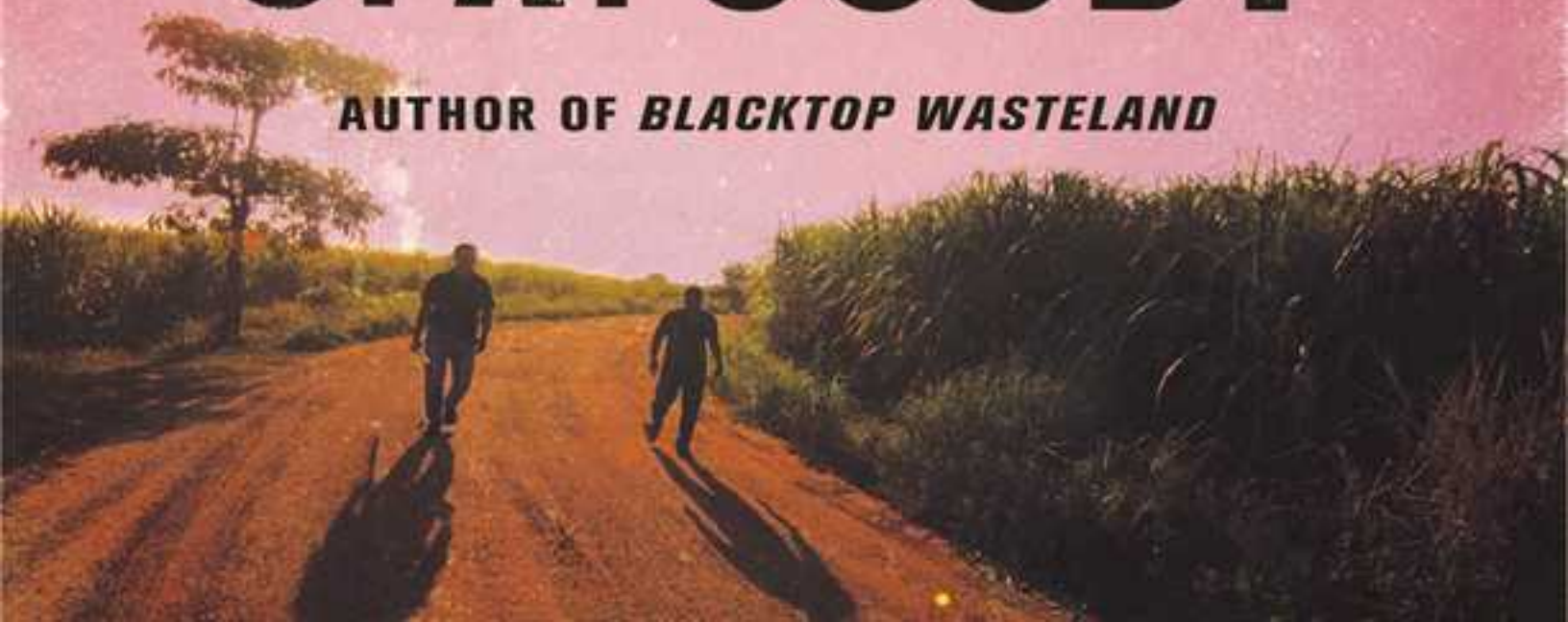


RAZORBLADE TEARS

A NOVEL

S. A. COSBY

AUTHOR OF *BLACKTOP WASTELAND*



**RAZORBLADE
TEARS**



S. A. COSBY



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To my mother, Joyce A. Cosby, who gave me two very
important gifts: determination and curiosity

My drops of tears I'll turn to sparks of fire.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *HENRY VIII*

ONE

Ike tried to remember a time when men with badges coming to his door early in the morning brought anything other than heartache and misery, but try as he might, nothing came to mind.

The two men stood side by side on the small concrete landing of his front step with their hands on their belts near their badges and their guns. The morning sun made the badges glimmer like gold nuggets. The two cops were a study in contrast. One was a tall but wiry Asian man. He was all sharp angles and hard edges. The other, a florid-faced white man, was built like a powerlifter with a massive head sitting atop a wide neck. They both wore white dress shirts with clip-on ties. The powerlifter had sweat stains spreading down from his armpits that vaguely resembled maps of England and Ireland respectively.

