



PLAN
of
ATTACK

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Plan of Attack

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Smashwords Edition

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Chapter One

The Promise

“Bad luck?

Predestination?

Fate?

Bad Karma?

God’s will?

My own fault?

My own poor choices?

Foolish vengefulness?”

All of this flooded my memory.

How could I know a choice was poor until after it was made?

Every minute of existence is filled with choices. Even thinking about this is a matter of choice. At any instant, I

can choose to continue to ponder or cast my thoughts in another direction.

All choices are based on previous choices which begin a birth. They lead us down a path through a myriad of decision points like a lab rat in an unending maze.

At every turn, an entirely different path can be selected.

No one makes decisions that he believes will lead to completely negative results. Even the worst choices are made with some overriding positive result being expected.

It is much like climbing a tree with an infinite number of branches. One poor selection can lead to a rotted limb and when we grasp it, we fall.

At what point could we have chosen a branch leading to a sturdier limb. Was it the first branch point or the second or the third or the nth? And if our choice at any of these junctures was different would it have necessarily led to a better fate? Is it equally possible that it could have led to even a worse one?

I lie here with all of these thoughts racing; all questions and no answers. Even if I could conjure the answers, how would it help?

"Let vengeance be mine sayeth the Lord."

That Bible phrase flashed through my mind over and over and now I had come to know its true meaning. I should have left revenge in God's hands and never taken it for my own. I should have known that it would be impossible for me to do a better job than He.

They say that one's entire life can flash before you in an instant. I never really believed that but now I know that it is true.

All I could do now is hope that all these realizations were not a prelude to my demise.

Well, enough of this self-pity and philosophical bullshit.

Let me tell you how I came to this point, what happened, how it happened and how it all began.

I sat silently at the back of the class barely hearing the words of Miss Mosser.

“Fractions are like the slices of a pizza pie...” seemed to be echoing through a long, dark tunnel extending to the front of the room. I could feel a knife-like pain searing through my guts. I knew I was going to puke any minute. I hadn’t felt good this morning before I left for school, but I said nothing. I had to go to school today because today was the day Martin Shaw, the all pro NFL linebacker was coming to our school to talk to us kids! No kid in his right mind would miss that.

As much as I tried I couldn’t fend off the mounting pain and nausea any longer. Suddenly, my stomach spasms pulsed forth a stream of vomit all over my desk and my head fell forward into its acrid pool.

I struggled to raise my head from the slimy mass and open my eyes. All was a blur except the bulletin board calendar with its brightly encircled number twenty-one which gleamed against the dull background.

Within seconds all blackened.

My next memories were those of flashing lights and voices resonating from a deep, distant source. Again, darkness swept over me.

It felt like only minutes later that I found myself lying motionless as a mask was slowly lowered over my face.

Once again, a deep haze encompassed me while flashes of colored lights sparkled and danced everywhere.

The next thing I would remember is awakening in a hospital bed with my mother and Ralph by my side. She reached down and picked him up to rub his well-worn, furry face next to mine.

"Ralph is so glad to see you. You had him really worried' she explained as she continued to stroke my face with my favorite stuffed animal.

"What happened Ma? Did I miss Martin Shaw?" I asked with the most panicky tone I could muster.

"You did but I've been told that he may come to see you personally once you're a little better" she replied.

"You mean come to see me by himself?" I said excitedly.

"That's what Miss Mosser told me" she answered.

Wow! I could hardly believe it. Martin Shaw was coming here to see me; right here in this room. That would make all this worth it, I thought to myself.

But what really happened to me? my thoughts continued.

"Am I going to be alright?" I asked aloud.

"The doctor said for sure" my mother answered.

"You had appendicitis and the doctor fixed you."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"You had a problem with your insides and the doctor had to fix it and you're going to be okay" she reassured me.

"When is Mr. Martin coming to see me?" I continued eagerly.

"Very soon if you keep getting better!" she answered.

She was right. It wasn't more than a day later that a huge figure appeared in the doorway of my room, almost blocking it completely.

There he was, Martin Shaw, coming to see just me and he even brought me a football.

He stayed for several minutes telling me how glad he was to see me getting better and how he too had once had appendicitis.

A dream couldn't have been better.

"Mr. Martin, I'm going to work really hard to become a great football player just like you. You're my hero" I said enthusiastically.

"Teddy, I'm not your hero. Doctor Spiegel is you're hero. He saved your life. Without him you wouldn't be here now.

You know who my hero is?" he asked rhetorically,

"Doctor Sabine, he's the doctor that saved my life when I had appendicitis.

Do me a favor kid, don't be a football player, study hard and be a doctor."

With that, he placed his hand on my forehead and said,

"Promise me!"

How could I not promise Martin Shaw anything?

I immediately stammered out "I promise!"

I promise!

I will!"

From that moment forth I knew I was destined to become a doctor!

The thought never left me.

That's how it all started.

When I returned to school the following week, I was greeted as a hero, not because I had survived appendicitis but because I had met with Martin Shaw one on one.

I was a kid with a new attitude. The hero's welcome by the class was not what did it; it was that promise to Mr. Shaw that I had made.

Soon half the kids in the class were asking to copy my homework. When that happened, I knew that I was no longer the classroom "daydreamer", I had become the class "brain".

As the school year wore on, I more and more became known as the "geek". I didn't mind it at all because I knew that I had a dream and a promise to keep. I spent so much

time with the books that my mother began to worry. I don't think it was because she didn't want me to be smart. The best guess is that she had heard too many old wives' tales about people who study too much, going crazy. Whatever her concerns might have been she made several efforts to curtail the length of my study periods in favor of "normal boy" activities like stick ball and loitering. At one point she and my father when out and bought me some video games. When I think about it, the whole thing was like Backwards Land. With most kids the fight is about getting the kids to study, not getting them to stop studying but that's the way it was! When I got to high school her and my father's constant prodding finally worked. They worked, not because I actually believed her admonishments of my "going crazy from too much studying" but instead because I knew that extracurriculars would help me to get into a good college. And besides it would end the constant nagging.

So, it was that, in spite of the fact that it took a lot of time away from my studies, I joined the high school football team. It was there that I met Richie Whiteman. Ironically, Richie Whiteman was very black.

He and I were assigned lockers right next to each other and we became fast friends. Whenever I told anyone that he and I were "fast friends" they always corrected me saying he was the "fast friend" and I was the "slower fast friend". They were reminding me that Richie was certainly the better player. In spite of being the "slow fast friend" I was still good enough to make the team.

Of course, Richie with his superior speed and agility became an outstanding halfback while I, with lesser speed but good size, was assigned a lineman's spot, right guard to be precise. I was adequate but not close to the high caliber of Richie's play.

Despite of my initial resistance to my parent's prodding; I found the football experience to be rewarding. I made a lot of friends that otherwise would surely have shunned me

as one of the school's nerds had I not participated and most importantly, Richie and I would have never become best friends.

He was not only a good halfback but also a pretty good student. I don't think he studied like I did, and he never really reached 'nerd' status but he did well in school and was in the top ten percent at least.

By the time we reached our senior year I was in a close race with Harry Swartzbard for class valedictorian. Only about two tenths of a point separated us. When it finally came down to the wire, Harry broke the tape one tenth of a point ahead. I had to settle for sloppy seconds.

Here's how it all happened.

It all centered on AP Calculus. As the year progressed we both received As in each of the three preceding marking periods and now it came down to the last marking period and the final exam. Less than an A for either of us would surely result in a death blow to our valedictorian aspirations. Both of us aced the last marking period and

then of course it was the final exam that would determine our final grade.

Harry scored a ninety-eight and I scored ninety. It was over. Harry wore the crown. To say I was disappointed is an understatement. I was crushed.

I kept telling myself I would not be discouraged and tried hard not to be bitter.

My mother always said, "The only thing worse than a loser is to be a sore loser" and knew that she was right. I went on to congratulate Harry with a hearty handshake and no obvious indications of my overwhelming disappointment, although deep inside, my stomach rolled. It was not until several weeks later that I found out that my inner most feelings were probably more than justified after all.

I had been accepted at the State University. Ironically Richie was also going to attend State and was entering the same program as me, Pre-Med. I had already received my

first semester's schedule. When I looked at it the words "General College Chemistry I" glared out at me.

Although I did well in chemistry much of it seemed difficult to grasp. It certainly wasn't one of the "Easy A" subjects for me. I had to spend hour upon hour with the chemistry book to fully comprehend its intricacies.

Upon seeing it on my first semester course list, I decided to go to the library and take out Zumdath's - Introduction to General Chemistry. I knew that was the book used last year at State and was probably the same one that would be used in the upcoming semester. It would be good to do some reviewing before I began the course.

I entered the library and walked to the stacks at the back which I knew housed the science section.

Who did I meet there but Becky Goldman!

Becky had been in almost every one of my classes throughout my four years at Heckman High. She was never one of my best buds but I knew her fairly well. She was pretty smart and pretty too.

I greeted her with a causal 'What's new?

Becky always had the latest town and school gossip and was never reticent about spreading it far and wide.

"Well, did you hear about Mr. Ashberg?" she replied eagerly.

Mr. Ashberg was our AP Calculus teacher whose exam had cost me the high school valedictory.

"No, what?" I answered.

"He married Harry Swartzbard's mother!

Evidently, they had been going at it hot and heavy for some time.

That's probably why she and Harry's dad split in the first place.

I heard she got a ton of money when they split. Harry's dad was a pretty rich guy."

"Holy shit" I reflexively blurted.

Upon hearing her revelation, my mind drifted.

Throughout the remaining conversation with Becky I could think of nothing else but her comment about

Ashberg. I replied to her with robotic, detached responses as I continued to ponder over and over what she had just told me.

I had been part of study groups that prepared for Ashberg's Calculus tests during my senior year. Harry was always part of them too. Several of us would regularly get together prior to exams. I remember always having been surprised by Harry's exceptionally good grades on the exams despite his obvious lack of knowledge during our study sessions. I had passed it off as a unique ability on his part to rise to the occasion on the day of the exam.

I knew this kind of thing happens frequently in athletics. Some guys are great in practice and shitty in the game. We used to call them 'gym stars'.

Meanwhile, other guys are poor in practice and really excel when the pressure is on during the game.

I used to think that maybe Harry was one of those kind of guys but after hearing Becky's story, now I wasn't so sure.

Ashberg dating Harry's mother all the time. Harry's getting those great grades in Calculus even though he appeared to know shit during our study sessions?

You don't have to be Isaac Newton to figure out what was probably going on here I thought to myself.

Becky left the library and I went into the main lobby and seated myself so as to try and clear my head. After an hour or so of mental turmoil I realized I should just let it go. It was a bitter pill but what is done is done and there was nothing that I could do to change it.

First of all, how could I know if my suspicions were correct? All the evidence was purely circumstantial I told myself.

Then again, I thought to myself, "Men have been executed based on less circumstantial evidence than that".

How could I just let it go?

Well, suppose it was true after all and I could prove it?

If Ashberg really was greasing up Harry's grades because of his thing with Harry's old lady, what could I do about it anyway?

Could I demand a GPA recalculation and a repeat of the graduation ceremony?

I'm sure that would never happen!

I suppose I'd just have to suck it down and be philosophical about the whole thing.

It was treachery against which I had no means of rectification or reprisal

As Omar Khayyám once wrote:

'The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit,
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.'

"What is done is done! Gotta leave it behind and move on" I thought.

As hard as I tried, I couldn't release my thoughts from the vengeful grasp which kept them constantly whirling through my mind. How could I just forget the whole thing and pretend to be immune from the overpowering vengeful urge inside me?

As much as I wanted to I just couldn't. I knew that I had to satisfy the gnawing if for no other reason than to maintain my own self-respect. If I did nothing I would be haunted into eternity by my own indignity.

I shook my head trying to shake free all those tormenting thoughts. Then I placed "Zumdath's - Introduction to General Chemistry" under my arm and began the long walk home.

I walked pondering, in a trance like state. Suddenly, I was distracted by the foulest of odors. I continued to walk searching for its source. It followed me. After several glances I finally looked down at my feet. There it was, dog shit all over my left shoe!

Those were the days before “Pooper Scoopers” were in fashion and the chance of a fateful encounter with dog shit was had on every sidewalk. I found a stick, picked it up, leaned against a nearby tree and began the loathsome task of cleaning my shoe with it.

As I continued to scrape the most sinister of ideas arose. “Wicked but beautiful” I thought to myself as I finished the scraping and threw the excrement covered stick into the gutter.

Evidently, it was garbage night because as I walked I passed a myriad of trash cans. At the top of one of the garbage piles sat an empty, plastic, gallon milk container. It was exactly what I was looking for. As I continued along I found a second and then a third container. It was as if the hand of fate was guiding me in my scheme. I picked up all three and continued homeward.

When I got home I immediately picked up the phone and called Henry Glass. He had quit school in our senior year. It wasn't because he was stupid or lazy. It was because his

father, an alcoholic abuser, had kicked him out of the house. At the age of eighteen Henry found himself with no means of support and nowhere to stay. Reporting his father to the authorities meant he would live in terrifying fear of his father from that time on, so he chose the alternative. Henry got a job with a local delivery service and moved into a shabby, one room apartment on the other side of town and began life on his own.

I started the conversation by asking him if he was still working for the delivery service. He said he did. I knew he was before I asked because I had seen him just two days before on one of his delivery routes.

Then, I continued by telling him that I had been invited to a costume party and thought that a cheap disguise for me would be the “Maytag Man”. At the time the “Maytag Man” was featured in a popular TV commercial that was constantly splashed all over the airwaves.

“Can I borrow one of your uniforms as my costume?” I asked.

Although it was a pretty weak premise it was all I could think of at the moment and it worked. I immediately went over to Henry's and picked it up.

The next day I went out to search for ammunition. It was easy to find. Equipped with two plastic bags, one for my hand and one for collection, I walked down several streets with head bowed looking for my quarry, dog droppings. It didn't take long before the bag became half filled with the foul-smelling mass. It was a distasteful task to say the least, but it had to be done. The alternative was to continue bearing the remorse of not having in some way avenged my despoilment.

When I got back home I took a funnel and one of the plastic containers to the backyard. Holding my breath as best I could I forced half of the excrement which I had collected into the funnel and washed it into the bottle with water from the garden hose. When it was almost filled, I capped it and shook it well. I repeated same process with a second bottle.

Now the only thing left to complete the preparation for my plan was to get an empty box from the local grocery store. I carefully taped brown wrapping paper on the sides of the box so as to make it appear as a delivery package while leaving the top open.

I put one of the filled jars in the box together with the funnel to which was attached a short length of garden hose. Everything was ready to go. I went to bed that night eager for the next day to begin.

I got up the next morning, donned the uniform that I had borrowed from Henry, took the package and the second filled, plastic bottle from the garage. I carefully placed it in the trunk and drove to Ashberg's house. It was nine A.M. and no one was home of that I was sure. I had ridden by the place at the same time on several different occasions and had seen it deserted.

I pull the hat brim down over my eyes and opened the trunk. I carefully lifted the package from it and walked to

the front door of the house with the best official looking stride that I could muster.

Once there, I took out the funnel and threaded the attached hose through the mail slot opening. I opened the cap of the plastic container. The foul smell of the concocted slurry that it contained instantaneously burst forth. I took a breath and held it as I poured the vile mixture into the funnel and through the mail slot.

Just as I felt I was about to lose consciousness from holding my breath the jug was emptied. I placed the funnel and empty container back into the box, straightened up and walked back to the car. I opened the trunk, put the box in a plastic bag and closed it with a wire tie.

Within minutes I arrived at Swartzbard's house which was also unoccupied and using the second container of noxious solution carried out the same spiteful act. I drove to the dumpster behind the A&P and discarded all the remaining evidence there.

I felt as if I had been freed from the self-loathing that had plagued ever since my conversation with Becky at the library. I had avenged the wrongdoing and my feelings of having been played as fool evaporated. The constantly nagging thoughts of retribution disappeared. I could again walk with my head held high.

I parked the car on a side street, shut off the engine and sat silently. Images of Ashberg and Swartzbard discovering my sordid gifts swept through my mind and I smiled broadly with satisfaction at those lingering thoughts. I was tempted to repeatedly drive passed each of the houses hoping to witness them finding the depraved spectacles I had left. I had to use all the strength that I could summon to resist the temptation.

After several moments, I restarted the car and headed homeward.

All my urges had been satisfied. All my vengeful thoughts had been extinguished and I had not one iota of remorse.

I felt “Just fucking great!”

Chapter Two

The Surprise

It was the first day at State and I am moving on, on to bigger and better things. My schedule looked great in spite of "General College Chemistry I". My professors looked great, on paper anyway since I hadn't attended any classes yet. Even better my roommate was my old high school bud, Richie.

He never got the Ivy school football scholarship he had hoped for and his disappointment was profound, I'd say sometimes bordering on suicidal. Soon after the rejection, he got a real good bite here at State and it turned his entire mentality of defeat to elation.

State wasn't Ivy but it was a good school with big time football. I guess the prospect of playing in front of seventy thousand fans on a Saturday, made up for not getting that

Ivy scholarship after all. He never again even mentioned the word "Ivy" during our entire four years.

All the courses at State were challenging to say the least.

By the time our college careers at State ended, Richie and I had become even closer than in high school.

Throughout the four years, he and I had spent many hours together preparing for exams and writing lab reports.

I was always ready to help him with the books and he in return greatly improved my social life. BMOC (big men on campus) always have lots of friends and lots of girls and BMOC's buds do pretty well too!

His football career at State was outstanding. Outstanding was putting it mildly, he was selected as an All- American and his academics ranked well also. Considering the demands that big time football places on its athletes, he did exceptionally well with the books. I did considerably better but then of course, I didn't have to bear the burdens of constant practice sessions and games.

The time finally came to take the MCATs. I signed up for the prep class that everyone told me was essential to do well on the test.

The first evening I walked into the class and my mouth dropped open. There seated in the front row was Richie motioning to me to take the seat adjacent to his.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“You don’t think I was going to let all that studying go to waste, do you?” he replied with a grin.

I knew that several pro teams had offered Richie a ton to play for them. He had told me many times that he couldn’t wait for the first big game and the first big pay day. So, what was he doing here in an MCAT prep class beside me?

“Are you planning to go to med school and play pro ball in your spare time?” I asked facetiously.

“You got it backwards. I’m playing and going to med school in my spare time” he laughed.

“Of course not! Here’s what's really going on.

After the third game this season I started gettin' these awful headaches. Like killers, man. I was throwin' up, got dizzy and couldn't get outta bed.

Then it went away and the next day I felt fine again.

After the next game it happened all over again but this time it lasted for two days so I went to the doctor.

I got the MRI, the EEG and PET Scan treatment. The whole nine yards" he continued.

"And what did they say?" I interrupted.

"Well, here's the bottom line. They said 'If you want to wind up like Ali, keep on playing.

Then I asked them if I could finish the season at least" he answered.

"They must have said 'yes' because you did finish" I said.

"Well, not really. They said it's not a good idea but me, being me, I didn't listen, so I did finish."

"Did you have any more of those headache and vomiting incidents?"

“Yes, I did and that’s what finally convinced me. It was pretty hard to swallow but you gotta do what you gotta do if you know what I mean!

Everybody’s gotta have a job and since mine can’t be pro football I gotta settle for the next best and that’s why I’m here.

You know what, I was thinking about this a whole lot and in the end it’s probably better this way.

I can go back home and really help people out every day instead of just entertaining them on Sunday afternoons.”

He paused.

“Maybe I’m just rationalizing, trying to make myself feel better?” he concluded.

“No, I don’t think so. I think you’re right on” I replied sympathetically.

When the scores came in Richie did pretty damn good and so did I.

He got a 32 and I got a 35 both good enough for admission to good schools.

And so, it happened, that in May of our senior year, we both left for med school but not the same one. He went west to Pitt and I stayed right here at NYU.

Chapter Three

The Patients

The most challenging of all was my first experience in anatomy lab. I can remember it as if it was yesterday.

The class consisted of twenty-eight students. The first day we all arrived at the lab room entrance only to find the door closed and locked. A sheet of paper had been taped over the small window in the door.

We waited.

At the precise time the lab was scheduled to begin, the door swung open revealing a small, thin man wearing heavy spectacles and a soiled white lab coat. He closed the door behind him and spoke in a squeaky, high pitched voice.

“I am Doctor Demus, your anatomy professor for this term.

I will introduce you to my patients in a few moments.

Does everyone have his equipment, lab coat, goggles and dissection kit?"

Everyone nodded in unison.

"Okay then, take a deep breath and come on in" and he held the door open widely for all to enter.

Spread throughout the room before us were several metal tables bearing sheet covered corpses. The air in the room was brisk and bore a faint, acrid smell.

"Please assemble in groups of four around one of our patients" he announced as he pointed to the sheet shrouded tables behind him.

"Please note his number on the clip at the foot of the table and remember it. He will be yours for the rest of this course."

My guy was WM1432.

"Treat them with care and respect.

All of these people are your patients because without them and those like them you would never have the opportunity to master the art of anatomy and all that is

required for you to become a competent physician and treat living patients. They, then in a sense, are your very first patients. For this we owe them a great debt.

I am fully aware that some people choose to call these brethren, specimens. Please never let me hear that term used in this class. If I do ever hear that reference I will have to assume that the one using it has little respect for human life. I don't believe that anyone with that level of disrespect could ever be a good physician, and thus I refuse to participate in preparing such an uncaring doctor. I will have to ask him to leave the course immediately.

We must repay the debt to our patients lying here with respect and much diligent study of the things they will show you during your time with them. Having given us this gift they and I will expect no less than your complete dedication to the study and full mastery of anatomy during this class.

Now, please remove the cover from the face of your patient, step back and repeat a silent prayer for him in

repayment for the kindness of his gift to you” Demus instructed.

Everyone in my group hesitated. I finally reached out and pulled the shroud away revealing his face from beneath the sheet.

He was an older man, appearing to be in his sixties with a gaunt face and sunken eyes. He was partially bald, with thin lips and large ears. His wax-like skin bore several pock marks on his cheeks and he had "turkey neck" skin encircling his throat.

Then, as instructed everyone bowed his head for a brief moment in prayer.

Although we were told not to name our patients, one of the girls in our group insisted. She said it would make her feel more sensitive and respectful as we went about our morbid task. We all decided she was probably right.

Secretly of course, we named him ‘Fred’ because he kind of looked like Fred Flintstone.

I believe that the speech given by Doctor Demus was designed to serve two purposes.

The first was, as he had said, to instill respect for the person who had donated himself so that we could learn in order to help others. The second was to mute the initial impact of our facing a room full of lifeless corpses which we were to dismember piece by piece during the upcoming term.

To be honest, I'm not sure if that was really his second objective but it worked for me. It made the task less grizzly and more a labor of dedication and one of seeking knowledge.

As the term went on, I began to revere Doctor Demus even more. His understanding, skill and willingness to help each and every student far exceeded that of any instructor which I had encountered thus far. He often allowed me and several others to stay long after the lab officially ended. His encouragement, enthusiasm and patience

urged us far beyond the normal requirements of the course.

At long last, the end of the term arrived. My patient, Fred had been reduced to a mass of bone and sinew. He had given us all the knowledge he had to give.

Throughout the term, John Herms, a senior premed student had faithfully served as our lab assistant. He removed Fred and his companion patients from their chilly entombment before each lab session and then replaced them properly when we were finished. He also respectfully disposed of those remains which had been completely dissected were no longer needed for further study. Additionally, he kept everything clean and disinfected.

The very last day of class I approached John.

“I know that you are a senior and will be graduating next week. I remember you said that you have been admitted to an internship. I kind of assume that your job here will be open” I began.

“Pretty sure” he replied.

“How do I apply for it?” I asked.

“You gotta see Doc and ask him. If he says ‘yes’ then you go down to the administration building and fill out the paperwork and you’ve got the job. That’s how I did it” he answered.

“There are not a lot of people that want this job and you seem to be a pretty good student, so I think he’ll probably take you” he continued.

The next day I walked into Demus’s office and asked him for the job as John had suggested.

I got the job!

I was to begin three days before to the opening of the fall semester.

I arrived early, eager to impress Demus.

My starting tasks were to clean the place thoroughly, set up each lab table and make sure that each “patient” was tagged and ready to be assigned to his group of students in the upcoming semester.

At the end of the day Demus motioned me over to speak with him. I was hoping for a complement on the quality of my work.

Instead he said, "Tomorrow we have a special delivery coming in at seven o'clock in the morning and I want you to be here."

"What do you mean by a special delivery?" I asked so as to prepare myself for the job ahead.

"We will be receiving three additional patients. They will be arriving in the usual way, by van.

One of them is a very good find, a young man who was not diseased. The two others are slender, middle aged females also said not to be diseased and in exceptional condition.

Patients today are hard to find, especially those who have not been the victims of disease or not mutilated in an accident. We must be here to be sure they are in the condition they are said to be and make sure they are stored properly. These bodies are very expensive and not

easily replaced so we must take good care of them” he answered.

“Expensive?” I asked in surprise.

“I thought that all of them had donated their bodies?”

“Yes, that’s true, they have been kind enough to donate themselves to us, but the costs charged to us for preparation, pick up, delivery and storage are quite high. They are often between two and six thousand dollars each. So, considering that, we must be here for their arrival to make sure they are in the condition they are said to be. We will be here at seven sharp. Also, I think it is befitting that we be here to show them some deserved respect by greeting them. Wouldn’t you agree?” he answered.

“Yes, certainly!” I stammered as convincingly as I could.

