

CHAPTER ONE

WHOLESOME GOODNESS

Riley Mansfield sat quietly in a world of dull glistening. The stool was wooden, and the floor was brick tile, but everything else emitted the blurred reflections of pots and pans, sinks and spigots, steel cabinets, steel stoves, steel everything. It wasn't exactly charming, Riley thought, but charm wasn't likely to be a priority for the kitchen of the First Baptist Church, Killeen, Texas. Nor should it be.

He was hiding. His Aunt Sally didn't know he was here. She didn't know he was within eight hundred miles of here. Through the double doors, Riley could hear people talking about her, paying homage, offering up tributes and all kinds of other heartwarming shit.

Riley was the picture of relaxation. He wore khaki trousers, a black dress shirt and red-and-blue striped tie. His hair, which had extended to his collar, had been freshly shorn at the Great Clips in a nearby strip mall. He looked at himself, the likeness distorted in the reflective door of a stainless-steel refrigerator.

By God, I could almost still pass for a quarterback. A veteran quarterback, but still...

The emcee sounded like a coach. He had to be. He might be an administrator now, but like most male principals and superintendents in public high schools, he had once been a coach. Riley was sure of it. He imagined Darrell Royal.

"Now, Sally, next up we've got someone real special, young lady," said Coach Royal's voice. "I'm pretty sure you're not expecting this, but you've got a relative from way back in South Carolina, and I'm told he writes pretty fair songs."

Riley heard Sally Sue Ramseur Lollis gasp. She was a drama teacher and had once been an actress. People could hear Aunt Sally gasp on the rifle range at Fort Hood. Riley had written a song for

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Sally's retirement party. When he had played it for his mother, he had fretted that perhaps Sally might cry. Sara Mansfield had lowered her chin, looked over the top of her reading glasses and said, "Riley, you know Sally Sue. She's gonna cry."

Sally cried as Riley grabbed his guitar, pushed open the double doors, walked behind tables littered with valuable Aunt Sally memorabilia, blew her a kiss and plugged in his guitar to a public-address system that, in Riley's professional estimation, might or might not work. He sang the song he had written on Tuesday, worked out on Wednesday, studied on the plane on Thursday and played over and over in a Fort Worth motel room on Friday. He had sung it over and over in the rental car driving down I-35. His fingers were trembling now, oddly.

He spoke a few words to test the sound, strumming the guitar to make sure the audio was going out into the "fellowship hall" with some rough semblance of balance. "It is apparent to me that all you folks in Texas know my aunt merely as Sally," he said, "but back in South Carolina, where her family's from, we still know her as Sally Sue."

*I knew you, Sally Sue, back before I could walk
I knew you, Sally Sue, before I could talk
Your mother wrote me letters
Your boy shared my name
Your cousin was my father
Your heartache was my pain
I remember you in Panama
You told me of L.A.
You came to town for Christmas
And stayed past New Year's Day
I remember back when Texas
Was a trip of several days
When Frances was my tour guide
But Cas knew the way*

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CHORUS

*Riley's sense of humor
Matched up with my own
I shared his love of baseball
I can't believe he's gone
I argued with his father
A most insistent man
But you raised Riley gentle
Molded in your hands*

CHORUS

*So now I'm back in Texas
This day belongs to you
I finally get to see just
Exactly what you do
I knew your sense of drama
Was advanced and well-conceived
But you don't have to tell me now
How well it's been received*

CHORUS

Though his fingers continued to tremble as he strummed the guitar, Riley pulled it off the way he always did, looking relaxed even as inside he felt nervous. Sally Lollis, who had for thirty-two years been drama coach at the local high school, continued to weep throughout it, and when it was over, Riley stepped down, leaned his guitar against the stage and walked into the crowd to embrace his aunt.

“I tried to put some little phrases in there that would mean something to just you and me,” he said, “and at the same time, I tried to make it where it would be entertaining even to people who didn’t know all the little hidden meanings.”

“Oh, Riley, this means so much to me. You performed magnificently.”

“I reckon,” he said. After Sally released him from her robust hug, he awkwardly walked over to a table nearby and watched as

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would-be Coach Royal introduced the next testimonial.

