



WHEN THE
BUDDHA
MET
BUBBA

A NOVEL BY RICHARD "DIXIE" HARTWELL

Chapter 1

I lost everything a man could lose. Just a few months ago, I had a real nice trailer over in Plantation Estates Mobile Home Park. But now the bank has it and everything else except my answering machine. I hid it from them just in case I ever got a phone again. You never know when you might get an important call. Sometimes when I get drunk I play old messages just to remind myself how it all came crashing down.

Beep! “Mr. Strayhorne, this is Sand Mountain Electric. Your electricity will be turned off today unless a payment is made. Thank you.”

Beep! “Billy Bob Strayhorne, this is Southern Bell. You are three months behind on your payments and your telephone will be disconnected today unless we receive payment right away. Thank you and have a nice day.”

Beep! “Mr. Billy Stray...Strayhorne, this is Scottsboro Water and Garbage, we haven't received a payment from you in two months. Your water will be shut off at the end of this business day. Thank You.”

Beep! “Bubba, you can kiss my ass goodbye. You know I love you but I can't live with you anymore. I'm taking the cat and the pot-bellied pig. You can keep that beer-drinking, flea-bitten dog of yours. You two deserve each other. By the way, this is your former, soon to be ex second wife, in case you didn't

know. I'm gonna live with my momma en'em over in Fort Payne until my Uncle Walker can get the papers filed for the divorce. Don't call me and don't come by. I swear to God if you do I'll have my cousin Wayne at the Sheriff's office haul your ass to jail for wife abuse and it don't matter that there weren't none or not. I'll tell them there was and you know he'll believe me. I'll be praying for your sorry ass, 'cause if anyone needs it you do."

Us Southerners have a way of sticking it to one another but we always have to add "Thank you" or "Bless your heart" or "I'll be prayin' for ya." It's an unwritten code. After only three months of marriage, my second wife, Ginger, was so angry at me you'd think we'd spent a whole year or two together.

Hers was the last message I got. For two months I lived in my truck that - thank God- came with a camper shell when I bought it. I slept in it last November and December and nearly froze to death 'cause it didn't have a heater. The Sunshine Mortgage Company that held the note on it waited until the end of December before they came and repoed my truck.

With my ass in a sling, my life was turning into a genuine country song.

My second cousin on my mother's side, Skeeter Coker, is a big-shot manager over at Unclaimed Baggage. He offered me a job after my mother called his mother and she told him he had to help me 'cause we was kin. You

may have heard of Unclaimed Baggage in Scottsboro, Alabama. It's the only thing Scottsboro has ever been famous for except for the Scottsboro Boys' trial of nine black men back in 1931, though we didn't call them "black" back then. Unclaimed Baggage has been on *60 Minutes* and *Good Morning America*. Doyle and Sue Owens opened it about thirty-six years ago. They started buying luggage that was left on buses and airplanes sight unseen. They'd open them up and sell whatever was in them. People came from all over North Alabama and bought this stuff for a dime on the dollar. There were always colorful stories floating around about how people would buy a suitcase full of somebody's old clothes and find a diamond ring or a hundred dollar bill.

Skeeter didn't want to give me the j-o-b. He's hated my guts ever since I peed in his gas tank for no other reason than he got a car before I did and I was the oldest and it wasn't right. It was just a Pacer but it still made me ill at him. Anyway, I was sitting in The Black Cat Bar and Grill downing a few cold ones and putting quarters in the jukebox. I listened to song after song telling me what a piece of shit I was for losing my woman, job, truck and camper when Skeeter sees me going down for the third time in my beer. I tried to hide from him but he saw me anyways.

“Cuz, you don’t look so good,” he said with a grin as he pulled me by the hair off the bar. I reckon I went to sleep there for just a minute or two. “I saw yer mamma the other day in Food Land and she told me what’s goin’ on with ya. You really been living in your truck the last few months? Damn, that’s bad. Guess you better come work for me at the store.”

Skeeter’s huge. He weighs about a thousand pounds and played guard for our high school football team. He still wears his high-school football letter jacket when a bunch of us get together to play cards even though it is about three hundred sizes too small for him. He wears his hair so short it’s hard to tell if he’s a fat ex-Marine or an escapee from a mental institution where they shave your head so they can attach electric shock wires up to you. You know how some people’s personality fills up a room when they come in? Well, he didn’t have a personality but he sure could fill up a room with his big mouth, boasting about his important position at Unclaimed Baggage. I mean he is the most famous person any of us know but he shouldn’t keep rubbing it in.

