

Prologue

Very early on the gray, drizzly morning of January 24, 1987, Thurwood Talton put on his blue suit and ambled into the bathroom of his brick bungalow in Atlanta's Virginia-Highland neighborhood. He trimmed his silver goatee and taped a gauze bandage over the gash on his forehead, which had required six stitches to close. He was rather proud of his wound—his “badge of courage,” an admiring colleague had called it.

The retired Georgia State University history professor was preparing for the second Forsyth County Anti-Intimidation March, a follow-up to the previous Saturday's disaster. On that day, Talton and seventy-five others, led by fiery civil rights leader Redeemer Wilson, had been driven from the county by a pack of rock- and bottle-throwing thugs. Klansmen, neo-Nazis, and their Rebel-flag waving sympathizers had screamed at the marchers: “Get out of town, niggers!” “Praise God for AIDS!” “Forsyth County's always been white, and it'll always be white!”

Talton had heard someone shout “nigger lover” just before a beer bottle smashed his head. Although dazed and bleeding, he'd stayed on his feet—barely. The photo of a sheriff's deputy helping him back to the bus had run in hundreds of newspapers. After viewing several pictures of the mob, Talton had pointed out a hulking youth in a tan coat as his assailant. There had been no arrest. No surprise there. Forsyth County folks stuck together, he knew.

Redeemer, a fearless man, had responded to the violence by calling for a bigger protest. Now, nervous local and state officials were bracing for a march on the Forsyth County Courthouse in Cumming by an estimated 20,000 marchers from all over the world. Talton, one of the few Southern whites

who had participated in the 1960s civil rights movement, would have an honored front-row spot.

This was, in many ways, the last hurrah for the old guard. Although the King Holiday had recently been established in Georgia, the movement was facing its twilight during the Reagan years. Talton had written in his journal of his hope that the march would begin a revival. He was sure some good would come of the fact that Forsyth's nasty secret was finally out: Blacks were not allowed there to live, work, play—or even breathe. Needless to say, the attention was overdue. Long a sleepy rural enclave, Forsyth had first been awakened by the impoundment of Lake Lanier, the state's favorite playground. Now, three decades later, it was a fast-growing suburb, thanks to Atlanta's boomtown growth next door. That it was only a racist's stone's throw away from America's black Mecca made Forsyth County's outright bigotry not only ironic, but bizarre. Contrary to the catcalls, Forsyth had not always been white. And no one better understood Forsyth's peculiar demographics than Dr. Talton.

At first, reporters wanted to talk to him only about his head wound, but coverage shifted when they found out he'd spent several years researching and writing a hefty manuscript entitled *Flight from Forsyth*. After a dozen interviews, he'd boiled the story down to a sound bite: In 1912, a sensational rape-murder trial and lynching fueled the twentieth century's worst outbreak of nightriding, and more than a thousand black residents were driven from Forsyth, never to return. Journalists misquoted him, reporting that *all* had fled. There was more to it than that. Talton had recently learned some horrible and fascinating new information, but he wouldn't share it just yet.

Unfortunately, his manuscript was *too* hefty. University Press had rejected it "primarily for reasons of length" although the acquisitions editor had noted other problems as well. But surely *Flight's* prospects had improved in the last week, given the publicity surrounding the marches. Believing a book deal to be a sure thing, Talton planned to find an agent and cut a deal with a major publisher. He'd already promised to use part of the advance he would receive to take Kathleen on a cruise. To Alaska, maybe. Or Norway.

Alas, none of these things would happen.

As he looked in the bathroom mirror and adjusted the knot on his silver-and-red tie, Talton felt an overwhelming pain in his chest. He cried out in alarm and lurched into the narrow hall, bouncing off the wall, knocking down photographs, and stumbling into the front bedroom, where he died in his loving wife's arms. His last words were "not done." He was 68 years old.

The cause of death was an embolism of the left pulmonary artery: a blood clot. Kathleen Talton was certain that the man who threw the bottle had caused her husband's death, but no one listened to her pleas for justice. She grieved with her daughter Angela and a few friends. After the Unitarian funeral, she grieved alone.

Kathleen was certain that Talton had been talking about his book when he died, and she considered it her duty to see his work published. She tried to interest editors in *Flight from Forsyth*, to no avail. It needed extensive editing, she was told. Unfortunately, no one was willing to dedicate the time and effort necessary to fix it.

Many years passed. The manuscript gathered dust on the handsome walnut desk in Talton's study. Kathleen retired from her job as a high school English teacher in Decatur. Dementia crept into her life with the onset of Alzheimer's disease, and her world grew darker and lonelier. She feared becoming dependent on unreliable people. When unfamiliar faces showed up at her door, there was always a debate in her mind: Did she know them? Should she let them in?

One winter night nearly two decades after her husband's death, she wandered into the study and sat down at the desk, struggling to remember why she had come there. She was lonely—and angry at Angela for spending Christmas in Florida with her young girlfriend.

The manuscript sat where Thurwood had left it long ago. With a trembling hand, she lifted the title page, then put it back in place atop the pile of paper. She sobbed when she realized she'd let the book die and had failed in her duty to the man she'd loved for so many years. It would take nothing less than a miracle to get Thurwood's life's work published now. And what about justice? What about the man who'd killed him? She looked up at the faded newspaper clipping and its picture of that young punk, captured in an enduring grimace of hatred.

She wanted her late husband's work to be completed and published.

She wanted his killer to be brought to justice.

And it would be nice to have someone to talk to on desolate winter nights.

