

BORN IN SALT

T. C. Weber

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Broke the deep slumber in my brain a crash
Of heavy thunder, that I shook myself,
As one by main force roused...
For certain on the brink
I found me of the lamentable vale,
The dread abyss, that joins a thunderous sound
Of plaints innumerable. Dark and deep,
And thick with clouds overspread, mine eye in vain
Explored its bottom, nor could aught discern.

- Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*

Chapter Zero

Sgt. Jacob Adamson stared out one of the bulletproof side windows of the ATH-3C 'Retribution' airborne assault helicopter as it flew over green hills and fields. The other 'copters in their formation—more 'Retributions' and an escort of gunships—were close enough that Jake could see other faces staring back. Beyond rose the lush forested peaks of the Escambray range, some areas scarred raw from past battles. They flew below mountain height, to make it more likely they'd catch the enemy by surprise, but high enough to make the 'copters less vulnerable to ground fire.

As usually happened en route to landing zones, images of Rachel's beautiful face and trim body drove everything else from focus and gave him a raging hard-on. "I love you," her ruby lips intoned between orgasms their last night together, right before Jake got shipped out to Cuba. As he boarded the bus from New Bethany to Scott Air Force Base in nearby Shiloh, her last words were "Come back in one piece," a psalm that still echoed in his mind.

Jake was due for leave soon. He couldn't wait to hold his fiancée again, kiss her warm lips and perfumed neck, and most of all, drive between those smooth white thighs. *Two weeks of non-step sex with the hottest dish in New Bethany!* He had to see family, too. *Go hunting and fishing with my brother, watch his band play, say hi to Sarah and the rest.*

Strapped in next to Jake in the cramped cargo section, PFC Seth Bowen, a fellow survivor of the Hill 249 disaster, shouted over the noisy rotor blades, "Anything interesting out there?"

"More of the same," Jake yelled back.

"What do you think?" Bowen asked.

"It's mop-up. We'll be fine." It was Jake's job to ensure this, that all his men went home alive.

Ben was right, I shouldn't have re-enlisted. The Army had given Jake a sizable bonus, though, which his family needed to pay off the bank. And now that he was serving overseas, he'd be eligible for VFW membership, practically the only way someone from a poor farm family could secure the connections needed to get ahead in the world. Like to run for county council like Rachel had suggested, and stand up to goons like Sheriff Johnson.

Alpha Company's helicopters cut over the mountain spine and headed south. The knuckleheads in headquarters had decided one company was enough for the mission. Their destination, the village of San Isidore. According to Captain Tannin, the battalion's military intelligence liaison, it was an insurgency stronghold, and the home town of one of the rebel commanders.

The village came into sight—a few dozen red-tiled roofs atop white houses, nested among fruit and palm trees, with a Catholic chapel and a school in the center.

A squadron of Viper ground support jets zoomed in low at an angle. The deep thuds of explosions carried over the whine of the copter rotors and rattled Jake's bones. Giant fireballs blossomed upward from the village, angry fists of orange and black thrusting into the sky.

Did they have to use such heavy ordnance? Jake turned from the window and made hand signals to his quad, to get ready to deploy.

The 'copters dropped into bean fields about a mile from the village, forming a double semicircle. The rear door swung down. Jake waved his arm toward it and led his ten men out the back of the helicopter. As soon as all boots hit the ground, it took off again.

Every building and tree in the village belched flames and smoke. Even a mile away, Jake felt rippling heat, smelled burning gasoline, and heard faint screams.

Just beyond Jake's hearing range, Captain Tannin, a narrow-faced man who never smiled, and the German S.S. adviser, Hauptsturmführer Krüger, peered through binoculars and conferred with the company commander.

The radio operator relayed orders and the platoon commanders gave the order to march. "No one gets past us," Lt. Wheeler, the new commander of 3rd Platoon, told Jake and the other two squad sergeants.

Jake took point for his squad—he was the most seasoned, as well as the best shot. He moved carefully, scanning ahead for partisans and searching for mines. No gunfire came their way. There didn't seem to be any resistance at all. The company's gunships circled the burning village, laying down machine gun fire.

