



"Hard edged and gripping."

—Steve Berry, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *The Warsaw Protocol*

JOE PALMER
A MARINER'S TALE

A NOVEL

Praise for

A MARINER'S TALE

"A Mariner's Tale is a stunning debut: a seafaring novel rich with lush imagery and colorful characters from an exciting new voice in Southern fiction. With deft narrative skill, the author takes the protagonist, a cynical middle-aged mariner, and his protege, a troubled young man, on a voyage of self-discovery that begins on an island in Florida and ends in an Irish fishing village. You don't want to miss this beautifully crafted page-turner!"

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"Hard edged and gripping. An intriguing mix of hope and fear. Fans of Pat Conroy's evocative novels are going to love this stirring debut."

—STEVE BERRY

New York Times bestselling author of *The Warsaw Protocol*

"Part nautical yarn, part romance, and part coming-of-age story, *A Mariner's Tale* is a page-turner, but Joe Palmer's beautiful prose slows the pace to a perfect rhythm, allowing the reader to participate in the wonders of nature and the resilience of the human heart . . ."

—SUSAN CUSHMAN

Author of *Friends of the Library* and *Cherry Bomb*, and editor of *Southern Writers on Writing*

“A beautifully drawn seafaring tale built around a marina of lovingly flawed characters who have, in different ways, been floundered by life; who in rescuing each other, manage to rescue themselves. Set in the lush beauty of the inlets, streams and maritime world of north Florida, *A Mariner’s Tale* is told with great heart and uncommon compassion by an author who knows the life of tide and salt of the sea. I think fans of the hugely popular *Where The Crawdads Sing* would like this book, because the author describes nature so lovingly and accurately.”

—JANIS OWENS

Author of *American Ghost*, *The Cracker Kitchen*

“A Mariner’s Tale is a richly rendered story scented with sea spray and filled with salty characters seeking grace, mercy and second chances. Palmer writes with heart and authenticity, bringing life to an unforgettable crew worthy of the love and redemption we each hope to find in this life.”

—NICOLE SEITZ

Author of *The Cage Maker*

“Beautifully written and riveting. As a horrendous storm threatens, an aging mariner and a troubled young man find new trust, and each their own path to renewed hope. The author’s voice is reminiscent of many great Southern fiction writers and leaves one eagerly waiting for more.”

—MONICA TIDWELL

Tristan Productions, NY theatre producer and award-winning filmmaker

A Mariner's Tale

By Joe Palmer

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VIRGINIA BEACH
CAPE CHARLES

For Pam, my wife, my first mate and my best friend, the sun on my shoulders and the gentle breeze that fills my sails. You've been with me on this journey since the moment I set sail. You know every waypoint by heart. You are my true north, my beacon and my eternal love.

In memory of my brother, Michael C. Palmer, 1957–1992
*Eternal Father, bless those who make their living upon the sea.
And shine the light so that they find their way home.
The sea is so big and their ships are so small.*

CHAPTER 1

DUSK WAS ENCROACHING WHEN the sheriff of Ocean County's car edged into little North Florida boatyard and marina. On the other side of the yard, an older man with a sandy-gray ponytail stood on metal scaffolding running a power sander along one side of a sailboat. Slogging away at his work, he was oblivious to the sheriff's cruiser pulling into his marina, the tires crunching and scattering the crushed limestone.

The sky dimmed to the hues of a calico quilt as the sun continued its measured descent into the marshes beyond. A great blue heron squawked on a nearby mud flat while a lone, brown pelican dive-bombed the water nearby, hoping to fill its belly one last time before going off to roost on a tilted dock piling. The moon-faced sheriff opened the door and eased his bulk out of the car. He swatted sandflies while watching the other man work for a while, then put

two fingers in his mouth and whistled. The other man, still unheeding of his presence, kept his back bent and went on working.

When his loud whistling failed to get the man's attention, the sheriff cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, "Merkel! Yo! Jack Merkel! Damn it, man! Are you deaf? Merkel!"

