

CHAPTER ONE

Wednesday, June 13, 2012

A single arrest report lay atop the sheriff's desk. He scanned it with eyes not yet adjusted to the fluorescent lights overhead. Trap Malone was an early riser. *Early bird gets the worm*, his mother used to say. He wasn't sure he wanted the worm this day had in store.

The thin report summed up a slow night. Two out-of-towners had tried to pass a bad bill at the Piggly Wiggly. No drugs involved. No shots fired. Nothing but paperwork and two more reasons for his jailer to bitch. Trap yawned and took a sip of warm coffee from a white mug emblazoned with a gold badge and his name underneath. From the hallway he heard the heavy footsteps of his chief deputy.

Webster Carson was fifty and looked it. He had been chief deputy forever. Most of the men hated him. Trap tolerated him. He walked with his shoulders back and his chest puffed out, like he had inhaled too much air and couldn't let it go. Trap glanced at his watch. Time for the morning briefing. Carson's primary reason for getting up in the morning. Ten minutes of information stuffed into a thirty minute time slot. As he shuffled past the sheriff's doorway, the deputy stole a glance inward, but kept moving. Probably hoping to sneak by unnoticed, like a couple of newlyweds trying to sneak into the motel parking lot with a string of tin cans tied to the back bumper.

Malone considered briefing the men this morning but thought better of it. Nothing to be gained by it. The men already knew what today was. They read the papers just like everyone else. Still it couldn't hurt to take a stroll down the hall and listen in ... just to make sure Carson didn't get carried away.

The sheriff stopped at the open door. Close enough to hear, but out of sight.

"Dale Criss is a desperate man," Carson said, leaning against his forearms on the podium. "Shoot first and ask questions later. Save the taxpayers the expense of trying him again."

Malone bristled at the tone. Webster Carson liked to knock heads. Dale Criss might knock back. The sheriff scanned the room. Day patrol consisted of five deputies, ranging in age from twenty-five to forty-five. Twenty years separated Tony March, the youngest, from Roger Morris,

the oldest. Roger was a year older than the sheriff and five years younger than the chief deputy. He, like Carson, was a holdover from the Porter administration.

“Do we shoot if we see him, or only if he causes trouble,” Tony March asked. Bad move, Trap thought. Carson can hold a grudge for a long time.

“One more crack outta you, March, and you’ll be pulling graveyard till Christmas.”

Tony’s grin evaporated. Carson had not yet noticed his boss at the doorway.

“Sarton County thought it was shed of Dale Criss back in ’82, but bleeding-heart liberals on the parole board decided to let him have another crack at our teenage girls. We won’t let that happen.”

Malone took a step forward and cleared his throat. Carson stopped in mid-sentence. All eyes jerked toward the sheriff. Tony March suppressed a smile. Roger Morris frowned. Carson deflated like a popped balloon.

“Dale Criss has served his time. There’ll be no shooting and no harassment as long as he behaves himself,” Malone said.

“And if he doesn’t?” The chief deputy looked absolutely horrified.

“If he doesn’t ... he’ll wish he had,” the sheriff said. “The folks are worked up enough. Let’s keep our heads and do our jobs.”

“He won’t live a week,” Carson said. “Mark my words, some good ole boy’ll do what the state of Mississippi didn’t have the guts to do.”

“Not on my watch, Web. I won’t have my county ruled by a mob.”

“Dale Criss is a punk,” Carson said. “I remember how scared he was when Porter stuffed him into the back of his patrol car and hauled his ass to Parchman. Took him right down himself. We had bets on whether or not he’d get shot trying to escape.”

Roger Morris chuckled.

“He might not scare so easy now,” the sheriff said. “According to his sheet he’s six-foot-two and weighs two hundred and thirty-five pounds. Likes to hit the weights.”

“Prisoners shouldn’t have barbells,” Ty Strange said. Ty sat next to Tony March and usually kept his mouth shut.

