



Tammi Jean Cook was sixteen. She was also psychic, a designation she used to describe herself more often than she did her age or any of the other so-called ‘vital statistics’ found on her Alabama beginner’s license. So as Tammi Jean stood west of Luverne on U.S. Highway 10, sticking her thumb out at an approaching minivan, she thought how, given her keen intuitive powers, she already knew the van wasn’t going to stop. This being the case, she then wondered why she was standing there needlessly exerting herself in the God-awful August heat.

Sure enough, just as she had known it would, the van didn’t even slow but rocketed past, the hot wind of its passage whipping her hair back from her face and flinging dust onto her new boots.

‘Bitch,’ Tammi Jean hissed, since she knew that the driver, a middle-aged man, whose sympathetic eyes had met her own for an instant, would have given her a ride if not for his ugly bulldog of a wife. Yet, if anyone had asked her how she knew this, Tammi Jean would have been at a loss to explain. All she knew was *she knew*, and exactly how she knew was a mystery even to her.

Sighing, Tammi Jean looked back down the highway. It was now totally devoid of traffic as far as she could see, which she estimated to be a fair distance, especially allowing for the hills and how deceptive they could be if a person were trying to calculate the exact mileage to the horizon, which she wasn’t, given she’d never been much good at math and, come to think of it, really didn’t care how many miles it was to the damned horizon. All she cared about was when and if another vehicle was going to make its way down this highway. Not that it was much of a highway as highways went. Just a pot-holed stretch of asphalt that ran east to west, bisecting the lower third of the state like a carelessly inflicted incision and winding its way through kudzu-choked fields and small towns as nondescript and dull as Clio, her hometown, which now lay somewhere to the east, miles beyond that heat-washed horizon.

‘Never gonna get to California at this rate,’ Tammi Jean said, set her guitar case on the ground, then slid the cumbersome backpack from her shoulders. The pack she let drop so that it landed with a thud, creating a short-lived cloud of red dust that rained its contents upon her boots. She glared at the once shiny toes and yanked a pack of menthol cigarettes from her shirt pocket.

There were a lot of things Tammi Jean hated about Alabama, more than she cared to count, but she had to admit its damned red dirt was pretty high on the list, though not as high as the kudzu and mobile homes. Both of these she

personally likened to some contagious skin disease, maybe leprosy or scabies, which infected the land instead of a person's body and was epidemic in the state of Alabama.

Sitting down on the backpack, Tammi Jean made a half-hearted swipe at her boots, smearing the dust in the process, as well as soiling her fingertips. 'Oh, to hell with it,' she said and lit a cigarette, all the while keeping her eyes trained on the highway.

Her Aunt Winnie swore that the neighboring state of Georgia was famous for its kudzu and red dirt, but Tammi Jean had news for Aunt Winnie—whatever they had in Georgia couldn't hold a candle to that found in Alabama. No way in hell. Not that she'd ever been to Georgia to make a comparison, but since she had no desire to go to Georgia, it being too close to Alabama in both topography and climate for her taste, Tammi Jean figured Aunt Winnie would just have to take her word on the matter, given it was one of those things she instinctively knew, being psychic the way she was and had always been, regardless of the fact that other folks seemed to have a hard time accepting that she possessed some kind of sixth sense. Like her cousin Yancy. He didn't believe in it at all.

'You're plumb crazy.' That's what he'd said, laughing like a hyena while saying it, when she'd told him he'd best not go out with Molly Cope because she knew it wouldn't bring him nothing but trouble. The idiot. He should've heeded her warning. But had he? Hell, no. Just gone right ahead and dated the slut, that's what he'd done. Yet since he'd chosen to ignore her prediction, Tammi Jean now felt more than a little smug self-satisfaction in knowing that, just two weeks after she'd warned him about Molly, Old Yancy was at Doc Talbert's being treated for a runaway case of the clap; plus, three short months later, he was standing in front of Preacher Dade, marrying Molly Cope and looking like someone who'd just been condemned to the death penalty. The cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth, Tammi Jean smiled, remembering Yancy's hangdog expression and thinking how that still wasn't the best part of the story. The best part was her knowing that the child in Molly's womb wasn't his at all but Wade Dickinson's. Not that she was going to share that bit of information with her cousin or anyone else for that matter. Doubting Thomas that Old Yancy was, let him raise Wade Dickinson's brat. Served him right for laughing at her.

Tammi Jean took a long drag on the cigarette, pulling the smoke deep into her lungs and holding it there as long as she could so that when she exhaled, only the faintest wisp escaped her lips. Frowning, she glanced at her watch.

