

SEX, LIES, AND SOYBEANS

by

RICK GOELD

Sex, Lies, and Soybeans

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ISBN: 978-0-9829453-0-8

First Printing: September, 2010

Printed in the United States of America

To Kathy, with love.

Food animals had not fared well. New strains of bird flu, mad cow disease, swine syndrome, and red tide had pretty much decimated anything that flew, bellowed, grunted, or swam.

The world came to depend on grains, legumes, and vegetables. Some regions focused on rice, others on wheat, still others on potatoes, but corn and soy, both nutritious and easy to grow, became the world's "go to" crops.

*That is, until the corn chiggers came.
Soy became the world's primary source of protein.
Soy became king of the food world.*

CHAPTER 1

WILLIAM “BLACKIE” BLACKBURN

WEDNESDAY,
SEPTEMBER 21, NOON

WILLIAM Blackburn had never eaten mix before. “How do you order?” he asked.

The man behind the counter stared right through him. “The menu is right behind me. Can’t you read?”

An image of Burgess Meredith, the cranky old man in *Rocky*, flashed through Blackburn’s mind. “Yeah, I can read.” Blackburn had heard about mix, but never had the urge to try it. When the Retro Mix had opened, just a week ago, there had been a lot of buzz around the University of Texas campus. Word was the place was a throwback to the last century: comfortable chairs, magazines (real paper magazines!), board games (Yahtzee! Monopoly! Checkers!) and old time rock-and-roll.

Blackburn looked over the man’s shoulder. The menu was written in swirling letters; multi-colored chalk on an old style slate blackboard.

“What’s a thirty-thirty-thirty?” Blackburn asked.

“Thirty percent protein, thirty percent carbs, and thirty percent fat.”

“Sounds like a lot of fat.”

“To each his own.”

Shuffling noises came from an antique jukebox standing in the corner, and seconds later, the first few notes of “Beginnings” reverberated across the room. *Chicago. A classic.* “Okay ... and what else is in it?”

“That’s it. Just what I told you.” The old man looked perplexed.

“Thirty-thirty-thirty. That’s only ninety percent.”

“Oh.” The old man thought for a few seconds. “The rest is fiber.”

“Fiber.” Blackburn chewed on the word as he scanned the room. The Retro was just a few blocks south of the UT campus, so it attracted lots of students—mostly Grunges—but it was also close enough to downtown Austin to attract the young Professionals who worked there. Blackburn figured even if he didn’t like mix, maybe he could pick up a girl.

“So,” the old man said, catching Blackburn’s eye, “what’s it gonna be?”

“Uh, okay, give me a forty-thirty-twenty.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“Bingo,” the old man said, writing the order on a pad of paper—with a real pencil! “Now, what additives do you want?”

“Additives ... what are my choices?”

The old man gestured over his shoulder with his thumb.

“Uh, okay.” Blackburn looked over the list of additives written on the board. Most of the names were Greek to him.

“Hey, come on,” the old man growled. “I ain’t got all

day. Why don't I just give you the "booster" mix? That's what guys like you normally go for."

Guys like me? Blackburn's eyes narrowed. "What's in it?"

"It's a bunch of vitamins, minerals, and other stuff. You know, guaranteed to make you smarter and stronger."

"Uh, okay."

The old man muttered "Bingo" again, scribbled something on the pad, and then asked: "What flavor?"

"Let me guess: they're on the menu board, right?"

"See, you're getting smarter already."

Blackburn scanned the flavors: Chicken Enchilada, Iron Forge Barbecue (named after a once-famous restaurant in downtown Austin), Mama's Meatloaf, and Hong Kong. And three specials, today only: Monkey, Fintastic, and Pecan Praline.

"What's Hong Kong?" he asked.

"Think about it. What would Hong Kong taste like?"

A man standing behind him leaned forward. "It's good, Cantonese style. Throw in some jalapenos, and it's almost like Kung Pau."

Blackburn turned and looked at the man. *Ponytail, well-trimmed beard, white shirt, tie, jeans, boots ... a techie, for sure.*

"Hey," the old man said, regaining Blackburn's attention. "Don't listen to him. We don't have jalapenos today. That's only on Friday."

"What's Monkey?" Blackburn asked.

"Monkey is jungle fruit. Berries, stuff like that."

More shuffling noises from the antique jukebox, and, seconds later, Blackburn's ears were treated to the slick, funky sound of the first few bars of Earth, Wind, and Fire's "September." As he listened, he realized it was, indeed, the

21st of September—*just like in the song!* He looked around again, noting that there were no news screens, no sports screens, no showbiz screens, no game screens—no electronic entertainment of any kind. No obvious sign of anything “high-tech.”

“Hey! Space cadet!”

Blackburn turned back to the old man. “Sorry. What’s Fintastic?”

“Fish. You won’t like it.”

I won’t like it. “Okay ... I’ll have the barbecue.” He’d heard good things about the Iron Forge, which had shut down years ago, but apparently still licensed its “secret blend” of spices.

“Excellent choice.” The old man scribbled on the pad, and then asked, “Hot or cold?”

“Uh ... I don’t know.”

“You want hot. Barbecue is better if it’s hot.

“Okay ...”

“And what about texture?”

“What do you mean, texture?”

