

The Rivergrass Legacy

A Novel

Chapter 1

Grant Abbot Lonsdale III never suspected that someone planned to kill him in an act of revenge for what his father had done. From his apartment on Boston's Beacon Hill, the sole heir to the Lonsdale dynasty watched the morning come into its infancy wrapped in the cool, pale, dawn of an early New England summer. Before he rehearsed an articulate objection to his new assignment he allowed himself a ten minute window to relax with a black coffee in one hand and the *Wall Street Journal* in the other.

Grant downed the coffee, pushed the paper aside, and spent the next half-hour polishing up his arguments for being assigned to a more prestigious client. Shower, shave, a splash of his forty-dollar-an-ounce Sandalwood aftershave lotion, and he was ready to present his case— something akin to attempting to beard the lion in its den.

Grant knew Angus MacIver hadn't become managing partner of Warren, MacIver & Patterson by allowing the firm's professional staff to choose the clients with whom they worked. Still, it was worth a try. Anything to avoid being sent to Okeechobee— a seedy little South Florida town where old men probably sat in rocking chairs outside the general store and spit tobacco juice on the ground.

More to the point, he didn't see the need to commit a Harvard MBA to the routine acquisition assessment of a nondescript fish hatchery. Promotion to CEO of his father's company might be no more than ten to fifteen years away. The time to develop enough management consulting experience at WM&P to handle the position would have to begin now. Grant knew it required exposure to clients a hell of a lot larger than a small fish farm in the boondocks.

Construction-snarled traffic to downtown Boston turned a thirty-minute drive into an hour's worth of bumper-to-bumper frustration. Grant's contingency allowance, based on his firm belief in Murphy's Law, enabled him to still arrive a few minutes before the scheduled meeting with his boss. He found Angus, a workaholic who crammed thirty hours of production into a twenty-four hour day, already well into his morning workload and waiting for him.

In two years Angus had converted WM&P from a stodgy old Boston financial advisory firm into one of the most prestigious management consulting firms on the East Coast. Rumor held that mothers would change their newborns' diets from milk to bourbon if Angus recommended it. Grant didn't have to be told that challenging the decision of a man who ruled with unquestioned authority could be risky.

"Come on in, Grant. Pour yourself a cup of coffee, sit down, and explain to me why I should say no to a client who represents a million and change in billings each year."

Grant figured he might need a sugar hit for this dialogue. He dumped two cubes in, pulled up a chair to face the judge, and launched his opening volley. "With all due respect for the size of CLL Capital, sir," he said, "it still doesn't make sense to send me down there just to look at one of its oddball acquisitions. Anyone here can handle that kind of engagement. This thing in Okeechobee seems like another toy Conrad Vanderslice wants to play with when he has nothing better to do." Grant shrugged and extended his arms palms up. "I thought we agreed you'd give me a shot at something more significant than this."

Angus shoved a pile of signed payroll checks into his out-box and nodded. “We did, and I will. Right now, this takes precedence. And it’s significant for several reasons. One, I’m betting Conrad wants to buy the farm. Don’t ask me why. Anyway, he’s convinced something pretty bad’s going on down there and won’t make an offer until we check the place out. Two, he specifically requested you. By the way, that’s quite an honor for a twenty-five-year-old with limited consulting experience, in case you didn’t know it. And three, that little hatchery is apparently connected to another Florida outfit called Mayaca Corporation, which is by no means insignificant. It’s in a town called Myakka on a straight line west of Okeechobee. You do a good job on the hatchery, and WM&P gets a sizable consulting contract at Mayaca. So, that may be that large assignment you’ve been waiting for. The trip will be good for you, Grant. Give you an opportunity to expand your experience, not to mention your social horizons. Maybe even learn something about the world beyond New England. Any problem with that?”

Grant shifted in his chair, pushed his coffee cup aside, and glanced out the window before he turned back to face his boss. He decided not to challenge the “social horizons” remark. “Okay, fine. Okeechobee is at the very bottom of my must-see list. I get your point. Since the assignment’s obviously not optional, I might as well accept cheerfully. What does Conrad mean by ‘bad’? And when am I supposed to be there?”

