



SEDUCED

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

**G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK**

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

—GENESIS 3:6

Seduction begins with a fantasy that, pending a willing partner and a safe place, choreographs its own dangerous reality.

—H. M. TOMLINSON

ONE

I WAS ENJOYING THE CONVERSATION WITH A MAN I USED TO date, a biologist named Marion Ford, until the subject swung from Florida oranges to a giant snake. He'd seen it crossing a bay south of the island where I grew up and still occasionally reside.

"How far south?"

"A ways. We were flying back from Key West."

"That's where you disappeared to?"

"I've been traveling," he said, which was typical. "It was a Burmese python—twelve, maybe fifteen feet long. Too big for a boa. Hard to be sure of the size because it was swimming, but that's not the point."

"It is to me," I said. "If you're trying to scare me into moving closer to your lab, I'm flattered, but I'd prefer the particulars first. There are better ways than inventing snakes."

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“Invent?” He was mystified. Marion has warmth, if you get to know him, but he is slow to recognize playful humor.

“I don’t doubt you saw it, but there’s a hundred miles of coast between here and the Keys. Was the snake closer to Naples or Sanibel Island?”

“Let me finish. I was making a connection between the parasites killing your orange trees and higher-profile exotics like pythons, boas, a whole long list of reptiles that are taking over the state. Not just reptiles, of course. Fire ants have all but destroyed the quail population. Brazilian pepper trees are another example, but they were intentionally introduced by state biologists, so—”

“Marion,” I said patiently, “you know I’m not fond of snakes, and you know why. Please stick to the subject.”

“I thought I was.”

“You were for a while. Now you’re not.”

I was aboard a tidy Marlow cabin cruiser that is my home, neatening up the galley, with the phone to my ear. As we talked, I could look out the cabin door and see the family dock built by my late Uncle Jake as it wobbled through the mangroves. Across the road, atop an Indian mound, was an old yellow-pine Cracker house with a tin roof and a wraparound porch. Veiled by screening were ceiling fans, a summer kitchen, and a hammock where, as a child, I had often slept on hot summer nights.

What I chose not to notice was a black Lincoln Town Car parked in the shade. For more than an hour, I’d been trying to ignore the thing. It belonged to an old-time Florida millionaire who, twenty years ago, had been my mother’s secret lover. Two

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brain surgeries and a fondness for smoking pot have not improved her memory, nor pacified her mood swings and sometimes wild behavior.

Better, I'd decided, to call a friend rather than fixate on what might be going on up there. Inside, it was just the two of them: my mother, Loretta, and eighty-year-old Harney Chatham, the former lieutenant governor of Florida, who was also a married man.

Not that anyone remembers lieutenant governors. Even Mr. Chatham's recent prostate surgery had not made the news.

Ford asked, "Are you still there?"

I realized my attention had drifted. "I'm not one to interrupt, but that doesn't mean I'm not listening. How big was the snake?"

Apparently, he had already covered that ground. Instead of sighing, as a normal person would, he calmly repeated the details—a quality that was admirable, I suppose, but also rankled me. It was as if he were a professor tutoring one of his slower students.

"Hannah," he added, "I haven't heard from you in more than three weeks—"

"You disappeared a month ago, so what do you expect?"

"I didn't disappear, I was traveling," he reminded me. "Now, out of the blue, you call to tell me the oranges in your citrus grove are dying. Why ask me for advice?"

"They're *withering*," I corrected, "with a sort green mold on the skins, and the fruit's bitter."

"The entire grove?"

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“The ones I care about. The honeybells and grapefruit, all my favorites. You can tell by the leaves. They start to curl up, with yellow streaks.”

“But not all?”

“I didn’t think to check.”

“It wouldn’t hurt. If some of the trees aren’t infected, I’d step back and ask myself what’s different about them? Less shade, more sun—a different soil or rootstock? But if the entire grove is diseased—”

I said, “It’s not big enough to be called a grove; not really. Just a few dozen trees my grandfather planted way, way back.”

“I know. All I’m saying is, you must have ties to people in the citrus business who can give you better advice than me.”

