

SAMPLE

Beyond the Higher Ground

A Novel

Thomas A. Brigger

I

*April 2017*

*She's gone, Tuck.*

The words had surfaced as always, heavy and severe, as he awoke to the commotion of landing. Mason suppressed the past once again as he struggled into the aisle and exited the plane, moving quickly to the car rental counter, to the rental lot and out of the airport.

Springtime growth surrounded the highway ahead with budding trees and wildflowers flowing into the magnificence of the Blue Ridge range, conforming to what Google had displayed before he left Trenton. But it was not quite as expected as he drove on from the airport, passing deteriorating mountain burghs that seemed frozen in time that was not their best time and aging businesses that were long past whatever time they flourished in. Homes appeared sporadically, many that were no more than ramshackle structures on pitted lanes, where spent vehicles rusted among the emerging weed growth and the hollow stares of residents emanated from side yards and broken porches. There was a conflict here, a vague dissonance that seemed to underlie the rustic countryside and the isolated and sometimes abandoned industrial plants. The disconnect seemed oddly appropriate, as his charge for being here gradually became secondary to his curiosity, despite Leo's curt description of this part of Wells County, Virginia, as a desolate lost cause, offering little more than cheap labor in submission to a legacy of desperation, that desperation founded as coal mines were closing and perpetuated by the diminishing offer of employment that the plants held, not in hope but merely as a thin and vulnerable means to survival. Driving on, Mason already sensed that there was more to this place than even Leo was aware of.

The GPS announced the exit to Two Stump Road in a quarter mile, and Mason approached the narrow ramp slowly as it took him onto a poorly maintained pavement that dissolved into a heavily wooded area, then rising to a sharp curve and an unmarked intersection that the GPS proclaimed to be Mills Hollow Road, turn right. The GPS then marked his destination on the right in about one-half mile, but it did not appear as announced. He made a U-turn and drove slowly back, searching in vain for the address in his hand but seeing no structure except a small house on the other side of the road where two men were sitting on a front porch. Regretting his desperation, Mason turned his rental car into the graveled driveway, feeling as if he was about to experience something foreign and bizarre as he got out of the car and walked slowly toward the house. Even without speaking, the two men on the porch before him tacitly confirmed his expectations.

One of the men was young, tall, and broad shouldered with blond hair nesting a filthy cap in thick tufts, wearing jeans thinning at the knees and a faded shirt that was sparse and frayed at the collar. He was muscular and robust in his prime but strangely inanimate, his pale blue eyes shallow and without dimension, as if painted in the soft inset of his face. The other was considerably older, thin, and oddly proportioned, his tiny head burdened by thick glasses and nesting in a cradle of knotty arms as he leaned backward in his chair against the faded wood siding of the house. Mason regarded both men carefully as he walked through the yard, the two of them sitting there with neither motion

nor apparent cause as he approached, simply staring at him in the same transparent wonderment that infants display from the arms of tending mothers.

He stopped at the porch steps, a forbidding assembly, cupped and split more from neglect than use—bare wood and traces of gray paint that led to the faded deck in no better state of repair than the straight-backed chairs that the porch sitters occupied. The house was a pathetic clapboard single story with dust-laden windows and mossy black roof, colorless and trivial amid the untrimmed confinement of the tiny yard, about which random bits of debris and old tools lay in various stages of deterioration among the sparse grass and weeds. Behind and to one side of the house was a small shed, dilapidated and unpainted as it seemed to be leaning into itself, the onetime door flat amid the weeds that grew around it, and the wasted hulk of a pickup truck that still had some of its dull white finish showing obstinately through rusted dents and creases. Mason hesitated, feeling vulnerable in the presence of an unyielding culture that, until now, he could only imagine from hearsay and still regarded as something foreign, yet nonetheless imperatively rooted in some undefined commonality with himself. Unable to conceal his uneasiness, he spoke *foolishly*, he thought, his words spilling out haphazardly.

“Good morning. I’m looking for 62 Mills Hollow.” Mason waited politely for the response that came only in the form of a slight movement of the older man.

“I’ve been up and down here. This is Mills Hollow Road, isn’t it?” he paused, glancing over his shoulder toward the road and then back toward the two on the porch, who remained silent and unaffected. Mason continued, “I must be close,” pause again, no response. “Your mail box is 59 and my GPS says that I have arrived, so I figure I’m missing something.”

He waited, having nothing more to say, standing there before the two, the younger one staring at something on the ground beyond Mason’s left leg and the older one cocking his head slowly, as if Mason’s words were just now reaching his ears, dribbling in from the cool mountain air and reassembling into some form of translated coherence. He (the older one) leaned forward, the front legs of his chair clicking distinctively on the porch deck as he dropped his arms to his lap, his eyes swelling like fishbowls through thick lenses, which gave him a grotesque, almost menacing countenance as his mouth formed to speak, pursing and opening well in advance of any sound.

“That would be Newley’s place,” he said slowly in a voice dry and worn as the wood about the house and porch. “It’s over there.” He nodded beyond Mason, who turned instinctively in the direction of the nod toward a narrow driveway entrance across the road, almost completely obscured by growth and a large locust tree that was severely gashed well into its trunk. “Ain’t got no mailbox,” the man continued. “Kid whacked it off night afore last when he missed the bend. Durn near killed hisself. Ain’t got no sense nohow, that boy. Always bustin’ ’round that bend like he takin’ a turn at Bristol. I told Jeff”—he turned to the younger man, who still seemed mesmerized by something on the ground—“din’t I, Jeff”—the younger man lifted his head as if awakened from sleep but kept his eyes blankly on the lawn—“I told Jeff that boy’s going to git hisself killed and there be a blessin’ if he don’t kill someone else whilst he’s at it.” He leaned back again, crossing his arms behind his head as before, and he looked away from Mason, his chin lifting slightly as if he were attempting to hear some barely discernible whispering in the breeze that hushed gently about the house and yard.

Mason hesitated again, somewhat taken aback by the abruptness of the conversation. He stood there, awkward and exposed, unsure of the expected protocol. The silence of the moment was unsettling. “Thank you,” he said, turning his head toward the entrance across the road. He looked back at the men on the porch, regarding them with a slight raise of his hand and turned to leave. As he walked away, he heard the chair legs click again on the porch deck behind him and the older man’s voice, dry and raspy as before, but a little shriller now.

“If ya come to see Newleys, they ain’t there.”

Mason stopped and turned, again facing the house. The older man continued, now sitting erect in his chair, "Ansel died last fall. Ol' lady gone too. Died in her bed's what I heerd. So if ya come alookin' fer 'em, they ain't there." He leaned forward again, elbows propped on tiny denim-clad legs, his head tensed as if he were arguing a point in debate. He eyed Mason severely through the distorted depth of his glasses. Mason started to speak, feeling unexpectedly challenged, but the little man went on, his voice rising sharply in the breeze. "Ain't nobody been there since. Nobody livin' there, that is. 'Cep th' feller what owns it now, and he been havin' some folks in and out, what with fixin' it up an' all. But he don't live there. Just comes and goes and them folks he got just comes and goes and don't stay and ain't nobody really livin' there. Not since Ansel and the ol' lady died. So if you ain't one of them fellers what comes and goes and ya come to see Newleys, they ain't there."

The man paused, still leaning forward, his round little mouth poised open, not gaping but stiff-lipped and dark, like a portal from which whatever knowledge he possessed might tumble forth. Mason, now more amused than anything else, looked at him with a vague fascination, as one regards conversation in a foreign language. He hesitated, somewhat in politeness but more so from a sense of diversion and the expectation of more, but the man did not continue, sitting there as if frozen in his position, blinking through the bottled lenses. The wind picked up a little, and Mason could hear the faint drone of a truck on the highway as it shifted and accelerated about the dips and rises in the walled valley beyond, other sounds discretely and subtly emerging in the constancy of the breeze: birds, a shuffling sound in the trees behind the house, a dog barking in the distance.

Then the older man spoke again, with the same abruptness as before, as if he had been silenced and reenergized by some mechanical switch, the little mouth moving in advance of words like a puppet out of sync with its holder. "Be a pity, though. Nurse found 'em when she come to tend the ol' lady. Found Ansel there in the front yard, dead as a rock and been there for days, and the ol' lady dead in her bed. Be a pity, don't it? Ansel and the ol' lady dead and nobody knowin', not even me an' Jeff, here, nobody knowin' but that they be gettin' along and doin' what they done and that nurse hadn't been there, so a different one come later and found them both dead." He shook his head, moving it independently of his body, which remained stiffly positioned in the chair. "Be a pity, don't it?"

Mason stood patiently as the man spoke, still amused by the unsolicited bit of local gossip, conflicted by the self-generated urgency of his appointment, and an emerging desire to encourage more of the man's hearsay, having developed in his rather transitory adult life a keen and sometimes compulsive interest in the colloquial history of his surroundings. Nevertheless, he had a full schedule and realized his need to move on. Still attempting to extract himself politely, he acknowledged the information, carefully avoiding any encouragement to continue. "That's a shame," he responded. "Actually, I didn't know them. I'm here to meet a Mr. Wellman about renting the house—"

"Ain't there," the older man interrupted, with such abruptness that Mason instinctively took a half-step back, a movement that he immediately regretted as an obvious loss of control in strange company. He desperately attempted to regain his composure and extricate himself from the man's prattling.

