

God, Golden, and Diamond Jones

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First Edition

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ISBN: 978-0-557-86843-8

Chapter 1

Memorial Day, 2005

The Camp

Diamond Reed was usually more of a jokester. He used to live for making people laugh. Used to, that is. The improvisational slapstick that was his specialty for making girls laugh was now absurd and just plain stupid. There were usually a few boys hanging out at his house, but these days there was just his best friend, Dusty.

Diamond walked the camp road heading for the river. He saw two new sets of deer tracks crossing the road where the trees and hedgerows tunnelled overhead and made the road cool and dark.

A doe and a Bambi have been 'round here this morning.

The only thing that made him feel better when he felt as low as he was feeling now was getting out of his own head and walking into Mother Nature, and scouting for where the deer were bedding down brought him right next to her, and to memories of his dad.

Diamond also didn't usually walk the camp road alone. His father warned him the weekend before he left for Baghdad that there were wild Spanish hogs bedding down in some of the old hedge rows by the river. He saw several sets of prints that looked like the attack hogs. Unlike farm animals, these hogs are lean and vicious.

And tall. Tall pigs. And they can run fast. Are they faster than a coyote?...Nah, probably not, but way scarier.

Standing over the puddle slash slough at the entrance of the camp, a familiar musk hung in the morning mist. Where he usually walked around the mud and water, he suddenly realized he'd forgotten

his rifle. The hair on the back of his neck stood out. He carefully looked all around his peripherals.

I don't see anything. But something is telling me I should... Run!

It was a gut-punch feeling. Diamond ran as fast as he could back up the camp road. He heard guttural noise and looked back; there were 7 or 8 tall black and grey hairy pigs trotting up the road towards him. He ran full force and did not look back again.

He slid into his garage and pulled the garage door down in a flash. This was where the gun cabinet was kept. He looked through the window now and then, as though a tall dark pig might come banging on the door before he could find the key to a gun. He kept an eye on the treeline he'd just escaped from. So far there was nothing after him.

Now, where did Daddy hide the key?

He searched the garage and a courageous jaunt to a nearby flower bed. He went to the kitchen and opened all the junk drawers. While he was turning the kitchen upside down, he heard his clock radio blaring.

Dang! I can't believe he is sleeping through that. "Dustaay! Get yo' big head up!" He went to his bedroom where Dusty was still sleeping.

The radio on Diamond's bedside table blared and rattled from a tiny plastic speaker:

DJ Aaron

After the news, hang around for Jill Stills and today's country favorites. This is DJ Aaron signing off for today. Y'all have a blessed morning.

"Dusty," Diamond shook Dusty's shoulders. Dusty's eyes have the distinction of staying open part of the way in a dead sleep. It creeps Diamond out because he thinks it's what he would likely look like dead.

"Mama, there ain't no school," Dusty mumbled and pushed Diamond away. "It's summer," he whimpered. And Dusty never whimpers awake, so it made Diamond laugh at him.

"Get up Dusty-brain! We got some Spanish hogs down at the camp we gotta eradicate! They almost got me. They 'shore are scary looking." He got quiet and then suddenly hollered near Dusty's ear, "Dustaaaaay!" and pulled off his covers.

Dusty rolled over, cursing and yanking the covers back over himself.

Jill Stills

The high today? 86 degrees. 69 tonight. Today it will be sunny with a 30 percent chance of isolated showers late this afternoon.

[The news announcer suddenly stopped, cleared her throat, and rustled with a sheet of paper.]

Peggy just handed me a breaking news alert. Y'all, this news report has content that sensitive listeners might not want to hear.

A nightmare is unfolding, a disturbing story out of southern Pike County - A human skull, possibly what are leg and arm bones, and a rib cage were found on Kenny Bacot's property - Turtle River Canoe and Tube Rental.

"Oh my God! Did ya hear that, Dusty?!"

The remains have not been identified, but coroner Ramsey Davis says the bones were found on the sandbar very close to the river's edge. They were arranged in a pile with the skull on top. From his preliminary report, Davis says It appears flesh has been torn from the bones by canines. The body was decapitated and dismembered.

If anyone has any information about a missing person, any missing person, they are asked to contact Police Chief Bobby Jones at the McComb Police Department.

Diamond pushed the off-button thinking of the bones found just up the river. He reached under his bed looking for a not-so-dirty pair of cut-offs. Clean-clean clothes were piled on the bed. Clean-dirty under the bed and dirt-dirty in a pile by the door

“Dusty... Dusty.....Dustaaay!” Diamond pushed at his shoulder, but Dusty grunted back at him and didn’t budge.

Dusty was a gentle giant, Diamond’s backup slash wingman. When Diamond’s smart mouth got him into a fight, Dusty got him out. Been that way since the last week of 3rd grade when Lydia Washington called

his mama a witch.

Diamond slunk into his parents' bedroom where his mom was asleep, hidden beneath a soft, lush comforter. He grabbed the small 22 his dad always kept hidden under his side of the bed and quickly strapped it on his back.

Then he slipped out of the back door of the house, dropping down a small clay cliff onto the camp road where the noontime sun was sifting through zillions of leaves, changing from soft spotlights to spangled laser beams dotting the forest floor and the petals of the tree-covered hill, rising like a giant wall of green brushing his eyes with a soft touch.

He headed to the place where old growth magnolia and turkey pines grew high above into the canopy. There were bodacious boughs of yellow jasmine and whispery branches of the leaning river birch brushing the glass surface of the Bogue Chitto River. He was at the place everyone called The Camp, a grassy meadow on a high clay bank. His mother Helen named it The Green Cathedral. He and his dad Bill

built her a gazebo slash treehouse, where she could say her prayers, entertain friends and family, and enjoy mother nature – with an AC unit in the window, of course. But still, to Helen, it was right next to her, and that's what mattered.

Essentially, they had created a tiny cabin with a screened in tiny porch high up in the canopy of The Camp. It became a family destination, and it thrilled Helen to watch the reaction on the faces of her visitors when they climbed up the narrow wooden spiral staircase from the sandbar.

Diamond gently slapped his feet in the dew-covered silt of the dirt road. He loved the cool feel of it between his toes and the way the silt danced on the rain drops. The sun's light stretched thinner and thinner out into the horizon and slowly, imperceptibly burned off the misty light that filled the woods with gold. There was a strong, regal aroma of sweet olive trees lining the meadow on one side, like bridesmaids standing at the altar.

You're a rich man, whispered the voice that hadn't left his mind

since he was six years old. The voice he instinctively thought of as his Other. Everyone has one, his parents told him. But hardly anyone listens to what their inner voice is saying.

Diamond felt empty and numb. He had a nightmare about his father and he knew what he should feel, but he didn't feel that, and it made him afraid. He hated the numbness of his feelings, except for guilt and shame that he felt for being afraid.

His fly rod was ready and waiting by the riverside. He pictured himself throwing a perfect arch. There was not sight or sound of the wild hogs.

When Diamond reached the camp he stopped in his tracks at the sight of the sandbar. From the canopy of trees all the way down to the river, someone had carefully raked lace-like designs as far as the eye could see. The designs reminded him of garden spiders set in their webs, flower petals, and butterfly wings.

“What the-?” Diamond, who was known for quick thinking, stood with his jaw open. “Who?”

The rake was leaning against the woodpile. Not where he left it. His lounge chair had been moved, too, and was now very close to the fire pit. A tiny pile of smoke billowed up through a handful of damp sand.

He walked to the edge of the red clay cliff and stared out over a decorated sandbar. The curves and twists and turns of the lines delighted him, tickled his mind with sand. He stood and stared.

Could Dusty have done this? And when has Dusty ever been awake before me? - Like never.

Diamond noticed a sudden silence in the woods - the scurrying and chirping of small animals stopped, like all were anxiously waiting for an answer. He looked around....he imagined that he could see little squirrel eyes on him here and there. He pulled his rifle up and looked through the sites doing a slow 360 degrees.

The brief silence passed and he could hear the squirrels suddenly chirping and crackling again. A frog croaked nearby, and then a martin in the big magnolia sang to another martin further off. He pulled his rod

off the rack where two canoes, several inner tubes, and other floatables from Turtle Canoe were piled up.

Down in the river he dug his toes deep into the sandy clay bottom and unfurled his fly rod. As he stood listening to the sounds of Mother Nature, he suddenly had the eerie sense someone was watching him.

He scanned his surroundings, eyeballing the treeline and the underbrush, but there was nothing and no one. He dug his toes deeper into the river's sandy bottom and cast his line again. It glimmered in the sunshine like an elegant metallic arch flashing into a river of mirrors.

A sudden cackle of crows broke Diamond's reverie. The bird Dusty named Pogo Stick and her two sidekicks flew in closer. Pogo was the only crow that would approach them. The other two stayed at a near distance, but always waiting in deference to their leader. Dusty called them the Tweedles.

"I can't play right now, Pogo." Diamond said to the bird, who seemed restless and was perched on a nearby sandstone cawing at him. He flew up and then back down again.

The sun blinded Diamond as he looked up at the birds' silhouettes falling like sensuously thick black leaves into the yellow-sage field nearby. Pogo looked like he was in a conversation, cawing and strutting around. Diamond scanned the underbrush again looking for the source of his uncanny feeling. He didn't see anyone or anything but the crows.

The camp is where he felt most connected to Bill, his dad. It had been their escape- a 15-minute walk down a dirt road from the house, yet a world away from the everyday.

Diamond had the camp set. Dusty was responsible for the food, good eats like his mom's spicy fried chicken were the highlight of the menu. He couldn't wait to spark the campfire. He chopped wood earlier in the week. And he made a large pyramid of logs by the fire pit so they wouldn't have to stop and find firewood over the weekend.

Diamond had a surprise to add to their Memorial Day celebration - ingredients for s'mores and a six-pack of out-of-date Mr. Pibb, free Pibb, that is, from his aunt's grocery. He had the chocolate and the cokes in a gallon freezer bag chillin' in the cold spring water at the

bottom of the cliff next to the sandbar.

The river beneath the river pulled at Diamond's feet as he fished. He dug his toes a little deeper. The river beneath the river stretches her fingers out and bares a little more of herself in the curves of the small red clay canyons. Diamond loved the feeling of the dark river goddess pulling on his feet. He imagined her moving like a giant anaconda through the countryside, ready to devour any living thing in one slippery gulp.

"Beware of the river beneath the river," Bill had taught him. "It'll sneak up on you quicker than your shadow. It's too strong to swim against. Once the dense water has you, it don't wanna let you go, and the only thing that will save you is outright deliverance. You understand, Son?"

He pictured his father standing in the water upstream, looking back and smiling at him. Diamond's chest tightened. He'd turned 15 in April. Bill hadn't been there to celebrate his birthday.

Diamond's survival mechanism was to imagine Bill back home with

the intensity of an obsessive impulse. He imagined him throughout the day being right next to him and doing ordinary things around the house, like standing at the kitchen sink washing lunch dishes from work, fishing and swimming with him in the river, or laughing and carrying on with his mother.

When Diamond was born Helen immediately saw that his mind was “more than a sponge, more than a steel trap,” she declared that it was “a mind like a diamond.” They already had a nice name, Jake, picked out, but when Helen laid her eyes on her newborn son, she had a sudden vision. She saw years laid out before her in a flash and she blurted out, “Diamond! His name is Diamond,” weary from her labor. “Just Diamond. No middle name.”

And sure enough, Diamond’s mind was full of ideas all the time. Within his spirit there was this constant compelling inner force that spun ideas around and around in his mind, like a prism spins light, inspecting every aspect and sun beam, every possible view and perspective. He became intellectually intense at a young age. Helen said it was because she read to him as a baby and sang songs to him. And

she wasn't surprised when he started writing poems in kindergarten.

She often wondered if naming him Diamond had made him a prodigy, giving him his prismatic mind, or was he simply born to be a poet? Helen nurtured his thinking early on with word games and using lots of adjectives and explanations. He talked like a big boy at age two, and taught himself to read by age four.

Earlier this year his English teacher sent some of his work from his 8th-grade journal to a state contest and Diamond received \$50 in the mail. He used the money to help buy his new fly rod.

When Helen asked him about his writing process, he said, "It just came to me. The words appeared in my mind, and I wrote them down. It was easy. My teacher says it's a talent. Is that a talent, Mom?" he asked with all seriousness.

"Yes, of course it is, Doll."

"Then why do I feel like I'm cheating? How can it be a talent if something that's not really me is telling me the words to say or to write?" Diamond asked her. Helen laughed – she understood the gift of

words. Her father was a poet. She put an arm around Diamond.

“That’s actually a good question,” she said, “but most people aren’t given words like that. So, it’s ok, Diamond, the words are yours, entrusted to you, ok? Your job is to accept them, polish them, share them, or hide them under your bed for posterity’s sake; it’s up to you.”

Helen had his winning poem on the fridge:

Yellow and Orange make the cloudy day look BOOM!

Blue is the Teacher's classroom-

Green is the secret Goddess of Forever, Fins, Fauna, and The River,

But the most loving magic is Golden, Purple, and Effervescent Lava.

In the margin the editor of a regional magazine wrote, “Like his name, the writer has a mind like a diamond! Reality enters and reflects the truth in beautiful colors.”

The Enterprise-Journal put a picture of him and his grandfather, Pete, a former winner of the contest, in the paper with a blurb about his

and his grandfather's accomplishment.

Diamond had a sincere admiration for his grandfather, the poet and a Korean War veteran. He wasn't a crotchety old man to Diamond, as he absolutely *was* to everyone else. Pete was grumpy, and sometimes down right mean without any provocation at all. But, when Diamond looked at his grandfather, even when the grumpiness was toward him, he still saw the young and tough looking soldier from the faded black and white photos his grandmother had arranged in a scrapbook. He saw the 1950's James-Dean-looking guy who got the prettiest girl in town, who had heroic battle scars, who wrote love poems, and rode motorcycles. He didn't see the old man whose once bulging biceps are now hammocks of skin and bones. The man, who also had a mind like a diamond, now has late-onset schizophrenia and advanced PTSD. He wanders around the yard at all hours of the day and night, hell-bent on completing the patrol duty that scarred his mind forever.

Lately, it seemed there wasn't anything for a diamond mind to see except the grey twilight of sadness and the sense of emptiness he kept waking up with.

A few months earlier...

Bill went with an engineering company to be the superintendent on a big construction job in Iraq. He was going to make the family a lot of money and fund some family dreams.

Bill and several of his crew members were ambushed one morning as they showed up for their shifts. The kidnappers killed all of the crew members except for Bill because they understood him to be the crew leader, and thought he must be important to the Americans.

The terrorists made a video of him demanding that the U.S. leave Iraq or watch him be tortured to death and beheaded. These were also the terrorists that had been beheading Americans and videoing the act to upload to the web. That was nearly a year ago and nothing has been seen or heard of Bill since.

It so happened that Bill was kidnapped on the same day Diamond's beloved dog, Cowboy, was kidnapped. A very distraught Diamond was on his way home to tell Helen how someone had stolen Cowboy, but

when he got home he found his mother slumped on the couch with CNN blaring.

“That's your father's construction crew they're talking about,” Helen said bleary-eyed and weeping, “I'm waiting on a phone call to find out if your daddy was the one kidnapped, or if he was killed.” A picture of him was on the T.V. screen with handcuffs on.

Diamond turned up the volume to listen to the report, but the phone started ringing off the hook, beginning with Grandmaw and Grandpaw in Texas, every news outlet in the southeastern U.S., then friends from everywhere. Aunt Cutie came to stay with them for a while to comfort Helen and keep everyone fed.

Later, a man's voice on the phone from his dad's employer reminded Helen that Bill was not one of the ones found dead, just missing, but she fell to pieces anyway.

Helen didn't sleep for days. Every T.V. and radio station in Mississippi was camped in their yard for about two weeks. Then suddenly, one day, silence. The next big news story overshadowed

theirs. Diamond stayed in his room pasting up clips of his father's news story, maps of the Middle East, and city maps of Baghdad.

Early on Aunt Cutie insisted Helen take a tranquilizer to rest. Since then, she has needed the pills every day. Diamond didn't like it, but he understood. Not knowing what happened to Bill was maybe worse than knowing he'd died. There were publicized beheadings reported everyday on the news. Despite that, Diamond tended only to feelings of hoping beyond hope, and nothing else.

Helen became quiet and reclusive. She prayed a lot and cried a lot. Diamond couldn't bear to see his mother in so much pain. He felt an instinct to protect her from hurt, but he felt helpless.

The river was up slightly, Diamond thought. He had to move to a different spot so he could reel in and throw his line like Bill taught him. It had rained a few days before and the current was strong coming 'round the bend, yet it was still smooth as glass on top, filtering sunlight

down to the blonde sandy bottom. Diamond could see a dozen or so golden and rainbow colored sun perch swimming and darting around the sandstone closest to him. He remembered how Cowboy used to dive and bite at the slippery little slices of sunshine, and when he caught one he went and buried them in the woods for later. No telling how many perch were buried around the perimeters of the Green Cathedral.

Everybody was wrong about remembering Cowboy, a bouncing little black mini pinscher his dad brought home for his sixth birthday. Helen was like everybody else, and said that over time he'd forget Cowboy's little puppy-dog face, and it wouldn't hurt so much to think about him. But, that wasn't true. Diamond could still see his little black face clear as anything else in the steele traps of his mind. His sparkling black and brown eyes and his doggie smile had not faded and Diamond couldn't imagine that they ever would.

Even though Diamond didn't fully understand how he had a mind like a diamond, he did things only people with diamond minds do. Thoughts and emotions that'd put any other kid in the darkness of

despair lit his mind with energy and a strong sense of vigilance when vigilance was needed.

The shadowy figures of fear that tend to creep in from the back of a person's mind were never allowed to get the best of him - he stayed two steps ahead of them. Everything he thought, said, or did, carried an aspect of hope. Diamond's father was missing, not dead.

Missing, not dead. Missing. Not dead. He held tight to the vision of seeing his father again and feeling his embrace against the dangers of the world. He never let those images fade. His mind pulled up memories of Bill and polished them every day. He imagined what they were going to do when Bill got home - like camp on the river for at least a month straight, go fishing on the Mississippi, and hunt big bucks at one of those fancy hunting resorts in the Delta.

Now, ten months later, Bill was still MIA. It upset Diamond that his mother seemed to be falling victim to despair. He wouldn't straight out admit it, but he was angry at his mother. Wasn't she the one who'd taught him how to have faith?

Diamond tried to show Helen all the patience she'd shown him in life, and tried to protect her as much as a 15-year-old boy could.

For Helen, everything was foggy surrounding the time Bill went missing. She could never remember the day or the time he'd been kidnapped, sometimes not even the month, without looking back at the newspaper articles. The day her husband and her best friend went missing is lost in her memory; scrubbed over with the pain of her loss. She wanted to keep faith, but it just wasn't there.

Diamond remembered the day Bill was kidnapped very well. It was August 29, 2004. He had been at Dusty's house in town. They rode their bikes everywhere they went, but that morning they had walked down the train tracks to get shrimp po-boys and Cajun spiced 'tater logs from Aunt Cuties' Grocery.

Cowboy ran ahead of them and sat on the corner of State and Broadway outside of Cutie's – a convenient store with a deli and a fry kitchen. A popular place for good eats.

Diamond and Dusty ran when they saw an old guy with a limp

grab up Cowboy, jump in a dirty, beat-up, maroon Chevy S-10 and drive off.

Diamond couldn't run fast enough to get to the guy. For weeks Diamond went to Aunt Cutie's and waited for his dog to return or for the maroon truck to show up. He mourned his dog.

But remembering Cowboy didn't hurt. In fact, sometimes thinking of Cowboy and the way he trotted sideways, or how intensely focused he became when he was on the trail of possums and armadillos made Diamond remember happier days, and for a person with a mind like a diamond, to imagine happiness is to be happy.

Diamond's fishing line danced off the ripples of the river. The water sparkled like giant yellow gems over the shallow breaks of sandstone and the tree-studded sandbars. He liked the way the sparkles on the water blinded his eyes. That's why he didn't see Pete standing on the bank smoking a cigarette.

Across the river, the young stand of pine trees on the Bacot's farm

clanked softly in the wind like bamboo, bending and flinging high above the tall red clay banks. He could smell the pine straw covering the ground as the warm winds drifted down over the cliff.

High above the river, a hawk soared in large circles directly above the sandbar on the Bacot side of the river, dialing down on its prey. Pogo squawked several times. The hawk suddenly dove out of sight. But in a flash it reappeared with a field mouse in its talons.

His father used the story of a hawk and a field mouse to talk to his son about the nature of death a few weeks after his grandmaw passed away. She was a jogger and a health-nut, and still the prettiest woman in town, when she suddenly died of a heart attack at 68.

“You never know when you'll find yourself in Death's grip,” Bill had said as they were standing in the river for a fly-fishing lesson. “Miss Rose was loved by so many. It seems unfair that it was her time to go, but you never know,” he ruminated, “you might be working, tending to your daily chores, or loving your family, and suddenly, death grabs you like that hawk. So, find the work you love, Son, find the people you

wanna be with, and love them with all your heart till that old hawk comes. At least Rose was living a happy life. And, she had a good death. As deaths go.”

Then, without missing a beat, Bill turned and demonstrated how to swing a fly rod.

“It's all one fluid movement. Keep your eye on the line, it's an extension of you, it's a part of how you move. And picture a big fish taking your bait.”

Bill spent a lot of time with Diamond teaching him about camping and survival skills in the woods. Every trail, thicket, meadow, cypress and pine tree stand held a memory of his father.

He looked up into the deep liquid blue of the sky.

Alive? Or dead?

“Alive,” he whispered. He felt the answer in his bones.

The night before, he dreamed his father was walking toward him showing his palms, his arms were straight and stiff down by his sides. In

the dream he said to himself, "There's no blood in his palms." He kept reflecting on that, what an odd thing to say. It was surreal and strange. His dream landscape was lit like a shadow box. Maybe his dad was going for a secret handshake or something, or a hug, Diamond thought. He couldn't figure out what the odd gesture meant. The horizon flashed neon orange in the sky behind his father, and tears of joy were streaming down his father's face. In the dream he could feel his father's joy. Diamond couldn't imagine his father crying, even for joy.

He pulled the fishing line in and cast again. His line and hook looked like some extraordinary part of nature. That's the way he liked it to look.

"That's some fine casting there, Son!" Pete finally called out.

"Hey! What are you doing down here, Grandpaw? You OK?" said Diamond turning to see his grandfather standing on the river bank.

"Course I'm okay," said Pete gruffly.

It was strange to see Pete down at the camp. The once brilliant cabinet maker and closeted poet wasn't accepting that his new ideas, or

better said, conspiracy theories, were classic paranoia. He rarely left his room. And, he'd forgotten all about the notebooks filled with his poetry hidden in the bottom of a chest he brought from his old home. He used to write everyday. Used to, that is.

Instead of musical thoughts, Pete was now plagued with notions of secret agents hiding in the woods and shadowy people lurking around the house, and they were all out to get him. It did not help that he was watching the bad news bears of Fox, who were daily confirming his conspiracy theories. But he did have moments of clarity where he seemed like his old self.

He threw his cigarette butt down, took a pack of Kool's out of his housecoat pocket, shook a cigarette loose from the soft green pack and lit up another.

