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Cruelty has a human heart,  
And Jealousy a human face;  
Terror the human form divine,  
And Secrecy the human dress.  
— William Blake

## Prologue

On the morning of the day they died, Cody Jackson and Mark Turner were told they were being transferred from the Aimsley City Jail because of overcrowding.

The two had been cellmates for two days in the dank second-floor lockup, and the prospect of getting bumped over to a parish work farm was appealing. At least they would have fresh air.

Cody was awaiting trial on an armed robbery charge, although he had a rap sheet long enough to get him declared a habitual offender, a ticket to longer jail time. He was a massive black man with shoulders that stretched against the seams of the blue prison work shirt. The length of his hair sometimes led people to wonder if he was Rastafarian.

With the scraggly beard that covered his chin and the scar which stretched from the scalp line down across his forehead and through his left eyebrow in a jagged pink trail, he created a threatening presence. He was the kind of guy cops hated to deal with, and they were careful to keep him shackled wrist and ankle anytime he was out of his cell.

Turner was a less formidable five feet eleven inches and weighed one hundred fifty pounds. Still, wearing the faded jeans, tee shirt and denim jacket in which he had been arrested, he was a perfect example of the kind of person motorists didn't pick up hitchhiking.

His long black hair and beard made him frightening; they gave him a resemblance to Charles Manson. When they'd hauled him into the police station on a charge of vagrancy, one of the officers had muttered, "I bet you he's no saint."

He had been passing through Aimsley, Louisiana, drifting toward Houston for no particular reason.

It wasn't the first time he had been in jail on a "no visible means of support" rap. More than a few times in the six months he'd been drifting through the South, he'd been accommodated on bunks in small town jails.

He didn't really mind, because he had no place in particular to be. Turner had been concentrating on losing himself since his girlfriend's death in a car wreck. He had dropped out of medical school in Florida and begun to thumb along the Gulf Coast, taking jobs once in a while but more often than anything devoting himself to oblivion.

He drank, picked up drugs in the nooks and crannies and kept his head in a stupor that usually helped ease the pain.

He had been deeply in love with the girl, expecting to marry her. They had met in a bookstore near campus and been smitten immediately.

She was just out of college, working as a computer programmer and had become a breath of fresh air for him, a refuge from the grueling pace of school and work. He had to work because both of his parents were dead.

In a way, Lois had filled a void that their loss had left inside him long before.

He had not realized how much she meant to him until word arrived that she was dead. Someone had run a red light, and her Toyota had been demolished.

He had gone numb at first; then the tears had begun. After the funeral he had tried to return to the routine, but every time he turned a corner, there was some reminder of her: a shop where they'd had coffee, a bench where they had rested, a thousand others.

Running had been his only alternative, his only hope to escape his pain, and so he had bundled a few things and fled with his thumb extended.

A cold wind hit him, bringing him back to the present as they guided him out of the police station behind Cody. It was November and unusually cold for late autumn in Louisiana. Normally autumn was little different from the last days of summer.

With his hands shackled, he had difficulty adjusting his jacket. Cody remained stoic as the guard motioned them toward the rear of a blue police wagon.

Once his feet were released, Cody stepped up into the rear of the vehicle and sat down on one of the cold metal benches that stretched along the inner wall.

"Got a cigarette?" Turner asked the guard.

Without changing expression, the man gave him a slight shove.

"Moving, moving," Turner said and followed his cellmate into the van.

Once he was seated, the doors slammed, and the sound of the lock being set slipped through them.

A moment later the van was moving, rocking slightly as it bounced out of the parking lot.

They rode in silence for a long time. Cody rested his head against the wall, his dark eyes rolling toward the ceiling. He didn't talk much, and his expression was grim.

Turner read graffiti scratched on the gray metal walls until he noticed love messages. That made him think of Lois, so he turned his gaze toward the rear window. For a moment he could see her face reflected there. He forced himself to look beyond.

The glass was lined with protective wire, and the only view was the ribbon of highway behind them.

He could see that the morning was a drab gray color, maybe a better morning for sleeping than anything else. If the rain that was threatening appeared, it would be a cold drizzle, enough to make any other activity miserable.

"What's it like at the sheriff's penal colony?" Turner asked to break the monotony.

"Ain't never been there," Cody replied.

Turner shrugged. "Maybe it won't be too bad."

"Long as we got a roof over our heads."

"I'm sure I've been in worse," Turner said. "There are some smelly, shitty places to lock people up in the world."

"Been in a few of those myself," was Cody's reply.

Turner only nodded back. He didn't want to get into an argument about who'd had the worse incarcerations. No reason to stir up trouble. He kind of liked the guy, and he figured he needed all the friends he could get.