The next morning, I rode into the parking lot at a quarter to seven with a white van following behind me. It pulled over and backed up to the rear door of the lab.

“Mortuary Services, Inc, Green Tree, PA” was written in small, black lettering on the side door.

As I entered the lab, I could see through the open rear door, three body bags lying in the back of the van. Demus was talking with the van driver and his assistant and upon seeing me he enthusiastically waved me over.

“Which are the empty drawers?” he asked.

“Number twelve, fourteen and fifteen” I replied.

“Okay, put a table in front of each and these strong young men will put one of our new patients on each” he instructed as he looked at the driver and companion.

I dutifully did as he instructed, and the men did also as they were told.

Demus took the clipboard from the driver and began to read.

“Number 1473CF - Caucasian female, age forty-seven, five feet three, one hundred and forty two pounds, no visible wounds or puncturing, COD - barbiturate overdose.

Unzip the bag and let’s see” he instructed.

I reached over and did as he asked so as to reveal a blonde woman fitting the precise description he had read from the sheet.

Demus bent over the corpse and carefully examined it for several minutes.

“Looks okay, she looks good. Put her in twelve. The driver’s assistant and I lifted the body, placed it on the protruding slab, slid it into the open catacomb and closed the door.

Demus turned to the next page on the clip board.

“Number 5297BM - Black male, age twenty-five, six feet three, two hundred and fifteen pounds, one wound in left carotid artery, COD - blood loss

These papers never tell the real legal cause of death. They never use the words ‘suicide’ or ‘murder’. They just cite the physiological cause of death like this one ‘blood loss’.

I would bet this is a homicide. A severed carotid, of this magnitude, is rarely an accident.

From my experience it's always murder especially when a young person is involved.

Unzip the bag and let's have a look see" he commanded.

I again reached over and unzipped the bag.

I spontaneously let out a loud gasp.

I recoiled at the sight of the face that confronted me.

I could feel the blood drain from my face, my knees weakened, and I felt my stomach begin to cramp.

It was Richie!

"Holy shit!

Holy shit!"

The words rolled through my brain over and over and over again.

I was so startled that nothing else would come into mind.

It was all that I could think.

I had been with him but a month ago, during the holidays.

He couldn't stop talking about how satisfied he was with his choice to become a doctor instead of playing pro ball.

He continually talked of how a career of saving people from the misery of their illnesses would be far more rewarding than merely "entertaining them on a Sunday afternoon".

Now, I was staring down at his cold, lifeless face, lying on an anatomy lab gurney. All the enthusiasm and vitality, all the hopes and dreams had been drained, leaving only a collection of tissue and bone to be dismembered by a group of fledgling med students.

The incredible injustice of it all filled me with a swirling mix of sadness and anger.

I could feel it consuming me as I gazed at Richie's ashen corpse lying before me.

Then Demus's words came thundering through the haze as he leaned over to examine the wound more carefully.

"Nice clean cut. Sure, looks like a knife to me."

Then he looked up.

"What's the matter boy?"

Are you okay?

This surely isn't the first corpse you've ever seen.

What's the matter?" he repeated.

I struggled to conjure up a reply.

"Well, I feel pretty sick" I stammered.

"Too much late night and I got you up too early today I guess" he quipped.

"Go into my office and sit down for a while and you'll feel better. I'll finish up here."

I stumbled into the office and sat silently trying to comprehend what I have just seen.

After a moment or two, I began to question myself. Was that really Richie or was I hallucinating?

Maybe it was just somebody that looked like Richie and it was not really him after all.

But then again, the body did come from Green Tree, Pennsylvania. I knew that was right outside of Pittsburgh. Richie had told me several times that he was glad he was accepted to med school out in Pitt because his aunt lived

nearby in Green Tree, well Cannonsburgh which is another small town, right next to Green Tree.

He talked about how he was looking forward to being able to go there every once in a while for a good, home cooked meal at his aunt's house.

Oh well, maybe it was all just coincidence I thought soberly, hoping to convince myself.

Immediately after that thought, "Hoping doesn't make it so", as my mother used to say, flashed through my mind.

I grasp the arms of the chair to steady myself and slowly arose. I walked into the lab and approached cabinet fourteen, opened the door and pulled out the tray.

Demus turned when he heard the noise.

"Are you okay now?" he asked.

I nodded and continued to pull the cloth shroud from the body exposing the right leg.

I could feel a knot in the pit of my stomach.

There it was!

A small, red and black tattoo of a hawk and the number eighty-eight, our college mascot and Richie's football number stared back at me from the calf.

All the attempts at convincing myself had been in vain.

It was Richie!

I recovered the body and rolled the tray back into the cabinet.

I went back to the office and awaited Doctor Demus's return.

When he did, I told him the entire story.

From that time on, I was plagued by thoughts of Richie and wonderings of how this could have happened to him.

He wasn't a gang member or a drug dealer as far I knew. I had known him for many years, all through high school and college and I was sure I would have known about those kinds of things, had they existed.

He wasn't even a smoker or a big drinker. He'd have a few now and then but very seldom. He was always about

staying in shape for football. As a matter of fact, he was almost always the designated driver whenever we partied. Throughout the following days, I couldn't shake the image of his cold, blood drained face staring up at me from that open body bag. I couldn't shake the feeling of how unfair it all was. I couldn't shake the wondering of why and how it happened.

Every aspect of my life suffered as these thoughts constantly taunted me.

I found it increasingly difficult to concentrate, to study and to sleep.

I became obsessively compelled to find the answers to those questions.

Demus knew I was feeling poorly, and I was sure he knew why. I didn't hide my sadness and confusion very well. I just couldn't.

Every day when I came to the lab he asked me how I felt. My immediate reply was a lie, "I'm okay Doc".

He had been extremely kind, and consoling and I didn't want to burden him.

However, after two weeks of unceasing anguish, I could keep up the pretense no longer.

I felt an overwhelming urge to confess the truth of my unceasing depression and hoping to relief the inner pain.

Upon entering the lab he greeted me with his usual compassionate inquiry.

"How are you feeling today".

I hesitated.

"Well, to be honest, not that good" I answered half-heartedly.

He too, then hesitated as if instinctively fearing that which he was about to hear.

"Tell me more Boy" he then replied sympathetically.

Maybe Doc could help me to get some answers and so I confessed every morsel of torment that afflicted me in one long outburst.

At the conclusion of my explanation, he put his hand on my shoulder and spoke.

“I’ll call the funeral home which sent the body and see if we can get some answers for you.

Let me go and look up the number.”

“I think it was Mortuary Services in Green Tree Pennsylvania. That was the name on the van:” I volunteered.

“That’s not the funeral home. They are only the delivery service. They pick up the body from the funeral home and deliver it to us, for a hefty fee, of course.

I’ll have to contact them to find the name of the funeral home” he answered as he reached for the phone.

Several minutes later his phone conversation was ended.

Doc hung up the phone and spoke.

“It’s the Henderson Funeral Home in Cannonsburgh. It’s just south of Pittsburgh.

Let me call the funeral home. I remember the guy who owns it. I remember talking to him a couple of years ago

about a cadaver that was send to us out of his home that wasn't embalmed correctly, and he was very cooperative. His name was Mort Highberg. Kinda funny and hard to forget, a mortician named Mort, don't you think?

Let me call him and see what he knows" Doc volunteered. He dialed the phone.

"Hello, this is John Demus at NYU med school. I would like speak with Mort Highberg."

There was a silence.

"Hello, Mort, this is John Demus at NYU. We spoke with each other about a year or two ago."

A pause and Demus then continued speaking.

"No, no problems this time.

I'm just calling about a cadaver that was sent to us out of your home a few days ago. We have no problem with it; I am just trying to get some information about the deceased. It seems that my lab assistant recognized him as an old friend and it also appeared that he might have been the victim of a homicide. Do you know if that's true or not?"

Again, there was a pause.

“Well, I can give you the tag number” replied Demus as he shuffled through the papers on the clipboard.

“Here we go - 5297BM.”

There was another long pause.

“Oh, so I was right. It was a homicide. Can you give me some details?”

Oh, I see. Well, okay then, I guess that’s what we’ll have to do.

Thanks”, and he promptly hung up the phone.

“Well, I didn’t get much, and I really don’t know if it’s because he didn’t have any information, or he just wouldn’t give any to me. To be honest, the tone in his voice was very unconvincing when he said he knew nothing about the situation.

You know Cannonsburgh is a pretty small town. I grew up in a small town and news travels fast in those places, especially bad news.

Something like a murder happening in a small town like that, Christ, even people with dementia would know what happened” Demus explained.

“So, what did he say?” I asked eagerly.

“He said the only thing he could tell me is what appeared in the paper and that wasn’t much.

Your friend was found dead on a back street and the police said he might have been a murder victim, but it wasn’t officially filed as a homicide and there wasn’t much of an investigation. He said he didn't know anything more about it."

“How could a twenty-five-year-old or anybody for that matter, be found with a severed carotid artery and the police suspect it might be homicide but not thoroughly investigate?

Do you really think a body could be found like that and the local press not call for a detailed investigation in spite of the police not officially listing it as murder? Could they

both really be that incompetent or is it something else?" I replied.

"Local police in a small town never want the public to know about a major crime happening in their town. They might feel it makes them look bad, like they're not really doing their job of protecting the public.

Maybe that was the reason it wasn't officially listed as murder and not thoroughly pursued?

But then again, it does seem strange that no one would discover that it was most surely a murder just through local gossip if nothing else.

Like I said before, I grew up in a small town and everybody knew everything about everybody, at all times. If it actually was murder as I think, I would bet it would be the first in a hundred years in that town. I would think that the cops would do whatever they could to keep the record clean for another hundred years, too." he answered.

“Here, see if you can find any crime statistics for Cannonsburgh or maybe even a police report” he said as he motioned towards the computer.

I immediately did as he suggested.

I typed in “Crime statistics for Cannonsburgh, PA” and to my surprise, up it came.

Murders per 100,000 stretching back to 2001. All zeros.

I called Doc over and pointed to the screen. He nodded.

“Find the website for the local paper” he suggested.

“Newspaper Cannonsburgh PA” and “Cannonsburgh Gazette” flashed onto the screen.

I moved to the site map. No archive pages were listed.

“Nothing here Doc” I replied.

There was silence as we both sat staring at the screen.

“What now?” I thought aloud.

“Find the Cannonsburgh website” said Doc.

“Okay, find the police department page.

Ah, there it is, phone 590-809-4500 – Chief Harold Hawkings” he said pointing to the screen.

“Let’s call and see if we can get the police report on your friend’s death” and he handed the phone to me.

I dialed.

“Cannonsburgh Police - Dispatcher Grapp.

“I would like to obtain the police report on a recent death in Cannonsburgh” I replied.

“One moment please” and the phone went silent and then finally “Chief’s Hawkings office” the voice on the phone announced.

“I would like to obtain the police report on a recent death in Cannonsburgh” I repeated.

“And what report is it that you are interested in obtaining?”

“The death of Richard Whiteman” I answered.

“One moment please” she replied.

Silence again.

Then - “And what is your name?”

I gave her my name and then - “And why are you inquiring about this report?”

“The person was a close friend of mine” I answered.

This time I could hear a muffled conversation in the background.

“This death is still under investigation. We are still trying to decide if a crime has been committed.

Chief Hawkings has decided to seal the report until the further investigation can be completed. Please call back at a later time when this information may become available.

Thank you for calling” and with that the phone went dead.

The disappointment of that terse, uninformative conversation served to compel me even more.

I called back each and every week during the following six weeks.

I remained undiscouraged, if anything, my obsession grew with each inquiry. Soon, the woman who answered the phone recognized my voice and responded immediately as soon as I began to speak. Each time the

answer was the same but even more abrupt than the one before.

Chapter Four

A Ride for Richie

I knew it wasn't the smart thing to do but I couldn't think of any other way to relieve the nagging thoughts that plagued me. My studies suffered. My social life suffered. My whole mentality had collapsed into a constant obsession. It was the only way I knew to end the pain. To be honest, I wasn't even sure that this would end the anxiety. It all depended upon what I would discover. I had to find out how a guy with such a selfless spirit and zest for life could wind up murdered in a small hick town and lying on my lab table at the age of twenty-five. The one way I knew to grant his memory the respect it deserved was to find out why, how and who had committed the lethal act.

I was wondering what Doc Demus would think when he got my note. I was hoping that he would understand and

respect my decision. I had had many conversations with him throughout the term and had mentioned my intentions on several occasions.

He was an insightful man and was fully aware of my mental state. Each time I spoke with him he struggled to talk me out of my raging compulsion.

I knew he was a man of no religion, maybe even an atheist but surely an agnostic at best. In spite of it, he still used the old, "Let vengeance be mine sayeth the Lord" and quotes from Dante's "Inferno" trying to expel my demon.

As I drove towards Cannonsburgh, I could hear my mother's voice echoing in my head. It repeated her litany of admonishments for my "fool hearty and more than likely, even dangerous venture" as she had called it.

I had only one semester to go before my internship and now I had dropped out.

I was headed to Cannonsburgh to find answers to the questions that haunted me.

As I neared the town, my eyes scanned the roadside for a motel with a “vacancy” sign. I passed several but all of them looked like high rent. Then, about three miles into my search I found what I was looking for, “Kathy’s Place Motel”, no big chain, just a small, well worn, mom and pop operation and looking cheap.

I pulled in.

The woman behind the desk looked to be about in her sixties, stocky, with short gray hair and a broad smile. She wore a name badge, “Hi I’m Kathy”.

“Forty a night, thirty-five by the week” she announced as I approached the desk.

“How did you know what I was going to ask?” I answered.

“That’s what everybody asks the first thing when they walk into this place. Why would you be any different?” she said with a grin.

I smiled back and replied, “Let me see it”.

We walked to a room at the far end of the parking lot behind the office.

It was small but well kept. It didn't have the dinginess that I was expecting. It had a good-sized TV, the old fashion CRT type, an in the wall AC with a rumbling fan, an old but sparkling clean bathroom and hopefully, no bed bugs. "I'll take it" I announced, "For a week, two thirty-five, right?"

"You got bad math maybe on purpose, huh?" she replied. I smiled as she hesitated for a moment.

"But okay, I guess. I'm not going to argue for ten bucks", she sighed as we walked back to the office.

I unpacked the car and went out to get a six pack of beer to keep me company for the night. I came back, popped open a bottle and sat on the edge of the bed.

"What the hell am I doing here?" I thought.

"Christ only knows! Maybe I'm going nuts after all?" came my own sobering answer from deep within.

I didn't go back for my last semester and now to make it even crazier, I was spending my tuition money on an adventure with a purpose of which I was unsure. I really didn't know why or what I would do next.

The only thing I did know for sure is that I had to do something to relief the constant gnaw at my psyche. I couldn't shake the ceaseless internal inquisition as to how and why my best friend could have wound up dead on a morgue slab.

To simply sit and ponder day after day would not lessen the pain. I had to act. Rationally, I knew that acting without clear purpose or plan was a fool's errand but felt compelled to do something and as foolish as it might be, this was it.

Coming to Cannonsburgh, the place of Richie's death was the only thing I could think of doing and somehow it did serve to reduce my anxiety. Why, I really didn't know but it did.

I took another long slug of beer and finished the first bottle.

“It will probably take another two or three more beers to help me figure out what to do next” I thought to myself with a snicker.

I popped the next and proceeded to rip through the six-pack at lightning speed.

The next thing I recall was the sound of a car starting out in the parking lot. Sunlight poured in through the window. I raised my head a few inches from the pillow and felt a sharp pain across my forehead. My head fell back to the pillow as if struck by a sledge hammer.

“Ethyl is not a lady! She shows you a real good time at night and the next morning she turns out to be a bitch!” I thought.

Several minutes passed and I finally summoned the strength to stumble into the bathroom and wash the cotton from my mouth.

I looked in the mirror. My eyes looked like “two piss holes in the snow” as we used to say when I was a kid.

I grabbed a couple of aspirin from my suitcase hoping they might provide some relief.

I walked over to the armchair next to the window and sat down. As soon as I did that relentless, nagging thought returned and with even more ardor.

“What should I do next?”

I guess my hope that the additional five beers would have helped to answer my question didn't really work out because there it was again, still unanswered.

Going to the Cannonsburgh police station wouldn't prove a thing. I had called there so often that they knew it was me by the sound of my voice. As far as getting any information goes, well, I got none.

Every time the same old story, "The case is under investigation and no information is available at this time".

Richie had often spoken about his aunt "OMM" he called her. She was his father's sister and that was the nickname

he had given her. He pronounced it "Omm" like the Buddhist mantra word, but it was spelled "OMM" and it stood for Old Maid Madeline.

Evidently, Richie's aunt was never married and thus was dubbed with OMM. He never mentioned her full name only her first name and the nickname she had been given. He just always called Aunt OMM.

I assumed being his father's unmarried sister; it was most probably Madeline Williams.

He said that his aunt was a teacher at the high school in Cannonsburgh.

I reached for my laptop and punched in "Cannonsburgh High School". The website came up in a flash and I clicked on the "staff" tab.

There she was "Madeline Williams - English I and II".

"I should have done this long before I decided to drive all the way out here" I thought to myself, but I didn't, so what is done is done.

I clicked on "Contact" and wrote:

"Dear Ms. Williams

I am a longtime friend of your nephew Richie.

He and I attended both high school and college together. News of his death reached me several weeks ago. I was greatly saddened and disturbed by it.

I have been seeking information about the circumstances of his death ever since but have obtained no details. I was not even able to obtain a crime report from your local police.

I looked for his death notice in your town's newspaper on the Internet, but it was not archived.

I would like to speak with you about this at your earliest convenience.

My phone number is 876-888-9874.

I look forward to hearing from you."

I signed my name and clicked "Send".

It wasn't long before my phone rang. It was Madeline.

With a brief conversation we arranged to meet that afternoon, after school at the "Coffee Cup".

The "Coffee Cup" was located on Main Street in downtown Cannonsburgh. It was easy to find.

"Downtown" consisted of about twenty small shops, a couple of bars, a bank, two gas stations and of course, a CVS, a Burger King and a McDonald's.

I parked in front and walked in. Madeline was waiting for me.

I knew it was she since she was the only black person in the place. She appeared to be in her well-preserved fifties, slim, of light complexion, with short curly, bleached hair and well dressed.

She was a good-looking woman for her age. I was surprised by her appearance. I always associated "Old Maids" with a short, dowdy, plain look.

Madeline didn't at all meet my expectations in that regard. I introduced myself, sat down and after a bit of courteous banter got down to business.

"I don't know if you are aware of this, but Richie was murdered" I said and followed it with an explanation of

how I had seen his body in the anatomy lab and how Doctor Demus had immediately identified him as a murder victim.

"That's not what the paper said. It didn't say a thing about murder.

It was a very short piece which said that a young man was discovered on the sidewalk at about two AM by a paroling police car and that the cause of death was assumed to be accidental. It said that blood tests found the victim was intoxicated and that probably contributed to his death.

It also said that no identification was found on the body. That's all it said."

"So how did you find out it was Richie?" I asked.

"Well, he had come to visit with me two days before. He used to come and visit his "Old Auntie" as he called me, once or twice a year when he had vacation time from school. He'd usually stay two or three days.

The night he was found, he'd left my house earlier that evening and said he was going down to 'The Miner's Shaft'. It's a bar down town."

"I saw it on the way over here" I interjected.

"He said he was going to meet some friends he'd made over the times he'd been here before when he was visiting with me" she continued.

"Do you know their names?" I again interjected.

"No, I don't.

When he didn't come home that night I got worried. I knew he would never just stay out all night without telling me or at least calling.

I called the bar in the morning and spoke to the bartender. She said Richie had been there for about an hour or two and then left. That's all they knew.

"How did she know it was Richie who was there?" I asked.

"How many black people do you think would be in a white bar in this town and not be noticed?" she replied.

"After that I called the police and reported him missing."

"And what did they tell you?" I asked.

"After I described him they told me about finding his body the night before and I went down to the police station to identify him from the pictures they had taken."

"Did you ever actually see the body?"

"No!

They said they wanted to spare me, and I agreed. I just couldn't"

"What about the funeral?" I asked.

"There wasn't any.

As you know Richie wanted his body to go to science.

He didn't want a funeral either. He always said he wanted people to remember him as he was, not as a 'waxy looking corpse in a box' as he used to say.

So, the end result, we had a memorial service but not a funeral as such." she explained.

"Yeah, said the same thing to me" I answered.

"Did the police give you any more information other than what was in the paper?"

"No, they didn't.

But here's some things that I do know" she then continued.

"Richie was said to be found with no ID. How could he be going to a bar without his wallet?

How would he pay for his drinks?

If he had merely forgotten it, he certainly would have discovered it missing and come back here to get it.

The newspaper said it was determined he was drunk. I never saw Richie get drunk, never!"

I agreed, neither had I.

Then she continued,

"Being a high school teacher in a small town for a long time you pick up a lot of things from the kids either directly or when they're talking with each other.

Sometimes the stuff you hear is all nonsense and rumor but a lot of the time it's true.

The name Derick Hulse came up a couple of times after Richie was murdered and that name rang a familiar bell for a couple of reasons."

"And those reasons being?" I interjected.

"Well, he was in the high school some years back, maybe five or six. He was a whole lot of trouble and I mean trouble with a capital 'T'.

I don't even know if he ever graduated. If he didn't it sure wasn't because they kicked him out. No way was that going to happen."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"He's Harold Hawkings' nephew!" she answered.

"You mean the police chief?" I exclaimed.

"That's him" she replied with a frown.

"You know I think I'm to going to 'The Miner's Shaft' and see if I can dig anything up" I thought out loud.

"Is that a pun?" she asked.

"I guess so, an unintended pun but a pun all the same" I replied.

"Being an English teacher for all these years I just can't help myself in pointing it out" she answered again with a laugh,

I left Madeline with a stern warning from her about being careful with whom and about what I should speak at the bar. It was the only white watering hole in the town and anything said or even suggested, especially by a stranger, would be all over Cannonsburgh within hours.

"Upon whose ears it might fall is anybodies' guess" she added soberly.

I walked to "The Miner's Shaft", about three blocks up the street.

It looked to be a typical country saloon, with faded, red checked curtains in the small windows facing the street. They framed a sputtering, blue "Bud Lite" neon sign shining through the smoke-stained glass.

As I entered the dimly lit bar, the sour smell of stale beer and cigar smoke left over from the night before, filled my nostrils. The bar itself stretched along the entire left wall of the building and several tables each surrounded by well-worn chairs were scattered throughout the room. They

were all covered with plastic table cloths with a pattern similar to that of the window curtains.

It was about four o'clock, the lunch crowd was gone, and the after-work crowd was yet to arrive. There were only two people at the bar, an old guy at the far end talking with a younger man wearing a heavily stained, cook's apron. Behind the bar, seated on a stool, was an attractive young woman fiddling with her cell phone.

I walked over to the bar and sat down. All three looked over toward me with that "Who the fuck is this" kind of stare.

I motioned to the bartender and she begrudgingly slipped the phone into her pocket and walked to my end of the bar.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

I took a good, hard look at her breasts bulging through the tank top she was wearing. It was if I could smell the estrogen emanating from her every pore. I knew it was lust at first sight. My trance-like state must have been

obvious because I said nothing. After a moment or so she snapped her fingers to gain my attention.

"Hey!

What can I do for you?" she asked again in a bit louder voice.

I didn't tell her what I was really thinking. It's not good to be a stranger in a small hick town, especially not a smart-ass stranger so I answered with "How about a hamburger and Bud Lite?"

The guy in the apron stood up and walked back into the kitchen.

"Draught or a bottle?" she again asked.

"Draught" I answered, and she picked up a glass and went to the taps.

I wanted to start a conversation to try and find out if she knew anything about Richie being at the bar the night of his murder. I was pretty sure however, that to start an interrogation right off the bat would get me nowhere real

fast. So instead, I started with idle banter hoping it might lead to something more substantial.

“‘The Miner's Shaft', that's kind of a strange name for a bar?” I began when she returned with the beer.

"Not if you know anything about the old days in Cannonsburgh it isn't" she answered assertively.

"I guess you're not from around here, huh?" she added.

I should have known that a conversation with a stranger in a small hick town bar would certainly prompt that question from a local, but I foolishly hadn't prepared myself with an answer. I passed over the comment as quickly as I could hoping that it wouldn't be asked again until I had time to come up with a feasible reply and luckily it didn't.

"Would you give me another one?" I asked hastily as I gulped down the remaining half a glass of beer.

She immediately picked up the glass and refilled it.

"So, tell me about the name "The Miner's Shaft;" I again quickly asked upon her return and she readily obliged me with the story.

"Well, years ago this was a coal mining town. The guy that owns this place like pretty much everybody else worked in the mines. About twenty-five years ago there was a strike. Every mine in the area was involved and it lasted a long time. The coal company that ran the mines decided they would just wait the strikers out and kinda starve them out, if you know what I mean.

So, after a couple of months into the strike the miners threw in the towel and decided to go back to work.

When they finally went back, they found that the company had closed all the mines and chained off all the entrances, so nobody had a job anymore.

Then one night, one of Pete's friends, Pete's the guy that owns this place, broke into the mine property. He was really depressed. He had five kids and no job.

So, he broke in and committed suicide by throwing himself down the mine shaft, about three hundred feet. He left a note for his wife telling what he was planning to do and why. They found his body the next day.

The whole town went nuts. A bunch of them went to the mine and threw some gasoline down the shaft and lit it on fire. It's still burning today and that was years ago. When the wind blows right you can still kinda smell it.