Again, my eyes moved to the black limousine. “Some of the biggest,” I replied, “but I do miss our talks. You’re a biologist, and it’s been a while, so I thought maybe you’d heard something.”

This, he found humorous. “The parasites that spread citrus greening don’t have fins, and they don’t swim. I’m a *marine* biologist. All I know is, they’re exotics, and they’ve damn near ruined a billion-dollar industry. Is that really the reason you called?”

I was about to cover my deception by shifting topics when I saw Loretta charge out of the house wearing a housecoat and fluffy pink slippers. Her mannerisms were frantic as if she were being chased, or had suffered a second brain aneurysm. She bounced on her toes and flapped her hands in my direction, then charged back onto the porch.

“Something’s wrong,” I said.

“Nothing we can’t fix, Hannah, if you’re willing to—”

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“Not us, my crazy mother,” I interrupted, and went out the cabin door in a hurry.

The former lieutenant governor was either dead or in a bad way. I knew it when Loretta blocked me from the porch, saying, “Even as a child you had a selfish streak. Now you refuse to do me this one little favor?”

The favor she had demanded was, “Go away, and, for god’s sake, don’t call the law. It’s too late to save your mama from sinning . . . But you didn’t hear that from me. I’m not gonna confess to anything.”

I felt a little dizzy when I heard those words. “Where is he, Loretta?”

“Who?”

“You don’t think I recognize his car? If Mr. Chatham is sick, we need to do something. Please tell me something terrible hasn’t happened.”

She stared at the Lincoln Town Car and hyperventilated.

“Loretta, move. If Reggie’s sleeping in the backseat, go bang on the window and get him up here. I’ll look for myself.”

Reggie was Mr. Chatham’s limo driver.

“Not until I think this through,” she snapped, and squared herself in front of the door. Loretta isn’t a large woman—not compared to me, her only child—but she has a magic way of puffing herself while her bright blue eyes catch fire. “For once in your life, do something to make me happy, Hannah. Just go away and leave us be.”

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“I’m not leaving until—”

“Do as you’re told, young lady!” she hollered, and glared with those wild eyes of hers.

For an instant, I was a child again, standing in the same doorway of the same house that hadn’t changed much since my mother had stung me with similar words many times, over many years. But that girl was long gone, along with her timid nature. “If you don’t move, I’ll go ’round to the back door. Or pick you up and carry you to the couch. Is that what you want? The two of us wrestling around like crazy people while we could be helping?” Then I called over the top of her head, “Mr. Chatham! Everything okay in there? It’s me, Hannah Smith.”

On the mantle above the fireplace is a cherrywood clock my great-grandfather made when he wasn’t fishing mullet, or selling rum and egret plumes. The clock’s ticking was the only reply.

“My lord,” I murmured. “Loretta, talk to me. Please tell me you did not do something crazy. You didn’t stab him, did you?”

“Stab him! ’Course I didn’t. In my own bed? What do you think I am?”

“My lord,” I said again. “Is that where he is?”

With a dazed look, she turned toward the hall, her bedroom beyond, then appeared to wilt and stepped away. “When the law comes, I suppose you’ll tell them the governor ain’t the first man I killed.”

Kilt is the way the word is pronounced in the small fishing communities of Southwest Florida.

“He’s *dead*?”

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“I believe he is,” was her cryptic reply, “but Harney’s not the type to give up all at once.” She began to sob.

I rushed into the house to where Loretta’s recliner faced the TV, which wasn’t blaring soap operas for a change. Nearby was her walker. It was covered with a caftan as a vanity. Aside from confiding to a few women friends, she won’t admit she needs help getting around, not even to our handsome UPS man, let alone a former lover. I slid the walker within reach and hurried down the hall, calling the governor’s name.

The door to my old room was open, nothing I recognized on the walls or desk. Loretta’s door was shut tight, which was normal. As always, I could feel the privacy of shadows and forbidden drawers radiating from within. Twice I knocked, then bumped the door open. After a look, I hollered, “Call nine-one-one. Hurry!” but didn’t budge for a moment because my legs felt watery, like in a bad dream.