He'd learned it was good to have tough friends in the lockups. They kept bad things from happening.

His eyes trailed back to the window again, and he stared out at the roadway. It had narrowed. The van had made some twists and turns to which he had paid little attention.

Somewhere along the way they had left the main highway.

"Where is this place located anyway?" Turner asked.

"Edge of the parish," Cody said.

Turner stared out at what he could see of the roadside. "Is it in a swamp?"

"It's a work farm. Why would it be in a friggin' swamp?" Cody asked.

"Just judging by our surroundings," Turner said.

Cody frowned and looked out the rear window himself to see the narrow road which was heavily shrouded by the tree branches.

He shook his head. "Somethin's wrong," he said. "The farm is on Route 1. There's easier ways to get there from downtown."

The van clattered over a pothole which jolted them.

"Maybe it's a shortcut," Turner said.

"I don't think so," Cody said. "I think we're in trouble."

"Come on, settle down. We're prisoners. There's a limit to what they can do to us. Remember the Geneva convention?"

Cody shook his head. He was visibly nervous. It was the first emotion of any kind he'd shown since Turner had known him.

"Easy," Turner said, beginning to grow a little uneasy himself. If the big man was scared, there might really be something wrong.

They hit another pothole which once again jostled them, almost spilling Cody off his seat.

"I'm sure it's going to be all right," Turner said.

"You don't know the stories," Cody hissed. "You ain't from here. You ain't heard."

"Heard what?"

"Rumor, fact, who knows? In the jails they always talk about people who got released, only nobody ever heard of them again on the outside. It's like they let 'em go from the jail, and they just disappeared from the face of the Earth."

"What are you saying?"

"Nobody knows what happened to those people," Cody said. "But everybody has suspicions." He pulled against his handcuffs in a futile effort to

free his hands.

"They couldn't get away with that sort of thing," Turner protested. "I've been in lots of jails all over the place. Things are regulated. The state or even the federal people would catch on to it."

"They got other things to worry about," Cody protested. "We ain't nothin' but scum where they're concerned."

"What do you think we're in for?"

"We needs a plan," Cody said.

He started to get up and move toward the rear doors. When the van lurched to a stop, Turner had to catch him to keep him from falling backward.

An instant later the doors were yanked open.

The guard was not alone. Beside him were a couple of men in jeans and work shirts with heavy, sheepskin jackets. Each cradled a rifle cradled, and cowboy hats tilted over their eyes.

"Climb on out, boys," one of them said around a thin brown cigar clenched in his teeth. He was a tall, heavy man with long sideburns.

Turner followed Cody through the door. He could feel his heartbeat quickening, and he studied each of the men without finding any indication of who they might be.

As the guard herded them around the side of the van, Turner and Cody found themselves in front of several other men on horseback.

One of the mounted men reached into a saddlebag and pulled out a computer printout.

"What we have here are a couple of habitual offenders," said the dark-haired man. He wore a black baseball cap instead of a cowboy hat, and he had cold blue eyes that offered no sign of mercy.

A thick black beard covered the lower portion of his face, making him seem even more sinister.

He wore jeans and a thick vest that left his arms free, but they did not look like the kind of clothes he would usually wear. There was an elegance about him. Late forties but aged well, only a few touches of silver-gray visible at his temples.

"Gentlemen. Cody Johnson." Voice soft, his words precise. His breath turned to smoke in the November air. "He's in jail for robbery now He will probably be set free because there is not an accurate description of him from the convenience store clerk he pistol whipped."

Johnson stood silently, listening to the charges.

"Prior to that Mr. Johnson was before the judge for aggravated assault, theft, battery, attempted murder and on and on. We can't prove he killed his girlfriend's brother last summer, but we have a pretty good idea he did so, over some money. That's why he's joining us this morning."

Cody didn't bother to move. He had regained his stoic expression. Turner guessed it was the same look he would have assumed if he had been facing a judge.

The dark-haired man flipped the sheet up and looked at Turner. "Mr. Turner here has several aliases. He has ridden with the Lucifer's Disciples motorcycle group, sold drugs in three states and committed assault on numerous people including several elderly gentlemen in Jackson, Mississippi."

The words rattled Turner. "What the hell are you talking about?" he asked. "You're making a mistake." One of the men jabbed him in the side with a rifle barrel to silence him.

"Mr. Turner has four aliases that we know of, so who can tell what kind of crimes he's committed besides these on his list."

"You're making a mistake!" Turner shouted. "I've never been picked up for anything worse than vagrancy."

"The guilty man speaks loudly," the man replied, nodding toward the guard, who unlatched the handcuffs on both men.

"You have never done society any good," said the dark-haired man. "Never contributed anything. You've slipped through the fingers of the law. Now you're going to be hunted like the scum you are. It would only be a matter of time until you killed somebody else or did some other damage. So now you are ours. Judgment has been rendered."

