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DOG CATCHER

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Chapter 1

I opened the heavy lid of the freezer, and hooked it to a chain that was bolted to the cement wall. The freezer reminded me of a coffin, and in a way it was. The steam rose from inside. The cool air blew across my sweaty face. I looked inside and counted eight full trash bags.

I set my clipboard on a washing machine next to the cooler, then propped open the back door with a block of wood they kept outside. The back door opened to a fenced enclosure about twelve by ten feet. Its floor was made of cement, stained with rust-colored spots from the dogs that spent part of their day outside in the sunshine just below the I-75 overpass that snaked its way from Scott Road to Central Avenue.

I heard the steady rumble of cars and trucks barreling overhead. I tasted the tar and smoke and gasoline in the air. It was a hot, lonely place for the dogs to spend their lives, but they were just dogs, and I didn't have any say in the matter.

Dr. Fielding ran the hospital. He'd been a veterinarian long before I'd become an Animal Control officer, and that was seven years.

I had watched Dr. Fielding perform miracles. He'd brought a flea-infested Persian cat back to life right in front of my eyes. He had twisted his long fingers into the cat's blue mouth and pried at something deep within. His eyes screwed up, and looked over the surgical light that

hung from the ceiling like a mechanical arm. What he looked at I didn't know and never would really. But whatever it was, it must have given him the insight to pluck and pinch life into a dead cat. I knew many veterinarians, but only Dr. Fielding could look off into space somewhere and see life's blueprint.

I hefted one of the heavy trash bags from the freezer and slung it over my shoulder. A frozen skull cracked against my shoulder. The cold sank into my cheek, and the smell lingered in my throat. The smell was like dirt after a heavy rain, packed, moist, things from underneath dredged up and steaming in the sun. I carried the body outside and tossed it into the open bed of a green '72 Ford pickup. I used the truck every Tuesday morning for my route. After the body tour, I went to lunch at Greenhorns, then traded the Ford for my truck that I used the rest of the day to answer calls. I never got used to the thud the bodies made when they hit the steel of the truck bed. I slid the bag to the back to make room for the others.

The bad thing about the Ford was that by the end of the route some of the bodies thawed out; the bed was open to the Palm County sun, and the heat was worse somehow when you were on the road. When a body thawed out, the bag filled with water and locked in the smell. When I dug the bags out of the truck to throw into the incinerator at the kennel, the water spilled and the smell stayed on me the rest of the day. I changed shirts, I took showers, I sprinkled Old Spice over my face and chest, but the smell stayed.

I loaded all eight bags, slammed the tailgate, and latched it so it wouldn't pop open from a hard ride. I went inside and walked through the damp hallway of Dr. Fielding's hospital to a tub and washed my

hands. I dried my hands and went into the next room, where the greyhounds lived. I watched them wedge their long snouts through the cage wires. They were barrel-chested, muscular, and shy. Lying on the cement floor all day rubbed the fur on their legs and chests to dull, silver patches that looked bright against their dark coats.

Dr. Fielding took blood from them for other dogs who were anemic. I had never asked, but supposed he got them from trainers and breeders, then kept them until he found someone willing to adopt. There was a new batch of greyhounds in his hospital about every two months.

The two there now had both been racers. I knew by the numbered tattoos in their ears, but they must have been slow or stubborn or both because they had ended up here. I lifted the tucked ear of the brindle male and looked at the tattoo.

The greyhound trainers and breeders usually had a dog put to sleep if it couldn't race or follow instructions. Some used vets; others did the job themselves. It didn't matter if the dog was young or healthy. The trainers didn't want another kennel to get hold of their dogs and breed them, so they made sure that a dog was dead before they would pay the bill. Some of the vets would do it for the money, some wouldn't. I sure as hell wouldn't have done it if I were a vet, but then there were a lot of things I didn't like about the business. I knew some greyhound farms killed up to three hundred dogs a month. Only a few dogs ended up as racers. The rest cost too much to feed.

The greyhounds' cage was chest high, with a slab of plywood over the top. In the cage was a torn wool blanket and a red bucket filled with water. The cage was just big enough for them to take four or five steps in any direction, but they were used to it. Greyhounds spent most of

their lives in cages.

They were good dogs, and I loved to see them race. I never made much money betting on them, but then the game wasn't made for people to make money. The owners and the state of Florida made the money. I had never met an owner. I'd seen their names in the racing forms and sometimes in the newspaper, but I'd never met one in person.