The remaining tributes were equally divided between fellow faculty members and former students. Coaches talked about how much Sally's late son, Riley John Lollis, had meant to them when he played baseball and football for them. A struggling actor told about how "Miss Lollis" had helped him earn a scholarship at the University of North Texas. Two other young college graduates talked about their friendship with the son and enduring love for the mother. Afterwards, cake, punch, cheese-and-sausage balls, chips and dip were enjoyed by all. Then Sally invited Riley to join a small group of friends for dinner at a nearby Italian restaurant favored by "officers from Fort Hood." Sally's father had been an officer at Fort Hood, which is why her part of the family had settled there after he retired.

At the restaurant, Sally explained to her friends that her nephew still lived in Henry, South Carolina, from where her family had moved when they settled in Texas. She told them he made a living as a musician and that his songs had been recorded by Jimmy Buffett, John Hiatt (actually it was John Prine) and others. She also told them that he had played football in college and that she had known him since he had lived at his grandparents' house, along with his parents, until he was two.

Sally wasn't precisely Riley's aunt but rather his second cousin. Her first cousin had been Riley's late father. Just like her mother, also deceased, she often called Riley by his father's name. Riley never corrected her. She'd been doing it his whole life. He was sure it was confusing to Sally's friends, though.

"Yeah, Buffett recorded a song of mine, and I guess that's the song some people know me by," Riley said. "It's just a feel-good song, I reckon, not much heavy lifting. It's funny how the simplest little songs you write are the ones that wind up being the most successful."

"Did you ever think about becoming a recording artist yourself?" asked the only other male member of the party, whom

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Riley remembered as being Riley John's baseball coach at some point. Riley was pretty sure he'd said he "played a little guitar," too.

"Well, I am, a little. I've recorded several albums, one that came out just a couple months ago. But I guess you'd say that I make a living off royalties from my songs, and I kind of just break even selling CDs and appearing in person," Riley said. "I think it's good to try to stay visible, and I don't think there's anything I enjoy more than singing my songs in front of audiences, but I haven't ever really had that burning desire to be a big star."

The coach nodded and said "I hear you," but the look on his face suggested that he found Riley's attitude similar to a third baseman who wanted to play but didn't care about winning.

To each his own, Riley thought, determined to remain convivial. He had Diet Coke with his ravioli and refrained from the use of profanity.

"I just kind of like to do my thing," Riley said. "Not that I'm good enough or anything like that, but I've been around famous people, and there's a trade-off. I believe I'd rather make a little less money and have a little more privacy."

It was impossible to explain it to people who had plenty of privacy and didn't appreciate it.

Sally invited Riley to stay over, and she may have even meant it, but he explained that he had a flight to catch the following morning and that he needed to be heading back up the interstate to Fort Worth.

Back on the road, Riley realized why his hands had been trembling. He couldn't remember it ever happening before. It was because he was sober and he didn't often play music in front of people sober. He'd known he should've smoked a little weed in the parking lot, but after all, it was a church and it would've been a really stupid way to fuck up a surprise party. Riley hadn't come all the way from South Carolina just to mess things up.

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The next morning Riley rose early, blazed a little and took special care to hide the rest of his weed in his overnight bag. Then he ate voraciously at the motel's free breakfast and headed for the Dallas-Fort Worth airport and an American Airlines flight home.

As it turned out, it wasn't that easy. The flight from DFW had a big, flashing "canceled" blinking on the video boards when he walked in with his laptop in a backpack, carrying a guitar and the overnight bag. Riley checked his cell and found a text message with essentially the same information. After fifteen minutes in line, he found himself rerouted through New York's LaGuardia Airport, which, in turn, meant that he would be getting home five hours late. It wasn't a big deal. He had a gig on Monday night at a small bar in Columbia, so, as long as he got home sometime on Sunday, everything would be cool, though slightly more complicated. He checked the bag with the airline and proceeded through the security check points with the backpack and guitar.

For two hours, Riley consumed a blueberry muffin and cup of coffee, reading first the *New York Times* and then a couple of Annie Proulx short stories from a collection he'd bought secondhand in Dover, Delaware a month earlier and never removed from his backpack.

