

A man and a woman are shown from behind, embracing in a field of tall grass. The man is wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt, and the woman is wearing a floral dress. The sky is a deep blue with white clouds, and a bird is flying in the upper left. The title 'MAGA Country' is overlaid on the sky.

MAGA Country

*a novella by
Jack Hamerstone*

THE WORLD'S FIRST MAGA NOVEL

A BAND OF BROTHERS
PROUD DEPLORABLES
AND PATRIOTIC FRIENDS
FACE AN AVALANCHE
OF NEW CHALLENGES.

THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE OF ALL?
MAKING ENOUGH POPCORN.

"This smart novel sets a high bar
for conservative storytelling
in the MAGA era, indeed, it's a
long-over-due, refreshing break
from doomsday non-fiction
and incessant political chatter."

- *Books Among Friends*

ENJOY THE SHOW.

Q

WWGIWGA

Author-Direct Edition

MAGA COUNTRY

Jack Hamerstone

FUGITIVE POETS PRESS
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Fugitive Poets Press Greensboro, NC

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MAGA
Country

-for Every Patriot Out There

Just gimme a big hug,
we'll both feel a ton better.

- *Lorie Denison*

PREFACE

Welcome to MAGA Country, where Patriots are easy to find. They are working hard, growing families, and partying, caught up in daily routines beyond the realm of politics, too busy, usually, to pay attention to the insanity of D.C. bobbleheads.

But they did pay attention in 2016. These are the people who voted for Donald J. Trump in the hope that he might be able to fix some of the intractable problems plaguing the federal bureaucracy, or, if not fix them, wreck the establishment. In 2016, these freedom lovers woke up.

Then along came Q, that mysterious entity on 8chan who explained the root causes of the corruption and evil that voters in MAGA Country knew existed. They just didn't know how bad it really was. Nor did they feel like anyone had Trump's back.

Upon learning that a group of Patriots inside the system had a "plan," THE PLAN, to bring down the clowns and destroy the Deep State, the Smelly Deplorables in "Walmartland" awakened to new possibilities for America. They found the cause they'd been looking for for decades. They found a use for their anger and frustration. They could join the cause, and turn their disgust into something positive, something visionary: a renewed America, an America purged of political corruption, shadowy power players and evil puppetmasters.

This novella was written for those Patriots. These are the people I live around. I am one of them. I know them well.

I wanted to capture the character, grace, beauty and passion of their lives, complete with their faults, struggles, and misgivings.

This novella will be called political, but politics is only part of the story. The bigger story is an American tapestry about life in a small town, friendship, marriage, family and patriotism. The values that make America great. The kind of life that adapts and endures, even when challenged by outside forces.

This is the story of Patriots who decided to "get into the fight" to save America. The silent majority has found their voice, and it's the voice of Donald J. Trump and QAnon.

- The Author

“Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself.”

- Morpheus
The Matrix

1

The Great Awakening

“Would you vote for Hillary again?” I asked Shaneekra, who was streaking platinum highlights through the First Lady’s hair. The wife of Gospel Tabernacle’s founder, Bishop Lovick, had her eyes closed. Even if she was napping, I expect she was listening with one ear.

“That girl is not running anywhere,” Shaneekra said. “Our party’s getting some new blood, so we can kick them old fools out.”

“But let’s play *what if*, what if The Golden Muumuu ran for president in 2020?” I asked.

“Lorie girl, I’m not talking politics with you,” Shaneekra said. “You and all your far-right conspiracies. You know I’m not into that QAnon shit.” Shaneekra had forgotten that the First Lady of the biggest black church in Whiteville was sitting right in front of her. You do not say *shit* in front of the First Lady. And, when you do, you apologize, “I’m so sorry, First Lady, sometimes my mouth just gets runnin’ on its own,” Shaneekra said.

“I’ve heard a lot worse,” the First Lady said, without opening her eyes.

“Did you see the debates?” I asked.

“I watched some CNN to see my girl Kamala,” Shaneekra said. “She was lookin’ fine.”

“Tulsi Gabbard crushed your girl,” I said. “That didn’t look so fine.”

“Lorie, why do you even watch the Democrats?”

“Just for the fun of it, I guess.”

“I heard about that crazy thing on that island,” Shaneekra said.

“People are sayin’ it’s a Satan temple, but it’s just a gym where that guy Epstein did his workouts.”

“It’s a temple to Moloch, and that’s the god of child sacrifices, basically it’s Satan,” I explained. “Right, First Lady?”

No reply, the First Lady kept her eyes shut.

“See girl, you’ve done let them conspiracies screw up your pretty head,” Shaneekra said.

“You probably heard that gym theory on CNN or MSNBC,” I said. “The mockingbirds are shifting the narrative, because Epstein’s going to bring down the house.”

“What house is that?” Shaneekra asked.

“The Deep State, and lots of politicians and celebrities, the *cabal*,” I explained.

“Your boy Trump is going down next election if he doesn’t get his orange ass impeached first,” Shaneekra said.

Obviously, my salon colleague still believes the fake news, which is why I like to get her riled up. All in good fun, of course. The salon is where I take the pulse of the community, it’s my listening post, it’s where I get to hear *everything* the women in town are thinking. That’s because The Cutting Edge in downtown Whiteville, North Carolina is the oldest salon in town, all the Who’s Who have appointments usually once a week, mostly older women and wealthier women, whose opinions are sometimes worth hearing. Even though a lot of people in Whiteville probably voted for Trump, most of them keep a low profile. The people I know who voted for Trump fall into two piles: 1) they hate Hillary, or 2) they hate politicians and hate D.C. For me, it’s both. I’m happy to be a smelly Deplorable who thinks for herself. I cut off cable three years ago and set my brain free, and my soul along with it. Take a sniff, I smell like *sweet freedom*.

I was waiting for my next client, so I refilled my coffee mug and

finished my cinnamon bun. The Cutting Edge is located in a block of old two-story brick buildings, at the far end of the block is where you'll find Sweet Tooth Bakery where Sarah Robbins makes the best cinnamon rolls this side of Cinnabon, which you can only get at the mall in Wilmington. I mention the Sweet Tooth because they have a big American flag hanging on the wall and they have a shiny new Trump 2020 sign taped inside their window. When I need solace and intelligent conversation, I drop in there to see Sarah. My girls Jonquil and Lilly love the chocolate-covered donuts. Whenever I work a Saturday shift, I take a box home for Sunday breakfast.

There's a man who lives above the salon, a man named Henry Dodge, who teaches at the middle school. He's the president or chairman or whatever of the local Democrat Party, and he talked Twixie, the owner of The Cutting Edge, into putting a Hillary sign in our front window. It hung there for a week after she lost, and one day I snuck and tore it down and ripped it to pieces and threw it away. That's what you call *catharsis*. Funny thing is nobody even noticed the sign was gone.

Unlike the die-hard Democrat Shaneekra, Twixie is apolitical. She's a country girl, Tony Lama cowboy boots and all, but she refuses to vote. She says she can never find a politician she wants to encourage, so why bother. I can see her point. I didn't vote for McCain because even back then I could see through him. Now I know why Trump was wary of McCain. They were archenemies. McCain wanted to bring him down. Of course, a lot of RINOs wanted to bring him down, but McCain was their lead dog in Congress, him and Ryan. They could see the gravy train was about to crash, a party-pooper had won the White House, a yuge MAGA storm was brewing, and it would drop QAnon-size balls of hail.

Twixie walked from the storeroom with a box of hair products and began arranging them on the shelves up front.

“You want some help?” I asked.

“No, I’ve got it,” Twixie said. “Hey, I wanted to tell you, my neighbors need a new sunroom. I gave them your number.”

“Thanks a lot, Trixie,” I said. “Todd will be glad to hear it. He’s been short of work. Actually, I was wondering if you need me for more hours, I could sure use the money.”

“I wish I did,” Trixie said. “We’ve been slow. I’ve been thinking I should talk to the people who are building that new retirement village, you know, maybe see if they need an on-site salon.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “A real good idea. I expect a lot of those baby boomers will need their hair done.”

“If it weren’t for the black customers Shaneekra’s bringing in, we’d be sunk already,” Trixie said. “But I’ve also been thinking I could sell the shop and expand my farrier business.”

Shoeing horses is Trixie’s side gig, she has a truck for it and all the tools, and I think she likes it more than the salon. A kick in the head from a horse will scramble your brains, but at least you don’t have to breathe hair chemicals nine-to-five.

The First Lady is what you call an *enigma*. At least to me she is. She and her husband, Bishop James Lovick, built a successful church from scratch, because they’d seen that Whiteville needed a Church of God in Christ spirit-filled, pentacostal presence. Lovick himself had been a teenage drug dealer who got saved while in juvie hall, so he knew the street life and how to reach out to the poor black community in Whiteville. The First Lady’s real name is Jenna Brown Lovick, but her close friends call her Jen, and she’s a *CrossFitter*, which means she’s into CrossFit, which means she could probably lift me over her head, I mean, she’s buff, and lean as a leopard, but

always dresses in style, playing the role of First Lady. Not that she isn't a great First Lady, not that she's pretending, just that she's a real person, too, with other things going on. And she's cute as a button, with straight black hair cut short, and fantastic platinum highlights. I was admiring her new hairstyle while she was checking out and leaving Shaneekra a big tip, as usual, when she turned from the desk and came walking straight toward me.

"That Epstein is a creepy fella, isn't he," she said.

"Yes ma'am," I said. "He's a piece of work."

First Lady looked me in the eye with a serious expression. "Can I borrow Lorie for a minute or two?" she asked Trixie.

"Sure," Trixie said, surprised by the question.

"Let's go for a little walk," First Lady said, taking my elbow in her vise-grip hand, turning me toward the door.

We walked across the street to a concrete bench on the lawn of the courthouse.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, because she looked worried.

"I heard you and Shaneekra talking about Epstein," she said.

"Yes ma'am," I said.

"Don't call me *ma'am*. I'm not much older than you. And don't call me First Lady, that makes me feel really old. Call me Jen."

"Okay," I said. "Is that what you wanted to talk about, the temple on Lolita Island?"

"Do you think it's satanic?"

"Probably," I said. "It's not a normal-looking gym, that's for sure. It looks a lot like a bathhouse in Turkey, and there are some secret rooms underground. Three or four levels. The building has a huge air conditioning system. You can see it in the drone footage."

"How do you know all this?" Jen asked, "Are you a conspiracy nut like Shaneekra says?"

"I'm a conspiracy *analyst*," I said. "Not a nut."

“Jimmy says the world will be ending soon,” Jen said. “He’s been studying on the Internet. Every night, he’s on the computer, and it’s got me a little freaked out.”

“What are you worried about?” I asked. “Are you worried about Bishop Lovick?”

“No, no, I’m worried about the end of the world.”

“I don’t know much about that,” I said. “You’re talking about Revelation, right? I’ve never understood that book.”

“Right, it’s confusing, so much symbolism. Jimmy knows Revelation, he’s preached a whole series on it. But now he’s reading about QAnon. You know a lot about QAnon, right? Jimmy says that QAnon—and I don’t even know who or what that is—but Jimmy says that QAnon is bringing a *Great Awakening*. He’s studied the other Great Awakenings, the big American revivals, and he’s a good observer of people—he says darkness has covered the earth, and I think he’s right, we can see it in our people. I do counseling, and so does Jimmy, we see a lot of darkness, so many people who are messed up, and we’re seeing more perversion, more spiritual sickness. Spiritual ignorance and sickness. It is like a cloud of evil over the nation. In the end times, one of the signs is that everything gets turned upside down. Jimmy thinks America is upside down.”

“I think so, too,” I said.

“What do you think this QAnon person is trying to do?” Jen asked. “And is it real? Or is it just some fool on the Internet?”

“I think it’s real,” I said. “And I don’t think you or Bishop Lovick need to be worried.”

“But is it spiritual, is it biblical?”

“Q quotes the Bible a lot,” I said.

“That’s what Jimmy says, too,” Jen said. “He says QAnon must be a Christian.”

“I think so.”

“I know how Jimmy is, he’s a man of truth. He goes after the truth like a dog after a bone. This Q thing is his new bone.”

“So you’re worried about that? Don’t let it worry you. Everything is already happening. Somebody, some people, some very patriotic people inside our government have a plan, and the plan is already in motion. The plan has a lot of moving parts to it, and it’s even got a spiritual part. I don’t know if we’re in the endtimes. Sometimes it feels that way. But we have to look at all the positive things in life, the blessings, we have to try to be happy. The patriots have everything under control. Q says we should just enjoy the show.”

“How do you know that?” Jen asked. “Everything seems so wacko. How do you know the good guys have it under control?”

“I don’t know it for sure. But I feel it. In my heart of hearts, I feel like we’re at the beginning of a Great Awakening.”

“I can’t help but worry about Jimmy. Nobody in our congregation will understand any of this.”

“Sure they will,” I said. “But redpilling people isn’t easy.”

“Redpilling? That’s what Jimmy says, he says he’s been *redpilled*. What does that mean?”

“It’s a reference to *The Matrix*, the movie.”

“I’ve never seen it.”

“Well, in the movie, the hero, Neo, is given a choice, a choice between a red pill and a blue pill. The red pill is the truth, it wakes him up to the truth, and the blue pill is the pill that locks you into the matrix.”

“What’s the matrix?” Jen asked.

“It’s the world as it appears to be, the world we’re all trapped in, the world where you’re a slave. It’s what the world is like on the surface, like a movie we’re all watching, but most people don’t know it’s a movie. I don’t understand it that well myself,” I admitted. “But

the idea is that the world is being controlled by unseen forces, the people who pull the strings.”

“That could be Satan, too,” Jen said.

“That’s what some people believe,” I said.

Jen stood up, I stood up, and she gave me a hug. A good, strong, big hug. Then she gave me a sweet peck on the cheek.

I don’t know if I helped her or not. Honestly, I think she was in the process of being redpilled herself, and it was like when Neo was being given the choice between the red and blue pills. Jen was reaching for the red one, but she still had doubts.

I was walking back to the salon when Shaneekra ran out the door waving her smartphone.

“You won’t believe what happened,” she said, “Epstein killed himself.”

“I’m not surprised,” I said, because I really wasn’t. “It was probably another Arkancide.”

Shaneekra was noticeably distressed. “Now we’re never gonna know what went on in that gym.”

“Don’t worry, QAnon has it all.”

“He has it all?” Shaneedra asked, “What does that mean?”

“Q’s on top of it,” I said. “They have all the information they need, they have the NSA, they can use FISA, they’ll know what happened to Epstein. As soon as Q can find another home, we’ll hear about what happened.”

“What do you mean, *another home*?”

“8chan was shut down,” I said. “Because the Deep State is trying to silence QAnon.”

“What’s going to happen to him?” Shaneekra asked.

“Q will be back,” I said. “The show is just getting started.”

2

Ten Hands

Our house on Pineneedle Drive is nothing special if you're talking architecture, a simple ranch-style, but we own it. It's ours, and it has our fingerprints all over it. In fact, it has our daughter Jo-Jo's handprints in the cement pad out back, and some big scarlet drops of my husband's blood stain the OSB under the living room floor; from the day Todd shot a nail into his foot. He pulled the nail out, an hour later, he pried the shoe off and rang out his blood-soaked sock. He figured the wound would seal up under shoe-pressure, and he was right. Since the nail was galvanized, he figured tetanus was unlikely. No doctor needed, hurray! That's my man for ya.

The house was built by ten hands. None of them belonged to certified tradesmen. Just sayin', we didn't hire anyone to help us, didn't have the money, so we built it ourselves. And we lived in it for two years before all the rooms were trimmed out and painted.

Two of the hands are mine, and they are careworn and scarred country girl hands in need of a pedicure, hands belonging to the proud mother of two wonderful girls. I make some money at the salon, but these days I only do three mornings a week. Three days is fine by me, gives me time to run the girls around and do some gardening.

Two hands belong to Todd, and he can handle most anything: masonry, framing, plumbing, electric. He learned from his father, who also pitched in on the house-building. This was back in 2008, at the start of the recession.

My father-in-law is Carl Denison, and I'm proud to have that

last name. My name is Lorie Hawkins Denison. *Lorie*, not Laura or Laurie. Lorie was my great-grandmother's name, and she was a hardscrabble gal, much like me. Carl has been a farmer his entire life. He and his wife Shirley live just outside Whiteville, where they own 128 acres.

Two other hands belong to Carl's father, Winstead Denison, who has farming in his blood and knows a thing or two about fine woodworking and anything mechanical. He shares the two-story clapboard farmhouse with Carl and Shirley and most days gets out to the fields and barns for at least an hour or two.

Then there's Jackson David Moore, Todd's best friend, "J.D." for short. He and Todd actually did most of the work. The foundation, framing, drywall, flooring, and just about everything else.

As I write all this down, I'm sitting on the front porch of the house we built, and J.D.'s wife Katie is pulling up in an F150. She is not a happy camper. By the contortion of her face, I can tell she is about to blow a gasket.

"Aren't I the perfect' idiot," she says, planting her foot on the porch step, hands on hips. "Aren't I the blind little lamb that needs slaughterin', the stupid brainless housewife, hell, aren't I the raggedy doormat that just gets thrown in the trash once J.D.'s boots have stomped the life out of it."

"What the heck happened?" I asked.

"J.D.'s having an affair with a girl at the community college, one of his welding students. I don't have her name yet but when I get it she'll be hearing from me. I'll wring her freakin' neck."

"Come on," I said, tilting myself out of the rocker, "you need some tea. I just made a fresh pitcher."

We go inside. I don't want to say much until I get the full picture, but it's hard to believe J.D. would cheat on her. He's not that kind

of guy, or so I thought, but who knows what men are capable of? I mean, when it comes to affairs and the dangerous paths they explore in the backwoods of their minds.

“How do you know he had an affair?” I asked, before cracking open a tray of ice.

“Donnie Walker told me.”

“Who the heck is that?” I asked.

“A kid who is in that same welding class as the girl, the one who is messing around with J.D.”

“Oh. And how does Donnie Walker know about it?”

“He saw them carrying on,” Katie explained, though it’s not much of an explanation.

“He saw them doing it? Screwing around? Actually having sex?”

“No, not exactly. See, Donnie’s a preacher’s kid, but not like your normal preacher’s kid. Donnie didn’t turn into a hellraiser, he’s stayed with the church and leads the youth group and plays the guitar in the band. He’s quite involved over there. At Baptist Chapel, that’s his father’s church.”

“How do you know him, this Donnie?” I asked.

“He was my student. AP Botany. He graduated last year then started at the community college to learn a trade.”

“That’s a smart move,” I said. “Most kids don’t realize how much money they can make in a trade.”

“Very true,” Katie said, and she took a long gulp of tea. “You sweetened this just right. Of course, you always do.”

“How do you know J.D. is actually having an affair? Details, Katie, we need details.”

“J.D. denies it, of course,” Katie said.

“You confronted him?”

“Yes, of course I did, this morning, why let it fester? I laid my

cards on the table. I told him it was me or her, whatever her name is. I told him I would move out. I'll move in with Mom and Dad, I don't care. I'm not going to be cheated on, I'm not going to let him get away with it scot free."

"What did J.D. say about it?" I asked.

"He said the girl was cute, and he said he might've flirted with her some because she was always coming on to him. But he denied everything else."

"You mean, the everything else you're imagining?"

"Do you know Jeb Simpson?" Katie asked.

"The chemistry teacher?"

"The very same. Last year he got caught screwing one of his students. They canned his sorry ass."

"Guess they had a special chemistry," I said, "him and that student."

"Too funny, Lorie. She was *sixteen*."

"Sometimes our imaginations can run away with things," I said. "Honestly, I think you should take a deep breath and see if J.D. is telling the truth or not."

"He had the guilt smeared all over this face," Katie said. "I'm seeing him with a whole new pair of eyes now. I've been awakened to reality, and you know what, it sucks bigtime."

"J.D. is one handsome dude, I'm not surprised girls would come on to him, not surprised one bit," I said.

"You think he's pretty hot, huh?" Katie asked.

"I've always told you that," I said.

"Are you attracted to him?" Katie asked.

"In a brotherly kind of way, sure," I admitted.

"Well, shit, I don't know. You're saying I overreacted?" I nodded very lightly, a sensitive kind of nod, because I knew she had

overreacted. She always does. “Well, I was thinking,” Katie said, “you know, Donnie is very, very religious, and maybe he just wanted to warn me that something bad was developing. He never said he saw them screwing or anything. Jeb Simpson was caught with his pants down.”

“That’s a lot different,” I said, “a whole lot different.”

“But what if J.D. feels something for this girl?” Katie asked.

“Something like lust? Physical attraction? Temptation?”

“Yes. Yes, all those things,” Katie said. “He’s supposed to save those things for me.”

“In a perfect world, maybe,” I said. “But this world sure ain’t perfect, and marriages for double sure get some slings and arrows. Men are birdwatchers and their eyes are like binoculars always searching the trees to and fro for something new and pretty.”

“That’s rather poetic,” Katie said.

“Momma told me that, the day I married Todd. She was warning me about the nature of men. I always new that about men, but Momma said that being jealous of the women your man looks at was wasted jealousy. She said, ‘Keep him happy in bed, and you’ll be just fine. Otherwise, you won’t be.’”

“That’s motherly wisdom,” Katie said.

“I thought so at the time,” I said. A knock at the front door punctuated the pause in our conversation.

It was J.D. He poked his head inside the house.

“Where is everybody? Lorie, is Katie in there? My truck’s in the driveway, I know she drove it over here.”

“In the kitchen!” I yelled.

He walked to the kitchen doorway and stood there framed like a cowboy poster, his straw stetson tilted back on his head just right, a few blond curls sticking out, resting his fingertips on the molding

above him, molding my grandpappy-in-law had routed and mitered. We experienced a long moment before J.D. said, “This is a bunch of hogwash. Don’t believe a word the drama queen tells you.”

“You want a glass of tea?” I asked. I made him a glass and set it on the kitchen island. When he reached for it, I noticed the red spots on his forearm. “What are those spots?”

“Sparks,” he said without turning his head. “I wasn’t wearing my gloves.” He was gazing at Katie who was sitting at the kitchen table, afternoon sun on her hair and shoulders, gazing back. “What do you want to do now?” J.D. asked.

“What do you mean ‘what do I want to do?’” Katie replied. “You created this problem. What are *you* going to do about it?”

“I can’t help it if them teenage girls like to flirt. It’s just one of the dangers of the job, I guess,” J.D. said. “All them teenybopper hormones.” He looked deep into her eyes. “Hell, I’ll quit the job if you want, I don’t care. If it’s going to break up my marriage, I’ll quit the damn job. It ain’t worth the headache.”

“We need the money,” Katie said.

“It’s only three classes a week,” J.D. said. “Not that much money.”

“We still need it. It’s regular.”

“I know, baby, but I can find another side job. I can crew on with that retirement project,” J.D. said, referring to the big development for old Baby Boomers who might need a hair salon.

“Don’t forget your back,” Katie said, referring to the tricky disk in J.D.’s spine that gave him fits if he wasn’t careful.

“I’ll wear the brace, J.D. said, “I’ll wear that damn brace.”

“That must be Todd,” I said. My ears were trained to hear his Durango as it crunched down our gravel driveway. “What’s he doing home so early?” I muttered as I flitted out the kitchen door.

I had walked out to warn him. “Don’t surprise me one bit,”

Todd said as we crossed the patio.

“I’ve got it under control,” I bragged, before we walked in.

“Todd, what would you do if a teenage girl came on to you?” Katie asked, forgetting to say hello first.

“I’d call J.D. and ask for advice,” Todd said, grinning. He shot a glance at J.D. “I hear you got busted.”

“I’ve been unfairly accused,” J.D. said, “accused of something I never did. Thought about it, maybe, but never did it.”

“But you *thought about it*.” Katie asked, anger flaring in her eyes.

“Maybe I did. Hey, didn’t I just say that?”

“You said it,” Todd confirmed.

“You’re supposed to save those thoughts for me,” Katie said, “you asshole.”

“You ain’t seen these community college girls,” J.D. said, chuckling. Two of ‘em work at The Palace.”

“You mean they’re strippers?” I asked. “Strippers who want to be welders?”

“I guess so,” J.D. said. “Go figure, right? Guess they’re tryin’ to get a new start or something. You know, upgrade their lives.”

“That girl, Dorene, her dad has his own shop,” Todd said. “A transmission shop. Maybe she plans to work for him.”

“A transmission shop? That’s right,” J.D. said, thinking harder than usual, “she wants to work with her pops.”

“Todd, how do you know about Dorene?” I asked.

“J.D. said something about her, I guess.”

“Todd is my accountability partner, like in AA,” J.D. quipped.

“So you’re saying you’ve got an addiction to teenage girls?” Katie asked. “Or is it just Dorene the stripper-welder you’re addicted to?”

“Did I say that?” J.D. asked, looking at Todd, then at me.

“Here’s the thing,” I said. “A name like Dorene is not a stripper

name to begin with.”

“Her stage name is Sparky,” Todd said, and I thought about how J.D. had already burned himself with sparks and how painful that must be.

“Have you two ever been to The Palace?” I asked.

The boys looked at each other.

Since you don't live in Whiteville, and you've never seen The Palace, I should tell you that it's a square, cinderblock building, painted black, with “The Palace” in white paint in a cursive font on the front, and a gravel parking lot. In a past life, the building was used for a barbecue joint. There are no windows, it's just a solid black den of iniquity, and the waitresses go topless, and yes, they have one of those brass poles. It's somewhat famous, and yes, there have been shootings in the parking lot back when it was named The Mint, and painted spearmint green, and the Sheriff shut it down. So it re-opened under new management, some guy from New Jersey who they say has mob connections, and he put a huge bouncer outside to keep order on Thursday-thru-Saturday nights when drinking is heavy and gunfights sometimes erupt. Bikers love the place, and there's probably not a male in town, age eighteen on up, who hasn't been in there at least once, and yes, the rumor is that the strippers all have tight bodies. I mean, if you've got a tight body, showing it off might be better employment than Burger King. Better money, only a lot scuzzier. I know it's a shame that men seem to need a *palace* other than the castles where their wives and children live, but that's the upside-down nature of America, right? With so much porn on the Internet, it's a wonder a strip joint does any business these days, but apparently men like to socialize and get drunk while looking at strippers. It's an aspect of male bonding that I'll never understand, but, then again, there are those male strippers you can hire for a

party with your girlfriends, however, I've never seen one except in movies; of course, there are a lot of things in movies that normal people never see in real life. As for me, my simple pleasures are all I need to be happy, and sin of all kinds disturbs my inner feng shui so badly that I just do my best to avoid it. Nor do I really want to end up in hell. My husband's sins are even harder for me to handle, so at the moment my eyes are lasering into Todd.

"Look, I may have been there once or twice," he said. I turned my lasers on J.D. "Have you been corrupting my perfect husband?"

"Sweetie, J.D. dragged me in there with him, Todd said.

"Not true, it was your idea, as I recall," J.D. said.

"I'm so disappointed in both of you, I could puke," Katie said.

"It's really no big deal, baby," J.D. said, so don't go off on one of your tirades."

"I'm just making the connections," Katie said. "Dorene, or 'Sparky' works at a strip club, and she's got a thing for you, and you go there and watch her dance nude, you get a good eyeful. You dimwit, I can put two and two together. You've been making love to her in your mind *for how long?*"

"That's a form of adultery, you know," I added.

"No it's not," J.D. said. "Come on."

"It's mental adultery," I said.

"It's in the Bible," Katie said. "If you do it in your mind that's as good as doing it in real life."

"I wouldn't go that far," Todd said.

Katie looked at J.D. "You're not skipping church anymore," she said sternly. "I forbid it, and both of you are banned from The Palace, right Lorie?"

"Right. You boys have got to stop playing with fire," I said.

3

Oscar Darbonne

We decided to go to the Crazy Horse that night. It was early August, but the temperature had dropped as the sun melted away, so I wore my favorite denim jacket, a white T-shirt, and a skirt with giant red roses on it, which I love. The skirt had belonged to my mother but I took it up to fit me. I always wear a skirt when we go dancing.

Katie and J.D. were a few minutes late so we waited for them outside the Crazy Horse on the tailgate of the Durango. We'd brought a Mike's Lemonade with us so we shared that while Todd talked to his hunting buddy Luke about going on a boar hunt and I did some people-watching.

After he ended the call, he turned to me, "How would you like to have a hundred pounds of boar meat?"

"Oh, I'd love that. We can have us some barbecues," I said, being my encouraging self.

"We had to stop by the CVS," Katie said when she'd hopped out of J.D.'s truck.

"Everything okay?" I asked. "Why'd you need to go to the CVS?"

"They had this big box of Raisenets for half price," she said, pushing the box into my face.