A horse galloped across the bean fields toward Jake, fire trailing from its back and tail, eyes wide with terror, froth spitting from its mouth. *Poor creature.* He braced his rifle, aimed at its head, and pulled the trigger. The horse dropped and burned in place, smelling like gasoline-soaked barbecue.

The flames had died down by the time the infantry reached the outskirts of the village, or what was left of it. Jake spotted no signs of life, not even birds or insects.

Accompanied by Captain Tannin and the Hauptsturmführer, Lt. Wheeler called his sergeants over. “We’re on head staking duty.”

What? “Excuse me, sir,” Jake asked the lieutenant, “did you say head staking?”

“Orders. Cut off every head you find and place it on a stake outside the village. Divvy up your men accordingly.”

The Hauptsturmführer spoke in barely accented English, more to the officers than the sergeants. “The key to pacifying resistance is the precise yet overwhelming application of fear. When the natives see what we’ve done here, they’ll think twice before supporting the rebellion. It has worked well elsewhere.”

“Sir,” Jake said, “may I speak frankly?”

The lieutenant frowned. “Go ahead.”

“That’s fucking barbaric, sir.” We’re Americans, not Nazis, even if Germany is our ally and controls a third of the world.

The lieutenant’s eyes widened, then narrowed. “Just do as you’re told. I’m not in the habit of repeating orders.”

Inside the village, the houses and other buildings had all collapsed into piles of blackened bricks and wood, some of it still smoking. The trees were charred fingers stabbing at the sky. Burnt corpses lay amid the bricks. They smelled like the horse, only a thousand times worse, people who just an hour earlier, might have been smiling or laughing or expressing love or perhaps arguing about pointless things that didn’t matter anymore. There wasn’t much in the way of weapons, only a few old carbines and shotguns.

The bodies were thickest inside the collapsed church—stiff blackened limbs, frozen screams and scorched bones. *Maybe they heard we were coming, and went inside to pray.* Most of the corpses were small. Children. Jake’s squad picked through the church, not speaking.

Jake unsheathed his combat knife and knelt by the blackened eyeless corpse of a child, blade trembling. He couldn’t tell if it was a boy or a girl.

I’m not going to do this. Or anything like this, ever again. My squad’s not going to do this either. Jake lowered the knife and scanned the burnt church. “If you’re watching me from above, Mom, please forgive me.”

He gagged, stumbled to his feet, then threw up his breakfast on the remains of the altar.

Chapter One

“Benjamin,” our slick-haired preacher said into the pulpit microphone, “you have some words to share?” He stepped aside, offering up his post.

I couldn't tear my eyes from the casket in front, draped with an American flag and surrounded by flickering candles and white lilies. The Army had sealed it, saying the remains hadn't been recovered right away and weren't suitable for viewing. Only a hint of disinfectant, a faint chlorine smell beneath the flower scent, gave away the presence of a body inside.

My brother's body.

Jake's face, blue-eyed and strong-jawed like a Hollywood cowboy, smiled from a framed photo displayed to the right of the casket, *1962-1983* beneath his name, then the national motto, 'Love of God, Love of Country, Love of Duty.' My eyes lingered on that smile, which was more of a smirk, like Jake had been thinking, “the world isn't so hard if you play the game right.”

“Benjamin?”

I stood up from the pew, welcomed by a few coughs and lots of snuffles. Jake had been the family's Big Hope and we'd never imagined him to get snuffed out like this. Sitting next to me in the front, Pop, who had refused to cry at Ma's funeral, shuddered and choked.

My stomach tightened. What was the point of this church stuff? It didn't help when Ma died and it didn't help when poor Abby died either. Jake deserved better than a catalog funeral.

I patted Pop on the shoulder and edged past him. My feet dragged me across the red carpet, past my brother's casket, and up the steps to the pulpit.

Preacher Bill glared at me and tapped his index fingers together. Did he have better things to do? Or was he bent out of shape 'cause I hadn't set foot in his church for so long? As if his smarmy Bible waving should make me appreciate my lot in life.

