus Slavery, one word for each van, could be read. The students piled out of their vans, holding signs and shouting into bullhorns, with nineteen-year-old Brad Armory taking the lead, gesturing for the others to be quiet while he made his speech into a bullhorn plastered with stickers calling for Peace. “Florida Whore,” he said, his voice a steady ring, “You make millions a year, yet you pay your workers pennies a day. You go home to your big houses while the people who work for you live in shacks and can barely afford to eat. You profit off of slavery, off of injustice, off of oppression. Florida Whore, when are you gonna do more?” The students jeered and shouted around him, breaking into a chant of “Flor-i-duh whore, Flor-i-duh whore, Flor-i-duh whore,” holding their signs that read *Sweatshop in a Glass* and *End Orange Tyranny*.

“Ridiculous,” Frank Block said, looking out at them through Dusty’s window, a grey to his face like a cloud had been cast over it.

“What do we do?” Dusty asked, full of childish trust.

“Do? Nothing. Those kids’ll go once they realize they’re not getting any attention.”

Dusty spun around to face the crowd of protestors and flipped the switch for his massage chair, turning it on High, the words, Flor-i-duh whore playing on him like a sad song, breaking the day into syllables.

No one knows who did it, whether it was the protestors themselves, or a disgruntled employee angry about his loss of dental insurance, but someone called

WYZ, the local news channel out of Orlando, who soon pulled up in front of Florida Pure, and filmed the protest, the camera zooming out to get a view of their vans and the words, Stop Citrus Slavery.

The reporter, a hairsprayed blonde in a yellow linen suit, interviewed Brad Armory, asking him why they were there and what they hoped to accomplish. She asked him to define citrus slavery, calling it a bold accusation. “What’s bold,” Brad said, almost out of breath, “is that these people can sit in this building all day while they profit off of *slaves* – it’s inhumane; it’s *wrong*.” Shortly after this, the hairsprayed blonde rolled up her microphone cable and climbed back into the news van where she called Florida Pure for comment.

Upstairs, Frank Block was locked away with Nancy Sipps, their Public Relations guru, generating a response, which they e-mailed to WYZ and other local television outlets, saying that Florida Pure never, ever, employed anything that could be construed as slavery.

Outside, heady with victory, the protestors attempted to set fire to the sign that bore the company’s name, which sat out by the road, marking the entrance. “That’s it!” Frank Block shouted when he saw what they were doing. “Call the police!” And the police came, along with the fire department, their looping lights and yowling sirens a shock to the normally quiet landscape.

Chapter 2

That morning, when Tucker left Florida Pure, his refrigerated semi full of juice, he didn’t notice the workers in the groves any more or less than usual. And he

liked to notice them – liked to leave early in the morning when they were just getting started, just putting their ladders up into the trees, just beginning to fill their sacks with the oranges that would eventually fill the flat bed trucks that would drive to the Juicery and become juice; the juice that Tucker would drive out of Florida and deliver, crate by crate, into the florescent lights of supermarkets across the South East. Tucker loved his job – loved all of their jobs; he considered each of them necessary cogs in the wheel of Florida Pure. “All that Folic Acid,” he would say, driving out towards Interstate 95, “All that Vitamin C, sitting right behind me.” It simply blew his mind.

Tucker had worked for the company for going on nine years. In that time, he had been given four raises, which amazed him – how he could be paid so much for doing something that he didn’t really mind at all. Tucker had two jobs before coming out to Sanford to work for Florida Pure; one had been a paper route and the other had been at a bait shop, scooping out worms and stuffing them into Styrofoam cups. “Sorry, little fellas,” he’d say, sending them off to their death. It was a job he hated, and at nineteen, though part of him couldn’t stand to do it, he left his grandmother in Mexico Beach, a barely there town on the Panhandle, got his CDL, and moved to Sanford.

Since then, life had been just as steady and ordinary as ever. He rented a one-room apartment, went out with his friends in the evenings and drove to Mexico Beach once a month to visit his grandmother – usually just repairing things for her, running errands, and sometimes playing Scrabble with her or taking her to the movies.

The day of the protests, Tucker was going as far as Atlanta, driving around the city and suburbs, wheeling crates of juice in through the delivery entrances of grocery stores, saying “How’s it goin’?” and shaking hands with the grocers he’d made friends with over the years. He had four regular runs, one for each day of the work week, and although Atlanta made for the longest day, it was his favorite because the city was so pretty, so brimming with hope.

Back in his truck, Tucker switched on his CB Radio, listening to its low crackling as if it were music, waiting for someone to come on the line and say hello as he eased through the traffic on I-85, his long day of deliveries over, hours of driving ahead of him. “Hey ya, TP,” a voice called, pushing through the static.

“It’s Orange ya Thirsty!” Tucker said of his hanger, the name he wanted to be referred to over the radio.

“Your rig’s been vandalized.”

“Vandalized? What’s it say?”

“Says ‘Whore’ over where it used to say ‘Pure.’”

“Stupid punk kids.”

“Ya headed back down?”

“Yeah.”

“What’dya say we rendezvous in Cocoa Beach?”

“It’ll be late.”

“Come on, we’ll hit the breakfast buffet!”

“*Maybe*,” Tucker said, a laugh in his voice.

“What’s the matter? Afraid your girlfriend’s not gonna be working?”

“OK, OK,” Tucker said. “I’ll see you in about seven hours.” He hung up the radio and turned up the air conditioning. Just the thought of her made him sweat. Made his stomach go into millions of impossible knots.

Later that night, after exchanging his semi for his own car, a maroon Dodge Omni hatchback, and filing a report for his vandalized rig, Tucker drove to Cocoa Beach to meet Ned, who hauled lumber out of Georgia’s interior to furniture factories outside Jacksonville. Each had long ago acknowledged that it was stupid to drive all the way out to Cocoa Beach after having driven all day, but Ned was going through a divorce, so everything seemed stupid, and Tucker was in love, so nothing did.

When he got to the Venus Trap, Tucker freshened up by passing a brush over his head and gargling with Listerine (opening his car door to spit it out) before paying the \$5 cover charge and heading in. “Hey TP,” Ned said, keeping his eyes on the stage when Tucker pulled out a chair and sat down beside him.

“What’s goin’ on?”

“I haven’t seen her yet, if that’s what you mean, but I haven’t been here long. I heard about what happened today – saw it on the TV over by the bar. Stupid hippie kids.”

“What hippie kids?”

Ned looked at him now. “The protests over at Florida Pure? The graffiti on your rig? The stop citrus slavery nonsense.”

“Citrus slavery?”

Ned shook his head and emptied his beer. “Boy, you really do live in the clouds.”

“What’s citrus slavery?”

“Human trafficking this, job in America that...it’s not true. I mean, some companies probably do it, but not Florida Pure, it’s too small. Too family.”

“It’s not small.” Tucker puffed up his chest. “We’re the second largest juice company in Florida.”

“*Second.*”

“There she is.” Tucker sat back, folded his hands in his lap and then sat on them, fidgeting.

The DJ played her signature song, *These Boots Are Made for Walking*, as she stepped out onto stage, one long leg at a time. She wore cowboy boots, a holster, and nothing else. She swung a plastic gun around her index finger as she danced, which wasn’t really dancing at all, just moving slowly; graceful as poured honey, down the stage – performing little tricks for the people in the front row, people who slipped dollar bills up under her holster, people who asked her to do certain things, like touch the bottom of her boot to their foreheads and kick.

“You should go up there,” Ned said. “Try to talk to her.”

“Yeah right. She’d never go out with a guy like me.”

Ned rolled his eyes. “I didn’t say ask her out, I just said go up there for once in your life and see her up close.”

“I can see her fine from here. Besides, I wouldn’t want to see her flirting with a bunch of other guys.”

“You’re nuts, you know that?” Ned stood up. “I’m gonna get another beer. You want one?”

“OK.”

Tucker sat, watching. There was something about this woman that drove him nuts. He wanted to see her with clothes on, he wanted to hear her voice. He wanted to take her home and read the Sunday paper to her. He wanted to tell her jokes and hear her laugh. He was sure she had an incredible laugh. Also, he knew she wasn't made for this...exotic dancing. Not that he looked down on her for it – *no*. If she hadn't been a stripper, they never would have met. Not that they *had* met. But they would, Tucker was sure of it.

She danced off the stage, and Ned came back with their drinks. “Come take a look,” he said. “Your company’s on TV again.”

Tucker followed Ned up to the bar and watched as the cameras panned out to the men in the fields, watched the hairsprayed blonde and the protestors with their signs. “Florida Whore,” he whispered, the breath nearly gone out of him.

That day, when the oranges in Sanford were at their peak size and taste and color, and the squat, cut rows of citrus were busy with the business of it all, was a particularly slow day for news, and so that night, when people across the country came home and settled into their dinner and television routines, it was to the face of the hairsprayed blonde from WYZ TV in Orlando, and the brazen Brad Armory and his gang of well meaning peers as they waved their signs, and sang their chants, letting their frustration seed.

Chapter 3

The next day, the protestors returned, fifty strong. Their signs were bigger, and their voices, reinforced by the five news cameras (one of which came all the way up from a cable news satellite station in Miami), were stronger. Earlier that day, they had gone to area supermarkets and papered windshields with leaflets they put together titled “A brief history of Migrant Abuse in Florida,” which began, really, with poor free blacks, and now, the leaflet said, was something closer to slavery.

But Florida Pure, Dusty had been assured, did not partake in Citrus Slavery. Their workers were paid the going rate, 50 cents a sack – which was high, Frank Block told him. Satisfied, Dusty worked with Frank and Nancy Sipps to produce another written statement, which Nancy went out to the protest and read. “But what’s the difference between slavery and 50 cents a sack?” someone yelled. “That’s *what*? Two dollars an hour? You mean to tell us that the difference between Florida Pure and slavery is *two dollars an hour*?” The crowd started yelling *whore, whore, whore*, and Nancy Sipps began to shake and cry. She retreated from them, running back into the building, taking the stairs to the third floor, and charged into Dusty’s office, resigning. She had never been so humiliated, she told him, and really, when she thought about it, she didn’t know the difference between slavery and two dollars an hour.

Energized, the protestors continued.

“What’s the goal of this?” The reporters asked, “What should people do?” “

“Stop drinking juice!” An impassioned Brad Armory shouted. “Stand up for human rights! For appropriate wages! For life itself!”

That night, his image was broadcast out through wire, satellite and radio transmissions across the world to people who sat in the blue-green fuzz of their living rooms, jaw-dropped and watching, Brad Armory’s message was heard. The next day, there were small protests at supermarkets all across the country – gatherings of stay-at-home moms, students, the unemployed, and the overzealous, who had taken off of work to show their support for the migrant laborers and their anger towards Florida Pure. It was companies like this, they said, that gave Americans a bad name. And that night, *those* protests found television screens through local, world, and cable news. Brad Armory’s message was spreading like a virus.

A fire lit in them, the original twelve protestors began driving their vans through Florida’s rural routes, picking up workers and liberating them, getting this all on camera: the impoverished brown-faced men who couldn’t speak a lick of English and who were sure they’d just been picked up by the INS and would be shipped back to Mexico, where they would work to escape, once again, into the United States.

After their morning of liberating, the original twelve returned to Florida Pure, to the join the masses stacked up against the building, jeering, when Dusty Ruums, incensed, approached the crowd. He had been sitting in his office before this, sick to his stomach about what had gone on there every day for a week, sick that that Frank Block wouldn’t let him do anything about it, sick that those kids outside just didn’t seem to get it. He wanted to set the record straight once and for all, and so, outside, he let the hairsprayed blonde from WYZ TV interview him. He accused the

protestors of slander and expressed his anger that the students were targeting *him* when they could just as easily go to any given grove, tomato farm or strawberry patch in the state of Florida and see the exact same kind of people working for the exact same kind of wages...if they *knew*, if they could just begin to *understand* how impossible it would be to bring a carton of juice to their comfy little breakfast tables in their cushy little lives...well, they'd keep quiet then, wouldn't they? If they met all the labor "atrocities" in the world with the zeal that they came after him with, they'd probably never eat, wear, or buy anything, Dusty said, bewildered, his face sweating, his hair sticking up. The crowd threw oranges at him, and he threw them back, growling, and angry. "Damn," one reporter quipped, "That's good TV."

That weekend, a Nor'easter dumped three feet of snow in Massachusetts, two feet in New York and a foot and a half in Washington DC. That part of the country iced down by the late-season blizzard, its residents trapped inside their homes, they cuddled up under blankets with hot chocolate and television. On TV, the horrible, pig-faced, redhead that made a spectacle out of everything was left alone at her cable news desk, looping film of the snow: people without power, people digging, people walking through Central Park with snow shoes, and film of Florida – beautiful, faraway Florida – looping film of the protests that had taken place at Florida Pure that week. For the Florida segments, she drilled pundits – anybody they could get though a satellite connection in the droopy grey of the day – about what her station was calling the Orange Atrocities. "It's clear," a celebrity lawyer said, "that Florida Pure has a big problem on their hands." "It's disgusting," another said, "But I think most Americans would rather not know where their juice comes from." And another, who

agreed, “The truth is we’d all like to be more liberal than we really are. This, like all things, will pass.”

But something from that week did resonate. Perhaps it was the challenge of that pundit reflecting on the ignorance of his audience, who nodded along with him, shocked, and upset. Now that they did know, they could never go back. E-mails were sent and forwarded from one end of the country to another: migrant labor fact sheets, pictures of workers in groves, their Salvation Army tee shirts, their dirt-stained hands.

After the snow became nothing but dirty mounds of ice in parking lots, rivers of cold water rushing into storm drains, and crippled, pathetic snowmen, and people emerged from their houses, went to work, and school and little league practice, people across the country made one final silent form of protest: they crossed that carton of orange juice off their store list, a staple, one survey said, of most American households.

And Florida Pure, in the weeks following that initial Tuesday morning protest, moved from the front page headlines to the business news. If people were drinking juice, it certainly wasn’t *their* juice. Florida Pure, it seemed from the phone surveys conducted by the company Frank Block hired in lieu of replacing Nancy Sipps, had a name as dirty as any that could be uttered: its connotation right up there with Hitler’s.

The worst part was that instead of calling them back, instead of helping one of the state’s largest employers, the governor showboated for the press. When he commented about the Orange Atrocities during press conferences, ribbon-cuttings and other photo ops, he said only that it was sad what some companies had to resort to in

order to make a buck. Now that *he* was governor, he promised, the juice industry would be on the up-and-up.

Meanwhile, Florida Pure was struggling to stay afloat. They sold off half their trucking fleet, a portion of their acreage, and “rightsized” their employee base, laying off all non-necessary staff, but it wasn’t enough. As their juice sat souring on supermarket shelves, their remaining employees sat, nervous, nothing to do but gossip and upload their resumes to the internet. In the end, it took eight weeks for the company that built itself slowly over 45 years to come crashing, miserably, to the ground. All of the employees were laid off at once, including Frank, who had grown silent over those last days – he had once been sure of everything and now that the ground was swampy, the world unstable, he didn’t know what to say.

The Juicery was halted, the pulp bins cleaned, the pallets full of still-flat juice cartons recycled; its workers took off their goggles and gloves one last time, punched their cards and drove home. The offices and cubicles were emptied, e-mail accounts taken off-line, personal photos that had been thumb-tacked up over the years were taken down and replaced with blank, beige emptiness. The portraits of Henry Sanford, Henry Sanford Jr., Edward Ruums, and Eddie Ruums were lifted off the walls, and Dusty Ruums, in his office, sat, looking out the window at his family’s empire, his the great, sprawling nothing.

He turned his chair on High and picked up his phone to call his wife, who had been surprisingly quiet through all of this. “I think I’m gonna have a drink,” he told her voice mail, though he had already started, the bottle out in front of him, a glass of gin mixed with tonic and orange juice, his old favorite drink, cooling his hand.

The problem with Florida Pure, people said, is that it wasn't distanced enough from the reality of the juice industry and therefore had to deal with all of those muddy labor issues that companies like its competitor, Bottomless Lake Oranges, didn't. Florida Pure owned their groves and picked their oranges, whereas companies like Bottomless Lake Oranges, Florida Pure's nearest competitor, purchased their oranges from third-party growers – eliminating the key sticking points of ownership and labor. It was also true, and this was the opinion of some on Wall Street, that some companies were just luckier than others; that there would always be some to take the fall for many.

And now, well, everyone just assumed that Dusty would kill himself the way his brother had twenty years before – reality being something the Ruums boys couldn't take very well, which people attributed to growing up rich, not knowing what that was like.

But Dusty didn't kill himself. He called the man who handled his money to make sure he still had some. He'd have a little, the man said, if he sold what was left of his groves, the offices, the trucks and equipment – the whole shebang – to Bottomless Lake Oranges, who had quietly bid on it hours after the company closed its doors for good, after Florida Pure was nothing but a name on a sign.

For a week, Dusty refused, retreating to his house, the *new* house, his wife called it, the one in Sanford Hills, where there weren't any hills but big new houses sarcastically refereed to as McMansions by people who lived in ranchers, where he watched golf on television and tried not to drink.

“Sell!” Mona would say, walking past the room where he was sitting, but never coming in. “Sell!” she would say again as he passed her in the kitchen, going for another near-beer, and whatever else he could find to eat.

“Can you get some of that chicken from the store when you go next time?” he would ask her. This was the way they talked to each other, requests made in passing.

She would just look at him, full-well knowing what he was talking about.

“The kind on the spit, the kind they cook with the lights?”

“OK” she’d nod. “Sell!” she wanted to say.

Finally, he sold, going out for a real bender after that, driving down to the Keys to get as far away from himself as possible. He got as far as Marathon where he sat, bloated and sunburned on the beach for a week, eating fish sandwiches, fish kabobs, fish fish. He couldn’t begin to think of what to do with the rest of his life because he couldn’t get over what had happened – the fact that he hadn’t done anything wrong – that he hadn’t done anything different than Bottomless Lake Oranges, and that Bottomless Lake Oranges was tromping through his groves, through his offices, through his life –

Only it wasn’t his life. He wasn’t there. Dusty sat, bloated and sunburned on the beach, connecting those very dots.

The responsible thing to do at this point, the human thing, the *American* thing would be to pick himself off of that beach, clean himself up, smother himself with aloe, and get going. He still had a little money, though it was a pittance compared to what he had three months ago, and with that money he could do anything he wanted. He could start a new company. He could sue the kids who started this. He could

show the world the *real* atrocities that took place in the fields of Florida. But he didn't want to do any of these things. He didn't know how.

Eventually, Dusty did get cleaned up. He did smother himself with aloe, did get in his car and drive back up to Sanford, where he would kiss his wife and where they, together, would start over. It was, he told himself over and over through the mangroves of the Upper Keys and over and over through the toll plazas of Florida's turnpike, the American thing to do.

Chapter 4

Mona was proud to have begun her affair with Governor Portage before the downfall of Florida Pure, not after. To her, it pointed to the obvious problems in their marriage, and not to a tendency to "follow the money," a phrase she thought her mother must have coined, a phrase that stuck in her head like catchy jingle while she sat down to write Dusty a Dear John letter.

She couldn't decide if she wanted to list her reasons for leaving – relaying in her letter specific moments from their life together, moments more akin to a television movie than a marriage – or if she should go easy on him. She didn't want to hurt him, he had been hurt enough, but there was a rage inside of her that came when she thought about some of their 19 years together, like the time she swore he was cheating, the time he watched golf for a month, or that time he was drunk for ten years, and she wanted to empty that rage on paper and be done with it. So she did, scrawling out an essay of sorts, with a shaky hand, tears dripping onto the page, writing for what felt like hours, going through whole years, entire episodes where she

was the victim and he was the disgusting, sloppy drunk. When she was finished the letter, Mona felt a little better; it was as if she had gotten to watch herself on screen, as if all of those things hadn't really happened. Mona folded the letter, left it on the kitchen counter, and started packing.

She went upstairs, and packed only her clothes, make-up and jewelry, including her wedding rings, which were too nice to part with. When she was finished, she looked around. She had only just finished decorating the bedroom, which she had painted a too-dark green, and then lightened it up with yellow silk – yellow silk curtains, yellow silk table runners, yellow silk sheets. She touched the curtains, smoothing the fabric against her face, and left the room, something stinging her throat.

Mona carried her suitcases downstairs and looked again at her letter, folded and waiting for Dusty. She thought about how he would come home and find it, how he would stand over it, eating the chicken she'd left in the fridge, not blinking. It didn't matter what the letter said, or how many reasons she had for leaving, he would mix it all together anyway, and so she took that letter, tore it up and let the confetti of it drop into her purse. It wasn't the truth. She took a pen and wrote a new letter on the back of an envelope: *Dear Dusty, I'm in love with another man and I'm moving away. This has nothing to do with – It just doesn't. M*

Outside, Mona loaded six suitcases into the trunk and back seat of her convertible Mercedes C-Class, and took one last look at the house. It was nothing to cry over. She had a whole other life on the other side of this, and she was leaving to catch up to it. Behind the wheel of her car, Mona sipped from the white wine spritzer

she had mixed herself in a can of La Croix, and backed out of her driveway, her convertible roof retracting.

It was exhilarating, leaving Dusty. She had pictured hundreds of scenarios over the years – some more dramatic than others, but she had never gotten to the point where she could truly imagine what it would feel like to drive out and away from the town his family owned, away from all those damned oranges. And now she was going to Tallahassee to be with, if only secretly, the governor of the state of Florida. It was a good move on her part, one her mother, damn her, would be proud of. Mona twisted the rearview mirror to look at her face, and thought, it's true, damn it, you do become your mother, and Mona pretended to laugh wickedly.

In Tallahassee, Ted was going to put her up in a condo – the penthouse of a building called the Talla Villa, which had a private elevator and about a zillion other amenities most people couldn't even imagine, like pressing a button from your apartment to alert the valet that you needed your car so that you wouldn't have to stand around on the ground-level waiting for it. Mona loved that one.

Mona had met Ted Portage that winter during the Seminole Days festival in Tallahassee. Mona and Dusty had attended the festival together, representing Florida Pure as the county's largest employer and one of the event's sponsors. But when Dusty had to duck out after the first day to get back to work, Mona stayed, playing hostess to a ladies bridge competition, and attending the Seminole Days Ball solo.

"Your husband never stays very long, does he?" Ted Portage said to her, backing up against the wall to stand next to her.

“He’s not what you would call a social animal,” Mona said. “He can fit the bill, just don’t make him attend the ball.”

Portage laughed. “I was thinking that I should get to know the two of you better. I know that Governor Bloom knew your father-in-law very well, rest his soul.”

“Mmm.” Mona wasn’t sure if he was referring to the soul of Eddie Ruums or the late Governor Bloom, for whom Portage had been Lieutenant Governor and was now finishing out the last two years of his term. “Eddie knew everybody,” Mona said.

“And your husband?” Portage asked, motioning for the waiter.

“Between you and me,” Mona said, turning fully to him now, “Dusty’s plate is full enough as it is.”

“Is that so?” Portage said under his breath. “What are you having?” He asked her when the waiter came.

“White wine spritzer?” It was the only thing she could think to order.

“Dirty martini,” he told the waiter. “I was thinking that I should have a little sit down with your husband, but if he doesn’t do that sort of thing perhaps the two of us could talk sometime.”

“OK,” Mona said, not sure what she would have to offer any kind of discussion regarding orange juice. She was Dusty’s wife. She bought furniture and planned vacations. She didn’t have, nor did she want, anything to do with oranges.

“How about now?” the Governor said, but was being pulled by his jacket collar to join a photo op. “OK, not now, a half-an-hour? Room 1241.” When he was

gone, it felt to Mona like he had left his smile and the smooth tenor of his voice there with her.

She went up to her room, brushed her teeth and practiced standing, sitting, and standing again. She checked her messages. No one had called. She checked the cable news. Nothing impossibly horrible had happened.

When the time came, she went to room 1241 and knocked. Ted Portage answered, invited her in and offered her a drink. “How about just plain white wine?” he asked.

“That’s fine,” she said, sitting down, though she knew it would make her over-the-top drunk.

“Your dress is pretty,” he said. “That’s just how I would want my wife to dress – classy and just a little slutty.”

“Well thanks,” Mona said, sarcastic, and the governor chuckled, self-satisfied, and sat down across from her, putting their drinks on the table between them. “I can’t think of a thing I could tell you about Florida Pure that you don’t already know. I’m not exactly connected to the business.”

“Then what on earth are you doing here?” Portage said, passing his fingertips over her knee.

It was cheesy. It was subversive. It was wrong. But it hit Mona in just the right place inside of her that made her feel alive and fun and feminine. It started like that, and continued on for the next couple of months with phone calls and e-mails and trips out to the Alabama coast, where he wouldn’t be so easily recognized.

Dusty, of course, was clueless. He was putting so much into the company then, because it had been his father's and before that his grandfather's and because he wasn't very bright and because he knew this. He would have to work harder than his father, harder than his grandfather because he fell so far below the curve. It was he who should have killed himself and his brother who should be alive now, running the company, he once told Mona. Nonsense, she said. But she had never met his brother.

Chapter 5

Nolan Ruums had been one of those hippie-types back when it wasn't cool at all anymore to be a hippie-type, especially for a rich kid in rural Florida. What you were supposed to do as a rich kid in rural Florida was exactly what Dusty did: take the truck you got for your 16th birthday, take the girl that always followed, and go have some fun. Nolan, instead, wore Birkenstocks, dreadlocked his hair, and fought with his father about the grove workers.

It was unconscionable, the boy would say, that the people who worked for them lived in one-room shacks with their entire families. That they were paid a fraction of minimum wage, while they, the Ruums, lived in a big house with a big in-ground pool, six television sets, and a horse that no one even paid attention to. He couldn't believe that this stuff went on right out in the open – in America – and that nobody seemed to notice.

As a way of protest, Nolan quit school and started going out into the groves every day with a sack, picking. He would come in after six to eat dinner with the family, sunburned, dirty, and stinking of sweat and oranges. Nolan did this for three

weeks and Eddie Ruums said nothing – he didn't ask his son to stop and he didn't rehash their old argument. He didn't say, "Do you hear them complaining?" in his father-fight voice like he used to. He kept his mouth shut, and waited for the phase to pass.

When this didn't get him the attention he wanted, Nolan announced that he was going on a hunger strike. He didn't eat for 4 days. By the fifth day, he went crazy from hunger and hanged himself in the lobby of Florida Pure with a note tied around his neck that read, *What's so pure about this?*

It caused the company to close for a week during peak season. It got three days worth of attention from the local media, who, following the lead of Florida Pure's PR department, reported it as a sad loss and a family matter. The school that Nolan attended set up a scholarship in Nolan's name, and that was that.

Dusty, who was older than, and never quite understood, Nolan, started drinking. He met Mona, who was closer to Nolan's age, when he and his friends crashed a debutante ball, and they were married before her family had time to object.

Chapter 6

The drive up from Marathon Key had helped Dusty clear his head. He had enough money from the sale of Florida Pure to eat filet minion wrapped in twenty dollar bills every day for the rest of his life. He didn't need to work. He didn't even like work! There were people, Dusty knew, who never worked a day in their lives, and though he couldn't figure how they passed their time, he was willing to give it a try. He would start, he and Mona, with a trip around the world. They would see art,

eat fancy European cheese, and play golf. Mona would love it, and together, they would be different people. Not different – *better*.

Back in Sanford, Dusty was surprised to see that the house was dark, that the door was locked. Inside, he called into the darkness, but the darkness didn't answer back. He moved into the house and flipped on a light, heard the air conditioner chug and sigh, and called out for her again: Mona? But the house was empty. In the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator, pulled out a rotisserie chicken and began picking at it. He sifted through the mail with his greasy fingers and found Mona's note, there among the bills and flyers advertising missing people and professional carpet cleaning. *Dear Dusty, I'm in love with another man and I'm moving away. This has nothing to do with – It just doesn't. M*

He read it six times. Then, just the first sentence, slowly, over and over. Then, the second, repeating, "This has nothing to do with – " aloud.

He tossed the letter into the sink, took the chicken into the living room and sat down where he ate with his fingers, peeling the meat off of the breastbone and stuffing it into his mouth. He finished both breasts and plucked off a drumstick and ate that too, quietly, sitting on Mona's new sofa with a chicken in his lap in the living room, of all places, which was not even for living, much less eating. When he was finished, he let the bone fall to his lap, and gripped the armrest while he choked on his first inevitable tears.

Sitting there, his vision blurred by shock, his mind working to total the moments of their lives that had led to this, Dusty couldn't picture her face. It was like he'd never known her – but if he'd never known her, why had she left such an

impression, such a fossil of herself on his life? He couldn't even bear to look around. Mona was everywhere. Next to him, their child-like faces smiled out from a silver frame: their honeymoon picture.

They had gone to Cozumel on a cruise that left from Fort Myers and trudged along the Gulf for a day. That picture was taken on the boat, the deep blue of the Gulf behind them, their entire lives in front of them. They had had fun on that trip – they fished, and got sunburned, and had plenty of energetic sex; they bought big straw hats and jewelry made out of seashells; they lit a bonfire on the beach and cuddled under a blanket, splitting a bottle of cheap tequila and laughing and laughing. What on earth had been so funny?

Dusty tried to listen for her voice, for her laugh, tried to channel it from some place within him. But he heard it pipe out the words: I'm in love with another man. Love...Another...Man. Which meant that another man was also in love with her. How had that happened? Where had she gone?

A sudden panic twitched at his veins; his heart knocked at his chest and he began to sweat. He might have been able to make it without Florida Pure, and he might have been able to survive without Mona...but both of them? His entire life had been swiped from him, eradicated like some feeble disease. Dusty pushed the chicken off his lap and stood up, wiping grease on the back of his pants while he walked to the door. He had to get out of there. He had to find someplace to lose himself.

Chapter 7

Throughout the weeks that Florida Pure remained in the news, executives at Bottomless Lake Oranges were busy preparing a marketing offensive. Their new commercials, which aired during afternoon soap operas and primetime television, showed workers in groves, picking oranges to the Turtles' song *Happy Together*. Then, a worker turns to the camera and says, "I am Bottomless Lake Oranges," and then another, down the line, says "I am Bottomless Lake Oranges," while dumping his sack into a wheelbarrow, and the man who drives the wheelbarrow turns to the camera and says "I am Bottomless Lake Oranges," while adding his pile to the oranges heaped in a flatbed truck, and then the man who drives the flatbed truck turns to the camera and says, "I am Bottomless Lake Oranges," and then he drives to the processing plant and you see factory workers overseeing the caps being mechanically screwed onto cartons of juice and they say, smiling and in unison, "We are Bottomless Lake Oranges." And then you see Kathryn Peters, their genius CEO, and her dainty, slender, manicured hand take up a glass of juice and drink from it, after which she says, "We are all Bottomless Lake Oranges. For more information about how our juice is picked and processed, please visit our website at BottomlessLakeOranges.com."

The commercial ran for a month before it worked, but when it did, it worked like gangbusters, their sales spiking up to where they had been pre Orange Atrocities. Soon, those sales would double – even triple. They were a monopoly now, at least where Florida was concerned, and the Orange Atrocities had helped insure that even the juice made outside of Florida, imported mostly from Brazil, carried the same

awful connotations as Florida Pure. It was a beautiful twist of fate, one even Kathryn Peters couldn't have dreamt. And it was working. A month after Florida Pure shut its doors, Bottomless Lake's stock price ballooned.

But outside the cool steely hallways of Bottomless Lake Oranges' headquarters in Kissimmee, this market phenomenon was having a disastrous effect. The purchase and subsequent resale of Florida Pure's groves by Bottomless Lake Oranges meant that just about every orange grown for juice in Florida was up for purchase by Bottomless Lake, which drove the global price of oranges into the basement. This was good for Bottomless Lake, they could buy their oranges for less and sell their product at a discount, wooing back jilted consumers and gaining new ones, but it was bad for Florida, bad for the private grower who never saw the profits made by Bottomless Lake, even in a good year.

