

Ruby Tuesday

By Jack English

Chapter One: A Dark and Stormy Night

For one summer, she flashed across the sky like a meteor, lighting everything anew. Then, just as suddenly, she was gone.

I was a newly minted CPA trying to get my practice going in Petersburg, South Carolina, a little town half way between Columbia and Augusta, Georgia. One of my first clients was Magnolia Creech. She had a diner with a neon sign on top that said *Joe and Magnolia's*. But Joe was a drunk and when he started fooling around with one of the waitresses, Magnolia threw him out. She didn't want to spend the money to take Joe's name off the diner, so she just disconnected the electric to Joe's name. During the day, the sign over the diner said *Joe and Magnolia's*, but at night, it only said *Magnolia's*.

I came to the diner every Wednesday morning for an hour or two and did her bookkeeping. I sat in a booth at the far end of the diner opposite a huge calendar she had hung behind the counter. One of her customers was an oil salesman and he gave her a new calendar every year. All I had to do was glance up to check on dates.

Sometimes Magnolia sat with me and plied me with pie and coffee.

“I don’t want to show too much profit. I don’t want the revenueurs poking around.”

“If you want to keep the tax man away, report everything accurately and on time. I want you to be on the side of the angels.” I smiled at her.

Magnolia was a good soul. She was the daughter of a sharecropper, but through hard work she and Joe were able to buy the diner. After she threw him out, she was on her own and somehow, she made it work. She was a heavy-set woman in her mid-fifties. Most people thought of her as a wise old soul, and people came to the diner at odd hours to drink coffee and talk.

I thought I knew everybody who worked for Magnolia because I did her payroll. “I see you have some new help.” I pointed to a pale, thin young woman whose dark hair was scrunched up under a net. She was wearing a dress that was ten sizes too big for her. The loose material had been gathered into pleats and held in place with a belt. She was clearing dishes off the counter.

Magnolia slid into the booth and sat opposite me. “She’s an odd duck.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know how hard it rained last night?”

“It came down in buckets. I heard the Burton’s Creek bridge washed out.”

“She came in on the nine o’clock bus. You know they make a regular pit stop here. I let

people use the bathrooms. All I ask is that they buy a cup of coffee. Well, she got off the bus with everyone else and sat right here in this booth. She was drenched head to toe. She must have gotten soaked before she ever got on the bus. Anyway, the bus driver told everybody he was leaving in five minutes. And she just sat here holding her coffee with both hands like she was trying to warm herself up. I think she was in shock because when the bus driver made the final boarding call a couple of minutes later, she didn't move.

"It got to be eleven o'clock and she was still sitting here. I told her I was locking up and she had to go. She started crying. I sat down across from her. There were bruises on her face. Someone had punched her or slapped her, hard. I asked her whether she had somewhere to go. She shook her head no. I told her she couldn't stay here. I asked whether I could call her a cab. She shook her head no again, then said, 'No money.'

"I asked whether there was anyone I could call for her. She shook her head no. She was wearing a man's raincoat. It opened a little and I could see she was wearing an expensive looking dress." Magnolia paused, "Look, I'm telling you this in confidence. OK? Isn't there something like lawyer-client privilege when talking to an accountant?"

"No, but being wet in a diner isn't a crime."

“Don’t tell anybody, but I felt sorry for her. I told her she could sleep on a cot in the storeroom. I take a nap there myself once in a while.

“I locked up the diner, shut off the lights, and led her through the kitchen to the storeroom. I told her to get out of her wet clothes. I had an extra dress in the storeroom and gave it to her.

She nodded and took off the raincoat.

“There was blood on her dress, a lot of it. I asked if she was all right.

“She nodded yes.

“Is that your blood?

“She nodded no.

“Whose blood is it?

“She started crying again.

“I thought I’d try a simpler question. Where did you come from?

“‘The bus.’

“I mean before you got on the bus. Where do you hail from? What’s your hometown?”

“‘I don’t know.’”

“What do you mean you don’t know?

“‘All I remember is that I was soaked. I was on the bus and it pulled into your diner.’

“Do you remember getting on the bus?

“She shook her head no.

“Do you remember anything?

“She shook her head no.

“Let’s get you into some dry clothes, and we’ll deal with everything else in the morning, OK?

“She nodded yes.

“She might have had four inches height on me, but I had a hundred pounds on her. I pinned pleats in the dress as best as I could and she snugged it all together with a belt.

“She laid on the cot and I pulled a blanket over her. To tell you the truth, I half expected her to be gone in the morning.

“I put her dress in a tub of soapy water, figuring it might help to take the blood stain out. That’s when I noticed it was a Valentino. I’m no expert, but I think Valentino is pretty expensive. When I hung up the raincoat to dry, I felt something in the pocket. It was a steak knife, an expensive one. There was blood on it.”

“What did you do with it?” I asked.

“I put it in the dishwasher.”

“That might have been evidence.”

“Of what?” she asked.

I spread my hands and shrugged, “So, is she on the payroll or not?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s her name?”

“Ruby Tuesday.”

Chapter Two: Deputy Flirt

Magnolia went back to greeting customers and working the cash register. I continued on with my bookkeeping. Every once in a while, I would glance at Ruby. I remember thinking there was nothing special about her. She looked scrawny,

pale, sickly and nervous. She had a tendency to drop things, mostly little things like a spoon or a napkin hastily placed on a stack of dishes headed for the dishwasher.

A spoon slipped off the stack of dishes she was carrying as she passed me. She started to stoop down with a stack of plates in her hands. I knew sure as blazes that if she bent down to pick up the spoon, the dishes would go crashing to the floor. I leaned out of my booth, scooped it up and placed it back where it belonged.

“Thank you,” she said, and immediately turned away. Then she vanished into the kitchen and didn’t return before I left.

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I love spring in South Carolina, crisp cool mornings, sunny afternoons and everything seems to come to life. Winters aren’t bad either. They are mostly mild and fall is pleasant too. But summers can be brutally hot and humid. It was the beginning of summer and it was going to be brutally hot and humid today.

A week had passed and it was time to do Magnolia’s books again. I parked myself in my usual booth at the diner and opened my laptop. Magnolia slid a manila file folder onto the table. It was full of receipts, a check book and her checking account statement. That’s when I saw Ruby Tuesday for the second time. She was serving pie to Deputy Lee Porter.

Lee and I went way back. We went to junior high and high school together, and started college together. Some people take to college, others don't.

From the day he got there to the day he left, he complained that the faculty had no real-world experience and so the only thing they could teach was a pale imitation of life. He likened it to a flight school where none of the instructors had ever flown a plane. He scraped through the first year, then dropped out to join the Army. "At least," he said, "they know the difference between a rifle butt and a pork butt."

After one tour, he came home and joined the sheriff's department. They called him the "college boy," because he had a year of college. The sheriff was pushing seventy. Mostly, he just sat in his office and smoked cigars. The sheriff set the tone for the office and most of his men were just counting the months until they could retire. They weren't motivated to get out and do anything. So, after a short period of time the college boy became the public face of the Sheriff's department. Anything that needed doing, he'd get it done. The other deputies just followed along.

