Lovereading.co.uk

Down River

John Hart

Published by John Murray

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

CHAPTER 1



The river is my earliest memory. The front porch of my father's house looks down on it from a low knoll, and I have pictures, faded yellow, of my first days on that porch. I slept in my mother's arms as she rocked there, played in the dust while my father fished, and I know the feel of that river even now: the slow churn of red clay, the back eddies under cut banks, the secrets it whispered to the hard, pink granite of Rowan County. Everything that shaped me happened near that river. I lost my mother in sight of it, fell in love on its banks. I could smell it on the day my father drove me out. It was part of my soul, and I thought I'd lost it forever.

But things can change, that's what I told myself. Mistakes can be undone, wrongs righted. That's what brought me home.

Hope.

And anger.

I'd been awake for thirty-six hours and driving for ten. Restless weeks, sleepless nights, and the decision stole into me like a thief. I never planned to go back to North Carolina—I'd buried it—but I blinked and found my hands on the wheel, Manhattan a sinking island to the north. I wore a week-old beard and three-day denim, felt stretched by an edginess that bordered on pain, but no one here would fail to recognize me. That's what home was all about, for good or bad.

My foot came off the gas as I hit the river. The sun still

hung below the trees, but I felt the rise of it, the hard, hot push of it. I stopped the car on the far side of the bridge, stepped out onto crushed gravel, and looked down at the Yadkin River. It started in the mountains and stretched through both Carolinas. Eight miles from where I stood, it touched the northern edge of Red Water Farm, land that had been in my family since 1789. Another mile and it slid past my father's house.

We'd not spoken in five years, my father and me.

But that was not my fault.

I carried a beer down the bank and stood at the verge of the river. Trash and flat dirt stretched away beneath the crumbling bridge. Willows leaned out and I saw milk jugs tied to low limbs and floating on the current. They'd have hooks near the mud, and one of them rode low in the water. I watched it for motion and cracked the beer. The jug sank lower and turned against the current. It moved upstream and put a V in the water behind it. The limb twitched and the jug stopped, white plastic stained red by the river.

I closed my eyes and thought of the people I'd been forced to leave. After so many years, I'd expect their faces to pale, their voices to thin out, but that's not how it was. Memory rose up, stark and fresh, and I could not deny it.

Not anymore.

When I climbed up from beneath the bridge, I found a young boy on a dusty bike. He had one foot on the ground and a halting smile. He was maybe ten, in blown-out jeans and old canvas high-tops. A bucket hung from his shoulder by a knotted rope. Next to him, my big German car looked like a spaceship from another world.

"Morning," I said.

"Yes, sir." He nodded, but did not get off of the bike.

"Jug fishing?" I asked him, gesturing down to the willows.

"Got two yesterday," he said.

"Three jugs down there."

He shook his head. "One of them is my daddy's. It wouldn't count."

"There's something pretty heavy on the middle one." His face lit up, and I knew that it was his jug, not his old man's. "Need any help?" I asked.

"No, sir."

I'd pulled some catfish out of the river when I was a boy, and based on the unmoving pull on that middle jug, I thought he might have a monster on his hands, a black-skinned, bottom-sucking beast that could easily go twenty pounds.

"That bucket won't be big enough," I told him.

"I'll clean him here." His fingers moved with pride to a thin knife on his belt. It had a stained wooden handle with pale, brushed-metal rivets. The scabbard was black leather that showed white cracks where he'd failed to oil it properly. He touched the hilt once and I sensed his eagerness.

"All right, then. Good luck."

I took a wide path around him, and he stayed on his bike until I unlocked my car and climbed in. He looked from me to the river and the grin spread as he shrugged off the bucket and swung one narrow leg over the back of the bike. As I pulled onto the road I looked for him in the mirror: a dusty boy in a soft yellow world.

I could almost remember how that felt.

I covered a mile before the sun made its full assault. It was too much for my scorched eyes and I pulled on dark glasses. New York had taught me about hard stone, narrowness, and gray shadow. This was so open. So lush. A word fingered the back of my mind.

Verdant.

So damn verdant.

Somehow, I'd forgotten, and that was wrong in more ways than I could count.