"I seen your dog running around up there in the back yard," he said as a cloud of smoke rolled over his face. "Thought you'd want to know, so I came down here."

"What?" Diamond stopped. "Cowboy?"

“Yes. You think I walked all the way down here for nothin'? I sure as hell didn't.”

Diamond drug his fishing gear up the bank, jumped on the mini-bike and raced to the house.

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North of Baghdad, Bill sat on a mat in a sweltering hut. The walls were riddled with bullet holes and shrapnel. His captors spoke in hurried and tense tones. The tall, thin man who was his daily companion wouldn't look him in the eye. He had a feeling something was happening and it wasn't good. He prayed without ceasing.

“God, I don't know what your will is for me in this situation. Please take this fear from me so I don't say or do anything that'll get me killed in this place. Put a shield around me and help me say the right things to stay alive so I can get back to my family,” he prayed silently.

Suddenly, the older one of his captors he'd nicknamed 'The Senator,' burst in brandishing an AK-47. He told Bill to stand up. He spoke English well.

"Are you Christian or Muslim?" the man asked, gripping his rifle.

"Christian," Bill said, as he said every morning when they asked.

The man suddenly turned away and left the room. Another man dressed in westernized clothes – slacks and a Polo shirt – who Bill had never seen before, entered the room with an assault rifle gripped in both hands. He swung the stock of the weapon at Bill's head.

It was lights out for Bill.

Chapter 2

Follow the little black dog.

Diamond frantically searched the house and its parameters for over an hour. He checked the laundry room repeatedly where Cowboy used to take his daily naps. He pulled out the doggie bowls, filled them with food and water and put them at their old spot on the carport.

The pain of not finding him now, and not being able to hold him in his arms was like losing Cowboy all over again.

Diamond hesitantly went back down to the camp. Dusty was back from his mama's. Dusty stoked the fire nervously because he could see his friend was in a dark mood from a mile away.

"Where you been, Bro'?" Dusty said smoothly. He jabbed the fire, sending sparks shooting up.

"Pete came down earlier and told me he'd seen Cowboy running around up at the house."

Dusty gave him a look that questioned and cared at the same time.

"Did you see him?" Dusty asked. Diamond suspected pity and he hated that.

"What?" Diamond was irritated.

"Well, did you see Cowboy?"

“No.” Diamond sank down into his canvas lawn chair and stared into the fire. Dusty sighed along with Diamond as he sank. “Pete saw him, though.”.

Dusty admired Diamond's constant faith and belief in Bill being alive. That's because he didn't want to believe otherwise, either. But, when it came to Cowboy, Diamond's anger came easily.

“I left some food and water,” Diamond said.

“But you know, Pete is...you know,” Dusty said fidgeting around, “I mean, c'mon dude, he said he's seen Cowboy, what, three times since Spring Break? I think he might be seeing things.” Diamond shot him a look. “Well, he is a little, you know-” Dusty wasn't good at being politically correct, but he at least was trying to say it nicely. “Maybe he was having a hallucination. You said yourself that he can't help it. It's his sickness,” he said, trying to smooth things over. But, this only made Diamond defensive.

“He has PTSD, not schizophrenia,” But, Diamond knew he was schizophrenic, too, and that Dusty could be right.

“Okay, man,” Dusty said. “I just think, you know... it's been so long that he's been missing that, you know, maybe you should accept that he's... dead.” Dusty wished he hadn't said that word. He got up and walked around the fire poking at the coals with a stick. Diamond didn't speak.

Each boy was quiet for a long moment, staring at the fire, lost in their own thoughts. Dusty took his stick and began re-drawing the butterfly wings that circled the campfire.

“By the way, why’d you draw all these designs everywhere? I mean they look really cool and all, but-” Dusty said.

“I didn’t. You didn’t do it?” Diamond’s voice hit a high note.

“No, I just got here,” Dusty said. “This had to have taken somebody all night.”

“I think they must have been here at like six this morning... Dang, that’s weird. I thought you did it and you was playing a joke on me.”

“That wouldn’t be a very funny joke,” Dusty said. They got up and walked to the edge of the cliff and looked out over the sandbar in awe of the designs spreading out over the landscape of driftwood and sand.

“This is like a gesture, you know what I mean? Like a love note, or something, I don’t know, a gift. Know what I mean?” Diamond said.

“Or, freakin’ aliens!” Dusty said.

Diamond felt a chill tingle down his spine. “Someone had made a fire, too,” said Diamond. “This morning when I got here someone had moved my lounge chair

close to the fire, and it looked like they'd just thrown water on it when they seen me coming."

"Goldilocks," said Dusty.

"Yeah," Diamond said, "a for real Goldilocks," he laughed and rubbed his face, thinking.

Dusty's mama had encouraged him to help Diamond come to terms with the reality that Bill may never come home. But, Dusty learned to *never* say anything about Bill being dead, like *ever*! Not because Diamond threatened him, and he did threaten him by the way, but it was because of the way Diamond explained his father's kidnapping and possible escape, he made Dusty a true believer.

"Look at this," Diamond had said one day pouring over a map of the Middle East. "If he'd have been killed here, here, or here, we would've immediately heard about it. We know he was kidnapped right here. Not killed." Diamond pointed to a highway north of Baghdad. "That hasn't happened yet. I think he is somewhere along in here..." Diamond pointed to a spot in the city limits. "The American base is right here. Walking distance."

Dusty knew there would be no acceptance of death without a body. And, that was maybe the point, that there is no dead body, and just like Diamond talked about

picturing his father coming home in his mind, Dusty pictured him coming home, too.

But, Dusty was pretty certain that Cowboy was dead. He'd heard his daddy talking about dog fighting rings and what they do with little dogs like Cowboy. And, he knew about Junior Price, and he was pretty sure it was Junior who grabbed Cowboy that day.

Dusty rubbed his hand over his summer buzz cut. He kept flipping his head back like he still had the straight black locks of hair falling in his face. His dad clipped him for the last day of school. It was a tradition with the two boys.

But, this summer Bill was gone, so, Diamond's bushy blonde hair still hung to his shoulders. It'd gotten very curly on the underside since puberty hit, and the top was straight with blonde streaks from being out in the Mississippi sun every day since Valentines.

This was another thing that made Diamond a little different than most of the boys - he didn't care about video games. While Dusty had the latest in gaming technology, during warm weather, Diamond just wanted to swim, fish, and camp. He'd gotten a tan early on in the spring. His shoulders and his chest grew wide and he started growing muscles. Girls liked the looks of him.

“You gonna get a buzz cut this summer?” Dusty said. Night was falling and they stoked up the fire. “We could get my dad to do it for you.” Diamond was lost in thought, he shrugged his shoulders.

“Well,” Dusty said, keeping the conversation light, “you should just keep it long anyway. Melissa Harvey likes it like that,” he said teasing.

“What?” Diamond said. That made him smile a little. “That girl don't like me. She has never said more than 'hey' to me.”

“Oh my god, man. I knew you were off in la-la-land, but dang! Everybody in school knows Melissa Harvey has a crush on you. She is fine as hell, dude! I'd be celebratin'.”

“Whatever,” said Diamond.

Dusty went to the river bank where they had the chocolate and the Pibb tied off in the icy cold spring water. He handed Diamond a coke and they continued on with the sitting quietly for a long time. It was a moment when Dusty could read Diamond's thoughts, and Diamond could read his. This is when Bill would've drug out the guitar and sang 90's Rock songs really badly and Cowboy would have sat at their feet, always on high alert for raccoons, possums, an armadillas.

Diamond sat up straight and sighed. He took a deep breath to say something, but then didn't a couple times. “You know,” Diamond finally said, “I really don't care

what anyone thinks, and I know you're thinking something right now, but...I believe he is alive." Diamond said.

Dusty was unsure if he meant Cowboy or Mr. Bill, but he did not ask. "Hey Diamond, Man, I believe you." Their silence was comfort and they stared at the fire letting the quiet sink deeper and deeper into their bones.

"I'm so ready for Mr. Bill to get home," Dusty casually said. "I miss him. Daddy talks about him all the time, all the crazy stuff they did when they was our age." Dusty gauged Diamond's mood as he talked. "How they lived on the river during the summer and used all their survival skills. That's what we gonna do this summer," Dusty said. Diamond turned up a little smile on one side to reassure his friend.

"You remember what Mr. Bill promised me for this summer?" Dusty asked.

"No, what?"

"He was going to teach me how to drive a stick shift," Dusty said. "My daddy ain't worth a dang at a stick shift." They sat around the fire for a while, roasted a few marshmallows, and then crashed in the tent.

In Diamond's mind mornings on the river are what heaven must be like. He walked to the cliff where they liked to dive into the water. Diamond sat at the edge and watched gold, pink and baby blue clouds floating in the sky. Their beauty doubled by their reflections in the silvery river. Diamond climbed down the cliff and

slipped into the water without making a ripple. He went under. Silence into deeper silence. The river was cold. He loved the sudden shock of it and the way it numbed his limbs.

He swam deep, but slowly and carefully. He was checking their dive spot for trees, limbs or any debris in the water that may have flowed in with the undertow. The river drags trees and debris along, so the swim-hole had to be checked every day. His parents had been very strict about this.

“Always check before diving! The river is in a constant state of change,” Bill and Helen said many times.

“You must carefully approach the hidden goddess of the piney woods,” Helen taught him. “I advise against touching her,” Helen would say, “Mother Nature is as attracted to you as you are to her. She has given you a perfect playground. But, she will grab you and take you away from me forever without even a thought, so respect her dangers, respect what she is capable of. The river goddess gives and takes. I don't want her to take you. So, check before you dive. It doesn't matter if you checked that same hole the day before. The river changes every day.”

Diamond climbed to the top of the cliff 30 feet above the water. The water was deep at the cliff's edge. He stretched his muscles. Then, after a habit he learned from his father, he kissed his fingertips and threw his love to the river, to Her. Bill told him it was an attempt to wake up Mother Nature with something sweet, if only

for a brief moment, so that if he slipped, the sleeping goddess would be ready to respond and pick him back up. “That way, I got Jesus and Mother Nature on my side,” Bill had told him.

Diamond dove and made a clean cut into the surface of the water. He could feel the icy water down deep, and the cold, soft pull on his belly as he curved his back to come back up.

The fiery lights of the morning sky inspired Diamond as he swam in the cold river. It made him want to rush to his tent and get his notebook. The air was pink and golden, the sky, perfectly azure. Words floated into his mind with the sounds of the wind in the trees and settled into his consciousness.

What is this crazy good feeling? I shouldn't have good feelings.

He slowly swam through a looking glass surface and it looked like his limbs were seeping into a liquid mirror reflecting the baby blue sky dotted with cotton candy clouds.

Back at the camp site, Diamond and Dusty pulled out the sandwich stuff. Dusty rumbled around in the cooler for a few minutes.

“I didn't bring the mayo?” Diamond said.

“I don't see it,” said Dusty. “You know I like mayo on my hotdogs.”

“Yes, we know you’re wierd,” Diamond laughed at him.

Bill got Diamond a mini-bike just before he left for Iraq, and the boys would find any reason to jump on it and ride. So, up to the house they headed. Halfway there, Diamond suddenly put on the brakes.

“What the hell?” Dusty said, bumping his face hard against the back of Diamond’s head.

“Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“I thought I saw a dog running across the road,” Diamond said.

“Oh.”

“What do you mean, ‘Oh?’ Naw. I saw something,” said Diamond confidently. Dusty patted him on the back and shook his head. Diamond took off again with a jerk and almost threw Dusty off. “Sorry, man. Hold on!”

“You ain’t sorry,” Dusty said, rolling his eyes and checking his lips for blood.

The woods along the camp road were dark and thick. The trees grew in the shape of a canopy over the road and driving down it was like flying through a tunnel. The sunlight was a jolt when they emerged from the dark jade road.

In the living room, Helen was asleep on the couch and the T.V. was blaring. Diamond walked through the living room towards the kitchen without paying her much attention. Dusty clicked off the T.V. And pulled a cover over her.

Diamond couldn't see a thing but the light of the kitchen at the end of the dark hallway. Suddenly, there in the dark, cold chills ran down his spine, because he distinctly heard the tink-tink of Cowboy's collar and the sound of him panting. The sound suddenly bolted off in the direction of the kitchen. Diamond ran down the hallway and stopped dead still and listened. Dusty ran into him.

“Did you hear that?” He asked Dusty, whispering and holding Dusty back with his palm on his chest.

“No. What?” asked Dusty whispering back. Diamond put his hand up and listened intently. He distinctly heard Cowboy make a little whimper, heard his paws padding along the carpet, then clicking on the kitchen tile. When his eyes finally became used to the dark, he didn't see any sign of Cowboy, and didn't hear him again.

He started running through the house calling, “Cowboy!” His heart hurt. Then suddenly, just as clearly as Diamond could see his hands in front of his face, he saw Cowboy running down the hall, and when Cowboy reached the brightly lit kitchen, he disappeared like morning mist floating into the hot summer sunlight.

A chill of fright rippled through Diamond. He shivered trying to shake the crazy feeling out of his head. He stood very still and held his breath to hear the slightest noise.

“Diamond,” Dusty said. He was worried his friend was going off the deep end.

“What, Dusty? I'm trying to hear. Can't you see that?” He angrily whispered.

“Who, Diamond See who?” he asked confused and with a hint of concern that Diamond picked up on.

Diamond shot him a look of betrayal. Dusty was talking to him like he was some kind of sad little kid, and that pissed Diamond off. He pushed Dusty against the hallway wall.

“What are you trying to say, Dusty?” Big Dusty threw Diamond's arms off of him.

“Forget this crap!” Dusty said. He turned to leave, “I can see right now we ain't gonna have a good day. You got something up your butt. Forget this!” Dusty said. He pushed back on Diamond and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

“Good.” Diamond said. “Didn't need you anyway!”

Diamond stood still as a statue and held his breath in the dead silence. Suddenly, he saw something out of the dining room window. The hairs on his arm stood up.

Cowboy's jet black body popped up and down through the bright green overgrown grass of the backyard, and into the darkness of the tree line, right at the spot where he and his father made a foot trail down to the river.

Diamond flew out the back door and into the deep dark woods after Cowboy. At first he was sun blind and couldn't see anything through the shadows, especially Cowboy. But he could hear him barking up ahead.

"Cowboy!" He called out, hoping he would turn around and run like crazy back to him. But, he only barked like he was on the trail of something and ran deeper and deeper into the woods. He suddenly saw Cowboy darting here and there like a rabbit, and he went faster and further into the woods towards the river. When Diamond reached the river he didn't see Cowboy at first, but then he saw him on the other side of the river.

"Come 'ere boy!" Diamond threw off his shoes and walked in. Cowboy sat and stared at him and playfully cocked his head as he watched Diamond swim across. When he got to the other side and pulled himself up the bank, Cowboy ran into the woods before he had time to catch his breath.

There were no trails on this side of the river, so he followed the sound of Cowboy's barking. He ran through brush and thickets to stay with him, and occasionally he spotted him in the bright circles of sunlight shining down like laser beams through the forest canopy onto Cowboy's shiny black coat. Pop-pop, pop-pop, went the yellow lights. He was so focused on glimmers of Cowboy popping here and there that he never noticed his skin and clothes were tearing on dead limbs and briars. Dribbles of blood trickled out.

He came to an opening in the woods where in the near distance he heard, and could finally see, dogs barking ferociously and tearing at one another for the kill. He thought surely he was going to see a dog die.

The dogs were all staked off with chains next to an old hay shack with a porch about to fall in. He no longer discerned Cowboy's bark. He hid himself in the underbrush of the treeline and crept closer to the sound of chaos coming unhinged, looking for Cowboy to stick his little black head up and put his wet nose in the wind.

Chapter 3

Finding Goldilocks.

Diamond thought he'd come upon an old hay-shack at the first sight of Junior Price's house. The entire passel of his unfortunate dogs suddenly started barking and jumping at him till their chains jerked them back. He almost turned back, but he hid himself in the shadows and scanned the landscape for Cowboy.

The windows of the old Victorian-era house were dim with long shadows falling on the inside walls. Empty. Precious keepsakes and antique furniture were long since carried out by thieves and greedy family members. The side porch had fallen in and some of the windowpanes were broken out and rattled with the heavy steps of someone inside.

Diamond slunk around in the shadow of the treeline to get a better look. A bulky brindle colored pit was anchored off on a chain on the porch by the front door. She lowered her head with icy yellow eyes that beamed in Diamond's direction. She sniffed the air and barked twice at the treeline where he was hidden and then hid herself under a table nearby. A thunderous clamoring came from

inside the old house and Junior burst out the front door. Diamond scrunched down behind some huckleberry bushes.

Junior Price was a depraved man, respectably named after his father and grandfather. They were well-known in the community, one a judge and one a sheriff, but poor Junior, born John Price III, wasn't as genetically blessed as his forefathers. The respectable and good men of the Price family died off years ago. Their ram-shackle house was a lonely place at the end of a miles-long gravel road.

Junior was tall and broad with a white bristly face. His white hair was oily and yellowed, so were his bushy white eyebrows. His forehead was wide and low and cast a shadow on his face like a Neanderthal. He wore a bloody patch over one eye and his faded work clothes were sweat stained and dirty. He staggered around looking for something, turning things over and throwing random junk off the porch and then went inside slamming the door..

Junior had no one close to him - no friends or family. No one cared for him or saw after him or reeled him in when it was needed. He'd been a loner since his mother suddenly disappeared. His estranged daughter was there for a brief time, too, but the word was she went back to Florida when they couldn't get along.

He kenneled dogs in the dogfighting world. He tried breeding but wasn't capable of understanding genetics and offspring. Aging and alcoholism were taking a toll on his meager faculties and it was beginning to affect his kennel business. He

had begun ruminating on new fantasies that were far worse than hunting and torturing animals.

Diamond's legs were going to sleep scrunched up in the shadows of the tree line. He sneezed. The dogs exploded barking again. Price came out on the porch again bleary-eyed and stumbling.

"Piece o' shit dogs! Shut the hell up! Where's my damn shotgun?! Sons-a-bitches!" His voice boomed and the dogs chained in the front yard cowered down at the sight of him. Except the one on the porch. She was crouched under the table as though she were ready to eat the old man if he came close to her.

Not finding his shotgun, he came off the porch raging, slipping his belt off. There were nearly a dozen dogs staked off in the yard. He pulled his swinging arm up high and then waylaid the dogs nearest him with the belt, hollering, "Shut up, ya' dirty sons'a'bitches!"

Diamond had never heard anyone curse like this man, except Pete when he was drunk. Junior beat the dogs till they stopped barking. One dog was particularly stubborn, the old man balled up his fist and punched the poor animal and it fell to the ground. This insanity took several minutes until the old man finally stumbled back inside.

For a long time, Diamond stayed crouched down, still as stone, watching. Where had Cowboy run to? And, why of all places, had he brought him on a chase to what was obviously Dog Hell. He looked down at himself and saw so much blood everywhere that he freaked out, but then realized he was torn up with briars.

A couple of bare-boned dogs with patchy, scaly coats chained near the back porch were about dead. The sight of the emaciated animals made him sick to his stomach. Half of the dogs chained out in the yard looked especially buff and shined with health, looked like well-bred pit bulls, while the other half looked like neglected half-breeds.

Diamond scanned the overgrown yard and the perimeters of the house. He caught sight of Cowboy's little puppy dog face peeking out from under the house. He barked for Diamond to come on and it set the dogs to raising hell again. This time the old man came out blasting a sawed off shotgun into the air hap-hazard and one-handed.

Diamond thought about retreating into the woods, but he could see Cowboy under the house. After threats of death and mayhem and several lashes from his belt, the dogs quieted down and the old man stumbled back inside.

Diamond saw the old man at the window turning up a whiskey bottle. This gave him a little confidence. He'd witnessed Pete's binges that made him disorderly and pissed off, but eventually passed out.

Diamond couldn't call out to Cowboy, so he crept along the wood-line around the house searching for a path with the least chance of being seen from the inside. He was careful to not even crunch a leaf for fear of setting off the dogs. He came to a place where he could see through to the kitchen.

The old man was passed out with his head down on the table. Diamond eased into the yard where he could keep an eye on the old man's movements. The yard was full of old junk, rusted out cars, broken down appliances, and several washers and dryers peppered with shotgun holes. Diamond kicked his shin against something iron-solid hidden in the tall grass. He almost blew his silence, but drew in a hard, deep breath. An old piece of farm equipment hidden in the tall grass.

He called out in a whisper, "Cowboy," and kept an eye on the kitchen window to see if the old man had made a move. The brindle dog on the porch stood up and kept her eyes on him. She put her nose up in the air and got a good whiff of Diamond, but didn't bark.

Is she smiling at me? Diamond thought. The dog sat and panted. Diamond looked at her and she looked at him. Like she was studying him. Her nose twitched and then she settled her head down on her paws with a huff.

Diamond's mind was jumping with memories of Cowboy doing his bologna dance and the way he used to have a happy, smiley face when they played or cuddled up on the couch. He couldn't wait to finally get his little buddy in his arms.

The next thing Diamond saw sent a shock through him. It was Cowboy chained to a rusted out and stripped-down washing machine. He knew it was him because of the collar, otherwise he might have gone on past still looking for Cowboy.

His mind quickly rewound the day. He'd seen Cowboy's shiny black coat prancing through the green grass. He watched him shake the river off when they crossed over during the chase. But here he was, wasted away and looking delicate as moth wings. Diamond was in horror, but Cowboy was still breathing. He could see his little rib cage rise and fall.

The dogs in the front yard started barking again and stretched their necks at the end of the chains in his direction. He frantically looked for a way to unhook Cowboy. He checked the old man; he wasn't sitting at the table anymore. He searched for the collar's buckle. It was stuck.

"Jesus, help me." Diamond said. He frantically fought with the hook. He could hear the old man coming out the door and limping across the porch.

He got Cowboy free and cradled him with the tail of his T-shirt. He was afraid to hug him like he wanted to because the little thing felt like a bag of bones. He looked around for a place to hide because he thought if he made a dash for the tree line now, he'd certainly get shot. He started to panic.

Just run!

He was about to make a dash across the maze of junk, but he could see the man's legs beneath the edge of the old house about to come around the corner. The tree line was too far. He would never make it.

This is it. I'm dead.

Suddenly, a pair of small dark hands grabbed him from under the house. Their grip was strong and hooked him from behind so fast he didn't have time to react. In a tryst he and Cowboy were under the house and the small hands covered his mouth. He blinked his eyes like crazy trying to adjust to the dark quickly, and then he saw a girl's bright grey eyes staring at him fiercely with her finger over her mouth.

"Shhh!" Her eyes widened as she watched Junior walk by, raging and cursing.

Diamond's mind was going in many directions. Who was this beautiful, brown skinned girl, all ginger and honey colored, with blonde kinky curls? Where in the world had he gotten off to? Because to him it seemed he'd found the 13th level of Hell with this little angel trapped inside.

I never seen her at school.

He looked down to check Cowboy. Still breathing.

The old man staggered by.

“Don’t move a muscle,” the girl whispered. They were holding their breath for what was the longest minute of Diamond's life.

How long had Cowboy been chained up? How long had he gone without food and water? How was he going to get him out of here alive? How was *he* going to get out of here alive?

