

## Will Divide

Hawk Middleton flew the Ag-cat straight into a headwind looking for his wife, Kiki. He searched over drooping clapboard houses and doublewides, pickup trucks zigzag on lawns. At the St. Johns River, he throttled down, flew low over splintered docks, surveyed the familiar bend thick with eel weed and alligator lilies where years ago from his dad's jon boat, he'd fished for channel cats and flatheads. At a stand of weeping cedars, he banked right, backtracked inland, grazing the muddy snake of Deep Creek until ripples peeled the tannic surface. If Kiki didn't love him anymore, why didn't she just tell him? He swung toward farmland, the lipstick blur of culvert flowers beneath him. Kiki's blue-polished fingernails came to mind. Why didn't she wear Baby's Breath Pink like she used to?

Over Cabbage Swamp Road, trucks stopped. Drivers raised their fists. What would he say when he found Kiki? That he'd embrace change? Following a gaggle of gravel lanes connecting one farm to the next, Hawk surged over a bulkhead of live oaks. Gaining altitude, he looped toward Floyd Packers. His his stomach heaved. The dentist was right.

Earlier, Hawk sat in the dentist's chair making sense of it all—dagger toothaches and swinging vertigo, how his wife was a stranger. As Dr. Seymour tugged on the bad

molar, Hawk remembered the rotted oak girt he yanked from the pole barn, how when the twenty penny common came free, the termite-eaten 2 by 4 collapsed into spongy chunks.

The gray tooth plinked stainless steel. Dr. Seymour patched the gap with cotton, tapped teeth with a chrome-plated blade. His fingers tasted of latex. "Your father was a crop-duster?"

"All his life." Hawk's mouth marbled. His own hands smelled of whitefly pesticide and hydraulic fluid. "Was a Green Beret. I started as his loader back in '78. What's this got to do with anything?"

Dr. Seymour rolled away, legs in the air like a joy ride. "Let's take some x-rays."

The assistant was a plump woman Hawk remembered from the Jiffy Lube in East Palatka. She dabbed at blood on his chin, arranged a weighted blanket across his chest. Last time he saw her she overcharged him for an oil change.

Dr. Seymour jotted notes; Hawk hoped it had to do with prescription pain killers. He listened to commands. Bite this, bite that. Helpless, he obeyed, thought of Kiki coming home past dinner, leaving before dawn. Somewhere between the first x-ray and the fourth, he concluded Kiki was cheating on him again.

"Hawthorne, you can't fly for a week."

Unaccustomed to being called by his full name, Hawk grumbled. The assistant came at him with another rag; he waved her away. "It's my living."

"All that up and down?" The dentist drew circles in the air with the silver pick, complete with propeller sound effects. "You don't want an abscess."

"But— "

"You'll be on a sweet dose of Vicodin. No flying under the influence."

Hawk had flown with Jack and Coke hangovers, alongside blue forks of lightning, and once, before a tropical depression drowned acres of potatoes, he'd ascended Hastings in a muffled pre-storm calm. When he landed that little corner of Florida seemed less complicated, as if he'd been privy to a secret. If he could handle the mechanics of the violent sky in his yellow Ag-Cat, he was equipped for turmoil handed to him on land.

"I need your word," Dr. Seymour said.

"Okay," he lied.

It was over the boat yard, near Amos Pacetti's property, that he saw Kiki's VW Bug. The fifty-acre parcel had been for sale since Amos Senior died. Hawk and Amos Junior were friends since high school, roasting suckling pigs and running barrel races at Cracker Day. As Hawk surged and banked right, he dreamed of lost days. On the descent he thought he saw Kiki and a gangly man embraced in the bed of a pickup.