Ike's queasy stomach began to do somersaults. He was fifteen years removed from Coldwater State Penitentiary. He had bucked the recidivism statistics ever since he'd walked out of that festering wound. Not so much as a speeding ticket in all those years. Yet here he was with his tongue dry and the back of his throat burning as the two cops stared down at him. It was bad enough being a Black man in the good ol' US of A and talking to the cops. You always felt like you were on the edge of some imaginary precipice during any interaction with an officer of the law. If you were an ex-con, it felt like the precipice was covered in bacon grease.

"Yes?" Ike said.

"Sir, I'm Detective LaPlata. This is my partner, Detective Robbins. May we come in?"

"What for?" Ike asked. LaPlata sighed. It came out low and long like the bottom note in a blues song. Ike tensed. LaPlata glanced at Robbins.

Robbins shrugged. LaPlata's head dipped down, then he raised it again. Ike had learned to pick up on body language when he was inside. There was no aggression in their stances. At least not any more than what most cops exuded on a normal twelve-hour shift. The way LaPlata's head had dropped was almost ... sad.

“Do you have a son named Isiah Randolph?” he said finally.

That was when he knew. He knew it like he knew when a fight was about to break out in the yard. Like he knew when a crackhead was going to try to stab him for a bag back in the day. Like he knew, just knew in his gut, that his homeboy Luther had seen his last sunset that night he'd gone home with that girl from the Satellite Bar.

It was like a sixth sense. A preternatural ability to sense a tragedy seconds before it became a reality.

“What's happened to my son, Detective LaPlata?” Ike asked, already knowing the answer. Knowing it in his bones. Knowing his life would never be the same.

TWO

It was a beautiful day for a funeral.

Snow white clouds rolled across an azure sky. Despite it being the first week of April the air was still crisp and cool. Of course, since this was Virginia, it could be raining buckets in the next ten minutes, then hot as the devil's backside an hour later.

A sage-green tent covered the remaining mourners and two caskets. The minister grabbed a handful of dirt from the pile that sat just outside the tent. The pile was covered by a weathered artificial grass rug. He moved to the head of the caskets.

"Earth to earth. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust." The minister's voice echoed through the cemetery as he sprinkled dirt on both caskets. He skipped the part about the general resurrection and the last days. The funeral director stepped forward. He was a short chubby man with a charcoal complexion that matched his suit. Despite the mild conditions, his face was slick with sweat. It was as if his body were responding to the calendar and not the thermometer.

"This concludes the services for Derek Jenkins and Isiah Randolph. The family thanks you for your attendance. You may go in peace," he said. His voice didn't have the same theatricality as the minister's. It barely carried beyond the tent.

Ike Randolph let go of his wife's hand. She slumped against him. Ike stared down at his hands. His empty hands. Hands that had held his boy when he was barely ten minutes old. The hands that had shown him how to tie his shoes. The hands that had rubbed salve on his chest when he'd had the flu. That had waved goodbye to him in court with shackles tight around

his wrists. Rough callused hands that he hid in his pockets when Isiah's husband had offered to shake them.

Ike dropped his chin to his chest.

The little girl sitting in her lap played with Mya's braids. Ike looked at the girl. Skin the color of honey with hair to match. Arianna had just turned three the week before her parents died. Did she have any inkling of what was happening? When Mya had told her that her daddies were asleep, she seemed to accept it without too much trouble. He envied the elasticity of her mind. She could wrap her head around this in a way that he couldn't.

"Ike, that's our boy in there. That's our baby," Mya wailed. He flinched when she spoke. It was like hearing a rabbit scream in a trap. Ike heard the folding chairs squeak and whine as people rose and headed to the parking lot. He felt hands flutter against his back and shoulders. Words of encouragement were mumbled with half-hearted sincerity. It wasn't that folks didn't care. It was that they knew those words did little to soothe the wound in his soul. Speaking those platitudes and clichéd homilies seemed disingenuous, but what else could they do? It was what you did when someone died. It was as axiomatic as bringing a casserole to the repast.

