

THUNDER
AND
RAIN



PART ONE

In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.

—C. S. Lewis



PROLOGUE

Five years ago.

Andie grabbed the pommel, slid her foot in the stirrup and hopped up on May—a fifteen-hand black cutting horse with white socks. I handed her the reins while she glanced at me below the brim of her hat. A slight smirk. She walked to the door of the barn where the last of the sunlight danced on her shoulders. She ducked below the beam and the saddle creaked. An M. L. Leddy's we'd found at a flea market. I checked the knot holding her saddlebags and the picnic inside. She clicked her mouth, heeled May in the flank, pressed her hat down tight and May launched her out of the barn. Half laughing, she hollered over her right shoulder, "Last one down brushes them both." I laid the left stirrup across the saddle, adjusted the breast collar, and watched her. Full gallop. Swirling dust in her wake. I'd seen jets on aircraft carriers do much the same thing. If ever woman was at home on a horse, it was Andie. Heels deep, back straight, ponytail bouncing, arms straight. When we first married, she'd done some barrel racing. The insides of her thighs grew so strong from holding on that she could hang upside

down on a fifty-five gallon barrel like a kid on monkey bars. I tried it once and ended up with three stitches in the top of my head.

She rode across the pasture then disappeared through the mesquite and scrub oaks. I led Cinch to the door and climbed up. I stroked his mane. "Let's don't keep her waiting." He turned toward the river and blew through his nose, ears forward. I laughed. "Well, she can wait a little."

We ambled to the river, waded in, crossed over and climbed up on the island that had become our oasis. A scrub oak canopy rising up out of a sandbar known to few. Time spent here was once plentiful. Now rare. The echoes of laughter had long since faded downriver. I climbed down and tipped my hat back. She had spread dinner out across the blanket. I'd be up all night and the spread was her attempt to make sure I didn't go hungry.

I washed my hands in the river and sat across from her. She handed me a plate. Her cheeks were thinner. More hollow. Black circles under her eyes. Jeans loose. The nights had worn on her. Being alone did that. She said, "You'll be careful?"

I nodded. The trick was to give her enough detail to satisfy her while not causing more concern. Or showing my own. "Everyone'll be asleep. Most will be drunk or high. There's more of us than them."

"And if they're not asleep?"

"Then"—I laughed—"it'll get exciting."

She turned away. I should learn to keep my mouth shut. I tried to remind her. "This is four years in the making."

"But you always told me you can't control every variable, every angle."

"And, we feel like we've got most of them."

"But, what about—?"

"Honey."

"But..." She pushed the food around her plate.

"Andie." I set down my fork. "This is what I do."

She nodded, which meant she heard me but didn't like it.

Thunder and Rain

Maybe all this was unavoidable. Maybe it couldn't be helped. Occupational hazard. Or, casualty. Happened to lots of guys. I had tried to be a good husband. Father. Least, that's what I told myself. She turned and swallowed the pill she had told me was a women's multivitamin prescribed by her doctor.

I knew better. It was not.

We ate, stepping silently around the elephant on the island. I scooped the cobbler and passed it to her. The silence loud.

My pager sounded. A thunderclap. I muted it.

She shook her head. "You can't do that."

Five minutes later, it thundered again. I read the callback numbers: "60." I had an hour. I gathered the plates, began packing.

She stopped me. Set the dishes aside. Reached across. The vine-thick vein on her neck pulsed rhythmically. On a blanket beneath a deep Texas sky, she slid off my hat and pulled me to her. Once tender and warm, her love had been an offering shared, a discovery, a pursuit.

This was not that.

I'd already lost her.



CHAPTER ONE

Dad?”

“Yeah, big guy.” The sun had fallen and hung bright orange rimmed by dark mango, filling the sky from Amarillo to Odessa, drawing long shadows across rusty oil derricks.

“I don’t understand something.”

“What’s that?”

He was whittling. A yellow-handled two-bladed Case trapper. Three miles beyond the end of his knife sat Jack McCarter’s pasture where the last few years he’d grown melons. “I don’t understand why some people put salt on their watermelon.”

It was not yet March. Watermelons were still a good ways off. “A watermelon’d be good about now.”

“Why would people do that?”

His legs dangled off the end of the tailgate, hanging to below the bumper. He was eleven now and his boots looked to be getting small. The river slipped silently by. Wood shavings sprinkled his lap. A few rode the river. The Brazos River falls into Texas off the

Cap Rock, or the end of the Great Plains, in northwest Texas then meanders some eight hundred miles to the Gulf of Mexico. Below our feet it still had some six hundred to go. He waved the blade of his pocketknife in a circle in front of him, an extension of his hand. "Why would you want to put salt on something sweet?"