Dr. Fielding's office was behind the X-ray machine in a dark room that had a kitchen, a television, and a couple of worn couches. I sat on a couch, and filled out the body slip. I wrote that I had carried four dogs to my truck, though I had actually carried eight. I had a little deal with some of the veterinarians. Animal Control charged six dollars per body, whether it was a five-pound cat or a ninety-pound St. Bernard. The veterinarians were required by law to dispose of the bodies through an approved agent. Animal Control was the cheapest agent in the county. With a few select vets I cut the number on the official slip to half. That way, I made a little and the vet saved a little when we split the difference under the table. Since I was the one who had to toss them into the incinerator, I was the only one who knew the actual number, the body count.

That day I had made one hundred and two dollars from Dr. Fielding and a few others. I made close to that amount every week and socked it away on Friday at the Barnett Bank near my trailer.

It felt strange to me, even though the animals were dead and I'd had nothing to do with how or why. Somebody had to do it. Somebody had to haul off the dogs and cats and coons and foxes that were hit by cars or found dead or diseased or put to sleep because of age. Still, it felt strange.

Dr. Fielding walked into the office. He wore a long, white lab coat with the blue name tag over the right chest pocket. He was a tall man, over six and a half feet. He ducked under the top of the door frame. His hair was curly on the sides and thinning at the top, and he wore gold-rimmed glasses that slipped down the bridge of his long nose.

"Morning, Legget." He walked around the couch to his desk, sat behind it and opened the top drawer.

"Got eight all together. Four on the slip, so you owe me for four. That's thirty-six dollars if you don't care to do your math. How are my hounds doing?"

He slipped the money across the top of his desk, then leaned back in his chair. "Just fine. When do you want to take one home?"

"You ask me that every time, and I tell you: I live in a trailer. I can't have a dog. I'd have to throw out my bed just to make room."

He nodded, then unwrapped a piece of spearmint gum. I smelled it. Chewing slowly, carefully, he folded his hands and leaned back. "You've been a dog catcher a long time, but still you haven't seen everything. You're due."

He snapped his gum and winked. Doc talked that way often enough. I smiled as if I was in on the joke and got my papers together, stood up. We shook hands, and as I walked down the hallway to my truck, I heard the cabinet open and the familiar clank of a whiskey bottle against a glass. Dr. Fielding had told me he could've been governor if he'd wanted, if he hadn't become a vet. Veterinarians didn't get the same respect as people doctors, even though he said people were easier to treat. Animals couldn't say what hurt or how a medicine made them feel, and there were thousands of species. Every species had its own

problems and cures. But he was a doctor, and I wasn't. Second in his class at the state university. He knew people, politicians, lawyers. People knew him. That made a lot of difference in my world. Veterinarians enjoyed a privilege that an Animal Control officer could respect or attempt to destroy, but never ignore. And Dr. Fielding was the most powerful man I knew.

* * *

I drove around the back of Animal Control, through a tall chain link fence with three strands of barbed wire across the top. The incinerator was in a small field of Bahia grass with a few palm trees, down a worn dirt path. It looked like an oversized dumpster with a twenty-foot smokestack. About thirty feet from the machine the smell of burnt plastic and flesh hit you like a brick. The smoke that came out of the machine was toxic, and everybody knew it, but nobody wanted to tear out every dog from every plastic bag. So we just tossed everything in the way it came.

I backed the pickup to the wooden gate that was open and hanging on its last two-by-four from all the times I, and other officers, had backed into it. I dropped the tailgate and hauled out the first bag. Of course it had melted, and a healthy splash of cold, reeking water slopped across my shirt. The shirt glued itself to my chest, but I kept moving. The best way to finish was to keep pushing until the last bag was in the fire. I tossed the bags into the incinerator, flicked it on and closed up the truck. The pickup would wait there till next week.

Inside the kennel, the dogs erupted with barks and yelps. There was

no way to get used to the noise thirty dogs could make. You couldn't talk loud enough to hear your own voice. And there was no sense in yelling at them.

Our kennel was old and made of cement. Cement gutters ran in front of the cages. Kennel attendants went back there twice a day with rubber boots and hoses to spray them out. Thirty dogs produced a lot of waste. The kennel attendants cleaned it twice a day, and John Leland had to keep on their backs like a lion just to get it done right.

Animal Control, like any county service that lived off taxes, was always hurting. We could only afford two, sometimes three people to work the kennels, and it was a big job. People quit in a few days or weeks because it was just too much work for a few underpaid and sore hands.

