

*In a small southern town, summer fun and boyhood antics are interrupted when an alcoholic father pimps his twelve-year-old daughter out for drugs. When the authorities are slow to act, two friends take vengeance on her abusive dad.*

## **PETAL: Revenge Is Never Free**

By Jarvis King

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J A R V I S   K I N G

# PETAL

*Revenge Is Never Free*



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# Chapter 1

“They’re building a new Pizza Hut.”

“Where?”

“Here.”

“In Petal?”

“Yep.”

A franchise eatery blunder of such magnitude, if indeed foisted upon the unsuspecting innocence of Petal, could force Joe Ellis to abandon his dream of owning The Country Kitchen.

“It’ll never happen, Jimmy.”

“Why not? Little Ron says it’s a done deal.”

Officers Big Ron Ham and Randy Bacon comprised Petal’s police force. Little Ron’s awareness of Petal’s inner workings was usually spot on, and he was overly proud of his inside scoops.

“Because they would blow it up,” Joe Ellis said.

“Who?” The statement distracted Jimmy long enough for a breem to abscond with another red worm.

“I heard the old farts talking about it at The Kitchen.”

“Talking about what?” Jimmy asked, digging in his worm bucket.

“Blowing up the Pizza Hut.”

“You didn’t even know about the Pizza Hut till now.”

“Well, they were talking about blowing something up,” Joe Ellis said.

“Bull crap.”

“Bull crap, yourself! Mr. Morgan was there, and his brother works at the Hercules plant. He can get all the dynamite he wants. I’m serious, Jimmy. They were talking about blowing something up.”

Joel Ellis yanked his rod and another fat bluegill landed at his feet. When the fish was hauled from the water, Sam stood to inspect it like every other fish. It was her duty as the only adult in the group—she was thirty-six in doggy years. She stood guard as Joe Ellis placed his formerly white Converse on the flopping fish, removed the hook and secured it on a well-used stringer.

“Where’d you hear this again?” Jimmy wanted to know.

“Me and Ricky were playing pinball at The Kitchen. The old farts shut up when they noticed me listening.”

Ponderous thoughts replaced conversation. Indeed, the boys appeared hypnotized by the dance of red and white corks as they obeyed the surface of the water. A languid summer breeze was unconvincing in its aspirations to be called wind, yet it bore upon the pond strong enough for wavelets. The morning was getting on, and the biting of the bluegill had tailed off as the sun rose above the loblolly pines. The pair had fished since daylight, and the noticeable decline in action would no doubt compel the boys to hunt more suitable entertainment for a summer’s day.

“Dang, it’s hot,” Joe Ellis said, fanning with his ever-present Cardinals cap. Once bright red, it had faded

considerably from the sweat and grime and regular washings in his mother's Whirlpool. His father bought it for him, two summers before on a family vacation which included a night game at Busch Stadium. It seemed a magical world—the baseball diamond surrounded by a modern-day coliseum where Joe Ellis' heroes swung bats instead of swords. His gladiators had names like Joe Torre, Ted Simmons, and Reggie Cleveland. It seemed that magic descended as the sun went down and the lights came up not only at the stadium but on the St. Louis skyline and The Arch—"Gateway to the West."

"They wouldn't really blow up the Pizza Hut," Jimmy said. "You think?"

"As long as they don't sell Panther Burgers and Big Red shakes, I reckon they'll be alright." Petal High's mascot was Big Red, the panther.

The snippet of an overheard conversation struck a nerve with Jimmy's intrepid alter-ego. Any discussion between serious old men about an impending explosion was well worth overhearing. Each boy expressed his own thoughts.

Joe Ellis watched his bobbing cork. "Why does Petal need a dadgum Pizza Hut when we have The Country Kitchen?"

"Yeah, but I still wonder what's getting blown up."

"We go to Hattiesburg when Mama wants pizza. Pasquale's has that game—Pong."

"There's nothing in Petal worth blowing up,"—Jimmy cocked his head—"except maybe the school."

"That would be cool! We could have an extra-long summer."

“I bet school would start on time anyhow,” Jimmy decided. “They’d probably get a bunch of those trailers, like at the elementary school.”

“If they blow up the school, maybe they’ll get a big circus tent, like the one last fall, down by the river. I wouldn’t mind going to school in a circus tent.”

