

# ***A Gathering of Diamonds***

## **Chapter One**

A white-tailed doe raced across the road in front of the car, rousing me from a flashback and sending a crisp shot of adrenaline buzzing through my brain. Slowing the red rental convertible, I clutched its leather-covered steering wheel as a sharp pain behind my right eye nudged me back to reality.

Beyond the car's hood stretched the foothills of northern Arkansas, their autumn colors mimicking a watercolor painting still damp at the artist's hands. I had left the Big Easy at dawn, stopping only once in Little Rock for gas and a cold drink, the last ten miles or so missing from my memory. The road grew steeper with every passing mile, forcing me to concentrate on driving and forget the reason I had come here in the first place.

Heat devils rose off sun-blistered blacktop and early September sun, refusing to release its grip on summer, cooked the skin on back of my neck. After cresting the next hill, I saw a tall building topped off with a clock tower crowning the horizon. Its windows glimmered in the wake of late afternoon sun and I didn't have to check the map to know I'd reached Brannerville. The tiny college town lay nestled in a bowl-like valley in an even older range of rolling hills. It had weighed heavily on my thoughts for the past thirty days.

When I reached downtown Brannerville I pulled into a service station to stretch my legs and top the gas tank. A massive courthouse constructed of hand-

hewn red sandstone blocks occupied one corner of a town square. Shops and stores rimmed the courthouse and people in shorts and casual clothes filled the square, browsing in store windows or just soaking up late afternoon sun. A man clad in overalls and clutching an oily red rag interrupted my thoughts.

"Help you?" he asked, his hillbilly accent making his question almost imperceptible.

"Unleaded," I said, leaning away from his black-toothed grin.

He used the oily rag to dab his sweaty forehead. A rumpled welder's cap crowned his bald head and when he rested his hairy forearms on the door of my car I could smell his breath, stale from last night's whiskey. He also had a dagger tattoo on his hand that he had probably put there himself.

"Where you from?" he asked, likely as curious about my accent as I was of his.

"New Orleans."

"Kid in school here?"

"Something like that. Which way is the college?"

"Down the road a piece," he said, pointing a stained finger in the opposite direction from the way I had come.

"What's the building next door?"

"Courthouse and police station."

"Lots of crime here?"

"About the same as hair on a mangy yellow dog," he said.

I waited for him to smile, but he didn't. Instead, he stole a cockeyed glance at me to see if I had. When I obliged, he rubbed his chin and spat tobacco juice in a glob on hot concrete.

"What's the population around here?" I asked.

"About thirty thousand when school's out. Twice as much counting college kids," he said, wiping his oily mouth with an equally filthy hand.

"Someplace around here I can get a sandwich and cold drink?"

"College strip around the corner," he said. "Can't miss it."

Easing back into the car, I pulled out of the filling station and cruised down the brick-paved road toward the direction he had pointed. It didn't take long to find the strip-bars, restaurants, book stores and souvenir shops bordering a congested square that reminded me of a similar area near the LSU campus in Baton Rouge - and probably a hundred other college towns across the country. Fall semester had just begun and scores of students in cars, on bicycles and many more on foot, crowded the four-block quadrangle. Nosing the car into a vacant alley between a tee shirt shop and barbecue joint, I went inside for a sandwich.

As I exited the café a half hour later boisterous students were still pouring in. The indigo sky had begun turning azure but late afternoon heat remained. When I took a deep breath, the humidity made it feel like a kick in the groin. Then I noticed someone gazing into my car. She was frowning as she scribbled something on an unfolded pad.

"Problem, Officer?"

"Somewhat. You're parked in a no parking zone."

The young female police officer didn't possess the pervasive twang of the man at the filling station, or the waitress in the barbecue joint. Instead, she had a pleasant voice and spoke in neutral Midwestern tones.

"Didn't see a sign," I said, glancing around.

"You're illegally blocking an alley," she said. "I could have had you towed."

"Sorry. I'm from out of town."

The pretty police officer stared at me and shook her head. "You know what they say about ignorance of the law?"

