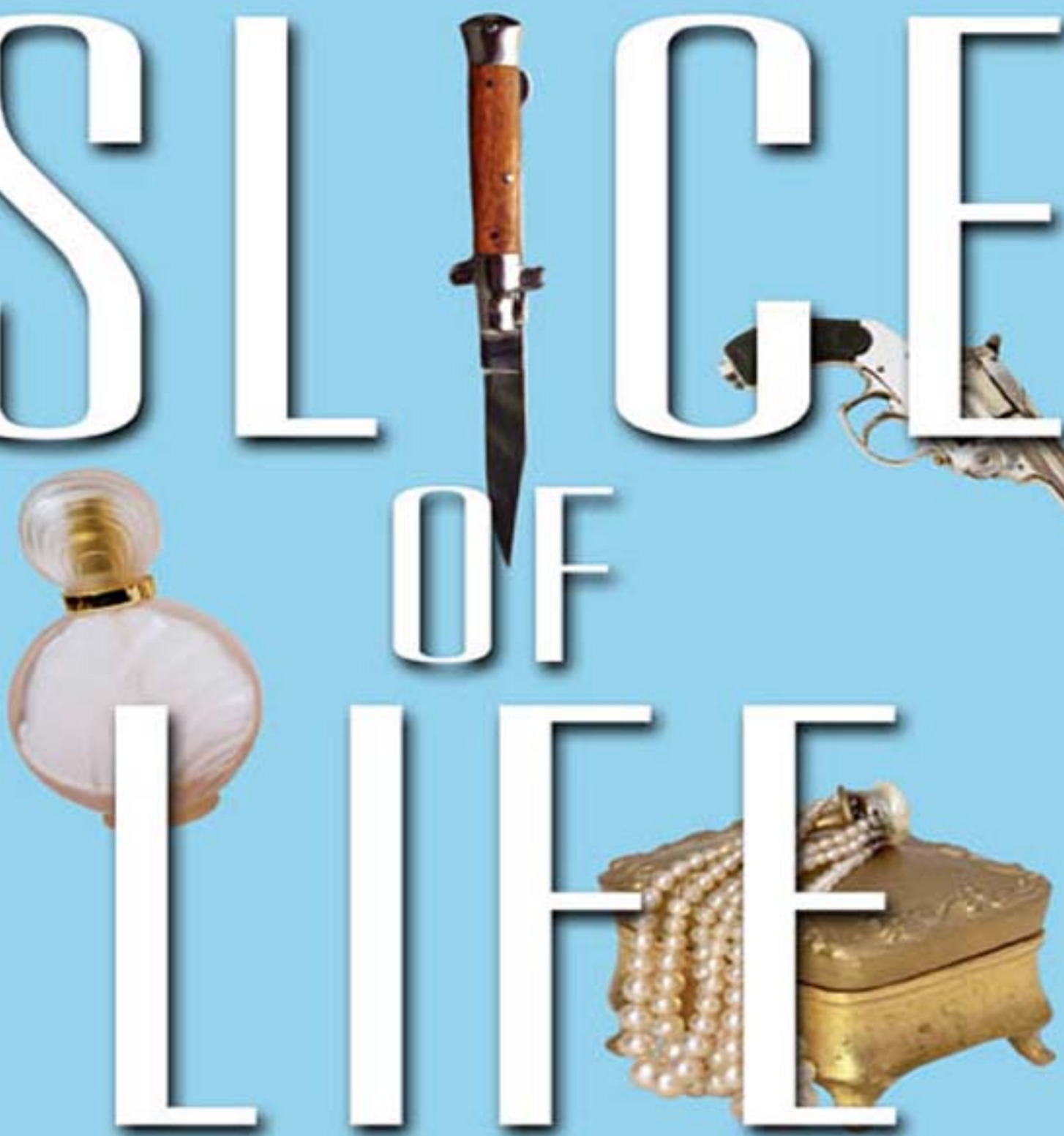


A DIXIE FLANNIGAN NOVEL

SLICE
OF
LIFE

A collage of vintage items is arranged around the title. A round, pinkish perfume bottle with a gold cap is on the left. A pocket knife with a wooden handle and a silver blade is positioned vertically in the center. A silver revolver is on the right. At the bottom right, there is a gold jewelry box with a pearl necklace draped over it.

