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## **BURIAL TO FOLLOW**

By Scott Nicholson

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The Ridgehorn kitchen was a mouth-watering shrine.

The island counter, made of polished oak and topped with 1950’s Formica, the kind you couldn’t chip with a hatchet, was piled high with the fruits of condolence: a sweet potato pie, with pecan halves floating face-down in its burnt-orange sea; glazed ham, ringed with pineapple slices and brown sugar; green bean casserole, though beans were out of season so they must have come from some basement-stashed Mason jar; gallons of sweetened tea and diet Coke and banana pudding and gravy.

Roby Snow looked around and made sure no one was watching. Not that anyone would care. At all the death sittings and watch-overs and grievings and gatherings he’d ever attended, food was usually the last thing on the minds of the bereaved but the first act of sympathy by acquaintances. He dipped a pinkie in the gravy, brought it to his mouth, licked the turkey drippings from his lips, and smiled.

The marshmallows that dotted the sweet potato pie caught his fancy, and he plucked two, popped them in his mouth, then rearranged the remaining four so that no one would notice the gap in the pattern. The ham was growing cold, and gray-white grease congealed in the bottom of its tin foil container. Roby crossed the room to the cabinets, opened them.

Crystal. Nice stuff, the kind that would hum if you put water in the glasses and rubbed your fingers around the rim. He’d seen a man on TV once who’d played a whole row of them at the same time, the glasses filled to varying depths, the performer wetting and wiping his fingers, raising a series of full notes that hung in the air like the blowing of lost whales. Crystal symphony, the man had called it.

“Mr. Snow?”

Roby looked away from the crystal. Anna Beth had entered the kitchen. She was the youngest of the Ridgehorn clan, and the prettiest. Years had a way of stealing beauty.

Of stealing everything.

Auburn hair. Her nose was all Ridgehorn, humped in the middle but not yet jagged, as it would be in a decade. She had her mother's bone structure and, lucky for her, not her father's eyes.

Because her father's eyes were glued shut in the back room of Clawson's Funeral Home.

"Hey, Anna Beth," he answered, turning his attention again to the cabinet shelves, the chinaware, the tea set, the chipped bowls in the back, the plastic fast food cups that the family probably used at the dinner table on weeknights.

"Can I help you find something?"

"I was looking for the Saran Wrap." He nodded toward the counter. "Flies are about to carry off the ham."

"Next cabinet over."

"Much obliged." He nodded, moved over, and rummaged through the shelves, behind the gelatin molds and paper grocery bags and cereal boxes. He found the wrap and brought it out. Anna Beth stared at him.

"Sorry about your dad," he said. The wrap felt as if it weighed twenty pounds.

"Well, we was kind of expecting it," she said.

*You never expect it, Roby Snow thought. We all know we're bound for it, but none of us believe, deep down in our hearts, that it will ever happen to us. Or to the ones we love.*

Anna Beth's eyes grew moist. They were as bright as the deviled eggs on the silver-plated tray. She was in her Saturday night dress, dark blue with white ruffles. Sunday best would be saved for the funeral. That was only proper. But this dress was plenty good enough for receiving callers.

"It's okay," Roby said. "You can cry if you want. Wouldn't blame you a bit."

She shrugged. "I'm about cried dry."

"Reckon so. You folks have the sorrow round-the-clock. The rest of us get to come and go. And after it's done, when your daddy, God bless him, is tucked in the ground, you all have to come back here and go at it some more. Grieving don't let up its grip so easy when it comes to blood kin."

From the living room, the widow Ridgehorn let out another long wail, this one a little tired and drawn out, as if her heart wasn't really in it.

"Poor Momma," Anna Beth said.

Roby put the wrap on the counter, rolled out a couple of feet. When he yanked the clear film across the serrated blade, he caught his thumb on the sharp edges. The blade bit the thick meat above his nail.

He put the thumb in his mouth. The blood tasted of gravy.

"You okay?" Anna Beth asked.

"I'll live," he said.

Someone had been thoughtful enough to bring paper napkins, which lay in a sterile pile near the desserts. He pulled one free and wrapped his thumb. The bleeding stopped. He ripped the piece of wrap, fluffed it in the air so the corners wouldn't stick, then draped the clear film over the ham.

"Can't have all this going to waste," he said. "I know you don't feel much up to it now, but comes a time when hunger helps feed the grief."

"Yeah. It's been a long time since Aunt Iva Dean passed. That was the last one in

the immediate family.”

“You were seven then. I remember, because you were in the second grade, and some boy had kicked you in the shin and you had a big bruise.”

Anna Beth’s face grew thoughtful and far away, the sadness momentarily gone. “Yeah. Funny how things like that come back. I’d forgotten all about it.”

“It’s the smell,” Roby said.

“Huh?”

“Smell. See this sweet potato pie? That’s Beverly Parsons’s favorite recipe. But she changes ingredients a little for a bereavement. Uses molasses instead of brown sugar. So the smell of molasses is a little sad to me.”

“I never noticed. I probably ate dozens of her pies, her being a neighbor and all, and she makes one for every homecoming at the church.”

“It’s not how many you eat, it’s when you eat them.”

The talk in the next room had heated up, and Anna Beth’s second cousin on her mother’s side was asking when the burial would be. The cousin was Cindy Parsons, Beverly’s daughter, maybe a future in-law since she was sweet on Alfred, the sole surviving son.

Roby shook his head, weary. What had happened to manners? You didn’t come right out and ask the burial time, especially of the immediate family. You looked in the local newspaper and read the obituary like everybody else, or, in a pinch, you called the attending funeral home and asked. Unless you were a professional, you never spoke of the burial when you were calling on the home of the deceased. It was practically like spitting on the grave. Or spitting in the face of the survivors.

“Anna Beth,” someone called from the sitting room. Sounded like the oldest sister, Marlene. The one who liked chocolate. Roby shot a glance at the bundt cake, saw the swirl of yellow that was exposed inside the crumbling brown wedge. Marlene was clumsy with a knife.

“I’d best go,” Anna Beth said to Roby. “That’s real nice of you to take care of things out here. Most men consider that sort of thing to be women’s work.”

“I ain’t most men,” he said. “And it’s the least I can do.”

“Well, you got that stubborn Ridgehorn blood in you. Just like me. I guess I’m more like Daddy than I ever like to let on.”

She waved a small good-bye and left the kitchen.

Roby looked at the sweet potato pie. If only someone had the nerve to mention to Beverly Parsons about the molasses. Maybe it was some old Appalachian tradition. He’d never heard of it, and he was big on tradition himself. He made sure the lid was secure on the bowl of Cole slaw and slipped it into the refrigerator before the mayonnaise turned.

That Anna Beth was a silly girl for being in her late teens. She wasn’t like her daddy at all. She was still breathing, for one thing. And she and Roby didn’t have anything in common except this house and this wake and this monumental tribute of food. They certainly didn’t share any Ridgehorn blood.

Roby took a knife from his pocket, eased out a sliver of Beverly Parsons’s pie, and slid it into his mouth. As good as her other death pies, molasses and all.

He swallowed, wiped his hands, put away the Saran Wrap, and went into the sitting room to hear tales of the late Jacob Davis Ridgehorn’s honorable and God-fearing life. Every sinner got to be a saint, at least for the three days between departure and burial. Yet every saint rotted just the same.

From the inside out.

From the heart first.

Roby would offer what comfort he could. He knew there were worse things than losing a loved one, and there were worse things than dying. His knowledge of those things made him swallow again. The bite of pie went down like a stone.

Widow Ridgehorn sat stiff and unyielding by the television. It was a big boxy RCA, a relic from the era of vacuum tubes. A fine layer of dust lay on it like loose skin. The decedent's photograph leaned backward on the top of the television, framed by a corroded gilt rectangle. Jacob's celluloid eyes were hard and dull, the face severe, like a mortician's handiwork done twenty years too early.

Roby sat across the room on the sofa, where Alfred had eased over. Alfred's polite gesture not only gave Roby room, but it also moved Alfred closer to Cindy, daughter of the famed pie-maker. Alfred's eyes were suitably haunted, edged with dark lavender, but something about the lines on his forehead gave the impression that he was unsure of his emotions.

The widow wiped at her nose with a tattered handkerchief. "Shame about the timing of it, but I reckon there's no good time to meet the Maker," she said. "When the Lord calls, and all."

"Late harvest was coming up," Alfred said. "Corn first. Daddy always looked at home up there in the seat of the Massey Ferguson, his hat pressed down to his ears."

"What about the tractor?" Marlene said. She had taken the chore of sorting things out, scheduling arrangements, seeing to the practical matters. "You going to sell it, Momma?"

The widow looked at the photograph on the television as if seeking advice. "Don't hardly know yet."

Sarah, the middle sister, stood with a rustle of her patterned dress, a sleeveless rayon thing from off the rack at Rose's Discount. It was a spring dress, really, not fit for early September, all light blue and yellow and pink. Roby felt sorrow for the family. In these parts, people couldn't afford to go out and invest in an entire wardrobe of black just for a short period of use. They mourned in their best. How come their best was never good enough?

He supposed that maybe all that really mattered was how you felt inside your heart.

"Let's not worry about that kind of thing," Sarah said. "It's like grave-robbing, to start splitting up the goods before Daddy's even in the ground."

Buck, her husband, nodded in agreement. Buck had twenty acres on the back side of Elk Knob, four of it cleared for crops. He could use a tractor. He'd been making do with a walk-behind tiller, the kind that fought you when the tines hit a rock.

Buck had asked Roby about the procedure for getting a tobacco allotment. All Roby knew about it was that the government was involved, told you how much to grow and how much not to grow, and the allotment could be passed on down as an inheritance. It was the same government that had sued the cigarette companies for millions. Damned if Roby wanted any piece of such nonsense, and had shared that opinion with Buck.

"Reckon the will spells all that out," Alfred said. "Who gets what, and all."

"If you don't mind a lawyer getting a big fat chunk of it," Marlene said.

The air in the room was heavy with perspiration and cheap perfume. Marlene's

blonde hair clung to her neck in damp strings. She was a natural blonde, all over, Roby had been told. She didn't meet his eyes, as if she were somehow aware of his secret knowledge.

"Well, there's the whole funeral thing to pay for," the widow said, wringing her leathery hands.

"Bet that thing there cost a hundred bucks to rent." Alfred pointed at the maple lectern at the room's entrance. It had a brass-plated lamp and on its slanted surface was a notebook filled with thick, creamy paper. The guests had signed their names, a keepsake book. As if this were a time to be remembered, picked over at some future date to share laughs and what-could-have-beens.

Roby had signed it himself, in his looping, swirling death hand, the florid signature reserved for these special times. He had almost written "good pie" after his name, but he didn't know the widow well enough. He thought of all the lonely nights waiting ahead, an empty space beside her in the bed where Jacob Davis Ridgehorn's shape had pressed a hollow over the years.

He knew all about lonely. In life, you had to give your heart to somebody. When you died, all you left behind was the love you thought you had given. And when you died, that was all you got back.

Roby had nobody, no family. Except, for the next few days, these Ridgehorns. And he wanted them to appreciate what they had lost, and what they were gaining. "Now, your pa deserves nothing but the best, so don't skimp on the arrangements."

"They ain't much money," Sarah said. "Daddy worked for himself all his life, pretty much hand to mouth."

"We'll work it out." He nodded to the widow. "I'll help you straighten out the papers, ma'am. And I know old Barnaby real well. I'll make sure he does you right."

Barnaby Clawson had been the county's sole undertaker for forty years until a corporate chain had set up shop five years back. But Clawson still got the local trade based on brand loyalty. In the tradition of morticians everywhere, he'd found a woman who could put up with hands that caressed the dead. He had two sons by her before she decided she could no longer bear the smell of formaldehyde. She up and moved to California, some said with a Bible salesman, others said with nothing but a suitcase and a scalpel.

Roby had felt neither sorrow nor joy for the undertaker's luck. Barnaby was under the impression that Roby had a solid streak of Clawson in him, maybe a cousin twice removed, and had even offered Roby a job. But Roby didn't enjoy that end of the aftercare process, the closed-door operations, the mutilation, the obvious deception. He didn't have the heart for such casual treatment of the departed. Besides, he was spoken for.

"Barnaby called this afternoon, wanted to bring the rest of the flowers over," Anna Beth said.

"Probably just wanted to eat again," Alfred said. Roby could tell the boy was trying to act like the man of the house to make his mother feel more secure. Or maybe Alfred was ashamed of having wept when he heard the news and now was making sure everyone knew he was tough and suspicious.

"I don't think you ought to sell the tractor right off," Buck said. "You ought to think it over some."

"We might keep it," Alfred said. "Somebody's got to get the crops in, and there's always next year. 'Course, if old Barnaby Boneyard takes us for every penny, we might be

selling the farm, too.”

A warmth rushed through Roby, not anger exactly, but a tiny trill of nerves. “I said I’d talk to him. He’s a fine Christian gentleman. You ought to be grateful somebody knows how to tend to all the little details. What would you have done without him?”

Alfred sat forward, a hand on Cindy Parsons’s knee. She looked at his hand as if it were a spider crawling up her skirt.

“Daddy always said, ‘Just toss me in the pond and let the sunfish nibble on me,’” Alfred said. “If he was done and buried, he’d be rolling over in his grave at all the waste of it. How much was that coffin? Two thousand? Two-and-a-half?”

Widow Ridgehorn’s face collapsed, shriveled. The first sob came like a giggle, dry and nasal.

*Go to her, Roby silently commanded. For the Good Lord’s sake, comfort the poor woman.*

He would have done it himself, but some things were best left to family. Even though they thought he was part Ridgehorn, it wasn’t his place. Marlene was the one for the job. Not only was she the oldest, she was female, and Alfred had shown he wasn’t going to suffer any more uncontrolled outbursts of sensitivity. Anna Beth sat with her mouth hanging open, and Sarah was busy picking stray threads from the hem of her dress.

“When did you say the burial was?” Cindy Parsons said.

“Day after tomorrow,” Alfred said.

