

Jasmine and Cinnamon

Dana E Donovan © 2009

I would not have stopped had it not started raining. I expected another good hour of driving before nightfall, but the cold Kentucky wind came in suddenly, bringing with it gray skies and a white fog that swirled in lazy barrow rolls ahead of the drizzle. I thought of the winding roads, how they turned and dipped, throwing left-hand bends at me when I expected rights, twisting almost unending, and then filing straight for mile-long runs. At a downhill curve, I clipped the shoulder of the road and almost skidded into a tree. I knew then that I needed to stop for the night.

A sign up ahead promised clean beds and warm showers. The thought of that made me think of home. It was the day before Thanksgiving. I was lucky to finish my business early and figured I could still make it there before Greg Junior carved the turkey and Molly dished out the pie. I told them not to wait for me, but I knew they would, at least until the scores came in from the home game. After dinner, if I made it, we would all sit around the fireplace sipping warm apple cider with cinnamon and talking about Thanksgivings past. Inevitably, the topic would come back around to the time I played Santa Clause in the big Thanksgiving Day parade. I pulled up the caboose on the back of the town's hook-n-ladder engine number seven. All I had to do was wave a lot and toss out candy canes to all the little kids. At the end of the route, some wise guy set off a string of firecrackers in the street. The team of horses pulling the pumpkin wagon got spooked and backed up into the fire truck. The truck stopped short, sending me tumbling out of my seat like Humpty Dumpty. I did not get hurt. The pillows stuffed into my costume cushioned my fall, but my picture in the paper the next day did bruise my ego some. Molly likes to bring the picture out every year. She has it framed and keeps it stashed under her bed next to her diary. I keep thinking that someday I will sneak into her room and get it—the picture, not the diary.

The motel promising clean beds and warm showers look like something out of a bad movie. The *NO* on the neon vacancy sign out front flickered so erratically, I could not tell if my presence was welcomed or not. In the parking lot sat only a couple of cars, so I decided to pull in and take my chances. I stepped out and turned my collar up against the chill. I saw my breath in whisks of steam. That warm shower sounded good about then. I walked into the office and the clerk behind the counter greeted me as if we were old pals. He called me friend and asked how my wife was.

"Excuse me?" I said. "Do I know you?"

"Name's Ernie Davis. I own the place."

"I see, and how do you know I'm married, Mister Davis?"

He pointed to my ring and smiled. His gray hair and beard made him look old, but his teeth were straight and white and looked like his own. I split the difference and pegged him at around sixty. He came up to the counter, tapped on the registry and spun it around. "You signing in? We got lots of rooms."

A coffee cup by the phone held a generous assortment of pens and pencils. I grabbed a ballpoint and jotted down my name.

"Greg Sherman," he said, "like the general?"

"What general?"

"General William Tecumseh Sherman. Ya ain't gonna burn us down now, er-ya?"

"Oh, right, the Civil War guy. I get it. No, you don't need to worry. I won't burn the place down."

He reached up on a board behind him and grabbed a key off a hook next to a dozen others. "Here, then. I guess you want a non-smoking room. Number five has a nice view of the pond out back." He handed me the key. "Will that be cash or credit?"

"Credit," I told him, and then asked if the room had coffee.

He nodded with a snap. "Better. We serve coffee and donuts here in the lobby at six, and the morning paper will be on your stoop before that. All compliments of Robert E. Lee."

"Who?"

He looked at me with that smile again. "That's the name of the motel. It's on the sign out front."

I turned and looked over my shoulder. "Oh, right." I had not really taken a good look around before that, but when I did, I noticed a conspicuous theme running about the place. Everything looked Civil War oriented. On the walls were discolored photos of Civil War soldiers, horse-drawn caissons and cannon and southern belles

with laced-draped parasols. An old musket stood in the corner with the umbrellas and a tattered union jack hung over the fireplace. "Nice job with the decor," I said, "Pre-reconstruction, isn't it?"

He pointed at me. "Hey, you got a sharp eye. So, did you come here for the ghosts?"

I finished signing my name and laughed a little at that. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah, we're famous for them, you know...well, really famous for just the one, but people expect more. I don't argue with them."

I pulled my wallet from my back pocket and tossed the old man a credit card. "You serious?"

He swiped my card through an electronic reader and handed it back. "Sure. The place has been haunted since we built it in sixty-four on the site of an old army hospital."

"From the Civil War."

"That's right."

"And now it's haunted by dead confederate soldiers?"

