

The Lake at Paynes Prairie

Meg sat cross-legged on the bench, watching a wading egret stalk its prey. She held her breath as the bird froze in place, made a swift jab at the fish and snagged it first try.

“He’s a cool one,” she said, her eyes on the graceful white neck that curved and undulated with its descending meal.

“Poor fish never had a chance,” said Pete. He’d been coming to Paynes Prairie since he was a kid, but sometimes failed to appreciate its unique vignettes. He loved that in Meg. She picked up on details, should they be pretty pebbles or Darwinian skirmishes.

“So Pete...”

He didn’t especially want this conversation. He looked out at the water, the reflected sun blinding him to her face.

“I love being with you,” she said, “but I have to think of Judy. After all, she is my sister. And with Daddy in the shape he’s in, I need to...”

“Yeah, but Judy’s a big girl. Don’t you think she can handle it?”

“I don’t know, Pete. Maybe *I* can’t handle it.” Meg slapped hard at a mosquito on her thigh. When she raised her hand, the insect carcass lay smashed in a small splatter of blood. “Ick. Shouldn’t have worn shorts to a swamp.”

“Swamp?” He gasped with faux horror. “Here, use my hanky. Did you live in Savannah so long you forgot the charms of Old Florida? Skeeters are part of the landscape.”

The landscape was Paynes Prairie State Preserve, just north of Micanopy, south of Gainesville. It wasn’t a prairie in the usual sense, but a marsh of endless yellow-green grasses punctuated by scrub palmetto, stands of cypress trees dripping with Spanish moss, cabbage palms gangling here and there. The hundred-acre lake beckoned through the trees. There was a calming horizontality to it that had always drawn Pete.

“Here, let’s walk the boardwalk. As long as we keep moving the little bastards won’t bite.”

“Which way?”

He pointed to the left. “More shady this way, along the lake. So Meg, while we’re talking paths...”

He knew what she would say—she didn’t want to hurt Judy. Meg had come back to the family farmhouse in Micanopy to help her sister with their father. The stress of giving full-time care to the old man was bad enough without Pete driving a wedge between them. He knew all that. He just didn’t want to hear it from her.

“I *want* us to be together, Pete. I’m just not sure how we—”

He looked at Meg. “You know I’m serious about breaking up with Judy. I was already planning to, even before you got here.”

“Yeah...but now that I’ve been here six weeks, I see how awful it’s been for her. I had no clue, Pete. Daddy’s a full-time job. Bad enough his liver and lungs are totally shot from the booze and tobacco, but goddam, he’s meaner than ever too. And I thought he was bad before Mama died.”

“Meg, I know I’m probably being selfish—” He glanced down. “Hey, watch out, there’s a loose board.”

“Ooh—they ought to fix that.” She stepped over the rotting plank. “Someone’s gonna take a header and get a face full of splinters. Or worse, fall in the water and—”

“—get eaten by a gator?”

“Yeah...right now, for instance. If one of those bad boys should just rear up and grab me, maybe it’d be...I don’t know, poetic justice.” She found an empty snail shell on the walkway and tossed it into the lake. It splashed in about twenty feet away.

“We need to strengthen your throwing arm,” Pete smiled. “I know you’re thinking about Judy, but it’s *you* I can’t get out of my mind. Just the thought of you jazzes me up. It’s like an electric current.”

“I feel that way too...but sweet Jesus, when Judy found out I was with you Friday night...I thought she was gonna throw me out of the house then and there.”

“She wouldn’t do that, would she? And lose all your help with Daddy-o?”

Meg’s blue-gray eyes got the look of gathering rain clouds. “Pete, that’s not fair.”

“You’re right. I’m a jerk. I didn’t mean to—”

“I know...you’re forgiven. You’re probably half right anyway.”

“I did try to talk to her, but she isn’t answering my calls.”

“Oh, she’s mad as hell, but she’ll calm down. She thinks you’re coming back. If you break up with her now—”

“But there’s never a good time. I mean, I don’t want to hurt her any more than you do.”

He *was* in love with Judy. Or so he’d thought. They had clicked literally over the water cooler by his lab in the UF Bio building. But after she quit her assistantship to care for her father, her crackly wit turned brittle. Pete didn’t blame her. Still, being her target was getting old. With Meg, he sensed something—a softness—that he missed in Judy. It had only been six weeks, but he felt more for Meg than he ever had for her sister.

“It isn’t just *her*, Pete. I guess we owe her honesty at some point. But there’s other...stuff you don’t know.”

“So tell me. Honestly.”

“Well...the whole issue with Daddy...a couple of times last year Judy asked me to come down, and of course I didn’t. Said I couldn’t leave work—like a goddamn interior design job was more important than family.”