The walls of the kennel had been painted a hundred times, red, blue, yellow, white. But the acid from the urine and the claws and constant rubbing against the sides had given it a beaten, dirty look. It looked like buckets of hot bleach had been thrown at the walls, leaving patches of white over red under yellow, like a bad quilt.

I walked into the dark kitchen and washed my hands and arms and face in a huge steel sink filled with dirty bowls. The dog and cat food was stacked against the wall, fifty-pound bags of dry pellets. I slapped the side of a new, stuffed bag. It was like hard flesh, and I liked the sound. The animals settled when they realized I wasn't there to feed them. I didn't see the kennel attendants and wondered if they were smoking pot again. John would fire them if he found out.

I went out the side of the building, where I had parked my truck. The kennel attendants were there behind a tree. When they heard the

door pop shut behind me, they peeked around the tree where my truck was parked. Tom, a skinny high school kid, looked me in the eye and coughed.

Albert was heavy, about eighteen or nineteen. He had a clump of blond hair and freckles. He wore a black rubber apron and rubber boots. He looked wet and wrinkled like a prune. Tom was paper thin. When I looked at him, I thought of chalk dust in a strong breeze. He was nothing.

“How’s the kennel looking, fellas?” I unhooked my keys from my belt and walked toward the truck.

“OK,” Tom said, and snarled a little.

I wasn’t scared of them. I was big enough to keep them at arm’s length. Luckily, I was trim and twenty-five and tall. The job helped. Chasing animals through backyards and woods and streets built muscles and stamina.

Tom put his hands in his pockets and kicked at the dirt around the thick roots of the oak tree. “Give me a cigar, Legget.”

I patted my shirt pocket. “Don’t have any to spare.”

Albert laughed, and I didn’t get the joke. Hell, I didn’t get any of their jokes.

“You boys been fiddling with my truck?”

“That piece of shit? Fuck no,” Tom said. He was the leader. Albert just slunk behind him and jeered at Tom’s smart-ass remarks. Albert was older than Tom, but Tom was smarter and trouble free. Albert had been sent to us by the courts—community service for stealing a car. Turned out the car belonged to his mother’s boyfriend, and his parents were trying to teach Albert a lesson.

John liked to be involved in things like that. He wanted to be part of the community and contribute. He didn’t talk about it much. He didn’t seem to want a pat on the back or anything, but he did things like hiring Albert. Fact was, he was probably better off without him.

I opened the door to my truck and put one boot on the running board. I stared at Tom, let a second or so pass in silence. “Don’t let John catch you boys smoking that shit around here.”

Tom looked at the ground and waved Albert back to the kennel. I hoped I’d done the right thing.

I started my truck, felt under the seat for my bag, and dug out a clean shirt. The CB coughed static as I hailed Molly. She was sitting in her damp office in the building I had just left. She talked too much, cut her hair short, and dyed it red. Her office was a small job near John’s, with a window-unit air conditioner that rattled. When I talked to her on the CB, I had to listen to the clanking in the background. We had to repeat everything at least once. But Molly wouldn’t part with her air conditioner. She had said she’d quit if it went. I couldn’t blame her. The office got real hot, and the humidity could kill a roach.

John Leland was a thirty-six-year-old black man with an army haircut, a close-cropped beard, broad shoulders like a linebacker, and a disposition like a frontier school teacher. He laughed and gave advice and bought beers as freely as a gambler on a winning streak.

John and I had beers and lunch at Greenhorns every Tuesday. John ate half a chicken sandwich with one Pabst, then wrapped the other half in wax paper to take home to his wife, Beth.

Greenhorns was a small restaurant that people claimed had once served judges, senators, wrestlers, pro baseball players, and models.

The waitresses wore copper uniforms that matched the furniture and wallpaper. They served coffee by the pot, and cold beer if you asked. John and I had picked Greenhorns because it was close to the kennel, and when we'd first started coming, it had the prettiest waitresses in town.

I parked my truck in the back, got the mobile phone from the glove compartment, and went inside. John was sitting in a booth near the back. He was the only black man in the restaurant. He had papers scattered on the table, and was bent over, a red pen in his hand, jotting notes. He had a steaming cup of coffee on the table. There was an empty cup on my side.

"Hey, Legget." He didn't look up from his papers.

"Afternoon, boss."

"I'll get this stuff out of your way in just a second." He looked up. His eyes were red and sleepy. "What do you think?"

