

*A lawyer in Austin, Texas with connections to the country music industry gets tangled up in a series of murders. Some people think maybe he did it.*

# **GETTIN' LOST WITH YOU**

**A country music murder mystery**

by Peter Hanke

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PETER  
HANKE

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## CHAPTER 1

Faded love. Unrequited love. Somebody new. Hard times, with an empathy for poverty unequalled since the New Testament. Parents and children. Drinking, cheating, and divorce. Law and disorder. Nostalgia. Loneliness.

Those were the big subjects for country and western songs, but there were others. The moral superiority of small towns, dance halls, beer, blue jeans, and the South over cities, country clubs, champagne, silk, and the North. God. Greed. Sometimes revenge and murder.

That covered “most ever’tang” that country music covered. Some things did tend to get left out, like happiness. But I didn’t see a lot of that in my business either. Which was not country music, despite what Ginger said to me that Monday an hour before Sonny Jamieson, a minor songwriter and one of my more unpredictable clients, to the surprise of all but maybe two or three people suddenly left Austin, Texas, for a higher or at least different sphere.

Ginger and I had just broken sourdough bread together in the courtyard of The Cedar Cutter, a down-home restaurant on Barton Springs Road in South Austin. Their barbecued ribs were tasty but most people left the potato salad on the plate. The cedar elm tree that struggled upward beside our table was bright green with new growth at the tips of its branches. In a month the vegetable halo would fade into the indistinguishable gray-green leaves of the rest of the tree.

What Ginger said as we left the courtyard for the main restaurant, her Slavic cheekbones taking on a touch of color and her French eyes narrowing, was: “Is that all you think about? Stereotypes, media exaggerations, country music emotions? You’re getting to be like your clients!” While I paid the cashier she paused dramatically, her silver sand-dollar earrings from James Avery, Silversmith, trembling. “Why shouldn’t I go to Guatemala next summer?” Her whale ring, also from James Avery, Silversmith, glittered in the fluorescent light.

Out of habit she immediately came up with a melody—she was always coming up with melodies—and half-sang, in a Calypso

rhythm: “Why shouldn’t I go to Guatemala, land of bananas and mystery?”

I pocketed my wallet and told her again why not, rather stiffly, because from my point of view her outburst had been out of line for a daughter. As she marched out the door I held open, I silently vowed that I would not, on the occasion of her next birthday or other achievement, set foot in the Barton Creek Square Mall or Tech Ridge or Northwood Plaza retail wonderlands of James Avery, Silversmith.

“Thanks for lunch, Daddy.” Her voice gave away nothing. It wasn’t only her shape or her curly blond hair, cut short, that reminded me of her mother.

One reason for my annoyance, I admitted to myself as I wheeled my one-year-old LeSabre out onto Barton Springs Road to go back to my office, was that there was some truth to Ginger’s charge. I did pay more attention to country music than most people did, even most people in Austin. Country music sometimes lurked in the background of my daily activities, and I actually listened to it several hours a week while jogging. As a result maybe I did perceive the world in more vivid colors and read into people’s behavior more primitive emotions than I would have if I were still being exposed regularly to, say, the orchestral structures of Mozart and Berlioz and Tchaikovsky rather than the acoustic guitars of Vince Gill and Wynonna Judd and Ricky Scaggs. I put the idea away to think about later, but since I didn’t write it down the idea began to thin out and lose its shape. My long-term memory was strong, I could remember things that hadn’t even happened; but my short-term memory could wobble. Wasn’t the forties a little early for that to start?

I drove rapidly north on Lamar Boulevard. I was late for my appointment with Sonny Jamieson, assuming that he would show up at all. I rather hoped that he wouldn’t, and I had a reason for that. What was that idea I was going to consider later, something about what if Mozart had written country songs? Of course, he sort of had, it depended on what you meant by country songs. No, that wasn’t it. Gone forever.

The sun sparkled on Town Lake. The air was fresh and clean after last night’s downpour. Today was July the first and some locals

said the rainy season should be over. Other locals maintained that the hill country around Austin needed all the rain it could get so no rain was unseasonable. Former Yankees like me who found themselves in such discussions nodded wisely and changed the subject interesting as it was.

From the bridge over Town Lake I caught a glimpse of a jogger down below in white shorts between MoPac Boulevard to the West and Longhorn Dam to the East. Times had certainly changed since the sixteenth century when the conquistadors, implacable in leather and metal, rode North with their Indian guides into the scrubby wilderness of what was now Central Texas. The jogger disappeared from view among trees and clumps of bushes.

When I entered the lobby, Sonny Jamieson was not there, only Melanie Bowie at the reception desk, her eyelashes longer than when I had left for lunch. She swiveled around from the computer. "Hi, Mr. Miller. How was Ginger? I've been thinking." There was a white streak through her black hair that a badger would have been proud of.

"I'm sure you have, Melanie. Ginger was herself. Any word from the late Mr. Jamieson?"

Startled, she said: "Late? What do you mean?"

"I mean he's late."

"Oh." She consulted a notepad self-consciously, like a starlet playing a bit part in a movie as an office worker. "No, but Joe Bob Loftus needs to see you ASAP. I gave him an appointment between Mr. Jamieson and Mr. Henninger. A man with a foreign accent called but I don't know who. He wouldn't leave a message."

In the multi-ethnic soup that was Austin, Melanie Bowie remained a stubborn Anglo spoon. "By foreign you mean Eskimo?"

On the other side of her designer glasses her almond eyes widened. "No, Meskin. What is an Eskimo accent like?"

"I hope you never have to find out. How are you coming on that brief? It's due Wednesday." Who had cast Melanie Bowie for this part, anyway? That was easy: her father, Barefoot Bowie.

"I know. I'm up to page two already." She propped her chin on the heel of her hand. "Mr. Miller, I've been thinking. Where do you suppose we'd be today if we weren't where we actually are? Aren't



you intrigued by the thought that one person's smallest action today can upset someone else's entire future? I don't understand how the world functions with these continual changes, do you?"

I counted to five; ten would have taken too long. Melanie was a native Austinite but her heart was someplace else—possibly North of San Francisco and more specifically within a balloon ride of Marin County.

"Melanie." I paused at the door of my office. "What happens is not always totally mysterious. Some of what happens is chance; some of it is fate; but a good deal of it is cause and effect. You should concentrate on the cause and effect part, that's where you can really influence events."

"I'm not sure I know what—"

"For example, you're already typing page two of the brief. Go on to page three, then to page four. Before you know it you will have caused an effect, the timely filing of one brief in one lawsuit. That will help keep the world on its axis as well as the wolf from the door. Let me know if Mr. Jamieson makes it." I went into my office and shut the door.

The life of a lawyer in private practice is precarious enough even if the support staff is competent. If your support staff includes a giddy secretary/receptionist like Melanie Bowie, you had better have worker bees elsewhere on the payroll. Luckily I had a fine paralegal, Maria Contreras Sandoval, who at the moment would be over at the Supreme Court Library researching food and drug law for me. (I hold the radical view that sometimes researchers have to get away from their computers and physically root around in a good law library.) Melanie was alternating at the reception desk for the summer with Ginger, whom I considered basically normal, but all fathers like to think that.

Each girl had finished her freshman year in college—Ginger at Texas A & M University in College Station and Melanie at the University of Texas at Austin—and would be returning to college in the fall. They had known each other since elementary school. After some misgivings, at least on Ginger's part, they had decided to room

together for the summer while working half-time at their fathers' law offices and taking summer school courses at U.T.-Austin.

I didn't know what classes Melanie was enriching her mind with, but Ginger was taking two classes. One, for credit, was "Local Archaeology," which involved digging for arrowheads and shards of pottery on abandoned farms under the tutelage of a bearded U.T. professor. The other, not for credit, was "Songwriting for Non-Musicians," an introduction to the craft by none other than Sonny Jamieson, whose motives, I had speculated, were to pick up a little change and to receive from students some of the admiration that successful professional musicians withheld from him.

On the way to my desk I pulled the Jamieson file out of a filing cabinet in case he managed to show up. The file contained a codicil to his will and a loan agreement, both ready for execution, and a form of musical band booking contract with the blanks to be filled in for how much would be paid and when. I put the file on the credenza behind my desk and resumed work—I was behind schedule—on Todd Henninger's proposed lawsuit.

You would have to be crazy to sue a grocery chain for altering the dates on milk jugs. But the natural foods movement had reached Austin, and Todd Henninger was out in front carrying the banner. I hadn't actually seen the banner but I could visualize it: a strawberry grown without insecticides, rampant on a field of broccoli and bean sprouts on which cattle raised without steroids were dancing with loaves of stone-ground whole wheat bread.

The store chain's headquarters was in Illinois. That enabled me to get jurisdiction in federal court, where I should be in a case like this. However, I had doubts about the case, which Todd wanted me to expand beyond milk jugs to larger issues of food additives, pesticide residues, insect contamination, chemical preservatives, use of high fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated oils, food recalls, poultry and pig raising practices, cattle feed, seed monopolies, agricultural subsidies, and genetic manipulation. I told him to slow down, that to take on the entire modern food industry mere lawyers would be insufficient, he'd need to outspend a thousand lobbyists and to hire the president, the Congress, and the Supreme Court.



He slowed down; but even so, did I as a responsible lawyer want to be involved in bringing one more questionable lawsuit against a respectable company ostensibly aimed at punishing unwholesome practices, which incidentally could enrich a plaintiff who had suffered the indignity of a misdated milk jug or a mouse in his Pepsi-Cola bottle and not so incidentally could also enrich the plaintiff's lawyer? Respectable companies might seem to have deep pockets, but they had earned the money in those pockets, and could the cornucopia of capitalism survive armies of litigious ants?

If a child had been hurt by a stone thrown from a power lawnmower designed without protective guards, a judgment for compensatory and also punitive damages against the manufacturer would have seemed to me to be only justice. Still, I was beginning to believe that product liability law had evolved into an amorphous principle encouraging rip-offs by greedy plaintiffs, aided by unscrupulous lawyers, that damaged the social compact.

When the telephone rang and Melanie told me that Mr. Jamieson had arrived, it was a shock. I had begun to think that I was rid of him.

The door opened. In walked a balding man in his fifties in green slacks and a brown velour-trimmed pullover. As usual, Sonny Jamieson looked as if he hadn't shaved for three days (how *did* he manage it?). But his usual sluggishness was absent. He was exalted, jittery, maybe short of sleep. His eyes darted here and there; his pudgy body fizzed with an excitement that did not fit the mundane matters we were supposed to be meeting about.

He leaned forward over my desk, resting his knuckles on my legal pad. "You may wonder why I'm late, Rufus," he began.

