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**T**he easy flick of Ricky Frazier’s right wrist sent what remained of the lit Marlboro cigarette on a low arc above the hot pavement of the visitors’ parking lot outside the Lee Correctional Institution. For a brief moment, Ricky watched as the cigarette butt bounced once before landing in a small puddle of water. Across the asphalt parking lot, shallow pools had collected in several locations from an intense rainstorm that soaked the entire county. Lasting for more than five hours, the overnight storm had washed out several nearby dirt roads not far from the correctional facility. In Lee County that morning, a number of unimproved roads were currently blocked off. Thick mud and large pools of standing water made them impassable for most types of vehicles. Already waiting in the parking lot for close to twenty-five minutes, Ricky watched as several small puddles shrank from the morning heat. By eight-thirty, the hot sun had heated the paved lot considerably. Slowly, even the larger pools of water began to recede.

*“It’s almost time to get the hell out of here. Ten minutes max and we’re gone!”* Ricky thought as he nervously glanced at the imitation Movado Datron watch fastened to his left wrist. The watch, like the cheap stainless steel ring he wore on his left index finger, had been shoplifted from a Myrtle Beach flea market a week earlier.

Like the two active arrest warrants being held by a neighboring sheriff’s office, Ricky’s past arrest record made his presence at the Lee Correctional Institution an uncomfortable experience to endure. The court had ordered the issuance of one of the warrants after Ricky failed to appear in Conway regarding an assault that occurred in Myrtle Beach months earlier. The second had been issued as a result of a serious motor vehicle accident which left the occupants of the other vehicle in critical condition for close to two weeks. For reasons which were still unclear to his public defender, Ricky had chosen to flee the accident scene on foot. While relatively minor as far as assaults go, the assault charge had been an incident involving one of Ricky’s girlfriends. While no one had been injured, he had chosen to skip the court date in hopes that his wife would not find out about his young girlfriend. For those reasons, as well as several others, Ricky was just as anxious to leave the LCI parking lot as the person he was waiting for. Cops, prison guards, and even prisons themselves were people and places he did his best to try and avoid. Just like his own arrest history, Ricky’s family genes caused him to have a serious dislike for those in authority, and for those places which restricted his freedom.

By nine-thirty, long after Ricky had thought his visit would be nothing more than a distant memory, the area outside the South Carolina Level Three High Security Institution buzzed with activity. Two highly marked Department of Corrections buses had already arrived at the facility that morning, and nearby Ricky could see several civilian employees were busy coming and going from the prison’s front lobby. From within the armed buses transporting the new prisoners to LCI that morning, Ricky noticed several scared looks staring in his direction. Their blank stares made him sweat even harder than he already was. Experiencing the same bus ride on two previous occasions, Ricky cringed when he noticed the blank looks seemingly staring right through him. Standing in the parking lot, he watched the prisoners being delivered like cattle to their new home. Seeing their stares caused him to realize many would likely be using the LCI mailing address as their own for the next several years. It would be for those who managed to survive life inside a maximum security prison.

As he stood watching the mix of prisoners, prison staff, and visitors come and go, Ricky noticed another gray colored corrections bus pull up close to the prison door that he had been nervously keeping tabs on. While the door sat less than one hundred yards away from where he stood, all of the prison’s security features, both the high tech and traditional ones, made it seem much further away.

Near the edge of the driveway, the door Ricky continued to watch sat behind three rows of wire fencing; each intentionally spaced ten feet apart from the one next to it. The security of the prison’s inner wall of fencing was enhanced by a triple layer of concertina razor wire, and by hard-wired electronic sensors tied into the facility’s main security system. The sensors were designed to activate when excessive force or weight was applied against the wire fencing. In most places, each section of fencing running along the outside of the entire prison was at least thirty feet in height. Situated on the middle row of fencing, and spaced apart every fifty feet, were large black and yellow signs. They warned all who passed by that the fence lines were off-limits. They also gave the additional warning of the interior line being electrified. Inside the first row of fencing sat guard towers that were spaced four hundred yards apart; each rising close to one hundred feet in the air. Each was manned by at least one set of eyes which had been trained to anticipate trouble and to prevent it from escalating any further. Along a narrow, circular walkway sitting immediately outside the small secure observation post at the top of each tower, vertical four foot slits in the reinforced concrete walls allowed guards to fire either tear gas canisters or, in the event of a major disturbance, to spray the fence lines and exercise yards with deadly automatic rifle fire. Inside the prison, the name given to the tiny strip of land between the inner and outer fence lines was *No Man’s Land.* Helping to complete the prison’s exterior security features were several Sony infrared cameras; each had been strategically placed along the entire length of the secured perimeter. Mounted on the prison’s exterior walls, several additional cameras monitored the comings and goings at each of the alarmed doors. While the cameras had the ability to function in complete darkness, improvements to the exterior lighting and the placement of one hundred and seven advanced microwave motion detectors served to complete the prison’s security features.

