

Chapter 1

“Get the hell outta here!” yelled the burly middle-aged man, as he gave a powerful shove to a much smaller, and younger man.

The surrounding men each took their turn, vigorously pushing the young man around. The action gained momentum as he bounced off each successive man in the crowded room like a ball in a game of four-square. The young man tumbled into Al, knocking him forward, pressing his chest into the bar as their denim-covered legs tangled in a wild dance. While the younger man lay splayed across the dark, wet, stained and scuffed floor boards, Al caught his nearly empty mug of beer before it had a chance to spatter across the wooden bar top.

“You’re not welcome! We don’t allow baby killers in here!”

Burly grabbed the young man from the floor by the collar of his t-shirt, tearing it as easily as a sheet of paper. The young man’s arm almost lifted from his socket as Burly forcefully escorted him to the door.

“The next time I see you in here, I’m calling the cops.”

He shoved the young man through the door, into the dark night and turned in glory to face his comrades.

“Any other drunken killers I see in here will get the same treatment. Take that as a warning.”

He glared around the room and for a brief moment the group fell silent, the juke box the sole sound, but quickly returned to the raucous activity so common for these men at the end of a work day. Like a magnet, Al’s eyes momentarily connected across the room with Jay, the only one to hold his secret.

Al pulled his baseball cap lower on his head, his eyes barely visible, so they wouldn’t betray him. He had a history of deceit that went undetected for years. But this was different. Now, there was much more at stake. His nerves brought on the paranoia as he felt eyes from around the room darting in his direction. He began to wonder if

he would be next. Maybe moving two hundred miles wasn't far enough. He nervously scoped the room as the ruckus settled down. The young man's baseball cap lay beer-soaked and trampled on the floor beneath him, causing Al to make one more tug on his own cap. He held onto the neck of his t-shirt and rapidly moved it in and out, fanning away the heat swelling up in his body. He could feel the fire start in his stomach, then like a back-draft, burst through the rest of his body. It was most intense when it reached his head and burned to the tips of his ears. He glanced at his broken reflection in the mirror behind the bar and noticed how cherry red they were. He finally sighed when he found no one was eyeing him as the next to be bounced to the street. The heat dissipated and he felt a coolness flow over his body. He emptied his glass in several long swallows, savoring every drop before it entered his throat. He passed his glass to the bartender with a nod. As he waited for the refill, his eyes skipped around to see if anyone was watching him. He could feel his face flush when he saw Jay making his way across the crowded room. Although he wasn't sure Jay had spied him yet. He reached his dirty hand, blackened from the days work, into his pocket and pulled out a handful of mints covered with a mixture of sand and lint. He blew off the lighter material, and then shook the mints between his two hands to jostle free the rest. He then popped them into his mouth and carefully walked on the outer edge of the crowd, close to the wall. He crept toward the door, while taking a few glances back to track Jay's progress. Moving among the assorted blue-collars-- dirty, holey jeans; filthy t-shirt; baseball cap-wearing; beer-swilling men-- was like swimming with spawning salmon moving up river. Defeated frequently of forward motion was one of the reasons Al chose to slide around the periphery of boisterous workmen. The other reason was an attempt at being inconspicuous, allowing him the chance to slip out.

Country music, bursts of hearty laughter, animated talk that periodically rose above the smoky, music-filled air, defined the typical

end to the workday for some of the working class men in this small Midwestern town. The loud music threatened the wainscoting that was older than most of the patrons. The men were loud and rowdy, enjoying their evening ritual.

With the possibility of jail looming over his head, Al continued his scanning hyper-vigilance. He had trusted only one co-worker with the secret about his past, and now he wasn't sure that had been such a good idea. He didn't want a baby sitter right now. Spilling that secret made it impossible to stay with the rest of the gang until bar time. Oh, how he wanted to stick around and enjoy a few more cold tonics that would eliminate the need to think about his life. Besides his craving for more, it was common knowledge among the crew, that anyone who refused to join the gang for a few cold ones after work would be razzed for the next week and given all of the crappy jobs. That was the double-edged sword presented to him: jail or shit-detail. On top of that, he had to make it out before Jay had a chance to slap his hand. His stealth movement toward the door was thwarted when he was cornered like a trapped animal.

“Hey, Stevens. You're not leaving already.” Bud caught him trying to make his escape only a few feet from the door. With a beer mug in one hand, a shot in the other, and a grin spread across his face, he waved the mug toward the other end of the bar. The foam at the top sloshed and drooled down the side, dripping on the protrusion from his hardy appetite. With a slight slur he made his first attempt to coerce his friend, “I'm sure that cranky old foreman over there is bound to buy another round. C'mon over here with me. We need to talk.”

Al, still facing the door, rolled his eyes and cursed under his breath. He slowly turned to face the hunter, desperately planning his escape.

“Can't stay, Bud. I'm in a hurry... ha..have to be somewhere.”

“Ah... Come on. Where the hell are you going to rush to in

Argon? Shit, you walk to the end of the block and you're on the other side of town," Bud rallied. "Well... that's an exaggeration. But ya know what I mean. You can't be in THAT big a hurry. Besides... it's 'thirsty Thursday'. Everyone knows that."

Bud put his arm over Al's shoulder, beer mug resting near Al's mouth, Bud's beer gut bouncing Al from his balance. He could feel the sweat and grime on their arms mix together, causing him to shift his stance in an earnest attempt to separate. But Bud's hold was tight. The movement only started the beer swashing back and forth in the mug. The smell of the brew wafted up to his nostrils. Al closed his eyes and inhaled slowly, deeply. *Maybe I could stay for one more*, he considered, then convinced himself. *What's one more anyway?* But an unwelcome internal utterance replied, *That's one too many you fool. You'd better find a way out of here.*

"Follow me, buddy. You're not getting away that easy this time. You have one mug of beer and you have to leave? No way. Some of the guys and I were talking. We're not going to stand for that anymore. You never drink with us, Al. What's with that?" He started to lead them back toward the bar, his grip unrelenting on Al's shoulder.

If you only knew.