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LIE STILL

A novel of suspense

JULIA HEABERLIN



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With love to Mom and Dad,
advanced fans

LIE STILL

Prologue



The ring glittered, resting on the dirt of the forest floor, the sun catching it in the fractured afternoon light falling through the leaves.

The ring hadn't been there the day before. A week of brutal, ceaseless rain finally cleaned it up and washed it from its hiding spot twenty years too late, long after something terrible happened.

A hiker paused when he saw it, nearly turned away, and then recognized it for what it was. Plastic. Made in China. A prize from a gumball machine. He picked it up and briefly examined it. A pink heart-shaped jewel on a small, dulled band. He thought about taking the ring home to his three-year-old daughter, probably strutting around at this very moment in her Barbie princess crown, but he decided his wife would yell at him. Tell him the ring was a choking hazard. His daughter would ask why it was scratched. He dropped it as casually as he had flipped his empty

Ozarka bottle into the brush a few minutes earlier and trudged on up the trail.

He didn't feel the eyes on his back, watching him disappear.

The crow swooped in.

It was the same crow that had been stealing the change out of a broken car-wash vending machine a mile down the road. Exactly $57.50 to date, all of it deposited daily into the sawed-out window of Joey Tucker's pine tree house that he built all by himself that summer. Joey told no one about the money. He thought it was a secret gift from God.

Few people—certainly not Joey or the man in the forest—know how smart crows are.

But the crow was done with Joey. Joey was rich enough. The bird flew through the trees, higher and higher, sweeping through clouds still heavy with water, a tiny black dot, taking his prize with him.

The crow recognized the ring for what it was.

For what it *once* was.

A bit of joy.

1



For me, the rape is a permanent fixture on the clock, like midnight.

A point of reference.

I was nineteen years and four days old.

I remember because he treated me beforehand to a belated birthday dinner of scallops, chive mashed potatoes, haricot verts, and a bottle of mediocre wine. I was surprised when my plate arrived and haricot verts turned out to be ordinary green beans.

His name was Pierce Martin, one of those names that could work backward or forward. The sheets were Tommy Hilfiger.

I remember because he pressed my face into the pillow's red and blue patriotic design to prevent me from screaming.

After my birthday dinner, our third date, he begged me to come back to his fraternity house and spend the night in his bed. *No sex,* he promised. *Just kissing. Just holding.* The wine made my world spin pleasantly, and he smelled sexy, a hint of musk and a

little sweat left from a basketball pickup game. Before I took my first sip of wine, he told me he had scored twenty-five points.

I said yes to his room.

I trusted him.

I'd told him I was still a virgin, one of the girls who signed the celibacy pledge at church camp in eighth grade and meant it. He'd told me with a solemn face that he wanted his wife to be a virgin. He didn't say anything about himself.

The first time he asked me out, also the first time he said hello, he slid an arm around my shoulders and walked me across campus as if he already owned the right. Sometimes I picture the moment, my face turned up to his, eager, a puppy, a lamb, a foolish girl. I want to slap her.

I was decently popular in high school but not material for the Pierce Martins of the world. So when Pierce—funny, smart, rich frat-boy Pierce—picked me out of at least fifty other girls in my college economics class, intoxication seeped its way into every insecure crack. He wasn't looking for the test answers for next Tuesday from the girl who scored 103 on the last quiz. He wanted the *other* me.

As soon as I stepped inside his room that night, it began to feel weird. The lights were off. Pierce's roommate lay sleeping across the top bunk, a long, dark lump, his face to the wall. Pierce had introduced him to me once, briefly, in the cafeteria. He was a legacy forced on the fraternity, a skinny freshman with random red splotches on his face from squeezing pimples, which he clearly despaired about when alone with the bathroom mirror. Pierce chose him for a little brother so he could abuse him the rest of the semester as a personal slave. He washed Pierce's dirty underwear, fetched Pierce's takeout, lied to Pierce's mother on the phone.

It seemed funny, before the rape. How easily I lost my center.

"It's OK," Pierce assured me. "He won't care. He's a deep

sleeper. Like in a tomb. Nothing wakes him." I crawled hastily into the bottom bunk, suddenly wishing I hadn't chosen a skirt over the pants I slid off at the last minute. I'd stay half an hour, tops, I decided, then say good night.