“We’re not here to redesign the penal system, Ty. Look, none of us know how Dale Criss will act when he steps off that bus this afternoon. According to statistics he’ll reoffend in his first year. If he does we’ll catch him. Until we know his intentions I don’t want anyone engaging him

alone. No cowboy stuff. Nobody goes in with guns blazing, but if you have to shoot ... if there's no alternative ... shoot to kill."

Malone's last three words hit Carson like a tonic. He perked up immediately. Almost smiled.

"Don't parolees have to get a job?" Ty asked. "Nobody around here's dumb enough to hire him."

"Leave that to his parole officer," Trap said. "Not our concern. Maybe his brother will put him to work at his car lot."

"Andrew wouldn't give him the time of day," Carson said.

"Maybe not, Web. Maybe Dale don't know that ... or thinks he can change his mind." Malone dismissed the men to their cruisers and waited for them to file out. "My office," he told Carson, and left the chief deputy standing at the podium in front of an empty room.

"Close the door." Trap sat against the corner of his desk and waited for the door to close. "I don't know what's eating you, Web, but today's not the day for it. I need cohesion."

"Briefing the men is *my* job," Carson said.

"I had no choice. You've had a hard-on for Dale Criss ever since they set his release date."

"I knew Kimberly Ryan. I saw what he did to her. Poor Martha hasn't left her house in years except to plead with the parole board. I drove her down myself the first two years. She's been living all alone since Hoyt died."

"Doesn't change anything. You know that." Trap was a budding Marine when Dale Criss stabbed the Ryan girl to death with a screwdriver and stuffed her body into a dumpster. He barely remembered reading about it in the newspapers his mother sent on Fridays.

"So we just wait for the next body?"

"We can't arrest him for what he might do."

"Turn that damned bus back at the county line. You can do that much."

"It's a Greyhound, for God's sake. I've got no authority to turn it around."

"Then stop it and turn HIM back."

"The state of Mississippi says he comes here. My hands are tied."

"Sheriff Porter wouldn't have given two cents what the state of Mississippi says."

Trap felt the muscles in his face tighten and tried to head off the color rushing to his cheeks. Anger was a weakness he could ill afford right now. "Porter made his own laws. The state makes mine."

“He gave no quarter to lawbreakers.”

“Sure he did. If he didn’t like the law he ignored it. If the man breaking the law was a friend of his he looked the other way. And if he needed a law that wasn’t on the books he cooked one up. Ain’t that how it went, Web? Well, ain’t it?”

“It was safe to walk the streets back then.”

“Tell that to Martha Ryan.”

Carson folded his arms across his chest and took his breaths by the bucketful. Satisfied with himself, but trying hard not to gloat, the sheriff stepped behind his desk and settled into his high-backed executive chair. A nice chair was one of the few luxuries he afforded himself.

Webster Carson brooded for a long while. Trap began to wonder if he was going to stand there all day. “At least let me put a man on him,” he finally said.

“Absolutely. Put every man you can spare on him. Watch him around the clock.”

Carson perked up, but it was short-lived.

“By the book,” Malone said. “And none of your electronic gadgets, either. I mean it, Web.”

“You and your damned book.” Carson turned and slipped out the door before the sheriff could respond. Malone shook his head and sighed. The return of Dale Criss had Carson had his hackles up.

* * *

The Greyhound left the pavement and swayed to a stop in the gravel parking lot of a small country store in the eastern edge of Panola county. A blast of compressed air kicked a dust cloud against the rear tires as the driver set the brake and opened the door. It was the third stop since Dale Criss boarded in Sunflower County decked out in state-issued tan work pants and a crisp new white button-up shirt. He looked more like a professional wrestler than an inmate, with his shaved head, goatee, and muscles.

