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The Ranger

Written by Ace Atkins

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THE RANGER

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1

Quinn headed home, south on the Mississippi highway, in a truck he'd bought in Phenix City, Alabama, for fifteen hundred, a U.S. Army rucksack beside him stuffed with enough clothes for the week and a sweet Colt .44 Anaconda he'd won in a poker game. He carried good rock 'n' roll and classic country, and photos from his last deployment in Afghanistan, pics of him with his Ranger platoon, the camp monkey "Streak" on his shoulder, Black Hawks at sundown over the mountains. Things you bring back home after six years away, from 3rd Battalion Headquarters at Fort Benning to Iraq to Afghanistan and back again, when you didn't really intend to return home so fast, if at all. He drove south on Highway 7 and then down 9W, and kept heading south into the winding hill country that had been logged down to nothing decades ago, leaving the people scrub pines and junk trees and squashed beer cans and bottles. This part of the state had always seemed used up to him as a kid, and it looked just as used up in the headlight glow of the truck. He was

headed back down to Jericho at midnight, not wanting to see a damn soul till the funeral tomorrow.

He figured nobody plans being away for that long, but when you join up at eighteen and earn your tab just before September 11th, a soldier can keep pretty damn busy. He tried to recall the last time he'd seen his mother (not caring if he ever saw his father again), and wondered about his sister who hadn't called him in two Christmases. At home there was an ex-girlfriend who'd dumped him not long after basic and good friends he hadn't spoken to in years.

He turned up the radio, a Johnny Cash version of a classic Western ballad. Quinn knew the song by heart but loved hearing it every time.

The old truck ran at seventy on a steady ribbon of blacktop unfolding from hill to hill, a path cut through endless forest that once had been traveled by horse and wagon, Tibbehah County being one of the most remote counties in North Mississippi.

After years of marching and maneuvers, sitting still seemed odd to him, although at rest he could fall asleep at will and wake up just as fast. The Regiment had whittled him down to a wiry, muscular frame built for speed, surprise, chaos, and violence. His hair was cut in the standard high and tight, not even an inch thick on top and shaved on the sides, making his face seem even more chiseled in the rearview mirror, sharp angles thanks to a Choctaw grandmother about a hundred years back mixed with the hard Scotch-Irish who settled the South.

The truck's heater was cranked, and Quinn, his hand on the wheel, sat comfortably in a black T-shirt, blue jeans, and cowboy boots. In the ashtray he kept a half of a dead cigar that he'd

smoked about a hundred miles back with some bad coffee. The trip was only five hours, but it was a hell of a long time alone with your thoughts.

Another bend, another curve on the highway, and there was a speck in the light. He touched the brakes—finding them a lot less tight than the salesman had promised—thinking the speck was a spooked deer or a dog but then seeing it was the bare back of a woman, turning on long spindly legs and caught in his high beams.

He shanked the steering wheel to the right, the truck coming within an arm's reach of the hair rushing across her blank face. He was in a ditch and stuck, back wheels spinning into mud.

Quinn got out and tromped over to the girl, still standing there on the double yellow line, her breath audible against the quiet of the motor and hot ticking of the engine. There were cows calling from someplace across a barbed-wire fence, and a train whistled far off. A lonesome midnight moon glowed, and Quinn called to the girl, just spotting a logging truck cresting the hill. He grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the shoulder, finding her face in his truck's headlight.

"You okay?"

She nodded.

"What the hell you doing in the middle of the road?"

"I didn't see you."

"You didn't hear my truck?"

She didn't say anything.

"Shit, I about killed you."

The girl wore cowboy boots, a miniskirt, and a sequined halter

top busting at the stomach. The girl, maybe eighteen or nineteen or sixteen, was blond and light-eyed. She had tight curly hair, a small upturned nose, and was well on her way with child.

"You from here?" he asked.

She shook her head, breath clouding in the cold.

"I'd give you a ride, but—"

She said it didn't matter and turned away, and kept walking south.

