

S.A. COSBY



**MY
DARKEST
PRAYER**

MY
DARKEST
PRAYER

by
S.A. COSBY

Copyright January 2019

All rights reserved. No part of this book shall be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, magnetic, photographic including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission of the publisher. No patent liability is assumed with respect to the use of the information contained herein. Although every precaution has been taken in the preparation of this book, the publisher and author assume no responsibility for errors or omissions. Neither is any liability assumed for damages resulting from the use of the information contained herein.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-940758-86-2 Paperback

ISBN: 978-1-940758-88-6 EPUB

ISBN: 978-1-940758-87-9 Mobi

Cover Design: Rae Monet

Published by:

Intrigue Publishing, LLC

11505 Cherry Tree Crossing Rd. #148

Cheltenham MD 20623-9998

Dedicated to my grandfather...

For my grandfather who taught me that doing the right thing is never easy but it's always worth it."

Acknowledgements:

My thanks to Nadira Grubbs for all her help getting my first paying story published. Gracias Dancing Queen

My thanks to Kimberly for everything she does and everything she doesn't do.

Eryk Pruitt for listening to me ramble on for hours on end about narrative structure and moonshine. Cheers to the Grit Lit crew!

Thank you to anyone who ever attended a Noir at the Bar event where I read one of my stories. Those events helped make me a better writer while also improving my alcohol tolerance.

I'd like to thank Austin Camacho and everyone at Intrigue Publishing for giving me the opportunity to tell this tale. Destiny can find us in the strangest places. Even the second floor of a performance venue.

Finally, I'd like to thank my 11th grade English teacher Mr. Jeff Bohn. You were the first person who read my fevered scribblings and convinced me i could actually write. Your encouragement and guidance were and continue to be invaluable. Thank you, sir. I'm sorry for talking during your lectures. i swear i was really paying attention.

MY
DARKEST
PRAYER

“Revenge is a confession of pain.”

Old Latin Proverb...

PROLOGUE

I can see the headlights cut through the dark and the mist enveloping the cemetery. I knew Skunk was driving slow and easy because the lane was filled with potholes and ruts. The Gethsemane Baptist Temple is located on the other side of the county near the North River. Digging a grave behind that Temple is like digging a well. Many years before I was even a gleam in my father's eye the Temple elders purchased a field near a grove of twisted mulberry trees. The branches looked like dancing skeletons as they were illuminated by the headlights. I was standing near a freshly dug grave covered by two large pieces of plywood. I leaned on my short camping shovel like it was a cane. A folding step ladder lay at my feet.

Skunk pulled up and stopped his car so that his trunk was lined up with the edge of the grave. He got out and I heard his keys jangle as he unlocked the trunk. I expected to be assaulted by a vituperative stench but we had sealed up the body well with duct tape and a thick tarp. We flipped the plywood over and exposed the gaping maw of the grave. Tomorrow the gravediggers would drop a 2,100-pound concrete vault in this hole. A few hours later a 280lb casket would be lowered in the vault and the whole thing would be covered with about 100lbs pounds of dirt. The edges would be filled in and tamped down and then the gravediggers would move on to their next job. Only Skunk and I would know this was the final resting place for two dead souls. There was a hot greasy film in my throat like I had drunk shots of whiskey mixed with gasoline. My mouth was rapidly filling with spit. Skunk turned and stared at me.

"You all right, hoss?" he said. I gripped the shovel tight.

What I wanted to say was that I didn't feel all right. I didn't think I would ever feel all right again.

"Yeah, I'm good. Let's get it done." I said.

CHAPTER ONE

I handle the bodies.

That's what I say when people ask me what I do for a living. I find that gets one of two responses. They drift away to the other side of the room and give me a sideways glance the rest of the night or they let out a nervous laugh and move the conversation in another, less macabre direction. I could always say I work at a funeral home, but where's the fun in that?

Every once in a while, when I was in the Corps, someone would see me at Starbucks or that modern mecca Wal-Mart in my utility uniform. Sometimes they'd catch me in my dress blues after a military ball just trying to grab something before heading back to the base. They would walk up to me and say, "Thank you for your service." I'd mumble something like "No, thank you for your support" or some other pithy rejoinder, and they would wander away with a nice satisfied look on their faces. Sometimes what I wanted to say was, "I took care of the bodies. The bodies with the legs blown off or the hands shredded. The bodies full of ball bearings and nails and whatever some kid could find to build his IED. I loaded the bodies up and dragged them back to the base, then went back out on another patrol and prayed to a God that seemed to be only half-listening that today wasn't the day that someone would have to take care of my body."

But I don't think that would have given them the same warm and fuzzy feeling.

Now I take care of the bodies at the Walter T. Blackmon Funeral Home in Queen County, Virginia. Today, the body I was taking care of was Mrs. Jeatha Tolliver from Mathews, the next county over. Momma J, as she was known throughout the community, was a deaconess and Temple elder who dropped dead at 78 while she was in the middle of berating her bingo neighbor for moving her lucky Jesus statue. I'm sure she would have ended the diatribe with, "Bless your heart" which is Southern for "fuck you, bitch" if she hadn't expired.

I was standing at the back of the funeral home chapel while Rev. Duke Halston yelled into the microphone about Hell and damnation. The crowd

shifted in their seats like they could feel the flames licking at their backsides. Duke had a bone-anchored hearing aid sitting on the back of his head like a mini satellite dish. He yelled when he was talking to you after the sermon. He yelled when he was in the supermarket. I think he lost the volume control years ago. Once he called for the undertakers to take over the service. My cousin Walter, his fellow funeral director Curtis Sampson, funeral assistant Daniel Thomas, and I would walk up to the casket and ferry the body along like four black-suited Charons. My suit didn't fit me quite right. It seemed to be cut and sewn at awkward angles. The knot in my tie kept trying to travel left or right in advance of unraveling. That's what I get for buying my formal wear from a thrift store.

"Now we uh, turn over the uh, services uh, back to the uh, hands of the uh, undertakers." Rev. Duke stammered. Walter nodded at me, and we began to make our way down the center aisle of the chapel. Despite the air conditioner running full blast, the air was stale and stifling. The flap of the hand-held fans reminds me of a flock of buzzards taking off after a full meal of warm carrion. We directed the stoic pallbearers to stand just outside the chapel door, three on one side and three on the other, as we transported Momma J for her final car ride. The pallbearers, her grandsons, apparently couldn't be bothered to wear suits for their grandmother's funeral. Some were wearing un-tucked dress shirts, some were wearing basketball jerseys and t-shirts emblazoned with Momma J's face. I'm sure Momma J was looking down with pride as the cast of a low-budget hip-hop video loaded her into our hearse. As Daniel began herding the crowd to the door so we could head to the cemetery, Walter motioned for me. My cousin was a plump chocolate drop of a man whose caramel-colored forehead seemed to be perpetually sweaty. He hung on to the jheri curl flattop with a tenacity that would have impressed Javert. His black suit was more expensive than mine but each button on his coat seemed to be screaming for help.

"Nate, you drive the flower van. I'm gonna get Curtis to drive the hearse. Hopefully, we'll lose some people on our way to the cemetery, and we can get back here by four. I'm so hungry I'm seeing bow legged biscuits going down molasses lane," Walter said. His face was pinched into a minor scowl. My cousin loved three things: his wife, his money, and his food. I could tell he had already calculated the time it would take to arrive at the cemetery,

put Momma J in the ground, and get back to the office in time to catch the dinner special at Nick's restaurant. Before I could respond, we heard raised voices and shouts from just outside the chapel doors.

I slipped past Walter. Momma J's son Carter and his soon to be ex-wife, a woman by the unfortunate name of La'Unique, were arguing near the hearse. I saw some people holding up their cell phones.

I also saw some folks trying to separate them. These must have been the family members who still believed in respecting the dead. A lithe figure slipped through the crowd. I saw something metallic in his hand. It caught the last light of the setting sun and glittered for just an instant.

I pushed forward and grabbed the thin man's arm as he raised it behind Carter's head. He was holding the ball end of a trailer hitch. His tiny rat-like eyes appraised me with a mix of shock and anger. Carter turned.

"La'Unique, see your man gonna hit me in the back like a punk bitch? And this who you left me for? Fuck you and him!" he yelled. The man tried to twist out of my grip, but my hand was bigger than his whole arm. He turned his head and tried to bite the inside of my forearm. I kicked the side of his left knee with my right foot, and he dropped like he was about to propose. It was a love tap really. I didn't want to break his leg. I twisted his wrist counter clockwise and plucked the trailer hitch out of his hand.

"Everyone, please make your way to your vehicles," I said. I let my voice go as loud and as deep as I could. I must have been louder than I thought, or maybe seeing me disarm Ratboy calmed the crowd because most of them complied. After Carter got in his truck, I let go of Ratboy's arm. I gave him back his trailer hitch.

"Go get in your car, man," I said. If looks could kill, I would have been on the embalming table that instant. He limped backward, keeping his eyes on me the whole time.

"I'm a see you again playa," he said. I shrugged in my ill-fitting suit and walked back inside the building. I had just embarrassed him in front of his woman. If he hadn't threatened me I would have been disappointed. Walter was waiting for me.

"Fools and flies both I do despise but the more I know of fools the more I like flies," he said with a grin. I smiled back. A good sense of humor was

one of the requirements of working in the funeral business.

“Hopefully, there won’t be any more theatrics at the graveside,” I said.

“Yeah, I hope not. We just gotta get through Trudy Wise going full Pentecostal at the grave and doing the holy worm across the cemetery. I really can’t fool around out there now. Just got a call from the ladies at Rev. Watkins’ Temple. They finally got hold of his daughter. I guess I’m gonna have to get Gloria to bring me some dinner,” Walter said as we made our way to the front door. His shoulders slumped noticeably.

Rev. Esau Watkins had been the pastor of New Hope Baptist Temple over in Mathews County. About two weeks ago he had been found dead in his house. Sheriff Laurent and his crew were being tight-lipped about the details, but the local rumor mill was whispering suicide. Rev. Watkins was a widower with no brothers or sisters. His only daughter had left town a few years after I had entered the Marines. No one had heard from her since. I couldn’t say I blamed her.

Rev. Esau Watkins had been known as E-Money Watkins. He was a local thief, drug dealer, and sometimes illegal pawnbroker. He had owned a barbershop down in the lower end of Queen County. At that time, it was the only black barbershop on this side of the Coleman Bridge. I could remember going in there as a kid with my dad. I could still see the eyes of the men in the shop appraising my father as we sat and waited for my turn in the chair. The bathroom was behind a gaudy beaded curtain. Just outside the bathroom door, you could see VCRs and televisions and anything else of value that people would bring to E-Money in exchange for a few dollars for the electric bill or to pay for school clothes or to buy a rock for their shiny new crack pipe. I remember Watkins eyeballing my dad when he helped me into the barber chair. It wasn’t until I was older I realized they were envious of Dad because he was a white man who had married one of the prettier black women in the county.

Sometime during my time with the Corps, Esau Watkins found religion. By the time I came home, New Hope Baptist Temple was the biggest Temple on this side of the James River. The week my parents were killed, they had just broken ground on a new temple three times bigger than the first one. People in the county, black and white, were shocked and a bit aghast when Rev. Watkins built his Temple smack dab in the middle of what was

supposed to be protected wetlands near some high-priced waterfront property.

“Well, that should be interesting. I haven’t seen Lisa Watkins since she sat behind me in Dramatic Lit class in high school. She was a skinny little thing back then. I always thought if she coughed too hard her sternum would crack.” I said.

“I don’t remember her, but I was a senior when you was a junior so that would make her a freshman. Us seniors didn’t have time to learn you lower classmen. We had toilets to blow up,” Walter said. I shook my head.

After the funeral for Momma J, I had driven up to Richmond to retrieve E-Money from the Medical Examiner. Since his daughter was coming in to make the necessary arrangements, we could take possession of the remains. Every time I went there, I encountered a different pathologist or intern or attendant. Not everyone who works in a morgue is strange or weird. That’s a stereotype that funeral directors have to fight as well.

I had just gotten back to the office and placed Watkins’s body bag on the embalming table when I heard the doorbell ring. I walked up the hall and answered the door.

There were two perfectly lovely older black women standing on the front step. One was tall and slim with a bit of a twinkle in her eye. The other was shorter with a face that had seen its share of hard days, but she had more laugh lines than wrinkles. My conscious mind acknowledged those ladies, and I nodded toward them politely.

The savage that lived south of my waistline noticed the woman standing behind them. She was tall as well but built like a brick outhouse. Her body had curves in places most women had nothing but hopes and dreams. She was wearing an off the shoulder clingy white blouse and a black mini-skirt so tight it could have been a tattoo. Her long legs ended in black stiletto high heels. Her brown skin was covered with a glossy sheen that reminded me of melted chocolate. A honey blonde mane swept down her back to her narrow waist. She had spent a pretty penny on her hair extensions, but no man that met her would mind. Her bee-stung lips seemed to promise the fulfillment of every dark fantasy you had and some you didn’t even know you desired. Her emerald green eyes gave me a quick once over then turned cold and dark. I motioned for the three women to come inside.

“Uh, Mr. Blackmon is in the back, but I can let you ladies into the office. He’ll be with you in a minute,” I said. The two older women smiled and said thank you as they headed for the office to the left of the front door. The brick house trailed after them. Her black mini-skirt rolled with every swish of her hips. She didn’t smile, and she didn’t speak. I tried to adhere to the three second rule as I watched her walk. If I looked longer than three, I was straying into pervert territory. I figured the two older women were the trustees from New Hope. As to the third member of their triumvirate, well, I guess Lisa Watkins had grown up.

CHAPTER TWO

I poked my head in the dressing room where Walter was changing from his formal attire to business casual and grumbling to himself because Gloria was working overtime at the hospital and wouldn't be able to bring him any dinner. Then I went to the little cubby hole in the back of the building that I called home and changed out of my off the rack suit and put on my everyday attire. Black t-shirt, jeans, and black combat boots. After I changed, I went outside through the garage and started to wash the hearse and the van. The weather had reached that perfect temperature that only happened between the end of September and the beginning of October in the south. The days never got over 75, and the nights never dipped below 60. Good sleeping weather if you were inclined to sleep. I usually could only manage three or four hours a night.

I was rinsing off the hearse when I heard the unmistakable sound of high heels tapping across the concrete. I glanced around the corner of the carport, and I saw the woman I figured had to be Lisa Watkins leaning against a black Lexus. She was puffing on a cigarette like she had been poisoned and the antidote was in the filter. I turned off the water hose and walked around the corner.

"Hey, you okay?" I asked. I was used to people rushing out of the office while making arrangements. A loved one is dying was one thing but seeing the details of their final interment in black and white brought home the finality of the situation for some people. Sometimes it was too much for them to bear. The woman puffed on the cigarette again. Her eyes were dry. But her chest was heaving.

"I'm fine. Those two old ladies think they know who my daddy was, but they have no idea. They are sitting in there talking about fancy caskets and ordering limos for his deacons to attend the service. Like he was the goddamn pope. I'm just here to sign off so they can put his ass in the ground. I don't need to hear that shit," she said between puffs.

"Weren't you behind me in Dramatic Lit in school? We had Mrs. Stone. She got in trouble for always trying to pray before class. Remember she told

Tim Dawson he was going to hell because he listened to Danzig, and he told her she was going to hell for staring at the boys' basketball team when they practiced?" I asked.

The woman smiled for just an instant. If you had half-blinked, you would have missed it.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember you," I extended my hand.

"Nathan Waymaker. It's cool. I was a junior when you were a freshman. I didn't expect you to remember me. Lisa, right?" I said.

"Yeah. So did you know my dad?" she asked.

"When I was a kid I went to the barbershop a few times. But I never attended his Temple." I said. She nodded her head.

"The Temple. Those poor ladies in there torturing themselves over every little detail. You know what my dad told me bout that Temple the last time I talked to him?"

"No, I don't."

She took a deep drag off her cigarette. "He said it was the best hustle he had ever gotten into. Even better than the drug game. That was my dad for ya," she said. I wasn't sure how to respond to that so I resorted to some mannerly funeral home jargon I had picked up from Walt.

"We'll put him away nice, Lisa," I said. At first, she didn't react. Then she laughed. It was a sharp, brittle sound. Like a pane of glass cracking from the cold.

"I don't give a fuck how you put him away. Just bury him deep so he's that much closer to Hell," she said as she flicked her cigarette butt on the ground.

Before I could come up with another brilliant funeral home catchphrase, Curtis pulled up and hopped out of his tiny hybrid car.

"Hey, Nate. Hello, ma'am," he said as he approached us. Curtis was short but as clean and neat as new money. The creases in his dress pants were sharp enough to slice cheese. His beard was incredibly well groomed. I suspected he manscaped, but I had never asked for him to confirm it. I watched as his eyes lingered over Lisa.

“Hello,” she said. She turned and walked back into the office. Once she was gone, Curtis looked at me and gave me a conspiratorial nod.

“That right there is some USDA grade A beef! I think I just met my next ex-wife,” Curtis said. At the tender age of 35, Curtis had been married three times. I could admit I had a healthy appetite for the opposite sex. But where I was mildly promiscuous, Curtis was ravenous. He put notches on his bed post the way a hunter put heads on his wall.

“You need help, man. That’s Esau Watkins’ daughter. I went to school with her. Although I will say she did not look like that in Drama class,” I said with a laugh.

“Really? I feel like I know her from somewhere else,” he said. He squinted and thought about it for a second. Then he let it go. Curtis wasn’t one for long bouts of introspection.

“How long they been here? I gotta get my check from the big man for today’s service,” he asked. He plucked an errant piece of dust from the lapel of his blazer.

“Not too long. You might wanna go to the television room and wait. I think they gonna be in there a minute,” I said. Curtis frowned. This obviously wasn’t the news he wanted to hear. He started to say something else when Lisa Watkins walked out of the building again. This time, she headed straight for her Lexus without saying a word. The car roared to life, and she spun tires as she left our parking lot and turned onto Rt.33. I watched as the tail lights receded into the distance. A few seconds later, Walter came to the door.

“Nathan, the ladies would like to speak with you,” he said. His voice was subdued, and a scowl was creeping across his face. I walked into the building with Curtis fast on my heels. Walter came out of his office with the company checkbook. As he brushed past me, he spoke into my ear.

“Might be some work for you. The office is yours,” he whispered. I bit the inside of my bottom lip. The two older women were sitting in Walt’s office staring at me. I could feel the weight of their expectations already bearing down on my shoulders.

I entered the office and sat in Walt’s chair. It felt molded to his girth and resistant to my wide shoulders. “What can I do for you, ladies?” I asked.

They looked at each other then back at me then at each other again. Their brown faces were nervous but determined.

“I’m Eloise Parrish,” the taller woman said. “We are members of Rev. Watkins’ congregation at the New Hope Baptist Temple. You’re Gordon Waymaker’s boy. Terrible what happened to your parents. Just terrible. And how that Vandekellum boy just got off. Lord, you was in my prayers that week. But your parents would be proud if they could see you now. You helped Jim Sutter get his girl back. My daughter works with his wife down at the nursing home. She told me all about it.” I didn’t say anything.

“I’m Louise Sheer. We...we know you got a good heart, Nathan,” the other woman stammered. Then her voice dropped to a low whisper.

“I heard about you taking care of that Hewitt boy who had touched them children at the daycare,” she said.

The two old women sitting across from me were studies in dignity. They held their gray heads up high. I didn’t want to burst their bubble, but I didn’t have a good heart. My heart had been shattered the day my parents died. Since I’d quit the sheriff department, I had done some odd jobs for some folks in the counties, earning a reputation as a man who could help you on the down low. Do things the cops couldn’t or wouldn’t do.

“All I did was ride up to Richmond with Jim and look scary when we found his girl,” I said. Mrs. Parrish smiled.

“Oh, you’re not scary. You’re just a big ol’ teddy bear,” she said. Mrs. Sheer gave her a disapproving glance, but Mrs. Parrish didn’t notice. Or if she did notice she didn’t give a damn. Mrs. Sheer cleared her throat.

“We been asking the sheriff about what happened to Rev. Watkins, but they won’t tell us nothing. It’s been three weeks, and we can’t get them to say one word!” she said. She was squeezing the handle of her purse like it was a serpent she was trying to strangle.

“I guess they were waiting for his daughter to get into town,” I said. Mrs. Sheer shook her head.

“That’s what we thought. But when we went by there with Lisa, they still didn’t tell us nothing. And that girl acts like she don’t care what happened to her daddy,” Mrs. Sheer said.

“And so you want me to ask the sheriff’s department what happened to Rev. Watkins?” I said. They both nodded. I leaned forward.

“Ladies, I know you both know I resigned from the department five years ago. They are not gonna tell me any more than they told you,” I said.

“We just wanna know what happened to him,” she said earnestly.

“What do you think happened?” I asked. Sheer looked at Parrish again.

“Wethinkhewasmurdered,” she said. It came out as one word. She said it fast as if the very syllables were tainted and she didn’t want them to make her tongue rot. I drummed my fingers on Walt’s impossibly neat desk.

“Really. Because I had heard it might be something else,” I said. Mrs. Parrish’s shoulders tensed.

“Rev. Watkins did not kill himself! I don’t know where that is coming from, but I know it ain’t true! Esau would not have done that!” she hissed. I nodded.

Growing up biracial, I have been able to observe the cultures of both sides of my lineage. I was always amazed at how many more similarities there were than differences. But one thing I noticed in the black community my mother had come from was that people were loath to accept suicide as a cause of death. It seemed like some people saw it as an insult to the resiliency that black folk were known for. Walt had sent me on a removal once where the deceased had the gun in his lap and a note on the refrigerator and some people still theorized on how the murderer had tricked him into putting the gun in his mouth. The only thing that kept me from dismissing her denials out of hand was something I knew that they didn’t.

The Queen’s County Sheriff’s Department could be bought. They could be bullied. They could be incompetent. They could be all three at the same time. That was how the drunk racist who ran my parents off the North River Bridge got away with murder. Thanks to the Queen County Sheriff’s department, Steven Vandekellum never served a day in jail for killing my mother and father. In fact, a week after they died he was celebrating his birthday in Aruba while I was trying to contact members of my father’s family that hadn’t spoken to him since I’d been born.

We sat there with the sound of Walt's wall clock ticking in our ears and the last desperate rays of the setting sun casting horizontal shadows through the blinds hanging in front of the picture window behind me. I considered what they wanted and what I knew. From everything I could remember or had heard, Watkins had been a sour piece of work. Whether he had been murdered or committed suicide, I didn't think the world would suffer too much from his absence. His own daughter wasn't wasting any tears over him. Poking around at the sheriff's office would be a pain in the ass. I hadn't left under the best of circumstances. Of the six people on the force, four actively disliked me, one had tolerated me and another had let me bang her silly on occasion until I called her the wrong name during a drunken rendezvous. Mrs. Sheer must have mistaken my silence for a negotiating tactic.

"We can pay you," she said.

"Money isn't the issue, Mrs. Sheer. I just don't think there is much I can do to help you," I said.

"Two thousand dollars. Just to ask a few questions," she said. I'm sure my eyes must have widened like I had stuck my finger in a light socket. Two thousand dollars to ask a few questions? I couldn't believe Watkins' Temple had that kind of money. I wondered if they put a roll of ten dollar bills in the bathroom for toilet paper.

"Are you saved, Nathan?" Mrs. Parrish asked. I blinked.

"My parents weren't big on Temple, ma'am. But I believe there is good and evil. Positive and negative energy, ya know? I believe you do right by people and it comes back to ya. Same thing if you do wrong," I said.

"The reason I ask is because if you was a Christian, you would do this for us instead of hemming and hawing. You would do it because it's the right thing to do. I haven't been saved that long so I can say some things Louise may not want to. This shit don't feel right. It ain't adding up. And we need answers. Esau wasn't always a good man, and I guess some people might say he got back some of what he gave out earlier in his life. But he didn't deserve to be killed right in his own house. And the sheriff don't seem like he got any fire under his ass to get to the bottom of it. To them, it's just another dead black man. But to us, he was our pastor and our friend, and we think he deserves better," Mrs. Parrish said. Her frank and honest eyes bore down on

me. I imagined that was the look she used when she was a sassy and sexy twenty-something and shit was about to get real. Mrs. Sheer's face looked pinched and tight like she had sat on a tack and was trying not to scream. I think Mrs. Parish's language had offended her a bit.

Looking back on it, I remember thinking, "Well, it can't hurt to ask a few questions."

Fools and flies. I had been one of them that day. I'll give you a hint. I don't have wings.

CHAPTER THREE

Mrs. Parrish and Mrs. Sheer left, taking my promise to stop by the sheriff's office first thing in the morning with them. I went back to the embalming room to get Rev. Watkins out of the body bag, but Walt and Curtis already were preparing to start the process.

"Sorry, Walt, those ladies kept me tied up," I said.

"No worries, cuz. Me and Curtis got him straight," he said. Technically, Walt was my boss, but he never talked to me like an employee, and I never took advantage of his trust.

"What did they want anyway?" he asked as he cut a small incision in Rev. Watkins' neck. He never looked up from his work, and his hands were as steady as a rock. Walt could prepare a body so well you would think the person was going to hop out of the casket and hit the club in his new suit. He understood something that some of his colleagues didn't. To be really great at funeral service you had to be part scientist, part artist, part businessman.

"They are convinced somebody killed him," I gestured toward the body of Rev. Watkins, "and they want me to light a fire under Laurent's ass to find out who," I said. Walt looked up then.

"You think that's a good idea? You going round the police station?" he asked. His voice had dropped an octave.

"Don't worry. I'm not punching nobody in the face. Or throwing anybody through a window. Or..." I said, but Walt held up one gloved hand and stopped me mid-sentence.

"I knew I knew her ass from somewhere!" Curtis said. He had taken off his gloves and was scrolling through something on his cell phone.

"Don't tell me you fucked her and she sent you some titty pics to commemorate the occasion," I said.

"Only in my mind, man. Look here," he said. He handed me the phone.

I looked at the screen. A video was playing of two women. One black, the other white. The black woman was going down on the white woman like

a golden ticket was buried in her snatch.

“I’m not that into girl on girl, Curtis,” I said.

“Keep watching,” he said, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

The black woman popped her head up from her deep-sea muff diving long enough for me to get a good look at her face and her sparkling green eyes. I looked at Curtis then back at his phone.

“I knew I knew her! Her name is Cat Noir in the movie! That scene won best girl on girl scene at the 2009 AVN awards. She does this thing with her tongue...well anyway, I guess we know how she can afford that Lexus now,” Curtis said. I handed the phone back to him. It suddenly felt dirty in my hand, like I was holding a soiled diaper.

“Two things. One, why do you have an index of AVN awards in your head? Two, you think the only way a woman can afford a Lexus is to be a porn star?” Curtis’s smile faltered a bit, but then it righted itself. He closed the window on his phone.

“I’m just saying she probably makes good money. Shit, she getting paid to do what a lot of women do for free. I ain’t judging her. Nothing wrong with sex, brother. Even the bible has a section on it. The Song of Solomon is all about sex. I’m just saying, at least we know we will get paid for the service,” Curtis said. He grinned like a jack o’ lantern. The urge to wipe that smile off his face briefly blossomed in my mind, but I ignored it.

“Oh, we getting paid. Just not by his daughter. She signed off and gave the New Hope trustee board all authority when it comes to the good Reverend’s services. I already got the check from Mrs. Parrish,” Walt said as he poured fluid into the embalming machine.

“Their collection plates must be the size of pizza pans. They giving me two thousand dollars just to go by the sheriff’s office,” I said.

“Jesus, Nate, don’t you think you’re overcharging a bit?” Walt asked.

“Hey, they came up with that figure. I would have done it for nothing, but they offered it. I mean, I feel a teensy-weensy bit guilty. I’m just gonna poke my head through the door, ask them about the deceased over there, and leave. Literally the easiest two grand I’ve ever made. And that includes the time we went to Atlantic City and I hit on sixteen at the blackjack table,” I said.

“Damn, they trying to make it rain up in here,” Curtis said as he began massaging Watkins’ arms and legs. He was facilitating the flow of the embalming solution.

“I tell you one thing. He didn’t kill himself,” Walt said.

“You don’t think so?” I asked.

“Nah. There ain’t no stippling around the wound. And look at the angle on that wound. Who shoots themselves in the chest from at least five feet away? Nope. Unless he did it with a selfie stick, I’d say somebody shot him. Probably with a .32 or a .38,” Walt said.

Great. Lisa Watkins was apparently a porn star and Walt had confirmed her father had most likely been murdered just as the Temple ladies had feared. In less than ten minutes, my two-thousand-dollar cake walk had become a minefield.

“If he didn’t kill himself, I wonder who did it?” Curtis asked.

“I don’t care. All I have to do is go by the sheriff’s and ask what’s going on. That’s it. I ain’t Sherlock Holmes.” I said.

“I don’t think your head could fit in a deerstalker hat anyway.” Walt said with a grin.

CHAPTER FOUR

By the time they finished stitching, gluing, and pumping fluid in the dearly departed Rev. Watkins, it was eight o'clock. Curtis had to dip, so I helped Walt move him from the embalming table to the dressing table. Once that was done, we walked up front again.

"That's it for me tonight. Maybe now that my stomach is stuck to my backbone I can find something to eat. The service is gonna be at the Temple over in Mathews this Tuesday. Oh, and be on the lookout for the casket truck in the morning. If you're here," Walt said.

"Gotcha. I'll probably be here. I might step out for a little while tonight, though. Ride over to Gloucester and hit the Cove. Maybe see what Raheem is doing. Play a game of pool or two." Walt stopped at the door. He had his hand on the horizontal bar that ran across its center. He looked back at me.

"You all right? I know them ladies talking bout the sheriff must have brought up some bad memories," he said. I stretched my arms to the ceiling and listened to my back pop and crackle like a campfire.

"I'm good. If I go out I'll make sure I lock up," I said.

"Night, cuz," he said.

"Night, cuz," I replied.

I locked the door behind him and went down the hall toward the garage. I stopped at the door on the left between the bathrooms and the second chapel. I pulled out my keys and unlocked it. My little cubby hole wasn't much on ambiance or décor, but it gave me a quiet place to lay my head. There were times where the quiet was too much and I'd tear down the hall on my way somewhere, anywhere. Anywhere I didn't have to hear my own thoughts echoing in the hollows of my mind. There was a single bed against the far right wall. To the left was a small dresser with four drawers with big brass pulls that looked like the buttons on an admiral's coat. Describing my room as sparse would have been an understatement. I lay back on my bed and closed my eyes tight. I thought about Mrs. Parrish and Mrs. Sheer.

About going to the Sheriff's office. My chest started to tighten like a goblin was sitting on it.

I got up and splashed some cologne on my face. I pulled out my phone and texted my friend Raheem. I asked him if he was up for a few hours of beer, pool, and shit talking. He responded that he was indeed in the mood for some rabble-rousing, and he could meet me at the Cove in thirty minutes. I told him that worked for me. Then I got the hell out of my room and hopped into my truck.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Cove had once been a small biker bar with a clientele that ranged from convicted felons to soon to be convicted felons. Two years ago, the owner, Ricky Callipher, and his girlfriend had disappeared. The last time anyone ever saw them was after the bar closed one hot and sticky Friday night in June. They had been observed at the gas station at the corner of Rt.198 and Rt.14. Most people thought they had run out of town ahead of debts. Both legal and otherwise. Word on the street was they had run afoul of some boys who went by the regionally influenced sobriquet of the “Dixie Mafia.” The local grapevine postulated they would show up one day after the heat had died down. I didn’t think so. A week before Ricky and his lady had gone missing I ran into my friend Skunk in town. I knew Skunk sometimes did some freelance work for the Dixie boys. If they had sent Skunk after Ricky you could probably cancel Ricky’s newspaper subscription.

The music was pulsating through the air as I parked my truck. A matte black refurbished ’57 Chevy with a 283 cubic inch V8 engine and four on the floor. Me and my dad had fixed it up the summer before he died. I had dipped into my savings to buy the body, but he and I had done almost all the work ourselves. The ’57 had always been my dream. Working on it with my dad had been a dream come true.

The front of the Cove resembled an antebellum mansion. Four white Corinthian columns supported a gray shingled roof that covered a wide porch. I climbed the three cinder block steps and walked past a bored bouncer with a beard so thick he could have smuggled the Ark of the Covenant in it. The interior of the Cove was bathed in soft red and green light from the paper lanterns strung across the high vaulted ceiling. To the right, a dark, oiled, teak bar sprawled across the room. To the left were booths and tables each with a faux hurricane lamp sitting in the center. In the far left corner, the DJ sat with his laptop and some speakers and a microphone. He had a flat screen on a stand set up off to his left. That could only mean one thing. The horror of karaoke night would soon be upon us.

The crowd was kind of light for a Friday night, but I knew the regulars would start pouring in after ten.

I cut through the large bar area and headed for a pair of bat-wing doors. The Cove had four old style pool tables in its backroom. The light back here was bright and white under the money green shades that hung over each table.

I saw Raheem shooting some unnecessary practice shots. The guy was a natural pool shark. That's why we never played for money. Raheem Reynolds was a slim, wiry man with a complexion the color of warm toffee. His hair was twisted into thick dreadlocks that fell to his shoulders. He had a wide smile and big expressive eyes that widened in direct proportion to how excited he was about what you were discussing. We had known each other since second grade.

Raheem was the Environmental Specialist for a recycling plant in Newport News. Newport News was across the river, but it might as well have been another planet. Men on this side of the water still got up at 4 am to run crab pots in the summer and gill nets in the winter. The chugging sound of flat bottom runabout motors still resonated through the counties. People from Newport News and Hampton and Norfolk boarded boats for hours of sun worshiping and beer guzzling. People in the counties did it to survive. They came home smelling like sea water and fish guts to put food on their tables and put their kids through college.

Raheem looked up and waved me over. We slapped hands, and he pulled me in for a manly half-hug.

"You ready for this ass whooping? I'll be as gentle as I can, but as you can see, I got a big ass stick," he said.

"I'm glad we are friends, or I would think you were coming on to me," I said.

"Man, if I ever went gay, you wouldn't be my type. I would get some Prince type motherfucker. He almost a woman," Raheem said.

"That whole statement is contradictory and offensive in ways I can't even begin to explain," I said.

"Aw, Nathan Waymaker, Mr. Politically Correct 2012," Raheem said.

I fished a dollar out of my pocket to pay for the next game.

“Rack ’em up, bitch,” I said. Raheem laughed.

The rest of the night passed like a languid dream. The beer and liquor flowed freely. Around midnight, Eros smiled upon us. Raheem and I made the acquaintance of a couple of ladies who shared progressive views on casual sex and a hotel room. They were in town for a wedding, but the bride had backed out of her bachelorette party at the last minute. So they had made their way to the bar closest to the hotel to celebrate for her by proxy. Raheem and I were more than happy to assist them.

We ended up back in their room after a massive amount of cherry bombs, lemon drops, and shots of tequila. The bridesmaid I ended up with was a short and pleasantly plump Puerto Rican with a fetching pair of double D’s. When we first met, she told me I reminded her of someone famous. She would say that again and again as the night progressed. Finally, after three minutes into one of the better blowjobs I’ve ever had the pleasure of receiving, she raised her head from my crotch. She grinned at me with her wide mouth. Her thick, black hair spilled across my thighs. She wagged her index finger at me.

“I got it! You look like a kinda chubby version of that guy from the Rundown!” she shouted. I heard Raheem snort as he lay in the other bed with her friend.

“The Rock?” I offered.

“No...the other guy. Dwayne Johnson,” she mumbled before falling face first onto my stomach. After a few awkward moments, she began to saw some serious wood. I sighed, rolled over, and tried to forget about my own serious wood. Just another Friday night in the boondocks.

CHAPTER SIX

As usual, I only slept a few hours. The sun was barely peeking over the horizon when I eased my bulk out of the bed. I found my clothes and crept out of the room as silently as my size 14s would let me. I couldn't remember if I had given the Hispanic bridesmaid my cell number. If I did, I doubted she would use it. I had a feeling I was destined to become a story she told her cubicle mate to scandalize her between staff meetings at the accounting firm where she worked.

I eased into Black Betty (I had named my truck after an old Walter Moseley novel, not the Ram Jam song) and guided her back onto the double lane highway. As I drove past the half-abandoned strip malls and dimly lit fast food joints that gave way to rolling hills and huge swathes of woodland, a voice in my head began to excoriate me.

The voice reminded me that I had imbibed enough alcohol to incapacitate a Tyrannosaurus Rex. I should not have driven Betty from the Cove to the hotel. Never mind the fact that I had to meet the casket truck at the office in two hours and I had agreed to go to the sheriff's office for the ladies from Rev. Watkins Temple this morning. I couldn't very well go over there hung-over and smelling like the inside of a bottle of Thunderbird. The little voice asked me if I had gotten drunk on purpose. Was I nervous about going to the sheriff's office? Perhaps I had subconsciously gotten shit faced so I could claim amnesia and tell the Temple women I had forgotten about their request?

I politely told the voice to go have sexual relations with itself through the anus and cranked up some Pearl Jam on my radio. The accusatory tone of my inner voice was drowned out by Eddie Vedder's mumbled lyrics.

The casket truck was idling at the garage door when I got back to the funeral home. I helped the driver, a pleasant middle aged white guy, get the casket on the Temple truck, and we rolled it inside the garage. I hopped in the shower and washed the smell of liquor and questionable choices off of my skin. I dried off and grabbed my casual funeral home attire: a black golf shirt and tan khakis and, of course, my boots. I brushed my teeth with a

thoroughness I usually reserved for a first date. Once I checked the mirror and made sure my eyes weren't too red, I took a deep breath and headed over to the sheriff's office.

The Queen County Sheriff's office sat about one hundred yards from the Courthouse. The Sheriff's office sat about fifty feet from the County Services building. The whole compound sat in the middle of Queen County's town center. Two grocery stores were about a mile from the Courthouse Buildings. Two doctors' offices, three restaurants, a fabric shop, a hardware store, a car wash with two extra big stations for jacked up 4x4's, a pharmacist, a bank, and the library rounded out the rest of the town center.

Perhaps owing to the influence it exerted over our lives, most of us locals called the whole area the "courthouse." It was another one of those regional dialectical phrases that made me the target of quizzical glances when I first arrived at boot camp.

I parked Betty in front of the stout brick building that housed Queen's County's finest. As the engine clicked and cooled, I sat there and squeezed the steering wheel until my hands ached. My stomach was doing jumping jacks as though a CrossFit enthusiast was trapped in my guts. I had been a deputy once. A pretty good one if I do say so myself. I wasn't a hardass when it wasn't necessary, but I was no push over either. I had no problem putting a little bit of extra enthusiasm into an arrest if I went on a call and saw a wife holding a frozen bag of peas against her face. I told myself I was doing good work. That I was protecting the weak and taking care of those who couldn't take care of themselves. Steven Vandekellum had made me realize how foolish those thoughts had been. The truth is no one can be fully protected. Safety is an illusion. There is no safety. Just downtime between tragedies.

I got out of my truck and strode up to the front door of the sheriff's office. I pulled on one of the steel double doors and entered the lobby and booking area. The room was painted a sterile shell white. Harsh overhead lights shone down, exposing every nook, cranny, and crack in the room. A small service window covered with bars and Plexiglas sat at the back of the room. A black metal door was located to the left of the window. On the right side of the window was a red metal door. The black door led to the office area where the five deputies and two special investigators had desks and cubicles. You had to go through that room to get to Sheriff Laurent's office. It

was nine o'clock. He was probably sitting at his desk reading the arrest reports from the previous night in between puffs from his omnipresent cigar. The state had decreed that all public offices would be smoke-free. The newest occupant of the Governor's mansion was a staunch something or other and this edict was supposed to show he was strong on health issues. Or was it environmental issues. I lost track sometimes.

With each puff of his stogie, Laurent expressed his feelings about the administration. Past, present, and future. He was a fixture in Queen County just like the forest ranger fire tower out on Rt. 33 that Woodrow Wilson had dedicated back in 1913. I think Laurent had been sheriff longer than some of his deputies had been alive.

The woman in the window was just as much of a fixture as Laurent, just not as well known. Ruth Ann Horton was the head dispatcher, secretary, and den mother for the sheriff's office. She was somewhere north of sixty and tough as a two-dollar steak. A true steel magnolia. A woman who never left the house unless her hair and makeup were impeccable and her fully loaded pistol was in her Dooney and Bourke purse. Today, she was rocking a swirled bouffant that looked like someone had dropped a scoop of ice cream on her head. Blood red lipstick that contrasted sharply with her milk colored skin. Her false eyelashes could probably trap a fly.

As I stood just inside the front door, the red metal door opened and Deputy Sam Dean appeared, escorting a young man. Sam was a little older than me with an elongated face and sad eyes. The young man was decked out in redneck chic. A camo shirt with a Dixie flag hat. Jeans and some brown work boots completed his ensemble. He shuffled up to the window. Ruth grabbed a plastic tray and slid it through the small slit at the bottom of the Plexiglas. The young man silently gathered his belongings. Once he was done, Ruth pulled the tray back through the slit.

"What about my fifty dollars? I had fifty dollars in cash last night," the young man said. His voice was low and husky. He sounded tired, disgusted, and dehydrated. Most likely a DUI.

There but for the grace of God go I.

"We gotta feed you. We gotta give you toiletries. We gotta give you blankets and pillows. So your money goes to those expenses. You want it back? File a report with the county clerk. They will send you a check in six to

eight weeks,” Ruth said. Four packs of Virginia Slims a day left her voice a rattling wreck.

“Six to eight weeks? What the hell you mean six to eight weeks? I came in here with fifty dollars, and I’m leaving with fifty dollars!” he yelled. Sam put his hand on the guy’s shoulder. Ruth leaned forward so he could hear her nice and clear.

“You came in here with a blood-alcohol level so high we could have lit your burps on fire to roast marshmallows. You came in here with piss running down your leg and vomit on your L.L. Bean shirt. Now you can leave and file the necessary paperwork, or you can stay for another night for defying a direct order of an officer of the law. Doesn’t matter to me, sonny. I just need to know if you’re going home or do I need to get you some clean sheets for tonight,” she said. The young man dropped his head and signed his property release form. I stepped aside, and Sam nodded at me as he walked the young man out the door.

“Still keepin’ em straight, huh, Ms. Ruth?” I asked. Ruth gave me a sad smile.

“Nathan, Nathan, Nathan. You know somebody gotta do it. What in the blue hell are you doing here?” she asked. She crossed her arms across her scant bosom and tilted her head to the side.

“I just wanted to see your beautiful face,” I said. Ruth let out a ragged guffaw.

“Flattery will get you nowhere except in trouble,” she said. Her smile widened a bit.

“Actually, I wanted to speak with Sheriff Laurent.” Aaaand the smile disappeared.

“About?”

“I’d rather just talk to him. It’s kinda personal,” I lied. If I told her I was asking questions about an active investigation, she would have thrown me out on my ear. After she chewed my ass. We stood there with an uncomfortable silence between us for a few moments before Ruth spoke again.

“Uh huh. Nathan, you um...you know we all feel sorry as all get out about what happened with that Vandekellum boy and your parents,” she

said.

“Yeah. Where’s Victor at today?” I asked. I knew as soon as I said his name an image of me hurling him through the front window had entered her head.

“Uh, he’s on patrol right now. Nathan, it was a terrible mistake what happened with those reports,” she said. Her face looked pained. I could see spidery wrinkles beneath her foundation.

“Ruth, could you just buzz Laurent?” I said. A few uncomfortable minutes ticked by before she turned and went to her desk. I saw her grab an old-fashioned handset and speak into it for a few seconds. A few more tense minutes went by before she came back to the window.

