

## REDEMPTION

I

Two blocks of Market Street were barricaded, and tattooed carnies set up rides made from thin sheet metal and tractor engines between gaming booths with prizes of stuffed animals and logo-painted mirrors. A flatbed trailer parked at the intersection of Fifth and Market made a stage for a country band of two round-bellied men playing guitar and bass along with a drum machine, while old men in cowboy hats two-stepped with their wives, and women in black jeans and fringed T-shirts line danced.

Among all this, Nick and the girl walked down the midway together, and he could feel the people watching. Under different circumstances, the whispers and sideways glances could have been about the fact that he worked for her father, which was true enough, but as it was, it was because she was young enough to be his daughter, and he was married.

Earlier in the year, not long after Nick had been laid off from the coal mine, he had hired on with Rod Jackson Construction—a one-man outfit that did everything from building complete houses to repairing old ladies' porch swings. Jobs were tight in Matin County and six others had applied, so Nick broke down and called his son, Jeff, who apprenticed as a finish carpenter with an upscale contractor in Chicago, specializing in restoring antique staircases, mantles, and molding. A recommendation on company letterhead went a long way.

Rod was about Nick's age, a big man with a snickering laugh and brown, curly hair. His presence was huge and his voice loud, filling up whatever space he occupied, so that everyone knew he was there, middle-aged and cocksure.

On Memorial Day weekend Rod had invited Nick and his wife, Evelyn, out to his river camp for a cookout with his family. Evelyn went inside the old singlewide to make coleslaw with Rod's wife, Cindy, and Rod tended the grill. Nick stood facing

the water. The river lay brown and silty, white roils of current moving across the surface, separated from the lot by thin trees lining the bank, their trunks bare and black, smooth as fence posts. The water was on the rise.

A boat bobbed next to a square, wooden dock built on fifty-five-gallon drums, and a girl lay in a lounge chair wearing a black one-piece swimsuit, her skin amber and slick with oil. She sat up and looked toward the trailer, then stood and bent over to pick up her towel. Nick watched as she slid cutoff jeans over her suit, then walked flinching and barefoot across the rough ground.

Rod said, "Honey, this is Nick Chapman." Then to Nick, "My daughter, Dana."

She smiled and waved with her palm flat against the air.

Nick gestured with his sweating can of beer. "It's hot out there. You're gonna burn."

"I just tan," she said, stepping to the trailer door. "Hardly ever burn."

Now the carnival hung electric around them, a feeling of anticipation with no regard for the outcome. Dana stood close to him, the top of her head just below his shoulder. She pointed to people she knew, sometimes waving and calling out. He wished they were in another town doing the same thing—the crowd, the rides and lights, the smells of wet asphalt and hot dogs and funnel cakes—with everyone who passed knowing they were together. Just not these people.

Earlier that day, Nick had been unloading bags of Quikrete from the truck into Rod's garage. Sweat dripped down his ribs, his shirt long ago soaked through and removed. The sky was dark and hazy, and moisture hung thick in the air. But it would not rain.

He carried the heavy paper sacks two at a time and set them just inside the garage door. When he turned to pick up another set, Dana was standing next to the tailgate of the truck, smiling.

"Did Daddy leave you to do this by yourself?"

Nick picked up the sacks from the bed of the truck and stood holding them. "He had some calls to make, so I told him I'd finish up."

He turned to go toward the garage and gripped his fingers tight around the edges, not wanting to show he was tired.

“You look hot,” she said. She sat on the tailgate now, swinging her legs back and forth.

He set the bags on the floor and dusted his hands against the back of his jeans. “You’re gonna get dirty sitting up there.” Then he lifted his hat from his head, his hair short and thin behind his high forehead, and wiped sweat from his eyes. “And you’re right—I’m burning up.”

Dana watched him.

“Got big plans tonight?” he said.

She laughed. “The demo derby’s going at the fair.”

Nick walked back to the truck and pulled the last bag to the edge of the tailgate, his hand brushing the side of her leg. “You going?”

“If someone asks me,” she said.

