

# BLUFF CITY TWILIGHT ZONE

Richard Powell

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*PREFACE*

This is a collection of short stories that have appeared elsewhere. I am pleased to now present them all in this one place for your enjoyment.

*Richard Powell*

## CHAPTER ONE

### *After Hours*

Joe Weaver carried his guitar in a gunny sack. With the strap over his shoulder, he cradled it in front, protecting it from the pressing crowd on the sidewalk. The bag provided little protection for his precious instrument. It had taken him many years to save up the money for it. One clumsy step in this crowd could easily shatter his baby. He didn't have to be so careful, but some habits die hard.

The lighted sign for B.B. King's hung over the sidewalk a block away, but it might take him a half hour to get there. After midnight on Saturday, the Beale Street foot traffic always ambled. Tonight, no exception. He managed two or three steps before stopping as people exited the clubs ahead. Several smokers standing outside the clubs ahead also impeded the flow of traffic. An accidental bump between the traveler passing through and inebriated smokers often erupted into pushing and shoving matches that could escalate into full-blown fights. The experienced traveler here tried to avoid these confrontations by gently and politely moving through. Joe tread lightly around them. As he did this, he carefully watched for anyone that might stagger into him, damaging his precious cargo. He could get there quicker, but he liked moving with the crowd, surrounded by all this life.

No one walked in the street. Street performers raced up and down the pavement. Some on foot, others riding every type of pedal-powered vehicle you can imagine. All performed stunts danced or juggled. Stepping into the street invited a collision with these energetic acrobats. Of course, many stopped to watch the show further slowing progress.

No breeze circulated the air this warm May night. The heat did not bother him, but most e around him appeared damp with perspiration. The pungent body odor mingled with the aroma of food cooking either in the restaurants or in the vendor's trucks parked down the street. As Joe approached the Hard Rock Cafe, the door swung open, blocking the sidewalk. A couple emerged holding hands while the sound of Credence Clearwater's *Born on the Bayou* spilled out into the street. The music

faded to the loud thump of the bass as the door slowly closed, allowing the crowd to move again forward.

Finally, he reached his destination, the entrance for B.B.'s. The doorman seemed to look through him but opened the door for a couple ahead. As they halted to pay the cover before getting their hands stamped, Joe passed without stopping, his instrument a passport on Beale.

He moved around the edge of the crowd to a dark corner of the room. A trio blessed the crowd with soft drum beats and organ chords while the guitar riffs sang a melody. The young black man playing the guitar crooned lyrics from an old Muddy Waters standard, *Hoochie Coochie Man*. As the rest of the group followed with their respective parts, the crowd sang along with the chorus. The boy had the room crowd under his spell, could do anything he wanted. Someday, Joe knew this boy would sit in with them. After hours.

"He is gonna be great if he keeps hisself clean," A voice said behind him.

Turning, Joe found a tall black man with a shaved head standing next to him.

"Joe Weaver, you ain't gettin' any prettier with age!" The man said with a smile.

"Sam!" Joe exclaimed as he reached out to put his arms around the big man's shoulders still careful to move his guitar from in between, "I jus' thinkin' that boy might be able to sit in, one day."

"Glad you think so. He my grandson," Sam replied, handing Joe a small open metal flask, "Wet your whistle with this. One of the boys just got in, brought it from Kentucky."

Joe sniffed then smiled as he recognized the smooth aroma of bourbon. He took a long pull on the bottle. The sweet taste, mixed with the warmth in his throat made him slightly dizzy. He smiled as he passed the bottle back to the big man.

"I was worried you wouldn't make it back tonight," Sam said as he watched his grandson.

"Just took some time to check on my people, you know? Like to see `em once in a while, see how they doin'," Joe answered, "You playin' tonight?"

"I don know yet. If a lot of you acoustic guys show up, I might get to set in. Them electric guys are hard for a mouth harp guy like me to keep up with. Also, they like to do they own wailin'. Don't like us blow hard boys stealin' they thunder."

"Lots different, nowadays. You know?"

"Yeah, back in the old days, smoke be so thick in here you couldn't see across the room."

"All different there for sure. Too bad didn't do that years ago."

"Yeah, never needed to buy butts back then. Hell, used to smoke three packs a night just breathin'."

"Luther never smoked a day in his life."

"Yeah, but lung cancer still killed him."

“That cat was somethin' else on the piano. Here's to Luther,” Sam said, raising the flask as if making a toast before he drank then handing it back to Joe.

“Yes, sir, here's to him,” Joe replied, making a similar toasting gesture before taking another swig.

“So, you think he'll make it?” Sam asked as the lights on the stage dimmed.

“I hope so,” Joe replied as the lights in the rest of the club became brighter, illuminating the audience,” Closin' time. Let's go back and see who else is here.”

As the club's patrons filed out, the servers and the bartender hurried through their clean up tasks. The night's official entertainment over, they all wanted to go their own way. Joe and Sam continued around the edge of the club to a room behind the stage. They found the area vacant. Joe took his guitar out of the sack. Carefully he turned it under the light as he polished it with a rag from his pocket. As the last of the employees left, Joe sat down on a chair to check the tuning on his guitar.

“Give me an E man,” he said to Sam as he plucked the bottom string on his instrument.

After taking out his harmonica, Sam softly blew into the instrument while Joe turned his pegs, trying to match the pitch. Finally, it matched. Joe then tuned the rest of his strings to that one. He closed his eyes to concentrate on the different tones. Finally satisfied, he thumped out a bass rhythm on the lower strings. Sam placed the harmonica to his lips, the mouth harp now added a soft harmonic rhythm matching Joe. They traded off with Sam doing the rhythm while Joe laid down a treble lick. Then Joe switched to the beat while Sam made his mouth harp wail. Both men finally stopped, smiled, and gave each other a high five.

“That may be old school, but it still kicks ass!” Someone shouted from the club's main room.

Sam and Joe made their way back to the main room. The empty stage now lit, left the audience area in shadows. They made their way to the stage and began again. Joe launched into a rendition of *It's Tight Like That*. Both men smiled as the raunchy lyrics came out. Each took a verse and then traded off with licks and riffs from their respective instruments. When they finished, several men laughed in the crowd. A woman cried out in the dark, “You built right they all tight like that,” triggering hoots and laughter from the crowd.

They then started in with the Crossroads Blues. As they played, others came up from the audience with instruments to join the jam. A young white man with a broad-brimmed hat played an electric guitar but did not drown out Joe. Instead, the two traded riffs, echoing each other. Another man added backup on an electric keyboard while a muscular black man played the drums behind them. The sound gradually amped up as the band rocked.

After several numbers, Joe left the stage to sit with the crowd as others came up from the crowd to join in with the session.

Officer Bill Waterston sat in the Sky Watch Tower overlooking the crowd passing on Beale St. From his perch twenty feet above the revelers, he watched for activity that might require action from the foot patrol officers on-duty below. The throng moved peaceably from Beale Street. Most appeared headed to the parking areas or Trolley stops while the die-hards proceeded to the after-hours establishments serving food. He hoped that most continued soberly, but always a few overconfident inebriates would end up smashed into something before blowing into a Breathalyzer.

He graduated only six months ago from the Police Academy, so it surprised him when the Sergeant assigned him to this critical post. Since coming to this shift, he routinely served on foot patrol, a duty most considered equivalent to garbage removal.

Starting at nine in the evening, foot patrol officers slowly roamed the street. In pairs, they defused confrontations between drunks, escorted alcohol-impaired bar patrons to places of safety, or found medical attention for those who seriously overdid their celebrating. Most wore Kevlar vests, as they never knew when a pushing and shoving match between bar patrons might escalate to guns or knives. Especially here, as Tennessee's liberal concealed carry laws nearly guaranteed that most people walked around armed.

Violence rarely occurred on Beale Street, mainly due to the blatant presence of the police. The city's officials wanted this busy tourist attraction known for its excellent music and food. No matter what happened elsewhere in the city, there always seemed enough in the budget for patrolling this street.

As the foot traffic thinned below him, the Sergeant's voice came over his radio.

"You can come down now I think we got a handle on the crowd."

As he pressed the button to lower the tower, he acknowledged the directive. As he stepped to the pavement, Sergeant Johnson stepped from the shadows nearby.

"Let's take a look around here to make sure nobody's stranded," Johnson said as he led Bill down a nearby dark alley. Bill followed the giant black Sergeant glancing from side to side; making sure the lane was vacant. As they rounded a corner, Johnson stumbled slightly. Bill looked down to see a leg extending from behind a dumpster. Once he turned on his flashlight, he aimed the beam into the darkened corner. A white man lay with his upper body against the building, his shirt front soaked. The smell of beer mixed with the sour odor of vomited food filled the surrounding air, overpowering the stench from the trash bin. The man's pants and underwear down to his knees, leaving him naked from his waist to his knees.

"Sir, are you all right?" Bill asked, shining his flashlight on the man's face.

The man raised his hands to shield his eyes, blinking as if just awakened. He looked up at the officers then glanced from side to side, looking puzzled by his surroundings.

