

## Blooded

By James Lambert – Copyright 2024

Gramps had one last wish, and boy was it a doozy – he wanted to die at his hunting club.

To raise the degree of difficulty, the club is located on an island in the middle of the Mississippi River. Davis Island is named after Jefferson Davis who owned a plantation there. In 1953, the heirs of the Davis lineage sold the island. It came to be owned by a family from Vidalia, Louisiana. Since then, the island has been dedicated to one pursuit – hunting white-tailed deer. It is accessible only by boat or a grass air strip. Brierfield Hunting Club has no website, no phone, no mailing address. It is open only to members lucky enough to land an invitation -- people like Gramps, a chancery judge in Clarksdale, Mississippi for over forty years, and a beloved figure in Mississippi politics since the early sixties.

I was conducting a cross examination of a police detective in a courtroom in Ripley, Tennessee when my phone vibrated. I glanced down and noticed my father was texting me. After sitting back down at the counsel table, I read his text asking me to call ASAP. It concerned Gramps, who was ninety-two. After stepping down from the bench, Gramps continued to practice law with my father, rejoining our family law firm which was founded in 1920. I had broken the family tradition by studying law at Vanderbilt (rather than Ole Miss) and setting up a criminal practice in Memphis.

Gramps battled prostate cancer for well over a decade. We had been assured repeatedly that he would die from some other cause, but the cancer had finally come

calling. It spread up and down his spine. He had been on morphine for a few weeks, ably administered by a local hospice in Clarksdale. I asked the trial judge for a short break and returned my father's call.

"Trey, thanks for calling back," my father said. "Looks like Gramps has just a few days left. He wants to fly down to Brierfield. Told me he wants to die there. I ran it by the owners, his oncologist and the folks at Gibson Brothers. We can take the plane down to Brierfield. Gibson will send a couple of their men over by boat to help us. I have a bottle of morphine pills to get him through the next few days. After he passes, their men will get him on a gurney and into the plane. They'll have a hearse waiting at the airport and will take his body straight to the funeral home. Trey, he really wants to pass there. He wants you with him. He says the day he blooded you was the proudest day of his life."

"Oh yea, I remember. My first buck. Deer blood all over my face. Threw my guts up. Never forget. But I know it was a big deal for Gramps."

"Can you make it, son?"

"You go ahead and get him out there. I've got to wrap up this trial in Ripley. I've got a couple of days left. I'll drive down after we wrap up and catch the boat to the island. Let the ferry pilot know I'm coming. I'll call you when I get to Vicksburg."

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I left my home in Whitehaven and headed south toward my first stop – the law offices of Williams & Williams in Clarksdale. I wanted to bring a file folder with me to Davis Island. Its tab read simply "MSSC." I knew exactly where it was located, up on the

second floor, in a box with other long closed files. I stumbled across the folder in 2012 while home for Christmas with my family. The tab referred to a former state agency, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, created in 1956 by the legislature to fight against civil rights activists and anyone else who dared to undermine the legal regime of Jim Crow. The MSSC operated like a secret police force. Working with local sheriffs, district attorneys, and state police, it investigated activists, protesters, journalists, and even college students. Detailed reports were generated on these undesirables, their identities, their activities, and their locations. Reports were given to the Klan and other terrorist groups for further action, including murder. The most notorious act of the MSSC was providing information on the movements of civil rights workers Mickey Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney to their murderers during Freedom Summer in 1964. It was a crime that rocked the nation.

The MSSC was shut down in 1977. I'm sure everyone associated with it hoped it would simply fade away and be lost to history. But a certain investigative reporter with the Jackson Clarion-Ledger just couldn't let it be. Jerry Mitchell wrote a series of articles exposing the activities of this state agency in connection with the 1963 murder of Medgar Evers and the subsequent murder trials of the accused assassin, Byron De La Beckwith, both ending in mistrials. These articles, and the involvement of the MSSC, led the Hinds County District Attorney to re-try him in 1993, finally yielding a guilty verdict. In the following years, more records of the MSSC became public when a federal judge ordered the commission records unsealed. In 2002, the records were put online. Shortly after that, a friend from law school called and told me that my grandfather had served as a commission member.