All the girls in high school considered Lee a good-looking guy. Broad shoulders, a slender build, short blonde hair as befits a sheriff's deputy and a million-dollar smile still made him a catch. More than a few of the young women in town were

disappointed when he announced his engagement to Marilee Fisk, a former high school cheerleader.

Lee leaned across the counter a little, gripped his coffee cup with both hands and whispered something to Ruby. Then he flashed his million-dollar smile.

She put the back of her hand up to her mouth and tried to suppress a little giggle.

I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I saw him lightly poke her hand with his fork. My guess is he was saying something like, "You are sweet enough to eat."

She turned to the counter behind her and picked up a pot of coffee like she was going to freshen up his cup. He put a hand over his cup and reached for his wallet, peeling off a couple of bills and laying them on the counter.

She drifted down the length of the counter offering coffee to the people sitting there, still smiling from whatever Lee Porter had said to her.

The next day I was back and Lee was there too.

I was using Magnolia's diner as an office to work on the books for another client. I stretched out breakfast for an hour and a half.

Lee spent nearly an hour there, flirting with Ruby. She giggled, shushed his comments away with the back of her hand and flirted back. I was there on business.

A sea of paperwork and file folders surrounded my laptop when she came over carrying a pot.

"More coffee?" she asked.

The pale sickly look I'd seen a week earlier had vanished and color had returned to her face. The dress she was wearing was still ten sizes too big for her, but she had it pinned back in a way that accentuated her girlish figure.

She glanced back at Lee Porter who was sitting on a stool turned in her direction. He winked. She smiled.

"You know Lee?" I asked.

"A little," she said. "Why? Do you know him?"

"We grew up together."

"What is he like?"

"Why do you ask?"

"He's taking me to Columbia tomorrow. We're going to spend the day together."

"That's nice." I had known Lee Porter a long time, I also knew he was engaged to Marilee Fisk. He had been for five years. Marilee's brothers, Jake and Ashwood, were big bruisers who worked in the cotton mill. They wouldn't take kindly to Lee stepping out on their sister, especially now that she was eight months pregnant. I kept my head down and said nothing.

Ruby bussed my empty plate and vanished.

Chapter Three: Bust Up

A week later, I was back working on Magnolia's payroll when I glanced out the window. I didn't

say anything about Lee and Ruby, but word must have gotten around.

Lee was driving a Sheriff Department's car when he pulled into the handicapped spot in front of the diner. As he got out of the car, Jake Fisk appeared out of nowhere. Loud, angry words turned to shoving. Jake took a swing at Lee and caught him up the side of the head. Lee returned the favor with a gut punch. Jake doubled over. Then Ashwood Fisk came up from behind Lee and punched him in the kidneys. After that, there was a flurry of fists going this way and that, bodies banging into cars, and general mayhem.

Other diners pressed themselves against the windows to watch.

Magnolia came over. "Should I call the police?"

"No, this is a private fight."

"Do you know what it's about?"

I pointed to Ruby, "Guess!"

I've got to give Lee a lot of credit. The Fisk brothers both outweighed him by thirty pounds, though it might have been thirty pounds of beer and burgers. Still it was two to one. After a few minutes, the three of them were all too beat up and too tired to keep going. One of the Fisk brothers had a split lip. They both had black eyes. They were both spitting blood. Finally, they pushed Lee to the ground, kicked him one last time and skulked away to their old brown pickup truck.

Lee sat on the ground next to his car.

“Magnolia,” I asked, “Can you spot me a couple towels and some soapy water?”

“Sure,” she said.

I went outside and handed Lee a wet towel. “I see you bumped into a door.”

He didn’t say anything. He had a swollen lip and dark bruises were forming on the side of his head. A little bit of blood dripped from the corner of his eye.

“Can I help you up?” I extended my hand.

He shook his head no and continued to pat his face with the cool wet towel.

I sat quietly with him. If he needed anything, I was there. After a couple of minutes, I asked, “Want to go to the hospital?”

He shook his head no.

“Can I drive you home? You can’t go back to the office looking like that.”

He nodded yes.

Porter still lived with his mother. The rent was cheap and she did his laundry. They lived in a little bungalow on Washington Street. It was a street with no curbs and few paved driveways. The bungalow was raised up above ground level on columns of bricks. His dog lay in the shade under the house and watched as we drove up.

I helped Lee into the house. The screen door banged behind us as we entered the kitchen.

“Lord almighty!” his mother said. “What happened to you?”

“Auto accident,” I said. “He’ll be OK.”

He tried to push his mother away as she fussed over him.

“Lee, why don’t you take a shower,” I suggested. “You’ll feel better.”

He didn’t say anything. He just nodded yes. I think he would have done anything to get out from under his mother’s questions.

“Mrs. Porter,” I asked, “do you have any of that blueberry pie you’re so famous for?”

She nodded yes, but her gaze followed her son as he stepped into the bathroom.

A half hour later, Lee had on a clean uniform, but his face was a mess.

“Want me to take you to a doctor?” I asked.

“No doctors,” he mumbled. His jaw was swollen.

“What are you going to tell them at work?”

“Auto accident. Hit and run. New Jersey plates.”

“Want me to take you back to the dinner so you can get your car?”

He nodded yes.

I dropped him off at the diner, and as he was backing out of the handicapped parking space, I saw him looking up. Ruby was pressed against the glass looking out at him. He gave her a little wave and pulled away.

Chapter Three: Pie

I didn't wait until Wednesday to go back to Magnolia's. I dropped in Monday morning. If I'm honest, it was because I wanted to see Ruby.

She rested her arms on the counter leaning over a little laughing and joking with two young men that worked at the cotton mill. I took a seat further down the counter.

Magnolia walked over. "You're a couple of days early. I hope this isn't about the tax man."

I nodded my head no. "Looking for a cup of coffee and a slice of blueberry pie."

"You know, Lee Porter's mother bakes these pies for me."

"I know." Mrs. Porter's pies were great. I glanced down the counter toward Ruby. A third guy sat on a stool near her. They were all laughing.

Magnolia crooked her thumb over her shoulder. "It looks like eats aren't the draw here anymore."

I spread my hands, "Boys will be boys."

"Yeah," Magnolia said, "and men will be boys too." She walked down to where Ruby was flirting and pointed to me.

Ruby carried a coffee pot in my direction and picked up a cup and saucer along the way.

"Blueberry pie?" she asked. There was a little curl to her lip when she asked it, a little smile like she knew some secret about the pie.

"Please."

She returned with the pie and a fork.

"Have you seen Lee lately?" she asked.

"No."

She turned serious. “Who were those guys? Why were they fighting with Lee?”

“I couldn’t tell you.”

Magnolia leaned into the conversation. “They were Lee’s fiancée’s brothers.”

“I didn’t know he was engaged,” Ruby said.

“The baby’s due in a month,” Magnolia turned away.

“Engaged?” All the air seemed to go out of her.

I glanced down the counter at three young men staring in my direction. “Looks like you’ve got some admirers,” I nodded in their direction.