Over the years only two inmates had tried escaping through the door that Ricky was intently watching. One had made it to the top of the first fence before falling and seriously injuring himself as he attempted to scale down the other side. The second prisoner had been shot and killed years earlier when the prison experienced a brief, but complete power failure during an intense storm. He had been cut down after cutting his way through the first two lines of fencing with bolt cutters stolen from the prison’s maintenance shop. On both occasions, the deadly combination of stupidity, electricity, and automatic weapons fire had put quick and successful ends to the escape attempts. Both incidents had later caused a variety of tales to be spun amongst the prison population. While some were true and others exaggerated, both versions had kept others from foolishly trying to cross *No Man’s Land*.

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The alarm’s loud piercing sound was a signal to the guards manning the nearby towers that one of the prison’s main doors was about to be unlocked. The brief, but intense sound came with no type of warning to Ricky and to others walking the grounds near the prison’s main exit. On this occasion, the door being unlocked was the one Ricky had been anxiously watching for far too long. The alarm’s ear-splitting blast startled Ricky as he stood there, but moments later he quickly regained his composure. Now he watched as seven men made their way down the concrete sidewalk towards the first fence line. As they cautiously moved, their eyes focused on the opened door of the bus idling along the curb outside the third fence line. To each of them, the opened door was confirmation they were about to be set free. Four of the men were Black, two were white, and one was a Latino. On this particular morning, it seemed as if the prison was letting out a representative sample of those who were still locked up behind its walls.

Ricky watched as the men slowly walked to freedom along the concrete sidewalk stretching from the prison to the curb. While carefully listening to the instructions being given by several guards, the men moved through the first two sets of gates present in the fence lines. From where he stood, Ricky could see the smiles on each of their faces. Each no longer wore an ill-fitting prison uniform, but rather civilian clothes which were either too big, too small, and, in most cases, very outdated. Remembering similar days when he had been released from prison caused a thought to crease Ricky’s ruddy and unshaven face. *“Free men don’t care what they wear, as long as it ain’t prison uniforms any longer!”*

Walking a few steps closer towards the same opened door the prisoners had exited from, Ricky finally caught sight of the person he was waiting for. He was among a second group of men shuffling their feet as they followed the first group out of the prison. Unlike those in front of them, these three were leaving the grounds in style; not by way of a bus ticket. For the first group, the trip home would begin by way of a quick ride to the nearest bus station aboard a Department of Corrections bus. From there, they would board another bus, in most cases a Greyhound, to wherever it was they called home. It was a no-frills ride paid for by the South Carolina Department of Corrections.

For Ricky’s passenger, the ride home would be done in style. He would return home by way of Ricky’s 2015 Cadillac DeVille. Eleven years of living in solitary confinement or inside a single person cell had warranted a ride home in the recently polished vehicle. Like the car itself which shined in the bright sunlight, the vehicle’s four black wall tires glowed from the attention Ricky had given them. Each had recently been treated with a generous application of an *Armor All* product.

Watching as the person he had been waiting for made his way down the sidewalk to the last of the fence lines; Ricky was again startled as the same audible alarm sounded for a second time. Concerned over the unexpected sound, he watched as everyone on the sidewalk came to a sudden stop. Only a few steps away from being released, the men were too scared to do anything except comply with the loud warning. Years of living behind bars had taught them to respond to the sounds made by many different alarms. Those sounds had often meant trouble. Today, as freedom was just yards away, no one wanted to be part of any trouble or to jeopardize the chance of being set free. Suddenly, Ricky’s focus shifted, and he watched intently as a somewhat overweight and disheveled-looking prison guard burst through the prison’s opened door. Quickly, the guard made his way to where Ricky’s soon-to-be passenger stood waiting on the sidewalk.

The yet to be released prisoner, disgusted over this latest attempt of delaying his freedom, was Ricky’s older brother, Eddie. Standing too far away from where his brother held his position, Ricky could not hear what was being said between the prison guard and his brother. While the exchange between them was brief and heated, from its intensity it was easy to see they were not exchanging a friendly goodbye. In moments it was over, and the last door in the wire fence lines opened to allow the last three men to finally taste freedom.

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Warmly, the two brothers embraced in the parking lot next to Ricky’s car. It had been far too long since they had been able to hug each other as brothers often should. After their long embrace, Ricky took a step backwards to look at the brother he had worshipped while growing up.