But the biggest problem in the months that followed the demise of Florida Pure was not in Florida but Brazil, where, thanks to Bottomless Lake's ramped-up marketing and drop in production costs, the concentrated juice market had become obsolete almost overnight, with two companies in São Paulo being put out of business and a third, Lacerda Estate Oranges, facing extinction. But Geras Lacerda, the man for whose family the company was named, was not about to let that happen. An Act of God had given them their start, after a deep freeze descended into Florida in 1962, destroying Florida's crop and throwing Brazil's juice production into high demand, and an Act of God would get them out of this current crisis.

But Geras Lacerda was dying of bone cancer, and in no condition to cause an Act of God. He summoned his sons and put them on a plane to Miami, instructing

them to find a way to influence the market, explaining what he was sure they already knew: that business was about relevance, and this company in Florida was making them irrelevant; then explaining what he knew his sons would understand: that without a sudden shift in fortune, there would be nothing left to inherit. The three boys, not young by any stretch, left their father with complete comprehension. They were not about to let go of their birthright.

On the plane to Miami, the trio barely spoke. They sat, three in row, in silence: Julián listening to headphones and sleeping, Arturo reading a book written in English, *The New Daddy's Guide to the First Year*, and Luis anxiously flipping through the stack of magazines from the seat pouch in front of him. They didn't speak, mainly, because they didn't have anything to say. It wasn't that they didn't like each other, but that they had nothing in common and only lived together on the family estate way into adulthood because of a long-held Lacerda tradition: if you wanted a slice of the family pie, you had first endure the family.

Their plane landed at 6:45, the end of the day turning Miami pink, its pinched sunlight flooding the cabin, making their faces glow. They took a shuttle from the airport and rented a car, "The biggest one," Julian told the agent who then offered him a giant SUV. "I said a car, not a tank," Julian said, exerting his tired snobbery. "Yes, thank you," he said, taking the keys to a Lincoln and insisting on driving. Out of the airport, they caught a glimpse of the city, with its tall steel and glass buildings, its cranes lifting even more steel and glass, building and building, everything manmade rising up over everything God made, the sun turning the buildings pink, the billowy purple clouds chasing the sun. Luis gasped. It was beautiful.

It was completely dark when they turned onto Alligator Alley and then up rural route 27, which alternated swamp and cane fields, the stable next to the unstable, one no darker than the other. When they were too tired to drive any further, they stopped in Clewiston – “America’s Sweetest Town,” Arturo said, reading the sign – and ate at a place called Camp Everglades. Finally, or inevitably, it was time to talk.

They did it over beers and gator burgers in the thin lamplight, the circles under their eyes just forming, the chewy meat getting lost in the crevices of their teeth. “Whatever we do,” Arturo said, chewing, “We do it fast and get out of here. I thought Nia was going to kill me when I told her we had to go,” he said, speaking of his pregnant wife. He shook his head. “Imagine being alone with our mother in *her* condition.”

Julian rolled his eyes and picked up his beer by its neck. “I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

Luis drummed his hands on the table. “Let’s think about what we’re going to do. Think...Act of God.”

Julian shook his head, put his beer down on the table. “You mean like a freeze? Let’s say some prayers. Or, how about doing a little dance like the Natives do? Or, I know, we’ll go up to the North Pole and consult with...”

Arturo elbowed him. “Would you relax please? I told Nia I’d be home in three days, so whatever we’re going to do, let’s figure it out and get it over with.”

“I’ll just call up Disasters R Us, and put in an order.”

“I’ve got it,” Luis said, slapping his hand on the table. “Why don’t we just call up Bottomless Lake Oranges and see if they’ll talk to us?”

“Talk to them about what?” Julian asked.

“About helping us. It’s not like we’re just creeps off the street.”

“You’re talking about a company who, in the last five years, has gobbled up every other juice company in the state, including the second biggest,” Julian said.

“They’re piranhas. They’re not going to help us.”

“Wait a minute,” Arturo said, waving his hands. “They wouldn’t just *help* us without getting something in return, but what if we gave them something?”

“I’m listening,” Julian said, sitting back and crossing his arms over his chest.

“What if we asked for some kind of a partnership? The thing that big about Bottomless Lake is their name, right? Well, what if we put their name on our product?”

“Gerias will never go for selling out,” Julian said.

“Not selling. *Renting*. We divert the money already spent on advertising to renting their name – we put our product in their containers. That way, they do away with another competitor, getting our labels off the shelves in Latin America, and we lose...absolutely nothing.”

“It’s actually a good idea,” Julian said, trying to curb his smile.

“So...we have a meeting,” Luis said, shrugging.

“So we have a meeting,” Arturo said, self-satisfied, “and then we go home and get back to our lives.”

“You mean you get back to *your* life,” Julian said.

“Don’t ruin this by pouting,” Arturo said. “I tried to get you a date with Nia’s cousin, but you didn’t want anything to do with her.”

Julian rolled his eyes. “I’m too *tired* to dwell on the one that got away. Let’s get out of here.” They paid their bill and checked into the nearby Clewiston Motor Lodge, rented three swampy rooms and tried to sleep in the swampy humidity.

Chapter 8

Raul had been one of the lucky ones. As one of the passengers on the van that overturned on the Bee-line, he had been sitting in the front seat, next to the driver, and so he was able to open the door, take off his seatbelt and jump out of the van, jolted, but not hurt. But his cousin Jose had been among the dead. During the ride, he had been sandwiched, along with another man, between two of the seats in the back. This was ordinary for them, and Jose squatted, Raul imagined, thinking of the meal he’d have that night, the bath he’d take, the cold can of beer he’d put to his lips. When the van flipped, his head connected with the ceiling just as the roof connected with the ground. He was like a turtle – Raul explained in a letter to Jose’s sister, still in Mexico – his head lodged in his chest cavity, crowding in with his heart.

Jose was young. He didn’t have a family of his own, or mouths to feed. Raul, on the other hand, had a wife and a baby. They lived in a studio apartment outside Intersection City. It wasn’t a bad life. Raul worked, he came home, he had dinner and a can of Budweiser, and played with his daughter, Yillian, the absolute light of his life. On Sundays, they went to church and had a long music-filled lunch in the rectory with other migrant families.

In the early mornings, long before sunrise, Raul would ride his bike to a vacant lot where he would wait with the others for a van to come and pick them up and take them to their day's work. But on a dark, star-filled morning in May, the van didn't come. The workers sat for hours, waiting. Eventually, some left, going out into the sunny day without an iota of what to do. Raul had been one of the last to leave, and when he did he felt stupid, lame. He knew what had happened. The whole time he sat there waiting, he knew; he had seen the protests on *Telemundo*, the free Spanish language channel, had seen the activists driving around, rescuing people like himself from their lives. At first, Raul thought this might be a positive thing – that the company would bend only slightly under the pressure, and that he would get paid more for the oranges he picked – a solution, he thought, that would make everyone happy. But the company did not bend – refused to bend, or did not see bending as an option, and so it folded, crumbled, evaporated. (Raul had thought up many images to coincide with this, the fact that he was out of a job).

He spent that first day riding around on his bike, ashamed. They never should have moved into that studio and taken on the rent, the responsibility. He should have left his wife in Mexico. That way he'd be mobile, free to travel up to Minnesota for the summer blueberry harvest, as so many of the others had done. Raul felt stupid, heavy, that first day, riding around on his bike when he should have been working somewhere, earning some kind of pathetic wage. He was beginning to think that Jose had been the lucky one.

The thing that didn't make sense to him was that there were oranges everywhere now, far outside the regular season, oranges left to hang, oranges left to

rot. Oranges that nobody wanted. If he wasn't too afraid, he would have gone into any one of those groves and picked enough oranges to feed his family their full, but he *was* too afraid. He picked only the fruit that had fallen onto the side of the road, his family now eating that and rice, every day, twice a day.

After two weeks of riding his bike around Intersection City, looking for work, Raul got a tip from a man in his parish: contractors were picking up migrants at a service station on Route 27 for construction work outside Orlando, and the very next morning, Raul stood at the service station, waiting for the red Chevrolet his friend described, being eyed suspiciously by the mechanic in the service bay. When the red truck came, Raul spoke to the driver, agreed to the terms of the work, and piled in the back with two other men who had also been loitering around the service station. Work, finally.

He was paid fifty dollars a day to help construct a canal that would dry out a low-lying area where the contractors planned to build a subdivision to be called Cypress Cascades II. Cypress Cascades I sat just a mile down the road, its near-finished homes already sold, wooden ducks already floating in its lakes. It was better money than he'd made picking, but it wasn't as steady. Some days the red Chevrolet would come, others it wouldn't, which made the work more volatile, the lump in Raul's throat grow. But he eked through the summer that way, some days working, some days riding around on his bike, watching the traffic flow as the educated, legal and English-speaking came and went, working too. They were as much alien to him as he was to them.

Chapter 9

In the nine years that Tucker worked for Florida Pure he had managed to save \$300,000. That, combined with the money he'd made off the sale of his grandmother's house in Mexico Beach, gave him a considerable chunk of cash. But he didn't feel right, having all that money. It made him nervous, half a million dollars, just sitting there in the bank, being green. And so after a summer spent tossing between one idea and the next, Tucker made a decision: he was going to buy an orange grove. He was going to make juice.

The idea had come to him in a daydream on Interstate 10 back when he was still hauling juice for Florida Pure. This was after the Orange Atrocities scandal broke but before Tucker lost his job because of it. He knew there was a better way to grow oranges than the way Dusty Ruums had done it – off the backs of the helpless. Tucker would grow his oranges, pick them and make his juice honestly. Maybe he would call it Honest Orange. Maybe he'd do his own commercials. Maybe he'd go on the *Today Show*. Maybe he'd be on the cover of *Time*: The Man Who Saved Orange Juice.

When his grandmother died back in June and he had to go to Mexico Beach and deal with the whole of their lives together – the pure volume and weight of their *things* – the idea of owning something made Tucker cringe. He couldn't reconcile with the idea of death. A person died, but their body stayed put (his grandmother's had stayed there, in her house, watching the daily loop of game shows, soap operas, talk shows, local news, national news, more game shows, situational comedies, more news, more comedies, infomercials, static, morning news, and more talk shows until

it was found, four days later, after neighbors noticed its smell). Her body could be buried – a simple service with just the two of them next to a grave, Tucker standing and his grandmother lying in a box, a priest performing the ritual tasks – but her stuff could not. It had to be dealt with, acknowledged.

Tucker went through the attic, through baskets and boxes and bags of things his grandmother collected when cleaning out other people's houses after other people's deaths – the things people left when they left her: boxes of his own mother's schoolbooks and diaries, bags of his great grandmother's hats. He didn't crack his mother's diaries – he had read them before – but he did try on one or two of his great grandmother's hats, standing there in the dark, damp attic, a man trying to find himself through other people's things. Even Tucker knew it was ridiculous.

He donated his grandmother's clothing, television, and furniture; he recycled his mother's diaries, and he sold the house two tiny generations of Parks grew up in – a one-story dump, he heard the realtor call it when she thought he wasn't listening – for \$195,000. God bless the real estate boom, the realtor said through the side of her mouth, shaking his hand.

When Tucker got back to his apartment in Sanford with a box of his grandmother's cookbooks, an old, partially used-up spice rack, and the soccer trophy from the only year he played, Tucker saw his life for what it was: empty. He had never been the kind of man that took chances, and his life – his spare one-room apartment, his sorry, sagging twin bed, his one glass, one plate, one bowl, one spoon, one fork, and one knife – reflected that exactly. So he was going to do it, he was going to buy an orange grove. He was going to make juice honestly.

Chapter10

It took two days for the Lacerdas to get a meeting with Kathryn Peters. When they did, they dressed for the part, buying three new Armani suits, getting haircuts, hot shaves and even facials. “We don’t want the beautiful Ms. Peters to see our pores, do we?” Julian said, convincing his brothers to join him in the indulgence. When it was time, they drove to Bottomless Lake in their rented car and entered the building one at a time through its heavy revolving door.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist asked, looking up from her magazine, when the trio had assembled in front of her.

“We have an appointment with Ms. Peters,” Arturo said, offering his business card, which he hardly ever had the opportunity to use.

“Have a seat,” the girl said, pointing to where a few pieces of mod leather furniture were arranged around a glass coffee table. “Someone will come to take you upstairs.”

They waited...and waited, forty-five minutes in all, with Luis fidgeting, Julian whining and Arturo sulking, before Kathryn Peters’ secretary, Sam, came down to greet them and take them up to the building’s fourteenth floor. “Ms. Peters apologizes for the wait,” Sam said, looking only at Julian. “She had to take a call.”

“Not at all,” Julian said, taking Sam’s lead in through the double doors and pausing at the open elevator. “This is a nice building,” Julian said, making small talk, something he usually hated, as they the four of them ascended.

“Thanks. We, ah, acquired it when we took over Trop-” Sam stopped, remembering himself. It was part of their branding technique to never again mention

the companies they gained in acquisition – they threw away letterhead, coffee mugs, even polo shirts that bore the previous companies name. “When we took over another company.”

When they got to the fourteenth floor, Sam led them through a corridor lined with framed black and white photos of working groves complete with flatbed trucks and workers on ladders, sacks slung over their shoulders. “Right this way,” Sam said, stopping to hold the door open, and letting the brothers file into Kathryn Peters’ office, where she sat, her chair facing the window, which flooded the room with sunlight.

When each brother had taken one of the three chairs assembled in front of her desk, Kathryn said, “That’s all Sam,” without turning to face them. After a minute, and it must have been a full minute, she finally turned around and greeted her guests. “Just trying to get a little sun,” she said, flashing her trademark smile. “What creeps in between 10:15 and 10:47 is sometimes all I get.”

“Completely understandable,” Arturo said, standing up and offering his hand for her to shake it.

Kathryn shook her head. “I don’t shake hands.”

“Of course,” Arturo said, taking his hand back and sitting down.

“My secretary said you had an interesting proposition for me.”

“Yes,” Arturo started. “As I told your secretary, our organization is in trouble, and we believe that Bottomless Lake could benefit from helping us.”

Kathryn Peters waved her manicured hand. “That’s too vague. Tell me what you want.”

“As my brother was saying,” Luis said, sitting up in his seat, “Your good fortune is causing all of the other companies in our market to dry up and close down. We’re the last. What we’d like is to enter into some kind of partnership where we rent your name, use your packaging, *et cetera*, for our product.”

“Which is?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought my brother – ”

“Which *is*?”

“Concentrated juice.”

“Concentrated juice went out with white bread. Companies in your market are drying up, as you say, because there’s no use for them anymore. They’re obsolete. We’ve got a glut of oranges here as it is. In Latin America, we’ve tapped into a key demographic that wants to live just as well as the rest of the civilized world. They don’t want a tube of frozen orange *stuff*, they want juice, and now – *for* now – they can afford to buy it.”

“Perhaps there’s something else we can do for you,” Julian said, finally speaking up. “Your shipping costs – ”

“Are right in line with what we can afford.”

Julian sat back in his seat and for a moment no one spoke.

“If that’s all, then I’ll have Sam show you out.”

The trio rose slowly, careful not to meet each other’s eyes, and Sam led them silently out. Then, they were out in the parking lot again and it was as if the past hour had never even happened – they were no closer to solving their dilemma, which, in

many respects, had only heightened as a result of meeting with Kathryn Peters. They were obsolete and they hadn't even known it.

They drove in silence to a nearby shopping center, stopping at a place called Latin America Café, which served fruit pastries, *croquetas*, Cuban coffee and *café con leche*. Each ordered a *café con leche* and a guava pastry and they sat around a small rickety table in the otherwise empty café.

"That's that," Julian said. "We should sell."

"Sell, no!" Arturo said. "What will our children do? Where will their fortune come from?"

"I don't *have* any children, and I'm not particularly concerned about yours. What I *am* concerned about is the fate of my pocket."

"Our father would never sell," Arturo said.

"Gerias has two feet in the grave. It doesn't matter what he would or wouldn't do. We're in control now. I say we sell."

"I don't recall seeing any buyers," Arturo said.

"Bottomless Lake can take over our company just as easily as it has the others. It makes sense too. I don't care what she says. It must cost a fortune to get all that refrigerated juice down to South America. And for what?"

"It's a good point," Luis said. "We should sell."

"No." Arturo raised his hand in protest. "We will come up with something else."

"Like what?" Julian narrowed his eyes on him.

"Like another plan."

“A plan that depends on others is not a plan. It’s a *wish*.”

“You’re right,” Arturo said, looking down into his cup. “But we have to do something. I have to get home to my wife.”

“So go. Tell Gerias that she was more important and that you left it to us.”

“*You* go,” Arturo said to Julian, still looking into his cup.

“Maybe I will,” Julian said, standing.

“Go where?” Luis asked, looking up at him.

Julian shrugged, but looked over his shoulder at the rental car outside. “He won’t go anywhere,” Arturo said. “In forty years, he never has.” But Julian took a step back, and then another, and then he turned and pushed the glass door open and stepped out into the steamy air. Julian got into the car and turned the ignition over. He suddenly hated his brothers – *hated* them, because they were so different from who he was. He would have done anything to be away from them – permanently. He’d risk being poor, alien, and alone. He’d risk never seeing Brazil again. He knew that what Arturo said was true: he had never had the guts for anything but complaining. But then, suddenly, he wasn’t himself, and it was with a sickness in his gut that he put the car into reverse and pulled slowly out of the spot, then quickly out of the shopping center, quickly away from his brothers.

“He’ll be back,” Arturo told Luis, as Julian peeled out of the parking lot. By the time Arturo realized that their brother might not be back, Julian was twenty minutes up the turnpike, breezing though the Orlando interchanges.

Chapter 11

Tucker had scoured the papers for deals and was overjoyed to find so many. There were so many plots of oranges out there, so many groves on the market just waiting for him to take them up and begin a new life together. On a Friday, he drove down to Frostproof, opting to see a grove called Ashire first because he liked the name of the town, and because the land came with a house.

He met Lliam Graves, the man selling the grove, at Alshire, parking his car off to the side of the road by a line of wispy-looking pines and waiting for Lliam to lead him in though the driveway, which was overgrown with cobwebs and vines straight out to the house, which sat back, some distance away, but facing the grove. “Holy moley,” Tucker said, seeing the house. “It’s huge.”

“Built by an associate of Mr. Henry Ford,” Lliam said. “Obsessed with the romance of oranges.”

“Yes sir,” Tucker said. “I sure can understand that.” He felt dizzy, looking up at that house, felt heady and stoned – like he was in his life and not in it at the same time. He felt like the place already belonged to him, felt the magnetic pull of his future. A future obsessed with the romance of oranges. Tucker ran up to the house, pushed open the door, ignoring the smell of mildew, which hit him hard in the face but was like a perfume rather than an odor, and called into the house, hoping to hear an echo. “Yoohoo!” he called, his lips pursed, but the house did not answer back.

“Let me show you the grove,” Lliam called, coming over to pull him away from the door.

They walked through the grove, where they were surrounded by the squat bushy trees with canopies like messy hair. Tucker was blinded by the sun as it entered and spread, doing what the sun was supposed to do: heat and fill and transfer. Soon, this grove would be alive with oranges, Lliam told him, nature doing what nature did. Tucker was seduced by the green of it, by the light, but the ideas that flooded him: Juice – he would make rivers of juice.

“So,” Lliam started once they were on the other side of the grove, over looking Lake Reedy, a small swampy pond of a lake that bumped against the empty town of Frostproof. “What do you think?”

“This part will be mine too?” He stomped his foot on the ground to indicate the sandy edge where the malaleuca trees that surrounded the grove met the water.

“All yours,” Lliam said, smiling.

“What’s that?” Tucker asked, pointing, his eyes fixed on a dark obscurity billowing up just beyond the town.

“They’re probably burning sugar cane. I believe that’s how they harvest it.”

“Scary,” Tucker said. “All that fire around all these trees.”

“The fires are controlled, I’m sure.”

“Of course!” Tucker’s hand shook nervously as he scratched his head. He looked around one last time and decided: “You’ll take cash?”

“God Bless America,” Lliam said, shaking Tucker’s hand, his British accent making the phrase sound odd and sarcastic. “In you, sir, the dream is truly alive.”

Tucker laughed, nervous, his stomach doing somersaults – as excited as any part of him.

Chapter12

There was a gymnastics competition that weekend in Orlando – with girls and boys ages six to sixteen from across the country descending upon the resort town, their overeager parents in tow, renting up all the hotel rooms, crowding all the restaurants, and paying full price for their rental cars, making use of every mini van, SUV, sedan and compact car in sight, so that when Arturo and Luis arrived via taxi to the rental car complex outside the Orlando airport, there was nothing left.

“Perhaps I’ve got something to sell you,” the rental agent said, pretending to take pity on them when he saw the defeated look in their eyes.

“Sell? No. We will only be here a few days,” Arturo said.

“But this car is so cheap – it’s like renting one for a week, but getting to keep it when the week’s up. Please, take a look.”

The man led them to the lot, which had been emptied of all of the nice cars, to the car that remained – a blue Hyundai hatchback with four balding tires and a cracked rear window. “What year is it?” Luis asked, grimacing at the car.

“Ninety-two. Only eighty-thousand miles though. It’ll get ya where you need to go.”

“How much?” Arturo asked, sneaking a peak at his watch.

“Five hundred.”

“Well take it,” Luis said, reaching for his wallet.

Once they were in the car, pulling away from the now completely empty lot, Arturo wanted to whack his brother silly, but instead, because Luis was driving, Arturo pelted him, only, with questions. “What in the hell were you thinking? How much money are you carrying around with you anyway? Don’t you know that you’re supposed to have insurance in this country? And we don’t even know what’s wrong with this thing!”

“We needed a car!”

“Not this bad! If things go well we could be out of here by tomorrow. All we’d need to do is go back and forth between Bottomless Lake and the airport.”

“You’re forgetting that we have to find Julian,” Luis said, the brakes crunching beneath them as they came to a stop.

“No, we don’t have to find Julian. What help was he to us? None!”

“Our father is not going to like –”

“It doesn’t matter anymore! He’s going to die soon and then what will we have? Nothing but a failing company in a dwindling business. What we have to do is figure something out.”

“With our suitcases.”

Arturo slapped his forehead. It had only just occurred to him that Julian had taken everything they’d come with. He suddenly felt naked and alone. “I had a couple grand in my suitcase.”

Luis laughed. “And you get on me for *carrying* my money.”

“You know what?” Arturo threw up his hands. “I don’t care. They way I see it, it’s all the money he has. I’ll be home in a few days. God knows if he’ll ever be able to come home.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Let’s drive around. See some more of this place in the daylight. What little there is left.” It was four-thirty. The day had left them just as quickly as Julian had.

They traveled south, getting back onto Route 27 and driving through thick, green, summertime-lush Florida where the late afternoon sky was just as blue as it could have been and the bugs that died on their windshield were marks of time and place and absurdity. The brothers drove in silence, through the flat winding back roads, passing rusted, outdated billboards advertising failed presidential campaigns, long past county fairs and even Florida Pure. “Can’t believe they haven’t burned that one down,” Luis said, pointing.

“The stuff we saw on TV was probably exaggerated – stuff on TV usually is.”

More silence. More sunshine, more oranges, and more a feeling of impossibility crept through them like disease. There were still so many oranges here, wind scarred and abandoned. If Bottomless Lake wanted to make concentrated juice, they could. They could make orange juice, orange concentrate, and orange marmalade if they wanted to – all with the oranges within thirty miles of their processing plant. Lacerda Estate Oranges couldn’t compete in this, the new world of abundant product and sagging consumption. Their land would have to be sold – for *nothing*, probably, and maybe even bulldozed. “Maybe we could grow soybeans,”

Luis said just as Arturo was nudging him, pointing towards the purple plume building on the skyline.

“Some kind of fire,” Arturo whispered.

Luis put the window down and took a deep, exaggerated breath. “It’s probably sugar cane; they burn it before the harvest.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“In-flight magazine.”

Arturo shook his head and pointed. “I don’t think that’s sugar. Looks like citrus. Far as you can see.”

Luis followed his brother’s gaze. “Let’s follow it then, see how close we can get.” They continued south, towards the building line of purple which cut into the sky – into the day, really – reminding them of the reality of this place that had tendency to look like a cartoon. Before long, they were right up against the fire, could feel the smoke in their nostrils and the backs of their throats. Arturo was right, it was citrus – oranges, and they were being burned on purpose: the fire company sitting on, watching, and a white van with an emblem that read Official Canker Inspector was sitting along side it.

Then they remembered: Canker. The disease that affects citrus fruit had, in the last decade, spread from one Florida county to another, infesting citrus trees from Miami to the Indian River. The fire was part of a containment program: When the disease was found, they burned everything around it within 1900 feet. Canker wasn’t a problem in Brazil, but in Florida, it threatened the entire industry – if not for the disease itself, for the way they handled it.

Luis sunk into his seat, feeling for a second like his organs had gone to jelly.

“Of course,” he whispered.

“Of course, what?”

Luis sat up tall in his seat, and dropped the car into forth gear, gaining speed.

“If we figured out how to get canker in more of these groves, they’d have to burn them all down.”

“How would we do that?”

“All we’d have to do is get some canker and find some places to spread it.”

“We could get shot doing that.”

“Well sure, if we did it ourselves. But think about it: who owns all these groves?”

“Different people, probably.”

“So what if we got close to one or two of those people?”

“How?”

“I don’t know how, I’m just thinking.”

“What if we became pickers?”

Luis made a sour face.

“It makes sense. We go to where these guys get picked up in the morning and we go with them.”

“Then what?”

“We brush some trees with the disease.”

“If we got caught, they’d kill us,” Luis said. “Besides, do you really want to know what that’s like?”

“Dying?”

“Picking.”

“Like you said, I’m just thinking.”

“I’m starving,” Luis said, deciding to trade the hypothetical for something real. They had driven for hours by that time, falling south through towns, long stretches of accidental malaleuca forests and citrus groves while the day faded around them.

“Let’s stop then,” Arturo said. “I’m tired of thinking.” They stopped at the next place they saw, and found a spot in the busy lot. In ten minutes, Luis and Arturo were sitting in the yellow light of the Bel Loc Diner, a pair of medium-rare flank steaks on the way and a couple of bottles of *Presidente* between them. They were so hungry that they barely noticed the bleachy smell of the table tops or the thin layer of smoke that hung in the air. They were so hungry that, when their steaks arrived, they tore into them, not looking up at each other, not talking – just eating. The steaks were tough, and they stabbed and cut and chewed, gulping their beers, and ripping into their perfect, steaming, baked potatoes. They didn’t talk about what had happened that day or what they were going to do next. They didn’t talk about Julian. They were hungry, and they ate. It was savage and it was beautiful. It was American in a way that they were not. They were in a diner and there was smoke everywhere. There were people eating and laughing and listening to the Go Go’s.

They ordered two more beers when the waitress came to take their plates, sat back and stared at each other. “What now?”

“I guess we get another hotel room somewhere. Start fresh in the morning,”

Arturo said.

When two men came in and sat in the booth behind theirs, Luis and Arturo instinctively stopped their conversation and drank their beers in silence, not wanting to be overheard, though they weren't saying much of anything. Arturo, who was closer to the two men, began eavesdropping on *their* conversation when the topic turned to acreage.

"So it's four-hundred grand for 17 acres, plus the house, of course," the man closest to Arturo said, his British accent weak and watery.

"That's twenty-four grand an acre. Is that high?" the other man asked; his voice had a touch of the south in it and Luis looked up at him when he heard his voice because it was so different from the other voice that it made the speaker sound naïve.

"It's a *steal*" the British man said. "As soon as the market flips, you'll be able to sell it for twice that."

"Hope I won't want to," the southern man said.

Luis watched the southern man take up a pen and sign whatever paper was in front of him, and then another, and then another. When he was finished, the man looked nervously up across the table to the British man who lifted his tumbler of Coke. "To your oranges," the man said. "Congratulations, Tucker."

"To my oranges." The southern man grinned and sipped through his straw, his face flushed with excitement.

When the two men paid for their Cokes, Luis and Arturo slipped out after them into the dusky, buggy haze, got into their Hyundai, and left the parking lot behind the British man's SUV.

They followed the pair a couple of miles back onto the darkening rural roads until the SUV stopped at a tree-lined edge where a car was parked, Arturo passing them, making an illegal U-turn, and coming back – parking far enough behind them so that the Hyundai was invisible.

They watched the man named Tucker get into his car, a maroon hatchback, where he sat for a long time.

“What’s he doing?” Luis asked.

“I think he’s reading.”

“He’d have to be an idiot to get into this business right now.”

“Let’s hope so,” Arturo said, turning the engine over and pulling onto the road to follow Tucker as he pulled away. They followed him through the narrow, empty highway that led out, eventually, to the turnpike. When he entered the turnpike plaza, Arturo looked at Luis, who shook his head, yes, agreeing to follow him.

They followed him for two hours. When he stopped they were in Cocoa Beach, in the parking lot of a place called the Venus Trap, whose neon sign featured a leggy woman and an undulating, red-faced, plant.

Chapter 13

Inside it was dark and smoky, the only lights coming from the red neon that outlined the bar and the strong white lights that sat above the stage to illuminate the dancers. Everything else was dim, and matched the smoke that spilled from the mouths and noses of the men and women who watched the dancers from their tables. It was a crowded night for the Venus Trap. There was a bachelor party in the corner,

working out the specifics of purchasing a private dance with a dancer who wore her hair in an electric pink bob. There was a pack of younger men, who had crowded up around the stage and were being stingy with their dollar bills. The other tables that spilled out from around the stage were comprised of smaller crowds – single men, smoking and drinking, and couples who sat closely to one another, smiling and kissing, bashfully critiquing the women on stage; and there was Tucker, at the farthest possible table from the stage, nursing his bottle of Budweiser and spinning a quarter.

Luis met Arturo at the bar and assumed the position of leaning against it and watching the room. “What’s with that guy?” Luis asked. “He’s not even watching the stage.”

One loud song ended and another began. Tucker checked his watch and sipped his beer, his eyes on the stage entrance. His face brightened as one long thin leg stepped out from the curtain followed by another and the woman who called herself TT Bang Bang stepped out into the lights. Tucker didn’t blink. He didn’t move. He watched this woman as she moved from one end of the stage to the other, letting her hips guide her. He watched her as she backed up against the chrome pole and bent forward, the top of her flowing slowly down, the tips of her long brown curls touching the floor. He watched her as she worked the crowd, collecting dollar bills with her legs and breasts and mouth. His beer sweated away in its bottle.

“Look at him now,” Arturo said, nudging Luis, who was also watching the stage. “He’s transfixed.”

“She is beautiful,” Luis said. And she was beautiful. She was beautiful in a way that most of the other dancers were not. She looked like a woman who had lived

and who *was* living – she didn’t look caged the way the other dancers did, trapped inside their minds, wrestling with addictions, sordid histories or the voices in their heads. She looked, somehow, smart – in control of everything she did. Luis knew that she made Tucker feel like there was still hope and possibility in the world, because she made him feel that way too.

Then, her time on the stage up, she walked through the beaded curtain and fell to the back of the rotation. Tucker checked his watch, stood up, stretched, and checked his watch again. He remained standing for a while before walking slowly past the stage, as if trying to get a peak behind the curtain, on his way to the men’s room.

“You go,” Luis said to Arturo, “I’ll be all right here.”

In the bathroom, Arturo stood at the urinal much longer than he really needed to, waiting for Tucker to come out of the stall.

“I just bought this orange grove,” he heard him say, the porcelain working to make his voice sound louder. “I’ve got this house – this empty house.”

Arturo could see from the way Tucker’s legs moved that he was standing, practicing.

“In Frostproof. Yeah, Frostproof! It’s near a lake. Well, it’s a small lake.”

Arturo heard a thud come from inside the stall and knew that Tucker had knocked his head against the door, by accident or on purpose.