“Can you help me up?” the man asked as he raised a hand.

Bill grasped the man’s hand, assisting him to his feet. As he stood, the man’s trousers dropped to his ankles.

“May I see some identification, sir?” Bill asked as the man weaved back and forth.

“Sure, right here,” he replied, bending down to grasp his trousers. He pulled them up partway while checking his pants pockets, “Shit, my wallet’s gone!”

“What happened, sir?” Sergeant Johnson asked as Bill grasped the man’s upper arm, trying to help him maintain his balance.

“Well, I met this little doll at the Club around the corner. Real nice piece, you know? She suggested we come back here and get better acquainted,” The man replied with a sheepish grin, “We came back here, and we’re really gettin’ it on when I blacked out. Don’t remember a thing from there.”

“You’ve got a nasty lump on the back of your head. Somebody mighta hit you there,” Bill said as he examined the man’s head with his flashlight. “Sounds like they lured you back here to steal your wallet.”

The man glanced down at his pants, now down at his shoes. Then peered around the alley.

“Looks like they stole my girl, too!” The man said as he reached down to pull his pants up.

Another man made his way on-stage to stand next to Joe. After he bowed to Joe, Joe tipped his hat to the man, stopped playing, and stepped down from the stage. The new man also carried an acoustic guitar but wore a glass tube on the little finger of his left hand. As he played, he rolled the tube down the neck between the frets making the guitar whine. While the rest of the group provided a rhythm, the player made the acoustic sing like an electric.

Someone shouted, “Yeah, baby! Get on it,” as several clapped in rhythm. Another whistled in appreciation while the player treated the crowd to a smug smile.

A hand from the darkness passed Joe a tall frosty beer mug. Despite not seeing the benefactor’s face, he smiled and nodded in the shadow’s direction. “Thanks, man.”

A voice came out of the dark, “You earned it, man. I sweatin’ just watchin’ you.” The beer tasted smooth and cold as it looked. He took a long swallow, nearly draining the glass.

“The place is really gettin’ hot man,” A man sitting next to him said with a grin as he clapped in time to the beat.

Joe took a bandanna from his pocket to wipe the sweat from his brow, grinned. "Music good too!"

The man chuckled, clapped Joe on the back. "Always better after hours!"

Once the ambulance took the man away, The Sergeant led Bill back to the alley. "Better make sure we got no other folks stranded, and we need to check for clues on that robbery. Otherwise, the detectives gonna be bustin' our chops."

A few feet in, Johnson scooped up a wallet from the ground. Peered inside. "Well, the guy got lucky. No cash, but they left his driver's license and credit cards. I'll turn it over to the Detectives at change of shift. Let them take the credit for finding it."

"Anything else happen tonight, Sarge?" Bill asked as they returned to the empty street.

"Quiet for a Saturday night. Had one fight, but that's all. How'd you like your night in the Tower, Rookie?"

"I just wonder how this guy got rolled right under me. I never even knew it."

The Sergeant clapped him on the back. "Can't catch it all. If you called in every time you saw a couple sneak off into one of the alleys, we'd be running all over the place. Sides you stop a guy like that from experiencing the natural consequences of stupidity, you interferin' with Natural Selection."

Even though he chuckled, Bill felt sorry for the man. After all, being stupid is not against the law.

As they resumed their walk up the street, they checked the shadowed areas searching for others in need of help.

"Lotta history on this street, you know?", Johnson said as they continued their patrol.

"Yeah, I mean, you look around at all the clubs. Handy Park, up ahead," Bill replied as they passed the Old Daisy Theater. He nodded at the sidewalk. "And here we're walkin' on these brass musical notes in the pavement, with all the famous singers' names on `em."

"Up there that Marker to Ida B. Wells just like a lot of others on this street." Johnson thrust back his shoulders. "She my great aunt."

Bill recalled his history classes in grade school. Ida refused to give up her seat on a railroad train in the 1880s to a white man. After being forcibly ejected from the train for her refusal, she sued the railroad for discrimination and won. Seventy years before Rosa Parks did the same thing on a bus in Alabama.

As they passed the Hard Rock Cafe, a band's thumping came from heard ahead. Both increased their pace, towards the music's origins at B.B. King's. Paused at the

door, the Sergeant shoved his cap back on his head and scowled. "Sounds like it's packed. It ain't licensed for after hours."

Finished with his set, Sam joined Joe in the audience. After the stage lights dimmed, shadows moved to the stage. Once they settled on the dais, the lights rose, and a stocky black man with close-cropped, gray hair stepped forward. With his guitar slung over his shoulder, he moved the instrument to the front as he stepped to the microphone.

Joe pointed, slapped his knee while nudging Sam. "It's him! He made it!"

While his back-up ensemble played rhythm, the man at center stage treated the crowd to a victorious smile as he continued to play. "Nice to be back on Beale. You listenin' to Lucille. I don't think I can say enough about her. She brought me from the plantation to where I am today."

As he spoke, his fingers danced on the neck while his pick stroked the strings. His narration continued. Described what he called paying his dues. Made it clear that through all this, Lucille, his guitar, always pulled him through. Some clapped in time to the music, while others shouted out in agreement with the man's words, or whistled their appreciation to his comments or the challenging riffs he laid down.

Bill rattled the club's locked door, hoping to get the attention of those inside. When no response came, he tapped a coin on the door's glass. The sharp taps echoed off nearby buildings. The music continued, and no one came to the door.

"Forget that!" The Sergeant illuminated the security company's sticker on the door with his flashlight. "Those folks inside are making too much noise. You'd have to wake the dead to get their attention."

"So what do we do, Sarge?"

As he punched numbers into his phone, the Sergeant scowled. "Have the security company'll let us in."

"Think they broke in?"

As he held the phone to his ear, the Sergeant made a wry face. "A break-in would trigger the security system. I'm guessin' the owner, or the manager might be inside with them. Thinks he can get away with ignorin' the law. See if this place has a back door while I talked to Security."

While the Sergeant made the call, Bill marched to the alleyway that might lead to the club's back door. He shined his flashlight down the dark corridor as he turned the corner. Dumpsters lined the wall, but a space between two of the bins revealed a door that might lead to B.B. King's. After finding the door looked, he scanned the area. The alley dead-ended past this back door. A person exiting this way would have to come out next to the front door.

To further hinder escape along the route, Bill shoved a dumpster against the door. Now those inside's only way out led right to the cop's waiting arms.

Finished, he strode back to the front where Johnson waited facing the street.

"The back door's locked. I pushed a dumpster in front of it to keep anybody from going out that way."

"That'll be all right for now. If the place catches on fire, we can get `em out."

The Sergeant glanced around and scowled.

"Somethin' wrong, Sarge?"

"Security company's sendin' somebody to let us in, but listen to this, he told me they set the system, and the place has motion detectors. Anybody moving around in there would trigger it."

"Maybe somebody forgot to turn off the jukebox," Bill said, shaking his head now, wondering if this would all end up a wild goose chase.

"Strange as hell, that's for sure, but it wouldn't be the first time one of these security systems failed." Johnson took out his portable radio. "I'm callin' back-up. That ain't no jukebox. There's people in there. More'n you and I can handle."

Joe nudged Sam. "I ain't heard him in years, a little rougher now, but still fantastic." As the man on the stage continued playing, his voice sounded rough from age and hard living, he shouted out a few refrains that brought the crowd to its feet. He then smoothly made the instrument mournfully cry with his skillful picking.

He resumed his story. "Someone asked me where Lucille got her name. I was playin' in a little club in Twist, Arkansas. Ya'll know where that is, right?"

The comment drew a few laughs from the crowd.

"During the show, a big fight broke out. In the scuffle, a woman knocked over an oil drum stove that heated the place."

He added a riff sounding like flames crackling. "The fire spread all over the floor around the stage. Set fire to the place and burned it to the ground. If I hadn't been up on the stage playin', I mighta burned up that night."

He stopped talking as he walked back to the band. Again picking out notes that seem filled the air magically. He returned again to the microphone while the keyboard player produced a mournful refrain.

"Yes, sir, burned the place to the ground. What a woman." The man smiled. "Her name was Lucille. From that day on, all my guitars carry that name. Reminds me how lucky I am to have survived."

The crowd now clapped loudly. Again some hooted, and others whistled as the man continued producing magical melody from the shiny black instrument. As the band slowly wound down its rhythm, the guitar man walked to one side of the stage. A tall, almost gaunt man strode on stage. His smile exposed a gold tooth in a central

incisor. The man at the keyboard stood while gesturing that the newcomer should take his place. The tall man slid behind the keyboards, rolled up his sleeves, and played. The band again started its syncopated rhythm as the guitar player pointed to the keyboard player.

Wide-eyed Joe turned to Sam while pointing at the stage. "Damn, Luther made it too!"

Sam arched an eyebrow. "Course. He sat in a lot with the man up there. We had to make sure B.B. know we need him after hours."

"The Thrill is Gone, babe, gone away from me," The guitar player wailed into the microphone. As the man played, a golden glow lit up the room. Joe felt himself rise as if floating. He felt better than he ever felt in his experience. The music better than any on earth, angelic.