"You've got a bad sugar addiction, don't you," I said.

"You know I do. They spoke to me," she said, shaking more Raisenets into her palm. "Chocolate really likes to speak to me."

The crowd was a typical Friday night collection of friends from town and church and high school. I bet, between the four of us, we

knew half the folks in there. We also knew their spouses, some of their kids, who was divorced, and who wasn't, where they worked, whether they owned a boat, jet-ski or four-wheeler, who had been in trouble with the Sheriff, who was an alcoholic or pothead, who went to church: typical small town factoids.

We sent J.D. for beers but Katie said she wanted a Diet Coke instead of a Bud Light. I drink regular old Budweiser in a bottle and expect I always will. It's what I grew up on, Daddy drank it and the bottle reminded me of him. He died two years ago but I won't get into that now. The beer tasted good and after half of it I wanted to dance but Todd had wandered off.

"I'm going to the can," Katie said, "come with me."

"I don't need to go," I said.

"Come with me anyway," she said.

In the bathroom, she pulled a pregnancy test out of her purse.

"Oh my god," I said.

"Yep, I think so," she said gleefully, and ducked into a stall.

Katie and J.D. had been trying to get pregnant for over a year, and she'd been saying J.D. needed to get his sperm counted. They were our age, 32 or 33, but me and Todd had a big head start in the baby department. I got pregnant just after high school, when I was eighteen (a surprise blessing) but I'm glad I did because having kids is hard work and when you're young and stupid you just plow through it. Heck, my sweet Jonquil, now 14, spent the first month of her life sleeping in a dresser drawer in the old farmhouse.

"I'm pregnant!" Katie yelled. "It's blue!" She ran out of the stall and hugged me and we did our silly sister dance right then and there. It's not really a dance, just jumping around and squealing at each other, but it's something we've refined through practice.

"When are you going to tell J.D.?" I asked.

“I’m going to tell him right now,” she said.

“You don’t want to wait for a special time?”

“This is a special time!” she half-screamed. “I’m pregnant!”

“Yes, I know, honey, but you two have been fighting over, you know, Sparky the stripper, and you might want to make him a nice dinner tomorrow night and break it to him then.”

“That’s a good idea, but that’s not me. You know me, Lorie, I’m spontaneous. Heck, I’m about to bust I’m so happy. He’ll know something is up.”

“Then you do what you think is best,” I said. “We’ll all celebrate together.”

We walked back to the table. J.D. and Todd were shouting back and forth to each other because the music was so darn loud.

“I’m pregnant!” Katie yelled and a few people nearby clapped and hooted, but J.D. seemed to be stuck to his chair with Gorilla Glue or something because he didn’t twitch. Then I saw the shock on his face. Kinda frozen on his face while his brain worked at comprehending what she’d just yelled to the universe.

J.D. looked at Todd. “I’m gonna be a daddy,” he said.

“Hell yeah you are,” Todd said.

J.D. burst out of his chair and threw his arms around Katie and began swinging her in a circle. I think I saw a few tears drip on Katie’s shoulder, too. It was one of those times you wish you had on video. Our two best friends in the world were about to get their lives rattled, and their ignorant bliss was a beautiful thing to see.

Around nine, the Crazy Horse owner, Shelby Cooke, took to the stage and introduced a musician from New Orleans named Oscar Darbonne. Shelby said, “We don’t usually get a musician like this here in Whiteville. Oscar plays the steel guitar, and he’s famous for playing Zydeco and swamp pop. So, for something a little different,

smack your hands together for Oscar Darbonne!”

I didn't know who I was expecting to walk onto the stage, but I sure didn't expect to see this: Oscar Darbonne was a tall, handsome black dude in jet black jeans and a white cowboy shirt with black piping and a white straw cowboy hat adorned with a dazzling silver brooch that sparkled in the stage lights as if this dude Oscar's brain was exploding with shards of light. His right hand clutched a glittering, nickel-plated acoustic-electric guitar and the strap was studded with rhinestones. He sat on a stool in the center of the stage and plugged it in.

“Howdy folks,” he said, as he examined the crowd through squinting eyes. He saw a lot of white faces staring back at him. There were only a few black customers and a few Hispanics in the Crazy Horse at any given time. They had other places to party, although, in Whiteville the choices were slim.

“I play Zydeco and Creole tunes, and some swamp pop. I played with a band in New Orleans, but, as you can see, I'm alone tonight. If I had a band with me, we'd give you some great dancing music. So tonight you're stuck with me and my baby here.” He strapped himself into the guitar and dug into his back pocket for his steel slide. “Let's see now, let's start with a classic. This one's called *Give Him Cornbread*. Beau Jocque wrote it.” He pulled the mic in front of him, looked out at the crowd again. Everyone was so quiet you could hear the bartender dropping ice cubes into a glass at the far side of the dance hall. When Oscar lit into the tune, he was strumming and picking, using that slide to bend and stretch the twanging notes like the song was taffy. The only lyrics were “Give him cornbread, whatchu gonna give him, I wanna know,” which he belted out in a fierce baritone voice. A few people got up and danced.

I looked at Todd. He grinned. He liked good music. We all did.

Todd and J.D. had their own band back in the day, a trio with Todd on drums and J.D. out front. Country covers mostly.

Oscar's set was frickin' amazing. When he was finished, I saw him at the bar drinking a draft, and there was a woman with him, an attractive mixed-race gal, and I figured she must be Creole, maybe his wife, on tour with him. But here's the strange thing. Oscar wasn't wearing his fancy cowboy hat, no, instead, he was wearing a camo trucker's cap. I wasn't sure at first—when he turned in our direction, I thought I saw MAGA embroidered across the front of it. I almost pooped my jeans.

I had to meet this dude from New Orleans, so I walked over, being sly because I wanted to get a better look at his cap. I leaned into the bar and ordered another Budweiser. It was super cold, too cold to hold until I wrapped a napkin around it. While I sipped on it, I stole a glance or two at Oscar Darbonne. Sure enough, he was wearing a Trump cap, and he might've been as tall as Trump, who is 6' 3"—yep, Oscar was at least 6' 3" and broad-shouldered, like he might've played football or at least lifted weights. Up closer, I could appreciate how handsome he was. Maybe a combination of black, American Indian and/or Spanish with some Caucasian genes thrown in to round out a look that you'd have to call a mashup or milkshake, like you see in Lumberton, NC where the Lumbee Indians have mixed with blacks and whites and just eating at a K&W you'll see a lot of beautiful genetic creativity.

Oscar looked at me and I smiled in a not-sexy way, a friendly little smile. He nodded slightly, a kind of "hello but I'm not flirting" nod. His wife or maybe girlfriend spun around and looked at me.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi," I said. "That set was great, really great."

"Thank you," she said. Then she leaned toward Oscar and told

him what I'd said.

"Thanks," he said.

"Is this your first time in Whiteville?" I asked.

"Actually, no," the woman said. "We moved here two months ago."

"Really? You *live* here?" I asked. "Why? Who would want to move to this town? I grew up here, and, you know, it's home to me, but why would anyone want to move here?"

"I took a job at the community college," the woman said. "My name is Camila."

I shook her hand, then Oscar stretched his hand toward me and I shook it.

"My name's Lorie," I said. "I'm a mom, and I do hair." I know that sounded lame but that's pretty much who I am, so.

So . . . next thing you know, Camila and Oscar are sitting at our table and the boys are talking about hunting and us girls are talking about Katie being pregnant, because of course she had to blurt it out right away, and Camila is talking about wanting to get pregnant but doesn't know what Oscar wants to do in terms of music, touring and so forth. For one thing, she can't travel with him once school starts, then J.D. gives her a few pointers about working at Southeastern Community College, where Camila will be teaching *Basic Law Enforcement Training*.

"I was a cop in New Orleans for nine years," she explained. "In 2005 when Katrina hit, I was in the police academy, and they drafted us to help keep order in the city. It was such a horrible mess. They sent me to the Superdome first, when it seemed like half the city was getting crammed in there, then they sent me to the Quarter. There wasn't as much flooding there, from the levees, you know, and all the clean up trucks and sanitation trucks and media people were parked

everywhere, clogging the streets, so I did traffic control. That's where I met Oscar. His mom had a little flower booth on Dauphine, and he was there helping her clean it up. It didn't get much damage. The Quarter was spared, for the most part. Oscar was with his first quartet back then, and they played on the street, you know, just to bring some life back to The Quarter. Later on, I'd go out to see them at the clubs. Oscar had a girlfriend, but I wrestled him away from her eventually."

"How long have ya'll been married," Katie asked.

"Twenty-one long, hard, wonderful years. Oscar did two tours in Iraq, and we got married after his first tour, on the Fourth of July. We lived at Fort Polk in a tiny white house. I loved it there, I loved the Army community."

"Where do you live, here in Whiteville?" Katie asked.

"We have a place at Whispering Pines Apartment Complex. It's nothing fancy, but we hope to find a house."

"Why did you stop being a cop?" Katie asked.

"I'll tell you about that one day, maybe," Camila said, "but anyway, the reason I was talking about Katrina is that I saw how much good I could do as a cop, how much I could help people. How important it was to maintain order during a natural disaster, so I went all in. I even got a masters in police training at Tulane."

I didn't know if Camila was bragging or just trying to make some new friends by opening up about her life, or whatever, didn't matter. I liked her. She made me feel like a measly little ant, I mean, compared to her, I didn't have any exciting stories to tell, but I liked her anyway.

In the truck on the way home, Todd said, "Did you know Oscar's a veteran. He went to Iraq twice. The second time he went over as an Airborne Ranger. That's some serious shit there. I mean, damn, he's

about as badass as they come, plus he plays a fuckin' mean guitar.”

“Camila was a cop,” I said, “that’s pretty badass, too.”

“Big O wants to go boar hunting with us,” Todd said.

“Big O?”

“That’s his nickname, his nickname when he was a Ranger, so he said we should call him *Big O*.”

“You’ve fallen for this guy haven’t you?”

“I have. It’s not like I have that many badass friends.”

“Camila is cool, too,” I said. “Plus, they like Trump. How cool is that.”

“A lot of vets like Trump,” Todd said. “And cops, too.”

“Very true,” I said. “And he likes them.”

4

Not Just Another Morning

My daughter Lilly takes after me in so many ways, but she's named after her great-grandmother on Daddy's side. She's only twelve but developing early and I can already see the woman she's going to become. A beautiful woman, tall like Todd, but feisty and opinionated like me. Katie thinks Lilly looks like Christina Ricci, with a doll-like face.

Our Jonquil, who turned fourteen last month, has an independent streak like me, and her father's physicality and athletic ability. She plays soccer, volleyball and softball. She likes to sweat, she likes to win, and she's a natural born leader. Jo-Jo (that's her nickname), in my opinion, has a European look, a stronger nose, black hair, and dark green eyes. I love both of them so much that I lie awake some nights worrying about them, because there's a lot of insanity out there, the world is getting more dangerous by the day.

Crime in Whiteville isn't terrible, but nearby there's a town called Hamstead where Mara Salvatrucha, the MS-13 gang, has been raising hell. I mean literally raising hell. A church there in Hamstead sponsored a lot of immigrants from El Salvador, and the gang came out of that community. Of course, MS-13 was actually exported from the U.S., from California, where it started. El Salvador didn't even have an MS-13 problem until we exported ours. Anyway, the gang in Hamstead murdered a young girl back in March. I won't give you the details. It was truly horrible what they did to her. I'm glad Todd is a hunter. Daddy taught me how to shoot a rifle and a shotgun. Todd gave me pistol lessons right after we were married,

but I had to take a class for my concealed carry. I carry a sweet .380 semi-automatic when I go out alone or with the girls. When I'm with Todd, he carries his nine. I don't particularly like guns, but I like protection, and I like to have my girls protected. Both of them know how to shoot. Todd has made sure of that. I love that about him. His practicality, his common sense, and the way he faces the world in a bold, manly way. He's always worked his ass off, too, you know, to be a good provider.

"My social studies teacher last year hated Trump," Lilly said, munching on a blueberry Eggo waffle.

"Don't let that syrup drip on your blouse," I said. She was perched on a stool at the island, looking like a perfect young lady, dressed for her "job" at the farmer's market where she works at her Grandpa Carl's stall on Wednesdays during the summer and most Saturdays. The job gives her a chance to dress up in her best casual outfits, but, for church, she always wears a dress. Maybe I didn't mention it, but Lilly has a passion for fashion.

"Why are you thinking about your social studies teacher this morning?" I asked.

"Because it's so dang hot outside," Lilly said.

"And what does that have to do with your teacher?" I asked.

"He hates Trump because Trump doesn't believe in climate change. What do you think about that?"

"Climate change? I think the jury is still out," I said.

"America only makes 15% of the carbon pollution," Lilly said, "so I don't know why Mr. Tankerly is so down on the Donald."

"The Green New Deal is going to take care of all our problems," I said. "Once we get rid of the cows, everything will be fine."

"They have a ton of cows in India, but they don't even eat them. Think about how much they fart. What's up with that?"

“Hinduism,” I said. “There could be a future person inside every one of those cows.”

“How is that even possible?” Lilly asked.

“Reincarnation. They believe in reincarnation. A cow could come back as a person, something like that.”

“I don’t believe that,” Lilly said. “A cow’s a cow. I don’t think it has a spirit like us. Plus, I love hamburgers. And chocolate milk.”

“The Hindus and Buddhists believe all life is sacred. They think God resides in every animal, even rats.”

“How do you know so much about it?” Lilly asked as she finished her orange juice. “Because of that religion class?”

“Yep, it was my favorite class at Chapel Hill. If I’d stayed in college, I might have majored in religion. Or maybe English.”

“But you had to drop out, right? Because you got pregnant?”

“Yep, and because I wanted to marry your father.”

“That makes me sad,” Lilly said.

“Me too. I wish I could’ve finished college. But of course I’m glad I had your sister, and I’m glad I married your father. Life takes funny turns sometimes. You gotta roll with the punches.”

“Do you feel like your life is incomplete or something?” Lilly asked.

“No, not really,” I said.

“Mom, you can go back to college. It’s not too late you know, you’re still a young woman really.”

“I love you so much,” I said, and I had to walk over and give her a hug from behind. My sweet baby, boosting her momma’s spirits like that.

Todd walked in. He’d been in the workshop out back.

“You want some eggs?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said. He plopped a twenty dollar bill on the island

beside Lilly's plate.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"I need you to pick up some of that good hamburger from that guy at the market," Todd said.

"We have hamburger in the freezer," I said.

"I want the good local meat, the grass-fed stuff," Todd said. "For the party."

"What party is that?" I asked.

"I'm gonna ask Big O and Camila to come over, and J.D. and Katie, and Luke and Susie."

"When is this?" I asked.

"Whenever you say," he said, smiling. "Baby, just whenever is good for you, that's when we'll do it."

"It's sweet when you call her 'baby'," Lilly said. "Very sweet, Pops, like you guys are still in love."

"That's because we are," Todd said, "right babe?"

"Eight people, huh," I said. "Plus Lilly and Jo-Jo."

"A summer cookout," Todd said, "won't that be nice?"

"Is Big O working with you today?" Lilly asked.

"Yes he is, how'd you know?" Todd asked.

"I heard ya'll talking about it," Lilly said. "I've got big ears, remember. What are ya'll going to do?"

"We're picking up materials for a foundation, and we're going to frame it up for a pour. We're building a sunroom."

"What about Miguel?" Lilly asked.

"Miguel hired on to that retirement project at the lake. He'll have steady work for months. That's a lot better than working for me," Todd said. "He'll make more money, and he'll get benefits."

"So Oscar is going to be your new hand?" I asked.

"And J.D. when he has time," Todd said, "like always. I don't

know if Big O wants regular work or not. We're going to have to work around the heat today, so I won't be back until after sundown. We'll make a Lowes run today, unload the stuff, do the demo, and lay out the foundation. We may just dig the trench by hand. It hardly justifies a backhoe. I'll ask Big O about it."

"It's your project, right?" I said, "I'm sure Big O knows how to use a shovel."

I was being sarcastic, I know, but Todd's bromance with Oscar Darbonne was kinda annoying. My husband's sensitive soul revealed itself in a lot of different ways. Like the way he treated his friends, and the way he devoted himself to his work. He actually took it heart. Even though it was mostly physical labor, the skills, and tools, and the labor itself were special to him. I'm not sure how to explain it, really. Todd told me once that he could get lost in it, and that it was hard to do everything perfectly, but that was always his intention, his focus. Not just to work, but to do his best, and to keep getting better. "It's got my fingerprints on it," he'd say.

Construction work wears you down, so I've been hoping he could find something else to do. He could join his father on the farm, but farming wears a man down just as bad. In farming and construction both, you're always fighting the weather, the heat and cold, the wind and rain, and pushing your body, busting up your hands, getting dirt or sawdust in your eyes. It's hard work, but some men, like my man, love doing it. They aren't happy unless they're dead tired at the end of the day, so when they crack open a cold beer, it's a real reward.

"When we have that barbecue, I want to meet Big O," Lilly said. "I want to ask him about Trump, and climate change."

"I'm sure he'd love that," Todd said. "Where's your sister?"

"Sleeping, as usual," Lilly said. "Or texting. Or maybe texting in her sleep."

“I’ll be right back,” Todd said. “Can you make me some fresh coffee? I need to see Jo-Jo.”

“He’d better be careful, if he has to wake her up,” Lilly said as Todd walked across the great room. “She’s in trouble, right?”

“Right,” I said.

“For coming in so late last night I bet,” Lilly said.

“Did she wake you up?”

“I’m a light sleeper, you know,” Lilly said. “She always wakes me up. Why can’t I have the guest room for my own bedroom?”

“Because it’s for guests,” I said.

“But we never have any guests,” Lilly said.

“You’ve got a point,” I said. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Plus I’m twelve, going on thirteen. I need my own space.”

“You’ve got another point there,” I said. “I’ll think about it.”

Todd returned by the time his fried eggs were done. He was not happy. I added bacon and a homemade vinegar pickle to the plate and slid it across the island along with a fresh mug of joe.

“How’d it go?” Lilly asked.

“He looked at her like it was none of her business, but then he said, “It went okay.”

We heard Carl honk his horn. Lilly kissed Todd on the cheek and ran out to join her grandfather for their morning at the farmers’ market. It was 6 o’clock, and they needed to be set up by 7.

“It went okay?” I asked.

“I told her that if she was smoking pot, there’d be hell to pay. She denied it, then I told her you’d found some seeds in her jean pocket when you did the laundry. She shrugged it off and said she didn’t know how they got there. Then I picked up her T-shirt, it was on the floor, so I assume it was what she wore last night, and I could smell the pot on it. I stuck it under her nose without saying anything. She

just looked at me for few seconds, thinking about her next excuse, then she said, ‘Smells like a campfire to me.’ Then I told her I’d skin her alive.”

“I thought you told her there would be hell to pay.”

“Yeah. I said that, too.”

5

Wildcat's Corner

Todd and Big O spent an hour at Lowes buying treated 2 by 6s and rebar, then went to the job site, an average brick house where the retired couple who lived there wanted a sunroom attached to the back and had twenty grand to pay for it. Todd would make a good profit off that.

He and Big O had to tear off their old porch first, pry-bar and sledgehammer work. Then they drove over to Joe's Barbecue, a joint that's kinda famous around here for its fried chicken and, surprise surprise, their barbecue, not to mention (but I will) its Country Lunch Buffet, and its Pig Pickin' Buffet on Friday and Saturday nights. Joe's is at the edge of town on Highway 130 that takes you all the way to the barrier islands. Just telling you about it makes me hungry. Anyway, the boys hit Joes every chance they get, but this was Big O's first time there, and, knowing Todd, he picked up the tab.

"I was thinking," Todd said, as they sat in Joe's with their mounds of food. "Maybe we should drive out to the farm."

"What farm is that?" Big O asked.

"Our family place. My dad's place, and his dad's place. Where I grew up," Todd said.

"That'd be alright by me," Big O said.

"It's gonna be hot as hell through five or six o'clock, we'll puke if we start digging the foundation in this heat."

"I wouldn't mind seeing a farm," Big O said.

"Well, it's not just that," Todd said, "Granpappy lives there. He lives with my Mom and Dad. I'd like for you to meet him."

"Fine by me," Big O said.

“He’s a real character. He’s very well-educated in politics and a lot of other things, and he’s a huge Trump supporter.”

“Sounds good,” Big O said. “Sounds like my kind of guy.”

“Yeah, yeah, I think so. He also follows QAnon,” Todd said. Big O’s eyes lit up. “Do you know about QAnon?” Todd asked.

“Oh yeah,” Big O said. “I’ve been tracking with Q from the beginning. It’s some deep shit, that Q, whoever he or she or it is.”

“I just know what Lorie and Winstead, that’s my granpappy, what they tell me. I’m not convinced QAnon is legit. I’ve read some of the messages, but I don’t get why they have to be so scrambled, like some kind of puzzle. I’m not really an Internet person anyway. I don’t even have a Facebook page. Lorie has one but I don’t care about the world knowing my business.”

“I get that,” Big O said.

“Okay, you’re going to love this, buddy: my granpappy is on the Internet all the freakin’ time, he’s on a YouTube show called ‘Patriots’ Soapbox,’ ever heard of it?”

“Oh yeah, sure, the 24/7 QAnon channel. I’ve listened to it. Your granpappy’s on it? That’s excellent, right, I’ve definitely got to meet him.”

“They call him ‘Wildcat’ on the show, that’s his handle. He does a video every day at ten in the morning. He calls it *Wildcat’s Corner*.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before now?” Big O asked.

“I don’t know. We haven’t really talked about politics. I’m not really into conspiracy theories, except 9/11, but it’s not a theory if it’s true, am I right? No, really, I don’t give a shit about politics. I don’t even watch the news. Lorie tells me what I need to know. It’s all a clown show, right? You have to be an Internet person to follow QAnon. The only thing I watch on YouTube is hunting videos.”

“How’d your granpappy get into it? Into QAnon?” Big O asked.

“I’m not sure. He served in Vietnam. In the Marines. He saw action. Doesn’t talk about it that much. He was one of the first to go over there, in 1957, to help the French. Then he went back in ‘65.”

“We sent thousands of advisors to Nam before the war became official,” Big O said. They sent some Rangers over. And in ‘60 or ‘61 they sent hundreds of Green Berets. That war should never have happened. Eisenhower was an idiot with his ‘Domino theory.’ It was just an excuse for war, for the Military-Industrial Complex. We didn’t understand anything about that country, about how badly the people wanted unification. The problem started with the French, then they handed it off to us. But there was no way to win that war, and guess what, when we left . . . well, look at Vietnam now.”

“My granpappy would agree with you,” Todd said. “That’s how he got into QAnon, I think, since he was a Democrat before Obama came along. But he’s never trusted the government, not after Nam. I voted for Obama, but the neocons had him in their pocket just like the Bushes, and Clinton.”

“Why did you vote Democrat?” Big O asked.

“Because my old man was a Democrat.”

“Is he still a Democrat?”

“No, he’s a MAGA guy like Winstead. He voted for Trump. All of us voted for Trump. Not because of Obama, not even because Hillary is a psycho, but because we knew D.C. was fucked up. When I saw those buildings implode on 9/11, I knew how bad it was. They fell straight down. I’m not an idiot.”

“World Trade 7, right,” Big O said.

“Right. Absolutely. They said ‘We’re going to pull it, get out!’ Then down it goes, imploded, just like the first two. And Bush was their puppet president. They had him by the balls.”

“So you do know a lot about politics,” Big O said. “And conspiracy

theories. And the Deep State.”

“I know that D.C. is corrupt as hell,” Todd said. “And I know it’s all about money.”

“By the way, I don’t think Q is a conspiracy theory,” Big O said. “Q is for real.”

“How do you know?” Todd asked.

“I’m a Ranger. I hear things. I know some people who know other people who know some things.”

“What kind of things?” Todd asked.

“Enough to know that Q isn’t a conspiracy theory,” Big O said.

They drove out to the farm, five miles down US 701, then down a two-mile dirt road that runs between soybean and peanut fields, the land Carl leases out. He just works the truck crops, about five acres in all he devotes to strawberries, tomatoes, squash, corn and so forth, plus he keeps a half-dozen hogs and a few goats. Shirley loves to cook, and one Sunday a month she puts out a spread for our family and some friends from church. You haven’t lived until you’ve had a bite of her coconut cake. OMG, as the girls say. *Oh My God*.

Carl’s father, Winstead, aka Wildcat, was on the porch smoking a stogie, his favorite box-pressed Padron to be exact. To look at Winstead, you’d think he was a biker or old hippie, with his white hair down to his shoulders. I suppose he is an old hippie. A lot of Vietnam vets were hippies. They listened to rock n’ roll, Country Joe, the Animals, Creedance, Dylan. Winstead told me once that he wore love beads with a silver peace medallion under his fatigue shirt. He said that during monsoon season the medallion stained his chest, giving him a peace symbol over his heart. He took it as a sign of who he really was, and, when he got out, he joined the peace movement.

Winstead walked to the edge of the porch when Todd and Big O

drove up. He was about half-way through his cigar.

“I hope you brought your guitar,” Winstead said, shaking Big O’s hand. “I hear you play the slide like . . . like a man from New Orleans would play it.”

“He is a man from New Orleans,” Todd said.

“That’s what I heard,” Winstead said. “I can’t leave this cigar, I’m right at the sweet spot. Let’s sit out here for a spell.”

“It’s hot as hell out here,” Todd said.

“Then we’ll go ‘round back to the shade,” Winstead said. “That’s where I usually sit. I just came out here to meet you fellas.”

Shirley brought them glasses of lemonade and some Krispy Kreme donuts. Big O thought she was the picture of a southern matron. She wore her long, silver hair boofed up and held by bobby pins, with wisps here and there catching the tiny rays of sun seeping through the massive sweetgum tree cooling their backyard.

“Why did you leave the Rangers?” Winstead asked, as their conversation unfolded that blistering afternoon.

“I got tired of war,” Big O said. “Tired of war and the military, tired of the regimen. I’ll always love the Rangers, but, if I ever go back, I want the country to have its act together. Anyway, I’m getting too old to go back. War is for young men with enough adrenaline to wade through hell, that is, if they’re dropped into hell like the Rangers usually are.”

“I hope our nation can get its act together,” Winstead said, “but I’m not sure it can, not until the shadow players are brought to justice. Comey, McCabe, Stroyk, Brennan, Clapper, and that whole gang. Hillary. The DOJ, the State Department, all of ‘em. Well, they’re really just the tip of the iceberg.”

“It’s the news media that’s the big problem now,” Big O said.

“Now that Barr and Durham are bringing indictments.”

“I said that very same thing the other day on the show,” Winstead said. “Declassifying those FISA documents will open some eyes, but the way the mockingbirds spin things, doing their damndest to shift the blame away from Barry, will make the libtards think it was justified, simply out of their fear and hatred for Trump.”

“The Democrats know how to leverage fear,” Big O said.

“They do indeed,” Winstead said, “and they’ve never feared anything the way they fear Trump. It’s delusional, I mean, seriously, it’s developed into a mental illness.”

“Belief systems are powerful,” Big O said. “People are defined by what they believe, or they think they are. That’s what getting woke is all about, it’s about the failure of your belief system, seeing the lies for what they are, realizing you’ve been duped. That’s what Q’s doing. Waking people up so they can see the big picture.”

“It’s a pretty ugly picture,” Todd said. “Most people don’t want to see it.”

“I’ve thought a lot about this,” Winstead said, “obviously you have, too. You’re right about the mockingbirds, they know how to bend the truth, how to bugger the narrative. That’s why they have to be crushed somehow. I think that’s what Trump is planning to do. And Q’s a big part of his master plan. There was another protest in Iran yesterday, with a lot of Q signs. And look at France, Hong Kong. I saw a video from Hong Kong this morning where a guy was carrying a sign with Pepe the Frog on it.

“Who’s that?” Todd asked.

“You might say Pepe is the 8chan mascot,” Big O said. “Q is an international phenomenon, no question about it. I can’t wait to see how that will play out. We’re in brand new territory, that’s for sure. Q has changed the game, he’s waking up the whole world.”

6

Jo-Jo's Vanishing Act

At seven o'clock that evening, Todd and Big O were loading the debris from the porch demo into the bed of the Durango, when I called to tell him Jonquil wasn't home yet. She'd gone to the State Park at Lake Waccamaw with her friend Hadley and Hadley's family, the Osbornes. We knew them from church, and I found their home number in the church directory. When I called them, Hadley's mother, Alicia, explained that Jo-Jo had gotten a ride home with her boyfriend. I didn't know she had a boyfriend.

"Hadley insisted it was okay," Alicia said.

"She's only *fourteen*, Alicia."

"I'm so sorry, I should have talked to Jo-Jo about it, but she was already gone."

