



An excerpt from *The Contest*,
available as an eBook at [Amazon](#),
or in a print book called [Two Novies](#).

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NOTE: This work uses film language to describe action as if it's unfolding on a screen. I call pieces written in this style novies (novel + movie = novie).

SO FAR IN THE STORY: Ava Goodwin won a free trip "anywhere in the world" and chose to visit her sister in Grimley, Texas. Albert Ross is a reporter who's trying to turn the story into a scandal. Daniel D. Lyon owns the company that sponsored the contest.

Jacqueline's standing over a gas stove and stirring the contents of a large metal pot. Ava is sitting at the kitchen table. "Did too," she says, speaking louder now, adjusting to her sister's poor hearing.

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Did not."

Ross is back in his van, listening to the debate through his earphones. He beats rhythmically on his steering wheel with his fist. The horn honks with each beat.

"Quit it and give me a quote so I can go home!"

Back in the kitchen, we hear a horn honking in the distance. Neither sister notices.

"And the medal we won for the three-legged sack race . . ." Ava says. The honking stops. "That one's mine because we used *my* strong leg."

Jacqueline, stirring her pot, says, "Toil and trouble. That's all you were ever good for. And now you can't even remember things straight. We used *my* strong leg."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Did not."

The honking resumes.

In the van again, Ross massages his hand. Cooking sounds come through his earphones, and

he looks at a crumpled hamburger wrapper on the floorboard. He rubs his stomach.

Jacqueline's voice says, "So, what were you saying on the porch? About the contest?"

Ross is suddenly attentive. He scrambles to find a pencil and notebook, then he sits, poised, pencil over paper.

"I won the Dan D's Candy travel contest," Ava says.

"What? Are you going to start in about candy again?"

"Yes. I've been trying to tell you . . . I mailed in a box top and won a contest to go anywhere in the world. And I chose to come here."

"Why'd you do that?" Jacqueline's voice sounds wary. Ross gets ready to write.

"Why'd I come here? Because I *wanted* to."

"Nooo!" Ross yells. "Say you *didn't* want to come!"

"I'm . . . I'm not sure I trust you," Jacqueline says. "You're too competitive. Something else is going on."

"You're *more* competitive."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not."

Ross tosses the pencil and notebook aside. He removes his earphones, rubs his stomach again and starts his van.



Lyon is walking away from his car, a bounce in his step. The underground parking garage is cavernous and dark, with patches of light here and there. A car door slams in the distance. Lyon aims his key ring back over his shoulder, pushes a button, and his car alarm chirrup.

The elevator door he walks up to is polished steel and has a big "B4" painted on the wall beside it. He pushes the Up button and checks his reflec-

tion in the door while he waits. He adjusts his tie and touches the swollen place under his eye.

“Makeup oughta have an ice pack,” he says to himself.

The elevator dings, the door opens, and he steps through it.



Ross is in downtown Grimley. It’s dead, and he’s sitting in his van at a rusted stop sign. He’s studying the car he saw earlier—Lillian Boyd’s, with the cross painted on the door. The car’s parked in front of an old building with a “Thrift sTore” sign mounted above the entrance. The Ts in the sign are crucifixes.

Ross looks from the store to the building next to it, one marked “GRIMLEY DINER.” He pulls over to the building and parks in front.

A throbbing country-western song greets him when he enters the diner. He sits at a table next to a window and thumbs through a menu. When he’s ready to order he signals a waitress who’s leaning against an old jukebox and watching him.

The waitress seems to be the only other person in the place. She’s a large, pasty woman, about seventy, and she’s squeezed into a grubby uniform complete with apron and cap. She straightens up and adjusts her girdle.

Ross watches her approach his table. Her big tits jiggle as she comes closer, closer, closer, and when she stops, his eyes are fixed on her nametag. It’s pinned above her left tit and says “HONEY.”

“And the other one gives milk,” she says provocatively.

“Huh?”