Lying flat in that dark cave, staring up at the bedsprings, I didn't realize Pierce had stripped to a T-shirt and boxers until he pushed his body against mine and swirled his warm tongue in my ear. Still, I thought: *This will be OK. Kissing. Maybe even a little more.*

I sank into him. I was butter melting along the path of nomadic, expert hands. His tongue roved lower, a friendly snake. I didn't want it to stop.

Minutes later, he slipped cool fingers up my skirt and yanked my underwear down. His nails raked the side of my leg, leaving a red scratch I'd find the next day.

"Please don't."

I said it as urgently as I could, leg stinging, my brain flipped back on like he'd thrown a switch. My voice was soft, not wanting to wake his roommate. Not wanting to humiliate any of us. I was still hopeful.

Those were my last words to Pierce Martin.

"You're a tease." He clapped his hand over my mouth and flipped me over. *He's done this before,* I thought, struggling a little, still sure I'd get away, still trying not to wake his roommate, still wanting to limit my embarrassment. The roommate had an unfortunate name straight out of a historical romance. Pierce made fun of it. Wheaton. No, Haywood. That was it. Haywood Worthington.

Pierce gripped my hair and yanked my head backward, pain ripping through my skull. His lips brushed my ear like a lover's. The whisper floated into my ear, down the dark tunnel to my brain, settling inside me.

"Lie still," he said.

The night with Pierce wasn't a fork in the road of my life because I didn't get to pick which way to go. More like a screeching U-turn.

I'm thirty-two years old. Up to this point, I've told only four people about that night: the campus police officer on duty at 3 a.m., a bored woman who put down her pen and said I'd never be able to prove it; Rosemary Jansen, my roommate that semester, whom I don't even exchange Christmas cards with; and my parents, who are no longer alive.

I still consider the rape a secret, but we all know there are really no secrets.

All of us walk around with ridiculous amounts of intimate information about strangers and acquaintances. We'd never get out of bed if we realized how much peripheral people in our lives know about us. What even the people we love most say behind our backs. The number of confidences broken.

A co-worker, a person named Anne whom I barely know, is the sister of a woman married to one of New York's top senators. Anne told me once over a happy hour that her sister keeps a private apartment in San Francisco for her lover. The senator, her husband, doesn't know.

Just a stray fact, a shard of conversation that disappeared from her mind into the next tequila shot.

The senator is a regular on primetime news shows, and now every time I see him interviewed, I think, *You're famous. I've never met you. I've never met your wife. Our lives haven't touched. But I know this thing that could blow up your world.*

I wonder about the people on the periphery of my secret. My parents probably told Father Joe about the rape as they sought counsel from our family priest to help me. I'm sure Pierce bragged about that night to his fraternity brothers, who told their girlfriends, who in turn will use my story someday as a cautionary tale for their daughters.

I imagine my old roommate Rosemary bringing me up as a personal example of being touched by rape. *That happened to my college roommate,* she might say at a party of fellow suburbanites. *I tried to get her to turn him in, call the frat board, anything, but she wouldn't. She thought it was her fault.*

It *was* my fault. I don't care what a court of law says about the word *no* or my polite "please don't." I lay myself down in that bed. I was naïve, stupid, shallow, flashing my virginity around like it somehow made me better. A prize somebody could win.

Haywood might still be keeping my secret because it was his, too. That night, Pierce branded us both with humiliation and guilt, the kind that embeds in your skin like a tick and spreads disease.

When my mind travels back there, the shame flares up from the embers, licking at my soul until I find myself flushed and kneeling over the toilet. So I've worked at not thinking about it.

Until Clairmont, Texas. This small dot on the map, thousands of miles away from where my story began, is the place that my past and present exploded.

My mother believed that Fate is a compass inside us. If she hadn't met my father in college, she said, she would have found him somewhere else along the way. *We choose our steps,* she insisted, *but they always take us to the place we're meant to go.*

I don't know how she could reconcile such loosey-goosey mysticism with her belief in Catholicism, especially if she'd known how she and Dad were going to die.

If you follow her theory, we are responsible for running dead-on into the evil as well as the good.

Misty and Caroline turned out to be both. Good and evil.

My kindred spirits and my tormentors.

They were the catalysts to free my soul.

But their secrets almost killed me.

2



If someone asked a few months ago, I'd say my compass pointed north. But a strange wind blew me here, and I held my breath.

I didn't want much. Just for every moment to be like this one. Blessedly normal. For the shadows to go *poof,* little vampires extinguished by the sun.