"When did you last see her?" I asked, feeling frantic and mad as hell, actually trembling, my voice about to break.

"She and Hadley had been swimming, then they went to the snack bar. When Hadley came back, she told me Jo-Jo had gotten a ride home. That was probably around four o'clock."

I told Todd that Jo-Jo hadn't been seen since four o'clock, and he told me to call the Sheriff, and the hospital.

"Why the Sheriff, why not the police?" I asked.

"Because Waccamaw is in the county," Todd said. "She could be anywhere in the county, right? Doug will know what to do. Call him, Lorie, call him right now." I called the Sheriff, Doug Brown, and told him I was Carl Denison's daughter-in-law, since he knows Carl from the Elks Club.

You might be wondering why Jo-Jo didn't use her smartphone.

She doesn't have one. Todd refuses. He said she can have one when she turns sixteen. It's something she boils about. All her friends have them. If she did have one, we could call her, or she could call us, or call 911, or the Sheriff, and he could track it, right?

By the time Todd and Big O burst through the door, I'd learned the Sheriff and the hospital had nothing to report, no sign of her.

"Doug is putting out an APB," I said.

"We've got to find out who that boy was," Todd said.

"Tell me she's going to walk in that door any minute now," I said. I was about to be flooded with pure panic. Poor Lilly was in tears. "You've got to find her, Daddy!" she practically screamed at Todd.

"I'm going to, sweetheart, I'm going to, I promise."

Big O stood there like a sentinel, quietly observing, thinking, perhaps speechless, given the circumstances. I could see that he was there for us, ready to help. But we didn't know where to start. Who was the boy? Did he go to school with her? Since he had a car, that meant he was in high school. Jonquil was still in middle school.

"Let's go see her friend, Hadley," Big O said, "maybe she'll know who that boy is."

Todd and Big O drove to the Osbornes. I took Lilly with me in our old Buick. No way was I going to sit and wait for news. I dropped off Lilly at Katie and J.D.'s and gave them a quick explanation from the car as I drove away. They both said they would be praying.

I floored it and made it to the Osbornes right behind Todd and Big O. When Alicia and Danny Osborne came to the door, I could tell they were intimidated by Big O, and they shoulda been. But Todd was the one to be scared of. He was ready to rip heads off. They invited us inside and called Hadley out of her bedroom. She was wide-eyed being confronted like that by three adults.

"Do you know who the boy was?" Todd asked.

“Some kid from WHS,” she said, referring to Whiteville High School.

“Can you describe him?” Big O asked.

“He was black,” Hadley said. “And he drove a nice car.”

“What kind of car?” Todd asked.

“I new one, looked like to me,” she said. “It looked like it cost a lot of money.”

“Did you notice the make and model?” Big O asked.

“Nossir.”

“What color was it?” Todd asked.

“Red,” Hadley answered.

“Did the boy look threatening?” Big O asked.

“Threatening? No, Jo-Jo knew him,” Hadley said. “They were smiling. She was happy to see him.”

“Did she tell you this kid was her boyfriend?” Todd asked.

“Sorta. But not really,” Hadley said. “She didn’t say the word. She didn’t say ‘boyfriend,’ she just said ‘that’s my ride.’”

“Do you know anyone who might know this boy?” Big O asked.

“Some kids at the high school probably,” Hadley said. “Since he has that fancy car.”

“Where do kids from the high school hang out on a summer night, where can we find them?” Big O asked.

“There’s no place to hang out in Whiteville,” Hadley said.

“Yes there is,” Big O said. “Kids always find places to hang out.”

“McDonalds maybe,” Hadley said. “You could look there.”

We drove to McDonalds and sure enough there were a lot of teenagers in the parking lot. I joined Todd and Big O in questioning them. We got a lot of blank stares at first, but they knew about the fancy red car, a “souped up Corolla,” one boy said, “his name is

Montrell Jackson,” he added.

“Do you know where he lives?” I asked.

“In that neighborhood where the rich folks live, at the golf course,” the boy said.

“Land O’ Lakes?” Todd asked. “Is that the golf course?”

“Yessir,” the boy said.

“He has a pool,” a girl nearby said, “I’ve been there. His parents are rich. It’s a really nice pool.”

“Do you know what street it’s on?” Big O asked.

“Nah,” the girl said. “But it’s at the golf course like he said.”

I called Sheriff Brown and told him about the boy and where he lived. He said he’d go over there himself. We headed to the golf course. The neighborhood is not that big and it only took a few minutes before we saw the Sheriff’s cruiser with its lights on, parked in front of a three-story McMansion with an immaculate lawn. The Sheriff was standing at the door talking to a man who must’ve been Montrell’s father.

“We were standing near the Sheriff’s cruiser when a call came through, “That girl just walked into the station, copy? Better hightail it back here, Sheriff, we may have some murders on our hands. Copy?”

I ran to the door and tugged at the Sheriff’s shirt, stealing a quick glance at the man in the doorway, who looked very pissed off. I turned the Sheriff aside and told him what we’d heard on the radio. I had to stand on my tiptoes so I could whisper in his ear, and I could feel his whole body stiffen.

“We’re going to get her,” I told him.

He turned back to Montrell’s father. “The girl showed up at my office. Jot down your number for me and I’ll call as soon as we locate your son.”

“To hell with that,” I heard the man say, “I’m going with you.”

“You’ll have to take your own car,” the Sheriff said.

“That’s what I meant,” the man said.

We ran inside the Sheriff’s office. Jo-Jo was sitting at one of the deputy’s desks in a big room with several cubicles. Her face looked puffy. She’d been crying. She saw us but didn’t stir, didn’t leap out of the chair and run to give us a hug. Then I noticed that one of her wrists was handcuffed to the chair. Todd and I walked over and looked down at the Deputy who was sitting at the desk.

“Why is she handcuffed?” Todd asked.

“You’re not suppose to go past that door,” the Deputy said, pointing to the door we’d just walked through, the one that takes you from the lobby into the office area. “There’s a sign.”

“She’s my daughter,” Todd said. “She’s only fourteen, take the cuffs off.”

“Can’t do it, not until the Sheriff gets back. It’s procedure when we’re questioning a suspect.”

A *suspect*? What the hell was going on? I stood beside Jo-Jo and put my hands on her shoulders.

“Can’t touch the suspect either,” the Deputy said. He looked down at his notes, unmoved by the fact that two parents were having their emotions rung out like a dishrag. Jo-Jo glanced up at me but didn’t want her eyes to meet mine. My heart was pounding with a mixture of unvaulted joy and unbridled fear for what she’d gotten herself into. Who had been murdered? The boy with the fancy car? I didn’t want to ask.

Big O had been waiting in the lobby, but he came to the door and watched us. He had a concerned half-smile on his face. At this point, he was stuck with us for the duration.

The Deputy looked up at us. “I need to speak to the Sheriff, then he can talk to you folks. You’re Jonquil’s mom and dad, huh?”

“Right,” Todd said.

“I need your full names,” the Deputy said.

The Sheriff walked in, looked at Jonquil, then at the Deputy.

“Are you finished with her?” he asked the Deputy.

“I think so,” the Deputy said. “I just need her parents’ names.”

“I know these folks,” the Sheriff said. The Deputy handed his notes to the Sheriff.

“Unlock those cuffs,” the Sheriff said.

“Burley and Pete are out at the scene,” the deputy said.

“I know. I sent them there,” the Sheriff said.

The Deputy took the cuffs off and the Sheriff ushered us toward his office. That’s when Mr. Jackson rushed in with his wife on his heels.

“Where’s my son?!” he shouted angrily.

“Deputy!” the Sheriff snapped, give this gentleman an update.” Then Sheriff Brown stepped toward the couple, “We haven’t found your boy yet,” he said. “I’ve issued an APB. The Deputy will give you more info. This is a very active situation, and I need to speak with these folks right now.”

We sat down in the Sheriff’s office. I finally got a hug from Jo-Jo. Having her nestled in my arms was the best feeling ever. If you’ve had a child go missing, and had her return to your arms unscathed, you’d know what I mean. It’s like holding your newborn again, makes your soul ache sweetly with all the love you have in you.

“Sheriff, is it alright if our friend comes in here?” Todd asked.

“I don’t mind,” he said. “He’s the Ranger, right? Oscar Something?”

“Yeah, do you know him?” Todd asked.

“I met him a couple months ago. He dropped by and filled out an application. You guys are friends?”

“Yeah, and he’s doing some work for me,” Todd said.

“What kind of work?”

“Construction,” Todd said.

“Bring him in,” the Sheriff said. He looked at the Deputy’s notes. “We’re gonna have to make this quick, though.”

I went to the lobby and motioned for Big O to come back to the office.

“Hello, Sheriff,” Big O said as he walked through the door. “Good to see you again.”

“Glad you could join us,” the Sheriff said. “Okay. Looks like there’s been a double homicide at that old farmhouse on 74. The house is back off the road. We’ve been suspecting drug activity out there for some time. Looks like a young man and woman have been murdered inside the house.” He looked at Jonquil. “You told the Deputy you didn’t see anything?”

“Yessir. I mean, nossir . . . I mean, I was in the car.”

“Montrell Jackson’s car?”

“Yessir.”

“Tell me what you saw,” the Sheriff said.

“Monty walked inside that house, and then he came running back.”

“How long was he in there?”

“Just a minute or two,” Jo-Jo said.

“What did he tell you?”

“He said there were two dead people in there. He said they had been chopped to pieces.”

“Okay, then what happened?” the Sheriff asked.

“He said we had to get out of there. He said we should go to

Myrtle Beach. He said we could hide out there,” Jo-Jo said.

“What did you think about that?”

“I just wanted to go home. That’s when I got out and ran.”

“Okay. How did you get back to town?”

“I ran to the highway and waved my arms at every car that went by. A man stopped and picked me up and drove me here.”

The Sheriff took a deep breath. “Okay. I believe you.” He looked at Todd. “You can take her home. But I’ll need her back here first thing tomorrow to write a statement in her own words.” He looked at Jonquil, “Young lady, you and Montrell were out there to buy drugs, right?”

Jonquil barely lifted her head, didn’t look at the Sheriff or us. “Yessir,” she said weakly.

“What? You needed some pot?”

“Yessir.”

“Okay, you can take her home,” he said, looking at me.

We stood up, the Sheriff stood up and motioned to Todd and Big O, “You boys hang tight. Close the door.” I heard the door shut behind me as I walked Jo-Jo into the lobby.

“Here’s what I think happened,” the Sheriff said. “Those two victims were drug dealers. Your daughter was there at the wrong time, her and Montrell. I suspect MS-13 did the murders.”

“Because they were butchered,” Big O said.

“Right. So here’s the deal. I don’t want Jonquil’s name in the newspaper, okay, because MS-13 might see it. The Hamstead gang wants to start a gang here, they want the drug business. So they snuffed their competition. And they did it the way they did to send a message to every other dealer in the county.”

“Sheriff?” A Deputy knocked on the Sheriff’s door.

“Come in,” the Sheriff snapped.

“That boy showed up,” the Deputy said. “Walked into his parents’ house pretty as you please.”

“Thank you, Jesus,” the Sheriff said.

“Yeah,” the Deputy said, “his dad says he’ll bring him in but wants to bring a lawyer when he comes by.”

“Tell him that’s fine, but I want the boy in here tomorrow before noon. And Jack, call the coroner and tell him to meet me at the scene in an hour,” the Sheriff said.

“Mind if I tag along?” Big O asked, surprising the Sheriff.

“Seriously?”

“Yessir, I’ll stay out of the way, but I wouldn’t mind seeing the crime scene.”

“If you go anywhere near it, I’ll have to deputize you first. Hell, I could use the help. Okay, you are now deputized. We’ll need to sign a form. And you can’t be armed. Ask Debbie about that form. Then you can run the cruiser for a fill-up and meet me back here ASAP.” He slid the keys across his desk. “Here’s the card.” He handed a debit card to Oscar. “It’s parked out front. Take it to the BP. I’m going to the can.” The Sheriff walked out, leaving Oscar and Todd alone in his office.

“County law enforcement,” Oscar said, “an interesting world.”

“I still need your help with that porch,” Todd said.

“No problem, I think I’m just a deputy for the night.”

“You’ll make a good deputy,” Todd said.

“I’m sorry about your girl,” Big O said. “Sorry she screwed up.”

“It could’ve been worse, I guess,” Todd said.

“Yeah. Yeah, it could’ve been a lot worse,” Big O said. “It’s a good chance to learn a hard lesson.”

“That’s putting a nice spin on it,” Todd said.

7

Soapbox Interview

Winstead's video studio is located in a storage building behind the farmhouse. He and Carl built it twenty years ago, but Winstead had converted it into a studio when he and his QAnon buddies first started talking about doing a 24/7 YouTube channel. He'd run a cable for his high-speed Internet line, dug the two-mile trench himself with a ditch-digger, all the way out to the highway, where the cable company put in a connection.

While I was visiting with Shirley, picking up some tomatoes and corn and snap beans, Winstead was turning on the studio lights, three "soft boxes," and a small back-light. The set for Wildcat's Corner was an American flag draped behind a desk and a bookshelf of his favorite books, mostly military topics, and books about firearms and American history. He had a video switcher app on an Ipad, an iMac on one side of the desk, and a laptop beside that. He could jump between the camera and his computer monitors. A one-man TV show! At age 72, Wildcat was the techiest person I knew, and a die-hard Apple guy. His video feed went out to a YouTube multi-camera event, and that's how the 24/7 vlogcast was possible. Hosts from across the country, and some in foreign countries, hosted their segments, usually an hour-long show, and they all ran together as a 24-hour, non-stop program with QAnon as the central theme. Whenever Q dropped a new message on 8chan, someone would review it and discuss it. Between "Q drops," the vlogging hosts would talk about other topics and cover the news. By July 2019, they had more than 70,000 subscribers.

I saw Big O drive up and walked out to greet him. He was

wearing his MAGA cap and a fancy blue cowboy shirt. He said hello to Shirley. She handed him a plastic grocery bag with ears of fresh-picked corn sticking out, showing off their bright, golden tassels, then I took him to the studio. It was 9:30, *Wildcat Corner* started at 10.

“This is the first time I’ve had a guest in the studio,” Winstead said, after greeting Big O. “Why don’t you take a seat behind the desk, and Lorie, why don’t you sit in my chair, so I can frame up a two-shot.”

“What are you going to talk about?” I asked Big O.

“Whatever Winstead asks me about, I guess,” Big O said.

Winstead overheard us. “Anything off limits?” he asked, as he leveled the camera.

“If it is, I’ll let you know,” Big O said.

“I’ll call you *Big O* on the show. You can use your real name if you want to, but most of us avoid it. I never say that I live in Whiteville either, I say North Carolina and leave it at that. Just relax and be yourself. We’ll sail right through this.”

“I think I can be myself,” Big O said with a smile. “Guess a lot of people know my name already, but, yeah, call me Big O. I’m not really pushing the music these days.” Big O settled in the chair. “Too bad Q hasn’t dropped anything lately.”

“Yeah, I know,” Wildcat said. “Q’s been awful quiet lately hasn’t he. But he always comes back.”

“We don’t even know if it’s a ‘he’,” I said.

“Well, you’re right, it’s not a he,” Winstead said. “It’s a *them*.”

“It’s Military Intelligence and a few folks from NSA,” Big O said.

“And somebody inside the White House,” I said.

“Like the President himself,” Winstead said, “Q-plus. Hell, we should save this for the show. Lorie, you should do a show sometime. You know this stuff better than I do.”

“I doubt that,” I said. The idea of being in front of a camera petrified me, to be honest, but I was a bona fide conspiracy *analyst*, as Lionel likes to call himself.

The show went live. *Patriot Dawn* (the show before Wildcat’s “handed off” to *Wildcat Corner*, then Wildcat played his intro, a one-minute montage of rural America mixed with a slow-motion American flag waving in a breeze, quick clips of some of his buddies at the firing range, and a few clips of U.S. jets and ships. I pulled up a chair and watched. I’d never seen his show in the studio. I’d watched it on YouTube a few times. I liked it, but I liked some of the shows hosted by women better. Wildcat usually talked about guns and the military, not my favorite topics.

He introduced Big O as a veteran and musician from New Orleans.

“We were talking earlier about QAnon being so quiet lately. Big O, what are your thoughts about the Q phenomenon in general? What do you think Q is trying to accomplish?”

“I think we know that already,” Big O said. “Q is trying to orient the public to the inner workings of the Deep State, because that’s what Trump and the patriots inside the government and inside the military are exposing. It’s what they have to expose to bring it down. Not only do they have to expose it, they have to do it legally, through legal means, otherwise Trump would be accused of political retribution or something worse. It has to be done legally, and that’s Barr’s job, Barr and John Durham.”

“And John Huber, too, he’s up to something,” Wildcat said.

“Absolutely, the Kingston Group-Turkey-Epstein connection maybe, who knows,” Big O said. “Something big, no doubt.”

“You’ve been following Q from the beginning, right?” Wildcat

asked. “You’ve been on top of this from day one.”

“From the very beginning, that’s right,” Big O said.

“How did you hear about Q’s first post?”

“A friend I served with, a Ranger buddy, called me the day Q did that first drop on 4Chan.”

“You’re an Army Ranger, Airborne, right, you served in Iraq?”

“That’s right. Two tours over there,” Big O said.

“How did your Ranger buddy know about Q?”

“He knew what was going down as soon as Trump got elected.”

“So the Rangers are involved in The Plan?” Wildcat asked.

“All I can tell you is that the entire military, every branch, is involved, but only a few people know any details. It’s all ‘need to know,’ and all my buddy knew at the time was that the public piece of The Plan had begun. He was in a position to know that much.”

“Why do you think Q can’t be more direct?” Wildcat asked.

“The Socratic method, and the cryptic style of Q’s posts, you know, that’s what keeps a lot of people from following Q, or even believing that Q is legit. Most people want everything spelled out for them.”

“I’ve thought about that,” Big O said. “I don’t understand some of the posts myself. But you have to ask, why use 8chan for the drops? I think it’s because Q needs to have anons working with him, or with *them*, to fill in the blanks. To translate.”

“To decode the drops,” Wildcat said.

“Right. The anons are a big part of The Plan. Using the Internet, the anons, and guys like you, and everyone on Soapbox, on the boards, the YouTube shows, Twitter, that’s a strategic choice. It’s the information war side of it. The whole world knows about Q now. Q is influencing the world, spreading patriotism and free-thinking, and freedom from corrupt governments, from oppression, those ideals, spreading them across the world.”

“You’re right, it’s a message of hope that rings true to whoever is listening to it,” Wildcat said.

“If their ears are open, if they wake up to it, if they can see it for themselves,” Big O said. “Okay, Wildcat, here’s something else I’ve been thinking about lately. It’s the idea that, number one, the Deep State is global, because it’s tied to global banking interests, and to a number of foreign intelligence agencies, and also because our politicians have learned how to milk profits out of foreign countries, oil and mining, weapons, all kinds of foreign trade deals. Wherever they can stick a finger in the pie, right.”

“Their corporate donors, and their foundations, and the lobbyists in DC. There’s no end to it,” Wildcat said.

“No, there really isn’t, because greed is the game they play. It’s an octopus with lots of arms.”

“Greed, and power and influence,” Wildcat said. “What do you think about Epstein and all of that?”

“I think it’s part of the blackmail and human compromise operations the Deep State has been using for decades. It’s big, it involves a ton of people. Important people.”

“You think Epstein was tied to intelligence?” Wildcat asked.

“No doubt about that,” Big O said. “Acosta said he was.”

“And there’s that Maxwell gal right in the middle of things,” Wildcat said.

“Right. But can you imagine, what if all of this can be stopped, what if all eight arms of the octopus can be cut off, what if their game is demolished? Like it was a board game, and we just ripped the board to shreds, imagine how the economies of the world would benefit. But not just that, imagine how much more economically vibrant, how much *safer*, the world *would have been* for the last fifty or sixty years. We’d be living in a different world right now.”

“Imagine the wars we would have avoided,” Wildcat said. “And free energy.”

“Exactly,” Big O said. “And imagine the money that could have gone to medical research, or to fight poverty.”

“Or to build up the country, to our infrastructure. Here’s a question for you, do you think Trump is orchestrating a massive restructuring of . . . well, of *everything*?”

“Do I think this is his idea? Or is it a military plan? It’s both. I think the plan has been very well-constructed, with lots of moving parts. When there are lots of moving parts, a lot of people are involved. It might be a need-to-know operation, but it’s been very well thought out, with very little room for mistakes.”

“The political side of it is unpredictable, at best,” Wildcat said.

“It is, and it isn’t. The day-to-day stuff is unpredictable, but it’s easy to see how predictable the left is. They are mobilized into attack formation, and they know the MSM will back them up.”

“The MSM will have to crack eventually,” Wildcat said.

“I think so, too, they’ll have to swallow the truth and figure out how to digest it,” Big O said.

I was amazed how smart Big O was. He really knew this stuff. I hadn’t fully considered what they call *The Plan*, the big picture. A restructuring of *everything*. And what was this about “free energy,” dang, I need to learn more about Nikola Tesla.

“So, you wore the Ranger Tab, went through Ranger School at Fort Benning, where you became airborne-qualified, is that right, and you served in Iraq . . . as an infantryman?” Wildcat asked.

“Infantry, specializing in ordnance,” Big O said.

“Tell the patriots at home what that means.”

“It means I knew the ordnance, and weapons, in detail, and made sure my unit was prepared for whatever mission we were on.”

“The Rangers have a great history, don’t they?” Wildcat asked.

“The Ranger lineage goes back to before the Revolutionary War,” Big O said.

“Most people don’t know that,” Wildcat said.

“No they don’t. They don’t know that Colonel Church created the first ranger unit in 1676. Church trained his men in guerrilla warfare. He had help from Native Americans who were friendly with the colonists. Basically, Church wanted his men to fight like the Indians so they could engage the Indians and win. And his official unit was made up of colonists and American Indians.”

“More than a little ironic, huh,” Wildcat said.

“I guess so, but it was an example of how Rangers have learned to adapt to combat situations. During the Revolution, the Rangers became more involved in intelligence-gathering. Some historians say that was the beginning of our modern day Military Intelligence operations.”

“You’re talking about the early lineage of the Rangers,” Wildcat said.” Our Q Patriots listening to us now might need to know that the Rangers specialize in short-notice operations, so they can be dispatched anywhere at anytime on special missions, it’s an elite force not unlike our Navy Seals. But the Ranger Regiment is big, the biggest special forces group in the Army, with four battalions?”

“Five now,” Big O said. “There’s a new battalion just for cyber warfare, signals intelligence, drone warfare, all the advanced technical operations.”

“Here it is online,” Wildcat said, looking at his iMac, it’s called the Ranger Military Intelligence Battalion. According to what I see here on *Task & Purpose*, it will “give the 75th Ranger Regiment the capability to deploy flexible Ranger intelligence teams capable of finding and fixing the enemy anywhere on the battlefield.”

“Right, that’s it. Sort of like what Q is doing,” Big O said.

Wildcat chuckled, “Yeah, it is.”

“The Rangers are evolving, that’s for sure,” Big O said.

“Would you like to share some of your experiences in Iraq?” Wildcat asked.

“Not really,” Big O said. “Sorry, it’s not something I’m ready to revisit. Don’t get me wrong, I love the Rangers. I’m proud to be a Ranger. Very proud. But that was my life as a young man. I’ll never put it behind me, it’s part of who I am, but I don’t live in that headspace anymore.”

“You’re a musician now,” Wildcat said.

“I am. But I’ve always been a musician. Even in Iraq I was a musician. I would entertain the guys.”

“You play the steel guitar?” Wildcat asked.

“That’s right. I started performing in New Orleans when I was a teenager. My grandmother had a flower shop on Dauphine, in the Quarter, and I would help her on weekends. Then I got a job washing glasses at Tipitina’s when I was fourteen. I was around a lot of great musicians, and I picked up the guitar. In fact, my grandmother bought me my first guitar. After a while, some of those local cats let me jam with them. On the weekends, I’d busk at the park for tourist money. And so it goes. Music is in my Creole blood.”

8

Zydeco Dancing

Here's how it went with Jo-Jo when we got home the night of her huge screw-up. Todd sat her down in the den and made her give us the play-by-play. She told us she had gotten hot at the lake and wanted to go home, so, when she saw Monty, and he offered her a ride, she took it. That was a lie. I'm sure she'd planned it.

"If I had a phone, I could have called you guys," she said, trying to shift the blame to us.

They went to that old farmhouse, then, she says, "I just sat in the car while Monty went inside. He came flying out of the house like his butt was on fire."

"Then what did you do?" Todd asked sternly.

"I just sat there. He jumped in the car and we drove away. We went to McDonalds."

"That's not what you told the deputy," Todd said.

"Yes I did."

"You didn't say anything about McDonalds," I said, "you did not, you said you got out of the car at the house and hitched a ride."

"Well, that Deputy's an idiot I guess, because I told him about McDonalds."

"Listen here!" Todd snapped into her face, "I've already lost my patience with you. You're going to be grounded until your eighty, if you don't buck up."

"I don't know what the heck that means, *'Buck up.'*"

"I means you need to pull her head out of your ass," I said. "What if you'd arrived at that house at the same time those two were getting murdered? Have you thought about that?"

“You’d be in pieces now,” Todd said, “chopped up like those drug dealers.”

“OMG ya’ll, aren’t you being a little over-dramatic?” Jo-Jo said.

“I swear, I don’t know what’s happened to you,” Todd said. “You’ve lost your mind.”

“What happened at McDonalds?” I asked.

“I got some nuggets.”

“After your frickin’ nuggets,” I said.

“Monty said we should drive to Myrtle Beach.”

“Why?” Todd asked.

“To escape. He said the cops or Sheriff or whatever would blame us for the murders,” Jo-Jo said.

“Why would he say that? How could they blame you if they didn’t know you were there?” I asked. “He could’ve just taken you home. No one would have known. You lied to the Sheriff, you said you got a ride from some stranger.”

“I’m all confused, now,” Jo-Jo said. “It’s all a blur.”

“I really, really don’t like this Monty kid,” Todd said. “He’s the one I blame for this shit storm. I blame you for being stupid, but I blame him for getting you into drugs.”

“It’s just pot, Dad. They’re making it legal *everywhere*,” Jo-Jo reminded us.

“Not everywhere,” I said. “Not yet.”

“You’re not going to smoke pot, haven’t I made that clear?” Todd said. “You can’t study on pot, you can’t play sports on pot, you’ll get fat and lazy on pot, and I’m not going to let you get away with it. Do you *understand*?”

Jo-Jo slouched into the sofa, gave us her big eye-roll.

“You don’t even act like you care,” I said. “You don’t act like you’re even in trouble, like your gray cells are dead.”

“Why don’t you go upstairs and think about it,” Todd said. She had deflated him the way teenagers do when their mushy brains can’t comprehend something, or when backed into a corner. Or when they’ve simply turned into evil brats.

“What shocks me the most,” I said, “is that you didn’t give a crap about those two kids where were murdered.”

After she left the great room, I said, “Todd, what if that Monty kid was getting drugs to sell, what if he’s a dealer?”

“He is a dealer. He provided drugs to our daughter, so of course he provides them to other kids.”

“Right, well maybe that’s why they went to McDonalds, so he could sell some drugs to the kids who hang out there.”

I must say, Jo-Jo behaved herself for a few days. She got up earlier and helped around the house. She offered to vacuum, to do the dishes, to Windex the storm door, and she helped Todd with the sunroom twice, but she was also bouncing back and forth to school for summer volleyball practice, and that means I was bouncing, too.

She was going into eighth grade, and that required some serious shopping for new clothes. She was at the top of the middle school pecking order and had to look like it, had to “put on the peacock” as my mom used to say. “Lorie, you have to put on the peacock for church, you want to let God see you at your best when you visit his house.” That confused me as a child, because I imagined peacocks in their glorious array of blue and green feathers walking into church and perching on the pews. I know Mom thought their feathers were their clothes, but aren’t we naked before God? When God looks at us, he sees our naked souls, as well as our warts and fat rolls, our stretch marks, our bruises, and our scars.

Lilly was entering the sixth grade, making her middle school

debut, but I didn't worry about her looking good. She was a fashionable little bird, she knew how to fan her feathers.

Todd and I agreed that we could spend \$300 on new clothes for our peacocks. He'd gotten his final payment for the sunroom job, so we set aside \$200 for Jo-Jo and \$100 for Lilly, and I took them to Wilmington to go shopping at T.J. Maxx, Target and Walmart. We spent all the money, and then some. I treated them to Taco Bell before we headed home.

On the way back, Katie called to tell me that she had a baby bump. She was so excited.

"My boobs are growing, too," she said, "and I'm getting very piggy."