As his eyes completely adjusted to the dark, he began to see a whole new scene under the house and tried to get a better look at who his rescuer was. Her hair was in a long loose braid and everything about her was a bit grubby, but even through the dust and grime, it was easy to see that this brightly browned skinned girl was a beauty.

The prettiest girl I’ve ever seen.

The old man staggered around the yard. The girl watched his movements with vigilance, ready to pounce, prepared for anything.

She is the wildest looking thing I’ve ever seen.

He could see in the girl's eyes a deeper intelligence than he ever saw in any of his friends, and there was something more, something he couldn’t put his finger on.

The girl had a dog collar on with a small padlock dangling from it. She gestured for Diamond to move back further up under the house. Diamond was fascinated by the way the girl moved on her squatted limbs underneath the house. Her thighs looked like they were made of iron and were lean and long. Her biceps had bulk and she had grace in every move. The ratty looking T-shirt and shorts she had on did not take away from her good looks.

“Here he comes!” she whispered. “Get behind these bricks.”

He'd only heard of stories like this on T.V. and the internet. Feral children abandoned or abused, taken in by dogs, mentally scarred. Feral children forgot how to talk, how to act, how to sit or even stand up right. They were always whacked out.

This girl ain't feral. Maybe she doesn't really live under the house.

But, looking around under the large conventional foundation, there were signs that someone had been living there, and not just a person, but a child.

Diamond had a sudden vision of the girl grown up and standing beside him at his home, where she smiled and held his hand, dressed in a flower print dress wearing white sandals and a tight French braid down her back. It was a flash of a vision and then, suddenly gone.

The girl reached her hand out to Diamond as she watched the old man come closer. He put his hand in hers and she squeezed very tightly and whispered to him, "Don't you move a muscle or make a sound," she said again. She looked down at Cowboy wrapped in his shirt, kissed her fingertips and touched Cowboy's head. The old man came scowling back around the corner.

"Hey, little shit!" the old man hollered. He bent down to peer under the house. "Where you at?" He nearly fell on his face and used the shotgun to set himself up right. "Come 'ere ya' lil whore!"

Diamond never in his life heard anyone talk the way this man did. And, to a little kid, too. He was sick with fear. On one hand, he wanted to protect this girl, but on the other, she seemed pretty confident in taking care of herself.

The girl edged her way to Junior.

"You seen anybody running around out here, gal?"

"No, old man! Go away!" the girl yelled and flipped her middle finger up at him. The old man went at the girl with his fist. The girl moved out of his reach the way a water spider slides across the surface of the river, her crouched limbs, long and elegant, moved swiftly under the house. Diamond was dumbfounded. He'd never seen a kid like this.

“Don't you disrespect me, gal! I'll beat you so good you won't ever see right again!” The old man lunged at her like she was one of his hell hounds on the chain, spewing spit and venom, and swung the butt of the gun under the house at the girl. The wild girl moved back further, avoiding the hit.

She kept looking back at Diamond to check on him and remind him to keep quiet, but Diamond was too scared to even take a breath. He looked down at Cowboy and prayed for dear life.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus....

The old man wobbled through the graveyard of appliances, lit a cigarette and let it stick to his bottom lip as he smoked. Now and then he would suddenly pull up on his shotgun and aim like he was practicing in case someone popped out from behind something. He mumbled to himself, “Sorry bastards. Junior gotcha.” He circled the yard, occasionally stopping to look under the house. Diamond stayed frozen.

Finally, the old man went inside. Diamond moved to the edge of the house. He needed to get Cowboy to the vet as soon as possible. He was still breathing, but barely.

“Wait!” the girl said, listening to the footsteps above them. They stopped in the kitchen. “Okay” she said and let go.

Diamond was terrified he'd gotten there too late to save Cowboy. He clutched Cowboy gently to his chest, praying.

"I been giving him water every day, but he stopped eating," she was looking at Cowboy with love, "I been locked up, too. That's the toughest little dog I ever saw," she stroked his head. "The old man is possessed by demons, I just know it. You better never let him get a hold of you." She gently kissed Cowboy on the head. "He will be okay, you think so?"

"I hope so, thank you for helping us," said Diamond. He wondered if she'd escaped from a chain. And, why didn't she run away?

"Let me double-check where the old man's at," the girl said, "then I'll give you the signal and you run." Diamond agreed.

"What's your name?" Diamond asked, but the girl suddenly turned away as if she heard something from the side yard. The girl turned back to him.

"Remember, when I give you the signal, run and don't look back, just run, you hear? The old man is quicker than he looks, and he wouldn't think twice about hurting you," the girl warned.

Her sharp grey eyes darted wildly from here to there. Then, she slunk out into the bright sunshine of the yard and stood up straight and tall. She was much

taller than Diamond imagined. She might be a little older than he thought, too. She looked back at him, she was stunning.

When the girl got to the old machine where Diamond had found Cowboy chained up, she looked up into the house, pointed inside and then started mimicking a drunkard tossing the bottle back for a swig. She was being very silly and hung her tongue out and drooped over like a drunkard. She bent her neck and rested her head in folded hands like she was asleep.

At least the girl still has her sense of humor.

She motioned for him to come on out. Diamond carefully came out with Cowboy slung in his shirt and quickly made his way through the tall grass.

Suddenly, there was a sound from the house. The pair shot a look at each other and bolted into the wood line in two different directions. Diamond aimed toward home, down the footpath he hoped would lead him back to the river. The girl disappeared into the woods where there was no path - where only the wind and the wild things played.

Chapter 4

Ghost Dog

“The vet said he’s a miracle,” Helen said, cradling Cowboy in one of Diamond’s old baby blankets. She held him like a baby, feeding him the medicines the vet sent home with a dropper.

Pete was making his third pot of coffee and it was only 10 a.m. Diamond never saw him consume anything but Kool cigarettes, sweet black coffee, and every now and then, Jack Daniels.

How does whiskey and coffee and Camels keep a person alive so long?

Helen gently placed Cowboy in a cardboard box working as a make-shift bed. She had him in the kitchen with her because she wanted him to be right where she could see him. She’d decided to cook a meal. It was the first time in months.

Diamond held back his desire to shout for joy as he sat at the bar and watched his mother working over the stove.

The kitchen smelled of Greek seasonings, garlic, potatoes, and roasted chicken. Diamond's stomach rumbled. Even through his hunger, Diamond could not stop thinking about the wild girl with the blonde ringlets and brown skin. He'd thought about her skin last night till he fell asleep. He was dreaming of her when he woke up this morning, a dream of desire. She stood in the sunshine, ankle deep in the river. Diamond! She called, and motioned him to come into the water with her.

"I can't believe that after all this time, he's here. He's still alive," Helen said. She couldn't take her eyes off of Cowboy.

"I told you, didn't I?" Diamond said.

"Yes, Baby. You did. Many times. I should've had a little more faith, I reckon."

Diamond felt a little lighter of heart, but Cowboy was still not out of danger. He barely had the strength to open his eyes, and he'd try to lift his head, but didn't have the energy to hold it up. Helen cradled a small baby bottle of milk laced with nutrients and medicines to Cowboy's snout to see if he could take it but he couldn't. She filled the dropper with the milk and got it in him.

Pete was puzzled. He looked down at Cowboy's emaciated body. He looked at Helen, he looked back at the dog.

“That ain’t the dog I saw running around in the yard,” Pete said. “How in the world?” He studied Cowboy closely and rubbed his own head out of consternation.

“I know what you mean,” Diamond said. “After you came and got me from the river, I was looking everywhere possible in the house, and I finally saw him. I followed him from the yard, all the way to that man’s house. He looked strong and his coat was shiny and his bark was so loud and so clear to me. How could it be that he is actually in this condition? I just keep telling myself to believe my eyes. But have my eyes lost touch with reality?”

“Ahh! I know what it was,” Pete said as though he’d solved the mystery, “we saw a ghost.”

“But, he isn't dead,” Diamond said.

“I’ve been thinking about that, too,” Helen said. “It is all very strange to consider.”

Pete still had the capacity to philosophize and he admired his daughter’s abilities. He called her the Housewife Philosopher. The first truth Pete ever taught his daughter was that everyone is their own little philosopher. But some people are good at it, and by good, he’d explained, their philosophies “have value in the lives of others,” and some do not.

“If,” Helen started the way she always did... “If,” she spoke with an unconscious gesture of opening up a door, “ghosts are real, if they are the truth, if they are made up of only spirit matter, then it is far more likely they are appearing to us through our minds,” she said. She perched on the edge of a bar stool – she needed room to move her hands, she couldn’t talk if she couldn’t use her hands.

Diamond listened intently. Helen was animated, not merely awake. Helen had a unique way of mixing science and the spirit world together.

Diamond thought himself lucky to have such a cool mother. His friends liked to remind him of the fact that Helen was such a fitting name. What did that matter to him? She was more interesting to talk to than anyone he knew. She was a Barbie doll of a woman with a petite frame, black hair, ivory skin, and eyes so black the irises could not be discerned from the darkness of the pupil. “Portals to a better world,” Bill would say with a Coca-Cola smile.

“Your mind and your knowing heart were working together,” said Helen, “which is everything you know and feel, and you know in your mind that you feel it in your chest, in your heart, in your knowing-heart,” she said placing a palm on her chest just beneath the dip in her throat, “and your mind is like a pool of water, or maybe better yet, a great lake. Your awareness and knowledge of your existence,

your feelings, your memories and even all the things you've forgotten, all of these things are in this great lake." Diamond raised his hand to her and Helen paused.

"Is your mind the same as your brain?" he asked.

"A good question. You might say you can't weigh your mind, but you can weigh your brain. It may be the second most important philosophical question there is," Helen said. "What is the mind? The mind is a product of the brain and the soul together," Helen said leaning over the kitchen counter towards Diamond, she tapped his forehead. "Think of the brain as simply a part of your body," she said. "The brain is matter but your mind is spirit. The mind is not simply the sum of your senses, though everything your senses take in and process becomes part of your mind. Experience and environment can have long term and unconscious effects. Your mind is separate from reality, beyond reality. The mind possesses the substance of the afterlife, the brain contains it. The mind is separate even from your physical, real body, yet inextricably woven into the fabric of your brain. They are subject to one another. But, the mind is the stronger of the two. The mind is the eternal thing.

"What y'all saw was the liquid mind of Cowboy as he projected his thoughts and dreams onto yours," Helen said. "He probably did this as a function of his spirit, which from the looks of him was trying to leave his body for good, and his will to

live did something I thought was impossible. He ...well, I mean I can't believe I'm fixing to say this, but he shapeshifted.”

Diamond sat puzzled for a moment. He didn't believe his ears. Helen fed Cowboy and stroked his head.

“What do you mean shape shifted? So, I was chasing a shape-shifting ghost?” Diamond asked.

“Something like that. We cannot know everything there is to know about the mind, or the nature of spiritual things. The only way I can explain this is to say that his spirit briefly left his body and shifted into his healthy self.

“A ghost is the soul of someone whose body has expired...right? The soul, or the spirit, is the eternal hinge of the mind. It is what makes a mind live forever. It remembers the body that it lived in. I believe a ghost, or a soul, may appear to someone's mind if it chooses, one mind communicating to another in a sense. A photo could not be taken of the ghost, because it will not exist here...,” she gestured all around her, “in this reality. It will only be visible in this reality,” and she pointed to the center of her forehead, “a reflection of one body of water upon another – an imprint if you will, of one soul's reality upon another soul. It is no less real to the

person who sees it, only it isn't the eyes that are doing the seeing, it is the mind that sees, and what the mind sees is superimposed upon the reality before it."

Diamond stared dumbly at her. She burst into laughter.

"It's not really true then," Pete said, "that people see what they want to see - truth is, people subconsciously superimpose their own truth over the truth-truth."

"True." Helen smiled. "Y'all just got a little extra something yesterday." Helen looked at her son and kissed him on the forehead. "I wonder, does being more conscious make someone more perceptive to unseen spirits?"

Helen looked at her son as though his thoughts were being written across his forehead. He'd drifted off in thought, this time that his father wasn't gone. He imagined Bill was in the garage working on the farm truck. Sometimes he was preparing pine tree seedlings in the garage. That was Bill's obsession. He wanted to be a tree farmer. That was why he took the Baghdad job. So, he could pay some things off, invest in some equipment, and start farming full time.

Helen pushed Diamond's hair back, her fingertips brushed his forehead. Her eyes looked a million miles away.

“But the girl that I told y'all about was real,” he suddenly said. “Really real. She was definitely not a ghost, or just some reflection.”

“The social worker said they found nothing,” Helen said. “There was no evidence of anyone out there but the old man.”

“Did they even look under the house? Or around the yard?” Diamond asked.

“I don’t know,” said Helen. “It’s their job. I guess they know how to do it.” Pete grumbled at her answer as he made a cup of coffee.

“Goddamned bureaucrats ain’t gonna look under no house,” Pete said as he shuffled into the hallway. Fifty years of anger at the American government had made Pete a lifetime detractor of anything governmental.

That evening Diamond pondered his mother’s metaphysics as he dug through his clothes and camping gear to pack a back pack for the river. He walked into his large closet where all along one wall he had posters of Baghdad and maps of Iraq and detailed drawings of the highway and surrounding neighborhoods where his father’s trucking company was attacked and Bill was captured.

He imagined the terrorists screaming at his father and the pictures of Bill that were on CNN flashed in his mind. He decided to change his mind and replaced

that image with a scenario of Bill using his smarts and staying alive. He imagined his father standing in the living room at Thanksgiving telling the whole family about his ordeal, how he survived and how he escaped.

“They thought they had this ole Mississippi boy here, but they was wrong,” Bill said in Diamond’s vision.

Diamond couldn’t stop thinking about Cowboy and how he saw him shining with health, jumping across the field and swimming through the river the very day he found him nearly dead and tied to a stake.

What power in God’s great universe was at work? Cowboy, being the badass little dog that he was, smarter than any other dog I’ve ever known, refused to give in. Even though he was tied to the ground and nearly dead, his spirit visited my mind with the hope that I would find him and that I would believe what I saw. He was barely alive, and his soul was becoming unhinged from his body and probably in moments where he was closest to death is when his appearances became even clearer to me, when his strong mind made its greatest effort to survive.

Diamond also knew the wild girl under the house was real - really real. He’d felt her hand in his. He’d talked to her plain as day. Who was she? Where was her mother? How did she come to live under that old man’s house? Wasn’t anyone

missing their daughter? Nothing had been in the news. The social worker told them that Junior Price had no living family members, although his mother was technically only 'missing,' she was as good as dead to Diamond after learning it'd been 15 years of no word from him.

Well, are you just going to keep being a chicken-shit? You ain't going to go see about that girl? How can you live with yourself? But I can't go back to that house. He was going to kill me! He was definitely going to kill me.

Diamond was laying around watching T.V. regretting how he'd treated Dusty. It'd been a whole month. This had never happened before.

Suddenly, Cowboy popped up out of his resting spot and sat between him and the T.V. with a doggy smile on his face. He looked at the back door, looked at Diamond, and wagged his tail, looked at the back door, looked at Diamond, and wagged his tail. Diamond wasn't even watching T.V., really. He was in a daze. Cowboy barked again and Diamond shook it off.

"Want to go for a run, Boy?" Cowboy barked and yawned. "OK, Boy."

Cowboy was the same spry little fellow as before - oblivious to danger, fearless on all counts. Diamond wanted to be that fearless and that spirited. Lately,

Diamond had little gumption to get off the couch and go outside. He missed his dad. They would have been on several hikes so far this summer had Bill been home.

When he saw that Cowboy was bounding with energy he decided to ride his bike to town. He knocked on Dusty's door with Cowboy by his side. He couldn't wait for Dusty to see him. Cowboy was skinny but healing up well.

Cowboy puffed his chest out like no one had ever chained him down. He was the same old Cowboy. He'd been worried that his dog might get PTSD like Pete.

In the home of a PTSD war veteran no one ever made sudden moves or banged doors loudly because there would be a price to pay in belligerence or emotional outburst, namely the emotion of rage and an onset of hyper-vigilance. How many times had he explained Pete to Dusty or one of his friends? Many times, but Dusty was the most understanding. He was the brightest kid in Diamond's class besides him, even though Dusty never studied.

It's funny 'cause Dusty comes off kinda on the dumb side. But he ain't.

Dusty answered the door. "Hey, Diamond. What's up?" he asked like they'd never fought, like it was just yesterday that they saw each other.

“Nothing,” Diamond said. “You wanna go by Aunt Cutie’s store with me, then go to the river?”

“Sure,” said Dusty, “let me go tell Mom.” Then Dusty saw Cowboy. “Oh my God! It’s Cowboy! I can’t believe it!” He got on his knees and Cowboy jumped in his lap and licked his face all over. He scooped Cowboy up and held him close. Cowboy kept licking his face like crazy. He hugged and hugged Cowboy. “OK. Let me go tell Mama where I’m going.”

Cutie’s Grocery was buzzing. It was July 4th weekend and people were grabbing last minute items for the holiday. Aunt Cutie was in the office cubicle making beer orders. She was a skinny fifty-year-old with beautiful skin. Something that ran in her and Helen’s family genes. She was Helen’s oldest sister. Helen was the baby.

Cutie was headstrong and independent. It took a special kind of southern man to be beside her. A lot of folks didn’t like her, they called her a liberal with progressive ways of thinking. Those are curse words in Mississippi. Aunt Cutie could give a damn, but she liked liberals. She kept the homeless in beer and chicken and once had an illicit love affair with the husband of her cousin Shelby, who was the very respected owner of Coburn’s Southern Art Gallery. He was a master

seducer, Aunt Cutie told Helen. She really felt bad about that one, but other than that, Aunt Cutie lived without regrets.

Sheriff Bobby Coburn was the man by her side these days. Aunt Cutie said he reminded her of Matt Dillon from Gunsmoke. The sheriff and his wife were recently divorced and he started staying with Aunt Cutie almost immediately. People said they had been seeing each other for a while before his divorce, but Aunt Cutie swore it wasn't true. He was a giant of a man with an angel heart and a head full of white hair, cut like Jimmy Neutron's. His militant pizazz fit with Cutie 's exuberant generosity, they made a handsome pair.

Bobby was standing at the cubicle talking to his lady when the boys came in. Diamond had a spontaneous urge for a couple of beers. It was a holiday, why not? The sight of Mr. Bobby did not deter him.

Cowboy walked right up in there with them like he owned the place and no one blinked an eye. Everybody loved Cowboy. Last winter he proved his worth as a proper store employee slash mascot when he showed Aunt Cutie his hunting skills.

He'd spent all morning in the back of the store one Saturday, barking and charging at some critter they could hear scratching and jumping around in the dark

corners of the storage room. Cutie had complained for weeks about something in her storage pantry stealing croutons and ruining the fresh veggies in the cooler.

Finally, after hours of persistence, Cowboy walked out of the swinging doors with his chest puffed up, and a big dead rat dangling from his jaws. He was so proud he was popping up his front paws like a Clydesdale show-horse.

The little thing knew everyone was looking at him. Everyone cheered as he passed them and went out the back door of the store. Then he sat in the shade and ripped the rat's head off, ate part of him and buried the rest.

Cowboy had a way of begging for food that was distinctive, more like persuasion. He managed to persuade people to give him food through pitiful teary eyed blinking and faking an excellent case of the shakes as though he was starving to death. If that didn't work he added a limp. He'd learned this little dance after a cow chasing accident left him in a cast for a few weeks and he was nursed back to health by Helen that time, too, who of course treated him like a little prince. He was so good at this that Aunt Cutie said they should petition the academy for an award for best actor in a real life drama.

"Hey man, stay close by me," said Diamond pulling open the glass door at Cutie's Grocery. "Let's get a pack of cocktails for the river."

“What? Uh, I don't know about this.” Dusty stood looking at items on the shelf between Cutie's line of vision and Diamond at the beer cooler. Diamond took his pocket knife and cut the plastic rings on a pack of Coors and hung them under a baggy T-shirt and on his waistband. They grabbed a couple of cokes off the shelf, a bag of chips, and their shrimp po boys and checked out.

“Hey, boy!” Aunt Cutie came running out of the store calling to Diamond. The boys looked at each other wide eyed. Diamond braked his bike and turned around to see her.

“How's ya mama doing?” She yelled.

“She's good. Better, actually!”

“And just what do y'all mean coming in here and not speaking to your auntie?” She was smiling and threw her hand on her hip. A truck driver approached her with a question. She huffed at him and turned back to the boys.

“Y'all come get some lunch tomorrow. I'll be open all day. OK baby? Lunch'll be on the house. The special's going to be red beans and catfish,” Aunt Cutie said.

“Yes ma'am!” the boys said with enthusiasm.

“And tell your mama to come, too, if she's up to it,” Cutie added.

Diamond, Dusty and skinny Cowboy played on the sandbar all morning, ate their po-boys and drank a beer each while they watched tubers and canoers float by.

“So, how’d you find Cowboy? I heard he was real sick, might not make it,” Dusty said.

“You won’t believe this, but me and Pete must’ve seen a ghost the day I found him,” Diamond said.

“What do you mean?” Dusty asked.

“So, when I was fishing that day, before you got there, I swear I kept having this feeling that somebody was watching me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood out. Then, Pete was suddenly standing on the sandbar smoking. He said, “I just seen your dog!” So, I jumped out’ the river and ran to the house and looked everywhere. I put his food bowls out. I thought I saw him run across the yard, but then nothing. That’s when I came back down to the river and you’d gotten here. Remember?”

“Sorry about that day, man,” Dusty said. “I shouldn’t have gotten mad like that.”

“It’s okay, dude. Anyway, after you left, I followed what I thought was Cowboy. He was real. Really real. He was his old self. Little ole muscular thing. He was hopping and popping through the woods so fast, and I could hardly keep up,” Diamond held up his arms to show some of the scars left from the briars. “Look. I ran through thickets and briars and got all tore up.

“I kept calling to him, but he would never turn around. I wanted so bad to look at his face, but he would never turn around!

“Then, I came upon some rickety, creepy looking old house out in the middle of nowhere. I couldn’t even see where the dang road came in at. I mean, this house looked like something out of Texas Chainsaw Massacre or Saw. It was messed up crazy lookin, dude!”

Dusty laughed, “Were you scared?”

“Hell, yeah! And, a bunch a’ dogs started raising ten kinds of hell, but something told me to stay put. I hid behind some bushes in the treeline forever, freaking out, thinking these dogs might get off them dang chains and eat me alive. I was praying, boy was I praying. And this old, greasy looking dude walks out the

house shooting his gun, yelling at the dogs and beating them. Man, I ain't never heard anybody talk like that."

"Awe man," Dusty said, "Hey, I bet that's old Junior Price. He lives around here somewhere. My daddy's talked about him before. He's into dog fighting. He's a little off, too," Dusty said, gesturing to his head.

"Really? Well, that would explain a lot," Diamond said. "I don't guess I've heard of Junior. So, anyway, I thought I saw Cowboy near the house. The old man finally went back inside, but now this is where things get real crazy, I made my way towards where I'd seen Cowboy and came upon the real Cowboy. And, let me tell you, what I saw made my brain flip inside out.

Cowboy was tied to an old washing machine and was nothing but skin and bones. I mean nothing but. Then the old man came out and just about when I thought I was gonna get shot somebody grabbed me and snatched me under the porch. Her grip was like a man's, I swear. So fast, so strong. Unbelievable."

