

When Saint Louis cop Cliff Branson rushes to the aide of his ailing grandmother, he is drawn into a life or death struggle. To save the woman he loves, he must face the terrifying secret of Theodosia's Flock.

Theodosia's Flock

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THEODOSIA'S FLOCK

BY

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“When you enter a grove peopled with ancient trees, higher than the ordinary, and shutting out the sky with their thickly intertwined branches, do not the stately shadows of the wood, the stillness of the place, and the awful gloom of this doomed cavern then strike you with the presence of a deity?”—Seneca

PROLOGUE

It was a quarter of an hour before closing time at the Homestead branch of the Sunbridge County Bank. The morning's leaden sky had given over to a slow, soaking rain. There was the only car remaining in the parking lot, and the two men inside waited nervously with the engine running.

"Deke, are you sure about this?" Cully asked. "'Cause I got a real bad feeling."

His partner rolled his angry blue eyes and shook his head. "For the hundredth damn time, yes!" Deacon snapped. "We wouldn't be here if I wasn't sure."

Raindrops drummed on the roof. The rusty Pontiac's wipers drubbed back and forth. Cully cowered in the passenger seat picking at a rip in the upholstery where the foam padding poked through.

Deacon draped an arm over the steering wheel and turned to face the smaller man. "Everything will be fine if you don't mess up. Have you got the note?"

"Yeah, Deke. I got it right here in my pocket just like you said."

"Good. Now, what are you going to do with it?"

"I'm gonna give it to the teller."

"And?" Deacon twirled a finger in the air, prodding him to continue.

Cully thought about this. At length he realized what his partner was driving at. "I'm going to keep my mouth shut," he said.

"That's right. I'll guard the entrance and make sure no one messes with you." Deacon swung out the cylinder on a nickel plated revolver, made sure that all the chambers were filled with live rounds and snapped it closed again.

Cully didn't like the pallor of Deacon's face or the way his hands shook as he handled the weapon. "You don't look so good," he said. "Maybe we oughta wait 'til you feel better."

Deacon shook his head. "I'll be fine as soon as we get some money and clear out of this little shit-splat of a town. Now, are you finished pissing and moaning?"

Cully's eyes dropped to the floorboard. "I'm ready," he said.

"Alright, let's do it! March across that lobby like you own the place. Look the pretty girl in the eye, and hand her the note. If there's any trouble, let me handle it."

* * *

The teller really was pretty, just like Deacon had said she would be. As Cully approached the window, her girl-next-door smile momentarily distracted him.

Leaning forward slightly on her stool, she said, "Can I help you sir?" The name tag pinned to her blouse read *Stacey*.

"Uh . . . yeah," Cully stammered as he fumbled in his wet shirt pocket. He pushed a folded card across the counter toward her.

Stacy read the note. She looked at Cully and blinked as if she were trying to decide if he were joking. She read the note again. "I'll give you the money," she whispered. "Please, don't hurt anyone."

Cully kept his mouth shut, but nodded his agreement. He started breathing again when she began moving bundles of bills from her cash drawer to a moneybag. Stacy was efficient. In short order the transfer was complete. She pushed the open bag across the counter.

Cully picked it up and looked inside. The smell of the crisp new bills wafted up at him, filling his mind with images of what he might do with it. He zipped the bag shut and was about to tuck it under his arm when he had the eerie sensation that someone was watching him.

Cully spun around and saw a woman in a charcoal gray business suit staring at him from behind a massive desk.

"Take your money and go," she said. Her voice was calm and even. "We won't interfere with you."

He could tell from the way she held her head that she was in charge. She was strikingly attractive, he thought, perhaps in her fifties with long, silver hair pinned behind her neck. He wondered how he had failed to notice her when he came in.

Cully froze. The lobby grew silent save for the rhythmic ticking of the Regulator clock.

"You heard her," Deacon said. "Now move!" He had the revolver in his hand now and waved it wildly in the air as he paced through the lobby.

His heart racing, Cully headed for the door. He was no more than halfway there when he heard the whoop and wail of a siren.

"You bitch!" Deacon screamed. "You called the police!" He pointed the gun at the woman in charge.

"Take the money and go," she said softly. "The sheriff won't pursue you as long as you don't hurt anyone. He'll leave that to the state and federal authorities."

The siren drew closer.

The woman behind the desk leaned forward and put both hands flat on its glossy top. She looked directly into Deacon's eye and said, "We knew you were coming. Surely you can tell that the Sheriff's car is approaching slowly. He doesn't want to corner you inside the bank."

Deacon's face turned red and twisted into a mask of rage. The stubby revolver shook, even as he steadied his aim with both hands. His knuckles were white when he pulled the trigger.

Cully saw the barrel of the gun whip upward an instant before the blast ripped through the lobby of the small bank. Two more shots followed in rapid succession.

Stacy screamed. Cully closed his eyes and wished that he would wake up and find that it had all been a bad dream. When he opened them, he saw the terrible result of Deacon's shooting spree.