“Would you’ve changed anything by moving back from Savannah sooner?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he’d be better off if I hadn’t come at all,” she choked. Tears streamed down her face.

“Meg...” He took her in his arms.

He brushed a line of ants—or maybe they were termites—off a bench. “Here, sit down. Think I got all the bugs off.” The tiny insects were marching from the bench to the cypress tree behind it, then up the trunk until they vanished, headed to some purpose only they knew.

“What are you saying? You can’t blame yourself for your dad’s issues.”

She wiped her eyes and nose with her shirttail. “No...I suppose not.”

The sun flickered through the trees, casting feathery shadows of her eyelashes on her face. She seemed made of porcelain, in need of protection.

“Pete...I might ask your help, okay?”

He kissed a tear off her cheek. “Of course it’s okay. And the one who should feel guilty here is me. I’ve been totally unfair to Judy, not to mention to you.”

“Works every which way, right? Judy was unfair to you, you’re unfair to her, I’m unfair to—hell, I guess everybody.”

He went for his cell phone to check the time, but feeling it wasn’t there, snapped his finger. “Oh, my phone.”

“The whole reason we’re here,” said Meg, reaching into her back pocket, “and I almost forgot to give it back!” She fumbled and nearly dropped the phone.

“Whoa,” he laughed, “gotta watch you every second.” He took the phone. “Okay, confession: I’m kind of glad I left it in your car. By the way, thanks for checking my texts. Missing that one from the department chair could’ve burned my ass.”

“No problem. And now I know your passcode, so I can see whoever messages you,” she smiled. He loved her face in a flash of amusement.

He looked at the phone. “Crap, 3:30. I hate to do this, but I have to drive back to Gainesville. Got that 5:00 class to teach tonight.”

“Hey, I’m just happy I got to see you.”

“You know, you should come and sit in. *Botany 211*. Plants for Dummies. We’re covering mosses this evening. Like this *Thelia*.” He brushed his hand across a velvety green mat on the tree behind the bench.

“*Thelia*. Sounds fascinating. But I promised Judy I’d be there tonight.” She gave him a light kiss. “I’d better get back to the house.”

They walked the quarter-mile to the parking area. Pete’s Prius was sitting humbly next to Meg’s Jeep SUV.

“Call later?” He said as she got into her car.

She nodded. In her rearview mirror he saw a split-second frown cross her face. It wasn't anger, more like anxiety. Almost fear.

He watched her back out and head down the road out of the preserve. He started up the Prius and followed until they reached the exit. She threw him a little wave and turned left onto 441 as he went right toward Gainesville. He should make his class about on time.

Meg didn't call that night. Probably tired, he thought, or afraid Judy would overhear. Still, that fleeting grimace on her face—it unsettled him a little.

The next morning he awoke to the hooting of a Barred Owl outside his window. *Really? My one weekday to sleep in?* He covered his head with a pillow, but the *hoot-hoot-hoo-hoooo* kept up.

Six o'clock. The morning light was barely filtering its way through a light fog when he went out to grab his paper. He looked around for the owl but didn't see it. *Flew off to taunt another sleeping victim, no doubt.* Pete paused before going back into his townhouse. He rarely let himself just be surrounded by the quiet. Two cardinals flitted into a live oak overhead and began a twittering dialogue. Their brilliant red feathers contrasted with the green leaves.

I should get up at six every day. Clears the mind, he thought. He went back inside to read the paper and have some coffee. No classes today, so he wasn't in his usual rush. He did have a few errands to do, and he half thought he might go down to Micanopy. He was dreading the talk with Judy, but how long could he go on misleading her? And Meg would be there.

After his morning run, he showered and made out a grocery list. On his way out he picked up his phone. He'd plugged it in last night, but it was still showing less than 10% juice. He replugged and jiggled the cord, but still no charging light went on. *Shit. Oh well, add "buy another charging cord" to the list today.*

He remembered the charger in his car, and thought maybe he *should* head down to Judy and Meg's. That drive would charge the phone up again. He could stop and pick

up some bacon-and-egg bagels on the way down. Not much of a peace offering, but it was a start.

He got into the car, connected the phone, and started for Micanopy. He had gotten down US 441 South almost to Paynes Prairie when the phone slid off the console and came loose from the cord. When he reconnected it, it generated a ping. The screen said *New Video* inside a little square balloon.

Did Judy or Meg use my phone to make a video? That didn't make any sense. He swished the *New Video* balloon and it opened. He couldn't see anything on the screen, but he could hear background sound. Then some muffled talking. He turned the phone's volume to max. Still no video showing up, but the audio got clearer. He heard Meg's southern contralto say something like *not right, Jude*.

Then Judy's light drawl came through loud and clear.

