

BIG DIEHL

A portrait of George Seaton, a shirtless man with a tattoo on his left shoulder, against a background of the American flag. The man has a serious expression and his arms are raised behind his head. The American flag is visible in the background, with the stars and stripes clearly shown.

GEORGE SEATON

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mlrpress

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CHAPTER ONE

Diehl leaned against the wall inside the vintage World War Two wooden barracks, now a gym with free weights, a pull-up bar, an incline bench and two mats at either end of the room. Watched two boys wrestle, a circle of others sitting on the floor or on their knees at the edge of the mat, hollering at the duo to do this or that to the other, flung admonitions framed around the words *pussy*, *wimp*. Boys wrestling wore shiny nylon shorts, tennis shoes, flash of jockstraps.

Diehl had wrestled in high school, knew the moves, the holds, the essentials of tactics; knew the necessity of quickly learning your opponent's weak points...a war of sorts. Knew the boys here were just working out the kinks of the Army, nothing serious. The screeve of testosterone wafted to the rafters. Neither of the boys appeared to know a damn thing about the fine points of the sport. Diehl smiled, wondered if they'd want to know. He could teach them. Didn't have any shiny nylon to pull on, though, just his old sweats, cut off at the thighs. But, hell, would they let him into the circle? He was a three-stripe sergeant, with three years of the Army behind him. These boys were all privates, PFCs, all just out of high school or scooting by on a GED...good enough for the Army. Diehl was only a few years older. But he was part of what some of these boys called the management, the chain of command to which they, the privates and PFCs owed fealty. Not that fealty was necessarily deserved. Just demanded.

Mock battle over, the loser now sat with his back against the wall, breathed hard, watched the others leave the gym with the winner. Grabbed his T-shirt, dabbed sweat from his face, shoulders, chest. Saw Diehl, smiled, raised his hand in greeting.

They all knew Diehl. Diehl was the junior NCO who assisted drill sergeants and staff sergeants with small arms training. Diehl'd always show up for one company or another's morning formation. Participated in PT, ran the two, three miles

with the privates, corporals and their drill sergeants. Sang the songs, chanted the chants against the unison double-time clomp of combat boots on tar top, cement streets or dirt trails. Diehl gave smiles and small talk to what were technically his subordinates, but who he'd come to think of as just kids — so much like himself, not so long ago — trying to figure out the particular nuances of the Army as well as the mysteries of themselves. Most of them had also seen Diehl in the gym, his body hard, defined, somebody whose wrong side you wouldn't want to test, even though he was only five-eight. When Diehl worked out, he took on the look of caged anger, a bantam whose gray eyes projected a cold hardness, something the primordial part of yourself, there at the top of your spine, told you, without thinking about it, to avoid.

Diehl walked over to the PFC. Denman was his name, remembered from the tag on his fatigues.

"You did okay, Denman." Diehl stood over him, watched him pull his T-shirt over his head.

"Guess I lost though, sarge." Denman looked up, smiled from his blue eyes, a dark blue that Diehl thought he could get lost in if he looked long enough. The kid's black hair was wet with sweat, his face carved fine; strong cheekbones, dimpled chin.

"Prob'ly did lose, but I think you could do better. I could give you some pointers. Wrestled a bit in high school. Could show you some moves, if you're interested."

Denman nodded. "Sure, why not. Maybe a rematch, huh?"

"Sure, couldn't hurt." Diehl thought about the prospect of touching the kid, feeling his skin, smelling his sweat, running his hand over nylon. "Tomorrow. Sunday would be a good day for it. Meet you here at, oh, say oh-eight-hundred. Work for you?"

"Yeah. That'd be great."

"Good. Don't eat much breakfast, though. Full stomach don't mix with exercise."

Denman smiled. "Okay, sarge, oh-eight-hundred."

“You could call me Diehl, if you want. Kinda try to get away from the Army when we can. Drop the sarge stuff.”

“If you say so, sar...uh, Diehl.” Denman stood up, walked to the door.

Diehl watched Denman leave, saw an ease of movement, stepping more from the balls of his feet than his heels, ass flexing with each step. The kid had worked his body. Probably knew what it was to be prideful in seeing what he saw reflected in a mirror. “See you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be here.” Denman turned and, once again, raised his hand in a wave.



Diehl stepped onto the mat, felt old memories surge. Sat down, placed his hands on the leather. He’d learned to keep the demon behind him since he last wrestled in high school. Demon wasn’t the sex, or just the feel of another man’s body against his. No, the demon still stumbled around in a tin house in Laramie. Someday he’d... No, he didn’t even want to give voice to it. Still, he let the thought simmer.

CHAPTER TWO

“Gotta be infantry,” Diehl had said almost four years before, threw the recruiting sergeant’s stare right back at him.

The old soldier, Master Sergeant Hunker, studied Diehl’s gray eyes.

He’d watched the kid open the door, saw him pause, look around a bit before stepping over the threshold. Had seen the same tentative entrance of hundreds of mostly ranch kids...the grayed jeans, slight bow to the legs, scuffed boots, polo shirts, belt buckles the size of his hand. Most all of them showed tight bodies hardened by the lives they’d lived on one ranch or another. Every one of them had taken off their ball cap or cowboy hat before closing the door behind them. A mannered gesture. This one was the same.

Hunker saw the white fuzz on Diehl’s chin, his close cut hair providing a hint of red mixed in with white. The kid’s face was so...He was thinking *pretty*, but settled for *young*. Saw in the kid’s eyes a seriousness of purpose that belied pretty.

“Son, the infantry ain’t no picnic. Now, you got better scores” — he held up a sheet of paper, then set it back down — “than what infantry needs. Hell, you could just about pick or choose anything. Don’t have to be settled on infantry.”

Diehl’d read about ’Nam, watched video replays of what ’Nam was. He had seen the images, the sounds, the commentary about that war. Had watched the men...no...the boys in their fatigues and helmets, M16s, .50 calibers, helicopters hovering over their heads, trudging the jungle, the unforgiving, dangerous thickness of the growth within which they always seemed to be hunkered. He’d seen the black haired, black-eyed little devils running around in pajamas with the sole intent of ending those boy’s lives on this earth. Had seen Desert Storm unfold in his mind as an adjunct to ’Nam, different uniforms, weapons; still the boys were there, noble trudge through a jungle of grit, sandstorms vicious as sleet carried on

the ferocious sweep of a northwester, birthed in the Rockies, barreling hell-bent for flat prairie, huddled cows, ass-end to the fury.

Something noble, he'd thought often, the words embraced as a talisman, a charm that, if he'd been old enough to be a part of it, would have given worth to what he'd believed now was the worthlessness of his own life. So far. He didn't know or care what the politicians said the fucking wars had been about. Knew something about country, though. Knew there were causes worthy of stepping into harm's way. Knew what he felt with the raising of a flag, the lump in his throat with the last word of the first line...*O, say can you see*. Wished there was a war right now, an opportunity to do something...noble.

Sergeant Hunker, kindly face furrowed deep, ancient eyes that Diehl would later swear read his thoughts before he gave them voice. Had a hunch the old guy saw other things, too; things Diehl'd kept buried, silent, stuffed somewhere at the back of his soul.

Diehl lowered his eyes, looked at the three rows of ribbons across the old man's chest. Raised his eyes. "You in 'Nam?"

Hunker tipped his chair back, never took his eyes off Diehl's. Put his hands together on his lap. "Yeah, I was in 'Nam. Why you askin'?"

"Studied it and all," Diehl fidgeted in the chair, his gaze found the picture of Bill Clinton hanging on the wall behind Hunker. "Just got a curiosity about it."

Hunker had seen it before. Boys sitting down in front of his desk, studying his uniform, his face, even looking at his hands, wondering if he'd killed some gooks, wondering if he'd plodded through that jungle and let loose a burst of .50 caliber against them slant-eyed shits, wondering if he'd woken up in the morning to the sweet smell of napalm. These were kids who'd probably watched *Apocalypse Now* or *Full Metal Jacket* or some other goddamned portrayal of 'Nam ten times, and had probably sat there through half the movie with a fucking hard-on, wishing they'd been there, wishing they'd had an opportunity to do what he had done.

“Nam was hell,” the old man tightened his grip on his hands. “Nothing worse. Don’t share often about what I saw, what I did. And, I’m not going to right now. If that’s why you want infantry so bad, I got news for you: ’Nam is done, gone, finished; kinda like a nightmare you hope never comes around again. That was ’Nam, kid. Desert Storm was no picnic either.”

Hunker tipped his chair back to his desk, rested his arms on top, got a little closer to Diehl. “Now, you tell me son, you wanting infantry because of ’Nam? Desert Storm? Maybe because there might be another ’Nam or damned desert conflict for you to get yourself into, a chance to kill the enemy, do something heroic with your life?”

“Well, I...” The old guy had hit the nail. Diehl thought quick, smiled, scratched the stubble on his head. “Nah, nothin’ like that. Just think infantry is where I wanna go.”

“Infantry MOS goes to Fort Polk. You ever been in Louisiana in the summer?”

“Never been anywhere, ’cept Colorado and Wyoming.”

Hunker held his stare on Diehl’s eyes. Saw the kid look away, uncomfortable maybe in admitting he was just a hayseed, not knowing much of the world outside the boundaries of open prairie, cow shit and endless days of involuntary servitude on his daddy’s ranch.

“Well,” Hunker gave up a quick smile, “Fort Polk will give you some inkling of what soldiering is all about. You feel that wet heat down there — nothing like you’ve ever felt before up here where humidity ain’t an issue, ever — and I guarantee you’ll give a second thought about infantry.”

“Never thought it would be easy.” Diehl’s voice hard, determined.

Hunker waited for Diehl to continue. When he didn’t, he looked at Diehl’s paperwork on the top of his desk, looked back at Diehl. “That your birth name? Big? Big Diehl?”

“Yessir.”

Hunker didn’t ask the obvious question. Who in hell would name their kid Big? Especially given what his last name was.

“Okay.” Hunker picked up a pen and countersigned Diehl’s enlistment form. “You just got yourself a little stay at Polk. Probably advanced training at the same place. You ready to go in about two, three weeks?”

“Ready right now.” Diehl wondered how far the ten bucks in his wallet would go. Hadn’t figured he’d have to hang out in Casper for more than a day or two.

“Right now isn’t possible. You’ll get orders when to show up.” He looked at Diehl’s paperwork again. “You put down General Delivery, as an address. You’re not going back to Laramie? Gonna stay here in Casper?”

“Yessir, ain’t goin’ back to Laramie.”

“Family in Laramie?”

“No, just my daddy. Mamma died a long time ago. No reason to go back.”

Hunker nodded his head, had a notion why the father might not constitute family anymore. More than a few kids had walked past that threshold with only the urge, the necessity to get away from fathers hell-bent on keeping the kids rutted in the misery of their own failures.

Hunker stood up, reached his arm across the desk. Diehl stood, grabbed the old guy’s hand. Diehl stepped over the threshold, and onto the sidewalk, climbed back into the old Ford, wondered a minute where he’d go from here.

CHAPTER THREE

Diehl had pulled on his Wranglers, boots, tugged a blue T-shirt over his head. Packed the important things in a canvas bag, grabbed his water-worn wrinkled Stetson, his ball cap. He studied the tiny room, the four walls, seams that whistled with the wind and iced up with the snow, the pea soup carpet, the little boy's bed he'd outgrown even before he and his daddy had moved here. Wouldn't miss it. He looped the straps of the canvas bag over his shoulder, stepped out of the room. Heard his daddy's snore behind the cracked plastic accordion door, smelled the reek of the bathroom, glanced at the pile of dishes in the sink. Had been awake all night. Wanted coffee. He'd do without.

Besides Joe, maybe his only friend right now was the old Ford his daddy'd given him when he was fifteen. Had been his refuge since then, took him to places where his mind could open up, see possibilities. Knew, at fifteen, there were few options. Had to finish school, find a way out of what he'd found himself in. Mamma dead, his daddy'd sold the home place. Lived behind tin walls in Laramie while finishing school, he and his daddy avoiding one another in the narrow hallway from kitchen sty to back bedrooms. Toilet worked half the time. Propane heat when his daddy got around to paying the bill...if he hadn't drunk the money up already.



Diehl'd taken off after graduation. Fired up the old Ford and drove until his head nodded, eyes closed. Found himself in Casper, ten bucks in his wallet, diploma on the passenger seat beside him, possibilities ahead. Slept the night behind some damned warehouse abandoned on a street that appeared to have also lost itself in disuse. Dawn confirmed appearances.

Diehl watched the rise of orange to the east, brushstrokes of gray as paint to a canvas. Wondered why Joe hadn't given a second thought to what he'd told him. They'd graduate and go

off somewhere. Work awhile, save some money, rent a place. "Possibilities," he'd said. "Goddamn, we can't stay in this fuckin' place forever."

Hell, Joe was in the same fucking boat. Only difference was it hadn't been Joe's daddy who'd managed to ruin just about every fucking dream Joe'd ever had. His mama managed to do that just fine on her own. The old man left her and Joe once he'd found out the true nature of the woman: got fat, drank beer, smoked cigarettes, gabbed on the phone through the day, did Tupperware, let baby Joe lie in his own shit for hours.

Diehl and Joe had recognized each other as connected, somehow sitting on the same dead stump where visions of possibilities outside the clutch of Wyoming ways beckoned like the call of a red-tailed hawk, seeing the world from an encompassing perspective. Both dreamed of soaring.

Senior year in high school, finally eighteen, their mutual yearn for possibilities saw them take to the high prairie, trail horses rented, destination just somewhere away from the suffocation of Laramie. They'd ridden miles over dry grass and scrub, skirted mesas and arroyos, watched pronghorn antelope skitter from their path, listened to their horses blow and huff, fart like machines made to do such a thing. Diehl knew horses, didn't think much about it. Joe snickered. Hadn't lived most of his life with horses.

Stopping at a creek, cottonwoods and willow boughs savoring the stingy trickle, they dismounted, tied their horses loose, enough slack to allow them to munch the sweet grass on the banks, mouth the water.

Joe and Diehl'd sat cross-legged in the shade the cottonwoods grudgingly provided against the glare of midday. Listened to the creek bubble, flow.

Small talk eased their proximity. Both knew what they wanted. Relaxed into it timidly, Diehl the first to touch the other. Placed a hand on Joe's thigh, didn't look at his eyes, didn't know what Joe would do. Joe waited a minute, glanced at Diehl, looked at the horses chomping the sweet grass, smiled, nodded his head, placed his hand on Diehl's thigh.



Diehl realized this was the first time he'd ever touched a boy in any way other than the necessary aggressive maul the team demanded. He'd wrestled his sophomore and junior years, always envisioned it was his daddy he was battling, not just another kid in a singlet. Never felt anything sexual, never felt the satisfaction of touching his opponent. Gave it up when he became a senior. Coach wanted him back. Didn't understand Diehl's reasoning that he'd just lost interest, was focusing on other things, was already looking past high school, Laramie, trailer parks and a sport that wouldn't get him anything but blue ribbons, plastic trophies and a slap on the ass for a match won. Coach had tried to talk to Diehl's daddy about the decision. Daddy'd welcomed the coach into the 10X30, wobbled to a chair, offered the coach a beer. Coach did a quick inventory of the place. Began to understand Diehl's thought process. Yeah, the coach concluded, if he had lived like this as a kid, he'd probably have wanted to look at outside options, too.



Joe let Diehl place his hand on his crotch, let him squeeze his dick, laid back, closed his eyes. Diehl leaned over and kissed him, mouth to mouth.

"Never really been kissed before," Joe moved his hand to the swell in Diehl's jeans. Rubbed the bulge, grabbed the swell.

"Me either. Not in this way." Diehl unsnapped Joe's top button.

"You sure nobody is gonna come up on us? If somebody sees us..."

"Nobody for miles." Diehl sat up, leaned his head over the prize, pulled on the flap which opened easily, old Levi's aged soft from a hundred washings. Joe's dick found the slit in the boxers, exposed, rock hard, clutched in Diehl's hand.

"Lemme get yours," Joe looked at the back of Diehl's head.

Diehl turned, smiled at Joe. "Let's just get naked. I wanna see all of you. We can lay on our clothes."

Diehl pulled off his T-shirt, boots, started on his jeans.

Joe sat up, watched Diehl expose himself, glanced at the horses, scanned the prairie behind them, stood up, followed Diehl's lead.

Diehl sat down on the clothes. "Go stand over there," Diehl pointed to a spot in front of him. "Want to take you all in."

"Never done this before." Joe took a few steps.

"First time is never forgotten." Diehl saw the hard halves of Joe's ass tighten with each step, saw the muscled spread of his shoulders and back that receded to the small waist. Joe turned, Diehl took in the defined pecs, the ripples on his stomach. Knew Joe was a swimmer, freestyle and butterfly. His body shaped by water, the ineluctable pull, pull, pull against the resistance of fluid. "Turn around a couple times."