He let the sack lay and stood looking at the girl for a moment, his hands curved around the edge of the tailgate.

“You’re dark,” she said, nodding to his back.

“That’s what working outside will do for you. When I was down in the mines, you’d’ve thought I bleached my skin.” She giggled, and he laughed too. “I’m not kidding.”

“Are those heavy?” she asked.

“Not too bad. This is the last one, so it don’t really matter now, thanks for asking.” He pinched at her bare leg, and she giggled again and wiped away the grime he’d left on her skin.

Her laughter died away, and they didn’t move for a moment.

“Guess I better go,” Dana said.

“I might go uptown tonight, if you wanted to go. Pretty girl like you shouldn’t be sitting at home on a Friday.”

Later, he told his wife he was going to the fair with Rod.

On the way out to pick up Dana, it rained for the first time in six weeks. A gentle summer shower that lasted all of ten minutes, falling straight down. But it gave a break from the heat, leaving only a few gray clouds in the west against the failing sunlight.

The grandstand stood at the end of Market Street near the river, and they made their way through the crowd to find seats. Below was a dirt infield surrounded by a high chain-link fence. The derby cars were parked there, and the drivers and their mechanics could be seen moving around, making last-minute adjust-

ments. Most were high school kids, some a little older, who put together a few hundred dollars to find a heavy car that ran.

Dana sat looking around at everything, a big smile on her face. Nick leaned over to her and said, "It won't start for a few minutes. You want anything?"

"No, I'm okay."

"You sure? Because I was going to get a hot dog. I haven't had supper."

"Well, if you're going." She pushed a piece of hair behind her ear. "I'll have a pretzel and a small diet."

The concession stand was under the bleachers, and he lit a cigarette while standing in line, checking the faces to see if he knew anyone. When he got to the counter, he ordered her pretzel and drink and ordered himself two hot dogs, a candy bar, and a large Coke. The booth was lit by a yellow lightbulb that haloed around the woman working as she put the bills Nick had given her in a metal strongbox next to the popcorn popper.

When he'd lost his job at the mine six months earlier, the company had given no notice until he entered the washhouse where a few other men were getting dressed for work. Lockers lined the walls. Wire baskets hung by chains from the ceiling, each one belonging to a miner, holding his shower supplies, his towel, maybe a razor and shaving cream. At the end of each shift, they would lower them like chandeliers and try to wash the coal dust from their skin. The concrete floor was always damp.

Before Nick finished changing into his work clothes, the superintendent walked in and said to each man on his list, "I'm sorry, but we don't have any work for you." When asked for a reason, he only said, "It's those damn hippies in the EPA with this new Clean Air Act."

Nick spent the rest of that day driving around, drinking from a pint bottle of whiskey he'd picked up at a convenience store, and when he walked into the house two hours earlier than usual, Evelyn came from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

"Was someone hurt?" she said, a small space between her lips as she breathed in.

He forced a smile. "Well, they gave me my pink slip."

She stood quiet for a moment, then slammed her palm on

the counter. "You worked your ass off for them. What are we supposed to do, Nick? Just all of a sudden they expect us to go without money. When did you find out?"

"This morning."

"You mean you didn't even work today?"

"No."

"Then where the hell have you been?"

"Just out driving around, trying to think."

"Well, what's your answer?"

"I don't have one."

She turned around and looked into the kitchen as if something would be there to tell her what to do, then she turned back and threw the dish towel at him, but it unfolded and filled with air, floating gently to the floor between them.

"Goddamn it, Nick. How are we gonna do it?"

She started to cry now, like a child who was fine after she'd fallen, until she'd seen her own blood. Nick walked toward her and pulled her into his chest.

"I don't know," he said, "but we will." She still shook with her tears, and he put his hand on the back of her head. "We'll figure something out."

He walked back up the wooden stairs of the grandstand, holding the snack carrier in both hands, and as he came down the aisle toward their seats, Dana sat looking out into the empty track, her hair long on her shoulders, her feet propped on the seat in front of her.