This invasion of my space irritated me. I stood up, six feet and a quarter inch to his five feet eight, and retrieved my legal pad. "I don't wonder at all," I said. "I'd wonder if you were on time. Sonny, you'll be late to your own funeral."

"No, I plan to be on time for that."

"A dollar says you'll be late."

"You're on!"

I made a mental note to remember this bet. "Calm yourself and sit down." I sat down and pointed to the middle of the three armchairs opposite my desk.

Sonny Jamieson never had taken advice well. He eased himself down into the chair farthest from the door.

I said: "Sonny, I drafted the codicil the way you wanted but I'm sure you didn't mean it. I'm not talking about your changing the executor from me to Rory, I have no comment on that. I'm talking about your changing the beneficiaries."

"What's wrong with changing the beneficiaries?"

"Everything's wrong with it. You may not think much of your ex-wife, but who else is there to take care of Sonny Two? Do you think Rory is equipped to do that? Do you really want Sonny Two to go into the State Home when you die? I realize it's none of my business."

His unshaven face twitched—I had reached him—but his voice remained calm.

"You're right, it's none of your business. They'll get by. I have responsibilities besides them and—"

Suddenly interrupting himself, he bounced to his feet. "Doggone it, Rufus, listen to me!" He thrust up his fists like a basketball player who has sunk a three-pointer to win the game. "I've written my best song ever and you'll never guess who just recorded it!"

"I knew you had something on your mind besides cutting off your dependents without a cent."

"Get off it, it's my money. And there's going to be a lot more! Where do I sign?"

"Hold your horses. We need witnesses for all three documents. Might as well do them at the same time. If you're going to get rich off this new song of yours, why are you such in a rush to borrow \$25,000? The bank's loan form is brutal. You paid off your home mortgage last year, if I recall, and this puts a lien right back on the house plus a second lien on your Porsche. And why are you holding out for another thousand on this contract to book Mud Bath into Schmidt's? Choo-Choo Rotan probably won't pay a nickel more, and

even if he does the extra legal fee to me to argue about it with his lawyer will be more than the extra commission you'll earn."

He subsided into his armchair, like a turtle withdrawing its head into its shell. He said defensively, "I got debts to pay now. I even got a debt to you." His lips twisted up on one side, revealing an unfriendly eyetooth. "Not that I plan to pay that one real soon. I figure you to be patient, considering what I got on you. As for Choo-Choo, I count on you to out-talk his lawyer."

My stomach muscles tightened. I am not always patient, but I am usually disciplined. "All right, Sonny, I'll scratch your ego. Who did record your song? And what kind of contract did you sign? Why didn't you have me negotiate the contract for you? Or, to be realistic, at least have me review the one-sided document they laid on you. We could have discussed the clauses you might have had a chance to change."

Embarrassed, Sonny said: "I had my reasons to leave you out of it; and the contract wasn't that one-sided. I guess you think I'm an idiot. And now that you ask I'm damned if I'll tell you who recorded my song. It might blow your mind to learn that a worn-out old songwriter from Amarillo like me has a song on the new album of the number one male country singer!"

"Are you telling me George Strait? Willie Nelson? Garth Brooks? Kenny Chesney? Alan Jackson? Tim McGraw? Keith Urban?"

He shook his head at each name. "Bigger!"

"No one is bigger than they are."

"My man is bigger. He's international!"

I thought for a moment. "You can't mean Jethro Polk. Assuming he can still be called country. He wouldn't spit on you."

"He wouldn't, eh?" Sonny grinned and made as if to wipe something off his face.

I said in disbelief: "I know more about Jethro Polk than I want to know." The unforgettable face of Frances Chamberlain swam up from my memory. "And I can't think of any way a prairie dog like you could even get access to that particular King Kong. Much less persuade him to record a song of yours."

"I get around, I do favors, I have contacts you wouldn't believe. And when I finally got to him he remembered he owed me. Now how about that thousand more for the Mud Bath booking?"

"I couldn't get Choo-Choo's lawyer to budge."

"Who's his lawyer?"

I jerked my thumb sideways.

"Who, Barefoot Bowie? He's your partner!"

"He isn't, I've told you a hundred times. We share offices is all."

"Well, you started out as partners when you moved here ten years ago and you're still in cahoots. Came down from Connecticut, wasn't it?"

I moved some papers on my desk.

Sonny half-smiled, the eyetooth visible for a moment. "Forget it. But I want a thousand more for Mud Bath. Choo-Choo needs class acts for Schmidt's if he wants to upgrade those beer-drinkers to margaritas." Schmidt's was a beer garden in Austin that was trying to adjust its redneck image to attract yuppies. "I have exclusive booking rights for Mud Bath in Austin and Choo-Choo is got to pay the piper, me. Four thousand is too cheap for four Saturday nights of Mud Bath. They're back from L.A. and they're hot."

"According to 'Dobie's Club Watch' in the *Armadillo*, they're back from L.A. with their tails between their legs."

The Austin *Armadillo*, a free weekly tabloid that with the Dallas *Observer* and the Houston *Press* constituted the best of Texas' alternative press, covered what was once called the counterculture. It had turned into the New Age. \$1.99 sandals hand-sewed in California communes had been replaced by \$100 name-brand running gear glued together in Chinese factories. In some respects the New Age establishment was more influential than the traditional establishment. Either because of the kind of people in it or because an oppressed group come to power needed to keep its adherents in line, it dealt severely with apostates who strayed into traditional values.

True, this harsh attitude could weaken in the case of materially successful apostates. Sixties flower children who now directed corporations or served in Congress were understood to have matured rather than jumped ship. But woe to the local actor, dancer, or singer-

songwriter who praised a real estate developer or refused to perform at a benefit for illegal immigrants! The *Armadillo* was always nipping at the heels of Austin's mainstream newspaper, the *Times-Herald*. The *Times-Herald* pretended to ignore it. Few advertisers appeared in both.

The *Armadillo*'s pages were filled with news about AIDS, local music, theater, and dance events, local and area happenings, poetry readings, art galleries, the gay and lesbian and bisexual and transsexual communities, women's rights, restaurants, and (they were the same thing) the environment and local politics, along with movie, that is, film, reviews, classified ads, personal ads (some of them strange), letters to the editor, cartoons, and columns—some home-grown like "The Opening Closet," "Dobie's Club Watch," and "Bubba Says Check It Out" and some nationally syndicated like "The Straight Skinny," "Weird People," and "The World of AIDS."

Anyone who traveled with the *Times-Herald* in one pocket and the *Armadillo* in the other had a reasonably balanced view of current events, if he read the *New York Times* daily.

Sonny said: "Your friend Dobie Svoboda is an asshole journalist, not a musician. I wouldn't expect him to understand a class act like Mud Bath. Try your partner Bowie again, go cut a deal."

"I'll see if he's in." I phoned and Barefoot said he was in so I said if he had a minute I would be right over to discuss the value of Mud Bath to Schmidt's.

As I stood up, Sonny winked. "Let me give you some encouragement." He reached into his pocket. "You haven't never had stuff this good. The word from Fox is I'm not supposed to share it, it's a special treat for me." He started walking toward the door of the bathroom at the far end of my office.

I jumped to my feet. "No, you don't!" I caught up with him and snatched the small glassine packet out of his hand and slipped it into my jacket pocket. I could not be sure what was in it but I didn't want to take any chances under the circumstances.

"Hey! Give that back!"

"Why should I?"

"You want me to call the cops?"

"That scares me. Do you promise to lay off here?"

"If it's that important to you."

I thought, *The promise of a drunken man is like a reed bending in the current of a river.* I reached down into my pocket and felt around.

"So give!" Sonny held out his hand palm upward and closed his fingers around the packet. I reached out to him.

"I'm warning you." I turned toward the door.

"How long will you be?"

"No more than ten minutes if Barefoot and I can come up with something and reach Choo-Choo to approve it."

Crossing the lobby enroute to Barefoot's office I found that Melanie had taken a break from word-processing and was feeding the canary. She craned her head toward me. "Mr. Loftus has arrived. Do you need me to be a witness or anything for Mr. Jamieson's documents?"

"Thanks, I'll let you know."

The canary flipped to the far end of the cage.

"Joe Bob," I said to the lean man in a sport shirt and jeans uncoiling from a chair, "don't get up." We both weighed about 180 pounds but he was a good four inches taller than I was.

Joe Bob Loftus insisted on standing up and shaking hands. "The damn rain last night ruined my studio."

"Sorry to hear it. I'll be tied up a while longer."

"And the damn landlord has no insurance. I'll wait."

In the anteroom to Barefoot Bowie's office I stopped to say hello to Tamara Montoya, his paralegal assistant. Like my paralegal, Maria Contreras Sandoval, currently busy at the Supreme Court library, Tamara was a devastating Latina, her petite body wrapped today in a mustard blouse and black skirt. But the evasive expression in her eyes, so different from the open expression in Maria's, seemed today, as always, to reflect a secret sorrow. Some man was not treating her right, or she needed reading glasses. She put down her small gold pen. "Yes, Mr. Miller?"

"He's expecting me, Tamara."

She rang Barefoot, nodded to me, and as I entered his office went back to work.

Barefoot Bowie, a large man, sat at his desk in a simple, expensive, wood chair black except for the gold Harvard crest across the back. He once told me this chair had jeopardized a lot of business for him. But when a prospective client's eyeballs took in the Harvard crest and his mouth turned down in a certain way, Barefoot could usually save the day by drawing attention to the diploma on the wall from the University of Texas Law School that he had prominently mounted on an irregular piece of brown and white cowhide.

Barefoot had been baptized Henry Barefoot Bowie but his mother, who was a Barefoot, was the only person who had ever called him Henry. For a long time she had been dead and he had been Barefoot to all the world. Not counting his black shoes and socks, red suspenders, and rumpled white suit, he generally weighed in at, as he liked to say, "plus or minus 254 pounds, one pound for every county in Texas." Once, on doctor's orders, by a year of self-denial he had got himself below 200 pounds. After explaining to the doctor that he had lost too much territory to feel comfortable, he reversed direction and began adding back a couple of counties a week until he was as big as Texas again. "Welcome back, Deaf Smith," he would say, patting his belly. "Welcome back, Atacosa, Comanche, Kleberg, Red River, Val Verde."

Many years ago Barefoot and I had met and become friends at Harvard College, he a rawboned provincial from West Texas and I a suburban kid from Hartford, Connecticut. After college we had separated for different law schools and private practices and had not met again until circumstances had brought me to Austin ten years ago. We bought a small house on Nueces Street before prices skyrocketed and tried being partners for a while. When the partnership didn't work out we turned the house into two office suites, hired separate paralegal assistants and clerk/typists, and shared common expenses such as library and secretary/receptionist.