“Shit,” Tucker said and flushed the toilet before undoing the lock and darting out of the stall, out of the men’s room, past the stage, through the maze of tables and chairs, and out the door.

“You’re not going to follow him?” Luis asked when Arturo came back and sat down.

“He’ll be back,” Arturo said. “You wouldn’t believe it – he’s going to ask her to come live with him in Frostproof.”

“So follow him! Maybe he’s got strippers up and down the coast. We can’t rely on just this one.”

Arturo stood up to leave. “Aren’t you coming?”

“I better stay here and keep an eye on this one. Just in case.” Arturo rolled his eyes, but left in time to watch Tucker beat his head against his steering wheel before starting his ignition and driving away.

Luis bought another beer and found a table closer in towards the stage and waited for TT Bang Bang to reappear. When she did, it was with the same brown curly wig, cowboy boots, plastic holster and guns, which she came out shooting. Luis pulled out his wallet, took out a ten and held it up towards her.

“I don’t have change,” she said.

“I’m not asking for any.” Luis smiled and tucked the bill under her holster. She dipped down towards him, bending her knees, and opened her legs quickly, to thank him. Luis took out a twenty. “Where are you from?”

“Not here,” she said.

“So where?”

“Little bit of everywhere else.” She hung onto the pole with one hand and spun around it, kicking a booted leg up high.

“What time do you get off?”

“I don’t. Far as you’re concerned, anyway.” She swung the plastic pistol around her index finger.

Luis laughed and tucked the twenty beneath the black band she kept for this purpose tight around the ankle of her boot. She pointed the gun down at him and lipped *pow pow* before dancing slowly away.

Luis took a long sip of his beer to finish it off. When she left the stage, he got up and went back to the bar, ordered another beer and asked the bartender for a pen. On a cocktail napkin he wrote, *Have a proposal for you. Could mean money.* He scratched his head, pen still in hand, and wrote *No Sex*. When she came out to the stage again, he tucked the note beneath the band. When she came out for the fourth time, she said, “How much money?”

“Don’t know yet. Depends on how much you can do for us.”

“No sex?”

Luis shook his head.

“Drugs?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“Oranges,” he said.

“The trouble with oranges,” she said later as they met face to face for the first time, after the late-night rush, “is that they sound so innocent. There’s some kind of catch, right? Am I gonna have to kill the governor or something?”

Luis chuckled. “Not unless you want to.”

“Let’s sit down,” she said, directing him to a table near the bar and motioning

for the bartender to bring them some coffee. “Now tell me again how you’re going to get me out of this dump.” She folded her hands and leaned in towards him as she said this. Her real hair was red and stringy and knotted back in a loose bun; her skin, without the influence of the lights, was white as milk.

“Do you know anyone from Frostproof?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Good.”

“Do you know anyone named Tucker?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“Are you opposed to lying?”

“That depends.”

“Criminal behavior?”

“That depends too.”

The bartender brought their coffee with a handful of sugar packets, which he placed in front of her. “Thanks,” she said to him and started dumping packet after packet into the coffee. “The coffee here sucks,” she said. “I’m sure you can imagine.” She looked down into her cup as she stirred it. “You’ve got about five minutes to tell me what this is all about or I’m gonna have you thrown out.”

“There was this guy in here tonight,” Luis said, in no particular hurry. “I think I need someone to spy on him.”

“You think you do?”

“Yes.” Luis shook his head. “I think I need *you* to spy on him.”

“Why me?”

“He’s quite, um, taken with you.”

“Of course he is. I take my clothes off for money.”

“You don’t understand. He sits back and does a *crossword* puzzle until you come out.”

She rested her chin against her fist, her elbow on the table, and studied him.

“What did you have in mind?”

“He just bought an orange grove that I’d like access to.”

“This is where the lying and criminal behavior comes in?”

“He’s going to ask you to go with him.”

“To his orange grove?”

“Yes. To his orange grove.”

“And you want me to go there and give you access to it?”

“I want you to be my access. Do whatever I need you to do.”

“Why?”

“Money.”

She sat back, watching him. “What’s in it for me?”

Luis scrutinized her face, trying to gage how much she’d do it for. “Five grand,” he said, “When the job is done.”

“I could make that here in a month,” she bluffed.

“This may only take you a month.”

“I’ll do it for ten.”

Luis twisted in his seat. Arturo would kill him. But how else were they supposed to do this? “How about seven? Half now and half when it’s finished.”

“Ten,” she said.

“Half now and half when it’s finished?”

She nodded. “Fine.”

They shook hands; hers was firm and his was light.

“What do I have to do?”

“Just wait. He’ll be back.”

It took three days for Tucker to come back. When he did, it was in the middle of the day, a Saturday, and Trudy wasn’t working. She had come in to the Venus Trap to get her paycheck and Luis had followed her. “I know what you’re doing,” she said to him through the window of his car.

“What?” He asked, smiling, all sunglasses and teeth.

“Following me everywhere. You think you own me now ‘cause you paid me five grand?” He nodded. “Well stop. I said I’ll call you when he shows, so I’ll call you when he shows.” Just then Tucker’s maroon Dodge Omni pulled into the parking lot and Luis shooed Trudy away, putting up his window and reclining his seat in an attempt to hide.

Trudy walked slowly towards the building and fell in step with Tucker. “Hi, there,” she said as they approached the building. “Back so soon?” She opened the door for him.

Tucker pointed to himself. “You know me?”

“Sure,” she said quieter, tilting her head slightly.

“You’re not working today?” he asked, walking in with her.

“No,” she smiled. “Just here getting my paycheck.”

“Oh,” he said. “I didn’t know you – I mean, I thought you only made tips.”

She shrugged. “Mostly.”

Trudy walked over to the bar and Tucker followed her. “It’s nice to see you here without all your stuff,” he said. “I mean, your hair...” He reached up to touch her hair and she backed away. “Sorry,” he said.

Trudy spoke to the bartender. “Tell Vinnie I’m here for my check,” she said.

She turned back to Tucker. “You here on vacation?”

“Me? Uh...no. I’m actually...” He shook his head. “I’m actually here to talk to you.”

“To me?”

“Yeah, listen, see, I bought this orange grove...it’s in Frostproof, do you know where that is?”

Trudy shook her head.

“It’s about eighty miles south of Orlando. Well, anyway. I bought it so I wouldn’t have to work anymore, at least not for some crappy company. And see, I come here and I watch you and I think that you might like it there too. And we could – ” he grabbed her hand – “We could live there together and grow oranges, and you wouldn’t have to do this anymore. See, I’ve watched you a lot and you’re not like, just a stripper or anything – ” He shook his head. “Sorry. See, what I mean is that I know there’s meaning somewhere in this world and – ”

“OK,” Trudy said.

“What?” Tucker shook his head slightly, his face paled.

“OK,” she said again. “I’ll go with you. It sounds...nice.”

“OK!” Tucker said, jumping a little.

When Vinnie came back with her check, Trudy took it and said, “Vinnie, this is...What’s your name?”

“Tucker.”

“Tucker’s invited me to come and live on his orange grove.”

Vinnie gave them a flat, confused stare.

Trudy leaned into him. “I quit,” she said. She took Tucker by the arm, and led him out into the light.

Chapter 14

Tucker’s stomach felt like knots and chains and marbles. He wasn’t sure if he would throw up or collapse to the ground. His legs were so weak he knew it was God’s grace that he was still standing on them, unlocking the passenger door for Trudy, and letting her in. He had gotten so caught up in asking her that he never once thought about what might happen if she actually said yes.

“I just have to stop by my place to get some things,” she said as they settled into the car.

“OK,” he said. His palms were slick against the wheel. “How much do you have?”

“Not much,” she said. “Only things I own I could *carry* to Frostproof if I needed to.”

They pulled slowly out of the parking lot, Tucker sweating, and sliding the air conditioning gauges from side to side as he drove in an attempt to get the air conditioning to work. “Sorry about this,” he said. “It’ll work once we get going.”

“That’s OK,” Trudy said. “It’s just nice to be sitting down for once. My car crapped out a couple of months ago. That’s how I ended up here in the first place. It’s just around the corner,” she said, pointing. “Left on Apollo Avenue.”

“Apollo Avenue,” he repeated, his voice low.

“This place is ridiculous, isn’t it? Everything named Lunar Landing, this, Moon Rock, that. It’s like living in a goddamned theme park.”

“I came out here once to watch a launch,” he said. “With my grandparents - when I was little.” Tucker smiled and shook his head. “It was something. The earth actually *shook*. It was the first time in my life when I realized how small I was – how big the world is. You ever go to Cape Canaveral?”

Trudy shook her head. They had arrived at her building. “Here it is; the pink one.”

Tucker stopped the car and Trudy got out, telling him to wait, that she didn’t need any help. For a while, Tucker stayed in the car, playing with the radio dial then riffling through his glove compartment for no particular reason. Then he got out, stretched his legs and looked up at the motel-style building wondering which apartment she had gone into. He paced a little then leaned against the car, trying to look casual. He watched a stray cat stalk and catch a gecko. When Trudy reappeared

it was with two duffle bags, a knapsack and a cooler. “I just gotta leave a note for the landlord,” she said, penning it on the back of a piece of junk mail.

“How far away is this place?” she asked after they had settled back into the car.

“About an hour and a half,” Tucker said, turning south on A1A towards Melbourne to avoid Orlando traffic. They drove along for a while in silence, watching the smattering of aging pink and purple buildings give way to taller stucco condos along the coast.

“This is just what I needed,” Trudy said as they turned onto the causeway, the four-lane bridge that separates the barrier islands from the mainland. She stuck her arm out the window, and let the wind blow through her fingers. She inhaled deeply, closed her eyes and rested her head back against the seat.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?” Tucker said.

“You have no idea,” she breathed.

Once they were past Interstate 95, the landscape opened up into groves, bean farms and patches of cypress. The afternoon sky was a perfect electric blue. This drive back towards Florida’s middle reminded Tucker of all of those days he spent behind the wheel for Florida Pure, excited to get to witness firsthand the beauty of the world from behind the wheel of a big rig, glad that he didn’t have some job in some office, moving papers from one desk to another. Now his excitement was different, and the beauty of the green scenery screaming against the sky didn’t begin to compare with what was next to him – this lovely mystery nodding off beside him, smiling in her sleep as if she didn’t have a single care in the world.

“Hope you don’t have anything against podunk towns,” Tucker said once they arrived in Frostproof. He wasn’t kidding. Downtown Frostproof was a colorless strip of half-unoccupied shops – stores selling “antique” glass, dishes and toys, a used book store containing mostly stacks of dusty paperback Harlequins, the office of a citrus mutual, a post office, a general store which sold fruit, Tide and batteries, and an abandoned newspaper office, once home to the defunct *Frostproof Weekly*.

The streets were empty, and Trudy wondered aloud where all the people had gone. “Saturday night,” Tucker said. “Most probably still out from the day or went to dinner in Avon or Lake Wales. There’s not much here, but, to tell you the truth, that’s why I like it. It’s got a lot to become.”

“So are you an investor or something? Just keeping your grove long enough to sell it?”

“Heck no,” Tucker shook his head in a look of disgust. “I’m gonna grow oranges here. Beautiful oranges. Gonna earn my money the old fashioned way.” He beat his hand once against his chest.

Tucker made a right turn off of Main Street followed the street down a slight hill. “That’s the lake,” he said, proud of it. “Come on, I want to show you something.”

Tucker got out of the car and walked out to the end of the pier, Trudy following him. “See that?” He pointed.

“What?”

“Just on the other side there – that line of trees? That’s the end of my property. Hundreds of orange trees on the other side of that pine,” he said. “That little part of the lake front’s ours to do whatever we want. Could be your own private beach!”

Trudy looked down at the water and back up at Tucker. Lake Reedy was dark, swampy, and alive with mosquitoes, cordgrass and exaggerated-looking lily pads; it was accessed by a public pier at the end of a rinky-dink residential street, behind the dead-as-a-door-knob downtown. She guessed the beach *was* private, to an extent, and that Tucker was probably crazy.

“Let’s get back in the car!” Tucker said, practically jumping out of his shoes. “I’ve got to show you the rest!”

They drove a half-mile past town and back into the deep green curtain of trees. “I hope you like it,” Tucker said, turning onto the grounds of Alshire Grove, passing a large, rusted open, wrought iron gate. “A neighbor said this place has got some real history to it.”

To Trudy, the house looked more dilapidated than historical. The wooden siding was dry-rotted and falling off in places. In others, animals, probably raccoons, had burrowed into the façade of the house, so there were holes bigger than bowling balls where the house met the ground. “Don’t worry about those,” Tucker said about the holes, “They don’t go clear through.” The porch steps were broken in places and Tucker had to help Trudy up, showing her the strongest places to step.

Inside, the house was a little nicer. Tucker had cleaned the floors and screwed new light bulbs into the bare ceiling fixtures in the kitchen and living room. He had

purchased some second-hand furniture from a thrift store in Intersection City so there was a wobbly checkerboard-topped table in the kitchen, and a lumpy, threadbare sofa in the living room. “Home sweet home,” Tucker said with his arms outstretched to the two-room expanse, grinning.

“Home sweet home,” Trudy repeated, thinking about the ten grand and all the places it could take her.

“Listen,” Tucker grabbed her hand. “I know this is weird and all, you being here and us not really knowing each other. But I want you to feel at home here. I want you to feel like you belong here, because...because *I* feel like you belong here. I really do,” Tucker said, his voice cracking at the end.

Trudy nodded and took her hand away. “OK,” she said and backed into the kitchen, which was large enough to dwarf the checkerboard-topped table and make her voice echo slightly when she said, “So I guess you don’t have much to eat here, do you?”

“We can go out!” Tucker said, raising his finger in a moment of eureka.

Although Atsa Pizza and the Bel Loc Diner were the only place to eat in Frostproof, neither place was particularly crowded. “Pizza or greasy diner food?” Tucker asked her, raising a hand for each choice, mimicking a sale.

“Greasy diner food,” she said and they turned toward the diner, Tucker slipping a dollar to the man who sat outside the diner, a hat full of donated loose change in his hat. “I’ve seen a lot of things,” she said once they were inside,

following the waitress to their seats, “but I’ve never seen panhandling in a town so empty. What’s the point?”

Tucker shrugged. “Maybe he’s just down on his luck.”

“I’d hate to be down on my luck here,” she said, opening the menu. “They have scrapple here! I haven’t had scrapple in *years*.”

“What’s scrapple?”

“It’s a Virginia thing – or a *Delmarva* thing,” she said, using the term for the parts of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia that reach their fingers into the mouth of the Chesapeake.

“That’s where you’re from? Delmarva?”

“Virginia, the *va* part of it.”

“And scrapple is?”

Trudy shook her head. “If I told you, you wouldn’t eat it. Ooh. I’m gonna have eggs and toast and scrapple,” she said excitedly, and Tucker loved the way her eyes glinted in the pale yellow light.

When the waitress came they ordered two light beers, two orders of scrapple, eggs and toast. “Tonight I’ll eat Virginia style,” Tucker said, and thought about winking at her but decided against it.

“So what’s the game plan?” Trudy asked after a long sip of beer.

“You mean with the oranges?”

She nodded.

“Well, I’m gonna make juice.”

“All by yourself?”

“Well, you can *help*. I mean, if you want to...”

“Sure. It’s just – it sounds like a lot of work.”

“Naw,” he shook his head. “It won’t be so bad.”

Their beers came and they toasted. “To oranges,” Tucker said. “No wait, to Alshire. No.” He shook his head, keeping his beer lifted. “To you.” Trudy tilted her bottle towards his until they clinked.

When their food came they ate it, idly chatting and laughing, Tucker enjoying his Scrapple and agreeing that he’d rather not know what composed the tasty grayish rectangle. They talked about Florida and driving and about how Trudy ended up at the Venus Trap, “By mistake,” she said, “But I really don’t believe in mistakes.”

“What *do* you believe in?” He asked, his eyes sparkling.

She shrugged. “Everything else.”

Tucker nodded, deciding once and for all that he loved her. It was all he could do not to lunge across the table and kiss her. Instead, he blushed, digging the tips of his fingers into the palms of his hands. Later, they walked arm in arm into the house and Tucker made up his bed for her before returning to the living room and the lumpy, threadbare sofa.

Chapter 15

Trudy had come to Florida on a whim. She had been in British Columbia, finding herself there after years of driving, drifting, moving west; then there was Boulder, where she met her husband, and then Amarillo, where she left her husband. Before Trudy came to Florida she was in Houston, waiting tables at a place called the

Cowboy Bar which had a mechanical bull, quarter beers, and two-pound burgers, but no real cow boys. She made good money at the Cowboy Bar, enough to leave Texas, anyway; enough to pick up and get back behind the wheel of her car, which was what she lived for.

Trudy had changed her mind about following the curve of the Gulf of Mexico through the lower South when she passed through Alabama and knew Georgia lay just beyond it – she could almost feel the red dirt between her toes and smell the paper factories. She turned towards the northeast, trading Route 65 for Highway 10, gulped, and made her way into Georgia, where her father still lived.

She was 200 miles from Macon before the same gut instinct that had taken her there told her to turn around. She turned off on State Highway 82, allowing herself to fall southeast and dip, finally, into Florida. She stopped at a convenience store, bought a Diet Coke, and kept on pushing south on I-95 on her way to Key West. She thought she'd go as far south as possible.

Trudy didn't think much of Daytona as she passed through it - lots of pink and purple, lots of motorcycles and tourist traps and condominium complexes with names like Glades and Palms and Rivers. It wasn't a bad place to be for a moment or two, she thought, the salt-breeze blowing her hair and the sun visor down, but when her Impala's engine cracked wide open just south of those idyllic wanderlust feelings, Trudy wished she was anywhere else but Florida. She wished, even, that she had gone up to Macon and broken down there, that at least would have had some symbolism to it – God showing her where she belonged. But this, this was a mistake of the cosmos.

Her car was beyond repair and she needed to get going, so she took a job at the Venus Trap, which wasn't her last option, but the job she took before giving up completely, which is just the same. Waitressing and dancing were her two "skills." With them, she could go anywhere. And now she was in Frostproof, not waitressing or dancing. Perhaps this was fate after all. Some kind of twisted version of her life, as if some other part of her was living a perfectly normal life back in Georgia or Virginia, as if she had divided herself – one part for moving and one part for staying.

"He's clueless," she said to Luis, taking the cigarette he offered her, though she'd long ago quit. They were standing on the pier at Lake Reedy.

"Clueless meaning what?"

"Clueless meaning that he doesn't have a *clue* what on earth he's supposed to be doing now that's he's got this place. He doesn't know where to start."

"Do you think you could just go out and spread the canker then?"

Trudy shook her head. "Maybe. What'll it take?"

Luis shrugged. "Rubbing infected leaves against non-infected ones, I guess."

"Sounds pretty easy. I could be out of here by tomorrow."

"Not so fast." Luis shook his head. "I've got to find some first."

"What do you want me to do in the mean time?"

"Just make sure he doesn't figure anything out. We've got to bide some time until I get my hands on some canker. Got to be come crazy botanist growing it on purpose around here somewhere."

"Florida," Trudy said, rolling her eyes.

Luis tossed his cigarette butt into the lake. “Keep your phone on. I’ll call you when I’ve got it.” He walked over to the Hyundai, got in, and tried to speed away. Trudy picked up her bike, a rusty ten-speed she’d found in the shed at Alshire and pedaled slowly back, catching the eyes of several townspeople not used to seeing *one* stranger, much less two.

Luis, who had taken Arturo to the airport two days before, was looking for a more permanent residence, because Arturo, before leaving him in charge while he went back to São Paulo to tend to his wife, instructed Luis to “blend in.” And so once Trudy left him, he wandered the empty streets of Frostproof, looking for a place in closer proximity than the motel where he’d been staying in Avon. When he found the perfect place, a room to rent in a giant house on Lake Reedy Drive, he left a note for the owner before driving to Alshire and parking where he and Arturo had parked the night they’d followed Tucker. It wasn’t part of the plan, but he had an overwhelming need to spy on Trudy.

He left his car and walked slowly through the woods, conscious of every sound he made – every stick broken under his foot, every bird that flew from his path – as if they could actually hear him, which they probably could not. The end of the day made for thick swarms of mosquitoes and gnats, which seemed to attack him as he moved through the viney brush, most likely attracted to his cologne which he wore without fail. Once he got close enough to see the house, the windows were too dark to see into. Of course he wouldn’t be able to see anything. What was he thinking?

But then he heard voices, light with laughter, and then he saw Trudy on the handlebars of her bicycle as Tucker drove it around from the back of the house. Luis

shrunk into the darkness of the trees, ducking behind a muscly, gumbo limbo tree and watched them as they turned to pass behind the house again, wobbly and laughing. Luis clenched his fist and took a deep breath, trying to reason with himself. Of course this was how they were passing their time. Tucker probably didn't even have a television. They looped back around, with Trudy still on the handlebars, still laughing and Tucker took a turn into the grove, driving her through the cut rows of trees.

Luis decided that he was too close, that he shouldn't even have been there – that he shouldn't have seen what he saw, not only because it made him sick with jealousy, which did not surprise him, but because it made him overwhelmingly eager to call the whole thing off, just to spite them.

Chapter 16

Nell Glass set the can of beer she regularly brought Steven, who was homeless, on the ground next to him. “Saw that strange woman again today,” Steven said to Nell without opening his eyes.

“The bike woman, huh?” Nell said, opening the door to the Bel Loc.

“She's real pretty,” Steven said. “*Real* pretty.”

Nell started to go in. “You want me to order you anything tonight, Steven?”

“A tomato sandwich!” Steven opened his eyes and smiled now, showing his gums.

Nell ate one meal a week at the Bel Loc, usually dinner. With it, she ordered a glass of wine – red or white, depending on what she was eating – which comes in a

single-serving bottle. Nell poured out half of what's in the bottle, screwed the lid back on tight and put the bottle back in her purse, to save for another night. Tonight she was hungry. She ordered beef tenderloin and a baked potato with a glass of red wine. "And a tomato sandwich for Steven," she tells the waitress. The Bel Loc has a rule: Any paying customer can order anything for Steven and will only be charged a dollar for it. The owner claimed it was his ticket to heaven, but he was soft on Steven and no one else.

Nell unfolded her napkin and smoothed it against her lap. She took her reading glasses from her purse, unfolded them, and put them on. She took a book from her purse, a stiff paperback titled *New Mexico* and opened it at her bookmark, a crossword puzzle ripped from *The Polk Country Tribune*. Nell read travel books only. She started reading about how the Pueblo Indians came to settle in Taos and about how they built what is called the Taos Pueblo. Nell could close her eyes and see it, all sunbathed and golden; she could see the brightly dressed tourists climbing its steps. Nell loved that she could be there, in Frostproof, Florida and close her eyes and see any part of the world. She sometimes tried this trick with her husband, closing her eyes to pretend that he was there in the room with her, taking a nap or quietly doing the crossword. Sometimes she tried to imagine his lips on her lips, his arms tight around her. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

Nell ate carefully, cutting her steak one bite at a time, chewing it well and swallowing, until the entire cut was gone. Then she ate her potato, half of it, and then she finished her wine, licking the inside curve of the glass for the last drop. When Nell finished, she wrapped the other half of her baked potato in a napkin and put it in

the box with Steven's tomato sandwich. She'd have saved him a bite of tenderloin, but Steven was a vegetarian.

It was six-thirty when Nell walked home, and still grossly humid. She felt the top of her head for where her hair rebelled against her bun. As Nell passed Lake Reedy, she noticed how swamp-like it seemed, how over-run with swarming horseflies and croaking toads. She noticed too, how no one was outside. Too hot, she said aloud.

When Nell got home, there was a note on her door from a man responding to the For Rent sign stuck in her window. Before her husband died, he converted the second floor of their home into two apartments, so that Nell would always have a source of income; now both apartments had been vacant for a month and two months, respectively. The house was too quiet, and Nell didn't like having to live off of Social Security alone – she liked her little luxuries of books and dinners and trips out to Space Coast with the Frostproof Women's Club.

She unfolded the note and read it. Curious about the apartment, it said, Please call. The note was signed Luis Lacerda, and gave a local phone number. Nell balled the paper in her hand. He sounded like a picker. Nell didn't rent to pickers.

Chapter 17

Raul never planned on bringing his wife with him to Florida. It was hard enough to make it over the border by yourself. His plan was simple: he was going to leave for the desert in the middle of the night, leaving her a note with a promise to

send money; he was going to say in the note that he loved her very much, that he would find a way for them to be together just as soon as he found work and got adjusted to his new life. He didn't believe this, but he was going to say it anyway so that she wouldn't feel like so many of the women in their village who had also been abandoned for the border. But his plan didn't work – women had a way of sensing things, and his wife's eyes were all over him that night, worried and constant, waiting for him to make his move – and when he did, rising slow and moving softly to gather his things and the hidden purse full of money his cousin Jose had been sending him for this purpose, her eyes popped open and she said, *Sin mi no* – not without me. And so they argued in the night, Raul explaining his plan and Maria fitfully shaking her head, no, no, no. She would go with him or he would stay.

They didn't speak as they traveled over the mountains – as morning broke like an egg over them, and the slippery dew rose up into a fine mist over what was to be, God willing, their last morning in Mexico. Finally, in the desert, they ate stale rolls and waited for night. They were going to cut a hole in the fence that separated Mexico from New Mexico, sixty miles west of El Paso, just as Jose had done two years before: *It's easy!* He wrote in a letter, *Everybody talks like it's hard, but it's easy!* Standing in the chill of the desert, Raul didn't believe him. He knew that you had to be fearless in order to cross the border successfully; he knew that you weren't supposed to care about death, but he *did* care. He didn't want to be one of those men shot in the back while running for his life towards America – and now that had his wife with him, he couldn't be shot. *She* couldn't be shot.

They huddled together and prayed, whispering their Hail Marys though the desert was empty and there was nothing in the still air to carry their prayers very far. But she had heard them, she *had* because when it was dark, and they made their way to the tangled barbed wire fence, nothing stopped them from cutting a hole large enough for their bodies and slipping through – nothing stopped them from moving slowly over the weedy terrain, nothing rushed them, nothing hurt them, and when day came and they had a proper breakfast in Las Cruces, nobody looked at them like they had just arrived. Nobody knew.

At the bus depot in Las Cruces, Raul spent every dime of the money Jose had sent him on two tickets to Florida. Weren't they *obvious*? Two deer-in-headlights border jumpers from Tepache, Mexico? If they were, nobody cared, and they were able to fold into American society as if they had been naturally born to it. It was as good as a dream. And when they got to Florida, she was prettier than they had ever to dared think – she was mile-high palms and blue skies and water, and birds, and green, and every living thing that did not exist in their tumbleweed died-out past.

When they got to Florida, it was time to work, and that was OK too. Raul went to work immediately in the citrus groves with Jose; the days were long and the pay was lousy by American standards, but they were not living by American standards. Maria found work washing dishes and scrubbing the floor at an all-night diner. The three of them lived together in a studio apartment near the highway in Intersection City, and while they were tired – they worked a lot – they were happy in a way that they had never before imagined: the future was a mystery and this was good.

But Raul never should have let Maria get pregnant. He never should have even gone *near* her. But he had, that was certain, and when the baby came, she stopped working. Now, with Jose gone and Raul and Maria alone in the world – in *this* world – with their baby girl, the future was etched out for them: there would be work, and meals and scraping by. There would be birthdays, headaches, days that would never end and days that ended too quickly, but their baby, Yillian Lourdes Fuentes Garcia, would never have to sneak through a hole in a barbed-wire fence in the middle of the night; she would never have to run from the INS; she would never have to pick an orange.

With Jose gone, there were practical matters to attend to. They couldn't afford to stay in the studio, and moved into a motel room with another family from their parish who also lost someone in the bus accident. Raul hated it. There were too many bodies vying for space, too many bodies flaking off dead skin, too many bodies breathing too little air in the night. Work became a sort of solace, a sort of monotonous refuge, and Raul looked for more construction work, biding time before the picking season picking began, when the work would become more steady.

At night, lying in the semi-dark on the stiff sheets with his wife and daughter in the double bed, he would dream of Jose – he couldn't *help* it. It was strange, the idea that death was purely a physical thing, even though a person is so much more than his body. But in the end, the body, the *vessel*, the priest calls it, is what counts. At night, he would look everywhere for Jose's soul – praying to him instead of the

Virgin – but not, as it sometimes happened when he prayed to the Virgin, getting an answer.

Chapter 18

Now that it was time for Tucker to actually begin the work of farming, he didn't know where to start because he simply hadn't thought of it, hadn't considered the *work* of nurturing and maintaining a 17 acre grove. In the back of his mind in the months and days that led up to this moment where he stood in the middle of that grove, looking around at the trees and wondering where to start, he assumed that the trees would simply birth the oranges, that October would come, and that he'd go into the grove and pick, retrieving the fruit, taking it inside, and making juice. But his trees were a buggy, cobwebbed mess, their small leaves dulled and eaten through – the holes the bugs made reminding Tucker of the rust holes in the wheel wells of his Dodge. The trees looked like they had been abandoned, left to the sun and the bugs – they had cooked away all summer, getting only what water would pass over in the afternoon, those short, Florida storms. To him, the grove looked like a powder keg. He swore it hadn't a week ago. A week ago it looked like Eden.

Tucker decided that he needed some help. He drove into town to visit CitraSpree, a citrus mutual based in Frostproof and just happened to catch its owner, Jack Spree as he was on his way out. “So you the guy who bought Alshire,” Spree said, sizing him up while leading Tucker back into his office, and offering him a seat. “I was gonna buy it myself. Just waiting for the price to come down a little. What'd you pay?”

“Four-fifty.”

“Ouch! Sucker born every day.”

“Well, there’s a house on it. A lot of land. On the water, too.”

“Oh sure,” Spree said. “How’re the trees?”

“Dry. Buggy. But I haven’t sprayed yet.”

“Got any green on it yet? Any fruit?”

“Just the leaves and even those aren’t too green.”

“You probably won’t have anything to pick come October.”

“That’s kind of why I’m here, I thought that you could give me some advice.”

“You want my advice you should have come *before* you bought the land, I would’a told you not to bother. This business is crap these days. Might be hard to unload your oranges.”

“My oranges? Oh I’m not gonna try to unload them. I’m gonna make the juice myself. Call it Honest Juice,” Tucker said with a smile.

Spree chuckled, rocked back in his chair. “Who you gonna sell it to?”

“I’ll worry about that when I’ve got some juice to sell. For now, I’ve got to get my grove to produce some oranges.”

“And for that you want my advice.”

Tucker nodded.

Spree shook his head. “Sorry Charley, we don’t give advice here at CitraSpree. We come into your groves, pick your oranges, and pay you for them – minus a fee, of course – but advice really isn’t our thing. Now if you wanted to hire

us, you grow some oranges and I'll have some pickers out there just as fast as you need. How many acres you got back there?"

"Seventeen."

"You're gonna need some help. See Sheri up front. She can give you a brochure."

"What happens to the oranges you buy? Where do they go?"

"To the great big juicer in the sky," Spree said, sarcastic. "Bottomless Lake, of course; the only game in town."

"So your workers, they're paid fair wages?"

Spree leaned forward. "*Fair*, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder."

Tucker shook his head. "*Decent*, then. Minimum wage, or something."

"Minimum wage is for American's. These people are illegals."

"But what happened to Florida Pure – "

Jack Spree leaned in closer to Tucker, his elbows on his desk. "What happened to Florida Pure is a crying shame. I'm just glad it didn't happen to me. But if we started paying our pickers – what did those kids call it? 'Appropriate wages' the entire citrus industry would go down the pisser. Do you have any idea how many oranges it takes to make a carton of juice your average consumer won't pay more than four dollars for? A whole hell of a lot. Now how in the hell is that supposed to happen unless we pay those people what we're already paying 'em? Where is all that extra money supposed to come from?"