In life, Mr. Chatham was an imposing man with oversized accomplishments. He favored Western-cut suits, string bolo ties, and the only time he removed his hat was when entering a house, or greeting a lady, or before sliding into the back of his limo.

His cowboy hat—“my John Wayne Stetson,” he called it—was the only reason I knew for certain the man who lay there, toes up and naked, vomit crusted on his chin, was the former lieutenant governor. My mother, despite her panic, had had the good manners to place the hat strategically over his pelvis. The Stetson tilted, as if on a peg, with two long, heavy legs sticking out. I charged in and did what I’d been taught in a CPR course I had

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to take when I'd upgraded my captain's license. Mr. Chatham's neck was as white and cool as clay when I felt for a pulse. Glassy eyes failed to respond to my shouting, nor when I hammered a fist on his chest.

Next step: clear the airway, then begin mouth-to-mouth. Practicing on a CPR dummy had not prepared me for the realities involved. But I did as I'd been taught. Billowed two breaths into his lungs, then shouted out the compressions in a robotic way while I pumped his chest. This helped stem a blooming nausea.

"Mama—you'd best be dialing that damn phone! Carry it outside while you talk, and bring Reggie fast as you can."

There was no need to add this because the chauffeur was suddenly beside me, hands on my shoulders, and cooing in his gentle Southern way. "You done what you could, Miz Hannah. Go on now, girl, an' leave the rest to me."

I stepped back and brushed hair from my face. "He's got no pulse. Did Loretta call nine-one-one?"

Reggie, a tiny, wiry man, was wearing the same blue cap he always wore. "All taken care of," he said. Then he removed his driving gloves and yelled, "Governor! Wake up, sir. This is ain't no place for this to be happening."

He plopped down, grabbed the man who'd been his employer for decades, shook him by the shoulders, and looked up at me with wide eyes. "Lord God, he's cold as death, Miz Hannah. His heart done stopped. I knew this was gonna happen."

"You can't be sure."

"Cold as he is? Honey, he's been gone a while."

"We have to keep doing compressions until—"

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“I know, I know,” the little man said, yet sounded resigned. “I took that course for my chauffeur’s license, but the governor wouldn’t like it, you seeing what I gotta do first.” He glanced at the Stetson, as if to convey his meaning, then hunched his back and continued CPR. Between breaths he told me, “Leave us alone, girl. It’s what he’d want.”

I was duty-bound to stay but suddenly in need of air. In the bathroom, I left the water running to cover the sound of my nausea, then washed my face and went searching for mother. She was on the porch, rocking and staring past the mangroves that fringe our dock. It was a cool, bright afternoon in February, with the sky too low for soaring gulls and frigate birds. When I covered her legs with a blanket, she spoke in a monotone. “No need to badger me, I know it’s my fault. He warned me often enough.”

“Don’t fret about that now.”

“I’m being punished for doin’ what I knew I shouldn’t do. I, by god, deserve whatever hell has to offer, ’cause that’s where I’m headed.”

“Don’t say such things. Do you mean Mr. Chatham mentioned he had heart problems? I think that’s what happened. He had a heart attack.”

“It wasn’t him who warned me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Never mind. The governor’s problems always started way south of his heart. We was both that way, God help us. That’s why he had that thingamabob installed. I knew we was playing with fire but couldn’t stop myself.”

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Rather than endure further details, I offered to make a pitcher of sweet tea. My mother rocked and stared.

“Earthly pleasures are a trap, Hannah. Chastity might seem its own punishment—until you accept a man from the spirit world. That’s when our behavior is supposed to change. Oh, I knew what I was doing.”

There is often no making sense of her babbling. I hugged my mother close as she cried, her shoulders bird-like. “I’ll call the home health nurse and have her come early. Or would you rather I have the ladies come keep you company?”

I was referring to Loretta’s friends from childhood, Esey Hendry, Becky Darwin, and Jody Summerlin—all widows. Once a week, they would gather on the porch, with cookies, or a pie or brownies, and wait for the church shuttle to carry them to bingo.