“They’re just being friendly.”

“So, they haven’t asked you out.”

“Well, not in so many words.”

“I see you have a new dress.”

“Lee bought it for me. We went to Walmart. I’ve never been to a Walmart before. It was amazing.”

“You’ve never been to a Walmart?”

She shook her head no.

“Where are you from, that you’ve never been to a Walmart?”

She used a rag to wipe a spot of coffee off the counter. “I don’t know. I don’t remember anything before being on the bus.”

“Do you remember getting on the bus?”

She shook her head no.

I thought I’d try something easy. “Do you remember the name of your high school?”

“I don’t remember going to high school.”

“Mom’s name?”

She shook her head no.

“Dad’s name?”

She shook her head no again. She looked upset. Then she tilted her head toward Magnolia. “I better get back to work.”

~

Wednesday morning, I returned to update the diner’s books and do the payroll. I settled in with a cup of coffee and Magnolia dropped off a manila folder full of receipts and her checkbook.

“Lee’s back,” she said.

“What do you mean back?”

“He picked her up last night after work.”

I spread my hands, “So?”

“He’s your friend. You’d think after the thumping he took from the Fisk brothers and what with Marilee being due in a month...” She let the statement hang in the air.

“Lee and I have known each other since we were kids, but it’s not like we double date or anything. What about her?” I pointed to Ruby. “Find out anything?”

Magnolia turned serious. “The blood still bothers me.”

“The blood?”

“The blood that was all over her dress when she first got here,” Magnolia said. “What do you think happened? What do you think it means?”

“Maybe two guys were fighting over her.”

I glanced down the length of the diner to where she was wiping down a table. She still seemed pale and thin. But there was something special about her. Maybe it was that crooked little smile she flashed once in a while, or the twinkle in her eye like she knew something nobody else did. It was times like that when I felt the breath go out of me. I didn't want to admit it, but she pulled on me like gravity pulls on a football in flight.

Chapter Four: War not Peace

A low-level war broke out between Lee Porter and the Fisk brothers. They made it clear that as long as Lee cheated on their sister, they were going to keep coming after him.

The Fisk brothers were hunters and trappers. One day a skunk wandered into one of their traps. They had used bait laced with sedatives. They put the snoozing skunk in a burlap bag and drove around town until they found Lee's patrol car. It was parked under a shade tree next to a barbershop. Like I said, it gets brutally hot in the summer in South Carolina, so Lee often left his windows rolled down. The Fisk brothers left the sleepy critter in Lee's back seat, then they parked half a block away so they could watch what happened.

After Lee got his haircut, he pulled out of the parking lot and drove through town. Nothing

happened until he reached Route 72. That's when he slammed on the brakes, skidded to the side of the road and jumped out of the car.

The Fisk brothers laughed and beat the sides of their truck as they passed him standing beside the highway.

The patrol car was ruined. There was no way they could get the skunk stink out of it. The sheriff assigned him to foot patrol for a week. Then the Sheriff's Department bought a surplus car from the Barnwell Police Department. It was an old Chevy. Everybody else in the department got to drive new Fords. It was humiliating.

The skunk incident wasn't the end of the feud. Once, when the Fisks were in Rosier's Gun Shop, Lee looped a steel cable around a municipal trash can and secured it to the trailer hitch on Ashwood's pickup. When Ashwood pulled out of his parking space, he yanked the trash can off the sidewalk sending cans and bottles and hamburger wrappers flying in every direction. As he dragged the trash can down the street, it smashed into a dozen cars.

Around here, there isn't anything more serious than messing with a person's girl, their dog, or their car. The Fisk brothers nearly got into a fight with a half dozen of the car owners. The brothers finally agreed to pay for any damages not covered by insurance.

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Returning home from work one day, Lee found Marilee sitting on the front step of his mother's house. She demanded to know when they were going to get married. She demanded he stop seeing Ruby Tuesday. There was so much yelling and screaming, the neighbors called the police.

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Friday morning, I stopped into Magnolia's for more pie and hoped to see Ruby. She started wiping the counter from the far end and eventually reached me. "What will you have?"

"The usual."

"Coffee and blueberry pie."

"Right."

She poured the coffee and served the pie and stood there quietly for a while.

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah, sure." She continued to stand there.

"Have you remembered anything yet?"

She shook her head no. "I guess that makes me a nobody."

"No one is a nobody. You've got to be somebody. At least you remember your name."

She continued wiping the already clean counter in front of me.

"What is it? You can tell me."

"It's your friend."

"Lee?"

"Yeah, he's getting a little too possessive."

"Meaning?"

“He wants to be with me every minute of the day. And, he wants to know what I’m doing and who I’m talking to when he’s not around.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I feel like I’m being suffocated.”

“But what do you want to do?”

“I’d end it if I could.”

“Tell him it’s over. Tell him you’ve found someone else.”

“He’s not going to believe me unless I can tell him who I’m seeing. I can’t just make someone up.”

My heart raced. Maybe this was the opening I had hoped for.

“Tell him you’re going out with me.”

“He’ll know it’s a lie.”

“I won’t be a lie if you actually go out with me.”

“He’ll beat the crap out of you.”

“Just because I’m an accountant and not a cop doesn’t mean I’m defenseless. Besides, I think the Fisk brothers will help me out, if I need backup.”

So, we made our first date. I offered to buy Ruby dinner at the country club.

Chapter Five: Country Club

Once our date was set, I thought I would buy a little protection by visiting Marilee Fisk and her brothers. The three of them sat on the front steps of their house. I stood opposite them.

“Ruby had no idea Lee was engaged to you, Marilee, not when she started seeing him. She’s sorry she got involved with him.”

“Then why is she still seeing him?” Ashwood demanded, shaking his fist in the air.

“Yeah, why?” Jake chimed in.

“She’s been trying to break it off. Lee just won’t take the hint. He’s like a man possessed.”

“What do we have to do, kill him?” Ashwood asked.

“No!” Marilee screamed as she stroked her swollen belly.

“Ruby asked me to step in. She thought that if Lee knew she was going with someone else,” I put my hand on my chest, “he would back off.”

“He’ll beat the crap out of you,” Ashwood said.

“Yeah, well that’s the downside to the plan. I was hoping that since we have the same goals, you guys might see your way clear to backing me up if I need it. What do you think?”

“So, what do you want us to do? Lay a can of whoop-ass on your friend. Is that it?”

“No, not exactly. What I want, what we all want, is to get Lee to see that it’s over between him and Ruby. Then I’m sure he’ll realize what a good thing he has with Marilee, and things will get back to normal. What do you think?”

“What do you want us to do?” Jake pressed.

“I’m taking Ruby to the country club Saturday night.”

“That stuck-up bunch of stiffs,” Ashwood said. “Why are you taking her there? Take her to a good barbeque or something.”

“I’m trying to get my accounting practice going and there are a lot of potential clients at the country club so I have to make an appearance once in a while.”