"Shit, that sounds like B.B. King in there," the Sergeant said as he walked back to the door to listen, "News said he was really sick in Vegas!"

Bill shrugged. "Well, that's the news for you."

A car bearing the security company's emblem pulled to the curb. A man wearing a baseball cap emerged from the vehicle. With a portable radio clipped to one of his shoulder epaulets, he wore a white shirt with an embroidered badge matching the emblem on his car.

As the man joined them, he glanced towards the door. "You, Sergeant Johnson?"

"Yep."

"Got a call that you may need to get inside to check the place out."

The Sergeant pointed over his shoulder by tossing his thumb over his shoulder. "You hear that. Party goin' on inside after hours violatin' their license. We need to wait for backup, though. Sounds like we got us a crowd."

The security man walked closer to the building. He smiled as he listened. "You're right, sounds like one hell of a party. "Whether or not you arrest them, you're gonna need help handlin' this bunch."

"Called it in. Backup should arrive soon. As soon as they get here, you can let us in, and we'll take it from there." The Sergeant turned to Bill. Keep an eye on the back door. If they try to come out that way, let me know, and we'll back you up."

Bill trotted around the corner to the dark alley where the dumpster remained across the doorway. He punched the portable's microphone. "Sarge, they're still inside."

"I'm requestin' the police van too. I mighta let 'em walk with a warnin', but now they're pissin' me off. You cover the back while we go in the front. Then we'll go in and collar these clowns!"

Bill shared the Sergeant's annoyance. Had plans for tomorrow, wanted to get off duty at the regular time. So much for that. It would take hours to process this bunch. Probably be stuck till tomorrow afternoon.

Eventually, Several vehicles pulled up on the street. A squad car, its light bar flashing, pulled up to the alley's entrance, illuminating the area. Two black officers emerged from the ar. Their hands on their belts as they approached Bill.

"Stand by we're goin' in the front," The Sergeant called over the portable.

"Roger," Bill responded.

"Big bust tonight?" The first officer asked he joined Bill.

"Yeah, after-hours party. Must be a big crowd judging by the noise."

The second officer's eyes roamed over the building. "Big place. Brought my wife here once. Musta been a couple hundred in the bar."

The other nodded. "Probably Memphis in May crowd that just can't go home from the party. We might need to call in a couple buses to haul `em to 201."

The second chuckled, "Let's get Mounted Patrol. They can march `em over there like one big herd. Plus, the walk might sober `em up."

"Nah, can't do that. Some of these jokers might pass out or get sick along the way. Can you imagine the papers gettin' a hold a that? I see the headline now 'The Beale Street Death March. End up makin' em all heroes.'"

Just then, the door opened. A smiling, uniformed officer beckoned them inside.

"The big bust all over?" One officer standing with Bill asked.

The officer at the door shook his head, "You won't believe it."

As the three trailed the officer who opened the door, their footsteps echoed as they strode down the hallway's hardwood floor. The light from a doorway at the hallway's end provided the only light.

Inside the fully lit main area, stood no one but police officers. The Sergeant stood near the front door, talking to the security man as several officers moved quickly up the stairs searching the upper floors.

Puzzled Bill joined the Sergeant. "You already load `em up."

The security man and the Sergeant exchanged glances. The Sergeant shook his head. "You ain't not gonna believe this, kid. Place is empty."

"What? The place sounded like it was packed with people, Sarge."

"Johnson, you partying with the crowd?" A short black man wearing a dark blue polo shirt with a gold badge embroidered on the breast said as he walked in the front door. "As a command officer, we expect you to set a good example for the younger members of the force."

"Shit, Lieutenant, I know what I heard. The Rookie here heard it first." Johnson said while pointing over his shoulder with his thumb at Bill.

"Yes, sir," Bill replied, now standing next to the Sergeant as if getting ready to go toe to toe with the Lieutenant. "There was music, and sounded like a big crowd."

“Sounded like a real party,” the security man added, “Don’t know why they didn’t trigger the motion detectors. Have to send someone over to check `em out tomorrow.”

The Lieutenant now strolled around the main room, accompanied by Bill and Sergeant Johnson. He scanned the walls then turned. “Place got a basement? They mighta heard you and slipped out some secret passage or tunnel.”

While Bill and the three other officers searched for a basement door, the Sergeant climbed the stairs. “I’ll have the guys look for doors that might connect with the adjacent buildings. They coulda slipped out that way.”

Bill’s search led him to a door opening onto a stairway going down. As he flipped on a light switch near the door, illuminating the area below, he shouted over his shoulder. “Found the basement.”

Once the Sergeant and Lieutenant joined him, the three followed the stairs down.

Cases of liquor and restaurant paper supplies stacked on pallets filled the area. The solid, windowless concrete walls appeared seamless and uncracked. A walk through revealed no trap doors or windows.

Back at the main floor, remaining officers gathered in groups talked and laughed. Three stood off to the side, studying an old jukebox setting in a corner.

“Looks like a false alarm, guys,” the Lieutenant shouted as he entered, “You guys can go back to serving and protecting while we wrap things up here.”

While the others trailed out, a few glanced back at Bill and the Sergeant, chuckling and shaking their heads.

One standing near the jukebox beckoned them over. “Hey Sarge, look at this, will you? This is a real Wurlitzer Bubbler, must be worth a mint man!”

The three stood aside as Bill and Johnson approached, allowing them a view of the machine. The arched wooden cabinet trimmed with chrome and neon plastic stood silently in front of them. Despite the tape covering the coin slot, the machine remained plugged in.

As they stood in front of the machine, a short black man entered the front door passing the exiting officers. A younger black man trailed behind him. Both looked glanced around the room wide-eyed.

The older man approached the men at the jukebox. “What’s happenin’ officers? Been a break-in or somethin’?”

The Lieutenant frowned. “And you are?”

“Bob Ralston, me and the boy here come to do the early mornin’ cleanin’. The old man reached up to touch his shiny gray-fringed bald spot. “Manager called me to come in early today on account a the news. Thought they might want to have a big thing today. Maybe a wake.”

The Lieutenant placed his hand on his hips. “What news?”

Ralston frowned shook his head. "B.B. King. Died last night in Vegas. This bein' his place figured a lot a people be comin' by today to say goodbye." He pointed to the jukebox. "That old thing actin' up again?"

"Whattya mean?"

"It don't work real good, but it just come on sometimes at night. Play a few tunes and then go dead. Spooks the hell outta me, you know," The old man added as he walked over to the machine. "Yeah, look here, Ronnie."

As the younger man walked to the jukebox, Ralston pointed inside. "See here. Was stuck on a old Joe Weaver song. Now it's stuck on B.B.'s The Thrill is Gone."

"You mean it just comes on every so often?" the Lieutenant asked, "If it doesn't work, why don't you just unplug it?"

"Can't. It would break the covenant," the old man replied, "Man had it put in the deed when he sold it to B.B. that it has to remain plugged in. They can unplug it to move it, but if the electricity is off it for more than a hour, the deed is forfeit."

"Maybe that was what caused this ruckus tonight?" one officer near the jukebox said as he now strolled to the door.

"That why y'all here?" the old man asked, Noise comin' outta here after hours?"

"Yeah, that's about it," the Lieutenant replied.

The old man chuckled "Y'all must be new to Beale. Check with the boys that used to work outta the Beale precinct. They clue you in, I'm sure. If you don't mind, me and Ronnie gotta get busy gettin' the place ready."

Later, as Bill and the Sergeant strolled to their parked cruiser, Bill turned to the Sergeant. "What do you think happened, Sarge?"

"Damned if I know kid, but the old man was right. You and I have only been down here for six months."

Later that morning, Sergeant Johnson stretched as he stood after the church service. Even though he had been up all night, he faithfully attended church on Sundays with his wife and two daughters. After dealing with low-life all week, the routine refreshed him. Once he took them out to breakfast, he then could rest before returning to duty that evening.

As they exited the church, a familiar figure walked ahead of his family. He touched his wife's arm. Excuse me, honey. There's someone over there I need to talk to real quick, won't take a minute."

As he kissed her on the cheek, she nodded. "I'll take the girls to the car?"

"Tavis!" He shouted as he approached a heavy-set man moving down the sidewalk with a woman who appeared to be equally plump.

The couple smiled as they turned while stepping into the grass next to the sidewalk to wait for him.

The man extended his hand, "Kevin, how you been?"

“Your lookin’ like retirement suits you, man,” Johnson said as he shook the man’s hand.

Tavis turned to the woman at his side. “This here, Kevin Johnson, Louise, I had him as a rookie in trainin’ years ago. Word is you in charge of the Beale night shift.”

“Yes sir, just took it over six months ago. Nice bunch of officers there, but there is something I wanted to ask you about since you used to work out of the Beale Precinct.” He then told the couple about last night’s experience. As he talked, the older man listened, nodding his head occasionally to show he followed the story.

When Johnson finished, Tavis turned to his wife. “Honey, me and this man need to talk shop for a minute. Why don’t you head over to the car, and I’ll be right along?”