The crowd was thin, and it didn't take long for the chairs to empty. In less than five minutes the only people in the cemetery were Ike, Mya, Arianna, the gravediggers, and a man Ike vaguely recognized as Derek's father. A lot of Ike's family hadn't shown up for the service. As far as he could tell, only a few of Derek's people had bothered to attend. Most of the mourners were Isiah and Derek's friends. Ike noticed Derek's family members. They stood out among the bearded hipsters and androgynous ladies that made up Derek and Isiah's social circle. Lean wiry men and women with hard flinty eyes and sun-worn faces. They wore blue collars around their red necks. As the sermon neared the thirty-minute mark, he'd watched their faces begin to bloom with crimson. That was when the minister mentioned how no sin was unforgivable. Even abominable sins could be forgiven by a benevolent God.

Arianna pulled one of Mya's braids.

"Stop it, girl!" Mya said. It came out sharp. Arianna was silent for a moment. Ike knew what was coming next. That pregnant pause was the

prelude to the waterworks. Isiah used to do the same thing.

Arianna began to howl. Her screams pierced the quiet contemplativeness of the funeral and rang in Ike's ears. Mya tried to soothe her. She apologized and brushed her forehead. Arianna took a deep breath, then began to scream louder.

"Take her to the car. I'll be there in a minute," Ike said.

"Ike, I ain't going nowhere. Not yet," Mya snapped. Ike stood.

"Please Mya. Take her to the car. Just give me a few minutes, then I'll come and watch her and you can come back," Ike said. His voice almost cracked. Mya stood. She pulled Arianna close to her chest.

"You say what you gotta say." She turned and headed for the car. Arianna's cries withered to whimpers as they walked away. Ike put his hand on the black casket with the gold trim. His boy was in there. His son was in this rectangular container. Packed and preserved like some cured meat. The breeze picked up, making the tassels hanging from the edge of the tent flap like the wings of a dying bird. Derek was in the silver casket with the black trim. Isiah was being buried next to his husband. They'd died together and now they'd rest together.

Derek's father rose from his seat. He was a lean and weathered piece of work with a shock of shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair. He walked up to the foot of the caskets and stood next to Ike. The gravediggers busied themselves with shovel inspections as they waited for these two men, the last of the mourners, to leave. The lean man scratched at his chin. A gray shadow of a beard covered the bottom half of his face. He coughed, cleared his throat, then coughed again. When he got that under control, he turned toward Ike.

"Buddy Lee Jenkins. Derek's father. I don't think we ever officially met," Buddy Lee said. He held out his hand.

"Ike Randolph." He took Buddy Lee's hand and pumped it up and down twice, then let it go. They stood at the foot of the coffins, silent as stones. Buddy Lee coughed again.

"Was you at the wedding reception?" Buddy Lee asked. Ike shook his head.

"Me neither," Buddy Lee said.

“I think I saw you at their girl’s birthday party last year,” Ike said.

“Yeah, I was there but I didn’t stay long.” Buddy Lee sucked his teeth as he adjusted his sport coat. “Derek was ashamed of me. Can’t say I much blame him,” Buddy Lee said. Ike didn’t know how to respond, so he didn’t.

“I just wanna thank you and your wife for getting everything straight. I couldn’t afford to put them away this nice. And Derek’s mama couldn’t be bothered,” Buddy Lee said.

“Wasn’t us. They had things already taken care of. They’d set up some kind of prepaid funeral package. We just had to sign some papers,” Ike said.

“Man. Was you setting up funeral arrangements at twenty-seven? I know I sure wasn’t. Hell, I couldn’t set up a fucking paper route at twenty-seven,” Buddy Lee said. Ike ran his hand over his son’s casket. Whatever moment he had imagined having was ruined now.

“That tat on your hand, that’s Black God’s ink, ain’t it?” Buddy Lee asked. Ike studied his hands. The indistinct drawings of a lion with two scimitars above its head on his right hand and the word RIOT on his left had been his silent companions since his second year in Coldwater State Penitentiary.

Ike put his hands in his pockets.

“That was a long time ago,” Ike said. Buddy Lee sucked his teeth again.

“Where’d you do your time? I did a nickel at Red Onion. Some hard fellas out that way. Met a few BG boys out there.”

“I don’t mean no harm, but it ain’t really something I like to talk about,” Ike said.

“Well, I don’t mean no harm, but if you don’t like talking about it, why don’t you get the tat covered up? Shit, from what I hear, they can do that in an hour,” Buddy Lee said. Ike took his hands out of his pockets. He looked down at the black lion on his hand. The lion was standing on a crude map of the state.