“He said come on back. I’ll let you in. Nathan, I just want you to know...” but I cut her off.

“Thank you, Ruth. I know it wasn’t your fault,” I said. The conversation made me feel like I had opened the door on my parents having sex. Ruth hit a button, and I heard the black metal door unlock. I walked through and didn’t look back. I think she was as relieved as I was that our little discussion was over. There was only one deputy in the office. Les Drayton was eating a hot dog at his desk. He looked up, saw me, and started to choke. I just walked past him and knocked on the frosted glass window that bore Laurent’s name and title.

“Come on in, Nate,” Laurent said.

William Jefferson Laurent was a squat fire hydrant of a man. His wide face was perpetually red as though he had just finished climbing a flight of stairs no one else could see. His bulk stretched his battleship gray uniform to the breaking point. But under that bulk was a lot of farm boy strength. His hair was cut in a crew cut that was more salt than pepper. His cigar was smoldering in an iron ashtray on his scarred desk. His small black eyes were nearly hidden behind rapidly encroaching bags and jowls.

Laurent was old school country tough. Cool Hand Luke tough. Years ago, some good ol’ boys had gotten it in their head to rob the pharmacy in town. Laurent had been in there out of uniform when the robbery went down. He drew his .45 caliber semi-automatic out of a holster under his old poplin jacket and shot both would-be robbers. One died at the scene, the

other had to attend court proceedings on a stretcher. Laurent had shot him in the dick. I thought the guy who died had lucked out.

“What you want, Nate?” he asked. He didn’t invite me to sit. I put my hands in my pockets and stared back at him.

“How’s the Esau Watkins thing coming?” I asked. Laurent’s face was impassive. But I saw him squeeze his hand into a fist and grind his thumb against his forefinger.

“Nate, was you related to Rev. Watkins?” he asked. His voice had a dry, clinical tone.

“No, but-”

“Are you in any way an executor of his estate or legally responsible for any of his affairs?”

“No, but I-”

“Then I don’t think you have any call to ask anything about Rev. Watkins,” he said. And with that, he picked up his cigar and took a few long puffs.

“I know one thing. It wasn’t suicide. Walt’s got the body, and there ain’t any stippling around the wound. And he said it look like he was shot from about ten feet away. So I don’t think you wanna pass that story around town. What’s the matter, Sheriff? Somebody told you to cover this up too?”

Laurent glared at me with a baleful intensity. I thought he was going to get out of his seat, but he just puffed harder on his cigar. He took it out of his mouth and knocked about a pound of ash off of it into the ashtray.

“I’ve been sheriff of this county for thirty-two years. I was twenty-three when I was first elected, and I ain’t never took orders from anybody. What happened with your parents’ care was a clerical error. And I wish it hadn’t happened. I really do, Nate. But I’ll be damned if I gonna sit here and listen to you question my integrity,” he said. His eyes were small shards of obsidian.

“Look, I didn’t come here to debate whether or not Warren Vandekellum made you his bitch. I was asked by two officials from Watkins’ Temple to see what was going on in the investigation. Two determined and dignified ladies who want some answers. The kind of ladies who look real good on Ten On Your Side telling their story to the news,” I said.

“Nate, we don’t need no newsboys coming down here looking for something that ain’t there. You tell Mrs. Sheer and the other one we doing all we can. We exploring every avenue. And we will find out exactly what happened to Rev. Watkins,” he said. He didn’t look at me when he said it. His eyes had gone to something over my right shoulder.

“Sheriff, you don’t owe this bastard any explanation. You want me to throw him out?” Victor Culler said behind me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Victor Culler was breathing hard. I didn't turn around. I didn't trust myself to see him yet.

"How you doing, Victor?" I asked.

"Just say the word, boss. We can get him for resisting arrest," he said, ignoring my question. I heard his footsteps as he moved closer to me.

"Victor, go out front. Go on now and let us talk," Laurent said with a weariness.

"I'm about to turn around, Victor," I said. My voice sounded strange. Too soft, too delicate. Like I was talking to a lover.

Victor leaned in close to my ear. I could smell some cheap male body spray coming off him in waves.

"Just so you know, I'm leaving because a superior officer gave me a direct order. I'm not afraid of you, Nate. In a fair fight, I got your ass!" he hissed.

"In a fair fight, I'd break both of your arms. Throwing you through that window was an act of mercy," I said quietly.

"Whatever," he said with some bravado. But he carried his ass out of the office just the same.

"You hear me, Nate?" Sheriff Laurent asked. He was staring at me.

"What?"

"I said you make those ladies understand we gonna find out what happened. Just give us some time. Esau wasn't always a minister, and somebody might have held a grudge against him for something he might have done before he found the Lord. We in a small town, Nathan. Don't nothing stay buried forever. And people can't help but talk. Eventually, everything comes to light," he said. He bore down on me with those black eyes when he said it.

"I'll try, Sheriff," I said.

"You do that now, Nate. Now, if you would excuse me, I got a lot to do and not a long time to do it," he said as he opened a manila folder on his

desk. I turned and walked toward the door.

Ruth buzzed me out, and I nearly ran right into Victor. He was leaning against the service window.

“You have a good day now. Make sure you doing the speed limit and don’t have no busted tail lights, all right? I’d hate to have to pull you over, Nate,” he said.

“You ever get all that glass out your face, Victor?” I asked. He stood up straight and put his hand on the butt of his pistol.

“Everybody knows you sucker punched me that day,” he said. His face was getting redder than Laurent’s. He looked like a ripe tomato that was about to burst.

“You keep telling yourself that,” I said as I moved to walk past him. He put himself in my path.

“You think you can just talk to me any kind of way? I am a duly appointed officer of the law. You just a homeless vet with a fucked up head. Yeah, I get it. You’re pissed at me about what happened with your parents. Well, I’ve apologized. Time for you to get over it, Nate. Shit happens. One day soon I’m gonna be Sheriff. So, you might wanna watch how you talk to me,” he said. I put my hands in my pockets. I needed to keep them away from Victor’s neck.

“How much they pay you, Victor? How much did it cost for you to shit on that badge and let Vandekellum walk?”

“Speaking of walking, no one has seen Steven Vandekellum walking around for what, three years? What you know about that, Nate?” he said with an icicle of a smile.

“I know if you had done your job, instead of sucking on Warren Vandekellum’s shriveled up old pecker, we would all know where his son, Steven was. Cause he would be in prison where he belongs,” I said. “Where you bury him, Nate? Out by your parents’ old house?” he whispered.

“Get out of my way, Victor,” I said.

“You threatening an officer of the law?” he said, gripping his gun.

Maybe he decided today wasn’t the day. Maybe he heard something in my voice that told him I wasn’t playing. Or maybe he finally remembered

what really had happened the last time he had put his hands on me. I don't know.

He stepped aside and let me pass.

“One day soon, Nate. You think about that. One day soon,” he said, trying to maintain some shred of machismo. I didn't say anything. I was done talking. I left the sheriff's office.

By the time I got to Black Betty, I was shaking. I got in and sat there for a few more minutes, kneading my thighs with my fists. I knew I'd see bruises tonight when I got into bed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I drove back to the funeral home and crashed for a few hours. I didn't dream of oceans full of zombies this time. The feature presentation in my mental theater this afternoon was the day I gave up my duties as a duly sworn deputy of Queen County, Virginia. Can you really call it a dream when it's a real memory? It was like watching a hyper-stylized movie where every motion, every word held special significance. I awoke to the sound of Walt knocking on my door. He knows that I can't be shaken or poked while I'm asleep. That never ends well. Especially not after a dream like that.

"Hey, you alive in there?" he asked through the door. He was only partially joking.

"Be out in a second." Walt moved on down the hall, and I got up and stretched. I put my boots back on and went to the lobby. Walt was sitting at his desk looking much happier after a big breakfast. I plopped down in the chair opposite the desk and threw my leg over the arm rest.

"So everyone in one piece down at the police station?" he asked as he looked at me over the top of his reading glasses.

"All present and accounted for, captain. All the windows were intact when I left," I said. Walt shook his head.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

"Oh, everything is hunky dory. The Queen County Sheriff's Department is handling things with their usual care and professionalism," I said. Then I rolled my eyes. Walt sighed.

"That bad, huh?" he asked.

"I don't know. On the surface it doesn't seem like they ain't doing their due diligence. But something just doesn't feel right. I don't know how much of that is me and my wonderful relationship with the police force of this fine county and how much is some actual shady shit. Either way I don't think I'm gonna be much use to those ladies. They'd be better off calling Gene Cox at Channel 12." I said.

“Maybe that’s for the best. You don’t need to be running behind those boys down there at the sheriff’s office. Victor Culler just looking for a reason to lock you up. He’d arrest you not wiping properly if he could,” he said.

“Not wiping properly should be a crime. Ask anyone who has to sit on the toilet after you,” I said. Walt laughed.

“Stop talking shit and go get the van. We got a call from the nursing home this morning. Miss Verlaine Holmes has exited stage left,” he said.

I parked around back and hit the intercom next to the rusty backdoor near the employee smoking area.

“Yeah?” a tired voice said.

“I’m here from Blackmon’s Funeral home. Picking up Verlaine Holmes,” I said.

“All right, come on in,” she said and the intercom went silent. I opened the big door and grimaced as it screeched. It was in desperate need of some lubrication.

A tall, dark-skinned black woman with long braids and in nurse scrubs met me halfway as I walked down the hall. She motioned for me to follow her. I did so happily. Her butt was as round and as firm as half a pumpkin. We entered one of the private rooms, and I stood next to her, dumbfounded.

“This is how you found her?” I asked. The nurse nodded.

“Mr. Johnson from across the hall has confessed to getting a Viagra from his grandson and, as he put it, ‘giving the lady some attention,’ the nurse said. Like I said, I take removals seriously. Families look to us to treat their loved ones with respect and solemnity even if they weighed four hundred pounds and we had multiple hernias trying to get them off the floor. I always do my best to make the transition of the remains (another piece of jargon from Walt) as smooth and seamless as possible. But nothing I had seen in my three years of working with Walt prepared me for how I found Miss Verlaine.

Face down, ass up was apparently the way she liked to fuck. She must have expired while she and Mr. J were getting it on. He had panicked and retired to his room without telling anyone, and none of her nurses had checked on her before the rigor had set in. Her ample backside was high in the air, and her nearly hairless head was pressed face first into a pillow. Oh,

and she was buck ass naked under the sheet someone had thrown over her. I know they were trying to preserve her pride, but it just made you stare harder. She looked like some kind of sex tent.

“I guess she died doing what she loved,” I said. The nurse laughed but cut it off and tried to hold it in. Finally, she got herself under control.

“How sad is my life that a nursing home resident has gotten laid more times this month than I have?” she said. I almost offered to help her with that sad state of affairs, but I had work to do.

After some creative loading techniques, I got Miss Verlaine back to the shop safe and sound. I asked Walt if this was the weirdest removal he had ever seen.

“It’s definitely in the top five,” he said. Just as we finished getting her on the table, my cell phone buzzed. It was Mrs. Parrish. I thought about hitting the ignore button but that was just postponing the inevitable.

“Hello, Mrs. Parrish,” I said.

“Did you go by the sheriff’s?” she asked. Her voice was thick with anticipation.

“Yes, ma’am, I did.”

“Well, what did he say?”

“He assured me they are doing everything they can and the case is under investigation,” I said. The line was silent for a few seconds.

“But you don’t believe him, do you, Nathan?” she said. It was less a question than a statement.

“Look, I think they are investigating it, just not as well as they could be. You know you could always call the news stations and have them come get in Laurent’s grill,” I said.

More silence.

“Hey, don’t worry about paying me, okay? I didn’t really do anything, and I’m sure there is some poor family that could use two thousand dollars’ worth of groceries or something,” I said. I could hear her breathing hard.

“Can you come by the Temple and meet me? I’d like to talk to you face to face if you don’t mind,” she said. The tone of her voice told me that “no” was not going to be an acceptable answer.

“Can I meet you in an hour?”

“That would be fine. Will you be alone?” she asked.

“Do you want me to bring somebody?” I asked. I wasn’t shocked by her question. It might look improper for a married Temple going woman to meet a single man by herself. Even if they were in a Temple. There could be wide pews there or something. It was a southern thing. A holdover from our more genteel roots. You know, when we weren’t whipping runaway slaves.

“No,” she said and hung up.

CHAPTER NINE

The New Hope Baptist Temple was a glass and brick monstrosity that sprawled across the corner of Rt.14 and Rt.198 like some overgrown amoeba. I parked Betty in one of the hundred parking spaces and headed for the front door. The foyer was as big as the lobby of the funeral home. To my right was a polished and buffed wood staircase that wound up and around a wide wooden support beam. To my left were a series of doors with names like “Family Meeting Room” and “Private Counseling.” An oil painting of Rev. Esau Watkins stared at me from the wall next to the “Music Ministry” door. It depicted a dark-skinned man with a weak chin but bright brown eyes and a close-cropped salt and pepper flat top. He looked a lot better in that painting than the last time I’d seen him.

I pushed on through the enormous gilded double doors and stepped into the stadium-like sanctuary. The pulpit was bathed in amber-hued theatrical lighting. It seemed to be a hundred yards away. Row after row of padded pews stretched out before me. It was like a Roman coliseum where God and the Devil fought to the death for the souls of the sons and daughters of man. And you could conscript God as your champion. For the right price. That may sound harsh but those gilded chrome doors didn’t come cheap.

Mrs. Parrish was sitting on a pew near the pulpit. She was reading a bible. I stopped at the pew and cleared my throat. She glanced at me. She had a strange smirk on her face.

“I keep reading the Word, hoping it will give me some kind of peace, but it just makes me feel more confused,” she said. She slid over, and I sat next to her.

“Mrs. Parrish, I don’t mind meeting you here, but I don’t think I can tell you much more than what I told you on the phone,” I said. She turned her whole body and stared at me with those intense brown eyes. I could once again see the beautiful woman she had been years ago. It was like she was haunted by the ghost of her youth.

“Nathan, do you mind telling me why you think there might be something wrong with the sheriff’s investigation of Esau’s death?” she said.

Her voice was ragged like she had been crying all night. I pretended not to notice.

“I...uh...things just don’t feel right,” I said.

“Like what?”

I let out a long breath. “Like they haven’t called the State Police in for assistance. SOP-” I started to say but I saw the bewildered look on her face.

“Standard operating procedure is for the state boys to assist with all murders or suicides. But that’s at the discretion of the local sheriff. They are kinda like vampires. If the local sheriff doesn’t invite them, they aren’t inclined to come in,” I said. She shifted in the pew.

“What else?” she asked.

“I’ve seen them let a case get away from them before. And my gut just tells me there is more going on here than we know. Like I said, you can call one of the news stations and have them put some pressure on Laurent. Other than that, I don’t think there is much more any of us can do,” I said.

“What do you think happened to Esau?”

“Mrs. Parrish, I couldn’t begin to guess,” I said. She stood.

“I have something I want you to see,” she said. I followed her as she walked past the pulpit and through a door at the back of the choir stand. We came out into a white tiled hallway. Sunlight poured in through several large skylights. It gave the place an ethereal quality. It reminded me of the tunnel they say you see just before you cross over. Or they bring you back with a defibrillator. At the end of the hall was an office marked “Financial Affairs.” Mrs. Parrish pulled a key from the pocket of her brown polyester pants and unlocked the door.

The office was all browns and blacks with leather bound chairs and two long teak banquet tables. On the right side of the room was a massive floor safe like something out of a heist movie. Toward the back of the room were two chest-high black filing cabinets. Mrs. Parrish retrieved a black three-ring binder from one of the cabinets and sat down at the first table. She motioned for me to sit beside her. I saw twelve polished brass collection plates stacked inside each other near the safe.

“I’m the head trustee for the Temple. Every Sunday, I count the collections along with my three other trustee board members. We do pretty

good with collections and tithes. Most months we average around twenty thousand dollars,” she said.

“I’m in the wrong business,” I said. Lisa Watkins’ words flashed through my mind.

“A lot of this money goes back into Temple programs. Or maintaining the building. Expenses for a place this size can pile up quick,” she said.

“And I’m sure Esau got a nice honorarium,” I said. Mrs. Parrish took a deep breath.

“Yes. Yes, he did,” she said.

“Mrs. Parrish, if you wanted to impress me, mission accomplished. I’m putting in my resignation at the funeral home and buying a black robe,” I said. Mrs. Parrish flipped through the pages in the binder. Her hands were shaking.

“About six months ago, I noticed our monthly sanctuary collections were increasing. By a lot. Twice a month we would collect double what we collected on a normal Sunday. And someone was tithing like a motherfucker on those Sundays to the tune of five thousand dollars, In cash,” she said. I glanced around to make sure lightning wasn’t going to barbecue us where we sat. I may not have been an overly religious person but even I didn’t say mf’er in Temple. I leaned in close to Mrs. Parrish and took a good whiff. I smelled some powerful mints but under that was the sickly sweet scent of rum. Mrs. Parrish was pie-eyed drunk.

“Mrs. Parrish, what are you trying to tell me?” I asked.

“Up until six years ago, I was a wild girl, Nathan. I got married for love at sixteen and three years and one daughter later I got divorced for hate at nineteen. When I was thirty, I married for money. Clarence Parrish was fifteen years older than me, and I liked that just fine. He raised my daughter while I went out and did whatever I wanted with whoever I wanted. I’d go out dancing, drinking, fucking. I’d get high so I could party all night then get drunk to come down and deal with Clarence and the kids. After a while, I started running with some rough characters. It was about this time I realized I was no longer holding the bottle. It was holding me. One night I got in over my head. It happens to the best of us ya know. I found myself lost on 45th street in Bad News. High as a kite in a tornado. I found a pay phone,

and I called Clarence to come get me because I couldn't remember where I'd parked my car. There I was standing on the street in my get'em dress with one shoe on and my wig in my purse.

"Clarence was blind as a bat on a good day. But this was a dark night. It was a new moon, and then it started to rain," she said. A tear was running away from her left eye.

"Clarence crossed the center line coming across the hill at Ridge Road. He hit a family in a minivan coming back from a trip up north. Five people including Clarence died that night. I lost my mind for a while. My sister told me to come to this Temple. She said the minister here knew what it was like to walk a dark, sinful path. She said he could help me. And he did. And so did everybody else here. They helped me to learn that God forgave me even if I didn't forgive myself. That was six years ago. Up until this morning, I hadn't had a drink in six years. Then I talked to you, and you told me what I already knew. This thing with Esau is wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. And I think it might have something to do with these donations," she said. Tears were flowing now. I watched as a few twirled through the air and fell onto the lacquered tabletop. At first, I didn't understand what she was talking about. Then my gears clicked like an old three column shift.

"An extra five thousand in the collection plate and a five-thousand-dollar tithe twice a month is some serious paper. You think the money was dirty and someone was trying to clean it up," I said. She nodded. It made sense. Temples aren't taxed. They don't get audited. If you wanted to launder some loot all you would have to do is make sure you had access to the Temple's bank account to get your money out. Watkins could be that access. I was sure his name was on the Temple account down at The Merchant's Bank.

"What if he didn't change, Nathan? What if he was just fooling us all along?" she asked. I saw the pain and confusion in her eyes just behind her tears. I didn't have an answer for that so I asked a question of my own.

"Have you shown the police?" I asked. She shook her head and then wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. I watched as she forcibly composed herself.

"I loved him, ya know. I never told him. It probably wasn't the healthiest kind of love, seeing as how much of a mess I was when I came here. But love is love," she said. I rubbed the heels of my hands across my thighs.

“What you want from me, Mrs. Parrish?” I asked.

“If we call the State Police, they won’t come in, will they?” she asked. I couldn’t believe what I was about to say. This was as crazy as a bag of cats.

“Not without some evidence. Some compelling evidence,” I said. She reached under the table and grabbed my hand. Her grip was strong.

“I want you to get that evidence. I want you to find out who killed Esau. We’ll give you another two thousand,” she said. Four thousand dollars. Walt paid me well but not that well.

“I don’t wanna make you promises I can’t keep, Mrs. Parrish. I’m not a detective. I’m not a deputy anymore. Contrary to what some people may think small towns know how to keep secrets. And murder is a big goddamn secret. Pardon my French. I might be able to find enough to interest the State Police but that doesn’t mean we will find out who killed Esau,”

“But you a good man. I saw that yesterday. You’re like me. You’ve been in some rat holes and some rough places but you good. You parents raised you right. Please just do what you can,” she said. Why did she have to mention my parents again?

“All right. I’m gonna need to know everything you know about Rev. Watkins. Anything that’s been going on with him, anybody who might be angry with him. His address, his friends, his habits. Everything. Then I’ll just ask around a little bit. But first, who was dropping those big tithes?” I asked. Mrs. Parrish peered at the binder and ran a finger along the edge of the tithe report. She squinted at a name.

“Harold Montague,” she said.

I laughed.

“What? Do you know him?” she asked.

“Yeah. When I was on the police force I arrested him like three or four times. “

“For what?”

“Drugs. Lots and lots of drugs,” I said. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Other than these donations was there anything else going on with Esau? Any reason somebody might be mad at him?” I asked. Mrs. Parrish closed

the binder and interlaced her fingers. I could see she was struggling. Finally, she blurted it out.

“We were in talks with The Almighty House of Christ to become a satellite Temple for their organization. A few members were against it, but no one was so against it they would have hurt Rev. Watkins,” she said. “Have you ever heard of Minister Tommy Short?”

I wrinkled my forehead.

“The dude with the pompadour and the tight shirts? Is he the one that always looks greasy like he just fought a can of Crisco?”

Mrs. Parrish laughed.

“Yes. Minister Short and Rev. Watkins met last year at the Baptist Convention. Since then, there has been some talk of us joining them. I was for it personally, but a few old rollers weren’t so supportive,” she said.

“Like who?”

Mrs. Parrish shifted in her chair. She bit her bottom lip before answering.

“I guess the main person against it was John Ellis Jones. He is, or was, the Senior Deacon for us.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Was?”

“He and Rev. Watkins couldn’t seem to set horses, as my mother would have said. He resigned and left the Temple six months ago,” she said.

“Can you write his name and number down if you have it?” I asked. She got up and went to the filing cabinet. She came back with an old Temple bulletin. It had Mr. Jones’ name and cell phone number on it as well as his former title within the Temple hierarchy.

“Do you want me to see if I can find Mr. Montague’s information?” she asked.

“No, I think I know where to find him. Mrs. Parrish, what about Rev. Watkins’ daughter? Have you talked to her about any of this?” I asked.

“She doesn’t seem too concerned about what happened to her daddy. She is only in town until the funeral. She told me she is putting the house on the market and going back to California as soon as possible,” she said.

“I just don’t want her to get mad about my poking around her father’s life. Where is she staying while she is in town?” Mrs. Parrish rolled her eyes.

“Trust me, Nathan. That girl couldn’t care less. I don’t think she and Esau had been close for a long time. But if you want to talk to her, she told me she was gonna be at the Hampton Inn in Gloucester,” she said. I was acquainted with that hotel. I had stayed there the previous night.

I silently wondered if Lisa and Esau’s estrangement had anything to do with Lisa’s line of work. I got up from the table.

“Like I said, I’ll poke around, but don’t get your hopes up. I’m not the law. Nobody has to talk to me if they don’t want to,” I said. Mrs. Parrish looked up at me.

“I’m sure you don’t have too much trouble getting anyone to talk to you, Nathan,” she said. For an instant, the ghost of her youth was corporeal. I chalked it up to flirtatious grieving. That sounded about right.

“Just the same, don’t expect anything. That way I can’t disappoint you,” I said.

CHAPTER TEN

I left the Temple and headed out of Mathews and back to Queen County. I was going to see Harold “Fella” Montague and Deacon Jones, but I needed to sort my thoughts and figure out how I was going to approach these two antithetical men. I decided to get some gas for Betty and get in a quick workout before I started poking around. I stopped by the Get-N-Zip convenience store. As I pulled up to the gas pump, I saw a bedraggled white man riding through the parking lot on a lawn mower. It was one of those zero turns. I always thought they looked like rowing machines with wheels. I recognized Eugene Crabbtree, a guy who did yard work around the county. He pulled up to the pump opposite mine and began to fill his tank. I waved my hand. Eugene returned the wave and added a big smile. His teeth were so far apart he should have had a sign on his gums that said next tooth one mile.

Gotta love the country.

I scored a bagel and some orange juice and got in line to pay for my snacks and my gas. A tall, gangly white man was in front of me in the cashier line. He glanced over his shoulder at me. I didn’t recognize him at first. After a few seconds I realized he was Ray Carpenter.

He hurriedly paid for his chewing tobacco and a tall can of beer before noon. He didn’t wait for his change. Good Ole Ray Carpenter. He was the first person to introduce me to pure, unadulterated rage. Ray was the aforementioned kid I almost murdered on the school bus all those years ago. Now, before you get all judgmental, I had my reasons.

Ray rode my school bus until he dropped out in his junior year. Buck-toothed with dry, dead blonde hair, Ray certainly looked the part of a white trash troublemaker. He spent most of his time on our bus grabbing the nascent boobs of the girls and mercilessly taunting anyone he and his two cohorts perceived as weak or defenseless.

In the fall of ‘91 it was finally my turn. I was a bit surprised it had taken him so long to get to me. I was a chubby, brown fifteen-year-old with a head full of unruly curls that my mother wouldn’t let me cut. I wore second-hand

sneakers that my dad found at the thrift store and I had a canvas tote for a book bag. I was a bully's wet dream. At first it was just jokes about my weight and my shabby jeans. Jeans that were not nearly as mangled as the ones he wore. I don't think there is anything more emblematic of the damaged American psyche than a poor white kid insulting a poor black kid for being poor.

I tried keeping quiet. I just kept my nose in the newest paperback by Isaac Asimov or Ray Bradbury that I had found. That didn't work. If anything, it made them more aggressive. These days you can't spit sideways without seeing an internet ad about non-violent conflict resolution. Back then, there were only two ways to deal with a bully. You either fought him or you fled from him. I wasn't shocked when my dad advised me to flee. This was a man who didn't like smacking a wasp even after it had stung him. I tried confiding in him one day at the restaurant.

"Has this boy touched you?" he said as he wiped his hand on his blue apron. The flour and sugar had stained his fingernails like a French tip manicure.

"He calls me Twinkie or Nathan Gaymaker. He makes fun of my shoes. He calls me half-breed or chunk butt. He says I'm -" My dad held up his hand. I had given my dad the G rated version of Ray's non-stop ridicule. I left out how he called me a cum guzzler or how he told me I should kill myself because I was a piece of shit taking up space.

"Boys like this are really just angry at themselves. He probably doesn't have a good home life. Have you tried talking to him? Maybe he needs a friend," my dad said. I raised my head from the Punisher comic I had been flipping through. I was sitting at one of the round plastic tables that filled the dining area of the restaurant. At fifteen I didn't know what "incredulous" meant, but I'm sure the expression on my face defined it.

"He has friends, Dad. They make fun of me too," I said. My dad sighed. He came from behind the showcase where he had been stacking my mom's croissants and cinnamon twists for the lunch rush. It was Saturday and I was already dreading getting back on the bus on Monday.

"Nathan, words can't hurt you. They only have as much power as we give them," he said. He leaned on the table and ruffled my hair.

“The way everybody laughs, I think those words must be charged up pretty good,” I said. My dad sighed again.

“Nathan, just ignore him. Unless he puts his hands on you he’s not hurting you. Show him you’re the better man,” he said.

“And what if he does put his hands on me?” I asked. My dad frowned.

“Violence never solved anything, Nathan,” he said. I could see in his eyes that this was no clichéd homily to him. He believed it in his heart and soul. It was the mantra by which he lived his life. I always admired my dad for being so dedicated to such a high-minded ideal. I also pitied him because the rest of the world took that ideal and wiped their ass with it.

The next to the last day of school before Winter Break I was sitting on the bus reading as we headed home. Raheem was sitting next to me, playing on his hand-held video game. We had big plans for the afternoon. We were going to go investigate the abandoned nursing home that was only a thirty-minute bicycle ride from our houses for ghost activity. It was Raheem’s idea. He had been inspired by an especially intense episode of “In Search Of.” I wasn’t a total skeptic, but I highly doubted we would see any full corporeal apparitions. But it was something to do instead of just sitting around the house until my parents got home.

I was just finishing the last chapter of “The Drawing of the Three” when Ray started up with me.

“Hey, half-breed,” he said. I heard his sidekicks guffaw like plants in a stand-up comedian’s audience. I turned the page in my book and continued reading. Raheem raised his head from his game.

“Hey, nigger-nose, tell your mom I’ll be over later so she can juggle my balls. Unless you wanna do it,” he said. It wasn’t the first time Ray had dropped the n-bomb, but I did what my father told me to do. Raheem glared at me. I pretended I didn’t see him or hear Ray. I just gripped my book so hard I left indentations in the pages.

Suddenly, I felt a warm, wet splash on my neck that spread down my back. I jumped up and turned around to see Ray, Richie Downs and Tim Hornick braying like they had just done a ton of whippets. Ray was holding a plastic soda bottle. The bottle was half-full with a yellow liquid.

It was then I noticed the acrid smell coming from the back of my neck. A sour scent that made my nose hairs curl.

“Fuck, is that piss?!” Raheem exclaimed. He slid out of our seat and fell into an empty seat across the aisle. I touched my hand to the back of my neck and sniffed my finger. Raheem was right.

I’ve never done hard drugs. I’ve smoked some weed a few times. I’ve drunk more than my share of whiskey and moonshine. In my short law enforcement career, I had the opportunity to talk to addicts from all walks of life. I interviewed casual addicts who could still pull off the square look. I’ve talked to serious addicts who had faces worn around the edges and frayed like a moth-eaten blanket. And I’ve spent time with the hardcore addicts. The kind who traded their babies for a bag of heroin. The kind who sucked dick for a crack rock the size of a grain of rice. They all said the same thing when it came to the hard shit. You never forgot that first hit. It’s like a door opens in your mind and you spend the rest of your life trying to find the key to lock it. The ugly truth is that there is no key. You destroyed it when you got your first taste. So you spend the rest of your life trying to keep that door shut with your bare hands. That’s how it felt when Ray Carpenter poured a bottle of piss down my back. A door flew open and the rage was released.

Of course I had experienced anger before in my life. A girl I liked didn’t sit next to me at lunch. A gift I had wanted didn’t appear under the Christmas tree. My Raiders missed the playoffs again. Normal everyday annoyances that burn brightly for a few seconds, then disappear like a shooting star. This was different. Years later, listening to those lost souls describe the sensation of main-lining some China White or smoking some pure uncut professional grade ice, I finally found the language to describe how I had felt that day. That first dose of pure uncut fury had me hooked

I don’t remember launching myself at Ray Carpenter. Raheem told me I sailed over the seat like Edwin Moses wearing rocket boots. I do recall Ray’s laughter ceasing abruptly. Like a switch had been flipped off as I sailed through the air. Over the years I’ve learned that most altercations between unskilled combatants are decided by two factors. Size and will. Ray was six inches taller than me but I outweighed him by thirty pounds. And he couldn’t match my determination. He just wanted to fight.

I wanted to kill him.

There was a time when I couldn't admit that to myself. I attempted all types of rationalizations to explain my actions that day. I don't think I was ready to accept how completely my anger could consume me. I now recognize my rage for what it is. A gift.

Today everyone would have probably pulled out their phones and posted the video to some viral website that specialized in random mayhem. Back then, they just shouted words of encouragement. Some of the people on that bus had felt Ray's wrath. They weren't opposed to his getting a dose of his own medicine.

I slammed my fist into his mouth so hard I felt his thin lips split like a pair of cheap pantyhose. His teeth cut divots into my knuckles until they finally gave way and broke. My ears were buzzing as I pounded the bloody stumps again and again. Tim and Richie started punching me in the head and neck. I felt their blows, but they had minimal effect. I hit Ray squarely on the tip of his aquiline nose and it crunched and snapped like a fortune cookie. Ray's hands fluttered around my face like drunken sparrows. The speed of my attack had left him disoriented. His attempts at defense were pathetic.

A moist mewling began to come from his ruined mouth. I hit him again. Drops of blood dotted the spaces between the buttons on my shirt. Tim and Richie stopped trying to hit me and started trying to pull me away from Ray. My hands were crimson. Ray was gurgling like he had a throat full of mud. A harsh cough wracked his body and a bubble of blood erupted from his mouth. His right eyebrow was a hieroglyphic in scarlet. He coughed again and a pinkish colored tooth flew from between his ruined lips. Ray's hands fell to his side and he stopped moving.

I was beating him to death and I didn't care.

It was Raheem who saved his life. He joined Tim and Richie and pulled me away from Ray's body. We fell in a heap in the last seat across the aisle. Maggie Hull scrambled out of the way as we tumbled toward the floor.

"Nate, he's dead!" Raheem screamed in my ear. I realized I was groaning. A dry, hollow wail from somewhere deep in my chest. I finally stopped struggling. A hush had come over the bus. The driver had pulled off on the side of the road but hadn't dared tried to intervene.

He wasn't dead, of course. Three of his front teeth had to be replaced with implants. He also had sixteen stitches and a broken nose. I got suspended for two weeks. My suspension began immediately after Winter Break ended. I spent the time during my exile working at the restaurant. My dad was hard on me those two weeks. Every time my eyes caught his, I felt the sting of his disappointment as keenly as if he had slapped me.

Near the end of my suspension I was on my hands and knees cleaning out the oven with a wire brush and a great deal of resolve. My mom came into the kitchen and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Nathan, leave that alone for a minute," she said. I silently thanked her for her gracious mercy. I stood and wiped my face. As soon as I did it, I realized I had spread grease across my forehead like war paint. My mom grabbed a clean dish rag and cleaned it off.

She tossed the rag on the counter, washed her hands in the sink and dried them on her apron. She came to me and pushed a stray lock of hair out of my face. Her dark chocolate face broke into a tiny smile.

"You still look like a coal miner," she said. I shrugged.

"Dad acts like he wouldn't mind burying me in a mine," I muttered. Her smile faded. She closed her eyes for a second, then shook her head and opened them.

"Nathan, I know your father is being tough on you. He only wants you to be the best person you can be. He thinks violence keeps us from achieving our best possible selves. He always has. Your father is the kindest, most loving man I have ever met. He sees the good in everyone. But I know it's hard to see the good in people when they are pouring a bottle of piss down your back," she said. Her voice seemed so damn weary. She took her apron and wiped some more of the grime off of my face.

"I don't want you starting fights, Nathan. And I don't want you seeking out confrontations. But as long as you're black and breathing, you're going to run into people like this Carpenter boy. And make no mistake no matter how we see you, the world is going to see you as black. And there's not a damn thing wrong with that. It is how the world treats you because of it that's wrong. Now, I know your father says violence is never the answer, but sometimes it's the only viable option. It's not fair, but the real world isn't fair.

I think...I think we haven't really prepared you for that as well as we should have. I guess we thought if we raised you color blind, the world would treat you that way. But that was hubris," she said. I watched tears roll down her cheeks like chips of melting ice.

"Don't cry, Mama," I whispered. I'd seen my dad cry on numerous occasions. From watching a particularly emotional long-distance ad to hearing the end of "Brian's Song." My mother's tears were much rarer. She wiped her face with both hands and grabbed me in a tight embrace.

"Shhh. I wasn't crying, boy, my eyes were just leaking, that's all," she said. I laughed in spite of myself.

I watched as Ray Carpenter hustled his skinny ass out the door. I put my purchases on the counter and watched as he jumped into his jacked-up truck. I saw him take a huge wad of chaw and bury it in his cheek. I guess he didn't mind ruining those pearly white implants.

I could say that all these years later I had moved past all the horrible shit he had said and done to me. I could say that we were both older and wiser and I held no ill will toward the man.

But I'd be lying. The truth is, I still can't stand Ray Carpenter. If he left his change behind because he had a flashback to my beating him like a rented mule, I have no problem with that. Not one fucking bit. Am I glad he didn't die? Yeah. Do I regret what happened? Nope. Guys like Ray don't change. I'd bet my life there is some dude in his hunting club that he picks on mercilessly. There's a lady at his job that he mocks behind her back. The ass whooping I gave him didn't make him a better person. It just made him a better asshole. It taught him subtlety, not humility. If my father was alive and we were having one of our in depth philosophical conversations over a game of chess, he would bemoan the fruitless nature of violence. And I'd concede that point. However, I'd then have to counter with my own hard won wisdom. A lesson I have learned from all the Victor Cullers and Ray Carpenters of the world. A succinct philosophy that can be summed up in four words.

Talk shit. Spit blood.

I pulled into the YMCA parking lot and threaded my way through the cars in the cramped parking lot.

I hit the weight bench and did twelve reps with 225lbs. Took a break and did twelve more. I didn't know my max, and I didn't care. I wasn't trying to impress any soccer moms or geriatric widowers that might be watching. I was lifting for stamina and endurance.

In a fight, it doesn't matter who throws the first punch as long as you can throw the last one. I did another set of twelve, then I racked my weights and moved on to deadlifts. I did eight reps with 350lbs and took a break. I could feel the familiar stinging sensation working its way up my legs and through my chest. Muscle fibers tearing and then repairing. That's what happens when you work out with weights. You have to break down in order to build up. I was just about to hit the heavy bag for a few when I saw Sandra Gilchrist walk into the gym. Sandy, as I liked to call her, was the only other female in the Queens County Sheriff's Department. Unlike Ruth Ann, Sandy actually went on patrol.

She was a tall, lean blonde with legs that seemed to go on forever like an M.C. Escher staircase. Her sunflower colored hair was tied back in a tight ponytail that trailed down her back. She was wearing black tights that showed off the definition in her legs and a blue sports bra under a loose pink tank top. Sandy bent at the waist and touched her toes. Her ponytail slipped over her shoulder, exposing a delicate rose tattoo. There had been a time when I kissed that tattoo and felt the power of those legs around my waist. Then I murmured "Heather" and got bucked off like a broken down rodeo cowboy. That had been three years ago. Now we saw each other occasionally around town. She was cordial but cool. I couldn't say I blamed her.

She was just about to grab the lateral pull down bar when I walked over and tapped her on the shoulder. Her big blue eyes appraised me quickly, and I thought I saw a flicker of memory. I was kind of sweaty and kind of pumped. My biceps were straining against my sleeves. Perhaps she had been transported to the past by my musky scent. We had engaged in some mutually satisfying vigorous sex back then.

"Nate. You trying to get your swoll on?" she asked.

"Nah. I'm just here for the witty banter," I said. I was rewarded with a smile.

“I heard you went by and pissed off Victor this morning,” she said.

“Damn, that was quick. Did you get a message from the pony express?” I said.

“Ruth Ann called me on the radio right after you left. I was finishing up my shift. She said she thought you were gonna toss him through the window again. I told her he probably deserved it,” she said. Sandy didn’t like Victor either, but for an entirely different set of reasons. Despite being married, Victor had chased after Sandy since she joined the force. I think if he found out about me and her his anger would be so powerful it would create a black hole and he would jump into it. I leaned against the cool stainless-steel beams of the lat machine.

“Aw, Victor isn’t so bad. If you ignore his attitude and his incompetence and his general disregard for the law, he’s actually a pretty big asshole,” I said. She laughed. It was a nice sound.

“Why were you there anyway?” she said as she began to pull the bar down behind her neck. I watched as her traps flexed under her tanned skin.

“I was just checking on how things were going with Esau Watkins’ case. Some ladies from his Temple were concerned,” I said. I didn’t need to get into my feelings about the sheriff’s department.

“I don’t know what’s going on with that case. Victor was the first one on the scene, and he swears up and down it’s a burglary gone wrong,” she said between deep breaths.

“But you don’t sound like you’re convinced,” I said. She let the bar go and looked up at me.

“It’s just...The house didn’t look ransacked, but it looked out of order. The couch had been moved. I could see the old indentations in the rug. And the bookshelf had some books sticking out, ya know? Not flush with the rest of them. We didn’t find any sign of forced entry. The television was still there. Watkins still had his wallet in his back pocket with about three hundred dollars in cash and his debit card. We don’t have a murder weapon. It’s...I just don’t know. Victor and the sheriff are running the show. So you know it’s whatever. They still think of me as a glorified errand girl,” she said before grabbing the bar again.

“Who called it in?” I asked.

“Duane Hemphill from Tyson Gas. He was making his monthly delivery that Tuesday and saw that the door was open. Walked in, saw the body, and got on the horn,” Sandy said.

“So you guys got any leads?”

Sandy shook her head. “Not you guys. This is strictly a Sheriff and Victor thing. Really, it’s a Victor thing. He says he’s investigating it non-stop. I believe that about as much as I believe in Santa Claus,” she said.

“Wait, he isn’t real? Then who the hell been reading my letters all these years?” I asked. She laughed again. But then a cloud seemed to come over her face.

“I’ve never felt right about what they did with your parents. I hope you know that,” she said. Everyone knew about what had happened so everyone felt the need to comment on it. Sandy was one of the few people on or off the force who I felt was genuinely concerned about it.

“I know. Well, I’ll let you get back to it. Say, what you doing tonight?” I asked. I thought I could feel a significant thaw in her usual coolness. Might as well try to make the best of it.

“No, Nate,” she said with a sad shake of her head.

“You still mad at me?” I said in a lowered voice.

“No. Not at all. But you’re not the type of man to settle down, and I’m in a settling down phase in my life. I like you, Nate. I really do. But I’m getting a little too old to be somebody’s booty call,” she said. There was wistfulness in her voice. I understood where she was coming from. My ass was sore from kicking myself about the way things ended between us. We’d had a good connection and not just in the bed. Sandy wasn’t just a beautiful woman; she was also a good woman. And that combination is rare.

“Duly noted. You take it easy, Sandy,” I said.

“You too, Nate,” she said and grabbed the bar again.

I hit the heavy bag for about fifteen minutes before I hopped in the shower. Then headed back to the shop. Walt was gone, but he had texted me while I was in the shower that someone was coming with clothes for the good reverend. So I was stuck there until the someone showed. I wanted to go talk to Harold Montague. I had a feeling he could clear up a whole lot of the issues surrounding Esau’s death.

Harold “Fella” Montague was a wannabe gangster from Queen County. He might have been 160lbs pounds soaking wet and with rocks in his pockets. Regular rocks not crack. His friends called him Fella because he was obsessed with the movie “GoodFellas.” He could recite whole scenes from memory like some Mafia movie savant. He was a few shades darker than me with dirty cornrows that looked like they needed to be plowed. He sported a patchy goatee that could have passed for a map of England. Even though he was born and raised less than ten miles from me, he spoke with an exaggerated New York accent. He aspired to be Nicky Barnes but came off more like Snidely Whiplash.

I parked myself in the lobby with my copy of an old Travis McGee novel and waited for the clothing courier to show up. Then I could go have a little chat with Fella. I was halfway through “The Lonely Silver Rain” when the doorbell rang.

A celebrity was at our door. The famous Cat Noir herself.

“I would’ve thought I’d see a Chupacabra and the Loch Ness monster playing double dutch before I saw you up here again,” I said as I opened the door. She was dressed a bit more demurely today. Hip hugging blue jeans and a black knitted sweater with a black bra that peeked out at me through the knitting like a shy puppy. Her blonde locks were held back with a headband. Her new wardrobe did nothing to hide her voluptuousness.

“It wasn’t my idea. They gave me my dad’s keys and stuff at the sheriff’s office. The lady from the Temple called me and told me that you all needed clothes for him, and since I had the key and I was closer, could I just go there and get him some things,” she said. She handed me a garment bag with the hooks of three clothes hangers sticking out the top. The bag had the name of a high-end clothing store on it.

“But you went out and bought him some clothes?” I asked. Lisa sucked at her teeth. Her right foot was tapping out a staccato rhythm

“I didn’t want to go up to the house. So I just bought some stuff. Is that gonna be okay?” she asked.