For a time, Riley watched the people bustling through the airport. He thought it amusing to separate the commuters by parts of the country. Some people could be from anywhere. Others were obviously either from abroad or obviously still connected there. Some wore their regions in their hair, their footwear and maybe even the looks on their faces. Women were particularly interesting, he thought. Many Northeasterners, Riley reasoned, tried with some diligence not to be particularly attractive. He thought there might be a song in it but couldn't come up with a hook.

Riley got mildly annoyed when the gate agent hassled him about his travel guitar.

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“You may have to check that,” she said.

“Ma’am, whatever you say, but the very reason people use undersized guitars like this one is so they can carry them on planes. They’re really pretty easy to fit in the overhead bins.”

The woman frowned, disappointed at Riley’s lack of submissiveness.

“Well, check with the flight attendant,” she said, waving him reluctantly past.

Riley looked around, reckoning that the plane was only going to be half full. It was hassle for the purpose of hassle. “Another glamorous day of air travel,” he mumbled, drawing a nod from the businessman filing in behind him.

“Woman must be a Yankee who don’t like Southerners,” he muttered to no one, because the businessman might himself be a Yankee.

CHAPTER TWO

SHIT HAPPENS

Riley Mansfield considered the words of the old Simon and Garfunkel tune “Homeward Bound.” He wondered whether that was originally Simon and Garfunkel, or whether it was by Tompall and the Glaser Brothers. Simon, he thought, but wasn’t sure.

In any event, home was where Riley Mansfield was finally headed. *Jesus*, he thought, *it’s a prop plane. Whoever heard of flying in a prop plane all the way from New York City to South Carolina?* Damn cash-strapped airlines, cutting corners at every turn. The plane was called a Dash 8, and Riley had flown on more than his share, though usually in short junkets from Philly to Allentown, or LaGuardia to Elmira.

With both his Baby Taylor and the backpack safely “stowed” (as the flight attendants insisted on saying) in the overhead compartment, Riley settled in for the long flight to Greenville-Spartanburg, in his native South Carolina. Riley still remembered when it was fashionable to call Greenville-Spartanburg Airport “the Jetport,” as if it didn’t cater to aircraft that were technologically obsolete. “Jetport” gradually came to sound as stupid to the natives as it did to the cynical outsiders flying in, so the term had gone out of fashion.

Greenville was where Riley had gone to college. It was where he had played quarterback, though not with overwhelming success (“I had my moments,” he was fond of saying), for the Piedmont Bobcats. It was where his country-folk music was still well known. He’d been a gypsy for so long that he no longer considered himself fit for any other life. Home was where he washed clothes, paid bills and cut grass. He lived in Hampton Inns, Motel 6’s and Microtels. Home he yearned for in theory. In practice, home was not without its complications. Home, in fact, was forty-five minutes away from both Greenville and the airport. But both were in range. Greenville was his home metropolitan area. His agent

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would call it his home market.

Monday night was going to be good, though, he thought. Riley was scheduled to appear at a bar north of Columbia. He couldn't remember the name, even though he'd appeared there before. He'd check out his MySpace page when he got home, probably shortly after he loaded some dirty clothes in the washer. There would be a decent crowd, even on a Monday night. Friends, or maybe merely fans, would be there. He'd just be on stage, guitar plugged into an amp, but that wouldn't be as desolate as some coffeehouse in Blowing Rock or honky-tonk in Little Rock. This would be intimate. This would be cool. Riley was tired. His long legs felt cramped. Sometimes that restless feeling in the legs—the legs worn down by years of athletic contests and repaired by a succession of surgeries—was the only warning in his psyche that he had become fatigued. *Thank God for small favors. Thank God for exit rows.* He leaned back, stretching those legs as far under the seat in front as space would allow, closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Excuse, please.” It was a foreign voice. Riley looked up. A man with olive skin stood above him. Apparently the aisle seat was his. Riley yawned and slid next to the window. No more words were exchanged. No “Thank you.” The man just sat down, nervously. *Oh, well, it's the language barrier.* The man's eyes were expressionless, cold even, but Riley thought little of it. *These are desperate times,* he mused. A man who looks like this one could be Indian, American or otherwise; or Mexican; but in the wake of terrorism and the war in Iraq, the first thought was Arab and the second was terrorist. He couldn't help but be suspicious. He scolded himself. *A terrorist who looks like me could blow up anything he wanted.* Riley wanted to make some attempt at conversation but couldn't figure out a way to break the ice. The man likely wouldn't understand his humor or would take any comment the wrong way. Riley sighed and said nothing, but now he couldn't sleep. He pulled the book mark from Annie Proulx and

