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## The Bass Player

### Chapter 1

By Drake Koefoed

Keith Thomas left the band when they refused to pay him. He headed for New Orleans with all his stuff in the car, and a pint of whiskey on the seat next to him. Somewhere in West Texas, he nodded off. He hit a drain inlet, and his car went straight where the road turns. It turned over and landed in what is, in Texas, the bar ditch.

He crawled out the passenger side window, and tried to figure out what to do.

“You all right, cowboy?”

“I think.”

“What do they call you?”

“Keith Thomas.”

“Know where you are?”

“Texas.”

“This is Blue Cat, Texas, and I am Len Williams, Chief of Police.”

“Am I in trouble?”

“You just wrecked your car. If that isn’t trouble to you, then no.”

“What do I do from here?”

“Well, get your car towed and find somewhere to stay.”

“OK, who tows cars?”

“I can’t recommend any towing company. I can tell you there is only one in town, which is Marie Williams towing. She will probably charge you \$100 to take it to her yard at our ranch. We don’t charge no storage, and if you don’t have the money, make yourself worth \$8 an hour and work it off.”

“Can you call her?”

“I can, but that’s the wrecker right there.”

Marie parked her wrecker. She said the Spanish equivalent of “Oh, heck”, uh, kind of.

Keith answered in Spanish, “My poor little car. Auntie, I need to get my bass out before you turn it over.”

Marie said, “You’d better. This town is already short a bass player.”

Keith went down to the car, and reached in and got his bass. He came back up.

“I can loop it with my cables and turn it over, but I would scratch it up.”

“So what should we do?”

“Is it any good anyway?”

“No.”

“So we just get it to the ranch, and maybe get some parts off it? I might give you 200 for it.”

“Let’s turn it over. I may need to drive it to New Orleans if it will run.”

She went down with the cables and looped them over the car and back to the axle housings. “It probably will, but it won’t impress the girls.” She flipped the car and hooked it up. “We see you at the house, then, Len, when you finish your shift.”

“Keep your radio on.”

“Am I still on call?”

“Until 0200, Williams.”

They got in the truck. “I’m a cop, too.”

“Good gig?”

“Totally sucks. What you gonna do in New Orleans?”

“Fish for a new gig. My band shafted me on money, and to tell you the truth, they play like crap anyway, so.”

“I’m gonna put you in the spare room and put your car in the yard. You got a bill for me for the tow?”

“I have about 80.”

“Forget it. I don’t take anyone’s last dime. You can take parts off cars, chop cotton or something”

“Sure.”

“Want to meet the band that needs a bass?”

“Sure.”

“Let me call the band if you are up to it.”

“I will be.”

“You play country?”

“Mostly rock.”

“Who you like in country?”

“Oh, Willie Nelson, Juice Newton, Johnny Cash.”

She picked up a headset, and hit a speed dial. “Hey, Bert. Got a bass player here who, the only thing I know about him is he crashed his car in the ditch.

Likes Willie. I should bring him by?”

She threw the headphone back in the console. “She says yes. Bertha McCall. She is the lead singer, bandleader, and lead guitar. Her drummer is Sammy Alvin Dane.”

“I know Sammy Alvin from long ago. He is a good player.”

They pulled into an auto body shop. “If you have some alcohol in your car, take it with you. Bert will call me at 0200 and I will come get you.”

“Great.” He got his pint bottle from the car, and went into the body shop with his bass. Bert looked up. “You got a bass. Can you play it?”

Sammy said, “He can.”

She played a lead in to ‘on the road again’ and they played it. She started a Kenny Rogers tune, but Keith waved it off. “Need the sheets for that.”

“You don’t know it?”

“I’ve heard it, but I don’t know it.”

“The Gambler, then?”

They played it. Keith’s guitar proposed “All Along the Watchtower” and Bert picked it up and sang the lead. Then she kicked the mike over at Keith, and played an intro to J.J. Cale’s ‘Cocaine.’ They played that, and then, without breaking, several more J.J. Cale tunes.