"Bottomless Lake has a big shiny building, and funny ads on during the Super Bowl. I bet all their executives drive big fancy cars and eat out all the time when the

people who're picking their oranges eat..." Tucker sat there, staring at Jack Spree, and felt his face begin to burn, "I don't know what they eat. The point is, the company has some money to toss around, it's all a matter of who they toss it around *to*."

Spree shook his head. "The world just don't work like that."

Tucker stood up and balled his fists. "The world doesn't work like that *yet*." He backed up away from his chair and started to leave.

"Kid?" Spree called to him. "I give ya a month before that grove of yours is up for sale again, and you know what? I just might buy it this time. Care to save yourself some trouble and sell it to me now?"

"Alshire's not for sale."

Jack Spree lost his smile. "I'm gonna be straightforward with you, because that's the kind of guy I am. Hotshots like you come around all the time. They think this industry don't need so many illegals in the fields, they think all they have to do is sacrifice a little on their end, with money I mean, and the whole world will turn around just like that. Only the world don't work like that. And then realistic people like me come along buying up all the hotshot's land in a fire sale. That's why I've got oranges straight out to the Gulf of Mexico, and you're coming to me for advice that I won't give." Tucker turned again to leave. "I just thought you'd like to know the way it's all gonna turn out, just so you ain't surprised," Spree called after him.

In his car, Tucker slammed his fists against his steering wheel. Advice. Shit. He'd do it on his own. He drove back to Alshire, and headed directly for the shed he hadn't yet had the nerve to open because what he feared might be inside, namely snakes, and flung the shed doors open to reveal the red McCormick Farmall tractor

Liam said would be in there along with the 500-gallon drum pesticide sprayer hitched to its back. All he had to do was get it started.

Tucker took one last breath of clean air and stepped up into the shed, which stirred with bits of dirt and dust that looked like mini planets in the light. He climbed up into the tractor's bucket seat and liked the way he felt in it – like a farmer, like a sewer of land. He bent forward and turned the ignition, which, at first, was stuck. He turned it back, tried the ignition one more time, and the engine sputtered and whirred, clearing its throat, and then it started. Tucker coughed – all that old gas, and laughed. Triumph!

Tucker looked around for a ramp on which to back the tractor out of the shed. There was hose – must have been miles of it – wound up in great cylinders, gardening sheers, an old chain saw, and stacks of empty wooden crates, but no ramp. Before getting up off the tractor and attempting to fashion a ramp from the wooden crates, Tucker looked up, and jumped, leaping off the tractor and quickly bounding out of the shed. There were snakes everywhere – *snakeskin*, that is, hanging from the rafters – long thin ribbons of it, brittle and ancient.

Tucker wanted to scream; he wanted to throw up, but what he did was dance – jumping from foot to foot in front of the shed to calm himself down – it was the dance of disgust, of fear, of self indulgence. When he was finished, Tucker stood, bent over with his hands on his knees, catching his breath, as Trudy came towards him.

“What’s all the commotion?”

“Sa – snakes,” he said, still trying to catch his breath.

“What kind?”

He shook his head, said, “Snakeskin,” and pointed to the shed.

“Oh,” Trudy said, peeking in. “Gross.”

Trudy spent the afternoon with dish gloves on her hands, cleaning out the shed, first climbing up and pulling the snakeskin down, one papery ribbon at a time. While she cleaned, Tucker worked on the tractor, cleaning and oiling it, getting it ready for another season of work. That night, exhausted, Tucker and Trudy sat in the kitchen with a pizza between them, drowsily eating. “So you’re afraid of snakes?” she asked him, peeling a pepperoni off her slice and eating it.

“Don’t remind me,” he said, waving his hand. It was only reluctantly that he let her order pepperoni.

“It’s OK. I’m afraid of a lot of things.”

“Like what?”

“Aliens,” she said, an embarrassed giggle in her throat.

“Like an alien invasion? Like in the movies?”

“More like alien abduction. Like being picked up and taken to their ship and being...prodded.” Tucker laughed and Trudy took a sip of Coke. “It happens,” she said. “I saw it on TV.”

“OK, OK, what else?”

“What else am I afraid of?” Tucker nodded. “Oh God, lots of things,” she said. “I’m afraid of getting stuck, you know? Afraid of doing the wrong thing. Afraid of...fate.”

“Of fate! That’s crazy!”

“OK, not *fate*, then, but...Oh God, I don’t know. Not death exactly, but life

almost, not *living*, but living for the wrong things, living the wrong way.” She tossed her pizza crust into the box.

“Is that why you left Delmarva?”

“Virginia – sort of.”

Tucker smiled. She was absurd and wonderful and perfect. She was everything he knew she would be. “And that’s why you came here with me?”

“Sure,” Trudy said, closing the lid on the pizza and getting up from the table.

The next day, Tucker got down to the work of spraying the grove. He hitched the sprayer to the back of his Omni and drove to Whaler’s Grove Supply to fill it with pesticide. Back at Alshire, Tucker navigated the tractor between the rows of trees, driving slowly, a mist of pesticide fanning out behind him, making rainbows. While the bugs that had invaded his Eden were being stunned to death, curling and falling out of their rusty, dry canopies, Tucker dreamt that he and Trudy were standing in the kitchen, slicing and juicing, making a simple life from simple things.

Chapter 19

When Luis didn’t hear back about the room for rent on Lake Reedy Drive, he went to visit the house. When the lady opened the door, he offered her cash and was moved in (his only luggage being a knapsack filled with the clothes he’d just purchased from the Salvation Army in Intersection City) in under a minute.

The place was clean and had a bed made up with sheets and a thin blanket. There was a window, covered with a dingy white curtain, that looked out onto Lake Reedy. Luis moved his bed over to that side of the room so he could sit at the window

and stare across the lake over to Tucker's property; though he couldn't see anything, the proximity gave him a sense of power, and it was with that sense of power that Luis drifted off to sleep that night, under a hazy September half-moon.

The next morning, Luis had forgotten all about this supposed power. He had had a dream (or was it a memory?) about his mother. He had done something wrong and she had slapped him, looking down at him with her dark eyes and cursing – calling him a bastard son of a whore. This was how he found out that his mother wasn't his mother. Soon after, he was sent to a boarding school south of London, but it hadn't done him any good to see that part of the world – not with what he had to return to, a life full of money but devoid of love.

What had happened would have had always been a mystery if Julian hadn't told him one night after Luis returned from school for the summer and Julian was drunk. "Your mother was no *whore*" Julian said to him, his mouth rounding out the word. "She was a saint. She loved us. She loved our pig of a father." Who was she? Luis asked, his pulse skipping quickly in his wrists. "She was our maid – Olivia. Our mother – *my* mother – killed her, poisoned her after you were born." You lie! Luis said, his eyes wild. "Ask her. She'll deny it, but ask her. Watch what her face does when you do." So Luis believed him. He didn't have to ask her. He was different, and now he knew why. He did nothing about it, returning to school grateful that he had been sent in the first place– grateful that his mother hadn't been poisoned while he was still in the womb.

Now it was his job to save the family that he only marginally belonged to, but he was happy about it. This was his chance to prove himself. Luis rose out of bed

with a bit of imagined pain and looked out the window. The lake looked *thick*. The noise of Florida rose and fell all around it. It could have been a mirage – that lake, this circumstance – that would fade from his vision if he blinked enough. But he didn't try. Instead, Luis organized his thoughts, gathering his intentions the way a woman named Olivia may have once gathered the laundry, and got up fully out of bed.

Mrs. Glass tapped lightly on his door, and said, without waiting for a response, "I've made too many eggs. If you want them, come down." And, now aware of his hunger, Luis responded automatically, pulling on his worn grey tee shirt and dingy thrift store jeans. He went downstairs to find Mrs. Glass sitting at the kitchen table with the newspaper, a plate of scrambled eggs and toast wrapped under cellophane on the counter, the breakfast dishes already washed and put away.

"Eggs might be cold," she said to him. "Want me to light the oven?"

Luis shook his head. "They're fine," he said, shoveling a fork-full into his mouth.

"I always make too much food," she said, turning the page of the newspaper to follow a story she'd been reading, spreading it out on the table, smoothing the page. "Looks like this Jack Spree's in trouble," she said, not looking up. "Canker inspector's coming."

Luis looked up from his eggs. "Canker inspector?"

"Citrus disease, don't you know about it?"

Luis lied, shook his head no.

“If they find it, they burn everything else down around it. Everything within 1900 feet is what it says here.”

“Here in Frostproof?”

“Over in Hardee County.” She pointed in that direction. “Spree’s got oranges straight out to the Gulf.”

“He’s some kind of big-deal owner?”

“I suppose so,” Mrs. Glass said. “There used to be more like him. That Ruums fellow up in Sanford was one of the last of them – forced out of business, poor guy. I supposed Jack Spree’ll be next.”

“1900 feet’s worth of trees won’t mean much to a guy that’s got groves across three counties.”

“That canker’s mean stuff,” Mrs. Glass said, closing and folding her newspaper. “Once it’s one place, it’s in a whole lot of places. Especially during hurricane season, when the wind carries all kinds of things from one place to another.”

“Did your family own groves?” Luis asked, suddenly curious about her.

“No,” she said slowly. “My family built resorts - hotels, stuff like that. Most of ‘em are gone now. Torn down to make new ones.” She stood up and smoothed her skirt. “I’ll set out some towels in the bathroom for you,” she said, leaving the room before Luis could thank her for the eggs.

He pulled the newspaper towards him and starred at the picture of Jack Spree. What were they doing messing with a small-timer like Tucker Parks when they could spread canker all over Spree’s property until the entire state of Florida was set to a

controlled burn? Luis shook his head. Tucker Parks would be easy, that's why. Jack Spree was too big to be messed with, for sure. But his property sounded like an excellent place to find canker.

Luis drove to Hardee County, to the town of Ona, which was all groves, and nothing else. Funny, there was no sign that said, Jack Spree's Grove, much less a sign that said, Jack Spree's Grove Infected With Canker, and just as Luis was about to give up, he felt the sting in his nostrils and the back of his throat – fire. He searched the horizon for the plume of smoke and drove to it, just as he had done the day Arturo was in the car with him. He shook his head. Fire. What a stupid thing to do.

But what was more stupid was what Luis did next – pulling off along the side of the road and sneaking into the trees, which were full of buds not yet ready to burst. He got close enough to watch the men make their fire, standing around it as if they were camping, as if there was a guitar to play, songs to sing, meat to roast. Even Jack Spree had come for the event. Luis watched the man he recognized from the paper eyeing the fire suspiciously: his arms folded across his chest, regarding the canker inspectors as trespassers, the fire as frivolous.

When Spree stepped away from the fire to take a call, coming dangerously close to Luis, who stood just a few trees from him, Luis wished he could change color, the way a lizard might in the same situation, instinctively growing a deeper shade of green. “Yeah?” Spree said defensively into the phone. “There ain't no shortage of workers around here, you tell them that. If they don't want to agree to the fee, tell them not to bother coming. This is a whole new business now that Florida

Pure shut itself down. That's right. Just remind them that we're guaranteeing them a job. That's their whole reason for coming here, right? I don't have time to talk about this right now. Take what you can get and get the hell away from the border. There's a glut of workers here anyway. What the hell do we need 'em for? Doin' 'em a favor is the way I see it. Yeah. OK." Jack Spree finished his conversation and slapped his phone shut, clipping it back to his belt. He stood there for a few minutes amongst the trees, Luis' heart beating just feet from his own, and stared at the fire. He grabbed at a branch, held it for a second, and let it spring loose, snapping back against the tree. "Business is getting ridiculous," he said, under his breath.

Jack Spree moved back to the Canker Inspectors, saying, "Watch now this doesn't get out of hand," when a sudden gust of wind came out of the south, and Luis used the opportunity to disappear into the trees and follow a narrow dirt path back to the road.

Chapter 20

The next day, Luis sat in the parking lot of a K Mart, looking on his map for the turnpike exit for the Florida Department of Agriculture, thinking he might try and break in and steal some canker, when the canker inspector's white van pulled up beside him. This was more than luck. It was like the universe had given him a great big push. He sank down in his seat, afraid the van might be able to read his mind, and watched the canker inspectors hop out, their white polo shirts bearing the same symbol as the van – a circular emblem which read Florida Department of Agriculture, Official Canker Inspector. He watched the men walk towards the shopping center

and disappear into a place called Smokey's Bar and Grill, tossed his map into the backseat, jumped out of the car, and excitedly circled the van like a vulture. He tried the passenger door, but it was locked. He tried the van's back door, which was also locked. Then, he tried the driver's door, which, miraculously, had been left unlocked.

Luis looked around the parking lot one last time before climbing up into the van, which was strewn with bags of trash from fast food restaurants and empty Styrofoam coffee cups. He started hunting around in the back, which was full of official canker equipment: a three-ring-bound manual, a fire blanket, some gardening tools, heavy plastic bags, a can of kerosene, and a blow torch, but no official canker.

He opened the manual, which showed pictures of the stuff – delineating what was canker and what were natural spots or wind scars. Luis closed the book and tossed it back into the van. He climbed up into the front and began riffling through the glove compartment. He had seen the uniform. What he needed was one of those heavy looking badges the men wore around their necks so that he could pose as one of them. But there was nothing in the glove compartment. He decided to check the back again.

Luis froze when the driver's side door opened; he tried to back up against the curved wall, sinking into the shadows. The Canker Inspectors climbed up into the van, and the driver started the ignition. Luis tried not to breathe. He sunk down to the floor of the van and laid flat on his stomach. He stretched out his arm to reach the fire blanket, but could only touch it with the tips of his fingers. He scooted up half an inch, and pressed the blanket against the floor to pull it towards him, and gained a little leverage on it, pulling the blanket until it was taut, but it was stuck, caught

between the driver's seat and its track.

As the van backed out of its spot, one inspector clicked on the radio, tuning it to a pop station which had to compete with the soft crackle of their CB radio, the mouthpiece for which dangled from the windshield. Both took out packages from a brown paper bag and fiddled with their lunches, balancing sandwiches and fries on their laps, tossing the empty the Styrofoam cups into the back of the van to make room in the cup holder for full ones. "Want to finish early today, if we can," the passenger said, chewing. "It's my anniversary, did I tell you?"

"Three times," the driver said.

"Sorry, I'm excited. I got her this necklace with these three gems, a pink, purple and green one."

"Sounds to me like you don't get laid but once a year."

The passenger laughed. "Don't forget my birthday. Sometimes Christmas too, depending on what I got her."

The driver laughed.

"Plus, I'm getting a new putter."

"Oh yeah?"

"Titanium."

"How do you know?"

"I found it in the hall closet. Took it out to Greenway last weekend while she was at her mother's."

The driver laughed, choked on a fry.

They hit a pothole and Luis's head jerked up and came down again, his chin

connecting with the floorboard, his bottom teeth mashing into the roof of his mouth.

He grimaced, tasted blood. “Shit,” the driver said. “I lost half my fries.”

“Here we are,” the passenger said, “Make a left.”

As the van turned onto a narrow dirt service road, Luis’s heart hammered away in his chest. He started pulling again at the fire blanket. It wouldn’t budge. The van stopped, and Luis held his breath. But the two men did not move for a while. Instead, they finished their sandwiches, slurped their drinks, and stuffed their trash back into the brown paper bag before opening their doors and climbing out of the van. Luis gave the blanket one last tug and, the weight of the driver gone, it was freed. Luis gasped in relief. He balled himself up under the blanket, clasped his hands, and prayed.

The back of the van clicked open, a crack of sunlight illuminating part of the floorboard. “Here it is,” one of the inspectors said, taking the manual and closing the door.

Luis readjusted himself, trying to make himself flatter against the floor. The men were gone for a while, but Luis didn’t move. Then, he heard chatter outside, and felt the door open behind him. He heard one of the inspectors explain what would happen next to the man who owned, or at very least managed, the grove. The other inspector climbed into the back of the van. He chose a pair of gardening shears and a plastic bag, and left the door ajar. “Today we’ll burn the cankerous tree,” the inspector told the owner. “Tomorrow we’ll send a team back to burn everything around it.”

The other inspector came back, tossed the plastic bag into the van, and took

out the can of kerosene and the blow torch. When he slammed the door, Luis sat up and grabbed the plastic bag the inspector had just tossed into the van. Inside it were browned, spotty leaves, and a grapefruit with brown, rusty looking spots. Canker. Luis let out an involuntary breathy sigh. He stuffed the plastic bag down his pants, climbed into the passenger's seat, and sat there, watching the men out of the side-view mirror as they walked off together into the grove.

Luis opened the door and slid out of the van, keeping his body close to it as he moved around to the front, watching the patch of trees where the men had disappeared. Then, he smelled smoke and knew that they had lit the cankerous tree. Luis ran, crouching down for fear of being seen, and escaped, finally, out onto the highway. He kept the bag of leaves and fruit down his pants, rearranging it as he walked. Luis couldn't help but congratulate himself, smiling into the bright blue of the day as he walked back to his car.

When he got back home, Mrs. Glass was sitting in the living room, having Afternoon Tea with a group of women on her television set. "Oh, yes," she said to one of them, holding her tea cup and smiling at the TV, "That is so true." When Luis walked in, the bag of canker now out of pants and dangling from his hand, Mrs. Glass turned to him and offered him some tea. "Today we're having peppermint."

"We?"

"Well, I don't know what *they're* having," she said, nodding towards the television, "But I like to pretend."

“Sure,” Luis said, his foot already on the second stair. “Just let me wash my hands.”

Upstairs, Luis stashed the canker in the bottom of his duffle bag, under his clothes from the Salvation Army and dialed Trudy’s number. “I’ve got it,” he said to the void of her voice mail, “Ready whenever you are.”

Back downstairs, Mrs. Glass poured him a cup of peppermint tea from her bone China tea pot and introduced him to the ladies. “That’s Margaret,” she said, “She dyes her hair. That’s Gladys, her grandson’s in the Marines. That’s Helena, she’s the loud one. That’s Wendy, she’s new. Ladies,” she addressed the television, “This is Luis Lacerda, my new charge.” Luis nodded towards the television and Mrs. Glass turned towards him. “How are things going?”

“Things? Um. Things are fine. How are things with you?”

“Oh wonderful!” She said, touching his leg. “I heard from Walt today!”

“Who’s Walt?”

“Oh, my son. He’s in Bermuda. Says he’s getting tired of it, though, and might come back home. But don’t worry; I’ll put him up in the other room.”

“I didn’t know you had a son, Mrs. Glass.”

“What?” She asked, her face blank.

“A son. I didn’t know you had a son.”

“Oh. Yeah. Poor boy. Go ahead and finish your tea, honey,” she said, tapping him on the knee. “I’m getting tired. I think I’m going to go lie down.” She got up and left him with the ladies from Afternoon Tea, Margaret saying to Gladys,

“And how *is* your grandson?” And Gladys saying, “We haven’t heard from him.”

Luis clicked off the TV and took a cookie from the second tier of Mrs. Glass’ tea service set. He checked his watch. Three o’clock. Maybe he could get Trudy to meet him for dinner. He could give her the canker then. He called and left her another message. “I’m going to have some dinner at the diner later if you want to meet me. Let me know.”

Chapter 21

Trudy stood at the stove, making potato pancakes, the oil in the pan cracking. “Your go,” Tucker called to her from the kitchen table, a Scrabble board in front of him, its wooden pieces forming messy geometry. They switched places, Tucker manning the stove, Trudy going back to her letters, taking her turn.

“Your phone’s ringing,” Tucker said of her cell phone, which he could hear slightly from upstairs. “What me to go get it?”

“No,” she said, not turning around. “I’ll just let it go to voice mail.”

“Could it be important.”

“It’s never important.”

Tucker wasn’t surprised by this; he was more surprised, in fact, that her phone rang at all. Trudy didn’t seem to talk to or about anybody – family or friends. He tried constantly to piecemeal what he knew about her – to construct her from the stories she let slip out. So far he had scrapple; that her mother was a seamstress and divorced; that her father worked in a paper factory and ran around with women half his age; that she broke her leg when she was fourteen, skiing; and that she had never

been in a car accident.

She was a stranger. They lived in the same house, ate the same things, were kind to each other. And she *was* kind. She did things for him – things that a sister or a wife would do. She had calked the tub, for God’s sake. She seemed...happy. But then, he didn’t know her. This could be her happy *or* her sad, and he wouldn’t know the difference.

Tucker looked down at the pan because the potato pancakes were burning. Trudy stood up. “Pancakes are burning,” she said, coming over to the stove and reaching around him to turn off the burner.

“Sorry,” he said. “I was just thinking.” He turned around to face her. “You’re not bored around here are you?”

“Why were you thinking that?” She slid the pancakes out of the pan and onto a plate.

“It’s just that I don’t know anything about you – your likes and dislikes. What you’ve been doing all your life. For instance, when did you start dancing?”

“About six months before I met you.”

“And before that?”

“I waitressed. And before that I did a million other things.”

“OK, good.” He carried their plates over to the table. She followed him with mugs of coffee. “Things like what?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I’m just curious about you. Always have been since the first time I saw you.”

She touched his hand, and, not sure why she had, pulled hers quickly back. He looked up at her, starry-eyed, sure he was close to something. “I just never really thought that work was something that you should have to, you know, *work* at. I never really understood that about life. Work is about money. Life is about life. I never really got the connection between the two.”

“Are you happy? I mean, with your life?”

She squeezed her lips together, pressing at them with her teeth. “Enough. I do what I know how to do – what comes natural; I guess a person can be happy with that.”

“Yeah,” Tucker said, touching her hand briefly, amazed at how soft it was, how fragile.

“These are good,” she said, a bit of potato inside her mouth, against her cheek.

“Yeah. Did you take your turn?” He regarded the Scrabble board.

“Lagoon. Nine points.”

After dinner, Trudy took a long shower if only to be alone – away from Trucker’s scrutiny, Luis’ phone calls. There was a poison building up inside her – guilt. Sometimes, she shook with it, panicked – her hands and feet sweating. At night, she lay awake, thinking about disease and fire, the trees outside her window. She thought about Tucker. She liked him – his simplicity, his warmth. There were times when she forgot about what she was there to do, and she caught herself feeling happy and peaceful; so this, she would think, is what that feels like.

After her shower, Trudy combed her hair, parting it in the middle, and took

the small scissors out of her makeup bag. She measured off an inch and began cutting the ends of her hair, the scissors making a crisp sheering sound, red wispy pieces of her hair falling into the sink, a celebration. Trudy took four inches off the length of her hair, an inch at a time, each time, comparing the person she was, with long hair, to the person she'd be with shorter hair, egging herself to go another inch, to change a little more. It was a strange but wonderful ritual, one she had practiced at varying times throughout her life – before she left Virginia for good, she cut her hair all the way up to the base of her neck, letting the pieces on top go spiky. Now, she was after something different, something she wasn't quite sure of. When she was finished, she put the scissors down, and starred at her face, at her work. She watched her eyes, as if trying to read them. She tried to picture the lines of the map that had led her here, but saw only the lines on her face, emerging as if all of the sudden – though they'd been coming, the cracks deepening, for years. She tried to piece together the events of her life, drawing the connections between them, but each was like its own short story. “Nothing matters,” she whispered, looking at herself, but the words didn't sound right. There was an itch in her bones that said, “Leave.” She rocked back on her heels, stretched out her toes, and pressed her feet firm against the floor. Stay, she told herself. Stay.

Chapter 22

After leaving his brothers, Julian had driven to Gainesville, where he watched college kids in their less-than-hip beer and booze excess, jealous of their youth and their opportunity. Sure, no one had had more opportunity than him: he had gotten to

travel extensively in his youth, only to be brought back to São Paulo when he was just beginning to rid himself of his family – when he was just beginning to like himself; he was educated in some of the most elite boarding schools in the world, and as an adult he had been allowed, for a time, to live outside the family home. But his opportunity, unlike that of the American college kids he so envied, had turned against him; he would have to work, not for more opportunity, as was often the case, but to keep what he had, because Family Money came with its own twisted sword.

It had been a mistake to leave his brothers; he knew that. But he also knew that he hadn't had a choice. He couldn't stand to be around them any longer; he couldn't stand, anymore, to be different from them. To have his family's money hanging over his head. But, Julian decided, as he watched a man with one shoe and a six-month beard beg at an intersection outside Ocala, it was better to have money hanging over your head than no money at all.

What he needed was both his family's money and his personal freedom, which, considering his sexual orientation and his family's bigotry, were exclusive of each other. What he needed, and it didn't bother him to say so, was his father's death to come so that his life could begin. But before that could happen, he would have to convince his father to give him control of the company. What he needed was a miracle. No. Not a miracle. What he needed was a carefully executed plan.

It seemed fairly obvious to Julian that Kathryn Peters had been bluffing – he saw a sparkle in her eyes when he mentioned shipping costs. But he understood women like her – women of power – he had, after all, been raised by one; he knew that Kathryn Peters would have to come to a decision on her own. She had to believe

the idea was hers all along. She certainly wasn't going to agree to something because *he* – a stranger from another country, a *competing* country – suggested it; the idea would have to pop into her head all by itself. Or – *would* it?

Julian had been sitting at a bar in Gainesville, nibbling on the remains of his lunch and drinking a beer as the newly legal drinkers sat around him, cutting class over pitches of cheap beer and chicken wings, enjoying their freedom as they never again would, the local afternoon news droning on from the television set suspended above the bar when he had an idea, and that idea spawned another, and a fire was set in him.

It was the news that started it, which *was* a miracle because Bertha's was just about the only bar in town playing the afternoon newscast and not rehashed football highlights from Sunday's games; it was the news itself that Kathryn Peters and just about every other big deal business leader in Florida was in Tallahassee for a conference at that very moment. Julian figured that all he had to do was drive out there and see her – not see her, but *bump* into her, and let the idea establish itself in her head all by itself. It wasn't, he admitted, the kind of genius plan his brothers would have blindly followed, but it was enough to get him back behind the wheel of his car and into the flow of midday traffic of I-75.

Governor Portage was in the Dodd Hall Auditorium at Florida State, finishing a speech about corporate ethics before an audience of bright-eyed business majors and local business leaders. Kathryn Peters, who was slated to head a roundtable discussion on Agriculture in a Changing World later that afternoon, was seated in

front as was Lyle Thomas, president of Glades Development, who sat with his eyes closed, listening, as the Governor went on and on: “The future business leaders of our state must have the flexibility, the drive and the compassion to deal with a changing Florida and a changing world. We have to realize as a state that tourism and orange juice (he looked down and winked at Kathryn) are not the only two industries in Florida. You have to have the guts, the innovation and imagination to bring secondary sectors to life. As governor, I am working to ensure a comfortable environment for business in Florida. We are bringing a research lab to Palm Beach and putting in technology hubs in both Miami and Sarasota. We are making it easier for businesses to come, and stay and thrive. We are pulling Florida out of the swamps and into the 21st Century, and we depend on you, the future of business in Florida, to continue our momentum.” The governor stopped as the audience hooted and wailed, cheering, mostly, for themselves, for their bright and sunny futures.

When his speech was over, the governor stepped back through the curtains, and said, “Good huh?” to the first person he encountered. Cliff, the state trooper who made up one sixth of his twenty-four-hour security brigade, nodded and checked his watch. “What’s next?” the governor asked Lisa, his right hand.

“Death row decision time,” she said, her mouth somber as she spoke

“Right,” the governor said, a tickle to his throat. The state was set to execute a man in Lake County, supporters for whom had been sitting vigil outside the Governor’s Mansion for weeks now. The governor hated this part of his job and considered, when the Lake County case hit his desk with all its obvious weight, that the state should put a moratorium on their capital punishment law, but his idea had

been grossly overruled. “You know, I always thought that there must be a better way than deciding once and for all that a person should die. Perhaps we should just put our criminals in really dangerous situations and let fate take over from there.”

“Let’s not make that your reelection platform,” Lisa said.

“Let’s go over the evidence one more time. What do the polls say about this kind of thing?”

“They’re inconclusive. The only people who pay attention to this kind of thing past the time it’s gone off their TV screens are the handful of people sitting outside the mansion. Then there’s the other side who’ll think you’re weak on crime if you don’t personally pull the switch.”

“Right.” He swallowed. “What would Bloom have done?”

She looked up at him and he noticed, for the first time, that her eyes were a puddly, swampy brown. “I don’t work for Bloom, I work for you.”

“Right. Let’s look at the evidence one more time.”

They ate lunch while driving from the auditorium to the mansion. “You made a date to meet Lyle Thomas for drinks later, don’t forget.”

He nodded. “What’s he want?”

“Same thing he always wants. Just be careful how you handle it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, sulking.

“You want me to do anything about this Girlfriend Watch thing or not?” It was a question she had been asking him every day for weeks – one he always shrugged away. “We really should.”

“You sound like Mo...my girlfriend. No. Or, maybe.” He shook his head.
“I can’t decide right now.”

“Just let me know, boss,” Lisa said, as tired of the conversation as she was the situation.

When they arrived back at the mansion, Portage reviewed the evidence from Lake County and sent a written notice to the courts that he would not interfere with the death warrant. The crowd outside the mansion jeered and prayed and said that the governor would go to hell straight away when his life left him, as it eventually would.

It was times like this that Portage was truly reminded of his power. It was a wonderful world they lived in, where he, a boy from Calhoun County, could rise up to become the most powerful man in the state. And now, people lived and died at his whim. Sure, it was the will of the people he was upholding when he sent the Lake County man into death, but he didn’t have to...he could have spared him – could have had him to dinner at the mansion, if he wanted to, he could have fired Lisa and put the Lake County murderer in her place, but then...he’d never get reelected, and that was the name of the game. And so, Portage agreed with himself, straightening his tie and looking out his office window at the protestors as they jeered at him, his power was limited to interests of the people who would elect him. Still, it was power.

Portage spent the rest of the afternoon reviewing minutes from the legislature. They were trying to increase the sales tax along with the minimum wage, which was good for the state since a majority of people who spent money in the state didn’t live there, and a lot of people who did live in the state made minimum wage; but it would

never go through and if it did, Portage would never sign it. His benefactors made a hell of a lot more than minimum wage. That was the problem with power. The more you had, the more you had to sell off, just to keep your power. It was like an animal – a dog, but Portage didn't think dog, he thought animal – chasing its tail. Once he was president, or at least reelected governor, he'd start doing good things for the underdogs (and for that he thought *dog*), he'd start doing the things he did in Calhoun as county councilman. When he had enough power, he'd use it for good. But now was a different story, and he had to meet with Lyle Thomas over the pretext of drinks to discuss the thing that was always on Lyle's mind. Portage left the mansion in his own car with a State Trooper trailing him, and headed for Joy, the restaurant in the lobby of his building, where he continued to live since taking over as governor ten months ago, choosing privacy over appearance.

When he got to the restaurant, Portage spotted Lyle Thomas immediately, sitting by himself at the bar, hunched over a drink. "What's on your mind today Lyle?" the governor asked, extending his hand out to the imposing man who stood up from the bar as Portage approached.

"Same thing that's been on my mind for three years now," Lyle Thomas said, not taking his hand from his scotch to shake the governor's hand. "Just hoping now that we can finally get something done."

"Sounds like the same thing that caused Lieutenant Governor Martin to lose his job."

Lyle shook his head. “Martin lost his job because he was stupid. You’re not stupid, Governor. In fact, none of this even has to be illegal. All we need to push this thing above board is your support.”

“What exactly are we talking about here?”

“Miami-Dade. Pushing the ‘glades back just a bit more.”

“How much more?”

“Ten miles.”

Portage shook his head, and said to the bartender, “Give me some gin, please.”

“How would you like it sir?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Portage turned back to Lyle. “What do you have in mind?”

“The mayor’s already on board, but the voters don’t trust him since he rammed that new highway extension through county council.” Portage chuckled, wanting to say something about the fact that the voters *use* the highway. “But the voters still trust you, and I need you to make them understand is how good this could be for them – pushing the western border ten more miles out – there’ll be new towns, new jobs, new houses, new everything.”

