

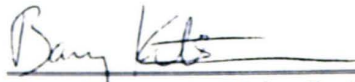
OVER THE FALLS IN A BARREL

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MARK ANDREW BROWN

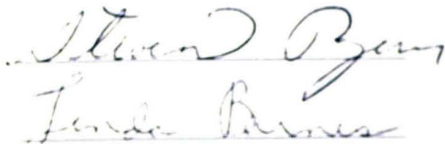
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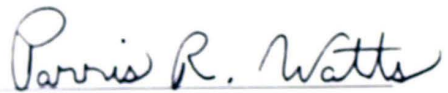


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Over the Falls In a Barrel

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Mark Andrew Brown

August, 2000



## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated with love to  
the people who did all the difficult work:

Lise Brown,

Betty Palmer Nelson,

and

Barry Kitterman.

## ABSTRACT

*Over the Falls in a Barrel* explores the nature of life in a specific historical time and place: contemporary Clarksville, TN. While these stories could stand alone as separate creative pieces, they are intended to work together as complements. Unavoidably, each person must make choices from one moment to the next, and the environment in which a person lives determines the range of choices which he or she faces. The characters in this collection face difficult choices, choices that offer no clear-cut and satisfactory solutions; however, they cannot refuse to choose. As Jean-Paul Sartre noted, to choose not to choose is still to make a choice. In real life, such a choice is often a bad one. In fiction, not choosing is the worst choice a character can make.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	v
Squares, Monet, and a Dollar Bill .....	1
A Lousy, Sad Excuse .....	9
The Only Good Cracker is a Ritz .....	20
Only You Will Ever Know .....	35
I'm Only Bleeding .....	92



## INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, a friend asked me to speak to one of his creative writing classes. I agreed, and feeling I had no earth-shattering wisdom to pass along to the students, I decided to wing my presentation. I read a story and then started ad libbing. As I listened to myself, I amazingly enough discovered a theme in my comments. Over and over, I told the students to write about the people they cared about. If they did that, they might find themselves constructing some meaningful stories.

That idea undergirds *Over the Falls in a Barrel*. These stories concern people who matter to me—people I love, in some sense of the word. These characters are based on the people I live with, work with, battle through rush hour on Nashville Pike with, and stand with in the express lane at Kroger. They are based on the people I attempt to teach and on the people from whom I learn a great deal. While not a single character is derived directly from any specific person, each character is enlivened with the spirit of innumerable people I have known throughout my life in Middle Tennessee.

In short, these stories are based on real people in a real place in real time. Fiction writers use our imaginations as tools. The materials we work with, however, are the temporal, the physical, the mental, the emotional, the finite. If we do our job well, maybe our creations transcend time and place. But without a basis in reality, our work rings hollow. Without a basis in reality, fiction says nothing. It amounts to pretty noise.

Set in Clarksville, Tennessee, *Over the Falls in a Barrel* concerns contemporary southerners: people with unique problems and unique solutions. The South of this work is

not the South of William Faulkner, nor the region fictionalized by older Tennessee writers like Evelyn Scott, Caroline Gordon, and Peter Taylor. Clarksville bills itself as “The Gateway to the New South,” and the region has undeniably changed a great deal since the time of these writers. New problems face today’s southerners, problems that would baffle Quentin Compson and Aleck Maury. In many ways, however, the South still wallows in the provincialism, elitism, racism, and paternalism of Yoknapatawpha County. I hope this work touches on some of the new and old problems.

Why bother? Because I care about the South and about southerners. Hell, boy, I am one. These are the people I am supposed to write about, and write about honestly. Fiction is a mirror perpetually held up to the world. Why? Because, as Sartre says,

It is assumed that no one is ignorant of the law because there is a code and because the law is written down; thereafter, you are free to violate it, but you know the risks you run. Similarly, the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it’s all about.<sup>1</sup>

We write about people because we want them to see themselves. We care enough about them to try to make them aware.

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<sup>1</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. “What is Writing?” *Literature and Existentialism*. Trans. Bernard Frechtman. Citadel: New York, 1994. 7-37.

## Squares, Monet, and a Dollar Bill

“Squares run four dollars apiece in here,” Dollar Bill said, holding out a cigarette to me as he sat on the edge of my bunk. “But I think I can spare one for you, Weekender.”

Officer Cowley had taken my cigarettes when he processed me in. He also took my Duck Heads, my Polo sweater, and my Top-Siders and replaced them with orange pants, a white T-shirt, and blue rubber flip-flops. He explained that shoes made versatile weapons: an inmate could use one as a bludgeon or strangle someone with shoestrings. As he led me with clattering steps down the steel staircase to my cellblock, he told me with a laugh that all Gibson County buildings were smoke-free environments. I had slept off as much of the front end of my sentence as I could: two whole hours. Now, as I rubbed my bleary eyes, this immense black man sat on the edge of my bunk like a bear in those roadside petting zoos that caught my eye as a kid. He had introduced himself as Dollar Bill. Apparently, I was Weekender, since I was only serving forty-eight hours in the Gibson County workhouse for DUI, First Offense. Usually, I don’t smoke Mavericks; they taste like straw. But this was no time to be finicky.

“Why didn’t they put you with the Dirty White Boys?” Dollar Bill asked, nodding toward somewhere on the other side of the block wall behind us.

I accepted his cigarette. “Guess they knew I’d have better company here.”

“Cowley knows what’s up.” He packed his cigarette against his disposable lighter. “Been locked up before?”

“Unfortunately.” All for boys-will-be-boys crimes: two public intoxications, one destruction of public property for beating mailboxes with a baseball bat, one simple



possession of marijuana. Nothing that cost me more than a few hours in jail, bail money, a lawyer's retainer, a fine, and court costs. The DAs and the judges never broke a sweat dealing with me.

Dollar Bill held out his lit lighter. I glanced through the wall of iron bars separating us from the hall outside. "Don't worry," he said. "If you ain't smoking no dope, the jailers don't give a damn."

After lighting my smoke, I took my first long look around the cellblock. It was somewhere around nine o'clock. Not that we knew it, but outside a tornado was brewing in the January Sunday morning, a tornado that would kill nine people down I-40 in Jackson. Like a family of gypsy contortionists, most of the other inmates sat on their bunks, stretching the sleep from their bones. A tall, thin one in green-and-black-checkered boxers stepped off a few paces along the back wall. The lights in the cellblock weren't on, so we made do with the lights from the hall. Pretty dim. There were eight of us. I was the only white one.

"Where you from?" Dollar Bill asked.

I inhaled a long stream of smoke and held it deep in my lungs. By all rights, I should have been scared out of my wits—a twenty-four-year-old white boy locked in a cell with seven black men—but I wasn't. Maybe a lack of fear was my problem. My mom thought so. She called me Felix the Cat because I wanted to experience everything. I knew what curiosity did for the cat, but I thought the education outweighed the risk. Maybe some healthy fear would have kept me from hauling ass, blind drunk, through the middle of a Milan night in my 280Z. As for the men in the cell, I thought our differences were on the outside. In here, we were all inmates. "Clarksville," I said.

Dollar Bill frowned like an irritated sea lion.

"It's in Middle Tennessee. I had to drive three hours to get here."

"What you doing down here drinking up our West Tennessee liquor?"

"Acting like a moron." A big moron. The previous summer, I had come down for a weekend-long bash with Bruce Paskewitz, a classmate at Austin Peay. His sister attended UT-Martin and lived in Milan. We hooked up with her and her friends and drank ourselves silly. On Saturday night, we decided to go to Low Places Bar and Grille, a local dive, for karaoke. Around midnight, I got into a pissing contest with some redneck about whose car was faster, so I challenged him to an empirical test on Highway 79. The Milan PD was so impressed with my Z's performance they hauled me in to discuss it. My lawyer talked the DA into dropping all the charges, except the DUI. After all, I had done nothing major, other than endangering who knew how many innocent motorists. I exhaled smoke and tried to give Dollar Bill my most embarrassed smile, knowing I looked like a jackass chewing on sawbriars.

"We all done that," he said.

"Weekender," someone called from the other side of the cellblock, "don't listen to that old fool. Don't nobody care what he has to say."

"Shut up, Billy Jack." Dollar Bill returned. "Only fool in here is you."

Perched on his bunk, Billy Jack worked his brawny shoulders, rolling them up and down like a wave. "Tell him why everybody calls you Dollar Bill."

Dollar Bill smacked me on the arm and said, confidentially, "Billy Jack thinks somebody's going to make a Kung Fu movie about him some day. Keeps getting thrown in here for fighting."

“If you had a dollar bill, old man, maybe you wouldn’t write those bad checks.”

“See, that’s what’s wrong with black men today,” Dollar Bill said, clapping his hands. “Always got to be starting something. Somebody says something about your woman, you got to hit him in the jaw. Somebody look at you wrong, you got to cut him.” He shook his head. “Hell, you in here, and they out there laughing at you.”

Billy Jack grabbed a pair of pants—orange like everyone else’s—from the floor. “I can kick your old ass.”

Dollar Bill blew a stream of smoke toward the blackened ceiling. Even in the darkness, I could make out the gray streaks running back from his temples like chalk smears across a blackboard. “You coming after me, Billy Jack, you better pack a man-size lunch.”

Billy Jack pulled the string on his pants, tightening the waist, and glared at Dollar Bill.

“You fighting the wrong people,” Dollar Bill said. “You come after me, and what we going to get? A trip to the Psycho Ward.” He pointed toward somewhere above us. “Solitary, big boy. Thirty days for both of us. What good’s that going to do?”

“Ain’t nobody laughing in my face,” Billy Jack said. His voice had lost some of its bite. He took a furtive look at his bunk.

“Ain’t me you’re mad at.”

“Who ought I fight?” Billy Jack nodded toward me. “This white boy?”

I took a drag off my cigarette. Maybe he should have fought me. He looked like a guy I would avoid on the street: the gangsta rapper type. Somewhere outside, I assumed,



he had a Lakers jersey and a collection of gold chains. I also thought he would despise a white, college boy.

Slowly, Dollar Bill put his cigarette between his teeth, squinted, and rubbed his hands on his thighs. "Got to go through me first. Ain't no color in here but orange."

Billy Jack took another look behind him, slowly flexed his biceps, then fell across his bunk. "You ain't worth fucking with no way, old man."

Dollar Bill blew another stream of smoke toward the ceiling. "What you do?" he asked me.

"I'm a graduate student." He frowned again, but I didn't bother to explain. "And you?"

He held his hands before him, palms up. "This, for the next ten months. I already been in two."

"Are you married?"

"For fifteen years." He looked away. "Got a twelve-year-old daughter. She's pretty disappointed." He shook his head again. "All over a hundred and twenty dollars. Four checks."

His words made me think of numbers. Statistics. In sociology, I'd read the ones for black men in the U.S.: million of arrests each year, hundreds of thousands locked up in jails and prisons, significantly fewer enrolled in colleges. Statistics, statistics, and more statistics. I grunted sympathetically and knocked the ashes off my smoke.

"If you dance, you got to pay the piper." He flipped ashes on the floor. "Knew I couldn't cover them when I wrote them."

“Then why’d you do it?”

He cut his wide-set eyes toward me. “Needed running money. Didn’t have much left after paying bills.”

“Couldn’t your wife help?”

“She don’t get out much. Got a hip problem.” He leaned forward. “You brought some books.” He reached toward the stack beside my feet. “Not much to do in here other than read. I got some Tom Clancy and Dean Kontz, if you’re interested.”

Flannery O’Connor’s *Collected Stories*, Eudora Welty’s *Thirteen Stories*, a non-fiction work entitled *Inventing Southern Literature* made up my stack. All reading for Dr. Joy’s seminar. I also had a paperback collection of Monet prints.

Dollar Bill went for the Monet. He jabbed his cigarette into the corner of his mouth, then thumbed through the book. I smoked and looked over his shoulder at Monet’s take on water lilies, picturesque white bridges over quiet streams, the burning House of Commons, Gothic cathedrals, and French folks.

“The people are cloudy,” Dollar Bill said. “Out of focus. Colorful, though.”

“It’s a style called Impressionism,” I said. “The painter doesn’t try to make the people look exactly as they do. He gives you his impression of them, how he feels about them.”

He pursed his lips. “I suppose you get people like they really look on TV. No need to do it in painting.”

“That’s about the way I look at it.”

“I’d rather see what a man thinks about the world hisself, anyway. Hell, I can take a picture if I want.”

“Weekender,” Billy Jack called again, “you eat pussy? White boys love to eat that pussy.”

“Shut the hell up,” Dollar Bill said. “We’re trying to talk.”

Billy Jack rubbed the thick, white scar running down the side of his shaved head.

“I’m just making conversation. Do you, Weekender?”

Wouldn’t that question drive my mom nuts? I could hear her screaming at me not to answer, not to even consider answering. “I’ve been known to,” I said.

Dollar Bill shut the Monet and left it lying on his lap. “Don’t pay that bastard no mind. Some people don’t learn.” He ran his big hand across the book. “I like art. Life’s a piece of art.”

“How’s that?” I asked.

“It’s a jigsaw puzzle. You kind of see it’s going to make a picture, but you ain’t got all the pieces.” With a flick of his huge thumb, he sent ashes showering to the floor. “Everybody you meet and everything you go through is another piece in the puzzle.” He smiled, uneven rows of white teeth below the dull thickness of his mustache. “The older you get, the more pieces you got.”

“Do we ever get all the pieces?”

“If we’re lucky.” He shrugged. “Hell, I don’t know. That’s for somebody else to decide.” He nodded toward the ceiling.

I stared at the end of the cigarette cupped in my palm. The skin of my hand glowed a dim red. “What if you don’t like your pieces? What if they don’t make sense?”



“You ain’t the artist.” He held up the book. “Did this man ask what you wanted before he made these? Did he ask if they make sense?” He laughed. “Besides, what you bitching about? Your puzzle might not seem so bad to me.”

The lights came on in the cellblock. The other inmates began to stir more vigorously. Billy Jack turned on the television, muttering something about watching Pokémon kick much ass. Probably on all the cartoon enemies of God, country, and everything right with the world. I didn’t agree with Dollar Bill. Tidy answers never solve complex problems. But I wondered if I would ever find a philosophy I completely agreed with. Down the hall, a heavy door clanged open.

“Breakfast time,” Dollar Bill said.

I took one last hit off my cigarette and mashed it under my flip-flop. Maybe Dollar Bill had found an answer to help him get through his time, which was more than most of us could claim. The other inmates, some holding plastic cups, plodded barefoot over to the bars and peered down the hall. Billy Jack settled Indian-style on the floor before the television. I clasped my hands behind my back, stretched, and smiled. “What are two smart guys like us doing in a dump like this?”

Officer Cowley pushed his food cart up to our cellblock. Dollar Bill stubbed out his cigarette on the wall and tossed the butt under my bunk. “We ain’t too damn smart,” he said. “We’re in jail.”

## A Lousy, Sad Excuse

"I'm right. I'm always right. Don't you know that?" cried Ms. Beach. "No, you don't." Her long, cherry fingernails clacked against her mouse. "Well, that's just another way you're wrong."

Two computers over, Surfer Dude flinched and wheeled his chair around, turning his back to them. Behind the Reference Desk, Jenny looked concerned. Shawn returned an embarrassed smile. He wished Ms. Beach and Surfer Dude would leave so he could shut down the computer lab and put to bed this lousy, sad excuse for a night. After two grueling, repetitious weeks of helping with her divorce decree, he couldn't stand another second of Ms. Beach. He wanted to go home, catch *Dr. Katz* on Comedy Central, and try to forget her.

"If this computer eats my divorce papers, I'll sue this library," she grumbled. "I'm not staying married to Dan because you people won't buy decent computers. He stole \$2,000 from my checking account, the son of a bitch. Can you believe that?"

Shawn inched behind her so he wouldn't have to look in her taut face with its cappuccino-colored skin. One too many trips to the tanning booth, he guessed. "Click FILE, ma'am."

"I've done that."

"Please, do it again."