Well, anyway, Pete, just luckily, after all this happened came into some money. I think it was his great aunt died and left him a few bucks. Like I said this was just after they closed the mines on the guys so he like the rest of them didn't have a job.

So, he decided to open this place and since all the miners in the town got shafted he called it "The Miner's Shaft". I always thought that was a pretty cool name. Like a mine shaft and the miners gettin' shafted. Get it?"

"Yeah, pretty cool" I replied.

The conversation continued.

She told me her name was Sally and Sally could talk. She was like one of the old fashion, wind up monkey toys that used to clap the cymbals and dance around. Once you wound it up and flipped the switch it wouldn't stop. It just kept going on and on.

Actually, it was good for me. I didn't have to continually come up with something to talk about so as to keep the conversation going. All I had to do was nod occasionally and interject a word or brief question here and there. She did the rest. I am guessing that she was tired of talking with the same old people day after day and the opportunity to speak with someone new, anyone new that is, was a welcome relief from the boredom. I don't think that it was my engaging personality, charm or good looks that inspired her voluminous chatter,

After about an hour or so, the work crowd began to dribble in. Each time she was forced to leave the conversation to serve the newly arrived patrons, she apologized profusely and returned immediately after.

Soon, the place was pretty much filled, and Sally had little time to continue her talk with me. Seeing that little more would be said and the fact that I probably had a few too many beers, I threw a five-dollar tip on the bar and waved goodbye.

As I walked back to my car I mulled over our lengthy chat trying to decide how I could squeeze in questions about Richie in our next conversation without them seeming to just come out of the blue.

When I got to the car, I opened the door, slid behind the wheel and fell fast asleep.

The next thing I knew there was a tap, tap on the window. I looked up at one of Cannonsburgh's finest shining a flashlight straight into my eyes.

I rolled the window down.

"You okay Mister?"

"Yeah, yeah - I'm fine. I was just a little tired, so I closed my eyes and I guess I was more tired than I thought" I replied.

"You all rested up now?" he asked with a bit of sarcasm.

"I'm fine" I replied.

"Okay, go on home and go to bed" and with that he got back in the cop car and drove away. I drove back to the motel, sprawled on the bed and went back to sleep.

Chapter Five

Friends and Fears

During the next two days, I spent a lot of the afternoons at The Miner's Shaft talking with Sally for hours on end and getting pretty drunk besides.

Before my second afternoon with Sally, I had carefully concocted a story about the purpose of my visit to Cannonsburgh. I had gone to the local library and looked up some of the obits of the past year.

"Ann Fredrickson, 84 of Whitehall Township passed into eternal life on....." one read and further down "she was predeceased by her father Herbert and her mother Elsie..." and no further mention of any children or relatives.

It was just what I was looking for. Upon finding it, I walked up to the librarian who appeared to be in her eighties herself. Just the kind of person I was hoping to find. I assumed from her appearance that she was

probably a Cannonsburgh native, born and bred. I was right.

"I just happened to see an obituary for Anne Fredrickson in one of your old Cannonsburgh Gazette. Did you happen to know Ms. Fredrickson?" I asked.

"Yes, I did. She came here quite often up until a year or two ago. Why do you ask?" she replied.

"Well, it seems I might be related to her" I replied.

"A month or so ago a lawyer called me and advised me of her death and of my possible relationship. He said that thus far, no known heirs had been located and I may be one" I continued as convincingly as I could be.

"I have had many conversations with Anne and she never did mention any relatives, except of course, her father and mother, both of whom are long since dead. I know that she was an only child and was never married. She just lived on the farm with her parents until they passed and then she just continued to live there all alone.

I've been by the place a few times. It's about fifteen miles from here and it's not in very good shape. The farm hasn't been operational for years. All the buildings, the barn, the sheds and the house look as if they're about to collapse any minute. I really don't know how she lasted there as long as she did.

I guess when you have nowhere else to go you've got to do what you've got to do to survive!" she explained.

"That's pretty sad" I interjected.

"I don't even know if there was a formal funeral for her. If there was, who would have come anyway?"

I'm pretty sure both her parents are buried up at Hillsdale Cemetery. It's the only cemetery close by. She's probably there now too.

You could take a ride over and see if you want. I don't know if it would help you any, but I don't think it would hurt.

Maybe you could even go down to Highberg's, that's the funeral home in town, and see what they have to say" she suggested.

Ah, this is perfect I thought to myself.

I'm here to inquire about being a possible heir to the estate of an old lady with no relatives and few friends. No one will have any reason to check up on me or become suspicious of my visit to the town, or so I hoped anyway.

And my story could be a great segue in to raising questions about any recent deaths in the town.

Armed with this guise, I returned to The Miner's Shaft the next afternoon looking for an opportunity to uncover any information that I could about Richie's murder.

Then came Sally's question which I had avoided once before. I knew it would eventually arise again and this time I was ready.

"You never did around to telling me much about yourself?" she asked after the first few minutes of our conversation.

"No, I didn't. It was much more interesting hearing about you and your town" I replied.

"Well, now it's your turn to entertain me" she answered with a broad, enticing smile.

"Did you know Anne Fredrickson?" I began.

"She lived about fifteen miles from here" I continued.

"No! Never heard of her!" answered Sally.

"Never heard of anybody named Fredrickson" she added.

That was a relief. Had she known anything about the old lady or her family she might have become suspicious of my story.

Feeling more at ease, I began my pretense.

I spilled out my story about my supposed great aunt Anne Fredrickson and how I was here in Cannonsburgh to check up on the inheritance that I might be in line to receive.

She appeared to swallow it all with little questioning or comment. After a pause, during which she tended to one of the other few customers at the bar, she returned. I

tossed out the line I had so carefully rehearsed in my mind.

"I was looking at some of the old newspapers in the library trying to find my great aunt's obit and I happened to notice an article about a recent death here in Cannonsburgh.

It was about a guy who went to the same school as I did, a guy named Richard Whiteman. It was pretty surprising that I would stumble on somebody whom I knew, being killed here in Cannonsburgh, don't you think?"

"Why did you say 'killed'?"

It was listed as an accidental death in the paper wasn't it?" she answered.

"Well, yes that's what it said in the article but when I spoke to the librarian about it she said he was 'killed'. So, what's the real story?"

There was a long pause and then she leaned forward over the bar and spoke quietly.

"The real story is you don't want to know anything about it. The less you know, the better off you are around this town."

"What does that mean?" I replied.

"It means you should keep your nose out.

It means that if you know too much you might wind up just like him.

It means if certain people know I told you anything, I might be right there with you" she answered soberly.

"So, you're saying" that he was really killed, and you know more about it but you're not telling right?"

"You got it!" she answered and walked away to tend to a customer at the other end of the bar.

Well, at least now I'm pretty sure Sally knows something about what actually happened to Richie and I'm not just fishing in an empty pond,

It was probably a good idea to drop the subject now, I thought to myself as she returned. I was sure I wasn't going anywhere with more questions, not today anyway.

I didn't want to antagonize her with more uninvited prying. I'd save it for another day and hope for better results.

When Sally returned, I didn't mention a single word more. It was a titanic struggle to contain my relentless, nagging curiosity but I endured throughout the rest of the afternoon.

During the ride back to my room and throughout the rest of the night, I was consumed with finding a subtle way to extract more details of my friend's death from Sally. Try as I might, I was unable to conjure any satisfactory plan.

The next day, I was back at The Miner's Shaft. I was hoping I would simply stumble on another opportunity to broach the subject in an offhand way and that she might have a change of heart.

When I entered, the usual small group of regulars was seated at the bar. This time however, instead of engaging in idle banter, all including Sally, were glued to the TV screen. So, intent was everyone that not one even turned

to acknowledge my entry. It was if all were entranced by the pictures before them.

I slowly walked to the bar while also staring at the screen trying to see what was so captivating.

The camera focused on three men standing in a courthouse doorway. Each stood with both hands raised, flashing the victory sign to the waiting crowd on the sidewalk below.

Suddenly, applause echoed throughout the bar room. The five patrons began in unison, to stamp their feet and cheer.

"Good old American justice the way I see it" one yelled.

"Ain't that a pretty site" chimed in another.

Sally turned away from the TV and walked towards me bearing a scowl and muttering to herself.

"What's this all about?" I asked.

She hesitated and then spoke.

"You don't read the local papers much do you?"

"I guess not!"

The only papers I've been reading lately are the old ones down at the library like I told you" I replied with a smirk.

"So, what's this all about?" I repeated.

She leaned over the bar and spoke quietly.

"I don't really know you that good, but I think I kinda get the drift of where you stand on this from all our talkin'."

"On what?" I snapped.

"Well, you see these guys on the TV, they were just found innocent" she began.

"Innocent of what?" I hastily interjected.

"Keep your voice down and let me finish" she chided.

"These three boys live over in Stopton, about fifteen miles from here. They were all accused of attempted murder and aggravated assault.

Looks like the trial just ended and it was a 'not guilty'."

"So why are all these guys down the other end so excited about that?" I asked.

"Well, it seems the guy they messed up was Jake

Robinson. He owns Jake's Place on the other side of town."

"Jake's Place?" I said.

"Yeah, that's the colored bar over there."

"I thought this was the only bar in town. When I asked a couple of people where the nearest bar was they only mentioned The Miner's Shaft. Nobody ever said anything about Jake's Place" I answered.

"Of course, they didn't. They took one look at you and knew that you wouldn't want to be going to a colored bar so why would they even tell you about it?"

"You haven't told me why these guys are so happy about this verdict" I again asked.

"You know a lot of people, especially where you're from, watch TV and see colored, or should I say African Americans, on it all the time. They kinda figure racism and hatin' blacks is in the past.

Well, they don't live around here!

We've got a whole bunch that no way would ever give up 'nigger hatin' as they call it. Their fathers, their

grandfathers and their great grandfathers all did it and they're not about to give up on it either!

The three guys on the TV and those down the end are all part of that bunch. That's why they're so happy to see white guys found innocent of an attack against a black man.

What's more, they know those guys. They come in here every once in a while, and Mike and Arty drink with them" she said as she nodded her head toward the group at the bar's end.

All that makes it even sweeter for them when they hear the 'not guilty'.

Bunch of assholes!" she added.

There was a brief silence.

"Well, maybe they're not guilty" I said hoping to stimulate more conversation.

"You gotta be shittin' me!" she exclaimed.

"This was about six months ago. All three of them came in here. I guess it was about nine o'clock or so.

I usually work days but that day Freddy, the night bartender called in sick and so Pete asked me to stay on for time and a half, so I stayed.

Anyway, the three of them got pretty drunk and when eleven o'clock rolled around Haha, the tall one, says 'I think I'm goin' to get me some poontang'

"Haha?" I interrupted.

"Yeah, that's his nickname. His real name is Harry, Harry Karse.

It seems when he was a kid, he had kind of a stutter and when they asked him his name in school he used to say 'Ha... Ha... Harry' so they all started callin' him Haha and it stuck.

He never liked it too much, but I guess he had to get used to it cause everybody kept on calling him Haha and they still do."

Then she continued.

Like I said, all of them were pretty shit faced so I didn't think it meant much, but then the other two, Moose and Luke, jumped right in on the idea.

They all got up and left for Jake's."

"Poontang?" I asked.

"Yeah, colored girls!" she replied.

"Who's Moose?"

"His real name is Gary Fine, but he's been Moose ever since I knew him" she replied.

"Then what?" I asked her to continue the story.

"I only know what I've been told but knowin' them as I do I believe it.

They went over to Jake's and got pretty frisky with some of the girls, so Jake cut them off. They didn't take too kindly to that and they got even wilder, so Jake threw 'em all out and they didn't go that easy.

Evidently, a couple of big black guys in the place gave Jake a hand and they roughed them all up pretty good on the way out.

Gettin' kicked out of a colored bar and gettin' an ass whipping besides was pretty embarrassing. I guess they thought their pride was a stake if the story got around, so they had to do something about it.

At two o'clock, when the place closed they caught Jake locking up. They took him around the back where there was a bunch of fire wood. Jake had a little smoke house out there where he used to home smoke ham and ribs and stuff like that.

They grabbed the axe he had by the wood pile and chopped his hand off.

Jake had the good sense to tear off his own shirt and stop the bleeding while he got some help, or he would have bled to death. I really don't know how he did it being in shock and all, but he did.

He ran to the front of the building and good luck for him a car was coming by. He flagged it down and got to the hospital.

He told the cops the story and said when they cut off his hand one of them yelled 'You like to cut people off and so do we'.

Then one of them picked up his hand and threw it into the river behind the building shouting 'You won't be needin' this anymore.

Here fishies! Here fishies!'"

"Some pretty sick stuff" I replied.

"So, the cops went and arrested those three?" I continued.

"Well, not right away.

They said they didn't know who it and they didn't have a clue.

When Jake told 'em who it was, they just said it was way too dark for him to really tell who it and they did couldn't arrest nobody just on his say so.

It took a big march by the colored down in front of the town hall to get them to finally bring those guys in.

The first march didn't really mean much but when they came back the second night things got hotter. I think the

mayor was starting to worry about the town being burned down and so he forced Hawkings to arrest them" she concluded.

"So, you think they were guilty?" I asked.

"I knew them, and I knew Jake. They were smart ass crackers and Jake, he was a pretty straight guy; never caused any trouble for nobody.

He ran a good place for the colored folk around here.

White people used to go there once in a while too and never had no trouble at all. Sometimes they would go with some of the black guys after work and I never heard of any problems.

I even went there a couple of times and I was always treated real good.

Like I said before, I saw all three of them leave here that night, goin' to Jake's, lookin' for trouble.

Now part of the problem is that Derick Hulse is Chief Hawkings' nephew and is best friends with Luke, Haha and Moose, the three guys that was in on it.

Of course, then, even when the cops were forced to investigate, they never found any evidence linking any of them to Jake, if you know what I mean!

So, what happened is Jake and his guys called in the county sheriff and the next thing you know all three of 'em were arrested. The sheriff is an elected job here and I guess he didn't want to take the chance of losing all the colored vote around here so that's why he arrested them real quick.

I'm sure he probably knew too that there was no way in hell that they would ever be convicted of anything, so his arresting them didn't really make a difference.

The trial was over at the county seat. All the juror's live around here and they all sure know they're gonna get some night visits if they find those boys guilty.

Puttin' all this together, I was god damn sure they did it and I was god damn sure that they wouldn't be found guilty but actually seeing it happen, with those shit eatin' grins on their faces!

Well, it's hard for me to take."

"Why do you keep on working here and putting up with these guys day after day like this?" I said as I shifted my eyes and raised my brow towards the men watching the TV.

"I like to eat more than I dislike them" she snapped.

"I've got me, my kid and my mother to look after.

Pete treats me real good and the pay's decent. Where else in this town could I get another job anyway and even if I did I'd probably have to deal with the same kind of people all over again.

One time, I did tell Pete that I was thinkin' about quitting, that I couldn't put up with these assholes anymore. When I did he gave me some good advice.

He said he wasn't too fond of them either, but he knew damn well they were paying the rent and keepin' the lights on. Without them he'd be out of business because if they left they'd probably take half his other customers with them. Most probably they'd start going to Junior's,

another bar over in Dunton. It's only a couple of miles away.

They're all good old boys if you know what I mean.

Then, he reminded me about when I was in high school. I was the lead role in the school play in my senior year. He said that's what I should do here every day, pretend like I'm back in that play.

Why should I let a bunch of yahoos push me out of a good job?

So, you know what, I did exactly what he suggested, and things worked out just fine. Every time I listen to those guys or go and chat them up for a tip, I'm back in that high school play and I don't give a shit what they say.

Watch this" she said and hurried to the men at the far end of the bar. Within seconds, laughter and shouts echoed throughout the room. When she got done with them they were all giddy as school girls at their first dance.

She turned and walked back towards me with a wink and a broad grin.

"See how easy that was? Like Pete said, you just get on the 'it's all in a day's work' attitude."

There was a long pause and then she spoke again this time more soberly.

"You know that question you asked me the other day about your friend?"

Again, she paused as if struggling to get the words out.

"Yeah!" I replied trying not to act too eager.

"The night before they found him he was here.

I wasn't working the bar that night. I stayed after work and was talking with a couple of friends at the table over there.

He used to stop in every once in a while. He said he was visiting with his aunt. I talked with him a little bit and then went back to my friends at the table.

Soon after Hulse comes in and sits about three sits away from him. Then he starts talking to Freddy, the bartender, in a loud voice about the Jake trial. He was making sure that your friend overheard the conversation with all its

'niggers' and 'coons' spliced in every sentence. It was obvious he was baiting your friend. I think they were trying to set him up to get him outside and rob him. So, your friend, he took the bait and said something to Hulse.

Pretty soon him and Hulse were into it heavy and Hulse says 'I wasn't talking to you!

You got a big mouth for a city coon. Let's go outside and let a country boy shut it for you'.

Your friend didn't take it outside right away. He was twice the size of Hulse and he probably knew that Hulse wasn't planning on a one on one or had a weapon with him.

The argument kept going and got even louder and finally got to pushing and shoving.

Then, Pete came out of the back room and threw them all out. That's the last I saw of Hulse or your friend that night.

The next day it was all over town that the cops found a black guy dead on South Street, two blocks from here, an

apparent accident?" she concluded with raised eyebrows and a smirk.

I left The Miner's Shaft that day feeling relieved. I had finally gotten some solid information about Richie's death. As I drove back to the motel I asked myself over and over - Now what?

Chapter Six

Confessions and Consolations

The answer wasn't long in coming.

The next afternoon, I was back at The Miner's Shaft talking with Sally. I didn't expect any more information. After yesterday, I felt that she had confessed all that she knew and there probably wasn't much more to tell.

So why was I back, I asked myself?

Maybe it was searching for 'what to do next', that called me back?

Maybe it was that I liked Sally?

Maybe I was becoming a bar fly?

Who knows? All I know that I was back at the bar in my usual seat again that afternoon.

"You know, I was thinking about our conversation yesterday" I began.

"You never told me you had a kid before?"

"I didn't think it was that important" she replied unconvincingly.

"Most people I know can't wait to tell you about their kids!" I replied.

"Well, I guess I'm not 'most people'!"

Then she looked down at the floor. There was a brief silence.

"After you told me about your friend Richie, I knew I couldn't say a word about him" she said.

"About who?" I asked.

"My boy" came the answer in a meek tone.

"Why's that?"

Another pause - longer this time.

"He's Richie's boy!"

I felt my jaw drop open.

Jesus Christ, it was all beginning to make sense, some of it anyway.

I remembered when Richie and I were back in college, he used to go and see his Aunt OMM maybe twice a year, Thanksgiving and Easter. During our junior year he went to see her one Easter like usual.

Then after that, all of a sudden, from then on, he began to go every chance he got.

I even remember asking him about it. All he said is that he got very close to his aunt and he liked going and seeing her. That's about all he would say and when he did say it, he said it with a tone of 'mind your own business'. I got the message loud and clear.

Richie was private about some things that way. He never really talked much about girl friends or his home life. I guess some people, including Richie, just like to keep private things private and that's the way it is.

I knew better than to pry any more. Needless to say, I never asked him again.

But now, I was beginning to understand why he visited Aunt OMM so frequently and why he refused to say much about it.

When I spoke with his aunt earlier, I didn't remember her mentioning anything about the increased frequency of his visits. He was most probably visiting Sally instead and his pretense of visiting Aunt OMM was a disguise to forestall my prying.

I have to say, it worked pretty well because as I said, I never queried him again on his frequent trips to Cannonsburgh.

Another question that puzzled me was why Sally never said anything about the child right up front?

Then, I chided myself for being so stupid.

It wouldn't take a brain surgeon to figure that one out.

A girl with a baby out of wedlock wouldn't go over too well in a small town like Cannonsburgh and a black baby besides! I was sure if that was known, her life would have become be a living hell or maybe worse. It was easy to see

why she initially made no mention of her child and definitely not her relationship with Richie.

Now I asked myself, why did she just tell me, a person she had known barely a week?

The answer came from her lips a moment later.

"You're probably wondering why I'm telling you all this" she said.

It was if she was reading my mind.

"When you first came in here, I didn't have any idea who the hell you were. After you told me your name, it still didn't register but then later on when you asked about Richie's death I put it all together.

I remembered that he used to talk about an old high school and college buddy every once in a while. Then I remembered your name. I realized it was you and why you might be here.

How am I doing so far?" she asked.

"Right on" I replied, and she continued.

"When I found out that Richie was dead, I wanted to die too. We were planning on getting married when he finished med school. He wanted to get a residency in the city, maybe Philly or Pittsburgh, something close to here. That way we could have moved out of this hick town to a place where we could be accepted, and I could still come back here all the time to keep an eye on my mother. She's eighty-two and I couldn't just move a million miles away and leave her flat if you know what I mean. She's not really an invalid but she does need help now and then - well, often!

When I heard about Richie dying I wanted to scream but I couldn't even say a word around here. I did have to take a couple of days off from work though. I just couldn't come in here and face these people. I told everybody, including Pete, that I had the flu. What I was really doing was trying to regain my composure, so I could put my happy play face back on and keep working here.

Now, when you came in and we started talking and dragging up all those horrible memories it became harder and harder for me to keep up that smiley face, day after day. I thought I was going to explode if I didn't let it all out.

The more we talked the more the ugly memories continued to consume me. When I met you and realized who you were I knew I had found somebody that I could finally unload on and I did"

"I understand.

Do you feel a little better now?" I replied sympathetically.

"Sort of!" she answered sheepishly.

"If you thought that this guy Hulse was probably involved in Richie's death why didn't you tell the cops?" I asked, knowing the most likely answer.

"You are kidding!

I'm sure I told you that Hulse is Hawkings' nephew and besides if I was to say anything I'm sure there would be a

thorough investigation of me before they ever investigated Hulse. I couldn't risk that.

Suppose they found out about Richie and me and my boy? I wouldn't be surprised, if I and maybe even my boy would have wound up just like Richie.

I'm not the smartest person in the world but I'm smart enough to know when to keep quiet."

She paused and then continued in a somber voice.

"Now all this doesn't mean that I don't want to see some justice done and you know what?

I think that's why you're here too!"

A brief silence and I replied.

"Maybe you're not the smartest person in the world but you're pretty god damn smart.

That's exactly why I'm here!" I confessed.

I proceeded to tell her about the awful way in which I had become aware of Richie's demise and how it had gnawed at me for all those following months.

I explained how it had compelled me to leave med school and come to Cannonsburgh. I told her of my confusion as to what I would do when I arrived and from whom and how I should seek revenge.

She listened and seemed to nod at almost every word as if reading my thoughts before I spoke.

Finally, we agreed that our sentiments where of the same mind and something should and would be done.

The only things left were the what, how and when?

Chapter Seven

Shot in the Dark

Sally eagerly greeted me when I entered the bar the next afternoon.

Like I said before, I was at The Miner's Shaft so often that I was beginning to think I was becoming a "bar fly". As soon as that thought occurred, I immediately had to remind myself of the real reason for my frequent visits, retribution for the murder of my best friend!

If there was some way that I could get in tight with Hulse maybe I could find out what had happened and see a way to exact revenge.

What did Sally think?

"Tell me more about Hulse and the guys he hangs with" I asked.

"I went to high school with him. He was a real troublemaker but was always bailed out by his uncle. His

brother graduated a few years before him and he was the same kind of guy, a troublemaker and a bully.

When his brother was in school, he and some of his boys constantly beat up on a couple of black kids in the class. In those days there were no rules against bullying, as a matter of fact; it was kind of in fashion.

Anyway, I guess one of the kids that was being bullied never forgot it. When the class had its five-year class reunion, Hulse's brother and his friends started the same old shit, like he had done in high school with the kid.

The way I heard it, the kid tried to walk away and leave the reunion. They all followed him out into the parking lot. He got into his car and when he tried to pull out they all started threatening him and kicking in the doors.

The kid was probably scared to death. He pulled a gun out of the glove compartment and shot Hulse's brother dead right there in the parking lot."

"So, what happened to the kid?" I asked.

"Well, of course he was arrested and jailed and beat up by the cops from what I heard. Then, he went to trial.

Some big city lawyer evidently heard about it and took his case for free. The trial went on for over three weeks and Hulse and his boys sat in every session for the whole time even though it was way over in Evanston. That's about an hour and a half from here.

There were even some threatening notes sent to the lawyer. Everybody kinda knew who sent them but it could never be proven.

In the end, the verdict was self-defense. That pissed them all off, big time, and again, this is only hearsay, they all went and joined the 'Defenders of Our Nation'."

"Defenders of Our Nation?" I replied.

"Yeah, the DON.

They've been around here forever. They're like the KKK or the Arian Nation or so I've heard. They've all got the lightning bolt tats and Hulse and all those have them now too. You tell 'em a mile away just by the strut

especially when they're in a group which they most always are."

"What do you think my chances are of getting in with these guys and finding out what really happened" I asked.

My question was met with a look of shock and surprise.

"I think you're out of your god damn mind. You don't look or even act close to what you need to be to get in tight with them.

If you plan on trying to buddy up with Hulse and his crew you're going to have to do some fabulous acting.

I think you'll have to be an Academy Award winner to get along with these guys. Just listening to their shit is going freak you out right from the get go and then they'll see right through you. What happens after that is anybody's guess but I'm sure it won't be good!" she concluded.

The conversation lulled for a moment.

"I could try" I answered.

"Well, if you try and fail halfway through it's gonna cost you big, real big, like maybe dead big!" she warned.