I hesitated at the microphone. A cough escaped me and echoed off the pale blue walls.

I'd held my share of audiences, but never this large, and never by myself, without even a guitar for help. Every pew was filled: easily a couple hundred people, all clothed in dark suits or dresses. Everyone in New Bethany knew my brother, or had at least seen him play football. In the entrance hall earlier

they'd said one after another that Jake's death was a damn shame, though most added that dying for one's country was the greatest of honors.

Behind me, the preacher sighed.

Better get this over with. I unfolded my two-page speech, written in barely legible cursive and full of corrections. My eyes drifted to Rachel, Jake's fiancée, sitting in the front row across the aisle from Pop and Grandpa. Her face, normally so flawless and assured, was wracked in agony, tears smearing her makeup.

I laid the speech over the open Bible on the lectern and started to read. "Jacob Adamson was a rare figure. He was smart, handsome, and popular. He had a beautiful fiancée, land to till, and probably a career in politics down the line. It is a terrible tragedy that his life was cut short ..."

An image flashed in my mind: the whole family, Ma and Abby too, gathered around the Christmas tree Pop said he'd planted the year Jake was born. I was six and my wool pajamas itched. But I was happy. We all were. Jake tore the paper off a model tank with moving treads, a present from Grandpa.

Tears blurred my vision. He's never, ever coming back.

In the back pew, close to the door, a solitary dark face urged me forward. Sarah. They'd let her in or she snuck in. She mouthed something, probably akin to 'the stage is yours.'

I gave up on the speech and stuffed it in my pocket. "You all knew Jake. He was the guy I wish I was. I won't lie and say he was perfect, but he was a lot closer than most people."

A lot closer than me.

"He shouldn't be lying in a coffin at twenty-one," I said. "He should be sitting on a porch well into next century, grandkids and great-grandkids gathered 'round, telling his life story and farting dust."

No one laughed. Jake would have.

"Pop taught me how to fish and trap and shoot a gun and lots of other things." I cast a glance at Pop but he was too lost to notice. "But Jake was the one I did most of that with. We were a team, me, Jake, and Sarah, all the way up to high school. Jake was the leader of course since he was oldest. But he never bullied me and even stuck up for me. Can't ask for more from a big brother."

In the back, Sarah wiped her nose. Up front, Rachel sobbed.

My knees grew weak but I locked them rather than lean against the podium. "I'm supposed to quote Scripture and say how this is all part of God's plan." I stared at the Bible in front of me, open to 1 Corinthians 15. *Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*

My shoulders tensed. We'd been robbed. Again. And the preacher and government thought it was glorious.

"Death is victorious." I gripped the mike and words spilled out. "Death always wins, and misery, and pain. That's the world we're stuck in."

The whole room seemed to hiss inward. Even Sarah and Rachel stared at me with open mouths. I eyed the cross on the wall behind the podium and nearly gave it the finger.

I couldn't stop my tongue, though. "If there's a God, he's a sadistic son of a bitch."

Pop's face reddened and I stomped back down the pulpit steps. With all the scowls directed my way, I almost kept going. Out the door, out to freedom, where I could take off this damn noose they called a tie, run to one of my ponds, and take my peace in single combat with whatever largemouth bass I hadn't bested yet.

Wouldn't be right to abandon my brother, though. I took my seat, Pop's eyes still glued on me.

Preacher Bill examined the ceiling, as if gathering strength, then shook his head and trudged to the microphone. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want ..."

People were still staring at me. I slunk against the back of the pew.

"...Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

My rod and my gun, they comfort me.

* * *

Most people had avoided me at the burial at New Bethany Baptist Cemetery, and now avoided me at the reception. Preacher Bill had offered to pray for my soul but I told him to pray for his own damn soul. His entourage of Praise the Lord housewives kept peering at me like I was a three-legged dog.

I wasn't up to talking anyway. I could still hear the shots fired by the honor guard at the grave site, each one piercing my heart like I was a mourning dove in season.

