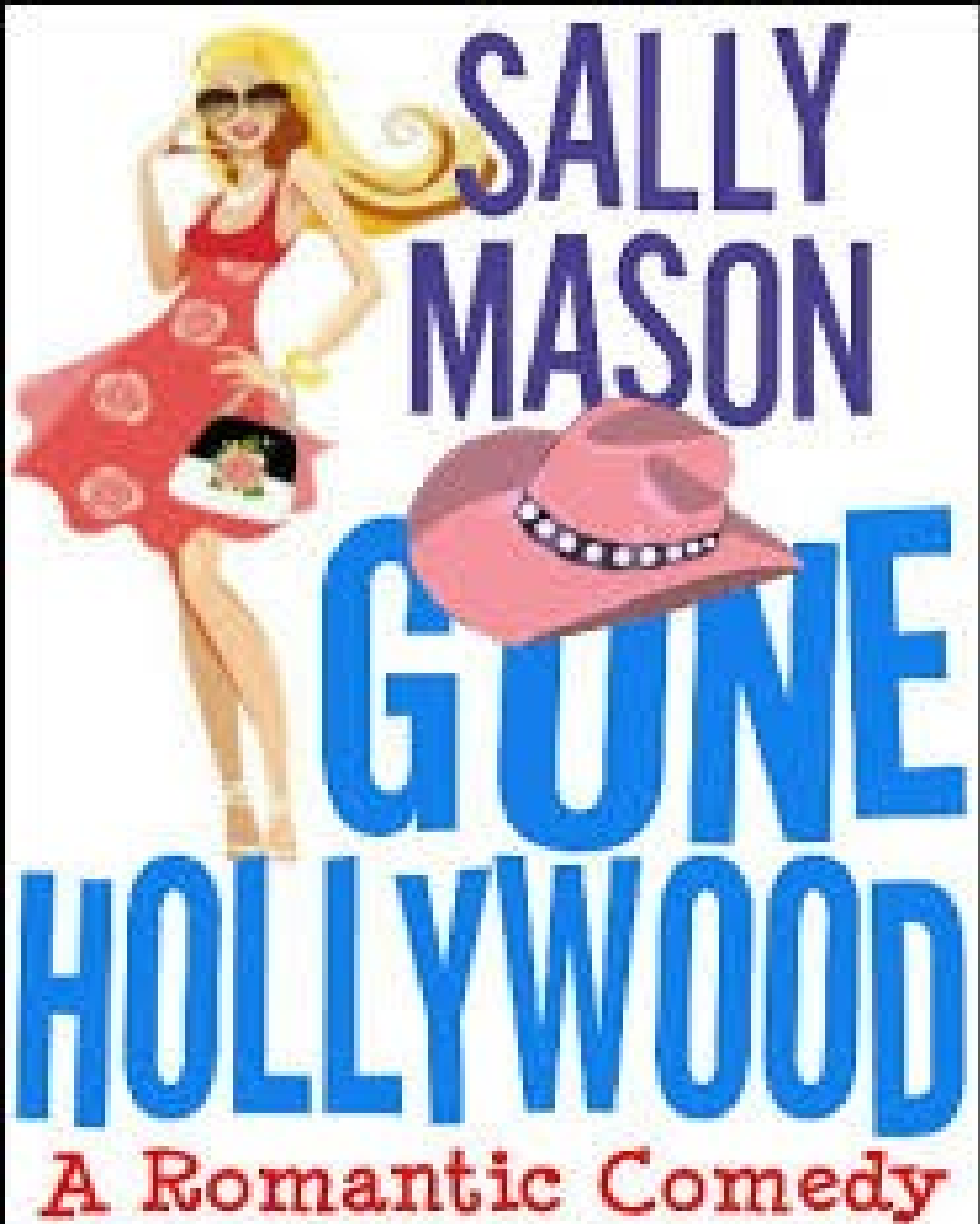




SALLY
MASON

GONE

HOLLYWOOD

A Romantic Comedy

Also by Sally Mason

[Rent A Husband: A Romantic Comedy](#)

[:](#)

Gone Hollywood

A Romantic Comedy

by

Sally Mason

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“In Hollywood brides keep the bouquet and throw away the groom.”
Groucho Marx

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Bobby Champagne and Cord McCann meet beneath the Hollywood sign when Bobby, blood boiling at her ex-husband's latest outrage and foot flat to the floor of her Ford truck, totals Cord's puny Japanese rental.

Now, Cord McCann may be a big time movie star, but the sign in question is not on that famous Los Angeles hillside, it's on a dirt road leading to Hollywood, Texas (Population: 467 and falling) where Bobby "Don't *never* call me Roberta!" Champagne is a failing cotton farmer.

To fully appreciate the irony, let's rewind a couple of hours and see Cord waking in the pre-dawn dark, unsure for a moment where he is.

The giant face of a neon cowboy, leering at Cord through a gap in the drapes, gives the answer: he's in a motel room a hundred miles west of Amarillo, Texas, on location for his latest movie.

Cord's playing Tommy "T-Bone" Buford, an alcoholic singer-songwriter who scratches out a living by doing one-night gigs in small-town bars until his ex-wife, a country star on the wane, tracks him down to convince him to write new songs for her in an effort to boost her flagging career.

The country star, of course, is played by Cord's own wife, the agelessly luminous Kat Mansfield.

Cord switches on a lamp, revealing the full glory of the Western-themed room with its peeling wood-panel wallpaper and garish throw rugs.

A room just like the one farther down the corridor, still cluttered with lights and camera gear, where T-Bone first rebuffs his ex-wife.

Kat had been outraged that they had to spend the night here after technical problems had caused the days' shooting to go way over time, but even she'd been able to understand the folly of traveling back to their suite at the Savoy Hotel in Amarillo when they had to start work right here at the motel just after dawn.

Cord, exhausted after a day that had required of him to repeatedly sing a particularly maudlin country ballad, get into a bar fight and jump from a first-floor balcony in order to escape T-Bone's loathsome ex (why the hell was he still fool—and vain—enough to do most of his own stunts?) fell

asleep early, vaguely remembering Kat saying that she was going to join the crew for “just one little drinkie.”

“Kat?” Cord says.

No reply.

He goes into the bathroom, blinking at himself in the mirror when he switches on the buzzing florescent.

He looks like a broken-down juice head.

His dark hair is long and greasy, with white streaks artfully added by the make-up department.

A thick black beard, shot with gray (thanks again to make-up) covers his leading-man features.

Cord is forty-one, but the hair and beard make him look a decade older.

As the movie progresses, when the hero is seduced by money and the promise of fame and heads off to Nashville with his ex-wife, the beard will go, the hair will be trimmed and the movie will end with a handsome and rejuvenated T-Bone turning his back on his ex and finding love in the arms of her twenty-something back-up singer.

Cord isn’t looking forward to being shorn and shaved.

He’s grown attached to the beard and the hair and anonymity they lend him.

Wandering back into the bedroom he calls out again: “Kat?”

Has she gone off early to wardrobe and make-up?

As Cord parts the curtains and steps out onto the balcony that overlooks the motor court, the door to a room on the ground level opens and light spills out, and for a moment a couple is silhouetted in the doorway.

A couple locked in a passionate embrace.

When Kat Mansfield—she of the tumbling raven tresses—drags herself from the arms of a half-naked stunt man barely in his twenties and hurries across the parking lot, Cord slips back into the room, kills the lamp and slides into the bed, a sick feeling in his gut.

By the time the door opens and his wife creeps in, he’s pretending to be sleep.

In a moment he hears the sound of the shower.

Cord lies in the gloom, fighting hurt and rage.

It’s happening again.

Kat’s doing what she promised she would never again do.

Cord, despite the carefully placed tabloid stories, is boringly monogamous.

A one-woman man.

Unfailingly faithful to his wife of twenty years.

A wife whose taste for stunt men, grips and camera assistants is legendary in the movie industry.

Whose appetite for men half her age seemed to double when she turned forty a year ago.

They split up around that birthday—Cord, finally refusing to be the eternal cuckold, moving out of the mansion on Mulholland Drive, taking a suite at the Château Marmont.

After a month apart Kat asked him to meet her poolside one afternoon and he agreed.

Truth was, he missed her like poison.

When Cord got down to the pool Kat was waiting for him, dressed in jeans and boots. She'd chosen a table carefully: positioned perfectly for the paparazzi to get flattering shots, in the shade but with enough backlight to halo her hair.

She was sitting with her best profile—her left—toward the lurking photographers.

When Kat stood and hugged him, real tears flowed from beneath the huge Bulgari sunglasses she wore.

She sat and dabbed at her eyes, not disturbing her flawless make-up.

"Kat," he said.

"Cord, darling."

After he ordered a Perrier, she said, "I'm so glad you agreed to meet."

He shrugged.

"It's against my better judgment."

"Well, I have news."

"Yeah?"

"Yes, I'm seeing someone."

Cord felt his gut clench.

Kat had one night stands by the score.

But she never *saw* anyone.

This was serious.

She grabbed his hand.

“Oh, god, darling, not *seeing* someone like that. I mean a doctor.” A Hollywood pause. “A shrink.”

He stared at her.

“You? Impossible.”

“No, I swear. His name is Dr. Karpov and he has rooms in Beverly Hills and I see him three times a week. He has given me some very illuminating insights into my behavior.”

“Like?”

“Like, I’m becoming a loathsome old cougar and what I’m doing is both sordid and sad.”

“Guy sounds smart.”

“He is.”

She gazed out cross the pool then met his eyes again.

“I’m sorry, Cord. I’ve never stopped loving you. These dalliances—”

“Let’s call it as it is. You’re a sex addict.”

He saw a flash of rage touch her face, then she shrugged and smiled.

“Fine let’s call a spade a spade. This sex addiction preceded you.”

She stopped when she saw his expression.

“So I wasn’t your first?” he asked.

“No, darling, not by a long shot.”

“Why did you lie?”

“Because you wanted me to, simple as that.”

He nodded.

“Maybe I did. But I don’t need your lies now. Can you kick this thing?”

“Yes. Day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year. I can do it.”

The glasses were removed and he was lost in her huge green eyes, feeling his resolve melting into the pool.

“Come home, Cord, please.”

They stood and embraced, and the cameras loved them as they walked hand in hand to the elevator and went up to his suite and made long, slow, sweet love.

The next day Cord moved back home, slowly relaxing his vigilance as the months passed with no evidence of infidelity.

When the script for this movie was sent to them, Kat urged him to do it with her.

It was always Kat who looked at the scripts and said *yes* or *no*, even scripts that were solo vehicles for Cord.

That was her hold on him.

She'd never given the nod to a bad script, even when the money on offer seemed too vast to resist, her instinct infallible.

It was ambitious Kat who had got them from Nowhere, Kansas to Hollywood.

Kat who had changed his name from Fred Wilks to Cord McCann.

Changed hers from Betty Brown to Kathleen Mansfield.

Got them an agent and got them noticed.

Only later did Cord discover the methods she'd used, but by then Kat had made them one of the richest power couples in Hollywood.

And never stopped reminding Cord that he owed her everything.

But, lying in bed in this god-forsaken motel room, listening to the hiss of the shower as his wife washes away another man's sweat, Cord understands that he has repaid that debt a thousand times over.

He owes his wife nothing.

Wants no more of her.

Wants no more of this movie.

He stands up from the bed and pulls on jeans and a T-shirt, grabs his boots and tip-toes to the door.

He lets himself out and sits on the stairs in the strobing glare of the neon, pulling on his boots.

Then he walks down to the parking lot where a gofer, a kid of maybe twenty, steps out of one of the production vehicles, a tiny Japanese compact.

"Morning," Cord says.

The kid comes to attention.

"Morning, Mr. McCann."

"I need a favor."

"Name it, sir."

"I need to use this car."

The kid stares at him, then he holds out the keys.

"Absolutely, Mr. McCann."

Cord folds his six-foot-plus into the tiny car, fights back the seat to accommodate his long legs and drives away from the motel, passing beneath the smirking cowboy.

Cord turns onto the highway and speeds toward the sun peering over the distant hills, with not the vaguest notion of where he's going.

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When her cellphone rings Bobby Champagne is on a tractor, working her cotton fields under yet another hot blue sky—rain clouds just float on by, day after day, month after month.

The drought is killing her crop and her ex-father-in-law is in bed with the biotech scum from Dallas with their genetically-modified cotton and has bought up all her neighbor's lands, waiting for the day when she, too, must give up her battle.

She feels the vibration of the phone in her jeans pocket, the roar of the tractor drowning the ringtone: "Girl On Fire" by Alicia Keys.

Kinda appropriate here on the parched high plains of Texas.

Bobby kills the tractor and frees her phone.

"Yeah, this is Bobby."

"Bobby, Darnelle here from the school."

"Is Jolene okay?"

"Yes, fine. It's just that Buster came on by and took her out of class. Said they're goin' horseback riding."

Bobby has to fight back her fury as she thanks the teacher and hangs up.

Her ex-husband, Buster Pyle—she dumped his dumb name as soon as the divorce was final two years ago—wages a constant battle for the affections of their seven-year-old daughter.

He's waging a custody battle too, and his father Earl has a ton of money to pay big-city lawyers.

Bobby runs across to her pick-up truck, an elderly Ford inherited (along with the land) from her dear dead daddy.

She throws the truck into gear, the old pickup fishtailing as she barrels away from her rundown house and onto the dirt road into town, knowing she'll find Buster and her daughter on her ex-father-in-law's farm, Jolene in love with a little pony called Sparkles.

God, that Buster is one manipulative bastard.

Bobby finds herself close to tears.

As if the drought and the looming loss of the land that has been in her family for generations isn't enough, she is staring at the loss of her

daughter.

Hell no, she says.

Not never!

Bobby frees one hand from the wheel of the truck and fingers the tiny bale of cotton at the end of a silver chain hanging from her neck, bouncing as she speeds along.

Her good luck charm.

A gift from her daddy just before he died and left her the farm, her only sibling, Carlton, lost to friendly fire in Iraq ten years ago.

As Bobby drifts the truck through a bend she sees a small car parked beneath the HOLLYWOOD sign with its ass halfway out in the road.

Knowing that if she hits the brakes she'll spin and roll on the dirt, Bobby throws the Ford to the right, trying to speed by on the berm.

But she's not fast enough and the bullbar of her pick-up snags the rear of the little car and tosses it into the air like a puppy bone, while Bobby fights to control the truck as it bucks across what used to be old man Herman's field, and is now just red sand and dead cotton plants.

The truck comes to a halt in a ditch and Bobby, unrestrained by a seat belt, bangs her head against the windshield and sits dazed for a moment.

Then she looks back through the dust and a trickle of blood and sees the little car on its roof, spinning like a stop.

Bobby kicks the door of the Ford open and steps down just as a man with long hair and a beard appears out of the dust saying, "Hey, I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

She punches him in the nose.

What the hell else is she meant to do?

Sitting on his butt in the dirt, gently touching a finger to his nose—*is it broken?*—Cord McCann keeps a wary eye on the woman standing over him.

She's tall and fills out her faded jeans very nicely, with a mane of blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail and a freckled face that would be pretty if she weren't glowering at him.

When she lifts a boot he flinches, sure she's going to aim it at his head, but she just steps in closer and holds out her hand.

"C'mon," she says, "git up."

Cord, still humiliated that a woman knocked him down, ignores the hand and hauls himself to his feet.

"You some kinda moron?" she asks, "leavin' that little old car blocking the damn road?"

"I did apologize."

"Never apologize, mister, it's a sign of weakness."

He squints at her. "Didn't John Wayne say that?"

"If he did," she says, "he stole it from my granddaddy."

She turns from him and swings herself up into the dented old truck.

After a few cranks the engine takes and she slams the door closed.

"Hey," Cord says, "you can't just leave me here."

"Watch me," she says and guns the motor, the Ford bucking and rearing as it roars from the ditch in a cloud of dust.

Cord looks across at the Japanese rental lying forlornly on its roof, not about to take him a mile farther on his journey into nowhere.

He'd found a digital camera lying on the passenger seat of the car and curses himself for wanting to snap a self-portrait in front of the rusted HOLLYWOOD sign in the middle of this dustbowl.

That little bit of would-be irony has landed him one hell of a mess.

The sound of a horn gets his attention and he sees that the old Ford has stopped near the road, the woman impatiently waving him over.

He jogs across to the pick-up and clambers up into the shotgun seat.

She says, “You get a ride into town. That’s it. Try anything and I’ll throw your sorry ass out of my truck.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says in his best T-Bone Buford accent.

“You sassin’ me?”

“No,” he says in his own voice.

They drive a while and he notices her shooting glances across at him, and he waits for the inevitable question, the one directed at him when he’s ambushed by fans on sidewalks, in shopping malls, in restaurants: “You’re him aren’t you? Cord McCann?”

Usually followed by a squeal of “Oh! My! God!” and the clicking of camera phones.

But the woman says, “Where you from, anyways?”

“Kansas.”

“How’d you end up in Hollywood?”

When he can’t smother a laugh at the rich absurdity of this day, she thinks he’s laughing at the name of the town.

“You know it’s been here way longer than that other one? The one in California?”

“Yeah?”

“Uh huh. So don’t you go mockin’ it now.”

“I’m not.”

“And you’re not the first sorry fool who stopped to snap a picture of the sign. And, lord knows, you won’t be the last.”

Her accent is so determinedly Texan that Cord struggles to catch some of her words.

There’s a dialog coach on the picture—some guy from Dallas—but this girl is the real deal.

“What you starin’ at?” she asks.

“Nothing. You’re just very . . . Texan.”

“Well, what the hell else would I be? I was birthed right here as was my daddy before me and his daddy before him, and I’m happier’n a gopher in soft dirt.”

“Well, pleased to hear it.”

“What do you do, anyway?” she asks.

Cord says the first thing that comes into his head.

“I’m in sales.”

“And what you fixin’ on sellin’ out here?”

“Nothing. I was at a conference in Amarillo and I took a drive.”

“Like what you see?”

“It’s dry.”

“Sure is, but you don’t hear us gripin’ and fussin’.”

They drive on, and he gets a better look at her.

She’s pretty in a defiantly natural way that is refreshing after the esthetically enhanced faces of Hollywood.

Even his wife Kat, born with enviable bones, has succumbed to the blade and Botox injections in the last year.

“There’s blood on your forehead,” Cord says.

“It’s nothin’.”

“Maybe you should go to the emergency room.”

“Mister, Hollywood don’t have no emergency room. What you get is fat Nurse Ella shovin’ a thermometer up your butt.”

She laughs and so does he.

The woman turns to him and says, “Bobby Champagne.”

He stares at her and it is only when she shoves out a hand that he realizes that this is her name, not a request for a drink.

“Tommy Buford,” he says after a beat, shaking the hand that is rough and callused.

The hand of a worker.

As if she’s reading his mind she says, “You’ve got the paw of a man never done an honest day’s work in his life.”

“Well, as I said, I’m in sales.”

She grunts.

“You have an unusual name,” he says.

“What part of it?”

“Well, I’m guessing Bobby is short for Roberta?”

“Last feller called me that developed a taste for hospital food.”

“But I can’t say I’ve ever heard Champagne used as a surname.”

“Word is there was some Frenchie in the mix way back.”

They drive a little and she says, “Sorry I went and slugged you.”

“That’s okay. I was reckless and you were in shock.”

“Nope, I was just aggravated. You took the smack meant for somebody else.”

Cord knows enough not to ask questions.

Bobby says, “I gotta stop off before we get to town, to pick up my daughter.”

“That would be Baby Cham?” he says before he can bite his tongue.

“You’re quicker’n a hiccup, ain’t you?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Mister, my names Champagne and I live in Hollywood, Texas. I reckon I heard all the dumb jokes a hundred times over.”

“I’m sure you have.”

Bobby swings off the road, driving up toward a big white farmhouse.

She stops the Ford beside a paddock where a small blonde girl sits astride a pony.

A guy in his thirties leads the pony and a busty redhead sits in the shade flicking through a magazine, her face a study in boredom.

“Just stay in the truck, okay?” Bobby says as she steps down.

Your ex-husband is dumber than a box of rocks, Bobby tells herself as she ducks through the white fence and walks to where Buster leads Jolene on the pony.

Take pity on him.

Despite these calming thoughts her hands clench into fists.

She feels a twinge of guilt at smacking that salesman, idiot that he is.

Fact is, running into him like that was a blessing.

She would've roared over here in a fury and taken a swing at Buster.

And his fancy lawyer would've got a court hearing quicker than custard and she would have lost Jolene.

So Bobby tries a smile, "Jolie, you havin' fun, honey?"

"Yes, Mama."

"Okay, that's nice baby, but I need you to get down from Sparkles and go wait for me by the truck, okay?"

"Oh, let her ride, Bobby, c'mon," Buster says with his oily grin.

How could she have ever liked this man enough to kiss him?

And more.

"You listen to me now, Jolie. Mama'll take you into town to get a DVD, okay?"

"Okay, Mama. Can I get a Fast Freddo?"

"Anythin' that takes your fancy, honey."

The girl slides down from the pony and trots off across to the truck.

Bobby gets in close to her ex-husband.

"How dare you go take her outta school to come and hang out here with you and your little hot-pants slut?"

The redhead looks up from her magazine, "I heard that, bitch."

"Girl, you *bitch* me one more time and you'll be wearin' your ovaries like a bolo tie," Bobby says, taking a step toward the little hussy, who jumps to her feet and retreats.

Buster grabs Bobby by the arm, "You watch your mouth."

"Take you hand off me, Buster."

He only squeezes tighter and a dangerous red fog starts to drift across Bobby's vision, then Buster's grip loosens as he turns toward the truck.

"Who the hell is he?" he asks.

Bobby turns and sees the salesman standing by the fence, his arms crossed, watching them.

"None of your damned business," she says. "And you stay away from Jolene, hear me?"

"You're gonna lose her, Bobby. Like you're gonna to lose that ragged-ass farm of yours. Jolene will come and live here with me and my kin, and she'll be the better for it."

"You tend to your own knittin', Buster, and keep outta my way."

She turns on her heel and strides back toward the truck, ducking through the fence.

"I thought I told you to stay in the truck?" she says to the salesman.

"Who's this, Mama?" Jolene asks, looking up at the stranger.

"Just a man who needs a ride, honey. We're gonna drop him off in town."

Bobby opens the truck door and smiles down at her daughter.

"Come on, baby, git on up."

Jolene scoots across the seat and Bobby gets behind the wheel.

The salesman sits beside Jolene and looks across at Bobby.

"You okay?"

"I'm just fine," she says, starting the car.

She can't help but notice that he has the bluest eyes she's ever seen on a man.

The scene he's just witnessed reminds Cord McCann of a picture he and Kat did years ago called *Three For All*, a kind of heartland *Kramer vs. Kramer*, where they played a divorcing Indiana farming couple fighting for custody of their only child.

The most memorable thing about the movie was that the child star playing their eight-year-old daughter grew up to become a coke-snorting sex fiend of such epic proportions that even jaded Hollywood paid attention, but Cord remembers feeling relief during the filming that he and Kat had decided to remain childless (their careers came first) and they'd never have to go through that kind of heartache.

Or put a child through it.

As the truck drives toward town the kid turns to him and says, "What's your name?"

"Tommy," he says, hating to lie to the girl.

"I'm Jolene."

"Hi, Jolene. That's a pretty name."

"My mama took the name from a song. By Dolly Parton."

"Hush, now, honey," Bobby says.

Cord says, "I know that song. It's real nice."

The kid is staring at him.

"What?" Cord says.

"You sure talk like Fast Freddo, mister."

Before Cord has to lie again, Bobby interjects.

"She's obsessed with these cartoon movies about some skunk—"

"Raccoon!" the girl says. "Fast Freddo is a raccoon!"

"Well, he looks like a skunk to me."

Cord, seeing the distress on the kid's face says, "Uh, I'm pretty sure he's a raccoon."

Bobby looks across at him. "You got kids?"

"No. But I've seen Freddo on TV."

"Well, Jolie is crazy about him, so don't you pay her no mind."

Cord stares out at the dry landscape passing by.

Hell, what a day.

The mother, thank god, hasn't figured out who he is, but the kid has his number.

Thing of it is, he *is* Fast Freddo.

Or his voice at least.

When he was approached to do the voice for the first Fast Freddo movie (*Fast Freddo & Friends*) he'd wanted to turn it down, but Kat had convinced him to do it.

"Look at who is doing voices for these things: Tom Hanks, Matt Damon, Johnny Depp. We're talking A-list here. It's a smart career move."

And it had been.

He'd done two more movies about the endearing raccoon: *Fast & Furious Freddo*, and *Fast Freddo Slow Dances*.

Hell, he even won the Kids' Choice Award for Favorite Voice from an Animated Movie two years running.

"Please, mister," the kid says, "talk like Fast Freddo."

Cord, looking into the girl's huge brown eyes, is ready to break his cover and let rip with one of the one-liners from the most recent movie, when the saddest town he's ever seen comes into view.

A dead gas station, grass growing amongst the rusted pumps.

A church with locked doors.

Stores boarded up.

Bobby stops outside the Lone Star Saloon, a faded sign sitting above its doorway.

"Go in there and talk to Ray the bartender. Tell him I sent you. He'll sort you out a ride back to Amarillo."

"Thanks. I'm sorry, about earlier."

She shrugs. "Mister, you ain't the worst thing that happened to me today, believe me."

Bobby takes the girl's hand and they walk into a convenience store with a display of sun-faded DVDs in the window.

Watching them go, Cord has to fight a crazy impulse to chase after them and beg them to let him be part of their lives, for even just a couple of hours.

You're pathetic, he says and pushes through the swinging door of the bar, the mournful warble of Willie Nelson drawing him into its gloomy interior.

“Mama, that man sure did talk like Fast Freddo,” Jolene says as they enter the convenience store.

“Did he, honey?” Bobby says.

She waves a hand at her oldest friend, plump Emma-Lou who sits behind the cash register watching a rom-com on the wall mounted TV, crunching her way through a pack of potato chips, which she tries to hide under the counter.

“I see that diet of yours is holdin’ up real good,” Bobby says.

“A momentary lapse,” Emma-Lou says, talking like somebody out of one of the movies she consumes day in and day out.

She squints at Bobby. “What happened to you?”

“Had a fight with the Ford windshield. Windshield won.”

Emma-Lou doesn’t look convinced.

“Shouldn’t she be in school?” she asks, nodding toward Jolie who has homed in on the Fast Freddo DVDs in the racks near the window.

“Buster’s been up to his stunts,” Bobby says.

“You got into a brawl with him again, didn’t you?”

“I did not.”

“Promise?”

Bobby holds up her right palm. “The whole truth and nothin’ but the truth, I swear.”

“Mnnnn.”

Emma-Lou gives her a disbelieving look, then glances over toward the DVDs.

“How’s kiddo holding up?”

“She’s okay. Thank the lord for that Fast Freddo, but how can she watch those things over and over again?”

“It’s reassuring, I guess. Something constant and unchanging in her disrupted life.”

Bobby nudges her friend’s pudgy arm. “Listen up to Dr. Phil.”

“I’m just sayin’ . . .”

“You’re right, honey. Makes me ashamed.”

“You’re doing your best. It wasn’t your fault Buster nailed every piece of ass between here and San Antone.”

Bobby says, as she always does, “If skirt-chasing were an Olympic event . . .”

“. . . Buster Pyle woulda brought home triple gold,” Emma-Lou finishes, and the two friends laugh.

Bobby looks across at her daughter.

“But Jolie’s obsessed with that damned skunk.”

“Raccoon.”

“Whatever. I just now gave a ride to some guy and she accused him of *bein’* Fast Freddo.”

“What guy?”

“Just a salesman I ran into near the Hollywood sign. He was havin’ car trouble.”

Bobby doesn’t see the need to bother her high-strung friend with the details of the car wreck.

Emma-Lou is staring up at her. “What’s he look like, this guy?”

Bobby shrugs, “Long hair, beard. Didn’t look like no salesman I ever seen.”

Emma-Lou reaches for the laptop that sits on the counter, constantly gushing Hollywood gossip, and clicks the mouse and rattles away at the keyboard.

After a moment she turns the computer screen toward Bobby.

“This the guy?”

Bobby squints at a picture of a bearded man sitting on a bar stool, holding a guitar.

“Sure looks like him.”

Emma-Lou shakes her head. “No, it can’t be.”

“Who is he?”

“Cord McCann.”

Bobby looks down at the computer. “That actor?”

“Yeah, *that* actor. The guy with the three Oscars and the bombshell wife.”

Bobby shakes her head. “I don’t keep up with that stuff.”

“He’s married to Kat Mansfield. They split up last year, but they’re back together again, shooting a movie right here in Texas, near Amarillo.”

“Guy said he was at a sales convention near Amarillo.”

“Well, according to Skip Herring, Cord McCann went AWOL this morning, just disappeared off the set.”

“Who the hell’s Skip Herring?”

“Only like the biggest journalist on Studio Zone?”

Bobby shakes her head.

“The 24/7 on-line and network entertainment show?”

“You know I don’t pay no mind to that trash. Anyways, you’re dreamin’, Emma-Lou, the guy told me his name was Tommy Buford.”

The chubby woman’s mouth drops open, “Oh! My! God!”

“What?”

With a shaking finger Emma-Lou clicks the mouse and a movie clip comes up on the monitor: a smarmy young guy with gelled hair and a shiny suit, flashing a grin that could give you sunburn.

“This is Skip Herring reporting to you from the Studio Zone HQ in Hollywood. Reports just in that Cord McCann (or should I say, Cord McCan’t!) has disappeared from the set of the latest picture he and his off-and-on-again bride, foxy Kat Mansfield, are shooting deep in the heart of Texas. In *Old Fashioned Love Song*, Cord is broken-down country singer Tommy “T-Bone” Buford who heads for the hills when his ex-wife, played by the passionate Kat, sets her sights on a professional reunion. Life, yet again, imitating art? I’ll keep you posted on latest developments in this juicy story.”

Emma-Lou freezes the guy with a mouse click.

“No way,” Bobby says, “that’s just some crazy coincidence.”

Jolene appears and dumps *Fast & Furious Freddo* beside the cash register.

“I want this one, Mama.”

Emma-Lou flips the DVD box and points a finger at the back cover.

“This a coincidence too, Roberta?”

Bobby takes the box from her and reads that Cord McCann is the voice of Fast Freddo.

A movement catches her eye and she sees the man who nearly killed her exit the saloon, heading toward Burrito Express.

“Jolie, you stay here with Aunt Emma-Lou, okay?” Bobby says as she hurries out of the store, her blood up.

Cord McCann is no great lover of Mexican cuisine—he has a delicate gut—but he hasn’t eaten since last night, and the beer he drank back in the saloon (to help persuade the surly bartender to scratch him up a ride to the airport in Amarillo) has left him a little lightheaded as he heads down the sidewalk in search of food.

Cord, so often portrayed in the tabloids as a hard-drinking womanizer, is in reality pretty much a teetotaler who, when on location away from Kat, goes to bed with a book and a glass of milk, not a bottle and a blonde.

But that doesn’t make for good copy, or so his publicist tells him.

“Hey! Hey you!”

A voice has him turning and he can’t stop a smile when he sees Bobby Champagne striding across the street toward him.

The smile evaporates when he sees the look on her face.

He backs away, hands raised in surrender.

“Please don’t hit me again.”

“This here is Hollywood, Texas, mister. Not Hollywood, California.”

“I’m well aware of that.”

“We’re upright, god-fearin’ people in this town, who don’t hold with no liars.”

“Of course.”

“Shuddup.”

“Okay.”

“Why did you lie to me and my girl?”

“May I speak now?”

“No! You’re Cord McCann, ain’t you?”

When he just looks at her blankly, she says, “Answer me, goddamit!”

“Yes, I’m Cord McCann.”

“So why did you lie?”

“I didn’t want to be recognized. I wanted to stay incognito.”

“Incognito?!”

“It means—”

“I know what the hell it means. What, did you think I was gonna go all groupie and throw my body at you?”

“No. I just wanted to be invisible.”

“Mister, people who become movie stars give up the right to be invisible.”

“Very true. But today wasn’t a great day for me and I just wanted to hide.”

“What, they didn’t put enough cream in your breakfast latte?”

He shakes his head, opens his mouth and words come out in a tumble.

“No, I woke up this morning and discovered that my wife had spent the night with another man. She has a history of this, but she’d promised it was over. Like an idiot I swallowed her lies. So, when I realized it wasn’t over, I just got in that stupid little car and drove into nowhere. Cowardly, I guess.”

She stares at him.

“This the truth?”

“Yes.”

After a long pause she says, “Call me a fool, but I believe you.”

“Good.”

“And, for what it’s worth, I sympathize. About your wife. I’ve had some experience with infidelity, myself.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well, it’s like ugly on an ape.” He gives her a quizzical look. “Just comes with the territory.”

“I think I understand.”

“Doesn’t mean you shoulda gone and lied, though.”

“You’re right. I shouldn’t have lied to you.”

“It’s not me I care about, it’s my little girl back there in the store.”

“I can only apologize again.”

“Oh no, mister, you don’t get off so easy. You’re gonna come with me and you’re gonna talk to that little girl like Fast Freddo. You hearin’ me?”

“I’m hearing you. It would be a pleasure.”

“Well, don’t just stand there looking at me like a calf looks at a new gate, let’s go.”

She turns on her heel and he follows her.

When Bobby Champagne walks back into the convenience store with Cord McCann, she sees Emma-Lou's mouth opening and closing like a goldfish's, but no sounds emerge.

"Cord, this here is my best friend, Emma-Lou. She's kind of a fan."

Emma-Lou whimpers and when Cord sticks out his hand the chubby girl looks like she's about to faint.

Cord shakes her hand, and she stares at it afterward like she'll never wash it again.

And knowing Emma-Lou, she won't.

Jolene is looking up at the actor.

"Mister, is your name Cord?"

"Yes. Cord McCann."

"Then why'd you tell me your name was Tommy?"

Bobby leaves him skewered on her daughter's innocent gaze—she'd been there often enough herself—for a few moments, then she says, "Mr. McCann is a movie actor, honey. And when movie actors work they do something that's called getting into character. He's playin' a man named Tommy, so for now he kinda thinks he *is* Tommy."

Cord shrugs. "Your mother has got it exactly right."

"Then why do you sound like Fast Freddo? Cause there's no way you're Fast Freddo, 'cause he's a raccoon and you're a man."

Cord looks at the two women and when he sees no help coming, he hunkers down and speaks to the kid.

"Well, me and Freddo are like partners."

"How?"

"I'm going to tell you a secret, but you have to promise me you won't breathe a word of it, ever, to another living soul."

"Can Mama and Aunt Emma-Lou hear?"

“They already know the secret.”

“And they’ve promised not to tell?”

“Yes, they have.”

When Jolene looks across at her mother, Bobby nods and says, “I’ve promised.” And she elbows her plump friend who mumbles something unintelligible.

“Okay, Mr. McCann, I promise,” the child says.

“You can call me Cord.”

“Okay, Cord.”

“Thing is, Freddo is a really talented guy. He can dance and drive a car —”

“And fly a plane and sail a submarine.”

“That too, yes. But, well, his voice is kinda soft.”

“Soft?”

“Yeah. He had a bad cold when he was a baby and his voice never really recovered.”

“Poor, Freddo.”

“Yeah. But Freddo is a tough guy and smart too, so he came to me and asked me if I would do his voice.”

“How do you do it? His voice?”

“Well, the movie gets shot and then I go into a studio and I say whatever he said, just the way he said it, only louder.”

“So you help, Freddo?”

“I guess.”

“And you’re his friend?”

“More than that. Sometimes I feel like we’re brothers.”

Jolene sits on the floor and closes her eyes.

“Okay, do him. Do Freddo.”

“Hey, who is this half-pint kid tellin’ me what to do?” Cord says in his Freddo voice.

The voice of a wise-ass DJ from New Jersey Cord had idolized when he was a boy, lying in his bedroom on the farm in Kansas, thinking this guy was the ultimate in smarts and sophistication.

He can’t remember the DJ’s name now, but his voice, bouncy as a rubber ball, is etched in his memory.

The kid laughs, but doesn’t open her eyes. “It’s him! It’s Freddo!”

“Well, who’d ya think it is? Rocky Raccoon?”

“Who’s Rocky Raccoon?”

“Just some loser from before your time, sweetheart.”

“So, tell me, Freddo,” Jolene says, “are you going marry Miss Petula?”

Miss Petula, the cute little girl raccoon who is voiced by the breathy Renée Zellweger.

“I can give you a definite maybe on that, sugar.”

The kid opens her eyes and looks at her mother and says in a voice way older than her years, “Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce anyway, don’t they?”

Cord sees the stricken look on Bobby’s face, watches as she kneels down and embraces her daughter, and before Cord can stop him, Freddo says, “What are you broads doin’ later, anyway?”

The kid, her face buried in her mother’s shoulder, says, “Why?”

“Well, maybe I can come on over to your house and tell you a very special, guaranteed-once-in-a-lifetime-never-to-be-repeated bedtime story.”