He kept his seat as the other passengers rose as one and exited the air conditioned bus. The chill bumps peppering his biceps vanished as soon as he stepped into the sweltering Delta heat. He hung back and took in the freedom of the unfenced parking lot, empty except for the bus, a blue Ford van in front of the gas pumps, and a dozen passengers shuffling toward the store. Some of the passengers wiped sweat from their faces as they walked, but not Dale. He welcomed the escape from the unfamiliar feel of air with all the humidity pumped out.

Cotton fields, as far as the eye could see, consumed the landscape. It was like standing on the beach in Biloxi looking south after the water had turned green. In another month the sea would be white, then machines would come and leave it brown. Cotton had made many a southern man wealthy, but that was a long time ago. These days most farmers did good just to break even.

The store was a steel rectangle, a shade between yellow and beige, with two glass doors and a white tin awning that jutted out just far enough to shade the black rubber welcome mat. A single window to the left of the door had a blue neon sign that flashed *MILLER*. Off to the right, in a sea of weeds, sat a dilapidated outbuilding made of rough oak lumber. An old smokehouse, perhaps, back when people still knew how to cure a ham or a side of beef. Before refrigeration took the skill out of preserving food. A narrow path snaked from the parking lot toward it.

The driver stepped off the bus behind Dale. "Better step it up. We pull out in ten minutes."

Dale veered off toward the old smokehouse. Weeds brushed against his knees as he explored the path around its side to a small clearing just outside an opening with no door. A five-gallon plastic bucket sat bottom side up in the center the clearing. Dale took a seat on the bucket and waited for the bus to leave. It felt odd sitting there without men in towers with rifles looking down on him. Without a fence topped with razor wire to hold him in. He sat there until he heard the blast of compressed air as the driver released the brake, then the chatter of the massive diesel engine pushing the heavy bus away.

He stepped into the poorly lit store. Behind the counter stood a petite woman, thirtyish, with a gold stud in her left nostril and black hair chopped short like a boy's. She had dark eye shadow, purple lipstick, and black nails. For the past three months Dale had stared at her picture on the wall of the cell he shared with Martin Fletcher. He knew she looked good topless.

"The bus left," she said. Dale glanced around the store to make sure they were alone.

"Fletcher sent me."

"Don't know him," she said. "Next bus is at five."

Dale lowered his eyes to her pink halter top. She had a nice tan. "Fletcher showed me your picture. It didn't do you justice."

"Bastard."

"I've seen him turn down ten cartons of cigarettes for that picture."

"Wait here," she said. "And don't steal anything." She stomped away and disappeared down the aisle toward the back of the store. Even walking away she looked good. A door slammed.

Seconds later it slammed again, and she strode back up the aisle with her right fist clutching the strap of a camouflage duffle bag.

“Take it and get out,” she said, swinging the bag into his chest. “You’ll find your car in a barn down the road. That way,” she pointed southeastward, then stepped behind the counter again, reached underneath, and leveled a handgun at him with the confidence of a woman who knew how to shoot. “Come back and I’ll blow your head off.”

“I’m in no hurry.” He moved his eyes from her face to the gun and back again with a grin. The thought that she might actually pull the trigger amused him. Shot on the first day out. Wouldn’t that be a kicker?

“First dirt road to the right. There’s a gate. A smart boy like you can’t miss it. Registration’s in the bag. Everything’s in your name just like Fletcher said.”

“Even the license plate?”

“What part of everything don’t you get?”

“Just checking,” Dale said. “Fletcher mentioned a driver’s license.”

She pointed at the bag with her gun. “This evens me with him.”

The door swung open and a cop stepped inside. He was almost as tall as Dale, and thin.

“Everything okay, Jill?”

“No problem here, Max.” Dale glanced at her empty gun-hand.

The officer shucked his sunglasses and examined Dale from head to toe. “We arrest hitchhikers around these parts, son.”

“He came in on the bus,” Jill said.

The cop made a show of looking out the door at the empty parking lot. “You got business here?”