I shook my head, ran my fingers through his hair. "I'll be gone when you get up in the morning. Dumps'll fix your breakfast. Get you to school." He nodded and didn't look up. The fishing pole next to him leaned against the side of the truck bed, its line connected to a red-and-white bobber floating midstream and a piece of hotdog resting on the bottom. The fish had yet to find it. "I should be home tomorrow night."

He shrugged, digging his knife into the wood, marring it. "Can I go?"

I shook my head.

He looked up. "But I'm old enough."

The weight of the world lay hidden in his question. "Yes, you are, but I need some time with her."

"You always say that."

"You're right, I do. But it's true."

"When can I see her?"

"I don't know, son."

"She don't call much."

"I know that."

His eyes narrowed. "You taking her some flowers?"

Beyond the river, the pasture was dotted with the first of the bluebonnets. *Lupinus texensis*. The Texas state flower. Another month and God would paint the earth blue and the sky red. "Think I should?"

He nodded.

"Okay. I'll pick some. Take them down."

"You get her some for me?"

"Yep."

Thunder and Rain

I reeled in his line, held it while he fed a worm onto the hook. He cast farther upstream and set it back against the truck bed.

He returned to his stick.

“Dad?”

“Yes.”

“How much longer does she have?”

I put my hand on his shoulder. He looked away. I tried to speak quietly. “You should know.”

He’d hung a calendar on the refrigerator. Every morning he’d mark another “X” then announce the number of days remaining. “Thirty-five.” He looked up at me. “When she’s done, is she coming home?”

I pulled him to me, tucking his shoulder under mine. “I don’t know, son.” The sun slid. Orange bled to crimson.

“Do you want her to?” The world hung in his question.

I squeezed him. I’d never lied to him. “I don’t know.” He cut deep into his stick. “I don’t know.”

CHAPTER TWO

I-10 westbound. Louisiana in my rearview. Texas beyond my hood. The rain had returned. Grape-sized drops pelted the windshield. I couldn't see past the end of my wipers. The manila folder sat on the dash. Yellowed. A coffee stain on top. The weight of the papers inside drew my eye. Such finality. Two signatures . . . I could almost hear the "sign here" tags talking. I shuffled it off to the side. Wedged down where the windshield met the plastic. But it did little to dull the conversation. Nothing silenced that.

I slowed, watched my mirrors for lights and mopped off the fog on the inside of the glass with a dirty T-shirt. I slowed to a crawl, nearly stopping. I couldn't see anything. The flowers lay on the seat next to me. Wilted.

I hadn't left them.

My mind was distant. The Polaroid stared up at me. I'd taped it next to the gas gauge. When full, the needle pointed to Brodie's ice cream-covered face. He was sitting on my shoulders, wearing my hat, arms raised. He was so proud. My mind was distant—half

Thunder and Rain

of me was driving, and half of me was walking up the front porch trying to find an answer to Brodie's question. That distance only partly explained why I bumped the car in front of me. The rest of the explanation had something to do with it being parked in the middle of the highway.

I hit my flashers, pulled off to the side, pulled on my slicker and hat and walked toward the driver's window. The car was once a 1970s wood-paneled station wagon. Most of the wood was gone. A woman—young, maybe early- to midthirties—climbed out of the driver's side as I approached. She was soaked to the skin. A muffled and tight cough rose out of the backseat.

The driver was tired. Haggard looking. Medium height. Five-eight or so. Skinny. Light brown, even blond, hair. Faded T-shirt. Glasses. She wrapped a dirty towel around her shoulders. She pushed wet hair out of her eyes. Rain dripped off her face. One lens of her glasses was fogged up and the rain was causing them to slide forward on her nose. One of the nosepieces had broken off so they sat at an awkward angle. She shoved them up with her finger. She was not happy. "Why don't you watch where the hell you're going!" The word "hell" was two syllables and sounded like "hale."

I looked behind us. Two lights approached in the distance. Closing faster than I liked. Sometimes the best way to disarm somebody is to come in around them. "Will it crank?"

More coughing from the backseat. Her eyes narrowed. "If it would, do you seriously think I'd be sitting here?" Her accent wasn't Texas. More Alabama. Maybe south Georgia.

"You steer. I'll push."

She bit her lip. This confrontation wasn't going as she had planned. I glanced at the lights behind us. She hopped in, I leaned against the rear bumper and pushed her onto the shoulder of the road as a moving truck passed in the left lane. I walked to the window. "Hit the engine one time and let me listen." Rain puddled alongside the road.

She turned the key and the engine turned over but wouldn't

start. She palmed her face, locked the door, and began rolling up the window. She spoke through the glass. "Thanks for your help." She tried to smile. "We got help coming."

I'd "read" a lot of people. It's helped me stay alive. 'Course, I've missed a few, too. I knocked on the window. "You sure it's got gas?"

She cracked open the window and tapped the gauge. "It's broken. Doesn't register right."

"When was the last time you filled up?"