Angus pulled a handful of mail from his in-box and leaned back in his chair. “I’ve known Conrad for more than ten years, and if he thinks something’s bad it’s probably worse. We didn’t talk much about it, yet he seems to think someone is stealing money from the farm, like big time. If true, it would make that little company’s net worth appear smaller than it should be. I think Conrad simply wants to know. The problem is this: if Conrad acquires an entity — no matter how small — that implodes later on because of a weakness he should have spotted, he loses more than money. He loses face among his peers in the higher echelons of the New England business community. You know Conrad and his ego. Therefore, he wants the best and he wants you. Jennifer has your plane ticket on her desk. You’re flying out today. Now go and make me proud.”

Satisfied that the assignment was no longer subject to debate, Grant picked up his ticket and almost made it to the door before Jennifer caught him up short.

“Hey, Lonsdale, you better come back with a tan and a triumphant grin on your face. Also, a dozen oranges on my desk would be a nice incentive for me to process your reports ahead of anyone else’s.”

They exchanged smiles, and Grant headed for a place he wasn’t sure could even be found on the map.

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On his way to the ATM, Grant stopped at his apartment for a change of clothes. He’d moved out of his parents’ Beacon Street mansion with a wardrobe that far exceeded the size of the closet in his new digs. While he fumbled through the garment overflow piled on the table, he let his thoughts wander. The Okeechobee thing was a damned fish farm, anyway— probably located between two mud holes. No need to take a suit or anything more formal than slacks, tee shirts, and a sports jacket. The worst of it would be exchanging a weekend of recreation in Boston for a trip to no-man’s land in South Florida.

His undergraduate degree in engineering at Yale, and twenty-some-odd away games as a defensive lineman, had involved plenty of travel. Fortunately, nothing had taken him

south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Convinced the Okeechobee job would be an easy one he could wrap up in a couple of days, he packed light and caught the noon flight out of Logan International.

Accustomed to a better quality bourbon than the first class offering, Grant started to turn it down, then had second thoughts and grabbed two of the miniature bottles. With luck it might help him forget about Okeechobee and the last conversation with his mother. Still rankled at his Yale decision, she'd never been able to bring herself to refer to the place as anything other than "that New Haven School." At least she admitted he'd made some measure of atonement with his graduate work at Harvard, which she considered the only appropriate institution for a Lonsdale.

At the end of an uneventful flight, during most of which he slept and dreamed of bigger assignments, Grant stepped out into the heat of Orlando. The moment he inhaled the hot, humid air he felt a sense of hopelessness. He rented a car, cursed Angus in an uncensored release of his resentment, and plotted his itinerary on a map that made Florida look like a large network of rural roads.

The busy four lanes from the Orlando airport gradually narrowed to two and splintered off in various directions, bristling with dots on the map, bearing names like Holopaw, Yeehaw Junction, and his destination, Okeechobee. They all seemed, somehow, more appropriate to the far reaches of the Australian outback than to the United States. Sun-bleached flatlands, punctuated with pale green palm trees and ragged palmetto bushes, passed monotonously in stark contrast to the rolling hills, white birches, and blue-green firs of his native New England. An occasional cluster of bright pink roadside oleanders sprang up here and there as if in mute apology for its drab surroundings.

The radio in his rented Lexus introduced him to deep-down country music. He listened with mild curiosity to the mournful strains of *Only Daddy That'll Walk The Line* by Shawn Rader and the Redneck Riviera Boys. Touted by the local radio station as a country-western favorite, its twanging melody and redundant lyrics rang in Grant's ears as a cacophonous insult to Beethoven, Mozart, and all things beautiful in music. The less time spent down here the better.

Signs along the gently winding approach road into Okeechobee posted a forty-mile-an-hour limit. The mile-apart advisories left motorists free to interpret them either as thoughtful safety alerts or fair warning of a lurking patrol car. Grant had never paid much attention to speed constraints before and didn't see any need to then. Lulled by the nothingness of the flat landscape spread out ahead of him, his thoughts wandered in and out of his family's history of relentless obsession with wealth accumulation through selective marriages.

