

# PAWNBROKER

A thriller by

**JERRY HATCHETT**



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Mississippi, I miss you.

Tom and Nancy Wheeler,  
you guys were the first people I remember  
encouraging me to write.

I miss you, too.



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for providing me a way out of my many shortcomings  
through your Son.

# PROLOGUE

A rusty chain hung across the spot where the abandoned road entered the woods. A stencil-painted tin sign, drooping from the chain on baling wire, issued a Day-Glo warning to the curious: PRIVATE LAND. TRESPASSERS PROSECUTED. RICHARD BALLARD, SHERIFF, PONTOCOLA COUNTY. Three miles into the woods, atop a shallow ridge, an old building still stood. Once fresh and gleaming, its weathered shell had long ago turned the lifeless gray of decaying lumber. Such was its condition when Ray Earl Higgins and Rocky Shackelford first beheld it in the beam of an Eveready flashlight on a hot August night, thirty minutes shy of midnight.

Rocky and Ray Earl had killed more deer over the past twenty years than anybody in Pontocola County, maybe even the whole state. (It helped that they weren't hindered by things like seasons, rules, or limits.) Rocky knew they were on posted land, but if they got caught hunting deer three months before season opens, at night, a trespassing charge

would be the least of their worries. Besides, the deeper they went, the less likely they'd meet up with a game warden. Or some candy-ass animal rights freak who might run whining and blabbing. Finally, all those fine considerations aside, Rocky just didn't give a happy damn. He'd go where the hell he pleased.

As for Ray Earl, well, he went where Rocky went. That's the way it was in the second grade, and that's the way it was on this fine evening. If Ray Earl were diagnosed by modern standards, he would probably have been deemed autistic, with a savant-like ability to mentally record and catalog detail. Instead, at age four he was diagnosed by Dr. Hurston Westerfield—a portly gentleman who hung his shingle just after World War II—after much careful evaluation, as “a V-8 hitting on four cylinders, maybe five on a good day.” Ray Earl was well liked in town, or at least well tolerated.

They had never hunted these woods, and to be accurate, the quest for venison was not what drew them in tonight. It was the stench. It rode in on a hot southern breeze, a reek so strong it made Rocky gag. Rocky, who had disemboweled countless deer as he dressed them out. Rocky, the A-shift foreman at Montello's open-surface sewage treatment plant. He had to find the source of such an impossible stink.

As strong as it was, he figured it couldn't be more than a couple hundred yards into the woods. A mile in, they crossed a small stream and the kudzu started, its thick vines and leaves covering and choking everything it encountered. Every tree was wrapped in the stuff, from the ground up to the highest branch, making them look like leafy green monsters. At two miles, the smell was so stout that he almost called it off. Fortunately, the very strength



of it numbed their sense of smell enough for them to continue.

The road veered left and tracked its third mile alongside a small canal that Rocky had never seen. It was obviously manmade, and just as obviously abandoned decades ago. The kudzu thinned out and tall hardwoods grew right at the water's edge on both banks, their tree-tops meeting over the water and forming a dark tunnel.

"That smell's real bad, Rock. I'd just as soon turn around," Ray Earl said, his camo T-shirt pulled up over his nose.

"Don't be a pussy, Ray Earl."

\* \* \*

Ray Earl saw it first. "Rock," he said in a low tone, almost a whisper. "Look." He played the beam of his flashlight across the front of the building. Something about the place creeped Ray Earl out. He wanted to turn right the hell around and run.

"The hell you whispering for?" Rocky said, using that voice that made Ray Earl feel like the dumbest person in the whole county.

"Kind of spooky, is all."

Rocky tilted his head back, sniffed, and headed for the building. "Spooky, my ass. I swear, Ray Earl." He turned his head and power-spat a narrow stream of tobacco juice through his front teeth, then stopped in front of the small stoop on the front of the building and looked up.

The sign above the front door was cracked and its letters faded, but the three lines of text could still be read:

## CCC BARRACKS, MISS.

\* \* \*7

ERECTED 1933.

“I’m going in,” Rocky said, climbing the steps.