One shot had gone high and splintered the Regulator clock that hung above and behind the woman's desk. Another went wide and shattered a glass paperweight. The third had found its mark. The bullet had struck the woman in the throat. She was sprawled backward in her swivel chair with her hand pressed over the wound, but a crimson spray shot through her fingers with every beat of her racing heart.

Cully jumped when the gun fell out of Deacon's hand and clattered loudly on the marble floor. Stacy's terrified screams merged into a steady wail. She came around the counter and ran past Cully to where the wounded woman had collapsed in a spreading puddle of blood. The siren now howled at ear-splitting volume.

Deacon and Cully turned and ran. Shoulder to shoulder they burst through the door and sprinted across the parking lot in the rain.

* * *

The two men sped past the last gas station on the edge of town. They had seen the Sheriff's car pull up to the bank, so they knew, for the moment at least, that they had not been pursued. Deacon gripped the steering wheel tightly, his face flushed from exertion.

Cully huddled against the passenger door, staring sightlessly ahead. Tears streamed down his cheeks. "Oh my God!" he whimpered. "What did we just do?"

"Shut up!" Deacon growled. "I'm trying to drive." He turned on the air conditioner as high as it would go and pointed the vents toward his face.

"You hurt her real bad, Deke," Cully said. "You said nobody was gonna get hurt."

Deacon tugged at the collar of his shirt and the top button flew off. "She wouldn't have got hurt if she hadn't called the cops," he said.

Cully looked up at his partner and saw that his face had turned an ugly shade of red. "Geeze, Deke, you look like you've got a sunburn," he said.

The Pontiac swerved across the centerline as Deacon cranked down the window. "I'm burning up! What the hell?"

I . . .”

Cully stared in disbelief as the skin on Deacon’s hands and face began to blister and turn brown. The acrid smell of burnt flesh filled the air.

Screaming in agony Deacon turned loose of the steering wheel and pawed wildly at his face. The car veered across the centerline and sailed across the ditch. Cully grabbed the wheel and fought for control, but Deacon had the gas pedal pushed to the floor.

The Pontiac’s tires squalled as it shot back across the highway and flew over an embankment. The last thing Cully saw before being tossed through the passenger window like a rag-doll was his partner erupting in flame.

CHAPTER 1

Officer Clifford Branson climbed out of the driver's seat of the police cruiser and walked around to the passenger side where his partner waited for him. A twenty-year veteran of the Saint Louis Police Department, Leo Watson had been dozing in the passenger seat when the call came in. Now he stood with his thumbs hooked in his gun belt, scowling up at the shabby apartment complex that rose before them.

"Looks like someone woke up cranky from his nap," Cliff said, grinning at Leo, his friend and partner.

Leo scowled. "You're a funny guy, Cliffy-boy. I'd like to see how alert you'd be after a plateful of Rosalie's cannelloni. The old girl ain't much to look at, but I swear she can cook."

Cliff chuckled. "You'd better be careful talking like that, he said. "If it gets back to Rosalie, she'll skin you alive. And by the way, you should really speak to her about the way she keeps shrinking your uniforms."

Leo sucked in his belly and changed the subject back to the matter at hand. "What was the apartment number again?"

"2-G," Cliff answered.

"That'll be around back and up a flight," Leo said. "Are you ready to play marriage counselor?"

"I hardly think I'm qualified," Cliff replied. His smile faded, and for a moment a frown took its place. Then his expression brightened again and he continued, "You, on the other hand, bear a striking resemblance to Doctor Phil."

Leo growled, "Oh, how clever you are tonight! I can see this is going to be a great shift. Let's get it over with."

* * *

The Meadow View Apartments had been aptly named when they were first built. John F. Kennedy was president at the time, and the first occupants could actually look out of their windows and see cattle grazing in the nearby fields. Their children, on hot, summer nights, would chase fireflies to the accompaniment of a chorus of crickets and cicadas.

By the time a disturbed young man named Hinkley had shot President Reagan, the relentless, creeping sprawl of the city had nibbled away the meadow and replaced it with a strip-mall. As trees and grass gave way to concrete and tarmac, the residents began to grumble because there was no place for the kids to play. The owner of the building, alarmed that his best

tenants were moving out, built a courtyard surrounded by a high, wooden privacy fence. For a while that had stemmed the tide.

In the decades that followed, the edge of the city crept onward to the west, and with it followed growth and prosperity. The neighborhood wasn't blighted, like so many others had become, but it was on the downward swing. The apartments were no longer stepping stones for the upwardly mobile, but rather had become a refuge for those who had suffered a setback. Most of the tenants were recent divorcees struggling to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives. For some, the conflict from their previous life spilled into the new one. Such was the case with this domestic disturbance call.

All of this flashed through Cliff's mind as he and Officer Watson walked through the breezeway that split the building into two equally unappealing halves. The brick tunnel opened into the courtyard that once had been an enclave. Now it was unkempt, with weeds growing through the spokes of a forgotten bicycle. The blustery spring wind tumbled a Big-Mac wrapper across the shaggy grass.

On the second floor a curtain was drawn back and a face appeared in the window. Cliff pointed this out to his partner. "Looks like someone is expecting us," he said.