The truth was he'd intended to scare her, and *then* he'd lost control. The plane teetered, and Hawk overcompensated. The tail sagged, the plane dropped, landed sideways, right wing hooking soil, propeller churning potato plants like a combine. Hawk's head knocked the windshield; he swallowed blood. Pain lit deep. Unable to differentiate new aches from old, he leaned forward, started the engine. It groaned. Wisps of smoke drew from the hood. He clutched his chest, eased from the cockpit. When Kiki's Volkswagen appeared at the end of the road, he was unsure how long he'd been sitting there.

“You tried to kill me.” She’d missed a button on her silk blouse, and the transparent fabric clung to her skin. “I’ll take you to the cleaners. I’ll have the house. That truck a yours— “

Hawk thought of the rail of a man in the truck, the ones before him. His throat was parched. “You love him?”

Kiki straightened her blouse, securing the button. “I was showing a house.”

Maybe he was losing his sight *and* his senses. He blinked. “Showing a house? You’re a receptionist.”

Kiki marched in place, the spikes of her patent leather pumps sinking like garden stakes. “I’m more than that. There are big things in store for me. Big things!”

An ambulance whined. Kiki seemed to notice the extent of the damage— the wrecked Ag-cat, the uprooted crops. “Jesus. Your head. It’s cut up.”

Hawk felt the grimy gash along his scalp, but it was his heart that throbbed. He could have another tooth removed, and then another until all the hurt was gone, but what if toxins had settled into his heart? A heart wasn’t something that could be shot up with Novocain and carved out like a rotten molar. Surely there was something he could do. He removed a boot, worked a fallow trench, clutched a heap of back-flung potato plants, tucked them down into the hole. He willed the tendrils to root deep, fuse to the caurst caves of the aquifer, outlive them all. Old timers wearing coveralls arrived. They circled, clenching John Deere caps. Their faces blurred. They spoke with concerned amusement.

“He’s grasping at straws if he thinks those plants will take.”

“I never did think he was right in the head.”

Paramedics tromped through pocked soil. Kiki hollered, “Hurry.” The Ag-cat’s engine stuttered in a finale of flames. Clouds frothed from extinguishers. Gloved hands were on Hawk’s shoulders, his legs, and then he was suspended on a stretcher, hovering over shifting land.

Kiki was at the kitchen table painting her nails metallic blue. Hawk had been sprawled on the sofa for twenty-four hours. He didn’t have a concussion, but when he stood, he swayed. “Why didn’t you tell me you had another career lined up?”

“I didn’t tell you because you would act like you’re doing now,” she said. “Truth is, you can’t tolerate change, and I’m downright bored by it.”

They’d argued all afternoon, Hawk saying she’d betrayed him by attempting to sell off all the farmland in the county. “Like I’m a magician. Sold,” she’d said, tapping an imaginary wand on the table. “I haven’t taken the license test yet. I need to pass that first, remember? Then, I’ll commence with selling.”

“I thought you loved Hastings,” he said, sipping the tea. Everything tasted of sheet metal. “I thought you wanted to preserve farm life.”

Kiki sighed. Hawk noticed the black and white photograph of his newlywed parents. It was crooked. “It’s that people like Deluca have given farmers the impression they’ll sell all this land for millions of dollars and someone will develop it—hundreds of cookie-cutter houses—make Hastings a metropolis like Nocatee or Julington Creek.”

Hawk said. “Deluca walks into town, starts teasing desperate farmers with all this money, and they’re hungry. They’ve been living hand to mouth for years.”

“And you want them to keep on living like that?” Kiki asked.

“It’s tradition. It’s America. And, if they don’t have land to dust, I can’t dust. And if I can’t dust, then what is it I’m supposed to do for a living?”

“As usual, it’s all about you.” She started on her toenails. “Farmers are selling off land because it’s the end of agriculture in America. We’re going to be eating tomatoes and squash grown in laboratories.”

“What in hell are you talking about?” Her annunciation was different.

“Honest to god, Kiki, I don’t think I could pick you out in a crowd.” He studied her wry grin. Maybe that’s what she wanted, to be unrecognizable to him. Kiki started a second coat of polish. “And, you’re right. I can’t deal with change, and I don’t like my wife cheating on me, either.”

