

Summer 1996

Years ago, when the twins were young and life held promise for James and Maria Ambrose, James's family welcomed his rare attempts at spontaneity. Now Wick and Charlotte were fourteen, James hadn't seen a pay increase in four years, and Maria struggled to maintain Merilee, a seven-thousand-square-foot antebellum mansion that needed far more work than a vacuum and dust mop could handle. Life was tedious and sometimes difficult.

When James burst into the house that late June afternoon around three, Maria's first thought was that Mr. Slage had fired him at last. Why else would he be home before six? But then he made her close her eyes, and when she opened them, he fanned a stack of hundred-dollar bills in front of her face.

"James! What...what on earth have you done? Where did you get that money?"

"*That money*, as you so casually describe it, is three thousand dollars. Three thousand smackers that your husband received as a bonus today. We finished the bridge project in Loreauville three months early and under budget, and our company earned a bonus. The boss split it up and gave everybody an equal share. Do you know what we're doing with ours?" He was practically dancing around the kitchen; she hadn't seen him this animated—or this happy—in years.

There hadn't been extra money for a long time, and in seconds she knew a dozen things the house needed. Fixing plumbing and heating problems, the washer that was dying, and painting the house inside and out, just for starters. "I'd vote to fix things up around here," she began, but he shushed her.

"No, no, no. You will not rain on my parade, Maria. I planned this all the way home from the office. We're going on a trip. A road trip to Florida. We'll spend tonight at the casino in Biloxi, and I'll win us a little extra cash at the craps table. Then we'll drive to Pensacola and spend a week on the beach. How does that sound?"

Maria hesitated. She dared not cross him, but they desperately needed that money, and what he suggested was foolish. "You hardly ever mentioned that bridge project," she said. "You couldn't have had much to do with it..."

"Stop it, dammit! I may not be the engineer you thought you were marrying, but I helped put together the specs for the job, and I earned that bonus!"

*You only got it because the boss gave everyone an equal share.* Whether he did or not, Maria realized her husband was an unambitious man in a dead-end job. Fifteen years ago, she got pregnant and they married. Then he flunked out of engineering school at LSU and got hired on at Slage Engineering because her father and old man Slage played poker together at the Elks Lodge. He asked Slage for a favor, and James went on the payroll as an assistant something-or-other. His job title hadn't changed in all those years, and he got the occasional cost-of-living increase, but never one based on merit.

"James, we need so many things around here. That money could come in really handy."

He wouldn't hear of it. In fact, he walked to the stairs and called his children from their bedrooms into the upstairs hall. "Wick! Charlotte! Throw a few days' worth of clothes in a bag and meet me down here in five minutes. Hustle, everybody!"

"I'm busy," Wick yelled down, and Charlotte protested too, but James was adamant. He sent Maria to help them get ready. "I don't know how long we'll be gone," he said. "Just pack some clothes. We can find a laundromat if we need to."

*And one of us will do the washing,* she thought. *That would be me. What a vacation.* But she didn't voice her complaints aloud. It wouldn't go well if she did.

Charlotte carried a small duffel down the broad circular staircase, but Wick bounded down two at a time, his hands empty.

“I told you to pack a bag...”

“And I said I’m busy, Dad. I’m in the middle of something.”

“Go sit down in the library, both of you. Maria, go upstairs and pack him some clothes. We’re leaving in five minutes.”

Wick’s eyes widened in astonishment, and Charlotte wondered what her brother was up to that was so important.

“I can’t leave right now,” Wick cried. “I...uh, give me maybe fifteen minutes or so.”

“Out of the question. Go to the car. We leave now!”

“Dad, don’t make me...” Charlotte looked at him, astonished. He was about to cry.

“Unless the Pentagon has you working on a secret project, you’re out of here. Now go!”

James drove the old Volvo station wagon out to the highway and turned right. When they passed through Breaux Bridge and got on eastbound Interstate 10, Wick said, “Where are we going? Are we coming back home tonight?”

“Your old dad got a big bonus at work today, son. I’m taking the family on a road trip. It’s been years since we had fun together, and we’re heading to the sunny Florida Panhandle. Tonight we’ll stay in Biloxi; the casino’s calling my name!” He turned on the radio and told them to settle back, relax, and leave the driving to him.

“Holy shit!” Wick muttered under his breath. “Holy shit!”

“What’s wrong?” Charlotte whispered.

“I’m in deep shit, that’s what’s wrong. Now shut up and let me think.”

Over the next six days, Wick was quiet and stayed mostly to himself. He wouldn’t join the others for meals or trips to the beach, instead sitting by the motel’s swimming pool for hours on end. And he refused to confide in Charlotte, his twin sister, who usually knew everything about his antics, and who supported him by keeping her mouth shut when she might have gotten him in trouble.

In her wildest imagination, she couldn’t have dreamed what Wick had done this time.