Judge Charles Milton Williams has always been a huge presence in my life. I bear his name, as does my father. Our family law firm was founded by my great grandfather and is a fixture in the Mississippi legal community. He gave a speech every year to my high school on Law Day. I decided to become a lawyer after working with Gramps one summer before college. Gramps was well liked and had a huge circle of friends. As a chancery judge, he ruled on matters of family law and knew the detailed histories of most of the families of Coahoma County, Black and White. As far as I knew, his reputation for integrity was solid. After he retired from the bench, he served on many community boards which included Blacks. Growing up in the eighties in Clarksdale, I never heard him utter a word which would have made me believe he was a hard-core racist. He and Mamaw always had a Black housekeeper. As far as I knew, she was treated and paid well.

When my friend called about the online records, I was surprised, maybe a little ashamed. I knew Gramps was a man of his time, but I expected more of him. I read the online documents which linked him to the MSSC. He was named to the commission rather late, in 1971, by his old friend Governor John Bell Williams. The records concerning him were minutes of commission meetings. These were bland. Most of the meetings concerned budgetary matters and occasional discussions of public relations strategies designed to emphasize the threat to Mississippi posed by activists pushing leftist agendas. I ran this by my father who at the time was still practicing law with Gramps. He read the commission documents, and we agreed that while Gramps was aware of the nature and mission of the MSSC, what we read online wasn't sufficient to provoke a rift in the family. Gramps was seventy-two at the time.

All that changed in 2012 when I happened across the MSSC file folder. We were visiting over the Christmas holidays. Our family was having a dispute with a tenant over a duck hunting lease on family property along the Gulf Coast. My father asked me to locate the original lease from the sixties located among the closed files. Many boxes were marked “personal.” I began to flip through the tabs and eventually spotted the initials MSSC. My gut tightened. I took the folder downstairs and entered Gramps’ empty office, closed the door, and began to read. Inside it were copies of letters to the MSSC dating from 1961. Gramps was fastidious in his record keeping and never threw away or destroyed a file. He claimed you never knew when you might need something you generated in your law practice. Here it was – a series of letters and reports to the MSSC, written years before his appointment to the commission, and all after he was elected as judge in 1960. Sadly, these letters were not routine commission business. These letters and reports were the fuel which fed the secret police machine that was the MSSC.

Most disturbing was a report he wrote to the MSSC on the activities of the murdered activist, Mickey Schwerner. Schwerner worked with fellow volunteers James Chaney and Andrew Goodman in the Freedom Summer project, the goal of which was to register Black voters throughout Mississippi. The three workers went missing near Philadelphia, Mississippi on the night of June 21, 1964. Their bodies were found a few weeks later buried in a dam in Neshoba County. The crime commanded the attention and condemnation of the nation and the world. Eventually, members of the Klan and a local sheriff’s deputy were convicted on federal charges. Decades later, evidence became public that the MSSC had provided critical evidence to the Klan which helped the murderers identify and track the Ford station wagon driven by Schwerner.

Just days before the murders, Gramps wrote a detailed report to the MSSC outlining the activities of Schwerner over the three days he worked in Clarksdale. The Coahoma Sheriff's men had been following Schwerner, and Gramps' report provided critical details such as a description of his vehicle and its license number. More importantly, a confidential source in the voters' rights movement told the sheriff's men that Schwerner was headed back to Meridian after his work in Clarksdale was finished. This was relayed by Gramps to the MSSC which in turn told the Neshoba sheriff exactly where Schwerner was headed next and exactly what type of vehicle he would be driving. Armed with this information, Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney were easy targets for the murderers that fateful night.

Reading this turned my stomach. Had everything I knew about this man been a lie? Part of me wanted to burn the file, but another part wanted to confront him. Unsure of what to do next, I decided to make copies of the key documents. I returned to my father's home where my mother and sister were preparing a duck gumbo for Christmas Eve. I pulled Dad into my old bedroom and gave him copies of the letter. After reading it, he sat down in a desk chair directly under the mounted head of my first buck. A brief silence fell between us.

"Trey, he's eighty-two. He's on oxygen. He's alone. I see him every day at the office. He comes in for coffee. I don't know what this would do to him, to his health. Now that your grandmother is gone, the past is all he has."