Roby searched inside himself, found room to forgive Cindy. She’d not had many funerals herself. The Parsons clan was long-lived and didn’t breed much, so the losses were few and far between. Maybe after the sitting was over, he’d take her aside and advise her to listen to the daily obituaries on the local A.M. station.

The widow coughed a few times, swallowed her sobs, and wiped her eyes again. “Flowers need watering,” she said.

White chrysanthemums. They were one of Barnaby’s specialties. He ran a floral arrangement on the side. One of his boys had turned out gay, but that was just the run of statistics and had nothing to do with growing up in the aftercare industry. The other boy was the one who ran the floral shop. Weddings, anniversaries, births, deaths, Barnaby took a cut from just about every memorable occasion, sad or joyful. He even had his ordaining papers and could perform a marriage if necessary.

“I’ll get the pitcher,” Anna Beth said, trying to be useful.

“Here,” the widow said. She picked up a glass and held it out.

Everybody froze. It was Jacob’s denture glass. When he drank beer at night, too worn to chew tobacco, he’d take his teeth out of his mouth and plop them in the jar, plant the heels of his dirty socks on the hearth and gaze into the fire.

The glass was as holy a relic as Jacob’s fishing pole and pocketknife. Far holier than a tractor. You don’t just go and insult a dead man by abusing his intimate worldly possessions. Roby chalked that one up to the widow’s distraught nature.

“I’ll get some fresh from the kitchen,” Anna Beth said, taking the glass from her mother’s shaking hand.

“I’ll help you,” Roby said, and followed her out of the room. Behind him, Buck was asking Alfred about the condition of the Massey Ferguson’s tires.

The congealed salad had a ghostlike tint, the peaches floating among the red Jello and whipped cream. Red was the proper choice of gelatin for a death. Someone knew the rules. Roby would have to check the formal book on the lectern to see who was

responsible for that particular tribute. Such small tokens paved the way to healing far better than any minister's words.

Anna Beth put the denture glass on top of the refrigerator. A film of paste and flecks of white settled to the bottom of the glass. Barnaby had taken the dentures with the corpse. The false teeth would be fitted into Jacob's mouth so that he wouldn't be slack-jawed at the viewing. If Barnaby attended to the details with the usual care, then Jacob would be haler and heartier than he'd looked in decades.

But the viewing wasn't until tomorrow. There was still the sitting to get through.

Anna Beth was at the sink, rinsing out a chipped coffee mug, when the tears came. The first sign was the tremble of her shoulders, then her head dipped, and Roby saw her reflection in the window behind the sink. Her hair hung over her face, tangled strands on either side of the faucet. Roby went to her, patted her on the back just below the neck, rubbed softly.

"Here, let me," he said, taking the cup.

"I shouldn't be carrying on so."

"Hey, now." He squirted some Joy into the cup, let a trickle of water run into its bottom, then ran his forefinger around the ring of stain in the bottom. "You only get one daddy, and he only gets to die once. So you go ahead and do whatever you need to do."

She wiped her eyes, then wiped her hands on a dish towel hanging from a cabinet knob. "I think I need to eat something."

"Try the pie," he said. "Beverly Parsons made it."

"Maybe so. You know what's funny?"

"What?"

"I can't taste nothing. Ever since . . ."

"Ain't unusual." He rinsed the cup and filled it with water. Spring water, come from a fresh rocky crevice in the hills. Roby had found it with a dowsing rod, not that you needed a dowser to find water in these parts. But Roby had the gift with water witching, could make that forked stick dip down for water or precious metal or even lost bones.

He handed a knife to Anna Beth, handle first, so she could take it without cutting herself. She *snicked* off a sliver of sweet potato pie and used the blade to push it into her mouth. She stretched the plastic wrap back over the pie. Roby frowned. The wrap was wrinkled.

"Take this to your ma," he said.

She licked the knife clean and set it on the counter, then took the cup with both hands. "Good pie."

*A good-bye pie*, Roby almost said aloud.

She left the room, and Roby was once again alone with the heaps of food. Deviled eggs, left out for at least two hours. The paprika had dissolved into a rusty blur among the yellows. That was a sign. The eggs had turned. Only four of the dozen had been eaten.

Roby poked a finger into the mushy yellow of one of the remaining eggs. He sniffed his finger. Definitely turned. But maybe he could get Buck to eat a few, if only to shut him up about the tractor. If Buck churned his guts up later, that was okay.

The pie called to Roby again, almost with a whisper of human voice. He picked up the knife, wiped it on the leg of his jeans, and looked at his reflection in the blade. The fluorescent light made him look green and sickly, as if he himself were two days dead instead of Jacob. But Barnaby would take care of the skin. Barnaby was as reliable as the sun.

He reached the blade to the pie and was about to cut a thick wedge when Marlene entered the room.

“Momma wanted some of that,” she said.

“I thought she wasn’t hungry.”

“You know how it goes when you got sorrow. Half the time you can’t stand a bite and the other half you want to stuff yourself blue.”

“I’ll cut her a piece, then. Mind handing me a plate?”

“Momma’s all the time going on about Beverly Parsons’s pies. Daddy raved about them, you know. Ever time we come home from a church social, he’d lay on the couch and put his hands over his tummy and said if he’d married Beverly instead of our ma, he’d weigh four hundred pounds. And Momma would throw a pin cushion at him, sometimes not even taking the pins out first.”

“Well, they’re good pies.”

“And Daddy stayed skinny as a rail, even though Momma ain’t so bad a cook herself.”

“No offense, Marlene, but your momma is best with casseroles, when she has some garden harvest to work with. Beverly’s good for all seasons.”

Marlene almost smiled. “Hush up, now. She might hear you.”

Roby eased the slice of pie onto the plate. The crust collapsed and lay on the plate among some brown crumbs. He hoped the widow would eat that part. Every crumb added to Jacob’s burden, and if the dead man couldn’t even count on his own wife to help him make the passage, then he was in deep trouble.

Roby had handled visitations and sittings where the widow was practically sending out feelers for a new husband, right there during the mourning period. Some, you’d think they helped their poor old menfolk into the grave, they were so cold. Such things had been done before. A farmer’s wife had a dozen dirty ways to get rid of a man. Most of them had bad arteries from eating too much fat, because no part of an animal was wasted.

For evidence, all you had to do was look at the sausage patties from the Clemens place.

Peggy Clemens had already put the headstone to two husbands, and was known to boil down the entire pig’s head, brains and all, then debone it and run it through the grinder. Roby took no sides in the moral issue of whether brains were proper eating or not, but you had to admit that a Clemens patty had enough grease in it to shine a barn door.

“You gonna help your momma keep up the place?” Roby said.

“I don’t know. I got my place in town and you know things with me and Harold Pennefield are getting sort of serious.”

“So I heard. You could do way worse than marrying a mechanic. As least you’ll always have something to drive.”

“Yeah. I hate he smells like gasoline and always has those black curves under his fingernails. But he’s regular in church of a Sunday and lets me pick out which movie to see. He took me up to that fancy inn over in Glendale Springs, you know the one.”

“The Inn at Glendale Springs, they call it. A rich couple from Florida bought the place and fixed it up. Reckon they couldn’t come up with a good name.”

“That meal was over thirty bucks, but Harold didn’t bat an eye. He even ordered me seconds on wine that was four dollars a glass. I didn’t tell him the wine tasted like brake fluid.”

“You better learn to cook so he doesn’t have to spend so much money on you.”

Marlene cocked her hip a little, not flirting, exactly, but just letting Roby know she could if she wanted. “He says I’m worth spoiling.”

Roby nodded at the pie. “Well, you best get that in there before *it* spoils.”

“Give me another minute. Sarah’s going on about what to do with Daddy’s war medals. Daddy couldn’t give them away while he was alive, and all of a sudden they’re something to fight over. Like Buck and that damned tractor. I say sell everything and split the money all around. With Momma getting the biggest chunk, of course.”

A fly landed on the pie. Marlene didn’t notice.

*Flies were the worst thing that God had ever put on this earth. They laid eggs in your food and, if you didn’t die where somebody could find you easy, they laid eggs in your nose and eyes and mouth.*

Roby waved the fly away, then watched as it cut a lazy arc in the air before settling on a whole hog hunk of Clemens sausage.

“You don’t mean to sell the land?” he asked.

“No, nothing like that. Momma needs a place and she’s liable to live for another ten years at this rate. Anna Beth is set on staying here, too, and ain’t any men lining up to woo her away from the nest. Sarah’s got her own problems, but at least she has Buck to take care of her.”

Roby didn’t see the attraction that Buck had for Sarah. She was a little bookish for these parts, not much good with her hands. She could play a banjo, but that was about it for useful skills. She had fancy ideas and talked about going to a big-city college, but she was three years gone from high school and the longer you put off things like that, the harder it was to make happen, especially if you were married. Still, no kids yet, so you could never say never.

Roby himself had once thought about joining the Air Force, even though his eyes weren’t great so he’d never make jet pilot. But maybe he could have worked on an aircraft carrier or something, seen the world beyond Barkersville. Maybe he would have found somebody, got married.

And if he’d gotten away from these parts, he wouldn’t have driven out in that backroads part of Pickett County under the dead moon, drunk as the devil, his foot heavy on the pedal. That night had touched him and shaped him and tied him to these mountains like a Billy goat on a chain.

“Reckon your momma will ever marry again?” he asked.

Marlene smiled this time, though the grief cut shadows beneath her eyes. “No, she was a one-woman man. Some are like that. I can see things with Harold maybe giving out one day, especially if he never opens his own garage. Me, I might get impressed with a traveling salesman or a long-haul truck driver or something. My generation ain’t as stable and reliable as Momma’s.”

Roby nodded. He was between those generations, and he was only half-stable. He was reliable on the job, though. He had to be. There was job and there was duty, and he put his heart into it. On the night that changed his life forever, he hadn’t asked the consequences of failure. He took the job. It was the lesser of three evils, or so it had seemed at the time.

“Think she’ll want some coffee with that?”

“All we got is Maxwell House instant. It’s rough enough stuff in the morning. This late, you’re better off with tea.”

“Well, I guess she’s sleeping restless as it is. Maybe a glass of milk.”

“Lordy, as long as you don’t use the denture glass. I don’t know what she was thinking.”

“The grief-struck mind takes an odd turn once in a while. You ever heard of ‘gallows humor’?”

“No, but I’m sure going to hang Buck if he don’t shut up about that tractor. He could at least wait until the other vultures got their fill.”

“It’s a damned good tractor.”

“A real man deserves that tractor, not somebody like Buck. I want to see a real man on that thing.”

“I got to wrap up this sausage. The flies are going to carry it off.”

“Are you a real man, Roby?” She moved closer, lowering her voice.

Roby looked at the Frigidaire. On it was a Polaroid of Jacob and the girls, taken maybe a decade before. A young Marlene was barefoot, in a calico dress, with pig tails and uneven teeth. Jacob was smiling like somebody had a pitchfork in his back.

“Marlene, your momma’s probably starving by now.”

She cocked her hip again. “It’s some damned good pie.”

“You had some?”

She grinned, her teeth still uneven, and leaned back her head. She looked at him through half-lidded eyes. “Harold says it’s the best in town.”

Roby felt his throat tighten. Here was Jacob barely cold, and his daughter was acting like a floozy on his grave. Harold was going to have his hands full with this one, but probably only for a few years. She had the itch. He could see Marlene talking her momma into selling the place off, then jumping a bus for Raleigh or Wilmington or even Pigeon Forge. She looked like the Pigeon Forge type, with her styled hair and shirts that were always a little too tight.

“Ought to get that pie to her,” he said, working to keep his voice level. “I’ll fetch along the milk.”

Marlene pouted a little, as if she’d used her best bait and hadn’t got so much as a nibble. She gave a little extra shake of her rear as she left, but Roby forced himself not to watch. It wasn’t his place. She had given her heart to Harold, at least for the time being.

Biscuits. A time like this, a good scratch biscuit eased the troubled soul.

He took one out of the Tupperware container and ate it dry, without the butter that sat on a porcelain dish, its yellow edges soft in the heat of the kitchen.

By the time Roby entered the sitting room, the widow had eaten half the piece of pie. She chewed with a crooked yank of her jaws, as if she had an aching tooth on one side. Her gaze was fixed across the room where Alfred and Buck were studying over one of Jacob’s rifles. It was a war relic, brought home from Japan by Jacob’s father.

“What caliber is it?” Buck asked.

“Japs don’t use calibers. Why do you think they lost? Besides being yellow Commie slants and all that.”

“Well, it had to have had a bullet.”

“Daddy showed me one, once. Long as your little finger.”

“I remember that,” Sarah said. “Maybe the bullet’s in that old cigar box with his medals.”

The widow cleared her throat. A tarry crumb stuck to her lower lip. “He threw

that stuff out. Figured they'd be grandkids running around here before long."

She shot a stare at Buck, as if his worthless seed had refused to take root in Ridgehorn soil, as if he were personally responsible for Jacob's dying without ever meeting a third-generation descendant.

Alfred lifted the barrel of the gun, pressed the thick wooden stock to his shoulder, and sighted to a spot somewhere near the setting sun outside the window. "Man, bet you could really knock down a deer with this thing."

"Or a buck," Marlene said.

"Ain't you funny?" Buck said. To the widow, he said, "Reckon this will go up on the block, too. No grandkids, you might as well sell it off."

"We don't have enough money to buy it and the tractor, too," Sarah said.

"Don't be dumb," Buck said. "You don't buy it, you inherit it. I say if we get the tractor, then Alfred here deserves the Jap rifle. Marlene can have—well, what would you rather have, Marlene, the Dodge pickup or Old Laddie?"

Old Laddie was Jacob's horse, high-spirited in his day, before they gelded him and turned him out to pasture. He was experienced with plow-and-harness, but when you had a tractor you didn't need to mess with draft animals. Now Laddie mostly spent the day in the shade of the willows by the creek, his dark tail sweeping flies, his nose wet with age.

"Jacob said one time he wouldn't mind being buried with Old Laddie," the widow said. "Wasn't there a Civil War general who done that? Buried himself right on top of his horse?"

"Probably a Yankee," Buck said. "Who else would be that damned stupid?"

