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Written by Tom Franklin

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CROOKED LETTER, CROOKED LETTER

TOM FRANKLIN

PAN BOOKS



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For Jeff Franklin

and

in loving memory

of

Julie Fennelly Trudo

M, I, crooked letter, crooked letter, I, crooked letter, crooked letter, I, humpback, humpback, I.

—How southern children are taught to spell *Mississippi*

CROOKED LETTER, CROOKED LETTER

ONE

The Rutherford girl had been missing for eight days when Larry Ott returned home and found a monster waiting in his house.

It'd stormed the night before over much of the Southeast, flash floods on the news, trees snapped in half and pictures of trailer homes twisted apart. Larry, forty-one years old and single, lived alone in rural Mississippi in his parents' house, which was now his house, though he couldn't bring himself to think of it that way. He acted more like a curator, keeping the rooms clean, answering the mail and paying bills, turning on the television at the right times and smiling with the laugh tracks, eating his McDonald's or Kentucky Fried Chicken to what the networks presented him and then sitting on his front porch as the day bled out of the trees across the field and night settled in, each different, each the same.

It was early September. That morning he'd stood on the porch, holding a cup of coffee, already sweating a little as he gazed out at the glistening front yard, his muddy driveway, the bobwire fence, the sodden green field beyond stabbed with thistle, goldenrod, blue salvia, and honeysuckle at the far edges, where the woods began. It was a mile to his nearest neighbor and another to the crossroads store, closed for years.

At the edge of the porch several ferns hung from the eave, his mother's wind chime lodged in one like a flung puppet. He set his coffee on the rail and went to disentangle the chime's slender pipes from the leaves.

Behind the house he rolled the barn doors open, a lawn mower wheel installed at the bottom of each. He removed the burnt sardine can from the tractor's smokestack and hung the can on its nail on the wall and climbed on. In the metal seat he mashed the clutch with one foot and brake with the other and knocked the old Ford out of gear and turned the key. The tractor, like everything else, had been his father's, a Model 8-N with its fenders and rounded hood painted gray but its engine and body fire-engine red. That red engine caught now and he revved it a few times as the air around his head blued with shreds of pleasant smoke. He backed out, raising the lift, bouncing in the seat as the tractor's big wheels, each weighted with fifteen gallons of water, rolled over the land. The Ford parted the weeds and wildflowers and set off bumblebees and butterflies and soggy grasshoppers and dragonflies, which his mother used to call snake doctors. The tractor threw its long shadow toward the far fence and he turned and began to circle the field, the privet cut back along the bobwire, the trees tall and lush, the south end still shaded and dewy and cool. He bush-hogged twice a month from March to July, but when the fall wildflowers came he let them grow. Migrating hummingbirds passed through in September, hovering around the blue salvia, which they seemed to love, chasing one another away from the blooms.

At the chicken pen he shifted into reverse and backed up, lowering the trailer hitch. He checked the sky shaking his head. More clouds shouldering over the far trees and rain on the air. In the tack room he ladled feed and corn into a plastic milk jug with the mouth widened, the brown pellets and dusty

yellow corn giving its faint earthy odor. He added a little grit, too, crushed pebble, which helped the chickens digest. The original pen, which his father had built as a Mother's Day gift somewhere back in Larry's memory, had run twenty feet out for the length of the left side of the barn and adjoined a room inside that had been converted to a roost. The new pen was different. Larry had always felt bad that the hens lived their lives in the same tiny patch, dirt in dry weather and mud in wet, especially when the field surrounding his house, almost five acres, did nothing but grow weeds and lure bugs, and what a shame the chickens couldn't feast. He'd tried letting a couple run free, experiments, hoping they'd stay close and use the barn to roost, but the first hen made for the far woods and got under the fence and was never seen again. The next a quick victim of a bobcat. He'd pondered it and finally constructed a scheme. On a summer weekend he'd built a head-high moveable cage with an open floor and attached a set of lawn mower wheels to the back end. He dismantled his father's fence and made his own to fit against the outside door to the coop, so that when the chickens came out they came out in his cage. Each morning he latched an interior door and, weather permitting, used the tractor to pull the cage into the field, onto a different square of grass, so the chickens got fresh food—insects, vegetation—and the droppings they left didn't spoil the grass but fertilized it. The chickens sure liked it, and their egg yokes had become nearly twice as yellow as they'd been before, and twice as good.