CHRIS ROGERS

PROLOGUE

“Two ripe and ready redheads,” Leon Stovall marveled, trying to sound hip and experienced...to sound like anything but an overweight, slightly drunk, nineteen-year-old virgin. “How’d I get so lucky?”

He copped a feel under the heavy one’s T-shirt. Sharon, wasn’t that her name?

The slighter one teased his zipper down. “Before you go talking about luck, Leon, let’s see the size of your ante.”

“What, right here?” Leon had stood naked in gym showers often enough to know he wasn’t lacking in size, but he’d never shown it to a girl. He glanced at the glaring light bulb swinging from a grimy electrical cord, then at the cluttered shelves, rusted file cabinets, and dusty racks of wine bottles, some probably older than he was. A storage room. “Don’t you have a bedroom in this spooky old shack? Cold as iced shit up here.”

“Not for long,” Sharon whispered, nipping gently at his neck. She smelled as sweet as fresh mown grass on a sunny afternoon. They’d entered the storage room by sneaking up a narrow back stairway. After loosening his silver belt buckle, Sharon had pushed him into a lumpy overstuffed chair, the only soft spot in the cramped room. Dust whooshed up around him. The other girl knelt beside his thighs. What an arm chair was doing crammed here among the wooden crates, Leon couldn’t grasp. To sit and count the wine bottles? He took a long pull from the Bordeaux they’d opened.

“What’s that song? ‘Ninety-nine bottles of wine on the wall...’” Leon bellowed it in his good voice, six years in the choir, four singing solo, and wished he had as much confidence about women as he did about singing. “‘Ninety-nine bottles of wine—’”

“Shhhhhh!” The skinny one batted his arm. “Quiet! Anyway, that song’s about beer, not wine.”

“‘If one of those—’”

Sharon covered his mouth with her soft lips. The skinny girl’s hand slipped into his khakis. Leon squeezed a sizable mound of firm breast, tasted the wine-sweetened mouth, and let everything between his ears go fuzzy.

What a damn lucky day picking up these two, his first driving trip this far west, stopping in that bar, buying a round with his Pick Three winnings, them cozying up like he’s Daddy Warbucks. Well, hell, let’s have some fun!

A smooth warm hand encircled his Johnson, and a buzz of expectation zinged through his belly. Hunching upward to encourage the stroking hand, he thrust his tongue into Sharon’s moist mouth.

After a moment, she whispered, “We’ll be right back.”

“No, c’mon. I’ve got what we need right here in my back pocket. Never leave home without. Just give me a sec.” He reached for his wallet and the plastic pouch—replaced faithfully every six months—that had etched a circle in the worn leather. They

couldn't leave him all hard and ready and not go through with it, could they? Wasn't there some unwritten rule?

"Put it on, Leon. We'll be right back."

"Oh, hell, Sharon. Don't go."

She pressed her velvet lips to his. "Have a little patience. You won't be sorry."

When they'd vanished behind the wine racks—what was back there, anyway?—Leon took another drink before easing Big John out of his pants and into the rubber.

He heard a toilet flush. Wouldn't mind letting go some of what he'd drunk. But what was that other sound? Someone crying? Big, wailing moans.

"Mama!"

Hells bells. That skinny one had looked awful young, maybe too young, but Sharon sure wasn't old enough to be her mother.

"Oh, Mama. No!"

The misery in the girl's shriek cut through him.