“As long as you didn’t get him a sun dress and Spanx we should be fine. Unless that’s what he wished to be buried in,” I said. She fought the smile that was trying to creep across her face. Finally, she gave in and put her hand

over her mouth. That kind of modest behavior seemed out of character for a porn star.

“You funny,” she said. A few seconds passed. The silence didn’t seem awkward. It felt expectant. I forced myself not to stare at her body but gazing into her eyes was just as dangerous. At last, she broke the spell.

“So we good?” she asked.

“Oh. Yeah, sure. We are all good.”

She turned and headed for the door. When she got there she stopped and her head swiveled back toward me. “I remembered you the other day. You took up for that kid with the messed up eye when Tito Laramie and Joe Shale were picking on him. You beat the shit out of Tito that day,” she said. So, what did you do after high school, Mr. Waymaker?” she asked.

“Oh, you know. Traveled the world. Blew shit up. Got blown up,” I said. The blank expression on her face told me my joke had fallen flat.

“I joined the Marines. Did ten years then came home. How about you?” I asked. I left out the part about joining the sheriff’s department or my parents.

“You don’t know?” she asked. I could have lied. She would never have known but I felt like we had struck up a good rapport. Even if it was only temporary.

“I mean, I’ve heard stuff, but you hear stuff about everybody. I heard Chris Artimador was a cult leader in Oregon. He’s not. He works at a bank in Lancaster. He lived on a commune in Washington State for a while. I heard Misty Green was an aide to the Governor, but actually she works in the kitchen in the Governor’s mansion. I even heard I was an assassin for the government. That one’s true, by the way,” I said.

“Well, what did you hear about me?” she said after her laughter subsided. I switched the garment bag from my left hand to my right.

“I heard you make artistic films of an adult nature.”

Lisa applauded slowly. “Good job. You managed to make it sound semi-respectable. I do porn, sugar. I ain’t ashamed. I got a nice condo in LA, and even though that Lexus is a rental, I’ve got a BMW back home. By the end of the year, I’ll be directing my first movie. I’ve already done a few of my own scenes when the director was coming down from a three-day coke binge. I

was being a bitch to you yesterday. I'm sorry. I just didn't want to deal with another yokel who wanted to tell me how many times he had jerked off to me and Anna Iminya doing a double dildo scene. I mean, I want you to jerk off and pay for the movies; I just don't need to hear about it when I'm getting gas or making funeral arrangements. It's funny. I had forgotten how backward this town was. You tell somebody in LA you do porn, they ask you what studio you work for. You tell somebody here they either wanna bone you in the supermarket parking lot or rub oil on your forehead and drive the fuck demon out of your soul. Or both. At the same time," she said.

"Fuck demon? That must be one hell of an exorcism. Does the preacher smoke a cigarette when he's done?" I asked.

"I don't remember you being this funny in school," she said.

"I don't remember you having such a magnificent rack," I said.

"Best set money can buy. I got the saline ones so they don't feel all hard and bulky," she said.

"I guess I have to take your word for that," I said. Another moment of silence blossomed between us. I didn't know where this was going, but I had high hopes it might end with moaning and sweating. There are some men who will tell you they would never sleep with a woman who does porn. Science calls these men liars.

"So I guess I'll get out of here," she said.

"Yeah, I gotta get going too. Lots of funeral business to attend to, you know," I said. More silence. It was like we were standing in a library instead of a funeral home. I switched the garment bag back to my left hand.

"Is there a good place around here to get a drink? When I left, The Cove was biker boy central and Sailors was a breakfast diner," she said.

"Actually, the Cove is a pretty cool place now. The bikers moved on to Sailors and some locally grown hipsters own the Cove now. If you can get past the patchouli oil, it's not too bad," I said.

"Which is it? Are they hippies or hipsters?" she asked. It was my turn to chuckle.

"It don't matter as long they still sell liquor. "

"All right. I guess I'll see you later," she said.

“Yeah, I’ll be at the funeral,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll see you before then. I’m tired of being stuck up in my room. But I don’t feel like going across the bridge. Think I’ll check out the Cove later,” she said. I hoped my face didn’t betray the balloons of excitement that were exploding in my head. Was this semi-famous adult actress asking me out?

“Well, I got some things I gotta do, but I might be there later like say around ten.”

Lisa nodded. “Okay. Maybe I’ll see you there, Mr. Waymaker. What kind of name is that anyway?” she asked. I took a deep breath.

“My dad’s given was Gordon Penn. But he was a peace loving social activist and so he decided to take the name “Waymaker” because that’s what he wanted to be. ‘Take the name, live the life’ was what he used to say,” I said.

“He sounds like a good man.”

“He was,” I said. Lisa ran a well-manicured hand through her hair.

“Sorry, I didn’t know. My mom died in ’97, and I dipped right after that,” she said. I didn’t know if she was sharing a memory with me or explaining her ignorance regarding my dad. I lackadaisically waved my hand in the air.

“It’s all good. We can compare tragedies over a rum and coke later if you’re at the Cove,” I said.

“Okay. See ya.”

“Yep,” I said. She licked her lips, then turned and went out the door. And just like that, whatever magic spell had been conjured between us was broken. I would still go to the Cove later, but now I didn’t think she would show. The black cloud of depression that generally hovered over me had appeared out of nowhere and ruined this little picnic. Maybe I was wrong. I hoped I was. I liked her and not just for her enhancements. But one thing she said bothered me. She said the sheriff had given her the keys to Esau’s house.

That went against protocol concerning murders and suicides. All of the deceased’s personal effects are supposed to stay with the body when they go to the ME. In truth, the keys should have been with him when I picked him up.

Wow. Improper actions by the Queen County Sheriff's department?
Color me astonished.

I hung the garment bag in the prep room. I took off my golf shirt and put on another black t-shirt, threw on my black denim jacket and locked up the shop. I'd ruminate on those keys later.

I had to go see a goodfella.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Apple Hill trailer court sat at the upper end of Queen County. My hometown was a sixty-mile-long eight-mile-wide swath of land that had two distinct sections. Up the county and down the county. The poor whites and blacks lived up the county in the trailer parks and on the old farms or in the one-story shotgun houses that dotted the landscape. Down the county was where the wealthy Vandekellums and Hosters and Ricksons lived in fancy estates or civil engineered cul-de-sac communities that seemed to spring up whole and completed out of the recently bulldozed earth. The courthouse and Walt's funeral home sat toward the middle of the county. The white people's funeral home was firmly ensconced down the county. Funeral business was the last place where segregation was openly tolerated in America. You can have your interracial marriages and mixed race babies and white hip-hop artist and black rockers, but when you died it was still the amount of melanin in your skin that determined who lowered you into the ground.

I drove Betty nice and easy over the speed bumps that were placed at irregular intervals on the main road that bisected the Apple Hill trailer park. One look around told you the apple was rotten. Every lot seemed to be overflowing with broken down trucks and cars and a multitude of tacky lawn ornaments and second-hand children's toys. Fella's triple wide was on the last lot. Domestic abuse, drunken brawls, stolen property, you name it, it happened in the Apple. It was like the pain and despair of the tenants spilled out through their fists.

For reasons I couldn't begin to fathom, Fella's trailer was painted puke green with purple shutters. No wonder he got raided so much. It wasn't the drugs; it was for his crimes against good taste. A red Honda Accord sat in the short driveway in front of Fella's trailer. The car had been lowered so much an ant would have had to get on his knees to get under it. I didn't see any other cars. That was good. I parked on the side of the main road. I climbed out of Betty and knocked on Fella's door.

The trailer creaked as I heard the shuffle of footsteps near the door. I saw Fella's hawkish face peering at me through the pentagon shaped window in the center of his door. His eyes darted left and right like a rat. He opened his door just a crack and glared at me. I could see the door frame was splintered and broken where a chain lock might have been attached long ago.

"What the fuck you want?" he said. There was more south than north in his voice this evening. Maybe he only practiced his New York first thing in the morning.

"Hey. You know me? I'm Nathan Waymaker. I want to talk to you about something," I said.

"Yeah, I know you. You used to be a cop. Fuck off," he said and started to close the door. I put my hand against it and stopped him cold.

"You hear about Rev. Watkins?" I asked.

"Yeah. Dat nigga's dead. What that got to do with me?"

"The people at his Temple setting up a reward. Anybody know anything about what happened to him might be in line to get that reward, you hear what I'm saying? They got me asking around. Seeing what people have heard," Only a fifth of that statement was a lie.

"Yeah, that still ain't got shit to do with me. Get the fuck out of here with that shit, man," he said.

"I think it do got something to do with you. You been dropping ten thousand dollars in the plate every two weeks," I said. Fella's eyes widened for a second, then he threw his weight against the door. I pushed forward and threw my weight back at him. 270 vs. 140. It was no contest. Fella tumbled backward and hit the floor on what little ass he had. I stepped up into the trailer and closed the door behind me.

"Yo, what the fuck man? You just gonna bum rush in here?" he yelled. His voice threatened murder, but his eyes asked for mercy. I leaned against the door.

"I guess you can call the cops," I said. He didn't respond. Instead, he got up and dusted off his sweat pants and flopped into a dilapidated leather recliner with duct tape on the arms.

I was about to ask him about his newfound religious devotion when I heard another set of shuffling footsteps. A light female voice called out from

the hall that led to the bedrooms.

“Fella, what’s going on? You gotta take me home,” the voice said. A young Hispanic woman stepped into the living room clad only in an old RUN-DMC t-shirt. Her short pixie cut hair was sticking up in odd corkscrews on top of her head. Her butterscotch colored legs greeted each other as she walked. She looked to be about 190lbs and 90 of that was ass and titties.

“Nathan? What the fuck you doing here?” she said when she caught sight of me.

“Tanisha, what the fuck are you doing here? With him? I mean, have you looked at him?” I said. Tanisha Gomez was one of the waitresses at the Cove. I figured she was no older than 21, 24 tops. Fella was older than me. So that put him a few years north of forty.

“Hey, yo, what the fuck you mean by that?” Fella said. Great. Two men with a woman in the room. I could almost see the testosterone boiling in his veins.

“Come on, Fella, you old enough to be her daddy,” I said. He grinned. Was this fool still sporting platinum fronts? I believe he was.

“Oh, I’m her daddy all right,” he said. Tanisha blushed. I ignored Fella.

“Tanisha, you grown so you can do what you want. But this fool look like an overgrown sewer rat. Besides that, you don’t need to be around what he gets into,” I said. This diatribe probably wasn’t going to make him receptive to my questions, but it needed to be said. Tanisha was no saint, but she didn’t need to get hooked up with this piece of walking fecal matter. Fella jumped up and got in my face. If he had been a few inches taller, we would have been nose to nose.

“What the fuck, nigga? You think you can just come in here disrespecting me, disrespecting my house?”

I took a look around the confines of the trailer. Split and warped paneling on the walls. An overflowing trash can full of beer bottles. A formerly white rug stained with cigarette burns and some brown substance that was either chocolate or shit. Two battered couches that looked like a hippo had fucked a pig on them.

“Fella, your house is disrespectful to my eyes. Come on, man, we both know I ain’t saying anything that isn’t true. You double deep in the game. You’ve done serious time at least twice by my count. You don’t need to drag this girl into whatever you got going on with all that money you dropping in the collection plate at New Hope,” I said. Fella’s eyes narrowed.

“Tanisha, give us a minute,” he said. Tanisha’s shoulder slumped.

“See ya, Nate,” she said. When she turned to walk down the hall, I saw four long, red marks on the back of her neck. The kind of marks fingers would make if they were squeezing into flesh. I felt something inside me begin to stir.

“You don’t know what you messing with,” Fella said. He curled his upper lip into what I assume was supposed to be an intimidating snarl.

“I’ll tell you what I do know. You ain’t never been much of a Temple goer, but now you on a roll at New Hope. For the last six months, you been dropping ten thousand dollars twice a month in the collection plate. Five in the general collection and five in tithes. Where you getting that kind of money, Fella? Because we both know you are probably the world’s worst gangster. You even had a blind pit bull. Tommy DeVito would be ashamed of you. And the minister of the Temple you just happen to be dropping giant gobs of money on ends up dead,” I said. Fella exhaled in my face. I picked up the unmistakable scent of cheap weed and MD 20/20 wine.

“So?” he said.

“So? So I’m wondering what that is all about,” I said. Fella took another step closer to me. If he got on his tiptoes, he could give me a kiss.

“I think you need to leave shit alone before you get fucked up. You playing with something that might eat you alive, motherfucker,” he said in a low growl. I slowly turned my head from one side to the other.

“I’m trying to find the person you talking to cause I know it ain’t me. Am I supposed to be scared of you, Fella? Ain’t you the same one who cried in the back of my cruiser when we found you with all that weed? Let me tell you something. You ain’t hard, brother. I’ve seen harder pieces of shit in my toilet bowl after a big plate of corn pudding,” I said. My temper was threatening to escape its flimsy cage.

“You keep playing. You gonna end up just like your mama and daddy,” he said.

The cage opened. I didn't like Fella. I didn't like what he did to our community. I didn't like what he was doing with or to Tanisha Gomez. And I definitely didn't like what he had said about my parents. I felt my self-control slip away from me like a greased snake squirming through my fingers.

I smiled. My hands were in the pockets of my jacket. I raised my left knee. It slammed into Fella's nut sack. I heard him emit a high, piercing whine as he doubled over in pain. I grabbed his left arm with my left hand and pulled his body across mine and slammed my left knee into his nuts again. I pushed him back into his recliner. I put one hand around his throat and my other hand around his wrist.

“You going tell me what was going on with you and Esau. You gonna tell me or I'm gonna snap your wrist like a breadstick. I ain't with the cops anymore, Fella, so I don't have to worry about getting a reprimand. Once I'm done with your wrist, I'm gonna pull a George Jefferson and move on up to your shoulder. So you gonna talk or you're gonna scream,” I said. I gripped his right palm and twisted his hand and wrist to the left as hard as I could. Fella squealed in pain.

I heard footfalls rushing up the hall. I saw Tanisha out of the corner of my eye. She was brandishing a wooden baseball bat. She swung it at my arm, but at the last second, I released Fella and jumped back and to the right. The bat whistled past my arm and cracked Fella in the nose. A bright red ribbon of blood spooled across his mouth and chin. He groaned as he put his hands to his nose.

“Oh, baby, I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry, baby!” Tanisha mewled as she dropped the bat and knelt beside the recliner.

“Tanisha, you don't have to be here with him. You can leave with me. You don't have to be afraid,” I said as calmly as I could.

“Afraid? Why would I be afraid of him? He's my baby! I love him!” she hollered over her shoulder as she tried to tend to Fella's nose.

“I seen the marks on you neck. I know he been putting his hands on you,” I said. Tanisha sighed.

“I like it rough, Nathan. You know what, just get the fuck out!” she screamed. I backed up and kept my eyes on the two of them as I left the trailer.

I pulled up to the funeral home, parked my truck, and went straight to my room. I grabbed my book and sprawled across my bed. It was only seven o'clock. I had some time to kill before I was going to head over to the Cove. I still didn't think Lisa would be there, but I'd been wrong before. I thought about Fella. He didn't want to talk about the donations in front of Tanisha. And he had looked like a deer in headlights every time I brought it up. A voice in my head chastised me for trying to knee his balls into his throat. I told the voice that he deserved it and to kindly go fornicate off. The voice reminded me I was getting paid to find out information, not rearrange somebody's genitalia.

Tomorrow I was going to talk to Deacon Jones. I promised myself, no matter what happened, I wouldn't lose my temper. I didn't want to beat up an old ex-deacon. That would put a huge dent in my karma points.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Cove had a live band playing, and the place was packed by the time I got there. I had texted Raheem but he was, as my grandmother would have said, taking company with the other bridesmaid. So I was flying solo tonight. The air was thick with the smell of beer and sweat. The band was tearing through a rock version of “Hot in Herre”. The crowd shimmied and gyrated like some great Lovecraftian cephalopod. The band’s rhythm section was the creature’s heartbeat as it undulated across the dance floor. I just barely missed being engulfed as I slipped past two older white ladies who tried to pull me into the collective.

I took a seat at the bar and was greeted by the part-time bartender and one of the full-time owners, Bradley.

“Hey, Nate Dogg, what’s good man?” he asked.

“The rum, I hope,” I said. Bradley smiled. He had a head full of shaggy white boy locks and a full on Smith Brothers beard. Bradley, his girlfriend Star, and about six other people actually owned the Cove. To this point, I had met only Bradley, Star, and Justin. The other five investors were following Phish around the country or on a pilgrimage to Machu Pichu or something. That was fine with me. Bradley was the antithesis of the cliché. He was a bartender who actually cared about how your day was going. In fact, I worried about him. The poor guy genuinely thought most people were decent.

“Man, the rum is always good here. It’s the energy, man. Makes everything sweeter. Be right back,” he said. I watched as he bopped down to the other end of the bar in his tie-dyed t-shirt. He came back with my usual. A rum and Coke. Heavy on the rum.

“Thanks, Brad. How you been?” I asked. Brad ran a hand through his dreads.

“All good gravy, man. Dino just got back from North Dakota, so he might be able to take some shifts up here. Me and Star are going to Telluride in a few weeks for a folk fest. Robbie Robertson is gonna be there. Life is

good, man,” he said. Bradley was so positive he could probably jump your car by holding on to one of the battery terminals. I envied his outlook.

“Salut, brother,” I said. He flashed me a peace sign and went to take someone’s order. I sipped my drink and let the warm sting of the rum permeate my body. People like Bradley always seemed to get hurt by people like me. The cynics, the pragmatists. Even if it was unintentional, we always seemed to end up crushing their dreams or their hearts with our ponderous realism.

“Hey there, Waymaker. You gonna buy a lady a drink?” Lisa said as she plopped down beside me.

“When I see a lady, I will,” I said. She punched me in the arm.

“Ass. What you drinking?”

“Rum and Coke. So let me guess, you want a Sex on the Beach?”

“No. I don’t like the drink or the act. The drink is weak, and the act gets sand in places sand ain’t supposed to go,” she said. She smiled, and I smiled back. We were starting to look like we were auditioning for a toothpaste commercial.

“Hmm...let me see. I don’t think they know how to make a Cosmo here. You might have to settle for a Malibu and Sprite,” I said. Lisa cocked her head and stared at me.

“How did you know I liked to drink Cosmopolitans?”

“You have lived in LA for the past however many years. You said you got a condo and a nice car. You probably go to upscale clubs out there, and those clubs push those kinds of drinks on their female clientele. Or it was a lucky guess,” I said. Honestly, it wasn’t that much of a lucky guess. I had just played the odds. I had seen an episode or four of “Sex in the City.” Didn’t matter if the city was LA or NY, ladies liked Cosmopolitans.

“Uh huh. Smart and funny. And you’re not booked up with somebody? What’s wrong with you?” she said. I laughed.

“Nothing much. I just like my freedom. I’m not the type to fill out a permission slip every time I want leave the house,” I said.

“I hear ya. I’m not trying to be Suzy Homemaker either. Honestly, I think I’m more like a guy when it comes to relationships. I just like to hang

out with somebody, watch a movie, and fuck every now and then,” she said.

“Do you date outside the industry? I mean, I guess it’s hard for some guys who aren’t in the business,” I said.

“Oh, it’s hard, Nathan?” she asked in a high babyish voice. I felt my ears burning a bit. I wasn’t intimidated by many people. Male or female. But trying to flirt with a woman who had seen more penis than my urologist unnerved me.

“Uh, no. I mean it gets hard. No, I mean. Aw, fuck it you know what I mean,” I stammered. Lisa reached out and stroked my chin. Her hand was as soft as an angel’s ass.

“Aw, you’re nervous. That’s cute. Now buy me a drink,” she said. She threw her head back and laughed. I motioned for Bradley and was happily surprised when he announced he indeed did know how to make a Cosmo. Another reminder never to judge a book by its cover. We moved to a booth near the far wall.

“Those old ladies really got you playing detective, huh?” Lisa asked. I took another sip of my drink.

“Just asking some questions for them. They’re concerned the sheriff isn’t fully invested in finding out what really happened to your dad. How did you find out about that anyway?” I asked. Lisa killed half her Cosmo with one big gulp.

“When they called me about the clothes. They were so fucking proud of themselves. Telling me they had you investigating my dad and shit. ‘Oh, Lisa, we have Mr. Waymaker looking into things because you can’t trust that sheriff when it comes to our people. Oh, Lisa your father was such a great man we are going to get to the bottom of this. Blah blah blah,’” she said before killing her drink. She motioned to one of the waitresses for another.

“The sheriff does have a history of losing evidence,” I said. Lisa rolled her eyes.

“You know, Nathan, I’ve lived in some of the roughest parts of LA, and guess how many times I got brutalized by the police? Zero. Zilch. I know my big titties help, but if you don’t run your mouth and do what a cop tells you to do, usually you will be all right. We black people have been treated badly, but you can’t tell me things ain’t better than they was years ago. We gotta

stop seeing conspiracies where there aren't any. My daddy probably fucked with the wrong person, and he got his ticket punched," she said just as the waitress appeared with her drink. And then scurried away like a small woodland creature. I think she figured she didn't have enough black friends to be party to this conversation.

"I think you're right. In most cases. But I was a deputy for a couple of years, and I saw a lot of guys get pulled over just for DWB. Driving while black. I think it's fifty/fifty," I said. Lisa took another big gulp of her drink.

"Yeah, I hear ya, but I'm just saying you didn't know my daddy. He had a talent for pissing people off," she said. I nodded.

"While I was a deputy, my parents were run off the road by the son of one of the richest guys in the county, and the evidence mysteriously disappeared," I said. Lisa bit her bottom lip.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. Fuck, Nate, I'm sorry. You must wanna slap the taste out of my mouth," she said.

"For what? You got a right to your opinion. I just thought you should know that the ladies from the Temple have a reason for their suspicions," I said. It was strange having to recount the story of my parents' demise for someone. I was so used to talking to people who thought they already knew all the details.

"So, I guess you're not a deputy anymore," she said.

"No, I tendered my resignation most forcefully," I said. I was beginning to feel the rum. "You and your dad didn't get along at all, did you?"

"Nope," she said. Her tone indicated she didn't want to talk about it anymore. We sat there with the remains of our conversation dying. I stared into my drink. The band was playing a treacly country ballad as drunken couples stumbled against each other.

"When I was sixteen, my mother killed herself. I dropped out of school and hitchhiked to California with a trucker I met at the rest stop out on 64, and I didn't step foot in Virginia for the next twenty years,"

"I'm sorry. I know that must have hurt you. I know what my parents' deaths did to me," I said.

"Yeah. It did. It hurt a whole fucking lot. At least, your parents didn't hang themselves so that you could see them swinging from a tree. I don't

know why I'm telling you this. I don't even know you like that."

"Maybe that's why. It makes it easier sometimes," I said.

"Yeah, it does. It makes everything easier," she said. Her voice had dropped into a whisper. I could feel an electrical charge between us.

I was just about to ask for the check and throw her in Black Betty and head to her hotel room or, failing that, find a deserted driveway and release the savage when I noticed Fella and three of his cronies enter the Cove.

I grabbed the big, heavy salt shaker with the hard edges and gripped it tight. It wasn't a roll of quarters but it was made out of a durable glass, and I didn't think it would break easily. Fella and one sycophant eased their way through the crowd from the left. The other two were slipping toward us from the right. The band was taking a break, so the mass of bodies on the dance floor began to dissipate.

I saw recognition ripple across the face of one of the guys approaching from the right. It was the guy I had disarmed yesterday at Mama J's funeral. Of course, a yahoo like that would be one of Fella's boys. I saw a brief hitch in his stride. He shook it off and kept coming.

And Here We Go.

"Lisa, some guys are coming over here. They got a problem with me. I'm gonna try to deal with them politely. But you might wanna go over to the bar," I said. She slid out of the booth and walked over to the bar without saying a word. Fella had a bandage covering most of his nose and upper lip. Both his eyes were bloodshot. His friend was sweating like a whore in Temple. They were both so high if they raised their arms they could have touched the moon. I slid out of the booth and held the salt shaker by my side in my left hand.

"Time to get your fucking shine box, nigga!" Fella screamed in his thickest Brooklyn accent. They all rushed toward me. Fella and his cohort reached me first. As other bar patrons scattered or cried out, I focused on the gang that couldn't shoot straight. The guy with Fella was wearing a baggy football jersey and baggy pants. He was tall but spindly like a sick giraffe. He had a short length of pipe in his hand. He raised it over his head and brought it down in a deadly arc toward my head. I blocked it with my right arm. My bicep took most of the impact. A sharp burning sensation ran

down my arm to the tips of my fingers. I planted my feet, ducked, and fired a shot just below his ribs with my left fist. Air escaped his lungs, and he dropped like a hooker during shore leave. As he fell, I slammed my right elbow at his orbital bone. Blood erupted from his eye socket as he slid to the floor and assumed the fetal position.

Fella tried to sucker punch me, but I spun to my left and slipped his punch while driving the heel of my right hand up and under his chin. His feet came off the floor a few inches then his baggy jeans dropped to his ankles as he crumpled to his knees. His boxers were tattered and dingy, but at least he had them on. He looked like a penitent as I punched him dead in the mouth with my left hand. I felt his full lips flatten against his platinum encrusted teeth. One of them gave way, and I saw light bounce off it as it skittered across the floor. Fella fell on his side keening like a wounded calf.

The guy with the Trailer-Hitch was shorter but stocky with some solid muscle on him. He pulled a pipe wrench out of his back pocket.

Jesus, I was going to have to talk with Bradley about his security. He swung a forehand shot at my head like he was holding a tennis racket. I stepped forward, getting inside the arc of the swing. Instead of getting brained with the wrench, I ended up trapping his right arm against my side. I dropped the salt shaker and snaked my left arm around his right bicep and placed my right hand on his shoulder. Then I pulled down with all my strength. I raised my knee to meet his face and felt the satisfying crunch of his nose and teeth shattering. I picked him up by his shirt and his belt and tossed him over the back of the booth where Lisa and I had been sitting. Our drink glasses crashed to the floor as he landed on our table. He slid off the table and fell to the ground with a mouth full of blood. He began making wet, gurgling noises.

Trailer-Hitch came at me shouting something about it was my time or some other nonsense. I couldn't hear him anymore. My head was throbbing, and the color had drained from the world. I was seeing everything in a muted black and white palette. He didn't have his signature weapon. Just his ashy fists that looked like he had been juggling powdered donuts. I whipped a sidekick at his right knee and this time, it did break. I felt it snap like a piece of kindling. As he fell, I caught him around the neck with my right

arm, then brought my left arm under his right armpit. I interlaced my fingers and started to squeeze him in a modified chokehold.

“Nathan! Let him go! You’re gonna kill him, man!” a voice said. I started to see colors again. I looked down. Trailer-Hitch’s tongue was sticking out of his mouth. His jaundiced eyes were rolling up into his skull.

I felt hands on my arms trying to free him from my grip. The bouncer and a guy in a chef’s apron were attempting to pull me off of Trailer-Hitch. Fella was writhing on the floor with his hands pressed against his face. Wrench and Pipe Layer were lying in opposite supine directions. There was salt all over the old wooden floor.

The whole confrontation had lasted two minutes. The way my body was trembling with adrenaline, it felt like I had been fighting for days. I released Trailer-Hitch. He slid along my leg until he, too, flopped to the ground. The bouncer and the chef were trying to push me toward the door, but they were having trouble moving my bulk.

“Just go, Nathan. I don’t wanna call the cops, man,” Bradley said. His forehead was wrinkled with worry. I backed away from the carnage I had caused. People stared at me like I was some sort of trained animal that had gone berserk. I felt twitchy and rung up from my adrenaline. My mouth was so dry I could have spit gravel. I scanned the crowd for Lisa. She was nowhere to be found.

“I’m...I’m sorry, Bradley. They started it, man,” I stammered. All the poisonous pain and anger had drained out of my system when I saw Bradley’s tortured face. Violence sickened him. He once told me he couldn’t even watch trailers for horror movies because the thought of seeing blood made him nauseous.

Suddenly, he was tumbling onto me. For a moment, I thought he had forsaken his peace-loving principles. Then I saw Fella sprinting for the door. He had pulled up his pants and pushed Bradley into me. I watched as he smashed through a few patrons and streaked across the parking lot. The mention of cops must have tripped his flight or fight reflex. And since the latter hadn’t worked out for him, he was choosing the former.

I held my hands up in surrender, and the glorified doorman walked me to the exit. I gave the bar one more quick glance. I still didn’t see Lisa. As I

ambled out the door, I noticed Fella had left his low-rider near the entrance/exit. Any closer and he would have been on the porch. They must have been flying when they hit the parking lot. He'd probably taken off through the woods. He'd come back to get his car once shit cooled down. He'd be covered in honeysuckle and pine needles, but he would have ducked the cops.

Suddenly, I heard a revolting thump and then the crash of metal and the crack of fiberglass. As tires screeched, the bouncer and I looked at each other for a second before we both took off in a full sprint. We made a beeline for the George Washington Memorial Highway.

The Cove sat on the side of the busiest road in Gloucester. The four lanes of the GWMH sliced through the heart of the county and bisected the town. At night, only a few lights from the Cove and the Wal-Mart across the median illuminated the darkness. I could hear footfalls behind me as I, the bouncer, and a crowd of bar patrons reached the side of the road. A small pick-up truck had run into the back of a mid-sized sedan. Steam billowed from under the hood of the truck. The scent of motor oil and the cloying smell of antifreeze wafted up my nostrils.

Fella was sprawled across the hood of the sedan. He was groaning and clutching at his right leg. An elderly white lady was standing outside the car in the middle of the road with her hands held up toward the sky in frenzied supplication. Vehicles in the northbound lane inched their way around her as she screamed at the stars.

"Oh Lord, I knew I shouldn't have gone to bingo tonight! I have sinned, God, I have sinned!" she howled. Several corn fed boys from the crowd began threading through the traffic to make their way to the accident. They were probably members of the volunteer rescue squad. Small towns like Gloucester couldn't seem to convince their citizens they needed a paid team of first responders. There were Daffodil Festivals to pay for.

I started to join the boys when I felt a firm hand on my arm.

"Don't you think you should probably get out of here?" Lisa said.

I started to protest, but I realized she was right. No matter how bad I wanted to stay and explain what had happened or how much I wanted to help, the truth was, a few moments ago I had been beating Fella to a pulp. I

hadn't pushed him into traffic, but I wasn't sure a deputy wouldn't slap me in cuffs just based on general principles.

"Yeah, let's get out of here," I mumbled.

"Come on. I parked on the other side of the building. You can come get your truck later," she mumbled back. We faded away from the accident scene just as I heard the sound of sirens in the distance. She didn't say we were going back to her room, and I didn't assume that was our destination. But I wasn't too surprised when we pulled into the Hampton Inn parking lot.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We rode the elevator in silence. The electricity between us filled the space where words would have gone. When we reached her floor, we exited the elevator, and she pulled out her key card. She slid the key in the slot and clicked on a light as we entered. Her room was one of the two suites in the hotel. There was a love seat and a sink and a couch, but my eyes were drawn to the king-sized bed. It was something out of a rap video with plush black blankets and full white pillows thrown at haphazard angles across its entire expanse.

It looked sturdy.

Lisa got a bottle of water out of the mini-fridge and tossed it to me. I caught it one handed while looking at the bed. She giggled. I watched as she glided across the carpet toward me.

“I’m sorry you had to see all that. I’m not really a violent person. I...”

“Just don’t like to be fucked with. I get it. Believe it or not, I’ve seen worse things go down. Nobody got a cap busted in their ass tonight. The club didn’t get sprayed by an AK. It was actually refreshing to see somebody just get his ass handed to him. I was in a club in Van Nuys once where a guy got into it with some boys over who was a better rapper Xzibit or Snoop Dogg. They got into a fight and the Snoop Dogg fan lit up the parking lot with an AR-15. A girl I used to dance within Vegas got shot in the eye,” she said matter-of-factly.

I was right. This wasn’t her first rodeo. It wasn’t even her first barrel race.

“Oh shit. I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay. She didn’t die. She does a sexy pirate act now. She raking in that paper,” she said.

“Wow. It’s a good thing she still has her booty,” I said. Lisa rolled her eyes.

“Sit down. I’m gonna go change out of these clothes,” she said as she poked me in the chest. My heart was thudding like a bass drum. I felt the bottom drop out of my stomach. I was going to have sex with a porn star. It

was going to happen. I knew it like I knew the sun would rise tomorrow. And I was just a bit terrified. It was like a mountaineer who finally attempts to climb Mt. Everest who got all his gear off the internet. I wasn't positive I had enough equipment.

The door to the bathroom opened, and Lisa walked out wearing a white terry cloth robe. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail with a bright pink hair tie. The robe could not hide her God-given and man-made curves. Her hips swayed maddeningly as she sashayed over to where I was still standing in the middle of the floor.

"Maybe I should call my cousin to come get me," I said hoarsely.

"Did they teach you that in the Marines? The way you fight looks like some Bourne Identity shit,"

"Most of it. Some of it is just country boy fu," I said.

"You always got jokes," she said. She hooked her fingers in the belt loops of my jeans.

"Not always. I'm pretty quiet on the toilet," I said. Lisa laughed in spite of herself.

"Stop making me laugh. I'm trying to be sexy," she said.

"You ain't gotta try hard," I said.

"Hard. Ha ha," she whispered against my chest. I could feel the heat from her sex through my jeans.

"I liked watching you fight," she said. A sliver of melted steel ran down my spine.

"You want me to stay?" I said. My tongue felt thick and dumb. Lisa stepped away from me and leaned against the wall near the headboard.

"What do you think?" she asked. She ran her hands up and down her robe.

"I just don't want us to do anything we might regret," I said finally.

The robe fell to the floor.

"Boo, I've done porn. I don't believe in regrets," she said. I took two steps and then picked her up under her arms until I was face to face with her snatch. She wrapped her slick brown legs around my head, and I buried my

face in her shaved pussy. The warm, sweet yet slightly salty taste of her filled my mouth.

“Fuck, your strong,” she moaned. I walked over to the bed and lowered her onto the blankets. She sat up and busied herself with the button of my jeans.

“Well, aren’t you big all over,” she said once she had freed my dick from my pants. I heard the smile in her voice. I resisted the urge to ask her how it compared to some of her co-stars. Then she put her mouth on me and rational thought ceased.

I could say that actually sleeping with a porn star didn’t meet the impossibly high expectations I had created in my mind. Yeah, I could say that.

It was everything you imagined it would be and some things you didn’t. It was wild and passionate and intense. It was also tender and romantic. And silly and goofy. As the rays of the sun pierced the blinds, I awoke to see Lisa sprawled across the bed like an action figure some kid had left behind once he was done playing. I moved her foot off my face as I got up to go to the bathroom. The condom wrappers were spread across the floor like confetti. I came back from the bathroom and found that she had made a chrysalis out of the blankets.

“What does BAM mean?” she asked as she pointed to the Olde English letters tattooed over my heart.

“I got it when I was in the Corps,” I said.

“Well, I figured that, but what does it stand for?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said. She must have realized I didn’t want to talk about it anymore because she let it drop. I used my toes to pull my shirt off the floor then grabbed it with my hand and pulled it over my head.

“Do you think of me as more of a whore now than when you found out I did porn?” she asked. The question hit me like a slap to the face.

“I don’t think you’re a whore. You get paid to give pasty photo-phobic geeks a vicarious thrill. That doesn’t make you a whore. And I don’t have any moral high ground to stand on to judge you. Like my friend Skunk once said, “Everybody’s grandma done touched a dick,” I said. Lisa rolled on her back and laughed long and hard.

“I gotta use that one,” she said after she caught her breath.

She smiled, and I sat on the edge of the bed. I grabbed my jeans and pulled them up to my calves. Lisa traced her fingernails across my back. I flinched when her finger found the scratches she had given me.

“I gotta get going up the road. I got some things I gotta do,” I said.

“Give me a minute to get myself together and I’ll take you back to your truck,”

“Nah, I’ll just walk. It’s only a mile. You get your rest,”

“Oh, you don’t wanna be seen getting out of my car. I get it,” she said. I saw that mask of indifference slide over her face.

“No, it ain’t that. I don’t want you to be seen with a bar brawler and former deputy with an anger management problem. No need for you to get pulled over for an imaginary broken tail light before you leave town,” I said.

“I guess you got a point,” she said and rolled onto her back again. She let the blanket slip down to her waist. Her dark brown nipples were as hard as bullets. I wet my finger and stroked one. She moaned.

“Don’t start no fire you can’t put out,” she said with a lascivious grin.

“I think I’ve got enough hose to do the job. But that was just a tease. I gotta go,” I said. I pulled up my pants and grabbed my jacket. It had found its way to the lamp beside the bed.

“I do have a favor to ask, though,” I said. Lisa arched her eyebrow.

“Can I get the keys to your dad’s house?” The temperature in the room dropped thirty degrees.

“Why you want the keys for?” she asked. Her eyes were hard green bits of glass.

“That guy that tried to jump me? He was dropping heavy wads of cash in the collection plate at your dad’s Temple. I went by to talk to him about it yesterday after you stopped by with the clothes. A few hours later, he tries to stomp a mud hole in me. That’s out of character for him. Oh, he go for bad but he more talk than walk. He’s the type that would usually mean mug me for a few weeks then maybe get his nerve up to key my truck. Not that full frontal assault shit he tried last night,” I said. I left out the part where I had

kneed him in the nuts, but I still thought my assessment was pretty accurate. Fella was a punk who had spontaneously grown a set of balls.

“So you think he’s involved with what happened to my dad?” she asked.

“I think him and your dad was up to something. Was it bad enough to get him killed? I don’t know. I do know Fella was moving ten thousand dollars twice a month through your dad’s Temple. Children have killed parents for less. I just wanna look around and see what I see,” I said.

“And what are you gonna do if you do see something?” she asked. I shrugged my shoulders.

“I’ll just pass it along to the state boys. But it will have to be something really compelling. Honestly, I probably won’t find a fucking thing, but it can’t hurt to look. Unless you don’t want me to,” I said. I had given my word to Mrs. Parrish I would check into what happened to Esau, but Lisa was his daughter. If she wanted me to leave it alone I’d leave it alone.

“Sure. Go ahead. I don’t give a fuck,” she said. She got up and walked across the room to the ottoman. I got a glorious view of her rock-solid ass as she retrieved the keys from her purse. She turned and tossed them to me.

Lisa put her robe on and sat on the bed. She stared at the window with her back to me.

“I used to pray that one day all the stuff my dad had done would get him killed. I would lay in my bed and close my eyes tight and strain every muscle in my body as I prayed. Like if I strained hard enough it would get my prayer to God quicker. Maybe my prayer finally got through. That’s a dark fucking prayer, ain’t it?” she said.

A question I didn’t want to ask clawed at my throat. It was such a common and terrible question. You ask it knowing the answer but all the while hoping you’re wrong.

“Lisa-” I started to say but she wasn’t finished talking.

“I don’t feel anything. Ain’t that terrible? I can’t even say I’m happy he’s dead. I feel nothing. He was a user. He used my mama, then he used me and finally he used God. But God got his ass. My grandmother, my mom’s mother, would tell me that God didn’t always move swiftly but he moved. We couldn’t see it. It was like watching a pine tree grow. You look once, it’s

four feet tall. You look again, it's above the house. He moved on my dad. He got him," she said. Her shoulders trembled slightly.

"Can you do a favor for me? When he told me he was doing a Temple hustle, I asked him for my grandmother's bible. I gave him a PO Box where I get some of my mail. He never sent it. That woman's bible didn't need to be a part of any phony religious game he was playing. If you see it while you looking around can you bring it to me? It's the only thing I want from that house," she asked.

I wanted to put my arms around her, but I wasn't sure of the etiquette of our situation.

"Yeah, if I see it I'll get it for you," I said.

"You can't miss it. It's big as hell and blood red with gold lettering. " she said. I started to head for the door. I stopped and turned back. She was still staring out the window.

"I put my number in your phone while you were asleep. It's under my stage name," she said. I grinned.

"So I guess it's okay if I send you inappropriate text messages later," I said. She laughed, but it was a mirthless sound.

"Actually, I was hoping you'd send me videos of cats being assholes," she said. I chuckled.

"All right. I talk at you later. If I see the bible, I'll hit you up and drop it off," I said.

"Hit me up even if you don't see it," she said. She stood, then turned around. I saw that her eyes were red. I also saw that the robe had fallen off her shoulders. She hugged herself and her full breasts struggled to free themselves from their terry cloth prison.

Fuck it.

I reached her in three steps and pulled her to me by her arms. I crushed my mouth to hers. As her tongue slipped between my lips, I could taste the remnants of last night's Cosmo. Her hands snaked under my shirt and roamed across my chest. She moaned, and I felt the vibration in my teeth. I slipped my hands under her ample backside and picked her up off the ground. She wrapped her strong legs around my waist as my shirt rolled up

on my back. Her skin was feverishly hot, but she felt weightless in my arms.
It was like holding a feather from a phoenix.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I got back to the funeral home just in time to see Mrs. Verlaine's family filing into Walt's office. Her son Eddie and his sallow-faced wife Tabitha and her daughter Mary Beth and her boyfriend Tam-Tam sat down across from Walt as I eased through the lobby.

"My mother was a godly woman. She was ready, ya know? Ready to go anytime. She had a deep love of the Lord. I know she was ready for him when he came. I know it. I bet the Holy Ghost just filled her right up!" Eddie said as Walt nodded his head sagely. I hurried to my room. I was proud of myself for not laughing until I fell across my bed. A few minutes later, I had drifted off to sleep.

I woke up to Walt knocking on my door with gentle love taps. I grabbed my phone and checked the time. It was half past noon. I cursed to myself. I had wanted to catch up with Deacon Jones, but if he was finding salvation at some other Temple he wouldn't be free until 2pm. Going to a black Temple in the South was an endurance event. Walt had this theory that marathon black Temple services could trace that tradition back to a time before marches and the Movement. Back to when the only place black people felt truly safe was within the walls of a clapboard edifice.

Nowadays, the refuge was becoming a ghost town. With desegregation came freedom. Freedom gave birth to choices. Now brown and black people could go to the mall, to the beach, to the movies relatively sure they wouldn't be lynched or beaten. Most of the time. Black folks didn't feel the need to hide out in Temples for three or four hours on a Sunday. You could now wear your best suit to your new job Monday morning instead of waiting for the Sabbath. Things weren't perfect, but they were better. And that was great for everyone.

Except the small town black country Temple. Members moved to nice neighborhoods. They didn't have twelve or fifteen kids anymore. They attended services around the corner from their civil engineered communities. Or they didn't attend Temple at all. Most country Temples

could barely fill the pews on an average Sunday morning. At this rate, Jesus might be coming home to an empty house.

New Hope was the exception to this rule. Where most rural Temples were barely surviving, New Hope was thriving. I had never attended a service there, but I had driven past their slam packed parking lot many times.

“That you, Walt?” I said.

“Nah, it’s the Easter Bunny,” he said.

“It’s open,” I said. Walt opened the door then leaned his wide shoulders against the frame. His sad eyes appraised me. He let out a heavy sigh and crossed his arms.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing to a bright red bruise on my arm.

“Love bite?” I offered.

“And them stains on your pants?” he asked. I looked down. There was blood on my jeans. Dark muddy brown patches on my knee and thighs.

“Would you believe it’s tomato sauce?” I asked. He sighed again.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I just had a disagreement with some boys down at the Cove,”

“You put anybody in the hospital this time?” Walt asked. I shook my head.