“You can have it cereal style, or whipped, you know, like mousse.”

“I don’t ... what do you mean by cereal style?”

“Let me make this real simple: smooth or lumpy?”

“Uh, smooth.”

“Bingo.” The old man scribbled on his pad and then punched a small display, initiating a wireless transaction with Blackburn’s money account, wherever it happened to be. Micro-seconds later, the flip-phone attached to Blackburn’s hip-clip beeped, signaling a completed transaction.

What a world we live in, Blackburn thought. Since the “Hot Money” crisis—Islamic terrorists had circulated radio-active coins and paper money in scores of cities around the

world—no hard currency was accepted at this restaurant, or, for that matter, any other retail establishment in the developed world. You either carried a transaction-capable wireless device, or a properly encrypted smart card, or ... you were out of luck.

Blackburn watched the old man measure ingredients: a gooey, molasses-like substance, then some white grainy material, then some brown pellets that looked like rabbit shit, and finally a number of finely-ground powders: yellow, dark green, and iridescent purple. He measured each ingredient precisely before dumping them into the mixing bowl, closing the lid, and touching the display. A rumbling sound, like an ancient garbage disposal grinding bones, morphed into the high-pitched whine of a jet engine. After perhaps thirty seconds, the machine stopped, the display blinked, the lid opened, and the old man scooped the mix into a serving bowl. He placed the bowl on a tray and slid it toward Blackburn. The entire process had taken less than two minutes.

The old man mumbled “Next,” and the techie moved forward, ready to place his order.

The first few notes of “Honky Tonk Woman” blasted from the jukebox.

The Strollin’ Bones. Blackburn walked over to the drink bar, wondering if Mick Jagger was still alive. He helped himself to an iced tea—soft drinks were included in the price—and scanned the restaurant, looking for a place to sit, preferably near an attractive co-ed eating alone. But the place was jammed. He spotted a few empty seats at a large community table on the patio. He strolled through the Spanish-style archway—under an ornate “Keep Austin Weird” sign—and offered a friendly “Hey” as he placed his tray on the table. He got a couple of grunts and nods, and took them as signs

of acceptance. He sat down and started to eat. *Not bad ... kind of a barbecued beef pudding.* After a few spoonfuls, he looked up and spotted the UT Tower in the distance. He tried to recall the name of the guy who had climbed up there, one bright sunny morning a few decades ago ... with a rifle.

A man slid into the seat opposite him. Blackburn looked up and recognized the techie who had been in line behind him. On his tray was a bowl overflowing with a chunky concoction that was deep purple. *Monkey?*

"My name's Smith," the techie said.

Blackburn nodded. "Nice to meet you. Bill Blackburn. Call me Blackie."

"Blackie." Smith swallowed a mouthful of mix, smiled and nodded. "You go to UT?"

"Yeah, I'm a senior," he lied. He had enough credits to call himself a junior, but he was taking two senior level courses. *Who keeps track of what class you're in, anyway?* "What about you?"

"I work in a software lab." Smith swallowed more mix, then took a long pull from a Lone Star Soy. "You know, the one down in Oak Hill? By the big shopping center?"

"Yeah, I've been by there a couple of times." Another lie, he'd never been to Oak Hill. "What kind of software do you write?"

Smith ignored the question. "So, you like mix?"

Blackburn swallowed another mouthful. "It's pretty good. Very good, actually. First time I ever had it."

"You've never had mix before?"

"Nope. Never."

Smith smiled. "Great stuff. It's got everything you need."

"Everything?" Blackburn's curiosity was aroused. "What do you mean?"

“It’s got all the right proteins, fats, vitamins ... you name it.”

Blackburn tried to recall what his mother had told him, maybe a thousand times, about eating a balanced diet. “So how do they get all of that out of wheat and beans and ... whatever else they use?”

Smith leaned back and took another swig of beer. “That’s all soy you’re eating, my friend. All soy.”

My friend? Blackburn stared into his bowl. “I thought it was ...”

“Nope. It’s all soy.” Smith wore a satisfied look, but frowned when he saw confusion on Blackburn’s face. “Didn’t you know that?”

“No,” Blackburn replied, shaking his head. “I guess I didn’t.”

“Synthetic food—mix made out of all kinds of stuff—has been around for a few years. But this is the first ‘all soy’ mix restaurant in the state.”

“No shit?” Blackburn used his spoon to poke at his mix.

“No shit, but, hey, don’t worry about it. It’s genetically engineered. I eat it all the time. Look at me. Strong like bull!” Smith raised a fist in the air.

Strong like bull? There aren’t that many bulls left. Blackburn brought a tiny spoonful of mix to his lips, sniffed it, placed it on his tongue, and finally, carefully, mouthed and swallowed it.

“Good, right?” Smith grinned.

“Well, yeah,” Blackburn nodded. “It tastes great. I just didn’t realize it was all soy.”

“Yup, all soy.” The smug look was back on Smith’s face.

“Hmm.” He’d have to ask his mother about this “all soy” mix. Blackburn’s mind wandered before finally landing back on software. “So,” he said, picking up the conversation where

they'd left it a few minutes ago, "what kind of software do you write?"

Smith looked surprised, but answered quickly. "Oh, I don't actually write software."

"No?"