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began reading.

The flight attendant arrived. She was a young black woman, her enthusiasm not yet quenched by flight after flight, day after day. She explained the obligations of sitting in an exit row. Riley didn't even try to act like he was paying attention. He could've recited the spiel for her.

"Are you willing to assist the captain in the event of an emergency?" she asked.

"Yes," Riley said on cue. The other man merely nodded.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "You have to say it verbally."

"Yes," the man said, a bit impatient. "Yes. Whatever."

Riley gave the woman a look that said "Wonder what this guy's problem is?" Just a momentary opening of the eyes wide and the slightest shake of the head. It was enough to make her chuckle.

"What's your name, ma'am?"

"Shawna."

"It's a pretty name: Shawna. Don't you worry about a thing. I ain't on as many of these buckets as you are, but I've been on more than my share, and in the 'unlikely event of an emergency,' I will promptly obey your every command."

Riley's gregariousness seemed to make the nervous man...more nervous.

"Why, thank you..."

"I'm Riley."

"Thank you, Riley," she said, turning away.

"And, oh, Shawna?"

"Yes."

"I won't even think about tampering with any of the lavatory smoke detectors, either, because I know it's prohibited by law."

"That's so considerate of you," she said with an agreeable touch of sarcasm. "I would like to wish you a pleasant flight, Riley. By the way, the seat across the aisle appears to be unoccupied. Would you care to move over? It might be a bit more roomy."

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“Why, yes, Shawna, I appreciate the consideration.” As he moved over, he thought about asking Shawna if she’d like to come to the show, which was kind of ridiculous since it was more than twenty-four hours and a hundred miles from Greenville. It even occurred to him, ever so lightly, to ask her if she would marry him, or if she was married, or if she’d like to fuck, or if she’d like to get high. But, oh, hell, she would undoubtedly be turning right around and flying somewhere else. He’d never actually been with a black woman, unless a lap dance in Indianapolis counted. That’d go over well at home, though, in retrospect, probably not any worse than a kid with an honors degree and acceptance to law school deciding he wanted to play guitar and write songs for a living. Home was accustomed to weirdness.

The plane took off. Riley studied the Gotham skyline, squinted to see if he could find Yankee Stadium and the Meadowlands in the distance but settled for Shea Stadium, which was in its last year of operation. Riley soon became drowsy. Vaguely, he had lyrics in mind. He gave up on the book. The words were darting across his mind without having any effect. He wanted to write a song about the president, one that made fun of the fact that the president had been a college cheerleader. The name he had in mind was “Go! Fight! Win!” He sat there happily floating in the nether land between the conscious and unconscious, lyrics and rhyme flitting about with a lessened awareness that he was riding on a plane and that the trip would soon be over. For over an hour, he slept. The plane began its descent toward Greenville-Spartanburg Airport. Riley awakened and glanced out and looked for golf courses, a favorite hobby. He never failed to marvel at how many suburban homeowners owned pools. And how many occupants apparently played golf.

The man who had once been sitting alongside him had inexplicably gotten up. Riley felt like informing him that the fasten-seatbelts sign was on, but he wasn’t completely sure it wasn’t a dream. If Shawna noticed, she wasn’t saying anything.

