

TROUBLED WATER

A Novel

By

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CHAPTER

1

SATURDAY NIGHT

The lilac sprig I clutched in my right hand had long since lost most of its spring-fresh scent. Three days earlier, as I began driving from Wisconsin to Georgia, I'd cut it from a lush lilac bush that shaded the graves of my parents. I never knew them. They died in a car accident a quarter century ago when I was an infant. Annie, my father's younger sister, raised me. We were like sisters. Now, she's buried next to them -- and that lilac bush.

Every few miles, I'd take another deep whiff so that spring in Wisconsin would stay with me -- and in me -- as I drove farther and farther into the Deep South. I'd never been to that part of the country before, so I had all kinds of preconceived notions of what life would be like living "down there." Actually, I'm ashamed to say I haven't traveled very much at all. So, after a long heart-to-heart with my friend and mentor, Lionel Stone, publisher of the *Pine Bluff Standard*, we agreed it was time for me to leave my reporting job at his paper and spread my wings.

Through Lionel's contacts, I landed a job as a cops and courts reporter at the *Columbia Sun-Gazette* -- a daily paper in west central Georgia about a hundred miles southwest of Atlanta and just across the river from Alabama. Lionel told me the

paper had a reputation for scrappy investigative journalism that led to Pulitzer Prizes for reporters who then went on to prestigious publications like the *New York Times* where Lionel recently retired as the paper's National Editor.

"It'll be a good place for you to park for awhile, kid, until you're ready to go on to the big time," Lionel had said to me a couple weeks earlier when I was weighing the paper's offer.

Lionel won his Pulitzer in the early 1970s when he was the White House Correspondent for the *Times* during Nixon's presidency. Lionel had also covered the Civil Rights Movement, so he insisted that I stop in Memphis on my way south and tour the National Civil Rights Museum located in the old Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968.

On my drive south, I also made a detour to the King Center in Atlanta to see MLK's tomb, tour the neighborhood where he grew up and see the Ebenezer Baptist Church where he and his father preached.

About nine-thirty on this Saturday night, I was cruising down I-185 closing in on Columbia, but still in the boonies and having a heck of a time staying awake. I'd had so much caffeine that I was facing the law of diminishing returns – it seemed like the more coffee I drank, the sleepier I got. To entertain myself, I kept hitting the scan button on my radio to see what kind of nonsense could be strung together by the brief bursts of audio snippets. One particularly amusing string sounded like this:

“Governor Gannon’s presidential campaign got a boost today when he won the endorsement of -- [fffffftttt] -- JAY-zuss. Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord for your -- [fffffftttt] -- Dodge Charger. It comes fully-equipped with -- [fffffftttt] -- your own personal banker. That’s right. I’m here to -- [fffffftttt] -- got a line on you, babe, yeah -- [fffffftttt] -- I can’t get nooooo...sat-is-FACK-shun. No, no, no -- [fffffftttt] -- are you SAVED by the blood of the LAMB?”

After awhile, that got boring, so I called Lionel because I can always count on him to keep my mind energized. We’d been yakking for a few minutes when my bladder began competing for my attention.

“Lionel, if I don’t stop this car right now, I’m gonna wet my pants.”

“You should’ve worn a diaper, Lark,” he chuckled.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you remember the story about the former astronaut who drove cross-country wearing a diaper?”

“That must’ve been before my time.”

“She was in such a hurry to confront the ‘other woman’ – her romantic rival -- that she didn’t want to take rest stops, so she--”

“Lionel!” I barked.

“Whuh?”

“I can’t talk any longer. I’ve gotta pull over. Now!”

“Oh, alright,” he sighed.

“I’ll call you right back.”

“Okay.”

I hit *end call* on my iPhone and peeled off the interstate at the very next exit – exit 252 – Skunk Run Road. On impulse, I turned right at the bottom of the ramp, the hyper-caFFEinated urine in my bladder pressing urgently for release.

There were no gas stations or fast food joints. Traffic was sporadic. I needed to find someplace more private. I turned right again at the first road that came along. It was narrow and had no shoulder. Trees and shrubs crowded the pavement. There was no place to pull over.

I pressed on the accelerator and Pearlie, seeming to understand my plight, lurched forward. Pearlie is my yellow VW Beetle. We’ve been through a lot together.

“I’ve gotta go, Pearl. Help me out here.”

We rounded a curve. Down the road, I saw four pairs of headlights. At first, it looked as though one car was passing another. Quickly, however, I realized the lights weren’t moving toward me at all. The four lights looked like two small cars parked side by side on a narrow bridge.

“What the hell, Pearl. Are they about to drag race right at me?” I eased back on the accelerator.