“They won’t blow up the school,” Jimmy conceded.

“Nope, we ain’t that lucky.”

Jimmy lay back and gazed into the clouds. Here was a mystery worthy of investigation, so he steeled his determination. “I *will* find out what’s getting blown up.”

“Let’s go to The Kitchen tomorrow morning. The old farts might talk about it.”

“I have to go to the doctor, remember?”

“But you’re still coming to the game tonight, right?”

“If Mama doesn’t change her mind. She says the night air’s not good for me.”

Jimmy Perkins fought a running gun battle with allergies, everlastingly. Routinely pricked and injected, he could swallow seven pills at once—a skill highly respected by Joe Ellis. Because of his asthma, Jimmy’s mother attempted to limit his activities to more sedate and non-taxing. While other kids took part in organized sports, Jimmy spent much of his time reading crime and mystery novels. When the Perkins moved to Crestview Hills, Joe Ellis discovered Jimmy was an early riser like himself. Before other kids got out of bed, Joe Ellis and Jimmy were chasing adventure.

“Oh, crap, it’s old man Findley!” Joe Ellis exclaimed.

“Hey, you boys!” Mr. Findley, the contentious owner of the pond, yelled from the opposite bank.

Instantaneously, Joe Ellis and Jimmy were on the move, with Sam in the lead.

“I’ve had enough of this, Joe Ellis Keene. I’m calling your father this evening.”

“I ain’t Joe Ellis,” he called as he wriggled under a barbed-wire fence. “My name’s Little Ron. My daddy’s a cop.”

As they followed their trail to Old Corinth Road, strains of Lynyrd Skynyrd and yelling drifted through the trees, so they detoured to the Watson place. They snuck behind an ancient Dodge pickup—one of eight rusting wrecks in the backyard—and peeked through its filthy windows. Petal sat on the top step of her back porch, drinking pickle juice and playing with a slinky. She wore the same tight cut-offs and pink halter top as the day before. “Sweet Home Alabama” and the sounds of a one-sided argument poured from the old house’s open windows.

Joe Ellis moved to the front of the truck. “Petal,” he called, softly. She didn’t hear, so he stood and waved his arms.

“Y’all need to split!” she exclaimed, running from the porch. She squatted to pet Sam but kept a wary eye on the house.

“What’s happening in there?” Joe Ellis asked.

“Daddy’s on the phone, fussin’ at somebody who owes him money.”

“He sounds drunk,” Jimmy said.

She wagged her head and sighed. “Loaded.”



“You ought to come with us,” Joe Ellis told her. “After we clean these fish, we’re going to the gravel pit.”

“I can’t right now,” she said. “That Edna lady is coming over. They’ll pass out after they do it. I might go somewhere then.”

“Who’s Edna?” Jimmy asked.

“Some big ol’ nasty woman he’s seeing from work.”

“Come on, Petal,” Joe Ellis begged. “He probably won’t even know you’re gone.”

“Oh, yes, he will,” she said with a huff. “He’ll whip me when I get back, too.”

“You still coming to my game tonight?”

“If he goes to work.”

“*Petal!*” her father bellowed from inside the house. “Where you at, girl?”

“Get outta here,” she said and ran toward the porch. “I’m out back, Daddy.”

Petal was the toughest girl Joe Ellis knew, and the prettiest. She did everything the boys did—some things even better. Her father, Rand Watson, was apparently a misplacer of money, because, according to Joe Ellis’s dad, he lost it every Friday. He was boisterous and vulgar, often drunk, with a quick temper—instant and violent. What hair he had was sparse, blonde and greasy, and tended to be in his face more than not. How he maintained regular employment at the Masonite plant in Laurel was anybody’s guess.

Petal didn’t have a mother—the poor, beaten soul crawled away during Petal’s eighth birthday party, never to return. Though her mother had named her for her beloved hometown,

her mother couldn't stay. Parents hoped rough and tumble play accounted for the bruises and scratches which appeared regularly on Petal's rapidly developing body, but Joe Ellis knew better. She became a topic of discussion—hushed snippets of conversations between the mothers of the community, cut short and whispered when a kid was nearby. New blue jeans, tennis shoes and school supplies often appeared on Petal's front porch, and mothers often invited her to supper, but she begged off with, "I have to get home and fix supper for my daddy."