That seemed to satisfy them. It was agreed that the Fisk brothers would follow us from the diner where Ruby was staying to the country club. Then they would hang around for a couple of hours, just to see what Lee would do. All it cost me was a case of beer and two buckets of fried chicken.

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The Raven Run Country Club wasn’t full of stuck-up stiffs, but it was class conscious. It saw the world as divided into “us” and “them.” The “us” were the professionals and successful business people. The “them” were everyone else. It wasn’t a race thing. The chairwoman of the membership committee was Dr. Melanie Washington. She was the Superintendent of Schools. She was also a thoroughly charming African American.

Every doctor and pharmacist made the cut to be “us,” judges made the cut and lawyers who had the right kind of clients made the cut. Burt Amons, the man who owed the Ford dealership, made the cut, but Billy Burket, the man who owed the biggest used car lot in town, didn’t. It didn’t matter that Billy Burket made twice as much money as Amons

or that he sold three times as many cars. The membership committee just couldn't get past his plaid jacket. Deputy sheriffs like Lee Porter were not considered "us," either. He was one of "them."

Fortunately, CPAs were the right kind of people and they approved my application without much fuss. What I didn't realize was the kind of reception Ruby would receive.

Chapter Six: Who Does She Think She Is?

It was customary to dress for dinner at the country club. Even people who had spent all day playing golf brought a change of clothes for dinner. I wore a dark blue suit, white shirt and striped tie. I didn't realize it, but Ruby only had two dresses, Magnolia's old dress and the house dress that Lee Porter bought for her at Walmart.

To my eye, she would have looked great draped in a bedsheet, but members of the club weren't so generous. From the moment we stepped in the door, I heard whispers calling her a dishwasher, hash slinger and trailer trash, often followed by comments about how inappropriate her dress was and that she had no sense of decorum. If I had thought two steps ahead, I would have gladly bought her a nice dress.

I knew she heard the whispers. "Want to leave?" I asked.

“We’re here now,” she gripped my hand tightly.
“Let’s not put on a show for them.”

“Maybe we should.”

“These people are your future clients,” she said.
“Let’s do the best we can to avoid offending anybody and get out of here.”

I thought it odd that a waitress should think in terms of clients and marketing, but on reflection, nothing she did was really odd, only unexpected.

We finished our main course in the dining room. All the men in the room snuck glances at her. Even dressed as simply as she was, there was something magnetic about her. All the women in the room gave her disapproving stares.

The waiter asked whether we wanted dessert. She declined and so did I, so we paid the check and got up from our table. Just outside the dining room, there was a large parlor. She hesitated as we passed the open door.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I feel like there is something familiar here.”

“Does this room seem familiar?” I was sure that if she had been to the club before, someone would have recognized her.

She drifted over to the piano and sat down. She laid her fingers on the keys ever so lightly. Then she started playing chop sticks.

I glanced toward the door. There was a couple passing. They stopped to glance in. The woman shook her head no in disapproval.

Then, all of a sudden, Ruby started banging out Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No 1*. And she was good, loud and good. Other couples stopped at the door to listen. Some came in and sat. Then she transitioned into Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. It was pure magic. From there she pounded out Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. By then the parlor was packed with people, standing room only.

She paused for the briefest moment and an elderly man near the door broke out in applause. Everyone broke into applause.

Up to that point, she acted as though only she and the piano existed. Then, while still seated, she did a half turn toward the people in the room and nodded her head.

From Gershwin, she transitioned to John Williams and belted out a number of his movie themes from *Jurassic Park*, the *Imperial March* from *Star Wars*, and the main theme from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and half a dozen other movie themes.

When she finished, everyone was on their feet cheering.

She stood, bowed slightly and whispered, "Can we go now?"

I said, "Of course."

Everyone wanted to talk to her. Everyone wanted to tell her what a great pianist she was, but she kept her head down, held my hand and just followed me out of the parlor and out of the club.

Once were outside and halfway across the parking lot, I said, “Wow! You were great! Where did you learn that?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. There was something about the piano. It just seemed so familiar. I just couldn’t help myself.” She wrapped herself around my arm. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind? You were the star of the show.”

That’s when Lee Porter appeared out of nowhere. He had a beer bottle in his hand. “What are you doing with my girl?”

“Your girl? She doesn’t belong to you. She doesn’t belong to anyone. She’s her own person.”

“You better watch that smart mouth of yours, buddy!” he laid his beer bottle on the hood of a black Lincoln.

I turned away. Ruby was still holding my hand. “Let’s get out of here,” I said.

“Hey!” Lee grabbed me by the shoulder and spun me around. “I’m not done talking to you!”

“Ruby, go back to the club and wait for me there.”

When I turned back toward Lee, he hauled off and socked me in the chops. If I hadn’t bounced off someone’s Mercedes, I would have gone down.”

“I’m not going to fight you, Lee.”

“Then, I’m going to stomp you into the ground.” He took another swing at me. He was pretty drunk so I was able to sidestep it.

“Don’t do it Lee!” I said, backing away.

He swung at me again. I blocked the force of the blow with my left arm and punched him in the Adam's apple with my right hand.

He grabbed his throat. He was choking.

He stepped back, picked up the beer bottle by its neck, and smashed it on the ground. He thrust the broken bottle at me.

That's when the Fisk brothers appeared. They each grabbed one of Lee's arms and dragged him off. He cursed and thrashed, but at this point he was so drunk he probably didn't know what was happening.

"Don't hurt him! I just wanted you to stop him from beating the crap out of me."

"You can go back to your stiffs. We got this," Ashwood said.

Chapter Seven: Gone

I returned to the club to find Ruby, but she was gone. She caught a ride with an elderly couple, someone said.

I drove back to the diner to see whether she made it home. It was all buttoned up for the night. The lights were out. I knocked on the back-kitchen door. "Ruby? Are you in there? Are you OK? Ruby?"

Eventually, I heard a small voice from the other side of the door. "I'm here."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm tired. Can we talk in the morning?"

“OK.”

~

I arrived at the diner the next morning around nine and Burt Amons was already there.

“Morning Burt.”

“Morning.”

“What brings you out so early?”

“I just made a sale.”

“Congratulations. What did you sell and who did you sell it too?”

“I just hired Ruby to play the piano in my showroom.”

“A piano player in a car showroom? Is that really cost effective?”

“We’ll see. I just signed Ruby to a thirty-day contract. I don’t think the music is going to be the main attraction though.”

“What did you mean?”

“Did you see the way the young men at the club were staring at her?”

“I might have noticed a few heads being turned.”

“I’ve got a lot of Mustangs to sell, and if Ruby can get young men to the showroom, I’m halfway home.”

And so, Burt Amons took her under his wing. He bought her a short, white, sequined dress that complemented her figure and sent her to his wife’s hairdresser. Her contract called for her to play the piano in his showroom from two thirty to four and five thirty to seven Wednesday through Saturday.

He started her at six hundred dollars a week. That is fifty dollars an hour. He must have expected to sell a lot of Mustangs.