“I told you a hundred times,” Kiki said without looking up. “That’s over.”

“Yesterday?”

“I was showing a house. To an *elderly* couple.”

“Two weeks ago? The old packing plant?”

She slammed the polish. “You’ve following me all this time. What is wrong with you?”

Hawk glanced at the rug he’d bought at the outlet mall. It matched the blue in the sofa perfectly, just as he’d hoped, but the edges were fraying. He turned to the creamy blue polish drying on Kiki’s nails. This was not the color of the sky or the Atlantic Ocean. Hawk wondered what name Maybelline gave it. When he and Kiki married, they picked paint for each room based on the name. The bedroom, Vibrant Violet. The den, Nurture. The kitchen, Country Morning Dew. “What in the world kind of blue *is* that?”

Kiki fanned her fingers. “I wish you were more progressive.”

“Progressive?” he couldn’t believe Kiki’s vocabulary. “Here’s what I want. I don’t want us to change.”

As newlyweds, Kiki crawled under the Cessna with him, helped change tires. She’d climbed up on the wing and held torque wrenches and wire strippers. On his thirtieth birthday, she’d stood in Samuel Middleton’s field one hot May afternoon and flagged him down with a six-pack of icy Michelob and a double order of fried shrimp and Datil pepper squash from Osteen’s.

“I miss the old Kiki.”

“Well, the new Kiki’s got to study. This test is going to whoop my ass.”

She took a book and a yellow highlighter to the bedroom, a funny duck walk to keep from mussing her painted toenails. Hawk eased off the couch, and with care walked to the kitchen table. He turned over the bottle of nail polish to read the name. *Storm Surge*. He knew that color afterall.

The next morning, Hawk was asleep when Kiki left for work. At 10 o’clock, he drove downtown to spy, but her Volkswagen was not at Deluca Land Management. Hawk parked across from Second Baptist Church, chased aspirin with grape Gatorade. He fiddled with the radio, contemplated the sheer sky; he had to be his old self by tomorrow. There were 1,500 acres at the Wells’ Farm to dust. Second-month cabbage shouldn’t go another day. Also, by this time last spring, he had six contracts for the upcoming year. The year before, nine. Here it was April, and there were farmers who’d not returned his calls all season. Joe Ricks, Abe Middleton. What in god’s name happened to the Willis brothers? He’d waited all week for Baker Wells to let him know if

the whitefly infestation on his new leaf seabagoes and rotated sorghum had cleared. Hawk would check in later, see what was keeping them. In the meantime, he'd need to rent or borrow a plane.

Beck Toquoi, a friend of Hawk's late father, strolled by. Hawk lifted his hand to wave, was surprised by a blow of nausea. He clung to the truck as Beck went into Deluca's office. Cauterizing light ricocheted off windows. Hawk squinted. What in god's name was the old farmer doing there? He eyed the rugged ligustrum on the church lawn until the dizziness passed. By then, Beck had gone. Once the buildings steadied, Hawk eased across the street.

Deluca scratched his orange goatee as Hawk introduced himself. Hawk wondered what the old timers thought of this man's facial hair and suits.

"She's out with our associates," Deluca said. "I'll call her on the radio."

The terrazzo floor spun; Hawk propped against the wall.

Deluca picked up a CB radio. "Kiki Hawthorne, what's your twenty?" Deluca said.

That's all it took to get hold of his wife? A hand-held radio like he and his childhood friend, Nelson Geiger, played with in the cornfields? The box spit static, and Kiki's voice answered far away and exasperated. She was off Cabbage Swamp Road. Hawk heard nothing that said she was in love with her boss. He eyed Deluca to detect lust, but all he displayed was the glow of a hungry realtor.

"Have a seat," Deluca said. "They're ten minutes away."



