

Chapter One

MY NAME'S ODOM SHILOH. My sister's name is Bridget although we call her Birdshit. That's what we've called her for thirty-six years. When she was a baby, learning to talk, she could never quite get her name out of her mouth the way it was intended. "Birrgdshit," is what it sounded like she was saying, so we started calling her Birdshit. Even schoolteachers and neighbors got in on it, somewhere along the way failing to realize that the tail end of her name was, in fact, a less than desirable word to spout in public. It's all right though. We're small town folks in an even smaller town and we do things our way, always have, and probably always will.

So my sister ran off, out of Frothmouth, with a black boy from around here. She ran away with him to north Louisiana, we think. Thirty-six years old and not married ever a once, not even any kids to boot; she falls for this eighteen year-old boy who tied for second in the state in total high school rushing yards last season. Every coach that's ever seen him run agrees: that boy's sure got a future in front of him. But he's on probation for fraudulently registering his car; he couldn't go away to any of the big football schools to play ball. So theoretically he was supposed to stick around Franks County for a year, pumping through flat rubber tires while his probation officer watches, whistle between teeth, at the end of the course. But then this boy, he glances to one side, spies Birdshit alone in the grandstand. He stops jumping through them bureaucratic hoops, skips town instead. And now the two of them are in Louisiana. At least we think they're in Louisiana. But I don't know any more than that right now.

I got me a buddy, Blakey Flake, who is from Louisiana, the center part; he knows everything from Alexandria on up to the Arkansas border; knows the roads, and all the creatures that live there. We're going to go find Birdshit and put her back in her cage, you could say. Back to Momma's house where she's been living her entire life, minus that five week stint when she tried living on her own. That stint didn't work

out too well. But that stint's a story I don't need to get into right now.

We get to driving. Blakey Flake does all of it. He flew up to Little Rock earlier today at my request. I picked him up in my Honda Accord of the year 1997; he told me to scoot it over and let him drive. I asked him to be careful. I'm sentimental about the '97 Honda: four doors, four cylinders, green. It's got the usual dings and a deep dent over the left rear wheel where a bicyclist ran into me in downtown Memphis.

Actually, the reason I'm a little touchy with the '97 is that it's technically a crime scene. It's a small matter, I hope. That bicyclist was hurt pretty bad, that's what the papers and television are saying. He's a professional cyclist from France. His name is Pierre Duponte. He's in the hospital with several broken bones in both legs, a shattered shoulder, a sprained wrist. They are awaiting the results from further tests to see if he suffered brain damage. His safety helmet split in half when his head hit the ground. They said he was traveling at top speed when the impact happened. I didn't even realize it was an organized race that I was driving through. I figured it was your typical Saturday morning cycling club full of scrawny, bald, suburban white guys. But their bikes were something else, I couldn't take my eyes off of them. They looked like heavyweight champions: strong, agile, awesome. I got so engrossed in watching how they were able to move so swiftly that I soon found myself aware of nothing else. I felt it first, the noise came second—I'd hit something.

In retrospect it's unclear who was technically at fault. I didn't stick around to find out though. I darted down several side streets, hopped on I-40 and sailed across the Mississippi River back to Arkansas as fast as I could. I knew Pierre was hurt but I was scared. I don't need the police putting the light on me in those little rooms. I don't want them prodding me about the past, the family, or the woods.

I admit. I've been out of sorts lately. I've been having these fits where I zone out and lose track of things happening around me. On three different occasions I've awoken from some kind of semi-conscious state to find myself driving with no destination or ability to recall what led to my road trip. One time I got as far as

Arkadelphia before I snapped out of it, idling outside a gas station, listening to two Spanish girls gossip about their boyfriends. It wouldn't be too hard to end up in Memphis. It's only an hour and ten minutes away.

In fact, this going to get my sister is probably a wholesome distraction for now. It doesn't feel half bad to get away from Frothmouth. I was never one for taking vacations. After all, you always got to go home. You wonder what sense there is in deluding yourself for a few days or a week when home is always back there, waiting, and ready to crash down on you. No point in getting away unless you're going away for good.

I can't get away. Frothmouth, my house, step-son, soon-to-be ex-wife, Momma, my Birdshit, that's what I got. Even if I could gather up all the strength I've ever been capable of that still wouldn't be enough for me to just get up and walk away for good. The most mysterious forces aren't way out there, millions of miles away, invisible and star destroying. No cosmic eagle wings beating the vacuum at the core of the universe, scattering moon-sized asteroids like cigarette ash out the window of time. That's maybe how Birdshit would describe it in one of her poems. I think what it means is that the most powerful forces in the universe are those closest and most familiar.