Later that morning, I found out what happened to Lee. The Fisk brothers poured another fifth of whisky into him, then drove him out to a remote stretch of Route 72, somewhere near where his patrol car got skunked. When he was unconscious, they removed his clothes, superglued antlers from a stuffed reindeer onto his head and superglued a racoon tail to his naked butt. They left him on the median strip. His fellow officers were, shall we say, unkind. They thought it hysterically funny. They also knew he had been playing around behind Marilee's back. They saw it as rough justice.

~

Burt Amons was right. Ruby attracted a lot of young men. Arguably, she was supposed to play the piano, but when a young man wanted to take a test drive, Amons let her go along if she wanted to. In the first week she was there, Amons set a record for Mustang sales. When I first met Ruby, I was still driving the old Dodge I had in college. I traded it in on a Mustang, a top of the line model. Good old Burt Amons, I guess he really did know what he was doing.

~

Since Ruby was no longer working at the diner, she had to move out of the storeroom. There was a third-floor efficiency in my building. My one room

office and two-room apartment were on the second floor of an old brick building downtown. The first floor was occupied by a hardware store. There were three one-room efficiencies on the third floor. Ruby took one of them.

On a typical day, she would come down to my place and have breakfast with me, usually cereal and coffee, or toast and coffee, or a pastry and coffee and then she would vanish until it was time for her to go to work.

After work, we watched TV together or took a ride. But, my favorite thing to do was midnight swimming. We waited until the country club was closed for the night. Then we'd sneak in and swim in the pool. Often, the night air was cool and the water was warm. It was magical.

To tell the truth, I had been taking dates for midnight swims at the country club since high school. That was long before I ever dreamed of becoming a member. I was a simple country boy and never thought it possible to become a member.

We floated in the pool together, holding each other, sharing long passionate kisses and luxuriating in each other's bodies.

One night when I returned from visiting my last client, I found Lee Porter sitting on the stairs leading up to Ruby's apartment.

"What do you want, Lee?"

"I want to talk to her."

"She doesn't want to talk to you."

"How do you know?"

“She told me. She said you were suffocating her.”

“I just want to be with her.”

“What about Marilee?”

“Marilee... I don’t know. We started dating when we were kids. What did either of us know about anything then?”

“You knew enough to make a baby.”

“That just happened.”

“Sure it did. Lee, I think you better leave.”

“No. I just want to talk to her for five minutes.”

“You had your five minutes. Put it behind you. Close that door and move on.”

“I can’t.”

“Do I have to call the Fisk brothers?”

I never saw Lee Porter cry before, but he broke down in tears.

“Don’t torture yourself. Go home, Lee. Have some of your mother’s pie and get Ruby out of your system.”

He reluctantly stood, then plodded down the steps like he was going to the gallows.

Chapter Eight: A New Friend

After dating Ruby for three weeks, I was so head over heels in love, it didn’t matter where she came from or what she’d done in the past. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I knew I could make her happy. It would be my mission in

life. I just had to pick the right time to pop the question.

I made lasagna, well, I bought lasagna from the supermarket and heated it up. I made a salad, heated some garlic bread and bought a bottle of wine. She finished work at the Ford dealership at seven and it took her fifteen minutes to walk home. I was so excited I could hardly breathe. I left my apartment door open so I could see her when she hit the second-floor landing on the way up to her apartment.

I thought I heard something in the hall a half dozen times. It was nothing. Finally, I heard her cross the landing on the way up to her apartment. She was carrying a box under her arm.

“Ruby, how did it go today?” I was all smiles.

“Great! We sold a Ford GT!”

“Wow!” Was all I could say. The GT is Ford’s supercar. It pumps out something like six hundred fifty horsepower and costs half a million dollars.

“I’ll be down in five minutes. I’ll tell you all about it.”

She vanished into her efficiency.

It was the longest five minutes of my life.

I left the door open. She walked in. She was wearing a black sheath dress. She took my breath away.

“A guy by the name of Taylor Maxwell bought the GT. Ever hear of him?”

“Taylor’s father owns the cotton mill, and the paper mill and one of the television stations and two or three strip stores on the north side of town.”

“So, you know him?”

“Only by reputation.” I motioned to the table and pulled out a chair for her. “I made lasagna and bought a bottle of wine.”

She came to me, perfume in her hair, and put a hand around my back. She leaned in and pecked me on the cheek. “That’s sweet, but Taylor is taking me to dinner in Charlotte. Don’t wait up. I have a feeling we’ll be out late. She flashed a smile and vanished out the door.

In an instant I knew how Lee Porter felt.

She didn’t come home that night.

The next morning, I banged on her door. There was no answer.

I called the Ford dealership and they put me through to Burt Amons. I told him that she had disappeared.

“She’s our star attraction,” Amons said. “We’d never let anything happen to her.”

“But she’s missing! Gone! Vanished!”

“No, she’s not. I’m looking at her. She’s playing the piano.”

He must have held his phone up to his office door because I could hear faint piano playing in the background. It was one of the songs she had played at the country club.

“Is she all right?” I asked.

“She seems to be. She came in with a big smile on her face this morning.”

“Thanks.” I felt a tightness in my chest. I had a bad feeling.

When I got to the dealership, she was playing the piano. She was flirting with three guys as she played.

I glanced out the dealership’s big glass windows. Lee Porter drove past in his beat-up old Chevy patrol car. He slowed down as he rode by. I guessed he was trying to steal a glance at Ruby.

When she saw me, she motioned me over.

The guys she was flirting with gave me a fishy look.

She pulled me aside and the other guys drifted off to look at the new Mustangs.

“I need a favor,” she whispered.

“Name it.”

“Could you gather up my things and bring them to me here.”

“Why? What’s up?”

She raised an eyebrow. There was a twinkle in her eye. “I’ve got new digs.”

“Where?”

“The guest house on Taylor Maxwell’s estate. He’s even lending me his old car.” She pointed to a silver Mercedes sports car, the kind with V-8 written in chrome letters on the side.

“Aren’t you coming home?”

“Got a new home,” she was all smiles.

“Will I ever see you again?”

“Of course, silly!” she smacked me lightly with the back of her hand. “Here’s the key to the apartment. Just throw everything in a paper bag and bring it here. You can drop it off at the front desk.”

“But...,” I didn’t know what to say.

“Got to get back to work,” she used her thumb to point at the piano behind her. And then she walked away.

Chapter Nine: Magnolia

I didn’t know what to do. I stood in the lobby of the dealership for a couple of minutes then turned away. I suppose most guys would have gotten drunk or raced their car down a lonely stretch of road hoping an accident would put them out of their misery. Around here, boys tended to take out their frustrations by fighting or shooting up stop signs.

I wasn’t a fighter and I didn’t have a gun, yet. Everyone seemed to have a gun. So, I did the only thing I could think of, I returned to the scene of the crime, Magnolia’s Diner.

I sat at the counter.

Magnolia came over. “It’s Friday and Ruby isn’t here anymore so something must be up. Spill it!”

“She’s gone,” I whispered.

“What do you mean gone? Vanished?
Disappeared? Run away?”

“You know she was renting a one room
efficiency above me, right?”