It might have been heat-induced fatigue, or maybe his focus just lost its edge. Whatever the cause, the sharp curve ahead came up so fast he didn't see the Brahman until it was too late. With the unexpected view of the animal's rump filling his windshield, he gasped, clenched the steering wheel and jerked it to the right, barely in time to miss the lumbering beast, but not the roadside stump.

Simultaneous sounds of grinding metal and an exploding tire wrenched Grant's gut, blocking out all intelligent thought except the blurred image of his Lexus catapulting forward into a partially filled drainage ditch. Moments later, after he stopped shaking, he stepped out into water up to his knees, briefcase in one hand, suitcase in the other. He

slogged up the bank to the side of the road, fighting for traction on the moist soil. He bent over once or twice to squeeze out some of the water and shake mud and loose grass from his soggy trousers.

Hands on his hips, he stared down at the stricken vehicle and turned to curse the dumb animal. This day's getting worse by the minute, he thought. Why would anyone want to buy a fish farm at all, let alone in this God-forsaken place? He heaved a sigh and figured the client must have seen something he wanted. Conrad Vanderslice could smell a windfall profit a mile away, and it didn't have to be legitimate money. But why in a hell-hole like this? "Damn it." He kicked a loose stone into the ditch after he surveyed the un-Lonsdale-like nature of his situation. "Vanderslice can take this job and shove it, along with the rest of this backwater cow town."

His fuming had only partially run its course when an oversized, red pickup pulled over on the shoulder a few feet ahead. A Confederate flag hanging conspicuously in the rear window only partly blocked the hunting rifle mounted over it. A red, white, and blue sticker on the rear bumper issued a prophetic warning: *When Guns Are Outlawed Only Outlaws Will Have Guns.*

A girl climbed down from behind the wheel of the pickup, glanced first at the stranded Lexus, and then at Grant. She shook her head. "Looks like you got yourself into a real mess, mister." Her denim shirt and faded blue jeans were enough to take gorgeous out of the equation, and what was left looked like an angel in cowboy boots sent to rescue him. Tall, blonde, busty, yet not overly so, she moved toward him with sensuality he didn't expect in someone who drove a truck. The snug-fitting work clothes seemed to accentuate every curve in her body.

"Yes, that cow and I just missed each other," Grant said, pointing to the Brahman munching grass across the road, "and the ditch seemed like the path of least destruction. Why the hell was a cow wandering down the middle of the road, anyway?"

"Oh, that's one of Sam Tillery's herd. It happens every now and then when one of 'em breaks through a weak spot in the fence. It's a bull, by the way, not a cow. You're not from around here, are you?"

"No. I don't suppose I could get towing service to get my car out of this muck."

"Well, you're looking at it, so just step back while I free up that pretty Lexus." She reached into an industrial-looking metal box in the back of the pickup and pulled out a long chain. While Grant watched her effortless movements with amazement, she hooked one end onto the pickup's trailer hitch and moved toward the Lexus with the other.

Grant put his hand up. "Whoa! You can't do that by yourself. Here, let me give you a hand."

"Forget it. Your shoes are already a mess, and you'd just get the rest of that nice suit all dirty. I've done this before. My name's Luanne Gibbs. What's yours?"

"Grant. You sure you want to do this?"

"Yep. You got a last name, Grant?"

"Uh, yes. Lonsdale. Hey, why're you taking my bumper apart? Why don't you just hook that thing underneath it?"

"You don't know much about cars, do you, Grant Lonsdale? I'm taking the little panel off so I can attach the chain to the tie-down hook the Lexus Company was smart

enough to install inside the bumper. So you and your briefcase just stand over there and wait while I bust this car loose.”

She hopped back into the seat beside him, maneuvered the vehicle into a position closer to the ditch, put it in forward gear, and slowly accelerated. The low growl of the pickup’s engine escalated into a roar of determined commitment as the chain tightened. The Lexus lurched forward and, with a loud whooshing sound, the ditch reluctantly released its prisoner.

After Luanne put the truck in neutral, she climbed out to assess the damage. She shook her head again and turned to Grant. Her sparkling blue eyes held steady on him. “Well, your car’s out on dry land, but it’s not going anywhere. The fender’s jammed against what’s left of your tire. And I mean jammed.”

