Chapter 1

It came by mail, regular postage, the old-fashioned way since the Judge was almost eighty and distrusted modern devices. Forget e-mail and even faxes. He didn't use an answering machine and had never been fond of the telephone. He pecked out his letters with both index fingers, one feeble key at a time, hunched over his old Underwood manual on a rolltop desk under the portrait of Nathan Bedford Forrest. The Judge's grandfather had fought with Forrest at Shiloh and throughout the Deep South, and to him no figure in history was more revered. For thirty-two years, the Judge had quietly refused to hold court on July 13, Forrest's birthday.

It came with another letter, a magazine, and two invoices, and was routinely placed in the law school mailbox of Professor Ray Atlee. He recognized it immediately since such envelopes had been a part of his life for as long as he could remember. It was from his father, a man he too called the Judge.

Professor Atlee studied the envelope, uncertain whether he should open it right there or wait a moment. Good news or bad, he never knew with the Judge, though the old man was dying and good news had been rare. It was thin and appeared to contain only one sheet of paper; nothing unusual about that. The Judge was frugal with the written word, though he'd once been known for his windy lectures from the bench.

It was a business letter, that much was certain. The Judge was not one for small talk, hated gossip and idle chitchat, whether written or spoken. Ice tea with him on the porch would be a refighting of the Civil War, probably at Shiloh, where he would once again lay all blame for the Confederate defeat at the shiny, untouched boots of General Pierre G. T. Beauregard, a man he would hate even in heaven, if by chance they met there.

He'd be dead soon. Seventy-nine years old with cancer in his stomach. He was overweight, a diabetic, a heavy pipe smoker, had a bad heart that had survived three attacks, and a host of lesser ailments that had tormented him for twenty years and were now finally closing in for the kill. The pain was constant. During their last phone call three weeks earlier, a call initiated by Ray because the Judge thought long distance was a rip-off, the old man sounded weak and strained. They had talked for less than two minutes.

The return address was gold-embossed: Chancellor Reuben V. Atlee, 25th Chancery District, Ford County Courthouse, Clanton, Mississippi. Ray slid the envelope into the magazine and began walking. Judge Atlee no longer held the office of chancellor. The voters had retired him nine years earlier, a bitter defeat from which he would never recover. Thirty-two years of diligent service to his people, and they tossed him out in favor of a younger man with radio and television ads. The Judge had refused to campaign. He claimed he had too much work to do, and, more important, the people knew him well and if they wanted to reelect him then they would do so. His strategy had seemed arrogant to many. He carried Ford County but got shellacked in the other five.

It took three years to get him out of the courthouse. His office on the second floor had survived a fire and had missed two renovations. The Judge had not allowed them to touch it with paint or hammers. When the county supervisors finally convinced him that he had to leave or be evicted, he boxed up three decades' worth of useless files and notes and dusty old books and took them home and stacked them in his study. When the study was full, he lined them down the hallways into the dining room and even the foyer.

Ray nodded to a student who was seated in the hall. Outside his office, he spoke to a colleague. Inside, he locked the door behind

him and placed the mail in the center of his desk. He took off his jacket, hung it on the back of the door, stepped over a stack of thick law books he'd been stepping over for half a year, and then to himself uttered his daily vow to organize the place.

The room was twelve by fifteen, with a small desk and a small sofa, both covered with enough work to make Ray seem like a very busy man. He was not. For the spring semester he was teaching one section of antitrust. And he was supposed to be writing a book, another drab, tedious volume on monopolies that would be read by no one but would add handsomely to his pedigree. He had tenure, but like all serious professors he was ruled by the 'publish or perish' dictum of academic life.

He sat at his desk and shoved papers out of the way.

The envelope was addressed to Professor N. Ray Atlee, University of Virginia School of Law, Charlottesville, Virginia. The *e*'s and *o*'s were smudged together. A new ribbon had been needed for a decade. The Judge didn't believe in zip codes either.

The N was for Nathan, after the general, but few people knew it. One of their uglier fights had been over the son's decision to drop Nathan altogether and plow through life simply as Ray.

The Judge's letters were always sent to the law school, never to his son's apartment in downtown Charlottesville. The Judge liked titles and

important addresses, and he wanted folks in Clanton, even the postal workers, to know that his son was a professor of law. It was unnecessary. Ray had been teaching (and writing) for thirteen years, and those who mattered in Ford County knew it.