Leon zipped his pants over his dwindling erection and pushed himself from the chair, unsettling another cloud of dust. He wasn't one to go looking for trouble, but he couldn't ignore those sobs. If they were arguing about having sex with him, well, he could straighten that out. Plenty to go around.

He took another swig and tottered toward the sobs. Saw an open door to a lavatory, toilet, and sink. Beside the door, a wine rack pulled away from the wall, exposing a room behind it—dark, but...hell, they *did* have a bedroom up here.

And someone in the bed.

Leon smiled. Playing games?

He glanced at the wine bottle in his hand, nearly empty. Raised it to his lips and poured the mellow liquid into his mouth. He could play games.

With his next step, he saw what all the wailing was about. The wine he'd drunk rose in his gullet like rotted sewage. The bottle slid from his hand.

He stumbled backward through the broken glass. The bloody death in that room had nothing to do with him. Nothing. He should just leave. The house, the town. The *state*. Keep moving, don't look back.

Before he could turn away, Leon felt a slice of cold steel at his throat. He choked, gasped, clawed at the pain. He kicked out convulsively. Then he slid to a concrete floor made slippery with his own blood.



"Run, her brain screamed. Run!"

But her knees wanted to fold, her body longed to slump around her leaden feet, curl up, and wait to die.

Eyes darting, taking in all the blood, the bodies, her brain hammered again—*run!*

A hand clamped over her wrist, bloody and slick.

She yelped, twisted free, and ran...ran...ran...

CHAPTER 1

Friday afternoon

From El Paso, Texas, to Houston is nearly the same distance as driving across Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Maryland, and Virginia—but West Texas is a damn sight bleaker and dustier. After retrieving a smelly, Bible-quoting bail jumper, Dixie Flannigan pushed the Mustang to triple digits and covered the seven hundred-odd miles in just under nine hours. Near San Antonio her air conditioner wheezed its final puff of cool air, setting the prisoner to grumbling and allowing the August heat to sap Dixie's last ounce of give-a-damn. Sweaty, cranky, but with the accused felon finally handed over to Houston police, she drove the twenty-seven miles home.

Under the blessed shade of pecan trees, she shouldered her ready bag through the kitchen door, hell-bent on improving her mood before a dinner date later that night.

Dixie smiled. Looking forward to this dinner date had kept her going those last few hours on the road. She kicked the door shut behind her, envisioning a skin-prickling shower followed by an icy mug of Shiner Bock.

“Welcome,” her computer greeted saucily. “You’ve got mail.”

“Greetings to you, too,” she grouched.

How her teenage nephew had managed to rig the door lock to trigger her on-line message service—with auxiliary speakers in every room—Dixie couldn't fathom. The imp had also set up video-conferencing.

“Aunt Dix! We got another hit on that Arkansas license plate!”

Dixie kicked off her dusty boots, grabbed a cold beer from the fridge, and carried it into the office.

“Hey, kid.” The sight of Ryan's goofy grin on her computer monitor mellowed her out faster than a six-pack of Shiner. “What's cooking?”

“A mail carrier in Nacogdoches spotted Thompson's Ford Escort headed south on Highway 59. She's gotta be coming here.”

Not a bad bet. Dixie lifted a sheet of pale yellow paper from her printer—she'd forgotten to remove the letterhead stock again. Above the photo of a young woman's grimly attractive face appeared a single word: WANTED. A dense paragraph below gave the particulars.

Usually, Dixie focused her bounty hunting skills on rounding up suspects who'd skipped while awaiting trial. But early that morning Ryan had discovered the thirty-thousand-dollar reward for Marla Gennae Thompson posted on the Internet, sparking a dialogue about the suspect's possible whereabouts as Dixie drove across Texas. His enthusiasm had never wavered.

She sighed sympathetically at the tiny camera her nephew had stationed atop her PC.

“Ryan, every cop and bounty hunter in East Texas will be watching that highway, with more manpower than I have—”

“That’s the cool part. Nobody knows but us—and my email bud in Nacogdoches.”