Grant surveyed the stranded vehicle, now trapped like a helpless insect in Okeechobee’s spider web of ditches and serpentine roads. “So, isn’t there a repair service in town that could tow it in and fix it?”

“Yeah, but it’s after four o’clock. Lem’s three sheets to the wind by now. Around here everyone knows not to ask him to do anything after about noon. Look,” she said as she unhooked the chain, wrapped it into a neat coil, and heaved it into the box, “I’ll drop you off at a motel, and Lem can bring your car in tomorrow morning.”

Grant shook his head. “Great. A one-horse town and no car.” He threw his suitcase into the back of the pickup, folded his jacket over his arm, and climbed into the passenger seat with his briefcase and a scowl that made him look as if he’d been born angry.

Luanne slid in behind the wheel, looked down at the briefcase between Grant’s legs, and giggled. “Hey Grant, what are all those initials for on your briefcase?”

“My name.”

“So what do they stand for? And what are those three lines at the end?”

Grant frowned at her. “They’re Roman numerals. They stand for ‘the third.’ I’m Grant Abbot Lonsdale the Third. Look,” he said, trying to ignore her giggle, “it’s a family name, and I wasn’t consulted when it was chosen. If I had been, I might have come up with something more resonant, like Whip Sheldon Lonsdale, or Wade Remington Lonsdale. That didn’t happen and it is what it is.”

“Wow. The *third*! So they gave you the same names your ancestors had, right? I mean, every male in your family is called Grant Lonsdale, right? That’s a pretty big load to drop on a little kid, isn’t it?” Her mouth curved in a teasing smile while she waited for a reaction. Grant shook his head without responding.

Luanne giggled. Her hand went to her mouth. “Oh, I’m sorry. It’s just that you’re the first man I’ve ever met with three last names and a number.” She giggled, her hand over her mouth again, while she accelerated around a plodding John Deere tractor pulling an empty trailer.

“It’s a matter of lineage, damn it! Something I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“Oh. Well, it sounds to me more like a lack of imagination. Hey, Grant, did the other Lonsdales let you have any pets of your own when you were growing up?”

“Not that it’s relevant, but yes. I had a turtle. The part of Boston where I grew up didn’t lend itself very well to keeping pets.”

“A turtle, oooh, that sounds exciting,” she said, breaking into a wide smile that annoyed and mesmerized him at the same time.

Before the tractor had even begun to recede in the rear view mirror her eyes went wide in concert with the tightening of her lips. She swerved the pickup off the road and slammed on the brakes, pitching Grant forward hard enough that his head would have hit the dashboard had the seatbelt not restrained him.

“Holy cripes! You’re *him*, aren’t you?” A sharp glare replaced her smile.

“What?”

“You’re the stuffed shirt they’re sending down from Boston to take Daddy’s company away from him, aren’t you? I should have known it the minute I saw your fancy suit. Hell, I should’ve left you right there in the mud.”

He could almost feel her scowl. He met her glare. “Look, I’m not here to take anything from anyone. I’m here simply to review a possible, although unlikely, acquisition. So can we—”

“Yeah, well we don’t need any ‘acquisitions’ down here. Daddy and I are doing just fine thank you. So you can haul your damnyankeeass back to Boston and leave us alone!”

Still reeling from the sting he hadn’t seen coming, he couldn’t help but marvel at how smoothly she blended three unrelated words into a single obscenity, as though that was the way it should always be pronounced. He held up his hands in a gesture of mock surrender. “Believe me, there’s nothing I’d rather do right now, but I’ve a job to complete. I’m going to do it quickly and then hop the next plane to Boston. Not to mention I’m stuck here until your inebriated friend can find it in his busy schedule to dry out and fix my car.”

She turned away and glared out the window in silence. They sat for a few moments without speaking before Grant decided he needed to break the impasse.

“Okay, Luanne, I’ll share something with you I probably shouldn’t. I can’t see what our Boston client could possibly be interested in down here. Based on the research I’ve done, I think I can safely say there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell anyone’s going to want a little fish farm.”

She turned her glare at him again for a moment. As if to translate her feelings into action, she pressed the accelerator down hard, launching the pickup forward and onto the road. His head slammed against the seat back. Although it might have been just his imagination, it seemed she deliberately aimed at every pothole, tossing him forward, back again, and sideways, the seat belt doing its best to leave a diagonal bruise from his right collar bone to his left ribs.