“I don’t know. I think one of them might have to get his knee looked at. But Fella Montague ran into the road when the owner mentioned calling the cops. He tried to wrestle an old lady and her car. I’m pretty sure at least one of his legs is broken. So I don’t think I’ll be running into him anytime soon,” I said.

“Running? Funny,” Walt said. He stepped into the room and sat on the foot locker I had behind the door.

“You a grown man, Nate, so I’m not gonna talk to you like you ain’t. You my cousin and I love you. You know that. But I’d prefer that the only time people read about Blackmon Funeral Home in the paper is at the end of an obituary...”

“I hear ya, cuz. I hear ya.”

“Come on, Rocky, help me get Mrs. Verlaine dressed and her and Esau casketed. I hope we don’t have to strap her down to keep her from popping up like a jack in the box. You know it took me two hours to straighten her out? Aw, I can’t be mad at her, though. I hope I’m still fucking when I’m that age,” he said.

“They picked one of the floor model caskets?” I asked.

“Yeah, but they didn’t want to. But when I asked about insurance, they started to act like I was speaking Klingon. And you know they still had me show them the top of the line stuff? People want champagne funerals but got beer budgets,” Walt said with another heavy sigh.

We got Mrs. Verlaine situated without the use of rigging. Her service was scheduled for Tuesday. The same day as Rev. Watkins. I asked Walt if it was cool if I worked Esau’s funeral. He shrugged.

“I don’t care. Hers is gonna be a graveside at four. I’ll just need Curtis Daniel and me. How’s that thing going anyway? Find out anything yet? Was Watkins an ex-CIA agent?” Walt asked.

“Nah. Haven’t really found anything. That’s kinda why I wanna go to the service. See how people act around the remains,” I said. I didn’t think Walt needed to know about Fella and the donations just yet. The less he knew the less he was involved. I wasn’t so sure what exactly was going on but wherever dirty money was involved blood was sure to follow.

Then I went to my room and pulled out the piece of paper Mrs. Parrish had given me with Deacon Jones’ telephone number. I called him and listened as his generic classical ringtone played.

“Hello,” a gruff voice said. It sounded like someone who woke up pissed off and waited for the day to go downhill from there.

“Hello, is this John Ellis Jones?”

“Who is speaking?”

“Well, sir, I’m Nathan Waymaker, and I was thinking about applying to be the new pastor at New Hope Baptist Temple in the wake of the tragic loss of Rev. Watkins. I was wondering if I could perhaps come by and talk with you about the Temple since you are one of the deacons,”

“I don’t know where you got your information from, but I’m no longer a deacon at that place.

“Oh, my. Well, would it be too much of an inconvenience for me to come by and personally speak with you about why you left? I think before I pursue a pastorate at a Temple I should hear why the eldest deacon left,” I said. The line was quiet for a few moments.

“When did you get ordained? Last I heard of you was you leaving the police force,” he said finally.

“Oh...uh, it’s a recent conversion, but I’m fully devoted to my calling. I have immersed myself in the Word,” I stammered. A few more quiet seconds ticked by.

“So, you have fully embraced Leviticus 11:12 as it pertains to your calling?” he asked. I bit my bottom lip. I had no idea what Leviticus 11:12 pertained to at all. Why didn’t he ask me to quote the Martian Chronicles? I took a chance.

“Um...well only in so far as it references the true calling,” I said. I squinted at my phone.

“Son, Leviticus 11:12 prohibits the eating of shellfish. I don’t know what kind of game you playing but I ain’t interested,” he said.

“Wait! Mr. Jones. Okay, I’m not a minister, and I’m sorry for trying to trick you. I’m working for some folks who are concerned that the sheriff isn’t investigating Esau’s death as well as he could. I just wanna talk to you for a few minutes. I already know that there were some unusual donations coming in. And that you was opposed to joining Rev. Short’s organization. I was wondering if that was why you left and what about Rev. Short concerned you so much. I’m not the police anymore. I’m not anything official. I’m just trying to put some people’s minds at ease,” I said. I could hear him taking rapid breaths over the phone. Then the line went dead.

“Well, shit,” I muttered. I dialed Deacon Jones again.

“What?” the gruff voice said.

“Look, I just want to ask you a few questions. Somebody killed Watkins. He didn’t commit suicide, and he didn’t fall on a bullet. Now I know he wasn’t no saint, but I don’t think the Queen County Sheriff’s department should get away with covering up another murder. What about you?” I asked.

“What you want from me, boy? I don’t know who killed him,”

“Yeah, but you might know something about why he was killed. Something you don’t even realize you know. Mr. Jones, can I come by and talk to you face to face? Or are we just gonna play phone tag all day? Cuz I’m just gonna keep calling you,” I said. I heard him grumble under his breath and then he spit out a response.

“You know where Beacon Hill Lane is?” he asked.

“Yeah, down at the bottom of Mathews County. Past the Tasty-Freeze,” I said.

“Call me back when you get close. GPS don’t reach down here,” he said. Then the line went dead again.

I drove out to the far end of Mathews, guiding Betty past barren pine trees and dying magnolias. I had the window down, and I could smell the scent of the sea beyond the marshlands that lined the coast in this part of the county. I passed deep ditches full of cattails and ditch lilies and beer cans. I turned on to Beacon Hill Lane and called Jones.

“Turn down the lane with the tractor trailer mailbox. You can’t see all the numbers but it’s 2456,” he said. I did indeed see a tractor trailer mailbox. I turned down that lane and drove under delicately bowing red maples that formed a canopy above the driveway.

I crested around a gentle curve in the driveway and came upon an automobile graveyard. Trucks and cars and station wagons and vans littered the yard in front of an old two-story farm house with white aluminum siding. The roof was missing at least four or five rows of shingles, and it gave the house a gap-toothed smile. Off to the right of the property past some of the vehicles were the blackened remnants of some kind of outbuilding. A garage or a big shed, I guessed. I cut off my truck and climbed out with my phone in my pocket. I walked through the dead vehicles and stepped up on the porch. Before I could knock on the door, a man opened it.

He was almost as tall as me. Craggy lines as deep as canyons covered his weathered brown face. He had a wide nose that had been broken once or twice. It curled across his face like a question mark. He wore some old school glasses with dull brass frames. He had on a pair of grease covered jeans and a red plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. His

forearms rippled with hard earned muscle and thick veins that ran down to his hard hands.

“You Waymaker?” he asked. His hands hung loose at his sides, but his shoulders looked tight and ready to flick out a punch at a moment’s notice.

“So they tell me.” I held out my hand. After a few seconds, he grasped it. His grip was firm. He appeared to be anywhere from 50 to 75 years old. It was hard to pin down.

“Well, go ahead and ask your questions,” he said.

“All right. Why’d you step down as head deacon? What did Watkins do that made you leave the Temple?” I asked. Jones looked off into the distance. He stared at his empire of rust.

“I just didn’t agree with the direction the Temple was going,” he said.

“Did that have anything to do with Fella Montague dropping ten thousand dollars in the collection plate every two weeks?” I asked. I studied his face. It stayed as smooth and placid.

“Whatever that was about was between Esau and that boy,” he said. His eyes studied the horizon.

“Then what was it? Was it something personal?” I asked.

“Son, what do you know about the people of New Hope?” he asked me. I hunched one of my shoulders.

“Not much. I know it used to be one of five black Temples in Mathews when I left for the military. By the time I came home, it was the only one still thriving. I know the current building is the third building to house the Temple since Watkins became pastor. What else am I supposed to know, Mr. Jones?” I said.

“A lot of people who go to that Temple came to the Lord late in their lives. They had lived lives of inequity and sin, and New Hope offered them just that. A new hope. A lot of them was like me,” he said and this time, he stared right at me.

“And what are you like?” I said. Jones squared his shoulders and stood up straight.

“I used to be a hustler. I ran a shot house here and a chop shop over there in that garage over yonder. Sold liquor out my house and cut up old

cars for the catalytic converters and alternators and stereo systems. Back when people was still wanting stereo systems. My wife left me years ago, but I had some female friends that kept me company from time to time. My daughter lived here, but I hardly noticed her. I live with that, and I own it, Mr. Waymaker. When crack made its way here, my daughter was one of the first to die from it. Some of the boys that brought me cars was using that shit. She got hooked up with a few of them while I was busy not paying her no attention,” he said.

“She overdosed in the garage. I found her with a glass pipe still in her hands. Your cousin buried her for me. That Sunday, I went to New Hope, and I prayed to God to help me find a way out of the darkness that had taken over my life. The Monday after her service, I shut down the shot house and the chop shop, and I have been a man of God ever since,” he said. He sounded out of a breath when he stopped talking.

“Mrs. Parrish told me a similar story,” I said. Jones nodded.

“If you go to a Sunday service, you’ll likely hear a dozen stories just like that. New Hope was a Temple where you wasn’t judged on what you had done but on what you was gonna do. That was the Temple that saved my life. I believed in that Temple. I believed in Esau Watkins,” Jones said.

“Then you lost your faith?” I asked. I saw his nostrils flare.

“Not in the Lord! Never that! But did I lose my faith in Esau? Yeah, you bet your ass I did. Don’t get me wrong, I’m sorry that he’s dead, but I bet he went to hell on a scholarship,” Jones said. A loon called out through the darkening woods. I stood there with my arms crossed. Jones wanted to tell me what had gone down between him and Watkins, but he needed to get there in his own time on his own terms. I shifted from one foot to the other. I tried my best to put his mind at ease.

“Mr. Jones, I’m not gonna run tell nobody nothing you tell me. People know I helped Jim Sutter cuz he told it. But I’ve done other things that nobody know anything about. I keep my secrets, and I keep my word. I’m doing a favor for Mrs. Parrish and Mrs. Sheer and the rest of them folks at New Hope. Now I know you wouldn’t have spit on Watkins if he was on fire, but I think you still care about the rest of them people up there. And they want answers,” I said. Jones eyed me warily for a few seconds. Then he stepped aside.

“Come on inside,” he said finally. The house was the antithesis of the front yard. A leather sofa and a love seat glistened under the yellow light from two floor lamps. An oak entertainment center dominated the left wall. A tan shag carpet was clean enough to serve a four-course meal on it. Jones motioned for me to sit on the love seat. He disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a mason jar filled with a clear liquid. He sat down on the sofa and unscrewed the lid. I caught a good whiff of the contents of the jar.

“Shine? Kind of a strong drink for a man of God,” I said. Jones took a sip.

“Even Jesus turned water into wine, son,” he said. He handed me the jar. I took a swig. The liquid burned all the way down, but once it hit my stomach, a warm feeling flowed through my extremities. I passed the jar back to him.

“They want answers, huh? All they gotta do is look at what Esau had become. At the last Temple meeting I attended, he said we needed to make sure we was all committed to the Temple and its success. That struck me as odd because I couldn’t think how we could be any more committed. That Temple was my life, and the people in it were my family. I lived and breathed for New Hope. He had that damn greased up moose Short there with some of his armor-bearers. Huh, more like soldiers. They some boys he took in from that country over in Africa that was fighting the war.”

“Rwanda?” I asked, but Jones ignored me and pressed on with his story.

“So him and his new best friend Short come up with this idea that everybody’s got to give them their bank account information. And cosign them onto their deeds for their land. And leave the Temple something in their wills. If they didn’t have a will they should write one,” he said.

“That don’t sound like a Temple. It sound like a damn cult,” I said. Jones nodded.

“That was my thought exactly,” he said.

“I’m guessing you didn’t just sit there and go along with this new business structure,” I said as he handed me the jar again.

“I told him he was out of his damn mind if he thought I was going to go along with that craziness. He just shook his head and told me that as his deacon, I had no choice. Well, I told him I would never give him the key to my damn piggy bank never mind my bank account, and I would make sure

the rest of the congregation didn't either," Jones said and now he did look his age. His face seemed to sag, and his eyes looked yellowed and rheumy.

"What happened?" I asked. I kept the jar this time. Jones looked like he had had enough. He coughed a few times.

"About a week later, I came back from the store to find my garage on fire. One of Short's men was here watching it burn. He told me if I didn't step down he would come back and set me on fire. Lord, if this had been ten years ago I would have served him up some homemade whoop ass. But it ain't and I didn't. I just stepped away. And a month later Esau ends up dead. The Lord do work in mysterious ways, don't he? Now, I'll be taking that jar back if you don't mind," he said as he held out his wide hand. I slid it across the pristine coffee table that was between us.

"You think Short had something to do with what happened to Esau?" I asked. Jones took a long sip from the jar. He made a horrific face and then sat the jar on a coaster.

"I don't know. Them boys Short got with him are some hard rocks. They got eyes that have seen some shit. Dead eyes. But by the time I stepped down, the congregation had went along with Esau's new rule." He sipped from the jar again. Then I watched as he pulled a .44 long barrel revolver from under the coffee table and laid it on his thigh.

"If them boys ever decide to come back, I'm gonna be the one setting some fires. To they asses," he said. He was staring down at the gun.

He slid the jar over to me, but I had gotten my fill of moonshine. I stood and thanked him for his time and headed back to the office.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Walt was gone by the time I got back. I unlocked the door and went to my room. The sun was setting, and I was staring at a long, lonely night.

I grabbed my cell phone. I dialed the newest number in my contacts.

“Well, hello, Superman,” Lisa’s honey coated voice said.

“Superman? That’s a tough title to live up to,” I said. She laughed.

“Well, you earned it last night. What’s up? Did you get my grandma’s bible?” she asked.

“No, not yet. I got hung up with something. I was wondering if you had eaten yet,” I said.

“Be more specific,” she said. I got the joke after a second.

“Food, smartass. There is a restaurant in Mathews that makes great sloppy sandwiches,” I said.

“Mr. Waymaker, is this an actual date? Because I haven’t been on one of those in at least a year,” she said.

“Let’s call it dinner and leave it at that. Date sounds so formal since I’ve seen your glorious ass up close and personal,” I said. I heard her sigh.

“I kinda wanted it to be a date but whatever. You picking me up or is that off the table too?” she said. I heard the hard edge in her voice. It was like biting down on tinfoil.

“Fine, it’s a date. I’ll even bring you a corsage,” I said. She guffawed.

“Really?”

“No, not really. Can you be ready in thirty minutes?” I asked.

“It’s a restaurant in Mathews. I’m ready now,” she said.

I picked her up, and we headed to Smitty’s Diner on Main Street in Mathews across from the library. The cool night air filled Betty’s cab. Lisa had the passenger window down and was blowing smoke out into the crisp October air. I rarely had people in my truck so I didn’t have a hard and fast rule about smoking. But I formulated a pretty stringent protocol as we parked on the street in front of the diner.

Smitty's had an intentional nostalgic design. Stainless steel stools and leather-bound booths harkened back to a simpler time when water cannons and German shepherds kept black folks in line. I'm sure some locals thought of it as the good old days.

"Wow, I feel like I've gone back in time," she said as she perused the menu, which had a 57 Plymouth Fury on the cover.

"Not too far, I hope. At a certain point, things get dicey for us," I said.

"Shit, all you need is some lye for your hair and you'll be good. My black ass would be in trouble," she said. I couldn't dispute that. I got a lot of my father's complexion but also a lot of my mom's hair.

"You trying to say I need a tan?" I asked. Lisa laughed so hard she snorted.

"You stupid," she said.

"I'm beginning to think you're right," I said as I looked at the menu.

"Didn't this used to be something else when we were in school? Like it was a restaurant but they sold bread or something?" she said. She scrunched her face as she tried to recall the memory. I ran my tongue along the inside of my bottom lip before I answered.

"Nah. That place you thinking of was around the corner from here. L&L's Restaurant and Bakery." I said. I tried to keep my voice steady.

"Yes! They used to make these croissant things. Man, I used to love them things. My grandmother would get them for me if I came into town with her," she said. She started to smile but it faltered when she saw my face.

"What? What is it?" she asked.

"That was my parents' place. They only had it for a few years. But they were able to lose an impressive amount of money in that time. My dad came up with the name. The L&L stood for laughter and love," I said.

"Oh, Nate, I'm sorry I didn't mean to bring up a bad memory," she said. She looked pained.

"Nah, it's cool. I mean the restaurant closing was rough but a couple years later right when I was leaving for Basic, my mom started a catering business out of the trailer. By the time I was out of the Corps they had hired six people and were doing jobs all across the state. I think my dad was too

nice to run a business. He would give away more than he sold to anybody that came in with a sad story and puppy dog eyes. The catering thing had been all my mom. My dad helped, but it was my mom's baby and she was fiercely protective of her babies. Whether it was me or the catering business. They were able to buy a real house without wheels and a car that didn't burn two quarts of oil leaving the driveway. By the time they...by the end, they were really happy," I said.

"So anything new with my sperm donor?"

"Not really. Like I said, I'm just poking around. Thought you didn't care?" I asked.

"I don't. But I need to sell his house, and I don't want nothing to come up to fuck that process up. I'm heading back to LA right after the funeral. I've been talking to a real estate agent who says she can handle the sale for me and confirm everything through email. I'm trying to tie this shit up as smoothly as possible," she said.

"You not coming to the wake either?" I asked.

"Nope," she said. I cleared my throat.

"I guess you got a lot of people missing you out there," I said. Lisa tossed a golden lock over her ear.

"Not as many as you think. I got some friends, mostly people in the business. But besides my dog and my doorman, I don't think nobody is really missing me. And no, I ain't got a man," she said. I arched an eyebrow.

"That ain't none of my business. We just doing what we doing here. You had a life before I met you. I know that. I was just saying, you seem sad and/or pissed off here in VA. I figured LA is where your heart is. Where you're happy," I said.

"I don't know about that. I mean, is anybody really happy? But I'm happier in LA than I am in these fucking woods," she said. Our waitress showed up and saved me from having to defend the Tri-County area. Lisa ordered first, and I was just about to put in a request for Smitty's signature Big Hoss sandwich when I felt the hair on the back of my neck rise. Somebody was staring at me. I looked up from the menu and sucked my teeth. Victor Culler and Sam Dean and their respective better halves were coming through Smitty's front door.

“Shit on a fucking stick,” I mumbled.

“I’m sorry?” the waitress said. I didn’t get a chance to clarify my order before Victor and Co. stopped at our table. Victor was wearing good ole boy attire tonight. Blue Carhartt t-shirt and Wrangler jeans over brown construction boots. Sam had adopted a more formal wardrobe for his off-duty hours. He had on a shirt with buttons. Victor’s wife was a former homecoming queen who had gone to seed. It wasn’t her fault. Carrying Victor’s evil spawn to term four times had wrecked her body. Mary Anne Boucher-Culler had once been the star of every boy in the Queen County school system’s masturbatory fantasies. I had cast her a few times myself back in the day. But that day was done. Her once luxuriant black hair hung in lank strips around her doughy face. Mean, ratty eyes stared out from the recesses of her jowls and wrinkles. Her face looked like a human origami project.

Valerie Eden was five years older than Mary Anne, but she looked a decade younger. Her tousled red hair was cut in a short, severe style with a crest of bangs that she swept back from her forehead. Valerie worked out at the Y five days a week, and it showed. She was wearing some white Capri pants that showed off her firm thighs and calves. They looked capable of crushing a cantaloupe or locking around your neck as you gave her the business. Either way, it would end up messy.

Victor leaned his bulk on the back of Lisa’s seat in the booth we were sharing. A smirk spread across his ruddy face like a blood slick on a river.

“Well, hey, Nate, how you doing tonight? Surprised to see you out and about. I mean, seeing as the boys from Gloucester wanna talk to you about a fight at the Cove last night. Mmph, I hope none of them boys wanna press charges. You’d be looking at what you think, Sam, four cases of assault and battery? Or maybe even attempted murder, I’d say,”

“I don’t know, Victor. Guess that be up to the boys in Gloucester,” Sam said. His long, hound dog face seemed more wan than usual. I interlaced my fingers and rested my chin on my knuckles. They were still sore from the other night, but I didn’t care. I was trying to give my hands something to do so I didn’t throttle Victor in front of all the nice folks at Smitty’s.

“I don’t know what you talking about, Victor. But if I was talking to a motherfucker who put an ass whooping on four grown men by himself, I’d

watch my goddam mouth,”

I heard someone in the booth behind me inhale sharply. The waitress shifted on her heels. She didn't seem ready to abandon the table without my order, but it didn't seem like she wanted to get caught in the crossfire between me and Victor either. The diner got real quiet real quick. Victor leaned forward even more and lowered his voice.

“You think you always gonna get away with your shit, don't you? Hey, honey, you Rev. Watkins's daughter, ain't ya? Why don't you ask your date here what he did with Steven Vandekellum? I bet your daddy be rolling over in his grave if he knew what kind of man you was sitting with,” he hissed.

“Victor!” Valerie Dean said. She glanced at me ever so subtly. Valerie had made it clear to me on more than one occasion that her Welcome Wagon had a few seats available to Pound Town if I was interested. Till this point, I hadn't taken her up on the offer. Of all the cops on the Queen County police force, Sam was probably the most decent and honest next to Sandy. Didn't seem right to be fucking the bejesus out of his wife behind his back. Lisa turned around in her seat and smiled at Victor.

“My daddy was a pimp and a drug dealer before he started hustling the Temple folks. And I'm an adult actress. And before you drop some of your self-righteous shit on me, just know I make more taking a money shot than you make in a year. So I gave up giving a damn what he did or did not approve of long before somebody put him out of my misery,” Lisa said. Her voice was as cold as shaved ice. I looked up and saw Victor blink a few times.

“Yeah, well, I just thought you should know who you with. Y'all enjoy your dinner now. I'll see you, Nate. You can count on that,” he said with some gusto. He was trying to reestablish his footing.

“I'm literally counting the minutes with an abacus,” I said as Victor and his group headed for the back of the restaurant. Sam looked over his shoulder and mouthed the word “sorry.” The voices in Smitty's rose again like a slow tide. Knives and forks began to clatter against cheap plates, and the whole place seemed to take a collective sigh.

“Um...you know what you want?” the waitress asked. Her powers of concentration were admirable.

“Yeah. Big Hoss and a Bud,” I said. Once she had scuttled off to the kitchen, Lisa touched me on the hand. Her fingers were warm and smooth. I ran my index finger over them.

“What’s the deal with you and that guy? And who’s Steven Vandekellum?” she asked. I answered the first half of her question.

“He was the first officer on the scene when my parents died. He was the one that magically lost the evidence. I threw him through a window,” I said as I peered at the old black and white photos that lined Smitty’s walls.

“That’s the guy? Man, I’ve seen some big dicks before but he is the biggest,” she said. I laughed. She seemed nonplussed about me tossing Victor around like a sack of shit.

“You stupid!” I said.

“Hey, don’t be stealing my line!” she said.

We hustled up and ate our meal then I drove us back to Lisa’s hotel room. On the way, I played a compilation CD of old school hip-hop while she funkyed up my upholstery with her Newports.

We almost kept our hands off each other until we got to her room. Once we hit the elevator, she demurely put her hands around the back of my head and under my chin and pulled my mouth down on hers. It was a genteel move that belied our furious gyrations the night before. Her mouth had that hard taste that cigarettes always left behind, but I was able to get past it. We hit her room like a tornado of arms and legs. I didn’t take off my shirt, and she barely got out of her pants before I slapped on the rubber and slammed into her.

Her eyes were feral and through clenched teeth, she implored me to go harder, deeper.

“Give it to me, motherfucker! Tame this bitch’s pussy!” she growled. That was Cat Noir talking now, and I was all ears.

Later as we caught our breath, Lisa sprawled across my chest and I gazed at the heavens for the strength for a second round. She hummed a tune and nestled herself into the hollow between my neck and my shoulder.

“We just doing what we doing, huh?” she said, and I heard the grin.

“Yeah, and what we doing is fucking awesome,” I said.

“You going by the house tomorrow? I really am trying to leave by Wednesday, and I’d like to have my grandma’s bible,” she said.

“Yeah, I’ll go by there before the wake. I’ll get it for you, don’t worry. I keep my promises,” I said. Lisa cleared her throat.

“My dad didn’t touch me if that was what you was thinking. What he did was worse,” she blurted out. I scooted up in the bed and rested my back against the headboard.

“Hey, you don’t have to tell me shit,” I said. Lisa flipped over and propped herself up on her elbows. Her eyes had a liquid sheen that was the precursor to a deluge.

“I know. I just want you to know why I don’t wanna go there. My mom used to clean up houses on the white side of town. Sometimes she worked Saturdays, and since my dad was working at the barbershop, she would take me with her. I think she didn’t want me hanging around the shop. Thought I might get in trouble up there. I was like nine or ten. My mom’s family didn’t like my daddy, and my daddy’s family was spread all over the state so there wasn’t no Aunt Tee for me to stay with or cousins to play with. Hand me my smokes,” she said as she sat up. I pulled a cig out and handed it to her along with the disposable lighter I found sitting next to the crumpled pack.

“One of the houses we went to was Allan Hinson. The county building inspector and owner of Triad Construction. I used to love going to his place. A two-story brick house so big I think you could have put our trailer in the living room and still had space to play Twister. He used to let me stay upstairs in this den with a TV while my mom cleaned the house. Most Saturdays, he would let us in as he was on his way out. He had a granddaughter, and she had some coloring books and drawing pads upstairs in the den. It was like I was in a fairy tale. The princess in the tower or some shit like that,” she said. She took a long drag on the cig. I had my hands in my lap. I didn’t grab her hand even though I wanted to. We weren’t falling in love. This was just her venting, some form of catharsis, one-half sex, one-half confession.

“Anyway, one Saturday he didn’t leave. He let us in, then said he was going to do some work outside. He had a backyard as big as a football field so, ya know, I guess there was a lot to do out there. I went upstairs, and my

mom started vacuuming. I was laying on the floor coloring a butterfly when Hinson came in,” she said.

“You don’t have to say nothing else,” I said, but I must have whispered because she went on.

“He stank. I can still remember that. He smelled like wet grass and rotten leaves. His t-shirt was plastered to his chest. He came and squatted down beside me. And...and he just started touching me, kissing me, telling me how good looking I was. And then he flipped me on my back and then all I remember was it HURT!” she yelled. Her eyes were spewing tears like a geyser. I put my hand out to touch her, then pulled it back like she was on fire.

“That night when I was in the bathtub, I was bleeding, and my mama asked me what happened. And I told her. Goddammit, I told her! And she went right up to my daddy. He was sitting in the kitchen chopping up some rocks. Small plastic baggies were all over the table. And I knew my daddy would make Hinson pay. He would HURT him! Ha. He made him pay all right,” she said.

“My daddy jumped in his Grand Prix and drove right over to Hinson’s house. When he came back, he was grinning like a fucking lunatic. My mama sent me to my room. But I could still hear him talking to her. He told her Hinson had cried like a little bitch when he confronted him. My mom asked him was we going to the police in the morning. My daddy, my own daddy, had said fuck no, we ain’t going to the police. That motherfucker cut me a check for three grand. And he gonna make sure I get the building in town so I can move the barbershop. That was what my daddy said when he found out a dirty old white man had raped his only child. All he was worried about was his goddamn barbershop. My mama said something, and then I heard dishes crash and the trailer rocked like a storm was hitting it,” she said. The cig was almost done.

“After that, my dad took me over there himself. Just left me on the step like a gift. My mama started hitting the pipe. Hinson would make me wait for him in the room. I was trapped like fucking Rapunzel. For years. Then one day, my mama went to visit Hinson. She came home and told me he wouldn’t be hurting me anymore. Then she went out back and hung herself from a pear tree in the backyard. We was in a double wide by then. Paid for

by my chapped pussy and my daddy's slinging. Later, Laurent and a deputy came by asking for my mama. I had seen her from my window. Seen her get the step ladder and the clothes line wire. Seen her swinging in the breeze."

"She had pushed Hinson down his own staircase. He wasn't married, and his granddaughter didn't come to visit him anymore so it was the UPS man who had seen the body through the front door. A neighbor had seen my mama leaving the place," she said. Her breathing was chugging like a locomotive.

"The way Laurent saw it wasn't no use calling his death murder since my mama was dead. I showed them my daddy's stash, and they arrested him at the shop. I was sixteen, so I dropped out and got my GED. See, Nathan, that's why I won't be attending the wake or the funeral. I might fuck up all your cousin's hard work. Cuz I might just stab that bitch through the eye to make sure he dead," Lisa said.

I almost told her then. It was the closest I'd come to telling anyone. Confession can be good for the soul but terrible for the flesh. So instead of sharing my pain I reminisced about it as Lisa stirred against me. I stared straight ahead and peered back into the past.

Eight months after my parents were reduced to ashes and poured into an urn I lost their house to the bank. They'd been behind in the mortgage payments when they died and since I had quit my job I couldn't catch up or keep up the payments. It was the same bank where Warren Vandekellum served as president of the board.

That's what finally broke me. I decided to do what no one else was willing to do. My parents didn't deserve to die, and they damn sure didn't deserve to have their murders go unavenged. My father would have said revenge was a useless emotion, but he was dead. So was my mom. All thanks to Steven Vandekellum. And now his father's bank owned my parent's house.

The day I got the letter Skunk was already on his way into town to check up on me. He picked me up and we went to the Cove and settled down to do some serious drinking. As we swallowed straight shots of whiskey chased by beer, I tapped Skunk on the shoulder. He turned toward me with his long, black hair falling into his face. I leaned in close and whispered in his ear.

“Time to end this motherfucker.” was all I said. Skunk took a sip from his beer.

“I don’t know what took you so long,” he said.

My friendship with Skunk hadn’t changed much when I became a deputy. I do think he was kind of relieved when I quit, though.

“All that badge mean is you gotta pretend you don’t know what I do,” he had said once. When I quit, I didn’t have to pretend anymore. Skunk was a hijacker, an armored car robber, a hired gun. But above all that, he was a killer. He was my friend and my drinking buddy, and I knew for a fact he had personally killed at least ten people. And that night I asked him to help me and raise his total to eleven. And he didn’t even blink.

We waited another six months. I moved into the funeral home after the house and land were auctioned. I worked with Walt and started climbing out of the bottle of Southern Comfort I had fallen into. We watched Steven Vandekellum, and we waited for all the stars to align. Then one morning as I stalked Steven on social media, I saw he was selling his boat. According to his post online, it was a twenty-five-foot-long cabin cruiser. He was selling it because he wanted a bigger one. That he was going to buy with my parents’ blood. If he was selling the boat, he would get lots of messages from strangers interested in taking a look at it. He wouldn’t be suspicious of someone he didn’t know contacting him out of the blue. I called Skunk that night.

“All right. Let me get some things straight down here, and I’ll see you in a few days,” he said. He was in Virginia by the next morning. We went to the library, and while I flirted with the librarian, Skunk slipped into the computer room and stole an old lady’s login and went on the social media platform Steven was using to sell the boat and created a fake profile. He stole a pic of a big breasted blonde from a file sharing site and started sending Steven messages about the boat. After an hour, he had gotten Steven’s telephone number and the location of the marina where the boat was housed.

“Now I text him from this burner phone. You got a spot?” he asked me as we left the library. At that point, my parents had been dead a year. The sun had returned from its winter home and was bearing down on us.

“Yeah, I got a spot. You got the pieces?” I had said.

“Yep. They clean as a bishop’s sheets,” he had said.

Skunk texted Steven later that night as Barbara. He kept texting him as Barbara the rest of that week. By Friday, Steven was chomping at the bit like a wild stallion.

“She told him she wants him to fuck her on his boat,” Skunk had said as we had sat in my room at the funeral home.

“What the fuck are you saying to him?” I had asked him.

“All the nasty shit I wish women would say to me,” Skunk had said plainly.

Barbara told Steven she would meet him at the marina Saturday night around midnight. We had done reconnaissance on the place and realized they didn’t have a security guard or any cameras. One of the perks of country living was the low crime rate. Which, ironically, was going to help us commit a crime. We parked Skunk’s dark blue LTD three miles from the marina down an old abandoned driveway next to a dilapidated house. Skunk had grabbed a backpack off the back seat then locked the door. Then we walked those three miles carrying a skiff boat and two paddles. The weather forecast that night was clear and cool with calm seas and a new moon. A hunter’s moon.

*****We had hidden in the reeds down by the edge of the dock that led to the boat slips. I had brought a pair of night vision goggles I had gotten as a gift from my unit when I was discharged. We sat in those reeds sweating and fighting bugs for an hour before Barbara was supposed to meet Steven. We didn’t talk. Instead, we listened to the water from the bay lap against the pylons and seawall near the marina. A loon cried out and a choir of bullfrogs responded like some amphibian holy rollers. Finally, I felt like I should say something.

“Skunk, I just wanna say-” but he cut me off.

“Stop. Your family was good to me after that thing with my Dad. Aint’ nothing I wouldn’t do for them or for you, Ray. What’s that thing you Marine boys say? Semper Fi,” Skunk had whispered.

“Semper Fi,” I had whispered back. As if on cue, headlights crested the hill before the gravel-covered parking lot. I looked down at my watch.

Steven was early. The horndog couldn't wait. He was driving a BMW SUV. It was black or dark blue. I remember I couldn't tell in the dark. He turned the car off, and as I watched, his face was illuminated by a pale blue light.

Skunk's pocket had started to hum. Steven was texting Barbara. I remember thinking that if we ignored that text and just waited for about thirty minutes Steven would get mad and leave.

"We can stop this right now," I remember thinking. But I didn't want to stop. Time had not dulled the pain of my parents' death. It had sharpened it to a wicked point that dug into my soul every night. Sitting in that salty marsh, I knew no matter what happened that pain would never go away, never slacken. But it would be a thousand times worse if I was enduring it with the knowledge Steven Vandekellum was still drawing breath.

I rose out of the reeds. I pulled my gun out of my waist. It was a .45 nickel plated semi-automatic. I walked over to Steven's truck and tapped the barrel on his driver's side window.

His pale face looked ghostly as confusion was replaced with recognition that was then finally replaced with fear that spread across. It was like this was the first time in his privileged life that he realized he wasn't in control. Skunk had slipped around the truck like a ninja and was tapping on the passenger window.

"Get out," I said. At first, he didn't move. Then I saw him try to slide his finger along the face of his phone.

"You press a speed dial and you'll be dead before you can say Ma Bell," I had said.

He bit his bottom lip. Then he put his phone down on the passenger seat. As he held my gaze, I noticed his hand was moving toward the ignition.

"Get out, Steven, or I'm going to shoot you through the glass," Skunk said. His voice was eerily soft. It sounded like he was speaking to a child. Skunk never made bellicose threats or gave colorful warnings. He just told you what he wanted. Most people took one look in those pale blue eyes and complied. There was a madness behind those eyes that you did not want to release.

Steven opened the driver side door. I pulled him out by his shirt and threw him to the ground. I kicked him in the thigh, high up on the

quadriceps as hard as I could. He cried out. Skunk grabbed the cell off the passenger seat and tossed it to me. Then he came over and put his .38 in Steven's mouth. His teeth clicked against the barrel.

"Shhh. Quiet, sister. You wouldn't want Barbara to think you was a pussy, would you?" he asked. Steven's eyes widened until it looked like they were all white. Skunk grabbed him by the neck and pulled him to his feet. Steven was a short hiccup of a man. His dark brown hair had been styled to look like it had not been styled. His features were delicate like those of a castrati. Not womanish but not fully masculine either.

"Let's go see your boat, boy," Skunk said in that creepy soft voice. He started dragging Steven to the slips. I grabbed the skiff. It was a light, fiberglass number. I put it on my head and steadied it with one hand like an African tribeswoman in some old Hollywood jungle epic. I tucked the oars under my other arm.

When we reached the boat and dropped it into the calm waters, Steven started to plead his case. Neither Skunk nor I responded. We tied the skiff to one of the cleats on the stern. Skunk took the wheel while I held my gun on Steven. We headed out into the bay. We had picked the wolf's hour. Late enough that we wouldn't run into any weekend boaters but early enough we wouldn't run into any watermen setting nets.

"Whatever you're thinking about doing, don't. You want the house back? No problem. You got it. You want some money? My dad is the president of the goddamn bank!" Steven said. The water in the bay was as placid as a mirror as we sliced across its surface, barely leaving a wake.

"You want me to say I'm sorry? Okay, I'm-" he started to say but I cut him off.

"Shut up," I said. I had been leaning against the wall of the cabin but then I put my gun against his cheek. He put his hands up and closed his eyes.

"Please. Please don't do this. I got a daughter on the way. Or I might have one. I won't know till she's born and me and Lucy do the DNA test. Please, man. Give me a chance," he said. I hit him with the butt of the gun. Cracked him right across the nose. I felt the cartilage give way. Blood began to pour out of the slit I had made. He fell to the floor of the cabin. My face was slick with sweat. Skunk cut the engine. He came and stood next to me. The boat

rocked gently on the water as it began to drift lazily. Steven had gotten to his knees. Then he plopped on his butt.

“What? What do you want? I fucked up. I’m sorry. I’m a piece of shit. What do you want me to say?” he said. He didn’t scream. His tone was conversational. He still thought he could talk his way out of this.

“I want you to say my parents are alive. I want you to say they are waiting for me to come home,” I said. I started to cry. Tears ran down my cheeks, and my eyes started to burn.

“I can’t say that, man,” Steven whispered.

“Then I guess we just about done,” I had said.

“You can’t do this, man. You think you gonna get away with it? My dad will hunt you forever! He will leave a codicil in his will to pay for a hit on your descendants! I promise you that!” This time he did scream. My gun hand began to tremble.

“Do you remember what you called my mom and dad in your statement?” I said. My voice sounded like it belonged to an alien. Steven dropped his head. When he raised it again, he was crying too.

“You called her a nigger bitch. And you called my dad a nigger lover,” I had whispered.

“Momma, please help me!” he howled. As last words went, I’ve heard worse.

I shot him first. Then Skunk shot him, too. The gunshots hurt my ears as they filled the cabin with thunder. The smell of cordite and shit slapped me in the face. Steven had voided his bowels. A fine red mist hung in the air for a moment before settling on the teak wood railings and the brass fixtures in the cabin.

It went quick after that. Skunk got a tarp out of his backpack and wrapped Steven’s body in it. He sealed it with a roll of duct tape that had also been in his backpack. I dropped his phone on the floor of the cabin. The police would try to track his movements by following his cell phone signal. That would be fine. It would lead them to the middle of the Chesapeake Bay. I remember thinking they might find the boat. They might even find the phone. But we were going to make sure his body disappeared and didn’t wash up on shore somewhere.

We tossed his remains in the skiff. Then we climbed into the small boat with his body on the floor between us. Skunk pulled a sawed off double barrel shotgun out from under his denim jacket. He had drilled a hole through the sawed-off stock and threaded a rope through it so he could wear the gun like a purse under his jacket. The barrels had been sawed off, as well, so that it could be hidden under the jacket. He fired into the hull of the boat three times with both barrels. I saw a thin spiral of smoke swirling out of the barrels every time he broke it to eject the shells. He tossed the empty shells into the water. He also tossed the burner phone into the bay. As we rowed away, the boat had begun to take on water with a phlegm-filled gurgle. "No boat no crime scene," Skunk had told me earlier. I didn't question him. He had more experience with outright murder than I did.

It had taken us an hour to row back to the shore. I threw Steven's body over my shoulder while Skunk hoisted the skiff. Steven had only been around 170lbs. That was about 70lbs more than my rucksack.

We started marching through the woods toward his LTD. Halfway there, Skunk stopped and put the skiff on the forest floor upside down. He piled leaves and branches and other debris on top of it.

"Some hunter might come across it someday. Or maybe no one will ever notice it. Either way, this is the best place for it," he had said. Then he helped me carry Steven. We got to his car about 4am, and threw Steven in the trunk.

"We won't be able to go to the spot until tonight. Sun's about to come up in a few," Skunk said.

"So what, you gonna ride around with that in your trunk?" I asked. Skunk shrugged.

"Wouldn't be the first time," he said. I stared at him. A question slithered just behind my lips. How many times had I ridden in his car with an unknown second passenger? I remember thinking it didn't matter anymore. I no longer had the right to question Skunk about anything.

The next night we buried Steven Vandekellum in the bottom of a freshly dug grave. Later that day, the company that had dug the grave came back with a vault and placed it on top of his remains. We had been lucky that the gravediggers Walt used had been so busy they had dug the grave two days

before the actual funeral. For weeks I waited for Laurent or Victor to come knocking and slap a pair of handcuffs on me and put me down in a hole not much different from the one where we had put Steven. Weeks became months and months have become years.

There are people, like Skunk, who would say we got away with it. A guilty man was punished. I think my dad, ever the philosopher, would say we are all guilty and our punishment is coming in due time. There are nights that Steven Vandekellum comes to visit me in the darkness of my fragile dreams. I see his face flayed open to the bone and full of holes big enough to hold a pool cue. In those moments I don't feel righteous or vindicated. In those moments I am convinced I'll be the face that visits someone else one day. It doesn't frighten me. If there comes a time when the scales have to be balanced for my parents to be avenged that's a cost I'm willing to pay. It's a punishment I'm willing to endure.

After reliving the story of my past, I lay back against the headboard and encircled Lisa in my arms. So there it was. We both had terrible secrets. Secrets that weighed us down and held us in place. She had shared hers with me. I couldn't return the favor, but I still felt like we had a kind of solidarity.

We were not like other people. The things we held inside kept us from moving on, from moving forward. We had to watch from the sidelines as everyone else we knew was able to connect to those around them. Watch as they shared true intimacy. And all we could do was hold each other tight in a cheap hotel room and pretend we weren't broken. It wasn't much but right now it was enough. She nuzzled her head against my chest. I ran my fingers through her hair.

We stayed like that for a long time.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A few hours passed as we lay there in the fresh dark. The first thing that came to my mind was that tomorrow I was going to tell Mrs. Parrish and Mrs. Sheer that Esau Watkins was not a good man, and I didn't give a damn what happened to him. They could keep their money. Then I'd go get the bible for Lisa and that would be it. I was done.

Lisa stirred in her sleep. It was like unloading all that baggage had drained her, and she had drifted off in my arms. I stroked her hair, and her lips curled up in a smile.

"Do you need to get back to the funeral home?" she murmured.

"Not just yet," I said. Everyone was in their boxes at the office. Mrs. Verlaine wasn't having a wake, so tomorrow all we had to do was move Esau to the Temple at 2pm and get set up for his four-hour wake. I was in no hurry to go anywhere.

Just then, as if the universe had read my thoughts, the phone in the hotel room rang.

"What the fuck?" Lisa said. She sounded startled.

"It's probably the front desk," I said. I reached across her and grabbed the handset.

"Hello?" I said.

"Uh, hey, Nate, it's Lashawnda," a tense voice said. Lashawnda Corey was the front desk clerk. We had hung out a few times last summer. Nothing much came of it except some awkward sexting. Some people just can't take good dirty pictures.

"Hey," I said.

"I hope I ain't disturbing you, but some guy came here and said that whoever owned the old reconditioned truck might want to come out and check on it. He said he saw somebody messing with the front tires," she said.

"How'd you know what room I was in?" I asked. Lashawnda laughed. It was a high-pitched keening.

“Well, I saw you come in with Ms. Watkins. She been here since Friday. She stands out. I guess that’s what you like,” she said.

“Thanks for the heads up. I’ll be right down,” I said into the phone. I didn’t wait for her response. I hung up the phone and stood. I pulled my pants up and slipped into my boots.

“How the fuck did she know you was up here?” Lisa asked. Her big green eyes were wide with surprise.

“That’s the charming thing about small towns. She knows me and you kinda stand out. Be right back,” I said.

I gave thanks to whatever gods there might be that Lashawnda was not at the desk when I reached the lobby. A timid rain had begun to fall. The parking lot looked like it was covered with liquid diamonds. I stepped outside walked toward Betty.

There was a man leaning against the passenger door. He was wider than me at the shoulders but not as tall. His bald head gleamed under the lights. He was darker than me but lighter than Lisa. His skin was the color of summer sunsets. He wore a light leather jacket over a black turtleneck shirt. He was heavily muscled from top to bottom. Hard earned muscle that came from hours and hours in the gym. Or years in prison.