“Bad nachos a ways down the road, boss,” Dale said, rubbing his stomach.

“Driver left him in the john,” Jill said. “I told him he could wait for the five o’clock. What can I get for you?”

“Pack of Camels,” he said, still eyeing Dale.

“Camels? You been rolling drunks again?” She reached up and pulled a pack from the overhead bin. Max turned his head away from Dale in time to get an eyeful of cleavage.

“Finally got that raise. Thought I’d celebrate before the wife finds out.”

Jill slid the cigarettes across the counter and took his money.

“You sure everything’s all right here?” He gave Dale another head-to-toe sizing up.

“Peachy,” she said.

“If you say so. I’ll swing back by in an hour or so just in case. Can’t have nothing happening to the prettiest girl in the county.” He looked her way again as he dropped the cigarettes into his shirt pocket.

“Bet you wouldn’t say that in front of your wife.”

“Darla’s plain as an Amish dress, Jill. That’s why she settled for me.” He winked at her, gave Dale one final eyeballing, and left. Dale stepped to the door and watched the patrol car until its taillights faded down the long flat highway.

“I’d better get moving before he comes back.”

“Remember what I said about not coming back here. I’ll put the rest of your money in the barn after you finish the job.”

“Keep it,” Dale said. “I’m done with Fletcher, too.”

Her eyes flew wide. “Double-cross Fletcher and you’ll get us both killed.”

“He’s in prison.”

“He’s got people.”

“If they all look like you I think I can handle myself.”

“He’ll think I helped you.”

Dale laughed and moved back away from the door. “Just a few minutes ago you were pointing a gun at me.”

“Give me the money back. I’ll tell him you never showed.”

“No deal. Tell him I said thanks. I’ll drink a toast to him when I get settled.” He pointed to the scar under his left eye. “He owes me one.”

She grabbed the gun from underneath the counter and leveled it at Dale’s head, holding it with both hands, arms outstretched. “I’ll shoot you and tell the cops you tried to rape me.”

Dale grinned, then turned toward the men’s room in the back of the store. “Don’t think that’s an idea that hasn’t crossed my mind.”

“I hope he gets you,” she said. “It’ll serve you right. Maybe I’ll tell him myself.”

The men’s room smelled of piss. Dale dropped the duffle bag onto the sink and pulled the zipper down its length. Underneath a new pair of Levi jeans and a blue pullover shirt, he found ten neat bundles of one hundred dollar bills and a loaded .9mm handgun with the serial number

filed off the barrel. He stripped to his underwear and discarded his prison clothes into the trash can beside the door, then put on jeans for the first time in twenty-five years. The feel of stiff cotton against his skin made him feel more human. On his way out he grabbed a six-pack of Coors from the cooler along the back wall.

“Give me a pack of Camels too,” he told Jill when he reached the counter again. “I’ve got some things to celebrate myself. And a box of matches.”

Jill put the Camels on the counter along with a yellow Bic lighter. “Matches are old school.”

Dale laughed, picked up the cigarettes and lighter and pushed open the door.

“That’ll be nine-fifty,” she said.

“Take it out of your half.” He stepped out the door then stopped and looked back at her. “That stuff you said about being through with Fletcher ... you know he’ll never let you do that. Take the other ten and disappear.”

Dale found the car in the barn just like Jill said. A candy-apple red 1967 Mustang under a gray canvas tarp. A near replica of the one he had in high school except it didn’t have a bloody screwdriver stashed underneath the spare tire. He raised the hood and checked the oil. Full and clean.

He feathered the throttle until he cleared the barn door, then gunned the engine and snapped the front end around toward the highway. He stopped, gripped the wheel with both hands and grinned, then idled down the dirt path. When he turned into the highway he punched the accelerator again and left a long black stripe in his rearview mirror. A manila envelope lay in the passenger seat but he didn’t open it. Not yet.