He came outside with the feed. Storm clouds like a billowing mountain loomed over the northernmost trees, already the wind picking up, the chime singing from the porch. Better keep em in, he thought and went back in and turned the wooden latch and entered the coop, its odor of droppings and warm dust. He shut the door behind him, feathers settling

around his shoes. Today four of the wary brown hens sat in their plywood boxes, deep in pine straw.

"Good morning, ladies," he said and turned on the faucet over the old tire, cut down the center like a donut sliced in half, and as it filled with water he ducked through the door into the cage with the nonsetting hens following like something caught in his wake, the tractor idling outside the wire. He flung the feed out of the jug, watching for a moment as they pecked it up with their robotic jerks, clucking, scratching, bobbing their heads among the speckled droppings and wet feathers. He ducked back into the coop and shooed the setting hens off and collected the brown eggs, flecked with feces, and set them in a bucket. "Have a good day, ladies," he said, on his way out, turning the spigot off, latching the door, hanging the jug on its nail. "We'll try to go out tomorrow."

Back inside the house he blew his nose and washed his hands and shaved at the bathroom mirror, the hall bathroom. He tapped the razor on the edge of the sink, the whiskers peppered around the drain more gray than black, and he knew if he stopped shaving his beard would be as gray as the beards his father used to grow during hunting seasons thirty, thirty-five years before. Larry had been chubby as a kid but now his face was lean, his brown hair short but choppy as he cut it himself, had been doing so even before his mother had gone into River Acres, a nursing home nowhere near a river and mostly full of blacks, both the attendants and attended. He'd have preferred somewhere better, but it was all he could afford. He splashed warm water on his cheeks and with a bath rag swiped his reflection into the steamy mirror.

There he was. A mechanic, but only in theory. He operated a two-bay shop on Highway 11 North, the crumbling white concrete block building with green trim. He drove his father's red Ford pickup, an early 1970s model with a board

bed liner, a truck over thirty years old with only 56,000 miles and its original six-cylinder and, except for a few windshields and headlights, most of its factory parts. It had running boards and a toolbox on the back with his wrenches and sockets and ratchets inside, in case he got a road call. There was a gun rack in the back window that held his umbrella—you weren't allowed to display firearms since 9/11. But even before that, because of his past, Larry hadn't been allowed to own a gun.

In his bedroom, piled with paperbacks, he put on his uniform cap then donned the green khaki pants and a matching cotton shirt with LARRY in an oval on his pocket, short sleeve this time of year. He wore black steel-toed work shoes, a habit of his father's, also a mechanic. He fried half a pound of bacon and scrambled the morning's eggs in the grease and opened a Coke and ate watching the news. The Rutherford girl still missing. Eleven boys dead in Baghdad. High school football scores.

He detached his cell phone from its charger, no calls, then slipped it into his front pants pocket and picked up the novel he was reading and locked the door behind him and carefully descended the wet steps and squished over the grass to his truck. He got in, cranked the engine and reversed and headed out, raindrops already spattering his windshield. At the end of his long driveway he stopped at his mailbox, tilted on its post, a battered black shell with its door and red flag long wrenched off. He cranked down his window and reached inside. A package. He pulled it out, one of his book clubs. Several catalogs. The phone bill. He tossed the mail on the seat beside him, shifted into drive and pulled onto the highway. Soon he'd be at his garage cranking up the bay door, dragging the garbage can out, opening the big back doors and positioning the box fan there to circulate air. For a moment he'd stand in front by the gas pumps, watching for cars, hoping one

of the Mexicans across at the motel would need a brake job or something. Then he'd go inside the office, prop open the door, flip the CLOSED sign to OPEN, get a Coke from the machine in the corner, and click the lid off in the bottle opener. He'd sit behind his desk where he could see the road through the window, a car or two every half hour. He'd open the low drawer on the left and prop his feet there and tear into the package, see which books-of-the-month these would be.

BUT FOUR HOURS later he was on his way back home. He'd gotten a call on the cell phone. His mother was having a good day, she told him, and wondered might he bring lunch.

"Yes, ma'am," he'd said.

In addition to lunch he wanted to get a photo album—one of the nurses, the nice one, had told him those helped jog her memory, kept more of her here, longer. If he hurried, he could get the album, go by Kentucky Fried Chicken, and be there before noon.