"What? Who?"

"A girl"

"A girl?"

“Yeah, well, more than a girl. She was tall, and beautiful. She was mixed.”

Dusty shot him a look, but Diamond’s mind suddenly went off track thinking of the girl’s face.

“What’d she look like?”

“She had cinnamon brown skin, blonde ringlets in a braid hanging down between her shoulders. They were muscular shoulders, too. I never seen a girl built like that, not one that was pretty anyway,” Diamond said. “I guessed that she was 13 or 14 looking at her face, but she was so damn tall. Amazon like.

“I want to go back there and find her. I don’t care if that old man does kill me. I guarantee that dang old social worker didn’t poke around the property looking for signs of a kid, not that she’d find any anyway, ’cause there really ain’t none until you get under the house. Then, you’ll see a makeshift home - dolls and little toys arranged neatly on some bricks where she hid herself and slept. There were blankets and pillows neatly arranged on her pallet. Even under that old crickety house she had everything all neat and arranged, all cute. It was crazy, Dude. She had Christmas lights strung all around for light. Crazy, man, just crazy cool!”

Dusty and Diamond swam all day in record heat and were asleep by 11 p.m. in front of the TV. Helen paused to look at their sleeping faces as she went to the

kitchen. She had gone several days without a pill, but she'd had a bad day and she couldn't sleep. She was going to take just one.

"He was right about the dog," she thought. "Please God. Please, make his vision true about his father. You know my heart and know that I have no faith left. Forgive me. I just want Bill to come home," Helen prayed.

Helen stood stroking her hair in the bathroom mirror. She thought about the embrace and the touch of her husband. She slumped onto the bathroom floor and she cried till no more tears would come out. She dug into the back of the cabinet for her stash and pulled out the pills that helped her sleep.

She poured a whiskey and water and sank into her bed with the TV on. As usual she put on the comedy channel and hoped it would make her laugh, but again, as usual, it only helped her not cry.

The Xanax helped her frantic mind go quiet. Her sleep was upside down and she hit REM sleep before going into a deep sleep instead of the other way around."

Diamond woke up at 2 a.m. and heard his mother crying in her sleep. He turned her TV off and pulled a blanket over her. She quieted down as he tucked the covers under her chin.

On the bed side table her cell phone started buzzing. The caller was “unknown” and the number was unusual, had extra digits. He grabbed it and walked to the kitchen so as not to wake his mother.

“Hello?” he said cautiously.

“Diamond!”

Diamond knew that voice. “Daddy!?”

“It’s Daddy, Son!”

Diamond rushed back to Helen and tried to wake her but she didn’t budge.

“Daddy, where are you?”

“I am somewhere in Iraq. I know it’s a farm. I can hear gunfire and missiles in the distance. I think I’m somewhere north of Baghdad.”

“Everyone thinks you’re dead! No one believes me that you are alive. I knew you were, Daddy. I knew it!”

“I love you, Diamond. I’ll be home soon. Best believe that,” Bill said. “I only have a second to talk, so just tell them I’m alive. I’m on a farm north of Baghdad. It’s

a religious sect that's got me, maybe Isis. They keep moving me around from house to house, but I've been in a barn behind a farmhouse for weeks now." He suddenly went quiet. Diamond held his breath listening... "Tell Mama I'm coming home, boy. Tell her not to worry. God is going to deliver me. Tell her I love her. I love you, Son. I gotta go now. I'm gonna be home before you know it, best believe that..." The phone crackled and the line went dead.

Diamond knew what 'best believe that,' meant. He knew it was short for, 'I ain't playing around. This is serious and I'm ready to kick ass.'

"Best believe that," Diamond said to himself.

In a rural town 31 miles north of Baghdad Bill shimmied back into his chains as if he'd never been loose, as if he'd never been near the door where just on the other side armed men were contemplating his future.

Someone dropped their phone the night before. There had been a dozen or more men there last night filming him along with the man he'd named Chief. In the film Chief told the U.S. government to leave Iraq or they would be-head the American.

Bill was sure to put the phone back in exactly the spot he found it in. When the captors entered the room the next morning they found him asleep in chains. They woke him and asked the same question they asked every morning.

“Are you Muslim or Christian?”

“I am Christian,” Bill said. Two men brought in his morning meal of rice, tomatoes, herbs and fish and unchained him. They left the room, but he could hear them talking outside. He could tell by their tones that something important was happening. The kidnapper with the gentle eyes and good manners, who’d been with him since the beginning of the ordeal was being reprimanded, he was certain of that. Angry voices attacked him and Bill had the sense his kidnapper was pleading with them, and then, from the sounds of it, was drug away. Bill never saw the man with kind eyes again.

In the boarded up window frames of the mud hut were slits in the walls large enough for him to see there was a farm house about fifty feet away and open fields beyond that. He could hear U.S. army fighter jets buzzing high over head and could sense what direction their flight patterns were. That gave him some bearing on where he was located.

Each day around the same time he saw a young shepherd boy pass by with several sheep, early in the morning just after dawn and late in the evening just at sunset. He watched the sun rise and set through the narrow hole. In the pitch black of night he could hear small critters scratching at the mud walls and the mosquitoes swarmed, feeding on any flesh he couldn't fit under the small square blanket they gave him to sleep with.

Nothing helped the intense heat of the black mud tomb during the day. He closed his eyes and thought of long summer days floating in a canoe on the glassy surface of the Bogue Chitto and the taste of an ice cold beer.

"Thank you God for those days," he prayed. "Thank you for my Mississippi home, my beautiful wife and our son. Thank you God for my miracle."

The miracle Bill believed in might never come because there were people all around that wanted to see him die

Chapter 5

July 4, 2005

Night float.

The wild girl sat cross-legged in her cozy little corner beneath Junior Price's ramshackled house. Curled up next to her was the pit bull from the porch she called Princess. Proud that she was a free Princess. She etched her initials into the back of a small wooden medallion she carved with a pocket knife she'd sharpened till it had a razor's edge. On the front was an image of Cowboy with a happy face. She admired her creation for a moment.

She'd found a large piece of dark, dense wood in the barn, a chunk of ebony from a long forgotten piano, and made several small treasures out of it, like animal and human figurines, including one that resembled her mother.

"It kinda looks like him," she said. Princess was listening, as she moaned and propped her head on the girl's knee. "See?"

"To Diamond, from LP. I didn't have enough room to put Lauren Price so I

just put my initials.” She finished etching on the back and blew the ebony dust away. She found her leather twine to make it into a necklace. “Now for the thing that's gonna get me noticed.” She got one of her mom’s Army dog tags from her trinket box and strung it on with the medallion.

At the river Diamond and Dusty were swimming, and climbing up and down a tree adjusting a swing that flew out over their swim hole.

“So. You wanna go with me to find that girl?” Diamond asked Dusty.

“Didn't you say that old man tried to kill you?”

“You ain't gotta go, if you don't believe me. I'll go alone.”

“You won't be alone, you'll have Cowboy.”

“What?” Diamond asked with a seriously offended look.

“Dang, man, don't get your panties in a wad,” Dusty said, slapping him on the back and laughing. “Sure I'll go. But I ain't going unless I can hold the gun.”

“I'd rather you hold it anyways. We'll do a night float. Hadn't done one of them in a long time,” Diamond said. They had always done it with their dads. “It's supposed to be a bright night. We can boat to the Bacot's land up river at midnight.”

He pointed across the river. “I went into the woods right there following Cowboy, but then I remember heading north for a good ways till I hit a trail, probably half a mile east of here,” Diamond said.

“How far?”

“About a half mile, maybe a few feet more.” All of a sudden Diamond had chills

run up his spine.

Diamond stopped, he had that funny feeling again, he scanned his surroundings. Dusty eyed him strangely. Diamond shivered and shook it off.

“You okay?” asked Dusty, looking around, too. “You freakin’ me out.

“Shh!” Diamond said.

“What?”

“Listen.”

“Umm, okay.”

Cowboy stood up and put his nose in the wind. He started barking like crazy, but it was his happy bark.

“What is it boy?” Diamond said, egging him on. “Talk to me.” Cowboy yarled back.

Wild Girl let out a sharp little yelp from the nearby woods to Cowboy.

“Did you hear that?” Dusty asked.

“Yeah, that didn't sound like a coyote”

Cowboy stopped barking and sat with his chest poked out, like he was fixing to strut around or something, just waiting on a command. “He is so ready to hop up and pop around,” Diamond could see it on his puppy dog face. Diamond walked out onto a beechtree growing out over the river.

“Come on Boy! Come on Cowboy!” Dusty called to him.

“I thought I heard something, too,” Diamond said, who was now out on a limb

over the river scooching to the rope swing. He stopped to listen again. But the sound was gone.

Dusty swam across the river.

“Where you going?” Diamond asked.

“just right here buddy’ro, just waiting on you.” He dog-paddled to the water under the rope swing.

Diamond shortened the rope swing another three feet and tied it off. They were getting bigger and heavier very quickly, and the swing was dragging them down onto the sandbar.

“Well? What ya waiting on? Is it ready?” Dusty asked, swimming back to the sandbar.

“Hold on.... almost done.” Diamond made sure the rope was secure by chimmying down it. If they'd have been paying attention at the right time, they might have caught a glimpse of the blonde and brown beauty quickly tying her gift to the limb of a huckleberry bush on a prominent deer trail and then disappearing into the woods.

In the woods, Wild Girl Lauren turned her face towards the river again and let out a howl that made Diamond freeze and listen. Then she barked for Cowboy. Cowboy started his feisty bark in response, hopped in the river, and swam across.

“What is it boy?” Diamond said. “What is that Cowboy? You got something? He’s on the trail of something, alright.”

“What's that there, hanging on that bush?” Dusty said. “You see that?”

Cowboy swam across the river and scratched up the red clay cliff onto the top of the bank. He passed up the medallion and ran straight into the woods after the girl. Cowboy remembered his old friend. He jumped on her lap and bounced off. He started bouncing up and down and yelping. He sounded like a little kid laughing and playing. Wild Girl crouched down and pulled a treat from her small satchel tied at the waist and gave it to Cowboy.

“Good boy,” she said. She gave him a good petting, cupped his ears, and made some playful growling and barking sounds to which Cowboy sat and quieted down. Then the wild girl ran off leaving him gnawing on his treat.

Diamond climbed back up the rope. “Watch this!” Diamond hollered down to Dusty. Then he stood up on the limb and dove into the river next to Dusty.

“Dang! Good one!” Dusty hollered. They swam to the other side. Diamond walked along the clay bank to the huckleberry bushes.

“Wow!” said Diamond, pulling the medallion off of the bush.

“That's Cowboy,” Dusty said standing behind him.

“I bet the girl made this,” Diamond said and he quickly looked around in the woods for someone to be there. He stood in awe, looking at the details etched in the small round piece. It fit perfectly in the palm of his hand. “Wow. Some artist! I told you. I told you,” Diamond said.

“Okay, if I doubted you I'm sorry. Now I believe you.”

“And look! Initials. L.P. , and this dog tag says LaHoma Price.”

“Wow, dude. This is really cool,” Dusty said. “I’m jealous.”

“No you aint.”

“Ok. I aint. But, it is super cool,” Dusty said. And it's proof.”

“You shoulda already believed me, Dummy,” Diamond said. Then he called out to his mystery person, “Heeeeeeeey! Anybody out there?.... LaHoma!!” Diamond screamed into the woods. He held up his necklace. “THANK YOU!” He hollered out loud and took a bow.

In the unseeable distance of the forest, the Wild Girl paused and smiled. She felt feelings she’d never felt before. Thinking she hated all people because of the way her mother indoctrinated her, she was surprised to find that she liked the feeling of liking someone. She wanted more of that.

Diamond and Dusty sat in the white sand beneath a large beech tree, letting the sun burn their shoulders, ruminating over the beauty hidden in the woods.

“We gotta go tonight,” Diamond said.

“Dude, we can go right now,” Dusty said. “The canoe awaits us, and besides, why ‘we gotta go in the dang dark anyways? Couldn’t we go first thing in the morning?’”

“Trust me, you don’t want this old man to see you. If he had‘uh ever got a hold of me that day he was gonna kill me,” Diamond said. He tied his necklace on.

“Cowboy!” Diamond hollered across the river. Cowboy eventually showed his

face.

“I reckon that wild girl likes you,” Dusty said, teasingly. “If we find her, what are we going to do? Throw a net over her and bring her in? I mean, do you think she can talk?”

“What? Yes.” Diamond said laughing. “She talks. But it wasn’t really a great time for conversation when we met. We were hiding from the barrel of a gun. You should’ve seen this dude, Dude. He looked like a freaking neanderthal. Greasy and hairy. He had eyes like an albino gorilla, but he was a man, just the craziest looking man I ever seen.

Ok, like, like remember the pictures in Miss Bonnie’s class of the neanderthals? This guy is the guy known as the missing link - before Neanderthals. He is even an insult to Neanderthals. But the girl, I don’t think she’s feral at all, Dude,” Diamond continued. “Just skittish. She had this collar on her neck. It had a lock on it. I thought, maybe she was escaping, or something, I don’t know, what if she has no one to trust?”

“Yeah, maybe so,” Dusty said, drawing circles in the sand and looking off in the distance with Diamond. “So, when we get there are we gonna try to get this girl to come back with us? I mean, what’s the plan.”

“Yes. I want to get her away from that place. She is living like an animal.”

“C’mon, we need to run to town to get a couple things before tonight. I need

batteries. What else? Hey, it's the weekend," Dusty suddenly brightened up, "let's go down to Aunt Cutie's and watch the bikini parade of stars."

Dusty and Diamond had the beginnings of muscles popping up and girls were noticing Diamond, with his long curly blonde hair swinging down between his shoulders, and an adorable ape-man swagger.

"Heck yeah! That's exactly what we need to do" Dusty hollered. "Them girls won't be able to resist this," he said, straightening himself out as tall as he could get and puffed up his chest. He gestured to all of himself. Spontaneous twerking ensued. Puberty wasn't hitting Dusty as hard, but he'd made a lot of gains in the last couple of months. The pair jumped on the mini-bike wearing empty back packs and sped to Cutie's Grocery.

* * *

Nightfloats felt like the headspace a dream to Diamond. The night woods sounded just as lively as the day under the hot white light of July's full moon as the boys walked toward the camp.

This is Emily Dickinson's high noon, what is your high noon? My showdown is right now. When is your show down? His musings were less of a hearing way of communication than it was a knowing. The words were in his mind's ear and in his heart simultaneously. He found the voice comforting, not scary and suspicious like

Pete's new inner voices. But the finding of a beautiful little girl living under a house had shaken him. Is it the showdown, yet? asked his inner Other voice. Not yet, he told himself, this is a mission to get the girl to come with us to safety, where she can be fed properly, have a bed to sleep in. Heck, to have a decent roof over her head. And you're sure it doesn't have to do with that naughty little wet dream you had yesterday morning. No. It isn't. Shut up. No, you shut up. You have to at least be honest with yourself. -La, la, la, I don't hear you.

Black shadows fell in the whitely moonlight streaked woods like traveling spirits, as June bugs turned them into sparkling black drapes clicking with life. Diamond felt a sudden impulse to stop and pray before they pushed off.

"Did you just say, 'Let us pray'?" asked Dusty.

"Yeah, Dude," said Diamond, who fell to his knees in the sand. "This man is a psychopath, and very large, bigger than both our daddies put together."

"Now I'm worried," said Dusty, laughing nervously.

Diamond closed his eyes and breathed for a moment. It didn't take long for him to feel a holy presence moving closer than close.

"I ain't gonna say don't pray. I remember your dad praying," Dusty paused. Diamond was silent. "Are we praying yet?" He whispered after a long moment of silence. Dusty sat quietly drawing small circles in the sand. He could not stand the silence. "Are we finished yet, dude?"

"We are almost..." whispered Diamond back to him with a Buddha-like calm,

and he continued his praying. This time out loud, because this prayer was a regular every day prayer in Diamond's home. It was how he saw his parents start each day. It was the prayer that ostracized Helen from the church that three generations of her family had attended. Some might even call it a dangerous prayer. Helen would say, Dangerous for who?

"Holy Mother, it is you the Father loves and needs. And, it is the Father I seek for your sake-" Diamond illuminated his mind with love and courage.

The prayer gave Dusty goose bumps on the rare occasions he heard it. He hardly ever heard Diamond pray. "[...We](#) prepare a banquet for you on the occasion of the Father's return to Earth and you in your millennia's long slumber will wake and be our omnipotent holy mother, lighting every mind, and every heart..."

Dusty had heard the prayer a couple times from Bill. He didn't know much about their idea of the Holy Mother other than it was actually Mother Nature who is the holy one, and not baby Jesus' mama. He didn't know what to think about it and Diamond never talked about stuff like that, anyway. He thought his mama might say it's wrong, but it was undeniable the way it made him feel like there might be a loving, kind God.

His daddy was always asking him what kind of man did he want to be, one that's scared of everything? Or, one that hits life head on? - Do good in school, mind your manners, and don't get anybody pregnant. That was the sum of his dad's spiritual advice.

Diamond hopped up and the boys grabbed their gear - an oar a piece, a thermos of water, 2 flashlights, buck knives strapped to their sides, and the rifle. The river quietly pulled their canoe out into the current, and then they began to row upstream. Cowboy hopped in and sat in the middle seat of the canoe.

"Weird how all the crickets are singing like it's daytime," said Dusty.

"Cool, right?" said Diamond. "Yep. That's some really bright moonlight." The river was black smoke and mirrors in the bright light of the moon, water dripped from the oars like liquid silver.

Suddenly, a blast of cawing came from the sky diving down on them. Cowboy growled and started barking. Dusty's black feathered friends cawed at Cowboy.

"What the hell!?" said Diamond.

"Pogo!" hollered Dusty to the birds as they swooshed and dived back and forth and up and down at the canoe. "Y'all stop!"

"Well, we can forget about sneaking up on somebody. What's the matter with these dang birds, man?" said Diamond.

"Trust me, I do not know." The birds cawed and Pogo dove and landed on Dusty's shoulder while the other two circled above. Dusty froze while Pogo made all kinda strange noise.

"I swear that bird talks to you," said Diamond.

"Of course he does. He's my friend." Dusty pulled his oar in and petted the bird. "What's a matter you, Pogo?" The bird kept turning back and forth on his

shoulder and started cawing. Then he turned backward and pointed his beak back at the sandbar, cawed and pointed, cawed and pointed. "He wants us to go back."

Dusty said.

"Now how 'you know he said that?"

"Body language and...well, I can read lips." To this Diamond laughed,

"Awe whatever Dude," said Diamond.

"If I'm lying I'm dying."

"But, Pogo, we have a princess to save," Diamond said with sincerity.

"Yeah, Pogo. It's okay, boy."

"Caw, caw, caw," said Pogo. He flew to the bow of the canoe and stood there facing forward.

"Good man, Pogo. He's ready to go," said Dusty.

The boys rowed peacefully with Pogo sitting quietly and the other two crows circling high into the bright moonlit sky. The southern humidity was low and the stars sparkled with bright spangles.

"This is so cool, ain't it Pogo?"

"Caw," Pogo said in almost a churgle, "Click, click."

Approaching the Bacot's farm, a feeling of awe came over Diamond, forgetting for a moment the news report. The sandbar was stark white with inky shadowy trees all around. At first he felt it was just his sense of Her, because it felt holy and reverent to see Mother Nature in this aspect. The river trickled in the

shallows, a barn owl hooted in a nearby tree, and tree frogs and cicadas sang their midnight songs.

They floated onto the Bacot rock bar, lodging the canoe on shore under a young cypress tree.

“Dawg. You know this is the same place they found them bones? Did you tell me *this* rockbar? Uhh, no. You did not say, hey, bruh we gonna go to a serial killer’s house and hang out with his daughter. Dusty moaned and groaned.

“You are killing me, bruh. I doubt very seriously the old man is a serial killer...but then again- Besides, that old man is too easy to fool. I don't care if he is a serial killer, he dumb.”

“Caw!”

“He agrees with me,” Diamond said.

“No, he said he tried to tell me, but I didn't listen, I listened to you.”

“Really bruh, that bird said all that? You killin’ me.”

As the boys gathered themselves with flashlights and buck-knives, Diamond suddenly had that uncanny sense of being watched again. Cowboy started whining. Pogo flew up like an arrow into the sky above the tree tops and cawed loudly, then he dove down at Dusty, swooping in front of him.

“Go on Pogo!” Dusty called out, waving him on. “We got something to do. I'll play with you later.” But the bird only flew up and joined his buddies high in the air, circling and circling. Cowboy joined Pogo in the protest and wined and yawled like

he does when he's trying to tell Diamond something.

"What is it, boy?!" Diamond was anxious, feeling very edgy and fearful, but he didn't let Dusty see that.

I'm a soldier. Going back for a comrade. 'No you're not,' said his Other.. 'You're more like Luke Skywalker. "There's a trail here somewhere that leads right to the old man's back yard," Diamond said to Dusty, pointing up the hill.

In the cover of the treeline they took their flashlights and searched up and down for the opening of the trail.

"Thought you said this is the rock bar where you came out at?" asked Dusty, who was beginning to tire of walking up and down the rugged sandbar with prickly gumballs everywhere and Pogo cawing wildly now and then.

"Can't you get that bird to shut up?" Diamond said, as he was nervously looking back and forth with his flashlight. The hair on the back of his neck stood out.

"I know this trail is here somewhere," he said irritated, "I know it is." He was replaying that day in his mind trying to remember the trail, and then there was this touch on his shoulder, and since Dusty was walking in front of him it startled him. He jerked around, there was nothing and no one there, but for a split second he thought he saw something or someone flying through the air like a little ninja and vanish into a black shadow.

"Come on Dude," Dusty said.

"I am coming on. But did you see that?"

"See what, Dude?" Dusty kept walking. As he spoke, another gentle touch on Diamond's shoulder made him jerk around quicker this time, pointing his flashlight into empty woods.

"Ahhh!" Diamond screamed, but again there was only the night air.

"You Ok?" asked Dusty.

"Are you-"

"Am I what?"

"Nothing. I'm just trippin'."

"Oh that's for dangdong sure."

Tap, tap, tap.

"Ahhhhh!" Diamond screamed like Dusty had never heard before, which made Dusty scream, and they clamped onto each other till Dusty finally took Diamond's shoulders,

"Get a hold of yourself, man!" Diamond stopped screaming. "Are you having flashbacks or something?"

"Maybe so." He realized that maybe it was all in his head - the sense that someone was watching him. Then suddenly his inner voice said, Turn here, dummy. Diamond stopped and looked with his flash light and suddenly turned into the woods.

"Caw! Caw! Caw!" Pogo was just above the trees.

"Dusty, come over here," and he began walking into the treeline. "This way!"

"Finally!" said Dusty.

"Yep. I believe this is the right way," Diamond said after a few minutes. They could hear Cowboy barking from the rock bar. He would not come any further.

"Oh, Cowboy," Dusty said.

"He'll be fine. He'll guard the boat." It didn't take long to get up the trail to the Price place. It had seemed miles long before.

"Don't make a sound when we get close," Diamond whispered to Dusty as they crouched down into the thickets at the treeline, "cause all those dang dogs'll go nuts," Diamond said. Dusty nodded his head. Diamond could sense his friend's fear. But he felt there was nothing he could say. He knew they had good reason to feel that way.