With the weight of loss and loneliness bearing down on her soul, she did something she hadn't done since she was a little girl who wanted a pony. She bowed her head and prayed. This time, she asked for vengeance, justice, companionship, completion, and closure.

It was a careless and jumbled-up prayer, but a most interesting one.

Chapter One

In the silence between the clatter of dishes and the waitress's barked order, Charlie Sherman heard himself dripping. He counted tiny splashes on the laminated menu: one, two, three. Waving to get the server's attention accelerated the patter. Interesting.

It was late on the night after Christmas, and less than an hour before, Charlie had been a semi-respectable stay-at-home suburban father, failing novelist, and not-so-loving husband. Now he was homeless, and he looked the part, in a torn blue nylon bomber jacket, tattered beige Henley shirt, paint-spattered gray sweat pants, and holey black basketball shoes. To top off his grungy appearance, he wore basketball goggles—a necessity after he'd broken his tortoise-shell frames during a Christmas Eve wrestling match with his four-year-old son, Ben. Not only did they make him look like a devolved alien, but the prescription was ten years old, so they gave him a headache, too.

He'd been thrown out of the house following an ugly domestic dispute that was not, at this fragile time, resolvable. Upon bitter reflection during the driving rainstorm, Charlie had concluded that Susan had wanted him out for months. Still, the eviction had come as a surprise. A shock, actually.

He'd been in the garage minding his own business, plunking bolts into a can, straightening up his workshop in preparation for his next home improvement project—just two days after he'd finished renovating the master bath. When he heard Susan hollering, Charlie thought his wife was being assaulted. Armed with a mini-sledgehammer, he'd rushed to her side, only to learn that *he* was the problem—one she'd decided she could do without.

She was standing in his office, pointing at his computer screen. Dumbfounded, Charlie stared at it. Honestly, he had no idea how that picture had become his screensaver. Due to the vagaries of Microsoft Windows, he had unwittingly turned a photo of a mournful-looking young blonde being gang-banged by a basketball team into his desktop background. An anti-virus icon covered her left nipple, but she was otherwise completely exposed. *Damn you, Bill Gates.*

Meanwhile, Susan let loose. “You fucking asshole,” she said. “Get out of my house.”

That was just her opening statement. When she unloaded, she could carry on for days on end, just like her mother. Before Charlie could properly formulate a response to her rapid-fire accusations, the cops arrived. Almost instantly, it seemed. Of course, she invited them inside.

While Charlie never swung the mini-sledge at anyone, hit anything, or even threatened Susan with it, he was still holding it when the cops came in, and they didn’t like that very much. One of them drew his gun, and they ordered Charlie to put it on the floor—and his hands on his head. Her face pinched and flush, dark eyes throwing daggers in her husband’s direction, blonde hair flying as she wagged her head and shook her fist, Susan then accused her husband of threatening her with the hammer, or more precisely, wielding it in a menacing way. “He acts like he wants to use it on something, maybe me,” she said. Then she launched into her longstanding complaint: “It would take a miracle for him to get a real job instead of writing books no one will ever read.” She delivered this pronouncement in that hateful North Georgia twang that was the hallmark of her family.

Charlie was left sputtering by the attack. “Hey. Just ... wait a minute—”

“Cool down,” said the white cop, laying a hand on Charlie’s shoulder.

“Chill out,” said the black cop, pushing him toward the door.

“Just go,” Susan said. “Porn freak.”

So there he was, down and out. With his van blocked in by two squad cars in the driveway, Charlie stomped off into the jaws of a winter thunderstorm. After walking a mile in the rain, he came to the Hanover Drive overpass at Interstate 285. Consumed by both rage and despair, Charlie had a George Bailey moment as he stopped on the bridge and stared out through the rain into traffic. Yes, this seemed a fitting end, since his suicidal father had, on a lonely evening long ago in Missouri, embraced his own *Goodnight, Irene* moment and jumped in the river to drown—or at least to disappear forever.

And then something strange happened. As he stuck his left leg over the

tubular guard rail and gazed out through the rain at the oncoming traffic, he saw a transit bus nearly sideswipe a gasoline tanker. An instant later, the tanker spun out of control at sixty miles per hour on the rain-slick Interstate beneath him. In cart-before-horse fashion, the eastbound tractor-trailer became a trailer-tractor. Its headlights flashed on the median wall, then swept across the windshields of the vehicles behind it, then spotlighted the noise barrier beyond the right shoulder, and finally returned to illuminate the highway ahead as the rig regained its proper configuration, having narrowly avoided crashing into the swerving bus and several other vehicles.

Not only had the truck spun out without wrecking and miraculously come back under control, but Charlie would swear he'd seen someone riding on the outside of the truck. For an instant, he'd glimpsed a man standing on the truck chassis between the back of the short-haul cab and the front of the tanker trailer.

Fascinated, Charlie removed his leg from the rail and ran across the bridge to see what would happen next. He put his hands on the cold, wet rail and leaned over to watch as the vehicle pulled to the shoulder and shuddered to a stop, air brakes squealing and gasping. A few seconds later, the driver jumped from the cab. Through the hum and whiz of traffic, Charlie thought he heard the man retching. But there was no sign of the truck-surfer.

Suddenly he realized that if he killed himself, he wouldn't be able to see weird stuff like that anymore, which would be tragic. Also, shame crept into his heart. After all, jumping off a highway bridge into traffic was one of the most socially irresponsible methods of suicide imaginable. At the very least, he could come up with a way to do it that didn't snarl traffic for hours. So he decided to mull things over instead.