"About what?"

John lifted the page he had been writing on, and cleared his throat. "I'm writing a letter to the county commissioner. I'm trying to appeal to his sympathetic side. Puppies and kittens. What do you think, Dear Sir or Your Royal Majesty?"

I poured coffee into my cup and set my phone next to the salt shaker.

"I ordered for you already," John said.

I lit a cigar and leaned back. John borrowed a drag from it, then wadded up the letter.

"Let's have a beer." He waved for the waitress. "How was body tour?"

John didn't know that I grafted money from his organization. If he'd known, he probably would have taken me outside, thrown some fists, then fired me. John knew his dog catchers were not the most honorable, up-standing citizens in the state, but we were all he had, and there was a job to do, and the job never ended. John didn't have time to catch up on things in the street. He kept a small transistor radio in his office. He tuned it to a twenty-four-hour news and weather station. If he heard that a storm was coming, he'd send a message over the CB through Molly, to all the catchers. If you were out there you could see it was going to rain, but that was John. He wanted to be part of things. He was like a father who didn't know how to talk to his kids because he lived in a world of papers and forms, county officials and summons, rabies tags and veterinarians.

"Fine. Dr. Fielding said hello." I lied because John was fond of Dr. Fielding. He believed that Dr. Fielding was a good old boy.

According to John there were new vets and old boys. The old boys had learned medicine the old-fashioned way. The old boys listened to the owners, maybe felt the patient's ribs or looked at its tongue, but they knew what was wrong mostly from experience. The old boys had reduced medicine to a simple proposition: no fancy blood tests or X-rays (unless there was no alternative), and definitely no fancy drugs.

According to John the new vets were detail fanatics. They did every blood, skin, eye, ear, cough and urine test the client would pay for. They piled all the information on a desk or in front of the broke, confused client, then connected things like the pieces of a puzzle. Either way, the results were the same. You could choose an old boy who didn't test or fuss, who lacked ceremony and two-dollar words, but who didn't

go as far as one might want him to. The old boy might say, “He can’t piss,” where the new vet would diagnose your cat’s “feline urological syndrome.” I liked the old-boy style. Maybe that was something I’d picked up from John.

The waitress came with her tray. An omelette for me and the chicken sandwich with steak fries for John. John wiped the table clean of papers, and the waitress set our plates down. I ordered the beers.

“Are you tired?” I poured myself fresh coffee.

John rolled a fry in a pile of ketchup. “It’s my back. Can’t get to sleep without whiskey or the damned TV.”

“The letter’s a good idea.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve written three, maybe four, and I always get a real nice one back, but it doesn’t say anything. I don’t know. They’re not giving us any more money unless something terrible happens. Then they’ll send money, and there’ll be ten white boys in suits right behind it asking all sorts of questions.”

My mobile phone rang. It was Molly. I pulled a pen from my front pocket and wrote directions on a paper napkin. Sheriff Dario had requested me to a call, but hadn’t said what for.

I turned off the phone and clenched the napkin in my fist. John waved me off.

Chapter 2

Dario stood in the driveway with his thumb hooked in the holster at his belt. He pulled up the belt, spit and walked over.

“Afternoon, Legget.”

“Afternoon. What’s going on?”

“The dog bit an officer while we were searching the house. Took his whole goddamn thumb off.”

“Where is it?” I put my thumb in the air.

“Thumb or the dog?”

“Dog,” I said.

Dario pointed at the garage door.

“No tag?”

Dario raised his hands. “She claims she lost it.”

“Right ...”

The sheriff’s department wouldn’t touch an animal unless they had to. As far as they were concerned it was Animal Control’s problem. Dario wasn’t much different, even though we knew each other. I walked to the garage and peeked in. Dario followed. Since the dog had bitten an officer, it would have to be quarantined for thirty days at the kennel. Though it was unlikely the dog had rabies, it didn’t have a tag, which probably meant it had no vaccines.

The door bucked out and lifted a few inches off the ground. The dog's head poked under. He was big by the size of the head, about eighty pounds.

"He looks big."

Dario nodded. "What do you want to do?"

I walked to the side of the garage and looked in the door. The room was dark. There was a car in the middle, washer and dryer behind it, a lawnmower, and another door led into the house. I didn't see the dog. Dario stood behind me. He plucked a blade of grass, put it in his mouth and chewed.

"Do you know anything about the dog?"

"Not really, I think it's a Husky."

"Can you get another deputy out here?" I walked back to the truck to get my rabies pole.