"I...beg your pardon."

"Ain't there yet. Not Cletus Wellman, not nobody. Ain't nobody been there all day. Been somebody there we'd a seen 'em. And we ain't seein' nuthin' yet, are we, Jeff?" He turned to his younger companion, who still had not moved or changed his gaze or acknowledged Mason before him on the lawn but sat there, lumpish and dumb, his dull countenance slightly affected by the inclusion. The older man continued, "Reckon if Cletus set to meetcha, he'd be along presently. Reckon you set there awaitin' fer 'im, he'd be along." He lifted his chin, twisting his neck as he spoke. "You can set here iffen you want."

Mason smiled at the proposition of remaining and overcame the temptation to accept the offer, turning his head slightly. “Thanks, but I think I’ll go on over and have a look around.” He turned to walk away but stopped in favor of an obligatory sense of courtesy, turning back toward the two on the porch. “In case we end up as neighbors, I’m Tucker Mason.” He considered stepping forward to offer a handshake but decided not to, sensing an invasive element in his presence that would make such a gesture somewhat violating and pretentious. There was another excruciating lack of response from the porch and the awkwardness of his position on the lawn suddenly seemed unbearable. But the little man spoke again before Mason could walk away.

“Cecil Beckman.” His tone was more in the form of an address than an introduction. “Dis here’s Jeff.” He leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms on his chest, his chin lowered. Observing the obvious disconnect, Mason waved his hand awkwardly, mumbling, “Pleased to meet you,” and walked away, desperately attempting to conceal his relief to escape as he opened the door of the idling car. As he backed the car out of the driveway, he glanced at the porch and its two occupants who sat with the same rigid disassociation as when he had found them, motionless and unaffected, like background props on an empty stage.

Gravel and dried mud crunched under the wheels of the car as Mason turned slowly into the drive across the road. To the left were the scarred locust tree and the path of stripped vegetation and churned earth where the kid had taken out the mailbox and apparently rolled his car into the ditch that ran parallel to the road. The remains of mailbox itself were partially visible under a crushed bush in the bank of the ditch—trashed and fragmented bits of gray metal pressed into the earth like shredded paper. The drive was rutted and unpaved, twisting severely and banked into the slope of Mills Hollow Road, which dropped abruptly and curled down a steep hill into a darkly wooded vale, with a few apparently abandoned structures that either hid behind the trees or, like Cecil Beckman’s, sat obtusely near the road. Mason proceeded carefully, wishing he had his Jeep instead of the rented Buick, which bounced and slid about the narrow cut that neither terminated nor continued but simply faded into a sparsely graveled lot in the yard around Ansel Newley’s former residence.

The house appeared suddenly, emerging in a clearing of the dense woods amid an acre or more of recently trimmed lawn, a moderately sized single-story structure of white frame and matching trim with a disproportionate covered front porch that ran the full width. The house and porch were freshly painted and showed evidence of minor repairs. A small outbuilding, larger than a storage shed or garage but too small to be called a barn, was situated to the right and in front of the house partially enclosing the lot. The yard itself was randomly interspersed with budding forsythia and various shrubs, mostly unattended and showing the wooded heaviness of old plantings, in base kinship with the forest beyond that encircled the place with a kind of walled confinement. Mason opened the car door and got out, casually looking around as he strolled up to the porch, where he sat on a white iron chair that had not been recently painted but showed evidence of harsh cleaning and still bore scrub marks on its flat surfaces.

The place in general held a primitive sense of revival, and the layers of white paint and new rails on the porch and cheap new hardware on the front door were a kind of temporary rescue from the ruinous state of so many of the houses (Cecil Beckman’s included) that Mason had passed driving in from the airport that morning. The restoration was not extensive, being more of a rude conformance to the home that it once was—someone named Ansel Newley’s home that he shared with his wife and where he probably raised children and had the fleeting pleasures of life sifting through its very boards until that moment, as chronicled by Cecil Beckman, when Ansel and his wife passed on, and the walls were painted to obscure whatever thriving they contained and promulgated for how many years—walls covered like Ansel in his grave, his corpse covered with earth, and his legacy with white paint. It was the sense of renewal that attracted Mason to the place, the neat cleansing of mortality

and fitness for his presence, the memories that he did not share now to be obscured and scrubbed clean as the chair he was sitting on.

If Leo was right, Mason thought, this was probably as good as it would get. Leo, sitting back in his chair in the Trenton office, rubbing his hand through the sparse patch of red hair on his freckled forehead, had said that he would be best to find a place to rent and stay out of the motels because there wouldn't be much to do, and the motels are hardly habitable for more than a night or two. "Besides, it's cheaper in the long run," Leo had said. "You're going to live there for more than a year, Tuck, and you won't find anything like what you had in Denver, so I'd recommend that you rent yourself a house somewhere near the site. You shouldn't have any trouble finding one, but you may have to work at finding a decent one. In all honesty, we didn't see much when we were down there." "We," referring to Leo himself and whoever from Estimating had been to Wells County to check out the site and bid the prison project and then again to finalize the contract details in a crowded meeting room at the airport, when Mike Beal was there, and it was to be his job. But Mike had to beg out shortly after the project commenced, his wife drawing the line at eighteen months in Southwestern Virginia. He sat there in the conference room in Trenton, offering, "Sure, Tuck can handle it," and everyone knowing full well that, despite his successes, Mason had no prison-building experience but also knowing that the alternative could land duty building a prison in Wells County, Virginia, that could be regarded as a kind of sentence in itself and, in Mike's case, a means to divorce. So they all endorsed Mason's capability to build the prison, though Tom Doenitz was skeptical, looking to Leo across the table with obvious concern without so much as a sideways glance at Mason or even peripheral notice of his presence, and Leo, ever confident in his intrinsic necessity to his employer, sitting back, nodding slightly, almost defiantly, the challenge being laid upon not one of his own, not Mason nor any other subordinated project manager in the employment of Doenitz Building Company whom Leo had either trained or retrained but on Leo himself. The decision was made then between Leo and Tom, having little to do with Mason's capability or experience (or lack of it) or mere breathing presence in the room to accept the job while the others quietly bated, their eyes trained to the table. Mason was then handed forth, the decision being made with no more affectation than Tom Doenitz's brief glare at Leo and Leo claiming unspoken once again the rights to competency, all in a moment, all in the instant of an agenda check-off in a weekly meeting of the project team. But despite his trepidation about the assignment or his quiet resentment of Leo's arrogant pandering of his services, despite the droll, unfitting circumstance of Wells County and the overwhelming unbuilt prison, Mason felt a welcoming sense of renewal, sitting there on that porch in the now warming morning breeze.

A renewal was appropriate; renewal in the sense of this house, which was not really renewal but a covering of white paint over old boards that, beneath the white coating, were no better than the waste of Cecil Beckman's rotting abode, perhaps not really renewal but a covering of the past, obscuring the loss like the change of scenery might obscure Katherine. And Katherine, not forgotten but also covered over, still there under the whitewash, hidden and revealed only in the fleeting interjections of his thoughts. Mason would call it a renewal, a reassembling of pieces to an image that might resemble its former presence but reformed for its current purpose: the wreck of Ansel Newley's home and the painful, heartbreaking loss of Katherine covered over and trimmed neatly for a beginning away from all things past. Appropriate, Mason thought, sitting there in that old iron chair, with its layers of worn enamel scrubbed clean, the place being fitted well and secluded, not in Denver, not in Maryland or Ohio or any other place he had lived, appropriate for renewal in the freshness of spring, so he could breathe out the lingering past and live to whatever end there was beyond Wells County, Virginia, and its Low Creek Maximum Security Prison, the prison itself being representative of newness and initiation. He leaned back, comfortable perhaps for the first time since he had left Denver, warmly regarding this place as a suitable home for the time being (home being

such a relative issue in his life) so much so that the gray Suburban creeping around the bend and into the lot already seemed a violation of his privacy.

Cletus Wellman climbed out of his car slowly in a series of short mechanical movements that revealed some painful process in his exit, which was further accentuated by the tentative stiffness of his form as he walked, carefully measuring each step as he proceeded toward the porch. He was a small colorless man with a rather clerical presence and pervading fastidiousness that affected his uneasy motion. His thinning hair was brushed neatly back over a pale scalp, and he had a plainness about the face and wash-and-wear white shirt and ill-fitting trousers and hairless arms that dangled in sparse definition from his short sleeves like appendages on a toy that could be removed and interchanged. He could easily be taken for a back-office subordinate, except for the incongruous sense of purpose that he bore as he rigidly and painstakingly placed one foot in front of the other as one would walk barefoot over rough ground. Mason watched him casually, questioning in his mind whether the man would actually make it to the porch or seize up altogether and fall over like a statue off its base, brittle and teetering as it toppled to the grass. Eventually arriving at the porch, he reached out his right hand toward Mason, the other steadying his meticulous ascent of the porch steps.