"No. I just do some of the systems designs."

"What kind of systems?"

"Uh, financial."

Blackburn watched Smith stuff another heaping spoonful of mix into his mouth. "Financial ... that doesn't tell me much."

Smith swallowed the mix, then gulped more beer. "Systems that look at trends in financial transactions. Does that tell you enough?"

"Trends. Is that a market research kind of thing?" Blackburn was always on the lookout for interesting new fields of study.

"Something like that."

"So, what brings you up here?" Blackburn said, suddenly realizing that he was asking a lot of questions. He felt hot blood rush to his cheeks. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry. It's just that we're a long way from Oak Hill." *Eight miles? Ten?*

Smith swallowed more mix. "My sister. She's a student at UT. I'm meeting her here." Smith flicked his wrist and his cuff dropped an inch, exposing an implanted display. He glanced at it. "She's already late."

Blackburn's eyes lit up. "Nice. May I take a look?"

Smith unbuttoned his cuff, pushed the sleeve up, and extended his arm, palm up. The flexible display extended from his wrist almost to his elbow. The time, date, GPS locator, and an array of icons shone through a thin layer of skin. Blackburn whistled softly, then gazed at Smith's face,

focusing on his eyes and ears, looking for telltale signs of other implants.

"You can't see them," Smith said, scraping purple mix from the sides of his bowl. "The other implants, I mean."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to ..."

"It's okay. Natural curiosity. The main transceiver is behind my ponytail."

Blackburn nodded. That was the most common location for the transceiver; shielding material and skull protected the brain, and enzymes bonded to the transceiver's surface took care of any reaction to the microwaves. Blackburn had wanted an implanted computer since before puberty. But good implants were a privilege of the rich and famous. "What about voice and sound?"

Smith tapped his jawbone just beneath his ear.

Wow. Three implants. Top of the line. Blackburn thought he might ask Smith if he had a video eye implant, but thought better of it. "If you don't mind my asking, how'd you pay for it?"

"The lab sprang for it. I need it for my work."

A girl—a woman—was suddenly standing behind Smith.

"Got room for one more?"

Smith turned his head. "You're late," he said, pulling a chair closer.

She tossed a paper bag onto the table, and slithered into the chair.

"Manta," Smith said, "this is Bill Blackburn. Blackie. Blackie, this is my sister, Manta Ray."

Blackburn's eyes got wider.

Wow. Tall, and muscular, and wiry, and curvy ... all at the same time. Light coffee skin. Must be a heavy dose of Latino in her gene pool. Tight-fitting black leather vest. "Butterfly"

body art. Lots of metal: ear jewelry, a forehead weave (the latest thing!), and some other stuff. Shades perched on her head. She's nothing like her brother.

"I love your ... your whole look," Blackburn said, immediately feeling like a fool.

Smith leaned back and closed his eyes. He was either praying, Blackburn thought, or perhaps contemplating the absurdity of Blackburn's statement. Manta smiled and slid something out of the paper bag. *A burrito*. Seconds later, Manta was chewing, and chili sauce was dripping down her chin.

"Don't you like mix?" Blackburn asked her.

"Not when I can get this." She took another bite.

The jukebox shuffled, and seconds later, guitar music rocked the room.

"Barracuda" ... Heart ... the Wilson sisters. Blackburn took a deep breath. The aroma of beef and chili was intoxicating. People sitting near them began glancing at Manta.

"Will you cool it, Manta? You're making a scene with that"—Smith nodded at the burrito—"that thing."

"Fuck you, Charley." She held the burrito high over her head. Gobs of sauce went flying. The scent of beef, chili and onions filled the air.

Smith was now thoroughly pissed off. "Manta, wrap that fucking thing up."

Blackburn was confused. "Charley?"

Manta reached over, grabbed her brother's beer, and took a sip. "That's his name—Charley."

Smith retrieved his beer. "It's Charles Nelson Smith."

"Yeah, after you changed it," Manta snorted.

Changed it? Blackburn looked at Manta, who had noticed people pointing at her and was wrapping the burrito

in a large paper napkin. "Is that real?" he asked her. "I mean, real beef?"

"Yes, it's real beef."

Real beef costs a fortune. "Where'd you get it? The black market?"

"Yeah. A bootlegger I know." She took another bite, this time keeping the burrito covered and her head down.

Smith smirked. "You mean 'A bootlegger I blow,' don't you?"

"Fuck you again."

"I hope you rinsed your mouth out after you did him." Smith grinned and gulped a large spoonful of mix.

Manta ignored her brother, but Blackburn could see her blinking away tears. He decided to change the subject. "Your brother told me you were at UT. What are you studying?"

Manta took a couple of deep breaths and regained her composure. "I'm pre-law."

"Pre-law. Impressive."

"Yeah, but I may drop out." She grinned wickedly. "I'm thinking of becoming an exotic dancer."

"Bullshit, Manta," Smith said. "You couldn't dance if your feet were on fire."

"Fuck you for the third time."

Open warfare. Blackburn's eyes flicked back and forth between brother and sister. Smith had a satisfied look on his face, grinning as he shoveled more mix into his mouth. Manta looked like she might actually shed some tears. She put her half-eaten burrito down and wiped her eyes with a clean napkin.