“Just because I don’t wanna talk about it doesn’t mean I want to forget about it. It reminds me of why I don’t ever wanna go back,” Ike said. “I’m gonna leave you with your boy now.” He turned and started to walk away.

“You ain’t gotta go. It’s too late for me and him,” Buddy Lee said. “Too late for you and your boy, too.” Ike stopped. He half turned back toward

Buddy Lee.

“What you mean by that?” Ike asked. Buddy Lee ignored the question.

“When he was fourteen, I caught Derek kissing another boy down by the creek in the woods behind our trailer. Took off my belt and beat him like a runaway ... like he stole something. I called him names. Told him he was a pervert. I whipped him till his legs was covered with welts. He cried and cried. Saying he was sorry. He didn’t know why he was like that. You never got into it with your boy like that? Never? I dunno, maybe you was a better daddy than I was,” Buddy Lee said. Ike adjusted his jaw.

“Why we talking about this?” Ike said. Buddy Lee shrugged.

“If I could just talk to Derek for five minutes, you know what I’d say? ‘I don’t give a damn who you fucking. Not one bit.’ What you think you’d say to your boy?” Buddy Lee said. Ike stared at him. Stared through him. He noticed tears clinging to the corners of the man’s eyes, but they didn’t fall. Ike ground his teeth so hard he thought his molars might crack.

“I’m going,” Ike said. He stomped toward his car.

“You think they gonna catch who did it?” Buddy Lee shouted after him. Ike picked up his pace. When he reached the car, the minister was just leaving the parking lot. Ike watched as he creeped by in a jet-black BMW. Rev. J. T. Johnson’s profile was sharp enough to slice cheese. He never turned his head or acknowledged Ike and Mya at all.

Ike jogged down the driveway. He caught the minister before he turned onto the highway. Ike tapped on his window. Rev. Johnson lowered the glass. Ike dropped to his haunches and extended his hand into the car.

“I guess I should thank you for preaching my son’s funeral,” Ike said. Rev. Johnson grasped Ike’s hand and pumped it up and down a few times.

“No need to thank me, Ike,” Rev. Johnson said. His deep rich baritone rumbled out of his chest like a freight train on greased tracks. He tried to pull his hand away but Ike gripped it tight.

“I’m supposed to thank you but I just can’t.” He gripped Rev. Johnson’s hand tighter. The minister winced. “I just gotta ask you, why did you preach the funeral?”

Rev. Johnson frowned. “Ike, Mya asked—”

“I know Mya asked you to do it. What I’m asking you is why did you do it? Because I can tell you didn’t want to,” Ike said. He tightened his grip on Johnson’s hand.

“Ike, my hand...”

“You kept talking about abominable sin. Over and over. You thought my son was an abomination?” Ike asked.

“Ike, I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to say it. I might just cut grass for a living but I know an insult when I hear it. You think my son was some kind of monster and you made sure everybody at his funeral knew it. My boy was less than five feet away from you, and you couldn’t shut the fuck up about how his sins were forgivable. His abominable sins.”

“Ike, please...” Rev. Johnson said. A line of cars was forming behind the good minister’s BMW.

“You didn’t say nothing about him being a reporter. Or that he graduated top of his class at VCU. You didn’t talk about him winning the state basketball championship in high school. You just kept talking about abominations. I don’t know what you thought he was, but he was just...” Ike paused. The word caught in his throat like a chicken bone.

“Please let go of my hand,” Rev. Johnson gasped.

“My son wasn’t no fucking abomination!” Ike said. His voice was as cold as a mountain stream flowing over river rocks. He gripped Rev. Johnson’s hand tighter. He felt metacarpals grinding to powder. Rev. Johnson groaned.

“Ike, let him go!” Mya said. Ike turned his head to the right. His wife was standing outside their car. The line behind them was ten deep. Ike released Rev. Johnson’s hand. The minister spun tires as he rocketed onto the highway. Ike marveled at how fast the German engineering carried Rev. Johnson away.

Ike walked back to his car. Mya got in the passenger seat as he slid in the driver’s side. She crossed her arms over her narrow chest and leaned her head against the window.

“What was all that about?” she asked. Ike turned the key in the ignition and put the car in gear.

“You heard what he was saying in his sermon. You know what he was saying about Isiah,” Ike said. Mya sighed.