"But which past, Dad? He's a damned accessory to murder. You think he treasures that? That's the problem with this damned state. Everyone wants all the skeletons to stay buried. They say they want to move forward, but you'll never move on

with this kind of anchor dragging you down. What about your grandkids? You want me to lie to them? Sis' kids – should she lie to them? And by the way – we've never told her about his being on the commission."

"Look Trey, it's Christmas Eve. We're about to sit down for a meal and then go to mass. You're right. First, we need to bring Jenny in on this. I think we probably should sit down with our wives as well. It's a family secret. Let the family decide what to do."

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Melissa and I drove down to Clarksdale a few days after New Years for a family meeting at my parents' home. Dad and Mom were present along with my sister Jenny and her husband Bill. We gathered in the living room over coffee. I explained the basics of the Sovereignty Commission, then distributed copies of the key letter in Gramps' MSSC file for the others to read.

Melissa spoke first. "So, what do you want us to decide, Trey?"

"Well, Dad thought since this was a type of family secret, that we should decide this as a family. I agree. I guess the question is what we do with this information."

"You mean like turn this over to the newspaper?" Jenny asked.

"Absolutely not," Dad said. "We were thinking about what to do with it amongst ourselves. And perhaps whether to speak to Gramps about this."

"Charles, he's eighty-two now!" my mother said. "Can't we just let him be?"

"He's so kind," said my mother. "It'd hard to believe he'd try and hurt those people."

“It was a different time,” Dad said. “A lot of White folks were just plain scared of what might happen. Turns out, they were wrong, but they couldn’t have known it then. I’m not sure we want any of this to leave this room.”

“So, what about our children? Do we lie to them?” I asked. “The MSSC records are online. That’s how I found out.”

“Is this letter online?” Melissa asked.

“No,” I said. “Just the minutes of the commission, where Gramps attended as an appointed commission member. Governor Edwards appointed him in 1971. There’s nothing explosive, but he clearly served on the MSSC.”

Jenny rose and walked around the room. “I suppose we could tell them about it when they get older,” she said. “Or maybe it never comes up. It’s so long ago, what is it? Fifty years? Good grief!”

“Sounds like we all agree on a few things,” I said. “None of this goes outside our family. Second, how about each family decides how we deal with our own kids? Agree?”

Jenny, Bill and Melissa nodded.

“Now, I feel we need to bring these up with Gramps,” I said. “Maybe me and Dad?”

“Wait, don’t bring me in on that,” said Dad. “I see him every day. I just think he’s too old, son. It’s just too disruptive. You’re up in Memphis. You won’t have to watch him lose face. It would really kill him to know we think lesser of him.”

“But isn’t that the point? He needs to have a reckoning with all this stuff,” I said. “This ain’t exactly jaywalking, Dad. Hell, he supplied information which maybe got people killed.”



“Son, it’s a matter of timing. This mess is just too old, and the Gramps is too old. At least that’s my view.”

I looked around the room. I could see that ten-thousand-yard stare. I knew it was no use. I knew I had to stuff the secret further down in my gut, and I did so for years -- until Dad’s phone call.

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As I drove south toward Vicksburg, so many moments with Gramps passed by in a slide show. He was always there at the big moments – my baseball and football games, my marriage, my law school graduation, the baptisms of my children. I recall sitting with him in his office discussing where I should practice law. He clearly wanted me to come back home to the Williams law firm, but he never leaned on me. He told me to follow my gut. He freely expressed his pride in me and the life I built for myself.

Gramps had a sterling reputation among local lawyers and judges. A couple of my boyhood friends became lawyers and returned to Clarksdale. They had nothing but praise for Gramps’ work ethic and his conduct on the bench. I recalled the many acts of both personal and civic kindness he performed for people in need, people of both colors. His devotion to my grandmother and all his family was unquestioned. He neither drank nor gambled to excess. He loved to hunt and fish, and he deeply loved Ole Miss football, both of which he passed on to me.

It was very hard to square the man I knew with the contents of the MSSC file. I had read extensively about the history of racial violence and the climate of fear which existed in Mississippi in the early sixties. It was a subject rarely discussed in our home. Now that the sand in the hourglass was running out for Gramps, I realized that I’d never

get another chance to discuss this with him. I'd never get his side of the story. He was lying in a bed on an island once owned by Jeff Davis. I was left with anger and deep disappointment, along with a family secret which stained the aura of honor surrounding our family patriarch.