"Uh-uh, not soldiers."

"But you said—"

"Jasmine."

"What?"

"The ghost. That's her name: Jasmine."

"You named her?"

"Not me, my guests, on account of how some say they smell jasmine just about the time she shows herself. Mabel down at the Hitch'n Post thinks she might have been a nurse."

I shook my head and laughed, not wanting to buy into it for a second. "I see, and have you ever seen her yourself, Mister Davis?"

"Mabel? Sure, lots of times."

"No, Jasmine."

"He fell back and scoffed. "Oh yeah, I seen her, too."

I knew he was lying. "So, what's she look like?"

"Look like?" I watched his eyes roll up and to the left. They say you can always tell when someone is lying because their eyes will do that. A person trying to recall something will usually cast their eyes down and to the right. "Well," he said, scratching his chin, "she looked all swirly and milky like a fog or som'm. And she moaned a lot, like this." He went into a typical ghost howl. I will spare you the details. "And I heard chains rattling, too."

"Chains?"

"Yeah, with shackles and irons."

"Really."

"Ah-huh."

"And why was she in chains?"

"Well.... I don't rightly know. Must be a ghost thing."

"Right." I thanked him for the key before heading for the door.

"Oh, Mister Sherman!"

I turned. "Yes."

"Just a reminder, if you see a ghost don't tell me, tell a friend."

"A friend?"

"Well sure. We make our living by word of mouth." He smiled and gave me a wink. I smiled back, pushed the door open and left.

The Robert E. Lee is a single story motel shaped like a boomerang. The office and lobby are located in the middle, with even numbered bungalow-like rooms spread left, and odd ones spread right. A long boardwalk spans the complex from one end to the other and each unit has its own little porch and framed entry. I hopped into my car and drove the twenty or so yards to the far south end where unit five sat. I entered the room, and the first thing I did was turn up the heat. The second thing (and if the heat did not work so well, it would probably have been the last) was open the blinds over the window. As the old man promised, the room commanded a princely view of the pond, but what he failed to mention was that in front of that, a mass of granite headstones stood like Stonehenge just outside my window. It gave me the creeps, but I shook it off and pulled the blinds closed again. It was too cold to go hiking back to the office to ask for another room, besides I did not want the

old man to think he succeeded in spooking me. With all his talk about ghosts and things, I imagined he would get a kick out of seeing me lose my nerve over a few silly graves.

The bathroom was large for one usually found in a motel. I liked that, and that the shower had glassed doors instead of some moldy old curtain set well with me, too. I put my shaving bag down on the vanity and set up to brush my teeth. I had barely started, when I thought I heard voices coming from the next room. I hurried to investigate and found the television had somehow turned itself on. It looked like the evening news, but the reception was lousy, lots of snow and static. I heard the anchor say something about Richmond fending off a Yankee advance, and figured he must be talking sports. I turned the station and settled on a movie channel showing a colorized version of *Gone With The Wind*.

Back in the bathroom, I realized I left the water running in the sink. The mirror had steamed up, and though I had not noticed before, I saw that someone had written on the glass the words, Deo Vindice, the meaning of which I had not a clue. I grabbed a towel and wiped the mirror clean. That is when I saw something move in its reflection. I spun around and caught a shadow of it out the corner of my eye. It looked like it ducked behind the curtains by the window overlooking the graveyard. I ran to it and prepared to pull the curtain back. My heart beat fiercely. I found myself flinching, as though whatever it was I expected to find might strike at me the moment I exposed it. I allowed for the possibility of a rat or maybe a coon or opossum. Though in the back of my mind I accepted that the shadow I saw was much larger than that. It moved quickly, too quickly for anything native to those parts, and that it caused the curtain to fold with a jerk, told me it was large enough to effect itself with force. I swatted the curtain with the back of my hand. To my relief, if not my disgust, I found only dust balls and rodent droppings matted against a moldy sill. The window was closed, which meant that the wind could not have pulled on the curtain, and though I thought I could explain the phenomenon by attributing it to drafts, I had to let that theory stew when a knock came on the door. I reached out and answered it in just under a second.

“Mr. Sherman!” said the visitor, obviously taken aback by my quick show at the door.

“Mister Davis, did I startle you?”

He blinked back his surprise. It was starting to get dark already, and in the dim glow of the porch light, his bearded face took on a haggard look. If I had just seen him for the first time, I would have guessed his age at something much older than the sixty or so I approximated earlier. Still, his teeth were bright and his smile soothing. He held up a piece of paper and bent it toward the light.