Even as Bobby Champagne is shaking her head at Cord over her daughter’s shoulder the kid is saying, “Oh, yes, please. Please, Mama, okay?”

The blonde woman mouths words at Cord that would earn a movie an R rating, but when she speaks she says, “Of course, honey. What a sweet and special offer.”

Earl Pyle, hands on his wide hips, stands beneath the mounted head of the lion somebody shot for him in Africa.

Earl, of course, swears it was his rifle that brought down the aging lioness in Tanzania, but Buster has heard from members of the hunting party that it was an alcoholic game ranger who killed the beast, took his father's money and gave Earl the credit.

Earl, fat gut encased in a tight shirt, a bolo tie hanging between his man boobs, says in his best Ben Cartwright voice: "How old are you, boy?"

"Daddy, you know how old I am," Buster says, feeling like a fool kid.

"Answer me, damn you!"

"I'll be thirty-three come April."

"And in your thirty-two useless years on this planet how many things have I asked you for?"

The true answer to this would be *countless*, but Buster plays along, "Two, Daddy."

"And what are they?"

"Daddy . . ."

"What the hell are they?"

"That I produce a son and heir and that I get Bobby to sell her farm to you."

"And have you achieved either?"

"Nossir."

"Nossir!"

"Daddy, it's just a matter of time before the drought forces Bobby to sell."

"A matter of time! Time is a commodity I do not have! The deal I'm swingin' with those peckerheads from Dallas is dependant on me deliverin' all the land west of the highway. All of it!"

"I'm workin' on it, Daddy."

"You couldn't work up a decent sweat in a steam room."

Earl sighs and collapses into his chair.

“And what’s happening with the child?”

“The lawyer promises me that we should get custody soon.”

“I want that child here, with her kin. Understand?”

“Yes, Daddy. I want that too.”

“Granted, she’s not a boy child, but she’s still a Pyle, and she should be here with us, not growing up ragged-assed out there with her mule of a mother.”

“I agree.”

The older man stares at Buster through his Porky Pig eyes, then he shakes his head.

“You’re a disappointment to me, Buster. A real disappointment. Now get the hell out of my sight and don’t come back until you have good news for me.”

Buster leaves Earl’s study and walks down the stairs and finds one of his father’s men, Jimmy Wilson, waiting in the hallway, Stetson in his hand.

Jimmy, the wrong side of fifty and bandy as a sailor, tips Buster a salute.

“Can I go up and see your daddy, Buster?”

“He’s kinda busy. What’s the problem?”

“That car I told you about that landed on its roof on Old Man Herman’s land—”

“You mean my daddy’s land?”

“Of course, just old habit. Anyways, I done what you asked and had it towed to the pound in town.”

“Okay, good.”

“Thing of it is . . .”

“Yeah?”

“I had me a quick look in the vehicle, and I found this.”

He hands over a couple of sheets of paper, stapled together.

Buster reads: CALLSHEET: OLD FASHIONED LOVE SONG.

“What the hell’s this?”

“I don’t rightly know, but I reckon your daddy should see it.”

“Okay, thanks Jimmy, you go on home now,” Buster says, folding the page into his back pocket.

Jimmy salutes again and walks out.

Buster goes through to the annex of the mansion where he has his quarters.

Redheaded Madison Mount lies on the couch in the living room, fiddling on the iPad Buster bought her for her last birthday.

“You still here?” he asks, pouring himself a Jack and Coke.

The red head pouts.

“Why are you always so mean to me when you been in with your daddy?”

Buster doesn’t answer, just takes the pages from his pocket and slings them at Madison, who says *ouch* and glares at him.

“What the hell is this?” she asks.

“You tell me,” he says.

As she flips through the pages her eyes narrow and she gets that hungry look on her face like when she sees something pretty on the internet fashion stores.

The look that is usually followed by a whiny demand.

“Buster, this is real interestin’.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s what’s known as a call sheet. From a movie. All the actors and the crew get it each day, to tell them what they’re doin’.”

“So why the hell should I give a damn?”

“This is from that movie they’re shootin’ over by Amarillo, with Cord McCann and Kat Mansfield.”

“So?”

“Where did you get it?” she asks.

“In a car that ended up crashed on one of daddy’s farms.”

“Who was drivin’ the car?”

“Nobody knows. They gone and disappeared.”

Madison stands, which means she’s excited.

Mostly she spends her time on her back, which is fine by Buster.

She flounces across to him, carrying her iPad.

“Remember that guy that was with your bitch ex-wife, earlier?”

“Loser with the long hair and the beard?”

“I snapped his picture. Just in case you needed it.”

She lifts the iPad and shows him an image of the tall, bearded stranger standing by the fence, his arms folded.

“So?”

“Wait. Look here.”

Her long-taloned fingers tap on the touch screen and something called the *Studio Zone* homepage comes up.

She taps again until a picture of long-haired man playing the guitar fills the screen.

“That’s the same guy,” he says.

“Yes it is. That’s Cord McCann.”

“The movie star?”

“None other. He’s disappeared off the movie set.”

“You tellin’ me some movie star wrecked his car and Bobby picked him up?”

“Looks that way.”

“And Bobby’s got this degenerate holed up at her place with my daughter?”

“My guess is yes.”

Buster is already walking toward the door.

“I’m gonna fix this.”

Madison grabs his arm and slows him down.

“Baby, think this through.”

“What’s there to think about?”

“You want your little girl don’t you? Real bad?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Then imagine the scandal if it’s found that Bobby’s shackin’ up with some movie star with her kid in the house? What’s a judge gonna make of that?”

“Okay . . . What are you sayin’?”

“What I’m *sayin’*, Buster, is we need to call some big time gossip guru and break this news wide open.”

“You know somebody?”

“Hell, yes I do. You leave this to me, Buster, I know *just* who to call.”

“Still no sign of the absconded Cord McCann,” Skip Herring says, leering at the camera, “but—and that’s a J-Lo sized *but!*—Studio Zone is *hot, hot, hot* on his tail.”

He ends the segment with his signature wink and the index finger and thumb of his right hand in cocked-gun salute, then as the strident music peaks and dies and the red light fades, his toothy grin evaporates.

“That was as boring as Thanksgiving at the Osmonds,” he says, stalking away from the cameras.

He waits until a faceless nerd unhooks his microphone and then he swings on the two girls, barely out of their teens, who run his show.

“Why aren’t you kiddies feeding Daddy?” he asks. “Why is Daddy getting little bitsy, teensy-weensy scraps?”

The girls shrug in unison, hidden like Muppets behind lank hair, biding their time until another show makes them a better offer.

The turnover of production staff is so high that Skip never bothers to remember names.

“What’s Charlie Sheen up to?” he says.

“Nothing interesting,” Muppet Girl One says.

“And Kim?”

“Quiet. We think she has a cold,” Muppet Girl Two says.

“Well, tell her to suck on something. Preferably where we can see it.”

He flounces off to his desk which is shoved in the corner of the dingy Studio Zone office, on the first floor of an ugly building on Sunset Boulevard, the stink of Korean take-out sucked in through the wheezing A/C.

After Skip gets his pay check there’s no money to make this place glamorous.

Or even livable.

He slumps behind his desk, his nerves twanging like banjo strings.

There have been rumors—of course—that he is a speed-freak, ingesting some designer concoction that could fuel the next Space Shuttle, but the

truth is Skip is driven by nervous energy alone.

By fear.

By the terror that one day, just like that, nobody will watch or read him and he'll disappear back to the plains of Nebraska where he grew up bullied and unloved.

And, when he's feeling anxious, the thing he tries to keep at bay bangs through his mental armor.

Skip Herring has a secret.

A dark and terrible secret, that—should it emerge—would surely end his career.

Now, as any scandal-junkie will tell you, the highly charged world of celebrity gossip is all about two things: sex and fat.

Skip has the fat thing covered—he's small and wiry, like a nasty little Jack Russell terrier dressed in a slim-fit Paul Smith suit.

His barbed comments about junk in the trunk and ballooning waistlines are all the more effective because he is so svelte.

But the sex thing?

Not so much.

Truth is: he's a virgin.

At twenty-five years old!

If this had to emerge he'd be scorned.

He could see the headlines: *Gossip Guru's Cherry's Unpopped*.

How could anybody trust him?

In the gossipverse, a journalist's sexual orientation is unimportant: straight, gay, bi, animal, mineral or vegetable—it doesn't matter.

As long as it is clear that you are out there doing it, and doing it often, so that when you write about other people doing it your words have the weight of truth.

Nobody, but *nobody*, is going to buy the Flying Nun as a scandal-scribe.

What saves Skip is his Siamese-twin relationship with his cameraman, Wack Delves, a fat, forty-something Dutch émigré who hits on anything that moves and scores more than you would believe.

Waitresses, baristas, pre-school teachers, dog walkers, even the female captain of the Boeing that took Skip and Wack to Florida last week on the hunt for a one-time child star now too obese to leave her trailer.

And Wack is a sharer.

His rambling monologues, rich with gross details about smells and skin textures and—*for god’s sake!*—booty-heft, enliven the time waiting to ambush some unsuspecting celeb.

And, best of all, Wack—the ultimate narcissist—is monumentally disinterested in Skip’s (non-existent) sex life. Only keen to unload details of his own.

Skip saves up these details and lets enough of them slip out in conversation with his co-workers—he is too busy for friends—or as salacious little nuggets during his reports, and has very successfully created the illusion that his appetite for sex is as insatiable as his lust for gossip.

Wack Delves, dressed in an extraordinary ensemble (a purple tank vest that reveals far too much of his Limburger-colored flab, plaid Bermuda shorts and sandals over knee-length Argyle socks) falls into a chair beside Skip.

“Just got me some mother-daughter action,” Wack says in an accent that got lost west of Rotterdam and surfaced in the Bronx.

“When?” Skip says, intrigued despite himself.

He could swear the lardy Dutchman has been right here in the studio all day.

“I popped down for a burger and met a mamma and daughter from Des Moines. When I tole them I was in TV they wanted the full tour. Gave it to them.”

“Where?”

“Janitor’s broom closet. It was kinda snug, but in a good way.”

Skip, eager to lose his anxiety in the vile Netherlander’s Bukowski-like ramblings, is about to draw his chair closer, when one of the Muppet girls come scuffing up.

“Skip, we got something on Cord McCann.”

“What?”

“He seems to be hiding out in Hollywood—”

“He’s here?!”

“No. Hollywood, Texas. Some dirt speck on the map. We got an email from a source there.”

“Hollywood, Texas? Sounds like we’re being trolled.”

“She emailed me this.”

The girl shoves a photograph on her iPad at him, and Skip—eyes honed by years of celebrity watching—instantly recognizes Cord McCann

standing behind a white fence, a house that looks like Southfork in the background.

“What’s the closest city to this dump?” he says.

“Amarillo.”

“Get me and Wack on the next flight. Are we exclusive on this?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“The source is a fan. We promised you’d interview her for The Zone.”

“And if she’s cute she’ll end up getting more Herring that she can chew on,” he says with a salacious leer.

Just keeping his hand in.

He grabs his overnight bag, kept packed beside his desk, and is already whistling “The Yellow Rose of Texas” as he rushes for the elevator, the flabby Dutch cameraman, like a pack-donkey under all his gear, huffing in Skip’s wake.

Bobby Champagne's daddy always said she was as fierce as a lioness.
 Maybe it was 'cause her mama lit out for Galveston when Bobby was eleven and never returned.

Never wrote.
 Never called.
 Nothin'.

Left Bobby to look after her Daddy and give what mothering she could to her brother Carlton, who was eight at the time.

Carlton, small and skinny, was always being picked on at school, and it fell to Bobby to fight his battles for him.

Kinda ironic that he enlisted in the Marines when he was eighteen, maybe to prove some stupid thing about his manhood.

A week into his first tour in Iraq he was shot by members of his own platoon.

Got a medal and a military funeral, but there were sniggers in the saloon and nasty jokes about *scoring an own goal* from Ray the bartender who'd developed a passion for British soccer since he stuck up a satellite dish.

Bobby got to her use her fists and her feet a lot around that time.

Always big-boned and strong, with a natural aptitude for duking it out, Bobby developed a reputation as a hellcat.

Buster Pyle saw it as his manly duty to tame her.

Each livelong day Bobby curses the girly hormones that turned her to mush and allowed Buster to bed her and marry her, only to break her heart into enough itty-bitty pieces to write ten country songs.

But, despite all the hell she'd change nothing, because she got Jolene, the most beautiful gift that had ever come her way.

And she'd fight to protect Jolene.

Fight Buster and his fat daddy.

Fight the law.

And, sure as hell fight this tall drink of water movie star who is even now yarn spinnin' to Jolene as Bobby drives the Ford back to her spread, the sun

sagging low over the cotton and setting it ablaze.

Cord, speaking to the kid wedged between him and Bobby, says, "There's an old saying in Hollywood—"

"*Your* Hollywood?" Jolene asks.

"Yeah, *my* Hollywood. Old saying that you should never act with dogs or kids."

"Why not, Cord?"

" 'Cause they blow you off the screen, is why. They're just too darned cute. And in a movie I did a couple of years back called *Digger's Moon* I made a fatal mistake."

"What?"

"I acted with a dog *and* a kid. Pretty blonde girl about your age with her Labrador. Man, they left me invisible."

"You ain't a daddy, Cord?" Jolene asks.

He shakes his head, staring out over the fields. "No."

"Why not?"

"Jolene, where are your manners? You don't ask questions like that." She looks across at Cord. "Sorry, guess she's gonna grow up to be an interrogator at Guantanamo Bay, or some such."

"Where's Guantanamo Bay, Mama?" the kid asks.

"Hush, Jolie," Bobby says.

Cord just smiles and says to Jolie: "Wanna hear about the time I had to act with a donkey that kept on biting me in the butt?"

Jolie laughs and he's off again.

He has a way with her, Bobby has to allow.

But he's a movie star, after all.

Not to be trusted farther than she can throw him.

Back in the store, after he'd made that irresistible bedtime-story offer (*damn his eyes*, as her daddy would have said) Bobby left Jolene chatting excitedly to Emma-Lou who still looked like she was in cardiac arrest, and edged Cord over to the iceboxes on the pretext of stocking up on some dinner wine.

He opened the swing door of the cooler unit, lifted out a bottle of Thunderbird and said, "I'm told this is a pretty good year."

She punched him on the arm so hard he nearly dropped the bottle.

"Hey," he said returning the wine to the cooler and rubbing his bicep, "what the hell's your problem?"

“You are, Mr. Big-time-I only-have-to breathe-and-I-hear-panties-drop movie star.”

“Want to run that by me one more time?”

“You heard me, mister. If you think the way into my britches is via my daughter, you’re dumber than dirt.”

“What?”

“You want some kind of revenge on your hot-pants wife and you’ve fixed your sights on me, and think you can use my kid to soften me up.”

He looked shocked.

“Getting you into the sack was the last thing on my mind.”

“What? I’m not good enough for you?”

He held up his hands.

“Whoa, this is crazy. I saw enough of that little scene with the guy and the pony to figure out what’s going on. I just wanted to cheer your kid up is all. But if that’s going to get me assaulted and verbally abused I’m out of here.”

And he started for the door.

“Hold your damn horses mister.”

He turned at the frozen foods.

“What? You gonna draw on me?”

“Git back here,” she says.

“No,” he said, all in a hissy fit, “you *git* on over here, if you want to talk to me.”

“This is childish,” she said.

“Yes, it is,” he said. “I’ll meet you halfway.”

They each headed for the frozen burgers, where they stopped.

“You think you can just walk away now?” Bobby asked.

“I can.”

“And break that little girl’s heart?”

He shrugged.

“That’ll be on you.”

She shook her head. “You’re cute as a possum, ain’t you?”

“God, do all you people talk in clichés around here? Guy in the saloon said I had as much chance of getting a ride to Amarillo today as a one-legged man had of winning a butt kicking contest.” He shook his head.

“That’s a direct quote.”

“Sounds like Ray.”

“A man of rare charm.”

“That he is.”

“And a man who takes great pride in his appearance and personal hygiene, too.”

She had to laugh.

“He didn’t recognize you, did he?”

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

“Believe me, I’d know. Eyes glaze over, jaws drop and hands reach for camera phones.” He nodded over her shoulder. “Kind of like that.”

She looked back and saw that Emma-Lou had unfrozen herself from her stupor and was busy snapping away with her BlackBerry.

“Put that damn thing down, Emma-Lou! What are you, some kinda paparazzi?”

Emma-Lou blushed and stowed her phone.

Bobby turned back to Cord.

“Okay, mister, you get to come back to my house.”

“I’m honored.”

“You get to tell Jolene a bed time story, you get a square meal, a bath if you want one and a couch to bunk down on. Then we fix you a ride in the mornin’. Okay?”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Let’s get you out of here before you cause even more of a ruckus. Think you can choose some wine without makin’ smart-ass comments?”

“I’ll try.”

Bobby went back to the cash register and leaned in close to Emma-Lou.

“You’re not gonna breathe a word about this, hear?”

Her chubby friend nodded.

“And you’re not gonna paste even one of those pictures on the internet.”

“Uh, that would be *post*.”

“Don’t get smart with me. Promise?”

“I promise, Bobby.”

Emma-Lou darted a glance across at Cord, who was approaching with a bottle of wine.

“But are you really takin’ Cord McCann home?”

“I’m givin’ him a bed for the night.”

“I bet you are.”

“Just ’cause you’re short and fat don’t mean I won’t slap you senseless.”

Emma-Lou went all catatonic when Cord set the bottle on wine down on the counter.

He said, “I’m embarrassed to admit that I left Amarillo without my wallet . . .”

“That’s okay,” Bobby said, “just write your John Hancock on Emma-Lou’s arm and she’ll let you have the wine on the house. Won’t you, honey?”

The chubby girl nodded and handed Cord a felt-tipped pen, watching in awe as he wrote his name on the pale skin of her left forearm.

That arm, for definite, wouldn’t see water until the drought broke.

Bobby grabbed Jolene’s hand and said, “C’mon, let’s get out of here.”

And they’re bumping up to her raggedy old house right now, Bobby and her kid and the movie star.

What a damned day.

It's dark and Skip Herring and Wack Delvers are in a car on a road hours out of Amarillo.

Skip drives.

Whatever his talents at seduction, Wack is a menace behind the wheel of a car, so Skip always takes the helm.

And now he's lost.

The GPS, speaking in a voice suspiciously like Spock's in *Star Trek*, keeps telling him to *take the next exit*.

There hasn't been an exit in a hundred miles, so Skip grabs the little box that's suction-cupped to the windshield and frisbees it out the window.

"Okay, good plan," Wack says, guzzling on a stick of beef jerky.

The Netherlander bought a Stetson at the Rick Husband Airport in Amarillo—at first Skip had misread the sign as the *Rich* Husband Airport, and thought, wow, these Texans do wear their greedy hearts on their sleeves—and has it pulled low over his eyes.

"Any cell phone reception yet?" Skip asks.

Wack jabs at his iPhone. "Dead as a nun's desire."

The Dutchman can be eerily poetic at times.

Skip sees a giant neon cowboy boot with a yellow spur flashing like a star rising out of the darkness over the fields.

A knot of pick-up trucks are parked outside a bunker-like building.

A smaller sign promises *beer and dancing*.

Skip turns the rental car off the road and as he crunches to a stop on the gravel outside the saloon, he hears the horrible wail of country, a musical genre that has been known to induce bouts of projectile vomiting in the scandal scribe.

Skip turns to the cameraman, "Go in and use the pay phone and call this Madison Mount. And write the directions down, for pity sake."

Wack offers no argument, just heaves his bulk from the car.

Amazingly, the cameraman is accepted wherever he goes.

With his bizarre accent and weird attire, people simply assume that he's a local with a speech impediment and take pity on him.

Skip clicks on the car radio and channel surfs through a cacophony of revivalist preachers and farming reports offering bad news about the drought until he finds a station playing old Motown numbers.

Skip is tapping the steering wheel in time to Marvin Gaye asking "What's Going On?"—a fair question—when the door to the saloon disgorges Wack Delves with his arm around the waist of a giantess with a towering ginger beehive.

Wack leans into Skip's window.

"This here is Honey. She's gonna show us the way."

"Forget it," Skip says.

Too late.

The car sags low on its springs when the Dutchman and the huge woman drop into the rear seat.

The woman says something that sounds like *hairyeu* and gabbles on in no language Skip has ever heard.

"What's she saying?" Skip asks.

"She says you get back on Route 385 and drive until you see The Coyote Café and hang a left."

"And then?" Skip says.

"And then she'll tell you more."

As Skip clicks the car into drive and returns to the highway, there's the sound of wet smooching, grunting and zippers unleashing overheated flesh and Skip glimpses a sight in his rearview so grotesque that he fixes his eyes on the road ahead and tries to think of anything but what is happening behind him.

Cord McCann has stage fright.

Standing outside the child's room, waiting for her mother to finish tucking her into bed before he goes in and tells her the much-hyped bedtime story, he is reminded of the time Kat talked him into doing a revival of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" with her on Broadway.

It was the first time either of them had ever done theater, and the media buzz was massive.

On the opening night, standing in the wings, wearing a black suit over a white shirt, a skinny tie, eyes hidden behind a pair of Buddy Holly glasses, Cord had felt such terror that he would've fled if Kat hadn't seized him by the arm and dragged him out on stage in time for them to make their entrance as the drunken couple arriving back from a college faculty party in the early sixties.

Reviews had been generally kind, but Cord hadn't shaken the terror for the entire run, and he'd never done theater again.

And he was not a movie actor known for his improvisations.

Screenwriters loved him and his diligent delivery of the words on the page.

But here he was about to wing it, about to tell some heartbroken kid a story to cheer her up.

What if he blew it?

Bobby Champagne would probably put him in the emergency room.

If there'd been one.

The door opens and Bobby emerges.

"Okay, mister, you're on. I'll be listenin' from the kitchen."

Cord nods and, dry mouthed, he steps into the room where the kid lies in bed in her PJs watching him expectantly.

Jolene smacks the mattress beside her.

"You can sit right here, Cord."

"Thanks," he says, lowering himself.

"So," the kid says, "is it going to be a Fast Freddo story?"

Is it?

Hell, he has no idea.

“Yes,” he says, feeling suddenly calm and focused.

Without knowing where it all comes from, he starts telling Jolene about the night Fast Freddo takes Miss Petula for dinner at a swanky restaurant, and when his lady love bites into her acorn salad she thinks she’s encountered a pit, until she sees a gleaming diamond and realizes Freddo has hidden a ring in her plate.

The child, of course, is captivated, as Cord effortlessly spins a yarn about wedding planners and dress designers and pre-nuptial nerves, leading up to the night before the ceremony when Fast Freddo’s friends take him out partying, reminiscent of one of *The Hangover* movies, only rated G, of course.

Bobby is in the kitchen preparing Texas chicken fried steaks, river bottom gravy and all the fixins.

Earlier, she made macaroni and cheese for Jolene, who’d decided a few months ago that she was a vegetarian after seeing something about animal slaughtering on TV.

Bobby has decided to humor her daughter.

What the hell, if vegetarianism is the only visible symptom she’s displayed since the divorce, then Bobby counts herself lucky.

She asked Cord McCann if he was some kinda California food-faddist.

“I’m a farm boy,” he said.

“When last were you on a farm?”

“A few months ago,” he said. “But it was on the MGM backlot.”

“Well, I just wanna warn you that you ain’t gonna get some fancy L.A. meal. I cook plain and I cook big.”

“That sounds perfect,” he said.

Taking meat from the icebox, she hears Cord’s voice coming from the bedroom.

He’s an actor, after all, and his voice carries.

When he’s not doing Fast Freddo’s nasal voice, when he’s just filling in with the story about the buildup to the wedding, his voice is deep and rich and real pretty, she is forced to admit.

She tiptoes down the corridor to Jolene's room, sneaking a peek into the bedroom.

Jolie lies in bed, her hand on Cord's arm, her eyes wide and mesmerized, hanging onto every word he says.

That doesn't surprise her.

What does is the expression on the man's face.

She sees how important this is to him, how he is completely focused on her daughter and the sweet, funny story he is telling her.

Bobby has to remind herself that this is some mega-star sitting on Jolie's bed, because when her eyes blur with tears—tears of joy, yes, but also tears of what might have been—she can't think of even one night when Buster had taken the time to tell his daughter a bedtime story.

Wiping her eyes, Bobby goes back to the kitchen where she pounds the heck out of the steak—the vigor of the pounding fueled by Buster and his cheating ways that broke two girls' hearts.

“Oh my lord!” the pneumatic redhead says as Skip steps out of the rental car, and she honest to goodness does a little dance on the spot, which gets her girl parts ajiggle.

“You must be Madison Mount,” he says, sticking out a hand. “I’m Skip Herring.”

The girl grabs it in both of hers and says, “This is like so unbelievably, crazily, exciting.”

She shoots a look over her shoulder at the pampered-looking man who stands watching from the steps of the big, brightly lit house, his hands in the pockets of his Levis.

“Isn’t it, Buster?”

“Truly, Madison, I don’t think I’d be more excited by the second coming itself.”

Skip, too much of a sarcasm-slinger not to feel its sting, says, “Madison, maybe you could ask your houseboy to get me a Perrier? I’m parched.”

This gets Buster walking down toward Skip, with a look on his face that’s meant to be menacing.

Wack Delvers chooses this moment to rise from the rear of the car where he has been slumbering post-coitally after his session with the stripper—they dumped her near a Greyhound station, purse stuffed with banknotes when she got them on course—and his outré appearance gives the Texan pause.

Wack has this effect.

People either pity or fear him.

He looks berserk enough to kill with his bare hands and yellow teeth.

“May we invite you in for some refreshment?” Madison says, in what she imagines is a *lady of the manor* voice.

“I’d rather we grab something to go and head on out to the target zone, if you don’t mind. That’s the way I keep the edge on my competition.”

“Of course,” Madison says. “Buster fetch some bottled water.”

“And bring me a six-pack of Bud,” Wack says, scratching his paunch with a sound like a rasp on metal.

Buster looks like he’s about to argue, then he disappears into the house.

“I was expecting a bigger crew,” Madison says.

“We’re like Navy Seals,” Skip says. “We travel light and keep under the radar. Don’t you worry, my lovely, we have everything we need to blow Cord McCann and this bimbo into orbit.”

“And when do you interview me?” she asks, stroking his arm with a talon painted the color of fresh blood.

“After we capture our prey, my dear. Then you will tell the camera in long, lingering detail how you blew the cover of Mr. Cord McCan’t.”

“McCan’t! That’s so brilliant?”

“Just what I do, my peach. Just what I do,” Skip says, knowing that as soon as he has the video of Cord and his lady friend, he’ll leave Miss Titties and her hayseed beau eating their dust.

The yokel returns with some water and beer.

Wack grabs a can, rips the tab, opens his gullet and empties the Bud in one draft.

He drops the empty can to the gravel, burps, and repeats the performance with a second beer.

Skip, immune to the talents of his cameraman, gets behind the wheel of the car.

“Don’t you want to ride in Buster’s truck?” Madison asks.

“Thank you, but no, my pretty. All our gear is in the trunk.”

He pats the seat next to him.

“You sit here with me, darling one. Let the boys bring up the rear.”

Once they’re seated, Skip starts the car and says, “Direct me to the Hollywood sign.”

He even manages not to laugh.

Within a few minutes they are at the road sign, and Skip combs his hair, adjusts the hang of his jacket and the line of his tie, and takes his place in front of the rusted and bullet-pocked metal.

Wack sets up a flattering soft-light (another of his skills) and frames a shot as the gossip-maven flashes a killer grin and says, “This is Skip Herring reporting from Hollywood. That’s Hollywood, *Texas*, kiddies where the very naughty Cord McCann is about to be caught with his—to use the local parlance—britches round his ankles! About to be caught popping his

cork with a bubbly blonde by the name of—would I lie to you?—Bobby Champagne!”

⋮

Bobby removes the dinner dishes from the kitchen table, pleased to see that Cord's plate is so clean it barely needs washing.

"Thank you," he says. "That was delicious."

"My pleasure," she says, back at the table, sitting opposite him. "Thanks for tellin' Jolie that story."

"I enjoyed it."

"So, what are your plans for tomorrow?"

"I'm going back to Amarillo to finish the movie. I owe it to the director and the crew."

"What about your wife?"

"That's over. We shoot in Amarillo for another couple of days then return to the studio in L.A. I'll get my lawyer busy on cleaning up the mess."

"Sorry," she says.

He shrugs.

"It happens."

She holds up the wine bottle.

"More?"

"No, thanks," he says, still busy on his first glass.

"A movie star that doesn't drink?"

He smiles.

"Don't tell the tabloids."

"And doesn't womanize?"

Cord shrugs.

Emboldened by the wine, she stares into his very pretty blue eyes and says, "I find that kinda hard to believe."

"Look, Bobby, in my line of work women throw themselves at me every day. Not because they want *me*, but because they see me as some kind of trophy: *I slept with Cord McCann*. I find it very easy to resist that kind of thing."

"You're a rare man."

“Maybe.”

“So you’ve never cheated on your wife?”

“Never.”

“Even when she was cheatin’ on you?”

“Even when she was doing that.”

“You never been tempted?”

“Once or twice, of course.”

“When last?”

Cord stares at Bobby before he replies.

“You’re gonna haul off and punch me again.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m tempted, now, for the first time in a very long while.”

She squints at him.

“That some kind of line?”

“No. And I’m not going to do anything, okay? You asked me a question and you deserve an honest answer.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re real.” He hesitates. “And you’re beautiful.”

“I feel a punch comin’ on.”

“You are beautiful. Just not Hollywood beautiful. *My* Hollywood.”

“Thanks.”

“That’s a compliment. I grew up on a farm. I like girls who look like you.”

“Your wife sure doesn’t.”

“Well, she used to. Healthy, fresh faced, no make-up. That all changed when we got to Hollywood.”

“Do you love her?”

“I think the answer to that’s in the past tense.”

“Yeah, I know that song.”

Cord sips his drink.

“What happened, with you and that guy?” he asks.

“He messed around so much that I finally threw him out and divorced his ass.”

“When?”

“A year ago. It’s been tough on Jolie.”

“She’s a great kid.”

“She’s my world. And him and his daddy got money and they’re trying to get custody of her. I’m fightin’ it.”

“I’m sorry.”

When Cord takes her hand, Bobby doesn’t resist.

And, looking past the hair and the beard, she can’t but see how handsome he is.

“Yeah, well,” she says, “it’s like the drought: just something you gotta weather.”

She moves nearer to him, staring into those eyes, and their faces are close and she just knows they’re going to kiss.

“Smooch her, dammit, smooch her!” Skip screams silently.

He stands a little behind Wack Delvers, lurking in the dark outside the farmhouse window, and can see the shot the Dutchman has lined up on the flip-out LED viewfinder of the camera: Cord McCann taking the hand of the blonde, wholesome, freckled-faced bumpkin, and sitting closer to her.

All the unpleasantness of the last hours (jammed into coach with obese people stinking of junk food and sweat on the flight from L.A. because one of the Muppets screwed up the first-class reservations; getting lost in the dark in the ass-end of nowhere; having to put up with bare-bottomed Wack pounding away at the stripper like an oil-driller) will be forgotten if McCann just puckers up and sucks the face off this clodhopper.

“See, I tole you!” Madison Mount says in a stage whisper, and Skip is forced to turn and grab her and shove his hand over her mouth.

Free of her boyfriend, who is sulking in the car on the other side of a cotton field, Madison—thinking that Skip is feeling amorous—shoves her hot body against his, smothering him with her breasts, and sending a hand where no woman has gone before: right into his pants.

Skip squirms free of her grasp like a contortionist.

“Not now,” he says, panting with terror. “Later.”

She gives his tight little butt a squeeze and nibbles his ear like a dog, saying, “I’m going to give you a real big Texas style *thank you*, Mr. Herring.”

Skip spins back to the farmhouse and silently urges the errant movie star, still staring soulfully into the girl’s eyes, on.

“Come on, Cord, rip her clothes off and have her right there on the table like Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.”

And, rejoicing, Skip sees that, yes, it’s really going to happen as Cord McCann and the blonde girl lean in closer and closer and closer . . .

Bobby’s eyes are already closing, her lips parting, the warmth of Cord’s breath on her face when he releases her hand and stands up like hornets have got to his butt.

He crosses to the sink and pours water into a glass.

“It’s late,” he says. “Maybe you should show me where to sleep?”

“Sure,” she says, trying to hide her disappointment, “I’ll get you a blanket.”

Bobby hurries away to get the bedding from the closet in her bedroom, feeling all kinds of things that she never thought she’d feel ever again.

As the first rays of sun touch a scorched field very far from civilization, Skip Herring, sitting in the passenger seat of the rental car with his laptop on his knees, finishes editing the video segment of Cord McCann and the country bumpkin.

Skip hits *send*, watching as the progress bar zooms from left to right on his computer.

America will awaken to that kiss.

But, hold up, there was no kiss!

Was there?

Skip, who always edits his own material—no ways would he let one of the Muppets loose on it—is a master at creating something from nothing.

Toiling through the night under the dome light of the rental car, the flabby cameraman snoring and expelling gas in the rear, Skip slowed down the shot of the actor and the blonde girl as their faces get closer and closer.

He repeated it, in a rapid montage.

He screamed over it in a shrill voice-over recorded right here in the car, “Cord cheats on Kat with Cowgirl—a Studio Zone Exclusive!”

And there is nobody out there in the vast and rapacious gossipverse who won’t believe that Cord McCann kissed that girl and that the two of them then retired to her bedroom for some hot and steamy country-style lovin’.

Skip clicks off the dome light and sits a while, watching the sun hit the microwave tower that allowed him internet access, that allowed him to spread the gospel of gossip to the believers, and for a moment he is almost happy, knowing that, yet again, he has scooped the competition.

Then, with the old familiar nervous hunger eating at his innards, he starts the car and bumps back onto the road.

After all, you’re only as good as your next story.

Kat Mansfield awakens to the feel of a man's body hard against hers.

She's rolling over, ready to say, "Morning, baby," when she remembers that this isn't her husband with her in the bed at the Savoy Hotel in Amarillo.

It's the stuntman.

Rick?

Mick?

Dick?

His name escapes her.

How the hell did she allow him to sleep over?

Too much champagne.

She sits up, her face made placid by Botox, betraying none of her annoyance as she elbows the boy in the ribs.

"Hey," she says, "wake the hell up."

He opens his eyes.

Eyes shockingly empty of anything resembling intelligence.

He sits up, the sheet falling from him, revealing abs you could scrub washing on.

He reaches for her, "Hey, beautiful, come here."

She rakes his face with her nails and he yelps.

"Get the hell out of my room," she says, rising from the bed and wrapping her body in a monogrammed robe.

"Aw, c'mon," he says.

She throws his jeans and work boots at him, prompting another yelp.

"By the time I come back from the little girls' room I want you gone or I'm calling my bodyguards."

She goes into the bathroom and takes a long, hard look at herself in the mirror.

What she sees pleases her, even after a night on the tiles.

She's had a little work, sure.

What the hell, even nature can do with a helping hand, now and then.

But the work is subtle, and the face staring back at her is that of a gorgeous thirty-year old, not a woman nudging forty-one.

Kat brushes her teeth, and when she's done she returns to the bedroom.

The stuntman is gone.

She'll talk to the producer when she gets on set and have the clown fired.

He's beginning to bore her.

Taking a bottle of water from the fridge, she wonders when Cord will creep back, his tail between his legs.

She knows that's what'll happen.

Always does.

He's her bitch, as the kids say these days.

Always was and always will be.

Since she first spotted him on the football field of a Kansas town so insignificant and tedious that she has erased its name from her memory.

Saw those chiseled good looks already forming beneath the last layer of puppy fat.

Seduced him, got him to run away with her to L.A.

Made him.

Without her Cord McCann is nothing.

And he knows it.

So, what's the harm if she has a little fun?

Even Dr. Karpov, her shrink, had become a conquest, falling prey to her on his couch, finding it impossible to resist her allure.

He proved to have surprising stamina for a man well into his sixties.

Reaching for the remote, Kat clicks on the TV, ready for her morning jolt of Skip Herring. The nasty little imp amuses her.

But she is not to be amused this morning.

Filling the giant screen is the image of Cord McCann—*her Cord!*—holding the hand of one of those corn-fed blondes that Kat left behind in Kansas.

And Cord is leaning in, about to kiss her, this freckled, snub-nosed blonde.

And that movement, that head dip, is repeated again and again and again in a maddening montage, Skip Herring yelling over it about how her husband has cheated on her.

Kat kills the tube and hurls the remote through the open balcony doors.

It tumbles eight floors to the road where it is crushed by a passing garbage truck.

She stands, filled with rage.

How dare he!

How dare he humiliate her like this!

With the single-mindedness of the true narcissist, there is no room in her thoughts for the endless tally of her own infidelities.

All she can see is Cord and that dumb, vapid-faced clodhopper.

This is war!