I certainly took her warning seriously. She had known these people and what they were capable of since her childhood. She had seen or at least greatly suspected what they had done to Richie. I surely couldn't take her words lightly but again, I felt compelled to do something and this was the only thing I could think of.

I told myself, over and over of the insanity and the possible consequences if my plan failed but I still couldn't be dissuaded.

So, after much agonizing, I spoke with Sally again about how I should enact my dangerous scheme.

"I think the first thing you have to do is maybe get a couple of tats" she suggested.

The thought alarmed me. I had never even had the slightest inclination to get a tattoo much less the kind that would be required to make me look acceptable to these people. After a little thought I knew she was probably

right, and it was something I had do if I was to have any chance of success with my plan.

She made several suggestions as to what type might be best and each one was less appealing than the next.

When I went back to the motel that evening I looked on the Internet for some of the tats Sally had mentioned.

I finally decided on a skull with a snake slithering out of one of the eye sockets. It looked pretty mean, just what I wanted. It could be done at Terry's Terrifying Tattoos in a nearby town. I would get it done on my upper forearm where, when wearing a long-sleeved shirt, I could choose when and to whom to expose it. I would get it done in black ink. I knew that black could more readily be removed by a laser. The colors are much more difficult to remove and often can't be completely erased. I was looking to the future and hoping that I would have a future after this upcoming adventure.

So, there it was, settled in my own mind. I would go to Terry's the next morning and get what I hoped would be a

badge helping me on the road to gaining Hulse's confidence.

The process wasn't a lot of fun but after it was done, I had to admit it looked kind of cool. Maybe I had that feeling because it was my unconscious trying to convince me that I had done the right thing. I walked out of Terry's with a large, white gauze covering the oozing body art and three hundred dollars lighter.

In any event, it was done and now it was the time to take the next step.

Another talk with Sally and we decided that she would call me when Hulse next came to the bar. I would begin a conversation about hunting, which of course, I knew little about. That might get me an introduction to Hulse since he and most of the others in the town were rabid hunters.

My story would be that I left the city not only for hunting but primarily because of my disgust for the overflowing,

nonwhite population. This then, I thought would provide a segue into a relationship with him and his friends.

Now all I had to do was some home study on hunting and buy a shotgun. The study part wasn't hard, I had the Internet. The gun part was harder; I was beginning to run out of money!

Again, I searched the Internet to see what a twelve gauge might cost. Several were priced in the four to five-hundred-dollar range.

I could afford that but barely.

Armed with that information, no pun intended, I drove to Barry's Gun Shop in the neighboring town and there I bought it. A used double barrel, twelve gauge for three fifty. I got a deal and it had a well-worn stock, even better to present myself as an experienced hunter.

While I was there, Barry convinced me that if I was to take up hunting, I should also have camouflage, boots, a couple of boxes of shells and of course needed a license.

Another four hundred down the drain!

I left Barry's with the complete costume and all the equipment. Now all that was left to do was to brush up on hunting lingo, rehearse my anticipated meeting with Hulse and wait for Sally's call.

As I walked towards the car, carrying my gear, it occurred to me.

How stupid I am!

I've never even fired a shotgun!

When I was a kid we used to go to the dump on the outskirts of town and shoot rats but that was a long time ago and it was a twenty-two. This could be a serious problem, I mused to myself. Suppose I was out hunting with these guys and I didn't know how to fire the gun?

I'd read several times about inexperienced shotgun users actually breaking their shoulders. I sure didn't want one of them to be me. Beside the pain, it would certainly blow a hole in my hunting persona. I chuckled halfheartedly, to myself at another, unintended pun.

It wasn't long before I got the call from Sally, not telling me Hulse was at The Miner's Shaft but instead to ask where I'd been.

I hadn't been to the bar in two days and she was concerned. I was busy getting my tat and my hunting getup!

I immediately quelled her fears with an explanation of the events of the past couple of days.

With all that being said, her excitement calmed, and the conversation turned to refining the details of my plan.

I soon confessed to her about my lack of hunting experience and how I feared that it might easily reveal me as a fraud.

"My Uncle John has been a hunter all his life. I'm sure if you spend a few hours with him he'll be able to make you look like Frank Buck."

"Who the hell is that?" I asked.

"He's an old time, big game hunter that my Uncle used to mention all the time" she answered.

"You know Sally, I've got another problem" I started.

"I'm gettin' low on cash and...."

She interrupted me in mid-sentence.

"No surprise, after all the stuff you bought.

Remember I told you about Freddy, the night man, the guy I filled in for, the night Richie was here?

It seems he's not doing too good. He's always had a problem with the booze and I guess workin' here didn't help any.

Anyway, Pete had to fire him the other day. He was calling in sick every other night and most of the time Pete or me wound up doing the shift.

This has been going on for a few months and Pete finally got tired of it."

She paused.

"Did you ever tend bar?" she then asked.

"Yeah, in college. I worked part time in a shot and beer place.

I never made any fancy drinks. No Margaritas, no Long Island Ice Teas or any of that stuff" I replied.

"The fanciest drink I ever make here is Jack and Coke" she answered.

"Maybe I can get you the job. I'll talk to Pete tomorrow. I'm sure he'll hire you if I ask him"

"That would be great!" I replied.

"And what about your rent at the motel you're at?" she continued.

"It's getting harder but with a job, I guess I can keep making it" I answered.

"You don't have to. If you want, you could come over and stay at my place. There's just me and my mom. She rambles a lot but once you get used to her, she's okay."

"I don't know about that. I feel like kind of a sponger. Know what I mean?" I replied.

"I didn't say you're staying for free, did I? You have to kick in a little, not nearly as much as that motel is costing

you and you'll probably do some stuff around the place now and then too" she said.

There was a silence.

"I'll give you directions to where I live and if you show up one day that will be that. Just be sure you come when I'm home. Call me first.

If you come when just Mom is there, she won't answer the door. She might even call the cops so be sure I'm there first."

"Okay, thanks Sally I'll give it some thought" I said.

I really didn't have to give it too much thought; just looking at my empty wallet made the decision for me.

I would take the job and move to Sally's.

The house was an old, worn farmhouse at the end of a long, rutted road, bordered by fallow fields on both sides.

It had a barn in the back which was well on its way to collapse. A tar paper covered, chicken coop housed several hens and a spry rooster who crowed incessantly throughout each and every day. Luckily, the coop was

located on the opposite side of the barn which shielded the house from his endless cacophony.

The house itself consisted of eight, large, sparsely decorated rooms. In spite of its rustic appearance it possessed an old-style charm that couldn't be ignored. Somehow, it's faded wallpaper and old wooden floors gave it an air of the hominess from a bygone era.

Sally assigned me to a bedroom on the north side of the house. It had a three drawer, maple dresser, an unmatched night stand and a telephone booth sized closet. In the far corner of the room stood a radiator with a constantly hissing vent valve. The floor was covered with old linoleum, topped with a small throw rug at the edge of the bed. It wasn't the Ritz but I certainly wasn't about to complain.

Sally's mother was a small, frail, grey haired woman appearing to be in her late seventies. She wore what my mother used to call, a "house dress" and slippers with a "bunion hole" cut out of each.

Her speech, as Sally had warned me, was rambling at times but not unintelligible. She frequently spoke about the past and people that she seemed to think I should know.

I remembered my great aunt Emma used to have those same kinds of conversations when she was on the verge of Alzheimer's. I used to just go with the flow, pretending to recognize every one of whom she spoke and interjecting a courteous "yes" or "I see" every now and then into the conversation. I did the same with Sally's mother.

Although she had frequent lapses from the present, she had a pleasant disposition and rarely wore a frown. I had no problem humoring the old lady and got along with her quite well.

Sally, on the other hand, found it difficult to accept her mother's incoherency. I guess it was hard for her to admit her mother was failing so severely. She frequently corrected the old lady in mid-sentence and her mother would just continue on undeterred. Sally would then

quietly chastise herself for her intolerance and sit silently enduring the remainder of her mother's ramble.

The day after I settled in at Sally's, I met Uncle John for some shooting lessons. Sally told me Uncle John was a crack shot and a good teacher. When we got to John's house I could see why he was so good.

He had a Skeet range in the field behind his house. It was complete with an automatic launching device for the traps or clay pigeons as they are sometimes called. Uncle John called to his wife as we walked to his backyard.

She dutifully emerged from the back door and loaded the first trap into the mechanism.

"Let me show you how it's done and then you can give it a try."

He picked up the twelve-gauge which was leaning against the back wall of the house and walked over to a well-worn patch of dirt at the edge of the field. He slowly raised the gun towards the sky and yelled "Pull!"

A skeet immediately soared, and the barrel of his gun moved with a slow, fluid motion, following the target's trajectory with graceful ease. Then, a loud crack and the pigeon shattered in midair.

Within a second, John's wife sent the next target skyward and again his shot met its mark.

Then another and still others followed.

Uncle John continued to pump the gun relentlessly; making every shell hit its target until at last the gun was emptied.

"That's how it's done, boy!" he exclaimed with a smile.

"You made it look pretty simple but somehow I don't think it is" I replied.

"It ain't. Takes lots of practice to make yourself that good. I know I done lots of practicin'.

But I think if we spend a couple of day at it I can make you passable or at least so nobody would know that you never used a shotgun before" he answered.

And so, my shooting lessons with Uncle John began.

After two days of shoulder aching and ringing ears, Uncle John's prediction had come true. Annie Oakley I wasn't but I acquired enough skill so as not to appear as a complete novice. I actually found myself capable of hitting the skeet about one out of three. Not bad for walk on after only two days.

Uncle John was well satisfied with my progress and even suggested that I might have some natural ability.

When I left his house that last day, I felt confident that with some good acting and a little hunting lingo thrown in, I could pass myself off as an experienced hunter.

Chapter Eight

Dancing With Devils

I'd been working at the "Shaft", that's what the regulars call it, for about a week now. As Sally had promised, Pete gave me Freddy's old, night shift behind the bar.

Things went pretty good as long as I used Sally's mentality. Many times, while overhearing conversations around the bar, I found it difficult to remain detached.

Ugly banter spewed forth on a daily basis from most of the regulars. I often found myself tempted to interject my own, honest thoughts but immediately Sally's words raced through my mind.

"Why should I let a bunch of yahoos push me out of a good job?" and no matter what I said I wasn't going to change their way of thinking anyway, so what would be the point?

I kept my mouth shut and acted indifferently to their ignorant chatter just as Sally had advised me.

I would quietly drift away from their conversation and tend to people at the other end of the bar.

Actually, I had very little interaction with the regulars except for their calls for more rounds. It seemed that whenever I approached the speech lulled, only to again accelerate after I served them and walked away.

Many of the little fragments that I did pick up on blamed me to some degree for Freddy's firing.

Freddy had been born in Cannonsburgh, grew up in Cannonsburgh, had worked at the Shaft for over ten years and from what I could gather, was an all-around, popular guy. He was known to be a heavy drinker pretty much all his life and of course throughout his ten-year stint at the Shaft. Pete never saw fit to fire him up till now.

Then when I showed up, suddenly Freddy was out, and I was in his place, I was sure it would make perfect sense to

them to think I probably had something to do with his firing!

This was entirely untrue, but I was sure I had no way to change their thinking and never really tried. I merely ignored the overheard accusations, pretending not to hear them as I walked about the bar.

Then one day, there appeared a sudden relief from the undercurrent of ill will.

Freddy walked into the bar and took a seat near the entrance to the small liquor store that was attached next to the barroom.

"Gimme a shot of Fleishman's and short beer, will ya?" he called.

I walked over and poured the shot just as the bell in the liquor store rang signaling a customer's entrance.

I immediately shouted through the open back door into the store.

"I'll be right there!"

"I got it!" interrupted Freddy and he arose from the stool and walked into the store to wait on the customer.

I was confused. Up till now it had been my job to leave the bar and tend to the few liquor store customers who came throughout the evening.

Pete was standing in the kitchen doorway on the other side of the room. He called my name and motioned me over to him.

"Listen, I hired Freddy back" he began.

My heart sank.

"No more job!

How could I continue to support myself and carry out my mission to find Richie's killer here in Cannonsburgh?" I thought.

He continued.

"After all the years I've known him, we go way back as kids, I couldn't dump him even though it's the smart thing to do. Lots of times your feelings overrule your common sense, you what I mean?"

I nodded sadly awaiting the words of my firing.

"But, I'm not lettin' you go either" he assured me.

I'm sure the look of surprise jumped from my face.

"I gave Freddy a job back just minding the store.

When I have you doing the bar and the store too, anybody can just walk in a take whatever they want and scoot out the door before you can even get in there.

This way, with Freddy, he can keep his eye on the store full time and I can give him a job too. That's the way I'm looking at it.

This way I don't have to keep going around feelin' so bad about firing him and I can get the store covered too" he said.

The liquor store had always been tended by the bartender and it must have worked out fine because it was done that way for years. No one had ever mentioned anything about things being stolen from the store and I don't imagine anything ever was.

I knew that Pete was trying to justify putting Freddy back to work and I certainly wasn't about to second guess his sense of loyalty to an old friend.

"Now part of the deal is he can drink for free when he's workin' so don't worry about him payin' anything" Pete added.

As Pete continued, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the stream of people walking up to Freddy, grasping his shoulder and congratulating him on his return.

"Give him whatever he wants. Don't worry about him gettin' too shot to work the store. Freddy's a quart a day man. I never seen him get completely shit-faced no matter how much he's had. Some guys are just like that. They can drink the well dry and never show it.

I don't know how they do it and I really don't want to find out. I haven't had a drink in twenty years" he concluded.

"Okay - Thanks Pete" I replied gratefully and went back to the bar.

All of that was good news.

I would no longer be seen as even partly responsible for Freddy's firing. I was sure that would help me to get a little closer to some of the regulars now that this cloud had been lifted.

My suspicions were almost immediately fulfilled. I felt the coolness of the regulars begin to evaporate within minutes of Freddy's arrival. I was glad that Pete had decided to bring him back. There was no more hushed conversation when I approached a group. I felt I was inching my way into becoming one of the boys.

I was pretty sure that my newly achieved acceptance by the regulars would help in establishing a relationship with Hulse and his crew when the time came.

And the time did come soon!

Tuesday night and it was slow as shit, a dozen people in the whole place, including Freddy and me. About seven o'clock, three guys came sauntering through the front door, all of them big and black! One of them wore a Black Panthers beret, the other a pony tail of dreads and the

third had long, curly hair, a beard and a beret looking as if he had stepped out of an old Che Guevara poster. All three had knurled, ebony arms, big as my legs, covered with tats barely visible against the dark background.

The room fell silent. I spotted one of the regulars reach into his pocket for his phone and begin to dial.

They pulled up stools at the bar and one spoke with a slow, unfamiliar accent.

"Three fingers of Jack for each of us" came the order as he laid a twenty on the bar.

Each slid their fingers down the shot glass that I had placed before them and I poured. I turned, walked away and rang up the sale without a further word.

I could see the man on the phone, over in the corner, covering his mouth as he frantically whispered into it and occasionally glanced up at the three as he talked.

"Yo, barkeep!" called the gravelly voice of one of the three.

"Do you know a guy named Luke that comes around here?"

I paused for a moment as if in thought. I knew exactly who he was talking about.

"Not really" I replied as convincingly as I could.

I wasn't lying. I certainly had heard about him from Sally but I had never actually seen him.

"How about Harry?" asked the man next to him?

"No, nobody named Harry either" I replied.

"Guess you don't know nobody named Moose either, huh?" said the third man.

"Nah" I answered.

"Looks like this guy doesn't know shit" announced the first man.

Then he continued.

"If you happen to see anybody named Luke, Harry or Moose in here any time soon, just tell 'em we came to have a nice little talk with 'em and we're real sorry we missed 'em. Maybe next time!"

With that all three downed the remaining shots almost simultaneously, got up and left.

I felt a wave of relaxation spread over me as the door closed behind them.

Well, for a brief instant anyway because within minutes the front door again swung open this time revealing three familiar faces accompanied by two others who I had never seen before.

The familiar ones were the three I had seen just days before on TV standing before the County Court House steps, gleefully flashing the "V" sign. They were the very guys for which the previous three had been looking, I was sure.

Four of them took seats at the bar. One walked over to the man in the corner who had been so anxiously chattering on the phone moments before and started a hushed but animated conversation with him.

All five wore a scruffy, unkempt look with long greasy hair and arms fully tatted with skulls, snakes and arcane symbols and acronyms. The clothing they wore provided a gritty complement to their menacing aura.

They all had lightning bolts tattooed down each finger segment from knuckle to nail and a swastika on the backhand just as Sally had described.

Pete appeared in the kitchen doorway wearing his usual food stained apron. He motioned to me.

"Listen, be careful with these guys" he whispered.

"They're pretty fuckin' nutty!" he added.

"Who are they?" I whispered back.

"They're the ones that roughed up Jake. The ones just found not guilty over at the Courthouse the other day. You saw it on TV didn't ya?" he answered.

"'Roughed up?' Is he shitting me" I thought to myself. They chopped the guy's hand off!

"Yeah, I know the three of them but who are the other two?" I questioned Pete.

"The one talkin' to Mike over there is Hulse and the other one, well I don't think I ever seen him before.

But whatever, be careful. From what I know about 'em it wouldn't take much for them to start bustin' the place up or worse."

"Okay Pete" I assured him and went back to the bar just as Hulse rejoined his friends.

"What do ya gotta do to get a drink here? Blow the bartender?" one shouted as I walked towards them.

"You mean blow his fuckin' head off!" quipped one of the others with a snicker.

"Give everybody a shot and none of the bar brand piss either" Hulse said.

I took a bottle of the best from the shelf and poured all five.

Each slugged it down and slammed the glass on the bar as if they were playing in an old western movie.

"Keep 'em comin' " ordered Hulse.

I poured another. This one they sipped more gingerly.

The guy that I remember being Luke from TV pulled out a fifty and laid it on the bar.

"On me boys, I'm still celebratin' "he announced.

"Come here" he called to me as I picked up the money and was headed to the register.

I rang it up and brought back the change to him.

"Know what I'm celebratin'?" he asked

I thought it might be best to play dumb.

"Not really" I answered.

"You're new around here aren't ya?" he said followed with a quick "Don't ya watch no TV?"

He continued uninterrupted by my attempt to answer.

"Me and these guys were just on the TV a couple of days ago. I thought everybody in town woulda seen it, but I guess you didn't, huh?"

"Guess not " I replied.

Then an ease dropper from the end of the bar called over.

" Gimme the remote" and he reached his hand out towards me.

I handed it to him and within seconds the screen lit up with the images of the three exiting the Courthouse.

Just as when it was first aired, those at the bar began to laugh, cheer and stomp their feet with glee. Hulse and his group joined in the jubilation.

"Give those guys over there a drink on me" announce Hulse as he pulled another twenty from his pocket. I obliged and walked over to pick up the twenty.

He grabbed my wrist, leaned forward and spoke.

"What's your name Bud?"

I told him, and he continued to speak.

"Ya know we didn't come here to watch reruns.

We came cause my man Mike over there called me. He told me about the darkies that were just here.

He said he didn't recognize any of 'em and he couldn't hear what they were sayin' real good but he did hear Luke's name said. He said they was talkin' to you a lot. About what?" he asked.

"All they said is they wanted a talk with your three guys here. The guys from the TV. They had a couple of drinks and left. That's all I know" I answered.

"So, you don't know nothing about 'em?

Never seen 'em before?

You're sure that's all they said?" he replied.

"Why would I lie to you?" I answered.

"I sure hope you're not" Hulse threatened as he released his grip on my arm.

He leaned back, took a sip of his drink and continued.

"By the way, I ain't never seen you around before. Where are you from?"

It sure looked like it was time spin my yarn and so I began.

"I'm from the city."

"What city is that?" he immediately interjected before I could continue.

"Down around New York - Newark."

"And what are you doin' here in this little shit town?" he again interjected.

I paused for a second being sure to get the story straight in my head before I answered.

"Well, it's kind of like this" I began, being careful to look at his expressions as I spoke.

"I got tired of all the low life around me day in and day out. No matter where I went it seemed like one of them was moving in across the street or down the block and I had to move again.

Whenever I turned on the TV there they were. After a while, I was starting to think I should have kept my mom's old black and white set and saved some money. Even when I turned on the radio there they are playing that shit Rap and what they call Gangster music. Every billboard, magazine and newspaper is loaded with them. I always used to say, 'Live and let live' but when they start taking over every neighborhood, every city, every state and the whole god damn country, well that's too much for me to handle.

I know I couldn't get away from all the media shit, but I sure could get away from all that scum living right up next to me."

I looked him straight in the eye as I spoke being as convincing as I could.

I paused, hoping that I wasn't laying it on too thick right from the get go. I anxiously searched his face for any sign of my story's credibility.

Then, I saw a faint smirk spread over his lips and he spoke.

"So, what you're tellin' me is in plain English, you got fed up with dealin' with all the niggers and spics?" he interrupted.

"Well if you want to put it that way, yeah, I guess!

I wasn't taking too kindly to all the Dots and Slants either" I added for good measure.

"So, what made ya come to this little hick town?"

"When I was a kid my father used to take me on hunting and fishing vacations out here. It was about twenty or thirty miles down the Interstate where we used to stay, and he always came here for food and beer when he ran out."

"You mean down over by Shawtown?" he again interrupted.

"Yeah, I guess so but that was quite a while ago and I don't really remember the name of the place we stayed.

So anyway, one day when I finally decided to get away from all the bull shit, I remembered this town from when I was a kid.

I figured I'd come here cause at least I know a little bit about the area. Like I said, not a whole lot because it was a long time ago but still a lot more than if I just went somewhere I'd never been before.

So that's how I picked here" I concluded.

"Takes a lot of balls to just pack up and leave. You must have really been pissed."

"How about fucking pissed?" I added with a frown.

"What did you do for a living back there? You don't look like the barkeep type to me" he asked.

That was a question which I foolishly hadn't thought of and so I hesitated momentarily.

I thought telling them I had been a med student would only prompt more suspicion of my presence in their town. I didn't think it would make a whole lot of sense for an aspiring doctor to quit medical school in his last year because he didn't like the "niggers and spics"?

It would appear strange and questionable even to the naivest.

I had to come up with a more plausible reply.

"What type do I look like I shot back?" stalling and hoping they might give a reasonable suggestion.

"Well, I guess you kinda look like - ", then he paused and scanned me head to foot.

"What do you guys think he looks like?" he asked the others.

"He looks like a ma dicker to me" answered Moose.

"Come on Moose you just met the guy and you're a ball buster right from the get go. Don't pay no attention to him. He's just bein' his usual asshole self" said Luke.

"Yeah, come on, the guy's gonna buy us the next round and you're breakin' his balls!" jumped in Hulse.

I looked over at Pete who was taking in the whole thing and I saw him raise his eyebrows in silent agreement.

"More of the same?" I asked.

They nodded, and I refilled the glasses.

"That's mighty white of ya.

Now what were we talkin' about.

Oh yeah! Let's see your hands"

I held my hands out stretched for them to see. Three leaned forward for a closer inspection while the remaining two appears completely uninterested.

"You're right handed, huh?" asked Moose.

"Yeah" I replied.

"I knew it!

Looks like you use that right one a lot more than the other one.

I think it's probably from jerkin' off too much" he roared with a laugh.

"Speaking of jerk offs, you just can't help yourself, can ya?"

Hulse said to him soberly.

Moose silently leaned back on the stool with a smirk.

"I'd say you did some office kind of stuff. Like pencil pushin'" continued Hulse.

"This is a bunch of bull shit! Playin' twenty questions about what the guy did for a livin'!

Who gives a shit!

You guys are gettin' on my nerves!

Just let him tell us and end it for Christ's sake" said one of two who had appeared disinterested.

A quick thought flashed through my mind and I reflexively blurted, "I was an insurance company detective in Jersey."

That had been my father's job. He had originally been a cop in Jersey City and after he retired he took a job with a Texas based insurance company.

He investigated compensation and liability cases and had plenty of stories to tell, many of them pretty funny stuff.

Things like, the guy who was supposed to be in a wheelchair as a result of a bus accident. My father went to check up on him and found him putting a roof on his garage. When the guy saw my father with the video cam, he jumped off the roof and chased him down five blocks, trying to get the camera.

I remembered most all the stories he used to tell.

Maybe they would come in handy now.

My father always said, "Good stories are always good for making good friends".

I hoped he was right.

"There ya go! I was right! He was a dick!" shouted Moose with another silly laugh.

I proceeded to tell them about my father's job as if it had been my own, along with a couple of the funniest of his stories.

By the time they were ready to leave, I was feeling confident that I was on my way to becoming one of the boys. As they walked out the door, I felt a sense pride in

my impromptu acting and my ability to ignore my inner thoughts.

Actually, I found them to be a fun bunch like hick frat boys. In spite of their amiability my suspicions continued, and I remained intent on revenge.

I couldn't wait to tell Sally.

"If I remember correctly, a lot of people liked Ted Bundy and Charlie Manson too!

I've known these guys since high school and you gotta be careful. Don't let them suck you in too deep.

You gotta constantly remember who you're dealing with" she warned me.

I knew she was right, and I admonished myself severely for having even the slightest feeling of rapport with them.

Chapter Nine

Deception and Decision

It wasn't but a week later when they again came to the Shaft. They took up seats at the bar and greeted me as if I was an old friend.

Sally's words echoed through my head. I couldn't be sure if their collegiality was the result of my acting ability or if they had something else in mind.

No what their motivation might be, I had no choice but to accept their cordiality and continue with my pretense.