Having temporarily given up on giving up, he hiked through the rain up the hill to Pancake Hut, where the waitress—Lil Bit, according to her nametag—refused to acknowledge his existence and pour him a cup of coffee. Usually he wouldn't set foot in the place. Pancake Huts were notorious for discriminating against gays and blacks, and Charlie was a liberal, of sorts. However, at the moment, he needed shelter from the storm, not political correctness. Anyway, he was white, so what was up with Lil Bit's cold shoulder? It was just a diner, damn it! With a "74" on its inspection certificate!

Perhaps the restaurant sensed his disrespect, for the place had turned against him the instant he walked in the door. One of the young drunks in the booth behind him called Charlie "tarded" when he took his seat. The other muttered, "homeless fuck." Obviously, these were not his people: One

wore a camouflage hunting outfit and the other a red baseball cap adorned with a Rebel battle flag and the words “Fergit, Hell!” And they’d been cooing insults at him ever since. Of the four other people in the place, only the cook had failed to show his contempt for the soggy newcomer. (Then again, his back had been turned the whole time, so maybe he had.) In any case, having just survived and escaped his own worst impulses, Charlie now felt trapped in this Pancake Hut of Hate.

The rain quickened, pattering on the roof like a manic drummer. Charlie lowered his hand and raised it. The dripping had slowed, so he waved to get the water molecules in his cuff moving again. Lil Bit, standing behind the counter just a few feet away, continued to give him the alert indifference only the best truly bad servers have mastered. She’d wait on him, all right—to leave. When he recalled a news story about a homeless man who’d been fed cleaning fluid by a Pancake Hut cook, Charlie thought that maybe it was better if they didn’t serve him after all.

Well, she was stuck with him, since Charlie had nowhere else to go. He didn’t even have his wallet, just a ten-spot he’d stuffed in the pocket of his sweat pants weeks ago. Enough to pay for food, if Lil Bit would notice him.

The drunks escalated their insults. Apparently, having failed to charm any women at the topless bar across the street, they were now intent on kicking some ass before they called it a night. “Come on, turdface, step outside,” the Rebel said. “Just you and me. We’ll go a few.”

Charlie was big, six feet four inches, but he was in his forties, overweight, and relatively nonviolent, so he ignored the invitation. He just wanted some coffee. He didn’t even care if it was good, so long as it was hot and not laced with ammonia or bleach. After that, he’d figure out how to survive the night. Or maybe, if he got a chance, he’d make a run for it.

Right then, he decided that no matter what, he wasn’t going home, not until Susan got down on her knees, apologized for what she’d done, and begged him to come back. Which might not happen for a while. Or ever.

His thought was punctuated by a flash that lit up the sky. As the lights went out, a loud boom rocked the diner. The guy in camouflage drawled, “What the hell?”

As the diner’s occupants murmured in concern, another bolt landed just behind the building with a blinding flash. A few seconds later, Charlie noticed a greenish-yellow glow through the rearmost side window—like some kind of radioactive fire.

The lights flickered back on. The rain let up.

His antagonists, apparently having short attention spans, refocused on their ham, eggs, and grits, so Charlie decided to take the opportunity to slip outside, check out the fire, and mosey off into the night, thereby avoiding the whupping he'd been promised. He slipped off his stool unnoticed as his antagonists grumbled and chewed.

Charlie stepped outside. He walked around the diner and saw something on fire behind the building. Whoa. Make that *someone*. Fighting panic, he ripped off his soaking wet bomber jacket and tossed it over the prone figure, putting out the flames and raising a cloud of acrid, funky-smelling smoke and steam. *Whew*.

The poor wretch lay motionless. Charlie picked up his coat and saw a six-inch-wide hole in the back of the victim's black leather jacket. Sure that nobody could survive a direct hit like that, Charlie reached for his cellphone ... which he'd left at the house. Damn it. He'd have to go back inside and use the pay phone to call 911, which meant facing those assholes.

He debated the issue for a moment, looking back at the diner, then into the night. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw signs of life. The victim's fingers drummed the concrete. *Shave and a haircut, two bits*. The body folded in on itself, fetus-like, and then jackknifed open with alarming speed. Charlie watched in amazement as the once-dead creature rolled over on his back and started to rise, yawning and stretching as he did so. His eyes fluttered open, showing rolled-up whites. Charlie yelped in horror at the zombie-thing, now standing in a crouch.

"Do not be afraid. I'm here to help," the fellow said in a raspy voice crackling with static.

"I'm not afraid," Charlie claimed as a deep chill swept through his body. "Just curious."

The guy he'd given up for dead held out his arms as if to suppress applause, then coughed out smoke. Shaking his head, he wavered unsteadily on his feet. He was short, with long, unkempt, iron-gray hair, and looked old beyond his time, like a wizened drug freak, scrawny old biker—or jazz trumpeter Chet Baker near the end of his days. He removed his jacket and examined the hole, which was bordered by a circular scorch mark. He sniffed it, said a rueful goodbye, and tossed the garment over his back into the Dumpster.

The stranger staggered around briefly but wouldn't let Charlie touch him, contorting to avoid a helping hand—as if he was an extraordinarily clumsy Neo dodging bullets in *The Matrix*. "You do *not* want a piece of me," he warned. "Not when I'm fully charged."

Charlie caught a whiff of the fellow and nearly gagged at the stink of homelessness—and something worse. The lightning must have triggered multiple excretory functions, yielding a horribly vile stench that could knock out a skunk at thirty paces.