At sixty-four, Jack Merkel still had a physical presence as sturdy as seasoned oak. Tall and roped with lean muscle, he had the hard-bitten look of an old salt. He'd been a career merchant seaman, then used part of his retirement pension to buy a trawler, spending the next ten years as a shrimper. His right arm was scarred from a shark bite he acquired late one summer afternoon while trying to untangle a fair-sized black tip from his trawl. He had wrapped his bleeding arm in his sweaty T-shirt, taped it snug and grudgingly surrendered the helm to his first mate. Diverting to a nearby port, he had refused the mate's entreaties to summon an ambulance and instead hailed a taxi for a ride to the emergency room, into which he strode, sunburned and cross. When he left the hospital, he had thumbed a ride back to his boat and went home. A week later, he severed the stitches with his pocketknife and plucked them out with a pair of needle-nosed pliers from his tackle box. Later, when the grotesque wound had begun to heal, he got drunk and had a shark tattooed above it. He still wore a gold hoop earring in his left ear that he got while yet a swaggering young sailor, drunk on cheap booze and on the prowl for whores one lust-drenched night in Singapore. A ship's anchor adorned his other arm and beneath it, the name *Stormy Coast*, the first merchantman on which he sailed.

The sheriff ran his hand through his thinning brown hair, leaned into his green and white county issue car and whooped the siren. Jack turned off the sander, set it down on a work bench jumbled with other tools, pawed the dust mask off his face and turned. He picked up a pack of cigarettes, tapped one out and lit it. The sheriff waved at him and cocked his thumb toward the rear door of his car. Jack acknowledged him with a curt nod and the sheriff opened the rear

door and extracted a sullen looking boy who appeared to be in his late teens. The scrawny boy twisted and tried to pull away from his grasp. The cop snatched handcuffs from his belt, the polished steel catching the remaining light. With the agility of a man half his size and reflexes of one who'd played the confrontation game for years, he wrenched the boy's hands behind his back and snapped the cuffs onto his wrists. The ratcheting echoed across the yard, magnified by the stillness of gathering dusk.

"Fine, boy," the sheriff drawled. "If that's the way it's gonna be. Git on over there."

He shoved the boy toward Jack, who waited beside his work bench, patiently smoking and watching the cop prod his manacled charge across the yard. The kid shuffled dirty, sneaker-clad feet on the lime rock, kicking up little puffs of dust and cursing his uniformed captor. When the duo was a few paces from him, Jack raised one calloused hand in a halting gesture. He fixed his gray eyes on the boy for a moment and then shifted his attention to the lawman.

"Who's the kid, Hal?"

The sheriff shoved a stick of gum in his mouth.

"You tell me, Jack. He look like the burglar on your surveillance camera video?"

Jack pulled a bandana from the pocket of his stained khakis and wiped the fiberglass dust from his face. He studied the young man glowering back at him and then replied quietly, "Might be."

The kid sneered and spat at his feet. "Ain't done nothing, you old shit. Never even seen this place before."

Jack settled his eyes on the boy and took the cut of his jib from head to toe with a mariner's attention to detail, noting that the kid was nearly as tall as his own six-foot-three inches. He had dirty, straw-colored hair, a peach fuzz mustache he was trying to cultivate and pale blue eyes. They reminded him of the shark that'd nearly taken his arm—cold and without remorse. His arms were festooned with crude, homemade tattoos. He wore filthy jeans with a hole in

one knee and a grubby yellow T-shirt. He repaid Jack's stare with a snarl.

"I'd like to kick your ass, you old sonofabitch."

"Reckon you would," Jack replied. "Bring him up to the office, Hal. Drag him if you want. It don't matter a tinker's damn to me."

He turned around and trudged toward a washed-out looking two-story building on the north end of the yard. A black Great Dane sitting on the covered porch stretched and trotted toward them, long tail wagging. He leapt up and licked his master's face. Then he dropped back down onto four colossal paws and sniffed at the kid. The boy halted mid-step and the dog snarled, revealing the tips of his teeth. The sheriff cackled.