“Nothin’. What can I do you for?”

“Oh, uh, tuna sandwich and coffee.”

Honey turns and walks toward a counter that runs along the back wall of the diner. Ross watches her big hips grind in time to the music, then he

shudders and looks out the window. Lillian's car is still the only one at the thrift store.

Ross *jumps* when a cup and saucer clatter onto his table. Honey stays leaned over. She has unfastened the top two buttons on the front of her uniform. She looks meaningfully at Ross.

"After grub, maybe I'll give you a . . . tour of the back."

Honey winks and walks off toward the counter again.

Ross stirs sugar into his coffee, takes a sip and gags. He sniffs the coffee and starts to complain, but he thinks better of it when he looks at Honey. She's behind the counter, squeezing a loaf of bread and dancing suggestively to the music. Ross pushes his coffee away and looks out the window.

Honey bumps and grinds while she works on the sandwich. She removes her apron and tosses it aside, then she reaches up to unpin her hat. Ross isn't aware of her striptease, but we see stockings, underwear and such floating down through the air, behind his turned head.

The song ends and Ross' sandwich is placed on his table. "Want me to . . . hold the pickle?" Honey asks.

The silence after the music is profound. Ross looks at his sandwich, then at Honey, and then his mouth falls open. Slowly, reluctantly, his eyes move downward. We don't see Honey's body, but Ross' facial reactions tell the tale.

Outside, Ross comes hustling through the door with his sandwich in his hand. "Keep the change!" he yells over his shoulder.

Then it's later and he's sitting in his van. He's almost finished his sandwich, and as he chews he studies the thrift store next to the diner. It still has just the one car in front. He stuffs the last crust of bread into his mouth, gets out of his van and starts toward the store.

It's quiet as the door closes behind Ross. He's the only person in the place. He wanders around for a while, looking at junk and old clothes, before he goes to the checkout counter and taps a service bell.

Lillian pushes aside a curtain that's hanging in a doorway behind the counter. She steps up to the cash register and smiles.

"You ready to pay, young man?"

"Just browsing. I'm, uh . . . I'm a friend of the *Tarr sisters*."

Lillian points to the dresses and shoes on the counter.

"I just brought those things from there. For the earthquake victims in Mexico."

Ross pokes at the dresses and looks through the bag of shoes.

"If you have anything *you* want to donate," Lillian says, "some church members are taking a shipment down tomorrow, after the morning service."

Ross holds up an old pair of spike heeled shoes. "For earthquake victims?"

"Oh . . . well, people need to walk through all that rubble. Pretty deep, I imagine."

Lillian comes out from behind the counter. She mutters to herself while she walks around and tidies things.

"Don't know how those poor folks manage, and I don't know why Jacqueline would give me a pair of high heels either, come to think of it. And now Ava's back . . ."

Ross perks up at the mention of Ava's name. He falls in behind Lillian and shadows her, listening over her shoulder.

"No telling *what's* going to come of that," Lillian mutters. "I just hope they . . ."

Lillian stops and turns around. As she does, Ross picks up a yellow plastic hardhat and puts it

on, like he's trying it on for size.

"You got family, young man? No ring on your hand. I have some nice toys for children."

Lillian turns back around and rummages through things that toot, squeak and rattle. Ross leans close to listen as she returns to her mutterings.

"Never saw a boil kill anyone before, but at least it was quick. And now Ava's back, and that contest... Jacqueline's so *jealous*. I hope they can..."

Ross is listening intently, but Lillian's voice gets softer and softer. Ross taps her on the shoulder.

"Excuse me. Can I ask you something about that contest?"

Toot, squeak and rattle. Lillian turns around, *fast*, and holds a rattlesnake out at arm's length. The snake *strikes* at Ross' face.

Ross jumps back and collides with a shelf full of bric-a-brac. He slides to the floor as junk rains down on his hardhat and shoulders. Lillian withdraws the snake. One last item, a plastic snow dome, hits Ross' hat with a *thunk* and rolls away.