⋮

Bobby is on her tractor in the field she's dubbed "Little China" because it's located on the extreme eastern end of her spread, far from the road.

Far too, from all the land Earl Pyle has gobbled up and planted with genetically modified cotton, in cahoots with greedy biotech types from the big city.

Like her father before her, Bobby is an organic cotton farmer who tells all who will listen to her—and few will these days, as the drought forces them to sell out to Earl and his cronies—that genetically modified seed is killing the small farming towns on the high plains.

Emptying the towns of their labor force.

She, and the few organics still hanging on by their fingernails, are at war against chemical drift from the pesticides that Earl Pyle's biotech buddies use, and contamination by GM seed.

But, for once, this isn't plaguing her thoughts like it normally does.

She's thinking of Cord McCann, still asleep on her couch when she left an hour ago to get Jolie down to the bus before Bobby came to work her parched fields.

Or maybe he'd just been pretending to sleep, embarrassed about what hadn't happened last night.

Why'd he pulled back from that kiss?

Could he, honestly, be the gentleman he said he was?

Well, I guess you'll never know, honey.

That boat has sailed.

A rumble reaches Bobby's ears, over the clatter of the misfiring old tractor, and she turns in her seat and looks out toward the road.

The biggest dust cloud she's ever seen is advancing on her land.

A cloud that could only be thrown up by a convoy of vehicles.

In a second Bobby realizes what she's looking at, and who is about to invade her world, and she jumps from the tractor and sprints toward her house.

Cord *had* been faking sleep when Bobby and Jolene left that morning.

He waited until he heard the old truck wheeze to life and rattle down the farm road before he stood up from the couch and folded the bedding.

In a few minutes the truck returned—he had a memory of his father taking him down to the road as a kid, leaving Cord (or Fred as he had been then) standing amongst the wheat fields to wait for the yellow school bus—and he prepared himself to face Bobby.

The truck stopped at side of the house and the motor was cut.

Cord heard footsteps on gravel and waited for the back door to open, but it didn't and the morning was filled with the roar of a misfiring engine and, through the kitchen window, he saw Bobby riding an ancient, bucking, tractor out into the cotton fields.

Seeing her like that filled him with a longing that was difficult to contain.

It was all he could do to stop himself running after her and dragging her down from the tractor and kissing her.

No!

He was more of a danger than the drought or the chemical drift she told him about over dinner last night, before conversation turned more personal.

And intimate.

Before he nearly kissed her.

Before he got a hold of himself and shut that down, knowing his world with the mess that was about to break when he ended it with Kat, was too toxic to bring into the lives of this woman and her daughter.

They had enough trouble of their own.

Cord stands now at the sink in the kitchen, washing up the dishes from last night.

When he's done he's going to call a number the unhelpful bartender, Ray, gave him yesterday.

The number of a failed farmer who would be prepared to drive Cord back to Amarillo if he reached him before he went off to drink himself into a stupor in one of the saloons.

Cord dries his hands on a kitchen cloth when a rumble reaches his ears.

He crosses to the living room and looks out the window toward the road and, in the distance, he sees the SUVs and trucks that can only belong to an

invading army of media vultures.

They've found him.

Cord is paralyzed for a second, then he flees the house, heading for the old Ford parked in the shadow of the barn.

Pulling open the door of the truck, he prays that Bobby has left the keys in the ignition.

His prayer is answered.

Cord gets behind the wheel and cranks the engine.

It wheezes, splutters and dies.

He tries again.

Nothing.

He pumps the gas pedal—says another prayer—and turns the key.

This time the engine takes and he floors the old truck, speeding toward the advancing cloud.

Cord heads off the media circus at the Hollywood sign.

He hasn't planned it this way, of course, but it *is* fitting.

And, for the next twenty-four hours (which is about as long as the attention span of the gossipverse will stretch) Hollywood, Texas, will be almost as famous as its Californian namesake.

Parking the old Ford broadside across the road, Cord stands up out of the truck, positioning himself slap in front of the rusted old sign, and waits for the vehicles to reach him, disgorging voracious men and women with cameras and microphones, their voices raised in a frenzied babble.

For a moment Cord is tempted to run, bolt into one of the dying fields.

You're a movie star.

Act like one.

So he acts.

He holds up his arms for quiet, as if he's reprising his Oscar-winning role as the evangelist Oral Roberts in *Born To Preach*.

Slowly the babble dies down.

"I am going to make a statement," he says. "I will not be taking questions."

The roar begins again, and again he raises his arms and stills the crowd.

"For personal reasons I left the set of *Old Fashioned Love Song* yesterday. I want to make it clear that there is no conflict between me and the producers or director of the movie, and, when I return to Amarillo today, I will be offering them my apologies for my unprofessional behavior and hope that we can continue the production in good spirits."

He pauses, looking out over the hungry lenses and microphones.

"Me ending up here in Hollywood, Texas, was by complete chance. Ironic, of course, but chance none the less. I was raised in a small farming community and I'm pleased to say that country hospitality is still alive and well, even in these tough and cynical times. Perfect strangers took me in and gave me shelter. I owe them my thanks, and I would ask that you make me the focus of your attention, not them. Thank you."

When he tries to return to the truck he is mobbed, questions hurled at him.

“What about the blonde babe you were kissing?”

“Are you ditching Kat for this country girl?”

“Come on, Cord, dish the dirt, man!”

Cord tries to fight his way through to the Ford, but he is in danger of being trampled, and his nose is bloodied when the zoom lens of a video camera smacks him in the face.

Then the clatter and roar of a helicopter and the draft of its rotors gets everybody looking skyward, blinded by the dust it throws up as it lands on a dry field.

And through the dust, looking suave and cool, smiling his billion dollar smile, comes super-producer Tyler Swann.

The crowd parts for him and he walks up and puts his hands on Cord’s shoulders.

“Cord,” he says.

“Ty.”

“You okay?”

“I’ve been better.”

Swann turns to the media and says, “We will not be taking questions.”

He puts his arm around Cord’s shoulders and walks him toward the helicopter that still churns up the dust, the producer oblivious to the media scrum and the questions they hurl at him.

Ducking the blades, the two men climb into the chopper and the door is slammed shut.

Cord settles into a seat and buckles his belt.

“I’m sorry they had to get you out from L.A., Ty.”

“Ah, relax, Cord. Nobody died,” Swann says, handing Cord a monogrammed handkerchief.

“I screwed up,” Cord says, dabbing at his bloody nose as the engine of the chopper rises to a scream and it starts to lift off.

“It’s Kat who did the screwing, I’m told.”

“Yeah.”

“You are going to finish the picture?”

“Of course.”

“Good. What you and Kat do is no business of mine. I hope you’ll be able to work with her.”

“We’re pros, Ty. Don’t worry.”

“I won’t.”

“I’m sorry about this mess.”

Swann shakes his head.

“Hell, you didn’t insult any minorities or punch any cops. The publicity people are partying. No harm done.”

Cord looks out the chopper as it rises high above the plains, and sees the media vehicles swarming past the Ford and heading toward Bobby Champagne’s farm.

“Yeah,” he says. “No harm done.”

⋮

Sweating, panting, Bobby was still far from the house when she heard the unmistakable sound of the old Ford revving, and watched as her truck took off down toward the road.

She ran on, seeing the truck stop near the Hollywood sign, blocking the vehicles, and she felt, for a moment, that maybe Cord McCann wasn't a hero only on the screen.

But now, standing with her hands on her knees, sucking air, watching the chopper rise above the fields, Bobby curses him.

Curses him for coming into her life.

And Jolie's.

Curses him for leaving her to face these media vultures all alone.

As the vehicles speed toward her farm, Bobby sinks to the parched earth, hugging her knees and does something she hasn't done since her daddy died.

She cries her heart out.

Ten Cadillacs are planted snout first in the red sand of the Texas plain, their huge-finned bodies covered in a swirl of graffiti.

The SUV that brings Cord to the location bumps off the old Route 66, and rumbles toward the clump of movie production vehicles and trailers that squat in the sand at the gate to the Cadillac Farm.

Once Cord had know the story of how these cars had come to be here, part of an installation built by a group of art-hippies imported from San Francisco back in the seventies, but today his mind—understandably—is on other things.

From the high passenger seat Cord can see his stand-in, Pete Bridger, dressed in a Stetson, walking past the ten Cadillac carcasses, followed by Kat's stand-in, Lucy Pearl, who—only in Hollywood—had once been Pete's wife.

A camera dolly tracks with Pete and Lucy, the crew setting up the shot that the director, Topper Yazback—bald-headed and tattooed, barely out of film school—wants to get as soon as the molten sun is low enough in a sky the color of faded Levis.

A rusted Ford truck—T-Bone Buford's ride in the movie—stands near the planted Cadillacs.

It's a dead ringer for Bobby Champagne's pick-up, and Cord feels a hollowness in his gut as the SUV crunches to a halt and the driver comes around to open the door for him.

When Tyler Swann's chopper deposited Cord back in Amarillo, he had a production flunky track down the phone number of the convenience store in Hollywood, Texas, and he had a brief conversation with Bobby's chubby friend.

A very one-sided conversation, the plump girl seemingly tongue-tied at talking to him.

"Your name is Emma-Lou, right?"

He heard a gargle which he took as an affirmative.

"I want you to tell Bobby how sorry I am for this mess I landed her in. Okay?"

Another gargle.

"And I want you to give her my private cell number."

He gave the plump girl the number that only a handful of people were privy to.

Then he said to the girl, "Tell Bobby I owe her big time and if she ever needs anything, anything at all, she only has to call me, night or day. Will you tell her that?"

The girl mumbled something and Cord ended the call.

Walking now toward the make-up trailer, Cord knows the hell he has unleashed on Bobby's life.

It'll pass, sure, but like a tornado it'll leave a trail of destruction in its wake.

The memory of Jolene sitting up in bed, staring into his eyes as he told her the story, has him stopping dead in his tracks.

"You okay, Cord?" Dixie Lamb says from the stairs of the trailer.

Dixie has been the make-up artist every movie Cord has done and is the closest thing to an older sister he will ever have.

His wife no longer uses her, preferring a young French woman who panders to Kat's every whim, but Cord always demands Dixie, with her long gray hair pulled back into a ponytail, and her lined face wrinkled into a smile.

"I'm good, Dix," he says, stepping up into the air-conditioned trailer.

As he sits down in the chair in front of the mirror, Dixie says in a pretty mean Aussie accent, "So you went walkabout, mate?"

Cord laughs.

"Something like that."

"Media loved it."

"What do they say about no such thing as bad publicity?"

"That the gospel according to Tyler Swann?" Dixie asks.

"It is."

"Where's Ty?"

"Back in L.A. by now, shaking the Texas dust from his cordovans."

"Ever the dandy, old Tyler."

"Makes Tom Wolfe look like he shops at Costco."

Dixie laughs, but she's squinting at Cord in the mirror as he brushes make-up onto his cheeks.

"You wanna talk, Cord?"

"Nah, not right now, Dix. But thanks."

"Sure."

Cord closes his eyes and tries to concentrate on the scene ahead where Kat's character, Crystal Perdew, pursues T-Bone Buford and finds him wandering among the old Cadillacs.

It's a pivotal scene in the movie, the one that will allow T-Bone to be drawn back to the Grand Old Opry, and allow him—after much pain—to find love and redemption.

Cord feels very far from both of those things right now.

The door slams and Cord opens his eyes to see Topper Yazback standing beside him, Dixie stepping out of the trailer for a smoke.

"Cord," Topper says.

"Top. Sorry about running off."

"Don't sweat it, Cord. Kat was a trouper and we got Pete to double your stuff yesterday. Hell, you guys have been together so long he's more like Cord McCann than Cord McCann."

"That he is," Cord says and finds something like a laugh.

"Tyler tells me you're good to go on?"

"I am."

"Excellent. Now, I know there's some tension between you and Kat—"

"We're pros, Top."

"Hey, for sure. All I'm saying is I can use that in this scene, man. So I don't want you talking to her before you go on camera. Bottle that stuff. Uncork it in the scene, read me?"

"Loud and clear."

"I'm rolling ten cameras on this, Cord. There won't be any rehearsals, we're gonna go straight into a take. We've got maybe a ten minute window to catch the golden light and then it's dead, man. So . . ."

"So, no pressure?"

Topper holds up a hand for some skin.

"Excellent, Cord. My hero."

The director is gone is a whirl of boyish energy, and the old make-up artist returns.

“They keep getting younger,” Dixie says, bringing with her a cloud of Lucky Strike.

“You’ll need to keep a stock of Pampers soon,” Cord says, and Dixie laughs the last of her smoke.

An assistant director bangs on the door and Cord takes his Stetson and walks out in the golden sunset.

As Cord crosses to the rusted Cadillacs, he sees his wife standing off to the side, the French girl neurotically brushing at her face.

He ignores Kat.

The assistant director gives him his marks and steps away.

Cord stands staring out at nothing, until he hears *action* and then he’s T-Bone Buford, a man on the run from his past, walking the line of dead cars.

“You’re so predictable,” Kat as Crystal says, and Cord turns to face his wife of twenty years.

His first and only love.

Even with her hair teased into a big country diva do and more make-up on her face than she normally favors, she is still—for a moment—able to leave him breathless.

“That’s me,” he says in his T-Bone voice, and when he hears Bobby Champagne saying, “You sassin’ me?” he has to purge her from his memory.

“Remember when we were here last?” Kat says in what she thinks is a country drawl.

“Yeah. You’d opened for Willie Nelson the night before and ended up in the sack with one of his roadies.”

“Come on, T-Bone,” she says, her head held at the perfect angle for her cheekbones to catch the setting sun, “you were no angel.”

He stops at a car that’s daubed with swirls of color, and points at something scrawled on the Cadillac door: CRYSTAL & T-BONE 4 EVER.

Cord positions himself so the litter of digital cameras on the dolly that is stalking them can see the graffiti added by the art department.

“Hell, it’s still here,” she says.

“But we ain’t,” he says and he’s walking toward the truck.

“T-Bone, write me a song,” she says, following him.

“I don’t write no more. That well’s gone dry.”

“I don’t believe it.”

He shrugs and opens the door of the Ford.

Then he turns and stares at her.

“Okay, truth is, seeing you yesterday inspired me,” he says.

“Yeah?”

“Uh huh. I started writin’ a song for the first time in years.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Maybe. But you’d never have the balls to sing it.”

“Try me.”

He holds her gaze for a long moment, then he reaches into the cab of his truck and lifts out a beat-up old Martin guitar.

Leaning against the Ford, staring at the last of the sun, he strums the guitar.

“It’s called ‘Yesterday All Over Again’.”

Then, feeling more like Cord McCann than T-Bone Buford, and looking his faithless wife in the eye, he starts to sing:

Ain’t it funny

How time just flies

Over all the broken promises

And all the little white lies

And ain’t it funny

How all the old whiskey

And all the young men

Can’t stop tomorrow

Bein’ just yesterday all over again.

“That’s all I got,” he says, laying the guitar across the hood of the Ford.

“You finish it and I’ll sing it,” she says and then she turns and walks away, speaking over her shoulder. “You know where to find me.”

Cord watches her go, the sun briefly haloing her hair, and then slipping beneath the horizon.

Topper yells “Cut!” and the kid is all over Cord like an excitable terrier, beckoning Kat across.

“That was amazing! Just fantastic! We got it. Perfection. Wow.”

Cord nods and walks away toward the trailers.

Kat falls in beside him.

“So,” Kat says.

“So,” he replies.

“Quite a fuss you caused.”

“Yeah.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing happened.”

They walk a little farther, alone in the mob of crew wrapping the location.

“It’s over,” Cord says.

“I thought nothing happened?”

“You and me. It’s over with us, Kat.”

“You’re just angry. Hurt. I’m sorry.”

He stops and looks at her.

“I’ve already got another room at the Savoy Hotel. When we get back to L.A. it’s your turn to move to the Château.”

“Cord . . .”

He walks away from her and doesn’t look back.

Emma-Lou watches in horror as Bobby tears the piece of paper with Cord McCann's phone number on it into little pieces and scatters them like confetti.

"But he said if you wanted anythin' at all, to call him, anytime!" Emma-Lou says.

"What kind of trouble could I want from that man that he ain't already given me?"

Bobby finishes ripping the paper and falls onto the ratty old couch, a cloud of dust rising around her, getting her to sneeze.

"Bless you," Emma-Lou says, laying a plump hand on Bobby's shoulder.

Bobby shakes it off, then she reaches across and takes her old friend's elbow.

"I'm sorry, honey, I'm just all choked up over this bidness."

"And that's only to be expected."

"You sure nobody followed you here?"

"I'm sure."

Bobby is hiding out in the house that belongs to Emma-Lou's brother and sister-in-law, who had joined the exodus from Hollywood and gone to the big city to try and find work.

They haven't been able to sell the house, and it's sinking into disrepair.

Emma-Lou, comfortable in her apartment over the store, refuses to live here, convinced that the old house is haunted by the ghost of a woman who died in the master bedroom a hundred years ago.

Bobby, sitting in the gloom with her friend, too nervous to light a candle—the power had been cut months ago—prefers a ghost any old time to the media vampires who were even now camped outside her farm house and

cruising the streets of Hollywood, doing sarcastic little on-camera reports in the sad main road, still searching for her.

When she'd seen yellowbellied Cord McCann flying away in that helicopter, Bobby turned on her heel and ran hell for leather, tearing through the neighboring fields—most of them Earl Pyle's kingdom now—until she arrived sweating and breathless at the school.

Too late.

Buster had already fetched Jolene, taking her to his father's ranch.

For once this almost pleased Bobby, knowing that her child would be safe from the media on Earl Pyle's spread.

Then she'd walked into town through the fields, cursing herself for leaving her cell phone in the Ford, and made her way to the convenience store, avoiding the main road, letting herself in through the alley.

When she entered the store, Emma-Lou stared at her, mouth agape.

"You're famous."

Bobby said nothing, just launched herself at her oldest buddy, knocking her from her perch behind the cash resister, farm girl hands at her chubby throat.

"How could you? I thought you were my friend?"

With a move that a WWF wrestler would envy, the big girl threw Bobby and dragged herself to her feet, weeping, saying, "You gone plumb insane, Bobby!"

Bobby getting to her knees, ready to take Emma-Lou down again said, "You contacted him, didn't you? Your little hero, Skip Haddock?"

"It's Skip *Herring*, and no, of course I didn't contact him. I swore to you I wouldn't."

"Then how did he know where Cord was?"

"How in hell should I know?"

"You lyin' sack of mule dung!"

Bobby launched herself again, and Emma-Lou had to dodge her like a matador sidestepping a bull.

"Think, Bobby," she said, tapping her temple. "Who has the most to gain by makin' trouble for you?"

Bobby stopped, panting, staring at Emma-Lou through her mussed up hair.

"Buster and Earl?"

"And whose even more addicted to gossip than me?"

“Madison Mount?”

Emma-Lou nodded.

“You got it in one.”

Radiator boiling over, Bobby swung for the door.

“I’ll kill that red-headed tramp. I’ll feed her her underthings!”

Emma-Lou tackled her from the rear and threw her behind a display rack of candy just as a fancy truck pulled up outside and people in big city clothes, festooned with camera gear stepped out.

“Git in the storeroom,” Emma-Lou said, “and stay there.”

Bobby obeyed and when the media types asked their questions, Emma-Lou did a good impersonation of everybody’s favorite small-town idiot (“No, ma’am I cain’t allow as I know no Roberta Champagne”) until they slammed out in frustration.

Then the big girl smuggled Bobby into her old Mazda and drove her over here to this hideout, fortifying her with potato chips and bottles of soda.

Lent Bobby her cell phone, too.

When Bobby called Buster, Emma-Lou’s name came up on his phone and he answered by saying, “If you’re phonin’ on behalf of your slutty friend, you’re wastin’ your time.”

“Only slut is the one in your bed, Buster,” Bobby said.

He took a moment to gather himself.

“You screwed up major league, this time, Bobby.”

“Let me speak to Jolene.”

“No way in hell.”

“Let me talk to her or I’ll come over to your daddy’s house and I’ll bring a convoy of media monsters with me.”

“You wouldn’t do that.”

“Try me.”

There was a pause before she heard her daughter’s voice.

“Mama? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, honey, I’m fine.”

“What’s goin’ on?”

“There’s just a misunderstandin’, baby, it’ll all be cleared up.”

“A misunderstandin’ about Cord?”

“Yeah. Now you stay with your daddy, okay, and you be good. Mama’s gonna come git you just as soon as she can.”

“Okay, Mama.”

Fighting tears, Bobby had hung up.

And now here she was, sitting with her chubby friend in the dark, wondering what to do next.

They both jump when Emma-Lou's telephone rings.

The big girl checks it and says, "It's Booth Tarkingham."

Bobby's drunken, deadbeat lawyer.

The only person she can afford to fight Buster for the custody of Jolene.

Bobby answers the phone.

"Booth."

"Bobby, I'm afraid I'm the bearer of bad tidings."

"What tidings, Booth?"

"Earl and Buster have petitioned the circuit court for an emergency custody hearing in the wake of this whole damned movie star ruckus."

"When?"

"Tomorrow. Ten a.m."

"Oh, hell."

"I have to tell you the outcome don't look to favor you, Bobby."

"I'll see you in court tomorrow, Booth."

She almost adds, "Please try to be sober," but she bites back the words, kills the call and tells Emma-Lou what's going to happen in the morning.

"What are you going to tell the judge?" Emma-Lou asks.

"The truth," Bobby says.

Emma-Lou says nothing, but they both know that the truth is no defense against Earl Pyle and a judge who has a hand deep in his wallet.

“When I stepped outta Sam’s today after gettin’ my head pruned some skinny Asian feller shoved a camera in my face and asked me if I knew Bobby Champagne,” Earl Pyle says, setting fire to a giant cigar.

Buster Pyle, left standing before his father’s aircraft-carrier sized desk, says, “Is that right, Daddy?”

“Damn straight. And I looked right into the damned lens and said, apropos of sweet nothin’: gun control is for faggots.”

Buster has to laugh.

“You really said that?”

“Yessir, I did. I’m not fool enough to believe they’ll put that on the television, but I said it.”

He stares at his son through the cloud of cigar smoke.

“Was it your idea to bring this media pondscum to my town?”

When Buster hesitates, Earl shakes his head and says, “No, I’m thinkin’ it was the work of The Harlot.”

Earl’s name for Madison Mount.

“You don’t have the necessary deviousness,” Earl says.

Buster decides this means his father approves, so he takes the plunge.

“It was something I set in motion.”

“That right?”

“Yessir.”

“Well, it brings to mind your late mama.”

Earl Pyle’s face softens as he gazes at his row of stuffed animal trophies.

He wags his cigar at the chair in front of his desk.

“Sit, boy. Sit.”

Buster sits and watches as his father splashes two fingers of whiskey into a shot glass and takes a sip. Buster isn’t offered a drink.

“You remember your mother?”

“Yes, of course I do, Daddy.”

Buster was ten years old when the 6:19 train from Amarillo struck his mother's Lincoln Town Car on the level crossing just outside Hollywood.

"A most unsightly woman," Earl Pyle says. "I sent for the daintiest dresses from the best stores in Dallas but it was no good, she always looked like a linebacker in drag. You're lucky that you favor me in the looks department."

Earl swallows his drink and pours another.

"Our union was arranged, of course, by my daddy and hers. Good for bidness. I had to fulfill my obligation to produce a son and heir, but I was free to find my carnal pleasures outside the marital bed. If I was left unaroused by your mother's body, I came to greatly admire her mind. We were a formidable team and built the Pyle Empire into what it is today. If only that damned train . . ."

Earl is lost in thought, staring over Buster's head.

Then he focuses his rheumy eyes on his son.

"After her death, word came to me that your mother had formed some kind of friendship with the big ole gal who worked at the feed store. I hope she did, and that it gave her satisfaction." He blows a smoke ring. "You have any notion how two outsize females would go about pleasin' one another? Physically?"

Buster has spent more than enough time on porno sites on the web to know exactly how this is achieved, but this turn in the conversation leaves him queasy and he shakes his head.

"No, Daddy," he says.

"Certainly brings vivid images to mind," Earl says, lost in thought.

Then, suddenly, he's all business.

"Anyway, whoever engineered this movie star scandal-mongering, it has delivered us the child."

"You're sure tomorrow's hearing will go our way?"

"If Judge Crowe puts his hand any deeper in my pocket it's gonna come out wet."

Earl Pyle sniggers.

"The child is ours, Buster. Bobby's land, however, remains in question."

"The two are linked, Daddy. Bobby is fightin' to keep the land to pass onto Jolene. If she loses Jolie her spirit will be broken. The land will be ours within the month."

Earl nods.

"I'm gonna hold you to that."

He turns to charge his glass.

"You do realize that in order to acquire all the land I have acquired in the last few years, I've had to mortgage our spread a hunnerd times over?"

Buster shakes his head. His knowledge of his father's business dealings is sketchy.

"Yessir. If we don't get the Champagne land the Dallas biotech consortium will look elsewhere. They demand complete control. They have to own every parcel of land in Hollywood or they'll walk away. They've had enough lawsuits over the years from organic commies like your ex-wife. So, let me paint a picture that even a retard like you can understand: we get Bobby's land or we lose everything. *Comprende?*"

"Absolutely, Daddy. You relax yourself now, I'm on it."

"You better be."

Earl Pyle waves his cigar.

"Now git on down and see to your daughter."

Buster's more of a mind to drive across to Ray's Saloon and deepen his friendship with the new barmaid, but he walks down the steps, the babble of reality TV drawing him into the living room where Madison sits with Jolene.

Buster takes a bottle of Jack from the sideboard and pours himself a drink.

"Madison, are your breasts plastic?" asks Jolene.

Madison glares at her.

"Of course not! How can you even ask that? Every inch of this body is the way God made it."

"You're lyin'."

"Buster," Madison says, lost in Kardashian-land, "talk to your little girl."

"Jolie, stop botherin' Madison," Buster says.

"But she's lyin', Daddy, she's done stuff to her lips. That's why it looks like she's gone and kissed a hot stove."

The kid laughs, and so does Buster.

When Madison sends him a withering look, he hides his grin in his glass.

He needs her as an ally for a few more days, then her bubble butt (surgically enhanced in Houston at his considerable expense) is outta here.

"Come on," he says to Jolene. "It's past your bedtime."

"Will you tell me a story, Daddy?"

“Hell, no, but you can watch one of them stupid DVDs until you fall asleep,” he says, taking the child’s hand, but thinking of the barmaid over at Ray’s, a dirty blonde with sloe eyes and the laugh of a wildcatter.

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It's like something from *Through the Looking Glass*, Cord McCann and Kat Mansfield sitting side by side on a couch in a suite in Amarillo's Savoy Hotel, facing . . . Cord McCann and Kat Mansfield.

Well, not exactly.

They're facing their stand-ins Pete Bridger and Lucy Pearl, dressed and (in the case of Lucy) made-up to look exactly like the Hollywood power couple.

All part of producer Todd Levinson's plan to satisfy the voracious appetites of the media without discomforting his stars.

Levinson is no Tyler Swann, he's an overweight man who worked his way up from the publicity department back when there was still a studio system, a nuts and bolts producer who isn't scared to get his hands dirty, leaving Swann to make rain in Tinsel Town.

Levinson's gathered the two couples (ex and about-to-be-ex) here in his suite to finalize the game plan for that night.

When Cord arrived a few minutes ago, Pete was over by the window gazing out at the night, and Levinson was pacing the carpet, talking on his cell phone.

No sign of Kat and Lucy.

Cord went and stood beside Pete, staring at their twin reflections in the glass of the window, marveling as he always did at the resemblance between him and his stand-in.

Same height.

Same weight.

Same blue eyes.

Same long hair and beards.

They'd done more than twenty pictures together since Cord had convinced the producers on his first movie to take a chance on Pete—fresh out prison after a stretch for dealing weed—as his stand-in.

They'd met in a bar in Venice Beach, back when Cord still drank a little, Pete taking the stool beside him saying, "Damned if I know if you look like me or I look like you."

“When were you born?” Cord asked.

Pete told him.

Cord was two months older.

“You look like me,” Cord said and bought Pete a drink.

The next day Cord got him the job that changed his life, and Pete had never forgotten it.

Twenty-three years later, the resemblance—if anything—was even greater.

“How’re you doin’, pard?” Pete said in his native Texas accent.

“I’m okay.”

They stood in silence for a while longer then Pete said, “You may have heard that old sayin’ about wives: can’t live with ’em, can’t live without ’em?”

“I think I heard it somewhere, yeah.”

“I’ll allow that the first part is true, but the second is the ripest horse manure. I have to say that I’ve found it very easy to live without Lucy since I cut her loose.”

Cord laughs.

“That’s good to hear.”

“So, take heart my friend.”

“I will.”

“You need anythin’ you only gotta ask, okay?”

“Appreciate that, man.”

There was a knock at the door and Levinson, cradling the phone under his jaw, ushered Kat and Lucy into the room, saying, “Ladies, welcome.”

And here they all sit, Levinson perched on a chair between the couches.

“Okay, so Lucy and Pete you’re going out on the town. Starting at Crazy Dave’s Fillin’ Station,” he says, consulting a computer print-out, “where you will enjoy diner-style food and a great selection of domestic and premium longnecks.”

“Oh my,” Kat says when Lucy pulls a face, “I’m envious.”

Lucy, with her hair coiffed and careful make-up, dressed in Kat’s clothes, looks good enough to fool most people.

She appeared on set on Cord and Kat’s third movie together, and—of course—Pete was attracted to her.

Cord and Kat were at Pete and Lucy’s wedding and Kat, a little tipsy, said to Cord in the car afterward, “That was like watching a low-rent

version of my life.”

Vintage Kat.

And, of course, Kat had hit on Pete, the resemblance to her husband too perverse to resist.

Pete had never breathed a word of this, but Cord had straight from the mouth of the third assistant director who'd bunked with the stand-in that Pete had picked Kat up and carried her from his room, telling her that if she ever tried this again he'd whip her until she wept.

Which probably only piqued Kat's interest, but she stayed away from Pete after that.

Levinson says, “We chose Crazy Dave's because the lights are dim and you can sit in booths fashioned from classic American cars, giving you a little distance between you and your neighbors.”

Lucy is a fair facsimile of Kat until she opens her mouth and pure Jersey shore spews out: “Sounds like old times, doesn't it, Pete?” she says. “You and me in eatin' in a car? You always were a cheap bastard.”

“And you, darlin', had the manners of a sow. A car was the only place for you.”

“Kiddies, please,” Levinson says, “play nice. After dinner you'll have a quick drink at La Cabana and then it's home before pumpkin time. There'll be bodyguards a plenty to run interference, so, Pete and Lucy, all you have to do is smile, smile, smile.”

Lucy flashes her toothiest, grin.

“Like that you mean?”

“Easy girl,” Kat says, “it's me you're doubling for, not Julia Whatsername.”

Levinson stands and shoos the stand-ins from the room.

“Okay, Pete and Lucy, go out and have fun.”

Levinson hovers over his stars.

“Kat, Cord, all I'm going to say is I hope you kids can work it out. You know how much I love you both.”

“Aw, gee Uncle Todd, you're bringing a tear to my eye,” Kat says, very dry-eyed.

“I'm relying on neither of you to talk to the media without clearing it with me.”

Kat jabs a finger at Cord.

“It's Mr. Lover Lover here who needs to get media-smart,”

She stands.

“We done here?”

“Yes. Can I trust you to stay in your room tonight, Kat?”

“Sure. I’ll brush my teeth and say my prayers and tuck my lonesome little self in.”

She looks down at Cord.

“I’ll remember you in those prayers.”

And she’s gone.

“These things are never easy,” Levinson says.

“What things?”

“Divorces.”

“How do you know we’re getting divorced?”

“Well, aren’t you?”

“Hell, Todd, I dunno. I guess so.”

“Then as a veteran of four, let me advise you to get a pitbull of a lawyer. A woman scorned is terror to behold.”

“I think I’m the one who has been scorned.”

“Believe me, Cord, the scorned role is always the woman’s. No matter the circumstances.”

Cord stands.

“Nobody’s going to buy it, that Kat and I out on the town together.”

“Of course not. But it’s a dance. The media knows that we’re parading your stand-ins before them, but we’re doing it respectfully, and they have hungry network shows and websites, so they’ll take what we throw them. By the way, this added publicity is a fillip.”

“Nice word, Todd. Can I use it?”

“It’s yours, Cord. Goodnight.”

Cord leaves the producer’s room and walks down the corridor to the elevators.

He presses the button, waits a few moments until he hears a ping, and then the doors slide open and reveal the single occupant of the elevator.

Skip Herring.

Many people wonder why Skip Herring is so good at his job.

How he has managed to scale the slopes of scandalmongery, to stand alone at its pinnacle, the acknowledged master of his art.

(In his estimation, that is.)

He is tenacious, true.

He is cunning rather than intelligent, an asset in his trade.

(Intelligence usually comes bundled with taste and—god forbid—empathy.)

His skin is thick enough to bounce back a Sidewinder missile.

Useful attributes, all, but none of them is unique enough to explain his success.

Skip, alone in the elevator as it makes its rapid ascent from the lobby to his room on the tenth floor, cheeks his teeth in the mirror for spinach—a reflex after spending years on camera—knows that he is so good because of the thing that is both his blessing and his curse.

His virginity.

That by holding onto his virtue and his fluids—Skip allows himself no recourse to self-pleasure—he keeps bottled within him a force that fuels the key to his success.

His sixth sense.

For Skip Herring knows things, without knowing how he knows them.

They just come to him, downloads from some mysterious place somewhere way out there in the universe.

Nuggets of information that determine his actions.

And he has come to believe unquestioningly in this intuition.

Like, earlier today, when he and his cameraman, the sordid *Mijnheer* Delvers, were en route to the airport in Amarillo, a voice had told him to stay in Texas.

To get rooms at the very hotel that was accommodating Cord McCann and Kat Mansfield.

Now this notion hadn't seemed earth shaking at the time.

After all, the hotel was crammed with media types, following on the coat-tails of Skip's scoop about Cord and his hayseed paramour.

Normally Skip would have flown away happy to let them snack on his left overs.

To make-do with his sloppy seconds.

But here he is, still in Amarillo, scoffing at the transparent ruse of the producers sending the stand-ins out into the night.

Skip, unlike his rating-conscious colleagues, wouldn't stoop so low as to play along with this.

He's waiting.

Waiting for what?

He isn't sure.

Isn't sure until the elevator stops and the doors open and Cord McCann steps inside.

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On the helicopter ride to Amarillo, Tyler Swann had snapped his fingers at a flunky—or *flunkette*, to be more precise, because she was young and blonde and looked built for a casting couch—who had made an iPad appear from a recess somewhere and had shown Cord that vile peeper Skip Herring’s report from outside Bobby Champagne’s window.

Shown him the almost-kiss.

Made into something much more by the toxic gossip-monkey with his strident, alliterative insinuations.

Cord shoved the iPad back at the girl.

“The man is a cockroach.”

“I won’t argue with that,” Tyler Swann said, as the girl dabbed dust away from his suspiciously tight jaw line with a moist towel. “But I thought you needed to see it, just to know the genesis of this whole brouhaha.”

“I appreciate that, Ty.”

“A low breed, the scandal monger,” Tyler said, allowing his hand free reign as it wandered the plains and hollows of his assistant, who never lost her Zen-like smile. “Feeding off other men’s *kaka*.”

The words echoing through Cord’s head as the elevator doors whisper closed at his back, sealing him in the mirrored cabin with his nemesis, Skip Herring.

Skip Herring inspects his swollen eye in his bathroom mirror.

Probes the tender cheekbone, sees the bruise already rising to the surface of his skin.

He's going to have a shiner, okay.

It's good, but it's not perfect.

Not *camera ready*.

So he takes a deep breath, makes a fist and punches himself in the eye, like he did a few minutes ago.

Blinking away tears, Skip is satisfied at what he sees.

"That Old Sixth Sense," he croons as he hurries back into his room and hits speed-dial on his cell phone.

"Yep?" Wack Delvers, says after a few rings.

"Get up to my room pronto," Skip says. "Bring the camera gear."

"Can I bring a friend, also?" asks the Dutchman, and Skip can hear giggles in the background.

"No, you may not. Just get your flabby butt up here right now."

Skip kills the call and readies himself for the camera.

Something that Skip knows a lot about: cameras.

Like in the elevator, earlier, he'd known exactly where the surveillance camera was positioned, mounted on the ceiling of the cabin, just above his left shoulder.

Known instinctively to shift around, so that Cord McCann's back was to the camera, the movie star saying, "You're slime, man. How do you sleep at night?"

Without answering, Skip Herring—possessed by a moment of genius breathtaking even by his high standards—had moved up close to the movie star, then flung himself backward as if he'd been struck, sliding to the floor of the elevator, covering his eye with his hand.

Cord McCann, who of course hadn't lifted a finger, stared at Skip in amazement as he acted out this crazy kabuki.

When the elevator reached Skip's floor he sprang to his feet and bolted, as if in terror.