"Good thing me and ol' Pogy wasn't here when you came calling," Jack said to the ashen-faced boy. "Don't believe he cottons much to you."

Smelling the boy's fear, the Dane bristled and growled louder. The kid's insolence turned to panic.

"Git him away from me," the kid pleaded.

The dog edged menacingly forward, tail flat. Then the kid broke. "C'mon, old man. Call him off."

Jack looked at the cop and smiled. "Well now," he said.

He made a barely audible cluck out of one side of his mouth. The dog came and stood beside him, his caramel eyes still glaring at the kid.

Jack looked at the cop again, nodded and started back toward the building. The dog trotted ahead and sat sentry-like on the porch, eyes never leaving the kid's face. Jack walked up the three steps to the porch and opened the door. The rambling building, weathered gray by the years, exuded the fragrance of cypress. A yellow, one-eared tomcat napped on a rocking chair near the door. The sun was sinking fast, a thin slice of orange settling deep into the bright green spartina marsh grass. A tugboat pushing a barge glided by on the Intracoastal Waterway. The skipper blasted the vessel's horn in greeting. Jack

waved. The captain honked again and went on his way. A moment later, the red and green channel markers flashed to life just as the last fragment of sun vanished.

Jack held the screen door while the cop frog-marched his captive up the steps and shoved him through the door. He turned on a fluorescent overhead light, which buzzed like an insect trapped in a jar. The office was cluttered with papers, parts of boats, nautical charts, coils of rope and other accoutrements of the mariner's trade. An antique soft drink machine, the kind with the metal pull-down handle, stood in one corner and a plaque on the proprietor's desk declared "The captain is always right, even when he ain't."

Jack took the remote control from his cluttered desktop and aimed it at a monitor screen on the opposite wall. The screen blinked to life, gray and grainy at first, and then cleared. An image of a person climbing a chain link fence and cautiously picking his way across the moonlit boatyard appeared. The kid lowered his chin onto his thin chest.

"Ain't me."

The sheriff grinned and popped his gum. "Sho' is, kid. And wearing the same filthy-ass clothes you're wearing right now." He grabbed a hank of the boy's hair and yanked his head up.

The kid stared at his image easing through the boatyard, looking this way and that into the shadows, his attention settling on the building. Glancing around, the kid first tried the door and when it wouldn't give, he tried each of the windows. He picked up a small anchor and hefted it as if he meant to throw it at a window. After a moment's hesitation, he dropped the anchor and walked back down the steps, turning his head and looking toward the rear of the boatyard. He came to the work shed and found it padlocked. He peered around the yard and then headed toward a sailboat resting on metal jacks on a concrete pad near the water. He walked over to the worktable beside it and picked up a hammer and a large screwdriver and returned to the shed. He jammed the tip of the screwdriver down onto the padlock and slammed the hammer down on it. When the lock didn't give; he repeated his

effort, once more, then twice more and when it still wouldn't budge, he pounded furiously on it. Winded, he put his hands on his knees. Then he straightened, flung the screwdriver into the water and focused his attention on the sailboat.

Another camera captured his face in detail as he stared up at the deck of the vessel and began walking around it, glancing up and about as if looking for some way to climb onto it. Spying a wooden stepladder nearby, he went over to it. The boy propped the ladder against the boat and started to climb. The rotted ladder snapped soundlessly, spilling the boy onto his back. When he got up, he grabbed the hammer and charged the boat in a rage. Jack clenched his jaws and watched the intruder smash the sides of his beloved boat from one end to the other, inwardly berating himself for his rare act of carelessness. A fastidious man, he'd neglected to put a few of his tools away before he and the dog had climbed into his skiff and went off for a night of flounder gigging. The boy's final assault was on the rudder. Jack winced as he felt his boat's every wounded scream as steel shattered fiberglass.