Barefoot had started out in general practice and over the years had migrated toward real estate law and criminal law. "There isn't much difference," he would say. "Both involve scoundrels and a lot



of procedural rules.” I had moved from general practice toward entertainment law. But we each felt free to take on anything of interest that turned up so long as we thought we could handle it. “Anything of interest” meant anything brought by a client who was financially able to pay a retainer. Although we were no longer partners, we remained close. We would refer clients to each other when we had a conflict of interest or were otherwise engaged. Sometimes we filled in for each other at the courthouse when a motion had to be heard or a docket call answered.

Without getting up from his Harvard chair, Barefoot stuck out his big hand and shook mine. Texas men do a lot of hand-shaking. “Haven’t seen you since Friday, Rufus,” he said. “Melanie is working out real well, wouldn’t you say?” No one else saw Melanie the way he did, but then he was her father.

“Mary Contrary hasn’t complained yet.” I hung my jacket on the back of a chair and sat down. “So, far be it from me.”

“I was concerned about Ginger complaining rather than Mrs. Sandoval. I’m relieved that Ginger and Melanie still get along. They check with each other and keep the desk covered, as if nothing had happened.”

“Something happened between Ginger and Melanie?”

“I assumed you knew. Melanie moved out of their apartment a few days ago. Some kind of a hissy fit, Melanie wouldn’t say what. I finally got out of her that there was a man problem.”

“One of them has a man problem? Which one?”

“Melanie wasn’t clear about that. She said she and Ginger saw the situation from different planes of consciousness but intended to remain friends.”

“I took Ginger to lunch today and the only topic of conversation was her interest in anthropology.” It occurred to me that anthropology meant the study of man. This required looking into, but now was not the time. “Barefoot, Sonny Jamieson is in my office and he wanted you and me to try one more time on Mud Bath. He still wants \$5,000 for the four gigs at Schmidt’s and last I knew Choo-Choo was stuck on \$4,000. Can we work out an override?”

Within minutes we agreed and got Choo-Choo Rotan's very reluctant blessing by phone. The arrangement guaranteed Mud Bath, in addition to \$1,000 per night, 25% of each night's bar sales in excess of \$2,000 up to a maximum of \$250 per night. This gave Mud Bath a chance to earn a total of \$5,000 for the four nights but only if Schmidt's sold considerable liquor. Although I had little confidence that Choo-Choo would report his bar sales accurately, a chance at a percentage of bar sales was better than nothing. One thing I was sure of, if I personally had to listen to Mud Bath for three hours I'd drop a lot of money on that bar.

"Don't forget your jacket," Barefoot said as I left his office.

"Oh yeah, thanks." On my way back I stopped in Barefoot's bathroom and inspected his mirror. It looked okay except for the face in it: hazel eyes a little clouded, nose pinched, mouth a little tense. What was going on with Ginger? I did the necessary, straightened my tie, and combed my brown hair (it had used to be reddish). Appearances were so important these days.

When I opened my office door to give Sonny the deal, I didn't see him and I sensed that the office was somehow different. The furniture hadn't moved and the lights and shadows around them seemed the same, but there was a feeling of pressure in the air, or some kind of smell. After checking around the office and finding nothing I noticed that the bathroom door was partly open. I walked over to the bathroom and opened the door the rest of the way.

Sonny's body, pullover rucked up and green pants split at the brown-stained seat, lay prone across the edge of the open shower stall. His knees were between the toilet bowl and the shower stall. His face, unnaturally pink, was pressed into a gray sludge on the shower floor. A trickle of cherry-red blood was moving over the white tiles toward the shower drain. The stench was overpowering.

## CHAPTER 2

This was my first professional death, so to speak. I had not realized that the Austin Police Department would react so quickly to a 911 call. The *Times-Herald* sometimes complained of delays in police reaction to burglaries in apartment complexes in South Austin and teenage gang rumbles on the other side of Interstate 35 in East Austin on Saturday nights. Possibly a sudden death in a lawyer's office in the 1300 block of Nueces Street in downtown Austin on a Monday afternoon was more convenient and interesting than those situations.

Sonny Jamieson was pronounced dead at the scene by a doctor who without leaving Brackenridge Hospital was able to read the flat line on Sonny's cardiograph through telemetry equipment brought by an EMS van. Flat lines on a graph of an Austin high-tech company's sales and earnings were unwelcome enough. But on a cardiograph they were definitely to be avoided.

My office and bathroom area and Sonny's body were photographed and inspected and videotaped. The body was hustled away by the EMS van to the county medical examiner's office on West 11<sup>th</sup> Street, the siren shrieking, as it departed, louder than seemed strictly necessary.

A yellow tape that the police would not remove for two days shut off my office from access by civilians, including me. I was allowed to relocate my essential files and desk materials to a spare room in back next to the Xerox and coffee room.

After the initial hubbub, all of us were questioned separately: I; Barefoot; Melanie; Mary Contrary; Tamara Montoya; and Darla DiDibuno, Barefoot's clerk-typist. My clerk-typist, Bean Eargle, was still out delivering documents to the post office and the Travis County Courthouse and other law offices, one of which he was ringing the doorbell of, he told me later, when the EMS van sailed past him with siren sounding and panel lights flashing. Also questioned were Joe Bob Loftus, who galvanized by the event was

still hanging around the lobby when four officers roared up in two cars with rooftop lights flashing and invaded the building, and Todd Henninger, a wiry man in a well-cut charcoal gray suit, who had arrived for our appointment one step ahead of the officers and was similarly swept unwillingly into the investigation.

The detective in charge, Sergeant Juan Delgado Ortiz of the Homicide Unit, had arrived seconds after the other officers and seconds before EMS. He was a dark, slender man in his thirties, in plainclothes. I knew a little about him from Maria, who had dated him for a while the previous year before she married her high school sweetheart, Luis Sandoval (still referred to around the office behind her back as “Darling Luis”). Maria claimed that Sgt. Ortiz had a great sense of humor. If so, it must have been when he was off duty.

When he was done with me he suggested that I wait till he was through here and then come over to his office to give a statement. I said that was fine but I had some things to take care of first. I explained that I was the executor of Mr. Jamieson’s will and wanted to make sure that the family was notified and funeral arrangements made. Sgt. Ortiz said to wait on the funeral arrangements, the county medical examiner had work to do. We arranged that I would meet him at his office in an hour. I would have preferred to go with him then and there, because I was not looking forward to making telephone calls to Minelle Duval Jamieson in Pampa and Rory Rotan here in Austin.

I looked around the lobby. Melanie seemed frozen in her chair at the reception desk, unable to respond to the questions that Sgt. Ortiz was directing toward her. Barefoot was standing beside his daughter with his arm around her shoulders. Finally Sgt. Ortiz shrugged, beckoned over an officer to continue with her, and said something to Barefoot. He and Barefoot started toward the door to Barefoot’s office area. The two men seemed to know each other, which was not surprising; Barefoot often had business at the APD.

Maria and Tamara Montoya were sitting together on the couch opposite the reception desk. Sgt. Ortiz paused at the couch. “Hello, Miss Montoya.” “Sergeant,” she said faintly. He gestured for her to join him and Barefoot. “Can we see you for a minute.” She looked at

Maria with an anguished expression and rose from the couch. Sgt. Ortiz held the door open for her and Barefoot and followed them through.

I went over to Maria. "Are they finished with you? How do you feel?"

She shivered. "It gives me bad memories of Mexico." She had immigrated from Mexico with her mother and brothers and sisters 15 years before, when she was a schoolgirl. She had never told me what had happened to her father in Mexico.

"They said for me to wait here. But do you think it would be okay if I went back to see Darla? She's lying down in my office. She's never seen a dead person before."

None of the officers were paying any attention to us. One, a compact man with the milky skin and pink eyes of an albino, was talking with Melanie and taking notes; other officers were going in and out of my office or the lobby. I nodded and Maria disappeared to attend to Barefoot's horizontal clerk-typist.

As I went out onto the porch overlooking the side yard I passed the albino officer who had been questioning Melanie. He was reviewing his notes with a puzzled expression. "That one," he said to another officer, indicating Melanie, whose head was now on the desk on her folded arms, "I asked her what the man was here for and when he came in and how he acted." He squinted at his notes. "She said he was here to sign his will—appropriate, no?—but she didn't know when he came in, she doesn't live in a time zone like other people. She doesn't have to go by the normal rules here on earth."

The other officer shook his head. "Kids nowadays. The parents are more to blame than they are."

"Families are falling apart," said the albino officer. "The situation is very serious. Children are being abused. Men don't behave themselves." His fingers closed around his night stick. "Something should be done about it."

From the porch I could see officers and spectators milling around in the yard and on the sidewalk. By now three or four police cars were parked around, engines running and roof lights flashing. It was not a scene I had ever wanted to take place at my office.

Just below the porch two men stood beside a woman reporter from the *Times-Herald* in navy slacks and a blazer. She had buzzed in on a motor scooter—a vehicle more than a moped and less than a motorcycle—and, having got all she could, which was very little, out of me and the police, was grasping at straws. The two straws in question, Joe Bob Loftus and Todd Henninger, were happy to accommodate her. Monosyllabic a few minutes before with the police, they were talkative now that they had been released. Death was a great disguiser of people's attitudes toward the deceased, or maybe it changed their attitudes, because a stranger would not have known from the pious sentiments that Joe Bob and Todd were expressing to the reporter that neither of them had had much use for Sonny Jamieson when he was alive.

I watched the reporter size them up with a flick of her eyes. Women, like cats, go for the cream: sports shirt and jeans, although taller and younger, lost out to establishment gray suit.

She held a tape recorder microphone out to Todd. "Just speak slowly into this thang."

Ducking in ahead of Todd, Joe Bob told the microphone: "Sonny Jamieson was a good friend to me. He was a solid citizen. Took care of his son, who always been in a wheelchair."

"Actually," Todd corrected, "his ex-wife took care of Sonny Two. But Sonny always took care of his ex-wife."

"Whatever," said Joe Bob. "In the sixties Sonny wrote some purt' good rockabilly songs, 'Gallopang Angels' and 'Brenda Brenda Brenda' come to mind, and I think one of his songs hit the charts the Indie chart not the reg'lar one those were his glory days."

The reporter frowned. "I said slowly."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Todd said: "The chart song was 'Pull My Chain.' He was privileged to have Mr. Presley record it on a bootleg label."

Joe Bob turned and looked at Todd. "I was going to say that, Todd. In the seventies Sonny kind of faded in songwriting. Did some missionary work for the Country Music Association. Began to get into other aspects, promotion and booking and teaching."