There was plenty of sun. Mike lay in a yellow patch of it, stretched out on the bed, nursing a bottle of Sam Adams, surrounded by piles of my discarded clothes. He flipped the pages of a *Sports Illustrated* while absently observing my state of fashion crisis.

I'd ripped open every U-Haul moving box that littered the floor of the room.

"Eyes up here," I ordered. "What do you think of this?"

"I think it looks good. Just like the last five things you've tried on." He patted the bed. "Why are you worrying about this so much? It's not like you're walking into a room full of celebrities.

And, I'd like to point out, you've actually done that with a lot less drama beforehand."

I propped the full-length mirror leaning against the wall in a better position to see the side effects of a protruding belly.

"I think you'd want me to wow them, Chief," I said, tugging the orange top down so it wouldn't show the safety pin keeping my pants together. "This makes me look like a construction cone." I yanked the top over my head and slung it at his head.

I'd started to really show in the last couple of months, but the move and goodbye lunches with colleagues and friends left no time for maternity shopping. In the life I'd resigned, as director of a small SoHo art gallery, I would throw on something black, a gold cuff, and be done with it. But even in the two short weeks we'd been in Texas, I could see that would make me look like a fat crow among a flock of colorful, glittery birds.

"I don't want to stand out as too . . . New York. My father always said, 'Make a bad first impression and you're digging yourself out of a grave for years, make a good first impression and people—' "

" '—will you give the benefit of the doubt forever.' I'm familiar with the wisdom. And why do you think New York is an instant bad impression?"

"We're snotty, rude, walk too fast, use big words when little ones will do just fine. Steal their best baseball players."

Mike moved from the bed to the floor, kneeling with his ear pressed against my bare tummy. "Just be your quirky, sweet self," he murmured. "Texas thanks God and the Yankees every day for stealing their overpriced baseball players. I hear they've incorporated it into the Lord's Prayer."

My hand rested gently on his head, shaved bare to avoid the inevitable, the unexpected bonus being that it made him look even fiercer during his seven-year run as an ATF agent. Mike had led a brotherhood of men who carried recessive genes from cave-

men ancestors to kill and protect the way others carry genes for cancer and beauty. I'd watched these men drink beer and tease one another in my kitchen like regular guys, but they never, ever truly relaxed. I sleep beside one of them, so I know. They are different from the rest of us.

Our mirror reflected a happy, loving union. No fear, no tension, no anger. No hint of three years of painful infertility treatments, miscarriages, weeks of utilitarian sex, and hot words that nearly ripped us in two.

My eyes remained glued to the couple reflected there, hoping it was real. In Mike's case, the bald look worked, like it did on men without ridged Cro-Magnon skulls, making him even more attractive than he was before.

"Come on, give me a more detailed rundown on my hostess tonight." It was my practice to be fully equipped before negotiating a room of strangers.

"Three words," I demanded. An old game we played.

Mike shrugged. "Rich. Widow. Tragic."

"OK, need more than that. And your left hand needs to stop right there."

"I think she lost a son," he said. "I don't know if she cast a vote, but she attended my final interview, so she wields power here in little Clairmont. Mostly with her wallet. I was told she provided seed money for some upgrades at the new headquarters."

So far, my only impression of Caroline Warwick was a soft Southern drawl on the other end of the phone. Three days ago, she invited me to a gathering of the town's female elite and seemed slightly annoyed when I told her I'd have to get back to her. Despite his casualness now, Mike had urged me to accept. *Get to know people, Emily. Help establish our new life.*

Texas was not even a glimmer in our wineglasses on those late nights after the stick turned blue and we talked dreams with new urgency.

So Mike was lightly dismissive when an old FBI friend of his mentioned a position leading a well-funded police shop in a high-heeled Southern town, the kind of town rising on *Fortune* magazine lists. Clairmont, Texas, per capita the wealthiest, most highly taxed city of its size in the country, home to CEOs and Dallas Cowboy football players and Texas land barons and nouveau riche wannabes who carried mountains of mortgage and credit card debt.

But then there was a phone call from a persuasive headhunter. And another. Mike flew down first-class for two interviews. The salary shone like a gleaming platinum carrot: $175,000 a year, plus a bonus plan tied to lowering the town's crime statistics, which were mostly connected to rowdy teens. In Texas, that amount of money meant something. Mike feared it also meant he'd been bought. I could tell it bugged him, this worry that he, the caped crusader, was selling out. That maybe he wasn't hearing the whole story.

