

Kennesaw State University  
**DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University**

---

Dissertations, Theses and Capstone Projects


---

10-1-2010

# Sweetwater Blues

Raymond L. Atkins  
*Kennesaw State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Atkins, Raymond L., "Sweetwater Blues" (2010). *Dissertations, Theses and Capstone Projects*. Paper 410.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University.

Sweetwater Blues

By

Raymond L. Atkins

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in  
Professional Writing in the Department of English  
in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of  
Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

2010

College of Humanities & Social Sciences  
Kennesaw State University  
Kennesaw, Georgia  
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

*Raymond L. Atkins*

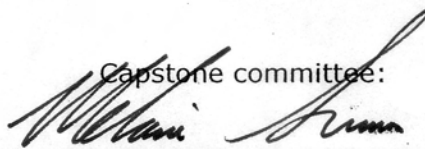
Has been approved by the committee  
for the capstone requirement for

the Master of Arts in Professional Writing  
in the Department of English

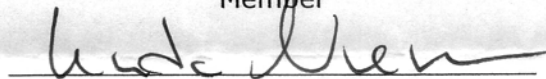
At the (month and year) graduation

*12/2010*

Capstone committee:



Member



Member

## Prologue

**June 28, 1998: Excerpt from the journal of Palmer Cray.**

Morphine is a flat-out bust. On a scale of ten, I'd give it about a two. Maybe a three, if the nurse giving the shot is a looker. You know how we always heard the stuff would really mess you up? It's a funny thing about that. It does mess you up, but it doesn't make you high. I asked the nurse about that, because if I have to lay here for the next eight or ten weeks wearing these two casts and all this other assorted shit, I wouldn't mind having a little buzz on, if you know what I mean. It would kind of help the time pass. The nurse told me that when a person is in a world of hurt, which is where I am, the morphine kills the pain, but it burns off the high as a side effect. That's just bad planning if you ask me. But at least I'm not hurting much, although, like I said, it's a little bit disappointing. I could stand a trip into the happy zone right now. It would take my mind off of my troubles.

And man do I ever have troubles. In case you haven't figured it out yet, you are dead. Or at least, that's what they tell me. I didn't actually see you go into the ground, but why would they lie about something like that? I have to tell admit that it's kind of hard for me to get used to the idea, though. I bet it was tough for you to get up next to the concept, too. I remember you alive and well. You had your shirt off, and you were wearing your graduation hat. That stupid tassel was hanging down in front of your nose, and you kept swatting at it like it was a fly. You were as drunk as Cooter Brown and hollering 'kick this motherfucker' while I caught another gear in the Camaro. I don't actually recall kicking that motherfucker, although I'm sure I did. And now you're gone. It's like there's an empty spot right beside me that you should be

standing in. You left a hole in the world when you fell out of it, and if I'm not careful, I may fall in myself. I might even jump if the notion takes me.

I'm probably not even going to be able to read this when I get through writing it, because the handwriting is wandering all over the page. That's the "messed up but not high" part of morphine I was telling you about. Maybe goofy would be a better word. Do you remember back in first grade when Mrs. Williams would smack our hands with a ruler if the writing got outside of the lines? I think she wore out two or three rulers on us. Remember we called her the Bride of Frankenstein because of that tall beehive hairdo she had? If she was still around today, she'd be whacking my hand, for sure. Of course, if she was around, she'd be about two hundred years old. She was two days older than sin back when we were six. And mean? Damn. That woman was as mean as a cottonmouth on a hot road. You know, just thinking about it, I don't believe that teachers are allowed to hit children with rulers any more. That's probably why penmanship is going straight to hell.

Since you are dead, you probably won't be reading this anytime soon, so I guess the state of my handwriting shouldn't matter all that much in the long run. But I'm writing it anyway, just in case you've acquired some kind of enhanced eyesight now that you're on the other side. Who knows? You could be drifting around behind me right this minute, looking over my shoulder and trying to read every word I write. Actually, that would be kind of cool. Or at least it would be from my end. So if you're back there, give me a heads up. Tap on the wall or levitate my chart or something. Make a cold breeze blow across me and give me goose bumps. Maybe put a sheet over your head and float by. No? Well, maybe later.

Listen, I'm sorry I didn't make it to your funeral, but I was in here that day trying to die. They tell me I missed two good opportunities at it, but I'll have to take their word on that. I was

out like a light for about a week after the accident and don't remember any of the early medical miracles performed on my behalf. Never saw any bright lights or had any out of body experiences. I guess if you're going to have near-death experiences, sleeping through them is the way to go. Mama went to your funeral, though. She said your service was well attended. She told me it was a really sad day, and that it was plain you had a lot of friends who were all sorry to see you go. Poor Mama. All of this business has been hard on her, and since it's not over by a long shot, it'll probably get harder. Most of the time, she doesn't know how to act or what to say, so she just sits there, sniffing and dabbing at her eyes with a Kleenex.

You're probably wondering why I'm writing this journal in the first place. Mostly I'm doing it to keep my counselor happy. Yes, I have a counselor. Mama went out and got me one. His name is Just Call Me Morris Anderson. He's older than us but still kind of young. Mama hired him because I've been pretty depressed, and I can't seem to shake it off. I know, I'm just a big pussy, right? Need to man up and all that shit. But it was a bad accident, very traumatic, as they say in the world of counseling. I got busted all to pieces, and you got yourself killed, and I've felt really weird about that. So I've got a counselor, and he's trying to help me iron out some of my issues.

I give him a hard time, but he's not a bad guy. When he came up with the idea of keeping a journal, I told him I had several good reasons to be depressed, and that having to write all this stuff down was depressing me even more. But he didn't buy it, so I said I'd give journaling a try if he'd quit nagging me. I had a couple of false starts, because I felt really stupid just writing what was in my head. You wouldn't think it would be that hard to do, but it was like I was talking to myself, and once you start doing that, it's only a matter of time before they drag you over to the State Hospital for your own good. To tell the truth, I was about to give up on the

whole thing when I got the idea that I would write to you. That has worked out much better. It's almost like we're talking to each other, just like we've done a thousand times before. All we need to make it feel perfect is a couple of cans of beer, some Slim Jims, a tank of gas, and a stretch of back road to roll down.

The thing is, I don't know what to do about how I feel about killing you. I never killed anyone before, so I don't have anything to compare it to. Just Call Me Morris tells me that I need a point of reference. That may be. All I know is that there's all this stuff running through my mind. Check it out. I feel happy because I'm alive, and I feel guilty because you're not alive, too. I feel sad that I've lost my best friend, and I am truly pissed that you got killed, like it was your fault or something. Plus, I'm really afraid of what's going to happen now, because it looks like I'm in for a hard ride, and I'm ashamed of that. All of this is going on at the same time. It's like there's a pack of crazy, hungry dogs in my head, growling and snapping and ripping off little pieces of my brain. It's the kind of shit that will drive you nuts, if you're not already. I've got to get those dogs chained. I've got to put them down.

When we had the wreck, I took a pretty good knock on the head, and you took a bigger one than that. We hit a tree, by the way, the Cherokee Oak at the bottom of Bankhead Hill. I remember we climbed that tree once, back when we were kids, and it looks like we tried to climb it again in the Camaro. I hope you never felt a thing. I asked the doctor about that because it was bothering me. You always were a little skittish about pain. Well, you were. Anyway, he said he was sure you died so fast that you never even knew you were gone. We always said that was the way to go if you had to go. Get it from behind and never see it coming. But I was sort of thinking it might be fifty or sixty more years before it came up for either one of us. That's what I get for thinking, I guess. I need to leave that to people who are better at it.

The law has been buzzing around like bees ever since I woke up. Since I was the one driving, they are going to make a case against me. They had a couple of investigators come in here to question me, but my old man ran them off until he hired me an attorney, a new guy in town named J. Randall Crane. When they came back, they did the good cop, bad cop thing, just like you always see on TV. I asked them if that was what they were doing. J. Randall Crane told me to hush, and the bad cop called me a smart ass. None of that bothered me much, including the smart ass part, which is true. I am. But then the son-of-a-bitches arrested me in my bed, right in front of Mama, and that was just plain wrong. The sight of it nearly killed her. My old man was really pissed, and if J. Randall Crane hadn't stepped between him and the cops, he probably would have been heading for an arrest, too. They could have waited until Mama went to the bathroom or for a cup of coffee before they nailed me. It wasn't like I was going anywhere.

My old man thinks that J. Randall Crane is one of the great legal minds of the century. He compares him to Spencer Tracy in *Inherit the Wind*, that movie about the Scopes Trial we saw in history class. Yeah, I know, Spencer Tracy lost the case. He got his ass handed to him by Frederick March, but don't tell my old man that. And I do hope that J. Randall Crane is a good lawyer, because if they convict me, I'll be going to jail for a long time. And Rodney, as bad as I feel about wiping you out, I don't feel bad enough to go to jail for it. Me going to prison won't bring you back. It won't fix a damn thing, so unless you just want to see me sitting in a cell because you're dead and it was my fault that you got killed, put in a good word for me with whoever or whatever seems to be in charge. I'll owe you one, and you know I'm good for it.



## Chapter One

### October 12, 1998: Excerpt from the journal of Palmer Cray.

Just Call Me Morris told me that one of the first steps toward healing is for me to apologize to all the people I've hurt by my actions, and then to do my best to try to make amends for the pain I've caused. That suggestion sort of got on my nerves. As a matter of fact, the thought crossed my mind that I ought to smack him with my crutch for even making it, and then I could offer my apologies for hurting him. But I didn't do it, mostly because the reason it pissed me off in the first place was due to the bad case of morphine withdrawal I've got. No, I'm not kidding. I've got a monkey on my back big time. Feels more like a gorilla, to be honest, and like I told you before, I didn't even get to see the pretty colors. What the hell's that all about? I want my money back.

Anyway, when I began making the list of the people I've hurt, it turned out that nearly everyone I knew was on the damn thing. So it looks like I'll be doing a lot of apologizing. I asked Just Call Me Morris if I had to apologize to the people I had only accidentally hurt, and he told me that those were the main ones I needed to ask for forgiveness. They're a longer list, for sure, and I sometimes wonder if JCOMM is just making this stuff up. But you'll be happy to know that you're the only dead guy who made the cut. Well, maybe *happy* is not the right word, but you know what I mean. And hey, you got the number one spot on the list, to boot. Since you already know I didn't mean to slam you into the Cherokee Oak, I'm only going to say I'm sorry this one time. But I am sorry. Sorrier than I've ever been about anything. I have wished a hundred times that it hadn't happened, that I hadn't killed you. I think I would have rather died in your place, or at least gone along with you to keep you company.

The way that people look at me drives me crazy, and like the old joke goes, that's a pretty short drive these days. Some of them look at me like they feel bad for me, but at the same time, like they don't really want to be around me. Mama is one of those, and she doesn't even realize it. To her, I'm a walking, talking reminder of how fast everything can go strait to hell. I'm the shit-storm poster boy. She comes to see me every day, and she looks sad all the time.

Sometimes we'll be talking, and one of us will say something that doesn't even have anything to do with you or with the accident, and out of nowhere, she'll start shaking, and then she'll go to crying. I know this shit is killing her, but she can't seem to stay away. It must be a mama thing.

And as bad as Mama is, your mama is worse. She reminds me of a balloon with about half of the air gone out of it. When she looks at me, I can tell that her heart is broken. I know I'm the one who broke it, and I wish there was something I could do to fix that. But with her, it's like it's been broken twice. Once for you, and once for me. When I look at her, I understand that sometimes the people who die are the lucky ones. I used to think that notion was crap, and I will bow to any opinions you have on the subject. But I always thought that there was nothing in the world worse than dying. Now I know better. Dying is bad, but sometimes, living can be the worst thing there is.

You know who else looks at me with those sad and teary eyes? Both of the Nickel sisters. Those are two good-hearted girls, and that's a fact. They'll make a couple of fine wives some day, but not for you, and not for me. Tiffany looks the way she does because she misses you and maybe a little because she feels sorry for me. She tries to act normal, and I can see that she is working hard at not blaming me. And to give credit where it's due, most of the time she manages to do it. It's tough for her, though. I guess it is human nature to want an accounting,

and when you boil the whole deal right down to the bone, I killed her sweetie. That's a hard fact for anyone to get over.

Poor Kaitlyn looks all weak-eyed because for her and me, it's not ever going to be like it was before the accident. I told her she needed to find someone else to be her boyfriend, because if I was a betting man, I'd be willing to lay odds that jail was in my future. I told her that even if I don't end up in a cell, which according to my lawyer isn't likely, the fact that I killed you would always be there. We went for a ride right after I got out of the hospital, and the whole time it was like you were sitting with us in the car. You weren't, were you? I didn't think so. But the fact of you was between us, and that was when I knew we couldn't pick up where we left off. When I told her that it might be better if she didn't see me for a while, she cried and cried. But then she went away. I think she knew just like I did that it was the right thing to do, at least for now. Kaitlyn is number two on my apology list, but I can never make it right with her, just like I can never make it right with you.

Other folks look at me like I'm a criminal. Your old man is one of those. He looks at me like he hates me, and maybe even like he wouldn't mind taking a shot or two at me. But you know what? He never liked me much, anyway, so he can just kiss my country ass, stitches and all. He came to the hospital once, not long after I woke up. He was drunk, but where's the news there? He was in my room, hollering that I was going to hell and that he might just send me himself. That kind of shit. It really upset Mama. My old man had stepped down the hall to get a cup of coffee, and when he came back and saw what was going on, well, it was kind of impressive. My old man snatched yours up by the collar and backed him on his tiptoes across the room, out the door, and up against the wall in the corridor. Then in this quiet voice, he told

him that the next time he saw him would be the day he died. It was pretty sweet, and I swear it made me shiver. He sounded like Clint Eastwood. It would've done you good to see it.

I guess I need to get used to people looking at me sideways and treating me different. After all, not everyone has killed someone, so that singles me out. I'm special, and not in a good, just-scored-the-winning-touchdown sort of way. I have really fucked up. I didn't mean to do it, and I know you know that, but I need to keep saying it. I'm sorry. Whoops, I said I was only going to tell you that once, but here I am saying it again.

\*\*\*\*\*

Prison time is comprised of equal parts mindless activity, enforced idleness, and utter boredom, but it does have the advantage of offering a man plenty of opportunity to consider his shortcomings and reflect upon his transgressions. Or at least, that had been Palmer Cray's experience. He had given his measure of sin its full share of contemplation during the long days and longer nights of his incarceration, and the deliberate passage of each moment had led him to the conclusion that the biggest problem with killing his best friend was that the one person he really needed to talk to about the whole sad business was dead and planted, so he couldn't strike up a conversation with him, or at least, not one that went both ways. Dead men told no tales, according to the generally-held view.

This gradual epiphany was completely detached from the physical reality of being imprisoned, which was definitely a problem in its own right and every bit as bad as its reputation implied. And then there was the whole question of maybe going to hell as final penance for his crime. This was the outcome his mother thought most likely. It was the reason she spent large

portions of her days down on her arthritic knees, petitioning the Almighty for mercy as she chain-smoked Marlboro Menthols, trying to out-pray the inevitable, attempting to strike a cosmic deal on her son's behalf. Palmer didn't believe as she did in a literal damnation to an underground destination that included fire, brimstone, and malevolent red demons with affinities for pitchforks and roasted sinners, although he seemed to be in the minority on that particular point among the people living in his area of the world. Out of respect for his mother's ardent beliefs, however, he had to concede that there was at least a fifty-percent chance that he was wrong, and if that should prove to be the case and a postmortem journey to the Baptist hell came to pass, it would no doubt be quite unpleasant, an experience literally never to be forgotten.

Rodney Earwood had been Palmer's best friend for as long as either could remember. They had both been the only children their parents had ever produced, and they had grown up in and around Sweetwater, Georgia. They had attended the same small school, four buildings and a gym that contained all of the school-aged children from Sweetwater and the surrounding area. They went to the Baptist church together, marched down there by a pair of mothers who might just as well have been twins for all the real difference there was between them. Rodney and Palmer were two peas in a Southern pod, brothers in all but the genetic sense, each born later in the lives of good women who had all but given up on the dream of motherhood when their respective miracles occurred.

The boys wandered the hills of north Georgia, hunted the pine woods, fished the cool, green streams, and camped under the stars. They shared each other's clothing, each other's families, and each other's homes. They even entered the mysterious world of dating together in the company of the Nickel sisters, Tiffany and Kaitlyn, although Rodney was a bit better at the social graces than Palmer was, smoother and more self-assured. They grew into tall young men,

and they excelled at the art of being alive and full of promise. And on a hot May afternoon right after they turned eighteen, they both graduated from Sweetwater High School, numbers seven and eight in the crooked, sweaty line that held a class of thirty of Sweetwater's finest.

Then Palmer killed Rodney.

It wasn't like he stole his father's service revolver, pulled it from beneath his robe at the reception, and gunned Rodney down, although the outcome of graduation day for both boys was much the same as if he had done just that. When Palmer did what he did, it was an accident, just one of those bad turns of the cards. It had only taken one tick of the second-hand to happen, a mere blink of the jaded cosmic eye, but he knew he would carry the moment with him like a jagged scar until the end of his earthly time, and perhaps for longer than that. Indeed, as the years had passed since the killing, he had actually come to feel worse rather than better about the episode. Rodney's demise had rubbed Palmer's conscience as raw as a bed sore. Every day that he awakened and drew breath seemed to be a day he had stolen away from his friend. His guilt was compounding interest at an extraordinary rate. The debt was staggering in its scope and could never be fully paid.

The fact that Palmer was still unable after the passage of time to even remember the particulars of the accident made the entire state of affairs worse in his view. But try as he might, he could not bring the details into focus. He could retrieve a glimpse here and an impression there, but mostly he just drew a blank, and this was a problem for him, because he felt that killing a person was an important event. More than that, it was a downright momentous occasion, and having engaged in this activity, he believed he ought to have the good grace to remember at least some of the larger details. It would have been the decent thing to do, and he felt that he was being disrespectful to his friend's memory because he could not. So Palmer Cray

felt bad about killing Rodney Earwood, and he felt worse because he didn't remember doing it. It was the rare day that the subject didn't at least cross his mind, and some days it was all he thought about.

After the receipt of their diplomas on that sultry Georgia afternoon, Rodney and Palmer each attended the obligatory round of family gatherings that went with such a significant occasion. The afternoon consisted of hearty handshakes and hugs, crisp twenties and fifties tucked into the graduates' shirt pockets, and paper plates loaded with warm potato salad, cold fried chicken, and a side of well-wishes. Once these festivities peaked and waned, the pair struck out on their own to begin their celebration in earnest. In Sweetwater, that meant riding around in the car, drinking beer and listening to the radio. They chose Palmer's Chevrolet Camaro for this purpose, because he had more gas and the radio picked up better. Plus, Palmer liked to drive, and Rodney had always been more of a passenger, preferring to leave his fate in the hands of his nominal brother while he contentedly watched the features of the north Georgia landscape meander by.

"Kick this motherfucker," Rodney said as they settled into their bucket seats.

"Consider it kicked," Palmer replied as he dropped the Camaro in gear before popping the clutch.

To complete the celebratory plan, they needed beer. One of the advantages of living in a dry county was that the bootleggers seldom worried themselves over their customers' exact ages. If an individual's legs were long enough to reach the pedals of the car and his arms were long enough to reach into his pocket and hand over the cash, then he was old enough to buy alcohol. The pair of graduates took advantage of this liberal sales policy and bought themselves a case of beer and three bottles of cheap, sweet wine for toasting. This wasn't the first beer or wine they

had ever consumed, not by a long measure, but it seemed to them that it was the best they had ever tasted, perhaps due to the gaiety of the occasion. They loudly and frequently clinked their beer and wine bottles together in mutual salute as they rolled down the narrow asphalt in the Camaro. This was their turf. They had run these roads more times than they could count. They knew them like they knew their own names: Rodney Earwood and Palmer Cray, two up-and-coming young men parting the silky dark curtains of the soft Georgia night, curious and eager to see what marvels lay just on the other side.

Eventually they found themselves parked in the middle of the cemetery behind Mission Hill Baptist Church. This was an exceptional spot to drink or to take the Nickel sisters, because Millard McChesney, the local policeman, never came up there when he was out making his rounds. Millard was a large, rough man with a short left leg, and it was his great shame that he was afraid of all manner of dead people, both the freshly-departed as well as those who were little more than memories on the gentle winds of time. This was admittedly an odd and somewhat limiting trait for a law officer to have, considering the nature of the work and the eventual likelihood of encountering an individual who had ceased to be. But Millard was an odd and somewhat limited man, so it made sense for him. Still, the dead can do no harm. It is only the live ones who must be watched.

Rodney and Palmer were deep into their celebration and not worried about Millard McChesney in the least when they decided that the night was still young enough for another journey to the beer joint. It was a decision that changed the world, or at least, one that forever altered the part of it they knew and called their own. Many times during the ensuing years, Palmer Cray marveled that he was able to recall those moments at the cemetery so well, especially considering the fact that he didn't recollect much at all from the time period right



after. But the memories were there, etched like a still-life onto his neurons just as surely as if he had taken an illicit and forbidden spoon and had carved them onto the walls of his prison cell. All he had to do was close his eyes, and it all came back to him, as unbidden and unwanted as a night terror, as welcome as a category-five hurricane.

The stars that night were like twinkling Christmas lights strung randomly against a backdrop of black velvet, blue and white beacons sparkling just out of his reach. The only cloud in the entire sky had wrapped itself tightly around the heavy moon like a cape. It was white and billowy, like chiffon. A wispy ground fog meandered to and fro among the white tombstones like a lazy snake in search of a secure spot to rest from the dark mysteries of the night. The gravel road gleamed like alabaster in the moonlight. Fireflies danced their careful dance, as fireflies will, ever watchful for barefoot children bearing mason jars.

It wasn't just visual images that came to him. He could inhale the scents of summer as they lingered on the gentle breeze, the thick, sugary perfume of the fat honeysuckle vines as they hung from the branches overhead, the cloying sweetness of the gardenias, and the overripe richness of the magnolias. The crickets and the tree frogs croaked and skreeked back and forth as they skirmished for ascendancy. From a great distance came a long, mournful note as a freight train approached a marked crossing. It was a slow moment in time, a rare glimpse of perfection, a brief calm before the gale descended and the tides surged against the seawall. They had all the days of the world before them. Their lives were each an unblemished canvas, and they could paint just about whatever they wished.

Later in his life, Palmer would sometimes awaken in the cool silence of the night, and on those occasions he could often see those two young boys in his mind's eye, reclined like worldly sultans upon the hood of the Camaro. They would be parked on the dirt road in the Mission Hill

graveyard, as carefree as newborns, guzzling beer as they boldly sculpted their tomorrows and shared these plans with each other and with the surrounding dead. If he could have conjured the spell, Palmer would have chanted the syllables and thrown the bones. He would have ripped the seams of the universe and reached across the indifferent years like a stern father to stop them from getting into that car. His invisible hand would snatch the keys from the ignition switch and fling them into the woods. He would hurl the keychain so far that it would be out there still, rusting slowly away, an aging artifact from an unwelcome reality. If he only knew the magic, he would have sketched the lay lines that might have shielded them from their respective fates. He would have gently settled them to slumber among the stones, out of harm's way until the morning sun was born in the east and the world was harmless once again. But sadly, the pair was well and truly beyond his power to save. Sleight of hand could not compete with the wiles of destiny. He only ever had one chance to save them, anyway, and when he climbed into the Camaro on that outlandish night, he had let the opportunity slip through his fingers like dry sand on a windy day.

Palmer's remembrances of what happened after he and Rodney left the boneyard are preserved like freeze frames from a peculiar hell. The images play themselves over and over like a looped tape. They come back to him frequently, as memories from the unfortunate past have a cruel predilection to do. There is movement of a sort in all of his recollections, but it is jumpy and out of sync, like the footage from an old eight-millimeter film that has missed a cog on the projector's drive gear. The sounds and images meet and mingle like oil upon the water, but they refuse to homogenize. Pictures are grainy and indistinct, like old tintypes that have lain too many years in a drawer. The images lack focus and are scattered with spots and other irregularities. The soundtrack is tinny. Its volume is irregular, as if someone is turning the

sound up and down at random. It hisses and crackles like the vintage seventy-eight rpm records that his grandmother used to play.

The reminiscences rise and fall with the moon and the sun. They lap at him like haphazard waves caressing a rocky shore. First Palmer hears what he has always called *the Big Bang*. He found out several days after it occurred that this noise was produced when his Camaro t-boned the Cherokee Oak at a spot about ten feet up the trunk of the tree. Local myth held that the Cherokee Oak was the longtime meeting place for the many Cherokees who had roamed the area in previous centuries, a luckless tribe that had been transferred west en masse for their own good as well as for the good of the country. This fable may or may not have been true, but it was a big tree regardless of its heritage, and Palmer's car had wrapped itself around the venerable hardwood like it was giving a hug to an old friend.

Palmer's next memory of the accident is usually a strobed, flickering image of flying. He whips past the trees like a runaway rocket while wondering vaguely why he is doing so. There is no discernible up or down until he notices the full moon has traded its cape for a ghostly ring as it hangs in the sky like a white pumpkin. His head hurts badly, and he hears his grandmother—ten years in the grave—telling him that a ring around the moon predicts the arrival of a storm. He has the impression that he is rotating in a sidereal manner as he sails, like a Frisbee or an aboriginal boomerang. He recalls that he is screaming like a banshee, as if he has realized that he wasn't designed for flight at all, and that no good whatsoever can possibly come of the experience. These screams of terror, when recalled later in life, have always had the effect of making him afraid all over again, as if the fear of that night is hardwired in him like an electrical circuit. In his final recollection from this scene, he whooshes feet-first into a soft, yielding substance, and the world disappears.

Right after he was released from the hospital, Palmer borrowed his mother's Oldsmobile and drove out to what he had taken by then to calling the scene of the crime. Actually, the sequence of events on the day of his medical discharge included, in order of their occurrence, being released from the hospital, being re-arrested on the charge of homicide by vehicle, being bailed out by his father, who signed a fifty-thousand dollar property bond secured by the Cray home and by his good name, and then driving the Olds out to the scene of the crime. This second arrest was necessary due to procedural errors associated with the first. These irregularities mostly revolved around the fact that the District Attorney did not wish to have to prosecute a young man who had been arrested in a hospital bed in front of his mama. He had thought, rightfully so, that it would look bad to the jury.

So Palmer was un-arrested one day and re-arrested the next, but the process of becoming an alleged felon for the second time took up a fair amount of time. Thus it was late in the afternoon before Palmer was able to make his return to the scene of the crime at the bottom of Bankhead Hill. It was morbid curiosity that took him there, a desperate urge to see and remember. He had bits and pieces of graduation night rattling and chattering around in his head like chunks of tramp steel in a bucket, and he had the need to see the accident site before he could fully believe the reality of all he had been told about what he had done. He only went that once, though, because there were one too many ghosts lounging around the Cherokee Oak to suit him, one too many bad memories lingering by the highway. The memory of Rodney hung heavy, like a weighted velvet drape in a funeral parlor.

But while Palmer was there, he stepped off the distances. Then he sat down at the foot of the Cherokee Oak and allowed himself an impressive case of the shakes. It was rainy in the gloaming, and the raindrops dripped from the leaves above like tears. The Camaro had vaulted

twenty-five feet through the darkness before it struck the tree, an impressive distance for a conveyance not originally designed for travel by air. This impact had produced the Big Bang and a bare instant later had caused Palmer to smash through the car's windshield. After shattering the glass, he was then airborne for another eighty feet or so. During that portion of the journey, he somehow missed three large trees he should have hit before sailing right over the top strand of a wicked barbed wire fence that ought to have garroted him. Then, to top off the miracle flight, he had landed in a haystack. Palmer Cray shook his head. He had no idea why he was still alive, or how he had managed to maintain that state.

At Palmer's trial it was revealed that the car had left the road at the bad dip in the pavement at the bottom of Bankhead Hill, and according to the investigator, the vehicle must have been speeding along in excess of one hundred miles per hour when it took flight. As Palmer Cray listened to this testimony, he didn't doubt the assessment for a moment, although he was curious about the methodology the witness had used to arrive at that number. Perhaps the investigator had employed some type of arcane algebraic equation taught only at the police academy, a formula in which the known values had been the depth of the dip in the road and the height of the impact on the Cherokee Oak, and the variable being solved for— $X$ , as it were—was the speed of the Camaro. Or maybe he had simply guessed. Regardless of how the estimate had been made, however, Palmer was certain of one fact. The truth was that the Camaro had always run like a wild bat out of hell, and Palmer had always loved to drive it that way. So it was quite likely that they had been going at least one hundred as he and Rodney shot down Bankhead Hill like a jet down a runway, and the sad fact that he wished that they hadn't been really didn't come into play at all.

Those who do not farm for a living might be surprised to learn that in modern times, it is nearly impossible to locate a haystack. One might be found on a family farmhold in Europe, perhaps, or in an Amish hayfield in Pennsylvania, but in the state of Georgia, hay comes pretty much two ways: large round bales or small square ones. If Palmer had flown into either of those, he would have been as dead as Rodney was, even before the echo of the Big Bang had made its way back across the valley from the low mountains to the west. But as luck would have it, Mr. W.M. Mitchell, whose hay Palmer had landed in, had once been bitten by a cottonmouth that had wintered inside a bale. When the twine was snipped the following spring, this rogue reptile had sunk its fangs deep into W.M.'s left arm. The snake was big and arguably somewhat perturbed at its recent treatment, the poison was strong and plentiful, and W.M.'s arm drew up like he had been afflicted by palsy. Ever since that year long past, W.M. stored his hay loose. If asked about this practice, he noted that he would rather lose a little hay from time to time than to sacrifice his remaining good arm to a hungry snake with a bad attitude due to awakening on the wrong side of the bale.

In Palmer's final recurring memory from the night he killed Rodney Earwood, he sees himself lying on his side high atop W.M. Mitchell's pile of fescue. This is an odd point of view for a recollection, as if he were both in the hay and floating above the haystack, looking down upon himself. He can't move his right leg, and his left arm is bent in the wrong direction at the elbow. Blood slowly drips into his eyes, where it clings and burns like sweat. He really needs to pee. It is quiet except for the crickets chirping and the hiss of his breath as it rasps in and out like sandpaper on a plank of dried hickory. Presently a white light bobs into view, a will 'o the wisp that dances and hops as it makes its slow, crazy way through the darkness. Palmer wonders at this phenomenon, wonders if he should move toward the light. He has heard that this is a

crucial step in the dying process, and from the way he feels, he assumes that he must be passing on. Oddly enough, he is no longer fearful, and an unnatural calm has covered him like a down comforter. Then, between one blink and the next, the phantom light turns into a state patrolman with a flashlight. When he spots Palmer, he says *oh, shit*. Then he hollers *here's another one* even as he shines the light in Palmer's eyes. From the distance, a voice resembling Millard McChesney's shouts *is that one alive?* The memory ends with Palmer Cray straining to hear the answer to that intriguing question as the picture dims to black.

As she was prone to do with any unexplainable detail, Palmer Cray's mother, Laurel, saw the hand of the Almighty at work in her son's nocturnal haystack discovery. "It's one of God's blessings," she said while visiting him in the hospital. It was eight days after the accident and less than twenty-four hours since Palmer had awakened from the blessed oblivion of unconsciousness. Rodney had been in his grave a mere three days. Assumably, Laurel's blessing reference was directed only toward the haystack landing and not the entire Big Bang, although a case could have been made that surviving the eighty feet between the windshield and the hay had been somewhat miraculous in its own right and just as unlikely as the mere fact of the hay. "The Lord has a plan for you. We'll just have to be patient. We can't always know His design for the world." She had spent the morning quietly crying as she straightened and re-straightened his hospital room. She was doing her best to find some good news in an obviously bad situation, which is sometimes all that can be done.

"Yes, M'am," he had replied, all the while thinking that if the Lord had a design for the world, it wasn't *much* of a design. He kept this sentiment to himself because he didn't want to tread upon his mother's beliefs, and because he certainly didn't want to add to her misery. She needed her faith like she needed food, water, air, and the occasional Marlboro Menthol. It kept

her alive, and she was entitled to it. It was Palmer's view, however, that if there was a plan in motion, it seemed a bit sketchy to him, perhaps even sketchy bordering on piss-poor, and he was quite sure that he didn't care for his assigned role as Rodney's executioner. But then, maybe the morphine drip plugged into his good arm had dulled his ability to perceive the Almighty hand as it moved the pieces across the board. Perhaps that trip through the windshield had limited his ability to sense divine intervention when it was occurring right in front of his broken Roman nose. Who knew about these things? Palmer certainly didn't claim to.

Despite Laurel Cray's certainty that all was going according to design, Palmer's father, Trenton, hired his son a lawyer. It was his belief that the good Lord helped those who helped themselves, and that young men in trouble with the law should always seek benefit of counsel. So Palmer got an attorney, but unfortunately, he wasn't able to provide a great deal of assistance with the preparation of his own defense. He wasn't trying to be difficult, but since he couldn't remember most of the facts from the critical period of time between leaving the cemetery and awakening at the hospital, he certainly couldn't recall many that were to his benefit.

There was a part of him that wondered, then and since, if one of the reasons for his inability to help with his own case stemmed from some innate psychological need to be guilty as charged and punished accordingly. After he went to prison, Palmer spent hours lying on the bed in his cell, looking up at the mattress of the top bunk, counting the stripes and stains on the fabric while wondering if he had actually wanted to be held somehow accountable for his friend's demise, if he had an inner need to make reparation for his deeds. He didn't know the answer to that question, and he probably never would. Even Just Call Me Morris wasn't much help.



“I can’t tell you what you think,” Just Call Me Morris said when Palmer put the question to him during one of their visits. “Only you know how you feel, and only you can decide what to do about it.”

“Then what fucking good are you?” Palmer had replied. He was having a bad day. He obviously didn’t like being in prison, and he was absolutely certain that he didn’t want to be there, but the whole question of whether he deserved to be there remained unanswered in his own mind, even though the State had rendered a more definite opinion.

One fact was certain. Even if Palmer had wanted to walk away from the charges scot-free, chances were strong from the outset that he was not going to be able to, because his defense attorney, J. Randall Crane, wasn’t a very good lawyer. He wasn’t a bad person—quite the opposite, in point of fact—but he *was* a bad attorney, which can be an almost insurmountable setback when presenting a defense against a charge of vehicular homicide with extenuating circumstance. And perhaps it was even the case that J. Randall Crane wasn’t so much a bad attorney as he was simply an inexperienced one. He was fresh out of law school, newly admitted to the bar and still making payments on his dark blue vested suit. Palmer Cray was his first big criminal defense. Later, while he was in stir, Palmer sometimes found himself mentally wishing J. Randall well and hoping that the young lawyer had gotten better at his vocation in the years since his conviction. It was certain that he needed to if he wished to build a practice, perhaps attract a mate, and avoid starvation in the meantime.

But speaking on J. Randall Crane’s behalf, even if he had been an absolutely top-notch barrister with years of experience, he still didn’t have much to work with. Palmer was guilty, after all, and there is only so much that can be done for a client in that situation. Furthermore, regardless of his legal competence, he was the best lawyer that Palmer’s parents could afford,

and they nearly broke themselves paying for him, at that. The Cray family home had been mortgaged, and most of those proceeds eventually went to Palmer's defense.

In his role as prison guard, Palmer's father had seen a truckload of attorneys come and go over the years, some better than others, and he had developed the theory that the best of the lot were always the ones who had initials for first names. He also believed that this characteristic signaled the presence of an excellent doctor. So after the charges against his son were filed, he had found Palmer an initialized lawyer. Once J. Randall Crane had been placed on retainer, Trenton Cray had stepped back to allow better legal minds to determine his son's fate. He had done what he could. The rest was in the hands of the American legal system, and hopefully that venerable estate would not fail the Cray family in its hour of need.

J. Randall Crane tried a variety of strategies to defend his client, including an ambitious attempt to use Palmer's spotty memory of the accident to his advantage by arguing that he was suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome and thus he was unable to assist in the preparation of his own defense. He even brought Just Call Me Morris to the stand to testify on Palmer's behalf. It was a novel approach, but it just didn't fly with the judge, the prosecuting attorney, or eventually, the jury, all of whom seemed to be more interested in the defendant's state of mind *before* he hit the tree rather than after the collision had occurred. To be frank, the theory had even sounded a little thin to Palmer, and he was definitely invested in having the tactic bear fruit. But as J. Randall's worthy opponent pointed out during closing arguments, maybe the boy did have post traumatic stress syndrome, and then again, maybe he didn't, but either way, he had also been very drunk on the night in question and had gone through a Camaro windshield on top of that, and those two facts had no doubt contributed in some measure to his sketchy recollections.

J. Randall also advanced the hypothesis that since there were no witnesses, who was to say that Palmer had even been driving when the car hit the tree? After all, what was left of the steering wheel had been found more or less imbedded in the Cherokee Oak, which was the same general vicinity in which Rodney had met his maker. On the other hand, the passenger side of the front seat was in a direct line with the haystack, which was where Palmer had flown. It actually wasn't a bad premise from a legal perspective, and Palmer, at least, preferred it to the opposing and predominant assumption, because if it were somehow true, then he wasn't guilty of killing his best friend.

Unfortunately, most of the evidence seemed to point in Palmer's direction, and try as he might, J. Randall was unable to successfully plant any seeds of doubt, gravity and line of sight be damned. To begin with, the pair had been in Palmer's car, and it had been testified to by a succession of his unwilling peers that no one but Palmer ever drove that Camaro. It was his baby. Additionally, Palmer had been found guilty on one other occasion of operating a vehicle while under the influence of alcohol, back when he was sixteen. This piece of information was deemed to be quite significant by the State. It was, in fact, presented so many times during the trial that finally even the judge got tired of hearing the story.