“Which *you’ll* develop should the contracts come your way.”

“Property prices are going through the *roof* down there. Giving us some new land to work with will quell all that.”

“For now.”

“Now’s the only thing worth worrying about. You’re a popular governor, Ted. People listen to you. If you tell them this is a good thing, they’ll go along with

it. And when you're President – " Lyle paused for Portage to huff and blush, knowing that he had hit on the governor's biggest desire. "When you're President, nobody will even *remember* this." Lyle knocked the rest of his scotch back through a toothy grin, then added, "Nobody votes the environment."

Portage shook his head, deciding to play the game. "I'm not convinced."

"I've got five million that says you are. Just tell me how to get it to you."

"I'll work on it," Portage said, shaking the last of his gin away from its ice cubes.

"Good man," Lyle said, patting the governor's back as he stood.

When the governor finished his drink and stood, his state trooper, who had been seated three tables away from him, also stood and walked over to him. "Do me a favor," Portage said to Andy, the three-night-a-week guy, "Go sit in your car or something. I'd like to be alone tonight."

"Yes sir," Andy said and Portage headed out of the restaurant towards the belly of the building where the elevator would take him to his apartment.

Chapter 23

The Talla Villa, whose sixteen floors towered above Tallahassee's low-rise skyline, was one of many 21st Century concept "residencies" popping up in the state's major cities. There was the Met in Miami, the Riverhouse in Fort Lauderdale, the Skyblu in Sarasota and the Trix Towers in Tampa. The concept was comfort, luxury and convenience in a tower that was a city within a city. In addition to the restaurant Joy, the Talla Villa housed two spas, a salon, a clothing boutique, a tanning salon, a

yoga studio, a cigar bar, a martini bar, and an organic supermarket. Although the concept had done well in focus groups, the Talla Villa was only at 24% capacity because of the residency's steep price tag. At a couple million dollars a unit, even those in love with the idea of buying spelt flour in the lobby of their building couldn't afford to do so. When he persuaded Mona to move to Tallahassee, Ted Portage had done it by purchasing the two-bedroom unit next to his. They were neighbors.

Every night, when the governor left the mansion and returned home to the Talla Villa, it was to the beautiful face and tanned body of his mistress, a woman who he never could have hoped to be with back when he was just a litigator in Calhoun. Becoming Lieutenant Governor and then Governor had allowed Ted Portage to transform into the person he always knew he could be. He was taking the luck the universe gave him and turning it into more luck – now he had what looked like money, like power, like love. And Mona was helping him. She was refined and beautiful; she knew how to stand and how to move, how to hold a glass of wine and which fork to use and when. But she could never be seen with him, a problem he never quite anticipated but was now fully and acutely aware of, like the bald spot that seemed to be forming near the crown of his head.

Still, every night he got to come home to her – usually to a meal she spent hours planning and shopping for and preparing, and always, eventually, to her warm naked and perfect (at 40!) body. The three months since she left her husband to join him in Tallahassee had been filled with heady, joyful lust, much like the affair that led them here, and Portage would have liked to keep the two of them suspended there

forever – him doing rewarding and profitable work, and her waiting for him at home, her own day just beginning.

Tonight, as he was unlocking the door to his apartment, wanting to brush his teeth to get the taste of gin from his mouth before going over to Mona's, she opened the door to greet him before he could slip into his apartment, and stood with her back against the door jamb, a beret crooked the side of her head, the pungent scent of *Ossco Bucco* pouring out from the kitchen. "Bonjour," she said, sounding sultry but practiced. It was enough for him and his lips found hers like a magnet to metal. "Where's your stooge?" she asked when they had finished kissing.

"I told him to go sleep in the car," he said, keeping his face close to hers. "I thought it would be nice to be alone for once."

"You smell like happy hour," she said, dropping her arms and moving away from him.

"I had a meeting."

"At a gin mill?"

"Downstairs."

"I wish you would drink something else. Just the smell of gin makes me queasy."

"What would you like me to drink?" he asked, sitting down at the dining room table and pulling her towards him by wrapping his arm around her waist.

"Scotch?"

"That's an old man's drink."

"You'll be an old man someday."

“*Then* I’ll drink scotch.” They smiled and kissed. “What’s with the French thing?”

“I got inspired, and thought we could go sometime. I’m starting to get bored here.”

“Bored?”

“Yes, bored. I’m starting to feel like Rapunzel, trapped in her tower.”

“You’re not *stuck* here. You can go out.”

“Alone?” She scrutinized him, looking down at his perfectly sloped nose.

“So make friends!”

“*You* are my friend. I want to go out with you.”

“We can’t do *that*.”

“Why not? Don’t you think this Girlfriend Watch is getting a little ridiculous?”

“Funny maybe.”

“Well, I think this is getting ridiculous.”

“What choice do I have?” He shrugged, pushing her out of his lap.

“I could divorce Dusty - then we could be together; out in the open and for real.”

Portage shook his head. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“Why?”

“It’s politics, honey. My – *our* future. It’s...complicated.”

“You said that already.”

“Dinner smells good.”

“It would have been better an hour ago. You should have told me you had a meeting.”

Portage shook his head. “Every day you’re getting less and less like a mistress and more and more like a wife.”

She put a hand on her hip. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” he shook his head. “Dinner smells good.”

Later, after the couple had fully made up from their first-ever tiff, Portage revealed the real reason he asked Andy to stay in his car. “I need a favor,” he said, coming behind and wrapping his arms around her as she brushed her teeth.

“What kind of favor?”

“Lyle Thomas would like to give me five million dollars, but he can’t very well give *me* five million dollars. But he can give *you* five million dollars.”

“What’ll you have to do?”

“He wants me to endorse a project down in Miami. He says the mayor’s already on board, so all I’ll have to do is talk it up, make it sound good.”

“Is it good?”

“Depends on how you look at it.”

“How do *you* look at it?”

“Like five million dollars.”

“OK,” she said, massaging night cream under her eyes. “But I want a cut.”

“How much?”

“Ten percent?”

“That’s an awful lot of money.”

She turned around and smiled, bringing her lips to his. “I have awfully expensive taste.”

Chapter 24

Julian had arrived in Tallahassee at the peak of rush hour, but moved against the flow of traffic – the commuters leaving the capital, and Julian coming into it. His luck ended when he arrived at Florida State and found that the auditorium where the conference was supposed to have taken place was empty. There were only a few cars in the lot, all college kid clunkers, nothing Kathryn Peters would have driven. But Julian didn’t give up, he simply changed directions. There was a good chance Kathryn Peters needed precisely what he needed at that point and time – something good to drink and something hot to eat. He left campus and parked his car along College Avenue where a string of high-end restaurants shared the sidewalk with student-filled eateries, and chose an outside table at the kind of place where a woman like Kathryn Peters might eat a steak.

He watched the parade of cars and pedestrians and people moving in and out of shops looking out for her, easing back into his chair with a drink and a cigar – the picture of a man without an agenda; he did this for two hours, eventually trading his cigar for *tapas* and watching the throng of students and businessmen and legislators grab that quick happy hour imbibe before making their way home. By eight o’clock, the street had emptied considerably, and was enmeshed in darkness – the canopies that hung over the street were like shrouds, the night had crept upon them like a cold virus.

After three appletini's Julian had given up on bumping into Kathryn Peters, and after four, he was in no condition to drive. He paid his tab and walked around the low-lit streets of Tallahassee, not wondering what he would do next, but where he would do it. On Adams street, he checked into a hotel and on its eighth floor, he fell asleep with his clothes on.

Julian cursed himself the next morning, sure that he'd given up too easily on his only chance to find Kathryn Peters outside her comfort zone. He had a headache, his teeth felt grimy, his mouth pasty. This was it. He was going to fly back to Brazil and convince his father to – to *what*? To sell? No one wanted it. There was absolutely nothing for Julian to do but to lie there in the surprisingly comfortable hotel bed and switch on the television. He could lie there for hours – wasn't that what he did at home? Nursing hangover after hangover with the remote control in his hand, watching the scripted world pass by in front of him while the real world eked on, unaltered.

Julian put on a movie, and fell asleep. When he woke up again, he discovered that he had missed checkout time by fifteen minutes. Another night in Tallahassee wouldn't kill him. He flipped through the channels and settled, disappointingly, on the news, but perked up when the daily Girlfriend Watch segment announced itself with the refrain to Madonna's *Who's That Girl?* and the perky celebrity news commentator smiled into the camera. "No answer to *that* question yet," she said, a glint of innuendo in her eyes, "But on day 26 of our Girlfriend Watch sources tell us that a member the governor's security brigade slept in his car last night in the parking garage of the governor's building while the governor, we *assume*, was upstairs .

entertaining a lady friend. So come on, *Guvna*, you can tell us. Who is she? Is she married? A celebrity? Or is she *young*? A student perhaps, or an *intern*..." the commentator kept babbling while the segment's music played on and the picture cut to the weather desk.

Julian mulled this over, licking his still-scummy teeth. Why on earth did these people care who the governor was *entertaining*? What did it matter? It amazed him how sex-obsessed Americans could be. Nobody cares about who their elected officials are *entertaining* in Brazil. Unless...

Julian shot up out of bed. Unless it was somebody good, meaning *bad*. Somebody like Kathryn Peters – somebody with power, somebody with influence. Somebody who *could* influence. And what if it *was* Kathryn Peters? Why would he hide her? Why would he have to?

As Julian paced, his blood surged through his veins as it never before had. He was excited. He was on to something. If the governor was dating Kathryn Peters, that would make everything that happened last spring seem...fixed. What if Florida Pure was the last holdout of Bottomless Lake's take-over rampage; hadn't they gained power of every other orange juice company in Florida? Maybe Florida Pure refused to sell...Maybe the governor helped his girlfriend cook up a scheme to swallow her competition. And there would be money in that. Money for him. If Julian knew one thing, it was that public servants loved their money.

Julian took a quick, excited shower. What he had to do was find the governor and follow him. No, what he had to do was figure out where the governor lived and break in. If he *was* dating Kathryn Peters there wouldn't be any trace of her in his

office, but she could be all over his apartment – photographs, letters, *hair*. And *then* what? Then, he smiled to himself, rinsing off, he could blackmail Kathryn Peters into business with Lacerda Estate Oranges. Then, he could go home and take his place at the top of the company. And *then* he could do whatever he wanted.

#

It wasn't hard to figure out where the governor lived. His face was on a billboard advertising the place with the words, *King of His Castle* nestled next a picture of the tower, behind which, the actual tower could be seen, rising up over Tallahassee. Julian shook his head and smiled; the man was practically a celebrity – he would probably do anything to keep his secrets buried. Before heading to the tower, Julian stopped at an electronics store and bought what the salesman said was the “smallest camera they make.” If he was going to have any kind of legitimacy as a blackmail artist, he would have to take pictures.

Julian drove to the Talla Villa, parked across the street from the tower and entered the building through the organic grocery. He had no idea how he was going to find the governor's apartment, but decided to walk around the building until something came to him – until the luck that had taken him that far gave him another push in the right direction.

He didn't have to wait long. He had been out at the pool (Olympic size, no less) looking up at the building, trying to figure out which balcony looked gubernatorial, when a woman's cellular phone conversation caught his attention. “I'm calling for Governor Portage,” she said, “Is Lyle Thomas in?” Julian froze in his tracks. She could be his personal assistant. His live-in maid – *by the pool?*

Whoever she was, she could lead him right to the devil's den. "No? OK, ask him to call me back at this number. Yes, he'll know what it's regarding." The woman snapped her phone shut, closed her eyes and pushed her face up towards the sun, arching her back. She was *no* maid. She was petite, blonde, very tan and very pretty, even for his standards. Julian prayed that she was not the governor's secret girlfriend. Where was the scandal in that?

Julian waited around as the woman flipped through a magazine, swam, and flipped through the magazine again, watching her from the shallow end of the pool, where he hiked his pants up to his knees and dangled his feet into the water. When she finally got up and gathered her things, Julian waited until her back was to him before jumping up and following her to the elevator bay.

In the elevator, she pressed 13, looked at him and said, "What floor?"

"Thirteen," he said.

"There are only two apartments on thirteen," she said, scrutinizing him, "Are you sure?"

"Let me check." Julian dug into his pocket and pulled out the receipt for the camera and looked at it. "Oh, you're right, it's fifteen," he said.

On the fifteenth floor, Julian held his breath and counted to twenty before getting back into the elevator and taking it to the thirteenth floor. Only two apartments! And one belonged to the governor. Julian's heart knocked in his chest as he tried the door knob of the first apartment, which was locked. He tried the second knob and it gave into his weight; he pushed it open a crack and peered in. There was

music playing from some far-off room, but otherwise, the place appeared to be empty. Julian opened the door further, and walked in, letting the door shut behind him.

The foyer was the narrowest part of the apartment, which opened up and out, taking on one-half of the building's V-shape. Otherwise, the floor plan was open, the kitchen and living room filling the sizeable main room, with the bedrooms somewhere beyond it. Julian heard the squealing of a faucet, and the gushing of water from the direction of the bedrooms, and surmised that he had successfully followed the woman home – that he was standing in the governor's apartment.

When he was sure the woman had gotten into the shower, Julian had a look around. There was nothing of interest in the kitchen – leftovers, a half bottle of wine, a block of cheese, some expensive-looking coffee, and likewise in the living room: the end tables had no drawers, and the sofa was so new that there was not so much as a dime between its cushions.

Julian made his way beyond the kitchen and into the master bedroom, where he stood yards away from where the woman showered in the master bathroom, going through her closet – *her* closet, not the governor's – there were no men's clothes, no men's shoes, nothing that even suggested the presence of a man besides a few condoms in the nightstand drawer, and the scent of a man's cologne on the sheets. When the water in the bathroom stopped running, Julian left the bedroom and moved on to a smaller room, which was set up as an office with a desk, a computer and nothing else. Julian went over to the computer, and swirled the mouse around on the desk. When the monitor lit up, the governor's face smiled back at him – his white capped teeth, his tanned skin, his brown, sincere, smiling eyes. Either this was the

governor's girlfriend, or the man just couldn't get enough of himself – *and* was a cross dresser. As unlikely as this was, Julian was disappointed that his theory about Kathryn Peters didn't pan out.

He went through the woman's desk drawers, looking for her name, and found it on a credit card statement: Mona Ruums. His heart sank. She was no one special. Julian heard footsteps and jammed the credit card statement into his pocket before slipping into a closet and closing the door. In the closet, he read the credit card statement. On it, were purchases from the organic supermarket, Tallahassee Wine & Spirits, Victoria's Secret, Evelyn Shoe, Bella Salon & Spa, and Burdines Department Store. Nothing salacious there. Through the crack in the door, he watched the woman send an e-mail. Then, she made a phone call, waiting for a while before saying, "It's me. Just calling to see what time you'll be home," and then slapping her phone shut. Then, she surfed the web for a bit, reading something Julian couldn't make out. Then, the governor himself – Julian could smell him, could feel the way his unchecked arrogance changed the energy in the room – entered the room and took hold of her shoulders. "I just left you a message," she said, responding to him by lifting her head back towards his hands. "You said you'd be home early."

"It is early. Did you talk to Lyle?"

"I left him a message."

"He didn't call you back?"

"Not yet."

“What’s for dinner?” he asked, bending down to kiss her neck. Julian took the camera from his pocket and nudged the door open slightly. These were the kind of pictures he needed.

“I didn’t plan anything. I figured we could go out.”

“You know we can’t do that.”

“Maybe not here, but we can go for a drive – we could be in Mobile in a couple of hours.”

He knelt down beside her and spun her chair around so that she faced him. “I can’t tonight. Maybe we could do it on Friday.”

“*This* Friday?”

“Yes.” He kissed her and Julian snapped their picture.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Like...my toothbrush?”

“Isn’t there a tropical storm out there?”

“There’s *always* a tropical storm out there.”

“But this one’s predicted to hit. I know you know this,” she said, turning to him finally. “Why are you playing dumb with me?”

“It’s fun to be able to play dumb with *somebody*.”

She smiled at him. “After playing smart all day.”

“It *is* exhausting,” he said, mockingly.

“I’m willing to forgive you for the tropical storm. But I am getting tired of being cooped up in here.”

He crooked his head to look at her, the way a curious dog might, and squeezed her leg. “But isn’t it just a little bit worth it?”

She smiled at him and they kissed again. “A little bit,” she said, and he lifted her up onto the desk, and they kissed, and he unbuttoned her blouse and kissed her chest, and he sat in the desk chair and pulled off her pants and kissed her legs and kissed the bottom of her feet and she pulled him towards her and the governor dropped his pants and Julian snapped picture after picture as the couple kissed and moaned and pulled at each other’s hair. When it was over, the couple dressed and left the room, and Julian, hearing the shower rush on again, took a risk and slinked down the corridor, through the kitchen, and out the front door.

Instead of risking a wait at the elevator, Julian took the stairs down a few flights, reviewing his pictures as he walked. They were perfect – there were clear shots of the governor, and clear shots of the woman, Mona Ruums, the governor’s secret girlfriend.

Julian understood why a man like Governor Portage would want to keep his girlfriend, even if she *was* no one special, a secret. It was possible that his entire political career was built on image, rather than substance, and the image of a young, handsome, powerful man probably helped win elections. Julian wouldn’t be surprised if this Portage guy wasn’t even the brains behind his career, or the state – there could be some ugly political genius behind the scenes, pulling Portage’s strings – telling him that he had to remain single, for the sake of his Image. It was also possible that Mona Ruums was one of several girlfriends the man might have this year, and in the era of AIDS and sexual harassment suits, being a playboy was no

longer hip. So it didn't matter that Mona Ruums was a nobody. To Governor Portage, she was the woman who could drag his career into the toilet.

The next day, Blackmail Day, Julian took the prints that he had had made the night before and snuck into the governor's mansion with a guided tour. At the governor's office, he showed one of the photographs to the governor's secretary, and asked to speak the governor.

"Of course," the secretary said, looking down at the picture, her mouth agape.

Julian watched the secretary pick up the phone and telephone inside. "There is a gentleman here," she whispered. "He has some pictures – still, sir. I think you will want to see them."

"Go ahead," she said to Julian, pointing to the governor's chamber, and Julian let himself in through the imposing mahogany door.

In his office, the governor was sitting on his desk, not at it. He didn't speak until Julian was right in front of him, and then, he was curt, saying only, "Let's see 'em."

"Let me first explain," Julian said, recalling the speech he had practiced the night before and in the car that morning. "I am here on behalf of Lacerda Estate Oranges in Brazil."

"Let's see 'em," the governor said again, clearly not having it.

"We are sorry," Julian went on, "that it has come to this." He took the pictures from their envelope and handed them to the governor.

Portage looked blankly at them, turning the pictures, looking at them from different angles. His face didn't give anything away. "How did you get these?"

"I took them."

"What do you want for them?"

"I'd like you to act as a liaison between myself and Kathryn Peters. Our company is virtually ruined because of her, and we need her help to reverse our fortune."

"What makes you think I have any bearing on what Kathryn Peters does?"

"It's a dirty business, oranges. It's in her interest to keep you happy, is it not?"

"I think you've got it backwards."

Julian folded his arms. "Up until yesterday I thought Kathryn Peters might be your secret girlfriend."

Portage laughed through his nose. "Why would I keep Kathryn Peters a secret?"

"Why are you keeping *that* woman a secret?" Julian asked, pointing towards the pictures.

The governor sobered. "Maybe I *can* help you. Let me make a phone call. Where can you be reached?"

"I'm staying at the Senator, on Adams street. Room 670."

"I'll be in touch."

After Julian left his office, Ted Portage called Lisa in and showed her the pictures. “Who is she?” Lisa asked.

“Dusty Ruums’ wife.”

“Anything else you want to tell me?”

“No,” Portage said and childishly ripped the photos from her hands.

“This is a mess. What does he want?”

“It’s an *orange juice* thing.”

“We can call Kathryn – ”

“No. She thinks I’m an idiot as it is.”

“She owes you.”

The governor shook his head.

“Let me see those,” Lisa asked, holding her hand out for the pictures, and, looking at them said, “Maybe I can take care of this once and for all. Trust me?”

The governor shrugged. “What’s it matter?”

“Give me an hour,” Lisa said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

In two hours, Lisa returned with Sara Waters by her side. “She lives in my building,” Lisa said, introducing her. “Uncanny resemblance to the woman in the pictures. Don’t you think?” Portage agreed. Sara Waters could have been a younger Mona Ruums. “Sara has agreed to act as your girlfriend until this thing blows over.”

“You don’t mind?” he asked her.

“No!” she said, with too much youth in her voice, shaking her head.

“We’ve agreed to pay off Sara’s student loans in appreciation of her cooperation,” Lisa said.

“Great.” Portage clapped his hands together.

“I’ve scheduled a press conference for eleven o’clock,” Lisa said.

“OK.” The governor nodded, understanding that there wouldn’t be time to call Mona.

In five minutes, Portage stood in the pressroom in front of every reporter that could assemble with ten minutes notice – most of the local TV stations and newspapers, a wire service guy, and a woman from public radio. “I know there has been a lot of speculation regarding my love life,” he said, the same worried look he had when he presented the problem to Lisa gracing his face. “It was never my intention to sneak around, only to solidify the relationship before coming out in the open about it. We have discussed it, and do not want the growing public interest to become public spectacle, and so, citizens of Florida, please meet my girlfriend, Ms. Sara Waters.” There was applause as the woman stepped up to share the podium with the governor, smiling.

Mona had been half asleep on the couch, watching *The View*, when the local station interrupted programming to cover governor’s press conference. At first, she was elated, thinking that this was something he was doing for her – a romantic gesture – announcing her identity so that she could finally walk among Tallahassee society, the rightful owner of the governor’s heart. But her elation quickly turned to confusion, then, to anger. What in the hell was he trying to pull?

She dialed his number over and over, knowing that she was making his phone vibrate in his pocket, and correlating that to the pained look on his face when he stood by while his new ‘girlfriend’ answered questions about her background and told a perfectly bogus story about how the couple met. Finally, Mona left a message on his voicemail, “What in God’s *name* is going on?” and went downstairs to buy some ice cream.

After the press conference, Ted raced home to explain, walking in on his tear-streaked, ice cream-stained girlfriend. “Why is it,” she started, her red eyes narrow on him, “that *she* can be your girlfriend and I can’t?”

“We’ve talked about this – you’re *married*.”

“I can divorce Dusty. I’d practically *be* divorced by now if it at all interested you.”

“We had an affair – I can’t very well...”

“Lots of politicians have affairs!”

“Not ones who get reelected. This is a Red state. I have to act like a Red guy.”

“What do you even know about this girl? She could be a Satan worshiper or a junkie.”

“She’s not a junkie.”

“In any case,” Mona said, putting a spoon full of ice cream in her mouth and shrugging, “she’s better than I am.”

“She’s not!” Ted said, grabbing her cold hand. “She’s just...she’s nothing. Look, this guy came in, he had these pictures of us – *he broke in and took pictures of*

us – I didn't know what to do. I overreacted, and then Lisa had an idea, and..." he shrugged, "I went along with it."

"I see that."

He squeezed her hand. "*Please.*"

"What are we going to do now?"

"We'll just wait for it to blow over. You'll get a divorce, I'll 'break up' with Sara, and we'll start going out again. For *real*."

"What happens until then?"

"Same thing as now. I might have to be seen with her occasionally, but it won't mean anything and soon, it'll all be over."

"There's something you're not telling me."

"Baby, there's nothing."

"Bullshit. I've seen you lie and I've seen you tell the truth, and this – " she cupped his chin, "is your lying face."

He took her other hand, holding both of them now, and gulped, hesitated, and said, "I did it for you."

"You did *what* for me?"

He touched his tongue to the roof of his mouth. He'd sworn he'd never tell her, but the thought of her leaving caused a panic to build up inside of him so that he was like a bomb milliseconds before exploding. He opened his mouth, and told her everything.

They had been in bed on one of the long sun-filled mornings on the Alabama

coast when their affair first began, and Ted asked Mona if she was in love with her husband. Mona sat up and gathered a sheet around her breasts, tucking it up under her armpits. “That’s difficult,” she said. “It’s not like it was when we were young of course, that kind of wild, well...” Portage bit her elbow and nibbled up to her shoulder. “Right,” she laughed, and he nuzzled her neck. “But love, after you’ve been married awhile, is more about support than it is sex.”

“So you do love him then, and this is just sex?”

“Well,” she said, “that’s difficult.” She scratched her head and played with her hair, raising it up into a pony tail and letting it fall. “I don’t know about those things anymore. Life isn’t what I thought it was. It isn’t so simple.”

He bit her earlobe. “It can be.”

She pulled away. “What do you mean?”

“What if you left your husband? Came out to Tallahassee to live? We could do this every morning.” There was a knock at their door – room service delivery. “We could eat crepes and croissants and other breakfast foods that start with C.” She smiled at him. “What would it take? Just tell me.”

“Why do you want this so bad?”

“I like a challenge.”

She frowned.

“And I love you, OK? So what would it take?”

Mona smiled, rolled around on her side and propped her head up with her hand. “An offer I couldn’t refuse.”

After Julian left the governor's mansion, he went back to his hotel room to wait for the call, ordering an early lunch, and flipping through the television channels to pass the time. But when he flipped to the afternoon news, their lead story was enough to make him lose his lunch and his breakfast, and anything else lurking around his insides. So this was the governor's answer. "Mona Ruums," he said aloud, his voice dwarfed by the sound of the television, "why *is* he keeping you a secret."

Julian did what he should have done the night before, and went down to the hotel's media room to plug the woman's name into an internet search engine. When he did, a single article about February's Seminole Days festival appeared along with a photograph of Mona Ruums along side her husband, Dusty Ruums, "President and CEO of Florida Pure, Seminole County's largest employer," the caption read. Julian was incensed, and sat back from the computer, blinking. What kind of idiot blackmails somebody without first understanding what he's got? "The over-eager kind," he said aloud, staring at the image in front of him, then, only at Dusty's pudgy face, his forced smile. "Dusty Ruums," he said. "Do you have any idea what this means?"

Julian did a little more investigating, looking, specifically for any recent news on Dusty Ruums, trying to figure out where he could find him, but there was nothing. He did find his listed address, though, and quickly gathered his things, checked out of the hotel, and headed, immediately, for Sanford.

In six hours and eighteen minutes, Julian was standing on Dusty Ruums' front porch, knocking on Dusty Ruums' door. "Mr. Ruums?" Julian asked when the man answered, half-dressed and stinking of gin.

"What'dya want?"

"My name is Julian Lacerda," Julian said, offering his hand, and Dusty took it, shaking it limply. "I have some things to discuss with you. Can I come in?"

"Are you from the bank?"

"No."

"OK then." Dusty moved aside and let Julian in, gesturing towards the living room. "It's kinda messy," he said. "Don't get much company."

Julian pretended not to notice, and kept his eyes fixed on Dusty, who staggered towards him.

"Wanna drink?"

"Sure," Julian said. "Whatever you're having."

Dusty went into the kitchen and threw together two drinks with one ice cube a piece (all he had), lots of gin, a little tonic, and a little orange juice and brought them in.

"Is this orange juice?" Julian asked, taking a sip.

"Juice it myself. I almost got desperate one day and drank that Bottomless Lake filth, but I just went without. Next day I bought a tiny little juicer and now I just do it myself."

Julian nodded, sipping the strong drink.

"I got Florida Pure posters and pens and bumper stickers, but ya can't get the

juice anymore. Not even the concentrated stuff. Not anywhere. It's amazing what a couple'a months will do."

Julian began to wonder whether Dusty could handle what he had come there to tell him, but he shook it off: nothing was easy as it should be.

"So, uh, nice to meet you, cheers." Dusty held up his drink.

"I, ah, I've got some news for you. About your wife. Do you know where your wife is?"

"She dead?"

"She's in Tallahassee." He took out the pictures and handed them to Dusty.

"With the governor."

"The governor?" Dusty flipped through the pictures, over and over, quickly and then slower, until he was starring hard at every pigment, breaking her face apart into little digestible pieces.

"Did you happen to see the governor's press conference today?"

"Press conference?" Dusty starred at the pictures then looked around the room, confused.

"The press conference announcing his secret girlfriend?"

"Secret girlfriend? No."

"It was a lie. The woman he was with."

Dusty looked up from the pictures and at Julian. "*What?*"

Julian spoke slowly. "Your wife is the governor's girlfriend."

"Well," Dusty said, starring at the pictures. "How do you like that?" He began to cry sloppily, the pictures clenched in his hand.

“I’m here because I thought that you might like to help me do something about this.”

“Do something?”

“Well,” Julian said, reaching for Dusty’s drink as he was about to drop it. “It’s pretty obvious that the reason the governor’s trying to hide the identity of his real girlfriend is because of you.”

“Because of me?”

“Because of who you are. Because of what that says.”

“What it says about what?”

“Florida Pure sank like a rock. The governor could have helped you if he really wanted to, right? He could have said something or done something or put those kids in their place – but he didn’t.”

“No,” Dusty said, “he didn’t do anything. Bloom would’ah had them kicked out of school. Bloom would’ah ruined their lives. But that asshole Portage just sat around all doe-eyed pretending he didn’t know a flying fuck about the state’s agriculture.”

Julian shrugged. “Maybe he didn’t.”

“Lemme tell ya something, those guys know a million times more than they’ll ever admit to. They’re actors, is all. It’s how they get their jobs is acting. Acting and kissing ass. But not *my* ass. I never let any’a those clowns come near me. Couldn’t stand ‘um.”

“Maybe that was your problem.”

“Now look,” Dusty sat forward. “Ya already came in and showed me pictures

of my wife fucking the man that helped destroy my life, don't – ”

“Do you really think he helped destroy it?”

“Well he certainly didn't *hinder* anything, which is what we just talked about, if you could just follow...”

Julian leaned in. “I think he helped to destroy it too. Would you like to know how?”

Dusty sat back, took a big slug of his drink. “How?”

“Just because you avoided the politicians doesn't mean your competitor did.”

“What's your point?”

“When you got into all that trouble last spring, where was Bottomless Lake Oranges?”

“Exactly!”

“So what if the governor fixed it so that they couldn't be touched? What if the governor had a little meeting with those kids and said, look, you guys can have Florida Pure – just leave the rest of the industry alone.”

“No way. You didn't see those kids. They were out for blood.”

“And they got blood! They got *you*. They destroyed an entire company!”

“So you're saying that was enough for them?”

“Suppose those kids really didn't know what they were getting into – ”

“They *didn't*!”

“Right. Now they're into this, though, and they have to save face. They can't just go on TV and admit that the use of migrant labor is *complicated*. That they didn't understand it, that they take it all *back* – they couldn't do that.”

Dusty shook his head. “No.”

“So the governor’s a young guy and he sees this too. So he calls these kids in for a secret meeting, says he understands where they’re coming from and that he appreciates their energy and so on and so forth and then he makes the deal.”

“But what do the students get?”

“They got you!”

“Oh.” Dusty slouched down in his chair, his drink nearly about to spill again.

Julian took the drink out of Dusty’s hand and put it back on the table. “Don’t you think it’s about time you did something?”

“Something? Like what?”

“We could expose him, for one.”

“Might be kind of hard to do considering we don’t have any proof.” Dusty picked up his drink again. “What’d you say your name was?”

“Julian.”

“And why the hell do you care about all of this?”

Julian smiled. “Money.”

“What money?”

“My family makes concentrated juice in Brazil. Lacerda Estate Oranges, ever hear of it?” Dusty shook his head. “Those kids hurt everyone when they started protesting your company. Bottomless Lake came out on top by selling their juice so cheap; so cheap, in fact, that they broke into the Latin American market, and people stopped drinking the concentrated stuff and all of the juice companies in São Paulo are sinking in the mud, including mine.”

“What do you want with me?”

“I took these pictures to try to blackmail the governor into helping me, but he went another way and got himself a fake girlfriend.”