Bolted only as far as the adjacent elevator, which he took down to the basement where the hotel security guards had their office.

Skip found one old guy in a rent-a-cop uniform watching a ballgame on a portable TV, ignoring the banks of monitors beside him that took live feeds from the surveillance cameras dotted around the hotel.

A couple of hundred bucks had bought Skip the DVR recording from the elevator.

Sitting at his laptop, waiting for Wack to arrive, Skip scrolls through the footage.

Lordy, *lordy*, he deserves an Oscar for his performance.

Nobody, but *nobody*, watching the piece that he is about to edit and send out into the gossipverse will believe that Cord McCann didn't strike him.

"The mother lode," Skip says, laughing to himself as he plays the elevator footage again and again and again.

Bobby, unable to sleep—the court appearance in a few hours twisting her nerves, making her feel like a gnat caught in a hailstorm—gets up from the bed and wanders through to kitchen for a glass of milk.

Standing at the counter, milk in her hand, dressed in the outsize T-shirt and PJ pants that her generously-built friend dropped by for her, she feels like a kid.

Wishes she was five years old again, and that she was in her house, with her mama and daddy and little brother sleeping down the corridor.

The absence of them all is too much to bear, and to stop herself from just folding into a useless ball of tears and snot, she hurries through to the living room and clicks on the TV and almost screams when she sees that skull-faced little wolverine, Skip Herring.

About to click away from him, she stills her finger on the remote when the screen is filled with some kind of security camera video of Cord McCann stepping into an elevator with Herring.

When Skip Herring falls to the floor, clutching his face, she hears herself yelling, “Git him, Cord! Get the little weasel good!”

Then, as Herring is back on camera showing off his black eye, she clicks the TV dead and falls onto the couch, the cloud of dust triggering a sneezing fit.

Recovering, blowing her nose, Bobby knows that the person who is owed a good beating is Cord McCann.

Skip Herring, as disgusting as he is, is just the messenger.

Cord McCann is the real and deserved target of her anger.

Coming into her life, and bringing with him this twister of destruction.

Bobby allows the righteous rage to well up in her.

Rage at how he brought the media down on her like pack of coyotes.

How he used her child to weasel his way into her house.

How he left her hanging, waiting for his lips . . .

Bobby jumps to her feet, spilling the milk.

Hell, girl, are you that shallow?

With all you got to worry about, you're frettin' 'cause Mr. Big Time Movie Star Cord McCann didn't plant no kiss you?

Pathetic as it is, the answer is *yes*.

And that answer prompts the question: *why?*

Why didn't he kiss her?

She's only ever had one man in her life: the disgusting Buster Pyle, and she knows better than to believe a single word that came out of that lying mouth of his, but Buster had told her she was pretty, hadn't he?

Told her she was sexy?

Or was that just a line, to get her into the sack?

Get her to marry him?

Get her to sign over the Champagne land to his conniving daddy?

These dark thoughts lead her right back to the terror she's been hiding from: Buster is going to take her little girl from her in the morning.

Take away the last person she has left.

Bobby finds herself on her hands and knees, scrabbling on the floor for the paper she tore into strips.

The paper Emma-Lou scribbled Cord McCann's cell phone number on.

Hearing the chubby girl saying, "He said you can call him anytime, if you ever need anything. Sounded real sincere, too."

Abandoning the shreds of paper, Bobby stands, takes a deep breath, and goes to the bathroom and washes her face.

You're not never gonna phone that man, hear?

Not never.

Not never gonna allow him to bring his mess into your life again.

You'll fight your fight the way you always fought it.

Alone.

"I didn't punch the scum sucking little weasel," Cord says, trying to stay all cool and in the moment, sipping freshly squeezed OJ in his trailer, waiting to be called for the first shot of the morning.

Todd Levinson raises his hands as if he's surrendering.

"Nobody can blame you, Cord."

"Todd, read my lips: I. Did. Not. Hit. Him."

"The video footage says different."

"You watched it?"

"Me and the rest of America. Every network ran that clip."

"Did you see my fist land?"

"Come on, Cord . . ."

"Answer the damn question, Todd."

"No, you had your back to the camera. But you sure as hell see him hitting the deck. And in his reports Herring looks like he's gone ten rounds with Mike Tyson."

Cord drinks, keeping things cool.

"He did it to himself."

"He punched himself in the eye?"

"Yes."

"Now that you *would* have seen on camera."

"Todd, wise up, man. He jumped away from me, covered his eye and fled the elevator. Then he went to his room and did what he did."

"Cord, you know how this sounds?"

"Sounds like I'm talking about a twisted little gossip merchant who'll do anything for a story."

"No, it sounds like you've lost your mind."

"Do you believe that?"

Levinson shrugs.

"Cord, you're under pressure. What's happening with you and Kat. That business with the girl in the hick town. When you're back in L.A. maybe

you should see somebody. I can give you the number of a really good guy. Very discreet.”

“Todd, who the hell do you think you’re talking to? Mel Gibson?”

“Slow down, Cord. Everybody in this business gets a little strung out sometime. No shame in that. Comes with the territory.”

“Get out of my trailer.”

Levinson stands.

“I’m sorry if I offended you.”

Cord doesn’t reply and the producer leaves and closes the door after him.

When Cord finds himself throttling the empty foam cup, he drops it to the floor.

Whoa, man, slow down.

This isn’t you.

Cord, famously polite and discreet, one of the best liked stars in the business, marvels at how his life has unraveled in the last few days.

How the world now regards him as a guy who cheats on his wife and beats up gutter journalists.

The world can take a hike, he thinks, drop kicking the paper foam cup at the door.

And then he’s flashing back twenty-five years, watching as the ball he has just punted tumbles toward the uprights (an impossible kick, from the sideline, the monster defenders of the opposition running him down) and sails through, winning the game for his high school in the dying seconds of the second half, his team mates lifting him onto their shoulders as the bleachers erupted.

After the game, when all the others had gone off to get drunk and celebrate, he sat alone in the empty stadium.

It was the last game of his senior year.

He was an okay quarterback, but no college scouts were hunting him and there was no way his father was going to pay for him to study.

So, life would narrow from here on in.

He’d be a farmer.

Marry and have kids.

Why did the prospect of that seem so damned dire?

Then a girl came and sat beside him.

The girl the whole school had been in awe of since her family moved here two years ago. A girl too movie-star gorgeous for this small town.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi.”

“Good kick.”

“Lucky kick.”

“They count too.”

“Yeah, they do.”

He looked at her, her beauty making him blush.

“You a football fan?”

“No.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“I came to see you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

She didn’t answer, just looked out over the mean little town and the endless flatness of the wheat fields.

“So,” she said as if she’d been reading his mind, “that’s your future stretching out in front of you?”

“Could be worse.”

“Could be a hell of a lot better.”

“Yeah? How?”

In reply she leaned in and kissed him.

It was a kiss unlike any he had ever felt.

Somehow he understood that he wasn’t kissing a girl.

He was kissing a woman.

She pulled back, smiling, her eyes way too knowing for her years.

“You like that?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“You want more?”

“Sure.”

She laughed.

“Good.”

She nodded out at the fields.

“Want more than that?”

“Where’s this going?” he asked.

“What you should be asking is where *I’m* going.”

He laughed without knowing why, his head spinning.

“Okay, Betty, where are you going?”

“My names not Betty. Not anymore.”

“What’s your name, then?”

“Katherine. Kat.”

“How’s that?”

“I changed it.”

“When?”

“This morning. I woke up and looked in the mirror and said, *Hello, Kat.* ”

“Why’d you change it?”

“Betty’s the name of a small town girl. Kat, on the other hand, is a name to travel with. A name that can take you places.”

“Places like where?”

“Like Hollywood.”

“Hollywood, California?”

“Yes. That’s where I’m going. Tomorrow. My bag is packed and I’ve got my Greyhound ticket.”

He stared at her.

“You’re serious?”

“I am.”

He laughed.

“You gonna go and be a movie star?”

“Yes.”

When he saw her unsmiling face he nodded and said, “Well you sure are pretty enough.”

“So are you.”

He stared at her.

“Huh?”

She touched a finger to his cheek, still dark with a band of eyeblack.

“The camera will love you.”

He stood.

“Okay, now you’re making fun of me.”

She stood, too.

A tall girl, not much shorter than he was.

“I’m not.”

She put something in his hand.

He looked down at a bus ticket with a sprinting greyhound printed on it.

“You want more, you’ll be at the bus station six a.m. tomorrow,” she said.

“You’re crazy,” he said as she walked away.

But he’d lain awake all night, listening to yet another drunken brawl coming from his adoptive parents’ room, his mother matching his father drink for drink and punch for punch.

Fred Wilks had no siblings.

Hell, he didn’t even have a dog.

So he packed his bag and went to the bus station and boarded the bus to California with the girl who called herself Kat and drove into his future.

A future of fame and fortune beyond his wildest dreams.

Sitting now in his trailer, an actor with a star on Hollywood Boulevard and a couple of Oscars on his mantelpiece, he wonders how things would have been if he’d torn up that bus ticket and stayed in Kansas.

He would have been a plain man and poor, he knows.

But, maybe, he would have found the one thing that he didn’t have.

The love of a good woman, he sings softly in his T-Bone Buford voice and laughs.

Laughs even though it’s true.

Life has rained down on him a great bounty.

But the emptiness he felt that day sitting on the high school bleachers is still with him, has haunted him all these years.

Only left him for a few hours in Bobby Champagne’s house, telling her daughter a story, eating country-style food at her kitchen table.

It was as if the universe had done a little Twilight Zone thing for him, torn a hole and let him glimpse a life that may have been.

A feeling of such profound sadness envelopes Cord that when a gofer bangs on the trailer door and shouts, “Five minutes, Mr. McCann,” he can’t find any good reason to move.

Then he sees the child again.

Jolene.

Sees the way Bobby Champagne looked at him across the table.

The memory is like a spike twisting in his gut, enough to get him out of the trailer into the alley behind a grim Amarillo bar, where T-Bone Buford is found lying passed out by his ex-wife.

As he walks from his trailer, Dixie falling in beside him to finesse the grime on his face, the ant farm that is a movie set milling around him, Cord

walks off the ghost of Fred Wilks, walks off the empty shell that is Cord McCann and feels the comforting shroud of T-Bone Buford settling on him.

So when Kat, smirking at him over the shoulder of the French make-up artist who shadows her like a Siamese twin, says, “Nice left hook, Champ,” he just smiles a serene smile and replies in his T-Bone voice, “Thank you kindly, ma’am” as he settles himself in the meticulously art-directed trash outside the saloon.

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“Ain’t no atheists in a foxhole,” Booth Tarkingham says, his breath sour enough to curl Bobby’s hair.

They’re in Booth’s car, a Dodge so rusted Bobby can see the asphalt between her feet as they sit parked across the road from the Hollywood court house.

“What’s that even mean, Booth?” she asks, hunched low in the seat, keeping an eye open for the media.

She sees none and hopes that they have moved on, found another carcass to pick clean.

“Means that if your relationship with the Almighty has lapsed, it may be time to renew it.”

“I said my prayers. I’m going to trust in the truth.”

Booth, a hipflask in his shaking hand, says, “I fear we may need something stronger than that,” as he takes a long draft, then caps the flask and opens the car door. “Come on, Bobby, let’s get this bidness done.”

As she follows her drunken old lawyer across to the courthouse, she sees a brand new Lincoln glide to the curb.

Earl Pyle is at the wheel and Buster sits in the rear like a kid.

Earl doesn’t allow his son to ride up front.

Just the way the man is.

Earl stands up out of the car.

“Well, if it ain’t Bobby Champagne, the toast of Hollywood. And by that I mean Hollywood, Californ-*i-a*.”

“Mornin’ Daddy,” she says, just to rile the fat man, who always objected to the Pyle’s proud bloodline mixing with the inferior Champagne’s.

As she strides into the courthouse, keeping her chin high, Booth Tarkingham wheezing as he trots to keep up with her, Bobby fingers the tiny bale of cotton on the chain around her neck.

She’s going to need all the good luck she can get.

Things go pretty much as she expected.

The presiding judge, Culver Crowe, living up to his name in his black cloak, sits on his perch, glowering down at the courtroom as he allows the Pyle's lawyer, Beaumont Parch, to rip at Bobby like a fighting dog, painting a picture of her as a bad mother and a woman of loose morals.

Parch says, "Ms Champagne, are you insultin' the intelligence of this court by tryin' to tell us you did not know who that man was when you gave him a ride in your car?"

"I did not," Bobby says. "To me he was just a man in trouble."

"Let me suggest that you knew full well that Cord McCann was a motion picture actor of wide repute and invited him to spend the night in your house to slake your lust on his famous person."

Crowe shouts Booth Tarkingham down when he raises a querulous objection, and the old alky slumps back into his seat, and shrugs when Bobby meets his eye.

Parch winds himself to a conclusion as fiery as a tent preacher ending a sermon.

"Slaking that lust, I might add, with your dear, innocent child listenin' on from her room!"

And it goes pretty much downhill from there.

Buster Pyle is allowed to take the stand and pillory Bobby, with no interventions from Booth Tarkington tolerated.

Then Earl Pyle, sleek as a seal, is allowed the last word.

"Your Honor," he says to the man whose palm he greases, "as grandfather to the child in question, I promise to aid my son if he is granted sole custody. Aid my son by providin' the child with a home built on Christian foundations. A home irrigated by the milk of human kindness, and blessed with the glow of family affection. A home very different from the cathouse in which her mother holds her captive, endangering the very soul of the darlin' child."

Booth Tarkington whispers an objection.

Again he is rebuffed.

Crowe doesn't bother to retire, he grunts and fixes his button eyes on the few people present.

Clearing his throat, he speaks in a voice honeyed with corruption: “This court has been petitioned to modify the terms of custody of the minor Jolene Champagne. This is no small matter, since it is well documented that child custody laws of the state of Texas favor granting both parents access to the child.”

He pauses and looks at Bobby, his nose twitching in profound disgust.

“In reaching a decision I have had to consider whether having both parents serving as conservator to Jolene Champagne is in the best interests of the child. After hearing testimony today, and taking stock of the events that have played across our television screens and in the streets and fields of our beloved town, I have to conclude that it is not.”

His gaze now lingers fondly on his benefactor Earl Pyle who can’t contain a smile.

“I therefore grant sole custody of Jolene Champagne to her father, Bertram Pyle. Her mother, Roberta Champagne, is stripped of all rights of access to the child, and it is solely at the discretion of her father whether he wishes to allow any access in the future.”

He bangs his gavel.

“This court is adjourned.”

Sweeping his robe after him, the judge departs.

Booth Tarkington places a trembling hand on Bobby’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry.”

Then he scurries out, needed to fortify himself with neat whiskey.

Bobby stays in her seat, staring at the seal of justice above the judge’s bench.

“Roberta.”

She looks up into the face of Earl Pyle, his eyes little piggy slits in the rolls of fat.

“I would counsel you to sell your land to me at a price most fair, and then move on to greener pastures. Remove your taint from your daughter’s life.”

Springing up from her seat, throwing all her weight behind her fist, Bobby does the thing she has wanted to do for a long, long time.

She punches Earl Pyle in the nose, sending him sprawling ass over kettle on the courtroom floor.

Skip Herring lives for days like these.

As he packs his bag in his hotel room—he and Wack are finally getting out of Texas—he finds himself whistling, something he is very seldom relaxed enough to do.

Every major network ran the clip of Cord McCann assaulting him in the elevator.

True, there was an element of *schadenfruede* to some of the reports—Lara Spenser on *Good Morning America* deadpanned, “On today’s breakfast menu: Cord McCann serves chopped Herring,” as she delivered an uppercut—but it was his face on those zillions of TV screens.

Not to mention the ever building views on YouTube.

Even the owners of Studio Zone, creepy brothers in their seventies who spend most of their time funding far-Right think tanks (now isn’t that an oxymoron, Skip quips to himself as he fastidiously folds his boxers and stows them in the suitcase) sent word via their minions that they were well pleased.

Cord McCann was famously liberal, and seeing him embarrassed like this suited their agenda.

Oh yes, this is why Skip fled those snowy great plains of Nebraska for the tawdry glamor of Tinsel Town.

It is his calling.

Skip, packing the paisley shirt that he carries with him as a kind of security blanket, gets all misty eyed when he flashes back to when he wore this shirt on one of the very first YouTube videos to go viral.

He was eighteen, and the acne on his face found an unfortunate echo in the paisley pattern (how naïve he had been back then!) but already his nose for the salacious and sensational was as finely tuned as a truffle pig’s.

His neighbor in the apartment block in Omaha where Skip lived with his dimwit parents and dull kid sister, fancied himself as a tenor.

Well into his fifties and built along the lines of Pavarotti, the man entertained his equally stout lady love a few nights a week for thunderous sessions of sex and opera.

Skip borrowed his father's video camera, hid on the fire escape and filmed the massive couple (she naked but for a Norse horned helmet) sporting on the man's water bed to the strains of "The Ride of the Valkyries", their yodels of delight shaking the foundations of the building.

Skip shot a top and tail where he made wittily snide remarks, packaged a pithy little piece on the primitive editing software he had on his computer, and uploaded it to YouTube.

The video went viral, the neighbor threatened violence and a law suit and Skip hopped a train to Hollywood.

The rest, as they say, is history.

As Skip zips his bag his cell phone rings.

Well, one of his phones.

He has three, in descending order of importance.

The one that rings is the equivalent of the red phone at the White House, and he sees the name of his cameraman on caller ID.

"Wack," he says. "What's up?"

"I've been shot," the Dutchman says.

"Where?"

"In the ass."

"No, where *are* you?"

"In my room."

Wack groans and Skip hears the sound of the phone being dropped.

As Skip often says, his job is like working in a Laundromat, except what goes into the machine dirty comes out even dirtier, and the spin cycle is something vicious.

Yes, folks, it's all about the *spin*.

And when, with only a few fleeting thoughts for his own safety, Skip hurries down the stairs to Wack's room on the floor below—more anonymous and way faster than the elevator—his mind is already working hard on how to use this incident to his advantage.

When he gets to Wack's room (pleased to see no rubberneckers drawn by sound of a gunshot) he pushes open the door and finds his cameraman lying

naked on the floor, bleeding profusely.

Hovering over the Dutchman, making sure that no blood touches his hand-tooled shoes, Skip allows himself a glance at the Netherlander's nether regions, and affirms that the man's posterior, as cratered and pitted as the surface of the moon, is indeed the source of the blood.

"Who did it?"

"Guy in the room next door. I had his wife in here and he came back early from a meeting with the local chapter of the Texas Longhorn Breeders Association. Heck, what that woman couldn't do with her mouth . . ."

Skip holds up a hand.

"Okay, Wack, that never happened."

"Tell my ass that!"

"Shut up and listen to me. What happened is you were in the shower, you heard a noise and surprised somebody trying to steal a tape from inside your camera. They shot you and fled."

The Dutchman raises himself from the floor on one elbow and fixes a yellow eye on Skip.

"Where you goin' with this?"

"I'm taking us to prime time, my friend."

Skip sees the lightweight digital video camera lying on the bed and lifts it.

He's no cameraman, but he knows enough to get it rolling and, lifting the camera high over his head, frames a shot of himself crouched over the wounded Dutchman.

"Aren't you going to call 911, man?" Wack asks. "I'm leakin' blood like a West Texas barbecue."

"Stop whining," Skip says, "I'm working."

He clears his throat and stares into the lens of the camera.

"It seems that barbaric acts of violence against my person are not enough. Minutes ago my cameraman, decorated combat veteran Wack Delvers, was shot when he attempted to stop a man from stealing a video tape from his camera."

Skip pans across onto the prone cameraman.

"Who did this to you, Wack?" he asks, in his most urgent tone.

"I never saw the coward, Skip. He shot me from behind."

"What was on the tape in your camera?"

Wack, god bless his cheesy clogs, is an old pro.

“Footage I shot of Cord McCann, Skip.”

The Dutchman stares into the lens then his eyes close and he falls face-down into the spreading pool of blood.

Skip kills the camera and drops it onto the bed.

He toes the cameraman in the side.

“That was brilliant, Wack. You can wake up now.”

But Wack doesn’t move and Skip decides maybe he had better phone the emergency services.

As he lifts the receiver and hears the operator’s voice, he hesitates.

The story would be so much *bigger* if Wack died, and Skip would be able to give his imagination free reign.

If the Dutchman is only wounded, there will have to be a little nipping and tucking of the truth.

How long, Skip wonders, would it take for the cameraman to bleed out?

But there is some shriveled little organ that vaguely resembles a human heart pumping away in Skip’s chest and he sighs, shakes his head and says to the operator, “Get me 911. This is a life or death emergency.”

Bobby Champagne, feeling about as downhearted as she ever has, sits on the stinking bunk of a cell at the Hollywood, Texas, Sheriff's department, her arms wrapping her knees.

The little glow of satisfaction that came after she sat Earl Pyle on his backside in the courtroom has long gone.

She curses her temper.

The slender thread of hope that she may, somehow, get custody of her daughter again was snapped when she hauled off and punched the fat pig.

Within seconds Sheriff Ed Tom Baker had hightailed it over from his office next door to the courthouse, cuffed her and let his deputies haul her into the lock-up.

All the while Earl Pyle, nose dripping blood, had sworn revenge and damnation.

And Earl Pyle was not a man to make empty threats.

The sound of the key rattling in the lock of the cell door gets Bobby looking up, and Sheriff Baker walks in.

He's a tall man, skinny as a stick of jerky.

He'd been a friend of her daddy's and she's known him her whole life.

"You cooled yourself down now, Bobby?"

"Yessir," she says.

He sighs as he lowers himself onto the bunk beside her.

"Damn fool thing you gone and done."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Not that Earl Pyle didn't deserve it. And worse."

She shrugs.

"So, what am I bein' charged with?"

"Nothin'. You're free to go."

She stares at him.

"You funnin' me?"

"No. I spoke to Pyle. Reminded him that if he lays charges against you it would be all over the media, since you such a hot property lately."

He flashes a smile that causes his eyes to disappear into a network of wrinkles.

"Seems that Earl Pyle is too proud for the whole of this great State to think of him as the feller who was punched out by an itty bitty girl."

"I'm not itty bitty."

"No, that you're not. But that's the song that would be sung."

"So he's not pressin' charges?"

"No, he is not."

"Thank you, Sheriff."

He stands.

"I'm sorry for what they done with your little girl. My advice is for you to let things simmer down, then you lodge an appeal. Hear?"

"Yessir."

"Okay, then."

Bobby walks through to the front room at the Sheriff's office and sees Emma-Lou sitting waiting for her.

"What you doin' here?" Bobby asks.

"Sheriff Tom Ed called me. Thought you could use a friend."

"Maybe I can."

They walk out into the dusk, toward Emma-Lou's dented Mazda.

"Those media people gone?" Bobby asks.

"Disappeared as if they never were here. Excitement's over."

"Reckon I had me about all the excitement I can stand these last few days," Bobby says, doing her best not to cry.

"I'm sorry, honey. I really am," Emma-Lou says as she drives a few blocks down and stops outside her store.

"What we doin' here?" Bobby asks. "I need to git on home and soak in the tub. I stink like the drunk tank."

"Just come on in," Emma-Lou says, levering herself out of the car.

"Why?"

"Just do it," the plump girl says, unlocking the store.

Bobby leaves the car and follows the girl inside.

Emma-Lou locks the door again and walks toward the office at the rear, hovering in the doorway.

"What's goin' on, Emma-Lou?"

"Come over here," her friend says, "and promise me you ain't gonna throw a hissy fit."

Bobby walks toward the office, pushes the door open and sees a tall man perched on the desk, smiling at her.

“Hi Bobby,” Cord McCann says, “I’m hearing you’ve been putting that lethal left of yours to work again.”

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Cord did the scene with Kat waking him up drunk in the alley, his low mood lending a maudlin tone to his performance that, if anything, enhanced it.

The scene built to T-Bone Buford spurning his ex-wife's request that he write her new songs.

"Why don't you take yourself back to Nashville and go and polish your gold records or somethin'?"

"I may just do that."

"And while you're polishin', remember who wrote all those pretty songs that went gold."

"And platinum."

"Yeah, and platinum."

He started to walk down the alley, with the stumbling shuffle of a man who hasn't been sober in a long time.

"And make peace with the fact that there ain't gonna be no more. Well's gone dry, Crystal."

"Maybe you just drunk it dry."

"Maybe I did."

T-Bone tipped his Stetson at her in a salute and went into the saloon, the camera mounted on a steadycam following him, the juke box in the bar—of course—playing "Broke, Brokenhearted and Busted" one of those famous songs, written by T-Bone and sung by Crystal.

The script called for T-Bone to sit at the bar and order a drink, but Cord surrendered to a sudden impulse and finally let the anger take him, and rushed the jukebox, kicked it, then grabbed it and flung it to the floor where it groaned and fizzed and went dark and quiet.

Then he crossed to the bar, sat down, took off his hat and said, "What's a man gotta do to get a drink in here?"

There was a moment's reverential silence, then Topper Yazback yelled "Cut!" and bounded across to Cord, almost terrier-like in his excitement, doing everything but chase his own tail.

“Cord, that was just awesome in its awesomeness,” Yazback said without the decency of irony.

“Happy to oblige,” Cord said and went around shaking hands with the crew members who weren’t traveling back to L.A. in the morning, where the rest of the movie would be shot on the backlot and soundstages.

Of Kat there was no sign, and when Cord had done his greeting and thanking he returned to his trailer to change, looking forward to a quiet afternoon and evening in his hotel room.

Todd Levinson sat in the trailer.

“Make yourself at home, Todd,” Cord said.

“I hear Topper was very pleased.”

“Beside himself. Maybe you’d better deworm him before you start shooting in L.A.”

“That’s funny, Cord,” Levinson said unsmiling. “This isn’t.”

He turned an iPad to face Cord and prodded the touch screen to activate a video clip.

Cord saw Skip Herring ranting into a camera that panned onto a man lying in a pool of blood. Cord had been around enough movie sets know this was not the work of the effects department, this was the real thing.

The wounded man said something about being shot from behind, then Cord heard Herring’s voice asking: “What was on the tape in your camera?”

“Footage I shot of Cord McCann, Skip,” the cameraman said before he passed out.

Levinson prodded the iPad again, and the clip froze.

“What the hell is this?” Cord said.

“Skip Herring’s cameraman was shot in his hotel room this morning. You heard what he said about a tape of you being the motive.”

“C’mon, Todd. This is a stunt.”

The producer shook his head.

“No. The cameraman was admitted to Northwest Texas Hospital with a bullet wound. He’s out of danger, but he won’t be working for a while.”

“And the art of cinematography will be the poorer for that.”

“Comments like that aren’t helpful, Cord.”

“Listen, Todd, I was here all morning. There’s no way I could get back to the Savoy and shoot the guy.”

“There’s talk you hired somebody.”

“What?”

“That’s what’s going round.”

“That’s what Skip Herring is putting out there.”

“Maybe.”

“Can’t you see this is just naked opportunism? The guy took a bullet for something else, god knows being Herring’s sidekick can’t make him the most popular guy in the world. Herring’s just spinning it like a top. That’s what he does.”

“There’s nothing else I should know about? No other bombshell about to burst over my head?”

“What are you talking about?”

“This tape that they wanted to steal. With you on it.”

“Todd, how old are you?”

“Cord, I don’t like your tone. I’ve had Tyler on the line. Some of the backers are getting antsy. The completion bond people are starting to ask questions.”

“Okay, there’s nothing I have to hide. Nothing.”

Levinson stood.

“I need you to go back to Hollywood and keep your head down until shooting resumes next week. Can I have your word on that?”

“Yes, Todd, you have my word.”

The producer left and Cord cracked himself a cold Perrier.

He settled back in a chair, eyes closed, when his phone rang.

The one with “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” ringtone.

The only phone he’d answer right now.

“Yes?” he said and heard the voice of the shop girl back in that hick town—so she *could* speak—and when he heard what she was telling him, he knew he was going back to Hollywood, okay.

Hollywood, Texas.

Bobby, once she recovers from the shock of seeing Cord McCann in Emma-Lou's dingy office, feels that thermometer-red rage rising in her once again.

She spins on her heel, shoving her plump friend (make that *fat ex-friend*) out of the way.

When she feels Cord's hand on her arm, she is already making a fist.

"Mister, I'd advise you to unhand me."

He does and steps back.

"Okay, calm down now."

She shakes her head at Emma-Lou.

"How could you do this to me?"

"You need help, Bobby."

"From him? He's the reason I'm chest deep in skunk manure."

She reaches the door, her dramatic exit thwarted when she discovers it's locked.

"Open this door," she says.

"No," Emma-Lou says, folding her arms.

"Open. This. Door."

"Talking with periods between your words will not scare me."

Cord wanders across and leans against the magazine rack, keeping himself hidden from the street.

"I'm sorry to hear what happened with Jolene."

"Is that right? You know that you're the reason I lost my little girl?"

"That may be overstating things."

"*Overstatin'*! Mister for your own safety I think you should convince *The Biggest Loser* reject over here to unlock this damned door."

"I agree that my presence here was no help to you, but Earl Pyle owns Judge Crowe. It was just a matter of time."

"He's right," Emma-Lou says. "Calm down and come back into the office."

"Why?"

“Because I want to help you,” Cord says.

“Help me how?”

“Help you to get your daughter back.”

He turns and walks toward the office.

“You coming?”

Bobby looks at her friend who nods.

“This is against my better judgment.”

“Honey, based on your actions today, I’d say you have no judgment. Better or worse. Now get in there before this fat girl whips your ass.”

“In your outsize dreams,” Bobby says, but she walks into the office and stands, arms folded. “I’m listenin’.”

Cord, looking all cool and relaxed, is perched on the desk again, drinking a Coke.

“Every year I make pretty healthy donations to the Democratic Party.”

“Mister, your political persuasions could not interest me less.”

“Those contributions allow me to call in a favor now and then. Even out here in red state Texas.”

“That so?”

“Uh huh. After Emma-Lou contacted me and told me about your predicament, I put out a couple of calls and got to speak to a civil rights lawyer in Amarillo. Seems your Judge Crowe has a colorful history. He’s been run out of a number of districts because of his casual way with the law, and only found a home here because it suited Earl Pyle. Thing of it is, outside of this county, Crowe has some powerful enemies. Including a judge back in Amarillo who not only has the power and the will to oversee a hearing challenging Crowe’s ruling on Jolene, but is also a yellow dog Democrat.”

“Mister I think you need to run this by me in American.”

“There will be a hearing in Amarillo tomorrow appealing Crowe’s decision. Earl and Buster Pyle have already been served notice that they have to appear and take Jolene with them. She will be in the custody of social services during the hearing.” He sees Bobby’s face. “Don’t worry, I’ve spoken to the very nice lady who will look out for Jolene. She already has a TV set and a pile of Fast Freddo DVDs ready in an office at the courthouse.”

“How’d you manage to organize all this so fast?”

“He’s a movie star, Bobby,” Emma-Lou says. “People take his calls.”

"It's not all down to me," Cord says. "Crowe is under investigation. So is Earl Pyle. There are people eager to bring them to justice, and this hearing is a step in that direction."

"Will I get my little girl back?"

Cord pauses for a moment before he speaks.

"I can't guarantee that. But what I can guarantee is that you will get a fair hearing. The lawyer in Amarillo will represent you and he feels confident of a favorable outcome."

Bobby sits, allowing this to sink in, then she looks up at Emma-Lou.

"Don't you have shelves to stack or somethin'?"

The big girl nods and closes the door after her.

Bobby stares at Cord.

"Why are you doin' all this for me?"

"Because I unleashed all kinds of hell in your life. If I can make that up to you somehow . . ."

"Us Champagne's are proud people."

"I respect that."

"We don't hold with charity."

"This isn't charity."

"What is it then?"

"It's the righting of a wrong. It's fighting injustice."

"Mister, I ain't no Erin Brokovich. I just want to get my little girl back and carry on farming cotton."

"And I just want to help."

He shrugs and his face softens.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking of you and Jolene since the other night. For those couple of hours, in your house, I was a happy man."

"This ain't no movie, mister. This is my life."

"I know that."

"You get to move on to your next picture, but I have to make all this work. For me and Jolene. So let's keep this plain and simple, okay?"

"Meaning?"

"Let me put this in terms you'll understand: this is a courtroom drama not a love story. You hearin' me?"

"Loud and clear," he says, not quite succeeding at smothering a grin.

She laughs and shakes her head.

“How the hell did you get into town without bringing those media vultures with you, anyways?”

“In the rear of a Winnebago Adventurer motor home driven by the parents of your new lawyer. They’re down the road eating rib-eye steaks, waiting to take us back to Amarillo. This junket has been the highlight of their retirement years.”

Bobby stands.

“Well what the hell are you waitin’ for? Show me to that damn Winnebago.”

;

Kat Mansfield poses against the sky darkening over the Pacific, traces of Malibu's famous marine layer still fogging the air, sipping from a glass of the chilled Chablis she found in Molly Kent's fridge.

The comedienne, hilarious Hardy to Kat's sexy Laurel—her BFF, or at least her friend for as long as *forever* lasts in fickle Hollywood—said “Mi casa, baby” when Kat tracked her down on the set of the new Woody Allen movie in Paris.

So, here Kat is, the wronged wife in hiding.

A role she has never played before.

“How was the flight?” Tyler Swann asks, standing with his back to the Rothko, its reds and ochres setting off his vanilla-colored suit nicely.

“I was in L.A. ten minutes before I left Amarillo,” Kat says, curling up on the couch with her feet under her.

After Topper Yazback yelled *Cut!* she'd gone straight across to the airport and ordered the pilot of her and Cord's Gulfstream to fly her home, calling Ty Swann from the plane and convincing him to meet her for a *drinkie* in Malibu.

Swann pretends to sip at his wine.

Kat knows there will be no drop in the level of his glass by the time he leaves.

A prudent man, Tyler Swann, despite the silly clothes he wears.

“What's on your mind, Kat?”

She laughs that famous laugh, and twirls a lock of the hair that is—mostly—her own and says, “Aw, I dunno, Ty . . . Maybe the fact that my husband is chasing Texan tail, punching reporters and taking out hits on their cameramen.”

“That cameraman thing seems to be without substance.”

“Really? Tell that to CNN and Fox and The Big Three networks.”

“I grant you it is something of an imbroglio.”

“You always use such nice words, Ty.”

“Thank you.”

“What it *is* is a huge stinking mess of crap and I don’t want it on my shoes.”

“Understandably. But there’s a short hiatus before we start shooting here in L.A. and in the world of gossip mongering that’s an eternity. Mel or Lindsay or one of those big-buttred Kardashians will do something. You know how it goes.”

“You’re being a little cavalier, Ty.”

“Am I? What would you have me do?”

“I would *have you* fire Cord’s ass off of *An Old Fashioned Love Song*.”

“On what grounds?”

“He missed a day’s shooting.”

“A wrist-slappable offence in this town, as you well know.”

“What about all the negative publicity?” She holds up an elegant hand. “If you say there’s no such thing I’m going to plant my Manolo Blahnik in your crotch.”

“Ouch,” he says.

“Very ouch.”

He sets down his glass.

“Kat, sweetheart . . .”

“My mother told me never to trust a man who hitches your name to a term of endearment.”

Her mother, a taciturn woman who’d done little more than clean her house with an almost religious fervor, had told her no such thing, of course, but it sounded nice, and who was to know?

Ty laughs.

“Katherine, you need to calm down. The picture will remain a vehicle for you and Cord.”

“A vehicle that has gone off road.”

“I’ll bring it back on track. That’s my job.”

She smiles at him. A smile without a hint of humor.

“Where’s Cord right now, Ty?”

“In Amarillo.”

“You’re lying.”

“I resent that.”

“Resent away, *darling*. You and I both know he’s back in Hollywood, Texas.”

Ty can’t quite hide his surprise.

"I have my sources on set, Ty. They tell me that Pete Bridger was skulking around the Savoy doing his Cord impersonation, while my husband headed off for parts unknown."

Swann sighs.

"I'll allow that Cord has slipped through the net."

"What's he going to do next? Go into business with one of the drug cartels?"

"Todd Levinson assures me that Cord understands the gravity of the situation. I think he's just lying low and licking his wounds."

"Todd Levinson is a fat, sycophantic retard."

"Now that's more than a little uncharitable."

"And what's this I hear about the backers getting antsy?"

Swann toys with his glass.

"They're a little troubled. But I have reassured them."

"Well, you haven't reassured me."

"And for that I grieve," Swann says, placing his hand on his heart and showing her all of his capped teeth.

"I want Cord off the picture," Kat says, a little Midwestern plain speak coloring her honeyed voice.

"Not gonna happen," Swann says, matching her with Boston's south side. Kat stands and looms over him.

"Then I'm walking."

Swann shakes his head.

"No, you're not."

"Wait and see."

"Kat, we've know each other long enough to talk straight, haven't we?"

"Yes, we have."