Joe smiled. "Okay, but you got to do the same."

"I will. Just let me see you first."

Diehl stroked himself. Watched Joe move, a slow couple of turns against the backdrop of cottonwoods, the puffs of willows.

"Now you." Joe walked back to where Diehl sat, stood in front of him, his dick pointing up within Diehl's reach.

Diehl felt like he could shoot in a second, just having Joe right there, right in front of him, his body exposed as a succulence to be devoured.

"Okay." Diehl stood as Joe sat down, walked to where Joe had been, turned around a couple times. "How's that?"

"Nice," Joe said, hand on his dick.

Diehl returned, stood over Joe, pushed his dick down in front of Joe's face.

Joe examined the thick shaft, the bloomed head, looked up at Diehl's face. "You want a blow job?"

"That'd be a start."

Joe got to his knees, grabbed Diehl's dick, grabbed his own, inched his lips over the head, tasted the salt-sweet dribble from the slit.

"That's it." Diehl gently slid his dick into Joe's mouth.

Joe looked up at Diehl's face, saw him close his eyes, smile.

Took less than a minute for them both to release a lifetime of yearning, Joe swallowing hard the marrow of what made Diehl who he was, maybe capture something of Diehl for himself, maybe give himself something of Diehl's passion for...opportunities.



They'd moved through their senior year in high school as oddities, two jocks who'd skipped the proms, the football games, the rallies, first- or second-base encounters with more-than-willing cheerleaders or sluts. Nobody ever looked at their relationship as something queer. No, probably just trailer trash, too embarrassed by their particular situation to be part of the crowd.

Away from the crowd, finding comfort in each other's company, they explored their desires, made several trips back to the cottonwood and willow-laced creek, or dark places not far from town, or just in the back seat of the old Ford. They fumbled around the word or concept or possibility of love. Supposed they did love each other as they both lay in their beds, staring at the caress of night, remembering what it was they had done earlier to the exclusion of the rest of the little world around them. They'd grab themselves, relive the past vision of their coupling, shoot onto sheets browned by the rub of their bodies through weeks of use without washing.

Graduation night, Joe and Diehl climbed in the old Ford with a six-pack, drove out of Laramie, turned onto a county road and stopped on a pebbled pulloff. They got out of the car, sat down on the side of the road with the Ford to their backs. Diehl'd explained what he had in mind — that they should just take off, leave Laramie, maybe go to Denver and find jobs, get a motel at first, then an apartment after they'd made some money.

Joe had listened, sipped beer, tossed pebbles into the no-moon darkness, kept quiet.

A coyote yipped somewhere out on the prairie. A lonesome sound.

“So, whadaya think?” Diehl popped open another beer.

“Well” — Joe paused, squeezed his empty, listened to the crinkle of the soft metal — “I got my mamma. Not sure how she’d get along without me.”

Diehl turned his head, looked at Joe’s face. “Gotta start thinkin’ of yourself, Joe. Your mamma’ll get along just fine.”

“Maybe. Gotta think on it.”

“Well, I’m heading out early in the morning. You be waitin’. Opportunities out there, Joe.”



Diehl stopped by Joe’s trailer, waited awhile for Joe to appear. When he didn’t, Diehl stepped to the door, lightly knocked. Door opened, Joe’s mamma standin’ there in her bathrobe, huge woman with a cigarette drooping from her lips. “He ain’t here,” she said, placed her hands on her hips. “Took off awhile ago. Heard him get up. Little shit disturbed my sleep. Woke me up, Goddamnit! Whadaya want, Diehl?”

Diehl nodded. Understood Joe’d yet to think on it, make a decision. “Tell him I stopped by.”

“Yeah, sure,” she said, watching Diehl turn and climb into the Ford.

CHAPTER FOUR

Decision made, Army contract signed, Diehl started the Ford, pulled away from the curb, wished he'd packed some food. Drove a couple blocks, saw a McDonald's, passed it by. Knew he couldn't drop half his total worth on a McMuffin and a cup of coffee. He'd wait till later, get some fries, maybe a Coke. Then what? Realized he was burning gas he couldn't replace. He pulled to the curb again, grabbed his **Give Blood — wrestle** ball cap from his canvas bag, pulled it on, locked the car. Walked Casper's business district, looked in windows, smelled the aroma of lunches served in cafés, restaurants, bars. Thought about the ten in his wallet.

He waited till nightfall, found a bar caressed in neon, maybe pretzels or peanuts inside, opened the door and walked in. Ordered a Coke at the bar, cracked peanut shells, watched the crowd reflected in the mirror.

"You look a little down, cowboy." The voice, female, had sidled up to him without notice.

Diehl looked to his left, saw red hair conjured from a bottle, hefty halter top, blue shadow below the eyebrows, wrinkled smile.

"Nah." Diehl cracked another shell, looked back at the mirror. "Just bidin' time."

"You sure diggin' into them peanuts."

"Keep my hands busy."

Woman lit up, blew a cloud away from Diehl. "How old are you, if I might ask?"

"Ain't old enough to order anything but soda."

"Thought so."

Diehl said nothing. Thought his turn of bad luck had just gotten worse. Didn't need some old broad hittin' on him.

“Well...” The woman sucked on her cigarette, exhaled again. “I guess I’ll just be movin’ on, then.”

“Suit yourself.”

Woman turned full-face to Diehl, inched her lips to his ear. “Go fuck yourself.” She slipped off the stool and disappeared into the crowd.

Diehl smiled. Didn’t know why, except the conclusion that he’d just managed some kind of victory over the nature of small bars in small towns. Hell, he knew he was, as some said, a number. A hot number who’d might just provide the means for a desperate woman to think she’d overcome the ravages of thirty-something. Felt sorry for the woman. Hoped she’d find somebody by closing time.

Diehl grabbed his Coke, stepped away from the bar, saw an empty booth in the corner by the pinball. Walked through the crowd; some were dancing, some just standing there trading lies. He sat down, dug into the metal bowl of peanuts on the table.

“Supposin’ you got in here before the doorman sat down up front.”

Diehl looked up, saw overalls, a Shell ball cap pulled down tight on the head, braids slipping out the back. He noticed she wore no makeup, looked to be about thirty, thirty-five.

“Guess so.” Diehl rubbed the peanut shell between his thumb and forefinger.

“I see Hank served you anyway. Hell, he’d serve a two-year-old if they put money on the bar. That ain’t alcohol, is it?”

“No, just a Coke. I need to leave?”

The woman stared, smiled, then sat down facing Diehl. “You’re eatin’ them peanuts like a squirrel with a appetite.”

Diehl put the peanut back in the bowl, wiped his hands. “Yeah, well... Guess I don’t have much else to do in here.” Began to feel uncomfortable, her eyes taking him in like somebody trying to figure out if a slab of modern art was hanging right side up or not.

“What’s your story?” She reached into the bowl and took a peanut.

Diehl didn’t answer, had the urge to leave. “Why you askin’?”

“Curious is all. At least tell me your name.”

“Diehl.”

She cracked the shell, tipped it to her mouth and munched. “Well, I’m Christine.” She held her hand across the table. “How you spell that?”

Diehl’d already dealt with one lonesome, horny lady, didn’t need another. “D-I-E-H-L. You know, I’ll just get outta here.” He began to stand up.

“Hold on.” She flapped her hand, motioned for Diehl to sit back down. “I’m not lookin’ for a date or somethin’. Suppose Delores prob’ly already did that. Right?”

Diehl sat back down, nodded. “Been hit on once. Told me to go fuck myself.”

“That’s Delores, all right.”

“What’s goin’ on over here?” A large woman, maybe ten years older, fifty pounds heavier slid into the booth next to Christine, wore a black Stetson, shirt with pearl buttons, silver cords sewn into the fabric.

“Believe I got myself a waif.”

“Goddamnit, Chris. If it ain’t dogs and cats, it’s people.”

“This here is Madeline. Mad Maddie. Owns this joint.”

Diehl stared at the two women, nodded at Maddie. “Nice to meet you.”

“Same here.” She held out her hand. “What you call yourself?”

Diehl shook her hand.

“Diehl,” Christine said. “D-I-E-H-L.”

“You know, young man...Diehl” — Maddie pushed her Stetson up a bit — “number one, you ain’t old enough to be in here. Number two, ain’t no lone, young, good-looking kid ever

come in here just to eat my peanuts, if you get my gist. Ain't that kinda place. People come in here by themselves 'cause they're lookin' to hook up with somebody, or else they're hopeless drunks who've given up on people altogether, sit off at the corner of the bar and get shit-faced, pass out or wanna fight somebody."

"I..." Diehl began.

"Number three," Maddie interrupted, "Chris here has a nose for, as she says, waifs. You a waif?"

Diehl looked toward the small dance floor where a few couples were shuffling a two-step against the beat of some shitkicker's delight pulsing from speakers hung from nails on 4 by 10s at each corner of the dance floor, noticed the red and white Christmas lights looped over the rafters. Looked back at the women, shook his head. "Not real sure what a waif is."

Both women nodded their heads. Maddie turned to Christine. "See if he's hungry." She stood up, moved to another booth, had the people there laughing within seconds.

"I just don't have... I mean these peanuts is fine."

"Fine as a nice big cheeseburger, fries, ketchup?"

Diehl's mouth watered up, swallowed hard. "I... can't afford it just now. But, thank you for askin'."

Christine smiled like she'd just pulled the bow off a birthday present. "Don't believe I asked if you could afford it, Diehl. It's on the house."

"Gotta pay somethin'."

"Well, we'll see. You stay right here. I'll go order up some food." She slid out of the booth, walked toward the bar.

Diehl was having a hard time wrapping his mind around this one. Never took charity. People always seemed to take things away, never gave back. He figured he'd just get out of the place, started to rise, felt a hand on his shoulder, looked up.

"Sit it back down, D-I-E-H-L." Maddie had some strength to her, stared at Diehl as he eased back down in the booth.

"I was just..." He lowered his head, folded his hands on the table.

"You're just gonna sit there, eat a burger and, in return, you're just gonna tell us what's goin' on with you. That's the payment I want. You hear me?"

Diehl looked up. Saw his mamma's smile, lost now to memories, hard to recover, hard to even try.

"Okay." He nodded, smiled back. "Got about eight dollars, though. That enough?"

"We'll talk about that after you're fed."

Diehl nodded, started to shell another peanut, thought better of it. Put it back in the bowl. Never been lucky in his life, never had any stranger just come up and give him a kindness like these ladies were doing. Felt uncomfortable about it. He thought again about leaving, thought about his resources. Didn't have any except the eight dollars and fifty cents in his pocket. Goddamned glass of Coke a dollar-fifty. He shook his head, turned again and watched the crowd, most half-drunk or getting there. Saw his daddy doing the same, drinking alone in the trailer, watching *Animal Kingdom* or NASCAR or nodding off, head leaning heavy on his shoulder or dropped to his chest.

Chris returned with a plate in one hand, another Coke in the other. She set them down in front of Diehl. "Ketchup right there." She nodded to the cardboard six-pack on the table loaded with three different kinds of hot sauce, mustard, relish, ketchup. "I ain't gonna sit here and watch you eat. But, you ain't goin' nowhere until we talk. That a deal, Diehl?"

Diehl grinned. "Thank you, Christine. Yeah, I suppose we got a deal."

"Call me Chris; everybody else does."

"Chris. Okay." Diehl smelled the burger, the fries, let the aroma rise for a minute before touching it. "Looks good."

"Should be. I cooked it. I'll leave you alone now. But, you remember our deal."

"Will do," Diehl said, fixing up his burger with mustard, ketchup. Believed nothing had ever tasted better in his life.



Chris removed Diehl's empty plate, sat down in the booth. "Maddie's comin' in a minute."

Diehl reached in his pocket, pulled out his five and three ones, placed them on the table.

"Maddie said she and you made an agreement about payment." She shoved the money back to him. "Maddie ain't gonna like it if you renege."

"You could take somethin'."

"We'll take your story, Diehl. That's all we want."

Maddie slipped into the booth. "How was your dinner?"

"Tasty, for sure."

"Good." Maddie unbuttoned the pearl snaps at her wrists, rolled her sleeves up a bit. "Now, what's goin' on with you? Why you here?"

Both women said nothing, never interrupted as Diehl explained the events of the last couple days. Didn't mention the personal nature of his and Joe's friendship.

"So, I guess Joe just hadn't been able to make a decision. Wasn't there when I stopped by. I didn't wanna go to Cheyenne. So, I just drove north, got more halfway to Montana, just thinkin' things through. Turned around, headed south, saw the turnoff for Casper, ended up here. Drove around, saw the recruiting station and... What the hell... Could do worse, I figured. Thing is, the Army ain't gonna take me for a couple weeks. Shoulda planned ahead, I guess."

"What about your family?" Chris took off her Shell ball cap, reached back and undid the rubber bands around the braids, unfurled them with her fingers.

"Nah, no family left."

"How were you livin' in Laramie? You were goin' to school and all. Musta lived with somebody." Maddie's voice softened as, behind the bar, Hank changed the music tape.

"Well, there is my daddy. That's where I lived. But, he don't really count anymore. Hasn't for a long time."

The women didn't respond, watched Diehl look down at the tabletop.

"Where you stayin' here in Casper?" Maddie asked. Added, "Till the Army gets their hands on you."

Diehl looked up, shook his head, "Don't know. I'll find somethin'. Can sleep in my car if nothin' else."

"And that eight dollars is gonna get you how far in the way of food?" Chris wrapped a rubber band around her hand, unwrapped it, wrapped it again.

Diehl scooted to the end of the booth. "I really gotta use the...facilities."

"Right there," Maddie jerked her thumb toward the end of the bar.

"Be right back," Diehl said.

"You know, honey," Maddie grabbed Chris' hand, took the rubber band away from her, "you're really honing those redneck affectations to a fine art."

"Why, thank ya'll, Miss Maddie. I'm tryin' my best."

"Wonder how the kid would react if he knew you were art history at Vassar and I'm a burnt-out lawyer from a little isle called Manhattan?" Maddie wrapped Chris' rubber band around her own hand.

"Yeah, I've wondered the same thing, not just about the kid, but about the rest of these yokels, um, customers."

"I do so love it though," Maddie said.

Chris turned to her partner. "Me, too." She patted Maddie's leg. "You think Tony will..."

"I think Tony will see in this kid what I've noticed. Nobody is going to take advantage of him. Flesh or otherwise."

Diehl returned to the booth. "Guess I oughta be headin' outta here."

"To where?" Maddie frowned. "Your car?"

"About the only thing I got right now."

"We got a place, a little spread about twenty miles outside'a town." Chris pulled her hair back, put on her ball cap.

"Course, we only got one bed. Guess you'd have to be in the middle, you know, like the frosting in the Oreos."

Diehl tensed. Knew there was some price to be paid for what he'd begun to think as a simple act of kindness. "Uh, no, I..."

Maddie reached across the table, slapped Diehl on his shoulder. "Kiddin', Diehl. We got some spare bedrooms. Hired hand uses one a them. You could have the other."

"Oh, no, I couldn't do such a thing. You all have already..."

"Nonsense," Chris said. "You can work the stalls. Got a couple'a horses, a few cattle. You can help Tony, our hired hand, for however long you're gonna be here."

"I ain't..." Diehl paused, thought about what he needed to say, started again. "I ain't, um, available for, uh, dates, if you know what I mean."

Both women stared at him, turned to each other, smiled large, then began to laugh.

Diehl watched the women enjoy the moment, wondered what the hell was so funny.

"Listen, Mister D-I-E-H-L." Maddie leaned over the table, kept her voice low, motioned for Diehl to lean closer. "Less you haven't noticed, me and Chris here are a couple, don't want dates with you. Just wanna give a waif a helpin' hand. Know what I'm talkin' about?"

Diehl leaned back, thought a minute about the couple thing. "You're...like, I mean, you're..."

"Lesbians, honey, is the word you're lookin' for."

Diehl studied their faces, still smiling, intent stares directed at him communicating something honest about themselves. He smiled himself. "Okay. No dates, then."

All three paused a moment before laughing until tears filled Chris' eyes, until Diehl figured he'd stepped into a new opportunity he hadn't reckoned on.

“Come on,” Maddie slipped from the booth. “We’ll let Hank close it up tonight.”

Diehl and Chris followed. Maddie waved at the bartender, made a motion like she was locking a key. The bartender gave her a thumbs-up.



Diehl followed the Ford F350 out of Casper, turned onto a dirt road, unlit except for the moon hanging full, glitter of stars reminding Diehl of where he’d come from, before Laramie, before every goddamned thing in his life had taken a bad turn.

The house was two hundred yards past a lodgepole pine-framed access, floodlit, with **MadC Ranch** burned into the top crossbar. They stopped on a pebbled turnaround in front of the house.

Diehl saw the bare outline of a barn, maybe a stable not far behind. Wondered about the horses, opened the Ford’s door, stood a moment without closing it, watched Maddie and Chris climb out of the truck.

