

EXERPT FROM CHAPTER 11

CORKSCREWED

There was little activity on Market Street. Two-thirds of the sailors in Charleston had gone home for the holidays. I didn't have enough leave time built up to go anywhere. As lonely as I was, it was probably better to stay away from my so-called family. Last Christmas, I'd hitchhiked home from Boston in a snow storm only to find my dad drunk on the floor after having been knocked down by my brother-in-law Topper. Then Mom, also drunk, slipped Dad a pair of scissors and told him to stab Topper. I didn't need any more of that.

I looked in two other places on Market Street before I got to the Krazy Kat. Gail, the owner, was behind the bar. "Hey beautiful," I said. "Merry Christmas!"

Gail's butt was two axe handles wide, and her face looked like a squirrel's with both cheeks jammed full of acorns.

She screamed, "Well kiss my ass. Long time no see, sailor. Where the hell you been?"

"I quit hanging around joints like yours. It was giving me a bad reputation."

Gail whooped as she set a beer in front of me. "Yeah, wouldn't want you to get a bad name. I never will forget the night you and Hoot and that black-haired kid—what's his name?—beat the shit out of those jarheads in here."

"Whoa. Don't give me credit for that. DuBlois and I weren't even with Hoot that night. Hoot came in because there was a fight and he wanted in on it. If it hadn't been for him, those Marines would have killed both of us."

She was laughing hysterically. "But it was you set fire to the piano player's pant leg." She slapped the top of the bar, and cackled. "He . . . he was jumping . . . around like a one-legged kangaroo."

I sipped my beer, wishing Gail would go in the back room so I could spike my drink with Frogman's shine. My beer needed help, and so did the Krazy Kat's holiday décor. A few strands of icicles had been draped over the back bar, and three branches from a pine tree had been cut and stuck into a vase that was one third full of nasty water. Someone had hung two scratched Christmas bulbs on branches denuded of needles. "Gail, you seen Jackson tonight?"

"He that good-looking blonde kid with the partial plate that he sticks out on the end of his tongue?"

"None other."

"Two hours ago he and another guy from your ship—both three sheets in the wind--said they were on their way to the Snake Pit."

"What's that?"

"Another tonk. Like the name implies, a shit hole at the end of the world. I don't recommend it. Lot of Charleston's white trash hangs out there. Mean suckers. Carry switches, chains, jack handles—shit like that."

"How far?"

"Eight, ten miles back in the swamp. Ask any cabbie, he'll know."

"What I owe you, girlfriend?"

"Two bits. When are you and I going to do the town?"

I put a half dollar on the bar. Lonely as I was, Gail was out of the question. "Soon," I said. "In the meantime, have a Merry Christmas!"

"That's an eight dollar ride, buddy. Let me see your money."

I waved a ten dollar bill in the cabbie's face. "Let's see your two dollars in change"

His eyes got mean. "What are you, some kind a Yankee smartass?"

"Stop me when I get to the part that's not true. The majority of your rides are sailors, and they always pay, right? Don't treat me like a con artist. You don't trust me. Why the fuck should I trust you?"

"Okay, okay. Here's the change." He showed me two singles, and said, "Let's go."

Six miles south out of Charleston on Highway 17, the cab turned onto a dirt trail through thick live oaks and pines.

The terrain was pitch black and desolate. I was getting a little nervous. "How much farther?"

"Five minutes."

The taxie bumped over ruts and potholes. Ahead, three pair of eyes flashed green in the yellow headlight. We slowed and then stopped. The driver said, "If I had my gun there'd be meat on the table tomorrow." He edged the cab forward until the trio of deer sauntered away.

We rolled through several hubcap deep slews.

A dim light flickered through the moss-covered trees. There was nothing to indicate a parking lot. Several cars had been scattered under the trees as though abandoned. Three Indian motorcycles and two Harley Davidsons were parked side-by-side under a giant cypress. The cabbie pulled in next to the bikes and turned around in his seat with his right hand extended. "Eight bucks, sonny."

"Hand the change to me at the same time I give you this ten."

I stood amid the trees and watched the cab's tail light become smaller and then disappear. It was black as death in this damn swamp, and bugs were flying into every exposed orifice. I should have told the cabbie to wait. Fat chance.

What had possessed me to come out here in the first place? I wanted to see someone I cared about. It was as simple as that. Jackson was the only person in Charleston, maybe in the whole universe, who cared whether I lived or died. I was going to wish him a Merry Christmas come hell or high water.

The Pit had been put together with a variety of corrugated tin sheets, cinder blocks, and plywood. I stood in the doorway straining to see if Jackie was there. The gaudily lighted jukebox was blasting out Hank Snow's "I'm Moving On." To my left, a plank across the fourth step of two step ladders served as a bar. Tubs, full of iced beer, substituted for coolers. No indoor plumbing.