“Like you haven’t said worse. But now that he’s dead you want to defend him?” Mya asked. Ike gripped the steering wheel.

“I loved him. I did. Just as much as you,” Ike said between clenched teeth.

“Really? Where was this love when he was getting picked on morning, noon, and night in school? Oh, that’s right, you were locked up. He needed your love then. Not now that he’s in the ground,” Mya said. Tears rolled down her face. Ike worked his jaw up and down like he was biting the tension between them.

“That’s why I taught him how to fight when I came home,” Ike said.

“Well, that’s what you know best, ain’t it?” Mya asked. Ike clenched his teeth.

“Do you want to go back over there and—” Ike started to say.

“Just take us home,” Mya sobbed.

He stepped on the gas and pulled out of the cemetery parking lot.

THREE

Buddy Lee sat straight up in his bed. Someone was banging on the door of his trailer so hard it felt like the whole structure was shaking. He checked the clock sitting on the milk crate that served as his nightstand. It was six o'clock. The funeral had ended at 2 P.M. Buddy Lee had stopped off at the Piggly Wiggly and picked up a case of beer. He'd crushed the last can around 4:30. Then he had flopped on his bed and passed out cold.

The banging at his door erupted again. It was cops. It had to be cops. No one banged on your door that hard except Johnny Law. Buddy Lee rubbed his eyes.

Run.

The thought flashed in his mind like an LED sign. The impulse was so strong he was standing up and taking two steps toward the back door before he realized what he was doing. He took a deep breath.

Run.

The thought pulsed in his head even though he was ten years out of Red Onion. Even though he only had a jar of moonshine in the cabinet and two joints in his truck. Even though he'd basically kept his nose clean since he'd started driving for Kitchener Seafood three years ago. Well, he didn't have to worry too much about keeping his nose clean anymore since Ricky Kitchener had fired him instead of giving him a week of bereavement time.

Buddy Lee cracked his knuckles and walked to the front door. The temperature had skyrocketed since he'd passed out, so he flicked on the AC unit before he opened the door.

A short squat man was standing on the four cinder blocks that made up Buddy Lee's front step. His balding head was ringed by rust-colored patches of hair on the sides and in the back of his skull. His white T-shirt

sported a week's worth of stains. They spelled out his eating habits like indistinct hieroglyphics.

"Hey Artie," Buddy Lee said

"Your rent's a week late, Jenkins," Artie said. Buddy Lee burped and he thought all twenty-four beers in the case were going to make a surprise appearance in his mouth. Buddy Lee closed his eyes and tried to conjure up a calendar in his head. Was it the fifteenth already? Time had taken on a strange inconsequential quality since the cops had shown him a picture of Derek's face with the top of his head blacked out.

Buddy Lee opened his eyes.

"Artie, you know my son died, right? The funeral was today."

"I heard, but that don't change the fact the rent is due. I'm sorry about your boy, I really am, but this ain't the first time you been late. I done let you slide a few times but I gotta have it by tomorrow or we gonna have to have another kind of conversation," Artie said. His tiny rat eyes sat in his head dull and brown like old pennies.

Buddy Lee leaned against the ragged doorframe. He crossed his wiry arms.

"Yeah, I can tell you've really fell on hard times here, Artie. How in the world you gonna keep up your fantastic wardrobe?" Buddy Lee said.

"You can joke me all you want, Jenkins, but if I don't have full payment tomorrow, which includes the lot fee and the rent for the trailer, I'll—" Artie said, but Buddy Lee stepped down onto the first cinder block. Artie hadn't expected the move. He took an awkward step backward and nearly tumbled to the ground.

"You'll what? What you gonna do? Call the cops? Go down to the courthouse and get a warrant to kick me out of this broke-down-ass trailer? Lord have mercy, what in the world will I do without this fucking mansion that got a toilet that ain't flushed right since 'ninety-four?"

"Ain't no free ride here Buddy Lee! This ain't one of them Section 8 setups. You want that, you can go over to Wyndam Hills and hang out with the other welfare cases. I knew I should've never rented to no ex-con. My wife told me but I didn't listen. Every time I try to give somebody a break they screw me," Artie said. Spittle sparked from his lips.

