

BLACK

WHITE

And RED All Over

A Gritty, Current, Clean Christian Mystery

Deeann D. Mathews

Black, White, and **RED** All Over

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Chapter 1: The New Newspaper

“It used to be 'what's that black and white and read all over?' was a joke told about the newspaper, but every newspaper in the hands of racist reactionaries in the South has indeed been red all over – soaked with the blood of innocent Black people brutalized and slaughtered over lies in print that continue to this day.

“No more will we allow the wholesale placarding of racist tomes about ourselves and our children to pass for news. No more will we not have a voice to raise in challenge. No more shall we, the Black populations of Tinyville, Littleburg, Miniopolis, Smallwood, Shortport, Big Loft, and the rural countryside be passively painted as savages while the real savages sit comfortably in places of law, commerce, and politics. Be it known to all Virginia: those days are over! Hereby understand that the *Lofton County Free Voice* will roar back at the voices of racist reactionary news, beginning in Tinyville, then across Lofton County, then to the uttermost parts of Virginia!”

Captain Ironwood Hamilton and Lieutenant Patrick O'Reilly of Tinyville's two-man police force stood at the nearest public bulletin board nearest the police station, reading what they had been reading,

over and over again, on their regular dawn walk through the town.

The lieutenant was 25 years old, medium height and build, with bright red hair, ruddy skin, green eyes, and a shocking Southern drawl (unless you know the Scotch-Irish history of the southeastern United States).

The captain was 45 years old, six feet tall, sinewy, with iron-gray eyes and hair to match. His features looked like something that those Southern artists who loved to carve Confederates out of marble would have adored – classic, strong features, handsome, calm, and resolute. The slight pinch in those features from the sudden headache the captain was experiencing would of course have been glossed over.

“Wow,” said Lieutenant O'Reilly. “Have ever you read such bombast in all your life, Captain?”

Captain Ironwood Hamilton shook his head slowly, slowly because of the headache that was increasing every second.

“It's only bombast if the *Lofton County Free Voice* can't do what it says. I rather think it can, or at least can make a gallant effort.”

Lieutenant O'Reilly's green eyes got wide.

“Captain, you're not serious! A Black newspaper? In Lofton County? They won't last a week!”

Captain Hamilton shook his head again, and restrained his urge to rub his throbbing temples.

“It's not 1819, and these are not amateurs we are dealing with. Just from this first issue, I know they have a good chunk of money in hand, dedicated people, and good strategic and tactical sense.”

“How?”

“Look at the quality of the paper and ink – excellent for something the editors of the *Free Voice* have to know is going to be exposed to the elements and the anger of a good portion of 72 percent of the town. It's a 20 weight 11X17 paper, with first-class laser ink on a new printer.”

“How do you know it's new?”

“Printed items, particularly in color, have less sharply defined edges the older the printer gets – there's a bit less precision. Anyhow: one has to consider this being \$4 per sheet – a little less with discounts on bulk printing, but assuming just Tinyville for the moment, there are at least 100 of these if the town is saturated like we have seen on the streets we have checked. That's \$400 in printing costs alone. None of that was spent here – either in Roanoke or Big Loft, where they have the kind of print shops that can do this kind of work.

“Which brings me to the other point: this issue is composed of six

different articles, written by various people on various kinds of computers and word processors, but all of whom have the same desktop publishing software. Look here at the different articles. You can see the mild glitching in spacing between lines and within lines of text in the articles, although the frames that the stories go into remain perfect.

“Someone sent out the template with the editorial in place. The first person to receive it flowed his contribution into the space designed for it, saved it, and sent to the next writer who likewise flowed her contribution in. The last person who got his or her article in sent it to whoever was going to give it a final look before it went out.

“The point, Lieutenant: the paper is decentralized, and the writers beside the editor himself have used pen names of great figures in Black history. They know better than to present an easy target. As it stands, our local domestic terrorists would have to burn down the print shops in Big Loft and Roanoke to stop this paper from coming out.”

“They're not spoiling for that big a fight,” Lieutenant O'Reilly said.

“No. But the *Lofton County Free Voice* is trying to provoke a reaction, and they'll get it. The *Tinyville Times* and the papers of the other mentioned towns will lash back, say too much, and thus help the *Free Voice* put pressure on toward its true object – .”