As he stood with mouth agape, the stranger stared at Charlie with coal-black eyes. “What do you want, a friggin’ wish for saving me?” He broke out cackling. “Go ahead. Make my day.”

Charlie, nonplussed, managed to say, “I should call 911 and get help.”

The stranger waved off the idea. “No cops. We’ll handle this ourselves. That’s the rule.”

Obviously, the guy’s brain was fried. Charlie shook his head. “I’m confused. Didn’t you—”

“Walk here? Yeah.” He pointed toward the Interstate. “From there. Nearly had a wreck. Truck driver saw some fool asshole about to jump off the bridge and lost control of his vehicle. My job to come in and save the guy. Trucker, that is. Used all my power.”

He looked at Charlie knowingly, but the fool asshole had no response to that.

“So I was looking for food,” the stranger continued. “But it takes days to build up energy that way. Mighty inefficient. Just when I’m feeling low—voltage, that is—I get myself a charge, and I’m good to go. Circuit breaker boxes work too, but you rarely get useful instructions from ’em. Less natural, I guess you’d say. Plus, you don’t want to do what the power company tells you, do you?” He studied Charlie’s blank face. “Well, maybe *you* do. I don’t.”

The rain started coming down harder. Charlie shook his head and said, “Let’s get you out of the weather.”

“Let’s get me out of this weather,” the stranger agreed.

“What I can’t get over is, is ... how the hell did you survive?”

“Two things. Survival is never the issue for me.”

Charlie waited, but there was no second thing coming. “OK,” he said. “I’ll buy you a cup of coffee. If they’ll serve us, that is.” He bent down and picked up his jacket, which now smelled of smoke and homelessness in addition to already being tattered, with a busted zipper. He tossed it in the Dumpster to keep the other jacket company and gestured for the stranger to follow. The old fellow started walking. It appeared to be a new experience for him—he looked like a tightrope walker with cerebral palsy. Horrible to behold. Charlie stepped toward him, but the stranger waved off his helping hand, causing Charlie’s hair to stand on end. By the time they reached the diner entrance, the stranger had adapted to this mode of transportation, more or less.

If Lil Bit was unhappy to see Charlie return, she was horrified to see—and smell—his friend. She acknowledged the newcomer's arrival with a loud groan.

The Rebel laughed and punched his buddy. "Retard got hisself a spaz for a pet."

Charlie turned to address the men in the booth: "This guy just got hit by lightning! Cut him some slack." He hoped that this strange news would break the ice and relieve the antagonism that had been building up.

No such luck.

"You'll think you been hit with lightning when I'm through with you, bitch," the Rebel said.

Charlie whispered behind his hand to his new companion: "They're looking for trouble."

"Well then, today's their lucky day." The old man regarded the drunks disdainfully, drawing murderous looks in return.

Charlie shook his head at the stringy-haired bantam's bravado and slipped onto a counter seat. The stranger did likewise. "Two coffees, please," Charlie said, hoping this time that Lil Bit would acknowledge his order.

Feeling a static charge in the air, Charlie snuck a sidelong glance at his companion. Under the fluorescent light, the guy appeared to be not just old, but also terribly weathered—and abused. Veins threatened to break through the old man's paper-thin skin, which was darker than white and lighter than black. His grubby, uneven facial stubble looked like he'd hacked at it with an old knife, and he had the bloodshot, color-drained eyes of an ancient alcoholic. And he smelled worse inside than out—rotting teeth, with a hint of carrion. When Charlie leaned back, he noticed long bumps—or ridges—under a tight, wet, and remarkably unburned T-shirt that proclaimed *It's Better in the Bahamas*. Were those welts? Was this guy so old he'd spent time on a chain gang? What kind of hellhole had the poor guy been in where they flogged people? North Vietnam?

"What's your name?" Charlie asked.

"I've got a better question," the stranger said. "Who are you?"

"Who am I? Charles Sherman."

The stranger laughed. "Are you going to settle for that?"

That was rude. "Well, people call me Charlie. How about you?"

"I'm not from around here," the stranger said. "And I've been places you'll never want to go. Unless you're even stupider than you look."

Charlie grimaced at the insult. After a moment, curiosity overcame resentment. OK, the guy wasn't going to say who he was. He'd try a different tack. "Where are you from?"

"I just told you."

"Not exactly. Uh, how old are you?"

"What year is it?"

Charlie told him.

The stranger nodded and said, "Sounds about right."

"Huh? Never mind. Forget I asked." Obviously, the guy's brain was cooked.

Lil Bit, who had been staring at them with a curled lip, pointed to a sign above the grill: *Pancake Hut IS Home of the Sausage Cake*. She blinked in surprise and yelled, "Harley! Where's the sign?"

The middle-aged white man working the grill wiped his hands on his apron and looked up, then turned to Charlie and said, "Supposed to be a sign says, '*We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to You.*'" Gray hair tufted over the top of his T-shirt.

"The one you had to take down after Pancake Hut got sued for discrimination?" Charlie asked.

"They didn't say squat about stink," Lil Bit countered.

"Just serve us some coffee and we'll be on our way," Charlie said. "Ways, actually."

The stranger beamed impishly at Lil Bit. "That's right. A cup of joe would go down good right about now, yes ma'am." She responded by moving to the far end of the counter and fanning her face with a rag.

