



Forgiving Waters

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All day and into the evening, the Texas skies over the Gulf of Mexico brewed like a witch's cauldron, sucking up moisture from the abundant waters of the Gulf. A cleansing rain made its approach in the calm of darkness, a calm soon upended by a spectacular display of nature's fury against the pitch sky. For Beauregard "Bo" Lee Kelso, the storm had already infected his dreams, changing them to nightmares—the same nightmares that had haunted him, in one way or another, for years. He did not wake when the thunder roared or the lightning pierced the land, the brilliance invading every small line in the shutters and shades of his Texas ranch house. He slept fitfully, tormented by his past, distraught for his future.

"No! Pa, please!" the little boy's voice cried out from Bo's nightmare.

"Shut your mouth, boy, and hold the shotgun on him!" —the voice of his father erupts in the turbulent moment.

Then, his mother's plea: "Leroy, let him go! You can't do this. You know who he is! Just have the law take care of it!"

"You shut your mouth, Annabel, and get in the house!" Annabel ran to the house but did not enter. Instead she turned as she reached the top steps of their porch and continued to plead with her husband not to hang the man who'd been caught leaving their house, apparently a robbery thwarted. Her high-pitched tone of panic was amplified, as she repeatedly screamed, "You can't do this. Let him go!"

"No, Pa! Please no!" Bo cried aloud through his tormented dream. However, now seventy-three years since that scene had

passed for real, there was no one to hear him, no one to rescue him. Not the horses sleeping in the barn. Not the mockingbird resting in the fig tree outside his window. His wife, in death, may have heard him, but she could not help him. He was alone, frantic in the darkness of his dream state, unable to detach himself from it, the terror punctuated in a stage set of thunder and lightning.

"You take a good look at this, boy. This is what a thief looks like. A low-down, worthless colored," Leroy Kelso spat, disdain and pure anger consuming his leathered face. "You give him a job, and this is what he does. He is nothing but a low-down thief, and this is what you do with a thief. Now you hold that shotgun on him, boy," the old man said as he moved quickly toward a horse buggy parked next to the house and retrieved a section of rope.

The boy whimpered as his thin body shook at the sheer horror of the scene unfolding before him. "Please, Pa, don't do this!" But his words fell unheeded to the grass underfoot.

His mother's voice was relentless in its plea for reason and restraint. "Leroy, you can't do this."

"The hell I can't! No colored is going to break into my house and steal from me and get away with it."

The sedan headlights tore through the storm of the boy's terror, highlighting the waxy shine of damp skin on this black man he had known all his life. The weight of the shotgun was enormous for Bo's eleven-year-old frame. He could barely keep it raised, much less level. The barrel was so long it could almost touch the shaking knees of Calvin Mercer, who kneeled on the ground, crying shamelessly, doing his own fair share of begging for Leroy Kelso not to hang him.

"Please, Mr. Kelso, let me go, and I'll never come back here again. I swear it; I'll leave town. You'll never see me again. Jus' don't hang me, please! My family . . ."

"Shut. Your. Mouth!" Leroy's voice rivalled thunder.

Annabel pleaded: "Let him go, Leroy. This ain't right . . . you know it ain't right."

Unabashedly desperate, Calvin tried to bargain with Leroy

Kelso to spare him. But Leroy Kelso, in his own world of hate and intolerance, blinked not an eye nor listened. He stepped back and threw the rope over one of the low-hanging limbs of a pin oak tree that reached its massive branches across the majority of the front yard. Its roots crawled along the ground throughout the entire circumference of the tree, rising up like gravestones.

"Get up, you worthless thief."

Calvin could not move; he was petrified with fear. Kelso would not be deterred. He quickly fashioned the end of the rope into a noose and flung it around the sobbing man's neck as he said, "Fine, I'll just hoist you up to your feet."

In a snap of realization, Calvin raised his hands to his neck, grabbing the noose as Kelso tightened it. His scarred, dark fingers wrapped around the hemp rope as it bit into his flesh, like tiny razors on his neck and hands.

The sound of Calvin's sobbing permeated Bo's young soul. He was learning for the first time in his life the true meaning of the word fear and the preamble to suffering.

Bo's father towered over Calvin as he struggled, half-slumped and half-kneeling at the rancher's feet.

Somewhere between Calvin's writhing pleas for mercy and Mrs. Kelso's screams for reason, young Bo Kelso dropped the shotgun. It fell to the ground and bounced off one of the oak roots protruding out of the ground. Both hammers on the old double-barreled Browning slammed down and it went off.

Like thunder.

Bo awoke from his torment as an enormous clap of thunder erupted outside his window. He sat up and swung both his weary legs over the side of the bed, feet hitting the hardwood floor, and grasped his hair firmly as he held his head with both hands.

"I had that dream again, Mary Beth. You know the one, where Pa was going to hang Calvin." For just a second, he thought he heard his loving wife whisper, "It's okay, honey. It's long past." Dead now three years, Mary Beth would be at

best a ghost. Nonetheless, he was comforted. As he turned his sleepy gaze toward her side of the bed, the lightning flashed, shining a spotlight on the bedding that used to be filled with the preciousness of his wife. In that snap of illumination, he saw the comforter untouched on her pillow, neatly folded, undisturbed.

The clock on the nightstand read three thirty. Unable to sleep, he felt around in the dark for his slippers. He found one, put it on his foot, and then probed around with his toes for the other. When he placed it on his foot, it felt strange. He reached down and removed it with his hand. It was Mary Beth's slipper. He kept them just under the edge of the bed next to his, one of many nods to his devotion to her memory. This comforted him, easing the echo of loss that he would never shake. "It's okay, honey. It's long past." This time, he acknowledged her message with an indiscernible smile.