As I made my way down US 61, scenes from Brierfield came back to me. Hunting deer is in my family's cultural DNA. It is a male dominated past time, but on occasion our sisters and spouses hunted, gutted their kills and cooked for us men. My sister Jenny loved to ride her horse through the thick forest, hooting at the top of her lungs to flush the deer toward the stands where we hunters waited with scoped rifles or big bore shot guns. The hunting lodge was nothing fancy. It had one huge room where maybe twenty double beds slept singles and couples. There were a couple of single bedrooms off to the side. The kitchen was equipped with commercial grade stoves and ovens powered by propane. The head cook Lou was an elderly Black man from Vicksburg who learned his considerable skills from his mother's people in South Louisiana. Duck, venison and chicken and sausage gumbo were common fare at dinnertime. That man made the best jalapeno cornbread and fried okra I've ever tasted.

We hunters rose at 4:30am to the smell of coffee and chicory, grits and fried venison sausage. We crawled into the beds of three old pickups and the Brierfield workers deposited us around the island at deer stands. As a young boy, I'd be paired with my father. As I grew older, I often asked to be partnered with Gramps. What a storyteller! I loved his tales of growing up on his father's farm in the thirties, sneaking in the back of Negro blues joints and swigging Falstaff beer as a high school student, playing football for the Ole Miss Rebels, and catching garfish weighing over a hundred

pounds in the oxbow lakes over the levee. Gramps was a lot more fun than Dad. Plus, he was a lot more patient with me when it came to taking down a deer.

Two things are crucial to hunting deer – silence and patience, neither of which I practiced as a child. Gramps helped me quiet down and wait for the deer. “Breathe, Trey. One breath, two breaths, three breaths. Then squeeze the trigger real slow. Like you’re moving in molasses.”

I was fortunate as a youngster to kill several does which were found in great numbers on Davis Island. The slain deer were carried back to the lodge in the pickup bed and strung up with wire and a chain on a low branch of a huge pecan tree. Then, I slit their throats to bleed them. I’d use a large hunting knife to open the abdominal cavity and remove the vital organs. As I grew older, I performed these tasks as expected, but always with my stomach turning a bit. I loved the thrill of seeing my prey through the scope and firing the rifle to bring it down. But I hated the more visceral tasks. This was not something I dared to discuss with Dad or Gramps. As a male in a highly competitive family, I did what was expected of me.

Among deer hunters, the killing of a doe is of little significance other than their meat. The true motive for a deer hunter is to kill bucks, bucks with a rack. Brierfield’s walls are lined with row upon row of deer heads sporting huge racks with multiple points. The more points, the greater the prestige. Every deer hunter dreams of the day they shoot their first buck. A ritual is observed to mark the shooting of one’s first buck – it’s called getting blooded. After the deer is hoisted and bled, the hunter guts the deer. A friend or family member reaches into the cavity, scoops up some blood, and smears the

blood on the face of the shooter. At Brierfield, all the witnesses give a loud rebel yell, at which point the party retires to the lodge for drinking and storytelling.

I was twelve when I shot my first buck. Gramps and I were together in a stand near the bank of a swollen Mississippi which was running high due to January rains in the Midwest. The lodge was full of hunters that cold winter morning. Jenny was on her horse flushing deer for us.

There was a thin layer of frost on the field next to our deer stand. I could smell a faint scent of chewing tobacco from Gramps as he spit into an old coffee can. I could hear rifles popping around the island. Gramps had taken a shot and missed just after the sun rose. There was a slight whiff of Wild Turkey on his breath after he took a swig from a flask in his pocket. After he took his shot, he dozed off for a morning snooze. I stood sentinel over the field while the sun rose higher. Two does sauntered the field where I was staked out with my 30.06. Just after they munched some winter grass for their breakfast and wandered back into the woods, I saw a fine buck wander into the field after them. He also stopped for a bite. I slowly raised my rifle and sighted him with my scope. One breath, two breaths, three breaths.... I squeezed the trigger and he dropped. My shot jarred Gramps awake. He crossed to my side of the stand and saw my kill.