“So now you’re here.”

“So now I’m here and I’d like your help.”

“I’m not sure there’s anything I can do – ”

“The governor can’t give up the identity of his real girlfriend – your wife – because of what he did to you; how he helped destroy your company. But if he is brought to understand that we know what we know, he might come around.”

“But we don’t know anything.”

Julian smiled. “We know enough.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“How about the pleasure a man feels when he sticks up for himself? How about rubbing his face in the mud the way he did yours? How about making things very uncomfortable for the man who robbed you of your wife?”

“Do you think she’ll come back to me?”

Julian shrugged. “Maybe.”

“What do we have to do?”

“Start by cutting down on the booze, for one,” Julian said, taking his drink away. “And then, go upstairs and take shower. I’ll wait.”

“And then what?”

“And then we surprise him.”

Julian's theory about Governor Portage didn't ring far from true. In April, just three days after the initial protest at Florida Pure, Kathryn Peters sent Portage a note and a check. *An early campaign contribution*, it said, *Just keep those kids away from my front door*. Kathryn Peters had penned her phone number on the bottom of the note and Portage dialed it right away, the check in his hand. "What are you suggesting?" he asked.

"I'm not *suggesting* anything," she said, a smile to her voice. "But you *do* wield an awful lot of power. You could have those kids buried, if you wanted to – the question is, why don't you want to? That's rhetorical," she said, after he was silent for a few breaths, "I don't want to know. Though *you* should know that you're not the only one who spent last weekend on Mobile Bay. I have family up there."

"Oh really?" He said, trying to be calm, but was almost choking.

"No biggie. Just take care of us, OK? Just take care of those kids."

"Will do," Portage said. "And the check?"

"Like I said, that's a campaign contribution. I consider it small, but there will be more, so long as Bottomless Lake can afford it."

"Gotcha," he said.

"Good. See you on the bay!" Kathryn sang, hanging up.

Portage looked down at the two-million-dollar check and got on the phone.

"Stacy," he said to his secretary, "Come in here please."

Stacy arranged a secret meeting between the governor and the ringleader, Brad Armory. Brad was to stand on the corner of International Boulevard and Colonial Drive in Orlando, eating a corn dog and wearing a pair of Mickey Mouse

ears. The governor's car would pull up in front of him, and Brad would get in, which is exactly what happened on a balmy, May evening.

"You must be very proud of yourself," Portage said, not yet looking at Brad.

"You're what, twenty?"

"Nineteen."

Portage looked at him now. "Nineteen and already a star, primed to take down an entire company – a multi-million-dollar company. Do you come from money Brad?"

"A little."

"I don't. Did you know that?"

"Yeah," Brad said. "It's in your bio."

"Do you know why it's in my bio, Brad?"

"Because you think it makes you look like a regular guy, because you think regular people vote for regular guys, because you think it makes you special – "

"Don't they?"

"Don't what?"

"Don't regular people like to vote for regulars guys?"

"I don't know," Brad shrugged.

"Being a regular guy means people can identify with me. They look at me and they think that if I do something great with my life, they could too – they *won't*, probably, but you see Brad, I give them that hope."

"What's the point of all this?"

"The *point*, you snot-faced little cynic, is that the state of Florida needs me to

propel it forward, and I can't do that if I'm fielding calls from juice companies and growers, all scared out of their minds that they won't have a job tomorrow just because some punk kids are bored during spring break."

"But it's those companies who are in the wrong, not me. They're the ones who –"

"Provide a service – a *humanitarian* service to groups of impoverished people, people who left their home countries for a stab at the American Dream, the very dream that I am living, Brad."

"The American Dream isn't slaving away in a field for ten hours a day!"

"The American Dream is upward mobility. Those people are better off in our groves than they were in their own countries. If they weren't, they wouldn't be here. The citrus industry is key to lifting those poor, suffering people out of poverty."

"But citrus slavery –"

"Is nonsense and you know it. Florida Pure doesn't participate in anything like that, I happen to know for a fact."

"I'll come out about this conversation. I'll tell everyone you tried to buy me off."

"Have I?"

"No."

Portage smiled. "I'll tell you what, Brad. You can *have* Florida Pure. Go ahead, destroy them, call them every name in the book – put a great big feather in your little activist cap – but then, leave my state alone, OK? There are things going on here that you obviously don't understand."

Portage put down the partition that separates the back seat from the driver and told the driver to stop at the next intersection.

“Do we have a deal?” Portage extended his hand, and Brad shook it, looking down at his lap. When the car stopped, Brad got out. He was miles away from where he had parked.

Chapter 27

October comes to the world slowly, time zone by time zone, the slow crawl of autumn dragging its cloak across the globe. In the north, trees flush with reds, turn sick with yellows – the earth is aging and shedding, the northern hemisphere darkening, tilting back away from the sun. In the Atlantic, hurricane season rages on, with new storms exploding out of its warm waters every couple of days, and in Florida, large white flowers crack and spill their perfume as citrus groves everywhere prepare for the weight of the early crop.

In his kitchen, Tucker was praying for such a weight. While everything else was in bloom, Alshire was just trees, green upon green, as if it were still summer. If his oranges didn’t grow, he explained to God, during a prayer, he would have to sell Alshire, and with that, everything else would fall away. Everything he built up in his mind over the past three months – that he was a good man doing good work, that he would, someday, be up to his arms in juice, and that Trudy would, eventually, love him, that she would stay. *I know you have a plan*, he prayed, *but I hope that your plan is my plan. More than anything else* (he squeezed his eyes shut, his hands together) *I hope that she stays.*

Tucker rested his head in his hands, listening to the sounds of the kitchen: the humming of the refrigerator, the tapping of the pipes, the birds as they called to each other, not totally unaffected by October. Tucker perked up when he heard the creak of the porch stairs and the screen door swinging open as Trudy walked in from outside. “Where’d you go?” he asked, a bit of pink lifting his ears.

“Wandering itch.” she said, scratching her head. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” He forced a smile.

Trudy had gone to see Luis. Biking to the pier, she had noticed the change in the landscape, blossoms popping out everywhere – nature’s quiet force. When she got to Lake Reedy, Luis was already waiting for her, standing against the rail, watching her bike towards him. “What happened last night?” he asked as she stepped off the bike and leaned it up against the rail. “I called you three times.”

“I couldn’t get away.”

“Maybe you didn’t try.”

“You have the stuff?”

“In the car.”

“What about the money?”

“After, remember.”

“After I do it, I’m leaving.”

“Leaving how?”

“Car. Gonna buy one with your money.”

“Where will you go?”

“Don’t know yet.”

Luis looked down at her, his sunglasses hiding his expression. “How about São Paulo? You could come with me.”

“Thanks, but I travel alone.”

“Plenty of places to get lost in Brazil.”

“What makes you think I’m trying to get lost?”

“Aren’t you?”

She shook her head. “I’m just getting antsy. Starting to feel...”

“What?”

“Bad, OK? I’m starting to feel bad.”

“I wouldn’t waste a lot of time on that emotion.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“This guy’s asking for it. Vulnerable with a capital V. If anything, you’re doing him a favor. There’s no money to be made in this industry right now – if the state burns down his grove, he’ll at least get to collect insurance.”

“Sure,” Trudy nodded. “But if there’s no money in it, why even bother?”

Luis pointed to himself. “Us? Because it’s what we do. This guy can do anything. He doesn’t need it. *We* need it.”

“And I need that five grand. Without it, I won’t do the job.”

“I told you you’ll get it after.”

“And I told you that I’m leaving after.”

“Have you always been such trouble?”

Trudy crossed her arms.

“How do I know that I can trust you?” he asked.

“How do *I* know that I can trust *you*?”

When Trudy left, Luis watched her as she biked away, her long white legs pedaling slowly around the corner and out of sight. Something about the way she left hit him like a fist in the stomach. He didn’t want to go to Brazil either. He wanted to go away, with her. “Don’t know yet,” he whispered, the possibility of it sounding muddy coming from him, foreign and ridiculous.

Luis looked down at the swampy water. He didn’t have the five grand and he didn’t know when he would get it. He had called Arturo several times since they had separated two weeks before, and had yet to hear anything back. He had a feeling that something had happened – perhaps to Nia or the baby, perhaps something had gone terribly wrong. He dialed Arturo again and left another message, telling him that without the five grand, their plan was doomed.

Chapter 28

October, finally October. A few groves in the south had sprouted early and were ready to be picked, so Raul returned to long hot days in citrus groves, getting picked up in Intersection City by labor contractors and going into a different grove every day, picking. It was stupid, awful work, but it would become, in the next month, steady enough to get him out of that motel room, which stunk of too many people, too much skin, too many souls crowded into a single, squalid place.

Raul picked fast, not thinking of anything but orange, orange, orange. The

faster he could pick, the more money he could make in a day; the more money he could make in a day, the sooner he could get his family into their own cramped conditions; they could have, at least, the freedom of autonomy. It was stupid to have come to America for this: orange, orange, orange, but still, if the INS pulled up in front of him, he would run from them as fast as he could. Some nights, he dreamt about it, running. Life was crazy that way: to hate what you have but to loathe the alternative. And he knew the alternative – he saw it in the eyes of some of the other workers around him; Raul had a limited sense of freedom because of his illegal status and financial position, but others had no freedom at all.

He had seen this first-hand, two days ago in a Brighton when a worker two rows away from him was kicked off his ladder and beaten. The other workers didn't make a sound, all of the gasps and whispers and apologies to God seemed to exist in a vacuum, causing an eerie quiet to come down over them like a blanket. Help him, Raul thought. But he himself did not get off his ladder, he himself did not help. And the man never got up – the workers just moving around him, careful not to look, but careful not to step on him.

The man next to Raul, who had come with him on the bus that day from Intersection City, whispered the word, “slavery,” and explained that the other men in the grove belonged to the same camp of people who lived in trailers in Sebring. At first, Raul pretended not to hear him, pretended that he was unaffected by what had happened – that he was deaf and blind – but the man kept talking. “I saw him on the edge of the trees – before he was beaten – he told me that they came from Sonoyta, Mexico, that they were smuggled in and made to be slaves. He *begged* me to help

him, but what can *I* do?” The man stopped talking and Raul was silent, as he worked this out in his head.

“If they are slaves,” Raul whispered, “And we’re working alongside of them, we’re slaves too.”

The man shook his head, chuckled quietly. “No,” he said. “Look around. This is big grove, all of the fruit popped out at once and it needs to be picked. What I think is, *they* work here every day, and we are just here for *today*.”

Raul shook his head in half-disbelief. We’re all slaves – even Americans are slaves, he wanted to say but didn’t, because the word now felt too powerful, too real for his quick social commentary, his growing pessimism.

His mouth had dried out. There was a bubble in his gut. He felt lightheaded, sick. If these men were slaves and he was not, how would he leave at the end of the day? How would he go to *his* home and not theirs? But when the sun crested and nodded off towards the horizon, and the workers were called out, Raul was paid and taken back to the lot where he’d been picked up early that morning. Where had the other workers gone? What had they been paid?

He rode his bike home that evening, stopping twice to throw up. He had heard of this kind of thing, but now that he had been faced with it, how could he, a Christian man, turn away? How had he done it that morning – watch a man get kicked to death? It was amazing, the kind of fear that death inspired in *him* a Christian man – a Christian man with a crappy life.

At home with his wife, they took a walk along route 27, the darkness dotted with lighted signs for *other* motels, grocery stores and laundry mats called Sudsies,

Wash-N -Fold, and Clean-O-Rama, feeling the swish and pull of the air against their faces as cars drove by. Raul walked with his wife, holding her hand, but not saying anything. There was life here, but it wasn't *theirs*, they didn't belong to it and it didn't belong to them. He wanted to tell her about the man in the grove that day, to unload the thoughts from his mind, but he also didn't want her to know about any of it – was embarrassed that he had done nothing – that he planned to do nothing.

Chapter 29

It had taken Julian and Dusty all night to get to Tallahassee. While they drove, Dusty told his new friend all about his estranged wife, about how her cheating was really only fair – a free pass, he called it, because he had done it too – lots – he said, when he was drinking. “But you’re still drinking,” Julian said, downshifting.

“This is new, though. This is just – because of everything.”

“You think Portage is losing sleep over you? You think he’s feeling like he should drink himself into a stupor because of all the pain he caused you? You’ve got to figure out another way to channel your anger – do something more productive.”

“There’s nothing I want to do.”

“*Nothing?*”

“I never had to think about it.”

“So now you have to think about it,” Julian said, surprised that all of this was coming out of his mouth – when had *he* ever done anything?

Dusty shook his head. “No I don’t. I’m coming out here with you, but I don’t need a counselor.”

“OK,” Julian shrugged. “It’s just that we’re a lot alike –”

“How are we alike? You’re a gay playboy from Brazil – you break into apartments to take pictures of people having sex so that you can blackmail them later. I’m just a good ‘ol boy from Florida. I dropped out of college. I inherited a multi-million dollar orange juice company and I let it evaporate. I don’t have anything anymore.” Dusty let his head fall back on the headrest. “I’m nothing.”

Julian froze. “How do you know I’m gay?”

“It’s pretty obvious, even to me, and I’ve been in a stupor for the past five months.”

“*How* is it obvious?”

“It’s the way you move,” Dusty said, mimicking him with his arms.

“It’s the way I *move*. How could I not know that?”

Dusty shrugged. “Hard to see yourself, I guess.”

They arrived in Tallahassee very early in the morning. “Let’s get some coffee,” Julian said, stopping the car in front of a Starbucks. “We’ll have to figure out where he is today. I’m pretty sure I won’t be allowed back in the mansion.”

“What about me? I could probably go in and talk to him.”

“And what would you say?”

“I’m not sure. But what about Mona? You know where she is, don’t you?”

Julian turned to Dusty. “I am sorry to have to tell you this, but your wife is secondary right now. We have to get to the governor. We have a little bit of bluffing to do. We’re going to have to scare the hell out of him if we’re going to get what we want.”

"I want to see my wife."

"Here," Julian said, tossing the pictures in Dusty's lap and jumping out of the car.

Julian bought two strong American coffees, loaded his with cream and sugar and left Dusty's black. When he got back to the car, Dusty had shredded the pictures completely; little flecks of color littered the floorboards.

"What did you do that for?"

"Enough with the pictures! They didn't work and now you've got me as your pawn, so let's go. Maybe you should write down what you'd like me to say!"

"That's not a bad idea. What we've got to do is pretend like –"

"It's a terrible idea!"

"OK, OK," Julian pulled the car over to the side of the road, got out and went around to the trunk. He came back with the half-drunk bottle of bourbon, his own emergency stash. "I didn't think it would come to this, but here..." he took the lid off Dusty's cup and poured some in. "Now will you calm down?"

"I could use something to eat."

"Fine. Let's get some breakfast. Someplace stately. Maybe we'll kill two birds with one stone."

They went into a place on Brevard Street, a place that called itself a café but was really much more – leather chairs with wheels, dim lights, orange juice in wine glasses, white cloth napkins; it was filled with the music of clinking silverware and ice in glasses. It smelled like coffee and roses, pancake syrup and wood. "Perfect," Julian said.

Dusty sat, drinking his coffee from the large, lidded cup. “I probably wouldn’t even recognize the guy if I saw him,” he said.

“You did just see some fairly recent photos of him,” Julian said, unfolding his napkin and smoothing it in his lap.

Dusty held up his finger. “In clothes. And standing. With his dick out of my wife. OK?”

“That’s the spirit!”

Dusty ordered eggs benedict and a Bloody Mary.

“The same. Only make my Mary a virgin,” Julian said, winking at the waitress. “One of us has to keep his wits about him.”

“Do we even have a game plan?”

“Remember that little story I told you last night about the governor striking a deal with your activists to get them to leave the rest of the industry alone?”

“How could I forget?”

“We’re going to pretend that it’s true. That we know it as God’s word.”

“Great. How do we know it?”

“The kid came and told us. Guilt or something.”

“And what if that never happened?”

“He’d call us on it. Make us feel about this tall,” Julian demonstrated with his fingers. “Let me do most of the talking. I’ve rehearsed it all in my head.”

“I’m sure you have,” Dusty said, moving his hands out of the way of the streaming plate the waitress placed in front of him.

When the waitress had left, Julian kicked him. “Don’t turn around,” he said.

“Don’t kick me,” Dusty said, stirring his Bloody Mary with his fingers.

“He just walked in.”

“Who’s he with?”

“Some guy, I’ve never seen him before. Now you can look. They’re way over there,” Julian pointed. “Do you know who that guy is?”

“No. Probably some other government stooge. They travel in packs.” Dusty gulped his drink.

“We’re going to give him a chance to hear us out without an audience. When he gets up to go to the bathroom, you approach him, tell him who you are and what you know and then I’ll step in and join you.”

“What if he doesn’t get up to go to the bathroom?”

“Then we’ll just have to follow him out of here and wait until we can get him alone.”

“OK. You don’t carry a gun or anything, do you?”

“*No.*”

“It’s just that this feels so movie-like.” The waitress came back and Dusty ordered another Blood Mary.

“He’ll have water,” Julian said, interjecting. “What are you trying to do here?”

“I’m nervous.”

“We’ll take the check, too.”

They sat watching the governor’s table, watching him laugh, watching him gesture in his grey pinstriped suit, with his whiter than white teeth. “It makes me sick

to think of Mona with him. He's such a *cartoon*. Who does he think he's fooling?"

"Not only that, but he thinks he's going to run for president."

"Mona would be the First Lady?"

"Try First Mistress. I told you he had a cover-girlfriend."

"She look like Mona?"

"Enough."

"Look, he's getting up."

They continued to watch the governor as he shook hands with the man who had sat across from him and walked away from the table.

"I think he's leaving," Julian said.

"He didn't even eat."

"Come on, let's go. This is our chance."

Dusty continued to sit in his seat, dumbfounded. "I can't."

"What do you mean you can't? Yes you can. Get up!" Julian kicked his shin.

"Ow!"

"Just relax. Just go out there and tell him who you are. Tell him you know what he did. Go!"

Dusty got up, brushed the crumbs off his lap and tucked his hair (which had gotten long) behind his ears. Outside, the sun nearly blinded him. He squinted and found the governor walking briskly back towards his mansion, getting away. Dusty ran after him and called his name, "Hey Portage!" But the governor kept walking. Perhaps he was whistling, Dusty thought, perhaps he was thinking about Mona's thighs. "Ted! Ted Portage!" Dusty caught up to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

Portage turned around and jumped back.

“Do I know you?”

“You know my wife. I’m Dusty Ruums.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the governor said, turning away from him.

“And I know what you did.”

The governor stopped, mid-step.

“You struck a deal with those activist kids, and you let me take the fall for the whole damn industry. You could have done anything to stop them, you practically did – they didn’t attack anybody else.”

The governor turned around. “What do you want?”

Julian stepped out from where he’d been standing between buildings. “Same thing I wanted yesterday.”

“Let’s get in the car,” Portage said, looking for his. “Oh. I walked. Let’s meet later. My apartment. By the pool.”

“How can we trust you?” Dusty asked.

Portage shook his head. “There’s no such thing as trust. You of all people should know that.”

Dusty moved towards him and reached back to take a swing. Julian grabbed his arm, said, “We’ve got him in a corner. That’s why we can trust *that* he’ll be where he says he’ll be.” He smiled at the governor. “Four OK?”

“Fine.” The governor turned on his toe and walked away.

“This is never gonna work,” Dusty said. “He’ll have warrants out for our

arrests by then. Government people operate within their own reality in this country.”

Julian folded his arms and smiled, leaning against the rental car he had come to think of as his own. “You’re forgetting where I come from. Just relax. This is the way these things work.”

Chapter 30

That past January, there had been an attempt made on Governor Portage’s life by a mentally ill man who thought the governor was a Castro operative sent from Cuba to kill him. Portage had been in Miami for a fundraiser at the Bayfront Amphitheatre. It was nighttime and crowded; the band on stage was playing salsa music and people were dancing in the grass. A shot rang out and zipped past the governor’s head, and then another shot bleated out into the night – the man had killed himself.

Since then, Governor Portage has been *aware* – not paranoid or even nervous, but aware. In addition to his security brigade, he had a permit to carry a concealed Mustang revolver, which he fired once a month at the state police gun range. He kept the gun unloaded in a desk drawer, and kept its little silver bullets in one of the many hollowed books that sat on his bookshelf.

When he got back to his office after meeting Julian and Dusty on the street, Portage took the weapon out of his desk and loaded it, standing at the bookshelf, his head turning to check the door, then the window, and the door again. Then he left, got into his car, and drove to the Talla Villa.

“Stacy,” he said into his phone while driving. “Cancel my appointments for

today. I have to go back to Calhoun. My mother is sick.” He hung up with her and drove, jamming the gearshift, crunching the gears.

When he got to Mona’s apartment at the Talla Villa it was quiet and he thought at first that she had gone down to the pool. He called her name several times, but she didn’t answer. When he found her, she was on the floor in between the two sofas, the coffee table having been pulled out, her feet over her head. “Mona, what in the hell are you doing?”

“Plow,” she said quietly, between breaths.

“I called you. Why in the hell didn’t you answer?”

“I was breathing.” He knelt down to her, took her feet and swung her out of position. “What are you *doing*? I was almost finished,” she said.

“We have to talk,” he said, sitting down.

She sat up on her mat, looking at him. “What’s wrong?” She went to touch his temple, where his hair stuck to his head from sweat, but he shook her away.

“Your husband came to see me today. Says he knows about my meeting with that activist punk. He knows everything. How does he know everything, Mona?”

She put her hand on her chest, near her heart. “How should I know? I left him four months ago, and haven’t spoken to him since.”

“Bullshit!” He slapped her.

Mona stood up, tears beginning in her eyes, her face moving from numb, to stinging to throbbing. “Don’t you touch me!” she screeched.

“How does your husband know?” he shouted, his cheeks and forehead red.

“How in the hell should I know? I left him, remember, for *you*.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Just come over here and sit down, OK honey?” He smoothed the seat next to him.

“Thank you, I’ll stand,” Mona said, crossing her arms over her chest. “Just in case you try to take another whack at me.”

“I’m sorry. Listen, you really didn’t talk to him?”

“Really.”

“I’m sorry, honey. Please come over here and sit down.” She moved back towards him, but sat on the sofa opposite him instead. “They’re trying to blackmail me for something I can’t do, something I don’t have.”

“Who’s they?”

“Your husband and the Brazilian guy. The guy who took the pictures.”

“So you’re saying this is my fault. If the Brazilian guy hadn’t put Dusty and me together – ”

“I think you should go away for awhile, like we discussed.”

Mona shook her head. “No. I hate that idea – you sending me into *political exile* when I never even did anything.”

“I don’t mean go away like that. I mean, I think you should go back to your husband.”

“My husband!”

“Just for a little while, maybe. Then, we can do our thing like we used to – maybe.”

“*Maybe!*”

“Well, Sara and I are an item now, at least in the public’s eye, and the

overnight poll says she's going over well. Some of my advisors think we should even get married."

"Get married! She's just a patsy!"

"Honey, honey, honey," he got on his knees and came towards her. "I'm going to try for us, OK? But I can't do it wrapped up in a scandal that involves your husband."

"Well whose idea was that? Yours! You just had to see Dusty go down!"

He shrugged, smiled. "It was fun. Besides, I did it for you."

"Which part?"

"I did it so that you'd leave him." He stood up to meet her eyes. "So that we could be together."

"And now?"

"I could never have foreseen that things would get so complicated, that they would turn so far out of our favor."

"It doesn't have to be. You could give up the governorship," she said.

He backed away from her. "The governorship is just the beginning for me, baby, you know that."

She folded her arms against her chest again. "What's more important?"

He stood now. "My political future is everything, Mona, you know that. Without that I'm nothing, I'm not the man who you, you –"

"Love?"

"Right. Now listen, what I need you to do is pack your bags and drive back home to Orlando."

“You mean Sanford.”

“Right, Sanford. Call your husband and tell him that you’re sorry and that you’re ready to work things out.”

She looked up at him. “No.”

“What do you mean, “No?”

“I left Dusty because I was unhappy with him, I’m not going back just because you tell me to. Who in the hell do you think you *are*? Oh, that’s right, you’re the mighty and powerful governor of Florida.” She stood up. “I will pack my bags, and I will leave, but don’t you dare tell me where to go.”

He moved over to her, tried to put his arms around her. “Mona, listen – ”

“You have that gun down your pants again, don’t you? What were you going to do, *shoot* me?”

“No! I mean, Mona, I’m in a tight *position*.”

She went back into her bedroom, flinging open dresser drawers and closet doors, stuffing her five suitcases full. “I wish that Sara person never came into our lives. That you’d figured out a better way to serve your ego than destroying Florida Pure, that you were a *person*, not a politician!”

Portage took out the gun and engaged it.

“What in the hell are you doing?”

“Just say you’ll go quietly.”

“I’m going!”

“Quietly! That means never talking about this, about Sara or about Florida Pure.”

“Well,” she said, her hands on her hips. “That’ll cost ya, won’t it?”

“Cost me how?”

“I called the bank today. Your Lyle Thomas money came through. I guess I’ll keep that.”

“Mona – ”

“Don’t *Mona* me. You’ll be lucky if that’s all I do.”

“It’s five million dollars!”

“Consider what you’d lose if I didn’t leave.”

“You’re pretty bold,” he said, disengaging the gun.

“You’re pretty bold too.”

Within a half-hour, Mona was driving angrily through the streets of Tallahassee, cursing at slow and inattentive drivers. She didn’t know what to do with herself. She was an alien in her own life. She stopped at a Seven Eleven, bought a pack of Virginia Slims, and lit one, right there in the store. Sure, she could drive back to Sanford. Dusty wouldn’t even be there. Or she could drive out to the beach somewhere and stay in a hotel for a few days until she pulled herself together. Until she knew what to do.

Chapter 31

At four o’clock, Julian and Dusty entered the Talla Villa through the organic grocery and crossed the first floor and out to the pool where Governor Portage, Cliff, the governor’s security guard told them, was in cabaña number four. Before they

could go it, Cliff patted them down to make sure that neither had brought a weapon, or, the real danger, a tape recorder.

Inside the cabaña, the governor sat wearing the same pinstriped suit he'd donned earlier that day, waiting for them. "Aren't you a little overdressed?" Julian said, raising his eyebrows.

"If I wanted to be seen with you, I'd have invited you back to the restaurant this morning," Portage said. "Sit down. Believe it or not, I have more important things to deal with than a couple of self-serving goons."

"Self-serving? You've got some nerve. Where's my wife?"

"It's not as if I've been holding her hostage all this time."

"Where is she?"

"I sent her home. Getting tired of her. I'm sure you understand."

"Home? To Sanford?"

Portage shrugged. "I really didn't come here to be your marriage counselor." He turned to Julian. "I made a deal with Kathryn for you."

Dusty started, "Kathryn? What, you're on a first name basis? What she's like your best friend, your next mistress?"

Portage ignored him, and handed Julian an envelope. "Her number's in there. She'd like you to come by tomorrow to discuss the specifics. I hope that settles it."

"It does," Julian said.

Dusty looked at Julian. "Settled? Nothing's settled." He turned to Portage, "You ruined my life – and for *what*? You think that this is settled just because you and *Kathryn* dance around and decide to let someone *else* in on your party? What

about all those poor, suffering people out there you purported to *ache* over six months ago? *Oh*, that's right, they can't *vote*."

Portage raised his hand and narrowed his eyes onto Dusty, who had gotten redder with every word and was now sweating. "I'm not surprised that a guy like you would need the facts of life explained to him, spoiled rich kid that you are, but I don't have time."

"Right," Dusty said. "Captain Florida's got to put on his cape and fly off to the next disaster."

Portage leaned into Dusty, so that their faces were very close. "You're already dead," he said. "Stop twitching."

#

The sun dropped behind them as they drove back to Sanford, the day turning pink, the sky then taking on a purplish hue, the moon filling it up with light. Dusty fidgeted in the passenger seat, biting his nails, cracking his knuckles, and inadvertently cussing – emotional aftershocks. After a while, he stopped fidgeting and started, instead, to shake his head, and after a while, he spoke. "It's guys like that who run the world, isn't it? Snot-faced assholes who would rather grind someone's face in the dirt than help him up – Fuckers. Asshole baby fuckers. That guy ruined my whole life. My whole fucking life."

"It's people who let other people ruin their lives – they're the real problems with the world, especially you Americans. It's all this scapegoatism. Is that a word? That's what's wrong with your whole country, if you ask me."

"There's *nothing wrong* with my country! If there is, it's people like Portage

who – ”

“There you go again assigning blame. When are you going to take things into your own hands?”

“Into my own hands?”

“Sure!”

“I’m pretty sure that’s illegal at this point.” He shook his head, held up his hands in frustration. “My own hands.”

The pair rolled on in silence, Julian driving, and Dusty, alternately thinking and trying not to think. After a while, the only thing on his mind was Mona. The fact that she might be home when he got there. He wondered what he would say to her or if they would even talk at all. Maybe they would just fall into each other, Home. But then when he pictured her face, he saw the woman in those pictures. He didn’t know that woman at all.

Julian dropped him off to a dark house, without even pulling up the empty driveway. No Mona, Dusty thought, his heart falling into his stomach. No Mona. He dragged himself up the driveway, and pushed the front door open, a breath of air conditioning welcoming him. The house was a mess, just like he’d left it. It was only after ten, but he hadn’t slept since before Julian knocked on his door the day before, and he was exhausted. He went upstairs and fell into bed. Tomorrow, he thought, my own hands.

It happened overnight. Alshire. The trees bloomed. Perfume spilled from the tiny white flowers; and the trees, the trees in all their budding, splitting, cracking white greeted morning – the watery light. Tucker woke on his makeshift bed on the sofa, a tickle at his nose, smelling it, and sprung up, flinging open the front door and running out into the grove. Blossoms! Millions of tiny white surprises. He ran out into the grove, putting his face into the canopies of several trees, smelling them, their sweet orangy scent. He plucked one, ran back to the house and upstairs to wake Trudy, who sleepily bounded up out of bed and went with him out into the grove.

Blossoms meant oranges, and oranges meant their early-mids season wouldn't be a wash. Tucker and Trudy danced and cheered; Tucker lifted Trudy up, smiling; he let her down and hugged her. They greeted morning this way, the delicate white flowers – the watery light.

Tucker spent the day in the grove, pulling the hose around behind the tractor, slowly irrigating. Now that his oranges were coming, it was time to consider the next step: He would buy a juicer – do it all by hand; not the way they had done it at Florida Pure, hastily mashing the juice away from the oranges, a conveyor belt of efficiency. He would buy quart bottles. He would design a label. Honest Orange. The O for orange would be a sun, bursting with light. On the back, above the nutrition information (all the folic acid, all that Vitamin C), he'd tell the story of his juice – Made without the use – no, without the *exploitation* of migrant labor from oranges grown in a small grove in Frostproof, Florida. Juice made with a conscience. Juice made with love.

With love! The smile that stretched across Tucker's face could not be broken by the element of doubt that still sat like a panic inside him. *And who's gonna buy your juice Tucker? And how you gonna get it to them?* All of those things could be worked out, he was sure. It was time for him to win, there was no question. It *felt* right, like fate or God – like something seriously big.

It was what her mother might have called “a good day.” It was a day full of possibility, of magic. A day when even the things that weighed you down seemed to float off and bother someone else; and Trudy sat, drinking coffee, wondering what to do with it.

She had spent that morning in the grove with Tucker, their faces in the canopies, breathing deep, celebrating. When he took the tractor out, she came inside, because it was noisy and because she needed time alone. Today the nervousness crept up her arms and settled in her shoulders, causing knots and ticks of electric activity. She tried to forget what she was supposed to do. She tried to imagine that today was real – that there was such a thing as hard-earned happiness. She remembered what Luis said. Vulnerable with a capital V. But then so was she, so was everybody.