"Your last two solo outings bombed. Critical and commercial debacles."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Well, I would. And farther. They *stank*. This picture is your chance at a comeback. And the only reason we raised the money is because Cord's in it."

"That's a crock, and you know it."

"You realize we all wanted Ashley Judd for Crystal?"

"Oh, come on!"

"But Cord was adamant that we didn't get him without you, like some buy one get one free deal. Except you're not free, are you, Kat? Because of

your husband you're getting paid double what you're worth."

"This is insulting."

"No, it's true. You should thank Cord. And you should face another inconvenient truth."

"What would that be, Al Gore?"

"That your sex addiction precipitated all of this. If you'd only been able to keep your legs crossed none of this would have happened."

Kat throws her glass of wine in his face.

"Get the hell out of my house, you bastard."

"You don't have a house, Kat. Like you no longer have a husband, and—unless you're very careful—you won't have a career."

He dabs at his face with a handkerchief and lifts his Panama hat from the arm of the chair.

"See you on set Thursday."

He walks out to where his vintage Rolls Royce convertible is parked up near the Pacific Coast Highway.

Kat drops down onto the couch.

She thinks about crying, but remembers that the last bit of eye-work she had done left her tear ducts barren.

Anyway, crying never did anybody any good.

Another glass of wine is what she needs.

And then revenge.

In that order.

Skip Herring knows he is as close to heaven as any gossip monger will ever get.

He has called a press conference at the Savoy Hotel.

Yes, you heard right.

Skip (all-too-often jammed into airless rooms with his desperate competitors as brain-free minor celebs gabble incoherently about their weight or their boyfriends or their boyfriends' weight) has been so inundated with requests for interviews since the shooting incident, that he has been forced—*forced!*—to call a press conference of his own.

He sits behind a table in a function room at the Savoy, the target of a bank of klieg lights, as poised and perfectly groomed as if he is made of painted resin, staring out at the gathering of (sadly) mid-list gossip mongers.

No Rob Marciano.

No Dean Richards.

No Giuliana Ranci.

Ah, well, it is still a moment to savor.

Skip works the room perfectly.

He makes sure his black eye catches the sidelight as he talks of the trauma of being assaulted by Cord McCann.

When he comes to the shooting of Wack Delves, his tap-dancing is right up there with Fred Astaire's and he leaves no doubt—without actually *saying* so—that Cord McCann was behind the shooting.

That he had sent a hired goon to get the missing tape.

"What was on the tape?" a cross-eyed girl from *Gawker* asks.

Skip holds up a hand.

"My legal team has advised me not to comment on that."

"Does that mean that Cord McCann will be charged in connection with the shooting?" asks a midget from *People* magazine.

Where do they find these weirdos?

Ship dodges the question, and things seem to be winding down when the doors at the back of the room are flung open and an apparition enters.

The room falls silent, all eyes on the woman so ancient that it is rumored she is one of the living dead.

Bug eyes stare out of a face remodeled so often that it resembles a pilot experiencing G-force.

A blue-black wig squats on the shrunken head like an octopus.

Nasal cannula emerge from her nostrils, loop back around her ears, and connect to the portable oxygen container that is slung over her bony shoulder in a made-to-order Lagerfeld boucle bag.

Skip, not a man accustomed to being on the back foot, blinks to make sure that he's not suffering some kind of seizure that has left him hallucinating.

But when he opens his eyes he sees the doyen of the gossip world, Giselle Koff, lurching down the aisle toward him, brandishing her cane like a weapon, a retinue of flunkies at her heels.

Giselle Koff!

The celebrity journalist who writes for *Vanity Fair*, where stories arrive as gutter gossip and emerge as high art.

Since he was a boy, Skip has devoured this woman's work.

Worshipped at her altar.

Giselle Koff teeters into the light, standing face-to-face with Skip Herring and, in an accent so genteel that it could have floated across the Atlantic in the wake of the Mayflower, says: "Mr. Herring, this assault and this shooting is the most significant attack on a pop culture icon since Valerie Salonas pumped those three bullets into Andy Warhol."

She pauses, and gasps for breath, then continues.

"Perhaps you know that central to my work of these many years has been the study of the Dark Star? The male actor who is drawn, though a toxic brew of celebrity and his own self-destructive testosterone, to implode into the sucking abyss of an annihilating black hole? From Roscoe Arbuckle to Mel Gibson, I have charted the rise and fiery falls of these toxic males through the firmament of Hollywood."

A hacking cough and then she sails on: "And who is Cord McCann, after all, but the spawn of these Dark Stars? A relic of the last, dead, century? The century of the phallus!"

She rests her cane on Skip's shoulder, and as if she has just knighted him, says, "Arise, Mr. Herring. Arise."

Skip stands and she drops the cane and uses its rubber tip to lift open his Paul Smith jacket, exposing his loins.

Addressing the assembled journalists, who stare at her in rapture, she says. "You will notice, despite the snugness of the suit—it could be painted on!—there is no bump in the groin area. Mr. Herring is as sexless as a manikin. What are Cord McCann's attacks on Skip Herring but the wilting phallus of the 20th Century attacking the androgynous pre-pubescent 21st? Cord McCann, the epitome of the *old*, sensing the sheer meaty *uselessness* of his male appendage, attacking the *new*!"

Giselle Koff waves her cane and Skip thinks she is about to strike him, but she is merely using it for emphasis, and she lowers it to the floor and leans on it with both her bony hands.

"And the missing tape?" she asks, looking at the audience of dangerous piranhas. "There is no missing tape!"

Skip's heart lurches.

What is this?

Is he about to be exposed?

Has Wack, high on painkillers or in thrall to a bovine nurse, spoken?

But then Giselle says, "There is no missing tape because . . . It. Is. Missing." She cackles. "Like Schrödinger's cat, it is at once here and not here. Brilliant!"

She places a skeletal hand on Skip's shoulders.

"Post-post-post-Postmodern."

(At each pearl that drips from the lips of the ancient scribe, the opposable digits of the assembled flock are busy on their phones, tweeting, tweeting, tweeting, and this flurry will prompt none-other than Bret Easton Ellis to anoint Skip Herring *the godhead of the gutter press* in one of his own tweets later that day.)

"Follow me, Mr. Herring," Giselle Koff says, and without waiting for a reply sweeps out of the room in a lurching trot.

The next hour is a blur to Skip Herring.

In the lobby he comes face-to-face with another legend, the lesbian photographer Frankie Wurst—the only shutterbug Giselle Koff deigns to use—with her guillotine of a bob and her jodhpurs and her cigar.

As he will later remember it, the gossip guru steps into the elevator with Wurst and her retinue as Skip Herring and steps out onto the pool deck of the hotel as something else entirely.

He is naked save for a white Stetson, a leather waistcoat open to reveal the narrowness of his chest, and a pair of rawhide chaps that do little to dispel Giselle Koff's dismissal of his masculinity.

Frankie Wurst moves Skip to the edge of the pool deck, posing him on a mechanical bull against the neon iconography of the West that flickers across the Amarillo nighttime skyline:

A six gun.

A cowboy boot.

A lasso.

A Longhorn steer.

Skip whoops as he pretends to buck, (the bull, mercifully, is stationary) Wurst's camera flashes strobing like a glory night at Studio 54, and he knows that yes, now he *has* died and gone to heaven.

“Oyez, oyez the Texas Seventh District Court of Appeals is now in session. The Honorable Travis Cogburn presiding. All rise.”

As the court crier warbles out his announcement, Bobby—uncomfortable in the skirt, blouse and low-heeled shoes that Emma-Lou scrounged up from heck knew where—gets to her feet beside her new lawyer, Ruben Silver.

Silver is a sleek man with hair that matches his name, wearing a suit that looks like it’s made of money.

He puts a reassuring hand on Bobby’s arm as the judge, a massive figure in a billowing black cloak, sweeps in and takes his place behind the bench.

Bobby sneaks a look at Buster and Earl Pyle who stand on the other side of the courtroom with their lawyer, Beaumont Parch, who looks just a little out of his depth here.

The judge sits and bangs his gavel and everybody takes their seats.

Travis Cogburn is a terrifying looking man, with a head as big as a bull’s, scowling out at the world over a pair of tiny round spectacles.

“I have granted this appeal hearing after determining that Judge Crowe of Holbrook County should have recused himself because of certain financial dealings with the Pyle family. Judge Crowe will be given the opportunity to answer to these allegations at another venue and there will be no further talk of that in my courtroom. We here solely to determine who will be custodial conservators to the minor child, Jolene Champagne.”

The Pyles are given a chance to present their case.

Beaumont Parch, again, paints Bobby as a poor mother of loose morals.

The argument, again, hinges on her taking Cord McCann into her home, and the subsequent media onslaught.

It peaks with a clip of Skip Herring’s video of her and Cord at the kitchen table being shown to the courtroom.

Ruben Silver objects far less than Bobby would have hoped, and it seems as if he senses her frustration and pats her hand, whispering, “They’re

building their own gallows and knotting their own noose. Be patient.”

Bobby looks around the courtroom, empty but for a court reporter and a couple of marshals.

Of Cord McCann there is no sign, and this disturbs Bobby.

She hasn’t seen him since he checked her into an anonymous hotel last night after their drive back to Amarillo in the Winnebago, Cord charming the elderly owners with stories of the movie business.

Bobby hasn’t seen Jolene, and tries to still her anxiety, hoping that Cord is true to his word and that her daughter is sitting safe somewhere, happily watching cartoons.

The crier startles her back into the courtroom as he yells, “Call Cord McCann!”

What’s going on?

This was never discussed.

She watches as Cord strides into the room, his long hair and beard at odds with the well-tailored suit he wears.

He is sworn in and seated in the witness box.

The judge looks down at him.

“You’re Cord McCann?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“That actor feller?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Well, you sure as hell don’t look like him.”

“I’m in character, Your Honor. Hence the hair and beard.”

“Mnnnn. Continue.”

Ruben Silver strolls across to Cord.

“Mr. McCann, is it true that you spent the night of May 29th of this year in the house of Roberta Champagne in the town of Hollywood, Texas?”

“Yes, I did.”

“What exactly happened that night?”

“I told a bed time story to Ms. Champagne’s daughter, Jolene, and then ate a meal of chicken fried steak prepared by Ms. Champagne. It was excellent.”

He catches Bobby’s eye and smiles.

“Did you have intimate relations with Ms. Champagne that night?”

“I did not.”

“Did you even kiss Ms. Champagne?”

“I did not.”

Beaumont Parch is on his feet.

“Objection, Your Honor. We saw otherwise in the video.”

Silver smiles at him.

“Did we? Your Honor I would like to screen the video again.”

The Judge sighs, “Is this necessary? I’m allergic to reruns.”

“I beg the court’s indulgence.”

“Very well, go ahead.”

The video is screened and Ruben Silver stands with the remote, silencing Skip Herring’s hysterical commentary.

“Your Honor, I would ask that you observe the moment of the so-called kiss.”

“I have already observed it.”

“This video is the work of a charlatan. A desperate gossip monger. He uses the power of suggestion, Your Honor, to create the illusion of a kiss, where, in reality, no lips met.”

Silver slows the video and moves it frame by frame, showing Cord and Bobby getting closer and closer—but not kissing.

“There was no kiss. There were no intimate relations.”

The judge watches the video intently, and Bobby is certain that she sees that massive head nod, just an inch.

Silver turns to Cord.

“Mr. McCann, tell us how you met Ms. Champagne.”

“I wrecked my car near Hollywood, Texas, and she gave me a ride into town.”

“Did she know who you were?”

“No, she didn’t recognize me under all this.”

He gestures at the hair and beard.

“But she gave you a ride?”

“Yes. She was a real Good Samaritan.”

“When was your identity revealed?”

“Her daughter, Jolene, recognized my voice from a series of animated children’s movies I have done.”

“The Fast Freddo movies?”

“That’s correct.”

The judge leans down.

“Hold on here. You’re Fast Freddo?”

“I am his voice, Your Honor.”

“My grandkids are crazy about those damned movies. May I ask you, sir, to end an ongoing and very heated debate in our family?”

“If I can, Your Honor.”

“Is Freddo a skunk or a raccoon?”

“A raccoon, Your Honor.”

The judge pounds his gavel.

“I knew it!”

Then he colors, clears his throat and barks across at the court reporter, a stony-faced woman who sits typing into some weird gizmo, like no typewriter Bobby has ever seen.

“Strike the exchange between myself and the witness from the record in its entirety.”

He looks at Ruben Silver.

“You may continue, counselor.”

“Mr. McCann how did you come to spend the night at Ms. Champagne’s house?”

“I was stranded in Hollywood—Hollywood, Texas, that is—without money or credit cards and would only be able to get a ride to Amarillo the next day. Ms. Champagne kindly took me in and fed me and offered me a couch to sleep on. A Good Samaritan, as I said. I sincerely regret that my celebrity was the cause of all this embarrassing and aggressive media attention that led to untrue allegations.”

“Thank you, Mr. McCann, no further questions.”

Beaumont Parch listlessly cross-examines Cord, but the actor is rock solid.

The judge pounds his gavel.

“The court will adjourn for luncheon, which will allow me to make my deliberations.”

The crier bellows, “All rise,” and the judge sweeps out.

Ruben Silver takes Bobby across to a diner where she picks at a hamburger while he discusses other cases on his cell phone and then its time for them to return.

Taking his seat the judge scans the courtroom, then he clears his voice.

“I pride myself in being the owner of a brass-plated bull manure detector and this whole thing stinks. I see a young woman who has been victimized by the media and by dishonest members of her own community.”

He glowers down at the Pyles who shift uncomfortably, then he looks across at Bobby and his eyes soften.

“All I see is an honest young woman trying to do the best by her daughter and run her farm in the face of the worst drought in living memory. You’re an American hero, young lady. You should be on a damned postage stamp.”

He bellows across to the court reporter.

“And that can stay on the record!”

His eyes move back to Bobby.

“I grant sole custody of Jolene to the mother, Roberta Champagne. Access to the child only at the pleasure of the mother.”

He bangs his gavel.

“Get out of here.”

Bobby wipes tears from her eyes and shakes hands with Ruben Silver.

“Thank you, sir.”

“It was a real pleasure.”

Then Cord is at her side.

“Come on, there’s somebody who wants to see you.”

He leads Bobby out of the courtroom and into the corridor where Jolene waits with a smiling young woman.

The girl sprints across to Bobby.

“Mama!”

Mother and daughter embrace.

Bobby turns to Cord.

“I didn’t ever think I’d hear myself sayin’ these words, but thank you.”

“It was the least I could do.”

“No, without you I could never have beaten the Pyles. It’s like you were sent to me.”

“Hey, I’m no angel.”

Bobby feels an almost overwhelming urge to kiss him, but she takes his hand and says, “We won’t forget you.”

And Jolene climbs him like a jungle gym and hugs him tight.

Feeling the child’s hug, staring into the still moist eyes of her mother, Cord is overwhelmed by an emotion that he has never experienced.

That he’s home.

That he belongs with this mother and daughter.

Arm around Jolene, he says to Bobby, "You going to be okay?"

"Sure. We'll get the bus back to Hollywood. Be there in time for dinner."

"But what are you going to do next?"

Bobby shrugs.

"Hell, I dunno. One step at a time."

Jolene clambers off Cord and crosses to where the woman from social services hands her over her bag.

Cord says, "Your cotton crop has failed, hasn't it?"

"Yes, it has."

"And if I'm right, schools close tomorrow for summer vacation?"

"For a non-parent, you're pretty well informed. Where are you going with this?"

He isn't sure, exactly.

Not until he hears words coming out of his mouth.

"Come back with me, to Hollywood. The *real* Hollywood."

"You're funnin' me, right?"

"No, I'm not *funnin'* you," he says in his T-Bone Buford voice.

"Mister, if you're tryin' for Texas, all you're doin' is sounding like a Yankee who got something stuck in his throat somewhere up in Arkansas."

"Then help me," he says.

"Help you how?"

"Be my dialogue coach."

"On the movie?"

"Yes, on the movie. Make me sound like the real thing."

"You serious?"

"I am. It pays well, too."

"You're askin' me to come with you to Hollywood to teach you how to speak Texan?"

"Yes."

"And what about Jolene?"

"Last time I checked kids were still allowed to visit Los Angeles."

Bobby looks at him, and then she shakes her head.

"No, no way. That's crazy talk. Jolene has had enough nonsense to last her a lifetime. I'm takin' her home, and I'm gonna get her settled. And that's that."

"You're sure?"

"Sure as punkin' pie."

He shrugs, trying to hide his disappointment.

“Okay, well you know where to find me.”

“Uh huh, I’ll look out for you on the movie screen.”

Cord, feeling closer to tears than he has in his entire adult life, starts to walk away, waving at Jolene.

“See ya, kiddo,” he says in his Fast Freddo voice.

She waves and he turns and hurries out of the courthouse into the blinding glare, putting on his sunglasses as he heads for the limo waiting at the curb.

He expects a media ambush, but the sidewalk is clear.

As he slides into the rear of the limo, he says, “Rick Husband Airport.”

The Gulfstream is back from L.A., fueled and waiting for him.

Cord settles in his seat, staring out at the busy Amarillo street, but seeing a future that seems empty and bleak.

When the car stops at a light a block from the courthouse, he’s startled by a banging on his window.

Certain he’s going to look up into a camera lens, he’s already covering his face when he sees Bobby staring in at him.

He lowers the window.

“That offer still open?” Bobby says.

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, scoot on over, mister.”

Cord opens the door and slides across as Bobby and Jolene crowd in with their bags.

“Brace yourself,” Bobby says, “us crazy Texas girls are comin’ with you to Hollywood.”

If Amarillo was heaven for Skip Herring, then L.A.—if not hell, exactly—is a kind of airless purgatory.

Literally, airless.

The A/C in the Studio Zone HQ isn't working despite the Muppets making frantic calls to the building management.

Skip, sitting at his desk, three fans blowing warm, stale, air in his face, finds himself longing for the stink of the barbecued pork that was sucked in from the Korean take out downstairs back when the A/C worked.

He feels listless.

Drained of energy.

And it's not just the heat and the stale air.

What happened in Amarillo left him in a state of almost religious ecstasy: he had been anointed by the gossip gods.

Surely, then, everything had to change?

But it hadn't.

Disappointingly, there have been no approaches from any of the networks looking to poach him, to move him up the ladder of dirt-dishery, to the world of plush studios and hefty expense accounts.

To the mainstream, where the Big Five of gossip wallow sleek and smug, growing fatter and richer on their diet of filth.

It was all very well being on the bleeding edge of scandal mongering, building his reputation as the man who would go lower and farther than almost any other, but he longed for the acceptance that being invited into the fraternity of the upper echelons of dirt digging would bring.

And if he was expecting any further compliments (or financial compensation) from the brothers, he was to be disappointed.

He'd returned to Los Angeles the night before to discover that the gossip world had turned, as it does, and that Cord McCann was registering lower on the Richter scale of earth-shattering celebrity muck raking than Charlie Sheen and his ex-wives and their complicated brood of brats or the latest desperate machinations of the Kardashians.

Clearly it was sleaze as usual, and he was to find his place at the trough with all the other gossip hogs.

He tries to soothe himself with the knowledge that he is going to be in *Vanity Fair*, immortalized by the legendary duo of Giselle Koff and Frankie Wurst.

Then the phones will ring.

Then he will take his pick of offers.

On cue, a telephone *does* ring, one of the armory of mobiles scattered about his person.

He digs the phone from an inner pocket, recognizing it immediately as the one reserved for law enforcement snitches.

The conversation is short, and he is already heading for the elevator before he ends it.

Mindy Moran, a starlet on a very graphic, very public downward spiral of self-destruction, has just wrapped her Porsche around a pole on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood and, emerging unscathed from the wreck, dressed only in a Victoria's Secret babydoll nightie, assaulted a cop with a high heeled mule.

This is all happening one block from the Studio Zone, and Skip knows he can be the first responder of the gossip crews.

For a second he expects Wack Delves to fall in behind him, the Dutchman always alert Skip's body language when he is after a scoop, then Skip remembers that the lensman is in a hospital room in Amarillo, nursing a gunshot wound in his butt.

"I need a cameraman!" he yells.

One of the Muppets looks up through her curtain of hair.

"I have a freelancer on call. Gimme an address."

Skip, already being swallowed whole by the elevator, shouts the location of the accident, and hears the Muppet say, "She'll meet you there."

Could that really have been *she*?

He thinks he has misheard.

Then he's out of the elevator, sprinting, dodging traffic, and within a minute he is at the accident scene, the Porsche looking like a feral animal trying to gnaw at a light pole.

A couple of cops are waving away rubberneckers, and Skip's finely tuned nose leads him toward a patrol car parked near the Porsche.

He can see an extravagantly coiffed red head in the rear of the prowler car.

One of the cops waves him away.

"I'm Skip Herring," he says, "Studio Zone."

Flashing his press card.

The cop, a low-slung anthropoid type with huge shoulders, is unimpressed.

"Just keep back."

"You Skip?"

He turns to see a short girl with buzz-cut black hair, dressed in a flack jacket, combat boots and camouflage fatigues.

"Who the hell are you?" he asks.

"Zola Byrd. Your cameraperson."

So, he heard right.

She *is* a girl.

But who actually says *cameraperson*?

He looks her up and down.

"Where the hell do you crawl out of? Afghanistan?"

"Yes," she says, deadpan.

She has a camera on her shoulder and is gathering images of the wreck, ignoring Skip.

"Excuuuuuse, me," he says, positioning himself with the dented Porsche in the background, "I think you're forgetting something."

She shrugs, says, "No worries," and starts to frame him up.

"How do I look?" Skip asks.

Wack would always set him straight if one of the fronds of his spiky hairdo was limp, or his tie askew.

The girl just smirks and says, "Kinda gay."

Skip is about to explode when a giant stills photographer, known in the trade as Hans the Nazi, plants himself right behind Skip, blocking the view of the car, shooting away with his armory of digital cameras.

Skip knows better than to challenge this beast, and is already moving sideways, when Zola says, "Hey! Hey, pal."

The big man ignores her.

She crosses to him, stands on tip-toe and taps him on the shoulder.

When he turns one savage eye on her she says, "You're in my shot."

The giant says something filthy and carries on shooting.

Zola says, "Listen, shortass, I'm giving you two seconds to move."

By now the cops, no stranger to Hans the Nazi, are watching with amusement.

Hans stares down at the girl from his great height.

“Yeah? Or you gonna do what?”

“This,” she says, planting a combat boot in his groin.

He folds, leaking air.

“And this,” she says, kicking him in the side of the head, toppling him to the asphalt.

The giant tries to rise, then he groans and falls unconscious to the blacktop.

One of the cops comes over and says to her.

“Man, we were ready to radio the ER room to come and get you. Where’d you learn that stuff?”

“Marine Corps.”

“You kidding me.”

“I’m not.”

She lifts a sleeve and shows him some kind of tattoo.

The cop looks around and beckons her.

“If you’re quick I’ll let you grab a shot of this crazy bitch in the cruiser. You’ve earned it.”

When Skip tries to follow the cop says, “Not you, Tintin.”

Skip watches as this girl goes over to the car and shoots through the window.

Within a minute she is back.

“What did you get?” he asks.

She ejects a tape from the camera.

“Why don’t you go take a look, Muscles?” she says, and then she’s gone, disappearing into the knot of gathering media.

Skip looks at her, looks at the tape and gets the hell out of there, hightailing his scoop back to the HQ.

As the jet flings itself off the runway and into the sky, the last few crazy days hit Bobby like an eighteen wheeler and for a moment she feels like she's going to shatter into millions of itty-bitty pieces and just disappear.

She grips the arms of her seat and closes her eyes.

Pull your damn self together!

She feels a hand on hers and opens her eyes and finds herself looking into those of Cord McCann, which does nothing for her fragile sense of reality.

"You okay?" he asks.

"I'm fine," she says, dragging her eyes away from his, watching Jolene who is staring out of the window in open-mouthed amazement.

"Are you a nervous flyer?" Cord asks.

"How in hell should I know?" Bobby says. "I ain't never flown before!"

In fact, to the best of Bobby's recollection, no Champagne has ever taken to the air.

And what a first flight . . .

When she'd made that crazy decision back there at the courthouse and gone chasing Cord McCann's limo like the dogs were after her—suddenly wanting to be far away from Hollywood, Texas, and the Pyles and their schemes—she imagined they'd get on some passenger plane.

That maybe Cord would get them first class tickets.

But she could never have dreamed of this.

A private jet.

Like something she's only ever seen on TV.

She sits strapped into in a plush armchair, Jolene beside her.

Cord is opposite them, his long legs stretched out into the aisle.

"Well, just relax and enjoy it," Cord says.

As the plane levels out he unclips his seatbelt and slouches beside them on a couch.

An honest-to-apples couch, in a damned airplane!

A young woman in a blue suit and white blouse appears and asks says something in accent so refined it takes Bobby a moment to understand that she asking if they would like any refreshments.

Jolene asks for a Coke.

Bobby limits the kid's sugar intake, but since this is a day of celebration she lets it go.

"Do you have a cherry Dr. Pepper?" Bobby says.

"Of course, madam," the stewardess says.

"Just a water," Cord says. "And please bring some strawberries and cream."

The woman smiles and says, "I won't be a moment," before she disappears through a door beside the potted plant.

A potted plant?

On a plane?

"Is she British?" Bobby asks.

"No," Cord says, "I think she's from back East somewhere."

Cord clicks a couple of buttons and Jolene is watching Fast Freddo on a large screen TV, a pair of earphones covering her ears.

"I'm freakin' out, Cord," Bobby says. "This is a crazy thing I have done."

"Why?"

"I wasn't thinkin'. What came over me?"

"It's just a trip to L.A."

"We don't have any clothes."

"There are a couple of stores in L.A. that stock that kind of thing."

"Cord, I'm bein' foolhardy. What kind of example am I settin' for Jolie?"

"A good one. You fought for her and won. And now you're taking her on a trip. Broadening her mind."

"Goin' away with some man that she hardly knows?"

"I believe she likes me."

"That's just the damn problem. She's crazy about you. How am I ever goin' to get her to accept reality again?"

"Kids are elastic. They're much more flexible than we are."

"Spoken by the man who don't have none."

She sees his face.

"Sorry."

“No, you’re right. I have very little experience of kids, so I should keep my stupid mouth shut.” He stares at her. “Do you want me to tell the pilot to turn the plane around?”

“You serious?”

“It’s my plane, I can do what I like.”

He takes her hand.

“Bobby, if you’re really having second thoughts I’ll take you and Jolene back to Amarillo, even though it’s the last thing I want to do.”

She gulps air.

“No, let’s go on. But I want your word that if it gets all too much for me and Jolie, you’ll send us home?”

“You have my word.”

She brushes her hair from her eyes.

“The biggest city I’ve ever seen is Amarillo. And, from what I’ve heard, that’s but a little town compared to Los Angeles.”

“Yes, L.A. is huge. But don’t worry, you won’t be overwhelmed.”

“How do you know?”

“When I came to L.A. the biggest city I’d been in was Lawrence, Kansas, which makes Amarillo look mega. I survived.”

He watches her for a moment.

“And you’ll have me there, to help you.”

“That’s what worries me,” Bobby says.

“Why?”

“I’ll be dependent on you and I don’t even know you. I don’t even know why you’re doin’ this.”

“Because you and Jolene make me feel happier than I have in twenty years.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re real. And you’re not chasing some stupid dream like almost everybody I meet.”

“I wish I had a dream to chase. I don’t even have that.”

“I know things are tough for you, that’s why getting away is good. Take some time out and think about what you want to do next. You don’t have to rush into anything.”

“And I live off your charity?”

“I told you, you can be my dialogue coach.”

“How would I know how to do that?”

Cord digs into a leather bag and pulls out a wad of pages held together by three brass fasteners.

“This is the screenplay for *An Old Fashioned Love Song*.”

“Okay.”

He opens it at a page marked with a yellow post-it.

“This is the first scene that we’ll be shooting in the studio. It’s meant to be in a hotel room in Nashville, and T-Bone is meeting up with a music producer he hasn’t seen in years.”

He hands her the script, pointing to the top of the page.

“Tell me how this sounds.”

He closes his eyes for a second, and then as she watches he changes in some way she can’t explain, looks like a guy who has lived rough for years.

His voice when he speaks is rough, too.

“How are you, Sam? Hell, I thought I looked bad but you look as if the coyotes have been gnawin’ at you.”

Cord looks up at her.

“How does that sound?”

She shakes her head.

“Not right.”

“Tell me why.”

She hesitates, then says, “Okay. Do it again. Just the first part.”

“How are you, Sam?”

“Hair yew.”

He stares at her. “Huh?”

“Hair yew, Sam.”

He laughs, then says, “Hair yew, Sam?”

“Okay, not bad. Almost Texas.”

“There, you’ve helped me already.”

“Thought you had some dialogue coach?”

“I did. A guy from Dallas.”

“Dallas? Might just as well be from London, England, for all the good he could do you.”

“So, do it better.”

He takes the screenplay back from her.

“In L.A. we’ll go through the scenes. You’ll coach me. You’ll be on set.”

“I’ll be on the movie set?”

“Yes.”

“Won’t your wife be there?”

“She will.”

“That’s going to be mighty uncomfortable.”

He shakes his head.

“You know, each time I walk onto a movie set I see at least ten guys Kat has bedded over the years. Stuntmen. Cameramen. Electricians. Believe me this won’t be uncomfortable.”

“You ain’t doing this as some kinda revenge thing, are you?”

He shakes his head.

“No. I’d never do that to you.”

“And just remember, Mister, you ain’t bedded me.”

“I’m well aware of that.”

“And you ain’t about to neither!”

The girl with the drinks and strawberries is back and Bobby grabs her glass and throws back the Dr Pepper like it’s hard liquor.

Cord lifts his glass of water to his mouth pretty smartly, but not fast enough to hide his grin.

Skip Herring sits in the cramped edit booth at Studio Zone.

The small room is a sauna and even the anally immaculate Skip looks disheveled and sweaty.

But he doesn't notice the heat.

All his attention is focused on the screen, as he plays the video the camera girl—*Nola? Lola?*—gave him down on Santa Monica Boulevard.

The camera is rolling as it approaches the prowler car, and raccoon-eyed Mindy Moran stares into the lens.

"Hi," the camera girl says, over.

"Hi. You're a girl?" Mindy says, slurring, battling to focus.

"Yeah, I am."

"Okay."

"What you have for breakfast, baby?"

"Cocaine. And a bit of X."

"Nice. Who you party with last night?"

"Johnny Stone and Tim Parker."

Skip can't suppress a little whoop.

Two of the youngest A-listers, one famously a Scientologist.

"They give you the drugs?"

"Yeah. Johnny did."

Mindy giggles.

"Then we made a little sandwich. I guess I was the lunch meat."

The lens zooms in on her, a fabulously tragic study of something the dream machine has chewed up and spit out.

The cop car starts up and drives out of frame and the camera cuts.

Skip plays the video again.

It's gold.

Pure gold.

Then he sets up a microphone, checks the levels and says, “What did you have for breakfast, Mindy?”

He plays it back.

A little wooden.

He does it again.

With more pep.

More zing.

Skip listens again, and this time he’s satisfied, and he dubs his voice over all the cameragirl’s questions.

With a little street buzz laid in the background nobody will ever believe that Skip Herring wasn’t right there at the prowler car, getting the dirt straight from the starlet’s pottymouth.

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“This ain’t like no rodeo I ever been to,” Bobby says, standing with Cord and Jolie on Rodeo Drive, staring at the designer stores open-mouthed.

“Well, they’re stores that sell clothes. And you need clothes,” Cord says.

Bobby, reeling from the flight and the drive through the massive sprawl of the city from LAX, feels like her life is still hovering high in the air over the plains of Texas, and hasn’t caught up with her yet.

But Jolene—is this a good or a bad thing?—seems very at home.

The kid points at one of the stores.

“Cord, wasn’t that in the name of some movie?”

“*The Devil Wears Prada*?” he says.

“Yeah, Mama and me watched the DVD. Anne Hathaway was in it. She sure was pretty.”

She looks up at Cord.

“Do you know her?”

“I’ve met her. She’s very nice.”

“Why is she always cryin’ when she gets them awards?”

“Well, those are tears of happiness,” Cord says.

“From now on I’m only gonna cry happy tears,” Jolene says.

Bobby, her heart fit to break, turns away and walks across to the window of the Prada store and looks at skinny girl dummies dressed in fussy little dresses and tiny jeans.

A real girl, kinda weird looking—but this is L.A.—comes up to stand beside her.

“Honey, can you believe the price of this stuff? To me this is just as crooked as a dog’s hind leg.”

The girl doesn’t answer, too busy on her cell phone.

Bobby turns to Cord and yells, “Cord, where can I get me some Levis?”

She slaps her rump.

“My Panhandle ass ain’t gonna fit in none of these itty-bitty designer britches.”

Skip sits hunched down behind the wheel of the car that's illegally parked on Rodeo Drive.

He watches as Zola Byrd (finally he's figured out her name) comes to stand beside Bobby Champagne at the Prada window, Cord McCann and the kid waiting on the sidewalk near where the limo idles.

It was the limo driver who alerted Skip to Cord's whereabouts.

Skip had just completed the cut of the Mindy Moran piece and beamed it out to the gossipverse, when he got the call.

As he darted to the elevators he yelled: "Tell that girl, Nola, Lola—"

"Zola," one of the Muppets said.

"Whatever. Tell her to meet me on Rodeo Drive. Now."

He'd picked her up outside Tom Ford and they'd fallen in behind the limo, watching as Cord and the Texans stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"You stay here," Zola said cracking the door. "You're too conspicuous."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Skip said, pointing to the video camera lying on the back seat of the car.

She held up her phone.

"It's a job for this."

And there she is, right up beside the big-boned Texas blonde, pretending to make a call, nobody noticing a thing.

Cord watches Bobby over at the Prada window and realizes he has made a mistake.

Not bringing her to L.A.—she and Jolene are like a smog-clearing breeze—but bringing her here to Rodeo Drive.

Cord, after years with Kat, just assumed that all women came down here when they wanted to shop.

But Kat was a Hollywood bitch queen who discarded designer outfits the way she discarded lovers, with no thought of cost or consequence.

That isn't Bobby.

She's walking back toward him saying, "Cord, I know you have kindly offered to outfit us girls, but I need me a coupla pairs of work pants."

"Okay," he says, gesturing toward the car.

"Where do you shop for your jeans?"

Cord never shops.

He has a personal stylist to do that for him, but he's too ashamed to admit that.

But surely Gap over in the Beverly Center will have what they need?

"I'll take you there," he says and they pile into the limo.

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Skip Herring and Zola Byrd sit in The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf on North Beverly Drive.

She sips an espresso.

He toys with a chamomile—naturally so speedy he avoids caffeine—his feet jiggling under the table.

They are here at her insistence.

When she'd got back into the car on Rodeo Drive he'd held out his hand for her cell phone, ready to rush it back to the HQ.

"Not so fast, Muscles," she said. "I think we need to discuss the terms of my employment."

So, here they are in this coffee shop, and he finds himself listening to her extortionate demands.

Twice what Wack was earning.

"You're crazy," he says.

"You do understand that after that Dutch guy got shot in the ass, nobody will work with you? The pussies are all too scared?"

"I'll find somebody."

She stands.

"Good luck with that."

"Wait," he says.

She stops, but stays standing.

"I'm listening."

"I don't make decisions about money."

"But you can make recommendations?"

"Yes."

"They'll listen to you. They have no choice."

"Okay. Sit."

She sits.

"Give me your resume," Skip says.

"Gee, I'll have to get that typed up."

“Just give me the bullet points.”

She stares at him.

“I heard you telling that cop you were a Marine.”

“I was.”

“What happened?”

“I got through boot camp at Parris Island. Then shipped out to Afghanistan, and found myself sitting behind a damned desk. I saw women journalists were getting closer to combat than I was, so I ended my tour and got me a camera and went back.”

“So, why aren’t you still there?”

She shakes her head.

“What do you care? I’m not some celebrity.”

“I just want to know who I’m working with.”

“There was an incident. An ambush. I was embedded with a Marine platoon near Shewan. They trusted me. I got the footage, but the brass didn’t want it used. The ambush had been part of a command screw up. My network turned it down and nobody else would use it. I uploaded it to YouTube and got nearly half a million hits.”

“But your career took the biggest hit?”

She shrugs.

“Who said life is fair?”

“So we’re not in dissimilar positions are we?”

“Don’t speak in double negatives. They confuse the hell out of me.”

“And don’t try to smokescreen me.”

“Okay. Nobody in news will touch me. So what now? Are you gonna go all bargain basement on my ass?”

“No. You’re good. I’ll recommend the pay you demand. But . . .”

“But what?”

“You take orders from me.”

He sees her face.

“I said you’re good, but you’re a maverick. These bits and pieces you get are fine, but without me they’re just YouTube fodder. I’m the glue that holds the stories together. Do you understand?”

“You’re telling me to get your famous face in every shot?”

“Something like that. My presence lends these reports weight and credibility.”

“Credibility?”

She shakes her buzz-cut head.