He edged into his seat and handed her a drink from the carrier. She put her lips around the straw and drank, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Thanks," she said. "I was about to choke."

"I thought you said you didn't want anything." Nick started unwrapping one of the hot dogs.

"Well, I didn't want to be rude."

Nick took a bite and laughed. "Oh, bullshit."

They sat close on the wooden plank, their hips touching, as the cars pulled out into the arena. None had glass or hub-caps. Numbers had been spray-painted on the doors along with names on the hoods and roofs: *Piledriver*, *Lead Sled*, *Death Barge*. Two twin brothers had entered, one in a Ford LTD, the

other in a station wagon. On the roofs of their cars they had *Bruise Brothers* in black letters.

Mercury-vapor lights burned blue-white onto the field, the sky gone dark behind them. The drivers started revving the engines, and Dana sat forward on her seat, holding her hands tight around her drink. Nick leaned over and said, "Who you rooting for?"

"That big black wagon on the end over there." She pointed to an Oldsmobile station wagon with a skull and crossbones on the roof.

"Okay, but I think this guy down here is going to be tough." He nodded toward a faded yellow Monte Carlo with a ragged vinyl top. It rocked back and forth as the driver pumped the motor.

"It's too small," she said. "Won't last."

A man on a platform raised a green flag still rolled around its stick. The cars became louder, and Nick found himself excited, forgetting for a moment who might be watching him. Just before the man unfurled the green flag, Dana reached over and grabbed Nick's hand, holding it on her leg. Their fingers locked together. Blood filling his ears. Deaf with fear and lust. And when he looked up, the cars were all moving, most running in reverse, their bald tires spinning wildly in the mud.

They watched as the cars rammed each other. Consumed by the loud pipes and metal crashing. The crowd cheering and letting out collective sighs. A car was rammed into the fence right in front of the stands, flipping on its top. Another car caught fire when it was hit, and the driver came clambering out the side window as men trackside ran out with fire extinguishers.

Nick followed the yellow Monte Carlo around the field, its driver dodging cars, then slamming in reverse, cracking someone's grill, dealing a fatal blow. Dana's black wagon was on the far side of the arena, steam rising from the radiator, pinned in by the Bruise Brothers.

By the end there was Nick's Monte Carlo and the Bruise Brother wagon, whose engine had stalled. The driver had climbed out the front window and sat on his hands and knees, spraying ether into the carburetor through a hole cut in the hood; then, just as he started to climb back in, the Monte rammed him from behind at full throttle. The Bruise Brother dropped the can of

ether into the mud and almost slid off the hood himself. The Monte Carlo cut donuts, slinging a rooster tail of mud, and the man on the platform stood and waved the checkered flag above his head while the crowd cheered.

Dana clapped and whistled and yelled above the noise. "How'd you know he'd win it?"

"Lucky," Nick said and clapped along with her.

They left the stands, down the back to where the concession was, and once they were in the crowd, she took his hand again. They walked together past overfilled trash cans stinking of rotting food and sticky soda, yellow jackets floating above. The screams of kids riding the rides and the faint thump of bass from the bandstand echoed down the street. More clouds had moved in and the sky was dark and without stars, lit only by the glare of the floodlights over the grandstand.

Dana said she wanted to ride the Ferris wheel, so he bought two tickets, and they stood in line below the tangle of metal and cable, fluorescent bulbs burning along the spans. The operator pushed a lever and stopped a car above a wooden box, then pulled a cotter pin and threw the bar back from two little boys sitting in the seat. They jumped up and hurried past Nick and Dana, and the carnie motioned them forward. He wore a black tank top, his arms covered in tattoos that looked as if he had done them himself, and his hair hung in a long ponytail beneath a black leather cap. As Dana walked up the ramp, he eyed her from the ground up, then looked at Nick, smiling with approval.

The wheel took them up a short way, then stopped while more people were let on. When they were stuck at the top, she turned to him. "I'm glad you wanted to take me tonight. I've had a great time."

"So have I," Nick said. "Really."