There would be no bingo on this Friday night.

I gave her another hug, called Becky Darwin without explaining why she was needed, then went inside to check on Reggie. In the hall, I stopped out of respect. He was weeping, but in an angry way, and speaking in low tones to his former employer. Eavesdropping is not something I normally do, yet what I heard was so unexpected, I found myself drawn toward the open door.

I heard the chauffeur mutter, “Where the hell is the damn shutoff valve? I ain’t gettin’ paid to put my hands on your . . . no, I ain’t. I warned you, Governor—by god, I warned you—now here we are. And who gonna explain this to that bitch you married if I can’t . . . ? Shit fire! How’s this damn contraption work?”

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I peeked in and wished I hadn't. Mr. Chatham was faceup, no sheet over him, and his Stetson was on the floor. I'm not sure what I said—more of a gasp, I suppose—which caused Reggie to swing around and say, "I told him what would happen if a man his age got an implant, Miz Hannah. And takin' them damn blue pills of his, too. Please"—this was said with urgent deference—"we got to leak the air out of this damn thing and get the governor home before his wife finds out he's gone."

Again, I am uncertain of my response—another gasp, no doubt, albeit indignant, and something about waiting for the EMTs.

Reggie, who had tended to his employer's secrets for more than forty years, replied, "The governor ain't leaving here in an ambulance, and"—he motioned for emphasis—"he ain't going home lookin' like that. What would people think?"

What Loretta had termed a thingamabob was, indeed, a startling image to behold. Not that my eyes lingered. There is a sad, clinical starkness to an old man who lay as if staked to the bed by a porcine rod through his hips. A wicked thought darted through my mind regarding my mother, who, even in my childhood, had often walked around with a dazed expression on her face.

I backed into the hall. "What are you suggesting, Reggie? We can't move a dead body. That's against the law."

"The governor never cared nothing about the law. It's what he'd want."

"Are you telling me the ambulance isn't coming?"

The little man ignored that.

I said, "We should call Joel Ransler. He's an attorney."

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He was also Mr. Chatham's illegitimate son by yet another mistress.

Reggie shook his head while leaning over the dead man. "Joel wouldn't help. Those two ain't shared a word since the fool almost got you killed. Besides, Joel moved to Jamaica for the winter—which proves he is a dang fool."

"We can't do this on our own," I said.

"Why not? There weren't nothing about transporting dead clients on the chauffeur's test. Doubt if the topic was mentioned in your captain's test, neither. Transportin' folks is what folks like you and me are paid to do." Reggie's back was to me, a blessed screen from the explorations of his searching, uncertain hands.

"I'm not just a fishing guide," I argued. "My Uncle Jake's investigation agency is still doing business, and I'm licensed by the state. I took an oath, for heaven's sake."

Reggie, bending closer, replied, "Where the hell the doctors hide that thing? I'm running out of places."

I left the room, confirmed that Loretta was still on the porch, a rocking catatonic, then returned with my mind made up. "We're not moving him and that's that," I said. "I'd risk my license."

The little man's reply was a muffled question, which might have been a request for a flashlight.

"A what?"

"You can look now. I pulled a blanket over the both of us, but the lighting ain't good. Try the wall switch."

"No! I'm warning you, you can't do this. It's crazy. We have to contact the authorities."

"Don't pick at me so, Miz Hannah. Please. We can't let the

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governor be found in this condition. The coroner's gonna take one look and know what killed him. You ever met the governor's new wife? There'd be hell to pay, there purely would."

This was said with sinister implications, and a hint of fear.

"You don't really think a doctor would blame Loretta for—"

"How else you gonna explain it?" Reggie asked, then exclaimed, "Hey—found it, I think. Hear that hissing? But don't ask me where the air's goin'."

I peeked to see the little man exit what appeared to be a make-shift tent. He stood, bowed his head for a moment, then pulled the blanket over his former employer's face. "Gonna miss you, you ol' fool, I surely am," he murmured, then focused his red, watery eyes on me. "Miz Hannah, you telling me you ain't willing to keep a secret for an old friend like the governor? And with your mama's reputation at stake?"