He drove fast, unwise for him. The local police knew his truck and watched him closely, often parking near the railroad tracks he passed daily. He had few visitors, other than midnight teenagers banging by and turning around in his yard, hooting and throwing beer bottles or firecrackers. And Wallace Stringfellow of course, who was his only friend. But always unnerving were the occasional visits, like yesterday, of Gerald County chief investigator Roy French, search warrant in hand. "You understand, right," French always said, tapping him on the chest with the paper. "I got to explore ever possibility. You're what we call a person of interest." Larry would nod and step aside without reading the warrant and let him in, sit on his front porch while French checked the drawers in the bedrooms, the laundry room by the kitchen, closets, the

attic, on his hands and knees beaming his flashlight under the house, poking around in the barn, frightening the chickens. "You understand," French usually repeated as he left.

And Larry did understand. If he'd been missing a daughter, he would come here, too. He would go everywhere. He knew the worst thing must be the waiting, not being able to do anything, while your girl was lost in the woods or bound in somebody's closet, hung from the bar with her own red brassiere.

Sure he understood.

He stopped in front of the porch and got out and left the truck door open. He never wore his seat belt; his folks had never worn theirs. He hurried up the steps and opened the screen door and held it with his foot as he found the key and turned the lock and stepped into the room and noticed an open shoe box on the table.

His chest went cold. He turned and saw the monster's face, knowing it immediately for the mask it was, that he'd owned since he was a kid, that his mother had hated, his father ridiculed, a gray zombie with bloody gashes and fuzzy patches of hair and one plastic eye that dangled from strands of gore. Whoever wore it now must have found the mask French never had, hidden in Larry's closet.

Larry said, "What—"

The man in the mask cut him off in a high voice. "Ever body knows what you did." He raised a pistol.

Larry opened his hands and stepped back as the man came toward him behind the pistol. "Wait," he said.

But he didn't get to deny abducting the Rutherford girl last week, or Cindy Walker twenty-five years ago, because the man stepped closer and jammed the barrel against Larry's chest, Larry for a moment seeing human eyes in the monster's face, something familiar in there. Then he heard the shot.

WHEN HE OPENED his eyes he lay on the floor looking at the ceiling. His ears were ringing. His belly was quivering in his shirt and he'd bit his lip. He turned his head, the monster smaller than he'd looked before, leaning against the wall by the door, unable to catch his breath. He wore white cotton gardening gloves and they were shaking, both the one with the pistol and the one without.

"Die," he croaked.

Larry felt no pain, only blood, the heart that beat so rapidly pushing more and more out, bright red lungblood he could smell. Something was burning. He couldn't move his left arm but with his right hand touched his chest, rising and falling, blood bubbling through his fingers and down his ribs in his shirt. He tasted copper on his tongue. He was cold and sleepy and very thirsty. He thought of his mother. His father. Of Cindy Walker standing in the woods.

The man against the wall had sunk to his haunches, watching from behind the mask, eyes shimmering in the eye holes, and Larry felt a strange forgiveness for him because all monsters were misunderstood. The man moved the pistol from his right hand to the left and reached and touched the gory mask as if he'd forgot it was there and left another smudge of red, real among the paint, on its gray cheek. He wore old blue jeans frayed at the knees and socks stretched over his shoes and had a splotch of bright blood on his shirtsleeve.

Larry's head and face had filled with a rattlesnake's buzz and he heard himself whisper something that sounded like *silence.*

The man in the mask shook his head and moved the gun from one hand to the other, both gloves now stained red.

"Die," he said again.

Okay with Larry.

TWO

Silas Jones was his name but people called him 32, his baseball number, or Constable, his occupation. He was himself the sole law enforcement of Chabot, Mississippi, population give or take five hundred, driver of its ancient Jeep with its clip-on flashing light, licensed registrant of its three firearms and Taser, possessor of a badge he usually wore on a lanyard around his neck. Today, Tuesday, it lay on the seat beside him as he returned from afternoon patrol. On a back road shortcut toward the town, he glanced out his window and saw how full of buzzards the easterly sky had grown. There were dozens of them, dark smudges against darker clouds like World War II photographs he'd seen of flak exploding around bomber planes.

He braked and downshifted and did a three-point turn and pulled onto a small dirt road. He looked for signs of a dog or deer hit by a car or four-wheeler and saw nothing except a box turtle on the pavement like a wet helmet. Might be something near the creek, a mile or so down the hill, hidden in the trees. He shifted into first and nosed the Jeep into the mud and slid and yawed over the road until he found its ruts. He let the steering wheel guide itself until the road curved around a bend in the woods and he began the slow process

of braking in mud. When he'd stopped it was in front of an aluminum gate with a yellow POSTED: NO HUNTING sign, signature of the Rutherford Lumber Company. The signs were everywhere in this part of the county (and the next)—the wealthy Rutherford family owned the mill in Chabot as well as thousands of acres for timber farming. Sometimes higher-ups, always white folks, got to hunt whitetail deer or turkeys on prime plots. But out here, these acres were mostly loblolly pines ready to be cut, orange slash-marks on some trees, red flags stapled onto others.