“What you do is the lowest form of scum sucking imaginable.”

He shrugs, smiling.

“Welcome to Club Scum.”

“You think I’m proud of being so desperate that I’ll do this work?” she asks.

“Then why do it? Starve away, darling.”

He sees something on her face, some vulnerability, for just a second, than it's gone and she shrugs and drags her mouth down in a sour smile.

“What the hell, we all have to eat, I guess.”

“We do. But some eat hamburger and others eat *foie gras*.”

“Meaning?”

“I do what I do with style. With panache. With flair.”

“Isn’t that a bit like a turd standing up in a sewer claiming to be a candy bar?”

“Very colorful.”

He stares her down, no easy feat.

“Your job is to make me look good. At all times. Do you hear?”

She sighs and nods.

“I hear you.”

“Okay,” he says, holding out a hand. “Now let me see what you got back there.”

She hesitates for a second, then hands over her cellphone.

When the gates slide open and the limo cruises up the driveway Bobby thinks there must be some misunderstanding.

Cord isn't taking them to his house.

He's taking them to some fancy hotel that sits on the hilltop like a big pink cake.

There's a giant swimming pool with water so clear and blue Bobby can just feel herself diving into it.

There are fountains and statues.

There are shrubs trimmed into fancy shapes.

And there are palm trees in rows beside the driveway, like soldiers standing at attention.

The car stops beside a sweeping stairway and a group of men and women in uniform rush the limo.

Definitely a hotel.

The driver opens the door and Bobby steps out, Jolie sliding out after her, looking like she's been let loose in a candy store.

"Welcome home, Mr. Cord," a smiling woman in her fifties says.

Home?

No way.

"It's great to be back, Esmeralda," Cord says, standing up out of the car. "These are my friends Bobby and Jolene Champagne."

"Miss Bobby. Miss Jolene."

The woman favors each of them with a smile.

"You make sure they're comfortable, okay?"

"Of course, Mr. Cord."

As Bobby watches, their scruffy little bags, along with their clothes shopping, disappear into the mansion.

"You really live here?" Bobby asks.

"Yes," Cord says.

"It's kinda huge."

“It was built in the twenties by a silent movie star. When we bought it the place was pretty rundown and we restored it. It’s a real piece of old Hollywood.”

“Don’t you feel kinda lonesome here?”

“Not now that you and Jolie have come to stay.”

He walks toward the house, beckoning them.

“I’ve put you in the guest wing. I’m sure you’ll be comfortable.”

Bobby follows him into a single story building that curves around the pool.

The living room, all marble floors and high ceilings and huge windows, could hold her farmhouse.

“It’s beautiful, Cord.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

Jolene has flopped down on a couch and grabbed the remote, bringing the giant TV to blaring life.

Bobby sees the sneering little peeper who skulked outside her window, smiling his nasty smile at the camera.

“I’m on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, and I’m bringing you a sneak preview of Cord McCann’s remake of *The Beverly Hillbillies*! Just kidding. Or am I? You tell me.”

Suddenly Bobby is on screen, standing outside Prada, slapping her butt as she yells: “Cord, where can I get me some Levis? My Panhandle ass ain’t gonna fit in none of these itty-bitty designer britches.”

The camera pans across to find Cord and Jolie standing beside the limo.

“Mama, I’m on the TV!” Jolie says.

“Switch that off, Jolene!”

Jolene doesn’t hear, eyes fixed to the screen.

Bobby rushes her and as she’s about to snag the remote, she slips on the marble floor—these damned fool court shoes—and she bumps the control out of Jolene’s hand and it goes skidding beneath the couch.

Cord sprints to the TV, but it’s one of those modern contraptions that can only be killed by remote and he’s left staring furiously at Skip Herring, who is back, his teeth bared in a snarl.

“You heard it first, right here on Studio Zone, that Cord McCann flew his Texan cowgirl and her little heifer calf into L.A. on his private jet. And after taking them shopping, he has whisked them up to his Beverly Hills

mansion. That's right, bubbly miss Bobby Champagne, the girl who put the red in redneck, is lovenesting right now with Cord McCann."

Bobby gets down on her hands and knees, fishing beneath the couch, the remote control just beyond her fingertips.

Skip Herring taps his head.

"Just what is Cord McCann thinking? When he's not beating me up or doing other things that are far too *sub judice* to discuss, that is? And how does Kat Mansfield feel now that she's been thrown out of *chez* McCann to make way for the yellow rose of Texas? Cord, wow, that's like getting rid of a Ferrari and buying a John Deere Tractor!"

Cord finds the wall plug and pulls it free, killing Herring just as Bobby grips the remote.

Stepping back, unaware that Bobby is kneeling behind him, Cord goes down in a heap, and he and Bobby end up in a tangle of limbs on the marble floor.

Bobby, on her back, Cord astride her, his mouth inches from hers feels an entirely inappropriate rush of desire.

Skip Herring, this museum of a house and—what a terrible mother she is!—even Jolene disappear into a kind of fog, and all she wants is for Cord to finish the damned business he nearly started that night at her kitchen table.

And judging from the expression on Cord's face, he's feeling the same.

The mood is broken by Jolene bursting into fits of giggles at the tumbling grown-ups, and the absurdity of the situation hits home and Cord hauls himself to his feet and puts out a hand, helping Bobby up.

"You okay?" Cord asks, not quite meeting her eyes.

"I'm from Texas," she says, breathing hard.

Whatever that means.

Cord plugs in the TV again and Bobby changes the channel to the Cartoon Network.

"Mama, we were on the TV," Jolie says.

"Yes, we were, baby. You watch cartoons now, hear?"

The child is already absorbed in some animated craziness and Bobby crosses to where Cord stands looking out over the sprawling garden.

"I'm sorry about that," he says.

"I didn't see no photographer."

"There was a girl standing beside you at Prada. She must've shot that on her camera phone."

He shakes his head.

"I'm sorry, I was careless. I won't let that happen again."

"Is that how it's gonna be? The whole time?"

He holds her gaze.

"I'm not going to lie to you. It'll be bad for a couple of days, then they'll get bored and move on. That's how it always is."

"I don't want Jolie exposed to that kind of trash talkin'."

"I know. It's that Herring creep. He's targeting me."

"Why?"

"Because he can." He shrugs. "It's that simple. It's nothing personal with a vampire like that."

"You can't stop him?"

"No. As long as he stays off my property and doesn't threaten us in anyway, there's nothing I can do."

"Back home he'd face a lynch mob."

"Not a bad idea." Cord manages a smile. "It'll blow over. I promise."

"Okay . . ."

"I was going to suggest we go out for dinner, but in the circumstances I think it's better if we eat here."

"I'll rustle up somethin' if there's food in the icebox."

"Don't worry, Esmeralda will take care of that. Why don't you get settled and come over to the main house at around six?"

"Okay." She touches his arm. "Hey, thank you. For everythin'. I mean it."

He nods and smiles and walks off into his garden, leaving Bobby wondering what kind of rabbit hole she's fallen into to land up here.

Skip Herring lives in a box.

His apartment is so tiny that even a runt like him can reach up and touch the ceiling, and if he stands with his arms spread his fingertips brush the walls of the studio walk-up.

Skip has never been to Japan, but he imagines that an apartment built on such modest lines would be more in keeping with Tokyo than West Hollywood.

But Skip likes it here.

Likes its anonymity, the meager space discouraging the clutter of personal effects.

Just a futon on the tiled floor, a wall-mounted plasma flat screen, and a blond-wood Danish chair.

His clothes are neatly hung in the tiny built-in closet.

A galley kitchen that he has never used is hidden behind a sliding cabinet.

Nobody but Skip has ever been in here.

This is where he repairs each night when he is in the city—usually very late, for he seldom leaves the Studio Zone HQ before midnight—to listen to icy Nordic ambient music on his iPod and plot and plan his strategies for the next day's muck racking.

Tonight he follows his usual routine, removing his loafers at the door and sliding in the shoe trees before stowing them in the closet.

He strips to his white boxers and T-shirt (he has a shelf of neatly stacked white underwear) and hangs the suit on a wooden hangar.

Like Joan Crawford, Skip has an almost pathological aversion to wire hangars.

Then he enters the miniscule bathroom, a toilet, shower and sink somehow crammed into a space so tiny that when he flosses he has to limit his movements lest he bruise his elbows.

Skip showers away the grime of the day, dries himself on a giant white towel, and slips into his paisley PJs, the only splash of color he allows himself.

A little sartorial nod in the direction of the lucky shirt he wore in that viral video.

By the muted light of the lamp that stands on the floor beside the futon, Skip lies down and slips on the headphones of his iPod.

The artful coolness of the Röyksopp duo's synthpop caresses his ears, and he closes his eyes.

Ready to meditate on the coming day.

Hatch his nefarious plans.

Allow his mind to wander free and unfettered, to enter a zone of deep intuition, where he is able to make the connections—fusing together bits of gossip and innuendo into something cohesive and toxic—that so thrill him.

But not tonight.

When he closes his eyes he sees a face, with sharp, almost ferret-like features.

A face very much like a female version of his own.

The face of Zola Byrd.

And when, with an effort of will, he forces that face away, his mind presents him with the view of her torso, chest barely disturbed by breast mounds, arms wiry and sinewy, the blue ink of the Marine Corps tattoo peeping out from beneath the bicep-hugging T-shirt sleeve.

A torso, with the exception of the tattoo (he would never disfigure himself) that is very like his.

The shock of a sudden realization has Skip opening his eyes and rocketing up to a seated position.

The unthinkable has happened.

He is aroused.

He feels desire.

He wants to mate.

Mate with Zola Byrd!

This thought so disturbs him that he rushes through to the bathroom, stripping off his Pjs, doing his best to ignore the jutting evidence of his desire, and stands under the cold shower until some kind of sanity returns.

A shivering mess of gooseflesh he retreats to the futon, douses the lamp, curls into the fetal position, slips his right thumb into his mouth and,

sucking on it like he has his whole life, falls into a troubled sleep.

;

Kat swore the mansion was haunted.

That the ghost of Charlie Langford—dressed in his trademark black suit, little round glasses and flat cap—stalked the corridors and stairways.

Cord, standing alone in the bedroom he'd shared for so many years with his unfaithful wife, staring out at the moon reflected in the giant pool Langford built—a pool that in the heady pre-Depression days would have been littered with frolicking flappers, the comedian a legendary lothario—has never seen the spirit of the departed jokester, but he's oppressed by the ghosts of his dead marriage.

The air is still thick with Kat's fragrance, the closets crammed with her clothes.

Even though the bedding is fresh, Cord knows it will take a long while before her scent leaves the comforter and cushions.

In a house that has forty-four rooms, twenty-six bathrooms, twelve fountains, ten gardens and a nine hole golf course, he isn't forced to be in here, in this room with all its memories, but here he is, gone four a.m., sleepless, with a seven a.m. call at the studio.

What the hell, in the scene they were going to shoot T-Bone Buford was meant to look like crap, coming into Nashville on the back of a five day bender, needing a lot of booze to get his courage up to re-enter the world of his scheming ex-wife.

A role Kat was born to play.

Cord, despite his assurances to Bobby that all will be well on set, knows the truth.

Kat, true to her name, will have her claws out, and he'll have to watch Bobby's back.

Not that the Texas farm girl isn't tough, but she'll be no match for Kat and her schemes.

Cord pushes these thoughts from his mind, remembering that moment earlier when he and Bobby had landed in a pile out in the guest wing.

How he had felt, again, that almost overwhelming yearning to kiss her.

And more.

Hell, maybe the house *was* haunted.

For sure Charlie Langford would have approved of the pratfall that had Cord and Bobby landing on top of one another.

In fact, Langford and his frequent co-star and one-time wife, Molly Norman, had perfected the art of pratfall-as-foreplay, their silent movies following the formula of bumbling boy meets clumsy girl who (literally) fall in love.

The recipe had made Langford rich.

Rich enough to build this palace and cast Molly aside for the cornucopia of wannabe-starlets who threw themselves at the buck-toothed jokester.

A house that had been built on the foundation of a failing marriage.

Cord realizes how much he hates this place.

How he went along with buying it only to please his wife, Kat reveling in the splendor of the mansion, throwing parties that were crammed with the Hollywood power elite.

Parties that Cord had smiled his way through, always feeling bored and empty.

Now the place will be sold, and he can move on.

The thought cheers him.

And when he pictures Bobby and Jolene asleep in the guest wing, he feels almost buoyant.

They'd eaten dinner in one of the smaller dining rooms of the main house: Cord deliberately keeping things informal.

Pizzas were ordered in from his favorite spot, Luigi's down on Fountain, along with lots of fizzy drinks.

At the table, Jolene had started drooping from tiredness and Cord carried her across to the guest wing.

After Bobby got the girl into her PJs, Cord improvised a short Fast Freddy bedtime story, and soon the kid was asleep.

Cord and Bobby sat side by side on the couch in the living room.

"Why don't you fetch that screenplay thang?" she asked.

"It's late," he said.

She shook her head.

"Us Champagne's don't take hand outs. We earn our keep. Now go and git it."

Cord obeyed and they spent an hour working on his dialogue.

He realized how far from authentic Texas the guy from Dallas had allowed him to stray.

“What happens to all the scenes you already shot?” asked Bobby. “Ain’t there goin’ to be a difference, now?”

“It’ll all be looped,” he said.

“Looped?”

Cord explained to her how, after the movie was edited, the actors went into the sound studio and re-recorded their dialogue, to obtain the cleanest audio possible.

“Ain’t that a bore?”

He shrugged.

“Some actors hate it, but I enjoy the process. You only have to concern yourself with the dialogue delivery, and you have the time to do things you maybe couldn’t do on set.”

Bobby stood up and prowled the room.

“I’m kinda nervous,” she said. “About tomorrow.”

“Relax, I’ll be there.”

“What do we do with Jolene?”

“There’ll be child minders on set. She’ll have fun, don’t worry.”

Bobby popped a can of Dr Pepper.

“She’s gonna go back to Texas with some tall tales.”

Cord hesitated before he spoke.

“You really want to go back there?”

“Sure. It’s my home.”

“But what are you going to do?”

She shrugged.

“Pick myself up. Start again.”

“Will you have the money?”

“I’ll find the damned money. There is no way I’m letting Earl Pyle buy my land!”

She looked ready to punch somebody.

Then she smiled.

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay.”

She sat.

“Cord, the farm is everythin’ to me. I grewed up there. So has Jolene. It’s our world.”

“What do you want for her? In the future?”

“Only the best of everything.”

“You think that she’s going to get that? In Hollywood, Texas?”

Bobby shook her head.

“I guess not. But what the hell else can I do? Farmin’ is all I know.”

Cord stood.

“Well, the world is a lot bigger than Hollywood. Texas or California. And it’s full of surprises.”

“That it is.”

He said goodnight and there was a moment where they got close and he almost worked up the courage to kiss her.

But he didn’t.

He fled into the garden of this ridiculous mansion, and stands now in his bedroom like some poor man’s Jay Gatsby, gazing out into the night, the sky milky with light pollution.

His courage had failed him, down in the guest wing.

He should have kissed Bobby Champagne.

Kissed her and told her that he wanted her and Jolene to stay in Los Angeles.

With him.

Bobby, as wide-eyed as a kid, feels no older than Jolie who sits beside her in the limo, equally bug-eyed as the car drives through the double-arched gates to Paramount Studios, the water tower hovering in the background and the famous Hollywood sign—not the bullet-riddled, rusted thing from back home—looming through the gauze of smog.

Cord sits beside Jolie and despite his ready smiles and little jokes with the girl, Bobby can see he looks kinda tired.

Maybe even nervous.

Is this just the stuff that actors have to deal with before they work, or is it something else?

The knowledge, maybe, that he's about to face his wife?

Subtlety was never Bobby's greatest gift and, as the limo, comes to a halt in a parking lot, she says to Cord, "Man, you look kinda skittish."

Without answering he leaves the car and takes Jolie by the hand, leading her to a golf cart.

Cord takes the wheel and Jolie hops up beside him.

"You coming?" he says to Bobby.

She gets herself onto the rear seat and he takes off fast enough to get Jolene squealing with delight as Cord winds between buildings that look like factories, and Bobby guesses these are the movie studios.

The come to a halt outside Stage Two, a sign announcing that this is where *Old Fashioned Love Song* is being shot.

A lot of people are milling around and equipment is being unloaded out of trucks.

The doors to the studio stand open and Cord leads them in, showing them the set of the hotel room that they'll be shooting on today.

Jolie has her camera out, snapping away like a little paparazzo.

"Okay if she does that?" Bobby asks.

"Sure, but not while we're shooting, alright, Jolie?"

The kid nods and wraps her arms around Cord's waist.

“Cord, darling,” a voice soft as velvet says and Bobby turns and come face to face with the most radiantly beautiful human being she has ever clapped eyes on.

Kat Mansfield, wearing jeans and a rhinestone shirt, her hair a tumble of curls, turns those green eyes on Bobby.

“And who might this be?”

“Kat, this is Bobby Champagne.”

Kat extends a hand that drips with rings.

“What an *effervescent* name!” she says, touching Bobby’s hand for a second then pulling hers away as if it has been sullied.

The star turns her gaze on Jolene, who stares up at her, mouth agape.

“And who is this adorable little munchkin?” Kat asks.

“My names Jolene.”

“Jo-leeene,” Kat sings. “Like the song?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh don’t *ma’am*, me, darling, you’ll make me feel like some old spinster schoolmarm. Which, as Cord here will tell you, I certainly am not!”

Kat laughs her diamond-cutter laugh, and then raises a long-taloned finger to her mouth, staring at Bobby.

“That song was about a wife begging some scarlet woman not to steal her man, wasn’t it?”

Bobby says, “I believe so.”

“Mnnnn. How *apt*!”

She turns to face Cord.

“Well, darling husband, it looks like you have your hands full.”

She very deliberately lowers her eyes to Bobby’s rump.

“Very, *very*, full.”

Then she tosses her hair like a horse’s mane and says over shoulder as she walks away, “I’ll see you on set. Isn’t this the scene where I get to slap your face?”

She laughs like ice cubes dropping into a shot glass and she’s gone.

“Mama,” Jolene says, “why didn’t that lady’s face move when she spoke? Is there somethin’ wrong with her?”

Cord laughs.

“She’s just very, very old,” he says, taking Jolie’s hand. “Come I’ll show you my trailer. We can hang out there until I have to go off to make-up.”

As Bobby follows him she feels a tingle between her shoulder blades and spins on her heel.

Kat Mansfield is standing with a girl about as skinny as a lettuce leaf and both of them are staring her way.

If looks could kill Bobby'd be buzzing at the Pearly Gates.

Then the two women turn and disappear into the clutter of cameras and lights and Bobby walks after Cord and Jolie.

She has a good idea, now, why Cord looked like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

“Did you see the size of that cowpoke’s haunches?” Kat says, watching herself reflected in the mirror as Nadine paints on her make-up.

“It was grotesque,” the French girl says. “Disgusting.”

Deesgoooosting.

“How can Cord stoop that low? After all the years with me?” Kat says.

“Eet is like turning up zee nose at Nobu and eating instead at Fatburger.”

Nadine shivers in exaggerated disgust.

The make-up artist finishes her work and says, “Voila. Perfect.”

Kat stands and leaves the make-up room, walking over to her trailer, that has been—at the instruction of the producers, no doubt—parked very far from Cord’s.

Her stand-in hovers near the door.

“Hi, Kat,” Lucy Pearl says in her Joisey accent. “I just want you to gimme the okay on the wardrobe.”

It is Kat’s habit to inspect her stand-in, just to make sure that nothing makes the screen that could tarnish the Katherine Mansfield brand.

“Looking good, Luce,” Kat says stepping up into the trailer.

She stops in the doorway.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a teeny-weeny little joint stashed somewhere, would you?”

Lucy taps the pocket of her shirt.

“Funny you should mention it.”

“Step into my office.”

The two women enter the trailer and Kat closes the door.

Lucy fires up the joint, takes a puff, and hands it over to Kat who sucks so hard her cheeks smooch.

“I saw Cord with that bit of white trash,” Lucy says.

“He’s an idiot,” Kat says, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

“Men.”

Lucy takes the joint back.

“You’re better off without him.”

“That’s what I keep telling myself.”

Kat looks at her stand-in.

“You ever wish you and Pete were still together?”

Lucy coughs a laugh.

“You kiddin’ me? No way in hell! I’d be picking up his dirty skivvies and playing ma to his bastard son in the holidays.”

Kat stares at her.

“Pete’s got a son?”

“Yeah? You didn’t know?”

Kat shakes her head.

“Neither did he until last summer. He had a one-night stand with some floozy in Texas years ago. Boy’s nearly twenty now, and just appeared at Pete’s door and announced himself.”

“Pete honestly never knew?”

“Never had a clue. Now the kid’s the biggest thing in his life. He’s paying for him to study at some university out in Texas.”

She sucks on the joint.

“No, I am very pleased to have dodged all that. Never wanted kids of my own, and sure as hell wasn’t put on this earth to play stepmother.”

There’s a knock at the door and a voice shouts, “Five minutes Miss Mansfield.”

“I’ll see you out there, Kat,” Lucy says, handing over the joint as she leaves the trailer.

Kat finishes the last of the smoke, the weed taking the edge off things.

More than a little stoned, she knows that Lucy Pearl has told her something of great significance.

But what that is she couldn’t say.

“Put a pin in it,” she says to herself.

Then suddenly she feels as if a pin has been put in her.

Feels deflated.

Depressed.

Wishes she could go out there and take Cord’s hand and know that everything was okay.

Then she sees that vulgar Texan and knows that it’s not.

That it will never be again.

And suddenly, synapses fizzing from the weed, a plan, fully-formed and perfectly made, appears to her.

A plan that'll curdle whatever Cord has going with that corn-fed blonde.

Kat laughs and laughs and laughs as she leaves the trailer, drawn like a moth to the glow of the klieg lights.

⋮

It's been a quiet day for Skip Herring.

None of his many phones has rung.

And he hates that.

Hates it when there's no fruit falling ripe and juicy from the gossipvine.

Skip sits at his desk, inhaling the *bulgogi* burger coming at him live through the A/C ducts—mercifully the HQ is cool again—pretending to trawl the Web for any interesting dirt.

But what he's been doing is Googling Zola Byrd.

Which—even he has to admit—is kind of weird and stalkerish, because she sits at a desk maybe ten feet from him, dressed in her Shock & Awe camouflage outfit, completely unmoving, staring into space as if she's lost in a trance state.

The terms of her extortionate deal (the brothers, at Skip's urging, have given the nod to her wage demands) are that she be ready and waiting in the HQ should any gossip alerts hit the wires.

Sneaking a peek at her impassive, unblinking face, Skip can imagine her sitting through an aerial bombardment or a firefight without showing any emotion.

And he's gotten a couple of interesting Google hits on her.

Enough to see that she was telling him the truth.

She was a Marine.

And she did work as a cameraperson in Afghanistan.

When he searches YouTube for her ambush video, he finds that it has been removed for a “Terms of Service Violation.”

For a moment he goes all Bob Woodward and imagines doing an expose on the military machine and the news network flunkies who have blacklisted her.

Skip pulls himself back.

What the hell is wrong with you?

You're indulging in some adolescent rescue fantasy over a girl with chewed nails and body art?

The sound of giggling gets him turning in his chair to where the two Muppets, all hair and bubble gum, stand over a computer monitor.

One of them parts her hedgerow of dirty blonde tresses just long enough for Skip to know that she's shooting him a guilty look.

Now he's intrigued.

Skip leaves his desk and heads away from the Muppets toward the men's room, a stinky little cell he seldom visits.

And has no intention of visiting today.

He darts behind the greenscreen backdrop against which he shoots his studio stand-ups—images of celebrities caught unawares and obnoxious titles are added via video wizardry—and creeps up on the Muppets before they realize he's there.

Muppet One says: "Oh, wow, I just love seeing that whiny little ass-wipe caught out."

Muppet Two says: "I mean, was he like *retarded* to do this?"

"It's going *über*-viral. That little bitch is gonna get his. Seriously."

"Oh nooo! Boo hoo!"

The two unwashed and uncombed heads mask his view of the monitor, so Skip says, in his loudest voice, "Sharing is caring!"

He scares the two heads apart and for the briefest moment he catches a glimpse of what's on the monitor (and a chill grabs at his innards) before one of the Muppets does something with her mouse and a picture of Mindy Moran leaving a L.A. courtroom pops up.

"Show me what was amusing you two cretins," Skip says.

"I'm not a cretin," Muppet One says, "I'm a Serbian."

"And I'm from Duluth," Muppet Two says.

"Cut the *Dumb And Dumber* routine. If you value your jobs you'll show me what you were looking at."

"Is that, like, a *threat*?" Muppet Two says.

"Yes. Show and tell time or it's *adios*," Skip says with as much machismo as he can muster.

"No way you can fire us," Muppet One says.

"We're not that, like, *dense*!" Muppet Two says.

"Newsflash: if we *go* there's no *show*!"

They have Skip and he knows it and he's trying to figure out how to retreat with some dignity from this standoff when Zola Byrd walks up, hands in the pockets of her camo pants.

“Show him,” she says.

“And, like, who are *you*?” Muppet Two says, blowing a bubble.

“Yeah,” Muppet One says, “who *are* you?”

Zola’s answer is to grab two fistfuls of hair and bang their heads together.

There are yelps of pain.

“Who I’m *not* is somebody here to foster relationships in the geek community. Show the man what you were looking at or I will hurt you. I am not kidding.”

She twists more hair and a Muppet girl clicks her mouse and one of Frankie Wurst’s shots of Skip riding the mechanical bull back in Amarillo fills the screen.

The photograph is up on—gagging sounds—Perez Hilton’s blog, beneath the banner headline: SHOCKER: SKIP HERRING GOES ALL BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN WITH A BUCKING BRONCO!

Skip grabs the mouse and kills the image, the Muppets’ giggles trailing him back to his desk.

Fighting nausea he clicks through the sewers of gossipville.

The photographs are everywhere.

And they’re awful.

Humiliating.

He looks ridiculous.

Worse, he looks pathetic.

Skip discovers that they were leaked by one of Frankie Wurst’s assistants.

That the legendary shutterbug has suffered what is being called a *breakdown* and is receiving care at a facility somewhere in Upstate New York.

Giselle Koff has distanced herself from the entire debacle, saying: “*Vanity Fair* would never sully itself with such *déclassé* content.”

Skip Googles *déclassé*.

Of inferior social status, an on-line dictionary informs him.

Not since those appalling days on the snowy plains of Nebraska has Skip felt so desolate.

And to be the fodder of his fellow flesh eaters is the greatest humiliation of all.

And he has brought it on himself.

He has been his own worst enemy.

It's not the secret of his shameful virginity that has brought him down, it is his own rapacious, all-consuming vanity.

He closes his eyes and is allowing a vortex of depression to claim him when a hand grips his shoulder.

"What you need is a drink," a voice says and he looks up into the face of Zola Byrd.

"I don't drink."

"Today you do. Believe me."

Zola's already walking away, speaking over her shoulder.

"Come on, I'm buying."

Skip stands and follows her.

The trip to the elevator is a walk of shame, with the Studio Zone staffers sniggering and giggling.

Skip, about as comfortable as a pygmy in an NBA playoff, sits in a dimly lit armpit of a bar off Hollywood Boulevard, watching Zola order drinks from the troll of a bartender.

Yes, there is a jukebox.

And, yes, it whines out country music.

Can this day get any worse?

Zola returns to the table and deposits something as murky as a lab specimen in front of Skip.

"What is this?" he says.

"Don't ask. Just drink."

He takes a sip and grimaces.

"Listen, Muscles, pretend it's a Shirley Temple and throw it back. Like this."

She opens her mouth and empties her drink down her gullet, then looks at Skip, face impassive.

He hesitates.

"Do it," she says.

He does it.

The alcohol burns and his eyes tear up, but on the back of the feeling that's akin to a near-death experience comes a strange kind of calm.

Zola manifests another glass from a tray lurking out in the gloom.

“Put this one away, too.”

Skip does and it goes down easier than the first.

The pleasantly lobotomized feeling increases and he finds that he’s smiling for no good reason.

“Okay,” Zola says, “I have no idea why you were on that mechanical bull. I have no idea why you were wearing what you were wearing. And I have no idea why you allowed yourself to be photographed like that, given that you do what you do.”

“It does seem a little whack, in retrospect.”

“But it’s done and can’t be undone.”

“No, it can’t.”

“And you know better than anybody that the people who consume your brand of pondscum have shorter attention spans than a blowfly.”

“Mercifully, true.”

“And—I’m winging it here because my intel about of this world of yours is limited—it’s not unknown for this kind of seemingly negative publicity to generate positive aftereffects.”

“Also true. The Kardashian Paradox, I call it.”

“Huh?”

“Bad is good.”

“There you go then. Drink up.”

He drinks and feels as if his body is rather pleasantly oozing into the tacky pleather at his back.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” Skip asks.

Zola shrugs.

“I’ve been there. I’ve had my so-called colleagues turn on me like a pack of wolverines.”

“But in your case,” he says, working very hard to not to slur, “there were no positive aftereffects.”

“No,” she says.

“Would you do it again?” he asks.

“Upload that video to YouTube?”

“Yes?”

“In a heartbeat.”

“You have principles.”

“You make that sound like something you need to be vaccinated against.”

“I’ve never suffered from them.”

“Maybe you’re lucky.”

“Maybe.”

He drinks again, and then closes one eye and stares at her.

“What?” she says.

“You have a story, don’t you?”

“I’ve told you my story.”

“No, you’ve told me *G.I. Jane*.”

“Insult away, buddy.”

“But there’s something else lurking around in there, isn’t there? More of a ten-tissue weepy.”

Skip Herring is very drunk now, but even in this state of inebriation he retains enough of the instincts that have allowed him to truffle-pig his way up the slopes of the celebrity dung heap, and he sees he has hit home.

Zola blinks, and can those be tears he sees in those flinty eyes?

Before Skip can answer the question, Zola stands up out of the pool of dingy light and says, “We should get you home, hoss.”

As he rises the room spins like a Tilt-a-Whirl, and Zola grabs him by the elbow, easing him out into the night.

“Let’s get you a cab,” she says.

“I’m right over there,” says, pointing at his apartment building, a mere star-encrusted block away.

Still holding his arm she leads him through the traffic and into the cramped lobby.

“This is where I say goodnight,” she says.

“Thank you. You were very kind.”

“Tell me that when you wake up with a road crew working in your head.”

She smiles at him and it is a surprisingly sweet smile.

She ducks in and kisses him and as anesthetized a Skip is, he feels himself tightening up in shock, as the very thing that he’s been fantasizing about happening happens, right here, right now.

Zola steps back, laughing.

“I don’t freakin’ believe it.”

“Believe what?”

“You’re a virgin aren’t you?”

“You’re kidding? There are more pelts on my belt than a Canadian fur trapper’s.”

She shakes her head.

“I have a bullet-proof cherry detector. I am never wrong.”

“Well you are now.”

Zola laughs.

“Who would have thought? The man who wallows in filth is chaste?”

Skip, for the first time in living memory, is at a loss for words.

Zola says, “I’m out of here.”

“Why?”

“My charity doesn’t extend to cherry picking. Take my advice: get that thing removed by a professional.”

“And then?”

“And then, who knows?”

She’s gone and Skip drags himself up the stairs to his box, his blood awash with the heady brew of alcohol and hormones.

He falls fully dressed onto the futon and, as he passes out, his memory presents him with a snapshot of Zola Byrd’s bony clavicles.

They look like wire coat hangers.

And somehow that’s a good thing.

Cord McCann loves the buzz of a movie studio crammed with technicians and actors, loves the rush that he feels when he steps in front of the camera.

Even after all these years it remains a thrill.

But his favorite time on a soundstage is when the picture has wrapped for the day, when the hot lights have been doused and the crew has melted away into the night.

That's when he's reminded of the greats who have worked on these stages: The Marx Brothers, Marlene Dietrich, Alfred Hitchcock . . .

Unlike his estranged wife Cord McCann makes no claims to being psychic, but it's hard not to feel the presence of all these Hollywood legends, as if they've left traces of themselves in the air of the empty soundstage.

Cord still has to pinch himself sometimes, to make sure that he's not dreaming, that he's really part of this very special world of make-believe.

Walking alone through the studio he's a kid again, ten years old, sneaking into the drive-in theater carved out of the cornfields back in Kansas, hunkering down in the dark, watching the giant, flickering faces of the movie stars on the screen, hearing their voices echoing out of the tinny speakers hanging from the windows of the rows of cars and pick-up trucks, the families inside trapped in little bubbles of magic.

But tonight, perching on a camera box in the deserted studio, Cord realizes that he isn't thinking of those old-time greats, he's thinking of Bobby and Jolene—even now up at his house—and the understanding that they are going to fly back to Texas in a couple of days when the movie wraps leaves him feeling hollowed out.

Gutted.

Time has passed in a blur of work, the momentum of a demanding shooting schedule dominating his life.

He's seen Bobby, of course.

Run lines with her in his trailer.

Eaten a meal with her and Jolene up the mansion.

But there was a wariness between them.

A caution.

He knew why he was cautious: he didn't want to make some declaration that would blow everything.

That would send her running scared back to Hollywood, Texas, severing all lines of communication.

Because he feared that her caution stemmed from disinterest.

He knew she liked him, but was it anything more than friendship and gratitude for what he had done that day in the Amarillo courtroom?

For, despite the gloss of his movie-star life, Cord McCann is as inexperienced as a teenager when it comes to women.

Kat had pursued him.

Kat had seduced him.

He's never wooed anybody.

And he has no confidence in his ability to read those subtle signals that differentiate desire from just plain friendliness.

So he's stuck.

Paralyzed.

If body language can be tongue-tied, he tells himself, then yours sure as hell is.

"Speak to her," a voice says, startling him.

Cord turns and sees Dixie Lamb leaning against a light stand, smoking an outlawed cigarette.

"Speak to who?" Cord says.

"You know who."

"Kat?"

"No, not *Kat*. You can't *speak* to Kat. I'm not one to condone domestic violence, but how you didn't take a whip to that bitch years ago, I'll never understand."

"Ah, you know me: the Man with No Spine."

Dixie shakes her gray hair.

"No, you're not weak, Cord. You were just with the wrong woman for too long."

"I guess."

"That's why I'm telling you to speak to Bobby Champagne."

He stares up at her in surprise and she laughs.

"You're mooning over her like a kid, Cord!"

He stands, embarrassed.

“Don’t we have hair to cut and a beard to shave?” he asks, walking toward the make-up room.

“Don’t worry, honey,” Dixie says, killing the cigarette with the heel of her shoe, “that girl is crazy about you, too.”

Cord says nothing as he settles himself in the chair in front of the mirror.

Dixie, a cloud of cigarette smoke following her, comes in after him.

He waits for her to continue the conversation she started, but she doesn’t, just grabs her scissors and comb.

“We’ll get rid of this hair first, okay?”

Cord nods, relieved at the change of subject.

Tomorrow he’ll be T-Bone Buford transformed, shedding the drunken stumble-bum image and stepping into his new life.

How easy it is on the pages of a screenplay, Cord thinks.

Dixie drapes him in a waterproof cape, wheels in a basin and shampoos his head, then sets about cutting the long, messy tresses, coils of hair dropping into his lap.

The stylist doesn’t speak, just squints at his reflection in the mirror, then she steps back.

“Okay, I think that about does it.”

His hair, still a little longer than he usually wears it, is neatly trimmed for the first time in nearly a year month.

Cord pats his exposed ears.

“Hi strangers.”

“Okay, time for this bird’s nest,” Dixie says, tugging at the wild beard that masks his face.

She gets her electric clippers going and trims away the fuzz.

Then she lathers up his face and strops a straight razor on a length of leather.

“You really gonna use that thing on me?” he asks.

“Don’t let this gray hair fool you Cord, I’m still as steady as a surgeon.”

And she is, stripping away the beard in smooth swipes, revealing the bones that made him famous and very, very rich.

Then she tilts Cord’s head back, opening up his neck, and places the blade of cutthroat razor against his Adam’s apple.

“Okay, now you’re not going to change the subject, or weasel away,” his old friend says.

"What's going on, Dix?" he whispers.

"You're going to promise me you'll talk to that girl. Tell her how you feel."

Her eyes are fixed on his.

"How do you know she feels the way I do?"

"Maybe you haven't noticed, honey, but I spend my life staring into people's faces and after all these years I guess I've learned to read them. It breaks my old heart to see the way that girl looks at you."

"Really?"

"Really."

Dixie presses the blade down hard enough to hurt.

"Now promise me you're going to talk to her."

"Okay!"

"Tonight?"

"Tonight."

Dixie clicks the blade closed and wipes the foam off his face and frees Cord from the cloak.

"Now get the hell out of here, you heartthrob, you."

As Cord exits the soundstage he sees the glow of a cigarette in the dark and Pete Bridger steps out of a pool of shadow.

"Hey, pard, it ain't like lookin' in the mirror no more," Cord's stand-in says.