"That reminds me," the stranger said. In a wire rack on the wall, there was an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, already read several times. He reached over and grabbed the Metro section, then leafed through it. "Hmm." He handed it to Charlie, pointing to a local brief:

Raccoon Gets Revenge

Georgia Department of Natural Resources officials report that Forsyth County woodsman Phil McRae got more than he bargained for last week when he went raccoon hunting. After his hound treed the animal on a private farm near Lake Lanier, McRae shot the raccoon, which then toppled from the limb and struck the hunter on the head, chipping three vertebrae and sending McRae to the hospital. Currently recuperating at home, McRae was unavailable for comment.

Charlie shook his head. "Unbelievable." He jabbed the page. "That's my brother-in-law."

His companion, wearing a wistful expression, nodded. "That was some of my best work."

Charlie looked at him skeptically. "Are you a reporter?"

"No. I was the raccoon. And he's a liar. He missed me. Do I look like I got shot?"

If Charlie had been drinking coffee right then, he would have sprayed it over half the restaurant. Instead, he shook his head and tried not to laugh. Recovering, he said, "Now I know why Phil didn't show up for Christmas dinner. The varmints never tell me anything."

"Varmints?"

"My in-laws, from Forsyth County. The Cutchinses, more specifically—my mother-in-law's family. Phil married my wife's older sister, Sheila. I married Susan. Their maiden name is Powell, but take my word for it, they're Cutchinses. And Cutchins is as Cutchins does."

"Ahh ... I wondered why I was out in the woods. Now I know. That explains a lot." The stranger nodded thoughtfully. "Now it's coming to me. You're the one."

"The one?" Charlie asked. "The one what?"

The stranger cleared his junk-filled throat and said, "So what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a writer." Charlie caught the waitress's eye and stirred a nonexistent cup of coffee with an invisible spoon. She scowled and turned away.

"Earn a living at it?" The stranger started mimicking Charlie's act, pouring imaginary sugar into a phantom cup—then spilling it and rubbing make-believe crystals around on the counter with his palm.

"Not right now. Got some things going on, though." This was true only if he counted as a prospect the one literary agent who hadn't bothered to write him a rejection letter. (Agents tended to promptly decline to represent his work, so the fact that Barbara Asher hadn't responded gave him hope, even though she'd held his query for nearly a year.)

"So you're looking for work."

"I will be in the morning."

"I know of a job you can start tonight."

Their steadfast refusal to admit they hadn't been served seemed to be getting on Lil Bit's nerves. "Get out," she snapped.

"You can't tell us to get out! That's illegal!" Charlie protested.

Harley stepped over to stand by her, arms folded across his chest, fists clenched. "No it ain't," he said. "You ain't a—ain't a minority."

"I sure am," said the stranger.

"This chain discriminates against nearly everyone," Charlie grumbled. "Why bother to open the doors?"

The Rebel spoke up. "That's why I come here. They keep it clean. At least until you two came in here. I don't know what's worse, nigs or homeless assholes."

Grinning, Charlie's companion swiveled to face the guy.

"That's right," the young man said, jabbing his finger at his cap so hard he looked like he was mimicking a suicide. "This here means I stand for some-thin'. And you two can get the hell out of here so I don't have to look at you. Or smell you, you filthy fucks."

The stranger turned to Charlie. "What do you think of his hat?"

Charlie bit his lip. He'd nearly gotten killed on the Fourth of July over a Rebel flag—at a family get-together, of all places. This guy was just like the varmints, and he saw no point in arguing with such people.

The cook chimed in: "We told you to git. You're stinkin' up the place. Now git."

"We should leave," Charlie said. The stranger spun and hit the tiled floor with both feet. With blinding speed, he grabbed the Rebel cap by the bill. Flicking his wrist, he tossed it like a Frisbee over the counter. It landed on a burner and erupted in flames.

Arching out of his seat like a hunting bow, the Rebel yelped, "The sumbitch tased me!"

The stranger strode to the door, calling out over his shoulder to Charlie, "Come on. Let's go."

"I'm gonna kill both of you!" the Rebel shouted, flopping around as he tried to exit the booth.

Charlie slid off his stool and sprinted outside, shouting, "We gotta move, man! You know he's got a gun!"

The stranger kept his back to Charlie as he walked at a leisurely pace to the MARTA bus stop on Hanover Drive. Charlie caught up with him and looked at him in alarm. "You've got to be kidding! This is your idea of a getaway?"

The Rebel, moving slowly, struggled with the restaurant door on his way out, then stomped over to a Chevy pickup and opened the passenger door.

"He meant what he said!" Charlie cried out. "He's going to kill us!"

"Ha! That would be doing you a favor." Charlie's companion eyed their adversary in the distance. "He recovered quicker than I expected. Too bad."

“Too bad?” Charlie face was contorted in worried disbelief.

The Rebel bolted toward them, but when he saw they were just standing around at the bus stop, he slowed to a leisurely saunter and laughed contemptuously. As he neared, Charlie saw the silver glint of the man’s pistol under the light from a streetlamp.

Charlie gulped, his throat bone-dry.

Just then, a bus appeared on the overpass, barreling toward them at highway speed. Its wheels left the pavement when it hit a bump, and for an instant, Charlie thought it was flying. The Rebel was in shooting range when the vehicle slid to a screeching stop right in front of the stranger. “Don’t look back,” he told Charlie.

The bus door opened. The stranger climbed aboard and Charlie followed, scrambling up the steps, shouting, “Get us out of here! Get us out of here!”

The driver, a plump black woman wearing shades, looked down at Charlie and said, “So loud. Tsk, tsk.”

Before she could close the door, a shot rang out. Charlie grabbed his companion’s arm and felt a sharp pain. Then there was only darkness.