“Mr. Mason,” he breathed, gasping slightly, “Cletus Wellman.” Mason instinctively took the man’s hand and shook it. “Apologies for making you wait, sir. You been here long?”

“No. Just a few minutes.”

“Well, sorry anyway.” He was fumbling with a large ring of keys that he had held close to his body as he approached the porch. “I been running behind today, and to beat it all, I got it in the back.” He looked up at Mason from the keys. “Spasms. Get ’em ever so often.” He grabbed one of the keys, holding it between his thumb and forefinger as the others dropped noisily on the ring below it. “Come on in, and I’ll show you around.”

As he worked the key into the front door, Wellman looked back at Mason, pausing as he spoke, “Wife says you come to build the prison.” Mason had spoken with Mrs. Wellman when he called the number on a scrap piece of paper that Casey had passed to him in Trenton the week before. “How long you figure you’d stay?” Wellman continued. The door opened with a slight creak.

“About a year and a half, if the schedule holds.”

“Like the other guy from your company, McAfee, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, Casey McAfee. He told me you rented him a house near Kingsport.”

“Yep, rented several places out to prison builders.” Wellman still had his hand on the door knob. “Year and a half. Is that a long time to build a prison?”

“Not really. It’s a big facility, fourteen hundred cells. Actually, it’s—”

“No matter,” Wellman interrupted as he entered the house. “Don’t know much about prisons and don’t need to start learning now.”

Mason listened distantly as Wellman took him quickly from room to room and showed him about the sparse inside of the house with an urgency that would normally have been annoying had Mason not already made his decision about the house by its exterior, considering its position and location more important than the new floor in the kitchen or the proximate convenience of the three tiny bedrooms and renovated single bath, all of which had been meticulously cleaned and recently painted. He followed Wellman as he stepped outside from the back door onto a small but intricately built wooden deck, then into the yard, where Wellman pointed to the new Caviette that was buried near the tree line. Wellman had talked continuously as he moved about the rooms, describing them as if he were reading from a script, Mason nodding and commenting politely but not too much so as to initiate further conversation or contemplative delay that would keep Wellman there any longer than necessary by the courtesy due. The tour ended at the structure adjacent to the house that Wellman referred to as the shop. “I lost the key to it, but if you think you might want to use it, I can get a new key made. Oh, by the way, we had a security system installed because of some break-ins while we were doing the

renovations. Figured it was someone looking to steal tools or such. Nothing was stolen, but we left the system in place and will continue to pay for the service. That can give you some peace of mind although I don't think you would have much to worry about on this mountain." He looked up at Mason. "So what do you think?"

Mason looked back at the house and then at Wellman, sensing that Wellman's urgency was borne of the pain in his back and was not his usual business demeanor. He had no intention of keeping the man any longer than necessary in his discomfort, quickly addressing the rent issues that Wellman, with beads of sweat now appearing on his forehead, rattled at eight hundred and no lawn service you pay your own utilities and Mason requesting a written quote for approval of the home office, indicating an e-mail address on his business card. Then Wellman proceeded back to his car in painful short steps that Mason closely matched as he accompanied the man across the lot. "It's a nice place," he said, "close to the prison site and the highway. Seems like it's in fairly good shape."

"Took a lot of fix up. Only had one owner, though the man who built it originally."

"Really." Mason remembered his conversation with Cecil Beckman. "I understand he died here last year."

Wellman hesitated slightly, turning his head toward Mason with a strange, inquisitive look. Mason continued, realizing Wellman's apparent surprise at his knowledge of such information. "I spoke with a man across the road, and he told me that the former owner had died last year."

Wellman opened the car door, carefully pulling it past his body as he smiled painfully at Mason. "Oh, you met Cecil. Like an old washwoman, isn't he?" He gripped the door and began to slide back first onto the seat.

Mason shrugged. "I don't know. He seemed okay. Appears to know a lot about what's going on around here."

"Talks a lot. Hard to know when you can believe him." Wellman grabbed his pants as he drew his legs into the car. "He's harmless though. Give him a beer, and he'll pass bull to you all night if you can stand it. Crazy old bird."

"What about the owner?" Mason's curiosity seemed impulsive even to himself.

Wellman looked at Mason, briefly studying his face before answering. "Died right here in the middle of the lot. Poor guy." He started the car and now appeared to be quite agitated. "Call me as soon as you get your approval. I need you to fill out an application too so we know who it is we got living here. I'll send one to you. Pleasure meeting you, Mr. Mason, but I got another appointment. You're welcome to stay if you want to look around awhile." The door thumped shut, and the Suburban backed up slowly, turning in the lot and rocking about the rutted driveway as it disappeared around the bend. Mason looked at his watch and realized that he was late for a meeting at the prison site. As he got into the rental car, he looked around once more, satisfied with the place and his attitude in general, taking in the quaintness and simplicity of the house and lot and the thick wall of Appalachian forest that surrounded it with oak and hickory and heavy brush, the brush, however slightly disturbing for reasons not immediate but revealing afterward as he drove forward—a movement and fading glimpse of color occurring to him after its passing, his eye catching and losing something in the foliage that faded and disappeared as he drove on, and he realized only as he pulled out onto the road and saw Cecil Beckman sitting alone on his porch that it was Jeff, standing partially behind an oak tree and watching from the cover of a thicket near the drive.

Page Break **II**

Bright's Mountain was indistinguishable from its neighboring peaks to anyone except the local residents of Wells County before the state of Virginia designated it as the site for a maximum security prison. The selection of this site had been mildly debated, some considering this location as a

concessionary response to the objections of wealthier districts while others viewed the construction of a prison towering over the area as a continuance of the gradual degradation of Appalachian heritage. But to the residents of nearby Low Creek and its immediate neighbors, any facility that might offer a means to a government paycheck for some of the one quarter of its population who were unemployed or underemployed was welcome. So the site was approved with little need for active campaigning in the legislature, and Bright's Mountain was prepared to receive its holdings by having its crest removed and top leveled, and its scarred revelation could now be identified easily from aircraft at thirty thousand feet and passersby on the four-lane highway that traversed this corner of Southwestern Virginia.

Preparation of the prison building site was accomplished by drilling into the peak and setting off explosives deep underground, which caused the steeply sloping hillside to crumble in vertical sections that fell in thick plumes of dust, leaving piles of rock and dirt that were then shoved over the side of the mountain until a sizable notch was carved out with a rigidly flat surface for the building pads and an imposing shear wall of rock constituting its eastern boundary. The remaining exposures of the site were defined by a panoramic view of the Low Creek Valley and surrounding mountains, which seemed more suited for a tourist attraction than the benefit of what the Virginia Department of Corrections considered the worst of its incarcerated population.

Mason approached the site with the usual apprehension that accompanies new assignments, driving slowly on the dirt and gravel access road that twisted a half mile uphill from Mills Hollow Road, cautiously considering not the construction itself but the untamed condition that seemed to envelop it, the construction vulnerable and foreign in this endless swell of earth known as Appalachia to outsiders but as universe to those who claimed no ownership except by heritage of location and who submitted to it naturally. The road turned into the north side of the site and faded into a myriad of rutted and fading tracks, spreading like a river delta into the sea of dirt and activity about the building pads. The site had no order beyond its expectation, as the inherent symmetry of the intended buildings was not yet fully achieved and was now restricted to the emerging pads and the Doenitz office trailer, the latter being situated at the termination of the road in a controlling position over anyone entering the area, as well as making a suitable check-in station for the subcontractors who would queue their respective trailers alongside it, eventually creating a neat row of similar structures with wooden porches that would line up symmetrically like urban row houses overlooking the valley and facing the eventual prison structure. The trailer gave Mason an encouraging sense of stability as he parked in front of it, noting its double-wide familiarity and the requisite "Doenitz Building Company" sign and logo and Casey beside it, emerging from the ubiquitous backdrop of dust and rock in the glare of the late morning sun.

Casey McAfee had been assigned as superintendent earlier but now could be Leo's hedge against the risk of his untested project manager. Mike Beal had said, "Sure, Tuck can handle it," and all agreed, but Leo was well aware of the capabilities of his subordinates, and despite Mason's experience in building large structures, he had never built a prison. Leo's confidence in Mason was borne of his own ability to develop competency, and that ability, sacrosanct in the company and imperative to the provision of his employment, was far too vital for the hazard of Mason's unsupported presence. So Casey could balance the default, and Leo's brilliance would be sustained, and Mason's exposure redeemed. Mason knew Casey well, having initially been delivered by Leo to his tutelage in Maryland after two years in the home office in Trenton; the journeyman sojourn to the field that was mandatory for all aspiring Doenitz project managers, where Casey or other veterans like him would reveal the actuality of the business, taking trainees in the father-like fashion that Leo had promulgated in the home office, such that if Leo was indeed the Father of Form then Casey was the Father of Function, giving substance to the instruction gained. "Like boot camp in the army," Leo had called it, referring to Mason's seven months in subordination to the man whom he would eventually rise above

by design in the company hierarchy. Mason's respect for Casey preceded his position, and he was both relieved and anxious as Casey greeted him.