Magnolia put one hand on her hip. It was the
hand that held the dishrag she used to wipe down
the counter. “She couldn’t sleep in my storeroom
forever! A girl has got to have a place of her own.”

“She left the efficiency. Now she’s staying with
Taylor Maxwell.”

“She’s sleeping with Taylor Maxwell?”

I shook my head no. “I don’t know. She claims
she’s staying in his guest house, but...”

“But you don’t believe her.”

I spread my hands. “I have no claim on her.”

“She’s got to go where she wants to go, and do
what she wants to do, with whomever she wants to
do it with.”

I looked at her. “That from the Mama’s and
Papa’s, right?”

“I was young once, you know.”

“What am I going to do?”

“Right now, I’m going to get you a cup of
coffee and a slice of blueberry pie. Then I have to
take care of them,” She nodded toward a couple of
people who had just walked into the diner. “I’ll be
back.”

“Thanks Arnold.”

There was nothing left of the pie but a few
fragments of crust when Magnolia returned. “Can I
get you another?”

“Hit me.”

She slid another piece of blueberry pie in front of me.

“What am I going to do?” I whispered.

“Well, you’re not going to act like that ass, Lee Porter, I can tell you that. You’re going to take this like a man.”

“Meaning?”

“If you’ve got some crying to do, you’re going to do it in private. Then, you’re going to suck it up and get on with your life.”

“But....”

“You think you’re the only one who has been kicked to the curb by the person they love?”

Magnolia put a hand on her ample breasts. “You want to see the shoe marks? I know it hurts, but you’ve got to keep your head down and keep going. Put one foot in front of the other and over time....”

“I’ll get over her?”

“I was going to say it will hurt less. There are some things in life you never get completely over.”

I hung my head and Magnolia put her hand on my arm. “We both knew from the beginning we were going to lose her. Either she would regain her memory and go back to her old life or....”

I looked up, “The blood and the knife.”

Magnolia nodded, “Someone would come looking for her.”

I picked at my second slice of pie with my fork.

“She’s Taylor Maxwell’s problem now,” Magnolia said. “All we can do is sit back and watch.”

Chapter Ten: Fundraiser

I didn’t see her again for three weeks. It was at a Red Cross fundraiser held at the Petersburg Hotel. The Petersburg was a large antebellum hotel built in the 1920s. A row of large columns stretched across the front of the building. Double doors provided an entrance to the lobby. Each door was nine feet tall and four feet wide. The lobby was paved in marble and had a twenty-foot ceiling. A grand staircase led up to a balcony that wrapped around the lobby. There was wood and marble and brass everywhere. A sign directed me to the Red Cross fundraiser.

The fundraiser was being held in a large, glass enclosed dining room. Tables were arranged by donation. Those who donated a thousand dollars or more were seated at the main table, next to the speaker, facing everyone else. They got little red ribbons to pin over their hearts. Those who donated two hundred and fifty dollars or more got blue ribbons. Their tables were the next closest to the speaker. Those who donated a hundred dollars or more were seated farthest away from the speaker. We got white ribbons.

The point of the fundraiser was as much to see and be seen as to raise money for a good cause, so

everyone was dressed in their best. No man would be caught dead without a suit coat and tie. None of the ladies would be caught without a frilly dress and a hat.

Ruby Tuesday was seated at the main table next to Taylor Maxwell. She wore a dark blue sheath dress with a white collar and short sleeves. The sleeves were trimmed in white and she wore long gloves that reached nearly to her elbows. She wore a red ribbon over her heart and she had the biggest hat of all.

For a split second, I barely recognized her. It was the first time I'd seen her fully made up. Yes, she'd worn lipstick before, but now there was eyeliner, long lashes and all the other subtle touches people associate with glamor. She looked like a supermodel that had just stepped out of the pages of *Cosmopolitan*. It suited her.

She looked in my direction. I waved my fingers at her. A crooked little smile crossed her face, a smile I'd learned to love, and then it vanished as she turned toward Taylor Maxwell and put her hand on his arm.

Lee Porter was there as was another deputy sheriff. Most of the people in the room came from money or had money. They also donated to political campaigns, so the sheriff thought it was politic to provide a little extra security.

Halfway through dinner, I had to excuse myself. I passed Lee on the way to the men's room. "I hear you are a new father. Congratulations!"

“Her name is Ada Mae, seven pounds, six ounces.”

“How is Marilee doing?”

“She’s settled into motherhood like she was born to it. Good peasant stock I suppose.”

“We’re all peasant stock when you get right down to it.”

“So, how are you doing?” Lee nodded toward Ruby.

“Recovering,” I glanced in her direction. “How about you?”

“What do you do when a dog has an incurable disease?”

“It depends. Are you the dog?”

“Woof!”

“Magnolia has been helping me through it. She calls it blueberry pie therapy.”

Lee glanced at Ruby, then looked at the floor. He had a pained expression on his face.

I smacked him lightly with the back of my hand. “Got to go. Nature calls.”

I sat through the chicken dinner as did everyone else while the speaker droned on and on about how important her work was. There were about two hundred of us there and it took time to serve, clear the dinner dishes, bring coffee and finally dessert. I wanted to talk to Ruby in the worst way and thought I’d work my way over to her during dessert. But by the time dessert arrived, she was gone.

Chapter Eleven: Produce Something

I glanced at my watch. In a few minutes Ruby would be playing the piano at Burt Amons Ford dealership. I headed over. The piano was there, but no one was playing it.

I asked the receptionist, “Where’s Ruby?”

“She quit, two weeks ago.”

Amons walked over. He had been listening. “I heard she took a job at Channel Nine.”

“The TV station? Doing what?”

“I couldn’t tell you. She thanked me for the opportunity, gave me a little peck on the cheek and left. I only found out she was working at Channel Nine through my wife’s card club.”

I drove out to Channel Nine. Their offices were on the edge of town. I didn’t know what I expected to do or say, I was just drawn there.

I approached the receptionist. “Does Ruby Tuesday work here?”

She nodded yes.

“What does she do?”

The receptionist extended her hand toward an office directory mounted on the lobby wall. I walked over and read down the list. It said, “Ruby Tuesday, Assistant Producer, Special Features.”

I returned to the receptionist’s desk.

“I’d like to see Ruby Tuesday, please.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No.”

“Let me check her schedule.” She keyed something into her computer. “She’s in a production meeting.”

“I’ll wait.”

“According to her schedule, the meeting won’t be over until seven tonight. Would you like to come back then?”

A clock in the lobby said it was two thirty-five. I didn’t know what to say. I felt like an idiot. “I’ll come back later.”

I was back at seven on the dot. The front door was locked. I could see in through the glass that the receptionist was gone and the lobby lights were out. It was one of the smoothest brushoffs I’d ever gotten.

I’m not much of a drinker, but on my way home, I bought a fifth of Jack Daniels sipping whiskey. I figured Magnolia had already heard my sob story, so I decided to work things out on my own.

I reheated some leftover lasagna, poured two fingers of whiskey in a glass and put on the Discovery Channel. After my second drink, I fell asleep.