“Come on,” Maddie said, waving her arm.

Diehl closed the door, followed the women into the house, took off his ball cap.

“Have a seat,” Chris said, walking through the living room. Lacquered pine furniture, Indian blankets. Odd pictures of splotched color hung on the walls, a rock fireplace showed embers still glowing.

“Looks like Tony musta just gone to bed.” Maddie stepped to the fireplace, took a log from a pile, opened the grate, placed it on the hot coals.

Diehl sat down, looked at the clock on the wall: twelve thirty. Felt as tired as he’d ever felt in his life.

Maddie turned from the fireplace, looked at Diehl, saw a kid about at the end of his rope. “You know, me and Chris sleep most’a the morning. Runnin’ the bar and all, we get home late, have a drink, enjoy the fire. If you’re tired, I can show you to the bedroom.”

“Guess I am.” Diehl slowly rose from his chair. “Wanna thank you and Chris for this. I’ll pay up somehow, someday.”

“I know you will, honey. I know you will.” She led him past the kitchen where Chris poured red wine into tall crystal.

“G’night,” she said, watching Diehl follow Maddie, saw a slight slump in the kid’s shoulders, knew she’d got herself another waif, took pleasure in her latest conquest.



Diehl woke early, the room lit by the soft glow of sunrise sifting through what Diehl now saw as cotton curtains, printed with shapes of freak people, some with their legs coming out of their heads, eyes in their stomachs. Wondered if he should wait to get up till the women were up and about. Remembered it was their habit to sleep in. He threw the covers off, sat on the edge of the bed, smelled his armpits. Could go at least another day without a shower. Pulled on his jeans, socks, boots, worked his T-shirt over his head. Put on his ball cap. He stepped softly, grabbed the doorknob and opened the door. Smelled coffee, had to pee. He saw the open door to the bathroom, stepped lightly toward it. Went in, closed the door, released a stream that bubbled white into the porcelain pool, flushed. Looked at himself in the mirror over the sink. *Goddamn, Diehl, you look like shit.* He grabbed a washcloth from the towel rack, turned on the hot water, waited a few seconds. Soaked the cloth, put it to his face, rubbed his eyes, his ears, ran the cloth under his T-shirt, scrubbed his armpits. Rinsed the cloth out, folded it back onto the towel bar. He gently turned the doorknob, stepped into the hallway, slowly, quietly walked toward the kitchen.

“Well, what we got here?”

Diehl saw him, there at the kitchen table, nursing a tall cup of coffee, head raised, staring at him. Diehl took him in, assessed what he saw: brown hair, lightly brown skin, large dark eyes, a face lit by a sly smile. Prob’ly twenty, twenty-one. *Handsome*, Diehl thought.

Diehl stood, framed in the doorway to the kitchen. “I, uh...” He stammered. Didn’t know what to say.

Handsome nodded his head. "Ain't got to explain. Seen it more 'an once. Quite a few times, as a matter of fact. The girls got 'emselfes another waif. Right?"

"Uh, I guess that's the word they used."

Handsome stood up, stepped to the counter, opened a cupboard and grabbed a coffee cup. "Well, young waif, have a seat."

Diehl didn't move. Drank in the site of Handsome, back of his head, broad shoulders, ass filling out the threadbare Levi's.

"Name's Tony," he said, tipping the pot of coffee over the cup. "You want some cream or sugar?"

Diehl heard the words. Couldn't find his voice.

Tony turned, held the cup in his hand. "C'mon, waif. Have a seat."

Diehl saw the smile, knew he was in safe company. "Just take it black."

"Good." Tony sat back down, placed the cup on the table.

Diehl sat down, palmed the cup in both hands, took a sip, set it back down. "Sorry, I'm just... Never done this before. Never had occasion to need hospitality from strangers."

Tony studied Diehl's eyes, grinned. "No strangers around here. Hell, ever'body is welcome; cats, dogs...waifs. Whaddaya go by? What's your name?"

"Diehl."

Tony waited a moment before asking the question Diehl was, by now, getting used to. "How do you spell —"

"D-I-E-H-L."

Tony nodded, picked up his coffee cup. "Go by your last name, huh? I'd do the same 'cept mine is kinda hard for folks to wrap their tongues around. Fianarelli. Tony Fianarelli." He extended his hand across the table. "Bet you never run into any Italians in Wyoming."

Diehl grabbed his hand, thought again, *handsome*. Felt himself get hard. "Nice to meet you. And, no, can't say that I have."

“So, you show up in the bar?”

“Yeah.”

“Me, too. Maddie and Chris were on me like flies on potato salad. Same with you?”

Diehl nodded. “Yeah, wasn’t there long before they —”

“Hovered. Took you in. Prob’ly fed you. That’s what they do. Kinda their hobby.”

Diehl raised his cup, sipped. “Got fed, for sure. They — circumstances bein’ what they are — got me to come out here. Owe ‘em a debt I can’t repay right now.”

“Well, soon as we finish up here in the kitchen, you can begin to repay that debt helpin’ me out with the critters. You want some breakfast: eggs, bacon?”

“Nah, still digestin’ that burger.”

“Hah! I know what you mean. One’a Chris’ specials, fills you up for three damn days. Well then, let’s get to it.” Tony stood up, rinsed his cup in the sink, turned to Diehl. “You done?” Diehl handed him the cup. “Okay,” Tony placed the cups in the drain rack, “let’s go.”



“This here’s Gertrude Stein, Gertie for short.”

The dun-colored mare, a striking white blaze down its face, curious eyes, watched Diehl, its head over the top of the stall. Diehl moved in close, palmed the side of her face, spoke into her nostrils. “Hey, sweet thing.” He scratched on the blaze, let her smell his hand. “What a name you got...Gertrude Stein.”

“I see you been around horses.” Tony stood a couple feet away, watched Diehl let the horse take in his odor.

“Most’a my life. Yeah, she’s a beauty.”

“She’s about nine. She’s Maddie’s. Smart horse with a goddamned mind of her own. Sassy lady. Maddie’s about the only one can handle her. She’ll take advantage’a anybody else.”

“Know what you mean,” Diehl said, hungry to ride the dun, see if she’d take advantage of him.

“Now this beauty” — Tony stopped at the next stall where a dark bay stood, thin white stripe down its face, worried its muzzle against Tony’s palm — “she’s Alice B. Toklas. Alice for short.”

“Quite the names for horses.” Diehl stepped to Alice.

“Not if you’re Maddie and Chris. See, Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas were literary types, both of ’em...uh... Maddie or Chris explain to you what their relationship is?”

Diehl nodded. “Yup, understand what they got goin’. Okay with me. S’pose you were gonna tell me the names they give the horses was after some other, maybe famous...”

“Lesbians. You got it.” Tony watched Diehl greet the bay.

“And, finally this here is Walt Whitman. Walt —”

“...for short,” Diehl said.

“How’d ya guess? Yeah, this here’s Walt, a gelding’a course. He’s only about four, but he’s quite the gentleman.”

Diehl turned quickly; the horses backed up a bit in the stalls. Seven dogs ran into the stable, tongues hanging out the sides of their mouths, surrounded Tony then warily inched over to Diehl. Diehl bent down, let the menagerie sniff him.

“Them’s waifs, too. Picasso, Dali, Gaugin... You get the idea.”

Diehl looked up at Tony. “I recognize Picasso, the others...”

“Painters. Chris got a degree in art. About ten cats hangin’ out in the barn, roamin’ around the place, named after sculptors. Won’t bother you with them names. Lemme feed the dogs. You muck out the stalls.”

Diehl stood up. “Sure.” He watched the pack follow Tony out of the stable. Saw the rake hanging on the wall, pulled it down, opened up Gertie’s stall.



By ten thirty, they’d forked new hay into the stalls, dumped fortified oats into the troughs, rubbed conditioner on two saddles, repaired split reins. Through it all Diehl told his story

as he'd done with Chris and Maddie. Tony didn't say much, just listened, let Diehl speak.

Chores finished in the stable, all the waifs fed, Tony sat down on a bale, reached behind it and pulled out a pint of Wild Turkey. "Have a seat," he said, slapping the bale.

Diehl sat down. Watched Tony unscrew the cap, take a swig, then hold it out to him.

"Nah." Diehl pulled at the hay. "Don't use it, myself."

"Me either" — Tony screwed the cap back on, put the bottle back behind the bale — "except when I do."

Diehl turned to Tony, smiled.

"Listen, let's saddle up ol' Alice and Walt and check on the herd. Nice place to stop and sit out there, too."

"No objection here." Diehl hopped off the bale, grabbed the saddle Tony pointed out. "You want me on Alice or Walt?"

"You take Alice. Walt's kinda my baby."

They saddled the horses, walked them out of the stable, mounted and headed north.



"They got about three thousand acres, grow our own hay, got a little stream crosses the property. All in all, it's as nice a little spread as I ever seen."

Diehl kept Alice beside Walt, listened to Tony, viewed the sight of wide-open country as a healing salve.

"There's the herd." Tony pointed to dark specs up ahead. "Only got thirty black baldies. That's all. Maddie and Chris won't hear of butcherin' or sellin' 'em. They're like pets; same as the rest of the waifs, I guess. Screwball way to run a cattle operation. But, hell... Ain't no operation to it."

Diehl'd never heard of such a thing. Knew folks got sentimental about their animals. But, he'd never heard of anybody keepin' cows as pets. "That's a new one for me."

“Yeah, was for me, too. But, it’s their ranch, their cows. Let’s head a little west,” Tony pointed as he gently reined Walt. “Got a nice shady place over there. We can sit a bit.”

Diehl followed, stayed a little to the left and behind Tony, watched him ride. Looked comfortable on Walt, had melded himself to the horse’s movement.



“Now, you shared with me, told me your story. Mine might be interestin’. Got some experience with the military, myself.”

They sat near the bank of the creek, Tony pulling up grass, letting it sift through his fingers. Diehl tried not to think about the last time he’d ridden to a creek lined with cottonwood and willow scrub. *Kind of a déjà vu thing*. Had tried to set aside Joe’s indecision, guessed he prob’ly loved Joe, wondered if Joe had felt the same. Turned his attention to Tony.

“I lived in Casper all my life. Hell, my family’s been here for three generations. Family used to ranch. Things bottomed out. CEOs and stockbrokers from New York, A-rab princes, Hollywood types buyin’ up all the prime land; no profit in cows...nowhere to feed ‘em. Daddy went to work for the oil company. I worked cattle operations that were still hangin’ on in the summer, weekends in the spring when the heifers dropped; brandin’, castratin’, that sort of thing. Got some kinda hair up my ass to be a Marine. Just like you, ‘cept you chose the Army. Got sent to San Deigo for boot camp. Tough sonsabitches makin’ sure you’re up to becomin’ a Marine. Hell, I took it in stride. Been in shape all my life. Physical part wasn’t bad, aced the Crucible; you know, the fifty–sixty hours of hell they put you through at the end of boot. Anyway, got through that okay. And, by God, I come outta there a Marine. I was proud of myself. Made my parents proud, too. Corps sent me off to advanced individual trainin’ at Camp Pendleton, still in California. Did fine there. MOS 0311, rifleman.”

Tony paused, picked up a rock, threw it across the creek. “Waited for my PDS, uh, permanent duty station, orders at Pendleton” — picked up another rock, worked it between his

palms — “but got caught up in somethin’ that...You heard’a *don’t ask, don’t tell*?” He looked at Diehl, waited for a response.

Diehl glanced at him, looked down at the ground, pulled up some grass. “Yeah, heard’a it.”

“Had two buddies — Marines. We hung out, spent a lot of time together outside’a duty hours. Drove into San Diego a few times, Los Angeles once. San Diego was only about forty miles from the base. So this one time me and just one of my buddies head for the city. I liked this guy, maybe more than I shoulda. Knew he liked me, but prob’ly not in the way I...”

Tony stood up, walked a few steps toward the creek, turned to Diehl. “Ah, hell, Diehl, I’m queer. Always have been. Don’t apologize for it. Just the way it is and was back there at Pendleton.” Tony waited for a reaction, none came. Diehl began to pull grass, toss it from his fingers.

“Well, anyway,” Tony sat down, faced Diehl, kept his eyes focused on the ground, “Lonnie — the guy I went to San Diego with, originally from some damned little town in Oklahoma — says he knows a place he wants to check out. So, we drive downtown, get lost a couple times, but then we find this bar he wants to go to. Okay by me. So, we walk in and there’s nothin’ but guys in there. Some of ’em huggin’ each other, some kissin’ right out there in the open. Never seen anything like that. Knew it was out there. But, hell, here’s these two jarheads steppin’ into a gay bar and everybody is checkin’ us out, all heads turnin’ our way and I get a little nervous. But, Lonnie wants to get a drink, and I go along. We sit at the bar, have a few. Then Lonnie turns to me, grabs me around the neck and plants a big one right on my lips. Well, if I was nervous before, I was shittin’ bricks by that time. Hell, I knew about what kind a trouble we could get in. I was a Marine, for Christ’s sake. Well, I convince Lonnie we gotta get outa there. He was a lightweight with liquor, so I helped him off the stool, got him to the car. I drove back to the base, Lonnie sleepin’ all the way.

Tony looked at Diehl, expected a reaction of distaste. Diehl kept his head down, appeared to be studying the nature of grass growing.

“Well, next thing I know, there’s two MPs, couple’a corporals, bustin’ into my room at Pendleton. ‘Come with us, Marine,’ they say and they meant it. So, they take me over to a building on the other side of the base, one on either side of me, and they sit me in a little room...just a table, four chairs. Then in comes two Navy officers, they sit down at the table, hand me a piece a paper and tell me to read it. So, I read it and, what the fuck, there’s a confession from Lonnie that we was havin’ a homosexual relationship. Goddamn! Never touched another man in that way in my life, ‘cept that one kiss in that bar. But, there it was in black and white. When I shook my head, told ‘em ‘No sir, nothin’ like this ever happened,’ they take a picture out of their file and there’s me and Lonnie goin’ into that bar in San Diego. Goddamned Navy Intel takin’ pictures’a jarheads walkin’ into a gay bar. ‘But, nothin’ happened,’ I tell ‘em. They says, ‘Not accordin’ to Private Anderson.’ Anderson was Lonnie’s last name. So I argued awhile with them officers. Kept tellin’ me I had better cooperate, told me to just sign the statement Lonnie’d given to ‘em. Told me I was facin’ hard brig time if I didn’t. If I did, they said I’d prob’ly just get a dishonorable discharge. I kept arguin’ with ‘em. Kept me in that little room about six hours. Kept repeatin’ I’d have a hard time in the brig. Said queers don’t fare well behind bars.”

Diehl raised his head, looked at Tony. “Why you tellin’ me this?”

Tony saw ice in Diehl’s eyes. He figured one of two things: Diehl either did find some distaste in it or it was hittin’ a little too close to home. “Just my story.” Tony kept his eyes on Diehl’s. “You shared your circumstances, thought I’d share mine.”

Diehl nodded. “Okay, fair’s fair. This story got a end?”

Tony smiled, stood up and sat back down next to Diehl, picked up another rock, tossed it into the scrub. “Yeah, it’s got a end. I signed that piece a paper. Found out later they give Lonnie the same treatment, scared him into writin’ that confession. Both of us got dishonorable discharges. I come back to Casper. Lived with my parents for a while. My dad wouldn’t even talk to me. My mamma would talk, but every

time we did — even if we was talkin’ about the weather — she’d end up in tears. Think they could’a handled the queer part...eventually. But to be disgraced like I was... Nah, that was just too much. Moved to Denver for a while. Got caught up in some heavy shit. I came out as they say with a fuckin’ vengeance. But, hell, Denver was just too big, too many opportunities to lose your...soul. So, I come back to Casper, found that little bar with the fuckin’ Christmas lights strung up from the ceiling and, well... Chris and Maddie saved my ass. Been here about a year. And don’t have a notion of leavin’ any time soon. Maddie is tryin’ to upgrade my discharge. Prob’ly won’t happen. But, hell, she’s tryin’.”

“How’s she doin’ that?

“Guess you wouldn’t know. She’s a lawyer. Come out here from New York. She’s done a lot of legal work for...um, gay folk.”

Diehl stood up, wiped his hands on his jeans, walked the few steps to the creek. Squatted, cupped water in his hand, let it dribble out, pressed his palms against his face. Stood up and turned around. “Got one question.”

Tony stood up, shoved his hands into his pockets. “Shoot.”

“Them curtains in the bedroom... Freak people on them curtains. What’s up with that?”

Tony stared at Diehl, hadn’t expected a left-field question, lowered his head, smiled at the grass. “Well,” he said, looked back up. “That’s art, Diehl. Picasso.”

Diehl nodded, smiled, stepped to Walt and untied the lead rope from the low-hanging cottonwood limb, mounted the horse. “Okay then,” he said, reined the horse, gently slapped his heels against Walt’s ribs.