If you can find Little Rock, Arkansas on a map you're pretty close to where our town is. Go east on I-40 to where the hills turn into flatlands and that's where we are, all 327 of us. It was 328 last month but old man Mr. Cohen finally died of a heart attack, after surviving the first five. He'd lived by himself and no one ever remembered him as a young man. In fact, it got people to scratching their heads sometimes wondering how old he really was; no one could remember him as anything other than bald, shriveled and permanently bent forward.

Frothmouth's like most small towns, I guess. There's Garner's Gas & Snack where most of the town's gossiping and social gathering takes place. Old man Mr. Garner still runs it by himself with only the occasional help from his drunken son, David. It's where I go every morning to buy a newspaper. Sure, it's got some other buildings I'm happy to stay away from: the dive bar, the police station. The

dirt roads tangled up in the woods like hair. Those I do drive a lot.

Birdshit and I've lived here all our lives. We grew up in a green house surrounded by the woods that thrive in the northwest corner of the county, woods that absorbed all of our secrets. There's a beautiful little pond buried back there. Not many people know about it. It's hard to find. I like sitting down on the bank and watching that water breathe in and out, center to shore, very slowly, like it always has. Before any of us were here and long after we're gone them woods will remain. Everything they've witnessed, carved into its natural history. The I-love-you's and old treehouse ladders leading to nowhere. All my life the silhouette and the glare and watchful eye of them knotholes has followed me. The tree-branches draped over you, gripping the ground with shadows. Every morning it's a reminder of something. Something I spent my twenties thinking about and my thirties trying to forget.

Now before I go any further and before we even cross over into Louisiana, I got to tell you the truth of the matter is I ain't going after my sister because she's with a black boy. No, sir, that don't make a lick of difference to me or anyone else in our town. It's too bad people naturally accuse. It's the ones who accuse who still imagine black men dangling up in the trees.

In fact, Frothmouth is the only town in Franks County that has a black executive branch. Mayor Ferguson has been our leader for twelve years now. He's local, born and raised in Frothmouth, graduated from Philander-Smith over in Little Rock. He went to law school somewhere up in Ohio. He's the most educationally decorated person in Frothmouth. He talks about logical fallacies and poetic leaps of faith. Every Sunday night he cooks up a huge soul food dinner and everyone in town is invited. Most folks try to swing by and get themselves a plate; by the time the night is through it's not unusual for two hundred people to have made their way through the serving line.

Down this way the blacks used to have this saying. And for the life of me I can't remember it exactly but it goes something like this: The Southern white man will let you live close but won't let you live high. The Northern white man will let

you live high but he won't let you live close. Now that's about a wash if I ever heard one.

Through the years we've managed to expel most of them violent combative racist types up north where they belong, to live their segregated lives amidst talk of peaceful reconciliation and Christian harmony. Hell, they're nothing but a bunch of R.O.T.C dropouts wearing camo and sitting high up in leafless trees in the middle of January, freezing to death with a crossbow laid across a branch talking about state rights, gun laws, immigration and patriotism. Down here, we just find it hysterical to watch on the TV. It's better than "COPS." Okay, once in a while we hang our dirty laundry out for some media airtime: let a few white-robed hooligans swagger out of the forests, lugging their burning crosses behind them like the ghosts of suicide bombers. They stand out in pharmacy parking lots with a megaphone and scream about brimstone. These were the guys at the back of the high school table blighted with acne scars and banished from the greener side of the bell curve, and their actions are like so many compressed "fuck you's" uncorked and sprayed by the Northern underclass across the iron guts of its subway stations.

No, we have much more important reasons for our urgent need to return Birdshit quietly and safely home. It's long, complicated, sad. But I don't need to go into that right now. I'd rather find her first, and explain later.

We get to putting some miles on the '97 when Blakey finally takes a cigarette out of his mouth long enough to try and make conversation. Blakey Flake is missing a few teeth from the cigarettes, a pinky finger from his oil rig days, and plenty of hair that he hasn't seen since the early morning of his twenties. He looks normal enough without it though. I'm just glad he doesn't comb over the hair on the side of his bald scalp into a fancy bow. Sometimes I fool myself into thinking I'm still young enough to change the course of my life. Blakey's forty eight years old, nine years older than I am. He's not fooling anybody.