"We're going to make a run for it to that tree line over there." They were hunched in a thick swirl of abandoned hedges near the house studying the scene. Diamond noticed that the beautiful pit that was tied off at the front door was gone. Her absence gave Diamond a bad feeling. Where was she? Where was the girl? Maybe under the house again. Maybe nearby. His heart pounded so hard that the blood rushing in his ears made him deaf. He took a deep breath and motioned for Dusty to follow.

Diamond quickly and safely guided them through the tall grass, around the hidden iron plow and two other tractor hitches he didn't know the names for, and

an old car engine. He quietly led them around and under the house at the exact place where the girl had pulled him in.

Christmas lights drew them to the other end of the home beneath the house. The white and colored lights revealed a cozy space where surprising order and color appeared. Linens and tiny pretty things lined the spaces in the bricks of the foundation walls. Her figurines were arranged in "conversations." Some were painted with bright acrylics left from the days when she could still remember her mother's face. She had salvaged many of the framed watercolors her mother had created. She hung them from her make-shift foundation walls and her figurines sat on shelving she made with pine planks and mortar bricks.

She also had family photos, prints of different pastoral settings, and paintings that the old Mr. Price did in retirement, which were actually quite nice, in a folk-art style, with bright and simple design elements.

There was a spot of ground higher than the rest, a mound sort of, that the girl had made a bed on - wood pallets to level the surface and a patch of hay covered with a floral comforter made of bright red floral silhouettes floating on a white ground. Fuzzy blankets were piled at the foot and pillows were stacked squarely at the head. Near the bed were two doggie bowls, one with water and one empty.

Dusty was in awe. "Someone really does live under here...Oh my God!"

"Didn't you believe me?"

"Well," Dusty said, hesitating to give Diamond the truth, "You do exaggerate the truth sometimes."

"I do not!"

"Uh, Bro! Everybody knows who be tellin' stories - You!"

"Okay, so I embellish sometimes. So?"

Suddenly, growling started and stopped their loud whispering. They were on high alert. Another deep growling ensued and then a crushing rhapsody of barking. Above them could be heard stomping around and door slamming.

"It's him," Diamond said. Dusty stared wild-eyed at Diamond looking for him to give some direction. "Well, what are we gonna do!"

"We're gonna run like hell," Diamond said as he vigilantly scanned the edges of the house. "This way," he said, and Diamond scuttled as fast as he could to the opposite end of the house as the old man came down his front steps. Junior was a little more sober tonight than he was the day Diamond met up with him. He wasn't stumbling and he moved a lot quicker than Diamond remembered. "Ok. When we get to the edge of the house, run straight for the tree line."

"I don't know man," Dusty said looking back.

"We ain't got a choice," Diamond said with his jaw tight. "You ready?"

"Ready."

Now!" Diamond said, and they popped out from under the house in quick time. Dusty looked back, but Diamond screamed and yanked his arm, "Don't look

back! Run! Run goddammit!!”

BLAM! BLAM! Junior fired his shotgun. Dusty screamed but the boys kept running for the back tree line. The old man came around the corner of the house and bolted in their direction. The boys were no comparison to the dumb strength and wiliness of a sober, or soberer, Junior Price. He got to Dusty first and grabbed him by his neck.

“Ahhhh!” Dusty screamed and Diamond instantly turned to see his friend in the grasp of a snarling Junior, who threw big bad Dusty to the ground like he was a ragdoll and threw up his shotgun to fire.

“You sorry little bastards? I know what y’all out here fer. But that’s my little girl.”

“Then why does she live under the house if she’s your little girl?” Diamond screamed, surprised at his own questioning.

“Look here boy, y’all see that barn there? You fixin to walk your little asses over there to it ‘fore I shoot you both in the face. You got that, you little assholes?” The boys complied. They kept looking at each other for answers. Diamond was usually the answer guy, but he’d never had a gun pulled on him before and he almost peed his pants. He started praying.

They entered the dark, hot barn. When the barn door closed on the moonlight they were in pitch black and stopped in their tracks. The old man found a pull chain and in an instant a yellow light colored everything odd. The cattle and

horse stalls were filled to the roof with old furniture and appliances. The old man kept the gun lowered on them with one hand as he fumbled around in an old wooden crate for something.

“Damn! My rope must be in the house. That’s right. I tied that bitch off in there this morning...come on ya little bastards, let’s walk to the house. Come on, git!” They turned and were pushed out of the barn door by Junior’s size 14 boot.

“There's no need for that, we are–” Diamond started.

But he and Dusty froze for an instant as the Wild Girl passed right in front of them, traveling swiftly as though on a rope, all in a quiet swoosh, drifting before their eyes she held her finger over her lips saying, “Shhhh.” Her pit bull dotted into the shadows after her.

“Well git! Ya little bastards! What the hell?” screamed Price and he booted them again, his big foot pushing both at once. “Y’all about to get a lesson in trespassin’. Folks like me don’t care for trespassers. I got signs up saying I’ll shoot for a reason!” Price snarled.

“We didn’t see them signs, Sir!” Diamond said in his usual smart alec tone and in a flash, the old man smashed Diamond in the face with the butt of his rifle and he fell to the ground seeing stars.

“Shut the fuck up ya’ little bastard. I’m the one doin’ the talkin’ here, not you–”

A sudden thud and the old man didn’t get to finish his vitriolic speech. Wild Girl flew into him from out of nowhere, with her feet kicked out in front of her, she

took the old man off his feet as soon as he stepped out of the barn. She was so fast he never knew what hit him. She pulled a bat shaped stick out of a sling from back of her and whacked the old man in the back of the head.

“RUN!” she screamed. Behind him, Diamond could hear her yelling out commands. “Princess! Sic! Woah!! Set him down Princess! Easy. Easy. No Princess! Don’t kill, Princess! Keep! Keep, Princess.” There was an incredible snarling coming from her pit bull. “That’s a good girl,” she said, holding the dog back. He couldn’t help himself, he had to turn around. He had to lay his eyes on her beautiful face again, if only for a moment. He wanted to remember it. The old man was trying to get up but the girl whacked him straight in his chin and he hit the ground a second time, but this time unconsciously.

The boys ran without looking back. At the river Cowboy was already in the bottom of the canoe waiting with Pogo, who was perched on a limb nearby. Pogo quietly launched into the sky ahead of them down river. They hauled the canoe back into the river and drifted swiftly home to safety and quickly jumped on their mini-bike and headed to see if Mr. Bobby was at the Maycomb Police Station.

“We been out there already looking for a kid. And they ain’t nobody out there, ‘cept the crazy old man - which by the way I want you boys to steer clear of, ya’ hear? Look at what he did to ya. Let me see that again.” Diamond lifted the ice pack off his left eye.

“Will you let me take you to urgent care?”

“Yes, sir,” Diamond said.

In the chief's patrol car he drilled the boys.

“Junior shoots first and asks questions later, and I damn sure don't want anything to happen to you boys. Now, I mean it, do not go near Junior Price's again. I'll go deal with Junior.”

“Please, Mr. Bobby, there is a girl there. She lives under Junior's house. We gotta help her,” Diamond said.

The scanner suddenly squawked and Deputy Stringer called for back up out on a Walthall County road. Escaped cows causing trouble.

The chief got on the radio, “Jim..... Jim.”

“I'm here, Sir.”

“Can you get on the phone with Derrick? Tell him come back you up.”

“I'm on it, Sir.”

“Mr. Bobby,” Diamond said, “she made this,” taking off his necklace. He handed the chief the wooden medallion, “and this was with it, looks like army tag. I need to find this person. Maybe it's her mother or something.”

“LaHoma Price, huh? Related to Junior?”

“I think so, but not sure how to find out.”

“I tell you what. If you boys will stay away from there I will check this name for you.”

“The chief seemed to not believe us, Diamond. I told you,” said Dusty in the

gravel parking lot of the police station, "I knew they weren't going to believe us."

"But we know. And I can't un-know."

They spent the rest of July and August living at the river, their home away from home. And they didn't stay completely away from the old man's house. They patrolled the woods surrounding the old Price place weekly, calling out, "L.P.! We are your friends! Let us help you!" But there was no sight or sound of the girl.

The boys swam for hours every day, stole the occasional six-pack from Aunt Cutie, and dreamed of the beautiful cinnamon-colored girl they nicknamed Goldilocks. Diamond had a cool scar on his cheek bone and an even cooler story to tell about it.

When August came around they were super sad about having to go back to school. They were hoping the big storm that the news was warning everyone about would get them a day off.

Helen drove up on her four-wheeler spraying sand behind her and laying on the horn, hollering, "Heeey, Boys!!" Dusty finally came out of the treehouse.

"Hey, y'all. Aunt Cutie needs help down at the grocery. There's a big storm coming tomorrow night or maybe Monday, can't remember, anyways, the store is jam-packed," she said. "Hurricane Katrina, that's it. It's probably going to die down 'fore landfall. But everyone is making a fuss as usual. Won't be bread or toilet paper for weeks."

"Okay, Miss Reed," Dusty spoke softly to Helen. He had a severe crush on her.

No one had a mother as pretty as Diamond's mama. She looked like Shania Twain.

“They have a mandatory evacuation for New Orleans,” she said, “so, they are taking it pretty seriously.”

“Like, the whole city?” Diamond asked. His mother nodded. “What kind of storm, Mama?” Diamond was a little confused. He was used to this sort of preparation when on very rare occasions snow and ice were on the way.

“A hurricane, I said. If it hits where they think it's going to hit...” Helen paused at the thought, “it's going to devastate Louisiana and Mississippi.”

On the way to Cutie's Grocery the boys stopped on the bridge going over I-55. “Whoah!” said Dusty. “This is trippy, man. It's like the end of the world is coming.” The highway resembled a parking lot as traffic moved slowly and quietly north toward Jackson.

Cowboy jogged along with them to Cutie's. Her parking lot was full and there was a long line at the gas pumps.

“Sorry, y'all, but Cowboy has to stay outside,” Cutie said. “Of all days, the inspector is here to check out my new kitchen and even though he's the reason I have narry a rat in the building, the inspector would frown on him being in the store.”

Hours passed that they were bagging groceries and replenishing shelves with Cuties' regular crew. Cowboy was outside doing his usual song and dance. Diamond checked on him and saw he was in good hands as some little kids fed him pieces of

chicken and petted him as he ate. Diamond went back to bagging.

Suddenly, one of the crew burst in and hollered,

“Diamond, some man in a little maroon truck just snatched your dog. I tried to get to him in time, but he saw me coming at him and...I just couldn't get to him.”

A shock went through Diamond. “Awe hell naw!”

He ran outside, jumped on his bike and hauled in after the all too familiar truck. Cutie and Dusty ran outside to see what was going on.

“Where the hell is that boy running off to?” Cutie said.

“They said somebody snatched up Cowboy,” Dusty said. “I gotta go help him, Miss Cutie.”

“Go!” She said, and Dusty jumped on his bike and hauled in after Diamond and the maroon truck with Cowboy in it.

“Well, he’ll be back in a minute,” Cutie said a little doubtful. She took out her phone and texted her boyfriend about the dog knapping. “Yeah, he’ll be back, she said to the cashier standing beside her.

“I better call his mama,” Cutie said.

Occasionally Diamond caught a glimpse of the old man's truck in the straight sections of Summit-Holmesville Road. Cowboy's head popped up at the back window and the old man pushed him back down in the seat. This made Diamond double his effort, sick at the thought of the old man laying a hand on his dog.

This was not part of Diamond's vision for his family. How could this old man take someone's beloved pet without even a thought, he wondered. What kind of slime bag was this guy?

They winded through several narrow back roads that eventually turned into gravel. Dusty had long since petered out without Diamond ever noticing that he'd tried to come along and help.

Suddenly, the old man sped out of sight and out of sound. When he came to a fork in the road he followed the cloud of dust. He kept his head down and peddled.

By the time Diamond made it to the old man's house his truck was parked and he'd disappeared with Cowboy. The dogs were barking like crazy and snapping at him. It was a bomb field of teeth as he made his way to the front porch. The dog on the front porch, the one he'd seen with the Wild Girl, stood and sniffed his hand. He dropped his bike in the driveway and marched right up to the old man's front door madder than he'd ever been before.

He banged on the door and the glass window panes rattled – their caulking long since rotted away. When no one answered he walked to the old man's truck and looked in, it was empty. He banged on the door again.

"I know you have my dog!" he screamed. "Cowboy!" He called out. He was so angry that he felt he was on fire. Tears streaked down his dusty face.

"I'm gonna call the sheriff! He'll put you in jail if you don't give me my dog back!"

He walked back to the truck as if Cowboy would magically appear there where he last saw him. His heart was beginning to break and that only inflamed his anger even more. He ran around the graveyard of appliances calling, "Cowboy!"

He looked under the house for the girl and caught sight of her bright gray eyes.

"You got a knife or something?" the girl asked him. Then Diamond saw the rope and chains. He tossed her his pocket knife. Suddenly the old man was right behind him.

"Hey Boy!, You trespassing," the old man scowled at him and the gray eyes under the house withdrew into the darkness. Diamond turned around to the old man.

"Give me back my dog, Sir," Diamond said and stood bravely. He couldn't stop the tears from rolling down his face. He wasn't afraid, he was enraged.

"That little black dog? That ain't your dog boy," Price said smugly. His eyes looked greasy and shiny with glee. "Somebody come on my property and took him a while back, took him right off the chain," said the old man mocking concern for Cowboy.

"You don't care about my dog. You left him to die out here on that chain. He was almost dead when I found him."

"So, it was you." "He's my dog," Diamond said. "If you don't believe me, we can call my mama and she'll tell you I've had that dog since kindergarten."

“Since kindy-garden?” The old man mocked him, laughing. “Well, ain't that sweet. What you crying for boy?” He enjoyed seeing Diamond's pain and it gave him a taste for more. “What? You still a little baby, Boy?”

A fire raged in Diamond's belly. His overwhelming desire was for the rescue of his dog and justice for the girl. In his mind he could not help his visions of waylaying this old man with a blunt object.

Behind the old man in the distance, L stood up in the tall grass to get Diamond's attention and she pointed toward the barn.

The old man wagged his finger at Diamond. “I 'spect you's the one that got them people from the state to come out here sticking their nose in my business, wasn't you, boy?”

Diamond stepped around the old man heading for the barn but the old man blocked him. Price stepped in front of him with an expression heavier than a battleground blockade. He had dead eyes with the same dull luster as people with low intelligence, but the dullness was from a depravity of the mind more than it was a disability. Diamond had one thing set in his mind at the moment, and that was getting his dog. He was not leaving without Cowboy.

“I'm getting my dog, Sir.” Then he suddenly bolted around Price and headed toward the barn. “Cowboy!” Price followed him, taking his time.

Inside the barn he frantically searched for Cowboy. There was hardly room to walk for all the junk, more rusting appliances, worn out old furniture not worth

saving, and broken up antiques, old mattresses, push lawnmowers lined in a row and various pieces of farm equipment. A lifetime of middle class living all stuffed in the barn to rot.

“Cowboy!” Finally, he heard Cowboy’s whimper and found him muzzled and tied off to a fence post in the back of a stall. As he desperately tried to get the rope undone he did not see the old man coming up behind him with a long heavy rope.

He finally got Cowboy’s rope loose, but suddenly Junior threw the rope around Diamond, threw him down on the ground and wrapped the rope around his chest and arms quicker than a rodeo star. Then he forced Diamond back up onto his feet. Diamond screamed.

“What are you doing?” Diamond hollered at him. He was really scared now.

“I’m ’bout to teach you a lesson, boy,” Price said. “You shouldn’t trespass on other people’s land. Some people take strong offense to that.” Price quickly tied Diamond to a fence post near Cowboy.

“If you hurt me mister, you’ll be in a lot of trouble,” Diamond said. Price laughed at him. This wasn’t really about trespassing to Junior, that’s just what he said.

“I ain’t going to hurt you, I’m just going to teach you a lesson. Then, if you don’t learn, I might have to kill you.” He laughed, enjoying himself.

“You can’t do this to me,” Diamond said.

“Sure I can. And, I am. I’m going to teach you that you don’t go putting your

nose in my business.” Price recalled the visit from DHS, “Yeah, them officials sent a lady out here saying somebody told them I had a little girl living under the house.”

He laughed hysterically for a moment. “I told 'em, 'ain't no girls around here, only a bunch of damn ol' dogs. I told 'em to see for themselves, but they said they was sorry for putting me in such a position and hoped they didn't cause me any embarrassment, and on like that. I reckon my dogs scared her off.”

Price came in close, scowling into Diamond's face. He said in a whisper, “They ain't no record on that girl being in the state of Missi'ppi. There ain't nothing that says any little girl has ever been here. I can do whatever the fuck I want to do in this county. ”

“But, there is a girl,” Diamond snapped back. “I've seen her. I seen you come out screaming at her under the house.”

“So, it *was* you that called 'em.” Price said. He snatched Diamond's necklace of Cowboy off and punched him in the gut. “This mine now.”

Diamond gasped for air. “Awe, that didn't hurt, now did it? I barely hit you.” Diamond's vision went black for a split second when the old man's fist plowed into him. Nothing had ever hurt him that bad before. A rib might be broken. He started thinking he might die in this barn.

Diamond wondered how much of a monster this guy was – another thing no one believed him about. Was he a child killer? How do you know if someone is a psycho-path? Easy, they don't care about human feelings or human life, Diamond

thought. They hurt animals and children. "Holy shit!" Diamond thought, this man was a man without a conscience.

If he could stomach keeping a little girl beat down so much that she wouldn't come out from under the house, what else was he capable of? He was busy looking for something.

"Mister if you hurt me, my daddy will hunt you down," said Diamond.

"Boy, everybody knows yo daddy is dead," Price said. "He ain't coming home."

As Diamond tried to say something Price gagged him so tightly that Diamond nearly choked on his tongue. He wrapped up Diamond's wrists and ankles in extra rope and finished the job with some duct tape.

"They won't miss you till after dark, Boy" he said, "now, ain't I right?" he glared at Diamond. "So, you and I got plenty of time to take care of business."

The old man was not aware of the coming storm. He didn't have a T.V. or radio that worked, so he did not know that Katrina was on her way. The old man had three day old whiskey breath and his clothes smelled of stale menthol cigarettes. He put a blindfold on Diamond, who fought against the ropes. This only entertained the old man, who laughed at Diamond struggling.

"You look like a fish out of water," the old man laughed. Diamond heard Cowboy whining and making a strange sound. The old man had muzzled him again and re-tied the rope Diamond had undone. Cowboy scratched at his muzzle. The old man left them, shutting the barn doors behind him. Hours passed. It was getting

dark.

In town Aunt Cutie made a call to Bobby, whom of course she could not get on the phone, what with getting all of the FEMA personnel situated and opening the storm shelter for the volunteers and evacuees. She called Helen and told her what happened and that she might want to ride down to Price's house and see what she could see.

When Bobby finally talked to Helen he could hear the concern in Cutie's voice, she also knew Junior Price.

"I know you're tied up with everything going on, but I'm worried. I'm really worried. I don't trust that old man. He really gives me the creeps," Helen cried to Bobby over the phone. "Can't someone just run out there and see if Diamond is out there? Or see what's going on?"

"Alright, I'll go myself," Bobby said. "I need to check something out that way anyway.

"I really do appreciate you. I owe you."

Bobby went out to the old man's house and banged on the front door. It was dusk. A steady breeze began to blow gently through the pines.

"John Price?" Bobby called out. Price came around the corner of the house.

"Mr. Bobby," Price said in a friendly sober tone, "How you doin,' ole boy? Been a while," he laughed saying, "thank goodness."

"Yeah, I guess that is good ain't it, Junior?" Bobby laughed with him.

“Hate to bother you,” Bobby explained, “with Katrina on the way,” the old man looked confused at the name. Bobby noticed Junior was a lot grungier than he was used to seeing him.

“You do know about the storm coming, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Price said, but he didn't know. He might have overheard some talk in town, but paid little attention to it. He was drunk and foggy-headed all the time, so he never caught on to much.

“Well it's coming our way. So, you better tighten everything down. Now, the reason I'm out here is that I'm looking for a young man about so high, bushy blonde hair, blue eyes, about 14?. Name's Diamond. You seen him?”

“Naw, can't say I have,” Price chuckled, unconsciously opening his hands to the officer as if to show him he had nothing to hide. He shook his head, no. “Don't nobody come out here much.” He folded his arms over his chest and grinned real friendly at Bobby.

He did not see the boy's bicycle, so he figured maybe Diamond got tired and just headed home. But Something wasn't sitting quite right in the back of Bobby's mind.

“Okay, Mr. Price,” Bobby said. “Sorry to bother you...oh, and remember, be sure and tie down what you don't want flying away. They're saying sustained winds over 80 mph headed our way. Katrina is eminent. She's coming with a vengeance and there's nothing we can do except try to stay out of her way.”

Price brushed it off in his mind, but was cordial to Bobby. "Yes Sir, I will keep that in mind," Junior said and stuck his hand out to shake the deputy's hand. They shook and Bobby reluctantly returned to his car. He called Helen's cell phone, but no answer. He decided to ride by there and check things out.

In the barn Diamond relentlessly struggled against the ropes. He could hear Mr. Bobby and the old man outside and he tried to call out, but he was gagged so tightly, he did good to breath. He continued to struggle with the ropes only to get frustrated and raw. All he could think about now was all the unsolved murders in Pike County.

Bobby's cell phone was blowing up with calls. It buzzed in his pocket. Not seeing the boy at the old man's house didn't offer him any relief. The old man was creepy, and Bobby had always felt that Junior was capable of anything.

Junior was socially odd and awkward. He had low to mediocre thinking skills and was overly sensitive about that fact. He tended to lash out at people and harbor conspiracy theories and think that all the people in town are trying to take advantage of him. Bobby had a bad feeling. His gut was telling him something, but what exactly, he wasn't sure.

Junior experienced paranoid delusions that in recent years brought him to a mind crippling state - a state which he could not endure - and in his own sick, demented way, he fought his awkwardness back into submission with whiskey and many small acts of cruelty sprinkled throughout his daily life. He waved politely to

Bobby as he drove away.

Diamond struggled for hours with the evening turning to pitch black, till he could see nothing from the bottom of his blindfold. He resolved to fight like hell if he ever got loose. He was a ball of rage ready to be unleashed. He pictured himself waylaying the old man and hog tying him. He even pictured shooting the old bastard in the face. That's what he deserved, thought Diamond. How many dogs had the old man tortured and killed? And how many dogs did he turn into dangerous animals?

He's going to kill you if you don't kill him first.

The sound of the barn door slowly screeching made Diamond freeze. He sat stiff, holding his breath. He didn't hear the footsteps that had a heavy plod on one foot like the old man's. He could barely hear the careful and quiet movement of someone in the barn. He held his breath to hear better. Diamond thought maybe it was some small animal, so he kept vigilant. Then he felt someone near to him and heard them breathing. His blindfold was lifted. It was the girl. She was holding a lantern.

"Don't worry," she said softly, "you gonna be okay. I'll make sure." Princess was by her side. She took the gag out of Diamond's mouth and began tugging at the ropes. Suddenly they saw the old man skulking around outside with a flashlight. They froze when the old man flung the door open. The wild girl bolted into the darkness.