“Mister Sherman, it’s your bill. It seems your credit card has been declined. Do you have another?”

“Declined? I don’t understand. I just...oh, wait a minute.” I remembered that I had given him a Visa card, which had expired the week before. “I got a new one in the mail,” I explained, “but I haven’t bothered to activate it yet. Silly, isn’t it?” I invited him in so that I could get him another card. He stood patiently by the door and watched as I ransacked my overnight. “Mister Davis,” I said, “do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Please.”

I hiked my thumb up over my shoulder. “In the bathroom there, I noticed that someone had written something on the mirror.”

His brows arched with concern. “Oh? I’m sorry. I’ll send room service right away to—”

“No, that’s all right. It is not written with anything, I mean, it is something that shows up when the mirror steams over. But what I wanted to ask you was do you know what Deo Vindice means?”

He looked at me queerly. “Deo Vindice? I haven’t heard that in a while.”

“So you do know what it means.”

“Sure, it means God will vindicate. It’s the motto of the confederate states, printed on the official confederate seal after the south declared secession from the union.”

“Really? Why would someone write that on the mirror?”

He shrugged. “Maybe Jasmine wrote it. She’s very patriotic, you know.”

I laughed. “Right, Jasmine, perhaps it was. Stranger things have happened here already.”

“Oh?”

I pulled another credit card from my bag. “Never mind. Here, try this one.”

He took the card and gave me a sort of salute with it. “Be right back.”

“No, don’t bother. I’ll be up there in a while to get it. I saw you had some vending machines in the lobby. I’ll stop by when I go for some snacks.”

He gave me another salute. “Okay. See you then.”

I shut the door and threw the lock. When I peeked out the front window, I saw he had already disappeared. *Who's the ghost now?* I thought. Almost immediately, the telephone rang. It was Ernie Davis again. He wanted to let me know that my credit card went through.

"How did you get back so fast?" I asked. "You just left here."

"Mr. Sherman," he said, like maybe I was crazy, "that was twenty minutes ago."

My heart sank to my stomach. "What?"

"Sure, in fact, you called here ten minutes ago to ask if I had any vending machines in the lobby. Remember?"

"No, I remember telling you I saw the machines in the lobby, and that I'd be there shortly to use one when I come to get my card."

He paused, as though waiting for me to say, *Gotcha!* When I did not, he said, "I see, well, your card is here whenever you're ready."

He hung up. I held the phone to my ear for a moment before doing the same. As I pulled it away, though, I thought I heard a woman's voice. I put the receiver back to my ear and said, "Hello?"

There was nothing at first, only silence. But I heard it, I knew I did. So I kept the piece to my ear, and in a soft voice I said, "I know you're there."

Finally, a woman replied, "Mathew? Is that you?"

I crowded my brows tightly. "Who is this?"

"I'm waiting for you, like I promised."

"You're waiting for me?"

"Are you coming home? I hear the war is almost over."

"War? Look lady, I don't know what you're trying to pull here, but if you don't stop, I'm going to report you to Mister Davis."

"My stars! You know Jefferson Davis?"

"What? Are you for real?"

I waited for a response, but heard nothing more. "Hello, hello!" I said. She was gone. I hung up the phone and headed for the shower. Night had moved in solid by then, and I had most of the lights in the room turned on, especially in the bath. I peeled my clothes off while waiting for the water to run hot, and just before stepping into the tub it hit me: a distinct aroma of peppermint. I sampled the air like a hound and concluded that the scent came mostly from the back of the bathroom by the window. Ernie Davis told me that some of his guests smelled jasmine just before the ghost made herself known to them, but peppermint? That put a new twist on the old folklore, if you will excuse the pun.

I left the water running in the shower and wrapped a towel around my waist before slipping out the front door. Slowly, I worked my way around to the back of the building, just in time to catch a glimpse of someone disappearing behind the unit next door. I yelled for him to stop, and if I were not half-naked and freezing, I would have gone after him. Instead, I made a quick inspection of the grounds around the window, and there I found incense burning on the sill. I bent down to sniff it and came up with a nose full of peppermint.

Back inside, the shower was running hot and had filled the bathroom with steam. On the mirror was another message. This one I needed no help in deciphering. It said, "Yankee, Go Home!"

I went straight to the phone and dialed the desk. Ernie Davis picked up on the first ring.

"Hello, Mr. Sherman, how may I help you?"

"You can start by cutting out the crap!" I told him.

"Excuse me?"