“I don’t know. That sm—”

“That’s right. You don’t know shit, Ray Earl, so clap your trap.”

Ray Earl watched as Rocky twisted the knob. It turned. He pushed and the door opened without a squeak.

“Gimme that damn flashlight,” Rocky said, reaching an open hand behind him while he stepped into the room.

Ray Earl stuck at the bottom of the steps. “I don’t want to go in there, Rock.”

Rocky was all the way inside the black room when he bumped into something. “You get that flashlight up here right now, Ray Earl Higgins!”

Ray Earl stood a moment longer, deciding which would be worse, the stinking spooky building, or Rocky being mad at him. He took a deep breath, climbed the steps. Just inside the door, Rocky stood facing him, shaking his head, hand outstretched. Ray Earl handed over the flashlight. Rocky turned back around and suddenly screamed. Then he puked. Ray Earl stood frozen, his brain processing the scene before him. Rocky had bumped into a folding metal chair. With a dead man in it.

Rocky straightened up, turned around, handed off the flashlight to Ray Earl, then bounded out the door and down the steps just before a new round of vomiting erupted. Ray Earl, unable to take his eyes from the scene, played the beam of the flashlight around the room, his fear squeezed aside by fascination. He never missed an

episode of *CSI*. Miami. New York. And the best of them all: Las Vegas. What would Grissom do? He would examine the crime scene. And so would Ray Earl Higgins. He raised his flashlight and stepped forward, walking carefully, disturbing nothing, mentally filing everything he saw.

\* \* \*

Halogen work lights, mounted in pairs on bright yellow stands and connected by a grid of thick extension cords, lined the walls, their now-dark heads aimed inward. Folding metal chairs of modern manufacture were set in clusters all around the cavernous, rectangular room. Some groups had four chairs, some six, some eight. There were ninety-six in all. One of those chairs was what Rocky had bumped into in the dark. That chair contained a corpse. In fact, every chair in the room contained a corpse, most of them bound to the chairs by nylon ties at wrist and ankle.

Some of the bodies looked fresh. Others were in various stages of decay, from early deterioration to seething with maggots. A mix of male and female, most of the victims looked to be in their late teens to early twenties, though there were a few outliers who were considerably older. All were nude, all had dark skin, dark hair, Hispanic features. None presented any obvious physical defects. In a macabre twist, most of their death-masks were looks not of pain and torture, but bizarre smiles, frozen rictuses of some pleasure that bridged the spiritual gorge between their earthly existence and whatever lay beyond. None of the bodies showed any evidence of trauma. It was as if dozens of healthy people walked in, got strapped into metal chairs, and died in a state of bliss.

The bare wood floor had been swept clean. Black cloth, stapled in place, covered the windows. Aside from the stench of putrefaction, nothing else remained. No blood. No tools. No other furniture. No clothes.

\* \* \*

After several minutes, Ray Earl made his way back to the door, outside, and down the steps. Rocky leaned against a tree twenty yards away. He wiped his mouth with his forearm and said, "Let's get the hell outta here."

"Wait," Ray Earl said, walking along the front of the building. He stopped, pointed the flashlight up at one of the windows, then traced a thick extension cord from the window down to the ground, where it lay in a neat coil, its male end exposed. He played the beam across the ground nearby, stopping at a spot several feet away where four indentations marked the hard-packed red dirt.

"Looks like they had a generator, Rock."

Something squawked overhead.

"Oh shit," Rocky said, trying to unsling his gun and getting tangled up in the strap. "What the hell was that?"

Ray Earl aimed the beam up into the trees and squinted.

"Buzzards."

# CHAPTER 1

**W**hen Bill Berner walked through the door as the first customer of the day, I should have read it as a dark omen, a signal from fate itself, a stern warning to lock the door and head back to the house in abject surrender. Don't get me wrong: Bill's not a bad guy, and I doubt he has an evil bone in his body. But he is one of the most irritating people on the planet. The kind of customer you'd rather encounter midday. Not in the dream melt of morning, and certainly not before you've armor-coated your psyche with caffeine. Not the end of the day when you're brain-fried, either. Midday.