*“Good to see ya, bro!”*

“Good to be seen, my man! Let’s get out of here before someone changes their mind about me leaving. Deal?”

*“Deal, hermano!”*

Pulling down the driveway of the large prison, at first, Ricky and Eddie exchanged awkward and uncomfortable small talk between them. Because of their respective stints in various jails and prisons over the past several years, they had become strangers. For a few awkward moments, it was as if they were in the company of a complete stranger. Without spending much time thinking about it, their small talk was the first conversation in years that was not being monitored by prison officials or delivered by a prison’s in-house phone system. Over the course of the next several minutes their conversation gradually became free and easy, and they quickly took turns telling each other about the many events they had recently experienced. After almost fifteen minutes of getting to know each other, Eddie asked the question his brother had expected him to ask. Ricky had prepared himself to answer the question so it would please his brother.

*“Ricky, you got anything for me?”*

“Got some of it, bro. Most of it’s in a paper bag on the floor behind you. Don’t get upset, but I didn’t bring you any weed. There’s plenty of time to get high once we get home, but now is not the time. We don’t need any problems so close to the prison. I want you to enjoy your first few hours of freedom without having to look over your shoulder to see if anyone is watching. We’ll smoke some weed together, but later, not now.”

Nodding his head, Eddie reached around his seat to grab what his brother had placed there. In moments, Eddie set the Piggly Wiggly grocery bag down on his lap. Seeing the red tank top tee shirt inside the bag, he quickly pulled off the ugly shirt he was wearing before tossing it out the window. Moments later, it landed on the shoulder of the road next to a set of rickety mailboxes.

*“So much for that freakin’ rag, this shirt is much better! Thanks, bro!”* Eddie said, tossing the empty bag over his shoulder into the back seat. After blowing out the right rear window, the empty bag landed a short distance away from Eddie’s old shirt.

Driving carefully as he drove further away from the prison, Ricky paid close attention to his speed and how he was operating his vehicle. He had little interest in giving the South Carolina Highway Patrol or any deputy sheriff a reason for pulling them over. As he drove, Ricky shot several glances at his brother’s muscular arms. No longer covered by the prison-issued long sleeve shirt, Eddie’s bulging muscles revealed how much time he had spent lifting weights. As he stared, Ricky focused on the area around Eddie’s left shoulder, inspecting the prison tats which now adorned the space that had long been void of any tattoos.

“You’ve got some new art since I’ve last seen you, Eddie. They’re not bad for prison tats, not bad at all.”

Reaching behind Ricky’s seat, Eddie pulled out two twenty-four ounce cans of Budweiser from inside an ice-packed cooler. Popping the top of the first can, he handed it to his brother. Anxiously, he popped the top on the second can. It was a moment Eddie had been waiting for since being told he was being released. An exceptionally hard drinker prior to being sent to prison for a botched armed robbery he had been a part of, Eddie could not wait to taste his first cold beer. He knew it would far exceed any of the disgusting concoctions put together illegally by his cellmates as they tried mustering a cheap buzz. Taking a long hit of the cold beer, his first taste was everything he had hoped for. With his eyes closed, and his head tilted back against the Caddy’s headrest, Eddie quickly drained the can of its remaining contents in two large gulps. The taste brought the day’s second smile to Eddie’s face.

“Tasted just like I hoped it would, bro! Thanks for hookin’ me up with that. You ready for another?” Focused on his driving, Ricky had barely had time to drain half of his first beer by the time Eddie was well into his second. Quickly, the second Budweiser was drained by the thirsty ex-con. Like his shirt, both empty beer cans, like several others that day, were soon lying on the side of the road. The party had just started for the Frazier brothers as they drove further and further away from the prison. Ironically, Alan Jackson’s version of *‘It’s Five O’Clock Somewhere’* was now playing on the Caddy’s expensive Dolby stereo system.

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Halfway through his third beer, and more than halfway home to Myrtle Beach, Ricky asked his brother about the incident he had seen take place on the prison’s sidewalk.

“What was that all about? I could tell the guy was pissed about something, but what happened?” As he asked the question, Ricky could see Eddie’s face becoming flushed with anger.

*“My brother, that’s a question I will answer some other time. For now, I’ll only tell you one thing about that guard. I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but in due time, and after I’ve had some fun with the ladies, that man is dead!”* A blank stare quickly formed in Eddie’s eyes. It was one Ricky had seen many times in the past. On each occasion trouble soon followed.