When the mayor told him the job came with a brand-new, fully loaded, armored Hummer, Mike thought he was joking. He asked if most Clairmonters carried grenades and ran from crime scenes on foot, in which case the Hummer would be fine. When nobody in the room laughed, he said he preferred a basic high-speed cruiser.

I didn't press him too hard on his doubts.

"It's not forever," he said, shrugging, and my relief flowed, a swift river.

Because, at that point, I wanted to go.

I wanted to run.

Two months ago, my past had snaked its way into our New York apartment on a rainy afternoon while Mike was hunkered down on a case somewhere. He could have been a hundred miles or two minutes away, dodging bullets or playing cards in a safe room, I never knew.

There was so much he never told me about the details of what he did for a living and so much I didn't tell him about what lay at the core of me. On the bad days of our marriage, our secrets circled us like ghosts, blowing an icy draft between us. Would we love each other the same if we knew what the other was capable of?

I remember holding the violent message in shaking fingers, as the soft rain turned to hail, a thousand fingernails tapping on the living room windows, wishing Mike were there so I could finally tell him everything. He showed up at the apartment ten hours later, exhausted and bruised, after I'd tucked the piece of paper away in a shoebox with all of the others.

That is the short story of how we ended up here in the Southern hemisphere, seeking warmth. Mike turned in his resignation and I quit the gallery, promising to take it easy until the baby was born, with the idea that I'd take up my painting again. Life was suddenly an open, blank canvas that we could sketch with careful hands.

"Go away," I said now, as Mike's fingers began to roam again. "Go make out with yourself. It's acceptable in the second trimester."

He stood, his large frame blocking my view of the couple in the mirror. Not budging.

Now it was just us. The *real* us.

Flesh and blood and flaws.

I fought a sudden urge to cry, which seemed to be happening about every fifteen minutes these days. Losing this man would kill me. I pulled his head down and traced my tongue along his mouth. I felt the rush of familiar heat that had sustained us through everything. He drew away for a second, grinning.

"Is this hello or goodbye?"

I pushed him back onto the bed.

Maybe I could help him out a little.

Fourteen minutes later, adjusting the seat in my newly purchased, pre-owned Volvo station wagon, I tipped down white wraparound sunglasses picked up off the streets of New York for ten bucks, and took one last pass at myself in the rearview mirror. Not too bad. My green eyes were made less weary by dark blue eyeliner, the splash of gold in the center of the iris more noticeable than usual.

I'd opted for a bold New York/Texas compromise: a body-hugging black cotton-Lycra dress that left no doubt about my state of maternity and over-the-top, gem-studded gold flats bought at a Barneys sale two years ago.

My body buzzed pleasantly. It seemed wrong to love the thing that had ripped my life apart. But sex set me free in a way nothing else did.

I plugged Caroline Warwick's address into the navigation system that Mike insisted I'd need as a person born without directional ability. He'd bought the GPS from a friend setting up an online business of British paraphernalia, so my guide ordered me around like a bored Hugh Jackman.

As the sun slid down in an orange halo, I found myself on the outskirts of Clairmont, driving for 2.3 miles on a farm road, a field of rising corn on one side and a rolling stone wall on the other. When Hugh crisply ordered me to turn, I did so with relief, away from the corn and toward the façade of a medieval-style gatehouse. Fields of corn always remind me of a gang of children wielding farm tools and a childhood slumber party where I didn't sleep a wink. Thank you, Stephen King.

I could see instantly that I had entered a land of surreal-dom. A little city of copper turrets and tile rooftops lay beyond the stone wall, a glittering mirage on the prairie. The gold letters set into the limestone wall announced The Manses of Castle-

GATE. I rolled slowly forward and halted at a miniature stop sign that looked like it belonged at a Renaissance Faire. For a second, I wondered if Hugh had the magical powers to transplant this place from across the Pond.

A sun-beaten troll of a man in a beige uniform sat in cramped air-conditioned quarters, nursing a Diet Coke and watching *Wheel of Fortune* on a tiny TV. I wondered if his prior life involved tending the field across the way.

"Yep?" he drawled, sliding open the window.

"I'm here for a party at Caroline Warwick's. My name is Emily Page."

Manses were supposed to be the homes of ministers, not vulgar rich people, a detail I remembered from a Scottish architecture course, and something I'm sure my troll friend didn't want to hear from an uppity New Yorker. He ran his finger down a small computer screen, found my name, punched a button. The iron gates swung open easily into a pseudo-snotty fake England.