Alfred lowered the rifle. "If we'd have had ordnance like this, then the stars and bars would be flying over Washington, D.C., right this very minute."

"Don't make fun of Momma, Buck," Marlene said.

"They was one," the widow said.

"I think it was Jeb Stuart," Roby said. He actually didn't know, but figured if it had really happened, it was either Stuart, Stonewall Jackson, or Robert E. Lee, and he didn't think it was Lee, because Lee had lived many years after the war and his horse Traveler probably died long before Lee.

And Stonewall Jackson's arm was shot off, maybe that was what the widow meant. Maybe they buried Jackson's arm with the rest of his body. Stuart was a cavalry hero, at that. To bury a man on a horse, you'd need a mighty deep hole. Or maybe they were just planted side by side. Roby wondered who'd baked Stuart's death pie.

"I want to be buried on top of Harold," Marlene said, and her eyes were looking right into Roby's. Nobody else seemed to notice that she was talking dirty.

"You got to marry him first," Anna Beth said. "Nobody gets in the Ridgehorn cemetery unless they're family. Right, Momma?"

The widow nodded, setting her pie plate on the scarred, handmade coffee table that would have been an antique hunter's dream except that one of the cherry legs had splintered off and been replaced by a square hunk of locust.

There were at least two forkfuls worth of the pie left on the widow's plate. Roby wanted to say something, like maybe Cindy Parsons would go home and tell her mom that the widow let some of the pie go to waste. But it wasn't his place. A grieving widow had a right to her own appetite.

"The cemetery will be a problem if you ever need to sell out," Sarah said. "I done some studying on it. Once you make a graveyard, it puts an easement on it so you can't

never do nothing else with the land.”

“Goddamn government,” Buck said. “Next thing you know, they’ll be telling you what color to paint your barn.”

“How big is the graveyard?”

“The fenced-in part is half an acre,” Alfred said. “You got grandpaw and grandma up there, his parents, the two oldest, plus that one baby that died. With the hole for Daddy, there’s still probably about two generations’ worth of dying room left.”

Roby clenched his fists, then stuck his hands behind his back so no one could see his anger. This was a family affair, after all. It wasn’t his duty to make sure the survivors behaved like they had a lick of human decency. He had other worries.

“Turk’s cap lily,” the widow said. “I want to plant Turk’s cap on his grave. He always liked those.”

Turk’s cap was a drooping yellow-orange mountain flower that bloomed in early summer, its petals curling up so that it looked like one of those fancy, old-fashioned caps. Roby figured a dead man’s wishes were to be respected, even if it involved a horse and a deep hole, keeping a farm together, or passing a tractor down to an in-law.

“So, Momma, when do we get to read the will?” Anna Beth asked.

“When the time comes,” Alfred said, not easing his grip on the Japanese rifle. “Best get him buried first. That’s only proper.”

“Well, you know they ain’t no savings,” the widow said. “And the government trimmed the tobacco allotment again. Down to four acres next year. Why can’t they treat us like they do soybean farmers and pay us not to grow it?”

“They sued the ass off the cigarette companies, that’s why,” Buck said. “It won’t look good for them to turn around and say, ‘This is good for farmers but bad for everybody else.’ Hell, I almost want to take up smoking just for spite.”

“Snuff has sure gone up,” the widow said. “Eight dollars a jar now, and the jars ain’t even fit for putting jelly in no more. Used to be pretty glass things, little diamond patterns on the outside. Now they’re plastic.”

“You need to quit that, anyway,” Marlene said. “Stuff will rot your mouth.”

“I only do it of an evening,” she said. “After dinner. When me and your daddy—”

She looked down at her hands. Her voice grew quiet, and even Alfred stopped his fidgeting.

“We’d sit out on the porch this time of year, rock and snap beans, Jacob with his chew and me with my dip. Never felt like no sin to me. Nowhere in the Bible does it say tobacco’s wrong.”

Cindy Parsons stood up, went to Alfred, held the hand that wasn’t gripping the rifle. “You don’t need that gun.”

“Don’t tell me what I need or don’t need.”

“Honey—”

“We got the land,” Marlene said. “Forty acres split four ways, we’ll all do okay.”

“Except you’d sell your share off in a heartbeat, and before you know it, we’ll have a row of condos popping up on the ridge,” Alfred said. “You’d open it up to the same rich Yankee trash that caused the rest of Barkersville to go to hell.”

“You’re forgetting about Momma,” Sarah said. “Forty acres split five ways.”

“Won’t be no splitting ‘til after I’m dead,” the widow said.

“What about we sell it all in one chunk and just divide the money?” Anna Beth said to her. “You can move into the Westfield Estates. It’s real nice in there, air conditioned,

satellite TV, an indoor pool, a cafeteria right there on the spot.”

The widow worked her lips as if she were holding back too much snuff juice. “It’s an old folks’ home, no matter what fancy name you give it.”

“But, Momma, you *are* old.”

The silence fell again, as thick as the ash dust in the back of the hearth.

“Dishes,” Roby said. “There’s a whole sink full in the kitchen.”

He moved across the room, every eye on him. He took the widow’s plate, almost asked her if she were going to finish that last bit of pie, then took her glass. A ring of milk had hardened halfway up the glass.

“Mind giving me a hand, Sarah?” he asked. Buck gave Roby a suspicious look, then turned his face out the window, toward the barn where the Massey Ferguson sat in the shadows.

Sarah got up. Marlene crossed her legs and folded her arms. Cindy moved closer to Alfred, who planted the stock of the rifle on the floor as if he were a soldier at parade rest. Anna Beth watched the black screen of the TV.

The fork fell off the widow’s plate as Roby lifted it. Crumbs flipped onto the gray rug. The fork bounced across hardwood. Roby counted the crumbs. Three big enough to see, maybe six more too small for a mouse.

Sarah stooped and gathered the fork and Roby followed her into the kitchen.

Lemon-fresh Joy. Roby not only enjoyed its smell, but the lather was richer than that of Ivory or Dove. The dishes were stacked to the left of the sink. Sarah had scraped them clean and was busy putting away the morning’s plates from the drying rack.

“That’s one thing people don’t consider,” she said. “They bring over food, but nobody remembers to bring paper plates.”

“It would be even worse if you had to cook, too,” Roby said. “Greasy frying pans, tomato sauce clinging to the bowls, egg yellows that set up and get stubborn on a plate.”

“I’m sorry about what happened in there.” She wiped her hands on a dish towel.

Roby lowered the first stack of dishes into the soapy water. He wiped the scrub pad over the surface of the top plate, flipped it over, wiped a circle in the back, and placed it in the adjacent sink.

“It’s not your fault. And people got to find their own way to get over a death.”

“But picking and fighting isn’t the way. Daddy would bust a gut if he was here.”

“Maybe that’s the way of it,” Roby said. “Everybody lost the one person they would look to when something like this happens. When was the last death? Didn’t you lose your aunt a few summers back?”

“Yeah. Iva Dean on my Momma’s side. Had a stroke in her sleep, the doctor said. Was gone before she knew what hit her.”

Roby kept working the dishes, getting his momentum, wiping, flipping, stacking. “I remember now. That was some spread.”

“*What* was a spread?”

“The kitchen. Had the sitting over at your cousin Vicky’s house. That was Iva Dean’s only daughter, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. Iva Dean’s husband died back in the Reagan years.”

“Tuna salad. One of you girls brought tuna salad, didn’t you?”

Sarah turned the cold water tap and rinsed the stack of cleaned dishes. “That was Anna Beth. She made it herself, back before she learned how to cook.”

“Sweet pickles and mayonnaise and mustard. No onions.”

“How do you remember all that?”

Roby looked at the food on the counter, the heaps of it, a feast fit for a king. Probably the most food that had ever graced Jacob Ridgehorn’s kitchen. The refrigerator had enough pork and beans, melons, and corn on the cob to feed a small army.

“Food and death go together,” he said. “Because food is life.”

“I reckon. I heard that Vicky hid food up in the attic so the preacher wouldn’t eat it all. Somebody said she done it so that those who dropped in to pay their respects would see no food on the table and would run out and bring some more.”

“Vicky did hide food in the attic. Some of it spoiled.” Roby shook away the memory of Iva Dean’s lean spirit, forlorn among the molded cakes and collapsed soufflés. A Beverly Parsons pie was among the food that had gone to waste. How do you apologize to somebody when their death pies don’t get eaten?

The plates were done and he was working on the flatware. The finger he’d cut earlier began to throb, the nerves activated by the warm water. “I didn’t want to say this in front of the others, but I think you got the most sense of any of them. You’re married and more or less settled, Buck’s got his own land and a steady job. So you don’t need to worry about who gets what and how much land ought to be sold off.”

She stared into the rinse water. “Daddy liked Buck. You should have seen them at the wedding. We had a string band, I got to pick some banjo, and Buck and Daddy were square-dancing together, laughing like crazy. And Buck was only half drunk at the time, Daddy maybe three-quarters.”

“I wished I could have made that one.” Roby had been away, tending to a death sitting on the other side of the county. Serving.

“At least Daddy got to see one of us settled down. Though I expect Cindy got her claws deep enough into Alfred that he won’t get away.”

“Cindy might be good for him. Some men lose their dangerous edge when they get married.”

“What about the others?”

Roby got busy with the dirty glasses. He’d been to several sittings where the husband was in prison without bail, the wife dead long before her time. Sometimes with kids running around underfoot who were too young to know that their momma wouldn’t be coming back. All they knew was that there sure was some good pie in the kitchen.

“What I’m trying to say is that it’s up to you to keep the farm together,” Roby said. “I know it ain’t none of my business, I ain’t close kin, but I know your Daddy would want it that way. No telling how much of his blood spilled out there on that dirt, how many splinters drove under his fingernails, how much dust he swallowed in the barn. This place is all about him. And soon he’s going to be buried here, gone back to the soil that he loved so much.”

“I don’t know. It might be easier on everybody to just sell it. I mean, Anna Beth will soon be wanting to get out on her own, see the world a little, and where will that leave Momma? She can’t keep this place up by herself.”

Roby’s nose itched. Probably from the smell of the spoiled eggs. “But you got roots here. Memories. Don’t that mean anything?”

“I’m growing new roots. Me and Buck will probably be having kids in a few years. That’s why he needs the tractor. We probably can’t afford one after that.”

“You take that tractor off this ground and it’s the same as if you walked across

your Daddy's grave backwards."

Sarah turned away and carried an armload of dry plates to the cabinet. "Maybe it's none of your business. I mean, here we are, close family trying to work out our differences, and you come in and start bossing the kitchen and bringing in your big ideas of what the Ridgehorns ought to do and not do."

She paused in her stacking. "Come to think of it, you did that at the Jones house, too. When Granny Aiken died. She was Momma's great aunt, so that makes you what? Second cousin? Third? Yet you went right ahead and meddled when Momma went after the doll collection."

"Them dolls should have rightly stayed with Granny Aiken's grandkids, somebody who'd appreciate them. What good would it do to sell them off so they'd get stuck on a shelf somewhere?"

Roby looked at his smeared reflection among the spiderweb cracks of the plate he was rinsing. When had his eyes gotten so old? While he wasn't looking, that's when. That's the way it worked.

"Well, that money would have come in handy when Gertie needed a heart bypass. The hospital in Asheville said they couldn't turn anybody away, but you can bet your boots they didn't go the works for a dirt-poor country patient. And when she died on the operating table, why, it's just one of them things, ain't it? Happens from time to time, the doctors said. Every surgery a risk. Except you can bet if it was one of *theirs* on the cutting table, the odds would have been a lot better."

Poor Gertie, God rest her soul. Dead at forty. Beverly Parsons had made a pumpkin pie for that one, sweet as snuff and thick as tar.

"And what good would the money have done her dead?" Roby asked. "At least the kids can look at the dolls and have memories. Money don't make memories."

"Yeah, but if Buck got the tractor and we got our share when the land sold, we could afford to build a house and move out of that trailer. You can hear the rats at night. They eat right through them aluminum walls."

Roby pulled the stopper and watched the gray water swirl down the drain. "What would your Daddy say?"

"Nothing, because the dead don't talk."

Roby said nothing. He couldn't explain, and she wouldn't believe him if he tried. "There's still half a pie left. Why don't you have some?"

"I ain't hungry. You got me mad."

"It's not my decision. It's you-alls."

"Well, just shut up about it, then."

Roby looked out the window. The sun had hit the lip of the far mountains, splashing the ridge lines with molten gold. The shadows around the barn had grown long, the woods dark by the fence. In the quiet, he could hear crickets through the screen door, and a couple of frogs had taken up conversation down by the watering pond.

"Buck's getting that tractor, no matter what Marlene says," Sarah said.

"Not while I'm breathing," said Alfred from the kitchen entrance. Roby wondered how long he'd been standing just outside the room, listening. Then Roby figured it didn't matter. This family didn't have many secrets. At least the living members of the family.

"You don't give a bucket of horse hockey for this place, Alfred," she said. "You can have everything else you want. Daddy's got a bunch of hand tools, the hay baler, the old junk Ford Falcon—"

“Hey, that’s a collector’s item. Worth some money. Maybe more than the tractor.”

Roby thought of Granny Aiken’s collection, how the dolls had stared down from the shelves with dark glass eyes while her family scratched and hissed over her worldly goods. What did those dolls think about that? Probably wished they’d get sold and not have to witness any more such foolishness.

“Eat some pie, Alfred,” he said.

“You and your damned pie.”

“Where’s Cindy?” Sarah said. “I didn’t think she let you out of her sight these days.”

“She’s comforting Momma, since you girls are doing such a bang-up job of it.”

“She’s sucking up, more like it.”

“Look, I don’t know what you and Marlene are scheming behind my back, but I’m man of this house now, whether you like it or not. Daddy wanted it that way.”

“How do you know what Daddy wanted?” Roby said. “You were hardly ever in the same room with him since the day you turned fifteen.”

Alfred’s cheeks burned red, his eyes narrowed to quick, cruel slits. He glanced at his sister, then back to Roby. “Don’t you dare say another word,” he said in a half-choked whisper.

“You carry your sins inside you, whether they’re spoken of or not,” Roby said. “In your heart.”