"I'm bonded by the state of Florida," was all I could think to say. I was shaken by the chauffeur's sadness, and the prospect of Loretta somehow being dragged into this mess.

"What about if'n the governor was your client? In ol' Jake's agency. Was there something in that oath you took about protecting a client's privacy rights? I expect there was. *Confidentiality*—that's the word the governor always liked to use when reminding me to keep my mouth shut."

The wiry little man accurately interpreted my reluctance to speak. "Then it's true."

"Even if Mr. Chatham had hired me as a private investigator, I'd have to check with an attorney. Do you realize how crazy it is, what you're suggesting?"

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“You could pretend he’d hired you. Only us two would know.”

“Me knowing is one too many,” I countered.

“You are a stubborn woman, Miz Hannah. We got to hurry and get this thing done. Please . . . take this”—he produced car keys and some crumpled dollar bills from his pocket—“This’ll make it all legal. The governor’s good for whatever else we owe.”

“I can’t take your money.”

“You already did,” Reggie said, and gently squeezed the bills and the keys into my hands. “You’re working for me now, and here’s what your new client wants you to do. While I get him dressed, you pull the Lincoln up close to the rear of the house and open every door on that car. And not a word to nobody.”

The little man’s rheumy red eyes sharpened. “Doesn’t that sound better than the governor and your mama making headlines on the television news?”

TWO

WE HAD CROSSED THE SEMATEE COUNTY LINE INTO CIT- rus-and-cattle country when, from a dirt road, a sheriff's vehicle, green on white, appeared in the rearview mirror, and came up fast, until it was a car length behind.

"Shit," I said, which is a profanity I often think, but seldom say aloud.

"I'll be go to hell," Reggie agreed. "God sure is testing us on this dark day. You're going too slow, Miz Hannah, I done told you. Cops ain't never seen the governor's car when it weren't speeding. Ain't that true, Governor?"

The little man had been doing that for thirty miles, speaking to his dead employer, often in a confidential way not meant for my ears.

"I'm going almost sixty as it is."

"That's what I'm saying! Honey, mash that pedal like you got

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nothing to fear or the deputy's gonna know something ain't right."

"This is nuts," I replied, but sped up a bit anyway.

I was driving because I had insisted on driving. The alternative was to sit in the back with the late Harney Chatham, who was belted into a reclining seat that didn't recline far enough. Our hope was, if his John Wayne Stetson stayed put, it would appear as if the big man were dozing, except his lifeless neck shifted with every turn in the road. So Reggie had to use a hand and his shoulder to maintain the desired effect. Thank god, the windows were tinted.

"Faster," he said, "and slouch yourself down a bit. You gotta drive faster, Miz Hannah, and sit way shorter, more relaxed, sort of let your top hand drape—know what I'm saying?—if that cop is to believe you're me. You're one tall drink of water, if you don't mind a compliment. It ain't too late to put on my driver's cap."

That wasn't going to happen.

Never had I ridden in a vehicle so large, so powerful and ghostly quiet. When the digital speedometer hit 70, I touched cruise control and checked the mirror. The squad car was still there, close enough I could see the deputy's silver sunglasses and bulldog jaw.

I heard Reggie spin around in the backseat. "That's good. He ain't talking on his microphone. They always do that before they use the siren. Oh yeah . . . we got nothing to worry about."

Nothing to worry about! I almost laughed. "Do you recognize the deputy? You'd better, because I went off and left my purse and my license is in that purse. If he stops us, don't say a word. I'll

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do all the talking—unless you know him. Do you know him?” Jabbering like a fool is something else I seldom do.

“Miz Hannah, a driver’s license ain’t the first thing he’s gonna ask about if he sees a dead body back here. So we ain’t gonna stop even if he tries. Those toggles next to the radio? We got emergency lights installed front and back on this here Lincoln. We’ll drive straight to the hospital and tell them the governor’s sick, maybe had a heart attack. Only part we’ll have to change is, we’ll say you was sittin’ back here when it happened.”