They sat looking at each other. Sometimes her eyes would drop a little from his, then raise, and Nick's stomach leapt as if he were falling from the car. He leaned closer, feeling vertigo from the height, and then they kissed. Her mouth was soft and sweet with soda, and in that moment, he stupidly believed he'd never known anything like it.

The Ferris wheel jerked into motion, and they pulled apart and watched as the world moved below them, the town dark

out past the lights of the fair. A church steeple rose white into the sky across town, and the lights of cars pulling from their parking places shone faintly against the wet streets.

They went around several times, and then the wheel began stopping to empty the cars and let others board. When they reached the bottom, the long-haired man opened the bar, and they stepped onto the box and walked down the ramp back into the crowd that had seemed far away and beautiful when they were above it.

Inside the cab of his truck, Nick put the key in the ignition but didn't start it, trying to figure out what to say, what to do.

She said, "Do you like me?" Her voice made his stomach jump, and he turned to see her sitting with her back against the door.

He thought it a silly question, considering what had happened. "Yes, I like you, and like being with you, but it's not as simple as wearing my class ring. I'm forty-four years old. I'm married."

Dana looked as if she might cry, and Nick couldn't believe he was risking everything for this pouty girl less than half his age. He lit a cigarette.

Her hair had fallen across one eye. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, looking out the windshield at the trees moving against the breeze. "I just wish things were different." She smiled. "But life ain't fair." Repeating words her mother always said to her. Trying to sound grown up.

Nick backed the truck into the road. She scooted over in the seat next to him, and he touched her leg, and she lay her head on his shoulder. They drove along backstreets to the river, then turned down a two-track that ran behind huge gravel piles stacked on a concrete pad.

He parked and watched the black water roll past, saw the lights of a single car moving across the bridge downstream. Dana touched his arm, his cheek, and he was mindless, like some kid strung out over his first girlfriend. But instead of stopping it, he focused on the river and the sweet smell of her hair and the darkness beyond.

## II

The heat lasted into September, and then the nights became cool. Few crops were fit for the harvest, some left standing dead

and dry in the fields, ruined by drought. The farmers with good land or talent brought a yield, and the combines worked constantly, sometimes moving in pairs, raising dust in great clouds that hung over the fields like smoke. And at night, their floodlights shone through the haze and the chaff, shadows shifting in the halogen glare below the black autumn sky. The rains finally came, only too late, and left the ground covered in mud, turning gray as the sky.

The house was a small single story on five acres north of town. When Nick's grandmother had lived there, it was surrounded by flower gardens, kept clean, and always smelled of cooking. Now only a few rosebushes and the grape arbor remained, growing wild and untrimmed. The inside of the house was empty, with only the old gas stove and the refrigerator, and when Nick moved in, he added his clothes, a small wooden table, and a twin bed.

Nick's grandmother had willed him her house when she died nine years before, and though he'd never really thought of selling it, he never thought he'd end up living there either. As a kid, he always figured his father would want the house, but just after his father's retirement, his parents announced at Thanksgiving dinner that they had sold their house in town and bought a condo apartment in Gulf Shores, Alabama. Nick couldn't believe it, but his dad told him later, after they had left the women inside with the kids and sat on the porch smoking, "I didn't work my whole goddamn life just to keep doing what I've already done." Since then, they visited southern Illinois once a year and seemed as if they didn't miss it at all. They had even bought cemetery plots, not far from their condo, beneath a tree hung with Spanish moss.

The day Evelyn told him to move out, he'd come home from work, and she stood cutting vegetables at the counter. He'd stopped at the grocery on his way home and carried the plastic sacks in both hands and set them down on the kitchen floor.

"Hey," he said, coming in.

She continued to work the knife through an onion against the wooden cutting board.

"Cooking supper?" he said faintly.

"Yep." She still didn't look at him.

He stood for a moment, but she never moved. He stepped closer and knew she was ignoring him deliberately.

“Well,” he said. “I’ll bring the sodas in, and then I’m jumping in the shower.”

Evelyn scraped the pale onion in a neat pile, and he turned and went outside.