“What the hell, Trey! You got a buck! Looks like a fine one!” I was muttering something, set my gun down. I felt his big arms grab me up and hug me like a newborn and kiss me on the cheek. “Let’s go have a look. What a shot! I want you to remember everything. You gonna’ have to tell us all about it. Don’t forget anything, you hear?”

We climbed down the ladder and ran to the fallen buck. “You got him right through the chest, Trey. Perfect. We won’t have to chase after this one. He died on his feet.”

“It’s a twelve pointer, Gramps. Can we have it mounted?”

“Oh, you better believe it. We’ll hang it in your bedroom, that is unless your Daddy wants to put it over his fireplace. He’ll be mighty proud, Trey. Heck, he might want to hang it in our office lobby, so he can brag on you.”

“No way, this is mine. I want it in my bedroom where I can look at him.”

We’d have to wait two hours before the pickup truck came by to transport the hunters back to the lodge for lunch. Gramps used this time to question me about every detail leading up to my kill. He wanted to know about the light, the wind, the sounds, as well as each action I took, no matter how minor. These nuggets would be squeezed into a narrative which I would recount several times that day to other hunters and members of the Brierfield staff, later to my mother and my friends.

With the aid of the two helpers and other hunters, we manhandled the buck into the bed of the pickup. I sat on the carcass of my buck on the bumpy ride back to the lodge. Jenny and Dad were thrilled. The morning had been a good one for several of the Brierfield hunters. My buck was the sixth one to be hoisted in the trees outside the lodge. I pulled out my hunting knife and slit its throat. We all went into the lodge for coffee and tale swapping. After bleeding, which would take a half hour, I would then gut it. At long last, I would be blooded. It was a rite of passage. I knew Gramps would do the honors since we had partnered that morning.

My family and a couple of friends circled around my inverted buck. I took off my hunting jacket and handed it to Dad. I wore a long john top underneath. I pulled my hunting knife from its scabbard, opened the buck's belly, detached his vital organs and scooped them into a gut bucket which would later be fed to the hunting dogs. I stepped back. Gramps reached into the cavity and smeared blood across my forehead, down my nose, and across each cheek. He gave me a strong bear hug while the others let out a loud rebel yell and began clapping. The instant Gramps began to smear the blood, my gut seized up and I felt a gag response. I knew this might happen, so I wasn't surprised. I knew I had to fight it. I couldn't embarrass my family. I kept my mouth shut, and feigned being overcome by emotion. I trotted quickly to the lodge and headed straight for the bathroom where I emptied my guts. I tried to make it quiet and quick. Repulsive -- that was my thought. But, as expected, I kept the blood on my face the rest of the day.

My act didn't fool anyone, but no matter. I had slain a twelve-point buck, and that was enough. Not a word was said about my bathroom visit. All the hunters sat down for a lunch of venison stew and cornbread. The successful hunters were called on to recount where and exactly how they brought down their bucks. Once again, more applause. I didn't go back out that afternoon. Instead, I lounged around the lodge and began reconsidering what I had done that morning. Why did I want to gag at the smell and feel the blood of the animal I killed.

Lou was cleaning up and passed near me with his mop. "Look a little green around the gills, Trey."

"Can you tell it that easy?"

“It’s no shame Trey. I seen lots of young men get a little spooked when they smell the blood of something they killed. You’ll be fine. You get used to it.”

Lou moved on with his mop, but his words stuck with me. I had taken down a beautiful animal, but why? Was it so I could remove his head and rack and pay someone to mount it for my bedroom? Was it so we could eat the venison from his body? Was it to make my Gramps and my father proud of me? Was it to impress the other hunters? Was it to have a hunting story to tell my friends at school? Maybe all, but I wasn’t satisfied.

In the years ahead, I threw myself into sports at school. My deer hunting tailed off, and I never again shot a deer. My buck’s head was mounted and still hangs in my old bedroom at my parents’ home. Every time I looked at it as a teenager, I felt a twinge of guilt. Recalling the smell of its blood, I felt just the slightest beginning of a gag.

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I pulled up to park at an oilfield pipe yard just south of Vicksburg. The business operates a dock along the river where I would meet the boat that would take me to Davis Island. Every square inch of Vicksburg sings with the past. The location of the pipe yard had formerly served as a Confederate mortar battery and was pummeled by the Union flotilla which fought its way past the Rebel guns during a famous night battle. Since I had set my mind on waging another battle on the land formerly owned by Jefferson Davis, the past was singing loud and clear that hot summer day.