“Come here you little bitch!” he yelled. The old man plodded his way to Diamond. “You better not touch my boy!” he yelled to her. The old man swung the light of a flashlight around from one side of the barn to the other as he screamed. “Wait till I get my hands on you! Where’s Bootsie! It’s going to be the end of you this time, little girl! I want my Bootsie back. This ain’t no threat! I’m done with you! No more Mr. Nice Guy for you. Naw, you gonna see the real Junior Price if you don’t put Bootsie right back where she belongs!”

The old man was red-faced and the veins in his forehead pulsed as he approached Diamond, who closed his eyes, clenched his teeth and stiffened his body to prepare for whatever the old man was going to do next. The old man started at him with an old furniture leg, then pulled back.

“Not yet,” he said. He started to put his blindfold back on but said, “Naw, I want you to see me coming and I want to hear you scream like a little girl when I do. I’ll be back in a little bit.

“And, hey you little bitch, if you come near my new toy, here, I will poison your favorite animal,” His laugh rolled out like oily gravel as he walked out of the barn.

Hours passed and the winds steadily increased, pushing down on the barn harder and harder. The torture was in the waiting in the dark, Diamond thought. He wondered if this is what it is like for Bill. His stomach hurt at that thought. He couldn’t bear the idea of his father being treated this way.

A search party was formed to find Diamond on the cuff of Katrina's landfall. All night Helen drove the back roads frantically looking for her son. "Dear God," she prayed. "This can't happen. Don't you take my boy, too! No, God. I am sorry. Please God, put a shield of grace around my boy. Protect him and keep him. I dedicated him to you when he was born, so I must have faith that you will return him."

In the barn Diamond could hear the wind begin to howl. It was Monday morning. August 29. He wondered if anyone was looking for him, little did he know that *everyone* was looking for him.

Helen drove to every swimhole and campsite she knew the boys to go to, while her mother and Cutie were in town calling and going by friends' homes. The kids at Cutie's Grocery had split up into teams and started covering the neighborhoods. Pete stayed at home in case he showed up there, but he walked the camp road up and down until Deb and Dusty showed up and stopped him and made him come inside.

As the wind grew steady and ever stronger, they were forced to take cover. Then electricity everywhere was starting to go out. Power lines were taken out by falling trees that would eventually cover every acre of Pike County.

"Bobby! Please, let's go question the old man again. I know that's where he is, I just know it," Helen pleaded. "Dammit! He tried to tell me the old man threatened him. He tried to tell me, Bobby, and I didn't listen!"

"Okay, but we are going to *have* to take cover very soon," Bobby said. "Katrina

has arrived." He peered out the window where the trees were beginning to sway.

"Winds are getting stronger by the minute." Helen looked so certain, and he didn't want to disappoint her. Diamond was her only child, her precious son, the only thing she had left. "Let's go."

They flew down Summit-Holmesville Road in Bobby's Charger toward Junior's. Torrential rains soaked the ground and swelled the Bogue Chitto River. The winds from Katrina were so strong that day that they blew the current backwards.

Bobby turned down Bacot Road where the pines of a tree farm swayed to nearly horizontal. Bobby and Helen looked at each other. Helen watched Bobby's complexion turn white as a sheet and the sudden realization of how bad it was made her go numb inside.

"I've never seen anything like this, Helen," he said, talking above the sound of the winds. They could hardly see the road right in front of them. The morning skies were dark as night. Suddenly! In an instant, a large oak trembled in the wind ahead of them and then crashed down on top of the car.

Chapter 6

Landfall.

Monday, August 29, 7:45 a.m.

Bobby managed to get out from under his airbag. He looked over and saw Helen's face covered in blood, but she was still breathing. She had a peaceful look despite the sound of the raging winds and the shining red liquid covering her face.

The police radio was out and the whole front of the car was crushed beneath an oak tree. The driver's side windows were shattered. Wind and rain were blasting over the car. In a flash, a crackled back window was sucked out and Katrina's winds threatened to swallow them whole into a blackening sky. He crouched on the floorboard with his back to the broken windshield, praying it would hold, and positioned himself over Helen to protect her. He pulled his cell phone out..

"Mr. Mack!" Bobby yelled into his phone. The forest groaned in the wind.

"I been hit by a big oak! My passenger is badly injured. I need help as quickly as humanly possible!"

He knew it was going to be a while. Trees were down all around.

Amazingly, the oak tree had pushed down the roof of the car over Helen

without shattering her side window. He had no injuries that he could tell. But Helen took a serious blow to the head. He took his jacket and wrapped it around her, checked her pulse. It was slow, but strong.

“Helen!” he said, trying to wake her. “Helen. Can you talk to me, Helen?” She moaned and made an effort to respond. “Helen, can you tell me if you are hurting?” He squeezed her hands. “You feel me grabbing your hands?” She lightly squeezed back and mumbled. “Thank God! Help is on the way, just hang on,” he said.

Bobby felt around her head. The roof of the car was so close to her skull he could hardly get in there to see where she was bleeding from. He needed to retrieve his first aid kit from the trunk and fast. Was he strong enough to do it is what he wondered. He had a hard hat in the back seat. He put on his work gloves because they had excellent grip. He strapped on his hard hat and slunk out into the wind.

He could not believe what he was seeing. In the near distance, there were trees pushed nearly to horizontal by the wind. Boom after boom, trees fell over sideways, popped or pulled from their roots, and dashed to the ground.

“Lord above, I ain't ever seen anything like this! Mother of God, deliver us. In the name of Jesus, deliver us.” He speedily prayed, “Holy Mary, mother of God...”

He grabbed tight to the side of the vehicle and he was blocked by limbs from the oak that pinned the car down. The trunk was smashed in by a large gnarly limb. In an inside compartment of the trunk he found the kit. He made his way back into the car scratched up, but without injury.

Across the world, in the desert heat of Iraq, Bill was about to make a move. His mouth was as dry as the desert sands. He'd not had water or food for two days or more. Heavy artillery had pounded around him for 48 hours. There had been heavy gunfire for the last 24.

Now, suddenly, complete silence. Terrified, he waited. Hours later, still silence. The slit he used to see outside was gone. It had been filled with dirt days earlier by one of his captors. He went to the door. It was still chained. He prayed, "Thank you for my home, the beautiful river, the green fields and the blue skies above.

"God, deliver me to Mississippi. Deliver me to my wife." He held his hands up and open, then pressed them down onto his eyes and wept. He worshiped, he silently prayed. He felt a sense of courage building inside himself for whatever might happen next.

He steeled his insides and stood with fists down by his side, breathing, concentrating, his eyes and mouth narrowly focusing on the door. He stepped back several feet and ran with all the might he could muster, diving into the door with his shoulder. He felt a crushing pain as he bounced back down onto the floor.

He jumped up and pressed his ear to the door. Not a sound could be heard, no steps, no voices, nothing. He pushed at the door to see out, as much as the chain would allow.

He could see across a yard to a road. The road was far away. He waited and watched the road for several minutes. He saw a single figure approaching there. The person passed by without looking in Bill's direction. There, at the corner of the house in front of his mud hut, he saw a dead body piled in a dark heap.

He waited for a while with his face pressed to the little crack, and then could no longer fight the compulsion to ram the door again. He dove into the door with his shoulder. It threw him right back onto the floor. But, this time he'd made a crack at the hinges.

He repeated his effort and did this till the hinges came loose and he fell out of the hut at full force. He quickly popped up on his feet, the sunlight blinded him. Adjusted, he looked around in every direction. He saw a farmhouse near the mud hut where he'd been imprisoned for weeks.

There was a burned out truck in the front yard of the farmhouse with smoke billowing out from red hot cinders and three dead men inside. There were many little fires with plumes billowing up and they made a gray fog all around the hut and the farmhouse where he'd heard bombs, gunfire, and the screams of the wounded for the last few days and nights. He saw two more dead men at the corner of the farmhouse, then he suddenly took in the reality that there were dead men all around him. Off in the distance, he saw a military unit in transition coming slowly towards the farmhouse. It was American soldiers. He knew the drill, and he could hear the sound of Abrams tanks rolling slowly toward him.

Bill fell to his knees and wept with such joy that when the first two soldiers got to him, he could not speak or utter a sound. Their rifles were pointed at him, and he quickly said, "American! I'm an American!" One of the men poured fresh water on his face and handed it to Bill. He took a sip and wanted to guzzle the water, but the soldier pulled back on the canteen.

"Not too much at first, Sir. Take it easy. Where you from?" the soldier asked.

"Mississippi," Bill said. "Bill Reed."

"Hot damn! You are Bill Reed?!" The soldier got on his walkie-talkie.

"Sargeant? You ain't gonna believe who we got here....the Mississippi man....." The soldier turned back to Bill saying, "We got the EMT's coming," the soldier said to Bill, who could only nod. "Yes, Bill Reed, Sir.....This is the dude where they hijacked the trucks. They killed a bunch of 'em. Remember? Not the New Jersey guy. That guy was decapitated on video, I remember. This is the Mississippi guy. Yes sir, Sargeant, we will take good care of him." The soldier took a good look at Bill, checking his eyes and ears. "He's very dehydrated. He's got some injuries, but none appear to be life-threatening." The soldier unstrapped his water canteen and gave it to Bill. "Help is on the way, Sir," the soldier said.

Chapter 7

Monday, August 29, 12:45 p.m.

The Apocalypse

Helen lay in a bed at Southwest Mississippi Hospital trying to make herself wake up through the foggiest of morphine and a head injury. Her gut was still on fire for finding Diamond. She had a bad cut on her forehead and a concussion. She lost a good bit of blood during the long wait for the EMT's. In fact, it was a miracle they'd made it to her in time. They had to climb through about fifty feet of gnarled trees and debris to get to Bobby's crushed car. The debris was sometimes as high as the pine trees that were left standing. Most of the county roads were impassable.

She was going to be fine. Better than anyone expected.

There were flashes of consciousness and in her mind she was praying every moment that God would put a shield around her boys. She'd had a nightmare of mayhem and destruction in the streets. Bill and Diamond were giants walking above

the town's skyline. The dream tortured her because the boys couldn't hear her calling out to them. She was calling them to come in. "COME IN! Over here!" She could see a maddeningly intense yellow and red tornado dressed in gray and black clouds coming from the distance to the near. The giant Bill and Diamond shrank to normal size as they approached her. She frantically managed to get everyone into a cellar door just in time to see the tornado go by above them. It was one of those dreams that felt really real. Realer than the reality.

She jolted awake and looked around confused.

"Baby?" Aunt Cutie was there holding her hand. Pete was in the chair on the other side. He stood up to see Helen's face. Cutie squeezed her hand. "You gonna be OK, baby," she said warmly.

Helen fought to get her words out, "My boys..." Cutie stiffened, firming herself up to tell Helen a lie, that the boys were fine, but Helen drifted off again.

Cutie sighed and held Helen's hand to her heart, patting it. She pulled the covers around, tucking them under Helen. She walked to the window and looked out over McComb, where Katrina was still pushing down trees and shattering homes. Cutie could not believe the destruction she saw. She looked over at Pete.

"Is God punishing us? Has he had enough of our bullshit?But, why Diamond? Why take Diamond from us?" she cried. Pete came to her by the window and looked out.

"Hold on, Sister," Pete said, putting his hand on his sister's shoulder. "Cutie,

our boys will be home soon. I need you to be strong for Helen. I just know they' coming home. I can feel it in my gut. And if they aren't, it isn't because we are being punished for goodness sake. The sooner you get ideas like that out of your head, the better off you'll be," said Pete. "How many times I gotta tell ya, Mother Nature has her own way of loving us," Pete said, becoming mesmerized by the storm. "She ain't looking for justice nor fame. She really is a force to be reckoned with." Pete turned his voice to the storm outside their window, "Holy Mother, it is you I seek for the father's sake..."

"Pete? You still say Mama's old prayer?"

"Yes. If you came to see your old brother now and then you'd know."

"I know, but I been so busy with the store,"

"Don't you know Time is in a box? You gotta take it out and make it be where you want it."

"You still weird, ain't you Brother? Can't understand a word 'comes out of your mouth," Cutie said.

In Junior's barn, the inhabitants could feel the pressure of the winds pressing down on the old wooden plank structure. The old man looked through a knot hole to see the sustained winds of Katrina pushing the old iron tractor up against a patch of pine trees. He smiled his greasy smile every time Diamond or Cowboy groaned.

If the old man doesn't kill me, I'm afraid this hurricane will. I'm dead. I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead. No I'm not, no I'm not. No I'm not. Breathe, Boy!

Fucking shut up!

No! You shut up!

No, you! Just calm your ass down. Can't survive like this, Dummy. Diamond's fear was immeasurable. What was the old bastard going to do to him next?

How can a person do to a kid what this man is doing to me? Diamond thought. He's an adult. He's supposed to protect us. If he treated his own blood like a dog, what is he going to do to me?

He worried about his mother and Pete. The burning blade of fear felt like it was slicing his insides. He couldn't do anything but be scared and tied to a stake. He pulled at the rope till his skin was raw and bleeding. The barn creaked and shimmied. He expected the whole world to come undone at any moment and he'd be carried off with the wind. He prayed the prayers his mother sang to him as a child.

High above in the loft, Wild Girl did her own kind of praying. She kept a watch over Diamond and Cowboy, expecting the old man to come back into the barn.

Diamond's first prayer came from the Holy Bible. The other ones came from the Holy Spirit, Helen told him. Helen taught him that the Holy Spirit had something different for everyone and that one day he'd have his own prayers.

She taught him that prayers are important to the well-being of a person, to the psyche. “They help our mind and our heart line up for a fuller purpose, for courage, for guidance during difficult times” she'd say.

Diamond squeezed his eyes tight and started saying the Lord's prayer, the first prayer he ever learned.

“My father, who is in heaven, Holy is your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven...”

Diamond heard an incredible cracking and a boom.

The old man's house was hit on one corner by a falling tree. It was a striking scene with the old man sitting in a kitchen without a southern wall, he was jolted from his boozy sleep. His shotgun was strapped to his back and he grabbed the whiskey bottle that was sliding away from him in the wind. The wind was so strong it pushed his face to the side. He fled into the part of the house still standing and crouched down in a heap, afraid for his life. He decided he'd have to go to the barn. He strapped his whiskey bottle to his suspenders. He decided to make his way very slowly to the barn. The rain pelted him like needles and was powered by debris that stung and pricked his skin till he bled. He had to lean into the wind and find things to grab onto and pull himself along. He saw a washing machine being pushed across the yard. He was too drunk to contemplate it, he shook his head like an old dog who couldn't believe his eyes and kept moving, sometimes crawling, on the ground, sand from the ground pelted him like fire ants.

Diamond was trying to remember the words of the prayer his mother always said when bad storms came. It was also a prayer she said after the Lord's prayer, her standard worship. She said it many times gazeing at the river or the sky from her tree gazebo. In truth, it was really two prayers, but Helen always said them together, one after the other.

If I could remember the first few words the rest would come.

Helen had told Diamond that he couldn't, could *not* share the prayers, because she had written them herself, and others outside of the family might be shocked or afraid of them.

“They just wouldn't understand,” she'd say. “Besides, Jesus taught us that we should worship and pray in private.”

Diamond had found the prayers written on an old piece of paper yellowed with age and worn around the edges in his mom's Bible. He remembered that he liked the words, and he thought of the prayers as poetry for God. He liked the way the prayers made him feel something new, a thing he could not yet explain. He wanted to share them, so he asked her why they had to be kept a secret.

“Because, to honor the Mother is to honor the Father,” she said to him. “If the Mother is not honored and treated with respect, then the Father in Heaven can never return to us and live among us. The Father is waiting for us to adorn his Bride with a veil of love. It is in fact our purpose to recognize her and to lift her up in our hearts. But this is better kept a secret for now.”

When Helen was truly afraid, she said the prayers with courage, if angry, with peace on her mind, if grateful, with a joyful heart. Now Diamond must do the same. He put everyone that he loved in the forefront of his mind and added a new friend, the Wild Girl, Lauren.

The winds pressed down hard on the old wooden structure at a slow and steady rate. Diamond sensed the pressure in the air. The sustained winds of Katrina consistently pushed away at whatever she came into contact with. The only thing that would be left in Junior Price's yard was the large solid iron tractor attachments.

Little did Diamond know that Katrina was pounding Pike County with 80 mph sustained winds. He worried about his mother and Pete. The burning blade of fear felt like it was slicing his insides. He couldn't do anything but worry, tied off to a stake. He pulled at them till his skin was raw and bleeding.

The barn creaked and shimmied. He expected it to come undone at any moment and be carried off into the wind. He prayed the prayers his mother taught him. He called them out like she did, and made his voice heard above the roar of Katrina .

Helen taught him that prayers are important to well being. Diamond's first prayer came from the Holy Bible. The next one came from the Holy Spirit. Helen

taught him that the Holy Spirit had something different for everyone and that one day he'd have his own prayers.

“They help the mind and the heart get lined up to receive blessings,” she'd say. “Best believe that.”

Diamond squeezed his eyes tightly against the fear that was raging in his heart and imagination, and he said the Lord's prayer, the first prayer he ever learned,

“My father, who is in heaven, Holy is your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven...”

High above in the loft, Wild Girl hid and did her own kind of praying. She kept a watch over Diamond and Cowboy. But not before freeing all of the chained up dogs in Junior's yard. They, and her companion, Princess, had run off into the woods.

There was a sudden, incredibly loud cracking and a boom. Junior's house was hit on one corner by a falling tree. The old man was suddenly sitting in half a kitchen, jolted from his boozy sleep. He reflexively felt for his shotgun still strapped to his back and he grabbed the whiskey bottle sliding away from him in the wind.

He fled into the part of the house still standing and crouched down in a heap. He feared for his life. He decided he'd have to go to the barn. He strapped his whiskey bottle to his suspenders and made his way very slowly to the barn.

The rain pelted him. He had to lean into the wind and find things to grab

onto and pull himself along. He saw a washing machine being pushed across the yard. He shook his head like an old dog, not believing his eyes, but he kept moving, sometimes crawling on the ground.

Diamond was trying to remember the words of the prayer his mother always said when bad storms came. It was a prayer she said after the Lord's prayer. She also said it when she was enjoying the outdoors. Many times he heard her say it gazing at the river. In truth, it was really two prayers, but Helen always said them together, one after the other.

She'd told Diamond that he shouldn't share the prayers she wrote with anyone outside of the family.

"They just wouldn't understand the idea that Earth is Sleeping Beauty," Helen told him. "Besides, Jesus taught us that we should worship and pray in private."

Diamond had found the prayers written on an old piece of paper, yellowed with age and worn around the corners in his mom's Bible. He committed them to memory at the time, but that was all they way back in fifth grade. What were the words? He remembered liking them as poetry - poetry that he liked, since most of the poetry he was forced to learn at school turned his stomach. Except for Poe, and what's her name? Emily Dickinson.

Diamond asked his mother why it was important to pray to a Holy Mother if she can't hear it, asked the precocious 10-year-old Diamond.

"To honor the Mother is to honor the Father," she said to him. "If the Mother

is not honored and treated with respect, then the Father in Heaven can never return and live among us; like it says in the Bible. The Father is waiting for us to adorn his Bride. It is in fact our purpose to recognize her and to lift her up in our hearts.”

Diamond remembered a certain shift in himself and a sharp pang of pain for things he didn’t understand yet. But now, he had an understanding. He remembered:

We worship you Mother Love, in the forests, in the deserts, in the seas, in our gardens, in our hearts, and in our minds.

Your milk and honey flood the Egg, and your beauty fills the heart.

Your symphony is a gorgeous gift for the sky;

It is you the Father loves and needs, and it is the Father we seek for your sake. Amen.

The prayer helped Diamond escape into his mind, into a place of his own making, where the light was golden and soft. Then he prayed his mother’s prayer to Father God,

To my Heavenly Father, who is the fabric of the sky;

I attribute to you all the power and all the glory.

It is you I seek first, because it is you that knows every good thing that should be in the kingdom.

Tell me today what is wisest, and I will keep your words in my heart

and they will guide me through my day.

Amen.

As he said the words, a strong sense of peace came over Diamond. Little did he know the effect this singular prayer would one day have on everyone he knew. The effect on Diamond was that all of his fear and rage at the old man was flooded out and replaced by a gush of love and acceptance from somewhere outside himself. He even felt love for Junior.

For a moment, reality and all of his fears rushed back in and swelled hard in his chest, but were suddenly relieved again by overwhelming and complete acceptance. An astounding peace ran through him, and the fear was gone. The feeling was indescribable. Tied to a post, the hostage of a psychopath, Diamond was having his first numinous experience.

Outside, the old man made it to the barn door and attempted to slither in. The barn doors flew open with a bang. Wild Girl popped out from her perch and like an acrobat, swung from her perch to the old tractor, did a flip off the tractor and was by the old man's side in an instant.

She and the old man struggled with the doors. The wind whipped them around like rag dolls. There was one point when Wild Girl almost lost her soul. She looked at the old man barely holding on in the blistering wind and considered all of the abuse and the belief that the old man was responsible for her mother's disappearance. She could have easily shaken him a'loose and pushed him. But she

didn't have the heart for killing. Nightmare memories flashed in the forefront of her mind. And in that moment, she could pull him in and bolt the door, or push him out and into the screaming winds of Katrina. There was a silent exchange – a look between the two.

Chapter 8

Dogboy

The old man acted like he was shocked at the strength of his dog girl, or maybe it was her ice-cold, death-defying stare. They pressed the barn doors closed and threw down the bar. He fell back on the ground, out of breath. She landed on her feet and was backing away from him as quickly and as cautiously as she could, readying her insides with courage. He checked for his rifle and his whiskey bottle. Satisfied, he rolled over and stood up, thinking he was still going to beat Wild Girl.

Wild Girl felt a pang of nausea, thinking how much better the yard dogs smelled compared to Junior. He started coming at her, but she did this thing where she ran toward the old man, which stunned him. And like a gymnast she vaulted over him, locked her hands on a rafter, and pulled herself up into the hay loft.

“You lucky, Gal!” the old man scowled. “When I catch my breath I’m gone’

catch you and we gone' have words. I don't let no little shit like you handle me like that." In truth, it scared the old man and Wild Girl knew it- couldn't hardly believe it, but she knew it.

Diamond watched her with abandoned amazement and grunted through the gag. He looked at the old man to see if he was shocked, too.

"What you want boy?"..... "The fuck you lookin' at?" He hollered at Diamond.

Diamond grunted through the clog in his mouth, "She saved your ass!" If he could have been heard by the old man, the old man would have certainly pulled out his shotgun.

Old Man can't take a joke. Don't know how to tell one either.

The girl watched them from above.

"Leave Dogboy alone!" Wild Lauren yelled from the loft, but she aimed her words at the old tractor to mess with the old man. Her voice bounced off the tractor and into the back of the barn. A trick she learned from a Scooby-Doo episode.

The old man yanked his rifle up to his shoulder, wagging it in the direction of her voice like a wild man. He was plastered, that was clear.

Lauren kept herself hidden, throwing her voice from one side of the barn to the other, snickering at how the old man was waving his gun in every direction, trying to catch her voice.

"Where you at?" The old man yelled and spun around.