"That'd be the one who made the call," Leo replied. "Better go see what the story is."

The two officers climbed the stairs and walked the short distance down the hallway to the apartment where the face had appeared. Leo knocked sharply on the door. The locks rattled and the knob turned. The door swung slowly inward until the safety chain clinked taut. A small, elderly woman peered through the open space.

Leo smiled. "Police, Ma'am. Did you call about a domestic disturbance?"

The door briefly closed and then opened all the way. The woman modestly gathered her robe more tightly around her stooped shoulders. "Yes, it was me that called. There was a terrible fight next door. I'm worried about Anita and her little boy. Her ex-husband showed up screaming and pounding on the door. That poor, stupid girl let him in."

"Stay inside, ma'am, and lock your door," Cliff said. "We'll be back later to get your statement if we need it."

When the door closed and they heard the deadbolt snick into place, the two officers stepped over to the adjacent apartment. A child was wailing inside.

Cliff knocked sharply on the door. The child continued to cry but there was no answer. "This is the police!" Cliff shouted. "We need for you to open the door." There was still no response.

“What do you think?” Cliff asked his partner. “Do we try to find the super?”

Leo shook his head. “I don’t think so. We have a credible witness and that kid is screaming its head off about something. We gotta go in.”

Cliff nodded in agreement and put one hand on his sidearm. With the other he twisted the knob. To his surprise the door swung open. The child’s wailing rose to an ear-splitting pitch.

“This is the police! We’re coming in!” Cliff shouted. He stepped through the open doorway with Leo close behind.

The living room of the small apartment looked like it had been turned upside down and shaken. It smelled of Chinese takeout and lime Kool-Aid. Cliff drew his weapon and hurriedly picked his way through the overturned furniture. The crying came from the next room.

The first thing Cliff noticed, even as he entered the bedroom, was the wet, metallic reek of blood. The screaming boy sat on his mother’s bed, his face streaked crimson. He rocked back and forth while holding the bloody mess of his mother’s head in his arms.

Leo rushed past Cliff to where the unconscious woman lay prone across the bed and pressed his fingers against the side of her throat. “She’s still alive!” He shouted to his partner.

“You call the ambulance” Cliff said. “I’ll check the rest of the apartment.”

Cliff first looked in the closet, and then the bathroom directly across the hall. He could hear his partner talking on the radio followed by the tinny response of the dispatcher repeating Leo’s request for an ambulance and police backup.

Cliff held his weapon with both hands and crept down the short hallway to where a closed door barred his entrance to what he expected to be the boy’s bedroom. He turned the knob and swung the door open.

The room was empty, and yet something didn’t quite feel right. It was a kid’s room such as he expected to find, cluttered with plastic dinosaurs, toy trucks, and comic books. What caught Cliff’s eye was the suitcase lying open on the child-sized bed. Cliff tightened his grip on his gun and walked toward the closet.

As Cliff reached for the door, it exploded toward him and batted his hand aside. A screaming man leapt from inside and crashed into Cliff’s chest, sending him sprawling backward onto the floor. Landing on a Tonka dump truck that momentarily knocked the wind out of him, he struggled to shout a warning to his partner.

By the time he struggled to his feet, the intruder had dashed out of the boy’s room and was plowing his way through the furniture in the living room headed for the door.

“Are you hurt?” Leo shouted from the doorway of the woman’s bedroom.

“I’m OK!” Cliff answered. “You stay here! I’m going after the son-of-a-bitch!”

* * *

When Cliff reached the bottom of the stairs he spotted the intruder racing across the weedy courtyard. He raised his gun and shouted, “Halt! Police!”

The man broke his stride long enough to glance back at Cliff, and when he did, he tripped over the bicycle that lay half hidden in the weeds. Scrambling back to his feet, he looked at Cliff and then at a two-board gap in the fence.

Cliff could see that he was trying to decide whether to run, or give up. “Stay where you are!” he shouted. “Put your hands on your head!”

The man began to raise his hands, and for a moment Cliff thought it was over. But as he reached back to unhook the handcuffs from his belt, the intruder looked once again at the gap in the fence and made a break for it.

Cliff holstered his gun and took off running in pursuit. He followed his adversary through the fence and spotted him again, this time sprinting down the street. Cliff ran after him. He could hear the man huffing and puffing ahead of him.

Cliff quickly closed the distance between them and he knew that the intruder could hear his own footsteps. He was near enough to catch the scent of panic when the man suddenly darted to one side and drew a gun.

Without thinking Cliff dived behind a Honda Civic that was parked beside the curb. He smashed his knee against the concrete curb and grimaced in pain as he rolled on the ground. A split second later he heard the crack of a gunshot and the ping of a bullet striking metal.

Cliff radioed Dispatch and advised that shots had been fired, and gave his location and direction of pursuit. He heard running footsteps and raised his head above the car hood. The intruder was once again running down the street. Cliff followed, limping now because of the pain in his injured knee.

The man veered into an alley. Cliff turned the corner and was sprayed with shards of brick when a bullet missed his head and smashed into the building instead. One of the fragments nicked Cliff’s face, and he felt the warm flow of blood trickling down his cheek.