Silas got out and his sunglasses fogged. He took them off and hung them in his collar and stretched and smelled the hot after-rain and listened to the shrieking blue jays, alone at the edge of a wall of woods, miles from anywhere. If he wanted, he could fire his .45 and nothing or nobody in the world would hear other than some deer or raccoons. Least of all Tina Rutherford, the nineteen-year-old college student, white girl, he was both hoping and hoping not to find under the cloud of buzzards. Daughter of the mill owner, she'd left home at the end of summer, headed back north to Oxford, to Ole Miss, where she was a junior. Two days had passed before her mother, worried, had phoned. When her roommates confirmed that she'd never arrived, a missing persons report had gone out. Now every cop in the state was looking, especially those around here: forget everything else and find this girl.

Silas searched through a wad of keys for the one with a green tag and let himself in the gate and drove through and parked on the other side and closed the gate and locked it behind him.

Back in the Jeep, he cranked down his window and floated through identical pine trees, tall wet bitterweed in the middle of the road wiping the hood like brushes at a carwash.

Where the land slanted down the trees had angled their trunks gracefully like arms bent at the elbow. He bumped and slid along half hoping he'd get stuck. Since much of his work in his rural jurisdiction involved dirt roads, he kept requisitioning the Chabot town council for a new Bronco. Kept not getting it, too, stuck with this clunker that, in a past life, had been a mail truck—you could still see a faint US POSTAL on its little tailgate.

His radio crackled. "You coming, 32?"

Voncille. If Silas was the Chabot police force, she was City Hall.

"Can't, Miss Voncille," he said. "Got something I want to check out here."

She sighed. If he wasn't there to do it, she'd have to put on the orange vest and direct traffic at the mill entrance for the early shift change.

"You owe me," she said. "I just got my hair done."

He rogered and hung the radio on his belt and shook his head at what he was about to do to his good leather boots.

He slowed to five miles an hour. When the road ended at the bottom of the hill he braked but kept moving, his own private mud slide. The Jeep turned by itself and he turned with it and soon had it stopped. He took his cowboy hat off the seat beside him and got out and pushed his door to and passed into the trees and descended the hill, digging his heels in the wet carpet of leaves, slipping once and grabbing a vine, which rained a pail's worth of water on him. Prettier land down here and, too steep to clear-cut, trees other than pines. The trunks were darker in the rain, some shelved with rows of mushroom or layered in moss. The air grew cooler the lower he went and at the bottom he brushed at his shoulders and emptied his hat, the hill tropic behind him, its odor of rain and worms, dripping trees, the air charged as if lightning had just struck,

squirrels flinging themselves through patches of sky and the snare-roll of a woodpecker a few hollows over, the cry of an Indian hen.

He picked his way along the water's edge, setting off a series of bullfrogs from the cattails and reeds. Cane Creek was more like a slough, he thought. It hardly moved at all, its blackberry water stirred only by the wakes of frogs or bubbles from the bottom or the bloops fish made. Among floating leaves and dark black sticks, liquor bottles and their reflections and faded beer cans and theirs had collected in coves and turns, and he wondered who the hell would come all the way out here to litter. He fanned his face again, insects like toy planes propellering madly through the high branches. Might just be a bobcat, he thought. Come down to the creek to die. That old instinct: hurt, head for water.

He thought of his mother, dead eight years. The time the two of them lived in a hunting cabin on land owned by a white man. No water in the place, no electricity, no gas. They'd been squatters there for less than a week when a one-eared tomcat appeared on the porch just past dark, scrotum big as a walnut. They shooed it off but morning found it lying at the steps with a twitching mouse in its jaws. My Lord, his mother said, that cat's applying for a job. They hired it and it insinuated itself all the way onto his mother's bed, where she said it warmed her feet. They moved from that cabin a few months later and the cat moved with them. It would live with them for years, but then, just before he left to go to Oxford his senior year, the cat disappeared. By the time he noticed, his mother said it had been gone nearly a month.

"Where?"

"Just off, baby," she said.

"Off?"

She was washing clothes in the sink, still in her hairnet

from work. "To die, Silas," she'd said. "When an animal's time come, it goes off to die."