“Shut up in front of her,” Alfred said.

Roby looked at the half-empty jar of apple butter on top of the refrigerator. Made from Macintosh apples in the orchard that covered the slope above the meadow. Cooked down over a kettle in October, an all-day event, with taters wrapped in tin foil and tossed into the embers, pan-fried cornbread, fresh-squeezed cider.

“Don’t trouble yourself none,” Roby said. “Your daddy told me all about it.”

“What’s he talking about, Alfred?” Sarah said.

Alfred looked around like a mountain lion caught in a cage. He lunged forward, grabbed a ceramic urn, and flung it across the room. It bounced off the Frigidaire and fell to the floor, unbroken. A spatter of cream blurred and ran in tiny white rivulets down the refrigerator door. The murmur of conversation in the living room eased off.

“You all okay?” the widow said in her loudest voice.

“We’re fine, Momma,” Sarah said. “I just dropped a cake plate, is all.”

“Cake wasn’t on it, I hope.”

“No. Nothing broke.”

Alfred stared at the cream as it dripped to the floor.

“Get a mop,” Roby said to him.

Cindy Parsons came into the kitchen and hurried to Alfred. “What’s wrong, honey? You took ill?”

“I’m all right,” he said. He looked at Roby as if daring him to speak, as if the secret of Alfred’s fifteenth birthday was something he’d never shared with his lady friend. With anybody, for that matter.

Roby crossed the room, scooped up the urn, and examined it under the kitchen fluorescents. “Lucky bounce.”

Sarah brought a wet dish rag and wiped down the front of the Frigidaire. Then she got on her hands and knees and began soaking up the pool of cream. Roby put the urn back on the crowded counter, then pushed the sweet potato pie toward Alfred.

“Here,” Roby said. “Have a piece. Take your mind off your anger.”

Alfred looked into the surface of the pie, more than half of it gone, the dull aluminum pan grease-smearred beneath the part that had been eaten.

“Go on, honey,” Cindy said. “Momma made it special for the Ridgehorns. Spent half the day on it.”

“I don’t want no damned pie.”

“Eat it,” Roby said. “You don’t want to disappoint your ma. No more than you already have, I mean.”

Alfred scrambled around the counter, sweeping a bowl of green beans with bacon to the floor. He grabbed for the glazed ham, its hunk of exposed bone slick among the red meat. He raised the ham and charged Roby, wielding the weapon like the Bible’s Sampson flailing around the jawbone of an ass. Roby ducked the two blows, hearing the shallow breath squeezing from Alfred’s lungs. Roby spun, grappled at the counter, and came away with Beverly Parsons’s death pie. He shoved it into Alfred’s face.

Alfred froze, more stunned than hurt. The ham slipped from his fingers and hit the floor. Cindy squealed in panic. Sarah stood at the far end of the counter, the wet rag limp in her hand.

Alfred took two steps back, then began wiping the sweet orange goo from his eyes.

“Sorry about that,” Roby said, his voice barely audible.

By now, the rest of the family had clustered in the kitchen, the widow hunched and squinting, trying to make sense of the scene. Buck fought through the group of his in-laws to Sarah’s side. Marlene let out a laugh that sounded like a pig’s last call at a slaughterhouse. Anna Beth was saying three or four things at once, none of them complete sentences and only a few of the words recognizable as English.

They all watched Alfred, waiting for his reaction. He peered through the mess that clung to his face and looked at the pie filling and ruptured crust on his hands.

“Sorry,” Roby whispered.

In the silence, the sounds of the mountain dusk leaked through the windows and screen door. The cows had come down from the high pasture and bumped against the warped locust gate that led to the barn. A hound dog bayed on a distant ridge, the tolling of a death bell for a treed raccoon. The crickets had risen up in armies now, emboldened by the cool darkness. A lost gray moth battered against the wire screen in the kitchen window.

Alfred held his hands out, palms up, as if he were experiencing stigmata and wanted the others to witness the miracle.

The silence grew deeper until the room was swollen with it.

“You’re right, Roby,” he finally said. “That’s one hell of a pie.”

Marlene laughed for real. The widow eased forward on legs that were worn by age, each step a creaking curse on gravity. Roby felt his muscles relax and he rose out of the fighting crouch that had knotted his gut. Alfred’s tongue flicked out and licked at the pie that surrounded his lips. Then he lapped the thick substance from his palms.

The tension that had filled the house all day fell away like mist burned under a strong dawn. Everyone began talking at once, Sarah gave Alfred the towel so he could clean himself, Roby picked the pie pan and ham off the floor, collecting the larger clumps of pie. Buck took a clean plate from the cabinet and heaped it full of mashed potatoes, then broke the skin that covered the cold gravy. He dolloped some gravy on the white

mound, then ladled some sliced carrots on his plate.

Cindy helped Alfred wipe himself, kissing him on the mouth before all the pie was gone, so that her lips were stained and smeared as well.

“Hope your momma teaches you how to cook that good,” Alfred said to her.

Sarah got out plates for everybody. The widow was in the mood for casserole. Roby washed the ham off in the sink and put it back in its foil platter. Anna Beth carved a slice and stuck the meat between the split halves of a scratch biscuit. Marlene had a fat, out-of-round piece of Clemens sausage. Roby started a pot of tea and everybody worked on the pile of food, all standing gathered around the kitchen counter except the widow. She sat on an uneven stool, head bent forward like a minister leading a flock in some joyous ritual.

They were still eating and chattering when the car headlights first appeared as specks on the dim end of the dirt drive, bouncing like twin fireflies.

The knock was unnecessary, but Roby knew the action was meant as a sign of respect. Alfred, clean now except for a few stains on his shirt, swung open the screen door and held it as Barnaby entered. The undertaker wore his midnight blue suit, the one he wore when dropping in on a sitting. His black suit, the serious hand-tailored one, was saved for the actual viewing and interment.

Roby nodded at Barnaby. Barnaby smiled in greeting while somehow keeping the undercurrent of sorrow fixed on his face. Roby marveled at the man’s professional talent. Or perhaps it wasn’t a talent. Maybe his face had grown that way, etched by a thousand funerals, the solemn features worn and eroded like a tombstone that had weathered too many storms.

“Hello, Mrs. Ridgehorn,” he said. The widow had risen to her feet and let Barnaby take her hand. “Hope this isn’t an inconvenient time to discuss the final arrangements.”

“Needs to be done,” the widow said. “No use pretending he ain’t dead.”

“I’m handling it for Momma,” Marlene said. “I’ll do all the signing.”

Barnaby, with his hunched back, long neck, and sharp face, had the aspect of a vulture. He hunched even lower in a bow of resigned agreement.

“We don’t want nothing fancy,” Alfred said. “A regular Baptist funeral, the preacher does his sermon, the choir sings ‘When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder,’ then a straight drive from the chapel to the family cemetery.”

“And no more wreaths,” Marlene said. “Or memory books. No limousine, just the hearse.”

Barnaby looked to the widow for approval. She pursed her mouth. The casserole had given her lips a slick sheen. “I reckon Jacob would have wanted the bare bones,” she said.

“As you wish,” the undertaker said.

Roby caught a faint whiff of formaldehyde over the aroma of the food.

*Death seeped into a man when he was around it long enough. His breath became the gas of rot and his skin became dust. His eyes became dying lights, dry and gray and empty. He returned to the dirt more slowly than his customers, but the process was just as one-way, with the same end.*

“You want some food?” Anna Beth asked him.

“No, thank you. I’ve already eaten.” Barnaby made his way around the counter and shook Alfred’s hand. The veins in the undertaker’s neck throbbed visibly under his

thin skin. "Alfred. Sorry about your loss."

"Our loss is your gain."

Roby stiffened, but the undertaker's colorless smile took the edge off the remark. "When you stick out your chin that way, you look just like your father," Barnaby said.

Alfred didn't know whether to take that as praise or an insult. "Want some cake? The pie's all gone but we got devil's food and bundt. Pick your poison."

"Thank you, really, but I just stopped by to take care of the details."

"Come on, Barnaby," Roby said. "Make yourself at home."

Their eyes met.

"Any pie left?" Barnaby asked.

"All gone," Roby said.

"Must have been good."

"It was. Beverly Parsons made it."

Sarah got out a plate and set it before Barnaby. He rubbed his hands together and said, "Well, since you're being so hospitable."

Anna Beth nicked off some of the bundt cake. Barnaby was asking for seconds before Roby could make the offer. Roby wondered how the man stayed so thin, as many sittings as he'd attended over the years. After he'd finished off the second piece, he wiped the crumbs from his chin with a handkerchief he'd pulled from a hidden suit pocket.

"I have the flowers out in the car," Barnaby said. "The usual way is for the flowers to stay at the house until the viewing."

"No more wreaths," Marlene reminded him.

"Oh, of course there will be no charge. These are gift flowers, sent in loving memory. Jacob was well-respected by the community."

The widow choked back a sob and rubbed a hand across her eyes. "Thank you, Mr. Clawson, for your consideration in these trying times."

"Ma'am, I talked to Jacob a few times in the past year. Even though the Lord took him before any of us expected, he was already laying plans. He didn't want you to worry over the details."

"He was a good man."

"I think relieving a loved one of the burden of afterlife care is the best thing a person can do in this life," Barnaby said.

Roby wished the man wouldn't lay it on so thick. It's not like he needed a sales pitch. He had the product that sold itself.

"Where are the flowers?" Alfred said.

"Out in my car," the undertaker said. "In the trunk."

"Let me get them," Roby said.

Barnaby fished in his pants pocket and came out with the keys. "You know the right key."

Roby nodded.

"Get the porch light," the widow said to Anna Beth. "It got dark while we wasn't looking."

Anna Beth followed Roby outside. He felt, more than saw, the dark hulk of the barn off the road to the left of the yard. The early stars were like cold holes in the night sky. The autumn breeze played along the tops of the trees, rattling leaves that had gone to red and brown. The stretch of Jacob's farm was a distant, forgotten corner of a deep and heartless universe.

“You wait here,” Roby said to Anna Beth.

“You might need some help.”

“I done this plenty. Don’t want you falling in the dark and getting your dress dirty.”

That was something she couldn’t argue with. She needed something for the viewing, and had to save her best for the funeral itself. That meant she’d be wearing tonight’s dress tomorrow. “Be careful.”

Barnaby Clawson’s car was parked twenty yards from the house. He could have driven closer to the door, but distance meant respect. And distance meant safety from prying eyes.

Except from those eyes that could see in the dark, could see through skin, could see right into the heart of things.

Roby inserted the key, popped the trunk, and looked back toward the house. Through the windows, the kitchen was like a lighted stage. Barnaby looked to be helping himself to a third piece of bundt cake. The widow held a mug of warm tea, Alfred and Cindy had an arm around each other’s waist, Sarah was at the sink washing the latest round of dirty dishes, and Buck was talking to Marlene, no doubt about tractors.

He ducked under the trunk lid and rummaged under the bouquets of flowers. The smell of crushed petals was heady and sickening. He hurried in his task, eager to breathe the night air again. The suitcase was over the wheel well. His fingers found its familiar frayed piping, the ragged leather raised from its surface like warts on flesh.

“I’ll be just a second,” he said to Anna Beth, who stood under a swirl of moths that had collected around the porch light. “Got to get something from my car.”

His palm was sweaty around the handle of the suitcase, his breath shallow, his lungs burning though the air had a September chill. His arm ached, as if the contents were a hundred pounds instead of a few. He reached his truck, opened the door, and slung the suitcase into the passenger’s seat. Roby glanced up to the barn, its black mouth open to the world.

Roby didn’t like that part of the job, the one that was far removed from bright kitchens, clean plates, solemn families, sweet pies.

He hurried back to Barnaby’s trunk, stacked some bundles of flowers in his arms, closed the trunk, and headed for the safety of the front door. Anna Beth held the door open and he went in, peering through the stems, stalks, and leaves.

“Lordy mercy, Roby, you look like you took ill,” the widow said.

“Where do you want these?” he managed to say, hoping his voice fooled them. All except Barnaby. The undertaker frowned around a forkful of cake.

“In the living room,” Marlene said. “On the hearth by the chrysanthemums.”

“You sure you’re okay?” the widow asked.

“Just a little heartburn,” he said. “It’ll pass.”

“Hope it wasn’t them deviled eggs,” Sarah said. “I knew we should have put them in the refrigerator.”

“Probably ate too much of that goddamned Parsons pie,” Alfred said.

Sarah turned from the sink. “No, if it was the pie, we’d all be sick. We all had some.”

“Not me,” Marlene said. “I’m on a diet.”

Roby nearly dropped the flowers on his way out of the room.

He’d forgotten Marlene.

Barnaby left first, followed by Cindy. Alfred had to drive her home because she didn't have a car. The widow had turned in early, and Anna Beth went upstairs to read to her, to help take the edge off the loneliness. Buck, Sarah and Marlene sat on the couch, Roby on a worn vinyl footrest. Jacob's rocker sat empty beside the coffee table, and the four of them were turned as if Jacob still sat in it.

"I still say we sell it all," Buck said. "Except the tractor."

"When did you become part of 'we'?" Marlene said.

"He's my husband," Sarah said. "We share and share alike."

"He wouldn't be saying that if Alfred was here."

"Don't worry about Alfred," Roby said. He was trying to figure out a way to get Marlene out into the kitchen. He'd have to scrounge through the trash can and find some of the pie that he'd swept up. Then trick her into eating it somehow.

"Well, I don't want to stay in these mountains forever. You ever been to that mall in Raleigh? They got a fountain right there in the middle of it, under a glass roof, and a hundred stores, half of them selling nothing but clothes. Name stuff, fancy, not those off-the-rack seconds we get in Barkersville."

"Marlene, why don't you think about somebody besides yourself for a change?" Sarah said.

"Just 'cause you're stuck here don't mean I have to be."

"We're all stuck here. You're part of this place, no matter how far you run."

"Now," Roby said. "You girls just lost your daddy. Don't be at each other's throats."

"Since when did it get to be any of your business?" Buck said.

"I'm almost as much family as you are."

"Why don't you take your ass to the kitchen and let us work this out? Better yet, why don't you just get on home? You're way past polite, to be staying this late."