“Okay, okay. I get the picture,” he said, bracing himself against the dashboard. “How about if we just agree on a truce for a couple of days, and then I’ll be out of your hair?”

Luanne said nothing, her jaw set and lips compressed.

“Would that be okay? I mean if we made a truce?”

“Fine.” She made it sound more like a snort than a word. She swerved to miss the next pothole.

They rode in silence for about a mile with no further pothole encounters before Grant decided he needed more information. “Luanne, I know the name of your father’s company, but—”

“My father’s and *mine*.”

“Right. Sorry. I wasn’t given your father’s first name. I know his last name is Gibbs. I’d like to know his first so I don’t sound clueless when we meet.”

Half a minute passed.

“Luanne?”

“Major. Major Gibbs is his name.”

“Well, okay. I meant his first name, not his rank. And I didn’t know he was still in the military.”

“He’s not in the military,” she snapped. “Major *is* his first name. It’s a fairly common first name down here. Of course, that’s something I wouldn’t expect you to understand.” With an angry gaze riveted on him, she made it clear any further conversation would be less than friendly.

“I guess I had that one coming. Well, I’d like to meet your father before I check into a motel. Are you okay with that?”

“Yeah, I’m sure he can’t wait.”

She ramped up the speed to sixty and held it there through the outskirts of Okeechobee.

Right after they passed a sign advertising the city as the “Speckled Perch Capital of the World” Luanne gunned the vehicle to seventy. The scenery rushed by too fast for Grant to read the narrative on the landmarks referencing the Seminole Indian Wars of the mid-nineteenth century. He couldn’t resist one more attempt at some kind of friendly communication.

“Luanne, where does the name ‘Okeechobee’ come from?” The question prompted another, not unexpected, pause before she decided to respond.

“It’s a Seminole name meaning ‘Big Water.’ It’s a reference to Lake Okeechobee, which is the largest fresh water lake in the United States.”

“Really? I thought the Great Lakes were the largest.”

“No, I meant the largest lake occurring entirely in one state.” She glared at him with a didn’t-you-think-I-knew-that look in her eyes.

Silence again. Two or three miles later she brought the vehicle to a stop in front of a building ruggedly landscaped with hibiscus, pampas grass, sago palms, philodendron, and flowers Grant couldn’t remember having seen before. The whole mixture was arranged as though specifically intended to highlight a large sign that read “South Atlantic Farms, Where the Healthiest Angel Fish in the World Are Bred and Raised.” The flowers seemed to explode in brilliant colors unlike anything on Beacon Hill.

“We’re here,” she said, turning off the engine. “Don’t forget your monogrammed briefcase.”

“Yes, thanks,” he replied, bending to wipe mud off his Brooks Brothers trousers.

She led him into an office that looked like it had been ransacked. His eyes scanned the room, searching for any two pieces of matching furniture. The rank odor of dry fish food assaulted his nostrils in concert with an oily, metallic smell from a few small-horsepower air pumps under repair. Surrounded by shelves stacked with unfiled old documents and jars of live brine shrimp, he felt claustrophobic and dirty. A palmetto bug scurried between his feet. He wondered what other forms of insect life he’d never seen before might come crawling out of the woodwork. The scroungy little place made no pretense to be something it wasn’t. Damn Angus for this dead-end assignment.

A tall, lean, suntanned man wearing a broad smile, grass-stained blue jeans, and a beat-up baseball cap hauled himself slowly out of a fully depreciated swivel chair. He shook Grant’s hand with a vise-like grip. His leathery skin made him look like he’d spent

so much of his life outdoors that he and the land belonged to each other. Underarm sweat stains darkened the upper part of his denim shirt.

“I’m Major Gibbs. You must be Mr. Lonsdale. Welcome to South Atlantic Farms.”

“Daddy, this is Grant. I picked him out of a mud hole near Sam’s ranch where his car got stuck.” She gave him a sidelong glance. “I’d introduce him by his full name, but it would take too long and I know you’re busy. Do you want me to stay?”