He opened the envelope and unfolded a single sheet of paper. It too was grandly embossed with the Judge's name and former title and address, again minus the zip code. The old man probably had an unlimited supply of the stationery.

It was addressed to both Ray and his younger brother, Forrest, the only two offspring of a bad marriage that had ended in 1969 with the death of their mother. As always, the message was brief:

> Please make arrangements to appear in my study on Sunday, May 7, at 5 P.M., to discuss the administration of my estate.
> Sincerely, Reuben V. Atlee.

The distinctive signature had shrunk and looked unsteady. For years it had been emblazoned across orders and decrees that had changed countless lives. Decrees of divorce, child custody, termination of parental rights, adoptions. Orders settling will contests, election contests, land disputes, annexation fights. The Judge's autograph had been authoritative and well known; now it was the vaguely familiar scrawl of a very sick old man.

Sick or not, though, Ray knew that he would be present in his father's study at the appointed time. He had just been summoned, and as irritating as it was, he had no doubt that he and his brother would drag themselves before His Honor for one more lecture. It was typical of the Judge to pick a day that was convenient for him without consulting anybody else.

It was the nature of the Judge, and perhaps most judges for that matter, to set dates for hearings and deadlines with little regard for the convenience of others. Such heavy-handedness was learned and even required when dealing with crowded dockets, reluctant litigants, busy lawyers, lazy lawyers. But the Judge had run his family in pretty much the same manner as he'd run his courtroom, and that was the principal reason Ray Atlee was teaching law in Virginia and not practicing it in Mississippi.

He read the summons again, then put it away, on top of the pile of current matters to deal with. He walked to the window and looked out at the courtyard where everything was in bloom. He wasn't angry or bitter, just frustrated that his father could once again dictate so much. But the old man was dying, he told himself. Give him a break. There wouldn't be many more trips home.

The Judge's estate was cloaked with mystery. The principal asset was the house – an antebellum hand-me-down from the same Atlee who'd fought with General Forrest. On a shady street

in old Atlanta it would be worth over a million dollars, but not in Clanton. It sat in the middle of five neglected acres three blocks off the town square. The floors sagged, the roof leaked, paint had not touched the walls in Ray's lifetime. He and his brother could sell it for perhaps a hundred thousand dollars, but the buyer would need twice that to make it livable. Neither would ever live there; in fact, Forrest had not set foot in the house in many years.

The house was called Maple Run, as if it were some grand estate with a staff and a social calendar. The last worker had been Irene the maid. She'd died four years earlier and since then no one had vacuumed the floors or touched the furniture with polish. The Judge paid a local felon twenty dollars a week to cut the grass, and he did so with great reluctance. Eighty dollars a month was robbery, in his learned opinion.

When Ray was a child, his mother referred to their home as Maple Run. They never had dinners at their home, but rather at Maple Run. Their address was not the Atlees on Fourth Street, but instead it was Maple Run on Fourth Street. Few other folks in Clanton had names for their homes.

She died from an aneurysm and they laid her on a table in the front parlor. For two days the town stopped by and paraded across the front porch, through the foyer, through the parlor for last respects, then to the dining room for punch and cookies. Ray and Forrest hid in the attic and

cursed their father for tolerating such a spectacle. That was their mother lying down there, a pretty young woman now pale and stiff in an open coffin.

Forrest had always called it Maple Ruin. The red and yellow maples that once lined the street had died of some unknown disease. Their rotted stumps had never been cleared. Four huge oaks shaded the front lawn. They shed leaves by the ton, far too many for anyone to rake and gather. And at least twice a year the oaks would lose a branch that would fall and crash somewhere onto the house, where it might or might not get removed. The house stood there year after year, decade after decade, taking punches but never falling.

It was still a handsome house, a Georgian with columns, once a monument to those who'd built it, and now a sad reminder of a declining family. Ray wanted nothing to do with it. For him the house was filled with unpleasant memories and each trip back depressed him. He certainly couldn't afford the financial black hole of maintaining an estate that ought to be bulldozed. Forrest would burn it before he owned it.

The Judge, however, wanted Ray to take the house and keep it in the family. This had been discussed in vague terms over the past few years. Ray had never mustered the courage to ask, 'What family?' He had no children. There was an ex-wife but no prospect of a current one.

Same for Forrest, except he had a dizzying collection of ex-girlfriends and a current housing arrangement with Ellie, a three-hundred-pound painter and potter twelve years his senior.