After an hour or so of banter, I finally summoned the courage to wedge my toe in the door.

"Like I told you guys I came out here to get away from all the bull shit and to do some hunting. The spots I used to go with my father are long since gone. I rode by there the

other day and it was pretty much all houses and even a golf course, not farm land like before.

I saw what looked like a good spot up the two forty about five miles from here, but it was all posted.

You guys know any good places around here?" I began.

Haha spoke as he leaned over and looked passed the other three at Hulse, "He's talkin' about the Club".

Hulse smiled and replied, "Think so!"

Then he continued.

"Yeah, that whole area over by Shawtown is pretty well over for huntin'.

That posted land ya saw is our Club. We got close to eighty acres out there. We been huntin' there since I was a kid."

"Good huntin'!

I got me a ten-pointer last year! "

"And we got good fishin' too" chimed in Moose.

"Club?" I questioned enthusiastically.

"Yeah, the Club rents the whole thing for cheap, been doing it for years" Luke replied.

"And I sure don't think that's gonna change real soon, especially since three years ago" added Hulse.

My puzzled look must have been apparent because he went on with the story.

"Three years ago, the guy who owns it was gonna sell off half of it for houses like over by Shawtown so we had my Uncle Harold go and have a talk with him before he could. I was real disappointed after that cause he wouldn't budge. He was still gonna sell it off on us.

So next, I sent a couple of our members to see 'em and guess what?

Right away, like one day later, the 'For Sale' sign came down and our rent went down along with it. It worked out really good for everybody, us and especially him, if you know what I mean."

A week or two passed and 'The Boys', as I liked to call them to myself, had come to the Shaft regularly. With each visit I got closer to my goal of becoming a trusted friend. As the friendship grew, I asked myself more and more frequently "What next?"

Suppose that I did find out conclusively who killed Richie and why.

Could I actually kill someone as revenge?

I tried over and over to imagine myself in that situation and still couldn't decide.

If I couldn't see myself actually doing it then what was the point of all my scheming?

Despite the apprehension and unanswered questions, I continued with my plan to seek out Richie's killer and the circumstances of his death. My compulsion drove me forward, despite my misgivings as to what the final outcome might be.

It was a Wednesday evening, kind of early, about six thirty. The Boys came in and sat at their accustomed spot at the bar.

"What 'ill you have?" I asked as I reached for the usual bottle.

"Come here" ordered Hulse.

He placed a small cloth bag on the bar and pulled open the draw string for me to peer inside.

"This much Jack for everybody" he announced as I bent over to view the contents of the sack.

I recoiled in horror at the sight.

"Holy shit!

Holy shit!" I gasp.

The bag contained three severed black, pinky fingers.

Hulse pulled the drawstring closed and shoved the bag into his pocket.

"You know those three monkeys that you said was askin' about us the other day?

Well, they found us, or should I say we found them.

I nervously poured each his three fingers of Jack.

The shock left me clouded with nothing but "Holy shit!" racing through my head over and over. It must have been minutes before I regained any kind of clarity.

I was sure that the look on my face revealed my alarm, but nothing was said. All of them just sat quietly sipping their whiskey with ever so subtle smiles.

As difficult as it was, I knew I was obliged come up with some laudatory or all my efforts to gain their acceptance would have been in vain.

I struggled to find what I should and could say without exposing my disgust.

Finally, I found the strength to stutter out the words.

"Looks like you guys done good. They were some pretty big dudes" I said hoping not to stammer.

There was a pause and Haha spoke.

"Don't make no never mind how big ya be when a forty-five is at the back of your head. They's just lucky they got away without more stuff missin'."

"Just lucky they got away period" said Moose.

"Guess so!" I added with all the conviction I could muster.

Then thankfully, the conversation changed.

"We're goin' huntin' on Saturday up at the Club. Goin' for birds, pheasant.

Wanta come along?" asked Hulse.

It was the invitation I was waiting for but now after being shown the bag with its grizzly contents my enthusiasm was tainted with apprehension.

Sally had warned me of their capabilities. Her constant urgings to be cautious rang truer now than ever before.

What if they somehow knew of my real intention for being in Cannonsburgh in the first place?

What if they knew Richie was my best friend?

Suppose my conversations were insufficient to convince them of my sincerity?

Did I have the courage to roam distant, vacant woodland and fields knowing what they were capable of doing and have done?

Should I make up an excuse or take a shot - well hopefully not 'take a shot?

This could be my one and only chance to get inside. Did I really want to blow it after all this effort?

I agonized momentarily as the 'What ifs' and 'Should Is' spiraled through my mind. I should have been prepared for this invitation all along, but I wasn't.

All of these thoughts flooded through my brain as they awaited my reply.

"Sure! That would be great!" I blurted out and it was done.

"Where will we meet and at what time?" I continued.

Final plans were made, and they left the Shaft.

I called to Freddy at the far side of the bar, over by the store entrance.

"Hey Freddy, will you watch the bar for me for a few minutes"

He immediately came behind the bar and I walked to the men's room.

I entered one of the stalled, closed the door and sat on the toilet seat lid. I bent over and put my head in my hands with all the 'What ifs' and 'Should Is' continuing their dizzying spiral.

I could still back out. I could certainly come up with an excuse, but then could I erase the feelings of cowardice that would surely arise within me? How could I justify having ventured this far and not found the answers to my plaguing questions about Richie's death? After several minutes the answers percolated into my consciousness.

I couldn't back out now and surrender all of my self-respect.

Too late now, it was done!

I arose, washed my face with cold water and returned to the bar.

Chapter Ten

Hunting High and Low

The sun was bright at six in morning. I never really appreciated how clear, crisp and silent it could be at that time of day.

I met Moose in front of the Shaft as we had planned. I was nervous, and I was hoping to God that it didn't show.

I arrived fully decked out in the hunting gear I had bought, camouflage and all.

Moose wore a pair of faded blue jeans, a red plaid, flannel shirt covered by a sleeveless gray vest and high-top boots.

Upon seeing his attire and comparing it to mine, I felt I might as well been wearing a sign on my back reading "City Slicker".

It was too late now and besides they all knew that I had come from the city, so my dress shouldn't be a surprise.

I piled into his old Ford pickup with its see-through floor boards and heavily stained seats. We headed off to the Club accompanied by the continuous rumble from its rusted-out muffler.

As we rode Moose enthusiastically described the delights of the Club's hunting grounds and his high expectations of a good day's take.

When I got in the truck, I had noticed a strange but familiar odor, the smell of death to be precise but I said nothing. About halfway through the trip, I had to ask. "What's dead in here?" I queried.

He motioned towards the bed of the vehicle.

"Stuff in the back I guess" he replied.

I turned to look out the back window at the bed. There it was four deer legs and two buck heads lying on a black plastic bag. I turned back to Moose who immediately noticed my perplexed expression.

"Picked 'em up a couple of days ago and forgot to put 'em in the frig till I got around to workin' on 'em" he answered.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I always carry a hack saw with me everywhere. Got one right now" and he pointed under the front seat.

"When I see some road kill like a big buck, like those guys in the back, I cut the head and feet. Then take 'em down to Marty and he fixes 'em up like taxidermy stuff. When I sell 'em to guys that come out here huntin' on the weekends, we split the money.

I guess the guys that buy 'em take 'em home a hang 'em on the wall sayin' they shot 'em. I don't really care what they do with 'em, all I know it's workin' out real good for me and Marty. Easy drinkin' money!"

A few minutes later, we turned down a rutted dirt lane into the Club grounds. About a mile in, the outline of an old, gray farmhouse loomed in the distance. The faint sounds of yelping and howling grew ever louder as we

approached. A rusted cyclone fence surrounded the place which bore a spray-painted sign reading "Whites Only - No Jews Neither".

Moose stopped the truck at the gate behind which three snarling, drooling mongrels darted back and forth, with teeth bared.

One looked to be a Doberman Shepard mix and the other two appeared to be half Rottweiler and half Shepherd. No matter what the mix all three looked mighty mean.

He leaned out of the window, cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted towards the house.

"Hulse - get these god damn mutts outta here!"

Hulse immediately appeared on the porch, put his fingers to his lips and release a loud, shrill whistle with a simultaneous yell.

"Rudy!

Herm!

Joe!

Get your asses over here!

Now!".

All three reacted instantaneously as if a magical switch had been thrown. They all turned in unison and silently raced back to the house.

Moose got out of the truck, opened the gate and slid back into the driver's seat.

"Fuckin' dogs are a pain the ass but I'm glad we got 'em. They do a good job of keepin' people from sneakin' round when we're not here.

Only problem is they do their job too damn good. Seems like the only guy that can really control 'em is Hulse.

The rest of us, sometimes they listen and sometimes they don't. I got a couple of pretty good marks on me outta 'em" and he pulled up his shirt sleeve to reveal a three-inch bite scar on his forearm.

We drove through the gate and into the yard.

Moose got out of the truck and I sat stone still. I could still hear barking and howling coming from behind the house.

"Well, come on" he commanded.

Then sensing my fear, he added, "All that noise is the huntin' dogs out in the back. They're all penned up and besides they won't hurt nobody. All they wanta do get out after those birds."

I still remained in the truck.

"Listen Man, come on, we can't go huntin' in the truck."

He paused and then continued.

"Don't be worried 'bout them other dogs. Hulse got 'em all chained up. They're not gonna bother you none" he added reassuringly.

I took a deep breath, got out and followed him towards the house.

"Here, wait a minute" he said and then he led me around the side of the building and pointed.

Off in the far corner of the field all three were chained each to an old, rusted out car with the door removed.

Each had his own make shift dog house. One was a seventy-two Torino and the other two appeared to be old Chevys of early eighties vintages.

On the other side of the field were the pens containing the hunting hounds which continued their yips and howls.

"Let's go inside" he continued and prodded he me back towards the front of the building.

We entered through an old, patched screen door which slammed behind us.

It was a large room with rows of deer heads and antlers adorning each of the walls. Two old, well worn, stained sofas were in the center and three equally disheveled chairs stood in the corners. What served as a coffee table was a door mounted on four upright cinder blocks. It was strewn with empty bottles, filled ashtrays and gun mags. There was acrid odor in the air, a combination of stale smoke and beer.

On one of the sofas sat Hulse, next to him was Haha and across from them sat two guys whom I had never seen before. All were dressed similar to that of Moose, flannel shirts, faded blue jeans, hunting vests and high-top boots.

All remained seated with their feet up on the table as Moose and I entered.

Hulse looked up announced, "Guess we're all here now. Ready to go and get us some birds".

"Man, that's some outfit ya got there. Hope ya shoot as good as ya look" he continued.

Everyone laughed. I smiled.

"These guys are goin' with us. This is Jum and he's Squeak" as he motioned towards the two sitting opposite him.

I immediately understood why the big one of them was called Jum. I didn't even have to ask. He looked to be at least six five and maybe two-fifty. When he finally stood up I knew my estimate was probably a little short. I'd say six seven and two seventy-five would have been closer.

"Christ, I thought Moose was big!" shot through my mind.

Then the other man spoke.

"So, this is the guy you were tellin' us about, the bartender down at the Shaft?"

As soon as I heard him speak, he too gave away his nickname, "Squeak". He had a high-pitched voice like that of a prepubescent boy but certainly not a body to match. Although not nearly the size of Jum, he appeared very broad and bull-like.

I reached over to shake hands and got the fist bump from each along with an unenthusiastic "How ya doin' ".

"How about some coffee before we go? Your special blend if ya know what I mean?" Moose asked Hulse.

"Ya want some Biker's Brew, Slick?" he replied looking straight towards me.

I remained silent. I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or someone else.

"Slick! That's what we're gonna call ya" he continued.

"Like city slicker, ya know. And now that I see ya in that getup ya do look pretty slick, so that's a good name all around. Jum come up with it before he even seen ya just from hearin' about ya".

Well if it was Jum's idea, I certainly wasn't going to dispute it that was for sure. So, from that point on I was known as "Slick".

Hulse went into the kitchen and returned with a cup black coffee for each of us. It had an odd taste, not unpleasant but distinctly different from any coffee I'd had before.

After five minutes or so of hunting stories and halfway through the cup, it happened.

Suddenly, everything was faster, smoother, and better; like my mind had been tuned into higher vibrations. My thoughts became streamlined and focused and my blood felt like it was filled with little bubbles tingling through every part of me. I didn't feel drunk, just like it was my very best day; I was the very best version of myself that I could possibly be.

My thoughts were then interrupted by "How's Hulse's brew treatin' ya? "

I looked over to see Squeak speaking. I didn't know what I should say.

"Pretty good stuff, huh. It's gonna make you aim a whole lot better, I can tell ya that" he continued.

I still didn't respond.

"It's got ya pretty well stoked didn't it?" chimed in Haha.

"Yeah, I guess so" I stammered back.

"What the hell was in that coffee? Are they poisoning me?" flashed through my mind.

My questions must have been apparent in my expression.

It was as if Jum was reading my mind.

"Just put a little pinch of meth in. Just enough to get a bit sharper. We're much better shots when we get pumped" he explained.

Now, I realized why the coffee tasted so bitter.

I never did too much hard stuff before. I did lots of pot and hash in the old days and once in a while some coke but never speed or heroin. This was out of my league, but it was too late now. I was already amped.

The coffee was finished and we all marched out the back door with shotguns in hand. I was the last to leave and called out to Hulse as I shut the door behind me.

"Not gonna lock up?"

"Nah, don't have to. Ain't nobody around here gonna mess with us, not after word got around 'bout the last one who did.

Right, Hulsey?" shouted Moose.

Hulse didn't reply but merely looked back with an acknowledging glance and continued over to the hound's kennel. He released all three of them. Then we spread out through the fields of high grass with the dogs eagerly leading. I was paired up with Moose and one dog, Jum and Squeak with another and Hulse and Haha with a third.

I could feel my heart pounding and the veins in my neck throbbing with each beat. I wasn't sure if it was the drug, my own paranoia or a combination of both. In any case, I was on high speed and on high alert.

We must have walked a couple of hundred yards into the field. It felt as if it had taken hours but in reality, it was only minutes.

Suddenly, our dog Jake stopped dead in his track. The thunder of a gun blast instantly erupted from behind me. "Holy shit!" flashed through my mind as I anticipated the pain that would follow. I froze awaiting its arrival. I was sure that Moose had shot me.

"Got 'em!" I heard Moose's voice and I looked up to see a shower of feathers falling from the sky.

"You gotta be faster to get 'em before me. Ya gotta pay more attention to old Jake here. He don't stop and point like that for no reason. He's sniffed one out when he does that."

Then, as the gun smoke from his shot drifted over me, he added "Ya shouldn't get in front of me like ya did. Ya gotta stay along side of me.

I come pretty close to shootin' you on that one. Next time it might not work out that good for ya."

I was alarmed and relieved simultaneously. I was relieved by having not been shot as I had expected but I was alarmed by the tone of Moose's voice. It gave me the sense that if he had hit me, he wouldn't have necessarily considered it big deal, as long as he got the bird.

Jake raced over to thrashing carcass, picked it up and brought it back to Moose. He immediately took out his knife, slit its throat and held it out at arm's length for a minute or so to let the blood drain.

"Just like Squeak" he said. I was perplexed by his remark.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Didn't ya notice his voice? Ya had to!"

"Yes" I answered expecting him to continue and he did.

"Ya saw the scar on his neck didn't ya? Well, it seems Squeak was pretty good with a knife when he got into a fight. About six years ago he got into one with a guy who was better. The guy cut Squeak's hand and that made him drop his knife and then sliced him real good right across the throat.

I got Squeak to the hospital just in time and he made it. They saved him, but they couldn't fix his voice. He couldn't even talk for over a year. Then when he finally did he had that squeaky high voice and he's had it ever since.

That's when we started callin' him 'Squeak'."

Moose then stuffed the bird into the knapsack he was wearing, and we continued forward.

This time I walked in perfectly parallel, lock step with him.

About a hundred yards further and Jake again froze in stride. I immediately looked to a clump of high grass in front of him and saw cock bird spring skyward. I reflexively raised my gun and followed its path just as Uncle John had taught me. I pulled the trigger; the gun kicked and sent the bird shot on its way.

A millisecond later, I heard another blast coming from Moose's gun. I could see his pattern against the sky far to the right while mine struck its target clean, sending the

bird to the ground. Again, Jake did his retrieval and brought the quarry to Moose. He once again he slit the bird's throat and held it out to drain.

"Here ya go Slick. You got 'em fair and square. Mine didn't even come close" he said while holding it out to me.

"I gotta hand it to you. I didn't think you were gonna be as good as ya just showed. Ain't too many guys around here that can beat me to a bird like that" he added.

I smiled and said nothing. I certainly wasn't going to tell him that I was sure it was just dumb luck on my part.

His compliment set me more at ease as we continued the hunt. It seemed he had gained some respect for my hunting ability and that would probably go a long way with these country guys.

By the end of the hunt, I had one and Moose had two.

It was just the way I liked it. I couldn't have planned it better. I didn't want to appear as skill less and then again, I didn't want to outdo Moose either.

I had heard numerous shots from the other side of the property and wasn't at all surprised to see everyone with at least one pheasant and that too pleased me. I remembered times when my father and uncle had gone hunting and came home empty. It made for very sour dispositions and I surely didn't want any of my new-found friends to come home in a nasty frame of mind, especially being all cranked up as we were.

By the time we got back to the house, the effects of the Biker's Brew had begun to fade. It must have been only a pinch of meth as Hulse had said.

Everyone sat in the living room and recapped the day's events with beer and boisterous shouts and laughs. When it was over Moose and I got into his truck and headed home.

I had to admit to myself, as difficult as it was to do, I had a pretty good time with these guys. It was like hanging around with a bunch of hillbilly fraternity guys. Lots of

good stories, laughs, beer and of course, the juiced-up coffee added to it too.

There for a while, the thoughts of Richie and the reason for my coming to Cannonsburgh were out of mind. I was caught up in the comradely and the party-like atmosphere of the day.

Moose dropped me off at the Shaft. I drove back to Sally's place with pleasant thoughts of the day's events rolling around in my head.

Maybe it was the high that had led me astray for those temporary moments. Maybe it was the thought that I hadn't decided what I would do if I did truly discover the identity of Richie's killer.

Could it be that I unconsciously didn't want to find out, precisely because I had no idea of what I would or could do next?

Maybe that was part of the reason I found myself enjoying their company so much. Its diversion helped to forestall

the inevitable decision, I knew I would have to eventually make.

I found myself eager to hunt with them again. I told myself it was because I was anxious to find Richie's killer, but I wasn't sure if that was completely true. Could the real reason be my anticipation of another good time? I couldn't be sure. All I knew is I would definitely go with them again, if and when I was asked.

When I finally arrived at Sally's I found her seated on the front porch, nervously rocking back and forth. As I pulled in, she leapt from the chair to greet me.

"I'm so glad to see you're okay. I was so worried about you!" she blurted and threw her arms around me.

"I was fine. No problem. It worked out really good "I reassured her.

We walked into the house where dinner was waiting.

"Got a bird today. It's in the car" I announced with a bit of pride in my voice.

"Wow, guess Uncle John's a pretty good teacher" she replied.

"Sound like we got tomorrow's dinner. I'll take care of it later" she added.

After we ate, Sally and I returned to the front porch to enjoy the cool evening air while I told her of the day's events.

Halfway through my story, I paused for a moment and then spoke.

"You know I gotta ask you something Sally.

When we left the house to go out into the field I noticed they left the door unlocked so I said to Moose, 'Not gonna lock up?' and he said 'Nah, don't have to. Ain't nobody around here gonna mess with us, not after word got around 'bout the last one who did'

What did he mean by that?

I wasn't about to ask him. I was high as the sky, but I still knew that the answer I would get probably would be something that would make me even more nervous than I

already was. I could kind of tell that from the tone of voice.

So, I just let it pass and figured I could find out later."

She hesitated.

"Here's what I heard around the Shaft and generally stuff you hear there is pretty much true.

It hadda be two or three years ago that the guy who owned the property decided he was going to sell it for housing I guess. Well, the guys that belong to the 'Hunting Club' which is really the DON weren't happy about that at all.

You see, that hunting lodge so to speak, is really their headquarters. It's been for years. I don't think the owner of the property even knew anything about it. He lived in New York and I don't think he ever even came out here. He just stayed home and got the checks from Hawkings, the Police Chief, whose name was on the lease.

I suppose he figured he'd sit on the land until he could get a good price for it and in the meantime, he was gettin' rental money.

So why would he even bother to come all the way out here to look at it. There was really nothing to look at anyway, just an old farmhouse and a lot of vacant fields.

When the 'Club' found out that he decided to sell it to a developer they got Hawkings to call him to come out. He gave him some cock and bull story about violations or whatever.

Anyway, he did get the guy to come out and they all met, that is, some of the Club members and the owner.

Well, they couldn't talk him outta of selling it and he said he was going back to the city and finalize the housing deal.

One thing led to another and they somehow got him out to the farmhouse and it seems then all of a sudden he disappeared."

"What happened to him?" I interjected excitedly.

She paused.

"They never found a trace, not so much as a hair. They had all kinds of cops out here, not just Hawkings' cops but the States too and even some Feds and none of them ever found a thing.

When I kinda got a little nosy about the whole thing, the comment was,

'The three dogs they've got up there, they ain't bein' under fed'

That's all I know about it and to be honest, after hearing that, I don't want to know any more! "

There was a silence.

I swallowed hard.

"Now, remember this is only hearsay, but I never heard anybody say that it wasn't true.

And to put the cap on it they guy's name was Rubinstein, a Jew!

So, with that, it sure wouldn't surprise me if it was all a hundred percent true" she concluded.

"Wasn't the property inherited then?" I asked.

"Yeah, by his son and he was going to sell too but he sure wasn't going to come here. He knew better after his old man disappearing like that.

He was going to do it with lawyers and real estate people and never came near the place."

"How is it then the Club still has it?" I asked.

"Evidently, again this is just from what I hear the DON is a branch of a big operation. They have 'Brother' Clubs as they like to call them, all over.

So, what they did is they called their New York City brothers and had them talk with the son. Now what actually happened I don't know? All I know is the land still isn't sold and it's still the hunting grounds for the Club.

Maybe it was more than a talk if you know what I mean.

In any event, I guess that talk they had was real convincing" she answered with a smirk.

Sally's story made for a hard night's sleep. I don't think I got more than an hour's worth.

I awoke the next morning, or should I say, got out of bed, with Sally's words still running over and over through my mind. Her story was disturbing and alarming to say the least. I knew when I started this adventure that I wouldn't be dealing with the nicest of people but from what she had told me they were even more sinister than I had expected. Any of my feelings of friendship with them were crushed. I was ashamed of myself for even having had fleeting thoughts of comradeship. I tried to quell my embarrassment by attributing them to the drugs and assured myself that I would continue as I had originally planned. I would find Richie's killer and exact vengeance. I wouldn't allow myself to be sucked into their evil band.

However, the necessity of false friendship remained.

I was sure that I must still continue to buddy up with the Club if I was to find out the truth.

After hearing Sally's story, I knew it was going to be harder to get my courage up and my game face on for the next encounter. Additionally, the same old problem still haunted me. I hadn't decided what I would do, if and when I did find out the truth.

I had fantasized several times of luring Hulse into a situation where I could just kill him and be done with it. I could end my anguish of indecision.

Every time these thoughts occurred a voice in my head kept repeating.

How would I lure him?

Is he the killer?

Am I sure?

Should I kill?

Could I kill?

How would I kill?

I had no answers to any of these questions and so, as they occurred, I immediately forced my mind to wander away from those thoughts. I knew I would eventually have to

answer those questions with conviction but for the time being, I would just blow them off as I usually did. I'd worry about them later, if and when the time came, I told myself.

During the ongoing weeks, I was invited to the Club several more times. Each time my apprehension rose to a crescendo when I arrived at the farmhouse and then ebbed to feelings of sociability as I left.

The constant banter during each and every visit centered around hunting, pranks played on one another and inane babble about nothing of consequence. Racial slurs flowed freely throughout every conversation but were not voiced with animosity in spite of the inbred bigotry being evident. The terms they used appeared to be just part of their upbringing and their innate language pattern.

Never a word was uttered about any of the things of which local gossip had suspected them. Honestly, I was somewhat relieved. It meant that I didn't have to face the decisions that I was afraid to make, not soon anyway.

They could be delayed but for how long?

Chapter Eleven

Revelation and Revolution

It was a typical night at the Shaft; Sally had ended her day shift and gone home. Pete was in the kitchen cooking up a hamburger and Freddy sat by the liquor store entrance with his shot and beer in front of him waiting for customers. There were maybe ten people in the place, all the left over, after work regulars.

The door opened and in walked Moose all by his lonesome. He sat at the bar in his usual seat and called me over. He leaned over the bar and spoke in a low voice.

"We're havin' a Club meeting tomorrow night with everybody comin'. Hulseley wants you there too. You can meet all the guys.

He sent me over to tell ya."

I hesitated for a moment thinking of a reply.

"I gotta work" I replied.

"Tell Pete you need the night off. Tell him you're gonna go to one of our meetings.

He won't give you any shit about it.

If he does, just tell me and I'll fix it for ya.

I'll pick ya up at seven out in front" he answered.

It appeared I had no choice.

I nodded and poured him a shot of the usual. He threw it back and left the Shaft.

I went to Pete and explained what had just happened.

Upon hearing of Moose's words, he immediately agreed to give me the night off with pay.

He'd go with Freddy as my replacement.

Then he added "From I know about that 'hunting club', you might be in for a surprise!"