I stepped into a small crew boat and took a seat. We got underway down river. Joe Mitchell served as pilot for the pipe yard and ferried guests and equipment to

Brierfield during hunting season. Today he was helping my father fulfill Gramps' last wish.

"Heard the Judge ain't doing well. Your daddy tells me he wants to pass at the lodge."

"Yea, I bet that's a first for you," I said.

"Oh yea. But the owners are very fond of him. They're happy to oblige. It ain't hunting season. They know he loves the island. He told me himself how much it meant to him to see you blooded."

"I'll never forget. My first buck, a twelve pointer. High point of my hunting days."

"I ain't seen you down at the island in so long," he said. "You still hunt?"

"Well Joe, you know how it is. I got a couple of kids. My practice in Memphis keeps me busy. There's the kids' soccer and baseball games to watch."

My father was waiting at the island's dock. "Glad you could come, Trey. He's sleeping a lot. I give him a morphine pill every three hours. But when he wakes up, he's good for a few minutes of talk. Mostly, stuff about our time at Brierfield, that and Rebel football."

"The essential things of life in Mississippi – deer meat and getting drunk in The Grove. How could you live without 'em?"

"Can you stay a couple of nights? Here, let me take your bag."

"Dad, I'm staying for the duration." We climbed onto a four-wheeler he was driving.

"Man, I'm glad you came. I need some help to sit watch on Gramps. He's not on a regular sleep cycle. It's the morphine. When I give him a pill, he sleeps. Then, after three



or four hours, he wakes up. This goes on all night. With you here, I can get a little sleep. I haven't really slept in a couple of days. Can you watch hm tonight?"

"That's why I'm here. Say, how's the hunting been down here?"

"We had several good hunts this past winter. Year before, the water mostly kept us out after Christmas."

"Say, is there venison in the freezer?"

"I haven't looked,' he said. "But I suspect there is. Someone always leaves a backstrap or a roast. Why do you ask?"

"Thought I'd make us some stew," I said. "Like old times."

"I'd welcome it. I bet Gramps would be tickled to see you cook. Not sure if he could eat it, but I bet the smell would take him back. Go for it."

We traveled along a primitive dirt road toward the lodge. These were the dog days of August. The air was thick and hot. The four-wheeler kicked up a little dust as we passed through the canopy of oaks which hung low over the road. We passed the crumbling remains of the foundations of the original Brierfield Plantation. Only a pile of old red bricks remained from the place Jefferson Davis called home. I felt like I was attending the death of the last of his followers, but first there had to be a reckoning.

We went straight into a side bedroom where Gramps was sleeping. We sat beside him for a few minutes watching his face and listening to his breathing. His breath was slow and unlabored. I thought of his instructions, "One breath, two breaths, three breaths, then ... squeeze slowly."

"I gave him a pill about two hours ago," Dad said. "Why don't you go whip up that stew?"

I looked in the freezer and took out a frozen roast and threw it in the microwave. When I unwrapped it, I saw a small pool of deer blood on the freezer wrap and spooned it into a zip lock bag. I then defrosted some frozen okra and green beans. I cut up the roast and set about making the stew. I began to cook it in a saucepan and went back to Gramps' bedside.

I returned to Gramps' bedside and relieved my father for a well-deserved sleep. After watching Gramps breathe for thirty minutes, I saw his eyes flutter and open.

"Trey... you came. I knew you'd get here. How you doin'?"

"I'm good, Gramps. The big question is how are you doin'?"

"It's kind of pitiful but... it is what it is. I've had a good life, Trey. Thanks for coming to see me off."

"How's your smell, Gramps?"

"Pretty good I suppose. Why?"

"I'm cooking some venison stew. Smell it?"

"Why, I think I do. Is it ready? I might give it a try. I didn't know you could cook, Trey."

"That's what married life will teach you. It ought to be ready in a couple of hours. I'll bring you a bowl." I saw him grimace. "Is it time for another pill?"