It was a biological miracle that Forrest had produced no children, but so far none had been discovered.

The Atlee bloodline was thinning to a sad and inevitable halt, which didn't bother Ray at all. He was living life for himself, not for the benefit of his father or the family's glorious past. He returned to Clanton only for funerals.

The Judge's other assets had never been discussed. The Atlee family had once been wealthy, but long before Ray. There had been land and cotton and slaves and railroads and banks and politics, the usual Confederate portfolio of holdings that, in terms of cash, meant nothing in the late twentieth century. It did, however, bestow upon the Atlees the status of 'family money.'

By the time Ray was ten he knew his family had money. His father was a judge and his home had a name, and in rural Mississippi this meant he was indeed a rich kid. Before she died his mother did her best to convince Ray and Forrest that they were better than most folks. They lived in a mansion. They were Presbyterians. They vacationed in Florida, every third year. They occasionally went to the Peabody Hotel in Memphis for dinner. Their clothes were nicer.

Then Ray was accepted at Stanford. His

bubble burst when the Judge said bluntly, 'I can't afford it.'

'What do you mean?' Ray had asked.

'I mean what I said. I can't afford Stanford.'

'But I don't understand.'

'Then I'll make it plain. Go to any college you want. But if you go to Sewanee, then I'll pay for it.'

Ray went to Sewanee, without the baggage of family money, and was supported by his father, who provided an allowance that barely covered tuition, books, board, and fraternity dues. Law school was at Tulane, where Ray survived by waiting tables at an oyster bar in the French Quarter.

For thirty-two years, the Judge had earned a chancellor's salary, which was among the lowest in the country. While at Tulane Ray read a report on judicial compensation, and he was saddened to learn that Mississippi judges were earning fifty-two thousand dollars a year when the national average was ninety-five thousand.

The Judge lived alone, spent little on the house, had no bad habits except for his pipe, and he preferred cheap tobacco. He drove an old Lincoln, ate bad food but lots of it, and wore the same black suits he'd been wearing since the fifties. His vice was charity. He saved his money, then he gave it away.

No one knew how much money the Judge donated annually. An automatic ten percent went to the Presbyterian Church. Sewanee got

two thousand dollars a year, same for the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Those three gifts were carved in granite. The rest were not.

Judge Atlee gave to anyone who would ask. A crippled child in need of crutches. An all-star team traveling to a state tournament. A drive by the Rotary Club to vaccinate babies in the Congo. A shelter for stray dogs and cats in Ford County. A new roof for Clanton's only museum.

The list was endless, and all that was necessary to receive a check was to write a short letter and ask for it. Judge Atlee always sent money and had been doing so ever since Ray and Forrest left home.

Ray could see him now, lost in the clutter and dust of his rolltop, pecking out short notes on his Underwood and sticking them in his chancellor's envelopes with scarcely readable checks drawn on the First National Bank of Clanton – fifty dollars here, a hundred dollars there, a little for everyone until it was all gone.

The estate would not be complicated because there would be so little to inventory. The ancient law books, threadbare furniture, painful family photos and mementos, long forgotten files and papers – all a bunch of rubbish that would make an impressive bonfire. He and Forrest would sell the house for whatever it might bring and be quite happy to salvage anything from the last of the Atlee family money.

He should call Forrest, but those calls were

always easy to put off. Forrest was a different set of issues and problems, much more complicated than a dying, reclusive old father hell-bent on giving away his money. Forrest was a living, walking disaster, a boy of thirty-six whose mind had been deadened by every legal and illegal substance known to American culture.

What a family, Ray mumbled to himself.

He posted a cancellation for his eleven o'clock class, and went for therapy.

Chapter 2

Spring in the Piedmont, calm clear skies, the foothills growing greener by the day, the Shenandoah Valley changing as the farmers crossed and recrossed their perfect rows. Rain was forecast for tomorrow, though no forecast could be trusted in central Virginia.

With almost three hundred hours under his belt, Ray began each day with an eye on the sky as he jogged five miles. The running he could do come rain or shine, the flying he could not. He had promised himself (and his insurance company) that he would not fly at night and would not venture into clouds. Ninety-five percent of all small plane crashes happened either in weather or in darkness, and after nearly three years of flying Ray was still determined to be a coward. 'There are old pilots and bold pilots,' the adage went, 'but no old bold pilots.' He believed it, and with conviction.