Diamond saw the girl moving all around among the hay bales and various other pieces of broken furniture and boxes of old clothes. He was amazed at her ability to make the sound of her voice jump all over the barn.

“Where you goin’ ya’ stanky old coot!” She yelled back to the place she just left, and every time she did, it was a wild goose chase for the old man.

How the hell?

“Take his gag out Old Man!” the girl demanded. The old man could never level his sights on her. Even though she moved all over the place, she kept a straight line view of Diamond and Cowboy at all times. The old man slung the gun back down to his side and waddled to Diamond and Cowboy, both muzzled and weary-eyed.

Cowboy's eyes were like two black onyx sparkling in the shadows. Cowboy looked at Diamond with the same eyes the wild girl did, thought Diamond. He recognized the look of 'I'm going to protect you with a vengeance.' Like Army boys in combat, Diamond was their front line and they were guarding him with their lives.

“That girl is wild like a fox,” said the old man, almost like he was proud, Diamond thought. To Diamond's surprise, the old man began unraveling the ridiculously large gag.

“She don't let you near her, ever since her mama died,” the old man said, and then suddenly teared up and started bellowing as Diamond was attempting to juice up his mouth.

“She was my only baby girl,” the old man cried. “My Lil’ Bay.”

Diamond wondered at the grotesque old man whose massive chest heaved at the memory of his daughter. He almost felt sorry for him, but that lasted about half a second.

The old man suddenly turned his raging grief toward Diamond and stung his face with the back side of his large hand, then he pressed the butt of his rifle on Diamond's chest. Diamond's ear was ringing at a painfully high pitch. The hit made him see stars. His heart pounded and he pulled at his ropes, but the ropes were still tight and burned his skin.

“What did you hit me for?” Diamond screamed. “My daddy is going to come for you if you do anything to me!”

Near the barn outside a loud crashing sound pierced through the howling wind, rain, and debris. They both turned to the sound, expecting something to come in on them. But it didn't.

Hurricane Katrina was unrelenting and pushed harder and harder till things began to soften under her pressure. Diamond remembered the weatherman saying, “What would sustained winds of 80 mph over several hours do?” That had been the question on everyone's mind. He wished he'd have kept watching for the weatherman's answer.

The old man ran around the barn, checking to make sure all the shutters were barred. Katrina had really come, Diamond thought. It felt like the end of the

world, and that the crazy preacher on TV was right, it was the Apocalypse.

The book of Revelations was playing out before his eyes. But wait! He was still here. Didn't he belong to God? Like his mother said? The angels didn't take him away with them. He brushed the notion aside because Diamond's understanding of Biblical stories was that they were poetry about God, stories to be interpreted.

I'm being ridiculous, he thought. It's just a bad storm. A very bad storm. He worried about his mother. He wished he could let her know he was alive.

Where's Dusty? Did he get home safe? Did he pick up the camp like he knows to do during a storm?

It wouldn't really matter if it's the Apocalypse, Dummy. It must not be. The world is still here. I'm still here. The barn's here. Is Aunt Cutie and Uncle Bobby okay?

The old man was satisfied with securing the barn's windows and stood back by Diamond. He suddenly turned on Diamond again without provocation and hit him with an open hand. Something deep in Diamond's ear popped.

"That's for your good-for-nothing daddy," Price said out loud and laughed with his greasy smile and janky teeth.

Diamond, filled with rage, instinctfully lept at the old man, still tied tight to the post. Junior laughed like a man at Sunday dinner, while he brought his hand back down for a third time on Diamond. Diamond's face went numb. He was dizzy. Then his ear went completely deaf.

“Awe now, this is fun,” Price said.

In the loft above, Diamond could see the girl. She put a finger over her mouth – Shhh. The old man suddenly turned to look at what Diamond was looking at, but the girl disappeared.

“You little bitch!” The old man hollered into the loft. “Come here and take your punishment now, or I’m going to make it worse for you. No scraps for you tonight.”

If there is a tonight, Diamond thought, as the timber and beam barn shimmied like a scared puppy from the roof to the ground. It made Cowboy shimmy, too. He whined and jerked at the end of his rope toward Diamond.

“That girl is a regular little Tarzan,” Junior said. “Yep, she lives just like that damn old Tarzan. She stays up in the trees all day. She sleeps under the house at night, too. Done that since her mama gone.” At this, the old man’s chest heaved again and his eyes teared up. He mumbled something to himself and chugged his whiskey bottle, hissing at the burn of it going down.

“Ghissssss! Goddamn!” The old man found a pile of hay and feed sacks and plopped himself down.

Diamond prayed instead of trying to plead with the old man, which was getting him nowhere for sure. The old man chugged his bottle with fat tears rolling over his face, mumbling something about someone dying in an accident.

Okay, I have an idea. Concentrate on a part of your body that doesn’t

hurt. Diamond closed his eyes. I think it's my fingers. My fingers do not hurt. He imagined himself at home lying in bed awake and listening to the sounds of his parents in the kitchen early in the morning, making coffee and breakfast and talking about the day ahead, the bills, their dreams for a log home. He was going to have the whole upstairs to himself. Unless Mom and Dad have another kid. Nah, they're too old. God, I'm not ready to die.

Don't panic, just don't panic. We're going to get out of this. Are you sure?

Diamond thought about his home and about his dad. Over the old man's graveyard breath and the odor of sweat, pee, and cheap liquor, Diamond imagined his father's voice calling out his name. His memories were filled with sensations, sights, sounds, smells, flavors. He immersed himself in a virtual reality playing out in his imagination.

During this meditation, Diamond had a vision. Nothing quite like it had ever happened to him before. He was always actively imagining the things that made up his prayer life, but this felt like something different, something from outside himself.

The sun was blazing at the opening of the camp road. He saw his father's hands reaching out to him and Bill pulled him through a dark tunnel to a place where it was tranquil and 77 degrees and a sky so blue and cool he thought he could reach up and pour it down. Was it Heaven? Was he dead? There was no sun because God was the light in everyone's day. So it was Heaven!

Diamond came to, opened his eyes, and saw the old man bellowing like a baby. Nope. It was not Heaven. The old man was sitting on the old tractor. He pulled a smoke out. Diamond laid his head back. The dream, or vision, or whatever it was had left him feeling high. He no longer felt the pain of his battered face. See? It worked! Hah!

The old man finally passed out. Little did he know that outside, Katrina was pushing the Bogue Chitto up-stream, and the day became night.

Diamond was still in a buzzy state of mind when the girl popped up face to face with him, dangling a lantern. She found a place to hang the lantern and examined his wounds.

“As soon as we can, we have to clean this,” she whispered, looking at a large cut on his cheekbone. She looked over at the old man with disgust, “He’ll be out for a little while. He has consumed 42 ounces of whiskey since this morning,” she said.

She pulled out a knife and began sawing at the ropes and duct tape.

When the girl got Diamond's arms free he instantly threw them around her in gratitude, but the wild girl's immediate reaction was to jump back in defense.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” Diamond said. “I didn't mean to-”

The girl suddenly came close again and cautiously put her arms around Diamond. Diamond hugged her back. It was awkward, but it put a smile on the girl's face. He wondered, How long had it been since she'd had any hugs? All alone without her mother. Diamond had the opposite problem. His mother wanted to hug

him all the time. Before his dad got kidnapped, anyway. He thought of Helen and his stomach ached. Where was she? He tried not to worry, to just pray.

“Can I borrow your knife?” he asked the girl. He cut the ropes on Cowboy and took the muzzle off.

“We need to get out of here,” Diamond said to the girl.

“That ain't going to happen anytime soon,” she said. Wild girl motioned for Diamond to follow her. She pointed to a large knot hole in the wall. Diamond peered out and saw the world getting pushed down by Katrina. His heart sank at what he saw. There would be no running through the woods to Mama's house. Destruction was inevitable, was *now*. He trembled.

“That’s the source of the high-pitched whistling that won’t go away, and is driving me insane,” she said. “I just hope he's passed out for a long time,” she said, looking over at Junior laid out on the ground, snoring over the roar and whistle of the wind.

“Yeah, like forever,” Diamond said. His ear was ringing, he pulled at it and rubbed it.

“It'll stop ringing after a day or two,” the girl said.

“Yeah?” Diamond looked at her with concern.

“Yeah, but I kinda don’t worry about getting hit anymore. He can't catch me anymore.” In a flash of childish glee, she darted from here to there to demonstrate how quickly she could escape a man’s grasp. She climbed the ladder to the loft with

amazing speed and agility. Diamond followed her up, climbing the ladder as fast as he could. When he got to the top, he found the girl in a corner room made with walls of hay bales. It was a cozy space that looked lived in.

“This is where I come when it gets cold and rainy,” she said. “And where I like to think.”

Diamond sat down facing her. He admired her gray eyes and her freckles. She shyly looked away and paid attention to cleaning glue off the knife she'd used to cut the boy's duct tape. Then she stored it nearby where she had other things like a hair brush, mascara, finger nail polish, the clothes that were too little for her, and Barbie Dolls she hadn't played with in months. Plus, there was the food stash from Aunt-granny who lived not too far down the road.

Diamond noticed that her skin was cool-dark and warm-dark together. It was the color of ginger and cinnamon darkened by summer days spent on sandbars where no one but her played. Her hair was French braided and made into a thick blonde rope with little curls popping out everywhere.

Simply beautiful, Diamond thought to himself. She's going to break some hearts. Lord, please let me be the first heart she breaks. No, no, the last one. And Lord, forgive me for those thoughts I was having. Now if I can just get her out of here and to a safe place, a safe home, where someone could, I don't know, reprimand her for being so pretty. Her-

Diamond suddenly said to the girl. “What's your name?”

“Lauren. And you are Diamond.”

“Yes. Well, Lauren, it's nice to meet you.”

She smiled and pulled her braid around, nervously picking at the tiny curls, looking at Diamond with babydoll sweetness.

Mixed race, Diamond thought.

“Lauren,” Diamond said, imagining her as a crying baby, a trick Bill taught him to prevent unwanted risings. “Do you know where your mama is?”

“Yo, are you talking to me like a child?” she said. “I’ll have you know I will be 15 in two weeks. She’s at the cemetery, I guess. But she didn’t die of what they said she died of.” The girl turned around and ran across the length of the loft and found a spot to peer outside of. She did not want Diamond to see her cry. He could see she was bothered by the question and decided not to ask her anything more.

The winds of Katrina were beginning to wane after hours of relentless pushing.

Sitting up all night against a post had taken its toll on Diamond's young body, and he ached from head to toe. He nestled out a spot in the hay to lay down in, and he quickly fell asleep.

Lauren looked down from the edge of the loft, to the barn floor where her grandfather lay, and she was thinking about doing what she'd thought about for months – getting that rifle away from him, a feat that appeared much easier than it actually was. She swung down from the rafters onto a pile of bales and landed

quietly near the old man. She held her breath and tiptoed. She listened closely to judge his breathing. Slow or fast made the difference. Slow, he was out. Medium, he was really lying there awake. Fast, he was in REM; and this is where old Junior Price is dangerous if suddenly awoken. Lauren learned this by playing games with him. She would wake him from a distance with some object she'd throw at him. This was the type of thing she entertained herself with day in and day out. In doing so, she had learned his every move, and every state of mind for which he had capacity.

At the beginning of her predicament, when she lived in his house, she was in such fear of the old man that the thought of killing him never occurred to her. Once thoughts like that did occur to her, they made her feel bad.

Killing her grandfather was not what she wanted. She wanted the cops to come and take him away, but that never happened. He just kept doing mean things to her, and no one ever stopped him. No one ever came to her rescue.

One night, when Lauren was 13, the old man got in bed with her. He put his hands all over her. She was so afraid, and when he tried to get his greasy fingers in her underwear, she kicked his nuts as hard as she could and got away. She hid from him for days. The days became weeks, and the weeks months, and so on, until she learned that she could survive without him.

A few weeks ago, when he got lucky and was able to grab her, the old man put a lock collar on her neck and chained her to her bedstead. He thought he'd done something. He went to town for groceries, and when he got back, the bed had

been taken apart and the girl gone.

In order to do the right thing and tell the cops, her plan was to get the gun away from the old man, and get to town for help. Help hasn't helped me yet, but this time, I'm really going to do it. She was going to have proof of his abuse because of Diamond. She could get the old man arrested for sure this time.

Repeatedly, the voice in her head said, You ain't going to hurt anyone else, anymore, Old Man!

She made an effort to not allow the things Junior always said about her to play out her mind. "Worthless waste of breath. Murderer. Little coward. Little whore. Bitch. Bitch. Bitch."

This time, she was really going to escape. She carefully lifted the old man's bulky arm off the gun. His arm dangled, limp as a big ol' dead drunk catfish. The old man breathed his heavy sleeping breath with lungs like wet pebbles in a milk jug.

In a trist the gun was in her clutches. She jetted through a stall and into the tool room in the center of the barn, where she hid the gun underneath a plank on the floor. Lauren let out a sigh of relief. She listened to the wind. It sounded like girls singing. They were starting to let up late during the afternoon. The day was revealed again. Soon it would all be over.

Helen shot up out of her bed. She pulled the oxygen tubes from her nose and dragged her I.V. to the window to see if it was true - to see if Katrina had really come after all. She was on the fifth floor.

The hospital had electricity and was fully functional. Their lights never went out with four generators as big as minivans. Patients and staff did not suffer the heat wave that followed Katrina. It was like a comfortable capsule from the storm for many of the staff and their families who stayed there.

The sun outside was beaming, and Helen felt its full force when she pulled the curtains open. She was not prepared for what she saw from the highest building in McComb.

Utter destruction. She could not see the streets for all the trees and debris that looked like it had been swirled up in a heap all over the terrain by a giant hand. All of the landscaping had been pushed over in one direction against other, more rooted trees, or sometimes a house or other structure. The debris piles reached roof tops.

"Diamond," she cried. Pete was quickly by her side. Her boy was all she could think of. She could not wrap her mind around the devastation she saw outside. She began weeping.

Pete scooped his arms beneath her elbows as she was wavering. She was light headed and immediately felt the need to lay back down.

"It looks worse than it is," Pete assured her. "No one died in McComb. It's a

damn miracle if you ask me.” He helped her get back in bed. The T.V. was on mute, but images of New Orleans were flashing on the screen. She stared at it in disbelief.

“New Orleans is flooding and there’s people all along the coast – Mississippi and Louisiana – that’s dead or missing. They are talking about towns on the coast where they ain’t nothing left, just the smooth earth.”

He looked at her reassuringly. “Our boys are coming home,” he said.

“Diamond and Bill are coming home. I can feel it.” He held her hand and squeezed it.

“Oh, Daddy...” She began to weep. Several minutes passed while Pete held her and comforted her. He didn’t know what to say. He had no answer. The phone rang. Helen jumped and drew in a deep breath.

“Hello?” she said. She knew the voice on the other end.

“Bill? Is it really you?” she cried.

“It’s really me, sweetheart. I’m on my way home,” Bill said.

Chapter 9

Tuesday, August 30, 2005.

It was lights out for the South.

The sky outside was a liquid electric blue. Diamond lay there awake staring through a knot-hole above him in the hay loft. The wild girl was there. Then she slid down a fireman's pole, a thing Diamond hadn't noticed was there before. He turned around and there she was again. She looked at Diamond in a way he'd never had anyone look at him before. A look he'd only seen in movies, sexy movies. She looked much older, too. She pressed him back and down to the floor and began kissing all over him. He'd never kissed a girl like this.

He tried to stop her.

Wait! What's this all about?

I don't know! I'm confused. What's this? Is your roof leaking?

Diamond woke up to Cowboy licking his face. Diamond started to move and realized he may have a broken rib. The pain was intense. He managed to roll over

and get up. He thought about the wild girl and felt bad about his dream, though he didn't know why he felt guilty. It was only a dream. He looked around for the girl, but she was nowhere to be seen.

A large swath of the Southeastern U.S. was still experiencing hurricane-force winds. The deep south was silenced into a state of shock, and it was the hottest summer night he could ever remember.

A hurricane like Katrina had never happened in recorded history. Towns like McComb were locked in a mesh of downed oak and pine trees. On the Mississippi-Louisiana Gulf Coast, it was like a nuclear bomb had gone off. Whole towns disappeared. In New Orleans, thousands of poor Americans were bussed to the Super-Dome. Then the levee broke and the water bled into the city streets, into businesses, into homes. Terrible things, things worse than the worst hurricane, were taking place against the bodies of black and poor Louisianans at the Dome.

Near Long Beach, Mississippi, a single stop sign stood as a testimony to where Highway 10 and Copper Head Road ran into each other. After Katrina, the roads led to a no man's land for many miles in all directions.

The morning after, it was the disappearance of the birds that upset Wild Girl the most. The forest was stripped of Her green veil, and Her music had fallen silent. All the musical residents of the woods had been scattered in the 80 mph winds. She called out to the crows that usually populated the wood line and the meadow where she liked to sun and play. A meadow that was now covered in storm debris and

downed trees. She paused and held her breath to listen better. There was deafening silence as she turned north, south, east, and west.

The void of sound and no home to return to left old Junior Price alone with an angry and jealous god screaming at him all of the things his mother and grandmother used to browbeat him with - worthless little bastard, you'll never be pleasing to God with a face like that, I gave birth to a Sasquatch, I wish I never had you. Had Diamond known the old man's abuse, he may have felt a little sorry for him. That would have been a grave mistake.

Diamond could hear him mumbling in the barn below. The old man was hungover and trying to figure out what had happened. He was pacing back and forth in a state of bewilderment. He had a slight recollection of tying up a boy and a dog. His victims weren't there, so maybe it was a dream. But, he couldn't be certain it was a dream. He remembered feeling pissed off at the girl.

Junior kept looking out of the barn doors at the house split in half on its foundation, with one half of it now facing northwest instead of due north. He kept blinking his eyes at the destruction as if some form of magic would return his house to the way it was before.

Diamond lay back down in the wild girl's hay bale corner, sore from head to toe. A rush of cool air brushed over his face, and he thought it a little strange in the suffocating heat that had followed Katrina. It's just the cooler air returning, Dummy. Another soft, cool brush came through the barn, and this time it lit up his mind. In

his mind's eye, he saw Bill. Daddy is coming home. He felt it deep, where it hurt the most to miss him, that's where he knew it.

That's why I never cried about Daddy being kidnapped.

Diamond's side began to throb. He rolled over to favor the pain and hoped the old man didn't hear him groan. He could hear Junior pacing back and forth.

What the hell is he doing? He's just delirious, Diamond thought. Diamond's mind kept going back to the wild beautiful girl. What would she look like in a few years? What would she be like? Would she stay like Tarzan and never live with other people? Her dog, her only family?

Out of nowhere, the old man snatched him up by the nape of the neck and tossed him like he was nothing. In his mind, he was moving in slow motion through the air. Helpless, there was nothing to grab a hold of on the way down. He hadn't heard the old man sneaking up the ladder. Diamond screamed as he was face up flying in the air, out over the open barn floor. He braced himself. The impact was terrible. His breath completely left him with a heaving of sharp pain. His sight went black. Cowboy started barking like crazy at the old man, who scurried down the ladder with terrifying speed.

Lauren had seen what happened from her hidden perch in the rafters. She was holding onto a rope, readying herself, waiting for the right moment to jump so that by slipping her hands ever so carefully as she flew in the air, she could descend at just the right moment, in just the right place.

“You little bastard!” The old man yelled at Diamond. “Thought you was going to get away from me?” He went for his rifle, which wasn't hanging on him as it usually was. “You ain't shit, boy!” The old man leaned over and popped him in the chest one time with his fist. Diamond gasped in one big gulp of air and groaned. He was starting to understand why someone might wish death over torture. The old man grabbed Diamond's hair and pulled him to his feet.

“Leave him alone!” Wild Girl yelled at the old man. She squeezed the rope and jumped from the rafters. What Diamond saw was incredible. She dropped to the loft. Then she jumped through the air over him and landed on her feet, on top of the old tractor. She stood straight and tall and looked down at Junior.

“Let go of him, I said!”

“Well! I guess you can talk after all, huh?” He said mockingly. “Where's my whiskey at you little scum-sucking rodent! And my damn rifle!” the old man hollered. Out of the blue, and lightning quick, he balled up a fist and punched Diamond in the stomach. Diamond saw stars. The air that was left in his body ran out in an instant, and blackness filled his vision. His mind fluttered like a broken film reel. It was lights out for Diamond.

Lauren disappeared.

“See what you made me do to this boy! You little chicken-shit!” Junior yelled.

“You seen outside yet, boy?” The old man bent over him, scowling and grabbed him by the shoulder. He hissed at Diamond, who was unresponsive. He

pulled at him tighter, but the boy was limp. He shoved his face into Diamond's, screaming into his skin.

“Wake up! You little bastard! So you can see me knock yo’ ass out again!” Junior threw him back down and went for a hammer hanging on the wall nearby. Diamond came to. Half conscious, he could see the old man looking through a pile of junk.

“It looks like God's done punished the whole fucking world, just like I'm punishing you,” the old man gargled. He laughed wickedly and lunged toward Diamond, clenching a hammer by his side, and as he ran, he raised it high above his head to come back down on Diamond.

Diamond saw his life passing before his eyes in the split second that the old man pulled back with the hammer to hit him. He also saw a vision of his future laid out before him. With the magic of adrenaline rushing through him, the slice of an instant in time was equal to a state of eternity.

An incredible blast came from behind the old man. Diamond saw a flash of fire right as he was throwing his hands over his head in defense. The old man fell on him dead, clenching the hammer. Diamond lay there a moment in shock. The old man didn't move. His dead weight crushed Diamond's side.

He tried to call out to Lauren, but he was too weak. Suddenly, she was standing over him. Blood was everywhere. It covered Diamond from the neck down.

“I think he's dead,” Diamond said.

The old man opened his eyes and made an utterance, muttering something about his house on fire. Lauren jerked the rifle to her shoulder, aiming at the old man's head. The old man sputtered out a mouthful of blood and fell back over.

"Ahhh!" Diamond screamed and pushed away from the gore of the old man's body. Lauren slung the rifle onto her back and ran. Sunlight flooded the barn as Wild Girl pushed the barn doors open wide. It took a minute for Diamond to get up and focus his eyes.

"I have to go find my dog," Lauren said. She stalled, looking at Diamond's wounds. "My God. How could he do this to that pretty face?" Diamond was blushing under the dried layers of blood. "If you look around here, there might be some old clothes or something to wipe off the blood. I'm also gonna check on Aunt Granny next door. I pray she is ok," she said, nearly coming to tears. "Are you good by yourself?"

"Of course I am," Diamond said. Oh God! Does she think I'm weak! No Dummy. If you could see your face right now."

You damn fool! Get up and go with her. I'm too hurt. Oh yeah, I am. This really sucks.

"I'll be back, hopefully with some first aid and some food." And in two seconds, Lauren had disappeared into the heaps of broken trees.

Diamond stared at the old man's body, waiting for him to move, but he was for sure dead. The wild girl had saved his life. Again.

But, a man is dead. Maybe not a good man, but still someone, a human being was dead.

Diamond struggled to stand. He wanted away from the dead body. Outside, he couldn't believe what his eyes were seeing. How did they even survive?

Destruction and pure devastation was all around. His eyes were tender to the morning daylight. A strange new numbness rushed in as he was struck with wonder for Holy Mother Nature. He felt glowing gratitude to be alive. After a few minutes of standing still, taking it all in, he wanted to go to Junior's broken house to see what he might discover.