Jack turned off the monitor and took a deep breath to settle the fluttering in his chest, avoiding eye contact with the boy for a few moments. The buzzing sound from the fluorescent light seemed to grow until it filled the room like the skirling of cicadas. He stepped closer to the manacled boy and stared into his eyes, searching for even a scrap of regret. What he got was hatred coiled tight as a rattlesnake.

"Don't eyeball me, you old bastard. Video don't mean nothing. Could be anybody."

The sheriff looked from the boy to Jack and nodded. "Could be, but ain't."

The cop reached into the front pocket of his trousers and pulled out a spherical-ended, slender tube made of silver for piping commands on a ship. He handed it to Jack. "Reckon this'd be yours," he said. "Got your initials engraved on it."

Jack regarded it for an interval as if it were a treasure. "My

boatswain's call," he said at last. "Won it off an old bosun's mate in a poker game one night somewhere in the Indian Ocean. I whistle up Pogy with it sometimes. Where'd you find it?"

The sheriff cuffed the kid on his ear drawing a yowl and a string of curses.

"Sonny boy here had it in his knapsack when I collared him. Figured it was yours right away."

Jack stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray fashioned from a big cockle shell and then went over to the drink box. He pulled the lever down and a bottle dropped into the chute with a muffled thump. He removed it, pulled the lever again and dropped another bottle into the chute. He popped the metal caps off both them and handed one to the sheriff. Then he walked over to the window and stared out at the moon while swigging the icy beverage. At length, he turned around, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked the boy over again. His eyes shone with tears he refused to spill in front of the cop and the young hoodlum who'd trashed the sailboat he cherished. He saw the jailhouse in the kid's eyes, the insouciance of one who, although maybe not irredeemable just yet, tramped inexorably along the mean streets in that direction. But he also saw something else. Skirting the edges of the boy's fixed stare, he saw someone who'd lost his way, another throwaway in a world where everything was as disposable as the glass bottle wrapped in his fist. Despite his anger and sadness over his own loss, Jack looked into the boy's eyes and saw someone who'd never had a break. And even though he couldn't forgive the kid's trespasses, he couldn't bring himself to hate him for them, either.

"Why, boy?" he said. "Why couldn't you just steal and go on your way? Why'd you have to do that?"

The boy lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes. "Fuck you, old man."

Jack stood there for a few moments considering a reply, but knew that nothing he said would matter. He looked at the sheriff and shook his head.

"Get him outta here, Hal. Do what you gotta do."

The sheriff looked back at him and nodded gravely.

"Sorry, partner. I sure am sorry about this here mess."

He tossed off the remainder of his drink, set the bottle on the desk, turned around and shoved his prisoner through the door. The kid tumbled down the steps and landed belly down on the scrabble. When he wailed, the cop yanked him up by his arms and shoved him to the car.

Jack listened to the sheriff read the boy his rights; then the doors slammed and the car slewed around and went back along the causeway, its strobe lights pulsing across the marsh. When the car turned onto the highway and disappeared over the bridge, Jack whistled his dog in from the yard and closed the door. He picked up his cigarettes and lit one, then sat down and gazed at a framed photograph in the middle of the desk. When the cigarette had burned down almost to his fingers, he crushed it in the ashtray, put his hands over his face and leaned forward on his elbows. Pogy cocked his ears, whined, then padded over and nuzzled him. After a while, he knuckled his raw eyes, eased himself out of the chair and climbed the stairs to his home, the dog at his heels.

CHAPTER 2

POGY DANCED AROUND THE kitchen, woofing as Jack filled his food bowl. He set his dog's breakfast on the floor and watched him tear into it while pouring two cups of coffee.

"Slow down, Pogy," he said. "You'll get indigestion and fart all day."