Besides, central Virginia was too beautiful to buzz over in clouds. He waited for perfect

weather – no wind to push him around and make landings complicated, no haze to dim the horizon and get him lost, no threat of storms or moisture. Clear skies during his jog usually determined the rest of his day. He could move lunch up or back, cancel a class, postpone his research to a rainy day, or a rainy week for that matter. The right forecast, and Ray was off to the airport.

It was north of town, a fifteen-minute drive from the law school. At Docker's Flight School he was given the normal rude welcome by Dick Docker, Charlie Yates, and Fog Newton, the three retired Marine pilots who owned the place and had trained most of the private aviators in the area. They held court each day in the Cockpit, a row of old theater chairs in the front office of the flight school, and from there they drank coffee by the gallon and told flying tales and lies that grew by the hour. Each customer and student got the same load of verbal abuse, like it or not, take it or leave it, they didn't care. They were drawing nice pensions.

The sight of Ray prompted the latest round of lawyer jokes, none of which were particularly funny, all of which drew howls at the punch lines.

'No wonder you don't have any students,' Ray said as he did the paperwork.

'Where you going?' demanded Docker.

'Just punching a few holes in the sky.'

'We'll alert air traffic control.'

'You're much too busy for that.'

Ten minutes of insults and rental forms, and Ray was free to go. For eighty bucks an hour he could rent a Cessna that would take him a mile above the earth, away from people, phones, traffic, students, research, and, on this day, even farther from his dying father, his crazy brother, and the inevitable mess facing him back home.

There were tie-downs for thirty light aircraft at the general aviation ramp. Most were small Cessnas with high wings and fixed landing gears, still the safest airplanes ever built. But there were some fancier rigs. Next to his rented Cessna was a Beech Bonanza, a single-engine, two-hundred-horsepower beauty that Ray could handle in a month with a little training. It flew almost seventy knots faster than the Cessna, with enough gadgets and avionics to make any pilot drool. Even worse, the Bonanza was for sale – $450,000 – off the charts, of course, but not that far off. The owner built shopping centers and wanted a King Air, according to the latest analysis from the Cockpit.

Ray stepped away from the Bonanza and concentrated on the little Cessna sitting next to it. Like all new pilots, he carefully inspected his plane with a checklist. Fog Newton, his instructor, had begun each lesson with a gruesome tale of fire and death caused by pilots too hurried or lazy to use checklists.

When he was certain all outside parts and

surfaces were perfect, he opened the door and strapped himself inside. The engine started smoothly, the radios sparked to life. He finished a pre-takeoff list and called the tower. A commuter flight was ahead of him, and ten minutes after he locked his doors he was cleared for takeoff. He lifted off smoothly and turned west, toward the Shenandoah Valley.

At four thousand feet, he crossed Afton Mountain, not far below him. A few seconds of mountain turbulence bounced the Cessna, but it was nothing out of the ordinary. When he was past the foothills and over the farmlands, the air became still and quiet. Visibility was officially twenty miles, though at this altitude he could see much farther. No ceiling, not a cloud anywhere. At five thousand feet, the peaks of West Virginia rose slowly on the horizon. Ray completed an in-flight checklist, leaned his fuel mixture for normal cruise, and relaxed for the first time since taxiing into position for takeoff.

Radio chatter disappeared, and it wouldn't pick up again until he switched to the Roanoke tower, forty miles to the south. He decided to avoid Roanoke and stay in uncontrolled airspace.

Ray knew from personal experience that psychiatrists worked for two hundred dollars an hour in the Charlottesville area. Flying was a bargain, and much more effective, though it was a very fine shrink who'd suggested he pick up a new hobby, and quickly. He was seeing the

fellow because he had to see someone. Exactly a month after the former Mrs. Atlee filed for divorce, quit her job, and walked out of their townhouse with only her clothes and jewelry, all done with ruthless efficiency in less than six hours, Ray left the psychiatrist for the last time, drove to the airport, stumbled into the Cockpit, and took his first insult from either Dick Docker or Fog Newton, he couldn't remember which.

The insult felt good, someone cared. More followed, and Ray, wounded and confused as he was, had found a home. For three years now he had crossed the clear, solitary skies of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Shenandoah Valley, soothing his anger, shedding a few tears, hashing out his troubled life to an empty seat beside him. She's gone, the empty seat kept saying.