"Just watch the sugar," I said.

"I can't stop eating ice cream," she said, "but I eat it with strawberries or peaches."

"Are you sure you aren't using this as an excuse to eat ice cream? My cravings didn't kick-in until the second trimester. You've only been pregnant for a month."

"I know," she said. "It's strange, right? But ice cream speaks to me. Like, every night."

"You don't want to put on fat you can't lose," I said. "Remember Sparky."

"J.D. still wants sex," Katie said. "When should we stop?"

"When it becomes uncomfortable," I said. "But be careful."

I had her on speaker, so the girls heard this.

"They're having sex?" Lilly asked after I'd ended the call. "That's gross."

"Why can't she just focus on having the baby?" Jo-Jo said.

"Because, well, because your husband might want to have sex, and you might want to, and it's not going to hurt the baby."

“I’d just focus on having the baby,” Lilly said.

“Sometimes a husband thinks their pregnant wife is even sexier than she was before,” I said.

“That’s just soooo gross,” Lilly said.

“This might be a good time for us to talk about it,” I said. “About sex. Do you two have any questions?”

“We know how it works, Mom,” Lilly said. “I have to reach puberty first, but that’s just around the corner.”

“No, you have to get way past puberty, then meet your husband,” I said.

“Nobody does that anymore,” Jo-Jo said. “Nobody waits till they’re married.”

“A Christian girl waits,” I said. “I should make you sign one of those contracts. True love *wails*.”

“You are so antique,” Jo-Jo said. “If you love the dude, it’s okay.”

“Don’t make me smack you, Jo-Jo. When you’re a teenager, you don’t know what love is. You may think you do, but you don’t.”

“That’s so prejudiced,” Jo-Jo said. “Prejudiced against the young.”

“Don’t be a hater, Mom,” Lilly quipped.

“Your body is ready for sex way before your mind is ready,” I said. “Way before your heart is ready. When you have sex, you’re giving away a little part of yourself, a little part of your soul. Sex is a sacred act.”

“That’s a nice concept, Mom,” Lilly said. “Really nice.”

The girls heard me, but did they understand me? I doubt it.

At the start of the school year, Sheriff Brown hired Big O on a provisional, part-time basis. He was assigned three night shifts per week at the county jail, plus weekends when they put him on standby

for traffic control and events.

Big O knew the Sheriff liked him. He had driven him to the MS-13 crime scene, and stood beside him over the dismembered bodies, a sight as gruesome as anything he'd seen in Iraq.

Working as a corrections officer was disheartening, Big O told me. "So many of those folks are dope-heads and alcoholics, and two-thirds of them are black. This county has a serious mental health and addiction problem," he explained one evening when he, Todd and J.D. had gotten together to jam in our great room.

Camila was standing beside me in the kitchen where we were making dinner, and Katie was sitting at the kitchen table clipping coupons from a packet of fliers. She was mostly interested in the Arby's coupons because she'd become addicted to their gyros.

"Whiteville has a 24% poverty figure," Camila said. "If you think about it, with almost 56,000 people living in the county, that's 14,000 people who live below the poverty line. That has a lot to do with crime. To make matters worse, the city is more than half black, and poverty in the black community is generational."

"So black folks are stuck being poor, is that what you're saying?" Katie asked.

"Exactly," Camila said. "Education is the primary off ramp, but when the parents are under-educated, their kids are at a disadvantage from day one."

"My baby is going to be super smart," Katie said. "If I can get a degree in botany, there must be some decent brain genes in my family. Even though, I must say, J.D. is proving to be pretty dumb."

"How much money do you need to make to not be a poverty person?" I asked, chopping through a head of iceberg with a Ginsu chef's knife I'd bought on HSN for a one-time bargain price.

"\$25,750, that's the federal poverty income figure," Camila said.

“How do you know all these numbers?” I asked.

“I teach it. It’s part of the sensitivity training for the rookies. I teach them about the contributing factors behind crime and crime rates. Poverty makes people feel hopeless, and hopelessness makes some people turn to crime. Drugs are easy money. Petty theft is pretty easy. If you need to eat, if your kids are hungry, then you get desperate, and you’ll do desperate things. Sometimes it’s literally do-or-die, even though you can get a SNAP card, or you can go to a food pantry. A lot of these folks don’t have cars, heck, they can’t even drive to a grocery store, and a lot of them don’t have a Food Lion around the corner. But a lot of crime, a whole lot, is drug and alcohol-related. Druggies dying for a fix, and husbands getting drunk and beating up their wives. Or, I’ve seen wives and girlfriends who get drunk and beat up their men.”

“I found some diaper coupons,” Katie chirped, “some really good ones. And the Piggly is still doing double coupon days.”

Ignoring Katie, as I sometimes must do, I said, “When Todd and I were first married, we could live pretty well on twenty-five grand a year. It wasn’t easy, a lot pinto beans and liver mush, but we did it.”

“Cornbread,” Katie said, “Liver mush, pintos and cornbread is a feast.”

“We were living at the farm,” Todd said from the great room.

“That’s true,” I said. “We didn’t have a house payment. We’ve been lucky. Winstead’s father bought that land when it was cheap, and they’ve kept the farm going all these years. Todd is the fourth generation.”

“Todd’s the fourth? Wow,” Camila said. “Why didn’t Todd follow in his father’s footsteps?” she asked me in a low voice.

“He wanted to start his own business,” I said, “Todd wants to be on his own, to prove something to himself.”

“Men always have to prove something, don’t they,” Katie interjected.

“Plus, we’re not sure farming is the way to go,” I said. “There’s a lot of risk in it. Prices change, the weather screws everything up, the equipment costs a fortune. Carl leases most of the land now, to make some steady income.”

“Does Shirley do a lot of canning?” Camila asked.

“She does. She keeps a large pantry full of stuff.”

“When I was a kid, I remember walking into my grandmother’s pantry. It was a small, dark room, one overhead bulb, shelves from the floor to the ceiling lined with canning jars filled with everything you could think of. Beans and corn, pickles, tomatoes, cherries and peaches. I remember standing in there one day when I was maybe five or six, and staring at the jars of peaches. They looked like faces pressed against a window, scrunched up faces of people who were asleep, and I was frightened by it. Frightened and amazed at the same time.”

“Where did you grow up?” I asked.

“A little place called Vacherie. It’s about half way between New Orleans and Baton Rouge.”

“Okay, Camila, I’ve been wondering, are you Cajun or Creole?”

“It’s hard to tell the difference sometimes, but Cajuns have more French ancestry. Creoles, like me, are a little bit French, Caribbean, African, and American Indian, plus some European genes, a real blend of races.”

“That must be what makes Creoles so handsome,” I said.

“I don’t know about that,” Camila said.

We could hear the boys starting to find their groove. It was funny to see Todd with a frottoir on his chest. Big O had brought it over. It’s basically like a metal washboard you wear. Todd has a pretty good

sense of rhythm, so he'd volunteered to play it. J.D. was on bass. Big O had also brought over three lovely button accordions. He picked one up and started playing. J.D. and Todd did their best to learn the tune. Camila decided she wanted to teach me and Katie Zydeco dancing, so the three of us danced in front of our boys, working up a sweat, then Lilly and Jo-Jo joined us, maybe the cutest thing I'd ever seen them do together. When the oven went off, I pulled out the two pans of lasagna and set them on the counter to cool. I watched Camila teaching the girls how to dance. At that moment, my life seemed pretty complete, I must say, I was happy in a way that never lasts and just has to be grabbed and remembered in all the less happy times.

We sat down to eat. Todd said a prayer as usual. Camila had brought a bottle of red wine, a Beaujolais, which Camila says is "fresh wine" made in France. I thought it was pretty good, but we don't drink a lot of wine so what would I know. I like my Budweiser, and Todd is developing a taste for IPA, which I hate.

Anyway, conversation is always the best part of a meal.

"Winstead invited me and Lorie to the Trump rally in Charlotte," Todd said. "Winstead is going to meet some of his friends there, friends from Soapbox. They're planning a tailgate shindig, sounds like."

"Shirley will probably make her potato salad and her coconut cake," I said.

"Any of you smelly Walmart people want to join us?" Todd asked. "That might be fun, right?"

"I'm up for it," J.D. said, "hell yeah."

"If I can get off work, we might could do it," Big O said.

"It's on a Wednesday night," Todd said. "October second. But we'd have to get there early. Winstead and Shirley are going on

Thursday. They're going to camp out to be at the front of the line."

"We're still on the for boar hunt, right?" J.D. asked.

"I've asked off that weekend," Big O said.

"What about your music career?" Katie asked. "I bet your new job makes it hard to do gigs, huh?"

"What music career?" Big O said, rather glumly.

"If we're ever going to get out of apartments, we'll need two salaries," Camila said. "So Oscar is sacrificing his soul for a year, or maybe two."

"I'll give it a year, then we'll see," Big O said.

"Do you like your job?" I asked.

"What do you do exactly?" Lilly asked.

"I work in the jail," Big O said.

"That's pretty interesting, huh?" Lilly asked.

"It's alright. Yeah, it's alright. I couldn't do it forever."

"You'll move up," Camila said. "It won't take long."

"Winstead wants you to do another show," I said, "he mentioned it the other day."

"Tell him I'm working on a song," Big O said. "It's a song about the Great Awakening."

"No way," I said. "He'd love that. You could play it on the show."

"I need a band, so I can record it," Big O said. "I want to do it justice."

"Well, you've got a band," J.D. said, glancing at Todd. "Hell yes, you've got one."

"What's it called," Lilly asked, peering at Big O through curious eyes. "The song, what's it called?"

"MAGA Country," Big O said, grinning. "It's a country tune with some Zydeco spice thrown in."

9

Our Confederate Dead

Sheriff Brown called Big O first thing Monday morning, even though he was scheduled for the graveyard shift at the jail.

“Some fool dumped paint on our Confederate dead,” the Sheriff said. “You need to meet me over there.”

“Over where?” Big O asked.

“At the cemetery,” the Sheriff said.

Big O had to GPS the cemetery location. On the way over, he kept wondering why the Sheriff had called him.

The Sheriff was waiting for Big O at the entrance to Memorial Cemetery, and Big O followed him to the Confederate Memorial, which was surrounded by a tall, wrought-iron fence.

“Somebody cut the lock off,” Big O said, stating the obvious. “Probably didn’t want to get impaled on one of those.” He was looking at the fence topped with sharp, spear-shaped spires.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” the Sheriff said. “They keep it locked up because of something like this. Fucking vandals. After they started tearing down Confederate statues, like Silent Sam in Chapel Hill, and that one in Durham, the libtards went on a spree looking for new targets. Big O was surprised to hear the word *libtards* but he knew the Sheriff was a Republican. Most Sheriff’s are. They walked to the obelisk commemorating the Whiteville men who had died in the Civil War. On each side of the obelisk there was a headstone with the names of the men inscribed on them. Thirty-eight names, all from the tiny town of Whiteville, gone but not forgotten. The obelisk had been splashed with red paint and so had the headstones.

“What a shame,” Big O said.

“Bastards,” the Sheriff said. “Fuckin’ soulless bastards.”

“Yeah, they made a terrible mess,” Big O said. “Looks like the cemetery has security video.” Big O was looking at the camera on the streetlight nearby.

“Yep,” the Sheriff said. “If we’re lucky, we’ll see a car, maybe get a license plate. The feed goes to the funeral home over there.” The funeral home sat at the edge of the cemetery, a short walk from the Confederate Memorial.

“I’ll go see them,” Big O said. “Hopefully the system was working last night.”

The Sheriff reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small camera. “Here,” he said, handing it to Big O. “Take some pictures.” The Sheriff crouched on his haunches, looking for any kind of evidence on the ground. “Let’s take a sample of this paint,” he said. “Then I want you to visit every store in town that sells paint, and see if they can remember anyone who bought red paint recently.”

“If they keep a record of the paint that was bought, and the colors, we might find a match to this,” Big O said. “I know Lowes and Home Depot do that. I’ll search the trashcans in the area, maybe they left the can behind.”

“Great idea,” the Sheriff said. “He touched the paint. It was still so fresh it stuck to his finger. “It’s like the blood these men shed has been spilled on them again.” He stood up and looked at Big O. “I’ll call city maintenance and make sure they get over here right away. Hopefully the granite hasn’t been stained permanently.”

That morning, Monty Jackson thought he was the biggest badass at Whiteville High. He was a junior now, a wad of money in his skinny jeans pocket, and fresh kicks on his feet, \$350 black Yeezys. When two Hispanic seniors approached him, he didn’t know what

to think. These boys aspired to join Mara Salvatrucha in Hamstead, and they'd volunteered to draft Monty into a new gang in Whiteville. The "el palabrero," or leader, of the Hamstead gang, had told them to pull Monty into the gang and retrieve the stash from the farmhouse, or else kill him for stealing it. They had planned to steal it themselves. When they killed the two dealers, the attackers (four members from Hamstead) had failed to find the cache of drugs and cash. When Monty dropped by later, he knew exactly where it was. After all, the two dealers had been wholesaling to him since middle school, and they trusted him. The girl who died had always said hi to him at Piggly Wiggly, where she worked as a cashier, always gave him a wink and smile. She was a small town girl who had fallen in with an evil boyfriend, a common trend that led to a lot of petty crime, drug dealing, meth-addicted babies, and fentanyl deaths.

When the two seniors explained his two choices—*join us or die*—Monty wasn't impressed. He wasn't as tall or strong as them, but he'd been practicing Dambe, a brutal West African form of boxing, since he was twelve. His father was a big UFC fan. When Monty was younger, he and his father had wrestled on the floor. He'd been taught the basic techniques of Greco Roman wrestling, and he'd wanted to join the wrestling team at Whiteville Middle, but the coach was such a jerk that Monty didn't enjoy the practices, so he threw in the towel and began peddling drugs.

The seniors pushed him against a locker and got in his face. They told him his choices. "Únase a nosotros o muera."

"I didn't take anything from that house," Monty said. "Get off me before I break your legs."

"Estamos MS-13 usted poco mierda," the shorter one said. (We're MS-13 you little shit.)

The bigger of the two shoved Monty's shirt into his neck so hard,

pinned against the locker, he began to choke. Monty thrust his knee into the thigh of the Hispanic kid, and the kid crumpled to the tile floor. By then, the Assistant Principal, Ben Chartman, was on the scene. Since the big Hispanic boy was on the floor, groaning, and cursing in Spanish, Chartman took Monty to the principal's office, where he had to explain the altercation.

"They were bullying me," Monty said, "they wanted my lunch money."

"You're saying they came after you?" the Principal, Gene Jamison, asked.

"It was two against one," Monty said. "They were choking me. I had to defend myself." The Principal was jotting a few notes.

"But you threw the first blow, didn't you? That's what the other kids said. "Those who saw it unfold."

"I told you they were choking me."

"But you threw the first blow, right?"

Monty glared at him.

Then the principal called his father.

Big O took a deep breath of fresh hot air as he walked down the front steps of the funeral home. The place had creeped him out. That putrid smell of rotting carnations and musty carpeting.

The Sheriff called. "Yessir?" Big O said, because he'd put the Sheriff's number in his smartphone and knew it was him. "How's it going, sir?"

"Badly, it's going badly. We had a tractor-trailer explode down at Tabor City, on the highway. It's a fuckin' mess. I've gotta run down there. I need you to drop by the high school. There's been a fight, and I need you to check it out."

"Copy that," Big O said. "Don't they have a cop there, a School

Resource Officer?”

“An SRO? Yes they do, but I want you to talk to Gene, the Principal. It’s Montrell Jackson who was involved in the fight. This is important. Check into it. And stay on that other case, the paint thing, the vandalism thing.”

“Yessir, copy that,” Big O said. “I’m leaving here soon.”

“Learn anything?”

“There was nothing on the tape. No cars in the vicinity all night. They must have walked to the cemetery, parked somewhere outside, and there’s not a camera aimed at the memorial itself.”

“A slight oversight, wouldn’t you say,” the Sheriff said.

“Copy that,” Big O said. “I’ll start canvassing the stores, right after I go to the high school. Sheriff, there’s a meeting for my jail squad at two today. Should I stay on this stuff all afternoon, or go to the meeting?”

“I’m going to move you out of the jail,” the Sheriff said. “So don’t worry about it.”

When Big O told us this story later, he called it his “initiation day.” The Sheriff was testing him, and a week later Big O was called to the Sheriff’s office:

“We need to start a new squad,” the Sheriff said, “a half-dozen deputies who focus on gang activity in the county. And illegals, we need to see if there’s a connection. But the squad will require organization and direction. I think it’s a job a Ranger can handle.”

“Yessir. Thank you, sir,” Oscar said.

“Is it a job you’d like to have?” the Sheriff asked. “Is it something you’re interested in?”

“Yessir. I think it would be,” Oscar said, “just haven’t thought about a job like that before.”

“You’ll figure it out, and I’ve got some ideas myself. By the way,

the job comes with a pay raise, and the rank of Lieutenant.”

“Thank you very much, sir,” Oscar said.

His initiation day had continued at the high school, where he started by talking to the SRO, and Ben, the Assistant Principal:

“This is not going to end well for Montrell,” Ben said. “Those Mexican boys have been trouble from the day they walked in. They’re tough guys. One has a father in prison and the other one doesn’t know where his father is. Both come from the immigrant community. But Monty, he lives at the golf course. That kid’s not hurting for anything. His father’s on the way over to get him.”

“Tell me about the fight,” Big O said.

“We didn’t see it,” Ben said.

“I was on the other side of campus,” the SRO said.

“We had some eye-witnesses,” Ben said. “A few kids saw it. They say the Mexican boys started it by pushing Montrell, then Montrell kicked one of them. That’s when I got there. Montrell really hurt that boy. Those Mexican boys speak Spanish, and we can hardly understand them, so we questioned Montrell.”

“How did that go?” Big O asked.

“He said it was self-defense, said they’d confronted him.”

At the Principal’s Office, Montrell sat in an orange fiberglass chair looking bored, didn’t even glance at Big O when he walked in.

Principal Jamison invited Big O into his office and motioned to a chair.

“The Sheriff asked me to drop by,” Big O said. “We’d like to know more about this fight.”

“There wasn’t much to it. Looks like a typical case of bullying,” Jamison said. He glanced over Big O’s shoulder. “That must be

Montrell's father." He opened his office door. Jeffers Jackson was talking to his son. "Sir, Montrell is free to go home, but I need to explain the situation, if you don't mind."

Jeffers Jackson came into the office and was surprised to see Big O sitting there. Jeffers was the kind of man who might be accused of speaking down to people. Not because he tried to. He was just better educated, a successful businessman, and confidence was built into his character. He'd studied textile science at State, he'd gone to Davidson for an MBA, he'd started his own niche chemical company and grown it into a multi-million dollar business. Yet the white business community in Whiteville had ignored him. For two decades, he'd suffered the indifference of a small southern town. So he bought the nicest house at the country club, played golf there, mostly with black friends, but never took dinner there. He didn't want to be part of their circle, just wanted them to see his \$45,000 Benz, the black coupe he parked at the far end of the parking lot, safe from dings.

"What's the Deputy here for?" Jeffers asked.

"We like to stay in contact with our schools," Big O said, "especially when there's an incident."

"Montrell was defending himself, why are you suspending him?" he asked Jamison.

"I'm not suspending him, just sending him home early. It's protocol to inform a parent immediately when a child is engaged in any form of violence."

"Those boys were choking him," Jeffers said. "He reacted the way I taught him to." He scanned their faces. "Did you send those Hispanic boys home? His *attackers*?" Jeffers asked.

"We can't send them home. Their parents don't answer the phone. They may not even have phones for all we know. Look, I

want this to be positive for Montrell, I want . . .”

“I see bias, *racial bias*, at work here,” Jeffers said sharply. He was ready to snap.

“You mean bias in favor of the Hispanic kids?” Jamison asked.

“Bias against Monty, that’s what I see. Either because he’s black, or because he comes from a wealthy home.”

Big O thought this was a new spin on racism. Racism merged with classism. Prejudice against the wealthy, or the black and wealthy, among white public servants.

“Nobody’s biased here,” Jamison said.

“Oh my god, the town is named *Whiteville*,” Jeffers said.

“That doesn’t mean we’re racist,” Jamison said. “Just white.”

“Was that a joke?” Jeffers asked. “This isn’t a joke.”

“I agree with you,” Big O said. “Whiteville isn’t a great name for a town. Not if you’re colored.”

“The town was named after a man named James White,” Jamison explained. “He donated the land for the courthouse.”

“Thank you for the history lesson,” Jeffers said. “I’m going to take Montrell home now.” Jeffers stood up and looked at Big O. “Do you have a card?” he asked.

“Yessir,” Big O said. He retrieved a small business card holder from his pocket. “This is your basic Sheriff’s Office card. My name’s not even on it yet, because I’m new. But I have this card with my name and number.” He handed Jeffers the card he used for music gigs, the one with Oscar Darbonne, Master of the Steel Guitar embossed in gold leaf. Jeffers took the cards and left with his son. The room grew quiet.

Principal Jamison looked at Big O and winced. “Well,” he said.

“Do you do locker searches?” Big O asked.

“Once a month,” the Principal said.

“I’d like to see Montrell’s locker,” Big O said.

Montrell’s locker had books in it, textbooks and spiral notebooks, and a metal compass with a bent pivot pin, a Scripto leaking blue ink, and an old iPod. Big O had thought he might find drugs, or something else of interest.

He was on his way back to Principal Jamison’s office when he noticed a mark on the floor. A small red sliver of paint on the speckled white tile, then he saw several more. Then he realized it was a partial footprint. Red paint from a shoe.

Had he found the vandal? Was it a student? A student who hated the Confederacy? Someone who considered themselves a radical activist or anarchist?

Jamison didn’t know of any kids who matched that profile.

Big O left the school with a printout of the students, their names, addresses and phone numbers. He’d narrowed the field of potential suspects to 346 teenagers.

10

Wild Pigs

Friday morning, September 20th, 2019, Todd was giddy, like a child on Christmas morning. Annoying, sure, but I love seeing him happy and high-energy, going after life full-bore: he'd packed the Durango the evening before, he'd gotten the coffee pot ready the night before and programmed it to turn on at 5 AM, and had set his big, green Coleman thermos right beside it.

Pure Adrenaline Outfitters in Four Oaks, NC is not that far from Whiteville, just an hour drive straight up the map, past Fayetteville, on Highway 95. The boys (Todd, J.D., Big O and Luke) planned to drive up early that morning, do some fishing at a lake Todd found online, then go after some wild pigs Saturday afternoon. Other than NASCAR, this was maybe the perfect male bonding experience. I don't see why in the world NASCAR and hunting, and, for that matter, football, have such control over men. It has them by the nads, I guess, to use a crude explanation. It's all about testosterone, but isn't everything? Ambition, sex, war. Hormones. And adrenaline. The drugs the human body uses to make a man tick.

My god, think of the cost of all those hormones. A boar hunt costs \$325 per hunter! Cheaper than a golf addiction, I guess. I'm glad Todd isn't into that. We can afford a NASCAR race once a year, and a Panthers game once in a while. Fishing and hunting licenses aren't that expensive. But a boar hunt? Think how much pork you could buy for \$325! Add the cost of a motel room, gas, meals, beer and cigars, heck, this weekend was going to cost us \$600!!! Notice those three exclamation points. Male bonding is frickin' expensive, and guess what . . . you have to shoot a "small boar," a 200-pounder,

or else the meat will be too tough. If you kill a 300 pound “trophy boar,” you can put its head on your wall, I suppose, with its nasty tusks sticking out, but the meat is no good, except maybe the tenderloin. Who wants a boar head on their wall? Not me.

That Friday, Camila and Katie came over for coffee. This was their fall break at Southeastern Community College, so Camila didn’t have classes. I’d invited Luke’s girlfriend, Susie, but she’s a teller at Suntrust, and banks don’t get a fall break. I had made a pan of brownies, and we had a full carafe of Peets, so we were as contented as three sows in warm mud, or three gals with Ghiradelli Dark Chocolate brownies and good coffee.

Camila had prodded Big O to go on the hunt. She said it would be the first time he’d handle a rifle since retiring from the Rangers.

“I realized on the way over here that me and Lorie have “E” names,” Katie said after we’d sat down on the patio.

“We could call you *Camie*,” I said to Camila.

She thought about it. “No, I’ll stick with Camila,” she said. “I had a boyfriend once who called me ‘Cam,’ and ‘Camie,’ and he was a jerk. Actually, he was abusive, not physically, but emotionally. He had a dark side.”

“You should tell us about him,” Katie said, prying, as usual.

“No. Old wounds don’t always need to be reopened,” Camila said. “Sometimes you have to forgive, and try to forget.”

“So true,” I said.

“I forgave J.D.,” Katie said. “Just for the record, I forgave him.”

“You mean, for the Sparky affair?” I asked. “I mean, the non-affair?”

“What’s this all about?” Camila asked.

“J.D. had a fantasy affair with one of his students,” I explained.

“A stripper named Sparky.”

“Nothing ever happened, really,” Katie said. “It was all in his stupid head.”

“Well that’s good,” Camila said, grinning.

“But I forgave him,” she said. “With the baby and all, I want our marriage back on solid turf.”

“I’m glad Oscar could go on this trip,” Camila said. “He needed it. He needs new friends. Good friends. You two are lucky to have good husbands. We’re all lucky.”

“We all need good friends,” I said. “I remember that night at the Crazy Horse when we met. I would never have thought that we’d become friends.”

“Why did you walk over?” Camila asked. “You went out of your way to tell Oscar how much you enjoyed his set. You were the only person who said anything.”

“Most people were probably intimidated,” I said.

“By Oscar?”

“Sure,” I said. “Not intimidated in a bad way, just because he has such a big presence on stage, so much *charisma*.”

“*My* Oscar?”

“Yes, your Oscar,” I said. “You know he does. You probably don’t see it, but all of us see it.”

“Why did you say he needed it?” Katie asked. “The hunting trip. I guess most men need hunting trips. Just to feel like a man.”

“He needed a break from his routine at the Sheriff’s office,” Camila said. “And he needs to be with friends he can trust. The way he trusted his Airborne buddies. One of the reasons Rangers can’t readjust to life in the real world is they don’t trust regular people. Rangers can’t tolerate slackness, they strive for perfection. That’s the Ranger DNA. Zero tolerance for mistakes. Normal people don’t live

by their standard. I think I know Todd and J.D. pretty well. They're hard-working men. Oscar sees you guys, how you work and struggle like we do, and he admires you for having good marriages, and for being good parents. Oscar doesn't know his parents. He was raised by his grand-mère."

"What happened to his parents?" Katie asked.

"His father was killed in Vietnam, so he never knew him. In fact, all we know about him is that he was an older man, a Captain in the Army. Oscar's mother left New Orleans to live in California with another man. We think she had a baby girl by him, that girl would be Oscar's step-sister, but he's never met her. Then his mother married a different man. She came back to New Orleans once, when Oscar was six years old. We have one picture of her. She's sitting on the steps of Gigi's house with Oscar sitting beside her. He was a scrawny little kid, and his mother was quite lovely."

"Is his mother still alive," I asked.

"No, she passed away. From a heroin overdose."

"Who is Gigi?" Katie asked.

"Gigi? That's his grand-mère. It's an extremely sad situation. Oscar had no connection to his mother. His grand-mère, and the Darbannes, his aunts and uncles and cousins, that's his family. Half his family is missing."

"You mean Darbonne is not his real name," I asked, "it's not his last name?"

"No, and he doesn't even know his birth father's last name."

"No birth certificate?" I asked.

"He doesn't have one. He was born at his grand-mère's house, and his mother left him there. Her name was Prissy, or Priscilla. Of course, he had to get a birth certificate later. His grand-mère knew the date and time of birth. It's so ironic, right, I mean, she delivered

him . . . when he came out of the womb, the first hands he felt were hers, and she carried him through life for eighteen years.”

“I’m going to cry,” Katie said.

“I know,” Camila said. “But Oscar’s story has a happy ending. He survived Iraq, I thank God for that. And now he has a new job.”

“And he’s got you,” Katie said.

“Yes, he’s got me. And I’m lucky to have him.”

“How’d he get into the Rangers?” I asked.

“ROTC. He loved ROTC. He excelled at it. That and baseball. He played second base in high school, and he was going to play for Tulane, he had a partial scholarship, but he joined the Army instead.”

“How did he become a musician?” I asked.

“New Orleans taught him music,” Camila said. “That’s the only teacher he needed.”

On the first day of their adventure, the boys caught some fish, three crappie, two bream, one big catfish, and two bass that they released, but they took the other fish back to Traveler’s Inn and paid the cook at the attached diner to fry them up. They ordered two baskets of fried shrimp and had themselves a feast, packed shoulder to shoulder in a red vinyl booth with a lovely view of Highway 95.