There was a black Yukon idling with all the lights parked on the driver side of Betty. I saw an interior light come on as two men exited the vehicle. They were not as big as the man leaning against my truck, and they were not dressed nearly as conservatively. One of them was wearing a big black hoodie with a well-known designer logo emblazoned across the chest. His jeans were almost sagging, and his Jordans were immaculate. The other one had on a long sleeve black shirt under a Raiders jersey and a black snapback hat with a NY symbol above the brim.

“What year is it?” the man leaning against Betty asked. He hunched one shoulder toward my truck.

“The current year or the truck?” I asked. I widened my stance. The man laughed.

“You a funny motherfucker. The truck, man,” he said.

“It’s a ’57. You saw somebody messing with it?” I asked. The man shook his head.

“Nope. Just wanted to get you downstairs. Got somebody who want to talk to you,” he said. His voice was even and pleasant, but his face was empty. It was the same look I saw on Skunk’s face from time to time. It was the killer’s gaze. The murderer’s stare. The I-can-kill-you-and-not-lose-one-hour-of-sleep glare.

“Somebody want to talk to me, I’ll give you my number, and you can pass it along. But tell ’em not to do that blocking shit when they call. I don’t answer no restricted calls,” I said. The big guy opened his coat. I saw a Beretta M9 in the waist of his dark jeans.

“See, I’m hoping we can skip all that corny whack ass gangsta shit. You know, where I threaten to shoot you, then go upstairs and put my gun in the ass of that fine bitch you fucking and pull the trigger until I make her a hand puppet. Now, I know you supposed to be some badass ex-Marine and all that, but I chop down family trees and set those motherfuckers on fire for a living. So what you say, big man? Can we kangaroo over that shit and you get your ass in the car?” he said.

“Former Marine,” I said. The world was rapidly losing color as the blood pounded through my veins.

“What?” he said. His two associates were behind me. A lyric from a Smashing Pumpkins song ran through my head. Something about rats and being trapped in cages with my rage.

“There is no such thing as an ex-Marine,” I said. I was clenching my jaw so hard my head ached.

“Duly noted. All apologies. Now can we get out the fucking rain?” he said as he gestured to the Yukon.

“Who wants to talk?” I asked. The bald man closed his jacket. He wiped his clean-shaven face. Then his dead eyes settled on mine.

“Shade wants to talk to you about Fella and Rev. Watkins,” he said. My jaw went slack, and my stomach convulsed. All the spit in my mouth seemed to have relocated to below my waist and transformed into piss which I struggled not to set free.

“What if I say I don’t wanna go?” I croaked. The bald man sighed.

“Then we go get that piece upstairs and your cousin and his wife and your friend Raheem and before I slit your throat you get to see them choke

on their own guts,” he said. His voice was as even as the odds in a drunken catfight.

“Thought we weren’t gonna do that whack ass gangsta shit,” I said. I was still feeling the effects of the moonshine from earlier. That helped to keep the tremors out of my voice.

“We ain’t ‘cause that won’t be no threat,” he said. Any jocularly was gone now.

So I got in the SUV. Because Augustine “Shade” St. Clair didn’t make threats. He didn’t make promises. He made pronouncements. He spoke and it was so.

He was a drug kingpin who had never been photographed. He was a real-estate magnate who had never attended a Governor’s Ball. Local rappers dropped his name in their latest song eulogizing a slain brother or street soldier. All the while oblivious to the fact that Shade probably gave the order that put that brother or cousin or son in the ground. The State Police in three or four states knew his name but didn’t realize he was one of the largest donors to their benevolent fund.

He was a whisper on the wind. A rumor on the street. Half-man half-terrifying. That’s why they called him Shade. He stayed out of the spotlight. Not completely in the shadows but well out of the sun. He was the man in the Mid-Atlantic. Not the dying Mafia, not the new upstart Russians. Not the boisterously violent MS-13. Shade was king in the streets and in the mountains. Along the coast and down the rivers. You wanted to do business along the Chesapeake you had to deal with him and his organization.

And now he wanted to talk to me. About Fella. Who I had just beaten the living shit out of last night.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The SUV was tricked out with climate-controlled seats and LED headlights. They must have gotten the upgrade package on the suspension because I didn't feel nary a pothole as we drove. Usually driving on 64 loosened my fillings. If I hadn't been headed to a meeting with the Devil, I would have enjoyed the ride.

I saw a large green rectangular sign on the side of the road that said Stonehill Downs exit was a half mile away. Stonehill Downs had been a misguided attempt by some earnest businessmen to bring horse racing to southeastern Virginia. For a while, folks were able to sip mint juleps and wear huge, ridiculous hats and dispose of their disposable income like the high rollers they fancied themselves to be. Then the housing market collapsed and all income became vital. The silly hats were packed away, and the mint juleps were poured out in remembrance of a lost dream.

We broke off from the flow of traffic and took the exit. I saw the three-story brick building that housed the VIP boxes and the betting parlor and the bar in the distance. The LED lights cast a ghostly pale pall over the entire structure. Dead boxwoods lined the driveway like brittle corpses. Yellow grass sprouted through the cracked asphalt of the massive parking lot. We headed toward a peeling black metal gate that guarded the road that led to the rear of the building and out toward the stables and the track. A man was standing by the gate. He was wearing a black raincoat with a hood.

He opened the gate, and we drove through. There was a long black car sitting near the track under a canopy that stretched the full length of the stables. There were twenty stables in all. More grass had grown up around the stalls and the track. Our truck crushed it under its wheels as we moved forward. We came to a stop, and the driver killed the engine and cut off the lights. The building provided excellent cover for whatever they had planned. No one could see us from the interstate. The only thing they had to worry about were some horny teenagers searching for a place to fuck or a lazy cop looking for a place to get some sleep.

The bald man had the barrel of his gun in my side. He jabbed it in my ribs.

“Get out. Don’t run. Don’t try to do any of that G.I. Joe shit. Just walk nice and slow to the car,” he said.

“You not worried about some enterprising State boy seeing our lights and coming up here to give the place his due diligence?” I asked. The bald man shook his head.

“My boss is one of the owners of this property. We could set up a picnic here if we wanted,” he said.

The rain was starting to slack off, and a quarter moon was peeping out from behind the clouds. The bald man slipped out of the SUV, and I followed him. I didn’t try anything even though my head was splitting. I had squeezed my fists so tight my hands were cramping. The man who had been by the gate jogged up to where we were parked. The long, black car was a modified Caddy. Maybe a DTS. It had nice rims but nothing flashy. It wasn’t quite as long as a limo, but it was longer than a standard sedan. The guy in the raincoat opened the door, and Baldy poked me in the back with his gun. I climbed into the car. The seats were covered in some of the softest leather I had ever had the pleasure to feel against my ass. The car had a limo-type interior with a seat that was battened up against the front seat facing the rear window and a regular back seat. Baldy indicated I was to sit in the reverse seat.

Shade was sitting, but I could tell he was taller than me, so that would make him 6’5 or 6’6. He wore a razor-sharp goatee and a fade that was so tight it could have been a tattoo on his skull. His skin was smooth and dark, and it stretched taught over a ruggedly muscular frame. That frame was draped in a gray suit that cost more than my truck. Baldy got in the car on the other side and sat next to Shade but didn’t look at him. Instead, he counted raindrops on the window. Shade sat back against his seat in the most relaxed pose I’d ever seen. He gave off an aura of total control which paradoxically made him look like he was bored.

He wore a pair of Cartier sunglasses, but that was his only extravagant accessory. No fancy rings, no gold bracelets, not even a high-priced Rolex. Instead, he wore a simple black-faced watch with a leather strap. Beneath the gray suit, he wore a black shirt and a gray tie. His huge hands were on each

of his knees. They appeared powerful enough to crush billiard balls. He didn't acknowledge me at all. He just started talking.

"You know, I don't usually involve myself in this street level shit anymore. But I had Fella putting in some work for me with Rev. Watkins, and it seems like you've put yourself in the middle of that venture. That's not a place you want to be, Nathan. That's not a place anyone wants to be," he said.

"I...Fella tried to jump me. I didn't know he was a part of your crew," I said. I kept my voice low and steady. Shade stroked his goatee.

"He isn't. He's a punk bitch that I was using to facilitate an arrangement I had with Rev. Watkins. So what do you know about that arrangement, Nathan? And I guess I don't have to tell you how important transparency is at this point, do I?" he said. I rubbed my palms on my jeans.

"Is there even a chance of me walking out of this?" I said. Shade adjusted his sunglasses.

"That depends. If I like what you have to say, you walk out. If I really like what you say, you walk out with both hands," he said. We might have been discussing how best to plant tulips for all the emotion his voice conveyed. He finally turned his head toward me.

"So educate me, Nathan. What do you know?" he said. I licked my lips.

"I just know that Fella was dropping some money in the collection plate at Watkins' Temple, and Watkins had him down as a member even though I don't think he been to Temple since he learned to walk. That's it, really. Then, like I said, Fella jumped me last night. I guess he didn't like the idea of me asking about why he was walking around with ten thousand dollars in his pocket every other Sunday," I said. My stomach was twisting. Shade leaned forward slightly.

"Did you say ten thousand?" he said, and I heard the street in his voice come to the surface. My heart fluttered against my rib cage. Was this it? Was this how I died? In the backseat of some gangster's car behind an abandoned building? I clenched my fists. If this was it, I was going down with somebody's eyeball hanging off my thumb.

"Yes," I said. I tried to keep my voice measured, but Shade must have heard the violence it promised. He smiled. It was like seeing a tiger grin. I

could hear the rain pick up again as the drops splashed against the roof of the car. His white teeth gleamed in sharp contrast to his dark skin.

“Relax. If I decide to have you smoked, it won’t be in the back of a car I just got detailed,” he said. I couldn’t tell if he was joking, so I didn’t say anything. He made a steeple out of his long fingers and held them up in front of his face.

“But you don’t know why Fella was making those donations?” he asked. Was he throwing me a lifeline? I wasn’t sure, but I decided to grab it.

“No. No, I don’t. I was just doing a favor for some ladies at his Temple. They wanted to make sure the police was doing they job. I’ll tell them to forget about it, and that will be the end of it,” I said. Shade flexed his left hand, and I heard his knuckles crack. They sounded like knots of sap popping in a wood stove.

“Me and Watkins were getting along fine. He helped me out, and I was helping him out. In fact, he was going to introduce me to a colleague of his from Northern Virginia. We were going to form an investment group and purchase some properties in Arlington. My relationship with Watkins was good for business. And I’m always about my business. But you think I had him popped?” he said. He intertwined his fingers.

“Ain’t none of my fucking business,” I said. Shade grunted. He took off his sunglasses and stared at me. He had a pair of sterling gray eyes that seemed to shimmer like waves of heat on a blacktop road.

“You just confirmed something I already suspected,” he said.

“Fella was stealing from you?” I asked. Shade nodded his head curtly.

“I wasn’t sure until you told me how much they had him down for in the Temple records. The only question I have now is why? Was he stealing for himself or was he flipped by some of my...business rivals,” he said. It seemed like the backseat was getting smaller by degrees. I could feel Shade’s cool, precise outrage filling the car. He sat back and put his sunglasses back on. He glanced toward the window again.

“A week after Watkins was found, he was told to get the account information from the Temple so I could move my assets to a more secure location. He made excuses. He didn’t know who to get it from. He couldn’t catch anyone at the Temple. Blah fucking blah. So on Thursday, I had Mr.

Carver here stop by and make it clear to him that the information was required by Monday,” he said. He was flexing his fingers in and out.

“I put that blind pit bull out of his misery,” Carver, formerly Baldy, said. He was still staring out of the window. If it had been up to me, I would have shot Fella instead of the dog. Shade leaned forward and put the tip of his index finger against my forehead. I involuntarily leaned back. It took every ounce of concentration I had to stop me from slapping his finger out of my face.

“But then Carver gets a call Saturday night about you. Fella tells Carver you’re Watkins’ partner. Tells him that you came by his place, fucked him up, and told him to never come back to the Temple again. And that any money that was in the account was now yours. Even sent him a pic of his nose. So can you guess what I told Carver to tell him to do, Nathan?” he asked. And for the first time, I began to believe I might get out of his fucking car alive.

“You told him to bring me to you,” I said. Shade smiled again.

“But you kicked his entire crew’s ass,” Carver said. His flat monotone made me realize I wasn’t out of the woods yet. I glanced at Carver. His right hand was inside his jacket. Where it had been since he climbed in the car.

“You respect me, don’t you, Nathan?” he asked. I bit the inside of my lip.

“Yeah. Sure,” I said. Shade nodded.

“I know all about you, Nathan. I know where you sleep. I know where you go to get your drink on. I know where you go to bust a nut. I know who you love and who you hate. But I also know you ain’t lying to me. Because you get that I could put you in a box. And I wouldn’t give it any more thought than when I swat a mosquito,” he said as he slapped his hands together in front of my face. I didn’t flinch. On the outside. His hands had been a blur moving through the air. He was faster than he appeared.

“I won’t be poking around this anymore, okay? I’m done. Message received loud and clear,” I said. Carver moved his head slightly. Shade let out a long, harsh laugh.

“I want you to do me a favor. You can do that, can’t you? You find out who put Esau down, I want you to get word to me. It might just be some backward country ass bullshit. Or it might be something else. So I want you keep poking, all right? I’ll even make it worth your time. If you find out

something and if I think it's relevant to my interests, I'll drop...oh let's say five grand on you," he said.

"So, I guess it's safe to say you really didn't do it," I said. Shade turned his head toward me again.

"Take him back," Shade said. Carver motioned toward the door, and I opened it and stepped out into the mist. Carver got out on the other side. I started to head to the SUV.

"Nathan," Shade said. I stopped, but I didn't turn around.

"If he had killed my parents, I would have made him disappear too. Right after he found out what his left nut tasted liked," he said. I didn't say anything. The guy in the rain gear closed Shade's car door.

The mist had enveloped the SUV and fogged up the windows. Carver slid in next to me. We slipped past the betting parlor and back onto the interstate. We drove in silence. The two men in the front didn't even turn on the radio. As we got off the Newport News exit and started to cross the Coleman Bridge, Carver nudged my arm.

"Do they clang when you walk?" he said. I turned my head.

"What?"

"Your brass balls. Do they clang when you walk? They must be made of brass the way you was talking. Shade don't speak to many people face to face and most of them too scared to say boo to a cat. But you back there popping off smart. Talking about horse heads and shit. I was trying hard not to laugh. I had to maintain, ya know? I mean, I would have shot you if he had said the word, but that shit would still have been funny. Good thing you knew 'bout them donations. You the first nigga I ever met that Temple really saved they life," he said. I was suddenly reminded how close I had been to death.

We finally got back to the hotel. The rain had stopped for good, and the moon came out from the clouds. The SUV pulled up to my truck, and I reached for the door handle.

"Wait a minute," Carver said. I was squeezing the handle so hard I thought it might break. He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a cell phone. I let out a low sigh.

"Take my number so when I call you you'll answer it and not just hit ignore," he said. I took out my phone and put his number under "Psycho." I

already had Skunk down under “Sociopath.”

“I’ll take ya number but I don’t think I’m gonna have much to tell you. Ain’t it kinda obvious what happened? Fella and Watkins was stealing from Shade. Watkins was gonna tell, and Fella killed him,” I said. It was the simplest answer really. This wasn’t New York or L.A. Murder was rare but it was hardly ever complicated. Carver shrugged.

“Fella was probably planning on trying to cap you, but that was cause his back was up against it. And look how that turned out for him. I mean, you the ex-cop and everything, but do you really think he could roll up and straight blast on somebody? And why would Watkins be telling? His ass would get dealt with too. Nah, homie, Fella ain’t no real crook, son. He a shook one. Shit, he so pussy he meows when he walk. He ain’t like us, Nathan,” he said. I got out the SUV. I was nothing like this brother with the jailhouse tats on his hands. He might have been right about Fella but he was wrong about me.

“I probably still need to talk to him again,” I said.

“Make it fast. I’m going to be visiting him and relieving him of his sticky fingers soon. One at a fucking time,” he said.

“Tell me something. How did you find me tonight?” I asked. Carver laughed.

“Ain’t that many all black 57’ Chevys with white mag rims registered in this state, Nathan,” he said.

“How long you been watching me?” I asked. Carver smiled.

“Good night, Nathan,” he said before slamming the car door shut. The Yukon streaked out of the parking lot.

I climbed in Betty. I leaned back against the bucket seat and howled. Nothing too over the top, just a primal, cathartic scream. It wasn’t nearly loud as the scream I had let out at the Sheriff’s office.

I contemplated going back to Lisa’s room, but instead, I drove to the funeral home. Shade had definitely ruined the mood. Plus, I needed some downtime to decompress. The events of this evening were most likely going to weasel their way into my subconscious.

I got to the office around 12am. and retrieved a bottle of rum from my old foot locker. I plopped down on my bed, unscrewed the cap, and took a

long swig from the bottle. A tingly sensation spread across my chest and nestled in my belly. I had been summoned by one of the most dangerous men on the East Coast and I had lived to tell the tale. But now this thing with Watkins had just become a million times more complicated.

I sat and drank and drank and sat until I felt good and disjointed. I got up and paced from one end of my room to the other while sipping from the bottle. My room was the size of a large closet so that didn't take long. I took my phone out, stared at it, realized I wasn't drunk enough yet, and tossed it on the bed. I took another long swig. Once I was sure I was good and inebriated, I picked up my phone and hit "Sociopath" on my speed dial. Skunk's ring back tone was an old Allman Brothers tune. I tapped my foot in time with the scorching rhythm of Duane Allman's slide guitar.

"Yeah," a deep, gravelly voice said.

"Hey, it's Nate."

"I know."

I inhaled deeply.

"Hey, I might need you to come up here for a few days if you can. I been looking into something that might be getting bad, and I think I'm gonna need you to have my back on it," I said. I heard Skunk's deliberate breathing as it bounced off cell towers from here to Georgia.

"You think I need to bring more than one gun?" he said finally.

"Uh, I don't think so,"

"It ain't that bad then. I'll see you in a day or two," he said, and the line went dead.

I touched my phone screen, and it went black. After taking another long swig I replaced the cap and set the bottle next to my bed. I leaned back and let the liquor do its work. I had just called in a sociopath to help me deal with a crime boss and his psycho henchman. That was a foolproof plan. Nothing could possibly go wrong with that. Nothing at all. But I needed some kind of backup if things started getting dirty and going sideways. And when things started going sideways, Skunk was in his element.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I woke up the next morning with rum and regret marinating in my mouth. I had gotten myself into something way above my pay grade, and now I couldn't just drop it. I was under the impression that my employment with Shade was subject to violent termination if I didn't, at least, come up with something to report. For a man who was a charlatan and a monster who pimped out his own daughter, a lot of people were really invested in finding out who killed him.

I got up, went to the bathroom in the back near the prep room, and brushed my teeth and washed my face. A sour mash of moonshine, rum and stress was making my stomach send smoke signals up my esophagus. I checked my watch. It was 8am. The wake wasn't until four. I had plenty of time to get some breakfast then go by Esau's house. I patted my left pocket and felt the hard knot of Esau's house keys. I didn't know what I was going to find, but with the revelations of the last 24 hours, I had a feeling it wouldn't be good.

I fired up Betty and took off for the opposite end of Queen County. Down the county as we locals said. The temperature had dropped a lot since yesterday. I had the heat on while Forever My Lady pumped through Betty's speakers. A voice whispered inside my head, whispered that I was wrong. Carver was right about me. I was like him. I was a killer. I told the voice to rapidly depart the nearest geological precipice. I had killed. That was true. But I had killed for my country, for my family, for my brothers in arms. That was different. I held on to that distinction like a drunken man holding onto a stair railing. It was the only thing keeping me upright.

Esau's house was nestled at the end of a cul-de-sac in an exclusive planned community called Sheltered Acres. When I was a kid, Sheltered Acres had been a grove of pine trees and hunting trails. Now it was where the wealthier denizens of the county escaped the riffraff. I turned down Sheltered Acres Lane and entered an alien world. Each house had a lawn that was manicured within an inch of its life. There were bountiful red maples lining the sidewalks. Fucking sidewalks. I remember wanting a

skateboard as a kid then realizing I had nowhere to use it because my backyard was a forest.

The houses varied in style but not in ostentatiousness. Some were two-story brick behemoths. Some were one story sprawling ranchers. Others were vinyl-sided abodes more suited to a viceroy than a shipyard supervisor. There was even a log cabin that must have been built out of redwoods. The house number was on the key chain along with a pewter cross and a small, silver charm with the 23rd Psalm engraved on it. Lisa hadn't grown up in this house, but I understood why she didn't want to step foot in it. Her bad memories were about her father, not any particular place or structure. But being in his house would just stoke those memories. Turning over the embers and re-igniting the flames.

I parked in the curve of the cul de sac. Esau's house sat at the top of the half-circle. His neighbor to the left was a fan of Confederate flags and the Dallas Cowboys. His neighbor to the right had lost control of her garden gnome addiction. The eerie statues filled her yard and guarded the walkway that led to her front porch. They peeked out from under hydrangeas and around terra cotta plant holders filled with dying petunias and pansies. There was a "Best Grandmother in the World" sticker on the rear of the Mini-Cooper parked in her driveway. There were a few other cars parked in driveways and on the street, but most of the residents appeared to be at work. That could go in the win column. I didn't need a lot of prying eyes with their itchy dialing fingers poised to call the sheriff because a big black man was in Rev. Watkin's house.

I climbed out of Betty and walked up the exposed aggregate walkway to Watkins' front door. His house was a two-story Tudor style house with newish slate gray vinyl siding and black faux shutters on every window. There was no front porch but there was a small overhang above the door. Just enough to keep the rain off you as you fumbled for your keys. Which I was doing now. To the right was a one car garage with a carriage style door. There was no crime scene tape on the door or in the front yard. Probably violated the homeowner's agreement. I heard a few dogs barking off in the distance but didn't see any patrolling the neighborhood.

I stuck the key in the lock and opened the door. The house had a faint musty smell. No one had been here to stir the air in weeks. I stepped inside

and entered a large foyer with real hardwood flooring and an ornate rack of coat hooks. The walls were a pale shade of blue like a robin's egg. I moved through the foyer into the living room. There was a wraparound couch positioned directly in front of the biggest television I had ever seen in my life. It was at least 72 inches across. To the right of the couch was a staircase with chestnut-colored stair treads and a polished mahogany banister with light blue balusters. The floor in the living room was covered in a plush cream-colored carpet. To the left of the couch was a large bookcase that sat at a right angle in front of a small window with thick black curtains that were drawn tight.

On the floor in front of the television was an overturned walnut coffee table and a blood stain about the size of a spare tire. I moved over to the blood stain. This was where Watkins had died. Had the coffee table been overturned in a struggle? I didn't think so. There was blood on the bottom of the legs of the table. Like it had soaked up some from the rug then been flipped over. That was troubling. I stepped gingerly over the blood stain and headed for the bookshelf. It was five shelves high with a thin layer of dust on every shelf except the top one. I saw that some of the books were partially pulled out and were on the edge of the shelf. None of those books were Lisa's bible. I pulled each book off the shelf and held it by the spine. Then I shook the shit out of it. Once upon a time people liked to hide sensitive materials in the pages of a book. When I joined the force, Laurent would always tell me to flip the mattress and shake the books. In our current digital society, it wasn't likely you'd find an incriminating photo or letter pressed among the pages of a great novel. Most of our salacious communication is by text message these days. But Watkins was from an older generation so it couldn't hurt to check. I checked the second, third, and fourth shelf. There was no bible there, either, and none of those books had a written confession from Watkins's assailant pressed between page 248 and 250.

I dropped down to my knees and checked the last shelf. There was a large leather carrying case, weathered and cracked with age. I pulled the case out and unzipped it. Inside was the blood red bible Lisa had described. The words "HOLY BIBLE" were embossed on the cover in gold letters. I grabbed it by the front and back covers and shook the hell out of it, too. Nothing. I

put it back in the carrying case and zipped it up before putting it on the couch.

I walked through the living room into the kitchen. My head was pounding. The scene could've been staged or it could be legit. The blood on the feet of the coffee table bothered me, but that wasn't enough to definitely label this a murder scene. Watkins could have shot himself in the chest (unlikely) and then the Sheriff's department could have moved the table to get to the body. Yeah, that was possible. It was also possible that monkeys could start flying out of my ass. Didn't mean I was going to start buying bananas for toilet paper.

The floor in the kitchen was black slate tile with matching black appliances. There was a small clear glass table in the center of the room. I checked the sink. At least ten dirty glasses. The counter was composed of dark gray granite with rich white lines of variegation. At the end of the counter was a trashcan on a small roller. You could slide it out when you needed it, then slide it back and close the door when you didn't. The door was open and the trash can was almost full. It stank, but not as bad as some bodies I had picked up for Walt.

I pulled it out and dumped the contents on the floor. I poked the garbage with my foot. some cheese wrappers, bologna skins, a few coffee filters. An empty milk carton with an expiration date that was two weeks old. A couple of clear plastic hemispheres that looked vaguely familiar. Some used razor blades and empty toilet paper tubes. All the things consistent with a man living the life of a confirmed bachelor. Including condom wrappers. Lots and lots of condom wrappers.

Extra-large, extra thin, ribbed for her pleasure, ribbed for his pleasure, warming gel lubricated, and spermicide-coated ones that were flavored. There were even some glow in the dark ones which I thought was a novelty that had died with the 80's. Watkins had burned more rubber than a NASCAR race. What the hell was his secret? I didn't know, but a man of Watkins' age with the kind of stamina evidenced by this detritus was inspiring. It gave hope to us all. I left the kitchen and poked my head in a small sunroom on the back of the house. There were three deflated air mattresses wrapped up in storage bags and sitting side by side next to a

small futon. The sun room had heavy blackout blinds on the windows, and the blinds were closed tight.

I turned around and trotted upstairs. Once I reached the landing, I saw three doors to my right and one smaller door to my left. A small octagon window let light fall on the landing. I went to the first door to the right. It was locked. I went to the next door, and it was open. The room was about the size of the lobby at the funeral home. An empty wastebasket sat just inside the room to the right of the door. A queen-sized bed with a leather covered padded headboard was pressed all the way up against the left wall. There was an antique looking nightstand next to the bed with a single drawer sporting a brass pull. I opened the drawer and was greeted by more condoms. Plus some lubricants. And what might have been a cock ring, but I didn't pick it up to inspect it closer. Unless he was mainlining Viagra, Watkins couldn't have that much stamina. I felt my dreams of octogenarian sex fading away. There was a window in the middle of the back wall of the room. It too was covered with black curtains. Flowing velour numbers that rippled like dark water. I pushed them open and light crashed into the Stygian room.

A painting on the wall depicted the biblical scene of Solomon and the two mothers. In the painting, the wise king is about to split a baby down the middle. An intricate iron frame housed the painting. Three feet wide and four feet tall, it dominated the room. It might have been painted by someone who wanted to emulate Raphael. I walked over to it and took it off its hook to get a better look at it. My father had instilled in me an appreciation of the Renaissance masters that had blossomed into a lifelong love affair with art. It wasn't a thing I talked about a lot with very many people. Raheem knew. Skunk knew but didn't get it. Walt knew too. Last year he had gotten me a calendar decorated with the work of the Old Dutch masters.

It wasn't as heavy as I thought it would be, but it wasn't signed either. It never hurts to check. You never know when you might find a priceless work of art that had been rescued from a rummage sale. As I went to replace it on the hook, I could have sworn the baby winked at me. I held the painting in front of me about waist high and peered down at it. Thinking my mind was playing tricks on me or I was still drunk, I raised the painting and started to

replace it on the hook. Another wink. I put the painting right up to my eye and stared at that baby hard.

He wasn't winking. I turned the picture over. On the back in the center of the cardboard backing was a circular plastic disk about the size of a fifty-cent piece. An infinitesimal red light was blinking in the center of the disk. I popped it off the cardboard with my thumbnail. A light, quick acting glue had held it in place. It was a small, wireless camera. What I had thought was a wink was a reflection of the sunlight off its lens.

"What the fuck were you up to, Esau?" I said out loud. There was no response from the spectral realm. I put the painting back and put the spy camera in my pocket. I went to the next room. This must have been his master bedroom. There was a king-sized bed in this one. It sat in the middle of the room like an archipelago. There were two nightstands on either side. Another empty wastebasket sat on the far-right side. A plush area rug covered most of the floor. On the right wall was another painting. Same size as the one in the previous room except this one depicted two women and a man walking away from a fiery scene. Lot and his daughters. My skin began to crawl as I checked behind the painting.

Another camera. I didn't pocket this one. I went to the room with the locked door. I put my back to the door and mule kicked it. The flimsy lock broke, and the door slammed against something behind it in the room. This was supposed to be Esau's study. The door had slammed against a worn writing desk with a threadbare ink blotter on it. The outline of a rectangle the same size as a laptop was pressed into the blotter. Another bookcase stood against the wall to the left like a forgotten sentry. I started pulling books off the shelf. I ran my hands over the top of the shelf. I dropped to the floor and searched under the bottom of the shelves.

I was looking for the router. Wireless cameras needed a router to send the signal to a recording device or a monitor. But I didn't find anything. I tore through the rest of the room. There were some cardboard boxes with files pertaining to the Temple and his old sermons. I looked at the dates on the sermons. He must have written them longhand until 2009. After that, he must have switched to the laptop.

Everything about this felt wrong. How had Laurent and the boys missed the cameras? Or all the contents of the trashcan? Had they even had

forensics sweep the place? It didn't make any sense. Searching a crime scene was Police Work 101. I turned around in a slow circle in the middle of the room. If they had found the router, maybe they had taken it without recognizing what it was. Which made them shitty cops. I decided to give the room one more good going over. I dropped to my knees and checked under the desk. Nothing. But there was a floor register under the desk. A bright chrome vent that ran along the cove base molding.

When I was a kid, I used to hide things in the floor vents in my room. The furnace in our trailer didn't work, so it was a good place to put porno mags and the occasional bag of weed.

I scooted my wide shoulders under the table and reached for the vent. After some manhandling, it came up out of the floor. I stuck my hand down into the ventilation shaft and felt around. I hoped to God I didn't find the rotting corpse of a rat or mouse. Or any other furry friends. I was about to give up when my fingertips brushed against something smooth and slick. I stretched my hand as far as I could. The rough edges of the vent bit into my wrist. Finally, I was able to get one corner of whatever it was and pull it out into the light. I slithered from under the desk and sat with my back against one of the iron legs.

It was an electronic tablet. About the size of a piece of notebook paper. There was some dust on it but not a whole hell of a lot. I ran my finger along the edge and pushed the power button. It was dead. I stood and wiped my hands on my pants. I put the tablet under my arm and went to check out the other room on the left which I figured had to be the bathroom. Esau's medicine cabinet was a treasure trove of pharmaceutical delights. There were bottles of Viagra and Cialis. OxyContin and Vicodin. Percocet and Xanax. And some other bottles with no labels. There was one toothbrush on the sink, but I found six more in a drawer. All of them had those plastic covers on the heads. The kind you used when you traveled. There was male deodorant on the sink but several types of female deodorant in the drawer. There was a wastebasket next to the toilet. It was empty. The contents of the trash from the kitchen made sense now. He had dumped the wastebaskets into the trashcan in the kitchen after they had been filled. How had they gotten filled with so many condoms was the question.

An idea was beginning to dig its way out of the morass of my mind. There were pieces here that if you could get them to fit together right would show you just what type of shenanigans Esau Watkins had been enjoying here in good ol' Sheltered Acres. I tramped down the stairs, my footsteps making hollow echoes as I walked. I went back to the kitchen and went through the door that led to the garage. Esau's Mercedes sat there like a mute black tarantula. I felt along the wall to my left until I found a light switch. When I turned it on, a weak, snow white fluorescent bulb fought gamely against the shadows. The garage was a testament to a man who never got his own hands dirty. No tools. No lawn equipment. Just a few buckets of paint, some more cardboard boxes full of papers, and some lawn chairs that hadn't seen the outside world in years.

I went back to the living room and grabbed the bible case by its straps with my left hand. I had the tablet in my right. I wasn't sure what was on it, but thought it might hold the answers to a lot of the questions surrounding Esau's death. I left the house, and I didn't bother locking the door behind me. An older white woman was on her knees weeding the flower beds near the door of the Gnome house. She nodded to me as I headed for my truck.

"Morning!" she said. Her voice was high and cheery. She sounded like someone who called out the directions at a square dance.

"Morning, ma'am," I said. I headed for my truck.

"You must be Esau's son. You look just like him!" she said. I made a mental note to never have this woman be an eyewitness for anything.

"No, ma'am. I'm a friend of his daughter. She wanted me to check on some things for her at the house," I said. She nodded her head again. She got up from her knees without much difficulty. She was a thin woman but not frail. Her forearms were wiry. Probably from years of gardening. She had a deep tan that came from being outside, not from ultraviolet bulbs. Her skin was only wrinkled around the eyes and her mouth. More laugh lines than crow's feet. She appeared to have most of her own teeth, and her gray hair was tied back in a long braid that wound its way down her back from under her wheat-colored sun hat. She wore a loose man's button down white shirt and a pair of ancient khaki shorts. Her eyes were a deep shade of hazel but clear as the day she had been born. She took off her gloves and held out a hand to me. Her grip was firm.

“I’m Helen Smithers. I was Esau’s neighbor,” she said.

“Nathan Waymaker. Nice to meet you,” I said. She put her hands on her hips.

“Such a shame about Esau. He was always so nice. You don’t know what happened to him, do you? I’ve been his neighbor for five years. My Morton died in 2007. I sold our place up the county and moved here. Esau would always help me with my groceries or just stop and talk for as long as I wanted to. My son David is a doctor who goes to those poor countries, so I don’t get to see him much,” she said. There was no bitterness in her voice. More like pride.

“Doctors without Borders?” I said. She smiled.

“Yes! So I don’t have any family here in Virginia. My sister lives back home in New York. So it’s just me, my cat Shepherd, and my gnomes. It was so nice of Esau to make time to speak to me. Even when he was getting ready for his bible studies, he would stop and speak to me,” she said. Her face crinkled at the eyes as she reminisced.

“Bible studies? He had them here at his house?” I asked. Helen nodded.

“Oh, yes. Twice a month. Sometimes three times a month. My Lord there must have been some uplifting lessons. Cars would be lined up down the street. I’d go to bed and they would still be here at nine at night. Esau must have been one heck of a worship leader,” she said. I saw the flesh around her eyes crinkle even more.

“You messin’ with me, ain’t ya, Mrs. Smithers?” I asked. She laughed. It was a musical sound. It mixed with the songs of the morning birds in the trees.

“I’m old, but I’m not stupid, Mr. Waymaker. Esau was a nice man, and he was always polite to me. But those were parties he was holding, not bible studies. Lord knows, I wouldn’t have held it against him. I was raised Catholic. Our priest used to take a nip now and then. Being in the clergy, regardless of the denomination, is a challenge. He even told me what they were supposed to be studying,” she said.

“Oh, and what did he say was the lesson?” I asked.

“He would tell me they were studying 1st Corinthians or 1st Thessalonians or Song of Solomon,” she said. She was smiling. I wasn’t.

“Song of Solomon huh?” I said. Her smile broadened.

“One of the most beautiful books in the bible, don’t you agree?” she said as she blushed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As I drove out of Sheltered Acres, I passed a few cars that hadn't been there when I had arrived. I wasn't usually paranoid but last night's field trip had my hackles up. I drove by the cars slowly. Two of them had tinted windows that I would have pulled over for a violation. The third car had an old man sitting in the driver's seat. His face was scrunched up like a dish rag. He was either lost or taking a shit. Either way, I was no help to him so I drove on.

It was 9:30am. I could still get some breakfast at the restaurant near the funeral home. The bible and the tablet bounced in the passenger seat as I guided Betty over the potholes and cracks in the asphalt. As I drove, I started adding up what I knew about what had happened to Esau, formerly E-Money Watkins.

Somebody had shot him and tried to stage the crime scene. Watkins had been working with Fella Montague and Shade St. Clair to launder twenty thousand dollars (or more) a month through his Temple. He had also been in talks to fold his Temple under the umbrella of Rev. Thomas Short who ran a megaTemple up in Northern Virginia. Who was also about to go into business with Shade. Meanwhile, Watkins was throwing some kind of party every couple of weeks at his house that required hundreds of condoms. I'd found two hidden cameras in his bedrooms. He probably had more throughout the house. I mean, he was the kind of guy to pimp his daughter out to the county building inspector. I wouldn't put anything past him. And for some reason, the local police didn't seem outwardly pressed to solve his death.

And because of my own misguided guilt, I was in the middle of whatever the hell Watkins had gotten himself into. Yep, that about summed it up.

I pulled into the Country Kitchen and went inside. I wolfed down some scrambled eggs and pancakes. I threw some coffee on top of the whole mess and waited for the grenade in my guts to explode. When it didn't, I paid my bill and winked at the waitress who had cashed me out and headed for the

funeral home. She and I had engaged in some parking lot passion at The Cove once upon a time.

When I pulled into the parking lot, my phone went off and about scared me half to death. It was Lisa. I let it go to voice mail. I'd call her back later. Right now, I needed to get ready for Esau's wake. I checked the hearse and the van we moved the flowers in and made sure they were full of gas. I got the supply bag with the reserved signs and the parking signs and the casket light and our MP3 player full of soft, gentle music that soothed your soul or put you to sleep depending on your inclinations. I ironed my suit and shined my shoes. I washed the hearse and van, using lukewarm water from the utility sink in the garage. The temperature was dropping like a stone. I had a feeling we wouldn't see 70 degrees again this year.

I was drying off the hearse when Walt pulled up. He got out of his Caddy carrying a steaming disposable cup of coffee.

"You trying to get a raise?" he asked me as I wiped down the fenders.

"A raise? I'd be happy if you just start paying me!" I said. Walt shook his head.

"It's just you, me, and Curtis today. Daniel got a doctor's appointment in Richmond. You got your suit ready?" he asked. I put the rag on the hood of the hearse and gave him a mock salute.

"Yes, sir!" I yelled. Walt rolled his eyes.

"There goes that raise. We don't reward smartasses around here," he said. He went into the office and left me outside in the rapidly cooling air. As I finished cleaning the vehicles, a florist van pulled up and dropped off some flowers. I took them right to the van. As soon as I shut the hatchback, another florist showed up. And another. And another. Our serial killer van was full by the time I finally got to go inside.

"Man, all those florists showed up at the same time. It was like the Tournament of Roses parade out there. But with carnations and lilies," I said. Walt was at his desk finishing up the handouts we would be giving away at the wake this afternoon.

"Yeah. We'll probably have more at the Temple. People been calling all weekend. They done forgot all about Mrs. Verlaine. Poor thing," Walt said. He didn't look up from his laptop.

“If they knew what I knew, they’d set them flowers on fire,” I mumbled, but Walt caught it.

“No one ever buries an evil man, Nate. Death makes everyone a saint,” he said.

“I think Esau might be the exception,” I said. He raised his head then.

“Why you say that?” he asked. I told him Lisa’s story. I left out the part where her mom pushed Hinson down the stairs. I just went with the lie Laurent had told. Walt’s face was ashen.

“What a nasty sonofabitch. That’s the thing about this business I’ll never get over,” he said as he went back to his computer. I was standing in the doorway of his office. I stared at him until he raised his head again. I moved my hand in the universal “go on” motion. Walt blew air through his full lips.

“Finding out that your principal cheated on his wife and left his girlfriend as a beneficiary on his insurance. Or finding out your mail lady had four children but only two belonged to her husband. Or that your old choir director was on heroin. Finding out all the dirty shit that we can’t hide when we’re dead,” he said. He seemed to slump down in his chair.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure I erase your browser history after you croak,” I said.

“Shiiiiit. Ain’t nothing on there except how to open a Swiss bank account,” he said with a sigh.

Curtis came through the door humming an old Al B. Sure song. I moved out of the doorway and glanced at him. He already had on his black suit. His shoes were polished so thoroughly I could see my face in them. He had tied an intricate pleated knot in his silk tie.

“Gentlemen, Gentlemen good morning!” he said.

“Hey, Curt. You missed the parade,” I said. He gave me a quizzical look.

“We got a ton of flowers for Watkins. But that’s all right. You just in time to help us get him in the coach,” Walt said as he came from behind the desk. I saw Curt’s lip twitch. I think he was hoping he had missed that. But he put on a brave face.

“No problem! Let’s get’er done,” he said way too enthusiastically. Walt and I stopped and stared at him.

“I had a lot of coffee this morning.” He said with a smile.

We got Watkins loaded, got the handouts printed, and Walt and I got dressed. We were pulling out of the parking lot by noon. Even though the official wake wasn't until four, we knew people would be stopping by the Temple all day. People threw aside etiquette when it came to the death of a well-known person. Add the curiosity factor because of the mysterious circumstances of his death and we were in for a long day. Lisa called again while I was driving the hearse to the Temple. I didn't answer it. I wasn't sure what to say to her just yet. Oh, by the way, your dad, who you justifiably hate, was involved with one of the most dangerous gangsters east of the Mississippi. Who has threatened to feed you your own guts. Oh, and he had spy cameras all through his house recording God knows what. Yeah, that was going to be a fucking wonderful conversation.

Our caravan reached the New Hope Temple by 12:30, and the parking lot was already half full. I backed the hearse in front of the door while Curt parked the van and Walt parked his car. We jumped into work mode. A few people exited their vehicles and made a beeline for Walt.

“Mr. Blackmon, is the body in the Temple yet?” a saggy faced old black woman asked.

“No, ma'am, but just give us a few moments to get set up and you can come in to view,” he said. He lowered his voice and made his enunciation more precise.

“We've come to pay our respects, you know,” she said. I could almost see Walt's explanation fly right over her head.

“Yes, ma'am, I understand. Just give us a few moments,” he said. The old woman faded back into the crowd that had gathered around the front door. Curt and I got hustling on the flowers. There were more flowers in the foyer. By the time we got them all set up, it looked like the goddess Flora had shit all over the sanctuary. We went back and with Walt's help, we got the casket out of the hearse and wheeled it past Watkins' portrait and into the expansive sanctuary. Walt came up and opened the casket. He checked the body for leaks and smells and inspected the general condition of the remains. Once he was satisfied, he went to the front door and waved in the folks who had gathered there.

I found a pew in the back and pulled out my phone. I sent Lisa a text apologizing for last night but giving her an excuse that it was work. She didn't respond. Curtis came and sat next to me.

"You think Walt would mind if I slipped off early? Since we leaving the body here until tomorrow he don't need me to take anything back to the office," he asked.

"He'll mind, but he will probably let you go. It's going to be balls to the wall tomorrow, though. We got Mrs. Verlaine's service, too," I said. Curtis leaned back against the pew. He wiped some pollen from his shoulder, looked at his hand with disgust, and then wiped it on the pew.

"Man, what a way to go," he said. I grunted.

"I guess. I'm surprised she was still interested at her age." Curtis shot me a glance.

"I'll be horny on my death bed. I plan on going out busting a nut," he said in a low voice.

"You got a problem," I said. Curtis turned his head from side to side.

"The only problem I got is I love pussy like a fat kid love cake. I gots to have me at least three women a week," he said. He leaned toward me conspiratorially.

"Unless I was fucking a true star like you are," he said. He winked at me.

"What are you talking about?"

"Come on, man. I heard you was with Lisa Watkins AKA Cat Noir when you got into that fight the other night. You hit it, didn't you? Did she suck your dick from the back? Did she give you a California Ice? I need details, my brother!" he said. His face was rapt with glee.