“No, honey, I want to talk to this young man alone. You just go on and we’ll all get together later for supper.”

“Okay. I’ll be working on that broken pump if you need me.” She managed to fire one last glare at Grant before she slammed the door, a final punctuation of her contempt for him.

Major grinned. “Whew! I don’t know what you two talked about on the way in here, but whatever it was it sure got her dander up.” He pointed to a chair, ran his hand over it to sweep off some dried fish food flakes before Grant sat on it, and returned to his swivel. “I ain’t seen Luanne so mad since her momma made her stop playing baseball with the boys and start dressing like a girl. Don’t get me wrong,” Major said, “Luanne’s a bright young lady. Graduated top of her high school class and won herself an athletic scholarship to Florida Southern. Her momma died before she could get there an’ I needed her in the business. I always felt kinda bad about that, like I cheated her out of something rightfully hers. Her momma didn’t leave her much except a full-time job and a trunk full of memories.”

“I’m sorry about your wife, Mr. Gibbs. I’m sure Luanne’s a fine girl, although she really went into orbit when she realized I was sent here to assess South Atlantic as a prospective acquisition. Maybe you can fill me in on what’s transpired between you and Conrad Vanderslice, because he didn’t tell me much about it.”

Major threw his hand up and shook his head. “Ahh, he’s tried to buy me out a couple times before. His offer price was way too low and I’m not interested in sellin,’ anyway. Those high rollers up there in the big cities just don’t get it when I tell ’em this company’s gonna be Luanne’s future after I’m gone, so there’s no way in hell I’m lettin’ go of it. Sometimes I think them smart-ass big city bankers don’t have enough common sense to pound sand in a rat hole. Only reason I let you take a look is that Vanderslice promised I could set the price myself after your look-see. Just between you and me, I still won’t sell but I’d kinda like to know what the company’s really worth.”

Major leaned forward and swung his chair around to his right. “Say, I’ll bet you could use a good stiff drink. Here, wait ’till you get a taste of this.” He leaned over, reached into an old wooden cabinet, and pulled out an unlabeled bottle of a pale yellow liquid that looked to Grant like old-fashioned, homemade corn liquor.

Grant winced. “I’m really not all that thirsty, Mr. Gibbs, but thanks any—”

“Naw, this ain’t what you northerners think. Once you’ve throwed this down your throat, you’ll feel better’n you ever felt. I guarandamntee it.”

“What is it, if I might ask?”

“We call it Okeechobee Comfort.” The cork squeaked against the bottle top. Major grinned, poured a few shots into a ceramic mug stamped with a picture of an angel fish, and handed it to Grant. “You can’t get this nowhere in the U.S. of A. except right here. And you can drop the ‘mister’ and just call me Major. And I’ll call you Grant.”

Grant sipped tentatively at first, as if the mug might contain a toxic chemical. The liquor tasted better than he thought it would. He touched his mug to Major's in a toast, and they downed a couple of hearty swallows. The earthy informality of it all brought to Grant's mind contrasting memories of upper echelon Boston cocktail parties, yacht races at Marblehead, and the annual beer bash at the Harvard-Yale homecoming game. It conjured up the sound of ice cubes jangling in drinks amid discussions of elegant skiing vacations in Switzerland.

After a couple more swallows, Grant decided it was time to get to the subject at hand. "Major, when I looked at your last year's financial statements, which Conrad gave me, I sensed there was something very wrong but I can't precisely identify it. I need to know, first of all, why the company's debt-to-equity ratio is so low."

Grant's question was met with a frown and a pause. Major tipped his cap back, and ran his long, bony fingers through his hair. "Son, how about running that by me again in plain English."

"Well, what I mean is you have a lot of equity on your balance sheet and not much debt. In other words, the stockholders hold most of the claim to your company's assets, and the creditors' claims are relatively small. That's a bit unusual in this day and age. I was wondering if you could tell me how that came to be."

"Ah, I guess you'd have to ask Luanne about that. She keeps the books mostly. Is that bad or good? I mean about having all that much equity."

"Well, it's good in the sense that you're virtually debt free and aren't burdened with a lot of interest and principal payments. That means you have plenty of borrowing power. Still, it raises the question of why you haven't used your borrowing power to expand the operation." Grant's glance around the cluttered room raised an afterthought as to whether an expansion could actually survive the man's disorganization.