"And I thought my sister and I didn't get along," he said, attempting to lighten the mood.

Manta sniffed a few times, and finally blew her nose into

the napkin. "You're right," she said, attempting a smile. "I guess I started it. I'm sorry."

"Me, too. We were both out of line." He leaned over and kissed Manta's cheek. She made a face and laughed.

Smith glanced at his wrist display. "I've got to go meet someone." He stood and offered his hand. "See you around, Blackie?"

Blackburn stood. "Uh, yeah, sure." He shook Smith's hand.

Smith looked at Manta. "See you tonight?"

She nodded. Blackburn watched as Smith walked through the patio, under another Spanish-style archway, crossed the street, and headed south toward downtown Austin.

"Do you want the rest of this?" Manta asked.

"The burrito?" Blackburn's eyes got wider.

"Yes, the burrito. What else is there?"

He tried to remember the last time he had eaten real beef. His sister had occasionally brought home leftovers from one of her political "power dinners." He tried to remember what it tasted like. He couldn't. "Are you sure?"

"Sure. Go ahead." She pushed the half-eaten burrito across the table.

Blackburn picked it up, careful not to spill its precious contents. He brought it to his mouth and took a small bite, closed his eyes, and chewed. Chunks of beef, hard to break, but once broken, flaky and tender, delighted his taste buds. With onions and peppers, in a thick red sauce ... *Heaven ... I'm in heaven.*

She smiled. He took another bite and started to fall in love.

Blackburn set two cups of coffee on the table: hers with

artificial sweetener and whitener; his “black” befitting his self-proclaimed nickname. “Always on My Mind” played softly on the jukebox. *Willie Nelson, a Texas legend*. “So,” he said, sitting down opposite her, “do you and your brother always fight like that?”

She smiled. “Only when he acts like a piece of shit.”

Play it cool, Blackie. “Which is how often?”

“Most of the time.”

“Hmm. Sounds like me and my sister.”

“You have a sister?”

“Yeah. Vicki. Victoria Blackburn. Ever heard of her?”

A puzzled look. “No. Why? Who is she?”

“She’s a state senator.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Well, I’ve never heard of her. I don’t know much about politics.”

“Mmm.” Blackburn sipped his coffee. “You mind if I ask you a personal question?”

She shrugged.

“You and your brother. You’re so ... different.”

“Yeah.” Manta lowered her eyes, raised her cup, and sipped her coffee. “People mention that sometimes.”

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

She looked him straight in the eye. “Nothing to be embarrassed about. Same mother, different fathers.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Charley is pure WASP. I’m ... I am what I am: half white, half Mexican. With some Chinese. Maybe some other stuff, too.”

He smiled at her. *Yeah. I can see the Chinese in your eyes*. “How’d you get your name?”

She laughed out loud. “My mother had a thing for fish.”

"Manta Ray ... it's, well, unique." *I guess it could have been worse.* "So, where's your mother now?"

"In Waco. In a commune with a bunch of other 'free thinkers.'"

Waco ... a haven for wackos. "And your father?"

"Never met the man," she shrugged.

He hesitated. "Do you have any problem with ..."

"With what?"

"Prejudice?"

"Prejudice?" She sneered. "Is that the politically correct term for it now?"

"You know what I mean," he said, his face reddening. Texas was one of the hottest, fiercest battlegrounds in the underground campaign against Latinos.

"Yeah. I know what you mean. No, it's not a problem. Other than the odd nasty remark I get on campus."

"Hmm." He saw that Manta had finished her coffee, and his cup, still half-full, was cold. "How about more coffee?"

"You know, I'd really like a glass of wine."

He glanced at his ten-dollar plastic watch: one-thirty. He had a class at three. *Fuck it.* "We could walk back to the university. There are a couple of wine bars on the way."

She tapped on the edge of her coffee mug. "You have any wine at your place?"

My place? The broken-down apartment I share with my roommate? "Uh, no. No wine."

"Well,"—she gave him a look that he couldn't decipher—"we could go to my place."

"Your place?" Sweat dampened Blackburn's armpits.

"Yeah. The house I share with my brother. Have you got a car?"

"No, no car." *Damn.* "You've got wine at your place?"
Dumb question.

“Yeah. It’s not far. We can walk.”

“What kind of wine?” *Damn, Blackie, pull yourself together.* “I mean, I’m kind of particular about what I drink.” He smiled at her.

“Right.” She smiled back at him as she stood. “Well, I’m sure there’s something there that you’ll like.”

He took another good look at her. *Yeah, you might say that.*

Minutes later, Blackburn was sitting in an armchair, sweating, as he watched her strip while standing on the coffee table. She attempted some kind of exotic dance, but she was no dancer—not that it mattered to him. She peeled off her vest and jeans. No bra. Her breasts were small, firm, and pierced with nipple rings. Butterflies, in a range of colors, adorned her body. Her plain black thong undulated inches from his face. Then she jumped off the coffee table and headed down a hallway. Blackburn followed.

Once in bed, he peeled off the thong. Her pussy was draped with metal—more metal than he’d ever seen—and the situation deteriorated rapidly.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Uh ... I don’t know. This has never happened to me before.”

“What—shit, are you a virgin or something?”