I kept by the front window of our crowded living room. Grandpa and the other seniors sat on the tattered sofa or quilt-draped stuffed armchairs. The younger guests stood in trios or quartets, talking quietly without smiles. Throughout the room, embedded in baskets of goldenrod and blue monkshood, fragrant sprigs of rosemary hid the mold and mildew that had flourished inside the walls since Ma's passing.

Pop, standing with hunched shoulders, got most of the attention. He'd stopped crying and started drinking.

"Picked up this bourbon on the drive through Kentucky," one of his old Army buddies told him. "Supposed to be one of the best." He poured a golden liquid into two aluminum mugs decorated by war eagles. The man, who had a flesh-colored patch over his left eye, thrust his mug toward the portraits of Presidents Lindbergh and Clark on the fireplace mantel, then turned to Pop. "Strength and honor."

Pop tapped mugs with him, but didn't return the toast. He took a swig, exhaled, and said, "People die in war ... but Jake, he was special. No one with more potential on God's whole earth. We thought for sure he'd come back without a scratch, and a fuller man. Like us when we came back from Haiti—stronger, more appreciative."

He gulped down more bourbon. "Shoulda been someone else who stepped on that mine."

Pop had been drinking the day we got the news. We'd delivered twelve thousand bushels of corn kernels to the Midland Grain Corporation, but they'd only paid half what we'd hoped, well below the break-even point. Two Army officers in dress uniforms, one of them a gray-haired chaplain, knocked on our door. The old chaplain sat us down in the living room and told us Jake had died instantly. Pop had kicked over the coffee table and swung the hat rack around and the officers had called in reinforcements from the car out front.

A hand touched my shoulder. It was the Army grief counselor, a young guy with glasses and lieutenant bars. I couldn't remember his name.

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

I shrugged off his hand. "Fine." I was only nineteen but I was a veteran at grief and didn't need his help.

When Sarah stepped in from our screened-in front porch, I lightened a little. She wore her winter dress, which was long and dark blue, not happy and flowery like her summer dress. A matching felt hat hid her short kinky hair. Her wide cheeks drooped and her molasses eyes were puffy from crying.

I waved her over. Her parents and two older brothers followed her into the room. And behind them, a tall man dressed in a charcoal suit with a white fedora. His skin was deep black, darker than Sarah's. His name eluded me but he looked familiar.

Sarah threw fierce arms around me. "I'm so sorry, Ben."

She almost never called me Ben. Usually it was Deerslayer, which Jake had come up with. I almost never got skunked, and even if I went for a head shot, I never missed.

“Thanks,” I managed.

Sarah smelled her normal earthy self, no perfume. She squeezed my shoulder. “Why didn’t you read your speech? It was good.”

“Didn’t feel right, just leave it at that.”

“Yes but... You know you shouldn’t go cursing God, especially in a church.”

She meant well so I didn’t get mad. “Maybe God shouldn’t keep cursing me and mine and all the other folk who don’t deserve it.”

Sarah stepped back as her parents and brothers offered condolences. “The rest of the family, they’re all sorry too,” her mother said.

Then the tall man with the white fedora clasped my hand. “I’m Paul. Do you remember me?”

He wore gleaming white shoes to match the hat. City slicker all the way.

“Cousin from the Turners,” Sarah said.

Now I remembered. Must have been ten years ago I last saw him, maybe more. I was a kid then, Ma and Abby still alive.

“Paul’s been living in Chicago,” Sarah said. “Just moved back and got a job tending bar at the Deer Head.”

That was the only saloon in the county, part owned by Sheriff Johnson. I wasn’t twenty-one yet and had never been inside.

She winked. “He knows every cocktail invented. They couldn’t resist.”

Paul nodded. “Being a war vet helped too. Though things being as they are, I wouldn’t expect to make management.”

Sarah’s mother interrupted. “You come by the farm any time, Ben, and I’ll cook you a nice meal and we can all sit down together. Any time you want.”

Food wasn’t what I needed. I stepped forward and twined my fingers with Sarah’s. “Come get ’faced with me. We got all manner of homebrew and shine in the kitchen. Got food from two dozen families too if you’re hungry.”

She smiled. “Blaze the way, Deerslayer.”