Police sirens now surrounded them. The shooter took off again, his eyes wild with panic. “Aw, shit,” Cliff groaned when he saw where the man was headed. The alley opened up into the parking lot of a crowded strip mall. This armed, violent man was running headlong into a crowd of unsuspecting people.

Cliff decided it was best to back off and keep an eye on the guy until his backup arrived rather than risk cornering him in the crowd. He holstered his gun and strolled out of the alley as casually as he could manage. The intruder had quit running as well and was walking just behind a pair of gawky teenage boys, who in turn were following a pair of giggling teenage girls.

The first police cruiser came into view and Cliff thumbed the radio microphone to give a status report. Moments later the lights and sirens went off. The cruiser turned into the parking lot and blocked the farthest entrance. Cliff angled directly toward the strip mall to block escape in that direction. A few curious shoppers noticed the blood on Cliff's cheek and veered out of his way, but so far the milling crowd seemed oblivious to the events unfolding in their midst.

A second police car, lights and sirens off, turned in to block the only other entrance to the parking lot. The gunman was surrounded. Cliff waited for his fellow officers to signal that they were ready. With weapons holstered, they slowly closed in. It was then that a woman noticed the gun in the intruder's hand and screamed.

The people near the screaming woman instinctively turned toward her. They then followed her line of sight to see what it was that she was screaming about. When they saw the gun, they too panicked. Drawing his own weapon as he ran, Cliff took advantage of the distraction to get closer to the armed man and to take rock-steady aim.

The intruder saw Cliff and turned to run. First one officer then another blocked his path. The man's face flushed with rage and frustration. Cliff shouted, "Drop your weapon!"

The armed man grabbed the screaming woman, and clutched her to his chest. "You gotta let me go or I'm gonna shoot her!"

"Drop your weapon and let her go," Cliff said in a voice so chill that a nearby child whimpered and hid behind his mother's legs. "No one has to get hurt."

Everyone but the hysterical woman had managed to scramble to safety and were now huddled behind parked vehicles. Only the police officers, the armed man, and his hostage remained. Cliff watched his colleagues close on the man's flanks from either side, being careful to stay out of the line of fire.

"It's your move, mister," Cliff continued. "You're surrounded. Drop that gun and put your hands behind your head."

"I'll shoot this bitch! I swear to God I will!" the man screamed. He jabbed the barrel of the gun into her ear for emphasis. Rather than scream again, the distraught woman slumped to the ground in a faint.

Now the armed man stood helplessly in the open. Cliff tuned out everything around him and focused all of his attention on the man's next

move. If he surrendered, it would all be over. If he didn't, there would be no choice but to shoot.

The two men measured each other across the open space. Neither one moved. It was only then that Cliff realized where he was standing. Directly behind him was a pizza joint filled with kids. If the armed man shot and missed, the bullet would pass through the window of the crowded restaurant. Cliff kept the front sight of his weapon on the man's chest and waited. When he saw the muzzle of the man's gun rise, he rapidly fired three shots.

CHAPTER 2

Cliff swallowed the stale dregs of coffee and tossed the empty cup into the waste can. Leaning forward in his chair and propping his elbows on his knees, he watched Leo pace back and forth, nervously waiting to be summoned. Their commanding officer, standing at attention beside the door, put Cliff in mind of a man awaiting execution.

“For crying out loud, Leo, would you sit down?” Cliff said. “You’re driving me nuts.”

“Cliffy-Boy, that’s the Chief of Police on the other side of that door,” Leo replied. “Do you think he hauled us in here in the middle of the night to invite us up to his house for beer and bratwurst?”

Cliff shrugged indifferently. “He puts his pants on one leg at a time the same as us. I’ve got a pretty good idea what’s coming. I just wish he’d get on with it so I can go home and take a shower.”

“Hey, that’s a healthy attitude.”

“What’s the worst he can do, fire me? I was looking for a job when I found this one.”

“That’s easy for you to say. How am I supposed to explain it to Rosalie if your smart mouth gets us both fired?”

“That’s enough you two!” barked their captain. “Do you think this is funny?”

Both men silently stared at the floor.

“I didn’t think so,” the captain continued. “Sit down, shut up, and show a little respect.”

* * *

Chief Almeida opened the door and invited the men inside. “Please, take a seat,” he said in a tone that Cliff thought was surprisingly cordial under the circumstances. He settled into his own high-backed chair behind a massive oak desk.

“Captain Salazar, I understand that the victim—Ms. Jackson I believe is her name—is in stable condition?”

“Yes sir. I spoke to the doctor at Saint Anthony’s less than an hour ago. She’s got a concussion and internal injuries, but she’s expected to make a full recovery.”

“And the boy is in the custody of his grandmother?”

“That’s correct, sir,” the captain answered.

Chief Almeida turned to Leo and asked, "Officer Watson, did you participate in the pursuit of the perpetrator?"

"No, sir."

"Did you witness any of that pursuit prior to the arrival of other officers on the scene?"

"Ah . . . no sir. I stayed with the victim until the paramedics arrived."