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Riley looked up the aisle and saw her strapped into the little fold-down seat, apparently preoccupied with writing details into a logbook of some sort. Riley's mind was hazy, and it was hard to differentiate between the real and dream worlds. The plane was definitely close to landing. The man opened the overhead bin. *Wait a minute.* There wasn't anything in that bin but Riley's guitar, the Baby Taylor he could carry on a plane. The man hadn't had anything with him when he came down the aisle. The realization brought Riley wide awake. He started to get up, but unfortunately he failed to allow for the fact that a seat belt held him in place. Bouncing back when he sprang against the strap, he realized that he probably should think this through. *No need to panic. Stop obsessing over the color of the man's skin.* He closed his eyes again. The man wasn't necessarily an Arab or a Muslim, and if he were, the odds were overwhelming that he wasn't some fanatical nutcase. Radical Muslims were to their faith no different than what the Ku Klux Klan, or the Oklahoma City bombers (*Sounds like a roller-derby team*) were to Christianity. There were, however, no more than five or ten minutes until landing.

The man returned to his seat, closing the overhead bin, and to Riley's eye, seemed a bit stiff. Riley looked at him directly. The man avoided his gaze. *Goddamn it, he sure looks suspicious.*

Riley unbuckled his seat belt and got up himself. He reopened the overhead bin. Nothing there but his guitar. He reached for it. Everything seemed okay. *Shit. What's wrong with me?* Riley started to sit back down. He stopped, though. Just for safety's sake, he unzipped the side of the cloth gig bag. Something was glowing inside. A red light, dancing ever so slightly around the meshed polyester. It came from beneath the strings, down inside the guitar. Riley was positive this wasn't normal.

Oh, fuck, Riley thought, but he said not a word. He looked at the man. This time their stares met. Neither said anything. The man's eyes were full of uncertainty, not hate, but a certain resentment showed up, too. Perhaps the resentment was for the

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infidel, the American with long brown hair and a denim shirt. Perhaps the uncertainty was that of a man ready to meet his maker, ready to become a righteous martyr for his cause. This man's eyes seemed to be saying that nothing could be done to prevent a random act of violence.

Or, then again, Riley could be embarrassingly deluded. His mind raced. *Is it possible that this isn't a bomb? Well, fuck, what else would it be?* It certainly was remarkably compact. *Shit!* The laidback strummer of guitars had to disappear. Riley had to go back in time and become a man of action again. He had to make quick decisions, audible at the line. If this was all some horrible misconception, he was going to wish he hadn't been a quarterback.

Without a word, he yanked the guitar, bag and all, out of the overhead bin, wheeled around, pulled the emergency latch and kicked the door. It made the slightest bounce because it opened to the inside. Wind whistled through the cabin, but the altitude was low and there wasn't much problem with depressurization on a prop plane. An alarm went off. Lights switched on in the floor and blinked. Other passengers shrieked. One burly man leaped to his feet and, staggering, tried to shove him. Curiously, the could-be Arab remained in his seat, almost serene. He didn't appear to be worried. Shawna, on the other hand, did appear to be worried. She was alongside him now, trying to get him to stop, trying to close the exit door.

The burly man had him by one arm, struggling to tear the guitar from his grasp. Shawna had him by the other, stunned by the fact that this man who had been so pleasant just two and a half hours earlier had now yanked open the emergency exit while the plane was still in the air.

Riley had no choice. He let go of the guitar with the right hand, caught it and yanked it back with the left and, in so doing, shed Shawna's grip. She bounced off a seat and landed on the floor. Riley then punched the other, presumably innocent man, nailing him in the nose. He called Riley "a prick" as he fell, blood starting

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to squirt. Riley retrieved the guitar case, pulled the emergency door inside, threw the guitar case out the opening and watched it fall. *Goodbye, little Baby Taylor.*

“What the fuck are you doing?” It was Shawna. He barely knew her but doubted her words came from a training manual. The terrifying possibility that he might have overreacted occurred to him. *No, no*, he thought, it was a rational decision, a conclusion any man would’ve reached. *Wonder if she’ll say “fuck” again?*

Just above the tree tops, the case exploded. Riley and Shawna saw it, because the plane was banking toward the runway and they were looking backward and peering out the space where once an emergency exit had been. He had the edge of the overhead bin in one hand and Shawna’s waist in the other. He continued to hold her as the plane descended. The plane’s wheels touched down. The landing was smooth, all things considered.