"We've been through this, Meg."

"But Daddy—"

"Daddy's 82 and tired. He said so himself. You heard."

"Yes, but Jude, I feel like we're playing God. We—"

"Oh, so now you're the moral backbone of this family? After you fuck *my* boyfriend and then come crying to me to ease your guilty conscience?"

Pete almost swerved in front of a pickup in the left lane until the honk of the horn stopped him. *Jesus, I'd better pull over or get myself killed*. He switched off the phone.

He saw a Dollar store and pulled into the parking lot. He backed into the farthest space in the only shady spot, and looked at the cell phone. Meg must have accidentally hit the video recorder when she was checking his texts. There was more on there. He thought he should really just delete it, but he was too curious now.

He turned it back on to hear Meg's voice.

"That's not fair, Jude. I really am sorry—"

“You really are, aren’t you. You move back down here to help with Daddy after I take care of him for two fucking *years*, and then you help yourself to Pete.”

“Taking care of Daddy was your choice, Judy. The way he treated Mama—all those empty promises, the booze and the abuse...if you felt like sacrificing your life for him, fine, but why should I?”

“What would you know about sacrifice? Oh wait, you did sacrifice your family for that freaking decorator business in Savannah. First you say you’ll come help, then you all but ignore me when I ask. Look who’s talking about empty promises.”

“I’m here now, aren’t I? And maybe people wouldn’t ignore you if you didn’t drive them away first.”

“Oh. I suppose that’s what I did to Pete? Drove *him* away?”

“I don’t know, Judy. The change in you, it’s not good since—”

“Since I don’t have a life anymore. Thank you for pointing that out.”

“Look...I said I was sorry.”

“That’s not enough.”

“You’re talking about the plan?”

“Well, I was actually thinking of Pete. You do have to end this little side fling, you know. But yes, that too. With Daddy out of the picture, everything’ll be different.”

“Jude...”

“You’re not backing out on the plan now, Meggie. Not this time.”

“Look, I know we both said he’d be in a better place...but—”

“He will be. I got the Valium, you got the Jim Beam, he’s gonna just ease on out.”

“God, sounds like some horrible country western song. And I’m still scared about the Valium...they can detect that, Judy—”

“I told you, they won’t. Derrick’ll be on duty, and he’s not doing an autopsy, I guarantee it.”

The recording abruptly ended there. Pete turned off the phone and sat in the car, staring out at the passing traffic on 441.

He pondered calling Meg.

Or maybe he should go straight to the police.

Meg didn't call last night.

What had she said? Something about promising Judy she would be home.

I've got to get down there. He pulled out of the parking lot and started toward Micanopy. Was Judy really this desperate? If he could just talk to her.

He tried Judy's phone, then Meg's, but got voicemails.

He drove faster than he should, speeding past Paynes Prairie and arriving at the farmhouse in under fifteen minutes. The gravel driveway crunched and spit little stones as he pulled up. He got out of the car and heard the *sproing* of the screen door as Meg came out onto the front porch.

"Pete—what are you doing here?" She looked small, waif-like, not herself.

"Meg—"

Judy came to the door. "Pete, you should go back home." She looked at Meg.

"Did you call him?"

"No. God, why would I...why would..." Meg crumpled just as Pete got up the porch steps in time to break her fall.

"It's all right, I got you. Here, lie down on the swing. Judy, can you go get a cool rag or something?"

She went inside and brought out a wet washcloth to lay on Meg's forehead.

"Here, just stay put for a minute. Your color's coming back."

Meg sat up. "I'm okay. Just got light-headed." She glanced at Pete. "You really should go, this is a bad time."

Judy burst into tears.

Meg looked at her. "So now you cry? *You?*"

A siren sounded, and an ambulance pulled up. Two medical attendants got out, a man and a woman.

“You called us about your father?” The woman said.

“Yes,” sniffled Judy. “I can’t wake him up. I’m not sure he’s breathing. He seemed okay when he went to sleep last night.”

“Anything unusual? Did he fall?”

“No.”

“Medications?” The paramedics hurried into the house, continuing to ask questions. Judy and Meg followed.

Pete decided to stay outside on the porch. In ten minutes they came out and pulled a stretcher out of the ambulance. The man caught Pete’s eye and shook his head.

Judy and Meg said a last goodbye to their father as the medics loaded the stretcher containing his body into the ambulance. The woman came back and touched Judy’s arm. “So sorry, ma’am. We did not initiate resuscitation because you had a DNR. Looks like he just passed in his sleep, but we have to take him to Gainesville for the medical examiner to sign off on. Unless they want a post, he’ll then go to the funeral home for cremation, as he had requested.”

“Yes...thank you,” whispered Judy. Meg just nodded.