Roby knew it. There were unwritten laws to sittings, the food, the settling of affairs, the burial arrangements. He was a creature of habit, steeped in tradition, and had been to more sittings than he could count. He'd eaten dozens of death pies, he'd served up thousands of plates to grieving relatives. And easy rested those who'd trusted their hearts and souls to Roby.

Except for Jacob Davis Ridgehorn.

Roby stood. "Maybe you're right, Buck. Forgive me, ladies." He bent low. "I reckon I'll see you at the viewing tomorrow."

"Wait a second," Marlene said. "You going to help clean up the kitchen?"

"It's the least I could do," Roby said.

He'd washed the last round of dishes, including another go at Jacob's denture glass, before he tried anything on Marlene. He knew he didn't have Harold's good looks or charm or pure heart. All Roby had was a stubborn streak. And a crumpled piece of pie.

"Want to go for a walk?" he asked, careful to keep his voice even.

"I don't know. I'm awful tuckered."

"Just to get some fresh air. I'll have you in bed before you know it." He realized what he'd just said, how she might take it. "I mean—"

She grinned and shook her head. "Roby Snow. I thought you didn't have a single bad thought in your head."

“I don’t—I mean, well, it’s a pretty night, and I could use some fresh air. This kitchen has got me feeling cramped.” He thought of Jacob, who’d soon be confined in a casket.

Marlene looked toward the kitchen entrance, considering. “Well, okay. Just don’t try nothing. I’m not in the mood.”

“I’m not, either.”

She gave him that patented Marlene pout and put away the last of the food. The Frigidaire was jam packed, the freezer so full that bags of raspberries fell out when the door opened. The top of the refrigerator was covered with the remnants of cakes and homemade loaves of bread.

They went outside into the cool darkness. The dew had settled early, fat and slick on the blades of grass. Alfred had put the cows in the barn on his way out, and now the pastures were empty under the weak gleam of moon. Black trees stood like long, scrawny scarecrows along the fence line.

Marlene walked a few steps ahead, following the worn path that bordered the garden and led to the creek. The water was silver in the night, gurgling and licking at the smooth stones. The aroma of cow manure and cut hay filled the sky. The tobacco had been harvested and speared on stakes to dry, and the silent rows seemed alive with small moving shadows.

“How could you ever leave this place?” Roby asked.

“Easy. If you lived here, you’d want to be gone, too.”

“No. I’ve been out there, to other places. The big city. I’ve been places where you wouldn’t believe, even if I told you.”

Marlene stopped along a broken wooden fence and leaned against a post. Her face was turned to the moon, its light soft on her cheeks. Roby realized she was probably beautiful. Maybe this is what Harold saw in her, what all those other men had seen in her. A glow that came from inside.

Maybe that’s why people gave their hearts to each other.

No. That was foolishness. Roby had a job to do. Something more important than the things between a man and woman, the twin beating of hearts. His business was between life and death.

“Can I ask you something?” Roby asked.

“You just did.”

“Something scary.”

She looked at him, then back to the house with its distant squares of light. “Roby, I do believe you’re trying to get fresh.”

“Hey, I’m serious.”

“Yeah. Just like every other man.”

“It’s about your daddy.”

The crickets chirped louder. Something moved in the shrubs along the creek.

“I don’t want to talk about him,” she said, so low that Roby could barely hear her.

“This is important.”

“I don’t care. He’s dead.”

“I know. But he talked to me, told me what you folks ought to do.”

“Well, he told Momma, too. And Barnaby Clawson. And just about every damned body except us. The ones who have to decide.”

“He told me last night.”

Marlene had no answer for that. Her breath came fast and shallow, her eyes wide and wet with moonlight. "Don't talk like that."

"He come to me, Marlene. While I was asleep." A little lie, but he'd told worse. In truth, he hadn't been asleep at all.

"Don't tell me you're one of those crazy people who dream about dead folks? I liked you better when you was just another guy trying to work his way inside my dress."

"This ain't about liking or not liking. It's about doing what's right." Roby eased forward, his boots hushed in the grass.

"Marlene turned, tried to run, but was cornered by the fence and the underbrush. "Get back, or I swear I'll scream."

He stopped a few feet from her. She could scream, but Buck and Sarah wouldn't find them for at least two minutes. Plenty of time. "I ain't going to hurt you. I just want you to do one thing."

"Sure you do. And I was ready to do it. Only now I don't want to."

Roby reached into his pocket and brought out the mashed and balled wad of sweet potato pie. He held out his fist, hoping his hand wasn't shaking. "Here."

She was suspicious. "What's that?"

"For you."

She looked at his hand as if he held a snake. "What is it?"

"Eat this."

"What are you talking about?"

"Eat it. It's what your daddy wanted." He used the past tense, to make it easier for her.

*It's what your daddy wants. Because he loved you, and you have to love him in return.*

"I ain't eating that. Whatever it is."

"Pie. It's good."

She looked up the path, at the house that now probably seemed a hundred miles away. "I'm sure it's good. Because Beverly Parsons made it, right?"

Roby smiled, but the expression felt wrong on his face. He pressed his lips together. "She made it special for you folks. Wouldn't want to hurt her feelings, now. That wouldn't be neighborly."

"What about *my* feelings, Roby? You got no right to scare me out of my wits. You're a real creep, you know that?"

"Eat up. It's good for you."

"No." She eased deeper into the shadows, edging for an escape up the path.

"Your daddy wants it this way."

"Leave me alone."

"You won't scream. You won't, because then I'll have to tell."

"Tell what?"

"About Alfred's fifteenth birthday present. Behind the barn."

She said nothing. There was nothing she could say.

Roby held out the clod of pie.

"Nobody . . ." Her voice was like a wind over ice, brittle. "Nobody saw."

"Family secrets. We keep it in the family."

"Nobody saw."

"Somebody did. How do you think I found out?"

“Nobody saw.”

“Your daddy did. And he told me all about it. Last night.”

Her words were like notes played on the wet rim of a crystal glass, uneven and piercing. “My daddy was dead last night.”

“I know.”

“My daddy was *dead* and nobody saw and you’re crazy and you and your pie can go to hell.” She sprang forward and slapped at his hand.

The pie flew from Roby’s open palm, parted some leaves in the underbrush, and landed in the creek with a liquid *thunk*. Marlene clawed her way past him, screeching. He looked at his empty palm under the moonlight, then watched her grow smaller and darker until she was nothing but a moving shadow. Then her figure was outlined in the light of the screen door. She went inside and the door to the kitchen slammed closed.

After a minute of listening to the creek, Roby walked to his truck, started it, and headed for Clawson’s Funeral Home.

The back room of Clawson’s was dim and still and clammy as a cellar. The room smelled like Barnaby, or maybe that was the other way around. Roby knew that death could get in you, worm its way through your pores, crawl down your throat and into your lungs, sneak into your eyes and inside your brain. Death could surround you and suffocate you. Death could stiffen you up. Death could swell you and then shrink you. Death could do it all, change your face, give you a tight grin, take you places, open doors.

But first, you had to shake its hand.

Jacob Ridgehorn looked good. One of Barnaby’s finest displays of talent. The cheeks were smooth and pink, the eyes closed peacefully, the lips full. Under the shop lights, his forehead shone with the faintest luster of wax. The sparse hair was combed into place, more neat than it had ever been in life.

Roby looked at the clock above the workbench, carefully ignoring the sharp tools, surgical saws, thread and glue and buttons and rubber bladders. Five-gallon plastic containers of chemicals lined the floor beneath the bench. A long stainless steel table stood in the middle of the room.

It was nearly midnight.

Roby listened to the rodents in the storage room and waited.

Jacob’s body spasmed when the clock’s thin hands both reached straight toward heaven.

“I tried,” Roby said.

Jacob’s mouth had parted as the skin tightened in death. Barnaby hadn’t gotten around to running a stitch through the inside of the corpse’s mouth yet. Roby was relieved that the dentures were in place. It made Jacob seem less dead somehow.

The thing that bothered him was he could never be sure if the dead person was really dead. Or if it was a ghost.

He’d have to ask Barnaby about that one day. Or the old man at the broken-down garage at the end of the world.

As if the old man would tell him anything.

But maybe Jacob would, the way he had the night before.

“I fed them the pie,” Roby said. “You never tasted such a heavenly thing.”

Jacob twitched, maybe one corner of his mouth lifted in appreciation.

“It was good.”

No answer except the soft settling of cloth.

“You should have seen Alfred. He was a tricky one, all right. Had to get a little feisty with him.”

Jacob said something about how Alfred always was a bit stubborn, maybe he was too much like his Daddy that way. Or maybe what Roby heard was just the whisper of a car passing on the distant street outside.

“And Sarah. Fine girl, that one. She and Buck will give you some great grandkids once they get around to it. I know, I know, a little too late, but at least you can be content that your blood line will be carried on.”

Jacob said he figured there were plenty of Ridgehorns in the world already.

“Anna Beth is my favorite. No, don’t get mad, I don’t mean *that* way, I just think she’s got spunk and will do all right for herself.”

Jacob said that a father wasn’t supposed to say such things, but now that it didn’t matter what opinions he held, he could admit that Anna Beth had been his favorite, too.

“Marlene,” Roby said. “Now, Marlene is a horse of a different color.”

Jacob waited silently, hands folded across his waist, as patient as a saint.

“But she . . . she didn’t have none of the pie.”

Another thirty seconds of silence passed, the tick of the clock filling the gap of missing heartbeats. Jacob looked sad, even with eyes glued shut.

“I’m sorry. But I ain’t give up yet. I just have to talk to Johnny, is all. And Barnaby. We’ll sort it all out.”

And this after I told you all the family secrets, Jacob said.

“I know, I know. Don’t make me feel worse than I already do. And it ain’t just because I let you down. It’s because I’m—”

Roby looked at the clock on the wall, mad at himself for expecting sympathy from a corpse. The deceased deserved all the sympathy. That’s what this was about. Honoring the dear departed.

Jacob said it was hard to feel honored when a man’s own flesh and blood turned against him.

“I don’t think she did it out of spite,” Roby said. “And maybe it ain’t my place to say, but your family got the worst grieving manners I ever did see.”

Jacob said that every family was different, that you couldn’t understand unless you were on the inside. Roby didn’t know whether he meant the inside of the family or the inside of the coffin.

The family, Jacob said. Though laying stiff in a coffin was no way to spend an eternity, either. That was for them who were too unlucky or too despised to get their pies eaten. Nothing sadder than to cross over with a sack of soured deviled eggs and moldy cake and a whole pie. That was no way to meet Judgment.

“You don’t have to paint me a picture,” Roby said.

You’ll have to go see him for yourself, Jacob said.

Roby pressed his tongue against his teeth. He didn’t want to go out there, not tonight. He wasn’t sure he could find the place again. Or maybe he was scared that he would.

Because he’d found it every time he looked. Or else it had found him.

And every time, whether it was midnight or sunrise, the old man was sitting there, waiting, as if the last Greyhound had rolled through forty years ago but he was still determined to catch the next.

Except Johnny Divine's type of waiting had no end.  
I know you're scared, Jacob said, but I'd trade places with you in a heartbeat. Ha ha, that's supposed to be funny.  
Roby nodded.  
See you at the viewing, Jacob said.  
Roby nodded.  
And bring the family, Jacob added.  
"I won't let you down," Roby said.  
No, Jacob said. That's what old Barnaby's for.  
Roby said nothing, looked at the clock and its slow countdown toward tomorrow.  
A joke, Jacob said. He's the undertaker, get it?  
Roby's sense of humor was not in the best of shape. "Sleep tight."  
Jacob said he'd try his best.  
Roby headed for the door, feet as heavy as gravestones.  
And, Roby . . .  
Roby turned, looked at the sallow corpse, the rigid mouth, the sunken cheeks.  
Don't forget to lock up behind you, Jacob said. Wouldn't want nothing getting stolen.

It had been dark the first time, three in the morning maybe, the hour when even the night creatures were bone lazy and dawn seemed like it was as far away as forever. Roby had taken a wrong turn down the back country, through the little community known as Mule Camp that had once been a whistle stop on the old Virginia Creeper railway. The town had died with the passing of the locomotive era, but a few people still kept up shops in the area. Roby hadn't been through those parts in years, not since he gave up bow hunting for deer, but that night he'd been drinking and hell bent on speed.

He passed an old gas station he never remembered seeing before. Something about it, the suddenness of it, made him fumble for the brakes, the way it gleamed skull-white in the moonlight, its windows nothing but blank holes and the cinder block walls weeping rust and cracks. He lost control and skidded off the road, smacked a tree and bumped his head. It was a miracle he wasn't killed outright.

He got out of the truck and that's when he first saw the old man sitting in shadows.

That was the night his life changed.

Tonight, as he pulled beside the gas pump that was so old it had a hand-operated suction pump, the same figure sat in its usual place in a warped rocking chair. Roby had the feeling that, if he dropped by during the daytime, unexpectedly, the side of the road would be barren, or he'd find only a stand of stunted jack pines. He had an equal belief that the garage could be found in other places, on other dark stretches of roads that led to nowhere. The same garage, the same old man.

"Been expecting you," Johnny Divine said. His eyes shone, the only features visible amid the dark face.

"I got what you wanted," Roby said. He pulled the suitcase off the passenger seat, slid out of the truck, and walked across the crumbling old concrete tarmac.

"It's not what *I* want, Mr. Snow," the old man said. "It's what *you* need."

"I don't need this. I never asked for this."

Johnny Divine's laughter crept from the shadows, around the chipped corners of

the low structure, down from the moon and up from the cold ground. "You most certainly did, sir. The first night we met. Said you'd do anything."

"I didn't mean it like that."

The scratchy voice was almost sad. "They never do. I guess they never really do, when you get right down to it."

Roby held out the suitcase. "Here."

Johnny Divine didn't take it. After a moment, Roby set the suitcase down near Johnny's moccasined feet and moved a couple of steps backward. He heard a tapping sound, then saw the head of Johnny's cane poking at the suitcase.

"Are you sure that's the right one?" Johnny asked.

"Barnaby sent it special," Roby said. "Fresh."