Quinn hopped back in the truck and cranked the ignition, the F-150 older than him kicking to life, and he knocked it in four-wheel drive just for the hell of it, thinking he'd never get out of that ravine. But the tires spun, and it lurched forward a foot and then five feet, and he was back on the road, following the girl. He let down his side window, slowly, and told her to get in.

She stopped and didn't say a word. She just stood there, back roads leading nowhere all around, with nothing on her, nothing to her, and then she climbed inside the cab. Quinn accelerated fast in case she decided to change her mind.

"Headed down to Tibbehah County," he said. "Jericho."

He didn't realize he'd left the radio on, catching a staticky local station. A talk-radio-show host offering his views at the decline of American morals and the nearing of the End Times.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Twenty-nine."

"You look a lot older."

Quinn and the girl didn't speak for nearly fifteen miles.

"You can let me out here," she said.

"Nothing here."

"I can walk."

"Where you from?" Quinn asked, keeping the same speed.

"Alabama."

"You walked from Alabama?"

"It's a fur piece," she said, staring straight ahead.

"'Specially in those boots."

"You from Jericho?"

"Grew up there."

"You know a man named Jody?"

"Haven't been home in some time," Quinn said. "What's his last name?"

The girl didn't say anything. She just stared out at the headlights hitting the ten feet of darkness ahead of them, not much to see along the road but trailers perched on some cleared land and homemade signs offering fresh vegetables, although the season had passed months ago. The nights had turned chilly; past cotton harvesttime.

"What you're doin' is dangerous," Quinn said.

"Thanks for your concern."

"Just tryin' to help."

"Why are you going back?"

"It's time."

"How long you been gone?" she asked.

"Six years and a few months."

"You do something bad?"

"Why would you ask that?" Quinn asked, a little edge in his voice.

"Just trying to talk."

"You have money?"

"You can let me off in town."

"You have people?"

"Jody," the girl said, not sounding too excited about the prospect.

"The boy without a last name."

She stayed silent and leaned her head against the window glass, a few stray cars passing, high beams dimming over the crests of hills, all the way till they reached the Tibbehah County line, the road sign spray-painted over with the words AIN'T NO HOPE. Quinn recognized some things, Varner's Quick Mart, the small high school stadium where he'd played football long after they'd been state champs in '78, JT's Garage—but JT's looked like it'd shut down a while back. The downtown movie theater where he'd seen *Fievel Goes West* with his kid sister had been turned into a church. He passed the town cemetery where he'd probably be buried alongside both sets of grandparents and a few kin beyond that, and then they were circling the town Square. A small gazebo stood in the center as a monument to all the boys who'd been killed in action since the Civil War.

"Is this all there is?" the girl asked.

"Pretty much," Quinn said. "Can I get you a place to stay?"

"I'll make my own way, thank you."

"Some churches and places might could help. Hey, look, there's a motel right across the railroad tracks over there. I'll pay for your room tonight and then you can make your way fresh in the morning. I have to check in, too."

"I know that song," she said, turning to look at his face.

"I'm not shy," he said. "But I draw the line at pregnant teens."

She didn't say anything. He gunned the motor and crossed over the tracks, circling down into the Traveler's Rest, an old U-shaped motel where the units faced outward to the highway. Quinn remembered it used to be thirty bucks a night back when the couples needed to be alone at prom time. Now they advertised bass fishing in their pond and free Wi-Fi. You used to could drive past this place at midnight and know which girls had finally given in to their boyfriends or who was stepping out.

Quinn grabbed his bag, paid for the rooms, and tossed the girl her key.

"Good luck," he said, heading to his room.

"I'll pay you back in the morning."

"Not necessary," he said. "I got a funeral to be at anyway."

"Who died?" she asked.

