

“I loved it and devoured it with fury, straight to its blazing end.”

—Lily King, author of *Writers & Lovers*

New York Times bestselling author of *A Land More Kind Than Home*

WILEY CASH

WHEN GHOSTS
COME HOME

a novel

WHEN GHOSTS
COME HOME

- A NOVEL -

WILEY CASH

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

For Mallory, again

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Tuesday, October 30, 1984

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Wednesday, October 31, 1984

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Thursday, November 1, 1984

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Friday, November 2, 1984

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Acknowledgments

*P.S. Insights, Interviews & More . . .**

About the Author

About the Book

Praise

Also by Wiley Cash

Copyright

About the Publisher

Tuesday, October 30, 1984

Chapter 1

Winston did not hear it so much as feel it as it passed over their house and into the trees across the waterway. He opened his eyes into the darkness of the bedroom. Had he been sleeping? He'd certainly been dreaming. If not dreaming, at least his mind had been seeing the same thing he'd seen over the course of so many nights. He blinked, rubbed his eyes. When he looked over at Marie, she was already sitting up in bed beside him, her sunken cheeks and wisps of graying hair tinged red by the glowing numbers of the alarm clock on her bedside table. *Her cancer and sadness are wasting her*, Winston thought, and then he knew the same was true for him. Just that morning Marie had forced him onto the scale after he pushed his eggs and sausage around on his plate. "One sixty-four?" she'd said. "Who's got cancer, you or me?"

Now, in bed, she looked at him as if terrified of what had woken them.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

"I did," Winston said. He unfolded the covers off his body, and then he sat up and put his feet on the floor.

"It sounded like an airplane."

"It did," Winston said.

"But it's too late for a plane."

Winston turned and looked past Marie toward the alarm clock. It read 3:18 A.M. "It is late," he said.

"It sounded like it came in low," she said. "I haven't ever heard one come in like that before. And never this late."

Winston reached behind him and placed his palms flat against his back. His fingertips explored the knobiness of his spine, and his thumbs closed around the soft skin on his sides that Marie liked to pinch when telling him he needed to gain weight. He stretched and sighed, curled his toes against the carpet. Then he stood and walked to the back window that looked out on the waterway. The county's tiny municipal airport sat through the trees on

the other side of the water. He parted the aluminum blinds and peered out, half-expecting to find fiery wreckage blazing through the grass and disappearing in a gathering plume of smoke at the water's edge. But what he found when he looked out the window was what he always found: the dark, empty backyard; the inky black roll of the water; the thin, ghostly silhouettes of pine trees.

Marie clicked on her lamp. The window became a mirror, and Winston found himself staring into his own eyes.

"Do you see anything?" Marie asked.

"Not now I don't," he said.

"Sorry," she said. She turned off the light, but Winston had already let the blinds close. He reached for his pants where he had left them folded across the back of Marie's reading chair, and he stepped into them and tucked his T-shirt inside the waist.

"Where are you going?" Marie asked.

"Out there," he said. "To the airport."

"Why?"

"To have a look around. To figure out what we just heard."

"There's no sense in you going out there this late," she said. "Send somebody else."

"Nobody else this close," he said, which was true, meaning it was at least true enough to say. It was late October now. Beach season was over. Just about all the tourists had gone home. The county had slashed budgets back in July, and Winston had had to limit night shifts by assigning three officers to patrol the county while keeping someone on call at home and someone on dispatch at the office. Tonight was his night on call, even if dispatch hadn't called him yet.

"Send Glenn," Marie said.

"Glenn's not on call," he said. "And I don't think he's on patrol tonight. I *am* on call, and I'm right here."

"I don't want you to go. It's too late."

"Well, it's my job," Winston said. "At least it's my job until they vote me out next week." He smiled at Marie, then he turned toward the dresser and pulled a pair of socks from his top drawer.

"Keep talking all hangdog like that and they will vote you out," she said. "And if you keep going on these calls in the middle of the night, I'll start campaigning against you."

Winston lowered himself into her reading chair. He put his socks on. “You’d side with my political enemies out of spite?” he asked. “I didn’t know you had it in you, Marie Barnes.”