In a few easy steps, he led her to her file. She brought it up on-screen and glowered. "I want it saved to disk, not to the hard drive. Is that too much to ask? Why won't this computer do what I tell it to?"

Shawn clenched his fists so tightly his fingernails dug into his palms. He knew Ms. Beach told it to save to the hard drive. Four other times, they had gone through the proper procedure for saving to disk, and she couldn't retain the information. But he wouldn't remind her of that. Surfer Dude cut her a glare, twisted quickly from his seat, and headed for the exit, his sandals clapping. One down and one to go, Shawn thought. "Click FILE again."

He led her through the process one more time, and she complained at every step. When they finished, she jabbed the eject button and snatched her disk out. "I don't see why you people won't put Word Perfect 5.1 back on your computers. It's so easy, and these new versions are so complicated, with their little icons and mice."

"I'll make a note of it, ma'am," Shawn said, his fingernails still digging into his palms.

"You do that, smart aleck." She read his name tag, for the first time in two weeks. "Shawn Fentress? You must be one of those trashy Fentresses from down by the river."

He clenched his fists one last, good time and moved toward the other computers. "We close in ten minutes, ma'am."

She shoved her disk in her handbag and turned in a tornado of blonde hair. "Thank God I'm through with you and this cheap library," she said over her shoulder as she left.

I hope he steals it all, Shawn thought and shot a glance toward Jenny. She pushed papers around on her desk, a preoccupied look tightening her small face. Shawn knew her routine: she tried to look especially busy near closing time so patrons would feel compelled to leave without asking her questions. She saw him watching and gave the



okay sign with her thumb and index finger. He shut down the computer beside the one Ms. Beach had used. What a lousy, sad excuse for a human being. He moved to her computer and shut it down. What a lousy, sad excuse for a job. He shut down the next computer. What a lousy, sad excuse for a life. He hit the power button on the final computer in the row; its screen flickered and went black.

Back in high school, he loved the Clarksville Public Library, but if he had known he would wind up chained to its computer help desk, he would have shot himself. Okay, so he wouldn't have shot himself; suicide was too melodramatic. But he wouldn't have been happy about it. Who could be happy bringing home \$15,000 a year for dealing with all the Ms. Beaches? And now his ten-year reunion was coming up. Was he ever thrilled girlfriend waiting for his electronic love note. Don't it touch your heart? Shawn wished he could finally show his classmates what a loser he had turned out to be. The biggest one he could send her a message. Wouldn't that make her night. With another chuckle, he wheeled the cursor to REPLY and clicked.

Hey, Shawn, say hi to Bill Gates. He sighed, knowing he would grin and bear it. He always did.

He laughed aloud.

The exit door slammed, and Shawn took a quick look around the floor. No one hid in the stacks.

Shawn flinched. "Yeah."

"Are we clear?" Jenny asked in her mousy voice.

"Forward them to me if you think I'll like them."

"Looks like it."

"Will do." Without a second thought, he began typing madly, dashing out the

She smiled like a chipmunk with a buzz, drummed happily a few times on her desk, and took off her plastic name tag. "Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, we're free at last." He finished, wheeled the cursor to SEND, and stopped. He leaned back in his chair and entwined his fingers behind his head.



Shawn smiled at her silliness. She always made him smile. He went back to the computer Surfer Dude used, a screen saver of multi-colored, squiggly lines tumbling across the monitor. He rolled the mouse, and an e-mail message came up. "The dumb ass," he muttered. People left their e-mail on the computers all the time. These days no one cared about privacy. After all, they carried on cell phone conversations in public. He always felt guilty about reading their abandoned messages, but he always did. He sat and read.

*dear chris hows your day going? mines a little better since I know this is going to you. I was SO DEAD because of what you told my mom on the phone last night. LOL I cant BELIEVE you told her. you are a BAD boy. miss you. write me back as soon as you get this. Im gonna keep checking my mail until I get something from you. love britney*

Awww, tain't it sweet, Shawn thought and chuckled. Surfer Dude has a little girlfriend waiting for his electronic love note. Don't it touch your heart? Shawn wished *he* could send her a message. Wouldn't that make her night. With another chuckle, he wheeled the cursor to REPLY and clicked.

And a compose screen appeared before his eyes.

He laughed aloud.

"Are you reading jokes again?" Jenny asked.

Shawn flinched. "Yeah."

"Forward them to me if you think I'll like them."

"Will do." Without a second thought, he began typing madly, dashing out the meanest things he could think to write off the top of his head. He finished, wheeled the cursor to SEND, and stopped. He leaned back in his chair and entwined his fingers behind his head.



Just what was he doing? What did this girl do to deserve such a shock? For that matter, what did Surfer Dude do? Actually, he was a decent patron: low-maintenance. He did whatever he needed without asking for Shawn's assistance, which he was paid to give. He even left before Shawn asked him to. If all patrons acted like Surfer Dude, Shawn's life would be easy. But as his grandmom used to say, if ifs and buts were candy and nuts, it would be Christmas every day.

Jenny sauntered up across the computer from him. "You look thoughtful."

Only her head cleared the monitor's top. Shawn thought of the cloth mascot she kept atop her computer, a fuzzy insect named Y2K Bug with eight purple legs, four green wings, bulging yellow eyes, and a crooked smile. Only Jenny, with her sharp nose and chin, was cuter than Y2K Bug. He liked the way her sandy brown hair rolled smoothly back along her head, a few renegade strands flying out behind her ears. "There's something I want to do, and I'm trying to decide if I should."

"You know, you're good with people," she said. "I don't see how you put up with that Beach woman. Why doesn't she hire a lawyer to handle her divorce?"

He waved a hand in dismissal. "Trying to hold onto every penny, I suppose."

"Well, you have the patience of Job. Even with all the hassles, you never bite anyone's head off. We appreciate that."

"Can I expect a bonus?"

She grinned from the side of her mouth. "Don't hold your breath," she said, laying a thin forearm across the computer. "How do you do it?"

"It's my Southern Baptist upbringing," he said. "They train us not to talk back." And he could honestly say he didn't. Jenny told the truth: he dealt with the most ill-

tempered, impatient patrons in the library. Computers brought out the worst in people. But he never fired back. Instead, he dug his fingernails into his palms and responded with even-toned commands, followed by sir or ma'am. At one time or another, he assumed, everyone snapped at a smart aleck customer, but he always gave those even-toned replies.

"You're not going to crack on us some day, are you?" Jenny said. "I don't want you coming in with a machine gun."

"I'm sane, I think."

He stared at the computer screen, wondering what Surfer Dude and Britney had done to him. Nothing, but that didn't matter much. Someone had done something to him, something that never should be done to anyone. What? He drummed his fingers on the desktop. They pinned this bad dream of a life on him. And how bad was it? Well, there was this lousy night, which was actually the latest in a long string of lousy nights. In fact, he couldn't remember his last good one—probably one with Michelle. But that ended weeks ago, and he couldn't remember the last good time they had.

He crossed his arms and pursed his lips. Jenny repositioned herself, dropping her head to the side and exposing her slender neck. Maybe he exaggerated; his life wasn't all that lousy. But it wasn't exciting, damn it. In Michelle's blue eyes, his life appeared boring, too boring for her to put up with. Actually, she broke up with him because *he* was boring, not because his life was boring, but drawing a distinction between the two was splitting hairs. She declared him too boring and too nice. He still couldn't believe it took her two years to figure that out, but then again, she was a little slow on the uptake concerning anything outside herself.

Unlike Jenny. Shawn paused and tapped his fingers on the mouse. Jenny asked how he was doing every day. She noticed his rough times, like with Ms. Beach. Since the break up, she'd been especially thoughtful, listening whenever he complained. Now she leaned against the computer, her dark brown eyes drooping a little with fatigue, but she wasn't too tired to pay him a compliment, which was something Michelle never did.

He sat back again. And how had he responded when Michelle called him boring? He told her she knew her needs better than he did. If he couldn't fulfill them, she should look for someone who could. He didn't mean it, naturally. He just thought he should say it to avoid a big blow up. In fact, he thought it would make her see what a sweet guy he was. He naïvely expected her to run to his arms. Instead, she thanked him for being so understanding and took his advice. What could he do except learn from his mistakes? Learn not to be so boring. "If you're smart," he said, "you'll stay single."

Jenny adjusted her glasses and frowned. "I don't plan on it. I'll grab some nice guy's attention before I retire."

"Better hurry, you only have forty years." He pushed the mouse across its pad. So maybe his life was lousy. Maybe he'd never had a good night. His days weren't anything to write home about either. Always the same old never-changing routine. But expecting Clarksville to change was like expecting a keyboard to toast bread. This town offered nothing except hanging out at Rebel Rouser's Pub, drinking over-priced imported beer and shooting pool. Other than that, he could wander around downtown, staring at the same old brown brick buildings built before the Civil War and the same old people who thought they hung the moon, like Ms. Beach.



Again, though, he wondered how that concerned Surfer Dude and his little girlfriend. "Who names their daughter Britney?" he said.

Jenny grinned. "Are you on a teen chat line?"

"God, no." Did Britney deserve to be insulted because of her lousy name?

Especially when she would think the insult came from the loverboy she pined to hear from. She would probably cry if she read his message, and Shawn hated to see anyone cry. But he wouldn't *see* her, would he? He smiled. The joys of technology. With the stress of face-to-face contact removed, he could be anyone he wanted. In fact, he had gone into computers so he wouldn't have to deal with people. Hadn't he been wrong about that. But this set-up was too cruel to be true. Too cruel to pass up? It was more evil than anything he would do in real life. If he told Jenny about it, she wouldn't believe him. He blew air into his upper lip and released it. "Have you ever done something just to be mean?"

"Everyone has," she said. "It keeps us from picking up that machine gun." She narrowed her eyes like a cat. "What are you up to?"

He motioned her around to his side of the computer. "Some guy left his e-mail account active. I'm going to send his girlfriend this."

Jenny read the message and giggled. Shawn hit the BACK button and let her read the e-mail from Britney. She cut him a questioning look. "You're not."

"Should I?"

"Of course not," she said. "But are you?"

Shawn shrugged. "What if he figures out what happened? I could lose my job."

The threat of retribution had always kept him from firing back. How would the patron



respond? What if they yelled at him? What if they told his bosses? What if they hit him? Worst of all, what if God kept track of every sinful thing he did on some holy legal pad, just waiting to run down the entire list on Judgment Day?

"How will he know you did it?" Jenny asked. "He'll think some hacker got into his account." She turned and leaned against the desk. Shawn tried not to be too obvious about checking out her legs, descending, as they were, well below her dress—her shapely legs, and surprisingly long for a woman so short. But what was he thinking? Jenny was too cute and intelligent for him. He was boring, and pudgy. But you never know. If he dropped fifteen pounds, he wouldn't look so much like a beer barrel, and he could learn to be exciting. Maybe he could find a CD ROM tutorial. He caught himself staring at her legs and looked quickly to see if she had noticed. She smiled like she caught him with his hand in the cookie jar. "But what did this Chris do to you?"

"He did the wrong thing in the wrong place at the wrong time," Shawn said, rubbing his forearm. "I guess I need to vent."

"Are you doing this to get back at Michelle?" she asked. "Vicariously, I mean. You've handled the break up so well."

Shawn thought about that. He stretched his arms and cracked his knuckles. "Not just her. It's a general getting-back-at."

"You put up with enough crap." She stood and hitched her head to the side. "It's your call."

Shawn leaned forward and rolled the mouse. Britney's message came back on-screen. He wondered what she looked like. Surfer Dude had appeared to be in his late teens, so Shawn guessed she was about the same age. She might look like Michelle, same

black hair bobbed at the shoulders, same expression like a kitten stuck in a tree. Or he could imagine she looked like Ms. Beach. Quite a few women spent too much time in tanning booths. He could make her look like anyone he chose. And Surfer Dude? Shawn could let him stand in for any of his high school classmates. He could be Craig Felts, who went to Duke and became a public relations rep for the Charlotte Hornets, or Jeff Mobley, who raked in dough as a broker for Merrill Lynch.

Jenny yawned and stretched, extending a fine hand between Shawn and the computer screen. He followed her arm into the sleeve of her flower print dress and noticed how gracefully her collarbone flowed into her neck. She folded her arms and smiled. Shawn had to smile back. Maybe he had been too mixed up with Michelle to notice Jenny before. But he wasn't mixed up now, was he? "You want to get some appetizers at O'Charley's?" he said. "They're half-priced until closing."

"If we split them, they'll only be quarter-priced."

"Draft beer for a dollar, too."

"Sounds like fun."

He clicked to his reply and read,

*You Silly Bitch,  
I'm glad you're dead b c I never liked you anyway. I just wanted to get laid. Your mom  
looks like a bulldog's butt, especially when she's naked. And don't call me Chris.  
Blow Me,  
Christopher*

He rolled the cursor over SEND and leaned back in his chair. "This really wouldn't be right."

Jenny glanced at her wrist watch, leaned over Shawn, and clicked. "Goodbye Michelle," she said. The message disappeared and was replaced by a sent-message

confirmation notice. "We have a date. Besides, you can't be nice your whole life."

He stared gape-mouthed at her. She laughed and headed for the exit. He closed the browser and shut down the computer while she waited outside the door. Then he laughed too, quickly scanned the empty library to make sure no one had seen what he did, and followed her out.

## The Only Good Cracker is a Ritz

The doorbell jingled, and Polly screeched, "Ritz." Looking back on it, Early would chalk that up to coincidence. At the time, he thought she had called the man entering the store a cracker—an awfully quick judgment, even for Polly. With his mud-covered clodhoppers, his corduroy jacket, and his baseball cap riding back on his head, the guy looked like an old redneck, but Early didn't like Polly insulting his customers. If he knew anyone, he knew Montgomery County hillbillies. Hell, he was one. And he didn't want to explain to one this rough looking why the store's macaw called him a hick. "Stuff a sock in it," he whispered to her while adjusting his sailor's hat. "Can I help you, sir?"

Without turning around, Mr. Ritz lurched down the first aisle. "Whiskey. Cheap whiskey."

From the slow, thick way the words fell out of his mouth, Early could tell this country boy drank for a living. He glanced at the wall clock over the wine cooler: nine-thirty in the morning. Beside the clock, the store's lone security camera, trained on the counter, blinked a red eye. In all likelihood, Mr. Ritz had been awake long enough to start hurting for liquor. During his drinking years, Early had gone through that often enough. He felt a pang of sympathy and thanked his higher power he'd been sober long enough to stop counting the days. "Straight ahead," he said. "Against the back wall. We have bourbon, Irish, sour mash, anything you want."

"Sour mash is too sweet. Like mine raw."

While Early registered the way he said "sar mash," Mr. Ritz turned around. When he saw the nose, Early realized this was the one College Street Package Store had called about: the latest drunk trying to pass a bad check. "We have anything you want," he



repeated

He went back to stocking the pints and half-pints, arranged on the shelves behind the counter from left to right in descending order of quality. Early worked on the vodkas: Stoli to the left, followed by Absolut, Smirnov, Popov, and finally Country Club. He shoved two pints of Smirnov in their proper slots. He hated handling this kind of drunk, and in his two years at Captain Kid's Wine and Liquors, he had dealt with at least one a month. They hopped from liquor store to liquor store in the hope one would take a check. Of course, the first clerk ran the check, learned it was bad, and warned the other stores. But as sure as thunder followed lightning, the drunks tried everyone.

In her cage, Polly scratched beneath a blue and gold wing. Early straightened the half-pints of Popov. Mr. Ritz stood before the Jim Beam display, apparently comparing prices. Early needed more vodka from the stockroom, but he couldn't leave the guy to snatch a bottle and run out. He took the dust rag from the counter and pretended to wipe the shelves.

He wanted to tell himself this might not be the one, but the nose eliminated any doubt. Karen, the daytime clerk at College Street, had told him about it: big, round, and red, like a clown's. Even from across the store, he could see that nose, a drinker's nose. After handling too much alcohol, the blood vessels had burst. Fortunately, Early had quit before that happened to him. In fact, he quit before he caused any major physical problems: no permanently bloodshot eyes, no corroded liver, no pickled brain. He even managed to get through four months in jail without major damage. In all, he considered himself lucky.