“*They?*” Hawk said. He imagined that leaning packing house he eyed from the eye—empty for another six weeks till potatoes came in—smoky blue morning glories climbing the walls, cicadas seething from thickets of beggar lice—a meeting spot for lovers.

“She’s showing a place.”

“Who’s she showing it *to?*”

“With all the business? I can’t keep up.”

Hawk looked to plywood-covered store fronts. His head split at the absurdity of it.

“*What* business?”

He swept his hand through the air. “I have vision. For all of Hastings.”

Those buildings on Main Street hadn’t seen renters in twenty-five years. After an eight-year-old girl became pinned beneath an avalanche of concrete, the county was pulling down the old Red Cross building, a scaffolding of stucco, home to crack dealers and overturned grocery carts.

“You can see better than me,” Hawk said. “And, I have eyes of a hawk. Can see for miles.”

“How about that?” Deluca said, unimpressed.

“I *can*,” Hawk said. He felt the need to impress Deluca, but ashamed at his desperation, stopped short of telling him the story. He was named for his mother’s ornery great uncle, Hawthorne Eustis Middleton; the name never suited him. In 1995, the county was hit hard by Jeanne and Francis, the worst hurricanes in 22 years; potato fields were waterlogged, the river flooded, and while Hawk accessed damage from the air, he spotted

Jimmie Solano's flooded-out missing Black Angus bulls and a herd of lost goats stranded on an overturned bass boat. They'd been missing six days.

"My god. You're a hawk," Jimmie had said.

The nickname stuck. In the Ag-cat, Hawk soared like a territorial red tail. Like the grand bird of prey, Hawk pictured the sparsely inhabited acreage, the matted foliage, weatherworn farmhouses, hidden limestone roads as his— as if *he* had been the one to cultivate and protect the land, not the farmers. He wanted to set down his own roots, raise a family. He couldn't imagine life without the huge expanse of space, and endless patches of green. Or, without Kiki.

"Well, soon my vision will be complete. You'll see for yourself," Deluca said, grinning. "Kiki will be part of it. Big money. As in neighborhoods cropping up—pardon the pun— all over this great land."

Hawk pictured beige subdivisions burgeoning from the ground like briars, acres of potatoes and sorghum and cabbage covered in circular cement driveways, lined with sycamore seedlings. This land was part of him, its roots deep, washed by torrential summer floods, warmed by unforgiving Florida heat. He knew how stubborn Kiki could be and if she turned all that bull-headed energy into selling Hastings she'd have it sold in five minutes. "Tell Kiki I'll meet her at the house."

"A little man-to-man advice?" Deluca said. "You need to let her blossom."

Hawk was at the door. "I don't need your advice."

"Suit yourself. She'll be back soon. Don't you want to wait?"

Hawk went dizzy. He'd stood too long. "What did you just say?"

"*Wait*," Deluca said as if talking to a child. "You want to wait?"

Hawk heard *weight*, as in 50-pound burlap sacks of potatoes, truckloads of pea gravel. Was that what he was to Kiki? The sidewalks went wobbly, then ballooned. Hawk remembered Beck Toquoi.

“Earlier?” he said. “Why was Beck here?”

“He’s putting his land up for sale. A pretty penny. What with the view of the river and all.”

Hawk, threw open the door, spit blood on the sidewalk.

Hawk took another aspirin, managed to drink water without feeling nauseated, then drove to Baker and Velda Wells’ house. They were the voice of reason. Hawk imagined Baker would apologize for not getting back about the contracts, then he’d write Hawk a check and all would be fine. Hawk felt a guilty he’d underestimated the farmers. Those men have an allegiance to the land. He felt better, and come to think of it, when Kiki did get her real estate license, she might not sell a damn thing. She was probably setting herself up for failure.