“Well, cancer can’t take everything from a girl,” she said. “Believe it or not.”

“Now look who’s talking hangdog,” he said. He stood up and walked to her side of the bed. He bent toward her and cupped his hand under her chin, then he lifted her face to his and leaned in for a kiss. “I’ll be right back,” he said. “Go back to sleep, honey. You won’t even know I’m gone.”

“I always know when you’re gone,” Marie said. “Forty years now, and I always know when you’re gone.”

“Well, I won’t be gone long,” he said.

“You’ve been saying that for forty years.”

“If you take care of yourself and go back to sleep then I’ll be able to say it for forty more.”

“I just don’t want to be—” But she stopped and looked away from him. The room fell into silence, and Winston would swear that he could hear the distant lap of the waterway outside their windows. Or maybe it was the sound of the ticking clock he sometimes heard in his mind. Marie looked back at him after a moment. “I just can’t stop thinking about Colleen,” she finally said. “I wish she’d call us back.”

“I know, honey,” he said. He fought the urge to break his gaze from hers, to drop his chin to his chest. He considered sitting down on the bed beside her, but he knew that doing so would delay his leaving even longer. “I know. Maybe she’ll call tomorrow. If not, we’ll call her. Maybe we can try getting ahold of Scott at work, ask him how she’s doing.” He’d said all of these things many times since he and Marie had come home from Texas, and he was tired of saying them, but he knew that, when it came to their daughter, Marie needed to hear certain things, and he knew that it was his job to say them.

For Winston, what had been a charming bedside scene—a scene of Marie worried over him in the middle of the night—had devolved into a kind of repulsion at Marie’s mentioning their daughter’s name. Winston’s grief for Colleen was caustic, and he knew it had turned poisonous, infecting his heart and hardening it against Marie’s own particular brand of grief and her need to share it with him. Unlike Marie, Winston’s sadness was a thing he could bear only when he was alone.

He reached for her, held her fingers with the tips of his, gave her hand a little shake.

“We’ll call the house again tomorrow,” he said. “And then we’ll get ahold of Scott at work if we need to.”

Marie smiled a weak smile and lowered herself to her pillow. She closed her eyes, and Winston kissed her forehead again. He stood up straight and looked down at her. He watched her turn away from him and pull the covers up over her shoulders.

When the telephone rang on the dresser across the bedroom, Winston jumped like he’d heard a slammed door or a gunshot. Marie didn’t even stir. “I bet that’s Rudy,” she said.

“I bet you’re right,” Winston said, trying to hide the breathless surprise in his voice. “There’s my call.” He left the bedroom for the hallway and took the stairs down to the kitchen, where the telephone was still ringing. He picked it up.

“Calls are coming in about some sort of noise out at the airport,” Rudy said. “Sounds like it might be a plane crash.”

“We heard it too,” Winston said. “I was about to call in and tell you I’m headed out that way.”

“You want backup?” Rudy asked, his voice as raspy and whispery as it always was. Winston knew Rudy smoked cigarettes and drank coffee in the dispatch room all night long during his shifts, but Rudy was the best they’d ever had, and he’d work the night shift when no one else wanted to, so Winston was willing to let Rudy’s smoking slide.

“No,” Winston said. “No sense in waking up somebody who’s not already awake or pulling somebody else off patrol.”

“All right, Sheriff,” Rudy said. “Call if you need something.”

Winston found his boots in the laundry room. He took his jacket from the hall closet and slipped it on, unlocked the safe in the back of the closet, and removed his pistol and holster. He lifted his walkie-talkie from the shelf above him and turned it on, its low white hiss breaking the silence of the quiet house.

Once he had his gear, Winston stood at the bottom of the stairs by the front door, listening for something, but for what he did not know.

“Marie,” he said. His voice escaped his throat in a whisper. “Marie,” he said again, “I’ll be right back.”

There was no sound from upstairs. The silence of the house encircled him, but Winston knew that Marie was awake, her eyes closed, her ears trying to do the same. He could almost feel her heart beating from where he stood at the front door, and for a moment he considered going back upstairs and touching her one last time, but he unlocked the front door, opened it, and stepped out into the night instead.