The underbrush thinned as he went, the air hotter, muggier, and suddenly the trees had thrown open their arms to a high white sky, a burst of glowing logs and schools of steaming toadstools and clouds of gnats, wet leaves sparkling like mirrors and a spiderweb's glowing wires. A mosquito whined past his ear and he slapped at his arms and neck, going faster, leaves plastered to his boots, aware of a sharpness to the air, now a sweet rot.

Something fifty yards ahead began to lurch toward him. He stopped and thumbed the quick-release of his sidearm as other things moved as well, the earth floor stirring to life. But the thing veered away flapping into the air, just a buzzard, feet hanging, and then others were winging their duffle bodies over the water or waddling up the bank.

The odor grew worse as he stepped closer to where the land gave over to swamp. Farther down more of the birds lined the bank like crows on steroids, unfeathered necks and heads and some with faces red and tumored as a rooster's, some stepping from one scaled claw to the other and some with their beaks open.

He hoped not to have to shoot any as he mushed along fanning the air with his hand. Here he was two years as Chabot's law and he'd never fired his pistol except at targets. Practice. Never for real. Not even a turtle on a log.

Another of the ungainly birds heaved itself from the bank and kicked the swamp face, breaking its own image, and flapped up to the knuckled low branch it stood clasping and unclasping with its feet. He remembered somebody, Larry Ott, telling him that once a flock of buzzards took to roosting in a tree, the tree began to die. He could smell why. He took a ripe breath and went on as the limbs closed in again. He

ducked a low vine, wary of snakes. Cottonmouth-moccasins, his mother used to call them. Mean ole things, she'd say. Big and shiny as a black man's arm, and a mouth as white as the cotton he pick.

Silas took off his hat. In the distance, three or four lumps in rags of plaid clothing, lodged in the water among a vista of cypress trees and knees and buzzards black and parliamentary and all the flies a world could need. A large shadow passed him and he looked overhead where more buzzards circled yet, some at near altitudes not colliding but seeming to pass through one another, their wings and tail feathers sun-silvered at the tips. His mouth was dry.

These early birds had been at work awhile, and the heat hadn't helped. From this far off, and at this level of decomposition, an ID should have been impossible. But Silas shook his head. Keyed his radio.

IT WAS THE PLAID, he'd later tell French.

A few days back Silas had been called out to a secluded area behind a grown-up cotton field off Dump Road. An old Chevy Impala burning. The driver of a passing garbage truck had seen smoke and radioed it in.

Silas knew the car from its charred vanity plates, M&M, Morton Morrisette's nickname. He'd played second base to Silas's shortstop in high school. After graduation M&M had worked for a dozen years at the mill until he hurt his back; now he got a small disability and, allegedly, sold weed on the side. Because he was smart and careful, and because he avoided narcotics, he'd never been stung by the police. Watched, yes: French and the county narcotics investigator managed to keep their eyes on nearly every known or suspected dealer in the county, but barring violence or a complaint, or someone

flipping on him, they'd had to let him be, and M&M had sold his marijuana to trusted locals both black and white since the early 1990s.

Regarding the burning car, Silas had called French—for anything higher than simple assault, he had to notify the chief investigator. French arrived quickly and took over and within twenty-four hours had found an elderly woman who'd seen a man matching the description of a well-known crackhead in the car with M&M. French and the narcotics investigator had been watching this man—Charles Deacon—for a while and used this occasion to swear out a warrant. But thus far they hadn't found him. Or M&M either, for that matter. While Silas had gone back to his patrols, looking for trespassers on Rutherford land, writing tickets, directing traffic, moving roadkill, French had searched M&M's house and discerned that somebody, presumably M&M, had been shot there and then moved. Though the place had been carefully wiped down, they'd still found a few blood specks and prized from the wall a .22 bullet, mushroomed so badly from impact that it would likely be of no use. They did not, however, locate the gun. As for drugs, they found nothing but a pack of Top rolling papers, not even any shake. A few days later, they'd found M&M's plaid fedora snagged in a tree near a creek miles away, in Dentonville. But since the Rutherford girl's disappearance, everybody had back-burnered Deacon and all but forgotten M&M.

Silas was sitting on a fallen log upwind from the body. Even here, the edge of the swamp, he could see how swollen M&M's face was—the size of a pillow, blacker than he'd been while alive and grotesque and pink where the skin had split, eyes and tongue eaten out, much of his flesh torn

by the buzzards, a long lazy line of entrails snaking away in the water.