“Well, somebody gotta screw you since your wife gave up on getting you to take a bath more than once month,” Buddy Lee said. Artie flinched like he’d been slapped.

“Fuck you, Buddy Lee; I got a glandular condition. You know, you ain’t nothing but trash. Been trash just like all them Jenkins. That’s why your son was a—” Artie didn’t get to finish the statement. Buddy Lee had closed the distance between them in one and a half steps. A jackknife, its brown wooden handle smooth and slick from years of use, was pressed blade first against Artie’s belly. Buddy Lee balled up a wad of Artie’s T-shirt and put his mouth close to the shorter man’s ear.

“That’s why my son was a what? Go on. Say it. Say it so I can slit you from nuts to neck. Split you open like a killing hog and let your guts fall out like we cooking chitterlings for Sunday dinner,” Buddy Lee said.

“I ... I ... just want the rent,” Artie wheezed.

“What you want is to come over here while my boy ain’t even cold in the ground and swing your dick around like you the cock of the walk. All the time I been here I done let you talk your shit because I didn’t want no trouble. But I buried my boy today and now I ain’t really got a goddamn thing to lose, So, go ahead. Say it. SAY IT!” Buddy Lee said. His chest heaved as his breath came in rapid bursts.

“I’m sorry about Derek. Jesus Christ, I’m so fucking sorry. Please let me go. I’m so damn sorry,” Artie said. From his armpits a fetid odor wafted up that made Buddy Lee’s eyes water. At least that’s what he told himself. With the mention of his boy’s name, the rattlesnake in his heart that Artie had poked slithered back down into its hole. The fight flowed out of him like water pouring through a sieve. Artie was a mean-spirited, unhygienic son of a bitch but he didn’t kill Derek. He was just another asshole that didn’t understand who or what Derek was. That was something he and Buddy Lee had in common.

“Go back to your fucking house, Artie,” Buddy Lee said. He let go of the man’s shirt and put his knife back in his pocket. Artie scuttled backward and sideways. When he felt there was enough distance between him and Buddy Lee, he stopped and flicked him off.

“That’s your ass, Jenkins! I’m calling the cops. You ain’t gonna have to worry about the rent now. You gonna be sleeping in a jail cell tonight.”

“Go away, Artie,” Buddy Lee said. It came out flat and listless, all the bravado gone. Artie blinked hard. The sudden de-escalation confused him. Buddy Lee turned his back on him and went into his trailer. The AC hadn’t so much conditioned the air as suggested it might want to cool down.

He sprawled across his sofa. The duct tape on the armrest snagged a few of the hairs on his forearm. He fished around in his back pocket and grabbed his wallet. Behind his driver license was a small wrinkled photo. Buddy Lee pulled the photo out by the corner using his thumb and forefinger. It was a picture of him and a one-year-old Derek. He held the boy in the crook of his arm as they sat in an aluminum lawn chair. Buddy Lee was shirtless in the picture. His hair was down to his shoulders and black as an ace of spades. Derek was wearing a Superman shirt and a diaper.

Buddy Lee wondered what the young fella in the picture would think of the old man he’d become. That fella was full of gunpowder and gasoline. If he looked really close, he could see a small mouse under his right eye. A souvenir he’d acquired collecting a debt for Chuly Pettigrew. The man in that picture was wild and dangerous. Always down for a fight and up to no good. If Artie had spoken ill of Derek in front of that man, he would have waited until dark and then cut his throat for him. Watched him bleed out all over the gravel before taking him somewhere dark and desolate. Knocked out his teeth and cut off his hands and buried him in a shallow grave covered in about fifty pounds of pulverized lime. Then the man in that picture would have gone home, made love to his woman, and not lost a minute’s sleep.

Derek was different. Whatever rot that lived in the roots of the Jenkins family tree had bypassed Derek. His son was so full of positive potential it made him glow like a shooting star from the day he was born. He had accomplished more in his twenty-seven years than most of the entire Jenkins bloodline had in a generation. Buddy Lee’s hand began to shake. The photo fell from his fingers as the tremors worsened, working their way through his hand. The photo floated to the floor. Buddy Lee put his head in

his hands and waited for the tears to come. His throat burned. His stomach was doing cartwheels. His eyes felt like they wanted to burst. Still no tears came.

“My boy. My sweet boy,” he muttered over and over as he rocked back and forth.