The chief of police then fixed Cliff with a steely glare. "Officer Branson, why did you engage an armed man in a crowded public place? You knew his identity. We could have picked him up later, probably without a fight."

"It was never my intent to engage him sir," Cliff answered. "I was attempting to maintain visual on him until backup arrived."

"I see. Do you think it was good judgment to fire your weapon in a crowded parking lot at a perpetrator who was holding a hostage?"

Cliff bristled. "He really didn't give me much of a choice, sir. He was going to shoot, and there was a window full of wide-eyed kids behind me."

Chief Almeida opened a manila folder on his desk and shuffled noisily through it. "Officer Branson," he continued. "I understand that you are a particularly good shot."

Cliff shrugged. "I guess so. I shot competitively when I was in the Army."

"His scores are consistently the best in the department," Captain Salazar added.

The chief pushed a stack of photographs across the expanse of his desk toward Cliff. "Then you'll be pleased to know that all three of your shots hit the suspect squarely in the heart. He was dead before he hit the ground. My God, son, why did you find it necessary to shoot him three times?"

Cliff glanced at his partner who looked as though he'd just swallowed something nasty. "Do you really want to know?" he asked.

"Yes!" the chief raised both palms theatrically toward the ceiling. "Please enlighten me."

"The Glock Seventeens that we are issued are accurate and reliable," Cliff explained. "But the nine-millimeter round is under-powered. I shot him three times to make sure he didn't get off a shot and put bystanders at risk."

Chief Almeida slumped in his chair. "I can't believe what I'm hearing. The best shot in the department executes a suspect in front of a hundred witnesses. The woman he took hostage is going to need professional counseling to deal with the trauma. The press is having a fit. Son, have you given any thought to how this looks?"

"No, sir. The thought never crossed my mind."

“Well, you’re going to have a chance to think about it now. Effective immediately you are on administrative leave pending the results of a full investigation. Surrender your gun and badge to your captain.”

Both men stood. Cliff drew his sidearm, removed the magazine, and locked open the slide. He handed the weapon and his badge to Captain Salazar.

“Will that be all, sir?” Cliff asked.

“No,” Chief Almeida replied. “There’s one more thing. As you know, we provide counseling after a traumatic experience such as this. I want you to call tomorrow and make an appointment.”

Cliff frowned. “Sir, I’m fine. I don’t need to see a shrink.”

“You may not think so now, but you will need help coping emotionally with what you did, even if it turns out that your actions were justified.”

Cliff felt the heat rising up his neck. “Chief, my emotions are just fine. That son-of-a-bitch beat his wife nearly to death in front of his kid. He shot at me twice and would have shot again if I hadn’t punched his ticket. I’m sorry things went down the way they did, but I don’t feel any more guilt than if I’d killed a mouse in my garage. I’ve got better things to do with my time than talk to a shrink about whether I look in the toilet after I take a crap.”

Chief Almeida leapt from his seat and shook a finger at Cliff. “That attitude confirms what I already suspected. You are emotionally unstable and present a danger to yourself and the community. You will not be allowed to return to duty until the psychiatrist gives you a clean bill of health. Is that clear?”

Cliff glared at the chief. “Yes, sir.”

“Good! You’re dismissed!”

* * *

There wasn’t much going on at the Log-Jam Roadhouse. As near as Devin Hardwick could tell, that was pretty normal for the middle of the week. Most of the locals were on the wagon until Friday due to insufficient funds, leaving the place empty except for him and his crew.

Devin was the superintendent for the construction company under contract with the state to build a new stretch of highway nearby. The closest town to the project was Homestead, a sleepy little village deep within the rugged hills of Missouri’s eastern Ozarks. Other than a post office, a school, and a scattering of small businesses the place didn’t have a lot to offer.

The construction company was based in Belleville, Illinois, and the workers had drifted into Homestead like nomads, taking rooms in the town’s only motel or setting up campers anywhere they could rent a space. They

quickly discovered there wasn't much in the way of nightlife, so at the end of the day they gathered at the roadhouse to drink beer and shoot pool.

The owner of the Log-Jam was a big, raw-boned character named Hank who looked like he might've worked in the timber for most of his life. He watched over the place like a hawk, swooping down on patrons who got too rowdy and hustling them, none too gently, out the door. Devin knew from years of living on the road that a bouncer could stay pretty busy in a place like this, a place that had a sign over the bar that read, *Absolutely no guns or chainsaws allowed.*

The crew had pulled two tables together, and were drinking beer and watching two young equipment operators circle the pool table like a pair of fighting roosters.

"C'mon, Reggie. Take the damn shot!" said the sandy haired man wearing a Caterpillar ball cap and a t-shirt with the sleeves cut out.

"Hey, Frank, this is for you." Reggie replied as he thrust his hips forward and grabbed his crotch. "And what's your damn hurry anyway? It ain't like there's anything else to do around here. I never saw a place so damn boring."

Frank leaned on his cue stick. "No doubt," he said as he turned to Devin. "Boss, what put the wild hair up your ass to bid a job way out here in the middle of Butt Scoot, Missouri?"