Speaking to his former employer, he added, “It’ll sound better if you died in the arms of a beautiful young woman instead of back here alone, with a man who’s your own chauffeur. That’d look bad. Don’t you think that’d look bad?”

“I think I’m about to fire you both as clients,” I snapped, “but the hospital’s not a bad idea.” I thought for a moment. “Are you sure the deputies around here all know this car?”

“There ain’t but one black stretch Town Car in all Sematee County,” he replied, then spoke to Mr. Chatham. “I thought you said she was Florida-born, Governor? That there’s a silly question, her not knowing your car.”

I straightened the rearview mirror to make eye contact with the deputy and offered a casual wave. I didn’t expect much, but that small gesture was enough. The man lifted his hand in response, then suddenly dropped back, did a U-turn, and sped off in the opposite direction.

“Didn’t we tell her?” Reggie smiled. “She’s got nothing to worry about, riding with us big dogs.” This was punctuated with a child-like cackle. Tee-hee-hee.

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It would have been wrong to say what I was thinking to a man his age, so I drove in silence, knuckles white on the wheel. Good manners began to fail me, however, when I slowed to turn into the double-winged security gate at the Chatham estate. It was a wall of ornate wrought iron attached to miles of fenced pasture where horses grazed. In the far distance, a barn was visible beneath domes of cypress and oaks.

“Uh-oh,” Reggie said.

“Now what?”

“I forgot. Today’s Miz Chatham’s day off from the ranch. Don’t slow down—keep going.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Don’t even look. Go on, now, drive right on past.”

“You *wanted* his wife to be here?”

“I was counting on it. Mash that pedal.”

“Reggie,” I said, “I’m beginning to hope you’re in shock instead of just slap-flat dumb and crazy. I’ve about had it with you.”

“Honey, listen. That woman never leaves the third floor, or her office in the barn, normally. But Fridays is when the governor’s daughters and grandkids come to ride and play around the ranch. See there”—he pointed, and I saw a line of trail horses, children aboard—“and there’s a bunch more somewhere, I guarantee, clomping around in the house, makin’ a mess, getting peanut butter all over her upholstery. Lonnie Chatham purely hates them kids, but they love me and the governor like Santa Claus. See now why we can’t stop?”

I hit the accelerator to jettison anger and held my tongue. A billboard that read *Chatham Lincoln-Mercury-Ford* flashed by be-

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fore I slowed the limo to 60 and touched cruise control. “I’m going to park within a few blocks of the hospital and take a cab home, Reggie. After that, you’re on your own.”

“Please don’t, Miz Hannah. I got an even better idea now.”

“I bet.”

“At least hear me out. I should’a thought of this first.”

“My mind’s made up,” I said without looking around, or realizing I had made this claim before.

“You didn’t work for this man for goin’ on forty years. A man like the governor deserves to die in a respectable way.”

“That’s something you should take up with God, not me,” I countered.

“Would love to do that, lord knows I would. What I’m saying is, the governor should die with the things he loves best around him—not that he didn’t love your mama. He purely did. That’s why we can’t let him be hauled off on a gurney from a hospital parking lot. Most of the people who work there are too young to remember who he is or all he did for the folks in this county. Remember who ponied up the money for that museum near your mama’s home?”

This was true. Mr. Chatham had been generous when it came to helping fishermen in the area, and many illegal aliens as well, although some might argue that giving away cash earned by smuggling drugs could also be regarded as hush money.

I gripped the wheel tighter to keep myself from weakening. “Please leave Loretta out of this,” I said. “Go ahead. Tell your idea.”

“Oh, you’re gonna like it, ’cause this is a good one. Not ten

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minutes from here is the governor's quail camp—Salt Creek Gun Club, way back in one of his citrus groves, a quarter mile on the Peace River. You've never seen a more beautiful spot.”

“I can't believe this,” I muttered.

“Oh, you will when we get there. There's a nice log cabin with shelves full of books, and a kennel for the shorthair pointers he used to run. They all dead now, too”—the little man's voice cracked—“ain't they, old friend? And all buried right there. Duke, and Buddy Rough, and ol' Elvis. I sure do miss that Elvis. He was some kind'a dog, weren't he, Harney?”