"Don't tell me you don't know anything about the incense burning on my windowsill."

"Incense?"

"Yes, and this writing on my mirror. I suppose you don't know anything about that, either."

He paused, and I think I even heard him gulp. "I'm sure I have no idea what—"

"Don't give me that. I know you had something. . . . Wait a minute." I put the phone down and walked over to the TV. I followed a hunch and traced the electrical cord back to the wall socket where I found the end plugged into a timer switch. Then I ran my hands along the back of the curtains in front of the window. I found a thin piece of monofilament line stitched to the fabric and running outside through a small hole under the sill. Things were beginning to add up. I put my pants and shirt on and beat a path down to the office. Ernie Davis was still on the phone, I suppose waiting for me to come back on the line. He looked surprised to see me.

“Mister Sherman.”

“Don’t Mister Sherman me, Davis. I demand an explanation. What’s going on here?”

He shushed me before coming around the counter to pull me aside. When we got out of sight of a couple stirring in the lobby, he put his arm around my shoulder and aired a guilty grin.

“Mister Sherman, forgive me. We don’t mean to upset anyone, but we have a reputation at the Robert E. Lee.”

“For what, harassing guests?”

“No, to the contrary; for entertaining them. You see, people come here because they want to see ghosts. Now, I’m not saying we don’t have ghosts; it’s just that the ghosts don’t always let themselves known to everyone. So, sometimes we help them out a little by throwing the spook into some of our guests. It gets them talking at breakfast and it keeps them coming back. It is what they want, and it’s good for business. We don’t mean any harm by it. You understand, don’t you?”

I jerked my shoulder out from under his arm. “I understand that what you’re doing is possibly illegal. I mean, putting a timer on the TV probably isn’t, and pulling on a piece of fishing line to make the curtains move may be borderline. But coming into an occupied room to write on the mirror, well....”

“We have done no such thing!”

“You didn’t write on my mirror?”

“Absolutely not. Going into the rooms without permission is strictly prohibited.”

“And the incense?”

“That was Gary.”

“Who’s Gary?”

“My son. He helps out around here, but I assure you he’s harmless.”

“He lit peppermint incense outside my window. He could have started a fire.”

“Peppermint?” Ernie Davis rolled his eyes and shook his head. “My son, he’s not so bright. I keep telling him it has to be jasmine. The guests expect it.”

“Maybe your guests do, but I expect nothing more than to be left alone, and if I see your son sneaking around outside my window I’ll—”

He stopped me before I could finish, and promised I need not give it another thought. And to show there were no hard feelings, he offered me a coupon for fifty percent off my next visit to the Robert E. Lee. I told him thanks, but that I did not expect I would need it. Then when I asked for my credit card back, he turned white in the face.

“I gave it to you twenty minutes ago,” he said. “Don’t you remember?”

“What?”

He pointed to my pocket. “You put it back in your wallet.”

I fished my wallet from my pants and opened it up to the fold where I kept my credit cards. I could hardly believe it, but there it was, alongside the one that had been declined earlier.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Did I forget to give it to you?”

He shook his head. “You gave it to me. It went through. I charged forty-nine dollars for the room on it.”

“And then you gave it back?”

“You came and got it.”

“I did?”

He stitched his brows and winced uneasily. I knew he was telling the truth, or at least he believed it. I just did not know if I believed it. I folded my wallet and slipped it back into my pocket. When I left, I remember thinking that the couple in the lobby was looking at me, talking behind my back. I could feel them pointing with their eyes, singling me out like some intruder. “Yankee, go home!” I heard someone say, or maybe I thought it.

Back in the room, I decided against the shower. I did not want to do anything that would keep me from knowing what was going on in the room at all times. Instead, I got out of my street clothes and put on some sweats before climbing into bed for a quiet evening of television. I suppose it was about midnight when I fell asleep with the TV on. A few minutes later, I awoke. I thought I was dreaming. The TV was off. The lights were low and the scent of jasmine filled the air. I blinked a few times, and when I tried to reach for my eyes to rub them open, I discovered something alarming. Someone had tied my hands and feet to the bed and bandaged my right leg in a splint. I pulled sharply on my restraints and a pain like a knife blade ran up my back. I screamed, or tried to, but found my voice too hoarse to muster more than a squeak. From deep within the shadows, a strange

woman stepped forward. I realized then that the lamps by my bedside were out and that only candlelight illuminated the room. My heart fell into a jolting rhythm of miss-beats and tremors. I looked around. The television was gone. In its place stood a small table with an assortment of knives and saw blades spread out along the top of a clean piece of linen. I looked back at the woman. She smiled at me gently. I thought her to be about thirty, attractive, but shy. Her hair was long, pulled back and nested in the belly of an old-fashioned poke bonnet. Her dress, excessive with folds and pleats, hugged her body like a vine until it gathered loosely in dainty ruffles around her collar. She reached down and stroked my foot.