"Lay off, already," he told the prosecuting attorney. "The bench *gets* it. The boy likes to drink and drive. Move on." The nail in Palmer's coffin, however, had been the fact that he had been seen driving the Camaro on that fateful night by a variety of witnesses. Of all the facts presented against Palmer, this last one had been particularly damning.

Probably the most innovative strategy employed by J. Randall Crane was when he decided at the eleventh hour to call Rodney Earwood's mother, Kathleen, to the stand. She testified in tears in her Sunday dress while her husband, Harris, sat in the gallery and glared at J.

Randall Crane, Palmer, the judge, and a goodly number of the rest of the courtroom's occupants, as well.

"Do you know this young man?" J. Randall asked the distraught woman as he pointed toward his client. It was a thoroughly stupid question, because just about everyone in the courtroom knew most everyone else on a first name basis, but J. Randall was trying to be a lawyer, and Palmer, at the very least, thought that this was a good sign.

"Of course I know him. He's Palmer Cray. I've known him since he was a baby." She turned her gaze to Laurel Cray as she made this statement, and they shared a moment of silent misery.

"Do you think he ever had any intention of harming your son?"

"Objection!" barked the prosecutor as he shot from his chair. "The question calls for speculation on the part of the witness."

"Overruled," replied the judge. "Let Mrs. Earwood talk."

"But Your Honor—" The prosecutor was apparently unwilling to concede on this particular point of law.

"I said let the woman answer the question," the judge growled. "I want to hear what she has to say." J. Randall Crane repeated his question.

"No, of course not," Kathleen Earwood replied. "He would have never harmed Rodney. They were like brothers."

"Do you want him to go to prison for what happened to your son?"

"Objection," said the prosecutor.

"Overruled," replied the judge. The courtroom held its breath as it awaited this answer. She was quiet for a moment. Then, once again, she caught the eye of Laurel Cray.

“No. Palmer didn’t mean to do it, and sending him to jail won’t bring back my boy. I’ve lost my son. There’s no point in Laurel Cray losing hers, too. No point at all.” It was a poignant moment. Kathleen Earwood had spoken with such quiet dignity and bottomless sadness that she left no room for rebuttal, and the prosecution declined the State’s right to cross-examine her. He had seen the looks on the faces of several of the jurors, mothers and grandmothers of boys close to the same age as the deceased and the accused, and he wanted Kathleen Earwood and her Sunday dress off the stand as soon as possible, before she could harm his case any further.

As the trial unfolded, most of what became the official version of Rodney Earwood’s death was filled in by people who were bent on putting Palmer Cray in jail for causing it, individuals who were, ironically, nowhere near Bankhead Hill when Rodney and Palmer took their short, deadly flight, people who did not see the Camaro take wing or hear the Big Bang as it ricocheted through the pines. The sequence of events that was eventually agreed upon was deduced from both forensic and circumstantial sources of evidence, and it was deemed to be the truth because that was the way it all *had* to have happened given the facts as presented. This composite of blame seemed to fit Palmer Cray like a worn and comfortable calfskin glove.

The pair made had it to the bootlegger’s that night without incident and bought another case of beer. Houston Bibb testified to this fact, and he further added that they were both as drunk as fish while they were there. After the purchase, they roared off into the night like a pair of bucks running from the hounds of perdition. According to Houston Bibb, Palmer was behind the wheel at this time, opening another can of beer as the car fishtailed from the gravel driveway onto the highway. Approximately two hours later—sometime around 2:00 a.m.—the Camaro hit the dip in the road at the bottom of Bankhead Hill and flew into the Cherokee Oak. Rodney Earwood went through the windshield but was unable to penetrate the tree. He left this world

and joined the ranks of the departed members of the Earwood family, a long line that extended from the bark of the Cherokee Oak back through time and across the slate-grey seas into the mists of antiquity. Palmer Cray flew feet-first into a haystack in the dark—an improbability on several levels—after which he spent a week in a coma followed by several long weeks in the hospital—accompanied by his thoughts and his mama—while nursing a broken arm, a fractured leg, a concussion, a cracked pelvis, and several bruised internal organs.

The damning testimony of Houston Bibb was objected to by J. Randall Crane, but to no avail. “Your honor, I object! This is hearsay evidence, and that witness is currently awaiting his own trial for a variety of offenses, including the sale of alcohol to two minors, one of whom is my client. He will say anything to ameliorate his own legal difficulties. Additionally, I don’t see how he can possibly offer testimony concerning the defendant’s state of inebriation unless he did a blood-alcohol test, which he obviously did not do!” In Palmer’s admittedly biased view, these were all valid points. Maybe J. Randall Crane was coming along, after all.

“The man’s a bootlegger,” the judge replied. “He certainly ought to recognize *drunk* when he sees it.”

“But—“

“Overruled.” The judge was an equal-opportunity magistrate and overruled each barrister who came before him at about the same rate.

During the course of a three-day trial that concluded just a week shy of his nineteenth birthday, Palmer was convicted of homicide by vehicle as well as of other lesser but still serious crimes, one of which was the possession of an ounce of marijuana at the time of the accident. The cannabis had belonged to Rodney Earwood, but it was in Palmer’s car, and that made it his in the eyes of the state of Georgia. Palmer didn’t want to impugn his friend’s reputation or

tarnish his memory in front of his grieving mother, so he didn't mention who really owned it. There was no point. He had taken too much away from Kathleen Earwood already, and he knew that he was going to jail for a long time no matter what he said or who had actually paid for the dope. It could just as well have been his, anyway, and there were plenty of times when it had been. So he let it be. He knew in his heart it was the right thing to do.

His sentencing hearing came a week later, on the date of his birth. It was a fearful episode, and the actual sentencing was a ghastly moment in time, the permanent low point of Palmer's life. As the subsequent days and years crept past his cell door, each more deliberate than the last, he often drew sad comfort from the knowledge that he had hit bottom hard and had somehow survived, and that every subsequent sunrise was a bonus of sorts, guaranteed to bring a better day than that dreadful day had been. It was a liberating feeling to know that the worst had come and gone, and that although it had marked him like a branded steer, it had at least left him still trudging among the living.

He stood before the judge with J. Randall Crane at his side and heard his fate. Because he had been intoxicated and driving recklessly, and due to the fact that he was in possession of the marijuana when they hit the tree, and in consideration of his thoroughly reported previous DUI conviction, Palmer was sentenced to fifteen years in prison and mandated to serve ten. It was a surprisingly stiff sentence, and both Palmer his attorney stepped back when it was rendered, as if they had been slapped. J. Randall Crane strenuously protested, but Charles "The Hanging Judge" Herrett felt that the punishment fit the crimes, particularly since it was an election year, and he invited the young lawyer to hush unless he wished to join his client.

They took Palmer from the courtroom in shackles, stainless steel manacles that dug into his wrists as they clung tighter and tighter. The hardest parts of that for Palmer was hearing his

mother sob and seeing the sorrowful look on his father's face as the deputy marched him out the side door. He was surprised that they were taking him straight to jail. He had supposed that he might be given a day or two to say his goodbyes and make his arrangements, such as they were. Rodney's mother was crying too, but for a different reason. Or maybe her anguish had the same root cause as his mother's, after all. Both women had lost their sons during the Big Bang, and the only real dissimilarity was that Rodney's departure was quicker and arguably more merciful, his mother's grief more concentrated. Either way, the pain in the courtroom that day was deep enough to pile with a shovel.

Palmer reported in chains to Sweetwater State Correctional Facility and stumbled through a surreal afternoon of procedural matters as if he were trapped in a bad dream, one of those that could not be escaped. He was stripped, probed, poked, examined, and categorized. He was instructed, questioned, answered, documented, and filed. He was shaved, barbered, deloused, washed, and dried. He was photographed and fingerprinted. Then the jailers issued him underwear, socks, white cotton shirts, tennis shoes, and denim trousers—his Sweetwater Blues. Then they had him dress. He was handed a large cloth sack that resembled a sea bag. It contained two changes of clothing and a few toilet articles. He shouldered the bag.

Then he and an escort began a long, slow walk that led through a series of steel doors and sturdy gates. Each door or gate was another stage in the journey from freedom to imprisonment. After crossing several of these thresholds, he found himself walking down a broad corridor, following a yellow stripe painted on the floor. Cage after cage of imprisoned men lined each side of this gauntlet. Some were whooping, some were hollering, and some just stood and silently watched as the new man passed in review. Eventually, Palmer and his silent escort reached his own cell.



The guard spoke into his radio, and that steel door slid open. Palmer hesitated. He had arrived at the ultimate before-and-after moment. He knew that his entire life would forevermore be divided into two distinct parts. The first would be comprised of everything that had occurred right up until that very instant. The second would begin with whatever happened next. His escort gave him a firm shove between the shoulder blades, and he stepped over the final threshold. The door clanged shut behind him, and he stood there with his bag clutched firmly in his arms, staring at the opposite wall of his new home. It looked to be about twelve feet away.

## Chapter Two

### **July 10, 1999: Excerpt from the journal of Palmer Cray.**

I knew it was coming, and now it's here. The Hanging Judge ran over me like a loaded dump truck. That bastard gave me fifteen years for killing you, and I have to serve at least ten of them. No one in the courtroom could believe it. Hell, even the prosecutor looked surprised. The Hanging Judge is one mean son-of-a-bitch, and I guess he decided to make an example out of me. Or maybe something about me just pissed him off. J. Randall Crane told me before the trial began that I needed to prepare myself because I was probably going to get convicted, so it wasn't much of a surprise when I did. He also told me that I'd most likely get sentenced to around three years and maybe have to serve one of them. So that's was what I was looking for. It was what I had gotten my mind prepared to hear. When the man dropped an entire decade on me, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Ten years? Shit.

I know that my sentence is not as long as dead, which was what you got, and you didn't even get a trial. But ten years is still a long damn time. I'll be almost thirty when I get out. Everyone we both know will be married, and have jobs and kids and houses and such. They'll be getting on with their lives. And there I'll be, an ex-convict, bumming loose change and hoping someone will give me a break for old time's sake. Oh, and you'll love this. I got sentenced on my birthday. I guarantee you that the Hanging Judge did that on purpose. He's a piece of work, for sure. You know how from time to time you hear about a judge getting shot or blown up or something? Believe me, I can understand the urge. The only thing I don't get is why it doesn't happen more often.

Don't tell Just Call Me Morris, but ever since the sentencing, I've been thinking that being dead might be better than serving ten years. What do you think? How bad is being dead? Would you rather be wherever you are doing whatever you're doing, or would you rather be in a jail cell for ten years? No, I'm not just full of shit. I'm really thinking about it, and I need your opinion. Send me a sign or something. I don't have many options, but going to take the dirt nap a little early is definitely one of them.

The real problem is that if I decide to come join you, it could be tough to manage. From the looks of it, it's harder than you might think to kill yourself in prison. Plus, every way I can think of to do it seems like it might hurt. You can't just take a bottle of pills and go to sleep, because there aren't any bottles of pills. And even with some of the other ways, they sort of expect guys to try it, so they watch out for the signs and try to prevent it. I guess if too many convicts off themselves, it makes the guards look bad, and then they don't get their Christmas bonus. But there are ways. The trick is to not let them know you're considering it. If they get a clue, they'll lock you down tight in the isolation block. Once that happens, you're sunk. The only way you can kill yourself in there is by holding your breath until you die. There's a guy a few cells down named Booty who swears he did that once, but I think he's lying.

To be honest, I might've already given it a shot, but both our mamas are about this damn close to falling completely apart, and I think that me killing myself might be just enough to send both of them to a better land. I'm assuming, of course, that it is a better land, which you'd know more about than me. Anyway, they're both standing pretty close to the edge, and I don't think either one of them can take much more. I don't want to hurt them any more than I already have. I've got enough shit splattered all over my karma, and I don't need that on there, too. I'll end up coming back as a turtle or one of the Hanging Judge's grandkids.

Mama cried when I got my sentence. Your mama did too, but your old man looked as happy as a fat pig in the sunshine. I was sort of surprised that he even had the balls to show up at the courtroom after his last meeting with my old man. That was when 5'8" Trenton Cray backed 6'4" Harris Earwood up against the wall and told him he'd kill him if he ever saw him again. I know he meant it when he said it, because I heard his voice. Unfortunately, he seems to have changed his mind. Or maybe he's just waiting for the right time. I can just see it now. Your old man will be out walking the dog. He'll kneel down to tie his shoe, and when he stands back up, my old man will be right there, slowly loading slugs into the clip of his old Army .45.

You should have seen the way my old man looked at yours all the way through the trial. It was like he was daring him to say even a single word. Take it from me. The business between those two isn't over yet. I'll say this for your old man, though. He has learned to keep his mouth shut when he's in the same room with mine. Still, if your daddy isn't careful, Trenton Cray is going to hand him his ass in a sack before this is all over with. That is a fight I would pay cash money to see. Your old man with his big damn mouth getting his ass kicked all over Sweetwater by quiet little Trenton Cray. Hah!

They took me straight to Sweetwater prison, which was good news for Mama, at least, because I'm close enough to home for her to be able to visit every week. This whole last year has been really hard on her, and I just hope that the next ten years don't finish her off. Her health's not that good, anyway, and those Marlboro Menthols don't help. Keep your fingers crossed that she doesn't worry or smoke herself to death on my account. I wonder if it wouldn't have been better for her in the long run if I had been sent off to a prison she couldn't get to every week. She says she wants to visit whenever she can, and she has been to see me each week so far, but it might be less of a strain on her if she could only see me every now and then. If you

had a kid, would you want to be reminded every week that he was in prison? I wouldn't. I'd want to put it as far out of my mind as I could get it.

\*\*\*\*\*

Before Palmer went to jail, about the only notion he had of what doing time might involve came from a song his father liked to sing. It was called *Mama Tried*, originally written and performed by Merle Haggard. Merle did a much better job with the song than Trenton Cray did, which was to be expected, although, as it turned out, Trenton had a special skill set of his own, one that would prove beneficial to his son. In the song, Merle lamented that he “turned twenty-one in prison doing life without parole, and no one could steer him right, but Mama tried.” Despite the song’s claim, he actually didn’t do life without parole, and he may not have even turned twenty-one in prison, but there is no doubt that his mama had indeed tried, as has been the case throughout history with most of her ilk. And he did serve time in San Quentin, a somewhat infamous penal facility in California.

As Palmer eventually came to understand from one of his fellow inmates—a middle-aged man with the unlikely nickname of Pittypat who had been unsuccessfully fighting the urge to rob convenience stores his entire life—there were prisons and then there were prisons. Pittypat was a con who apparently acquired many of his facts as well as his entire nickname the hard way. According to Pittypat, who had turned twenty-one in prison and who was now doing life without parole, doing time at San Quentin, or at Reidsville in middle Georgia, or at Limestone in Alabama, or, perish the thought, at Mississippi State Prison in Parchman, were all much worse than serving a stretch at Sweetwater State Correctional Facility. Palmer took this information on

faith and believed every word as if it were Gospel, although if the truth were told, Sweetwater was plenty bad enough for him.

Sweetwater State Correctional Facility was built during the 1970's as a means to help alleviate the crowding caused by Georgia's burgeoning prison population, which was growing exponentially due to the state's strict penal code on the one hand and the cocaine epidemic on the other. The prison was originally intended to house 500 inmates, and even though the representatives of the state of Georgia insisted upon calling it a medium security detention and correctional facility, it was a prison, pure and simple. There were wicked double coils of razor wire strung around the perimeter, and a kill zone between the inner and outer fences. There were two guard towers—one at the north corner of the compound and the other at the south—and there were armed guards in those towers, some of whom looked like they might know how to shoot, and who were just itching for an opportunity to demonstrate their proficiency with a high-powered rifle and a rubber bullet.

As is often the case with best-laid plans, Sweetwater State Correctional Facility did not turn out to be the ultimate panacea for the surplus of errant Georgians requiring incarceration. It had become much too small even before its opening day arrived, and less than a year after it was completed, over 600 prisoners had made the facility their home. That census continued to climb as time passed and relatively expensive cocaine gave way to cheap and nasty methamphetamine, the growth industry of rural Georgia. The day before Palmer Cray walked the long yellow line down the center aisle of the main building, the population at Sweetwater had swollen to 707. His arrival bumped that number to 708. The prison had originally been laid out to house two inmates per cell, but since it was already close to fifty percent over its capacity by the time Palmer took residence, some of the cells had acquired a third bunk and occupant.

Luckily for Palmer, his cell was not one of these. Three in a cell had a built-in two-against-one dynamic that could be a problem for a newer or weaker prisoner, and being caged was bad enough without having to worry about maintaining a defense against battery or sexual assault. The cells were claustrophobic with just two people in them—eight feet wide by twelve feet long—and the general consensus on the cell block was that the poor souls housed in the three-bunk cells were being subjected to cruel and unusual punishment, and that they ought to get a good lawyer and sue the State over this violation of their Constitutional rights. The problem with this plan, of course, was that if any of them had known a good lawyer, they most likely wouldn't have been stacked three-high in Sweetwater State Correctional Facility to begin with. It was a no-win scenario, a catch-22.

Palmer deemed himself lucky to have drawn a two-bunk assignment, but it turned out that luck had played a very small role in his cell selection, and it had even less to do with the assignment of his cellmate. There was an aphorism around the town of Sweetwater that one way or another, half of everyone in the city limits wound up in prison every day. This saying had its roots in the fact that the cotton mill had closed down and emigrated to Mexico back during the mid-eighties, and as a result of this strategic relocation, the detention center had become far and away the largest single employer in the county. One of these employees was Palmer Cray's father, Trenton, who had hired on as a prison guard when the penitentiary was still being built and who had risen to the rank of captain of the guard during the ensuing years. As Palmer was to discover, having a father on the payroll could work to an inmate's benefit.

In addition to the numerous Sweetwater citizens who were on the prison payroll, there were also some few townsfolk who had strayed from life's straight path and who had wound up there as residents. One of these was Palmer's first cousin, Cheddar Cray. His given name was

David, and he was the oldest son of Trenton Cray's only brother, Cullen. He was doing an extended stretch due to his unfortunate choice of occupation, which was the manufacture and subsequent sale of methamphetamine. Unfortunately, Cheddar was the type to take his work home with him, and he had begun to sample his own wares on a regular basis. Besides a double armload of prison time, this pastime also earned him his descriptively accurate nickname, because over the years his teeth had acquired the color and consistency of a wheel of sharp Somerset cheese, and for those who found themselves in close proximity to him—a mistake that the large majority of people he encountered did not willingly make twice—there was a definite cheddary odor, as well.

The last two things in the wide world that Palmer had on his mind as he stood in his new home with the echo of the steel door's slam still ringing in his ears were his father's occupation or his cousin's teeth, so he was quite surprised when this same cousin Cheddar hopped down from the top bunk and grinned a cheddary grin. He had greasy black hair streaked with gray and a scraggly beard that was little more than salt-and-pepper stubble scattered over a pointed chin. He sported several impressive scars on his forehead, cheeks, and forearms, remnants of a chemical miscalculation that had resulted in, among other things, a frightful explosion, his second incarceration, and the fiery loss of his mobile home. His shirt was open to reveal a tattoo of an extremely limber red-headed woman with impossibly large bosoms. Cheddar looked like hell on a biscuit, but Palmer didn't care. He had never seen such a heartwarming sight.

“Welcome to paradise,” Cheddar said. He took Palmer's hand and gave it a few shakes. “The bottom bunk is all yours. I like to be up high, where maybe I can see what's coming.”

Palmer was amazed. He just stood there and stared at his cousin. His mouth worked a bit, but the effort, although earnest, produced no words. He had been close to tears since hearing



his sentence pronounced, and it had only been the whirlwind of activity since that moment plus maybe a light case of shock that had kept him from breaking down on several occasions throughout the day. He had been somewhat ashamed of this strong need to cry. The urge had peaked like a high tide when he had been compelled to strip to the skin and change into his Sweetwater blues in front of an assortment of armed strangers. Luckily, none of them had been particularly interested in their charge, so they hadn't seen him blinking frequently as he mostly kept his tears at bay. Now, however, upon seeing Cheddar Cray in such an unexpected setting, a friendly face with orange, crumbling teeth and an outlandish tattoo miraculously appearing among the first bleak impressions of forced captivity, tears began to stream freely down his cheeks.

When Cheddar saw this emotional reaction, he grimaced, grabbed Palmer's arm, and pulled him back into the cell, as far away from the barred door as he could get. He still looked extremely alarmed as he positioned himself in front of his new cellmate in such a manner as to block the view from the door and from the cell across the corridor.

"Shit, man," he whispered loudly. "Don't let anyone see you do that. Not in here. Not ever. They'll eat you alive and then have me for dessert." Palmer made an effort to regain control, all the while trying to apologize to Cheddar for his lapse. The resulting gulps and snorts sounded unusually loud in the small cell. Cheddar held up his hands as if to say that no apology was necessary, that these things happened from time to time. "If you gotta cry, you gotta cry," Cheddar reassured him. "You just can't let anyone know." He patted Palmer on the arm. "Listen, man. Drawing your first piece of state time will do that to you, I don't give a shit *who* you are. It hit me the same way. But if you have to do it, do it into your pillow. At night's even better. Quietly." Cheddar looked over both of his shoulders, as if he thought someone may have

crept in during Palmer's moment of weakness, but all was well, and they were still the only two people in the locked cell.

Palmer's mouth was dry, and he felt as squeezed out as a sponge, as limp as an old mop. He placed his bag on the bunk and sat down on top of it. There was not a chair in the cell, so Cheddar sat on the steel toilet opposite Palmer. The bizarre day had caught up with the freshman convict, and he shook with emotion and fatigue. His head pounded, and his heart hurt. He looked at his cousin as he sat on his makeshift stool, and it hit him like a thrown brick that for the next ten years, he was not entitled to privacy even while performing the most basic of bodily functions. He turned to the right and noted that he could see into the cell across the corridor, and that its occupants could view his every move, as well. He shook his head in despair. Tomorrow might be better, but today he wanted to die.

"I'm sorry," he said to Cheddar, who appeared to be trying—unsuccessfully—to look encouraging. "I've been keeping that swallowed down all day. But when I saw you jump down from the bunk, I was so relieved to see someone I knew that it just sort of broke loose. I was dreading meeting my cellmate. I was afraid he was going to be some big, mean fucker who hadn't seen a woman in about thirty years who would immediately rape me. I've been sweating that for damn near a year." Cheddar nodded sympathetically.

"That shit happens sometimes," he noted. Palmer grimaced. He knew that, but he didn't want to hear that. "There are guys in here who'll try for it. But I'm not one of them."

"Why are you here?" Palmer asked. He was glad to see his cousin, gladder than he could possibly even say, but he didn't believe in happy coincidences, or not anymore, anyway. The previous year had all but cured him of the expectation of serendipity, and the previous week had inoculated him for life against the hope for miracles. He was the newest member of the glass-

half-empty club, and as such, he didn't believe that it was just good fortune that his cellmate was his cousin rather than the much-dreaded big, mean fucker who would immediately rape him.

"Why am I here?" Cheddar asked. "First off, that question is out of bounds to anyone but me. I'm serious. Don't ask anybody else. Some guys don't mind talking about it, but other guys do, and you never know which is which until you're getting your head caved in with a piece of pipe. But anyway, I'm here because the state of Georgia wants me to quit making meth, and what I'm doing here is twenty-five years with no chance of parole because I haven't been paying attention to them." Cheddar said this matter-of-factly, as if he had just told Palmer what the weather forecast for tomorrow was, or what was on the supper menu from the dining hall. He shrugged, and Palmer grimaced. Cheddar was ten years older than he was, and he had been caught manufacturing methamphetamine three times since his seventeenth birthday. He was now a ward of the state under the harsh three-strike law. He would be in his fifties before he drew his next free breath, assuming he kept his nose clean and didn't get any additional years tacked on. "I've already served two years," he continued. "Just twenty-three more years and I'll be walking out that door." He looked off a moment as he spoke, twenty-three years into the future, perhaps, or three years into the past, and he smiled wistfully. "Free as a bird."

"I don't know what to say," Palmer said. He had only done about an hour's worth of time, so far, and that was quite long enough to make him cringe to even hear about a quarter of a century behind bars. Twenty-five years was six years longer than he had even been alive. It was a number too large to imagine, a concept drawn from the reaches of infinity. He shuddered as if a ghost had floated through him.

"How long did you get?" Cheddar asked, breaking his own rule.

“Fifteen years,” Palmer said quietly. Tears came to his eyes once again. He shook with effort as he tried to blink them away. After a moment he had mostly succeeded and was able to continue. “Whatever happens, I have to serve ten.” He looked at his cousin with despair. “I can’t believe any of this, Cheddar.” He gestured at their surroundings. “I’m in prison. I’m only nineteen. I’m nineteen today, for Christ’s sake! It’s my birthday.” The scene was just too bizarre. He was sitting in the jail cell that would be his home for ten years, comparing prison terms with his n’er-do-well cousin, the one his mama had always warned him to steer clear of, because the poor boy just wasn’t right, bless his heart. “I’m not a criminal. I was just riding around with Rodney Earwood drinking some beer, like we’ve done a hundred times before. I don’t even remember the wreck. I never wanted any of this to happen, and I don’t want to be here.” He shook his head in disbelief. Cheddar nodded solemnly. If anyone could appreciate how quickly it could all head south, it was Cheddar Cray.

“Sometimes the shit just lands on you hard,” he said. “Who was the judge at your trial?”

“Herrett.”

“Ho-lee shit! The Hanging Judge! You poor bastard. That fucker would send his own mama to jail. I had him once, the time before last, and I swear to God I thought he was going to give me the firing squad. It’s some scary shit when he looks at you with those beady eyes over the tops of those big ass black glasses. I’m telling you, that guy ain’t right. You’re lucky he didn’t make you serve the whole piece.”

“I don’t feel lucky,” Palmer replied, although it was possible that he was not seeing the situation clearly on this day of days. He was forlorn. It felt like the entire Cherokee Oak, the remains of his Camaro, and the rest of the weighty objects in the wide, hard world had fallen on him and bounced twice for good measure. He was nineteen, and he was in prison for ten years.

With luck, he would be twenty-nine when he got out. He shook his head. He had participated in each step of the entire process that had brought him to Sweetwater State Correctional Facility, and he still didn't know how he had arrived at this place. Palmer needed to change the subject. His inclination was to lay back and feel sorry for himself, but even in his emotional state, he realized that this would be a bad idea. He took a deep breath and forced himself to speak. His mama had always told him that the first step was the hardest, and now was the time to test her theory. "When I asked you a while ago why you were here, what I meant was, why are you *in here?* With me. In this cell." He pointed at the floor, just to make sure his point was taken. "I didn't even know you were in Sweetwater." The last he had heard from his Uncle Cullen, Cheddar was in a facility down in middle Georgia somewhere.

"Your old man arranged that. He told me to take you under my wing and show you the ropes. He wanted me to keep you between the ditches and out of trouble." This was news that Palmer had not expected and wasn't quite sure how to take. His father had never struck him as the kind of person who *arranged* things. He didn't come across as a mover and a shaker. At home it had been his mother who ruled the roost, making lists and lining out the other members of the household. He could see her in his mind's eye, sitting at the kitchen table with her legal pad and Marlboro Menthol, writing out the day's agenda. Trenton Cray was always somewhere out there on the periphery, maybe reading the paper or mowing the lawn, but mostly just staying out of the way. Laurel Cray was definitely the person in charge. She ran a tight ship.

"My old man is just the guard captain," Palmer said.

"No, man. Put that shit out of your head right now. Your old man's *the* guard. He runs this place. The warden's the boss, on paper. He wears a coat and tie and takes the VIP's to lunch and all that kind of shit, but your daddy is the man down here inside the walls. If he says

*jump*, guys don't even ask how high. They just start jumping and hope that's good enough. He told me if I did him this solid, he'd keep an eye out for my wife and my kid on the outside. He said *Cheddar, you help me and I'll help you*. I told him I didn't give a damn about my wife since the bitch turned me in this last time and all, but I love my kid, and I would surely appreciate him looking in on that boy whenever he got the chance." A shadow of melancholy crossed Cheddar's features. Then he shook his head, forced a small smile, and looked back at his cellmate. "When I get out of here, that boy will only be a little younger than I am right now. He might be married and have a kid of his own." Cheddar slapped Palmer on the knee. Then he pointed to a snapshot taped to the wall that featured a little boy in overalls holding up a fish that might have weighed three ounces. He was named Benjy—the boy, not the fish—and he was five or six years old. "That's my boy on his first fishing trip. He caught that channel cat all by himself."

"Your wife turned you in?" Palmer asked, backtracking to an earlier point in Cheddar's story. It didn't seem like proper wifely behavior to him, but he was a bachelor and didn't really know the protocols.

"Oh, man, you didn't hear about that? I figured it would have been all over town. You'll love this. The bitch waited until I was asleep, well, *passed out*, so I couldn't even try to run when they came for me. Then she turned me in. When I woke up, Millard McChesney was standing there with that big Smith and Wesson revolver pointed right at my head." Cheddar pointed to a spot in the center of his forehead, like it was a target. "The barrel was resting right there. He was so close, I could see the bullets in the cylinder and smell the snuff on his breath. Then he smiled at me and said *Good morning, Sunshine*." Cheddar shook his head. "You think

*that* won't fuck up your whole day, you just try it sometime." He shuddered at the memory. The trauma of that moment was with him still.

Cheddar was a born runner, for all the good it had ever done him. When the lawmen came, he went. Sometimes it was out the window. Sometimes it was off the roof. Once he had gotten carried away and jumped into the Echota River, and only after the dive did he recall that he couldn't swim. He had always been swiftly apprehended during these flights from justice, but he felt it was important to his self-respect and perhaps to his reputation as a felonious persona to make the effort. Now, though, his own wife had denied him one last, futile sprint from the longish arms of the law. The mother of his child had deprived him of one final attempt to put the wind at his back and make that mad dash for the high country. By the time he got out of Sweetwater, he would be too old to run much, although he might still manage a brisk walk if the need were to present itself. Cheddar being Cheddar, it probably would.

Palmer was touched by Cheddar's love for his son, and by his familial fealty, in general. He appreciated being looked-after. And he had to agree with Cheddar on one point. His wife was known around town to be an absolute bitch on wheels, and that was the somewhat charitable assessment made by an assortment of people she hadn't even turned in to Millard McChesney. But upon reflection, Palmer didn't suppose that being married to Cheddar could be categorized as a leisurely stroll through the daisies, even on the good days, so perhaps she could be forgiven at least some portion of her bitchiness, maybe even as much as half. Her maiden name had been Annette Dewberry, but everyone who knew her simply called her Bay-Annette, after the edged military weapon of the same name. Cheddar had sworn with a raised right hand on more than one occasion that she was as sharp and deadly as her namesake, and that she was just as prone to kill a man.

Palmer was still mulling over the fact that his father had apparently gone to the trouble to ease his transition into life as a convicted felon. The two had not spoken much about Palmer's predicament, but this behavior wasn't that unusual for them, because they never talked about anything else much, either. Since the wreck, Trenton had mostly just looked at his son with deep sadness etched upon his features, an expression that caused him to resemble a bloodhound. Since he wasn't much of a talker to begin with, Trenton likely figured that the possible imprisonment of his only child and heir for the ignominious crime of homicide by vehicle was a poor subject around which to build a new habit of chattiness, so he just skipped the exercise rather than set the bad precedent. Trenton's taciturn demeanor had suited Palmer, because he really didn't have much to say about the whole business, anyway. He was ashamed that he had killed Rodney and sad that he was gone. Additionally, he was afraid of what was going to happen next, and he was dealing with about ten other emotions he couldn't even identify, none of which were good. The last thing he wanted to do was to talk to his father about the whole sorry affair. It was bad enough just thinking about it.

“So my old man got me assigned to a cell with my cousin?” This revelation made him feel both better and worse about his situation. Palmer felt relief in knowing that his father had his back. It was reassuring to know that he was in there pitching for him, catching the corner with the good stuff. But he was ashamed that Trenton Cray had been placed in the position of having to intercede on his behalf at the very prison at which he was not only a guard, but the captain of the guard. Speaking of which, Palmer was having some difficulty envisioning his father as the kingpin of Sweetwater State Correctional Facility. He just couldn't get a clear picture of Trenton as the man who authorized movements and assigned bunks—the man who arranged things, as Cheddar had said—even though the proof was in the fact that he was sitting



in a two-bunk cell with his first cousin rather than in a three-bunker with a couple of guys with names like Rifle and Skeeter.

“He did more than that,” Cheddar continued. “Did you stop and think about the fact that you’re even here? At Sweetwater, I mean. Every convict in the state of Georgia gets sent to Jackson first, to the classification prison. That’s where they decide if you’re dangerous, or crazy, or need detox, or if you’re about to kill yourself. Then, after Jackson, most convicts get sent wherever the next open cell is. You hardly ever end up at the prison just down the street from where your mama lives. I didn’t. They sent me halfway across the fucking state from here. Of course, my mama wouldn’t visit me, anyway, but that’s not the point.”

Cullen Cray’s wife and Cheddar Cray’s mama had been a quiet woman that Cullen had met, impregnated, and married while he was stationed at Ft. Riley, Kansas. Her Christian name was Dolores, and after being the cornerstone of her little family for more than twenty years, she had decided one dark afternoon that she was no longer worthy of that honor. She was last seen at the rest stop on I-75, just south of Chattanooga, climbing into the cab of a Kenworth truck. Assumably, she was making her way back to the high plains.

“This last time, they sent me to Arrendale,” Cheddar continued. “I was there for two years, and let me tell you that Sweetwater is like the Hilton compared to that place. I wouldn’t even send my damn dog there, if I had one.” Cheddar had been dogless since the trailer explosion. “Then out of the blue, I was transferred here about three months ago. I tell you, your old man’s been pulling strings all along.”

Palmer had to admit that he hadn’t really been thinking in terms of which jail he might end up in, because he had assumed that he would be sent to Sweetwater, since it was right down the street and all. But now that Cheddar had brought it up, he took a moment to consider the

subject. The classification prison was news, and he was grateful that he had been spared the experience. And while he wasn't thankful that he was in Sweetwater, he now realized that it could have been much worse. There were over thirty state prisons in Georgia, and Palmer might have been shipped to any of them. Plus, every county had a jail and some of the bigger cities did, too. Incarceration was a growth industry, and any of these with some room to spare housed state prisoners on a contract basis. Palmer realized that it was fortuitous, indeed, that he had been assigned a bunk in his hometown prison. Here was further proof of Trenton Cray's intervention.

"The word's out on you and on me too," Cheddar continued. "We are protected property. Private stock. If anyone even *thinks* about fucking with either one of us, your old man will land on them hard."

"What do you mean?"

"Your daddy spread the news that if anyone decides to screw with either one of us, he'd have them shipped to Reidsville."

"Can he do that?"

"Damn it, boy, you're not listening to me! He can do whatever he wants. I also heard that he said that if anyone puts hands on you, they could plan on getting shot while escaping. And that would be whether they were actually escaping or not. Maybe they'd get it in the leg. Maybe they'd catch one somewhere else. And don't get the wrong idea just because they use rubber bullets, either. That shit can hurt real bad. If you get hit in the head or the chest with one of the damn things, it will kill you just as dead as steel will. If you get one in the nuts, you just wish you would die, and you can forget about having any young 'uns, too." They both grimaced at the thought of it. "I got hit by a rubber bullet down at Arrendale, once, one afternoon when

the yard got a little rowdy. All I was doing was trying to get the hell out of the way, when the next thing I knew, it felt like someone had run over my knee with a freight train hauling wet coal. The doc said it was a ricochet that got me, but I don't believe that. I think one of those fucking guards down there shot me deliberately, even though it was as clear as a bell to anyone who had eyes that all I wanted was to get back to my cell. My knee still has a knot on it, right here, and it hurts like hell on cold mornings." Palmer backed up from the knot on Cheddar's knee to a point made earlier in the conversation.

"My old man has threatened to shoot anyone who gives me trouble?" Every time Palmer thought he was beginning to get a handle on the moment, another surreal tidbit would flutter past and upset his equilibrium. For some reason this last piece of information brought to mind the time his father had visited Sequoyah's school to talk with the principal about some bullies who were harassing several of the younger boys on the playground, including Palmer and Rodney. Palmer had never learned what had transpired in that meeting, but the bullying ceased being a problem the very next day. Now he wondered if his father had threatened to pepper the playground with rubber bullets or perhaps had sworn to ship the miscreants to the Reidsville Elementary School at the next sign of trouble.

"Well, I can't testify to the getting shot part," Cheddar admitted, "because I didn't actually hear him say it, but Pittypat and a couple of the other guys all swear he said it. Whether he did or not, he's not kidding about you being left alone. He means it, and everyone knows he does. Check this out. We had a guy in here named Mondo. You need to believe me when I tell you that Mondo was a bad son-of-a-bitch. If they put me in a cell with him, I'd just hang myself the first night and be done with it. It'd be quicker that way, and I'd suffer less. After your old man put the word out that you were off limits, Mondo said he didn't give a shit who your daddy

was or what he said, there wasn't no one gonna tell him what to do. Mondo said he was going to catch you in the shower, and when he did, he was going to break you down like a shotgun. You know what he was talking about, right?"

"I can guess." A vivid image crossed his mind.

"Well the next thing anyone knew, Mondo was shackled and on the transfer bus to Reidsville. He's in general population down there now, and for a child molester, that's not a good place to be. Mondo's in for a real long next few years. I hope someone cuts his fucking throat, the sick son-of-a-bitch."

"I always thought he was just a guard here and a regular guy at home," Palmer said, referring to his father and not to Mondo. "He puts in a garden every year. He takes Mama to church on Wednesday night and Sunday morning. He likes to watch baseball on TV. He cooks hamburgers on the grill." Palmer had only heard his father *swear* once or twice that he could recall, and that was just when he got hurt, like the time he slammed his hand in the car door. But now, Cheddar was describing him in terms quite different. It was like hearing that his mother used to be a table dancer at the Prancing Pony Lounge over in Attalla, or that Reverend Jimmy, the pastor at Mission Hill Baptist Church, was running a string of girls out of a gentlemen's club down by the Memphis Airport. The concepts just didn't match the realities. The captions didn't fit the photos.