Suddenly, the car lights darted forward, swerving in tandem into my lane.

I hit the brakes and eased Pearlie to the right, trying to get over as far as I could without smashing into the dense hedges that hugged the edge of the road. Branches slapped against the side windows and scraped along the side door.

Then, just as unexpectedly as the lights had veered toward me, they lurched back into the other lane.

I felt my brow furrow as I squinted to get a better look. As the lights sped closer, I could now see that it wasn't two cars going side by side, but one car with an unusual quad headlight configuration.

I honked and shot an annoyed glare at the driver as the car swished past, but I couldn't get a good look at who was behind the wheel.

I turned my attention to the road ahead – and my insistent bladder – accelerating as I got to the bridge. Just beyond it, I saw a road to the left. I took it. The road sloped down. On the left was a clearing with a picnic table. I turned in. It seemed to be the perfect out-of-the-way place to pee.

I turned off my lights, threw the lilac branch I'd been holding onto the passenger seat, grabbed a flashlight and some tissues from the glove box, and raced to a sandy spot among reeds and tall grass along the edge of rushing stream -- as out of the way as I could get from the road. I didn't want to be caught with my pants down if someone else suddenly stopped by.

Before undoing my jeans, I swung the flashlight around to make sure some guy and his girlfriend weren't making out nearby. Satisfied that I was alone, I turned out the light, shoved down my jeans and underwear, squatted, and then . . . blessed relief!

"Ahhhh"

It seemed to take forever. The warm, humid May night surrounded me like a heavy blanket. My eyes had still not adjusted to the darkness, which made me feel claustrophobic. The sound of the churning stream next to me blended with the riotous chirping of cicadas and crickets. It was so loud I feared I wouldn't be able to hear the rustle of grass if someone just then decided to sneak up behind me. That thought instantly made me feel frightened and vulnerable.

I finished as quickly as I could. I didn't want to be exposed a second longer.

Hurriedly, I wiped myself as daintily as I could with a tissue, stood and pulled everything up. Just as I was buckling my belt, I felt something bump my foot. Alarmed, I switched on the flashlight and aimed it straight down at whatever it was that had just given me that gentle, but unexpected nudge. I hoped it would be nothing more than some harmless night creature out for a stroll.

But what I saw caused me to scream in terror.

CHAPTER

2

As I screamed, I jumped backward, bobbling and then dropping my flashlight. It plunked into the sand and went out. I groped wildly for it in the dark before I latched onto it a few seconds later. I clawed at the switch. The light came back on,

but my hands were shaking so badly I needed both of them to aim the beam. At first, I couldn't see what had startled me, but I was sure my mind wasn't playing tricks – I knew I'd felt and seen *something*.

The air was saturated with the cacophony of thousands of cicadas. They shrieked at me as I brushed aside reeds and tall grass and crept closer to the gurgling water.

Then I saw it again -- a right hand, palm up, bobbing gently against the sand at the water's edge. I gasped and clamped my left hand over my mouth to keep from screaming. I tried to catch my breath, but couldn't. The sound of my heart thudding in my ears was deafening.

I bent closer and pushed aside more of the tall reeds. The hand was attached to a thin, grayish, bare arm.

"Oh, Jesus," I kept repeating under my breath.

A slight breeze pushed a reed into my face. I brushed it away with my free hand and continued to focus the light. It slowly revealed more. Floating face up in the eddying current was the body of what looked like a teenaged girl, her mouth open in a silent scream, her eyes wide and bloodshot.

"Oh, God!" I jumped back.

My breaths were coming fast and shallow. I felt light-headed, my body tingling as if a strong electrical current pulsed through me. Everything inside me ordered me to turn and run away, but somehow I resisted the urge to panic.

I'm no stranger to death. On two separate occasions, I was the one who was the first to discover the dead bodies of people I loved dearly. Now, it had happened again -- a young girl, staring wildly at the night sky. She had died violently, or so it seemed, perhaps not too far from here.

I took several deep breaths to try to calm myself, but it wasn't easy because I was afraid the murderer might be nearby, perhaps watching me.

I shined the flashlight in all directions. As near as I could tell, I was alone. The thrumming of the cicadas and crickets continued unabated, blending with the rushing water of the stream.

I thought about running to the car and locking myself in, but something inside urged me to stay put so as not to contaminate the crime scene. Quickly, I dug my cell phone from the front pocket of my jeans and stabbed 911.

"Nine-one-one. State your location and your emergency," came the reassuring voice of a woman.

"My name is Lark Chadwick and I've just found a dead body."

"What's your location, ma'am?"

"I'm not sure. Don't you have GPS?"