“Gotta go in to see that recruitin’ sergeant, tell him I got a address.” Diehl watched Chris spread mayonnaise, a little mustard on slices of bread, turkey, lettuce, tomatoes already cut to top it off. Potato salad already on the table, pitcher of iced

tea ready to be poured. Tony was to his right, Maddie sat to his left.

“Ever hear of a telephone?” Maddie poured the tea.

“Guess I have. Didn’t think of it.”

“Well, now you have. No need to go back in town today. You and Tony got some more chores to do, anyway. Chris and I will be headin’ out shortly.”

Diehl nodded, thought about Tony’s earlier confession.

“Yeah,” Tony spooned potato salad onto his plate, “we got about twenty feet’a fence to repair. Give the guy a call.”

“Guess I will,” Diehl said, glanced at Tony, quick acknowledgment he wanted to touch him, just feel the skin, the slope of his nose, run his fingers through his hair. *Possibilities*. Got hard with the notion.



No stranger to fence mending, Diehl knew the essentials. Tony had taken off his shirt, hung it on a post. Diehl did the same, placed it over Tony’s. Both glanced at the other, sweat running now with the slow chug of the sun moving toward late afternoon. Talked a back-and-forth dealing only with the task at hand. Fence fixed, Diehl handed Tony his shirt, both wiped the wet from their faces, chests, balled up the shirts, climbed into the F350 — Maddie and Chris had taken the Jeep Wagoneer to town — and drove back to the house.

They returned the tools to the barn.

“C’mon, let’s ease up a bit.” Tony closed the barn door, walked to the stable.

Diehl knew what was coming: a side-by-side sit on the bale, sipping Wild Turkey. *Possibilities* palpable. Diehl knew what he wanted, needed maybe. But, hell, Tony’d lived in Denver, got caught up in some heavy shit. Diehl didn’t know anything about heavy, thought he’d probably not want to.



Gertrude, Walt and Alice munched hay, peered over the top posts of their stalls, eyed Diehl and Tony there on the floor, fused as one entity, clutched close, a curiosity.

Tony spat in his hand, rubbed the spittle between Diehl's asscheeks, commenced a probe.

"Nah," Diehl grabbed Tony's hand. "I can't... Not ready for that."

"That's okay," Tony moved his hand to Diehl's dick, mouthed the head. Felt rock-hardness dwindle.

"I had..." Diehl said, his hands lightly clasped on the backs of Tony's ears. "I just can't do that right now."

Tony raised his head, looked in Diehl's eyes. "It's okay."

"I know," Diehl raised his head, sat up. "I mean... See, I got issues. My daddy... after mamma died, he..." Diehl began to sob, covered his eyes with his hands, stood up, stepped to the bale, kneeled down, hands to fists, began beating the bundled hay. "Goddamnit! Goddamnit! Goddamnit!" Sobs laced with phlegm, spitting the words.

Tony stood behind Diehl, placed one hand on Diehl's forehead, wrapped an arm around his chest. "It's all right, Diehl. It's all right." Tony welled up, kept his hold on Diehl, tightened it, said again, "It's all right."



Days turned, Maddie and Chris off to town, chores done, Diehl and Tony forsook the stable for a bed. Held each other, kissed, discovered with tongues and fingers the spread of the other's body, bulges, crevices, smooth or stiffly curled protrusions of hair. Tony would often roll to his stomach, receive Diehl into himself as a gift given with care, something quite different from the reckless acts of greased friction engendered by dark recesses in dark haunts in Denver.

Diehl never offered and Tony never asked for an explanation about what had happened in the stable. Each understood there was fragility there, birthed long ago, tender to the touch, dangerously voracious if roused.



The letter came nearly two weeks later, orders for Diehl, reporting date one week ahead. Fort Polk, Louisiana.

Maddie and Chris gave a party at the bar. Let Diehl have a beer or two. Christmas lights on a blink circuit, flashing festive against the regular crowd of aged losers, lonesome women, cowboys gone to seed, drunks hunkered in semidarkness sipping a slip-slide into nirvana, or meanness, or just stupor.

Maddie and Chris feigned a celebratory mien, portioned free drinks, finger food, chips and salsa. Hugged each other when in the kitchen, assured one another it would be all right, that Diehl'd do just fine. "Gonna miss him, though," Chris whispered.

"I know," Maddie said into Chris' shoulder. "I know."



That night, Diehl and Tony saddled up the horses. Walt and Alice flapped their lips, shook their heads, not used to night rides. Couple of the dogs, Dali and Gougin, followed them out of stable.

They knew where they were going. Didn't need to discuss it. Full moon lit the way.

Sitting where they'd sat before, listened to the breeze tickle the cottonwoods, the trickle of the stream, horses pulling up grass. Dali, a golden retriever, Gougin, a breed of indeterminate mix, snuggled up to them, nosed their thighs.

They scratched the dogs in places only those who love such creatures know causes pleasure, behind the ears, under the muzzle, around the neck.

"Nice night, I guess," Tony said, "considerin' the circumstances."

"Yeah." Diehl raised his head, drank in the sky, the stars looking like snowflakes yet to fall, smelled the air, sighed, turned to Tony. "I'll never forget you, yah know."

Tony turned, put his arm around Diehl's shoulders. "Me either. You been some kind of special waif, D-I-E-H-L."

Diehl patted Tony's thigh. "And you..." Diehl paused, considered what needed to be said. "You're only the second man I've ever touched in any way but what you're s'posed to, you know, what folks believe is proper. Joe was the first. Believe I love Joe for that. Believe I...love you, too."

Tony raised his hands to Diehl's face, framed it in his palms. "Can't love every man you ever touch, Diehl." Kissed Diehl on the eyes, the nose, the lips.

Diehl nodded, moved in for another kiss. "I could stay here forever. Kinda what I wanted for Joe and me."

Tony again put his arm around Diehl's shoulders. "Nah. Good as it is for me, Diehl, it ain't for you. At least not right now. I done things, been places. Now it's your turn to...fly."

"Not sure the Army is gonna let me do much flyin'."

"Nope. That they won't. But, flyin' also takes place inside yourself, places that nobody but you can see, places where you never been. That's what the Army is gonna do for you, Diehl."

"Not sure where I'll land."

"On your feet. No doubt about it. Don't forget what I told you of my circumstances, though. Even when you're not intendin' to tell anybody about your...nature, it might come out, anyway. Might come out in a lie that you can't prove untrue."

"I ain't forgot your story, Tony. Didn't say much at the time, but understood the lesson. You would'a made a good Marine. None finer. Their loss, not yours."

"I lost somethin', Diehl, somethin' of myself I can never get back."

They listened to the night then, each silent with their own thoughts, each feeling the warmth of a critter, Dali and Gaugin, snuggled up against their thighs, sublimely comfortable within the honesty of themselves.

Mattie and Chris had begun to walk across the acreage, due northwest, shortly after the boys had said they were going for a ride. Knew their destination. Forty minutes later, they held hands, stood back a ways. The moon to their backs, they saw

them, sitting on the ground facing dark bundles of cottonwoods, their heads bowed slightly, Walt and Alice tied off to their right, two furred lumps at their sides, the ripple of the stream barely heard.

“Maybe we just ought to go back,” Chris whispered. “I mean, they may want to say their good-byes more...intimately.”

Maddie squeezed her hand. “Nah. Something tells me they’re about as intimate as two men can get in a situation like this.”

“Yeah.” Chris wiped her eyes. “Guess you’re right.”

They stood a bit longer, turned and headed back to the house.

CHAPTER FIVE

Denman was already sitting on the mat at the far end of the gym — or dayroom, as it was generally called.

“Good mornin’, gentlemen.” Diehl smiled at three boys working free weights just inside the door.

“Hey, sarge.” The three said in unison.

Diehl’d pulled on his cutoff sweats, wore his olive drab T-shirt.

“Looks like you’re going to get serious today, sarge,” one of boys Diehl knew as Carson, a buff, blond corporal said as he curled a hundred-pound dumbbell.

Diehl walked toward Denman. “Maybe so, Carson.”

“Morning, sar—” Denman remembered Diehl’d asked him to call him by his name.

“S’okay,” Diehl knelt on the mat. “Others around, guess it’s better we keep to protocol.”

Denman nodded. “Sarge.”

“Okay.” Diehl faced Denman, lowered himself from his knees, sat cross-legged on the mat. “I guess the first thing we need to talk about is the sizin’ up part of wrestlin’.”

“Okay.” Denman’s blue eyes met Diehl’s head on. Diehl glanced away, cautioned himself about drinking too deep.

“Anyway, sizin’ up is takin’ a look at your opponent. You know, just a quick survey of his legs, stomach, arms, neck. Ever’thing is quick in wrestlin’. So, your sizin’ up has to happen quick, pretty much without you even thinkin’ about it, but still makin’ mental note of the strong points, the weak points. If he’s got skinny legs, you know that’s what you need to work on. Smooth stomach, there’s your hint he might be weak in workin’ himself outta some holds. Weak lookin’ arms... Well, you see where I’m goin’. When I was in high school, most ever’body kept the tops of their singlets — you know, those one-piece

outfits wrestlers wear — down around their waist till their match come up. You could see pretty much what they had to work with.”

“Yeah. Exactly.”

“Okay.” Diehl stood up, took off his shirt, motioned for Denman to do the same. “Start out in a standin’ position. You look at his eyes. Sometimes there’s some little hint of fear, sometimes there ain’t. You see fear, you got most’a the battle won.” *Goddamn. Those eyes... Those eyes.*

“You circle around your opponent” — Diehl began to move to Denman’s left — “like this. C’mon, you do the same.”

Denman moved, watching Diehl’s eyes, gray eyes not so much hard or cold but inquisitive, studying his own, looking for fear.

As they moved in a tight circle, Diehl smiled. “You ain’t afraid, are you?”

“Nope,” Denman smiled himself.

“Whadaya see in my eyes?”

“I sure don’t see any fear.”

“Good, ’cause there ain’t any. Don’t worry, though. Just practicin’. Now, as you circle, what you already read about the weak spots — legs, arms, stomach — becomes your strong point. You got a couple choices. First one is the shoot. You can do an ankle pick.” Lighting fast, Diehl crouched, thrust his right hand onto Denman’s left ankle, raised it to his waist. Denman went down with a *thud*.

“Ankle pick,” Denman said. Raised to a sitting position, Diehl’s crotch directly in front of him. “Effective.” Craned his neck, looked up at Diehl.

“Wanna try it on me?”

Denman quickly got to his feet. “My right hand to your left ankle, pull up and down you go. Right?”

“I may not be goin’ down, but, yeah, that’s the idea.”

They circled again, eye to eye. Denman made his move, reached for Diehl’s ankle. Not quick enough. Diehl encircled

his arms around Denman's waist, flipped him, laid him on his back, quickly dropped down, hooked his arm around Denman's right leg, grabbed Denman's left arm, raised his leg, pinned his shoulders to the mat.

Instinct had taken over. Diehl saw the surprise in Denman's eyes, savored the memory of other battles, now lost to a time and place he'd rather forget.

Diehl released his hold, sat on his haunches, watched Denman sit up. "Sorry. Got a little carried away."

Denman didn't say anything, wasn't sure what he saw in Diehl's eyes... anger, maybe.

"Well," he said. He folded his hands in his lap, "I guess you won that one."

Diehl relaxed, let the moment hang. "I..." Thought a moment about what needed to be said. "I'm just wired, I guess, to react that way. Forgot for a second you're just learnin'."

Denman patted Diehl's thigh. "Only way to learn is to do."

"You okay, right?"

"Sure. What's next?"

Diehl realized he could hurt the kid; that it wasn't all that easy to let the past go. "Let's try some moves from the kneeling position. Just get on your hands and knees. You'll be in the bottom position, I'll be on top."

Denman flashed a quick smile. "Okay. Me bottom, you top."

Denman assumed the bottom position. Diehl knelt down, placed his hand on Denman's back, struck him that Denman's smile, his comment, held more meaning than what Diehl had intended. Wrestling terms aside, Denman seemed to have dealt a notion of an understanding of terms encompassing a coupling more intimate than what they could accomplish on the mat.

Diehl felt himself harden, had prepared for such a thing by strapping his dick pointed upwards in his jockstrap. Wouldn't do to... expose his nature.

Diehl took Denman through the switch, roll, standup, escape. Found himself sliding his hand over the shiny nylon, feeling Denman's ass, even quickly sliding his fingers up the crack. Couple times palmed Denman's crotch, felt a thickness. Knew Denman was doing the same, as they worked themselves into a sweat, breathed hard.

Afterward, wiping themselves with their shirts, they sat on the mat facing one another.

"Good workout," Diehl said, dabbing his forehead. "You got some talent. Got some strength, too."

"Nothing like you." Denman wiped his chest.

"Well, I got a advantage." Diehl placed his T-shirt over his crotch, cupped his hands over it. "I was born to be top."

Denman's eyes didn't blink, continued to reconnoiter Diehl's stare. "Don't mind being bottom. There's a lot a bottom can do to get an advantage."

Diehl nodded, wondered about the comment, had to look away from those eyes. "You learn well, Denman. We should do this again. Get you ready for that rematch."

"Anytime."

"Okay. We'll do it, then." Diehl stood up, pulled his shirt over his head, watched Denman do the same.

"When?" Denman asked, stared into Diehl's eyes.

Diehl couldn't find the strength to look elsewhere. *Those eyes, those goddamned eyes, pullin' me in like iron filings to a magnet.*

"Soon," he said. "Soon."



Tuesday morning, Diehl walked into company headquarters, glanced at the first thing anyone saw as they entered the building: George W. Bush's photograph, hanging a few inches higher than that of the base commander's on the left, the company commander's on the right. Diehl'd noticed, months ago, two PFCs pushing a cart piled high with the new president's picture on the top shelf, the old president's pictures piling up on the bottom shelf of the cart. He'd known it was

Clinton who'd taken on the cheerleader role for Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Maybe it'd been the only compromise Clinton could come up with. But seeing Bush up there, silly grin on his face, always drove Diehl to the same conclusion: Don't Ask, Don't Tell wasn't going anywhere any time soon.

Diehl walked down the hallway to the cluster of metal desks where NCOs kept their files, lesson plans for what it was they'd been tasked to do, to take those eighteen, nineteen, twenty-year-olds already molded to the Army's way through boot camp, and give them additional skills in the essential art of confronting an enemy with the latest deadly technology.

Diehl sat down at his desk, looked at his calendar marked up with lesson subject matter, classroom locations.

"Diehl, c'mon," another buck sergeant, Abrams, yelled. Motioned with his hand for Diehl to follow.

"What's goin' on?"

"On the tube. Captain's office. C'mon, Diehl."

Diehl stood up, followed Abrams.

NCOs, a couple lieutenants had crowded into Captain Enders' office. The TV was on, sound turned up. In living color, a passenger jet sliced through the upper floors of some building, huge ball of fire erupted. Commentary from talking heads uncharacteristically frantic in their loss for words, muttering "Oh my God," and repeating themselves over and over about the World Trade Center being attacked, that thousands were in the towers and, "Oh, my God..."

Diehl turned his head, looked at the faces of his fellow NCOs, the officers staring at the tube. Fear, anger, sadness. Turned back to the TV, saw the network switch to DC.

Another passenger jet had crashed the Pentagon.

Company commander, full bird colonel, stuck his head in the captain's office. "Gentlemen, we're on lockdown, per the base commander. Get the hell outta here and get your troops in their barracks. Everything is canceled for today. I say again, we're on lockdown."

No one moved, each mesmerized by what they were seeing on the TV.

“Now!” the company commander shouted.

There was instant reaction. The captain’s office emptied quickly, NCOs running through the halls and out the building. Diehl followed. But where? Hell, he wasn’t directly responsible for any troops. Decided he’d head for D platoon. Denman was there.

The barracks were empty when Diehl popped open the door. Realized they were all probably still in the mess hall. He ran the hundred yards to where the troops were probably still leaning over scrambled eggs and orange juice. Diehl took the steps two at a time, rushed past the open door, stopped cold. Everybody stood at attention, meals uneaten. Captain Sanders faced them, explained the country was under attack, all leaves canceled, all personnel restricted to barracks. Diehl caught Denman’s stare, returned it. He waited until the captain was finished, until he’d dismissed the troops, ordered them back to their barracks. He followed the troops out of the mess hall, saw Denman look back.

What the hell am I doing, Diehl thought. Nodded at Denman, turned and walked back to his billet.



It was more than two weeks before things eased up. Weekend leaves were reinstituted, the base stood down from lockup. Still, there was a tension about, shared by everyone. What was coming next? They were soldiers for Christ’s sake. What the hell were they doing still in Louisiana?



Diehl knew Denman had headed back to New Jersey or Ohio or some damned place on emergency leave.

“His mother died in a car accident,” the company clerk told him. “Due back in a couple days. Why you asking, sarge?”