Dario came back with another officer, a woman with aviator glasses and a starched uniform. An ambulance arrived and the injured officer walked to it. Dario followed me to the side of the garage. He took off his gun belt and hooked it on a window sill. The woman stood with Dario and waited.

Inside, the garage smelled like onions. I crouched and looked under the car. I saw the dog on the other side. His head lifted and his ears cocked back. They were thick; his fur was thick and brown. There was a white flash of tooth below the wet, black nose.

I walked around the car. My boots squeaked, and the dog turned his eye on me. He needed to see what he was going to bite. A dog always had to look first, then bite. It was a Siberian Husky, and I was surprised it was vicious. They were usually good, calm dogs.

The best way to catch a dog was to let it do the work. I had my rabies pole. It was made of aluminum and plastic, with a wire noose looped at the end. I could pull the wire and snap the noose shut around the dog's head. The way to do it was hold it out at a little angle to the body, kind of like a fishing pole, and just let it hang there like it was nothing important. Let the dog think it was nothing.

The Husky stepped back, and I stepped forward. His tail touched the garage door. There was no room for him to back up. He turned his wedge-shaped head around, then turned back and showed me a little tooth. I moved the noose toward his whiskers, inches from his snout and nose. He stiffened and eyed the noose, but didn't bite. I gave the noose a little twist to make it flop over and tag him on the snout. He took the bait and snapped at it.

When he had the wire in his mouth, I let out some slack and the loop was big enough to wrap over his ears. His eyes rolled up and watched the noose go over his head. He didn't like it. He let go of the wire, and I flipped it under his jaw, then snapped the noose tight around his neck. I had him. He flopped and twisted like a fish on a hook, but I had locked the noose and there was no way he'd get far with the pole locked around his neck.

He shook his ears and twisted, then finally he calmed down. Dario and the woman officer came into the garage to help me, as the door opened and the owner came walking out. She flicked on the light, and for a second I felt so foolish standing there in her garage with her dog on the end of the pole. The Husky wagged his tail, and the tension in the pole slipped out as he moved toward the owner. I was surprised, and didn't know what to say. The owner was skinny but neat, with a ring on

every long finger. She bent toward the dog, tears in her eyes, and I just held the pole on him.

“You bastard.” She looked up at me, and then the Husky started to growl again. “Let him go you bastard. He’s sick.”

Her voice was shrill and crazy. Behind her another sheriff came through the door, reached down for her arm, thinking I had the dog under control, but his mouth was free. The Husky snapped. The cop flinched, a curse forming in his mouth, and the owner jumped at me. She was a small, fired-up woman, and she got the pole out of my hand somehow, screaming and pushing and kicking. I figured my job was to get the dog, so I just reached for his head. The woman was throwing punches into my chest and stomach, yelling about how they weren’t going to get her. I wanted to get his mouth so he didn’t bite anybody, but he was confused, trying to bite and protect his owner at the same time. I saw the panic in the dog’s eyes as I broke past Dario and the sheriff and the skinny woman.

I got his head, but it was a weak grip, and he got out. I had to crush him to avoid getting bit. A dog bite took months to heal. I let myself fall on top of him, while holding my palms out where his face should be. The Husky fell to the floor. I crushed him under me while the owner fought the big sheriff who held her. He carried her back into the house, screaming at me and everybody, and she looked at Dario and pointed at him, then spit.

The Husky was slack beneath me. His eyes were glazed up and there was a sadness in them. I got off him, and he couldn’t get up. He was lame in the right rear leg.

I carried the dog out of the garage to my truck. Dario followed and

opened a cage on the truck. I placed the dog inside. Dario knew I was shook up. “It wasn’t your fault,” he said.

“What about the woman?”

Dario looked away, watching, I thought, the activity near the patrol cars. “What about her? She’s upset. Said a Mexican broke into her house. When we get here, she’s ballistic. Happens like that sometimes.” He rubbed his neck and sighed heavy.

“I’m not sure what you mean, Dario. Did you catch him?”

“Who?”

“The Mexican.”

“No. Supposed to be wearing a tan or a brown Stetson. Figure that? If you see him, give me a call anyway,” Dario said and chuckled like he was joking.

“Anyway.” I repeated. “I’m sure I broke that dog’s leg.”

Dario nodded and walked back to his patrol car with one hand raised in the air as if to say it was over. I drove the Husky back to Dr. Fielding’s clinic.