But Mr. Ritz didn't appear to be so lucky, the poor bastard. He obviously still sucked on the bottle. For Early, that stay in the Montgomery County workhouse had done the trick. He'd gone in on his third DUI in two years, thirty years old and living in his car, with half a pack of Winstons and \$11.18 to his name. Talk about hitting bottom. He'd come out sober, which was enough to get started on, and landed the job at Captain Kid's two months later. What else could he do with a high school diploma and six months sobriety?

"How much for a fifth?" Mr. Ritz asked.

"Eleven-ninety-nine plus tax."

He yanked one off the display, and Early grimaced. If he wanted to pass a bad check, why do it for no more than a fifth? "The half gallon's a better deal."

Mr. Ritz paused, stared at the bottle, then at his feet. "I'm trying to cut back."

Polly cackled.

"Suit yourself," Early said.

After glancing at the fifth again, Mr. Ritz put it back, grabbed a half gallon, and headed toward the counter.

Early hated these confrontations; they made him feel like a jerk. This guy needed some whiskey in a bad way, but Early would be out on his ass in a heartbeat if Skip, the owner of Captain Kid's, found out he'd taken a check from a drunk he'd been warned about. And he needed this job. He wished he'd gone to the stockroom. To hell with a stolen bottle. Skip never would've known, unless he checked the security tape, which he rarely did.

"Ya'll take checks?" Mr. Ritz set the Jim Beam on the counter.

Early noticed how his hand shook. "I'll have to see it."

He reached in his back pocket and produced a check, a single check, folded over and ragged, one edge covered with dirt. Early took it and found the name Karen had given him: *Carson G. Logan*. "I need your driver's license."

"Number's on the check."

"I need to see it," Early said, "to verify this is you."

"Left it at home."

Early closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You're driving?"

Carson nodded toward the door. "Truck's beside the building."

"But you don't have your license?"

"Naw."

"Look, I'll cut to the chase," Early said and tossed the check on the counter.

"College Street called me. You tried to pass them a bad check about an hour ago."

"Weren't me," Carson said. "Somebody stole my checks."

"The cashier described you, man." Early took the bottle by the neck.

Carson watched it slide away. When it stopped, his eyes moved up Early's arm to his face. "Where'd you get that nose?"

Early frowned. "According to them, this account's no good."

"Where'd you get that nose?"

"From my mom and dad. What's that got to do with anything?"

"Don't look like no nose at all," Carson said. "Too little."

"I don't need this." Early twisted his head, causing his hat to fall over his eyes. He pushed it back roughly. "If you have cash, I'll sell you the bottle. If you don't, you'll have to leave."

"Ain't got no color either."

"Don't make me call the cops."

Slowly, Carson took the check from the counter, re-folded it, and replaced it in his back pocket. "Guess I have to take my business elsewhere."

"Don't bother," Early said. "College Street called everybody in town."

Carson, who had stepped a few paces away, stopped in his tracks and lowered his head. "All the liquor stores?"

"All four. Not one will take that check." Early rubbed his neck. "Look, if you can come up with some cash, we'll work something out."

"Can't get no cash."

Early sighed and sat back on his stool. "Sorry, man, then I can't help you."

"Thanks for nothing," Carson said and left.

Early took another deep breath and reminded himself he shouldn't expect his job to be easy. He grabbed the phone on the counter and dialed the number for Mackie, his AA sponsor.

Mackie's secretary answered on the third ring. "Carmichael and Mackenzie." She put Early through.

"I don't believe these drunks," he said.

Mackie laughed. "What's up?"



"Another one with a bad check. Pathetic bastards."

"We all were at some point," Mackie said. "You're not getting high and mighty, are you?"

Early laughed. "You know me. These losers wear me out." His hat fell over his forehead again, and he pushed it back.

"That's why I got you the job," Mackie said. "Don't they remind you why you're sober now?"

"You can say that again."

The doorbell jingled. Polly clenched a bar in her beak and rattled her cage.

"Got to go," Early said and hung up.

When he looked around, Carson was slowly re-entering the store, the cool November air trailing him through the entrance. Early pushed the phone away and, without speaking, took his position behind the register.

"Got that bottle?"

Early dragged the whiskey closer to him. "Find some money in your truck?"

"Got the next best thing," Carson said and pulled a black pistol from beneath his work shirt. It weighed down his arm, and he let it lie against his thigh, his finger on the trigger. Not knowing much about guns, Early guessed it was a .45.

Oddly enough, he felt nervous and annoyed, but not alarmed. Having been held up twice before, he knew the routine. Robbers wanted money, not murder raps, so they didn't want to shoot anyone. He stole a glance at the security camera, thinking of Skip and dreading another of his sermons about Clarskville white trash. "The only good cracker is a Ritz," he'd say, which was where Polly picked up her habit. He claimed

Captain Kid's catered to a clientele disinclined to rob liquor stores. Go figure.

"I want that damn bottle," Carson said.

Early took another look at the gun, just to assure himself it was real. It was, and it shook in Carson's hand. Not a slight shake or a quiver of nervousness. Jonesing for a drink bad, Carson shook steadily. Early wagged his head. Alcohol withdrawals were a bitch. He ran his thumb along the bottle's cap, considering his options for the silent alarm: he could press the button beneath the second shelf behind him or he could press NO SALE and then CASH on the register. He could get away with either. Probably. "You don't want to do this."

"Don't tell me what I don't want to do."

"You're in no shape to get away."

"Be all right after a drink."

Polly hopped along her perch. Slowly, Early lifted the half gallon. "I'm getting a sack. Don't get antsy with that thing." As he reached under the counter, he watched the gun. It hung limply, shaking more than before. Carson didn't have the strength to raise it, and thinking of the register's silent alarm, Early said, "I suppose you want my cash, too."

Carson looked from the bottle to Early's face. In his bleary eyes, Early saw nothing: no focus, no intent, no consideration. "Naw," he said. "Just give me the whiskey."

"You think only stealing one bottle will keep you out of prison?"

"Give it to me."

Early pushed his hat back and frowned. "You're wrong, man. Armed robbery is armed robbery. You're going upstate."

"You're going underground if you don't give me it."

"You couldn't shoot the broad side of your momma's ass."

"Sure about that?"

Reasonably sure, but not foolish enough to push it. Not simply for his own sake.

No, Early felt sorry for Carson, truly sorry. Sorry enough to forgo the alarm. Carson didn't care about money. He didn't care about anything except his next shot of whiskey.

On many a past morning, Early would've put a gun to his grandma's head for a drink. But he had left those days behind. "Let me do something for you," he said. "Let me call a friend of mine in AA. He'll get you some help."

"AA?" Carson said. "The fucking drunk's group."

"Yeah, the drunk's group. He'll get you to a treatment center. They'll help you."

"Help with what?"

"They'll help you get sober."

Beneath his greasy bangs, Carson furrowed his brow. "Don't want to be sober. I want that damn bottle."

"Enough to go to prison for it?"

"Don't make no difference no more. Not to me."

Early shook his head. "You don't want to go to prison, man. You know what happens to guys in prison."

"You been?"

"I've been to jail. Have you?"

"Just overnight."

"Then you don't know what it's like," Early said. "You see the same brick walls, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. You pace from one end of your cell to the other. You only see your family once a week."

"Family don't talk to me."

"You living in your truck?"

"Want to make something of it?"

"Let me call my friend."

Carson lowered his head. "You're in AA?"

"What about it?" Early asked.

"Good place for a drunk to work." He twisted his wrinkled face and nodded toward the displays behind him. "Plenty of liquor."

"What I see keeps me sober."

"You're like me."

Early smiled feebly and shrugged. "I'm just like you."

"Then give me that bottle."

"That won't help. Not in the long run."

Carson raised his free hand, shivering like a leaf in the wind. "Look at me."

"I've been there, man," Early said. "That's why I can't give you this."

"Then I'll take it." Weakly, he tried to lift his gun. His shaking worsened. He swayed forward and to the side and barely managed to catch himself with his free hand. The gun banged against the counter. Early lowered his head, wishing Carson would go away. But they don't just go away. Early knew that. They don't go away, and he couldn't get away from them any more than he could get away from himself.



He set the whiskey down. Polly jumped off her perch and, with her claws, caught herself against the cage. Carson couldn't make it. Early knew that, too. He didn't have the wherewithal or the blind, dumb luck or whatever it took to get sober. Early couldn't give it to him. Nobody could. Hell, keeping himself clean took all his time and energy. Besides, he wouldn't have straightened up without going to jail. To think, getting locked up had actually set him free.

He stood up straight. "How old's your check?"

Carson shrugged. "Two, three years. Found it in my glove box." He sobbed. "I ain't always been this way. Had a job. Had—"

"Been there, done that," Early said. If he gave up the bottle and claimed robbery, Carson faced hard time in prison. The security videotape would be more than enough evidence against him. Early couldn't send anyone to prison, no matter how much he needed to be locked away. But if Carson passed a check on a closed account, the court might send him to the county workhouse, provided he couldn't pay the check, the store's \$25 returned check fee, and court costs. "You can't get any money?"

"Naw," Carson said. "Can't work."

"No one you can borrow from?"

"Nobody talks to me no more."

The bottle cost \$24 with tax. The returned check fee would take the total to \$49. If Early threw in \$51 cash, Carson could hang it up: no way could he pay \$100 plus court costs. And the cash? What the hell, maybe he'd buy something to eat. At least Early could tell himself that. "Write a check for \$75. I'll sell you the bottle and give you fifty bucks."

Carson held out his trembling hand. "Can't write."

"Give me the check."

He pulled out the check and dropped it on the floor. As he bent down, he swayed forward and almost lost his balance. He slumped against the counter and looked toward Early, who came around and picked up the check. He reached across Carson and placed his hand on the gun. "Give me this before you hurt yourself."

Carson released it.

"You realize my boss will press charges when this bounces," Early said, resuming his place behind the register. He put the gun beneath the counter. At least Carson wouldn't have it to pawn. "He hates people like us."

"Hurry up with that whiskey."

Early pointed to the information printed on the check. "This your correct name and license number?"

"That's them. Why?"

Polly jumped back to her perch.

"I want to make sure the police can find you," Early said. "You have an address?"

"My brother's is on the check."

"You told me your family doesn't speak to you."

"He'll know how to find me." He sobbed again. "I lived with him back then. Come home from working on the pipeline in Alaska." He shook his head. "Never should've come back to this goddamn town."

"This town didn't do anything to you." Early took a pen from the holder beside the register, wrote in the information, and passed the check across the counter. "Sign it."

"Told you, I can't write."

"Don't give me that. It has to have your signature."

"Give me a drink. That'll help."

Early cracked open the bottle and passed it across the counter. Trying to pick it up, Carson swayed forward again and could barely raise it half an inch. Again, he looked to Early, who came out, turned him around, leaned him against the counter, and poured a long shot of straight whiskey down his throat. Carson gulped it down and coughed. Early waited for the coughing to subside and poured another.

Thinking he better get enough of the place while he could, Early looked over the store as Carson swallowed his second shot—over the neatly stacked rows of whiskeys, rums, vodkas and gins, ports and wines; over the neon-bright signs for Jack Daniel's, Bacardi, Seagram's, and Kendall-Jackson, all promising drinkers a good time; over the banner covering the length of the back wall: *CAPTAIN KID'S - THE PLACE TO GO WHEN SPIRITS ARE LOW*. Carson's check would come back in two or three days. When it did, Early would lose his job. Skip didn't allow checks written over the amount of purchase. More than that, after Skip talked to College Street, he would think Early was too damn gullible or mischievous to work a register. Even Early's best lie couldn't save him.

Carson took a deep breath and opened his mouth like a baby bird waiting to be fed. Early poured another drink. Polly, rocking on her perch, shrieked. Early took off his stupid hat and stared at the silly gold braid around the bill. He laugh quietly and tossed the hat on the counter. Why lie? Why bother? Skip would think he took the check as part of some cracker pact or something equally crazy. Well, let him. Early didn't care.

He didn't need this anymore, any of it. "That's enough," he said. He capped the bottle, turned Carson around, and put the pen in his hand. "Sign it."

As Early walked around the counter, Carson scribbled on the check. When he finished, Early took it and examined the handwriting. "You tell them this is yours." It vaguely resembled a signature. Close enough for a judge. He swiped the bottle through the scanner, punched up the transaction, took \$51 from the drawer, and slid the check, the first one he had taken for the day, into its proper slot in the register. He bagged the whiskey and dropped the money and receipt in the sack. "Congratulations, Carson, you just broke the law."

"Much obliged," he muttered.

"Hope you mean that some day. Can you drive?"

"In a minute."

"Then leave."

And Carson did.

After he left, Early took the gun from beneath the counter, removed the clip, and popped the shells, one at a time, into the wastebasket. He tossed the empty clip in with them. He took some paper towels from beneath the counter, wiped the gun clean, wrapped it in the towels, and threw it away too.

He went to the office. The feed from the security camera played on the small television screen. It showed nothing, the store being empty. Early hit REWIND and watched Carson's gun leap from the wastebasket back into his hand, followed by the clip, which sucked its bullets back inside itself. In reverse, Carson re-entered the store, and their entire scene replayed for Early, in black and white, without sound, like some cheap



silent comedy. Carson's thinness struck Early, opposed to the beginning of his own middle-age spread pushing against his striped Captain Kid's shirt. He'd put on some weight since he quit drinking. Not much, but enough to notice.

After Carson backed out of the store for the first time, Early stopped the rewind and hit RECORD. There would be no reason for Skip to watch the tape, but Early felt more secure knowing whatever else might happen during the day would replace Carson's visit. Probably nothing. Being a Tuesday, the store wouldn't have much business. Fine by him. He felt more comfortable knowing the tape would show a lot of nothing.

Too bad his brain didn't have a rewind button. Then he could record over the memory of Carson and several other memories in the process: liquor stores and whiskey bottles, the shakes and the DTs. He could replace it all with a bunch of nothing. Then again, those memories were good for him. As Mackie said, they made powerful reminders of why he wanted to stay sober.

He went back to the counter and threw his sailor's hat in the garbage. He tied off the bag and decided that before anyone else came in, he better shove it beneath the other trash in the dumpster where no one would find it. But first, he should call Mackie. That's what he should do. He set the wastebasket on the counter and grabbed the phone.

Mackie's secretary answered on the third ring. "Carmichael and Mackenzie." She put Early through.

"I'll be job hunting soon," he said.

"Jumping the pirate ship?"

"I'm going to be fired."

"What happened?" Mackie asked.

"Too complicated to tell over the phone."

"Sure Skip will fire you?"

"Positive."

"Don't be negative. Maybe you can work it out."

"If he doesn't, I'll quit," Early said. "I don't need this anymore."

"Need a drink?"

"Yeah," Early said. "Let's have coffee later."

"Four-thirty at Waffle House?" Mackie asked.

"Sounds good."

"Can you cope until then?"

Early stared out the window. In the parking lot, a white and black Ford Ranger with a missing hubcap pulled onto Wilma Rudolph Boulevard. He couldn't see the driver.

"I feel all right, pretty good."

"Okay," Mackie said. "See you at four-thirty."

Early hung up and took the wastebasket from the counter. Yeah, he felt good. Why not? How would feeling different change anything? As he walked past, Polly flapped her wings. She had been oddly quiet throughout his encounter. Early wondered why, but he knew she wasn't telling. "Well, girl," he said. "Looks like we'll be parting ways soon."

She glared at him, cocked her head to the side, and screeched, "Ritz."