The funeral started at nine a.m. sharp, everyone noting that his uncle sure would have appreciated the punctuality. There were about twenty people there. Quinn expected more, but understood it was a cold, rainy morning, and it being Thanksgiving Day and all. Most were men, old veterans who'd been buddies with his uncle since Korea, long before he'd become sheriff back in '73. They held their baseball hats, decorated for whatever military branch they'd entered, over their tired hearts as the body of Hampton Beckett was lowered into the ground to the sounds of a twenty-one-gun salute, some of the old men looking like they sure enjoyed getting out the rifles and firing off a few rounds. Every

damn snap made Quinn recoil a bit, and he hated himself for that, watching the flag being folded and handed to a frizzled waitress from the Fillin' Station diner, a woman that Hamp had been seeing since his wife had died five years ago. There were nice words and handshakes, and then it started to rain harder and everyone ducked under their umbrellas and ran for their cars, snaking out of the county cemetery and starting the real bit of the ceremony at the VFW club.

As Quinn reached for the truck's door, Luke Stevens waded through a ditch to shake his hand. He hadn't spoken to Luke since they graduated from high school, but he looked pretty much the same, with shaggy brown hair, a handsome face and confident grin. His gold glasses were spotted with rain and his suit drenched. He just gave a brief smile to Quinn, shook his hand, and then wrapped him in an awkward hug. Luke still feeling bad about taking Anna Lee away, even though Quinn was the one who'd left. Luke being the one who'd gone to medical school at Tulane and come back to Jericho to live and die.

Quinn started to speak, but Luke had turned back to his car, where Quinn caught only the back of Anna Lee's black dress as she climbed inside and shut the door. Hell, he didn't know what to say anyway.

The VFW building wasn't much but cinder block and tin, murals of Europe, Vietnam, and Iraq painted on the walls. A sign outside advertised BINGO SATURDAYS, and a CATFISH FRY from two Sundays back. Quinn removed his damp dress coat and loosed his

wet tie and sat at a table with three old men. One of them looked around the empty room, more for show than from worry, and pulled out a bottle of Wild Turkey; another headed to the kitchen to fetch some coffee mugs.

"You been to see your mother yet?" asked old Mr. Jim, a Third Army man who from his barbershop pulpit told stories of meeting Patton, even keeping the prayer card he'd been issued since before they rolled into Belgium. His nose resembled a rutabaga, his eyes narrow and a washed-out blue.

"No, sir."

"She'll want to see you."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't be angry."

"He was her brother," Quinn said. "Doesn't seem too much to show up at his funeral."

"They hadn't spoken for some time," Mr. Jim said. "Bad words said."

"Those two argued over the color of the sky," Quinn said. "Hamp didn't talk to her for nearly a month after she called John Wayne a pussy."

Old Judge Blanton, small and white-haired in a black suit, cracked open the seal on the bourbon and uncorked the bottle. Luther Varner, a Marine in Vietnam, owner of Varner's Quick Mart, returned with four mismatched cups. Varner lit a long, cheap cigarette. Quinn wished he'd brought in cigars.

He felt odd sitting with them, the men always just a "Sir" and a polite handshake. Quinn was never part of the boys sitting around drinking coffee in the morning at Varner's. But here he

was after doing what was expected of him in the Army, and the old boys seemed to say, "Sit down, and sit a spell. You're one of us now."

"You didn't wear your uniform," Judge Blanton said.

"I've worn it enough."

"You gettin' redeployed?" Mr. Jim asked.

"We just got back," Quinn said. "Third Batt did six months in Afghanistan."

"You see much action?"

"We always do."

"Y'all boys get called in when the shit hits the fan," Varner said. "In case of trouble, break the glass and call in the Rangers."

"I just don't know why he did it," Mr. Jim said, making a clicking sound with his cheek. He was staring into a blank spot in the corner of the VFW, not listening much to what was going on around him.

Quinn watched. The other men exchanged glances. All looked down at the table.

There was a good twenty seconds of silence when all Quinn could hear was breathing and rain pinging on the roof. He sat and waited.

"You didn't know," Mr. Jim said.

"Know what?"

Mr. Jim looked to Varner and Varner to old Judge Blanton, Quinn noting Blanton must've been elected their spokesperson.

Judge Blanton took a big swig of whiskey. "Sorry, Quinn. Ole Hamp stuck a .44 in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Go figure."