Devin smiled, but the corner of his mouth twitched disapprovingly. He wasn't accustomed to being challenged. "Money is always the reason I bid jobs, and I expect to make a lot of it on this one. I could make a lot more if my operators would quit crashing into the fuel truck."

The rest of the crew erupted in raucous laughter. Frank's face turned red. "That was an accident, one time," he said, his knuckles white on the pool cue. "All I'm sayin' is that there ain't nothin' to do around here. I don't know what keeps the locals from bein' bored to death."

Devin leaned back in his chair, pleased with himself for rattling Frank so easily. "The natives have never done anything interesting, so they have no idea that they are bored. Maybe you could teach them."

Frank and Reggie laid their pool cues on the table, wrecking the unfinished game. "What did you have in mind?" Reggie asked.

"I don't have anything in mind," Devin replied, raising his hands in a defensive gesture. "I'm only suggesting that you quit your damn whining."

* * *

Wispy tufts of cloud drifted across the planter's moon. Sheriff Lyman Garrett steered the Chevy Tahoe through the hills and curves of Sunbridge County

road number 535. The digital clock on the instrument panel indicated it was just past two in the morning.

This was police business, after a fashion, but it had not been the radio dispatcher who had called him out in the middle of the night. The caller had spoken only a few terse words, but they had been enough to chase away the remnants of a dream. Out of habit he had then rolled over in bed saying he had to go. The empty pillow had been a stark reminder. He'd sighed and swung his feet out of bed.

The trees looming over the road cast thin pools of shadow. A whippoorwill, catching bugs on the warm pavement, fluttered across the headlight beams. Ahead, a heavy iron gate blocked the road. The sign above it read, "Mystic Spring—Visitors Welcome." Beyond the gate, off to one side of the road, was the caretaker's cottage. A light shone faintly through one window.

Lyman braked to a stop and waited. The front door of the cottage opened, and a squat figure stepped onto the front porch. He was a barrel-chested man with no visible neck and short, stocky legs. He waddled down the flagstone path into the headlight glare. He opened the gate, waited for the sheriff to drive through, and then closed it behind him. Then he stepped around to the passenger side of the Tahoe and climbed in.

"What the hell happened, Fritz?" Lyman asked.

With a thick, German accent the other man answered, "They must haff sneaked up the spring branch."

"Any idea who it is?"

"Nein."

"You said *they* must've snuck up the spring branch. How do you know there was more than one?"

"Two flashlights dropped on the ground."

Lyman put the Tahoe in gear and drove the short distance to the parking area. He pulled two flashlights out of a canvas bag and handed one of them to Fritz. The two men got out and headed down the trail on foot.

To the left, hidden in the darkness except for an occasional glimmer of moonlight, gurgled the spring branch. In the distance an owl hooted. The two men walked single file along the winding earthen path, with Fritz leading the way. It struck the sheriff that in less grim circumstances their night walk might have been described as comical—he, lithe and wiry, meekly following the shuffling and stolid caretaker.

At length the narrow trail opened into a grassy clearing. The stream made a long, slow bend around its perimeter until it reached its source. Mystic Spring boiled up from the earth at the base of a limestone bluff. Its waters shimmered in the cold moonlight as they flowed through a tumble of mossy boulders that had weathered from the ledges above.

At the edge of the clearing stood Theodosia, the towering white-oak that loomed over visitors to the spring. No one knew just how old the tree was, but two men embracing its massive trunk could not touch each other's fingers. On a steamy, dog-day afternoon its shade provided comfort to children and adults alike. Tonight, however, the spectral tree intimidated Lyman. Its gnarled branches came to life in the breeze, and its shadow danced in the moonlight.

Lyman caught a whiff of burned meat, and as Fritz led the way across the clearing, the smell grew stronger. A dark shape lay on the ground at the foot of Theodosia. A plastic gasoline container sat a few feet away.

As he drew near, he saw that the shape was, in fact, a charred body that was curled into the fetal position with its arms drawn up to its chest and its hands twisted into claws. Lyman picked up the gas can. It was still full.

"I tink dey meant to burn the tree," Fritz offered.

"Looks like it," the sheriff replied. "But, it didn't quite work out the way they planned."

"Vat about the other one?"

"You mean his buddy? He'll turn up before long, either stark-raving-mad or dead."

CHAPTER 3

Cliff parked his Corvette and hit the button on the remote to close the garage door. It wasn't a very practical car to commute in, but he just couldn't bring himself to part with it. He had bought the bright red sports car when he was discharged from the Army, and it had been his only real indulgence in life. He kept it meticulously—his wife would say lovingly—maintained.

Leo had asked him to go out for a few beers after their grilling from the Chief, but Cliff declined. He knew his partner was worried about him, and he appreciated the concern. He even felt a little guilty about brushing off his friend. Tomorrow he would make amends, but tonight he just wanted to be alone.

When he came through the door, the house was completely dark and smelled empty. He flipped the light switch beside the door and saw that the room was spotless, just the way he had left it. Cliff knew it was stupid to keep getting his hopes up, but somehow he couldn't help himself. Sighing, he tossed his keys on the counter and got a beer out of the refrigerator.