## Only You Will Ever Know

The Army gave me Capt. Morales, my judge advocate, because I didn't want no civilian lawyer. She stood beside me at the defendant's table when Col. Gilbert slow-marched into the courtroom for my sentencing hearing. Even though we'd spent untold hours together, I'd never noticed before how short the captain stood. She only came halfway up my biceps, but I'm a big man. While the colonel settled in behind the judge's bench, I peered over the captain's head and watched the panel members, four officers and two enlisted men, standing at attention in their box. They made a colorful sight. Two whites, an American Indian, a Hawaiian, an Oriental woman, and a black woman. All in dress uniforms with ribbons and badges covering their chests. I felt squared-away in my Class A greens—I never bought no dress blues—but I didn't have as much chest decoration as a one of them. We took our seats after the judge.

In a booming voice like the other barrel-chested black men I knew, Col. Gilbert started his opening speech. My head was swimming from lack of sleep and the captain's grilling earlier that morning, so I let my eyes wander out the window. Three newspaper reporters with cameras swinging from their necks ran around the building, heading for the entrance. The day sure was bright. Another July scorcher on the Kentucky-Tennessee border. Before long, that courtroom would be burning up. Somewhere outside that window, the boys of my unit—Bravo Company, 507<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division—was ironing their uniforms and dicking around. Nothing else to do at Ft. Campbell. As soldiers, we was as useful as my sentencing hearing.

I wagged my head. The Army could concoct more ways to waste time and money. Like my court-martial. Capt. Morales felt we'd lost. I would've pled guilty, but the Army wouldn't allow that for a capital crime. We hadn't done nothing except go over my confession and let the prosecutor show his evidence—the ballistics reports, the bloodstains on my living room carpet, my fingerprints on the murder weapon. The panel members deliberated for all of forty-five minutes before handing down the guilty verdict everybody knew they would in the first place. The guilty verdict I'd wanted.

Now those panel members could give me a death sentence, just like my major general wanted. Just like I wanted. What I didn't want was no part of their world. Not the Army, not nothing. What good was a world run by people like Ambrose? Capt. Morales wanted to tell the truth as she saw it. I knew that was a waste of breath. Her truth didn't matter a bit. She'd fought to get me to tell the whole story, and now she wanted to do her duty and inform the court. As for me, PawPaw had taught me to keep my big mouth shut and let the Good Lord work out trouble. I didn't believe in PawPaw's Good Lord no more. Ambrose had showed me that PawPaw's ideas don't work in the real world. But I kept my big mouth shut because what the captain wanted to say didn't make no difference, other than to make her feel better, feel like she'd done her job. The panel wasn't going to listen to her. Their minds was made up. Everybody's minds was made up. They knew what they thought happened, and they knew why they thought it happened. Wasn't nothing going to change their minds. The captain had nothing but a bunch of useless words, and people don't listen to your words unless they agree with them before you say them. Besides, words didn't matter to me no more. The last words worth something to me came from Ambrose, and nothing else meant nothing after he said them.



“It’s one of them, or it’s everyone,” he’d said. “Including you. Your choice, Charlie.”

Even though he hadn’t said it loud, his voice echoed through the empty rooms of the old McAllister house. Until that second, I’d been in a wide-awake sleep, refusing to believe what was going on. On the floor in front of me, Darius and Midnight was propped against the wall, back to back, bound with duct tape. In the thin moonlight falling through the window, I saw dried blood on the tape over Midnight’s mouth, on his chin and neck. Dried blood made a brownish-red patch on the black skin below Darius’ ear, covering the back of his thick neck and running beneath his collar. My head spun from all the liquor and cocaine, and a black-out crept through my brain. Something heavy weighed down my right side, dragging me that way—my .357. A big sidearm, but it looked tiny in my hand. Seeing my weapon made everything real. Confused but real. My blurred head didn’t want to accept it. If you don’t accept something, it can’t be real. “Let’s take these boys back to base,” I said. “If this is ya’ll’s idea of a joke, it ain’t funny.”

“Funny?” Ambrose said behind me. “Have you heard us laughing?” I wanted to turn around, but I couldn’t. He had a pistol. If I turned, he might open fire. He pressed the cold barrel against my neck. Judging by the size, it was my .38. The hammer clicked when he cocked it. “You want to laugh now, Charlie?”

“T.K.,” I said. “What’s going on?” In the corner of my eye, I caught the gleam from T.K.’s pistol barrel. My words ran out of my mouth as fast as they could. “This is out of hand.”

"It's been out of hand," T.K. said from the darkness to my left and sniffed, like always when he did coke. "That's why you're about to kill your first nigger."

Darius' head twitched. I wished I could think clear. If I'd known how things would go down, I would've laid off the partying. But I never knew what was going on until too late. "Come on, T.K., knock it off. This is getting to me."

"We've stood too much, Machinehead. I'm not putting up with them anymore."

"This is Darius and Midnight," I said. "We're in Bravo Company, man. They're good ones."

"No such thing as a good one. No such thing."

I couldn't believe he said that. We'd been in the same unit for months. Darius was a heavy weapons man, like me. Not that I liked everybody in our company, but I didn't pull stunts like this. Ambrose had changed T.K. into a different soldier from the one who'd come to Ft. Campbell, though. Changed him for the worse.

"They tore down your flag, Charlie," Ambrose said. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

He stood close to keep the pistol pressed against my neck, and I could smell his spicy aftershave mixed with his beer breath. "They're buzzing. They didn't mean nothing."

"Don't you read the papers?" T.K. said. "They want to do away with our flag."

"They shot a boy a few years ago for flying the Stars and Bars on his pickup," Ambrose said. "Not five miles away."

"They're taking over our country, Machinehead. You better wake up."

“These boys ain’t taking over nothing,” I said. “They’re grunts. Like us, T.K.”

Ambrose leaned his mouth close to my ear. “They took over your living room.”

A rotten floorboard squealed under T.K. “They tore down your grandpa’s flag.”

My head throbbed like a machine gun firing behind my eyes. I rubbed the bridge of my nose with my left hand. The .357 hung from my right. “Come on, they’re drunk. They’ll apologize when they sober up.”

“Too late,” T.K. said.

Ambrose pushed his pistol hard against my neck. “Far too late.” He breathed deep. “I’ll repeat myself one more time, Charlie, to make sure you understand. Since you’re squeamish, we’ll let you off easy. Shoot one and we’ll let the other go. If you don’t, we’ll kill both of them. And you.”

This time I listened to every word, and I couldn’t see a crack in his claim. No way out. I didn’t understand why, but I understood one thing—the choice was mine, all mine.

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Around sunup on the morning my sentencing hearing started, four guards drug me from my cell, chained me, and led me to the interview room. Not that I minded. I’d been staring at the ceiling of my cell long enough to have it memorized. Staring and thinking about things far too long. I had that interview room memorized, too. Just like every one I’d seen in the movies, it was small as a cracker box, with a table, four chairs, and a window with blinds along one wall. The guards unchained me and stepped out. Two stood just outside the door on either side. The other two went off to bring sunshine and joy into some other prisoner’s life. I took my usual seat furthest away from the door and got ready for another round of telling Capt. Morales nothing.

Not long after, the door whipped open and the captain marched in with her back as straight as a chair's, wearing her khaki casuals, pressed as stiff as cardboard. She was one squared-away soldier, no doubt about that, with her JAG Corps insignia gleaming on her collar.

"On your feet, Soldier," the guard barked. "Officer in the room."

I stood to attention and saluted.

Capt. Morales saluted back and nodded toward my chair. She sat her briefcase on the table and opened it. "Our chances are bleak, Charlie, unless you're ready to come clean with me. To be blunt, our chances are bleak if you tell me the truth." Even at that time of the morning, the Captain looked fiery and alert, with her chili-pepper red skin and sharp eyes. She had hair as black as most of the Mexicans around Clarksville, only hers was cropped, combed smooth, and peppered with white. She took pains over her appearance. "I got you up to see if you're ready to stop playing games," she went on. "We're going over your case one more time."

"Should've stayed in bed," I said. "I hope we lose."

She frowned, took a pen from her briefcase, and started her usual routine of rapping it across her palm while pacing the length of the table and back. "The major general has asked for the death penalty, but you'll only get one if the panel members come to a unanimous decision on three points." She flicked out an index finger. "First, they must decide that the prosecution demonstrated at least one specified aggravating factor. You were found guilty of multiple murders, you were convicted as the trigger man, your offenses were hate crimes. Those are three such factors, so we've lost that point." Her middle finger joined her index finger. "Next, they must decide that the extenuating or



mitigating circumstances in your case outweigh those aggravating factors.” She stopped and glanced at me. “We haven’t gotten to those mitigating circumstances, have we?”

I stared at the blinds behind her.

She flipped out her bare ring finger. “Finally, each panel member must examine her or his personal conscience. Even after considering the other factors, a panel member can choose a sentence other than death.” She closed her fist. “Sound difficult for an entire panel to agree on those points?”

“I suppose so.”

“Not in your case.” She took some papers from her briefcase and tossed them on the table. “That’s your confession?”

“If you say so.”

“Want to read it again?”

I shook my head.

“You’re aware of what it says?”

“I remember it.”

“Why did you confess, Charlie? Why didn’t you wait for counsel? Were you coerced in any way?”

“I talked of my own free will.”

“Do you have a death wish?”

“Call it a guilty conscience.” I shrugged. “Or maybe I’m just sick of this fucking world.”

“You could have withdrawn it before your court-martial,” she said. “*The Uniform Code of Military Justice* allows that.”

“I stand by every last word.”

She rapped her pen across her palm a few times, stopped, then did it a few more times. “What about the things you didn’t say?” she asked, squinting her black eyes at me. “You left out quite a bit.”

“Don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“Let me give you a profile of one of your friends.” She pulled out the chair across from me and sat. “White kid, twenty-four years old. Rich boy, son of a Tennessee state senator. Scored through the roof on his standardized tests. Everyone thought he should have attended a private school.” She tapped her pen against the table. It sounded like somebody typing. “Instead, he went to the local state university. Seems he had trouble cutting the apron strings. Six years after graduating from high school, this kid still hadn’t finished a degree. Do you see where I’m going with this?”

We had played this game before, but the captain wanted to play it again, whether I wanted to or not. “Ambrose ain’t my friend.”

“Did I mention he’s a grade-A, pompous son of a bitch. Totally self-absorbed. Thinks the world isn’t good enough to spit shine his boots.” She leaned forward and tapped her pen against the side of her head. “Oh yeah, he’s also a professed racist. A philosophy instructor told me he loves Nietzsche. His father, that state senator I mentioned, heads the local chapter of the Sons of the Confederacy.” She raised an eyebrow. “And your buddy befriended a GI who took night classes at the college.”

I yawned and took a deep breath. “That’s illegal?”

“Neither have been seen since they left Rebel Rouser’s Pub with you and the victims.” She rapped her pen on the table again. “If you need some cash, that SOC dad is offering a substantial reward for information.”

“Hope he finds his boy,” I said and squirmed in my chair. Since being locked up, my back had stiffened, making it hard to sit still for long.

“I’m your defense counsel, Charlie,” the captain said. “Shoot straight with me.” She pushed her chair forward and put her lean forearms on the table. “What happened that night?”

I waved at my confession. “You got my story.”

“I’ve read it, and I’m amazed by your conciseness. You summed up everything that happened in the McAllister house in four words.” She leaned back and crossed her arms. “*I pulled the trigger.* That’s your entire account. You claim you knocked out both victims, tied them up by yourself, and took them to the farm. Then what?” She rolled her eyes. “*I pulled the trigger.*”

“All that matters.”

“But not all that happened.”

I stared at the blinds.

She gathered the papers, shuffled them, and tapped the ends even with the palm of her hand. “Did you know the U.S. military currently has eight soldiers on death row? We haven’t executed one since 1961.” She glared at me over the top of the papers. “But you’re about to end that streak.”

“Don’t mean nothing to me.”

“Does how you’ll be remembered mean anything to you?”

I shrugged.

“I have a feeling it does,” she said. “You should have the guards bring you a newspaper.”

“Don’t read the papers. Don’t watch the TV news.”

“That’s best for your peace of mind,” she said. “The media thinks you’re Nathan Bedford Forrest reincarnated.”

“Meaning what?”

“They’re making you out as a grade-A piece of racist white trash.”

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From the first time T.K. brought him over, I disliked Ambrose. He smelled like trouble, like a psycho rich kid who thought he could get away with murder because his pap had money. The more I saw him, the more I disliked him. But T.K. thought highly of him, and PawPaw taught me when you make a friend, you make friends with their friends. Get along as best you can.

Nobody got in trouble on Wednesdays, so I didn’t expect problems when T.K. and Ambrose came over that night. T.K. and me was off the next day, so we planned to hit Clarksville and throw back some brews at Rebel Rouser’s. T.K. invited Ambrose along. Since they’d met in a damn story writing class, T.K. had been hanging around with that bastard. We met at my apartment since T.K. lived on base and Ambrose lived with his folks. I didn’t live in the Taj Mahal, just a living room, kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom in a fixed-up boarding house, but it made a decent enough place to down some beer and shots. When they knocked on the door, I hollered from the couch. They came on in.



Kentucky and Tennessee was duking it out for the SEC lead, and T.K. and Ambrose had showed up right in the middle of the second half. Even though he'd been a basketball fan, T.K. kept yakking with Ambrose about some book named *The Clansman*. As he sat on the couch beside me, Ambrose called the book a piece of true history. He cuffed me on the shoulder as a Kentucky guard hit a three-pointer to pull to 68-63 late in the game.

"Do you read, Charlie?"

"Not when basketball's on."

T.K. sprawled his punching-bag-shaped body across the recliner on my other side and laughed. "He doesn't even read the manuals he's supposed to. That's why we call him Machinehead. He's no rocket scientist, but he can take apart a weapon and put it back together before you can blink."

"Call me dumb again," I said, keeping my eyes on the TV, "I'll take apart your weapon."

Ambrose grinned like he knew something I didn't. "You have a violent streak, Charlie."

"When my game's interrupted."

"That's all you care about, beer and sports?"

"That's a Georgia cracker for you," T.K. said.

I flipped him off. "South Carolina white trash ain't no better." T.K. and me was both southern boys, so we could pick on each other about it.

"You should pay attention to the world around you," Ambrose said. "Things aren't good for people like us."



Out of the corner of my eyes, I glared at him. People like us? Hell, I wasn't nothing like Ambrose Drake, sitting in my living room with his hundred-dollar, pretty-boy's shirt and his blonde hair moussed back. His pap was in the Tennessee legislature, and I figured his mamma grew up in the Junior League. And me? I was a North Georgia cracker that joined the Army to keep from slinging carpet in one of Dalton's factories. People like us, my ass.

"We white boys have it rough," he said. "Tell him, T.K."

Before they got there, I'd set a couple of beers on the coffee table for them. T.K. took one and downed some. "It's true, Machinehead. These blacks are taking everything. All the good jobs, all the money for college." He rubbed the bloody dagger tattooed down his forearm, a purple banner over the handle that said "Live free or die" in black. "Hell, if we so much as say 'boo' to them, they haul us into court for violating their civil rights." T.K. nodded toward the wall behind me. "That, for one."

I didn't think about black people no more than I thought about nobody else. There was good ones and bad ones. But not a one had done nothing bad to me, and PawPaw taught me to leave other people alone. To each his own. As long as I wasn't bothered, I didn't give a damn what happened to the whole lot of them. "Nobody's hurting me," I said and waved my hand around my apartment. "I got all I need." I grabbed my beer and took a big swig.

"People like you disgust me," Ambrose said. I pretended to believe him, though, because I sat my beer on the coffee table, real slow. "Better watch yourself."

"Hold on, Machinehead," T.K. said, raising up in his chair.



“Nietzsche was right,” Ambrose went on. “Any race weak enough to become enslaved deserves it. Look at you. Your country’s being stolen, and all you care about is that.” He jabbed a finger toward the TV.

“I ain’t a slave,” I said. “I’m just trying to watch a goddamn ball game and have a beer.”

“That’s the problem,” T.K. said. “White folks today are fat and lazy.”

“You better watch your mouth, too.”

Ambrose settled back against the couch. “Relax, Charlie. We’re only saying you’re too good for this.”

“I ain’t too good for nothing.”

“You’re too good to let a bunch of niggers take everything away from you.”