“You’re awake,” she said. “Good. You had me worried. Can I get you something?”

I tugged on my restraints, and once more, that stabbing pain returned like a hot dagger to my back and leg. “Yes, you can untie me,” I told her, after the pain subsided again. My voice sounded weak but my words were clear. “And then you can get the hell out of my room.”

She stroked my leg and foot again. “You’re delirious, I know. But don’t worry; the doctor will be here soon.”

“Doctor? Lady, I don’t need a doctor. I need the police. Because when I tell them about the scam you and Davis are running here, they’ll have this place shut down so fast your head will spin.”

“Do you have kin here?” she asked.

“What?”

“Family, in case you don’t make it.”

“Make what?”

She smiled softly again. I knew it was meant to reassure me. “Never mind. I’m sure it’s going to be all right.”

I watched her turn and walk back to the corner of the room where, until then, I had not noticed that a rocking chair sat where a stuffed sofa chair had been. She picked what looked like a Confederate uniform up off the chair, sat down, and began sewing the garment’s cuffs and sleeves. Without looking at me, she said, “Do you know Captain Harris?”

I shook my head. “Who?”

“Captain Mathew Harris. Surely you know him.”

“Why would I know a Captain Harris?”

She stopped in mid-stitch and held the uniform to the light. “You’re from the 3rd Kentucky Volunteer Calvary, Company B. That’s Captain Harris’ regiment under Colonel James Jackson.”

“Lady, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“He hasn’t written in over two months. Do you know where the fighting has taken him?”

“Do you get paid for this?”

“Sir?”

“Really. Does Ernie pay you to do this? Because what you are doing is against the law. You are holding me against my will. And what have you done to my leg? It’s killing me.”

She set her sewing down and approached the bed with a candle cupped in her hands. Then she lifted the blanket off my splinted leg and lowered the light to it. “Yes, it is much worse,” she said, shaking her head. “The sooner it’s gone the better.”

“What!”

“The doctor is the best in town, you know. You need not worry.”

“You’re not taking my leg. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Oh, it’s very infected, I assure you. You are lucky, though. Another inch to the left and that musket ball would have severed your artery.”

“You’re nuts. I demand you let me up this instant! Untie me, now!”

The woman fell back with a start, as I pulled and jerked violently against my restraints. The pain it caused I can hardly describe, but the fear I had that that woman truly meant to take my leg proved greater. At last, the fabric binding my right hand gave way. I reached over and untied my left. All the while, the woman insisted I quit resisting, though she made no attempt to stop me herself. I freed my hands and began uniting my legs. The strap around my left ankle came undone quickly, but the one on my right, where the splint on my leg prevented me from reaching it easily, created a greater challenge. I had barely finished untying it, when the door opened and a man in a heavy topcoat and hat walked in. He ran to me as I struggled to my feet and forced me back onto the bed. I tried to resist, but when he pressed his weight to my splinted leg, I hollered in agony and gave in without a fight.

At once, the woman came around the bed and refastened my hands and legs to the posts, using the restraints I

had just untied. The man in the topcoat stood up when she was done, oblivious to my cries. He wiped his brow with his forearm before removing his coat and hat and handed them to the woman. He looked down at me and shook his head, and in that instant, I knew I recognized him. Only a few candles burned in the room, and although the man sported no beard or mustache, I could tell from the unnaturally white smile that it was none other than Ernie Davis, proprietor of the Robert E. Lee.

"Looks like I got here just in time," he said to the woman. "Has he given you much trouble?"

"Not till now, Doctor," she uttered.

"Oh, I'll show you trouble," I said, through gritted teeth. "When my lawyer gets through with you, Davis, my name will be all over that sign of yours out front. You hear?"

"Davis?" said the man. He turned to the woman. "Does he think I'm Jefferson Davis?"

"He's been delirious all evening," she admitted. "I think we better get on with it."

They both looked at me. "Yes, you're right." He nodded once. "Let's get started."