Like many of our regular pawners, Bill is unemployed. He lives on a confusing amalgam of government checks, government programs, and the occasional nuisance settlement from his portfolio of lawsuits. It's disconcerting to look at Bill because one eye points vaguely at you while the other targets the Taco Bell across the street. They're a bit beady and they ride atop a fat nose and shrunken

mouth that is for the most part devoid of teeth. He has a perpetual three- to ten-day growth of stubble, and he shaves and bathes with the same frequency.

“Come in, Bill,” I said, the resonant tones of the door chime still hanging in the air.

“Need to borrow a little money.” He had a greasy hydraulic jack in his left hand and a plastic bag stuffed with videotapes in the right, a typical Bill Berner pawn. Low-dollar items trending toward junky, the sort of things a metro pawn shop wouldn’t fool with. In the small towns, though, we have to be a little less selective. Bill ambled to a stop and put his goods on the pawn counter.

“How much?” I said.

One eye swung my way, overshot the mark, then pulled back and drifted a bit before settling down and targeting my forehead. “I need fifty.”

“You need coffee.”

“Forty?”

I said nothing.

“Thirty?”

“Twenty bucks, Bill. Just like last time. And the time before that.”

“It’s a nice jack.”

“It’s a butt-ugly piece of crap with no handle and not another pawn shop in Mississippi would take it.”

“Does too have a handle.”

“Rusty screwdrivers don’t count. You want the twenty?”

“Thirty?”

“Fifteen.”

“You said twenty!”

“You didn’t want the twenty.”

“Give me the twenty.”

This is the way the pawn game is played, day after week after millennium. They want to borrow more. I want to loan less. They have sad stories, most of which contain about as much truth as an Oliver Stone movie. We haggle and moan, and a transaction takes place more often than not.

Twenty years ago, friends and family called me crazy for choosing the pawn business. I had a bachelor's degree in business administration from Ole Miss, and had gotten several good job offers coming out of school, but none of them appealed to me.

"Those things are nothing but fronts, places where people take stolen goods so they can buy their dope," the esteemed Judge Grayson Bolton, a.k.a. my father, had proclaimed. He never approved any idea that wasn't his own, and his scorn only cemented my resolve. It was also the beginning of the end of our relationship.

"They take advantage of the poor. Unconscionable, just unconscionable," was the summary from my Uncle Walt, professor and dean of some obscure philosophical curriculum at some arcane little New England college.

A litany of similar warnings flowed in from up and down the family tree and all around the circle of friends, but I've never been one to let others do my thinking. I did my research and decided it was a business as legitimate as any other, and one with the potential to provide a semi-lucrative living right here in Montello, where I wanted to be. To top it off, it looked like a hell of a lot of fun.

And it was.

At first.

Then the routine set in. The Bill Berners. The countless others like him, the same handful of perpetual hard-luck tales wrapped in slightly different circumstances and

regurgitated ad nauseum. Milk for the baby. Medicine for dear old Mama. I used to smile and shake my head as they walked the milk money into the liquor store across the street. It wasn't funny anymore, just very boring.

I keyed Bill's loan into the computer, and handed him the ticket to sign. I made a point to do everything really fast, trying to project the message that I was oh so busy this day. He took his copy of the ticket, worked his toothless mouth around a bit, and reacquired me with that eye. Bill loves to tell jokes, none of which are funny. No, it's worse than that. They're so un-funny you can't even make yourself laugh. He was determined to tell one that morning, and I was just as determined not to hear it. Showdown. He opened his mouth, drew a breath—

*Ding Dong*, said the door chime as another customer walked in. "Come in," I said.

"Come in, sir," LungFao said. LungFao's real name is Larry. LungFao is blond, Caucasian, and tall, and my reason for calling him LungFao wouldn't make the slightest sense, so I'll not get into that. He's the assistant manager of Gray's Green Cash, Montello's finest pawn shop.

Bill's face sagged in defeat and he shuffled toward the door, no doubt shooting the newcomer a look with one of his eyes as they passed.