“Here’s my offer,” Skeeter said, “You come work for me as a sorter and I’ll give you \$6.00 an hour and you can sleep in the back room until you get on yer feet. There’ll be no drinkin’ or druggin’ or whorin’ around back there. The

Lord doesn't like it and I don't either. If I catch you doin' any of that, then that's it. Got it?"

"Uh-huh."

"You want the job, then come in first thing Monday morning. We'll find you some work clothes at the store. This whole black T-shirt," he said pulling it until it was stretched all out of shape, "and jeans and Dingo boots thing has got to go. And get you a haircut. You look like a damn hippie."

I could barely get in a word edgewise so I just said, "Thanks, Cuz, I'll take it. I don't have much choice. I won't give you any trouble. I've had all of that I can handle for a little while. One thing though. Could you give me a little walking around money? I'll pay you back when I get my first check."

"Sure Bubba, here's twenty. Don't drink it all up. See you Monday morning bright and early. And for God's sake go to church this Sunday and make your momma proud. Act like you got some raising."

So now thanks to my momma and Skeeter's momma I live in a small room in the back of Scottsboro's most famous tourist attraction. I work with Chigger Suggs, my best friend since elementary school. Chigger is a small guy, who kinda looks like the kid who played the banjo in one of my all-time, favorite

movies, *Deliverance*. You know, that's the movie with Burt Reynolds that scared city folk half to death. At least it kept them away from here, for fear we were all inbred freaks chasing after our sisters and first cousins. Chigger's daddy gave him his nickname because he was always pestering him and has this weird little head.

Baggage arrives by the ton-load from nearly every airline in the world and boy howdy let me tell ya' people try to take some weird ass shit on a plane. Last week we got a leaf blower, two dust busters, three toilet plungers, and a car bumper from a 57 Chevy and a suit of armor, the kind Knights wore. We also get the stuff security confiscates—fourteen cans of WD 40, a machete, and six mouse traps. It all comes here.

We sort through everything and make sure we find the good stuff and separate it from the crap. What we don't put on the floor, Skeeter's momma comes and gets and loads up in her golf cart because that's all she can drive since she got her license revoked for doing eighty-five in a fifteen mile an hour school zone. Jimmy Ray, the cop that pulled her over, asked her where she was going in such a hurry. She told him The First Church of Nazarene was having a huge yard sale that morning and she wanted to be the first to get there. When he went to sit in his car to write her a ticket she tore off like a bat

out of hell. He went after her but then gave her a few minutes to load the things she bought before taking her to the courthouse. Sometimes she has to make six or seven trips to Unclaimed Baggage just to haul it all back to the trailer park where she and Skeeter live. She sells it each August at the world's largest yard sale. Boy you should see it. It's like all the K-Mart's and Wal-Mart's, and Dollar General stores exploded at the same time and it all landed on the four hundred mile stretch that it runs from Florida to Ohio and people descend on it like a herd of deer on a salt-lick. You can get thirty or forty pairs of socks for about two bucks.

Spring was coming on and I'd been working at Unclaimed Baggage for three months when I decided to go to Henagar to visit my first wife, Shirley. It was Saturday and I thought it was time to try and see her and my son who goes over there on the weekends to fix anything that's broke. I was pretty sure my boy's birthday was coming up, so I was going to give him a twenty dollar bill as a gift. I'd finally saved just enough money to do that and buy me a very used pickup.

Robert Earl, my second cousin, drove me. Now you'd like my cousin, dumb as a sack of hammers, but he's a good ole boy. He's blind in one eye and can barely see out of the other one so when he's driving he hunkers down on the

steering wheel with his bad eye shut and his good eye bulging out like he was taking aim at the road. In daylight, he scares passing drivers so much they have to pull off the road and wait for Cyclops to barrel through before they're composed enough to keep driving.

As soon as we arrived, Shirley flew through the front porch and into the front yard.

"Told you the last time you came up here drunk as Cooter Brown not to set foot on my property unless you were coming to apologize to me and Lucius. Now you get the hell out, ya hear? We don't want nothing to do with your sorry ass. Who's that?" She pointed to Robert Earl who was leaning against the truck and petting my dog, Blue, who had his head stuck out the window.