In the distance, the captain and the lieutenant heard the phones in the police station began to ring. It was 6:30am, and Tinyville was beginning to wake up. Like Captain Hamilton's headache, the volume of calls would continue to increase through the morning. Indeed, Tinyville and the whole of Lofton County were seeing red all over, everywhere the provocative new paper was posted.

Not that the two-man police force in Tinyville took all those calls. The non-emergency voice message service picked up all the calls, transcribed them, and printed them for quick review – either the lieutenant or the captain scanned them periodically for police matters, but left the complaints to accumulate. Woe be to the citizen who called through 9-11 about the paper! Captain Hamilton answered those in such a way that the offending person would *never* make that abuse of emergency services again.

Meanwhile, the morning went on. Captain Hamilton handled five interviews for three open lieutenant positions that morning, and then returned that afternoon to the task that had cost the Tinyville force those three lieutenants. The captain had the grim task of going through the 68 percent of cases handled by the department in the decade before he came that showed clear racial bias in treatment and investigation of Tinyville's

Black population.

There was sufficient reason for the thundering indignation of the *Lofton County Free Voice*. Some of those cases had led to wrongful convictions, and the captain was painstakingly sorting those out and slating them to be re-opened. In 10 years, there was a goodly bunch, and therefore a goodly bunch of innocent men and women incarcerated for crimes that they didn't commit – or never even happened. Some cases had been made up out of thin air!

The problem for Captain Hamilton was two-fold: he knew that if 68 percent of cases had clearly gone wrong, then there was no trusting *anything* the department had done in the last ten years when it came to Black people. *Every* conviction obtained on the county and state level of a Black person that came out of Tinyville was suspect.

The other problem: while working through that much legal mess was a process best done carefully, and therefore had to be done slowly with only one man having access to the material, 28 percent of Tinyville was tired of waiting for the truth to be brought out. The paper's launch was provocative. The Freedom of Information Act request it had made of the Tinyville police department would be downright explosive, no matter how Captain Hamilton handled it.

In the afternoon, citizens of Tinyville incensed by the *Lofton County Free Voice's* intrusive launch began coming to the police station to see why their complaint calls were not being answered. They were stunned to see their rather excited statements presented to them in writing, and then to hear the grim gravity of Captain Hamilton's voice as he said, over and over and over again, “Although I understand your concern, we do not have departmental resources to spare to respond to and investigate non-criminal matters.”

Lieutenant O'Reilly marveled at how many people seemed to *want it to be a crime* that the descendants of the enslaved could make use of the rights of American citizens in public expression, just like everyone else in Virginia. They rhetorically danced around it, but, it was at the heart of the dance.

Captain Hamilton sat like a block of marble in his department's heather-gray uniform, and held his ground. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see through the window screen a set of mahogany-colored fingers, holding a notebook that was bobbing up and down – being written in.

All the carrying on of many White citizens of Tinyville about the launch of the *Lofton County Free Voice* at the police department – all

their wanting the police to do what it had traditionally done since the end of the Civil War in assisting in the snatching of hard-won freedoms away from Black people – was being recorded and would be reported. There was a long line urging that, including prominent town figures. The embarrassment was going to be severe. Captain Hamilton's concern was that the police department itself not get caught up in any way. The Freedom of Information Act request sitting in the captain's desk would be more than trouble enough.

Not only that. Lieutenant O'Reilly had kept track of social media, and had found something interesting. Instead of the new paper having a website that could be attacked, what people were doing was taking pictures of the first edition of the *Lofton County Free Voice* and its articles, and then putting them on their own social media. Further decentralization, since now to shut down the spread of the news, a whole bunch – dozens, becoming hundreds, becoming thousands – of social media accounts would all have to be shut down.

The local crowd most interested in that shutdown likely did not have the kind of sophistication to catch up – and besides, the diversity of the social media was too much to cope with, given that Black Junction and Blaggenuf and Hive and Palnet and Dtube and Threespeak were not

likely to bow to the pressures to class the new paper as “hate speech” that the big social media giants might come under. *The Lofton County Free Voice*, and its six articles, were spreading far and wide quickly, and also into corners where it could not be easily stifled, from whence its message could be summoned to confront its ideological foes at the touch of a button.