Why did people who could afford multimillion-dollar castles like this install their 15,000-square-foot homes on postage-stamp front yards, forty feet apart from neighbors on either side? While the general impression was grand, after a block or two, the cupolas, curved stony walls, and widow's peaks blurred together like a theme park.

A few twisty detours on cobbled streets designed to invoke the feel of the Ripper's old London, and I turned off the ignition at 4203 Elizabeth Drive, a faux palace half the size of our New York apartment building.

The ivy-covered brick archway to Caroline Warwick's manor rose to the sky. Mike had told me that in Texas, the height of the front-porch arch directly correlated to the price of the house. It was like a house bragging about its penis size. And this was a top-dollar, porn-star penis.

As for my own house hunt, I had quickly abandoned the

newer subdivisions after five days of drifting through bland, light-filled spaces with half the rooms already wired for flat screens. Our real estate agent expressed dismay when Mike and I stumbled across a wood-frame fixer-upper a few streets outside of Clairmont's historic downtown and fell in love. A giant live oak in the front yard, honeysuckle run amuck, a stone fireplace, a wraparound porch, sixty-year-old wiring, and a kitchen that felt cramped with three people in it, including the one in the womb. Still, it was twice the kitchen space of our Manhattan apartment. Now staring at the formidable home in front of me, I considered a U-turn back to my bed.

"Honey, open up. Don't be shy."

My head whipped around to see a woman's pudgy hot-pink manicured fist banging vigorously on the window, the other balancing a plate of something triple-covered with Saran Wrap. I switched off the ignition and opened the door two inches, straight into the rolls of her stomach pressed against my window.

"Watch it. You're going to spill Aunt Eloise's Lemon Squares. They're not quite set. Here, carry them."

She deigned to move a few inches back and I squeezed by, grabbing the plate dripping from her fingers. She didn't seem to notice that Aunt Eloise's Lemon Squares nearly fertilized the grass.

"You must be Emily," she told me. "I'd die to have had a little pregnant basketball like that but my family's all big-boned. That dress is a little tight on you, don't you think? You're a pale one. I guess it's New Yorky. If you want, I can get you into a tanning bed real cheap. My cousin Marsha Lynn Gayle runs the best facility, about seven miles from here, in Keller. Her motto is, 'Tanned fat looks better than white fat.' I told her she should paint it on the door."

I watched a raindrop of sweat drip down her face, tracing a

white line through her makeup. "Not to get you worried or anything," she continued, "but labor is like one of them Iraqis torturing you. All three of my kids were like poopin' frozen turkeys. Not to mention the hem'rhoids. I read on the Internet that I could dab apple cider vinegar on them, but all that did was make me stink like Easter eggs for a week so I don't recommend it." That was a hell of a lot of similes in one breath.

She must have weighed 250-plus pounds, but she moved fast, her mouth a blur of candy-pink lipstick and her ass a giant, bobbing red and yellow flowered pillow. As she propelled me toward the house, I was trying to figure out if she meant she smelled like the vinegar you put in with the dye pellets or . . . I didn't want to know. She'd guided me halfway up the walk up before I could think about asking her who the hell she was.

"I'm Leticia Abigail Lee Dunn. Everybody calls me Letty. I'm sure you've heard of me." Her twang fell heavy into the hot air.

When I looked blank, she said impatiently, "Oh, come on, honey. Wife of Mayor Harry Dunn the *fourth,* your husband's new boss. Daughter of William Cartright Lee *of the Robert E. Lees.* You know the General, don'tcha, honey? We've also got a long line of pageant girls in our family, too, but I don't want to brag." She gave my arm a squeeze.

"I was fourth-runner-up in Miss Texas. Miss Congeniality was outright *stolen* from me by Miss Haltom City," she whispered, as if it were a secret.

I nodded mutely, struggling to imagine a crown perched on the top of that teased mountain of bleached-blond hair, happy that I didn't have to participate for this conversation to go on.

I wondered how she knew so instantly who I was. She swept her hand grandly at the nearby houses. The ripples of fat on her lower arm swung like dimpled bread dough.

"This tract used to be one of our ranches. I think my ancestors would like that it is now home to modern royalty. You aren't

a Democrat, are you? That's one thing I told the girls, 'We might have to brainwash the Hillary out of her.'" She narrowed her eyes at me. "You don't talk much, do you?"