"That's just my cousin Robert Earl. He's carrying me over to Wheels for Steals so I can buy me a used truck. I wanted to come by and say hello and give Lucius some money for his birthday. I reckon it's coming up soon, ain't it?"

She sneered at us as she wiped her hands on the apron my mother made for her as a wedding present.

“Sorry about the last time I visited,” I said. “I know I shouldn’t oughta done it. I was drunk and had no business talking to you like I did. Will you accept my heartfelt apology?”

I was terrible-acting that day. My second wife had just left me, I’d lost all my stuff and I was having a real good pity party. Sometimes I get mean when I’m drunk on hard liquor and that was one of those times.

“Alright then. I reckon you’re forgiven.” She threw up her hands and pursed her lips. “Lucius went to the store to get me my smokes. You’ll have to ask his forgiveness when he gets back if you’re still here.”

“Mighty kind of you,” I said.

She lit up a Marlboro. “I guess all you rednecks have to drive a truck? It’s like the law or something. But what the hell do you need a truck for? You don’t own anything.”

“To haul stuff.”

“What stuff?”

“The stuff I’d have to haul if I had a truck to haul it in.”

She rolled her eyes. “Get the fuck outta here. You never did make a lick of sense.”

With my first wife, Shirley Crowe, what you see is what I got. She was the prettiest girl in high school with a mouth like Chris Rock, and a body like Jessica Simpson. She's got eyes as green as an old coke bottle and hair that looks like Marilyn Monroe's. Her momma said she didn't have much of a brain under that hair or she'd never have married me. She didn't think much of my natural intelligence either.

On our wedding day Shirley told me her momma whispered in her ear as she was walking down the aisle, "I'm telling you, you shouldn't marry that boy. Like the country song says, 'When it comes to brains, he got the short end of the stick.'"

Shirley and I met in high school. I was one of those black sheep, outcast guys who didn't really fit in anywhere. I wasn't a jock or a geek. I guess you'd call me an outlaw— I smoked, drank and screwed around. Shirley was raised in a strict Church of Christ family that tried to discourage their members from having sex because it looked too much like dancing, which they are really against. They wouldn't even let their own church have a piano or nothing. They said Christians were supposed to "make a joyful noise" and boy could Shirley do just that in the back of my old Ford Econoline van.

On the other hand, my family was members of The Full Gospel Charismatic Second Antioch Church of the Pentecost or Holy-Rollers for short. We had guitars, drums, tambourines, and an electric organ. About half of us got drunk on Saturday night and screwed and danced our asses off and almost never felt guilty because we knew we were going to get washed in the blood of Jesus on Sunday morning. Our reverend Hawk Hawkins always told us not to tell anyone that we spoke in tongues and handled snakes and drank strychnine ever once in while, because he said he didn't want a bunch of weirdoes come to church just to gawk at us.

My people are all from Sand Mountain where they still do that stuff. But I ain't set foot in a church since Shirley and I got married on graduation day. We missed our graduation ceremony because she was already showing. We got married on that day instead 'cause her daddy was real fond of her and his shotgun but wasn't too keen on me. Six months later we had our son Lucius Gene and the very next day she asked for a die-vorce. She said she waited until then 'cause she didn't want to bring a bastard child into this world. That sort of thing still counted back then. I haven't been around much ever since.

Just as Robert Earl and I were about to leave and go truck huntin', my son came driving up. Lucius is twenty-one or twenty-two years old. I'm not real

sure which. He's a good-looking boy, if I do say so myself. He is tall and slender. His momma says he works out real regular. He has brown hair like his momma's, well I mean like hers before she dyed it a color not found in nature. He has a temper like my daddy's.

"What the hell you doing here old man? I thought momma told you not to come around here." He started towards me with his fist doubled up.

"Now wait a minute, son I was just..."

"I don't give a good goddamn what you were just. And don't call me 'son'. You're just a sperm donor. You'd have to be a father to have the right to call me that and you gave up that right a long time ago. Get your beer drinking, sorry ass in the truck and leave us be."

"Now listen here, you're not too big for me to whup. You don't talk to me like that; I'll kick your ass all over Henagar, goddamnit!"

Shirley shouted, "Bubba, you better git now!" She looked at Lucius, "Son, come on in here. We don't want the police called on us again."

