

Blood Eagle

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*Published by
Dreamscape Books
Columbia, Tennessee*

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Cover Design by GetCovers

ISBN: 9798309224999

Printed in the United States of America

February, 2025

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 1

The sun was setting. It would be dark soon, and the October nights could get pretty cold. It wasn't cold enough yet to freeze you, but if you didn't have a warm place to sleep it could be mighty uncomfortable. Howard had slept on a gravel lot the past two nights, and he was hoping to find a nice grassy patch for once. He had a ratty old blanket, and he used his coat for a pillow. As long as it didn't rain, he would be fine.

In the bigger cities, like Nashville and Knoxville, there were bridges and overpasses that homeless people could camp under. There were camps, shelters, churches and other resources for homeless people. But here in the city of

Greenwell, surrounded by farmland to the west, the Great Smoky Mountains to the east and dense forest to the north and south, there were no such things available. Howard had been run out of town multiple times, only to be picked up by police in the next county over and brought back to Greenwell.

There was a sizable homeless population in Greenwell, about seventy-five people in all. But unlike the bigger cities, the homeless in Greenwell rarely banded together to help each other. It was every man, or woman, for themselves. Howard missed that about Nashville. When the weather would get cold, they would burn trash in an old metal barrel, and gather around the fire for warmth. He had never been turned away.

There were an awful lot of churches here, but none who would open their doors to the homeless. Churches here were locked up at night, with no staff or volunteers to help the poor.

There were no homeless shelters, and most everyone Howard had talked to about sleeping on their property had shooed him away. His own sister wouldn't even give him a place to sleep, now that she had been elected to public office.

Howard had been on the streets for about ten years now. He used to have a home, a car, a job. He paid his bills, and had a happy life. Until it all went south. He started having flashbacks, became fearful of people, paranoid. It made work difficult, and he eventually lost his job. Without his income, he soon lost his car and his house. He'd been on the streets ever since. He knew where to find food, and he could usually find shelter when it was required. Most of the time he stayed out in the open, but on rainy days he could always find someplace dry to wait out a storm.

He supposed he was lucky. Some people don't have what it takes to survive without their expensive lifestyles and high-tech gadgets.

Howard knew that whatever life threw at him, he could handle it. He'd been handling it for ten years.

There was a large grassy strip on the shoulder of the highway. Howard didn't particularly like the idea of sleeping so close to the road, but it was better than sleeping in the gravel lot again. And he was far enough out of town that the traffic would be light, and he should be okay unless a State Trooper came along to run him off.

He had an old folding chair in a carry bag that someone had donated to him a long time ago. He took it off his back and set it up on the shoulder of the road. This is where he would camp tonight. He sat in the chair to rest his aching feet. They were blistered from wearing shoes that were too small with no socks.

Howard opened his pack and took out a can of beans and his bottle of water. He sat in his chair and ate slowly. It felt good to sit after a long

day of walking. He tried to do useful work during the day, like picking up trash on the side of the road. Of course, he had to spend a little time trying to find necessities like food and water, but the rest of his time was spent being productive. He doubted that anybody noticed the service he provided to the community. He was invisible to most people, they just overlooked him.

The lack of thanks wouldn't stop him from doing his part. It wasn't for other people that he did it, it was for himself. Being homeless stripped you of any pride or dignity that you had. Howard picked up trash so that he could take pride in doing a day's work, even if nobody else recognized it or appreciated it.

After he ate, he put his trash into a bag and lay down on the cool ground. The grass felt soft, much softer than the gravel lot. He bunched up his coat underneath his head and spread his blanket over him. Several cars came by, but as

darkness fell the traffic slowed and Howard drifted off to sleep.

It felt as though he had only been asleep a couple of minutes when he heard the car stop. Howard prepared himself for an inevitable encounter with a State Trooper. They were the only ones who stopped this far out, and the Trooper would want him to pack up and move on somewhere else. He tensed up, waiting to be kicked by a steel toed boot. When the kick never came, Howard opened one eye. There was someone standing over him, either a woman or a man of smaller stature. It was difficult to tell with the car's headlights. All Howard could see was a silhouette. Those headlights were bright. He put his arm up to block the light that was shining in his eyes. A voice said, "Shhh. It's all going to be okay now." He still couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. The silhouette was no longer standing in front of him, but those headlights were still shining in his eyes. Howard

felt a blinding pain in his head, and spots began to flash in his eyes. He heard the sickening cracking sound as something hard made contact with his skull.

Chapter 2

Margot Thompson whipped her car into the turn lane and pressed the accelerator. She didn't have time to be sitting in all this traffic. As she reached the intersection, she zipped back into the left lane to proceed through the light. If she didn't hurry, she would be late for the ceremony. And it would not look good at all for the County Mayor to be late for the ribbon-cutting ceremony at the new steel mill, her pet project that was going to create two hundred new jobs in Fulton County.

As she raced toward the site of the new mill, Margot rehearsed her speech in her head. She hated these things, but she had to put on a

good face for the public. She needed their votes to win re-election. The jobs this mill created would put two hundred more votes in her pocket.

When she was only a block away from the site, her phone rang. It was Ray Greene, the sheriff. Margot ignored the call. Whatever it was, it would have to wait until after the ceremony. She didn't have time for anything else right now, and Ray had a scheduled meeting with her later today.

Margot arrived at the new mill and hurried to the platform that had been set up out front. A large red ribbon stretched across the front of the building, and the platform was centered just behind the ribbon. Margot climbed the steps, and shook hands with Richard Bradbury, the new site manager.

Richard was in his mid-thirties, not bad looking, about five and a half feet tall and slender. He had piercing blue eyes and short

blonde hair. Margot thought he was nice man, based on her previous interactions with him. Richard had been integral in getting the new mill opened in Greenwell.

The site was technically within the city limits of the City of Greenwell, but since the city and county governments were integrated, Margot didn't have to share credit for the new mill with any city politicians.

Richard introduced himself, and then Margot. She delivered her speech and together they cut the ribbon, smiled for the cameras, and gave quotes to the reporters who showed up for the event.

When it was over, Margot was in a hurry to leave. It wasn't any pressing matters of local government that caused her to rush, although that was the excuse she used. She just really hated these things. The press, the crowd, the speech, the smiling, it was all just too much for her. She

said her goodbyes, then hurried back to her Lexus.

She was back at her office fifteen minutes later, ready to hide behind a closed door for a while and let her nerves recoup. But when she opened her door, Ray Greene was sitting in her office, looking serious. She sighed. She had forgotten about Ray.

“Mayor, we have a problem.”

“What is it now, Ray?”

“Well, you know my deputies keep tabs on the homeless population around here.”

“Yes, what’s your point?”

“Well, they have been noticing a decrease in the number of homeless people.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Well, it’s suspicious. It just started a few nights ago. Two or three each night are disappearing.”

“Again, isn’t that a good thing?”

“Mayor, be serious. I suspect foul play.”

“I am being serious. I don’t give a damn about the homeless. Homeless people don’t vote, they don’t work, they don’t want a hand up, they want a hand-out. I have no patience or tolerance for them, and if they’re leaving here, I say good riddance to ‘em.”

“Mayor, we believe Howard is among the ones missing.”

“What do you mean? Howard was out on highway 212 two days ago, picking up trash.”

“Yes, but nobody’s seen him since then.”

“You’re telling me that my brother is missing, and nobody knows where he is?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Well, that’s Howard for you. He runs off, tries to make his way back to Nashville. Panhandling’s better there. Bunch of liberals who

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