"Unh-huh." Johnny leaned forward and Roby got a brief glimpse of his face, the blank eyes, the dark caverns of cheeks and eye sockets. A face that looked to have drawn its substance from the surrounding blackness, cobbled and knitted itself from the dirt, shaped itself in the cold forge of the night.

Johnny pulled the suitcase into the shadows and flipped the brass latches. Roby didn't want to see what was inside.

On that first night, Johnny had sent him to Clawson's Funeral Home with the empty suitcase. Barnaby hadn't said a word, just looked him over as if they shared an unspoken secret, then took the suitcase. Roby had waited while Barnaby attended to some work in the back room. Barnaby then gave the suitcase back to Roby, several pounds heavier. And Roby had driven back out to Mule Camp and made the delivery to Johnny Divine.

Then Johnny had instructed Roby to go to the home of the deceased's family and help ease the grief.

Roby hadn't understood then, but now he knew plenty enough.

Enough to hold out his hand when Johnny Divine passed him the wrinkled sheet of paper.

"Would you please, sir?" Johnny Divine said. "My eyes aren't so good anymore."

Roby read the name that ran across the top of the document. Glenn Claude Isenhour.

Roby didn't know Isenhour, but he had a feeling he would soon be his second cousin. A member of the grieving family.

"You wouldn't mind reading it aloud, would you?" Johnny said.

Roby cleared his throat and held the paper higher so that it caught more of the moonlight. He tried for a mixture of solemnity and energy with his voice, as if he were a news anchor.

"Glenn Claude Isenhour, age 72 of 1235 Pleasant Valley Road, Barkersville, died Thursday morning, September 18, at Pickett County Hospital following a long illness.

"Mister Glenn Claude Isenhour was born on December 27, 1930, to the late Otis Cornell Isenhour and the late Beulah Florence Cook Isenhour. Mister Isenhour was a veteran of the Korean War.

"Mister Isenhour was preceded in death by his wife, Sally Ruth Ridgehorn Isenhour. He is survived by a daughter, Mary Ruth Eggers, and a son, Glenn Claude Isenhour, Jr.; two grandchildren, Glenn Claude "Trey" Isenhour, III, and Emily Faye Isenhour; and a number of nieces and nephews.

"Funeral services for Mister Glenn Claude Isenhour will be conducted Saturday

afternoon at 2 o'clock at the Clawson's Funeral Home Chapel, officiated by the Reverend Barnaby Clawson. Burial to follow in the Shady Valley Baptist Church cemetery."

Roby paused, aware of his voice being the world's only sound, as if the walls of the old garage, the surrounding forest, and the soft dark hills were all listening.

"Go on," Johnny Divine said. "You're getting to the good part."

"The family will receive friends at the viewing Friday night before the service from 7 until 8 p.m. At other times, the family will be sitting at the home of Mary Ruth Eggers, 4752 Old Cove Road. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to V.F.W. Post 1393, Barkersville. Clawson's Funeral Home is in charge of the arrangements."

Johnny sat back in his rocker as if he had just finished a heavy meal. "Mister Glenn Claude Isenhour."

"Do you know him?" Roby asked.

"I've made his acquaintance recently."

Roby looked longingly back at his truck.

"Don't be in such a hurry," Johnny said.

*How did he know? He couldn't see.*

But there were other kinds of sight. Some that saw through to the bone even in pitch-blackness. Some that looked right into your heart.

"I have a problem," Roby said.

"So I heard. Jacob told me all about it."

"What should I do?"

"Well, you wouldn't want Jacob to show up for Judgment with only four-fifths of his soul. So you'd best find a way for that last family member to get a piece of the pie."

"What if I can't?"

The cane tapped at the ground, steadily, four beats, five beats, then stopped.

"You'll find a way. Or you might just end up on the wrong side of this suitcase yourself."

"I've got the Ridgehorn viewing, then I'll have to run over to the Isenhour sitting. I reckon the pie will be ready by tomorrow."

"Oh, sure. Beverly Parsons knows better than to let us down. Her daughter's leukemia didn't go into remission of its own accord. Unless you happen to believe in miracles."

Roby was sick of miracles. He'd seen too many, the bad kind, nothing holy or inspiring about them. He looked around at the trees, at the kudzu that draped them and smothered them. He wondered if anything could be worse than this endless cycle of sittings, his constant posing as a relative of the deceased, his strange and endless mission. He'd been privy to too many family secrets for families that weren't his.

Roby peered into Johnny Divine's pale, sightless eyes. "How many more, Johnny? How many times before I've paid what I owe?"

"I didn't set up this game of living and dying. I got caught in the middle myself. You think I *like* sitting out here by this spooky damned garage in the dead of night, miles from nowhere?"

Roby had never considered the strange man's motives. Barnaby Clawson made an earthly profit, Roby and Beverly Parsons benefited in their own selfish ways. The dead counted on these strange transactions to aid their journey to a mysterious Judgment in a plane beyond this one. But Johnny Divine seemed tied to both worlds, the one of battered suitcases and broken-down garages as well as the one of shadows and spirits.

Though Roby had been raised a Baptist, he'd learned new rules of the road since

meeting Johnny Divine. God and the devil had no place here. Unless Johnny Divine was one or the other. Or both.

In a moment of angry bravery, Roby stepped forward until he was a few feet from the old man. "Tell me, Johnny. When you died, who ate your pie?"

The old man's breath came like the stale stench of a grease pit. "Who says I'm dead?"

Roby could only nod. He looked down at the suitcase. He could have looked inside it any time over the past few hours. He could have looked inside the suitcase during any of his dozens of other courier runs. If he wanted answers, he could have found them. Not all, but some.

Even one answer would be too many.

"I'll give Jacob your regards," Roby said.

"Tell him to come on out and see me sometime," Johnny said.

Roby headed for the truck. He believed that, if he turned, he would find that Johnny Divine had drifted off with the night mist. The garage would be gone. The suitcase and its contents would have never existed.

He started the truck and pulled onto the dirt road. He didn't glance even once into the rear view mirror.

Jacob Davis Ridgehorn may have been a simple man, a farmer and construction worker, but you would never have guessed it from the attendance at the viewing.

The chapel at Clawson's Funeral Home was crowded and smelled of cologne, flowers, and Baptists. A line was out the door as neighbors, distant relatives, and local public figures took their turns viewing Jacob in the casket. As they filed past, each person would mutter a few words, say a prayer, or give a somber bow. Then the line led to the members of the immediate family, who shook hands or hugged those who came to pay their last respects.

Or next-to-last, in the case of those who would be attending the funeral itself.

Roby stood with the widow, offering support, keeping her supplied with tissues. Normally the oldest son or daughter ought to handle the chore, but Roby had eased his way into the family cluster and by the widow's side. Buck and Alfred wore their suits as if they were strait jackets, looking stiff, the flesh of their necks straining over their white shirt collars.

The widow was in a dark blue dress. It was bad luck to wear new clothes to a funeral, and she didn't own anything in black. Marlene was in a skirt and a blouse that was unbuttoned too far down for such an occasion. She'd been avoiding Roby, staying quieter than usual, keeping to herself. Sarah wore the same print dress as she'd worn for the sitting. Anna Beth wore a yellow sweater and a brown, knee-length dress and shoes that had thick, sloping heels.

They all looked out of place, uncomfortable. But the guest of honor, Jacob, looked as if he had been born for this very moment. His lips and eyes were relaxed, his forehead unwrinkled. Every strand of his gray, thinning hair was in place, curving gently over the peachy sheen of his skull. Barnaby had even plucked the little hairs from his ears. Jacob was radiant under the soft, recessed lights, his casket polished, his body at rest amid the plush interior. He could have been dreaming of a gentle walk toward a distant and brightly-lit gate.

"He looks like he's sleeping," said a stooped old woman whose blue-rinsed hair

was topped with a small black net.

“He’s mighty handsome,” said the widow.

“They did a fine job on him, all right.”

Roby wanted to step on the old woman’s toes. You’d think she would have learned some manners. After all, she’d probably been to many viewings in her day.

“I only touched him once,” the widow said. “Set me off to bawling. His skin was so cold.”

“I remember I found my Henry that way, hunched over on the toilet. I thought he was straining away, because he was mighty bound up with constipation there his last few years. But I laid a hand on him, and he was plumb cold. Fell over on the floor and laid there while I screamed.”

“Ma’am,” Roby said. “Sorry to interrupt, but the line’s long and we don’t want to keep the family out too late.”

The old woman bobbed her head in agreement. “I know what you mean. They probably ain’t sleeping much.”

She juddered a few steps away and hugged Marlene, then the other girls. “Say, do you know what time the burial is?”

Barnaby Clawson stood near the chapel doors, hands folded and clasped together over the lowest button of his suit jacket. “Ma’am, the information is posted on the sign outside.”

The old woman went to him, touched him on the forearm. “You did a fine job on him.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Roby waited until the old woman had exited, made sure the widow was occupied by some concerned neighbors, then went over to Barnaby.

“Marlene didn’t eat none of the pie,” Roby said.

“I know,” Barnaby said, his practiced expression of sorrow never slipping.

“What am I going to do?”

“Did you ask you-know-who?”

“How come you’re afraid to say his name?”

“Look, a man sees too much in my line of work. Some of it stays behind closed doors. To these folks—” Barnaby gave a small nod to indicate the line of those paying final respects “—the show is everything. We’re all in on the great big lie. Jacob’s gone on but we pay tribute to his flesh in all these little rituals that are supposed to make us feel better.”

“Well, you’d be out of a job if it wasn’t for the rituals.”

“No. I’m as deep in it as you and Bev Parsons and the old man. We’re maggots eating off the same corpse, when you get right down to it.”

“You shoulda known better. You had your face pushed into it all your life.”

“My boy,” Barnaby said. “He had AIDS. I know he turned out funny, was punished by God and deserved it, but a man will do most anything for his sons, even when they despise him.”

“And he’s better now, no sign of it, huh?”

“I don’t ask questions, I just open the suitcase and do what Johnny’s note tells me to do.”

“At least you did it out of love. From the goodness of your heart. I reckon that will count for something when you get to Judgment.”

"I don't know," the undertaker said, sounding weary. "I guess we all got our own sins to answer for."

A distant cousin came by, recognizable by the distinct Ridgehorn chin that resembled a burl on an apple tree. He was middle-aged, smelled of bottom-shelf whiskey, and his eyes were watery. "You sure done proud, Mr. Clawson. Jacob looks fresh as a daisy."

Barnaby smiled a little without any of his wrinkles moving. "Thank you, sir. I hate to see him go, but I'm glad I can do my part to help ease his passing."

The man sniffled and moved on, wobbling slightly.

Barnaby dropped his voice again. "We're all maggots. We all eat the sorrow and then go home, glad that it's him and not us that had to give up the ghost."

"What if you don't give it up?" Roby asked, thinking of Johnny Divine's stubborn belief that he was still alive.

"I'd take the heat of hell over the cold indifference of the dirt. You and me, we know that souls go on, and we believe it more firmly than any church-goer you ever met. We've seen it with our own eyes, and that sets us apart."

"I guess it's kind of a like a holy duty, when you look at it that way." He looked at Marlene, at the exposed fringe of her bra, the soft white curving flesh above it. Harold had arrived and was greeting the widow, taking her frail hands in his large ones. Black grease filled the creases of his fingers and his hair was slicked back with what looked like thirty-weight.

Barnaby put a hand on Roby's shoulder. "It's the least you could do for poor old Jacob."

Roby nodded. "Yeah, I reckon." Then, after a pause, he said, "Has Glenn Isenhour come by?"

"They wheeled him in this morning. Don't worry. He'll get his turn. He don't deserve no less."

"And the suitcase?"

"You don't need to know too much about my part. And I don't want to know about yours."

Roby felt Barnaby press something into his palm. He took it, glanced down, then slipped it in his pocket.

"A little extra," Barnaby said. "I always save some for emergencies."

Beverly Parsons made her way through the line, hugged the widow and the girls. She gave Alfred an extra special squeeze, and Roby would have sworn she had real tears on her cheeks. Leaving Cindy to comfort Alfred, Beverly went over to Roby and Barnaby.

"Got that Isenhour pie in the oven?" Roby asked her.

She looked at the undertaker, then back at Roby. "Things like that aren't to be spoken of."

"Jacob's pie was about the best I've had in a while. You really outdid yourself."

"I do what I do and you mind your own business."

"Cindy's looking mighty healthy. Gained her weight back."

Barnaby excused himself, said that he had some matters to discuss with the widow.

"I don't want to talk no more," Beverly Parsons said.

"I was just curious about something. If Cindy walked out of the funeral parlor and stepped out in the road and got smacked down by a dump truck, would you still be beholding to Johnny Divine? Or would it be even Steven?"

“Quit that kind of talk. Somebody might hear you.”

“Oh, you mean Johnny? He already knows, ma’am. He sure enough knows.”

“Hush up.” She clamped her hands over her ears. “Hear no evil, hear no evil, hear no evil.”

Roby leaned over her, put his mouth near her ear. “If Cindy died, would you have to bake her pie?”

She ducked away from him and rejoined the Ridgehorn family. Roby, smiling, followed her.

“Much obliged for the pie,” Anna Beth said to Beverly. “Everybody’s been so nice to us. Daddy would be happy to know how much you all pitched in.”

“He was a good man,” the pie-maker answered.

“Real good,” Roby said. “Delicious.”

Anna Beth gave him a confused look. Marlene, who’d been letting Harold show his admiration for how good she looked all dressed up, moved away from the rest of the family. Harold stuck close to her, like a dog following a bucket of chicken guts.

“Are you okay, Roby?” Sarah asked. “You’re looking a little sickly.”

“Yeah.” The sweat on his forehead was thick enough to collect in rivulets. “I reckon I better get some fresh air.”

“Want me to come with you?” Alfred asked.

“No, I’ll be fine. Funerals just get to me, is all.”

“I know what you mean,” Anna Beth said. “I liked to never got to sleep last night. Kept thinking I heard Daddy out in the barn. You know, Alfred, how he used to hum that little tune while he was milking the cows?”