She paused, staring through the windshield. Black circles around her eyes. She sat back, crossed her arms. "A while back."

I lifted a five-gallon can out of the back of my truck, and began pouring it into her tank. Doing so allowed me to see the person in the backseat. She was small, hidden in a blanket, eyes wide and knees pressed to her chest. Her face was pale and her breathing shallow. While the empty tank drank, I listened. The coughing came in violent, spastic spurts. Sometimes hard and deep. Other times, short and shallow. Sounded like it was coming from down in the lungs and it sounded like everything else was swollen and tight. I'm no cough-reader but it needed a doctor. I screwed the cap back on, patted the roof. "Okay, hit her one time." She turned the engine over and over. "Pump the pedal." She did and the engine sputtered, backfired, then the big block roared to life, sending white exhaust out the left bank. It idled rough and the timing needed adjusting. I knocked on the hood and spoke over the rain, which was thundering. "Pull the latch."

She did and I lifted the hood. I shined a light. The engine was leaking oil like a sieve and one of the engine mounts was broken and banged every time the engine revved and torqued. I hollered around the hood, "Your timing's off."

I heard a mumble from inside, "You're telling me."

The door opened, she came around the side, wrapped in the soaked towel, arms crossed. The rain was bucketing. It was cold and getting colder. "Is that expensive to fix?"

Thunder and Rain

Water was dripping down my back. More hacking erupted from the backseat.

I leaned in, and turned the distributor counterclockwise.

The engine settled but little improved. White clouds blew from the right rear pipe. I shut the hood and held the door while the lady climbed back in the car. An empty quart of oil lay on the passenger floorboard. The gas gauge was bouncing off “E.”

She cracked the window again. I spoke above the rain. “You’re burning a lot of oil. Your right head gasket is leaking like Swiss cheese. You push this thing very hard and you’re liable to blow the engine.”

“Can it be fixed?”

“Yes, but . . .” I glanced at the car. “I’m not sure the car would be worth whatever you’d have to pay to fix the engine.”

The woman seemed distracted, nervous. Like she was looking over her shoulder. She was rubbing her hands together. The person in the backseat had pulled the blanket over her head, crossed her legs Indian style, and was writing in a journal. The pages were covered in words. Lots of words. She looked up once, eyed me, but never quit writing.

The woman pushed the hair out of her face. Unzipped a small black backpack that looked like it served as a purse, and pulled out her wallet. Crow’s-feet formed in the corner of her eyes. She said, “What do I owe you?” Given the concert of her life—the torn upholstery, bouncing gas gauge, empty oil can, kid coughing, bald tires, smoke billowing out the exhaust pipe, smell of burning oil—I had my doubts.

“Not a thing.”

She let out a breath. “I’m sorry about your truck. Is it very bad?”

My truck is a Dodge Ram one-ton, 3500 series four-wheel drive, powered by a Cummins turbo diesel. Its color was in the gold family but with a little over two hundred thousand miles, it’s more a dull satiny remnant of that. If there is such a color. It’s what I like to call

a highway tank. It has a crew cab—four doors—a topper that keeps everything dry in the bed, including me when I sleep back there, and aftermarket BFGoodrich all-terrain tires. It is designed to pull cattle trailers, which it has done much of, and if forced, could probably slide a house off its foundation.

“Where I come from that’s called a cattle guard and it takes something akin to a nuclear blast to ding the thing. A few exits down, you’ll find a truck stop. Greasy place, but it’s dry, they serve a good egg sandwich and they got a mechanic who will be in tomorrow morning. He’s almost honest. If you can’t wait, then you might ought to stop and pour some oil in this thing. Maybe buy a few quarts for the road. It’s burning as much oil as gas.”

Another push on her glasses. They were stretched out and didn’t fit her face well. She tried to laugh. “Don’t I know it.”

Another painful swallow. She proffered her wallet. “Sure I can’t pay you something?” Another muffled hack sounded behind her. The shape moved slowly, obscured by the fogged-up windows. The woman glanced over her shoulder, then returned to me and slid her hand back into her purse. “I can.”

Rain was flooding the side of the road. “I’ll follow you to the truck stop. Just stay in the right lane and click your flashers on.”

She nodded, smeared the rain off her face and rolled the window up. She tried to take a deep breath but it didn’t get very far. She opened and slammed the door, which did little to lock it shut. She shut it again, but the hinge was bent and, judging by the sound of metal on metal, had been for a while.

She dropped the stick to drive, rolled up her window, and eased off the side of the road, slinging mud out of the right tire. The left spun on the asphalt. The car fishtailed. Two eyes stared at me out of the backseat.