Harney was Mr. Chatham's given name. I'd never heard Reggie speak to his boss in such an informal, affectionate way. Listening the dogs got to me, too. I was near tears.

“Yep, the gun club, that's the place for you. It's gonna get chilly tonight, so I'll put you in the recliner and build a fire to keep you and them old dogs warm. Then later, when it's safe, I'll come back and find you already dead. Ain't that smart? Make it all official-like.”

That broke the spell—almost. I'm no fool, but the little man wasn't acting. The depth of his remorse bespoke the transience of life, and of love and loyalty. I could hardly trust myself to speak. “Reggie, I'm not going to be seen doing what you're asking me to do. What about a caretaker? There has to be someone looking after the place. Someone who might, you know . . . come snooping around and offer to help with the heavy lifting?”

“Nope, just me. I got me a little cottage not far from there. Oh . . . and the new gentleman who manages the groves, Kermit

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Bigalow. He's there sometimes during the week but never on weekends, and never this late. Miz Hannah, long as I live, I'll never ask for another favor."

It was a little after five. It would be dark in an hour.

I said, "Are you absolutely sure there's no chance anyone will see us?"

"There's only one road in, and the same road out. They'd have to come on horseback, once we lock the gate behind us."

"There're riding trails? You don't mean public riding trails. If that's the case—"

"They're private, hardly ever used. They's from back in the quail-hunting days. You got nothing to worry your head about. I promise."

This time, I did laugh, a sarcastic chuckle. How many times had the chauffeur said that? All my instincts told me to drive to the nearest hospital and deal with the situation honestly. Yet I heard myself respond, "How far did you say the camp is?"

"Take the next right, that's Bronco Road. Honey"—Reggie's boyish cackle again—"we're almost there already."

Tee-hee-hee.

Parked outside a smaller wrought-iron gate, crested with the Triple C brand—Chatham Cattle & Citrus—the chauffeur hopped out, saying, "See how the chain's locked? No one here but us," then leaned into the backseat. "Relax yourself, Governor. I won't be long."

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I drove through, waited until the gate was locked and Reggie was in the backseat again. “You said the cabin was set way back. How far?”

I was concerned because the road we’d been on, State Route 74, hadn’t been overly busy, but there was a steady flow of semis, many of them open-bedded trucks piled high with oranges.

“No, ma’am, we still got a ways to go.”

I hit the gas.

An asphalt lane arrowed through wide-open pasture that reminded me of photos of Africa. Humpbacked cattle with horns grazed in isolated islands of shade created by oaks with canopies the size of rain clouds. White ibis, on stilt legs, perched atop the dozing animals and ambushed flies, while one massive Brangus bull stood guard next to a windmill that pumped water.

“That’s Jessie James,” Reggie said. “He’s famous in these parts. Weighs most of a ton, and he’s serviced every kind’a cow there is. Rumor is, he has a taste for Thoroughbred horses, too. Even a truck or two, if they don’t move quick enough. No sir, you don’t want to turn your back on Mr. Jessie James.”

“Is that the sort of crude story you share with all your women visitors?” I asked. I didn’t mean it to come out as sharp as it did.

“Sorry, dear. Truth is, ma’am, I feel like laughing and crying all at the same time. Guess my emotions got the best of my manners.”

Through another gate, which was open, a mile of orange trees crowded in close. There was row after row, their odor fragrant, with the window down, yet they were a sad sight to behold. The disease, citrus greening, had curled and severed the leaves like a

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killer storm. The fruit, which should have been ripe on the branches, lay withered and bitter on the ground.

“Are all Mr. Chatham’s groves like this? He should be harvesting now.”

“That ain’t a happy topic,” Reggie responded.

“He lost the entire crop?”

“You’d have to ask Mr. Bigalow that question.”

“Our trees have it, too. Most of them anyway.” As I said it, I reminded myself of Marion Ford’s advice to check the entire orchard.