Todd crowded in on the microphone. "Sonny never gave up on songwriting, though. In his heart he always was a songwriter first. He could craft a song, he knew where the pieces go.

"But he needed collaborators to wake him up and good ones wouldn't give him the time of day."

"Todd, if you'll just let me have a minute. Sonny kept on recording songs, used my studio in fact. He must have left a catalog of 300 songs. The difficulty was getting them cut. Music is a hard business."

The reporter yawned. "Who am I speaking with?"

"Ma'am, my name is Joe Bob Loftus, L-O-F-T-U-S. My studio is Red Bud Recording, that's R-E-D—"

"Thank you, Mr. Crofter." The reporter shoved the microphone into Todd's face. "You got anything to add, Mister?"

Now that he had a clear shot at the microphone, Todd was suddenly tongue-tied. "Sonny was—" He cleared his throat. "Sonny was a personal friend and I'll miss him. He understood the importance of good nutrition and clean living, well, he didn't always live up to that aspect. But he avoided additives and fried foods and qualified as a vegetarian if you can call a chicken a vegetable. My business is producing songs and managing musical acts. I was Jethro Polk's first manager, I could tell you some stories. My name is Todd Henninger and the way it's spelled is—"

"Thank you, Mr. Hennager, I got all I need." The reporter turned off the tape recorder. She unshipped the cellular phone at her waist, turned her blue back on the two men, and began hitting the buttons.

I went back inside to make my phone calls. Crossing the threshold I caught a glimpse of Melanie Bowie, her spirits recovered, talking animatedly with Maria and the now vertical Darla DiBuono. I wondered who the Eskimo had been who had declined to leave a message for me. Probably someone connected with Fox Tippet, he worked with a lot of Hispanics. I had been expecting all day to hear one way or another from Fox Tippet. We had some business to take care of.



## CHAPTER 3

When I had made and signed a statement about the who, what, when, where, how, and why of Sonny Jamieson's visit to my office, Sgt. Ortiz made me a copy and dropped the original in his out-basket. His wall clock said five minutes to three. The voices and footsteps of people passing in the corridor echoed into his small, neatly ordered alcove; it was hardly an office. Through the closed window came the sound of traffic on Interstate 35 a hundred yards away.

He leaned back in his chair. "I had expected to have a report from Dr. Howard by now. I wonder what's holding him up." He telephoned the medical examiner's office. After a fast back and forth he hung up. "No information," he said.

My waist beeper went off. "Excuse me." I called my office, got the number, and reached an agitated Fox Tippet.

"Rufus! I'm calling from the booking desk and I want you to get me out of here."

I asked which booking desk, Austin Police Department or county jail, and learned that he was in the same building I was in, the APD headquarters between 7th and 8th Streets. "What did you do this time? Moon a street person?"

"They've got it in for me. They know my car and stop me night and day on any excuse to search it. There is never anything in my car but they keep hoping."

"They can't just stop you and search your car without probable cause."

"Tell it to the Supreme Court."

"You could bring an action for harassment."

"Yeah, yeah. This time they said I didn't come to a full stop at a stop sign."

"That's no reason to bring you in."

"As he was leaving I gave him the finger."

"So you're here for assault and battery?"

"No, resisting arrest. Get me out, will you?"

"Give me a couple of minutes."

"Make it one."

I hung up. "Were you going to ask me anything else, Sergeant?"

"Yes, Mr. Miller. Who did Sonny Jamieson usually get his cocaine from? And who was that on the phone?"

"Fox Tippet—"

"Are you answering both questions?"

"—was on the phone," I finished. "You're quick. I wouldn't know who Sonny's suppliers are. Were."

"He may not be around anymore, but they still are. I want to make the point that they are enemies of society and to catch them we need the full cooperation of public-spirited people like you."

"Good luck."

"It's not my responsibility, but our narcotics people do cooperate with the Drug Enforcement Administration. As long as you're here, what can you tell me about Jamieson's private life, any enemies, any reason he had to live or not live, any idea why this might have happened?" His dark eyes searched my face as if the answers were there rather than in my brain.

The answers stayed in my brain. "What *did* happen? I'd be interested in knowing what the medical examiner says and when the body can be released to a funeral home. He wasn't the most popular man in Austin but I don't know who might have wanted him dead." It would have been more honest to say: *I don't have time right now to kick around ideas about who might have enjoyed doing in Sonny Jamieson more than I might have, and if I did have time I wouldn't anyway.*

"I'm not asking for suspects, just information and circumstances and relationships."

"I'll call you if anything comes to mind."

"Thanks." He pushed back from his desk and stood up. "You can have the funeral home keep in touch with my office. I don't know exactly when Dr. Howard will be through."

I walked down half a flight to the checkpoint and corridor that led to the booking desk. Fox Tippet, his hands in his pockets and his bootheels hooked on the rungs of his chair, sat with his jeans-clad

legs jack-knifed in front of him. When he saw me he got up and ran a hand through his long straw-colored hair. "About time, Rufus."

The officer seated behind the desk kept writing and did not look up. He wore the tan uniform of the Travis County Sheriff's office rather than the blue APD uniform.

I read the nameplate on his desk. "What was he brought in for, Sgt. Mead?"

Sgt. Walters—the nameplate turned out to be wrong—explained that the arresting officer had cooled down from Mr. Tippet's insulting behavior and had dropped the charges. Mr. Tippet was free to go. His car, however, had apparently got taken somewhere by mistake. They were trying to locate it and would notify him when it was found. In the meantime if I wanted I could arrange for him to be driven home. If not, Sgt. Walters would be glad to call a taxi for him but Travis County and the APD did not have taxi fare in their budgets.

Fox told Sgt. Walters that they could look all day but the car was clean. If they poked a lot of holes in his car he personally would see to it that they regretted it. Sgt. Walters repeated that they were looking for the car and would notify him when it was found.

On our way downstairs, Fox said: "I heard about Sonny Jamieson."

"What did you hear?"

"Don't act so dumb. It was on the radio. All they knew was Jamieson died suddenly this afternoon *in your office*." He looked at me expectantly.

"Don't you act so dumb. It was some kind of bad trip. Your department, not mine."

When he asked what I meant, I gave him a few details. He whistled. "Well, I didn't do it. Nobody better come looking for me."

"Don't count on it."

"Come on, Rufus. Who knocks off a milk cow?"

"Was he paid up?"

He gave me a funny look and fell silent.

I did not need directions to his house. A metallic gray Cadillac sedan behind us on MoPac Boulevard turned with us as we exited

onto 35th Street. His house did not compare with the mansions on Balcones Drive that we passed first—the Cadillac also followed when we turned right onto Balcones Drive—or the large homes higher up on Mount Bonnell, but his house on the lower slope was not shabby: a two-story French Provincial, white with light gray shutters. As we approached his house I said: “That Cadillac has taken every turn we have since MoPac.”

His head whipped around, then he relaxed. “Oh, that’s just my neighbor, the one on the uphill side.”

“What’s his name?”

“Riker. Don’t know his first name or what he does. He moved in a year ago not long after I did.”

“Friendly neighborhood you have here.”

“How many people do you know in your apartment house?”

I thought of the Scanlans, the Benois, B. B. Gardiner, Bishop and Mr. Wickersham, Mona Eisely, Bobo Lobo, Marmadale. “Not many, but isn’t that different? People in apartments don’t need to mingle with the neighbors to borrow pruning shears or gas for their lawnmowers or sign petitions to keep convenience stores out of the neighborhood.”

I lived in the center of an apartment complex named The Four Winds on Spyglass Drive a mile and a half south of Zilker Park, in the squat, hollow tower named The Hill. The Hill was built around a large open courtyard. Walkways that overlooked the courtyard circled the building on each of the three floors. The building was held up by steel and concrete pillars; if the pillars buckled, the building would come down onto the cars parked beneath and squash them like bugs. I had been there three years and so far the pillars had held. I wasn’t really worried about it.

As in any apartment house, The Hill’s denizens kept pretty much to themselves and I was acquainted only with people I had met at the mailbox wall or around the pool or in one of the laundromats, and the man next door, for whom I had cut a length of dowel to fit his window after he was cleaned out of his Macintosh computer, TV, VCR, and stereo equipment by thieves who pried open the window when he was on vacation.

“That’s what you get for asking the *Times-Herald* to cut off your home delivery for a week,” I told him. “They say the clerks in the circulation department sell the names to professional thieves. Next time, tell me and I’ll just throw away your paper every day.” “Okay, but think of the waste,” he said. “Or maybe you want to read my paper free, or maybe you’ll sell my name to professional thieves.” He was an accountant.

By repetition I had of course grown familiar with the sight of many of the occupants of The Hill. In particular, a proud, picturesque female of a certain age attracted my attention. Always wrapped in fur whatever the season, at any time of the day or night she might be found stepping along the walkways or listening at doors, and one day we scraped up a speaking acquaintance. It had not yet developed beyond that, just me saying, “Hi there, Marmadale,” and she, when she would deign to utter any sound at all, responding with a well-modulated “meow.” She was the prettiest orange cat I had ever seen. Her striped tail was white at the fluffy tip. I didn’t know who owned her—she acted as if she owned the whole place—but from her blue rabies tag and well-fed look somebody did. Understanding, from the odorless air that leaked out under my door, that I had no pets, Marmadale took to hanging around my door, begging to be let in so she could expand her territory, but I never would oblige.

Fox said: “I don’t know about your apartment house, but on this street you don’t run over to borrow a cup of sugar from your neighbor.”

“There’s not a lot of that at The Hill at The Four Winds either,” I admitted.

We pulled into his driveway. The Cadillac that had been behind us turned into the next driveway; up went the garage door and in went the Cadillac.

“Maybe he’s with the Drug Enforcement Administration and has you under surveillance,” I suggested.

“Don’t say that, I have enough on my mind already.” His eyes were restless. “I appreciate the lift. Put it on my bill.”

“I’m glad you mentioned your bill. I’m going to have to charge interest, like doctors. How about a thousand on account?”

“Take it out in trade?”

“No, thanks. I’d rather keep on a cash basis my modest purchases of your sideline product.”

“Jamieson was so deep into me, and so are a couple of others, that I’ve been having trouble paying my bills. Especially the big one.”

I made a gesture of pushing things back. “I don’t want to hear about it. Sgt. Ortiz asked me what connection there was between you and Jamieson. If he finds out, I’d rather it wasn’t through me. Are you getting out of the car, or do you like it in here?”

He put his hand on the door latch. “Did Jesus reach you this morning?”

“Oh, was that Jesus? No.”

“I don’t know exactly what he’s up to. He told me last night he wanted to talk to you about a problem.”