I made successive turns, and the roads narrowed. My foot pressed down and I hit the northern edge of my father's farm doing seventy; I couldn't help it. The land was scarred with emotion. Love and loss and a quiet,

corrosive anguish. The entrance rushed past, an open gate and a long drive through rolling green. The needle touched eighty, and everything bad crashed down so that I could barely see the rest of it. The good stuff. The years before it all fell apart.

The Salisbury city limit came up fifteen minutes later and I slowed to a crawl as I pulled on a baseball cap to help hide my face. My fascination with this place was morbid, I knew, but it had been my home and I'd loved it, so I drove through town to check it out. It was still historic and rich, still small and Southern, and I wondered if it had the taste of me even now, so many years after it had spit me out.

I drove past the renovated train station and the old mansions stuffed with money, turned my face away from men on familiar benches and women in bright clothes. I stopped at a light, watched lawyers carry large cases up broad stairs, then turned left and lingered in front of the courthouse. I could recall the eyes of every person on the jury, feel the grain of wood at the table where I'd sat for three long weeks. If I closed my eyes now, I could feel the crush of bodies on the courthouse steps, the near physical slap of fierce words and bright, flashing teeth.

Not guilty.

The words had unleashed a fury.

I took a last look. It was all there, and wrong, and I could not deny the resentment that burned in me. My fingers dug at the wheel, the day tilted, and the anger expanded in my chest until I thought I might choke on it.

I rolled south on Main Street, then west. Five miles out I found the Faithful Motel. In my absence, and unsurprisingly, it had continued its roadside spiral into utter decay. Twenty years ago it did a booming business, but traffic trailed off when the church moms and preachers drove a stake through the triple-X drive-in across the street. Now it was a dump, a long strip of weathered doors with hourly rates, weekly tenants, and migrant workers shoved in four to a room.

I knew the guy whose father ran it: Danny Faith, who had been my friend. We'd grown up together, had some

laughs. He was a brawler and a drinker, a part-time pair of hands on the farm when things got busy. Three weeks ago he'd called me, the first person to track me down after I'd been hounded out of town. I had no idea how he'd found me, but it couldn't have been that hard. Danny was a stand-up guy, good in a tight corner, but he was no deep thinker. He'd called me for help, and asked me to come home. I'd told him no. Home was lost to me. All of it. Lost.

But the phone call was just the beginning. He could not have known what it would do to me.

The parking lot was pure dirt, the building long and low. I killed the engine and entered through a filthy glass door. My hands found the counter and I studied the only wall ornament, a ten-penny nail with a dozen yellowed-out air fresheners in the shape of a pine tree. I took a breath, smelled nothing like pine, and watched an old Hispanic guy come out of a back room. He had finely groomed hair, a Mr. Rogers sweater, and a large chunk of turquoise on a leather thong around his neck. His eyes slid over me with practiced ease, and I knew what he saw. Late twenties, tall and fit. Unshaven, but with a good haircut and an expensive watch. No wedding ring. Scarred knuckles.

His eyes flicked past me, took in the car. I watched him do the math.

"Yes, sir?" he said, in a respectful tone that was rare in this place. He turned his eyes down, but I saw how straight he kept his back, the stillness in his small, leathery hands.

"I'm looking for Danny Faith. Tell him it's Adam Chase."

"Danny's gone," the old man replied.

"When will he be back?" I hid my disappointment.

"No, sir. He's gone three weeks now. Don't think he's coming back. His father still runs this place, though. I could get him if you want."

I tried to process this. Rowan County made two kinds of people: those who were born to stay and those who absolutely had to leave. Danny was the former.

"Gone where?" I asked.

The man shrugged, a weary, lips-down gesture, palms turned up. "He hit his girlfriend. She fell through that window." We both looked at the glass behind me, and he gave another near Gallic shrug. "It cut her face. She swore out a warrant and he left. No one has seen him around since. You want I should get Mr. Faith?"

"No." I was too tired to drive anymore, and not ready to deal with my father. "Do you have a room?"

"*Sí*."

"Just a room, then."

He looked me over again. "You are sure? You want a room here?" He showed me his palms a second time.

I pulled out my wallet, put a hundred dollar bill on the counter.

"*Sí*," I told him. "A room here."