A large oak fell through the middle of the old man's house. One half of the house was still sitting on the foundation. Some of the rooms were left exposed to the elements. He saw a bedroom where you could see the bed, a dresser, and a few things still hanging in the closet.

How could that be? Lee haul, dummy. What? Just shut up already.

The other side of the house had been pushed off its pilings and forward several feet. There wasn't a large tree standing for as far as Diamond could see. The young spindly trees that were skint and bent over were all that survived. There wasn't a tree within sight that held a single leaf. All the old washing machines were pushed against the barn.

Diamond climbed through a dozen sideways trees to get to the piece of the old house still on its foundation. He was drawn to something he'd caught a glimpse

of.

There was a box underneath the bed. He pulled it out and sat on a bed full of leaves and tree debris. The wind had been here, but Katrina didn't take everything with her when she left. He opened the box. School pictures of a blonde headed brown skinned girl with braids. First grade, second grade, and so on through 7th grade.

Would she like *me*? Circle yes or no. How immature. No, really, shut up now.

There was a program from the funeral of Ashelyn "Minnie" Grace Price, 26, of McComb. Died Dec. 31, 1999, at her home. A picture of Minnie holding a baby, and a portrait of her and Lauren when Lauren was 4-years-old was printed in the program.

Photos from Lauren's 4th birthday were in the bottom of the box. There were dozens of pictures of Minnie and Lauren with their friends in a life lived before her mother decided to reconnect with family in Mississippi. Her daughter's black family, to be exact, but Minnie never made it to them. Visiting Junior first, had been an afterthought.

Lauren's report cards were from Jet Elementary School in Pensacola, Florida. Though the first photo, the one from kindergarten, was in Pascagoula, Mississippi. And, not surprising to Diamond, Lauren was an honor roll student.

Diamond looked over and could see into the barn door and there was Lauren

tying up the dead man like she was roping a calf. She left two loose ends. One she tied to herself and the other she tied to Princess.

“Ready, Princess?” she said to the big pitt lolling around in some hay. Princess yawned at Lauren, hopped, and bowed up all in one move. Diamond would swear that the dog was smiling.

“Good girl! Good girl,” Lauren said, patting the dog. This bothered Diamond. She leaned forward pulling the rope taught to get in a ready-set-go position. She stood shoulder to shoulder with Princess.

“Getty-up!” said Lauren, and Princess yanked them all forward. Lauren had to keep up unless she wanted to get pulled by the dead man. Diamond watched her in horror. The wild girl walked into an opening in the fallen trees until he no longer saw her. But he could hear them dogs.

All of the dogs that Junior had staked off in the yard were free and they barked like crazy at the dead old man.

One of them howled like a wolf. Then he heard them snarling.

Diamond knew in his bones what he was hearing. He felt suddenly weak with fear.

Am I next? Man eating dogs would not know the difference between a good person and a bad person. The apex animal attacks and it eats without caring. No questions, just instinct. That’s the nature of Nature.

Then something occurred to Diamond. Was that old Pentecostal preacher

right? The Apocalypse had come and he'd been left behind? He looked around at the destruction. He considered all of the things he saw on the news and everything going on around the world. Famines, drought, flooding, war.

Holy shit! It is the Apocalypse. It is the End with a capital E.

For a couple of hours, Diamond couldn't hear his inner companion because of the blood rushing through his ears, making a deafening white noise. Then the noise stopped.

Who knows what body systems were gored by the old man's fist. Is this how I die?

Chapter 10

High noon for Goliath.

Diamond folded the funeral program neatly and stuffed it into his pocket. He

paused to look at the pictures sliding around in the box. He could hear the laughter in them. In his mind he played them like they were his memories. He heard the adult conversations floating in and out of rooms. Life was a quiet crochet-covered wrecking ball.

He slid the box back under the bed and decided to retreat to the rafters of the barn. That would be a safe place from rabid dogs, he thought.

He crawled back through a downed oak that landed near the side of the house. He could not escape the thought of it being the apocalypse. The way the air hung heavy, like all the oxygen had been sucked out of it by Katrina, and time was moving ridiculously slow. His heart was beating heavy.

Is everybody dead?

He heard a dog howl and then the whole pack started in with the first. He made his way back to the barn, pulling at holly and the top of the fallen oak to get the rest of the way out. He managed to climb the ladder to the hay loft. He felt safe up there.

As the sun hit mid day, the heat was oppressive and rose in waves above the landscape. Only hours earlier it had been a jungle-like forest creating green canopies over every meadow. Landscaped lawns were peeled back and the red clay was still soft from the deluge. Minutes crept by like hours, hours like days. Then it was getting to be late in the day. He knew he better get a fire going if they didn't want to be carried off by mosquitoes.

Bet their ass survived.

After a while, it was getting too hot to bear in the attic of the barn. He had to get some air. He climbed down with dead silence ringing in his ears. His body was sore.

As soon as he landed on the ground, he came face to face with Lauren. She was wild-eyed and charged up.

“Want a sip of whiskey?” she said to Diamond. “I did some. I feel alright.” She pulled a silver flask out of her wrap. “Want some?” she said again.

“Sure,” Diamond was really unsure, but took a swallow anyway. After a couple of swigs, he felt his arms relax, then he felt his legs relaxing.

He searched the wild girl's face for signs that she might be a killer.

Did one kill make a killer? “You OK Lauren?”

She shot him a look. Then she motioned for him to follow. They climbed back into the loft of the barn. They sat facing one another.

“Diamond,” she said, barely containing her sadness, “the old man can never hurt another person again.” she said and started to cry. She sipped her grandfather's whiskey and said “good riddance” under her breath.

“There have been other people who came here and disappeared,” she said through her tears. “What do you think happened to them?”

“I don't know,” Diamond said. He could tell the answer to the question truly disturbed Lauren. What had this girl seen? She probably already has PTSD, thought

Diamond.

“I know what happened to them,” she cried. Large tears marked her dirty face. She took a swig and passed it back to Diamond, who took another swig, and this time it felt very nice.

Diamond could feel the burn of the alcohol lifting him up. He was no longer afraid. He was stronger than he thought. He didn’t hurt as bad.

“He ain’t never going to hurt anybody else,” said Dogboy. “I can promise you that.” But, Diamond knew there was a price to pay for killing a person, even if they are the worst piece of crap in the world. It scars a person with a good heart.

Pete never got over having to kill those boys in Korea. It scarred him for the rest of his life, and it was happening to Lauren.

“If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t have had to shoot him,” Diamond said. “But, you had to. He was going to kill me.”

“I thought, ya’ know,” Lauren said thinking aloud and muttering through her crying, “that I’d always get away from here. Go back to Florida. I have friends back there.”

“You still can,” Diamond said. “Or, you can come live with me at my house.”

“Do you know you’re covered in blood?” She suddenly asked him. Somehow, housing didn’t appeal to Lauren.

Diamond looked down. Blood had soaked him everywhere. He freaked out. He started pulling at his clothes and frantically searching for a wound, found

nothing, then suddenly remembered.

“It's the old man's blood,” Diamond said looking back over at the wild girl, but she had vanished. She was nowhere in sight. Diamond looked out over the barn from his perch in the loft.

“Lauren!” he yelled. He climbed down to the ground calling for her.

Diamond returned to the bloody mess on his upper body. He held out his hands and there was no blood on them nor his skin. It was dried into his shirt. He held out his arms to look at them again to make sure there were no cuts. Out of nowhere, Cowboy jumped in his arms.

“Cowboy,” he cried, and hugged his dog tight. Cowboy was exuberant. He was hyped up after chasing around with the big dogs.

When they settled down, Diamond found a large oak limb to perch on. He sat in the bend of the tree with Cowboy by his side.

“Listen to that,” he whispered to Cowboy, who perked up one ear and waited.

“It's the sound of nothing and nothingness,” Diamond said. “Just nothingness. His head was spinning with ideas.

“What happened to the birds, Cowboy?”

Cowboy barked and snarled like he always did just before going on a hunt. He was letting Diamond know he was ready – bring 'em on Mister, and I'll bark my head off.

“We can't go get Katrina, Cowboy. She can't be gotten. She's the wind. She's

Mother of all the others. We're in the Apocalypse. Ain't it obvious?" Diamond laughed nervously.

The whiskey inflated him. It didn't take him long to find a couple more of those hidden whiskey bottles. He sipped and sat back. Every now and then, the yelp of one of the old dogs made him jump.

He could feel himself expanding on the inside. He was definitely bigger. He squatted down on his haunches, threw his head back and howled like a wolf. Cowboy threw his head back and howled. In the distance a pack of dogs howled back at them.

"Looks like it's just us dogs," Diamond said tucking Cowboy under his arm.

Suddenly, a loud clamoring came as a helicopter flew over them. It crossed the river valley and over Diamond's camp.

Diamond brightened up.

"They landing in the pasture," he said. "I just know they landing in the pasture behind the house. Let's go, Cowboy."

Diamond paused at the hidden path before him. There was a mesh wall of trees everywhere he looked. He knew what direction he should take to head toward the river and back home, but a gnarly wall of hardwood and pine lay in his way. He wasn't sure he'd be able to stay in the right direction in the strange new landscape of mud and debris.

Just start moving forward, he thought. The tangled forest got very

compressed at times. At many turns he was afraid he'd lost his way. But Cowboy was sniffing out a trail and kept them on track.

His mother's voice was in his head said saying, "Wait in the safety of the barn. Help is on the way." But, then he also heard his father saying, "If you get lost, and you just want to get home, get your butt moving in the right direction. Instincts will guide you. Trust in them. It's very important to keep moving straight forward, even when you're afraid. Around here, you're going to eventually come out on some county road somewhere."

Diamond felt compelled to follow his father's advice, because ever since he woke up from the storm he could not get the image of his father's face out of his head. He sensed the presence of his father. It was a feeling he couldn't shake. Oh God! Ain't that what happens when people you love die?

He knew Bill wasn't really there, but he continued to feel his presence so strongly. It might have been the whiskey. Whatever it was, it set his mind at peace.

The helicopter hovered high above the Reed's house. Down below Pete and Deb came running out. They were dressed in work boots and jeans. They had formed another search party for Diamond and were waiting on Bill to arrive.

In the dining room several people were buzzing around.

Cutie, Bobby, Pete, Dusty and his parents Deb and Jay, the EMTs that pulled Helen to safety and Helen's parents, Betty and Dan.

Pete could see his son-in-law was racked with fear. He could hardly breath,

either. Bill, Bobby and the EMTs carried rifles slung on their backs. It was making Pete nervous.

Bill thanked everyone for coming and gave a couple of safety tips to everyone.

Pete suddenly spoke as everyone was about to head out of the door together.

“Son,” Pete said. “Let's say a prayer together before we leave.”

Bill stopped and turned. It wasn't like Pete to make such a request. He knew Pete as a closeted Christian.

“Of course,” Bill said. “Y'all, let's bow our heads for a moment of prayer. Pete-”

“Dear Lord,” Pete prayed. “Our hearts are heavy Lord, for my daughter and my grandson. We want him, alive and well. We thank you Lord for blessing this family and for bringing my son-in-law home. Thank you for Helen's healing and pray you show us the way to Diamond.” Pete opened his eyes and looked at all the people standing with him.

“Amen y'all,” Bill said. Now, lets go bring Diamond home.”

The small crowd was visibly pumped up by the prayer. They went to work making their way down the different camp roads around Holmesville. The helicopter pilot decided to make a loop around the area Bill had shown him on a map. He called Bill on his cell.

“I think I seen a girl that looked Diamond's age over at Junior Price's property. There's a small little spot near the barn, where I could land the helicopter,” the pilot

said.

“Then, come back and get me,” Bill said. “I want to go with you.”

Diamond was not making much headway into the path leading down to the river. The woods were so enmeshed that moving forward seemed an impossibility.

He'd gotten to a place along the way where massive oaks had fallen and were pressing down on a stand of bamboo. The shoots, with their leaves by the way, were jutting out into the path. He wandered into the middle of the bamboo. The shoots stood tall and straight, pointing into the empty blue sky. He wondered how long it would take for the birds to come back home.

The oak trees were 5 and 6 feet in diameter and the bamboo folded in and around every massive arm. He tried to go around but came face to face with oak tree barriers again and again.

It was starting to getting late in the day. I can just camp wherever I get to.

He felt a small puff of air rush over him. He could smell the ocean. Something in the gnarled wall of trees that stretched over and above him shimmied in the breeze. He heard a snap. Cowboy dashed away.

Suddenly through the bamboo, he could see a tree crashing down on him. Everything seemed to pause in his mind, and he went down in slow motion.

When the fall ended his right leg was pinned under a large limb. The pain was excruciating at first. He knew it must be broken. There was a lot of pain in the first few moments, but then he went numb. He checked himself over. The racket outside

made him afraid that a tree would come falling in.

Relax, the voice in his mind said. He took a deep breath and relaxed.

Cowboy appeared above him on a limb.

“Cowboy,” he said. Cowboy hopped down and came close to Diamond. He sniffed all around and whined at the leg pinned under the oak.

“Cowboy,” he said. “Come here Boy.” Cowboy came close and licked his face.

Diamond looked into his onyx eyes. “Cowboy, go get Mama, Cowboy.” Cowboy looked off in the distance in the direction of home.

“Go home, Cowboy. Go!” But Cowboy wouldn’t budge.

The helicopter flew really low and slowly glided by above them. A rescue team, he thought. He was worried about what happened to his home, to his mother, and Pete.

“My father in Heaven,” he prayed. “Deliver me.”

Cowboy barked brightly at the helicopter. It was the bark he used to get someone's attention. Cowboy turned and followed the sound of the helicopter barking all the way.

The helicopter landed by the barn doors. By the time Bill got out Cowboy had jetted through the mass of trees and found Bill.

“Cowboy!” Cowboy jumped into Bill's arms. He barked and barked and jumped down on the ground towards the river, looked back at Bill and started trotting away.

“That's a good boy, Cowboy,” Bill said, and he followed Cowboy into the chaotic forest. Sargent Powell followed them with a saw.

“Diamond!” Bill called out.

“Diamond heard something off in the distance. He held his breath to listen.

“Diamond!”

Daddy! He could hear them clawing through the woods.

“Diamond!”

Diamond pulled at his leg trying to free himself, but his leg was hopelessly pressed under the tree.

“Daddy!” He cried out.

“Hold on Man! I'm coming to get you!” Bill yelled. “Are you OK?”

“I'm OK. But, I'm trapped. My leg is stuck under a tree.”

“Don't worry,” Bill yelled out. “Help is on the way.” Bill called Pete's phone.

“We found him! Praise God, Daddy, we found him. I can hear him. He said he's OK, but it's going to take a while to get him out.”

But, Diamond wasn't feeling OK. He could feel himself slipping in and out of consciousness. Cowboy was back by his side.

The chainsaw roared and Bill pulled at limbs and debris that stood in between him and Diamond.

They had been clawing through the debris for nearly 30 minutes to get the

short distance to Diamond.

“Thank you, God,” Bill said over and over in his mind. He wasn't going to stop moving forward until he could put his hands on his son, till he could hold him in his arms.

“Daddy!”

“What, Son?”

“Is Mama and Pete okay?” he called out.

“Yes, they are much better now that they know I've found you in one piece!”

Diamond was also thanking God. “Thank you for bringing my daddy home. Thank you, thank you, thank you.” He was elated at hearing his father's voice. He knew everything was going to be okay. “Best believe that.”

His father sang an old church hymn as he worked.

“I have decided, to follow Jesus-” he sang as he chopped through the trees.

“I have decided, to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.”

Diamond knew that song well. Helen sang it around the house a lot before Bill was kidnapped. The pilot had caught on and joined in with Bill. Diamond began to sing, too.

“He's not far off,” Bill said.

“When that roll, is called up yonder. When that roll, is called up yonder. When that roll is called up yonder. Praise Jesus, I'll be there,” Bill sang. He could hear Diamond singing. He was only a few feet away. They came to the bamboo

stand and he could see Diamond through the enmeshed woods.

“I’m going to crawl through to him,” Bill said. He started grabbing at all the small limbs and pushed them aside.

The sun had set and dusk was turning to dark quickly. As soon as Bill was within a few feet of Diamond he threw himself, with all his might through the wooden mesh, scratched through the bamboo and put his arms around Diamond.

“Daddy,” Diamond said. He was weak. He didn’t know it yet, but besides the broke leg he was bleeding internally.

“I’m here Son, we are going to get you out of here.”

Diamond started to cry, overcome with joy. “How’d you get here?”

“It’s a long story, Son. I can’t wait to tell you everything. We have a helicopter waiting for us by the Price’s barn. We’re going to put you in it and head straight to Southwest.”

Diamond could feel himself letting go. I feel like I’m dying, God. Father God, Mother God, Jesus! I don’t want to die. I got plans. I’m going to change the world, don’t you know? Diamond suddenly turned white as a ghost.

Bill panicked. He patted Diamond’s face.

“Diamond? Diamond?” He felt him still breathing. He turned to Powell, “We gotta hurry.”

Powell began sawing on the limb that had Diamond pinned. They carefully lifted the limb off of Diamond. Bill got his arms beneath Diamond’s body and Powell

got his legs. They pulled him out and laid him out on the ground. Bill was panicking.

“Don’t take my baby. Don’t take my baby,” he was crying.

Powell looked him over. Diamond was trying to come to, to wake up, but he passed out again. “I’m a trained EMT, Sir. May I?”

“Sir, I don’t think this is Diamond’s blood. There are no major wounds.” He checked Diamond’s pulse, and they both searched his body for wounds. “Looks like he’s been beat up by Katrina, but I can’t see where all of this blood came from. Not from him. I think he’s going to be okay,” he assured Bill. “I think he’s probably suffering from exhaustion and dehydration, though. There’s also the possibility that he’s bleeding internally, so we need to jet him to the ER.”

Powell had a small tarp among his gear. They slung Diamond in it and made their way back through the woods much quicker than coming in. It was just a few minutes and they were at the hospital.

Chapter 11

It's not the end of the world!

When Diamond started waking up he saw Helen and Bill standing over him. Aunt Cutie and Mr. Bobby were walking in. Pete and Dusty were there, too.

“Y'all seen the news?” Cutie asked and turned on the T.V. “Y'all gotta see this....look there's Melanie right now.”

WJTV Channel 12 news anchor Melanie Christopher was looking into the camera with that distinguished tight lipped expression she always had when telling people bad news. With a slight nod of her head to the guy holding the camera she started her monologue.

Melanie:

A gruesome discovery was made in Pike County today when members of the National Guard were searching private property for Hurricane Katrina survivors. Found were the skeletal remains of four people who authorities believe to be members of the John Gayle Price family. There are believed to be two males and two females.

The bodies found on Price's property appear to have been buried in shallow graves for months, possibly years.

[The camera panned Price's farm. It was torn to piney shreds, except for the old barn. Not a single timber was missing; only a few side panels of patchy sheetmetal.]

Melanie:

It is unclear how they might have died. The current owner of the home is missing, and police are actively investigating.

“Katrina might be covering up a few crimes, but she is revealing some old wrong, too,” Bobby said. He turned and saw Diamond was trying to wake up. “Look y'all.”

Helen pressed her cool hands on his brow. Cutie rushed to be by his side, too.

“What do you think, Helen? This boy going to make it?” She said half jokingly looking down at Diamond.

Diamond reached out and put his hand on Aunt Cutie's.

“I don't think I'm gonna make it, Aunt Cutie, cause y'all look like angels to me,” he said.

“Now would ya' listen to this little player!” Cutie howled. She put an arm around Helen, hugged her and kissed her forehead.

At the sound of his voice Dusty began weeping openly, he was so overcome with joy he could not help himself. He thought his heart would burst.

“Well, ya see?” said Cutie in her bright hyperbolic brand of joy, “the boy's

back to being a jokester!" Everyone in the room laughed at Cutie. "And you did all that crying and worrying for nothing," Cutie said to Helen, and Cutie threw her head back and her hands up in praise, "Thank you, Jesus!"

Diamond felt sluggish and drunk, but he felt compelled to ask,

"So, it ain't the Apocalypse?"

"Hah!" Aunt Cutie squawked. "Not yet, Sweetheart. We prayin' for an age of reason first."

Helen and Bill were crying tears of joy along with Dusty as they held close to one another.

"Daddy," Helen said to Pete, "You were right. Our boys came home!"

"I know one thing," Bill suddenly said, scooping up Diamond's long hair, "This boy needs a haircut!"

When Diamond was home and recovered, he and Dusty went to the old man's place for months looking for Lauren. Diamond finally took the box of photos beneath the bed in the half-house home, and put them up for her. He left her notes that pleaded with her to come to one of their homes. He drew maps to show her how to get there, as if she didn't already know.

No one ever believed Diamond about the wild girl except Dusty, and maybe Helen. They tacked it up to Diamond's vivid and wild imagination and a very stressful period of time in his life. Poor, poor Diamond.

Diamond thought of Lauren every day. He wanted to share his home and his life with her. He couldn't explain the feelings he had towards her, except to say that he wanted to protect her. He wasn't sure if he should play the part of a brother, or boyfriend. He owed her everything because she saved his life - more than once. He couldn't bear the thought of the little wild girl out there all alone.

Why not both? Whatdya mean? See, this is why I call you a Big Dummy, Dummy.

She's not that little.

Ok, so, the young girl.

Winter came and went. One spring morning, Diamond sat at the riverside with Cowboy thinking of Wild Girl Lauren. Little did he know that the brown athletic and acrobatic girl was not too far away. She was watching him. In fact, she rarely went a day that she didn't find her Dogboy in his daily activities. She watched from a distance. She watched in silence and secrecy. She loved him deeply already and did not understand the strange feelings that had begun to stir in her heart and in her body.

Maybe she has gotten too wild to return to normalcy, he thought. Truth be known, she thought it, too.

Define normalcy, Dummy.

Normalcy is life's quiet wrecking ball.

Nope.

Metaphorically speaking it is.

Okay, I'll accept that. .

Maybe she's actually living the dream life out there alone in the woods? Nah, he thought. Not possible. It was frightening to think about her being out there with a killer on the loose. There were mysterious murders and thefts of large amounts of food happening on the news.

Is she the killer? Nah. No way. She just killed Junior 'cause of that raised up hammer in his hand, running at me. No court would ever convict her. They might give her a medal of honor, but not a sentence. What would she do with Aunt Granny's sack of peas?

Cowboy started barking. It was his happy bark.

"What is it, Boy! You see something?" Then Diamond noticed something hanging in a bush along the river bank on the other side. He stripped his shirt off and his jeans and dipped into the river. The water was freezing and made his limbs go numb.

Wow, this is actually a nice feeling now that I'm in here. He swam across and retrieved a medallion from the huckleberry bush near where Wild Girl had left the medallion of Cowboy. Like that one, this was intricately carved, but it was a portrait of Diamond.

"Oh my god! Wow, that's amazing." He looked around and called out,

“Lauren!” The woods were silent as death. He called out again and again without an answer.

The next day he brought tools and got in his new bright red canoe. He paddled upstream till he got to Bacot’s sandbar and started clearing out a path back to the old man's house. He could not let her live alone in the woods. So he began hauling debris off the trail and, little by little, he made his way back to her.