“I don’t have any problems that gorilla can help me with unless he’s still your delivery boy.”

“Maybe it’s a problem of his. He seems to be after one of the girls in your office.”

“I assumed he was trying to give me a message from you. By the way, it’s about time.”

“I’ll tell him. Any other messages I have for you, I’ll give you directly.” He got out of the car but he didn’t close the door. “Or if it has to be indirect, I’ll make sure there’s some authentication you will recognize.”

“A secret handshake? Wonderful. The only message I want from you is, for starters, a thousand dollars.”

He closed the car door. “Your bill is on my list.”

On my way back down Mount Bonnell I noticed that a little maroon Datsun in my rear view mirror was turning whenever I did, about half a block back. It seemed too obvious to be real and, sure enough, when I deliberately turned the wrong way off Balcones Drive and took a right down 35th Street toward the water treatment plant and the Gloria Mundi Art Museum, the Datsun took a left up toward MoPac and disappeared.

Since I was there anyway I parked on the grounds of the museum, formerly someone's in-town villa, and spent a few minutes walking among the sculptures. Life was short and you might as well feel the sculptures. There were a couple of new ones: a Henry Moore knockoff composed of holes, hollows, and melting surfaces, and a sort of Venus-Madonna going somewhere in a hurry with a layered hairdo and few garments. I much preferred the second sculpture, as a reminder that three-dimensional humanity was where symbolism, cubism, surrealism, minimalism, all the -isms, came from.

I got back in the car and proceeded back up 35th Street. Opposite the water treatment plant I reached Todd Henninger on my car phone and rescheduled our appointment for my office at four-thirty. That was less than an hour away. I had just about made a decision on the lawsuit he proposed to bring against the Peach Blossom grocery chain but I wanted to visit the scene of the crime first.

When I called my office to tell them I'd be in soon, Melanie gave me my messages. They included (a) five calls from real estate agents who had heard about Sonny's death and if he had a house wanted me to give them an exclusive on it (he did, but I would give an exclusive only to someone I owed or thought was really competent), (b) "a message from the *male secretary, an Englishman, of Wesley Patterson III*, who sounds like *a big New York lawyer*," and (c) "the same man who wouldn't leave a message wouldn't leave a message again, I know I shouldn't have said he sounded *foreign*, Maria has been scolding me, he was a *person of Hispanic ancestry* and I certainly didn't recognize his voice."

"Bless you, Melanie," I said. "Before you know it you'll be politically correct."

I reached Joe Bob Loftus on the third try. On the first try I got a recorded message at Red Bud Recording Studio. On the second try I called his home and his wife said they were separated and gave me the telephone number at his new apartment, which she described as "a one-bedroom in a student ghetto." That was where I finally reached him.

"You batching it for a while, Joe Bob?"

"It's better than living with a bitch!"



"I suppose. I kind of miss it myself. Do you still want to see me about the leaking roof at your studio?"

"You bet I do! I've taken photographs but you need to see what a mess it's made."

"Try for nine-thirty tomorrow?"

"Sure, but I have a session scheduled for ten."

On the way to my office I stopped at two Peach Blossoms and checked out the milk bins. In both stores the dairy section, in accordance with the invariable custom of supermarkets, was way in back. You couldn't get there without passing everything else, either because the store management would rather have you buy merchandise with higher profit margins than milk or because they wanted to make sure you bought something in addition to milk.

At neither store did it look to me as though the freshness dates on the milk cartons or gallon jugs had been altered. At the first store the only thing unusual was that a few cartons lacked dates.

At the other store the fresher containers were lined up in back out of easy reach: normal. But also the cartons faced the wrong way and the jugs had the dates on the back side so that you had to turn them around if you wanted to see the date: not so normal.

"May I be of assistance?" a man said.

I looked up from my squatting position. The man did not have the usual store apron. He was wearing a pink three-piece suit. It was not the vest so much as the pinkness that I found objectionable. "Do you work here?" I asked.

"You look like *you* work here," he said. "Are you putting those jugs in or taking them out?"

"Both. I'm looking for the freshest milk."

"All the milk here is fresh. Yes, I work here. I'm the manager and I want to make sure you locate what you want. At Peach Blossom we aim to please. Are you a comparison shopper?"

"My cat is finicky." I straightened up. "I'll take this jug."

"You must have several cats."

"Only one." In a way I did have a cat, although Marmadale wouldn't get any of this milk. "Is there some reason why the dates on these jugs are on the back?"

“Let me see. My goodness, you’re right. Are they all that way?”

I said: “Yes.”

The man looked at me. “Let me make a note of that.” He took out a pad of paper and wrote something down.

“And is there some reason why the cartons are all placed backwards?”

“I don’t want any trouble. Are you from the Health Department?”

“I’m not from the Health Department.” I had been going to advise Todd Henninger to drop the matter, the world had enough frivolous lawsuits; but now my dander was up. Maybe Ralph Nader, King Plaintiff, was not the unbalanced egoist I had always considered him to be.

The man walked along beside me as I headed for the checkout counter. “Are you a lawyer? Why don’t you take that jug for your cat, I’ll square it with the clerk. As an apology from Peach Blossom for having the dates on the back.”

“Thanks, I’ll pay for the milk,” I said virtuously. A client of Barefoot’s had once told me never to steal anything small. What he stole was savings and loan associations, mainly.

When I left the store the manager followed me out to my car. In his pink three-piece suit he looked out of place in the parking lot. “We certainly apologize about this mistake.” There was sweat on his upper lip.

“Have a nice day.” As I pulled out of the parking lot I saw him writing down my license number.

## CHAPTER 4

My expected visitor, Todd Henninger, was not in my office when I got there but, such is the pendulum of life, I had an unexpected visitor. Rory Rotan stopped talking with Melanie and came straight over to me with her right hand raised menacingly in the air. I stopped short but then saw that she was merely holding a key in her hand.

You might think that a woman who had just unexpectedly lost her live-in lover to the grave was entitled to be distraught. But although her face was flushed, her auburn hair was immaculately curled and her blue linen dress didn't have a wrinkle in it.

"Do you see this key?" she said. "The damn bank won't let me in Sonny's safe deposit box! As soon as you called I went down and told them I was executor and sole beneficiary but they still wouldn't let me open it. They said I needed to bring letters testamentary or a police officer."

I said: "Rory, let's go in my office. I couldn't explain everything in one telephone call."

"Are we supposed to walk through that yellow tape?"

"No, we're not. I'm set up in another office in back. Melanie, what's wrong with you?"

"Mr. Miller, that woman has been being mean to me. Why should I know where Mr. Jamieson's will is?"

"There, there." I handed Melanie my handkerchief. "Ms. Rotan is not herself today."

"The hell I'm not!"

Melanie patted her eyes and handed me back the handkerchief, now blotched with mascara, and some pink message slips. "A lot of Austin people have been trying to reach you. And the lawyer's secretary in New York called again. Did I mention that he was an Englishman?"

"You did. It's not common in Austin, but it's okay, Melanie. There's lots of male secretaries in Manhattan and half of them are

from the British Isles. New York City is still the last frontier for adventurous Brits.”

By New York rules, if you call back a lawyer you don’t know the same day his secretary calls you, you lose face. If he himself calls and leaves a message giving a good reason for you to call him back, it’s okay to call him back without delay. I was going to play this one by New York rules. So far, only his secretary had called, and no reason had been given for me to call back.

I escorted Rory Rotan back to my temporary office and explained to her that Sonny had died without executing the codicil to his will that would have made her executor and sole beneficiary. Her composed manner continued to surprise me but it was pleasanter than having her hysterical.

Her eyes narrowed. “Sonny promised he had made me the executor and was leaving everything to me. You’re telling me he didn’t do either thing?”

“He intended to. He had me draw up the document, but he didn’t execute it.” I wanted to talk to her about funeral arrangements, but she wasn’t giving me a chance.

“When did he ask you to draw it up? Did you tell him you had done it? Did he know all he had to do was sign it?”

“That’s why he came to my office. But before he could sign it—”

Rory took a handkerchief out of her purse. She looked at it. She put it back in her purse.

“You said he died of an overdose of drugs.”

“An overdose, or something. I’m not a doctor. That’s what it looked like to me. We’ll have to wait for the medical examiner’s verdict.”

“It happened right in your office, where the yellow tape is?”

“I left him in my office for a few minutes. I told him not to take a hit. When I came back he was on the floor of my bathroom.”

“You told him not to take a hit?”

“He acted like he was going to.”

“You let him kill himself?”

"I don't think he meant to kill himself. Maybe there was something wrong with the dose. He was in a very good mood. He said Jethro Polk had just recorded a new song of his."

"I know about that song. So he didn't sign the codicil and you're still executor and his ex-wife is still the beneficiary."

"His ex-wife and his crippled son."

Suddenly Rory stood up and said: "Oh God! Oh God! The poor dumb bunny!" Her voice was so thick I could hardly understand her. "I loved him and he loved me and we were going to take care of each other the rest of our lives but I knew I could never trust him to do anything right! Oh God, what am I supposed to do now?"

"He would want you to go on," I said. "He loved you."

She burst into tears. Obviously this was not a good time to discuss funeral arrangements. I put my arm around her and started walking her out to her car. Todd Henninger, sitting in the waiting room, looked the other way when he saw us. If things had developed as they might have, Rory would probably not have been much affected by Sonny's death and if she had been Todd would have been the person walking with his arm around her.

As we passed the reception desk Melanie reached up a pink message slip that said: "Wesley Patterson III called from this number about Mr. Jamieson's will."

Rory let me lead her along the front walk, her head sagging forward over her crossed arms, leather purse dangling from one hand. She was crying openly now. I told her she didn't have to drive, I would take her anywhere she wanted. She shook her head and opened the door to her red Mercedes 300SL roadster. The soft top was down. She got in and sat behind the wheel with her hands in her lap. I repeated I would take her wherever she wanted to go, she was not fit to drive. She shook her head again. I stayed on the sidewalk. After a couple of minutes she took hold of the wheel, started the car, and drove off.

Todd Henninger said when we were seated in my office, "Rory seems to be taking it hard, but I'll bet Choo-Choo has a different point of view. He never could stand Sonny. Come to think of it, I don't know many men who would be thrilled to have their daughters

putting their shoes under Sonny's bed." He crossed himself. "Meaning no disrespect to Sonny, the worthless son of a bitch." He crossed himself again. "I didn't mean to say that. I hope he's galloping with those angels even as we speak."

He was happy to hear about my visits to the Peach Blossom stores and my willingness to consider representing the Friends of Freshness if he really wanted to go through with a lawsuit against the stores' parent company.