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Raceway Short Stop had two gas pumps but no racetrack. A small sign hanging inside the front window designated it a stop on the Greyhound route. The store had a rough-hewn lumber face, just like all the other storefronts in the row. As a group the buildings were called the Spanish Village, though there had never been anything Spanish about it until a Mexican spice store opened in the end opposite the convenience store. Now the wood looked more old than rustic. Throwing on a fresh coat of dark brown stain did no more good these days than a second layer of makeup on an old woman.

Sheriff Malone parked his white Crown Vic at the west end of the large paved parking lot, nearest the spice store, and left it idling to keep the air conditioner pumping. It was hot and

humid, more like July than June. From his vantage point he could see the scattering of protestors just beginning to organize at the far end. When the bus arrived he would have a good view of its door. Malone had never met Dale Criss but had no doubt he would recognize him from the photograph the Department of Corrections emailed him.

Through his side mirror he caught a glimpse of Webster Carson's burgundy Chevy Tahoe as it turned in behind him. Carson lay claim to the Tahoe after the department seized it in a raid on a meth lab. Unlike Malone's car, which had no markings other than the SO-1 license plate and the blue light on the dash, Carson's had a rack of blue lights on top and oversized replicas of his silver badge on both front doors. Both vehicles had dark tinted windows.

Carson pulled the passenger door open and slid into the front seat with a sigh. Malone quizzed him on the placement of the men. The chief deputy repeated the sheriff's orders almost verbatim but his recital lacked enthusiasm. Two patrol cars rolled into view at the far end of the parking lot. Each car had a deputy and a uniformed reserve officer. Malone wanted a presence at the scene, not a show of force. Behind the scenes he had everyone on standby. The police chief had placed his officers at Malone's disposal, ceding command to the county. Sink or swim, this homecoming rested on the sheriff's shoulders.

Between the spice store and the Short Stop sat a beauty shop, a laundry mat, and a CPA who specialized in tax returns. Not much traffic even on a good day. The paved parking lot ran the length of the row and half that distance toward the street. Like the building it serviced, it had seen better days.

"Looks pretty calm," Malone said as Webster pulled his door closed. The chief deputy picked up an 8x10 glossy from the seat between them and gave it a look.

"Ugly bastard ain't he," Carson said. "Just wait until his feet hit the pavement. You'll wish you'd taken my advice."

"Somebody has to patrol tonight."

"We've got the reserves."

"Reserves are fine for ballgames and traffic control, Web. I won't have them patrolling the county by themselves."

"Then let me use them here."

"I gave you two."

"Two. What good will that do when we've got a full-scale riot on our hands?"

“There’s not going to be a riot. Looks like a low turnout.”

“They’ll come.”

Malone glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes to go. “I gotta tell you, Web, I’ve never seen you get your back up like this before.”

“He killed a seventeen-year-old girl, Trap. Seventeen.”

“We’ve worked murders before. Remember three years ago when Jerome Corbin killed that girl out at Hendrick Lake?”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Why not? She was fifteen. You didn’t get all bent out of shape when his lawyer cut a deal with the DA. He’ll do seven years tops.”

“Kimberly Ryan was white. Her mother wasn’t some crack whore who let her sleep all over town.”

“Porter teach you that? It’s okay to kill black girls from dysfunctional families?”

“I knew Kimberly Ryan. She didn’t deserve what happened to her.”

“None of them do,” Trap said. “Not even little black girls with bad parents.” Trap felt his blood getting up and regretted the timing of the conversation.

“Here they come,” Carson said, pointing toward a church bus stopped in the street with its turn signal flashing. The bus was white with *East Grove Baptist Church* in big black letters down the side. It had been a school bus in a previous life. Trap had talked to the county school superintendent on behalf of the church committee and got them a good deal on it. Now they were using it to haul in trouble for him.

“What are *they* doing here?”

“Protesting,” Carson said. His face beamed with satisfaction as the bus wheeled into the parking lot and two dozen churchgoers with signs filed out like ants converging on a picnic.