She thought about geography. Virginia – Accomack in October, the cool costal breeze; the wild horses swimming from island to island, something her mother explained to her once about instinct, urge, necessity. She thought about Macon. A still-hot October, the paper factories that smelled like burnt broccoli, spilling pollution. Of course, she thought, she would have ended up here, in this mess. The

way her mother cared for her lackadaisically, on “good days,” the way her father hadn’t cared for her at all. God damn. Her hand was shaking from too much coffee. She balled it to a fist.

She thought about geography. Florida. The name of the place rolling around inside of her, spreading seeds. It was the wildest place she had ever been - wilder than Texas, with its long empty stretches and Armadillo farms and cattle ranches that cut sometimes right into the roads; it was wilder, even, than the states that fell under the Rocky Mountain ranges and the empty, frozen earth of British Columbia. Florida was wild because it appeared to be contained, under control by developers and government and the people who lived here, but Florida was controlled only by the thick, clenched fist of nature – its quiet, ticking watch. She saw what Florida could do to the abandoned, the discarded. She saw it in Alshire, the rotted wood and rusted metal that composed the house, and she was determined, suddenly, not to be counted among Florida’s ruins. Alshire was a chance for Tucker. It could be a chance for her too.

Trudy spent the rest of the day knocking around the house, thinking of it as *her* house, her *home*. The idea, she was surprised, made her giddy. She would paint and put up curtains. She would help Tucker with his juice. She thought of the sign, If You Lived Here, You’d Be Home Already, and it didn’t make her sick.

Trudy pulled the box of cookbooks that had belonged to Tucker’s grandmother out of the cupboard and spread them out on the table. There was *The Joy of Cooking*, *Betty Crocker’s Good & Easy Cookbook*, *365 Ways to Cook Hamburger*, *The General Food’s Kitchen’s Cookbook*, *The Bisquick Cookbook*, and a

book called simply, *Family Gatherings*, which made Trudy immediately and strangely jealous of Tucker for what must have been a wonderful childhood full of such gatherings around a table with plates full of (she flipped through the pages) roasted lamb with mint jelly, roast turkey with rum-raisin stuffing or chicken hash with mashed turnips, honeyed pumpkin, creamed spinach and onion soubise. Trudy poured over these pages, imagining the way they would make her kitchen smell, the way the steam from the oven would be as much an intoxicating fragrance as orange blossoms.

When she found the perfect recipe, Roasted Hens with Wild Rice and Apple Pilaf, she ran out into the grove to find Tucker. “I figured we’d celebrate tonight,” she said, catching her breath. “We’ll get some wine. I’ll cook a big dinner.”

“No need for you to go to all that trouble. Why don’t we just go out?”

She smiled and cocked her head, pausing to consider this. “I’d rather cook,” she said.

Trudy took the Omni to the Kash & Karry, list in hand. She was excited. She wasn’t sure if she had ever even *seen* a hen, and now she was going to strip two of them of their skins, lay them over nests of pilaf, and baste them in their own glorious juices. In the produce section, she was buying onion, apples and celery when Luis came up behind her, poking her shoulder with a carrot.

Trudy spun around, startled. “What in the hell are you doing here?”

“Same thing you are, I guess. Though my dinner’s not so fancy,” he said, noticing the wine in her basket, and waved a sandwich wrapped in paper. “I was going to call you. I thought maybe you’d like to go get a drink.”

“You know I can’t do that. What would I tell Tucker?”

“Tell him that you have a date. You *are* allowed to date?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“So what are you celebrating, anyway?”

“Who says we’re celebrating?”

“Wine, celery...I know a celebration when I see one.”

“Got the money yet?”

“Almost,” he lied.

“Call me when you do,” she said, “but not before.”

“I don’t know what gave you the idea that you’re in charge here. I’ll call you whenever I want,” Luis yelled out to her, but Trudy had already disappeared past a display of Halloween candy.

Trudy’s pulse jumped. Her face warmed. She had to think of a way out of this.

That night, she made the hens and the complicated rice pilaf that took longer to make than undressing the hens, removing their skins and necks, and cracking each at the breastbone had. She was nervous, unsure of herself. This had seemed like a good idea – cooking, staying. But now, having seen Luis, having been shocked back into their *plan* made her more aware of herself, of her position in all in this; she was split like a hen-half.

The next day, she called Luis and asked him to meet her at the pier. In half an hour the two were standing together in the late-morning humidity – the approaching tropical storm spiking the barometric pressure, causing it to be hotter, the air heavier

than it had been in weeks. It was so hot, in fact, that Luis' sunglasses kept slipping down his nose, which was wet with sweat. "Let's go sit in my car," he suggested, "In the air conditioning."

He started the car and they waited a few minutes in silence while the air conditioning sputtered, coughed and eventually cooled the car. "I wanted to talk about the canker," she said.

"What about it?"

"Maybe there's some other way I can help you, without contaminating Tucker's grove. Maybe Jack Spree..."

"Forget Jack Spree. What are you going to do? Go hook up with him on the side? Besides, I've already considered that."

"Fine. Just promise me that whatever happens, you won't blow my cover."

"Your cover? I thought you were leaving."

"I am. I just don't want him to ever know."

"Right. You're just little Suzie Striptease, American as the atomic bomb."

"He would have asked me to come anyway."

"But you wouldn't have said yes."

"I might have." She shook her head. "I'll never know."

Luis leaned over and smiled at her. "People like you don't belong with people like Tucker Parks, if that's what you're thinking."

The engine's fan kicked on. The air conditioning choked back, losing power. "Just give me the stuff. I'll do it tonight. You'll have the money by then?"

"Yes."

“It’ll probably be late – or early, depending.”

“I’ll wait up.”

Trudy raised an eyebrow.

“It’s not like you would have to leave immediately after you did it. We could make an escape together.”

“Escape being the operative word,” she said, tilting her head, “I’d rather not.”

“Let’s go for a ride,” Luis said, shifting into reverse.

“No.” Trudy opened the door. “I’ve said what I had to say.” Luis pulled the car out anyway, causing the door to swing back towards Trudy. “What in the hell is your problem?” She barked.

“You forgot the canker,” he said, reaching to retrieve it from the glove box.

“I saw your charge today with that pretty girl,” Steven said to Nell as she set down his can of beer.

“Saw him where?”

“Having quite a talk today over by the pier. Looked like jilted lovers!”

“Lovers, huh? Well, I can think of worse things. Can I get you anything tonight, Steven?”

“Applesauce, maybe. I lost another tooth, you know. A molar.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Nell stepped in and seated herself in a two-person booth. She opened her book, which mapped a road trip through the California wine country. “Do you have any Pinot Noir?” she asked the waitress.

“Is that red or white?”

“It’s red.”

“Well, we’ve got red. Maybe that’s got some Pinot Noir in it.”

“Maybe,” Nell nodded, not wanting to embarrass the waitress.

“Do you know what you want yet?”

“Sweetbreads, I think.”

“We don’t have any of those, Mrs. Glass, you know that.”

“Just some chicken, then, sweetie. I don’t care what he does with it.”

Nell turned to her book and pulled out the map, tracing the thin line that drew itself down California with her finger. She was having a harder time picturing the places she read about and wished she could just be there, driving down Route 101 in Mendocino, the top down on her white MG, her husband next to her, quietly taking it in. She ate her meal in silence, picturing it: she and Ralph, big youthful smiles across their faces, the feeling that stretched out into their legs and arms and fingertips said that this could go on forever.

When she was finished eating, Nell was surprised to see the empty plate in front of her. She hadn’t tasted a thing. When she returned home, Nell perked up because her charge was sitting on the front porch, rocking himself on the swing, a bottle of beer in his hand. “Well *hi* there,” she said sunnily, trying. “I meant to tell you that you can use the porch whenever you want.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Care to join me?” He kicked at the six-pack below him with his foot.

“Well, maybe for a minute,” she said, sitting down next to him. He picked a beer up out of the pack and screwed the cap off, handing it to her. “Oh, no thank

you,” she said. “I detest beer. But you know I do have a little wine left over from dinner.” She fished the tiny bottle out of her purse and showed it to him. “I usually don’t drink it all in one sitting,” she said, examining the bottle, “But what the hell?” She unscrewed the cap and took a swig from the bottle’s tiny mouth. “Tough day?” She asked him.

“Tough as any other.”

“When my son was a young man, he had this girlfriend over in Avon. I think the two did more fighting than anything else. She was a really pretty girl, I think that’s why she got to him so much. Half the girls at the high school wanted to go out with him, but he liked that one.” Nell shook her head, smiling. “And she gave him a real tough go of it.”

“Your son that’s in Bermuda?”

“Bermuda? My son’s dead. Almost twenty years now.”

“I thought that – ”

“They were fishing on Lake Okeechobee, he and his dad, and Walter – that was his name, but everybody called him Walt – went to cast out his reel, raised it up high over his head,” she mimicked this, clasping her hands and raising her arms up behind her, “and lightning came right out from nowhere and struck him dead.” She clapped her hands. “Right in front of his father’s own eyes.” Tears dropped from her eyes now, but Nell kept her face composed. “Clear blue sky that day. Blue as you ever get. But it happens, they say. It’s rare, but it happens.” She turned to Luis. “But enough about that.” She looked down to study her bottle. “I think I’ll go in now,” she said, standing. “I hope your love troubles all work out.”

When she was gone, Luis sat on the swing for a long time, rocking back and forth. Love troubles. Everything in the world must stem from love troubles.

Chapter 33

For her last night at Alshire, Trudy bought another bottle of wine and prepared leftovers. She opened the wine and drank while she cooked, preferring the heady, flushed, empty-stomach-drunk feeling to everything else she had felt that day. The canker was surprisingly ugly, and gave the fruit a ruined-looking, rusted quality. Soon, Alshire would be covered in fruit just like it – all for nothing.

All day, she had thought of words like ‘poison’ and ‘disease’, imagining rust spots on her face and on Tucker’s. She thought that she should just come clean and tell him everything. She didn’t need ten grand that bad. She didn’t need anything that bad. But then – maybe this was a sign, a sign telling her to go. It would be easier than staying. Than fessing up. Than putting her fate in someone else’s hands. (Would he forgive her? Hate her? Make her leave anyway?) And then, if she did leave – without the money – she’d have to go back to dancing, waitressing, something – and she couldn’t. She was too tired.

When Tucker joined her, they toasted to the blossoms, to their hard work, and to themselves. Three sips for three toasts. When dinner was ready, they sat next to each other at the round kitchen table, the stove light on, the overhead light out, for ambiance; they ate slowly, enjoying a second night of hen – now juicier, the rice more intense in flavor.

Trudy chewed nervously, taking too long for each bite. In her head, she

searched for conversation, anything to say to him that would make this seem normal, that would take her mind off of what she was going to do. But nothing came to her so she chewed, finishing the last of the wine, blushing when, under the table, they bumped knees.

Then, as immediate as lightning, Tucker took her hand, though she was still holding her fork, and Trudy leaned over their plates and kissed him. After a shock and adrenalin-filled couple of seconds, Tucker stood, and Trudy stood with him, their lips still together, and they embraced. Wild, Tucker backed her against the refrigerator, and they stayed there for months and years, breathlessly kissing, Trudy's legs wrapped around his waist. Eventually, they found their way upstairs and did the thing people do when there are searching, hopelessly, for a better ending.

#

Trudy woke and slid out from under Tucker's arm. She pulled her pants on, slid a tee shirt over her head, and packed her things. She went out to the Omni, put her bags in the trunk and took out the cankerous fruit. It was five a.m. and still dark. The moon was a big round eye, a lonely polka dot, a full belly in the sky. Under it, she traipsed through the grove, rubbing the cankerous orange and leaves against Alshire's leaves. The grove was heavy with orange blossom, and, somehow, with regret. An indigo snake, its electric scales glowing in the moonlight, slid along side of her, and, noticing it, Trudy jumped, scared, and the snake slithered away, also scared.

Trudy hurried through the grove, only half spreading the disease, mostly running, rushed. She was afraid that Tucker would wake up and come looking for

her. When she was more or less finished, done with the job she was paid to do, she tossed the fruit back in the paper bag, got in the Omni and left, dialing Luis's number as she made her way into town.

Luis didn't answer. She drove to the house where he rented a room, and his car wasn't there. Damn him. Trudy drove to the Bel Loc to wait. She ordered a cup of coffee and a piece of scrapple. She let the coffee get cold and didn't touch the scrapple. She was sick with guilt. What she needed to do was leave, to shake this, to start over.

Trudy drove to the Greyhound station in Avon and bought a ticket to Miami because it was the next bus leaving. She left the Omni in the parking lot, unlocked, the keys in the glove compartment. She fought the urge to leave a note.

On Route 27, Trudy slipped out of the grasp of orange groves and into sugar. She thought about all of the snakes that slithered through the long stalks of cane, of all the farmers, all the people whose lives revolved around sweet. The bus drove on, pushing south. Trudy remembered what she had done as if she was watching it unfold in front of her: taking the five grand from Luis, agreeing to go with Tucker, cooking, dreaming, dancing in the grove. Two days ago she thought she could stay, but she had been a wrong. She wasn't meant for staying. She thought about the horses on Chincoteague, about nature and urge. She looked at her hands and thought of Tucker's hands, the sweet way he kissed her...the way he had taken her in and opened himself up to exactly what he got.

But so had she. She had been a fool – spreading the canker against her better judgment just to have Luis skip out on her, skip out on paying her the rest of that ten

grand. If Tucker got exactly what he deserved, than so had she.

Chapter 34

From Tallahassee, Mona had driven all the way down the Gulf Curve of Florida and stopped in St. Pete Beach. She had traveled all that way with Sarasota on her mind – it being the more *luxe* of the two destinations – but the *Sara* part of Sarasota (seeing her name in highway signs, and billboards) caused Mona to dig her nails into the steering wheel rubber, caused her to want to vomit. So she chose St. Pete Beach, tired of driving.

There, she checked into the Tradewinds Beach Resort and spent the extra two hundred bucks a night for an oceanfront room. Inside, she wanted to collapse – her arms and legs tired, her eyes blurry with road. Instead, she made coffee, took off her clothes and stood on the balcony, watching the Gulf of Mexico turn pink from sunset, its tiny waves ripple against the powder-fine beach. She was only on the fifth floor, so when a couple that had been walking along the surf turned around and pointed at her, surprised by her nakedness, she flipped them the bird, took a sip of her coffee and lit a Virginia Slim.

So this is what she had been reduced to. No. This is what she was.

She had the time, on the ride down, to sort some things out. She didn't want to go back to Dusty. She was tired of playing the role of wife, adoring or otherwise. What she really wanted, was to be rich – rich and adored, like a pop star, but not quite so young or so ridiculous. She laughed at herself (the ability to do so, she had always counted as her saving grace) and tossed her cigarette over the balcony, aiming for, but

of course missing, the pointing couple.

But her heart broke. It ached. It burned with rage and sadness and jealousy and embarrassment. Mona clutched her chest. She thought she might die – really die, of being full of shit and bile and muck and dirt and devil blood. She felt as if her whole body was poisoned, her whole life. Even her toes ached from it. She thought about killing herself – about drinking seven or eight white wine spritzers and drowning herself in the hotel bathtub or the hotel pool, or – better, the God damn pink-as-an-Easter-egg Gulf of Mexico.

So, she would kill herself – she *had* to. It didn't fit to be so dark in a world so full of color. It didn't fit that she had one-half of what she wanted, the money, and that she felt worse than ever. God was a cruel motherfucker. He had never let her have she wanted. Mona decided that her last acts in this world would be pleasurable ones. She called down to room service and ordered a stinky cheese plate, escargots, a chocolate soufflé, a bottle of white wine and a bottle of 7-UP. She took a shower, thinking that she better shave her legs – if her body was going to be found and pawed over by a bunch of burly EMT's, it should at least be in its ideal state.

In the shower, Mona cried, eventually having to hold herself against the tiles, blubbering into them, and eventually having to sit down, the water drumming upon her as she hyperventilated. She thought of her lungs filling with water, of her skin turning blue – she thought of being found that way: blue and bloated like a fish – and simply could not stomach the possibility of drowning. She would do it some other way. Out of the shower, Mona put on her robe (the one that Dusty'd given her for her last birthday, the one she'd known his secretary picked out) and opened the door for

the room service cart, tipping the attendant only with a view of her mostly-exposed left breast.

Mona made herself a drink, clicked on the television and ate a piece of stinky cheese.

While Mona was enjoying her life's final meal in St. Petersburg, the governor was preparing for a press conference to announce his engagement to Sara Waters. The mansion's pressroom, anticipating this, was frenzied with lights and cameras and big black microphones with ends that looked like fists. Sara Waters sat with the governor in his office, a four carat diamond weighing on her finger. "When do we go on?" she asked him.

"Eight. Primetime and *in* time for the Eleven o'clock news."

"This still feels a little funny – I never pictured – "

"I know. It's funny the way things work out." He smiled. "But I love you, and so we have to figure that everything else was fate."

"Fate! I never met a man who believed in fate."

"Baby, I believe in a lot of things," he said and scooped her up in his arms.

In twenty minutes, they stood in front of the cameras and announced a December wedding date to the applause of reporters.

Seconds before Ted's image was beamed into her hotel room, Mona began choking on an escargot. Her eyes welled with tears as her body reacted, convulsing, trying to dislodge the snail from her throat. She punched on her stomach, gagging

and turning blue. She realized that she didn't want to ever die – that death was too violent, too physically taxing – and the snail, perhaps sensing this, removed itself from her windpipe, and sailed across the room, landing in a *splunk* across Ted's high cheekbone. Reporters applauded.

Mona saw him, saw Sara, saw the camera catch the glint of her four-carat engagement ring as Ted drew his arm around Sara and Sara rested her head on Ted's shoulder to the press' collective *AWWWW*. Mona's face began to tingle; her insides turned from 'shit to jelly. She picked the wine bottle up by its neck and took a swig. He was really going to marry her – that, that *girl* with breast implants and a degree in *fashion* for Godsakes, and *hair dye* for brains.

Mona began pacing the room, taking swig after swig of wine, getting drunk. She would never be a pop star, and she could not bring herself to commit suicide, so she would have to settle for the tertiary desire of revenge. Mona went through her suitcases, through zippered compartments and Velcroed flaps, ripping clothes from where they'd been hastily stuffed that morning. Finally, she found the envelope containing the pictures the Brazilian had taken just days before – Ted had asked her to destroy them, the lazy bastard, but she couldn't bring herself to do it; she liked the pictures, liked the way she looked in them, the way they made her feel. Now, she liked them for another reason: they would help her destroy Ted Portage.

Still in her robe, Mona went down to the hotel's media room and typed out a lengthy, gut-spilling letter. In it, she described her affair with Portage from the time it began to the time it ended, just nine hours before. The letter included a paragraph depicting the contribution Portage'd received from Bottomless Lake Oranges, the

meeting with Activist Brad, as they called him, and the subsequent fall of Florida Pure; Mona ended that section with the sentence, “The governor believes that the exploitation of migrant labor is the backbone of Florida’s economy – it certainly bankrolls him.” She wrote about the apartment he rented her with taxpayer money, the trips they’d taken with funds funneled from companies like Citra Spree and the five million they’d just collected from Glade’s Development. Then, she went onto the photos, explaining that they were taken as an instrument of blackmail and that, instead of being blackmailed, Portage elected to let Sara Waters, a dyed-blond look-alike, stand in for Mona. “He knew that our relationship implicated his involvement in the collapse of Florida Pure. I am certain that had it not been for my relationship with Ted Portage, my husband’s company would still be around today.” When she finished writing, Mona scanned the pictures into Photoshop, and logged onto the Internet. She created a new e-mail address for herself and hunted down the e-mail addresses of every news outlet she could think of – local, national, international – she didn’t care. She tilted her e-mail “Incriminating Evidence about Florida’s Governor Attached” attached the documents, one at a time, and hit SEND.

Afterwards, she didn’t smile, and she didn’t shake. She felt a headache creeping in at her temples and spreading across her forehead. Her mouth was dry. She went back up to her room, drank a glass of water, and scraped the collapsed chocolate soufflé from its tureen with a spoon. She took two aspirin and fell into bed.

Jack Spree's Citra Spree was a multi-tiered organization. There were the groves he owned, which he leased out to sharecroppers – making money off both the rent for the land and the fruit the land reared. There were the groves he didn't own, but brokered for, paying a small-time farmer for his oranges and then selling them to Bottomless Lake for just a little bit more. Then, there was the labor itself. Citra Spree used private contractors who found the pickers, brought them to the groves and paid them at the end of the day. When Raul was picked up in a parking lot in Intersection City and taken to a grove for work, it was by a labor contractor, the cowboy of the industry.

Citra Spree, along with the many private groves under its umbrella, was Bottomless Lake Oranges' main supplier. If the Lacerdas had researched this – if they had really wanted to hit Bottomless Lake in the jugular – they would have gone after Jack Spree, but it wouldn't have been as easy. Jack Spree was a bulldog. If he had had owned Florida Pure, it sure as hell would still be juicing today, he liked to say through the side of his mouth to anyone who would listen. He couldn't believe how he used to be jealous of Dusty – jealous of how *lucky* he was to have everything laid out for him; his father had done all of the work, Spree knew, and Dusty would get all of the reward. But now Spree knew – he'd come to see – that he was the lucky one. He went to Orlando Prep on scholarship, getting to hang out with all those spoiled rich kids. Kids who took their parents luxury cars out joyriding when they were fourteen. Kids who had permanent dumb, pretty smiles. Kids totally unconcerned with the *real* real world. Jack Spree's fortune stemmed from their

ignorance. He wasn't about to let a bunch of dumb kids inherit the world. He was going to take a piece of it for himself. And so he got close to Dusty, close enough to be a mainstay in the Ruums' household, and he learned everything he could from Edward Ruums.

Edward Ruums' problem, a problem Dusty inherited, was that he didn't see the potential in the immigrant population – hell, the very immigration *laws* were written in their favor. Here were a group of people who wanted to get into this country *so* bad that they would do anything – *anything*, and once they were here, even after they'd seen it for its pitfalls, its impeded freedoms, all its dumb beauty – they would do anything to stay. They would work ten hour days for whatever wages you set. They would keep their mouths shut to violence or slavery because whatever it was they wanted – money, freedom, a bed to sleep in, a woman to love, a house to live in – they always wanted something else more: to stay. Jack Spree cringed when he tried to picture the lives they must have escaped in Mexico, so he didn't picture it very often. Instead, he smiled every time he went to the ATM and threw away his receipt without even looking at it, or ate a great big steak, or climbed into the cool leather luxury of his gigantic tank of a car.

When he thought about Dusty Ruums, all he could do was shake his head. If that guy was smart, he would have kept his big mouth shut. Instead, he went out there night after night, convulsing for the cameras, trying to explain the facts of life to the good people of the news media, and, by extension, the world.

Dusty, of course, had never even *heard* the phrase citrus slavery until he was accused of it. What a joke. What an ironic twist. Jack Spree had practically *invented*

citrus slavery. And here he was, at brunch with the beautiful but icy Kathryn Peters while Dusty Ruums was most likely locked up in his big house all alone, gin-soaked and stuttering.

“I’ll have the crab frittata,” Kathryn told the waitress, handing her the menu. “And a bellini.”

“Better make my drink a little stronger,” he told the waitress. “I’ll have a Bloody Mary.”

“I appreciate your being able to come up here so fast,” Kathryn said to him once the waitress was gone. “Once I saw the news this morning I nearly combusted. That stupid woman. And so I need to make sure, once and for all, that we’re on the up and up. Honestly.”

“To be honest with you, Ms. Peters, I don’t really know. I don’t handle the labor. You know that. I’m not really sure what goes on.”

“In that case I need you to make sure. Because I think that you’re either lying or you’re a fool. Ruums was a fool. And his wife – clearly – has some issues of her own –”

Spree smiled, but was totally unaware of what she was talking about.

“But I am in a position to drop you completely. Do you understand that?” She leaned towards him and moved her wide red lips slowly, “Com-plete-ly.”

“What’s that? How?”

“Never mind how.”

Jack Spree raised his voice. “Who in the hell are you gonna get eight tons of oranges from a year? Or – lemme guess, you’re going out of business too? Some

dumb kids who don't understand the facts of life gonna run orange juice outta the American diet? Come'on Kathryn, that don't sound right."

Kathryn clenched her napkin. "I *said* that I was in a position to drop *you*, not Bottomless Lake."

"You're gonna have to explain this one to me."

"No, Mr. Spree, I am not. You work for me. You are a *supplier* of which, it seems, I have many options. And so, tell me once and for all, are you on the up and up?"

"The up and up? Hell, I don't even know what that is."

"Well then, Mr. Spree," she dropped her napkin on the table and stood up, "I thank you for being honest with me."

"No, wait, Kathryn," Spree said, standing, "I can *get* on the up and up."

Kathryn nodded. "Do it fast. Things are about to get interesting. It'll be every girl for herself out there." Just like that, she turned and walked away.

When she was in her car, Kathryn called her assistant, Sam. "See what you can do about setting up a blood drive for the staff today – something grossly philanthropic. Or go get a bunch of toys or canned goods and set them up in a box by the reception desk." She smiled into her phone. "Make it look like we care."

Jack Spree gulped his drink and ordered another. He ate both his omelet and her crab frittata. He hadn't seen the news and so he had no idea why Kathryn Peters was going on about Dusty Ruums' wife, or why things were about to get 'interesting,' but he did know the only thing he needed to know: he had a lot of cleaning up to do. He made a mental list of sharecroppers, labor contractors, and the residence camp in

Sebring where sixty or so men lived as indentured servants – forced into debt by, well, by him.

He called the foremen in Sebring first, and told them to close up the operation.

“But sir,” one said, “the money they owe us – and, really, where will they go?”

“I’m only concerned with letting those people go and bulldozing their shanties. Forgive all debt and tell them to get the hell out of town.”

“But, sir... Why?” Because Kathryn Peters told him to, and because she was the only game in town.

Chapter 36

When Kathryn got back to Bottomless Lake, the hysteria she predicted was already unfolding. There were news trucks parked in front of the building and on the lawn. The blood center was setting up in the lobby – unfolding collapsible beds and putting up screens for privacy. “Tell them to take down the screens,” Kathryn said to Sam, who was in the lobby, frantic from all the activity. “I want it all to be out in the open. How’d you get them to come out here?”

“I told them we’d get them a hundred units.”

“Log into my email and send a note out to the staff asking them to donate. Tell them that whoever does will get the afternoon off.” Sam nodded and bounced into action.

Kathryn turned her attention to the reporters, which were standing, in all their ticking, heightened, potential energy, on the other side of the glass doors. “Come in,” she said to them, pulling a door open, a gracious hostess. “We’re a little busy here

today, what with the blood drive and all – it's very important to give, especially with the hurricane coming – but I saw the news this morning and I understand why you're here.

“Ms. Peters!” a reporter called, “did you make a two-million dollar campaign contribution to Governor Portage last spring?”

“Yes.”

Another called, “Was that before or after the scandals at Florida Pure?”

“During.”

“Had you ever before made a contribution to Governor Portage?”

“It is important in business to make sure that your values are the same as the elected officials. Bottomless Lake contributes widely to state and local politicians.”

“So that they'll look the other way when it comes to labor?”

“Not at *all*. We are in the process of auditing each of our citrus suppliers in terms of labor. *Any* company found not to be on the up and up will be replaced.”

“And the two million dollars?”

“It is not illegal to give money to the politicians you believe in. I am sure each of your employers does the same, am I right?”

The press was shut up. She thanked them for coming, and got in line to give blood. A few cameras stayed to film this – the bag attached to her arm, her blood spilling into the bag and mixing with saline. Beautiful.

Everything was back to normal at Bottomless Lake in time for Julian's two o'clock appointment, and Julian, who had slept in that day, had not yet seen that his

photos had been made public. For Julian, the world had not changed very much at all – he went into the same steely lobby, spoke to the same lipglossed receptionist, and stood, waiting, just like he had weeks before. After a few minutes of waiting, Kathryn Peters’ assistant came down to greet him, took him upstairs and led him into Kathryn Peters’ office where she sat at her desk, stubbing out a cigarette.

“Thank you, Sam,” she said, smiling at him. “You can go now.”

“Your boy toy?” Julian asked when Sam had gone.

“Sometimes,” she said, wheeling around in her chair to put the ashtray on a table behind her and turning back around to face him. “Now, what can I do for you Mr. Lacerda?”

“Several things, but this won’t be a one-sided arrangement.”

“I imagine it won’t. You’re right; we could use a Latin American imprint. If you had gotten me on a better day, you wouldn’t have had to resort to such extreme measures.”

“So long as everything works out in the end,” Julian said with a shrug and a smile.

“Only nothing’s ended yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you seen the news? Your pictures are famous. Lucky for you Portage got to me before his mistress got to the world.” Now she shrugged. “A deal’s a deal, and you’re right, Bottomless Lake will benefit just as much as your outfit will.” She handed him a folder. “Everything’s there. Our attorney drew up the contracts last night. But you should have gotten yourself a better negotiator. I

would have paid more.”

“Is that so?”

“Women of power terrify Ted Portage. It’s probably why he resorted to this phony girlfriend stunt before coming to me in the first place. He’s a bit of a puppet, if you ask me.” She shrugged playfully.

Julian smiled. “I’m dying of curiosity.”

“Oh no, Mr. Lacerda. I never talk. That’s why I’m sitting here and you’re sitting there.”

“Very well.” Julian took a pen out from his jacket pocket and signed the two copies of the contract in front of him, keeping one, and closing the folder.

“But I like your moxie,” she said. “If you ever wanted to relocate, I’m sure I could find something for you.”

Julian smiled. “I don’t actually like to work, Ms. Peters.”

“No. Well. Some people don’t have to.” She took the folder from him. “I’ll have Sam show you out. He’s gay, you know. In case you’re interested.”

“Thank you,” Julian said, standing up. When they shook hands, her energy gave him a jolt.

Back in his car, Julian sat in the parking lot, listening to the news. *Wow*. After issuing a statement that said, essentially, *Bullshit*, the governor had gone into hiding. Sara Waters had been attacked by reporters early that morning when leaving her apartment to go running. The term the press used for her was “Dummy Bride.” They played a sound bite of her shrieking, *Leave me alone!* There were reporters, apparently, stacked up against the governor’s mansion, Citra Spree, Glades

Development, and the Ruums' residence, the news said. Julian even heard Kathryn Peters' smooth controlled voice saying "Any supplier not on the up and up will be replaced," and he knew immediately what that meant for him.

Julian's passenger door clicked open and Sam slid in next to him. "Sounds like you've had quite the exciting day," Julian said, using his flirt-smile for the first time in a long time.

Chapter 37

All day, Sanford Hills had been abuzz with the news. Neighbors watched through their windows, greedily satisfied with themselves for having a front row seat for the unfolding scandal, for having known Mona Ruums, the tramp, who sent those pictures of herself all over the place – and thank *God* she had (life was just beginning to get boring). But the neighbors were partially annoyed, too – annoyed that news trucks had blocked the whole street, and had trampled their betony plants, their decorative grasses, their stalks of aloe vera.

Inside his house, Dusty sat watching the television. He had slept in and hadn't yet taken a shower. There was nothing to eat, not to mention drink, and he badly wanted to order a pizza, but knew then that he would have to open the door, have to face those swarming vultures, so he sat in the den, his stomach noisy, thinking about pizza, and watched clips from the governor's press conference the night before as they focused in on that poor Sara woman as she leaned her head, smiling, on the governor's shoulder; the graphic they had made for her every time the five-item news cast – Hurricane Maria's approach, Will the fed raise interest rates?, New evidence

linking a poor diet to cancer, and Live broadcasts from The War – looped back into Florida, a veil cropped around her face, the words *Dummy Bride* scrawled underneath, was especially cruel.