"I don't know what you talking about," I said.

"Nate, I ain't nobody, you ain't gotta lie to me. I mean, if you need some help, I'm here for you. Shit, you can tag me in any time," he said. He grinned at me with a smile that showed me too many of his teeth. The thought of knocking a few of them out briefly flitted through my mind. He pulled a bottle of breath freshener out of his jacket pocket and shot two short bursts into his mouth. A crumpled tissue and a few clear pieces of plastic came out with the breath freshener and fell on the pew between us. The pieces of plastic were little half spheres. I had just seen some half-spheres like those

the other day. My throat dried up like a frog caught between two panes of glass on a summer day.

“What are those?” I said. Curtis turned his head and scooped the pieces of plastic up off the pew.

“Shit, man, I’m always picking them things up and putting them in my pocket. They eye caps. They give the eyelids shape when we embalm somebody. If you don’t use them the eyelid might droop. Nobody wants their grandma peeping at them during a service,” Curtis said. He had a sly smirk on his face. My head was pulsating. I thought I could feel my brain twitching. Curtis faced forward again and looked toward the pulpit and the casket. I tapped him on his shoulder. I was glowering at him. I couldn’t help myself.

“What? Aw, man, you ain’t mad about what I said, are you? I was just messing with you,” he said. I shook my head.

“I ain’t mad about that.”

“Then what is it? You freakin’ me out, man,” he said with a chuckle.

“You ever hear one of Esau’s sermons?”

“Nah, man, I ain’t much of a Temple goer. I see enough of Temple when I’m working,”

“So, you ain’t ever been to one of his services or his bible studies? You ain’t ever been to his house?” I asked. Curtis turned his whole body toward me.

“Nathan, what the hell are you talking about? I barely knew the brother,” he said. I slid closer to him and lowered my voice.

“Really? You sure about that? Because I went by his house as a favor to the porn star you say I’m fucking. Just checking things out, ya know. I found a couple of pieces of plastic in his trash. I couldn’t remember what they were but I knew I had seen them before. Then a couple just fell out your pocket. So, do you have any idea how a couple of eye caps ended up in Watkin’s trash can?” Curtis didn’t have much of a poker face. His eyes bulged out of their sockets and a thin layer of moisture appeared on his upper lip. Flecks of perspiration hung from his pencil thin mustache.

“How the hell am I supposed to know? Maybe Walt or Daniel dropped them when they made the removal,” he said. The sentence came out like a

curse.

“Nah, try again, homie. Daniel went on the removal with his cousin Curtis. Neither one of them fool with the equipment in the prep room. They just like me. A pair of strong arms to pick up bodies and a strong back to work a service. The only person who walks around with eye caps in his pocket is you. So maybe you know because you been to Watkin’s house before he was dead. You attended one of his bible studies. Only they weren’t bible studies, were they, Curtis?” I asked. Curtis moved his jaws up and down silently. He jumped up, but I grabbed his arm and dragged him back down into the pew.

“Let go of me, Nate,” he said. He tried to sound menacing, but I had been threatened by better men in worse locations.

“Esau had a neighbor that told me she saw cars piled up in his driveway from time to time. He told her he was having a bible study. One of the books they were supposed to be studying was the Song of Solomon. Was that a little in-joke for your group? Ya know, I wonder if I described your hamster mobile to her she would remember it?” I said. I tightened my grip on his wrist.

“I don’t know what the fuck you been smoking but maybe you should share it,” he said. He laughed. It was a short, high-pitched bark.

“You don’t know nothing about what I’m talking about, huh? Okay, that’s cool. It’s whatever, man. I’ll let you know what I find on the tablet,” I threw that ace down and he folded.

“What tablet?” he asked. His bottom lip was quaking.

“Esau had wireless cameras all through his house. I’m guessing from where I found the tablet hidden at that he was recording the bible studies. And a piece of shit like Esau wasn’t recording it for posterity. He was using it,” I said.

“Oh, fuck,” Curtis whispered.

“We done playing now? I got a pretty good idea what was going on there, but why don’t you fill in the blanks because I think we both know you in this up to you well-groomed chin,” I said. Curtis stared at the ceiling.

“Let go of my arm, Nate,” he said. I let go of his wrist.

“Whoever killed Watkins was probably somebody who got recorded on them cameras. You think about that. You think about that long and hard. Cuz you in some deep waters, homeboy,” I said. Curtis stood.

“Tell Walt I had to go,” he said. There was sweat on his forehead, too.

“Tell him your damn self,” I said. Curtis strode out of the sanctuary. I sat back against the pew. Walt came through the swinging doors of the vestibule and tapped me on the shoulder.

“Where the hell he going?” he asked. I shrugged.

“I don’t know. He said something about an emergency,” I said. Walt tapped me on the shoulder again. I turned my head as much as I could in my dress shirt and gave him a raised eyebrow.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“What?” I said.

“I’ve know you. You couldn’t lie to me if you wanted to. What’s going on with Curt?” he asked.

“I don’t know. He just left,” I said. That was more or less the truth. I didn’t exactly know what was going on with Curtis. I had some strong suspicions, though. I didn’t think he killed Watkins. He didn’t have that kind of sand in him. Plus, he didn’t know about the tablet or the cameras. He didn’t have a motive. But he might know who did. I just needed to convince him to talk. Once I got a look at what was on that tablet, coupled with whatever testimony Curtis could provide, I might have enough evidence to get the State Police to take over the investigation. Then I could watch Laurent and his crew squirm under the bright lights of a State Police inquiry. I just had to persuade Curtis to come clean.

Hours passed, and the stream of mourners ebbed and flowed. The level of grief seemed to rise and fall as well. Some folks went up to the casket, peered at the body and went on their way. Others fell across the casket wailing at the top of their lungs and had to be helped to their seats. Walt flitted around shaking hands with the men and comforting the women.

Around three, I decided I was going outside to give my ass muscles a break from the unforgiving pews when I heard a murmur move through the crowd. It was like a wave that started at the back of the Temple and reached a

crescendo near the casket. I could pick up snatches of conversation. It was like a rock star or a wrestler was making his entrance.

“He’s here!”

“You see that limo?!”

“Lord, he look just like he do on TV!”

I stayed in my seat as the doors swung open, and three tall, dark-skinned brothers wearing identical dark brown suits entered the sanctuary. Their posture was as straight as an arrow. Two of the men had short flat top haircuts. The third had a small mini-fro and wore a pair of steel frame glasses and a garish brown and tan speckled bow-tie. The two flat tops held the doors open while mini-fro stood to one side against the end of one of the pews.

A couple walked in arm and arm with measured steps like royalty. To some Temple going folk, I guess they were. Rev. Tommy Short and his wife Angeline had made the scene in spectacular style.

He was a short tank of a man with wide shoulders and a broad chest. A mop of loose, greasy curls was piled on top of his head in a modified pompadour. The sides were shaved down almost to the scalp. His skin was a dark shade of Jacobean brown. A thin chin strap beard connected to his mustache then wound its way up to a hairline that started so far back on his skull that it made his forehead a five head. A red nylon t-shirt was stretched taut over his bulky frame like a sausage skin. Lips that seemed to be permanently pursed moved in and out as he walked. A heavy gold cross hung from his wide neck and swung back and forth like a pendulum. More gold adorned his wrists in the form of a Rolex on one arm and a gold bracelet on the other. By the look of it, the Lord had been very good to Tommy Short.

Angeline Short was not fine. She wasn’t a hot piece. She wasn’t even sexy. She was beautiful in a way that made it hard to stare at her for too long. Long, luxuriant black hair unfurled down her back like corporeal darkness. A demure blazer and black dress could do little to diminish the majesty of her curvaceous body. Strong thighs that led down to firm, muscular calves and led up to a derriere that curved outward like half a peach. She had a honey brown complexion that made it appear as if she was sculpted out of

amber ambrosia. Her eyes were pools of the lightest hazel. Her aquiline face ended in a delicate chin with a small teardrop dimple. Her lips were full but not sensual. They looked ethereal. Like something Rembrandt might have painted had he studied with Andrew Wyeth. She could have been a tanned Italian or a light-skin black woman or a Latin goddess come to life or a combination of all three. You didn't gaze upon her and think about fucking her. You wanted to protect her. Put her in a gilded cage and admire her for the rest of your life like a captured angel.

I rose from the pew and watched them glide past me on their way to the casket. Once they reached it, Angeline seemed to be overcome with grief. She leaned against the burly arm of Rev. Short and trembled. Short put his arm around her and then they turned to go. As they made their way out of the sanctuary, Gary Bradley threaded through the pews and put his hand on Short's shoulder. Gary was one of the other trustees, along with Mrs. Parrish and Mrs. Sheer. Short's entourage moved quickly to intervene. One pulled Bradley's hand away from Short. The other two buffeted the couple on each side as they headed for the exit.

"I was just wondering if he could say a few words about Rev. Watkins," Gary said. His voice had a slight edge of petulance.

"The Minister is on a tight schedule," the man with the short Afro said. He sounded like Mufasa. Rev. Short stopped and turned. He waved his hand, and the man with the short Afro stepped away from Gary.

"It's okay, Samuel. I have a few moments to speak about my friend," Short said. I had stood because I didn't know if Short's men were planning on stomping on Gary's neck. Gary was a thin wisp of a man who looked like he'd snap in two if you poked him in the chest. The other two members of Short's goon squad eyed me impassively as I stood. They were sizing me up and obviously felt they could take me if the need arose.

"Easy, hoss. I'm with the funeral home. Just trying to maintain some decorum. You know what decorum is?" I asked. Neither of them spoke, but they stared at me a little harder. I stepped out from between the pews. I didn't look away. I felt their hostility and returned it in kind.

"What can we do for you, gentlemen?" Walt asked. He had just stepped through the doors.

“Elijah, Nicodemus, could you go bring the limo around, please?” Short said. He didn’t look at his charges, but they moved swiftly and slipped out between the swinging doors.

“Walt, I was just asking the Reverend if he would say something about Esau. If that’s okay,” Gary said. His eyes darted from side to side. He looked embarrassed. I’m sure he didn’t intend for his innocuous request to nearly start a fist fight.

“As long as we are not imposing on Rev. Short,” Walt said. Short extended his hand and Walt shook it.

“No imposition, sir. You are the funeral director?” Short said.

“Walter Blackmon and this is my assistant Nathan Waymaker,” Walt said as he gestured toward me with his head. I saluted him with two fingers. Short nodded.

“Rev Thomas Short and this is my wife Angeline. You are a master of your craft, sir. Esau looks wonderful,” Short said. His wife’s eyes were red from crying. I had the strange urge to walk up to her and put my arm around her and hold her close. She turned her head and caught me staring at her. I dropped my eyes. I could stare down some fake ass hard cases who looked like extras in a Bond film all day but a beautiful woman broke my nerve.

“Thank you. I will pass that along to my staff. We take great pride in our work. It is a calling as well as a trade,” Walt said and I knew he meant it.

“Yes, it definitely is a calling that only few can answer,” Short said. His voice was melodious. He spoke with a rhythmic cadence that made every word seem like a stanza in an epic poem. He stuck his hand out toward me. I shook it and felt my metacarpals grind against each other. I shook his hand and gave it a squeeze at seventy-five percent of my full strength. For a moment, we were locked in a contest to see who had the strongest grip in this pissing contest. I relented first. I didn’t need to prove anything to the good reverend. I felt eyes on me and saw that his wife was staring at me this time.

“How much?” Short said.

“Huh?” I responded. I had been lost in his wife’s eyes.

“How much do you bench?” Short asked. He had a smirk on his face that indicated whatever it was it would be well below his own personal best.

“Uh...I don't know. I work out with 225. I don't lift for my ego,” I said.

“Then what's the point?” Short asked. An uncomfortable silence popped up between us all like an unwelcome relative at a cookout. Then Short laughed. Then Walt laughed. Then Samuel laughed. We all laughed except for Angeline. She was still staring at me.

“I only asked because you got a hell of a grip there, Nathan. I began working out when I was sixteen, and I have found that it has become a way for me to connect with the Almighty. Psalm 18:32, it is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect. When I lift, each rep is the Lord testing me, and when I lock it out, it is the Lord showing me that with Him nothing is impossible. The struggle with the iron is a direct metaphor for the struggle with sin. When I first took Samuel, Elijah, and Nicodemus in, I showed them the ways of the iron. It helped direct some of their misguided rage. My wife and I took them from Rwanda many years ago. The iron has made them physically strong and spiritually vigilant. They are like sons to me now. Closer than sons, really,” Short said as he ruffled the short Afro of the young man with the bow-tie. The uncomfortable silence returned and this time, it wanted a to-go plate. Finally, Walt cleared his throat.

“Well, Reverend, if you would like to say a few words, the pulpit is yours,” Gary said. He scuttled away like a scolded child. Rev. Short smiled and then turned and walked to the pulpit. Samuel followed him. I could see him pouring gasoline on an old man's shed and watching it burn. With a raging boner.

Angeline stayed put.

“I'm sorry for your loss,” I said. She cocked her head to the side like the RCA dog.

“What?” she said. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other and back again.

“I saw you crying at the casket. I'm sorry for your loss,” I said. She straightened her head.

“Yes. Yes, Esau's death is a loss for us all. I don't know why someone would shoot such a wonderful man in his own living room like a dog. But

there are times when even the Word of God is no protection from the tyranny of evil men,” she said. She walked away with her long hair swaying with every step. Mrs. Short’s faith was not as firm as her honey gold thighs, apparently.

“They say the rich are different from us. If they meant weird, I totally agree,” Walt said out of the side of his mouth.

“They doing that good?” I asked.

“You ain’t never seen their Temple on television have you? It make this place look like a pump house,” Walt said.

“His wife is gorgeous,” I said. Walt elbowed me.

“Demon in a black dress, cuz. You leave that alone. She won’t get you nothing but trouble, and I think you got enough of that already,” Walt said.

“I didn’t say I was gonna try to hang her panties from my headboard, I was just saying she is beautiful,” I said.

“So is a Foxglove. But it’ll still kill you stone dead,” he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Short spoke about Watkins for about five minutes. In that brief span of time he made Esau sound like the 13th apostle.

“Brothers and Sisters, I have not come here today to tell you anything about this man that you don’t already know. He was a man who had lived a life steeped in sin. Who had peddled drugs to his community. Who had found his joy in realm of the world’s earthy desires. But don’t you know God is committed to the backslider? No matter where you’ve come from or what you have done God can change you in the blink of an eye! There is no one beyond the reach of God’s love and grace. Not Noah who was a drunkard, not Mary of Bethany, the harlot, not Paul the persecutor of Christians who had the scales knocked from his eyes on the road to Damascus. And not Esau Watkins. Esau was a man who pulled himself up from the depths of moral perdition and offered his life to the one living God! And Our Lord blessed him beyond measure. He may not be here with us anymore in his physical form but he is still in our hearts. He now sits at the feet of Master waiting for us to join him in that eternal paradise.” He said.

Beads of sweat dotted his forehead as he left the pulpit. His entourage fell over themselves trying to mop his brow. Angeline rose and fell in step behind them. The Temple erupted in applause.

He and his wife and their protectors left the Temple amidst a cloud of adulation and adoration. As he strode down the center aisle mourners reached out to touch his arm or his hand. A few were crying. I think they would have pushed aside the Man from Galilee to get to Tommy Short. His armor bearers made sure everyone kept their distance.

The spark seemed to go out of the room after Short and Co. left the building. As the flow of mourners slowed to a trickle, I stepped outside to call Lisa. A frigid wind blew around the corners of the New Hope Temple. It seemed like an hour passed before she answered.

“What the fuck happened to you the other night?”

“Well, hello to you, too,” I said. I heard her suck her teeth.

“For real, what happened? Did you get lost?” she asked.

“I’d rather just tell you ‘bout it in person. Can I stop by in a little while? I have your grandmother’s bible,” I said.

“You went to the house?”

“Nah, I saw it flying outside my window, so I trapped it with a bowl full of communion wine. Yes, I went to the house,” I said. She didn’t laugh.

“I don’t even know if I still want it,” she said. She was breathing with increasingly rapid inhalations.

“Well, it’s a good excuse for me to come by and see you. I need to explain some things to you,” I said. Silence. She was so quiet that for a moment I thought she had hung up.

“Okay. I’ll be here,” she said.

“Okay. See ya in a bit. “

“Yeah,” she said. The line went dead. I stepped back inside the Temple just as Walt was dismissing the last of the mourners. Folks were filing out past me as I made way to the pulpit. Walt stepped down off the dais and motioned for me to meet him at the casket. I hadn’t seen Mrs. Parrish or Mrs. Sheer tonight. Maybe they were saving their tears for the funeral the next day. After everyone was gone, Gary came over to the casket.

“You gentlemen need any help with anything?” he asked.

“No, sir, but thank you. We are just going to close up the coffin until we open it during the service tomorrow,” Walt said.

“All right. Nice turnout tonight. Esau is really going to be missed. He took this Temple from a one room storefront to this majestic temple you see today. Rev. Short sure had some nice things to say about him,” Gary said.

“Yes, it was an eloquent speech he gave,” Walt said. Gary clapped Walt on the shoulder.

“Let me know when you fellas are done so I can lock up,” he said. He left the sanctuary and headed for the lobby. Walt and I placed some napkins over Esau’s face and lowered the lid of the casket.

“It’s gonna be a big crowd tomorrow. Preachers always show up when it’s one of their own,” Walt said.

“Yeah. They come rolling up like mafia dons,” I said.

“He wasn’t a preacher, though. Not a real one,” Walt said. I shrugged.

“Aren’t all of them sorta hustlers?” I said.

“Not the good ones. Not the ones who get it. Anybody can say they were called to preach. But only a few earn the title of Reverend,” Walt said.

“You got a testimonial you wanna share, Brother Blackmon?” I said. Walt grunted.

“I’m just saying. People like Watkins or Short, they can talk the talk but they don’t walk the walk. Not by a long shot.”

We exited the Temple together. Walt headed for his Caddy, and I headed for the hearse. He was halfway to his car when he stopped and turned to face me.

“You know you can’t hide nothing from me. If this thing you working on gets too hairy, you know you can just leave it alone, right?” he said.

“Stop being so damn mushy. You gonna make me cry,” I said. I could almost feel Walt rolling his eyes.

“Night, cuz,” he said before getting in his car. I got in the hearse and headed for the office. The light of the setting sun seemed muted by the falling temperatures. By the time I got back to the office and parked the hearse, the temp had dropped into the forties. I saw the flower van sitting under the carport at an odd angle. I went over to the van and saw that the front driver side signal light was broken. There were a few bits of shattered brick on the ground. The first brick column that held up the carport had a chunk missing. Had Curt been that unnerved by what I had said? I needed to go by his place and talk to him again. He knew more than he was telling and holding it in was messing with his head. He was ready to break any minute. But first, I had to go see Lisa. I stopped at the red light in front of the Wal-Mart and drummed my fingers on the steering wheel in time with the deceptively simple lyrics and melancholy melody. I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw a Gloucester County cop car behind me. I took a deep breath and let it out slow and deliberately trying to tell myself that I had no reason to feel apprehensive. I had on a seat belt. My license and insurance were both valid and, surprise, surprise, I hadn’t had anything to drink. But the voice in my head was not convinced. It insisted I should get ready to be pulled over. It reminded me I had gotten into a nasty bar fight a

few nights ago. In Gloucester. And I had left my truck in the parking lot all night giving anyone who chose to plenty of time to jot down my license plate number. I tried to ignore the voice. Just as the traffic light turned green and I was about to hit the gas, the lights on top of the cop car came alive flashing blue and red. I drove on through the intersection. The car stayed on my ass. I pulled into the parking lot of the now-defunct Larson Furniture store next to the 7-11.

I undid my seat belt and put my hands at two and ten on my steering wheel. I saw another cop car pull in behind the one that pulled me over. That wasn't good. In fact, that was horrible. Two cops meant they thought they needed back up. If they needed back up, that meant they planned on arresting me. For what, I had no idea. I couldn't believe a recreational pharmacist like Fella would press charges for a fight. A thought tried to enter my mind but I wouldn't allow it to come in. Not yet. Not until they got out of the car and told me why they had pulled me over. A deputy got out of the first car. I saw him in my side mirror. He looked like he had just started shaving this morning. His sandy brown hair was slicked back and held in place with what appeared to be shellac. He had his hand on his gun.

His backup got out of his cruiser with all the urgency of a seal flopping off a dock. I could see him in my side mirror as well. Average height, terrible build, with a mop of unruly gray hair and a face so florid it looked like he started each morning with a heart attack. The teenager had reached Betty's back bumper.

"Get out of the car, Mr. Waymaker!" he yelled. It made me jump. He was gripping his gun like it was a life preserver and he had just fallen overboard. I lowered my window and opened my door from the outside. Using smooth, slow movements, I got out of my truck. I held my hand up and faced the deputy.

"What's the problem, officer?" I kept my voice calm, but my nerves were raw.

"Hands up!" the deputy screamed. The older deputy moved closer. He had drawn his Taser.

"They are up," I said. The wind stirred some leaves and loose trash in the old parking lot. I watched as some of the leaves floated into a drainage ditch near the highway.

“Well...get down on the ground!” he said.

“Come on, man, not in my suit. Can’t you tell me what this is all about?” I said.

“Get down or I will tase you!” the first deputy said.

Old Yeller with the Taser picked that moment to have a hearing aid malfunction.

“Tase him? You want me to tase him?” he said with a quavering voice.

The next thing I knew, a couple of metal pins were sticking out of my chest.

“Aw, f-” was all I got out before the electricity hit me like a freight train.

Ever been tased?

It feels like every muscle in your body got a cramp at the same time and simultaneously you have no control over said muscles. If the prongs are making a really good connection, you will fall to the ground like a log. I could taste blood in my mouth along with dirt and gravel. I must have hit the ground face first. I remember Opie and Grandpa Jones handcuffing me and trying to lift me into one of the cruisers. The older deputy fell down and clutched his back while the younger deputy was caught under my body weight. If I hadn’t been drooling, I would have been laughing. They must have radioed for more back up because some more deputies showed up and they got me in the car, and then I think I blacked out for a while because the next thing I remember was being pulled out of the car in front of the Gloucester Hall of Justice.

They walked/dragged me through their red door, removed my cuffs, and tossed me into a holding cell. As the feeling and mobility began returning to my body, I checked my crotch. Thankfully, I had not pissed my pants. As I dusted myself off, I took stock of my surroundings. I was in one of the two holding cells. I hadn’t been charged, and I hadn’t been offered a phone call. This didn’t feel official. It felt like a sheriff throwing some weight around. Nonetheless, I had trouble keeping my breathing steady. I was behind bars. Jail bars, not prison bars, but bars all the same. There is not a more helpless feeling in the world. I wrapped my hands around the thick cylindrical pipes that made up my cage and closed my eyes. I squeezed them until my forearms ached. They couldn’t keep me here more than 24 hours without

charging me. If it was THE charge, I wouldn't be in a holding cell. They would have taken me to the Regional Jail in Saluda. I just had to stay calm and see what they wanted.

I heard the sound of metal screaming as the door to the holding area opened and hinges cried out in pain.

“Well, well, well. I told you one day I was gonna get your ass.”

Victor Culler grinned at me as he stood in front of my cell.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Victor was standing too close to the cell. I shot my left arm through the bars and gripped his throat with my left hand. His neck was too wide for me to get my hand all the way around it. So I dug my thumb into his Adam's apple and squeezed as hard as I could. Victor's eyes began to bulge from their sockets. I saw panic fill them as he began to claw at my forearm. I guess I was lucky he forgot he was wearing a gun and a Taser and had a can of pepper spray on his gun belt. I yanked him toward the cell. His face slammed into the bars. His face hitting the cell door made a flat, hollow sound. He wouldn't be able to see out of his left eye tomorrow.

Sheriff Danforth Carter and his staff must have been watching us on a closed-circuit system because they came running through the door. The three of them grabbed at my forearm and tried to tear my hand away from Victor's neck, but I just squeezed harder. The world was gray and all I could think about was hearing Victor squeal like a pig right before it gets its throat cut.

Sheriff Carter took his nightstick and jabbed me in the gut. I felt a stabbing pain in my mid-section, but I still held onto Victor. He jabbed me again. This time, he aimed for my nuts. White hot pain filled my abdomen and radiated up my chest. I let go of Victor and stumbled backward. I leaned forward and grabbed my knees. I took deep breaths even though my balls ached every time I inhaled.

"Open it up! Let me in there! You fucked up now, boy! That's assault of a police officer, you sonofabitch!" Victor screamed. His eye was rapidly swelling. By the time he went to bed tonight, it would look like a ping-pong ball. If they let him in here, I'd give him a matching set.

"Victor, shut up," Sheriff Carter said. Victor looked at him like he had grown a second head.

"Dan, you saw the whole fucking thing!" Victor said. His face was as red as a bottle of ketchup.

"What I saw was a deputy from another department standing in my holding area without my permission. God, Victor, you think you're John

Wayne but you act like Barney Fife. Go home. Put some ice on your eye. And for the love of Christ, don't tell anybody you were here," Danforth said. Victor frowned.

"I haven't been booked. None of us are supposed to be here," I said between breaths. Victor bit his bottom lip, then rolled his big head on his wide neck. He seemed to be looking for a way to make an assault charge stick.

"Dan-"

"Go, Victor," Danforth said. Victor shot me a murderous glance before leaving the holding area. Danforth glared at the two deputies. These were the two who had come to assist the one who had pulled me over.

"I wanted him picked up. Not antagonized by a bully. Whichever one of you is hunting or fishing buddies with Victor is gonna be doing night patrols at the dump for a month. Now get the hell out of here," he said. The two deputies fell over each other leaving the holding area. Danforth crossed his arms.

"I see why Granville and Joel were afraid to bring you in. Was that one of the moves you used on the boys at the Cove?" he asked. I sat down on the hard metal bench that was bolted into the wall.

"Nah, we just did the foxtrot and the Charleston," I said. Danforth smirked.

"Always the smartass, ain't ya, Nathan? Even sitting in a jail cell," he said. "You fucked them boys up pretty good. Of course, none of them are pressing charges. Hell, none of them will even admit a fight took place even though I got a bar full of witnesses," he said. I felt a knot in my chest begin to unwind. This was about the Cove. It wasn't about anything else.

"You charging me, Sheriff Carter?" I asked. Danforth hunched his shoulders.

"I could if I wanted to. Commonwealth could take up the case even if Fella and the boys didn't want to press charges. Which they say they don't. But I don't think that will be necessary," he said.

"Then why you pick me up?"

Danforth uncrossed his arms. He hooked his thumbs into his front pockets. "Saving face mostly. Can't have an ex-deputy from another county

beating people in my town like they were runaway slaves. Constituents frown on that kind of shit. But it's also a warning, Nate. Nobody is above the law. No matter who they are or what reason they have for doing what they done. Keep that shit in Queen County. So I'm gonna let you cool your heels in here to, oh, I don't know, 7am tomorrow. Give you some time to think. Meditate on things," Danforth said. He turned on his heel and left the holding area.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A deputy I had never seen before came and unlocked my cell at a few minutes past 7am the next morning. He didn't say anything. Just opened the cell door and waited by the red door. I walked out and closed the cell door behind me.

"Be sure you check out my review online," I said as I walked out the red door. I went to their window and waited for a much better-looking dispatcher than Ruth Ann to come and speak to me through the wire mesh.

"Can I help you?" she asked. She had her hair pulled back in a severe bun, but it only helped to accentuate her big blue eyes and heart-shaped lips.

"I hope so. Did you all tow a black 57 Chevy? It's my truck, and I just want to know where I have to go to pick it up," I said. She furrowed her brow and turned to click clack some keys on a computer.

"Doesn't appear that we did," she said. I hit my forehead with the palm of my hand.

"Of course you didn't because I wasn't really arrested." I muttered. I could have called a news channel or our local rabble-rouser and complained about my civil rights being violated, police brutality and other assorted buzzwords. But I was walking out of the police station free and clear. I was gonna call this one square.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket. I had 1% battery life left. Whoever I called next would be my last call until I could charge my phone. I couldn't call Lisa after standing her up last night. I didn't want Walt to have to retrieve me from a police station, especially in light of our conversation the other day. That left one person. I pressed an icon on my screen.

"Raheem. Man, can you come get me? I'm at the Gloucester Sheriff's office. No, I haven't been arrested. Yes, I'll tell you all about it. Just come on," I said.

Raheem only talked my ear halfway off while we drove to get my truck. I told him part of what was happening. I left out the part about Lisa and Shade. He was still overly enthusiastic.

“Man, you in some real Alex Cross type shit! You better watch your ass!” he said. He dropped his voice. It was only me and him in his car. The extra caution seemed unnecessary.

“You carrying?” he asked.

“Yeah. I got a .357 caliber water gun in my glove compartment,” I said.

“Stupid ass!” he said as we pulled into the parking lot. He stopped right next to my truck.

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it,” I said and offered him my hand. He grabbed it and pumped it twice.

“For real, man. Be careful. It sound like you stepped in some real shit,” he said as I pulled on the door latch.

“Don’t worry about me. I know how to keep my shoes clean,” I said as I opened the door and got out of his car. Raheem shook his head and pulled off. I went and jumped in my truck and merged into what could barely be called traffic. I had to get back to the office, take a shower, and iron my suit. We were burying the right Rev. Esau Watkins today. Couldn’t go there smelling like I was the one that needed to be in a casket.

I rolled into the parking lot of the office and parked Betty near the carport. No one else was there yet. We were all supposed to meet at the funeral home, then drive over to the Temple with the hearse and the flower van. We had to transport the body and the flowers to the Lee Smith Memorial Gardens. Plots there went for a pretty penny. Nothing but the best for the great Rev. Watkins.

I got out of my truck and grabbed the tablet and the bible. At this rate, I would have to mail Lisa the bible. And I didn’t know what I was gonna do with the tablet. I didn’t have the password. I could sit there and try to guess it for a few decades, I suppose. Most likely, I would have to find someone who could hack it.

I went into the funeral home and stripped down out of my suit and dress shirt. I grabbed some starch and sprayed it on the shirt and the suit. Then I tossed the whole kit and caboodle in the dryer. It was an old undertaker’s trick. It would knock the wrinkles out faster than ironing. While the suit was in the dryer I jumped in the shower just long enough to get wet. I got out

and tossed on my t-shirt and jeans and boots while I waited for my ghetto dry cleaning to finish.

I heard Walt opening the door. I peeked down the hall and saw that he was already in his suit. He headed for his office, and I followed him. As soon as he sat down at his desk, Daniel came walking through the door.

“Nate, go get dressed. Anybody heard from Curtis? I’ve called him five times this morning.” Walt was all business this morning. This was gonna be our biggest funeral of the year by far.

“Got my suit in the dryer trying to knock some wrinkles out of it. Should be ready in a few,” I said.

“Good. Check the hearse and look in the storage compartment and make sure we have enough parking signs. Daniel, get the guest book and put it in the hearse. I’ll try to get in touch with Curtis again. If I don’t get him this time, we are going without him. I’ll call Chester and them and make sure that grave is dug and the vault is ready,” Walt said. His face was smooth and impassive. That’s how I knew he was on edge. “Walt,” I said. He looked up from his phone.

“Yeah?”

“Can I stick some coal up your ass before we leave so when the service is done I’ll have a diamond? You wound too tight, cuz. We got this,” I said. At first, he retained his inscrutableness. Then he guffawed like a donkey and flipped me off.

“Go get your damn suit,” he said.

The New Hope Temple was beyond packed. Cars spilled out of the parking lot and onto the side of the road. I had to hop out of the hearse and use my outside voice to get people to move out of the way as we entered the driveway. I parked up near the door so that when the service was over we could ferry Watkins off to the graveyard without too much trouble.

Every black minister and a few white ones from the tri-county area were in attendance. I saw them filing into the Temple in their black robes and frocks. I was standing near the hearse waiting for Walt to park his car and Daniel to park the van when I felt someone touch my arm. It was Mrs. Parrish.

“Hello, Nathan,” she said. She was dressed in a form-fitting black blouse and ankle-length pencil skirt. If not for her gray hair, she could have easily passed for ten years younger than her actual age. Her hair was pressed out and floated around her shoulders like baby’s breath.

“Mrs. Parrish, how are you?” I asked. She tried to smile, but it never got out of the gate.

“I’m doing...I’m just doing. Nathan, have you found out anything at all?” she asked.

I made a show of glancing around.

“There are a few things I have found, but I don’t think this is the best place to talk about it. How about I call you later tonight after the service?” I asked. Her left cheek twitched, but she gazed into my eyes and didn’t look away.

“Oh, okay. You’re right. We shouldn’t talk here. I’ll look forward to your call,” she lied. She slipped away into the river of people heading into the Temple like a selkie. I looked past her and saw a Queen County police cruiser pull into the parking lot. My stomach contorted into a knot of nerves until I saw it was Sam Dean behind the wheel. He’d be our escort to the cemetery. I threw up my hand in a casual salute. Sam didn’t wave back. I guess I had made it on to his shit list too. Maybe his wife had finally confessed to coming on to me. Or maybe it was because the sky was blue.

Walt came over and tapped me on the arm.

“We’re on,” he said.

We were like the Men in Black moving in the space between the spaces. That was what Walt always said before a funeral. We were there and we were not there. We guided and prodded and cajoled the family to take the first steps through their grief. Lining up the family for the processional into the Temple. We stood at the casket ready for a funeral goer to pass out or fall to their knees or, more often than you would think, try to climb in the casket. We made sure everyone was seated comfortably and correctly according to their relation to the deceased or their position of power within the family. And finally, we helped with the hardest part of the service. The last view before we lowered and locked the lid. I hated that part. It didn’t matter if it

was a lovely lady like Miss Verlaine who was being buried an hour after this service was over or a bastard like Watkins.

After we had done our part, we left the sanctuary and retired to the foyer. We would wait there until the preaching and crying and praying was complete. Once everyone had lied about how godly and full of Christian charity Esau was, we'd go back in and toss him in the hearse and head for the cemetery. I sat on a wide bench near the entrance. Walt sat beside me and pulled out his phone. His face was even more pensive than earlier.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I still can't get Curtis. I need him this afternoon for Miss Verlaine's service. It's not like him to ignore my calls all day," Walt said. I ran the heel of my hands against my thighs.

"Did y'all get into it yesterday?" Walt asked. I considered telling him the truth, but I wasn't sure he wanted to hear it.

"Nah, we just joking around. He said he needed to dip out early, and I told him it would be cool. I didn't mean to overstep," I said. Walt cut his eyes my way.

"That's not overstepping. If you had told him not to show up today, that would be overstepping. I'm gonna see if I can get in touch with Larry Collier from Lancaster. He helps Miss Eliza Newton out from time to time at her shop. Hopefully, he'll be free today," Walt said as he closed his ancient flip phone. A gale of applause erupted from the sanctuary.

"They in there hooting and hollering like he was the second coming of Martin Luther King," I said. Walt sighed.

"No one ever buries an evil man," he said.

After two hours of intense public mourning, the funeral for Esau Watkins ended. We took his 20-gauge royal blue casket out of the Temple and loaded it into the hearse. Sam flipped on his lights and led us to the cemetery. Once we arrived I watched as people gathered around the tent near the grave. The air was rapidly changing from cool to frigid. I searched the faces, black, white, and brown. I wondered how many had attended Esau's bible studies. How many had been in his debt or in his grasp. How many had wanted him right where he was at this moment. Unfortunately, no

one had a crisis of conscience at the grave and confessed. Lisa was true to her word. She didn't grace the wake or the funeral with her presence.

As the gravediggers lowered the casket, Walt motioned for me to come to his car.

"What up?" I asked.

"I'm worried about Curtis. You sure you two didn't get into something?" he asked.

"Cuz, I'm being real with you. Did you get in touch with Larry?" I asked.

"Yeah, he can help, thank God," he said.

"Tell you what. Since you got Larry and Daniel, let me go swing by Curtis's place," I said. Walt drummed his fingers on the roof of his car.

"Yeah, go make sure he all right. Hope he ain't tied up in some dominatrix dungeon somewhere," he said. I raised my eyebrow.

"Mr. Blackmon, what the hell you know about a dominatrix?" I asked.

"Mind your business, Nate," he said with a sly smirk.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Curtis lived in a modest house up the county in a new subdivision that had been built near the high school. I think the developers envisioned young families with 2.5 kids filling up the single floor ranchers. Sadly, they completed construction just as the bottom fell out of the housing market in '07. Curtis had gotten the house for a steal.

“If any kids ever show up on my doorstep, I’m less than a mile from the school. I’m planning for the possibility,” he told me once.

Curtis had lucked out and gotten the corner lot. He didn’t have a neighbor for a mile on each side. Oh, there were houses there, they were just empty. I pulled Betty into his driveway, which was covered in crushed oyster shells. The shells were an old English tradition that took hold in the English influenced South. My tires crunched the old shells until Betty’s front bumper was less than a foot from the rear bumper of Curtis’s hybrid.

Curtis’s house was dressed in an off-white, cream-colored vinyl siding with a complimentary light blue shingled roof. There wasn’t much in the yard in the way of decoration, but it was neat and well-manicured. His grass was just starting to turn brown. I jogged up to the door and banged on it. I waited a few minutes. When no one came to the door, I banged on it again. Nothing. I put my ear to the door. The cold fiberglass stung my ear, but I didn’t pull it away. I could hear voices coming from inside, but they sounded like the mindless chatter of some talking heads on a talk show. The door had a frosted arch window at the very top. I stood on my tiptoes and peered through the clouded glass. There was something dark on the floor. It could have been a pile of blankets. Or maybe a rolled up rug. The voice told me it wasn’t either one of those things and that I damn well knew it.

I jiggled the door knob. It was locked. I walked back to Curtis’s car, then turned around. I took off at a slow trot toward the front door. About halfway there, I picked up speed and broke into a full out run. I planted a foot on the concrete pad in front of the door and launched myself into the air, kicking the door with both feet. Luckily, there wasn’t a deadbolt. The door flew open,

and the frame split. I landed on my feet, stumbled, and caught myself against the ruined frame.

I stepped into Curtis's living room. I had been here once before watching an MMA fight on pay per view. Raheem had come with me and Walt had stopped by. Daniel had shown up just as the card was coming to an end. Curtis had made us some Southern Hurricanes and his world-famous buffalo cheese dip. It had been a good night. We wouldn't be having any more nights like that ever again.

Curtis was on the floor. A yellow-handled screwdriver was jutting out of a hole in his neck. Blood was everywhere.

There was blood on the walls of the living room. There was blood on the curtains of the big picture window over the flat screen television. There were even spots of blood on the vanes of the blinds in the window. A trail of blood led from the television to my left to the coffee table lying on its side in front of me. There was a halo of broken glass around the coffee table. Blood had pooled among the shards, making them look like pink diamonds. Blood had stained his fancy white button-downed shirt.

"I told you, and you didn't fucking listen," I whispered.

I called 911 and then sat in my truck and waited for the police. Ten minutes later, blue and red lights began reflecting off my side mirrors and the vinyl siding. Two cruisers came around the corner. One pulled up to the corner; the other pulled in behind me. One of the cruisers carried Sam. The other one was driven by Victor. I got out of the truck and held my hands away from my body. Victor came toward me with his hand on his gun. His left eye was an ugly purple color, and his cheek had a tawny yellow bruise that looked like a mustard stain. Sam came up and stood next to him.

"Nate, what's going on?" he said with his lazy drawl.

"Curtis Sampson. He didn't come to the funeral home this morning. He wasn't answering his phone. Walt asked me to come over and check on him. The door was locked, so I knocked it down. I found him in there. He's been stabbed," I said.

"Is he dead?" Sam asked.

"If he isn't, he is doing a hell of an impression," I said. A sickly green hue began to spread across Sam's face. Victor pulled out his gun.

“Get your ass on the ground until we sort this out. Do it!” he yelled. Sam put his hand on his shoulder.

“Vic, let it go, man. There’s a dead body in there,” he said.

“There’s about to be one out here if he don’t get his black ass on the ground,” he said as he pointed his gun at me.

“That’s some nice eyeshadow you got, Victor,” I said.

“Get your motherfucking ass on the ground,” he said between clenched teeth.

“No. Not today, Victor. We ain’t having this bullshit pissing contest today. A man I worked with is dead in there. A man I called a friend. So, for once in your miserable fucking life, just go do your goddamn job,” I said. Victor put the barrel of the gun right in front of my left eye. I didn’t blink. I felt sick. I felt like I wanted to vomit all over his shiny shoes.

“Get On The Ground,” Victor said. He pronounced each word distinctly as if each was a single sentence. The wind whipped up and blew some scraps of paper and some leaves across the driveway.

“Easy, guys!” Sam said. His voice was trembling like a tuning fork.

I reached up with my left hand and pushed Victor’s right hand, his gun hand, to the right, away from my body. I gripped his wrist as hard as I could. With my right hand, I grabbed the barrel of his gun and twisted it back toward his chest while squeezing down on his forearm. His trigger finger slipped out of the guard. I stepped back holding the gun. I ejected the magazine and the bullet in the chamber. Then I dropped all of it on the oyster shells.

“Do your job, Victor. Sam, you wanna take my statement?” I asked.

Laurent and Sandy showed up about twenty minutes later. Another deputy that worked part-time named Nelson Ross showed up a few minutes after that. Sam took my statement in his cruiser. When we were done, Laurent came over to the car. I got out and started to walk past him.

“You know anything about this?” he said between puffs on his cigar.

“I just gave Sam my statement,” I said.

“I’m not asking about what you saw when you broke down that door. You worked with Sampson. You knew him. Now I’ll ask again. You know

anything about this?” he said.

“All I know is you and your boys don’t have a good track record with cases like this. Don’t you think you should call the State Police in on this? I mean, you groping in the dark on the Watkins case and now you got this,” I said. Laurent took a deep drag on his cigar and blew the smoke in my face.

“I don’t need no State smokies to help me run my county,” he said. I laughed. No, I brayed like a mule.

“Look around you, Laurent! Your county is turning to shit so fast pretty soon people gonna be wearing toilet paper for shoes. Now if you don’t mind, I gotta go tell my cousin that one of his best employees and friends is dead,” I said. Laurent puffed again.

“Keep yourself available. Now get the fuck out of here,” he said.

I went back to the funeral home. I got my bottle out of my room and took a long swig. I went into Walt’s office and sat in his chair. I took another swig and another. I kept drinking until he and Daniel and Larry returned from the graveside. They were laughing as they came through the door. Walt stopped as soon as he saw my face.

“Nathan, what’s wrong?” he asked. He had his blazer draped across his arm, and he had loosened his tie. I chewed on my bottom lip, then took another sip of my rum.

“Curtis is dead. I found him at his house. He had been stabbed. I’m guessing we will be getting a call from Ruth Ann soon to pick him up.” I said.

“Dead? What do you mean dead?” Daniel asked.

“I mean dead. Shuffled off this mortal coil. Headed for the upper room. Singing in that great choir. Dead, motherfucker,” I said. I was slurring my words ever so slightly. Daniel’s bottom lip began to tremble.

Walt sat down on the love seat just outside the door of his office. He put his head in his hands and dropped his blazer on the floor. Daniel was walking around in circles.

“Dammit, man. Not Curtis. What the hell happened, Nate?” he asked. I chugged the bottle before I answered.

“I think he was fucking with the wrong chick. I’m sorry that’s derogatory. I mean he was fucking the wrong hoe,” I said. Walt got up and came into the office.

“Give me that damn bottle. You’re drunk, and I need a drink,” Walt said. I stretched across the desk and gave it to him.