She nodded and smiled. “Pleasure meeting you, young man. I need to get outta this sun and rest my feet. So, I’ll just head out.”

Tavis took Johnson’s arm and walked him to a nearby shade tree. “So, nobody clued you in?” Then he rolled his eyes. “Oh, that’s right, you took over from Robinson. So, he couldn’t fill ya in. Damn what a shame, him dyin’ in that wreck and all.”

“What do you mean?”

“What you heard last night. Happens all the time at that place. Been goin’ on for years. Back when I first started out, we got those calls all the time about after-hours shenanigans at that place.” Tavis shook his head. “Same as what happened to you last night. We’d go in there already to bust a bunch of late-night partyers and find nothin’. Brass started sayin’ stuff about our shift that wasn’t exactly flatterin’, you know. Accusin’ us of usin’ on the job and the like. Shameful.”

“You got that right. Caught a raft of it last night. So, what did you do?”

“Finally, we let it go one night, and the next day nothin’ happened. No complaints from the owner nothin’. If other places violated curfew, we responded, but we learned to leave that place alone.”

Johnson shook his head. “What do you think is happenin’ there?”

“Don’t know. Some things happen in this world that I don’t understand, and no one else does either. This thing is one of those. Just be glad it’s not something you have to solve.”

“How do I explain this to the men on the shift?”

Tavis sighed. “I’m sure you won’t have to. By now, most of the guys who showed up last night couldn’t wait to talk about the crazy thing. There are others on the force been clued in. They’ll set `em straight, believe me.”

“Humph. Unreal. Well, thanks, Tavis, for fillin’ me in. But I’m not sure how to handle it.”

Like I said, you probably won’t have to say anything to the men. Just accept the fact it will happen again from time to time. The more you respond by the book, the

## Bluff City Twilight Zone

crazier everybody will think you are. There is one thing you could do next time it happens, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Enjoy the music. It’s better than you’ll get anywhere else. And there’s no cover.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Chapter*

Jim slowed the car as he approached the iron gate at this end of the stone bridge, so narrow it barely contained one lane of traffic. Elmwood Cemetery, in bold white lettering, stood out against the gate's black iron background. He craned his neck as the car rolled up the arched bridge's steep incline hoping he might spot any vehicles coming in the opposite direction. No luck. He crossed his fingers. Expected that if another car came from that direction, they also traveled cautiously. At the hill's crest at mid-bridge, he relaxed, seeing the way ahead clear.

On the road's left side, a young girl sat on the porch of the gray cottage in a white rocker. She leaned back, her eyes closed, soaking up the rays of the setting sun. As he slowed, she rose and waved. Her bobbed black hair, white knee socks, and saddle shoes, the perfect portrait of a 1950s high school girl. The white poodle appliqué on her black skirt reinforced this impression. Bouncing down the steps, she approached the car with a smile.

"You're early, Mr. Bell." She beckoned to the porch. "Park your car. Join me on the porch. They're not quite ready. The sun is wonderful this time of day. We can chat until they are."

After parking his car near the chapel across the road, Jim grabbed his notepad before slinging the camera bag over his shoulder.

As she led him up the cottage stairs, she smiled back over her shoulder. "I'm glad your paper allowed you to come. I so wanted our little event to have some decent coverage. Everyone has worked hard, getting ready. It's our first time, and I want it to succeed." She seated herself in one rocker on the porch and beckoned him to the other. As he settled into the chair, he turned to her. "Actually, I'm not with the paper anymore."

"So who are you with."

“Since the layoffs, I freelance. But I have a blog that is growing. An event like this should increase readership. I might even get it to run in the Appeal or the Flyer. I still have contacts there.”

“Well, whatever publicity you can get for us, the better.”

“So, when is the main event?”

“In two weeks on June twenty-first. The summer solstice. That’s when the energy of life is strongest, you know.”

“No, I didn’t. That’s important?”

“Well, I think so. Most of the folks in the cast agree too!”

“So, Miss Roberts...”

She put her hand on his arm and laughed. “Mr. Bell, please! Just call me Julie. Whenever someone calls me Miss Roberts, it usually means I’m about to catch hell.”

Jim grinned and shook his head.

“Well, I don’t intend to do that. I just wanna make sure I get all the information from you. Write a story people read and get `em interested in coming for your performance. And please call me, Jim too.”

“You mean Jim? Or do you really mean like in Jim junior or Jim the second,” she chuckled.

Jim laughed. “No, just plain Jim.”

She batted her eyelashes at him, squeezed his hand, and smiled. “I wouldn’t call you plain anything.”

“All right, I give up. You’ve swept me off my feet. Ready to do anything you want. Now tell me about all this, so I could woo you more fans.”

“It’s a walking tour. People stroll around at their own pace. Stop at the sites that interest them and talk to the folk’s representing each section.”

“Just lectures then?”

As he said this, a horse neighed nearby, followed by the sound of clashing steel. After leaping to his feet, Jim looked across the street. Near the Confederate monument, two men, astride horses, slashed at each other with swords. One wore a gray uniform with gold piping. His broad-brimmed hat folded up on one side held a flowing plume. His blue-uniformed opponent wore the plain kepi, favored by soldiers of the period, held his sword high. They cursed at each other as they slashed.

Julie, standing at his side, chuckled.

“Don’t worry, they can’t hurt each other. They do that all the time.”

“So I guess that answers my question. It’s not all lecture. Dramatization as well. Are they re-enactors?”

Julie shrugged. “I’m not sure what you would call them.”

“Julie darlin’, is this the man from the press?”

Jim turned to find a man staring up at him from the bottom of the steps. His eyes twinkled behind round spectacles with dark black frames. His bushy gray hair escaped everywhere from beneath his broad-brimmed hat. Even though his three-piece suit seemed heavy for the heat of the day, the man seemed comfortable.

“Mr. Bell, I’m sorry, Jim, this is the Boss.”

The man tucked his cane under his arm and doffed his hat.

“Jim Bell. Can’t say I’ve heard your name before. Know most of the local reporters. You new?”

Jim chuckled as he nodded to the man. What a great actor she chose for this part. He even looked like pictures Jim remembered from the archives. A twin to the man who ran the city for so many years. Known by many as Boss Crump. Jim allowed the man to stay in character. “No, sir! Just not from your particular time.”

The man laughed. “I like this man Miss Julie. Would it be alright if I walked along with you two? I’d like to see the rest of the show. After all, I’m at the end of the line.”

“If Jim doesn’t mind. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

The man grinned. “Splendid. But I’ll make myself scarce when we get down to No-man’s-land.” He turned to Jim. Arched his eyebrows. “Young man down there has eyes for her. Don’t wanna make the boy jealous.”

Julie slapped him on the arm. “You’re incorrigible.”

After leaving the battling cavalrymen behind, Jim snapped pictures of characters as they walked. Some he questioned, others he merely listened to as they told their stories. While remaining behind back with the Boss at the Yellow Fever section, Jim watched Julie talk with a red-headed young man. He looked a little older than Julie, but as the Boss claimed, the boy looked infatuated. As they left that section, Jim turned to the Boss. For once, the twinkle had left his eye. He looked grim. He removed his hat again and stood silently, staring at the area.

“More people died from the Yellow Fever here than in any other disaster in the country combined. All it took to get rid of it was clean up the crap. Wish I’d been Mayor then. Mighta been able to make a difference.”

From inside his coat, he removed a flask. Took a long drink and then handed it to Jim.

“Supposed to be illegal. I know, but despite what them scalawags in Nashville believe, a man’s entitled to a few vices. Right?”

Jim took a sip. The whiskey tasted smooth. Expensive.

“Go ahead, son. Wet your whistle!”

Jim tossed back a good swallow. Flipped the cap back on the flask and returned it to the Boss. The young man talking to Julie followed her with his eyes as Julie rejoined them.

“Done courtin’ for the day?” Boss inquired with a chuckle. “By the way, now that you’re all done with school, what you gonna do? Stick around here. Work out somethin’ permanent with that boy down there?”

“Oh, boss, you’re so nosy.”

No! Just concerned. You’re too bright a star to just settle down here and raise a buncha kids.”

Julie took Boss’s arm and spoke softly so Jim could barely overhear. “I’m goin’ to Hollywood week after the event. I gotta friend out there said I could get into pictures.”

Boss scoffed. “Pictures! You don’t wanna be some floozy on the stage girl. You’ve got talent! Brains! I mean, look at what you did here with all this.” Boss emphasized his point with a gesture that swept the horizon.

“No! Not acting. Though that might be fun like today. I want to be a director, and my friend found me a real job at Warner Brothers. I could work with several of the major directors. Like an apprentice.”

“You mean like Cecil B. DeMille or John Ford?”

“Maybe.”

Boss patted her and turned to Jim. “Did you hear that? What about next year, though?”

“Well, I’d try to come back for that one, but honestly, after Jim gets out the word, you won’t need me. You all know what to do without my help.”

Boss scowled. “You’ll keep in touch, though, right?”

She gave him a peck on the cheek. “And I expect calls and letters from you as well.”