I waved a hand and frowned. “What they taking from me?”

T.K. nodded toward the wall behind me. “That, for one.”

A Confederate battle flag, the one everybody called “The Stars and Bars,” hung over my couch between an Army poster of an infantryman in full battle gear running in a crouch across an open field and a poster of Led Zeppelin’s first album cover, the picture of a blimp going up in flames. PawPaw gave me that flag for my thirteenth birthday, and I kept it with me. He claimed it was a real battle flag, flown at Chickamauga, and he bought it at a museum. I knew better than that. PawPaw was a dirt farmer. His life’s savings wouldn’t have bought him no real Rebel flag. I pretended to believe him, though, because I wouldn’t have hurt him for nothing. “Ain’t nobody coming in my living room and taking a damn thing from me.”

“They’re trying to take it down in South Carolina,” T.K. said.

Ambrose pointed at me like his hand was a pistol, his finger the barrel. “They’re afraid of what it stands for, so they want to get rid of it.”

I frowned at him again. For me, that flag stood for PawPaw. He’d loved it, and that’s why he passed it on to me. To him, it meant some things that died when he did. I’d listened to his foggy tales about his grandpa riding with General Forrest in the last year of the war. As a boy, I’d learned about Lookout Mountain, Vicksburg, Chancellorsville, and all the other battles. To me, though, those stories seemed like they were stolen from movies. I’d seen Klan people flying that flag over the years, but that meant nothing to me neither. That flag stood for PawPaw, the man I loved. Whatever it meant to everybody else was their business. “What’s it stand for?” I asked, daring Ambrose to tell what it meant to me.

“White power,” he said.

I curled my lip like I sucked on a lemon. “What the hell does that mean?”

He puffed out his narrow chest and raised up in his seat. “We enslaved the niggers for centuries, Charlie. That’s the way things should have stayed, but our will got weak.

We fought amongst ourselves and let them go. Now they’re trying to enslave us.”

“Coming damn close to succeeding,” T.K. said.

“That flag is the last symbol of the natural order of man, the last vestige of the way things should be. The white man in control, the black man under his boot heel.” He flapped his arms in disgust. “If we let them take it away, we might as well tie bandannas around our heads and start picking cotton.”



I took another drink of beer. "As long as this place is mine, that flag stays on the wall. I don't care what nobody thinks about it."

"That's it," Ambrose said. "Stand strong."

"I ain't standing for nothing. Most white people I know, I wouldn't piss on if they was on fire. That flag reminds me of my PawPaw, and that's all. He's the only kind man I ever met, and I loved him."

"So you'll let them take away your PawPaw's memory?" T.K. said.

"What the hell you talking about?" I nearly screamed. "I'm trying to watch a ball game. Ain't no goddamn niggers beating down my door and taking my property."

"That's what you think," Ambrose said. "That's only what you think."

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"Let me give you another profile," Capt. Morales said and stood up. "A profile of one of your fellow grunts."

So the captain claimed everybody called me white trash now? Big deal. They'd thought it my whole life.

"He's from Walterboro, South Carolina. Ever heard of it?"

"Skip it," I said. "You're talking about T.K."

"I forgot, you don't read the papers," she went on. "In December 1997, a white man in Walterboro shot a fifteen-year-old African-American boy for pulling down a Confederate flag flying on his property." She paced to the end of the table and turned back. "A jury acquitted the shooter. They take the Confederate flag seriously in Walterboro. Private Headden does too, doesn't he?"

"Can't speak for him."

The captain closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. "Headden was just another GI. A twenty-one-year-old with nothing except some nice street clothes, a pickup truck, and some textbooks. His high school teachers said he was a C student who could have pulled down Bs with some effort. Apparently, he had changed because he did well at Austin Peay." She waved her pen in the air. "But here's what interests me. Two assault convictions on his record. The second was a drunken bar fight three months before he joined the Army. The first was domestic." She bunched up her eyebrows and waited a few seconds before going on. "A little over two years ago, he beat up his fiancée because he thought she was screwing a black guy."

I curled my lip and nodded. "Got nothing to do with me."

"Stop stonewalling me, Charlie," she said and turned away. "You weren't alone in this."

I folded my hands on my lap and stared at them. "Wish I was alone now."

"For Christ's sake, tell me what I need to know." She wheeled around, put her fists on her hips, and stared at me, her eyes black and shaped like almonds. She pressed her thin lips shut, making creases at the corners. In a weird way, she looked like my momma then. Just her expression, like she wanted to know something the world wasn't telling her and it pissed her off to no end. Otherwise, she didn't look nothing like Momma, who was blonde and broad-shouldered. If she'd been alive, Momma would've had fifteen or more years on the captain, but she would've looked thirty years older. Anybody could see the captain took better care of herself than Momma ever had. And unlike Momma, the captain seemed to care what I had to say, even though I wasn't saying nothing at all.

The captain looked away, rubbed her forearm, and turned back, her expression as rigid as her collar. "You fit the profile of a hate criminal. Too perfectly, in my judgment." She folded her arms and started pacing again. "You're white, relatively uneducated, stuck in a low-prestige job. You're just the type who's supposed to believe the minorities, foreigners, women, homosexuals, and liberals are out to get him." She shrugged. "But it's my duty not to believe that."

"I pulled the trigger."

"Were you the only person with a weapon that night?"

"I had the murder weapon."

"If left to your own devices, you couldn't have shot those men," she said. "You weren't motivated by your own hatred."

"Nobody pulled that trigger but me."

"What did Drake and Headden do that night, Private? As your defense counsel, I'm demanding you tell me." She leaned across the table, pushing her face closer to mine.

"As an officer in the United States Army, as your superior, I'm ordering you to tell me."

I stared right back in her eyes. "Not a goddamn thing."

She shoved herself off the table, knocking over her chair, and headed for the door.

"Go to hell then, Charlie. Go straight to hell."

I didn't bother to tell her I'd been there since February 23.

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T.K. and Ambrose carried on about PawPaw's flag and what it meant, about blacks and whites, about my place in the world. Tennessee hung on to beat Kentucky by

seven points, so I said we should go on down to the pub, hoping a change of scenery might get their minds on another subject.

“Not before we have a pick-me-up,” Ambrose said. He pulled out his bag of cocaine, divided up two lines apiece, and we done them.

We laughed and cut up in the car on the way down, but I wasn’t settled. Ambrose rattled me, sitting in the back seat thinking highly of himself with his two-hundred-dollar leather jacket and his hiking boots. I watched him in my rearview mirror. He sat straight, his hands across one knee. Sitting that way made him look long and stretched out, like a tight wire. He gave me the impression of a guy too good for the rest of the world.

Except for T.K. He liked T.K.. At least they hung around together. T.K. was a good guy, talkative, full of energy. We’d been tight since he’d landed in Ft. Campbell a year before. He was a lot more intense than me. He walked fast and talked fast. But I didn’t mind. He had big ideas about bettering himself. When we worked out, he threw around the weights like he had to be in the Mr. Universe contest the next week. He’d fly around that gym until the veins was popping out of his neck and forearms and the sweat made the top of his head shine like a brand-new cueball. He kept his hair shaved down to nothing. I didn’t have the energy to keep up with him, so I didn’t try. He took classes at Austin Peay. He wanted to get a degree there, if the Army let him stay in Ft. Campbell long enough. If they had other ideas, he’d get one somewhere else. He wanted to go places, not be a grunt his whole life.

It was a warm night, especially for February, so I rolled down my window. We wound down Ft. Campbell Boulevard, and the air got warmer as we got into Clarksville. A tornado had torn through the town the year before. They’d done a good job of cleaning



up, but some damage was left. We looped around a curve, and there was two buildings. What was left of two buildings. Five jagged walls, two left of one building, three of the other. Poking out of the ground like broken teeth. We went down another hill, past a couple of pawn shops, a blood donor business, and a dirty used car lot advertising a walking man's special—no credit check, low weekly payments. And there was another smashed building. Just a foundation with one wall standing, a window with the glass blown out in the middle. Some black kid with squirrel's-nest hair squatted beside the wall, smoking. I guessed he was smoking a cigarette, but I couldn't tell for sure. His sweatshirt hung from his shoulders like it was made for somebody a lot bigger than him, and he had duct tape wrapped around the toes of his left shoe. He stared at the car as we slowed for the stoplight. Like he knew us, was waiting for us. He stood and stepped toward the street. The light went from yellow to red. I punched the gas and went through. We couldn't get to the pub fast enough for me. As I turned onto Second Street and headed for downtown Clarksville, T K brought up something about school.

"Charlie," Ambrose said, "why don't you join us at the college, take some classes?"

"I'm doing fine in the Army."

"You could study local history. Did you know there's a house on Dover Highway that Gen. Forrest used as a hideout during the war?"

"Machinehead couldn't study weapons in college," T K said. "He's a gun nut. Has quite a collection at his apartment."

"Not really," I said, shaking my head. "Just a Beretta 92F and a 96, a Desert Eagle .357 Magnum, a Glock 30, and a Smith and Wesson .38 Special." Thinking Ambrose wouldn't know the names, I was showing off.

"Beretta makes a fine handgun," he said.

I checked him in the rearview mirror.

He smiled like he'd won the lottery. "Let me guess, you keep them loaded under your mattress."

What a stupid guess. "In the top shelf of my closet. Unloaded, but I got ammo."

"Within easy reach, in case you need it."

"What would I need it for?"

"Say some niggers break in your place."

"Stow that shit," I said and swung onto Franklin Street, thankful we was almost to the pub. I wanted out of that car. "I don't have nothing nobody would want to steal."

"Crackheads will steal anything," T.K. said.

Ambrose grunted. "They could pawn your guns for a pretty penny."

"I just like weapons," I said. "I like working on them. I like shooting them. I don't keep them to use on people."

"Niggers aren't people," Ambrose said, laughing like a jackass. "Not like us."

I smacked the steering wheel. "Can it."

With his fist, T.K. nudged my shoulder. "Relax, he's just fucking with your head."

"Yeah," Ambrose said cold, "I'm playing around." He leaned against the front passenger seat. "T.K.'s making quite a splash at school, especially in creative writing."

“Really?” I said.

“He’s pretty good. Has a way with words, tells a good story.”

“I’m southern,” T.K. said. “We can all tell a story. They’re wired into our brains.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Ambrose said. “Now you need to write the truth, what you really think and feel.”

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Capt. Morales wouldn’t quit. She was bound and determined to ask the same questions over and over as long as I kept telling her nothing. That room, small enough to begin with, was getting smaller and smaller to me. I wished she’d open the door and let some air in. Even better, I wished she’d open the door and step on out. Instead of leaving, she leaned her hand against the wall for a while, then wheeled and started in again. “When during the fight did Drake and Headden leave?”

“Don’t know.”

“You didn’t hear a door?”

“I had my hands full. I didn’t have time to listen for no door.”

“Where did they go?”

I shook my head. She was fishing and doing a lame job of it. Like I was really going to make a stupid mistake like saying I knew where they went. She must’ve thought I was a real idiot. She started pacing off the length of the table again. The night of the shootings, I’d lost all the strength in my legs, and it hadn’t come back. But the captain had strong enough legs to keep pacing forever. “Ask them,” I said, smiling like one world-class smart ass.

If she saw the humor in that, she didn't let on. She marched along the table another time without speaking, then said, "I want to know how two men, one AWOL from the United States Army and the other the son of a state senator, dropped off the face of the earth."

"They had fake IDs."

"Where did they get them?"

"Probably off the Internet," I said. "Ambrose got them. T.K. said they had driver's licenses, social security cards, passports, credit histories, the whole nine yards."

"Why?"

"Ambrose convinced T.K. to leave the Army, made him believe nobody cared about white men and if he stayed in, he was worse than a slave."

"Private Headden told you this?"

"At the pub, before Darius and Midnight got there. Ambrose was shooting pool, and T.K. told me I should pay him to hook me up with a fake ID, too. Then I could leave the Army and travel with them." I was lying about exactly what T.K. told me, when he told me, and what I said. Just yanking her chain. There was some truth in my story, but she couldn't get nowhere with it. My back really ached, so I squirmed again. "I told him I didn't want out, that I intended to stay in the Army as long as they'd keep me. They paid me good. I had a good place to live, a good car. Why mess it up?"

"And he said what?"

"That I better wake up before it was too late."

She paced around the table and stopped behind me. Since that night, I couldn't stand to have nobody behind me. It spooked me, made me nervous. "Private, did Drake



and Headden go to the McAllister farm that night?”

I squirmed. “I went.”

She leaned over my shoulder. I could feel her breath hot on my neck. I didn’t turn around. “Some people believe you killed them too, Charlie. In fact, Drake’s father told *Time* he thinks so.”

“Where are their bodies then?” I said quick.

“You disposed of them.”

“Why didn’t I get rid of the other two?”

“You intended to. The deputies found you taking a rest after the first two.”

“Where’d I bury them?”

“You tell me, Charlie. You tell me.” She walked out from behind me, twirling her pen between her fingers, and sat on the corner of the table.

I squeezed the back of my neck, trying to loosen the muscles. It didn’t work. I figured I should say something, just to keep the story going. “I think they went west. T.K. said he’d like to see the Rocky Mountains.”

“How? We found their vehicles.”

“They took a plane.”

She screeched like a game-show buzzer. “No airport records of either.”

“I told you, they had fake IDs.”

“Do you know their assumed names?”

“Yeah, Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee.”

She grunted in disgust. "You don't know much, do you?" She threw her pen at her briefcase. It glanced off the side and fell to the floor. "Did Headden ask the victims to meet you that night?"

Without thinking, I started to say something smart aleck, but I caught myself. "What?"

"Did Headden ask the victims to meet you at the pub? You know, were they sitting around base that day when Headden mentions he's going out drinking that night and tells them to come along?"

"Don't know."

"Guys from your unit drink together all the time, don't they? He could have asked them. No big deal."

"None at all," I said. "But what're you getting at?"

"You stupid hick." She pushed herself off the table, picked up her pen, and started pacing again. "There's no evidence you killed Drake and Headden. They didn't run when the fight broke out at your apartment either. They set you up." I opened my mouth, but she cut me off with a hard look. "Look at yourself, Charlie. You're a nightmare for Ft. Campbell," she went on. "You're a nightmare for the Pentagon. You've been convicted of the murder of two soldiers from your own unit, two African-Americans."

I didn't understand why she told me that, but I wished she'd stop. I knew it all, had been thinking about it over and over since that night.

"You committed your crimes not seven months after the Winchell murder. You committed them while the Army's Inspector General conducts an investigation into discipline and leadership on base." She shook her head slowly. "Within a year, the major

general has one dead homosexual soldier and two dead African-Americans on his hands. All three were murdered by comrades, and both murderers were wasted when they did it. To the world, Ft. Campbell looks like it's full of violent, bigoted drunks and drug addicts."

"It's a grunt base," I said. "Things get out of hand sometimes."

"The major general needs to assert control." She folded her arms and tapped her foot a few times. "The first step in that is executing you."

"I don't disagree with him. Guys like me get into trouble."

She took a deep breath and sat on the edge of the table. "This is pure conjecture, nothing for which I have support. If you'd like, I can quote *Rules for Courts-Martial, Part II, Chapter I, Rule 104* on illegal command influence." She rubbed her palms on her thighs. I guess they were sweaty. "I'm not claiming the major general has done anything improper, but I'm sure certain conversations have taken place. And I'm not saying the panel members wouldn't come to the same conclusions if left alone. They're soldiers, and they care about the Army. Honestly, I believe they'd condemn you without any pressure from above. We have to stop things like what you did."

I frowned and rubbed my forehead. "You're saying the Army set me up?"

She stood again and paced around the other side of the table. "No, I'm saying Drake and Headden set you up. I'm saying they were prescient enough to determine how this would go down. You're a perfect fit for their purposes."