"Well, hell, I can answer that." Major stood to sign for a UPS delivery and then returned to his seat. "We don't need no more expansion. We got about all me and Luanne can handle right now. We're doing just fine as it is. So is that why this Vanderslice guy has been pestering me? I mean, is it because we haven't expanded?"

Grant shrugged. "That's a good question. His company doesn't actually need your debt capacity or your cash, so I can't honestly see why he would pressure you to sell."

Major leaned back, lifted his cap a few inches again, and scratched the top of his head. "Well then, what's he looking for?"

Grant reached for his mug and took another gulp. "He wouldn't say. He simply insisted that I come down here and review the whole operation. My managing partner and I surmised it must be for a potential acquisition. Therefore, I'll need to scope out how the company works, and take a detailed look at your cash flow, financial statements, and your annual audits."

"Okay. You can get the financial statements from Tommy Rawls down at the bank, and Luanne can show you the operation. We don't get no audits."

"None at all?" Astonished, Grant cocked his head and frowned. "I can't believe your stockholders would allow that."

Major leaned forward, placed his elbows on his knees, clasped his hands together, and rested his chin on cupped fists. "We only got three stockholders, son. I own thirty-one percent, Luanne owns twenty, and the other forty-nine is owned by our biggest supplier, Aqua Star out of Bogota, Colombia. That's where our breeder fish come from.

And that's why we get such a good price on all our stock and supplies — because most of our profits go back out to the stockholders in dividends. Me and Luanne do well, Aqua Star does well, and that's why I ain't sellin.' So now you see why no one's ever asked for an audit."

Major drained his mug, put it down on the desk, and rose out of his chair. "Okay, young man, over here's our conference room, right next to this office. This is where you can set up and start your work tomorrow. Got a couple of good filing cabinets in there, too."

"Thanks. That will do fine." Grant stood and welcomed the sight of an uncluttered space.

"On the other side of it is the accounting and record storage room where Luanne and her assistant, Maria, work. They'll dig up whatever you need. Now come on, let's you, me, and Luanne go have some dinner. Essie Mae's little restaurant don't look like much, but you ain't gonna find better food anywhere."

Grant swallowed the last drop from his mug and threw a doubtful look at Major. From what he'd seen since his plane landed, good food and local restaurant dining were a contradiction in terms. He remembered what happened before he wrecked the Lexus. He'd stopped for a snack at Bubba Bobby's Family Restaurant where grits were served whether you asked for them or not, and catfish was featured as the main entrée along with a green, mushy substance the waitress identified as a grape leaves wrap. Faced with the Hobson's choice between that and a greasy-looking breakfast menu, Grant opted for the latter. Clearly insulted by Grant's selection of scrambled eggs as the lesser of the menu's culinary evils, Bubba Bobby and his waitress had seemed as happy to see him go as Grant was to get back on the road.

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Major had been right. Essie Mae's didn't look like much. It was a far cry from Boston's Top of The Hub or Menton's at \$145 a person. The clientele looked a cut above Bubba Bobby's, though not a lot. Cowboy hats and baseball caps with logos advertising places like the local tire shop never left the heads of their wearers during the meal. Little square tables, each covered with a red and white checkered tablecloth, with a tiny flower pot of fake blue and yellow pansies in the center, made the place look like a small pizza parlor in South Boston. The buzz of conversation at the tables seemed restricted to the mundane events that defined the parameters of daily life in the local area: cattle prices, upcoming farm equipment auctions, and Edna Lou's hip replacement.

On the positive side, the dinner was everything Major said it would be. Catfish was optional and, thankfully, not the only offering. A deliciously-spiced meatloaf put an end to Grant's fear that the Okeechobee assignment had condemned him to a culinary hell of grits and grape leaves. Luanne's temper cooled down, another welcomed surprise. After the mellowing effects of a couple of beers, she managed to tease him once or twice before she launched into the operations he'd see the next day.

"Grant, you're not listening," she said. "Why are you staring at your dessert?"

"I'm trying to identify the thing. Looks like an upside-down pudding smothered in syrup. Does it have a name?"