"See, that's why he put you with me," Cheddar said. "There's a whole lot you have got to learn if you're going to make it out of here in one piece, and I'm the one that's going to teach it all to you. We might as well have lesson number one right now. Ready?"

"I think so."

“The most important thing you have to understand is that everything’s different in here. Out there in the world, you were just a kid who fucked up. It could’ve happened to anyone. You had a few too many beers, you hit a tree, and a guy died. Bad shit happens, and your mama cries. Hell, up until last week, they even pretended like they thought you were innocent until they proved you were guilty. But in here, you are a convict. You’re a criminal. You’re an inmate. You didn’t mean to kill Rodney, but that doesn’t matter a damn bit now. He’s dead, and you have been convicted just like you meant to do it. More important, you’re in here with all the guys who *did* mean to do what they did. They are *real* criminals. They belong here. Don’t forget that, no matter what. You can trust you, you can trust me, and you can trust your old man, but don’t turn your back on another living soul, inmate or guard. In here, you’re only as good as you are bad. And by good I mean safe. And by bad I mean hard. You can’t show any cracks. You have got to be as hard as an iron bar and as sharp as a straight razor. And you’ve got to be as mean as my old lady. At least, you’ve got to be that way when people are looking. I’m serious about this, now. Do you hear what I’m telling you?”

“I hear,” Palmer said. He knew he would have to toughen up some to rival Bay-Annette, but he was game, and the words that Cheddar spoke rang true.

“And the guards have got to be the hardest of all. They are riding herd on over 700 of us, and there ain’t anywhere near that many of them. ‘Course, they *do* have the guns, which does tend to even the score some, but you notice they don’t wear them in here. And they’ve got riot sticks and tasers, too. And if you don’t think they’ll use them, you just hide and watch while some con runs his damn mouth at one of them. They’ll beat the shit out of him and swear he fell down. They’ll fry him like bacon where he stands, and then they’ll make him clean up the grease. Look, I’m not talking bad about your old man, but when you’re around a guard,

remember what you are, and remember what he is. They train them to put a convict down fast and hard, before shit gets out of hand. And about half of them are mean son-of-a-bitches to start with that didn't need much training. They'd work here for free just for the chance to fuck with someone. The only difference between us and some of them is that our uniform is blue and theirs is gray. So it's *yes sir* and *no sir* when you can't avoid them and keep the fuck away from them when you can. A guard will hurt you."

"I'll keep my distance and make sure my mouth stays shut."

"And bear in mind that not all of the guards like your old man, either."

"I'll remember."

"That's good. Now, listen to me. We're in a medium security jail, and that's supposed to mean that the really *bad* motherfuckers are somewhere else. But you can't count on that. These days they have to put guys wherever there's room. That means that some of these boys in here with us haven't got a damn thing to lose. They are here for life plus one day, and on that day, they leave in a box. You need to remember that a man with nothing to lose is a dangerous son-of-a-bitch. He. Does. Not. Give. A. Shit. He will kill you for your shoes. He will kill you for your pudding. He will kill you if he doesn't like the way you look or how your name sounds. And some of the guys in here are just flat fucking mean, like Mondo was. And some of them are bat shit crazy. Some of them are all three. If you run up on a guy who is mean, crazy, and doesn't have anything to lose, don't make any sudden moves around him." He was quiet for a moment. Then he added one final comment, as if it were an afterthought. "And pretty much all of them would take a crack at the head bull's boy if they thought they could get away with it. That's *you*, by the way." He pointed at Palmer. "And the only reason they don't is because they're afraid of what your old man will do to them if they try it."

“I don’t think I want to hear that,” Palmer said. There was too much information of the wrong sort coming his way.

“You *better* hear it. And you damn well better understand it. This is not summer camp. I’m just saying that you need to listen to me and do what I say. Your old man will do his part, and I’ll do mine. You’ve just got to be sure that you do yours.”

“I’m hearing every word, and I’ll do exactly what you tell me to do.”

“That’s good. Your old man is absolutely the meanest son-of-a-bitch in the valley, but it’s a big damn valley.”

“What valley are you talking about?”

“You’ve never heard anyone say that before? Ha! It’s the bad-ass version of the Twenty-third Psalm. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for I am the meanest son-of-a-bitch in the valley.* That’s your old man. I won’t say that he has never been fucked with, because he has. Look at Mondo. But no one’s ever fucked with him twice.” While digesting this newer version of Scripture and his father’s place in it, a thought crossed Palmer’s mind.

“I only got sentenced today. When did you get moved here?”

“They brought me up about three weeks ago.”

“And when did Mondo get sent to Reidsville?”

“They shipped his sorry ass down there last week.”

“My father must have known I was going to get prison time.”

“Well, according to what Uncle Trenton told me, that wasn’t any big secret. There was no way you were going to get probation, no matter what. I mean, you were driving, and you were loaded, right?”

“Right.”

“Even if you hadn’t drawn the hanging judge, you were screwed, glued, and tattooed.”

“Looks like.”

“Well, there you go. Your daddy started putting the word out right after I got here. That was before your trial even started. He told me that short of Jesus coming back to take the faithful home, it didn’t look like there was any way around you catching some time. He said he didn’t want to wait until the last minute to take care of the things he needed to take care of. So somehow or other he got you out of Jackson and into Sweetwater. Then he had me moved up here from Arrendale. And then he sent Mondo down below the gnat line, and I don’t think anyone was sorry to see that lowlife bastard gone. Then he asked if anybody else had any questions. I damn sure didn’t have any, and nobody else raised their hand, either.”

Palmer sat on his bunk and absorbed all he had been told. A nameless song blared from a radio somewhere along the cellblock. The angry voices of two men arguing drifted past. Away out of sight, a door slammed shut, and that noise echoed down the main corridor like a lockdown. These were the sounds that Palmer would never get used to. They were the songs of his new reality, the music of captivity.

“I wish my old man had talked to me about all of this,” Palmer said.

“Maybe he just thought it was bad luck to talk about it,” Cheddar said. “You know, like he was hoping for the best but planning for the worst. Or maybe he didn’t want to take away your hope. Hope is a big deal to people in prison, and your daddy knows all about what it can do. Hope can give a man a reason to stay alive. You lose your hope, and you might as well lay down and die.” Palmer nodded. Maybe that was it. A rueful smile flickered for the briefest of moments. He swallowed loudly. Then he sighed as a small revelation descended upon him.



“Do you know what this whole thing is?” he asked, looking at his cousin.

“A cluster fuck?” Cheddar asked.

“Well, yeah, it’s that, for sure. But besides that.”

“I don’t know, man. What is it?”

“This is pure, USDA, choice, grade A, *Cray* sloppy luck.” Cheddar considered this observation for a moment. Then he began to nod.

“By God, I hadn’t thought of that,” he replied. “But hell yes, you’re right. It *is* sloppy luck.” It was Palmer’s turn to nod.

“Think about it,” Palmer said. “I smashed a car into a tree at one hundred miles per hour and didn’t die.”

“That’s some sloppy damn luck,” Cheddar said.

“I went through a windshield and flew eighty feet before landing in the dark in the only standing haystack in the Southeastern United States, and I landed feet first so I didn’t break my neck.”

“Sloppy, sloppy,” Cheddar said, still nodding.

“I got sent to a prison that was hand-picked for me by my old man, a jail so close to home that my mama can walk over here to see me whenever she wants to.”

“I’ve only heard of sloppier luck once or twice in my whole damn life,” Cheddar noted.

“And then, when I get to that jail, I find out I have two people watching my back. One of them is a bad-ass guard who is also my father, and the other one is my cousin.”

“It’s the sloppiest luck I’ve ever seen. You ought to bottle it and sell it.”

Sloppy luck was a trait that had been exhibited for many generations by selected members of the Cray family, if Grandpa Cray’s anecdotes were to be believed, and he was

generally a truthful man. It was a phenomenon difficult to define and was perhaps best described by example. The first instance of sloppy luck that Palmer had heard of as a child was associated with the family legend of Granny Brown and her wedding. In days long past, Palmer's great-great grandmother was once engaged to a circuit-riding teacher, a man who rode from small town to small town trading rudimentary knowledge of letters and numbers for his keep. He was a quiet, handsome man who was not particularly known for his luck, sloppy or otherwise, as was indicated by the fact that he was struck and killed by lightning on the very day that he and Granny Brown were to be wed. This bolt of white fire came from a clear blue sky as he rode his mule to the church for the ceremony. It was a tragedy of the highest magnitude, and Granny Brown had been so devastated by the loss that she had finally allowed herself to be cajoled into taking a spoon or two of sugared whiskey to help assuage her grief.

But as the arrangements for the funeral were being made the next day, spare wives began to crawl out of the woodwork like termites from a weathered barn. It was eventually determined that the deceased groom was already married three times, and that Palmer's great-great grandmother would have been wife number four. Thus, the terrible happenstance of losing her betrothed on the very day of her wedding proved to be to her benefit, and that was without even considering that fact that the mule had survived the strike. She kept him as a souvenir of the time she almost committed inadvertent mortal sin, although he tended to be skittish for the rest of his mulish days. She also had developed a taste for sugared whiskey during her period of grief and mourning, and she continued to enjoy this small vice several times daily for the next fifty years or so. Hers was arguably the original case of Cray sloppy luck, the alpha luck, as it were.

Another example involved Cheddar's father, Uncle Cullen, and the loss of his right leg in the defense of democracy. After he graduated from high school, Cullen Cray was drafted by the

United States Army and sent to the Republic of South Vietnam for a year's tour of duty. This was a routine practice at that time and place in the world, and nothing about the experience was commonly associated in any way with the phenomenon of luck. Sometime near the end of his twelve months in-country, Cullen found himself walking the point position on a patrol in the central highlands, and it was there that he was accidentally shot in the right leg from behind by one of his own platoon mates, a new man who had forgotten to engage the safety on his weapon before stumbling over a random Asian root. Uncle Cullen cursed Vietnam, the new man, Richard Nixon, and stupid people in general while he was quickly bandaged and choppered out of the jungle and straight into surgery.

The wounds were plentiful and severe, because the recruit's M-16 had been set to automatic when it went off, and Cullen Cray lost the leg after several hours of surgery. In the meanwhile, however, the rest of his platoon continued patrolling right up until the moment they walked into an ambush and were killed to the last man. When Cullen heard this news, he had only two words to say to the chaplain standing before him. "Sloppy luck," he said philosophically, and the chaplain, who had no idea what his one-legged lamb was talking about, just nodded and smiled as Cullen drifted back into a drug-induced sleep.

Cray family history was littered with instances such as these. B.G. Cray was fired from the brick plant after long years of faithful service. According to B.G.'s version of events, he was terminated for not much reason at all, although the management of the plant seemed to wish to dwell upon the matter of the brick kiln that B.G. had allowed to catch on fire while he was having a bit of a nap. Regardless of the small details surrounding the incident, the long and the short of the episode was that B.G. was called into the office, given a severance package and his vested retirement, and shown the door. After a two-week vacation during which he took his wife

and kids to Disneyworld, he found employment as a brakeman with Southern Railway at a starting salary in excess of his former remuneration. Six months later, the brick plant packed it in and followed the cotton mill to Mexico. Everyone lost their job, no one got severance packages, and even the final paychecks bounced. B.G had lost his job but had gained the windfall of sloppy luck.

Palmer had an aunt who had always wanted children, but the man she fell in love with and ultimately married was unable to become a father. He had the will, but lacked the gametes. This turn of events was a great sadness to them both, but she and her husband managed to put the disappointment behind them, and they eventually adopted two little girls. The four of them made a nice family, and as is often the case with nice families, they knew great happiness. Much later, after the adopted girls were grown and gone out into the world to start nice families of their own, Palmer's aunt had to undergo some routine medical tests to track down a lingering malady, and it was discovered quite by accident that she only had one kidney. Thus, according to the doctors, if she had ever become pregnant, her one and only wish would have almost certainly killed her. Luckily, however, she had inherited sloppy luck in place of the missing organ.

So when viewed in a certain light, Palmer's current situation was nothing special. He was in prison, but he was alive and not alone and was, in fact, being watched out for by at least two people who had his welfare at heart. He was the latest in a long line of sloppily lucky Crays. He was the next generation.

“You know, when you think about it, me being in prison is a case of sloppy luck, too,” Cheddar said.

“How do you figure?”

“Well, you know I can’t leave the damn meth alone,” he said. Palmer nodded. Everyone knew that. “When I’m out on the street, I’m using all the time, and that shit is just killing me. I can feel it leeching the life right out of my bones, sucking my soul right out of me. Anyway, if that bitch of a wife of mine hadn’t turned me in, I’d probably already be dead by now. She did me a favor when she dropped that dime. She saved my life.” Palmer nodded at his cousin. He had heard some interesting examples of sloppy luck over the years, but Cheddar’s was the first that involved a prison sentence of twenty-five years without the possibility of parole. Still, at least he had both of his legs and all of his kidneys, and he hadn’t been struck by a stray lightning bolt from a blue sky. Sloppy luck was a matter of perception and generally rested in the eyes of the beholder. It was an imperfect gift, a glass half full.

“Why did Bay-Annette turn you in?” Palmer asked. “You never said.” The thing about Bay-Annette was that she wasn’t an unflawed stone, herself, thus the bar for acceptable behavior wasn’t set all that high. Additionally, she had put up with a great deal of scurrilous activity from Cheddar during their turbulent years together, so she was bound to have developed some tolerance for his foibles, and Palmer was curious about what, exactly, had sent her tumbling over the edge. He figured it had to be something major.

“Hell, it wasn’t much of anything. I had a girlfriend, and my old lady got jealous about it and turned me in.”

“Well, women are that way,” Palmer said, but he still didn’t get it. Cheddar had attracted several girlfriends over the years—usually girls who would do anything for some meth, as demonstrated by their willingness to sleep with Cheddar—and Bay-Annette had always seemed happier when he had one, like maybe the pressure was off of *her*.

“I still think if she hadn’t seen the girl’s picture, she might’ve gotten over it,” Cheddar continued conversationally. “But you know what they say about *might*.” Palmer had no idea what they said about might, but he did have another question for his wayward cousin.

“You showed your wife your girlfriend’s picture?” he asked incredulously. Palmer was only nineteen, and aside from the sweet attentions of one the Nickel sisters, his experience with the opposite sex was still somewhat limited and was likely to remain that way for a decade or so. But even though his familiarity with carnal subjects was scarce and his prospects along those lines curtailed, he still knew better than to show the wife the girlfriend’s picture. He may have been born knowing better. It was one of those things that simply wasn’t done. Cheddar must have been several miles deep into the meth zone to have made such a monumental error in judgment. It was almost beyond comprehension, like the theory of relativity or the map of human genome.

“Well, I didn’t exactly mean to. I forgot that I had this damn tattoo, and when I took off my shirt, I was caught like a rat in a trap. Man, was Bay-Annette ever pissed. She beat the living shit out of me.” He shrugged, as if to say *go figure*.

“*That’s* your girlfriend?” Palmer asked, nodding at his cousin’s torso.

“That’s Shirley,” Cheddar said, nodding. He looked down with fondness at the likeness inscribed on his skin. “Nice boobs, huh?” There was no denying that they were an exceptional pair, perhaps even bordering on world-class.

“Cheddar, I don’t know what to say.” Sometimes words were simply not up to the task at hand, and this was one of those occasions.

“There’s nothing to say. It’s kind of funny, though. Bay-Annette turned me in when she found out about Shirley. Well, that’s not quite true. She didn’t give a shit about Shirley. She

turned me in when she saw the tattoo. It made her mad because I'd never gotten one of her. I tried to tell her that I didn't even know I was getting *this* one until it was already done, because I was passed out, but by then she was wound up and not listening to a word I said. Anyway, when she turned me in, she probably saved my life in two different ways. First off, I can't get my hands on any meth in here, and that's the best thing for me. Maybe I'll get straightened out in twenty-five years. Plus, it turned out that Shirley was married, which I didn't know until after I got sent up. Her husband is this big, dumb motherfucker, and he has sent word he's gonna kill me if he ever sees me around her again. Now I've got twenty-five years to get off the meth—well, twenty-three, come next Tuesday—and he's got plenty of time to forget about me.”

Cheddar had taken the long way around the barn to make his point, but he had finally arrived.

“A lot can happen between now and when I get out.

“Sloppy luck,” Palmer said. He lay back on his bunk with his hands behind his head. He had a bad headache, and he needed to rest. Perhaps he would sleep until morning, and then there would only be nine years and three hundred sixty-four days to go.

“Sloppy luck,” Cheddar agreed. That was all it could have been.

## Chapter Three

### August 6, 1999: Excerpt from the journal of Palmer Cray.

So far, the days in prison have not been so bad. Let me rephrase that. What I meant to say was that the daylight hours are not as bad as I thought they'd be. I'd rather be somewhere else, for sure, but at least I can stand it most of the time. They give everyone work to do unless they're sick or going to school. They even pay you to do it, but then they apply what you earned to what it costs the State to keep you up, so you don't actually get any cash. I'm not complaining, though. Money isn't worth as much in here as it is out there, and having something to do does help the time pass.

In prison, that's what it all boils down to. Everything you do is about making the time pass. They can't really make you work, but they can sure make you wish you had. A couple of guys got their asses up on their shoulders a few days ago and refused to work. It was laundry duty, too, which is almost as good as it gets. When the guards got through persuading them that a little honest labor would be good for their characters, they were begging for something to do. They ended up on permanent shower duty, which is about as bad as it gets. But they had it coming, so I don't feel too sorry for them. They broke the first rule of prison, which is to never piss the guards off. Guards carry clubs and guns. Guards can make your life a living hell. You would have to be insane to intentionally make one mad.

You'll never guess in a million years who my cellmate is. It's my cousin, Cheddar Cray. That boy is just as crazy as he ever was, but it's good to be in here with someone I know. I was really worried that I'd end up rooming with some shit bag, and that I'd have to sleep with one eye open for ten years if I didn't want to end up being his bitch. No, I know what you're



thinking, and it's not just a small world, and it wasn't just good luck, either. My old man arranged for me and Cheddar to be in the cell together. I never would have thought it, but it turns out that he's kind of the main man in here. He walks around carrying that big stick, and from what I hear, he doesn't mind swinging it when he needs to. I still have a hard time picturing that. It's funny how sometimes you think you know all there is to know about a person, and then it turns out there's a whole other side to them. That's my old man. And since he's my old man, he keeps an eye out for me.

Talking about work, some of the inmates have jobs outside the walls. It's funny how things turn out, and how your point of view can change. Believe me, there's nothing like the sound of the steel door slamming to change the way you look at the world. I used to feel sorry for the state prisoners who were riding on the backs of the garbage trucks or cleaning out the ditches. I was embarrassed for them, and I used to think, you know, how low can a guy sink? But now I wish I was one of them. It would be pretty sweet to get out into the world every day. It's my bad luck, though, that they won't let me work outside the walls. I'm a flight risk because I'm nineteen, so they keep me behind the razor wire.

According to Cheddar, younger prisoners with long sentences tend to boogie every chance they get. I really don't know if I would run or not, but the idea of it holds a certain appeal for me, and I just might. Cheddar never seemed to have very much luck with running, but that's Cheddar. He's family, and he's helped me a lot in here, but most days he couldn't find his ass with both hands if he had a map, a compass, and a head start. So maybe I would run if the opportunity came up. I think it might be one of those deals where I won't know until it comes up. Of course, the down side to running would be that if I got caught, then I'd have to serve my full fifteen-year sentence, and they'd tack on some more years on top of that for the escape

attempt. Cheddar said five years, but I don't know if that's right, and it's not like I can check it out with the nearest guard. Anyway, the full fifteen plus something for escaping might add up to more time than I could stand.

Cheddar and I work in the kitchen. This is considered to be good work among the inmates, and I've got my old man to thank for the assignment. I wash dishes, which is not as bad as it sounds. Actually, the automatic dishwasher does the washing, but I scrape and load the thing, and then I unload and stack the trays when they're done. Cheddar is a cook's helper. His main duty is standing around in the kitchen with his hands in his pockets talking to the cooks. Sometimes he opens some cans. Leave it to him to get the sweetest job in Sweetwater prison. The cooks aren't prisoners, and most of them are pretty good guys although not necessarily pretty good cooks. They feed us in the kitchen on the days we work, and when that happens we eat what the cooks eat, which is better food than the general population gets. So like I said, the days aren't so bad. But the nights are a different story. The nights are long.

\*\*\*\*\*

As Palmer Cray settled into his new life with Cheddar, he discovered that prison time was not bound by the rules of physics or the actions of men. Rather, time in the slam was a sluggishly fluid substance. It was dark, slow matter that oozed like chilled oil, and its passage was not marked by hours, days, or even years so much as it was by events that occurred outside the norm, happenings that Palmer came to think of as milestones. Ideally, days in prison were pieces of time notable only for their bland sameness, and they would pass in deliberate lockstep like soldiers marching before a fallen comrade, each just like the last, none any more or less

remarkable than any other. Palmer and Cheddar descended into the routine of prison existence, and barring any disruptive milestones, time passed without any conscious thought concerning the nature of their mean condition.

A comparable experience would be that of the long distance runner who was tuned into the rhythm of his stride and the cadence of his breathing to the exclusion of all else. Ideally, that runner would slip into a reality into which no interruption would follow, an alternate universe where cramps and blisters did not exist, where thirst and hunger could not intrude, and where fatigue and pain were words not found in the lexicon. Once in this state, the runner's world would become breaths, steps, and heartbeats, and his next conscious thought would be that he had crossed the finish line, and that the race was done.

This was the existential state that Palmer and Cheddar sought when they settled into their daily routine at Sweetwater State Correctional Facility and began to build their respective mountains of time. Just like the marathon runner, they strove to enter a mindless world, a fugue state from which they would emerge weeks, months, or even years later, marveling to all who would listen at how fast the days of captivity had passed. This was the way the old timers did it, Cheddar had told Palmer, and it was the time-honored method that the two of them would employ, as well. They would simply dig in and build time. There was no use in re-inventing the wheel when the wheel they already had rolled sufficiently well for their purposes.

“Don't you even *think* about being in here ten years,” Cheddar said. He was in his mentor persona. “And I damn sure won't think about all that time that I have to do. It's too long, that way. The numbers are too big, and you can't get your mind around them. They'll drive you nuts. Even a year is too much to imagine. I knew a guy when I was at Arrendale who only had to serve two years. Two years! Hell, I could serve two years and not even have to take

a shit. But this guy wouldn't listen to me. He was counting down every day. He had a calendar taped to the wall, and the last thing he did every day before he went to sleep was cross off another day. Do you know what happened to him?"

"What happened to him?"

"He went nuts, and he tried to hang himself with his t-shirt. *That's* what happened to him. Over a pissy little two-year stretch. There's no telling what ten years would have done to him. Twenty-five would have probably blown him up on the spot. But the point is, he was thinking about tomorrow. You can't do that, and neither can I. It'll make both of us bat shit crazy if we do. The only thing you and me need to worry about is *today*. Just today, and that's all. We get up. We go eat. We work in the kitchen. We eat again. We work in the kitchen some more. We eat one last time. We come back here and maybe read a book or play a game of checkers or some cards. Then we go to bed. That's all we need to think about. If you keep your mind on today for enough days in a row, it'll be time for you to go home. And if I do it long enough, it'll be my time, too."

"Can I take a leak sometime?" Palmer asked. "You didn't have that on my schedule. Ten years seems like a long time to hold it." He had gotten in the habit of kidding with Cheddar, particularly when his cousin took on his imperious *instructor* tone.

"You know," Cheddar said in a mildly petulant tone, "it's a damn good thing you've got me to take things serious for you, because you damn sure don't take them serious for yourself." He crossed his arms over his chest and turned his back on Palmer. "Take a leak," he muttered. "Damn smart-ass."

"I was just trying to lighten it up a little," Palmer said. Cheddar's colorful delivery aside, the subject of how to survive the next decade without resorting to the noose was a somewhat

heavy topic of conversation. “I know you know what you’re talking about, and I understand what you’re saying.” He had truly just been kidding. The last thing he wanted was for Cheddar to slip into a mood. Cheddar was prone to touchiness upon occasion, and he seemed to be warming up for a sulk now. It always made for a long day when he did.

“Everybody likes a little ass,” Cheddar said, “but nobody likes a smart ass.”

“I said I was sorry,” Palmer said, but couldn’t resist one more pass at Cheddar, so he continued in a quiet voice. “But I do need to pee from time to time.”

“Well pee then! Who’s stopping you? Just remember if you shake it more than twice, you’re playing with yourself.”

When an event occurred that broke the mindless routine prescribed by Cheddar—when a milestone intruded upon their lives—it was a bit of a shock to both Palmer and Cheddar, like they had been doused by buckets of cold water or slapped in the face. And because their routines weren’t grand in scale, it didn’t take very much at all to interrupt them. A troubling letter from home could smash an inmate’s protective psychological wall like a bulldozer. An unsettling comment from a visitor could slice through a con’s layer of mental insulation like a knife. A snack cake or a cigarette missing from a locker could shatter a prisoner’s composure like glass. And as a general rule, the bigger the milestone, the larger the ripple it produced, like a chunk of mountain stone tossed into a pool.

Such was the case the day Bay-Annette came to ask Cheddar for some money. She said she needed the cash because their boy, Benjy, was sick with some sort of blood disease, and she needed to take him to see a specialist down at Emory. Bay-Annette hadn’t been to see her husband since she had turned him and his tattoo over to the unforgiving arms of the law. That lack of companionship was more understandable when he was down at Arrendale, six hours

away. But he had been back in town for months, in a manner of speaking, so Cheddar was naturally quite suspicious of Bay-Annette's motives when the guard informed him that his wife was there that Sunday to visit.

"I wonder what the fuck she wants," he muttered as he slipped on his shoes and buttoned his denim shirt to the very top button, just to be on the safe side.

"Maybe she brought your boy to visit," Palmer replied. Usually Cheddar's father brought the boy to visit, but maybe the plan had changed.

"Not likely. I guarantee the bitch is up to no good."

"Well, she can't do much more to you than she already has," Palmer noted.

"If you say so." Apparently, Cheddar wasn't so sure.

Their visit lasted about thirty minutes, and when Cheddar returned to the cell, he was visibly upset. His eyes had a dangerous gleam, and his fingers opened and closed, as if he were performing hand exercises or trying to snatch invisible weapons from the ether. He was as beside himself as Palmer had ever seen him, and he appeared to be agitated enough to remain that way for days.

"Did you have a nice visit?" Palmer asked, looking up from his copy of *Rolling Stone*. Each inmate was allowed subscriptions to five magazines, and his mother had subscribed her son to his limit. Of the five periodicals, he enjoyed every page of his issues of *Rolling Stone*, *National Geographic*, and *Nature*. He was less enthusiastic about the *Ladies Home Journal* and *Guideposts*, but he read them anyway out of a sense of obligation and to have something to do.

"Shit," Cheddar said. He seemed to be speaking to himself more than to Palmer. He sat on the toilet and stared at his son's picture taped to the wall. Occasionally he repeated his initial comment, and these were the only sounds he made for a long time. Palmer went back to his

magazine. He figured that his cousin would talk when he got ready. Later, just as he finished reading the periodical in its entirety—including the ads in the back, which were sometimes the best part—Cheddar spoke again.

“The thing is, I know the bitch is lying.” Again, this was addressed to no one in particular, even though Palmer was sitting right there. “I know it like I know my name is Cheddar Fucking Cray. She asked me for some money for some kind of special doctor for Benjy, but I know she just wants it so she can buy some drugs or some booze. I swear to God, I don’t know why I married that woman.” This observation was not quite the Gospel truth, although in his defense, Cheddar may have forgotten the whirlwind details of the courtship. He had proposed to Bay-Annette on the very day she informed him that he had inadvertently burdened her with child, and that she would kill him in his sleep if he didn’t do the right thing, and do it quickly. “But what if she’s not lying?” Cheddar continued, addressing Palmer for the first time. “That’s the hell of it. What if for one damn time in her sorry life she’s telling the truth and the boy’s really sick?” It was a conundrum. Cheddar’s features were etched with anguish and indecision.

“What did she say was wrong with him?”

“She said he had pernicious anemia. That’s something to do with his blood. She said she needed to take him to Emory. He didn’t look sick when my old man brought him last week, but how the fuck do I know what a kid with pernicious anemia is supposed to look?”

“I’ve heard of that disease,” Palmer said. “A guy I went to school with had it. He looked sort of normal.”

“Maybe she’s not making it up, then.”

“Well, whether he’s really sick or whether it’s just Bay-Annette running a scam on you, there’s not much you can do about it either way. You’re in jail. What little money you earn goes to the State. I have a few bucks hidden in my socks that you can have, but it’s not enough for a trip to Emory.” Cheddar looked at his cousin with an expression akin to pity, and he sighed. Palmer had a lot to learn, and apparently he was a slow learner.

“Damn, Palmer. *I’m* in jail, man. My money isn’t.” Upon further explanation, it turned out that Cheddar’s methamphetamine enterprise had been a successful one even after the normal write-off’s for attorneys, bail, and burned mobile homes. Over the years, he had buried over a dozen coffee cans full of profit at strategic locations around the county, good hard cash on which no pesky taxes had been paid. He called these containers his retirement fund, and barring torrential rain, excessive rust, or unfortunate gravesite selection, they would comfort him like a warm blanket during his waning years. As he discussed his business affairs with Palmer, however, Cheddar was beset by anxiety.

“What’s wrong now?” Palmer asked.

“You don’t feel different about me now that you know I was a meth dealer, do you?” Cheddar asked, looking at Palmer with a bit of apprehension. He did not want the person he was living with for the next decade or so to hold a low opinion of his choice of careers in a past life.

It was a decent question. Palmer was no saint, obviously, but neither was he a meth dealer with a baker’s dozen coffee cans full of twenties, fifties, and c-spots that spoke to his success at that profession. Given that methamphetamine was more addictive than life and nearly as dangerous, it went without saying that Cheddar had been a bad man in his heyday, a purveyor of misery and slow death. Palmer didn’t care for the man that Cheddar had been, but he had no issue with the person that Cheddar was now. That individual was his cellmate and friend. That



man, like Palmer, had been tried and found guilty by a jury of peers and was now making restitution for his past sin. That man, like Palmer, was earning his second chance every day. After all, he was mostly rehabilitated, at least for the next twenty-three years.

“Cheddar, everyone in the county knew you were a meth dealer. Probably everyone in north Georgia knew it. You were on the state news twice that I remember. I think you made the networks when your trailer blew up. Even the cops knew what you were up to.” Palmer gestured at the cell’s bars as if to illustrate this final point. If Cheddar’s occupation was supposed to have been a secret, it had been a poorly-kept one, for sure.

“I just want us to be cool,” Cheddar said.

“We’re cool, Cheddar. Of course, I killed my best friend, so the bar’s not set that high with me. You might need to lay on a few more years before they’ll invite you to join the choir down at the church. Now can we get back to the story? Did you give Bay-Annette some of your retirement money?” Palmer was betting that his cousin had, because his heart was even softer than his teeth.

“Yeah, damn it,” Cheddar said. He shook his head in self-disgust. “She said she had to have it right away. Otherwise I could have had my old man check out her story. I told her where a small coffee can was buried, a Sanka can.” Apparently, Sanka cans were used when reluctant disbursements were being made. “There was five grand in it. That ought to take care of any doctor bills in case the boy is really sick. I still think she’s lying, but I can’t take the chance that Benjy needs help and I wouldn’t give her the money. If I didn’t and he got worse, I couldn’t stand it.”

“That would be bad,” Palmer agreed. “If I were you, though, I’d have the old man check it out, anyway. Just to keep Bay-Annette honest.”

“Oh, hell yes. I had him dig up a Maxwell House can back when I got sent off, anyway, so he could take care of the boy. So he’s already used to going by every week.”

“Maybe he can get some of the money back for you if she lied to you.”

“Nah,” Cheddar said. “Let her keep it. I can’t take it with me.”

“You’re a good man,” Palmer said. Cheddar nodded. He knew.

“What is pernicious anemia?” He asked hesitantly, as if he really didn’t want to know but needed to.

“I think it’s got something to do with low blood,” Palmer replied. “Like maybe he needs more iron. There might be something about it in the library.” Sweetwater boasted a library that contained over ten thousand volumes. The warden believed in keeping his charges occupied.

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“I’m sure they can fix him up down at Emory.”

“You know,” Cheddar said, “if it was just Bay-Annette needing some money, she could hook for it for all I care. I got over her while I was sucking on the barrel of Millard McChesney’s Smith and Wesson. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d slipped out of those panties and spread those fine legs for a payday. Hell, it’s how we met.” His eyes got a faraway, dreamy look for a moment as the pleasant memory came to him. “Man, that girl had some great pussy on her back then. Pussy that would make you grit your teeth and curl your toes. She still does, if you can catch her in the mood and she doesn’t turn you in to the law. Trouble is, she’s still a bitch, and she doesn’t get in the mood that often.”

“Maybe she’ll be in the mood by the time you get out,” Palmer offered helpfully. He didn’t know what else to say.

“Maybe,” Cheddar replied in a dubious tone.

A death on the cell block, whether from natural causes or otherwise, was another of those events that qualified as a milestone every time it happened, and it was more common an occurrence than Palmer would have ever dreamed. One morning as he and Cheddar lined up in front of their cell for breakfast call, they noticed a vacancy in the line ahead of them, a gap where an old man should have been. A con named Glass had stepped from his cell into formation on schedule, but his cellmate, Pittypat, did not appear behind him. At the command from the guard, they all began to march to the dining hall, and as they passed the cell, Palmer looked to the right. A sheet-shrouded body lay on the bottom bunk. Talking was forbidden in the chow line, so he nudged Cheddar and nodded toward the deceased. Cheddar grimaced and looked away. Cheddar, like Millard McChesney, did not care for the departed. Later, while they worked in the kitchen, they discussed Pittypat's final roll call.

"I liked that old man," Palmer said as he scraped and rinsed trays. "He was a nice guy. I was just talking to him a couple of days ago. We had oatmeal that morning, and he was telling me about how bad the oatmeal was over at Limestone. He told me it tasted like warm sawdust and glue." The oatmeal at Limestone was infamous throughout the prisons of North America. No one who had ever consumed a bowl full of the lumpy, bland substance was ever again able to put it completely from their mind. In that respect, it held much in common with the rest of the Limestone experience.

"I *heard* they had bad oatmeal over there," Cheddar said. "They say the oatmeal at Limestone is even worse than the Salisbury steak at Reidsville. I know for a fact that *that* shit would gag a maggot. I talked to Glass at breakfast, and he told me that Pittypat died in the middle of the night. He said he felt the bunk shaking, and he figured that Pittypat was just relieving a little tension down there. Then he heard him start to make a strangling noise, and

when he checked him out, Pittypat's eyes were all bugged out, and he was choking and kind of turning blue. Glass waved for the guard, but by the time he got down there, Pittypat was dead. They just covered him up with his sheet and left him in the cell all night. Said there wasn't anything that could be done for him now, and no use waking up the Doc. That's some creepy shit, right there. Glass said he didn't sleep a wink. I wouldn't either, sleeping with a dead guy." Cheddar shuddered. The idea was all over him like a bad rash.

"I wonder what he died from," Palmer said.

"He died from being an old man in fucking Sweetwater prison," Cheddar said. "It's a terminal condition."

"That's not a disease."

"It's the worst disease there is."

"Pittypat wasn't a bad guy," Palmer said. He felt that someone ought to be feeling low about the ancient inmate's relocation to that halfway house in the sky, but he wasn't getting any takers there in the prison kitchen. Perhaps they weren't the mourning type, or maybe they wished to grieve later, during the quiet time after the meatloaf pans had been slid into the cavernous ovens and the large tubs of potatoes had been mashed. In Palmer's view, Pittypat hadn't been much, but he had been theirs, part of their odd, extended family. He had been a human being, and now he was just as gone as if he had never even been. According to Cheddar, Glass had already been assigned a new cellmate, a car thief from Summerville, and time was marching on. Palmer hoped that someone had at least remembered to change the sheets, but he supposed that was the new man's problem. Cheddar noticed that his cellmate was having philosophical issues with the passing of their colleague and decided to intervene.

“When you said that Pittypat wasn’t a bad guy, did you mean to say that he wasn’t a bad guy for someone who liked to rob 7-11’s at gunpoint and who had spent most of his life in prison?” Cheddar had provided a succinct summation of Pittypat’s life.

“Well, yeah, I guess that’s what I meant to say. Maybe you shouldn’t be the one to get up and say a few words at his service.”

“What damn service?”

“His funeral service.”

“That’ll be six guys from the yard detail and the chaplain, unless it’s the chaplain’s day off,” Cheddar said. “If he is, it’ll just be the six guys. I think one of them used to be a preacher, though.” It was something.

“That doesn’t seem right.”

“Remember what I told you about most of these guys belonging in here,” Cheddar said reproachfully.

“I remember.”

“Pittypat like to stick people up with guns. He was good at it, and he liked to do it. He told me once that he liked to see the fear in their eyes. He was one of the ones who belonged in here.”

“Well, he never held a gun on me,” Palmer said. He felt the need to defend Pittypat, and he couldn’t even say why. It didn’t make much sense, even to him.

“That’s mostly because they don’t let us have guns,” Cheddar replied. Palmer had to concede the point. “Otherwise, he might have taken a run at you, and if you didn’t give him what he wanted right away, he might have shot you before he robbed you. He shot a guy once in Mississippi, you know. He was a store clerk. The guy had a wife and some kids. Pittypat shot

him up in the chest, too, up there where all the important stuff is. It didn't kill the poor bastard, but that was just good luck, and you can bet that Pittypat didn't stop to check, either. He was old and pitiful in here, but back in his day out there in the world, he was a bad ass. He was the kind of guy you didn't want finding out where you lived."