Overhead, cirrus clouds spread out like long wisps of baby hair. These were his favorite, and he’d once told Kiki they should name their first born in honor of them. She’d called it a hippie name. He’d bring it up again, and ask what *she’d* like to name their child. He was ready for a family. As if on cue, at the end of Cabbage Swamp Road Hawk smiled at the sight of Velda hanging clothes on the line. Her grandson watered a row of zinnias. He remembered that boy’s daddy at nine years driving a truckload of potatoes to the packing house. He had to stand to shift gears. Hawk was admiring white mallow and red Canna lilies blooming from soggy ditches when a huge white sign with

orange lettering stopped him in his tracks. He pressed the brake hard, and sat stunned, digesting the words: *500 acres. Owner Financing. Will Divide.*

Velda insisted Hawk come inside. Baker had wanted to explain, she said, pouring coffee, ladling banana pudding. “Son, it’s a dwindling life.”

Hawk picked at the pudding, stabbed a Nilla Wafer. His jaw throbbed.

“What will Baker Jr. do?”

“That boy never was a farmer,” she said. She touched Hawk’s arm, smiled. “You and I both know all BJ liked to do was drive tractors.”

“What about your contracts?”

Velda shook her head. “We never even got one from Frito-Lay.”

Hawk put his hand to his heart.

“Last year they came in so low,” she said. “We could make more selling twenty-pound bags of sebagoes at the flea market.”

Velda and Baker selling potatoes alongside hand-me-down shoes and stolen guns? Hawk studied the meringue, perfect with snowy peaks. “I won’t let it happen.”

“Son, there’s nothing you can do. They own us. We’ve not made a dime more than we did ten years ago.”

Hawk pushed his chair in, stood at the sink, and stared out the window.

“You live with what life throws you,” she said. “Accept things.”

Hawk watched Velda’s grandson playing. “I can’t accept *this*.”

What would all these farmers and their children do? Work at the outlet mall? What would happen to his dusting business? The spring and summer of 1964, weevil

infestations killed off all the potatoes in North Florida, and Hawk's father spent the season spraying corn in Iowa. Was he going to have to fly to the Midwest for work? He'd never take to that landscape. Velda's grandson tried to peddle a tricycle but his legs were too long. "The boy's too big for that contraption," Hawk said.

"Nobody's getting any younger," Velda said. She wrote out a check, handed it to him. "We'll put down sod in May. A developer in Jacksonville paid us outright on the harvest. Then we'll see—"

"Sod?" Hawk asked. "That's not farming. Sod's growing in my Aunt Alma's backyard. She's no farmer."

Velda followed him to the truck. "It's nothing personal."

He couldn't look at her; it hurt to see her smile. Velda lifted her hand to block the sun. She was the best farmer's wife he'd ever known. How dare the world come to this?

When Hawk got home, Kiki was pouring coffee into a thermos. "I got to pull an all-nighter. There's 40 flashcards on probate law I need to know by Wednesday."

He held up the red coffee tin. "It's in Spanish."

She snatched it. "It's Cuban espresso."

"Did you know Velda and Baker are selling out?"

Kiki fill a paper bag of cheese crackers, microwave popcorn. She nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You can't deal with change." She packed a quart of Plant City strawberries, and an angel food cake. "Plus. That's old news."

Hawk inspected her overnight bag: *Real Estate for Dummies*, tooth brush, makeup bag. “Where are you going?”

“Deb McGuiness’ at St. Augustine Beach. We’ll study at her cute condo. She looked out the window to the crewelwork of new cabbage fields. “Imagine getting up in the morning, smelling the ocean?”

“I don’t like the beach.” He opened the cabinet. “Where’s my Maxwell House?”

“I threw that out. It’s *pedestrian*.”

“I can’t understand a word coming out a your mouth these days.” Hawk studied the snacks. It was enough to last a week. “Where are you *really* going?”

She parted her hair, pulled the brush through tangles.

“Where?”

“It’s all over with Jimbo. I told you.”

On her way to the door, he squeezed her arm. “A kiss?”