The aroma of coffee filled the room. Jack picked up the mugs and walked downstairs to the office with them. The early morning sun washed the marina with a golden glow and a stillness of bath water. He knew that the late July weather would be stifling in a couple of hours. Weather forecasters were watching a growing system of storms forming off the west coast of Africa. Jack, a local whose family went back three generations, didn't fret much about the storms that sometimes menaced Florida during the June-through-November hurricane season. Mostly, they passed harmlessly offshore, riding

the Gulf Stream and only causing a few days of high winds and surf. There hadn't been a direct hit on Morgan's Island in Ocean County in more than fifty years. The island and most of the county was tucked into a cleft on the extreme northeast coast of the peninsula and thus largely sheltered from tropical storms. A natural barrier island, it formed part of a chain of analogous sea islands from South Carolina to North Florida. The island, ten miles long and a mile at its widest, was separated from the mainland by the Intracoastal Waterway and only accessible by a drawbridge a couple of hundred yards from the boatyard.

Before he could step outside, Merkel heard heavy boots clunking on the porch, followed by his manager and dockmaster, Rafael Hernandez, who everyone just called Rafe, shouldering his squat, muscular frame through the door. As always, he was neatly groomed, his black, graying hair parted smartly on one side and his tanned face freshly shaven.

Jack handed him a cup of coffee. "Morning, Rafe."

The dockmaster grinned, revealing a gold tooth. Jack considered him to be one of those rare sorts who seemed to wear their cheerfulness like a second skin. In all the years Rafe had worked for him, Jack had only seen him sad once, when his brother died. Rafe took a couple of weeks off to return to Mexico bury his brother and grieve with his relatives. He returned from the trip with his sunny demeanor.

"Thanks, brother," he said. "So, what's on the agenda for today? I don't like the looks of that storm out there. It's a huge system and it's a Cape Verde storm. Could be bad news for Florida if it develops into a hurricane and heads this way."

"Let's hope not, Rafe. But maybe we should take a dock walk and inspect everything just in case. This place will fill up fast if the damn thing turns into a full blown 'cane and gets within five hundred miles."

"Good idea," Rafe said. "Let's get it done. I need to spread a load of lime rock on that bare area out back. We gotta paint Bo Riddle's

Hatteras next week if the weather holds and it's awful dusty back there. A good covering of fresh rock ought to fix that. I'll get some of the guys to help me. We ought to be able to knock it out before lunch."

"Well, come on, then," Jack said. "Oh, Hal Patterson dropped by yesterday evening with the fellow who messed up the place the other night. Just a kid. A real punk, but I kinda felt a little sorry for him."

Rafe's weathered face lit up and he laughed.

"Sometimes you're too damn nice for your own good. I'm sure Pogy would've sorted out that problem if he'd been loose in the yard and not out fishing with you."

Before Jack could reply, the phone rang. He caught it on the second ring and put it to his ear. He nodded and frowned.

"Okay, tell him I'll be there in ten."

He set the phone down. "Damn," he said. "Guess you'll have to do the inspection yourself. Judge Kicklighter has requested my presence for breakfast at Nell's."

"Better get running," Hernandez said. "What's up?"

"That kid's in court for formal charges this morning," Jack grumbled. "His Honor wants me there, but he wants to have breakfast first. I'd better take off."

Taking his cup with him, he climbed into an elderly Jeep Wagoneer, rolling down the windows so he could smell the marsh as he headed up the causeway to the road leading into town. Jack was spellbound by the spartina grass, the color of emeralds and worn like a monarch's cloak in the spring and summer, as well as the dull brown peasant's rags that clad it in the winter. He soaked up the marsh's fragrance, a bountiful distillation that reminded him of the smell of fresh oysters. Most evenings after work, he'd walk Pogy up the causeway along the edge of the marsh and watch the legions of fiddler crabs skittering wildly across the mud, brandishing their single big claws like cutlasses. He'd listen to the maniacal laughter of marsh hens in the deep grass. When the tide was in, he loved the popping

sound of sea trout attacking small baitfish schooling near the surface, and he'd watch for signs of redfish hoisting their tails above the water as they foraged nose-down for crabs and other crustaceans on the bottom. Jack couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

Judge Kicklighter stood waiting for him outside the Harborside Café and Grille. It was next door to an antediluvian courthouse built of red bricks faded and smoothed by the years. The judge chugged contentedly on one of his legendary Dominican cigars. In private or with close friends, he indulged himself in the occasional and illicit Cuban cigar. He glanced at his watch as Merkel stepped out of his car, then grinned at his old fishing buddy as they shook hands.