Then, the scene would switch and the camera would pan to his front door with reporters speculating that he, Dusty, was the real victim in all of this. “I am standing in front of the home of Dusty Ruums, the former president of Florida Pure,” one said, “Who, you might remember, watched in disgust last spring when his company was targeted by violent protests and eventually folded under the weight of those attacks. One can only image what Mr. Ruums is thinking now...” Wasn’t that just like them – to run from one story to another, labeling one thing as Victim and another as Scoundrel before even taking the time to understand it? It’s a wonder anything productive ever happened in this country, what with the masses glued to this Newsertianment, feigning a *need to know*.

Suddenly, he didn’t care anymore what Portage had done or hadn’t done. It made just as much sense to him that a handful of people got angry about April’s bus accident, that those people sparked what was, in their minds, a revolution, and that, when all was said and done, nothing had changed. And nothing would ever change. Sure, Portage might be run out of office because of this or some other thing, but he would be replaced by someone just as corrupt or, at the very least, corruptible. The important things were not the things that the television screamed *This is important! Watch!* The important things were singular and personal, like love, like family. Portage had taken those away from him too.

“Mr. Ruums,” a reporter called through a bullhorn. “All we want is your

reaction to your wife's letter." Then, a pause. Then, "Mr. Ruums, you deserve to tell your side of the story. *Please.*"

Dusty shook his head, and his heart began, finally, to repair itself. He didn't deserve anything – not Florida Pure, not this house, not even Mona. Dusty shook his head and a smile crept up his lips, surprising him. Now, this second in time, he saw the world as clearly and purely as he ever would. He saw the face of his grief-stricken mother, the hands of his work-obsessed father, his grandfather's yellowed cigarette-grin, and Henry Sanford's will (just try this one more thing).

He saw the entire state of Florida, its contradictions, then the whole of the United States, then the world – that everyone, everywhere is trying and failing, and that they do it anyway, over and over, grasping on to little successes, propelled not by money but by *survival*.

Dusty let the breath out of him. Exhausted, he picked up the phone dialed the police, asking that they please remove those asshole reporters from his front lawn. Then, he ordered a pizza.

Chapter 38

Ted Portage was lucky. During any other time, the news of a public official lying as he had lied, caught in a love triangle, and exposed via salacious pictures would have set the jaws of his constituency, who would have strung up his noose, however temporarily, at the gallows. But that afternoon, Hurricane Maria had been upgraded to a category three; the Florida Keys were under a mandatory evacuation as were the beaches and barrier islands of Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach and St.

Lucie counties. No one knew exactly where Maria was going to hit, just *that* she was going to hit, and the grey anticipation loomed over Florida, the humidity spiked, the October air once again tropical, spongy, gross.

Northbound tolls had been lifted on the turnpike, toll collectors standing in front of their booths, waving big orange flags that seemed to say, *get the hell out of here*. In the next couple of hours, home improvement stores up and down the peninsula would sell out of plywood, generators, batteries and radios; people would flock to supermarkets for canned goods and equal parts beer and bottled water. Gas stations would run out of Regular, Mid-Grade and cigarettes. Nobody had time to worry about the governor or some fallen orange juice empire. Sure, it sounded awful, but the world was full of things that sounded awful.

And so after a morning in hiding, Ted Portage went along with the business of the state, declaring a State of Emergency and releasing a recorded speech, asking Floridians to abide by the evacuations and employers to give their employees the rest of the day off to prepare. He loved how easy it was to seem like a good and caring leader in times of crisis. The best thing was that Sara had stayed by his side the whole time, helping him the way a politician's wife should help, doing the things a politicians wife should do, like looking gorgeous and smiling through anything.

In Sebring, there was mayhem. The sixty-five men who had been evicted from their homes and freed of debt bondage wandered the small rural roads, no longer sure about the world or their place in it. First, they were ecstatic, hugging each other, avoiding the eyes of their captors as if fearing the punch line, or at very least, the

punch. Scores of them walked the streets, penniless refugees, unaware of the coming hurricane, or much else.

Chapter 39

Tucker had spent the day heavy with grief and confusion. The police had found his car at the bus station, but there was no sign of Trudy, no word from her. She had left. Though there was a part of him that always expected this, the back-of-his-mind part of him, the part a person had to ignore if he was ever going to do anything or love anyone, most of him felt torn, cheated, impossibly empty. The worst part was, he couldn't shake it – couldn't understand – and so he repeated their actions over and over in his head, looking for a clue, for a hint that might tell him why she had gone, what he had done to make her leave.

He had awakened that morning with such excitement, such weightless happiness. He had never experienced anything like it, and now he knew he never would. He was a fool among fools – the way he called out for her, racing down the stairs in his underwear, tipping his head into the kitchen, and then swinging the front door open. “Trudy!” he called out into the bug-music morning, but the house was empty; she wasn't there.

He drove to Cocoa Beach looking for her – to her pink apartment building, to the Venus Trap, but they were as empty of her as he was. It seemed the entire world was empty, drained of its color.

As luck would have it, on his way back to Frostproof, Tucker got stuck in evacuation traffic – too many people traveling west on the narrow Route 60 from

Vero Beach – so he had to inch past the scenes he once blew by with her next to him, back when everything was in front of him, and the future was a tightly held secret. Now, the pain caught in his throat. But, he thought, as he looked out the window and caught the eyes of an old man in a beat-up Chevy who sat along side him in the traffic, he wouldn't trade the experience for anything.

In Miami, Trudy had bought a car at one of the chop shops near the airport, using what little Spanish she picked up in Texas to negotiate. She was going to drive down to the Keys, just to see them – the miles of highway flanked by water, the blue-green dream she'd been having since she read about the Keys in a magazine – but by that time they were already evacuating tourists, and the news of the traffic crawling up the skinny island extension of Route 1 was enough to keep her away.

She considered it fate, and got on the turnpike, taking advantage of the free tolls. Thousands were already leaving to escape Maria, and she was leaving to escape Florida. For good.

But something happened on her way up, out of the state. She wanted to blame it on the hurricane's heavy air, which made her feel arthritic, old, tired of sitting behind the wheel of a car, lost. She wanted to blame it on the traffic, which made her impatient, antsy, and bored. She tried, even, to blame it on her conscience, which said over and over that she owed Tucker an explanation. But it wasn't any of these things. It was Florida – its patchwork of God and Godlessness, its places of sheer beauty that were almost always followed by utter kitsch and trash – the swampy gator parks, the endless stretches of trailer parks bordering endless stretches of gated,

waterfront communities, the overuse of the color pink and the word *glades*, the billboards advertising places like Sea World and Disney World, and Holy Land, and everything else that invaded the marshy middle ground of the state that might one day collapse in on itself: plastic pink flamingos, coin laundries and everything-for-a-dollar shops slipping, sliding, surrendering to the earth the way she imagined garbage does.

And then she realized it, the moment of epiphany striking her just as she hit the exit for Yeehaw Junction – She loved Florida. She loved its kitsch, she loved its trash, she loved that everything, in one way or another, looked like a theme park – Art Deco Land, Space Land, or Gated Community Land. She loved the light and darkness of it. She loved the people: the people who honestly couldn't figure out a ballot if they tried, the hopelessly middle-aged who wore clothes obviously too tight, too small, too young for them, the immigrants who lived fifteen to an apartment, the waitresses who wore cigarettes behind their ears, the surf fisherman who ruined the beach for everyone else, the shark fishermen, who ruined the ocean, the politicians who ruined the wildlife, and the wildlife itself, that hung on no matter what. But most of all, Trudy loved Tucker. She loved him. She couldn't say how or why, but that he was a part of her, a long-missing link. She took the exit for Yeehaw Junction and made her way back into the state's agrarian middle lands, back to what she knew.

She was sitting on the front porch when Tucker got home. She stood, and he walked slowly to her, his knees buckling slightly, his body weak with surprise. He climbed the stairs, not blinking, but staring at her face, trying to figure out if she was

real or a traffic-weary mirage. She put her arms around him, buried her face in his neck, in the smell of him, and cried.

Later, she told him. She sat him down at the kitchen table, the late-afternoon light just beginning to throw shadows against the floor, the cabinets, their faces. She told him about Luis and Arturo, the money she made and didn't made. She told him about the canker: that she couldn't even say now why she did it, because she didn't have to and she didn't want to, but she did it, adhering to the plan because she felt that she should, because she always assumed that she didn't have a role in the things that happened – that she always thought fate took care of things and she realized now that it didn't.

Tucker was dumbfounded. His mouth hung open, his eyes starred at his lap. Of course, he wanted to wreck things. He thought he should overturn the table and shake his fists at her. He thought he should dig up his trees, or rip the leaves from their limbs. He thought he should call the police and have her arrested. But he just sat there, slack jawed and drooling.

After what seemed like a decade of silence, Trucker went out into the grove with his tractor, pulling the hose behind him, and washed water over the trees, as if the thing she had done could be reversed. He prayed, using the words he could remember, and even combining prayers with psalms and the words of John Lennon solos when he couldn't think of anything else. Nothing in life made sense. Nothing fit. Canker. They'd burn the whole place down. He'd have to start from scratch. No Honest Orange. No cover of *Time*. No Tucker Parks beating the unfair system. That was why the system was unfair, it could not be beaten.

Chapter 40

Friday night, the winds came as predicted. Hurricane Maria, a strong category two, washed up against Palm Beach, knocking out power, pulling down large, weak-rooted banyan trees, and tearing tops off of palm trees, tossing them across lawns and streets, and flooding Ocean Boulevard, the water eking ever so close to gilded beach-front mansions. Maria came slowly, tossing the ancient vines of the Loxahatchee Strand like hair under a frantic a blow dryer. She caused white-capped swells on Lake Okeechobee, and capsized a motor boat. She flattened cane fields, tore down a fence at Gatorama, causing Bertha, the oldest, to escape. She tossed an old, dilapidated house into Lake Istokpoga. She blew into Sebring, picking up the wood and particleboard wreckage from the labor camp that Jack Spree had had demolished earlier that day, tossing the wood through windows, killing a woman as she stood out her window, watching the rain whip around in circles. She blew into Avon Park, Frostproof, Lake Wales and Winter Haven, causing fruit trees to shake their bushy heads, citrus to break free and toss around in the wind. She stalled out in Winter Haven, dumping ten inches of rain, swelling the lakes and flooding muddy rural roads and retirement village streets. She washed north, up past Citrus Tower and the Magic Kingdom, up into Clermont and Apopka, turning east, forcing her way back to the Atlantic through Seminole County, whipping through Sanford Hills, and Henry Sanford's now-ancient last try.

Ted Portage sat in front of his television in the mansion's residential quarters – his pants around his ankles, Sara's face in his lap – watching a windblown, rain-soaked reporter in Palm Beach County. "God damned category two," he growled.

“We need at least a category three to get us out of this mess.” Sara looked up at him and touched his face lovingly, supportively. “Keep going,” he said.

His power out, Dusty searched through his closet with a flashlight, pulling shoeboxes full of pictures down from where Mona had put them. He had been packing, tossing only his favorite sneakers, his favorite jeans, sweaters and tee shirts into a duffle bag, and those boxes had just been sitting there, watching him, begging to be touched. Here was the evidence of their life together: proof that he had, once, been connected to another person, that he had, once, been loved. He sat on the floor with them, and let the pictures spill out around him. There they were in Mexico during his thirtieth birthday, suntanned and tacky, wearing big straw hats and floral rayon shirts. Smiling. A Christmas where every gift was a clue to the *real* gift, a cruise to Alaska: Mona, making a face, holding a miniature plastic oil rig. Mona, pretending to be asleep, her lips curled at the ends, smiling. Dusty at the wheel of his blue Ford F250 when it was brand-spanking new. Mona in the kitchen on Thanksgiving, a glass of pink wine in one hand, an electric knife in the other. Dusty carving the turkey. Mona at the top of a ski slope. Mona at the bottom of a ski slope. Dusty on the ground, tangled with poles and skis. Dusty laughed. He was sure he’d die that day, sure he’d freeze to death on the side of that tiny Pennsylvania mountain.

Dusty choked on his laughter and dumped out another box; these were pictures of his family, pictures of him and Nolan as kids in front of birthday cakes and under Christmas trees, dopily smiling, looking eerily alike. There were pictures of their mother with her cynical eyes and weary smile. Pictures of his father and his

grandfather, their arms around each other, standing in front of their groves, Henry Sanford's groves. Dusty's groves. His stinking birthright.

Dusty left the pictures where they were and continued packing. His plan was that he didn't have one – that was the point. He was too old to go off and find himself, so he pretended that he wasn't going to look. He was through with dark corners. He wanted to go somewhere bright.

He had been at the bank early that day, facing them finally, and picked up the deed to his house and liquidated his accounts. He had roughly a million and a half dollars in cash. That was it. He took a million of it and put it in a garbage bag, and put that in the freezer. He would use the rest to travel.

There was so much news that afternoon, that only WYZ TV out of Orlando picked up on the story of the displaced migrants. At least a hundred of them – wandering around Sebring, aimless. A helicopter picked up aerial footage of the men, tattered brown spots on the landscape, and the bulldozers that tore at their homes less than a mile away, but reporters did not make the connection between the two anomalies.

Raul, however, did. He saw the men on television and knew *what* there were, where they had come from. He biked to his church and spoke to his pastor. Together, they drove the church's van down to Sebring and spoke to the men. It took seven trips, back and forth from Intersection City to Sebring, loading the men in the van and bringing them to the church. By the time they had finished, the rains had already come, and the gusts were just beginning. The men packed into the small

church, sleeping in pews, safe, while Hurricane Maria screamed and wailed.

Julian spent the hurricane holed up in a hotel room with Sam. He had gotten some bad news about his father that morning and told himself that he was using the extra time in Florida to work things out. Together, the two of them barely noticed the hurricane – the ripping wind, the spilling rain, the flickering lights.

When the hurricane hit, Trudy was making grilled cheese sandwiches, one for her and one for Tucker. They sat across from each other while they ate, the wind rattling the windows of the old, splintery house; the power clicking off early. He hadn't spoken to her since she told him. He wasn't sure how. He wasn't sure anymore if he knew any words. But they went to bed together, exhausted from the heft of the day, and though Tucker didn't speak to her, he scooped her up from behind, pulling her into his gut.

Outside, canker spores smaller than the finest specs of salt were lifted and tossed in the circular winds of Hurricane Maria.

In Frostproof, Nell Glass curled up with a book and a flashlight. Her muscles ached from the work she had done that day – collapsing the shutters against every window on the house's south and east sides. A fine time for her charge to leave, she thought. An old woman should never be stuck in such a position to have to do manual labor, all by herself.

She had gone to look for Steven, but he hadn't been in front of the Bel Loc or

the coin laundry. He hadn't been under the stairs of the church. At home, now, warm under a blanket, she sent a little prayer up for him: Dear God, please take care of us, please take care of Steven.

Tonight she was in Switzerland, a place that never got hit by hurricanes. In a shop, she bought a carved wooden walking stick and an expensive bar of chocolate while Ralph purchased tickets for the Alpine lift. They were cold in the mountains, but it was a wonderful, refreshing kind of cold, and Ralph commented sweetly on her apple-red cheeks. It was like a dream – rising up above the Alps, the sharp parts of the earth reaching up towards them, she and Ralph humming “The Hills are Alive.”

Chapter 41

Governor Portage had been right. It was going to take more than a Category 2 hurricane to erase the memory of his Dummy Bride from the minds of the local media and their bored cable counterparts. Portage sat in his kitchen, eating breakfast and watching TV as one cable talking head said, “Still no word from Florida’s governor since Hurrican Maria passed, leaving millions of dollars worth of damage where it made landfall in Palm Beach Country, and knocking out power for a million Florida Power & Light customers, and the question remains: will the governor surface to help his wind-scared state?”

His advisors had already told him: enough was enough. It was be better for him, they said, to come out and show strong leadership than to cower in his dark apartment with that bimbo who, they were sure, would no longer play as well in the polls. The state needed him, and if not him, somebody else would have to step up and

take charge; he would have to resign. Resign? It never, not in a million years, would have occurred to him to give up over this – this *scandal*. “But I do still have a chance, don’t I? I do still have a political future?” It would take a small miracle, they said, but small miracles happen in politics everyday.

And so Portage prepared himself for what he had to do. He was going to fly to Palm Beach to survey the damage and to have a press conference with a spokesperson from Florida Power & Light. He was going to, as they say in politics, “Get down with the people.” He would be photographed picking up tree limbs, during which he would look up, smile, and encourage people to help their fellow Floridians. “The only way we can get through this,” he would say, “is by reaching out to our neighbors, and lending a helping hand.” Then, he would flash that killer smile he was known for, and if the reporters wanted to know anything about Mona, Sara or Florida Pure, he would express a subtle outrage, saying that he was *sure* there were more important things to worry about in this time of crisis.

In This Time of Crisis. Those were the words that would lead him out of this mess. Hell, maybe he could even get Florida Power & Light to delay putting the lights back on. Maybe he could stop the flow of relief money – keeping the displaced eating from Red Cross Styrofoam and living in tents long enough to blur pre-Maria recollections. He would smile with sincerity. He would say he is doing all he can do. And soon, this Mona/Sara/Florida Pure thing would disappear.

It wasn’t until after Portage landed on the airstrip in West Palm Beach that he knew he was wrong. Reporters rushed at him with questions concerning Mona and her husband, that idiot, Dusty Ruums. All around them were flattened trees and

swampy, semi-flooded lawns and all the reporters wanted to know about was his Dummy Bride and what they seemed to be calling the Florida Pure Scandal. There were too many of them to smugly shrug off. The story was too real, too important – more important than flattened trees and darkened houses; more important than the blackened stop lights across the state that were causing an average of one accident per intersection every fifteen minutes. There wasn't any time to think this through. He simply had to go with his gut. "Yes, I had an affair with Mona Ruums," he said, walking through the sea of reporters, "But no, I didn't do any of those horrible things she's accused me of. She's angry and jealous, and I am deeply sorry if I caused her any pain. What? No. The state has bigger problems than her half-brained accusations."

And this was true, but aside from the cleanup, the trips to Publix and Home Depot for food and supplies, the people of Florida also didn't have much to do *but* talk about the governor. Even the man selling generators out of the back of his truck for a thousand bucks a pop on the corner of Andrews Avenue and PGA Boulevard was talking about the governor. "Sounds like the guy's been paid off by everybody but *me*," he'd say to anyone who'd listen, just to give him something to do while he took advantage of the situation, price gouging out in the sun. "You gonna vote for that guy if he runs again? Hell, I wouldn't vote him to head up *garbage* collection, much less run the state. Who the hell is the guy anyway?"

Neighbors, taking a break from reaching out to each other, swapped banter about the governor. "Soon as we get power I'm gonna look up those pictures up on the internet. I hear they're pretty R-rated."

“R? Try NC-17, I’ve seen them.”

“Maybe Portage should pull a John Bobbit, go into porn after he’s run out of the state.”

“Maybe Mona Ruums should have pulled an *Elana* Bobbit.” And laughter would break out between the two of them, over the fallen fence they were hammering back into the ground.

Chapter 42

In orange country, there were real problems. The first estimates were that the hurricane had shaken at least forty percent of the fruit from the trees, and small growers everywhere were panicking; they would need to take out mortgages against their land in order to stay afloat this season. For some growers, this would be the third year in a row they had had to do this, hurricane season becoming longer and more intense every year for the past few years.

In Frostproof, Jack Spree was nervous, not about money, but about having enough oranges to supply Bottomless Lake. Kathryn Peters *had* said she had another large-scale supplier, and if he couldn’t furnish enough oranges to meet her demand, he might fall from her favor all together, no longer being Bottomless Lake’s largest supplier, no longer maintaining a lock on the industry. There was a way out of this – there was a way out of everything – he just had to figure out what it was.

Just two miles away, Tucker was walking through his own mess while Trudy stood at the stove, boiling a pot of water for instant coffee. The good thing was that Tucker didn’t have any fruit to loose, and so Alshire, while its leaves did litter the

narrow pathways, appeared to have been spared. The key word, Tucker thought, was “appeared,” and the plan he came up with, out there in that wasted, sun-filled grove was nothing he was proud of. But he was a good man, at least he had been all his life, and so it was time for him to do something rotten.

He came back inside, put a hand on Trudy’s shoulder, and spoke to her for the first time in 36 hours. “I have an idea,” he said, “and I want to know what you think of it.” They sat at the table with their coffee, Trudy stirring sugar into hers while Tucker spoke. “I’m going to call Jack Spree, and offer to sell. Whatever he gives me will be more than we have now, it’ll certainly be more than what we’ll have once the canker is discovered.”

Trudy looked down into her cup. “I’m sorry that you have to do this. I’m sorry that I – caused it. I’m –”

Tucker put his hand on hers to stop her. “Who knows if it would have worked out anyway? It was a dumb idea – a long shot. Honest Orange,” he gaffed, “Forget it.”

“I love you,” she said, the words leaving her mouth when she could no longer hold them in.

And he reached over the table head first, and found her lips. It was a sweet, sad, coffee-flavored kiss, after which he whispered everything he’d ever wanted to tell her.

Tucker dialed Jack Spree. It was a quick conversation, full of business and numbers. “How much fruit you loose?”

“Not a piece, don’t have any yet,” Tucker said, faking confidence, adopting Spree’s vernacular for the conversation. “Just bloomed a week ago. Got leaves everywhere but everything else still looks good.”

“How much you asking?”

“Well, you know I paid four-seventy-five, but I’ll take less than that.”

“You bet you’ll take less than that, I’d be doing you a favor.”

“You certainly would be, Mr. Spree.”

“Why don’t I come out and inspect it then? I could be there in half an hour.”

“OK,” Tucker said, suddenly worried.

But Tucker didn’t have any time to be worried. Jack Spree showed up in fifteen minutes, his checkbook sticking out of his back pocket. Together, they toured the grove, Spree reaching into the canopies, grabbing at the trunks and shaking; Spree kicking at the dirt, saying “Good dirt.”

“I’ll give you three-eighty-five,” Spree said, finally, the two emerging from the grove and standing in the girthy shade of the gumbo limbo.

“I’ll take it,” Tucker said, shaking his hand, squinting, the sun in his face.

“What’d I tell ya, boy? I told ya I’d be buying this place out from under you someday.”

“I guess you were right, Mr. Spree,” Tucker said, accepting the check.

Jack Spree drove back to his office on a high and with an idea. That grove was worth twice as much as he paid for it, especially now that it hadn’t lost any fruit, but men like Tucker Parks never saw things that way. Men like Tucker Parks got

scared too easily, and there were men like Tucker Parks throughout orange country, feeling crushed now under the weight of their lost fruit, and he, Jack Spree, would rescue them all.

Spree was quick to the phone, dialing anyone he'd ever brokered for, offering his assistance, saying, over and over all afternoon, "I'd like to offer my financial support. I'd like to buy you out of that grove and set you free of all those tiny little burdens. I know, I know," he would smile into the phone. "Who would have ever guessed it would come to this?"

By the end of the day, Spree had dumped 70% of his capital into orange groves as far south as Sebring and as far north as Sanford, buying up all those old Ruums family oranges (my, how things had changed). But this was an investment. One that would pay off this year and every year when he'd have more than enough oranges to sell Bottomless Lake. Hell, maybe one day he'd buy the company. He'd put on his business card, Emperor of Oranges.

Tucker wasn't even that heartbroken. He was even a little relieved. A little thrilled. Now, more than ever, his life spread out before him, a series of possibilities. He had the girl of his dreams, and some cash to spend on her. He didn't know where they were going to go or what they would do when they got there and he didn't care. He already felt like a part of his life was decided, fixed, and everything else was a welcome mystery.

Chapter 43

It took nearly a month for the first of the canker to be discovered, and when it was, it was discovered in Frostproof, in one of Jack Spree's groves – a migrant worker calling it to the attention of a foreman – the tarnished-looking fruit, the rusted leaves. It was discovered again in a lemon grove in Lake Wales, again in Haines City, again in St. Cloud, again in Sanford. Suddenly, there were too many cases to report. Canker, it seemed, was everywhere.

It was all-too-clear what had happened: the footprint of canker followed Hurricane Nancy's trajectory exactly – the canker had been in one, maybe two places, and now canker was everywhere. There was only one thing to do, and Governor Portage, enjoying the knowledge that this spectacle would finally be the thing to quiet the jokes and speculation about him, ordered the Department of Agriculture to immediately burn the surrounding and infected groves. This meant burning 75% of the groves in the east, missing only a smattering of groves to the far south as well as the prized table fruit of Indian River County. Everything else was Crème Brûlée.

They burned everything on the same day, starting in Sebring, Avon Park, and Frostproof, then up into Winter Haven, Haines City and east, following the path of Hurricane Nancy, up into St. Cloud, Winter Springs and Sanford. In Frostproof, at Alshire, the border of melaleuca kept the heat off of Lake Reedy, and the groves burned nicely, the purple plume that rose up above the town could be seen as far east as Melbourne, as far south as Alligator Alley. Then, a squall came up out of nowhere, capsizing a pontoon boat on Lake Okeechobee, and blowing up through Sebring, Avon Park and Frostproof, throwing the fires into the tall prickly melaleuca,

across the swampy grasses of Reedy Lake, and into the town, the fires easily taking its colorless strip of buildings, including the Bel Loc, which was forced to close that day, and the used book store, its dusty paperbacks providing stinky kindling.

The fires took four homes of Reedy Lake Drive; too, including Nell Glass' which, still locked up tight with hurricane shutters a whole month after the storm, was like a timber box. The fire ate it ravenously – barely even tasting the yellowed draperies, the shag area rugs, the door knobs once touched by Ralph, the sheets that once cooled Walt's skin, the house that still contained their DNA, their lives locked up in there, the stacks of books she used to take her mind off of them and keep them living at the same time, the rotted food in the refrigerator – all gone. The body of the old lady, Nell Glass, resting on the couch, a book over her face, a flashlight next to her, her eyes very nearly consumed by the process – no spirit left in them. All of the evidence that they had once lived, had a home, a purpose, and strength, and intelligence and humor and guilt and doubt and sorrow and love was all eaten by that fire – those *fires*. But it didn't matter.

Jack Spree was pissing nails. A kidney stone, to be exact. Of course, he *would* piss fire on the very day his life was being ruined by it. And the kicker was that he had called the governor and he'd *begged* him not to do it. It was so *stupid* to burn three quarters of the citrus in the east because of some "Containment Program." What did they think they were *containing*? It was out, it was there, there was nothing left to contain. Spree had tried to explain this to the dolt, the governor. But he just wouldn't have it. I'm sorry, the governor said, but we have to do what's best for the

state, we have to think about the greater good.

The greater good my ass! He wanted to kick and scream, and pull the governor by the hair. If it wasn't clear to everyone in the free and intelligent world what the governor was up to, well, it was clear to him. "Governor Portage! Governor Portage!" Those arrogant little television reporters would yell, "How is the state going to overcome such a huge and widespread disaster?" And then Portage would smile, that sick sniveling little smile, and he would answer, "Time and money," as if that was the answer to everything.

Oh! Jack Spree was disgusted by it. It wasn't *his* time, it wasn't *his* money. That little snot of a man that should never have been in office in the first place. That little snot of a snot. Jack Spree grimaced and fell over. The cool of the bathroom tile felt good against his face. Oh agony. Oh everything was wrecked.

Chapter 44

A week before Hurricane Maria beat against the American peninsula, Geras Lacerda succumbed to his cancer. His wife had called their middle child back home two weeks before this, wanting to keep the others in the dark for as long as possible while they made some arrangements. She told Arturo that Geras hadn't wanted Julian, who was clearly a homosexual, to inherit anything from his estate, and that she didn't want Luis, the son of their maid, to inherit anything either. She made Arturo swear to keep the news of their father's death to himself, and for a while, he did.

But when Luis needed the rest of the money to pay that woman off, Arturo

knew he had to come clean – to an extent. “There is no money,” Arturo said to him one night, the two brothers speaking for the first time in what seemed like years but was really only weeks.

“What do you mean ‘there is no money’?”

“Just like that, it happened. We were too late.”

“But she’s already done it. The canker. It’s already spread.”

There was silence for a long while, Arturo considering this. “It’s too late to change that. It’s too bad.”

“So what are you doing down there?”

The weight of their money was on him – his mother’s desire to keep Luis and Julian out of it for good. Arturo had a family – a wife, a daughter, and his mother was there somewhere in the house, listening; he could smell her. “He’d dead, Luis.”

“Where is Julian, is he there? Why didn’t you call me?”

“There was no point. We’re selling the estate. There’s nothing.”

“*Nothing!* Well what in the hell am I supposed to do?”

“You have a little money of your own. Do something with it, start something.”

“*Start* something, are you out of your mind? I just *finished* something.”

Then, Luis doubled back, got the gist of what is going on. “I’m flying into Rio tomorrow. Meet me somewhere.”

“I can’t.”

“Meet me somewhere!”

When they got off the phone, Luis called Julian and left another message.

Call me, it said, all the urgency of the situation caught in the tenor of his throat, in the nowhere of Julian's voicemail box. And in Rio, Arturo never met him. Instead, he left a note and a check for fifteen thousand dollars in an envelope for him at the Hotel Rio. *All I could get my hands on*, it said, along with the truth: *You have to understand, I have Nia and Little Jo. I have to go along with what she wants, for their sake.* Angry and confused, Luis went into the hotel bar, called Julian, and left another, longer, message.

He had no idea what to do, no vision of his place in the world, which seemed empty and meaningless – a world full of heartless, soulless bodies that came and went with as much intension as the pawns on a chess board. So this was the rotten, underside of life. He thought he had seen it before. He pictured Walt Glass, fishing with his father on Lake Okeechobee, lifting his rod high up above his head, ready to cast.

Although Florida was out of oranges, Bottomless Lake was not out of juice. The deal Kathryn Peters established between Julian Lacerda and his family's company had very nearly fallen through, Kathryn coming in between them to play negotiator after a death and subsequent inheritance wrangle, which let her keep Julian Lacerda in Florida and on her payroll, and kept the oranges rolling in.

Chapter 45

Before Dusty left Florida, he had an outstanding debt to repay. He went to the church he had seen on TV – the one that had sheltered all those displaced migrants during the storm and sat out in the parking lot, his truck idling, trying to get up the

nerve to go in. As luck would have it – and there was, he decided, a considerable amount of luck in this world, just floating around, waiting to be found and lost – a man passed him on his bike, and turned to look suspiciously at him. “Hey,” Dusty said to him, climbing out of his truck. “You speak English?” The man shook his head, but this didn’t deter Dusty, who kept moving towards him. “Here,” Dusty handed the man an envelope inside of which was the signed deed to his house and a key. “House,” he said, slow and loud. “*Mi Casa*,” he pointed to himself. “*Su Casa*,” he pointed to the man, who nodded and accepted the envelope.

That night, Raul, along with his wife and daughter, the family they’d been sharing the hotel with, and the twenty men from Jack Spree’s labor camp they could get to come with them, descended upon 201 Sanford Hills Drive. Raul turned the key and pushed the heavy door into the cool of the air conditioning, which Dusty ran year-round. They walked into the house, wide-eyed, over the faux hardwood floors and into the living room where they sat on the leather furniture, laughing, touching its skin-webbed smoothness; they walked into the kitchen, opening the refrigerator just to see what was inside: catsup, chicken, and oranges; they walked upstairs and into the bathrooms, climbing into Jacuzzi tubs and shower stalls, laughing; they laid down on the beds, peeling the covers back and putting their faces against the unbelievably soft sheets, smiling at one another, knowing that they, in a way, had earned this.

It wasn’t until late that night when, hungry, Raul descended the stairs and opened the freezer, hoping to find some kind of ice cream. What he found instead would buy all the ice cream a man could ever want. It was still a month away, but

Christmas had come early.

To celebrate, Raul decorated the house, pissing off the wealthy suburbanites of Sanford Hills Drive, when he strung up musical lights, inflated musical Santa's, rolled white, foamy, look-a-like snow out on the lawn, and hung a lighted sign over the roof that read, *Feliz Navidad*.

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