* * *

The technician muzzled the dog, then flipped him on his side. Dr. Fielding was in his office watching some gameshow on the television. When he came out, he yawned and stretched, then took the dog’s leg in his hands. Gently, he twisted the joint. The dog yelped, but the technician held him down.

“Femur’s cracked.” He yawned again, then rubbed the dog’s nose and whispered to it.

It was good enough for a splint, a Bobby Jones as he called it. I was surprised the dog was so calm. He wrapped the Husky's leg in white, red, and blue tape. When he was done, he thumped it like a watermelon and smiled to himself.

"Don't come back today, Legget." He put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the treatment table.

"Are you serious? Don't know how many calls I might get today," I said as I signed the form.

"Yeah, think I'm going home. Need a drink or something."

"OK. Want me to take him?" I put my hand on the dog's neck.

Fielding looked at the dog. "No, I'll take care of him," he said and turned to the counter.

I caught him smiling in that strange way I'd seen him smile. I put the papers together and shut the notebook. Fielding was shaking his head and whispering to himself, kind of laughing. I didn't know what was going on.

"He needs rabies quarantine. Bit an officer."

"Animal Control?" He turned and asked.

"No, sheriff."

"Which one?"

"I don't know his name."

Fielding nodded and went back to work, the smile gone.

If Dr. Fielding wanted to keep the dog, that was OK. He knew Animal Control wouldn't pay him for any treatments beyond the splint he'd already put on. But the doc had done this before. Sometimes an animal just hit him a certain way and he kept it for nothing. I thought maybe this was one of those times.

* * *

I walked through the pound and saw Tom and Albert putting out food and water. I helped them finish up, then turned off the lights. I went up to John's office, but he wasn't there. I shut the door, dropped onto his couch and shut my eyes for a minute. The office smelled like pipe tobacco. I heard Molly Phelps in the next room, talking on the CB. The tobacco smell reminded me of the farm.

* * *

I had grown up on a farm, in a small house with an aluminum roof, and a porch made with warped scraps of lumber torn from a barn that had burned one summer. The porch was a faded green like the barn used to be. The house had three rooms and a kitchen. It had smelled like incense and cat piss. Stray cats had roamed the fields around it, on occasion making their ways inside. We ate beans and strawberries, when they were in season. I tracked the years not by the changing of the weather, but by strawberry pies, pudding, and whipped cream.

My mother had leased the house from Mrs. Dorothea Roy, who owned the farm, and hired migrant workers to pick strawberries. My mother was a half-Mexican migrant worker with bad ankles. They swelled up like ripe fruit, so she couldn't stoop and pick twelve hours a day. Two weeks into any month and all you heard was the shuffling of her feet and the groans she made with the effort of moving. By the end of the month, she couldn't walk and would sit by the window waiting for Dr. Diaz.

The doctor was a tall man with heavy round eyes and little scars in his cheeks, and dark hair. He moved like a boxer through the migrant workers who gathered around his black Mercedes once a month outside the picking shed. There were fights and babies and wounds from the combine to mend. Everyone knew Dr. Diaz worked for no pay.

My mother could see his car from where she sat. When he'd finally come, with dogs and sometimes a chicken at his heels, she'd blush and apologize for not getting up, and I could feel her lifting some. He'd split open that dark leather bag, draw a shot of milky fluid, give her the shot and say she'd be up in no time.

Then he would help her to the porch, set her down and fix his bag, sit next to her. I had listened to him talk. He twirled the end of his moustache and tapped his boot hard to make a point. By the time he was about to leave, my mother could walk. I never saw her pay him. But she thanked him with a word and a look like she'd move the whole house if she could, just to get it out of his way. She told me later he was the only man she'd ever trusted.

Sometimes he'd given me a dollar to bring his car around. Driving it just that short way gave me status with the workers. They must have thought I was related, and surely it had saved me from some fights. I lingered with the keys and drove it slow to keep down dust. The other boys lined up and watched.

I remembered waiting on the porch with Dr. Diaz for a coroner. When she'd died I was seventeen. He'd tried to show me how to hand roll a cigarette while we sat there waiting, then asked me what I knew about town.

"What do you want to do, Coleman?" he'd asked. He was the last

person I could remember who'd used my first name.