Some women leave and come back eventually. Others leave and endure a painful reconsideration. Still others leave with such boldness they never look back. Vicki's departure from his life was so well planned and her execution of it was so cold-blooded that Ray's lawyer's first comment was, 'Give it up, pal.'

She'd found a better deal, like an athlete swapping teams at the trading deadline. Here's the new uniform, smile for the cameras, forget the old arena. While Ray was at work one fine morning, she left in a limousine. Behind it was a van with her things. Twenty minutes later, she walked into her new place, a mansion on a horse farm east of town where Lew the Liquidator was

waiting with open arms and a prenuptial agreement. Lew was a corporate vulture whose raids had netted him a half a billion or so, according to Ray's research, and at the age of sixty-four he'd cashed in his chips, left Wall Street, and for some reason picked Charlottesville as his new nest.

Somewhere along the way he'd bumped into Vicki, offered her a deal, gotten her pregnant with the children Ray was supposed to father, and now with a trophy wife and another family he wanted to be taken seriously as the new Big Fish.

Enough of this, Ray said aloud. He talked loudly at five thousand feet, and no one talked back.

He was assuming, and hoping, that Forrest was clean and sober, though such assumptions were usually wrong and such hopes were often misguided. After twenty years of rehab and relapse, it was doubtful if his brother would ever overcome his addictions. And Ray was certain that Forrest would be broke, a condition that went hand in hand with his habits. And being broke, he'd be looking for money, as in his father's estate.

What money the Judge had not given away to charities and sick children, he had poured down the black hole of Forrest's detoxification. So much money had been wasted there, along with so many years, that the Judge, as only he could do, had basically excommunicated Forrest from

their father-son relationship. For thirty-two years he had terminated marriages, taken children away from parents, given children to foster homes, sent mentally ill people away forever, ordered delinquent fathers to jail – all manner of drastic and far-reaching decrees that were accomplished merely by signing his name. When he first went on the bench, his authority had been granted by the State of Mississippi, but late in his career he took his orders only from God.

If anyone could expel a son, it was Chancellor Reuben V. Atlee.

Forrest pretended to be unbothered by his banishment. He fancied himself as a free spirit and claimed he had not set foot inside the house at Maple Run in nine years. He had visited the Judge once in the hospital, after a heart attack when the doctors rounded up the family. Surprisingly, he'd been sober then. 'Fifty-two days, Bro,' he'd whispered proudly to Ray as they huddled in the ICU corridor. He was a walking scoreboard when rehab was working.

If the Judge had plans to include Forrest in his estate, no one would have been more surprised than Forrest. But with the chance that money or assets were about to change hands, Forrest would be there looking for crumbs and leftovers.

Over the New River Gorge near Beckley, West Virginia, Ray turned around and headed back. Though flying cost less than professional therapy, it wasn't cheap. The meter was ticking.

If he won the lottery, he would buy the Bonanza and fly everywhere. He was due a sabbatical in a couple of years, a respite from the rigors of academic life. He'd be expected to finish his eight-hundred-page brick on monopolies, and there was an even chance that that might happen. His dream, though, was to lease a Bonanza and disappear into the skies.

Twelve miles west of the airport, he called the tower and was directed to enter the traffic pattern. The wind was light and variable, the landing would be a cinch. On final approach, with the runway a mile away and fifteen hundred feet down, and Ray and his little Cessna gliding at a perfect descent, another pilot came on the radio. He checked in with the controller as 'Challenger-two-four-four-delta-mike,' and he was fifteen miles to the north. The tower cleared him to land, number two behind Cessna traffic.

Ray pushed aside thoughts of the other aircraft long enough to make a textbook landing, then turned off the runway and began taxiing to the ramp.

A Challenger is a Canadian-built private jet that seats eight to fifteen, depending on the configuration. It will fly from New York to Paris, nonstop, in splendid style, with its own flight attendant serving drinks and meals. A new one sells for somewhere around twenty-five million dollars, depending on the endless list of options.

The 244DM was owned by Lew the Liquidator, who'd pinched it out of one of the many hapless companies he'd raided and fleeced. Ray watched it land behind him, and for a second he hoped it would crash and burn right there on the runway, so he could enjoy the show. It did not, and as it sped along the taxiway toward the private terminal, Ray was suddenly in a tight spot.