"Can I help you?" I said to the newcomer, a guy I'd never seen before.

It was early, I hadn't had so much as a swallow of coffee, and I had already done business with Bill Berner. All those elements combined to weaken my senses, and I had just made the worst mistake of my life.



## CHAPTER 2

The newcomer was a black man, about my size, six-feet plus, in Oakley wrap-arounds and an overcoat. In August. Just so you understand, walk outside in a Mississippi August and within two minutes your clothes are plastered to your body with sweat. Here was a guy wearing an ankle-length, thick black overcoat. Hand in the pocket of that overcoat. Car pulled right up near the door. Driver door standing open. I couldn't see his eyes through the shades, but I knew they were darting left and right, checking the environment, assessing our defenses, which at the moment sucked. It's amazing how many thoughts can fire through the mind in a matter of seconds. I thought about the stupidity of my complacency; I should've spotted this threat when he pulled up outside, in time to activate The Trap.

The outside door leads into a six-by-eight entryway, from which another door opens into the shop proper. The Trap, activated by a red button beneath the cash

drawer, waits for either door to open and close, then electrically deadbolts both doors, trapping the person inside a six-by-eight box of bulletproof glass. The process also triggers a silent alarm which transmits a text message to the central monitoring station: SUSPECT DETAINED. DISPATCH POLICE IMMEDIATELY. Unfortunately, my lack of attention had allowed Overcoat to walk right through the defense and into a position to kill us.

I moved closer to the counter. "Can I help you?"

He said nothing. I moved closer. Bill cranked his van outside and was backing out. LungFao, much newer to the game, hadn't picked up on the threat directly, but he had sensed my tension and was moving toward the back of the shop as per our standard procedure in such situations—it's impossible for a single man to cover two spread-out targets.

Overcoat was getting nervous, his head whipping back and forth, looking around the shop, glancing outside. I was directly behind the counter now, at its tallest spot, where the main computer was. In one motion I reached down and hit the silent-alarm button with my left hand, then picked up a Smith & Wesson Airweight Bodyguard with my right. 38 Special, five shots. My heart was pounding. I could tell his was, too.

The phone rang and I glanced at the caller ID. CENTRAL STATION.

"Answer it," he said, "and don't even think about getting cute."

I picked up the phone. "Green Cash."

"This is Central Monitoring. Password, please?"

"No ma'am, I don't have any..." I started to say "televisions" but caught myself. Anyone, including Overcoat, could see I had a shelf full of them and figure out what

was going on. "...rocking chairs right now. Sorry."

"Dispatching now."

"Thank you, ma'am." I hung up the phone and it happened. He whipped his right hand out of the pocket, holding a little nickel plated semiautomatic, probably a .22 caliber. He'd likely have to hit me in the head or directly in a vital area to kill me, but that was little consolation.

"Step away from the counter! Give me what I want, I'm out of here." His head looked nervous but his hand was steady. Weird.

I didn't turn my head or even take my eyes off his, but in my peripheral vision I saw Bill's van leave the parking lot and pull into traffic. He pulled out in front of a car, and the driver laid on the horn. Overcoat turned his head to look, and by the time he turned back to me, he was staring at my Bodyguard and its considerably bigger hole at the end of the barrel. If I'd had another half-second with him looking away, this might be over. As it was, we had a hell of a stalemate.

"Be smart, put your gun down nice and slow," I said.

"Don't think so, motherfucker."

"Then we got a situation, don't we?"

"Put your gun down," he said.

"Kiss my lily-white ass."

"I'm gonna fuck you up if you don't put that gun down!" He was screaming now, ratcheting up the tension. If I could maintain the status quo, the cavalry would be here soon.

He had forgotten about LungFao, who had managed to duck into a little alcove about thirty feet down the line of showcases. He had gotten the Mossberg assault shotgun off the wall and was leaning around the corner of

the alcove with it pointed in our direction. The drills had paid off, but LungFao was not hard, and he had never been in a situation even close to this. I hoped like hell he remembered the rest of the procedure. Time to find out.