Her smile tore away some of the heaviness crushing my ribs. Then Pop tramped over and stuck his aftershave-drenched face in mine.

“What’s all these... people... doin’ in my house?”

My skin flushed with embarrassment. “Sarah’s come with her family to pay respects.”

Grandpa frowned, and my aunts and uncles did too. Dumb ass racists, the whole family, even though we lived in the Land of Lincoln.

“What’s the big windblow,” I said. “We’re all equally poor.” And our families had lived near each other for generations. Sarah was practically my sister.

“We’ll be on our way,” Sarah’s pop told me. “Ain’t a time for confrontation.”

“No, stay,” I said.

Sarah squeezed my hand. “I’ll stay.”

Pop glanced at our clasped hands and grimaced. He knew we weren’t a couple, but might be afraid things would head that direction. We’d thought about it, naturally, but sex would have felt weird, like incest. And what if I broke her heart? Or she broke mine? It would be too much to bear.

“Go on and drink with your old buddies,” I told Pop. “Let me drink with mine.”

“These are your buddies?” He exhaled bourbon fumes. “That’s the best you can do?”

Sarah gritted her teeth and let go of my hand. “What did you say?” She’d never been one to take shit.

My toes clenched, then my fists, but sadness and fatigue won out. “Truce, Pop. Sarah was Jake’s friend too. He’d want her to stay.”

Pop’s face sagged and he took a swig from his eagle mug. He threw up a hand. “Have it your way.”

Grandpa waved him over and he retreated.

Sarah’s folk hugged me one by one and said goodbye.

“I’ll wait outside for you,” Paul told Sarah.

“Wait on the porch,” she said. “I’ll bring you a drink.”

As Paul left, Rachel approached. I hadn’t spoken to her at the funeral, not knowing what to say. Her shoulder-length raven hair was still tangled from the wind at the cemetery. Her face was slack, emerald eyes blank like a doll’s. “*Why, Ben?*” Water oozed into her eyes and started to drip.

My body tensed as the horror returned. Jake was gone. Forever. Poor Rachel. Even though they were an odd match in a lot of ways, she’d been Jake’s steady since tenth grade and had a whole life planned with him.

I wrapped my arms around her, breathing in her rose-scented hair. “You know I’m here for you.” I wondered if I would still be her confidant, or if she’d leave my life too.

“I’m real sorry about Jake,” Sarah told her.

Rachel turned her head. “Thank you.” Her watery eyes returned to me. “I have to find out what happened. You have to help me.”

“He stepped on a mine,” I said. “What else is there to know?”

She wriggled out of my embrace. The grief counselor studied us, but I shook my head and he stayed put.

“That’s all they’ll tell me, he was killed in action.” Her lips quivered as she grasped my left arm. “Nothing about what he was doing. Whether someone could’ve stopped it.”

His death could have been prevented if he’d quit the Army after the mandatory two years instead of signing up for more like a dumb ass. If I had a girl like Rachel, no way would I spend one minute apart from her.

“Jake’s last letter,” she continued in a shaky voice, “had more redactions than usual, and then I didn’t get anything at all.” Her pink-nailed fingers remained wrapped over my forearm.

“Well,” I said, “the Army chaplain told me they try to keep spies from seeing anything sensitive in the mail.” The pictures Jake had mailed after he first arrived at his post depicted a tropical paradise: green mountains, blue seas, and endless fields of tall sugarcane. He and his squad buddies smiled like they were having a good time.

“Why Cuba?” she asked. “What’s the point of that?”

“You might as well ask why a tornado comes down and smashes up one side of a street but not the other.”

Her eyes widened and she let go of my arm. “I thought you were on my side.”

Should have said something comforting. This was why I’d never had a girlfriend more than a couple of weeks. Never said the right thing. That and being skinny and not having a nickel to my name.

Still by my side, Sarah came to my rescue. “You ain’t the only one who lost someone, you know.” She put a hand on my arm. “Let’s get those drinks.”

Rachel’s face fell. “Are you leaving?” She bit her lip, one of her worry gestures.

“I’m getting a drink,” I said. “Want one?”