The heat was relentless, the metal along the bed of his truck filmed with humidity. He pulled two cases of soda over the bed side and carried them toward the house. By now, Evelyn had heard people talking, maybe even someone had called her. There was no telling what story had been told by the time it had gotten to her, which didn’t matter because the truth was as bad as any small-town gossip.

Moving back into the air conditioning made the hairs on his arms stand up. The house was clean and smelled of cinnamon. A few candles were lit in the living room. Nick figured by the time he got out of the shower they could eat supper and talk things through.

When he stepped into the kitchen, she was digging through the grocery sacks, putting things away. She stopped, still holding a package of steaks, and said, “You want to explain what’s going on or just let me believe what I already think?”

Nick couldn’t think of anything to say. So he said nothing.

“Look, Nick. We’ve been through a lot of shit, and I’ve stayed by you the whole time, right and wrong. But I just can’t do it anymore. I won’t.”

He set the soda cases down. “I’m sorry. I’m not sure—”

“Don’t ever see her again.”

Her dark eyes went right through him, holding him where he stood. “What?” he said, as if he didn’t understand.

“Don’t ever see her again. You’ve got no ground to stand on here, and I’m not sure what I’m going to do yet, but regardless I don’t want you around her.”

“I can’t do that.” He could see Evelyn fighting the tears.

“You can’t?”

“Evelyn, she’s my best friend.” He heard himself say it and knew it wasn’t true.

She stood a moment, stunned by his words, staring blankly. Then her face changed, anger tightening the muscles around her mouth. Nick imagined stepping to her and holding her close so she could cry, but she quickly drew her arm back and slung the steaks at him. The flat package hit him in the chest with a smack.

“Goddamn you, Nick!” she yelled. “Goddamn you!” She moved forward a step and slammed her fists into his shoulders, her face red and wet with tears. “You make me hate you so much. Just looking at you, I fucking hate you so much.” She hit him with each word until he grabbed her wrists, then she broke free, her screams fading down the hall. “I want you gone from here! I don’t want to live with you anymore! No more!”

The bedroom door slammed, and Nick stood looking at the knife on the cutting board, the steaks cold and sweaty in his hands, and in that moment he felt as if his life had been nothing but a long dream and he’d been living in it without concern, waiting to wake up with everything back to normal, and now he had awakened and found that there had never been a dream at all.

He continued to work for Rod Jackson, but that was all—no more invitations for beers after work, no more cookouts at the river—just meet at the job site, work, and go home. He hadn’t seen Dana since he’d moved out to his grandmother’s. Then in October, Rod stopped calling altogether.

One morning Nick rose early and drove to Rod’s house and sat in his truck finishing a travel mug of coffee and smoking a cigarette, waiting to see if anyone would come out. The sun was just up. Finally he went to the back door, knocked, and stood in the cold morning, his breath clouding in front of him. Rod came to the door in jogging pants and a T-shirt.

“Are we working today?” Nick said. The last he had heard from him was two weeks before, when they had finished a remodel job on a utility room. “I figured you’d’ve called before now.”

Rod looked straight at him, the flesh around his mouth drawn. “Nick, I know I told you there’d be work, but things haven’t figured like I thought.”

Nick tried to turn the ambiguity in his favor. “Well, just give me a buzz when a job lines up. I’ll be ready.”

Rod looked out behind his house where two does stood along a fence line and spit into the grass. “I don’t think I can keep you on, Nick. I’m sorry about that, but that’s the way it’s panning out.”

Nick had never heard him speak so softly. Finally he said,

“Well, I appreciate you giving me the job. It sure has helped me out.”

Rod nodded and rubbed the back of his neck. He looked tired, his eyes sagging and pale without his glasses. Nick turned to go, but figured he had nothing to lose now. “Is Dana here? I haven’t seen her in a while.”

Rod shifted his weight, moving one foot slightly forward. “She’s gone to stay with my brother and his wife up in Mattoon to go to the junior college there.”

Nick looked to the field and only one deer was still in view, standing between two rows of corn stubble, watching him, then it bounded out of sight in two graceful leaps, its white tail raised in alarm.