"Yes, flan, a very popular dish. I'm sure it won't bite you. Don't they serve Hispanic food in Boston?"

He took a precautionary bite. “Not where I eat. Ahh you’re right, I like it. And I *was* listening. Now tell me about the financial statements. Your father told me your banker keeps them. I’ll need the statements for each of the last five years, and I’m a bit surprised that this guy Rawls is the custodian.”

“Well, don’t be,” she said. “Tommy Rawls has always maintained our financial records. After supper I’ll call his cell and tell him to make copies for you.”

While the waitress refilled their coffees, Grant caught Luanne eyeing him in a thoughtful, almost forgiving way, as though perhaps acknowledging that a more objective reassessment might be in order.

“You didn’t have much of a childhood, did you?” she asked. “I mean, your life must have been pretty restricted under all that lineage and stuff.”

“I grew up with a lot of freedom and probably more than my share of privileges. The restrictions came, I suppose, more in the form of with whom I could associate and with whom I couldn’t.”

Luanne leaned toward him on her elbows with her chin in her hands. “Like what kind of associations?”

Surprised by the intimacy of the question, Grant stalled to consider an appropriate response. How much do I want to reveal to these people? I don’t know them. Not even sure I like them. Nonetheless, I’ll probably have to share something if I expect to extract information from them.

He pushed his coffee aside and leaned forward toward Luanne. “Well, for example, one of my earliest recollections dates back to age seven when I brought a new-found friend home for a sleepover. He was a nice kid who needed a friend as much as I did. It seemed like a good idea until my parents explained that the boy came from a neighborhood they frowned on. That made it a forbidden relationship. Only that word was never used. It was ‘inappropriate,’ they said, but I knew what they meant.” He decided against any further reference to the parental restrictions that had robbed him of the childhood they purported to protect.

Luanne persisted. “How about girls? Any restrictions on those?”

His lips tightened in a reflexive response to suppressed memories that surfaced again through the fragile seal Luanne had broken. He hesitated, partly because of the guilt that seemed inseparable from the memory, and partly because he’d never intended to reveal the South Boston incident to anyone. Submerged crosscurrents of remorse and quiet resignation flowed into his consciousness once again. “Ahh, I think that’s a rather personal—”

“Well now,” Major said, “I think we’ve imposed about enough on this young man’s privacy, honey. It’s getting kinda late and he’s had a long day, so why don’t we just pack it in and let him get some sleep?”

Grant smiled, grateful for the intervention.

Luanne’s expression made it look like she was struggling to hold back still more penetrating questions. “Sure, Daddy, I guess you’re right. I’m sorry, Grant, I didn’t mean to pry. I’ll pick you up early tomorrow and we can get started.”

Major dropped him off at the Blue Moon Motel, handed him a bottle of Okeechobee Comfort, and parted with a grin. Grant found the minimally furnished room, with its Gideon Bible and a small writing pad bearing the logo of Lem’s Towing and Repair Service, neat, clean, and comfortable. A pleasant surprise for a backwater town.

He climbed into bed and tried to force a sleep that wasn't ready to come. He tossed and turned, trying to remember exactly what managing partner, Angus MacIver, had said about Conrad's hidden agenda. Grant's disappointment at being shunted off on an insignificant project had allowed his mind to drift off to the edges of the conversation, and obscured most of Angus's orientation instructions. Except the part about there being something seriously wrong at the hatchery and Conrad needing to find out what it was.

Even on the surface it didn't smell right, and questions that refused to go away swirled around in his mind. What's Vanderslice's hidden agenda, he wondered. What's the Colombian partner covering up by avoiding audits? Why doesn't the bank object, and why is a banker handling the business transactions?

Grant opened Major's bottle and took a shot at trying to douse his suspicions. For a quick reread he opened the South Atlantic file Jennifer had given him. He concluded it didn't contain enough information for a defensible assessment of the hatchery's operations— except that they showed one hell of an impressive profit. The little battery-operated digital bedside clock showed one in the morning. Grant finally succumbed to his fatigue and fell asleep to the low-decibel hum of a chorus of cicadas performing against the background of unfamiliar nocturnal sounds in the nearby swamp.