Moose pulled his battered truck up in front of the Shaft at seven sharp. I piled in and off we went to the farmhouse.

When we arrived, things appeared quite different than they had before. No dogs were seen snarling and growling behind the fence gate. Instead the gate was swung wide open.

The front yard of the house was packed with two dozen or more cars and pick-up trucks. I could see through the windows of the house that it too was packed. Shouts and laughter echoed from inside as Moose parked the truck. We walked towards the house. Just as we approached, Hulse stepped onto the front porch with a big smile and beer in hand.

"My man Slick!

Glad ya could make it.

Good work DON Moose!

Come on in see the rest of the boys.

They're real eager to meet ya!" he said while maintaining a smile

Somehow, that "eager to meet ya" sent a chill through me.

I wasn't sure what he really meant but I knew I was going to find out.

The acrid smell of smoke mixed with stale beer and sweat hit me squarely through the open door as I entered.

The house was packed, almost shoulder to shoulder in the living room and kitchen. I recognized some of them as the regulars at the Shaft.

Most all appeared to be wasted or well on their way. Some spoke in a slightly slurred voice while others acted overly animated. I assumed that it was probably the beer and maybe some of Hulse's coffee that was responsible for their behaviors.

In any case, one of the few that appeared completely sober was Hulse himself.

"We're gonna get started in a couple of minutes, out in the back. Ain't really enough room in here. We're like fuckin' sardines in here" he explained.

As promised, within minutes, Hulse stood on one of the kitchen chairs and shouted.

"Everybody!

Get your asses out back!

We're gonna get started!"

The noise of the crowd immediately muted, and all exited the building out into the backyard as he had instructed.

Aside from the chirping of the tree toads and the occasional yelp of the dogs, the yard was silent. The crowd too remained silent.

At the edge of the yard there had been erected a small platform consisting of several wooden pallets nailed together, upon which Hulse was standing.

He began his speech.

It was delivered in Hitleresque fashion, with the flailing arm and piercing stares.

This was the moment at which my view of him and his crowd, as ignorant, bigoted hillbillies changed dramatically. I realized that Sally's description was wrong or maybe I should say, inaccurate.

Her comments about the swastika and lightning bolts tats was right on and they all surely did have the strut to go with it, but I heard not one word of the fiery bigotry she had described.

The main concern was the abolition of the government and everything for which it stood.

Not one racist word was uttered throughout the entire speech. No mention of white supremacy, white power or degradation of Jews was made or even inferred.

Instead, a tirade describing the sinister policies and acts of a malevolent government against its citizens spewed forth. I, as was everyone, remained transfixed by the drama and enthusiasm of Hulse's speech.

"Land of the free!"

You gotta be shitin' me!

Have any of you looked at your check on payday?

The government steals billions every day from you and me.

What do they do with all that stolen money?

I'll tell ya what they do with it.

They send it all over the world. All over the world except here in the good old U.S.A.

They fight foreign wars tellin' us that their defending our freedom.

Whose freedom are they really defending?

Not ours, not mine, that's for sure.

They're defending all the big corporate interests and the Wall Street crowd, that's who.

They send what they call 'foreign aid' to countries so they can buy from the big arms manufacturers. They steal from us every pay day and fix it, so the big companies get rich with our money It's like a giant conveyor belt from your pockets to theirs!

'Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness!'

More bull shit!

If I have the liberty to do as I please as long as I'm not hurtin' no one then why does the DEA come bustin' in my house if they think I got a little weed or coke.

If I wanta make a little hooch in the backyard, who comes barrelin' in, the ATF that's who.

If I pick up a little lady and wanta do some partyin' I better look out cause the cops might be comin' any minute.

'Right to privacy!'

More bull shit. They're readin' our mail, listenin' in on the phone and pretty soon spy cameras are gonna be flyin' over your backyard. The sadder part is you're payin' 'em to do it with the tax money they steal from every paycheck.

'Equal rights!'

My ass equal rights.

Not when the rich cats buy elections and got all the Congress guys in those deep pockets they got. Not when the same old scum bags keep screwin' us over and over and still get reelected over and over.

And what do they do when they get to Washington.

They put on a good show arguing and fighin' with each other during the day and then buddying up all cozy like with each other at fancy parties and dinners at night. And who's payin' for it?

Look to your left and look to your right and then go home and look in the mirror. That's who!

Now they wanta take our guns too. The only people we got helpin' us is the NRA and the only reason they're helpin' is because they're workin' for the big gun makers.

You don't think they're in it for us do ya?

"Ain't had a war since WW II that went through Congress like it's supposed to. Congress don't have the balls to put their stamp on any of 'em cause they know none of 'em are gonna work out right and I don't think any of 'em give a shit if they do or they don't.

All that's gonna happen is a shit load of our guys are gonna die and the fat cats are gonna make a ton money off it.

And what really pisses me off is, it happens over and over, and they think nobody's catchin' on. I gotta tell ya, their wrong cause we're damn well catchin' on!

He paused, and shouts went up from the crowd.

"Right on!"

"Godamn right!"

"Tell it like it is, Don Hulse!"

The voices quieted, and he continued.

"I don't know if you guys know much about history?

I sure don't, but I do know a little.

Tom Jefferson used say that we need a revolution every twenty years or so otherwise government won't serve the people right. They said he was a pretty smart guy and I sure think they were right.

It would be a good idea if everybody here gave a lot of thought about what he said, if ya know what I mean."

He wasn't eloquent, but he was filled with contagious passion. The crowd roared with approval when he ended.

Everyone continued to chatter with each other, many reciting word for word, much of what he had just said.

Not one dissenter could be heard.

I had to admit that I too was influenced by what he had to say and found it difficult to disagree with much of it.

The only problem I had was with his last statement. I knew that his paraphrase about Jefferson and revolution was correct but why did Hulse include it in his speech?

Was he trying to plant the seeds of revolution?

If he was, how in his wildest dreams, could he expect a group of this size to be in any way successful?

What kind of revolution was he suggesting?

I was perplexed to say the least.

The meeting continued with several more speakers, most alluding to, complimenting and embellishing that which Hulse had said.

After an hour or so, the formalities ended, and everyone piled back into the building for more refreshments as they liked to call them.

After a short time, Moose and I got back in his truck and headed home.

"What do ya think?" asked Moose as we bounced down the rutted lane towards the main road.

"About what?" I replied.

"About the meetin' and the talks and all."

"Well, why was everybody calling each other Don so and so?" I asked.

"It's a sign of respect between members. Whenever we have a meetin', members call each other 'DON'. It means Defender of Our Nation. It shows we're proud of what we stand for" he answered.

"It's kinda like 'Sir' in the Knights of the Round Table?" I replied.

"Yeah, I guess" said Moose in an unknowing tone.

There was a short silence and I spoke.

"You know that sign out in front of the house by the gate that says, 'Whites Only - No Jews Neither'.

What's that all about?

I didn't hear any 'White Power' and not one word about niggers or Jews the whole night."

"That ain't our shit no more!

Usta be but not no more.

After a while we kinda figured it all out. We was bein' sidetracked.

All that nigger and Jew hatin' was taking us away from the real problem, the one we gotta fix, the government.

So now we don't hate 'em but we don't love 'em neither.

We don't want 'em the Club and besides ain't none of 'em ever asked to join. Guess maybe they know better, huh?

If they don't bother us none, we don't bother them none.

We don't go lookin' for trouble with nobody.

We don't hate nobody 'cept the government" answered Moose in a slurred voice.

I knew he was wasted, not only by his slurred speech but also by his driving. We rode the entire way at no more than twenty-five miles per hour and frequently swerved back and forth onto the shoulder and back to the road.

I wanted to ask him more, but I hesitated. I didn't want to appear too inquisitive, but I felt compelled. If I didn't try to get the truth from him in his current state I probably wouldn't have another opportunity and besides he probably wouldn't even remember my questioning anyway.

After a brief silence, I summoned the courage to ask some more.

"If you guys aren't down on the darkies then how did that thing over a Jake's happen? That thing they put you on trial for?"

"We didn't get into it cause he was black, it was cause he embarrassed the shit out of us by throwin' us out of his place that night.

We was gonna go back and rough him up a little, that's all. Luke was with us and he was high as a fuckin' kite. He goes nuts when he's all tooted up like that so what does he do, he chops off the guy's hand right in front of us.

I about shit in my pants when I seen him do that and we got outta there real fast."

It seemed that Moose was in the right mood for telling all and so I continued.

"You know, I heard some other stuff at the Shaft a couple of times" I began.

"Yeah, whatta ya hear?"

"I heard that one night, a nigger came into the Shaft and one of you guys got into with him and he wound up dead over on South Street and you guys did it."

"Wasn't me!" he immediately protested.

A long silence continued as we wove down the roadway.

Was this all I was going to get?

I wanted more and so I spoke, hoping to restart the conversation.

"Nobody said you did."

Well, I didn't!" he again protested and then continued.

"I heard they was all at the Shaft one night and Hulse, he got pretty drunk and started raggin' on this black guy at

the bar. I don't know why, he just did. He starts a lot of fights when he gets really shit faced.

Pretty soon they had some words and the guy says, 'Let's go outside and settle this'.

He musta been wasted too or he wouldn't have never gone out with three guys like he did.

He musta thought he was a pretty tough hombre that's for sure or maybe Hulse just pissed him off so much that he couldn't help himself.

I don't know what it was, but he came out and we

- I mean - they all went around the corner to the vacant lot on South Street to take care of business.

Now, him and Hulse gets into it and the guy steps back and trips on somethin' in the lot and down he goes. When he goes to get up there's blood shootin' outta his neck, like water outta a garden hose.

Did ya ever see 'em kill a pig?

They stick 'em in the neck and he runs around till he's dead. It kinda looked like the same thing.

He grabbed his neck and the blood kept on shootin' through his fingers. He kept tryin' to get up but couldn't do it.

When everybody saw that they all took off. I guess he just bled out.

Hulse swore he never even touched the guy, and nobody there said he did.

He didn't stick 'em like everybody else was sayin'."

"So how did he wind up with that cut neck then?" I asked.

"Somebody told me that they went over to the lot a couple days later and saw a shit load of broken bottles all over the place and lots where the guy fell down. I know that's right cause I seen 'em all there too.

They said the guy probably fell and a piece stuck 'em in the neck when he hit the ground and that's how he got cut. Real bad luck for him I'd say" he replied.

I sat silently letting all of this sink in.

I was doubtful that Moose would ever contrive a story this surprising. I was sure that he was there when it happened.

The convincing tone of his voice in his drunken state, told me that his story, although implausible, was most probably true.

Oddly enough I felt great relief after hearing it.

My agonizing thoughts of what I should do when I identified Richie's killer were eased.

Now, relieved of the compulsion to seek out and punish a killer who I had just found out was probably nonexistent, I could leave Cannonsburgh and go back to med school.

Or could I?

I wasn't so sure!

I had developed sincere affection for Sally and she for me, Could I just walk out on her and abandon her and Richie's kid?

Maybe I could just take both of them with me?

Really?

How would I support them? I could hardly support myself when I was in school and what about her aged mother.

Would I expect that she would just leave the old lady behind?

I don't think so!

I would have to stay in Cannonsburgh until I could figure all of this out.

I knew I was lying to myself because there was nothing to figure out!

It would be using common sense to get out of town and go back to school but I knew I was staying.

For me, emotion always trumped logic. My trip here trying to find Richie's killer and seek revenge proved that. I would be here for the long haul.

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted as Moose pulled up in front of the Shaft and stopped the car.

"Okay Slick, see ya tomorrow" he announced.

I got out of the truck, got into my car and drove to Sally's with my head spinning.

Chapter Twelve

A Marked Man

My sweat laden pillow awakened me. I could barely crack open my eye lids. The sun's rays penetrated through our bedroom window and radiated its heat over me. It poured through the tiny slits made by my partially opened eyelids. I instinctively rolled over away from its brilliant glare.

The other side of the bed was empty.

I raised my head from my sweat saturated pillow to see Sally naked, standing before the dresser mirror, combing her hair. My vision was blurred; mouth desert dry and my head throbbed.

I slid my feet out of the bed and struggled to sit upright.

"Hard night, huh?" she questioned.

"Guess so" I replied in an almost whisper.

As I began to revive, my thoughts of the night before came flooding back. Did it happen or had it all been a dream, I asked myself? I wasn't sure.

I remembered, on the way home, having realized that Moose was pretty drunk, and I had asked him a lot of questions and had gotten a lot of surprising answers.

The pain racing across my forehead reminded me that I must have been drunk as well. That was probably the reason that I was having such difficulty in remembering all the details of our conversation.

The major points however were stuck in my brain.

The 'hunting club' was not solely for hunting.

It wasn't a White Supremacist operation either. It was, in fact a group, hatefully zealous in its intent, on seeing the downfall of the government.

My mission to seek, find and punish Richie's killer had become a pointless venture. In spite of my suspicions and that of many others, his demise had been the result of an

almost unbelievable accident. It had not been the murderous, racist act that I had envisioned!

As I sat recalling the events of the past night, I again felt a sense of relief surge through me.

The decisions which I wasn't sure I could make, no longer had to be made. I felt rewarded for not having acted in haste. I was self-satisfied that I had sought and obtained the truth before carrying out undeserved vengeance upon those whom I had wrongfully suspected.

Suddenly, Sally interrupted my thoughts.

"Came home pretty shot last night!"

She paused, and I said nothing waiting for her to continue.

"You had some pretty good stories."

"I did?" I answered curious as to what I had said.

"Sure did" she answered and continued on to relay my conversation of the previous night.

As I listened all of the details came creeping back to mind.

"And then you crapped out on the sofa in the living room and I had to drag you into bed here" she concluded.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"About what?"

"About all the stuff Moose told me?" I replied.

She hesitated.

"Probably true I'd say.

Why would he have any reason to lie?

It's not like you're the State Police or F.B.I. and you said he kinda slipped and said he was there when it happened, which to me makes it pretty believable.

I've known him since high school. I don't think he could even make up a story like that on his own and if somebody else made it up for him he probably couldn't remember it and keep it straight anyway.

I think he had to be there and that's the way it happened."

Sally's confirmation gave me even more relief.

Now I was sure that Moose's story was most likely for real and not just a bunch of bull shit to disguise the true circumstances of Richie's death.

Even my vicious headache began to subside. I couldn't be sure if it was the dissipation of tension or just the booze wearing off but in either case, I felt better.

I stood up, grabbed Sally around her waist and we both fell back into the bed.

I went back to work at the Shaft that evening.

It was littered with the same old familiar faces, many of whom were at the meeting the night before. Most appeared much more cordial than usual. I suppose it was because they had seen me at the meeting.

No matter what the cause, I felt myself becoming more and more one of the 'good ol' boys'. To be honest, somehow, I kind of liked the feeling.

It must have been ten o'clock when Hulse came waltzing into the bar. He was alone.

As soon as I saw him, I was certain that he had come to warn me about my questioning of Moose.

He sat at the bar.

"The usual Slick!" he commanded.

I turned, grabbed the bottle and glass and poured the Jack without a word.

"What did ya think?" he began.

"Think about what?" I replied with some surprise.

"The Club last night?" he answered.

"Yeah, pretty good!

I didn't hear too much that I didn't go along with" I replied.

"I been talkin' with Moose and some of the other guys" he began.

The words that I expected to hear next immediately flashed through my mind, but they never came.

Instead, he continued.

"Everybody seems to think you're a smart guy and we could use a guy with some smarts.

Besides, most of 'em kinda like your style and think you're pretty straight up.

How would you like to join the Defender of Our Nation?"

My surprise must not have shown because he made no indication of it. I hesitated for an instant to collect my thoughts.

What would be required of me and could I do whatever it might be?

"What do I have to do to join?" I asked nervously.

"Well, there won't be another meeting until a couple of weeks. In the meantime, I'll kinda explain the whole thing to ya.

Then you can come to the meeting and decide if ya want to be one of us or not."

He downed the shot and got up from the stool. He was about to leave when he turned and spoke.

"Ain't too many guys get invited and I don't remember any of 'em that didn't join up" he said with a sly grin.

I was sure his comment and expression was meant to send a subtle message and it did. I was positive that I would soon be DON Slick.

The only way to avoid it would be leave Cannonsburgh for good and that would mean leaving Sally and Richie's son too. That was something I was convinced that I couldn't do!

During the next few weeks I spent a lot of time with Hulse, Moose, Haha and the others at the farmhouse. It became almost a daily ritual, Moose picking me up, driving to the house, going out hunting or just sitting around, drinking and bull shitting.

I soon learned much more than I had already surmised.

It seemed that the Defenders of Our Nation was but a chapter of a much larger, loosely affiliated organization of many chapters throughout the country. Not all were composed of country hicks and hillbillies. Several were headquartered in cities and large towns.

Some were even funded by unknown benefactors who anonymously paid the bills.

I was told that the cost of leasing this very farmhouse in which we sat and the land surrounding it, was paid by

one such individual. Again, the identity of that person was a closely guarded secret known only to a few. Even the names of the few that knew was a secret!

The purpose of the group, besides comradely, hunting, drinking and Biker's Brew wasn't all that clear.

All I was told that its prime purpose was to 'Be ready' but for what?

When I asked that question, the response was, "We will be told when the time is right" whatever that meant.

I wasn't about to ask the question again because I was sure by the tone, the answer would be the same.

It was the following Thursday and another meeting of the Club was held. I was again invited and driven by my faithful chauffer, Moose,

The scene before the meeting was the same as it had been before, a hillbilly frat party.

When the actual meeting began, Hulse again took the make shift platform and spoke.

"Fellow DONs, we have with us tonight, one who seeks to join us; someone who you have all met and considered for membership in the Defenders of Our Nation.

Slick come up here!" he motioned to me.

I stepped up and stood next to him centered in the beam of the single flood light which illuminated the stage.

I looked out over the crowd which was barely visible through the glare. The only thing to be clearly seen was the sporadic glow of cigars and cigarettes in the darkness in front of us.

"Is anybody here opposed to this man in any way what so ever?" he said as he placed his hand on my shoulder.

Silence prevailed but for the sound of the tree toads coming from the distant woods.

"Is anybody here opposed to this man in any way what so ever?" he again spoke.

Silence still.

"Is anybody here opposed to this man in any way what so ever?" he announced for the final time.

Once again there was no response.

"I have asked three times as I am required to do and no one has denied him so we will continue to grant him his wish and give to him his title of respect and brotherhood among us" and he paused.

"The three who have presented this man to us, step forward."

Moose, Haha and Jum stepped onto the platform. Moose stood to my left, Jum to my right and Haha in front of me. Hulse continued.

"All of you will reaffirm your pledge with our new brother.

Repeat after me" he commanded.

"I am here before my God and my country to proclaim my loyalty.

I will always stand for our beliefs with my Defenders of Our Nation brothers."

I recited his words along with the chorus of the crowd.

"I will honor, respect and bear no malice to anyone who bears the title DON."

My recitations continued, and the chorus of the other members again arose each time as the pledge of my membership carried on.

"I will honor and respect the actions and beliefs of the Defenders of Our Nation.

I will honor and respect all the tasks assigned to me by the Defenders of Our Nation.

I will never betray or stray from the Defenders of Our Nation.

If by action or word I renege on any of these promises I will be held in contempt and experience appropriate punishments and expulsion from the Defenders of Our Nation."

The pledge was ended and Hulse nodded to Haha who walked to a small Hibachi at the edge of the stage.

Both Moose and Jum each gripped one of my arms. Haha again stood before me, this time holding a long-handled

rod with a brightly glowing tip. It was about the size of a quarter and I could see the letters DON in the center of a red-hot circle.

Hulse reached out and tore open my shirt. Haha plunged the fiery symbol against the right side of my chest.

The pain shot through me, as hot as the iron that had branded me. I felt my knee weaken and struggled not to cry out. If it had not been for Moose and Jum I surely would have collapsed.

As I slowly began to recover from the shock and agony of the ordeal I opened my eyes. Standing before me were all four, each with his shirt pulled open, exposing his mark of the DON branded on his chest.

Each then stepped toward me, one after the other. Each put his hand on my shoulder, shook my hand and announced, "Welcome DON Slick. It is an honor to call you brother."

After each congratulatory gesture, the crowd roared and chanted my new name.

At the conclusion of the ceremony everyone moved inside to continue the celebration. Hulse walked over to me and handed me a plastic bag filled with ice.

"Proud of ya, DON Slick. We picked a good man.

Here, put this on the mark and it'll feel better in no time."

Then, with the other hand he gave me a cup of his special brew.

"This is gonna work too!" he added.

I clutched the ice pack to the burn and gulped down the coffee in one swallow. He was right, within minutes the throbbing started to subside, and I joined in the party full speed ahead.

I'm sure the ride home that night was as unsteady as ever, but I wasn't the least frightened by the skidding and swerving. I responded to Moose's conversation only enough to make him think I was actually paying attention. My thoughts were instead occupied with the events of the evenings and speculation of what was to come.

When I got home that night, Sally met me at the door with her beautiful, broad smile and a kiss that seemed to last for an hour.

I knew then, for sure, that in spite of the uncertainty of my decision to stay, I had made the right choice. I vowed that I would never allow myself to experience regret thereafter, no matter what might happen.

I had been a full-fledged member of DON for about four months and nothing had really changed. My branding had healed and left its prominent scar on my chest like it was supposed to.

The meetings were like 'good ol' boy' parties with an a few antigovernment laden speeches spliced in. That was pretty much it. To be honest, I was having a pretty good time for myself. My relationship with Sally was in full bloom. I could see that her kid was becoming quite fond of me and me of him. I was even becoming attached to her mother despite her deteriorating mental state.

Often, those suffering dementias get nasty and argumentative but luckily, that was not in her case.

Although, not always fully rational, she remained amiable and that made it easy for me to get along with her.

It had to be February when I got the call at the Shaft. It was Hulse.

"Stay after work today. I wanta come down and talk to ya."

"About what?" I asked.

The phone was dead. He had hung up.

I ended my shift and sat at the bar with a beer awaiting his arrival.

Fifteen minutes later he came through the door with a stern look covering his face.

He came next to me and whispered.

"Come over here" and he motioned toward a table at a far, isolated corner of the bar.

I followed him to it.

"We got a problem, a real big one" he started in a hurried, low voice.

"Haha killed a guy!"

He paused and swallowed hard.

"What do you mean?" I asked reflexively.

"What the fuck do you think I mean? He's got a dead guy up at the farmhouse and he called me.

He told me he was out huntin'. You know as well as me that it ain't huntin' season now.

Well, anyway, a game warden catches him, and he gets into it with him. Next thing that happens is the warden says he's gonna arrest him and he starts to take out the handcuffs that he had with him.

When Haha hears that he goes nuts and winds up shotin' him dead on the spot. Now he's got the body layin' there and he don't know what to do. So, he carries the guy back to the farmhouse and puts him under a tarp in the old barn in the back.

Now this all happened yesterday and the guy's still in the barn. Lucky it's cold out or he'd be startin' to stink already. It went pretty low last night so he's probably solid as a rock by now but that's beside the point, we gotta get rid of him real soon. If they start lookin' for him I sure don't want them findin' him in our barn. I want him in a place where he'll never be found.

You gotta help us out here. You're a smart guy. That's why I'm comin' to ya.

Got any ideas?"

I sat, without a word, looking him straight in the eye. I didn't know what to say. It was the surprise and the shock of the story that left me silent and besides I had never dealt with the task of disposing of a dead body before.

Well, that wasn't really true!

I had disposed of many bodies, but it was in anatomy lab under quite different circumstances, not murder.

"I have to give this some serious thought" I finally replied.

"Don't think too long. I want this over with tonight" he snapped back.

"I'm goin' and gettin' a drink and let you think this over" and with that he got up and went to the bar.

I could feel the cold sweat in my armpits beginning to run down my sides.

Should I get involved with this?

Hiding a body!

An accessory to murder!

Then it occurred to me.

It wasn't should I get involved, I was involved!

I was sure there was no way of getting out now.

The same old thoughts returned just as they had before.

Should I leave Cannonsburgh?

Could I leave Sally and her mother?

Could I leave Richie's boy?

I already had the answers to all of these and each was a resounding 'no'.

Within an instant I was back with the problem at hand, how do I get rid of the game warden's body?

How in Christ's name did he expect me to figure this one out? He must think I'm Houdini. I sat straining to come up with a plan.

Then, suddenly, without warning, it came to me. How I don't know but it did.

I had driven to work that morning at the usual time, nine o'clock. I always rode passed the Highberg Funeral Home for Services on my way.

As I approached the funeral home, the traffic became stop and go. I was going to be late for work I was sure.

When I got near the front of the building I saw lines of people crossing the street and entering the funeral home.

A cop in the street was periodically stopping traffic to allow the people to cross. That was the tie up.

I called Hulse over to the table.

"I saw a funeral this morning over at the funeral home on the way to work. Who was that?" I asked.

"That was Tom Greene. He was the president of the Board of Education. He died a couple of days ago all of sudden like. They said he had a heart attack.

The guy was only about forty or so.

Pretty much every politician and all the town workers in Cannonsburgh went to the funeral" he answered.

"Where did they bury him?" I asked.

"I guess over Hillsdale Cemetery" where they bury most of 'em" he answered.

"Get the paper over there on the bar. I want to see the obit" I said.

Hulse went and retrieved the newspaper and I thumbed through it to the obit page.

"You got it - 'Interment at Hillsdale Cemetery' - it says right here" I confirmed.

"Yeah, now what?" asked Hulse eagerly.