After a brief walk-down of the site, Casey led Mason to the trailer, which was the usual Doenitz specification with dusty cheap wood paneling and worn vinyl tile floor that bore muddy streaks made undoubtedly by some begrudging laborer's mop in preparation for Mason's visit. The offices were as yet unfurnished except for one in the rear, which Mason would eventually claim as his own, where there were two battered steel folding chairs and an old steel desk upon which Casey unrolled blueprints and discussed the intricacies of the project with Mason, describing details in his caustic firmness of voice that resounded years of communicating in the chaotic environment of his work. Mason listened earnestly as Casey spoke, offering his acknowledgment with forced concentration, though the spectacular view through a rear window of the mountains beyond occasionally stole his attention, causing Casey to look up over the rim of his half glasses with a riveting glare and "are you with me, Tuck?" and Mason, embarrassed, would return to the matter at hand like a chastened schoolboy.

It was half past noon when Casey finally leaned back in his chair, holding his glasses with one hand and slapping the table with the other. "Damn," he said, his voice reverberating against the thin walls of the trailer, "it's past lunch time already. C'mon, let's go eat." He stood up and excused himself into the tiny restroom, still talking to Mason through the door. "Where are you staying tonight, Tuck?"

"I'm not. Leo wants me in Trenton tomorrow to meet with the architect. I'll be back next week for good, though."

Casey came out of the restroom, wiping his hands with a paper towel. "I guess that's okay." He opened the door, peering out at the site and rubbing his chin with his thumb. "Pads are in good shape." He motioned for Mason to follow him as he walked out. "Mike did a good job on the preconstruction stuff, but I'll need you here next week, boss. Make sure that fat ass Leo doesn't hang on to you any longer than that."

"I'll be here," Mason answered as he followed.

When they exited the trailer, Mason noticed that the left front tire on his rental car was flat. Casey motioned to a laborer who was spreading gravel nearby and instructed him to change it, his voice transcendent over the sound of earth-moving equipment and the continuous crumbling of the mountaintop. The laborer caught the keys from Mason and was opening the trunk of the rental as they climbed into Casey's pickup and drove down the severely curving access road toward Low Creek. The stringency of Casey's disposition seemed to soften as they drove away from the site and he seemed to become more personable as they progressed down the hill, mellowing gradually as if his demeanor at the site was reserved solely for the rigors that toughened experienced builders to the mien of their environment. It was a quality that Mason admired greatly in Casey; the inherent ability to match his intensity to the necessity of circumstance and leave the rigid demands of his responsibilities at the jobsite, giving him a depth of character rarely demonstrated by his peers. As they approached the second turn Casey asked Mason, "Did you get ahold of Cletus?"

Mason answered, "Yeah. I met him this morning. He's got a nice little place for me just down the road."

Casey downshifted as the road became steeper. He looked hard at Mason, though still without the severity of his jobsite persona. "What the hell do you want to live there for?" He rubbed his hand across the short thickness of hair on his scalp. "Look, Cletus has some apartments in Kingsport near my place. A lot of the subs are moving in there too. Shoot, Tuck, you don't want to live out here all by yourself."

Mason withheld his annoyance at the comment, and he started to say that it was Leo's recommendation but caught himself. "I know. Mrs. Wellman told me about the apartments when I called. But that's forty minutes either way. I'd rather be a little closer to work."

The pickup lurched a bit as Casey shifted and turned onto Two Stump Road and the highway in the direction of the Low Creek business district. He shook his head slightly. "Well, suit yourself, boss. I don't know why Cletus showed you that place anyway. Just the same, it seems to me like you'll be awful lonesome out here."

The word "lonesome" seemed to have an unusual brutality, unusual because despite the fact that so much of Mason's life had been spent alone, he had seldom considered the impact of loneliness until recently. His mind wandered off with it as Casey turned a corner into the Low Creek business district.

"Here it is, Tuck, beautiful downtown Low Creek," Casey said as the heart of Low Creek commerce and government emerged around him, four blocks of worn-out buildings in frame and old brick, none more than three-stories high, some empty, some partially in use for whatever minor business they housed amid crumbling streets and sidewalks that were noticeably unattended, plain houses with neatly trimmed yards, a church with rust streaks running down its yellowing white steeple, flanked by a bank and gas station; a quaint, regressive assembly that seemed to exist for no reason other than its precedent need in the relative prosperity of times past. Mason stared through the window of Casey's truck, still contemplating loneliness as Katherine entered his thoughts, her essence dissolving as he helplessly longed for her presence, the buildings fading into a soft blur as his attention turned inward.

"C'mon, Tuck."

Mason blinked as he realized that the pickup had stopped, and Casey was climbing out. He got himself out and Casey was saying something about the food here as he walked ahead through a dusty storefront with a painted sign that said HARLEY'S RESTAURANT. Mason followed sheepishly, embarrassed by his obvious daydreaming into a plain but impeccably clean dining room with a buffet line set up along two exterior walls and a dozen or so tables in the center. The tables were occupied mostly by construction workers from the prison and the local regulars, all regarding each other in colloquial rituals and noisy conversation among themselves so that the place had the atmosphere more of a family gathering than a restaurant. Mason and Casey took their food from the line and sat down at a table near the front, where a waitress approached them with two plastic water glasses and paper napkins as Casey bantered with others in the room. The waitress was thin, easily in her late seventies or more, her white dress hanging in haphazard pleats that scarcely concealed the frailty of her body, gray hair pulled back to reveal the ravages of time and exposure about her face and blue-framed glasses that seemed oppressive on the thin ridge of her nose. Casey took her hand and pulled her to him. He winked at Mason as he spoke. "Ya still love me, darlin'?"

The waitress laughed with a low cackling sound that was perhaps the vestige of a giggle from some time ago, the tight creases of her face drawing together as she stiffly tossed her head back. She placed her hand on Casey's shoulder, looking down at him through her thick glasses. "You's my man" came slowly from the thin line of her lips in a static monotone that bespoke her years.

He released her hand, and she blushed as she smoothed her apron. "Verna Lee, this is Tucker," Casey said as he arranged his plate on the table. "Now you treat him good because he's going to be my boss from now on."

Verna Lee touched Mason's arm. "Nice to meetcha, Mr. Tucker. We'll take good care o' ya. You settin' up in Kingsport like my man here?"

"No, ma'am, I'm staying near the prison in Wells County."

She lifted Mason's glass and wiped the table beneath it with a damp cloth. "Where 'bout's?"

"On Mills Hollow Road."

Verna Lee stopped, holding the cloth away from her as she spoke. "Ain't many houses there to take from. Y'ain't movin' to Newley's house, are ya?"

"Yes, ma'am. Well, I haven't rented it yet, but I intend to. Do you know the house?"

She wrapped the cloth around her hand and held the ends tightly, so the thin and mottled skin turned white around mildly arthritic knuckles. A sudden darkness seemed to come about her face as the smile left it entirely. Her already-weakened voice was even lower and somewhat strained when she spoke again, and Mason had to lean slightly toward her to hear beyond the noise in the room. "I knowed Thelma and Ansel just real good, honey," she paused briefly, looking at Mason with a restrained sadness in her eyes, which were red-rimmed and translucent behind the lenses, and then continued in the same feeble tone. "Whatch ya wantin' to live there for?" Briefly forcing the smile back to reveal the gaps among her damaged teeth, she touched Casey. "Y'oughta move in to Kingsport like my feller here." Casey looked up from his pulled pork and beans, and Verna Lee patted him on the shoulder, looking away from Mason but not necessarily at Casey. "You best tell your boss that that mountain ain't no place for folks what don't come from here." She turned to walk away, disregarding Mason entirely as she shook her head, her voice trailing behind her. "Ain't no place 't all. You boys be good now, y'hear?"

Mason looked at Casey. "Did I say something wrong?"

"They're a strange bunch, Tuck, but good people," Casey answered as he broke a piece of bread. "I guess it'll take some time to get to know them. This corn bread is outstanding."

Mason watched Verna Lee disappear through a metal-clad doorway into the kitchen. "I don't know. She seemed kind of pissed off, didn't she?"

"She's old. Who the hell's Thelma and Andrew?"

"Ansel. They were the people who used to live in the house I'm renting."

"Cletus tell you that?"

"No. I heard it from one of the neighbors out there. An old guy across the street gave me the whole low-down. Actually, I don't think this place is nearly as bad as Leo made it out to be.

Casey peered over his half-glasses and shrugged. He wiped his mouth with his napkin, seeming uncomfortable and apprehensive, as if he were struggling to remember a rehearsed line. Looking at Mason, he spoke in the slow, obligatory tone of a visitor at the funeral for someone he didn't know. "Tuck, ah, about your wife. I'm real sorry..."

Katherine's face passed in Mason's mind, and he felt her presence briefly, as if a door had opened to reveal her and quickly closed, her appearance fading behind it. After what seemed a long time, he answered quietly, "Thanks, Casey."