The black sky and its pinpricked canopy of stars pressed down on Winston as if he could reach up and push it away. The air was cool and heavy, and he could smell the trees—pines, yaupons, oaks—the moss that hung from them, the brackish air coming from the waterway behind him, the salty tang of the ocean on the other side of the island. The world was near silent, but he could hear the water moving.

Winston was halfway down the gravel walk when he looked up to find that Marie's burgundy Regal was parked behind the cruiser. Instead of taking the time to move it he climbed inside Marie's car and started the engine. The radio came on, a late-night talking head discussing Mondale's slim chances against Reagan. Winston clicked the radio off and turned to back Marie's car out of the driveway.

On the passenger's seat were the posters and flyers that Marie had picked up that afternoon in Southport, each one featuring a photograph of a younger version of Winston, the photograph accompanied by the phrase *Vote for a man you can trust*. He had been forty-eight years old the first time he had run for sheriff, and now he was sixty, almost twenty years older than his opponent. Something about seeing his young face and thinking about the even younger face of Bradley Frye—the man who would probably defeat him—embarrassed Winston.

Bradley Frye was the son of a local developer named Everett Frye, who'd spent decades building up this part of the North Carolina coast. Condominiums, shopping centers, expensive vacation houses. Now that the elder Frye was dead, his son seemed hell-bent on clear-cutting swaths of land and stamping out track homes and new developments on the sandy, swampy soil where forests and wetlands had sat just days before. Winston figured Bradley Frye was either making a fortune or driving himself into unimaginable debt. Regardless, he now had his sights set on local government, beginning with the sheriff's office. Although he'd gained some small amount of notoriety as a basketball player at Brunswick County High School in the late 1950s, Frye had never left the county after graduation. In

his twenties he set about furthering his name by showing up drunk and looking for girls at high school parties, and when county schools integrated in the late 1960s and early '70s, Winston knew Frye as one of the local boys who'd load up in trucks to harass and beat up Black students protesting just up the road in Wilmington. In the years since, Frye had tried to soften the perception that people had of him—a good ol' boy with a rich daddy who could afford to play nationalist—by wearing golf shirts, khaki pants, and work boots while on job sites. And now forty-one-year-old Bradley Frye was the first challenger Winston had faced in nearly twelve years as sheriff, and something about seeing his own much younger face on the campaign posters in Marie's car told Winston that he was probably going to lose. Bradley Frye had used his inheritance to make a name for himself as a businessman, and over the summer he'd papered the county with billboards, yard signs, newspaper ads, and even a television commercial. The election was just a week away, and Winston knew it was all coming down to money; Bradley Frye had it, and Winston didn't, and that made him even more afraid of losing, especially when he considered what the loss of their income and health insurance would mean for Marie.

He'd been worried about her being too tired to pick up the posters and flyers after her treatment, and he'd asked her not to do it, but he wondered now if he'd only been afraid to continue involving her in what he had come to believe was a losing venture. He felt shame creep over him, and he tried his best to push it down and away from him in the same manner he'd learned to vanquish his grief and fear.

But those things—shame and grief and fear—still overtook him sometimes and fell upon him like a weight that wanted to remind him of its heaviness at the very moment he forgot to stoop beneath it. He found that the weight kept him hidden from people, certainly from Marie and Colleen. From the moment his daughter was born, Winston had wanted to make himself known to her in ways his father had never made himself known to Winston, but he knew he had failed because at that very moment he and Colleen were strangers to one another, all of them—Marie included—alone and lonely in their pain.

It seemed cruel and ironic, but over the past few years Winston had dreamed of himself as his father, a man who'd left this world when he was only seventy-two. If Winston's lifetime were to roll along the same track as his father's, that would mean he now had twelve years left, which on some

days seemed like too much time, and on other days seemed like not nearly enough.

Winston had a habit, each year around his birthday, of trying to conjure his father's face at that same age. How old did that man seem in his mind's eye? Older than Winston, for certain. Probably wiser too.