The light was blinking on the answering machine, so he punched the button. The moment he heard the voice he stiffened and cocked his ear to listen.

"Cliff, this is Cynthia. You can't just keep avoiding me like this. I need to talk to you right away. Please call me when you get this. It's important. Bye."

"Now what?" Cliff mumbled to himself. He'd call her first thing in the morning.

He drained the beer and headed to the refrigerator for another. Changing his mind before he got there, he decided instead to go with something stronger. He got the bottle of gin and a tall glass out of the cupboard over the sink. Behind another door he found a bottle of tonic. He mixed the two, added ice and headed for the living room to try to unwind.

The mail was piled on the table beside his chair, exactly where he had left it that morning. Cliff decided against turning on the television. There was never anything to watch in the wee hours of the morning. For that matter, there really wasn't much that interested him at any time. Music was another matter. Music to match his mood was just what he had in mind.

One drink led to another. His body slowly relaxed but his mood grew ever more morose. The self-pity that he nurtured was at once gratifying and depressing. At some point, shortly after the Pink Floyd CD finished spinning in the stereo, Cliff stumbled down the hallway and collapsed on the bed.

* * *

Devin Hardwick drove his pickup to the edge of the clearing and shifted it into park. He poured a cup of coffee from a Thermos bottle and watched the spread of heavy equipment working in the early morning mist. Titanic yellow earth-movers rumbled back and forth before him, nibbling away at the mountain and filling the valley below. Ordinarily the sight of the well-orchestrated operation was gratifying, but today something wasn't right. He counted the pieces of equipment. Two machines were missing.

"Somebody's ass is in trouble," Devin said angrily to himself. He pulled the shift lever into drive and floored the accelerator, darting between two mountainous pieces of rolling machinery. The pickup bounced along the rutted haul-road, but not a drop of coffee was spilled. Ahead, a man holding a fiberglass measuring rod directed the equipment operators where to dump their loads. Devin pulled up beside him and stopped.

"Cully, why the hell isn't all my iron working?"

Cully's eyes shifted from the equipment to Devin. "Frank and Reggie didn't show up this morning."

"You call their motel room?"

"Yeah. They didn't answer."

"Probably sleeping one off. If they show up, be sure to dock them for being late. I'm going to drive into town and see if I can find them." Pitching the remains of his coffee out the window he continued, "If they're lucky, you'll see them before I do."

* * *

The sun was high in the bedroom window when Cliff woke. Someone was banging on his door. He groaned and dragged himself upright. His mouth tasted like something nasty had crawled inside it and died. His stomach roiled, threatening to spew its contents across the carpet. The banging came again.

"I hear you already!" he shouted. The effort along with the sound of his own voice produced an eruption of pain in his head.

Realizing that he was still wearing his pants and shirt from the evening before, he stood and took a few wobbly steps toward the door. The banging resumed.

"I'm a cop!" he shouted at his tormentor. "If you touch that door again, I will shoot you!" Cliff made his way down the hallway, across the living room and threw open the door.

Standing on his front porch was one of his fellow police officers. The young man was red-faced and clearly uncomfortable. Cliff had seen the guy around, but didn't really know him.

"Are you Clifford Branson?" the officer asked.

"Uh . . . yes," Cliff stammered, struggling to process what was happening.

"You've been served." He handed Cliff a summons.

Cliff took it from him, staring at the official document in disbelief. The young officer continued to stand in front of him, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "What are you waiting for, a tip?"

"No. No. Of course not. I just . . . I'm sorry about doing this."

A lot of Cliff's friends made extra money serving papers when they were off-duty. He'd even done it himself. Cliff figured the kid needed the money. "Don't worry about it. Somebody had to do it." He stepped back inside and slammed the door behind him.

Cliff stared at the heavy document in his hand. He dreaded opening it because in his heart he knew what it was. Steeling himself for the worst, he unfolded the legal sized paper and three words jumped out at him: *Petition for Divorce*.

An icy chill spread through him. Sure, Cynthia had threatened to file, but he never believed that at the end of the day she'd actually follow through. How could she do this?

Cliff unconsciously paced the length of the living room floor as he struggled to cope with the range of emotions he was feeling. At some point anger seized control, and he threw the papers across the room, knocking over a lamp. He snatched the cordless telephone out of its cradle and punched Cynthia's number.

Her phone rang five times before the answering machine picked up. Looking at his wristwatch he realized that it was the middle of the morning and she would be at work by now. Growing more frustrated by the moment, he dialed her work number and waited.

"Controller's office, this is Cynthia."

"Hey, guess what I just got in the mail?" Cliff asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Cynthia was silent for a few moments. "I'm sorry Cliff. I didn't mean for you to find out that way."

"Oh? Well, that makes all the difference in the world! How exactly did you intend for me to find out?"

"There's no need to shout, Cliff. I've been trying to call you for days. I've left messages for you everywhere."

"So now it's my fault?"