In the center of the room was a pool table with the felt cover torn in three places. One of the pockets was ripped out, and the wood trim around the top was scored with dozens of cigarette burns. Two-leather clad, tattoo-covered toughs were slamming the cue ball into the other balls. One of the balls went into the shredded pocket, dropped to the floor and rolled to within a foot of where I was standing. The player swaggered over, picked up the ball, and turned to face me. He wore a bandanna around his forehead, a dangling earring and a length of chain in his belt. He pitched the ball in the air, caught it, and said, "Wha' cu want?"

Before I could say anything, an old man rolled from behind the bar in a wheelchair. "Jodie! Shut you mouf. You ain't running the Pit." Five feet away from the biker, he pulled a sawed off shotgun from a holster mounted to the side of the chair, pumped a round into the chamber. "I need you hep, I let you know. Now back off for I blow a tunnel through you guts."

Another biker hollered, "Whatsa matter, Jodie, you scared that old cripple?"

The man in the chair said, "I ain't tell'n you 'gin. Fuck away from this boy."

Jodie edged past the wheelchair and went back to the pool table.

The other player slapped his thigh and laughed, "You scared Jodie. Yeah, you 'fraid that ol' cripple."

The biker called Jodie said, "Shut up 'fore I jam this cue stick up your ass."

The shotgun wavered for a minute while the old man looked me over. He studied my black-eye and battered face, spat on the floor and said, "From the look of you, boy, you might be a troublemaker. I truck no fight'n inside. Outside? That you bidness. Now what you want?"

"A beer'd be good."

Four tables and a floor heater filled the space to my right. At one of the tables were two sailors. I took my beer and headed that way, but before I could get across the room, Jackie jumped out of one of the chairs and said, "Jesus Christ! It's Myers. Man, I thought you were dead." He grabbed me and hugged my neck. "Where you been?"

"I'm still at the Naval Hospital."

"What you doing out here in the swamp?"

"I've been looking for you. Gail, at the Krazy Kat, told me you'd come out here. Jesus, man, are you nuts? I love you, but this place is full of maniacs."

"Yeah, but it stays open all night. Rigby and I plan on staying here till after Christmas."

Rigby jerked his head off the table. "Fuck you doing out here, Myers?"

"I just told you."

Rigby was too drunk to understand why I'd be looking for Jackie in a swamp. He stood up, flapped his arms, and said, "Cock-a-doodle-do. I'm a fucking rooster, and I'm going to find a house full of hens." He crowed again.

Someone from the other end yelled for Rigby to shut up.

On the far side of the pool table there were four others dressed in leather.

I leaned into the middle of the table. "Listen, you two. We've got to get out of here. Those skinheads are going to beat the shit out of us. Maybe worse. Gail said they're bad news. I saw a chain hanging on one's belt."

Jackie put his arm around me. "Looks like somebody used your face for batting practice. You need something to stiffen your spine in case we have to fight our way out of here. Been in the hospital too long." He giggled and stuck his teeth out. He waved and yelled, "Bring us some whiskey."

There was no way I could fight with my fists. I'd have to find a ball bat or a cue stick.

The wheelchair came out from behind the bar, rattled across the floor and stopped at our table. The old man said, "Best moonshine in Carolina. Be one dollar for half a pint."

Rigby yelled, "Cock-a-doodle-do." He handed a dollar to the chairman.

"Jackie, look here." I held out my hands. The right was still lightly bandaged. "I can't help you. Fight breaks out I have to use something other than my fists."

"Hey, that left hand looks a lot better." Jackie spiked both our beers, then handed the bottle to Rigby. He turned the pint up and guzzled.

I took a swig of my beer. "God almighty! That moonshine's rancid. I patted the bottle under my jersey. "Don't buy any more of that arsenic. I've got the best shine in Charleston. Stiles took me to the dealer, a guy named Bull Frog."

Rigby gagged, grabbed his throat and fell to the floor. "Cock-a-doodle-do! I just drank diesel fuel."

Jackie pulled him by his jumper. "Get up, Rigby!"

"If I get up, I'm going to have to beat the shit out of those two assholes playing pool. Then I'm going to push that old man and his chair into the swamp."

"For god's sake, Jackie," I said. "Make him shut up, he's going to get us killed."

Rigby yelled, "It's too hot in here. Turn off that fucking stove." He crawled under the table.

Jackie pulled on his jumper. "Come on, Rig, let me help you up."

Rigby said, "Wait 'til I finish peeing."

I dove under the table. "Rigby, you've got to go outside and do that."

Rigby pounded the floor. His laughter sounded like Daffy Duck. "You don't think ole' Rigby would actually pee under his own table, do you? Cock-a-doodle-do. Give me some more diesel oil. I got to get this engine cranked."