The summer before, at the crack of dawn on a Saturday, Joe Ellis, Sam and Jimmy swung by on their way to a certain pond. They found Rand Watson on his back in the yard—his right leg in the driver's floorboard of his primer-colored Firebird, apparently dead. It was a valid assumption until he moaned when Sam lathered an ear canal.

The trio ventured inside and conducted a search—living room, kitchen, bathroom...no Petal. She was eventually trailed up by Sam, found as a tiny ball, curled under a blood-dappled sheet inside her father's closet. "Just leave me alone, Joe Ellis." She didn't feel like fishing that day, and neither did Sam—she stayed with her chin resting on Petal's arm.

After that horrible revelation, Joe Ellis, on the bank of Findley's pond, made a solemn vow before Jimmy and God Almighty: "No matter how long it takes, I'm gonna rain retribution on Rand Watson because, by God, he's got it comin'!"

\* \* \*

Like most afternoons, Henry Keene arrived home from work at five-thirty. Henry was the owner-operator of Commercial Communications—a Motorola radio repair center in Hattiesburg. He relaxed in his recliner browsing the *Hattiesburg American* and watching Channel 7 News, while his wife put the finishing touches on the usual, three-course supper. Joe Ellis' older sisters, Terry and Emma Jean, were setting the table when the telephone rang. Hoping the team colors might act as an anti-whipping, good luck charm, Joe Ellis had dressed for his Thursday night game.

“Honey, pick up the phone—it’s Arthur Findley.”

Joe Ellis hurried from his room and listened from the hallway.

“Hello...Doing good. How about yourself?...Is that right?...Uh-huh...I understand, but boys have to learn...Yep, did it a few times myself...I understand...Don’t you worry, I’ll tell him alright...I’m sorry, Art...Bye, now.”

“Joe Ellis!”

He appeared, instantly. “Yes, sir.” His heart pounded at an appropriate pre-whipping tempo.

“You heard every word, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If you want to fish in the man’s ponds, you need to ask him.”

“We only fish in one of ‘em, Daddy.”

Henry shook his head, slightly annoyed. “That ain’t the point is it, son?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, let’s dispense with the verbal wrangling, okay?”

“Yes, sir.” His adolescent machinations had zero effect on his old man.

Henry smiled and wagged his head. “Joe Ellis, you know what Mr. Findley told me?”

“I couldn’t hear what he was saying Daddy.”

“He said you and Jimmy fish this one spot in the upper pond because he can’t see it from the barn. Is that right?”

Joe Ellis dropped his chin. “Yes, sir.”

“You know what else he said?”

He thought in a hurry, attempting to recall other infractions he may have committed on or about the Findleys.

“He said if you would’ve asked, y’all could have fished in all three ponds.”

“Seriously!” Joe Ellis couldn’t believe it. Local legend claimed the lower pond had bass big enough to swallow a Chihuahua! Joe Ellis had tried it twice himself, at night, with no luck.

“Don’t get too excited. It may be too late.”

“Oh, well, guess I don’t blame him.”

“Son, all I’m saying is—if you want to fish in the man’s pond, go talk to him. But if you don’t ask him...just get caught over there again without permission. I’ll whip the fire outta you. I don’t want Art Findley to waste his time calling over here with this foolishness. Okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, alright then. Let’s eat. We have a game tonight.”

\* \* \*

At supper, Henry opened half of his mouth and—around a wad of smothered pork chop—uttered words of such magnitude they should have been recorded for posterity’s sake.

“Constable Belk chased a UFO plum to Jones County last night.”

At first, Henry didn’t think his wife heard him. She did indeed hear—she simply didn’t know how to feel. “What?”

Joe Ellis’ mouth went slack—snap bean hanging like a green cigarette butt.

“Daddy,” Emma Jean scoffed, “he did not.”

“Thirty miles. That’s what he said.”

“Daddy, you’re so full of it,” Terry said. She knew her father’s poker-faced storytelling skills were prolific, but sheesh.

“Goodness, honey.” Priscilla chuckled and sliced her chop.