“Just didn’t see him in class, is all.”

Company clerk nodded, turned back to his keyboard and started punching keys.

Diehl walked to the mess hall. Breakfast was the only full meal served on Saturdays and Sundays. Sandwiches, bags of chips, sodas were the fare for lunch and dinner. Diehl didn't know what else he'd do with his weekend, might as well get some breakfast.

Kid smiled at Diehl as he moved his food tray down the line. Diehl smiled back. Kid dumped scrambled eggs, sausage onto Diehl's plate. Diehl winked. "Appreciate it."

Diehl sat down in the NCO section of the mess hall. Only one other sergeant there, Master Sergeant with a gut, ballooned cheeks, shoveling food like the apocalypse was at hand, famine ahead.

Diehl watched the kid behind the food counter, who'd only recently come from finishing boot on the other side of the base. He was small-boned, fragile even. Pretty face, showing teeth white as new fallen snow, through a large, friendly smile. Kid had dark skin, like Tony's, hairless except for that on his head, jet black under the white paper garrison cap. Mexican maybe.

Diehl stepped to the counter, held his coffee cup under the urn's spigot. "How you doin'?" He glanced at the kid who had no customers, supervisor — a staff sergeant — nowhere in sight, read the kid's nametag: Marquez.

Kid turned away from Diehl, glanced behind him toward the closed door of the staff sergeant's small office. "I'm fine, sir. How are you?"

"Well, I'd be better if you'd cut the *sir* stuff. I'm Sergeant Diehl." He held his hand across the counter.

The kid grabbed his hand, let Diehl shake it. "Sorry. I've seen you go through the line before. But, well... Get officers in here sometimes in civvies. Can't be too careful."

"Guess not." Diehl picked up his cup, sipped. "Got a slow day goin' here."

“Yeah. Guess everybody was anxious to get off base after they cancelled the lockdown.” The kid again looked behind him.

Diehl wondered if the kid had ever considered the Army would put him in a mess hall, a position considered to be pretty much bottom of the barrel. Diehl knew the mess sergeant. He’d been present when the sergeant had berated his crew, privates mostly, for piling too much food on plates, or giving extra helpings of pie or cake. Mess sergeant always seemed to be angry, losing himself in pronouncements that the maggots his crew fed could eat shit as far as he was concerned. Knew the sergeant was now probably holed up in his office, as was his habit, sipping whiskey, watching tit movies or *Cops* reruns on the little TV he’d stolen from the enlisted men’s dayroom. Diehl had little use for him. Wanted to tell the kid he had some admiration for his duty, serving his country, filling the bellies of soldiers who might one day remember his generosity as they put themselves in harm’s way. But he didn’t. Knew saying such a thing would breach what had been instilled in him during his training at the NCO Academy: maintain a professional separation from your troops. Knew also that he’d found himself selectively ignoring the edict. There was Denman, of course. Now, this kid, pretty, soft spoken who he couldn’t stop looking at.

Diehl finished his breakfast, carried his tray to the wash station. The kid stepped into the small room with the framed opening where trays, dirty dishes were left off.

“I guess you’re a man of all trades, today. Nobody else on duty?”

“No. Just me and...Sergeant Woodrum.” The kid took the tray, took the dirty dishes off and grabbed a spray hose hanging over a sink. “Got my first leave, though. Maybe go into Leesville tonight.”

“Ah, Leesville.” Diehl smiled. “Town you gotta be careful in. Watch your wallet. Hell, watch your back.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard stories about some of the things guys get themselves into there. Don’t plan on taking any chances, though. Just want to get off base for a while.”

Diehl stepped aside as Sergeant Fatass shoved his tray at the kid, belched, left the mess hall.

With the kid still occasionally turning his head, watching for Sergeant Woodrum to emerge from his lair, they talked about the Army, where they came from, where they wanted to go. Diehl knew he was again selectively ignoring his training.

“You know” — Diehl watched the kid hose off the dirty dishes — “I kind of wanted to get off base myself. Maybe you’d wanna ride into Leesville with me. Beats takin’ the bus.”

The kid smiled, turned off the spray. Looked at Diehl as if he was trying to read a book with words not wholly understood, nodded his head. “Sure. I’d appreciate that.”

“Good.” Diehl saw that smile again. “You meet me in the parking lot the other side of D Company at about nineteen hundred. Got an old Fairlane. I’ll wait for you.”

“I’ll be there.”

“What the fuck is up, private?” Sergeant Woodrum’s words slurred from inside the kitchen area. “Where you at, Marquez?”

The kid’s smile turned to concern. He stuck his head out the wash room doorway. “Right here, sergeant. Just washing dishes.”

“Well, hell... Let’s close this place up. Well past breakfast time.” The sergeant’s door slammed.

“Will do, sergeant,” the kid looked back at Diehl. “See you tonight.”

Diehl nodded. “I’ll wait for you.”



Diehl and Marquez agreed to go to a bar in town where most of the boys who were becoming men within the parameters the Army had defined drank beer, flirted with women who seemed never to have anything better to do.

Diehl had been to DeRidder only once, Leesville twice, during his stay at Polk. Found both towns — the two nearest to the base — to be pretty much the same as any military towns, anywhere. Towns looked okay to the eye, but once you stepped into a bar or two, there was no mistaking the intent of the commerce occurring inside. Women and girls giggled, probed, teased, fingered young men who had money to spend, energy to burn.

Diehl and Marquez ordered draughts, watched the crowd, young men huddled at tables or in booths, appearing not to be that interested in the young women roaming the room. Heard a voice raised over the music: “Fuck Osama bin-Faggot.” Saw the young men lift bottles of beer in a toast.

Diehl and Marquez talked about 9/11. Both wondered where the attack would take them, knew there was something up at Base HQ. A couple of new generals had shown up. Command staff seemed overly stiff, thin-lipped concern across their faces. Company commander looked as though he’d just shit three bricks every time Diehl saw him.

“I guess you’re more in line for being a part of whatever this all comes to.” Marquez looked at Diehl’s eyes, sipped his beer. “Me... Well, I’m just a cook. Don’t see myself going much further.”

“Thought about it a lot,” Diehl said. “Came in the Army wantin’ nothing more than a war, you know, gettin’ into some combat for country. No second thoughts. Yet. Don’t know where all this will go. I guess we just wait it out till... I guess we just wait and see.”

Diehl broached the subject of a girlfriend back home. Marquez shook his head, cradled his glass in his hands. “No, no girlfriend.” Lowered his eyes, looked into his beer. Looked up, waited for something else from Diehl. When Diehl didn’t say anything, he asked, “You?”

Diehl shook his head. “Nah. No girlfriend.”

Diehl figured some like-mindedness had been exchanged. Stared at Marquez a minute.

“We need some more beer.” Diehl stepped to the bar, ordered a pitcher, carried it back to the booth. He tipped it to Marquez’s glass, then his own. Understood what he was doing, understood the danger of it all.

After the second pitcher remained half full for more than twenty minutes, after Marquez had returned from the restroom and sat back down in the booth and stared at Diehl to the exclusion of everything else that was going on in the bar, Diehl smiled, placed five dollars on the table, set the pitcher on top of the money. “You look tired. Maybe it’d be nice just to find a room, a motel somewhere. No need to get back to the base right now. Hell, we got some freedom to take care of. Order a pizza or somethin’. Watch some TV.”

Marquez nodded. “Okay, sounds good.” Marquez slid from the booth, followed Diehl out of the bar.



Diehl fucked him hard, knew no other way. The kid’s skin smooth as brushed silk, no hair except the black patch where it oughta be, there above his dick. Diehl pumped the kid. Slapped his groin against the kid’s asscheeks; muscled firm, defined as two orbs, the lovely slit up the middle.

The motel offered time by the hour. Diehl had left the kid in the old Ford, signed in, and paid the price.

“Clean sheets, at least.” Diehl had locked the door behind him and the kid, looked at the brown and black papered walls, roses and tulips and some other damned flower imprinted on the paper, wondered if nature had ever really produced a flower so drab, dark. He had checked out the bathroom: brown rust in the toilet, around the bathtub. Pulled open the drawer of the side table next to the bed, found half a phone book, torn down the middle, no bible. Diehl smiled. “Good Lord ain’t hangin’ here.”

The kid had sat down on the bed, turned to Diehl, smiled through his eyes. “Never did like three-ways.”

Kid had a sense of humor. Diehl sprawled on the bed, pulled the kid down, kissed his lips, stared into his brown eyes, ran his hand through the kid’s hair. “Yeah, just you and me.

You are one beautiful boy. What's your first name? All I know is you're Marquez."

"Miguel. Michael." The kid lifted his head, wanted more from Diehl's lips.

Diehl gave him more, unbuttoned the kid's shirt, then his own. The kid's chest was sculpted marble, pectorals defined, nipples dark, erect. Diehl licked the tips.

Shirts off, then pants, their nakedness a complement; Diehl's pale skin against the kid's, tinged a hue delicate brown, exotic in a way for Diehl. He'd never had a Mexican.



Diehl passed the schnapps he'd bought on the way to the motel to the kid. Kid sipped, passed the bottle back. Side by side, heads on pillows, the top sheet kicked to the floor.

"That was good." Diehl sipped more of the Schnapps. "Got a friend back in Wyoming. Tony. He's Italian. Got the same kinda skin as you...dark skinned. You're...smooth, hairless...except where it counts. Kinda like that."

"Something genetic, I guess. It was good for me, too. How'd you know I'd...do this?"

"Something I saw in your eyes in the mess hall. Can't explain it, really. Just something..."

"I saw in your eyes..." The kid hesitated.

"What? What'd you see?"

"Maybe a loneliness, a sadness."

"Yeah, well..."

The kid slid his left hand to Diehl's dick, caressed it, inched his hand to the balls.

"Careful, we ain't got much time left. Prob'ly ought to get back to base."

Diehl scooted off the bed, pulled on his jeans, T-shirt, socks, boots.

The kid did the same. Turned to Diehl. "You some kind of cowboy or something? Before the Army, I mean?"

"I guess you could say that." Diehl stood up, looked around the room. "Grew up on a ranch in northeastern Colorado, cattle operation. Had cows, chickens, horses. Had to move to Wyoming, though. You got everything you came in with?"

Marquez, too, inventoried the room. "Yeah, I'm set."

"I'll pull the car out onto the street. You wait a minute, then come on out. Gotta be careful."

"Sure," the kid nodded, frowned. "Never can get away from the Army altogether. It's always there, even when you can't see it."

"Yeah," Diehl pulled his car keys from his pocket, reached for the door. "Thing is, though, these fuckin' rednecks down here would do a lot worse than the Army. Not much use for queers in these parts."

"Nah, guess not." The kid stood up, watched Diehl leave the room and close the door behind him. Kid knew for sure he'd never have Diehl again. That was just the way things seemed to turn out. Sure, they'd probably still smile at one another at the chow line, remembering their night. But shit, second times were hard to come by in the Army. Too many eyes. Too many consequences.



Diehl pulled the Ford into his parking spot on base. They sat a moment, not saying anything. Diehl put his hand on the kid's thigh. "It was a good time, Michael. I enjoyed it."

"Me, too. Maybe we could try it again sometime."

"Sure," Diehl squeezed the kid's thigh, pulled his hand back. "Maybe... Remember though, don't ask, don't tell."

The kid grabbed the door handle. "*Nunca. No incluso en mis sueños.*"

"Say what?"

The kid opened the door; a tear slipped down his face. "Never. Not even in my dreams."

"The Army gettin' inside your dreams?" Diehl watched the kid step out of the car.

“Sometimes.” The kid’s voice broke. He closed the door, glanced back and raised his hand, waved, walked out of the glow of the street lamps toward his barracks.



As Diehl walked back to his billet, he thought again about where he was, what he’d learned. He never considered the Army would make a fuckin’ teacher out of him. It was still infantry. Didn’t matter, though. The Army had been about the only place to go at the time. Where the fuck else would he be given some little time to think about what life had handed him? Except Casper. But, Casper had come too late.

He had spent every leave over the past three years back in Casper, savoring the only real family he knew: Maddie, Chris, Tony, the horses, dogs, cats and, everytime he returned, there was a new waif the ladies had managed to wrap themselves around, sometimes girls, sometimes boys. Tony had even admitted that he’d had some interest in some of the boys. But, none of them, so far, had been of a like mind. Tony and Diehl would end most of those cherished few days of Diehl’s leave at the creek or in the stable, used a bed when the ladies were at work. Partings had always been hard, everybody seemed to tear up, embarrassed by their emotion.

After boot, after AIT, after NCO Academy, it wasn’t long before Diehl realized the Army had wasted its time trying to make a man out of him. The Army had given him that epiphany. He’d been a man since he’d turned thirteen or fourteen. Hell, began tasting the hard crunch of manhood probably when he was ten. His daddy’s cow operation had demanded nothing less. His daddy had demanded nothing less. Ranchers’ kids had always been unpaid assets contributing to the success of the operation, to the lives and deaths of cows. But, hell, the Army could do as it pleased. Diehl had never thought the Army would change just for him. He’d embraced the Army because he’d had nowhere else to go. He valued the Army as he valued the slip of a foal from its mama’s body, the simple miracle of the birth, a new life for a critter that knew nothing but the honest truth of itself, of what it was birthed to do. Diehl remembered the colts, all of them, their first attempts

to stand, slick with afterbirth, their mamas turning to lick them clean, spindly legs not quite up to the task nature demanded...that they find their feet.

The Army had given him time to find his feet. That was the fucking point of it all. That was what Diehl had been looking for.

But, now, having found his feet, he realized what he had just done with Marquez fulfilled a yearning, something deeper than what he owed the Army. Hell, he'd managed to get through boot, AIT, NCO training without ever giving anybody cause to think him queer. He knew he'd hidden his nature well. Even ignored second glances from one or another kid soaping up in a shower room. He never acted on impulses other than those he'd shared with Joe, Tony, now Marquez. Knew he wanted Denman, though. He shook his head. Thoughts raced through his mind. He did it often...took stock of where he'd been, where he was, where he wanted to go.



Diehl unlocked the door to his billet. Undressed, climbed into the shower. Thankful that his roommate, another buck sergeant, had gone back to Arkansas on leave, he stepped from the shower, dried off and crawled into bed naked.

He lay in his bed, stared at the ceiling, relived his time with Marquez. Understood that he'd needed some release, some opportunity to touch another body, to love somebody for just a while. Thought of Denman, the blue eyes, the body he'd touched. Thought of Tony. He returned to images of Marquez, the lithe spread of the dark-skinned, smooth body, his quiet voice, his willingness to take a dick up his ass with only muffled moans, sounds of pleasure, not pain.

Diehl grabbed his hard-on, slowly stroked. Spit on his hand, replayed the vivid images of him and Marquez, saw blue eyes watching, saw Tony kindly blessing the coupling as something natural, something as needed as food by the stomach, air by the lungs. Diehl shot for the second time that night, wiped himself clean with the sheet. Thought of the danger he'd carelessly put himself into. Concluded that what he and Marquez had shared

was something outside the Army, something only he and the kid had a need to know, remember, hold in their minds as something pure, something...honest. Thought the kid had wiped an eye as he'd left him, though. Couldn't do anything about that. Kid would learn. Army had a way of putting things in perspective without sentiment. Marquez would find his feet. Eventually they all did.

CHAPTER SIX

Re-upping, extending his contract with the Army, was something Diehl had no doubts about. He was nearing his fourth year of enlistment, was offered a short-term reenlistment of twenty-four months. It was the first sergeant who had initially broached the subject with him. The captain caught him in the HQ hallway, urged him to consider it, told him he had potential. Hell, there was something going on, a feel of excitement, anticipation that the Army was gearing up for something big. Diehl wanted to be a part of it. A thousand rumors flew. War ahead.

Another year passed. Diehl still took leave in Casper, reveled in the joy of the place. Loved Tony, Maddie, Chris as a constant reminder of what love was supposed to be, a caring that transcended time, space.

Marquez no longer served in the mess. Didn't know where the kid had gone. Didn't ask. Wished him well.

Denman had moved on to his PDS, permanent duty station in Germany. Diehl still, mostly just before sleep, his roommate snoring mightily across the room, saw blue eyes luring him in like some damned enchantress in a forest of magic plants, elixirs promising a comfort of the flesh to which only gods were privy.



Diehl finally received his orders: TDY, temporary duty at Fort Bragg, predeployment: Writing was on the wall, Iraq the eventual destination.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Diehl's squad paced behind the slow chug of the M1A1 Abrams tank, patrolling darkened streets. Building rubble from airstrikes littered the way.

They hadn't fired a shot. Streets were empty. Still, Diehl watched his squad, watched the shadows projected by the toppled buildings, watched the sky for no other reason than there was comfort in the stars.

