

SOUTHERN GOTHIC



D. KRAUSS

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Chapter 1

Friday at noon

Butch's voice crackled over the phone line. "I bought the house."

Art didn't have to ask which one.

"Hello? Did you hear me?"

Art did. Too clearly, despite the line noise. "Are you on a cell phone?" he asked.

"No. Payphone. In Enterprise."

"Payphone? You found a payphone?"

Art could almost see Butch's shrug. "In Enterprise."

Of course. "Why aren't you on your cell?"

"No service. Why are you asking me stupid questions?"

"Seems appropriate," Art said, "given your news. So, here's another- why the eff did you buy the house?"

Now Butch was silent. "I don't know," he finally said, "Just something I had to do."

"Does Cindy know?"

"No."

"She's going to kill you."

"I know." A pause. "Don't tell her."

"Think I have a death wish?"

Butch chuckled, then silence, pregnant with obvious and stark truths, such as purchasing a house in these bad times in an especially bad location, let's say, for example, anywhere within five hundred miles of Enterprise, Alabama, wasn't all that smart, Butchie boy. And preachers don't make all that much money, so now you're carrying an extra, unnecessary debt, brother o'mine, but that's neither here nor there. Butch's eyes had drifted south for thirty, forty years now and stark truths had never deterred him from doing other stupid things. Becoming a preacher, for instance. No need, then, for Art to voice the obvious, that Butch had made an emotional and quite idiotic investment. Maybe if he had bought the house to live in it... but that would be insane.

"I'm going to live in it," Butch said.

Anyone in the dispatch office looking at Art right then might think a sledgehammer had just reached out of the phone and stroked him. "What?"

"It's in pretty bad shape," Butch continued, as though this was a normal conversation. "The windows are gone and I think there's some foundation issues, so I want you to come down and help me."

Second sledgehammer stroke. "What?"

Butch hesitated. "I'll pay you."

Suuure he would. The eagle screamed whenever Butch let go of a quarter.

Art absorbed all this and then rendered judgment. "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"No." But even Butch didn't sound convinced.

Art mentally scanned the infinite number of proper objections to this most hare-brained of Butch's hare-brained ideas and summarized them in one inescapable fact. "The place is haunted, Butch."

"I know." A pause. "So when are you coming down?"

"I have to go to Alabama," Art said.

Linda didn't miss a beat. "You don't have to. You want to."

"Entirely wrong," he said, "Just the opposite."

At the stove, she put the last trimmings on his pot roast; the savory steam flooded the room and made Art's stomach rumble. His pot roast. His. He ate that or meatloaf or hamburger steak with mashed potatoes for dinner every day, no variation. Well, sometimes he varied, pork roast or potato pancakes, but the variants did not stray far from the original. Linda insisted on adding superfluous vegetables and he humored her by taking a spoonful or two of whatever it was, Brussels sprouts or corn, but usually it ended up scraped into Pace's dog dish.

Surety. After six hundred miles or so each day over roads sometimes dry, sometimes wet, the trailer overloaded with stone for the out trip and empty on the return, his unvaried dinner was something to count on. It had been an evolution. Adventurous when they first married some twenty years before, he'd accepted the dishes Linda pushed, salmon steak, and pastas with elaborate sauces and mixed meats and vegetables, of which she had been justifiably proud. Art had liked them, but as time dulled into a daily routine of early morning truck prep and load after wearying load, his adventures diminished, his horizons shrank, and the rest of him followed suit. He bowed to inevitabilities... more accurately, was crushed under the weight of them... and his only solace grew into an assurance of what awaited every day for every coming year for the rest of his life, including meals.

Linda didn't get it. She insisted, even now, that he try southwest chicken or fajitas or trout almondine, all of which she prepared expertly, but he just looked at it, pushed away from the table and went to Burger King. Nothing to do with her cooking because her cooking was excellent; it was the diminishing of Art's prospects, but there were no English words to properly convey the concept. Maybe the Germans had one, since they seemed to have a marvelous ability to explain whole philosophies in a single term, like *schadenfreude*, but Art didn't know anyone who spoke German.

So she made the southwest chicken or fajitas for herself and Rich and the pot roast for Art and always, always expressed the silliness of two different meals as

she chalked up one more disappointment in him, which was okay. He always, always let her know how good the pot roast was, how much he appreciated her extra effort, and privately agreed with her that it was a strange thing, as he chalked up his own disappointments.

"No." She shook an agitated spoon at him. "Just the opposite of opposite. You're just like your brother."

"I am in no way like my brother."

There must have been warning in his tone because she got off that right away. "How long?"

He shrugged. "Couple of weeks. Want to go?"