I was getting drunk but not drunk enough to drag Walt into this mess. Curtis was dead because I had scared him into contacting somebody who had been at the “bible studies” with him. Had that same person who killed him also killed Watkins? I didn’t need a Magic 8-Ball to tell me all signs were pointing toward yes. I couldn’t tell Walt anything because I didn’t want him to die too. And if I had to kill someone, he needed plausible deniability. Curt was self-centered and arrogant and prissy, but he was also loyal and funny, and he didn’t deserve to die the way he did. He was a good mortician, and he was dedicated to Walt and his business. That made him family. This wasn’t about Watkins anymore. I was going to find the person that did this to him, and I was going to hurt him. It’s what I did best.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Ruth Ann called about an hour later. Daniel said he would go since I had been drinking and Walt was too upset. Once Daniel and Larry were gone, Walt came and sat across the desk from me. He put the empty bottle on the desk next to his laptop.

“Now that it’s just us, you gonna tell me what you really know,” Walt said. I rubbed my hands over my face.

“Walt...”

“Come on, Nate. This is me. We too tight for you to keep lying to me. I saw you and Curtis talking at the wake. Now he’s dead. Is it about the Watkins thing?” he asked. I got up and sat on the corner of the desk. I put my hand on Walt’s shoulder. He reached up and put his hand on my shoulder. We put our foreheads together. We sat that way for a minute before I spoke.

“I can’t drag you into this. I won’t,” I said. Walt put his hand on the back of my head and shook his head up and down vigorously.

“Nate, it’s too late for that. I’m already in this. Look, I know you can take care of yourself but ain’t no shame in knowing when to walk away,” he said.

“I gotta see this through. It’s not just about the money anymore.” I said. Walt raised his head and hugged my neck.

“You ain’t gotta do nothing but stay black and die. I don’t want to be picking out a casket for you anytime soon cousin,” he whispered in my ear.

“I hear ya,” I said. Walt let me go.

“You hear me, but you ain’t listening,” he said. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

“I’m gonna go home and lay next to my wife and hold her tight. No one is promised tomorrow. I know that better than most people. But damn, Curtis...” He let the statement hang in the air.

“I know, cuz,” I said. Walt shook his head and hurried out the door. I locked it behind him, and then I stumbled down the hall to my room. My body felt like a washcloth that had been wrung out and tossed to the floor.

I lurched through my door and collapsed across my bed. It was around seven. The thought of calling Lisa popped up in my mind, and it disappeared just as quickly. I closed my eyes and felt everything that had happened over the past few days catch up with me.

I felt an insistent pressure against the side of my head. My eyes cracked open, and I saw three men standing around my bed. They were all wearing black old style ski masks. Out of the corner of my right eye, I could see that one of the men had what appeared to be a Desert Eagle .50 caliber pressed against my temple. The other two men were at the foot of my bed. They were wearing brown blazers and white dress shirts open at the throat. The bastard with the gun was wearing a brown blazer and a bow-tie. It was a brown and tan tie with a speckled mosaic pattern. I had seen that tie before. Rev. Short's chief armor bearer had been wearing it at the wake yesterday.

"Well, you three are definitely not the salsa dancers I was dreaming about," I croaked. The one with the bow-tie spun the gun on his index finger like a cowboy and cracked me across the forehead with the grip. For a moment, the world erupted like a solar flare that blinded me. Pain spread across my face and head. I felt warm blood trickle down my face. As my vision returned, he put the gun against my temple again.

"We here for the tablet, mon. We gonna tear this room apart. Then we tear up the office. We rip the bathroom up, and then we be gon to the room where you prepare the dead. We gon mess this place up for real. Or you can just tell us where it is. Either way, we find it. You choose," he said. His accent was as thick as pancake molasses.

"Is that a Desert Eagle?" I asked. Bow-Tie didn't respond.

"I was just wondering cuz it's gonna hurt when I shove it up your ass," I said. Bow-tie shook his head in a slow, sad way. He flipped the gun again. He brought it down in a hard, quick movement. He was aiming for my mouth. I grabbed his wrist with my right hand as it was coming down. I yanked him toward me. At the same time, I sat up. My bloody forehead slammed into his face. I thought I could feel his teeth against my brow ridge. This wasn't some Hollywood action flick, and I wasn't going to get out of this unscathed. But if I was gonna bleed, then we were all gonna bleed.

My feet dangle off the foot of my bed. Usually, I tuck my legs up and sleep in the fetal position. But in my drunken state, I had fallen on my back and let my legs hang. As Bow-Tie's associates moved to help their leader, I raised my legs and caught one of them in the chin and the other one in the neck area. I punched Bow-Tie in the side of the head with my left fist. I felt his head snap to the side. I twisted his wrist with my right hand as hard I could. The gun fell out of his hand and hit the floor with a heavy clatter. I hit him again, but this time, I used a forearm/elbow strike. Bow-Tie was making a low, whistling sound like a balloon with a small hole in it. He fell to the floor. Right on top of the gun. I should have secured it, but I needed to get out of the room. I was going to die if I didn't.

I jumped off the bed and took off for the door. One of Bow-Tie's associates had gotten to his feet. He tried to tackle me, but I had a full head of steam, and he looked like he hadn't had a good meal since the Carter administration. I stomped a mudhole through him. I felt his nuts flatten against his ass as I stepped on them with my size 14's. I might have felt a rib snap too, but I wasn't sure. I didn't bother trying to open the door. I threw my weight against it. The press board split open. Splinters and paper stuck to my bloodstained face.

Something slammed into me from behind as I fell through the door into the hallway. I felt a strong, wiry arm try to snake its way around my neck. I did a push up with one of the masked fuckers on my back and got to my feet with him stuck to me. I took a few steps backward, bounced off the wall, and then threw my body back against the same wall. I heard the spider monkey on my back cry out as the back of his head connected with the wall and the back of my head connected with his mouth. Wetness began to ooze across my neck, and I felt the arm around my neck go slack. I rolled him over my shoulder and dumped his carcass on the floor. I was breathing like I had emphysema. I turned to run toward the door at the end of the hall that led to the garage and the prep room, and the other associate launched himself at me with his arms outstretched like he thought he was a superhero about to take flight. He looked like he weighed 160lbs with rocks in his pockets. I caught him and let his momentum turn both our bodies. I hurled him at the opposite wall, and he hit it like a bug smacking into a windshield, then crumpled to the floor.

“ENOUGH!” a voice that sounded like Mufasa with a mouth full of broken teeth said. I faced the voice. It was Bow-Tie. He had his gun again.

“The tablet now. Or I swear to every god there might be I’m going to fill your face with bullets,” he said. Well, at least, that’s what I think he said. Blood was pouring out of his mouth. It had soaked his mask. The mask was bulging on the left side where I had clocked him. He seemed unsteady on his feet, but his gun hand was steady, his arm ramrod straight. And the barrel of that big Desert Eagle was pointing right at me. I licked my lips. Tasted blood. Felt the rage blossom again.

“The fucking tablet!” Bow-Tie groaned. His mouth must have been killing him, but he was holding it in as best he could. He was too far away for me get the drop on him. I had a choice. Try something and get killed or give up the tablet and live to fight another day and track this motherfucker down. One of the other guys was back on his feet. Without hesitation, he slammed his fist into my side. As kidney shots go, it wasn’t a bad one. I think he expected me to fall to the ground in agony. I just grabbed my side and let out a low sigh.

Now the other one was on his feet as well. These boys were tough. His mask was twisted to the side. He adjusted it with some effort. Once the eye-holes were in the correct place again, he hit me in the back of the head. I don’t know what he hit me with, but I don’t think it was just his fist. The pain was a burning that ignited my whole head and neck and jumped to my shoulder for some reason. I staggered but I didn’t go down. I probably should have, but I wasn’t going to give them the satisfaction just yet. As associate number 1 was loaded up to hit me again, associate number 2 peered past Bow-Tie.

“Isn’t that it on the foot locker?” he asked. His voice was drenched in incredulity.

Bow-Tie didn’t take his eyes off me, but he did step backward. He reached blindly with his right hand and groped the top of my foot locker. When my door was opened, it sat behind it. His hand landed on the tablet. He picked it up and glanced at it for the briefest of moments.

“Hapa,” he said as he tossed the tablet to one of the associates. I was getting fuzzy on who was who. He caught it deftly. He looked at it for a second before he raised it above his head and broke it across his knee. Bits of

plastic and glass flew through the air as he snapped it in two like a Popsicle stick. He dropped the pieces to the floor and then he stomped on the two halves for good measure.

“I just wanted you to hold it. We were supposed to retrieve that Tablet,” Bow-Tie said. His voice dripped with disdain. His associate shrugged his shoulders and held his hands out in a gesture of capitulation. Bow-Tie let out a long, tired sigh.

“Fucking amateurs,” I whispered to no one. Bow-Tie stepped out of the room. He was still pointing his gun at me. I tried to send him telepathic messages to come closer. Just a few more feet and he would be in my fighting radius.

“Grab his arms,” he said. He sounded like he was talking through cotton. The other two happily complied. The one who had broken the tablet seemed happy to have something to do. They took hold of my arms and pushed me back against the wall. The back of my neck felt like I had been pissed on and my head was spinning, so I didn’t put up much of a fight. They stretched my hands out like I was on a cross and held them against the wall.

“Where I come from, there are not many Christians. But when the missionaries come, they can’t stop talking about Jesus and how he was crucified for our sins, and if I believe in him my sins be forgiven. I became Christian, you know? I have a lot of sins,” he said. He closed his right eye and moved the gun slightly. He was aiming for my left hand.

“You want to be Christ-like? I’m a make you Christ-like.”

“If you gonna shoot me then fucking shoot me cuz I can’t listen to one more minute of your mumble mouth bullshit,” I said. A bullet to the hand was going to suck, but I was betting this psycho would want to inspect his work. He would get nice and close. They were holding my hands, but my feet were still free.

“Come on, you goonie goo goo looking son of a bitch,” I said before spitting a globule of blood and saliva on the floor.

“Okay,” he said.

A shot rang out, but I didn’t feel any pain. The associate holding my left arm fell to the ground and clutched at his left leg. He was howling like a newborn. Blood seeped between his fingers and soaked his pants. Bow-Tie

grabbed me by my collar and positioned me in front of him. Standing, I was too tall for him to put his gun against my head so he jabbed it in my side. The other associate was behind him near the door at the end of the hall.

“Which one should I shoot next, Nate? The bow-tie or the one that can’t keep his mask on straight?” Skunk said in that low, gravelly whisper of a voice.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Skunk held his still smoking .38 out in front of him casually like he was inspecting it. He was standing directly under one of the fluorescent lights in the hallway. The ultra-white light gave his rugged countenance a ghastly appearance. He was wearing a leather jacket, white t-shirt, and blue jeans. The white streak in his long, black hair seemed to glow. He had a few new scars but other than that, he looked like his old, crazy, cat-loving self to me. The way Bow-Tie was breathing, he must have looked like the Devil. Skunk took a step forward.

Bow-Tie pulled me backward.

Skunk took another step forward.

Bow-Tie pulled me backward. At this rate, we were going to run out of hallway.

Skunk was standing over Bow-Tie's howling associate. Once he noticed Skunk, he stopped howling.

"So which one, Nate? I say Bow-Tie. He seem to be the boss. Let's just cut the head off this snake and be done with it," he said.

"He means it. I once saw him beat a man with a sock full of wood screws over a game of Pac-Man, so I'm pretty sure he won't hesitate to kill your ass, Kunta Kinte," I said as loud as I could.

"Shut up! How bout we trade, huh? Your friend for my friend," Bow-Tie said. Skunk cocked his head to the side and frowned.

"You mean Mr. Bleeding here?" he said. Bow-Tie's associate was lying on his side with his hand over the gunshot in his leg. Skunk cocked his head to the side and studied Bow-Tie and his other associate for a second. Without losing eye contact, he took the heel of his right cowboy boot and slowly ground it into the man's hand and, by default, the wound in his leg. Mr. Bleeding started howling again.

"I ain't trading shit. I'm gonna kill you, then I'm gonna kill that lil bitch hiding behind you, then this motherfucker on the floor. I think me and Nate can figure out what to do with the bodies. We already at a damn funeral

home,” he said, and I knew he was completely serious. Skunk didn’t make idle threats. Bow-Tie was wheezing in my ear. With each breath, it sounded like something moist was crawling out of his chest.

“Watch your head, Nate,” Skunk said. Bow-Tie was close to hyperventilating.

He pushed me hard. In my dizzy state, that was like pushing over a statue. I tripped over my own feet and felt myself falling forward. Twisted Mask tore open the door to the garage and ran. Bow-Tie was right behind him. Skunk fired his .38. It sounded like a Howitzer in the tight confines of the hallway. As I fell, I heard someone cry out in pain. Skunk caught me before I hit the ground. For such a slim man, he was unbelievably strong. He held me in his left arm while he tried to fire with the gun in his right. Mr. Bleeding scurried out the door like an injured rat. Skunk gave up trying to shoot them and put both arms around me. He guided us to the ground. I heard the unmistakable click-clack of the garage door being raised.

“I got ya, hoss. I got ya,” I heard him say. The world went black.

I awoke with a burning sensation in my throat. I gagged, spit, and then gagged again. I felt a strong hand on my neck. I opened my eyes, and Skunk was squatting next to me waving what looked like a tube of lip balm in front of my face. I pushed it away and spat again. My head was aching like a gnome was trying to dig his way out of my skull with a dull pick axe.

“Get that out of my face, man. It smell like zombie breath,” I mumbled. Skunk stood and tossed the tube in the wastebasket near the entrance to my room. He wiped his hands on his pants and then ran a hand through his hair.

“I found them smelling salts in Walt’s desk. I didn’t know if they were gonna work. The directions showed a white man with a duck ass hairdo. Guess you doing all right. You still a smartass,” Skunk said. I rolled to my side and pushed myself up off the floor. The world started to spin, but I braced myself with the wall and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, I surveyed the damage. My door was demolished. Sections of it were still hanging from the hinges, but most of it was on the ground in a million pieces. There was blood on the dark green carpet and two big blood stains about the width of a child’s palm print on each wall. I started down the hall

toward the lobby, still bracing myself with the wall. The double glass doors were still intact, but there was a hole where the lock used to be.

“They must have popped the lock out. They didn’t want to break the glass and risk waking you up. That’s how I would have done it too,” I heard Skunk say from behind me. I turned and looked back down the hall. The light caught a few bullet holes in the door at the end of the hall and one in the wall. I pointed toward the holes.

“You losing your aim,” I said. Skunk made a noise that sounded like “hmpf.”

“I meant to shoot that one in the leg just like I meant to miss the ones that ran. I ain’t gonna kill somebody in your cousin’s place unless you say it’s okay. But why didn’t you cap them boys? You didn’t get rid of your piece, did you?” he said. I had to admit I admired Skunk’s dedication to etiquette. It was a twisted version of what we in the South called good home training. Don’t ask for something to eat at the neighbor’s house. Always say sir and ma’am and don’t murder anyone in your friend’s home unless they give you permission.

I slipped past him and lurched back down the hall and went to the bathroom. The face staring back at me from the mirror was wearing what the old pro wrestling announcers would have called a crimson mask. The wound in my forehead had started to clot. There was a wet scab beginning to form there. It wasn’t as bad as the amount of blood would have suggested.

I touched the back of my head. The wound there was still bleeding. I probed it gently. It felt like I had grown a pussy. That one might need stitches. I washed my face and cleaned the gore out of my eyes. Wiped my face with paper towels then pressed a wad of them against the wound in the back. That hurt like a son of a whore but I had to stop the bleeding. I left the bathroom and went out into the hall. Skunk was gone. I went to the lobby. He was sitting on one of the love seats with a bottle in his lap.

“I couldn’t get to my gun. You still drinking that nasty Scotch?” I asked.

“Scotch ain’t nasty,” he said. To prove his point, he took a sip.

“No, not all Scotch is nasty, but that shit you drink taste like lion piss,” I said. Skunk took another sip.

“I’m wondering why you know what lion piss taste like,” Skunk said in that low, laconic way that made you wonder if he was joking or not.

My throat was burning, my head was aching, and my cousin’s place was a mess, but I was alive. Thanks in no small part to the outlaw sitting on a love seat a few feet away from me. I pulled the paper towels from the vagina on the back of my head and looked at them. It was like someone had dipped them in a can of barn paint. I balled them up and tossed them in the trash. I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket.

“What you doing?” Skunk asked.

“I gotta call Walt,” I said. Skunk took another sip.

“In a minute. Them boys that was here. They part of what you was telling me about on the phone?” he asked. I sat down on the opposite couch. I perched myself on the edge so I wouldn’t get any blood on the backrest.

“Let me tell you what’s going down,” I said.

I told him the whole story. Watkins, Lisa, Curtis, the Rev. and Mrs. Short and the tablet. Skunk took another sip, then put the bottle on the floor between his feet.

“So what you think was on that, whatcha call it, tablet that had them boys ready to pop you?” he asked. I lightly touched the back of my head. The bleeding had stopped, but I still might need stitches. I took a deep breath.

“I think Watkins was having sex parties at his house. Orgies. I think he was recording the parties and using them recordings to blackmail some people. I told you what he did to his own daughter. I bet whoever killed him was somebody at them parties and they was on that tablet. Curtis was at them parties too, and I think his dumb ass confronted somebody who was also at them parties. Somebody he knew had a reason to kill Watkins. Whatever went down, that person killed Curtis too. That preacher, Short? Them was his boys that came here. They was wearing masks but they still had on their Temple clothes. So he in it, too. I don’t know if he the one who killed Watkins and Curtis, but I bet his ass knows who did,” I said. Saying what had been swirling around in my head was kind of a relief. I had been carrying all this around since I found the hidden cameras in Watkins’ house.

“What you gonna do? Besides calling Walt,” Skunk said.

“Well, after I do that, I’m going to clean up and see about giving myself some stitches. We got all the same equipment in the back they got at the emergency room. Then I’m gonna pick up the pieces of that tablet and see if my friend Raheem can pull something off the memory card,” I said. Skunk raised his eyebrows.

“Apparently, them boys ain’t that computer savvy. That tablet probably got a memory card or a hard drive that you can still access. I might have to get Raheem to take a look at it.” I said. I hadn’t wanted to pull Raheem into this just like I had wanted to avoid involving Walt. I was really batting a thousand on the whole keeping my friends and family out of this clusterfuck thing.

“You planning on going to see this preacher?” Skunk asked. His eyes were wild like a rabid dog. He wasn’t done spilling blood. Not by a long shot. That was the problem sometimes. Once you let him off his lead, it was hard to get him back on a leash.

“Maybe. I wanna see what’s on that tablet first. Might be enough to get the state boys interested.”

Skunk snorted.

“If that preacher loaded like you say, he probably connected. Them state boys ain’t gonna do shit,” he said.

“Well, if they don’t, I can always tell Shade. I got the feeling he would love to get his hands on the person that fucked up his savings and loan plan with Watkins,” I said. Skunk grunted.

“Shade get his hands on them, they gonna wish the cops had took them in.” I got up off the couch and rolled my head side to side. The world remained stationary. I’d have a headache for a few days, but I would be functional. I’d suffered far worse injuries in the Corps.

“When Walt get here, he gonna call the cops. Then I gotta go see a friend. I got something that belongs to her. You got a place to crash for the night? Tomorrow we go see Raheem and then we just take it from there,” I said. Skunk stood, as well.

“Walt ain’t gotta be afraid of me. You my brother which makes him my family, too,” he said.

“Walt ain’t afraid of you,” I lied. Skunk grunted again.

“I’ll be over in Mathews. I got a friend, too. She ain’t expecting me, but she’ll be glad I came,” he said. Was that a joke? I was going to assume it was.

“All right. Skunk, th-” I started to say.

“Don’t say thank you. We been through too much for that bullshit. Hit me up in the morning. Enjoy that pussy tonight,” he said.

“Why you think I’m getting some tonight?” I asked. Skunk picked up his bottle.

“Well, you almost died. Nothing makes me feel more alive after that than some good hot pussy that would melt Superman’s dick,” he said. With that piece of homespun wisdom, he left. A few minutes later, I heard his LTD roar out of the gravel-covered parking lot. I went in the back and grabbed some suture thread an S-shaped needle and a handheld mirror Walt kept in the dressing room and went to work on the orifice on the back of my head. The wound looked worse than I had imagined in the reflection from the bathroom mirror that was in turn reflected into the handheld one.

When I was done, I buzzed Walt. He must have traveled at light speed because the next thing I knew he was standing in the lobby. He was wearing a robe and plaid lounge pants and a pair of loafers. The clock on the wall said it was 1 a.m. He walked down the hall to check out the scene near my room. He came back and put a hand on my arm.

“You all right? What the hell happened?” he asked.

“Some guys broke in. I think they was looking for embalming fluid. They jumped me in my room. They had a gun, but I had one of my moments, and I fought them off. We did fuck my door up though, and we gonna have to fix the lock on the front door,” I said. Drug addicts will use embalming fluid and mix it with PCP to make “wet.” The story had sounded more plausible in my head. Walt removed his hand and crossed his arms over his ample belly.

“Nathan, I was valedictorian of my high school class. I graduated Magna Cum Laude from John Tyler University. I scored 1350 on my SATs. I’ve run my own business for seventeen years. So, you know I’m far from stupid. Stop lying to me like I’m in the 11th grade studying coloring books. This ain’t got nothing to do with any wet and everything to do with Esau Watkins,” he said. I didn’t say anything. I had my gym bag in my hand. The pieces of the tablet were in there along with Lisa’s bible.

“Call Laurent and the boys. Tell them what I told you. I gotta go,” I said. I headed for the door.

“Nathan, this shit done got way out of hand. There’s bullet holes in the wall. There’s blood everywhere. And you look like you went fifteen rounds with a sledgehammer. What if we had a body in the prep room and they did something to it? And Curtis is dead! He is on a slab at the medical examiners getting his rib cage cracked open because of this Watkins shit. Nathan, I love you. You know that, but... I think maybe you should leave. Leave and don’t come back. At least not until it’s over. I’ve worked too hard for this. I built this brick by brick while you was traveling the world. It’s all I got, Nathan,” he said. His voice broke when he said my full name. The pain from the beating I had taken tonight was nothing compared to hearing those words come from Walt. Walt had always been in my corner. When everyone else in town thought I was crazy and turned their backs on me, Walt gave me a place to lay my head. He gave me a job even as rumors swirled around me about the disappearance of Steven Vandekellum. My chest ached like someone had cut my heart out with a butter knife. If he was giving up on me, what the hell was I going to do now?

Finish it. That was all that was left. See it through to the fucking end.

“You right, Walt. I won’t come back until it’s done. Either I’ll walk through the front door or you’ll be rolling me in through the back,” I said. I turned and stepped out into the cool night air.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The voice was screaming in my head. It was saying I had really fucked up this time. I had dragged Walt into the swirling, belching sinkhole of my life again. I had gotten Curtis killed. This shit was out of control. I had no comeback for the voice this time, so I just turned the radio up as high as it would go and then I screamed. I screamed until my chest burned and my stomach muscles began to cramp. I screamed until my nose began to bleed. I stomped on the gas and shifted Betty into fifth gear. She leaped forward like a racehorse. The stars above looked like fireworks as the speedometer crept toward 100 mph.

I slammed on the brakes and downshifted at the same time. Betty fishtailed then did a 360 degree turn. There was no one on the road but me. I sat there with the engine idling.

“This ain’t done. I’m not done. They can’t just come in my fucking house and think that it’s over. It ain’t fucking over. NOTHING IS FUCKING OVER!” I screamed. Smoke from the tires curled around Betty’s hood and rear fenders. I took long, slow breaths. The night was as quiet as a monastery. Not even the crickets were playing their one note symphony. My heart eased into a nice rhythm. It went from jackhammer to bass drum.

I put Betty in gear and drove on.

I banged on the door to Lisa’s hotel room with my bloody left hand. The knuckles left crescent moon shaped stains on the polyurethane covered surface. After about a minute, she snatched the door open. She was wearing a black teddy, and her hair was tied up in a wild ponytail.

“What the fuck do you want?” she said.

“Can I come in? I really need to come in,” I said. She squinted, and I could tell she was taking a closer look at my face.

“Oh, shit, what happened to you?”

“Just let me in,” I said. She stepped aside and closed the door behind me. I sat in the chair near the nightstand.

“I think your dad was blackmailing somebody. I think that person killed him. My co-worker Curtis Sampson knew the person your dad was blackmailing, and I think they had some kind of confrontation. Curtis... Curtis is dead,” I said. Lisa sat on the bed with her hand over her mouth.

“Rev. Thomas Short sent some guys to rough me up tonight because I told Curtis I had found a tablet that was connected to some hidden cameras at your dad’s house. Somehow they got that info and paid me a visit. They smashed that shit, but I know a guy who might be able to get some info off of it. They came to the funeral home. They came to my cousin’s place and fucked it up. I think I got Curtis killed. I think your dad was having orgies at his house. I figured out Curtis had been to the parties. I know I’m rambling. My head is killing me. I got your bible,” I said. I got up and handed her the carrying case. She cradled it in her arms.

“Jesus, Nathan come here. Come here,” she said. She grabbed my hand and pulled me down next to her on the bed. She unzipped the case and pulled out the bible. Her fingers traced the gold lettering on the cover.

“My grandma was the sweetest person I ever knew. But man was she a Jesus freak! I remember seeing her carrying this thing around in this case like it was surgically attached to her hand,” Lisa said. A smile appeared on her face like a magic trick. The gearwheels in my head started to lock into place. I snatched the carrying case from her lap. I stood up and started pacing around the room as I started twisting it in my hands like a washcloth.

“What the fuck, Nathan?” she yelled

I had searched the bible but I hadn’t searched the case. I ran my fingers along its sides and edges. The old leather was as supple and soft as a rich man’s hands. The inside of the case had pockets for pencils or pens and a mini-note pad. I ripped them out of their homes and let them fall to the floor. I slipped my fingers along the interior spine. Halfway down, my fingertips brushed something hard and rectangular. I inspected the seam at the center of the case. There was tight black stitching above the rectangle and below it. I pushed the rectangle from the left side with my thumb. A flat black plastic thumb drive popped out the right side.

“Do you have a laptop?” I asked Lisa.

“What? Yeah, I got one. I brought it with me for work. Why?” she asked.

“I need to see what happens at a bible study,” I said. She was mystified until I showed her the thumb drive. There was a distinct possibility that I was totally fucking wrong. The external drive might be holding relatively innocent information. Like the menu for the next Temple anniversary dinner. Maybe Watkins had transferred all his sermons to a data file. I didn’t think that was the case though. A sleaze ball like Watkins wouldn’t trust his most powerful piece of leverage to the hard drive of a tablet. He’d back up those files. But not on the cloud. Old school, remember. He would want something tangible. An actual piece of equipment he could hide under his pillow or in the lining of his bible carrying case. Easy access in case he needed a piece of property rezoned in a hurry.

Lisa got her laptop out and sat on the bed. I sat next to her and plugged the drive into the USB port.

“I thought you said he had a tablet?” she said.

“Yeah, I found it in a vent in the floor,” I said.

“Well, he wasn’t using that thumb drive with it. Tablets are not compatible with thumb drives,”

“Could he have used the tablet to record the video, then transferred the files to the thumb drive?” Now it was her turn to look at me like you would look at a bear that started reciting Shakespeare.

“I was around some fairly fancy shit in the Corps sometimes,” I said.

“Yeah, he could have, but I doubt he set it up himself,” she said.

“It wouldn’t have been hard for him to get some tech-head kid from his congregation to do it, he just wouldn’t have said what it really was for,” I said. I dragged the mouse over to the USB drive icon and clicked on it. A screen popped up with about fifteen different files.

“All right, all of these are video files,” Lisa said.

“We don’t need to look at every file. If I’m right and it’s somebody from the parties, we can just go to the most recent file and see if something happened at the last party,” I said.

I clicked on the last file on the screen. The video was in black and white. The screen was divided into four sub-screens. One showed the living room where four air mattresses were laid out haphazardly. The other screen was in

the sun room where a few more air mattresses were set up along with what I could only assume were bowls full of condoms and lube.

The other two screens were in the upstairs bedrooms. There were about twenty people in the house. I recognized Esau and Curtis right away. I saw a few other locals that I knew. John Denton and his wife Donna. John was the current chairman of the board of supervisors. There was Saul Williams. Saul was a retired oil exec who owned an estate on the North River that he called Wild Plains. A beautiful Asian woman was standing near him. I saw Lamar Young who owned a construction firm. I didn't know the woman standing between him and Esau, but she wasn't his wife. Esau was gesturing to the air mattresses and the bowls and laughing. There was no audio on the video, but I could tell by the way his mouth was opened wide he was braying. Or maybe he was yawning.

"I am going to go downstairs and smoke a cigarette. I don't want to see him get naked," Lisa said. She threw on a pair of sweats and left the room before I could say a word.

When I turned back to the screen, I was greeted with the beautiful sight of Angeline Short taking off her blouse. She was standing in one of Esau's bedrooms. Rev. Short entered the frame and reached out and squeezed her breasts. He was still fully dressed. Angeline slipped out of her skirt and got on all fours on the bed. A pale figure entered the scene. He was already fully nude and tumescent. He entered Angeline and began thrusting forcefully. Rutting was a more apt description. There was something desperate and animalistic about what they were doing. Rev. Short was standing there with his right hand down his pants. It was moving furiously. The pale figure turned to look back at Rev. Short. I could see his face clearly.

"Motherfucker," I whispered. The pale man was a member of our esteemed Queens County Sheriff's Department. For a moment, my whole body went numb. I thought I was having a goddamn stroke. Once that passed, something started nagging me. Something that irritated me like a kernel of corn stuck between my teeth or a splinter in my hand. It had to do with seeing Angeline in Esau's house

As I watched her heavenly body twist and buck on Lisa's computer screen, I tried to make the connection. What was it about seeing her in that

house that was bugging me? It wasn't the fact she was getting her guts rearranged by a member of the police department while her husband watched. I've tagged in and out of my share of threesomes. I closed my eyes. My thoughts appeared in my brain like they were written on flash cards.

Esau's house.

Angeline in Esau's house.

In his bedroom.

In his house in his bedroom with her husband and a deputy.

Esau's house has seven rooms.

Esau was shot in his living room.

When it finally hit me, every piece of the puzzle fell into place.

I was still sitting there stunned when Lisa came back to the room.

"You look like you saw a damn ghost," she said.

"A ghost would have been less shocking," I said. She sat behind me on the bed.

"What was on the tape, Nate?" she asked. I told her what I had seen. She leaned back against the headboard. She laughed long and hard. It was a full rich sound that made me feel warm in places I wouldn't be able to use tonight. But it was still good to hear her laugh.

"In the business we have a special word for that," she said after her laughter subsided. I pushed myself up and leaned against the headboard, too. Lisa leaned her head against my shoulder.

"Does shit usually get this crazy around you?" she asked. I put my arm around her, and she repositioned herself against my chest. It felt good. Like she belonged there. "Sometimes. Usually, there's a conservative ninja leprechaun involved." She chuckled with her mouth against my arm.

"So what you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna go to Laurent first thing in the morning. He needs to see this. Then, if he doesn't call in the State Police right then and there, I'll call them myself. I wanna see his face when he sees one of his deputies at this fucking party. No pun intended," I said.

"Then?" she asked.

“Guess I’ll come by here and tell you goodbye. I’d love to give you eight the hard way tonight but my head is still fuzzy,” I said.

“Eight? That’s being a little generous,” she said. I craned my neck down to look at her. She was smiling.

“I’m fucking with you,” she said.

“Not tonight you ain’t. And eight was me being modest,” I said as I closed my eyes.

As I drifted off to sleep I felt like for the first time since I got involved in this clusterfuck I was ahead of the game. I knew who had murdered Reverend Esau Watkins. I also knew why they had done it. And I also knew who had tried to help them cover it up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The morning sun slipped into the room. My eyes opened, and I saw Lisa had curled up on her side. I had slept with my back against the headboard all night. My spine felt like someone had shoved white-hot copper wires through all the vertebra up to my skull. I got up and stretched. I heard a snap, a crackle, and a pop. I still had on my clothes, including my boots. I grabbed the thumb drive and my jacket. I bent down and kissed Lisa on the cheek.

“Mmmm, you going?” she mumbled.

“Yeah. Gonna go see Laurent. What time is your flight?”

“Four, but I’m leaving here round two,” she said. I looked at my cell phone. It was 8am.

“I’ll be back before then,” I said. I kissed her on the cheek again.

“Well, come as soon as you can. I can’t be getting on the plane smelling like country boy,” she said. She turned over and pulled the blanket up over her head. I left the hotel room and headed for my truck. The voice spoke up. It was telling me it was hubris to show Laurent the video clip. It was saying I should go straight to the State Troopers. That I should give them the thumb drive and tell them my suspicions. It was saying that I just wanted to rub his face in it. And that was true. I did want to rub his face in it. I wanted to see him choke on that goddamned cigar.

I drove to the sheriff’s department feeling like a fighter who had been getting rocked all night who finally gets a chance to land that knockout punch. That punch that you know is gonna put your opponent on his ass as soon as you throw it. That punch that you are so sure is gonna connect that after you throw it you don’t even watch the ref count to ten.

I parked Betty in front of the sheriff’s office. I hopped out, and I stomped up the steps. Ruth Ann was behind the mesh window as usual. I didn’t see anyone else in the lobby area. I went right to the window and banged on the screen.

“Lord, Nate, you scared me! Them boys really did a number on you last night. You come to give your statement?” she asked.

“Nope. But I do need to see Laurent right now. And I don’t wanna hear he’s in a meeting. It’s important, Ruth Ann,” I said. She got up and came to the window.

“Just what is this about, Nate?” she said. Her eyes had narrowed.

“Tell Laurent I need to see him or the next person walking through that door is gonna be a special investigator from the State Police,” I said. The mention of the State Police made her face go white under her pancake makeup.

“I’ll try him,” she said. She turned and picked up the phone on her desk. A few seconds passed before she turned around.

“Go on in,” she said.

I strode toward Laurent’s office. I passed Les Drayton. He was eating a cheeseburger at his desk. He nearly did a spit take when he saw me walk past him. I opened Laurent’s office door. I didn’t even bother knocking. Laurent was sitting at his desk with a fresh stogie clamped between his lips. The tip glowed red as he inhaled.

“Nate. I was just about to call you. Sit down,” he said.

“Laurent, I got something you need to see,” I said.

“Sit, Nathan,” he said. I sat in the metal office chair that was in front of his desk. There was a second one in the corner. Laurent took the cigar out of his mouth and knocked some of the ash off into an iron ashtray molded into the shape of a tractor tire.

“Laurent, you got a laptop?” I asked.

“Whatever you got can wait,” he said.

“Laurent, trust me when I tell you that you have never been more wrong about anything in your life,” I said. Laurent put the cigar back in his maw.

“Nate, you gonna tell me everything you know about Esau Watkins, or I’m gonna have you arrested for obstruction of justice,” he said. I blinked my eyes hard.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I asked. Laurent leaned forward.

“I’m talking about Esau Watkins, murdered. I’m talking about Curtis Sampson, murdered. I’m talking about a break-in at your cousin’s business. We haven’t had this much crime in this county since Cornwallis was sailing up the York River, and you smack dab in the middle of it. Now, you gonna tell me what you know, and you ain’t gonna leave out a goddamned thing, or I swear, Nathan, I put you so deep in the Regional Jail you grandchildren will have to post your bail,” he said. Normally, my head would be splitting and my heart would be close to bursting. But not today. His threats no longer carried any weight. He might as well have been a five-year-old threatening to hold his breath.

“Tell you what, Sheriff. You get that laptop and take a look at what I got on this here thumb drive, and I think it can explain things better than I ever could,” I said. Laurent puffed two or three times. The smoke was an azure cloud that partially obscured his doughy features.

“Let’s see what you got. And you better not be jerking my chain,” he said.

“Oh, there’s some jerking all right, it just ain’t nobody’s chain,” I mumbled. Laurent swiveled to his right and grabbed a scarred and weathered laptop sitting on the side of his desk. It was so old I wondered if you had to wind it up to get it to run. I went around to the other side of the desk and put the external drive into the USB port. When the screen came up with the files on it, I went straight to the last file. I clicked on it and fast forwarded to the part he needed to see.

At first, Laurent stared at the screen with a deadpan expression on his face. That only lasted a few seconds. His face started to turn red from the bottom up like a cartoon character channeling a thermometer.

“What in the hell?” he said. His words were dry husk that fell over his lips. I bent down and whispered in his ear.

“Yeah, you see that? That’s Sam Dean plowing Angeline Short while Rev. Short plays with his privates at a sex party hosted by the great and terrible Esau Watkins. Your deputy on tape at a fuckfest in the house of a murder victim. That’s your boy, Laurent. You know you done, right? Once the State Police get a hold of this, you’ll be lucky if someone elects you to a 4H garden committee. I can’t wait to see you in a blue vest working as a greeter at the door of some big ass grocery store,” I straightened up and put my hand on his shoulder.

“But wait, there’s more,” I said. Deep inside, I knew I was throwing the karma scales out of balance, but I didn’t care. I had lived long enough to see this bastard squirm. We both watched as Rev. Short entered the frame and dropped to his knees. I started yelling at Laurent. I didn’t mean to. I just couldn’t help myself. Once it started, I couldn’t stop it.

“You see that shit? That’s gonna be your legacy, Laurent! Not the pharmacy robbery you stopped or the fugitive bank robber you caught in Old Neck Woods. That right there will be all that anybody remembers when they say, Sheriff Laurent. Your deputy pounding a minister’s wife, then the minister licking his cum off his wife’s rock-solid ass. I have a friend in the adult industry who says it’s called cuckolding. I call it the end of this shit show you call a department.”

A gurgling sound came out of Laurent. He clutched his chest and bit down on his cigar. The lit end fell to the desk. It seemed like I was watching it in slow motion. Laurent’s face was slick with sweat and red as a baboon’s ass. He slid out of his chair and sprawled across the floor. I heard footsteps running toward the office. At the same time, I heard a door slam. Les Drayton came running into the office.

“Call the ambulance!” I yelled at him. He grabbed his cell phone off his belt and dialed. I ripped Laurent’s shirt open and checked for a pulse. His badge and ribbons scattered across the floor. I had to squeeze my fingers under his thick, jowly chin. There was nothing there. I opened his mouth and removed the soggy butt of his cigar. I cleared his airway and began giving him CPR. His breath smelled like an outhouse full of tobacco and shit. I put my mouth on his and forced air down his throat. I nearly gagged, but I gave him two powerful breaths and began compressions.

“Come on, you fat fuck! Breathe! You don’t get to die! Not yet!” I said between compressions.

My arms were burning by the time the volunteer boys arrived. They could have stayed home. William Jefferson Laurent had gone to that great police station in the sky. They put him on a stretcher and rolled him out of the police station. Les was hugging Ruth Ann as she cried into his chest. Sandy showed up as they were loading him into the back of the ambulance. She was fighting her tears with a flinty determination that was making a vein near her hairline undulate like a serpent. They had worked on him for fifteen

minutes before they decided to take him to the hospital. I caught the eyes of the two boys that had answered the call. They knew what I knew, but Laurent was the sheriff. They wanted a man with M.D at the end of his name to pronounce him.

Between tagging the first responders in and them taking Laurent out, I had a few seconds to myself in his office. I grabbed the thumb drive and put it in my pocket. I stepped out of the office and watched as they rolled Laurent past the desks he had walked by for decades. I saw them wheel him through the door he had entered every day since I had been a toddler playing in the dirt in front of my parents' trailer.

I touched the black letters on the frosted glass panel in the door to his office. Could they even remove those letters or would they have to get a whole new door? I wondered if Laurent would see my parents if there was indeed something beyond this veil of tears. I wondered would he apologize? Would Steven Vandekellum greet him like he greeted me in my dreams? With his face flayed wide open by a fusillade of slugs.

“What were you doing to him, you bastard?” Sandra growled at me. She was standing close enough to give me a peck on the cheek. Her blue eyes seemed to give off sparks. I could smell her bath soap. It was a neutral scent. Neither overly masculine nor overly floral and feminine.

“Sandy, I wasn't doing anything to him. I was talking to him about my parents' case. I had a tip that Steven Vandekellum had been seen,” I lied. Lying was terrifyingly easy for me. Years in the military had taught me how to compartmentalize the truth. The truth was whatever my commander told me it was.

“You were arguing with him! You got so loud I thought Victor was going to break the door down!” Les Drayton said. He had a high-pitched voice like a teenaged girl.

“Victor was here?” I asked. Les squeezed Ruth Ann and nodded his balding head.

“Yes! He had his ear against the door. I wish...I wish he had gone in there and slapped some cuffs on you!” Les yelled. Yelling only made his voice go higher.

“I’m going to the hospital. Les take Nate’s statement then, call Sam and see if he can come in. And find Victor. Nate, you better hope he makes it. Because if he doesn’t, you could be staring down the road at a manslaughter charge,” Sandy said. She was glaring at me so hard I thought she might draw her gun. She put her gray peaked Smokey the Bear hat on and stomped out of the station. Ruth Ann pushed herself away from Les and wiped her eyes.

“Sit-sit-sit down, Nate, so I can take your statement,” Les said.

“Fucking nigger killed him,” Ruth Ann muttered as she headed for her desk. Les trembled like he had been slapped. I’d like to say I was surprised, but I wasn’t.

“Oh, that’s how it is, Ruth Ann? Was I a nigger when I changed your tire in the snow that time? Or when I found you crying because your grandson was going to rehab for the fifth time?” I yelled after her as she returned to her desk.

“I-I need your statement, Nate,” Les said. I crossed the room in two wide steps. I stared down at Les. His ears were turning red. His forehead was shiny with sweat.

“I came to discuss a possible sighting of Steven Vandekellum with Sheriff Laurent. The conversation became heated. Sheriff Laurent clutched his chest after suffering an apparent cardiac event. I administered CPR for twenty fucking minutes until the EMT’s arrived. Now I’m leaving, Les. Is that okay with you?” I asked. Les gulped, then nodded curtly.

I wandered out of the station. Across the street, a few well-dressed lawyers milled around the courthouse. To my left, I could still hear the sirens of the ambulance screeching as they took Courthouse Rd. back to Rt. 17 and then cut up through Esco Lane to take Laurent to Reed Regional Medical Center in Mechanicsville. To my right, I could see housewives and househusbands trundling back and forth across the Sav-More grocery store parking lot. The air was crisp and the sun was a muted flame in the sky. I hurried to my truck and quickly climbed into the cab.

I thought about what Sandra had said. There wasn’t much chance of my being convicted of anything once they did an autopsy on Laurent and saw that his heart looked like a piece of chicken gristle. I mean, he did smoke

fifteen cigars a day. He also wasn't exactly a walking billboard for physical fitness.

I put my head in my hands. I needed to get away from the sheriff's office. I would turn over the evidence, but first I needed some time to decompress. My skin felt prickly. I could still taste the remnants of Laurent's cigar in my mouth. I couldn't go back to Walt's, and none of the local bars were open yet. I started up Betty and pulled onto Courthouse Rd. I turned right and headed for Gloucester. I'd go say goodbye to Lisa and push away the memories of the last few days as I pushed my way inside her. Maybe if we fucked hard enough and long enough I could forget the faces of the people who had died because of me. Either by my hand or by my actions.

Twenty-five minutes later I was walking through the lobby of the Hampton Inn. As I headed to the elevator, Lashawnda called out to me.

"Nate, you looking for your friend?" she asked. I stopped. The bottom dropped out of my belly. I turned to face her.

"Yeah, actually I was. She didn't check out already, did she?" Lashawnda shook her head and then motioned for me to come to the desk.

"I don't think so. I mean, I ain't trying to put her business out there like that, but a cop came and asked me to have her come down to the lobby. Then they left together," she said. My heart became a chunk of granite in my chest. I felt the pulse of my blood slow.