On both sides of the road, the citrus grove ended as abruptly as a cliff. There was a third gate, also locked, a log mantle above with a large lacquered sign:

Salt Creek Gun Club

Members Only

“We didn’t really sell memberships,” Reggie said, after opening the gate. “It was built more for socializing when the governor was running for election. ‘Shakin’ hands is good,’ he’d say, ‘but three fingers of scotch is better.’ You’d be surprised, Miz Hannah, at some of the famous names been here. Two U.S. presidents, I can think of, and Walt Disney himself. Remember what you said about Mr. Disney?” (Reggie was speaking to his boss, I realized.) “You said, ‘That there man is up to something.’ He ain’t laid a card on the table, but you knew, yes you did. This was back when the Disney folks was buying up land under different names all around Orlando but keepin’ it secret. Only man in this state wasn’t surprised is sitting right here next to me.”

Not since the sheriff’s car had I risked a look in the mirror but

did now: two old friends huddled shoulder to shoulder, one tiny and frail, the other big, with a lolling, chalk-white face, the Stetson no longer a necessary part of the charade

A strange feeling came over me. I hadn't known Mr. Chatham well, and didn't approve of his affair with my mother, which I'd told him to his face. Yet the man had been kind to me. He'd treated me with respect—as an equal, in fact, which was rare for men of his age, or men of wealth and power no matter their age.

Even rarer, he had entrusted me with the truth regarding the affair with my mother, and also about his early drug-smuggling years. The man had owned three shrimp boats and kept them busy running between what he called Pay Day Road, which was south of Sarasota, to the Yucatán, and sometimes Panama. Rather than spend the bundles of cash, Chatham had had the foresight to live poor during that period and take his time converting the cash into silver and gold, which he'd hidden away. A small part of the profit was filtered into buying a car dealership, the first of several in Sematee County. The cattle ranch and citrus groves came later, as did his two-term lieutenant governorship.

His affair with Loretta had continued throughout those decades and survived Chatham's two wives, three children, many grandchildren. It had also weathered at least one murder, several funerals, a brain aneurysm and two surgeries, after which the man, without me knowing, had privately, and sometimes anonymously, tended to my mother's every need.

Once again, I had to wonder, *Why had they never married?*

I wasn't Mr. Chatham's daughter, as I knew for certain, but my biological father had abandoned us early on. As a child, this

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was a painful mystery until I had aged enough to understand that Loretta, even before her stroke, was wildly unpredictable and near impossible to live with. Yet, the famous man in the limousine's mirror had, in his way, been devoted to her all these years.

Why?

I had never understood, nor had I summoned the ill manners to ask the man. Now the opportunity was gone.

Asphalt melted into a winding shell drive edged by oaks and shady moss. A wooden bridge clattered beneath our tires; cattails battled palmettos on both sides of the road, flattening into pine forest acreage. Beyond the rise of an archaic sand dune, a section of river and a two-story cabin appeared, each log layered by white caulking, beneath a pitched tin roof that flared to shade a porch with a view of the river. Through the trees were outbuildings, a barn and a corrugated-steel maintenance shed, with farm machinery, much of it rusty, sitting out beneath a warm winter sky. In a triple carport floored with sand was a beat-up truck that, according to Reggie, Mr. Chatham sometimes used to shuttle back and forth to his home.

It would be a way of explaining how the great man had arrived here alone.

“Don't you think?” the aging chauffeur asked softly.

I wasn't sure he was speaking to me, but replied, “About what?”

“Such a pretty ol' Florida sort of place,” he said, “the way Florida used to be. Roasted many a hog in that fire pit yonder, and quail was thick along the river; they'd flush into the palmettos.

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

Our pointers had them a time dealing with snakes. See that stretch of wire grass and river oats? That was a good place, too.”

This made little sense. “Should I park near the back porch or the front?”

He answered. “Either one, but pull up close. I’ll fetch a handcart. I ain’t as stout as I used to be.”

Then he got back to his original question, which was, “Miz Hannah . . . don’t you think this is where you’d want to die?”