

Chapter 1

Where Are All the Nice Rednecks?

If Governor Judson Porter King III thought he was walking into a friendly crowd, he couldn't have been more wrong. These rednecks were angry.

The stench of discontentment hit King as soon as he breached the doors of the Hartsfed Civic Center, and that foulness followed him with every step through the standing-room-only crowd. Gone were the smiles and attaboys King was so accustomed to as he walked the stately halls of governance in Montgomery. Here, in this backwater excuse of a town, it was only scowls and crossed arms. His state police detail caught wind of it too, and they circled around the governor a little tighter than usual as they pressed him cautiously toward the podium.

The rumbling from the crowd continued even after King took the stage, cleared his throat and blew into the microphone. But he wasn't going to yell over these yokels. That wasn't his style. The governor pulled up to his full height, straightened the already starched-tight lapels on his suit, and he waited. And waited. It was only after the audience hushed to the level of deference it seemed willing to give him that King went in for his best icebreaker.

“I’ll take just a moment during this trying time,” King said in a most sympathetic tone, making sure his face matched it like pork and greens. “I realize the plant closing has been difficult news for many of you. Understandably, you’re concerned about the future of this fair community. Well, I assure you”—King gave his best smile here—“my wife, who is out shopping this morning, is doing her absolute best to boost Alabama’s economy.”

He paused for laughter.

Nothing.

Not one appreciative grin, not one half-hearted chuckle from the grim faces in front of him. What a bunch of humorless hicks.

The crowd’s rumble began to quicken in tempo again, but King was not going to be deterred by these amateurs. He’d sparred politically with the best. The union agitators, the environmentalists, the League of Women Voters, for Christ’s sake. He could handle this crowd.

King began again. “It is my highest priority, and that of the dedicated commissioners here in Moran County”—King gestured to the line of men standing stiffly behind him on the stage—“to attract new industry to your lovely town. It might take some time, but I have no doubt we will replace the jobs lost with even higher-paying ones.”

“What do we do ’til then?” someone yelled from the crowd.

King smiled. *Ah, audience engagement.* His strong suit.

“Of course, there is job retraining and—”

“Retraining? For what?” another voice called out.

“Ya mean for them high-paying jobs down at McDonald’s?” said someone closer to the podium. Harsh laughter rolled across the room.

King's perma-smile faded only a little. "Well, McDonald's shouldn't be ruled out as a viable—"

The rest of his answer was drowned out by the booing. King searched the audience for his campaign manager, Clayton, who was engulfed in this seething wave of humanity. Making eye contact with his man, King's expression was clear. *Get me out of here.*

The governor lifted his hands. He would give it one more try.

"I am confident of a bright future ahead," he said. "Our economy is strong. The stock market is reaching record highs. There's a lot to look forward to, wouldn't you say?"

King motioned again to the commissioners behind him, expecting a firm "amen." But some of the men shifted nervously and avoided the governor's gaze.

A broad bear of a man, who had been in the front row, took a step toward the podium. "Governor, you talk about that bright future everybody's got," the man said. "Well, from where I'm standing, *my* economy ain't looking nearly as good as *your* economy."

There was thunderous applause from the crowd. One of King's escorts positioned herself between the big man and the governor, and the rest of his security detail closed ranks in front of the podium. Clayton the campaign manager had finally made his way to the stage and was moving toward King. *About damn time.* Clayton took the mic, thanked all for coming, and directed the governor toward the backstage exit. A chorus of jeers and shouts followed them.

As they were hustled by security back to the governor's black-tinted SUV, King leaned down to Clayton's ear. "I've had it with these ingrates, Clayton. I'm outta here," he said.

"Sir, we still have the meet-and-greet at the coffee shop. The press is already there. We can't not go."

“Holy Christ, not another one. Come on, let’s cut our losses,” King said.

King’s head of security agreed with the governor for a completely different reason. “The coffee shop is a tight fit. We can’t keep a good eye on you in a space like that,” the man said.

Clayton, looking annoyed at the security head, interjected. “Governor, we don’t want to leave here with nothing but video of ...” He hesitated. “Of what just happened. It’s not good optics.”

King, already in the SUV and loosening his tie, considered that argument. Damned if he could afford any more bad press. He started straightening his tie.

“All right,” he said, “but let’s make it quick.”

“Yes, sir,” Clayton said, and he directed the driver to Connie’s Coffee.