He'd seen Vicki twice in the years since their divorce, and he certainly didn't want to see her now, not with him in a twenty-year-old Cessna while she bounded down the stairway of her gold-plated jet. Maybe she wasn't on board. Maybe it was just Lew Rodowski returning from yet another raid.

Ray cut the fuel mixture, the engine died, and as the Challenger moved closer to him he began to sink as low as possible in his captain's seat.

By the time it rolled to a stop, less than a hundred feet from where Ray was hiding, a shiny black Suburban had wheeled out onto the ramp, a little too fast, lights on, as if royalty had arrived in Charlottesville. Two young men in matching green shirts and khaki shorts jumped out, ready to receive the Liquidator and whoever else might be on board. The Challenger's door opened, the steps came down, and Ray, peeking above his instrument deck with a complete view, watched with fascination as one of the pilots came down first, carrying two large shopping bags.

Then Vicki, with the twins. They were two years old now, Simmons and Ripley, poor children given genderless last names as first names because their mother was an idiot and their father had already sired nine others before them and probably didn't care what they were called. They were boys, Ray knew that much for sure because he'd watched the vitals in the local paper – births, deaths, burglaries, etc. They were born at Martha Jefferson Hospital seven weeks and three days after the Atlees' no-fault divorce became final, and seven weeks and two days after a very pregnant Vicki married Lew Rodowski, his fourth trip down the aisle, or whatever they used that day at the horse farm.

Clutching the boys' hands, Vicki carefully descended the steps. A half a billion dollars was looking good on her – tight designer jeans on her long legs, legs that had become noticeably thinner since she had joined the jet set. In fact, Vicki appeared to be superbly starved – bone-thin arms, small flat ass, gaunt cheeks. He couldn't see her eyes because they were well hidden behind black wrap-arounds, the latest style from either Hollywood or Paris, take your pick.

The Liquidator had not been starving. He waited impatiently behind his current wife and current litter. He claimed he ran marathons, but then so little of what he said in print turned out to be true. He was stocky, with a thick belly. Half his hair was gone and the other half was

gray with age. She was forty-one and could pass for thirty. He was sixty-four and looked seventy, or at least Ray thought so, with great satisfaction.

They finally made it into the Suburban while the two pilots and two drivers loaded and reloaded luggage and large bags from Saks and Bergdorf. Just a quick shopping jaunt up to Manhattan, forty-five minutes away on your Challenger.

The Suburban sped off, the show was over, and Ray sat up in the Cessna.

If he hadn't hated her so much, he would have sat there a long time reliving their marriage.

There had been no warnings, no fights, no change in temperature. She'd simply stumbled upon a better deal.

He opened the door so he could breathe and realized his collar was wet with sweat. He wiped his eyebrows and got out of the plane.

For the first time in memory, he wished he'd stayed away from the airport.

Chapter 3

The law school was next to the business school, and both were at the northern edge of a campus that had expanded greatly from the quaint academic village Thomas Jefferson designed and built.

To a university that so revered the architecture of its founder, the law school was just another modern campus building, square and flat, brick and glass, as bland and unimaginative as many others built in the seventies. But recent money had renovated and landscaped things nicely. It was ranked in the Top Ten, as everybody who worked and studied there knew so well. A few of the Ivys were ranked above it, but no other public school. It attracted a thousand top students and a very bright faculty.

Ray had been content teaching securities law at Northeastern in Boston. Some of his writings caught the attention of a search committee, one thing led to another, and the chance to move South to a better school became attractive. Vicki

was from Florida, and though she thrived in the city life of Boston, she could never adjust to the winters. They quickly adapted to the slower pace of Charlottesville. He was awarded tenure, she earned a doctorate in romance languages. They were discussing children when the Liquidator wormed his way into the picture.

Another man gets your wife pregnant, then takes her, and you'd like to ask him some questions. And perhaps have a few for her. In the days right after her exit he couldn't sleep for all the questions, but as time passed he realized he would never confront her. The questions faded, but seeing her at the airport brought them back. Ray was cross-examining her again as he parked in the law school lot and returned to his office.

He kept office hours late in the afternoon, no appointment was necessary. His door was open and any student was welcome. It was early May, though, and the days were warm. Student visits had become rare. He reread the directive from his father, and again became irked at the usual heavy-handedness.