The woman walked back to the table with the knives and blades spread upon the starched-white linen. She straightened and rearranged the instruments neatly before wheeling the entire apparatus over to my bedside. As she did that, the man that I knew was Davis went to a cabinet in the corner and grabbed something off the shelf. He came back and held it to the light for me to see.

"I have enough of this to make the pain go away," he told me. "Do you want some?"

"What is it?"

"Heaven in a bottle."

"Whiskey?"

"Kentucky's finest."

"I don't drink."

"You might start. This is going to hurt."

"And you're going to hell."

He uncorked the bottle and took a large swig of the tea-colored distillate. "You sound like a Yankee. Are you sure you're with the 3rd regiment?"

"That he is," said the woman, quickly. She held up the uniform she had been working on. "He knows Captain Harris with Company B."

"I know nobody," I said, "except for a few New York lawyers who'll be chewing you up like cud when I get out of here."

"New York, you say?" He looked down at my leg and smiled. "Well, maybe this won't hurt so much, after all. Nurse?"

He picked a scalpel up off the table and ran it along the splint. Immediately, I felt the tension give, as the blade sliced through tape and gauze like wind through tattered sails. Slowly, the smell of gangrene crept in. It hovered thick and smothered what little scent of jasmine lingered within the room. I remember thinking it could not be coming from me, but somehow I knew it was. Davis removed the splint and the bits of gauze that stuck to my wound like thorny spurs. In the open air, my leg ignited, and thousands of tiny fires burned in places where only embers smoldered previously. I stiffened hard and jerked my body in convulsive twists, but the pain it caused me only served to paralyze me further.

"Goddamn you!" I shouted, tears streaming down my face. "God will get you for this."

Davis laughed. "No, Mister Sherman. God will vindicate." He tipped the bottle and poured whiskey over my leg. As he did, I heard him utter softly, "Deo Vindice, my friend."

The stinging pain from the alcohol proved more than I could bear. My eyes roll back into my head. My throat constricted. I felt my lungs collapse under the weight of my own chest, and then nothing. The lights went out, the smell of gangrene faded, and numbness escorted me to everlasting peace.

I awoke with the morning light spilling in through the window overlooking the graveyard. I flinched at first, thinking for a moment that I was still tied to the bedpost. Soon my body eased and my head came back to rest on the pillow, as I realized it was all just a dream. The table across the room that once held the scalpels and knives was again just a television set. The cabinet in the corner, the one where Doctor Ernie Davis found the whiskey, had turned back into a coat closet. I looked down at my arms. Red marks and bruises wringed my wrists where I imagined I had grabbed them in my sleep, thinking they were tied to the posts.

The telephone on the nightstand by the bed rang and sent me into a fright. I grabbed it and said hello even before I knew what I was doing. Ernie Davis was on the other end. He sounded coy, as if he had something to

hide. I guessed that was just my imagination, too.

“Good morning to you,” I said. “What do you want?”

“Just letting you know that breakfast is served in the lobby. We’ll be cleaning up in ten minutes, if you’re interested.”

“Yeah, thanks, but I’ll pass.”

“Okay. Deo Vindice.”

I had already started to put the phone down, when I realized what I heard and put it to my ear again. “What did you say?”

He paused. “I said, to your device. You know, whatever you say.”

“Really? That’s a strange comment.”

“Is it?”

I waited a moment, not wanting to sound paranoid. “Mister Davis.”

“Yes?”

“I’ll be checking out soon. Will you be there when I do?”

“Well, I don’t know. I have errands to run in town later.”

“Give me twenty minutes. I want to see you.”

I heard the hesitation in his voice, but finally he agreed to wait at the office for me to check out. I do not know what I expected, though. I mean, it is not as if I thought he would have shaven off his beard and mustache or anything, but I just had to see for myself. I hopped out of bed and into the shower. While there, I thought I smelled a whiff of jasmine in the air. I poked my head out from behind the shower doors, but it was gone. Twenty minutes later, I stood at the checkout counter in the lobby, shaking hands with Ernie Davis. He looked just as he did the day before, his beard and mustache a little grayer than I remembered, but definitely his own. He asked if I thought I might stop by again sometime and I told him I would. Privately, however, I had vowed never to set foot in the Robert E. Lee again. I was not willing to admit that the place was haunted, but it gave me the creeps enough to make it feel it was.

