

Scruffy

I STEER MY SMALL SKIFF DOWN CLARKES Lane past Beaumont Street. I'm accompanied by a small, scrawny dog who is half-standing and half-sitting in the bow of the boat. He's very lethargic, probably exhausted. He looks back at me with vacant eyes and a defeated expression. I call him "Scruffy." I plucked Scruffy out of the brownish, contaminated water about a quarter of a mile back near Shawnee and Pine. Scruffy stares ahead at the watery muck, then he scampers to the back of the boat to join me. He licks my hand. I suppose he's showing his appreciation to me for saving his life. He smells terribly and needs a bath. So do I.

I've been cruising around for almost three hours looking for anyone left to rescue in this small town. Two or three other boaters have crossed my path today, also looking for survivors. The entire neighborhood has the stench of sewage. It's been covered under five feet of water for the past three days. Most folks who wanted to git have already gotten. But the little armada to which I belong wants to make sure no one gets left behind.

I hit my little air horn and send out a blast of noise in case anyone is within earshot. Almost immediately I hear a faint cry from the house across the street. I think it comes from the upstairs window. "Hey-y-y."

"Hello! Anyone there?" I yell.

"Up here. Up . . . here."

It's a woman's voice. It starts out strong, then it tapers off as though the person is bone-tired and spent.

"Okay, hang on. I'm coming."

I maneuver over near the front door and reach out to the door knob. At first, I can't tell if the door is locked or jammed. I give it a big tug, and almost fall back into the boat as the door moves only an inch. In the process, I manage to scrape my arm on the side of the skiff.

"Damn."

I get out some bottled water and rinse off the cut. Scruffy comes up and tries to lick it, but I brush him away. "No, Scruffy. Stay." Cuts exposed to this filthy water can be quite dangerous. I apply some Neosporin and a bandage.

PHILLIP TEMPLES

"Ma'am, can you hear me? What's your name? Are you hurt?"

After a moment, I hear, "Ida Mae. Ida Mae Hanson. I'm . . . I'm okay, I think."

"Well, Ida Mae, I got a boat down here to take you to safety. Is there a back door or a window you can get out of?"

"Round the side of the house, maybe?"

I fire up the outboard and maneuver through the front yard to the right side. Sure enough, there's a living room window that appears to be about the right height for me to pull up to. Some human excrement floats by. I try not to look at it. I don't want to add my vomit to the already disgusting mix.

Through the window I see a frail, elderly lady come down the stairs. She's holding on the railing. She hesitates for a second before stepping into the water in her living room. It's higher than her waist. She wades over to the window.

"Can you open the window, Ida Mae?"

"I don't rightly know. I'll . . . try."

Ida Mae attempts to pull up the heavy, wooden portion of the double-hung window but she lacks the body strength to pull it up. She stares blankly at me through the window.

"I'm gonna have to break it open. Stand back so you don't get hit with flying glass."

She wades over to the other side of the room while I grab an ax. I heave the ax head through the glass and run it around the edges to clear out the remaining fragments. It makes a horrible racket.

"Okay, Ida Mae. All set." Just then, a cottonmouth falls off a nearby tree branch into the boat. It lands three feet from me. Scruffy is beside himself. He looks like he's about to jump out of the boat. The snake doesn't look too happy, either. I feel sorry for the critter. He's trying to survive like everything else out here. But he picked the wrong boat in which to hitch a ride.

"Scruffy! Stay!"

I carefully poke the ax head toward the snake. He strikes at it. After a few attempts, I'm able to pin his head against the ax and the side of the boat and apply deadly pressure. After a moment, I snuff the life out of him. I pick up the carcass and



fling it about ten feet into the water. It hits with a splash. Scruffy looks calmer. He goes back to the bow and lies down.

"Okay, let's try that again, Ida Mae."

It's tricky helping the old woman out the window while keeping the boat stationary. I finally manage to grab her waist and haul her in. I slip, and both of us fall down into the bottom of the boat with her on top of me.

"Goodness! I'm sorry."

I'm guessing it's the most intimate contact she's ever had with a black man.

"Don't worry about it, ma'am. I'm just glad you're okay. I'm Josh." I nod at the mutt. "This here's Scruffy." The dog comes up and licks her arm.

"You live here by yourself?"

"No," she replied. "My son, Harold, lived here. But he up 'n left me two days ago. He waded out the front door when the water was only knee-high. Told me, 'you're on your own.'"

"Well, you're safe now. Both you and Scruffy."

I fire up the outboard and set a course down the street for the edge of town and higher ground.

What kind of a bastard would do that to his mother? 🐍