"Rosebud," Lillian says, stroking the snake's neck. "We use her in our services. Now where's her cage?"

Lillian looks for and finds a wire cage. She puts the snake inside it. Ross gets up from the floor. He's about to say something, but then his attention is drawn to a large papier-mâché bug in a corner of the shop. The bug is three feet long, peanut shaped and painted green and purple. It has six legs, two antennae, glittery eyes, and a smile. Ross points.

"What's that?"

"Oh, someone left it outside. Might be a science project. I don't think it's real."

Ross studies the bug, and as he does, he rests his hand on a table. He feels something and looks

down to see a green plastic tank. It's the strap-on aqualung portion of a water rifle. A hose connects the tank to the squirt gun. Ross picks up the gun, looks at the bug again, then at a rail of clothing.



Daniel Lyon is leaned back in a barber's chair. An ice pack covers his eyes and a pair of hands is working on his hair with a comb and pick.

Lyon laughs and says, "Funniest thing I ever saw on TV. I mean, people going in an' out of a public bathroom, then one guy walks out like nothin's wrong, and he has . . ."

Lyon pauses to laugh. The comb and pick are turned over to a different pair of hands. Lyon doesn't notice. The new hands continue to work. Lyon resumes his story.

"This other guy has a streamer of toilet paper on his shoe. Doesn't know it and just walks on. Then *another* man comes out with some paper stuck to his *knee*! So, he was on his *knees* in the bathroom. That means he was a . . . he was . . ."

The pair of hands removes the ice pack, and Lyon is smiling up into the face of an obviously homosexual man.

"He wath having *fun*?"

Lyon's face goes rigid, smile still stuck in place.



Three sharp knocks on Jacqueline's front door. Jacqueline walks up and opens it. Ross is on the other side of the screen door. He's wearing orange coveralls and a lineman's tool belt. A blue revolving light is duct taped to the top of his yellow hardhat. The light's off. He's got the green tank of the water gun strapped to his back, and the plastic rifle is hooked to the tool belt. A stethoscope hangs from his neck. He holds a clipboard with a piece of paper on it.

"Good afternoon," he says. "Are you Miss . . ."

He looks at the clipboard. "Are you Miss Jacqueline Tarr?" Jacqueline nods. Ross tips his hardhat. "Well, I'm The Bug Doctor, ma'am." He touches his stethoscope. "I've come to spray."

Ross gestures over his shoulder and we see his van parked in front of Jacqueline's house, by the mailbox. The papier-mâché bug that was at the thrift store is duct taped to the roof of the van. Jacqueline looks from the bug to Ross, and she taps her hearing aid. "You've come to play?"

Ross leans forward and speaks up. "No! You won a free *spraying!* You won a . . . a *contest.*" Ross is fishing, and he gets his reaction. Jacqueline smiles. "I know I should have called ahead," Ross says, "so maybe I should come back later and . . ."

"No! Hold on." Jacqueline glances over her shoulder and grins. "I won a free bug treatment, huh?" She turns back to Ross. "Well, come on in, since you're here. I need to get back to my goulash."

Jacqueline pushes the screen door open and Ross steps inside. The water tank on his back sloshes. He closes the screen door, then Jacqueline closes the front door and peers up at Ross.

"What's your name, young man?"

"Just call me The Bug Doctor."

Jacqueline taps her hearing aid. "Dr. Bugger?" She looks at the nametag on Ross' coveralls. It says "DUC."

Ross looks down at the nametag and seems to be seeing it for the first time. He frowns. "Duck," he says. "That's . . . Vietnamese."

Jacqueline is impressed. "Well, I declare. I never met a Vietnamese before." She bows, geisha-like, and says, "Is great honor, Duck Bugger." Then, in a confidential tone she adds, "Sorry about that war."

"Ava!" she yells, turning away. "I just won a contest too!"