I threw my overnight into the back seat of my car and headed off down the road. About an hour out, I was feeling comfortable. I had some hot coffee in the thermos, golden oldies playing on the radio and warm thoughts of home swimming in my head. I thought about Thanksgiving dinner and how it looked like I would make it in time to enjoy it with the family. I thought about Molly, too, pulling out that stupid picture of me in the Santa suit, sitting in the middle of the street with candy canes stuck to my butt; and about the fire we would all gather around later, as we sipped hot apple cider with cinnamon. I could smell it then, warm cinnamon percolating in the autumn air, filling the car with memories of Thanksgivings past. I sucked it in and swallowed, as though I could taste it, but after the third breath, I smelled something else. I thought it was just my over-stimulated imagination at first. I mean, it hardly seemed possible. I straightened up in my seat and shook the goose bumps from my arms. Then I cleared my throat and sampled the air once more. It was there, not like the cinnamon, which I had conjured up in my thoughts and was able to dispel on command. No, this time it was real and unmistakable. This time it was jasmine.

I barely looked around for the source of it when I noticed a string of blinking red and blue lights in my rearview mirror. I recognized the car as the State Patrol, so I slowed down and pulled over thinking the trooper would pass me by. Instead, he pulled in behind me and got out of his car. I watched him in the mirror as he approached, his right hand covering his sidearm, his left, keying a microphone clipped to his collar. He stopped at my window and tapped on the glass. I rolled the window down and handed him my license.

“Problem, Officer?”

He took my license and read the name. “You in a hurry, Mister Sherman?”

“No. Why, was I speeding?”

“You were,” he said, and he pointed to the back seat. “Is that yours?”

I assumed he meant the overnight bag. “Yes.”

“You been drinking already this morning?”

“Drinking?” I flipped around in my seat, and there, next to my overnight, I saw a bottle of whiskey. It looked just like the one from my dream the night before. “That’s...that’s not mine, Officer. I swear!”

He looked at me suspiciously, his nose twitching as he sniffed the air. “What’s that? Jasmine?”

I suddenly felt very flush. My head grew dizzy and my eyesight dim. Now the smell of jasmine all but suffocated me. I looked up at the officer and read his nametag. “Officer Harris?” I said.

“It’s Captain.”

“Captain Harris?”

“Yes.”

“Captain Mathew Harris?”

“That’s right.”

“3rd. Cavalry Regiment?”

“What?”

“I know someone who is waiting for you.”

At that point, my eyes were beginning to roll back into their sockets. I dropped my head against the headrest and pinched my nose closed with my fingers. The smell of jasmine had brought me to the brink of gagging. Captain Harris opened the car door and suggested I step out. Thinking that was a good idea, I swung my left leg out the door and began exiting the vehicle. I got half way out of my seat before spilling out onto the roadway like a rag doll. Captain Harris came immediately to my rescue, propping his hands up under my armpits to help me back into the car.

“Jesus, Mister!” he cried. “I didn’t know, honest! I wouldn’t have asked you to get out.”

“Didn’t know what?” I asked, confused at my inability to stand on my own.

“Your leg. I didn’t know you only had one. Here, let me help you.”

“My what?” I looked down and could not believe my eyes. My right leg was gone, severed above my kneecap. I looked at my car, certain that I would find I had just been pulled from a horrible wreck, one I could not remember because of the shock I undoubtedly was in. But that was not the case. My car was in perfect condition. And my leg—there was no blood, only a rounded stump.

I worked with Captain Harris as he helped me back into the car. I remember the smell of jasmine fading then. It had not disappeared altogether, but lingered faintly. It hung in the air, mixing delicately with another aroma, one I could not rule out entirely as being real. It smelled like home, and I welcomed it with open arms. I let it take me like a thread of smoke back to where I came. And on that thread I rode, that thread of jasmine and cinnamon, back, back to where I came.

“Hey you!” said a voice. It came with a wrap on my window. My eyelids felt unusually heavy, and the morning sun jabbed at my retinas as I tried to pry them open. I looked to my left, blinking at the silhouette blocking out the bulk of the sun. I saw the State Trooper standing there, tapping the butt of his baton against his palm. I rolled the window down and poked my head out. “You need me again, Officer?” I said, only then noticing that something was amiss. The cop was not the same cop and his uniform looked perceptibly different.

“Again?” He holstered his baton. “Let me see your license and registration, please.”

I looked at him, puzzled. “What happened to the other officer?”

“What other officer?”

“I was just talking to him. I showed him my license already. He helped me back into the car after I found out I had no...” I looked down at my legs. They were there. Both of them. “...Leg.”

“Come again?” said the officer. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” I gave him the biggest smile that my cheeks could surrender. “No! I don’t suppose I am.” I slapped the tops of my knees. “Ha-ha! Look at that. My legs are as good as new. I gotta get out and walk.”