I didn't want to believe her, couldn't believe her. During my court-martial, she'd thrown out this idea, and I'd tried to ignore her. The prosecutor objected, called it smoke and mirrors, a ploy to divert the panel's attention from the matters at hand. He called me another James Earl Ray and asked if I wanted to claim T.K. and Ambrose worked for the

CIA. The judge agreed and reminded the captain nobody but me faced a murder charge. I couldn't believe her, then or now. Missing something that obvious would've made me pretty damn blind, or pretty damn stupid. One or the other. They'd been mad at what Midnight had done. That's why they done what they done. They hadn't planned it before. If T.K. had set me up, what would that mean he'd thought about me? Pretty damn stupid. "What purposes?"

She rubbed her palms again and took a slow breath. "Your friends want you executed so every damn Son of the Confederacy can claim you died because you defended your private property against black aggression."

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Before Darius and Midnight showed up at the pub, we'd done gone through four beers apiece, two rounds of tequila shots, and one of Goldschläger. We'd snuck off to the bathroom for more coke, too. I'm bigger than most men, and I could feel it all, so I knew the other guys could, especially Ambrose. Even being short and stocky, T.K. could take as much abuse as any grunt.

T.K. and me finished a game of darts with a couple of college girls and came back to our booth, where Ambrose was kicked back with a beer and a silly grin. We could always count on the pub being full of college girls. Most of them had more sense than to go home with a GI, but they'd let you buy them beer and a few games of darts or pool. A group of hippies with greasy hair and earrings in their eyebrows shot pool on one table. A bunch of guys in loafers and slacks shot on the other. The pub was hopping for a Wednesday night—a good mix of people we could relate to, folks in their twenties and thirties who liked to party. I was taking my seat when Midnight topped the stairs.



standing a half-head taller than anybody else in the bar. He was as tall as me, but not as broad. Beside him, Darius had his head on a swivel. They was the only black people in the place, but nobody seemed bothered much. When T.K. saw them, he barked out their names. They found our booth and came over.

“What’re ya’ll doing out on a weeknight?” I asked.

“Same thing as you, Machinehead,” Darius said and slid onto the bench beside me. “You’re earlier than you said, Headden.”

T.K. nodded. “I’m lit up. That’s what I am.”

“Then you’re ahead of us,” Midnight said. “But we catch up fast.” He slid an empty chair from a nearby table to the end of our booth and went to the bar.

“Who’s your running mate?” Darius asked, nodding toward Ambrose.

“Ambrose, Darius,” T.K. said, pointing from one to the other. “Darius, Ambrose.”

“Good to meet you.” Darius put out his hand.

Ambrose eyed his hand, then his face. I felt my cheeks get hot, thinking he would embarrass us by not shaking hands. If he did, I hoped Darius would fling him out the second-story window. Darius was even-tempered, but he was a muscular son of a buck, trained in hand-to-hand combat. Without breaking a sweat, he could’ve torn that skinny asshole in half. But Ambrose broke into a wide smile, grabbed Darius’ hand, and shook it for all he was worth. “Pleasure’s mine,” he said. “How do you know these two?”

“I have to do their work,” Darius said, smiling like a cat in the canary cage. “If I don’t, the sergeant chews our asses.”

Midnight, who’d just come back from the bar, sat their beers on the table. “That’s a white boy for you—always expecting a black man to do his work.”

Darius laughed his big laugh, and I laughed too. Midnight didn't mean nothing by it. On base, we screwed around that way all the time. Like the guys, even the black ones, called him *Midnight* because his skin was so dark. Just a joke. Ambrose glanced at T.K., then at me, cocking an eyebrow like an arrowhead.

We stayed there drinking until the pub closed at two. Given the way I knew he felt, Ambrose surprised me by asking Darius and Midnight what they wanted to do then.

"Take it back to base," Midnight said. "Every bar in town is closing."

"The night's young," Ambrose said with a frown. "Let's buy more beer and make it an all-nighter." He hooked a thumb at me. "Charlie's apartment is free."

I nodded. "I got nowhere to be tomorrow."

"Let's do it," T.K. said.

With a wide grin, Darius pushed me toward the exit. "If you got the place, I'm buying the brew."

We ran by MinitMart, Darius bought a couple cases, and we went to my place. When I flicked on the living room lights, Midnight checked out my flag, bunched his eyebrows together, and cut his eyes to Darius, who shrugged.

"My PawPaw gave me that," I explained.

"It's your place," Darius said. "And it's a free country."

We turned on the stereo, keeping the volume low so my neighbors wouldn't hear, and started on the beer. Midnight and Ambrose settled on the couch, T.K. took the recliner, and me and Darius sprawled on the floor. Before long, I brought out my liquor supply, and we took shots straight from the bottle of anything and everything I had. Everybody cut up and talked trash. Basketball, football, women, the daily bullshit at the

base. Midnight bitched that the Army gave him a fancy title, Indirect Fire Infantryman, then sent him to Ft. Campbell to take a nap. T.K. told him not to feel lonely because Army life was the same for him, a cherry-private IFV driver. Recruiters don't tell you that, though. Darius said doing nothing at the fort beat the hell out of whatever he might be doing in Troy, Ohio, his hometown. He was a Heavy Anti-Armor Weapons Infantryman, like me. We talked a little about the Winchell murder. The year before, some psycho had beat a queer soldier to death with a baseball bat. From what I knew, I thought they both was queer. But they was in a different regiment, so I didn't know for sure. The murderer claimed another guy in his unit talked him into the killing. The Army didn't buy it. They sentenced him to life in prison. We didn't talk about it much. Nobody on base liked to talk about it. We threw back the liquor. Even skinny Ambrose kept up. He didn't have much to say when we talked about the fort, but he stayed awake and kept drinking long after I expected him to pass out. Fairly late in the night, he brought out his coke.

Darius, leaning against the couch, shook his head hard. "I'm too fucked up. Keep that shit away from me."

"Oh, hell," Midnight said, rubbing his hands together. "Time to get freaky."

"That's the intention," Ambrose said and cut up four lines.

After we done them, I felt like hearing some Lynyrd Skynyrd. "Sweet Home Alabama" was floating around in my head, so I took my beer, scooted over to the CD rack, found *Second Helping*, and popped it in the player.

As soon as the first guitar licks came across the speaker, Midnight groaned. "Why you want to play that redneck shit? We had a groove going on."

Darius waved a hand over the couch arm. "It's the man's house. Let him play what he wants."

"Do you have something against Alabama?" Ambrose asked. I didn't like the hateful look on his face.

"Fuck Alabama," Midnight said. "I ain't never been and don't ever want to go. I'm from Southern California, god damn it."

T.K. curled his lip like he'd tasted something rotten. "You're in the South now, and we listen to this music around here. Not that bass-thumping, jungle music, hip hop shit."

Ambrose nodded toward the wall. "Want to kiss our flag?"

"You saying I'm from the jungle?" Midnight sat his beer on the coffee table and leaned forward. "That what you're saying?"

T.K. stayed sprawled across the recliner. "Better keep your seat before you make the worst mistake of your life."

"Chill out, gentlemen," Darius said in his deep, gravelly voice.

I hit the stop button. "To Hell with Lynyrd Skynyrd then. I just wanted to hear a song, not start a fight."

"Listen to your song, Charlie," Ambrose said.

Darius nodded. "You pay the rent, you pick the CDs."

"Midnight's my guest," I said. "If he don't want to hear it, I don't play it."

"Fuck him," T.K. said.

Ambrose stood up. "If you're going to fight, I'm going to piss."



“Bathroom’s through the kitchen,” I said. “Beside my bedroom.”

As Ambrose left, Midnight leaned further forward, pinched his lips together, and closed his eyes. All the blood drained from his face, making his skin turn grayish. I thought he was about to pass out.

“Chill, bro,” Darius whispered. “The cocaine’s talking to you.”

Instead, Midnight jumped off the couch. His eyes popped open, and they were redder than fire. “Fuck these hillbilly bastards,” he screamed. “Fuck them all.”

“Hold on.”

Before I could get anything else out, he wheeled around on his heels, smartly, like his drill sergeant had taught him, and lunged across the couch. With a growl like a man straining under a heavy load, he grabbed PawPaw’s flag in both hands and ripped it off my wall.

I came off that floor so mad I couldn’t think. I’m quick when I need to be. Before Darius or T.K. had a chance to move, I jumped the coffee table, spun Midnight around by his shoulders, and punched him square on his nose. He went down like a sack of flour, blood pouring around his mouth and down his neck. I didn’t hit him again. Didn’t need to. I just stood over him, breathing heavy. Darius and T.K. came out of their seats and stood on either side, without trying to grab me. I’d done all I needed.

“Damn, man,” Darius said low. “You cold-cocked my boy. I never seen a man hit so hard. You think you pushed his nose into his brain?”

Midnight’s nose, mashed flat and pushed to the right, was definitely broken. A cold, hard throb sprung up in my stomach, making me feel sick. “He ain’t dead, is he?”

"He's breathing, Machinehead," T.K. said, sounding disgusted. Or disappointed.

Darius slapped me on the arm. "Get some ice. We'll get him to the hospital."

When I turned to go to the kitchen, I saw Ambrose standing beside the couch, right behind Darius. Since he was closer to the refrigerator, I wanted to tell him to get ice, but he wasn't looking at me. He stared at the back of Darius' head. I caught a flash of metal as he hit him behind the ear with my .38.

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"You'll make the perfect redneck martyr," Capt. Morales said, sitting on the edge of the table again. "Everyone says you're a good man. Quiet, never cause trouble. You've never done anything spectacular, but your record is clean. You love guns." She counted off each point with a tap of her pen. "You had a Confederate flag hanging in your living room."

"Had a Nerf basketball goal, too," I said. "Don't make me a Chicago Bull."

"You displayed that flag prominently."

"But I don't hate nobody," I said.

"After you're executed, those Sons of the Confederacy can hang portraits of you in their living rooms." She straightened her shoulders and looked off in the distance like she was really thinking about it. "Portraits of you in your fancy dress blues. A true defender of the white man's America."

I tried to focus on the wall. My eyes were really getting tired, and the white of the wall throbbed, jumped out at me like heat coming off an asphalt highway. What difference did the goddamn Sons of the Confederacy make to me? They could hang me beside their

pictures of Jesus, George Washington, Robert E. Lee, and their own boys and girls. All the people they really didn't know nothing about.

"Only you'll ever know what actually happened that night." She jumped off the table and started pacing again. "And you're going to let it happen." She waved a hand like it didn't matter to her. "It's your memory, Charlie."

"Don't mean shit to me."

"But that flag meant something to you," she said, turning on me. "That Confederate flag."

"PawPaw gave it to me."

"The same flag found with the victims' bodies."

I nodded.

"You killed two men from your company over a flag?"

I didn't answer. What was the point? Everybody was going to think what they wanted to, and I figured they wanted to think I killed Darius and Midnight over nothing but a goddamn Rebel flag. If that was the most comfortable answer for them, I couldn't do nothing to change their minds.

"That's what your confession says."

"I said the fight started over PawPaw's flag." I laid my hands on the table, palms down. "Midnight got mad and tore it off my wall, so I hit him."

"Just like that. Wham, bam. He tore down the flag, and you hit him."

"I did it without thinking," I said. "That quick."

"Then the other victim jumped in."

"He tried to tackle me, so I hit him behind the ear with a whiskey bottle."

"One you grabbed off the coffee table."

"Yeah."

"The investigators didn't find a bloody bottle. Don't you think blood would have gotten on the bottle?"

"I threw it out."

"Drake and Headden didn't throw it out? They didn't get rid of any evidence they'd been there?"

"I didn't say that, did I?"

"In your confession, you claim that Drake and Headden had time to leave the apartment during the fight. It sounds like the whole thing was over in a matter of seconds."

I shrugged. "They got out fast."

"Yeah, right," she said with a slow nod. "Were you in a blind rage?"

"I didn't say that. He tore down the flag, and I hit him before I had a chance to think better of it."

"What were you thinking?"

"He shouldn't have done it," I said. "PawPaw meant a lot to me."

"What did that flag mean to you?"

"It reminded me of PawPaw."

"Did it mean you were better than Privates Thompson and Kelly?" She slammed her palms against the table. "Did it mean those niggers should still be slaves? Did it mean they should die if they didn't like your country?"



She leaned across the table, pushing her face closer and closer to mine while she talked. I stared right in her dark eyes. "It reminded me of PawPaw. Nothing more and nothing less. I can't say what it means to nobody else. Don't give a damn neither."

She backed off, took a legal pad from her briefcase, and flipped over some pages. "When you say PawPaw, you're referring to Nathan Daniel Stinett, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Your maternal great-grandfather."

"My momma's grandpa."

"Born in 1910, lived his entire life in Dalton, GA, died in 1990."

"To the best of my recollection."

"Why was he so important to you?"

"We lived with him when I was little," I said. "My pap's family wasn't no good, a bunch of drunks, so Momma left Pap when I was six. We didn't have no place to go except PawPaw's. He took us in and made sure Pap stayed away, not that he was too intent on having anything to do with us. When PawPaw died, he left Momma his house so we'd have a place to live."

"And why did he give you his Confederate flag?"

"He said it stood for something gone," I answered. "Something I could be proud of, something passed down in my blood." That flag had hung over PawPaw's fireplace for as long as I could remember. He'd stood beneath it on the last day I saw him alive, tall and thin from the cancer, the skin hanging from his cheeks like windsocks with no breeze to hold them up. He stared out the window while he talked to me, and I wondered what he hoped to see. There was nothing outside that window except the factories of the

Dalton Industrial Park and a long, black stretch of highway heading south, to Atlanta and other factories in other industrial parks. He told me he was giving me his flag and I should carry it with me always. He said it stood for everything that was me, everything that would be a part of me no matter where I went and no matter how long I lived. I told him he should keep his flag for the time being. He had quite a bit of living to do. He smiled, told me he loved me, and left. We found him in the woods three days later, dead, without a mark on him. We figured he knew it was time to go, and he went off to die in peace, where nobody would see him suffer.

“Did you understand what that meant?” the captain said. “What was passed down to you?”

“A way of life,” I said. “A way of dealing with people. Being a good neighbor, believing in the good Lord, that sort of thing.” I shrugged. “I didn’t think too much about it. That flag stood for PawPaw, and he was the most decent man I ever met. That’s all the meaning it needs for me.”

“Was your great-grandfather a racist?” Capt. Morales asked.

I scratched my chin. How could you tell? Everybody’s racist, whether they’re white, black, yellow, or green. At least everybody I knew. What one person called racism, another person called healthy wariness. “No more so than nobody else.”

“Meaning?”

“Where I come from, the colors don’t mix outside of business.” I palmed my cheek, the stubble rubbing rough against my hand. “But PawPaw taught me to treat everybody like a person until they prove they’re otherwise.”

“And the victims,” she said. “What did you think of them?”

“Darius was a squared-away soldier,” I said, without hesitating. “You could count on him to do his job right the first time. I never had a complaint about Midnight neither. We never got cross of one another.” Being sick of all the questions, I blew a long breath. “But I lived off base. I didn’t hang out with the other guys much. Just T.K, mostly.”

She paced to the end of the table, dragging her hand along the tabletop. “Why did you live off-base? Were you too good for the company of your fellow soldiers?”

“I wanted my own place. I never had one,” I said. “A place where I could have some peace and quiet, some time to myself.”

“Not because there were too many non-whites on base?”

“Had nothing to do with it.”

“Your apartment building was all white.” She glanced at me. “Did you know that when you moved in?”

“I noticed it after I moved in,” I said. “But it wasn’t nothing new to me.” Besides, it was just a re-done boarding house with five apartments in all, three upstairs and two downstairs. “So what if everybody was white?”

“Your landlord didn’t tell you she only rented to whites when she let you have the place?”

I huffed and slapped my palms on my thighs. “She said she liked the place quiet and clean. She wouldn’t tolerate nobody who couldn’t respect that.”

“Which added up to non-whites?” Capt. Morales said. “In her mind, I mean.”

“You’d have to ask her.”

“You didn’t take it that way?”

“I told her a quiet, clean place sounded good to me.”

She rapped her pen across her palm. “After the fight, were you clear-headed?”