Bert looked at Keith. “Can you play with us Friday and Saturday night, or should I cut to the chase and ask you to marry me?”

She was for sure hot. Long Strawberry blonde hair, very curly, your basic fashion model build, the angel face.

Keith smiled. “You always save the most dramatic scene for the middle of the movie. Let’s make sure I know the songs for Friday and Saturday.”

Sammy made a list of the tunes they had to be able to play. Two of them, Keith did not know, but Sammy had sheets, so there we go. They rehearsed everything on the list.

“I need to work off having my car towed, but should we rehearse again tomorrow night?”

Bert and Sammy shook their heads. Bert said, “We’re ready. Friday is at 8pm, so is Saturday. Sammy will get you at 7 from Len’s unless there is a change.”

Marie was there, so Keith got in the car. Marie said, “Good?”

“Great. We are on for Friday and Saturday. Bert said Sammy would get me from your house, but nobody has asked you.”

Marie said, “We don’t mind. Let’s go round up some dinner.”

“We can't buy food at this hour, can we?”

“No. Len is doing his change of shift. He works the most ridiculous hours you ever heard of.”

“So our mission is to cook dinner before he finishes?”

“That's right, Mr. Phelps. This tape will self destruct in 10 seconds.”

They came to the house, and took the bass in.

“Can you cook, Keith?”

“I can make bread in a wood stove.”

“Strut your stuff, and make us a loaf of bread in the oven.”

“Make some, but use the oven.”

Keith took out some flour and all, and made some dough without measuring anything. He kneaded it with a lot of pressure. He set it on a high shelf to

rise. He washed all the dishes, not just the ones he had used.

“You don't need to do that.”

“You put me up for free. I better do something.”

She showed him his room. “I was going to make hamburgers but we would have to use bread for buns.”

“We can make some buns from the bread dough.”

“Let's do that. Len will want a burger sooner or later. He'll want eggs tonight.”

Keith kneaded the bread dough, and made some buns, and a loaf, and put it all in the oven. He set the timer of the oven to shut it off.

The radio squawked.

“He's coming.”

“So we make eggs? An omelet?”

“We could all eat those.”

He started cracking eggs. She pulled out some stuff. Jalapenos, cheese, onions, and so on. She started to cut up some jalapenos. “You eat jalapenos?”

“Sure.”

He chopped and mixed the stuff, and scrambled the eggs. He laid them out on the griddle, and put cheese on them. When they were ready, he rolled them up. He cooked some bacon and laid some toast on the griddle.



“We have this newfangled machine called a toaster, Keith.”

“I'll try one some day.” He flipped the toast, and put some butter on the grill and ran the toast around to pick it up.

Len came in. He took his rig off and washed his hands, then sat at the table.

“Smells like bread. That could make us suspicious.”

“He says he knows how to bake it, Len. We'll see when it comes out.”

“I shut the oven down a little early and leave it closed. Saves a little energy. We'll have bread tomorrow.”

Keith served out the omelets, and they ate them.

Len said, “Watch this boy in the kitchen, honey. We need to learn what he does.”

“How did you do with Bert and Sammy?”

“Just fine. We're playing in the City Friday and Saturday. Big Al's. Seems like Bert might like me.”

“Don't. All I am saying about her. Al is fine, but there are some cockroaches there. On the subject of your tow bill and such, Marie has a lot of stuff to do in the yard, so that is for you, I think.”

“Any work I can get.”

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In the morning, Marie had some things to do in the garden. When that was done, they put some oil in Keith's car, and got it started. Marie put some

gas in it from some junkers. “You use it from cars that were running recently, not the ones that died long ago. The old gas, I give away for fire starters.”

By lunch, they were pretty well caught up. Len came back, and they made some sandwiches. Len said, “I have an officer on. Got something to show you.”

They went to a little house on a fairly good sized lot. It was run down.

Trash was all over the yard. Old sofas and such sat on the porch.