Near the close of the day, Captain Hamilton looked at the information Lieutenant O'Reilly was compiling, and pondered the magnitude of what they both were seeing.

“I see what you were saying earlier, Captain,” Lieutenant O'Reilly said. “That may not be bombast after all, the stuff that little editorial was talking ... they are making quite a go at it, already! Oh ... look here, Captain. The paper and all its articles have now passed the 10,000th mark for shares, and there must be a million likes and thousands upon thousands of interesting comments”

“We ain't seen nothing yet,” the captain said. “Lofton County is not prepared for its Black population to talk back with *equal strength of voice*, but it had better get prepared, and so had we. In that stack of non-emergency calls are the calls of our fellow police officers in Big Loft, Littleburg, Miniopolis, Smallwood, Shortport, and the county itself.

Their day has been much like ours. I think an impromptu working dinner may be in order.”

Chapter 2: A Difficult Dinner

Although Captain Hamilton was a tea-totaler, he had a favorite bar – the Midway Bar and Grill, the last stop after Big Loft before hitting Miniopolis and the rest of Lofton County's truly small towns and rural countryside. Midway had fabulous barbecue, and was a favorite spot for the region's veteran population as well as lovers of barbecue all over southern Virginia. Ironwood Hamilton was both Major Hamilton, U.S. Army Reserve, and also a grillmaster with little time on his hands.

While he waited on his fellow officers, the captain ordered a huge to-go order for his wife and children – three kinds of links, short ribs, burnt ends, chicken, and his wife's favorite, tri-tip – to enjoy that night and for his wife to get set up for the weekend.

“You must spend half your check in here on barbecue,” the waitress who served him said, with a smile.

“My wife says that with the exception of what I grill myself, this is her favorite barbecue in all of Virginia,” he said, “and since I don't have time to barbecue right now, this is the least I can do to keep her happy.”

The cook, Rufus Johnson, came out of the back at the sound of the captain's voice, his ebony skin glowing from the heat of the massive grill

in the back, and his smile glowing with joy.

“Dropping your check with us again?”

“Well, if a man has to burn through his money, the best place to do it would be on your grill, Mr. Johnson.”

Mr. Johnson's laughter boomed all the way through the bar, a deep, rattling bass that startled a few of the captain's guests as they came through to the grill side of Midway.

Lieutenant O'Reilly had only been part of Tinyville's police force two weeks longer than Captain Hamilton, who himself had only been in office for three months. The lieutenant had been snatched up right out of police academy because of the emergency that had caused Tinyville to ask Major Hamilton to also come home: Captain Sidney had a heart attack behind the wheel and gone off the road, killing his favorite lieutenant as well. That had brought Tinyville's police force down to three. Lieutenant O'Reilly had scarcely gotten through orientation, such as it was, before Captain Hamilton had arrived and essentially blown up the whole process by firing the entire old guard.

Thus, Lieutenant O'Reilly and Captain Hamilton were still getting to know each other, and the lieutenant was constantly surprised by the

mature man's way of approaching law enforcement and life. He was also surprised by the effect the captain had on the people around him. It didn't take a great detective to look at some of the older police officers and realize they drank pretty heavily in their off time. Occupational hazard: being a police officer was not a stress-free life, even in rural Virginia. Still, not one guest ordered more than one beer in the presence of their host. None of them even over-ate.

Something about Captain Hamilton, calmly and genially eating his Caesar's Grill Salad with no dressing and a glass of sparking tonic water with no gin added on the side, just caused every man at the table to find his discipline. Lieutenant O'Reilly had seen a Black man do that before – since Thomas Stepforth Sr. had come to town, everything and everyone around him had just gotten in order. None of his grandchildren, his nieces and nephews, and none of their friends had been anywhere near legitimate police action since. Yet the lieutenant had not gotten to see how a mature family leader could have that effect on people up close, not until he sat down at the right hand of his commander.

Dinner before the business was relaxed. Despite the higher discipline at the table, most of the officers still seemed very much at home with each other. Most of them were Captain Hamilton's age or

older; the oldest, the hawk-like, white-haired Captain Angler from Smallwood, was at least 65. Lieutenant O'Reilly was the youngest, and drank in the stories of the experienced officers with amazement.