While I was pulling on Rigby, he laid his head on the floor and started snoring.

I backed out and sat on the floor by Jackie's chair. "Thank God, he's gone to sleep."

Jackie said, "Well, maybe we can get out of here in one piece. How we going to get back to Charleston?"

The Frogman's shine was adding courage. This was as good a place as any to spend Christmas. I staggered to my feet and called to the chairman, "Two more beers."

One of the pool players had crawled on top of the table and passed out.

The wheelchair came out from behind the bar and brought the beer. The old man started back to the bar, stopped, nodded toward the sleeping Rigby. "Best you keep that'n quiet."

I went to the jukebox. There was a song by Ernest Tubb I'd never heard. I put a dime in and punched "Blue Christmas" twice.

I poured us all a hit from the Frogman's bottle while Ernest Tubb wailed, *I'll have a blue Christmas without you, and I'll be blue thinking about you.*

I took a long pull and started singing along. "Decorations of red on a green Christmas tree . . . "

One of the bikers yelled, "Shut the fuck up."

Rigby rolled over and said, "Cock-a-doodle-do."

I started bawling. Jackie put his arm over my shoulder and said, "It's okay, don't cry, Myers. We'll get home one of these days."

"I don't want to go home. I don't know what I want. I'm lonely, but nobody at home gives a shit about me. You're the only family I've got."

"Come on, Myers, you're drunk."

"Well, maybe I am, but what I said's true. Remember the night I came aboard the *Towhee* in Guantanamo?"

Jackie nodded.

Tears and snot were flying. I blubbered, "You lent me a bar of soap."

Jackie jabbed me with his elbow. "Don't let any of those mule-fuckers hear you crying. Jesus, a bar of soap's no big deal."

"It was to me."

Jackie said, "Okay, friend, you're making me feel bad." He started sniffing back tears. The jukebox cranked, *When those blue snowflakes start falling, that's when those blue memories start calling . . .*

Jackie and I had our arms over the other's shoulder. We were slobbering and wailing along with the music. I said, "We ain't gonna let these assholes get the best of us, are we?"

I was referring to the Navy, but Jackie said, "If we could sober Rigby up, we could whip every sumbitch in here."

The biker that had been sleeping on top of the pool table rose up and threw a pool ball at the jukebox. It missed, but hit an electric beer sign. Sparks flew, and the lights blinked. He drew his arm back to throw another. The chairman's sawed-off shotgun blew a two foot hole through the front door.

Rigby jumped up and smashed his head against the underside of the table.

The chairman yelled, "Put that cue ball down, Jodi, or you gonna look jes' like that door. You dun fuck up the 'lectric."

Jodie dropped the ball.

One of his friends jerked the shotgun out of the old man's hand, smashed it across the bar and said, "Okay, now, Jodie, kill that fucking Christmas music."

Rigby crawled out from under the table. "I've told you for the last time to turn off that damned heater." He took two long steps, and like a professional football player kicked the heater off the floor. It flew through the air, pulled the connection to the oil supply loose and crashed landed onto an empty table. Within seconds, the Snake Pit was on fire.

Flames flashed between us and the door. Rigby picked up a chair and threw it through a window. "Cock-a-doodle-do . It's time to find another chicken coop. This one's too warm."

We dived through the window and landed on the back side of the building.

The chairman screamed at the bikers to get out.

We scrambled through the underbrush and followed the trail to where the vehicles were parked. Rigby tried the doors until he found one that was unlocked. The keys were under the floor mat. "You roosters want a ride back to the chicken coop? Ten bucks apiece. Take it or leave it. Cock-a-doodle-do!"

Jackie said, "Wait a minute." He ran to the motorcycles, splashed them with the chairman's bad hooch and threw a lit match. The bikes exploded in flames. "Might just as well have a big fire."

We jumped in the car. Rigby floorboarded it, and we roared away from the blazing building. The car fishtailed back and forth across the trail, lunged through chug holes, plowed through swamp grass higher than the windshield, and dragged the tail pipe off on a stump. Without a muffler the engine howled, popped and roared like a gravel truck. I braced a hand against the roof and the other on the seat. Best to injure my hands rather than fracture my skull. Ahead I could see an occasional car pass on highway 17. I thought we were going to make it when suddenly Rigby swerved the wheel, jumped a creek bed and smashed into a tree.

"Jesus, what you trying to do, kill us?" I asked.

"I didn't want to hit it."

"What?"

"That polar bear. Cock-a-doodle-do!"

I whispered in Jackie's ear, "Fucker's nuts."

“You just figuring that out. Hell, put a drop of booze in him, and he turns into a drug-crazed rhino. Tomorrow he’ll have the DTs and won’t remember a thing. Come on, we’ve got to catch a ride back, ’fore those bikers come out of that swamp swinging those chains.”