"Heads up, now," he warned, as the tank turned onto a street no wider than a Wyoming or Colorado no-name county road. Some two- and three-story buildings still stood, had lucked out of the tempest from the sky. They passed two bodies, bloodied, bearded, their faces mush, their arms, legs unnaturally bent as if their last conscious effort on the earth had been to find some consolation in providing a rare sight to green troops. Diehl saw his men stare at the bodies as they passed, remembered the freak people on the curtains in Casper, wondered if Picasso had ever seen war up close. "I say again, heads up." Diehl's voice had the intended effect. The men resumed a scan of their surroundings.

Training at Bragg had offered a harsh reality about Iraq: Everyone was a suspect. A chance taken on a ten-year-old kid could mean you and your squad would be delivered back to base in body bags. Five *S*'s of escalation hammered as a sledgehammer to a fence post. Shout the warning. Shove the suspects. Show the weapon. Shoot an engine bloc, a tire, a warning shot. Shoot to kill. Hell, shout, shove, show, shoot, shoot, were easily memorized, easy to forget when in a situation in hell, in Iraq, where base instinct overtook training. Kill or get killed became a mantra, a philosophy that trumped the five *S*'s.

The quiet of the first few weeks in Iraq turned quickly. Car bombs, IEDs, grenades launched from nowhere finessed paranoia to an art form called survival. Diehl'd seen his troops gradually slip from careful to manic. Trigger fingers not

hesitating, not buffered by any notions of humanity they'd taken from lives lived in American neighborhoods where lawns were cut, snow shoveled, folks waved, drunks and sex kept out of sight; basketball, football, hockey rubbing up against the meaning of God and flag. No, hell had become worse than anything Bragg had warned.



Diehl had ten soldiers in his care, had made a point to learn their lives...before the Army. Knew who had girlfriends, their names; where they'd come from, why they'd joined the Army, what their intentions were after their stint in hell. Diehl shoved the deeper feelings he had for three of his troops to a place at the back of his mind, his soul, where such thoughts were veiled as inappropriate, something unthinkable under the present circumstances.



Nights mostly, Diehl's squad and others, accompanied by Humvees, scoured decrepit hovels where people still lived. There was reluctance at first to assume the worst, until the worst showed itself. They'd bash in the doors of shacks, shine their flashlights from the ends of their M16s and M4s into the terrified faces of families huddled in rooms, grabbing one another, kids crying, mothers crying, fathers and sons hovering over the women and children. The squad would demand the boys, young men and fathers face a wall, the soldier's hands thrusting into their backs, keeping them corralled while a search was conducted. Weapons, writings, posters lettered with words none of the troops understood, the makings for IEDs, grenades, anything suspected as evidence the family members were the enemy, or harbored the enemy, or might have some little sympathy for the enemy became reason to take the men, the boys for interrogation. Diehl reasoned such was a necessity. Wondered if he'd found the nobility of war.

The next pitiful home, a gate closed to a courtyard, troops heard rustling, some movement behind the gate. The gate kicked in, the firing blasts from those in front sprayed toward the sounds. Diehl shouted, "Cease fire! Cease fire! Get your

fucking lights on.” The firing ceased. Flashlights popped on. Three donkeys lay in the courtyard, bleeding out. Dead. Diehl walked toward the animals, looked down, saw their blank stares. “Jesus Fucking Christ!” He turned to his troops. “Goddamn it,” he said, flashlights slipping to his face. He paused, thought of the innocence of critters. “Okay” — his voice lacking any real force of commitment — “check out the house.” Reached in his pocket, pulled out a twenty. “Here, Garcia.” He held out his hand. “Give ’em this for the donkeys.” Turned to the interpreter, a spec-4 named May, “You tell ’em we’re sorry.”

“No need for that.” The lieutenant had stepped from the Humvee, stood at the rear of the squad. “Rules of engagement, here, Diehl. Justified.”

“Ah, hell, lieutenant,” Diehl said, walking past his troops and stopping in front of the officer, “we just prob’ly killed any livelihood these people had. Don’t make sense not to make some kind of restitution.”

“You some kind of bleeding heart, Diehl? This is war. Coulda been some sand niggers, cocking their AKs, ready to kill some Americans. You willing to take that on? You willing to second-guess something that might have proved different than what it was?”

Diehl stared at the lieutenant. Felt his body stiffen, hoped his eyes were reflective of what he was thinking. “Lieutenant, it’s my twenty, my fault. I heard the rustlin’ in there before my men let loose. Knew what I was hearin’, spooked critters just tryin’ to move away from what they prob’ly smelled before they heard it. I shoulda stopped my men. Shoulda...”

“Okay, Diehl. Your twenty, as you say. Don’t let it happen again.”

Diehl hesitated a moment. “Yessir,” he nodded, turned back to his squad that had already entered the house, hollering against the screams of women and children, the pleadings of old men.



"I think you did right." Perkins, a PFC from east Texas, sat down next to Diehl as the squad dug into their MREs, ready-to-eat meals.

The squad had followed the Humvees to a temporary sandbagged encampment, where they could eat, get fresh water, take a shit, maybe sleep an hour or two.

Perkins was one of the three Diehl kept his eye on, appreciated the way he filled out his khakis, both front and rear. Knew Perkins had come from cow country, wasn't married, letters coming only from his mama and daddy.

"You heard it, too?"

"A' course. They was like horses, or elk caught by surprise just brushin' up against each other, steppin' away from danger, prob'ly woulda started runnin' if they hadn't been shot. Actually heard their hoofbeat against the stone."

"You were in front, on the front line?"

"Yeah. Like always, damned fool that I am. I even lowered my weapon, knew what I was hearin'."

"Guess it don't matter much, Perkins. War don't consider donkeys important."

"Bet they was to that family."

"Yeah," Diehl nodded, "bet they was."



Diehl's squad was assigned to a roadblock just north of Baghdad. Humvee set off to the side of the road, orange cones set up to direct traffic to where cars could be inspected, occupants scrutinized. Troops bored by the day-long duty of searching cars, finding nothing of interest.

Diehl saw it first. An old Mercedes coming up fast passed other cars slowing for the roadblock.

"Heads up," he said, sitting on the hood of the Humvee. Soldiers looked to the roadway in front of them, saw the Mercedes hell-bent for something.

"Over here!" Diehl shouted, slipping off the hood of the Humvee. "Get over here."

The troops ran to the Humvee, shielded themselves.

The Mercedes screeched over the cones. The .50 caliber gun atop the Humvee began spitting rounds, finding purchase in the body of the Mercedes. Diehl could see four men inside, saw their heads explode as the gunner continued to spray the car.

“Get back,” Diehl yelled, shoving his troops away from the Humvee, pointing to the spread of desert off the side of the road. “Get the hell outta here.” The men began to move.

The thump was felt before it was heard, knocked the troops over into the sand. The Humvee rose, its front end balanced in the air for an instant, then burst into flames, landed upside down ten feet from where it had sat.

Diehl had followed his troops away from the Humvee, had covered his head with his hands, snuggled into the sand. He felt the explosion raise the earth, the earth an insignificant plaything for the realities of war. Smelled the gasoline, diesel burst to flames. Quickly checked his men, saw each head raised. All alive. Looked to the Humvee sprawled on its back like an upturned beetle that’d been set aflame by some adolescent’s pathology. Got to his knees, his feet, began running to the Humvee. No time to shout orders, no time to lead. Diehl fell to his stomach, crawled to the windows now pressed against the ground, felt the immensity of heat coming off the vehicle. Saw movement, two men at least, there, inside, barely conscious. Diehl raised his ass, pushed with his feet, slipped into the Humvee. He grabbed the first one by the neck of his fatigues, pulled, inched his way back out the window. Two of his troops knelt just to his back.

“Here, grab him!” he yelled. His men instantly snatched the shoulders of the fatigue jacket and pulled hard. Diehl went back in, saw the other one flapping his arms against a spurt of flame.

“Right here,” Diehl yelled. “Gimme your hand.” The soldier didn’t seem to understand or hear or comprehend that help was inches away.

“Fuck it,” Diehl said, shoved himself back inside the now flaming interior, grabbed the second soldier’s arm, pulled, got purchase, felt hands grasp his legs from outside the window.

Once pulled outside the Humvee, Diehl got on his knees, saw his squad standing back from the inferno. Saw Perkins and the black kid, Hornsby, kneeling over the two from the Humvee.

“Now!” Diehl yelled, “Get these two away from here. Get ‘em the hell away from here.” The squad responded, rushed to the edge of the burning Humvee, picked up the soldiers, carried them fifty yards into the desert. Diehl followed, looked at his charred sleeves, felt the throbbing soreness on top of his hands.

“Get down,” he motioned with his hands, his voice strained, hoarse. He lay in the sand, once again put his hands over his head, waited for the fire to breach the Humvee’s fuel tanks, to heat the .50 caliber shells hot enough to explode.



“You contradicting what your men saw?” The captain sat directly across from Diehl, a major off to the side.

“No. Nothin’ like that.” Diehl rested his hands, wrapped in gauze, on his thighs. “I was close up to it all. It was Perkins and Hornsby. They got the guys out. I was just there. I burnt my hands on the side of the Humvee. All I could do was try to help Perkins and Hornsby.”

Captain looked down at the report on the table, looked back at Diehl. “You’re sure that’s your statement. You’re sure that’s how you want this reported to command.”

“Yessir. That’s what I saw.”

“Son,” the major spoke softly, “there’s no need for you to reflect other than what actually happened. Perkins and Hornsby tell a different story.”

Diehl turned to the colonel. “Sir, they’re two of my best men. If anybody deserves recognition, any honor for what happened out there, it’s Perkins and Hornsby. Not me. I was just there.”

The colonel stared at Diehl, turned his head to the captain. Captain tapped his ballpoint on the table.

“Okay,” the captain said, “you’re dismissed, sergeant.”

Diehl stood, saluted, walked out of the room.



Billeted in the Green Zone in central Baghdad, Diehl's squad occupied a single apartment room, all of their gear shoved up against the walls, cots covering the floor. When the squad's daily three- or four-hour patrols were completed, they'd return to their quarters, assume guard duty at the perimeter of the zone. There was a roof over their heads, sporadic availability of hot water, the constant chug of diesel generators supplying electricity, swamp coolers huffing water-cooled air barely felt more than two feet from the source. Duty done for the day, Diehl's squad contented themselves with small talk, card games, writing letters, reading letters from home, cleaning weapons, drinking Pepsi from a machine just recently hooked up in the lobby, washing uniforms, washing themselves, beating off when able in the shower or a small supply room adjacent to their quarters. They watched the beginnings of a flood tide of Western contractors dig foundations for what seemed like hundreds of what they knew would become barracks, even bases for American soldiers.

Diehl kept up his correspondence with Tony, Maddie and Chris, tried to get a letter out at least once a week. Receiving letters back was sporadic. Not because his little family in Casper didn't write. They did. Faithfully. War just had a way of delaying things like letters from home...like the rest of your life.

Diehl stuck himself up in a corner, sat on the hard floor and wrote words framed around his intent not to reveal the essential ugly truths of war. They didn't need to know about that back in Casper, back where he saw his future as a gentle thing. Could he ever get the war out of his head, though, even back in Casper, even with Tony in his arms, critters witnessing the deed?

"Sarge." Diehl looked up, Perkins stood, looking down at him.

"Hey, Perkins. Have a seat." Diehl slapped the tiled floor of the lobby where there was room for the men to have a little space to themselves.

"Didn't mean to disturb you, sarge. But, I gotta say somethin' that I think you oughta hear."

Diehl clipped his pen to the spiral rungs of the loose leaf notebook that he closed, placed on the floor.

“Okay. Well,” Perkins sat down, crossed his legs, “I heard you told the officers it was me and Hornsby who pulled them fellas outta that Humvee. Now, that’s not exactly true.”

Diehl let Perkins’ words hang, smiled. “Perkins, how do you know all this stuff? Where’s your source? You always seem to know what’s goin’ on with HQ.”

“Let’s just say I got a contact over there.”

Diehl nodded. “Okay. Your contact got it wrong. You and Hornsby did pull them two out. I just happened to be in the middle of it all.”

“Sarge, no way you can turn this thing. That commendation, hell, prob’ly a medal is yours. Why you doin’ this?”

“You ever think about things more inside of you than out? The kind of things that come in the night, when you got a little chance a bein’ alone with your thoughts?”

“Course I do. Think’a home, family.”

“Not that, Perkins,” Diehl shook his head, gathered his thoughts. “There are things inside you, like tests only you know you gotta pass. If you fail one’a them inside tests, you become less a man. Takes somethin’ outta you; a defeat you’ll never rid yourself of. But you pass that test, Perkins, you give yourself your own goddamned medal. You understand what I’m sayin’?”

“Well, yeah, guess I do. Never gave it much thought. But, yeah, I passed some’a my own tests out here. Not really tests, though. Just doin’ what was expected.”

“You got it, Perkins. And, you and Hornsby went beyond what was expected. You saved them two boys from that fire. I already got my medal. Time for you to get yours.”

Perkins raised to his haunches, scratched his head. “Not sure about all this. Not sure I like how you’re lookin’ at this thing. I thank you, though. Hornsby, too, is a little confused about it.”

“Don’t matter. Things is what they are. Period.”

“Okay.” Perkins stood up, started to turn. “Another thing,” he hunched down, “also heard you got a promotion on the way. Staff fuckin’ sergeant.”

“That from your HQ contact, too?”

“Sure is. He knows what he’s talkin’ about.”

Diehl nodded. “Be a goddamned general before I get outta this mess.”

“You’d make a good one.”

“Perkins, you showered yet? Got a odor on you.”

“Nah, hell... Ever time I try, there’s somebody else in there. I’ll get up there again.”

“Tomorrow’s comin’ quick.”

Perkins stood up. “Yeah, gotta get clean just so I can get dirty again. Take it easy, sarge.”

Diehl watched Perkins climb the stairs, probably going to check out the shower. Thought about tomorrow and the days after, grabbed his notebook, pulled his pen from the looped wire and wrote the words he knew would be read over cups of coffee at the kitchen table, there in Casper, there at the MadC Ranch. Tony, Maddie and Chris leaning into the writing, probably knowing that some truths about the war had been left hanging between the lines.



Ten months of the monstrous monotony of war in a place Diehl saw as encompassing the age-old wrath of a God uncompromising in his vengeance. The fury of dust storms in July and August enveloping everything in their path, a haze palpable, a thickness to the air, breathed in as ashes still hot from a dying fire. The heat throbbed, day in, day out. A hundred twenty degrees in the shade, where shade became a commodity worthy of worship, more immediately pliant than prayers to saints or saviors for the gift of survival where survival loomed uncertain. And the monsoons. The monsoons brought floods where, just days before, slight depressions in the arid plains soused sun as a drunk cheap wine. Winter, December through March, wet, cold, fifty degrees insinuating as a hard

freeze that chilled to the bone, hands, feet begging for warmers sent from home, from families, friends not understanding the need for such things. It was the desert. No winter in the desert.

And through it all, through the unkind caprices of the land, they, the soldiers, the Marines, slogged through their days, did their duty. Saw the bright-eyed, dark-skinned, happy smiles of children who begged for the chocolate the troops tossed. Ran after the Humvees, Abrams tanks, Bradley IFVs, jabbering their strange words, appearing so happy, carefree, ensconced in their surreal perception of what it was that had happened there, there where the simplicity of their lives had taken on an excitement with the arrival of strangers from a world away.

On and on, day after day, Diehl and his troops did their duty. Saw the children smile and laugh. Saw parents and grandparents shit and piss themselves in fear as helmeted warriors invaded their homes, weapons pointed at their heads, hard knocks on their bodies, searching, always searching for something, just something that would provide reason for suspicion, that would provide reason for taking a son, a father, a grandfather away from the clutch of family.

Days into weeks, weeks into months. Over and over again, the footslog of soldiers on roads, on streets, in the sand, doing their duty to the tune of some notion that their mission was keeping America safe from...from children with a taste for chocolate?

There was the other side of the proverbial coin. There were those who sought the destruction of infidels. Diehl understood this. His squad understood this. The enemy was real.



At another roadblock, just north of Baghdad, Diehl and his men waited in hundred and ten degrees, BDUs, desert battle dress uniforms, soaking up the heat like peat does water. His squad had draped a tarp from the side of the Humvee, the men with their backs to the vehicle, M16s resting on their legs, the shade offering a five-degree difference.

“Hydrate. Hydrate. Hydrate.” Diehl tossed bottles of water to his men, took one for himself, glanced up the road. People

walking toward them, half a mile away, appeared as phantoms wrapped in a shifting haze.

“Heads up,” Diehl said.

The squad got to their feet. Mason climbed atop the Humvee, prepped the .50 caliber.

“Who’s up?” Diehl looked to his men. “Martinez, Perkins, I think it’s you.”

“Right, sarge.” Perkins slapped Martinez on the back. “Let’s go, buddy.”