After giving me a sideways glance, he said, "Did you apologize to her for the last time?"

“That’s between me and your ma.” I pulled the twenty out of my billfold and wadded it up and threw it at him. “Happy goddamn birthday, you ungrateful little bastard.”

“I guess that’s what a son is who doesn’t have a father. Screw you, old man.” He went inside and me and Robert Earl went to Fort Payne and drank the whole weekend away.

When I finally stumbled back to my room in Unclaimed Baggage early Sunday morning I could see that somebody had moved stuff around. There were suitcases piled up everywhere. Then I remembered on Tuesday, we got in this old Samsonite that looked to be a hundred years old. It was imitation snake skin and faded yellow. It had travel stickers all over it from Paris, Rome, New York, Istanbul, Greece, Korea, China, Japan and Jerusalem. It was wrapped with duct tape and a bungee cord. I mean it, who travels with a piece of crap suitcase like that? I started to throw it in the garbage bin behind the store where we toss the shit that even Skeeter’s momma can’t sell. I don’t know what compelled me, but I took the old, beat up suitcase and put it in my room with about a hundred others.

Later that night I bought a bottle of Southern Comfort to ease off the hangover. I shrugged on one of Jesse Jackson’s fancy suits. Last week, we got

two suitcases full of them. Don't ask me why the airlines couldn't return these. He had his name on everything including his dang underwear so it wasn't that they didn't know who they belonged to. I grabbed football helmet that was in a duffle bag. I walked over to my little frigerator to get Blue a beer, when the room started shaking all of a sudden like. The suitcase with all the stickers fell right on the top of my head. It would have knocked me out cold if I hadn't had on that helmet. All the lights went off and Blue and me was just standing there in the dark, latched on to each other, when this voice said, "Trust Me."

First thing I thought was it must be Chigger and one of his inbred friends just messin' with me.

"Alright, Chigger, you asshole, come on out. I'm going to whup your ass, you pesky little son-of-a-bitch." I pointed my flashlight and pointed out into the store but there wasn't anybody there.

"TRUST ME!"—The voice screamed. I swear on my momma's head a bright light started seeping out of the suitcase. My first thought was that I'd stumbled upon a talking bomb. If them terrorists could make a shoe explode, then they could probably make a suitcase light up and talk.

My hands were shaking so hard that I could barely take off the bungee cords and unwrap the duct tape holding it together.

After I pulled off all the tape I heard bells ringing. The lamp on my bedroom table got really bright. I lifted the lid and green light damn near blinded me for about thirty or so seconds. I rubbed my eyeballs. Scared as I was I searched its contents.

Now what I saw didn't make any sense. All that was in that suitcase was a bunch of pictures. There was this one of a huge snake that coiled around itself; it was brown, white, yellow and rust. In the center was a circle with other circles around it and the snake's head was touching the center circle.

Under it was another picture of a stained glass window like the ones you see in rich people's churches. It was made up of these circles of roses with one rose in the middle and was red and green and white. Under it was a picture of a painting that looked like an Indian drawing of some kind and it was black and white and under that was a picture of something that looked real Oriental.

I looked at each one and the more I looked the more nervous I got. I was afraid that some demons might be lurking around. I hated demons all my life because I saw our pastor cast them out right in church many a time. The poor souls who were possessed would carry on, screaming and pitching fits—kinda like an angry drunk but with a better vocabulary.

I finally turned each picture over and saw there was writing on the back. The first said—*A Dreaming from Australian Aborigine*, on the second—*Rose Window in Grace Cathedral*, the third one said *Navaho Sand Painting* and the last one said *A Buddhist Mandala*. Below that one was written: *Whoever finds these paintings is ready to take a journey*. It was signed “Pu Tai.”

Chapter 2

I was dizzy and light-headed. The bells or chimes or whatever had stopped. My table lamp flickered, and then stayed on while the light inside the suitcase went out. Blue—who was hiding under my cot—whined softly as the room shook. I looked at the crate that served as my nightstand and saw a shot glass filled with whiskey ripple like in that dinosaur movie. Somehow I knew Blue and I weren't the only ones in the room.

I was terrified one second, then relaxed and drowsy the next. I dropped into bed and fell into the deepest sleep I've ever had.