“Marie wants you to work on her rent houses. The owner tried to sell me this one to rent, and I didn't want it. I saw him this morning, and he said he would sell it to you for \$3,000. \$100 a month. You would need electric, but not water, if the well pump works. Also, sewage and garbage, the city of Blue Cat will insist on.”

“No down payment?”

“I said you would clean it up, so if he forecloses, he comes out ahead anyway. He went for that. It's a pile of junk, but cheaper than renting. If you decide to leave, you could just give him the title back.”

They met the owner. He was fine with selling the house. He could trade work for payments, but the pay would be minimum wage. They signed the papers. The owner, Ken Anderson, wanted some cleanup done at another house. Len said Ken would have to trade the first month's payment for the

use of a pickup, and of course, pay for fuel and such. Ken was fine with that. He would show the job to Keith in the morning.

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Len took Keith to the wrecking yard to get the pickup. It was an ancient Dodge. They filled the gas tank from some wrecks. They equipped the truck with some old mops and brooms and such from a pile of junk in a dead van. They ate some leftovers, and went to Keith's new house.

“Len, can you burn trash here?”

“When the sun is down, you can.”

Marie put Keith's car by the house. She brought some old gas for fire starters. “Put it in a bucket and put a dry piece of wood standing in it overnight. That piece of wood will light easy.”

Keith took the truck to the grocery store and got some food and some beer, candles, and odds and ends. He got a bag of ice for his cooler, and he was ready to go. He dragged the rotting beds and such into the yard. He cleaned up in the house as long as he could see. He built a fire of the not too nasty trash in the fireplace, and started it. He brought a lot of stuff in from the car and put his sleeping bag in front of the fire. It was pretty warm, but he wanted to be there. When the sun was well down, he lit the trash. He sat on the porch while the junk burned. He drank some beers, and watched the junk turn to gases and ashes.

He went to Len and Marie's house in the morning. Marie put him to work on the yard again. He had to take a trip to the dump to get rid of a chunk of concrete. Bert came, and they went to the gig.

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Big Al's was a dingy building with a gravel parking lot with mudholes.

They went in, and Bert introduced Keith to Al while Sammy brought in his drum set. Al was big, for sure. He was only 6-7 but he looked strong for his size. "Sammy says you can play, so I'm happy. Do you drink when you play?"

"Not a lot. A little loosens you up, too much and you don't play so good."

"I don't attract a real connoisseur here but we need a good sound. I let the bands have a free beer on breaks, about every two hours. If someone wants to buy you a drink, you can say thanks, and the bartender will have it for you when you're ready. We put it on a list for you, and you can drink it next month if you want. I won't cheat you out of it. So always accept them.

People want to hand over money, we will take it."

"Good."

"I pay the band after we close. I don't do deductions, none of that. If there is trouble, stay out of it. I've been doing this 26 years, and never needed help with that. I can throw a biker out that door pretty easy. I hope you

don't smoke pot when you play, because your sound won't be so good.

After hours is fine. White drugs are totally out.”

“We understand each other, Al.”

They set up, and Keith had a cup of coffee. They started playing, and it was tighter than the rehearsals. They got a request for a Hank Williams tune Keith didn't know. Keith said the requester should ask Al for a sheet. Al brought it over, and Keith put it up on a rickety little music stand.

Bert said, “You're going to play a song you have never heard off sheet music?”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

She pushed the mike over. “I can't sing Hank, and Sammy can't sing 'Jingle Bells' so this is for you.”

Keith said, “Folks, I don't know this one. I'm gonna have to play it from the sheet, so if it don't sound like Hank, don't throw nothing at me.”

They played it, and it was very good. Bert played an intro to J.J. Cale's *Cocaine*. They went through the rest of their Cale tunes. They went on break, and Sammy wanted a smoke, so he and Keith went outside.

“She's flirting with you some more.”

“A problem?”

“Not with me. But she will flirt with everyone. If you take her up on it, she will cheat on you, and then probably the band breaks up. If it's what you

want to do, then do it. But I'm just telling you.”