Ten o'clock and hot as hell.

Thinking this, she suddenly saw her mama sliding from between the semen-stained sheets back in that rundown doublewide on Mason Mill Road. Saw her as clearly as if she were standing there in the doorway and watching the woman. Then she saw Charlene Cook run a hand through her bleached-blond hair, stagger down the narrow hallway, and open her daughter's bedroom door. The scene was so vivid, Tammi Jean could even feel the heat in that stifling mobile home as the sun careened over its roof, and she could see the sweat already beginning to roll down her mama's puffy face, streaking the makeup she hadn't bothered to remove last night. Then Tammi Jean couldn't help but giggle as she watched Charlene walk into the room and pick up the note she'd left on her pillow.

Guess what? I'm going to California so I guess you got to fix your own damn morning coffee.

Again puffing on the cigarette, Tammi Jean closed her mind on Charlene Cook and watched an eighteen-wheeler top the crest of a ridge almost two miles away, watched it slide into view and then disappear, only to reappear again, riding the undulating hills like a gigantic black whale rising and then plunging over waves in the sea. She narrowed her eyes. *This is it*, she thought, *my ride outta fucking Alabama*. She knew it for a fact, just like she'd known about the minivan driver's willingness to stop, about Yancy's making a mistake, and about Molly's carrying Wade Dickinson's child. Knew it without understanding how. The same way she also knew about her daddy's not being dead, the way her mama insisted he was, but being alive and in California instead.

Tammi Jean inhaled again, wanting to finish the cigarette before her ride got there, and continued to watch the semi as it swam through the mirages on the hot asphalt and pushed its way through the August heat.

'And I know it for a fact,' Tammi Jean said as she stood and hoisted the backpack once more into position. Travis Leon Cook wasn't dead. And she didn't give a damn what Charlene Cook had to say on the subject, though she doubted she was going to forget the woman's skepticism anytime soon.

'You're outta your fucking mind!' Those had been her mama's exact words when Tammi Jean had told her Travis was in California and not lying six foot under in some cemetery outside of Waco, Texas, the way folks seemed to think he was.

'No, I ain't,' Tammi Jean said in response. 'Like I keep telling you, I just know things.'

'You don't know diddly squat,' Charlene said. 'You just think you do. I done told you ten thousand times your daddy got hisself killed out in Texas.'

'Humph,' Tammi Jean said, 'You ain't got no proof.'

'The hell I don't. I also done told you, his second cousin Morris Goodall called me. Said the family got word from somebody your daddy knew and. . .'

'That ain't proof! You didn't get no death certificate.'

Charlene rolled her made-up eyes. 'Why would I? We weren't married no more. I'd done divorced his ass `cause he deserted me.'

'So, did you ask his folks if you could see that death certificate?'

'Hell, no. The last thing I wanted was anything to do with the Cooks. Not a one of 'em ever did like me, so when I divorced your daddy, I went and divorced them, too. And it was good riddance to the whole lot.'

'Well, if you didn't see no—'

'I ain't gonna talk about it no more,' Charlene snapped. 'Your sorry daddy is dead as a damned doorknob and—'

'He ain't dead either. He's out in California.'

'Did you hear me say I ain't gonna talk about it no more?' Saying this, Charlene left the kitchen where they had been sitting at the time the topic was broached. But Tammi Jean wasn't one to give up easily and followed her mama down the hallway to the bathroom. Charlene slammed the door and locked it as she yelled 'Leave me the hell alone.'

Tammi Jean leaned as close to the door as she could get and yelled back, 'My daddy is in California, and I know it for a fact!'

'Like I done said, you don't know diddly squat! But if you're so dead set on him being in California, why don't you go find 'im? Just don't forget to tell 'im he owes me nine years in back child support, the bastard.' After screaming this, Charlene turned the radio on to WYNX AM, her favorite station, setting the volume as high as it would go and letting Hank Williams Jr. effectively put a stop to any further discussion of the matter at hand.

Now recalling her mama's attitude, Tammi Jean narrowed her eyes as the semi topped the final hill and began its descent. A Kenworth, its chrome-plated exhaust stacks and running lights flashed in the sun and its powerful diesel engine growled as it bit off the distance to where she waited.

Hell, she thought. It didn't matter whether Charlene Cook believed her or not. She knew her daddy was alive and he was in California. The knowing was enough. And thinking this, Tammi Jean tossed the cigarette butt onto the median, picked up her guitar case, and stepped closer to the highway to wait for her ride out of the hellhole called Alabama.