* * *

A kick to the shin awakened Charlie, who was lying in the aisle on the bus. He blinked and looked up at the stranger. “Did I get shot? In the arm. Shoulder.” He ran his right hand up his left arm seeking points of pain but found none.

“No such luck,” his companion said. “You touched me.”

Charlie shook his head. He didn’t feel right. He must be crashing after the adrenaline bender he’d gone through. Reminding himself that he was lucky to be alive, he looked around. They were the only passengers on the bus, which was squealing to a stop. It was past twelve o’clock. Did that make it a new day, or a long night? “Where are we?”

“End of the line,” said the driver, standing up and stretching. “Bayard Terrace. Close to it, anyway.”

Charlie’s eyes widened at the unfamiliar name. “Can I ride back?” he asked the driver.

“Why you wanna do that?” She opened the door. “People shootin’ at you back there. Get real. Get out.”

The stranger stood and stretched, popping several body joints. “This is the job.”

“What job?” Charlie asked.

His traveling companion was already climbing down the steps. Charlie got off the bus and looked at its lighted route sign above the windshield: Out of Service. The rain had stopped. To their right, just ahead, stood Bay Street Coffeehouse, famous for the fact that there was no Bay Street within ten miles of it. They were in the Virginia-Highland section of Atlanta, many miles from where they’d started. What a screwed-up route. Charlie watched the bus pull away; he was unable to shake the feeling that a door had closed behind him.

The stranger walked a few paces to Bayard Terrace, a narrow side street, then turned and beckoned for his confused companion to follow. “Come on.”

Seeing no choice, Charlie fell in step behind the stranger. They hiked up the hill on the cracked sidewalk beside Bayard Terrace. Rain-spattered cars glistened in their parking spots on the street in front of close-set homes. After passing ten houses, the stranger turned up the sidewalk of a bungalow with a glowing porch light. He called to Charlie: “Forward or back, which way do you choose?”

Charlie stopped. *This is absurd*, he thought. *Insane.*

The rain started falling again, pushing Charlie toward the house just as the door opened and a birdlike woman with snowy white hair stood bathed in light, gazing out past both men, calling, “Bounce! Bounce! Where are you?” She wore an old burgundy cardigan along with black stretch pants, and she seemed trim except for a little pot belly. Charlie thought she’d take one look at them and slam the door. She didn’t. “My cat’s been gone a week,” she declared to the stranger. “I think my daughter had her executed. Maybe not, but I don’t like the odds.” She shook her head sadly.

“Do not be afraid,” the stranger told her. “We’re here to help.”

The old woman, showing no sign of fear, gazed at them expectantly.

“Do you always say that?” Charlie cried out in exasperation as he stood halfway between street and porch. “It’s guaranteed to make people suspect you, which they should. You almost got us killed.”

“You wish.” The stranger turned to the woman, who seemed not to mind his aroma. “He’s the one. Charlie Sherman—or is it Charles?—”

“Charlie’s fine.”

“—meet Kathleen Talton.” He neglected to introduce himself.

“The one what?” Kathleen asked.

“The one who’s going to finish your husband’s work.” He turned to Charlie and said, “You’re going to finish Thurwood’s work, right?”

“Thurwood?”

“Her late husband. The history professor I told you so much about.”

Charlie shook his head. “The professor you told me *nothing* about.”

“Who are you?” Kathleen asked the stranger.

“Ask him,” he said, pointing at Charlie.

“I don’t know who you are,” Charlie said, perplexed. “I’m sorry, ma’am. We—”

“That man found me,” the stranger said. “And you were looking for him, and I found you. So here we are. And there you go.” He seemed well-pleased with his logic.

“Who are you, the Riddler?” Charlie stepped back. “Ma’am, I’ll be honest. I don’t even—”

“As far as you’re concerned,” the stranger told Charlie, “I’m nothing but trouble. I thought I established that.”

“Trouble?” Charlie stepped forward and looked at him closely under the porch light. “Yeah, I see that now. Trouble it is, then.” Suspecting he’d been lured into a shakedown—or worse—he added, “This is a bad idea. Let’s go.” He reached for Trouble’s arm, then thought better of it and withdrew his hand.

“Nonsense. This is a great idea.” Turning to the woman, Trouble said, “You asked for help, remember?”

Kathleen smiled uncertainly. “Did I?”

“In there.” He pointed into the house and wagged his finger.

She turned and looked inside, then gave Trouble a blank look. “How did you know that?”

He said something to her that Charlie couldn’t hear. She retreated into the living room, and although she opened her mouth, no sound came out. Trouble stepped inside and beckoned Charlie, who asked, “What did you tell her?”

“I gave her my credentials.”

“Which are?”

“Impeccable,” Trouble said. Charlie followed him reluctantly, believing he’d walked into some sort of offbeat home invasion that happened to be going very smoothly at the moment.

It was a well-ordered house, though a bit dusty, with a closed-in, old-folk smell. Gas flames danced in the fireplace. “What big eyes you have,” Kathleen told Charlie. “Pull up those things so I can see your face.” Charlie pushed his goggles up on his forehead. After scrutinizing him for a moment,

she said, "You look just like my son." She pointed to a framed photo on the mantel of a young man in cap and gown. "That's Gary. He died in Vietnam."

"That's sad," Charlie mumbled. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yes. Yes it is. ... Well, where are my manners?"