“Too good to be true.”

“She is. But we're doing a good gig.”

When Sammy finished his cigarette, they went in. They went to the bathroom, but it was clogged with people in line. Sammy got two draft beers, and they went back outside. They watered some bushes, and drank some beer.

Keith looked at the night sky. “Sometimes, you look at that, and you think anything is possible.”

“But it isn't.”

“We're in the land of opportunity.”

“For the rich to get richer.”

They went in and played some more. When the bar closed, Al got \$150 out of the register and poured them draft beers. Bert handed \$40 to Keith, and \$40 to Sammy. She dumped the tip jar on the table, and split that with them. Al turned change into bills for her.

“You guys did great. Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

Keith said, “I liked playing here.”

“You did a great job with Hank. Happens he is my favorite, and it isn't just me. You guys rehearsing tomorrow afternoon?”

Bert said, “We could. You want us to get ready for some Hank?”

“That's it.”

“We know most of his tunes, but Keith doesn't.”

“He can learn.” He got a little booklet of Hank Williams music from his office. He ran a highlighter over seven of the songs. “Keith, I would like you to listen to them, too. See how he sang them.”

“I don't have a stereo.”

“I got something worse. Want a laptop computer with a bad keyboard?”

“I don't know anything about computers, and I don't have any money.”

Al got a laptop from his office. It had a charger, but no battery. “The battery died, so it is plug in only. Mouse to the Hank tunes. Play them, learn how he sings them, and it's yours.”

“Seems like a lot for just learning some songs. I might not have my electric on yet.”

“I could put it on eBay, maybe get the postage and \$5. Would you guys like another beer?”

They said they would.

Keith brought the glasses to the bar, and Al filled them. “So anyone like cats?”

Keith said, “Sure.”

“Well, I got a problem. A lady of the evening left a cat here so she could go on an engagement. She didn't come back for the worst of reasons. The

cops didn't want to interview the cat. My dogs want to, but it would be short and painful. So someone has to take this cat.”

He brought a box out of his office. In it was a small cat, cowering. Keith reached in and petted her. She pushed back, the way a cat does when it likes being petted.

“Take her before the dogs get her, Keith.”

“All right.”

“She comes with some cat food, a bowl, and a cat toy. Her name is Mauritania.”

“I'll care for her.”

“OK, gang, time to get going and leave it to the swamper. My wife is expecting me.”

They got in Bert's van. She took off down the road to Blue Cat. “Al likes you.”

“He's an all right guy.”

“He can be very hard to work for, Keith.”

“I will hope it doesn't get that way for me.”

She took him to his house, and said, “Maybe 2-4 tomorrow afternoon, we can do some rehearsals of the Hank tunes.”

He went in the house, and found the electric on. He turned on some lights.

Some worked, and some needed his spare bulbs. He let Mauritania out of



the box, and she wanted out the front door. He was reluctant to let her out, but he did. She went out, did her business, and came back in. He put some food in her bowl and found another for water. He put them under the kitchen table where they would not be knocked over. He put the cat toy on the floor near the bowls. Mauritania ignored the toy, and ate and drank. Keith got out the sheets, put the sheets and the laptop on the kitchen table, and sat in the chair that didn't wobble. He turned on the laptop, and figured out how to get it to play one of the Hank tunes. He played with the music, and read the sheet as he did. Mauritania explored her new territory. Keith played the rest of the music. He was probably ready to play it, but tomorrow afternoon might help. He took a pee, and went to bed.

Mauritania slept alongside him like the wife he had not found. He wondered if he ever would. Bert could be great, but if she didn't want to be, he should keep his distance.

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In the morning, actually early afternoon, he made some eggs and stuff, and ate. Mauritania went out and back in. He played the Hank tunes again. He had figured out how to make them a playlist. He took a loose panel out of a door and put a piece of heavy blanket over the hole, so Mauritania could get in and out. He threw the springs and frames from the burned sofa and all into an oil drum that sat near the house.

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