CHAPTER THREE

Dear God,

I figure you already know everything I need to tell you. If you don't then you ain't much of a God. Certainly not The God. Momma says God would know. And if God was really God then He would be pissed. I'm writing you 'cause we don't never stay nowhere long enough for me to find a real pen pal. Plus, Momma told me to. Remember the train station? We were sitting on that bench in that town with the name I can't remember, just Momma and me, and she was rubbing her hands together, and we didn't have no ticket to nowhere and no money and no nothing and I kept bugging her and asking her to tell me who to write 'cause somebody needed to know about us. Somebody other than us needed to care about our life, which was real bad but it was ours so anyway she's rubbing her face and sweating and pacing back and forth and trains are coming and going and nighttime was coming and I

didn't want to sleep in that station another night and I jabbed my pencil into this book and I said Momma, who can I write? And she looks at me and tells me not to raise my voice at her. Can't I see she's got enough going on. And when I started crying and threw this book at her she went and picked it up and straightened all the pages and then she sat down and put her arm around me and she cried too, which she don't do much 'cause she's trying to be strong but she cried then and she cried hard, I know 'cause she was shaking and she couldn't catch her breath and then she was quiet a while and finally she picked me up and carried me through this door that said "chapel" and it wasn't nothing more than a broom closet without the broom but with a stained-glass and bleeding Jesus hanging crooked on the wall that reminded me of one of those velvet Elvises you see hanging at closed gas stations and we spent the night in there and a couple hours later when the trains had quit coming and going and she was combing my hair with her fingers she looked at me and said, God, baby. He'll listen. He'll be your pen pal. You can write God. So, you're stuck with me. I know you're busy with hungry people and folks dying and disease and all kinds of bad stuff but when I asked Momma about you and having the time for me she just smiled and told me that you can walk and chew gum at the same time, which I think means you can do more than one thing at a time so if I'm bugging you then just tell me and I'll try to write shorter letters.

I haven't written much lately 'cause, well—I guess you know. Anyway, I can't talk to Momma about it 'cause it hurts her too much to hear it and come to think about it it hurts me too much to say it and, well, I don't really know where to start so I'll just start right here—Momma found out about the... you know, and she blew a fuse. Like I ain't never seen. She grabbed me and we took off. Said we were "getting the hell

Thunder and Rain

out of there.” Sorry to cuss at you but that’s what she said as we ran to the car. I’m just repeating it and repeating it ain’t a sin ’cause it didn’t start with me.

She stole this car. It was the neighbor’s and she wasn’t driving it. Just letting her cats sleep in it. She won’t miss it none. Anyway, we stole it and Momma’s been breaking every speed limit we see. By a lot, too. She says we’re headed to her sister’s. Told me not to worry. Says when we get there, she can get a job and we’ll be fine. Just fine. She said it twice, which means she don’t believe it none neither. Says there’s lots of jobs in New Orleans. She can go back to Wally World and they’ll transfer her job to wherever she’s living at the time. She says they’re good about that. They like her ’cause she’s always on time and never stole nothing like the other cashiers. And at her sisters, she says we’ll have our own room. Upstairs. Overlooking the water and the lights of the city. And we can have clean sheets every night ’cause her sister’s got a washing machine. Says there’s always something going on in New Orleans. Always a party. I’m not so sure. I know I’m just ten, but sometimes I think she tells me things to make me feel better even though they ain’t true and they ain’t never gonna be.

My blanket is dirty. I asked Momma if we could get a new one and she rubbed her hands and put her hand on her forehead, which told me it cost money and we didn’t have none of that so I took it in the bathroom at the rest area and tried to wash it out with the pink hand soap and then held it under that hair dryer mounted on the wall but it didn’t do no good. I tried to find a word to describe it. I think I found one. “Bedraggled.” I think it fits. Anyway, it’s real dirty and looks like I been dragging it in the mud.

It’s raining. I better go. Momma just cussed, twice, ’cause the engine quit and now we’re sitting in the middle of the highway with headlights getting closer.

Charles Martin

* * *

It's been a few minutes. This man stopped to help us. Actually, he bumped into us, Momma cussed him out and he just tipped his hat and helped us, which I thought was strange. He looks like a cowboy. Wears one of those long raincoats you see in the movies. Gave us some gas. Looked through the window at me. Momma pulled the hood latch and he fiddled with something. The engine don't sound as bad. He told us about a truck stop up ahead. Said he'd follow us.

He is. I just looked.

Momma once told me she's got a tumbleweed heart. I didn't know what it was so I looked it up. It's a bush that dries up 'cause its water source goes away, then, once it's sucked dry and dead, it rolls around in the wind. Or, tumbles. That's how it got its name. You've seen them in old Western movies.

Momma just asked me how I'm feeling. I said fine. But between you and me I feel like a dirty tumbleweed. Just rolling 'round in the wind. No roots. No place to set down. Nothing to call home. And you know when you see a tumbleweed rolling around those old movies, the movie always ends before you get to see what happened to it.

But, looking back on it, I don't think it's real good.