“All right,” Nick said. “I guess that’s all I needed to know.” He thought of offering to shake Rod’s hand, but took a step backward and said, “Thanks for everything. Truly, I appreciate it.”

Rod didn’t say anything more and went back inside his house. When Nick climbed into the cab of his truck, he sat for a moment looking down at the dead gauges in the dash, his hands on the cold hard plastic of the steering wheel. “Goddamn it,” he said. “Goddamn me.”

In town, the streets were quiet, not yet crowded with the cars of high school kids cruising Market before the first bell rang, having sodas and smokes for breakfast. Nick stopped at a convenience store. The neon tubes along the top of the building shone brightly against the pale morning. A young guy with a scraggly goatee and a pierced tongue worked the counter. Rolls of instant lottery tickets sat beneath the glass.

“I need a pack of Winston Lights and a pint of Turkey,” Nick said.

The counter man reached above his head and pulled a pack of cigarettes from the rack, then turned to a wooden shelf where pints and half-pints of liquor stood. “You should buy an instant,” the counter man said. “Just sold a five-hundred-dollar winner an hour ago.”

Nick thought of the time he’d lost his entire military paycheck in a card game and had to call his dad. It wasn’t long after he’d left home and was stationed in South Dakota before leaving for Vietnam. His father only said, “I once lost an army check to a French prostitute named Veronique, and while at the

time I would have told you it was worth it, it never happened again—at least not with a French prostitute.”

Nick put the money down for the whiskey and cigarettes and tapped the glass counter. “You could have every winner in the state under there, and I’d pick the ringer.”

### III

A week of Indian summer arrived just after Thanksgiving, and Nick picked up Evelyn around four. They drove south on Route 1 to Windsor Oaks, a large conference hotel set next to the interstate in the middle of nowhere. It housed two buffet restaurants, a lounge, and offtrack horse betting. Occasionally, just by chance, a celebrity would spend the night there, stuck because their bus broke down or some such reason, and it would make the paper in town the next day.

After Nick moved out, Evelyn had cried all that day, but then she reached the point of wanting to cry but not being able to make herself, and she knew it was over with him. Now her hair was shorter, and she had slimmed down some, enough to make people take notice, and so she walked into the restaurant with this man she had been married to for twenty-two years, as if she had just met him for the first time.

They ordered drinks and waited for their food to arrive, talking about things happening in town, about their jobs, about their son. Their eyes didn’t bear the stress that had been there when they had lived together, as if cohabitation had been the only thing keeping them from being the two people they were at that moment—sitting in a restaurant, having a drink, laughing together.

They sat near large plate glass windows that were tinted against the western sun. A U-Haul truck towing a car carrier with a four-door Toyota pulled into the drive and eased up to the portico at the front doors. Nick and Evelyn watched as the man driving tapped his brakes, causing the truck to creep and lurch, until it became obvious that it wouldn’t clear. Inches away from impact, the woman in the passenger’s seat appeared to yell and throw her hands up, and the truck slammed to a hard stop. Nick and Evelyn laughed.

“He would’ve just driven her right on through,” Nick said.

“I’ll bet she told him not to even try it when they pulled in, but he went on anyway.”

“Well,” Nick said, tilting his glass toward Evelyn, “he knew she was there to scream at him before he really screwed the pooch.”

Their food came, and they ordered a few more drinks, and when they had finished, Nick lit a cigarette and sat back in his chair. The man and woman in the U-Haul had tried the whole time to back away from the overhang, and each time the man put it in reverse, the trailer began to jackknife, and he would have to pull forward and try again. The woman stood on the curb with her arms crossed, watching helplessly.

“You should go out there and back it around for him,” Evelyn said.

“If it was just him I would,” Nick said, “but I don’t want to do that to him with his wife standing there.”

“Well, if she were driving, she’d go in and ask for help.”

“That would work fine for her, but a man’s got his pride to think of.”

Nick crushed out his cigarette. Evelyn stirred her drink with a finger, then looked up at him. “So,” she said, “I appreciate having a nice dinner and all, and I’m glad we’ve been able to work things out enough to be decent and have a good time, but we did come here for a purpose.”