"For how long?"

His eyes were not on me or on the hundred, but on my wallet, where a thick stack of large bills was about to split the seams. I folded it closed and put it back in my pocket.

"I'll be out by tonight."

He took the hundred, gave me seventy-seven dollars in change, and told me room thirteen was open if I didn't mind the number. I told him that the number was no problem. He handed me the key and I left. He watched me move the car down the row to the end.

I went inside, slipped the chain.

The room smelled of mildew and the last guy's shower, but it was dark and still, and after days without sleep, it felt about right. I pulled back the bedcover, kicked off my shoes, and dropped onto the limp sheets. I thought briefly of hope and anger and wondered which one was strongest in me. Nothing felt certain, so I made a choice. Hope, I decided. I would wake to a sense of hope.

I closed my eyes and the room tilted. I seemed to rise up, float, then everything fell away and I was out, like I was never coming back.

*

I woke with a strangled noise in my throat and the image of blood on a wall, a dark crescent that stretched for the floor. I heard pounding, didn't know where I was, and stared wide-eyed around the dim room. Thin carpet rippled near the legs of a battered chair. Weak light made short forays under the curtain's edge. The pounding ceased.

Someone was at the door.

"Who is it?" My throat felt raw.

"Zebulon Faith."

It was Danny's father, a quick-tempered man who knew more than most about a lot of things: the inside of the county jail, narrowmindedness, the best way to beat his half-grown son.

"Just a second," I called out.

"I wanted to talk to you."

"Hang on."

I went to the sink and threw some water on my face, pushed the nightmare down. In the mirror, I looked drawn-out, older than my twenty-eight years. I toweled off as I moved to the door, felt the blood flow in me, and pulled it open. The sun hung low. Late afternoon. The old man's face looked hot and brittle.

"Hello, Mr. Faith. It's been a long time."

He was basically unchanged: a little more whittled down, but just as unpleasant. Wasted eyes moved over my face, and his lips twisted under dull whiskers. The smile made my skin crawl.

"You look the same," he said. "I figured time would have taken some of the pretty-boy off your face."

I swallowed my distaste. "I was looking for Danny."

His next words came slowly, in a hard drawl. "When Manny said it was Adam Chase, I didn't believe him. I said no way would Adam Chase be staying here. Not with that big old mansion full of family just sitting out there at the river. Not with all that Chase money. But things change, I reckon, and here you are." He lowered his chin and foul breath puffed out. "I didn't think you had the nerve to come back."

I kept my sudden anger in check. "About Danny," I said.

He waved the comment away as if it annoyed him. "He's sitting on a beach in Florida somewhere. The little shit. Danny's fine." He stopped speaking, closing down the subject of his son with an offhand finality. For a long moment he just stared at me. "Jesus Christ." He shook his head. "Adam Chase. In my place."

I rolled my shoulders. "One place is as good as another."

The old man laughed cruelly. "This motel is a rattrap. It's sucking the life out of me."

"If you say so."

"Are you here to talk to your father?" he asked, a sudden glint in his eyes.

"I plan to see him."

"That's not what I meant. Are you here to *talk* to him? I mean to say, five years ago you were the crown prince of Rowan County." A despicable grin. "Then you had your little trouble and you're just up and gone. Near as I can tell, you've never been back. There's got to be a reason after all this time, and talking sense into that prideful, stubborn son of a bitch is the best one I can think of."

"If you have something to say, Mr. Faith, why don't you just say it?"

He stepped closer, brought the smell of old sweat with him. His eyes were hard gray over a drinker's nose, and his voice thinned. "Don't be a smart-ass with me, Adam. I remember back when you was just as much a shit-brain kid as my boy, Danny, and the two of you together didn't have the sense to dig a hole in the dirt with a shovel. I've seen you drunk and I've seen you bleeding on a barroom floor." He looked from my feet to my face. "You've got a fancy car and a big-city smell on you, but you don't look no better than anyone else. Not to me. And you can tell your old man I said that, too. Tell him that he's running out of friends."

"I don't think I like your tone."

"I tried to be polite, but you'll never change, you

Chases. Think you're so much better than everyone else around here, just because you have all that land and because you've been in this county since creation. None of it means you're better than me. Or better than my boy."