Silas thought he smelled cigarette smoke and was about to turn around when someone tapped him on the back.

"Shit," he said, nearly coming off the log.

Standing behind him, French set his investigator's kit down. "Boo," he said.

"That ain't funny, Chief."

French, a former game warden and a Vietnam vet, laughed and showed his small sharp teeth. He was late fifties, tall and thin, pale green eyes behind his sunglasses and close-cropped red hair and matching mustache. He had a blade for a chin and ears that stuck out and that he could move individually. Said his nickname in Nam had been Doe. He wore blue jeans and a tucked-in camo T-shirt that showed a Glock 9 mm in a beefy hand, aimed at the viewer. YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT, his chest said, FOREVER. The pistol on his belt was a dead match to the one on his shirt.

He said, "M&M?"

Silas flapped his hand toward the body. "What the buzzards and catfish done left of him."

"You go out there?"

"Hell naw."

"Good."

Above all, the CI hated having his crime scenes disturbed. He bent to see Silas's face and smirked. "You go puke in that water yonder the catfish'll eat it."

Silas ignored him, looked up at what sky showed through the trees and swirling buzzards. He thought of M&M when they were kids, how every time you bought a candy bar at recess he'd be there asking for a piece. If not for school lunches, he and his red-eyed sisters would've starved.

French sat with a Camel hanging on his bottom lip and

slipped off his boots and set them side by side on the log and pulled on a pair of waders, adjusting the suspenders.

"Watch out for gators," Silas said.

French smushed out his cigarette on the log and put the butt in his shirt pocket and pulled on a pair of latex gloves.

"I shall return," he said and rose and walked off like a fisherman, not even pausing as the swamp began, slogging out, lowering with each step as if descending a staircase, his wake gently dissolving behind him.

Overhead, crows were swirling, too, their caws something Silas had been hearing awhile, saying whatever crows said.

Near the body and in water to his waist, the chief bent, seemingly unperturbed by the smell or sight. He fished his digital camera from his pocket and began to take pictures, sloshing around to get every angle. Then he stood for a long time, just looking. From Game & Fish, he'd got on at the sheriff's department and worked his way up the ladder to his current position. Rumor was he might run for sheriff when the present one retired next year.

After a while he came back and sat on the log and shrugged the suspenders off and kicked out of the waders, flexing his feet.

"How deep's it get out there?" Silas asked.

French grunted, pulling on his boots. "Deep enough to dump a body, somebody thunk. All this rain brung him up."

"You figure his hat floated all the way to Dentonville?"

"Upstream?"

"Somebody trying to thow you off then."

"Be my guess, honcho. I'd say we dealing with above-average criminal intelligence."

"That eliminates Deacon."

"Maybe."

French pulled his boots on and rose and took more pictures from the bank, shook out another Camel.

Soon the birds went all aflutter again and a pair of paramedics and the coroner came bumbling out of the trees slapping their arms, cursing. One of the EMTs was Angie, a pretty, light-skinned girl, petite, slightly pigeon-toed, that Silas had been seeing a few months now, getting more exclusive by the week. Thing he liked best about her was her mouth, how it was always in a little pucker, off to the side, always working, like she had an invisible milk shake. She sniffled, too, from bad sinuses, and weird as it was, he found it cute.

Tab Johnson, her driver, an older white man who always seemed to be shaking his head, was doing so now, chewing his Nicorette gum.

Angie stood behind Silas and touched her shoulder to his back and he leaned into her thinking of the night before, her on top and her face buried in his neck, her slow hips and breath in his ear. Now her hand was going up his spine. She smelled like her bedsheets and suddenly what she called his "wangdangler" moved his pants. She sniffled and he looked down at her, over his shoulder.

"You coming over tonight?" she asked.

"Gone try."

She moved her hand. Here came the coroner, a young chubby white man in a denim button-down, glasses on forehead. Had a few years on the job. He'd ridden out with Angie and them and came between the two with his bag and his shirt out at the back and walked to the lip of the land, shading his eyes with his hand.

He said, "I pronounce it dead. Yall go ahead."

"Yuck," Angie said, glancing up at Silas. "You couldn't a found this on second shift?" She stuck out her tongue and headed down the bank, snapping on a pair of rubber gloves, fastening a surgical mask to her face.

Now the reporter who had the police beat and a couple of deputies were coming down the hill, and Silas took the

occasion to walk around some more, hoping to find a cigarette butt floating, a thread snagged in a spiderweb. And to avoid seeing them roll the pieces into the body bag.