It was not long before the lieutenant could sense why Captain Hamilton had fired the old guard, and why the Black population of Lofton County was fed up. It was not the racial slurs that slipped out of his fellow officers' mouths – at least at first, they were too professional for all that in public. Yet nowhere in the thinking of most of them did Black people exist as more than a hassle, an inconvenience, a problem – at best. Some of the comments about the *Lofton County Free Voice* indicated the old suspicions and hatred were neither dead nor sleeping, 154 years after the end of chattel slavery.

Captain Hamilton let his guests get their day off their chest, and then ordered dessert: a huge pound cake, warm and fresh from the oven. While that was being gratefully eaten, he commenced the business.

“So, like I said when I called, we're here to figure out what to do with the coming of the *Lofton County Free Voice* – I expect that all of you were inundated with calls.”

They had been. Littleburg's police switchboard had crashed, complete with arcs and sparks and a small fire. In Miniopolis, the officer

assigned to the switchboard had saved it by simply turning it off every thirty minutes and letting it cool down, leading to a flood of angry callers coming to the office, every thirty minutes. In Shortport, citizens had skipped the non-emergency line entirely and overloaded 9-11, which had caused a car crash to not get reported in a timely fashion. That call had to bounce all the way to Big Loft, which had big-city switchboards that could handle the flood of calls, before any EMTs could be sent to the crash.

“And you know there is going to be trouble behind that,” Captain Angler said. “One of those new-money Slocum brats, in his Lamborghini, upset with us because we couldn't get someone out to unbend his fender and change his tire in two minutes flat.”

(Translation: a “new-money” Slocum was one whose family branch had got their money after the Civil War, whereas the old-money Slocums were extinct – or at least, the old money had been extinct since 1870).

“Well, look, Angler,” said Lieutenant Grattan from Shortport, “it was a sort of an emergency. His girlfriend's mascara and half her hair color might have melted and run in a few minutes more of all that heat!”

On the stories went until they were finished, and then Captain Hamilton shared how he and Lieutenant O'Reilly had gotten an update

for their phone service, and Tinyville's switchboard had survived. This changed the mood at the table entirely; relief and smiles broke out, for a little while. But..."

"Now all we have to do is figure out what we are going to do about the paper!" an officer said.

"Oh, yes," sad Captain Hamilton, "which is why I called us together."

Lieutenant O'Reilly nearly jumped at the eagerness – nay, almost soul hunger – of most of the officers at that table at the thought of the brilliant Captain Hamilton devising a strategy to deal with the paper and the Black people behind it, in the "good ol' boys" style. With the exception of one grim and quiet officer of about Captain Hamilton's age with a strikingly familiar appearance, the rest leaned forward, hungrily, as if someone had offered them a nice, juicy, *black* burnt end ...

"Have y'all decided what to do with those Freedom of Information Act requests yet?"

The shock, the disgust, the disappointment – all of it was equally palpable as the officers jumped back. Some of them looked stung, as though Captain Hamilton had slapped them in the face. One of them, his face red, spat out – "What do you mean, have y'all decided – I ripped the

one that came to my office up and put it in the round file *and* burned it! Who do these news Negroes think they are, demanding our files – Obama ain't in office no more!”

The table froze up at first, but, broad agreement spread over many of the faces as the seconds passed.

“I am inclined to agree in substance with Captain Bragg,” said Captain Johnston of Shortport's police force. “Although the requests are indeed backed by federal law, there is likely not going to be serious enforcement of that law from the present administration. There is no need for these people, who have no knowledge of the working of law, its enforcement, and investigative techniques to have all that information they cannot possibly rightly interpret in hand, to bandy about to the press and social media and other sources of needless agitation.”

Captain Angler was more circumspect.

“My son was kind enough to get on the computer and look a bunch of stuff up for me about this thing when I got my request letter. His research says that there are only nine legitimate reasons to refuse a Freedom of Information Act request. One of them would be active investigations that can be compromised, but unless we reopen ten years of cases, we don't have a legal leg to stand on in order to refuse.”

“Angler – I would expect that you of all people –.”

