

don't call me daughter

Chapter 1

Ray Flynn and what he saw

Sunday/Monday Morning

The first shot of whiskey was harsh. The second was smoother. The third brought the calmness Ray Flynn so desperately needed. He sat on a tall stool at Jake's, hunched over the wooden bar, hands trembling, heart beating like a trip hammer. Overwhelmed.

Earlier that afternoon, he had been fishing along the shore of the Altamaha River. The fish were not biting and the hot, afternoon sun made him drowsy. He could barely keep his eyes open. He decided to leave his line in the water while he nodded off. With a long, sure cast, he landed the bait in the middle of the river where the current ran the fastest. He waited for the line to tighten, and anchored the rod between two large rocks. He leaned against a tree and slid the bill of his cap down until it touched his nose, then fell asleep.

A loud splash woke him. He was not alone. He carefully moved the bill of his cap above his eyes so he could see what was happening. He saw two men struggling with a large, heavy object on the shoreline a short distance away. They dragged it, arranged it, and seemed intent on dumping it into the river. He was pretty sure the object was a body, and from the pink fabric that trailed behind it, maybe female.

He sat as still as possible, wishing he was invisible. The two men were easier to see now. They stood up on the shore and watched the last evidence of the body submerge into the dark water. Circles on the water's surface above it widened until they disappeared entirely. It was as if it never happened.

Curiosity quickly turned to fear when he realized he had just watched two men dispose of a body in the river. If they had any idea he was there, he would be next. Plan A was to wait them out and leave after they were gone. There was no Plan B.

Suddenly his rod jumped clear off the rocks, clacking loudly as it hurtled toward the water, chasing the fish at the other end of the line. The men immediately turned toward the sound, and ran in his direction. Terrified, he stood up in one move and pulled his hat down over his face. With several long strides he was beyond the trees and across the road. He didn't stop walking until he reached Jake's.

Jake's Bar felt like a safe haven to Ray. Everything was familiar, everyone was familiar. After gulping the shots down, he switched to Jack Daniels and coke. It warmed his insides and numbed his

brain. He drank slowly until he started to breathe normally. The liquor didn't solve his problems, but it did help cushion them.

Around supper time, Larry came in and sat next to him. He trusted Larry, and he told him everything. His friend listened silently. It was apparent Ray's life was in danger, which meant anyone he talked to was in danger, too. Larry wiped his mouth on the bottom of his shirt, slid off the stool, and limped out of the bar. Self-preservation.

By ten o'clock, the whiskey had affected Ray's balance. He was banking off the walls to the bathroom like a billiard ball in a game of pool. He stopped drinking but the damage was done. When his head grew too heavy to hold up, it landed face-first on the bar where he fell into a dreamless sleep.

Jake shook him awake at closing time. He had finished the evening chores. The chairs were turned over on the tables, glasses washed, and floor swept. "Time to go home," he told him.

Ray opened his eyes, then raised his head off the bar. His head was throbbing and he could hear his heartbeat in his ears. He wiped the drool from his mouth with the back of his hand, and rubbed it on his pants. When he remembered the men and the body, his heart felt like it flipped over and his hands started shaking. He didn't think the men had a good look at him, but he would have to be very careful. Stay under the radar. Right now, he just wanted to go home and sleep in his bed.

"I'm awake," he said, sitting up. He tried to stand when he got off the bar stool, but his legs felt boneless, sending him sprawling onto the floor. Jake helped him up.

"This isn't like you, Ray. What's up?"

He thought about telling Jake. "You wouldn't believe what I saw," he said, instead.

"What'd you see?"

He didn't know who to trust. "You wouldn't believe it."

Jake laughed. "You're right. I probably wouldn't."

Ray was up and moving toward the door. Home was a short walk away. He stumbled into the dark night, sidewalks framed with gaslights to light the way. When he reached his house, he could hear Walter howling for him. He smiled, and turned the key in the doorknob until the door opened. The Bassett Hound bellowed louder. He squatted down to rub the dog's ears. "It's okay, Walter. I'm home."

But the dog wasn't looking at him anymore. Walter was focused on something behind him. Aware that he hadn't heard the door close behind him, Ray stood up slowly. Before he could turn and look, a hand covered his mouth and jerked his head back. In the final seconds of his life, Ray remembered he left his tackle box with his fishing license behind the tree.

Walter threw his head back and howled.