She didn't wait for an answer. "We can just walk on in, honey. Caroline is real gracious that way. She's a bit of a control freak in other matters but you'll get used to it. Have you filled out an application?"

Application? I risked a breath instead of speaking, hoping that once again she didn't really want an answer. I needed to prepare myself. A roomful of unknowns churned up my insecurities every time. I liked a script, a purpose, when entering a room.

My best friend in New York, Lucy, is a chameleon like me. Assessing the audience, adapting as necessary. She's the only other person I've ever known intimately who is as deliberate and sneaky about it as I am. We met at a museum gala ten years ago and instantly bonded over a Lucian Freud portrait, a mediocre glass of merlot, and our predilection for dark thinking. I wished Lucy and her biting humor were with me now as I navigated this land of twangy trolls and lemon squares.

Leticia grabbed the knob of the massive arched double door. She hesitated. One of her long pink fingernails tucked back a piece of my hair that I'd purposely styled to fall out of the bun on my head.

"I've got a little spray in my purse that will take care of that if you want to scoot off to the bathroom first. Be forewarned, this is a curious bunch. And we're tight. You'll need to suck up a little to get in."

In where? The door? Was she talking about my stomach? Her stomach? Why, why had I said yes to this?

"Hey, y'all!" Leticia bellowed into the house. "I got Emily here. The new chief's wife." She swept me across a marble floor, past a jade inlaid mirror in the entryway and a barely glimpsed

Miro sketch, down a hall of ancestral pictures in striking, contemporary frames. Twenty feet in, I stopped impulsively to admire the view.

A stunning garden room ran along the entire back side of the house, an atrium of tropical wonders—ferns, banana trees, and hibiscus I'd seen only on the Internet. Thirty or so women crowded around talking and drinking wine, a much more diverse, anorexic, and formal group than I'd expected after encountering Letty. A pale young harpist wrapped in a gauzy dress played Mozart near a banana tree as if she were all alone, or at least wished it. A few of the women paused at our entrance, smiled, then turned back to their conversations.

"Gimme those squares so I can present them to Caroline." Letty grabbed the plate and abandoned me, parting the crowd like a whale churning through water.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to face two nearly identical women, with taut, Botoxed faces, breasts like tennis balls, $150 haircuts, spray tans, French manicures, white capris, and tight sleeveless tanks that showed off their Pilates regimen. Women who looked older than they were because they worked way too hard at achieving the opposite.

"I'm Red Mercedes," said the one who appeared the tipsiest. "And this is Beach House."

"Stop it, that's not funny if she doesn't know us. Mary Ann's had a little bit too much to drink already. It's an inside joke. I'm Jenny, by the way. We have the same plastic surgeon in Dallas. And he owns a Mercedes convertible and a beach house, which we're pretty sure we paid for. I can't believe I'm explaining this. God, you look amazing. Do you even wear foundation? Oh, to have ten years back."

"Thank you. It's very nice to meet you." I felt like curtsying.

Huge diamonds in multiple forms and sizes glinted on their fingers as if they bred at night. These were women who likely

graduated out of college sororities straight into marriage, part of the pack of hausfraus I'd dodged this week in the local upscale grocery, Central Market. The women who pretended not to see you as they cut in line at the cheese counter and their Justice and Abercrombie-clad children demanded Havarti over Gouda.

"Welcome to our butt-hole of a town," Jenny told me. "The gossip is that your husband is a modern-day gladiator."

"Did Letty mention she was a pageant girl?" Mary Ann tipped the last sip from her wineglass. And, then, under her breath, "She's such a *bitch*."

I felt like I'd fallen into a Texas rabbit hole. Or maybe a tarantula hole. I'd gotten my first scary look at one of those suckers in the front yard yesterday. The six-year-old boy next door had offered to stick his garden hose in it and blast out the owner, an offer I politely declined.

I was unsure how to respond to this schizophrenic chitchat. Where was my hostess? My eyes flitted around a little desperately.

Mary Ann was rubbing a finger across a tiny red spot on Jenny's cheek. "Pimple. Not skin cancer," she slurred.

"I bet you're looking for a drink," Jenny announced into the space left by my hesitation. In seconds, the two women had tugged me into the yard that spilled out of the atrium. The architect's optical illusion with glass and nature made it nearly impossible to tell where the inside stopped and the outside began. That is, until I reached the invisible line, where the air-conditioned breeze evaporated and a stifling wall of summer air took my breath away.