"Two more minutes and I'd be assessing you a hundred bucks for next year's barbecue," he said, tossing the half-smoked cigar into a bucket of sand.

"And I'd be telling you to kiss my ass," Jack said. "Why are you bothering me today? I'm swamped."

"We have business this morning in my courtroom and I want you there. But while we have breakfast, I want to tell you about this new redfish lure I picked up."

Harborside Café and Grille was owned and managed by Nell Mason, a whip-thin woman of middling age with a raucous laugh and mercurial temperament. She either loved you or despised you, and she wasn't shy about displaying either sentiment. Locals just called the place Nell's. If you asked directions to the Harborside Café and Grille, you were marked as a tourist. The café was the official hangout for the courthouse crowd and all the attorneys and business owners downtown. The judge stepped to his favorite table in the back corner; it was as big around as a Conestoga wagon wheel and where Nell Mason's favorites and the town's gentry dined. There was a "reserved" sign in the middle of the oak table no matter how crowded Nell's was or how many people waited in line to be seated. No one but the chosen were allowed to sit there. It was rumored that more deals were made around that oak slab than at a meeting of Mafia bosses.

Nell rushed out of the kitchen when she saw them.

“What’ll it be, fellas? The usual, Your Honor? Cheese grits for you, Jack?”

Both men nodded and made their way back to the table where mugs of coffee and a pitcher of orange juice were already being set out. The judge took off his hat, put it on the seat of the empty chair beside him and draped his coat over the back.

“Hal’s bringing your young vandal in with the other arrestees today,” the judge said. “The boy’s bad news and I aim to go hard on him. Hal’s already given me his version of events, but I’m going to want to hear from you on the record about your losses. That’ll drive some of mine and the state attorney’s office’s decision-making. But first, we dine. No more business talk ‘til court convenes.”



Circuit Court Judge J. Harlan Kicklighter who Jack called “Harley,” was a short, spare and austere jurist whose hair was more salt than pepper. The son of Jamaican immigrants, his skin was the color of roasted coffee beans. He was a dandy, given to sporting blue seersucker suits, bow ties, suspenders and Panama hats. A convivial man in his private life, he governed his courtroom with the ruthlessness of a warlord. Lawyers who crossed him were rebuked and whittled to nubbins. Defendants who riled him or failed to show him the deference he demanded were gutted like mullet. Nor were the innocent out of harm’s way, for the judge, who everyone agreed was as blunt as the business end of a bullet, rarely missed the opportunity to point out in open court that a verdict of *not guilty* didn’t necessarily mean *innocent* when he felt like a scoundrel had evaded justice.

Nor did his Honor suffer fool prosecutors or lying cops. A prosecutor with a sloppily prepared case could look forward to the career-chilling humiliation of hearing the court grant defense counsel’s request for a judgment of acquittal. And any cop the judge

believed to be either outright lying or exaggerating—gilding the lily, as he called it—earned swift reproach, dismissal as a witness, and admonition to jurors not to believe a word of it.

Judge Kicklighter allowed spirited defense of the accused. But when he leaned forward in his chair and began sliding his gold-rimmed glasses down his nose, the time for defense lawyers, as well as prosecutors, to sit and be silent was at hand. Courtroom regulars loved the spectacle of a showboating lawyer oblivious to hand signals from the judge indicating he'd had enough and was about to bite. Tardiness to proceedings on either side was also taboo. No excuses were acceptable. Latecomers were fined a hundred dollars, which Kicklighter directed the clerk of the court to deposit into a special fund tapped every Fourth of July to pay for a barbecue for members of the courthouse family and their families. The annual soiree was so popular that, as Independence Day grew near, lawyers would inquire of the clerk whether there were sufficient funds for the event. If it appeared that it might fall short, they took turns being late for appearance in order to fatten Kicklighter's kitty. The judge was keen to this harmless plot but pretended otherwise.