"Here's what I want you to do. Call Moose or anybody that you can get a hold of and get them to go out to the

cemetery right now and see where that grave is and then come back and tell us. Right now!" I emphasized.

Hulse immediately called and sent Moose on his way to the cemetery.

He ended the call, looked over at me and asked, "What the hell is this all about?"

"Did you ever hear the saying, 'Hiding in plain sight'? If you wanted to find a body, where would you look?" I replied.

"Well, probably the cemetery, sure!" he answered.

"We're gonna put the warden's body in the cemetery alright but not in 'plain sight'. We're going to go out to Hillsdale tonight and bury him in the same grave as the guy who was buried today.

We'll wrap him in plastic real tight, so no critters get a smell of him and put him about three feet down. Nobody will ever think of looking for him in a new grave like that. We gotta do this tonight because the dirt is still soft. It hasn't had time to freeze up.

If we wait much longer it will be like a rock and we'll never be able to dig."

"I said you were a smart guy the day I met you and you just proved me right!" he exclaimed excitedly.

Twenty minutes passed, and Moose came through the door. He sat at the table and took a pen. I handed him a piece of paper and he proceeded to draw a map showing the location of the freshly dug gravesite.

After he finished we all went out to the farmhouse to pick up the 'patient' as we used to call the bodies in anatomy lab.

"Pull over here for a minute. I'll be right back" I commanded as we approached the CVS ahead.

I got out of the truck, went into the drugstore and bought a box of latex gloves. Moose and I continued on our way to the house.

We all entered the barn and Haha guided us to a stall at the rear, where the body was lying under a blue, plastic tarp. He reached down and pulled the covering away to

reveal the lifeless body. It was frozen solid. A gaping, grapefruit sized hole in the chest where the buckshot had entered was surrounded by blood clots sprinkled with small, glistening ice crystals mixed with it.

He reached for the body to move it onto the large sheet of window plastic which he had placed beside it.

"Wait!" I commanded.

"Everybody should put on these gloves first" and I pulled several from the box I had purchased.

Everyone complied without a word of question.

"Get another piece of plastic. Your hands have been all over this one" I instructed Haha.

He got a new sheet and taped the body tightly into the makeshift shroud.

"Remember now, no phone calls while we're out here or even on the way" I reminded them.

We loaded it into Moose's truck and left for the burial site with Hulse and Haha following in the car behind.

It was a short ten-minute drive to the cemetery.

The cloud covered sky made it even more dark and desolate than Moose had described.

When we got to the entrance, I was stationed at the gate to watch for unexpected visitor who might have seen our arrival.

"I'm the only one who will make a phone call if we have a problem. No others!" I again reminded them.

Both vehicles then turned off their headlights and drove into the cemetery guided by only their parking lights.

My heart pounded frantically as their lights faded into the hovering mist.

It seemed like an eternity but in fact only an hour had passed. Peering out from my hiding place behind a large oak tree, I had seen only two cars pass during the entire time.

Each passing car had left me panicked and breathless.

Then I heard the faint rumbling of car engines and the dim glow of lights approaching from the cemetery.

Seconds later, Moose pulled up followed by Hulse and Haha.

I jumped in the truck with a sigh of relief and we drove back to the house.

I could see in the dim dashboard lighting that his boots were covered with mud as were the latex gloves which he was still wearing.

"How'd it go?" I asked.

"It went!" he replied.

"Let me hear it"

"Well, it was like you said, the ground was real loose, wasn't much froze at all. It was pretty easy diggin'.

We went down about three feet and dumped him in and covered 'em up!

When we got done it looked like nobody did nothin'.

We put all the flowers and stuff that they left back on top of the grave and it all looked perfect. Ain't nobody ever gonna know what we did" he answered.

His story helped to calm me. I could feel myself relax and my heart rate slow to almost normal.

When we got back to the house the stories of the others confirmed that which Moose had told me. I felt even more of the tension ebb from me as I listened. My paranoia had dissipated. I fell into an exhausted calm.

Only the anxiety of knowing that I was now on a path of no return continued it's constant, subtle gnaw. There was nothing that I could tell myself to dismiss it. It was there, and it was there to stay.

I was in deep water and had no way back to shore. All I could do now is stay afloat and hope. What was even more distressing was I didn't even know what I should hope for!

The lunch crowd had gone leaving only the five regulars sitting at the far end of the bar nursing their beers. An occasional boisterous laugh echoed through the nearly empty room as they rehashed the same hackneyed stories with each other. I was seated at the other end eating my

usual burger and fries lunch and still pondering the events of the previous night. I found myself frequently questioning the reality of the whole thing. Did it actually happen or was it a frightening dream?

Immediately after that fleeting thought passed I snapped back to the truth of the event and my full participation.

Was it my unconscious which was constantly urging me to find a way to deny the memory of my involvement?

Could it be my conscience prodding me toward disbelief?

Maybe it was just plain fear?

In the end, no self-analysis could convince me of its fantasy.

What I had done was cold, hard fact.

Suddenly, a loud voice interrupted my unsettling thoughts.

"Hey man, look at this will ya!" one of the regulars exclaimed.

I looked up to see him waving his hand at the television.

A bright red banner streamed across the face of the set.

"Breaking News" paraded under the image of the local news broadcaster as he spoke.

"Connie Hacker reported her husband, Game Warden Wayne Hacker as missing and unaccounted for last night." Then, an all too familiar face that of the game warden, flashed on the screen as he continued to speak.

"Mrs. Hacker called police after he failed to return from a routine patrol in the wooded area on the outskirts, north of Cannonsburgh,

She reported that he had never failed to return home after a day's work during his entire twenty-five-year career with the State and that he had no known health issues.

A thorough search of the area has begun with dozens of police, dogs and volunteers.

If anyone knows the whereabouts or has seen Warden Hacker, please call 800-658-1000.

More on this story at six.

We will now return to our regular programming."

I swallowed hard and pushed the half-eaten meal away from me. My appetite too disappeared upon viewing the report of Hacker's disappearance.

I arose; walked back behind the bar, poured myself a stiff shot of Old Grand Dad and gulped it down with one swallow.

During the next few days, it was the number one story. It was the newspaper headline in every newspaper, the lead story on every newscast and the words on everybody's lips. Needless to say, my paranoia was at an all-time high.

What if they found the body?

Could they trace it back to us?

What if they interrogated Haha or Moose especially?

Neither one of them was too bright. What if they cracked and spilled their guts?

The "What ifs" ran rampant and unceasingly through my mind as I watched and read.

How could be it be that not one of the search parties had found anything?

I remember the wound in Hacker's chest. I had thought he was shot with buckshot but Haha said he had hit him with a pumpkin ball dead square and from close up. I was sure the heart and aorta were completely shredded by the blast. Blood must have flown everywhere!

How is it that with all that blood, the scene of the murder had not been found? With the troops of searchers and the dogs too, how could it possibly be missed?

All I could surmise is that the site had been found but its discovery was not revealed to the public. Maybe the police were saving that information. They could use it when interrogating a suspect hoping that if he was the killer he might slip and give undisclosed information about the murder, which only the police and the murder would know.

That's an old cop's trick that I had seen many times on TV. It was the only possible explanation I could think of.

As the days wore on, the story began to recede from the front page toward the second and third sections of the newspaper. Its descent from "Breaking News" to a secondary, tertiary and finally no reporting at all on TV news moved in lockstep with the paper.

As the intensity of the reporting continued its path to extinction so did my paranoia.

At long last, after a month or two, both the reporting and my paranoia had gone the way of Tom Hacker - disappeared!

My only thought was "Thank God!"

Throughout this entire time, meetings of the Defenders of Our Nation continued as usual. The only difference was that Hulse's tirades against the government became even more vehement and longer. At times I thought of Castro and the three-hour speeches he was known to give.

Hulse never approached the three-hour mark but he was long winded. To my surprise, I found much of what he said confirmed my inner most thoughts.

“‘Money for nothin' and chicks for free' he expounded the lyrics of an old Dire Straits tune and followed it with 'Money for the rich and nothin' for me'. That's the way our government works for us.

I use ta hate the A-rabs and all the shit they did, if they really did it?

After seein' what's goin' on I ain't so sure!

All these wars we got goin' all came outta the attack they said the terrorists did.

After all that Cold War shit was over and they ripped down that wall in Germany, all the companies that were makin' money off it saw a lot dry up. They didn't take to kindly to that.

A new enemy and a new war would sure fix that problem for 'em. Now, all of sudden, we got 9-11 and it sure fixed the problem right quick.

Now an awful lot of rich people are gettin' even richer from all these new wars.

A lot of politicians are gettin' a shit load for helpin' to fund 'em too.

Ya think maybe the whole thing's a setup?

I gotta give 'em credit though; they pulled it off real good.

They got half the country ridin' around with 'I support our troops' stuck on the back of their cars.

I don't even know what the fuck that means?

I don't think nobody else does neither. They just got 'em all pumped up and everybody goes with the flow, but they don't even know where the flow's goin' or why!

I can tell ya where the flow goin'. Out of our pockets and into the rich guy's, that's where.

Then they have the balls to say, 'Our Troops'. They ain't 'Our troops'.

They all been hired by Washington. They're Washington's troops and they do whatever Washington tells 'em to do.

The only time they were kinda 'Our Troops' is when the draft was on.

Now, they figured out they can't do that no more cause it really gets the people pissed off, big time.

So, what did they do, they kinda got themselves a private army to do all their shit.

The only way the people of our country can survive is if the government doesn't.

How we gonna get rid of it and get all those rats outta the holes in Washington, I'm not sure but I say, whatever ya have ta do, ya have ta do.

Does that mean violence?

Well, they keep tellin' us that violence is not the way to go.

Not here anyway!

But then violence in all the other countries, that's okay as long as the government says it's okay.

Now I ain't the smartest guy in town but it don't make a whole lot of sense to me.

It's alright to blow the shit outta everywhere else and then say it's no good here?

They call people that say some shit is bad and then they do it themselves anyway, they call 'em hypocrites.

That's what we got in Washington, hypocrites!

Ya ever read the Bible?

I ain't read the whole thing but I have read parts and I heard a lot about it when the old lady made me go ta church when I was a kid.

One of the things I remember most was when Jesus was talkin' about hypocrites.

I can't remember exactly what he said but it was somethin' about a millstone tied around their neck and them bein' thrown into a pit.

Don't sound like he was too fond of 'em and you know what, I ain't neither.

The A-rabs send terrorist martyrs to do their work.

From what I'm told, they blow themselves up cause they are promised Heaven with lots of women. I really don't think it works out that way for 'em but it sure gets 'em to do a lot of crazy stuff.

Now, I don't think we could get any of you to do somethin' like that by giving you those way out promises. Could we really get any of ya to kill yourself like they do? I don't think so!

We don't have guys that would kill themselves, but we do have guys that are willing to risk their lives to save our nation?

I do think so!

As a matter of fact, I know so!

How do I know?

Because I'll be the first guy to step forward when the time is right!

What about you?" he shouted in conclusion.

A boisterous shout of enthusiasm shot from the crowd as he left the stage.

"We're with ya DON Hulse!

We're with you!"

Chapter Thirteen

Decoding Death

I was standing behind the bar at the Shaft working my shift as usual and in walked Moose, Haha and Jum. They pulled up their stools and sat.

"The usual" announced Jum. I pour three stiff shots.

"Where's Hulse?"

"He's usually with you guys" I inquired.

"Hulsey went to Disney World" answered Haha.

"Disney World?" I repeated.

"Yeah, he took my kids with him.

Took both John and Mikey.

Went yesterday.

Gonna be back on Wednesday" replied Jum.

I was surprised and curious.

"Why in Christ's name would Hulse take Jum's kids on a vacation to Disney World?" I thought.

An instant later my question was answered, sort of anyway.

"He said he had to meet some people there and he might as well take the kids with him.

My guys will have a great time. They never been there before so I sure it's gonna be good for them" continued Jum.

"Why didn't you go with them?" I asked.

"He didn't want me too.

Said he was the only one who supposed to go to the meetin'.

Besides, I didn't have the cash even if I did wanta go.

He's payin' for the kids so that's all okay by me" he answered.

There was a momentary silence.

"Did he say anything about who he was meeting or why?"

I asked.

"Didn't say nothin' about that but he did say he wanted to talk to you. He said he's gonna call me here at four o'clock and I should put you on the phone with him "he replied. That was strange. Why would he want to talk with me and why on Jum's phone?

Four o'clock came and Jum's phone rang. He handed it to me.

"Hulse?" I said.

"Yeah, it's me. I'm in Florida" he answered.

"I know. Jum just told me" I replied.

He continued.

"Do you have a computer?"

"No" I answered.

"You're living over at Sally's place, right?" he said.

"Yeah!" I answered.

"She got one?" he asked.

"Yeah!"

"Are you any good with the computer?" he replied,

"Yeah, used to be pretty good."

"I thought ya would, being smart like you are" he said.
By the tone of his voice, I knew he was patronizing me. I
was anxious to hear what he would say next.

"Does Sally have email?" he continued.

"Sure" I answered.

"Do you know her email address?"

"Sallyzzz@aol.com" I replied.

"Great!

Put Jum back on the phone. I wanta let him talk to his kids
for a minute" he concluded.

I handed the phone to Jum and he walked over to a quiet
corner with the phone held up to his ear.

On Wednesday, Hulse returned just like he said he would.

Two days later he called a DON meeting.

When we arrived at the meeting it was business as usual
except for Hulse's speech. It was even more zealous than
usual.

He began.

"The Defenders of Our Nation have long talked about the government and how it sucks. How it's fuckin' all of us and everybody in the whole country. But that's all we been doin', talkin'. We ain't been doin' shit!

Well, the time for doin' is on us right now. Here's why.

We got half the country outta work. Most people are up to their asses in bills. Nobody's kids can go to college without taken a shit load of loans.

We got wars that don't wanta stop and more comin'.

All the bankers screwed everybody and then they got paid off. Lots of people lost their houses. Some are even livin' in their cars.

People that's got jobs ain't gettin' shit for pay. If they try to get a raise they get shit canned.

All the unions are pretty much outta business. They all been squashed by the politicians and if they ain't been squashed they got their balls cut off.

You got some retired guys losing their pensions and the politicians are talkin' about cuttin' Social Security besides.

Health benefits for the old people and as for Medicare, they got that in their sights too.

Pretty soon they're gonna replace it with a bunch of icebergs like the Eskimos do with their old folks.

If we can't get people riled up to join us now, we can't never do it.

The time is now!

If it doesn't happen now we may as well just give it all up and quit the bull shit because it will never happen.

Am I making sense to ya?"

Everyone around me nodded without a word of reply.

He continued on with the same fervor.

"Ya know I was listenin' to this guy on the radio a time a ago and he was talkin' about 9-11. He was sayin' some stuff that I don't know if it's true, but it sure does make some sense.

He says that whole thing was put up to get all these wars goin' so the big companies that make the war machinery

can get a ton of money out of it. He even said that maybe the government was in on it!

It kinda made sense to me. After we got buddy-buddy with the Russkies we didn't have much of a reason to make a lot of bombs and guns. What for?

If nobody came up with a new enemy and real soon, what were all those companies gonna do for business. Maybe the answer to that problem was the "terrorists"?

Like all of a sudden, they showed up right after the Cold War stuff stopped. I bet it wasn't five years and there they were. A replacement for the Russkies right on the doorstep.

Makes ya wonder, don't it?"

Again, everyone silently nodded, and he continued, "Now, if what this guy on the radio said is true, it looks like the government lettin' a couple of thousand of our own people being killed to get their way isn't a problem for them. And it worked pretty good for them.

They probably said to themselves that helpin' all the big companies is helpin' America and so people should sacrifice for the country, whether they want to or not. If it costs a few people their lives, that's the way it's gotta be. How many guys did the government get killed in Vietnam and they didn't think nothin' of it. All that bull shit about defending America, they weren't defendin' shit about America over there and they ain't now.

Startin' these wars wouldn't be the first time the government got a lot of people killed on purpose. They might just think it's okay to murder a few thousand of us if it's in their plan and it will make their plan work.

Let me tell some of things a great patriot of our own age had to say just a few years ago before he was executed. Maybe you heard of him, Tim McVeigh and here's what he said."

The crowd cheered at the mention of his name.

Hulse continued.

“Those who betray or subvert the Constitution are guilty of sedition and treason, are domestic enemies and should and will be punished accordingly.’

And here's what he said about our present, corrupt government and what it has done to the women and babies of the world.

'Remember Dresden? How about Hanoi? Tripoli? Baghdad?

What about the big ones – Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

At these two locations, the U.S. killed at least 150,000 non-combatants – mostly women and children – in the blink of an eye. Thousands more took hours, days, weeks or months to die.'

Those were the acts of our leaders done in our name which they considered justified and moral. They carried them out without a tinge of remorse or guilt because they thought them necessary to keep power and wealth in the hands of a few.

If we seek to overthrow a system capable of these kinds of acts, then it is necessary for us to carry out similar acts to defeat them.

I have sworn to defend our nation, just as you have, and I will defend against enemies foreign and those here at home.

Those here at home are the government and its kiss ass, special interests; those who destroy our liberties and God given rights for their own ends.

I will defend our nation because not only did I swear to, but I believe in what it stands for in every bit of my heart, soul and being. I will defend our nation by destroying its corrupt government.

I am sorry that people will have to lose their lives but that's the nature of every revolution. I understand going in what must happen and sadly will."

There was a pause and then he continued.

"Every country that got a government out of power did it with the people behind them, right?"

"That's right!" several shouted in loud agreement.

"Our job then is to get the people solidly with us. We could never come close to success by ourselves.

All of you know of Charles Manson.

His plan was to start what he called Helter-Skelter, a nationwide race riot to bring down the government letting him become chief after it was over.

You know, it didn't work out to good for him. The idea of planning a way to get the whole country involved in overthrowing the government, that part of it was pretty good though.

The problem was the plan itself not the idea behind it.

We're gonna use the same idea with a different kind of plan. One that's gonna work!"

Again, there was a silence and he continued.

"I said once before, the A-rabs send terrorist martyrs to do their work.

We don't have guys that would kill themselves, but we do have guys that are willing to risk their lives to save our nation.

Am I right?"

A resounding "Yeah!" rose in unison from the crowd.

"I'll be the first guy to step forward!

What about you?" he shouted.

Again, a resounding "Yeah!" spilled forth.

All of you step forward with me and wait for my call.

Some will then soon be chosen to serve our cause" and with that he left the stage and walked into the cheering crowd.

He moved through the gantlet of well-wishers and wended his way to me.

He came very close and whispered just above the noise.

"Come into the house. I want to talk with you.

Alone!"

The members were still in the backyard and the house was vacant. He reached into his pocket, took out a thumb drive and handed it to me.

"Take this and load it up on the computer. There's information on it about what you should do.

Don't let it out of your sight.

I'll be coming to the Shaft tomorrow and we can talk about what it says."

With that he slapped me on the back and went out into the yard with the others.

I stood there for a moment staring at the small, black object he had just given me. I slipped it into my pocket and followed him into the yard.

I couldn't wait to get home that night. If I could have I would have left immediately.

Moose was my driver and I had no choice but to wait.

Finally, I arrived back at Sally's. It was late. I sat at the computer and plugged in the thumb drive and eagerly waited for it to load up.

It contained several files, one entitled, "Info.txt".

I opened it immediately and read "Click file - Ck2rd.exe".

I followed the directions and clicked the file.

"Select bmp" it commanded.

I didn't know what that meant. I had to talk to Hulse.

The next day he came into the Shaft.

"So, did ya look at that thing I gave ya last night?" he asked.

"I did but I couldn't make much sense out of it" I replied.

"Didn't think ya would without the directions. I just wanted to make sure that it worked right in the first place" he answered.

He then pulled a slip of folded paper from his shirt pocket.

"I'm comin' over to your place after you get done here and we'll work on this together, I'll be over about seven" and with that he left.

Seven o'clock came and a sharp knock on the door resounded.

"Where's Sally and the old lady?" he asked as he looked around the room.

"Went to the city, Pittsburgh.

Doc Harmon recommended a specialist for her mom and Sally took her there this morning.

I'm pretty sure there's going to be a lot of tests, so they'll probably be staying for a couple of days. Probably won't be back until Friday or so.

I really don't think they can do too much for the old lady, but you can't just let her die without trying to do something." I replied.

"Too bad!

I was kinda lookin' forward to seein' Sally" he replied.

"You got pretty lucky.

I'd give my right nut to be beddin' down with her. I knowed her since high school and never even got a feel. You come into town and all of a sudden, you're in the saddle.

That name we gave ya, Slick, was really picked right I guess" he said wistfully.

He walked into the backroom where Sally's computer was set up.

"Open her email" he commanded.

I reacted immediately.

"Open that one" and he pointed to "Disneyland Pictures" on the screen.

The message opened revealing several photographs of him and Jum's kids at the park.

"Save them all" he commanded as he looked up from the paper slip he was holding.

"Now open that program off the thing I gave ya."

I plugged the thumb drive in the computer and opened the "Ck2rd.exe" file.

He looked at the note once more and read, "Go to the save pictures we just got and open the third one with this program".

I hit the browser button and click the third picture as he commanded.

"Decode" appeared on the screen. I clicked it.

"File pic3dc.txt" appeared.

"Open that" he instructed.

I did.

"032208192350399119122323701718225135900807980163"

that was it!

"What the hell does that mean?" I thought out loud.

"We gotta figure it out" he answered.

"Print it out for me."

I hit the "print" button. He took the copy and went into the kitchen. There he sat at the table with a pencil in hand, pouring over the series of seemingly random numbers. He continuously looked at the note he clenched in his left hand as he pondered.

Several minutes of silence passed as he struggled to decipher the digits before him.

"Awe, fuck this man. I can't figure this shit out. I wasn't never that good at math" he announced as he got to his feet.

"Here, you gotta do it" he exclaimed and pointed to the papers on the table.

I sat and looked at the crumbled note of instructions.

"Start two-digit number= offset, out of range = sp, $a > 10$, digit > 10 + next offset" was scrawled on the note.

This was as confusing as the number series.

"Whoever gave you this note; did he say anything about what it meant?" I asked.

"Yeah, he said a lot but a lot of it I didn't really understand that good. I didn't wanta act stupid so I just kinda pretended to know what he was talkin' about.

I thought I could figure it out later, but I guess I can't" he confided.

"Do you remember anything that he said?"

He was silent and then spoke.

"He said all the numbers where letters and they were all moved in the alphabet I remember that" he replied.

I again looked at the instruction sheet and stared at the numbers.

After several attempts, I was finally successful in its decoding.

It seemed that the first set of two digits told how far into the alphabet the number series was to start. The offset of this message was three meaning that "a" normal being letter number one or "01" would now be "04", "b" would be "05" and so on.

After "z" which would be "30", numbers one through ten would be "31" through "40". Plus sign for number larger than ten would be "41". Any value greater than "41" or less than "03" would be used to separate words, dates, number, and so forth, in other words, 'delimiters'.

I said nothing but quietly wrote the translation as I deciphered it.

"Offset 3, 22 = s, 08 = e, 19 = p, 23 = t, 50 = space, 39 = 9, 91 = space, 19 = p, 12 = i, 23 = t, 23 = t, 70 = space, 17 = n, 18 = o, 22 = s, 51 = space, 35 = 5, 90 = space, 08 = e. 07 = d, 98 = space, 01 = space and 63 = space."

There it was, as best I could tell anyway, "sept 9 pitt and the offset for the next message was 5 and finally 'ed' end of message".

September ninth, that's tomorrow, I thought to myself!

The code was less than elegant but combined with the picture embed, it made the message undetectable. It was a relatively simple but effective way to send clandestine messages.

What the message meant however, I had no idea.

I handed the paper scrap on which I was working to Hulse.

He took one glance at it and looked up with a knowing, pensive stare.

"Ya did good Slick!" and he stuffed the paper into his shirt pocket.

"Gimme the thing too" he commanded. I handed the thumb drive to him. He shoved it into his pocket along with the paper scrap and left.

I lay awake that night, trying unsuccessfully, to decide the meaning of the message.

The next morning, I arose in a sleep deprived stupor and went to work.

ESPN blared from the TV behind the bar.

Suddenly, it was interrupted with a "Breaking News Alert" banner streaming across the screen. The programming switched from "College Football Highlights" to a talking head holding a microphone. He excitedly spoke in a frenzied tone.

"We have just received reports of shootings in several metropolitan areas throughout the country. People have been shot and at least five killed in Cleveland. Two people are known dead in San Francisco and three in Las Vegas. Additional incidents have occurred in Miami, Boston and Pittsburgh."

'For Christ's sake, Sally and her mother are in Pittsburgh' flashed anxiously through my mind.

My attention immediately reverted back to the newscast.

"The number of dead and injured at these cities has not yet been determined. The identities of any of the perpetrators are unknown and no arrests have been made.

Police are scouring the areas at every instance and claim to have obtained no clues or viable information about the persons responsible.

We will continue to update you as more information becomes available."

The TV switched back to its regular program.

I continued to stare at the screen with a vacant gaze.

"I think I just found out what Hulse's secret message was all about" I thought to myself. Putting this newscast together with his speech at the last DON meeting and the decoded computer message left me with little doubt as to what was happening.

It was hard to believe that acts of this extreme were actually being carried out and that I had unwittingly become part of it.

As I stood pondering, my cell phone rang.

It was Sally. My heart sank.

"I'm okay " she immediately reassured me.

"I just wanted to call and tell you. I knew you would be panicked by the news" she continued.

"You're right, I was" I answered.