"That was a long time ago, though. Ever since I've known him, he's just been an old man. Hell, he was over eighty. He died in prison, alone." Technically, he had been with Glass when he went, but Glass was an arsonist by trade who was in for first-degree manslaughter due to a slight miscommunication about the location of the night watchman during the commission of an insurance job, and Palmer felt sure that he hadn't been much of a comfort to Pittypat during his final moments, laying there breathing his last while contemplating the greater mystery of what was to come next.

"A lot of people die in prison alone," Cheddar said. "He was serving life and a day, and today was the day. It was his time. That's how it works. They don't hand out those sentences to shoplifters or jaywalkers, you know. You have to fuck up pretty hard to get one. Pittypat fucked up pretty hard his whole life."

"I just realized I don't even know his real name."

"Lee. His name was Bryson Lee. Glass told me."

"What'll happen to him now?"

"If someone claims him, they'll hold him until the next of kin picks him up. If no one steps up, they'll bury him in the field behind the prison. Dead cons are the reason our garden grows so good." Palmer hoped he was kidding about the fertilizer. With Cheddar, it was sometimes hard to tell.

“I’m sure no one will claim him,” Palmer said. “He didn’t have any family at all. No kids, no wife, all his people dead. He told me that he had spent over fifty-five years in prison, one way or another. The first time he drew time was back during the 1930’s. He’s been at Sweetwater since it opened.”

“Well, there you go, then. Everyone he knew is dead and gone, and now he’s dead too. Eighty is a good long run, even if most of it was spent in a jail cell. I’ll sign a deal for eighty years right now, no questions asked. That’d give me over twenty-five years as a free man after I got out of here. I could do some damage in twenty-five years. Here. Scrape these trays and try to put all this shit out of your mind. You’re thinking, and thinking’s a bad thing. Poor old Pittypat might be in a better place, or he might even be in a worse one, if you believe in that kind of shit. Hell, maybe he’s nowhere at all, which is sort of my take on the whole business. But one thing’s for sure. Wherever he is, at least he’s in a *different* place, and that means he’s not *here* anymore. That’s gotta be worth something.” Palmer had to agree. Pittypat would finally get his set of civilian clothes, and he would leave Sweetwater State Correctional Facility behind. He had been released.

Holidays were among the worst milestones, and Palmer came to dread them both because of their disruptive effect on his normal day, and because they made it impossible not to think about what all the free people were doing to celebrate the occasion, those lucky souls who weren’t living in a cell with Cheddar Cray. He first noticed this phenomenon on the Fourth of July immediately following his incarceration, when he had only been in prison for a little over a month. He and Cheddar had both gone to great lengths to avoid knowing the date—even to the point of averting their eyes around calendars and humming loudly when they overheard conversations that seemed to be referring to that topic—because it was their belief that time

passed more swiftly when it was unmeasured. They had been so successful in their enterprise that they were a bit surprised when Independence Day presented itself like an unwelcome visitor at the door of their cell.

“Damn I hate holidays,” Cheddar said morosely. They were back from their breakfast trip to the dining hall, during which they had learned from a well-meaning and patriotic felon that it was the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. On the outside it was a day of parades, fireworks, picnics, and cookouts. For Cheddar and Palmer, the day was a somewhat unwelcome milestone marked by a release from work duties for the day and a scoop of Neapolitan ice cream with their supper. “I knew the 4<sup>th</sup> was close,” he continued, “but I was trying to keep it out of my mind.”

“You know,” said Palmer, “the Fourth of July has never been one of my favorite holidays. It’s usually too hot outside to even live. I remember one year the temperature showed 106° on the thermometer under the kitchen window. Every year, my old man burns the hell out of the ribs. Unless we’re having hot dogs. Then he burns the hell out of those. You’d think after all this time he would have figured that he just doesn’t have the knack for grilling.”

Cheddar nodded in agreement. Palmer finished his thought. “Then, even though they’re burnt, we have to pretend they’re not, and we have to eat them anyway.”

“The ribs do suck,” Cheddar agreed. “The hot dogs are not that bad. The trick is to put plenty of mustard and onions on them.”

“Your old man always gets depressed,” Palmer said. “When that happens, he starts hitting the beer, and then he gets drunk. When *that* happens, he gets mean and wants to fight someone. When no one will fight with him, he gets even more depressed. Then he passes out.”

Cheddar nodded. He had missed a few of the family Fourth of July celebrations over the years



due to conflicting commitments at various penal institutions, but the ones he had attended were all pretty much like Palmer had just described. About all he would have added would be the small detail that some years his old man threw up before passing out, usually on someone.

“Daddy misses his leg,” Cheddar said with a shrug, even though an explanation was not necessary. Not to Palmer, anyway, and not to the rest of the Cray family, either. It was understandable that Cullen Cray would lament his lost appendage, and no one faulted him for his occasional excesses, particularly on patriotic holidays such as the Fourth of July. He had lost that leg in defense of his country, more or less, and the loss weighed heaviest when the trappings of democracy were on full display, when the flags snapped in the brisk breeze and the fireworks burst in the night sky. “It still hurts him after all these years. He says it feels like it’s still down there, full of bullets.” Palmer nodded and continued.

“But even though the Cray family Fourth of July sucks, I’m really going to miss not being there with the folks, eating burnt ribs and some of that nasty warm potato salad, maybe helping you load Uncle Cullen into the car after he passes out.” He sighed. “Now that I can’t be there, I want to be there. It’s kind of like wishing I could work on the garbage truck. You always want what you can’t have. Human nature, I guess.”

“I could damn sure go for some of your mama’s pineapple upside down cake right now,” Cheddar said. Palmer nodded. His mama’s upside down cake was good stuff. He could almost taste the sweet, tart fruit and the caramelized sugar on the back of his tongue. He continued his reverie.

“The year before last after the family cookout was over, me and Rodney took the Nickel sisters down to the lake. I guess you were at Arrendale. We shot fireworks and drank cold beer. Later, we skinny dipped and drank more cold beer. We stayed all night, just looking at the stars

and talking. Well, not just talking. That was the first time I, uh, you know, with Kaitlyn. That was the best night of my life.” He was quiet for a moment. Then he tried to laugh, but it had a bitter sound. “I should have died the next morning and gone out on a high note.” Sitting in an eight by twelve prison cell talking about it with Cheddar was a definite anti-climax.

“Palmer, you’re killing me. You’ve got to quit talking about skinny dipping and cold beer and all manner of shit like that.”

“You talked about Bay-Annette’s fine pussy,” Palmer pointed out.

“I was wrong for that,” Cheddar conceded.

“I’m just saying.”

“I miss all of the good things, too,” Cheddar said. “That’s why I hate holidays. You can keep your mind off of what it’s like on the outside most of the time. But you can’t do it on a holiday. That’s when all of this shit really gets on your mind, and it makes you sad because you’re not out there with everyone, drinking beer, shooting fireworks, and dancing the love dance. If you think today is bad, just wait for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Guys are wandering around like fucking zombies then, especially the ones with kids. About half of the cells have to be put on suicide watch. The guards come through picking up belts and shoelaces, and they won’t let anyone shave. It’s kind of creepy.”

“Well, I hate it today.”

“I do too, buddy. Tomorrow will be better. You’ll see.”

Such were the milestones, the departures from the normal flow of the day that were setbacks for Cheddar and Palmer, and for the majority of their peers at Sweetwater State Correctional Facility. There was a certain irony to the fact that this discomfiture was the same regardless of the nature of the interruption. Whether they were presented with good news or bad,

they felt as if they had been shaken by a temblor or jarred by a collision, and it took hours and sometimes days before equilibrium could be re-established. Once the established patterns of existence were broken, it took a conscious effort on each man's part to regain his mental state. It required willpower and work to re-establish the mindless routine of the professional prisoner and re-enter the prison zone. In many ways it was like trying to forget about an elephant. Often, the harder they tried, the bigger the pachyderm became.

There were countless small milestones that marked Palmer's incarceration, little signposts along the way that served to remind him, among other things, that he was not deemed to be fit company for the world of mankind, a world that was moving on without him. In addition to these, there were milestones that were of the monumental variety, guaranteed life-changers even for those individuals lucky enough to not be under the supervision of the State. Palmer encountered this variety, as well, during his time at Sweetwater, and each served to mold him into a Palmer changed from the one he had once been. They were evolutionary steps on the road from the present to the future, flagstones on the path from here to there. The first of these large milestones may have in fact been the largest, and it occurred on a cold day in hell just nine months into his sentence.

It was a frigid February afternoon, a Sunday, and Palmer had been summoned to the visiting area, where he expected to meet his mother. She had been to see him every Sunday like clockwork since the very first week of his incarceration. She had been his very first visitor and remained his most frequent. Each time she came she brought reading materials and sweets, which was not strictly legal but which was allowed due to her status as Captain Cray's wife. When she came, she stayed as long as they would let her, but even then, more times than not she had to be given a second reminder when her time was up. Again in deference to her status as the

captain's wife, she was spared the customary search to which all other visitors were subjected, and Palmer appreciated this consideration. His mother was a private woman, and it would have been difficult for her to tolerate strange hands patting her down, although Palmer believed she would have done it if that had been the price of admittance.

But this week, it was not his mother sitting on the other side of the bulletproof glass. It was Trenton Cray, whom Palmer had not seen since that fateful day in the courtroom close to a year past when he was marched in chains to his new life. He had wondered more than once about the paucity of visits from his father and puzzled as to the nature of this segregation from one another. Trenton Cray had always been a quiet and undemonstrative man, perhaps even a bit aloof, but even so, Palmer had been a little surprised that he had received not a single visit from him since being imprisoned. He had discussed the matter with his cousin, and Cheddar had taken the time to explain the dynamics of the situation.

"He's still protecting you, man, just like he has been since even before they slammed the door shut behind you. He's staying away from you so it's not up in everyone's face all the time that he's your daddy and that he's keeping an eye out for your ass." Palmer hadn't considered this possibility, but now that he did, it made sense to him.

"He wants everyone to sort of forget that he's my father."

"You've got it, man."

"Still, it'd be nice to see him," Palmer said.

"Yeah, well, would you rather see your daddy, or would you rather not get stabbed out in the yard? That's kind of the choice it boils down to. Me, I'd rather avoid a shank slid up between a couple of my ribs, but to each his own, I guess." Cheddar had a way with words.

When he was passionate about the subject, as he was now, he was a regular wordsmith. He had

made his point quite clearly, and Palmer decided to let the matter drop. He could see his old man when he got out. It wasn't like he didn't know where he lived.

Back at the visiting room, Palmer sat down with a premonition of dread. Because he was still considered a flight risk, he met all of his visitors in the segregation visiting room, where he and they sat on opposite sides of a pane of unbreakable glass. He picked up the receiver, and his father did the same. Neither spoke for a long moment. Then Trenton Cray took a deep breath and began talking in a quiet monotone, the same tone of voice he used for all communications. Palmer had to strain to hear the words above the subtle background of white noise issuing from the earpiece of the telephone.

"Your mama's dead," Trenton said to his son. "She died last night in her sleep. The doctor says it was a stroke. She didn't suffer. She never even woke up." He looked away for a moment, gathering himself. Then he continued. "She twitched a few times, and I thought she might be having a bad dream. You know how she always had those nightmares." Palmer nodded. He felt like he was in the middle of one of those nightmares right now. "I tried to wake her up, but she wouldn't budge. I shook harder, but she still wouldn't open her eyes. I ran downstairs and called the ambulance. Then I did CPR on her until they got there. But it was no good. She was already gone. I think she was dead when I made the call."

There was a long silence punctuated only by the hiss of their breathing on the telephone line. This news was totally unexpected, and Palmer didn't know what to say. It seemed as if his life had become a series of unpleasant firsts, and the loss of his mother was another of these: the first time he killed someone, the first time he went to prison, the first time his mother died. When his father had spoken the word *dead*, Palmer had felt a sharp pain in his chest, like he had been stabbed with a wicked blade in the shower.

“I just saw her last Sunday,” he said, mostly to himself. His father nodded.

“I know.”

“She looked fine.” Truth be told, she had looked tired around the eyes and her features had been puffy. Palmer had told her then that she looked like she needed to go home and take a nap, and she had promised she would. Now he wondered if she had, as if a Sunday afternoon snooze could have changed her destiny. He wanted was his mother back. He looked at his father. “How can she be gone?” he asked.

“She’d been going downhill since you came inside,” Trenton said. He wasn’t being intentionally cruel. Rather, he was merely telling the truth, because he figured that Palmer would want it that way. But the words were inadvertently cruel. They carried blame with them like a regimental banner. “Longer than that really, but it has been a lot quicker since they sent you here. I could see it, but I couldn’t stop it. You know your mama. Kind of stubborn.” He smiled a rueful, sad smile as he realized that he was still referring to his wife in the present tense. “She didn’t want you to know that she was sliding. She was afraid you would worry about her, or blame yourself.”

“She was right on both counts.”

“It’s not like that, Palmer. You know she had bad high blood pressure and a touch of sugar, and she was always forgetting to take her medicine. Plus, she loved her Marlboro Menthols. She’s smoked two packs a day for a long time. She knew she needed to quit, or at least slow up, but some people just can’t. She was one of those.” Palmer took a deep, ragged breath. “I never really understood what her doctor was trying to tell me,” Trenton said, “but she also had some kind of heart ailment going on, too, something to do with one of her valves. And

she never slept anymore. I'd hear her wandering around the house at all hours, fixing up care packages for you or talking to herself like she was speaking to you and Rodney."

He ceased his monologue for a moment and took some deep breaths of his own, as if he had been shoveling sand or chopping wood and needed to rest from his labor. He had the habit of inhaling through his mouth and exhaling through his nose, and the cadence of his breathing was pronounced during the silence. The room was cool, but sweat beaded on his forehead. He continued. "The doctor at the emergency room said that all these things led up to her having a stroke. She just had a lot of things going on inside, and it killed her."

Palmer folded his arms on the table and laid his head upon them. He couldn't believe it. His mother was dead, and although his father hadn't said a single word about culpability, Palmer felt that he was more or less to blame. Sure, the Marlboro Menthols had helped, and there was no getting around the genetic component, but basically, he felt had contributed significantly to his own mother's demise. Now the count stood at two. Rodney Earwood and Laurel Cray. He raised his head and placed the receiver back to his ear.

"When is the funeral?" he asked. He felt as if he were speaking from a tunnel. His voice reverberated in his ears as if he had shouted.

"It's in a couple of days. I asked the doctor to do an autopsy. I'd just feel better knowing what got her. Once that's done, I'm going to bury her at Mission Hill, next to her folks. We sat down last year and talked about...things, and that's where she said she wanted to go when her time came. I'll put her in next to my sister." Palmer nodded. The Cray family plot was at the northern edge of that cemetery, edged by trees on two sides and a tangle of rhododendrons on a third. It was a pretty spot to spend eternity.

“Will they let me come?” he asked. He supposed knew the answer before it left his father’s lips, but he had asked the question, nonetheless.

“No.”

“They won’t even let me out for one hour to come to my mother’s funeral? What about...what do they call it...a compassionate furlough?” He had felt the harshness of captivity many times during the preceding nine months, but never so keenly as at this moment. The full weight of his loss of freedom bore down upon him like a slab of granite.

“The warden thinks you’ll run,” Palmer’s father said simply. He looked down when he spoke. Palmer mulled this statement. Then he smiled sadly.

“Do you remember when I was a kid and we used to watch *Cool Hand Luke*?”

“I do. That was a good show. I always liked Paul Newman.”

“Remember when Luke’s mama died and Strother Martin made that speech? He said something like *when a boy’s Ma dies, he gets rabbit*.”

“I remember it.”

“This reminds me of that,” Palmer said. He looked at his father. “I’m not rabbit. Tell him I won’t run. He respects you, and he’ll listen to you. You’re the captain of the guard.”

“He thinks I’ll let you run.” Trenton Cray looked back at his son through the smudged pane of reinforced glass. He shrugged, and his features were marked with sheepishness, or perhaps full-blown shame, as if he had been caught doing something wrong.

“He said that?” Palmer asked. It was hard to believe.

“No, he didn’t say it. But that’s what he thinks. I can see it in his eyes.”

“That’s just crazy. You wouldn’t do that.” There was a long break in the conversation.

Trenton Cray caught his son’s gaze and held it.



“I *would* do it,” he said.

“What?” That was the last thing Palmer expected to hear.

“I wish I’d made you leave before the trial even started. Your mama and I talked about it, and she was all for the idea. She wanted you to go to Canada. But I wasn’t so sure. I thought you would only get a year or two, and I didn’t want you to have to live your life looking back over your shoulder, which is the way it would’ve been if you ran. If I had it to do again, though, that’s what I’d tell you to do. I’d put some money in your pocket and some gas in the pickup, and I’d send you to Canada.”

“You would have lost the house,” Palmer said. The Cray home had been pledged to secure his bond.

“I never liked that house much, anyway. But that’s water under the bridge now. And the warden’s just being careful. That’s what they pay him for. He’s a smart man, and he’s right about this. I would let you run if I saw an opportunity and I thought you might get away. So I suppose it is better this way. That you don’t go to the funeral, I mean. It’ll keep us both out of harm’s way. She knows you want to be there to say goodbye to her, and she knows you love her. That’s the stuff that counts.” Palmer was caught short, both with respect to his mother’s death and in consideration of his father’s admission. It was quite uncharacteristic of Trenton Cray to admit doubt or show weakness, and he had certainly never been ambiguous concerning his feelings towards escape. He was normally as solid as an oak bench, a man with a firm and abiding respect for the law, a defender of the faith not generally prone to entertaining notions of jailbreaks and the like. Palmer supposed it was best that he not be allowed to attend the funeral. He couldn’t be sure what he would do, and he didn’t want to put his father in a worse position than he already had.

“I know this is all my fault,” Palmer said. “Rodney dead, Mama dead, you bending and breaking the rules. All my fault.” It was what was on his mind, and he felt that it needed to be aired. The burden he had been carrying since Rodney’s death had now more than doubled. It was like a pile of boulders that threatened to crush him to the floor.

“It’s not your fault, son.”

“I feel like I killed Mama. I’m sorry.”

“Mama didn’t take care of herself like she should have. That’s what killed her.”

“I had a hand in it.”

“No, you didn’t. People die every day, and we’re all going to ride that train sooner or later. It was just your mama’s time, bless her heart. Her people have all died young, mostly with strokes or heart attacks. All except your Aunt Midge, anyway, who got hit by that truck. It’s in their makeup. As you get older, you’ll need to watch out for that, yourself, because there’s some of her in you. I know you can’t see it now, but you won’t be in here forever. Someday this will all be over, and then you’ll just be a regular man out here in the world, making your way the best you can, just like everyone else. These days will pass, and someday they’ll be like a bad dream. You’ll see. The day you get out, we’ll go to Mama’s grave together, if you want. In the meantime, you go on back to you cell and try not to be too upset. If you want me to, I’ll see to it that you’re let off of kitchen duty for a few days.”

“I’d rather keep busy.”

“All right, then. I’ll let the work schedule alone. That might be for the best, anyway. Listen, I’ve got to go, now. I’ve got a lot to do. I’ll tell Mama you love her and that you wished you could come. But she already knows that. She’s here with us now. I can feel it. You know, she never had any doubt that you were a good son, that you just made a mistake. She loved you

more than she loved anything else in this world. You just keep that in your mind, and you'll get through this all right."

"Daddy?"

"Yes, son?"

"Why did you tell me like this?" He gestured to their surroundings.

"I'm trying real hard to treat you like everyone else."

"Are you in trouble for bringing me here and putting me with Cheddar?"

"I'm trying real hard to treat you like everyone else for your sake, not mine."

"I know that. But you didn't answer my question."

"Let's just say I won't be making Major any time soon." He hung up his phone, stood, and slowly walked away. Palmer watched him until he was out of sight. Then he placed his own receiver back on the cradle, arose, and made his way back to his cell. It seemed a longer way back than it ever had before, and it felt like he had been walking for hours when he finally arrived back at B-134.

Palmer entered the cell, sat on his bunk, and stared unseeing at the opposite wall. Granted there wasn't that much to see there: two lockers, a Madonna poster, a picture of a Harley Softail, a few pictures painted by Cheddar's son, some birthday and Christmas cards still taped up long past their respective occasions. Palmer saw none of it as he stared through the cracks in the world. Occasionally he would wipe one eye or the other, but otherwise he was motionless and silent. After about an hour of this, with Cheddar trying to engage him the whole time, he finally broke his gaze and his silence and looked at his cellmate.

"My mother's dead," he said. It was the first time he had said it out loud, and the words were like hot gravel on his tongue. "She died last night in her sleep. It was a stroke."

“Ah, shit, man. I’m sorry,” he sat beside his cousin on the bunk. “Aunt Laurel was a good woman. I’ll miss her. She didn’t judge like a lot of Christian folks do. I’ll tell you one thing, though. In your sleep’s the way to go. I hope when my time comes, I’m either asleep or fucked up.” He considered this statement a moment. “Just thinking about it,” he concluded, “being fucked up *and* asleep would be better still.”

“Mama wasn’t much of one to get fucked up,” Palmer noted. He knew that Cheddar was just nattering to fill the silence. He was well-meaning, but he had definitely strayed from the main trail.

“Sorry, man,” Cheddar said. “Of course she wasn’t. I was just running my mouth.” He hadn’t been thinking.

“They won’t let me go to her funeral,” Palmer said.

“They ought to let a guy go to his mama’s funeral.”

“The old man says the warden’s afraid I’ll run.”

“That’s tough, man. And you’re right. They should let you go. But they won’t. It’s too expensive, because they have to send a guard and a car. Plus, a lot of times they end up having to chase a guy down when he goes to take a leak and then crawls out the window and just keeps on going.” Cheddar spoke with the voice of experience. “That’s what I’d do. By the time they knew I was gone, I’d be in the next county, moving fast for Mexico.”

“Not Canada?”

“Too damn cold up there.”

“Well, anyway, I’d like to say goodbye to her.”

“Sure you would, man. She’s your mama, and you’re a decent guy. Like I said, Aunt Laurel was a good woman. But don’t let this thing get you bowed up. You have got to get it into

your head that we are in a whole other world. Weddings and funerals and baptisms and all kinds of other shit like that are not for the likes of us, not while we're in here. You've got to pretend like your mama's funeral is on the moon. There is no way that you can even get there, no matter how hard you try. It's impossible to go. You'd do it if you could, but you can't, just like you can't fly through the air or breathe under the ocean." He thought a moment. Then he added a codicil. "Well, breathing under the ocean, anyway. You seem to fly okay."

"Thanks."

"It's impossible to go," Cheddar said.

"It's impossible to go," Palmer echoed.

"Now you've got it right. So why feel bad about something you can't help? She won't even know if you're at the funeral or not. And just between you and me, there's not a lot of good to be had by spending time around dead folks, anyhow. Close your eyes and think about her like she was back when she was alive. That's how you want to remember her. Hold her in your mind and talk to her like she was here on a Sunday to see you. That's what you've got to do. It's a better memory of her for you to keep than the one of her in a casket, anyway. I hate seeing people in their coffins. The undertakers always try to make them look real peaceful, like they're just asleep, but they're not asleep. They're dead, and they look like wax dolls to me. It really creeps me out." Cheddar shivered, and not because of the February cold in the cell. "It's just nasty. Sometimes people even kiss them goodbye." He shivered again.

"Cheddar, I know you're trying to make me feel better."

"Well, that's my job."

"And you'll never know how much I appreciate it. But I need for you to stop now. It's not working. I'm not feeling better."

“It was just her time, man.”

“That’s what my old man said. I know she wasn’t in the best health and that she smoked too much, but I feel like it’s my fault she’s gone. I think she mostly fretted herself to death. She worried herself into an early grave over me. The old man said she’d wander the house at night, talking to me and Rodney like we were there with her.”

“That’s some crazy shit,” Cheddar said in a sympathetic tone.

“I put her into that coffin.”

“That’s bullshit. You didn’t kill her.”

“I can’t help how I feel, and I feel like I did just that. I pushed her in that direction, for sure.”

“You know, she was a grown woman before she ever had you. And I’ve never seen her when she didn’t have a Marlboro Menthol in her mouth. Sure, she wasn’t happy about you being in here, but you weren’t her entire life, and I don’t think she was willing to hang it up over you. You’re not that fine.” He grinned at this joke. It was his attempt to take the edge off the conversation. “She just died, that’s all. She didn’t want to die, and she didn’t kill herself, and you didn’t kill her. She just died. People do.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Palmer said. He wished his cousin’s words were true, but he wasn’t convinced by a long shot that they were. Mostly he just wanted Cheddar to hush his condolences.

As a postscript to the passing of Laurel Cray, the week following her funeral, Palmer received a note in the mail from his father. He had apparently reverted after his one and only visit back to the habit of no direct contact with his son, lest the ire of the criminal element in the

prison be raised past the boiling point. Trenton Cray had received the results from his wife's postmortem and wished to share these with his son.

Palmer—Your mama died of a bad stroke, but you already knew that. What I wanted to tell you was that when they did her autopsy, they also found lung cancer in both of her lungs. She probably had it a while, because it had spread to her kidneys and her bladder. You have to wonder about things sometimes. I talked to the doctor and the long and short of it is that she would have been gone soon anyway, even if the stroke hadn't taken her. He said that she had six months, maybe, and that at the end it would have been a slow and painful death. She would have lingered, and it would have hurt her a lot. Instead, she went in her sleep without any pain. So if you are still thinking you caused your mama's stroke, which you didn't, you need to think about the fact that even if you did, you saved her from a horrible death. I don't know what some people would call this. Her sisters would probably say it had to do with her good connections with the Lord. But you know what I think. Take care of yourself. —Daddy

“Sloppy luck,” Palmer said when he read the note. He knew exactly what his father would call a quick painless death over an agonizing, slow one. He showed the note to Cheddar.

“Sloppy luck,” his cellmate agreed. There was no getting around it.

## Chapter Four

### February 18, 2000: Excerpt from the journal of Palmer Cray.

I hate to have to be the one to tell you, but Mama has passed away. She died of a stroke. I know you liked her a lot, and she felt the same way about you. She always called you her good son. Man, did you ever have her snowed! I'll miss her more than I can say. She always took being a mother seriously, and she always tried to be the best one she could be. I bet she walked ten thousand miles over the years, stepping out to the porch to smoke. If you happen to run into her, explain to her that I wasn't at her funeral because they wouldn't let me out for it. That was hard, not being there. I mean, prison is prison, and I understand that it is supposed to suck. That's kind of the point. If it was great, it wouldn't be much of a punishment, and guys would be lining up to get in. But then something like Mama dying comes up, and you realize just how different your life is from normal people's lives. I've got a feeling that it always will be.

Mama was only fifty-one years old when she went, and that's too young to be dying. Yeah, I know, eighteen is even younger than fifty-one. Sorry. I wasn't thinking. My old man had them do an autopsy on her. I would've passed on that, I think, but she was his wife longer than she was my mama, and you know how he is about having to get to the why of things. He's always been like that. He'll worry at something until he understands it. It turned out that Mama was really sick with cancer, and she wouldn't have lasted much longer, anyway. It was kind of a mercy that she went fast with the stroke. I recall how much your grandma suffered when she died with her cancer. It was a terrible way to go. I felt bad for her, and for your mama for having to tend to her, and I'm thankful that Mama was spared that.



When you're in prison, you have a lot of time to think, even if your cellmate is Cheddar Cray. My old man once said that his nephew could talk the stink off a skunk, and I believe it. When it gets quiet and I can get a thought in edgewise, I've been thinking about The Big Plan. Mama always thought that there was a plan for the world. God's plan, she called it. But I swear I can't see it. I mean, look at everything that's happened to our families. You're dead. Mama's dead. I'm in prison. What kind of plan is that? And think of your poor old grandma. There was a woman who never hurt a soul in her life, a sweet lady who believed in God and baby Jesus and all the saints in heaven. Yet she found herself at the end of her days begging for someone to please kill her and put her out of her pain. What kind of plan is that? I'd have to call it a bullshit plan. If I was a big shot and some guy who worked for me came up with a plan like that, I'd fire his ass.

The same goes for Mama. A stroke took her out quick and clean, and saved her from a long, slow death. I bet I've been told a dozen times since she died what a mercy it was, that God was watching out for her. I have to admit that the way she went was better than the way she could have gone, and I am truly grateful that she didn't suffer. But the implication that the Almighty sent a stroke to save her from cancer just pisses me off. How can people be so blind? It's one short step from there to Him not sending either and Mama living to a ripe old age. She spent about as much time on her knees as anyone I know, and she deserved better than to die at fifty-one, just like you deserved better than to smash into a tree at eighteen.

A lot of guys in prison end up getting religion of one kind or another, and that's fine for them. I've got nothing against it. It doesn't cost me a dime, and I hope it helps them as much as some of them claim it does. But for me, the longer I am alive, and the more bad shit that happens, both to me and just to people in general, the less likely I am to see some just and

powerful God driving the bus. If there is a God, and if there is a plan in motion, then shame on Him! And I'm not whining because I'm in prison. I did what I did and I got what I got, and most days I take it like a man. But what about all the poor folks who haven't done a damn thing wrong? They keep getting blindsided just like the guilty people. The way I see it, He either isn't there, or if He is, He's got a real mean streak. Which is worse? Seems to me there's a problem either way.

\*\*\*\*\*

Palmer was slow to recover after his mother's death, partly because he had to make the slow voyage to acceptance of the fact before he could begin to grieve over her loss. In the immediate aftermath of her journey to a finer reality, it was almost as if her departure were a fable to him, a grim fairy tale with an ending neither happy nor enlightening. As had been the case when Rodney died, Palmer had arrived quickly at the cognitive realization that his mother had taken wing, but the emotional component of the equation lagged far behind. He knew because he had been told, but what his brain knew his heart didn't really believe. Eventually, however, he was able to layer enough time between himself and her demise to allow him to begin to creep up on the loss from behind. After a sufficient amount of time went by, he managed to pull up even with the event, and then, finally, he worked his way past it.

He still blamed himself for her death, and he thought it more than likely that he always would, but the pain of the wound had slowly subsided until finally it was little more than a constant ache, a dull throb that was barely noticeable most days provided he didn't poke at it. He and Cheddar went back to business as usual. They quietly slipped into the warm current of

mindless endeavor, and from time to time one or the other would float to the surface to see what day it was, or what week. In this manner they saw one and then two additional years pass. Thus it was that Palmer was nearing his third anniversary as a convicted, incarcerated felon when he encountered his second momentous milestone.

“Cray, you’ve got a visitor,” the guard said through the open door. It was free time on the cellblock, and most of the inmates were out in the common area of the corridor, playing checkers or cards. Palmer looked up from the book he was reading. It was Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, a perennial favorite from the Sweetwater prison library, both because it took a long time to read and because most of the characters contained within its covers regularly encountered worse circumstances than those experienced by the average Sweetwater inmate. During the time he had already spent in the State’s custody, Palmer had read many of the classics of literature—*Moby Dick*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Babbit*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*—first because they made the days disappear, and later because he had found a love for the written word.

“Who is it?” he asked as he marked his place and got to his feet.

“What am I, your fucking social secretary?” the guard asked. His name was Chambers, and he was a new hire who didn’t like Captain Cray, his boy Palmer, his nephew Cheddar, or much of anything or anyone else in north Georgia as far as anyone could tell. He was a guard of the variety that liked to rest his right hand firmly on the handle of his baton when he talked to a prisoner, just in case trouble arose and he needed to whip it out and cut down on short notice. All of the old hands—inmates and guards alike—gave him a wide berth when they could. He seemed about as stable and predictable as river stones on a steep bank.

“Sorry,” Palmer murmured. Chambers reminded him of a lot of things, but none of these was a social secretary. It had been a stupid question, and he normally avoided those like the Spanish flu, but the news of a visitor had caught him by surprise. Since his mother’s death, visitors had been few and dwindling. Just Call Me Morris came each week, but he was being paid to, so Palmer didn’t count him. His father didn’t visit because his father didn’t visit. His uncle had chatted with him every now and again, but only as a postscript to his weekly visits with Cheddar, and only when such was allowed by the guards. The ladies from the church had been out to see him on one occasion, but that visit had been painful for all involved was not repeated. The Nickel sisters had been regular visitors for a little while, but the regularity of their visits had tapered from weekly to occasionally. Finally, Tiffany stopped coming altogether, and after a few more months, Kaitlyn had followed suit. In a note written by Tiffany soon after they stopped visiting, she explained that the sight of Palmer in prison made both sisters sadder than they could bear.

Palmer had enjoyed their visits the most, but had been forced to admit that he had mixed feelings about seeing the pair. He was happy to enjoy the pleasure of their company, but seeing the two always brought back memories of better times, days that did not involve guards and barred, locked doors. They had through no fault of their own come to represent everything that he knew he was missing, and he, too, was left with a deep melancholy after nearly every visit. When he saw Tiffany, he felt bad because she couldn’t have Rodney. And when he saw Kaitlyn, he felt worse because he couldn’t have her. He was often depressed for days after they left the grounds and went back out among the free, and when they ceased their visits, he reluctantly realized it was probably for the best.

The Nickel sisters' effect on Palmer notwithstanding, visiting day was generally a treat for the large majority of prisoners, an event to be looked forward to and savored, like a trip to the fair. But more often than not, the act of visiting a prison inmate was an ordeal for the visitor. It was difficult to view a loved one or even a liked one in the prison setting: locked up, sometimes in shackles, dressed in Sweetwater blues with a number stenciled over the pocket and on the pants, smiling and trying to be brave while assuring the visitor that all was well when, in fact, all was about as far from well as it could possibly get. Most people found that they couldn't sustain the sheer effort of forced cheerfulness indefinitely. Spouses and mothers were the exception because it was their job to be, but for everyone else, the overwhelming tendency was to slack off on the visiting schedule after a short time. They would begin to defer the unpleasant task as long as possible and regretfully always have something more important to do on visiting day.

Palmer's mother was dead, and he had no wife, so slowly but steadily as the disappearing-visitor phenomenon occurred, he was becoming a card-carrying member of the legions of the forgotten.

Thus he was somewhat excited as he walked to the visitor's area. When he arrived there, he was directed to the last station. He was still considered an escape candidate even after three years of time served, so he was in the segregation room. Cheddar had explained to him that if he went five years without an escape attempt, his status as a flight risk would be reviewed, and perhaps he could begin to receive visitors face-to-face. He walked past eleven occupied visiting cubicles before arriving at the twelfth, tucked in down by the far wall.

Sitting there on the stool over on the good side of the glass—the side that had access to the door, the hallway, and the world beyond—was Rodney's mother, Kathleen Earwood. She looked at him with her grey eyes, nodded, and smiled slightly. It was a distracted effort. He sat and picked up the receiver with an odd sense of apprehension. This uneasiness was due in equal

parts to the fact that he actually had a visitor for a change combined with the fact that this caller was Rodney Earwood's mother. He wasn't normally apprehensive in her presence and had, in fact, always liked her quite a bit, but he wasn't quite sure what to expect next. She had smiled when he sat, it was true, but there was no getting around the fact that he had killed her only son. Plus, he had been in Sweetwater State Correctional Facility for a good long while, yet this was her first visit. Given the nature of his crime, he felt he had a sufficient understanding concerning the nature of her long absence. The part he was wondering about was why she had come to see him now.

"Hello, Mrs. Earwood," he said. He had been given permission years ago to use her Christian name, and he had done so upon more occasions than he could recall. But now he was unsure of the appropriateness of using her first name. He was unacquainted with the generally accepted protocols surrounding conducting a conversation with the mother of someone he had augured into a tree, so he decided to keep the conversation in the formal realm for starters, and then to play it by ear from there on in. It all depended upon how those critical first few exchanges went.

"Hello, Palmer," she replied. "It's good to see you." She smiled once again. "You're looking well. Are they treating you okay?" Palmer nodded at this most ubiquitous of all visitors' greetings. His mother had asked it every time she came, as had most of the other visitors he had received. It was the prison equivalent of *how are you doing*. The truth was that they were treating him well enough considering where he was and why he was there, although his answer would have likely been much the same even if they had been waterboarding him or routinely beating the soles of his feet with broom handles. What happened at Sweetwater State Correctional Facility tended to remain on the premises. This was an unofficial policy that

effectively kept the guards happy, and everyone from the oldest lifers on down to the newest men in the three-bunk cells liked contented guards. It was almost an obsession among the inmates. They all knew that as bad as any given day had been, if they managed to anger one of their keepers, intentionally or otherwise, then tomorrow could always be worse.

“Yes M’am,” he said. “They’re treating me just fine.” He had not seen her since the day he had been sentenced. The time between then and now had not been kind to her, and she seemed to have aged twenty years during those three. There were white streaks in her thick brown hair, and there were puffy bags under her red eyes that spoke of tearful, sleepless nights. Or perhaps she had taken to drink. Her skin looked stretched and thin, like it had shrunk a half-size or so but she had decided to wear it anyway. Her mouth had acquired a pinched look, as if she were either in chronic pain or expressing constant disapproval, or some miserable combination of both. Palmer wondered if she were nervous as he noticed that she exhibited a slight rocking motion even though she sat on a strait stool. She was only two years older than his mother had been when she had died, but she looked much older than Laurel Cray’s fifty-one years. Losing her son had been hard on Kathleen Earwood.

“I guess you’re wondering why I’m here,” she said tentatively. Her rocking seemed to pick up tempo. Palmer thought that perhaps it was a tic.

“Yes M’am,” he said again. He hadn’t intended to bring up the subject of her sudden visit, but since she had, he was indeed curious.

“The simple truth is, I wanted to see you. As a matter of fact, I’d like to start visiting you from time to time, if that’s all right.” She paused then, as if waiting for his response. Her rocking slowed almost to a stop, like a rowboat on a quiet pond.