“Hell no. I’ve had plenty of girls.” *Another lie.* “I don’t know what it is. Maybe ... I’ve just never seen that much ... jewelry.”

“It’s just some pussy rings and love chains.”

“Yeah, but ...”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” she grumbled, jumping out of bed and moving over to a dresser. Putting one leg up, she reached down, unclipped the chains, and dropped them on the floor.

“Think you can handle it now?” she smirked, climbing back into bed.

Soon he was inside her, pushing for all he was worth.

CHAPTER 2

VICTORIA BLACKBURN

Blackie: vick? u on-line

Vicki: Yes, little brother. I'm in my office, on my computer. *Just what I need ... an interruption.*
Are you texting?

Blackie: yeah. whassup

Vicki: Whassup? I thought you outgrew that stuff years ago.

Blackie: never underestimate power of immaturity

Vicki: Duly noted.

Blackie: met girl today

Vicki: Good for you. Masturbation must be getting old.

Blackie: lol. seriously, pre-law @ ut, sizzling hot

Vicki: Of legal age, I hope?

Blackie: will ask when i c her sat

Vicki: A date? This must be serious.

Blackie: only time will tell

Vicki: What else? I'm busy. After all, I am a state senator.

Blackie: pass any good bills lately

Vicki: Actually, my committee ... remember I'm the youngest ever committee chair?

Blackie: thx 4 reminding me

Vicki: Anyhow, we're about to start hearings on a new soy bill. That's taking most of my time.

Blackie: u hate soy. gonna recluse urself

Vicki: Recluse? Do you mean recuse?

Blackie: whatever

Vicki: No, I'm not going to recuse myself. I can be objective about anything. Remember, I'm fighting the good fight for the people of Texas.

Blackie: bullshit

Vicki: Again, you're wasting my time. *My four-fifteen should be arriving any minute.*

Blackie: going home 2nite. wanna come? score free meal. nada like mom's cooking

Vicki: True, but like I said, I'm busy. And don't you work tonight?

Blackie: don't work wed. when last time u saw folks

Vicki: A month ago? Two? Let me check my calendar.

Blackie: if gotta check, been 2 long

Vicki: In our family, I thought Mom was the official purveyor of guilt.

Blackie: u know what i'm saying. btw, thumbs wearing out

Vicki: I can't come tonight.

Blackie: promise you'll go next week. i'll b ur guilt deflector

Vicki: Let me check my calendar ... OK ... tentatively.

Blackie: wut a sweetheart

Vicki: Suck yourself. *My four-fifteen just walked in.*

Blackie: if only I cud

Vicki: If men could suck their own dicks ... you finish the sentence ... gotta go.

"Thanks for meeting with me, Senator."

"Not a problem, Mr. Gage." *My God, he's gorgeous.*
"Please have a seat."

Victoria Blackburn glided behind her desk—a monument of black oak, trimmed with gold leaf—and perched on her custom-made black leather chair. Her office was a testament to centuries of Texas political power. Behind her, a mahogany-paneled wall featured photos of famous Texans—mostly deceased—and oil paintings depicting great moments in Texas history. Another wall featured an array of news screens. A plush burgundy sofa, a coffee table, and a pair of end tables stacked with old copies of *Texas Monthly* dominated a third wall.

Justin Gage glanced out the floor-to-ceiling window. The view of the Capital grounds, dotted with live oak and pecan trees, was magnificent. He lowered himself onto the edge of one of a pair of exquisitely carved arm chairs, relaxed, and immediately slid to the back of the chair.

"Beautiful chairs," Gage said, shifting his weight forward, trying to balance on the front edge. "What kind are they?"

"They're Adirondack chairs, Mr. Gage. Gifts from an old, old friend: the Speaker of the House." *A lie, but what-the-hell, it sounded good.* She grinned as she watched Gage try to get comfortable. Adirondack chairs, designed for casual relaxation, have seats that slope backward. When polished with high-quality furniture wax, as these were, they were impossible to sit on for any length of time.

Gage gathered himself and smiled. "Please call me Justin."

She noted Gage's powder-gray Western-style suit with natural leather piping, his turquoise-studded bolo tie, his snakeskin boots, and his ten-gallon Stetson. *A buff Texas*

cowboy with a George Clooney smile ... but remember, Vicki: he's a damned lobbyist. "We hardly know each other. Why don't we leave it as senator and mister for now?"

Her staff had briefed her earlier that day. After graduating from Texas State University, Gage had worked for a handful of politicians before landing at Americans for Healthy Food. He'd been a midlevel manager for a couple of years before his surprise promotion to senior vice president for the Southwest region. In terms of experience, intelligence, and debating skills, Gage was no better than average. Her chief of staff suspected he'd gotten the job because of his youth—he was just thirty-six—his good looks, and his Texas drawl.

"Let's get down to business, shall we?" Victoria continued. "I've got a busy schedule."

"Of course," Gage said, leaning forward. "As you know, I'm here in support of a bill that's being considered by your committee."

"The Soy Bill."

"That's the one."

"I understand the *purpose* of your visit, Mr. Gage."

The muscles around Gage's eyes tightened. "Then I'll get right to the point. Texans deserve access to healthy, high-quality, cost-effective food. Soy mix has proven to be the best way to deliver that to the people of this great state ... of any state."