Cynthia sighed. "I didn't say it was your fault and you know it. I'm truly sorry things got so screwed up but I really can't talk right now. I'll call you when I get home, okay?"

The sincerity in her voice knocked him down off his high-horse. He could never stay mad at her for long. "Don't do this Cynthia," he pleaded. "We can still work things out."

"Cliff, I really can't talk right now. Can we please have this conversation later?"

"Look, you got my attention, okay? If you want me to go to the marriage counselor with you I'll do it now." Cliff heard a sniff on the other end followed by a long silence.

"I'm sorry, Cliff. It's too late."

* * *

Cliff had showered and was making breakfast when he heard a knock at the side door. Drawing a curtain to one side, he saw that Leo's car was parked in his driveway. He unbolted the door and let him in.

"How ya doin' this morning, partner?" Leo asked.

Cliff shrugged. "About like you'd expect. Want some coffee?"

"Sure."

Both men headed for the kitchen. As Cliff passed the credenza, almost as an afterthought, he snatched the court summons and handed it to Leo. "Take a look at this."

Leo pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and unfolded the papers. Cliff went back to chopping fresh vegetables. The pieces went into a blender. For a few moments the only sound was that of a paring knife striking the wooden cutting board.

"Aw, man!" Leo said. "That ain't right!"

"Tell me about it." Cliff threw the switch on the blender. Neither man tried to speak over the racket made by the whirring blades.

When Cliff cut off the blender, Leo said, "Man, this can't be for real. I can't believe Cynthia's really doing this."

"You haven't been around her since she left. She's changed. You wouldn't know her anymore." Cliff poured the viscous, green contents of the blender into a large glass. "Want some? It'll put lead in your pencil."

Leo wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "No thanks. My pencil is doing just fine."

"So you say. The question is, would Rosalie agree?"

"I haven't heard any complaints, and quit cracking jokes. I'm worried about you, man! You wouldn't go and do anything foolish would you?"

Cliff frowned. "Define foolish."

"Okay, how about this? The captain took your piece, but I happen to know that you've got several more in the house."

"Leo, I'm not going to shoot myself."

"Okay. What are you going to do? You can't just sit around the house feeling sorry for yourself."

Cliff finished his drink and rinsed the glass in the sink. "You are absolutely right. I'm not going to sit around the house. I'm going to the gym."

* * *

The bright red wrecker was backed up to the edge of the shoulder. A thick cable snaked over the roadway embankment and disappeared into the dense brush. A deputy's car, its flashing red lights dancing back and forth across the roof, served as a physical barrier protecting the workers and a warning to other drivers to slow down.

Sheriff Garrett turned to his passenger and said, "Looks like we found them, Doc."

Doctor Keegan Maguire always seemed unperturbed. Even today, in the gusty wind, his silver hair was perfectly in place. His charcoal gray sweater looked as though it might have just come from the dry cleaners. "It would seem so," he said.

The deputy stepped over to the edge of the highway and waited. The sheriff stopped beside him and rolled down his window.

"What have we got, Eugene?"

The deputy pulled off his sunglasses. "A late model Ford pickup with Illinois tags straitened out the curve at high speed and flew over the edge. It rolled to the bottom of the hill. The driver got ejected 'bout halfway down. Driver's dead." He gave the sheriff's passenger a lopsided grin and continued, "Of course I'm not a doctor."

"When did happen?" the sheriff asked.

"No way to know for sure, but I'd guess late last night. Ron Baker noticed the skid marks when he was coming in to work this morning right at daylight. I got here around 8:30 and the pickup engine had pretty nearly cooled off. So had the driver."

"Any idea who it is?"

"Well, I figured I shouldn't touch the body 'til the doc pronounced him, but there is a hardhat in the cab of the pickup that says Stalwart Excavating. That's the outfit working on the new highway, isn't it?"

The sheriff and the doctor exchanged a look.

"What am I missing?" Eugene asked.

“Hank out at the Log-Jam called the dispatcher last night to say that a couple of the guys from the construction crew had left drunk and looking for trouble. Doctor Maguire and I just collected one of them that burned to death down at Mystic Spring. Looks like you’ve got his buddy here.”

Knitting his brow, Eugene asked, “How the hell did he go and get himself burned to death?”

“It looks like they were trying to vandalize Theodosia. Beer, gasoline and matches are a dangerous combination.”

“I see,” the deputy replied, nodding his head. “This one must’ve been running away scared. Stands to reason.”

Sheriff Garrett got out of the Tahoe. “I’ll keep an eye on things here while the doc checks out the body. You go ahead and get some lunch. You might also want to swing by that construction company and let someone know what happened.”

“You got it, boss.”

When the deputy had climbed into his patrol car and driven away, the sheriff checked to see if anyone besides the doctor was within earshot.

“Keegan, it looks like this going to be easier than we expected.”

The unflappable doctor flicked a grass seed from his trousers and said, “I agree. All things considered, I don’t know how this could have worked out any better.”

When Saint Louis cop Cliff Branson rushes to the aide of his ailing grandmother, he is drawn into a life or death struggle. To save the woman he loves, he must face the terrifying secret of Theodosia's Flock.

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