He nodded. I reached into the bottle and poured a glass of water. Gramps swallowed slowly and gradually dozed off again. I returned to the kitchen to monitor my stew and read off my iPad. Three hours passed. Both Gramps and Dad remained asleep. The stew was ready. I opened my bag and took out the MSSC file folder. I took the folder and a cup of stew into Gramps' bedroom.

I sat beside Gramps and passed the hot cup of stew under his nose. It had the desired effect. He opened his eyes and smiled. “Smells good, boy. Let me try some of that gravy.” I spooned some up and he swallowed it. “Tastes mighty damn good. You’d give old Lou a run for his money.”

“You want to try some vegetables and a little meat? I cut it up good.”

“Sure, haven’t had any venison a many a month.” He took it without trouble, and we made our way through about a half cup. His countenance perked up. “Mighty fine, Trey. Couldn’t ask for more.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes. I reached inside my pocket and pulled out the zip lock containing the deer blood. I rose beside his bed and smeared a stroke across his forehead, then across each cheek. As expected, it took Gramps by surprise. He wiped his cheek and checked his hand to be sure of what had happened.

“Is that ....?”

“Yes, deer blood.”

“Well son, I guess that’s kind of you. You know, that was the finest day I can remember. When I blooded you. That twelve pointer. A perfect shot. I was so proud. I guess it’s come full circle. Thank you, Trey.”

“Gramps, there’s another day I had in mind. Here, read this letter. It’s from June 17, 1964, during Freedom Summer.” I handed him the carbon copy of the letter he wrote to the Sovereignty Commission on the activities of Mickey Schwerner. He slowly read the letter and looked up.

“Where did you get this?”

“I found it by accident in the closed files. In a file folder marked MSSC. Dad asked me to find an old hunting lease. There were other letters, but this one stood out. Those young men were murdered just a couple of days later. You remember all that, right?”

“I didn’t know that white trash down in Meridian would murder those boys. I was just passing along a police report. I thought they’d just try and scare them.”

“You know that your buddy at the Commission passed this on to the sheriff down in Neshoba County. You know that don’t you, Gramps? They knew Schwerner was going back to Meridian. The sheriff tipped off the Klan. Hell, his deputy drove them out there to be murdered.”

“What do you want me to say, Trey? What do you want from me?”

“Gramps, it’s just you and me in here. No one else. Dad doesn’t know I’m talking to you. I wanted you to know that I know. I guess I want from you is how you feel after all these years.”

“I feel ashamed, Trey. That’s what I feel. What politics and fear can make a man do. I thought I destroyed all those papers. I wanted them gone because I was ashamed, not because I’m proud. I never wanted your grandmother to know. I didn’t want to bring shame on my family. So, there’s your answer. It was wrong, But it didn’t seem wrong at the time.”

“Explain that to me.”

“We looked at those boys as foreigners, trying to change our way of life. It was a kind of battle. Us versus the outside world. But I never considered murder.”

“Why not? They killed Medgar Evers. Those little girls in Birmingham. Plenty of murders.”

“Well, I can’t argue that. I guess you always think you are acting with the best intentions. But later, I knew it was wrong. The whole MSSC mess. So, Trey, what’s the deer blood for?”

I leaned over him and retraced the smears of blood. “Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney.”

“Well, goddammit, Trey! Hell son, I can’t go back and undo what I did. I ask again, what do you want?”

“Gramps, I looked up to you all these years. I still do. I just wanted your truth, to see who Charles Williams really is. Without the black robes, just you. And we don’t have much time.”

“Trey, you got to believe me, I’d have never sent that report if I had any idea those morons would have wanted to murder those boys. I thought they were just keeping track of them. That’s all. You gotta’ believe me, Trey.”

I saw the anguish and fear in this powerful man. He was dissipating before my eyes. I had to back off. He had his reckoning. “I believe you, Gramps. And I understand what you said about fear causing people to do things. You need another pill?”

Gramps retraced the blood smears on his face. Within minutes he was sound asleep. I stepped out back of the lodge, and lit the MSSC file on fire, then returned to his side.

Dad arose in the morning and came to relieve me. “What’s that on his face?” he asked me.

“Deer blood.”

“Oh yea. The proudest day of his life. Nice touch, son. Did he understand you?”

“Yes, I believe he did.”

“I bet he was honored that you remembered.”

“Hard to say. But he did smile when I brought him the stew. Ate half a cup.”