The two men approached the orange cones they had earlier set up on the two-lane road. They were without the interpreter today. Some damned need for him to stay inside the Green Zone. Diehl hadn’t been happy. Told his captain there was a need to communicate with something other than hand signals that the locals didn’t understand anyway. Captain understood, said he was sorry, but they had a classified operation going on, something about important captives ready to spill their guts. Diehl said, “Yessir,” turned and knew those hard cases would spill bullshit instead of guts. And, the damn thing about it was that Command would believe every word they said. They’d call it new intelligence tomorrow.

“How in hell them people take this heat is a mystery.” Perkins walked to the cones.

“Spend some time in Mexico, *mi amigo*, and you might find out.”

“Yeah, never been there. East Texas hot enough for me.” Perkins released the safety on his M16.

Martinez sidled up to Perkins, clicked his safety off. “We get back in one piece, I’ll take you down there. Have us a time in Tijuana.”

“Hell, Martinez, that ain’t Mexico. That’s a little neighborhood in California.”

Martinez laughed, watched the group of people approach.

Diehl stood at the front of the Humvee, the rest of his squad behind him, their weapons at the ready.

“Hell, looks like a couple families.” Diehl saw six, seven children walking in front of what were probably their parents. Two dogs loped along with the group, their tongues hanging long outside their mouths.

“Haji comin’,” Perkins said.

Martinez let what had become a derisive term for Iraqis pass. He’d grown up with taunts of greaser, beaner, spic. But, this was different. Any one of these people, kids included, could have an AK47 behind their backs.

When the group was within thirty yards of the cones, Perkins raised his M16, fired a shot in the air. The group stopped. What appeared to be the eldest of the group, white hair, beard, held his hand up, continued walking toward Perkins and Martinez.

Diehl took several steps toward Perkins and Martinez.

Perkins motioned with his hand, his index finger pointed to the ground. “Right here, haji. Slow and easy.”

The old man stepped closer, stopped where Perkins had pointed.

“Okay, Martinez, you check him out.”

Martinez stepped to the old man, pulled out his own ID card, and held it in front of him.

“Identification,” Martinez said, shaking the card.

The old man understood, pulled some papers from his pocket, held them out to Martinez. Martinez grabbed them. “Hell, Perkins, how am I supposed to read this shit?”

“Pat him down.”

Martinez stepped closer, held his M16 pointed at the ground, palmed the old man’s chest, waist, trousers with his left hand. “He’s clean.”

“Okay. Let him pass.”

Diehl watched as Perkins and Martinez patted down the rest of the group, old women, young women, boys and girls of no more than ten or twelve. Diehl figured it curious that there were no teenagers in the group, no men under what appeared to be

fifty or sixty. He scanned the desert behind the group, left, right. No movement. Nothing unusual.

"Give 'em some water," Diehl shouted back at the squad standing near the Humvee.

"Christ, sarge," one of the men said.

Diehl turned. "I said, give 'em water. Now."

"Ah, hell." Perkins walked back to the Humvee, grabbed an armful of bottles and handed them to the Iraqis. "Drink up, haji."

Diehl watched two of the young boys take a quick gulp, grab the dogs and let them lap at the water. Diehl thought he'd do the same under the circumstances.

The group moved past the Humvee, up the road, their forms again shimmering against the immense heat.

Diehl clicked his safety on, turned and caught a reflection of something in the desert, a hundred or more yards from where the squad had, once again, settled into the shade of the tarp. He stepped around to the other side of the Humvee. He opened the door, grabbed binoculars. He scanned the flat perimeter, bumped here and there with outcrops of rocks. *There!* He saw it again.

"Heads up," he yelled. "Get on that fifty, Mason. Lock and load the MK 19."

Mason scrambled atop the Humvee. The squad scampered to the other side of the vehicle, looking toward where Diehl had directed his binoculars.

"Whadaya see, sarge?" Perkins asked.

"Flashes. Somethin' shiny out there just behind that outcropping of rocks. See, there it is again. Mason," he yelled, "get a bead on that clump a rocks with the MK."

"Got it, sarge," Mason sighted the 40-millimeter grenade launcher.

They saw the flash before they felt it. The squad dropped to their stomachs, sighted their weapons. The explosion hit twenty yards in front of them.

“Spread out,” Diehl yelled, dropping the binoculars. He fingered his radio. “Zulu one, X-ray seven, we got grenades, RPGs.” He waited for a response.

Two more explosions crept closer to the Humvee.

“Get it goin’, Mason,” Diehl yelled.

Mason opened up with the MK 19, kept the butterfly lever pressed down for thirty seconds. Over a hundred grenades spewed from the weapon. Mason had sighted short.

“Jesus Christ! Mason,” Diehl screamed, “you’re short.” Diehl stood up, began to run to the back of the Humvee, noticed his troops had fanned themselves away from the vehicle, a sitting duck. Diehl reached out, pulled himself up the side of the Humvee, intent on correcting Mason’s error.

Diehl felt himself yanked from his grip, carried on a hot wave of something enormous, felt a strange sensation in his right leg, landed across the road, rolled in the sand. Tried to sit up. Couldn’t. Caught the glare of the hellish sun, closed his eyes.



“Allah be praised.” Perkins sat at Diehl’s bedside, saw his eyes flutter. “You awake, sarge? C’mon. About time you perked up.”

Diehl first felt a heaven-sent breeze of cool air across his face. Saw a ceiling of colors, brilliant reds, blues, gold. Looked to his left. Perkins. Realized he was on his back, a sheet covering him. Looked at his arm; a tube was strapped down with a bandage. Looked back at Perkins, felt a throb from his leg going up to his ass, his lower back.

“What the hell,” he said, grimacing.

“Shrapnel’s all,” Perkins said. “You been wounded, sarge. They’re gettin’ ready to take you outta this goddamned hellhole.”

“No, I... Hell, no reason to...” Diehl winced with the pain, his right side on fire. “Just tell me, Perkins, am I all there? One piece.”

“A course you are. Nothin’ missin’. Got a line a hot metal up your right side back there in the desert. But, you’re in for some coddlin’, sarge. They’re flyin’ you outta here.”

“No...Not ready to go, Perkins. Tell ‘em... What about the squad? They come back okay?”

“All fine, sarge. And, no I can’t tell ‘em anthing. My influence don’t go so far, sarge. Your promotion come through, though. Staff fuckin’ Sergeant. Matter a fact, I got my HQ contact here to confirm that bit a news. Says he knew you back at Polk.”

“Wha...” Diehl couldn’t finish the word, saw blue eyes smiling beside Perkins. “Denman. Thought you was in Germany.”

“I was for a while. Right here now, sarge.”

“Whadaya you doin’... I mean...Christ!”

“Guess if I wanted, I could pin you down good,” Denman stepped a little closer to Diehl, grabbed his left hand.

“Denman,” Diehl said again, felt a slight squeeze on his hand. “Hell, I’d even be on bottom if that would help.”

“Well, I see you two got...um, some history,” Perkins said. “I’ll just get outta here.” He began to turn away.

“Wrestlin’, Perkins. Wrestlin’,” Diehl said, enveloping Denman’s hand with his own.

“He was teaching me how to wrestle,” Denman added.

“Whatever. I’ll check in before they take you outta here.”

“Thank you, Perkins.” Diehl managed a smile.

Perkins stepped away from the bed. Diehl turned to Denman, felt himself get lost in blue as a nurse injected morphine into the tube in his arm.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Diehl's recovery was quick. Took leave, boarded a plane to North Carolina. Found the old Ford waiting, dust covered, dead. Had it serviced, new battery, tires, fluids. Felt the comfort of his old friend as he headed west.

His orders sent him to Fort Hood in central Texas. Assigned to the First Calvary Division, Diehl found himself in a classroom, reliving the lessons of Iraq before young men eager to hear the stories, the homey wisdom of one who had been there. Found it hard to talk about the people, the Iraqi people, children mostly, who had got themselves caught up in something brought on by a tempest most of them didn't understand.

Diehl started working out again, began running two, three, sometimes four miles if the morning was cool. Watched the boys, men, some of them already battle hardened, comfortably inured to the ways of the Army. Took the opportunity to spend free hours with the horses the 1st Cavalry kept as symbols of a bygone era when horses carried much of the weight of war; drank in the aroma of horseshit and hay as healing, the essential ministry of critters that softened the edge of nightmares, vivid replays of death and destruction.



Maddie, Chris and Tony flew into Austin, sixty miles from the base. Diehl merged onto I35, early on a Friday evening, watched dusk settle on baked brown Texas scrub.

Tony had called Diehl, told him they were at the Hyatt Regency. "Google directions," he'd said, after Diehl asked how in hell he was going to find the place.

"Google you when I get there," Diehl had said.

"Dreamt about it, Diehl. First, though, Maddie and Chris are holdin' up dinner till you get here. Got a nice restaurant in the hotel."

“On my way,” Diehl had said, “just soon as I do a Google.”



Hugs and tears greeted Diehl. He'd stepped into the lobby of the Hyatt, ~~give~~ **give** ~~Blood – Wrestle~~ ball cap, white T-shirt with the yellow-black insignia of the 1st Cav imprinted on the chest, Wranglers, desert combat boots.

Maddie, Chris and Tony saw him enter, saw him survey the lobby, standing there just past the revolving door. Looked hard, not just his body, but, even from where they sat in the plush chairs bookended by live greenery, they could see his eyes, his gray eyes as flint, angry almost. And, his face. He'd aged since they'd last seen him. Still youthful, but changed, lines across his forehead, unsmiling, too serious for the Diehl they had known.



Wine with dinner, two shots of Wild Turkey for Diehl and Tony, all four sat around the dining table, finishing up their reunion. Diehl talked little about the war, just gave some sense of the melancholy the memories provided.



“Chris thought you might want your own room.” Tony swiped the cardkey, and opened the door, “so you do have a room to yourself right across the hall. But...”

Diehl placed his hand on Tony's back, gently prodded him into the room, closed the door behind them. “Where I wanna be right now.”

Tony turned, took Diehl's ball cap off, let it drop to the floor. Cradled Diehl's face between his palms, kissed his eyes, pressed his lips against his mouth.

Diehl's arms encircled Tony, hugged hard, let Tony dip his tongue into his mouth.

Tony moved his hands down Diehl's chest, moved his left hand to the small of his back, massaged Diehl's hard-on bulging against the grayed, jeans with his right.

Diehl grabbed Tony's ass, squeezed.

They stood at the foot of the bed, stared into each other's eyes as they undressed.

"Them ain't tears, are they, Diehl?"

"Happy ones." Diehl smiled.

Tony knelt down, cupped Diehl's balls, saw the familiar thrust of his dick, the bloomed head, the thickness of the shaft. Licked the head, heard Diehl sigh, slowly inched his mouth down to the base, withdrew, then again filled his mouth to his throat.

Diehl reached down, pulled Tony up and onto the bed. Scooted himself around, his dick to Tony's mouth, grasped Tony's shaft, squeezed, studied the purpled knob, swallowed hard as he lowered his head down, desperately wanted to take it all, knowing he couldn't, never could. It was just too long, thick.

Diehl continued to mouth the shaft, reached his hands between Tony's legs and parted Tony's asscheeks, ran his hand along the crack, found the patch of hair surrounding the hole, fingered it, felt it loosen.

Tony moaned, gently brushed his hand around the rock hard contour of Diehl's ass, knew he couldn't go any further, knew he couldn't explore Diehl as Diehl was him. Never allowed. Something in Diehl's past always reared up when Tony attempted it.

Tony scooted from Diehl's hold, rolled on his stomach, reached under the pillow and pulled out a rubber, lube.

Diehl straddled Tony's legs, pulled on the rubber, opened the lube. Looked down at Tony's ass, scooted further down, lowered his head, spread the cheeks, inhaled the delicious odor Tony's body effused. Diehl found the patch of hair with his tongue, spread the cheeks further, dug his tongue into the loosening prize, reached under and grabbed Tony's dick.

Diehl stepped off the bed, pulled Tony back. Tony raised to his knees, sat up slightly as Diehl slowly pushed a lubed finger into his asshole. Tony grabbed the lube, squirted some on his hand, began to stroke himself. "Fuck me, Diehl. Oh, God, fuck me."

Diehl eased himself into Tony, not stopping until the entirety of his shaft was grasped, squeezed, tightly held, an intimacy so deeply personal, so close to the essential truth of a coupling of souls, that they became one, there, Diehl pumping faster, harder, hands clamped tight on Tony's asscheeks, Tony stroking himself. Both sweating with the blessed effort, breathing in gasps, now a mutual cry, *Oh God! Oh God!*, shooting the essential stuff of themselves, a simultaneous explosion, the completing of two becoming one.



"Wasn't hard," Diehl said, his back against the headboard, naked, Tony next to him. "Kept my nature to myself...mostly. Had a couple, though. Kid at Polk. Michael. Miguel. Brown skin like yours. He was small. Tough little body. Beautiful smile."

"What about Iraq?"

"Nah," Diehl shook his head. "I loved a few...just the sight a them. Never did anything, 'cept dream of you, the kid at Polk, another kid with blue eyes. Sometimes held the images of a few in my squad, shirts off, throwin' a football or playin' baseball...images givin' purpose to my right hand pumpin' away in the solitary of the shower, toilet stall."

"I bet you loved 'em all, even the ones you never touched. Prob'ly still do." Tony poured a finger of Wild Turkey into both of the glasses he'd brought from the bathroom.

"Yeah, can't seem to get around that."

"Can't love 'em all, Diehl. Told you that before. Sometime you'll understand what I'm talkin' about."

"I know what you're talkin' about, Tony." He held up his glass. "Here's to lovin' only one other...just kinda liked the rest."

Tony smiled, clicked Diehl's glass with his own. "Well, just kinda liked a few myself since you been gone."

"Didn't love any'a them?"

"No, just one waif I believe I love."

Diehl glanced at Tony who looked down into his glass as he swirled the liquid. Didn't say anything, knew probably what Tony was thinking, what he had meant. Diehl held his glass out to Tony. "Just a little bit more."

"Sure thing." Tony tipped the pint bottle to the glass. "Those hurt?"

"What?"

"Those little dimples you got all along your right leg, a couple on your butt. That where the explosion got you?"

"Yeah, that's it. War wound dimples. Nah, they don't hurt. Did at the time, and for some time after. Not now. Kids comin' home a lot worse."

Tony didn't push his curiosity. At dinner Diehl'd refused to talk much about the war. Maddie had warned him and Chris that such would be the case. And, it had been.

"Well," Tony said, downing his whiskey, "you'll be gettin' out soon. How long now?"

"Six months. They're already on me to re-up. Think I'm done with the Army, though. Got what I wanted from it. Think they got what they wanted from me."

"Regret it? I mean, you ever think where'd you be now if you hadn't a joined?"

"Never thought about it at all. Just thought about getting' back to Casper, back to you and Maddie and Chris...the critters, them waifs always traipsin' in and out."

"Ever think about your daddy?"

Diehl didn't say anything, stared at the wall, cradled his glass in his hands, looked down. "Yeah, thought about him on occasion. Tried not to, but, hell, hard to let loose of somethin' clawin' at your mind for so long. Prob'ly gonna make things right before I get back to Casper. Learned in the Army you do what you can with what you got. Figure I'll do what I can about my daddy."

Tony looked at Diehl, saw his head bowed, heard from his voice a conclusion made with quiet determination.

“Well,” Tony stood up, placed his glass on the side table. “I need a shower. You wanna help with that?”

Diehl slid off the bed. “You bet. Deep clean some a them pretty parts.” He carried his glass into the bathroom and washed it out in the sink.

“My, my, you become some kind a neat freak or somethin’? Maid is just gonna replace the glass in the mornin’.”

“Army got into me. Got a feelin’ it’ll always be there. You make a mess, you clean it up. Army way. Somebody else makes a mess... Well, as I said, you do what you can with what you got. That was what Iraq was about, all rolled up in a ball.”



Over breakfast on Sunday in the hotel’s dining room, Maddie watched Diehl pick at his food. Memories of almost six years ago nestled in her mind, contrasting what she had known of Diehl then against his mien now. Not that he looked so much older, hell he was only twenty-four. He looked... troubled, maybe, was the best word she could come up with.

“Diehl,” Maddie said, “what do you believe you’ll be doing once you get out? Surely, you’ll come back to Casper. Get yourself together. Focus on your future.”

Diehl sat his fork down, smiled. “Got a question for you, Maddie. You, too, Chris. Back in Casper, you two talk as though you’d grown up among the countrified folks out there, same as I did. Now, here in the big city, you both remind me of TV people, slick words and accents more east than west. What’s up with that?”

“Honey,” Chris said, glanced at Maddie, “back in Casper we play a part, a role that we’ve become comfortable with. Yes, we’re both from the east. Both probably overeducated. But, we’ve found ourselves in Casper. We love...no, we cherish the life we’ve created for ourselves. And, if the western affectation — countrified as you say — enhances in some small way the lives we’ve chosen to lead, then so be it. We’re happy.”