Riley grabbed Shawna and placed his hands on each side of her face, as gently as adrenaline would allow.

“It was a bomb, Shawna,” he yelled above the swirling wind. “A bomb.”

“No shit,” she said, smiling. Riley felt mildly aroused. Shawna got cool in a hurry.

“He put it in my guitar,” Riley said. “When I opened it, the bag, I saw a red light flickering. I looked inside it. I was barely awake, but I got up and saw what was happening.”

The flight attendant headed back to the front of the plane. In the cockpit, undoubtedly, there would be some interest in what had occurred.

The man still sat there, strapped into his seat. Now he appeared to be praying, lips moving, and it must have been frustrating in that atmosphere to determine the direction of Mecca. Riley wondered why he wasn’t screaming that God would bring destruction to the infidels even if this particular messenger had failed. He didn’t. Somehow he’d managed to get a bomb on the plane, but he didn’t appear to have any means to kill himself or others with anything

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less subtle than a bomb. *No backup plan*, thought Riley. *No hatred in his eyes, just weird resignation*. Gradually the peaceful expression gave way to a look of frustration. Riley, on the other hand, had a look that translated roughly to: “Thank you, Jesus, thank you, Lord.”

With extraordinary swiftness, it was over, though it seemed to take an inordinately long time to taxi to the terminal. The plane stopped several times before resuming. When it finally came to a decisive stop, it was nowhere near the terminal. Squad cars converged. Armed men climbed on board to arrest and remove the thwarted bomber. They handled him harshly, though he offered no resistance, this abject failure in the cause of religious martyrdom. Riley’s transition from nutcase to hero was immediate. Word had drifted ahead of them somehow, probably from the pilot’s cockpit. Shawna’s composure had been impressive, apart from the f-bomb. Few women—or God forbid, male—flight attendants could’ve let the cockpit know what happened with such clarity. Riley thought about that morning, how he’d almost worn a Todd Snider tee shirt and shorts instead of a button-up shirt and jeans. If he had, he’d be getting off a plane, with TV cameras arriving and sirens wailing, with these words across his chest:

TREE HUGGIN’

POT SMOKIN’

PORN WATCHIN’

LAZY-ASS HIPPIE

The pilot and co-pilot shook his hands. At the top of the steps, out on the tarmac, Riley thought that the scene made it look like he was a real star, someone people knew. SUVs were arriving, television call letters emblazoned on the sides. How could they possibly have gotten there so quickly? It was as if the Stones had arrived on US Airways Express in a prop plane. Shawna was back. He hugged her.

“I really loved the fuck out of that guitar,” he said. Some choice for the last words he would likely ever say to her.

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Interrogation, from a progressively higher ranking assortment of law-enforcement officials, lasted into the night. They sheltered him from the press and told him to keep a low profile and not go anywhere. Every time they told him that, Riley lied and said he would. He told them he didn't know yet where he would be staying, but he gave them a number and said he could be reached via cell phone. When his mother called, Riley gave her his love and said he didn't have time to talk.

"Watch the news," he told her. "I'll be home sometime tonight, but I'll be tired, so I'll be over in the morning to tell everybody all about it."

Everything went fine until the Federal Bureau of Investigation came calling. Agents Henry Poston and Ike Spurgeon introduced themselves. Poston reminded Riley of Willem Dafoe in *Mississippi Burning*. Spurgeon was mildly reminiscent of Sidney Poitier's character—Tibbs, "They call me *Mister* Tibbs," was it Virgil Tibbs?—circa *In the Heat of the Night*. Movie characters were Riley's only reference point. The only FBI agents he'd ever experienced were in the movies. No, come to think of it, he had talked to an FBI agent on the phone once, but that was when a college classmate had interviewed for a job and the agent was doing a background check.

The possibility that he could be a suspect had totally eluded Riley. The bomb had been concealed in a guitar he owned. On the other hand, he obviously hadn't wanted to blow up the plane, or else he wouldn't have risked his ass getting rid of it.