"You also here to get shaved and shorn?"

"I am."

He flicks the butt away.

"How you holdin' up?" Pete asks.

"Pretty well, I guess."

"I woulda asked you out for a beer, but I seen you were kinda busy."

"Yeah?"

"She's prime Texas bloodstock. May I say I approve?"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, Pete," Cord says, but there's no beard now to hide his smile in.

"Sure you don't," his double says as he heads toward the make-up room.
"Catch you tomorrow."

Cord, walking to where his limo waits, marvels at how everybody around him seems to know more about what's going on in his life than he does.

Time to change that.

If you'd told Buster Pyle a few days back that he would ever miss Madison Mount and her endless prattling and her moods and her demands, he would have advised you (in his colorful Texan locution) to take yourself off to some fancy headshrinker up in San Antone.

But, sitting alone in the living room of his quarters, watching football on TV, he realizes that miss her he does.

Like poison.

She just up and disappeared the day after that humiliating court appearance in Amarillo.

There had been no goodbyes.

The things she'd been slowly smuggling into his house—her toothbrush, hairdryer, underwear (*that* he hadn't minded) and various bottles and tubes as mysterious to him as if they were artifacts from some lost tribe of the Amazon—just disappeared.

Her cell phone went unanswered.

The cramped furnished apartment she rented in town was empty of her belongings.

When he asked her few friends where she'd gone, they shrugged and said they didn't know.

Dallas maybe, one of them ventured.

She'd always hankered after the bright lights.

But gone she was.

And while he felt a slight yearning for her pneumatic curves and occasional burst of enthusiasm in the bedroom, it was her mind he missed.

Her scheming, conniving mind.

The only mind able to help him now that he was in such dire straits.

But that mind had fled along with those curves because the little gold-digger had heard his daddy bellowing at him the night they got back from Amarillo.

Telling him that he was disowned.

Disinherited.

Cut off.

A pronouncement that had shocked Buster even more than the outcome of the custody hearing.

And a pronouncement that had sent Madison Mount in search of richer pickings.

And who, Buster has to admit (as he kills the tube in frustration when the placekicker for the Roughnecks sends the ball far wide of the upright) could blame her?

Even though Earl Pyle has calmed a little.

Has granted his only son and heir a few weeks' grace before he throws him out with nothing but the clothes on his back. A few weeks for Buster to deliver the Champagne farmlands.

Pouring himself another Jack and Coke, Buster feels a terrifying liquidity in his lower regions.

How is he to do his father's bidding when he doesn't even know where he ex-wife and daughter are?

In Hollywood, he presumes.

That other Hollywood.

That Sodom and Gomorrah that festers out on the West Coast.

Out there with that movie star, Cord McCann.

Picturing the actor smiling smugly at Bobby from the witness stand in the Amarillo courtroom gets Buster so riled up that he begins to bang his head against the wall in impotent fury, the sound of his cranium connecting with gypsum board almost drowning out the ring of his cellphone.

A little dizzy, he takes a second to locate the phone that lies on a table blaring out "Texas, our Texas", and lunges across to grab it.

He's praying that it's Madison, but UNKNOWN CALLER comes up on the face of the phone.

"Yeah?" he says.

"Is that Mr. Bertram Pyle?" a female voice asks, and this gets Buster even more tense.

Only representatives of the law refer to him by that name.

"This is Buster Pyle."

"Mr. Pyle you are speaking with Katherine Mansfield."

Buster is baffled.

"Who?"

"I'm married to Cord McCann."

Now Buster recognizes the name.

He's seen this woman's movies.

She's hot and he's heard she's a cougar.

Then his native suspicion kicks in.

"Okay, I ain't no dumbass. Who is this jerkin' my chain?"

"This really is Kat Mansfield, and I think we can help one another."

"Prove it."

"Prove what?"

"Prove that you're who you say you are."

"How?"

This has him stumped, then the woman sighs and says, "Maybe this will convince you. I'm on a movie set each day with your wife and child. Mrs. Champagne likes cherry flavored Dr Pepper and drinks it in obscene quantities. Your daughter walks around with an iPad watching some cartoon skunk. Ring any bells?"

"My daughter don't have no iPad."

"She does now. My husband bought it for her, and he has them living with them up at his house. *Our* house."

Buster feels that rage welling up again and he's pleased there's no wall in head-butting range.

"Okay," he says. "What do you want?"

"I think we both want the same thing."

"Yeah?"

"We both want your wife and daughter back in Texas."

"Ain't that the truth."

"And I have a plan."

"Well, ma'am, I'd be pleased to hear it."

"Are you acquainted with the University of West Texas?"

"Sure am. I'm an alumni."

Buster flunked out in his freshman year, but that's not for her to know.

"Well, there's a student there by the name of Boyd Bridger."

"And why in hell should this interest me?"

"Shut up and I'll tell you."

Though it rubs him raw when a woman speaks to him this way, he shuts up and she tells him of a plan that is so cunning and nasty that all thoughts of—and longing for—Madison Mount are blown away across the parched

prairie, and when he ends the call and pours himself a drink Buster Pyle is smiling like a Halloween pumpkin.

;

Bobby has found herself a little ritual.

Every night after she puts Jolie to sleep she slips out of the guest wing and stands in the formal garden that surrounds the pool, drinking a Dr Pepper and listening to the trickle of the fountains, staring out at the endless sprawl of lights that stretch out beneath her like a prairie filled with June bugs.

Even though she hears the throb of the city below, this is as close as she can get to quiet here in Los Angeles,

She realizes how still the nights are back home in Texas, with only the rasp of the tiger beetles to break the silence.

She'll be back there soon enough, with the movie about to wrap.

How does she feel about that?

Kinda mixed, she has to admit.

Being out here has been a wonderful fantasy and she knows that going back means returning to the home she loves, sure, but it also means a return to hardship and conflict.

The image of Earl Pyle's ugly pug-dog face comes to her.

And the mean features of his weak son.

There will still be battles to fight.

The sound of a car has her turning and she watches as Cord's limo whines up the curving driveway.

As it comes to a halt at the stairs to the main house the headlights sweep across her, and when Cord slides from the car he says, "Bobby?"

"Yeah?" she says.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," she says, "Come on over."

Bobby enters the guest house, crosses the living room and gets herself a fresh Dr Pepper from the icebox in the open plan kitchen, her back to Cord when he comes in saying, "Hi."

"Hi," she says as she turns.

She nearly drops her bottle at the sight of the clean shaven, short-haired Cord.

“Wow,” she says. “You do clean up good!”

He shrugs.

“It was kinda fun, being somebody else for a couple of months.”

She has to drag her eyes away from him.

Wow, this guy sure is pretty.

“Jolie asleep?” he asks.

“Yeah, she had to make do with one of my bedtime stories. Man, you are one tough act to follow.”

He points to his face.

“Sorry, I needed to get all this out of the way.”

“No need to apologize. You want to run some lines?” she asks as she sits down on the couch.

“No,” he says and she sees an expression on his face that she’s never seen before.

He looks stricken.

“What’s wrong, Cord?”

“Nothing,” he says, then he looks into her eyes. “No, that’s not true.”

“Well, whatever it is lay it on me. The suspense is killin’ me.”

She tries for lighthearted, but hears the nerves in her voice.

And then, all at once, she knows the truth.

His wife is moving back in.

Of course, that’s it.

He wants you and Jolie gone.

He’s going to tell you to leave tomorrow.

Convinced that he has spoken these words, Bobby says, “I understand, Cord. Truly. It makes sense.”

He’s staring at her.

“What does?”

“What you just said. About your wife.”

He shakes his head.

“I never said anything about Kat.”

“You mean she’s not moving back in?”

He laughs.

“God, no. Why did you think that?”

She shrugs.

“Wait, is that what you thought I wanted to talk to you about?” Cord says. “To kick you and Jolie out because Kat’s coming back?”

"It crossed my mind," she says.

"No. It's pretty far from that."

"Okay, I'm listenin'."

She sees that he's as jumpy as a ball of barbed wire in a tumble drier.

"Cord, you can tell me anythin'. Really."

"Bobby," he says, "I don't want you to go."

"What?"

"I don't want you and Jolie to go back to Texas."

"What are you sayin'?"

"I'm saying that I want the two of you to stay in Los Angeles with me. Not here in this damned mausoleum—we'll find another place, maybe down on the beach. Jolie would like that, wouldn't she?"

"You're tellin' me you want me and Jolie to live with you? Permanent?"

"Yes, that's what I'm saying." He stares into her eyes. "I'm in love with you."

"Well . . ." she says, and knows that a confusion of emotions are playing across her face.

He stands, and raises his hands in surrender.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I've obviously misunderstood things."

"Cord?"

"Yes?"

"Shut up."

"Okay."

"Shut up and pucker up."

"Huh?"

She's standing close to him now.

Very close.

"Kiss me, stupid," she says.

"That was the name of a movie."

"With Dean Martin. I know. But don't change the subject."

She steps in toward him and melts into his arms like hot butter over corn, and when she feels his lips on hers and his arms around her body it's just as wonderful as she ever dreamed it would be.

"Mama? Mama?"

Jolene calling from the bedroom drives them apart.

"I'm comin' baby," Bobby shouts.

“I should go,” Cord says.

“Yes, git on down to your mansion, you poor little rich boy.”

He laughs and he’s just about at the door when she says, “Cord?”

He turns.

“Yes?”

“Me too.”

“You too what?”

“That love thang.”

And blushing like a schoolgirl, Bobby Champagne flees toward her daughter’s room, her heart fit to burst with happiness.

When Skip Herring—so weighed down by a hangover that he feels as if he’s wearing a brass diving helmet—enters Larry’s Chop House on the Sunset Strip and sees the mechanical bull with its malevolent bovine eyes and giant horns, it takes all of his resolve not to turn on his heel and flee into the blinding light of yet another insufferably gorgeous L.A. day.

The place, empty of customers, stinks of last night’s beer and BBQ baby back ribs and Skip has to hold onto his stomach along with the Samsonite suitcase he wheels behind him.

“Hi, Skip,” Larry, the owner—even this early sporting a ten-gallon hat—says in his J. R. Ewing drawl.

Larry, who’s from Liverpool (the closest he’s even got to Texas is watching reruns of *Dallas*) owes Skip a favor.

The scandal monger has orchestrated many a celebrity ambush outside the Chop House, giving the restaurant serious media exposure.

That Skip chooses the place—with its kitsch wooden façade and garish neon—because it sums up all that is crass and ersatz about L.A. is not for the Liverpudlian to know.

“Hey, Larry,” Skip says. “Mind if I change in the men’s room?”

“Knock yourself out, Superman.”

A couple of minutes later when Skip emerges in a Stetson, leather vest, rawhide chaps and not much else (his booty from a fancy dress place near Frederick’s of Hollywood, as close he can get to replicating what he wore on that night of humiliation in Amarillo), Zola Byrd, walking into the Chop House with her video camera slung over her shoulder, stares at him and shakes her buzz-cut head.

“You gotta be kidding me.”

“Sometimes,” Skip says, “you have to fight fire with fire.”

“Well, just be careful you don’t singe your wick,” she says, eyeballing his scrawny lower parts that the chaps do little to cover. “Don’t the rest of the Village People feel kinda left out?”

“Funny.”

Skip, unsmiling, slides behind the mechanical bull, trying to gather whatever shreds of dignity he can muster.

“I want you to get a low angle shot of me riding this thing. Then we’ll cut and stop the bull, and I’ll do a little piece sitting on its back. Okay?”

“You’re the boss, hoss.”

Zola kneels and frames up the bull from floor-level.

“Ready when you are, Tex.”

Skip climbs up onto the back of the bull.

In Amarillo Frankie Wurst had shot only stills, so the contraption was stationary.

But how hard can it be? Skip asks himself.

He’s about to find out.

Larry gets the bull bucking at a modest rate, but even that’s too much for Skip who is thrown from the beast and ends up lying in a pathetic heap on the sticky floor.

“Are you trying to kill me?” he asks Larry.

The owner, his accent less J.R. and more John Lennon for a moment, says, “Skip, even tiny bloody kids can ride the bull at that speed.”

Skip, a headache threatening to fell him, clambers back onto the mechanical beast and holds on for dear life.

Larry starts it up again and this time Skip manages to stay on for half a minute, even lifting his Stetson from his head and waving it at the camera, while he unleashes a whiny and rodent like, “*Weehah!*”

“How was that?” he asks Zola.

“Honestly, you could cut the testosterone with a chainsaw,” she says.

She sees his face and takes pity on him.

“Skip, it was okay. Even looked kinda convincing for a few seconds. I just wish I knew what the hell you’re trying to prove with this stunt.”

“All will be revealed in the fullness of time,” he says. “Now frame up my close-up.”

She comes to standing, the camera balanced on her shoulder.

“Rolling,” Zola says.

Skip, looking into the lens, flashes his trademark grin, and says, “The blogosphere has been dining out on an all-you-can eat Herring buffet the past twenty-four hours. But, kiddies, this ain’t my first rodeo. I’ve been gathering a scoop that’ll rock the worlds of publishing and politics.”

He dismounts the bull.

“Zola, for my wrap-up line I want you to start on my face then move down to my butt as I walk away.”

“You’re not serious?”

“Don’t question me, just do it.”

She shrugs.

“Okay, and . . . rolling.”

“For a tell-all, no-holds-barred expose that eviscerates the East Coast power elite I had to go under the radar, underground,” he turns and Zola pans down to his skinny little butt cheeks poking out from the chaps, “and undercover.”

For emphasis he slaps his behind.

“You get that?” he asks.

“Whatever it was, I got it.”

“I’m going to change.”

“And then?”

“And then back to the HQ to dish some weapons-grade dirt.”

“My hero,” Zola says, lifting the camera from her shoulder.

For moment Skip is given a view of her bony clavicles and—it must be the toxic remnants of the booze still swilling through his veins—he feels a distinct stirring beneath his rawhide chaps.

For some reason Bobby's mama has been on her mind this morning, real powerful memories coming to her that just won't let her free of their grip.

This is the last day of shooting, and the call time is only after lunch, because the last shots are at night, in the streets of Los Angeles doubling for Nashville, where Cord and his girl drive away from his ex-wife forever.

So, Bobby sits alone in the guest wing, reading the last pages of the screenplay, waiting for Cord to come back from a meeting he's having with the director, so they can run his lines.

Jolene has joined a party of kids—led by the child minders from the movie company—for a visit to Disneyland, and won't be back until evening.

So Bobby sits on the couch drinking Dr Pepper and thinking of her mama.

Happy memories of her before she ran away and never returned.

Remembers her mama combing Bobby's hair, the girl—never the most feminine of creatures—squirming away from the brush.

"Keep still, Roberta," her mama said, laughing.

For Mama it had always been Roberta.

Never Bobby.

"I wanna git outside and help daddy," Bobby said.

"You need to keep your hair pretty, so you can find you a fine, handsome husband."

"I ain't never gonna git married, Mama."

"Sure you will."

"No, never."

"Yes, you will," she said, as something crossed her face that Bobby only understood years later. "You won't make the mistake I made. You'll marry for love."

And Bobby has to allow that she'd loved Buster Pyle, in her own way.

But the truth—and this brings a blush to her face, as if her mama is in the room watching her—is that it was all about hormones exploding like

popcorn.

She was eighteen and she thought Buster Pyle was just so handsome and dashing.

And rich, of course, although Bobby had never been attracted to him for that.

But it hadn't hurt none that he had a fancy car, and could drive them into Amarillo for treats.

Why had he married her? she still wonders.

She'd fallen pregnant, true, but that was no good reason for a guy like Buster Pyle.

She has always suspected that it was Buster's one great act of rebellion against his daddy.

Marrying the trashy Champagne girl.

These thoughts are depressing her and she lifts herself from the couch and walks out into the sunlight, staring over the great pink mansion, the green gardens and the palm trees, counting the minutes until Cord returns.

She lowers herself onto a lounge beside the huge pool and all thoughts of Buster Pyle are lost in the sunlight dancing off the surface of water, and as the chuckling fountains lull her almost to sleep, she allows herself to remember what Cord said last night.

About Bobby and Jolene staying out here with him.

Could it really be true, or was she dreaming all of this, about to wake up in her bed back in Texas with the drought frying the land and the Pyles circling like vultures?

No.

He'd said it.

And they'd kissed.

Bobby allows herself to remember that kiss but doesn't dare wonder if—when he comes home—they'll kiss again.

Or more.

Buster Pyle sits in booth in a rib shack on a back road between Hollywood and Amarillo, washing BBQ brisket, beans, corn bread and spicy pickles down with a longneck of Shiner Bock.

He's feeling about as happy as he has since this whole ruckus with Bobby and the movie star polluted his life.

Feeling more in control.

More his own man.

When he left home an hour ago, speeding away in his pickup like the devil wanted him for dinner, he said nothing to his daddy.

Would say nothing to him about any of this until he had his little girl back and had delivered the Champagne's land to the elder Pyle.

He taps his fingers to the Hank Williams tune on the jukebox (the ancient crone with a mustache who cooks the BBQ still hasn't made peace with Hank's passing) and smiles when his old buddy Tommy Cole comes in the door.

After back slapping and hand shaking the two men sit and Cole pours a Shiner down his throat, then wipes his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Always nice to see you, Buster, but I'll swan this ain't social?"

"Not entirely. I'm here to draw on your expertise."

"Such as it is," Cole says, all modesty.

Tommy Cole is what as known as a gypsy cop.

He makes his living traveling through impoverished rural Texas offering to work undercover cheaply for short periods of time for underfunded police departments.

Drug stings are his specialty, and he has been known to massage evidence to suit the circumstances.

Buster says, "You have any influence with the campus cops over at the University of West Texas?"

Cole rubs his fingers together.

“With the necessary cash I got more friends than a nympho on Facebook.”

“Money ain’t no problem.”

“Music to my ears,” Tommy says, tipping a salute at the jukebox, “with all due respect to Mr. Williams.”

His smile evaporates.

“What you got in mind, Buster?”

“There’s a student over at West Texas. Name of Boyd Bridger.”

“He some kind of tweaker?”

“Hell, for all I know he’s head of the damned temperance league, but I need some leverage.”

“Kinda leverage that may involve the discovery of, say, a pound of Mexican meth in his footlocker?”

“I reckon that should about swing it.”

“Okay, now we play *The Price Is Right*, and if we come to terms you can consider it done.”

Cole names an extortionate number.

Buster haggles, because that’s what you do.

Finally they agree and clink bottles.

Buster says, “I want you to do what you do and scare the crap outta that kid, but I don’t want you takin’ him in. Least not yet. Okay?”

“You call the plays, Mr. Quarterback.”

Cole maneuvers his gut out from behind the table.

“Always a pleasure, Buster. I’ll be in touch.”

When the rogue cop has gone Buster calls across to the crone.

“Honey, bring me a Jack and Coke, beer back. And a plate of peach cobbler. Don’t be shy with the portion, now.”

What the hell, he’s celebrating.

“Giselle Koff, the grande dame of the poisoned pen at *Vanity Fair*, wasn’t always Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*,” Skip says in his richest voice.

He’s sitting in the little edit room at the HQ, Zola Byrd crammed in beside him, cutting in a particularly revolting picture of the ancient gossip maven to accompany his voice-over.

“Look at her back in the good old bad old days,” he says.

Skip cuts to an image of the young (or at least middle-aged) Giselle, looking rather fetching in a Chanel outfit, grinning into a camera flash.

Skip taps a couple of keys on the computerized edit suite, and the image zooms back to show that Giselle Koff is grinning at none other than that infamous bed-hopper John F. Kennedy.

“Here’s Giselle in the swinging early-sixties with the biggest swinger of all, JFK.”

Skip assembles a montage of images of Giselle and the President: at an opera at the Met, at a party on Martha’s Vineyard, at a gallery opening in New York.

Skip himself pops onto screen, smirking at the camera.

“Now, as promised, I have a snippet that is so *hot, hot, hot* that you’d better slip into something slinky and asbestos. This is a photograph of legendary shutterbug, Frankie Wurst, Giselle Koff’s snapshooter of choice.”

The elusive Frankie is up on the screen, caught in a lighthearted moment, smiling a very toothy smile.

With a little computer wizardry Skip morphs between a smiling JFK and a smiling Frankie Wurst.

It has to be acknowledged there is a passing similarity between the smiles that is enhanced by the digital box of tricks.

And is turned into cold fact by Skip’s strident pronouncement:

“Studio Zone has learned that Frankie Wurst is none other than the love child of John F. Kennedy and scandal scribe Giselle Koff! When Frankie found this out, just days ago, she suffered a nervous breakdown.”

Cut to a grainy shot of a creepy Adams Family house surrounded by high walls.

“She was committed to the Ryebrook Facility in Upstate New York yesterday. Giselle Koff, sadly, has declined to comment. More—much, much, *much* more—on this story as it breaks right here on Studio Zone.”

Skip concludes the package with the Studio Zone logo and frantically percussive them music.

Satisfied he calls in a technician.

“This can go out right now on-line, and get it to all our network affiliates, pronto.”

He leaves the edit suite and crosses to the fridge to snag a bottled water.

Zola Byrd follows him.

“I don’t know whether to admire you or call an exterminator,” she says.

“Aw shucks, I just does what I does,” he says, all hayseed.

“You don’t have one shred of evidence to back that up, do you?”

“Of course I don’t. It’s just an expertly prepared confection of innuendo and insinuation.”

“What about that old fashioned thing called the truth?”

“The *truth*? Oh come on, sugarpops, the truth is just the lie *du jour*. Anyway, I’m in the entertainment business, not the truth business. If people want that they go somewhere gray and boring like *The Washington Post* or the *New York Times*. Although these days . . .”

He lets it hang, perching his butt on his desk.

Skip’s hangover is gone, the adrenalin rush of the last few hours washing it clean away.

And he knows this little coup of his will dominate the gossipverse for at least a day.

An eternity in his line of work.

Waaaay long enough to bury that nasty little Amarillo disaster.

“Don’t your bosses ever freak at what you do?” Zola asks.

“Are you kidding? The brothers have hated the Kennedys since the dawn of time. I’ll probably get a bonus.”

She shakes her shaven head.

“Why do I always feel like I need a shower when I’m around you?”

“Because I drive you crazy with desire?”

She smiles sourly.

“No, because you’re a sewer rat.”

“You say the sweetest things.”

For the first time in hours he feels a little nervous, a little out of his comfort zone as he gathers his courage and says, “How about a drink? To celebrate?”

“I thought you don’t drink?”

“I’m acquiring the taste. Come on, let’s go up to the Polo Lounge. Maybe we’ll catch some starlets in a *folie à deux*.”

“You don’t have the slightest clue what that means do you?”

“No, I don’t, but it sounds all spicy and French.”

Skip grabs his jacket and heads for the elevator.

“You coming?”

⋮

Topper Yazback, the *wunderkind* director of *Old Fashioned Love Song*, is late for his meeting with Cord and Kat.

He's stuck on a location scout in downtown L.A., finding a street that can double as Nashville for tonight's shoot.

For the last scenes of the movie.

Scenes in which T-Bone Buford leaves a country music awards ceremony with a young backing singer, bids a final very public and very emotional farewell to his ex-wife and drives off into the night with his new love.

Cord, alone in a room with *his* wife for the first time in a week, prowls the director's office on the Paramount lot, eager to get this meeting done, eager to get back home to Bobby.

Kat swanned in a few minutes ago, a cloud of fragrance wafting in after her.

Cord knows his wife well enough to realize that she has taken a lot of trouble with her appearance: her hair is pulled back in a pony tail, there is just a light dusting of make-up on her striking face, and she wears a simple white cotton blouse over blue jeans.

She has designed her look to please Cord.

But it doesn't please him.

It angers him.

"Sit, Cord," Kat says as if she's talking to a favored pet.

He ignores her, staring out over the lot as Topper's flustered young assistant pokes her head in, apologizing yet again for the director's tardiness.

"Topper's having a creative conflict on Bunker Hill," the kid says.

"Sounds bloody," Kat says.

"He's just called to say he's on his way."

"That's okay, darling, hubby and I are having a cozy little chat, aren't we Cord?"

Again Cord says nothing, and when the girl leaves Kat comes to stand beside him.

“Don’t go all Gary Cooper on me, baby. You know how I hate that.”

“I could care less about what you hate.”

When she lays a hand on his arm he steps away from her.

“Beaten or shot anybody lately?” she asks.

“No,” he says, giving her cold little smile, “but that could change.”

“Ouch, girlfriend,” she says in her idea of street, “you sure got your bitch on!”

Then she drops the attitude and Kat’s herself again, or the self that she peddles to the world.

“It’s not too late, Cord, to stop this silliness.”

He looks at her.

“I’ve briefed Selwyn Sherman,” Cord says. “He’ll be in touch next week.”

Kat grimaces.

“Ooooh, you’ve retained a shark. There’s going to be blood in the water.”

“No, it’s pretty straightforward. We split everything down the middle.”

Cord hears a sniff and turns to see Kat crumpling onto the couch, holding a Kleenex to her face.

Before her cosmetic surgery there would have been tears rolling down her cheeks—one of Kat’s lost talents: she’d been able to cry at will, a skill that’d made her a favorite with her directors.

“Oh god, Cord, I miss you.”

Unmoved, he says nothing.

Kat is an actress.

A good one.

And she’s just playing another role: that of the wronged wife.

“How could you leave me for that little country bumpkin?”

“I didn’t leave you for Bobby, I left you for myself.”

His wife grimaces, and the real Kat surfaces, claws and all.

“Eew, Cord, you need a rewrite. That dialogue is so seventies. What are you gonna do next? Go check yourself into Esalen for a week?”

“Kat, quit it. This isn’t some smartass rom-com. This is real life.”

She is on her feet, anger bringing red spots to her cheeks.

“Real life? What’s real about you and Little Miss Cowpoke? Some retard from the boonies? Is that what you need to feel like man?”

“Kat, it’s over. Why do you want to prolong this sham of a marriage anyway?”

“Because I love you, Cord. I always have and I always will.”

He shakes his head.

“You don’t love *me*. You love the *idea* of me. The idea of *us*. The power couple, with their mansion and their red carpet interviews and their A-list parties. It’s empty, Kat, and I’m tired of living an empty life. I’m cutting you loose. Go and do your cougar thing with my blessing.”

Kat flies across the room and he thinks she’s going to slap him, but she controls herself, clenches her jaws and says, “Why is it that when a woman likes younger men she’s called a *cougar*, but when a man beds little bimbos he’s called *virile*?”

“Just one of the many injustices of the world, Kat. Maybe you can become the spokesperson for all the middle-aged, sex-addicted women out there?”

“This isn’t over, Cord,” she says, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

“Yes, it is, Kat. Move on.”

The door opens and Topper Yazbeck rushes in.

“Apologies, apologies. Just a little location crisis. The street looked more like Nigeria than Nashville, but Topper fixed it.”

Cord says, “That’s a relief. But now Cord really has to get Cord’s butt on home, so can we do this thing?”

The director stares at him, then he barks a little laugh.

“My man, Cord. My man!”

Cord allows his palm to be slapped and then the director and his two stars settle around a table and screenplays are produced and the familiar nonsense of this make-believe world casts a sprinkling of magic dust over the room and Cord can almost forget the look in Kat’s eye when she said this wasn’t over.

Bobby still hasn't got used to the clean shaven, shorthaired Cord, and when he walks into the guest wing she battles not ogle him like some star-struck schoolgirl.

"What?" he says.

"Nothin'."

"Tell me."

"It's the way you look. How'd you get to be so damned purty, anyways?"

He laughs.

"Good genes, I guess."

"Your mama and daddy handsome, too?"

"I don't know."

She squints at him.

"I was adopted," he says.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

He shakes his head.

"Long ago and far away."

Then he smiles that smile that gets even a tough girl like Bobby a little weak at the knees.

"And you? Who do you look like?"

"I've got my daddy's bones and my mama's face."

"An irresistible combination."

She laughs as she lifts her screenplay from the table.

"You ready to do this?"

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, you do, otherwise I'm gonna feel like a freeloader."

"We're going to have to do something about this work ethic of yours," Cord says.

"It's part of me."

"Maybe you can have it surgically removed?"

"That's real hilarious."

She sits opposite Cord and opens her script near the back.

“Just a couple more pages, then it’s all over. How do you feel,” she asks, “when a movie comes to an end?”

“A mixture of things. Relief that all that hard work is done. But it’s kind of sad, too, because you have to say goodbye to the person you have become for those months,” Cord says.

“Do you have something new coming up?”

“There are always scripts to read. But I’ll get to that down the road. When a movie wraps I like to go off on my own for a few days.”

“Yeah? Where?”

“When I got my pay check from my first movie I didn’t buy a Porsche or a speedboat or a suitcase full of cocaine, I bought an old cabin up in the Sierras. I still own it and it’s become a kind of ritual for me to go up there and clear my head.”

“So when do you go?”

He shrugs.

“I’m not sure I’m going to, this time.”

“Why not?”

“Two reasons.”

He looks at her.

“You and Jolene.”

“Oh, c’mon, Cord. Don’t change your plans on our account.”

“You’re sure?”

“Darn tootin’. We’ll hold the fort here for a coupla days with no problem.”

Then she hesitates.

“That’s if you still want us to, of course?”

“Nothing has changed since last night, Bobby.”

“Well, this here’s California. You folks are known to be fickle.”

“Relax, okay?”

“So when you goin’?”

“Tomorrow, I guess. Just for one night.”

“Go for as long as you please.”

“No. One night will be good.”

“Okay,” she says, lifting her screenplay, “let’s get to work.”

He grabs his copy, stares at the page and says in his T-Bone Buford voice, “How about we go roll around in that big old bed back there while eating crackers and petting a cat named mittens?”

Bobby searches her script, flicking pages.

Cord continues. “Yep, I think the time has come to do the wild thang. To bump fuzzies. Hit skins. Storm the cotton gin.”

“Cord, has there been some change to the script that I’m unaware of?”

He looks at her and says in his regular voice, “That stuff isn’t in the script. That’s just me, improvising.”

She stares at him. “Okay . . .”

Then she realizes what this is about and she giggles nervously.

“You’re funny.”

“I’m terrified,” he says.

“Why?”

“I’m as good as a virgin.”

“Well, hell, me too.”

He drops his screenplay and comes across to the couch, and sits beside her.

“So what are we going to do about that?”

“I reckon there’s only one thing to do,” she says.

“Ma’am, are you offerin’ me some horizontal refreshment?” he says, back in his T-Bone persona.

And then they’re kissing and a while later he carries her through to the bedroom—the man is *strong*!—and it’s all slow and beautiful and just so much better than she could have ever dreamed and the room is nearly dark by the time Bobby leaps from the bed when she hears the car bringing Jolene home grinding up the driveway.

It's nearly dawn and Kat sits in the rear of the limo that cruises along the Pacific Coast Highway, taking her back to Malibu.

Old Fashioned Love Song has wrapped.

Once her last shot was in the can, Kat slipped away without any goodbyes.

Escaping the crew and her fellow actors.

And escaping her husband.

The last scene between them, played out in the lobby and on the stairs of a building doubling for a Nashville awards venue, had been intense, Kat channeling her rage into Crystal Perdew's tirade at T-Bone Buford, a crowd of extras bedecked with enough rhinestones to sink a Mississippi paddle steamer looking on.

The confrontation had culminated in Crystal slapping T-Bone's face, and Kat could have kissed Topper Yazback when he demanded take after take.

And this was no screen slap, the camera was tight on them and Topper ordered Kat to smack the hell out of Cord time after time.

It was easy for Kat, all she had to think about was that big-assed cowgirl as she felt the pleasurable sting of her palm against her husband's cheek.

Sitting in the car now, staring out at the dark ocean, Kat's right hand is still stinging.

She wonders how Cord feels.

No doubt he is getting that little redneck to kiss him better.

Kat feels it again, that viper of rage coiled around her innards.

When Cord arrived on set earlier, Kat noticed something different about him.

She swore she was psychic, but she didn't have to be clairvoyant to know that her husband had just risen from the bed of another woman.

He had that stupid, cat-that-got-the-cream-smile on his face that only a man in lust gets.

Bastard!

Oh how she wishes he was trapped in the car with her, so she could bitch slap him again.

Then she calms herself.

The slap-fest was just light relief.

She has a lot more in store for Cord and his hefty cowgirl.

Kat digs a throwaway cell phone from her purse and punches in a number.

Texas is two hours ahead of California but it'll still be early there.

Never mind, those hayseeds are up with the sun to milk the cows and feed the pigs, aren't they?

But when Buster Pyle croaks something into his phone, Kat knows she has roused him from his sleep.

"Mr. Pyle," she says. "Do you know who this is?"

"Yeah. Hell, what time is it?"

"Time for an update. Give me good news."

"It's all organized, don't you worry your pretty head none."

"Thank you. Will you email the evidence to the address I gave you?"

"Jest as soon as I receive it, ma'am."

"Perfect."

"Say, sugar, maybe I can come out there to the West Coast sometime and show you how us cowboys party?"

"I look forward to that, Mr. Pyle," she says, just about keeping the distaste out of her voice as she kills the call.

She would like nothing more than to flay him with her tongue, but she needs this cracker on her side for another day or two.

Kat winds down her window and frisbees the cell phone into the Pacific far below.

When Bobby opens her eyes she's sure she can hear the clatter of her old tractor, and she's all ready to drag herself from her bed and face the depressing task of tearing her dead cotton crop from the parched soil.

Then she realizes that this is Hollywood, California, and the racket she's hearing isn't her ancient John Deere, it's the blender in the kitchen, Jolene whipping up one of those smoothies she's become addicted to.

As Bobby rises from the bed, the sheets still bearing the musk of her lovemaking with Cord—he'd sneaked in for an hour at dawn, after the shoot, before heading off to that cabin of his—and pulls on one of those white toweling robes that appear fresh and clean each day.

It's hard to believe this isn't some crazy, wonderful, luxurious dream.

Bobby goes through to the kitchen and finds her daughter standing on a stool at the counter, making herself a strawberry banana smoothie.

Jolene stops the blender, lifts up the lid, dips in a fingertip and tastes the mixture.

"Mnnnn, mnnnn, this is heavenly!" she says and Bobby hears the voice of one of the little California girls Jolie's been buddying up with coming out of her daughter's mouth.

How's that gonna be? she wonders.

Having a daughter growing up in this town?

Jolie pours two glasses and hands one to Bobby.

"Cheers," Jolie says.

"Cheers," Bobby says, tasting the drink.

It's good.

Bobby knows the time has come to talk to Jolene.

She's been putting it off, wanting to be sure in her own mind that Cord and his offer to them is genuine.

Bobby leans over and wipes a pink mustache off of Jolie's upper lip.

"Kiddo," she says.

"Yes, Mama?"

"There's something us girls have gotta talk about."

“What, Mama?” the child asks, settling herself on the stool, an adorably serious expression on her face.

“Cord has asked that we stay with him, here in Los Angeles.”

“Here? In this house?”

“No, not here. Not for much longer. Maybe a house down on the beach.”

“The beach! Oh, Mama!”

“Okay, now I know this sounds real exciting, but there are some things you gotta consider.”

“Like what, Mama?”

“Like you won’t see you daddy nearly as often as you have.”

“But he can come out and visit, can’t he?”

“Yes, he can do that,” Bobby says, knowing that Buster Pyle never would.

That he’d become just a shadowy memory in his daughter’s life.

But is that such a bad thing?

Especially with Cord building a relationship with Jolie?

“And you’d have to say goodbye to your school friends.”

“But I already got new friends here,” Jolene says with the casual brutality of the very young.

“Okay, well that’s good. So what do you think? Are we gonna take Cord up on his offer?”

“Oh, yes, Mama. Yes, yes, yes!”

The kid is dancing around, laughing, and Bobby sitting there with the California sunshine falling all soft and golden into the room is about as happy as she has ever been.

Cord parks his old Jeep off a gravel road that has a couple of mail boxes on it and not much else.

He hefts a backpack and starts up the trail that leads through the subalpine forest to his cabin.

Sweating from the climb he breaks through the trees and sees the view that never fails to leave him awestruck.

The little wooden cabin stands alone in a field of wheat grass, the spectacular peaks of the Sierra Nevada rising beyond it.

He opens the cabin and dumps his bag, drinking from a water bottle.

The cabin is about as basic as you can get.

One room with a mattress on the floor, a chair and a woodstove.

There is no bathroom.

No TV.

No cellphone reception.

It has always been Cord's conceit that he comes up here to be alone.

To clear his head.

But that's not strictly true.

Back when he bought it he asked Kat to come up with him and she'd laughed.

"Baby, are you asking me to go with you into the *country*?"

"Yes, I am."

"I don't do the *country* any more, Cord. That's why I left Kansas. If you yearn for the wide open spaces and the bear scat and the bugs you go ahead, but I'm staying right here with the decaf lattes and the sushi and the spas."

He'd never asked her again.

And he'd enjoyed his little Thoreau-like excursions into the wild.

Enjoyed the quiet.

But most of all he'd enjoyed escaping the emptiness of his marriage.