After saying farewell to the Boss, Jim and Julie strolled back to the cottage. Across the street, the duel had ended, and both horsemen had disappeared along with the others. Julie took his hand.

“Thank you so much for coming. I hoped you liked it.”

“Liked it? I loved it. What talent they all had. Made me believe they had all been there.”

“Make sure you get that in the story.”

“Don’t worry. By the time I’m done, you may have to do an encore. Once word spreads, people will be bustin’ down the gates to attend. Listen. Is it all right if I include information about you too?”

“What do you mean?”

About your plans to go to Hollywood.”

“Sure. That’s no secret. Family’s not thrilled. Think I oughta go to college first, but...” She shrugged.

“One last thing. I want a picture of you for the story.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, how about down by the Elmwood sign on the bridge?”

Julie smiled. “Okay, I guess.” She fiddled with her hair.

“Don’t worry, you look great. Let’s go I wanna get this before the light fades.”

“One more thing. Can you send the story and the pictures to the board? They want to see it before it’s released; make sure it’s not too plebeian they said.”

“Plebeian? I didn’t realize people around here even knew what that word meant. But sure, just give me the address, and I’ll send it to ‘em. How about you?”

“Oh! No need. I’m sure they’ll show me what you write. Let’s go take that picture.”

Jim checked the sheet of paper in the passenger seat once again to make sure his GPS had guided him to the proper place. The two-story home with its full-width porch typical of the Evergreen district needed paint, the lawn mowed, and flower beds weeded. He sighed as he looked up at the once elegant structure.

His hands trembled. His dry mouth tasted like he imagined a dirty chicken coop tasted. He pulled the flask from beneath the seat and chugged down a hearty measure. After popping in a breath mint, he emerged from the car.

As he climbed the stairs to the porch, he thought about the phone call. The voice that summoned him sounded old and feeble but angry. He worried that his story might have struck a wrong chord. He only hoped he could make it right. Somehow salvage his chance to work again. At least field some good freelance assignments. The voice on the phone put this outcome in doubt.

Before he pushed the doorbell, the door opened. A short, heavy-set black woman wearing burgundy nurse’s scrubs glared at him.

“Mr. Bell?”

“Erm. Uh. Yes, Ma’am. Mrs. Johnson?”

The woman scoffed, threw the door open, then stepped aside. “Miss Amanda be right, which you. She say you wait in the parlor. I’m gonna fetch her!”

The woman beckoned him to a room with a couch faced by two chairs. Before the sofa sat a coffee table. The photos from his story arrayed on the table. Before leaving, the woman gave Jim a look as if she expected him to behave and touch nothing. Leaving Jim to decide whether to sit or stand.

A huge painting hung over the tiny fireplace that once provided the room's warmth. As Jim studied the portrait, he felt as if he had stepped through time.

There she stood. The black bobbed hair, the black poodle skirt, saddle shoes, and knee socks. The artist had captured the blue eyes perfectly. She appeared there just as he saw her at the cemetery. Posed beneath the Elmwood sign.

"I don't find your little stunt amusing at all!" A voice growled behind him.

Startled, he turned to find an old woman in a wheelchair. Through her thick glasses, her eyes appeared enormous. Her gray hair styled in a bob like the girl in the portrait. The sneer on her face accusing. She nodded at the picture lying on the coffee table. "That picture of her, where'd ya get it?"

"Yeah, Where'd it really come from."

"I don't know what you mean?"

"Ya, swipe it from somebody? Find it at a garage sale?"

"I'm sorry Mrs. Johnson. I took it at Elmwood."

"Bull shit! My father gave that picture to the artist who did that portrait. Never got it back. It broke his heart. How'd ya color it?"

"I'm sorry. I uh don't understand. Like I said, I took it last Sunday."

"I know there's all kindsa tricks they can do with computers nowadays. And those other folks you said you photographed? That's shameless. My grandson saw it. Told me about this fake news service called Onion. That what you plan on doin'? Put this all out there as one big joke. I just don't know how you learned about Julie's big dream."

"She told me about it. Didn't you read the story?"

"I did. You claim to be some kinda psychic? Or you just made somethin' up so far-fetched that it ended up bein' close to the truth."

"No. It's like I wrote in the story. She told me about it. Ask her."

"Ha! I'm no nut job, sir. My sister's been dead for over sixty years."

"Julie's your sister?"

"That's right!. Was. Killed in a plane crash, 1955. On her way out West to work in Hollywood. Wanted to be in pictures. Not some actress, but a director."

"She told me that's what she'd do this fall. But right now, she wanted to do this special event at Elmwood. Have a bunch of her theater friends here portray people from the past at the cemetery."

"Yeah, she wanted to do that, all right. Loved that old place. Wanted someday to make a movie about it. Spent hours out there when school was out. Studyin' the archives and stuff. All she ever talked about was doin' that before she went away, but there was never enough time. Now the folk's runnin' the place do it. Kinda like she wanted, but they do it at Halloween. Makes `em a lot of money. She'd a been pleased. Another thing. I don't know how you got all them pictures. The rest of the board ain't gonna be too happy with you about that either."

“What do you mean?”

“Those folks you claimed were playin’ those parts. You fiddled some old pictures somehow, so you got the real faces on the people you say you photographed. Some of `em real powerful and they got family still around. They may want your head or various other parts when they hear about it. If I were you, I’d just get rid of these pictures. Tear up that story and maybe leave town before they hear about it.”

“But... But... They were there. I took their pictures. Just like I did for your sister.”

The old woman shook her cane at Jim. “You ain’t right in the head fella I probably should call the law just for your own protection,” she growled.

Jim’s knees trembled. As he stumbled to the couch, he loosened his tie. He dropped onto the sofa. Felt numb. The old woman’s voice now sounded far away.

“Thelma! Fetch the brandy! Mr. Bell looks peaked. Lord! You’d think the screwball saw a ghost!”

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Chapter*

#### A VERY WORTHY HUMAN BEING

On starboard, the Memphis lights glowed on the horizon. The rudders vibrations traveled up the steering lever as Jim steered the tow upstream, pushing the 40 barges. Nearly seven acres, the load stretched before him in the moonlight on the blackened water.

A clear night in spring, the air warm throughout the day, but now the thermometer registered 45 degrees outside. Chilly, but the water below came from the Northern snowmelt, its temperature near freezing.

He checked the radar. The river ahead and behind seemed deserted. The second mate called from the foredeck to announce the change-of-watch inspection. He flipped the switch that bathed the barges ahead in light, allowing the crew to see as they walked the tow. The men below moved along the edges of the barges. Clad in cumbersome survival suits and life preservers, they raised hatches and peered inside, making sure none leaked and all tethers tight.

Hypothermia in water comes much faster than in air. A person in the water at this temperature becomes exhausted in less than 15 minutes and dead in 30. The survival suit held off death for 90 minutes.

The second mate called up to the wheelhouse, announcing that the inspection's completion. He shut down the spotlights again, throwing the boat into total darkness outside. The door behind him opened, announcing the Captain's arrival and the end of his solitary duty at the helm.

"How soon to Memphis?" the voice behind him asked.

"Probably about an hour. Current here is strong, and with this load, we only make about 5 knots. No wind though. That helps," Jim turned to nod at the Captain, who now studied the radar screen in the dark wheelhouse.

“How’s traffic?” The Captain asked, stepping to the front now to study the river ahead.

“Nothin’ around. We passed the Johnny B. about 10 o’clock headed to Vicksburg, and that’s it.”

“Well, after it thaws up North, the traffic will pick up. How she handlin’ for ya,” The Captain turned to study Jim’s face by the light from the radar screen.

“A lot bigger than I’m used to on the Ohio, but this part of the river is so straight it doesn’t seem to matter.”

“Well, we get above Memphis, and it’s a little more twisty. Why don’t you come on up an hour early? You can watch me move her through the bends above here.”

“That’d be great. The rudder work seems easy to figure out. It’s the engine switching that’s tricky,” Jim replied feeling grateful for the Captain’s mentoring

“Yeah, this three prop job we use here and the bigger loads below Cairo take some getting used to, but hell I did it. You can too.”

“The simulators help a lot, but...” He said, moving to the side so the Captain could take the wheel while still holding course.

“Yeah, the real deal is different, no matter what they say.” The older man, his eyes glued to the river, stepped to the wheel in the change-of-watch handover.

As Jim stepped through the wheelhouse hatch, he paused. “Great, see you in the morning.”

After securing the door, he descended to the “Texas Deck.” He needed a smoke, and the best place would be at the stern behind the exhaust stacks. The company did not allow smoking in the cabins but said nothing about smoking on deck. He figured he broke no rules lighting up out here. He quit a year ago, but the stress of this new position as a Line Boat Pilot brought back the cravings, and he relapsed during the orientation. He could go a 6-hour shift without lighting up, but a whole month cold turkey right now seemed too much.

As far as he knew, none of the rest of the crew smoked. Guilty, he hid out here away from the others. He wanted his new companions to accept him, and right now, he wanted no hassles from any of the others. You never knew who might be an anti-smoking evangelist. He vowed to quit and throw the remaining cigarettes away as soon as the trip ended.