The phone woke me up. I glanced at the clock. It was nearly midnight. I picked it up and instantly recognized Magnolia’s voice. “Ruby’s in trouble.”

Chapter Twelve: Blood

“What do you mean, Ruby’s in trouble?” I asked.

“She’s here. She snuck in through the back, kitchen door. Come quick! If you have an old sweatshirt, sweatpants and a hat, bring them.”

Just then, I heard someone pounding on my door.

“Got to go!” I said and hung up. “Who is it?”

“It’s Lee, open up!”

“Geez, Lee it’s the damned middle of the night. What do you want?”

“Open up! Sheriff’s Department. You’ve got to the count of three and then I’m going to kick down the door. One... two...”

I opened the door a foot. “What’s up?”

Lee pushed his way in. “Is she here?”

“Who?”

He grabbed a fistful of my shirt and pulled me close. “You know who! Ruby!”

I pulled his hand off me. “What’s happened? What makes you think she’s here?”

Lee stomped around my apartment looking in closets and under the bed. It was a small apartment so it only took a minute or so.

“She tried to kill Taylor Maxwell; stabbed him seven times with a steak knife.”

“Did she succeed?”

“He’s in surgery. He lost a lot of blood.” Lee was angry and poked a finger within an inch of my nose. “That’s not the point. The whole Sheriff’s Department is looking for her. If I bring her in, at

least she'll get to jail alive. If one of the other guys gets to her first....," he folded his fingers into the palm of his hand and used his index finger and thumb to make a gun.

"They wouldn't...."

"Taylor's father is the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in these parts. He's not going to take kindly to someone trying to kill his boy."

"What do you want me to do?"

"If you see her or hear from her, call me immediately!" Porter said over his shoulder as he raced down the stairs.

I looked out the front window. Lee's patrol car was parked at an angle to the sidewalk. Its red and blue flashing lights were on. Another patrol car was parked across the street. Lee crossed to talk to the other deputies. There was nowhere I could go with Lee and his buddies out front.

I put on a clean shirt, combed my hair and threw an old sweat-suit and a hat into a paper bag. When I looked out the window again, Lee and his buddies were gone. I eased down the stairs and looked out the door. I didn't see anybody. Then I slipped around the back of the hardware store where my car was parked. Except for a barking dog, all was quiet.

The quickest way to get to Magnolia's was out the driveway and turn right. I went out the driveway and turned left, just in case Lee tried to follow me. After a mile or so, I turned down a side street and noodled my way back toward

Magnolia's. I parked on Murdock Street; it was a narrow street a block and a half away from the diner. When I got there, the lights were out. I knocked on the back, kitchen door.

Magnolia peered out before letting me in. "What kept you?" she whispered hoarsely.

"Lee Porter and the everyone else in the Sheriff's Department thinks Ruby tried to kill Taylor Maxwell. Tell me it's a mistake."

Magnolia grabbed my arm and pulled me inside. For a middle-aged woman, she had a hell of a grip.

Ruby was sitting on a stool in a corner of the kitchen far from any doors or windows. She was covered in blood. There was a large red patch on her cheek like someone had slapped her hard. Her lower lip was beginning to swell.

"Can we get some ice?" I pointed to Ruby's face.

"Sure thing," Magnolia said.

"What happened?" I asked.

She shook her head a little, but said nothing. She was shaking like a leaf.

Magnolia stepped between us. "Taylor attacked her. She defended herself."

"Defended herself?"

"With that," she pointed to a steak knife laying on the counter.

"Then what happened?" I asked.

"They fought, she grabbed his car keys and tore out of the Maxwell compound. She was cutting through town, headed for Route 72 when a dog ran

out onto the road. She swerved to avoid the dog, hit a mailbox and plowed into the fountain in the town square.”

“It won’t take long for Lee and his buddies to find the car. That’s only two blocks from here. I’m surprised they haven’t been here already.”

Just then, we heard someone banging on the front door of the diner.

“Cut the light,” I pointed.

“Leave it on. It’s a night light. It’s on every night. If I cut it tonight, they’ll know something is up.”

I peeked out of the kitchen toward the front of the diner. Two people were shining flashlights in through the windows. After a minute or so they came around to the back door and banged on it.

“Open up!”

I recognized Lee Porter’s voice.

“We know you are in there!”

I put my finger up to my lips and whispered, “He doesn’t know anything. If he did, he would kick down the door. Let’s just wait him out.”

“Won’t he see your car?”

“I parked on Murdock Street. Maybe he’ll notice it there and maybe he won’t. We’ll just have to see. Shush!” I put my finger back up to my lips.

Lee banged on the back door again. “Open up!”

He and his associate walked all the way around the diner again shining their flashlights in through the windows. Eventually, they left.

“What do we do now?” Magnolia whispered.

“We wait.”

Chapter Thirteen: Bussed Out Bust Out

I kneeled in front of Ruby. “What happened?” I whispered.

“He tried to rape me. He tried to force me to...,” she looked away.

I knew from my brief time with her that she was no stranger to sex. She liked it and she was good at it. Taylor must have done something awful to her.

“What’s the plan?” Magnolia whispered.

“Why are you asking me?”

“You’re the college boy. You’re the CPA. That must mean something.”

“Ruby,” I asked. “Is there any place you can stay? Any place you want to go?”

“Atlanta,” she said.

“Who is in Atlanta? Is it family? A friend maybe?”

“I can’t remember,” she started to cry.

I handed her a paper towel to dry her tears.

Magnolia delicately pressed an ice pack against her swollen face. The ice pack was little more than a few ice cubes wrapped in a hand towel.

“The airport’s too risky,” I said. “There are no trains anywhere around here. There is no way to rent a car at this hour.”

“Bus?” Magnolia asked.

“That’s just what I was thinking.”

“From where?”

“Columbia.”

“Think you can get there without being spotted?”

“I’ve lived here all my life. I know all the backroads. I’ll get her there. Why don’t you clean her up? I brought sweatshirt and sweatpants, but they are going to be way too big. See whether you can pin them up or something.”

A half an hour later, Ruby had shed her blood-soaked dress and had snugged on the sweatshirt and sweatpants. Magnolia used a trussing needle, the kind she used to sew up turkeys at Thanksgiving, to put a hem in the sweatpants so that Ruby wouldn’t trip over the legs.

Magnolia stood back to admire her work. “You look like an orphan.”

“How do you know I’m not an orphan?” Ruby asked.

“Are you?”

She looked away. “I can’t remember.”

“Are you ready?” I asked.

She nodded her head yes.

“Magnolia, can I borrow two hundred bucks? You know I’m good for it.”

“Sure.” She went into a hidey-hole in the storeroom and pulled out a metal box. She unlocked the padlock and counted the cash. “Here is two hundred and fifty dollars.”

I took it and laid it on the counter. Then I looked in my wallet. “I have eighty-two dollars. That

ought to be enough to buy her a ticket and give her a couple of bucks to live on.”