"Well," Casey said, raising his hands above the table, "we all felt real bad, you know. I was in Puerto Rico on Tommy Doenitz's goddamn hotel job and couldn't make it to the funeral. We sent flowers." He was obviously trying to find a way out of the awkwardness caused by the reference. "It's gotta be tough, Tuck. Maybe the change here will do you some good."

"Sure," Mason said as he tried in vain to regain his composure. He could feel a tightening in his throat as he spoke. The ensuing silence was unbearable. Casey's face grew serious, and he was obviously searching for some redemption as he sat back in his chair.

"You ought to consider staying in Kingsport with us, Tuck. Just think about it."

"I'll think about it." Mason looked across the room, avoiding Casey's eyes and harboring a growing resentment for the man's persistence about his living accommodations.

They finished lunch, and as they returned to the jobsite, Mason noticed with some amusement how Casey's manner seemed to gradually harden again as they neared the top of the mountain. Casey checked his watch as they entered the office trailer. "What time's your flight, Tuck?"

Mason pulled an itinerary from his shirt pocket. "Five seventeen."

Casey took his hard hat from the table and began to roll up the plans that they had been working with before lunch. "You probably ought to get on then. Sometimes there's traffic in Kingsport, and you need time to get rid of that rental car. You know how to get back to the airport, okay?"

“Same way I came in, I guess.” Mason realized that Casey was anxious to have him out of his way. He began to pack his backpack as Casey stepped out of the trailer, the thin door slamming shut behind him. Mason followed a few minutes later and found Casey with the laborer who had been assigned to replace the flat tire on the rental. They were standing near the open trunk of the car, which looked strangely incapacitated with the narrow temporary spare mounted on the left front wheel. The laborer was pointing at something inside the trunk, talking in the animated fashion of someone trying to prove a point as Casey stood in obvious disagreement, shaking his head and grinning under the brim of his hard hat with his hands on his hips. Mason approached them and looked into the trunk, where the flat tire lay with the short stub of a pencil stuck into a small hole in the sidewall.

Casey turned to Mason. “Cabby thinks someone shot your tire, Tuck.” He looked at Cabby and turned back to Mason, still grinning in what appeared to Mason as condescension toward the laborer. “You didn’t piss off one of the locals on your way up here, did you?”

Mason, feeling an obligation to dignify Cabby’s sincerity, addressed him directly. “What makes you think that, Cabby?”

Cabby pointed at the inserted pencil stub but addressed Casey with his reply. “Ain’t no way I never seen a tire get flat wid a hole like ’at in the side. Hit’sa bullet hole, boss, shor’s hell.”

Casey backed Cabby away with his hand and slammed the trunk deck, looking at Mason with his eyes rolling upward. Cabby protested as he was dismissed but stepped away immediately when a piercing glare from Casey signaled the unequivocal termination of the conversation. He walked away muttering, “Ain’t no goddamn rebar” and disappeared into the activity on the building pads. Casey stepped around to the driver’s side of the car, opening the door. He spoke with his face close to Mason as Mason obligingly entered the car. “Excavators cut and bent up some rebar for markers when they built the access road. You probably hit one just right, and it popped up and stuck your tire. Damn Cabby watches too much television.” He stood back and gave a short wave with his hand. “Have a good trip, Tuck. Tell Leo you got to be here next week.”

The car door was closed before Mason could speak, and he felt a bit compromised as Casey walked away in the direction of the building pads, the dust swirling about him and another piece of the mountain crumbling in a heap beyond him as he faded from Mason’s view. Mason drove slowly down the access road, casually scanning the compacted dirt and gravel for pieces of rebar or anything else that might have caused his tire to go flat, but he saw nothing, taking little concern for Cabby’s theory or, for that matter, any cause for the puncture because flat tires on construction sites were as common as the debris that caused them and were usually accepted as a minor hazard of the business. He turned right onto Two Stump Road and proceeded to the highway, suppressing an urge to pass it and continue on Mills Hollow Road and have another look at the house there, admitting to himself that his decision not to go had nothing to do with a lack of time but was more of a self-consciousness before Cecil Beckman’s porch vigil and Jeff’s apparent interest from the woods.

The highway was sparsely occupied by local traffic and the occasional eighteen wheelers that strained and downshifted on the rises and dips as the road rolled and twisted through the valley, parallel to a creek called Bents Run. The stream flowed well below the elevation of the pavement, making it visible only occasionally to passing vehicles as it carved its way through the valley, which in some places was so narrow as to only allow space for the highway and creek and wide enough in others to accommodate a random hamlet or the incongruous symmetry of an industrial plant. The mountains that defined the valley rose sheer and forbidding at the narrow passages, creating an imposing walled presence above the road and then opening gradually into less severe slopes where the houses of varying size and condition appeared subtly, scant and haphazard among the trees and rocks and spring foliage that lent a natural fullness to the place. There was a strange presence about the homes, a profound sense of containment that pervaded the occupied residences and abandoned structures. Mason drove forward with the same feeling of conflict that he had experienced driving in

from the airport that morning, wondering to himself why he felt drawn to Wells County while still sensing some trepidation, that perhaps leaving Denver was never quite a reality until he actually arrived elsewhere and his establishment here, however temporary, might give release to the former, as one foot stepping forward signals release of the other following, moving on and the painful loss behind—Katherine behind him now and just the shadowing memories creeping into his thoughts, hovering like apparitions in a dense fog. He drove on absently, the scenery passing as if he might be standing still, driving more by instinct than purpose as his thoughts wandered, and he caught himself in the reverie with the same private embarrassment that he had experienced with Casey earlier, noting with concern his tendency to daydream of late as something imposing and superseding his distraction caused adrenaline to rise at the moment of its sighting in the rearview mirror. Green and rusty gray, it filled the mirror before hitting the rear bumper of the rental car with a muffled crunching sound. Mason rebounded from the headrest and accelerated enough at a bend in the road to catch in the mirror the profile of an old and battered flatbed truck with wooden side gates. It was gaining on him again as a semi ahead struggled on a rise, so close that Mason had to brake hard and then accelerate to pass, though not enough as the flatbed hit again, this time from such an angle as to cause the rental to spin, barely missing the rear of the semi as it skidded sideways briefly, Mason righting it too late as it slid to the shoulder at the crest of the hill and the steep incline that took the car in its momentum; trees, grass, rocks, and water appearing in rapid succession amid the thump and crush of steel and glass, recurring and diminishing in harsh impact as motion suspended with the senses, and all was dissipated into a shattering prevalence of darkness.

Page Break **III**

Katherine passed like a shadow in the mist that collected about him, close but beyond his reach, passing quickly so that it was more the trailing draft of her presence that he noticed as it dispersed near him like a single breath. He spoke wistfully into the mist, *So this is how it is.*

And there was Denver, when he had stumbled senseless and unfeeling about the process due, the occurrence of life and death being as one without the reality—the reality being in his possession then but packaged and set aside to remain sealed and unaffected as he numbly plodded about. But it had not been real yet. The denial was immediate and unbroken as he put the cell phone back into his pocket and proceeded as if drawn forward without motivation, his car moving by its own intent and purpose as it accelerated and stopped and accelerated again and released him to the hospital parking lot where he again was drawn, his feet not his own but borrowed for the denial as they carried him and he possessing neither resistance nor inducement but acquiescing to the moment that was not real—not yet, not even when he saw Jack’s face, broken and grave in the helplessness of a father’s loss, and Helen, pathetic and small as she quivered in the singular pain of severance that only mothers know, her head buried in Jack’s chest and Jack looking up with his father’s eyes and his father’s pain and the want of strength that will curse a father forever in his grief, the words not real to Mason until he had heard them echoing in countless nights and screaming at one sunrise after another until the reality would quiet them with its own subtle and encompassing truth, the words not just words but the manifestation of the hopeless ruin in that father’s face, *She’s gone, Tuck.*

And it was not yet real. Not in the sober faces of those who then moved graceless and desperate about a room and collected in the doorways, standing in small groups, whispering and nodding in the dim hush as they each in turn segregated to regard Jack and Helen and even himself with a restrained formality that scarcely concealed their bewilderment of the inevitable truth—that truth evidenced by the dark casket amid the flowered softness in a corner of the room, but it was not real, not for anyone there because it was only time and this place that gave it cause and time had its limits, and they would leave this place, relieved and redeemed as they breathed the fresh evening air, alive again and the place

behind them in its stifling and menacing admonition of the truth they would not have, not them nor Jack nor Helen nor himself, not then, not yet. He saw them shift about, titled by Helen's low commentary as they approached as relatives and friends and neighbors and those who knew Jack and Katherine's friends from school, and then it was his turn when Leo arrived, Leo's weighty, sympathetic presence preceding the small group of laborers who shuffled in through the door, moving in such close cadence that they stumbled among themselves, ribald and austere in their borrowed suits and blazers, neckties askew and loose beneath unbuttoned collars on thick necks that turned and stretched like sunning reptiles as they stood pathetic and sad before the casket. He saw them and loved them for their dutiful presence, and he loved Helen at that moment for she was moved in the way that Katherine would have been moved, and she went to them as Katherine would have gone to them, shaking each rough and gentle hand and smiling as only she and Katherine could when it was not real, and they could leave it behind them, all of them anesthetized by the occasion as they then stood again, now in the dewy grass with the sun bright on their shoulders amid the languid apathy of trees and polished stones and innocent of the reality that was and would be as they turned away, their heads bowed, unmindful of the loss that was lowered and covered with earth and revered solemnly behind them as they slowly walked to their cars. And he was left alone, unfeeling and provisional, still drawn beyond the reality, the denial leaving him weightless and gullible in the unknowing comfort of the autumn breeze.