When I woke up the next morning, my first thought was that I'd had one hell of a dream. I even considered tapering off the hard stuff and just drinking Blue's beer.

As I washed my face in the sink, I saw a familiar open suitcase reflected in my bathroom mirror. I swallowed hard and blinked, but it was still there. My heart thumped in my chest and I was scared, but I knew what I had to do. I ran back into my room and looked inside the open suitcase. There weren't any lights or sounds, but the weird pictures were still there. With a shudder, I closed the suitcase back up and wrapped it tight with some Alabama chrome

(that's what we call duct tape in the south 'cause so many of our cars are held together with it).

When I finished with the tape, I tied the bungee cords around the suitcase and slid the whole mess under my bed.

All the stress I'd been under must have made me hallucinate. I needed a little R & R from my J-O-B so I could get my nerves calmed down.

Anxiety runs in my family. My momma was always worrying and fidgeting and my dad drank like a back-sliding Baptist preacher. I was getting to be like both of them. As a matter of fact that's how I came to have my beer-drinking Blue Tick Hound. Blue was my daddy's dog, but he couldn't keep both of them in beer so he brought him over to my house about two years ago. That was the last I saw him until we were at Morris's Funeral home for the viewing. That night he'd shaken hands too many times with his best friend, Jack Daniels, and ran into a big rock that wouldn't move to one side like me and my mother always had to when he'd had too much to drink.

I called Chigger and asked him if he wanted to hang out that night. He said he'd pick us a couple of bottles of wine. Wine never hurt anybody; they drank wine all the time in the Bible.

We decided to go frog giggin' cause two men can't go outdoors without killin' something or people might get the wrong idea. Besides, huntin' season hadn't started yet and frog giggin' always took the edge off. I had made my own gig by attaching a gardening fork to the end of a broomstick.

The only light I wanted to see for a while was the one I'd be shining in some old frog's eyes right before I sent his soul to his maker and his legs to a fryin' pan. A frog's hind legs can contain as much meat as the legs of a medium-sized chicken. Most people have never had frog legs really fried up just right. When they are they taste just like chicken. We gave up hunting frogs fifteen minutes after we started. I've always had a problem with sticking with anything for long.

At Bullard's pond we sipped Boone's Farm Strawberry wine which comes in a fancy bottle even though it only costs \$3.50 and has a twist off cap.

The cat-o'-nine tails at the shallow end of the pond waved in the dark like skinny men bein' blown by the wind. The smell of cow pies filled the air, which wasn't an altogether bad odor once you're used to it. Chigger had the Allman Brothers Band cranked up on his car stereo. We gave up hunting frogs fifteen minutes after we started. The night was cold and kind of damp and humid the way the last winter days can be in the South. We sat and sipped and listened

to dead Dwayne singing *Whipping Post*. Ole' Chigger banged on his legs like they were Butch Truck's drums. His dance consisted of him jumping up and down, flailing his bony arms in all directions. It looked like he was having a conniption. No wonder Baptists were against dancing.

He had brought four bottles of wine and by the third one I was telling him about the suitcase.

"You're shitting me, man. Why you wanna mess with my mind like that?" Chigger spit tobacco into the pond and wiped his mouth about half way.

"I'm telling you the God's honest truth. This voice just kept saying 'Trust Me.'" I thought back on the green glowing light and the weird ass pictures and shuddered. "It was some freaky shit, I'm tellin' ya."

Chigger opened another bottle and smelled the metal top before throwing it into the pond. "So what are you going to do?"

"Nothing. What the hell you think I'm going to do? I was born at night but not last night. Hell, I may have dreamt the whole thing but when I woke up this morning there that suitcase was with those confusing pictures staring at me."

“Let me make a Chigger Sug-gestion. Find that fucker and give him his sorry ass Samsonite. If he gives you ten dollars or whatever what have you lost but a little time? And that’s something you got plenty of, Bubba.”

I used to hate it every time Chigger or anyone but my mother called me Bubba, which is what my daddy started calling me when he wasn’t calling me some of his other favorite pet names like, “retarded”, “panty-waist,” and “momma’s boy.” It makes me want to whup somebody’s ass, mostly my daddy’s. I mean for god’s sake who starts calling their kid a name like Bubba before they’re two years old? But after all these years I’ve gotten used to it I reckon.

“Well, like my Granddaddy always told me,” I said to Chigger, “I never had a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of so when you got nothing, you got nothing to lose.”