“Where did you hear this, Pop?” Evan asked. He and Joe Ellis were over their initial rush of wonder.

“Yeah, Daddy, was it at the shop?”

“Yep. He stopped by to get his radio checked today. Said it went all squirrely on him somewhere up the Tallahala.”

This news was beyond epic! It was—It was—!

“Belk said a call went out...some weird stuff happening over Petal, so he drove by the high school. That’s where the chase started.”

His wife squinted and tilted her head. “You’re not kidding, are you?”

“I’m just telling y’all what the man said,” he stated pragmatically. “It’ll be all over the news. He ain’t trying to keep it a secret.”

“I can’t believe it!” Joe Ellis gawked at Evan, the only other person in the room who understood the influence the news conveyed to its bearer.

“Me either,” his mother agreed. “What do you think, honey?”

“He seemed as sincere as he could be. He got lathered up pretty good tellin’ it, I’ll say that.” Henry pushed a couple of beans around and chuckled. “The man was gnawing on that cigar like a starving beaver.”

## Chapter 2

From an early age, Joe Ellis learned life wasn't fair. Simply being small meant embarrassing attention from certain people, and that attention came primarily at school, where friends and classmates were sure to see. Being held by one's ankles and plunged into rusty, fifty-five-gallon trash barrels was socially demeaning. The barrels seemed always to be filled with soft drink cans and chocolate milk cartons—not all empty—used paper towels and discarded food. An abundance of fire ants, bees and yellow jackets added to his torment. The clinging aroma of the barrels spawned comments like, “You stink, Joe Ellis,” or, “Take a bath sometime, Joe Ellis.”

At times he was careful while getting undressed, lest his mom or dad see the bruises he suffered from being crammed into tiny spaces. He once lied to his parents about an injury to a little finger, after it was caught in a slamming locker door. He wouldn't have said a word, but his mom spotted the lacerated and swollen digit at supper. An x-ray at Dr. James' office confirmed it was broken. At other times, swirling head-flushes in a toilet forced him to wash his face and hair in a sink.

Evan often threatened to tell their parents about the torment, and he had been in fights with certain bullies—one of which he lost, terribly. Joe Ellis begged him not to tell because he believed it would only make things worse.

No, telling an adult was not an option, so Joe Ellis dealt with bullies on his terms. His imaginative schemes of revenge were patiently devised and covertly deployed, Jimmy and Sam his only confederates. Sometimes the hooligans took weeks to set up—the anticipation of payback grew with each passing day. Once, in a daring act of pilferage, he procured Petal school stationery. Using his mom’s ancient Underwood—citing student conduct violations and promises of assault charges—he typed threats of expulsion to the parents of Sean O’Reilly and Lee Bob Stanley. Overnight, their treatment of smaller and weaker students improved. Another time, Buck Foreman caught the blame for the second of two lewd pranks played on a pretty, first-year teacher. Young Buck spent the rest of that school year at the “alternative school.” There were but two persistent bullies left, and Joe Ellis had plans for them as well.

That was the hand life dealt him, and he played it the best he could. But with Petal...she never hurt anybody or cussed at anybody or stole from anybody. Why was her father so cruel to her? Why was she forced to endure, day after day, such fear and uncertainty? How could one person have it so good, while just down the road, another had it so bad? Petal’s love for her abusive father proved a maddening complexity Joe Ellis could not sort out with his childish reasoning.

“We need to do something, Jimmy.” They had been lying on their backs at the creek one sunny afternoon.

“What can we do, man? We promised her we wouldn’t tell.”

The life Petal endured was no childish prank played at school. The Keene home was loving and stable, but Petal’s was



a house of dread. He understood what Rand Watson was doing, and Joe Ellis loathed him.

\* \* \*

Her name was Sam and everyone who met her loved her, save the cats and coons and cottonmouths, or any critter deemed an affront to her canine matronage. She was perpetually cautious, yet amiable to a fault; if you were kind to Joe Ellis, Sam was kind to you. Unconcerned with self-preservation, she willingly threw herself between Joe Ellis and any danger. A Texan by birth, her Lone Star blood was no doubt the source of her grit.