Sometimes, in his quiet moments, Winston's mind would flash back to the last days at his father's bedside. His parents had lived their whole lives in the house he'd grown up in at the end of an unpaved, wooded road in a town called Gastonia on the other side of North Carolina. The house had sat at the base of Crowder's Mountain, and while his father was dying Winston and his younger brother had set up a hospital bed in his parents' bedroom by a picture window that looked out over the trees. It had been fall, an October very much like this one, in fact, and they had left the windows open to allow the scents of sweat and medicine and soiled clothes and bedding to leak from the sickroom out into the chilly world. But something else had happened: the comforting rot and waste and piney reek of the forest had found its way inside, so much so that for the rest of Winston's life, whenever he smelled pine, he was forced to confront the loss of his father with the clean, heavy nostalgia of a forest doing its work to live and die and live again.

But he still had that dream of being his father, and he'd had it again tonight before the sound he and Marie had heard had woken them both. In the dream, his father is in the hospital bed back in their house in Gastonia, his hands clenched around the sheet where it is pulled up to his chest. Winston is watching his father sleep and drift toward death, his dry tongue occasionally moving across his dry lips. Winston reaches for a cloth on the bedside table and dampens it with water. He passes the wet cloth over his father's mouth. In the dream, Winston looks down at his own hands and sees his father's, and then he realizes his hands are closed around the sheet, and he is lying in his father's sickbed, and he is dying alone.

Would Colleen sit at his bedside like he'd sat at his father's? Winston wondered if the old man had cared for him as much as Winston cared for his daughter. Surely he did, but it seemed impossible to Winston, impossible that his own father had been interested in or capable of feeling this love that could only be described as debilitating. It embarrassed him to think of his father loving him that much. And why was he thinking of it? What was he afraid of on these nights when he saw his father's hands as his

own? Colleen sitting or not sitting by his bedside, swabbing or not swabbing his chapped lips with cool water? Was he afraid of the hole his passing might leave in her life?

Colleen was just twenty-six, but she had already lost a child, Winston and Marie landing in Dallas too late to even lay eyes on his body. What do they even do with a baby that never drew breath? They hadn't attended a funeral, and Colleen had never mentioned one. He'd been too afraid to ask her; he didn't know if Marie had asked her, and he was ashamed of that. He'd spent so many nights since lying in bed, hurting for Colleen and her lost child, his grandson. Now the thought of his or Marie's passing as compounding that hurt was too much for him, and for a moment he found himself wishing he and Marie had never had Colleen, had not created this life they would hurt for, this life that would hurt for them in return.

Jesus Christ, Winston, he thought, why are you even thinking about this right now? Was it Colleen's losing the baby? Was it Marie's being sick again, this time worse than before? Or was it the plane they'd heard—or at least the plane they thought they'd heard? The specter of a fiery crash flashed through Winston's mind with no sound, only the images of flames and the spinning down of huge engines. But it was just an airplane coming in low, he thought. Or a dream. Maybe he and Marie had dreamed the same thing, and he would arrive at the dark airport and find it just as quiet and empty as his side of the bed back home.

THE DAY BEFORE Halloween and not as cold as it would be, but cold enough to send the vacationers scrambling back to work and to school and to their lives somewhere outside Oak Island. Even the soft-spoken, unassuming Canadians—the ones who hadn't headed as far south as Myrtle Beach, whose wives had combed the autumn beaches in one-piece bathing suits while looking for sand dollars, and whose husbands had kept the municipal golf course open into the middle of the month—had all gone home.

The island, thirteen miles long and four miles wide at its widest and sparsely dotted with old single-family homes, fishing shacks, vacation houses, and trailers, was heavily wooded and quiet. It ran east to west off the southeastern elbow of North Carolina. To people who lived there, it felt like a place that had either gone undiscovered or had been forgotten by the rest of the state, that feeling growing so strong as to be nearly palpable as

the island changed seasons and a blanket of unperturbed silence settled over it. As fall turned toward winter, the island always seemed to grow smaller, more remote, more insular.

There was no clock in Marie's car, and Winston had forgotten his watch where he usually left it beside his wallet and keys on the counter, but it was nearing 4:00 A.M. by the time he headed east down Oak Island Drive. Most of the businesses—a fudge shop, a T-shirt store, a pancake house, all the motels—had been shuttered for the off-season. The few places that had remained open for the winter had been closed for hours. After he and Marie had left Gastonia in 1963 and moved to Oak Island, they had joked that the island rolled up its sidewalks at 6:00 P.M., which was ironic only because there were no sidewalks. Winston thought then and he still thought now that the island would make an ideal place for someone to hide, and perhaps that's what he'd been doing all these years.