A COUPLE OF hours later, back at the office, he sat brooding. He and M&M had fallen out of touch when he left in high school and now he wished he'd stayed in better contact. Maybe he could've done something. But who was he kidding. M&M wouldn't have had anything to do with a constable. He'd be polite, that was all. No friendly visits. No fishing.

Silas was at his computer, deleting e-mails, but paused at one from Shannon Knight, the police reporter, called "follow-up question." He opened the e-mail and pecked out an answer. Even though he'd found the body, he knew Shannon would interview French as well, and he would be the one quoted in the paper.

Silas sat back in his chair. He shared the one-room building of the Chabot Town Hall with Voncille, the town clerk, her desk to the left by the window that faced trees. She got the good view, she said, because she'd been here longer than him and the mayor combined, plus neither of them was ever at his desk. Fine with Silas. Except for when he left the seat up in their shared bathroom, he and Miss Voncille got along fine. They were Chabot's only full-time employees, their benefits coming through the mill. Morris Sheffield, the mayor, part-time, kept a desk in the back; he was a real estate agent with an office across the lot. He bopped in Town Hall once or twice a day with his BlackBerry and loose tie and loafers with no socks. He and Silas were both volunteer firefighters and only saw each other at monthly office meetings and the occasional fire.

"You okay, hon?" Voncille asked, rolling her chair back. Her desk was behind a cubicle wall she'd bought herself. She

had blue eyes and a pretty, fat face and looked at him over her reading glasses. She was white, early fifties, divorced a couple of times. Her stack of stiff red hair seemed unperturbed by her morning of directing traffic.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "I will be."

"Poor ole M&M," she said. "Didn't yall play ball together?"

"Back in the day we could turn the double bout as good as any two boys anywhere."

"Yall still talk? I mean before."

"Not really."

She bunched her shoulders, both understanding and disapproving at the same time. But who did he see but other cops and the people he arrested? Just Angie. Who else did he need?

Voncille was back to work and Silas leaned forward. Out the window by his desk, propped up with an old Stephen King book, were Chabot's other buildings: Mayor Mo's real estate, the post office, a bank that was more of a credit union for the mill, a diner/convenience store called The Hub, an IGA grocery store and a drugstore, both going out of business because of the Wal-Mart in Fulsom. The third-to-last establishment, the Chabot Bus, was an old yellow school bus on blocks that had been converted into a bar, a counter at the back end and a few plastic tables and chairs inside and several more outside. Silas met Angie there for drinks a couple of times a week, later in the evening, after the mill crowd had gone home. The first time they met there, by accident, they'd closed the bar then made out in his Jeep until they knocked it out of gear and nearly rolled off into the gully before he pulled the emergency brake. Looking out the row of bus windows, you saw the last two buildings, empty offices with boarded windows. Silas checked them nightly for vagrants and crackheads. You saw, too, that

Chabot had been built on the edge of a gully filled with kudzu, that snaky green weed nothing could kill. Somebody kept throwing trash in the gully, which brought raccoons and feral cats, roving stretches of ink in the leaves at night, fleet as spirits.

Chabot didn't have an ATM; the nearest was eleven miles north, in Fulsom. Cell phones worked in Chabot sometimes and sometimes they didn't. Because Gerald County, wet, was bordered on two sides by dry counties, the DUI tally was high. Fulsom was the county seat and, with its Wal-Mart, high cotton compared to Chabot's little spate of stores. Chabot's one barber had died, and his son had come and dismantled the building a piece at a time and carried it off in his pickup truck. Now its lot was vacant, an explosion of wildflowers and weeds, and if you wanted your hair cut, you went to Fulsom or did it yourself.

Because of the gully, Chabot's buildings all faced east, like a small audience or a last stand: out Town Hall's front windows, across the road and beyond strings of railcars and tankers, the tall, rumbling city of the Rutherford Lumber Mill. It blocked the trees behind it and burned the sky with smoke, one giant metal shed after another, smokestacks with red bleeping lights, conveyor belts and freight elevators below, log trucks, loaders and skidders beeping backward or grinding over sawdust to untusk limber green logs soon to be cut to planks and treated or creosoted for poles. The mill boomed-gnashed-screeched and threw its boards and sparks and dust and exhaled its fumes sixteen hours a day, six days a week. Two eight-hour shifts and a six-hour maintenance shift. Its offices were a two-story wooden structure a hundred yards past the mill, two dozen people there, accountants, salesmen, secretaries, administration. Some even got company trucks, big green Ford F-250s with four-wheel drive.