She grimaced at the bandage across his forehead, brushed past with a stranger’s peck. Hawk look inside their bedroom—Vibrant Violet walls, Capri pants and slinky halter tops hanging from chairs like spandex ornaments, and turned back to the living room, arranged a crocheted afghan on his shoulders and sprawled on the sofa. He took one of his pills, then another. With the tip of his tongue, Hawk felt for where the tooth had been, a gap as deep as the sinkhole that devoured Hale’s Grocery parking lot last fall.

Hawk slept till noon the next day dreaming he was lost at sea clinging to a plywood raft. Steel-toed boots pulled him below surface. From shore, Kiki painted her

nails. The plywood sank. When a floating cloud appeared, Hawk grabbed at it until slimy bits came apart in his hand. Silver-backed minnows soared like scale-cloaked birds.

“I can’t swim,” he shouted, waking in a gummy sweat.

There was Kiki, freshly showered, hair glistening. She was reciting, “Warranty deed, quitclaim deed—*Swimming?* What in god’s name are you talking about?”

“What time is it?” he said, sitting up gingerly, the room spinning. “It was a dream. Yes, I think it was a dream.”

“You slept the day away,” she said, stacking papers, sorting them into manila folders.

“Listen, we need to talk,” he said, standing. Thinking better of it, he sat down. Something was wrong. Really wrong. Hawk cradled his jaw. Every tooth on the left side was on fire.

“I want to support us.”

“*Support* us? Baby doll, you couldn’t support us when you had the mother lode of contracts, and I was full-time at the Dollar Tree.”

“I’ll get dusting contracts in Iowa. We can work on,” he stuttered. “You know, a baby?”

“Your Cirrus Sunny Ray Hawthorne?” Kiki said. “Lord, no.”

Hawk blushed.

The phone rang, and on her way to the front door, Kiki answered it. “Sure, he’s here. Hold on.”

She handed Hawk the receiver.

“Wait,” he said. “Don’t go.”

Kiki stood at the door, and Hawk tried to imagine a mother's silhouette, shifting babies from hip to hip, but it wouldn't come. She checked her storm-surged nails, pointed at her watch. "I'm late."

"Hello?" the receptionist said. "The doctor wants you to come in. He's found something. You available in an hour?"

Kiki was closing the Volkswagen door when he got out to the driveway in his sock feet. "My teeth. The dentist has something to tell me. I think it's bad news."

"Oh, for heaven's sake. There's nothing wrong with your teeth."

"I've got headaches to beat the band."

She jabbed the key in the starter. "I need to go."

"Come meet me for lunch? At Johnny's?"

"Oh, damn it, Hawk. I need to be studying."

"About 1:30?"

Kiki shifted the car to reverse.

"Please?" he said.

"For the love of. Oh, fine. All right."

He reached through the open window, held the steering wheel.

"Hawk!" she yelled. "Let go, damn it."

"But I need to know."

"*What?*"

It must have been the Vicodin, because he'd never had the guts to address what bothered him most about her long-ago affair with the Hess driver. "Did you love him?"



“Oh, Jesus,” she said, eyes ahead where their dirt driveway met the blacktop two lane.

Hawk remembered what Deluca said. “Look, blossom all you want. Just don’t leave me!”

“Blossom?”

Kiki slapped his arm; Hawk released the wheel, jumped before she gunned the engine. He called after the sputtering engine. “Did you love him? Did you?”

By the time Hawk got to Dr. Seymour’s office, his jaw was taut. He squinted as Dr. Seymour drew a picture of his teeth. With a crooked probe, he tapped the map as he explained. “Your average person isn’t inhaling that pink dust you’re spraying. It’s like nerve gas. You ought to consider a new career.”

“This is all I know.”

“You take proper precautions? You wear gloves and masks?”

“When there’s time. Sometimes, I’ll be out working in the hanger, and a farmer will drive up and say, can you spray this afternoon? So, I go when they need me. I get in a hurry every now and then and forget things.”