So it was. Not the reality but the callused rebuttal of the truth, knowing but refusing to own that which is no less than a birthright; full payment was yet due as he lay alone and woke alone and remained for days and nights suspended in time, the time slipping about him like water flowing, cleansing gradually the feigned innocence of denial until he sat up as if pulled, and he could feel her presence in the bed, and her scent was everywhere he touched but not her; she was not there. And it was there, suddenly bursting its seal like a dam bursting from a single fissure in its wall, and it was all around him in a smothering inundation as he ran into the night, exploded into the night, and it left him totally and justly with himself as he expelled the denial in the shuddering, gasping trade of innocence and echoed that stark, eternal revelation of man's consequential retribution for living, Jack's voice cold and unrequited statement about him in the rock stillness of that night, *She's gone, Tuck.*

*So this is how it is,* he spoke into the fog, *this is how it is.* The numbness having ceased and the reality now resident so that the father's words would fade into their eternal reverberation of the universe, never ceasing but adding to that distant wailing of the inevitable blight of man's being, and there was only Katherine now, in the face of a woman at the airport, a voice in a crowd, the delicate turn of a hand or toss of hair or posture or walk or any brief reminder of what was once her so that a thousand women would all possess some part of those attributes that, if assembled, could be Katherine but not Katherine as they surrounded him, taunting him to believe and in Katherine herself, soft and ethereal as she brushed him with her interminable presence. He spoke, suspended in the fog like a balloon drifting aimlessly in a cloud, unseen and unheard, perhaps not even speaking but merely assembling the thought and resolving to himself, that resolution hollow and without substance so he would need to repeat it over and over again, *so this is how it is, so this is how it is.*

Voices emerged nearby, not suddenly but augmenting gradually in the obstinacy of his consciousness, rising indistinguishable at first as one and then separating into two until he recognized Leo's deep drone and Casey's impatient staccato as the two parried somewhere in the grayness. He could hear their solemn tones, speaking to one another nearby in some indefinable proximity wherein the speakers were oblivious to his presence. He struggled for their notice against the unsettling restraint of something familiar yet disturbing in the fog; another voice, solitary and distant, separate from the others as if behind an unseen partition, speaking indiscernibly in constant tenor, subtly revealing its owner by inflection alone as Mason vainly strained to hear, and he could tell by inflection alone that it was Katherine, her words spilling about him indiscriminately with no more meaning than

the incidence of her presence elsewhere in the dream. He resisted as the others pulled him from her, extracted him from her imminence in the mist to the actuality of her loss, and she was gone when he awakened.

He saw Casey first, sitting back, fingers laced behind the leathered neck and elbows pressing forward as if in some sort of restraint. As Casey spoke his lips seemed to move out of sync with his words. “Hey, Dopey, you come to join the living for a while?”

Mason blinked instinctively, and the room seemed to move about him as his eyelids dropped and raised heavily like trap doors. The room seemed changed from the night before, when he had lain there, painfully disoriented in the darkness, the pale yellow light in the hallway flowing about the night-shift nurses who slid quietly past the door. Sunlight now trickled from a window that he had not noticed before, and the room seemed to grow as he slowly came around, conscious and aware but still unsteady from the sleeping and dulled by the drugs that numbed his pain. He turned toward Leo who was leaning toward him on the bed. Leo’s voice was full and mellow, and it seemed to fill the room as he spoke. “How’re you doin’ there, buddy. You feeling all right?”

Mason twisted against the brace that held his left arm and shoulder snugly to his side. There was a tightness in his throat as he attempted to speak, and he immediately withdrew the effort, his attention drawing fully to the cup of water that Leo held out to him. The water was cool on his lips, but he found it difficult to swallow, taking small sips as the cup tipped slightly in Leo’s patient hand. Eventually, he found his free arm and sluggishly waved the cup away as Leo receded a bit, and Casey reappeared in a corner near the window, which was now streaming with sunlight. Mason tried again to speak, this time succeeding weakly as his breath escaped around his words. “Damn, how long have I been sleeping?”

Leo shrugged, his face bunching in ample folds. “I don’t know. Casey just picked me up at the airport. We’ve only been here about twenty minutes or so. I expect you’ve been sleeping for some time.”

A nurse appeared suddenly beside the bed and said something to Mason as she took his wrist, timing his pulse with her watch as Leo retreated clumsily and stood against the wall where Casey was still leaning back in his chair, the two of them silent and awkward as the nurse busied herself with Mason’s chart and adjusted his bed. She was a small woman, not particularly friendly but displaying a rather detached sense of caring as she took his blood pressure and propped the pillow behind him. “Dr. Klees will be in shortly,” she said as she smoothed his sheet and collected some things from the tray beside him. “I’ll have some breakfast brought up if you feel like eating yet.” She disappeared before Mason could respond.

Casey’s voice broke the ensuing silence. “Tell you what, Tuck. Why don’t we go get some coffee while you get yourself together?” He was standing now, stiff and nervously shifting from one foot to the other, and Mason could see that he was extremely uncomfortable with the environment of the hospital.

Leo leaned over the bed again. “Anything we can get you, buddy?” His enormous hand was clamped around Mason’s free arm. “We’ll be back after the doctor sees you.” He turned and followed Casey and Mason could hear them talking quietly to each other as they left.

Mason dropped back to the pillow as the events of the previous day and night began to collect in his recollection like photographs spread out of sequence: the cold lighting in the X-ray room, pale and sterile above the voice *turn this way and hold—can you do that?...* He had lain on a bed, and the curtain was pulled back. *I’m Dr. Klees... It’s badly dislocated, and there is a small linear fracture along the collarbone...but there appears to be no permanent damage...that knee will be sore for a while...just the same. I want to keep you overnight to make sure.*

He had lain sideways in the car for what seemed a long time; it was strangely silent, almost serene, and he was heavy, so heavy that his body felt as if it would collapse from its own weight piled

against the door...darkness and shards of light emerging...voices... *Hang in there, fella, don't try to move. We're gonna gitcha out. Just stay quiet, and we'll cutcha loose...* The sky was blue above him as they moved him, blue and so incredibly close that he might reach up and touch it...the sirens seemed distant and intermittent...

“Good morning, Mr. Mason.” Dr. Klees stood by the bed with a clipboard held flat against his chest. He was a young man, possibly younger than Mason, tall and thin, his white coat hanging stiffly from his shoulders as he spoke. “How are you feeling today?”

“Like I was in a car wreck.” Mason’s throat seemed strained when he spoke.

Dr. Klees pursed his lips a bit and looked at the clipboard. “I see you’re still a little hoarse. You should probably try to get up and move around a little. Take it easy, though, you’ve had a lot of pain medication. Dr. Mayhew will be in later to look at your shoulder and knee. If everything’s okay, there should be no reason you can’t go home today.”

“I was headed to New Jersey,” Mason said, his voice a little stronger now but still difficult.

“Is that home? Turn your head.” Dr. Klees pressed his fingers against the soft tissue of Mason’s throat. “Does that hurt?”

“Yeah, a little. For the time being, it’s home.”

The doctor pulled a cell phone from his pocket and read it as he spoke. “I’m not real keen on you traveling right away. You’re banged up pretty good, and you will be in a fair amount of pain.” He looked up from the phone. “The concussion wasn’t severe, but any blow to the head is serious. I’d like to see a CAT scan before you do much of anything.” He placed the phone back into his pocket. “Is there anyone here whom you can stay with for a few days?”

Casey had reentered the room as the doctor was talking, and he stood by the window as he spoke. “We got him covered, doc.” He turned toward Mason, the discomfort of his presence still obvious in his face, and his voice was loud and forced. “Tuck, you’re going to bunk up with me for a few days. Leo says you got nothing to go home to in Trenton except a one-bedroom apartment in some half-assed complex. Hell, I’ve got plenty of space, and besides, I can keep you up to speed on the job while you’re healing.”

Mason was not pleased with the thought of spending time in someone else’s home, and he suddenly felt helpless and vulnerable, an exposure that was particularly distasteful in front of Casey. He struggled to sit up, pushing against the bed with his free arm. “I need to get back to Trenton. All my stuff is there, and I need my car,” Mason said, pressing desperately for his independence.

“You’ll get there in time, Tuck.” Casey was now facing the window with his hands on his hips, his voice beginning to carry the harshness that it maintained at the jobsite. “Meantime, you just hang out at my place till you can travel, and then you can get your stuff.” He continued to stare at something outside the window. “We got it all set up, so you just get yourself right, okay?”