I said: "It will need to be a class action, and I've never done one. You might be better off with a professional shakedown artist in class actions. It wouldn't hurt my feelings. If you want me to do it, I'll want a \$10,000 retainer, and I'll need to associate another lawyer. He'll probably want a retainer too."

"Ten thousand dollars?" Wade's Adam's apple moved up and down. "I'll talk to the chapter. They're not all as well-heeled as I am."

"Take your time. As it is I have a full plate, and the matter is probably not worth litigating in the first place."

"I'll get back to you on it. But I tell you what, there's something else I know I could use your help on, if it happens. I'm managing two acts now but they're settling in and I've been approached by a new country band, the Pecos Kids."

"I've heard of them. Dobie Svoboda says they could be another Asleep at the Wheel."

"They told me they'd be at the Corner Cafe tonight and to come by and get better acquainted. If we make a deal, I'll need a manager's contract from you that crosses every i and dots every t."

"Then you better let me help you make the deal. You can't spring a contract on them with stuff you didn't talk about first. What if I join you tonight at the Corner Cafe? Unless, of course, you were planning to take your latest conquest."

Startled, Todd said: "What would I want to mess around on Tina for?"

"Then you're bringing Tina?"

"She wouldn't come if I asked her. I was planning to go by myself. She'd rather watch the tube or play bridge and she hates the music business."

"How did you ever attract a sensible woman like her?"

"I'll ignore that. You come on if you want to, as long as it isn't billable time."

Todd did not know how much I had heard about his extramarital proclivities and in particular his former relationship with Rory Rotan from Sonny Jamieson, who broke it up. I wondered whether he was still at it, but if he wanted to live that way it was not my affair, so long as it didn't affect me or mine. I asked him if it was okay to bring along Dobie Svoboda and his wife, we had talked about going out to have a beer and hear a band someplace tonight, and Dobie might have useful comments about the Pecos Kids. Todd said he doubted that but he had no objection, Dobie's wife was cute.

By now it was after six o'clock and I was the only one left in the office. I returned some of my stack of telephone calls.

Dobie Svoboda said: "Can't make it, son. Patches has a faculty thing at St. Michael's and I have to attend. Maybe we can jog tomorrow. Meet me at the gazebo at noon?"

Choo-Choo Rotan said: "Rufus, I won't pretend to be sorry about Jamieson, but Rory is taking it hard. I'd like you to fill me in on this will business when you get a chance."

Fox Tippet said: "I think I'm being taped so I'll only say this once. A certain person needs to see you tonight at a contrary location and I'd use a borrowed car if I were you, Mr. Lawrence."

The recorded voice of a young man with an English accent said: "You have reached the office of Wesley Patterson III. Office hours are 10 to 5, Eastern Time, Monday through Friday. Please leave your name and telephone number, hour, and date, and state your business, after the sound." After the beep I said: "Mr. Patterson, it's good to hear from you. Rufus Miller returning your call at 4:30 PM Pacific Time."

Sgt. Ortiz said: "The cause of death was ingestion of cocaine mixed with something else. The examiner will need the body another two days."

Ginger said: “Daddy, I made a casserole! I need your advice on something!! Come over for supper!!!”

For supper I had planned to dislodge something interesting from the back of the freezer compartment of my refrigerator and microwave it, but a father has obligations. In five minutes I was at Ginger and Melanie’s apartment, except that from what Barefoot had told me it wasn’t Melanie’s apartment any more. I planned to be very indirect about Melanie: when you need to worm information out of people, by indirections find directions out, legal training is invaluable.

“Where’s Melanie?” I asked when Ginger opened the door.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you?” Ginger’s eyes had never been bluer. “She decided to get her own apartment. Doesn’t the casserole smell terrific? It’s the herbs, Mom just sent me the recipe. You set the table and I’ll dish up.”

“How can she afford an apartment by herself? How can you afford one by yourself? Why did she leave? Did you two have a fight about something?” Or about someone, I added silently.

“The iced tea is in the fridge. I think the yellow candles.” She sang a rising and falling line in a deep bass voice: “The yellow candles are on the table, kiss me, I love you madly, Mabel. And how do these napkins grab you?” She opened a package of paper napkins covered with huge green lilypads. “Now isn’t this nice?”

“It’s nice.”

“We didn’t really have a fight. It’s just that we have different values. Of course that’s been obvious for years, but we’ve known each other forever and I never give up on anyone. We’re still friends, she called me from the office today to tell me about Mr. Jamieson. Whew! What it is, she’s seeing somebody. There is elbow macaroni and sharp cheddar and ground beef and tomatoes, but it’s the garlic, cilantro, oregano, and cayenne pepper that make the difference. Of course I can’t afford this apartment by myself, that’s why I need your advice. I’ve been interviewing possible roommates and it’s come down to Teresa or Paula.”

“What are they like?”



"The three of us get along real well. We considered all cramming in here together, but it's too small. Three girls with two in the bedroom and one in the living room might work, we could change off. But three girls in one bathroom would not work, not with the jars and bottles and gadgets we all have."

I made a mental note to check her bathroom for shaving cream, calculator batteries, and (it was supposed to be coming back) bay rum.

Ginger continued: "We've agreed to do whatever is best for all of us. Do you think they should go off and room together somewhere else, or should one of them come in with me, and if so which one?"

"How happy could I be with either, were t'other dear charmer away."

"Sort of. So which one?"

"Which do you like better?"

"I don't like either one better. Teresa and I are exactly the same size, all of our clothes fit both of us. But Paula would inspire me to better study habits."

Go for Paula! my mind screamed telepathically into Ginger's mind. But if I was not the smartest father in the world, I was not the dumbest either. "An intriguing choice," I said. "Let me know what you decide."

The corners of Ginger's mouth turned down. "Don't you have any opinion? I really want to know."

She wasn't going to trick me that easily. I examined my fingernails. Somebody had been biting them. "My child, far be it from me to intrude in a delicate matter like picking a roommate." Go for Paula! my mind screamed again into her mind.

Ginger scratched her head. "Teresa has a million neat clothes. I'm leaning toward her."

I could feel her observing me but I didn't flinch. "Clothes are important," I said doggedly. "They and written language are all that distinguish us from apes."

Ginger smiled a little. "Okay, Dad." Then her expression became serious. "Now tell me about Mr. Jamieson. I'm so upset about that! Tonight was supposed to be the last class in 'Songwriting for Non-

Musicians.’ He was going to summarize the course and inspire us to go out and write our own songs. He was so sweet. We all loved him, and now he’s gone. Melanie said he dropped dead in your office while he was trying to change his will, but she’s so unreliable. What really happened?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Don’t I?” she said.

## CHAPTER 5

After Ginger and I had cleaned up the kitchen I asked to borrow her car for an hour, I had an errand in a neighborhood where my almost-new LeSabre was not appropriate.

Ginger put her hands on her hips. "What are you up to, Daddy? Is this connected with Mr. Jamieson's death? From your description it might not have been accidental."

"The attorney-client privilege is recognized throughout the English-speaking world."

She handed me the keys. "Don't get any bullet holes in Brown Cow." This was an '81 Toyota Celica now the color of brown linoleum left too long in the sun. "Pump the accelerator and go easy on the brakes."

The small one-story house where Maria and Luis Sandoval lived was on Fourth Street deep in East Austin. I had been there once when Maria, housebound with a pollen allergy, needed to have some papers she was working on for me taken out to her and discussed.

I crossed I-35 on Twelfth Street at the corner of Comal and immediately ran into a dense collection of stalled vehicles. Up ahead there seemed to be a multi-car collision. People in various states of excitement were milling about.

I left the car, ignoring the popular conviction that no Anglo walks safely in East Austin after dark. My shoes crunched on broken syringes, empty cigarette lighters, stems used for smoking crack, and shattered bottles. The debris glittered in streetlights and headlights of cars nosing along the congested street. Ahead the Moral Order showed the flag in Babylon: several policemen shoved their way through the mass of black and Hispanic teenagers on the street and sidewalk outside the Casablanca Club. From the open doors and windows poured out the lyrics of *I Want to Sex You Up*.

A competing music advanced up Twelfth Street, a gospel band behind a banner proclaiming "Greater Calvary Missionary Baptist Church Against Drug Dealers" and "Take Back the Streets, O Ye

People, This Is Our Home.” Around the band and chorus an evangelist team confronted the bystanders, praying, shouting testimony, waving sign-up sheets. “Up with hope, down with dope,” they chanted. “Climb to heaven on Jesus’ rope.” Several people came forward weeping to sign up but mostly the devil continued to dance.

I passed an officer leaning into the window of a low-rider car parked by the curb. “What’s that?” He pointed at a chandelier hanging over the back seat, on which a young girl lay face down.

The driver, a teenaged Hispanic, said: “What law am I breaking with a chandelier?”

“Illegal lights. And what’s wrong with that girl? Let’s see your registration and driver’s license.”

Tow trucks and an EMS van arrived. Three cars were towed off; four bodies were loaded into the EMS van. The knot of cars in the street loosened. I got back into Ginger’s car and set off down to Fourth Street.

The street was well-lighted. My white face attracted attention from street loungers and people standing in front yards as I drove along slowly, peering for the house number. I felt for a moment the way a black or Hispanic man would feel driving slowly at night through Tarrytown or Northwest Austin. Nothing happened to threaten me but all the same I was glad to reach the house.

Luis Sandoval, alias Darling Luis, rose from the porch and opened the wire gate for me. I had last seen him six months before, in a black suit with Maria resplendent beside him in her silky white wedding dress as they ran, laughing, from a flower-filled Catholic church on East Sixth Street. Since then he had risen from clerk to a supervisory job in an office of the Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation. His face was solemn as he ushered me toward the parlor. “Mr. Miller, thank you for coming. Maria thought the meeting should be here. Mr. Serruta wanted to meet in your office but Maria said no.”

In the parlor Maria Contreras Sandoval, in a straight-backed wooden chair, and a squat man in his early thirties opposite her in an armchair, turned their heads toward me and got up, Maria quickly and Jesus Serruta heavily, his thick arms shoving down on the chair’s

arms. His chest was large, his legs were short and powerful, and he was angry.

Maria reminded us as we shook hands that we had met several months before at her wedding reception. Neither of us mentioned that we had also met a number of times before and after that occasion.

We all sat down and Maria said: "The coffee is ready. I will serve it now." The need for a Hispanic wife to serve coffee to guests in her home had been imprinted in Maria when young the way a baby duck is imprinted with the need periodically to turn upside down in the water. We all had coffee while I waited for someone to speak.