Poston asked, "Why did you place an explosive device in your guitar, Mr. Mansfield?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"Not at all. You don't mind me calling you Riley, do you, Mr. Mansfield?"

"No," he replied. "All my friends call me Riley."

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“You’re a musician,” said Agent Spurgeon. “Are you struggling with your career? Did you need some stunt to give it a boost?”

“You think this was all an elaborate publicity stunt?”

“No,” said Poston. “Agent Spurgeon merely asked a question.”

“I’m assuming you arrested the Muslim-looking fucker who stashed that little bomb in my bag.”

“Well, Riley, it turns out that he was about as unlikely a suspect as you are,” said Poston. “He’s actually not Muslim. He’s from South Florida. Cuban descent. He runs a hardware store.”

“I mean, you do have him in custody?”

“Of course, Mr. Mansfield. With whom do you think you’re dealing?”

A chill ran down Riley’s spine. This was about as scary as the incident itself. The reality of what had happened hit him. His guitar. Bomb inside it. Everything blown all to hell in a grove of peach trees.

“Did you interview the flight attendant? Shawna?”

“We have a statement. We haven’t talked to her yet. The sheriff’s deputies have debriefed her,” said Spurgeon, who pulled a notebook from his open briefcase. “Miss...Williams.”

“All I know is her first name’s Shawna,” Riley said.

“That’s right. Shawna Williams.”

Riley collected his thoughts. “She had to see everything,” he said. “It’s her job to pay attention, right? She was facing back, because she was strapped into one of those fold-down seats at the back of the pilot’s cabin. She had to see the man get up, open the overhead bin and jam that thing through my guitar strings. I mean, it wasn’t much larger than a baseball, and I didn’t really see what it was. I wouldn’t know it was there except there was a red light flickering from inside the guitar. But Shawna had to see him get up, tamper with my guitar bag. I was asleep and just kind of came to. After a minute, I realized there wasn’t anything but my guitar in the bin he was fiddling around with. She had to see him get up, sit

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back down, and then me get up to see what the hell was going on.

“Besides, when I told Shawna what he did, he didn’t say a word. He didn’t protest or anything.”

“How could he do it, Riley?”

“Do what?”

“Get the bomb through the guitar strings.”

“It’s easy. I always loosen them before I get on a plane.”

The rest of the interview was somewhat perfunctory. Riley guessed he had passed some sort of test. The agents left, and Shawna apparently corroborated what he said. At 9:45 p.m., they returned to tell him he was free to go. He took their business cards and told them he would be back in touch if he thought of something that might be useful to the investigation.

The cops gave Riley a ride back to GSP, where he picked up his car. He decided he needed a drink, so he headed toward Greenville instead of home.

Timmy’s Bar had a redneck name but was really sort of a hybrid between a honky-tonk and a coffeehouse, a tad funky to be relegated fully to honky-tonk status. It was also a private club, which meant that under South Carolina law, it was open to its members on Sunday. Membership was hardly exclusive, though. Hardly anyone was there at ten thirty, when Riley walked through the door.

Harvey Kitchens stood behind the bar. “Shit,” he said. “If it ain’t the big hero.”

Riley rolled his eyes. “What can I say? A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do. Pour me a shot.”

“Jack?”

“Fine.” Riley knocked it back. “Now give me a Budweiser, we’ll talk a little and I’ll be on my way. I’m looking for no trouble, barkeep.”

“So what the fuck?” Harvey asked. Riley told his story.

“You don’t got a cigarette, do you?”

Harvey flipped open a pack of Marlboro Lights. Riley lit up.

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“I thought you only smoked after you got high,” Harvey said.

“It changes a little,” Riley said, “after I’ve foiled an international terrorist plot.”

“Ah,” said Harvey.

“Sometimes, in rare instances, I smoke before I get high,” Riley said.

“So, when you want to play here?” Harvey asked.

“When’s the next open night?”

Harvey pulled a clipboard from under the counter, leafed through a couple pages and said, “Tuesday. Be damned. We got nothing scheduled Tuesday.”

“Tuesday it is,” Riley said. “Now I’d better be headed home.

“Ain’t got the shakes no more.”