A few minutes later, the driver shifting gears and the truck once again picking up speed, Tammi Jean settled into the seat, looked into the mirror on the door to her right, and watched the spot where she'd been standing grow smaller and smaller still as the ribbon of highway spooled out from beneath the silver trailer and unwound, twisting into the distance.

'Objects are closer than they appear,' the driver said.

‘What?’ She turned toward him.

Smiling, exposing a gold front tooth, he said, ‘On the mirror. That’s what it says. Or ain’t you ever noticed?’

She again glanced at the mirror, read the words printed across the bottom of the glass.

‘Objects are closer than they appear,’ he repeated. ‘Says it on all wing mirrors, on cars and trucks alike. Hell, you ain’t gonna find a vehicle that don’t have it stamped right there plain as day.’

Looking back at him, Tammi Jean sized him up: barrel-chest, stomach resting on an ornate silver belt buckle, he was in his mid to late forties, his hair more gray than black, though most of it was hidden beneath a sweat-stained baseball cap that announced he was an Atlanta Falcons’ fan. She decided if someone were to ask her to describe her idea of a typical truck driver, her description would be that of the man now changing gears on the Kenworth.

‘Kinda makes you wonder, don’t it?’ he asked.

‘Wonder what?’ Tammi Jean asked in return, given he’d lost her somewhere at the beginning of the conversation.

‘You know, what it really means.’

‘What, what means?’

‘The message on the blamed mirror.’ Saying this, he laughed, the gold tooth flashing as he did. ‘Leastways, it makes me wonder. Hell, way I see it, it must be important or why put it there in the first place, right?’ He glanced at her expectantly.

‘Right,’ she said, since she suspected this was what he wanted to hear.

‘Course,’ he said, ‘that being the case, I gotta ask why it’s so all-fired important?’ He held up a finger. ‘And the way I got it figured is—that message is important ‘cause it don’t really mean what most folks think it means.’ Lowering his hand, he again cut his eyes toward her. ‘It’s got one of them hidden meanings.’

‘Like what?’ Tammi Jean asked, wondering just what in the hell he was talking about.

‘Oh, one of them deeper, symbolic meanings, what folks called philosophical. Course, that’s just me talking.’ Shrugging, he shifted his hips on the seat as he asked, ‘So, how ‘bout you? You ever wonder what it really means?’

‘Not really,’ Tammi Jean said. She had a difficult time imagining herself sitting around and wondering whether or not the words printed on two zillion car and truck mirrors meant anything other than just what they implied.

Still chuckling, he eased the Kenworth into a higher gear. ‘Well, that’s ‘cause you ain’t me,’ he said. ‘Me, I’ve had lots of time to think about it. Been driving for twenty-three odd years, and ever mile of the way those words have been staring back at me whenever I look in the mirror. Objects are closer than they appear. All I gotta do is look and there they are.’ He jerked his chin toward the window to his left. ‘Right there, plain as day, objects are closer than they appear.’

‘So, with all the thinking you been doing, I guess you figured out if they have a deeper meaning or don’t.’ Tammi Jean said this to be polite and not because she had any interest in knowing what conclusion the man had reached.

He grinned. ‘Yep, reckon I’ve done that all right.’

‘And?’

‘And nothing. I ain’t gonna tell you what I decided ‘cause I want to know what you think?’ Saying this, he looked at her and raised one eyebrow. ‘So, tell me what you think.’

‘I don’t know. I’d have to study on it awhile,’ Tammi Jean said, though she had no intention of overexerting her thought processes on such a trivial matter as damned side-view mirrors. She had better things to do with her brain.

'Well, you just do that,' he said, 'but let me know what you come up with.' The Kenworth now sailing smoothly along the highway, he leaned back and removed a pack of Marlboros from the dash. 'By the way,' he added, 'my name's Elvis. What's yours?'

'Tammi Jean,' she said and swallowed a giggle.

'Go ahead and laugh,' he said. 'Most folks do. Always think I'm kidding, but I ain't. Name's really Elvis, like the King hisself. Hell, I was even born in Tupelo, just a few miles from his home-place. Course, I ain't no relation, and unlike the King, I can't carry a tune in a bucket.' Saying this, he laughed again, glancing back at her. 'Get it? Tune in a bucket.'

Shit, Tammi Jean thought, *sure I get it*. She wasn't exactly dense.

'But I reckon you can, carry a tune I mean,' he said. 'Else you wouldn't be lugging that guitar around, now would you?'