Staring at his brother’s face, Ricky realized something bad had happened between the guard and his brother, but knowing little else he knew better than to press the issue. His concern over seeing his brother’s stare was valid as he knew Eddie was not one to offer idle threats. Deep inside, Ricky’s strong feelings told him his brother had likely spent a great deal of time planning how he would kill the guard. As Ricky’s eyes returned to watching traffic on Highway 501; Eddie’s blank stare soon disappeared. It was his first day of freedom, and plans for a murder could wait for another day.

Reaching inside one of his pockets, Eddie pulled out an envelope. From its appearance, it was easy to see the envelope had been opened and folded several times over the past few days. “Ricky, I’ve got a check here from the damn state of South Carolina. Ya know, from the prison, I mean. It’s for the time I spent making them shitty prison uniforms we had to wear. I’ve spent the past several years doing nothing except lifting weights and working in that meaningless pain-in-the-ass job. *Each of them rehabilitation jobs are bullshit!* They pay you a meager eighteen cents an hour for what? I ain’t been rehabilitated at all as I’m meaner and angrier than I was when I was sent there. More than anyone, you know how crazy I was back then. I’ve got a damn check made out to me for a whoppin’ two hundred and fourteen dollars. What’s that gonna get me besides a few beers and a couple of hours with some ugly ass hooker?”

Shaking his head in agreement with what Eddie had just said, Ricky shot his brother a disgusted look. “Damn illegals make more than that just cutting grass in some rich-ass neighborhoods. It don’t seem right they worked your ass so hard and that’s all you’ve got to show for it.”

Anger again returned to Eddie’s face after being supported by his brother’s words. Staring defiantly at the check, Eddie forced himself to calm down. “Yo, I’m over it, let’s forget about it for today. But you’re right, my brother, it ain’t fair! Just find me a place on Seaboard Street to cash this thing. We need to have a few drinks at our favorite place on Seaboard; ya know … the strip joint we used to joke about. What’s it called? SlingShots or something like that? Then I’m gonna walk down the street and pick out a tattoo parlor; I’m gonna get me a new tat to celebrate my release. A freedom tat I’m gonna call it! Come to think of it, I might have the fingers on my right hand done. I’ve been dreaming of what to put on each finger. How’s that sound for a plan?” Eddie asked, staring at the fingers on his right hand.

*“Sounds like a righteous plan, bro!”* Ricky replied. “I can’t think of a better way to spend two hundred and fourteen dollars than on drinks, tats, and stretched out some place with a pretty lady. Hey, they’re all pretty when you ain’t been gettin’ any action, right, bro? Seaboard’s got more tattoo parlors than I can count these days, you’ll find one you like, but SlingShots ain’t there no more. The building is still there, and it’s still a strip club, but its name has changed several times since you’ve been gone. Same nasty people, same ugly ass customers, same shitty inside to it and all, but it’s got a new name now. It’s called *The Lady’s Lounge* these days, that’s if it ain’t changed its name since last Thursday. I ain’t been there since. The name don’t matter . . . it’s still a good place to get hooked up. Whatever you want, weed, Oxy, cocaine, heroin, underage chicks . . . they got it. I’m thinking you’re likely interested in scoring some quality weed. Then, I’m of the opinion you’ll want to spend the rest of the day falling in love with one of them pretty Russian dancers who work there flashing their titties at old perverts like you.” Unlike his brother, Ricky had a serious dislike for needles. He had never succumbed to the urge of having a tattoo placed on any part of his body.

Shooting his younger brother a wink and a wrinkled smile as they moved closer to Seaboard Street, Eddie said, “You’ve always been the smart one in the family, bro!”

Slowly moving his way in and out of traffic on Highway 501, Ricky knew there was a pretty good chance that his brother’s stay on the outside was not going to last for very long. While he idolized his older and tougher brother, Ricky was smart enough to know what caused Eddie to get into trouble. On this particular day it would be beer, Jack Daniels, and pretty Russian strippers. For now, it wasn’t those treats which scared him. What scared him was the thought of his brother’s twisted mind already hard at work planning some sort of revenge against the prison guard he had seen hassling Eddie earlier that day. That thought scared him a great deal. He knew revenge was a distinct possibility for those who crossed his brother as payback had often caused Eddie trouble.

Turning the Caddy left onto Seaboard Street from 501, Ricky saw the smile breaking out across Eddie’s face. Seaboard had always been his brother’s home away from home. On a smaller scale, it was the east coast version of Las Vegas; a street filled with strip clubs, tattoo parlors, bars, and many other forms of adult entertainment. It was just the place for a newly released prisoner to enjoy his new found freedom.

It was also the kind of street where all kinds of trouble found those who were looking for it.