Dr. Klees wrote something on his clipboard. “That being the case, you can go any time you’re ready, provided Dr. Mayhew doesn’t have any problem with it. I’ll leave some information with your discharge package. I’m going to give you something for pain, and I want to make an appointment with my office the day after tomorrow. We can also schedule a CAT scan and some other tests.” He shook Mason’s hand and left the room, his stiff white coat swinging on his thin frame as he walked out.

Mason wanted to argue with Casey, but he had no valid rebuttal, feeling somewhat compromised by the situation. The pain in his shoulder was returning severely, and he suddenly felt extremely exhausted. He pushed himself up a little more on the bed with his free arm. “Where’s Leo?” he asked.

Casey tossed his head toward the door. “On the phone.”

“I wish he hadn’t come.”

“Oh, you know Mother Leo.” Casey turned from the window and faced Mason, his voice a little quieter as he began to pace about. “You want to get dressed, Tuck? I don’t think that’s going to be an

easy task, all trussed up like you are, but I'll help you if you want." He opened the narrow cabinet on the wall near the door. "Your clothes are in here."

"I probably ought to wait for the orthopedic guy to come," Mason said, the resignation in his voice apparent even to himself. He held up the end of the hospital gown and flicked it back.

Leo stuck his head through the door and motioned to Casey who rolled his eyes at Mason and followed Leo into the hall. Mason lay his head back on the pillow, feeling spent and distressed, and dozed off briefly before the nurse returned with a tray containing his breakfast. He nibbled at the food and drank some orange juice, eventually pushing the tray to the side as he dozed off again. The orthopedic specialist who had treated him the night before, Dr. Mayhew, visited him and examined his shoulder and knee, discussing his injuries as if they were body damage to a car. The movement of the examination was painful, and Mason was sore and troubled as he lay alone in the hospital room for what seemed a long time, dozing and waking intermittently as the pain medicine that the nurse had given him after Dr. Mayhew left took effect. Casey and Leo did not return.

Eventually, an orderly arrived and helped him dress, carefully and patiently loosening the binding of his left arm and slipping his shirt over the wounded shoulder then bunching the pants over his ankles and up his legs in the same fashion, following with shoes and socks and the light jacket sleeved only on the free arm. The orderly then produced a wheelchair from the hall and held his good arm as he sat heavily in the leather strap seat with his left leg propped in front. They proceeded down the hall, past other rooms with their bedridden occupants to an elevator and then to the cashier's desk near the hospital lobby where a woman helped him with his paperwork and discharge instructions. Casey was waiting at the hospital entrance next to his pickup truck, where Leo sat in the cab holding his eternal cell phone to his ear, his large shoulder pressed against the window. Mason was wondering how in the world he was going ever fit on the seat next to Leo's immense frame when a woman climbed out of a late model Cadillac that had pulled up behind the truck. She was blond and attractive in blue jeans and a crisp white blouse that that was seductively unbuttoned at the top. Mason watched her curiously as she waved to Casey.

Casey and the orderly helped Mason into the Cadillac, carefully avoiding pressure to his left side, and then Casey leaned through the open door as the woman climbed back in on the driver's side. "Tuck, Mrs. Wellman is going to take you to my place and get you set up while I run Fat Boy up to the site," Casey said. He grinned, tapping Mason with the back of his hand. "See what you've done here? You get some time off, and I get stuck with Leo in my face." He nodded toward the woman. "Thanks, Sally. I owe you one. I'll catch you later, Tuck." He slammed the door and walked quickly toward the pickup but stopped midway and returned to the car, tapping on the window, which Mason opened with his free hand.

"By the way, Tuck," Casey said, "a state trooper was hanging around the emergency room last night looking to get a statement from you, but you were too far out of it. That truck that ran you off the road was stolen. It belongs to a guy we had delivering straw bales to the site for silt checks. He was down in the swale by the access road when whoever ran up on you stole his truck in broad daylight. Figure that. Anyway, whoever hit you took off, on foot I guess, and left the truck half sunk in Bents Creek about a hundred yards from your rental car. So the police and that poor guy who owns the truck would like to find him."

Mason wanted to know more about the accident, but the pain and discomfort of his condition limited him to a shallow nod of his head as he looked pathetically up at Casey.

"Anyway," Casey continued, "I expect the police will still want to talk to you. Sally, take this boy home and put him to bed. We'll be back a little later if I don't throw Big-Ass off the mountain."

They drove slowly through the hospital parking lot, and Sally introduced herself, and he acknowledged her politely but said little, feeling somewhat exhausted and distracted by pain and embarrassed by a disturbing sense of helplessness. Sally, however, continued, talking constantly as

they proceeded out of the parking lot and onto the main highway, Casey's pickup truck turning in the opposite direction with Leo still jammed against the door, his cell phone tight against his cheek.

Sally was an amiable woman, loquacious and engaging, with soft brown compassionate eyes and a natural easiness that Mason found comforting despite the awkwardness of his situation. She rambled on about her two sons, one a banker in Lexington and the other graduating from the University of Tennessee, and that she lived in Kingsport and managed the Holiday Inn Express there, which Cletus owned with some partners, and helped Cletus with some of his investment properties. Mason realized that she was apparently married to the same Cletus Wellman whom he had met the previous day and was the same woman he had talked to on the phone when he had called to inquire about the rental properties. He found it rather difficult and even amusing to place this woman in the company of that diminutive man with the bad back, but he had seen stranger matches in the past and dismissed it without further consideration.

Sally continued, her voice melodious and flowing, "Cletus has a lot of property, you know. He's got apartment buildings and houses all around but mostly in Kingsport and Johnson City. He's also in a partnership with some men in an industrial park and some office buildings near the airport and, of course, the Bright's Mountain property. He also has a Chevy dealership on the highway just outside of Low Creek. That's his home base, though. Sellin' cars is still his first love."

"Sounds like a busy man," Mason offered for no other reason than politeness.

"Oh, Cletus is always busy. Twenty-four hours a day. Walks around with a cell phone stuck to his head. Kinda like your boss I met this morning. Mr. Holcomb?"

"You met Leo?"

"Well, kinda. He shook my hand while he was on the phone. He's a lot like Cletus."

"What about you?" Despite his distractions, Mason was now enjoying the conversation, the content being incidental to Sally's almost childlike colloquialism and the strangely appealing sound of her voice.

She turned toward him and smiled. "What about me?"

"You sound pretty busy yourself."

Sally giggled. "Honey, you make sure you talk like that in front of Cletus, will ya."

"Well, I would think the hotel alone would take up a lot of time."

"Oh, it does. I spend most of my time there, matter of fact." Then, touching his leg lightly with her finger tips, she said in a lower voice, "But I got plenty of help, sugar, so I usually can get away when I need to. So if you're trying to make a point that this is taking me away from my work, it ain't the case."

Kingsport, Tennessee, appeared gradually before them, an orderly metropolis integrating modern architecture with the preservation of Southern charm and dominated by the enormous Eastman Chemical facility that occupied the west side of the road for several miles. The town itself was typical of many of the Southern and Midwestern towns that Mason had visited, with a neatly arranged public square lined by oak trees and benches and a bronze monument in the center, town hall and a high school and then a downtown section with department stores and specialty shops along the wide sidewalks and diagonal on-street parking spaces and converted gas streetlamps, restaurants with handwritten specials displayed in the windows, then houses, neatly arranged in brick and siding and painted wood trim—well-kept homes with small front lawns close to the street and narrow walks leading to porch stoops and painted front doors. Walmart and a state police facility were at the far end of the populated area. Sally turned off the main drag onto a narrow two-lane road that led up a steep hill, at the top of which stood a rather new two-story colonial house with an enormous front lawn that was defined by a white rail fence and a long drive lined by shade trees. The house was clearly the largest in the area, and it seemed a little out of place among the smaller and older Kingsport residences. "That's where me and Cletus live," she said, pointing at the house but keeping her eyes on

the road, which twisted on the top of the hill and then proceeded into a residential area consisting of a small apartment complex and about twenty single homes and duplexes.

Sally pulled into a blacktop driveway in front of one of the duplexes. "This here's Casey's place," she said as she pulled on the emergency brake. "Marty lives next door. Do you know Marty?"

Mason shook his head slightly, the pain in his shoulder prohibiting much movement. "No, ma'am, I don't think I do."

"Well, he does something at that prison you boys are building. I'm sure you'll be meetin' him soon." She got out of the car and walked around to Mason's side, gently helping him out. "We got a bunch of you boys here," she continued as she slowly walked Mason to the front door, stopping to point across the street. "Over there's four in that other duplex and the across the street's three more in that little house there with the blue shutters. Then there's a bunch more in the apartments. Ol' Cletus was sure glad to see you guys come to town. Durn nearly rented out everything he's got."