As he drove across the bridge above the waterway, Winston watched the light from the Caswell Beach lighthouse at the far eastern end of the island strafe the waterway in perfect increments. It flashed in his rearview mirror, and for a moment he could both see and feel its light in his eyes. When Marie's car climbed to the top of the bridge, the beacon light from the tiny airport appeared through the distant trees on his left. He had been at this exact spot on the bridge at night what must have been a million times over the years, and each time he felt like he was leaving the bright gleam of the lighthouse for the tiny spot of the beacon light, a light that was overwhelmed by the darkness of the mainland that waited for him in the woods across the water.

When Colleen was a little girl, both when they reached the apex of this bridge and the even taller and more magnificent drawbridge that spanned the Cape Fear River, her voice would come from the backseat, asking, "What would happen if we fell from here?" and Winston would consider what would cause someone to topple from such a height to the water below. Suicide? A vehicle fire? A bridge collapse? He pictured himself and Colleen holding hands and climbing over the guardrail before leaping into the still waters. No matter how many times she asked, he always answered her question with the same response: "I would save you."

But as she grew older her questions became more particular: "What would happen if we drove off the bridge?" or "What would happen if our car flipped over the side?" The more questions she asked, the more her fear

became corporeal, and she began to construct detailed stories of the tragedies that would await them. Winston always knew the answers to the questions she had, because he had trained—made all his deputies train, as a matter of fact—for water rescues. The county was dotted with water: lakes, canals, creeks, and waterways disguised as rivers. They had encountered submerged vehicles before, and he'd pictured himself seat-belted into the driver's seat of a car upside down underwater, Colleen in the backseat. There would be about thirty seconds before the interior filled with water. He would remove his seat belt, reach back, and do the same to Colleen's. He would pull her into the front seat, and, as water poured into the car, he would use the spring-triggered pin on his key chain (he made Marie and all his deputies carry them) to break the window and climb out. He would remind himself to follow the bubbles to the surface, Colleen clutched in his arms, his eyes searching for the light above him while his lungs waited for air.

But he didn't explain all of this to Colleen when they passed over bridges during her childhood. Instead, he would look at her in the rearview mirror when she was young enough to sit in the backseat, or he would turn his head to look at her when she was old enough to sit beside him, the water through her window stretching out below them beneath the bridge, and he would always say the same thing: "Don't look down, don't look back. Just look where we're going."

WHEN WINSTON PULLED Marie's car into the otherwise empty gravel parking lot at the airport, the only thing he found waiting for him was a two-door white Datsun with North Carolina plates. It surprised him to find a car parked here this late, but he wasn't concerned. Perhaps it had broken down on Long Beach Road and someone had helped the driver push it into the lot before giving them a ride home. Perhaps someone had parked it here before piloting a private jet, although, given the make of the car, that seemed unlikely. Perhaps it was just abandoned.

He was not driving his cruiser so he did not have his standard-issue flashlight, but he cupped his hands around the Datsun's driver's-side window and peered into the car's interior. There was nothing to see aside from a crumpled pack of crackers on the passenger's seat, an open cassette case of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* on the center console, and an empty Styrofoam cup of what looked to have been coffee resting beside it. A

child's seat was installed in the backseat, and an unzipped gym bag rested beside it, but from what Winston could see through the window it didn't hold anything interesting. This car could have belonged to Colleen or certainly to someone her age, and the contents revealed no great clues as to who owned it or why it was parked in an empty airport parking lot in the middle of the night.

Winston took his walkie-talkie from his belt and radioed Rudy.

"How's it look out there?" Rudy asked.

"Quiet," Winston said. "But there's a vehicle in the lot. If you'd run the plate for me."

"Of course," he said.

Winston stepped around to the back of the car and read out the license plate.

"Back in a second," Rudy said.