“How’s the squad shaping up?” Luke asked, holding a shrimp coated in cocktail sauce by the tail, then chomping into it.

“We have a team of ten now,” Big O said. “They’ve added human trafficking to our list of special investigations.”

“You mean we have human trafficking in Columbus County?” Todd asked. “What the fuck.”

“What we’ve learned so far is that trafficking isn’t coming into the county, it’s going out. It’s what we call *recruitment and abduction*. Girls

are recruited and groomed in Whiteville for sex work in Charlotte, believe it or not, and sometimes girls are moved out of state, sometimes down to Florida. Florida is bad for human trafficking. There are four networks we look at in North Carolina. MS-13, they traffic girls and children, and they transport illegals. Some of those illegals are trafficked for sex work. The Asians bring in girls to their nail salons, and who knows what else they do, house-cleaning, prostitution, but it's sometimes a form of slavery. Then there's the sex trade, including strippers, street walkers and call girls, and then there's number four, a loose network of prostitutes who work the truck stops, the lot lizards. You'll find runaways getting involved in that. Our biggest concern is MS-13, because they're moving into the drug business in Whiteville. We don't want them to get a foothold. If they do, our job gets a lot harder.

"I thought meth was the thing," Luke said. "Anybody can make that, right?"

"Not unless you know the chemistry," Big O said. "Pot and pills are popular, plus heroin, oxy, and fentanyl."

"You're investigating all of that?" Luke asked.

"Right now, we're researching, and monitoring. Sure, it's investigative work, but nothing specific. A girl did turn up the other day in Lumberton, a girl from Whiteville."

"What do you mean, she *turned up*?" J.D. asked.

"She was murdered," Big O said. "We think she was muling. And she got herself killed."

"What was her name?" Todd asked.

"Dorene Meeks. Her father has a business in Whiteville."

"Meeks Transmissions," Todd said. "He did some work for me a few years ago." Todd looked at J.D., who was wearing a blank, stunned expression.

“What’s *muling*?” Luke asked.

“That’s when they carry drugs in body cavities,” Todd said.

“In prisons, sure, but muling just means transporting drugs,” Big O explained, “getting someone else to transport them, someone you control, so you, the dealer, won’t get busted. The mule gets busted.”

“What about children?” Todd asked. “What about child trafficking?”

“The abduction part or the porn part?” Big O replied.

“Both,” Todd said.

J.D. had left the booth to go to the men’s room. Then he went to the counter and ordered a fresh beer. He was thinking about Sparky, wondering why he hadn’t seen the situation she was in for what it really was: a dark, dangerous world for a pretty girl too stupid, or too amoral, to see it for herself.

“We haven’t had a child abduction that I’ve heard about,” Big O said in response to Todd’s question. “Child porn is Internet-based, digital files. Trump’s been cracking down on that since he first took office. A lot of people make the stuff and sell it on the dark web.”

“Those assholes oughta be drawn and quartered,” Luke said.

“Do you think my girls are safe here?” Todd asked. “I’d kill any muthafucker who abused them, flat out kill him.”

“Without a second thought,” Luke said.

Big O knew about killing, he knew too much about it for his own well-being, his own mental health.

“Your kids are safe,” Big O said, “a lot safer in Whiteville than in a bigger city.”

That afternoon, Jo-Jo had a volleyball game. Katie and Camila went with me, but first we had lunch at Inlet View, a place in Shallotte, about a half-hour south at the barrier islands. It’s my

favorite place for seafood, and the view of the Intracoastal Waterway and marshlands is spectacular. Every Fourth of July, we take the girls there to see the fireworks. You see them bursting in the sky and in the water at the same time. Lorie and I wanted Camila to see the view, so we had lunch on the deck. The September sky was Carolina blue and filled with “cotton ball clouds,” that’s what Lilly calls them, and the shadows of the clouds were drifting across the water.

“I’m planning to get pregnant,” Camila said. She’d ordered a margarita, I had to have me a Bud, Katie was drinking sweet tea.

“That’s great,” Katie and I said almost simultaneously.

“When exactly?” Katie asked.

“I’m not sure,” Camila said. “But I’d like to plan on June for the delivery.”

“You’d better get busy, June is nine months away,” I said.

“Yeah, you better get to it, girl,” Katie said. “I hope it’s easier for you than it was for me.”

“I’m thirty-eight,” Camila said. “I can’t wait much longer. If I have a baby in June, I’ll have the summer to be at home full-time.”

“Then you’ll go back to work?” I asked.

“I’ll have to,” Camila said, “I don’t know that I even have a choice. I don’t want to raise a child in an apartment. I want to have a house before the baby comes.”

“You and Oscar will be great parents,” I said.

“I hope so,” Camila said. “We’ll have you guys for advice.”

“You might not want my advice,” I said. “I’m feeling more and more like a failure, with my crazy Jo-Jo. Teenagers are a different kind of animal. They literally get lost, in their heads, they get lost.”

“Maybe she’s looking for her self,” Camila said, “you know, her adult self, her grown up self, she’s just growing up. It’s a natural process. Emotional and psychological maturity is tricky stuff. Not

every kid benefits from a moral compass. That's the parents' job. Your anger and frustration, your discipline, that's like a wall you and Todd put up for her. She may crash into it, but she knows it's there, she knows it's a wall."

"The other day I found her pot gummies. Her stash of THC candy. The gummies have sprinkles on them, like something for kids. Like candy. Hell, it is candy, candy with THC in it."

"Did you confront her?" Katie asked.

"Hell yes I confronted her."

"And," Katie said, "what did she say?"

"She said everyone was eating them."

"What did you say?" Katie asked.

"I said I was going to let Todd handle it."

"And?"

"She said 'Daddy's a big bully.'"

"What does Lilly think about her sister, and the gummies?" Camila asked.

"She just listens, takes it all in. She's my good child, my little angel. If Jo-Jo corrupts her, I don't know what I'll do."

"Teenagers make stupid mistakes," Katie said.

"A little pot, or gummies, is not the end of the world," Camila said.

"Remember how much pot we used to smoke?" Katie asked.

"Yes," I said. "And I remember how close I came to screwing up my chances of going to college."

"Where did you go to college?" Camila asked.

"UNC-Chapel Hill," I said, "but only for one semester, then I had a baby. I don't talk about it much, it's too embarrassing."

"The baby? Or you dropping out of college?" Katie asked.

"Both," I said. "Of course, I love Jo-Jo, but having a baby at

eighteen is not cool. Not when you're going to Chapel-Hill."

"You want to make God laugh, tell him your plans," Katie said.

"Ain't that the truth," Camila said.

We had to get back for Jo-Jo's volleyball game, but we had enough time to visit Ocean Isle Beach and take a short walk. We took our shoes off and cooled our toes in the surf. I looked at Katie's baby bump. With the ocean as background, I could see how she was really showing now. Her belly was framed by the splashing waves, and, beyond that, the smooth blue-green surface of the Atlantic stretched to the horizon, the great big salty womb of the sea.

When I think of boar hunting, I imagine the boys tromping through the woods, looking for boar with their binoculars, finding one deep in the woods, sneaking up on it like Indians, using their \$1000 rifles to blow it away, that kind of scenario.

But that's not how it works on a hunting preserve. They have these things called "feeders" that chop up dry ears of corn and spray it on the ground. The boar come out to eat it, and you shoot them from a blind. They even shine green lights on the boar so you can see them, since the boar only come out at night. You do a lot of waiting for the boar to show up. Sounds like fun, doesn't it?

Todd and Big O were sitting in a blind that Saturday night. J.D. and Luke were in another blind a quarter-mile away, facing the opposite direction so the boys wouldn't shoot each other.

"You see anything?" Big O asked. Todd was peering out of the blind as the feeder went through a cycle. A half-hour had passed without the two men speaking. Big O was used to the quiet, he'd been trained in stealth, trained to lie in wait for the enemy.

"Nah," Todd said. "Nothing yet."

"Are you okay?"

“Sure. Okay? Yeah. Why? Because I’m not talking?” Todd asked, keeping his voice low.

“You’ve been quiet ever since we left the diner,” Big O said.

“I’ve got a lot on my mind,” Todd said. “I get quiet when I have a lot on my mind.” He sat back, holding his rifle between his knees. “That girl who died, that Meeks girl, J.D. and I saw her at The Palace.”

“The strip club?”

“Yeah. She was a stripper. And she had a thing for J.D. He took me to the club because he wanted to see her dance. Now she’s dead. It’s hard to believe. She came over to our table before she did her routine. I met her. She shook my hand. She had very delicate fingers. She was a good kid, but that’s what she was, just a kid. A kid in a woman’s body.”

“And she had a thing for J.D.?” Big O asked.

“Yeah, she was in his welding class. She liked to flirt with him. But they never did anything. You know, it was just something that J.D. got in his head, because she was pretty and she liked to flirt. I mean, this girl was Julia Roberts pretty.”

“Right,” Big O said.

“Do you know who killed her?” Todd asked.

“No, but I’ll see if they have any leads up in Hamstead.”

“Maybe check out the club, too, see if the other girls know something,” Todd said.

“Good idea,” Big O said, “I’ll see if they’re investigating that angle. Maybe offer them some help. Since she was murdered in Hamstead, they’re the ones investigating. I’d be surprised if they hadn’t checked out the club.”

“What’s it like, being a deputy, after being in the Rangers?” Todd asked.

“It’s nothing like the Rangers,” Big O said.

“Do you miss it? Todd asked.

“Every day,” Big O said. “Camila says we’re in a new chapter of life, but I’ll always be a Ranger, regardless of anything else I do. Some of it I’d like to forget. But most of it, well, here’s the thing, I’m afraid I’ll forget the best part of it.”

“What’s that, what’s the best part?”

“The team,” Big O said, “and how we depended on each other, how we worked like a machine when our lives were on the line.”

“I wanted to join the Army,” Todd said. “Sometimes I wish I had, but Dad needed me on the farm, then Lorie got pregnant. I wanted to get out of Whiteville, but here I am. Married with two kids. Living on a fucking shoestring, kissing my customers’ asses most of the time, trying to keep my daughter from self-destructing.”

“What would you rather be doing?” Big O asked.

“I don’t know,” Todd said. “I think about it a lot: ‘Todd, is there something else you could be doing, something else you *should* be doing?’ Lorie says you have to be happy where you are, or you’ll never be happy anywhere.”

“That’s pretty true,” Big O said. “She’s a smart lady.”

Two rifle shots rang out, both boys flinched. “That’s J.D. and Luke,” Big O said. “I bet they got two hogs.”

“Shit,” Todd said, “we’re going to be here all night. You know those hogs are scattering to the four winds now.”

“Let’s give it another hour,” Big O said. “Maybe one will wander over here.”

Less than an hour passed before three boar showed up at their feeder. One was a big-ass boar, according to Todd, but the other two were a decent size. He and Big O killed those two. “It was too easy,” Todd admitted later.

Thank God Big O carried a sidearm. He and Todd left the blind to examine the two boar they'd dropped. Big O's boar had scrambled into the trees before falling. He looked back at Todd, who was stooped down near the feeder, using a flashlight to check out the entry wound on his boar, when a black bear came out of the woods. Big O told me the bear bounded toward Todd and raised up on its hind legs before Todd knew what was happening. Big O drew his 9mm Beretta and put two bullets into the bear's chest from forty feet but the bear didn't stop. Big O stepped forward as Todd crouched lower, and he hit the bear with four more shots, the bear roared at him, and he put a slug through its open mouth, that's what did it: a bullet through the brain, but the bear didn't fall backward, it fell onto Todd, smashing him down on top of the boar. Todd said he could feel the bear groaning on top of him, its body shuddering before it died. He said he was pinned down by the bear and Big O had to pull it off him.

In all, they had three boar and one bear. Luke had missed his shot at a boar. They all agreed that the bear was worth the price of the trip.

The guide at Adrenaline hauled the animals to the processing shed on his Polaris ATV, and the boys went to work skinning and culling the meat off the boar. The guide said they would keep the bear since it wasn't included in the deal. They said they could sell the meat and maybe the hide, too.

"Good thing you were using a standard round," the guide said to Big O, "a hollow point doesn't penetrate as good. You hadn't made that head-shot, we'd be running Todd to the hospital right now."

"Aren't bears out of season?" J.D. asked. "Do we need to worry about the game warden?"

"You can always shoot a bear in self-defense," the guide said.

“And this was self-defense, that’s for sure.”

“Indeed it was,” Todd said, glancing at Big O.

They took pictures, including one of Todd’s camo jacket splotted with the bear’s blood. That was the photo he printed out at Walmart and clipped to the Durango’s visor. Proof of the night Big O saved his life.

11

Sad Things Come In Threes

Big O was walking the high school corridors again. He had gone through the list of students and only one of them stood out as a possible desecrator of the Confederate memorial. A senior named Junior Blackston, and the reason he stood out was that he had a long juvie record that included vandalism.

So Big O asked the Principal, Assistant Principal and SRO about Junior and learned that he was a country boy from a troubled home. If anything, he would be a skinhead or just a plain ol' redneck. A child of the ignored, under-educated, perennially poor in the bustling New South, Junior showed off a Confederate flag in his truck. Big O saw the flag himself when the SRO identified Junior's pickup in the parking lot, to prove that Junior was not a good suspect. Big O had seen the Stars and Bars thousands of times in the backwoods of Louisiana, and it always put him on guard. It was the Confederate *battle flag*, and some people were still battling, struggling with racism, ignorance, poverty, and identity.

The parking lot was sweltering and Big O had come up empty. He was ready to slide into the cruiser and enjoy its frigid air conditioning, when they walked past a Prius in the teacher's parking area, and it suddenly dawned on Big O that teachers walk the hallways of the high school, too. Not that the teacher who owned the Prius was a likely suspect, no, the Prius just stirred a thought. Maybe there was a radical leftist teacher among the staff.

"There's only two that I can think of," the SRO said. "They are both kinda hippie-like. Both are young. A woman and a man. The woman wears dreadlocks. The man has a ponytail."

Strangely perhaps, it seems to me, hair had become symbolic, in the SRO's eyes, of two teachers who might be radical, in some sense of that word. More radical than that, at least to me, is that eighty-year-old lady who shuffled into the Cutting Edge the other day and had me cut off her lovely silver hair. She wanted a Chelsie cut like her granddaughter's, who appeared to be a Goth in the photo the lady showed me. "Do you want me to put some purple streaks in it, too," I asked, "like her coloring?" Of course she did. Maybe the lady was senile, I don't know, but she was using the coupon we give out at the nursing homes.

"Do either of those teachers drive a Prius?" Big O had asked.

"No, don't think so," the SRO said. "The part-time nurse drives that. Her husband's a chiropractor. Guess they can afford a car like that." Like I told you, everybody knows everybody in a town the size of Whiteville.

Big O got the teachers' names and checked out their Facebook pages anyway. The woman had an FB posting about Silent Sam, the statue that once graced the campus of UNC-Chapel Hill. Silent Sam was a memorial to *the sons of the University who died for their beloved Southland*, but that didn't matter to most of the students and alumni. To them, Sam was a landmark, a place to meet friends before hitting the bars on Franklin Street. My stepfather was a Tarheel. One afternoon when he was there in the 70's, he met Livingston Taylor, who liked to play his guitar at the statue. (Livingston is James Taylor's brother, they grew up in Chapel Hill, don'tcha know.) You can see why my stepfather was so pissed off when they took the statue down.

The Facebook posting was enough of a lead for Big O, a long-shot, no doubt, but he *had a feeling about it*, so he went to the chamber meeting where they were discussing what to do about the memorial

at the cemetery. Sure enough, Ms. Dreadlocks and Mr. Ponytail were there, sitting together like two anarchist peas in a pod.

Of the hundred or so people who were present, Ms. Dreadlocks was the only one who made an argument for the removal of the memorial.

“Some of us are offended,” she said, “by having slave owners validated in a public venue.”

The mayor pointed out that “The cemetery is not exactly a public venue. It’s not like a city park or the courthouse. It’s a grave marker for men who never came home.”

“Yes, but it’s time we all acknowledged the immorality of the south’s position in the Civil War, as the defender of slavery.”

“Nobody likes slavery,” our dapper, bow-tied mayor, Tom Craven, said. “But people still want to honor their ancestors, even if they were on the wrong side of history. Maybe getting rid of Civil War statues is the politically correct thing to do, maybe it makes some people feel better, like they’re doing something positive, making a statement about slavery, I suppose, but that statement has already been made. It was made by the war itself.”

People clapped and hooted. Big O thought the mayor had framed the issue beautifully. He knew how tightly New Orleans and Baton Rouge embraced their Civil War heritage. There was a Union cannon ball still lodged in the side of a church on Florida Street in Baton Rouge. The tourists loved looking at it. In North Carolina, the war divided many families, brothers fought each other. When you kill your brother, it doesn’t mean you don’t love him deep down, it just means you had a terrible disagreement. Why not let that disagreement, that division, die along with the soldiers?

Big O decided to set up a sting. He had the Internet specialist on his squad lure Ms. Dreadlocks into a WhatsApp chat. The Internet

specialist pretended to live in Raleigh, and they chatted about the Confederate statues on the State Capitol grounds. Big O sent a deputy to take pictures of the statues, which they sent to Ms. Dreadlocks, who shared her own ideas about how to deface or graffiti the monuments. After two weeks of chatting, they agreed to meet in Wilmington. Big O sent a young female deputy undercover, and she recorded two conversations with Ms. Dreadlocks. In one conversation, the teacher bragged about dumping paint on Whiteville's memorial. Big O and the Sheriff got their pictures in the paper the day after Ms. Dreadlocks was busted. She didn't rat out Mr. Ponytail, though, she faced the charge by herself, and the school didn't fire her. The school board decided to wait and see what the judge would do. A week passed before her cute Mini Cooper was doused with red paint, by some drunk rednecks, no doubt. The Sheriff simply shrugged it off. Big O learned later that the Sheriff's great-great grandfather's name was etched on the memorial. He'd fought in J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry at Brandy Station, and had died not by pistol ball or sword, but when his horse was hit by artillery cannon, he was thrown off, and the stallion, raised at home on the family farm and brought to ride with Stuart's storied calvary, rolled on top of him.

I'm the kind of mom who never misses a game, or a dance recital or a school play, when one of my girls is in it. I can't stand the thought of missing a moment when they accomplish something, even something little that only I might see. Am I living vicariously through them? Sure I am. They are my life right now. I keep a calendar and schedule their practices and events around my styling appointments. When it comes to parenting, I'm all in. Because I know these years will pass quickly. "We only get to live this day once," my father liked to remind me.

But the day Jo-Jo broke her ankle is a day I'd skip over, if I had any control over fate.

Katie went with me to the game, and we were cheering our heads off, embarrassing Jo-Jo (she gave us a few eye-rolls) but we didn't care. She was having a great game. She was one of the best players on the team. She could dive after balls, and set the ball, but her best skill was serving, because she could win points with it. She wasn't the best spiker, though, none of the girls were very good at spiking at that age. But she went up for one anyway, right at the net, and, when she came down, she turned her ankle. She screamed so loud, the entire gymnasium gasped. I ran onto the court with Katie right behind me. I tried to calm Jo-Jo down while the trainer looked at her ankle. It was already swollen. Between sobs and moans of pain, Jo-Jo said, "I heard something crack."

"It might be broken," the trainer said. "She can't walk on it. I'll get the stretcher."

We thought it was best to wait for an EMT, because every little movement made Jo-Jo yelp. They let me ride in the EMT truck, and Katie drove my car to the hospital.

After x-rays, the doctor told us that Jo-Jo had fractured her fibula near the ankle joint but hadn't torn any ligaments. He said he would send us home with a boot, and we had to keep her foot elevated and ice it on and off for 48 hours. The doctor asked if I wanted a prescription for oxycodone. I said yes, but I didn't plan on using it unless the pain became unbearable. It was going to be ibuprofen all the way for my precious gummie-eater.

The next day, Carl was up in the hayloft at the farm, resetting a rat trap, when he stumbled against a length of railing that gave way and sent him sailing down to the earthen floor of the barn.

I had to leave Jo-Jo to her sister's care and race to the hospital where Todd was waiting for me outside the giant sliding glass doors. Shirley was back in ICU.

Todd's face was ashen. He wasn't prepared for this. We found our way to the ICU waiting room. We asked to see Carl and the nurse said his wife was with him. One of you can go in, she said. We allow two visitors at a time.

"You go," I said.

While Todd went in, I sat down and prayed. I'd been praying since I got the phone call from Todd. Katie and J.D. arrived in a few minutes. They looked so upset it made me start crying. Guess I'd tried to be strong until then. The idea that we might lose Carl was beyond heart-wrenching. It was not even a thought I dared think. He would recover, I told myself. He would get better and everything would be okay. I didn't know how Todd could endure the death of the man he loved the most, the man he was closest to.

Shirley came out of the ICU, looking pale and teary, a dark weight on her shoulders.

"They said his brain is swelling," she said. "They might have to operate on him. Make a hole to relieve the pressure."

I hugged her and rubbed her back, kissed her on the cheek.

"Is it okay if I go see him?" I asked.

"Yes, please dear, go look after Todd," Shirley said.

Todd was standing beside Carl's bed. Carl was motionless. His eyes seemed pasted shut. The heart and oxygen monitors were blinking. In a bed across the room there was a young man who had been in a motorcycle accident. He didn't look so good. Oh god, people die in here, I told myself. This is horrible. I took Todd's hand. It was cold. It was chilly in there. We should have brought sweaters. Who knew. I reached for Carl's hand.

“Is it okay to touch him?” I asked.

“Sure,” Todd said.

Carl’s hand was warm, heavy and muscular, but limp.

“The doctor came in,” Todd said softly. “A woman from India. They’re pretty smart people, I guess. She said the next twenty-four hours are critical. If his brain keeps swelling, they’ll have to operate. If they don’t, he could end up brain-damaged.” Todd choked up on the last few words, *he could end up brain-damaged*. Todd was trying to stay strong, but I knew he was tore up inside.

“Carl,” I said, “Carl? You’d better wake up. You have lots of visitors out here.” Nothing. “Is he in a coma?” I asked.

“I guess so,” Todd said. “I mean, he’s unconscious. He’s got to wake up soon, or else he’ll just get worse. He could stay in a coma for a who knows how long.”

The nurse came in and told us that Winstead wanted to see Carl.

“I’ll go say hi to J.D. and Katie,” Todd said. He squeezed my shoulder before exiting.

Winstead walked into the ICU, such a serious, yet curious, expression on his face.

“What’d my boy go and do to himself,” he said.

“Did Shirley tell you what happened?”

“Yes. Poor girl had to drag him to the car by herself.”

“Where were you?” I asked, not meaning to sound critical.

“I was in town,” he said. “At the hardware.”

“We can’t lose him, Winstead, we can’t lose him.”

“We ain’t lost him yet, sweetcake. He’s a fighter. He’s always been a fighter.”

The hours passed, and we took turns visiting Carl. The hospital became oppressive, a place where serious dramas had left sadness in the air, in the walls and floors, and in the chairs where we were

slumped, feeling totally useless.

J.D. and Katie went to the hospital cafe and brought back chicken salad sandwiches, chips and coffee. We spoke in hushed voices, out of respect for the sick and injured.

Around midnight, Carl's younger brother Ben arrived. He was wearing short-sleeve coveralls. Ben has a brawny physique, every time he's ever hugged me I thought he might break a rib or two. He was single, and he liked to squeeze his young niece longer and harder than necessary. He'd come straight from his one-man lumber mill in Laurinburg after checking his answering machine. His coveralls were streaked with resin, his arms looked sunburnt. He had yellow sawdust stuck in his oily hair.

"Where's my brother?" he asked.

"Todd is back with him now," I said, "but I'll take you in. We'll give Todd a break."

Ben and I walked in. Todd walked toward us but Ben passed right by him: his eyes were locked on Carl. He stood at the end of the bed, trying to make sense of it. Maybe he was thinking he could grab his foot and shake him awake like when they were boys.

"He busted his head, huh," Ben said. I nodded. I could see tears in the corners of his eyes as he gazed at his brother. "Come on, dumbass, it's time to cut this shit out."

I stepped to the side of the bed and took Carl's hand. My impulse was to protect him. Ben was being gruff. Honestly, it was a kinda disturbing.

"Listen to me, Carl, I know you're just horsing around," Ben said. "Enough's enough now, come on, time to snap out of it. We only got so much sympathy, brother. We've got work to do and you can't be slackin' off like this. There's fields to plow."

I felt Carl's fingers move, tickling the palm of my hand. Then he

opened his eyes.

“Who’s that? Ben?” he mumbled, his voice weak. He smiled a little smile as his eyes tried to focus on the hulking figure who was yanking on his big toe.

“That’s better,” Ben said, “that’s more like it. Time to get up and get on, can’t be sleepin’ the day away.”

I was weeping when I walked into the waiting room, weeping for joy, but to everyone who saw me I guess I looked distraught, because they looked frightened. Big O, Camila, and Luke were there. Katie had planned a prayer vigil for Carl, she’d called everyone, all our friends had rushed to join us at two in the morning.

“What the heck happened?” Katie asked.

“He’s awake,” I said. “*He’s awake.*”

Momma says sad things come in threes. That same Saturday, J.D. wanted to attend Dorene Meek’s funeral, but he didn’t want to sneak behind Katie’s back, so he told her he was planning to go, and she decided to go with him.

Awfully big of her, I thought, and told her so later, but she went out of curiosity. A mixed up kind of curiosity. Part of her wondered how Sparky had gotten herself into such a situation, going from stripper to drug mule, though the drug mule aspect was not yet proven, but anyway, she got herself killed, and part of Katie wondered why J.D. found the girl so attractive. Yet another part wanted to see how J.D. reacted to the funeral. J.D. wished Katie hadn’t wanted to go, but he appreciated how quiet she was in the car.

In the lobby or visiting area, or whatever you call it, the room outside the chapel-type room where a funeral is held, Dorene’s family had a long table filled with food. Katie and J.D. had never been to a funeral that served food, and a huge crystal bowl of pink

lemonade. It made the event more festive, and Katie overheard a blue-haired lady saying that Dorene would have liked a funeral like this because when “Doe” was a little girl she was always first in line at church picnics. This lady must go to church with the Meeks, Katie thought, to have a memory like that. Then she and J.D. realized that the people in attendance were mostly from the Meeks’ church, along with a handful of strippers dressed in their Sunday best.

“I teach welding at the college. Dorene was one of my students,” J.D. told Dorene’s father, Bob Meeks of Meeks Transmissions.

“Doe liked that class,” Bob Meeks said. “She wanted to learn welding so she could come to work with me. She had one more semester to go.”

On top of the casket there was a gorgeous photo of the girl with three names (Dorene, Doe and Sparky), it was her prom picture, and she looked like a southern belle glowing with potential. She wore diamond earrings, and her hair was perfect. Katie cried, gazing at Sparky’s portrait, and, in her mind, forgave her.

12

Boar-B-Cue

My parents drove down from Greensboro for our big Boar-B-Cue. I say parents, but it's really Momma and her second husband, Willie Johnson, my step-dad. Daddy died in 2017. Willie's okay, though, I have to give him credit. He likes to take cruises, and he's saved up enough money to make Momma feel secure and to show her the world from the bows of big ships. So long as she's happy, I'm happy, and she seems pretty happy these days.

Luke brought his new squeeze, Susie, with him, and he brought over the smoker he'd made from a propane tank. He and J.D. had done the welding, and I always thought it was a great piece of work. We've cooked up plenty of shoulders and Boston butts in that thing.

Susie and Luke had been dating for five or six months. She was sort of off-the-wall. She liked multi-player video games, and I think it might've fried some of her gray cells, because she's a bit ditsy, a bit wired. Not nervous energy, more like a nervous brain. We all liked her well enough, but most of all we liked seeing Luke with a girl. One thing she and Luke had in common was barbecue, that can take a relationship pretty far, IMHO.

We could hear the sizzling fat splatting on the red-hot bed of hickory coals and smell the boar shoulder and ribs roasting and the sweet, spicy aroma of Susie's homemade rub.

Willie was impressed. He walked by the smoker every time Luke opened it. He'd say, "Dang, those are pretty," and Luke would say, "Yeah, they're gonna be alright." Next time Willie would say, "How much longer are you thinking?" And Luke would say, "Maybe an hour, to get the meat break-apart tender."

I watched them from the kitchen window. I thought Willie looked smart in his Bermuda shorts and Sperry boat shoes. J.D. and Todd were farther back in the yard at the workshop, fiddling with our riding lawn mower, each with a beer in hand. That's the kind of thing men do, they work on fixing something when they're supposed to be relaxing.