"You're on a cell phone, so I can't pinpoint you. What's your location?" Her voice was steady. No emotion. No nonsense.

"I'm . . . I'm not sure. I was on the interstate and got off to go to the bathroom."

"Take a deep breath and try to calm down, ma'am. I need you to be more specific in case your call gets dropped."

I gulped some air, but my heart was still pounding.

"Were you on I-185?" the woman prompted.

"Yes," I said, getting my wits. "Northbound. No! Southbound. I was going south when I got off."

"Do you remember the exit number?" She was trying to sound patient, but I could hear exasperation seeping into her voice.

I shut my eyes and tried to concentrate. "Yes," I almost shouted. "It was exit 252."

"Okay. Thanks." There was a pause. "I've got someone heading that way now. Which way did you turn after you got off the interstate?"

"I turned right, then right again at the very next intersection. Then I turned left on the other side of a small bridge."

"Okay, okay. Slow down," she said. "I'm looking at a map. You would have gotten off onto Skunk Run Road--"

"Skunk Run. That's right. I remember."

"Creek Road is the first intersection. You turned . . . right?"

"Yes."

"How far did you go down Creek?"

"Not even half a mile. I went over a small bridge--"

"That would have been the east branch of the Chattahoochee River . . ."

"Uh huh." *The what-a-hoo-chee?*

"And then you made a left?"

"Right. I mean, yes. I turned left."

"Okay. That's River Road. Then how far'd you go down River?"

"Not even a hundred yards before I found a clearing off to the left and turned in."

"There's a picnic table there, right?" she asked.

"Yes. Yes."

"Good. That's what I thought. I've been there."

"How soon will someone be here?" I pleaded, my voice shaking.

"In just a few minutes. I want you to stay on the line with me while I update the responding units, alright, hon?"

"Okayyy. I'm getting a little sp-spooked."

The line was quiet for a moment, but soon the dispatcher came back on. "Are you sure the person is dead, ma'am?"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure," I said, taking a tentative step closer to the body.

"Are you near the body now?" she asked, seemingly indifferent to my growing fear.

"Y-yes. Just a few feet away."

"Can you tell if the person is definitely dead?"

"I think so."

“I’m sending an ambulance, but I need to know for sure. I might need you to do CPR.”

I felt my stomach tighten, but heard myself say, “Okay, lemme check.”

I pressed the phone against my ear as I slowly approached the body. I held the flashlight as far out in front of me as I could. The girl was bobbing in a portion of the stream that had carved itself into the riverbank. Her corpse was slowly swirling counterclockwise in an eddy formed by the gnarled roots of a huge tree on the downstream side of me to my right. In just the few minutes since I’d found her, the strong current had caused the body to rotate nearly 180 degrees so that now the water was pushing her left side up against the sand where I stood. I assumed her hand must have brushed against my foot on an earlier rotation.

An expression of terror seemed frozen onto the girl’s face. She wore a sleeveless checkered sundress, her long, blonde hair was splayed out like a sunburst behind her head. I picked up a stick and gently poked her side. She didn’t react to my prodding.

“I just poked her with a stick,” I told the 911 operator. “She’s not moving at all. She’s just lying on her back, eyes open, with an awful expression on her face.”

“Okay. I’m going to update the units. Stay on the line, please.” She must have put me on hold because I could no longer hear any background noise in my ear.

I continued to stare at the girl’s body, trying to notice more details. As near as I could tell, there was no blood, but there were some angry bruises around her neck and at her throat. The girl’s skin was ashen, but there didn’t seem to be any

decomposition. I looked for bullet or stab wounds, but saw none. Then something shiny alongside her head caught my eye. I leaned down to get a closer look.

A silver, tear-shaped earring dangled from her left earlobe. It resembled a fishing lure. I pointed the beam of my light at the right side of her head, but noticed that the other earring was missing. As I bent closer – my head directly over hers -- I could see that her right earlobe was ripped in half, making me wonder if perhaps a fish may indeed have been attracted to her other earring. There didn't seem to be any blood oozing from the ragged flaps that had once been joined together to hold in place the now missing earring.

Suddenly, I remembered the strange lights of the car that had been parked on the bridge and had nearly run me off the road as I approached. Was that the murderer? Had he just finished dumping the body into the water when I came along? I hadn't gotten a good enough look at the car to be of any help to the police, but did the killer know that?

My mind began to spin macabre scenarios: Did the killer fear that he'd been recognized? Has he doubled back? Is he sneaking up behind me right now, getting ready to kill the only person who can put him at the scene of the crime?

"Hello?" I shouted into the phone to the 911 operator. "Are you there?"

She wasn't. The line hissed.

I was alone . . . except for a dead body lying at my feet in the dark.