Winston slipped the walkie-talkie onto his belt and walked around to the front of the car. He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the Datsun's fender. He looked toward the trees on the other side of the runway, his eyes searching for movement or a beam of light or whatever it was that could have made the sound that had woken him and Marie, but there didn't seem to be anything to see. His nose caught the cool, swampy scent of the waterway, just a mile or so to the south, and he thought of Marie on the other side of the water, lying awake in bed and waiting to hear the noise of his keys turning the lock on the front door. He thought of the sound they'd heard that had jolted them from sleep; the way it seemed to vibrate along the roof of the house, the deep hum it had sent through his body. He didn't know what else to do while he waited to hear back from Rudy, so he set off across the grass-covered field toward the runway.

THE LOT WHERE Winston waited sat closest to the south end of the runway, where two white lights marked either side of the landing strip, and Winston knew that if what they'd heard was an airplane then this was where it had touched down. The runway was made of grass—it would not be paved for a couple more years—and it was useless to search it for tracks that this potential airplane or any other may have left behind. The expanse of runway stretched ahead of him toward a stand of pine trees that rose out of the dark night a couple thousand feet ahead. Another set of lights marked the middle of the runway on either side, and a third set illuminated its

northern end, but these lights were designed to be seen from the air, not from below. The sun would be up in a matter of hours, but Winston didn't want to wait for the sun. He knew that if something was hiding from him there at the end of the runway he would have to go there to find it.

He nearly jumped when his walkie-talkie crackled to life with the sound of Rudy's voice.

"Got it," he said.

Winston slipped the radio from his belt and held it to his mouth. "Go ahead."

"It's a 1978 Datsun registered to a Rodney Edward Bellamy. Want his birth date and address?"

"Hang on to them. Won't do me any good out here," Winston said, not because he didn't need the information, but because he already knew it. Rodney Bellamy had gone to school with Colleen. He was the son of Ed Bellamy, one of the only Black teachers in Brunswick County, and one of the people who'd stood up against harassment and violence during school integration. Bellamy was a history teacher, but he was also a de facto civil rights leader, and he and Winston had worked together just as many times as they'd butted heads. A decade before, Ed had served as the face of integration in the county schools, and Winston had done everything he could to ensure that the county didn't have the kind of violence that Wilmington had experienced, but of course there was violence. Winston couldn't stop it all, especially when he knew that half his deputies hadn't wanted their own kids sitting alongside Black children, and they especially didn't want men like Ed Bellamy explaining the law to them.

Winston agreed with the stances Bellamy had taken over the years. But he also knew the importance, especially in a place like Brunswick County, of walking that fine line of legal authority and cultural memory. Ed Bellamy understood it too, meaning he understood that what people like Winston believed in private and what they were willing to say in public were not always the same thing. Ed Bellamy was bold and outspoken because he believed he had to be to get things done. Winston was deliberate and careful for the exact same reason.

"Owner lives over in the Grove," Rudy said.

"Yep," Winston said. "Thanks, Rudy."

He slipped the walkie-talkie back onto his belt and then he set off toward the end of the runway, the sound of his footsteps falling silently on

the ground beneath him.

Later, when he would think back on this moment, Winston would realize that he had been able to sense the enormity of the airplane before he even arrived and saw it for the first time. It sat sideways at the very end of the runway. Its silvery body was perhaps twenty yards long, and its wingspan easily thirty. Up close, it shimmered beneath the faint moonlight like a mirror, the two huge propellers on either wing stilled like closed eyes, as if the airplane had been sleeping when Winston found it, the cargo doors on its right side thrown open like a breathing mouth that sucked in air. Winston did not know much about airplanes aside from his brief brushes with them while serving in Korea, but he knew this airplane was old—perhaps a World War II relic—and that it had been too large for this runway, and that was why it sat in the position it did, a quarter of the way into a full turn that the pilot must have made to keep it from plunging into the trees just beyond the runway's end, the rear landing gear snapped in half and the tail resting awkwardly on the ground.

Winston unholstered his pistol and stood with it down by his side.

“Hello!” he called. He waited, but all he could hear was what seemed like the sharp, tinny silence of the airplane's presence. “Anybody in there?”