“Well, sure,” Palmer replied. “That would be fine. You can come whenever you want to. It’ll be good to have the company.” He felt a stirring of happiness, a small twinge of interest in a larger version of the world than the shrunken existence he currently led, a small reality that included Cheddar, their cell, the kitchen, and the armload of woe caused by Napoleon Bonaparte when he decided to invade Russia.

“I’ve wanted to come see you several times since the judge sent you here, but Harris wouldn’t hear of it. He was dead set against me coming. You remember how he is.” Palmer nodded. He knew exactly how he was: loud, argumentative, opinionated, and most times, just downright mean. He knew all this, and he knew from Rodney that Harris was a hard drinker and a wife beater, as well. Harris Earwood was Kathleen’s second husband and Rodney’s stepfather. They had married when Rodney was three.

“I do remember,” Palmer said. Kathleen had sounded apologetic when she spoke, although Palmer wasn’t sure if this sheepishness was due to the dearth of her visits or the errant ways of her husband. Maybe it was both. She continued.

“I have always given in to him to keep peace in the family. Not just on the subject of visiting you, either.” Palmer was aware of many of her marital accommodations in the name of civil harmony. He thought that not wanting to be beaten for defying a violent husband was a perfectly acceptable reason for not coming down to Sweetwater prison on visiting day, but he couldn’t say that because he wasn’t supposed to know about the physical abuse. Rodney had sworn him to silence when he told him, and the fact that he was now gone to the long home didn’t relieve Palmer of his obligation to honor the agreement. A promise was a promise.

“Peace in the family is a good thing,” he said.



“I apologize for not visiting you sooner. I should have been coming to see you all along.” She wasn’t crying, but her eyes sparkled where tears had formed in them, and her rocking had again picked up speed.

“It’s okay,” Palmer said. “I understand about Harris. You don’t have to apologize. He never was all that crazy about me, anyway, even before...what happened. Besides, it looks like he must have changed his mind about you coming to visit.” He was feeling his way slowly forward through the conversation, like he was tiptoeing barefoot across a gravel road. There was something eccentric about this visit that he had yet to identify.

“No, the truth of the matter is, he never really did,” she said. Her voice had a far-away, wistful tone for the briefest of moments. “Change his mind, I mean. Instead of changing his mind, he changed his state of residence. We split up about a month ago, and he’s moved back to Asheville.” This was news that Palmer hadn’t expected. The information that his dead friend’s mother was sharing with him was almost too personal. Palmer felt a bit voyeuristic as he became privy to details he had not asked for and had no desire to know.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. He was indeed sorry to hear it for her sake, but he had to admit that he wasn’t that upset to see Rodney’s father gone. Harris Earwood had been a taste that Palmer had never been able to acquire, much like eating snails or playing soccer. Rodney hadn’t liked him, either, and he used to be fond of noting to anyone who seemed interested that his stepfather was a dick. Neither Rodney nor Palmer had ever really understood why Kathleen had continued to put up with him. Fear, Palmer supposed. Maybe habit on top of that. It had always been his opinion that Kathleen Earwood could have done much better than Harris. Rodney had always agreed with this assessment, often adding the codicil that it would have been true even if she had stayed single.

“Don’t worry about it,” Kathleen said. “I’m really not all that sorry. Mostly I’m just very tired. I haven’t loved him in a long time, and I haven’t liked him in a longer time than that. I was living a lie. I was trying to pretend that he would change and that everything would be all right. It takes a lot of effort to pretend. It made me tired.” Palmer could sympathize with his guest. Living with Harris Earwood would have worn him out years ago. But then, matters of the heart are difficult to predict, and there was just no accounting for some people’s taste. Still, now that she was back on the playing field and had another chance, perhaps she would be a bit choosier this time.

Once again, Palmer was struck by Kathleen Earwood’s extreme candor. He hadn’t seen her in a long time, and even back when he saw her regularly, the nature of their relationship was simply that she was his best friend’s mother. They were separated by a wide chasm of age, gender, point of view, and experience, and that was without even adding in the sad fact that he had flown her only son into a tree.

“Kathleen, you don’t have to tell me all of this.” He had decided that since he knew the inner secrets of her long relationship and recent breakup with her husband, the use of her Christian name was once again permissible. “It’s private.”

“Who else am I going to talk to?” she asked simply. “The girl down at the Dollar Store is sweet, but I don’t know her name. You’re the closest thing to family I have left.” He supposed she had a point, at that. Her son was dead, her husband had flown the coop to Asheville, and her closest friend—his own mother—had smoked herself into a premature and hopefully uneventful trip to heaven. “I’ll stop if you want me to,” she said. She seemed to have a need to talk. He knew the feeling. Sometimes, the words needed to fly free.

“No, no, it’s okay with me. We can talk about whatever you want to. I just thought you might feel odd later, after sharing this personal stuff with me. Sometimes I do.”

“Palmer, I feel odd all the time, anyway,” she said. Her rocking had returned, as if to illustrate her assertion. What the hell, Palmer thought. It wasn’t like he had anything else to do for the next seven years or so, anyway.

“Tell me what happened with Harris,” he said. “Why did you decide to run him off?”

“You know how he was,” she repeated. “He was sort of stubborn, kind of opinionated, awfully loud, and usually obnoxious. What you didn’t know was that when he got drunk, sometimes he hit me.” Palmer nodded. He was now officially privy to that information. “He never hit Rodney, though. He started to, once, when Rodney was just a little boy. I put a gun to his head and told him that if he ever hit my son, I would kill him where he stood. I guess he believed me, because he never made like he was going to hit my son again.”

“I like that,” Palmer said. “You should’ve just shot him then.”

“No bullets.”

“I like that even more,” Palmer said. “Why didn’t you just pack Rodney up and leave him?”

“I was foolish not to, but I was afraid. I can see that, now. But hindsight is always really clear. It’s like I have a telescope, and I can see all of my mistakes and all of my should-have’s. But back then, I didn’t have any family left, and I didn’t have a job or any money, and I had a little boy to take care of. It was important to me to have a husband, and I thought I could make Harris into the man I wanted. But I found out that people are like they are. You can’t change them. I worked for fifteen years trying to change him, and what happened instead was that I ended up changing myself.”

“I wish he had been a better husband to you. You deserved better.”

“We all deserve better, mostly,” she said. “But what we deserve doesn’t have much to do with what we get, or what we settle for. Harris turned even meaner when Rodney died. He was so bitter sometimes that I could barely stand to be around him. The thing is, on one level I understood everything he was going through, because there were days when I felt the same way.” She looked at Palmer with haunted eyes as she shared this confidence. “Some days I was so mad at you that I wished Rodney had lived instead of you. I’m sorry for that. It wasn’t Christian of me. It wasn’t right.”

“I’ve felt that way, myself.”

“You hush.” She put her hand to the glass as if she were covering his mouth.

“No, it’s okay,” he said. His heart went out to her. “I expect that it’s natural to feel that way. Both for you and for me.” She seemed to feel better to have the admission out in the open, like she had confessed a great and terrible sin and had received absolution.

“Right after you were sent here, I wanted to start coming to see you. Whenever I thought about you being in here, it would break my heart.” She blinked a few tears. Her rocking ceased, only to be replaced by her right leg shaking in a sporadic manner. “I hope you know you’ve always been just like my own son.”

“I know it. You’ve told me plenty of times.”

“Well, don’t ever forget that I love you. You’re my last connection to Rodney. It’s almost like I can see him sitting beside you. I even talked to your mama about visiting you, just to make sure she didn’t mind.”

“What’d she say?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Well, yes M’am, but she’s gone.”

“That doesn’t make one bit of difference. If she had said no, I would have respected that, even now. But that didn’t happen. She was happy for me to come visit you.” Her face hardened as she spoke. “But Harris wouldn’t hear of it. He dug in his heels like a blind horse being led to the dog food plant. At that time, I didn’t think I could stand to lose my marriage on top of losing my son, so I didn’t press him too hard. I was still afraid of being alone.” She paused as if waiting for a response.

“Alone is not good,” Palmer agreed, but even as he said it he had the thought that sometimes, alone was clearly better than the alternative. At least, that seemed to be the case with Kathleen Earwood and her departed husband.

“But I did keep the subject out in front of him, and I brought it up from time to time. Every time I mentioned it, he got mad. Sometimes, he would hit me. Finally one day it came down to Harris giving me an ultimatum. He told me that if I ever brought up the subject of visiting you again, he would leave. And that was the exact moment that I realized I was no longer interested in being married to Harris Earwood. It was like a light bulb had come on inside my head. I had put up with him for over fifteen years, but I had finally had enough.” She stopped speaking and sighed. Then she shrugged, as if to indicate that what was done was done. “Suddenly I knew he just wasn’t worth the trouble anymore. I knew being alone was better than being with him anymore. I wasn’t afraid, and I knew it was time for a change. So I told him I was going to start coming to see you on Sundays and I didn’t care if he liked it or not, and that maybe it *was* time for him to go elsewhere, at that.”

“Good for you,” Palmer said. He had been drawn into the story, almost against his will.

“We had a terrible fight that lasted all day, and he left that night.” She looked sheepish as she continued. “He tried to change his mind and make up, and I had to put him under the gun again to get him to get on out. I haven’t heard from him since. My lawyer has, but I haven’t.” She took a sip from the bottle of water she had purchased from the machine in the hall. Several minutes passed as she rocked quietly, staring at the water bottle. Palmer wasn’t sure if the visit was over, or if they were just on intermission.

“Was it loaded this time?” He really wanted to know.

“Yes.”

“Do you think...”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know what to say,” he said finally. His mama had always coached him that when he was in doubt, he should just tell the truth, and he truly had no idea what to say, so that was what he had done. He was in jail finishing up the third year of a ten-spot, but at that moment he had the impression that he was better off than she was. She looked up at the sound of his voice and began speaking again, as if she had just been primed.

“Once I started being honest with myself, I realized that I hadn’t been happy with him since the beginning. We were like water and dirt. When we tried to get together, all we did was make mud. We were long past the stage where we could make it work. Maybe there was never a time when we could have. Well, let me take that back. I could have given in like always, but I wasn’t interested in making the effort. It was time for a change, so we made a change. Thank God we never had a child together. I would have had to shoot him for sure.” There was another long, uncomfortable silence. At least it was uncomfortable for Palmer. He had known Rodney’s mother since he was just a boy, but he hadn’t known her long enough to be completely

comfortable listening to her marital woes. He had to admit, though, that the image of Kathleen putting a gun to Harris' head, twice, was pleasing. Finally he ended the hush.

"I'm sorry your marriage is breaking up." Palmer could see Kathleen's left hand through the glass as it rested on the table. He noted the indentation around her third finger where wedding her ring had recently clung.

"It was just time, that's all. We had worn out on each other. I guess even back when I did love him, I loved him in spite of him, if that makes sense. I suppose I was younger then, and I had a lot more energy. Plus, when I married him, he seemed to love Rodney, and that was all I needed to see. A woman can love any man who is good to her children, and I needed a husband, so when he asked me to marry him, I did. But Rodney became less important to him as the years passed, and finally it seemed like Harris gave up on Rodney completely. Now he has given up on me, too."

"That's his mistake."

"Well, that's his choice. He has chosen to fill his life with hate, and he's welcome to it. But I'm not going to be a part of it. I'm tired of living the life I have been living. I want to try to salvage what I can from whatever's left of my time. I'm ready to move on. Losing Rodney made me realize just how precious life is. I don't want to waste any more of mine." Palmer nodded slowly. He advocated moving on for anyone who had the means to do so and the mobility to make the trip. The silence grew long again. He could sense a pattern in the cadence of their conversations: short bursts of talk followed by lengthy pauses. After several moments passed, he once again leapt into the breach. He thought it was time to change the subject, anyway, although the new topic would be no more pleasant than the old one had been.

"I never got the chance to tell you this, but I'm sorry I killed Rodney."

“Well of course you are,” she said, once again putting her hand to the glass pane as if she were shushing him. “You don’t have to say it ever again. Not to me or to anyone else. It’s over and done.” There was a quaver in her voice as she reassured him. And she was correct about one thing. Palmer had been making amends to the people he had hurt for over three years, just as he had been told to do by Just Call Me Morris. Kathleen Earwood represented the last of the injured parties. He had worked his way from the top of the list to the bottom in no particular order. Rodney’s mama had been second behind Rodney, and she was the last.

“I didn’t mean to do it,” he continued. He had wanted to tell her this for quite some time. Of course, he was sure that she knew it already, but he needed to say it, needed to speak the words. They had spoken a few times during the time between the accident and the day he was shipped to Sweetwater, but he had never found the right moment to share this confidence, and she had always steered the conversation toward anything but.

“I know you didn’t,” she said sadly. “You don’t ever have to say that again, either. You boys just ran out of luck. That’s the bad thing about relying on luck. It always runs out, and sometimes it runs out at the worst times.” Palmer nodded. He knew exactly what she meant.

“I appreciated you testifying for me at the trial,” he said.

“I was glad to do it. I wish it had helped more. Your lawyer thought it would have a big impact on the jury, but I’m not so sure it had any effect at all.”

“I’m sure it helped,” he said as he shrugged. “The Hanging Judge might’ve given me life if it hadn’t been for you.” It wasn’t much of a joke, but it was the best he could do to lighten the mood at the moment.

“Your sentence did seem very harsh,” she said. “I talked to several people after the trial, and most of them thought so, too. One of the women who served on the jury told me she would



have voted the other way if she had know the judge was going to impose such a stiff sentence. She thought you were guilty, but not fifteen-years guilty. I had my own lawyer research the case, and he told me that the conviction and sentence would both probably stand if they were appealed. Of course, he mostly does estates and divorces, but even so, he believed that the judge had stayed within the boundaries of the law.”

“Thanks for having him take a look. J. Randall Crane said the same thing. He said I got hammered, but only just a little. The sentence was on the heavy side of legal, but it was legal. So it looks like seven more years of the quiet life for me.” He smiled at his small witticism, but she didn’t. He was trying to make light of circumstances that had no bright side, and his efforts fell as flat as unleavened bread.

“I was sorry about your mother,” she said. It was her turn to change the subject. Palmer nodded. He noticed that she had begun to rock again. Stress seemed to bring on the rocking and the leg-shaking too. “She was a good mother to you, a good friend to me, just a good woman in general. I never worried about Rodney when Laurel Cray was taking care of him.”

“Thank you.” He wanted to say more, but there really wasn’t much else to say, and her simple testimonial had moved him past the point of speech, anyway.

“I went to the funeral. The church was absolutely full, and there must have been fifty people standing outside. It was the same way at the cemetery. It had been raining hard all day, but when it came time for them to move her from the church to the gravesite, it stopped raining. The sun came out, and the sky was blue. There were birds singing along with the choir. I thought you would want to know that. It was like God wanted her to have a nice service before he brought her home.” Probably feeling bad about that cancer, Palmer thought.

“I appreciate you telling me about it. I didn’t have any details about her funeral.” He had not seen the casket, or stood by the grave, or heard the preacher’s words of comfort, and he had an enhanced sense of loss for having missed these things.

“Trenton didn’t tell you about the service?”

“No. We haven’t talked about it. He’s still too sad to bring it up.” Palmer spared her the detail that he hadn’t talked to his father at all since the morning after his mother had died, and that barring a prison break or any other untimely deaths in the immediate family, the conversational moratorium was likely to continue for at least seven more years.

“Bless your daddy’s heart. He loved your mama so much. My husband wouldn’t even go to the church with me.” She reached one of her long impasses. Palmer waited her out, just to see if she would restart on her own. Finally, just as he was about to throw out another possible topic of conversation, she spoke.

“Tell me a secret about Rodney.”

“M’am?”

“Tell me something about Rodney I don’t know. You were his best friend his whole life. I was just his mother. You knew a lot more about him than I did for a long time. Tell me something about my son that I don’t know.” Palmer gave this request some consideration. There were a great many things he knew about Rodney that his mama did not, and some of those details needed to stay that way until the seas gave up their dead. Finally, though, he chose a fact that he thought she might like to hear, a happy detail.

“Rodney loved Tiffany Nickel.”

“My Lord, Palmer, I knew that.” She smiled as she spoke.

“Well, how about this? He was going to ask her to marry him soon.”

“He never said anything about it to me, but I knew that, too. I could tell by the way he talked about her.”

“This is harder than I thought. Here’s one. Rodney was planning on joining the Army. He was already scheduled to go take his physical.”

“Now *that* I didn’t know.”

“He was pretty excited about it. He wanted to spend four years in the service. Then he wanted to go to college. The Army will put money into a college account for you, and he was going to get a big enlistment bonus, too. When he got out, he was going to use the enlistment money and what was in the college account to go to school. He was going to go to law school. He wanted to become a lawyer.” Palmer had always had trouble envisioning Rodney in a three-piece suit, but he had to admit that he would have made a good attorney, or at least, a better one than J. Randall Crane had turned out to be.

“I knew he wanted to be a lawyer someday. As smart as that boy was, and as much as he loved to argue, I always thought he’d make a good one. But I never knew he was thinking about joining the Army to pay for it. When did he decide on that?”

“He’d been talking about it ever since the tenth grade, when we went on a field trip to the granite quarry up near Jasper.”

“I remember that trip.”

“They were set to blast that day while we were there, and they let Rodney flip the switch to shoot off one of the dynamite charges. He thought that was the greatest thing he’d ever done, and he decided right then that he liked to blow stuff up. It wasn’t long after that trip that he started talking about joining the Army.”

“I wonder why he didn’t tell me about it.”

“Well, he figured you’d worry. But he knew he was going to have to tell you soon.”

Actually, Rodney’s plan had been to enlist, leave, and have Palmer tell Kathleen all about it the day after he’d gone. Palmer had been resisting this scheme, and the jury had still been out at the time of Rodney’s death with respect to the method of notification.

“He was right about that,” she said. “I would have worried. That’s the part they never tell you about being a parent. You never, ever stop worrying. If anything, it gets worse when your children get older and you can’t protect them anymore. I was worrying the night that he died.” She was quiet for a moment. Then she spoke again. “His father was in the Army, you know.” Palmer nodded. Rodney used to talk about him all the time, even though he had never known him. “His real father, I mean, not Harris. He was killed in a training accident while I was pregnant with Rodney.” She looked at the plywood partition separating her from the adjacent visitor, but Palmer knew she was seeing across the years, viewing a place and time better than the one she now occupied. She snapped back to the present and looked at her incarcerated host. “Thank you. I appreciate the confidence. Would you be willing to tell me something about yourself? Something I don’t know?”

“I don’t know, Kathleen.” It had been different talking to her about her own son’s dreams, even if they were now on permanent hold.

“Please?” she asked. Palmer was on the horns of a medium-sized dilemma. During his imprisonment, he had become reticent about speaking of his own hopes and dreams. He had become superstitious. He believed along with Cheddar and most of the rest of the inhabitants of Sweetwater State Correctional Facility that to talk too much about the future was to jinx it. Life after prison was a gossamer dream, fragile and rare. To voice a hope or share a plan was to risk its annihilation. To share a secret desire was to hazard its destruction. But he hated to disappoint

Rodney's mother, and she had shared much with him. So he decided to take the safe path and share a dream no longer in the queue, an obsolete desire once held by a young man before he became a felon.

“Rodney was going to join the Army. I was going to join the Navy.”

“The Navy! Did you want to blow things up, too?”

“No. I just wanted to go somewhere. Going somewhere is all I have ever wanted to do.”

They were both silent then, as the realization descended upon Rodney's mother that, given the nature of Palmer's secret, the punishment he had received was appallingly cruel. Palmer was well aware of that cruelty and had been for quite some time. He had long ago made his farewells to Hong Cong, Istanbul, the North Sea, the Horn, and all the rest. These places and many more were, like his own mama's funeral, on the moon. It was impossible to get there, and foolish to even try. That was not why he joined her in silence. Rather, he had emptied himself of words and simply had nothing else to say. They continued to sit in peace until a guard came up beside Kathleen, caught her attention, and tapped his watch. She nodded at the man and turned to make her goodbyes.

“It looks like it's time for me to go,” she said gently. “Do you mind if I come back next week? I just realized that you might not want the company.” She rocked slowly as she awaited the answer.

“You can come back whenever you want to,” he answered. “I've enjoyed talking with you. You've been the high point of my year.”

“How high is that?” she asked.

“Not that high,” he admitted. “But that's not your fault. I really have enjoyed your visit.”

“I need to warn you that sometimes when I come to visit, I’ll want to talk about Rodney.  
Not always, but sometimes.”

“That’s all right. He’s a good topic of conversation.”

“Do you need anything?”

“I’ve got everything I need. Well, that’s not quite true, but I have everything that they’ll  
let me have, anyway.”

“Okay, then. I’ll see you next week?”

“Next week it is,” Palmer said. “I’ll have a good secret ready for you.” She nodded and  
arose. The guard escorted her out. Palmer sat at his station and slowly tapped his fingers. He  
watched the door long after she had passed from view, watched until his own guard tapped the  
glass with his baton to remind Palmer that he, too, needed to vacate the visiting area and head  
back home.

Cheddar was asleep when Palmer arrived back at the cell, but he awoke when his  
cellmate entered. He loosely held the copy of *War and Peace*, which he had apparently been  
trying to read before he had dozed.

“You know, this book sucks,” he said without preliminaries.

“How would you know?” Cheddar wasn’t much of a fan of the written word, and of all  
the many, many authors he disdained, Tolstoy was way on up the list.

“I read the damn thing is how I know, all the way up through the sentence that says  
*Mercy on us, what a violent attack.*”

“Cheddar, that’s the first sentence.”

“Well, I know what I like and I know what I don’t like. It doesn’t take me all day to make up my mind like it does some people I could name. And I didn’t like it for shit. If I ever run up on Tolstoy, I think I’m going to kick his ass.”

“He’s dead.”

“Sounds like someone else thought his book sucked, too. Who came to visit?” He hopped down from his bunk and handed the book to Palmer. Each took vicarious pleasure in the other’s visitors, and it had been a while since Palmer had contributed to the visitor pool.

Cheddar was all ears.

“It was Kathleen Earwood,” Palmer said as he relocated his place in the text and slipped his bookmark back in.

“Oh, shit. How did that go?”

“It really didn’t go too bad, considering all that has happened to her and to me. We had a pretty good talk.”

“How was she about, you know, *the whole Rodney thing*?” The *whole Rodney thing* was Cheddar’s term for Palmer’s planned apology to Kathleen Earwood for killing her son. Cheddar and Palmer had discussed the issue at various times over the past three years, with Cheddar weighing in on the side of Palmer being out of his damn mind for planning to even bring up the subject if he ever saw his victim’s mother again. In Cheddar’s view, any action besides turning tail and running like hell was foolhardy and bound to bring regret.

“We talked about him a good bit. I told her I was sorry about everything, and she told me that she didn’t blame me for what happened. She said that we had just run out of luck.” He looked at Cheddar. “That’s what it was, you know. We just ran out of luck. If the Camaro had been six inches to the right or a foot to the left of where it was when we hit that dip, then Rodney

might still be here today.” Palmer realized that being sober wouldn’t have hurt, either, but he didn’t wish to discuss that at present.

“That’s what I’ve been telling you for three years, man. Sometimes, bad shit just happens. There’s no rhyme or reason to it. You can drive yourself nuts worrying about causality.”

“Worrying about what?” With the exception of son-of-a-bitch, Cheddar had used very few four-syllable words over the course of the past three years and had never uttered this particular one. Palmer was intrigued.

“Causality, man. You know. Aristotle? Cause and effect? What, you think I don’t read? Give me something worth reading, and I’ll zip right through it.”

“Well, Kathleen Earwood agrees with you and Aristotle that sometimes things just happen.”

“She’s a smart woman.”

“She just got smarter. She finally ran her old man off.”

“Harris?”

“The very man.”

“Harris Earwood was a sack of shit, anyway. I’m surprised someone hasn’t done him in.”

“According to Kathleen, she almost did. Twice. Once when he tried to hit Rodney a long time ago and again about a month back when he wouldn’t leave. He was a hitter.”

“I don’t know if I ever told you this, but he used to buy a little product from me from time to time.”

“No!” Harris Earwood on meth?



“Yes. As a matter of fact, the motherfucker owes me some money.”

“It might be tough to collect that. He’s gone to Asheville.”

“Well, it’s not like he was going to pay me, anyway. She should have just shot his ass and been done with it.”

“I think if he ever comes back, she probably will.”

“Maybe he’ll come back.”

## Chapter Five

**August 27, 2002: Excerpt from the journal of Palmer Cray.**

Your mama has started visiting me on Sundays. That's fine by me. I can use the company, and so can she. As far as visitors go, I'm pretty much down to her and Just Call Me Morris. He still comes every Wednesday, and he's still my counselor. I sort of thought he'd taper off after my mother died, but either my old man is remembering to mail the checks on time, or else I'm running up one hell of a bill. He tells me that I'm still depressed. He says I've got the Sweetwater Blues. I have a psychologist with a sense of humor. It doesn't get much better than that. Whenever he tells me that I'm depressed, I say that I'm twenty-two years old and locked up in a cage with Cheddar Cray for the next seven years. What could I possibly have to be depressed about?

I'm kind of concerned about your mama. She's not herself. I don't want to worry you, but she looks like hell, and she's not acting exactly right. I suppose there's good reason for that, though, kind of like there is with me. A lot has happened to her over the last four years, and it has been the type of stuff that can grind you down. I'm just keeping you posted, and I don't want you to get yourself into a twist. I'm going to keep an eye on her. Well, as much of an eye as I can, anyway, considering where I am. I asked Just Call Me Morris if he would check on her from time to time, and he said he would as a favor to me. No, that's all right. Don't even mention it. It's the least I can do.

Speaking of things happening to her, I need to tell you about one of those right now. Are you sitting down? Can you even sit down? Well, grab hold of something, anyway, because I don't want you to float off in the middle of this. Here it comes. Harris and your mama have

split up. I'm not kidding. Would I joke about something like that with a dead guy? She has finally handed that boy his walking papers and put him on the highway. She ran his drunk, mouthy ass all the way back to Asheville. And that's not even the best part. The best part is, she told me that she had to stick the barrel of a gun to his head to persuade him to go. I liked that part the best. The woman's got some spunk. What was it my grandmother used to say? That girl's got some moxie. I think if Harris ever comes back, your mama ought to put a couple of slugs into him, just to tune him up a little. She doesn't have to shoot anything important, just wing him a bit.

You know how we used to wonder why she even put up with him? She told me a little about that, and since she's your mama, I'm going to cut you in on the secret. After she lost your real father, she found herself on her own. She was in a tough spot. She had a kid, no money, no job, no family to speak of, and no prospects. What was she? Thirty? Maybe thirty-two? You know I suck at math, so you figure it out. And then along came smooth old Harris, probably wearing that light blue leisure suit we found in his closet that time. You just know he looked sharp in that thing. Probably had a couple of gold chains hanging around his neck. Back when he first showed up, he wasn't a drunk, or at least he wasn't one in front of your mama. And she told me that he was good to you to start with. I believe every bit of that, because it would have been a deal breaker with her from the start if he hadn't been. She would have sent him back to Asheville right then, leisure suit and all. Anyway, one thing led to another, and before they knew what had hit them, they were married.

Once he had her reeled into the boat, his persona started to slip around the edges. You like that word? Persona. I learned it from Just Call Me Morris. It means the person you are pretending to be. Harris was trying to be Husband and Father of the Year, but he couldn't hack it

because deep down inside, he was a dick. I know that because his stepson told me. It could even be that he had good intentions, although I'm not inclined to want to give him the benefit of the doubt. As time passed, more and more of the real Harris started slipping out, and the bastard you and I knew and loved started shining through. By the time your mama figured out that her husband was someone else entirely from the guy she married, the train had already left the station. She was stuck like a car in a ditch.

I was telling all of this to Cheddar, and he shared a tidbit with me. Harris used to buy meth from my cousin. We always knew he was a drunk, but I never thought he was a druggie. Cheddar says it wasn't every week, but it was pretty regular. That explains a lot. Those times he got crazy mean? I bet he was flying Air Cheddar. My cousin also told me that Harris stiffed him. Cheddar is a redneck capitalist. He has a long memory and a strong sense of ownership. He wants his money, and he's not going to forget. Your old man had better watch it. If he's still alive in 2020 or so, Cheddar might just ease up to Asheville to pay him a visit. Hell, I might even give him a lift, just so I can watch their reunion. I never realized that my cousin was a bad ass until I started living with him. I guess I should have, though. He was in a rough business, and he did all right until his wife turned him in. He's not a big guy, but like he told me once, you don't have to be big as long as your gun is.

\*\*\*\*\*

2002 evolved into 2003, and 2003 blended into 2004. Midway through that year, on June 11, Palmer Cray turned twenty-four and marked his fifth anniversary as an inmate. It was a momentous day, or at least what passed for one in Sweetwater State Correctional Facility. He

had reached the halfway mark of his sentence, and regardless of Cheddar's well-meaning advice to the contrary about the dangers inherent in keeping track of time, from this point forward, he would be counting the days down to zero. The computation was a simple one. He had five more years to serve. Five years times 365 days per year equaled 1825 days. There would be a leap year in there somewhere, maybe two depending upon the luck of the draw, so to be safe he'd call it 1827 days until the day he shouldered his sack and walked out that gate. 1827 days until he had a frosty bottle of beer. 1827 days until he got close enough to a female to smell her perfume. 1827 days until he was free to chose what he wished to have for supper, and to eat that meal from a china plate with silverware rather than from a plastic tray with a plastic spoon. 1827 days until he was free.

To commemorate the occasion, Palmer went on a shopping spree to the prison store, which was located in the visitor's building across the yard. While being escorted to the facility, Palmer took deep breaths and walked with a spring in his step as they traversed the one hundred yards between buildings. On both sides of the walk, basketball games were in session on fenced and locked individual courts. All three of the games underway were segregated according to race. There was an all-white game, an all-black game, and an all-Latino contest. Integration was the law of the land, but in Sweetwater State Correctional Facility, separate-but-equal made for fewer fights in the exercise yard and knifings in the cellblocks.

Palmer felt good on this day. He knew he had a long time left to serve, but he had crested the hill. He looked up at the buttermilk sky and sniffed the breeze. The air smelled heavy and damp. There would be a thunderstorm later, he decided. It was a hot June, and he hoped the coming rain would bring some cooler air with it. He looked out past the inner and outer fences to Possum Yancey's soybean fields beyond and noted that the seedlings could use the rain. The

prison had been built in farm country, and farming still went on around the prison at all four points of the compass. In that respect, Sweetwater served as a giant steel-and-block scarecrow in the agrarian countryside.

Palmer arrived at the prison store, which was in fact a small ten by ten room adjacent the visitor's area. It was actually more of a large closet than a proper room. It was open three hours each weekday and all day Sunday. The store was normally staffed by a trustee named Faro, who could be found during business hours propped up on the small counter in front of several racks of merchandise. Faro had once been a professional dealer in a casino, but it was his proclivity toward bigamy rather than that mildly disreputable career which had landed him in Sweetwater. Still, he was a good storekeeper. Inmates could buy toilet articles, candy and assorted snacks, cigarettes, postage, writing materials, and other odds and ends. Prisoners were not allowed to be in possession of cash, but friends and relatives could deposit money into store accounts on the convicts' behalf, and as long as the inmates had a positive balance and weren't in the segregation block, they could with permission come by to shop. And for those inmates who insisted upon dealing in cash even though it was forbidden, Faro ran a thriving black-market enterprise on the side.

From Palmer's very first month in stir, \$100 had been credited to his account each month, just like Swiss clockwork. This was quite a large sum of money considering that all it could be spent on was snack cakes, smokes, shampoo, toothpaste, and other similar odds and ends. Thus Palmer could afford to be generous, and he was. Cheddar didn't have a benefactor slipping funds into his store account, and he had to be careful with his shopping habits. His father lived on an Army disability pension and did not have the cash to spare. Originally, Palmer just shopped for the two of them and neither had mentioned the matter, because that was what family

did for one another. When this understanding grew troublesome to administrate, Palmer arranged it with Faro so that Cheddar could come by on his own whenever he wished to buy. This accommodation had cost Palmer a carton of Pall Malls, but he had gotten Pittypat thrown in for the price, and while Pittypat was alive, he was allowed store privileges on Palmer's account, as well. As for the source of the money, Palmer assumed that it was Trenton on the other end of this financial largesse, but he had only seen his father once during the first five years of his sentence—on the forlorn occasion of his mother's death—and the subject of who was funding the store account hadn't come up during that cheerless conversation.

While he was at the store, Palmer purchased a spiral notebook, a pack of Camels, a Hershey's chocolate bar, and a Baby Ruth, which Palmer believed to be the finest candy in the world. He also bought a small oscillating fan for their cell, which was already like a furnace with most of summer still in front of them. He intended to smoke the Camels, eat the Baby Ruth, and begin to keep track of his countdown to freedom in the notebook while he sat in front of his fan. The Hershey bar was for Cheddar, whose teeth had continued their crumbling decline over the past five years even in the absence of the dire influence of methamphetamine, thus making it impossible for him to share in the delights of a Baby Ruth candy bar. The peanuts were the problem. Cheddar had lost about half of his teeth by this time of his life, and he had exhibited the unfortunate tendency to lose every other one. This predisposition caused him to bear an uncanny likeness to a jack-o-lantern, at least from the shoulders up.

After returning from his trip to the store, Palmer sat in the cell and worked on his notebook. He had turned on their little radio and was listening to it while he worked when Cheddar arrived back from his work detail in the kitchen. The radio had been a welcome addition to the cell. Palmer had purchased it at the store two years previously. Prison

regulations dictated that radios and other audio devices could only be used with headphones or earpieces, but the guards did not enforce this regulation strictly as long as the volume was kept low and there were no complaints. It was a small clock radio, and Cheddar had taped over the LED clock face so that they would not constantly be reminded of the time. Because of its location inside the concrete and steel walls of the cell block, the inexpensive receiver could only snatch five or six stations from the ether. But those they could receive came in clearly, and there was some variety, including a country station, an oldies station, a couple of talk stations, and two broadcast sources that fell under the canopy of Mexican radio. Tuning in to any of these certainly beat listening to nothing.

“Happy Birthday,” Cheddar said. He sat down on their single folding chair, another addition to the décor of cell number B-134. It had been borrowed from the common area of the cellblock. This practice was technically against the rules, as well, but it was allowed with prisoners who had the wisdom to lay low and not make trouble for the guards. This was a code of behavior that both Cheddar and Palmer held sacred, and their commitment to institutional civility had paid off for them.

During the five years of their mutual confinement, Palmer and Cheddar had also acquired a deck of cards, a small hot pot, a pair of mugs, a diverse selection of wall art, a throw rug, a curtain for their window, a CD player, and a combination chess-and-checker set. They were the proud owners of most of the comforts of home, and compared to some of the cells on the block, theirs was positively opulent. They lived in the Hilton of B-block. They were the rulers of the land of the swells. The wisdom of their policy of peaceful co-existence with the guards was evidenced by the fact that many of these items were technically contraband, but all had been through more than one inspection—known as tossing the cell—and had survived unscathed.



“Have a Hershey bar,” Palmer replied. His cousin smiled like the Cheshire cat at this unexpected treat. He took his gift, carefully removed the paper wrapping, and slowly peeled back the foil liner. All these moves were slow and deliberate; Cheddar was determined to enjoy the entire experience, to slip into the Hershey gestalt. He broke off a square of chocolate and tucked it carefully between his cheek and gum, like a discrete dip of snuff. Then he closed his eyes as the flavor imbued his taste buds with pleasure. He loved chocolate, but he hated dentists, so he had to be careful about the substances that came in contact with his ruined teeth. Sweets and cold items were likely to initiate a throbbing jaw that could last for hours.

“Thanks,” he said after the square had melted. He carefully tucked another in its place. “What are you doing with the notebook? Keeping another journal?” Palmer had faithfully written in his diary every day since coming to Sweetwater. It had become an addiction with him, but unlike some of his cousin’s compulsions, Palmer’s habit would not in all likelihood take decades off his life or turn his teeth orange. He usually worked on his journal during the relative calm of the period between supper and lights out. Most of the residents of the cellblock hung out in the common area during that time. There was one television in each cellblock mounted high on the wall in each common area, and on the days that no inmates had misbehaved, viewing was allowed. But Palmer was more of a cellbody. He had gotten in the habit of keeping to himself early in his sentence, and so far he had enjoyed success with the tactic. His journal was a living document now contained in several volumes of bound composition books. These were stacked high on top of Palmer’s locker, mounted on the wall opposite the bunks.

“I have been to the mountaintop, and I have seen the Promised Land,” Palmer replied. “It’s all downhill from here. I’m making a five-year countdown calendar with this book. Every night before I hit the bunk, I am X-ing off one of these boxes I have drawn.” He flipped to the

back page of the notebook and pointed to the big box drawn there, the one he had drawn first.

“When I get to this one, I’ll be walking out the front gate.”

“Palmer, you know you shouldn’t pay that much attention to time.” Cheddar shook his head in disapproval. “It’s a mistake. Time is your enemy. It starts slowing down when you think about it.”

“I’m still counting down.”

“I’m telling you it’s a mistake.”

“I’ve made them before,” Palmer replied absentmindedly. There was no arguing that point.

“It’ll drive you nuts,” Cheddar warned.

“Too late,” Palmer said. “I’m pretty damn nuts, already.” He was busy drawing more boxes in his spiral notebook. Cheddar broke off another square of chocolate and slipped it into his mouth. He forgot himself in the heat of the moment and bit down. The inadvertent contact with a raw nerve caused him to grimace.

“Shit,” he said. Palmer looked up from his project.

“Cheddar, you ought to get all those teeth pulled,” he said. “They’re just going to keep giving you trouble if you don’t. Look at it as one of the few benefits of being in here. It’s like you work for a Fortune 500 company that has guards in the towers and bars on the windows. We have a dental plan. They’ll put you to sleep, yank them out, and when you wake up, it’ll all be over. It won’t even hurt.”