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King was in full recovery mode by the time he reached the coffee shop, shaking all the hands offered to him, turning just so for the cameras. He made his way to the counter, where a woman was ready with a hot biscuit, a fresh cup of coffee, and a smile. The stale Danish that the county commissioners had plied King with earlier was sitting poorly on his stomach, and the idea that he’d have to graciously accept yet another culinary gift was too much for King’s digestive fortitude. He put up a hand to refuse.

Clayton, seeing a diplomatic disaster in the making, stepped in with a polite decline. “The governor’s cutting back so he can enjoy the holidays. But it looks wonderful,” he said.

“Mm-hmm,” the woman said, but her smile was gone, and she appeared to want the cameras to record it.

Clayton leaned across the counter toward her. “The governor could use a moment of privacy,” he said. “Where is the, um ...?”

The woman motioned to the back of the coffee shop, and King began in that direction, making his way through more outstretched hands. The clientele at Connie’s Coffee this time of day was mostly senior citizens and retirees, and the plant closing didn’t have the same dire consequences for them as it did for the younger folk. They sat at Connie’s that morning and watched the governor with the kind of bemusement granted only to the more experienced among us—they had seen King’s kind come and go many times before. Some shared stories with their table mates about King’s daddy, his granddaddy, and his uncle, the one who got caught doing things with that legislative intern that married politicians weren’t supposed to get caught doing with legislative interns.

Elderly Mrs. Barnett, on the other hand, was clearly a fan. “You’re much better looking in person than you are on TV,” she told King, and she wouldn’t let go of his hand.

King leaned down and kissed her on the cheek for the cameras as he expertly wrestled away from her grip. Like a well-practiced team, King handed a giggly Mrs. Barnett off to his security head, who escorted her back to her table. The security chief then rushed to catch up with the governor, who was almost clear of the crowded dining room. King felt the familiar shadow behind him, so he turned and patted the man on the arm.

“It’s just a quick piss,” King said. “Go get yourself some coffee.”

The security head frowned.

“It’s okay,” King assured him. “What could happen in this holler?”

The man paused for a moment, then he nodded and returned to the counter.

King found the narrow hallway and the men's restroom, the last door on the left before the exit out of the old downtown store. Just before he stepped inside, he noticed the concentrated November sunlight beaming in through a crack in the back door. Free of the crowd, of Clayton, and of his security detail, for a moment King entertained the idea of walking straight out that door and escaping to the comfort of a bourbon and branch at his friend Jack Sasser's place. Today had not been the love-fest his wife had led him to envision. So much for her "get out and let the people love you" strategy. He would bring that up with her tonight.

This—he looked around the tiny bathroom with its plastic flowers by the sink and a framed photo of what must have been Hartsfed a hundred years ago—this is exactly why he hated the campaign trail. He was forced to engage with a world that offended each and every one of his senses. Kissing old ladies who reeked of old lady, the sticky babies, the dullard parents and their dullard children. Row after row of undereducated, gappy-toothed simpletons who grinned their ridiculous grins and parroted back everything he said to them, but too loudly and with too many vowels. It hurt his ears, his eyes, his nose. He should leave these idiots with their lard-laden biscuits to their diabetic fate.

He wouldn't have even made this trip if he hadn't said two words. Two little words. Yet, because of those two words, he had fallen from political grace and found himself doing penance in this Podunk. God, how he wished he could take back those two words.

After all, King reminded himself, wasn't he the first southern governor in decades whose poll numbers actually went *up* while he was in office? Yes, he was. Hadn't he fought against a state lottery and the American Indian casinos and won? Yes, he had. And they were going to expand Medicaid over his dead body.

But this fall, in the midst of the budget crisis, a TV reporter shoved a microphone in his face and asked him what he planned to do about it. The governor, worn down by arguing against the other party and fighting with his own, went sorrowfully off script.

Two words.

“Raise taxes.”

That sound bite looped on television newscasts for days, and King’s poll numbers started to free-fall.

State Senator Ed Blackburn—a man with ample seniority, a man who put his hand out for a piece of every backroom deal King made—could have come to King’s defense. But instead, Blackburn denounced the governor, accused him of “committing commie commerce,” and then led a demonstration in front of the governor’s mansion. People showed up, toting signs like KUT KING’S KRAZY TAXES and KEEP KING’S HANDS OUT OF MY POCKETS, yelling and fist-shaking in clear sight of King eating his BBQ sandwich in the dining room.

