

A River Closely Watched
(an excerpt from the novel)

She calls him a sonofabitch. He lets her call him a few other things. He fingers the ice cube in his glass of Jack Daniels. There are only a few regular slobbs at the bar at this hour; Ginnie Lewandoski and her sister and Hawk and Dutch Syska Junior. Sue is really pissed and she lets Westy have it again. He leans back in his chair and closes his eyes, waiting for the storm to pass.

Don't you shut me out W, she says.

He opens his eyes to register that comment and then he closes them again.

You rotten bastard, she says.

He feels her get up and then he hears her chair slide across the hardwood floor.

Westy eats stale popcorn until she comes back. He knows the routine.

Oh shit I didn't mean it, she says after a while.

I know you didn't hey.

She sits next to him and holds his hands.

I just worry, she says. That you're gone to get caught up in something.

She picks at the pieces of popcorn stuck in his three-day old beard.

I know you worry, he says.

That and I don't like the idea of you paying Nikki another visit.

It's not a social call.

Well whatever it is I don't like it hey.

I told you, he says. I just got some questions.

I hope that's all you got when you leave, she says. If you know what I mean.

Shit woman.

Shit nothing, Sue says. I know all about Darling Nikki.

Oh yeah and what's that.

She's got loose morals.

Westy laughs at the phrase.

Just then Ginnie Lewandoski spits in her sister's face and they end up on the floor throwing hands at each other near the jukebox and Westy and Sue have to break it up.

A tan backed coyote chases a rabbit across the dry shrubs and cuntgrass. Then inside the modest ranch-style house Darling Nikki pours herself a stiff one. Jack and a splash. She drinks half of it and then she looks back at Westy and he is sitting on her couch with his uniform hat in his lap.

Still down at the Greek's are you, he says.

Most nights, she says. You should stop by.

He clears his throat.

Not really my cup of tea, he says.

What's not, she says. You don't like pussy.

Westy laughs because he knew she was going to fuck with him a little bit.

I don't like paying for it, he says after a couple heartbeats.

Who said anything about paying for it.

Westy looks away and clears his throat again.

So you aint seen him since when, he says. Thaddeus that is.

I done told you last time.

I know but I thought maybe you might have new information.

Why have I did something wrong.

You tell me.

She makes an innocent face like she is on stage somewhere. He grins at her act.

I don't recall doing nothing wrong, she says.

Like harboring a fugitive even for just a minute.

Now she smiles and opens her arms as if to ask where she could hide somebody.

Where I'm gone to harbor anything in this shithole, she says.

Westy looks around and nods his head. Her place is small but tidy.

You can frisk me if you want, she says.

He shakes his head. She's tireless, he thinks.

You sure I can't give you something, she says. A drink I mean.

Well all right then.

Maybe that will get her to talk, he figures. If I play along just a little bit.

She pours him a drink, too. Brings it over to the couch with her. She hands it to him and then she sits down next to him, crosses her long legs so her foot is barely touching his shin.

I just want to get that boy out of this, he says. His nephew.

Oh you mean Bobby, she says. What you want with him anyhow.

Shit I don't know, he says. I guess I think he has a chance.

A fucking chance, she laughs.

Yeah hey, he says. A chance.

A chance at what exactly, she says.

Westy takes a sip of his drink and he makes a face when he does it. Darling Nikki sure pours a strong one. She finishes hers and puts the glass on the hardwood floor at her feet.

I don't know, he says.

Right.

Maybe a chance at not following after his father or uncle, he says.

Darling Nikki nods her head. She figures that is something. She wished somebody had given her a chance. She wished Westy would give her a chance right now, but she hears he's been running around with that skinny little bitch down to the Hot L. Sue something or other.

She can't stand those goody-two-shoes-type bitches like that.

What's she got that I don't, she thinks.

Then on a dime she decides to be a little bit cruel to her guest.

But you know it might be too late for him, she says. Too little, too late and all that.

He agrees with her to some degree and that throws her off.

Then she flirts some more and he finishes his drink. When he stands up to leave she stands up, too. Leans in and brushes up against him like that. He can smell body lotion. He sees what she is up to. He knows her game. Westy thinks he's too old for these silly games anymore.

Darling Nikki walks him to the door and he puts on his hat and says goodbye.

So that's it then, she says.

Unless there's something else.

There's always something else.

I mean about the boy and his whereabouts.

Oh if he's cut from the same cloth, she says. I'm sure he's just fine out there.

Out where.

See, she says. Already I said too much.

You don't have to be scared, he says.

Oh no.

I won't let him hurt you, he says. None of them.

Darling Nikki laughs.

Cops usually bore her but she likes Westy for some reason.

With a straight face even now, she says.

Westy lets out a long breath that smells like Jack.

Them boys do what they want, she says. Always have and you know it.

We got these special places called jail for people like that.

Throwing out these lines like he's in a fucking movie, she thinks.

The brave sheriff war hero come to save the day or whatever the fuck.

Westy fingers the brim of his hat and turns around and walks down the three cement steps to the dirt yard. Darling Nikki watches him cross to the driveway and the town police car. She strikes a pose on the threshold that would bring most men back, but he just smiles as he gets into the cruiser. He drives away slow and she shrugs her shoulders and closes the door with her foot.

End

