

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Buster McNath was already pissed off when he sank ankle-deep in the mud outside Ted Gilliam's home that night. It hadn't been pouring when he'd left the job site to pay the lazy bum a visit he really couldn't afford. He could barely see through the sheets of water falling from the skies. The trip down the backwoods lane to Ted's house had been easy enough for his pickup. He hadn't expected the ground to be so soft and deep. Water brimming with clumps of saturated earth poured into a hole in the sole of his boots. He aimed the beam of his Rayovac at his feet and groaned.

"Goddammit!" Buster gruffed. Those Montgomery Wards Powr House boots were practically brand new. He'd already cussed that dumb son of a bitch Roy Robinson for dropping planks nails-up where people have to walk. While eyeing the oncoming weather, Buster had stepped on a protruding nail and driven it entirely through the sole. He'd been lucky, however. The tip of it had only penetrated the space right between his first and second digits. Should've fired Roy's ass for that, but Buster already had too much on his mind.

The wet sock inside his boot was the final straw. If he'd had any inklings about a change of heart when he'd arrived

outside Ted's house, they were gone. He was going to get fired tonight.

The mud yanked at his boot as he wrenched it free. He shook that foot wildly in front of him, trying to rid himself of the annoying slosh in the moc toe. The ooky stuff had found its way inside easily enough, but it wasn't keen to leave.

"Shit," Buster mumbled. "Forget it." He glared at the front door of Ted's house which, bizarrely, was standing partially open despite the nasty wind and rain. It creaked on its hinges with each powerful gust and then slowly returned to its original angle, not quite closed but not entirely open.

"Damn thing's not plumb," he said. "Just like Gilliam. Should've fired him a long time ago."

He stormed to the door and pounded three times on the facing with the ball of his right fist.

"Gilliam! Where you at, boy? It's Buster!" He waited. The only response was the driving rain pouring from the gutters on each side of the front porch.

"Mrs. Donna?" he called, softening his tone a bit. "It's Buster McNath. Ted didn't show up at the job site today. Any idea where he is?"

No reply.

Buster sighed. *Well, now you gonna go and make me feel bad about firing ya if something's happened to ya.*

"Ted?" he tried once more. When that produced no response, Buster placed a palm on the front door and pushed it inward. He stepped across the threshold into total darkness. He fumbled for a light switch on the interior wall with his left out. He found one and flipped it up. Nothing.

"Power must be out. This just gets better and better, don't it?"

Suddenly glad he hadn't left the flashlight in the truck, Buster aimed it into the rooms beyond him and scanned from right to left. No sign of life. He had walked into what looked like a living area. A kitchen opened to the right. A hallway in the back of the room led into darker depths than the beam of his Rayovac wouldn't reach.

"Ted? Mrs. Donna?"

He treaded cautiously through the living area. The bedrooms were probably in the back of that hall. Buster had never made a habit of walking into folks' houses without an invitation, much less their bedrooms. But something about the quiet here wasn't sitting right with him. He wondered whether Ted missed work for some reason besides being a lazy, good-for-nothin' drunk who probably belonged in a prison pulling levers on a license plate press more than he belonged on a construction site with a saw in his hand.

The first door he arrived at was on the right side of the hallway. Buster peered in without stepping through, shining his flashlight in every corner. *This must be the nursery.* Baby Gilliam's crib stood against the far wall. Beside it sat a rocking chair with a small blue blanket draped over one arm as if waiting for mother and child to return. The room was stacked with stuff mothers require for baby care, at least as Buster understood it. There was no indication that the family had packed up and left town.

He backed out of the room and turned to examine the door on the left side of the hallway. This one was closed. "Ted?" He knocked and waited. Silence. The doorknob felt weird in his grip. A shiver of either fear or excitement crept from his balls and into his belly when he turned it and pushed the door.