For a diminutive man, he had a tuba's voice that resonated through even a packed courtroom. It was authoritative, capable of causing breaths to be held.

He strode into the courtroom that morning, took his seat on the bench and immediately called the first case. "Time's a-wasting," he thundered.

For the next forty-five minutes, while Jack watched the proceedings, the bailiffs hauled one petty crook after another in front of the judge, who swiftly took pleas, set conditions of bail and appointed attorneys for the defendants who couldn't afford their own. In the interim, he listened, with the same jaded expression, to the same used-up excuses he heard every day. And, as always, he made the same reply. "Well, cry me a river."

"How much more of this torture are you going to impose upon

me this morning, Mr. Reynolds?" he asked the young prosecutor, after a particularly loquacious and frequently appearing troublemaker was marched back to the holding cell.

"One more, if it please the court," Reynolds announced.

"Well, get busy," the judge rumbled. "It would please the court to make his tee time today."

The antique ceiling fans clicked drowsily in the quiet and now nearly empty courtroom. During a recent renovation, the original heart pine floor planks had been sanded smooth and covered with several coats of varnish, its mellow aroma still perfuming the air. Motes of dust drifted among the rays of morning sun that slanted through the room's row of windows. The courthouse clock, high in its belfry, gonged ten a.m. The judge patiently clipped a new cigar while he waited for the bailiff to haul in the last defendant of the day.

In the small holding area outside the courtroom, there were muffled curses and scuffling. Moments later, the door opened and two big bailiffs shoved a handcuffed and foot-shackled sandy-haired youth into the courtroom. Jack immediately recognized the boy. About that time, the sheriff walked into the courtroom, nodded at Merkel and made his way to a seat up front.

"State versus Raymond Douglas Eleazer," the prosecutor said, hopping to his feet. "Charged with one count each of criminal trespass, criminal mischief, petty theft and resisting arrest with violence."

Clad in an orange jumpsuit, the kid glanced over at the sheriff and then at the judge. "That's bullshit! I didn't do any violence to that fat cop. I just pushed him a little."

Judge Kicklighter pushed his glasses down his nose and leaned forward on the bench and pinned the boy with a stare. "You're one step away from having your mouth taped shut. Wanna try me? And for the record, shoving a cop during an arrest is considered resisting with violence *and* battery on a law enforcement officer. One more peep out of you and I'll suggest that the state add that charge. Now, answer me politely. Can you afford a lawyer?"

"No sir," the boy said, hanging his head. "I don't have a red cent to my name or a place to stay."

"Well, now you do, thanks to the nice sheriff there who so kindly took you in," Kicklighter replied. "Three hots and a cot."

Then he looked over at a lawyer wearing a dark blue suit and sitting at the table across from the prosecutor's. "Mr. Bryce, I'm appointing the public defender's office to represent this boy. Any conflicts of interest?"

The rumpled middle-aged lawyer stood.

"None that I'm aware of, Your Honor. May I have a moment to confer privately with my client?"

"You may, but don't be all day about it."

While the attorney and his client talked quietly off to one side of the courtroom, the judge returned his attention to the prosecutor. "Mr. Reynolds, would you kindly hand me the sheriff's arrest report?"

The prosecutor pulled some papers from his folder and passed them to the judge, who took his time reading them. After a few minutes, the accused and his lawyer walked together and stood back in front of the bench. The boy hung his head and stared at his jail issue rubber sandals.

"We're ready to continue, Your Honor."

The judge nodded and looked to the rear of the courtroom. "Mr. Merkel, would you please step up here for a moment?"

Jack got up and walked to the front of the courtroom. The bailiff opened the heavy wooden gate for him so that he could stand right in front of the bench. Kicklighter removed his glasses, massaged the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb and then put the glasses back on.

"Can you put a dollar amount on your losses?"