Rachel hesitated, then sniffled. “You’re more like your father than you think.”

My toes clenched again and I walked off, leading Sarah into the adjacent kitchen.

The heavy wooden table in the middle was covered with food, mostly casseroles. We’d hauled a second table up from the basement and piled booze on top. Folk congregated around the tables, heaping food onto plates and pouring homebrew or moonshine into glasses, teacups, and mugs.

“We should start slow,” Sarah said.

“Yeah.” After my outburst at the church, I was in enough trouble without passing out in the living room or throwing up on Preacher Bill’s wingtips.

I opened the old refrigerator and pulled out three bottles of factory-brewed Budweiser. Better than the local homebrew and a treat since it cost money.

I led Sarah through the living room again. Rachel was talking to my crazy Aunt Sybil, who was wearing a wide-brimmed hat sprouting a circle of egret feathers. She was Pop's oldest sister but she almost never visited.

"I have a book you should read," my aunt told Rachel as we passed. "It really explained things for me."

We continued onto the covered porch, which ran along the front of the house and down one side. The screen was supposed to keep out bugs but it had too many holes. Paul was sitting in a weather-beaten rocking chair, the only one that still had both armrests.

Sarah opened one of the beers and handed it to him.

"St. Louis's finest," he said, and took a swig.

Sarah and I sat on the swing. The chains creaked but they wouldn't break. We dove into our beers without talking.

The porch faced east so we couldn't see the setting sun. But the sky had darkened and the trees around the house cast long shadows onto the patchy yard and the two dozen cars and trucks parked there. Beyond, our hard-packed dirt driveway ran a hundred yards through fields of corn stubble to the county road.

"You got a nice house, Ben," Paul said, leaning slightly forward in the chair, feet planted to keep it from rocking.

"Everything needs fixing," I said. "But it's been in the family a hundred years. My great-grandpa put the porch on. It's home."

Each ancestor and offshoot had a picture on one of the walls, ghosts watching the generations pass. I half expected their sepia eyes to weep blood.

"No matter now," I continued. "Bank's threatening foreclosure, they wanna take the whole farm."

Paul shook his head. "That ain't right, to take a man's home away."

Sarah nodded.

My teeth gritted. "Banks, government, they see us as hogs for the slaughter." I finished my beer.

Sarah finished her bottle too. "Want me to get more?"

"I'm ready for something stronger."

"I thought we were gonna pace."

"You call downing a beer in two gulps pacing?"

She frowned. "Wasn't two gulps."

Paul fixed eyes on me. "You've got Lindbergh and Clark over the fireplace."

"Not my say." Pop and Grandpa worshiped President Lindbergh, National Leader for four decades until cancer took him. They even worshiped his cleft-chinned, slogan-spouting replacement, Andrew Clark.

“And if it was your say?” Paul asked.

I couldn’t help but feel bitter. “Why pay tribute to men who let the banks and grain buyers grind us down? And send people off to die when they’re needed here?”

I didn’t mention that Pop and Grandpa loved Clark’s ‘master race’ speeches. No matter how bad our lives got, they relished that there were whole races of people beneath them.

Paul scooted the rocking chair close and spoke quietly. “There’s more of us than them. We could stand up and say no.”

Was he serious? “That what they do in Chicago?”

“Sometimes.”

“And I bet they get their heads kicked in.”

His eyes narrowed. “Nothing worthwhile’s easy.”

“Nothing’s easy, period,” Sarah added.

The door opened behind us and Pop stomped out. He stabbed a finger at me. “Get back in here, boy. We got guests.”

That was true. Today was for Jake, not me. I slid out of the swing, rocking Sarah in the process. “I got circulating to do,” I told her and Paul. “Why don’t you come inside?”

Paul shook his head. “I don’t need to stir trouble with your kin. We’ll pick this up later.”

While Pop stood with crossed arms, Sarah stood and hugged me. “See you tomorrow?”

I whispered in her ear. “I’ll stash enough shine to last a while.”

Paul tipped his fedora at me and led Sarah down the porch steps. They followed their shadows toward the road.