Me, Susie, Katie and Momma were making potato salad and slaw, baked beans, and banana pudding. Momma was in charge of the pudding. It was her famous recipe. Famous in our family, anyway, and famous at First Baptist Church in Greensboro.

"Look at you," Momma said to Jo-Jo, who had paused at the kitchen door on her crutches, checking us out. "You look so cute on your crutches," Momma said, and Jo-Jo forced a small smile. Momma always tries to soften and make the best of everything. But Jo-Jo knew she didn't look cute. She hadn't taken a shower since we came home from the hospital because she couldn't get the boot wet, and her hair was flat and stringy. Lilly flitted through the door wearing a bright sun dress and light makeup.

"I'm starving," Lilly said.

"Here, try this," Katie said, holding up a spoonful of potato salad.

"That's yummylicious," Lilly said. "I'm ready for a feast, aren't ya'll? Let's do this thang."

"There's a tray of veggies in the fridge," Susie said. "Why don't you get it for me."

Lilly pulled a large platter of veggies out of the fridge and set it on the island.

"You want to be our waitress and take that outside?" Susie asked, "see if the boys want some? I expect somebody needs another beer, too."

“You’re trying to teach me how to be a good little wife, aren’t you?” Lilly said.

“Not a wife,” I said, “just a good little hostess.”

“When is Big O getting here?” Lilly asked.

“Soon, I hope. Why don’t you ask Luke when the pig will be ready.”

We watched Lilly carry the platter to the smoker, then to the workshop. The men seemed delighted to see her, especially Willie, who’d been kind and gracious to the girls from the first day he met them. He had no children of his own, so our girls were his only grandkids. Now Lilly was running back and forth from the cooler, delivering beers.

I glanced at Jo-Jo. It was a beautiful October day, a tad hot out, but beautiful, and Jo-Jo, with her frowzy face and limp hair, was the only negative vibe.

“Hey Jo-Jo,” I said. “Let’s go wash your hair.”

“Not now, Mom,” she groaned.

“Yes, right now. You know how fast I am. It will make you feel better. This is a big day.”

“It is? Why?”

“Because all our friends, and our whole family, are here with us,” I explained. “We have a lot to be thankful for.”

“Like a broken ankle?”

“No, but your Granpa Carl is coming. It will be the first time he’s been out of the house since his accident.”

While I was giving Jo-Jo a quick wash and rinse, Big O and Camila arrived. Katie introduced them to Momma.

“Big O’s the guy who saved Todd from the bear,” Katie said.

“Oh, I need to give you a big bear hug,” Momma joked. My momma is a smallish woman, only 5’4”. Big O’s arms swallowed her.

Camila had brought a Doberge cake, made from layers of cake and pudding, chocolate pudding in this case, a “New Orleans birthday cake” was how she described it to Susie and Katie and Momma as Big O went through the back door to join the boys.

Standing around the smoker while J.D. slathered the boar with sauce, Todd asked Big O, “What happened to that teacher? The one with the dreadlocks?”

“She had a lawyer come down from Raleigh, some big shot who defends activists for free. He got her a plea deal. Community service and a \$500 fine. And just a misdemeanor charge. That’s pretty sweet. But they pressure-washed the monument and it looks like new. Probably hadn’t been cleaned in years. The Sheriff wasn’t too happy about the plea deal. He huffed around the office all afternoon, but the next day he was back to normal.”

Big O went on to tell them about how the Sheriff’s ancestor had died at Brandy Station. The image of a horse getting shot by a cannon didn’t sit well with Lilly, who was sitting nearby.

“They *shot* his horse?” she asked. “With a *cannonball*?”

“That happened a lot in the Civil War,” Big O said. “The cavalry regiments had a unit called horse artillery.”

“What’s artillery?” Lilly asked. “Does that mean cannons?”

“It does indeed,” Big O said. “Over one million horses and mules died during the Civil War,” Big O said. “It’s true, I looked it up.”

“How many men died?” Lilly asked.

Big O knelt down, so he could answer her eye-to-eye. “Over six hundred thousand men died,” Big O said. “That’s about half the number of men who have died in all of our wars since then.”

“So that’s a lot, huh. How do you know so much about it?” she asked.

“Well, I was in a war once myself,” he said. “I also like to Google

things, to learn about stuff.”

“Pops says you were a Ranger,” Lilly said in her sweet voice. “He says Rangers are the toughest guys in the Army.”

“I suppose he’s right.”

“You don’t look that tough.”

“I don’t?”

“Well, you’re tough, I suppose, but not scary-tough,” Lilly said.

Carl, Shirley and Winstead finally arrived, right as Luke finished chopping up the shoulder. J.D. pushed Carl in his wheelchair, from the car, down the driveway, and into the backyard. Carl was upbeat but quieter than usual. The doctor had said it would take a few months for him to get back to his old self. He could walk short distances but was unbalanced at times. Winstead had been doing the farm work and it must’ve been good for him: he looked spry and tanned. His white hair and beard had a golden tinge from the sun. Being a stylist, I notice such things.

I’d insisted that Jo-Jo wear a summer dress, one I’d bought her because I liked it. She hated it because it had huge flowers on it, blue mums, but she gave in, and OMG did she look precious in it.

“So today, a Jonquil will be wearing mums,” I told her, and got a big groan in reply.

“BFLOL, Mom,” she said with a grimace.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Big fat LOL.”

Jo-Jo’s attitude improved when she joined the party. Her hair was still damp but the curls were perking up, and she’d put on makeup, including a light pink lipstick. She brightened with a shy smile when everybody turned to admire her makeup and mums as she walked into the backyard, just in time for the prayer.

After our boar-b-cue feast, the boys got out their instruments.

Todd on guitar, J.D. on bass, Luke trying out the frottoir, and Big O on his button accordion. I thought it should be an all-male band, so I handed out spoons to Willie, Carl and Winstead.

The music they made really wasn't half bad, since Big O could carry the songs with his accordion. The boys were just beginning to learn his favorite zydeco numbers, but they were staying in tempo.

Camila wanted to teach Susie, and Momma and Shirley, how to dance Zydeco, so all the girls, except Jo-Jo of course, kicked off our shoes and gathered on the grass and tried to follow her steps. Zydeco dancing reminds me of the Carolina Shag, a dance step that me and Katie have just about perfected. On summer vacations we'd always visit the clubs in Myrtle Beach, and hit Fat Harold's in Ocean Drive, Shagging Capital of the World. Whenever we have a party at one of our houses, we put on the classic beach tunes and dance ourselves silly. Zydeco is like the shag because both are short dance steps, but, with the shag, you move up and back, and Zydeco is more side-to-side.

The sun would be setting soon, and we were in golden hour when the sunlight turns yellow. The October air had turned cool and the dew on the grass was washing our feet. Todd had cut the lawn that morning, so we'd have green toes for a week. No one cared about that, we were moving in sync with the music, having too much fun doing a Zydeco line dance in front of our rag-tag band. Even though Carl wasn't his old self, he seemed to enjoy tapping those spoons on his thigh, his scruffy face lit up with a big grin.

Big O took his nickel-plated acoustic out of the case and plugged it into a small amplifier. The sunlight glinted off the instrument and his sweaty cheeks. He performed a slower tune called *When the Levee Breaks*. It's a blues song written by Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie in 1929 but Led Zeppelin and Buckwheat Zydeco did

versions, too. Big O told me later that he worked on his version after Katrina. I remembered Camila's story, the one about how she and Big O had met on Dauphine Street.

*Cryin' won't help you prayin' won't do you no good
Now cryin' won't help you prayin' won't do you no good
When the levee breaks mama you got to move
All last night sat on the levee and moaned
All last night sat on the levee and moaned
Thinkin' 'bout my baby and my happy home*

When it was time for dessert, Camila and I went to the kitchen for the banana pudding and her Doberge cake.

Lilly was still being our little hostess, fetching fresh beers for the boys, when we returned. I said, "Listen up everybody, Camila needs to tell us about her beautiful cake."

Camila waited until she had everyone's attention: "In New Orleans, this is the cake we make for birthdays. It's called a Doberge cake. You might be wondering why I made it. Okay, it's my favorite dessert, so there's that. But, I also have an announcement to make, I mean, me and Oscar. It's not a birthday, but, about nine months from now, there'll be one."

Sure, I wanted to shout, but I kept my big mouth shut for another second . . .

"I'm pregnant," Camila said calmly, then her face brightened with a wide smile.

Since the night we met, I'd thought Camila was the most exotic woman I'd ever seen. She was down-to-earth but also citified, and her Creole look, the combination of a milk chocolate complexion, silky black hair, and brown eyes, when you see her up close, is really dazzling, that's the only word for it. Now that she was pregnant, she

had that extra glow of joy and purpose pregnant women have. I think it's because we can eat all we want and not worry about it, and with the changes your body goes through, something must happen with the hormones, some kind of happiness hormone kicks in. Or maybe it's spiritual, like the spirit essence inside you rises to the surface where everyone can see it.

There was a lot of congratulatory hubbub and dessert-eating for the next twenty minutes but eventually the girls created a conversation circle and the boys dragged their chairs back to the workshop that doubles as Todd's man cave. He brought out his small humidor. All the men, including Carl and Willie, picked out a cigar. It was Winstead who first taught Todd about cigars years ago, how to trim one end and toast the other before lighting it.

"When that baby is born, I'm gonna buy you a thirty-dollar Padron," Winstead told Big O.

"Sir, I'd be honored to smoke one of those," Big O said.

Carl leaned toward Winstead, "Pops, you'll need to buy one for J.D., too."

"That's right," Winstead said, "Congratulations, J.D. I know you've been waiting a long time for a kid."

J.D. smiled, "Yessir. We heard the heartbeat the other day, that freaked me out a little. I was afraid we wouldn't hear it, but there it was, a little human being inside Katie. Kinda opens your eyes."

"Opens your eyes?" Willie asked.

"It opened *my eyes*," J.D. said. "It's time to make some changes. Me n' Katie, we get by okay, but having a baby . . . it just makes you think. For one thing, I've got to find a better job."

"I remember when I was your age," Willie said. "I was inspecting houses, but I'd gotten married. My first wife was Annette, and we were madly in love. I took a job with the city, so we'd have regular income, and benefits."

“What do you do for the city?” Luke asked.

“I’m a building inspector,” Willie said.

“He manages the whole department,” Todd said.

“I retire in two years,” Willie said, “and I can’t wait.”

“What do you plan to do?” Carl asked. “When you retire.”

“I plan to do house inspections again,” Willie said.

“What happened to your wife?” Carl asked. “Your first one.”

Todd thought his father was being too blunt, but Carl was always blunt.

“We divorced,” Willie said. “Best decision I ever made. I was a free man until I met my Jonquil.”

“Susie wants to get pregnant,” Luke said. “Thanks to you guys.”

“Baby fever has set in,” Todd said.

“I had an idea the other day,” Winstead said to Big O,” as the cloud of smoke from seven cigars settled around them like morning fog. “If you don’t mind doing another show, I thought we could shoot my rifles. Actually, one is a musket, my Brown Bess, and a 1861 Springfield.”

“That’s a fine idea,” Big O said. “I wouldn’t mind that at all. I’ll bring my pirate pistol.”

“You have a pirate pistol?” J.D. asked.

“A French flintlock. The antique dealer who sold it to me said it was used by Jean Lafitte in the battle of New Orleans. Of course, he was lying, but I liked the story. Who knows, it might have been used in the battle, or sometime during the war. It has the foundry mark, so it’s definitely an original. A lot of weapons went through the Port of New Orleans and up the Mississippi.”

“Bring your Ranger pistol, too,” Winstead said. “So we can show people the gun you used on that bear.”

13

Antifa Beatdown

We arrived in Charlotte by noon, and the rally wasn't until seven. When I say *we*: me and Todd, J.D. and Katie, Luke and Susie, Big O and Camila. Our crew. Winstead and Shirley had driven up the day before and camped at the front of the line at Panther Stadium.

I think Shirley was excited to get off the farm and see the city for a change. She'd become a QAnon fan, watching Winstead do his show for over a year. We'd left the girls with Carl, who was pretty much back up to speed and looking forward to having the girls cook dinner for him. Jo-Jo had promised to make one his favorites, taco salad. We'd gone by Redbox at the Piggly Wiggly and gotten a copy of *Olympus has Fallen* for them to watch.

Our crew stopped by NoDa (North Davidson), the arts district in Charlotte, to get lunch at Cabo Fish Taco, one of our faves.

"You must be going to the Trump rally," our waitress said after getting a good look at my American flag dress and Big O's MAGA cap.

"How'd you guess," I said.

"Good for you," she said with an obvious touch of annoyance.

We were munching on tacos and slurping our draft beers when Big O said, "You guys remember that kid, Montrell?"

"Oh, we remember him, he sold pot and gummies to our daughter," I said, "how could we forget?"

"Thank God Jo-Jo broke her ankle," Todd said, "it's kept her off the street."

"That's not funny," Katie said.

But it is kinda true, I thought to myself.

“If you have a girl, just get prepared for those teenage years, that’s when all hell breaks loose,” Todd said.

“So, what about Montrell?” I asked.

“He got initiated yesterday,” Big O said. “By that MS-13 gang in Hamstead.”

“What kind of *initiation*?” J.D. asked.

“They beat him up,” Big O said. “That’s the initiation. Only this gang in Hamstead puts their own touch on it. They use their fists and *axe handles*. They put Montrell in the hospital. Broke his wrist, and a rib, the rib punctured a lung.”

“Are you investigating it?” Susie asked.

“Yeah, our squad is investigating,” Big O said, “since it’s gang-related. I questioned him in the hospital.”

“Who was that politician who was famous for his pickaxe?” J.D. asked. “The guy in Alabama.”

“Lester Maddox,” Camila said. “But he was governor of *Georgia*. He was a staunch segregationist, a lot like George Wallace, who was the governor of *Alabama*.”

“It wasn’t a pickaxe,” I said, “it was a pickaxe *handle*.”

“Wallace got shot, right?” Luke asked.

“Yeah, he was paralyzed below the waist,” I said. “Both of those doofuses were Democrats.”

“Most black folks don’t know the history of the party most of them vote for,” Camila said. “The Democrats pushed for slavery and Jim Crow laws.”

“How did you and Big O avoid the brainwashing?” I asked.

“My grand-mère didn’t like the Democrats,” Big O said, “because of the black codes.”

“*Code noir*,” Camila said, “that’s what they were called, *noir* is French for black, but they were the same as Jim Crow laws.”

“My great-grand-mère suffered under those laws,” Big O said. “Most of the blacks in Louisiana were Republicans back then.”

“My grandparents were Republicans,” Camila said. “Oscar and me, we’re registered as independents.”

“That’s because of Bush senior,” Big O said. “And the GOP in general.”

“We couldn’t support the GOP any longer,” Camila said. “9/11 sealed the deal.”

“Building 7,” Big O said. “Well, all three buildings, really, they were all imploded exactly the same way.”

“Nanothermite,” I said. “And some say energy weapons.”

“You blame the Republicans for 9/11?” Luke asked.

“Did you see Bush in that classroom when the agent told him we were under attack?” Big O asked. “He just sat there like a dumbass.”

“Like the puppet he was,” Camila said.

“That’s not how a real Commander in Chief would respond,” Big O said, “that’s the response of a . . .”

“Puppet in Chief,” Camila said.

“Trump would have been mad as hell,” Luke said, “he would have ripped some heads off.”

“We think people are delusional now,” I said, “but even back then everybody believed we’d been attacked by Bin Laden.”

“Well, they did find that I.D. card,” Todd said, “right there on the sidewalk, come on, Lorie.”

“The whole nation bought into the lie,” Big O said, “even though you could see it with your own eyes, three perfect controlled demolitions. That’s when I realized that most Americans are fast asleep.”

“9/11 redpilled a lot of folks,” I said.

“Well, with 9/11, people believed the media,” Camila added.

“Sheep,” J.D. said. “America’s full of fuckin’ sheep.”

“Watch your language, J.D.” Katie said. “I’m sorry, ya’ll.”

“Hey, I’d be a sheep too if it weren’t for Lorie and Winstead,” J.D. said.

“What about me?” Todd asked.

“What about you?” J.D. replied, chuckling. “You’re as bad as me and Luke. You hate politics and you hate the Internet.”

“I been redpilled already. By Lorie,” Luke said.

“If you don’t stand up as a patriot, you’re a sheep,” I said.

“You mean by wearing a MAGA hat?” J.D. asked. “No, really, I honestly don’t know what we’re supposed to do. No offense to your hat, Big O. It’s just that, look, I’m a citizen, and I work. I pay taxes. Why do people have to make life so complicated?”

“Because it is complicated,” I said.

“It doesn’t have to be,” Todd said. “I’m with you there, buddy.”

“Everybody knows politics is . . . effed up,” J.D. said. They call it a swamp. Have you ever been in a swamp? I have, and I got a bunch of leeches stuck to me. Remember, Todd? When we caught those catfish with our hands.”

“Yeah, I had to pull one off your ass,” Todd said.

“A leech or a catfish?” Big O asked. “Look, our politicians have been robbing us blind, and we’ve been clueless about how corrupt they are.”

“The bureaucracy has been corrupted for a long time,” I said. “That’s what we’re finally starting to understand.”

“Exactly, we’re starting to see how secretive the elite are,” Camila said. “And how deep the swamp is.”

“It’s the Great Awakening, folks,” Luke said, “am I right or am I right?”

“Hell yes you’re right, brother,” J.D. said.

“The corruption has to be stopped,” Big O said. “D.C. has to be fixed. That’s why you have to get into the fight.”

“Dilley said the other day that America was already lost when Trump got elected, and now we’re taking it back,” I said.

“Who’s Dilley?” Susie asked.

“Brenden Dilley,” Big O said. “He’s got some solid sources.”

“This conversation is depressing,” Susie said, sighing. “Why can’t we just talk about babies?”

“You’re right. I need another beer,” Luke said.

The crowd at the stadium was crazy impressive. We’d been to a few Panther games, and Panther fans know how to tailgate, but these patriots had them beat. Hotdogs and hamburgers grilling, Bojangles chicken boxes, and fresh-cut watermelon, made the parking lot smell like a Fourth of July picnic, a giant patriotic picnic, that’s what it was. I’ve never seen so much red, white and blue in one place.

Everyone was upbeat and friendly, excited about seeing Q+. It was a reunion atmosphere, like when Uncle Ben has all the Denisons over to his place.

At the moment, our crew was walking through a sea of hot-blooded freedom-lovers, but there was a deeper meaning, at least to me: we were meeting our great American Family.

If I hadn’t seen it for myself, I’d find it hard to believe that one man, Donald J. Trump, could inspire this level of patriotism and camaraderie. Of course, it wasn’t about him, it was what he represented. He represented *us*. He’d made us realize that we are lucky to live in America, and it’s okay to be proud of our homeland, not just proud, but honored to live here. Trump pointed out what we already knew in our hearts. On 9/11 we felt it, in WWII we felt it. We’d just forgotten the feeling, we’d forgotten how patriotism can

sustain and motivate us. Trump had discovered a different kind of army, an army of deplorables, the working class, the true patriot subculture in Walmartland, the beating heart of America that had been pumping patriot blood since the War for Independence. We had just been ignored, and, finally, forgotten by those in the D.C. bubble, those with power over the economy we made possible, a gang of dysfunctional idiots and privileged mobsters entrenched for generations in the Capitol, where they were surrounded by statues of patriots, yet didn't know the real meaning of the word.

Trump had opened our eyes to new possibilities for America, and also shown us the enemies within. Q had dissected our enemies and exposed their guts to show us how evil they are.

Everywhere I looked, I saw Q signs, and I wanted to find Winstead and Shirley, because they were with his Soapbox friends and I wanted to meet them.

Up ahead of us, a crowd had gathered. Probably a celebrity of some kind, maybe Lionel or Praying Medic, who knows, could be Paul Serran or Neon Revolt, Dilley, H.A. Goodman or Greg Hunter, Tracy Beanz, Lori Colley or Amazing Polly. Lord please let it be Tracy or Lori or Polly! I doubted that rock stars like Sara Carter, John Solomon, or Luke Rosiac, James O'Keefe, or Tom Fitton, would be hanging out with the tailgaters.

I pushed my way through the throng to get a better look, and you'll never guess who it was: BCP!!! He was perched on the tailgate of a Ram pickup with his lovely Mexican wife, just the two of them, and he was signing autographs. I asked him to sign one of the white bars in my dress, near the hem, and he penned "BCP" with a black Sharpie.

I told him "I love it when you say *Our beloved and duly-elected President Donald John Trump*," and he flashed his big smile.

“Thanks a lot,” he said, “guess that’s kinda my tagline.”

I went to find Winstead and Shirley at the front of the line. Along the way, I told those I passed by that I wasn’t trying to leapfrog, just needed to find my granpa-in-law. Winstead and Shirley were with the Patriots’ Soapbox gang, forty or so of his peeps, several show hosts, their spouses and friends, members of their Discourse channel, and a bunch of YouTube fans.

He introduced me to everyone, saying “This is our sweet Lorie, she’s the one who introduced me to Q. She also gave me two beautiful great-grandkids.”

“She’s my daughter-in-law,” Shirley said proudly.

Winstead wanted to say hi to our crew, and Shirley said she’d stay behind to hold their spot, so I led him back to where we were in line, and it was quite a walk. He was glad to see Big O and Camila with us.

“I’m taking some videos of the crowd,” Luke said to Winstead, “in case you want to use it on your show.”

“Can you shoot some video inside?” Winstead asked.

“Sure thing,” Luke said.

Winstead looked at Big O, “Can you do the show this week?”

“If the Sheriff gives me a thumbs up, we’ll do it,” Big O said, just let me know when you want me in the studio.”

Listening to them, I realized that my friends had become part of the alt-media revolution. Even I had played a small role by telling Winstead about Q, and getting so deep into the Q world myself that I could help him find online sources for his show. Now Big O was doing shows. Maybe it was time for me to start my own YouTube channel. I’d thought about it before, but I could never come up with the perfect name for it. Or the nerve to actually do it.

“Are those the only crappers?” Winstead asked, looking across the parking lot at the rows of blue porta-johns about a quarter mile away. “Why do they have to put them way over there?”

“I need to get rid of some beer,” J.D. said, “I’ll walk with you.” And with that, they started making their way through the crowded parking lot.

“What the heck,” Luke said. He jogged to catch up with J.D. and Winstead. He was wearing his new Trump 2020 Keep America Great cap. I saw a guy hold up his hand as Luke passed, Luke slapped it and kept on trucking. He’d been late to the Great Awakening, but now he was 100% in. Like Todd and J.D., Luke was anything but a news junkie. I had to explain things to him, I was his Readers Digest for political updates, Q decodes, and longer-winded explanations of how all the dots connected. I’d always had a soft spot for him. He’d played football with Todd at Whiteville High. He’d played tackle and guard and was a real hunk, he spent a lot of time in the weight room, but he’d gained twenty pounds since meeting Susie, all that barbecue. Luke had a crew-cut back then but wore his hair long now. In high school, he was badass, rode a motorcycle he’d customized himself, drank beer his old man bought for him, never backed away from a fight, and sometimes went looking for one. For me and my girlfriends, getting a ride on Luke’s bike was a rite of passage. Having him as a friend made you feel tougher, tougher and a little dangerous.

Me n’ Todd had been high school sweethearts, but the four of us (me, Todd, J.D. and Luke) had been hanging out for more than a decade. During our twenties, Luke rode with a motorcycle club and J.D. chased girls most weekends, while me n’ Todd made babies. But we’d stayed connected with our high school friends. Funny, isn’t it, how we were all growing up and getting older together, older and

more awake than ever.

The three men waited in separate lines for a “crapper” to become available.

When Winstead had done his b’ness, and the plastic door slammed behind him, three men with black masks over their faces ran from behind the porta-johns. One of them swung a bike lock in a sock over his head. The crowd at the bathrooms backed away, but, at age 72, Winstead wasn’t quick enough on his feet. The hoodlum brought the bike lock down on Winstead’s head, striking him across the front slope of his skull. Winstead went to his knees fast, then rolled over on the asphalt, and, before anyone stepped in to help, blood was streaming down his brow. Luke and J.D. pushed through the crowd at the same time a young, Congolese doctor knelt beside Winstead, who was stunned but still conscious.

“What the hell happened?” Luke asked.

Winstead looked up at him, “Antifa,” he muttered.

J.D. stood up and scanned the area, anger rising so fast it took him by surprise, he could feel his heart banging in his eardrums.

“Over there!” he shouted, pointing at the three Antifa thugs who had already reached the far corner of the vast parking lot.

J.D. and Luke gave chase, sprinting flat out, dodging people and cars while three other patriots followed at a distance.

They saw the thugs running down a street in a neighborhood where the dwellings were modest but high-priced, a gentrified area of the greater downtown. The day was cooling off, and a few folks were on their porches and in their yards, chatting as they drank wine, others were out walking their dogs. J.D. and Luke gained on the thugs, getting close enough to hear their sneakers slapping against the street. But then other Antifa hoodlums appeared, a whole gang

of twenty or more that had been waiting at their cars.

J.D. and Luke slowed down to study the situation. The gang started moving toward them, so they turned around.

“Remind me to lose some fucking weight,” Luke said.

“You think we could take ‘em?” J.D. asked.

“I don’t know,” Luke said, huffing. “If . . . if we had weapons, maybe.”

“Over here!” J.D. yelled, veering into a lot where a house was under construction. J.D. found a three-foot piece of rebar and Luke picked up a two-by-four the perfect length for a club. When they stepped back into the street, the Antifa gang slowed down. Now that our boys had weapons, the thugs had something to think about. J.D. and Luke started toward them but the gang didn’t reverse itself, instead, those with weapons pulled them out: knife, iron pipe, steel chain, baseball bat, and that guy with the bike lock in a sock.

“I’m gonna cripple somebody,” Luke said.

“Let’s Chuck Norris their asses,” J.D. said. “We need to take out that sock guy first.”

“Then the fucker with the knife,” Luke said.

“Then the fucker with the chain,” J.D. said.

And that’s what they did, they went full Norris on them, targeted the sock guy, using both board and rebar, put him down in seconds with a broken wrist and busted kneecap. The others were taken aback, but this whole time they were screaming for blood, shouting the words, “kill the pigs, kill the pigs!” even though Luke and J.D. weren’t cops. They quickly turned on the knife-wielding thug and took him down. A piece of rebar is deadly, you can poke or slash. Luke got in a nice stroke with the two-by-four to the side of the guy’s head after J.D. had made the guy squeal by poking him in the gut with the rebar.

Obviously, Antifa didn't know how to coordinate an attack. When the guy with the chain began swinging it in a wide arc, he hit one of his comrades in the jaw. Strangely, several Antifa stooges laughed as their pal screamed and cursed in pain.

The boys timed their rush and basically knocked the chain guy to the ground, then Luke knocked him out with the board.

They looked for their next target. The Antifa gang had backed away a few yards, but some guy with a hero complex stepped to the front of the pack and egged them on.

"Let's off these crackers," he yelled, "come on!" And the gang inched forward. "Come on!" he screamed at them, and they surged forward like a band of crazed Apaches.

A gunshot rang out. Big O and Todd had arrived behind J.D. and Luke. The Antifa thugs stopped in their tracks when they heard the shot. Big O was holding his Beretta over his head and lowered it slowly, panning left and right, aiming at each of the gang members in turn.

"Don't move!" he yelled. "I'm a Sheriff's Deputy and I'm ordering you to freeze. You guys can make citizens arrests," Big O told Todd, J.D. and Luke.

Behind them, standing at the curb, three patriots were videotaping the whole thing. "Here's the badge," Big O said calmly, holding up his Deputy's star. The gang stepped backward. Big O fired another shot in the air. They flinched, then froze like statues commemorating the stupidity and hatred of libtard terrorists, a confederacy of dunces.

"Come on, we can take him!" their leader yelled, but no one stirred. Fear had seized them.

"Get on the ground!" Big O growled at the leader. "On the ground, face down!" But the thug ran like the chicken he was. Big O turned to our boys, "You fellas want to run that guy down?" Todd

and Luke chased the guy. Within forty yards, they had smashed him into the street. By then, the rest of the gang had fled. J.D. helped Big O hogtie the three damaged thugs and the punk cheerleader.

Charlotte PD arrived and handled the arrests after Big O gave them his credentials.

“You’ve got a dozen vehicles to impound,” he said. “But be careful, could be explosives in there. Track down those license plates and you’ll get some more arrests.”

“We need to take your statements,” one cop said.

“Sure thing, we’ll come by the station later,” Big O said, “right now, we’re going to see our President.”