“But then I won’t have any teeth.”

“Nobody can pull one over on you.”

“Well, I can’t let them pull my teeth. When I get out of here, I am seriously going to need a woman. I plan on being point man on the pussy patrol. How the hell am I supposed to get a female to pay attention to me if I don’t have any teeth?” Palmer could see where this could be a problem under normal circumstances. Unfortunately, Cheddar didn’t seem to realize that these weren’t normal circumstances.

“They’ll give you a set of false teeth,” he said. He left unsaid the fact that they would be a *complete* set of straight, white, odor-free, useable false teeth, the kind of dentures that a man needed if he was planning to be the point man on the pussy patrol.

“Women can spot false teeth a mile away,” Cheddar said in a dismissive tone.

Palmer looked at Cheddar’s Halloween smile, streaked as it was with Hershey’s chocolate. He knew he should break the news to his cousin that his chances for immediate or even somewhat delayed post-incarceration intercourse ranged the reduced gamut from *slim* to *not in this universe*, but he could not bring himself to do it. The pussy patrol had come to symbolize all that was good in life, and as Cheddar had once told him, it was unwise to deprive an inmate of hope, and Palmer had no wish to be cruel to his cousin. If Cheddar thought that a willing assortment of amorous women was a mere seventeen years in his future, it was fine by Palmer. If Cheddar believed these ladies would be standing outside the gate, topless, perhaps, waving signs saying CHEDDAR—OVER HERE or WILL SCREW FOR HERSHEY BARS, then who was Palmer to lay waste to the dream? Maybe Cheddar would meet a good-hearted blind woman with impossibly large breasts and a sinus condition, and then everything would work out fine. Stranger things had happened in the annals of man, he supposed. He would hold this good thought for his dentally-challenged relative, and the future would just have to take care of itself.

“You want a Camel?” Palmer asked, changing the subject. Camels were the cigarette of choice on B-block. Their lack of a filter tip eliminated waste, and they were strong cigarettes that packed a lot of nicotine in each puff, so even the worst tobacco addict could get by with only a few per day. Strictly speaking, smoking in the cells was prohibited. It was allowed out on the yards and in the common areas near the butt cans provided for that purpose, but it was formally discouraged near flammable objects such as pillows and mattresses for the sensible reason that some of the convicts liked to burn stuff. Thus Palmer and Cheddar had by necessity become quite adept at sneaking an occasional cigarette in the cell when the guards’ attentions were directed elsewhere. The smoke was exhaled out the small window, where it drifted and mingled with the clear air of north Georgia as it made its way first to the misty blue mountains, and then to the rumbling, petulant sea. The butts and ashes went into the toilet, and so far, no one in the employ of the State was any the wiser.

“No, I’m good,” Cheddar answered. He pointed at the notebook like it was a plague rat. “Let’s get back to that. Why have you decided to keep a calendar all of a sudden?”

“Five years is not all of a sudden. Today at 4:15pm, it will be my fifth anniversary. Five years ago today, I walked into this cell for the first time. I’ve been here for exactly half of my sentence. Every day of that first five years was an uphill battle. I felt like I was crawling through mud on my hands and knees most of the time, and I don’t even like to think about what I would have done without your help.” Cheddar inclined his head as he accepted the compliment. Palmer continued. “Every day was a miserable, slow climb. But I’m at the top now. And down at the bottom I can see an open gate. Gravity’s on my side. It’s all about momentum from here on out. And I’m keeping track from now on, too. Faro told me that he was doing a stretch down at Coastal State, and they messed up somehow and kept him two weeks longer than they were

supposed to. I just want to be sure that they don't screw up at the end of my sentence and keep me too long." Even one day extra would be too many.

"You can't always put a lot of faith in what Faro says," Cheddar noted diplomatically. "That boy would climb a tree to tell a lie rather than stand on the ground and tell the truth. And I'm telling you, if you start checking off the days, it'll make the time go slow."

"It can't go any fucking slower than it already is. I swear to God, Cheddar, it feels like I've been in here for a hundred years."

"I thought you were doing all right."

"I thought I was too. I wasn't thinking about much on any given day but that day, just like you told me. Then it hit me like a bucket of mud this morning on my way back from the store that I'm having another birthday behind bars. I'm twenty-four years old. Out there in the world, I might celebrate that fact by going out for a nice, juicy, thick steak. Then maybe I'd have a few ice-cold beers or even a couple of stiff drinks. I might even get drunk, if I could find someone to drive me." Palmer couldn't say for sure if he had been rehabilitated, because he really didn't know what that meant, but he had vowed early on that he would never again drive under the influence of alcohol.

"That's the stuff," Cheddar said, caught up in Palmer's birthday vision.

"And then, later on, if the birthday gods were in a charitable mood, I'd get laid." Palmer liked the way this last statement had sounded so much that he said it again. "I'd get laid." He took a deep breath. His teeth ached just thinking about it. Then he took a look out the door, and once he saw that it was clear, he tapped a forbidden Camel from the pack and lit it. "That's what I'd do if I was outside," he said.

“Man, oh man,” Cheddar said. “Steaks and pussy.” Every bit of that plan sounded fine to him. Palmer continued.

“But instead of steaks and beer with some loving on the side, it looks like I’m in for another night of Mexican radio and checkers.” At sundown the local stations went off the air, and the only two frequencies their clock radio could retrieve from the night sky were a pair of clear-channel Spanish-language stations from Florida. The music was upbeat and catchy, but neither of them had any idea what the announcers were saying.

“I thought you liked Mexican radio and checkers,” Cheddar said. He sounded offended, as if he had invented both Mexican radio and checkers with his cellmate specifically in mind.

“What’s not to like?” Palmer replied absently. The activity wasn’t cold beer, porterhouse steak, and hot, tangled love, but it was a four-star evening on a scale of five by Sweetwater State Correctional Facility standards. He was looking out the window at the darkening sky. That storm wasn’t far off now.

“You should cheer up,” Cheddar said. “It’s your birthday, and like you said, you’re halfway home.”

“I was as happy as a burglar in a pawn shop until you got here,” Palmer noted. He carefully held his Camel in a pair of tweezers as he got the last puff. Then he dropped the miniscule butt into the toilet and flushed the evidence.

“Sorry. That notebook did it.”

“I won’t get it out in front of you.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s all right.” There was no getting around the fact that a birthday was a milestone, and as such, it was a guaranteed bad day. Palmer should have just slammed his hand in the door upon arising and gotten it out of the way.

“I got you this,” Cheddar said as he dug in his pockets. He retrieved a bent pack of Camels from his left pants pocket and a crushed, melted Baby Ruth bar from his right. “It’s not much, especially since you already got the same thing for yourself.”

“It’s hard to buy for the inmate who has everything.”

“You’re telling me! I was going to surprise you later, but you need a pick-me-up right now. So here you are.” He handed the modest gifts to his cousin. It was a caring, gracious gesture. Palmer knew it was the thought that counted, and he accepted the presents in the same vein they were offered. The fact that he had paid for them himself made no difference whatsoever.

“You shouldn’t have,” he said. “I told you not to get me anything.”

“I know, but hey, a birthday only comes once a year,” Cheddar noted.

“Thank God for that. I think I’d have to kill myself if they came twice.”

“Truly,” Cheddar said. Then he had an idea. “Hey, I know what we can do. Tonight we can play *chess* while we listen to Mexican radio. Or we can deal up a few hands of cards. We could even fire up the CD player and listen to some American music. That would be a change of pace.” They seldom listened to the CD player because they only had three CD’s, and these had been listened to many times.

“You decide,” Palmer said. “It’ll be like a surprise party, that way.”

Palmer had only made four X’s in his countdown-to-freedom book when another in a seemingly endless series of Wednesdays rolled around, bringing with it his weekly visit with Just

Call Me Morris. Since Palmer's counselor was at Sweetwater in a professional capacity, he and his client were allowed to meet during a weekday rather than on a Saturday or a Sunday, the usual days for visits. Palmer had graduated from flight risk status the previous year and was now allowed to receive company in the visitor center rather than the segregation room. Just Call Me Morris shook Palmer's hand as they sat at the small wooden table in the largish room. Several other tables occupied the area. Most of these were empty, although what appeared to be attorney-client conferences were going on at a couple of them. Come the weekend, the place would be packed, and the two-hour visit limit would be strictly enforced.

"How was your birthday?" the counselor asked Palmer. He was in his mid-thirties with thinning blond hair, pale blue eyes, and a small pot belly protruding from an otherwise slim frame. He wore black glasses with thick lenses, blue jeans, and a flannel shirt. The wedding ring on his left hand indicated that there was a Mrs. Just Call Me Morris out there somewhere. Palmer always wondered if he made her keep a journal, too.

"I got a pack of broken Camels and a melted Baby Ruth bar. Then I listened to mariachi music from Jacksonville, Florida while I played gin rummy with a reformed meth dealer who has a naked woman with large bosoms tattooed on his chest. Actually, I'm not that sure he's reformed. It might just be lack of access. He already owes me somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty-five million dollars, and that's at a penny a point with him keeping score. I feel like it may be hard to collect the debt. Later on my birthday, after lights out, I listened to him jerk off in the top bunk. It's not that he was indiscrete, but a cellmate knows these things, and our cell's pretty small. I don't blame him for that, by the way. I'd jerk off too, if I could manage it, but I'm on so much Prozac that I couldn't get a hard-on even if it meant I'd be saving the lives of all the starving children in the world." They were quiet for a moment. Then Palmer finished his



narrative. “So I guess you could say that my birthday was about like last year’s. It sucked. Thanks for asking, though. How did your week go? Did you have any hot, juicy steaks? Did you sip any tall, frosty glasses of cold beer? Or, heaven forbid, did you dance the love tango with any tender young things?”

“It sounds like my week went better than yours did. And no, I didn’t do any of those things.” Palmer thought he was lying, because if he, Palmer, had been on the outside, he would have done them all, every single day. Some of them he would have done twice. Just Call Me Morris jotted a couple of notes on the legal pad he had placed on the table before him. “You were in a much better frame of mind last week. You seemed almost chipper during our conversations. Do you mind if I ask what happened? What soured your mood?”

“Actually, I felt pretty good for the first half of the week. Then I sort of got into a bad frame of mind right after my birthday, which also happened to be my anniversary day.” It seemed to Palmer that they had this same conversation every year. He wondered what was the point of Just Call Me Morris writing everything down if he wasn’t going to review the notes from time to time. “It was just that I hit a milestone, I guess. Two of them, actually. You know the deal. Holidays are bad. Birthdays are bad. The anniversary of the day you go to prison is extra bad, especially if it’s *on* your birthday. I’ve got the Hanging Judge to thank for that. Anything out of the ordinary is bad. We’ve talked about it.” They had indeed discussed the phenomenon, but he wasn’t sure that Just Call Me Morris really understood the issues involved or the way that he felt when one of these milestones was encountered. He wasn’t certain that anyone who hadn’t done a little time could possibly understand. It was like trying to explain quantum physics to a stone.

“I think we need to talk about it some more.”

“No point in talking about it,” Palmer said. “It just is. It’s a fact of life. In five more years, the problem will go away. Until then, there’s nothing I can do about it but brush and floss regularly and avoid greasy foods. I’m screwed.”

“What do brushing your teeth and avoiding grease have to do with prison milestones?” Just Call Me Morris asked.

“Not a damn thing,” Palmer replied. “Not a damn thing.” The psychologist wrote a few words on his pad.

“You mentioned having some unexpected difficulty with your anti-depressant. Is this something new?”

“Nope. Just never mentioned it.”

“Sexual side effects are quite common with fluoxetine. That’s the generic version of Prozac. Maybe I can talk to the prison doctor about changing your medication.”

“Good luck with that. I’m not on Blue Cross in here, you know. They buy the cheapest stuff they can find. They bring the shit in here in a dump truck. A guy who mops the infirmary said that they even get stuff that’s out of date, because they get a better deal on it that way.”

That inmate was known as Doc by his peers, although his moniker had nothing to do with the fact that he worked in the infirmary. Doc was known to be a reliable source of information. His nickname was the direct result of his uncanny resemblance to a one-time professional wrestler on the north Georgia circuit who went by the ring name of Doctor Death. He was doing five years for car theft.

“I can check into that,” Just Call Me Morris said.

“Don’t. I believe it, and to be honest with you, it’s probably not the worst thing in the world for me right now to have the libido of a rock. It kind of takes the edge off of the day when

you're not dealing with being horny all the time. A functional sex drive is a liability in prison. It's kind of like having a nice ass. It can get you into a whole lot of trouble. I'm surprised that they don't have everyone on the stuff, that they don't grind it up and dump it into the mashed potatoes or sprinkle it into the coffee. I have a safe cellmate, and we live on a pretty quiet cellblock, but there are places in Sweetwater where you don't want to go alone—the showers, behind the laundry, out in the wrong part of the yard—and if you do, you damn sure don't want to bend down to tie your shoe, if you catch my drift. They had a rape over in A-block just last week.” Palmer was a bit of an expert on the subject of prison rape, and turning twenty-one in prison doing ten years without parole had made him a careful man. He had avoided being a participant in the act, thus far, and he approached each new day with the intention of keeping it that way. He had read a great deal about the issue, however, both before and since coming to Sweetwater State Correctional Facility, and he knew that rape was about violence, not sex. Still, he was of the opinion that if a rapist couldn't get it up, he sure couldn't use it as a weapon.

“I heard about that as I was checking in. One of the guards told me they are on lockdown over there until they get it sorted out.”

“I heard that too. Hopefully they had enough sense to not lock the poor guy down with his rapist.” Palmer had heard that the victim had been offered protective custody—solitary confinement in the segregation block—but he had refused. He couldn't say that he blamed the guy. The segregation cells were the worst, twenty-three hours out of twenty-four with nothing but a Bible and your thoughts. He shuddered. If you weren't fucked up when you went in, he thought, you would be when you came out. He was surprised that the guy had reported the act. The reportage was what had earned him the offer of protection, not the rape. Most rapes went unreported, because it was the generally-held view among the inmates that it was better to be a

bitch than a snitch. A rape victim might receive a little sympathy and perhaps even some peer protection after the fact, but once a man went to the guards with a problem, he was branded a snitch for his entire sentence. The name would follow him from prison to prison and from state to state. It was like the mark of Cain.

“Let’s get back to you,” Just Call Me Morris suggested. “Sex seems to be on your mind this week.”

“You think so? I’m twenty-four years old—in my prime—and I’ve been laid exactly three times in my life, all by the same girl, who I loved dearly and had to send away for her own good. The first time lasted about fourteen seconds, and the last time was a little over six years ago. If I’m lucky, my next window of opportunity will be opening in about five years, assuming I don’t get my balls cut off in here and that I can find a woman who wouldn’t mind extending a bit of charity to an ex-convict. You know something? You might just be right. The subject of sex could be crossing my mind from time to time.” Just Call Me Morris looked over the tops of his glasses.

“Aside from the libidinal issues,” he asked. “Is the Prozac still working for you? How is your depression? How is your mood?” He was casually jotting one fact and then another onto his pad as they talked. In addition to the notes, there were circles and lines, stars and arrows. He was a doodler.

“I suppose it’s helping. I don’t think it’s doing any harm, anyway. Except maybe to my dick, and hopefully that’s temporary. I have good days and bad days, but like I said, I doubt if they’ll change it to something else.”

“Let’s do a quick little evaluation. We’ve done these before, so you know the drill. Answer truthfully. Do you feel sad?”

“I’m in a fucking prison, and I have to stay here five more years. I live in an eight by twelve closet with a methamphetamine dealer with bad teeth. What the hell would I have to be sad about?”

“How’s your anxiety?”

“Again, I’m in a fucking prison with over seven hundred criminals. They all received the same blanket threat from my old man not to fuck with me, which makes a large percentage of them want to fuck with me. What the hell would I have to be anxious about?”

“How’s your appetite?”

“Functional, considering the food and the company.” The food wasn’t bad, but it was always the same. Breakfast every morning was scrambled eggs, grits, fried potatoes, toast, and sausage. Lunch was potato chips and one of several varieties of sandwich: tuna salad, peanut butter and apple jelly, egg salad, pimento cheese. For the main meal of the day, supper, an inmate could chart his course and mark his calendar according to what was being served on any given day. On Monday, it was always beans and cornbread with banana pudding for dessert. Tuesday brought Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes, green beans, and a side of peach cobbler. Wednesday was the day for beef stew with slices of loaf bread, and there was always room for Jell-O. Thursday spawned meat loaf, cream corn, lima beans, and the rest of the Jell-o. Friday was turkey-rice pie and cherry cobbler day. Saturday featured hamburger steak, mashed potatoes and gravy, English peas, and ice cream. Sunday’s fare was chicken legs, baked potatoes, green beans, applesauce, and sugar cookies for dessert. The menu never changed. As for the company, it spoke for itself.

“Do you have feelings of guilt about Rodney?”

“Yes. According to the State of Georgia, I am officially guilty of getting drunk and running my best friend through an oak tree. Something like that will get on your mind and stay there. I also feel guilty actually about Mama. She worried herself into an early grave over me.” Palmer couldn’t explain it, but he felt worse about his mother’s death than he did about his friend’s, even though he had been an active participant in the latter. Rodney had placed himself in harm’s way voluntarily. He had been along for the ride in more ways than one. Laurel Cray, on the other hand, had been blindsided by the entire affair. She had been an innocent bystander, but the fallout from Palmer’s and Rodney’s joy ride had killed her just the same.

“Are you feeling suicidal?” Just Call Me Morris always lowered his voice when he spoke the forbidden word, as if saying it loudly would give it power over his charges. Palmer gave the question a long period of consideration before answering.

“You know, that’s kind of an interesting question. I really don’t think about killing myself nearly as much as I used to, and even back at the beginning of all this, when I was giving the idea a lot of thought, I don’t know that I would have done it. But sometimes, nowadays, I think that being dead wouldn’t be the worst thing that could happen. You know what I mean? It seems like it might be peaceful. At least it would be quieter. All I’d hear would be the winds of eternity.” A thought occurred to him. “Unless Mama was right. Then I’ll be hearing my own screams of torment for the rest of time. That’ll really suck. Either way, though, I don’t think I’m suicidal, but I don’t know that I’d fight that hard to stay alive if an illness came up. Especially if the way out didn’t seem like it would hurt that much. The pain has always been the kicker for me. I could never think of a way that I was sure wouldn’t hurt except for pills, and I couldn’t get the right kind of pills in here.”

“What do you mean by quieter?” Just Call Me Morris asked, ignoring Palmer’s digression into the darkness of the nether reaches.

“There wouldn’t be all this dialogue going on in my head all the time. All those voices in my mind that spend their days telling me how bad I’ve fucked up my life would be gone. I’m getting tired of them. I know I’ve fucked up. I don’t need to be reminded. As a matter of fact, it used to be a one-sided conversation, but lately I’ve been taking up for myself and talking back.”

“Are you saying you hear voices?”

“You’ll have to speak up. I can’t hear you over the crowd.”

“Palmer, this is important.”

“Yes, I hear voices sometimes, and I talk to myself in my head all of the time. I always have. There are three or four distinct voices up there. The Kid. The Smart-ass. Other Me. And every so often, I swear I can hear Rodney. It’s his voice and everything. That one is something new. I call him Dead Rodney.”

“How long has that been going on?” He was scribbling and doodling furiously as they discussed Palmer’s unexpected company. One especially long arrow left the page about halfway down the right margin and regained its footing on the following sheet.

“Dead Rodney has been around a few months now. He’s no trouble, and he doesn’t eat much. I thought I might keep him.”

“That’s the sort of thing you might mention a bit sooner next time.” He sounded perturbed, although whether it was with himself or with his patient, Palmer couldn’t say.

“Next time,” he said.

“How do you sleep?”

“Like shit.”

“Why do you think you sleep badly?”

“What, did you just get here? Did aliens abduct you and suck your psychology degree out through your ear? Take everything we’ve talked about since the Big Bang. Roll it all up in a nice, tight package and lay it on a six-inch thick, worn-out mattress. Then cover it up with a scratchy sheet and a thin wool blanket. That’s why I don’t sleep. I have bad things on my mind, and my bed sleeps like an Army cot.”

“Do you feel irritable?”

“If you ask me any more questions I may have to kill you.”

“I’m going to call that a *yes*. Angry?”

“If you ask me any more *fucking* questions I may have to kill you.”

“Another *yes*. Do you have feelings of worthlessness?”

“Most days I feel like the sorriest son-of-a-bitch to ever draw breath. The rest of the time I think Cheddar is and I’m running a close second.”

“Tell me why.”

“Are you kidding? I killed my friend. I killed my Mama. I broke my girlfriend’s heart. I am a waste. Everyone who gets near me comes to woe.” Just Call Me Morris wrote for another moment or two after Palmer quit speaking. He looked at the words and squiggles on his legal pad for a short interval. He scratched his thin hair and chewed on the end of his pen. Then he tossed the legal pad onto the table and spoke.

“I think your depression is getting significantly worse. Considering that you’re already on the next-to-highest allowable dosage of Prozac, that’s not good. I think I should talk to the prison doctor about a change of medication for you.”

“Uh, uh. Don’t do it.”



“A different drug might be more effective in treating your symptoms. You might also get your erection back.”

“I don’t need it right now,” Palmer said. “Unless you’re planning on smuggling a woman in here as a belated birthday present, talk to me in five years. I’ll probably take you up on your offer then.”

“A change in meds might be very beneficial,” Just Call Me Morris repeated.

“It might not be. I might just be depressed because this place is depressing. I bet I’ll be fine just as soon as I walk out the gate.”

“Let’s take that bridge when we come to it.”

“In the meantime, don’t go bothering the doctor.”

“Why don’t you want me talking to the doctor? What are you thinking?”

“Right now I’m just a face in the crowd. I’m no different from a hundred other guys in here who are depressed because they’ve fucked up. But if you go telling the doctor that I need more treatment, or different medication, or that I’m suicidal or mentally unstable or some shit like that, then I’ll be out of here faster than this.” He snapped his fingers.

“You hate it here.”

“I do for a fact, but it could be worse. They’ll ship me down to Central State or over to Augusta. Those are a couple of places I need to avoid. If you think I’m depressed now, wait till you see me in one of those joints. This place sucks, but at least I’m used to it, and I don’t want to break in a new cellmate or learn the ropes at a different prison. Especially a prison where no one’s got my back. So please don’t do me any favors. Just leave well enough alone. You’ve known me a long time, and I’m asking as a favor. I always gone along with you, but this time I can’t. I promise you I won’t kill myself. I won’t make you look bad.”

“It’s not about how I look, Palmer. It’s about how you are doing.”

“I’m doing all right. I’m not planning on offing myself. It’s not going to get much better than that until I get out of here.”

## Chapter Six

### December 3, 2004: Excerpt from the journal of Palmer Cray.

This is going to sound like a seriously crazy question, but I need to ask it anyway, so humor me. Have you been talking to me? I mean really talking, as in making noises with your mouth. I have been hearing your voice for a while now. It's not all the time or anything. Just every so often. When I do, it sounds like you are standing behind me, talking in a real low voice into my right ear. Sometimes I turn around when I hear you, because I forget myself and think for a minute you're still alive. I expect to see you standing right there, but you never are. Or at least, if you're there, I can't see you. Before you hear it from someone else, by the way, I call this mystery voice *Dead Rodney*. Well, because it sounds like you, and you're dead. I have no idea why I can only hear you with my right ear. Maybe it's because I'm right-handed. I've always seemed to hear better with that ear, so maybe I have a better eardrum over there or something like that.

Even though you haven't answered my question, I'm going to assume that you are speaking to me from beyond the void. It's not like I have a lot of choices here. I can either think you're really talking to me, or I can come to the conclusion that I've gone nuts. I don't think I've gone bonkers, but that's one of those things you can never be sure about. Someone who had actually gone off the deep end probably wouldn't think he had, so I might be as crazy as a shithouse rat right now and just not know it. I know when I told Just Call Me Morris about hearing you, he got a little excited, and he's a professional psychologist. He went to school to learn about this kind of stuff, and during our conversation about you I got the definite impression that he thinks I might've gone a little stir-crazy. He wanted to talk to the prison doctor about me

and see about changing my medication, but I told him no. I don't have anything against the doctor—aside from the fact that I bet all the really good doctors don't take clinic duty at state prisons—and I want it to stay that way. In prison, you want to stay below everyone's radar, and that includes doctors. You want to blend in with the surroundings. The fewer people who know your name, the better off you are.

If I had it to do over again, I wouldn't even mention to Just Call Me Morris that I am able to hear you. All that accomplished was get him shook up, and he's hard to deal with when he gets excited. It's not like you're telling me to go out and kill someone, or that I'm really Jesus come back to gather the flock. You're just commenting on the state of the world in that smart-ass way of yours, sort of like you used to. You always liked to stir it up, and then I'd have to help clean up the mess. Do you remember that time were drinking beer in the Camaro outside of that American Legion dance? Where was that? Calhoun? And you made a wise crack about that girl you saw walking across the parking lot. I've forgotten exactly what you said, but it was kind of funny, or at least I remember laughing about it. But then before I even knew what had happened, her brothers and her cousin and her damn boyfriend had dragged us out of the car and were all just beating the living hell out of us. I swear, I thought they were going to kill us right there in that parking lot.

They might still be pounding on us if the girl you insulted hadn't made them knock it off. I always meant to look her up and thank her for that, but prison got here first. Anyway, after they ceased beating us like we were bad dogs, they all started going into the dance until finally it was just the biggest of her brothers at the door. There was that mean son-of-a-bitch having to stoop down to go through the door, and right about the time he turned our way to look at us hard one more time, you hollered, "I'm sorry I brought up the subject of your sister's big ass!" It was

a good thing that the Camaro would get on down the highway when you needed it to, or we'd have gotten ourselves whipped twice that night. You know something? I thought that girl's butt looked just fine, and I don't recall hearing any complaints from you, either. Sometimes you used to be a smart-ass just because you could, and just thinking about it, you haven't changed all that much since you died.

Like the other day, I was in the kitchen rinsing trays, when this guard named Murphy came in and started screwing with me. I was running about an hour behind with my job, and Murphy was all "damn, Cray, what are you, a union man now?" What goes on in the kitchen isn't even his business. He had come in there for a cup of coffee and decided to try to get a rise out of me. He didn't know that the dishwasher had been stopped up all morning, and that I'd had to take it mostly apart to get it going. Or maybe he did and just didn't give a shit. Who knows? Some of the guards are just guys trying to make a living, and some of them are real assholes. Murphy is one of those.

Anyway, I didn't say anything back to him, because he was just aching to thump me if I did. I've been thumped before and can't say that I'd recommend it. And then, just as if you were standing there looking at him, I heard you say *what's this little prick's problem? Are you going to let him talk to you like that?* You sounded so real that I turned my head before I thought. Of course you weren't there. Then Murphy wanted to know what the hell I was looking at, but I didn't pay him any mind. I went back to scraping trays, but then you said *if I had feet I'd kick this motherfucker's ass.* The way you said it made me smile, and then Murphy wanted to know what was so damn funny. Lucky for me, one of the cooks came over and bailed me out. He refilled Murphy's coffee cup and gave him some cookies. Then he got him to

talking about fishing, and Murphy forgot all about me. But I've been thinking about it ever since. It sounded like you were there, Rodney. It sounded like you were standing right there.

\*\*\*\*\*

The first day of December was as grey as a battleship and as bitter as an unmarked grave. A chill had settled onto Sweetwater State Correctional Facility and clung there like a blanket of fallen snow. The cellblocks were heated, but the cells were built of cold steel and unyielding concrete and held no warmth to speak of. The inmates adjusted to the chilly ambient temperature by wearing jackets, extra socks, sweatshirts, and suits of long underwear sent from home. Some wore gloves and watch caps, as well. The days were physically shorter but seemed longer, as if time itself was stretching in honor of the upcoming holidays. The fields around the prison stood forlorn and bare. They had been harvested and turned, picked clean and deserted for the winter season, and it would be spring before they heard the rumble of the tractor and felt the bite of the harrow. Now they belonged to the deer and the crows. Clumps of mistletoe hung from the hickory trees that gathered in the rocky area at the south end of Possum Yancey's soybean field, and hickory nuts hung from their boughs like despondent yuletide ornaments. Opposite the soybean field, a small herd of cattle stood ruminating in the pasture, silent and watchful as they considered the bleak landscape and chewed their cud. The surface of their cow pond hissed with delicate ice.

Palmer sat in B-134 and worked a crossword puzzle. He was trying to come up with a six-letter word for *corrupt practices* while deliberately trying to forget the fact that another Christmas would be upon them in a matter of weeks. This would be Palmer's fifth Noël in

prison, and just as Cheddar had told him before his first, the December holidays were the worst. As the Christmas neared, fights became more common, depressions deepened, and the incidences of thousand-yard stares in the common area increased dramatically. Every cell in the segregation block was occupied, either by inmates placed there for their own good or by those transferred there for the good of others.

Palmer was not immune to these seasonal side-effects, and he tried to stay as busy as possible. His mama had always believed that busy hands were happy hands, and she had raised her only son accordingly. Thus he worked the crossword puzzle even though it annoyed him. He normally avoided puzzles of all types because he wasn't proficient at solving them, but he had run out of something to read. *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair had been a surprisingly quick read, and he had finished it a full two days before his scheduled library time. He had tried to read Cheddar's latest Regency Romance in the interim but had given up after only a few pages. It simply wasn't his genre. Cheddar's taste in reading had veered toward the historic, and he had taken a shine to Regency romances. He was currently reading *Sprig Muslin* by Georgette Heyer. Palmer sighed and gnawed on the stub of his pencil. January would be along soon enough, and then they would all be safe from holidays for a few months. Cheddar walked into the cell. He had been to the store to see Faro on a matter of great importance and was back to report on his progress.

"Damn it's cold outside," he said as he blew on his hands and rubbed them together. Winter weather had arrived promptly on November 1 and had made itself at home ever since. He removed his denim jacket and hung it on the hook mounted inside his locker door.

"It's cold in here, too," Palmer said. He wished they were permitted to buy space heaters for their cells, but the warden seemed to think the idea was a good way to get his prison burned

down and did not allow it. The prison wasn't that old. When it was built, effective climate control had been around for decades, so Palmer assumed that it had been deliberately designed with cells that were hot in the summer and cold in the winter as a further incentive to inmates to make it a point to not return.

“What the hell happened to all this global warming I keep hearing about?” Cheddar asked.

“That's just for people on the outside,” Palmer said. “They make us freeze our asses off in here because they can. It builds character, and that's a good thing for convicts. Plus, if you're worrying about how to stay warm, you don't have time to plan escapes. What's a six-letter word for *corrupt practices*?” Over the long course of Cheddar's prison career, he had become a world-class practitioner of the arcane art of crossword puzzle resolution. He bent down and looked over Palmer's shoulder at the puzzle for a moment.

“Abuses,” he said. Palmer tried the word and it fit. He nodded his head.

“Amazing. You never miss. When you get out of here, you ought to write crossword puzzles for a living.”

“Who's your boy? I am the crossword king. I've got good news. Faro told me that he could get it. He said it would cost us twenty dollars and a pair of long johns. He said it would take him a week to get it here. He said we could wait until delivery on the twenty, but he wants the long johns as soon as he can have them. I told him to go ahead and get it coming.” He dragged a sweatshirt over his head. “How are we going to pay for it? I only have three dollars, and if I give up my long handles, I'll freeze to death.”

“Don't worry about it. This is my treat. It will be my Christmas present to both of us.”



In addition to operating the prison store, Faro ran a small, unofficial specialty shop on the side for inmates with exotic tastes and hard cash. His partner in this enterprise was one of the cooks, a family man named Cookie who worked as the courier from the outside in exchange for half of the profit and virtually none of the risk. The *it* that Cheddar and Palmer were referring to was a pint of real, honest-to-God, made-in-a-distillery Kentucky bourbon. Palmer and Cheddar had the hard cash, or at least Palmer did, and with a delivery time of a week, they had plenty of time to scratch up a pair of drawers. Neither man had enjoyed a taste of bonded liquor for several years. Over Mexican radio and checkers one recent night, they had decided that it was high time to patch that hole in their lives. Their plan was simple. In fact, it had but two components. First, they would buy a pint of liquor from Faro. Then, on Christmas Eve night, they would sit in the cell, smoke Camels, eat Baby Ruth and Hershey bars, and drink their bourbon. While thus engaged, they would listen to the greatest hits of Lynard Skynard courtesy of Cheddar, who had won the CD in a poker game. It wasn't a grand plan when compared to other Christmas celebrations throughout the world, but by Sweetwater State Correctional Facility standards, it was big doings. Santa Claus was coming to town.

“Well, I did get us Lynard Skynard,” Cheddar noted. He wasn't bragging, but facts were facts. He had risked three unopened packs of cigarettes and a Hershey bar as he bluffed a busted inside straight while securing the musical portion of their upcoming holiday celebration.

“You did for a fact, and that's going to make it even more special. It wouldn't be the same if we had to listen to Mexican radio while we got drunk.” Palmer was certain that people got drunk while listening to Mexican radio all the time, and he wished each and every one of them well during this season of peace and brotherhood. But he was ready for some tunes he

could sing along with, songs such as *Tuesday's Gone*, *Gimme Three Steps*, and *Sweet Home Alabama*.

“Do you think a pint will be enough to get us drunk?” Cheddar asked. There was some concern on this score. They had been hoping to be able to afford a fifth or even a quart, but inflation had come to Sweetwater prison, and twenty dollars and a pair of long underwear just didn't go as far as they used to.

“It'll have to be. All I've got is twenty dollars. It's been a long time since either of us has had a drink, though. I think a pint will put us right on our asses.”

“I hope so. I need to get good and drunk and take a break from reality.”

“Reality is way overrated,” Palmer agreed. “What's a seven-letter word for pirate? The second letter is o.”

“Corsair,” Cheddar said without looking. “That's an easy one.” He grabbed his blanket from his bunk and wrapped it around his shoulders. Then he picked up his romance novel and headed for the common area, where it was warmer.

“You'll get your ass kicked if you take that out there,” Palmer said.

“Everyone's too cold to fight.”

“Well at least put your jacket on. The guards will give you trouble for taking a blanket out of the cell, and you look like you're wearing a shawl.”

The week passed without incident, and Sunday blew in breezy and cold. Palmer began his day early with a shower and a shave. There was no set time assigned for showers on the weekend, and he had found that earlier was better when it came to accessing an adequate hot water supply. His shower was followed by a breakfast of rubbery eggs and cold toast, but he ate his fill regardless of the unappetizing fare because it was a long time until lunch. Then he

worked a half-shift in the kitchen, first scraping and cleaning the breakfast trays, then doing the setup for the midday meal. This amounted to opening loaves of bread and hauling tubs of pimento cheese from the cooler. Cookie was working that day, and he met Palmer at the cooler and delivered the pint of Heaven Hill bourbon while Palmer was gathering up the final containers of pimento cheese. Cookie slipped the pint into the front pocket of Palmer's pants. They were quite baggy, and the bottle would not show if he put his hands in his pockets.

"Thanks," Palmer said *sotto voce*.

"Not a problem. Glad to help. You and Cheddar have a Merry Christmas." Cookie had done some time in Juvenile Detention due to a misunderstanding involving a Mazda Miata owned by his former middle school principal and a bucket of black paint owned by Cookie. Thus he was sympathetic to the plights of many of the inmates. He was a kindred soul who knew just how quickly action could turn to regret.

"You want me to pay you or Faro?" Palmer asked. He had been carrying his little wad of twenty crumpled one-dollar bills for two days in anticipation of the handoff. The long underwear had already been delivered to the storekeeper, who had immediately slipped them on.

"Pay him. He handles the money. That's how we do it." Cookie picked up a gallon jug of mayonnaise from the wooden shelf in the cooler. Then they both stepped out to the marginally-warmer kitchen.

"Can I ask you a question?" Palmer asked. Curiosity was not a desirable trait in prison, and normally Palmer did not succumb to its forbidden allure. But this particular question had been on his mind all week, and he figured he was relatively safe posing it to Cookie.

"Sure. I might not answer, but I don't mind you asking."

“You could make more money without Faro. Why do you cut him in?” By Palmer’s reckoning, Cookie could make twice as much if he went solo. What he might lose in volume if he cut Faro out would be more than offset by this increased profitability.

“I’ve been asked that before, and I usually tell the guys who ask to mind their own business. But I’ll tell you, because I think you’ll understand. Faro is my uncle. He’s my dead father’s brother. He’s family. You’ve got to take care of your family. You’ve got to help them if you can.”

“That’s a fact,” Palmer said. He was living proof of the validity of the theory.

“He doesn’t need the money so much as he needs to feel like he’s still got his hand in the game. You know what I’m saying? Before he got into the jam that sent him here, he had been in business his whole life, buying and selling stuff. It didn’t even matter much what it was. He was born trader, a wheeler and a dealer. He can’t live without it. It’s his life’s blood. If I cut him out, it would kill him.”

“You’re a good guy, Cookie,” Palmer said.

“I don’t know about all that,” Cookie said gruffly, warding off the compliment like it was a swarm of bees. He put Palmer to work hauling cases of potato chips from the back dock while he began the preparation of two thousand pimento cheese sandwiches. Once the chips were brought in, Palmer joined the assembly line with Cookie and to other men, and together they prepared the noon meal.

Palmer was released from duty at 11:00 am. He and the pint of Heaven Hill made a nervous journey back to B-block. He arrived back at the cellblock to discover Cheddar lounging in the common area. Palmer gave his cousin the barest of nods, and Cheddar hopped up from his chair and joined his cellmate. They walked the final hundred feet to the cell in lockstep and

entered one after the other. Palmer stepped to the back of the cell, as far from the door as he could manage.