“You sure you don’t want the lawyer present?”

“The settlement’s done. I figure we can sign our names by ourselves.”

Nick looked back outside where the man had climbed down from the truck and stood next to the woman, both of them studying the bind they were in. “Is this what you want?” he said, turning to focus on her brown eyes.

She didn’t say anything at all. He waited, still looking at her, raising his eyebrows slightly, as if to ask the question again, but she looked down at the table and ran her finger through a small drop of water there.

“It’s not what I want,” she said, “but it’s where we are. Nobody wants to get divorced, but too many things stacked up against us all at once, and we didn’t have the steam to pull through.”

“People reconcile,” Nick said.

“It wouldn’t be the same the second time around, even if we wanted it to.”

Nick looked back outside. The truck and trailer were still

parked in front of the hotel, but the man and woman were no longer there. He heard Evelyn's voice again, but didn't want to look up.

"Nick."

He raised his eyes, and she sat smiling, her eyes wet but not crying.

"This is something I have to do," she said. "After I got over all the hurt and the fear and the anger, I started to see myself again, and I'm not ready to let that go."

Nick shook his head. "We had some good times."

"Yes," she said. "We did." The ice had melted in their glasses, leaving a clear layer of water over the booze. Evelyn picked up her drink and tilted it toward him. "And we've got a lot of life to live, Nick. We need to live it as best we can."

They sat for a moment not saying anything, then Evelyn slid the divorce papers over to Nick, and he signed them quickly. She did the same, then put them back in her purse. After a while they started talking again, softly at first, the way people do in funeral homes, then to a normal level, the tension falling away, and Nick said something about them not knowing how to be married, but at least they damn sure knew how to back a U-Haul. Their laughter came easily, as it usually does amid sadness.

The waitress came and set the bill on the table near Nick. Evelyn opened her purse.

"How much do I owe you?" she said.

Nick smiled and tried to look offended. "Not a damn thing."

"Well, thank you, sir." She closed her purse, then reached across the table and took Nick's hand, squeezed it once, and let go.

When they walked outside, the sun was almost down, and long shadows fell across the parking lot. The U-Haul still sat close to the overhang, and the people's voices rose from the far side. Nick walked slowly, trying to listen.

"What are we going to do?" the woman said.

"Just give me a moment," the man said. "I can figure this out. I just have to analyze things."

"It's been an hour. We won't need to get a room because we'll still be out here trying to back this piece of crap out of here."

Nick motioned for Evelyn to wait and walked around the side of the truck where the couple sat on the curbside together.

“You guys need a little help,” he said.

“Oh, I think we can get it,” the man said, but was quickly cut off by the woman.

“Can you do it?” she said to Nick.

“Let me give her a shot,” he said.

He opened the driver’s door and climbed into the cab. The man and woman stepped up off the curb into a landscaped rock garden. Nick cut the wheels and backed slowly until he saw the trailer turning in the mirrors, then he brought the wheels around and eased out into the parking lot. He pulled the truck forward and parked across several empty stalls.

Nick got out and walked back to them, and the woman shook his hand, nearly in tears.

“Oh, thank you,” she said. “You have no idea how glad I am you helped us.” She looked across the lot toward Evelyn waiting next to Nick’s truck, then smiled back at Nick.

The man walked up and reached to his back pocket. “How much do I owe you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Nick said. The man quickly slid his wallet back into his pants, and Nick smiled. “When you have to back up, just turn the wheels the opposite direction you want to go, then when it gets started, bring the front of the truck around, and you’ve got it.” The man nodded and furrowed his brow to show that he understood, and Nick gave him the keys and told him to be careful.

Back at his own truck, he opened the door for Evelyn, and she climbed in, careful to hold down the hem of her dress as she slid onto the seat. When they were pulling out onto the highway, headed back toward town, she said, “I thought you weren’t going to do that to a guy with his wife standing right there.”

“Well,” Nick said. “Tonight I felt generous.”