Now that he thought about it, it had been a long time since somebody had come up out of the blue like that and ask him to spray. He could feel Dr. Seymour’s pinched blue eyes on him, so he stared out the window at the paint peeling on the hood of his truck. Kiki smoked cigarettes when she was angry. He imagined her driving around, stopping to buy a pack of Marlboro Lights at the Kangaroo.

“When toxins soak into the body, they sometimes travel up the roots of teeth thinking they’ve found an exit. But actually, they’re trapped and stuck to rot out their life inside your tooth.”

Hawk touched his jaw. Why was this happening? The ceiling spun, and he shut his eyes.

“I’m very worried, Hawthorne. I’d like to refer you to a specialist in Jacksonville.”

Dr. Seymour went on talking about detoxification and chelating therapy to remove chemical buildup, extracting more of his teeth, the cost of implants.

Hawk fell against the side table. Rows of tweezers scattered. Dr. Seymour steadied him.

“I got to meet my wife,” Hawk said. “I’ve just got to.”

The old-timers were gathered at the lunch counter at Johnny’s Kitchen, Beck Toquoi holding court.

“Way I see it, there’s plenty of land to go around. Hell, do what they want with it is what I say.” Beck had cleaned his plate of buttermilk fried chicken. Johnny himself came to the pickup window to listen.

“Turn it into a golf course,” Beck said. “Long as they pay me what it’s worth.”

Hawk fumed from the other end of the counter, stirred his coffee, added another round of sugar. He’d been waiting half an hour for Kiki, and the men hadn’t shut up for one minute about Deluca and his master plan for Hastings. They talked about him like he was a god.

“What you going to do, Johnny?” Taylor Betts called toward the window.

“Golfers don’t eat mashed taters and gravy.”

“I’ll change the menu to whatever they want. I’m flexible long as it involves money.”

They laughed and slapped their knees. Hawk shoved his mug. Coffee puddled on the Formica. Where was Kiki? He imagined her at the Kangaroo station taking the cellophane off the Marlboro Lights, complaining about him to ruby-haired woman who worked the cash register.

“I’ll get me a liquor license,” Johnny said. “Start brewing craft beers. Fancy beers with pretty labels. Spud Lite.”

They roared.

“Wait, wait. I got it. Sebago Amber,” Beck said.

Johnny called out, “Cabbage Swamp Ale.”

Hawk stood, pushed his chair in; it screeched against tile. “I can’t listen another second.”

“Don’t you want in on this?” Johnny said. “Gonna make a damn killing.”

“I’m a crop duster.”

“You can fly them all in from wherever it is they all coming from,” Johnny said.

“Grand idea,” Taylor said, leaning back, crossing his legs.

“Listen, you need some food,” Johnny said. “You been here going on an hour and all you’ve had is coffee.”

“He’s waiting on Kiki,” Taylor said.

“Believe she’s stood you up.”

“Believe she has,” Beck said. “Ask the boss man. Here he comes now.”

Deluca strode in like a movie star. “God a mighty,” Hawk said. “Acts like he owns the place.”

Deluca looked ridiculous with his goatee and bowtie. How did these men in Wrangler jeans and white T-shirts keep a straight face? When Johnny hurried out of the kitchen to greet Deluca, Hawk stepped in between them and smiled as the entire diner hushed in anticipation.

“What say we all grow one of these?” Hawk grabbed the wiry goatee and yanked.

“Ouch,” Deluca said, cupping his chin. “What’d you do that for?”

A pall fell over the room. Johnny grimaced, left for the kitchen, saloon doors swinging. Hawk looked for support, but even Beck stared into his coffee. Hawk made for the door, aware of their eyes on his back. Forks clinked against melamine plates, and from the pickup window, Johnny said, “Gold Tater IPA anyone?”

In the parking lot, his face stung. Hawk started the truck; it bucked along brick-lined Main Street. He wondered where Kiki was, but on the ground, his wings clipped, anchored to the earth in this dull pickup, Hawk knew he’d never find her.