She looked at him as if he were crazy and dished out dinner and set it before him, enveloping him in a savory fog and he smiled. Umm, good. "Rich!" she shouted, "dinner!" and immediately there was a "Coming!" from somewhere in the back without a concomitant thundering of feet to lend it validity. Linda would make two more calls before Art had to intervene so he took those moments to admire her handiwork: the dark brown slightly overdone slices of meat, just the way he liked them, the crater of gravy held back by walls of mashed potatoes, a pile of string beans he could tolerate. Not a fajita or almondine for miles. Mom, in his head, forty years ago: "Eat!"

"Rich!" Second warning as Linda futzed about the stove. "What about work?" she asked with her back turned.

"I can suspend my deliveries for two weeks."

"Will the quarries drop you?"

"No. I'm too good." Said with a bit more hubris than she liked and she turned and pinned him to the seat with her fear-of-poverty eye lasers.

Art inwardly shook his head because everything was always about money, wasn't it? If he were a good husband, he would work eighteen hours a day, every day of the year, never taking time off (except to drive her someplace she wanted to go, but even then, he would have to make up the hours somehow), and spend the remaining six hours left in the day doing home repairs and chores, thereby saving her the expense and time so she could blow his paychecks on more jewelry and clothes and he would never, ever buy something foolish for himself like a tool, unless it could be used directly for one of the home repairs she demanded, like installing gold and ivory marble shower tiles. If he were a good husband.

He wasn't.

"Don't worry, it'll be fine," he dismissed.

She frowned murder at him, reared back and yelled, "Rich!"

That was it, the final warning before missiles launched and Art, glad for the distraction, added his own, "Boy, get in here now!"

"All right, all right!" dopplered from the back of the house to the kitchen as big, clumsy, human feet tromped towards them, followed by four even bigger and clumsier dog feet as Pace trundled behind, a big dumb happy look on his face. Art had to smile even as he rumbled, "Boy, why do you make your mom call like that?"

"I was doing stuff." And he plopped down, staring at Art's plate. "You eatin' that again?"

Art didn't hear that last part because Rich had said exactly the same words in exactly the same tone of incredulity ever since the kid had turned eight about, what, five years ago? It was white noise by now. "Stop doing stuff when your mom calls." Art patted Pace's big dumb head. "Hello, you big dumb dog." And got a big dumb smile in return.

"Pace, outside," Linda ordered and Rich, groaning about the injustice, herded the Lab out to the porch where the dog immediately turned and pressed his big dumb face into the screen, aggrieved.

Art smiled. "Sorry, dude."

"What am I having?" Rich asked, and Linda dished chicken Florentine with great satisfaction. "Thanks, Mom, really looks good." Said with great satisfaction. Dig at Art.

"So when are you leaving?" Linda asked.

"Saturday."

"Leaving?" Rich blinked. "Where you going, Dad?"

"To see my brother."

"Uncle Butch?" Rich's eyebrows rose in hope. "Can I come?" Butch and Rich got along great, always roughhousing and reading comics to each other, at least on Butch's infrequent visits. Art never understood how his brother had a better relationship with Rich than he did.

"You have school," Linda reminded.

"Ah, Mom!" Teenager's standard objection, which had some merit. Art had realized, somewhere near the end of 7th grade, that further schooling was a waste of time. Most people could read and cipher at a fairly expert level by that point; if you can't, you're pretty much a lost cause. He didn't act on that conviction until the middle of tenth grade, because, well, habit. And Mom. And her husband, Ridge. But having already mastered math and history and English – at least, all that he considered necessary for average social functioning – through casual reading, Art no longer saw the point.

"But, but..." Mr. Ragu, Art's counselor (why do people with weird names go into education? Do they enjoy the torment?), spluttered in complete astonishment as Art signed himself out, forever, "You have a genius-level IQ!"

"So what?" Art said and walked out, forever.

Rich did not have a genius-level IQ. Or maybe he did and was simply bored. But he did not spend time casually reading math, history, and English; he spent it parked in front of the television. He was what the experts called a "visual" learner but how much larnin' can you get from *SpongeBob SquarePants*? Rich approached schooling with an air of indifference, so if there was someone who needed all the larnin' that could be squeezed out of public education, it was him. Take a look at Butch, who had attended school with an air of befuddlement but who liked going and got good grades, even though he was about as far from genius-level IQ as Rich. Proof that persistence rewards.

"You're staying here," Art gruffed around a forkful of roast. Rich glowered but said nothing. The old gunfighter had spoken.

But, uh-oh, Rich suddenly brightened, a strong indicator of a very bad idea. "Uncle Butch is still in Arizona, right?"

Art saw through this gambit immediately. Rich was angling for location as a pretext to go, since the trip would be "Educational, Dad! I could write a paper about it!" Like that would ever happen.

"Not at the moment."

"Then where is he?"

Art considered. "Hell."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

D. Krauss currently resides in the Shenandoah Valley. He's been a cottonpicker, a sod buster, a surgical orderly, the guy who paints the little white line down the middle of the road, a weatherman, a gun-totin' door-kickin' lawman, a layabout, and a bus driver, in that order.

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