"Let's be clear. You're talking about one hundred percent soy, correct? What they're calling 'all-soy' mix?"

"Absolutely. Current regulations, which are ambiguous and poorly worded, allow for synthetic food—mix—to contain up to eighty-five percent soy. With our new gene-tailoring technology, we can go all the way to one hundred percent."

"Tailored genes. Sounds like something I'd wear to a

rodeo.” She smiled, noting the startled look on Gage’s face. “In any case, Mr. Gage, when you talk about synthetic food, you’re referring to that stuff that looks like ... creamed spinach?”

“Creamed spinach, or beef stew, or an ice-cream sundae. It can be made to look like, and taste like, just about any kind of food. Think of it, Senator: synthetic food, made exclusively from soy, genetically engineered to deliver the optimum combination of proteins, vitamins, minerals, carbs, and fiber.”

“Synthetic food ...” *God, he’s beautiful.* “Isn’t manufactured food good enough any more, Mr. Gage?”

“Regarding synthetic food and manufactured food, I think our friends in the media have confused everyone. In industry terms,” he said, smiling, “manufactured food is food made from a variety of raw materials that are forced through nozzles, stretched into fibers, and then pounded, molded, pressed, sliced, and diced to look like real food. Synthetic food generally refers to mix: a combination of ingredients combined in a high-speed blender.”

“I don’t see what’s wrong with manufactured food. I like the idea of food that looks like real food.”

“Looks can be deceiving, Senator. In any case, manufactured food is old technology. Synthetic is the wave of the future.”

Lord help us. “When you described all-soy mix, you used the word ‘optimum.’ What do you mean by that, Mr. Gage?”

“I meant the optimum combination—the optimum *balance*—of proteins, vitamins, minerals, carbs, and fiber.”

He’s got that memorized.

“I can show you the studies,” Gage continued, again shifting his weight, trying to get comfortable.

“Done by your own people, I assume?”

“My own people?”

“The soy industry.”

Gage reached for his leather briefcase. “Actually, these studies were done by professors at some of this country’s finest universities.”

Funded, of course, by the soy industry. “Don’t bother, Mr. Gage. I believe our staffers already have copies.”

A satisfied look on Gage’s face. “Passing the bill will remove the ambiguity in the current state law. Entrepreneurs will be able to open restaurants serving all-soy mix—synthetic food—with no fear that they will be shut down.”

“Entrepreneurs, Mr. Gage?”

“Absolutely, Senator. Small businesses will benefit. Jobs will be created.”

Now that’s bullshit. “Why Texas, Mr. Gage?”

A look of surprise on Gage’s face. “Why not Texas, Senator?” His hands opened in a gesture of confusion.

“Why not Pennsylvania, Mr. Gage?” Her hands mirrored Gage’s. “Or Virginia? Or Illinois?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, let’s see now. So far, you’ve managed to get this type of legislation passed in just one state: New Hampshire. Not much soy grown in New Hampshire. Correct, Mr. Gage?”

“Actually, my responsibility only covers the Southwest region.”

“I’m referring to the soy industry as a whole, Mr. Gage.”

“I understand,” he smiled.

“This type of legislation would never pass in one of the influential states in the Northeast, would it, Mr. Gage?” She held his gaze. *So beautiful ... I can hardly stand to be in the same room with him.* “Or how about California, Mr. Gage? That’s an influential state.”

“Our studies ...” He stopped and cleared his throat. “Texas influences the entire Southwest region. Texas is where we want to begin.”

“Hmm ... right after New Hampshire. Correct, Mr. Gage?”

He again shifted his weight. Sweat was starting to soak through his collar.

After this much time on the chair, Victoria thought, his back will ache, his butt will be sore, and his hamstrings will be singing the blues.

Gage forced a smile. “Senator, with all due respect, how do you know that legislation hasn’t been introduced in California, and Pennsylvania, and Virginia, and other states?”

“Research, Mr. Gage. We have researchers, too. They tell me that Texas is the only state where this type of legislation has already been introduced.”

“Well,” Gage said, again shifting his weight, “I’m sure that, at this very moment, our national organization is preparing to introduce legislation in other states. In the meantime, our studies show that Texans will benefit greatly from the passage of this bill.”

“Mr. Gage, I’m sure what you meant to say was: your organization is working with *elected officials* in other states, so that *they* can introduce legislation. Isn’t that what you meant?”

“Yes, Senator.” Droplets of moisture were forming on his forehead. “I misspoke.”

“In your position, you need to be careful about that.”

“I understand,” he mumbled, staring at the floor.

“So you’re starting with Texas.”

He looked up. “What better place to start.”

“After New Hampshire, of course.”

"Yes. New Hampshire, and then Texas, and then the other forty-nine."

"Forty-eight, Mr. Gage."

"Yes. Forty-eight. I stand corrected."

She held his gaze for a long moment. "Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Gage?" She checked her wrist display. "As I said, I have a busy afternoon."

"Yes, Senator," he said, gathering himself. "One more thing. Can you tell me the current attitude of the committee members toward the bill?"

"The current attitude? Let me think ..." She raised her hand to her chin, assuming a pensive look. "Well, there are five Republicans. They're probably on your side, Mr. Gage. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I don't know, Senator."