I spied not one, but two outdoor rooms with plush furniture to sink into on either side of a lagoon-like pool. The fire pits glowed, even though it was 95 degrees outside. I smelled an industrial amount of mosquito spray. Chemical misters at work. Not good for Baby.

"So, what can you drink?" Jenny demanded. We moved toward a mini-bar covered with a fake thatched roof, where a tuxedoed young man with a green and yellow tropical bow tie stood, bored and hot. No one else had even ventured out here.

"White wine is great," I said. "On the rocks. Makes it last longer. My New York doctor's a woman who recommends one glass of that and a warm bubble bath every night."

"A Texan already. Ice in everything. If you need a rec for an OBGYN here, we all use Gretchen Liesel. She also cleans up our mistakes." Jenny winked. "Anyway, she's here somewhere unless she got an emergency call."

Jenny leaned in toward the bartender, showing that her small perfect breasts didn't need a bra to prop them up. He didn't care. I caught a glimpse of a Steinbeck novel propped up on the Jack Daniel's. I was busily reworking my preconceived views of Texas. Abortions. Wink. Classic literature, but of course.

"José, one white and two reds, please," Jenny commanded. I cringed at the Hispanic dig, until I saw that his name tag actually read "José." *Relax*.

"Let's sit over here and get acquainted." She handed me my glass of wine and pulled us deeper into the mosquito jungle, toward a concrete bench set beside a koi pond. I breathed as shallowly as possible.

"First, we have a little bet going," Mary Ann said. "A pair of Mephistos ride on this. How long did it take for Letty to tell you she is descended from the Robert E. Lees? In seconds, not minutes, because we know she couldn't hold out that long."

"I'd say thirty." I swallowed a deep sip and wondered if a second glass of this elixir would hurt. I'd need it to get through the next two hours.

"Shit," Jenny said. "I guessed ten. Mary Ann said twenty-five."

"It was right after she mentioned that her husband was 'the

fourth,'" I added rashly, sucked in.

"Ah, yes. Dirty Harry." Jenny grinned.

She dumped the remains of her glass into a spiky plant that drank it like a greedy alcoholic.

"Lookie over there. It's little Misty Rich. The other new girl." Jenny lowered her voice. "In a white dress and red fuck-me shoes." But by the time I turned my head, Misty Rich—whoever she was—had slipped out of sight.

"Misty's a freakin' weird one," Mary Ann informed me. "Pure trash. You can't dress it up. She's been here three months. Long enough for Caroline to become quite taken with her. Word is, she's already invited Misty in." She leaned closer. "We think Misty is into recreational drugs. We saw a scar on her arm. Caroline does love to find things to fix."

"Mary Ann, you're cut off," Jenny decreed.

A low-pitched chime made all three of us turn back toward the house. Jenny pulled her friend up, gripping her arm a little harder than seemed necessary.

"Summoned by the royal gong," Mary Ann said sarcastically. At the same moment, an elegant woman with coiffed silver-blond hair appeared at the opening of the atrium. It was impossible to tell if she had overheard anything. My two companions faded behind me like sullen little girls.

"So this is where you've been hiding my guest of honor."

Caroline Warwick shaped thin lips into a smile, gliding toward me in ice-blue linen. I imagined the air chilling as she moved through it. Her grip was firm and dry on my hand, her voice southern, but a violin, not a banjo. More Deep South.

I couldn't determine her age. Fifties? Sixty? Caroline had an ageless sex appeal that reminded me of Lauren Bacall, appearing both youthful and old, her skin near-flawless, her movements controlled, graceful, almost sensual.

"I hope this invitation wasn't an imposition, Emily. I'm sure

you're not quite settled yet." *Ema-lae.* My name falling from her tongue was like a caress. So why was I certain my hostess didn't give a flip if this was an imposition?

I smiled. "Not at all." I caught the flash of something white out of the corner of my eye. The newcomer stood several feet behind and to the left of Caroline, a nymph in a frothy shift and fire-engine-red stiletto heels. Short, casually spiked dark hair, a heart-shaped face. A small dollar sign encrusted with diamonds hung off the silver chain around her neck—a little irony with her last name that I'd bet was intended.

Misty Rich straddled the line between Peter Pan fairy and punker. She was instantly my favorite person within a radius of 11,000 square feet.

She raised her wineglass coyly at me, brushing her hand against a green frond, familiar, as if we were already playing a game.