'Guess I can sing a little,' Tammi Jean said. 'And my daddy, he taught me how to play. It was his guitar.' Though she'd really learned by listening to the radio and watching music videos, she knew, had Travis hung around, he would have taught his daughter, and this, in her opinion, was enough to make it true.

'Was?'

Tammi Jean removed her cigarettes from her pocket and shook one out. 'Well, he let me have it when I got old enough. Got himself a new one.' Not that Travis had exactly done this. Instead, he'd left the guitar behind, and when Charlene had come across it in the back of the closet, she'd thrown it out the front door, so Tammi Jean had claimed it as her own.

Nodding, Elvis the truck driver slowed the Kenworth to avoid ramming a Dodge pickup that was pulling out from a side road. 'So y'all live around here?'

'Nah, me and him live in California.'

'California? You're a right far piece from home, ain't you?'

'Yeah, guess so, but that's where I'm heading. Back home to be with my daddy.'

'What about your ma?'

Tammi Jean rolled the window down a little and watched the smoke stream out into the hot Alabama air.

'I said, what about your ma?'

'She's dead. Been dead a long time now.' In uttering these words, Tammi Jean realized they were somehow true. Charlene Cook had been dead for a long time, in fact, almost as long as she could remember.

'Oh, so what you doing here in Alabama all by your lonesome?'

'Been visiting kin folks in Florida. Just passing through on my way back home.' Tammi Jean looked his way and smiled. 'Had one hell of a time in Panama City. Me and my cousins, we. . . '

'Look,' he said, 'I gotta ask—what're you doing hitching?'

'Wanted to see the country,' she said, which was true, though she also wanted to make the money she'd saved from her part time job at Dairy Queen last as long as possible.

Quiet for a moment so that Tammi Jean dared hope he had tired of his inquisition, Elvis puffed on his Marlboro and kept his eyes on the highway ahead. Yet just as she was beginning to relax, he spit out another question: 'Does your pa know you're hitching cross country?'

'Sure does,' she said. 'Course he pretty much lets me do what I want.'

Frowning, Elvis tossed the smoldering remains of his cigarette out into the wind. 'Ain't none of my business,' he said, 'but seems to me, no daddy would want his little girl taking rides from strangers. Sure would hate to know any daughter of mine was out hitching on the highways.' He cut his eyes toward her. 'Seems mighty risky. You know what I mean?'

'Yeah, maybe,' Tammi Jean replied, turning her head to watch a field of kudzu grow closer and then flash by, blurring into a wasteland of green. Maybe he was right and it was risky; still, it was a risk worth the taking when weighed against the alternative—staying in Alabama and ending up just like her mama, living in a mobile home at the edge of town and letting sour-smelling men paw her body and then laugh behind her back.

'But ain't you ever afraid?' Elvis then asked.

Under the branches of a lone oak, a Fleetwood doublewide set in the middle of a scraggly, unkempt yard, the sun relentlessly and unmercifully hammering on its roof and pummeling the prefabricated walls. This too bled past her window, and Tammi Jean thought, *the only thing I'm afraid of is what I see spread out on each side of this highway*. Yet she wasn't about to tell some stranger her fears, so she just shook her head and said, 'No, I ain't afraid.'

'Still, you ought to think twice about what you're doing. You know what I mean?'

Hearing him but paying him no mind, Tammi Jean kept her eyes on a pickup as it made its way down a dirt road up ahead. Winding through parched cornfields, the road was red as blood beneath the blue expanse of sky, and the pickup, an old Ford, was traveling fast, the Alabama dust spiraling up behind and following it like the fiery tail of a comet on a collision course with some destination only the driver knew and was making no attempt to avoid.

'Then again,' Elvis added, 'it's like I said. Ain't none of my business, is it?'

No, she thought, *it ain't*.

'But if I was you, I'd be careful,' he warned. 'Ain't no way you'd know who you was climbing into a vehicle with.'

Tammi Jean smiled as she glanced into the mirror on the door. 'You're wrong about that,' she said. 'Cause I'd know.'

The words 'Objects are closer than they appear' were superimposed across the face of the landscape she despised; and as the kudzu, mobile homes, and red dirt faded into the distance with each rotation of the Kenworth's tires, Tammi Jean realized exactly what Elvis the truck driver thought these words meant. *You can never leave your past behind*. This was his so-called deeper, philosophical meaning. Yet, she had news for him—he was wrong—and she was going to prove it. In fact, she was proving it right this very minute. Her damned past was just that—the past—and she was never going to give it another thought.

'You would, huh?' Elvis said.

'Yeah, I would,' Tammi Jean said. 'You see, I'm psychic, and I know these things.'