Alfred’s eyes flicked toward Marlene, so fast that nobody noticed but Roby.

“Yeah. I guess memories come in different size boxes. Because I woke up in the middle of the night and thought I heard the tractor out in the cornfield.”

Buck turned from his conversation with Sarah at the mention of the word “tractor.” “Didn’t nobody steal it, did they?”

Sarah grabbed Buck by the arm and pulled him toward the widow. “Don’t even get started.”

Roby was hit by a wave of dizziness, as if the chapel had suddenly broken loose from the world and drifted into the clouds. The thick sweetness of the flowers made his stomach flutter. Roby grabbed Alfred to keep from falling.

“Here,” Alfred said. “I’ll help you outside.”

Alfred hadn’t said a word, hadn’t even snickered, as he helped Roby take a seat on the concrete steps leading into the funeral home. The evening was autumn cool, and as Roby leaned against the wrought-iron railing, his sweat dried, leaving him clammy. Two men he didn’t recognize were smoking cigarettes in the parking lot, the orange glows of their cigarette tips growing fat with each draw. Clawson’s Funeral Home sat on a small hill, and downtown Barkersville huddled below it in a tangle of utility lines, a wash of street lamps, and a stack of worn bricks.

“You got no right to nose into family business,” Alfred said.

“I promised,” Roby said, wiping his eyes.

“How did you find out?”

“Your daddy told me.”

“Bullshit. Wasn’t nobody else there. Just me and Marlene and—”

“You didn’t hear him coming, did you? I reckon not. You were probably breathing

too hard. Or maybe whispering little words in her ear. Tell me, what did you call her? Did you say, 'Oh, Marlene,' or did she make you say 'sister'?"

"You bastard," Alfred said.

"Don't worry, I won't tell nobody."

"It didn't happen. And don't go messing with Marlene. You leave her alone."

"I said I wouldn't tell anybody. Wouldn't want Cindy Parsons to know, would we?"

"Daddy's dead. He can't tell nobody. And who would believe *you*, anyway? Everybody pretty much thinks you're touched in the head."

"I guess we both got our secrets, don't we?"

Alfred kept quiet while an elderly couple doddered down the steps and into their Ford. The two men had finished their cigarettes and exhaled the last of the gray smoke, buttoned their jackets, and went back inside. One of them said, "Sorry about your loss, Alfred."

"Thank you, Mr. Adams."

When the funeral parlor door had closed once again, Roby said, "There's one way you can shut me up for good."

"Hell, yeah. I can put a Jap bullet in your brain and bury you out by a back road."

Roby almost told him to go ahead, to see how that worked out, to see whether secrets took to the grave actually stayed there. Instead, he fumbled in his pocket, touched something dry and ragged.

*No. Wrong pocket.*

He went inside his jacket and came out with the thing Barnaby had given him.

"Here. This is for Marlene."

Alfred held the object up to the light that leaked through the parlor's windows.

"What the hell's this?"

"Forgiveness."

"You're as crazy as everybody says."

"I swear on God's Holy Bible, you get her to take that, and I'll never whisper a word to nobody."

"Take it?"

"Eat it. All of it."

Alfred held the object close to his face, then sniffed it. "Shoo, smells like dried dog shit."

"It's pie."

"Pie?"

"A special recipe. Been in the family for generations."

"You're crazy, Roby Snow. Crazy as a frog-fucked hoot owl." After a long minute, Alfred said, "You promise, as God is your witness?"

Roby smiled. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

Alfred went inside, into the room where the others were paying tribute to the flesh that once housed Jacob Ridgehorn's soul.

The burial was almost an anticlimax.

By Saturday, the entire Ridgehorn family was worn down by grief, missed sleep, and the burden of hosting all of those who paid their last respects over and over. Some of them Roby had seen at the sittings, dropping by to deliver a roast or casserole, then

coming over a few hours later to help eat it. A few had joined the family after the viewing for a late meal.

Roby had skipped that one, as much as he had looked forward to spending time with his temporary relatives. After all, he had the Isenhours to prepare for.

Now, with the sun nearly straight up like God's golden eye, the clan had gathered around the family cemetery. Only the immediate family had been invited to the graveside services. The rest of the mourners had been shucked back at the official chapel service in Barkersville. Barnaby Clawson was offering a few words of comfort, a garbled mix of Bible verse scraps and personal anecdotes.

"Jacob Davis was not just a loving husband and father," Barnaby said. "He was also a friend, somebody you could count on in hard times. He held to his faith in everything he did, whether he was sitting in the third row of Barkersville Baptist or standing out in the cornfield killing crows."

Alfred cleared his throat. The widow looked misty-eyed, but the shakes that had plagued her the last couple of days had gone. Her chin was tilted up, as if she were gazing into that better land she would someday share with the love of her life. Sarah and Buck sat on the far end of the row of metal chairs. Buck kept stealing jealous glances toward the backhoe that stood under the apple tree, its metal jaw ready to scoop soil over the coffin as soon as the formalities were done. The backhoe operator, dressed in a pair of blue coveralls, smoked and stared off over the meadows.

An Astroturf rug had been placed over the dirt so everybody's fine shoes would remain spotless. Roby looked across the brown field at the barn. He caught Marlene looking in the same direction. Their eyes met. Neither of them had any tears.

"Jacob was a man of the earth," Barnaby continued. "But he was also a man of heaven. As we give him back to the dust from which he was formed, we also deliver him back to God. As we mourn his passing, we also rejoice in his new eternal life. Let us pray."

Roby's attention wandered as Barnaby reeled out one of his stock send-offs. The high hills were a splendor of red and yellow, and in the distance the wall of mountains rose like gray skyscrapers. The clouds were thin and far apart. The air smelled of harvest and earthworms. Jacob's horse, Old Laddie, had come up from the cool banks of the creek and now stood at the fence, watching the proceedings with curiosity.

Alfred and Cindy sat together, holding hands. Harold was at the far end, away from Marlene, his hands clean today. Anna Beth stood near the head of the closed casket, wiping her nose with a shredded wad of tissue. The casket gleamed in the sunshine, suspended by canvas straps over the deep rectangular hole in the ground, a pile of flowers perched on the casket's slick belly.

Roby read the names on the other tombstones that dotted the stretch of grass. Diane Kelly Ridgehorn, Julia Anne Ridgehorn, Thomas Ridgehorn, Wilbur Derek Ridgehorn, Maude Davis Ridgehorn, others with letters too worn to make out. A dozen dead folks, at least three generations.

Roby wondered who'd baked their pies.

He had no doubt that Johnny Divine had been around for all of them, and that the garage at the end of the world worked just as well by being a train station or a stagecoach stop or a ferry pier. Crossing places, that's what they were. The mode of transportation didn't matter, only the route.

And what about the conductors who guided the dead along the way? The people

like Roby and Beverly Parsons and Barnaby Clawson? What happened to them? Did they get to take that same road to Judgment that they'd help others find?

Or did they walk a different path?

Roby shook the dread from his thoughts and focused on Barnaby's prayer. Barnaby had said "Amen," and the family echoed the hollow word, each in a different rhythm and tone.

"Amen," Roby said.

"Bye, Jacob," the widow said. She tensed, and for a moment Roby thought she was going to throw herself onto the casket, the way they did in movies. Then she smiled, rubbed her lips, and turned away. The hearse, oversize and out of place with its polished chrome and tinted windows, blocked her way to the other vehicles. She stumbled over a stone and nearly fell.

Alfred moved over to the widow and put his arm around her, leading her to Marlene's sedan. Marlene got behind the wheel, and Sarah and Cindy Parsons got in the back seat. Buck and Harold climbed into Buck's pick-up. Alfred walked back to the grave site as the two vehicles drove off. Barnaby had loaded the flowers into the hearse and was shutting the rear door.

"I'll put the flowers back when the dirt's smoothed and the headstone's placed," Barnaby told Alfred.

"Funny, ain't it? Daddy always said he'd rather die than plant flowers where vegetables ought to grow."

"Your daddy had a way with words."

"Yeah," Roby said. "Like those words he said in the barn on your birthday."

Alfred's fists clenched. "You promised."

"What about you? Did you keep your end of the promise?"

"Excuse me, gents, I got to get back to the home," Barnaby said.

"Hey, why don't you come on back to the house for a bite first?" Roby said. "There's plenty enough for everybody."

Barnaby waved to the backhoe operator, then got in the hearse without a word. He drove away, the vehicle bouncing over the rutted dirt road that led away from the cemetery. The backhoe's engine roared to life with a giant cough of black smoke and the long metal arm grabbed at the air.

Roby raised his voice over the noise. "Did she eat it?"

Alfred looked down into the hole that would soon be swallowing his daddy. "Yeah."

"Did you have to trick her?"

"No, I just told her straight up. About you keeping your mouth shut if she did what you wanted."

"Tell me, and this is important . . . she didn't get sick or throw up or anything, did she?"

"No. Said it tasted like stale boot leather, though."

Roby nodded, and they both moved away from the grave as the backhoe approached.

"Come on," Roby said. "You don't want to watch."

"No, I reckon not. Damn, I sure could use a drink."

"Got a bottle under the truck seat. Keep it on hand for emergencies. Want a ride back to the house?"

Alfred glanced at the casket, then at the distant barn, then in the direction of the Ridgehorn house. "Let's get the hell out of here."

As they climbed into Roby's Ford, Alfred said, "So, are you going to tell me what it was I made Marlene eat?"

Roby shifted the Ford into first. "Can't. It's a family secret."

The kitchen was cleaner now than it had been during the sitting. The counter was almost bare, except for a few slices of store-bought bread in a plastic bag and some shriveled apples piled in glass bowl. The only thing in the sink was Jacob's denture glass.

"So, are you going to sell the place?" Roby asked the widow.

She had tucked a pinch of cinnamon-brown snuff behind her lower lip and worked it into place before answering. "I reckon not. When you stick your loved ones in the ground, you owe them. We talked it over. The kids will probably sell it off after I'm gone, but that's their worry. Me, I'm going to leave this world and join Jacob with a peaceful heart."

"Amen to that," Roby said.

Marlene came into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. She stooped from the waist, rummaging on the bottom rack. Roby glanced at the curves of her rear. A door to sin, that's what it was.

She closed the refrigerator and turned, holding a jar of bread-and-butter pickles. "Say, you know what would go good with this?"

"What?" Roby asked.

"Some of that meat you brought over the other night."

The widow squinted at him. "What meat? We done took that ham down to the bone."

"Oh, Roby knows what I'm talking about."

"You carry your bones with you," Roby said. "When you cross over. You carry your soured eggs and stale bread crumbs and molded cheese."

The widow took a step back, her eyes widening. "What in the world's wrong with you?"

"Peggy Clemens knows. Whole hog. Waste no part of the animal."

"Alfred!" the widow yelled, her voice brittle off the kitchen enamel.

"And Beverly Parsons. She's in on it. Barnaby, too."

Marlene held out the pickle jar as if it were a charm to ward off evil spirits. "You done gone crazy."

Alfred ran into the kitchen, with Buck and Harold right behind him.

Roby felt the sweat oozing out of the pores of his face like maggots from the holes of an electrified corpse. "Who's going to make your pies?" he said. "When you die, who's going to eat you?"

"Lord have mercy, better call the sheriff," Harold said. Alfred and Buck closed in on Roby from opposite sides of the counter.

This happened every single time. Roby was wracked by a wave of nausea and nearly collapsed. He grabbed for the edge of the counter and held himself up with effort. The room spun in the corners of his vision, the edges of the world dissolving like sugar in warm water. He felt hands gripping his arms, and he thought of Johnny Divine and the suitcase. Who would carry the suitcase after Roby was gone?

If Roby ever got to go, that was.

He pushed the hands away and straightened, trembling. "Sorry, folks. I just got a little carried away, is all. Been a mighty stressful time for all of us."

The widow studied him as if he were a bug on glass. "Anna Beth?"

The youngest daughter was standing behind her. "Yeah, Momma? Still want Sarah to call the law?"

The widow peered at Roby. "You been drinking?"

Roby fought off the small lightning bolts that streaked across the gray inside his skull. "Yeah. I apologize. First Jacob died, and then Glenn Isenhour. You know him, don't you?"

"Distant cousin," the widow said.

"Well, he was my second cousin. All this dying going on at the same time, I guess I just let it get to me. But I'm fine now."

"You sure?" Buck said. "You look like you swallowed a live lizard."

"Yeah. I'll just get a drink of water and I'll be good as new."

He forced himself not to tremble as he walked to the sink. He filled the denture glass from the tap and took four big gulps.

"You better go lay down for a while," the widow said. "You're a bit green around the edges."

"I can make it home," he said.

"Let me drive you," Alfred said.

"No. I done put you folks to enough trouble already."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I feel a lot better now. Just needed to get something on my stomach."

"Well, you be careful driving home," the widow said. "That's all we need, is to have to bury another one."

"I will. And I'm sorry for your loss."

"I guess we all lost something," Marlene said. "It's like all this food everybody brought over. You eat and eat and eat, and you're still empty inside."

Roby nodded, not sure what to say. He went outside and sat behind the wheel of his truck for several minutes before driving home.

The back room of Clawson's Funeral Home was as airless as a tomb. Roby didn't turn on the lights. He knew his way well enough.

Glenn Claude Isenhour's earthly remains were stretched out on a gurney, his belly as pale as a fish. A long, wet scar ran between his ribs. Barnaby had been at work. He had filled the suitcase. And, tonight, Roby would carry the suitcase to Johnny Divine, who would deliver it to Beverly Parsons.

Roby went outside to wait, leaning against the garage bay where Barnaby kept the hearse parked. He looked at the distant stars, the uncaring and dead moon that hung above him. At least Jacob was up there, rid of his burden, his worries over, his heart at peace. Thanks in part to Roby.

His hand went to his pocket, fidgeted for a moment, then brought out the tough and ragged hunk of meat. He put it in his mouth and chewed, swallowed without gagging, though the taste was bitter.

He was still hungry.

Same as always.

That long-ago night, when he'd made his deal with Johnny Divine, he never

realized how empty a person could be.