Not Silas. He wasn't a mill employee per se, so he got what Chabot could afford. His Jeep, purchased at auction, was over thirty years old. It had an emphysemic air conditioner and a leaky master cylinder, an addict to both Freon and brake fluid. Not to mention oil. Its odometer had stopped on 144,007. When he complained it was an old mail Jeep, Voncille said, "Count your blessings, 32. You lucky the steering wheel's on the right, and by that I mean left, side."

Around one, French called to say he was at The Hub across the parking lot. Did Silas want anything?

"*Hell* naw," he said and the chief laughed and hung up.

A few minutes later he came in the front door with a greasy brown bag and a Coke and took Mayor Mo's desk and uncrinkled the sack and removed an oyster po'boy.

"Where's his highness?"

Silas raised his chin. "Out buying land."

"Roy," Voncille said, leaning around her cubicle, pictures of her kids push-pinned over nearly every inch of it. "I don't see how you can eat from the same place every day."

"Hell," he said, chewing, "ain't got no choice. I done arrested somebody or other in ever goddamn joint in the county. Busboys, dishwashers, waitresses, fry cooks, owners, silent partners. Marla"—the cook at The Hub—"she's got a get-out-of-jail-free pass up to and including premeditated murder, long as she keeps feeding me. I gotta eat."

"What about Linda?"

Chewing. "Time she gets off work she don't do nothing but sit in front of the TV watching reality."

When he finished his last bite he wadded the paper into a ball and threw it into the wastebasket by Silas's desk. He slurped the rest of his Coke and got his Camels and shook one out.

"Don't you light that," Voncille called.

French lit it anyway, grinning at her sigh, the way she stapled harder.

"FYI," he told Silas. "Paid me a visit to Norman Bates other day."

Silas glanced over. "Who?"

"From *Psycho,*" Voncille said. "He means Larry Ott."

French blew a ray of smoke. "Always do it with a missing person, especially a girl. You know. The usual suspects."

Silas frowned. "You think Larry had something to do with the Rutherford girl?"

"'Larry'?"

Silas regretted saying it. "I was in school with him's all. Knew him a little way back when."

"He didn't play ball, did he?" Voncille asked.

"Naw. Just read books."

"Horror books," French said. "His house is full of em."

"Find any dismembered bodies?"

"Nah. I'll run by his shop a little later. See if I can spook him some more. Went this morning but he wasn't open yet."

"What time?" Silas asked.

He thought about it. "Twenty minutes ago."

"Shop wasn't open?"

The CI shook his head.

Silas creaked back in his chair and folded his arms. "You ever know of him *not* being open during business hours?"

"So what. He ain't had a customer in I don't know how long. Don't matter if he's in or not."

"Yeah, but that ain't never stopped him from being there's what I'm saying. Monday through Saturday, regular as clockwork. Don't even take lunch usually."

"Guess who's the detective now," French said, reclining in the mayor's chair. He stretched out his legs and adjusted his ankle holster with the opposite foot. "You ever see that other movie Alfred Hitchcock did, Voncille?"

"Which one?"

"*The Birds?*"

"Long time ago."

"All them buzzards and crows this morning reminded me of it. Seen it at the drive-in, when we was younguns. After it was over my little brother says, 'You know what? I wish that really would happen. With birds like that. Just going crazy. We could find us some football helmets and a bunch of guns and ammo and go on the road, just killing birds and saving people.' "

Silas barely heard. He was thinking of how, not long after he'd returned to south Mississippi, Larry Ott had called and left him a message on his home phone.

"Miss Voncille," Silas said. "You went to Fulsom High, didn't you? Did you know Larry Ott?"

"Not really, hon," she said. "Just of him. He was a few years behind me."

The CI winked at Silas. "You ever go out with him, Voncille?"

"Just the once," she said. "I was never heard from again."

French snorted. "We wish."

SILAS HAD BEEN driving north on Highway 11 for ten minutes before he realized he was heading toward Larry Ott's garage. It was early afternoon, the rain gone at last, puddles steaming in the road, a spongy dog of some unidentifiable breed shaking water from its fur. He ought to be over on 7, watching for speeders, getting his quota for the week, make a little cash for the city kitty, but something was gnawing at him.

Larry's first phone call had been nearly two years ago. Silas didn't use his landline much and had gone a couple of days without noticing the answering machine had been blinking.