Ignoring her cool stare, I read the tag on her uniform. It said her name was Armstrong. Officer Armstrong was small, no more than five-three, with short-cropped blonde hair sun-bleached almost white. It complemented her surfer girl tan. She also had expressive eyes the same hue as the darkening sky and every straight seam of her freshly pressed khaki uniform defied the rampant heat and humidity.

"Uncle," I said, raising my hands.

Officer Armstrong didn't smile. Instead, she said, "Can I see your driver's license?" I fished it out of my wallet and handed it to her, waiting as she made a notation on her pad. "Is this your car, Mr. Logan?"

"Rental."

Returning it to me, she said, "Pay this at the courthouse tomorrow. It's already closed for the day."

"Thanks, Officer Armstrong," I said.

She didn't react when I used her name. Ignoring eye contact, she said, "Next time watch where you're parking."

She strolled alone to a tan and white police cruiser parked in front of my convertible. They obviously didn't bother with partners in the small town of Brannerville. With red lights flashing, she spun the tires in loose gravel and disappeared over the hill. Raising the red convertible's canvas top, I switched on the air conditioning full blast and headed north.



It was late when I reached the hillside college, shades of crimson and pink already draping the hillsides. The person I was looking for had probably

already left for the day, but I decided to give the place a look anyway. As I parked the car and walked toward the largest of several red stone buildings, hazy clouds began masking the sky, further darkening it a smooth shade of early evening gray. A sudden chill permeated the air.

Overhead, a nighthawk floated in a thermal updraft and speeding cyclists, laboring with their ten gears up the steep grade toward town, passed on the street. A jogger brushed me on the sidewalk, almost knocking me down. It would not have taken much. After thirty days flat on my back in a hospital bed, my muscles labored from the strain of the hilly campus. Finding the front door locked, I entered through a door in back.

Somewhere down a darkened hallway, someone was humming as he pushed a broom across the floor. The tune echoed inside the empty building, reminding me of the interior of a cave and threatening to overload my dangerously fragile mental state. The cleaning person could have as easily been on the third floor or ten feet away. It didn't matter. The drifting sound caused a predictable reaction and I began to feel the madness starting to return. Against my will, my thoughts began racing back to distant murky memories.

This time it did not happen. Instead, the red glow of a nearby fire alarm returned me to reality but left me with a throbbing head. I was looking for a water fountain when a light radiating from an open door revealed a name on the glass. It said Dr. Theodore Fridel - History. I rapped on the glass to get the attention of the man sitting behind a desk.

"Help you?" he said.

Dr. Fridel looked nothing like I had imagined. Instead of looking old and gray, he seemed no more

than thirty but he conveyed the image of age as he gazed up at me with myopic eyes trapped behind thick-framed glasses. His hair and mustache were coal black, the same color as his eyes, and clashed with his peach-colored sports jacket and wide zigzag tie that he had probably bought from the nickel box at a garage sale.

"I'm Tom Logan," I said. "You were my brother's thesis adviser."

Recognition replaced Fridel's initial disbelief. Standing, he pointed to a chair in front of his desk.

"Your brother, you say?"

"Half brother. Much younger."

"I see." From the way he blinked his eyes and frowned, I realized he didn't. "Exactly how can I be of service?"

"I'm here to find out what happened to Bill, what really happened."

"I'm sure you read the police report -"

I held up a hand to stop him. "I was hoping you could add something. Explain why Bill seems to have vanished without a trace."

"Regrettably, it's as much a mystery to me as it is to you. I was his thesis adviser but we were not close. Your brother, I'm sure you know, was quite secretive."

Our father and both our mothers were relatively young when they died. I was almost old enough to be Bill's father and had taken care of him during most of his formative years. Secrecy was only one of his unusual traits of which I was well aware.

"Maybe you can tell me something about this," I said. Reaching into the pocket of my jacket, I removed a small leather pouch. Professor Fridel's mouth dropped open when its sparkling contents rolled across the desk toward him.

When he regained his senses, he said, "Is this a diamond?"