I stuffed the money in my wallet and peeked out the diner’s front window. All was quiet. I went to the rear kitchen door and opened it slightly. The air was cool. A light fog covered everything. I motioned for Ruby to follow me. She did.

We walked silently, hand in hand down an alley behind the diner and turned right onto Murdock Street. In another block we would be at the car.

I opened the door as quietly as I could. She slid in and I closed it as quietly as possible. Then I slid into the driver’s seat and started the car. Usually, I loved the throaty roar of my Mustang’s V-8. Tonight, I wished I was driving a Honda.

Everything was still and quiet, so quiet that I could hear gravel crunching under my car’s tires. I thought we would take a series of backroads to Columbia. The only problem was that Lee Porter knew the same backroads I did.

We hadn’t made it out of town when I spotted Lee’s Chevy patrol car in the rearview mirror. He pulled up behind me and put on his flashing lights. Normally, I would have pulled over, but I glanced at Ruby, she seemed so frail and frightened. The supermodel of a few hours earlier had vanished. The pale uncertain woman I’d grown to love had returned. I mashed down on the gas pedal as hard as I could. The Mustang took off like a rocket. I was a good quarter mile ahead of Lee by the time he got in gear. I was doing seventy, he was

closing. I hit eighty, he continued to close. Then an old brown pickup appeared out of nowhere and slid between Lee's patrol car and myself. It was the Fisk brothers. Their pickup bobbed and weaved and wouldn't let Lee pass. I couldn't quite see what happened, all I saw were the red and blue lights from Lee's car spinning sideways, headed for a ditch.

I crested a hill and when I went down on the other side, I could no longer see Lee's lights. I pulled into a dirt road next to a watermelon stand and turned the car off. Two or three minutes later, Lee's patrol car roared by.

Chapter Fourteen: One-Way Ticket

We got to the Columbia bus station just as the sky was beginning to brighten. The sun wasn't up yet, but it would be soon. The air was crisp and clear. I left Ruby in the car while I bought a one-way ticket to Atlanta.

I gave her the ticket and some cash and walked her to the bus.

"You're in luck," I said.

"Why?"

"This is bus 247. Two hundred forty-seven is my lucky number. Maybe it will be lucky for you as well.

She smiled a weak smile. She seemed so frail, almost childlike. A dark bruise was forming where she had been slapped. Half her lip was swollen.

She showed her ticket to the driver and walked back along the bus before settling into a window seat. I stood outside the bus looking at her. I kissed my fingers, then pressed them against the glass. She kissed her fingers and pressed them to the opposite side of the glass.

I heard the bus release its air brakes and rev up its diesel engine. It backed slowly out of its spot and pulled away. I stood there until the bus was out of sight. I felt like there was a lead weight on my chest.

The sun was just peeking over the horizon when I slid behind the wheel of my car. I headed home. I was exhausted. I pulled into a Dunkin Donuts drive-through and got a cup of coffee.

I was almost all the way back to Petersburg when I saw a bus pull off the highway and head into town. I got closer and realized it was bus 247, the bus I'd put Ruby on.

If I hadn't been so tired, so upset or so utterly smitten by Ruby, I would have realized the Columbia bus to Atlanta would stop in Petersburg before going on to Augusta and Atlanta.

I followed the bus into town and stopped a half block from the bus terminal. Lee Porter was there, standing next to his patrol car. Taylor Maxwell was standing next to him. Maxwell alternated between scanning the busses, screaming at Porter and holding his side.

Maxwell wasn't dead. At least that was something.

Porter and Maxwell watched people board the bus. Fortunately, she was already on the bus. When the last passenger was on board, the driver closed the door and pulled away. That's when Lee Porter noticed my car. I couldn't hear what he said, but he pointed and motioned for Taylor Maxwell to follow him.

I got out of the car so I could talk to them eye to eye, man to man. "Morning boys. What's up?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing," Porter said.

"I thought I'd get up and out early."

"Bullshit!" Porter said. "You're looking for Ruby."

"I take it you didn't find her." I glanced at the bus; it was a couple of blocks away turning down the street that led back to the highway.

Taylor Maxwell interrupted, "Where is she? We know you were chummy. Tell us damn it!" He smacked his hand on the roof of my car.

"You can hit me, but if you touch my car again, you're going to be in a whole different kind of trouble."

"You little shit! Who do you think you're talking to! I could destroy you!" Maxwell said.

I turned to Lee. "You know the *Bible* says you should love your enemies." I pivoted and gave Taylor Maxwell a bear hug.

He screamed in pain. A little patch of blood appeared on his shirt.

Lee Porter snickered a little.

“Look, we all want to find Ruby,” I said. “My guess is she went someplace familiar. Taylor, she said you took her to Columbia for a day. Where did you go?”

“I know just the place.” He walked away holding his side.

I turned back toward Lee. “I’m going to grab breakfast at Magnolia’s. Want to join me?”

He shook his head no. “I’ve got a newborn at home. I need to relieve Marilee.”

Chapter Fifteen: Who are you?

I rolled into Magnolia’s Diner and sat in my usual booth. Magnolia brought a cup of coffee and a slice of blueberry pie.

“Is she safe?”

“It was touch and go for a while,” I said.

“What happened?”

“Lee Porter spotted me as we were leaving for Columbia and he almost had me too, but the Fisk brothers came out of nowhere and cut him off. Talk about luck!”

“After you left, I may have called them and said you were getting Ruby out of town and Lee was trying to get her back.”

“You may have called them?”

She spread her arms wide and smiled a flat smile. “OK, I called them.”

“Anyway, I got her to Columbia and put her on the bus. What I didn’t realize was that the route

from Columbia to Atlanta makes a stop here in town. So, I parked near the bus station to see what would happen. Lee and Taylor Maxell showed up looking for her. I guess that takes murder off the table. They checked everyone boarding the bus. Thankfully, she was already on the bus so they missed her.”

“Well, I wish her luck,” Magnolia said.

I pulled a piece of paper out of my pocket and slid it across the table. “This is a notice from the IRS.”

“What does it say?”

“You know the social security number you gave me so I could put Ruby on the payroll?”

“Yeah.”

“The IRS says it belongs to Hector Gonzales.”

“So, the number was a fake.”

“I should have guessed as much. She said she didn’t remember who she was or where she came from. How could she possibly remember her social security number?” I put another creamer in my coffee.

Magnolia leaned in and whispered, “Maybe her name was fake, too.”

That was something I hadn’t considered. My eyes played around the diner while I was thinking and they landed on the calendar opposite my booth. It was a Ruby Oil Company calendar. “When did she show up?” I asked Magnolia. “What day of the week?”

“It was the day before you do your bookkeeping, so it must have been a Tuesday.”

I pointed to the Ruby Oil Company calendar on the wall and I said, “Ruby Tuesday.”

Magnolia let out a big sigh. Big girls let out big sighs. “I guess we’ll never know her name. But, name or no, we’ll never forget her.”

“I can’t help but think of the Rolling Stones lyrics that go, *‘Goodbye Ruby Tuesday. Who could hang a name on you? When you change with every new day, still I’m gonna miss you.’*”

THE END

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