As if. "And then there are three Democrats and two So-Whatters. Where do you think they are, Mr. Gage?"

"Again, I have no idea, Senator."

Right. "And then ... there's me." She smiled sweetly.

"The most important vote, Senator," Gage said, nodding slowly.

"Just one out of eleven, Mr. Gage."

"Oh, come now, Senator. You're just being modest. Your influence ..."

"I hear you, Mr. Gage. Anything else?" She leaned back in her chair. The embroidery on her cream-colored business suit—yellow roses—caught the sunlight.

Gage stood, hat in one hand, briefcase in the other. "I was wondering ... I'm free tonight, and alone in town. Would you join me for a casual dinner? How about a burger and a beer? Real beef and real beer ..."

After that conversation, he's still got the balls to ask me out? I'm impressed. She stood, her golden hair bouncing in

the sunlight. "Why Mr. Gage ... Justin ... I'm *flattered* by the offer." She flashed her best campaign-poster smile. "But a burger? Not really my style."

"Then how about a steak? I know a place ..."

"I'm really sorry, Justin. I'm booked solid. Perhaps another time?"

"Marlena? I need you." *Too much urgency?* "I mean, would you please ..."
Oh, who am I kidding? "Just get in here, please."

Seconds later, Marlena Gutierrez, Victoria Blackburn's executive assistant, stood in the doorway. "Should I bring anything?"

That coy smile ... that whiny little voice. "Just yourself."

She moved through the doorway between the outer and inner offices. "Anything wrong, Senator?"

"No, but lock the door behind you."

"It's only five o'clock."

Do I detect reluctance in her tone? "Actually, it's after five." *Attractive, well-dressed, a little on the heavy side, but that's okay.* "My display says it's ten after." Victoria watched as her assistant turned, locked the door, and moved slowly toward the Adirondack chairs.

"Not there, Marlena," Victoria said, standing. "On the sofa."

"It's awfully early."

"I've told you before,"—*touch her arm, smile sweetly, calm her down*—"there's no one around after five."

Marlena sat, legs crossed, hands in her lap, head high, and gave her boss a sideways glance. "He was very handsome, wasn't he?"

"Gage? The imitation cowboy?" She'd been turned

on—she was wet the minute he'd walked in—but she hadn't shown it, and she certainly wouldn't admit it to her assistant.

"Yes," Marlena smiled. "I thought he was very sexy."

"Lean back," Victoria said, sliding onto the sofa. She unbuttoned the first button of her assistant's blouse, and then the second.

"He turned you on," Marlena said, leaning forward, "didn't he?"

"Whether he did or didn't"—Victoria reached inside the blouse, unsnapped the bra, and removed it—"is irrelevant." *Those wonderful breasts.* Her lips brushed one, then the other, and she felt a chill as Marlena's nipples hardened. She slid a hand between parted legs ... no panties ... just wetness. "What a nice surprise," she mumbled.

Marlena leaned back and relaxed. "I thought you'd like it, Senator."

CHAPTER 3

CHARLES NELSON SMITH

CHARLES Nelson Smith parked his car and let himself in through the side door, which led into the kitchen. He grabbed a bottle of Bud Soy, twisted the top off, and sauntered into the living room. Manta Ray was half-asleep, sprawled over an easy chair. He noted a near-empty bottle of wine on the coffee table. *At least she used the cheap stuff.* A lipstick-stained glass ... a puddle of dark liquid, seeping into the carpet ... gang-bang porno, the sound muted, on the multi-screen.

“Manta,” he said, sitting down on the sofa, picking up the remote, turning off the porno.

No response.

“Manta.” Louder.

Nothing.

“Manta! Wake the fuck up!”

Nada.

Shaking his head, he tossed the remote, hitting her dead-smack on the left breast.

“Fuck you, Charley.” She rubbed her breast, eyes still closed.

“Hey, Sis.” He took a long pull of beer. “Welcome to the land of the living.”

She sat up, ran her fingers through her hair, picked up her glass, and poured herself more wine. "What time is it?"

He flicked his wrist and glanced at his display. "Five-thirty."

"God, I was tired."

Must be all that fucking and sucking. "Tell me what happened after I left."

"After you left ..." She gathered herself. "Well, let's see. He finished my burrito ... and I invited him over here for a glass of wine."

"And then you did him."

Her lips curled. "What do you think?"

He smiled. "How many times?"

"Just once. I'm trying to bring him along slowly."

"Hmm ..." He took another pull of beer. "Is our friend any good?"

"Fucking? Not really."

"I could have guessed that."

"Well built, though." A sly smile. "But my jewelry spooked him. I had to take it off."

"Down there?" His smile broadened. "I could have guessed that, too." Smith figured Blackburn to be a pretender, a wannabe. He leaned back and put his boots on the table. He still had his Texas techie gear on. "So is our story holding up?"

"So far." She moved to the sofa, sat, and kissed him gently on the lips. "But why the 'blow-job' remark?"

"Why the 'name-change' remark?" *Shit. That was my mistake. There was no need to tell her.*

"I'm sorry."

"That wasn't in the script."

"Well, neither was yours."

"I couldn't resist. Anyway, I was trying to pick a fight

with you. Remember the plan? Generate sympathy? Or empathy? Whatever?”