The drive from the hospital had caused Mason's knee to stiffen, and his shoulder was throbbing incessantly. He was extremely fatigued and found it embarrassingly difficult to maintain his composure. Sally walked him through the front door of the duplex and helped him to a green recliner in the small living room. "You set here a second, dear, while I get your bed ready. Oh, by the way, I got your pain pills here in my purse. Casey gave 'em to me at the hospital. You need to take these?" She held a small brown bottle that she had extracted from her purse and squinted at the label before putting on a pair of reading glasses that she fished from a side pocket of the purse. "It says here that you are supposed to take these every four hours for pain." She looked over the top of her glasses at Mason. "Honey, by the looks o' you, I'd say you was about due." She left the room and returned with two of the pills and a glass of water. Mason took the pills and handed the glass back to her, and she disappeared into the kitchen. "You want something to eat, Tucker?" she called from the kitchen. "I can fix you something if you're hungry."

"No, ma'am. Thank you. I'm really not hungry at all."

"You gotta quit callin' me ma'am, sweetie. I ain't your mama."

Mason smiled. "Okay, Sally. Listen, I'll be fine here. I really appreciate your help, but there's no need to—"

"Oh, hush, you," Sally interrupted as she walked from the kitchen to another part of the house. "I'll go in good time. Casey's got this place done just like a man would. Ain't never seen a man yet who knew how to set a home. It just ain't in 'em." Mason could hear her move about as she spoke. "I expect you'll be needin' to eat something eventually, Tucker. To get your strength back. God knows what Casey's gonna have around here to feed you."

A drawer opened and shut somewhere in another room, and Sally returned to the living room. Her hair had loosened a bit in the front and fell over one eye, causing her to seem a little disheveled as she brushed it back. She helped him out of the chair, her hands gently wrapped around his free arm, and he could feel her close to him as she walked him into a bedroom, a tiny space with an iron twin bed frame that was pulled down to reveal clean white sheets and two sparse pillows propped against the wall. The only other furniture in the room was an old nightstand next to the bed and a dresser with severe scratches on one side. The single window was covered by steel blinds that were separated and broken in places. Mason removed his shoes with Sally's help and climbed onto the bed. Sally stood looking at him with her hands on her hips. "You sure don't look in much comfort there, honey, but it'll have to do ya for now," she said. "I don't know why they don't just let you stay at that hospital for another day or two." She turned to the window and held the frayed cord for the blinds in her hand. "I don't think I can do you much good with this window either. If I could, I'd catch you some fresh air. Cletus needs to get this fixed, and I'm gonna tell him so."

"You've done plenty, Sally," Mason said as he adjusted his position on the bed. "Really, I'm quite comfortable here."

Sally left the room briefly and returned with her purse and a torn envelope that had a Holiday Inn Express imprint in the corner. She sat down on the edge of the bed and shuffled through the purse until she found a pen and then wrote some numbers on the envelope. "This here's where you can reach me if you need anything. That's the motel I run. I'd give you my cell phone number, but I let the battery run down. Now you don't get bashful, y'hear. Anything you need." She dropped the pen back into the purse and leaned forward, her brown eyes quiet and appealing as she looked at Mason and smiled. "Tucker, I know you ain't feelin' too good about all this. You're a friend of Casey's, and he's a friend of mine, and we all help our friends around here. Just like that." Her voice was soft and had a genuine, irresistible sweetness about it as she touched him lightly on the chest. "Casey says you was run off the road. That's a fine howdy for folks comin' to visit, ain't it now?" she said as she stood up, still close enough for Mason to sense her warmth and femininity and the trace of perfume about her hair. "I ain't far away, so you just call. I got some work that needs tendin', or I'd stick around a bit. Anyway, I expect Casey will be back before too long."

Mason thanked her weakly as she walked out. The pain in his shoulder was less intense but still there as he lay rigid and uncomfortable in the old bed frame that he figured Casey picked up at some garage sale so he could have an extra flop if needed for someone visiting the prison site. He looked at the broken window blind, the light fading behind it as the afternoon expired, the entire day seeming like another dream that he would awaken from find to himself in the relative comfort of the hospital, anonymous amid the hallways and patient rooms and beds and the unending process of healing. He fell asleep quickly, sleeping soundly for an interminable amount of time in the stillness of the room, without dreaming, without Katherine, without thought as his mind simply took its respite.

It was nearly dark when Casey and Leo returned. Mason felt considerably better when he awoke, though his shoulder continued to hurt, and he was suddenly hungry. Casey made a simple dinner served with cold beer. They ate at a small table in the kitchen, discussing the prison project in detail, Leo and Casey dominating the conversation and Mason respectively acquiescing in favor of the food, speaking only when addressed and listening attentively to the discussion. After dinner, Mason and Leo moved to the living room while Casey cleaned up the dishes, Mason following Casey's direction to the recliner, and Leo to the sofa which took his fullness as he sat. The conversation continued over coffee and then beer again, remaining largely with the prison but occasionally diverting to anecdotes about others in the company and mild barbs between Leo and Casey. They were interrupted by a knock at the front door, which opened immediately before Casey could get to it, and Sally walked in, carrying two large shopping bags.

"It's just me, boys. Get decent now. There's a lady in the house," Sally said as she set one bag on the floor and took the other into the kitchen.

Casey seemed unfazed by her entrance. "Get yourself a beer, kid, and sit down a while."

"Thank you, dear," she called from the kitchen. "I got some things for the patient." She came into the living room with a bottle of beer in her hand and sat on the arm of the sofa next to Leo, tucking her bare feet into the cushion. "I brought you some clothes, sweetie, since you didn't have a bag with you," she said to Mason as she waved off Leo's offer of space on the sofa next to him. She pointed to the bags on the floor. "I figured you're about the same size as my boy at college, so I brought you some of his stuff. I also stopped at Walmart and got you some socks and underwear. I had to guess at your size, but I bet I'm close. I raised two boys, ya know, so I'm pretty good at sizing men's shorts."

Mason was embarrassed by her efforts and insisted on reimbursing her for the items she bought, but she refused with a rather staged glare. "Don't be silly, you. It's just socks and underwear from the Walmart. The socks was on sale anyway," she said, rolling her eyes at Casey and then back to Tucker. "You ain't beholden, dear."

"Just let me pay for the socks and underwear, and I'll feel a lot better," Mason persisted.

“No, sir,” she returned in the same exaggerated tone. “Now you just behave and drink your beer.” She leaned forward, speaking in a lower tone but still teasing. “But if it’ll make you feel better, I’ll holler next time I need panties and socks.”

Sally winked at Casey and looked back at Mason. “I got you a razor too. We don’t want that sweet face to get all bristly now, do we?”

Mason could do nothing more than accept Sally’s consideration as gracefully as possible. She stayed for a short time longer, drinking her beer and talking constantly as she teased Casey and Mason and regarded Leo with a relative sense of distance. “Well, boys, I’d like to stay and shoot the bull with you some more, but I gotta get home before Cletus thinks I run off.” She left as abruptly as she entered, calling over her shoulder as she walked out the door, “I’ll come check on you tomorrow, sweetie. It’s been a pleasure, Mr. Holcomb.” The door closed loudly behind her.

After a few minutes, Leo stood up and said, “Well, I’m ready to hit the sack.” He looked at Casey as he gathered his briefcase and some rolled plans that he had brought back from the jobsite. “Can I get a cab or something?”

Casey laughed. “Damn, Leo, this ain’t New York, for crissake.” He looked at Mason and shook his head.

Leo smiled, unaffected as he looked down at Casey who was sitting on one of the kitchen chairs with his feet hooked into a rung below him. “Then you can haul me back to the motel.”

They left after Casey helped Mason remove his arm from the sleeve in the brace. Mason took some more of his pain medicine, washed down with the last of the beer he had been nursing all evening, and climbed onto his bed. The bedroom was totally dark now as he closed his eyes, trying desperately to put the last two days into some sort of order and perspective as Katherine crossed his thoughts like a distant star in the darkness. He struggled to recall the details as he lay there, painful and worn on the bed frame, revisiting in his mind the flatbed truck appearing in his rearview mirror and his first sense of awareness when he came to in the overturned car and the hospital and Sally driving him to Casey’s duplex. But there was something still not surfacing as he reviewed the sequence of events, something that kept bringing him back to the rental car, wrecked and sideways in Bents Creek, the paramedics talking through the space where the windshield had been—*Hang on there, fella, don’t try to move.* No, before that. Something else that seemed padded and obscure in his memory, occurring in the first emergence of his senses amid the glass and the deflated air bag and the heaviness of his body as he lay crumpled against the car door, something there, indifferent and subtle beyond immediate recollection but potently critical and foreboding in the murky semiconscious moment when he awakened. He lay on the bed with his eyes open in the darkness, pressing his memory in a futile query of its deepest recesses as he drifted off to sleep, almost sleeping when the lost remembrance found him coldly and suddenly so that he sat up in the darkness with its overwhelming revelation: there was another—before the sirens and the voices, there was another, breathing heavily and bearded, sideways where the windshield had been... *You...kin you hear me? You don’t come back, y’hear. You don’t never come back here agin...*

END OF SAMPLE

©Copyright Thomas A. Brigger 2019

All rights reserved

Page Publishing, New York, New York