Pulling the pack from his pocket, He shook one out. The wind caught it before he could grasp it. He lunged for it in the dark, trying to trap it before it fell over the side. He only had a small supply and did not want to waste these last few. If he did, he would need to purchase more to finish the trip. The cigarette bounced off his hand. He reached forward to grasp it again. The wind puffed, twirling the loose butt in the air in front of his face. Like a reflex, he snatched for it again. The wind now blew it back towards his face. He stepped back and reached for it once more, his

arms hampered by his life jacket. Like an errant moth, the cigarette danced in the air before his eyes, just out of reach.

He stepped forward. Instead of landing on the deck, his foot contacted nothing but air. He tipped forward closing his balance. He had stepped through the stern ladder opening, and nothing waited below his feet, but the frigid water. He reached for the rail with one hand but missed it. Surrendering to primary survival mode, he dropped the cigarette pack. Desperate, he reached out but not in time to catch the opposite rail. He plunged through the air.

No time to scream before he hit the water. Since he did not take in a breath before submerging, he clawed to the surface for air. Thank God, he thought, I'm wearing my life jacket, he said to himself as it pulled him to the surface.

While he sucked in air at the surface, his brain registered the cold. He shivered so hard his teeth rattled. Each breath hurt.

Desperate, he paddled towards the shadowy hulk moving up the river, but the boat pulled away from him as the prop wash pushed him back. No way could he catch the tug.

He changed direction. Frantic, he paddled and kicked towards the Eastern bank since it seemed the closest. Impeded by the life jacket, his arm strokes seemed clumsy.

It took all his effort to keep his legs extended and kicking. His mind screamed for warmth. Begged him to curl up in a ball to protect his core. He forced himself to keep moving, but the current pushed him downstream, increasing the distance.

He never swam well. With shoes, he performed worse. Not caring that this exposed his feet to the bitter cold, he kicked them off. Even though numb, his hands functioned as paddles propelling him through the water. Soon his legs and arms lost control. Stopped their kicking and flailing. He yawned. Giggled, giddy, he couldn't stop.

"I'm dying for a cigarette," he said then laughed out loud as he caught the double meaning.

His arms and legs no longer moved. The shivering stopped. A wave of fatigue swept over him. Now he yearned for a nap. His bunk appeared before his eyes. Yes, he told himself, lie down. Just a quick rest before swimming again. That would be all right. Lie back here in the water and float on back to the Gulf of Mexico. Imagining the warm water lapping around him brought a smile to his face. Relax, drift, and he would be there in no time.

Something nudged his shoulder. Hands slipped under his shoulders. Lifted him from the water, then laid him on a wooden surface. Light appeared through his eyelid, he opened them but saw nothing except the light. He tried to raise his hand to shield his eyes, but his arm did not work. Giving up, he closed his eyes.

“Hold still fellah. I’m coverin’ you up with these here blankets. You needs to get warm, real fast.”

He opened his eyes again but still did not see the person attached to the voice. The light too bright. He saw nothing else. Whoever pulled him from the river now heaped soft blankets on him. A motor purred nearby. The shivering returned. His teeth chattered hard enough to break. A hand raised his head while a warm cup touched his lips.

“If you can take a sip of this, it’ll help.”

The liquid seeped into his mouth, then trickled down his throat.

“Not too much. Let’s make sure you can swallow. Don’t want to drown you here in the boat.”

He opened his eyes. The light now behind his head. A black man holding a thermos with a cup looked down in his eyes. The man poured more of the steaming liquid into the container and held it out to him.

“Do you think you can hold it now?”

Still unable to speak, he nodded as he reached for the cup. Though numb, his hand ill worked.

“I’ll take you to the fire onshore. You’ll warm up faster there. You be all right.”

Again he nodded. The man moved to the spoked wheel. He pushed a handle on the wheel’s pedestal. The engine sound changed from its idling purr to a deep growl as the boat picked up speed. The vessel turned towards shore as the man peered into the darkness in front of him.

“What’s your name, sir?” The black man asked.

“Jim. Jim Carlson.”

“Thas good. Now you bein’ able to talk again and all. You might live yet to be an old man like me.”

“What do you mean? You don’t look much older than me?”

“Mister, I’m as old as you get,” The man chuckled.

Jim eased into a sitting position and pulled the blankets around him. Ahead a light flickered onshore. Must be the fire the man mentioned. Jim lay back down as the shivering started again.

“Just relax, sir. We gets to the fire, and you dry out; you be okay.”

Jim wanted to sleep. The shivering and teeth chattering though kept him awake. Finally, the boat’s motor slowed to a purr. A gentle bump and a sliding sound told him they beached.

The black man stood over him and reached down for his hand. “If you can help me get you up, I’ll get you to the fire.”

Jim reached down with his free hand and steadied himself as he tried to pull his legs up and assist in his raising. His numb legs supported him. “I’m not sure I can walk.”

The man heaved Jim over his shoulder, then stepped over the boat's gunwale. The warmth from the fire grew as the black man walked. About five feet from the fire, the man lowered Jim to the ground. He then removed Jim's bright orange life jacket and hung it on a tree branch over the river.

"You stay here and get warmed up. I needs to go back for the others."

"Others?"

The man said nothing only nodded. Returning to the boat, the man backed it from the bank then turned to head out. The fire's light illuminated the word "Zev" painted on the stern of the boat as it disappeared into the darkness. He heard its motor increase its speed as it moved move downstream. Jim felt his chin drop to his chest as his eyes closed. The shivering came and went, as he drifted off to sleep.

As the sun rose, a motor purred neaby, accompanied by voices stirred Jim from his slumber.

A blond angel wearing boots and what looked like waders with orange suspenders knelt over him. When his eyes opened, she lunged back, grinned "Damn, he's alive! Over here, guys."

Two men standing at the shore's edge rushed to her side, while the third sprinted off to return with a folding stretcher. Once they eased him onto it, they jogged to a boat with a Coast Guard insignia.

As the men carried him on the stretcher, the woman bent over him. "Your captain radioed us first thing this morning when they found you missing. We got folks searchin' the river from here up to Cape Girardeau. Nobody thought you'd be alive. We spotted the lifebelt hangin' in the tree and pulled in here to take a look."

"What about the others?"

"Others?"

"The man who pulled me out last night said he had to go back out for the others."

She frowned. "Don't know what you're talking about, sir. You're the only one missing out there that we know about."

"Before we go, you should make sure the fire is out. It must have burned down while I was asleep, but any smoldering ashes might catch this dry grass."

"Sir, there's no sign of a fire here."

A quick glance proved her right. Shaking her head, the woman straightened up and stole a glance at her companions. One chuckled and rolled his eyes as they set him in the boat. As they handed him a steaming cup, his stomach rumbled.

"Just relax, fella, and drink this. Don't worry about anything right now. We'll take care of you and the others if they need it. The ambulance at the dock will take you to any hospital you want for a good checkup. You're one lucky s.o.b."

The ambulance rushed him to Baptist Hospital on Walnut Grove. In the Emergency Room, a staff attached a blood pressure cuff and checked his temperature. A man carrying a test tube tray, drew blood changing vials several times. Probably for different tests, Jim told himself. Outside the room, a man in a white smock talked with the EMT's who brought him. Once they left, the man entered. "I'm Dr. Straw. We'll do some blood checks on you. You have some bruises and scratches and are weak from the exposure. I'm keepin' ya at least overnight for observation, but I don't think you have anything serious. Your company called. They're gonna send an insurance representative to talk to you. Also, the Police or the Fire investigators will want some of your time. Are you taking any medications or have any conditions that might need treatment while you're here?"

"No, sir," Jim answered. After changing into a hospital gown that opened in the back, a muscular black man rushed him through a labyrinth of hallways and elevators. Finally, they arrived at a room. The attendant helped him to bed and showed him how to operate the television remote. As he left, a short, stocky woman wearing surgical scrubs entered carrying a tray. After setting it on his bedside table, she raised the lid allowing the bacon's aroma to fill the air. Beside the crisp strips, set an orange mound of steaming scrambled eggs, toast, and a bowl of what looked like oatmeal.

Not waiting for an invitation or order, he shoveled the food into his mouth.

"That a boy. Doctor wants you to eat right now. Best thing for you after that little dip in the river. Also, if your up to visitors, Dr. Garrity will be in shortly,"

"Sure, no problem," Jim mumbled with his mouth stuffed.

As he finished the food, a tall gaunt man in a white smock, holding a clipboard rapped on his door frame. Still chewing he beckoned the man inside.

"I am Doctor Garrity from psychiatry. How you gettin' along?"

Jim sipped his coffee, cleared his throat. "A head-shrinker? Why?"

"Well, a trauma like this impacts the psyche, not to mention brain damage from the hypothermia. I just want to chat so we can make sure you are okay?"

Jim shrugged. "Sure."

The Doctor then asked a series of innocuous questions and recorded Jim's responses. The man paused his interrogation and studied Jim carefully.