“I'm 68 years old, Johnston. I lived through the civil rights period. The longer the thing stretches out in the press, the worse all of us and Lofton County are going to look. We answer the requests, and we thus show we have nothing to be ashamed of. We bury them in the data they want. They've got papers to get out; the storm of old news will fade out as new things happen, long before they get through all of that.

“If we dig in, even if the local courts decide in our favor, that paper will take all that time and agitate, agitate, agitate. Those who feel they have been mistreated will air their stories to fill the gap, and any attempt on our part to answer the mis-characterizations will be met with, 'Well, just release the records and we'll decide for ourselves.' By the time we have to give up the records, the damage will be done. Law men who have done absolutely nothing wrong will not be safe in Virginia, the anger will be so high – and then they will camp on every detail they find suspicious, week after week after week. Ten years of information – they won't be done for at least two, tarring and feathering all of us in public, and getting that rag read seriously across the country and the world.”

Lieutenant O'Reilly looked at Captain Hamilton, aghast – but there was nothing reassuring in that grim marble front, yet.

“Not only that, gentlemen – there's that pesky Innocence Project, holed up as close as the University of Virginia at Charlottesville,” said Lieutenant Hill of Littleburg. “You would think the boys could have at least stopped by there if they had wanted to do something helpful before that little girl was sadly killed –.”

“Ms. Heather Heyer, 32 years old,” Captain Hamilton interjected softly, “killed by one in that lawless mob.”

“Yes, that girl,” said Lieutenant Hill. “Anyway, imagine the situation if we draw this thing out and they end up getting the information later and calling on the Innocence Project to look into it. Once that happens, if there are any innocent n*****s we have inadvertently helped to put back to work for Virginia, and those folks find them, the scandal will go on for years. It will outlast *all* of our careers, except our new boy, O'Reilly here.”

The new boy's head was spinning. Only the steady presence of Captain Hamilton was holding him steady.

“Come on – I can't believe you all are talking like this!” Captain Bragg cried. “This state has gone through a lot in the last 158 years not to have to go through this with these people!”

A deep sigh from the only officer quieter than Captain Hamilton at

the table, his dark eyes emanating the sorrow that framed his grim face as thickly as his white-flecked black hair— and suddenly, Lieutenant O'Reilly realized why his face was *so* familiar in Virginia ...

“Now, don't you start, Lee!” Captain Bragg snapped. “Just because my great-great-grandfather messed up a few times and because your great-great-great-uncle had to sign the whole thing off in 1865 doesn't mean I need a history lesson from you! I already know what happened!”

Captain Henry Fitzhugh Lee of Big Loft's police force leaned forward in his chair and gave Captain Bragg a glare so cold that one would have thought it was around February of 1865. Like his cousin Captain Hamilton, Captain Lee was new in Big Loft's police force, and like Captain Hamilton, he knew he had a mess on his hands, very little time to solve it, and no patience for bombast from anyone. His tone was quiet, but as withering as a freezing cold day.

“Captain Bragg,” he said, “we've known each other since childhood, so you ought to know by now that I wouldn't even waste my time on you like that at a time like this.”

Captain Bragg looked as if he had been slapped again.

“What I was about to say,” the captain said, “is that we in Big Loft have a Freedom of Information Act office that has determined what you

have found out, Captain Angler. The decision is up to the police commissioner, and comes down to whether it is determined that some cases need to be reopened.”

“About how many would it take to stop a Freedom of Information Act request like this?” said Captain Johnston.

Captain Lee sighed again.

“That's not even the right question, but –.”

“Look here, Lee, we know your family fell from Olympus, but still –.”

“*Stop that,*” Captain Lee snapped. “There is no time for that foolishness!”

Captain Lee's orders were instantly obeyed; silence resumed at table.

“Have any of y'all *yet* all been through the files these people are asking for?”

“I have,” Captain Hamilton said.

Silence around the rest of the table.

“Fine,” Captain Lee said. “The rest of you haven't been through them because you lived what is there, or you just don't remember and just don't care – but you're asking questions like we just need to find

some simple trick or loophole out of this mess. *There is none.* Y'all just want to know if somehow there is a magic number of cases we have to halfheartedly reopen in order to stall this request. *There isn't.*"

"Are you sure?" Lieutenant Wells said.

Captain Lee sighed again.