"But I've got some bad news too. Mom is in the hospital here.

As soon as the specialist here examined her, he sent her right to the hospital.

He said we were lucky we made it here in time. He hoped it was in time anyway, He said he couldn't really be sure.

She's in the last stages of congestive heart failure and he isn't sure if there is much that can be done but he's going to try.

I guess all I can do is hope for the best and stay here with her to see what happens."

Well, that certainly was bad news but honestly, I expected it.

Fortunately, Sally's "bad news" was far outweighed by the good news that neither she nor her mom had been victims of the shootings.

After my call with Sally, I was eager to talk with Hulse.

I was hoping to find out that my suspicions were wrong, but I knew that was unlikely. Still I had to ask.

I hesitated for a moment but finally, I couldn't contain myself.

I called him.

"I want to talk to you about what happened last night and today" I began.

He immediately interrupted me.

"If ya wanta talk to me it's gotta be face to face. I'll come and see ya after you get off work" and he hung up the phone,

At five sharp, he came through the door and sat at the bar.

"I come for our little talk" he started.

"If we're gonna get into the nitty gritty here we're gonna have ta talk over there in the corner or outside, you pick it" he continued.

I came around to the other side of the bar and walked over to the table in the empty corner to which he had motioned.

"What's going on here?" I asked.

There was no replied. He looked at me with a glassy eyed gaze.

"You know what I mean" I responded to his blank stare.

Then he sighed and spoke.

"About the incident that just happened?" he questioned.

"What do you mean 'incident?"

Are you calling all those people being shot and killed an 'incident!' "I said in a challenging tone.

He paused and then continued.

"That's the word they used at the meetin' " he answered.

"And that means what?" I pressed.

There was more silence.

Then, I added with a veiled threat "Do you know anybody else that could figure out these computer messages for you next time?"

He thought for a moment. Then he looked straight into my eyes and spoke.

"I'm pretty sure I'm gonna need ya again so I might as well tell ya the whole story.

I know you wouldn't say nothin' to nobody about it cause you're in deep with the rest of us now.

And besides that, I'm sure you wouldn't want anybody to find out about that game warden ya killed a couple of months ago, would ya?

Ya remember how Moose, Haha and me helped ya bury him up at Hillsdale that night, don't ya? "

He stopped awaiting my reply.

Through its intended subtlety, his intent came crystal clear.

I guess my jaw dropping open gave me away. I nodded slowly in acknowledgement of his veiled threat. He could go to Hawkings, his uncle and reveal the location of the game warden's burial and then accuse me of the crime. He could surely get Haha and Moose to back him up and then I would be 'up shit's creek without a paddle' as the country folks like to say.

He then continued.

"Like I said at our last meetin' up at the Club, the time is here to start to change things. It could never be better. But like I said too, we gotta get the people on our side. Without them we ain't got a chance.

The guys I talked with down in Florida were from a bunch of different DON chapters all over the country. We all met together to talk about a plan that's gonna get pretty much everybody with us when we fight the government and make it right for the people.

Now, what do you think is the thing that will get most people to stick together in a fight?"

"A common enemy" I replied.

"Yeah, you're right but what is the most common enemy of all?" he asked again.

He paused momentarily waiting for my answer.

I said nothing.

He then answered his own question.

"Fear!

Fear and insecurity!

When people are afraid they'll go to anyone who will offer them protection. If those who are supposed to be protecting them don't or can't, they'll turn on them in a flash.

Am I making some sense here?"

I nodded not only to appease him but because I knew he was right in his thinking.

He continued.

"Now, if the guy in the street, any street, all the time, doesn't feel safe; he's gonna get pissed off at the government for not keepin' him safe and right quick too.

That's when we'll come in and tell him we're gonna protect him even though the government can't and we're gonna do it as soon as we take over.

Get the idea?

It's just like sellin' stuff on TV. First, they tell ya that ya got a problem and then they sell ya the solution to the problem that they made up for ya in the first place. It's that simple."

"And so, the problem you're making up is all these random shootings?

That's how you're going to frighten everybody in the first place?" I asked.

"Well here's where it gets kinda messy" he began in a slow, deliberate voice.

I'm not real happy about this part but that's the way it's gotta be and is gonna be and is already bein'.

The message you got for me said we were supposed to start today in Pittsburgh and we did. I guess we got Pittsburgh cause it ain't that far away.

Remember at the meeting, I said I was gonna pick a couple of special guys to save our nation?

Well, I got a lotta volunteers after that and I picked two. I sent them off to Pitt as soon as I left your place last night."

"And?" I interjected nervously.

"Well, in Pittsburgh some people got shot right outta the blue, like ya saw on TV today.

What time of the day and exactly where I didn't tell 'em. Could be anywhere any time. That was up to the guys we sent."

"Who are the guys?" I asked.

"I can't tell you that, I can't tell nobody.

Anyway, they're not the only ones that are doin' some shotin'. It happenin' in cities all over the country like you saw.

I don't like shotin' people for no reason but like I said before, the government don't care about killin' people in all these wars they got goin'. They kill people minding

their own business who ain't really got nothin' to do with it. They call it 'collateral damage' so I guess we're gonna have to call what were doin' 'collateral damage' too.

After this happens a few more times, nobody will leave his house, nobody will go to work, nobody will be seen on the streets, day or night. They'll all be afraid of being shot.

Everybody will be shitin' in their pants.

It won't be long before everything comes to a standstill.

The government won't be able to stop it. They won't know when it's gonna happen or whose doin' it.

Even if they catch a few guys, they don't know anything about anybody else or when it's goin' happen again. How can they stop us?

They can't!

After people get really pissed off at the government for not stoppin' the whole thing, we'll come out and tell 'em we can protect them. Then they'll all come over to our side and we'll take over and set things right like they should be."

"Man, what a crazy, sick plan" I thought to myself as I leaned back in my chair trying to absorb the full impact of that which he had just told me.

"Keep your eye on that computer. I'll be expecting more pictures real soon, maybe in a couple of days. Soon as you get them call me" and with that he downed the remaining contents of the shot glass and left.

I didn't move a muscle. I just sat there still entranced by the insanity his confession revealed.

"Breaking News Alert", the banner paraded across the TV screen again. Behind it stood the image of a reporter at the scene of the Pittsburgh shootings.

"As you can see the streets are deserted. No one is leaving his home for fear of another incident like the one yesterday.

Police have been going door to door, not only here but in every city that has experienced the recent random shootings. They are trying to find witnesses that may have been present when the incidents occurred.

So far, our sources have told us that little information has been discovered.

According to police, those questioned, either have no information or are not revealing any because of the fear of possible reprisals.

We have however obtained some information from witnesses who will not be identified.

Those that were willing to speak with us told of hearing what sounded like car backfires coming from a slow-moving car in the vicinity. The car was described as an older model with dull red paint. A partial license plate number with letters 'E' and 'T' and the number eight were also described to police.

The car was seen to be driving away immediately after the shootings occurred by a lone driver with no passengers. A description of the driver could not be obtained only that he appeared to be wearing a hat.

That's all we have for now.

We will be back as soon as more information is made available."

With that the banner disappeared and the regular programming resumed.

I continued to sit and ponder my unwitting involvement.

Could I really continue to go along with this madness?

Should I call the police in spite of Hulse's threats?

I knew that the DONs were a wild bunch of zealots, but I honestly didn't fully anticipate this level of craziness. I viewed their constant rantings as simply voracious rhetoric. I always thought of it as just dramatic fantasy and wishful thinking. I never believed it could lead to this kind of horror. I was left with a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach.

How would I escape its grasp?

The thought plagued me.

Should I go to the police?

If I did what would happen to me?

What would happen to Sally, Richie's kid and her mother?

Maybe I should just continue on and hopefully not become more involved? To do so was a coward's choice but it was the one I would probably make.

I remained seated there with those agonizing questions spinning through my mind and with no definite answers. I left the Shaft for home that night with my mind still racing.

When I entered the house, I went directly to the computer and snapped it on. A little ding accompanied by a popup told me mail was waiting. I hesitated, hoping that it wasn't more Disney World pictures.

I clicked on the mail icon and there it was before me "Disney World Pictures".

I opened the email. It contained five new pictures from Hulse's trip. Without the thumb drive I had no way to decode them, but I was sure of what they contained, places and dates, plans for another "incident".

Just when I thought that maybe, just maybe, I could erase the torment from my mind for a minute or two, here it was again staring back at me from the computer screen. I had to do something.

I couldn't just call Hulse and allow myself to decode a plan for more murder once again. I knew what I couldn't do but I was no further in answering the question of what I should do?

Suddenly, my cell phone rang.

I answered it to hear Sally's voice straining through her sobs.

"Mom's gone" she began.

"She died an hour ago at the hospital. I was there just before. I knew when I left that she probably would. She wasn't conscious, and she was taking deep, slow breaths, like she was coming up for air from under deep water."

"Jesus, I'm sorry Sally" I replied.

"Well, I knew this was going to happen. Doc Harmon kind of told me that it would when he suggested I take her

here. I suppose he just wanted to make sure that I would give it the best possible shot, even though he knew it probably wouldn't help.

When you come right down to it, I probably brought Mom here for my own sake, so I wouldn't have to chide myself for not having to tried harder to save her. This way I can at least tell myself that I did all that I could" she sobbed.

"You did.

Yes, you did!" I said sympathetically.

There was a brief silence.

I couldn't decide how to say what I was about to say, especially now, but I had to do it.

I swallowed hard and said it as convincingly as I knew how.

"Sally, I know this is certainly not the right time, but I have no choice.

I've got a serious problem and the safety of you and your boy is involved. When I explain it all to you you'll understand I'm sure."

"What are you talking about?" she answered soberly.

"I'm talking about you trusting me.

Your life depends on it" I replied in an equally sober tone.

"I can't tell you all the details here on the phone. I just want you to do what I tell you.

Do you trust me?"

A silence.

"If what you've told me so far is true I guess I have no choice but to trust you" she stammered.

"I'm leaving Cannonsburgh and some people here aren't going to like that. I know too much and what I know is not good.

If they found out I was planning to leave, I would be dead right now.

If you come back here, I'm sure they will try to use you to get me to come back once they discover that I'm gone.

If that were to happen, I would have no choice but to return and like I said, I wouldn't survive, and neither would you.

My life and your life and the boy's life all depend on you not coming back here."

There was silence and then she spoke.

"What am I to do then?" she asked with a quivering voice.

"And what about Mom and a funeral?"

I stopped and thought.

"I'm not being call us, but your mom really had no friends left. She out lived them all. You told me that she didn't even leave the house for years.

So, who would the funeral be for?

Not for her, for you!

If you can accept not having a funeral, I don't think your mother would quibble, do you?"

Again, quiet, and then she replied hesitantly.

"If it meant our safety, I guess not."

"I will give you the number of a close friend. His name is George Demus. He will make sure that Mom's body is taken care of properly and with utmost respect and dignity."

I recited the number.

"I want you and the boy to go to Easton; it's on the other side of the state. Find a motel, check in and call me when you get there.

Go as soon as you can.

Remember, I love you and I will see you soon."

I hung up the phone and began to search the house deciding what I should take with me.

I moved as fast as I could. There was no time to waste.

I carried several arm loads to the car and packed it all tightly in the trunk and back seat.

Just as I finished rounding up the last few items, I heard the sound of a car pulling into the driveway beside my car. I immediately recognized it from its low-pitched rumble. It was Haha.

I looked out of the front window and saw Hulse get out of the passenger's seat and walk towards the front door.

I opened the door before he even knocked.

"How come ya didn't call me?" were his first words.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I got a message that my vacation pictures were sent. Didn't I tell ya to call me as soon as ya got them?" he replied.

"I didn't even look at the computer yet" I lied.

"Well, let's look at it now" he said as he pulled the thumb drive from his pocket,

We started towards the computer and suddenly he stopped.

He pointed to the suitcase on the bed in the corner.

"Ya goin' on a trip?"

"No" I replied.

"Ya sure?"

I kinda thought I saw a pile of shit in the backseat of your car when we pulled in. Looked like a lot of clothes hangin'" he snapped back sarcastically.

"Got a flashlight?"

I went into the kitchen and brought the light to him.

"Let's go out and see if I need some eye doctorin'" and he nudged me in front of him as he went to the driveway.

He shone the light into to car and scanned back and forth across the clothes in the backseat.

"Guess my eyes is okay after all" he said slyly.

"Ya was plannin' on leavin' our happy little home here, huh?"

"I told you before, Sally's in Pittsburgh with her mother and she's got to stay there for a while. She called me and asked me to bring some of her stuff because she was going to stay longer than she thought.

Her mom's in the hospital and she doesn't know how long she's going to be there.

When she first went, she thought it was only for a couple of days but now it looks like it's going to be a lot longer.

I was packing up the car to take it to her tomorrow" I lied once again, convincingly as I could.

"Looks like an awful lot of shit for stayin' just a few days more" he replied with raised eyebrows.

"Hey, Man, you know women.

Whenever you go anywhere, you take a gym bag and they take two suitcases.

I'm just doing what I'm told!" I answered.

He paused.

"Guess so" he replied skeptically.

He walked around Haha's car to the driver's side. I followed.

"Wait here, I'll be a while" he commanded Haha.

"What am I supposed to do" exclaimed Haha.

"I don't give a shit!

Listen to the radio!

Jerk off!

Who cares!

Just wait!"

Haha said nothing but merely rolled the window back up.

As I stood, I took more careful notice of the car.

It was fully illuminated by the floodlight coming from over the garage door.

It was red, masked with a heavy layer of road dust making it appear dull red.

"Let's go in and take care of this computer stuff" he said and started ahead of me towards the door of the house.

I turned to follow him and saw the license plate as we rounded the rear of the car, "FIH357". I looked more carefully and saw a piece of black electrician's tape hanging from the bottom of the plate and another piece on the deck lid, partially covering a half dollar sized hole on its rear facing surface.

Now, for that instant it all came together.

They had used the tape to make the "F" into an "E", the "I" into a "T" and the "3" into an "8". That was why the letters were misidentified by the witnesses and the color was described as a dull red because of the dust.

We entered the house and I plugged in the thumb drive.

Then I did the decoding as Hulse watched.

This time, the city name came out as Harrisburg and the day, tomorrow.

I handed the paper to him and he again crammed it into his shirt pocket along with the thumb drive and started towards the door.

He stopped at the room entrance and turned to me.

"You know Slick; I'm startin' to feel bad about leavin' you out of all the action. I'm gonna bring you along tomorrow with me and Jum when we go to Harrisburg" he said with a sly grin.

Upon hearing him, I immediately realized that my excuses about bringing clothes for Sally and her mother to Pittsburgh were not as convincing as I had hoped.

Evidently, his suspicions remained, and he wanted to determine my loyalty by bringing me along on the next murderous mission.

"I told you, I have to take this stuff to Sally tomorrow!" I replied.

"Well, I kinda think she can live without it for a day more. Call her and tell her you're gonna be a day late.

We're gonna be leavin' early tomorrow, around six.

I want ya to be up, bright eyed and bushy tailed. I don't want to come by here tomorrow and find ya still sleepin' "he answered.

Then, he stopped and turned to me.

"Ya know what, I'm gonna call up Jum and get him to stay here with ya tonight so that you're sure to get up on time. I know ya got a little extra space now that Sally and the old lady aren't here" he added.

I hesitated and gave him a questioning look.

"Listen, if ya don't have enough room, I'm, pretty sure Jum wouldn't mind sleepin' on the sofa.

Give him a couple of beers and he would sleep on your back steps, if ya know what I mean" he concluded as he took out his phone and called Jum.

I nodded contritely, and he made the call.

Half an hour later, another car pulled in directly behind mine. It made loud scrapping noise as its muffler dragged across the cement apron of the driveway.

Jum parked the car and came in carrying a six pack.

We both greeted him and within minutes Hulse left.

"Sleep tight boys. See ya when the sun comes up" he shouted as he slid into the passenger's seat of Haha's car.

It was a hard night. Jum did sleep or should I say passed out on the sofa. I tossed and turned all night knowing full well what awaited me. There was no way to escape. I

couldn't even sneak out with Jum lying semiconscious in

the living room. He had blocked me in, bumper to bumper

and his keys remained securely in his pants pocket.

I'd have to go with the flow and hope for the best. What

else could I do? I had no choice!

The sun streamed in through the window and over my

face. I glanced at the clock - five thirty!

I got up and walked into the living room. So much for Jum

making sure that I was awake. There he was still lying,

fully clothed, in the very same pose as the night before,

almost as if he was a statue.

I woke him, and I got dressed.

Hulse and Haha pulled into the driveway at six sharp and tooted the horn.

We left the house and walked over to Hulse who was standing next to Jum's car.

"Did ya fix the trunk like I said" he asked Jum.

"Yeah" came the reply and Jum motioned toward the rear of the car. All three of us went to the back of the vehicle and Jum pointed to a hole in the deck lid. It was the same as the one I had seen in Haha's trunk lid.

"Okay, let's tape up the plates and get out of here."

He pulled a roll of black vinyl tape from his pocket and began altering the letters and numbers on the license plate.

When he was finished, he and I got into the car with Jum driving and left for Harrisburg.

It was about a two-hour ride, but it felt like an eternity. As the miles ticked by, Hulse spewed volumes of nonstop, rhetorical bullshit trying to pump us up and himself I'm sure, for the task ahead.

Jum said little in response. I nodded occasionally trying to indicate that I was giving him my full attention during his continued tirades.

Finally, the sign appeared in the distance, "Downtown Harrisburg" with an arrow pointing to the next exit ramp.

We drove to the center of town and parked in a far isolated corner of a mall parking lot.

"Now, Slick we're gonna give ya a chance to show your stuff!" Hulse announced.

We slid out of the car and walked to the back. He motioned for Jum to pop the trunk.

It was empty, well almost empty. Lying by the right fender well was a rifle with a sawed-off stock.

"Savage 99 - don't make 'em any more. One helluva gun! It was a shame to cut it down like that but ya gotta do what ya gotta do.

Couldn't really handle it too good all cramped up in the trunk like that with the whole stock still on it.

The way it is now, no problem! You'll see what I mean" he said as he pointed to it.

Then he lowered the deck lid a bit and pointed to the hole in the rear face of the lid.

"Here's the spot you'll be shotin' out of. It don't look too big on this side but once you're in there, it's big enough to stick the gun through and still see real good.

Ever shot clay pigeons, skeets?"

I nodded.

"Did ya like it?" he continued.

I nodded soberly.

"Well, you're gonna like this even better then cause here the pigeons don't move. It'll be like shottin' cans off a fence post.

Ya ain't scared of tight places are ya?" he asked with a faint smile.

"Sure ya aren't" he answered his own question before I could say a word.

"Jum, he really wanted to do this last time, but we couldn't fit him in the trunk."

He looked me up and down and continued.

"You, you're no problem.

Perfect size!

Here's the way we're gonna do this.

You're gonna get in there and then we're goin' down that street over there" and he pointed over towards a group of people who were sitting at sidewalk tables in front of a restaurant. I could barely read the sign in the distance, but it looked like "Bistro" something or other.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"How the fuck do I know?

All I know is you're gonna pick some of 'em off.

Jum's gonna drive us down the street real slow and just when we get passed 'em, I'll give you the signal and you pop them.

Jum tells me that you're a pretty good shot so you should be able to get at least a couple of them.

Soon as that happens we're outta here."

"What's the signal?" I stammered.

"I'm gonna turn up the radio real loud for a couple of seconds.

Let's get this over with and get the hell outta here.

Get in!" he answered.

He took a miniature flashlight from his pocket, checked to make sure it was working and handed it to me.

"Here- ya gotta see what you're doin' in there" he said and held the trunk lid open a bit wider for me to get in.

I climbed in.

The lid slammed shut.

I could hear him getting into the car and the engine starting. A loud rumble came up from the floor of the trunk as the unsecured muffler and tailpipe of Jum's car banged against it.

We began to move. I peered through the hole in the trunk lid to see the parked cars pass by in front of it as we left the lot.

"Jesus Christ" I thought to myself.

"What will I do now?"

I can't just shoot these people!

I can't just murder them in cold blood like that!

It's like a nightmare. The only thing that told me that it wasn't was that I could never imagine a nightmare so terrifying.

I was sure that if I didn't shoot, the bullets left unfired by me, would be for me in the end.

Maybe I could shoot and be sure to miss?

Would that work, or would I wind up in the woods, behind the farmhouse or maybe side by side with my friend the game warden?

As the car moved incessantly forward, the moment of my fateful decision rapidly approached.

Suddenly, my concentration was interrupted by the overwhelming smell of exhaust fumes leaking into my tiny enclosure. I turned on the flashlight Hulse had given me and strafed its beam over the floor of the trunk.

Over on my right side I saw a rusted hole about the size of a half dollar. I could see the pavement flashing by under it as we rode. At every little bump, the ruptured muffler swayed passed its opening and the intensity of the fumes became stronger.

I felt myself taking shorter and shorter breaths.

My head started spin and I felt a throbbing head ache. I felt nausea and weakness.

"Bad luck?

Predestination?

Fate?

Bad Karma?

God's will?

My own fault?

My own poor choices?

Foolish vengefulness?"

All of this flooded my memory.

I tried to press my nose up to the hole in the deck lid hoping for a gasp of fresh air. It worked, and I felt revived for an instant at least.

Then I heard the radio begin to blare. That was the signal. I looked out through the hole once again. I started to raise the muzzle of the rifle towards it.

I carefully sighted one of the people sitting in front of the restaurant. She was a pretty young woman, about thirty or so wearing a bright red dress. Two or three seconds passed. I held the rifle firmly and steadied my aim. The radio continued to blast its signal for me to shoot.

Then, I slowly lowered the gun and slumped away from the opening and towards the rear of the trunk. I just couldn't do it in spite of knowing the consequences of my failure to act.

Suddenly a loud voice screamed over the sound of the blaring radio. It was Hulse.

“We went right passed them all and I never even heard a shot. I didn’t see nobody gettin’ hit or nobody even running.

That motherfucker never even took a shot. I should have known he wasn’t up to it. We come all the way out here and he didn’t do shit! He’s gonna pay the mother fucking price!

Pull down this street and let me take care of this right now!

Moose where’s that gun you got?” he yelled.

A second later he shouted.

“I found it!

Here it is under the seat!”

I rapidly flashed the light over the interior of the trunk looking for an emergency escape latch. When I found it the handle had been removed leaving only the protruding shaft. Without the handle it couldn’t be turned. I was entombed

Then, suddenly I spied it. The black plastic rear seat fold down release handle was just above my left shoulder. I reached for it just as I felt the car speed up and swerve around a right-hand turn. I slid to one side of the trunk. I pushed myself away from the trunk wall and regained my position. Then I slowly pulled the release and with my other hand carefully cracked open the fold-down seat. I peered through the slit to see Hulse turned in the passenger's seat, looking out of the back window of the car. I could see the top of his forehead jutting above the seat headrest. He held a gun pointed towards the trunk. I squeezed the barrel of my rifle through the narrow opening and pulled the trigger. The bullet's impact sent him flying back from his seat and against the dash. Blood instantaneously sprayed over the windshield and side window.

Moose's startled, panic filled cry echoed through the car and I again felt it swerve abruptly.

"Hulse!

Jesus Christ!" he screamed at the top of his voice.

I pushed the fold down seat section fully forward, aimed the rifle at the back of his head and again pulled the trigger. The scene repeated itself with blood and tissue covering the entire front portion of the car.

The car continued to swerve and gyrate even more than before. After several seconds its collision with the wall of an old factory building brought it to a sudden halt.

I felt myself thrown against the forward wall of the trunk. The engine had stopped running and the wheels were no longer turning but the radio continued to spew its cacophony.

I crawled out through the opening from the trunk and into the backseat. I opened the back door of the car. I was about to leave when I decided to take the wallets of the two men. I knew finding them with no identification would make it more difficult to trace anything back to me. The less they had to go on the better it would be for me. Besides, I could use the money.

I pushed Moose forward and pulled his wallet from his back pocket. Hulse was already bent forward so I merely plucked it from him.

Again, as I was about to leave the car it occurred to me that their cell phones too would give the police a lot of information. I reached into the front pockets of each one and took their phones.

I stuffed their wallets and phones into my bulging pockets and ran from the scene.

I ran several blocks making several turns as I did so as to help cover any trail I might have left. Finally, I spied a public telephone sign in front of a small, neighborhood candy store. I called Sally.

I gave her little explanation of my circumstance and the events surrounding it. That could all be saved for later when she came to pick me up.

She said she would leave immediately and after an hour or so there she was.

I got into the car with the radio playing.

“Now in a development regarding the recent nationwide outbreak of random shootings which have kept millions of Americans off the streets, seeking the relative safety of their homes: -

Police have reported finding a crashed vehicle on Beech Street in south Pittsburgh. Two unidentified men have been found in the car. Both appear to have been shot to death.

From evidence found at the scene, it appears that they may have been involved with the rash of random shootings that have occurred over the past few months. No other information is currently available. More details will be reported when they become available” the announcer concluded.

I looked at Sally and she looked at me. I took the wallets from my pockets and pulled the money from each. I then took the phones from my pockets too.

Sally again glanced over at me but said nothing.

I rolled the car window down and began to toss each of the items into the roadside brush as we rode passed.

As I threw the last one she again turned to me.

I smiled.

“Every moment of our lives is a collision of the past and the future. Our best moments are yet to come because we have the future together” I said softly.

A broad smile spread over her face.

She said nothing but simply pressed down harder on the gas pedal and accelerated us into that future.

The End