Clayton, Mr. Campaign Expert, had made light of the matter at first. “Do you know how short the attention span of the American voter really is?” Clayton asked him. “They won’t remember any of it by this time next year, I guarantee you.”

But in case they did remember, Clayton launched the Redemption Tour, dragging King through every grease stain on the state map to shake even more hands and kiss even more saggy old cheeks. Just as King felt he was on the cusp of absolution, what did he find out but that Clayton had one foot out the door. That self-promoting little weasel thought King didn’t know he was looking for a new job, but the governor knew. *Rats off a sinking ship, that’s what this is.*

That's when King went home and told his wife he was done. He would be the first one-term King in the litter. Mrs. King, however, was having none of it.

"Might I remind you that the people of this state like Judson Porter King? No," she corrected herself, "they love you. You're so personable, honey. Attractive. Everything the average suburban mom wants in a man. You're their *leader*. They really should treat you with more respect."

She walked over to his chair, took his hand in hers, and squeezed it. "I know you don't care for it, sweetheart, but you've got to keep up the campaign schedule," she said. "Get out there and remind voters how wonderful you are. Show them that you understand them, Judd."

Understand them? He did no such thing.

The ability to divine the hopes and dreams of Alabamians had kept the King family's pockets lined for a long time. But the unfortunate truth was that the tea-reading gene had skipped over this particular King entirely. In fact, the only thing that had ever worked in Judd King's favor was an upbringing that hammered into him how his succession into the family business was a foregone conclusion. It was his birthright. And you don't spend much time questioning foregone conclusions.

King's daddy and his two uncles and his granddaddy had all served the great state of Alabama in some capacity—speaker of the house, attorney general, lieutenant governor. The big office, too. When his politicking days were done, King's daddy opened up a consulting firm two doors down from the statehouse. If a piece of legislation passed, you could bet it had the King seal of approval on it. Elected or not, King Senior was still an integral part of Montgomery's political machine. He ran with the big men, he was one of the big men. When Judd worked in his

father's office as a teenager, the men at the firm, some older than his dad, called Judd "Sir" and "Boss." There was no doubt of Judd's place in the pecking order. And there was no doubt Judd would attend his daddy's alma mater, no question that he would pledge his daddy's fraternity, that he'd date the girls from the right families that his daddy approved of. There was never any doubt at all.

When he came home after college, Judd's father bought him an auto dealership. Within a year, every new car in the state motor pool had a "King Motors" sticker on it. Judd joined the local political committee, served as its youngest-ever chair, even represented the party at the national convention. When the timing was right, he ran for his district's House seat, with the blessing of the political machine that had backed his family for generations. There was no doubt he was the party favorite. He didn't forget his friends and brought money home to his district. Industry loved him. The chamber of commerce loved him. There was never any doubt of their support. When the men behind Montgomery's machinations called him home and said they wanted him to be their pick in the governor's race, it was time. No doubt. And now, three years later, hadn't he been a good governor? Of course, he had. No doubt. His wife was right. The people still loved him. And King had no intention of losing what he had won. He was born into this. He was owed this. He would not doubt now.

Buoyed by his wife's pep talk, King asked his secretary if there was anything on the schedule. He was ready to fight again.

"Nothing right now. But the economic development folks up in Hartsfed are worried about a plant closing," she said. "They wonder if you can come up and deliver some good news."

Hartsfed. That was just a hop-skip from his old buddy Jack's place. He could put together a fundraiser. Make some deals. Maybe go quail hunting. Invite the media up for some Average Joe photos of him with his rifle. Screw the polls. It was time for another trip.

"Betsy, call Hartsfed and set something up for next week," he said. "And call Jack Sasser. Tell him to clean his gun."

Now, here was Judson Porter King III, surrounded by exactly the kind of people he had spent a lifetime trying to keep a sanitary distance from, the kind of people he didn't understand at all. He just wanted some privacy, and the only place he could find it was in front of a urinal in a coffee shop in a godforsaken town, complete with fake flowers and fake sentimentality.

He was standing there, pants unzipped, staring at the wall, thinking of ways to take out his frustrations on Clayton, when he heard a soft, out-of-place voice behind him.

"Hey, Governor," the voice said.

Then King felt the needle sink deep into his thigh.