“Please stay in your vehicle, sir” the cop said, but I don’t believe I heard him. I opened the car door and started out. “I said, stay in the vehicle, sir!”

“I must have dreamed the entire thing,” I said, not paying the officer any attention. “It seemed so real.”

“Sir. Get back in the vehicle. Now!” He reached for his weapon.

“You know, I thought it seemed strange.” I planted my feet on the ground, delighted in my ability to stand erect on two legs. “But you just wouldn’t believe how real—Aughhh!”

In a flash, a bolt of lightning slammed through my body. My knees buckled like rubber bands, delivering my body to the pavement, twisting and contorting in uncontrolled spasms. A broken cackle gurgled from the back of my constricted throat, as air passed sorely through my windpipes in labored breaths. I recall a vague sense of looking up into the sunlight and seeing a towering figure standing over me. Coiled wires with sharpened barbs on one end tethered me to a stun gun at the other. The officer squeezed his trigger unmercifully, delivering volt upon volt of punishing jolts until the damned device had lost all its charge. I unfurled from the fetal position that I had rolled myself into and lay sprawled on the macadam looking up at the sky.

“You going to give me any more trouble?” the officer asked.

I shook my head. “Nooooo.”

“Good.” He discharged the wires from the end of his stun gun and holstered it. “Now get up.”

I crawled onto my knees and then to my feet, amazed that my legs still worked. “You going to haul me in, Officer?” I asked.

“Yup,” he said.

“Can’t you give me a break, sir, just this once?”

“Sorry, I can’t.” He turned me around and began to cuff me.

“Why?”

“‘Cuz, you made me discharge my stun gun. You have barbs stuck in you. Now we have to go downtown and fill out a report. I have to fingerprint you; get them barbs pulled out of your leg. Then we have to take your picture and—”

“But you don’t understand,” I said. “You see, I must have gone to sleep on the side of the road last night. I had this dream where I thought I lost my leg, and when you pulled up here I was just so happy to see I was all right that I overreacted.”

He shook his head. “That’s all fine and dandy, but I went and shot you. So, now we got to go—”

“I know. We got to go downtown; you said that. But look. It’s Thanksgiving. Can’t you cut me a break? All I want to do is get back to my family and have a nice dinner, some pumpkin pie and maybe some jasmine and cinnamon and....”

“Some what?” He spun me around.

I stopped and thought about what I had just said. The dinner and pumpkin pie sounded about right, but where I got jasmine and cinnamon, I could not imagine. “I said I wanted to get back to my family for dinner.”

“Yes, and you also said for some jasmine and cinnamon.”

“I did?”

“Yeah. Hey, you know, when I was a kid, my mother used to burn jasmine incenses while she prepared Thanksgiving dinner. To keep us kids occupied, she would give us apple cider with cinnamon sticks in them.”

“Really?”

He looked at me with distant eyes. “Yeah. That was before my father went off to war.” He shook his head slowly. “I suppose those were the happiest days I’ve ever known.”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “Me, too.”

He looked me in the eye, and for just a moment, I felt like I had known him all my life. “Tell you what,” he said, and he spun me back around to remove the cuffs. “I think I might have accidentally discharged this old stun gun when I tripped over the curb this morning leaving the station.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, just as long as you don’t have a problem removing those barbs from your leg yourself.”

“No, that’s no problem. I can do that.”

“All right then.” He opened my car door and waited for me to get in before closing it for me. “Why don’t you get on home to your wife and kind, now? Have yourself a nice Thanksgiving and a mug of warm apple cider with cinnamon for me.”

I started the car and offered him my handshake. “Thanks. I will Officer....”

“Harris,” he said. “Mathew Harris.”

“Right; Officer Harris. Thank you, and er...you have yourself a wonderful Thanksgiving, too.”

He shook my hand, hopped back into his patrol car and pulled away. I drove off, heading home with the intentions of not stopping for anyone or anything. But later that morning and just a few blocks from my house, I did stop: at the store, where I picked up a package of jasmine incense and a tie of cinnamon sticks. Later, after we ate dinner and passed around the pumpkin pie, we all sat by the fire, drinking warm apple cider with cinnamon, telling stories of Thanksgivings past and having a great old time. And Molly, yeah, Molly brought out that damn picture of me dressed as Santa Claus, sitting in the middle of the road with candy canes stuck to my butt. It was then that I realized that those were the happiest days of my life.