"I never said I was."

The old man nodded, and his voice quivered with frustration and anger. "You tell your daddy that he needs to stop being so goddamn selfish and think about the rest of the people in this county. I'm not the only one that says so. A lot of people around here are fed up. You tell him that from me."

"That's enough," I said, stepping closer.

He didn't like it, and his hands seized up. "Don't you talk down to me, boy."

Something hot flared in his eyes, and I felt a deep anger stir as memories surged back. I relived the old man's pettiness and disregard, his quick and ready hands when his son made some innocent mistake. "I'll tell you what," I said. "Why don't you go fuck yourself." I stepped even closer, and as tall as the old man was, I still rose above him. His eyes darted left and right when he saw the anger in me. His son and I had cut a wide swath through this county, and in spite of what he'd said, it had rarely been me bleeding on some barroom floor. "My father's business is no business of yours. It never has been and it never will be. If you have something to say, I suggest that you say it to him."

He backed away, and I followed him out into the molten air. He kept his hands up, eyes on me, and his voice was sharp and harsh. "Things change, boy. They grow small and they die. Even in Rowan County. Even for the goddamn Chases!"

And then he was gone, walking fast past the flaking doors of his roadside empire. He looked back twice, and in his hatchet face I saw the cunning and the fear. He gave me the finger, and I asked myself, not for the first time, if coming home had been a mistake.

I watched him disappear into his office, then went inside to wash off the stink.

It took ten minutes to shower, shave, and put on clean clothes. Hot air molded itself around me as I stepped outside. The sun pressed down on the trees across the road, soft and low as it flattened itself against the world. A mist of pollen hung in the yellow light and cicadas called from the roadside. I pulled the door shut behind me, and when I turned I noticed two things almost at once. Zebulon Faith leaned, cross-armed, against the office wall. He had two guys with him, big old boys with heavy shoulders and thick smiles. That was the first thing I saw. The second was my car. Big letters, gouged into the dusty hood.

Killer.

Two feet long if it was an inch.

So much for hope.

The old man's face split and he pushed words through the smile. "Couple of punk kids," he said. "They took off that way." He pointed across the empty street, to the old drive-in parking lot that was now a sea of weed-choked Tarmac. "Damned unfortunate," he finished.

One of the guys elbowed the other. I knew what they saw: a rich man's car with New York plates, a city boy in shined shoes.

They had no idea.

I moved to the trunk, put my bag inside, pulled out the tire iron. It was two feet of solid metal with a lug wrench on one end. I started across the parking lot, the heavy rod low against my leg.

"You shouldn't have done it," I said.

"Fuck yourself, Chase."

They came off the porch, moving heavily, Zeb Faith in the middle. They fanned out, and their feet rasped on hard-baked earth. The man on Faith's right was the taller of the two, and looked scared, so I focused on the man to the left, a mistake. The blow came from the right, and the guy was fast. It was like getting hit with a bat. The other followed almost as quickly. He saw me droop and stepped in with an uppercut that would have broken my jaw. But I swung the iron. It came up fast and hard, caught the man's arm in

midswing and broke it as cleanly as anything I'd ever seen. I heard bones go. He went down, screaming.

The other man hit me again, caught me on the side of the head, and I swung at him, too. Metal connected on the meaty part of his shoulder. Zebulon Faith stepped in for a shot, but I beat him to it, delivered a short punch to the point of his chin and he dropped. Then the lights went out. I found myself on my knees, vision clouded, getting the shit kicked out of me.

Faith was down. So was the man with the broken arm. But the other guy was having a time. I saw the boot arcing in again and I swung with all I had. The tire iron connected with his shin and he flopped onto the dirt. I didn't know if it was broken, didn't really care. He was out of it.

I tried to stand up, but my legs were loose and weak. I put my hands on the ground, and felt Zebulon Faith standing over me. Breath sawed in his throat, but his voice was strong enough. "Fucking Chases," he said, and went to work with his feet. They swung in, swung out. Swung in again, and came back bloody. I was down for real, couldn't find the tire iron, and the old man was grunting like he was at the end of an all-night screw. I curled up, tucked my face down, and sucked in a lungful of road grit.

That's when I heard the sirens.