He only raised his gun when the bouncing beam of a flashlight caught his eye. Someone was coming across the grassy field from the parking lot on his right. Winston turned in that direction, and that's when his eyes fell on the body of a Black man lying on the grass alongside the runway. In the scattered beam of the approaching light, Winston saw that the front of the man's shirt had been blown wide open and his chest was dark and damp with blood. The man's eyes were open, but it was clear to Winston that he was dead.

He trained his pistol on the approaching flashlight, and he wondered who had shot the man on the ground in front of him, wondered if that same person was approaching him now. He was surprised by the night's turn of events, but in that moment nothing in him was scared. He was simply ready.

Behind the beam of the flashlight, Winston was able to make out the darkened face of thirty-four-year-old Captain Glenn Haste. He'd worked for the sheriff's department for almost thirteen years, and during that time Winston had never seen Glenn's face reveal an ounce of fear, but now his eyes were struck with panic. Winston lowered his pistol, allowed himself to exhale. He realized that his hands were shaking.

“Jesus, Glenn,” he said. “I almost shot you.”

“Well, Sheriff, I’m glad you didn’t.” Glenn lowered his eyes and his flashlight to the dead man on the ground between them, and Winston suddenly understood that the fear on Glenn’s face had not come from a fear of his being shot, but from the shock of stumbling upon what appeared to be a shooting in the line of duty. Glenn kept his beam on the man’s chest, the blood so fresh as to glisten in the light. He raised his eyes to Winston.

“Sheriff?” he said.

Winston, understanding the look on Glenn’s face and the implied question in his voice, took an unconscious step away from the body. He looked down at the dead man, and a long-buried shame and terror washed over him.

“No,” Winston said, nodding his head toward the body. “No, this wasn’t me. I found him here. He was down when I got to him.”

He tried to slip his pistol back into its holster, but he discovered that his hands were still shaking, and he had to reach across his body to hold the holster with his free hand so the pistol’s barrel could find it. He looked down, saw that Glenn’s flashlight gleamed in the dead man’s open, unseeing eyes.

“No sign of a weapon,” Glenn said. “Know who he is?”

“I think so,” Winston said. “I had Rudy run the plates on that Datsun in the parking lot.”

Winston knelt down beside the body and checked for a pulse. He didn’t find one. He patted the man’s pockets, and then he turned him slightly at the hips and felt his back pockets until he found his wallet. He slipped it out and removed the man’s driver’s license.

“Yep,” he said. He looked up at Glenn. “Rodney Bellamy.” He looked at the license again. “Twenty-six years old. Lives over in the Grove.”

“Ed Bellamy’s son,” Glenn said.

“Yep,” Winston said again. He looked inside the wallet, found a couple of twenties and a few smaller bills. Bellamy didn’t seem to have been robbed. He slipped the driver’s license back inside and stuffed it into Bellamy’s front pocket.

He didn’t know what it would mean to find Ed Bellamy’s son shot dead on the runway in the middle of the night, but he knew it would mean something. Winston respected Ed Bellamy, and he feared him a little too.

Both were reasons to dread making the phone call to tell him what had happened to his son.

“You okay, Sheriff?” Glenn asked.

Winston looked up at Glenn, and then he looked down at his hands. He clenched them into fists to hide their trembling. “Yeah,” Winston said. “Yeah. You just surprised me coming up on me like that.” He peered over Glenn’s shoulder as if he were looking for anyone else who might be coming across the field. He looked back at Glenn. “What even made you come out here? Rudy get ahold of you?”

“Marie called,” Glenn said.

“Marie called you? At home?”

“Yes.”

“What did she say?”

“She said you thought a plane might’ve crashed.” Glenn looked away as if what he was about to say next was going to embarrass both of them. “She said she didn’t want you out here by yourself. I told her I’d come have a look around.”

Winston sighed and shook his head. He wanted to be angry with Marie for calling Glenn, for overstepping and making Winston look like he couldn’t handle his job on his own, but everything that had happened—the plane crash, almost shooting Glenn, finding Rodney Bellamy’s body—crowded out his anger so that he had hardly conjured an ember of rage before it snuffed itself out.

Glenn smiled as if the embarrassment were behind them both. “I also wanted to come out because I’ve never seen a plane crash before.”