“I say go for it, goddamnit!”

“Chigger Suggs, if you give me another sug-gestion I’m going to puke.”

The next morning I woke up, looked around my room, and took stock. A. I live in the back room of The Unclaimed Baggage making minimum wage. B. My best friend’s name is Chigger. C. My other best friend is Blue who is a bigger sot than I am. D. I got two ex-wives who would have me shot if they

only knew someone from Mississippi. There are good ole boys in The Bayou State that will come over to Alabama and kill someone for you for a case of beer and a hundred dollar bill. They are so back woodsy over there. At least that's what my granddaddy used to say.

I wasn't exactly climbing the ladder to success, more like I was fallin' off it. Hell, Chigger would get a promotion before I did 'cause he had seniority.

Part of me has always wanted to leave the South and see what other folks live like. Between daddy's alcoholic craziness and my mom's tea toteling, there were whippin's, worshippin', hollerin' and holy-rollin'. I felt like a cross between Job and Jonah. The South is beautiful but it can swallow your whole life and if it doesn't spit you out you can get stuck forever, and end up in a white-trash trailer park, workin' in a junkyard or duckin' the law for makin' meth. Half my friends and cousins were cookin' crank and the other half was doin' time for it.

I've always wanted to know if there was something in me my daddy didn't see, that even I didn't see. Maybe Shirley saw something in me once upon a time. I remember one night before it got real bad she said, "Bubba, when I first met you, you were as shiny as a new copper penny. Now you're just plain rusty. Momma stayed with my father for thirty years hoping her love and

devotion would allow her see that shininess in him again. But she never did. I won't stay with no man trying to polish him up for no thirty years." If I recall she was crying a little when she said it.

All day, I pondered my future and finally came to a decision. All I had to do was return the suitcase and maybe get some money this crazy guy might give me for returning it and these pictures.

So I ruminated and cogitated all night about how I was gonna find this guy. I finally went to sleep about two in the morning. Not long after, I woke up to the voice, "Trust Me. I'm right here. I don't have time to waste, so if Bubba won't come to the mountain, the mountain must come to Bubba." I had absolutely no idea what the hell that meant.

The suitcase started to quake and then the bungee cords popped off and the duct tape split. The Samsonite opened and this big son-of-a-bitch came crawlin' out of it like a fuckin' rabbit out of a hat. He was wearing a fancy, Nancy pair of black pajamas and funny little black shoes. I screamed like a little girl.

"I'm not here to hurt you."

"You ain't real! I'm dreaming you. I've lost my mind. I'm going to wake up now. This is just a dream. Why can't I have one of Heidi Klum or something?"

This isn't happening. I'm going to wake up and everything is going to be alright."

I closed my eyes for a minute or two and when I opened them there he stood. Now let me set the record straight right now. I'm no pussy. I've jumped off the cliffs at Whippoorwill Hollow into the Tennessee River and I've ridden on top of cars going real fast while playing chicken and many a time I've uttered the words, "Hey, I bet you never seen anybody do this before?" But when it came to a fuckin' half-naked Oriental popping out of a suitcase, I peed my pants.

Chapter 3

“What’cha say, Bubba? How’s it hanging?” The big guy said in an accent and a low, quiet like tone of voice. “I hope that is the way your people say it? I didn’t have much time to learn much Southern Appalachian before The Wise Ones sent me.”

“How’s it hanging? Here’s a better question: Who the fuck are you? What are you doing here? You know what, it don’t matter, just crawl back in that suitcase and go back to wherever you came from!”

The guy stayed calm. “Allow me to explain. I have been sent by—”

“I don’t care who sent you! I don’t care who you are or where you come from or where you’re going so long as it’s a ways from here.

He seemed confused, but didn’t say anything. He must have weighed in at about 250 to 300 lbs. He had a short, coal-black pony-tail. Actually he sort of looked like Steven Seagal, the actor, but not like he looked in *Under Siege* but his later movie when he got real fat like; the ones that nobody but me and a handful of others watch.

“I’m going to lie down on this bed and I’m going to close my eyes and when I open them you’ll be gone. Then I’ll go to work and everything will be just like before. Okay, now I’m lying down. I’m closing my eyes, I’m asleep.”

With my eyes still closed, I heard a big sigh.

