

# DENNIS

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# LEHANE

# Coronado



STORIES

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**DENNIS LEHANE**

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For Ann Rittenberg and Claire Wachtel

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## **RUNNING OUT OF DOG**

**THIS THING WITH Blue and the dogs and Elgin Bern happened a while back, a few years after some of our boys—like Elgin Bern and Cal Sears—came back from Vietnam, and a lot of others—like Eddie Vorey and Carl Joe Carol, the Stewart cousins—didn't. We don't know how it worked in other towns, but that war put something secret in our boys who returned. Something quiet and untouchable. You sensed they knew things they'd never say, did things on the sly you'd never discover. Great cardplayers, those boys, able to bluff with the best, let no joy show in their face no matter what they were holding.**

**A small town is a hard place to keep a secret, and a small southern town with all that heat and all those open windows is an even harder place than most. But those boys who came back from overseas, they seemed to have mastered the trick of privacy. And the way it's always been in this town, you get a sizeable crop of young, hard men coming up at the same time, they sort of set the tone.**

**So, not long after the war, we were a quieter town, a less trusting one (or so some seemed to think), and that's right when tobacco money and textile money reached a sort of critical mass and created construction money and pretty soon there was talk that our small town should maybe get a little bigger, maybe build something that would bring in more tourist dollars than we'd been getting from fireworks and pecans.**

**That's when some folks came up with this Eden Falls idea—a big carnival-type park with roller coasters and water slides and such. Why should all those Yankees spend all their money in Florida? South Carolina had sun too. Had golf courses and grapefruit and no end of KOA campgrounds.**

**So now a little town called Eden was going to have Eden Falls. We were going to be on the map, people said. We were going to be in all the brochures. We were small now, people said, but just you wait. Just you wait.**

**And that's how things stood back then, the year Perkin and Jewel Lut's marriage hit a few bumps and Elgin Bern took up with Shelley Briggs and no one seemed able to hold onto their dogs.**

THE PROBLEM WITH dogs in Eden, South Carolina, was that the owners who bred them bred a lot of them. Or they allowed them to run free where they met up with other dogs of opposite gender and achieved the same result. This wouldn't have been so bad if Eden weren't so close to I-95, and if the dogs weren't in the habit of bolting into traffic and fucking up the bumpers of potential tourists.

The mayor, Big Bobby Vargas, went to a mayoral conference up in Beaufort, where the governor made a surprise appearance to tell everyone how pissed off he was about this dog thing. Lot of money being poured into Eden these days, the governor said, lot of steps being taken to change her image, and he for one would be goddamned if a bunch of misbehaving canines was going to mess all that up.

“Boys,” he'd said, looking Big Bobby Vargas dead in the eye, “they're starting to call this state the Devil's Kennel 'cause of them pooch corpses along the interstate. And I don't know about you-all, but I don't think that's a real pretty name.”

Big Bobby told Elgin and Blue he'd never heard anyone call it the Devil's Kennel in his life. Heard a lot worse, sure, but never that. Big Bobby said the governor was full of shit. But, being the governor and all, he was sort of entitled.

The dogs in Eden had been a problem going back to the twenties and a part-time breeder named J. Mallon Ellenburg who, if his arms weren't up to their elbows in the guts of the tractors and combines he repaired for a living, was usually lashing out at something—his family when they weren't quick enough, his dogs when the family was. J. Mallon Ellenburg's dogs were mixed breeds and mongrels and they ran in packs, as did their offspring, and several generations later, those packs still moved through the Eden night like wolves, their bodies stripped to muscle and gristle, tense and angry, growling in the dark at J. Mallon Ellenburg's ghost.

Big Bobby went to the trouble of measuring exactly how much of 95 crossed through Eden, and he came up with 2.8 miles. Not much really, but still an average of .74 dog a day or 4.9 dogs a week. Big Bobby wanted the rest of the state funds the governor was going to be doling out at year's end, and if that meant getting rid of five dogs a week, give or take, then that's what was going to get done.

“On the QT,” he said to Elgin and Blue, “on the QT, what we going to do, boys, is set up in some trees and shoot every canine who gets within barking distance of that interstate.”