"You know where you going, Blakey?"

"Oh yeah, got me a little eagle eye who tells me that sister of yours is in Bonita."

“That in Louisiana?”

“About five jumps from the border.”

Blakey Flake’s got him a whole gathering of eagle eyes, as he calls them. His eyes call him the Bald Eagle, and they’re not joking. He’s a State of Louisiana certified and licensed private investigator. A fifth career, he calls it, his final stop on the employment merry-go-round. Prior careers saw him working on oil rigs, teaching community college art appreciation classes, delivering transplant organs and stealing cars. You’re probably wondering how the State of Louisiana gave him a P.I. license if he used to steal cars. And you’re probably thinking he never got caught. But he did get caught, big time; got caught in Shreveport trying to outrun two of those sleek Camaro highway patrol cars. He couldn’t get the Dodge Colt he’d stolen out of second gear, the clutch was stuck and the engine overheated. Finally it blew up and threw Blakey out of the car into a ditch. They took him to county jail and fitted him into what they thought would be a permanent orange jumpsuit and cheap rubber flip-flops. At his trial, which he demanded—opting out of a plea deal which would have sent him to prison for three years—he represented himself. He wrote his responses in prison pencil and swapped cigarettes for stamps. At trial he put on a show. He’d cite rules that hadn’t been on the books since Napoleon was busy scribbling the code; on the stand he pleaded the fifth to every single question; he cross-examined witnesses with questions like, “Suppose you bought a baby parrot and taught it to swear. When it starts swearing of its own volition, is it taking the Lord’s name in vain, or are you?” During closing arguments he stood up and told the jury, “I have two graduate degrees from Tulane,” (he only had one) “and graduated tri-cumma lauda-daude from Louisiana State University.” (missed the grade cutoff) “Go Tigers.” (never been to an NCAA game in his life). “I taught Survey of Art in the Western World at Middle Louisiana Community College;” (this was true) “I’m not a career criminal. I confess, I tried it out. I failed. I’m done. You see the thing about me that is different is that I have options. Your average criminal kind don’t have college degrees. He’s stuck in a life of crime. Where’s he gonna go? Go get

him a real job, hell no, he ain't. But, I am. I got me a fancy resume printed up, suits, ties and recommendation letters and a reference sheet a mile long, which includes congressmen, senators, business owners, you name it, even the offensive coordinator of the L.S.U. Tigers. You see, I'm going places. Don't let this little setback get in the way of my bright future."

Earlier in the proceedings, the prosecution had brought in an art expert from a rival institution who questioned his credentials. But it did little to dampen Blakey's momentum. He knew that first impressions were priceless, but last impressions were the ones worth money. So for his finale he held a copy of a Seurat painting, the one with the people picnicking and sitting in the grass. "Lookey here," he said. "See this? It's a pretty painting, ain't it? Look closer." Then he took deliberate, painfully slow steps closer to the jury. "Looking different, huh?" He invited the jurors to look even closer until he had the painting right up against their noses. "See, this here's called pointillism. Its perspective changes, right? From back, it looks one way. From up close, it looks different.

"You see, I'm just asking you to look closely and pay attention to the dots. Not the bigger picture. The bigger picture, this case, is messy and ridiculous. Right? You follow? Good. Now, if you just take the time to look closer, you'll see that I'm not guilty. And don't forget, most importantly, and I cannot stress this enough. Jesus, our savior, is in the details, right? And I quote from that good, good book: "If thou hath sins commit, then our Lord savior Jesus acquits."

The prosecution started saying something to the judge, but the jury, who most certainly held the highly popular idea that non-believers are forever guilty as believers are divinely forgiven, were already nodding in a near-choreographed manner, murmuring, "Amen."

Acquitted.

As a P.I., Blakey's forte is monitoring unfaithful husbands. His business card plainly states that his expertise lies in "Intimate Resolution." He makes a solid income for himself, following around jolly-dicked husbands. Blakey takes videos, snapshots and uses sound recording devices to collect evidence. He even employs

beautiful Kappas from Louisiana Tech in Ruston. They work on a contract basis; he reports them on his taxes. The thing about them young girls is not what you see or what you think you see, it's the way they smell. There's this sweet air that surrounds only them, that can lure a successful auto parts store owner with a rosy-cheeked wife and a gaggle of kids into a cheap hotel already garnished with cameras. But he isn't limited to this. He also, on occasion, helps the local police departments and various state investigative agencies in rounding up the state's no-goods, including a 78 year-old crystal meth kingpin, a cross-eyed granny rapist and a habitual drunk driver who has passed every field sobriety test administered but routinely blows a .38 B.A.L.