“I’ve got it,” he said quietly. He pulled the pint bottle from his pants pocket and slipped it into Cheddar’s pillowcase as they had previously agreed. Then he arranged the pillow so that no telltale signs were visible. The owner of that bedding stood careful watch in the doorway. Because so much was at stake, Palmer would have preferred to shut the door while hiding the hooch, but it was a prison rule that only guards were allowed to open and close cell doors. On Sundays, all the cell doors stood open between 7:00 am and 6:00 pm unless there was a general lockdown. A closed door during that time stood out like a lighthouse on a dark seacoast. It was a smoking gun, an admission of guilt.

After the concealment was complete, Cheddar retreated from his post at the door and fell back to Palmer’s position. “What does it look like?” he asked as he sat next to Palmer on the bottom bunk. There was barely contained excitement in his voice. This was a big moment, perhaps the high point of his sentence, thus far.

“It looks a lot like a pint of bourbon,” Palmer said. Cheddar nodded, as if he had known that fact all along and thought it was a prime example of excellent planning.

“What brand did they get us? George Dickel? Ancient Age?”

“Heaven Hill.”

“Heaven Hill? You’re shitting me. We gave them twenty dollars and a union suit and they got us the cheap stuff?” Apparently it was a seller’s market.

“What did you expect? That’s capitalism. The less they spend on what we buy from them, the more money they make. It’s the same thing they do at Wal-mart, except they deal in tractor-trailer loads there. The way I see it, bourbon is bourbon. The first drink will kill our taste

buds, anyway. After that, it'll be smooth sailing." Palmer didn't mind Heaven Hill, anyway. It was what Houston Bibb sold at the bootlegger's, and Palmer had cut his bourbon teeth on it. "Of course, if you're too good for Heaven Hill, I'll just drink the whole pint."

"No, no, that's all right," Cheddar said. "I can't wait. Can I have first drink?" Before Palmer could answer, they began to hear a commotion out in the common area. There were loud voices and shouts, and someone blew a police whistle. A bell clanged, which was the signal for all inmates to leave the common area, return to their cells, and wait. A con named Reeves stuck his head into their cell and explained the ruckus.

"They're tossing the cells," he whispered loudly. "Four teams, working fast. Hide it if you got it!" Then he looked back over his shoulder before continuing his journey to the cell next door, where he intended to follow his own advice and conceal his unapproved belongings.

*Tossing* was prison jargon for the act of searching a cell for contraband. Such items might include knives, also known as tools or shanks, cell phones, drugs, cash, or pints of liquor, to name but a few. These inspections were made unannounced on a random schedule, and on average an inmate could expect to have his cell tossed four or five times per year. They were attempts by the prison authorities to keep the inmates mostly honest. B-block had been tossed just the previous week, so Cheddar and Palmer had thought they would be safe in hiding their bourbon in the cell, at least past Christmas Eve. Now they had a problem. The four two-man teams of guards currently tossing the cellblock had revealed the flaws in that theory, and they were in danger of being caught. Almost as if by design, there just weren't that many good hiding places inside a prison cell.

"Oh shit," said Cheddar. "Dammit. Hide it! Oh shit!"

“Settle down,” Palmer replied. “I did hide it. If they come in here and see you acting nervous, they’ll know something’s up.”

“We need to hide it in a better place,” Cheddar hissed. “They’ll find it there. They always toss the pillows.”

“Well then, why the hell did we hide it in the pillow?” The idea had originally been Cheddar’s.

“Because we thought no one would look! Do something! They’re coming!” He stood and leaned casually in the doorway to give Palmer more time. Palmer reached up into Cheddar’s pillowcase and removed the bourbon. Where to put it? Under the mattress? No, both mattresses would most likely be in the floor momentarily. Maybe behind his journals? Uh, uh. The journals would hit the floor right after the mattresses did. He was considering just slipping it back into his pants pocket and hoping for the best when his thoughts were interrupted. *Put it in the toilet*, Rodney said. What? The toilet? *Hell yes, put it in the toilet. Hurry.*

Palmer laid the bottle gently in the bottom of the toilet bowl. *Put some toilet paper on top of it.* Then he pulled a handful of toilet paper from the roll, wadded it, and dropped it on top of the pint. He was about to assume an innocent pose when he heard *piss on it!* Piss on it? *Yes, piss on it! Now!* So Palmer peed on top of the basin’s contents. Once finished, he zipped up and was just beginning to turn toward the door when he heard Cheddar speak to someone in the common area.

“Good morning,” he said pleasantly, just like he had nothing to hide.

“Step out, Cray,” the guard said. “You know the drill.” Palmer noted that it was Murphy. He seemed to be getting around this morning, and was accompanied by a new man, one whom Palmer had not seen before. The attrition rate for new guards at Sweetwater State

Correctional Facility was close to forty percent, and about as many new guards arrived each month as did prisoners. “You too,” he said to Palmer. “Don’t take all day about it. Chop, chop.” They both stepped out and watched impassively as the pair of guards entered the cell. The new man watched as Murphy expertly patted down the blankets on both bunks before snatching them to the floor. Then he grabbed up each pillow and felt for contraband. Cheddar nudged Palmer gently. He had been correct. Murphy tossed the pillows onto the floor before flipping both mattresses. “Nothing,” he said, sounding disappointed. He moved on to the lockers. He opened Cheddar’s first and inspected its contents thoroughly. Then he moved on to Palmer’s locker and rambled around in it. Finally he raked the tops of both lockers with his hand and inspected with interest the items he had knocked to the floor.

“It’s clean,” he said to the other man, a guard that Palmer had already dubbed as *Awnold* due to his strong resemblance to the California governor of the same name. Murphy turned toward the door as if to leave, but then his eye came to rest on the toilet bowl. “What the hell?” he asked of no one in particular. Palmer stiffened. “Which one of you boys needs to be toilet trained?”

“That’s me,” Palmer said. “I was just finishing up when you had us step out of the cell.” Awnold reached for the handle.

“Leave it,” Murphy said with disgust in his voice. “They don’t pay us to clean up after criminals.” He was shaking his head as he left the cell. Awnold followed his mentor. He reminded Palmer of a large, Austrian puppy with a bad haircut. The two guards stepped to the next cell and began again. “You toss this one,” Murphy said to his partner. Palmer and Cheddar re-entered their own cell and began to straighten up the mess left by the inspection. According to prison policy, they had fifteen minutes to get the cell squared away. As they worked, Cheddar



looked over his shoulder at the door. Once he had satisfied himself that the coast was clear, he eased up close to Palmer and whispered to him.

“Where’d you put it?” he asked. Palmer nodded toward the toilet. Cheddar stepped over and looked in the bowl. Then he glanced at Palmer in confusion. Palmer nodded again at the commode. Cheddar picked up an empty hanger from the floor and probed in the bowl. Then he smiled an orange smile. “Damn,” he said quietly. “Good job. You’re a genius.”

“I don’t think I’m a genius, but I’m smart enough to know that since I’m the one who put it in there, you’re the one who has to get it out.” It was a fair division of labor.

“That’s no problem. I’m so glad we still have it, I’d pull it out of there with my teeth if I had to.” Palmer eased over to the doorway and stood lookout while Cheddar hooked the hanger under the bottle and scooted it up to the side of the toilet bowl. Then he flushed twice to rinse the bulk of the makeshift camouflage from it. Finally, he picked up the Heaven Hill with his fingertips, placed it in the sink, and washed it thoroughly. After the bottle was cleaned and dried, he hid it back in his pillowcase. He sat on the chair and watched as Palmer returned from sentry duty and retrieved the last of their personal effects from the floor.

“The guards are getting cagey,” he said. “Back-to-back cell inspections just a week apart? That’s pretty slick. I bet they’ve found an armload of contraband.” He found himself wondering if they should try to hide the pint back in the kitchen for a few days in case the guards decided to come back for an unprecedented third toss. It was probably a good idea, but the thought of the pint of Heaven Hill being on its own, cold and lonely in the kitchen, filled him with anxiety. He wanted it where he could see it, risk be damned. He picked up his journals and placed them on top of his locker. The cover had been completely torn from one of the

notebooks, and the binding of another had been ripped. “I wish Murphy would take it easy with my journals.”

“They’re looking for shanks,” Cheddar said. There had been a stabbing in A-block the day before. It hadn’t been fatal, but it had been sufficient motivation for the guards to make an unexpected check.

“Well, they’re not going to find them in a composition book.”

“Those guys on fucking A-block really piss me off,” Cheddar said. “Everybody over there thinks he’s the baddest motherfucker in the prison. All they do is lift weights, fuck with each other, and hate white people. You know me. I believe in live-and-let-live, and if that’s how they want to spend their days, that’s okay by me. But this time they almost cost me my damn Christmas celebration, and that brings it down to a personal level. What they need to do over there is knock all that shit off. At least until Christmas.” Palmer agreed. Whenever an inmate misbehaved, he made it hard on them all.

“We came that close to getting caught, and that’s a fact,” Palmer said. Although he had only had it a short while, the pint of Heaven Hill had become precious to him, like an uncut blue diamond. It had come to represent all that was right and good in the world, and he was loath to lose it to the likes of Murphy and his sidekick. Apparently, though, getting drunk and listening to Lynard Skynard on Christmas Eve was meant to be. It was almost like Baby Jesus Himself was watching over the cell. Again they heard loud voices from the common area. They sounded like they were drifting over from the next cell, the one occupied by Reeves and his cellmate, Spunk Foster. Cheddar hopped up and poked his head out to see what was going on. From where he sat, Palmer heard Murphy’s voice.

“What the hell are you looking at, Cray? Get your ass back in your cell.”

“Sorry boss,” Cheddar said. He snatched his head back in like he was a turtle facing off with a cat. He came back to the bunks. “They found a tool and some raisin jack next door,” he said. “The shit’s going to hit the fan now.” Sweetwater State Correctional Facility was an equal-opportunity prison. Thus whenever contraband was found, the cell’s occupants were punished equally. Normally the price that had to be paid for having illicit items in the cell was forfeiture of all privileges for a specified period of time. But the discovery of a weapon always guaranteed a trip to the segregation block. Knives were big deals, and the one discovered in Reeves’ and Spunk’s cell would buy them each at least a month in solitary confinement.

“If I had to bet, I’d say that the raisin jack belonged to Reeves and the knife belonged to Spunk.” Palmer didn’t care much for Spunk Foster, but Reeves was a pretty good guy who generally made a nice batch of raisin jack.

“That fucking Spunk,” Cheddar said. “All the time wanting to be a bad ass. All the time going to stick somebody. You know the deal. The shank belongs to both of them now. Reeves is going to have to pay the price, too.” *Kind of like my bag of marijuana in your car*, Rodney said in Palmer’s ear. Palmer nodded. Kind of like that. “What they ought to do,” Cheddar said, “is put Spunk over on A-block and see how he likes that shit.” This plan would make Spunk—an avowed and outspoken Aryan brother—the only Caucasian resident of A-block, although he would not be likely to retain that distinction long.

“He wouldn’t make it to supper,” Palmer said. “They’d cut him into small pieces and mail him home.”

“Tough shit for Spunk. At least we’d be rid of him, though.”

“The segregation block is full,” Palmer said. “I wonder what they’ll do with our neighbors.” He figured they’d probably graduate a couple of the current residents of the

segregation block early so that they could accommodate Spunk and Reeves, although Palmer had seen guys transferred to different facilities over something as lethal as a knife. He hoped not, because he'd miss Reeves, although they could transfer Spunk to hell, or A-block, for all he cared. The man was trouble, and Palmer like to avoid trouble.

"I wonder what they'll do with that raisin jack," Cheddar said. He had a taste for the illegal prison brew, and it was a long time until Christmas Eve. From next door, they heard the toilet flush. The sound was accompanied by the usual clamor of pipes in the wall.

"I guess that answers your question," Palmer said, aware of the subtle irony of the situation. If Reeves had put the raisin jack in the toilet to begin with, it might have escaped Murphy's attention.

"What a waste," Cheddar said. He sounded sad. Out in the common area, another two-man team of guards had come over to assist with the aftermath of the contraband discovery. Reeves was taking his medicine with quiet, resigned dignity, but Spunk was cursing the guards, their wives, their sisters, and their mamas.

"I'm not so sure I'd be pissing off the guys with the guns like that," Cheddar said. "A lot can happen to a guy while he's on the segregation block."

"Spunk's not too bright," Palmer replied.

"Mean, though," Cheddar said. Palmer nodded. It was a fact.

Reeves and Spunk were searched, after which they were handcuffed for the walk to segregation. They could look forward to a cavity search when they arrived at their destination, and to a fair sufficiency of quiet time after that. After the pair was marched off, Murphy came back into the cell with Cheddar and Palmer. He sidled over to the toilet and looked down upon the clear water in the bowl.

“Now, that’s better,” he said. “You boys keep it that way, and we’ll be just fine.”

Palmer nodded and Cheddar smiled. They were happy to have been of service. Murphy left, and both inmates breathed a sigh of relief. They had dodged a bullet coming and going.

“I thought I was going to shit when they tossed the cell,” Cheddar said. “I just knew they were going to run up on our bourbon any minute, and I didn’t even know where it was.”

“I thought I had done a pretty good job disguising it,” Palmer replied. “But I did get nussed up when the new guard made like he was going to flush the toilet. If he had hit that handle, we would have been done for.” Cheddar nodded in agreement. They most likely wouldn’t have drawn solitary time over the liquor, but they would have received other punishments, such as removal of store privileges, suspension of visitation rights, and confiscation of other personal belongings. And the worst punishment of all would have been the loss of the booze.

“We got lucky,” Cheddar said. “Maybe we even had some sloppy luck.”

“Maybe,” Palmer said, but he was dubious. He wasn’t sure that mystical power had been in play this particular time. “I think sloppy luck would be more like if Murphy found the bourbon, confiscated it, put us on the chain gang, took the bottle home, had a sip, and then dropped dead because it was poisoned.”

“I guess you’re right. But poison or not, I’m drinking it anyway.”

“L’Chaim,” Palmer said.

“Boy, howdy,” Cheddar replied.

After the excitement of the morning had come and gone, Palmer was hoping that the remainder of the day would be somewhat calmer. He and Cheddar began the afternoon with pimento cheese sandwiches and potato chips in the dining hall.

“These are great,” Cheddar said as he bit into his second.

“Old family recipe,” Palmer replied.

After lunch, Cheddar reported to the kitchen for two hours of cleanup duty. Palmer adjourned to the cell and his crossword puzzle. It was visiting day, and he thought perhaps Kathleen Earwood might stop by, although a visit from her was no longer the sure bet it once was. When they had begun their weekly visits, she had not missed a single Sunday for over a year. She had, in fact, stepped into the weekly rotation at the exact point where his mother had left off, and she seemed to be trying to do her best to fill Laurel Cray’s role, at least as far as visitation was concerned. Since that time, however, her performance had deteriorated. At first she had begun to skip the occasional week. Then she worked up to missing two consecutive visits, sometimes three. He supposed she was running out of steam as most visitors eventually did, and he guessed that eventually he would see her no more. But for now, at least, she came more times than she didn’t, and Palmer enjoyed the company whenever she did. Beggars could not be too choosy, and he would take what he was offered.

Palmer had also begun to be more and more concerned over her mental state. She often seemed forgetful during their meetings, occasionally misplacing times, places, and names. Sometimes common words seemed to elude her, and when this happened, her speech would grind to a complete halt until she could retrieve the proper noun or verb. Additionally, she had forgotten his name a couple of times recently. Once she had called him *Rodney* during a conversation, and as they talked he had realized that she was speaking with him as if he were her long gone son. And sometimes she just talked nonsense, her conversation rambling this way and that like a runaway hound. Her appearance had become unpredictable, as well. Some Sundays she would be dressed to the nines with clothes pressed, hair done, and nails polished,

while on others she would be unkempt almost to the point of slovenliness. Palmer knew that she had been seeing Just Call Me Morris on a regular basis since soon after he had asked the counselor to check on her. He also knew from his own experiences with the dark side that many of her symptoms could be explained by depression, and he wondered if that was indeed her malady.

At 2:00, Awnold the new guard stuck his head in the cell to tell Palmer that he had a visitor. As Palmer walked past him, he noted that the man's nametag said *Llewellen*. He wondered if the man was related to that pile of Llewellens who lived over by the quarry next to the Alabama state line. Awnold certainly had the traditional Llewellen look—close-set eyes, oversized ears, flat chin—and if he was a member of that clan, Palmer had concerns about his fitness for this particular position. The Llewellens were known for their meanness, and they had a reputation for having a crazy streak on top of that. Palmer felt that the combination of these two factors made Awnold's choice of career an unfortunate one. Several Llewellens had been to Sweetwater prison in past years, although the guard standing beside Palmer was the only one to have ever come through the front gate in a paid capacity. It must be getting harder and harder to find prison guards, Palmer thought. Hiring a Llewellen was only a short step away from handing the keys to the prisoners, putting them on the honor system, and having them keep an eye on themselves.

Palmer arrived at the visiting area. It was as crowded as a Baptist church at Easter time and nearly as loud. He scanned the crowd until he spotted Kathleen Earwood. She was sitting across the room at a small table next to the door. He waved at her and caught her eye. Then he threaded his way through the space between them and sat opposite her at the table.

“Hello Kathleen,” he said. She frowned at him for a moment. Then she smiled and took his hands in hers.

“Hello Palmer.”

“I’m glad you came today. I guess I must be getting in the Christmas spirit. It makes me want to see people.” Different people, anyway. He had been seeing the same old people all day, and they hadn’t done all that much for him.

“I never miss a Sunday,” she replied as she patted one of his hands. Her fingers felt bony, and she looked like she had lost some weight since her last visit a month previously.

“You don’t miss very many, for sure,” he replied. She looked confused at this, but he paid scant heed as he continued. “You look nice today.” *She looks like shit today!* Rodney said. *She looks like someone dragged her here behind the car.*

“It’s cold out,” she said. Palmer didn’t see a coat. He hoped she’d hung it up in the outer room.

“Maybe we’ll get some snow.”

“What were you saying about Christmas?” she asked. She looked at him intently.

“I was just saying that I like the time of year and that it’s good to see people at Christmas. It’s my favorite holiday.”

“Me, too,” she said. “I’ll be glad when Christmas comes.”

“It won’t be long now,” Palmer said. Kathleen looked confused again, as if he had spoken in French or Latin. There seemed to be a slight disconnect between the conversation he was having and the one she was. She began to speak.



“Christmas,” she said. “Snow. I miss the snow. I used to love it when it snowed when I was small. I remember when I was a little girl, my family lived in Michigan. We moved up there so Daddy could get a job at a car factory. Did you ever meet him?”

“No M’am,” Palmer said quietly. Kathleen’s father had died long before Palmer and Rodney were born, the hapless victim of narrow arteries and insoluble fats.

“My mama was a cook in a diner in Michigan and my daddy worked at the Chrysler plant. He put motors into cars. I don’t remember what my job was. And one time it started snowing up there. You have never seen so much snow in your life. It was at Christmas, but this was way back then, and it snowed for a week straight. Every day and every night, there was more snow. It was up to my shoulders and over my sister’s head. They are used to a lot of snow in Michigan, but this was even too much for them. Everything was closed down. The Chrysler plant and the diner both sent everyone home. My daddy couldn’t get home, though. He was on his way to the store when a black cat ran out in front of him. His car slid and hit a bump in the road and flew into a tree. That killed him and another young boy besides. It was because of the snow. My job closed down, too.”

“What was your job?” Palmer asked the question in spite of himself. Kathleen was obviously not herself this afternoon, but the outlandish yarn she spun was fascinating, nonetheless. Her mind was leaping from synapse to synapse like a mountain goat on steroids. Past and present smoothly blended with whimsy.

“I don’t recall. I think I was a schoolteacher. No, wait a minute. That was my mama. She was a schoolteacher at the diner. She worked the graveyard shift. I worked at the funeral home with my sister. She made toast and I fixed the dead people’s hair so they’d be presentable when their families came. That’s how I found out about Daddy and that other boy so soon after

they hit that tree. They brought them in for me to get them ready, but then they wouldn't even let me look at that boy, even after I begged them. They had to put him right into his coffin and close the lid tight. His head was gone, so I couldn't make his hair nice. His mama cried and cried. They said her hair turned grey in a single day."

"How old were you when you worked at the funeral home?"

"I think I was about six. I was married to Rodney's daddy but I didn't have Rodney yet. I had a dog named John, though. I think he would have liked all that snow. Rodney, I mean, not John. It snowed for an entire week. We didn't have any electricity because all the trees had lain down on the power lines until they snapped. But the gas was still on, so we had heat in the kitchen and a stove to cook with. We had hot water, too, so we could take a bath. I have always despised cold bathwater. Mama sent me outside to play in the snow with my sister. I had on my blue wool coat and my snow pants. Did I ever show that blue coat to you?"

"No, M'am."

"Mama bought it for me. She said it matched my eyes. Laurel and I were digging a tunnel in the snow in our front yard. Laurel was my sister. She died, but not in the tunnel. It was later when her boy got sent away. We were in the front yard digging when this big snow blower truck came up our street. We lived on Ash Street, but I never saw any ashes there except in the big barrel out back where we burned the trash. The snow plow had a big screw on the front of it, and that screw would go around and around. It sucked the snow right off of the roads and blew it up and out of the way through a big pipe on top of the truck. By the end of winter the snow was piled so high beside the roads that even Daddy couldn't see over the tops of it. Well, that plow came on up our street, and we were out digging a tunnel and playing with John. He liked to lick the snow. Daddy always said John was a barking dog, and he ran out to bark at

the plow truck. I guess the man driving the plow couldn't see John because it was cloudy that day and getting near to sundown, besides. John was a white dog, and he got sucked up in that screw. The truck kept coming down the street, but now all the snow it was blowing was red, because John was dead and that was his blood. Some of John even blew onto me and Laurel as the snow plow went by, because the driver couldn't see us either, I guess. When we went inside the house to tell Mama about John, she screamed because she saw blood on us and thought something was wrong with us. Then she saw that we were all right, and she sat in the kitchen floor and hugged us and rocked us as she cried. She kept saying *my poor babies* over and over again. Poor John. Laurel never did get over him being sucked up in that screw, and finally it gave her a stroke and killed her."

"I'm sorry about John," Palmer said. No other words came to him at that moment.

"That's all right. He's in heaven now with that other one. I told them at the funeral home that we needed to go shovel up John so we could bury him, but they were busy painting the floor. By the time they got around to him, it was too late. He had melted. The electricity came back on Tuesday, and Mama went back to work at the diner. Daddy was dead, but a man who looked just like him had moved in with us and started sleeping in the spare room. He went back to work at the Chrysler factory in place of Daddy. He must have known a little something about cars, because they never did catch on at the plant that it wasn't Daddy."

"What was the other man's name?"

"He said his name was Daddy, but I think he was just saying that so Mama would let him stay. She knew that Daddy was dead along with John and that boy. She had stood right beside me at the funeral when they were both lowered into the ground. But sometimes she would forget, and then she would let that other man kiss her or call her *Honey*, and one time she was

very lonely and made a little girl with him, and that was where your mama came from. He wasn't a bad man at all, and I don't blame her for it. But he just wasn't Daddy. Rodney was dead, too, by that time, but Laurel hadn't fallen into her stroke yet, so we were still sisters. We wrapped Rodney in the curtains to keep him warm until the snow melted away and we could bury him next to Daddy and that other boy. Mama was mad about the curtains, but that other man who looked like Daddy told her it was all right and then he bought her some new ones. They were white with lace edges and let a lot of light into the room. They were pretty. I liked them a lot." Her soliloquy abruptly ceased, as if a switch had been pulled. She sat quietly at the table.

Palmer looked at her. She appeared to be calmly inspecting the backs of her hands as they rested on the tabletop. He thought he ought to say something, but he wasn't quite sure what that might be. *Mama's gone bat shit crazy*, Rodney said. Palmer was tempted to agree, but he didn't want to be rash.

"Kathleen, are you okay?" Palmer asked.

"I am," she said. "Just fine. What were we talking about?"

"Christmas and snow."

"That's right. Christmas. I have some gifts to send you." All gifts and parcels had to be mailed rather than delivered in person so that they could be inspected, and regardless of whether they were mailed from the back side of the world or down the street, the process always seemed to take about three weeks. "I'll mail them to you this week so you'll have them in time for Christmas." She took a deep breath and smiled at him sadly. "I know I haven't been here our whole two hours, but I'm all done in. I think I'm ready to go."

“Sure. We’ve had a good visit. You go on home and rest.” She nodded and they both stood. She gave him a long hug.

“You’re a good boy,” she said. “Mama loves you.” She released him and walked to the door. The guard opened it and let her out. *Which one of us do you think she was talking to?* Rodney asked. Palmer wasn’t sure he knew the answer to that question.

## Chapter Seven

### March 9, 2006: Excerpt from the journal of Palmer Cray.

I've been here nearly seven years, and I've only got three more to go. That's if I don't screw up and get any time added on, and that's starting to look like a pretty big if. The problem is, the way I've been acting lately, I just might screw up. Everything is just irritating the piss out of me these days. Stuff I used to be able to just let go gets on my mind now and stays there, eating away at me quietly, like Mama's cancer. Let me give you an example. The other day a guard got up into my face about my shirt-tail, and I came this close to popping my top. I never told you that we have a dress code here? No, I'm not kidding. They actually have a dress code in a prison. So if I get stabbed tomorrow but I'm not dressed properly for the occasion, I could be in big trouble. When we're outside of our cells, we have to be wearing an undershirt, and our denim outer shirt has to be buttoned up and tucked in. We're some of the best-dressed convicts in the country. It's all about power. They make us do it because they can. The thing is, I've never had a problem with it before, and I don't really have a problem with it now. I mean, it's a shirt. Who gives a shit? If they want it tucked in, they can have it tucked in. If they want me to wear it like a turban, I can do that too. I actually have more of a problem with wearing the t-shirt all the time. In the winter it's okay, because it's cold as hell on the cellblock, but you know how hot it gets in here between April and September. Sometimes by the end of one of our hundred-degree summer days, I have to wring out both my shirts and hang them up to dry.

Anyway, I was on my way to the kitchen to work my breakfast shift. I was in a hurry because that bunk had felt pretty good and I'd gotten an extra five minutes in it. So I was still tucking my shirt into my pants as I left the cell. It was early in the morning, and no one much

was even awake. Llewellen had opened the cell door and was standing out in the common area twirling that damn stick. When I came out, he was all, like, *Cray, get that damn shirt tucked in.* I just stopped walking and stood in place. I swear it was almost like he had backhanded me. I was obviously in the process of following the rules, yet still he was screwing with me. I mean, my hand was stuck down in my pants. What did he think I was doing? Playing with my dick? I wanted to turn around and explain my point of view. I wanted to take that stick from him and tune him up with it. He was every guard who had ever screwed with me, and I wanted to take him down and fuck him up.

Yeah, Llewellen's back. That son-of-a-bitch just loves being a prison guard. He's never going to quit. He'll still be here when Cheddar goes home, I guess. They'll probably let him live here when he retires and bury him out back when he dies. They had him over in A-block for a while, until three of the inmates jumped him one Saturday night and handed him his ass in a sack. I guess they got tired of his Johnny Badass number. I know I am. They took his radio away from him and beat the living shit out of him with it. The whole prison got locked down for two days, because it looks really bad when a guard gets beat up, and especially when one gets it as bad as Llewellen did.

Those three guys over in A-block all drew extra years and got split up, besides. One's at Reidsville, now, and the other two are at Augusta and Savannah. Still, I bet they think it was worth it. Whacking a guard with his own radio is big news in here. Those guys are famous now, like Elvis or someone. They're heroes. But they're not in so great with the guards, and you can bet they're still catching hell about it, even though they're at different prisons now. That all happened a while back, and Llewellen was out on medical leave for a couple of months or so healing up. The odds were five-to-two against him coming back at all. I had a pack of Camels

riding on him just hanging it up and staying home with Mrs. Llewellen and the kids. But he cost me that pack of smokes when he decided to come back in just enough time to tell me that my shirt tail wasn't tucked in quick enough to suit him.

Karma is a bitch. I must have been bad to a Llewellen in another life, or maybe to a whole pile of them, and he is my punishment. I thought I was rid of him when they sent him to A-block. I figured it would only be a matter of time before he forgot himself and dropped the N-bomb, after which the brothers would chop him up in small pieces and stuff him into a dumpster or something, and then we'd all be better off. But no such luck. It looks like the training they made all the corrections officers go to about avoiding the use of racial epithets is paying off. They did that right after Murphy started a ruckus in the exercise yard by explaining the difference between a good Mexican and a bad Mexican to a yard full of Mexicans. Anyway, the guards are trying really hard to be more sensitive now. I know I haven't been called a dumb-ass cracker in close to three months.

Back getting back to Llewellen. I thought I'd seen the last of him for sure when he got his ass kicked that Saturday night over in A-block. I just knew that he'd take a settlement from the State and keep his tall, dumb ass home. I figured maybe he would get someone to write his memoirs for him, or else he would go on the Springer show and they would reunite him with the three guys who put the hurt on him. I mean, no one ever comes back after a whipping like he got. The job's just not worth it. He should have died, but he was too damn stupid to know that. But he's back, and he's my problem. When he told me to get myself tucked in, it was like I felt something tear in my brain. I mean, I could actually hear a ripping sound. I started to turn around. I was in motion, and I was going to let him have it. It was time for a Llewellen sandwich. It was thump day, and I had that boy in my sights. Then the strangest thing



happened. For once in his life, the man had enough sense to see what was coming his way. He saw I had been pushed one step too far and that the shit was about to splatter. And then he threw me a bone. He actually saved me. He said *think about it, Cray*. He could see what was about to go down, and for some reason he made the decision to try to defuse the situation. Maybe those boys in A-block beat some sense into that thick Llewellen head after all. And now I owe him one. It's a hard thing to owe a Llewellen one.

Cheddar says I've got a bad case of the seven-year itch. That's what they call it when you've been here for a while and the place starts weighing down on you. It doesn't always have to be seven years. Sometimes it's more than that, sometimes less. But the main symptom seems to be that everything gets on your nerves. You'd think I'd be happy these days, or at least happier, but I'm not. I've only got three years to go, but I am fed up with this place right now. The sameness is starting to get to me. I am running out of steam. I have sampled every delight that Sweetwater State Correctional Facility has to offer, and none of them was delightful. I hate the cell. I hate the food. I hate my job. I am tired of Cheddar. Mexican radio sucks. I have read every single book in the library, and now I am starting to read them all over again. Since your mama quit coming, I haven't had a visitor in over a year.

I'm packed in with seven hundred guys, but I feel very alone. And three years is better than ten, but I still have a long way to go before I get out of here. I officially do not give a shit about anything anymore, and that's a dangerous mindset in prison. Look at Llewellen. There was no way to win if I'd confronted him, but I was about to anyway, because I didn't give a shit. And I didn't really even make a conscious decision to do it. It was just sort of happening. I'll have to keep an eye out for that, or I'll find myself doing a full fifteen plus maybe a little extra

for good measure, and some of that will be in segregation. The seven-year itch is bad, for sure, but a case of the fifteen-to-twenty-year itch would almost certainly kill me.

\*\*\*\*\*

Time passed as slowly as a glacier receding over a scarred landscape, but it did pass, and eventually Palmer found himself well into his seventh year of captivity. He had survived his bout with the seven-year itch without serious harm, although his successful navigation of that impediment had been due in large part to luck rather than skill, which is often the way of the world. He was prone to the occasional attitudinal relapse when the planets aligned just so, but he somehow managed to not be in the wrong place at the wrong time most days and thus avoided many situations that might have brought his risky demeanor to the attention of the authorities. And during the few instances when he might have fallen afoul of a guard regardless of his intentions or luck, the gods of human incarceration had placed Cheddar there as a buffer to help him during his time of travail.

Cheddar had undergone similar itchy periods on two separate occasions during his own prison career, and he understood what Palmer was going through. More importantly, he had learned the coping skills necessary to hold at bay and eventually defeat the seven-year itch when it reared its prickly head, and these he was more than willing to share. So Cheddar mentored his cellmate on the exceptionally fine arts of turning the other cheek and letting the sleeping dog lie. He instructed him on the skill of disregarding what he could not change and swallowing down what he could not vent. These were lessons well taught and learned, and they were put to good

use on the morning when Palmer's seven-year fever finally broke and he was finally able to lay the demons to rest.

"This is pure bullshit," Palmer had said on that occasion. They were standing in the common area while their cell was being tossed by Murphy and a new guard. It was 9:00 on a Saturday morning. The two guards were nosing around for whatever they could find, looking for serendipitous swag. Traditionally, the guards and the inmates both liked to slack off a bit on the weekends and take a break from the general insanity of the prison experience. This meant that weekend tosses were almost unheard-of unless there had been an escape attempt or an assault with a weapon. Since there had been neither during the past week, Palmer felt that the current Saturday fishing expedition was nothing more than a blatant intrusion into his private space. There were people in his home throwing his possessions onto the floor, and it was rubbing him raw on principle. It was simply uncalled-for. How would the pair in the cell feel if he went to their homes and did the same? If it weren't for the multiple strands of wicked razor wire, the towers staffed with armed corrections officers, and the attack dogs between him and the guards' houses, Palmer was tempted to try, just to see how *they* liked it.

"I can't argue with you there," Cheddar said. "It is bullshit for sure." He hadn't been awake long and looked scruffily unperturbed. He spoke in a prison whisper that only Palmer could hear. Over the years the pair had come to be able to communicate so quietly with one another that it was almost as if they were psychic. Even his shrug was perceptible only to Palmer. "But what can you do? Maybe he's teaching the new bull how to shake down a cell while it's quiet."

"There you go putting a positive spin on things again," Palmer said with lips that barely moved. "They're doing it because they've just got to be screwing with someone all the time."

That's the only reason." The inspection should have been no big deal because they had no contraband in the cell, but Cheddar noticed that his cellmate was coming to a slow boil over what should have been a routine occurrence.

"It's not worth it," he said. "Let it go. They'll be gone shortly, and no harm done. Just settle your ass down."

"What's not worth what?" Palmer asked. He watched as Murphy turned Cheddar's pillow out of its pillowcase before throwing both items onto the floor. He stepped on the pillow as he moved to the lockers.

"Running your mouth at the guards is what. Don't play dumb with me. You know exactly what I'm talking about. Take a deep breath and calm down. They'll be moving on in a minute. You should try counting to ten."

"What are you talking about?" Palmer asked. In the cell, Murphy swiped his hand across the top of a locker and raked Palmer's journals into the floor. He looked Palmer's way with a mischievous grin. Palmer gritted his teeth. His hands made fists at his sides. There was no need to treat his belongings that way. Cheddar had seen the swipe and the grin. He nudged Palmer in the ribs and elaborated on his advice.

"He's fucking with you now, boy. He knows you're on a short fuse. Don't let him win. Count to ten like I told you. My mama always used to tell me that I should count to ten when I felt myself getting mad at somebody. She said it would keep me from saying things I didn't mean and doing things I'd come to regret."

"Thanks for sharing that," Palmer said. "Your mama was an intelligent woman. Maybe you should've listened to her and counted to ten before you got that tattoo." It was a cheap shot

and Palmer knew it, but he needed to lash out at someone, and unlike Murphy, Cheddar was not likely to whack him with a baton and throw him into segregation for a week or ten days.

“I wasn’t able to count at all when I got the tattoo,” Cheddar replied, oblivious to the jibe. “And I’m serious as a heart attack about this. You need to pay attention to what I’m saying. You’re standing here getting pissed because they’re tossing the cell. Don’t try to tell me you’re not. I know you better than anyone, and I’ve been in your shoes besides. The unfairness of it is just killing you. But if you run your mouth, Murphy will fuck you up you nine ways from Sunday. He’s just looking for an excuse, anyway. Look at him. Stepping on my pillow? Throwing your books in the floor? You know what that shit’s about. He knows he’s getting under your skin. If you give him the chance, he’ll be thumping on that head for you. Then he’ll thump me because I share a cell with you. I don’t feel like getting thumped. It hurts. So just choke it on down, count to ten, and keep your damn lips pressed together before you get us both into trouble. I don’t need to be on the shit list and neither do you. Not over a damn cell inspection, anyway. Now count.”

“This is stupid,” Palmer said.

“Count.”

Palmer hesitated. *Do what the man told you to do*, Rodney said. Palmer began a slow count in his head. When he got to ten, he took a deep breath. “There,” he said. “I counted.” Strangely enough, he didn’t feel quite so outraged. Perhaps Cheddar and his long lost mama were on to something with the counting. Had she counted to ten before she left her husband and son? Palmer suspected she had, and then had gone anyway. There were some things that counting couldn’t fix. But Palmer felt a bit better. He would still like to meet Murphy on the outside some fine Saturday morning for a nice long chat about the importance of respecting

others' belongings. After their talk he'd like to throw all of *his* stuff into the floor and then thump him if he acted like he had a problem with that. But it could wait. Life was long, and Palmer was patient. He had all the time in the world.

“Good,” Cheddar said. “Did it help? Are you calmer now? Sometimes you have to do it twice. I knew a guy once who counted to a hundred. Everyone thought he was retarded or deaf, but he was just counting.”

“It helped a little. I don't think I'll count to one hundred. But they still don't have the right to treat our stuff that way.” He nodded at the pair in the cell.

“Sure they do. This is a prison, and we're prisoners. They're guards. They got hired in the first place because they like to fuck with people. There's a question on the application that asks *Do you like to fuck with people?*”

“No there's not.”