14

The Trump Rally

Everyone describes a Trump rally as *electric*, and it is, but that's not what I was feeling when we walked in. I was worried about Winstead and the boys. Winstead had been rushed inside the stadium for medical treatment and the boys hadn't returned. I was overwhelmed by that panicky feeling I get when someone I love is in danger, you know, that feeling you get when life goes out of control. It was the same feeling I had when we lost Jo-Jo, and when we went to the hospital to see Carl. My heart was aching, I wanted to scream but had to hold it in. Had to. Because I had to find our men, had to find Shirley. I knew she needed comforting, because I would, under these circumstances.

News of the Antifa attack had spread through the crowd and across the Internet at the speed of light. We'd seen a video clip and pictures of Winstead with blood streaming down his face. For some reason, the doctor had taken Winstead's shirt off, maybe to check for injuries, us girls figured, and Winstead's white undershirt was stained with blood, I mean, lots of blood, you know how head injuries bleed furiously because there are so many tiny veins in your scalp, right, so his undershirt had been soaked crimson down the front, and, when the doctor pulled him to his feet to check his balance, somebody got the perfect photo, the iconic image frozen in time: Winstead, sharp pain twisting his expression, the doctor's eyes wild-looking with the stress of the moment, Winstead's arm around the doctor's neck like he was a soldier being taken from the battlefield, yep, that was the pic that hit Twitter within seconds and the first page of every major conservative website within a half-hour.

The "fight videos" shot by the patriots were going viral by the

time the stadium gates opened and the river of people began to flow inside. The patriots had approached the fight from behind, then moved to the curb. They were shooting video on their smartphones when J.D. and Luke faced-off with the gang using rebar and timber as “weapons.”

Us three girls didn’t know what to do. We didn’t know where our husbands were, didn’t know if they’d been hurt, or maybe arrested.

When the boys finally arrived in the stadium, we could hear applause following them as they marched down the aisle to the seats we’d saved on the field. When we hugged, us girls were crying for joy. Of course, that was being videotaped by about a hundred people. We’d become the center of attention, enveloped by thunderous applause and cheering.

Todd and I left to find Winstead. We walked down a long corridor where fans buy their hotdogs, beers and souvenirs.

“You scared the crap out of me,” I said.

“I’m sorry. We had to go after those guys, we had to backup J.D. and Luke.”

“I’m glad you did,” I said. “I had one of my panics. I almost wish we hadn’t come to Charlotte.”

“Why would you, of all people, say that?”

“This is going to turn our lives upside down,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you see that picture of Winstead, the one with the doctor?”

“I haven’t seen any photos,” Todd said.

“You don’t know social media like I do. This is trending on Twitter.”

“Is that good or bad?” Todd asked.

“Hashtag *AntifaBeatdown*,” I added.

“I like that,” Todd said. “We’re on Twitter, huh.”

“Yes, you’re all over Twitter, and I don’t know if that’s good or

bad. It's probably good *and* bad."

We found the Health Center, where they treat people for small cuts and bruises, heat exhaustion, upset stomachs, but not *head trauma*. That's what I feared for Winstead.

"Have you seen an older man who had a head injury?" I asked a male EMT.

"The white-haired man who got busted up by some Antifa guy? Denison?"

"Right," Todd said. "Where'd he go?"

"I don't know," the nurse said, "two guys in dark suits came in here and spoke to him. A minute later, they ushered him out, him and his wife."

"This is not good," I said to Todd when we were back in the corridor. "He's been arrested by the FBI."

"You don't know that," Todd said, "you're getting as bad as Katie."

"He's *your* grandpa," I said, "why aren't you more concerned?"

"Okay, one, if he walked out of the Health Center, he's not that badly injured, right? Two, he didn't do anything wrong, he was attacked, he's the victim, so why would they arrest him? Three, it's Winstead, and he can be a mean old skunk, he knows how to take care of himself."

"*So where the hell is he?*" I asked.

We found the entrance to our section and walked onto the first tier of the stadium. The place was buzzing. We could see our crew below us, seated on the field. Yvonne Halliway, an African-American country music artist who resides in Charlotte, walked onto the stage to sing the national anthem. She was wearing a flowing blue dress that sparkled with sequins. The crowd immediately quieted down. I heard the squeaks of 20,000 stadium chairs as everyone stood up. Yvonne's voice was pitch-perfect. Her comforting country twang made the

anthem feel rooted, more than ever, in Deplorables' America, where patriotism pumps through our veins and Jesus lives in our hearts. MAGA Country. As Yvonne's voice soared, we knew that we were one nation under God, as surely as we were drawing breath, as surely as life itself.

The crowd remained quiet after the anthem, then Trump's theme song blasted through the speakers and the USA Freedom Girls ran onto the stage in their precious flag costumes, as I stood there in my flag dress thinking how cute Jo-Jo and Lilly would look in a costume like that. Maybe I could make one, I'm pretty good on the Singer. For a mom like me, The USA Freedom Girls were awe-inspiring. The song was fun as heck, with their dancing and pure cuteness, suddenly the energy of the crowd was peaking again. People were on their feet cheering and jiving to the song.

After the girls flitted off the stage, Trump walked on, *everybody* rose to their feet, and the thunder of our clapping and stomping seemed to rattle the stadium's steel and concrete. I exaggerate not, this was the electricity I'd been expecting.

"Thank you," Trump said, "thank you, Charlotte. It's good to be back in the great state of North Carolina. You folks surprised some people in the last election, didn't you. Yes you did, you really did. Well, it's been a big week, a lot is happening, a lot of good things happening. Good things. Big things. We're going to have a lot of fun tonight, that I can tell you. Something happened here just a . . . well, only an hour ago, right here. Outside the stadium. Some Antifa terrorists, a gang, a terrible gang, heartless people, that's what I call them, and terrorists. That's what they are, domestic terrorists. They hurt someone, really hurt him. Hit him with a bike lock. That's a deadly weapon, a bike lock. In a sock, they put a bike lock in a sock and swing it around and hit people. It's terrible. It's a crime. It's an assault, that's what it is. The

man's name is Winstead, Winstead Denison. Winstead, come out here, come on out here with me.”

Winstead had been waiting off stage. He walked on with the help of two Freedom Girls. His head was wrapped in a white bandage, but he seemed to be okay on his feet.

“Bring your daughter with you,” Trump said, “where’s your lovely daughter? Shirley, come out here, Shirley.” And then Shirley walked out, looking kind of shell-shocked, but smiling. “This is Winstead and Shirley Denison. Farmers, these folks are farmers. I love farmers. We love our farmers, don’t we. Without our farmers, we’d all starve. God bless our farmers. There are a lot of farmers, a lot of farms, a lot of crops, here in North Carolina. It’s one of the greenest states I’ve ever seen. You fly over and look out the window of Marine One and the land looks like broccoli, broccoli everywhere, the trees, so many trees.”

Winstead and Shirley stood on either side of the President, and each had a small attendant in a flag dress standing beside them.

“Winstead, tell us what happened. Everybody wants to know. We need to know, don’t we? When there’s an attack, and they pick out a Vietnam veteran, that’s what they do. Domestic terrorists. We’re going to clean them out of our country. You don’t like our country, leave. Leave. Just go. But that’s what happened, isn’t it. I’m so sorry it had to happen to you. And Shirley, I know this is hard, hard for you. Winstead, tell us what happened. Just an hour ago, folks, just an hour.”

Trump yielded the microphone to Winstead, and he stepped forward. Blood had started to seep through the white bandage. If we could see it from up on the second tier of the stadium, I expect everybody saw it. I squeezed Todd’s hand. This was getting good.

“I was at the crappers,” Winstead said, “and when I came out, there were three Antifa kids. In them black masks. And one had a sock with a lock in it, and he cracked me across the head. Lucky I’m a hard-headed old coot.” The crowd laughed, diffusing the intensity

of Winstead's story, and making it that much more real. "The Antifas ran, but my friends, and my grandson Todd, they chased 'em down. I'm not sure exactly what happened next, but I saw on a phone what happened. A video somebody made. Looks like my friends and my grandson took care of the matter."

Trump stepped beside Winstead. "I saw the video," Trump said. "That's all the proof we need, all the proof, right there. Somebody's going to jail, that I can tell you. Everything on video, not good, not good for the terrorists. Not good for Antifa. Not good. They want to destroy our country. But it's not going to happen. Not happening. But you're going to be okay. I went back there where the doctor was looking at Winstead, I asked him what happened to him, and he told me, and I said 'America needs to know who these people really are, what they can do, the damage they do.' Heartless. Horrible. We're going to clean them out. Thank you, Winstead, thank you. Thank you Shirley. Take good care of him."

"I will," was all Shirley said, before the Freedom Girls ushered them away.

"Now," Trump said, "now there's another hero. He's an immigrant. A legal immigrant. Doctor Anthony Mutombo." The doctor walked onto the stage, his pants and shirtsleeves stained with blood. The crowd stood, applauding, a thunderous wave of clapping, as the doctor stood beside POTUS on the dais. You could feel the love. Seriously, *you could feel it* emanating from the throng of patriots.

"This is the man who helped the farmer when he was struck with that lock, struck in the head, you saw the blood. So sad. These terrorists. Sad people. Do you want to say a few words?" Trump asked the doctor.

The doctor leaned forward and looked at the microphone, getting his thoughts together. "I came to America from the Congo. For a new life as doctor, and I help, help because a man is hurt, and that's why I am here." He paused, giving the crowd a chance to applaud again.

“I am here in America, finishing my schooling, and I will become a citizen very soon. The right way.” This made POTUS beam and made us cheer even louder. “I say, Keep America Great. Keep America Great!” Then the doctor turned to Trump and hugged him, almost like a kid hugging his dad, before leaving the stage.

Trump stood at the microphone. He seemed almost speechless for a few seconds. He shook his head, thinking, and we could see that he was disturbed, shaken emotionally.

“These good people, Winstead, Shirley his beautiful daughter, farmers, and a veteran. From Vietnam. He fought for his country. In Vietnam. Not that long ago. Not young a young man. Not old, but not young. A senior citizen. A veteran, fought for his country. With a bandage on his head from the attack. Domestic terrorists. Going to jail, that I can promise you. And the doctor. The good doctor. You heard him. You heard him. Thank you, Doctor Mutombo. Mutombo, an African name. From Africa, the Congo, and now a hero. So many heros. So many heroes. Unsung heroes. Who are the young men, the men who helped? The men who came to Winstead’s rescue? Stand up. Where are you?”

Trump searched the crowd. When he saw Big O, J.D. and Luke standing, he pointed at them. The crowd went absolutely freakin’ nuts. Big O looked toward me and Todd. He slowly lifted his arm and pointed straight at us the way Trump had pointed at him. Trump tilted his head, squinted, and looked at us, then he pointed at us. The whole stadium of people turned to look at us. To my surprise, Todd stepped forward, with me on his arm. He waved. I waved. The crowd kept cheering. We had, in a matter of seconds, become famous. Our whole crew had been blasted into the social media matrix like a missile spewing fire. It was fun to see the blast off, inspiring to feel the approval and enthusiasm of a giant crowd, but we had no idea where the missile might fall.

15

Harsh Reality

That night, Whiteville's two hotels filled to capacity with media people. Who knew, right? We were going to be a boon to the town's tourist economy.

But we had decided to stay over in Charlotte. Winstead and the boys had to spend two hours at the police station giving their statements. The boys learned that five Antifa terrorists had been detained, and warrants had been issued for seven others.

In the meantime, us girls had dinner at Panera. I had the cheesy broccoli soup in a bread bowl, comfort food, and slowly sank back into reality.

"What did you think about the President calling you Winstead's daughter?" Katie asked.

Shirley laughed. "Trump said that?"

"Yeah, I heard him, too," Susie said. "He said, 'Winstead, bring your daughter out here,' or something like that."

"I didn't notice, guess I didn't hear it," Shirley said. "It was so loud in there."

"Is your father still living?" Susie asked.

"No, he died in 2002," Shirley said. Later, Lorie would explain to Susie that both of Shirley's parents had died in a head-on collision on I-40 near Winston-Salem. A college girl who had fallen asleep at the wheel also died.

"Maybe Daddy was watching from heaven," Shirley said. "He'd get a kick out of seeing me on TV."

When the boys were done at the station, Shirley and Winstead went to their hotel. But the boys were starving. It was too late for

anything except McDonalds or Hardees, and they chose Hardees, so we gathered in there for awhile, talking about the rally. We were all fielding calls from friends.

The girls called. They'd watched the rally on YouTube, on the Right Side Broadcasting Network, because the legacy networks had refused to air it.

"Did you shake Trump's hand?" Lilly practically yelled into the phone.

"You know he doesn't like to shake hands," I said, "but . . ."

"I know, he's a germiefob," Lilly said.

"Germophobe," I said, "but he did shake my hand, and he hugged me, and we took selfies."

"No way," Jo-Jo said. "Hey did you know you're in videos on YouTube?"

"You're a rock star, Mom!" Lilly yelled.

"Hey Mom, you look really pretty on YouTube," Jo-Jo said, "in that dress."

"Is Popi going to be okay?" Lilly asked, referring to Winstead.

"I think he's going to be fine, sweetie," I said.

The Sheriff called Big O. He'd seen the news on Twitter, and watched the fight videos, but that's not why he called. He needed him back ASAP because there'd been a murder, but he didn't give the details. Big O grabbed his burger, refilled his Pepsi, and he and Camila headed out.

The hotel we'd booked, a Motel 8, was right beside I-95, and we heard the swish-swish of cars and semis all night long, but that didn't keep me and Todd from making love. I was jacked up on coffee anyway, and we were both more than happy to top off the day with sex, and fall asleep in each other's arms.

While Katie and Susie slept, J.D. and Luke shared a pint of Jim

Beam, sitting in plastic chairs on the second floor walkway, watching the highway. They talked through the fight with Antifa in as much detail as they could remember, and agreed it felt good to finally *get into the fight* when the fight demanded more of them than sitting at a computer screen.

Todd got a call from Carl at six in the morning. A producer from Fox News had knocked on his front door, looking for Winstead and Shirley, wanting to set up an interview.

“When will they be back?” the producer asked.

“I have no idea,” Carl had told him.

On Morning Moe, Moe and Lita’s staff must have worked through the night, because they already knew about Winstead’s QAnon show and were speculating that he may have staged the attack.

“This is just like QBaby,” Moe said, “a staged event to bring attention to the Q conspiracy. This guy has his own QAnon show. Something smells, that’s all I’m saying, something really smells.”

“Trump would like nothing more than to find a reason to go after Antifa,” Lita said.

“Well, he said he was planning to ‘clean them out of the country,’” Moe said.

“He’s really targeting them now,” Lita said, “targeting his enemies again. This morning he tweeted that photo of the old man and the doctor, trying to stir things up even more.”

“He’s not going to let this go,” Moe said, “he’s going to push this violence narrative as hard as he can.”

“White supremacists are eating this stuff up. The video of the cowboy and that fatso biker attacking the protesters, you know that’s gold for Trump,” Lita said. “My god, bikers and cowboys. Pure gold.”

“Are you fat-shaming?” Moe asked. “Don’t be doing that, now.”

“Not fat-shaming, but that fella is a tubby, right.”

“And that deputy threatened to kill those protesters,” Moe said, “I wonder what the Sheriff’s department there in North Carolina will say about that.”

On Fox Sunrise, they interviewed Doctor Mutombo, and we learned that he was two years into a residency in internal medicine at Carolinas Medical Center.

“He could have been killed,” the doctor said, “with a weapon like that, he’s lucky man, I’m surprised he walked away.”

“How bad were his injuries?” Toomey asked, “Any lasting damage?”

“I don’t think so. He had a bad laceration.”

“Any stitches?”

“Seven sutures,” the doctor said. “We iced his injury, right away with ice, and gave Ibuprofen, but it was a serious cut. It could have been a worse.”

“You said he could have been killed?” Toomey asked.

“Easily killed, or blinded if the bike lock had hit in the eye, could have been a lot worse,” the doctor said.

“Did the police question you?” Kildemire asked.

“Yes they did. I was questioned.”

“Do you think this Antifa thug, Perry Connors, will be charged with attempted murder?”

“I think that’s what it was,” the doctor said. “It was a terrorist attack.”

“Trump said the same thing,” Toomey said, “he said Antifa is a domestic terrorism group.”

“Winstead Denison looks like the drummer boy in that famous painting, The Spirit of 76,” Kildemire said, “with that bandage on his head, in that photo of you two.”

“Was it the drummer boy or the guy playing the flute?” Toomey asked. “I think it was the flute guy.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Kildemire said, “it’s an iconic image.”

“That photo says something about race in America, too,” Ashley Hardimon said. “For one thing, it’s a vivid example of the support President Trump is getting from the black community.”

“Doctor, you’re not an American citizen, right?” Toomey asked.

“No I’m not, not yet.”

“So you’re here on an immigration visa?” Kildemire asked.

“Yes. An H-1B.”

“So you can’t even vote for Trump,” Kildemire said, “but you went to a Trump rally.”

“Yes, to see the man in person,” the doctor said. “And to hear him speaking. To see history.”

“So, you’re a Trump supporter,” Toomey said, “that’s obvious, but I want to know how you became a Trump supporter.”

“My fiancée. I think she loves Trump more than me.”

“You’re a funny guy,” Kildemire said.

“Thank you. I’ve listened to many speeches,” the doctor said. “Many speeches, and videos on YouTube.”

“And what do you think of President Trump?” Kildemire asked.

“I think he will keep America great.”

“Doctor Mutombo, your photo is already famous, already trending on Twitter,” Kildemire said.

“This story blew up lightning fast,” Toomey said.

“How does that make you feel?” Kildemire asked.

“I’m glad since I was there to help this patriot,” Doctor Mutombo replied. “That’s all, I’m glad I could help.”

We didn’t know about any of this when we drove into Whiteville. We didn’t know how busy our lives were going to get. There were six

news vans parked in front of the farmhouse. It was Friday morning, and Carl should've driven the girls to school, but he gave them the day off. He didn't want them videotaped and was tempted to carry his shotgun out there and politely ask the news teams to leave, since it was his land, after all.

When Todd and I drove up, the cameras were rolling. We avoided them by parking behind the house and scurrying inside. Winstead and Shirley would be there soon. Carl had already warned them, and Winstead had decided that his first appearance would not be on legacy media, it would be on Wildcat's Corner on Patriots' Soapbox.

The murder that Big O had been called back for had him running hard. He'd only slept a few hours because the Sheriff was holding a meeting at seven A.M. The entire Special Investigations squad had assembled in the meeting room when Big O walked in and was greeted by handshakes and slaps on the back.

"Okay folks, settle down," Sheriff Brown said. "Last night, there was a shootout in Hamstead. A small massacre, looks like. Three MS-13 gang members were killed, five more wounded. The gang members aren't talking, so we don't know who did it. There's no camera footage, no leads, no nothing. But it might have been a revenge killing for the murders here, those two drug dealers. Question is, who would want revenge, and want it so badly? Anyway, the Hamstead PD and SBI want us to look into it. I wouldn't be surprised if SBI showed up here any minute now to look over our shoulder, or do some snooping around themselves. Oscar, how do you want to handle this?"

"Without a solid lead, it's a fishing expedition, but we can look at social media to see if there's anything online related to the killings."

"I may have a lead at the high school," the Sheriff said. "Gene called this morning asking me to come by, said it was something

about MS-13.”

“I’ll get right over there,” Big O said.

“Sounds good,” the Sheriff said. “As you all know, we’ve got a lot of media people in town, thanks in no small part to you, Oscar. I’ve been getting calls all morning.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Oscar said.

“Nothing to be sorry about,” the Sheriff said, “looks like you’ve turned into a media star overnight. But it’s bringing a lot of attention to our department. We’ve got a little shit storm on our hands, between these murders and the brouhaha in Charlotte. I don’t want anyone speaking to the media except me.”

As the meeting broke up, the Sheriff pulled Big O into his office.

“I need you to write up the details of what happened in Charlotte,” he said, “since you acted under the authority of my office. Did you use your service weapon?”

“Nossir, I used my usual off-duty carry, a Beretta,” Big O said.

“Well, it doesn’t matter, but we should probably check that gun for rounds fired,” the Sheriff said.

“Yessir,” Big O said. “I fired two warning shots. I’ll get Brenda to log the rounds.”

“How’s Winstead?” the Sheriff asked.

“He took a bad knock, but he seems to be okay.”

“Did you get to meet Trump?” the Sheriff asked.

“Yessir.”

“What did you think of him?”

“He’s a down-to-earth guy. He asked me where we were from, asked me what I did for a living. When I told him I was a Sheriff’s Deputy, he grinned and grabbed my shoulder. He said, ‘I’m with you guys, you small town law enforcement guys, the job’s not easy, not easy at all. Keep up the good work.’”

“He’s the real deal, isn’t he,” the Sheriff said.

“Yessir, he is.”

Principal Jamison invited Big O into his office. “I found something that you need to see,” he said, reaching into a desk drawer. He handed Big O a student notebook. “Look on the inside of the back cover.” Big O opened the notebook. Inside the cover, the student had drawn the devil’s horns hand symbol and the letters and numbers M S 1 3.

“What do you make of that?” Jamison asked. “Do we have MS-13 here in our school?”

“Looks like it,” Big O said. “But it could be some kid just doodling, maybe thinking about joining a gang. We need to find out what’s going on in that kid’s head.”

“I agree,” Jamison said. “The problem is, this kid doesn’t speak very good English.”

“We have a Spanish-speaking officer,” Big O said. “We should do the interview here, no need to haul the kid into the Sheriff’s Office.”

“Will you videotape it?” Jamison asked. “Do we need to get the parents’ permission?”

“How old is the kid?” Big O asked.

“Fifteen. But he’s a tough guy. He’s one of the kids who roughed up Montrell Jackson.”

“Is Montrell in school today?” Big O asked.

“No he’s not,” the Principal said.

“Is this kid in school?” Big O asked, as he handed the notebook to Jamison.

“No,” Jamison said. “He’s not here, either.”

We were bunkered at the farmhouse, but I needed to make a

Walmart run. We were low on things like HotPockets, brownies and pistachio ice cream that the girls require for existence, and out of half n' half, eggs and beer. But the reporters were encamped in the front yard. There were also reporters parked in front of our house on Pineneedle, according to one of our neighbors.

Winstead had been contacted by an “agent” who said he had someone interested in our story for a TV special or movie. I didn't know they did this kind of thing, that they bought rights to “life stories.” Winstead told me he didn't want to talk to the guy again, but he gave the agent my number, so I could find out how much money they might pay. Why not ask, right?

Jo-Jo and I were at Walmart, perusing the ice cream case, when the agent called me.

“Who do you represent?” I asked, after he had given me his name, Thomas Gaines, owner of Gaines Entertainment, LLC.

“I have a number of interested parties,” he said.

“How much money are we talking about?” I asked.

“Well, that depends on which rights are carved out,” he said. “For all media, just options, we're talking six figures, it's hard to say, but not less than one hundred grand, for all rights, again, that's just options.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Options? Options are just paying for the right to buy it. In other words, you're agreeing to sell the rights to the producer, if they want them. When they actually buy the property, it's another payment. See, what happens when a story goes mainstream, well, we have producers who might want to consider doing a TV special, or a film or streaming series, Netflix or Amazon, Hulu or Apple TV, but they don't have it packaged yet. So they collect stories like yours and see what they can get from the networks and other content producers,

filmmakers and so on. It's how the game is played. I'm the agent who represents you, so I want the best prices we can get."

"What's your fee?" I asked, watching Jo-Jo pile five cartons of ice cream into our cart. In the future we might be able to buy all the ice cream we want, I thought.

"Our fee is twenty-five percent," the agent said.

"Okay," I said, "I'll talk to Winstead."

On the way home, J.D. called to say, "Guess what, me n' Luke are going to be on Ariel Graham's show tonight. You know, on Fox News. She wants you and Todd to come with us, and Big O and Camila. The whole crew."

"What about Katie and Susie?" I asked.

"Them too. Everybody," Luke said.

"What about Winstead?"

"They said Hansen was going to get Winstead," J.D. said.

"They want him on *Prime News* with the big dog himself? I haven't heard that from Winstead," I said.

"How much is Ariel paying you?" I asked.

"I don't know," J.D. said. "They didn't mention it."

"Call 'em back and tell 'em you need ten thousand for all of us, see what they say," I advised.

"No way," J.D. said. "Are you kidding me?"

"I'm not kidding, J.D. Just ask them. See what they say."

When we got back to the farmhouse, Jo-Jo gave two boxes of Entemann's to the news people. After talking to Winstead, we sent Jo-Jo out again to tell them we'd make a statement at 2 P.M. The second time she went out, she wore my Trump 2020 cap just for fun.

Apparently, I'd become Winstead's PR person and manager, because he didn't feel like talking to agents or to the *Prime News*

producer. I didn't know what the heck I was doing, but I'm a fast learner. I knew enough not to sign anything without reading it, and to ask for money every chance we got. We had ice cream and college educations to pay for, don'tcha know.

Winstead's Soapbox friends suggested that he do an interview show with the boys *after* we did *Prime News*, since that would give Soapbox a lot more exposure. They said it was time for Q to go public. Q had said so in a recent drop. Winstead agreed.

That afternoon, we drove to the Town Hall in downtown Whiteville, where the Fox crew was setting up a makeshift studio for the interviews with Ariel Graham and Neal Hansen. Shirley refused to go on TV, and Big O and Camila declined, too. Big O said he was busy with an investigation, and Camila said she didn't want to appear without him.

16

Fake News Faceoff

Katie and Susie were thrilled to go on TV. Sure, I was excited, too, but I didn't want us to come off as country hicks, the kind of girls who "stand by our men," with no minds of our own. Guess I was afraid we'd be typecast that way, even though I know that's how we look to outsiders. It's a sore spot of mine, but not so much for my girlfriends. Maybe I'm just not perfectly comfortable in my own ego.

At the moment, we had to find a formula for splitting up the \$10,000 *Prime News* agreed to pay for the video footage Luke shot, but Luke wanted to split it equally, each couple would get \$3,333.33. But we also thought about putting \$1,000 in a vacation fund for a trip to Ocean Drive, or maybe Dollywood, then the split would be \$3,000 each, still darn good money for a one-hour interview.

"Why does Todd get a third, he didn't do anything," J.D. said.

"Him and Lorie started all this," Luke said, "hell, they took us to the rally."

J.D. grinned, "I'm kidding, dude."

"I knew that," Luke said. "Where we go one, we go all, right? Winstead should be on the show with us, he's the one who got his head busted. Weren't for him, we'd never had them Antifa to chase."

"He's become a national treasure," Katie said. "He's gonna get a book deal, that's what Lorie says, am I right, Lorie?"

"If we play our cards right," I said.

We were having this strange conversation outdoors, on the lawn of Town Hall, where Mayor Craven was about to be interviewed by Debra Dash from CNN.

"What about Big O and Camila?" Luke asked.

“They’re going to make some money,” I said. “All of us can sell our story rights. Tonight, we need to talk up Big O, you know, build up his value in the media marketplace.”

“Big O doesn’t need any building up,” Luke said.

“He’s becoming *the mystery man*,” I said. “The media is dying to interview him. He can charge them a ton, I mean, *a ton*.”

“I could tell them how he saved me from that bear,” Todd said.

“You should do that, baby,” I said.

We saw the video lights come on, then Debra Dash walked from an RV in the parking lot. She looked very prim and freshly made-up. When the Mayor was ushered from Town Hall, he looked ready for the limelight. He smiled and winked at us when he walked by.

After introducing the Mayor and doing a little backgrounding for the piece, Debra asked the Mayor, “All of these people were from your town, is that right?”

“All from right here in Whiteville,” the Mayor answered.

“And one of them, Oscar Darbonne, is a Sheriff’s Deputy?”

“That’s right.”

“Do you know why the Sheriff’s Office refuses to respond to our calls?” Debra asked. “Obviously, Deputy Darbonne was carrying a weapon on his person, while he was off-duty.”

“That’s a question for the County Commissioners, or for the Sheriff.”

“Well, what is the town’s response to the idea, and the accusations we’re hearing from the ACLU and many others, that these men, citizens of your town, were there to stir up a confrontation?”

“That’s not what I saw on the videos,” the Mayor said. “I saw one of our citizens, and a friend of mine, Winstead Denison, being assaulted, and these four men, all from our community, going after the perpetrators, many of whom were arrested. You didn’t see our guys getting arrested, just Antifa people.”

“With the outrage that’s trending on social media, people are saying that the confrontaton was terribly one-sided, since none of *your guys* were hurt in the melee.”

“I don’t really care what social media people say,” Mayor Craven said. “Those videos tell the story clear enough for any right-thinking person to see what happened. Here in Whiteville, we’re proud of our heroes who stepped up when they were needed.”