Elgin didn't much like this “we” stuff. First place, Big Bobby'd said “we” that time in Double O's four years ago. This was before he'd become mayor, when he was nothing more than a county tax assessor who shot pool at Double O's every other night, same as Elgin and Blue. But one night, after Harlan and Chub Uke had roughed him up over a matter of some pocket change, and knowing that neither Elgin nor Blue was too fond of the Uke family either, Big Bobby'd said, “We going to settle those boys' asses tonight,” and started running his mouth the minute the brothers entered the bar.

Time the smoke cleared, Blue had a broken hand, Harlan and Chub were curled up on the floor, and Elgin's lip was busted. Big Bobby, meanwhile,

was hiding under the pool table, and Cal Sears was asking who was going to pay for the pool stick Elgin had snapped across the back of Chub's head.

So Elgin heard Mayor Big Bobby saying "we" and remembered the ten dollars it had cost him for that pool stick, and he said, "No, sir, you can count me out this particular enterprise."

Big Bobby looked disappointed. Elgin was a veteran of a foreign war, former Marine, a marksman. "Shit," Big Bobby said, "what good are you, you don't use the skills Uncle Sam spent good money teaching you?"

Elgin shrugged. "Damn, Bobby. I guess not much."

But Blue kept his hand in, as both Big Bobby and Elgin knew he would. All the job required was a guy didn't mind sitting in a tree who liked to shoot things. Hell, Blue was home.

ELGIN DIDN'T HAVE the time to be sitting up in a tree anyway. The past few months, he'd been working like crazy after they'd broke ground at Eden Falls—mixing cement, digging postholes, draining swamp water to shore up the foundation—with the real work still to come. There'd be several more months of drilling and bilging, spreading cement like cake icing, and erecting scaffolding to erect walls to erect facades. There'd be the hump-and-grind of rolling along in the dump trucks and drill trucks, the forklifts and cranes and industrial diggers, until the constant heave and jerk of them drove up his spine or into his kidneys like a corkscrew.

Time to sit up in a tree shooting dogs? Shit. Elgin didn't have time to take a piss some days.

And then on top of all the work, he'd been seeing Drew Briggs's ex-wife, Shelley, lately. Shelley was the receptionist at Perkin Lut's Auto Emporium, and one day Elgin had brought his Impala in for a tire rotation and they'd got to talking. She'd been divorced from Drew over a year, and they waited a couple of months to show respect, but after a while they began showing up at Double O's and down at the IHOP together.

Once they drove clear to Myrtle Beach together for the weekend. People asked them what it was like, and they said, “Just like the postcards.” Since the postcards never mentioned the price of a room at the Hilton, Elgin and Shelley didn’t mention that all they’d done was drive up and down the beach twice before settling in a motel a bit west in Conway. Nice, though; had a color TV and one of those switches turned the bathroom into a sauna if you let the shower run. They’d started making love in the sauna, finished up on the bed with steam coiling out from the bathroom and brushing their heels. Afterward, he pushed her hair back off her forehead and looked in her eyes and told her he could get used to this.

She said, “But wouldn’t it cost a lot to install a sauna in your trailer?” then waited a full thirty seconds before she smiled.

Elgin liked that about her, the way she let him know he was still just a man after all, always would take himself too seriously, part of his nature. Letting him know she might be around to keep him apprised of that fact every time he did. Keep him from pushing a bullet into the breech of a thirty-aught-six, slamming the bolt home, firing into the flank of some wild dog.

Sometimes, when they’d shut down the site early for the day—if it had rained real heavy and the soil loosened near a foundation, or if supplies were running late—he’d drop by Lut’s to see her. She’d smile as if he’d brought her flowers, say, “Caught boozing on the job again?” or some other smart-ass thing, but it made him feel good, as if something in his chest suddenly realized it was free to breathe.

Before Shelley, Elgin had spent a long time without a woman he could publicly acknowledge as his. He’d gone with Mae Shiller from fifteen to nineteen, but she’d gotten lonely while he was overseas, and he’d returned to find her gone from Eden, married to a boy up in South of the Border, the two of them working a corn-dog concession stand, making a tidy profit, folks said. Elgin dated some, but it took him a while to get over Mae, to get over the loss of something he’d always expected to have, the sound of her laugh and an image of her stepping naked from Cooper’s Lake, her pale flesh beaded with water, having been the things that got Elgin through the jungle, through the heat, through the ticking of his own death he’d heard in his ears every night he’d been over there.