"Four, maybe five hundred dollars for fiberglass resin and cloth, Your Honor. Another fifteen bucks for that brand-new screwdriver he tossed into the drink."

“What would you normally charge per hour to do the same work on someone else’s boat, Mr. Merkel?”

“Standard rate’s eighty an hour, Your Honor. I make it about forty hours of labor, taking into account the time it takes the glass to cure before it can be sanded. All total with the material losses, I reckon it comes to about four thousand dollars.”

The judge nodded and looked at the prosecutor.

“Which brings this into the realm of felony criminal mischief instead of misdemeanor charges, Mr. Reynolds?”

The prosecutor popped back up beside his table.

“Yes, Your Honor. We’ll amend the charges to three felonies—assaulting Sheriff Patterson and the extensive vandalism to Mr. Merkel’s property. The state recommends bail set at fifty thousand dollars, that is, if he can make it and if he can find somewhere to stay and someone to be responsible for him while he’s awaiting disposition of his case. Your Honor, Mr. Eleazer here is a repeat offender. Juvenile court and shelters don’t appear to have taught him anything. The state’s going to be asking for two years in the Florida Department of Corrections, followed by five years of probation and full restitution to Mr. Merkel upon his release.”

“May it please the court?” the defense lawyer said, rising. “We’re going to be entering a plea of not guilty today. It’s obvious that my client can’t make his bail, nor does he have anywhere to go even if he could. But I beseech the court that, given his young age, he just turned eighteen, that he be transferred to the halfway house while his case is being worked out.”

Judge Kicklighter snorted loudly.

“Nice try, Counselor. Not a chance. Unless satisfactory bond arrangements can be made, he can cool his heels in the county jail until we’re done with him. Anything else, gentlemen?”

The boy’s face reddened. “This ain’t right!” he shouted. “I’m entitled to a fair trial!”

The defense attorney cringed under Kicklighter's blistering glare.

"Oh, you'll get your fair trial and fairly soon, kiddo," the judge replied disdainfully. "And after a jury convicts you in fairly short order, I intend to hand you a fairly substantial visit to state prison. Is that fair enough for you?"

"But judge," the boy cried. "That cop shoved me down the steps at that marina last night. I like to've bit my tongue off!"

Kicklighter shrugged. "Well, cry me a river. Court's adjourned. Sheriff, take Master Eleazer here back to your posh resort. Mr. Merkel, I want to see you in my chambers."

The courtroom cleared and Jack followed the judge through the rear entrance of the and across the hall. They stepped into a small office occupied by a plump, gray-haired woman seated at an imposing looking desk covered with small framed photos of her grandchildren. She looked up and beamed at the two men.

"Martha, no calls or visits for a few minutes," Kicklighter said.

"Yes, Your Honor," she answered.

He opened the door to his chambers, the paneled walls crowded with law books, family photos and pictures of him holding trophy-sized fish, and went over to the windows. He looked out for a few moments as if studying something below on the street before turning around and looking at Jack, who stood waiting just inside the door.

"Jack, we've known each other a long, long time. And I know what's going through that hard head of yours, which is precisely the same thing that's going through that soft heart down beneath it. Take my advice on this: Don't even think about it. You can't fix every broken thing in this world, nor should you try, my friend. Understand?"

Jack stood silent, studying the dirt and grease under his fingernails and listening to the rhythmic clank of the brass lanyard on the flagpole outside. A group of people loudly laughed two floors below on the sidewalk and the clock gonged the half hour. he finally looked back at his old friend, who stood waiting for his reply. "I reckon so, Harley. I reckon so."

“Good. That’s what I wanted to hear. Now go on. Get on back to work. And let’s go fishing sometime before the week is over. I’m dying to try this lure on a big red.”

Jack nodded, then walked out of the judge’s chambers. Kicklighter, an astute man who prided himself on being able to decipher most people’s thoughts and body language, shook his head sadly. “Yeah, sure,” he muttered to himself. “Soft-hearted, pig-headed damn fool.”

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