"What did I say my name was?" The man asked his pen poised over the clipboard.

Jim paused for a moment, "Dr... uh, Garrison."

"What department did I say I worked in?"

"Psychiatry."

"Tell me about your accident and rescue."

Jim described going to the rear deck at the end of his shift. He said nothing about going back there to smoke. He described the fall. The terrible cold. His feelings as the cold took hold of him. He then described his rescue by the black man in the boat,

including his placement by a bonfire. "Some Coast Guard folks, I guess they were found me under a tree on the bank. I told `em about the guy rescuin' me and the fire, but I don't think they believed me."

The Doctor frowned.

Jim pushed the table aside. "It was right there. And I felt its warmth, but when they found me and I looked around. There was nothin' no ashes, burned spot. Is that nuts, Doc?"

The Doctor studied him without expression and then shook his head. "Hypothermia commonly triggers hallucinations. As it takes hold, people see and experience things that seem real but are not. That's often why they do not survive. They become mentally imbalanced and actually do things that end up causing their death."

"So, you think I'm okay. Not crazy then?"

"Your current mental status seems normal. You are well oriented, and your memory, while not perfect, is not seriously impaired. I'm not sure you accurately recall the events of last night that led to your accident, but again that is common given the effects of the cold. I'm finished. If you want to talk again, have the nurse page me."

After shaking hands with Jim, the Doctor talked over his shoulder as he left the room.

"You are a fortunate young man. You came close to dying last night. Rest and eat. They are watching you to make sure you don't have any complications, but you should be fine soon."

With a full stomach, Jim dozed off. The sound of the supper food tray arriving woke him. He tried to sit up but found he could not. A young woman's face appeared above him.

"You're still a little weak. Let me raise the head of your bed. The food will help your body recover from the shock it had yesterday. The remote with the call button is on the bed on your left. Would you like me to turn on the television for you?"

He nodded, and the screen lit up. As she opened his food tray, he listened as the local evening news began. The man reading the day's events talked about a shooting in the Frayser area of town. Apparently, this happened often. He then saw the people who rescued him, lifting a stretcher from a boat and carrying it to an ambulance.

"Good news this morning. Fire Department River Rescue found a man who fell from a passing river tug alive just below Memphis. He was admitted to Baptist Hospital and is in serious condition but expected to recover. Here is a report from our reporter on the scene."

The picture switched to an attractive black woman holding a microphone standing beside the beautiful blond Jim recognized from his rescue.

“Firefighter Wendy Travers found the man on the bank and was first to talk to him.”

“Yes, ma’am. He was awake, sitting under a tree. He seemed a bit confused about the details of the accident and was really weak. He was stable enough for us to transport, and now he’s on his way to the hospital.”

“We noticed, though, that you continued the search after bringing the man in.”

“Yes, the man we rescued mentioned there might have been others, so we continued searching until the shipping company confirmed that no other crewmen were missing.

We had no other reports of missing people in the area. We wanted to make sure no one got left behind.”

The scene switched back to the man in the studio.

“We will have more details at 11 about this incident. It looks like the Grizzlies are going to advance in the playoffs. Here is Carl with that story.”

The scene on television changed, showing a huge white man under a basketball hoop driving to the rim and slamming the ball in over a defender’s head.

“Oh, I just love ‘Big Spain!’ You know he grew up here after his older brother came to play for the Grizzlies.” The nurse said, turning away from the television, “And it looks like you’re pretty famous around here, too.”

Jim chuckled. “Everybody gets 15 minutes of fame. Looks like I just used up a minute or two.”

The nurse chuckled and waved over her shoulder as she exited. After finishing his meal, he yawned, leaned back, and dozed off.

Laughter and hushed conversation outside his door woke him. Confused, but the light streaming under the door allowed him to identify his hospital room. Curious about the time of the day, he fumbled in the dark for the TV remote. Surely a news channel would show the time. Instead, he toppled a plastic object on his bedside table. When it clattered on the floor, a shadow appeared at the lighted crack. With a click, the door opened, sending a beam of light from the hallway. When the shadow in the doorway spoke, he recognized the nurse’s voice from the morning before.

“Awake, are you? How ya feelin’,” the woman asked as she approached his bed and turned on the bedside lamp. Once the nurse placed a probe in his mouth, she wrapped a blood pressure cuff around his upper arm. “Gotta make sure you alive before I bring you breakfast. Hospital rules.”

He smiled, and she patted his shoulder, “There’s a man from the Fire Department here needs to talk to you when you’re ready. You up to company?”

“Sure.”

After removing the cuff, she recorded the readings on a clipboard fastened to his bed.

“They’re gonna have this all on computer soon, and I won’t have to write nothin’. I’ll get your tray and tell the man you can talk. Okay?”

After she scurried out, she murmured in the hallway. Soon a figure appeared in the doorway, then approached the bed. As the man seated himself at Jim’s bedside within the light’s circle, the short, thin man’s brow furrowed. He brushed back his thinning gray hair and adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses. He wore blue jeans and a light blue work shirt under what looked like a jacket worn by hunters or fisherman with lots of small pockets. “I’m Joe Watson, Fire Department Investigator.”

“Fire department?”

“Yep. We file a report on any accidents on the river that require the use of our resources. I need some information from you for the report. It shouldn’t take more’n five, ten minutes.”

“Sure,” Jim told about his fall and how the fireman found him not mentioning his smoking, the black man who rescued him or the fire.

“You got lucky. I talked to the folks who found you and what they said sounded like you were hazy on a lot of the details.”

“That’s what the shrink said yesterday.”

The investigator, Watson, frowned. “Psychiatrist.”

Jim chuckled. “Said I mighta hallucinated a bit.”

Watson said nothing for the moment. Silent, he peered into Jim’s eyes as if boring into his brain. Finally, he broke his silence. “That’s a dangerous part of the river, especially this time of year when they have the heavy flow. Lots of strange currents and whirlpools at that spot probably one of those pushed you into shore.”

“Might be. I seemed pretty out of it at the time.”

“In fact, years ago, one of those whirlpools tipped over a riverboat right near there. Lotta folks drowned in that accident. Since you work the river, you’re probably familiar with it.”

“When that happen?”

“Been quite a few years back. Probably before you were born.”

“No, never heard about it. I’m new to the Mississippi. Worked on the Ohio for ten years, I’m familiar with it and the towns on it. I just got a promotion down here as a Pilot on a Line boat a month ago and haven’t learned much about this river yet. The only thing I know about Memphis is Elvis. Oh, and didn’t Martin Luther King get killed here?”

“Yeah, you’ve pretty much defined what most people outside of town know about us here, except you failed to mention barbecue. I need to go back to the office and type up your statement for you to sign. So I’ll see you later.”

The man rose and walked to the door. He stopped and looked back at Jim. His lips pursed as if he were about to speak. He didn't. Instead, he waved as he turned the corner, passing the nurse coming with Jim's breakfast tray.

A man from the Salvation Army brought a complete change of clothes. Before leaving, the man prayed with Jim then left a pamphlet describing their local services. As he dressed, Jim marveled that everything fit perfectly, but realized the hospital staff probably would know all his sizes by now.

A Fed Ex driver later delivered a packet to his room. He signed for the large padded envelope and opened it. Inside he found a cell phone and instructions. The company arranged for a private plane to fly him to the Home Office in New Orleans that afternoon. He could go home this evening but would report to the company's Safety Office first thing tomorrow.

The instructions also informed him that a union representative would be available during the interviews. The plane awaited his arrival at the Memphis Airport, and for transportation to the airport, he should contact a number listed in the instructions.

They discharged him from the hospital right after lunch.

As he prepared to call the contact number of his ride to the airport, the Investigator reappeared in the doorway and knocked.

"Got that statement typed I need you to sign right here. Looks like you're ready to go. I guess I got here just in time."

"Yeah, Company sent a plane to take me back to New Orleans. Sounds like I'm not done with investigations yet."

"When do you leave?"

"Sounds like it is pretty open-ended. A private plane."

"How're gettin' to the airport?"

"I guess I call a taxi, and they take me there."

"Well, if it's okay, I can take you there. Besides, I have some other things I want to ask you about, anyway."

"Like what?" Jim now worried. He had not told everything and hoped this additional questioning would not reveal some misconduct on his part and get him fired or worse.

"Oh, merely some things for my own curiosity. Also, I want to show you a bit of our town, so maybe you're familiar with more than Elvis, killings, and barbecue."

"I guess so, sure."

The fire investigator's car exited the lot going West on Walnut Grove. As they traveled, Jim looked out the window at the passing scenery.

"These are all nice houses. Memphis can't all be like this, is it?"

“No, like any big city, there are some real eyesores in town. There are many people here living at or below poverty, and there are a few at the top. Most are in between, and it seems like everybody tries to get by the best they can.”

As they entered downtown, they paused at an intersection, allowing a red trolley to zip through the intersection. Further down, they crested a hill, and the river appeared ahead.