Sure, kid. “Such a tasty morsel of information will spread faster than hot cane syrup on a short stack.” Dixie gazed out the window, glad to be home, even for a few hours. She peeled off her socks and toed a button on her CD player to start the mellow rifts of a jazz sax. Then she looked back at her nephew, all cheekbones and scrawny neck in his sudden growth of puberty. “Where did your friend hear it?”

“His mom is the mail carrier who spotted the Escort.”

“Why didn’t she notify the local police?”

“She hates cops. His dad is a cop.”

“But she told her son, who put it on the Internet. Don’t you think cops have access?”

“We’re talking private email, not a post. He’s in with us.”

Dixie’s ears did a double-take. “What do you mean ‘in with us’?”

“A bird dog—like you told me about. When we claim the reward, he and his mom get a split.”

Dixie’s network of bird dogs—law officers and other individuals she counted on to relay information—stretched across most of the fifty states. Ryan’s online chat groups appeared to be equally handy. But what would the kids’ mothers think about their teenagers tracking a felony suspect, even over the relative safety of the Internet? Imagining her sister’s plump, cheerful face twisted with alarm, Dixie felt a twinge of culpability.

“His mom saw the car at four-twenty,” Ryan added. “I was afraid you wouldn’t get home in time to go after it.”

“Ryan, thousands of cars travel Highway 59. *Thousands.* We need to call the Highway Patrol.”

“Would we still get the reward?”

“Possibly.” *If* the mail carrier had indeed spotted the right car, *if* the Highway Patrol apprehended Thompson before she went to ground, and *if* they acknowledged that Ryan’s tip led directly to her capture. “But don’t get too excited about collecting that reward. Like I said from the start, it’s a long shot.”

“Wouldn’t be a long shot if *you* brought her in.”

“First, we’d have to find her. Houston’s a big city.”

“You’d go to the places she’d go. That’s how you said you catch bail jumpers.”

True. People could change locations, jobs, cars, even their appearance, but habits drew them to familiar territory like wild game to a watering hole. Find out two things: who they know, where they go out of habit, and eventually—by burning up phone lines, tire tread and boot leather—you find the skip.

“But all we know about Thompson is that she usually works sales jobs in small towns. Makes me doubt she’d actually come to Houston.” Most recently, the clever twenty-year-old thief had managed a computer store in Tulip, Arkansas—a burg.

“We have small towns. Humble. Seabrook. You live in a small town.”

Richmond, Texas, population thirty-eight thousand, was indeed located on Highway 59, currently Thompson’s route from Nacogdoches, if she plowed straight

through Houston. More likely the woman was high-tailing it for the Mexico border. And theft, with no violence attached, wouldn't figure high on any Texas law officer's punch list—especially if the mail carrier really was the only person who'd spotted the Escort after it left Arkansas. According to Ryan's email source in Tulip, the girl had worked three months, nearly doubling the computer store's sales. But when the owner strolled through the warehouse, showing inventory to a potential buyer, a casual hand against a row of pricey software and peripherals had sent boxes tumbling like a house of cards. Empty boxes. Out front, customers stood waiting to pay at an equally empty, and unattended, cash register. Marla Gennae Thompson had fled. Enraged at being ripped off, the owner posted an unusually generous reward for the girl's capture.

"We could drive to all those towns between here and Nacogdoches," Ryan coaxed.

The thought of driving *anywhere* at the moment made Dixie's butt ache. Her gaze shifted to the calendar. MONDAY: COURT APPEARANCE. Immediately following the weekend she was due to testify against a skip who'd backed into Dixie's .45 when he tried to hold up a coffee shop for traveling money. But the subject of her immediate interest was penciled on today's date. She needed this weekend, dammit. Sun, fun and sex. CHATEAU LAFITTE, 8:30.

Eighty miles away.