Diehl nodded, looked at Tony, understood what Chris had said was an honest truth. Knew those who found the truth of themselves became comfortable in their skins, their souls.

CHAPTER NINE

Two weeks before Diehl's discharge, he finished his early morning run, picked up his mail, returned to his billet. Saw the return address on one of the envelopes as APO Baghdad, postdate three weeks prior. Opened it first.

Diehl:

My position here with Company HQ allows me to get into the computer and pull up all kinds of information. I've been checking on your movement since you left. I see you're now at Fort Hood, 1st Cav. Congratulations!

I hope your wounds have healed, with no lasting effects. I've worried about you. I remember the last time I saw you. I held your hand. Can't tell you what that meant to me.

I guess I should be worried that I'm exposing myself in this letter as maybe caring about you more than the Army might think appropriate. But, I can't help it. You are special. And, I can only hope one day we can get together, outside the Army, once I'm back in the world.

I want to keep this short. I could write a book about what's been in my mind since we first met, there at Polk, in that gym. I can't get the feel of you out of my mind.

I'll understand if you just tear this letter up, throw it away and never give a second thought to me. But, that's the chance I'm taking in writing to you. I'd value a return letter more than you could possibly know.

Denman

Diehl read the letter three times, smelled the paper, spread his palms against the words, saw blue eyes capable of capturing a heart with a single stare.

He showered, pulled on his khakis, walked to his duty station, sat down at his desk.

“Fuckin’ sand niggers did it again,” the master sergeant fumed, holding several pieces of paper in his hand. “Hit the mess hall, killed fourteen of our own.”

“Can I see that, sarge?” Diehl stood up, grabbed the report from the master sergeant’s hand. “It give the names of those killed?”

“Yeah,” the master sergeant said, hovered over Diehl.

Diehl sat back down, read the report of another IED attack that had occurred within a mess tent where soldiers had been eating their breakfast. At the end of the report fatalities were listed. That he’d read the name of Sergeant Stephen Denman, Marion, Ohio, in the list of casualties, was a certainty he’d considered before reaching for the report. Hoped not to see the name. Knew it would be there.



Diehl struggled through his day. Knew the worth of what he said to soldiers eager to get to the fight, eager to engage the enemy in a place he’d already been would contribute to their survival. The other images, though, the one’s he gave no voice to, came now only in dreams, nightmares that bathed his body in sweat, tears. Woke up two, three nights a week, sat up in bed, relived what was now a horror, what was then, at the time, only the raw necessity to live another day, to keep his men out of harm’s way.

At the end of the day, Diehl took off his uniform, pulled on his ragged shorts, ignored his roommate, and ran hard through the streets, paths, trails enclosed within the base. Found himself outside a gymnasium, newly constructed, large as a church with a sizeable congregation. He stepped inside. Saw wrestlers in singlets, one-piece suits of Lycra, nylon, exposing the bodies of the contestants as things of beauty...every bulge, every crevice, hard bodies honed for the contest. He climbed the risers, sat down on the third tier. These boys knew what they were doing. Unlike Polk, these boys had learned the essentials of...war.

Diehl watched the action, tried to push memories away. Couldn’t. Buried his head in his hands, began to sob. Soon felt a

hand on his back, an old woman's voice close to his ear. "Son, you all right?"

He wiped his eyes with his fists, looked over his shoulder. "Yes, ma'am, I'm fine. Got somethin' in my eye, is all."

He stepped down the risers, pushed open the door, stood still for a while, pulled the collar of his T-shirt up, wiped his eyes, walked back to his billet.



Two days before Diehl would leave the Army, leave Texas, get the old Ford moving and head for Wyoming, his roommate left the *Army Times* on his bed, knew Diehl was interested in flipping through the thing, catching up on what the *Times* considered news.

Diehl noticed a short column, headed with the words, SOLDIER BEATEN OUTSIDE BAR IN SAN ANTONIO. Diehl read further: "Specialist Four, Michael 'Miguel' Marquez, was found beaten to death in the parking lot of a San Antonio bar. Patrons of the bar, reputed to be a gathering spot for homosexuals, found Marquez's body stuffed between two waste dumpsters. There were no witnesses to the beating, although several unidentified patrons of the bar reported seeing Marquez leave the premises about midnight with two men who, apparently, were not regular customers. The death is under investigation by the local San Antonio authorities, as well as Army personnel."

Diehl carefully folded the paper, set it back down on his bed. Stepped to the door, paused a moment, opened the door, began to run.



Diehl stroked the big chestnut gelding, scratched the white blaze down the horse's nose. Spoke close to the nostrils, letting the animal, aptly named Sabre, smell his breath, get a sense of who he was. The 1st Cavalry stable hands had come to know Diehl, glad to let him in, knew he was a horse man himself.

"You're a beauty," Diehl spoke softly, stroked gently, moved his palm to the horse's lips. Let the magnificent animal lip the sugar cubes he'd grabbed.

"You could ride him a bit, in the round pen," Sam, one of the stable hands, said.

Diehl turned. "Yeah." He smiled. "Sure. Point out a saddle. It'd mean a lot to me, Sam."

"You got it." Sam led Diehl to the tack room, handed him a saddle, blanket, bit and reins.

"Maybe about a half hour," Sam said.

"That'd do fine. Thank you, Sam."



It was just circles. Didn't matter. He had a horse under him. A fine horse, so full of spunk and the simple nobility of itself Diehl just let the boy go, held the reins loose. Sabre soon began to pace, a smooth gait that forsook the usual trot; the rear and front legs on either side moved in unison. Diehl felt the ease of the ride, released his tension on the stirrups; he and the horse became one.

Occurred to Diehl he had made it. Since returning from Iraq, he'd never thought much about it. Why? So many dead, maimed. So many coming back in a box, the Stars and Stripes an honor bestowed on the dead, folded according to regulation, tight corners, handed cold from the coffin to widows, mothers, fathers. Wondered who he'd want to take that flag? Tony? Maddie and Chris? All three? Hell, wouldn't make a difference to the Army. They'd give it to his daddy. No queers in the Army. No need to ask the question: Who did this soldier love? To whom would this flag have meaning?

Sabre slowed his pace, began to trot. Diehl braced a bit in the stirrups. Wondered who'd get Denman's flag. Knew there'd be no flag for Marquez.

The stable hand stepped to the side of the round pen, pointed at his watch, opened the gate. Diehl reined Sabre, dismounted, and walked the big boy back into the stable.

"He's some kind a horse." Diehl unbuckled the flank strap.

“I got it, Diehl.” Sam smiled, grabbed the saddle. “Yessir, he is one hell of a horse. Sorry you couldn’t ride more. You know he’s the colonel’s?”

“Full bird?”

“Yup.”

“Thought as much. Noble horse like that deserves eagles.”

CHAPTER TEN

Diehl'd packed the Ford the night before his outprocessing. Next day, he appeared in his khakis, got his handshake from some damned major, his last paycheck, his orders to report for a Ready Reserve unit in Cheyenne. He studied the embossed thanks of a "Grateful Nation" for his service signed by a man who'd avoided any real commitment to his country, a president who knew as much about war as some half-wit drawing circles and stars in some goddamned institution for the simple-minded.



Diehl started the Ford, returned the salute of the MP at the gate, turned onto I35 north. Headed for Oklahoma City, once there, turned west onto I40. Albuquerque ahead.

Diehl stopped at a Best Western in Albuquerque. Kid behind the front desk stumbled on his words, hands shook a bit, looked at Diehl with a yearn now known. Kid was gay, queer as they come, blond, skinny as a model walking down a runway, heel to toe. Diehl handed him cash.

"Any excitement in this town?" Diehl took the receipt, the key.

"Ah-uh," the kid stammered, "you mean like, um, topless places?"

"I mean like places you might like. Places where a man might find a strong drink and some company...without tits."

The kid's expression gave Diehl the notion he was about to heave his dinner. Then a smile crossed his face, nodded. "Yeah, I know a place like that. Here, I'll draw you a map."



The bar reminded Diehl of Maddie's place. Wood made to look old, raw, lights dimmed to soften the blemishes of the flesh. Young men mostly, half in getups reflecting their perception of cowboy, some in leather chaps, vests, motorcycle

caps who, when overheard, forsook the intent of their getups with elongated esses, called each other Mary.

Diehl ordered a shot of Wild Turkey, a draught. Stepped to a little round table off to the side where the crowd congregated, sat down. He sipped the shot, had never been able to accommodate the quick burn of the whiskey in one gulp. He watched the crowd. Saw a couple boys that stood out, hard bodies without affectations. Found it hard to smile, the images of war, a constant slideshow flashing through his mind. Picked up his draught, remembered Marquez as a gentle soul. Remembered asking Marquez if the Army had gotten into his dreams. He now knew the feeling.



Diehl rose early, near dawn.

He'd left the bar alone. One of those he had seen as a possibility had sat down at his little table, had begun the inanity of the words that had no meaning except to lead up to the inevitable result, the coupling, the fuck. Diehl couldn't help himself from asking if the kid had worn a uniform, had fought for his country. "Fuck no," the kid had said, as if doing such a thing was akin to eating dog shit. Diehl'd smiled, patted the boy on the back, went back to the motel alone.



Diehl skipped breakfast, wanted to try to make it to Laramie by nightfall. Had unfinished business with an old man in a tin house.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native of Denver, Colorado--with glorious treks to Hollywood for three years, and the more onerous, but nevertheless rewarding coddling by Uncle Sam in Louisiana, Texas and Virginia--GEORGE SEATON has been writing forever, with some little succes in publishing short stories in slick-back publications and ezines. His passion encompasses the give and take of relationships, critters (so-called wildlife, including, oh, certainly including dogs), his 1893 Victorian in Northwest Denver, the luscious spread of the Colorado landscape and the stories of the men and women who value the land, the caprices of the land and the seasons, and, certainly, finally and forever, his twenty-six year relationship with his partner, David.

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GEORGE SEATON

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Closing the distance, he raised his cap and scratched the red-blond stubble on the top of his head. Lowered his cap back down, brushed his hand against the two-day growth on his face. “Shit,” he said, taking his foot off the gas. Speck resolved itself into what was clearly a dog, a border collie, most likely, its head raised, alive, fur shuffled by the wind.

Diehl gently pumped his brakes as he passed the critter, oddly content lolling in the middle of the road. He tugged the steering wheel to the right. The pebble-studded dirt off the side of the road let loose a brown cloud from the undercarriage of the Fairlane that, caught by the wind, vanished as soon as it rose. Skid of his used-up tires against the gravel, puff of gas fumes from under the dash gave witness the car was used up. Bringing him this far from the East Texas hardscrabble where he’d served out his last year in the Army, a place that nurtured little except tumbleweeds and armadillos, he knew he’d have to nurse the old gal just a little further. Laramie wasn’t that far away.

Stopping about fifty yards from the dog, shoving the gearshift into Park, he grabbed the bottle of sweet whiskey still between his thighs, tossed it onto the passenger seat, opened the door, and stepped out onto the graveled apron. Tugged his cap further down on his head, spit the Kool from his mouth. Looking back, he saw the dog hadn’t moved. Perked its ears.

Knew he’d pulled off 85 at the precise spot where, for the last time, Scooter had leapt the barbed wire along the western edge of the home place: the house, the barn, the silo, his mama, his daddy, the cattle, the horses. Knew everything that was the home place back then, back before hard times and fat Japs holding the bank’s paper — his daddy’s greed in the mix — yanked the whole thing out from under him. Knowing all this, he kept his eyes stuck on the black-white in the middle of the road. He’d promised himself a long time ago there was no damned use in looking back, or, now, in even turning his head

to his left to reckon the spread of Colorado prairie that, just a few thousand heartbeats ago, embraced his youth. But, tough as it was, tough as his daddy had made it, it'd still been home.

Forsaking his promise, he'd looked back often. Had to make things right. Justice be done.

He began to run.

Diehl closed the distance. Twenty yards between them, stopping, looking up and down the highway, seeing no cars or big rigs topping the horizon either way. He spread his arms, yelled against the wind, "Hey, buddy." Slapped his leg with his hand, whistled. "Right here, buddy. C'mon."

The dog, ears still perked, stared at Diehl, didn't move. "Shit on a stick." He walked toward what he now knew for sure to be a border collie, somebody's working stock, content lyin' for some damn reason in the middle of the road.

Not thinking about it, instinct maybe, he said, "Scooter! Come!"

Sitting up, not moving from the road. The dog's tail began to wag.

"That's right," Diehl muttered. Slapped his thigh, said it again, "Come! Scooter! Come!"

The dog stared at Diehl.

Turning his head, Diehl looked up 85 North, then south, where, barreling hard, an eighteen-wheeler pierced the horizon.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" Diehl slowly stepped to the dog. "You're a sweet one," he said, calm as could be, repeating words he hadn't uttered since Scooter was whole. He walked onto the blacktop, down the yellow line, soothed his words. "You're one crackerjack dog, you are."

Two feet from the dog, saw happy eyes, one brown, one blue-white, burrs in its coat, tail still washing the tartop, no blood. Diehl looked south again, saw the big rig not a mile away. Slowly extended his hand, said, "What the hell you doin' out here, buddy?" The dog sniffed the nicotine-stained fingers, smelled something familiar, stood on all fours, stepped toward Diehl. "That's it," he said, placing his hand on the dog's head,

scratched an ear, realized the dog wasn't broke up, hadn't been hit.

The big rig blaring its air horn, now a half mile away, Diehl grabbed a handful of hair on the dog's neck, quickly slipped his arm under its belly, picked it up, carried it to the west side of the road, slid down the small gulch off the apron, held the dog tight in his arms.

Semi passed, whipping a vacuum either side of 85. Diehl, still hugging the dog, raised his head, looked north. Saw the semi well up the road, moving hard toward the state line. Saw smoke rise from the front of the Ford. "Christ!" he said, heard a puff, saw fire coming off the engine. "Christ!" he said again. Picked up the dog, began walking further south, away from the Ford. Thirty more yards, he stopped, bent down in the gully, kept the dog low against the ground, watched the fire inch toward the trunk and its cargo of fertilizer. Lowered his head, laid down over the dog, knew what was coming.



"Aunt Bea, you out there? Come on. This is Red Devil." Red Devil, red-faced, well-fed, long-hauling out of Greeley bound for Sioux Falls, truck idling. Pulled off the road, thumbed the CB mike buried in his thick-fingered fist.

Aunt Bea, born Claudette Catherine Casebolt, ensconced in a 10 X 30 tin house set on cinder blocks at the western edge of Nunn. Never married, seldom dressed in other than a button-up bathrobe painted festive with daisies, red sallies, tulips, huffed a sluggish cloud from the Camel between her lips, grabbed her mike. "Never fear, Aunt Bea is here. Hey, Red Devil, how ya hangin'? Over."

"Well, some G-D big explosion 'bout three miles north of Nunn. Saw it in my rearview. There was a piece of you-know-what Ford sittin' off the side of the road back there. Wa'nt there after the boom. Metal, glass flyin' all over the road. Smokin', burnin'. Little prairie fire, too. Ain't got the time to check it out. You give a call to the smokies, will ya? And, Bea, leave my name outta it, okay. I'm pushin' a schedule. Over."

Kitchen table given over to her CB, telephone, coffee pot, ashtray, Claudette swept the cigarette from her mouth, picked up the receiver of the phone with one hand, pressed the mike with the other. "On it, Red Devil. Be safe out there. Over."



Hell incarnate, the blast lifted Diehl and the dog up, inches off the ground, set them down hard. Bits of steel, plastic, rubber, rocks rained on Diehl's back. A slow rise to his knees, still embracing the dog, Diehl looked to where he'd left the Ford. Not there. Saw the car's detritus. Saw the hole, ten, twelve feet across and about half as deep. Shook himself, took his hat off, slapped it against his thigh, put it back on. Let loose of the dog, who sat up, stared into Diehl's eyes, tongue hanging out the side of its mouth.

Diehl stared back into the dog's eyes, cradled its head between his palms. Eyes soaked up, Diehl broke his hold, pulled the burrs from the dog's coat. "Yessir, you are one crackerjack dog."



The Colorado highway patrolman, U-turned just this side of the Wyoming line, sped to the scene of some mess on the road a few miles out of Nunn. Not worth a second look, not unusual on this stretch of 85, he gave a quick eye to the young man, legs bowed, camouflage ball cap, green T-shirt, faded jeans, walking north on the apron toward Cheyenne. A border collie loped behind the kid, its shoulders hunched, head held low to the ground. "Best goddamned herdin' dog on the face of the fuckin' earth," the patrolman said to himself, letting the thought pass that a dog like that would herd a breeze if it thought it was blowing in the wrong direction.

A black and white photograph of a man lying down, looking up, with a bookshelf in the background. The man is shirtless and has his head tilted back, looking towards the camera. His right arm is raised behind his head. The background is a bookshelf filled with books. Some book spines are visible, with titles like "John Bunyan", "The Carnal", and "The Soul".

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