As Cord wields an ax and chops wood—he'll be cooking a dinner of duck, potatoes, turnips, butter, spices and wine in a pot over an open fire—

he understands he's going to have to get a crew up from Colfax to build a bathroom and some basic amenities.

Because this is the last time he'll come here alone.

Next time he visits it'll be with Bobby and Jolene, and even though they're tough country girls, they'll still need a few more facilities than the cabin offers.

The thought of sharing his life with these women gets him chuckling as he splits logs.

And who was it that said there was no such thing as a second act?

⋮

Kat opens the door of the Malibu house and sees Pete Bridger standing in the mauve light of early evening.

Even after twenty years she finds herself staring at her husband's double. The resemblance *is* uncanny.

And not a little erotic.

Sadly, the stolid Texan rebuffed her years ago.

Even more reason why tonight is going to be so sweet.

"Pete, darling, so good of you to come."

"Now what's this about my son, Kat?"

"Hey, cowboy, slow down," she says, letting him follow her into the living room. "At least let me get a glass of wine into you."

"I don't want your damned wine. I want to know what in hell is goin' on."

Kat, not to be hurried, crosses to the sideboard and pours two glasses of Chablis.

She hands one to the angry Texan.

"Be a good boy and sit down and I'll tell you everything, okay?"

He sits, thumping the wine glass down on the side table hard enough to spill it.

"Now, Pete," Kat says, sitting, "tonight we have the opportunity to trade favors, so let's keep things cordial, shall we?"

"You tell me what's goin' on or so help me I'm walkin'."

"Oh, I don't think so."

She smiles at him and sips her wine, allowing a more than generous view of her thighs when her skirt splits as she crosses her legs.

"The police raided your son's dorm room at West Texas University last night and discovered a pound of methamphetamine in his footlocker."

Pete stares at her, gripping the arms of his chair so hard his knuckles turn white.

"That's bullcrap."

“No, it isn’t. Look at these.”

Kat leans forward and opens the issue of *Vogue* that lies on the coffee table and reveals a few pages of computer print-outs hidden inside.

Photographs emailed to her by the odious Buster Pyle.

Handing them to Pete she says, “Snapshots taken on the scene by an undercover cop.”

Pete snatches the pictures and stares at them.

Sees his son sitting on a bed with his footlocker open and a bag of powder inside.

Sees close ups of the crystal meth.

“The cop posed as a customer. Your son is dealing. With the amount of meth in his possession he’s looking at what’s known as an enhanced first degree felony down in your neck of the woods. That’s around ten years’ jail time.”

All color drains from the Texan’s face and when he speaks he battles to keep the tremor out of his voice.

“You did this.”

Kat shrugs.

“I had a hand in it.”

“Why?”

“Because I want you to do something for me, Pete. And knowing what a crusty old curmudgeon you are, I need a little leverage.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“First, I want you to drink your wine and relax.”

He just stares at her.

“Drink!” she says.

He drinks, his expression as sour as if he’s sipping hemlock.

“Okay, now, if you do as I say—*exactly* as I say—that cop will destroy the evidence and your son will continue living his dim little life out there in hickland. Understood?”

“How do I know that’ll happen?”

“You have my word.”

“Your *word*? From somebody as crooked as a barrel of snakes?”

“Oh, you Texans are always so *colorful*.”

She smiles at him.

“Believe me, Pete, I have not the slightest interest in crucifying your lovechild. You play ball and I promise you this will all blow away like the

Malibu fog.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Kat smiles.

“Oh, what you do so well, darling. I want you to be Cord McCann.”

⋮

“No freaking way!” Zola Byrd says, crossing her arms as she stands over Skip Herring’s desk at the Studio Zone HQ.

“It’s your job,” he says, lounging in his chair.

“No, my job is to capture on video the dirt you rake up. Period.”

She looks very fetching with the dime-sized circles of color on her high cheekbones.

“That’s a very narrow interpretation of your job description,” he says, smiling up at her.

“I’m not doing it.”

Skip stands and beckons Zola.

“Come with me, please,” he says heading into the edit booth, away from the eavesdropping Muppets.

Zola reluctantly follows Skip and he slides closed the door to the booth.

“Okay, look at it this way. I presume you’re a feminist?”

“My god, you’re trying to spin this by appealing to my *feminism*?”

“Hear me out. This is a situation where a naïve young woman is being exploited by an older, *waaaay* more powerful man. Don’t you want to help her?”

“No, this is a situation where you want to use me as a decoy to lure that idiot girl into an ambush. Forget it.”

Zola’s reaching for the door handle when Skip says, “What do you need.”

She turns and looks at him.

“What do you mean?”

“Everybody needs something. Money. Drugs. Sex. Power. Pre-owned underwear.”

She’s staring at him.

“Okay, scratch that. What do you need?”

When she hesitates, he says, “Tell me.”

Zola looks down at the floor as all the resolve seems to drain from her.

“Money.”

“Okay, I’ll give you money if you do this for me.”

“How much?”

“Two thousand dollars. We’ll call it a performance bonus.”

She shakes her head.

“This blows.”

“It’s the way of the way of the world, sugarpie. One hand washes another.”

“How are we going to do this?”

“You’ll call her and bait the hook. Then you’ll drive up to the McCann mansion and take frothy Ms Champagne over to the Malibu *lurve* nest.”

“And what’s the story that I’m going to give her?”

“That you’re one of Cord McCann’s assistants. Low enough on the totem pole not to know very much. That he has asked you to bring Bobby Champagne to Malibu because he wants her to surprise her.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. Elegant in its simplicity.”

“It’ll never work.”

“She’s a girl, you’re dangling a surprise in front of her. It’ll work, believe me.”

“It’s sick.”

He shrugs.

“You’re sure about this whole thing?” Zola asks. “That it’s on the level?”

“Meaning?”

“How do you know it was really Kat Mansfield calling you, that you aren’t being *Punk’d* or something.”

“Babydoll, I’ve been doing this job for too long to be conned. That was Kat Mansfield, okay. Calling to offer me this once-in-a-lifetime, absolutely never-to-be-repeated exclusive.”

“Why you?”

“Oh come on, Byrdbrain, because I’m the guy who broke the whole damned Hollywood, Texas thing. I’m the guy whose cameraman got shot.”

“In the ass. By a jealous husband.”

She sees a moments’ shock on his face.

“Hell, Skip, people talk. You should know that.”

“Anyway,” he says, “what happened to Wack is beside the point. Kat is dropping a gem into our laps. And you do not look that kind of gift horse in the mouth.”

“Before you get your metaphors in a tangle, Muscles, there’s one thing you haven’t thought of.”

“What?”

“Bobby Champagne will recognize me from the other day on Rodeo Drive.”

“Not when you’re wearing this,” Skip says and lifts a shopping bag from beneath the edit suite.

He dips a hand inside and produces a long black wig.

“Go on,” he says, “put it on.”

She stares at him.

“Put it on,” he says, wagging it at her.

And Zola Byrd puts on the wig.

⋮

Bobby doesn't like surprises.

In her experience they bring only hardship and tears.

But sitting in the car beside the strange, black haired girl—not for nothing is this place called *Hollyweird*—she feels a real excitement and will allow that, just maybe, there's a difference between a *shock* and a *surprise*.

When the girl called on the landline at the guest wing an hour earlier saying her name was Mitzi or Bitsy (Bobby's forgotten and she's too embarrassed to ask) and she worked for Cord, Bobby assumed the worst.

"Has something happened to him? Has there been an accident?"

"No, nothing like that. He asked me to call you and arrange to bring you to him."

"Bring me where?"

"I'm not supposed to say."

"Well, then you put Cord on the line."

The girl hesitated then she said, "It's meant to be a surprise. But he's in Malibu."

"Malibu?" Bobby said. "He's supposed to be in a cabin halfway up a damned mountain!"

Then, like in one of those cartoons that Jolie can't get enough of, a lightbulb lit up real bright over Bobby's head.

"Malibu? That's by the ocean, right?"

"Yes."

And Bobby was back sitting with Cord on the couch that day he declared that he wanted her and Jolie to stay with him, saying he'd get rid of the big pink cake of a house and maybe get something down by the beach.

So Cord—bless his little white cotton designer socks—had invented the whole thing of going up to do the Camel Man thing in the mountains.

He'd been house hunting.

For them!

And judging by the mysterious call from this assistant, he'd found the perfect place.

Bobby was already agreeing for the girl to come up and get her when she looked across at Jolene watching—what else?—Fast Freddo cartoons and said, “I’m going to have to bring my daughter along.”

“No, don’t do that!” the girl said, sounding almost panicked.

It took Bobby but a moment to figure out that this was just Cord being considerate, again.

He wanted Bobby to see the house on her own, in case it wasn’t right.

He didn’t want Jolie to be disappointed.

The man was so darned, impossibly, adorably *sweet*!

“But what am I going to do with her?” Bobby asked.

There was a pause, and she heard a muffled exchange, then Cord’s assistant said, “Call the housekeeper and tell her to organize a sitter.”

“Okay. Right.”

Bobby ended the call and pressed the button on the phone that Cord had told her would get Esmeralda—just like in some fancy hotel—and within seconds the nice woman was on the line.

Bobby explained her problem and Esmeralda said that it would be her very great pleasure to personally come across and sit with young Miss Jolie.

Her words.

So Bobby had cleaned herself up a little and now she is in a small Japanese car with this girl, driving along the coast road.

“Have we met before?” Bobby asks.

Mitzi or Bitsy does look kinda familiar.

“No,” the girl says.

“If you’re Cord’s assistant I thought we might have met at the studio.”

“Oh, I’m like a third assistant,” the girl says. “I never get to go on set.”

“Okay,” Bobby says, looking out at the full moon hanging big and yellow over the ocean.

“Damn,” she says, “that sure is purty.”

The girl doesn’t reply, and in a few seconds Bobby hears the tick of the turn signal as Cord’s assistant passes a row of houses and then pulls up beside the road.

“Are we here?” Bobby asks.

“Yeah. We’re going to go down to the beach.”

“Oh, okay. Do I have to take my shoes off?” Bobby says, pointing down at her sneakers.

“No, I think you should keep them on.”

Bobby follows the girl down a little pathway to the sand.

The ocean is a soothing whisper and the air is fresher than Bobby has ever smelled.

Wow, she could get used to this.

The girl walks toward some houses that are built right out of the sand, balancing on wooden supports like stilts.

When Cord said they would live by the beach he was *not* kidding.

“Oh, I can’t believe that Cord is doing this!” Bobby says.

“Uh huh,” the girl says, striding on, hands in the pockets of her jeans, “brace yourself for the surprise of your life.”

⋮

Kat's iPhone Princess Plus—made of eighteen carat white gold encrusted with diamonds—purrs seductively on the arm of her chair, and she sees Skip Herring's name flashing on caller ID.

Lifting it, she says, "Is it all systems go?"

"Do it," Skip says.

Kat stands and beckons to Pete Bridger who sits on the couch staring into space.

"It's time, Pete."

He looks up at her, but doesn't move.

"Your son's a petty little thing for a redneck. Bet his dance card is going to be very full when he hits the penitentiary."

This gets the man standing.

Kat lifts a bit of lint from the shoulder of the crushed cotton shirt she got him to change into.

Her personal stylist picked it up at Ralph Lauren that afternoon.

It was the identical twin of the one she'd bought Cord for his last birthday.

Combined with the Rag & Bone raw jeans and the Vans Half Crepe shoes the stylist also brought (favorites of Cord's) you'd need a DNA test to separate the stand-in from the movie star.

"Now go out on the deck and lean on the rail," Kat says, "and when I come and join you I want real passion. Phone it in and our deal is off."

"You're wolverine mean, Kat," Pete says.

"Cut the banter and get your butt out there. It's show time."

He stares at her, then shrugs and does as she orders, looking very much like he is taking his last long walk to the gas chamber.

As Bobby hurries along the beach, battling to keep up with the whippet-fast girl assistant who disappears into the night, she sees Cord walk out of the nearest house—a brightly lit two storey, all wood and glass—and stand on the deck, leaning on the rail, staring out at the ocean.

Bobby's heart nearly skips a beat she is so happy.

Surely she's dreaming?

She and Jolie are going to be living in this fabulously pretty Malibu beach house with a movie star!

Bobby is about to break into a run and sprint across the sand, run up the flight of steps that connects the deck to the beach, and throw her arms around that gorgeous man, when somebody steps out of the house.

A woman.

A woman with a froth of raven hair.

Bobby, invisible in the darkness, comes to a halt, her mind a mess of confusion as she sees Kat Mansfield walk up to Cord, who turns to her.

Kat's tinkling laughs carries across the night when Cord pulls her to him and kisses her long and passionately.

Then a light, a very bright movie light, hits the kissing couple, and Cord and Kat stare stupidly into the beam for a second or two, like bunnies in the headlights of an eighteen wheeler, then they run into the house and disappear.

And that bright light swings onto Bobby, who is rooted to the sand, her jaw gaping.

Blinking, raising her hand to shield her eyes, Bobby can make out the girl—Mitzi or Bitsy—with a camera on her shoulder.

A camera aimed like a rifle at Bobby.

And when that horrible little critter Skip Herring leaps out of the shadows and stands beside Bobby in that cauterizing light, she understands only too well what the heck's going on.

“Cord McCann and Kat Mansfield have been caught red-handed doing the make up mambo in a Malibu love nest by Cord’s little Texas firecracker! Bobby Champagne, tell us how you feel?”

When Herring shoves a microphone into Bobby’s face she darn near woofs her biscuits all over it.

She turns and sprints toward the road.

“After her!” Skip Herring yells and she hears the gossip goblin and the camera girl on her tail, the light bouncing wildly across the sand.

But Bobby, fueled by shame and pain and rage outruns them, letting the night swallow her up.

In the morning, as Cord hairpins the Jeep up Mulholland Drive, the peaceful afterglow of the night in the country and the pleasant expectation of being reunited with Bobby and Jolene curdles in his gut when he sees a herd of entertainment media blocking the gates of his house.

Cord leans on his horn and scatters the vampires, who shove cameras at him and bombard him with questions he doesn't understand.

Questions about him and Kat reuniting.

After almost running down a photographer from *People* magazine, Cord manages to get the Jeep into his driveway and the gates closed after him, speeding up to the house.

He comes to a halt in a spray of gravel outside the mansion and jumps down from the car, leaving the door gaping as he sprints toward the guest wing.

Esmeralda stands in living room, shaking her head.

"They are gone, Mr. Cord. Miss Bobby and Miss Jolene."

"Gone where?"

"I think back to Texas."

"When?"

"Last night Miss Bobby she ask me to sit with Miss Jolene, that she is going to meet you in Malibu."

"In Malibu? Me? I was up at the cabin."

"She say it is a surprise and then some girl she is coming in a car and then maybe one hour later Miss Bobby she come back in a taxi and she is crying and she pack everything and she go with the cab. I think to the airport."

Cord stares at the woman, shaking his head.

Then he says, "Thank you Esmeralda. You can go back to the house."

She nods and leaves.

Cord, a sick feeling in his gut, reaches for the remote and surfs the gossip channels.

Skip Herring is everywhere with that jack-o-lantern grin of his, and Cord sees he and Kat kissing on the deck of Molly Kent's beach house—racking his brains for when the paparazzi could have caught them—and then the camera pans away and finds Bobby, her face a picture of pain and dismay.

Cord, beginning to grasp what he's watching, is literally felled, his knees failing him and he finds himself slumped on the couch where he first kissed Bobby, staring at an image of the distraught girl fleeing along Malibu beach, the camera pursuing her.

Cord kills the tube.

He slows the turmoil in his mind enough for a few pieces of a sick and crazy puzzle to start to form.

Digging his cellphone from his pocket, Cord powers it up.

He hits speedial and after a few seconds he hears Pete Bridger's voice.

"Cord, I'm sorry."

"Tell me this isn't true, Pete."

"Kat had stuff on my boy, Cord. Drug stuff. She was going to have him sent away for a very long time."

Cord shuts his eyes, focusing as hard as he has ever focused.

He needs to be strategic if he is going to prevail.

"Pete," Cord says, "I need you to help me straighten out this mess."

"Hell, Cord, you name it."

"What are you wearing?"

"Huh?"

"What are you wearing, man?"

"My skivvies."

"You still got those clothes from last night?"

"Sure."

"I want you to put them on and meet me in Hollywood pronto? Okay?"

Cord gives his double an address and heads into the main house to change.

If he is going to win Bobby back he's going to have to journey into the very belly of the scum-sucking beast.

When Bobby drives past the rusted, bullet scarred Hollywood sign, she has a powerful recollection of the first time she set eyes on Cord McCann, the day he nearly killed her by blocking this road with his car.

A car identical to the rental Nissan she picked up at Rick Husband Airport this morning to bring her and Jolene home.

How Bobby wishes she could wind back time.

If she could do it all over again she would punch Cord McCann even harder and maybe even apply her rawhide boot to his pretty face for good measure, before leaving him eating her dust.

She would *never* allow that lying, manipulating, man-whore into their lives.

She looks across at Jolie who is strapped in beside her, mercifully asleep.

The toughest part of last night—tougher even than dealing with what she had seen on that Malibu deck and being ambushed by that vulture Herring—was going back to Cord's house and explaining to Jolie why they were leaving.

She had to wake her daughter, who was asleep on the couch in front of the TV, the kindly Mexican housekeeper watching over her.

"Jolie, we're goin'," Bobby said.

"Goin' where, Mama?"

"Home, baby."

"Texas home?"

"That's right. Texas home."

"Why?"

" 'Cause it's time, baby. It's just time."

"What about Cord?"

"Cord has been very kind to us, but we can't no longer impose on his good graces."

"Doesn't he like us no more?"

She saw the tears in her daughter's eyes, and the heart she thought was as broken as it could get broke even more.

"Oh, he does, honey. He tole me to make sure you know that you'll always be real special to him."

"But why, Mama? Why ain't we stayin' here no more?"

"Jolie, honey, there some things you only gonna understand when you get older. What I need for you to do now is be a big girl and help your mama gather your things. There's a taxi waitin' on us, so we have to git movin'."

"Can't I even say goodbye to Cord?"

"No, baby, you can't."

Bobby changed into in the stupid dress and shoes she wore to the Amarillo courtroom and packed their sad belongings—taking only what they came with, leaving behind the clothes and toys Cord had bought for Jolene.

They had to wait at LAX until a six a.m. flight—Bobby not daring to sleep because she expected either Cord or some media monsters to set upon her and Jolie.

But nobody had bothered them and the flight had been uneventful.

Bobby drives past her farm, her jaw clenched when she sees the rows of dead cotton plants, and heads into the sad, empty town.

She avoids the main road and pulls into the alley behind the convenience store.

Bobby wakes Jolie, who sits up, wiping her eyes.

"Where are we, Mama?"

"Emma-Lou's store. Come on now."

Taking her daughter's hand she pushes open the rear door of the store, checks there are no customers, and walks across to where Emma-Lou sits at the cash register, chewing gum, staring dumb as a goldfish at the TV screen that's full of Kat and Cord and Bobby.

"Kindly turn off that trash," Bobby says, keeping Jolie behind a magazine rack, shielding her from the screen.

The fat girl's mouth gapes and she blows a big pink bubble that pops all over her face.

"Hell, Bobby, you nearly gave me a heart attack," her friend says, using the remote to switch off the TV.

"I need your help, Emma-Lou."

"I guess you do. What's goin' on?"

Bobby points toward the dead TV.

“Hasn’t your little friend Skip Herring kept you in the loop?”

Before Emma-Lou can answer there is the jangle of the motion-activated door chime and they all turn as Buster Pyle steps in, a smile wide as the Rio Grande plastered across his face.

“Well, a big Hollywood welcome to my girls.”

Jolene yells, “Daddy!”

Buster spreads his arms wide and Jolie rushes across to him and he scoops her up.

“Glad to have you back right here where you belong, baby. Right here in Hollywood. Hollywood, Texas, that is.”

Staring over the kid’s shoulder he tips Bobby a wink and it’s all she can do not to reach into the cooler for a can of Dr Pepper to inflict blunt force trauma on her ex-husband’s thick skull.

Skip Herring, despite the fact that he hasn't slept—he's been way too busy orchestrating the unfurling of his juicy scoop—is filled with exhilaration as the bank of monitors at the HQ update him on how the competing networks and the blogosphere have grabbed hold of his reports like hungry little dung beetles.

There is nothing like people being caught *in flagrante delicto*.

Nothing like a *ménage a trios* being revealed in all its sordid glory.

And we're not talking *Cheaters* here, with its tacky array of lowlifes.

We're talking Hollywood A-listers, letting it all dangle out for his lens.

And if one of the parties happened to be the *stand-in* of an A-lister, well Skip Herring was not telling.

No siree, Bob, as they say in the great state of Texas.

Or should that be: no siree, Bobby.

Skip lets out a little snort that has Zola Byrd looking up at him from where she sits at her desk, paging through—seriously!—an issue of *Soldier of Fortune*.

"You're a happy little guppy," she says.

"Well, shouldn't I be?" he says, perching on her desk.

"That poor, stupid girl. We destroyed her life."

"We did? Oh come on, we weren't up there smooching on that Malibu deck."

When she doesn't reply and carries on reading, he flicks the magazine with his finger.

"Thinking of selling your services in some flyblown little war?"

"It would be more dignified than doing this."

He leans in and whispers, "But you took the money, sugarpie. Didn't you?"

She looks up at him and he smirks.

"What's that all about, anyway? You got some secret *jones*? Some *monkey* on your back?"

Something crosses Zola's face, an expression of vulnerability, and she seems on the verge of saying something when she looks over his shoulder and her eyes widen in surprise.

Skip turns and stares.

He blinks, convinced that fatigue has left him with a bad case of double vision.

But no amount of blinking can change that fact that *two* Cord McCann's are advancing on him, wearing identical clothes.

And identically murderous expressions.

⋮

Cord stands over the little gossip monger and keeps his hands safely in the pockets of his jeans, lest he beat the filth merchant into a coma.

“Mr. Herring, I believe you know my stand-in, Pete Bridger?”

“Well, I’ve never had the pleasure,” Herring says.

When he tries to inch away from the desk Pete blocks him.

“What’s going on here?” asks a young woman with brutally buzzed hair.

“Who’re you?” Cord says.

“I’m Zola Byrd. Skip’s cameraperson.”

“So you were there last night? On the beach?”

She nods.

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself? Being party to this deception?”

When the woman stares at him blankly, Cord laughs.

“He didn’t tell you, did he?”

“Tell me what?”

“That it was my stand-in,” he indicates his double, “kissing my wife on that deck.”

“Now hold on, mister,” the girl say, “who’s to say this isn’t you being real sly here? Doing this double whammy thing?”

Cord, despite himself if impressed.

“You’re too smart to be working here.”

He looks at Skip.

“You know all there is to know about me. Have I ever done jail time?”

Skip shrugs.

“Well, my knowledge of your life is hardly encyclopedic.”

“Oh, answer him, Skip,” Zola says. “This is getting interesting.”

“Okay, to my knowledge you’ve never been in prison.”

Cord smiles.

“But Pete here has. Years ago. And he has a tattoo to prove it. Show them, Pete.”

Cord's double raises his right hand, revealing five dots tattooed between his thumb and forefinger.

Pete says, "Lot of jailbirds have them. Kinda proud of having done time. For me, it's just the reverse. Seeing it each day reminds me to keep myself clean, that's why I ain't never had it lazered away."

"On set the make-up artist covers it," Cord says. "But my guess is that last night Kat wasn't that attentive, was she Pete?"

The Texan shakes his head.

"No, she wasn't."

"Look," Skip says, "this is all very fascinating in a Hercule Poirot kinda way, but I don't know where you're going with this."

Cord says, "Where we're going is into an edit room and we're going to look at the footage you shot last night."

"Oh, *puh-leeze*," Skip Herring says, drawing himself up to his five foot nothing height. "You think you can just waltz in here like Tweedledee and Tweedledum and order me around? I'm calling the cops."

The camera girl stands.

"Mr. McCann, I'll get that footage up on the computer and we'll check it out."

"Zola," Skip says, "I forbid it."

"Get out of my way, cockroach, or I'll break your nose."

Skip steps aside and the girl leads Cord and Pete into a cramped little booth that smells of junk food and hot electrical wiring.

She runs her fingers over a computer keyboard and the monitors come alive with the image of Kat and Pete on the deck of the beach house, brightly lit by the camera light.

The girl fiddles with the controls and zooms into the image as Pete embraces Kat, his hand on her upper back.

The girl punches a key, moving the image frame by frame, until Pete's hand is clearly visible.

Then she zooms in again until his hand fills the frame.

She works some magic to sharpen the focus.

The five dots tattooed between his thumb and forefinger are clear to see.

The girl called Zola Byrd looks up at Skip Herring who hovers in the doorway.

"You knew about this, didn't you?"

“Now let’s not jump to conclusions,” he says, lifting his hands as if surrendering.

In a split-second she flies out of her seat and sinks her fist into the gossip guru’s midriff.

As Skip Herring wheezes and folds like a deflating sex doll, Zola looks at Cord and says, “Tell us how we can help you make this right.”

⋮

“My daddy and me can offer you twenty cents on the dollar for your land,” Buster Pyle says, standing at the kitchen window of Bobby’s house, her failed cotton crop spread out behind him in the merciless afternoon sunlight.

“You and that old coot are crooked as a mountain road,” Bobby says, feeling the fury rise in her.

Beaumont Parch, the Pyle’s mean little lawyer who sits at the kitchen table, says, “Ms. Champagne, your property has been independently valued by a consultant from Amarillo. Mr. Pyle’s offer is more than fair, given the economy and the drought. Let me assure you, you won’t get a better one.”

His voice, strained by tobacco and a lifetime of lying, fights the soundtrack of the Fast Freddo movie Jolie is watching in the living room, Bobby keeping the volume high to protect her daughter from this conversation.

“And the offer holds till midnight,” Buster says. “Tomorrow we’ll be talkin’ ten cents on the dollar.”

The ambulance chaser takes a document and an envelope from his briefcase and lays them on the table. Then he uncaps a pen and sets it beside the sheaf of papers.

“Sign here and I will hand this over to you.”

He points a yellow nail at the envelope.

“A cashier’s check made out in the sum agreed.”

Bobby crosses to the window and stares out at the parched land.

It’s over and she knows it.

Her crop has failed and so has she.

She is going to lose the farm that her daddy worked and his daddy before him.

The only hope for her and Jolene now is to take Buster’s pittance and start a new life.

She fights back tears—no way in hell will she let these buzzards see her cry—and crosses to the table, lifting the pen, only just mastering the

impulse to shove it nib-first into one of Buster Pyle's bloodshot eyes.

As she's about to sign her name on the document, sign away everything she has, there's a knock at the front door.

Bobby sets down the pen and says, "Excuse me."

She walks across the living room and opens the door.

Cord McCann stands on her porch, wearing a hangdog expression and the clothes she saw him in last night when he was doing his best to suck the face off of his wife.

"What the heck are you doin' here?" Bobby says, mad as a snake. "Git off of my land, git on your executive jet and fly the hell out of my life!"

"Bobby, I need to talk to you," Cord McCann says.

Now Bobby is so riled up that her eyes and her ears play tricks on her, because even though Cord speaks his lips don't move and his voice seems to be coming from her left.

When she turns and sees another Cord McCann standing with Sheriff Ed Tom Baker, two sheriff's deputies, Skip Herring, the camera girl and a bald man in a suit she has no recollection of ever having met in her life before, Bobby is forced to put a hand out to support herself on the doorjamb.

The Cord who spoke steps forward and, pointing to his double, says, "This is Pete Bridger. You probably saw him on set back in L.A."

Bobby stares at the stand-in and shakes her head.

This is the first time she has seen him clean shaven, with short hair, and the resemblance is uncanny.

The truth hits her and she raises a hand to her mouth.

"Oh, no," she says, "you mean . . . ?"

"Yes," Cord says.

"It was me last night with Kat," Pete says.

Buster Pyle speaks from behind her.

"What's goin' on here?"

The man in the suit steps forward.

"Mr. Pyle you're under arrest for conspiracy and bribing a police officer."

"Who the hell are you?" Buster says.

The man flashes his ID.

"Amarillo Assistant District Attorney Wendell Kolb."

He turns to Ed Tom Baker.

"Sheriff."

As Baker and his deputies step forward to cuff Buster, the little ferret of a lawyer sticks his snout out of the door and says, “I advise you to unhand my client.”

Kolb says, “You his lawyer?”

“I am. Beaumont Parch.”

“Cuff him, too, Sheriff. Mr. Parch I’m booking you on charges of malfeasance and perjury.”

Bobby stands on her porch watching as Buster Pyle and Beaumont Parch are led to the Sheriff’s cruiser and driven away, the camera girl filming it all and Skip Herring providing one of his hysterical commentaries.

“What are they doin’ here?” Bobby asks Cord. “Herring and that girl?”

“If you have any doubts about what happened last night, they’re here to give you proof.”

“Cord, I don’t need no more proof.”

The girl walks over, camera dangling at her side.

“I’m sorry, Bobby. I was duped, too.”

She turns to Skip Herring who mumbles something.

“Louder!” she says, almost kicking one of his spindly legs from under him.

“I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry,” he says, hopping on one pointy shoe.

Bobby shakes her head.

“I feel like I have taken leave of my senses.”

Cord says, “You haven’t. Now Pete’s going off to see his son, Zola and Skip are going to follow the decline of the Pyle empire, and—with your permission—I want to come in and explain this whole crazy, stupid mess to you.”

Bobby says, “I reckon you better do that, Cord McCann. Right damn now.”

As Cord makes to step into the house Bobby grabs him and hugs him and just can’t stop her mouth from finding his.

And if Jolene didn’t rush up and join the group hug like some celebrating football player, things may well have got wilder than a peach orchard hog.

Skip, sitting at the table of the diner, watching a neon boot wink at him—would somebody please explain to him why every damned motel or eatery in Texas is branded with cowboy footwear—feels curiously empty.

Which is odd, because he has just edited together and unleashed on the rapacious gossipverse a story as deliciously twisted as any he has ever done.

It featured Kat Mansfield sobbing into a Kleenex, pleading love-induced insanity for hatching a desperate plan to get her husband back, but swearing she had no knowledge of the drug plant.

It featured that very husband, Cord McCann, standing outside a rundown Texas farmhouse with his arm around Bobby Champagne—like some cheesy modern reenactment of *American Gothic*—smiling and declaring himself deeply in love with her.

(*Waaaay* more memorable than that midget Tom Cruise treating Oprah's couch like a trampoline.)

It featured a rogue cop singing like a canary about planting drugs on an innocent boy, and it featured the Pyles—a family more corrupt than the Ewings—being brought to justice.

This story has so much crossover appeal—gossip, soft and hard news—that it'll make every network and affiliate across the country.

Hell, it has real potential to go international.

The phones will ring.

Offers will be made.

Skip, as he toys with a serving of disgusting BBQ ribs—like a car wreck on his plate—knows that his days in that grimy little Hollywood office are over.

The heady world of limos and expense accounts awaits him.

So, pray tell, why does he feel an emptiness so profound that even this giant plate of ribs would be unable to fill it?

Because he's lost Zola Byrd.

He knows this is their last job together, and that leaves him feeling weirdly depressed.

An emotion entirely foreign to the heat-seeking gossip maven.

He looks up as Zola returns from the restroom.

"You going to eat?" he asks.

"No."

He nods and shoves his plate away.

"Me neither."

She's staring at him.

"What?" he says.

"I hate to admit it, but you did it well. The story."

"Just what I does, ma'am."

"I'm not going to use words like redemption, but I think you went some way toward making amends."

"Goody."

"Why do you have to always be such a facetious little ass-wipe?"

He shrugs, "Because if I'm not then I'd just be boring little Skip Herring from Omaha, Nebraska, and wouldn't that be a yawn?"

"Would it?"

He doesn't answer, just looks out into the darkness.

"What are you going to do next?" he asks.

"Look for another job. Fast."

Skip stares at her.

"You were going to tell me something, yesterday . . ."

"That was before I found out you were even more of a shallow, duplicitous little creep than I thought."

"High praise."

This gets a smile.

"My story would just bore you."

"Try me."

Zola thinks a while, then shrugs.

"Okay," she says. "Here goes. I have no siblings. My father was killed in Desert Storm. My mother has Alzheimer's. Most of the time she doesn't know who I am, but I've got her in a really nice place where she gets the best attention. Thing is, it costs a fortune." She spreads her hands. "There. Snigger away."

"I'm not sniggering. Maybe I can help you."

“How?”

“The brothers, the walking dead who own Studio Zone, also own a couple of regional news stations. If I put in a good word for you, they’d listen. Especially now.”

“You’d do that?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because . . . Hell, I don’t know. I like you, I guess.”

He finds himself blushing, a talent he thought he’d lost with his milk teeth.

Zola says, “Aw gee, Skip, don’t tell me there’s a heart beating under that Tin Man suit?”

“Go ahead,” he says, watching a huge rig thunder by, “have your fun.”

She takes his hand, and her touch is surprisingly soft and surprisingly warm.

“You’re not in a crazy rush to get back to Amarillo, are you?” she asks.

“No, the next flight to L.A. is only in the morning. Why?”

“I picked up a brochure for the motel across the drag. It boasts that each room comes with a waterbed and—wait for it—a Magic Fingers, coin-operated bed vibrator.”

She reads from the flyer she’s dug from the pocket of her camo pants.

“ ‘Feed in a quarter and allow Magic Fingers to quickly carry you into the land of tingling relaxation and ease.’ ”

She looks up at him and shrugs.

“Now, how can a pair fun lovin’, red-blooded American kids like us resist an invitation like that?”

For a second Skip can’t breathe, then he sucks air and says, “What about my, you know . . . ?”

“Your cherry?”

“Yes.”

“What the hell, what happens in Texas stays in Texas. Right?”

“Right,” he says, and with legs that feel a little unsteady and a head as light as a helium balloon, he follows Zola Byrd out of the diner and across the road to the Cactus Inn and its vibrating water bed.

Cord McCann, building a sand castle on Malibu beach with Jolie, looks up to see Bobby walk beneath the rusted, scarred old HOLLYWOOD road sign that hangs as a memento on the deck of their house.

A house far enough away from Molly Kent's not to stir memories of that unpleasant night nearly a year ago.

Bobby, with the cautious step of the heavily pregnant, waddles down the flight of wooden stairs and crosses the sand toward them, carrying a couple of cans of soda.

Cord stands and helps to seat his wife beneath the beach umbrella.

He kisses her sunburned nose.

"You still have your farmer's tan," he says.

"Don't you think it's sexy?" she asks.

"You know I do."

He kisses her on the lips.

They've been back in L.A. for a week, after spending nearly a month in Texas during the summer vacation, Cord reading screenplays, Jolie visiting with her old friends and Bobby catching up with the management of her farm, which—with both Pyles now sitting in prison—is part of a co-operative of organic cotton growers.

The biotechs have been beaten back, at least for the moment, and Cord loved watching his wife talking at meetings and inspiring her fellow farmers to build a future for themselves and their families.

Some rain has even graced parched Texas.

So, all is good.

As Cord is about to kiss his wife again, a shadow falls across them and he looks up to see Kat Mansfield dressed in a very tiny bikini, on the arm of a boy almost young enough to be her grandson.

"Hello, Cord, darling," Kat says, and bends to air-kiss the vicinity of his cheek.

Bobby McCann has to bite back a laugh as she watches the little charade: the aging Hollywood star—heck, she has had *work* done, Bobby can't but notice—pretending to be delighted to see her ex-husband.

When Kat's eyes find the bulge in Bobby's belly they narrow to slits, before she manufactures a smile and tosses back that mane of raven locks, like she's shooting some hair product commercial.

Cord, as blank as only he can be, stands and says, "How are you, Kat?"

"Never better. I'm off to Rome next week to shoot with Bernardo Bertolucci."

Cord turns his back on his ex-wife and runs into the waves, to where Jolie is splashing and wallowing.

Cord dives and rises up with the girl on his shoulders, laughing fit to bust a gut.

Katherine Mansfield and her toy boy walk away along the beach, the actress moving as if she's on some catwalk.

Cord returns as Jolene runs off into the house to get fresh towels.

"I'm sorry about that," Cord says, hunkering down, dripping onto the sand. "About Kat."

Bobby grins at him.

"Remember what John Wayne said: never apologize, it's a sign of weakness."

"I thought that was your granddaddy's line?"

"Handsome, don't you go believin' everythin' you hear now."

He smiles as she runs a finger across his damp shoulder.

"Cord, I don't hold with no trash talkin', but that woman looked so plastic I thought she was about to melt right away into a little puddle on the sand."

Cord laughs and kisses her and puts his arm around her shoulders, and as Bobby feels her son kicking inside her and watches her daughter come running across the sand toward them, she fingers the tiny bale of cotton hanging from her neck and thinks, *I'm home.*

I'm really, truly home.

THE END

Also by Sally Mason

Rent A Husband: A Romantic Comedy

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