She rubbed a kink in her aching neck.

"Okay, kid. Tomorrow I'll check small-town stores along the highway for any new hires. Burn up the phone lines instead of tire tread and boot leather."

"*Tomorrow?! Aunt Dix—*"

"Traveling up and down the highway is *not* an option, Ryan." Her voice sounded harsher than she intended. Usually, she'd move mountains to live up to Ryan's unshakable faith in her abilities. Thirty-nine and childless, she valued their relationship, had fallen under the twerp's spell the instant she first held him, scarcely out of his mother's womb. Her gaze fell on a framed aphorism rendered in needlepoint by her adoptive mother: Years Wrinkle the Skin; Loss Of Enthusiasm Wrinkles the Soul. Dixie shaved the barb from her voice as she added, "Anyway, I'll be in Galveston tonight."

And all weekend, if she could swing it.

"With Parker?" Ryan's three-second-delay image on the monitor gave a jerky thumbs-up.

"Of course, with Parker."

"If you picked me up, we could all drive—"

"*Not* an option."

Dixie tossed an Astros cap over the tiny camera and began peeling out of her sweaty camp shirt. But she couldn't keep her gaze from wandering over the WANTED poster again. Apparently, police had identified two similar crimes in Texas and Georgia; no fingerprint ID, but probably the same young woman with different hair color and an alias. Her recent employer, who posted the reward, knew her as Gennae Thompson. Customers liked her, but no one admitted knowing her well. Two footnotes on the reward sheet described her as: one, handy with disguises, and two, an addicted gambler.

Not a lot to go on.

Twenty refreshing minutes later, damp from a shower and wrapped in a terry cloth robe, Dixie snapped the monitor back on. Instead of Ryan's goofy grin, she saw a full-color photo of Marla Gennae Thompson.

"She's a hottie," Ryan commented.

Barely thirteen, he'd only recently brought girls into their conversations. Dixie wanted to be cool about it, but dammit, couldn't he stay a kid a while longer? She uncovered the camera.

"Gennae Thompson is twenty years old and a three-time felon," Dixie said pointedly. "Who will very probably waste her best years sitting in a nasty little room with bars."

The photo slid away, replaced by Ryan's jerky image, turned solemn. Until now, his computer chase of the accused felon had been about as real as his favorite online game. His next words sounded darkly thoughtful.

"What if she's innocent?"

"That's why we have lawyers, judges, and due process."

"It's not like she killed someone."

"Theft is a crime, Ryan. She'll be arrested—"

"What if she had a really good reason? Would she get off?"

"A good reason to steal?" Dixie studied the girl's face. In ten years as a state prosecutor, Dixie'd seen younger criminals, and they never failed to sadden her. She saw in Thompson's eyes something unexpected, something vulnerable and desperate. Before being adopted at twelve, Dixie'd known plenty of desperate moments that might easily have sent her down a dead-end road, if not for the Flannigans' intervention. Gennae Thompson had progressed from purse snatching at eighteen—arrest but no conviction in her home state of Georgia—to fraud and grand theft. Unless someone intervened now, the girl was destined to do hard time.

"Maybe she stole stuff so her family could eat," Ryan suggested.

"Right. Food stamps are too embarrassing, so she robs her employer."

"He was insured."

"You mean it's okay if the insurance company gets ripped off?" Dixie sighed.

"The line between right and wrong shouldn't be so hazy, kid. I'm with you on that part. But once we turn Thompson in, her fate is out of our hands."

Earlier in the year, Ryan had landed in some Internet trouble and lost computer privileges. Dixie'd been the badass aunt who ratted him out to his parents. Ryan hadn't spoken to her for weeks, and still didn't believe what he'd done was such a big deal. Maybe it wasn't. But Dixie'd put away too many offenders who might've been saved if someone had ladled good sense into their stubborn brains before they hardened to concrete.