“I swear to God it's true. I've seen it. And if you answer *no*, you're out. They might let you work in maintenance or in the office, but you're not getting a job as a guard.” Cheddar made a slight gesture in the direction of the pair in the cell. “This particular set of guards gets paid to fuck with *us*, and look what a fine job they're doing. Their yearly assessment is probably based on how well they do it. These two are up for big bonuses, I bet. Just remember that part of fucking with us is fucking with our stuff. It's not like you've never had your cell tossed before, and there's nothing in there to worry about, anyway. All of our good stuff is hidden in the kitchen. So this inspection is no big deal. It doesn't matter one damn bit. Don't make something out of nothing. Guys like us can't afford to get pissed on general principle. We'll come out on the losing side if we do. If we get pissed off, we'll get pissed on. Now, here they come. Keep your mouth shut and your eyes down.” Meeting a guard's gaze was considered to

be an aggressive stance, and as such, there was a rule against it. An inmate could draw punishment for the act up to and including segregation. Murphy and the new guard stepped out into the common area. Palmer took a quick glance as she walked past him. She looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties. She was a big, muscular woman with short brown hair and an abundance of freckles on her arms and nose. Her name tag bore the name Curtin.

“You boys are clean,” Murphy said, as if they hadn’t already known that fact. He grabbed his belt on each side of his buckle. “Now hop your asses in there and get that cell put back together. I want it squared away in fifteen minutes. Chop, chop.”

“Right, boss,” Cheddar said. He began to chop.

The two guards stepped to the next cell, the one occupied by Reeves and a new boy who went by the name of T-bone. T-bone was a young car thief whom Cheddar and Palmer believed with all their hearts to be a vast improvement over his predecessor, Spunk. Spunk had been transferred to Hays State Prison up in Chattooga County after assaulting a Latino inmate with a basketball as they were both on the way back from the exercise yard. The pair of inmates had been chatting about the contested outcome of a recently completed basketball game, and they apparently were unable to arrive at unity of opinion concerning the results of that contest. The guard was standing a mere five feet away when the assault occurred, but Spunk had jumped on the guy anyway. He was one of those inmates who had no truck with consequences, which was the main reason why Cheddar and Palmer both liked T-bone much better than they had liked Spunk. He seemed much less prone to maim one of them, or to frail away with a basketball on the basis of lost bet or even a mere whim.

Cheddar and Palmer entered their cell and began to reassemble their home. Cheddar reinstalled the mattresses on the bunks and made the beds while Palmer retrieved their scattered

belongings and repacked the lockers. They had performed this ritual many times before, and their moves were economical and sure, like robotic devices on an assembly line. In less than ten minutes, everything except Palmer's frame of mind was shipshape and as good as new.

"How about a cup of coffee?" Cheddar asked in an accommodating tone. He had already taken the hot pot to the sink and was filling it. "A good hot cup of Joe will help us take our minds off our troubles.

"I don't know."

"I've got canned milk." Cream in their coffee was a luxury usually saved for birthdays and holidays. Cheddar was hauling up the big guns in an attempt to make his cellmate feel better about the ragged start of their day.

"I guess some coffee would be good, at that," Palmer said. His cellmate had persuaded him with the canned milk, as he had known that he would.

"That's the spirit. I've got a package of Vienna Fingers, too." Vienna Fingers were their second-favorite treat, lagging only slightly behind Oreos. Honey buns brought up the rear of the prison trifecta of sweets.

"You know what?" Palmer asked in a conversational tone.

"What's that?"

"I just hate it when that son-of-a-bitch says *chop, chop*." Murphy was stuck in Palmer's craw like a fish bone, and it would apparently take more than canned milk and Vienna Fingers to hack him up.

"Damn it!" Cheddar said. He sounded frustrated. "For Christ sakes, let it go, will you? I thought we were going to have some coffee and chill out. Murphy's an idiot. He's been saying that since the day he hired in to this place. I wish I had a dollar for every *chop* I've heard. He



probably says it at home to his wife and his kids and his dog. I've heard him say it to some of the other guards, too. Why in the hell would you let it start to bother you now?" He shook his head in exasperation.

"It just does." Palmer shrugged, as if to say that it was all out of his hands.

"That's because you're letting it get to you. You're letting Murphy and the rest of the screws get away with you. You're out of control."

"So you're telling me that you like it when the guards screw with us?" Palmer asked. His tone was belligerent.

"What I like doesn't even begin to come into it. We're so far away from what I like that you can't even get there from here. What I like is in a whole other universe. It's like some of that Star Trek bullshit. Over there they have women with big boobs, and they have beer, and television, and air conditioning. Over there I don't have to take a dump in front of other people or take showers with guys who like what they see. But in this world, I'm a fucking state prisoner, and here I've got jack shit. They can pretty much do whatever they want to me—up to and including killing me—and get away with it. I don't get to have a say, and it doesn't matter what I like. The only way my situation could be any worse is if I was a state prisoner in Texas, or maybe Mississippi. Or if I was doing time in a Federal pen. That's just how it is. And you're sitting right here beside me and know the deal just as well as I do. Now, you need to knock this shit off. I mean *today*. As in *right now*. Get your ass off your shoulders. I'm serious. Quit being such a dumb fuck. Murphy always says *chop, chop*. It's just something he says. He probably doesn't even know what it means. It's nothing to get bent out of shape over. Neither is any of the other stuff that's been getting under your skin. There isn't a damn thing you can do about

any of it except get yourself in trouble.” He plugged in the pot and fetched their mugs plus two packets of instant coffee from his locker.

“Well, I wish he’d stop.”

“You know, maybe if you wish just a little bit harder, he’ll stop. Be sure to close your eyes tight and cross your fingers. Hey, I’ve got a quarter hidden in my shoe. If you want, you can throw it in the john and make your wish.”

“Smart ass,” Palmer said.

“Dumb ass,” Cheddar replied. “I guarantee you one damn thing.”

“What?”

“Letting Murphy know that something he does is pissing you off is *not* the way to get him to lay off. If you think he says it too much now, just let him know how much it bothers you. It’ll be *chop, chop* city, then, for sure. *Chop, chop* this and *chop, chop* that. That’s the kind of guy he is. He was trying to piss you off this morning, and you almost took the bait. What you have to do is ignore it when he pulls that crap, just like you always used to do before. It doesn’t mean anything.” Cheddar poured the contents of the coffee packets into the cups. Then he continued.

“No matter what you do, he’s not going to stop saying it. And the guards are not going to stop tossing the cells. And Llewellen or someone else just as stupid is always going to fuck with you about your shirt. And some new guy is always going to try to get over on you. Those are just the facts of life! Listen to me. You’ve let yourself get into the habit of being pissed off at every little thing. It happens to everyone in here after a while, so you’re not even special. But it’s a luxury you can’t afford. So far you haven’t gotten into any scrapes, but that’s because you’re a lucky son-of-a-bitch and because I’ve still got your back. But you are definitely

cruising for a bruising. You're asking for it, and you're going to forget yourself one of these times, and then there'll be hell to pay. You'll have your privileges taken away. They'll stick you in segregation. You'll get your ass kicked. They'll add more time to your sentence. If I hadn't been standing beside you this morning, you probably would have fucked up right then. I'm telling you, you can't win. There's no end to all the stuff they can do to you, and there's a world of hurt waiting for you when they do."

"I can't help how I feel."

"You can go tell *that* shit to Just Call Me Morris, because I don't want to hear it. You damn well can help it, and you'd better start. You're not some scared kid anymore. You have made your bones. You're a grown man who has survived seven years in a Georgia state penitentiary. If you can do that, you can do any damn thing you put your mind to. So don't tell me you can't help it. You can help it if you want to. Plus you're not nearly bad enough to be acting all big and tough all the time."

"I can take care of myself."

"You're not going to like this, but I'm going to say it anyway, because you need to hear the truth. There are some bad people in here, and you're not one of them. That's just the truth. You stick up for yourself all right, but when it comes to B-A-D bad, you're not. Hell, I'm badder than you are, and there are still about two hundred good old boys in here who scare the shit out of me. So you need to back down and ease up. Because if you don't chill out, then one of two things is going to happen. Either a guard is going to take a notion to fuck you up for the common good, or else some inmate who thinks you got smart with him will."

"But—"

“*But*, hell. I’m telling you to take your head out of your ass and knock this shit off. Notice I didn’t say that I am asking. I said I’m telling. If you won’t think about yourself, think about me. When you bring down that whole mountain of shit, it won’t just bury you, you know. It’ll get all over me, and probably all over Reeves and T-bone. Some of it’s bound to get on your old man, too.”

Palmer considered Cheddar’s words. It was true that he had been in a funk. It was a fact that he had been popping off at fellow inmates and staring at guards, and that both actions were different recipes for the same sort of disaster. He supposed a case could be made that he had been looking for trouble, at least on a subconscious level, and that if he wasn’t careful, he was going to get what he was looking for. For whatever reason, people in prison generally did. Perhaps Cheddar was giving sound advice. Stranger things had happened in the history of the world. Palmer decided to give easing up an earnest try. Maybe Cheddar’s count-to-ten method would be effective. If not, he supposed he could give try twenty a try. At least it might be a good avenue for Palmer to try as he began his seven-year attitude adjustment. After that, he’d just have to see what he saw.

“You might be right,” he said. “I’ll try get back to where it all just rolls off me.” Maybe he could begin afresh. Today was the first day of the rest of his sentence.

“I know I’m right. And don’t just *try* to get there. Get there. Trying is for losers. Doing is for winners.” Cheddar passed a steaming mug of coffee to his cellmate. He had split a third packet of grounds between the two cups so that the brew was good and strong.

“I thought we were having cream,” Palmer said. He took an appreciative sip.

“We might have cream tonight, if you chill your ass out in the meantime. We’ll just have to wait and see how that goes. But the Vienna Fingers are all the way off the table.” Cheddar

did not reward foolishness in others, although he was often blind to the trait in himself, and his cousin had spent most of the morning being foolish.

“What did you think about the new guard?” Palmer asked, changing the subject in an attempt to comply with Cheddar’s wish that he let his ire go. He declined to comment upon Cheddar’s withholding of the canned milk and the Vienna Fingers, which was apparently his cousin’s attempt at behavior modification, Sweetwater style. “Her name is Curtin.”

“Are you kidding me?” Cheddar asked. He took a loud slurp of his coffee. “What did I think of her? I think I’m in love! Did you see the titties on that girl? What were they? Forty-sixes? Maybe forty-eights? If Murphy hadn’t been standing there, I would have thought I had died and gone to heaven.” Curtin’s bosom had indeed been ample, and her uniform was cut in such a manner as to prominently feature her badge on her left breast like an official State of Georgia pasty. “If she was my woman, I’d never leave the house again.”

“I don’t know what size they are,” Palmer replied, although if Cheddar’s tattoo was inked to scale, then the new guard appeared to be in the same neighborhood as Shirley, the buxom girl on Cheddar’s torso. But that wasn’t the subject that Palmer wished to discuss at the moment. He had a larger issue on his mind. “Didn’t you think it was kind of odd that they let a female corrections officer walk a beat down here in the cells?” It had struck Palmer as a strange and unwise choice right off the bat. There had always been female guards at Sweetwater State Correctional Facility. At any given time, fifteen to twenty percent of the officers at the prison were women. It was an equal opportunity bad job that chewed up and spat out men and women at about the same rate. But today was the first time in seven years that Palmer had seen a female patrolling in the cellblock. He thought it was a questionable idea in general and dangerous for Curtin’s sake.

“I don’t know why they decided to put her in here,” Cheddar said. “But all I can say is, it’s about time they did. Thank God for the United States of America, the Constitution, and equal rights for women. They ought to get us a redhead and a blond, too. We live in a fine country, and I’ll cut any man who says different. Did you get a gander at that ass? Lord have mercy on us all. It looked like she was carrying two picnic hams in her britches. I thought I was going to die.” He shivered as the sweet memories teased and taunted him. “I’d give a hundred dollars just to nibble on that thing.”

“You don’t have a hundred dollars,” Palmer said. “All you have is a quarter in your shoe. And just so I’m clear, which thing are you talking about?” Cheddar had already referred to three of the guard’s things, and it was still early in the conversation.

“She doesn’t know I don’t have a hundred dollars,” Cheddar said, warming up to the theme of *derriere* mastication. “And she won’t know unless you tell her. As for which thing, it’s her choice. Whatever thing she’d be willing to have nibbled is the thing I’m talking about. I’m not as picky as some people in this cell. Although I have to admit that I would like to have that ass for supper. I want it on a plate with a pile of crispy, salty French fries and some Heinz ketchup. Maybe with a good cold beer or two on the side.” Palmer wasn’t impressed with Cheddar’s protestations of lust..

“Any backside would look good to you in the state you’re in,” he said. “If my mama was still alive, you’d probably be checking out hers on visiting day.”

“Aunt Laurel did have a nice butt for a mature woman,” Cheddar said. “Bless her heart.” This was not quite the reaction Palmer was expecting.

“Watch it,” he said. “That’s my mama’s butt you’re talking about.” *I hate to say it, but he’s right*, Rodney observed. You watch it too, Palmer thought.

“Sorry,” Cheddar said. He shrugged as if to indicate that the pleasing roundness of Laurel Cray’s now-defunct fanny had not been his fault in the least, even though it was apparently his problem. “I swear I meant no disrespect.” He clasped his hands and bowed his head in an attempt to demonstrate his regard for his departed aunt.

“I’m sure she appreciates the compliment if she’s listening in,” Palmer said. “But getting back to Curtin, I think it’s crazy that she has been given cellblock duty. Yeah, yeah, you’re in love with her, and you want to have her for dinner. Literally. I get it.” Palmer held up his hands to ward off further commentary about the Curtin’s various things. “My point here is that I guarantee you that you’re not the only person drooling all over the floor when she walks by. She’s locked in here with ninety guys who haven’t gotten laid recently. Some of them haven’t gotten lucky since Nixon was president. And I’m talking about the *first* time he was president. Putting her in here is like locking a glass of sweet tea in a room with ninety thirsty, violent people. Someone’s going to be tempted to try to sneak a drink before it’s over. You wait and see. If I was the warden, I’d be worried about her safety. Hell, if I was Curtin, I’d be worried about my own safety. Even with Murphy in here with her, something bad could happen to her. Things could get out of control. Hell, *especially* with Murphy in here with her, something could happen.” Murphy did seem to rub people wrong more times than not. It was his way, and there was no getting around the fact.

The guards always patrolled the cellblocks in pairs, and there was video backup on top of that, because what had happened to Llewellen was not an isolated incident. Corrections officers and inmates squared off quite a bit, and every year more and more guards in the prison system were assaulted and injured. Occasionally, one of the corrections officers ran all the way out of luck and was killed by an inmate. Guard duty was no walk in the park. It was tedious and

dangerous work for not a great deal more than minimum wage. Palmer wasn't sure why anyone would even want the job of prison guard, and even though the Curtin was a big farm-raised girl who looked like she could take care of herself, he wondered why she had made the decision to walk out into harm's way.

"I have to admit you don't see women in the blocks too often," Cheddar said. "But I have seen it before. We had one down in Arrendale. Now, that was one mean woman." There was a mixture of deference and admiration in his tone, as if he were a gladiator referring to a highly respected foe. An image of Bay-Annette came to Palmer's mind. She was one mean woman, as well, and she didn't even get paid to be. Maybe Cheddar liked them that way, Palmer thought. Perhaps it was the element of risk that excited him. Cheddar continued. "Her real name was Masters, but we all called her Thumper. I'll let you figure out why. The word on the tier was that she was a lesbian who hated men, but I think that was a bunch of crap. She actually *was* a lesbian, which was a real waste if you ask me, but she was a leaf who hated everybody. If she even thought you were checking her out, you'd find yourself sitting in a segregation cell for a week with a knot the size of a softball on the side of your head." His right hand meandered of its own accord to his temple and rubbed a spot there in fond remembrance. She had apparently made a believer of Cheddar. "She was one you didn't have to worry about, though. No one in their right mind was ever going to fuck with her. She could have walked through the cellblock naked, and guys would have looked the other way." Then Cheddar had a thought. "I didn't see a wedding ring on Curtin's finger. Do you think she dates ex-inmates?"

"I'm betting not. There's probably a rule against it. There is against damn near everything else." Or there might not be, Palmer thought. It could be one of those situations that no one had thought would ever come up.



“You’re probably right. I can just see the warden coming down against it. It’s easy for him to be particular, though. He’s got a woman. Hell, he’s probably got two.”

“Well, someone has to take up the slack,” Palmer said. Cheddar nodded and sighed at the unfairness of a system that would allow wardens to have abundant female companionship but would deny that same boon to a few deserving inmates. It just wasn’t right.

“Screw the warden,” he said after a moment. “I think she’s hot, and I’m going to ask her for a date when I get out of here. Do you think she’ll wait for me? I’ve only got sixteen more years to go.” The time would pass before he knew it.

“You’ve got Bay-Annette waiting for you. She’s enough of a woman for any man. She might even be enough of a woman for two men.”

“Bay-Annette’s probably waiting for me with a *gun*,” Cheddar clarified. His errant hand gravitated from his temple down to his chest, to the unfortunate body art that had brought so much woe into his young, promising life.

“Twenty-five years is a long time,” Palmer said. “Surely she’ll have gotten over that tattoo by the time you get out. And don’t you think it would break her heart if you showed up with Curtin on your arm? The last thing you want to do is break Bay-Annette’s heart. Not if you ever want to sleep again, anyway.” Palmer was pretty sure that he wouldn’t want to get anywhere *near* a woman who had sent him up for a quarter of a century, but to each his own, he supposed. Seven years in jail had taught him not to judge, lest he be judged.

“She does take disappointment hard,” Cheddar said. “And she doesn’t like women whose chests are larger than hers, so Curtin is probably out, anyway. If Shirley had little ones, I probably wouldn’t be here now.” He stopped speaking as if he were giving his last statements

some thought. Then he continued. “You know, I haven’t really given it much thought, but she may not want me back.”

“Nonsense. How could she not want you back?”

“No, really. What if she’s seeing someone else?”

“She’d never do that to you.”

“Twenty-five years is a long time. Women have needs, too, you know. It’s like with Vienna Fingers. If you get used to having a Vienna Finger every day, you develop a taste for them.” Palmer nodded. He knew just what Cheddar meant.

“We ought to have one right now,” he said.

“This is serious,” Cheddar said. “Once you’ve got the taste, if someone takes the Vienna Fingers away, you get to missing them. After a while, Vienna Fingers are all you can think about.”

“So you think Bay-Annette is pining away for a Vienna Finger?”

“I know it for a fact. She’s bound to be.” He looked conspiratorial for a moment. Then he shared a confidence. “I have really good Vienna Fingers,” he whispered.

“I’ll take your word for it,” Palmer said. Seven years of close proximity and too much information made for a bad combination. “Forget the damn Vienna Fingers for a minute. I guarantee you that she’ll be waiting for you. You two are a match made in heaven. No one would ever dream of taking her away from you.” At least, not anyone who knew her, Palmer thought. “Plus, even if she just had to sneak in a cookie or two in the meantime, they wouldn’t be as good as the real thing. You said so yourself. It’d be like she was eating a store brand cookie.” Cheddar thought about this analogy a moment, and it seemed to make him feel better about cookies in general. “Look.” Palmer said, “when it gets to be time for you to get out of

here, don't even let her know you're coming. Just head on over and walk in unexpectedly, like you own the place. Which you do, come to think of it. That way she won't have time to plan anything, like loading her pistol or moving away. Surprise is your ally. It can only be good news for you. I think you should plan on taking along a coffee can as a peace offering. They always seem to put her at her ease. That's the way you want her. Nice and relaxed." Bay-Annette loved coffee cans better than raccoons loved garbage.

"She does like to get her hands on a coffee can," Cheddar admitted. Bay-Annette had been back to see him three times since the fateful day he had capitulated and sent her to dig up a Sanka can in the interest of peace in the family and their son's continued good health. Now she was into him for a Hills Brothers, a Maxwell House, and a Folgers, as well. Each time she sought financial succor from her husband she had a good reason to do so, and each time she left, she had a twinkle in her eye, a spring in her step, and the directions to another burial site tucked into her bra. At the current rate of consumption, Cheddar might have one last coffee can left to bear before him as a peace offering when the time came to reunite with Bay-Annette. "I just can't say no to the bitch," he admitted. "She's running through my money like General Sherman ran through Georgia on the way to the sea, and I'm letting her do it."

"She is your wife, though, and the mother of your child," Palmer pointed out. "It's sort of like you're taking care of your family." *Sort of, hell,* Rodney said. *That's exactly what he's doing. And he ought to be. That's his kid, and somebody has to take care of Bay-Annette. Besides me, that is.* Palmer agreed. He believed that if he had a wife and son on the outside, he would try to support them if he possibly could. He was certain that at the very minimum, he would keep the coffee cans coming for as long as they lasted. Of course, if he did have a wife on

the outside, it most certainly wouldn't be Bay-Annette, so he could afford to be noble of intent and magnanimous of thought. It was awful easy to call them from the cheap seats.

“That argument would carry a lot more weight with me if she hadn't turned me in to the law in the first place,” Cheddar noted.

“You could be right,” Palmer admitted. As far as potentially unfixable marital difficulties went, sending a spouse to prison for a quarter of a century had to be well to the right hand side of the bell curve. Getting over it could be a problem.

“I may change my mind, but right now I feel like these twenty-five years will always be between us.”

“It would be hard to get over,” Palmer agreed.

“Of course, I'd still like to screw her again.”

“Well, naturally.” With Cheddar, it went without saying.

“I had intended to live out my life with what was in those cans,” Cheddar said. “At this rate, though, it looks like I'm going to have to get a job when I get out.” Regardless of whatever else Cheddar's prison sentence might have accomplished to date, it had instilled in him a sense of abject fear and penitent shame with respect to his previous career as a dealer of methamphetamine. As the years in Sweetwater prison had wandered by, he had grown ashamed of what he had once done for a living. He carried a burden of guilt for the lives he had helped ruin and the pain he had caused, both to his customers and to his family. At the same time he had come to be extremely fearful of ever again making or dealing meth, lest he once more fall afoul of the law—or, worse, Bay-Annette—and have to come back to prison for the remainder of his natural time. This fear extended to all manner of other illegal activities, as well. So if his coffee can fund ran out as it seemed destined to do, he was going to have to go to find some

honest work. Cheddar had never before labored in the traditional sense of the word, and the prospect of having to do so when he got out was unsettling.

“A job’s not so bad,” Palmer said.

“Easy for you to say.”

“Well,” Palmer said, trying to improve Cheddar’s mood, “you’re getting to be a pretty good cook. I’ve seen you scramble eggs for seven hundred inmates. Maybe the Waffle House will give you a shot. Even late on Saturday nights when all the drunks are hungry, you won’t have to cook for seven hundred.” Palmer tried to imagine Cheddar feeding seven hundred hungry drunks in a Waffle House on a rowdy Saturday night and found that he could not. The scene was too incomprehensible, the concept too surreal.

“I don’t want to work at the fucking Waffle House,” Cheddar replied. Palmer felt that it was probably just as well.

“Well, then, how about at Denny’s?” he asked. Maybe Cheddar would be happier in a classier setting, one in which the seats in the booths were upholstered.

“Denny’s? Fucking Denny’s? That’ll be lots better. Thanks.” He shook his head. He had arrived at a low point. “Just kill me now,” he said.

“First you have to tell me where the rest of the cans are buried,” Palmer replied. There was no use in both of them having to hire on at Denny’s.

The rest of that year passed and became another, and in the spring of 2007, Palmer became aware of Cheddar’s illness. He probably would have noticed it earlier if they had been separated from each other for any length of time at all, but they were constantly in each other’s company. They lived together, they worked together, and they ate and slept together. Under those circumstances, gradual changes in appearance and demeanor were hard to spot. So when

Cheddar first began to be tired all the time, Palmer just thought he needed to get more rest and perhaps that his cousin needed to take some vitamins. When Cheddar complained of feeling achy all over, Palmer assumed that he—like about twenty other inmates on B-block at the time—had a lingering case of the flu and advised him to take a couple of aspirins and call him in the morning. When Cheddar began to pick and nibble at his food, Palmer just chalked it off to the lack of variety if not carbohydrates in the prison fare. And when Cheddar developed a tremor in his hands, Palmer believed it to be a nervous tic, one of an infinite variety exhibited by many of their prison mates, an occupational hazard associated with being a professional felon in a violent and unpredictable setting. Thus it was only in retrospect that the gravity of these symptoms was brought home to him. Palmer’s hindsight turned out to be twenty-twenty, although in point of fact it wouldn’t have done either man a great deal of good even if Palmer had managed to stitch together a diagnosis much earlier. What Cheddar had was impossible to cure.

“You’re yellow,” Palmer said to Cheddar as he walked into the cell. He had been working the early shift in the kitchen and was now returned from that duty to retrieve his cellmate for breakfast. They were planning to eat in the kitchen with the cooks, where the extra bacon roamed free, and where fresh ground coffee flowed like spring water.

“I’m as brave as anyone in here.” Cheddar replied. “Braver than T-bone.” The boy had developed the habit in recent days of softly crying late into the night. They heard him fairly frequently after lights out, along with Reeves’ occasional *T-bone, for Christ’s sake, will you go to sleep?*

“No, I mean you are actually yellow in color. There is a word for that. What is it?” Palmer thought for a moment. Then he snapped his fingers as his Sweetwater High School education kicked in and the word came to him. “You are jaundiced.”

Their window faced the east, and the morning light as it streamed in had caught Cheddar in profile and had frozen him there. He looked just like an actor who was standing in a yellow spotlight. Actually he was more beige than yellow, the color of a manila envelope, a sickly shade that was oddly complementary to Cheddar's teeth. His eyes, however, were as yellow and feral as those of a hungry winter wolf at the rise of the full moon. It wasn't a good look for him. The skin color reminded Palmer of the time years ago that his mother had bought herself a first-generation tube of sunless tanning lotion and had conscientiously rubbed herself in the name of beauty into a fair likeness of a summer squash. As for the eyes, well, they were just plain creepy, even allowing for the fact that they were Cheddar's.

"Bullshit," Cheddar said. He was standing at the ready, poised at the toilet just about to make his morning water.

"It's not bullshit, Cheddar. You are yellow. Take a look at yourself!" Cheddar viewed his forearm. Then he looked at the back of his hand. He leaned as far as the sink and inspected his face in the small steel mirror mounted on the wall.

"Well I'll be damned," he said. "I *am* turning yellow." He assumed his former position and looked down. "My dick's even yellow," he noted. Then he began to urinate. As soon as he did so, however, Palmer took double before offering yet another comment.

"Cheddar, you're pissing blood." Cheddar looked down once again. It was true, although his pee wasn't blood-colored so much as a dark muddy brown, the color of coffee grounds or dark molasses. But either way, blood red or coffee brown, there was apparently a problem with the plumbing.

"Damn it," he said. "Not this shit again." Then he looked at Palmer. "Do you think I could get a little privacy here?" Palmer averted his eyes. The pair had an unspoken

understanding concerning the public nature of their sanitary facilities and the private nature of the need to use them. Thus they each looked elsewhere as much as was possible given the dimensions of their small cell. For Palmer, at least, the lack of privacy while performing his daily functions was among the worst parts of being at Sweetwater. It made him feel like a lower form of life, an un-evolved specimen, and it contributed to his feelings of inferiority with respect to the free people of the world, those lucky souls who had a bathroom door and were able and even expected to close it when the moment of truth arrived.

“Sorry,” Palmer said. “I wasn’t thinking.” He inspected the tops of his shoes. “But in my defense, you are pissing blood, and I felt like I ought to mention it.”

“Yeah, I know. I have been for about a week. I haven’t had any trouble with it in a long while, and it has caught me by surprise.”

“A week? That’s not good. And what do you mean you haven’t done it in a *while*?” In his view, peeing brown was a big issue even if you only ever did it once. The mere fact of russet urine must surely always imply serious physical malady. What else could it signify? It seemed like a peck of trouble to Palmer, but Cheddar was very blasé about the whole affair, like it was no big deal at all. Visions crossed Palmer’s mind of intrepid eighteenth-century British explorers hacking their way through equatorial jungles while beset by exotic diseases such as blackwater fever, dengue, and beri-beri. He wondered what was wrong with Cheddar. It couldn’t be good, whatever it was.

“Hold on a minute and let me finish what I’m doing, here,” Cheddar said. He sounded exasperated. “You know I don’t like to talk while I’m taking a leak.” Palmer waited while Cheddar completed his business and flushed the toilet. Then he stepped to the sink and washed



his hands thoroughly before drying them on his pants. While at the sink, he admired his yellow features once again in the mirror. “Nice,” he said grimly. “Just fucking lovely.”

“What’s going on, Cheddar?” Palmer asked. “Why are you turning yellow, and why are you peeing brown? And why did you say that it hasn’t been brown in a while?” Palmer realized that he had posed a plethora of *whys* before breakfast, but brown pee and yellow skin brought many intriguing questions with them, questions that literally begged for some answers. Cheddar sat in their chair and sighed.

“Brown pee is not so unusual,” he said. He sounded defensive, like he had been caught stealing a piece of penny candy from a kindly corner grocer or copying the answers from a fellow student’s test paper.

“Maybe on your side of the family it isn’t such a big deal, but over here where the normal people like to hang out, urine is sometimes yellow, sometimes clear, and never, ever the color of a Yoo-Hoo. I’ve been around for twenty-seven years, and I can remember twenty-three of them pretty well. In all that time I haven’t ever had to take a single brown pee. As a matter of fact, I’ve never even seen any until today.”

“Okay, okay. Brown pee is maybe a little unusual.”

“Maybe just a little bit. So what’s going on?”

“I’ve got a condition,” Cheddar said.

“I thought you did.” It appeared that Palmer was going to have to drag it out of him. “You want to know what my tip-off was? Your yellow skin and your brown pee. That plus the fact that you look like you’ve been hit by a log truck and left three days in the sun. So what condition does all that to you? Is it something to do with your kidneys?” Kidneys seemed a reasonable bet to Palmer.

“No, it’s more of a liver thing,” Cheddar said quietly. “I’ve got a chronic case of Hepatitis C. That’s what’s got me turning colors.”

“What?” Palmer was surprised. They had lived together for over seven years, yet this was the first he had heard of Cheddar’s problem.

“Hepatitis C. I’ve had it for a while now.” He cast his eyes downward, as if he were ashamed of his illness. “I haven’t had a bout of brown pee or jaundice for ten years or so, since before we started bunking together.”

“Do you know how you got it?” Palmer had of course heard of Hepatitis C. Everyone in prison knew what it was and how it was generally transmitted. A fair percentage of the inmates had acquired this knowledge the hard way.

“It’s hard to say. If I had to bet, then I’d say that most likely I either caught it from Shirley, or else I got it while I was getting this damn tattoo of her. Either way, she was probably involved.” There was regret in Cheddar’s voice, as if all things having to do with Shirley had somehow not been worth the price.

“When you said you caught it from Shirley, does that mean you got it from having sex with her? I always heard you couldn’t get it that way.” The word around the tier was that heterosexual love was safe.

“It’s a funny thing about that. We can put a man on the moon, but we can’t figure out what the deal is with Hepatitis C. One doctor told me that I could get it from sex with Shirley. Another doctor told me there was no way I could get it from sex with a woman. Of course, neither of those doctors looked like they were old enough to be shaving regularly, so maybe they just hadn’t covered that part in medical school with them yet. Who the hell knows? I like to think that having sex with Shirley was probably when I got it, because if that was it, then at least

I got some pussy out of the deal. It was either that or from her needle. She used to boil it. The needle, I mean, not her pussy, but I don't know if that helps or not. She was a smack addict, and I was pretty heavy into all types of drugs back then. We shot up a few times. I didn't care that much for it, but she just loved that shit. She needed that good sick every day."

"So you got Hepatitis C from having sex with Shirley, or from her needle, or from the tattoo artist." It seemed they had narrowed the list, and Cheddar was correct that Shirley was in some way involved with all of the potential causes.

"Yeah. Unless I caught it when I got raped while I was doing that nickel at Hays State. That was before I met Shirley. If that was the case, then Shirley caught it from me." The list was expanding again, and the theory of Shirley as causation had taken a blow, as well. "I hope I didn't give it to her," Cheddar lamented. "I thought a lot of that girl."

"You got raped at Hays?" Palmer was suddenly flooded with questions that he'd never be able to ask. It was morbid curiosity, he knew, but it was also human nature, and he couldn't help it. He had come close to having the same experience himself.

"A lot of guys do. There's more fucking going on in that place than there is in a Reno whorehouse."

"You've never said anything about it."

"I was never going to, either. It's one of those things a guy doesn't talk about much. But it just sort of popped out, today."

"What happened?"

"I told you. I got raped. The son-of-a-bitch who did me was a piece of shit named Gibson. He was serving forty years for all kinds of shit, including raping an old lady who lived in his trailer park. That old woman was eighty-three years old, and they ought to have fried his

ass for that, but instead they put him in prison. He nailed me in the back of the laundry while two of his buddies stood lookout. I'd been at Hays State about three weeks when it happened. I was just a punk kid, not much older than you were when you first got here. The shame of it damn near killed me."

"What'd you do?"

"What the hell do you think I did? I found out who got me, and I fucked him up just as fast and as hard as I could. I slipped up behind Gibson a couple of weeks later and put a tool into his kidney. I jiggered it around in there real good, too, so there'd be plenty of damage. It was my intention to kill him, but the last I heard, the sick motherfucker was still alive. That's my bad luck and his good, I guess, but if he ever transfers here, I'll finish the job." There was a look in Cheddar's eyes that Palmer had never seen before, a flinty stare that foretold mayhem and violent death.

"I never knew that you'd stuck a guy."

"Stabbing a guy is something else you don't talk about. Shit has a way of getting around in a prison. I've seen it too many times. A con will brag about stealing some guy's stuff or beating up a new fish, and the next thing he knows, he's sitting his ass in isolation for a month or so, reading his Bible and wondering who the fuck talked." He put his finger to his lips. "The walls have ears," he said mysteriously.

"I'm sorry Gibson got to you."

"Don't be. It's not like I was running around in panty hose trying to get laid. He busted me with a chair leg from behind. You can still feel the crease in my skull. When I came to, it was over. I didn't even know who had done it until I heard it in the yard." There was a hard look in Cheddar's eyes.

“Did you go to the guards?”

“You know better than that. Or you ought to by now. You never go to the guards about anything. A snitch is a dead man, pure and simple. They put me in segregation for my own protection. While I was in there, I made my plan. When I got out I sold all my shit, and I bought a shank. I didn’t have the full price for the knife, but the guy I bought it from didn’t like Gibson from a long way back, so he gave me what he called a deep discount. He said he’d give me the knife for what I had to trade if I promised to stick it in deep when the time came. I told him we had a deal and I bought the knife. Then I did my best to kill Gibson.” He shook his head. “I never have been any good with a knife, though. I got him in the kidney, but I was trying for his liver. There’s only one of those, and if I’d gotten him there, he’d be worm food right now, provided the worms weren’t too particular.” He looked at Palmer and shrugged at the irony of the situation. “And that’s the problem with me. Hepatitis C goes for the liver, and it has camped out in mine. I haven’t had any trouble with it in a long time, though, and I was hoping it had faded away. Sometimes it does, they say. They call it spontaneous remission. The bug’s still in there, but it’s asleep and not bothering anything. I’ve read about cases that only flared up once or twice before they just went away for good. I guess not this time, though.” He smiled ruefully. “Leave it to me to catch a good dose.” He shrugged. “At least the son-of-a-bitch didn’t give me HIV. They tested me for that about six months after I got tapped. That was to give it time to show up if it was going to.”

“You’ve had hepatitis C the whole time we’ve been cellmates and you never told me?” It seemed to Palmer like a fairly large omission. “What if you gave it to me?” He knew that the disease wasn’t supposed to be transmitted by casual contact, but he had a sudden strong desire to

wash his hands and scoot a bit farther away, nevertheless. He fought this urge out of courtesy and respect for his cousin and friend.

“Like I said, I was hoping the shit was in permanent remission. Anyway, you can’t catch it just by living with someone. Or at least, that’s what they say. You can only get it by sharing infected needles or by having sex with someone who has it. Sometimes you can get it from blood transfusions, but that doesn’t happen much anymore. And you can catch it from tattoo artists if they’re dickheads who don’t sterilize their needles.” He shrugged. “And sometimes you can pick up a case of it by getting ass-raped at Hays.”

“Still, you should have told me.”

“Should have, would have, blah, blah, blah,” Cheddar said. He stepped to the door, looked both ways, and lit a Camel. Palmer took the pack and lit one as well.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“There wasn’t any point in telling you. All that would have done would have been to get you all nuttud up, kind of like you are right now.”

“I’m not nuttud up.”

“You stay nuttud up. You may be the most nuttud up person I’ve ever met, but I know you can’t help it, so I don’t blame you. Look, I can’t do anything about the fact that I have it, and neither can you. I thought it had gone away but it hasn’t. You can’t catch it from me unless we shoot up together or we dance the horizontal love tango. I don’t have any drugs, so that one’s out. And don’t take this wrong, but frankly, you’re not my type, so that’s out, too. Plus, we’re first cousins, so it just wouldn’t be right. So it looks like you’re safe.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I guess I’ll make an appointment at the infirmary. See what the doc has to say. But it probably won’t be much. He’ll tell me to lay off the smokes for a while and try to get plenty of rest until it goes back into remission. He might put me on some vitamin D. Sometimes they do and sometimes they don’t. It kind of depends on the doctor. I guess I’ll need to go light on Reeves’ raisin jack. That’s too bad, because this last batch only makes you gag a little bit.”

Palmer nodded. Reeves had indeed hit his stride and was steadily perfecting his craft.

“What about medicine? Won’t the doctor give you something to take?”

“This is one of those \$5000 per month diseases,” Cheddar said. “Guys with good health insurance plans who aren’t serving twenty-five years for manufacturing and dealing meth get interferon, mega vitamin D, and all that other high-priced shit. I’ll get a pat on the ass and an aspirin. Unless they’re out of aspirin. Then I’ll just get the pat on the ass.”

“They have to treat you.”

“They absolutely have to treat me. But they don’t have to spend any money on me, and they damn sure don’t have to cure me.”