So here we are: me and the best P.I. in all of north-central Louisiana, who happens to be a very close personal friend of mine. He says this'll be wrapped in days, if not hours. I say this thing has only begun.

Chapter Two

AND WOULDN'T YOU KNOW IT but Blakey gets himself upside down on his directions, thinking Highway 133 is 52 or 165 or something like that and so instead of being in Bonita, we're in Bastrop. We get ourselves pulled over; Blakey executing a U-turn in front of a camped out state patrol car. Blakey rolls down the window, waits, lights a cigarette and waits some more. The highway patrolman stays in his cruiser for a solid three minutes.

"This car ain't stolen is it?" Blakey says.

"What do you think?"

Finally, the cop begins the walk from his car to ours. We both watch in the rearview. I put my hands in my lap and look at them.

"Howdy there, Bandit," the patrolman says.

"Yes, sir, howdy to yourself."

"No U-turns allowed back there."

"I know that now."

"You a fast learner, Bandit?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, learn this: an illegal U-turn in the State of Louisiana costs one hundred and fifty dollars."

"If you say so," Blakey says.

"Not only do I say so, but I'll show you."

"Well, that's nice of you." Blakey says.

The patrolman walks back to his car.

"Where's he going?"

"Writing you up a ticket," I explain. I reach into my pants and pull out my wallet. "Where are we? What county?"

“I don’t know,” Blakey says. “Why?”

“Because...” I flip through the cards, the notes, everything in my wallet.

“What are you looking for?”

“I have it here somewhere.”

“Have what, Odom?”

“There’s got to be one. I know people. We know people, Blakey. But the cop can’t know who I am. Understand?”

“Sure, whatever you say.”

“I’m serious, Blakey. If he asks, I don’t have any I.D. on me.”

“Then how do you explain that?” He points at the mess in my lap.

“It’s not anything, Blakey. You didn’t even see it. You understand?” I drop the glove compartment open and cram my wallet and its contents into it.

The patrolman comes back to the car.

“I need your driver’s license so I can write this up. That’s a hell of a bump you have on your car. Is that from an accident?”

“No,” I say, leaning over into the police officer’s view, “it just happened.”

“How did it just happen?”

Blakey looks at me like it’s a good question. He doesn’t know the truth. “I drove to Dallas to see Social Distortion in concert and when I came out when it was over, I realized someone had hit me.”

Blakey hands him his driver’s license and says, “You know, Jesus would have given me a warning.”

“I don’t care if Jesus would have given you a handjob.”

Blakey informs me that this is going under the miscellaneous expenses column in his invoice to me—services rendered in helping to find my sister. I’ve hired him on, remember. This is part helping out a friend, part making some money in the process. It seems Blakey is more motivated by the latter. It shows in that Bible

-talk. That trial was his finest moment. He was genuinely scared; cigarettes are expensive in jail. But somehow his penchant for atheism has become blatantly obvious in much the same way as it is for those show-off Christians who wear Jesus crosses between their breasts to advertise their affiliation. I've always found the worst Christians to be the very ones who wear those little crosses. Blakey's not much of a fan of the Christians. His motto, as he likes to remind me is: "Live it, quit talking about it." And he likes to point out that we can't live this so-called Christian life, so what we do instead is sit around and endlessly talk about it and pat each other on the back. Every year during Easter week he likes to drive around and find the folks taking turns dragging a cross around town in an alleged re-creation of Christ's miserable walk. He pulls up next to them and says, through a megaphone, "Why don't you take the wheels off that thing you asswipe."

The cop corrects our directions and we pull into Bonita, Louisiana and stop outside the Paved Street Café. It looks quiet enough; pretty much what you'd expect from a small town café. But Blakey tells me to stay in the Honda. He's got business to talk up. Some of his eagle eyes are meeting him here and he doesn't necessarily want me to lock my own eyes on them.

"They're undercover. I don't need you going and messing it all up," he says.

"I'm not going to mess anything up."

"These guys are on my taxes. My eyes and ears in the field."

"Your eagle eyes."

"That's right."

"But not your eagle ears?"

"Stop confusing the issue."

"I'm not confused yet."