"If we don't find her and claim the reward, someone else will," Ryan said, in a voice that lacked conviction.

"Or maybe she'll zip across the border and vanish. A single white female can find all sorts of trouble in Mexico. She could land in a jail far more sordid than the Harris County lockup."

"Should we keep looking then?"

“You started this, Ryan. What do you think?” He needed to discover which side of that hazy line he intended to toe. Regardless, Dixie was keeping that dinner dater tonight.

“If we catch her, she’ll go back to Arkansas?” Ryan asked.

“Eventually. She’ll be arrested here in Texas, where she’s wanted for an earlier felony.”

“What if she makes it all the way to Mexico? Would you still go after her?”

Three-hundred-thirty-one-point-six miles, if Gennae Thompson stayed on Highway 59 all the way to the border crossing at Laredo. Nearly five hours, even with the Mustang tapping ninety. Then there’d be the trip back, Dixie’s butt numb as a rock, furious prisoner yammering through the steel mesh separating the front and back seats. No air conditioning, unless Dixie took one of the other three vehicles she’d bought cheap from skips with no current need for wheels.

“Yeah, kid. If a reliable witness saw Gennae Thompson headed into Mexico, I’d go after her. Reluctantly.” It’d be far less hassle to catch the felon before she crossed the border, where bounty hunting was strictly illegal. Dixie massaged the persistent driver’s knot at the back of her neck.

“Cause she’d be better off in jail here, right?”

“Right. We’re just the angels to deliver her from evil.”

After they signed off, Dixie finished her beer studying the WANTED poster. Marla Gennae Thompson might serve as an example to Ryan of how easily simple misconduct can leap to serious crime, and to a dark and lonely place to spend your life. Or a few years, anyway, if Thompson was lucky. What a waste to be a bad example at twenty.

The young woman certainly didn’t look like an average felon. Dixie’d seen guilt in every guise imaginable—old, young, rich, poor, dumb, brilliant—so nothing really surprised her. But the haunted expression in Gennae’s eyes gave Dixie an uneasy feeling. She’d seen that look on runaways and street kids. On frightened animals.

And, long ago, in her own mirror.

CHAPTER 2

“This little pig went to Houston.” Chanting to keep the voice out of her head, Marla Gennae Thompson sped along Interstate 59, whipping around slowpokes, easing past sixteen-wheeling roadrunners, sniffing out cops.

“This little pig went home.”

Steady at five miles an hour over the limit, she watched other cars zip past as she counted the mile markers.

“Three-forty-seven. This little pig went to heaven.”

Cops ignored five-mile speeders. So far, anyway.

But every mile tightened an invisible bag over Gennae’s head. She could see, but not breathe. Clear plastic. A cleaning bag. The kind with a printed warning: Keep Away From Children.

“Play,” the voice warned. “Concentrate.”

Her fingers fluttered over the keyboard as her brain flooded with red mist. Then the bag was gone. She gasped, and kept her fingers moving, moving, hitting the notes, hitting the notes.

“See how much better you play when you concentrate?”

All in her mind, of course. All in her mind.

Now, it was all in her mind.

Gennae hiccupped. Hiccups always accompanied the fear.

Shit, who was she kidding? When had the fear ever left her?

Never mind. Show no fear, shed no tear—her new motto. Three days till her birthday. “Happy-happy-happy birthday...to me!” Three days. “Three-forty-six. Pick up sticks.”

Spotting the city limits sign—

“City without pity...”

—she tensed, tightening her grip on the wheel.

No panic, no panic. Miles to go before she could panic.

“Houston, Pasadena, Clear Lake, Dickinson, La Marque,” she chanted. And *then* the Galveston bridge.

A few miles later, she took the 610 Loop headed south.

“Why, shut my mouth, I’m going south...”

And despite her constant chatter—

“Way down south in the land of Cotton-eyed Joe...”

—she heard the hated, blood chilling voice...

Come home.

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