Maybe my memory had failed me, or my dream of going back had taken over my senses, but I could catch only glimpses of my early life, like faded photographs, images that seemed to come from nowhere and correlate with nothing. Public school, stray dogs, fields of strawberries, and furrowed dirt. I didn't care about going back to Mrs. Dorothea Roy's farm. What I wanted was to go back to something like it. Someplace with the same slow mornings, and lots of green. I remember telling my mother that I wanted to have fifty dogs on a ranch in the mountains, maybe, but I had never seen mountains, just read about them, imagined them. She had smiled and touched the back of my head. I still felt the strange tingle her old hand made against my neck, where the first whiskers grew.

The phone rang. I raised myself from the couch and saw it was after four. I walked to the bathroom. I heard Tom and Albert in the back, in the kennel, their hoses splashing against the cement walls. Molly Phelps came out of her office, a spill of red hair over her left shoulder, makeup caked on her face.

"Legget, what are you doing here? I've been trying to call you for an hour. John's looking for you." She dropped her purse on the counter like an exclamation.

"Sorry, I must have dozed off."

"There's some trouble with the Holton case."

"Who?" Sleep had slowed me.

"The Husky that bit the sheriff today." She touched her lip. "Holton's her name."

“Can you hold on a second?” I went into the bathroom and threw cold water on my face. Trouble. And I had to hear it from Molly Phelps.

When I returned, she said, “Are you ready for this Legget? Did you know she caught someone breaking in? My god, this town is getting just like Miami.”

“I was there; that’s what they said.”

“Well, Ms. Holton was taken to the hospital. I’m not sure why. Hysterics, maybe. That’s what John told me. He said she’s tickled spitless. Now, what does that mean? I think it means she’s OK. What do you think, Legget?”

“I’ve seen worse.” I leaned some weight on my other leg. “But what’s the problem?”

“Ms. Holton’s raising hell with the sheriff’s department and Animal Control. Apparently, she’s got a cousin or a boyfriend or God knows what in the courthouse, because John thinks it’s a pretty serious situation. He said he’d like to give that bitch a combing out. You know John’s mad when he starts talking like that. You know what I mean, Legget? Want a Coke?” She smiled and picked up her purse.

“No, but thanks Molly. I better call John.”

“Just wait for him here.” She waved good-bye, showing off her long, red fingernails, and left by the front door.

I went back to John’s office. If John was anything he was loyal to his employees. I didn’t have to fear him taking this out on me. But somebody might get spooked.

The media loved to get hold of us. Sometimes they paid us some respect and did a short piece for the late news about how hard we

worked at the pound. They’d tote their cameras into the kennel and get some good shots of the puppies and kittens, then talk about our adoption service. It created a little rush for about two weeks, but there were problems with the positive coverage too. Last time they’d shot film in the kennel, it was one week before Christmas. During the holidays we shut down the adoption service because people would adopt animals, then give them to people who didn’t really want them. A week or so later we’d get them back. So John had nipped the problem in the bud, by saying: No adoptions, at all, during any holidays.

Then there was the time that someone at Channel 62 had heard a rumor that there was an outbreak of parvo in our kennel. Parvovirus was an airborne disease that dogs caught. It attacked their intestines which, for weeks, shot bloody diarrhea. If a dog caught parvo, he died. The antibiotics and IV fluids were too costly for Animal Control, and considering the fact that the animal would most likely die anyway, we put them to sleep. The Parvo bug swept through the kennel in a matter of days. We had twenty to thirty sick dogs at a time. We hauled at least ten a day to vets to be put to sleep. Then, when the daily death toll increased to twenty, we called the vets to the kennel.

ACOs kept bringing dogs in from the streets. The new dogs caught the bug. An epidemic could set us back for months. We stopped the adoption service. We hired veterinary technicians to supervise. That was when Channel 62 caught on. It may have been the outside help we got from the techs, or the many times John had to go the city manager for more money, but they showed up one afternoon when we were piling dogs in the incinerator and filmed it, live at five. On the streets, after the telecast, kids threw rocks at our trucks. Drivers cut us off and

even tried to run us off the road. How could we explain? We had no control over incurable diseases. And what were we going to do with all the animals?

I had been at Animal Control for about two years when the parvo epidemic struck, and I was unprepared. Nobody had said it could happen, and nobody had told me what it would be like. John had called me off the streets. I spent eight hours a day spraying bloody diarrhea off the walls of the kennel, off the backs of the dogs, off the floor. I carried warm, wet bodies from the kennel to the incinerator, five six, seven times a day. The smokestack of the incinerator spit fumes for thirty-six hours straight. I wore a surgical mask to keep from retching at the powerfully sweet smell of digested blood.