At that moment, as Dash opened her mouth, a moth flew into it, and she lost her cool, gagging and spitting like a child while trying to keep a shred of composure. Remember, this was **live**. “Oh my god, a moth . . . *it flew into my mouth. Ach. Yuch.*”

“Are you okay,” the Mayor asked. “Do you want to go on?”

“Yes, definitely . . . *ach* . . . I’ve never . . . it’s these lights, they attract insects. *Ach.*”

“Yes they do,” the Mayor said. “Lots of bugs out here.”

“Oh gee, sorry. Yes . . . *ach* . . . Mayor, do you think there’s a nest of QAnon extremists here in Whiteville?” Debra asked.

“I don’t think there is,” the Mayor said. “No.”

“But you’ve heard the concerns? As a result of the Charlotte violence.”

“There are Q followers all around the world. We’re not worried about it,” Mayor Craven said, proving just how woke he was.

“There has been unrest, and calls for action by the black community, virtually all across the nation, to change the name of your town,” Debra said.

“I haven’t heard of that,” the Mayor said.

“Do you personally think ‘Whiteville’ is a provocative, maybe even racist, name for a town?”

“We like the name of our town,” the Mayor said, “we’re not going to change it.”

“You wouldn’t consider a name change, even when over fifty percent of your population is African-American?”

“No, that is not under consideration,” the Mayor said. “That’s the first I’ve heard of it, and it’s a crazy idea, it’s a lunatic thing to suggest.”

Dash’s producer had the gall to ask us for an interview. After watching the Mayor’s interview on the lawn, Luke and J.D. wanted another fight, this time with Debra.

The studio they had created inside our Town Hall was a lot more elaborate than I had expected. They had brought in chairs upholstered in red fabric, and a stool for Ariel Graham. There was a beautiful dark azure curtain with plump, perfect folds to serve as a backdrop. The most impressive thing was all the lights, a whole bank of them, and four cameras. This was bigtime tech, all for little ol’ us, me and my deplorable friends in the hinterlands of NC, the tarheel state where we’re known, or were known, back in the Civil War, for our fighting spirit. Our sticky heels when went to fightin’.

Ariel came in wearing a lovely white dress. She looked prettier than I’d ever seen her. In that dress, she completed the red, white and blue color theme.

She was nice, but business-like. She introduced herself to us one at a time. They sat the boys in the first row of chairs and us girls behind them. Her producer, a guy named Ron, had already briefed us about the questions she would ask, and given us tips, like to please be aware that we were on camera at all times and not exaggerate our expressions, don’t speak unless you’re asked a question, don’t wave to friends at home, or, God forbid, pick our noses. We aren’t children, I thought, but that’s how they treated us. Like children, or country bumpkins.

When the show went live, Ariel did her opening monologue right there in front of us. Using a teleprompter, she talked about Iran

and the growing conflict, AOC latest gaffs and her tit for tats with Pelosi, which were reaching *a new level of absurdity*, Nadler's insane impeachment investigation, and so on. Then she segued to us and we were on camera for a few seconds before she went to commercials.

During the break, I wanted to call Lilly to make sure she was DVRing the show, but they had taken our phones when we entered the studio.

"This is so cool," Katie whispered close to my ear. "I'm so nervous, are you nervous?"

"Yeah, pretty nervous," I said.

"I hope I can hold my pee," Katie said.

Then I leaned over and squeezed Todd's shoulder. He glanced back at me, and I could tell he was kinda freaked out, his body was super tense. I looked at Luke and J.D. Luke gave me a thumbs up. J.D. just eye-rolled me, and rubbed his thumb against his fingers, indicating that he was willing to endure this for the cashola.

After the commercials, Ariel began by identifying us and our roles in the Antifa beatdown. Then they played the video of Winstead, taken when he was writhing on the ground and Doctor Mutombo arrived. Then they showed the iconic photo of the doctor holding up Winstead.

"That's your grandfather, right? Winstead Denison?" Ariel asked Todd.

"That's right," Todd said. "That's him. That's Winstead."

"And that Antifa thug hit him with a bike lock? Let's just call them what they are, 'thugs,' alright."

"He was attacked," I said. "It was an assault, an attempted murder." Ariel didn't expect me to chime in, but I was just trying to stand by my man.

"You're right," Ariel said, "it was clearly a vicious attack, a

criminal assault. And right after this, you, J.D., and Luke, you two ran after the attacker?”

“Three of them,” J.D. said. “Two more were hiding behind the porta-johns.”

“If we hadn’t gone to take a whizz, we’d’ve never been there,” Luke said. “You can thank Budweiser for that.”

“Those other two Antifas were accessories,” I said, ignoring their little rules *again*.

“They took off across the tarmac,” Luke said, “like scared rabbits.”

“And you chased them,” Ariel said.

“Yes ma’am,” J.D. said.

“Oh my god, please call me Ariel.”

“Ariel, we chased them, into a neighborhood,” J.D. said.

“And what were you thinking at that moment? Luke, put us inside your head at that moment.”

“Inside my head, okay, well, we just wanted to whoop some Antifa ass,” Luke said. “That’s when we found some things for weapons.”

“In the video it looks like a piece of wood, and a pipe,” Ariel said.

“A two-by-four and shank of rebar,” Luke said.

“That’s all you had to defend yourselves with?”

“That’s all we had,” Luke said. “But that’s all we needed.”

“You were outnumbered, weren’t you?” Ariel asked. “It looks like you were outnumbered, and they were coming forward. They had knives and chains . . . let’s roll that video. They played the video all the way through Big O and Todd’s arrival, when the Antifas scattered and the boys tackled their cheerleader.

“That was a good tackle,” Ariel said. “You guys must have played football.”

“Me n’ Todd played for Whiteville High,” Luke said. “Back in the

day. I played guard and tackle. Todd was a wide receiver.”

“Todd, tell us your version of that last part,” Ariel said.

“That’s when me and Big O, I mean, Oscar, showed up to help out,” Todd said.

“Oscar Darbonne, the Sheriff’s Deputy,” Ariel said.

“And he’s a musician, too, he plays the steel guitar,” I interjected.

“He’s from New Orleans, right? But now he works as a Sheriff’s Deputy in Whiteville.”

“Right, he’s the guy who saved me from a bear,” Todd said.

“A bear? When was this?” Ariel asked.

“About a month ago, right baby,” Todd said.

“More like three weeks,” I said.

“The bear would’ve killed me if Oscar hadn’t shot it,” Todd said.

“Where was this?” Ariel asked, “where did this happen?”

“At a boar preserve,” Todd said.

“A boar preserve? What’s that, a place where you hunt boars? A hunting preserve?”

“Right, and you know Oscar is a Ranger, and he’s a helluva great shot,” Todd said, “helluva shot. Those Antifas are lucky.”

“What do you mean, they’re *lucky*?”

“Lucky they didn’t get shot,” Todd said. “Lucky to still be breathing.”

“Those guys were punks,” Luke said. “We took down three of ‘em, just me and J.D. With building materials.”

“Oscar shot that bear through the mouth,” Todd said. “That was the brain shot.”

They took another commercial break, then Ariel asked us girls what we thought of everything, our husbands being brave and so on, and we said we sure were proud of them. We sure were. Real proud.

“What do you say to people who accuse you of looking for trouble at the rally, and calling you white nationalists, or, even worse, skinheads?”

“We don’t say anything to ‘em,” Luke replied.

“We aren’t skinheads, and we aren’t rednecks either,” Todd said.

“We’re just average Joes,” Luke said, “just normal country folks.”

“We’re about as average as it gets,” Katie said, and that made Ariel chuckle.

“We just wanted justice for what they did to Winstead,” J.D. said. “It was time to get in the fight.”

Here’s the amazing thing that happened next. As soon as Ariel signed off, they said, “we’re changing it out,” and the video people got busy adjusting the lights. They pulled us off the set and brought in two big white leather chairs, then they ushered Winstead in and sat him down. Ten seconds later, Neal Hansen walked in. We didn’t even know Hansen was in town, much less in the building. We thought he was going to interview Winstead from New York, but there he was in the flesh right in front of our eyes. The man himself. We plopped down in the same red chairs we’d used before only now we were at the back of their Town Hall studio, and during commercials we could run out to the lobby where they had a bunch of snacks and soft drinks.

Hansen did one of his angry-sounding opening monologs, going through the whole list of deep state crimes, with a few jabs at Hillary and a few at Mueller, a few at the Jihad Squad, and a verbal assault on Antifa, a *Soros-funded radical terrorist group that needs to be labeled as such and dismantled before somebody gets killed.*

“Tonight, we have an exclusive, coming to you live from Whiteville, North Carolina,” Hansen said, “where I just had some of the best barbecue and hush puppies you’ll ever find anywhere. I have Winstead Denison with me in a Fox exclusive, so don’t go anywhere.” They cut to commercials, Hansen took a deep breath and leaned over to talk to Winstead, while we went for more snacks. Katie jammed three Rice Krispy Treats into her tiny purse.

When the interview started for real, Hansen asked Winstead to describe what happened, and he said basically that he'd been hit on the head with a bike lock in a sock. Then they played some video clips.

After the clips, Hansen asked, "I understand you're a Vietnam veteran, so you've served your country. You're a Patriot. Did you ever expect to see something like this, terrorism like this, inside America?"

"Well, don't forget 9/11," Winstead said. "Only those buildings were imploded, those buildings pancaked straight down. That was a false flag."

"I realize that some people do believe that," Hansen said.

"A lot of architects and engineers believe it," Winstead said.

"You're being called a 'conspiracy theorist,' and whether you are or not, I don't really know, but that's how the radical leftist brain-dead mockingbird media is portraying you."

"Do you follow Q?" Winstead asked. Hansen was stunned.

"The 8chan thing?" Hansen asked. "The cryptic messages that a lot of people are wondering about, and a lot of people say it's a conspiracy theory?"

"It's not a conspiracy theory," Winstead said.

"If you say so," Hansen said, "I wouldn't really know."

"I think you do," Winstead said. "Q says you do."

"Really? I didn't know that," Hansen said, flustered. "Q mentioned me? Wow."

"One time, one time Q mentioned you. I have a show on Patriots' Soapbox. It's a 24/7 QAnon livestream," Winstead said. "It's on YouTube, and we'll be doing a show tomorrow with Oscar, he's the Sheriffs' Deputy."

"Are you connecting QAnon to what happened in Charlotte?" Hansen asked.

"No, but it's all connected one way or another."

“Trump tweeted a picture of you today,” Hansen said.

“Yep, he did, and he said, ‘Desperate people do desperate things.’ I want to say to the patriots out there to stay vigilant. There’s more to come.”

“What do you mean by that, ‘there’s more to come,’ more what?”

“More death throes, more deep state death throes.”

During the next break, Hansen jumped up and huddled with his producing staff. The impression we got was that Hansen didn’t want to talk about QAnon. Winstead had just tied him to Q. Would this blow up? I checked Twitter. Yep, it was blowing up. #HansenIsQ.

Hansen sat down and collected himself and leaned over to tell Winstead that Q was off-limits. Winstead told me later that he was tempted to walk out. But he stayed and finished the show, since he wanted to promote his big event the following day on Soapbox.

“I want us to get back to the rally, and the attack against you,” Hansen said, and that was all they talked about for the rest of the show. Antifa, and how this incident in Charlotte was *a game-changer*.

IMHO, Ariel had a better show that night, because it was about the fight itself, but Hansen had been outed as a QPatriot, which was pretty big news. Of course, the really big story belonged to Big O, but that would have to wait. Patriots’ Soapbox would get that exclusive interview, the same way they got that exclusive with QBaby and her patriot parents right after QBaby showed up at that rally.

On Friday nights, the Crazy Horse is open until 2 AM. After the interviews, that’s where we met Big O and Camila, sometime around 11. When they walked in, a bunch of folks wanted selfies with Big O, Todd, J.D. and Luke.

“We can’t have a lot of selfies with drunken fools going out on the information highway,” Camila said. “We’re getting too much attention

already. The news will paint all of you as party animals.”

“We are party animals,” Luke said, “and I’m a tubby biker. But we’re not *skinheads*.”

“You know, somebody on MSNBC said Whiteville is ‘redneck heaven,’ Susie said. “I think that’s really, really offensive.”

“Where did you hear that?” I asked.

“I told you, on MSNBC, but I saw it in a tweet.”

“I didn’t know you were on Twitter,” Katie said.

“I am now, my codename is ‘WhitevilleGal.’”

“You’re gonna get trolled,” I said.

“I’m getting it bad,” Susie said, “lots of nasty people out there. Nasty and mad at me for some reason. Somebody called me a *racist slut*.” She laughed. “A lot of people are calling me *Whiteville trash*, too. You know, like *white trash*, only now it’s *Whiteville trash*.”

“You should stop looking at that shit,” Luke said. “Who said that to you?”

“Just some libtard,” Susie said. “Somebody suffering from TDS.”

“What’s that?” Luke asked.

“Trump Derangement Syndrome,” I said. “T-D-S.”

J.D. and Todd returned with fresh beers. Big O had been sitting quietly on the tailgate of our Durango.

“What’s shakin’, Big Dog?” Luke asked.

“He just needs some sleep,” Camila said. “He’s wasted.”

“I thought you were the iron man,” Luke said. “What’s up with you, brah?”

“He got a call from Charlotte PD,” Camila said. “They’re questioning what happened, and why Oscar fired warning shots.”

“What’s wrong with warning shots?” Todd asked.

“When an officer fires into the air, his bullets are going to come down somewhere,” Camila explained, “so ideally he fires into the ground, but, when there’s pavement, you don’t have that option. The

city wants to know why Big O had to fire into the air.”

“I’m not worried about that,” Big O said. “It’s this MS-13 shootout, it’s a really fucked up situation.”

“What shootout?” I asked. “A shootout here in Whiteville?”

“Up in Hamstead,” Camila said.

Big O popped open his beer, foam billowed across the back of his hand, dripping on the ground, as he collected his thoughts. “Okay, get this, I’m at the high school, right, and it turns out the two kids who harassed Montrell Jackson last week, those kids are MS-13 wannabes, and they’ve been recruiting Montrell. They do that with threats. They target kids they want to recruit, and they threaten to kill their families.”

“Oh my god,” Susie said, “that’s horrible.”

“It’s criminal group-think,” Camila said. “In these gangs, evil becomes pathological. It’s social pathology. Not unlike TDS, really.”

“Whatever that means, it sounds bad,” Luke said.

“Montrell told Oscar that’s precisely what happened,” Camila said. “His beating was his initiation, if he wanted it to be, otherwise it was a warning, a threat, a way to draw him in to protect his family.”

“Right, these are really evil dudes,” Big O said. “I’m leaving the school when I get a call from Montrell’s father. I’d given him my mobile number the day I met him, so he calls and he asks me to come by his house. I wanted to find Montrell anyway, right, to see if he was safe, because he wasn’t in school. I go over there, and he’s at home with his mom and dad, and his older brother, whose name is Marvin. Big guy, played football for Clemson, now he plays indoor football, played for that league in Raleigh.”

“That Raleigh team was a bust,” Todd said.

“Right, the team folded,” Big O said, “and Marvin moved home. He’s looking for work, but he’s volunteering as an assistant coach at the middle school. So they invite me into their house, right.”

“Over at the golf course?” Todd asked.

“Right, nice place, a pool and everything,” Big O said. “Jeffers, the father, tells me what happened. The three of them confessed to killing those MS-13 gangbangers up in Hamstead.”

We were riveted to Big O’s every word. All of our thoughts about Antifa, and news interviews, had faded away as we focused on the story he was weaving.

“Tell them the whole thing,” Camila said. “Might as well.”

“I’ll tell you, but you have to promise to keep it on the downlow,” Big O said.

“We promise,” I said, and everyone agreed to keep their lips zipped.

“Okay, so Montrell drove up to Hamstead. He realized when he got there that he’d made a big mistake. He said the MS-13 gang frightened him, and he thought they might kill him.”

“So why’d he go?” Luke asked.

“They had threatened his family,” Camila said. “And he wanted to protect them.”

“Or maybe he wanted to be their drug connection in Whiteville,” Big O said. “They’d already killed the two dealers who supplied his drugs.”

“In any case, he was afraid for his life,” Camila said.

“No doubt about that, he feared for his own life,” Big O said, “but he might’ve had mixed motives for going. He’d gotten in over his head. The next thing you know, they’re telling him he has to take a van to Myrtle Beach. They decide to keep his car until he returns with the van, him and the other two recruits. Problem is, the van is filled with young girls, all Hispanic, illegal immigrants that MS-13 needs to deliver to a strip joint in Myrtle Beach.”

“They were going to be strippers?” Katie asked.

“No, they were going to be trafficked for sex, through some

bad guys at this strip club, right. MS-13 sends Montrell and his two classmates to make the delivery, only Montrell has to sit in the back of the van with these girls. Turns out that's his lucky break. So he's back there with them, and he realizes he's gotten himself into a shit-ton of trouble. He calls his old man, right. He calls him because he's desperate, and his old man becomes enraged, and he and Marvin head to Myrtle Beach. They carry guns with them. Two shotguns and two handguns, and plenty of rounds. Along the way, they're making a plan with Montrell who is in the back of the van, and they decide the girls should be dropped off first, because they didn't want the girls to get hurt, then they'll intercept the van somehow. Of course, they don't know how to stop the van, they have to follow it all the way back to Hamstead, and that's where the shootout goes down. They get the drop on the MS-13 crew and take out three and wound seven or eight more. They get back to their house and barricade the doors and windows because they're expecting MS-13 to retaliate. Anyway, they decide to call me, and after I go in and get their story, I call the Sheriff, he calls the FBI, and an hour later a black 412 chopper lands in the middle of the street. I walk them out, and the FBI takes them away."

"Were they arrested?" I asked.

"For now they've been detained as witnesses while the FBI investigates, but they could be charged. Montrell's responsible for saving those girls, that counts for a lot. It's a federal matter, those girls came from Texas, so it's out of our hands."

"What happened to the girls?" Susie asked.

"Myrtle Beach SWAT picked them up. None of them were hurt, as far as I know," Big O said, "but get this, one of them was twelve years old. *Twelve years old.*"

"Fucking slime," Luke said. "They got what was comin' to 'em."

"Montrell's father and brother were rescuing him, so that's self-defense, right?" I asked.

“It’s complicated,” Big O said. “But I don’t think they’ll be tried for murder, if that’s what you mean. The biggest thing the Jackson family needs to be worried about is MS-13. Some kind of retaliation.”

“Baby, you had a hard day,” Camila said, rubbing his shoulders.

“I’ll be fine,” Big O said, “I just need some sleep.”

“Can you do the show tomorrow with Winstead?” I asked. “If you can’t, no worries.”

“I want to do it,” Big O said, “I’ve been looking forward to it.”

17

Soapbox Exclusive

The following morning, we were driving to Winstead's studio when Todd said, "I need to talk to you about something."

"Okay," I said, noticing his serious tone. "I'm listening."

"You know, Dad isn't back up to speed. That fall took something out of him. And Winstead's doing his show, he's all wrapped up in that. That's really his job now."

"Yes it is. He's made a name for himself."

"So there's nobody to look after the farm," Todd said. "We'll inherit it one day, and we'll have to decide what to do with it. I'm wondering if we should move out there."

"You mean, you want to run the farm?" I asked. "And live there? That house won't hold another four people."

"I know that, and I know you love our house," Todd said. "But we could build another one, maybe a log cabin this time."

"You've thought this through, haven't you?"

"Yeah, or I wouldn't be suggesting it," Todd said. "I've been thinking about the pros and cons."

"You want to change careers? You want to farm?"

"I wouldn't mind doing some farming, doing the truck crops. You know Dad will help as much as he can, and I thought I might build a woodworking shop. I could make some furniture on the side."

"You want to build a house and a woodworking shop?"

"Not right away, but in a year or two."

"Alright," I said, "but I want you to build something for me."

"Huh? What do you need, baby?"

"A studio. I want to start a YouTube show," I said.

“I’ll do that for you,” Todd said. “Why can’t you use Winstead’s studio?”

“Because mine has to be girly.”

“Okay. Sure. I had another idea, too, maybe we could rent our house on Pineneedle to Big O and Camila. So they’ll have a nice place when the baby comes.”

“When did you grow such a big heart?” I asked.

“I’ve always had a big heart,” Todd said. “I just don’t let on about it. You know me.”

When we got to the farmhouse, no sign of Big O, but J.D. and Luke were waiting for us. We parked out front and walked around to Winstead’s studio. He had brought his muskets outside and laid them on a table. He’d set up two cameras. I gave him a big hug, feeling, like I often do, a ton of gratitude, maybe more than a ton after his close call. We can lose our loved ones so easily, life can change so fast, it’s best to show love and thankfulness whenever you can. Plus, I’m just a natural born hugger, ya know.

I made a mental note, when I do my YouTube show, I’m going to talk about the *higher path* to a good life. Politics, Antifa, MS-13, abortion, false flag attacks, fake news, social division: so much darkness to wade through, it gets tiring. My show will be uplifting, inspiring, hopeful, *remember that, Lorie*.

Big O arrived in the nick of time, as Winstead was about to start *Wildcat Corner*. After introducing the boys, he said “These are the men who confronted Antifa in Charlotte, after I got clocked, these are the guys right here, a Soapbox exclusive with our friend, Oscar Darbonne, who we call Big O. Later in the show, we’re going to play your video, Big O, I hope you brought that file with you, your new music video, it will be a Soapbox premier.”

“I’ve got it right here,” Big O said, reaching for the thumb-drive in his shirt pocket.

“Let’s go ahead and get that cued up,” Winstead said, “Lorie, can you cue this up inside, on the iMac?” Big O handed me the thumb-drive. “Wait a minute, Lorie, can you come over here.” I walked onto the outdoor set and Winstead wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “This is my beautiful granddaughter-in-law, our precious Lorie. She knows more about QAnon than I do. She’s red-pilled our whole family. We love her for that. We love her anyway, but we really love her for that. God threw away the mold after making you,” he said, and kissed me on the forehead.

I went inside to plug in the thumb-drive while Winstead began talking about his guns. Sitting in the shadow of the studio building, I monitored the Discourse convo on my own laptop. We were getting a ton of viewers. I don’t know how many, but the Discord messages were flying by.

Winstead showed the boys how to load the Brown Bess and then he handed it to Big O.

“We need something to shoot at, don’t we?” Big O asked.

“We can use that old bucket!” I said, and I grabbed the bucket and ran into the field behind the studio. “Far enough?” I yelled.

“A little farther!” Winstead yelled. “About fifty yards!”

“That’s half a football field!” Luke yelled.

(Seeing me prancing cross those furrows turned out to be one of the funniest parts of the show, BTW.)

When I’d rejoined the boys, Big O took aim at the bucket. “I’m going to embarrass myself,” Big O said. “This thing is not going to shoot straight.”

“Wonder why it doesn’t have any sights?” Todd asked.

“Try using the bayonet lug to sight it,” Winstead said. “At fifty yards, the ball will drop four inches.”

“What?” Big O asked. “Four inches? How did they ever hit anything with this rifle?”

“They missed most of the time,” Winstead said.

“If you hit that bucket, I’ll eat this persimmon,” Luke said, holding one up for the camera to see. He had a handful of persimmons he’d picked off a tree in the backyard. If you’ve never eaten fresh persimmons, they’ll pucker your mouth something awful if they aren’t ultra-ripe, and Luke had picked them right off the tree, so he knew the risk he was taking.

Big O pulled the trigger and the blast surprised us. It was loud, and the gun made a big puff of smoke, but Big O hit the bucket, and the musket ball ricocheted with a sharp, metallic yowl. A few seconds past before I smelled the burnt gunpowder. It smelled like the bottle rockets we shoot off at the beach.

Winstead zoomed in to get a closeup of Luke eating the persimmon. The face he made was priceless (the second funny clip in the show).

The other boys took turns firing the Brown Bess and none of them hit the bucket, then they fired the Springfield, a more accurate rifle with sights, and J.D. and Big O hit the bucket.

To complete the gun demonstration, Big O brought out his “pirate pistol,” a French-made flintlock, however, they decided not to fire it for safety reasons. He’d also brought his Beretta, so he used up a clip brutalizing that bucket, tearing it to shreds. Didn’t miss a single time.

Winstead decided to play Big O’s music video, which really wasn’t a music video, but a song with a static frame of Big O for the thumbnail. The title is ‘MAGA Country,’ and it’s a Zydeco Country Western tune. While the song played, we moved the cameras back inside the studio.

For the last half hour of *Wildcat’s Corner*, Winstead and the boys talked about the Antifa attack and counter-attack.

“When J.D. picked up that shank of rebar, he looked at me,” Luke said, “that’s when I knew it was on. Because of that crazy look in his eyes. I found a two-by-four, and we walked out there in front of them Antifa fools.”

“Everything changed then,” J.D. said.

“Yeah, they backed up, they knew we were going to bust up somebody.”

“They had to ask themselves, ‘do I want to get hurt today?’”

“We put a few down,” Luke said, “but I wish we’d put a bunch more down.”

“They might have put you guys down if we hadn’t shown up,” Todd said.

“You mean, if Big O hadn’t been carrying a pistol,” J.D. said.

“Hey, I was ready to rumble,” Todd said. “I didn’t know Big O was armed.”

“Big O,” Winstead said, “what was your thought process when you got there?”

“I wasn’t thinking too hard, I just reacted. When you see a gang of people up against two guys who are your friends, you’re going to use deadly force if you have it. Of course, I didn’t want to shoot anybody. I didn’t see any guns, so I just had to let them know I was serious. I showed my badge, warned them, fired warning shots. They finally got the message.”

“So far, the five of us have gotten a lot of media attention, and the mockingbird media is trying to control the narrative,” Winstead said.

“They like Antifa more than they like us,” Luke said. “People are calling us *Whiteville trash*, and they called my wife a *racist slut*. My beautiful Susie, she plays piano at our church, ya know. The people out there who say shit like that don’t even know us.”

“They’ve never been attacked by Antifa, either,” Winstead said.

“Or faced a horde of them.”

“Winstead, I’ve got a question for you,” Todd said, “were you wearing your MAGA cap that day at the rally?”

“No, I was wearing my vet cap, but I lost it when I got hit. I guess somebody in the crowd picked it up.”

“I was wearing my Trump 2020 cap,” Luke said.

“I was wearing my Cabela’s camo,” J.D. said.

“I was just wondering what triggered them to attack you.”

“They saw how old I am,” Winstead said. “That young man, Perry Connors, went after the weakest victim he could find. He didn’t expect to be chased a mile by you guys. That’s what makes this different. You guys took the fight to them. If we end up in a second American Revolution, a civil war between left and right, what happened in Charlotte might get written up in history books as the place where the first shots were fired. When the Patriots said enough is enough, we’re going to fight back, we’re going to fight for what we believe, for freedom and the rule of law.”

“Winstead,” I said, as I looked at the monitor, “Winstead, there’s been a new Q drop. Somebody on Discord posted a link.”

“What’s Q saying?” Winstead asked.

“I’m looking for it now,” I said. “On qanon dot pub. Can you switch to this screen?” I asked.

“Can do,” Winstead said.

“Do you see it?”

“Yeah,” Winstead said. “It’s a picture of my Brown Bess. It’s the picture I put on Facebook a few years ago. And Q wrote ‘1765’ and a hyphen.”

“What’s that mean?” I asked.

“That’s the date the American Revolution started. 1765,” Winstead said.

“Damn,” Todd said, “Q is watching the show. Q heard what you said. Hot damn.”

“What does the hyphen mean?” I asked.

“Maybe it means the revolution is still going on,” Winstead said. “It’s not over. That’s what I was trying to tell Hansen.”

“Q just dropped again,” Todd said, pointing at the computer screen. “It’s a picture of a helicopter in the middle of a street.”

“Looks like a city street,” I said, “and there are Army men climbing out of it.”

“It’s a street camera,” Winstead said, “that’s why it’s black and white, it’s a security camera.”

“Q can tap into security cameras,” Big O said. He leaned in to get a better look at the picture. “Those guys aren’t regular Army, they’re Rangers. That’s a special op.”

“Look at the time stamp on the picture,” I said, “it was taken fifteen minutes ago.”

“Where do you think that is?” Big O asked. “It’s a city street, those are brownstones.”

“There’s another drop,” Winstead said.

“Man, Q is on fire today,” Luke said.

“It’s that rat picture,” I said, “the panic in DC picture. And Q says, ‘Be prepared.’”

“The Boy Scout motto,” J.D. said.

“So this special op must be happening in DC,” Todd said.

“Holy cow,” Winstead said. “It’s going down, the arrests are in progress.”

“Somebody on Discord just posted a Tweet from the President,” I said.

“What did POTUS say?” Big O asked.

“It’s short,” I said, “but it’s the words we’ve been waiting for.”

‘The storm is upon us.’