In 1969, Joe Ellis had just turned six when she came to live with the Keenes at 605 Bluebird Lane in Dallas, Texas. Henry had moved the family from ancestral Mississippi for a short time when he took a job at a Motorola repair depot. The company soon noticed his wizardry with RF technology, and before long offered him a service center in the “Magnolia State”. When the family moved back and took up residence in the Crestview Hills subdivision of Petal, Sam tagged along to see to any boogers, bandits or other bad things that might cause Joe Ellis problems. The kids of Crestview Hills adored her.

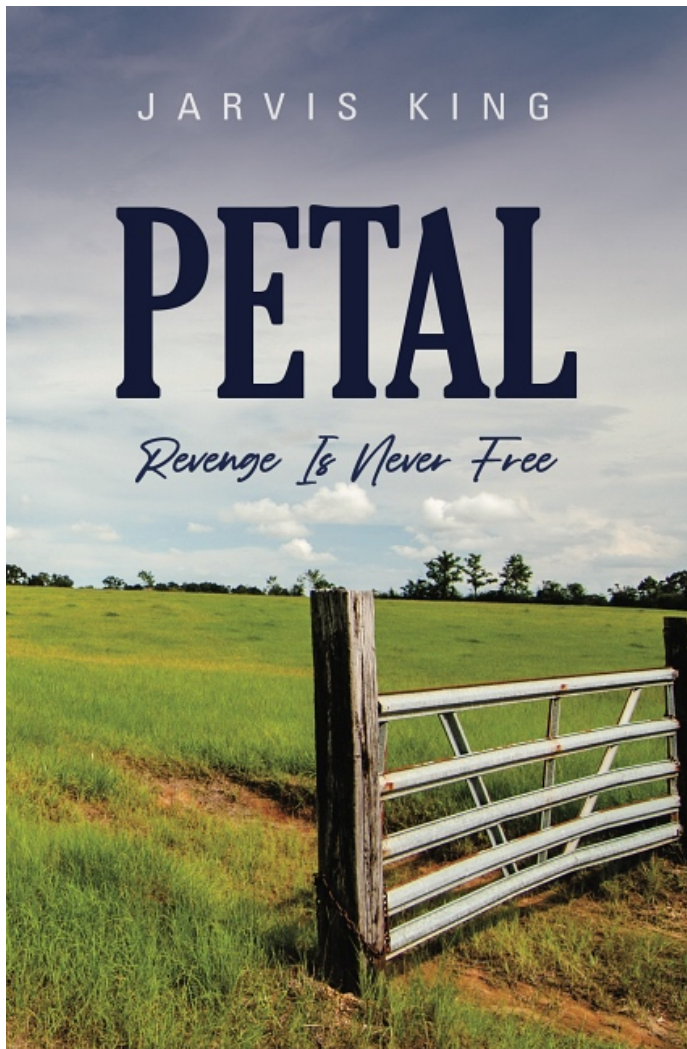
Sam was no burden or bother, given her lack of demanding pretension. Terry saddled her with the name Samantha, but it proved incompatible with her personality, so Joe Ellis shortened it to Sam. Having joined forces with Sam at the dawn of dependable memory, Joe Ellis recalled little of life without her. She was his self-appointed companion, encourager and protector. A dog of questionable breeding, Joe Ellis’ dad said she was part feist and part boar coon, because any dog that

could scrap like her was more than just a terrier. Joe Ellis called Sam a “something another” when asked about her breeding.

When the Crestview clan left home on feet or bicycles, you would see Sam—tail wagging and tongue flapping—keeping pace with her charges. If Joe Ellis was in a hurry and riding downhill, Sam stood half in and half out of a red Borden’s milk crate, fastened ever so loosely to the chopper bars of his Spyder bike.

She would go to baseball practice but never a game. The Country Kitchen, Ben Franklin Five and Dime, and Watt’s Ice Cream Parlor grew accustomed to her presence just outside their doors. At times, she would rather not be petted by unknown youngsters, but Samantha was regally gracious, and she never bit a kid who came in peace.

She was black and tan and diminutive, with solid musculature and a low center of gravity. She could be as rough as forty-grit sandpaper to wild things, but as smooth as cow-salve butter when you needed a friend. With no quit and the fighting ethos of a Tasmanian devil, Sam was a good friend to have, especially for a boy who loved ponds and creeks and gravel pits.



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