Maria said: "Mr. Miller, this is the problem. Mr. Serruta is in love with Tamara Montoya. He wants to marry her but she has refused. She would not come here tonight to discuss it; Monday is choir practice. But she said she did not want to discuss it any other time either."

I remembered Maria once saying at the office: "Tamara loves only Jesus in heaven, but a different Jesus is pursuing her here on earth."

I said: "What has this to do with me? Why did Mr. Tippet ask me to come here?"

Jesus Serruta put his hands on his knees. "I telephoned you at your office but you were not there. I asked Mr. Tippet to call you because I can't wait any longer. I want you to give Tamara permission to marry me."

Stunned, I looked at Maria. She said: "Tamara has no family in this country. Mr. Serruta believes you are the *patron* of the law office. He thinks she will obey you."

"Mr. Serruta," I said, "I am not the *patron* of the law office. I am the employer of my law office, and Mr. Bowie is the employer of his law office. Tamara works for Mr. Bowie. But neither Mr. Bowie nor I is her father. We would be glad for Tamara to marry a good man. But we cannot pick him out for her. She chooses for herself. Maria, please tell this firmly to Mr. Serruta."

"I have done that. But he simply doesn't believe it." She spoke rapidly to Jesus in Spanish. I had read *Don Quixote*, with a

dictionary, but I could not understand a word she said. Serruta lowered his head and did not respond. Maria said: “Luis, you try!”

I couldn’t understand Luis either, but he said something that brought Serruta’s head up. “No!” He said fiercely to Luis in English. “She is a trash woman, she meant nothing! It is Tamara I love!” Luis spoke again, and Serruta responded, in Spanish. Then he looked at me defiantly. “Juan Delgado Ortiz does not love Tamara. He is using her. He is a—” He spat out a couple of words that made Maria close her eyes. They sounded like “baboso” and “pendejo” and I had not encountered them in *Don Quixote*.

I said: “Look, Jesus”—by now we must be on a first name basis, which rather changed our previous relationship—“I will talk with Tamara. But I cannot tell her who to marry.”

“I am going to marry Tamara Montoya.”

At that, a tear popped into Maria’s eye. What woman, hearing the trumpet call of love from whatever quarter, could be totally deaf to it?

I didn’t look at Serruta again. “Thank you, Maria. The coffee was delicious. Luis, please don’t get up.”

Serruta’s dark eyes followed me as I left the room.

I returned Brown Cow to Ginger and drove my own car to the Corner Cafe, one of Austin’s smallest but most important venues for musical acts. Since it was Monday night I was able to park within two blocks. On the other side of Guadalupe, behind the Student Union Building, the Main Administration Building of the University of Texas at Austin stood in the moonlight. Like a *haiku* poem, it might be considered “a single finger pointing at the moon,” but there was nothing Japanese about it.

Since the Charles Whitman massacre in 1966 that had left 16 people dead and 31 wounded, the observation deck on the 27th floor had been closed to the public. But, I wondered, what middle-aged Anglo man—dean, vice president, or faculty department head—had withstood for years the pressures of higher education but today might finally have cracked? (The fierce ignorant editorials in today’s student newspaper might have been the last straw.) And might even now be climbing those forbidden stairs, armed, with the impossible

dream of clarifying his life? I hugged the wall and moved along quickly.

Inside the Corner Cafe the crowd, mostly college-age but not necessarily attending college, was lively. Some were hollering and guffawing or harassing waitresses, some were pounding beer mugs on their tables and calling for the Pecos Kids to hurry up and appear. At a table to the side I found Todd Henninger guarded by a couple of dead soldiers wearing the Heineken uniform. "One of those sissy brands," I said. The waitress took my order for a Shiner Bock.

Defending his choice, Todd said: "They have better water over there." He looked so smug about it that I said: "I guess you've never been to Amsterdam."

"So?"

"So you've never seen the Amstel River, where Heineken claims to get its water. It's not as clean as the Hudson River below Manhattan." Actually it would be hard to prefer Shiner Bock to Heineken but American men were expected to rattle each other's cages once in a while. When women did it to women, it was called social one-upmanship.

"A likely story." Todd dismissed the subject with a gesture. "You're late but you didn't miss anything. The band hasn't showed yet. They played in Fort Worth last night and they could have had car trouble. I asked Billy but he hasn't heard from them." Billy Akers was the Corner Cafe's current owner.

"Or maybe they got a late start," I said. Fort Worth was more than three hours away, and a band that finished a gig at 2AM might not be awake until noon and not really in focus until late afternoon. "In any event what it proves is they need a manager who can teach them how to use the telephone."

"Right, someone like me. I can see it makes Billy upset not to know if or when they will get here."

Billy Akers, who was hoisting one behind the bar and laughing with the bartender, didn't look upset to me, but that was the intriguing thing about other people's behavior: everyone could have an opinion about it even if all the opinions were wrong.

The room would have been smoky and hot except for the fans whirling overhead, and their hum seemed to dampen the noise. By the time I had matched Todd's two dead soldiers, he had recruited a third. "You're still ahead," I said. "No point in having a battle until the sides are even." Dead soldier battles were a recurrent feature of Austin beer joints, especially after midnight, so it wasn't time yet anyway.

A woman's voice said: "Rufus!" Someone was waving at me from a table on the other side of the room. I started to wave back but cut the gesture short when I saw that it was Frances Chamberlain and a man I didn't recognize. Most of the men I had seen Frances Chamberlain with over the years I had not recognized, but I had never been out with her to a public place without at least one man recognizing her. She attracted men the way—I could not say the way flypaper attracted flies, because flypaper held on to flies and Frances was always letting men go. A better comparison would be moths around a lightbulb. The moths had reached the glow their spirits yearned for but, wings beating, they could not reach the source of it, which burned them while they circled and hoped, until they fluttered away, or the lightbulb was turned off, or dawn came and they wondered what they were doing there with burned wings in an empty street.

A caressing voice said in my ear: "Rufus, if you won't come visit I'll just have to fetch you."

Frances Chamberlain stood glowing beside me. She wore a pale blue and yellow outfit and her dark hair was arranged in a French wave. She leaned her body toward me and focused her lips and wide eyes on me. Nothing sexual, oh no, just a welcome to an old friend, it's been so long, with a hint of, if there was ever anything sad between us, let's let bygones be bygones; in my heart I still desire you. The onslaught would be disturbing to almost any man and I was not one of the exceptions. Feeling the heat, I looked away, and then looked back. She was still there. I had not seen her since New Year's Eve. I thought then that I was never going to see her again, but Austin can be a small town.



"Hello, Frances," I said. If her purpose in accosting me was to see whether she still had power over me, and I assumed it was, she had her answer.

She stopped smiling, a trick she had in common with other very attractive men and women I had encountered. They all knew that not-smiling could be extremely effective. It made other people want to come closer, to get inside their skin, to make them smile. She moved as if to put her arm around me but did not touch me. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend? Todd, isn't it? Todd Henninger?"

Todd got to his feet. "Frances, we met at the South by Southwest Music Conference two years ago."

"Yes, we did. Rory Rotan, who you were with, introduced us. Are you still seeing Rory?"

"Not so's you'd notice," said Todd. Men always remembered when they had first met Frances Chamberlain, but they were always surprised when it turned out, as it usually did, that she remembered them. "But you are more beautiful than ever."

She produced a mock frown, which had much the same purpose and result as not-smiling.

"Todd, I'll just pretend I didn't hear that. You're a married man. Whereas Rufus is single, so he's the only one I'm going to invite back to my table." For all her gracious manner, she always did exactly what she wanted to do.

Against my better judgment I let her draw me over to meet and sit down with her escort, a tall, well-built engineer—I recognized his lapel pin—who was introduced as Terry Walcott. He looked about as happy to meet me as in the old days I used to be to meet the men of her acquaintance when I thought I had her to myself for the evening. They would drop by our table with eyes only for her, or sometimes she would pluck them out of the crowd to join us for a few minutes as she had just plucked me. She had never let them join us for long. The way she turned it, our privacy was not being interrupted, she was just taking a moment to greet an old friend: what man, no matter how jealous, was bear enough to object to that? Well, I had been, and so was this Terry Walcott.

I was surprised to see Frances with any man other than Jethro Polk. Polk and Frances were now a pair; and Polk, famous as he was for being randy and faithless, was not known for permitting his current number one woman to bestow or accept any other attentions. Either their relationship had recently broken off, which I doubted, or there was some other explanation.

The most likely explanation was that they had worked out an accommodation. Polk lived mostly in Nashville and New Hampshire and came only sporadically to Austin. All of Frances's friends and connections were in Austin. Perhaps she had insisted on keeping Austin as a home base, with occasional visits to Nashville or New Hampshire or anyplace else where Polk felt like taking her. Perhaps they had agreed that, whenever they were apart, she could flit around Austin in her own way provided that nothing developed and she remained willing to drop everything any time that Polk remembered her existence and summoned her.

The Jethro Polk treatment was the last thing that a woman like Frances Chamberlain, or any woman, needed in my opinion and I was trying not to let myself get angry about it. Clearly what she needed was a man who could see beyond her lust for attention and get to the sources of her insecurity and help her to know herself, a man who could inspire the true love she had never been able to feel for anyone. I had wanted to be but obviously was not that man. Neither, by the look of him, was a standard-issue Texan like Terry Walcott.

When I had been at their table three minutes I realized that was two minutes too long. I got up and, by way of saying goodbye, shook Terry Walcott's hand. The man had no couth whatsoever: he did his best to crush the small bones in my hand. I was at a severe disadvantage, like a man hit with a sucker punch, but I squeezed back the best I could and with tears in my eyes said heartily: "It was good to get to know you, Perry." In Texas you didn't "meet" people, you "got to know" them.

"Terry," he said.

"Larry, of course. Frances, it's been like old times."

She smiled without saying anything. Most men, while Frances was smiling at them, just enjoyed it, and only later wondered what if anything had been going on in her mind. What was different about me was I wondered at the time of the smile. As I moved away from the table she called after me: "Maybe we'll run into each other Thursday at the concert."

I waved back, thinking that was a delicate way to put it. No mention of Polk, but she might be telling me she was still "with" him and therefore by implication "not with" this engineer. The concert she was referring to was being advertised throughout central Texas as "Jethro Polk's Annual Fourth of July Family Picnic." This annual event featured his band with lesser bands playing around the edges; something musical would be going on more or less continuously from three to nine o'clock, when fireworks would erupt. It was scheduled this year to take place in Austin in Zilker Park.