Kathleen told them to make themselves comfortable while she got tea. Charlie stood by the fire to warm himself and looked at her photos. A family portrait with two kids, a girl and a boy. A framed black-and-white snapshot of a young man in a combat helmet, grinning in front of a palm tree. There were several pictures of the daughter, from gap-toothed girl to middle-aged woman. None showed her with a child or man, though she appeared in pictures with two different women.

"Kathleen needs someone to take care of her," Trouble said.

"Someone like you?" Charlie felt queasy, fearing that when Kathleen returned, the conversation would turn to her bank account and the whereabouts of her jewelry. What if she ended up dead? The halfwit accomplice was always the one that was caught and convicted. If Charlie could just figure out what the bastard was doing, he'd stop this nefarious plot.

"No, someone more down to earth. Like you, to talk to her and wreak vengeance, that sort of thing."

"Wreak vengeance?" Charlie's face contorted in disbelief. He whispered harshly, "You're fuckin' crazy, you know that? This is insane."

"At least she's not shooting at us, eh?" Trouble gave him a rotten-tooth smile.

Kathleen returned with a tea tray, placing it on the coffee table. Charlie watched Trouble from the corner of his eye. The old cadger and Kathleen were talking, but he couldn't make out what they were saying—it was as if they were speaking Greek.

Charlie asked to use the bathroom. Kathleen pointed toward the hall, and Charlie squished his way through the dining room and into the hall.

When Charlie returned to the living room, Trouble was gone. Disconcerted, he checked his companion's cup. Empty. And the box of shortbread cookies Kathleen had offered them had disappeared, as well. "Where'd, uh, Trouble go?"

"He said he had to go see a man about a mule. Or maybe a horse. I don't remember things as well as I used to. I have Alzheimer's, you know."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Comes with the territory," she said with a shrug. "He said his job was to get us together, and his work here was done, for the moment."

"You might want to check your purse." Charlie opened the front door and

looked out. No sign of Trouble. He returned and sat in a wing chair by the fireplace, then stirred some sugar in his cup of tea. "You don't know him, do you?"

"I don't suppose I do, but here you are, and you are an editor, aren't you?" She hummed a few notes and picked at some lint on her sweater.

Charlie took a sip. "I'm a writer. I've been a newspaper editor. I don't know that I can do this. Or should."

She gave him a pleading look. "You've come so far. You may as well look at the manuscript. Please."

But he was still perplexed. "Ma'am, aren't you concerned about your safety? I mean, letting strangers in ... it's after midnight!" He pointed to the clock and shook his head.

"If you were going to hurt me, you would have already done so. I can tell you're good."

"Aren't you afraid of what you're getting into?"

"Not at all. You've been sent here to help me. It's Providence, you know. He told me we're not supposed to tell anyone about him, by the way."

Even if Charlie wanted to talk about Trouble, what could he say about a thunderstruck stranger who suddenly appeared during his life's lowest moment and offered him salvation in the form of a scam? No, he wouldn't have any problem keeping his mouth shut. And while he didn't understand what was happening, he realized that, no matter how weird it seemed, he was getting a second chance of some sort. So, there it was: stay here, or walk back into the night.

Charlie listened to the rain, which had just started falling harder. "All right. Show me the book."

She led him into the study and pointed to the massive manuscript on the fine old desk—three times the size of any of the novels Charlie had written. "Sit down."

Charlie took a seat. "Ma'am?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Are you sure you're not afraid of me?"

"Oh, quite sure. You're the one. I know that now." She smiled. "And you fit *just right* at the desk."

While Charlie looked through a pile of rejection letters, she talked about her husband. "Thurwood was murdered. They never caught the racist who hit him on the head with that ... thing he threw. That's what caused the blood clot that killed him. My dear husband would still be alive today ... " She trailed off, tears welling in her pale blue eyes. She jabbed the air with her finger. "It was a beer bottle. I won't forget that."

She pointed at the wall, but Charlie didn't look up, absorbed as he was in the task of figuring out what kind of work the professor had written. Kathleen went to the kitchen to fix coffee. After reading two pages of Talton's dry-as-dust introduction, Charlie glanced up and saw the newspaper clipping Kathleen had pointed at. He positioned the lamp to spotlight the yellowed paper taped to the wall. It was dated Sunday, January 18, 1987. The photo showed a crowd of white rowdies taunting civil rights marchers. It was an ugly-looking bunch: the great-great grandsons of Confederate deserters, their faces grim under baseball caps like the one Trouble had pitched into the flames. One man wore a Confederate soldier's slouch hat. A bareheaded boy in the foreground had a serene, inbred look. Beside him, poised like a baseball pitcher on his follow-through, was a huge, round-faced youth who glared at the camera. His face was encircled by ink, with the hand-lettered caption: "J'ACCUSE!"

Charlie groaned in disgust and disbelief. He knew the guy. Oh, he didn't just know him. The asshole was family—a varmint, Susan's cousin, Rhett "Momo" Hastings, Jr. In the foreground, two steps away from a ducking Redeemer, stood Talton, raising his hand to his head. Charlie cursed Momo (who had once nearly killed him, too). "You bastard, I can't believe you followed me here."

But there they were. Charlie briefly considered telling Kathleen that he knew the guy who threw the thing, then decided against it. After all, what could he say? There was nothing anyone could do now. Besides, cause and effect didn't jibe. An old man keeled over a week after he was conked on the head. That wasn't exactly murder in his book. Anyway, that was twenty years ago. Momo had done time for his misdeeds back in 1987. Just not for this one.