“I could think,” I said. “But I wasn’t clear-headed, not really.”

“When did you decide to take the victims to the McAllister farm?”

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They moved fast. Ambrose asked for duct tape and trash bags, and I told him both was under the kitchen counter. I asked what they was doing, and T.K. told me to shut up and do what they said if I wanted to stay out of trouble. And I didn’t want trouble, no trouble with the neighbors or no trouble with my C.O. After that Winchell murder, the major general was really cracking down on fighting. I would’ve been up shit creek if he found out I punched another soldier. T.K. bound Darius’ hands and feet with the tape while Ambrose shoveled beer cans into a trash bag. I stood there, my stomach throbbing, my head cloudy, the blood pounding in my temples. I was mad, mad at Midnight for tearing down PawPaw’s flag and mad at myself for hitting him. We was both wrong, especially me for hitting him so hard. Ambrose and T.K. flew around the place until finally they went in the kitchen. They whispered for a while, both of them getting agitated with their hand gestures. They had gloves on. Then T.K. told me to go sit in my Monte Carlo until they came out, so I did.

A few minutes later, they towed Darius out between them, his feet dragging along the sidewalk. Lucky for them, I lived on the first floor, so they didn’t have to carry him down no stairs. They put him in my back seat and brought out Midnight. They was quiet, and no lights came on in none of the other apartments. I didn’t see nobody peek out a



window neither. T.K. slid in the back seat with them and bound their legs. They wasn't about to wake up, not as much as they drank and not as hard as they'd been hit. I thought it would've been a wonder if either of them woke up again.

Ambrose knocked on the driver's window. He had a gym bag of mine in one hand and the full trash bag in his other. "Follow T.K.'s directions," he whispered. "I'm taking his truck. Meet you there."

I started the car. As I backed out, I saw T.K. in the rearview mirror putting duct tape over Darius' mouth. "Where we headed?" I asked, hoping we was going to the base to dump Darius and Midnight off near Gate One. We could set them loose there, and they could make it back to their barracks. Guys stumbled back onto base drunk all the time.

"Out Dover Road," he said. "To the house Ambrose mentioned earlier, the McAllister place."

Everybody knew the McAllister place—a rundown, two-story, plank farmhouse on a handful of weed-eaten acres outside Clarksville. I turned down the driveway and drove slow past the statues Old Man McAllister made. Thirty to thirty-five cement and wire Confederate soldiers scattered over the hills to each side. All standing sentry, driving a bayonet into an invisible Yankee's gut, pointing to an enemy position somewhere across the highway, or sighting their rifles at nothing and nobody. All of them gray and headless. People said crazy old McAllister, who was filthy rich, filled the hollow insides of his men with cash. Since his death, punks had lopped the heads off each and every statue, looking for the money. Nobody found none, but McAllister's family wouldn't sell the place for fear somebody might once they had. So it sat there, abandoned, with those monuments to some great headless army—or maybe a ghost company, Bravo Company, forever

defending a piece of land they never lost in spirit. Nobody ever put up a gate. Guess they knew there was nothing worth stealing.

T.K. and me carried Darius and Midnight in the house before Ambrose showed up. Even by that point, I didn't know what was going to happen, and I didn't want to think about it. I was just glad we got out of my apartment without causing a scene with my neighbors. No need to get kicked out of a good place to live. And I was hoping we could take care of everything so my C.O. wouldn't find out what I'd done. Inside the house, I checked Darius and Midnight. Their bleeding had stopped, and they breathed regular. I waited quiet while T.K., who was pretty worked up, paced around the dark living room.

When Ambrose got there, he tossed me a beer from the gym bag and told me to keep an eye on our prisoners while he talked with T.K. The way he said *prisoners* jarred me because it was such a military word, too military for him.

Darius and Midnight slumped against the wall. A breeze blew through the window beside them and across my face. The night was still warm, especially for February. As I sat on the floor, I could barely see the outlines of T.K. and Ambrose whispering in the shadows, but I knew what Ambrose pulled out of the bag when he handed it to T.K. I'd seen the glint of gun metal before. They came across the room, both carrying a beer in one hand and a pistol in the other. Ambrose carried the bag too and sat it at his feet. "Pissed you off, didn't they, Charlie."

"I'm over it." I nodded my head at Darius and Midnight. "Untie them. They won't fight no more."

"They're not going to fight anyone anymore," Ambrose said. "Are they, T.K.?"

“Not anymore, Machinehead. We’re not going to stand for the way they treated you.”

“Forget it,” I said. “He’s drunk.”

“It’s your grandfather’s flag, Charlie,” Ambrose said.

I clenched my fists. “My PawPaw’s. He was my momma’s grandpa.”

“It’s your ancestors’ flag, and they showed an utter lack of respect for it.”

“These boys need to get to base, and I better get to bed myself.” I nodded toward T.K. “Shouldn’t you get back?”

“I’m not going back, Machinehead. Fuck the Army. You think I want to serve this?” He waved his pistol at Darius and Midnight, hawked up a wad of phlegm, and spit it at them.

“You’re not either, Charlie,” Ambrose said. “You’re with us now.”

“I ain’t with nobody but the United States Army,” I said. “Ya’ll are so fucked up you don’t know what you’re saying.”

T.K. stamped his foot on the floor, sending an echo through the empty house.

“Are you that stupid? They’re taking the whole damn country away from us. They came in your home and ripped your flag off the wall.”

“I told you, forget it.”

“Forget hell,” he said. “That’s what it’s coming to. They’re coming in our homes, taking our stuff, and telling us what we can and can’t do. I’m not serving a country that’s come to that.”

“What about the law?” I said. “Desertion’s illegal.”

"They won't find me. We have IDs, cash, everything we need."

"My dad gives me an allowance," Ambrose said. "A hefty one, if I do say so myself. I've been planning something like this for years, so I saved. We, Charlie, are going to vanish like smoke." He blew a quick breath into the air in front of him.

"What about me?" I asked.

"T.K. wants to take you along," he said. "He thinks you're a good guy at heart. I think you're a half-wit who'll rat us out." He shrugged. "But we came up with a way to ensure you'll never turn on us." He knelt, pulled a pistol from the bag, and slid it across the floor. "You shoot the niggers."

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My head swam as Capt. Morales paced like a tin duck in a shooting gallery from one end of that table to the other. Not enough sleep and too many of the same thoughts clawing at each other in my head, five months of wondering how things might have been if I had chose different, if I had done something other than what I did, five months of wondering what the hell kind of world I was stuck in. It got to me, and I wanted it over and done with.

"Are you scared of them, Charlie?" the captain said. "Are you afraid they'll come after you if you tell what happened?"

"I pulled the trigger," I said, keeping my voice even. "That's all I got to tell."

"Why didn't you try to escape?" she asked. "Your car was in the driveway. The keys were in your pocket."

"Who called the cops?" I asked, just curious.



"Anonymous caller," she said. "Someone said they saw you. But that's not important. Do you know why you didn't run?"

Sure, I knew. "Where was I going? Nothing mattered anymore. Nothing's no good. Not the Army, not the whole stinking world. Where can I go? They can find me. One way or another, they can. They can do whatever they want. What's to stop them? No law, no god. They're the law around here. They're god."

She pinched her eyebrows together and looked at me funny. "Who? Drake and Headden?"

"All of them," I said. "Ain't no place for a guy like me to run. You ain't getting away from their meanness and hatred. They prey on us, like a pack of wolves. Run us in the ground. They do what they like and blame it on us. Dying's the only way to get away from them."

"You're rambling, Charlie. Get a hold of yourself." She sat on the table and patted my shoulder. "They can't get you here."

"They got me," I said. "And I want out."

"How did they get you? Did they force you to do it?"

"I pulled that trigger, just me." I shook my head, harder and harder. "Nobody but me pulled it."

"I believe you," Capt. Morales said. "But why? Did Drake and Headden force you?"

"Nobody but me." I wanted to talk. I did. But what good was it? It didn't matter no more. Darius and Midnight was dead. Ambrose and T.K. was gone. Wasn't nobody ever going to find them. If they did, they wouldn't do nothing to them.

Everybody wanted to kill me. The captain said so. And I wanted them to, wanted them to get me out of this fucking piece of shit world. The weight had been on my shoulders. My choice. Talking about it wouldn't do nobody no good.

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"Your chance to be a hero, Machinehead," T.K. said.

My .357 laid against my foot. I left it there.

"That's how you'll be remembered," Ambrose added. "A hero." He looked around the room, twisting his head from side to side like an owl. "Do you know where you are, Charlie? Do you know who stayed here?"

I lowered my head. "You told me. Nathan Bedford Forrest."

"One of our heroes," T.K. said, his voice smooth and cold. "He fought for our freedom."

"Freedom from what happened to you tonight." Ambrose turned toward the window, toward McAllister's soldiers. "He knew the natural order, and he wasn't afraid to fight for it. That's what our flag stands for." He moved back into the shadows, making a rotten floorboard creak. I jumped. "Are you afraid, Charlie?"

"Maybe," I said.

T.K. laughed. "Is that what the Army trained you for? It trained me to fight."

"Pick up the gun, Charlie," Ambrose said.

Without moving, I stared straight ahead.

T.K. stepped toward me, clicking off his pistol's safety. I watched the barrel come level with my face. "Play time's over. Pick it up, slowly."

I did what he told me.

“Stand up,” Ambrose said from somewhere behind me now. “For the first time in your life, stand up and face them.”

I did that too. Darius and Midnight sagged against the wall, knocked out, not two feet in front of me. The pistol hung by my side. T.K. and Ambrose moved, their boots thudding on the wooden floor. T.K. came around to my left. Ambrose stood at my back.

“Forrest recruited farm boys from the area late in the war,” he said. “He wanted one more offensive. The Yankees held Tennessee by then, so he had to lie low, keep his operation hidden. He used this house as a secret base in 1864.”

“What’s that got to do with us?” I asked.

“Tonight,” T.K. said, “we carry on his fight.”

“They desecrated our flag, Charlie. You don’t want to allow that,” Ambrose said.

“It made you so mad you hit him.”

“Knocked the living shit out of him,” T.K. added.

I clenched my free fist. “It’s PawPaw’s flag. Nobody messes with PawPaw. I don’t give a fuck about Nathan Bedford Forrest or anything he fought for.”

“Enough debate,” Ambrose said. “Charlie, you go with us or you go with them.”

“You threatening me?” I asked, my voice rising. I tried to calm it, keep my nerves hidden.

“It’s more than a threat, Machinehead. Either shoot them or I’ll shoot you myself.”

“T.K.,” I spluttered. As hard as I tried not to, I choked on my words. “We’re tight.”

“That’s in the past. Leave it there.” He coughed and thumped his chest with a fist. The gleam of his gun barrel stayed level with my eyes. “I’m not going back. You can come with me or not.”

I knew then that somebody was going to die. T.K. didn’t hesitate. His voice didn’t hitch. No doubt Ambrose was crazy, but as far as I knew, he’d never fired a weapon in his life. He might crack, hesitate, refuse to do it at the last second. But not T.K. The Army had trained him, and he meant it when he said he’d shoot me. I could go after them, but I had no chance. They had my rear and a flank covered. I couldn’t get both before one got me. T.K. made the best first target. If I hit him, Ambrose might not return fire, might miss if he did. Slim chance I could hit T.K, though. He was on full alert, his weapon drawn down on me. He could cap me in the skull before I turned around. No chance I could wheel and shoot Ambrose before T.K. took me down. I couldn’t get both of them. If one lived, he would shoot Darius and Midnight. He’d make sure I died too. All three of us. At best, I could take out one more man.

T.K. laughed. “If you’re trying to decide if you can shoot us, let me tell you something,” he said. “You only have two bullets. If you want to shoot it out, go ahead. But don’t miss.” He laughed again, and I shivered. “See, we covered all the angles. We’re smarter than you, Machinehead, which isn’t saying much.”

“And don’t complicate matters by shooting yourself,” Ambrose said. “We’ll just use your gun to kill them. It’ll look like a murder-suicide.”

“Everyone will think you were afraid the niggers in prison would gang fuck you,” T.K. added.



A few orange rays of the dawn fell on my feet. Darius twitched his head and groaned. I hoped he wouldn't come to.

"We don't have all night," Ambrose said. "So I'll make you a deal, Charlie. You shoot one of them, and we'll leave the other here alive."

"You're lying," I said. "If I shoot one, you'll just shoot the other and me too."

"I give my word. You with me, T.K?"

He didn't answer. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him look toward Ambrose. "Yeah," he said finally. "That's the deal."

"Why do I have to shoot somebody?" I said.

"We can't trust you unless you do," Ambrose said. "If you pull the trigger, you won't turn us in."

"What keeps ya'll from turning me in?"

"We're accessories. We tied them up and brought them here."

"This isn't happening," I said, shaking my head. "It isn't happening."

And Ambrose said, "It's one of them, or it's everyone, including you. Your choice, Charlie."

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"What are you afraid of?" Capt. Morales asked. "What keeps you from telling the truth? You can't make things worse."

"I ain't staying in this world," I said, feeling like I rocked back and forth in my chair, even though I sat stone still. "I pulled the trigger. Nothing else matters. We can talk all day long. It won't bring nobody back, and it sure won't change the way things is."

The captain sighed. It sounded like she stood at the end of a long, dark tunnel. "You're absolutely right, Charlie." She fell into the chair across from me. For the first time, I saw her slump. "Look, your court-martial is about appearances, not about the actuality of the events of February 23. Symbols, meanings, and double-meanings." She looked to the floor. "You know why I'm your chief counsel?"

From my end of the tunnel, I answered, "You was assigned."

"I was assigned because I'm Hispanic," she said. "I'm not Caucasian, and I'm not African-American. I'm a compromise so no one can complain about the race of your judge advocate."

I understood what she meant, but I didn't have an answer if she wanted one.

"The major general didn't haphazardly put your court-martial together," she went on. "He selected every participating party with an eye toward her or his appearance to the public."

"What you want me to do?" I managed to say. "Call my congressman?"

"I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it, Private," she snapped. "I'm just keeping you informed. That's my job." She tapped her pen against her palm. "Your court-martial was designed to send the message that the Army will not tolerate such behavior. That's the only important mitigating circumstance. This hearing is a mere formality. You'll be sentenced to death."

"Fine by me," I said. "The sooner they execute me, the better."

"Don't hold your breath." She smiled a bitter, cruel smile. "By military law, capital sentences go directly from general courts-martial to the Court of Military Review. If they uphold the sentence, we go automatically to the Court of Military Appeals. From

there, we go to the US Supreme Court. If they uphold the sentence or refuse to hear the case, we go to the President. If he signs it, you die.”

“I don’t want no appeal,” I said. “I pulled the trigger.”

“*The Code* doesn’t give a tinker’s dam what you want. Those procedures must be followed for a death sentence.”

I wanted to double over and grab my stomach, but I wouldn’t let myself in front of a woman. I knew what she meant. I would spend years in Ft. Leavenworth, tossing around in a cell and turning everything that happened that night over and over in my head, wondering what might have happened if.

“My point, Charlie, is that you’re correct. What you tell me doesn’t matter,” she said. “The panel members found you guilty, and they will sentence you to death. You can tell me the truth, and it won’t change a thing.”

“I got nothing,” I said. “Nothing at all.”

“You have nothing to lose,” she said. “You can tell me, and I’ll tell the court. The prosecution will scream it’s obfuscation, and Col. Gilbert will agree. The panel won’t buy an eleventh-hour admission. In other words, it’s far too late for the truth to save you.”

“Suits me.”

“Tell me, Charlie,” she said, lowering her voice like she wanted to keep a secret from somebody. “Do you expect me to believe you killed two men because they dishonored the memory of your great-grandfather?”

“I loved PawPaw.”

“Ease your conscience. Your great-grandfather would. Didn’t he teach you to tell the truth? Didn’t he tell you the good Lord doesn’t tolerate dishonesty?” She laid her pen

down, leaned forward, and put her hands on the table, palms down. "Didn't he tell you the truth shall set you free?"

