

Celia Jenkins expected mice, silverfish, and termites, and once she pulled back the sheet-rock, mold, mildew, and roaches. Fire ants could be anywhere, from ceiling to walls to floorboard. Skunks, opossums, feral cats, raccoons, field rats, and snakes might nest in the crawl space. What massive, compact, and aggressive bat colony lived in the compromised brick chimney? Celia always expected the worst. There might be dead tweakers and junkies—or there might be homeless people using the house for home base, seeing as it wasn't but a half mile from the closest soup kitchen. She'd found such things in the other ex-cotton mill village hovels she'd bought to renovate, return to glory somewhat, flip, and get no recognition for it, unlike a hundred married couples now famous on HGTV, Discover, DIY, TLC, the Cartoon Network, Hulu, Netflix, A&E, and all those other cable channels. Some people called these places shotgun shacks. Celia didn't see it this way—with some creative wall rearrangements, no one could shoot a .410 or twelve-gauge from front door to back door without hitting walls. Celia prided herself on turning six-room houses into four or eight, finding ways for people to sit on a toilet and not be able to touch the clawfoot tub and sink simultaneously.

She ripped out cheap cut-pile carpeting to expose beautiful heart-pine flooring when, above the cacophony of a plugged portable CD player blaring Miles Davis, Celia heard what she thought was an ice cream truck. She got off her knees, still holding the utility knife, and turned down the volume. She said, "Hotdamn," and thought about how she deserved at least a Popsicle, if not a Nutty Buddy, Push-Up, Drumstick, ice cream sandwich, or Fudgsicle. She'd never have quit her job at Wells Fargo if someone showed up every day in an ice cream truck. Her marriage would've *lasted* had an ice cream truck ventured into High Pines Estates, been allowed to go through the security gate and meander through the series of cul-de-sac tentacles. Celia wiped her forehead with a bandanna she'd bought in high school at the Army-Navy store, a brick building that now housed a popular microbrewery called Pup Tent Lager, which most people called the PTL Club, or Praise the Lord, in reference to the Jim Bakker show back in the 1970s.

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She came out on the porch—a half-screened in concoction she would later turn into a wrap-around porch, no longer painted battleship gray—and looked off to the left, where, oddly, an armada of pickup trucks approached, driving five miles an hour, all playing the stereotypical and ubiquitous ice cream truck tune: “Turkey in the Straw,” which, Celia knew, happened to be racist. Out loud she said, “Hey, are these KKK trucks?” She walked down the three cracked cement steps and watched as the trucks drove by—four of them—all weighed down with something that wasn’t ice cream. Were they used tools? Celia thought. Each truck looked like it was filled with stuff for one of the recycling centers, the town dump, maybe a Goodwill, Salvation Army, or Habitat for Humanity thrift store.

Her neighbor, whom she’d not seen or met, laughed and went, “*Do-do-do-do-do-do-do, do-do-do-do-do-do-do*,” and raised something with his arm that Celia didn’t recognize. It glinted there at the end of his long-sleeved flannel shirt. He yelled out louder, “*Do-do, do-do-do-do-do, do-do-do-do-do*.” She squinted. She used the back of her right hand to wipe a mixture of perspiration and sheetrock dust from her eyelids. Her neighbor smiled and waved a hook for a hand.

“I take it you’re renovating this house,” Mitchell Mitchell said, ambling over toward her but not crossing the property line. “Thank goodness. It’s about time. I’ve lived here long enough to see this place go from the Coleman property, to the children of the Colemans’ property, to drug den, to Condemned.”

Celia smiled. She nodded. She pulled a pink mask from her back pocket and stretched it across her face. She thought, *Do not look at that hook on the end of his wrist*. She said, “Yeah. It’s the third one I’ve done in this neighborhood.”

She introduced herself, and Mitchell said, “Mitchell Mitchell. I don’t have a stutter. I got me a hook, but not a stutter. If I had both a hook and a stutter, I don’t know if I’d ever go out in the world. Technically, I’m Mitchell Jerome Mitchell. *Gerome* with a G, not a J. My parents wanted me to be an actor or something, thus the MGM initials. No one calls me Mitchell, or Mitchell Gerome, or M. G. I don’t know why, but since I was a little kid, people use both my names, Mitchell Mitchell.”

*Do-do-do-do-do-do-do/Do-do-do-do-do-do-do* seemed to be coming back around the block. They both heard it behind their houses on Saxon Street. Celia said, “MGM. I like it.” She walked toward Mitchell and stuck out her left hand after he, too, pulled a mask from his pants pocket and put it on. She feared what it might read, if he chose a stylized, one-of-a-kind, made-to-order cov-