“Well, just be careful. We’re walking a fine line here. I’m supposed to be a co-ed, not a hooker.”

“I know, Manta. This is my game, remember?”

“And what would have happened if there were no seats near what’s-his-name? For you or me?”

“Blackburn. For Christ’s sake, Manta, don’t forget his name. And I had men in the restaurant, remember? They would have moved some people around, if it had been necessary.”

“You mean those two goons standing in the doorway?”

“Goons?”

“I saw them.” She ran her hand over his crotch. “Can you trust them?”

“Forget them. Did Blackburn say anything about his sister?”

“He mentioned her while we were still at the Retro.” Her hand was on his zipper.

“Nothing else?”

“I didn’t push it. I told you it’s too soon.” His zipper was halfway down.

“How’d you leave things?”

“Tentatively, we have a date this weekend.”

“A date. How quaint.” He was hard. “Let’s go to the bedroom.” He took a last swig of beer, stood and moved toward the hallway.

She stayed on the sofa, pouting.

Playing hard to get? As if. “Come on,” he beckoned. “I’ll let you keep your chains on.”

CHAPTER 4

MANTA RAY

MANTA Ray's eyes popped open. *Shit. I must have fallen asleep. All this fucking is wearing me out.* She tried to move, but couldn't. She was wrapped in a blanket of sweaty flesh. Something wet and hairy was lodged against her thigh.

"Charley?"

No response.

"Charley!"

"What?" he mumbled.

Your breath. "Let me up." She lifted his arm and pushed, rolling him onto his back. He groaned, then turned away, and she was free. Covered in sweat and slime, but free. *God, I could use a cup of coffee.*

Five minutes later, she'd peed, thrown on a robe and slippers, walked to the kitchen, and started a pot of coffee. She picked up her cell phone and speed-dialed a number.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Mom. How are you?"

"Manta?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Well ... it's *so good* to hear from you."

Sarcasm. "I'm sorry I haven't called, Mom." The coffee

maker hissed as black liquid dripped into the pot. "I know it's been a while."

"Well, dear ... I know you're busy."

Jesus. Make me feel even worse. "How are you doing? How are things at the commune?"

"Here? Oh, you know. About the same."

"Are you still living with the same, what, uh, three roommates?"

"Oh, yes. The same three ladies."

"And how's your boyfriend? What was his name? Paul something?"

"Do you mean Jean Paul?"

That coffee smells so good. "Mom, hold on." She got up, poured herself a cup, stirred in some artificial sweetener and whitener. "Okay, I'm back. What were you saying?"

"Were you asking about Jean Paul? The man I introduced you to?"

"Yes. Jean Paul." *He seemed like a nice guy.*

"He moved away."

"Oh? Where did he move to?"

"Arkansas. Somewhere in Arkansas. But I have another boyfriend."

Jesus, Mom, you could always attract men. "What's his name?"

"Stewart."

"Well ... good."

"He's from Dallas."

"Good."

"But he travels some. It does get lonely here."

Here comes the guilt trip. Change the subject. "Uh, what about the food, Mom? Are you getting enough to eat?"

"Oh, sure, dear. You don't have to worry about that."

"I do worry about you, Mom. The last time I visited, you were skin and bones."

"Well, I've always looked after my figure. So, when are you going to come and visit?"

More guilt. "I've been pretty busy."

"Are you still living in San Antonio?"

"No. I'm in Austin now. I've got a job here."

"A job? What kind of job?"

"I'm working for the soy industry."

"Oh. Soy. You know, we grow that here at the commune."

"I know, Mom." *Your commune ... every commune ... every farm ... everyone grows soy.*

"What kind of job is it, dear?"

Let's see: I fuck who I'm told to fuck ... and get paid to do it. "I work in an office."

"What? You'll have to speak a little louder."

"I work in an office, Mom. You know, filing, working on-line, writing emails, that sort of thing."

"Well ... that sounds exciting."

"Most days it's pretty dull. Hold on again, Mom." *Find something to eat ... nacho-cheese-flavored crackers ... those'll work.* "Okay, I'm back."

"And ... do you have any boyfriends? You're not getting any younger, you know."

Tell me about it. "Well, I am seeing a man."

"Oh, good."

"Actually, I'm seeing two men."

"Two? That sounds like me when I was younger."

"I remember, Mom." *You were a real mover.*

"What are they like?"

"Well, one's my boss. The other ... he's a student at UT."

"Oh. Your boss is one of your boyfriends?"

“Yeah. He’s”—*how should I say this*—“he’s very good at what he does. He’s very smart. Aggressive.”

“Handsome?”

“Yes, Mom. I wouldn’t go out with him if he wasn’t good-looking.”

“And what does the other one do?

Like I said ... “He’s a student at UT.”

“Oh. What does he study?”

“He’s a business major.”

“Is he handsome?”

“Yes, Mom.” *Like I said ...* “I only go out with good-looking guys.”

“Well, dear, you’re not getting any younger.”

“I know, Mom.”

“Which one do you like better?”

Let’s see: this line of questioning usually leads to engagement, marriage, and grandchildren. “I can’t tell at this point. It’s too soon to know.”

“Well ... I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

“I will, Mom.”

“So ... when are you going to come visit me?”