“Should I tell Payne and Morris to move into position now?”

“For God’s sake, Web, it’s a church bus.”

“Yep ... but it ain’t Sunday.”

Protestors poured in by the carload. It was as if the bus had punched a hole in a dam and let the town gush through. A blue Dodge pickup rolled up and a half dozen teenage boys spilled over the sides of its bed. People gathered in a hapless mass, a hundred people trying to squeeze into a forty-person shade where pavement met grass between the gas pumps and the street.

"I don't see Mrs. Ryan," Trap said after a few minutes of silence between the two men.

"She did all her protesting at the parole hearings. Poor woman's give out." Carson raked his fingers through his gray hair and fumbled his shirt pocket with the other hand.

"Not in here," Malone said, seeing the cigarette pack in Carson's hand. "Kill yourself if you want to but leave me out of it."

"Nag, nag, nag. You should've been a woman, Trap. My ex-wife didn't nag as much as you."

"Which ex? One, two, three or four?" Trap needed to ease the tension between them until this protest petered out and he knew Web loved to talk about his ex-wives.

Carson laughed. "Number five."

"Five? I thought you stopped at four?"

"Five. Trust me, I remember."

"Which was your favorite?"

"Hmmm, let's see ... I guess I'd have to say the third one. She took off after a month. Marriage kills a relationship, Trap. How long you been married?"

"Twenty-one years."

"Damn. Twenty-one years. My longest was four, no, five years. Or was it six? She was a hellcat."

"What happened?"

"I came home early one day and caught her with the next-door neighbor."

"Bet he was scared," Trap said. "Getting caught with a cop's wife."

"She. And she wasn't scared at all."

"She? Your neighbor was a woman?"

"Neighbors can be women," Carson said. "Her husband was a truck driver."

"Bet that stung."

"Hell yeah it stung," Carson said, and fixed his eyes on the crowd beyond the windshield. Long awkward seconds passed. Web turned to his boss and said, "You believe they wouldn't let me join them?"

Trap looked at his deputy, not knowing what else to do. Carson's grim look melted into a grin. "Stingy bitches."

Finally the moment of truth arrived. The big bus lumbered into sight and pulled the protestors from the comfort of the shade. They tightened their line and waved their signs. Malone eyed the

bus door as it opened and spit out its first passenger -- a gray-haired woman carrying an oversized handbag. She looked around and hesitated like she wanted to bolt back up the steps.

"Poor thing," Malone said. "Bet she's thinking *what the hell*."

"I wonder what she'd think if she knew she'd been riding with a cold-blooded killer," Carson said.

Malone ignored the question.

Next off was a short stocky man who looked to be in his late fifties, followed by a woman about the same age and build. He took her hand at the bottom of the steps and escorted her double-time toward the store, looking back every few steps. One by one the passengers left the bus, thirteen in all, before the driver stepped off. No sign of Dale Criss.

"Would you look at that," Webster said, astonished. "He's scared to get off."

"Or he's not on."

"Not on? He has to be on. Where else would he be? He's scared of the crowd, that's all. Scared. Just like when Porter hauled him down there."

"Scared of a bunch of sign-toting old ladies and a handful of redneck teenagers? I don't think he's on there," Malone said with a sigh. "And I think I'd like it better if he was."

"Why?"

"We'd know where he is."

Webster pondered the situation for a moment then snatched the radio microphone from the dash.

"Not yet," Malone said.

Across the parking lot the protest fizzled like fireworks in a cloudburst. The chanting and sign waving became befuddled conversation and sign dragging. No one seemed to know what to do without the guest of honor. Then one of the younger men caught his second wind, hoisted his sign into the air and began yelling at the bus, *Come outta there you coward! Yellow Belly!* The more he yelled the braver he got. He moved closer to the bus. One of his buddies joined him and bounced a rock off one of the windows.