"Suppose we were to try to find that proverbial back door – Southern white men in Virginia, heirs of the Founders, reduced to desperately trying to slink through a back door – pick a number! Any number! What do you think, gentlemen? That Freedom of Information Act request encompasses all 80 miles of Lofton County – the sheriff's office, the five towns, and Big Loft – for the last ten years. How many cases do you think we would have to reopen in total to stop a Freedom of Information Act request that big?"

After a few moments, Lieutenant Pemberton sighed.

"I get it," he said. "Pretty darn near all of them."

"What would your ideal number be, Pemberton – you've got half the problem solved, but let's keep going."

"200 cases, county wide."

"That's a nice, conservative estimation," Captain Lee said. "Anyone else?"

“One tenth of that,” Captain Bragg spat. “This defeatism makes me sick.”

The veins in Captain Lee's neck began to stand out; he was very, very angry, but maintained the cold tone in his voice.

“Be patient, Captain Bragg. In a few moments, you'll learn the difference between defeatism and defeat – anyone else?”

Captain Angler had caught the wind of where this was going; his face collapsed in a colossal frown.

“500 cases – 50 for each year,” he said.

“With age and experience, at last we begin to hear a little common sense,” Captain Lee said. “Assume that was the number – that would lead to scandal enough.”

“I tell you, you make me sick, Lee!” Captain Bragg spat.

“Not as sick as I am about to make you,” Captain Lee said. “If the numbers hold in your office, and all the rest of your offices, like they hold in mine, *every case involving an African American in Lofton County in the last ten years needs to be re-examined, and as many as 80 percent of the convictions may need to be overturned – and the world is about to know it!*”

Forks were dropped. Beverages were knocked over. Pound cake

was choked on, and Heimlich maneuvers had to be applied, spreading cake crumbs and half-chewed cake across the table.

“Well, I had just about lost my appetite anyway,” Captain Angler said.

Anger gave way to sorrow again in Captain Lee's face.

“You are blessed, Captain Angler. You can retire out of this mess. I'd start drawing down that 401K as fast as I could, starting Monday. The rest of us – 20 years or more from retirement age. You're blessed, Lieutenant O'Reilly, to be very young, and fresh, and green. You can still go do something else, easily. And, Captain Hamilton, you're blessed because you are new, and at least made the right first steps *before* that Freedom of Information Act request came. If you don't survive in Tinyville, the Army will gladly have you back, full-time. Me? I already know I'm going back to the Army, or I will retire with 23 years of service. The rest of you? Plus-40 and with 10 and more years creating what is in those files?”

Captain Lee was kind enough not to say the rest. Captain Bragg thus flared up again.

“Well, I don't regret any of it – these people have to be kept under control or you see what they do! This is your fault anyway, Captain

Hamilton!”

“Oh?” Captain Hamilton said, with a disarming smile. “What did I do?”

“You handled that whole mess at the high school without the firmness necessary, and gave these people an opening to think they could get away with this kind of stuff!”

“The Freedom of Information Act request is dated two weeks before that happened,” Captain Hamilton said evenly.

Captain Bragg sputtered and coughed. Lieutenant O'Reilly desperately hoped his attempt to stifle his laughter was not visible to the rest. However, Captain Lee saw it; his dark eyes lightened up, just a little.

“Besides that, Captain Bragg, no crime had been committed. Once you have done real violence, if you have a functioning conscience at all, you seek not to do it again unless it is absolutely necessary. I know that not everyone, owing to lack of experience or lack of conscience, can understand that, but --.”

Captain Bragg turned the color of a tomato, while the grim features of Captain Lee brightened all the way up.

“-- It is what it is, Captain Bragg,” Captain Hamilton finished, and

then picked up his glass of tonic water and drank the last of it.

Captain Bragg had nothing else to say for the moment, and neither did Captain Lee, but the latter seemed much more satisfied than the former.

“Well,” said Lieutenant Hill, “it looks like we have two options. The Angler Option: respond to the Freedom of Information Act request with excruciating detail and hope some other news comes along to drown it out, or, the Bragg Option: make them fight it out in the courts, and hope for the best. Deputy Alexander, what do you think Sheriff Nottingham's position is going to be?”