Winston turned to his left and pointed at the end of the runway. “Well, it’s your lucky night, I guess.”

Glenn raised his flashlight and aimed the beam past Winston. “There it is,” Glenn said.

Winston’s eyes followed the beam of light where it shone on the plane’s body, the open cargo doors, the frozen propellers. “Yep, there it is,” he said. “Not much of a crash, but it’s a whole lot of plane.”

“Looks empty to me,” Glenn said.

“We’re still going to have to clear it,” Winston said.

GUNS RAISED, THE two men made their way toward the plane. They stopped at the open cargo doors in the middle of the fuselage, and Glenn knocked on

the exterior with his flashlight. There was an echo as if he had banged on the bottom of an enormous, upturned metal canoe. The nose of the airplane, propped up by the wheels beneath either wing, loomed above Winston on his right, but the fuselage narrowed greatly toward the end where it rested on its tail, the rear landing gear having completely collapsed.

The aircraft seemed simultaneously powerful and frail, and Winston could not believe that something so large could take to the sky nor that something so powerful could be grounded so easily. He reached out and placed his open hand on the airplane's body, nearly expecting to feel the rise of its breathing. He smacked it twice as if patting the belly of a horse before climbing into the saddle. "Hello," he called out. "Brunswick County Sheriff's Department." He nodded at Glenn, who raised his pistol, pointed his flashlight into the darkness of the aircraft's interior, and stepped up inside. Winston, his pistol also raised, stood by the door and listened to the creaking of the airplane's body as Glenn's footsteps shuffled around inside.

"It's empty," Glenn called out.

Winston holstered his pistol and stepped through the door.

The seats had all been removed inside the plane, and Winston stood in the middle of the fuselage and took in the scene: the pilots' chairs in the front; the long empty expanse as the floor stretched back toward him; the faint moonlight dusting the windows.

"It's empty now," Winston said, "but I'd be willing to bet it wasn't when it touched down." He moved his flashlight around the inside of the plane, its beam passing over every surface.

"What do you want to do?" Glenn asked.

"Get back in the bed and go to sleep."

Glenn laughed. "Me too."

"Let's go ahead and fingerprint everything up in the cockpit," Winston said. "And the doors inside and outside too. And then we'll call the morgue."

"You got it," Glenn said.

Winston stayed inside the aircraft and sent Glenn back to his patrol car for an extra flashlight and one of the crime scene kits they all kept in their trunks. While he was gone, Winston stood in the plane's open cargo doors and stared out at Rodney Bellamy's body. It was rarely the case, but everything that had happened that night had surprised Winston.

Once Glenn returned to the plane, he handed over the evidence kit, and Winston made his way toward the cockpit, moving uphill against the backward tilt of the plane. He dusted the cockpit controls carefully, paying special attention to the spots on the yokes where he knew thumbs and fingers would have been clenched tight as the plane came in over the trees not long ago. He moved to the instrument panel. Glenn held the flashlight while Winston worked. When he finished, he unspooled the tape and placed it over the spots where he believed good prints were most likely, but when he lifted the strips of tape and held them to Glenn's light, not a single fingerprint was revealed. He tried again, but there was nothing to see.

"Maybe a damn ghost flew it," Glenn said.

"Or they wore gloves and wiped everything down," Winston said. "But there's got to be a fingerprint somewhere in this airplane."

If they found prints, Winston's office had no way of running them. He'd have to send them off to Wilmington, if not Raleigh. Even when the FBI stepped in—which Winston knew would happen no matter how long he put off calling them—it would be days before the fingerprints revealed anything. News of the airplane's appearance and Bellamy's murder would spread quickly, and Winston knew that everyone in the county would watch how the sheriff's office handled it, and then they would vote. Election day was just a week away, and Winston's chances to influence the opinion of his constituents were running out. But, for now, he had all the time he needed out here on the runway in the middle of the night, Glenn and him inside an airplane that was empty but for the sounds of their footsteps echoing against the metal walls. They worked slowly. There was no reason to rush. No one knew what had happened but them. The airplane had already landed, and whoever had landed it had disappeared. The only person who might have seen them was Rodney Bellamy, and he wasn't talking.