Oh, he would do it all over again if he had the chance. He didn't have any regrets. Because when his truck had run off the road, hit a tree and thrown him through the windshield, and he'd lain bleeding to death on the side of the road, Johnny Divine had stepped out of the black nowhere and made the offer.

If Roby had loved anybody besides himself, he might have gone ahead and died and taken his chances. But he'd been scared.

It was a fair deal, all the way around. He helped lost souls find their way to Judgment, and that was something to be proud of. Yet he was always so hollow inside.

Because he'd given Johnny Divine his heart in exchange for his life.

Roby had no relatives to eat his pie. Nobody could help him pass over, nobody could send him down the road to Judgment. Nobody had ever loved him. And he'd never loved anyone else.

All he could do was keep eating his heart himself, and hope someday that he would be full enough, or empty enough, or whatever was required.

But, as always, the leathery thing he'd eaten only left him starved for something deeper, a craving that reached beyond flesh.

He thought of Glen Claude Isenhour lying cold and lost inside the building. Shame burned Roby like an inner fire, and he put away his selfish wishes. The Isenhour family needed him. Maybe in service to others, he'd find what was lacking inside himself. Roby walked under a midnight sky that had never seemed so large, and he straightened his back against the weight of sacrifice, determined to be strong. His own judgment could wait.

Right now, he had a pie to serve and a burial to follow.

###

1Burial To Follow Copyright 2008 by Scott Nicholson  
Originally published by Cemetery Dance Publications in *Brimstone Turnpike*

#### OTHER BOOKS BY SCOTT NICHOLSON

The Red Church  
The Skull Ring  
They Hunger  
Ashes  
Flowers  
The First  
The Farm  
The Home  
The Manor  
The Harvest  
Transparent Lovers

#### About the author:

Scott Nicholson has written seven novels, including *They Hunger* and *The Skull Ring*. He is currently adapting *The Red Church* as a graphic novel. Other electronic works include *Burial To Follow* and *The First*. Nicholson lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, where he writes for a newspaper, plays guitar, raises an organic garden, and works as a freelance fiction editor. His Web site [www.hauntedcomputer.com](http://www.hauntedcomputer.com) offers writing tips, free fiction, and survival tips. He loves to hear from readers at [hauntedcomputer@yahoo.com](mailto:hauntedcomputer@yahoo.com). If you enjoyed this book, please tell your friends and give another Nicholson title a try.

BONUS MATERIAL:

## DRUMMER BOY

An excerpt from the new novel by Scott Nicholson  
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On an Appalachian Mountain ridge, three boys hear the rattling of a snare drum deep inside a cave known as “The Jangling Hole,” and the wind carries a whispered name.

A sheriff’s deputy loses his mind after firing at a mysterious figure in the woods.

An old man who grew up at the foot of the mountain believes something inside the Hole has been disturbed by a developer’s bulldozers.

Sheriff Frank Littlefield, haunted by his own past failures, must stand against a public enemy that bullets can’t harm. A skeptical local reporter hears about the supernatural mysteries and wants to find out about them for herself.

On the eve of a Civil War reenactment, the town of Titusville prepares to host a staged battle. The weekend warriors who don their replica uniforms and clean their black-powder rifles aren’t aware they will soon engage in mortal combat. This is a war between the living and the dead, because a troop of Civil War deserters, trapped in the Hole by a long-ago avalanche, are rising from their long slumber, and their mission is far from over.

And one only boy stands between the town and the cold mouth of hell...

## CHAPTER ONE

The Jangling Hole glared back at Bobby Eldreth like the cold eye of the mountain, sleepy and wary and stone silent in the October smoke.

“Th’ow it.”

Bobby squeezed the rock and peered into the darkness, imagining the throbbing heartbeat that had drummed its slow rumble across the ages. The air that oozed from the Southern Appalachian cave smelled like mushrooms and bat crap. He could have sworn he heard something back there in the slimy, hidden belly of the world, maybe a whisper or a tinkle or the scraping of claws on granite.

“Th’ow it, doof.”

Bobby glanced back at his heckler, who sat on a sodden stump among the ferns. Dex McCallister had a speech impediment that occasionally cut the “r” out of his words. Right now, Dex was so intent on pestering Bobby that he failed to note the defect. Good thing. When Dex made a mistake, everybody paid. “I hear something,” Bobby said.

“Probably one of them dead Rebels zipping down his pants to take a big squat,” Dex shouted. “Do it.”

Vernon Ray Davis, who stood in the hardwood trees behind Dex, said, “They didn’t have zippers back then. Nothing but bone buttons.”

Dex sneered at the skinny kid in the Atlanta Braves T-shirt. “What book did you get that out of? You’re starting to sound like Cornwad,” Dex said, using the class nickname for Mr. Corningwald, their eighth-grade history teacher.

Dex and Vernon Ray were thirty yards down the slope from Bobby, in a clearing safely away from the mouth of the cave. Not that any distance was safe, if what they said was true. The late-afternoon sun coated the canopy of red oak and maple with soft, golden light, yet Bobby shivered, due as much to the chill emanating from the cave as from his fear. The rock in his hand weighed as much as a sack of feed corn.

“I’ve been to the camps,” Vernon Ray said. “My daddy’s got all that stuff.”

“That’s just a bunch of guys playing dress-up,” Dex said.

“It’s authentic. 26th North Carolina Troops. Wool pants, breech loaders, wooden canteens—”

“Okay, Cornwad,” Dex said. “So they didn’t have no goddamn zippers.”

“Daddy said—”

“Your daddy goes to those reenactments to get away from your mom,” Dex said. “And you, too. My old man drags me along, but you always get left behind. What ya think of that, Cornwad?”

During Dex’s bullying, Bobby took the opportunity to ease a couple of steps back from the mouth of the cave. The noise inside it was steady and persistent, like a prisoner’s desolate scratching of a spoon against a concrete wall. The Hole seemed to be daring him to come closer. Bobby considered dropping the stone in his hand and pretending he had thrown it while Dex wasn’t looking. But Dex had a way of knowing things.

“Bobby’s chicken crap,” Vernon Ray said, changing the subject away from his dad and deflecting Dex’s attention.

*Good one, V-Ray. I thought we were on the same side here.*

Dex tapped a cigarette from a fresh pack, then pushed it in his mouth and let it dangle. “Ah, hell with it,” he said. “You can believe the stories if you want. I got better things to worry about.”

Relieved, Bobby took a step downhill but froze when he heard the whisper.

“*Earley.*”

It was the wind. Had to be. The same wind that tumbled a gray pillar of smoke from the end of Dex’s cigarette, that quivered the trees, that pushed dead autumn leaves against his sneakers.

Still, his throat felt as if he’d swallowed the rock in his hand. Because the whisper came again, low, personal, and husked with menace.

“*Earrrrr-leeeee.*”

A resonant echo freighted the name. If Bobby had to imagine the mouth from which the word had issued—and at the moment Bobby was plenty busy *not* imagining—it would belong to a dirty-faced, gaunt old man. But like Dex said, you could believe the stories if you wanted, which implied a choice. *When in doubt, go with the safe bet.*

“To hell with it,” Bobby said, putting extra air behind the words to hide any potential cracks. “I want me one of those smokes.”

He flung the rock—away from the cave, lest he wake any more of those skeletal men inside—and hurried down the slope, nearly slipping in his haste. One more whisper might have wended from the inky depths, but Bobby’s feet scuffed leaves and Dex laughed and Vernon Ray hacked from a too-deep draw and the music of the forest swarmed in: whistling birds, creaking branches, tinkling creek water, and the brittle cawing of a lonely crow.

Bobby joined his friends and sat on a flat slab of granite beside the stump. From there, the Hole looked less menacing, a gouge in the dirt. Granite boulders, pocked with lichen and worn smooth by the centuries, framed the opening, and stunted, deformed jack pines clung to the dirt above the cave. A couple of dented beer cans lay half-buried in the leaves, and a rubber dangled like a stubby rattlesnake skin from a nearby laurel branch. Mulatto Mountain rose another hundred feet in altitude above the cave, where it topped off with sycamore and buckeye trees that had been sheared trim by the high wind.

He took a cancer stick from Dex and fired it up, inhaling hard enough to send an inch of glowing orange along its tip. The smoke bit his lungs but he choked it down and then wheezed it out in small tufts. The first buzz of nicotine numbed his fingers and floated him slightly from his body. Relishing the punishment, he went back to mouth-smoking the way he usually did, rolling the smoke with his tongue instead of huffing it down.

“We ought to camp here sometime,” Dex said, smoking with the ease of the addicted. He played dress-up as much as the Civil War reenactors did, though his uniform of choice was upscale hoodlum—white T-shirt and a windbreaker that had “McCallister Alley” stitched over the left breast pocket. Three leaning bowling pins, punctured by a yellow starburst indicating a clean strike, were sewn beneath the label.

Dex’s old man owned the only alley within 80 miles of Titusville, and about once a month Mac McCallister was lubed enough from Scotch to let the boys roll a few free games.

“It’ll be too cold to camp soon,” Vernon Ray said, constantly flicking ash from his cigarette like a sissy. Bobby was almost embarrassed for him, but at the moment he had other concerns besides his best friend maybe being queer.

Like the Jangling Hole, and whoever—or *whatever*—had spoken to him. *The wind, nothing but the wind.*

“Best time of year for it,” Dex said. “I can get my old man’s tent, swipe a couple six-packs, bring some fishing poles. Maybe tote my .410 and bag us a couple squirrels for dinner.”

“There’s a level place down by the creek,” Bobby said.

“Right here’s fine,” Dex said, sweeping one arm out in the expansive and generous gesture of one giving away something that wasn’t his. “Put the tent between the roots of that oak yonder. Already got a fireplace.” He booted one of the rocks that ringed a hump of charred wood.

“I don’t know if my folks will let me,” Vernon Ray said.

“Your dad’s doing Stoneman’s, ain’t he?” Dex dangled his cigarette from his lower lip. “Since he’s the big captain and all.”

Stoneman’s Raid was an annual Civil War reenactment that commemorated the Yankee incursion suffered by Titusville in 1864. The weekend warriors commemorated it by sleeping on the ground, drinking whiskey from dented canteens, and logging time in the saddle on rumps grown soft from too many hours in the armchair. If they were like Bobby’s dad, they spent their free time thumbing the remote between “Dancing With The Stars” and “The History Channel.”

“Sure,” Vernon Ray said, voice hoarse from the cigarette. He flicked his smoke twice, but no ash fell. “Mom will probably go to Myrtle Beach like usual.”

“The beach,” Dex said. “Wouldn’t mind eyeing some bikini babes myself.”

There was a test in Dex’s tone, maybe a taunt. Perhaps Dex, like Bobby, had been wondering about Vernon Ray’s sexual orientation. “What ya think, Bobby? Sandy squeeze sounds a lot better than watching a bunch of old farts in uniform, don’t it?”

Bobby’s gaze had wandered to the Hole again and he scanned the crisp line where the dappled sunlight met the black wall of hidden space that burrowed deep into Mulatto Mountain. As Dex called his name, Bobby blinked and took a deep, stinging puff. He spoke around the exhaled smoke, borrowing a line from his dad’s secret stash of magazines in the tool shed. “Yeah, wouldn’t mind plowing a tight little sun goddess.”

Dex reached out and gave Vernon Ray a chummy slap on the back that was loud enough to echo off the rocks. “Beats pounding the old pud, huh?”

Vernon Ray nodded and took a quick hit. He even held his cigarette like a sissy, his pinky lifted in the air as if communicating in some sort of delicate sign language. Vernon Ray, unlike most of the kids at Titusville Middle School, already had a hair style, a soft, wavy curl flopping over his forehead. Bobby wished he could protect his best friend, change him, rip that precious blonde curl out by the roots and turn him into a regular guy before Dex launched into asshole mode. When Dex got rolling, things went mean quick, and Vernon Ray’s eyes already welled with water, either from the smoke or the teasing.

“I heard something at the Hole,” Bobby said, not even realizing he was speaking until the sentence escaped.

“Do what?” Dex leaned forward, flicking his butt into the cold, dead embers of the campfire.

“Somebody’s in there.”

Dex twisted off a laugh that sounded like wheeze of an emphysema sufferer. “Something jangly, maybe? Bobby, you’re so full of shit it’s leaking out your ears.”

Vernon Ray looked at him with gratitude. *Bambi eyes*, Bobby thought. *Pathetic*.

Bobby put a little drama in it to grab Deke’s full attention. “It went ‘Urrrrr.’”

Deke snorted again. “Maybe somebody’s barfing.”

“Could have been a bum,” Bobby said. “Ever since they shut down the homeless shelter, I’ve seen them sleeping under the bridge and behind the Dumpster at KFC. They’ve got to go somewhere. They don’t just disappear.”

“Maybe they do,” Dex said. “I reckon those wino bastards better stay out of sight or they’ll run ‘em plumb out of the county.”

The shelter had been shut down through the insidious self-righteousness of civic pride. Merchants had complained about panhandling outside their stores and the Titusville Town Council had drafted an ordinance against loitering. However, the town attorney, a misplaced Massachusetts native who had married into the fifth-generation law firm that had ruled the town behind the scenes since Reconstruction, dug up some court rulings suggesting that such an ordinance would interfere with the panhandlers’ First Amendment rights. Since the town leaders couldn’t use the law as a whip and chair, they instead cut off local-government funding and drove the shelter into bankruptcy. Vernon Ray had explained all this to Bobby, but Bobby didn’t think it was that complicated. People who didn’t play by the rules lost the game, simple as that.

“Even a bum’s not stupid enough to sleep in the Hole,” Vernon Ray said. “Cold as a witch’s diddy in there.”

Dex grinned with approval. “That why you didn’t th’ow the rock, Bobby Boy? Afraid a creepy old crackhead might th’ow it back?”

“Probably just the wind,” Bobby said. “Probably there’s a bunch of other caves and the air went through just right.”

“Sure it wasn’t the Boys in Blue and Gray?” Dex said, thumbing another smoke from the pack. “Kirk’s See-Through Raiders?”

“Like you said, you can believe the stories if you want.” Still, Bobby’s gaze kept traveling to the oily orifice in the black Appalachian soil.

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