Yeah, PawPaw told me that. He'd told me other things I'd thrown aside by that point too. I yawned. I was tired, more tired than I could believe.

"Never mind, Charlie," she said. "The Army wants you executed, so you'll be executed. I don't need to be bothered with the truth. Keep your mouth shut. Just remember that those Sons of the Confederacy will take your silence as a sign of your loyalty to their cause. They'll think you refused to turn on two brothers. In fact, Drake and Headden are probably counting on your silence." She shrugged. "It's all the same to me."

I scratched my palm and breathed slow. She had me there. They probably did want me to keep my mouth shut. Besides, what difference did it make? Nothing could be changed. I'd done got what I wanted. The panel had convicted me, and I would die sooner or later. She couldn't get nowhere with my story. Why not get it off my chest? Why should I die the only one knowing? So I told her everything, everything Ambrose and T.K. did and said. The whole story flooded out of my mouth so fast I could barely keep up, could barely get the words out. None of it made sense, but it kept on coming. The captain listened, twirling her pen the entire time. When I finished, she leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. "Two weapons registered to you are missing," she said. "But the prosecution will point out no fresh tire tracks were found in the driveway of the McAllister farm, other than the ones from your car."

"Maybe he parked T.K.'s truck on the highway."



“Where a cop would see it?”

“Maybe, maybe not.” I squinted at her. “You don’t believe me?”

“I’m looking at it from our opponent’s perspective,” she said. “Your story is plausible, but the only supporting evidence is circumstantial. I gave you the information about Drake and Headden, so maybe you’re telling me what I want to hear. I don’t know.” She let her words trail off. The air in the interview room grew heavy with them, so heavy I could barely breathe. I told the truth, everything Ambrose and T.K. did. What was not to know?

“Private, that panel is filled with career soldiers,” she said finally. “When they hear your story, they’ll think that as a soldier in the United States Army, you swore to defend your countrymen and stand by your comrades. You failed on both counts.”

“I didn’t have no choice,” I said.

“They’re not going to buy that.” She stood suddenly and leveled her pen at me. “They’ll think you chose to shoot two innocent men.” Her words, coming from a long ways away, echoed in my head. I’d been telling myself the same for months. “They’ll want to know why you didn’t shoot Drake and Headden.”

“If I got one, the other would’ve gotten me.”

“At least you would have shot a man who deserved it.”

“The other would’ve shot Darius and Midnight anyway.”

“You don’t know that. He might have run for his life.” Her face grew a darker red than usual. “The prosecution will mention that option. And if he had shot the three of you, at least you would have died with some honor, some dignity.” She scowled at me

with the hardest eyes I'd ever seen. "As the panel will interpret your story, two men died because you're a coward."

She wheeled away from the table and started pacing again. "Drake and Headden weren't going to take you with them, and they weren't going to kill you," she said with a disgusted frown, her voice rising. "They wanted to leave you for the Army to deal with. That's what the panel will think." She turned back toward me. "In fact, the prosecutor will claim you knew that. He'll ask how we know you didn't kill those two men to save your own skin." She slammed her fist on the table. "Answer us that, Private "

My head tossed. I felt like I was struggling to stay above water and losing. "That ain't what I meant."

She breathed deep a few times, watching me as she did. "You're the only one who knows or cares what you meant, Charlie," she finally said, her voice even. She pointed toward the courtroom, toward Ft. Campbell, toward everything outside that interview room. "All that matters now is what they mean, and everyone this side of Amnesty International means to see you dead "

"Everybody?" I asked, looking straight in her eyes

She stared me down. "It's not my duty to make that judgment. My duty now is to present the panel with any possible mitigating circumstances "

"I didn't have no choice."

"The panel will think you did," Capt. Morales said. "They'll think you made the wrong one "

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I pulled the trigger, and nothing mattered after. I stood there, Ambrose shoving a pistol in my neck and T.K. aiming one at my head. T.K., a soldier I thought was my friend. He'd been to my place. We'd drank together, gone in the field together, worked out together, shot the bull together. He pointed a pistol at my head and told me to shoot one of the boys laying cold at my feet. Boys from Bravo Company, boys I'd hung out with sometimes. They was good people, all of them. Darius, Midnight, and T.K. I never thought they'd come to this. I never thought it of Ambrose, who I didn't like worth a damn.

And what was it? Why was we in this abandoned house with headless Rebel soldiers positioned all over the yard? Why was we pointing pistols and talking about shooting people for Nathan Bedford Forrest and whatever he fought for over a hundred years before? And why didn't it matter that I didn't care about that? Why didn't it matter that my flag meant PawPaw to me and nothing else? The whole situation was crazy, but what in the Lord's name did it mean? Why couldn't nobody tell me that?

Another floorboard creaked under T.K. My head swam, and the smell of Ambrose's aftershave and beer breath mixed together made me queasy. "Your choice, Charlie," he said again. "You better make it quick."

Then I realized. I heard it in his voice, whispered in my ear. Nobody could tell me what it meant because nobody knew. No good Lord was out there with an answer book, like some drill instructor with a training manual. We was it. Darius and Midnight, bound and knocked out on the floor. T.K., with his finger jumping on his trigger. Ambrose, with a pistol pressed to my neck, a pistol I'd paid my hard-earned money for. Me. Other than that—nothing. Nothing but people. And that meant the world ran on a whole lot of

meanness and hatred because far too many people lived on nothing else. We stuffed everything full of it, poured it into everything we touched. Sure, we came up with pretty excuses, but they didn't mean nothing. Just words, cover for pure meanness and hatred. And I was going to kill for no other reason. None of it had nothing to do with nobody's flag or the color of nobody's skin. Not a damn bit of it. None of it had to do with nothing except their meanness and hatred. And I couldn't do a goddamn thing about it. Somebody was going to die. Me or Darius or Midnight or the whole lot of us. Maybe Ambrose or T.K. could too. My choice. But no way for me to work it out without one of us dying.

Darius groaned again, so low and weak I could barely hear him. T.K. spit on the floor. More than likely, they intended to kill us all. I'd shoot Midnight. Then T.K. and Ambrose would shoot me and Darius. It didn't matter. Just part of their sick game. We would die because of their meanness and hatred.

"Do it, Charlie," T.K. whispered. "Do it now."

So I did. I raised my pistol and squeezed the trigger twice, thinking Darius and Midnight might have to die, but they didn't have to die at the hands of common trash. Besides, they was better off dead. We all would be. My .357 roared twice, and their heads thumped the wall, knocked against it by the impact of the shots. The shock overloaded my drunk, tired, worked-up system. I lost my legs and went to the floor. Then nothing.

The sunlight warming my face woke me, groggy and muddled. I scanned the floor and got scared because nothing looked familiar. I didn't know where I laid and couldn't recall what I'd done the night before. In front of me, I could see some red and blue



material, stained with something, something dark. I couldn't make it out, so I sat up, slow because my whole body hurt.

Darius and Midnight laid against the wall, back to back, with PawPaw's flag covering them from shoulders to waists. Their blood soaked the flag black, covered the stars and bars. Blood and gore stained the wall in red and gray splashes like two old hand fans. I got to my feet, my hands shaking with the rushing memories. Both hit square in the head. Not much left. Outside the window, a headless Rebel soldier drew a bead on me with his rifle. Maybe he shot them. If I'd had it in me, I would've laughed. Not that it was funny. The McAllister farm. Of all the places in the world. A ragged Confederate flag wrapped around two dead soldiers of the U.S. Army, black no less, inside some goddamn house Nathan Bedford Forrest once slept in. My .357 was laying on the floor. I wished it had some bullets so I could add my own splatter to the wall. My stomach turned. I looked at Darius and Midnight again, ran outside, and threw up off the porch.

Then I sat on the steps, staring over the formation of Rebel soldiers, a heavy, dead breeze blowing the stink of my puke across my face. My Monte Carlo not ten feet away, I thought of running, but I didn't bother. Some things you can't run from. Besides, I didn't have no place to go. I didn't know no other part of the country. And it was their world anyway. I couldn't get out of it by myself, and I didn't want no part of it no more. So I waited, thinking up the story I'd tell the cops. Somebody would show up soon enough.

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The deputies did. Soon enough, I went to the brig, got court-martialed, and finally told my story to the captain. Soon enough, the guards drug me from my cell and took me to the courtroom for my sentencing hearing. They took off my chains first.

I stared out the window, admiring the morning light, as Col. Gilbert finished his opening speech. The captain was itching to tell my story. I smiled, thinking again she was wasting her breath. The panel wasn't going to listen. They already wanted to execute me, and they wasn't going to be swayed. But what if? I wondered. What if they changed their minds? What if they decided to throw me in prison for the rest of my life instead of killing me? Like they done the murderer of that Winchell boy. What if they left me to wallow around in this shithole world? What if they left me to think about the meanness and hatred over and over and over? Wouldn't that be worse? Capt. Morales bolted from her seat when the colonel asked if the counsels had any pressing matters to attend to before beginning the day's business. "Your honor, if I may approach the bench. The defendant has told me—"

"Ya'll don't know what's out there," I cut in. "I ain't going back out. It's their world. Ya'll don't have a goddamn clue."

"Pvt. Cayhill," the judge boomed, "watch your language in my court."

"My words don't matter, don't matter a goddamn bit," I went on, jumping out of my seat. "It's out there, god damn it." I charged around the defendant's table. Capt. Morales took a step toward me, and the guards moved in. "It's out there," I screamed, waving my arms like a crazy man. "Meanness and hatred. And ya'll are fooling with me."

"Your honor," the captain yelled, "my client is in no mental state for this hearing."

"Out there, god damn all ya'll."

The colonel stood, waving his gavel, and hollered at the guards, "Remove this soldier from my courtroom."

They bore down on me quick. I didn't fight them. It didn't matter. They took me down and drug me from the courtroom. With eyes as big as biscuits, Capt. Morales watched them take me out. The judge wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. That courtroom was always hot. I laughed as loud as I could. A guard kicked me in the hip, but that didn't stop me. Before one clamped his hand across my jaw, I hollered one last, good time, "Let me out of this shithole."

As the guards drug me through the courtroom doors, somebody in the foyer stepped up and snapped my picture. The flash blinded me, made little, white dots of light swim in my eyes. A guard pushed the photographer away, and the others carried me out. I hoped the newspapers would use that picture. I hoped Ambrose and T K , wherever they was, would see it. I hoped all those Sons of the Confederacy would get a look at that one. I hoped they'd hang that shot on their walls.

## I'm Only Bleeding

Outside, the siren wailed to a stop. Red and white light cartwheeled through the bedroom window again, ricocheting off the walls. The ambulance stopped across the street at the home of the elderly couple. Kenneth could never remember their name. The Wheelers? Willards? They were the only elderly couple in the neighborhood, and the husband's doctor diagnosed his heart trouble soon after Kenneth and Julia moved in. Kenneth propped himself up on his elbow. How long since they'd moved to Rockport Drive? Right after their honeymoon. He quickly ran through the months, eleven in all. Eleven months was a long time to live with serious heart problems. The other neighbors said Mr. Wheeler, or Willard, was in bad shape, that his doctors told him to enjoy whatever time he had left because they couldn't do anything for him. Kenneth rarely saw him outside, and judging by the lawn-keeping activity of his neighbors, Kenneth thought Clarksville had a city ordinance requiring a well-kept yard.

In the bed beside him, Julia groaned. "What is it?"

"Ambulance," he said. "At the Wheeler's."

"At the Whelans again?" She shook her head on her pillow. "Those poor people."

"They won't be together much longer," he said. "How old do you suppose they are?"

"Late seventies, early eighties. Why?"

"They've had a lot of good years."

"I hope so, but it's sad."

"Why?" he said, rubbing the smooth skin over her shoulder blade. "People don't last forever."



"I know, but I don't like endings."

"They're inevitable."

She grunted. "That doesn't mean I have to like them. In fact, the only thing I dislike more is being kept awake by pointless conversations."

"She'll take it hard."

"Maybe she's glad to see him go."

Kenneth pushed her shoulder gently. "That's a horrible thing to say."

"Maybe she killed him."

"Why would she kill him?" he asked, the lights spinning over their bed. "They've been married since Moses."

"Maybe he kept her awake all night."

"You don't have to beat me over the head."

"I'm about to anyway."

He flopped back on his pillow and whined. "She threatens me. They always start with threats."

"Oh, hush."

"One day, threats. The next day, cyanide in my cereal."

"Why would I want to kill you?"

"Those mystery novels have warped you. They're all about some woman who kills her husband."

"Or lover," she said.

He threw his forearm over his eyes. "The truth comes out. I'm crushed, really crushed. It's a sick love triangle."

“More like an octagon.”

“More than one lover?”

“There’s money involved, too.”

“Oh, so you want my wealth.”

“Yeah, I married a college instructor for his wealth. Go figure.”

“I just couldn’t keep you satisfied, huh?”

“I’m a complex woman,” she said. “I have numerous needs.”

“Such as?”

“Sleep. Lots and lots of sleep.”

“You’d kill for sleep?”

“In a heartbeat.”

As the lights bounced around the room, he folded his hands over his chest and felt his heart thumping away beneath his ribs. For how long could it do that? He was in good shape: stomach flat and muscles toned from three workouts a week in the school gym. Julia read Andrew Weil’s wellness reports and made sure they are right. Still, good health wasn’t guaranteed. “What would you do without me?”

“Sleep.” She laughed softly. “You’re walking right into these, you know.”

“I’m bleeding over here, and you joke around.”

“How are you bleeding?”

“In my soul, dear. In my soul.”

“Please, it’s too early for melodrama.” She rolled over to face him. She smelled warm, like freshly baked bread. Sleep crusted the inside corners of her eyes. “We have fifty years to worry about this. Why talk about it tonight?”

“You hope we have fifty years.”

“And you don’t?”

“Of course, I do,” he said, nudging her leg with his foot.

“What’s the problem then?”

He patted his chest and sighed. “Ever wonder what’s the point? We’ll all die someday, and everyone will forget us.”

“I won’t forget you.”

“But you’d go on without me.”

“Yes, I would, but I wouldn’t forget you.” She ran a hand across his chest. “I’d be thankful I had you.”

“Then you’ll die too,” he said. “Life ends in sadness. No way around it.”

“All the more reason we should enjoy what we have.”

Kenneth followed the light tumbling around them. “Sometimes I wonder how.”

“First, you get plenty of sleep. You can only enjoy life when you’re well-rested.”

She poked his shoulder. “You’d go on without me, wouldn’t you? I’d want you to.”

Would he? Well, yes, but it wouldn’t be easy. He couldn’t imagine life without her, but he knew most people felt that way early in a relationship. Maybe that died too. Maybe the death of that feeling would be worse than her death. Maybe instead of losing her physically, he’d just lose all feeling for her someday. Maybe he wouldn’t care if she came to bed with him. Maybe he wouldn’t care if she dropped off the face of the earth. And would it be worth it if things turned out that way? If they wound up trapped together with no idea how to get out? If the world wore them down and they wound up bitter, old farts instead of a romantic, old, love-struck couple?

“About that sleep,” she said, smoothing the hair behind his ear, “you need some.” She kissed him on the temple. “I love you. To hell with all the rest.”

“I hope I die first,” he said.

“You’re going to.” She laughed again and rolled over. “You really walk right into them, honey. You really do.”

Kenneth heard the gurney roll down the sidewalk outside, followed by the clatter of the EMTs loading it into the ambulance. Doors slammed. The lights stopped bounding around the room. He listened to the ambulance back out of the Whelan’s driveway and slowly make its way down Rockport Drive.

Someday, Julia and he would be in that same situation. Another group of EMTs would cart one of them out on a gurney. But not tonight. Tonight, those EMTs weren’t even born yet. Tonight, he was here, and she was beside him, for tonight and who knew how many more nights. He hoped.

Would it be worth it? He didn’t know, but there was only one way to find out. He ran his arm under her pillow, beneath her head, and laid his other arm across her waist, thankful the ambulance had stopped across the street tonight.