At five o'clock he locked his office, left the law school, and walked down the street to an intramural sports complex where the third-year students were playing the faculty in the second of a three-game softball series. The professors had lost the first game in a slaughter. Games two and three were not really necessary to determine the better team.

Smelling blood, first- and second-year students filled the small bleachers and hung on the fence along the first-base line, where the faculty team was huddled for a useless pregame pep talk. Out in left field some first-years of dubious reputation were bunched around two large coolers, the beer already flowing.

There's no better place to be in the springtime than on a college campus, Ray thought to himself as he approached the field and looked for a pleasant spot to watch the game. Girls in shorts, a cooler always close by, festive moods, impromptu parties, summer approaching. He was forty-three years old, single, and he wanted to be a student again. Teaching keeps you young, they all said, perhaps energetic and mentally sharp, but what Ray wanted was to sit on a cooler out there with the hell-raisers and hit on the girls.

A small group of his colleagues loitered behind the backstop, smiling gamely as the faculty took the field with a most unimpressive lineup. Several were limping. Half wore some manner of knee brace. He spotted Carl Mirk, an associate dean and his closest friend, leaning on a fence, tie undone, jacket slung over his shoulder.

'Sad-looking crew out there,' Ray said.

'Wait till you see them play,' Mirk said. Carl was from a small town in Ohio where his father was a local judge, a local saint, everybody's

grandfather. Carl, too, had fled and vowed never to return.

'I missed the first game,' Ray said.

'It was a hoot. Seventeen to nothing after two innings.'

The leadoff hitter for the students ripped the first pitch into the left-field gap, a routine double, but by the time the left fielder and center fielder hobbled over, corralled the ball, kicked it a couple of times, fought over it, then flung it toward the infield, the runner walked home and the shutout was blown. The rowdies in left field were hysterical. The students in the bleachers yelled for more errors.

'It'll get worse,' Mirk said.

Indeed it did. After a few more fielding disasters, Ray had seen enough. 'I'll be out of town early next week,' he said between batters. 'I've been called home.'

'I can tell you're excited,' Mirk said. 'Another funeral?'

'Not yet. My father is convening a family summit to discuss his estate.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. There's not much to discuss, nothing to fight over, so it'll probably be ugly.'

'Your brother?'

'I don't know who'll cause more trouble, brother or father.'

'I'll be thinking of you.'

'Thanks. I'll notify my students and give them assignments. Everything should be covered.'

'Leaving when?'

'Saturday, should be back Tuesday or Wednesday, but who knows.'

'We'll be here,' Mirk said. 'And hopefully this series will be over.'

A soft ground ball rolled untouched between the legs of the pitcher.

'I think it's over now,' Ray said.

Nothing soured Ray's mood like thoughts of going home. He hadn't been there in over a year, and if he never went back it would still be too soon.

He bought a burrito from a Mexican takeout and ate at a sidewalk café near the ice rink where the usual gang of black-haired Goths gathered and spooked the normal folks. The old Main Street was a pedestrian mall – a very nice one with cafés and antique stores and book dealers – and if the weather was pleasant, as it usually was, the restaurants spread outdoors for long evening meals.

When he'd suddenly become single again, Ray unloaded the quaint townhouse and moved downtown, where most of the old buildings had been renovated for more urban-style housing. His six-room apartment was above a Persian rug dealer. It had a small balcony over the mall, and at least once a month Ray had his students over for wine and lasagne.

It was almost dark when he unlocked the door on the sidewalk and trudged up the noisy steps

to his place. He was very much alone – no mate, no dog, no cat, no goldfish. In the past few years he'd met two women he'd found attractive and had dated neither. He was much too frightened for romance. A saucy third-year student named Kaley was making advances, but his defences were in place. His sex drive was so dormant he had considered counseling, or perhaps wonder drugs. He flipped on lights and checked the phone.

Forrest had called, a rare event indeed, but not completely unexpected. Typical of Forrest, he had simply checked in, without leaving a number. Ray fixed tea with no caffeine and put on some jazz, trying to stall as he prepped himself for the call. Odd that a phone chat with his only sibling should take so much effort, but chatting with Forrest was always depressing. They had no wives, no children, nothing in common but a name and a father.

Ray punched in the number to Ellie's house in Memphis. It rang for a long time before she answered. 'Hello, Ellie, this is Ray Atlee,' he said pleasantly.

'Oh,' she grunted, as if he'd called eight times already. 'He's not here.'