And so, with nothing else to do and nowhere to go, Charlie settled in with the cup of coffee Kathleen had fixed for him and began reading Talton's work. He was vaguely familiar with the events of 1912 and knew that, nearly a century later, locals were still tight-lipped about them. He certainly remembered the two 1987 marches, which had been major media events. During the second one, Charlie and Susan had opened up their home as a refugee camp for Susan's Forsyth County kin, who fled the invading civil rights protesters. With characteristic gall, Charlie had pointed out to his mother-in-law Evangeline that, unlike black sharecroppers in 1912, she could return to Forsyth any time she wanted. He'd stopped short of telling her he'd considered joining the march. That would have incurred her eternal enmity as well as that of her brother, State Rep. Stanley Cutchins, a Reagan

Republican and barely closeted racist who'd flown to Hawaii on a lobbyist-paid junket rather than welcome the civil-rights marchers.

Soon after the event, Oprah herself had traveled south to tape her show in Forsyth County, which by then had become known worldwide as a racist, red-neck backwater. Of course, locals believed they'd been vilified unjustly. (Cumming residents told reporters, "We didn't do nuthin' to nobody.") Certainly there had been some progress in the seventy-five years since 1912. For one thing, subdivision signs advertising "Gracious Lake Living" had replaced the infamous county-line postings that said, *Nigger, Don't Let the Sun Set on You Here*.

Charlie knew that since 1987, a few blacks and increasing numbers of Hispanics had moved to Forsyth County. He'd seen photos of an African-American high school track star on the Cumming newspaper's sports page. This showed acceptance, but also suggested that speed was essential for blacks who chose to live there.

Most blacks he knew rolled their eyes in exasperation at the mention of the place. African-Americans certainly couldn't be too comfortable in Atlanta's ultimate suburb. After all, Forsyth's reputation drew the sort of white person who wanted to escape crime, drugs, poor schools, and welfare this and welfare that, but who didn't necessarily use racial pejoratives, preferring to speak in code. Forsyth recently had become the nation's fastest-growing county, a paradise for people of paleness. It also happened to be Georgia's wealthiest and one of the twenty richest in the nation. That was no mere coincidence. There were now polo fields in Forsyth, once the home of *Hee-Haw's* Junior Samples.

Charlie knew Forsyth's saga was interesting. Talton's manuscript, not so much. "This work is not publishable in its present form," stated one rejection letter he read.

While the old woman thought he could rescue the book, all Charlie wanted was to survive the night. That meant staying as long as he could—until his hostess asked him to leave or the police arrived. But Kathleen didn't tell him to go. Instead, she asked, "How long can you stay?"

"I got nowhere else to go," he confessed. "I have all night."

"You can rest on the couch if you get tired. Use the quilt."

Kathleen retired at 1:30 a.m. Completely at peace with his presence, she was soon snoring gently in the front bedroom. The Seth Thomas wall clock ticked in counterpoint to the rain's wavering beat. Wrapped in a quilt—his clothes remained incredibly damp—Charlie continued reading, mainly to justify his existence.

He reached the hundredth page. There was nothing remarkable written on it; so far, none of what Talton had written was special. Weariness overcame him. He couldn't continue. The scope of this mission was beyond his skills. The past was not within his power to change. The only thing Charlie could do was get some rest and try to save his own life. In frustration, he banged his head on Dr. Talton's desk.

The old sofa was inviting. Perhaps he could sleep off his dampness. He got up and shuffled over to it. The window trembled in its frame. The wind was rising, chasing the storm away. Charlie stood for a moment and considered his plight. He knew a couple of guys who might put him up for few days. Or not. The local Home Depot might hire him. Everyone who worked there knew him already, anyway. Then maybe he could rent a room. But he wouldn't return to the house on Thornbriar Circle, not until things changed. Not until Susan apologized and begged him to come back. But what about Beck (Rebecca) and Ben? What would he tell his children? He didn't know.

Charlie collapsed on the musty old couch. The dust he'd raised made him sneeze. He closed his eyes and dozed off. Soon he was dreaming that he was standing just a few yards away from an unpainted cabin. The world was sparsely furnished and small. He felt like he was on an old, cheaply designed movie set. Trees were bare-limbed silhouettes painted on canvas.

A family of black sharecroppers loaded up a mule-drawn wagon as a mounted gang of masked men watched them from under a spreading oak tree. The nightriders held reins in one hand, rifles and shotguns in the other, all aimed at heaven. Their skittish horses danced to crashing thunder that sounded like sticks hitting tin pans. The scene was illuminated by handheld torches. Charlie suspected that there was a Cutchins in the mob when he saw beady eyes glinting through holes in a makeshift white hood.

The children tearfully protested being dragged from bed in the middle of the night. Their mother, her body wrecked by childbirth and field work, snapped: "Get goin', ain't time to dawdle."

The father, wearing a look of utter defeat, knew his life depended on bowing before the hooded men. He said "Yassuh, yassuh," as he threw his meager belongings into the wagon.

Charlie knew what the sharecropper was thinking: Get to Hall County by nightfall tomorrow, got a cousin there, figure out what to do.

The wagon lurched off with the cotton still in the field. It was a scam: Drive them off at harvest time and take their crops. Affirmative action for white folks. A big, cruel-hearted swindle you couldn't perpetrate on humans

and call yourself a moral being. But there was an easy solution: Make the victims less than human. That family became no more important or deserving of reparation than a steer from which you'd carve a steak.

Charlie had to stop this outrage, but how? The book he held in his hand had something to do with it, but when he looked at it, the cover was blank.