Please, God. A little help here. I slowly tapped my left foot twice. LungFao remembered. The sound of a Mossberg pump being chambered is very distinctive. When Overcoat heard the shotgun being shucked, he instinctively turned toward it. Very bad move.

He had turned to his right. Within a half-second I drew a bead on his head. Another half-second later, I smoothly pulled the trigger. Even now, I can't remember hearing the shot, nor feeling the buck of the little Smith & Wesson in my hand. What I do remember—and will never forget—is the way the little purple hole just appeared in his left temple. The way he crumpled to the floor in a lifeless heap. Like you turned a switch off. I heard sirens in the distance.

\* \* \*

My shop is next door to the headquarters (a small but posh office suite) of Abraham Enterprises, Ltd. The company president and proprietor, Theodore Abraham, is Montello's business wunderkind, a local boy who went to college, then came back home to build his little empire. He owns a multitude of businesses in town, from the only hotel to a small chain of convenience stores. Teddy Abraham is also my best friend.

I saw him peer cautiously around the edge of the front display window, and motioned him in. He burst in, nearly tearing the door off its hinges in the process. He took about two steps, then froze when he saw the body in

the floor. His eyes flared wide and his jaw fell. With pale, freckled skin and red hair, Teddy looked like Opie Taylor, the Adult Edition.

“What the...”

“Robbery,” I said.

“Oh, man! You okay?”

I nodded. He stared at the body, his eyes still huge.

“Who is he?”

“No clue,” I said. “Just some thug.”

## CHAPTER 3

Let's go through it one more time," Mitchell said as he flipped to a new page on his legal pad and readied an imitation Mont Blanc pen.

"I don't think so," I said.

He carefully laid the pen onto the pad, sucked in a long breath and tilted his head down, peering over the frameless reading glasses he surely wore in an attempt to look intelligent.

"Excuse me?" The tone was classic Mitchell: smarmy, affected, as if he had surely misunderstood me. His big head was frozen in place, lips slightly parted as he waited for me to come to my senses. He looked like Jabba the Hut in a bad suit and a worse comb-over.

I looked him in the eye, drew a breath, then changed my mind. I pushed back from the table, stood, and turned to his partner, Bobby Knight. They were such a mismatch visually that it was almost comical. Mitchell, squat and overweight, managed to look perpetually rumped, while

Bobby, fit and tan, always had that sharp, pressed, new-penny look.

“I’m out of here,” I said as I left the detectives’ office, sorry I’d ever agreed to go there and give a statement. It was about fifteen minutes into the process when I noticed I was being treated more like a suspect than a victim.

Bobby followed me into the hallway. “Sorry about that, Gray.”

“Whatever Mitchell’s problem is, this is over the fricking line, Bobby.”

“Like I said, I’m sorry.”

“Is this some kind of corny good-cop, bad-cop routine?”

“Come on, Gray, you just killed a man, for God’s sake. You didn’t expect to answer some questions?”

“I did answer them. Three times. The bastard had a gun on me! I acted in self-defense and you damn well know it.”

He didn’t answer, and that sent a chill ripping down my backbone from stem to stern. I shook my head and left him standing there.

My wife, Abby, was just pulling into a parking space as I walked outside. Most husbands declare their wives beautiful whether it’s true or not. (Who wants to admit he had to settle for homely?) With Abby, it’s true. She was stunning the first time I saw her. Seventh grade, Mrs. Wade’s social studies class, one row to the right and two desks up. She’s stunning now. She changes hairstyles from time to time—right now it’s just long enough to brush her shoulders. It’s the color of sunlight. Not harsh sunlight that hurts your eyes. Magic hour sunlight, the last thirty minutes of the day, that soft golden light that soothes the soul. Her face is smooth and sweet, with a

smile that melts the heart. Her eyes are green, captivating. She got out and sprinted to me. I grabbed her and held her tight for a long time. She started crying.

“You could’ve been killed,” she said between sobs.

I laid my hands on her shoulders. “Look at me.” She did. “I’m fine. It’s over.”

\* \* \*

Detective Bobby Knight stared as Bolton walked away, his arm around Abby. Under his breath, he said, “Just getting started.”