Pete was sitting on the porch swing, staring at nothing in particular. A red-winged blackbird sounded its trilling note overhead in the sprawling oak that shaded the house. He looked up through the branches and noticed how heavily they overhung the roof.

After the ambulance pulled away, Pete rose to his feet as Judy and Meg came back to the porch.

“I was just looking at these oaks,” he said. “Probably should get an arborist to come and limb them up before hurricane season. I could call them for you. Might prevent a disaster.”

Judy looked at him. “So, is that why you drove down here this morning? To tell me to trim the fucking *trees*?”

“No, of course not, Judy,” he shook his head. “I was just...”

“Well, whatever it is can wait. Meg and me...we need a little time right now.”

Pete could barely remember why he did start out for Micanopy this morning. Was it to break up with Judy, or to see Meg? The whole game had changed. “You’re right, it can wait. I’m sorry...about your dad.”

Judy nodded.

Meg thanked him and murmured “Don’t forget your phone.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Judy turned to go inside the house. “I’d better go call Derrick.”

The screen door sprang, then slammed shut behind her.

“Derrick?” said Pete.

“The county coroner. He’s an old boyfriend of hers,” replied Meg. “I guess she just wants to...”

“–guarantee there’s no autopsy?”

Meg looked at Pete so intently she seemed to be looking through him.

“There’s this video on my phone, Meg.”

She turned porcelain again, as though she might shatter.

“I wondered if you might have switched it on by mistake.”

“Pete...” she swallowed hard. “It wasn’t by mistake. Night before last, after I checked your texts, I had your phone in my pocket. After Daddy was asleep I started to talk to Judy about–about...”

“–your so-called *plan*?”

“Oh God, Pete...I went into the bathroom and turned on the video. Then I put the phone back in my pocket.”

“Stupid question: Judy doesn’t know about this, right?”

“No,” her voice wavered. “I...I tried to get her to talk about the details. Did you listen to the whole thing?”

“Pretty hard not to. So...the two of you hatch this plan to off your old man...and then you all of a sudden decide to record this conversation?”

She started to cry. “Pete, the idea came to me...by some stroke of fate, I had your phone there, and...I guess it was a last-ditch effort to make this awful thing right somehow.”

“Make it *right*? Christ, Meg. What were you hoping for, that I’d come riding down here like some white knight and rescue you from yourself?”

“I don’t...maybe—”

“Maybe. Maybe if you’d been more honest with me. Maybe if you’d even told me you made the video. But hell, by the time I heard it this morning, your old man’s fate was sealed. What the fuck, Meg.”

“Pete,” she sobbed, “I don’t know *what* I thought. Daddy...”

“Daddy’s gone, he’s out of your hair. Isn’t that what you and Judy wanted?”

“I didn’t want any of this! Up in Savannah I pushed him out of my mind...but then the guilt...I wish to God I’d never come home.”

“So this is how you get rid of the guilt?” He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. “Meg, yesterday when you handed me this phone, did you even give a thought to what you were putting in my hands?”

“I’m so, so sorry...” She stopped as Judy appeared at the front door.

“I was just leaving,” said Pete. “I’ll call tomorrow.”

Pete was on autopilot driving up 441 toward Gainesville. A thick fog seemed to be clouding his mind, then crawling down to constrict his heart.

He was approaching the turnoff to Paynes Prairie. He got off the highway and drove into the preserve. He parked by the familiar boardwalk that wound through the marsh to the lake. As he stepped onto the wood-slatted path he looked down toward the water’s edge. He noticed for the first time that there was really no edge at all—just a gradual transition from moist earth to water.

He found the cypress-shaded bench he and Meg had shared. Was that just yesterday? He sat looking out at the lake. He touched the soft *Thelia* moss again. The

ant brigade was long gone to some other insect destination. A *chit-chit* called his notice to two squirrels skittering a spiral path up a tree. Life went on here as it always did.

The water was so still today it looked like a mirror. It reminded him of one of those heat mirages on the road, a dreamscape looking glass, vanishing as you got closer. This morning felt like that—as though it hadn't really happened. But the lake wasn't a mirage. The closer you got, the more real it was. If you tossed a stone into it, the reflections of the trees would ripple up with the splash. Pete knew there was a spring at the deepest part where the cold ground water bubbled up. Today you would never suspect that spring was there, with the surface so glassy smooth.

He got up and followed the boardwalk through a dense grove to its end. He took the cell phone out of his pocket and turned it over in his hand. A missed call from his mother. One new text from a grad student asking for a letter.

He looked to his right, then to the left and behind. His only curious company was a Great Blue Heron perched on a cypress knee. When the bird looked away, Pete threw the phone as far as he could into the lake at Paynes Prairie.