Doing swell, Ellie, and you? Fine, thanks for asking. Great to hear your voice. How's the weather down there?

'I'm returning his call,' Ray said.

'Like I said, he's not here.'

'I heard you. Is there a different number?'

'For what?'

'For Forrest. Is this still the best number to reach him?'

'I guess. He stays here most of the time.'

'Please tell him I called.'

They met in detox, she for booze, Forrest for an entire menu of banned substances. At the time she weighed ninety-eight pounds and claimed she'd lived on nothing but vodka for most of her adult life. She kicked it, walked away clean, tripled her body weight, and somehow got Forrest in the deal too. More mother than girlfriend, she now had him a room in the basement of her ancestral home, an eerie old Victorian in midtown Memphis.

Ray was still holding the phone when it rang. 'Hey, Bro,' Forrest called out. 'You rang?'

'Returning yours. How's it going?'

'Well, I was doing fairly well until I got a letter from the old man. You get one too?'

'It arrived today.'

'He thinks he's still a judge and we're a couple of delinquent fathers, don't you think?'

'He'll always be the Judge, Forrest. Have you talked to him?'

A snort, then a pause. 'I haven't talked to him on the phone in two years, and I haven't set foot in the house in more years than I can remember. And I'm not sure I'll be there Sunday.'

'You'll be there.'

'Have you talked to him?'

'Three weeks ago. I called, he didn't. He

sounded very sick, Forrest, I don't think he'll be around much longer. I think you should seriously consider –'

'Don't start, Ray. I'm not listening to a lecture.'

There was a gap, a heavy stillness in which both of them took a breath. Being an addict from a prominent family, Forrest had been lectured to and preached at and burdened with unsolicited advice for as long as he could remember.

'Sorry,' Ray said. 'I'll be there. What about you?'

'I suppose so.'

'Are you clean?' It was such a personal question, but one that was as routine as How's the weather? With Forrest the answer was always straight and true.

'A hundred and thirty-nine days, Bro.'

'That's great.'

It was, and it wasn't. Every sober day was a relief, but to still be counting after twenty years was disheartening.

'And I'm working too,' he said proudly.

'Wonderful. What kind of work?'

'I'm running cases for some local ambulance chasers, a bunch of sleazy bastards who advertise on cable and hang around hospitals. I sign 'em up and get a cut.'

It was difficult to appreciate such a seedy job, but with Forrest any employment was good news. He'd been a bail bondsman, process

server, collection agent, security guard, investigator, and at one time or another had tried virtually every job at the lesser levels of the legal profession.

'Not bad,' Ray said.

Forrest started a tale, this one involving a shoving match in a hospital emergency room, and Ray began to drift. His brother had also worked as a bouncer in a strip bar, a calling that was short-lived when he was beaten up twice in one night. He'd spent one full year touring Mexico on a new Harley-Davidson; the trip's funding had never been clear. He had tried leg-breaking for a Memphis loan shark, but again proved deficient when it came to violence.

Honest employment had never appealed to Forrest, though, in all fairness, interviewers were generally turned off by his criminal record. Two felonies, drug-related, both before he turned twenty but permanent blotches nonetheless.

'Are you gonna talk to the old man?' he was asking.

'No, I'll see him Sunday,' Ray answered.

'What time will you get to Clanton?'

'I don't know. Sometime around five, I guess. You?'

'God said five o'clock, didn't he?'

'Yes, he did.'

'Then I'll be there sometime after five. See you, Bro.'

Ray circled the phone for the next hour, deciding yes, he would call his father and just

say hello, then deciding no, that anything to be said now could be said later, and in person. The Judge detested phones, especially those that rang at night and disrupted his solitude. More often than not he would simply refuse to answer. And if he picked up he was usually so rude and gruff that the caller was sorry for the effort.

He would be wearing black trousers and a white shirt, one with tiny cinder holes from the pipe ashes, and the shirt would be heavily starched because the Judge had always worn them that way. For him a white cotton dress shirt lasted a decade, regardless of the number of stains and cinder holes, and it got laundered and starched every week at Mabe's Cleaners on the square. His tie would be as old as his shirt and the design would be some drab print with little color. Navy blue suspenders, always.

And he would be busy at his desk in his study, under the portrait of General Forrest, not sitting on the porch waiting for his sons to come home. He would want them to think he had work to do, even on a Sunday afternoon, and that their arrivals were not that important.