After two days, I couldn't take it. I went to John, and slammed my fist on his desk. He looked up slowly, fixed the papers I had knocked out of order, and motioned me to a seat. He told me I had a right to be mad. He told me I wouldn't be there if I didn't love the animals, if I didn't care about them. And since I cared, I had to do what needed to be done to save the healthy ones. He had told me the epidemic was like a war.

That was the first time John and I went to Greenhorns. He bought me lunch, though I had a hard time eating. He told me I needed to make up for things in other ways. I needed to care about every animal that I caught on the streets in a way that reminded me of how bad it could really be.

* * *

It didn't seem like John was coming back to his office so I called his house and talked to Beth, who said he was on his way. He had been at the courthouse all afternoon. She told me to come over for supper, and I agreed.

Beth had been an English teacher in public school and met John when he'd toured there, giving lectures on the importance of rabies vaccines. I enjoyed talking with Beth. Sometimes John and I skated around a subject, then eventually stumbled onto the truth. But with Beth, I just said whatever was on my mind. I liked her for that.

John and Beth lived in an apartment complex on Kelly Road, near Saint Alfred's Church and a private school that she claimed was the best in the state if you had the money. When I parked beneath their second-floor apartment, I didn't notice John's truck and was glad he wasn't there. I'd have a chance to talk with Beth before I saw him.

The door was open, and I smelled green beans and bacon on the stove. I wiped my boots on the mat and walked inside.

"Beth?" I heard her moving pots in the kitchen sink just around the corner.

Their apartment was decorated with brass teapots displayed on a walnut-stained coffee table, beneath brownish wallpaper with pictures of pumpkins, apples, and milk jugs. A Siamese cat named Dozer lounged on the couch. He looked up when I came in, flicked his tail, then went back to sleep.

Beth came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a faded blue apron she wore around the apartment. She had said it hid her fat as well as anything. But she was a sweet woman, and it was easy to see why John loved her. Her light, wiry hair was tied in a ponytail, but it

was frizzed and stuck out like she had been electrocuted. She smiled and waved me in.

“Well, hello, Legget.” She pulled me over to the couch. “Want something to drink?”

“Scotch?”

“Nope. I threw it out last Wednesday. John’s not sleeping well, and he thinks a glass of scotch helps.” She turned off the television.

“It probably does put him to sleep.” I sat on the couch.

“Of course it does, but at what cost? I got tea, milk, and water.”

“Anything.”

“God, I hate when people say that. What the hell do you *want* to drink?”

“Water.”

“Thank you.”

She brought me a glass of iced water and sat on a high-backed wicker chair facing the door. Dozer jumped into her lap and purred.

“John should be here soon.” She stroked the cat.

“Did he call?”

“Yes. He told me about it. Don’t worry. He knows it’s not your fault. The woman’s just blowing smoke to stay out of trouble.”

I nodded but didn’t really believe it. I heard his boots on the stairs.

Beth stared out the open door. “John’s here.”

He walked in with a brown paper bag under his arm. Beth stood and they hugged each other in the open door. John slapped my arm, set the bag on the counter, then walked into the back.

“Let me change my clothes,” he said over his shoulder.

Beth went to the kitchen. When John came out with jeans and a bare chest, Beth served up dinner. John opened the bottle of scotch, and we had a small glass.

“So tell me what happened,” John said with a fork full of beans an inch from his mouth. I pushed away from the table, my plate half-empty, and told him what had happened after I left him in Greenhorns. He listened closely and nodded.

“Well, I knew you were all right, Legget. I just need to know the facts so I can deal with the shitheads at City Hall. You know that. Anyway, Ms. Holton’s after us and the sheriff’s department. She said you provoked her dog, and then beat on it with the rabies pole. Normally, it wouldn’t mean shit, but the lady has some friends who are interested in her welfare.”

“What are they going to do?”

Beth patted my hand. John shrugged. “Probably nothing. But they want an investigation. They’re sending someone tomorrow or the next day. I’m sorry, Legget. You were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The county moves slower than a dead man on crutches. Maybe they’ll run out of steam before things get out of hand.”

“You’re not going to suspend me?” If John suspended me, I’d lose the body tour, and a lot of money.

“Of course not.” Then John was quiet a minute. Beth stopped eating. Her fork tinked against the plate. John said, “But it wouldn’t hurt to be careful.”

“Be careful? What does that mean?”

“Come off the streets. A few days maybe. Just till things cool down.”