“We're in the same position as Captain Lee in Big Loft,” Deputy Alexander said. “Our legal people are saying we either reopen the cases and thus get a legitimate reason, or we have to comply with the Freedom of Information Act request. The problem for those of you that want to hold out is going to be that if county and Big Loft go, and Smallwood goes as well, there's no chance in that much data that they aren't going to find something – the pressure on the rest of you will become immense, as will the pressure on the courts to force the rest out.”

“Which is why we *all* have to hold out!” Captain Bragg said through clenched teeth.

“But Captain Bragg,” said Deputy Alexander, “you're not listening. It's not in my hands. It's not in Captain Lee's hands either. We don't get to make those decisions.”

“Well, who do I need to speak to?” Captain Bragg said. “I was listening – if we don't take our chances *we don't have a chance!*”

“Call the office Monday, and I'll put you through to Sheriff Nottingham,” said Deputy Alexander.

Captain Lee drew out his pen and wrote on a clean napkin – “Here is the number of the police commissioner's office in Big Loft – Commissioner Orton Thomas.”

“I'm surprised I didn't have to shame it out of you, Lee.”

“I was sparing you the trouble of coming into the 21st century with your ideas, and having to use Google.”

Captain Hamilton intervened by saying something, but poor Lieutenant O'Reilly coughed and sneezed and wheezed so hard that he didn't hear it.

“And on that note,” Captain Hamilton said after he thumped his young lieutenant on the back like it was really necessary, “let's adjourn. I think we know where we are now.”

“We don't know where you are,” Lieutenant Hill said.

“That's because I don't know yet,” Captain Hamilton said. “I will let all of you know, when I have made my decision.”

No sooner were they outside and a little way from the rest did Lieutenant O'Reilly turn to his commander.

“Is it really that bad, sir?”

“It is, Lieutenant,” the captain said grimly. “Notice how most of our colleagues talked about it. No thought as to what they have done in terms of the actual people they have done it to. Just cases, and how do we all escape the consequences that are coming. It is that bad, Lieutenant.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I don't know yet. I know there is another way beyond what Captain Bragg and Captain Angler are proposing, and I know that unlike Captain Lee and Deputy Alexander, the buck stops on me. I also know Who knows.”

“Who knows?”

Captain Hamilton pointed upward with a smile.

“He does!”

“Oh, of course!”

“Aren't you glad you don't have to depend on me and I don't have to

depend on me either?” Captain Hamilton said with a smile. “We'll get home and get into prayer and then into bed, and we know the Lord will show us what way to go.”

“How much time do we have left?”

“Just eight days, Lieutenant. Just enough time to prepare a data dump if we wanted to do that – but Deputy Alexander is right: it wouldn't work even if we tried it. Captain Angler is not up for that kind of fight. He may retire and leave a lieutenant to do the dump, but he is not going to go through all that. He knows there is no point. Every tree in the wood south of Smallwood surely knows why there is no point in Captain Angler and his crew fighting.”

Lieutenant O'Reilly shuddered.

“You mean –.”

“Yes, strange fruit,” Captain Hamilton said, “and plenty of it. Maybe not in the last ten years, but still, once that floodgate of the last ten years opens up, that will be enough. The stories will all start coming out, for the past fifty. Captain Angler has been in that office for fifty years. He thinks, because he has forgotten things as we all do over time, that there's enough good policing in the last ten years so that the *Lofton County Free Voice* will get bogged down and then distracted away.”

“Captain Bragg will be up first thing on Monday, trying to convince county and the commissioner in Big Loft that there is no way forward but to fight. If you think Captain Lee was giving him a hard time –.”

Lieutenant O'Reilly broke out laughing at last.

“It was like watching a loud toy poodle barking at a pit bull – two pit bulls when he came after you!”

“Captain Bragg doesn't know how he is,” Captain Hamilton said. “He and his crew have made a career making themselves feel big by bullying people who can't afford to lash back – until now. He still won't get it after tomorrow, either.”

“I'm surprised Captain Lee didn't get the message over to him that it ain't about to work!”

“Lieutenant, let me tell you this: if you put a loud toy poodle in a room full of pit bulls, the toy poodle still won't know he's not a pit bull until he finds himself in a pit bull's stomach.”

Captain Hamilton sighed.