"We need to head that off," Malone said. "Gently." Carson lifted the microphone again and ordered Deputy March to move them back away from the bus. March moved quickly and quieted the duo before they mustered a following.

Minutes later the driver escorted his passengers out of the store and back onto the bus. When the bus pulled out of the parking lot Malone dropped his gearshift into drive and fell in behind it. As soon as they crossed out of the city limits he flipped on his blue light and followed the bus into the parking lot of New Grace Baptist Church. The driver stepped off and met the officers near the rear wheel.

“I wasn’t speeding.”

“We’re looking for this man.” Malone held up the 8x10 of Dale Criss and showed it to the bandy-legged driver.

“He got off in Clarksdale.”

“He give you any trouble?”

“Nope. Never said a word to anybody far as I know. That ruckus back there shook up a couple of my passengers, though. The boy in the store told us what it was all about. I figured him for a con. Get a lot of ‘em on my route. What’d he do?”

“Killed his girlfriend.”

“Takes all kinds I reckon,” the driver said.

Malone thanked the driver and sent him on his way. Webster Carson grinned all the way back to the car, but not the sheriff. Trap didn’t like surprises.

* * *

Guston Lake lay three hundred yards off the highway in the northeastern edge of Panola County. It had half a dozen slots for RVs and twice as many primitive camping spots. Entry cost a dollar, on the honor system, payable at a drop box nailed to a creosote post. Dale rolled past without paying and parked in the grass near a green picnic table on a hill that overlooked the water. A narrow strip of pavement angled down a moderate grade toward the water. Downhill he saw a concrete boat ramp and a small gravel parking lot as exited the car. The perfect place to spread a meal.

Dale walked across the fresh-mowed grass with a bucket of chicken in one hand and three beers hanging from a plastic web that dangled from the other. Somewhere back along the highway lay two stripped drumsticks, a meatless thigh and three empty beer cans. He selected a table beneath a dogwood tree and spread his lunch. Except for a few birds and a squirrel he was completely alone. A gentle breeze blew over the hill from the lake and broke the humid grip of the afternoon. Off in the distance a bass slapped the water and set off a ripple that reproduced

itself half a dozen times before the noise of the splash climbed the hill. Dale watched the ripples die away with a half-eaten chicken breast dangling from his fingers, then dropped the breast back into the bucket and wiped the grease from his mouth with the back of his hand. No sense trying to make up for twenty five years of prison slop in one sitting.

After his food settled, he dumped everything into the tin garbage can chained to a steel post, then went back to his car and retrieved the manila envelope from the passenger seat, and the duffle bag from the trunk. He squeezed the metal clasp on the envelope and dumped the contents onto the hood. A 5x7 glossy of Carla Welch dropped out. She was attractive in a plain sort of way. A redhead with a bit too much makeup. Probably covering freckles. He stared at it for a minute then pushed it aside and read the accompanying note.

Carla Welch, 38. Red hair, blue eyes. Office manager at Heartland Realty. Works out every Mon, Wed, and Fri at Fitz Gym in Guston. 7 PM. Address: 3128 Hart Road. Lives alone. No known boyfriend.

A printed map gave turn-by-turn directions to her home. Dale scanned it briefly, wadded it into a ball and tossed everything into the trash can on top of the chicken bones, then walked down the hill to the boat ramp with the duffle bag swinging from his fist. Across the water a man and a boy in a small aluminum boat fished a cove. Their voices carried across the water and reached Dale as an unintelligible mumble. He unzipped the bag just enough to reach in and pull out the gun. With a hard over-handed throw he sent the gun hurtling through the air and into the water.

The gun hit the water with a *plunk!*, then sank. Dale took a slow deep breath of free air, leaned his head back and exhaled. A door slammed. He spun around but couldn't see the car from the base of the hill. The sound of the engine removed all doubt. He ran as hard as he could, but heard the Mustang tear away before he topped the hill.