“I’m takin’ you to a city park on the river. There’s something there you might find interesting. That is, if you’re up to a little walk,” The Investigator announced as he turned left on the road that ran next to the river. The car eased off the road into a parking lot and stopped.

“Hop out and come with me.”

Jim released his seatbelt, opened the door, and climbed down from the passenger seat. As he stretched, he basked in the sun’s warmth. Pleased to be outdoors, he nodded to a passing jogger. Despite it being early afternoon on a weekday, the park seemed packed. People walked. Some on rollerblades whizzed by while here and there, people pushed strollers. All enjoying the mild spring day.

“People love this park. Safe most times of the day. Close to downtown and you cross the street, you can catch a trolley runnin’ through downtown,” The Investigator narrated as he led Jim toward a strange-looking object set close the bank.

“How long have you been a fireman?”

“Forty years. I worked rescue on the river most of that time. Been an investigator last ten. Probably will continue until I retire.”

“You must have seen a lot in that time.”

“First responders see it all. Plenty you wouldn’t believe.”

The unique structure ahead took a recognizable form as they approached. An unusual sculpture. In it, a man knelt in a small boat. He reached out to another man floating in midair. As they got close enough to touch the statue, Jim marveled at the detail in the floating man’s clothes the sculptor had achieved. Glancing up at the figure depicted in the boat made Jim pause. He stared wide-eyed into the man’s face. His jaw dropped.

“Seen him before, haven’t ya?”

Speechless, Jim merely nodded. He edged closer as he studied the figure in the boat.

“That’s the man who pulled me from the water. He wrapped me in a blanket before taking me to shore.”

“How come you didn’t mention that in your statement?”

“I told the people who rescued me, but I didn’t think they believed me. When I told them about the fire, they showed me there was no fire, so I figured I might as well not talk about it with them anymore.”

“I told the headshrinker about it, but he figured it was some hallucination from the hypothermia. I didn’t mention it to you, cause by now I didn’t believe it myself. Who is that man? What’s this about?”

“This is Tom Lee Park named after the man depicted in the boat. Come on, let me show you something else.”

Past the statue, they approached an obelisk.

As they walked, Jim glanced back at the sculpture. The word “Zev” was on the stern of the boat.

The Investigator cocked an eyebrow. “Spot something else?”

Jim pointed at the boat, “That was on the stern of the man’s boat who rescued me. But his was bigger. I’d say close to thirty feet long.”

“Well, the honor wasn’t to the boat, so it got cheated a bit in the scale. However, it points out how brave he was.”

“Brave?”

“Yeah, come on, I’ll show ya.”

They walked to the obelisk. The plaque at the base described a shipwreck on the river and how Tom Lee alone rescued many.

“Remember that shipwreck I told you about? Right near that same spot?”

Jim nodded, reading the plaque on the obelisk.

“Like it says, he saved a lot of people that night. He couldn’t swim, but that didn’t keep him from going after those folks. As a waterman, you know how dangerous it is to grab on to a drowning person.”

“Yeah, they get real desperate and can pull you under too, and you both drown. I wouldn’t touch one myself. Only use a float or a boat hook like they train us.”

“He pulled out 32 people like that. Also, he kept searching until late in the night. I heard he never got over not saving them all.”

“This was in 1925, and the plaque says it’s a memorial. Is he dead?”

“Died in 1952.”

“But I saw him. I touched him. I talked to him. He pulled me out of the river and saved my ass! You sayin’ I saw a ghost?”

“I’m not sure.”

Jim ran his hands through his hair. His knees, weak and trembly. He turned to the Investigator a flurry of questions racing through his mind.

“How did you know?”

“That you saw him?”

“Wendy, the woman who found you, told me what you said and figured I’d be interested. That’s why I wanted to talk to you. I’ve seen him myself.”

“You?”

“Yeah, and Wendy has too. In fact, we saw him together.”

“I thought she figured I was nuts or out of my head.”

“No, she knows it’s not wise to talk about it. About 20 years ago, I got called to go out to find a young girl who had fallen off her family’s houseboat. We searched for hours. They told us she wore a life jacket, so we figured we’d at least find her body. After dark, the rest gave up for the night. But I went out by myself one more time. As I came to the spot where they said they found you, I spotted him driving his boat away from the shore.

“Strange sight. A man in an empty boat, heading out like that. I headed to where he came from. As I pulled up to the shore, I turned on my spotlight. There against a tree sat the little blond girl we hunted.”

“I beached the boat and walked to where she sat. She looked up at me and smiled. Most beautiful I ever saw. As I carried her to my boat, she told me all about it. Claimed a black man pulled her out of the water and brought her to shore. She said after he made sure she was all right he left saying he had to find the others.”

“That’s exactly what he said to me.”

“I know. Wendy told me. So I figured I’d better talk to ya.”

“Me? Why?”

“Well, like I said, I saw him, and I told my bosses. They laughed it off. For a while, it became the joke of the department. Guys would ask me if I was going to Roswell to hunt for UFOs. Or had I spotted ‘Nessie. Stuff like that. It died down over time, but a lotta `em remembered. My career dead-ended. Never promoted. Finally. I got too old to work rescues, so they gave me this job as an investigator. I guess they figured a nut case like me could do no harm with this. Especially investigating these simple rescue incidents. If somebody dies, it goes straight to the police.”

“Just cause a that one time?”

“Well, I only talked about it once. Over the years, he’d pop up here and there. During night hunts, I swear he would appear at the edge of a spotlight beam briefly or the edge of the fog. Never talked to him, though. Wendy did.”

“Wendy talked to him?”

“Yeah, she was the little girl he saved that night I first saw him. It’s why she became a fireman, but she learned to not talk about it. Saw what happened to me.”

“So why is Tom Lee or his ghost anyway out there on the river?”

“Don’t know, but do you read the heading on that inscription on the marker?”

“Yeah, it says a ‘Very Worthy Negro.’ I’m no politically correct Nazi, but even to me that sounds offensive.”

“You mean the word ‘Negro?’”

“Yeah.”

“Well, they put this marker up in the 1950s. Back then, that was the polite way to refer to people of color. From what I have been told about Mr. Lee, he might have been offended more by the words ‘Very Worthy’.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, they have done some of the greatest evils in the world because some people figure they’re more worthy than others. That somehow others are not as good. Don’t deserve respect or kindness. Instead, we make `em more like us, or if we can’t, we might even harm them.”

“You mean like all these crazy Jihadis that go around killing people because they’re not Muslim?”

“Like that, but there are others. Look at the Crusades and all the holy wars between Christians. The Nazis and the Jews. Even we Americans. Look what we did to the Indians and, worse yet, slavery.”

“True.”

“It goes beyond that, right down to the bullying among school children. It all comes from the notion that some are worthy, and others are not.”

“So, is that why Tom Lee is still on the river?”

“I don’t know. Could be. It fits with what I’ve learned about him. Maybe he thinks that as long as people can remember what he did for others, they might get that message. Doesn’t hurt to think so, I guess.”

“I’m puzzled why you brought me out here and showed me all this.”

“Well, Tom Lee saved you. I won’t pretend to know why. I’m just an old man sharing my crazy thoughts with you.”

“They don’t sound crazy. I mean, even if Tom Lee is here for other reasons, your ideas of everyone being equal and all are beautiful. I’m not sure I could be an apostle, though.”

“You don’t have to be a preacher. We got enough of those. Probably more’n we need. What you can do is consider those ideas as you go through your day. Treat others like they are as good as you. That’s a big thing. It may not change anybody else, but it will make everyone you meet better off. That’s a good thing. Who knows, they might even pass the good treatment on to another and so on. You just never know. But there is another reason I wanted to show this to you and talk about it.”

“What’s that?”

“You recently got a big promotion, right? This company you work for and everyone else trusts you. You drive some expensive equipment and cargo. If not handled safely, your tow or your cargo could do a lot of damage.”

“That’s true.”

“I told you what happened to me in my life when I told others about seeing Tom Lee.”

“Right.”

“Do you suppose that if you go back and start telling people about what you saw, that they’ll continue trusting you?”

“Probably not.”

“Tom Lee saved you for a reason. You listened to me pontificate, but the truth is I do not understand why he saved you. Out of respect for his action, keep your mouth shut about this. Let fate take you where you’re headed. Don’t screw it up.”

“I feel guilty about not talking about everything that happened. I guess you’re right. It seemed like lying, you know, not telling the whole story.”

“Well, you might mention the smoking, if you need to shed some guilt.”

“How’d you find out? I never told anyone.”

“They found the pack of smokes on the deck. It’s not against the rules. Your company is more worried you might sue them cause of all the safety violations we found that led to your tumble. You might want to quit smoking, though. Tom Lee might have saved you this time, but if you are that stupid to keep smoking after all this, he may figure you’re not worth the effort again.”

Jim considered what the man told him, “Thank you, sir, for going to all this trouble for me. Anything else?”

The Investigator reached into his pocket and slowly drew out a card, “Wendy kinda took a shine to you. Thought you were cute. In a manly way, of course. She’s single. Give her a call sometime. Who knows? You do have a lot in common.”

As he took the card, Jim nodded then smiled.