“Captain Lee was not in the mood for it today,” he said. “He's normally not quite that growly, but he just wasn't in the mood for it today. He is the one about to get ill over all this, not Captain Bragg.”

By this time, they were at Lieutenant O'Reilly's car.

“Be careful on the road, young man – I’ll see you after the first shift tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir – I’ll be praying!”

“Please and thank you!”

On Saturdays, the Tinyville police force ran a split shift, which essentially meant the captain covered the office the first half of the day, and Lieutenant O'Reilly covered the second half. Off he drove, and the captain doubled back to the bar instead of going to his truck right away.

Captain Lee had not come out into the parking lot. The Big Loft officer, although he had Saturday off, was not the kind of man who under normal circumstances lingered at a bar – or anywhere, not in his youth and then really not after West Point, Special Forces, and JAG. Like his cousin, he was one of those men who did what he needed to do and then disappeared into his privacy – except that he was much more of a loner, not having the robust family life Captain Hamilton had enjoyed over the same 23 years of their service.

Captain Lee's blood pressure was also subject to huge spikes, and his cousin had seen his veins swelling up at table. Although the Big Loft captain took excellent care of his body and took his medications dutifully, there were certain triggers and situations that were beyond

preventative reach – and the blood pressure was not the only life-threatening problem.

Captain Lee was on the bar side of the bar, at the bar, the bartender making him a drink to order: a triple-strength virgin mojito. That is, a limeade, with three limes and triple mint in the glass – enough potassium and menthol in that to knock that pressure spike down in a hurry. That and some blackstrap molasses, and it was done. He paid the bartender and tipped him well, and then looked at his watch as he began to drink down his virgin mojito. Captain Hamilton knew that the other captain was counting his own heart rate. He could hear what was about to kill him, and was going to listen to it settle all the way back down to safe levels – or at least safe enough for him to go get more advanced medical help.

The bartender returned for the empty glass, three minutes later.

“How was it, Captain Lee?”

“Life-saving. Thank you very kindly.”

“If it's that good I ought to try it.”

That was Captain Hamilton, who cut his way with a smile through several good-looking women who were looking over Captain Lee with no idea of what was going on, and sat down by his cousin.

“Coming right up!” the bartender said, and went to go get more limes.

“You know, Harry,” Captain Hamilton said, “that traffic going into Big Loft on a night like this must be terrible. Why don't you come south with me to Tinyville, and enjoy the weekend with me and the family?”

“I wasn't going back to Big Loft tonight anyhow, Ham.”

“That's my whole point, Harry. I know what happens when you get like this. I'd be sick about the whole thing too if I could afford to be, but I've got a big bunch of reasons named Hamilton that I can't, and you need to borrow them for the weekend too.”

“I'm tired, Ham. I'm tired of this name I have and what I look too much like, I'm tired of Virginia, I'm tired of the memories of things we've had to do in order to serve this country that just never learns, I'm tired of it, Ham. I do not want to be here any more, and I just don't know how much longer I can take this mess.”

“That's right, which is why you are coming home with me.”

Like many members of his family, Captain Lee was subject to deep depression, compounded by PTSD – a dangerous problem for a man who needed to take meticulous care of himself. Captain Hamilton understood it, and just grabbed hold of his loner cousin when necessary.

“I've got the chains – put your car in neutral, and I'll tow it, and you can sit up in the truck with me.”

“However you want to do it, Ham.”

Twenty minutes later, Captain Hamilton was driving down the road to Tinyville, his cousin at last relaxed enough while listening to Southern Gospel on the radio to go on to exhausted sleep. He had slumped over against the window, and every car light illumined the burden he carried in his handsome and all-too-familiar-looking face. The resemblance was not exact, but it was close enough, growing with age as the black hair turned white, and the sorrow of two wars and a ruined people likewise settled upon him. Only, now, asleep at last, was there at last peace in that face.

“It's easy for him to be tired when he has insomnia half the time, Lord,” the captain prayed. “So, I've got two things to figure out. I've got to get Harry the help he needs without taking the work from him that he needs to keep going, and I've got to figure out how to honor that Freedom of Information Act request without blowing the county up. I don't have a clue, Lord, and that's bad for an investigator! I'm just counting on You, to get me and Harry safely home, and to show me what to do next.”