"A cop came and got her? Was it a Queen County cop?" I asked. My throat was waxy, and my tongue felt like a piece of rawhide.

"I don't know about that, but he looked pissed. Pulled her out here and handcuffed her in front of everybody. He was yelling that she was gonna tell him the truth about what happened to her daddy. She was screaming at him and cussing him out. He tased her, then he tore out of here with her like his ass was on fire," she said. The world instantly went gray. I put my hands on the desk and pressed my fingertips into its surface. I leaned forward and Lashawnda took a step backward. I guess she saw something wild in my eyes.

"What did he look like?" I said. The words came out slow because I was trying to stay calm.

“Who, the cop? I don’t know. He was white,” she said as she shrugged her shoulders.

“Did he have blond hair? Was he big like me?” I asked. Lashawnda shook her head.

“Nah. He was older with dark hair. He had a sad looking face, ya know,” she said. I felt cold. I straightened myself and headed for the door. Lashawnda called after me, but I ignored her. Betty sat in her parking spot waiting on me as I stepped out of the lobby of the hotel. The air outside was frigid. Gray clouds were gathering overhead. Rain was on the way. I got in my truck and just sat there for a few minutes. Lashawnda had described Sam Dean. Where was he taking her? Not to the police station. I would have passed them. There was only one way from Gloucester to Queen County and that was through Buena Vista Rd. I flexed and released my hands. I needed to find Sam and Victor. Whatever was going on, they were in this together up to their fucking necks. Victor had overheard me talking to Laurent. He must have run and snitched to his boy. Now Sam had picked Lisa up. There was no doubt they wanted the external drive. Why else would Sam have thrown Lisa in the back of a cruiser less than an hour after Victor had gone running out of the sheriff’s office? I needed to find them. I needed to put my hands on them. Would they have taken her to one of their houses? Maybe, if they thought they could trade her for the thumb drive. It was as good a place to start as any. I pulled out my cell phone. I dialed Skunk’s number. He answered on the second ring.

“Where you at?” I asked.

“Still in Mathews with my friend. What’s up?”

“Can you meet me at the waffle place in Gloucester near the Wal-Mart? We need to move quick,” I said.

“I’ll be there in five. Do I need to bring any tools?” Skunk asked. I knew what he meant.

“Yeah, I think we both might need some tools,” I said.

Skunk was sitting in his LTD by the time I got to Sunny-side Waffle restaurant. The wind was blowing his hair around his head like a halo. I lowered my window and motioned for him to get in.

“You sounded like somebody done shit in your sugar,” he said once he was inside Betty’s warm confines.

“Sam Dean picked up my friend Lisa and took her somewhere. He made a show of arresting her, but I don’t think they went to the sheriff’s office. We gonna go by his house and see if they there,” I said.

“You think he would have took her there? Ain’t like she’s a stray pup. What’s his family gonna say?” Skunk asked. He had a point.

“I think Sam’s family is what this is all about. He don’t want what’s on this video to get out. I think they gonna try and lean on me about it by holding Lisa,” I said.

“How hard we leaning back?” Skunk asked.

“As hard as it fucking takes,” I said as we pulled off. Suddenly, a .44 appeared in Skunk’s hand as if by magic.

“Just making sure we was on the same page,” he said.

Sam Dean lived in the upper end of Queen County at the end of a private road that rolled and twisted past the contorted cypress trees that lined it like green sentries. A two-story Cape Cod style house waited at the end of the lane for any guest that chose to visit the Deans. The blue paint on the house seemed as fresh as the day it was first applied. A two car garage sat off to the left side of the house. A red extended cab truck sat on the right side of the house near a wide flower bed with dying zinnias and geraniums holding court. I parked the truck.

“Don’t bring out the iron until we know she’s here,” I said.

“I got a pair of pliers, too,” Skunk said.

“What for?” I asked.

“Punch a man in the face, he might still lie. Break his fingers joint by joint, and he’ll tell you how many dicks his mama done sucked,” Skunk said. I couldn’t argue with that logic, so I just got out of the truck. We walked across the crushed pea gravel that lined the driveway. I climbed the front steps with heavy hands. My arms felt swollen and engorged with blood. I wanted Sam to be there. I wanted to see his face and then to smash it and hear the bones crunch like pecans in a nutcracker. Skunk hung back by the bottom step. He ran his hand through his hair. His fingers lingered near the white stripe and the scar tissue under it. I had never asked him how he got

that stripe, and he had never offered to tell me. The story must have been harrowing, because he'd had those scars for as long as I had known him.

I knocked on the door and waited. Footsteps approached rapidly. Valerie Dean opened the door and smiled at me.

"Well, Nathan Waymaker, what are you doing here? You haven't been to our house since the Super Bowl party!" she said. Sam invited me to that party a week after I had joined the force. That was also the night Valerie propositioned me.

"Val, where is Sam?" I asked. She stopped smiling. There was something in my tone she didn't like.

"Well, he left with Victor," she said.

"Victor been here?" I asked. Now she looked puzzled.

"Yeah, he came by, they went to the garage to talk, and then he and Sam left in his cruiser," she said. As she was speaking, I noticed something on the door frame. It was a brownish smudge about the size of a quarter. There was another smudge on the handle of the door. I had been a soldier and a deputy and finally a mortician's assistant. I knew what that smudge was. I touched it. It felt tacky like paint that hadn't dried completely.

"Did you see him leave with Victor?" I asked. Val frowned.

"He ain't here, is he? Nathan, what is going on? What do you want with Sam?" she asked. I stepped back.

"Val, you talk to Sam, you tell him I need to talk to him. It's real important," I said.

"Okay, sure. Look, I was just about to leave for work so..." she let the statement hang between us. I backed up off the step.

"We'll get out of your way. Don't forget, you talk to Sam, tell him I'm looking for him," I said. She gave Skunk a wary glance, then turned her attention back to me.

"Sure, Nathan, no problem. Is...is everything all right?"

"It will be," I said. Val smiled but it never reached her eyes. She closed the door slowly but firmly. We went back to the truck. I started her up and took off down the driveway.

“We going to see Victor now? I would love to talk to Victor,” Skunk said darkly.

“We gonna ride over there, but I don’t think Victor is gonna be talking to anyone,” I said. Skunk turned and leaned against the door.

“Why you say that?” he asked. I hit the road and turned right.

“There was a brown spot on the door frame and one on the door knob. It was blood, Skunk. Now what you think the odds are that there would be blood on Sam Dean’s door after Victor Culler done come by and told him I had a video of him boning a preacher’s wife while the preacher jacked off with a kung fu grip?” I asked. Skunk grunted before he responded.

“I hope Victor is okay. I was looking forward to spending some time with him,” Skunk said.

“We about to find out,” I said. I gunned the engine, and Betty flew down the road.

Everyone in Queen County knew where Victor lived. Every Christmas he decorated his house with so many lights they probably blinded some aliens as they flew by the moon. The local paper had splashed a picture of the Cullers and their lighting extravaganza across the front page every December for the last twelve years. To me, they looked like some redneck Norman Rockwell painting.

I had banged on the door hard enough to bruise my hand, but no one had come to tell me to stop. As we left the driveway, I punched Betty’s dashboard. I didn’t know what to do next. I had no idea where Lisa and Sam and Victor could be, and I damn sure wasn’t going to call Les and report them missing. I shifted into third and turned on the radio. Al Green’s heavenly falsetto came through the speakers as he sang about love and happiness. We drove like that for a few minutes until Skunk spoke over Rev. Green’s sweeping vocals.

“We should go back to the waffle place and wait,” he said.

“Wait for what?” I said. Skunk was staring out the window.

“Wait for one of them to call you and tell you where they wanna meet. He wants that thumb thing. That’s why he grabbed your friend, right? He

gonna want you to bring it to him, but he getting himself somewhere he think is safe first,” he said.

“Safe for what?” I asked. I already knew the answer to that, but I wanted the killer that was my running partner to put the words into the ether. But he wouldn’t oblige me.

“Nate, you know how this works. He ain’t planning on just leaning on you,” he said.

I swallowed hard and headed for the restaurant where Skunk had parked his car. We got there and a waitress named Tasha seated us at a table in the back.

“What you and your friend want to drink, Nate? Wait, let me guess. Sweet tea?” she said. She grinned at me. Her mouth was wide, and her lips were plump. Her coffee bean colored skin was as smooth as an oil slick.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” I said.

“I know you like it sweet, boy,” she said before she left to get our drinks. Skunk cocked his head, looked at Tasha’s rapidly receding backside, then at me.

“You done fucked everybody in the tri-county area?” Skunk said. I shook my head.

“She just a big flirt,” I said. Skunk picked up the menu.

“A woman don’t talk to you like that unless you done seen her panties hit the floor,” he said as he perused the menu. We ordered, but when our food came, I just pushed it around on my plate with my fork. I didn’t have much of an appetite.

“It’s my fault, you know. Curtis and Laurent. I pushed Curtis too hard, and then I had to rub it in Laurent’s face about Sam. I should have just let it go and gone to the State Police. Now they got Lisa. I fucked up good, didn’t I, Skunk?” I said. Skunk shoved a forkful of scrambled eggs into his mouth.

“Ain’t shit your fault. Curtis got what he got cuz he didn’t listen to you. And as far as Laurent go, somebody required that sonofabitch’s soul in Hell,” he said after he chewed his eggs. I put my fork down.

“Thought you didn’t believe in God,” I said.

“Ain’t gotta believe in God to think some people deserve to go to Hell. Two weeks after I got out the hospital for this,” he said as he pointed at the scar at the base of his throat, “that bastard dragged me out my aunt’s house by my hair and took me down to the holding cell. Then him and Delbert Green smacked me around and stomped on my toes trying to make me confess to getting back at Arnold and them. But when my aunt had tried to press charges against them, he didn’t do shit. So fuck him. He deserved worse than what he got just for that. Let alone what he did when your parents died. Some people need to go to Hell, Nate, and it’s our job to help them get there. You didn’t fuck up, Nate. They did when they snatched your friend,” he said. He guzzled some of his tea. I thought about what he said. I wondered when did we become the arbitrators of who lived and who died?

“The night you shot Warren Vandekellum’s son,” the voice whispered in my head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

My phone rang at five minutes to noon. Skunk was on his second plate of eggs. My first plate sat in front of me cold and stiff. I fished the phone out of my pocket as it vibrated against my thigh. The caller ID said, "Cat Noir." I scanned the restaurant. There were only a few locals in the place, and they were scattered around the building. I touched the screen and kept my voice low.

"Lisa, where are you? Are you with a deputy named Dean?" I said.

"No, not Lisa, Nathan," Sam Dean said. I squeezed the phone so hard I could hear the screen begin to crack. It sounded like bits of glass grinding against each other.

"Where is Lisa?" I said. Sam was panting on the other end of the line like he had just run up a flight of stairs.

"You call the State Police yet?" he asked.

"Where is Lisa, Sam?" I said. I heard some fumbling, then I heard a woman scream. My nuts felt like they were crawling up into my chest. The screaming turned to quiet sobbing.

"There she is, Nathan. Her index finger is broke now. I'm gonna ask you again, did you call the State Police yet? And don't fuck with me, Nathan, or her brains are gonna be a Rorschach pattern on the wall," he said.

"No," I said. My teeth were clenched, and I had to consciously stop squeezing my phone.

"That's good, Nathan. You gonna bring me the thumb drive. I'm going to give you an address, and I want you to bring it to this address alone. If it even looks like you thought about bringing somebody with you I'll put two in her head and tell everybody she was resisting arrest," he said.

"You really think anybody will believe that?" I asked. Sam chuckled.

"Nathan, I'm a white deputy in the south. She is a black porn star. Everybody's gonna believe it. I figure you should get here no later than one if you leave right now. If you late, I start breaking some more of her fingers," he said.

“Don’t touch her again, Sam, or I’ll-” but he cut me off.

“Or you do what? I have very little to lose, Nathan, but what I do have I am gonna hold onto with all my strength. And if it look like it’s slipping away, I will not hesitate to put your bitch down. Do we understand each other?” he asked.

“You right, Sam. I can show what I’ll do better than I can tell you,” I said into my phone. My tongue was dry, and it scraped against the roof of my mouth like sandpaper.

“3494 Glasshope Lane. Ashland, Va. One o’clock, Nate. Alone,” he said.

“Where’s Victor?” I asked. Sam inhaled so sharply he squeaked.

“Bring the fucking thumb drive,” he said.

The line went dead. I put the address in my GPS. Then I entered it into GoogleEarth. A street view of a huge estate came up on my screen. The estate sat at the end of a long driveway or private road. If I adjusted for the scale, the road was probably two miles long. The estate was surrounded on three sides by dense foliage and woods. There was a long, black car in the circular driveway that curved in front of the house. I zoomed in on it.

“We approach from the north at a single insertion point. I neutralize the principal combatant and facilitate extraction of the asset with minimal collateral damage,” I said as I stared at my phone.

“Huh?” Skunk said. I had slipped into tactical jargon.

“He wants me to bring the thumb drive to this house,” I said. I slid the phone across the table. Skunk picked it up and studied it for a minute. When he put it down, his face was dark as the sky before a thunderstorm.

“Do that license plate say what I think it says?” he asked. I nodded.

“Yeah. It says “TSHORT.” Thomas Short. He took her to that fucking freak’s house,” I said. Skunk sipped his tea.

“You could drop me off at the head of the lane. I can make it through them woods and come in the back while you talking to him in the front. It probably just this deputy, the preacher, your friend, and two of them three he sent after you last night. They wouldn’t have no full bodyguard crew. Them boys don’t want no audience.” he said.

“What about the third African assassin?” I asked. Skunk sipped his tea.

“That joker ain’t walking on that leg. So that leaves just the two. I can ease up on them while you talking to the deputy,” he said.

“You think you can get the drop on them boys?” I asked. Storm clouds gathered above his head.

“I can cut your throat and you won’t know it until you try to speak.” Skunk said.

“Duly noted. That leaves Sam. I’m gonna bet the preacher ain’t carrying. His wife might be there too. If I can get to him, I can get him. It’s getting to him that’s the problem,” I said.

“He gonna pat you down. If you braced, he gonna take it off you.”

“I know. I need something that can distract him but not kill anyone in a confined area. It’s gotta be quick and powerful,” I said. I ran my hands across my face. Just then, an old dump truck in the parking lot started. The engine backfired and a plume of gray smoke billowed out of the exhaust pipe. I watched as the wind dispersed that ball of pollution.

“I think I got a way for you to distract him. Finish your tea,” Skunk said before guzzling his own glass. We left a few bills on the table. Tasha waved at me as we left and Skunk nudged me with his razor sharp elbow. I didn’t even bother trying to deny it anymore. We got in the LTD and drove down the road a piece. Skunk guided the Detroit made tank onto an old logging road. The sun filtered through the trees as pine cones were crushed beneath our wheels. Finally, when he felt we were far enough off the road to escape the prying eyes of any nosey motorist who might happen by, he popped the trunk and got out of the car. I followed him to the rear of the vehicle. I let out a low whistle as I stood beside him.

Skunk had a rolling arsenal in his trunk. I counted at least two sawed off shotguns, three AR-15 type machine guns. Five or six handguns. A baseball bat with nails driven in it and a few stray metal lock boxes. I assumed those were full of ammo. I also saw the rust covered grip pliers lying against the spare tire. At least I think they were covered in rust.

“I thought I said you didn’t need more than one gun,” I said. Skunk shrugged.

“Don’t know what kind of tool ya gonna need til you get to the job. So ya just bring all of them. But I think I got just what you need in here,” he said

before rooting around in his personal armory. Eventually, he found what he was looking for. He handed it to me and crossed his arms.

“Ya think it will work?” he asked.

“Why do you have a...you know what, I’m not even gonna ask you that. But, yeah, I think it will do the job. I just need enough time to close the distance on this motherfucker. You got any tape in this thing?” I asked.

“Duct tape and electrical. Got rubber gloves and bleach, too,” Skunk said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Ashland was an affluent town that mixed old tobacco moneyed families with newly rich real estate developers and tech wizards. We drove down perfectly maintained streets and past outrageously opulent homes and office buildings. It was the kind of town that would have made 80's era Elton John feel underdressed. Glasshope Lane was located in the most exclusive neighborhood in this well-to-do town. People here paid for privacy and for space. We only passed two driveways before we got to Rev. Short's, and they were ten miles apart. Even the foliage in this town was supercilious. The leaves on their trees thus far had refused to fall. There were two tall brick columns on either side of the head of Rev. Short's driveway. A mailbox was ensconced inside the column on the right. The driveway was paved all the way to the house. The Jesus business had been good for Rev. Short.

I stopped the car. Skunk was already suited up. He had on his black rubber gloves, and he was carrying his .44 and an ice pick. He had changed out of his cowboy boots into some black sneakers. He turned to me and grasped my hand in a modified soul shake.

"When you get in there, remember some people gotta go to Hell," he said. Then he released his grip and got out of the car. He sprinted off into the woods like a startled deer. I sat there for a few seconds and took some deep breaths. Once I started down this driveway, there was no turning back. People were going to get hurt. I had to do my best to make sure it was the folks who deserved it. I grabbed the 8-ball on the end of the gear shift and put the car in drive.

The pictures on the computer didn't do the house justice. Rev. Thomas Short lived in a two-story brick mansion complete with a fountain to the right of the front door and a two car garage to the left with carriage windows in the center of the doors. A Queen County cruiser was parked in front of the garage.

I parked the car and climbed the twelve brick steps to the door and grabbed the gaudy brass door knocker. The door itself was made of polished oak that showed me the reflection of a raggedy man.

The door opened, and Rev. Thomas Short stood there with desperate eyes. He didn't greet me, just motioned with his hand for me to come inside. The same way we would motion for family members to sit on a pew at a funeral.

Short closed the door behind me. We were in a small foyer with a tiled floor. The sky had been overcast, but a transom magnified the illumination from the shy sun. We stepped down into a sunken living room with a massive stone fireplace recessed into the far wall. Framed pictures of Short and his wife with other ministers, with local sports stars and even the Governor lined the mantle. The walls were covered with a red and black floral print that I at first mistook for wallpaper but, upon further inspection, I realized was paint. They'd had someone paint that design on their walls. I was taking in the décor to calm myself. I lingered on the accoutrements before I let my eyes settle on Sam Dean and Lisa.

Sam had Lisa tied to a beautiful colonial style wooden chair with two pairs of handcuffs. He had a six-shot revolver pressed against her head. His service pistol was still holstered on his belt. Lisa had been crying. Her make-up had streaked her face like a sad clown. Sam had three long scratch marks across his doughy face.

"I assure you, Mr. Waymaker, I did not want things to come to this. Everything has just gotten so far out of hand," Short mumbled.

"Shut up, Tommy, and pat him down," Sam said. He didn't sound good. In fact, he sounded as ragged as I looked. Short did as he was told. I raised my arms as his hands roamed my waist and my thighs. He didn't have much experience searching a person for weapons. I hadn't counted on this, but it definitely helped.

"I...I don't feel anything," he said.

Sam pressed the barrel of the gun harder against Lisa's head.

"Give me the flash drive," he said.

"How much was he going to brace you for, Tommy? Five thousand a month? Ten?" I asked. Short's dark face was ashen. He was standing to my left with a tight blue workout shirt stretched across his wide chest.

"You have no idea how much it would have cost us," he mumbled.

"Tommy don't listen to him," Sam said.

“But you didn’t kill him, did you, Tommy?” I said. Short rapidly blinked his eyes.

“What?” he asked. I kept my tone low and even. I tried to remember how to use my cop voice.

“You didn’t kill him. You know who did though. You trying to protect that person. I get it. But you can’t, Tommy. We can still walk out of here, but you gotta give it up,” I said

I heard a click as Sam cocked the revolver.

“Why you stalling, Nathan? You expecting someone? I told you to come alone,” Sam said. His face shined with perspiration. He definitely wasn’t using his cop voice. Lisa’s eyes pleaded with me but she didn’t speak.

“Where’s Victor? Is he in the deep freezer in your garage? What happened? He overheard me and Laurent and came to confront you about it? And you flipped out just like you did when Curtis confronted you?” I said. Sam laughed. It was mirthless.

“Curtis. That was your fault. You got him all fucking riled up and paranoid. He swore up and down you were gonna post the parties on the internet. He called me and I just went over there to try and calm him down. It just got out of hand,” Sam said. He let out a strangled groan.

“This was all supposed to be about having some fucking fun!” he said. His eyes were wild like a summer storm rolling across the bay.

“And you keep asking about Victor after what he did to you. You know how much he got to “lose” the Vandekellum file? Two thousand dollars and a good interest rate on a truck loan. That’s all your parents were worth to him, Nathan. So I don’t blame you if you killed Stevie. You did what you had to do. Now I’m gonna do what I gotta do and splatter this bitch’s brains all over this hardwood flooring if you don’t give me the drive by the count of three,” he said. Short had backed up away from me and dropped to his knees. He was praying. He was fucking praying.

“One,” Sam said

I moved my hand toward my back pocket.

“Two,” he said. Short was praying loudly now.

“Lord may your will be done. For from dust we come and to dust we must return,” he moaned. I brushed my back pocket.

“Thr...” he began. A noise from the back of the house stopped his count. I kept my hand near the small of my back. Sam whipped his head toward the noise. It sounded like someone had dropped a sack of laundry.

“Go check it out,” he said to Short. The Reverend didn’t get off his knees.

“Goddamn it, Tommy, go check it out!” he screamed.

The next few minutes passed like I was studying images in a flipbook. Every moment seemed to transpire in some type of hyper speed slow motion hybrid.

Sam turned his head back in the direction of the sound.

I grabbed the flash-bang grenade I had gotten from Skunk. He and I had taped it to the area just above the small of my back with electrical tape. I had instructed him to loop the tape through the metal hoop at the top of the pin and then tape it to my back. That way when I pulled it off my body, the pin would already have been pulled.

I tossed the grenade toward Sam but off to his right.

He saw it in his periphery, and he instinctively turned his gun toward me. But I was already coming at him hard and fast.

The flash-bang exploded.

Even though I had stuffed cotton from the inside of the LTD’s seat into my ears, the effect was nearly deafening. I closed my eyes as my body hurtled toward Sam. I never heard the gun go off, but I felt a searing pain in my left shoulder. Heat from the flash-bang reached through my jacket and scorched my back. I pushed it away. All of it. I opened my eyes just as I slammed into Sam. I gripped his left hand, his gun hand, with my right hand while I crashed my left knee into the lean muscle on his thigh. I shifted my body to my left and got my right leg behind the leg I had just pounded with my knee. He tried to strike me with his right hand, but I partially blocked it as we crashed to the floor. My left arm was on fire. The room was filled with a gray, smoky haze. Every breath burned going in and stung going out.

I gripped his wrist as he gritted his teeth and started turning his gun toward me. It was a struggle, but I was able to bend my left arm at the elbow. I fell on his face forearm first just as he pulled the trigger on his gun. A bullet whizzed by my right ear. I strained and stretched my middle finger up his wrist and got it behind the trigger. The barrel of his gun was a black hole

looming in the corner of my right eye. Sam tried to pull the trigger, but my finger was in the way. He howled like a wounded animal. I raised myself up and fell on his face again with a forearm that was quickly becoming useless. Blood ran out of both of Sam's nostrils, and his top lip was swelling. I tried to rise up again, but I couldn't. My left arm was almost dead. Sam reached up and dug his nails into the wound in my forehead.

Pain filled my world as he tore at the tender flesh. The metallic taste of my own blood filled my mouth. Adrenaline and rage surged through my body, making me shake. I leaned away from Sam's prying fingers and then threw my head forward with all the strength I could muster. My forehead connected with his. I saw Orion and Cassiopeia and all the other constellations.

Sam let go of his gun. It skidded across the floor and landed in front of the fireplace. My ears were ringing, and my left arm was a dead shank of meat hanging from my body, but I rolled to my right and grabbed the pistol. Almost too late, I realized Sam hadn't tried to beat me to the pistol. I twisted my body into a seated position with my back against the fireplace. I pointed the gun at Sam. The sad-faced man was blinking his eyes like he was sending me Morse code. He fumbled at his side.

"Stop, Sam! Stop!" I yelled. I had been yelling since I'd tossed the flash-bang, but I had just now realized it. But Sam didn't stop. He pulled at the gun in his holster.

I pulled the trigger of the revolver. Three times. I watched as his face exploded. Just like Steven Vandekellum. My own face was bathed in pieces of flesh and bone. I had to spit bits of Sam's jawbone out onto the floor. Sam fell back onto his side. He didn't fire the gun with death throes like you saw in the movies. A soft gurgling came from where his mouth used to be. My whole left side felt dead. I grasped the edge of the mantle above my head and pulled myself up off the floor. An involuntary groan hissed from my lips. My middle finger was in agony. Probably broken. Rev. Short was crumpled in the fetal position on the floor. He was moaning and crying as he pressed his hands against his eyes. I pulled the cotton out of my ears as I stumbled toward Lisa. She was coughing and hacking up phlegm, but she was alive.

I stopped and stumbled back toward Sam. I would need the keys for the handcuffs. I went down on one knee. Where the fuck was Skunk? Had I

gotten him killed too? The plan had been for him to take out the two bodyguards and then rush into the living room when he heard the flash-bang go off.

“You gonna pray? I can tell you it doesn’t do any good,” a melted butter voice said. I raised my head. Angeline Short was standing in front of me under an archway to the left of the front door. I could see a staircase behind her. She must have been upstairs. She was holding a small nickel plated .32. The same caliber that Walt had speculated caused the hole in Watkin’s chest. She had it pointed at my head.

“I prayed for a way out of this. I prayed for the Lord to save us from Esau. And look where we are now,” she said. Sadness filled the room when she spoke. It almost chased away the scent of Sam and his voided bowels. There was blood spilling down my back like red rain. The bullet had punctured the thickest part of my deltoids.

“You killed Watkins,” I said. She sighed.

“Yeah. How did you know it was me and not Tommy or Sam?” she asked. She seemed genuinely curious. I swayed a bit, then steadied myself.

“I didn’t, at least, not at first. Then you said how horrible it was that someone had shot Esau in his own living room. Only thing was that wasn’t common knowledge. Our local paper hadn’t reported it. They just said foul play was suspected. The only people who knew where he had been shot were the cops and the guys who picked up his body. Then I found the thumb drive in the carrying case of his bible. Once I saw you on the video clip, there was your motive. I couldn’t see Sam telling you the exact location where Esau’s body had been found. And if he was the one that murdered him I still couldn’t see him telling you where the body had dropped. It didn’t make any sense. So it had to be you,” I said. She frowned at me.

“I don’t even remember saying it. You think that makes me crazy?” she asked. My eyes darted toward her gun.

“No, not at all,” I lied. She pursed her lips.

“You know what his last words were? He looked up at me after I shot him and whispered ‘Holy Bible the Word of the Lord’. I thought he was trying to make me feel guilty,” she said with a sigh. Her whole body seemed to slump, but her gun hand never wavered.

“He was blackmailing you. He blackmailed a lot of people who came to his parties,” I said. She nodded.

“He was planning on it. He had us all on tape. He said he’d show the world unless we gave him complete control of our ministry. The ministry we had built from nothing. We started out in an old store front, and now we have a Temple that can seat two thousand people. We have a helicopter! Tommy worked day and night making this Temple a success. We did good things. We fed the hungry. We helped the poor. Tommy plucked me from the streets of Richmond and took me to the Governor’s house. I went from turning tricks on Hull St. to having dinner with state senators. And if he wanted to watch me take a dick now and then, so what? Esau thought he could just walk in and take everything we had created. No, that’s not how it works. Not at all,” she said. Her eyes flashed hot and bright like embers in a fireplace.

“So you shot him and then you called Sam,” I said.

“I didn’t go there planning to kill him. I just wanted to scare him into giving us the video. After...after it happened I panicked and called Sam. He said he’d handle it. He handled it all right,” she said. A hard edge cut through her voice. She chanced a quick glance at Sam’s body, then settled her beautiful eyes on me.

“I don’t know why I ever expected Him to answer my prayers. God stopped listening to me a long time ago. That’s why I had to handle things myself,” she said.

“Put the gun down, Angeline,” I said. I didn’t want anyone else to die today. Angeline set her feet shoulder width apart. She steadied her gun hand with her free hand. She smiled at me.

“No,” she said.

Then I heard a gunshot. Angeline fell in a heap to the floor. There was a hole in her forehead big enough to shove my index finger through. I heard the pitter-patter of falling rain. It was only later I realized it was her blood and brain matter, not rain, falling to the floor.

“Damn shame. She was a pretty woman,” Skunk said. He came over and helped me to my feet. His .44 was in his right hand, and he grabbed me with his left. He had blood on his face too, but none of it was his.

“I guess you didn’t wear your sneaky shoes today,” I said. Skunk hunched his shoulders.

“Them boys was tough. Where are the keys to the cuffs?” he asked.

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of one of his saints,” Rev. Thomas Short said. Skunk and I did a stiff-legged shuffle and turned around. Rev. Short was holding Sam’s service pistol. He was pointing it at us. I felt Skunk’s body tense. I let go of his wiry shoulder and took a step toward Short. I could only manage one step since the room had begun to spin. I held out my right hand.

“Thomas. Give me the gun,” I said. Short held the pistol out from his body with one hand. It quivered in his grip. His bloodshot eyes seemed to be retreating inside his skull.

“She was always the strong one. Decisive you know? When Esau threatened us she didn’t hesitate. Oh, Jesus, I don’t know what to do!”

“Thomas. Please. This is all over now. Come on. Give me the gun. You don’t wanna shoot me and I definitely don’t want you to shoot me,” I said. I was trying to keep my voice steady but the tilt-a-whirl I was on was making it hard to stand, let alone talk. Short peered up at the ceiling.

“God, I am lost. I seek your favor,” he said. I was about to say something else. I think I was going to try to convince him that God wanted him to put the gun down. I never got the chance. I felt Skunk move behind me like a cobra about to strike.

“Get down,” Skunk said as he pressed on my bleeding shoulder.

I really didn’t have a choice. The world went sideways and I tumbled to my knees. I heard a shot ring out and I saw Rev. Thomas Short collapse. His gun clattered against the floor. He landed on his side with one wide, lifeless eye staring up at me. A fast-moving stream of blood was pouring out of his other eye. Skunk grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to my feet.

“Come on, hoss, we gotta go.” Skunk said. I studied his lithe frame. Angeline’s .32 was in his right hand and as he gripped me with his left. While I was trying to talk the good reverend down, he had retrieved it from the floor. Neither Short nor I had noticed. He really was as fast as a hiccup.

“Skunk-” was all I got out before he cut me off. His blue eyes were as hard as newly pressed steel.

“Nathan, the only way any of this has a chance of working is if it’s only the three of us walking out of here,” he said. Skunk sat me down and started searching Sam for the handcuff keys. He removed them from the tactical belt and stood. He glared down at Rev. Short’s body.

“Plus I don’t like motherfuckers that point guns at me,” he said.

Skunk released Lisa, and the two of them helped me to the car. Her eyes were red and mucus was running from her nose but she was in far better condition than I was. I heard him open his trunk and watched as he carried a bucket full of cleaning tools and a jug of color safe bleach into the house. Lisa was in the backseat with me. Skunk had put a thick bandage from his first aid kit around my arm to stop the bleeding from my shoulder. My broken finger didn’t get any attention. Lisa was wiping her face with a handkerchief that Skunk had gently put into her hand before going back in the house.

“I know what it means now,” Lisa said. My head was lying against the headrest. I opened my eyes, but I didn’t turn my head.

“What?” I croaked.

“The tattoo on your chest. BAM? It means bad-ass motherfucker,” she said. And then she lay against my chest and cried and cried.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Skunk took us back to his friend's house. Her name was Tracy Harwood, and Tracy just happened to be studying to be a nurse at the local community college.

They got me inside, and Tracy and Skunk pulled out the bullet, cleaned up my wound, and sewed me up. Skunk informed me in his indomitable fashion that he was no doctor, but if I didn't have nerve damage and I didn't get an infection, I should be just fine. I stayed there for a week so he could watch me. But I told Lisa she had to leave that night.

"If this goes bad. If any of this comes back on us, I don't want any of it to land on you. You gotta go. You gotta get as far away from Virginia as possible," I said as Tracy stitched me up. She protested, but her heart wasn't in it. By ten o' clock that night, she had rescheduled her flight and was on her way back to L.A. Skunk had made a splint out of tongue depressors for her finger.

She texted me about a month later to see if I was okay. I haven't heard from her since. I think that's best for both of us.

Skunk hung around for a few more days, making sure I didn't die. While we waited to see if infection set in, he told me how he had set the scene in the house. He had used color safe bleach to wipe down any surface I might have bled on including washing Sam's hands. Then he had pressed Sam's hand around his .44. After cleaning my prints off the revolver, he had pressed the reverend's hand around it. His prints were already on the service pistol and Angeline's were already on the .32. He had taken the ice pick with us, but he had rinsed off the two bodyguards' hands with bleach as well. He told me he had gotten the flash drive out of my pocket and, after wiping it, as well, had dropped it on the floor. Then he had retrieved the flash-bang canister and wiped down the rest of the living room including the mantle where I had left a nice set of bloody fingerprints and DNA. The reverend had an alarm system, but no cameras. It wasn't perfect, but there was enough evidence of a love triangle gone wrong that it should satisfy anybody who mattered.

Victor Culler was found in the Dean family garage tied up and unconscious and covered with a tarp. I ran into Sandy a couple of weeks after they found him. We were both having breakfast alone at Smitty's. She confided in me that when they found Victor he had shit on himself. I laughed so hard I almost choked on my biscuit.

Following the discovery of the bodies in the Short home and because of the evidence on the flash drive, the Queen's County Sheriff's Department was finally investigated by the State Police. Victor was able to place all the blame for the corruption in connection to the Watkins murder squarely on Sam and Laurent's shoulders. In fact, he was able to position himself as a hero who had tried to confront Sam once he had discovered his malfeasance. He also did his best to point the State Boys in my direction. He told them all about overhearing my conversation with Laurent. In the end, he came out looking like a dedicated lawman. The Board of Supervisors moved quickly in an effort to put this embarrassing incident in the rear-view mirror. They named Victor Interim Sheriff and named Sandy Senior Deputy.

Yeah, I can't believe it either.

I went to see Mrs. Parrish the morning I left Tracy's house. I told her an edited version of what had happened. I left out the part where me and Skunk killed a bunch of people. The disappointment on her face put a lump in my throat. She wrote a check for six thousand dollars and slid it across the table to me.

"This is more than what we agreed to, Mrs. Parrish," I said.

"But you did more than we agreed to, didn't you?" she said. When we made eye contact, I was the first one to look away. The New Hope Baptist Temple still stands, but now it's just an empty husk. Kids started using the parking lot as a place to drink beer and cop their first feel. The members returned to the various Temples New Hope had swallowed up during its heyday. I didn't see Mrs. Parrish again until Christmas. I was at the Cove, and she propositioned me. I wasn't nearly as drunk as she was, so I kindly declined. I think that made both of us sad, but for different reasons.

I called Skunk and tried to give him part of the money I'd been paid. His hostile silence told me he was insulted by the offer.

When I finally went back to the funeral home, I didn't know what to expect. I walked through the door with my arm hanging stiffly by my side to find Walt sitting behind his desk. He looked like he had lost twenty pounds. He got up from behind the desk and came to me. He wrapped his meaty arms around me and squeezed me so tight I thought my head might pop. The hole in my shoulder was still tender, but I held back my cries of agony.

"You scared the hell out of me. I saw all that stuff on TV about Esau and Rev. Short. I kept waiting for a call to come to pick you up out of some ditch or something," he said. He squeezed me tight one more time before releasing me. He walked back inside his office. I followed him and sat down in the chair in front of his desk. He eased into his office chair.

"Walt, I'm sorry. I didn't want to come back until it was..." I said. Walt made a noise that was halfway between a groan and a whimper that made me abandon the rest of my sentence. He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a brand-new bottle of rum. He also retrieved two glasses. He poured both of us some stout shots.

"About that. What I said, I didn't mean for it...I didn't mean for it..." I raised my hand and cut him off.

"I know. It's all good. You were right. I should have told you everything. I was just trying to keep you safe. I guess I suck at that. Among other things," I said. Walt pushed the glass of rum towards me.

"Nathan, I know if it ever came down to it I could trust you with my life. You're the closest thing I have to a brother and I should never have told you not to come back. This business, it's important, I won't lie, but we are blood and that's more important than anything," he said. He raised his glass. I raised mine. We toasted and threw back the rum. It burned all the way down. I felt my eyes get moist and I was almost able to convince myself it was the rum.

"An investigator from the State Police came by looking for you," he said. I felt my asshole tighten up.

"Oh, yeah?" I said.

"Yeah. He was saying he had heard you had been asking about Rev. Watkin's death. I told him you were just doing a favor for some of the members of his ~~church~~Temple who had voiced some concerns about the

investigation. You know, since you were a former deputy you were just asking your good friend the sheriff what was going on with the investigation,” Walt said. I looked down at my empty glass.

“You think he bought it?” I asked. He shrugged.

“Well, he hasn’t been back,” He poured himself another shot of rum. I put my glass on the desk and he poured me one as well. He peered at me over the rim of his glass.

“Is it really done, Nathan?” he asked. He sipped his shot this time. I threw mine back and put my glass on the desk again. He filled it up this time. I stared out the window over his shoulder. The last of the leaves were falling off the red maple near the driveway. I thought about DNA and fiber evidence and GSR tests and five dead bodies in a mansion in a quiet suburban hamlet. Old Man Winter was coming and he had the potential to be one nasty bastard.

“I don’t know,” I said. Walt let out a long sigh.

“I love ya, cousin. You get on my damn nerves, but I love ya,” he said.

“Love ya, too, you creepy ass mortician,” I said. We tossed back our drinks.

That night as I lay on my bed and looked at the new door Walt had installed for my room, I pulled out my cell phone and pulled up my contacts list. I selected “Psycho” and sent Carver a text message. One short simple sentence.

“He acted alone.” A few seconds went by before I received a response.

“And?”

“The other thing was personal,” I texted back.

If my cell phone records were ever subpoenaed, perhaps they would think I was debating Carver about conspiracy theories.

Two days later, as I was under the carport trying to figure out how to operate a push broom with one arm, a long black Cadillac DTS pulled into the parking lot. My heart began to flutter in my chest. I squeezed the handle of the push broom so tight I felt the aluminum begin to crumple. The car stopped about six feet from me. The driver’s side door opened and Carver’s boulder like frame emerged. The sun hid its face, then reappeared behind

the clouds like a coquettish debutante. Shadows appeared and disappeared with astounding rapidity.

“Hey, Nathan. Can you come over for a second?” he asked conversationally, even though we both knew he wasn’t really asking. I dropped the broom handle and walked over to the car. At least, Carver hadn’t pulled a gun on me this time.

Carver opened up the rear driver side door for me and I slid my wide frame into the car. Shade was staring straight ahead. He was wearing the same Cartier sunglasses, but now he was sporting a dark blue suit with a starched white shirt and a silk paisley azure tie. His manicured nails seemed to glow in the muted sunlight that was filtering into the car through the tinted windows. He was sitting so still I wondered if someone should wave a mirror under his nose. Carver closed my door, then got back in the driver’s seat. My chest tightened. The car was silent save for the quiet purr of the Caddy’s engine. I shifted to my left and then to my right.

“It was five, right?” Shade said without moving his head.

“Huh?” I responded. He flexed one wide brown hand. I heard his knuckles pop like kindling in a fireplace.

“Five grand for info about Esau and Fella,” he said.

“Oh, yeah. I mean that’s what you said, but I ain’t trying to hold you to that. I didn’t really do nothing,” I said. A bitter acidic taste was bubbling up from my throat and filling my mouth. I felt like I was walking across a field full of landmines.

“My word is my bond, Nathan,” Shade said. He extended his right hand and Carver handed him a white envelope. Shade placed the envelope on the narrow space between us on the backseat. I didn’t immediately reach for it.

“Go ahead. Pick it up. I think you earned that shit,” he said in his slick late-night DJ voice. I thought I heard the bird in my chest gasp.

“I didn’t really do anything,” I said. Shade’s head rotated so slowly I imagined I could hear the bones in his neck grind against each other. I could see myself in the polished lenses of his sunglasses.

“Come on, Nathan. Don’t play modest. We all killers here,” he said. I watched as the corners of his mouth moved upward. Teeth as white as the petals of a magnolia flower peeked out from between his dark lips. Every

inch of my skin broke out in gooseflesh. Carver chuckled from the front seat.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I mumbled. Shade shook his head.

“Yeah, ya do. It’s the reason I came to deliver your paper personally. I like the way you handle yourself. I might need to use your services again. So you ain’t gotta worry about those investigators coming back,” he said.

“What?” I heard a hoarse voice say. It took me a second to realize it was me.

“The investigators that caught the Massacre at the Mansion case. You know, them State Troopers from Richmond. They won’t be bothering you again. Or your buddy Skunk,” he said. I peered out the car window. The dark tint made the world appear to be bathed in a bluish monochromatic tone like a Picasso painting. Or maybe I was having a stroke.

“That was...Thank you, I guess,” I stammered. No use pretending, I didn’t know what he was talking about anymore.

“That’s good, Nathan. Good to see some motherfuckers still have manners,” he said. Carver chuckled again. I was now in debt to the worst gangster this side of Tony Montana. I almost longed for the days when he was just threatening to cut off one of my hands.

“I’ll be in touch.” Shade said. He didn’t say get out but I took that as my chance to escape.

Walt was sitting at his desk pouring over the books with his trusty adding machine by his side when I went back into the office.

“Who was that?” he asked without looking up from his calculations.

“Nobody you ever wanna meet,” I said. He raised his head.

“You all right?” he asked. His big eyes were darting from side to side.

“I’m good. Just gonna go lay down for a minute. It’s been a long day. Hell, it’s been a long week,” I said.

“Yeah, get some rest. You look like shit on a stick.” Walter said before returning to his precarious balancing act. Paying bills always put him in a snarky mood.

“Well, I did almost die in a shoot-out,” I thought.

I wandered down the hallway to my room. I pulled the envelope out of my back pocket and opened it. I fanned the bills out like a deck of cards. It was all tens and twenties. Folded over it was a knot big enough to choke a horse or a whore. My blood money. But is there really any other kind? I put the money back in the envelope and opened my foot locker. I tossed it inside and it landed next to the urn that held my parents' ashes. I leaned forward and ran my fingers across the lid. The surface was cool to the touch. I picked it up and pressed it against my face.

I was stretched out across my bed and trying not to think about my new part-time job working for the King of the Carolinas when I heard a light knock at my door.

"Hey, I hate bothering you but do you feel up to riding with me? Just got a death call over at the trailer park. The deputy said he's a big one." Walt said.

"Yeah, sure, just give me a minute," I said. I sat up and rubbed my face.

Somebody has to handle the bodies, right?

As I got ready to go with Walt I thought back to something Lisa had said about praying for her father to die. I think, if there is a God, he wouldn't be much of an omnipotent being if he didn't answer each and every one of those supplications. That's the tragedy of this thing we call life, isn't it? Either none of our prayers are heard or all of them are.

Even the darkest ones.

THE END

Author Bio

S.A. Cosby is a writer who was born and bred in southeastern Virginia. His first published work was a re-imagining of the Night Before Christmas in his local paper at the age of 8. Since since then he has gone on to publish his work in numerous magazines and anthologies. His story “Slant-Six” received an honorable mention in Best Mystery Stories of 2016. He resides in Gloucester, Virginia with a skittish pug and a cantankerous squirrel. My Darkest Prayer is his first mystery novel.