"Listen. You don't understand. They've got code names. Eagle 1A, Eagle 2A. The numbers denote their identity and the letter corresponds with the operation. So for example, Eagle 1A today may be 1C tomorrow. See?" He shows me a

spiral-bound memo pad. “It’s all in there.”

“I’m still not confused yet.”

“Good. Stay that way. I’m going in. No watching where I go or nothing like that. These boys are waiting for me. I can see one of them right now, sitting in that window right there.”

“Which one? With the red ball cap on?”

“Now, what did I tell you? You just forget what you’d seen. You hear me?”

“Erased.”

Blakey gets out of the car. He lights a cigarette and stands for a moment surveying the scene. He seems to be waiting for something, like an actor offstage waiting for his cue. We’re thirty yards from the Louisiana state highway we came in on and I don’t see anything worth noticing, just us, the three trucks parked out front and this box-shaped building called the Paved Street Café. I shout from inside the car, “Blakey, get on in there.”

“I’m going, I’m going,” he says, throwing down his cigarette.

He’s in the building for a total of eight minutes, according to the clock in my Honda. When he comes out, he shakes his head and lights another cigarette. After he lights it, he pulls it from his lips before inhaling and twirls it in between his fingers. I wave at him to hurry up and get in. He acknowledges me and holds a hand up to indicate he’ll get in when he feels like it. The other guys remain inside the café. One of them peers out the window, watches me. Adjusts his red ball cap. When we make eye contact, he disappears. I mean, he ducks or steps out of the way, whatever it is private investigators do when they’ve been caught or someone is onto them. A few seconds later, I see the bill of his red cap emerge across the right corner of the window. I set my eyes on the window, waiting. Again, he sees me and disappears. This is getting old. Blakey flicks his cigarette into the darkness, gets in the car, finally, and brings with him the exhaust of a full flavor, bargain bin cigarette. At least name brand cigarettes smell good. I cover my mouth, cough, then realize I made myself cough for no reason.

“What’s the word? You got my sister and her boyfriend tied up in there?”

“Afraid not.”

“Well, what’d they say?”

“Said Birdshit and that black boy ain’t here.”

“Ain’t here, where? Bonita?”

“Louisiana.”

“They’re not in Louisiana?”

“Nope.”

“Then where are they?”

“Not far.”

“Okay, then let’s go.”

“Actually Arkansas, just up the road.”

“They’re in Arkansas? Are you sure?”

“I have high confidence in my intelligence assessment.”

“Your what? You just came out of a cheap eats shack in the middle of nowhere and you’re talking about intelligence assessments? Where in Arkansas?”

“Little Rock.”

“They’re in Little Rock? The same Little Rock we just came from?”

“Yes, sir, I’d imagine it’s the same one.”

“So we have to drive back up there.”

“I’d reckon if you want to find your sister and that black boy she’s with.”

“How sure are you that hawk eye and eagle eye and falcon fang or whatever they’re called know what they’re talking about.”

“One of my boys in there called your Momma—”

“Wait a minute.” I turn so Blakey can see nothing but me. “No one calls my Momma.”

“Well, someone did.”

“You listen to me good. I’m not gonna say it again. No one calls my Momma.”

Blakey waits for me to settle. A long-haired man wearing a cook’s apron drags a green trash can across the parking lot to a trash disposal bin. After a deep breath, I let go of it. “Okay. So go on. What happened?”

“Anyhow, they got your sister’s cell phone number from your Momma, called it, play-acted to be someone else and got your sister to tell him she’s staying with friends in Little Rock.”

“Well if that ain’t a burnt bite, I don’t know what is. This isn’t something you could have done yourself? Isn’t there a standard checklist you do before you launch a full scale investigation, such as call phone numbers, check addresses, very basic stuff? We drove three hours to find out that my sister is three hours back the other way, the way we came from?”

“Pretty much.”

“Pretty much. What an unbelievable answer coming from a professional like you. And I’m paying you for this?”

“We’re friends too.”

“Well how about doing this as a favor.”

“I can’t pay bills with favors or eat favors.”

“Blakey, get out of the driver’s seat. I’m driving us back to Little Rock before you get us another ticket or make another wrong turn or follow a bad tip and steer us off towards Tennessee.”

Blakey lights a cigarette. I tell him to put it out, no more smoking in my car. He tosses it. I seat belt myself into the driver’s side. Blakey doesn’t buckle up. I pull the car up to the window of the Paved Street Café, wait a minute until the red ball cap wearing prick shows his face again. When he does, before he can jerk away, I hold up a big, fat middle finger.