“Rise up, Bubba. We have work to do. TWOS are serious about this. Trust me.”

“TWOS what?”

“The Wise Ones. I was told your people like acronyms.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Trust me.”

“Would you stop saying that? There ain’t no way I’m trusting you.” I cupped my hands over my ears like a damn four-year-old.

“Ahyyyyaaaayyyyyyyayyyyyya. I can’t hear you. You’re not here. You’re not real. I’m just having a fuckin’ nervous breakdown. Bryce State Mental Hospital: get a rubber room ready for me. Tuscaloosa, here I come!”

All of sudden I felt my cheek sting as his big hand connected with it.

“Come! I’m here. Respond to this moment. We have much work to do. Trust me.”

I rubbed my face. “You ever slap me again, I’ll open up a can of whup ass on your head.”

He sat on the floor and burst out laughing for no apparent reason. He looked like one of them Laughing Buddha statues I seen in Chinese restaurants in Fort Payne.

“What is so goddamn funny? I don’t see anything funny about this. Do you see something funny that I don’t see?”

“I was just thinking one eternal moment I’m up there,” he pointed to the ceiling, “I was wrestling Jacob—good man, pretty good wrestler—when I received the call to come to earth. Remember how your grandfather Strayhorne and you loved to watch wrestling on television on Saturday evenings?”

“All I want to know is what do you want with me?”

“Later. First,” he said, wiggling his fingers in the air, all girly-like. “Give me a tour of this interesting place of business.”

I switched on the lights hoping no one would see us, not that there was much chance of that. The store is the size of two football fields full of racks of clothes with enough sporting goods to outfit all the teams of any sport played in Alabama. The blue/white neon lights lit up all at once. I knew if anybody saw me talking they really would think I was a passenger on the short bus. My overactive imagination was in complete control.

“What is this place?”

“Unclaimed Baggage. I work here. Wouldn’t you know this if you really came from *up there*?” I pointed to the ceiling. Pooh smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

“Some things I know. Some I don’t,” he said as we walked through the store. He started touching everything and asking lots of questions.

“Nice guitar,” I said as he picked up an old Martin as we were passing through the musical instrument section. He strummed a few chords of my favorite country singer—Randy Travis’ song *Forever and Forever, Amen*.

“How do you know that? Are you from...heaven?”

“Some call it that. I prefer to call it Nirvana. But really that’s just a name.”

“I thought Nirvana was a band. My first cousin Gerald on my daddy’s side is into that weird music and was playing it one day when I went over to take his momma some tomatoes from my momma’s garden one time.”

“No. Nirvana isn’t exactly a place. It’s more like a state of mind that you dwell in until TWOS send you back down to be somebody else or do something else that needs to be done.”

That didn’t sound very Christian like and it made no sense, but we kept walking. It took forever to walk because he kept stopping in different

departments and asking questions about everything. Finally, I just stopped him in the women's section and said, "Don't you folks up there in Nirvana have any of these things? Heaven has got everything or so I've been told."

"No. You see I haven't been down here in a long time so you are going to have to teach me a lot."

"Teach you, my ass. You've got to get out of here. I don't know you, and besides you're just a figment of my imagination anyway. I don't even know why I'm talking to you. Teach you? Bullshit."

"According to TWOS I'm supposed to teach and learn. Their exact words were, 'What we've been doing up here isn't working and what you people are doing down here isn't working either. It is time to put what we know up here with what they know down there.'"

"Thanks a lot, that really clears things up."

"So where am I going to sleep? You must be knowledgeable about sleep since you've been doing it all your life. No offense. I'm just very tired. I had to travel a great distance and I need a rest."

"How the hell do I know where you are going to sleep? You can't stay here. My room is barely big enough for me. You've got to get back in your suitcase

and go back and tell TWOS I sent your ass packin'. Like I've said all along, I'm going to wake up in the morning and all of this is going to be forgotten."

He looked sad.

"But since you're not real anyway, I guess it won't hurt none for you to sleep on the floor with Blue. Looks like he's slept through all of this. I gave him way too much beer before he went to bed. Blue ain't no watch dog, that's for sure, but he's a good ole boy."

I threw a couple more blankets on the floor and made a pallet for the big guy. He fell asleep as soon as he hit the floor. I went to bed and just before I dozed off I thought to myself, so this is what it is like to lose your mind.