This was a prudent way to do it. The City of Austin was accustomed to erecting a security fence around Zilker Park and renting out the space inside for a healthy fee to be paid by whoever was sponsoring the particular event. When Polk's Annual Picnics and their predecessors named for other country stars were held out in the Texas boondocks in a field or a county fairgrounds, as had been the practice for years, the fights, trespassers, motorcycle invasions, liquor law violations, and accident lawsuits had discouraged the insurance industry in its eternal quest to receive a high premium for a low risk and had caused this removal of the venue to civilized Austin.

Todd said: "What a doll! You really used to go with that?" He looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

What did he expect me to do to prove that the relationship had existed? Describe where she had a birthmark? ("Todd, under her breast, worthy the pressing, lies a mole.") But he didn't read Shakespeare and she didn't have any birthmarks. So should I reveal which side of her waterbed she slept on when sober? ("The left side, looking down from her ceiling mirror.") Which side when drunk? ("The right side, and it only takes two glasses of wine.")

Maybe she'd had three glasses of wine that Saturday night when we went to a party on our first real date. When her condition became apparent I brought her home early, undressed her, and tucked her into the waterbed. After weighing the pros and cons for four seconds, I crawled in beside her for a somewhat fitful night's sleep. On my part, that is; she slept like a baby that had had too much of mother's gin. In the morning she was beside herself or, more accurately, beside me. I told her I had enjoyed sleeping with her. Her response was that she would kill me if I ever told anyone I had slept with her. We had a peaceable breakfast together and I went home. A couple of days later she asked me out for the next Sunday afternoon and at that time offered for my previous restraint a generous reward that no gentleman could have refused.

"What are you dreaming about?" Todd demanded.

My eyes slowly focused on my present surroundings. "There's a lot more to Ms. Chamberlain than her earthly husk."

"I'll settle for the husk. While you were circling the moon the waitress came by to say the band has arrived. I ordered you another Shiner." The waitress had removed the dead soldiers, which gave Todd more room to spread out on the table and make notes in his green-covered spiral notebook. While the band members were setting up their instruments he went over to talk with them.

When he got back to the table he told me that at first they had no idea who he was. Then the leader, carrying a steel guitar onto the stage, recognized him and the general indifference changed. That would have been when I saw them all suddenly start slapping hands with Todd. The six Pecos Kids had facial hair in different stages and styles and locations. They looked to be in their middle twenties. In height they varied from short to tall. They wore clothes that did not come from the same designer collection, but they all had cowboy boots and gray or tan range hats.

I was no judge of bands or crowd psychology, but I could tell from the first number of the first set that in the opinion of this audience the Pecos Kids had something going for them. Leading in to the music there was banter between the leader, who had swapped the steel guitar for an acoustic guitar, and another man with an acoustic

*GETTIN' LOST WITH YOU*

guitar. Then the drummer hit the high hat and cymbals and established an authoritative beat that was joined by the keyboard, fiddle, and steel guitar, and finally the two acoustic guitarists, who broke out into a vocal duet.

The leader sang:

We need to find two women and go two-steppin' tonight  
Where fiddles are playin' and dance hall lights are bright

The other man responded:

But you're in love with ice cream I drink beer a lot  
You've got a Blue Bell belly and I've got a Lone Star pot

Then the leader:

You used to polka pretty good I could waltz and swing  
I knew how to sweet-talk and you could make 'em sing

Then the other:

We were young and in our prime Cowgirls' eyes were hot  
We saw wild game a-runnin' We were loaded and we shot

They sang in unison:

We have a Blue Bell belly and a Lone Star pot  
No need to shine our boots 'cause we don't see 'em a lot  
Sure feel like steppin' out tonight but what chance have we got  
With your Blue Bell belly and my Lone Star pot?

It was a regular "Moe and Joe" (Moe Bandy and Joe Stampley) barroom buddy song.

Whenever they sang the title line, each would point to the other's stomach on the phrase "your Blue Bell belly" and would point to his

own on the phrase “my Lone Star pot.” Clearly, beer fat was considered more macho than ice cream fat.

The leader sang:

Well I used to do the pinwheel and the fancy lace  
The twinkle the shine the underarm turn all with style and grace

The other sang:

Well I could do the Schottische and the Cotton-Eye Joe  
The hustle the freeze waltz to and back and never touch her toes

The leader:

Hey I still have that fire don’t you? I have boots on my feet  
I have gas in my pickup truck and I can feel the beat

The other:

Yeah we still remember but there’s two things you forgot  
Your Blue Bell belly and my Lone Star pot

The drummer went into a frenzy, as did, in succession after him, the keyboardist, fiddler, and steel guitarist.

The leader stepped forward and sang:

Can’t stand it any longer We’re goin’ two-steppin’ tonight  
Get us two fine women and go where the lights are bright

The other man came forward to join him:

Tonight we’re going to celebrate ever’tang we got  
With your Blue Bell belly and my Lone Star pot

Together they sang:

We're steppin' out to celebrate ever'thang we got  
With your Blue Bell belly and my Lone Star pot!

They hit a final chord on their guitars and swung them up in the air with a "Yeah!"

The crowd liked it. Todd wrote busily in his notebook.

"Another beer?" the waitress asked. Todd shook his head. This was no longer recreation, this was business.

The second song was a solo by the leader, in front of a quiet drumbeat and a swinging melody from the strings. He leered at the women in the audience and sang:

You can have me if you want me  
But you better want me bad  
I've been loved by many women  
Don't know why they go off mad  
They want appreciation  
So what I have always done  
Is appreciate a second  
While I'm going with number one

In the second verse he tried to see things from the woman's point of view:

That isn't what they had in mind  
They tell me when they leave  
Crying breaking dishes slamming doors  
It makes me grieve  
I'm sensitive to what they want  
If they find it I'll be glad  
You can have me if you want me  
But you better want me bad

The melody changed, and in the bridge the singer got more personal:

You have a shape my buttercup  
Your eyes are flashing hot  
I never saw a woman  
With finer assets than you got  
You remind me of the pony  
That my daddy almost bought  
I loved that prancing filly  
How bells jingled to her trot

There followed a musical interlude in which the steel guitar predominated.

The “standard structure” of verse-verse-bridge-verse (AABA) in which the song was written was less and less standard nowadays. Verses had the same melody but different words. By contrast, a bridge had its own melody and words and normally appeared only once in a song. This standard structure was being crowded out by the verse-chorus-verse-chorus structure (ABAB, with variations). Choruses had the same melody and, sometimes with variations, the same words. For modern audiences, their wits dulled by television and movies, the verse-chorus structure was easier to follow than the more subtle standard structure.

In the final verse the singer still hoped to achieve fidelity but was too honest to promise too much:

Oh somewhere there’s a woman  
Who will occupy my heart  
Leaving no room for another  
And we’ll never ever part  
You may be that final woman  
But I really have to add  
You can have me if you want me  
But you better want me bad



GETTIN' LOST WITH YOU

The song's conclusion was received with catcalls by the men and head-shaking by the women. It was time for a change of pace, which the steel guitarist provided by abandoning his instrument for one of the acoustic guitars and accompanying himself on a ballad of lost love. It proved to be the band's first traditional verse/chorus song of the evening in which the choruses were identical; in their first song the choruses had varied somewhat. The singer's earnestness in the first two verses was touching:

You left the way you came as an owl flies  
I read your note with tears in my eyes  
It said "I love you I guess  
But send my things to my new address"

I'm gonna do just what you said  
The suitcase is open on the bed  
I'll pack it all in somehow  
But there's no room for your pink nightgown

In the chorus his voice rose as he indicated his reasonableness under the circumstances and offered a possible solution:

I have no choice but to keep that pretty pink nightgown  
It looks so good in my closet just hangin' down  
If you get homesick for that pink nightgown  
Come put it on and be my love again

In the third verse he became defensive, and in the fourth he labored to establish his good faith:

That suitcase is cram full I swear  
There's not an extry inch to spare  
You think I didn't try  
You think that gown *will* fit inside

I'm known to be a patient man  
I empty it and pack it again  
Try sideways upside down  
There's just no room for your pink nightgown

In the final chorus the singer allowed as how, in view of the nightgown problem, he would be willing to accept the girl back:

I have no choice but to keep that pretty pink nightgown  
It looks so good in my closet just hangin' down  
If you get homesick for that pink nightgown  
Come put it on  
Come put it on  
Come put it on and be my love again

They played half a dozen more songs and took a break.

The place was packed. Several college kids started throwing salsa and chips around at the table where Frances Chamberlain and Iron Hand had been. Here and there, with merry clicks of glass, dead soldiers that the waitresses had not retrieved in time were dueling.

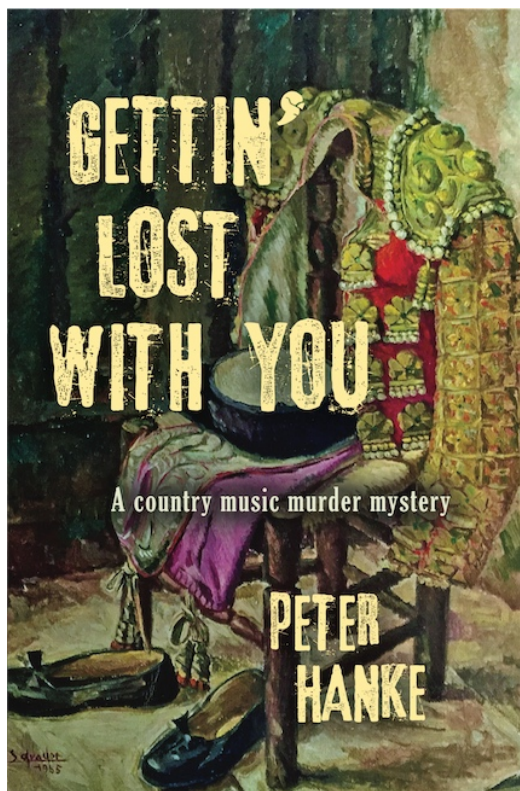
Todd said: "I don't know what Dobie meant by comparing the Pecos Kids to Asleep at the Wheel. There's no saxophone, no golden oldies, and no Western Swing. Are you leaving?"

"They started late and it's nearly midnight. You won't need me for any business discussions tonight."

"What would you say: Organize the sideburns and mustaches? Coordinate those clothes, maybe vests over colored shirts? Smoother transitions between songs? Better sequence of songs? Better keyboard? Maybe add a girl vocalist?"

"I didn't notice any of that," I said. "I thought they had a good beat and I could hear the lyrics."

Todd said he was going over to schmooze backstage. I said goodnight. After the day I had had I was more than ready to go home to my quiet apartment.



*A lawyer in Austin, Texas with connections to the country music industry gets tangled up in a series of murders. Some people think maybe he did it.*

# **GETTIN' LOST WITH YOU**

**A country music murder mystery**

by Peter Hanke

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