

When the men at Donny's table got rowdy, Pete walked over to Sara and asked what they were getting all heated about. She said, "Something about Mimi, I think. Let's go see."

Robert was saying, "Mimi's got a screw loose, and everybody knows it."

"Mimi Blackstone?" Sara chimed in. "Didn't she write the governor?"

She whispered to Pete that it was about the dams. Pete looked puzzled.

She whispered, "You know, The Big Lagoon." He still looked puzzled, and she shook her head in dismay at his ignorance.

"Didn't you check it, walk on it before you drove on it? Did it look different?" George asked Painter, who also was a dozer operator.

Painter was engrossed in his tale. "Didn't look much different. Just that fissure, halfway up The Big Lagoon, oh, I'd say roughly about twelve foot by three. We'd seen that before, so I wasn't worried. Didn't think nothing about it. Then, driving on it, it felt like I was driving on cake frosting. Back tires sunk three feet down into that slop, then the front. I was gunning it to about nine thousand. Thought I'd blow a bearing. Shit, I went flying outta there, down to my wife and kids, yelling, 'Dam's gonna blow!' I yelled to all my neighbors. It about scared me to death."

"Full of shit, and that's no joke," Robert said. "That does more harm than good because you just started another round of crying wolf. How the hell will we ever know if there's a real problem?"

"You made that up," Rino said. "I think you dreamed it."

"So, who else did you tell?" George asked.

"Sweeny, but he couldn't give a rat's ass," Painter said.

"He couldn't pour piss out of a boot with both hands," Donny quipped.

"You muckmen gripe more than the prisoners I used to guard," George snarled. "I wish I'd known this before I moved here."

“Why shouldn’t they complain?” Sara asked. “Complaining is how to make things better. If no one says anything, nothing will ever change.”

“I agree with that,” Pete said cheerfully.

George got up and headed toward the door, where he almost bumped into Frank coming in. Frank stood there looking for a table. He wore a felt fedora and London Fog trench coat, his herringbone tweed suitcoat showing underneath. The cacophony began. Controlled chaos everywhere. Chairs scraping the floor, people heading to the door. Sara hated this, but they always did it. Operator comes in, everyone clears out. She felt ashamed as she walked over to him, but before speaking she winked and hinted with a shake of her head that he’d better play it cool.

“Welcome to Otter Creek Holler,” she said. “Friendliest place on the planet. In a minute, you’ll have your pick of places to sit.”

“What do I have to do to get a drink?” The laws still required a club membership for liquor by the drink. The dues were one dollar.

“Try the broomstick from the Wicked Witch of the West.” She held out her hand. “Or just give me a dollar.”

Frank gave her a dollar and ordered a martini. “Very dry, no ice or vegetables.”

“You mean olives?” She gave him a menu, but he gave it right back without looking at it. “I’d like a steak, please. Very rare.” She half turned back before walking away. “No ice or vegetables?”

“Definitely no vegetables. I’ll take a salad, though. With Italian.”

People were leaving in droves, except Pete, who was by the jukebox. In the kitchen, Sara wondered whether she might be able to pull off eating with Frank. For one thing, Todd had gone home. Secondly, she was starved. She hadn’t eaten since lunch at about eleven that morning. And third, she’d have Todd deduct it from her paycheck. She put two steaks on the grill, dropped

the basket of fries into the hot grease. Todd had done most of the dishes and asked her to clean up while he went back to the hotel.

“Good night, Pete,” she said, bringing Frank his drink. Pete left, looking back over his shoulder at Frank. Frank gave him a hard stare.

On the front window, Sara turned the sign to “Closed.” While the food cooked, she flew around, stacking dishes hot from the dishwasher onto open shelves, putting food into the fridge, cleaning counters, and sweeping the floor. Then, back in the dining room where Frank was the only customer, she put both plates on the table, pulled out a chair, and sat down.

“How nice that you’ll join me, if it’s all right with your boss. And what about your brothers, and your whole community? Won’t they come in a big stampede and run me out of town on a rail?”

She laughed. “My boss has gone back to the hotel. No one else is coming in. The door is shut and locked.”

It was raining, a cold winter rain, but not a pounding rain, and she figured she’d still hear the back door if Todd came in. A train horn sounded with its long, mournful tone.

“Sorry I scared off all your customers.”

“Most of them leave at this time anyway. But, it’s true, they don’t like coal operators.”

“I know. That last one gave me a scowl. Is he your boyfriend?”