He pointed toward the edge of the forest. "Run. There is your only chance of refuge, but don't get your hopes up. You will be shown all the mercy you gave to your victims. We'll be after you, and who knows what lurks in those woods?"

Turner and Cody looked at each other for a brief instant. Fear filled their eyes.

With little choice they turned and sprinted toward the edge of the forest, seeking to disappear as they burst into the trees.

Branches slapped at them, and their legs ached as they moved across rough ground. Cold air burned in their lungs, and their hearts thundered, filling their ears with the sound of rushing blood.

Dodging smaller trees, the two tried to find some kind of refuge. Their legs kicked high as they ran, and they gasped through their mouths. The air made their faces numb and brought tears to their eyes.

When they reached a small creek, they paused, heaving as they looked back.

"We're in it deep," Cody said. "We got to do somethin'."

"What the hell can we do?"

"Get some weapons, somethin'."

"Are those cops?"

"Could be. Some of them. Hasta be."

"That man, their leader. Who the hell is he?"

"Don't know," Cody said, shaking his head. He leaned against a tree for support as he tried to catch his breath.

An instant later the sound of hoofbeats carried through the trees, like thunder, loud and coarse.

"We can't outrun those horses," said Turner.

"If we don't, we're gonna be dead men," Cody responded.

They splashed through icy creek water and climbed up the opposite bank in a frenzy of movement. Water soaked their pants and made the material heavy as they continued to run. In moments wind had chilled them.

Their muscles began to shudder.

On top of everything else, Turner realized hypothermia was going to become a threat, but as the shouts of their pursuers echoed through the trees, he decided illness was the least of his worries.

Stumbling along, Cody discovered a heavy oak limb on the ground. Seizing it, he tucked it under his arm.

"We'll get you somethin' too," he told Turner. "We both gonna have to fight if we're gonna get out of this, and I'm gonna need your help."

Turner only nodded. His head was a flurry of confusion. He had never dealt with a situation in which his own life was in danger.

He couldn't understand the charges they had read against him either. Somehow they had made a mistake, confused him with somebody else. He had made no contribution to society, but he hadn't done what they had accused him of either.

For the first time since Lois had died, he longed to be back in school, going through the rigorous but familiar routine of classes and work. What was he doing in the Louisiana swamps, being chased by a group of madmen?

He stepped on a root without realizing it until it was too late. His foot hung on the snag, and the pain drove up through his leg. Dropping to one knee, he groaned at the ache in his ankle.

He tried to rise again immediately but was unable to stand due to the pain.

Cody stopped beside him. "Can you move?"

"It's twisted bad."

"Shit."

He tried to help Turner stand. When it proved impossible he cursed again.

"We've got to keep moving," he said.

Turner could only shake his head. His face was wet with perspiration that quickly congealed, and his throat was tight and dry. "Go on," he said. "I'll find somewhere to hide."

Cody gave a quick look around to see if there was anything amid the pine trees that would offer shelter. Their surroundings were barren. The leaves had fallen, and the ground was matted down with a damp blanket of brown.

He failed to look upward, so he did not see the movement in the branches. It probably wouldn't have done him any good to know what was coming anyway.

With stick in hand, he got to his feet and started to take a step. The hoof beats were not far away now; flight was his only chance.

Turner tried to get onto his knees so that he could move or at least do something to find safety.

When the tree branch above them bounced and rattled, they both turned their gazes to the sky — too late.

What they saw was no more than a grimy blur.

At first it appeared to be an animal, then a man, and then it didn't matter anymore because it was upon Cody, sitting on his shoulders with its arms around his neck as its teeth began ripping at his throat.

He clubbed at it with the oak branch, but he could not reach behind him far enough to affect it. He was forced to the ground. Struggling against his attacker, he rolled, kicking and punching. His blows had little effect, and when something cut into his jugular, he stopped struggling. In moments his eyes glazed over, and he stared sightlessly at the forest sky.

Turner tried to move toward him, unsure how he could offer help against the creature. When he saw no sign of movement from the black man, he hesitated.

The attacker spun then, its movements quick and erratic. Turner thought for a moment he was hallucinating as a flap of Cody's flesh fell from its teeth.

He still did not know what he was seeing, and the terror that swept over him was so immense his mind stopped processing data altogether.

He screamed and began to thrash backward, dragging his injured leg. He was still looking toward the ruins of Cody's body, so he didn't see the second creature as it moved in on him, grasping his head to mash it until his skull crushed.

He died almost instantly; so he didn't feel anything as his flesh was devoured, and he never formulated the thought that might have come: *jailhouse rumors weren't all just rumors after all.*