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Hangmen **by Andrew Watt**

Lawrence gripped the wheel with sweaty hands as the school bus rocked up the hill road, coughing out clouds of dust and baking under the afternoon sun. Sheriff Buckley had been full of it when he suggested that Lawrence's yellow number one was the best hope of reaching the peak of Founders Hill, but there wasn't another man in all of Walter with the guts to take his truck up this route. The dirt track was more like the cratered face of the moon than any road Lawrence had driven before, and ten years in retirement wasn't making the ride any easier. Not to mention that Founders Hill wasn't so much a hill as a small mountain, modestly named by the modest people of Walter so many years ago. And with a sort of modesty of their own, the pine trees on either side of the road seemed to take a step back as the bus approached. If the woods were nervous, Lawrence didn't blame them.

The bus rolled through a big rut and its nose pitched down and up, windshield chattering like teeth. Leaning over the stairwell, Mac Simmons steadied himself with his shotgun. Lawrence wasn't surprised to find himself on this trip—God knew few had suffered for Walter like he had—but Mac was practically still a kid. Lawrence could remember him climbing onto the bus when he was seven years old. Mac was clearly nervous. The kid jittered like an alarm clock every time they hit a bump. He steadied himself against the gun and stared dead ahead, licking his lips, every now and then looking down the aisle behind him. Quick glances, the kind that people use when they pretend not to be looking at the thing they're looking at.

How this kid had gotten to be Sheriff's deputy was beyond Lawrence. Mac hadn't been a bad kid, not the worst of them, anyway, just a little out of step. When he used to tag along with the older kids smoking pot behind the high school, Mac had always been the one caught holding the joint. He certainly had shortcomings that were very much his own, though. Two years ago he'd tried to skip town in a stolen car, and some jail time had helped to sober him up. People said Buckley had given him the deputy job to shape him up, make him into a Walter boy his mother would be proud of. Mac might have grown up a little and learned a thing or two. But Lawrence was certain he wasn't ready to hang a man.

Mac rolled his tongue over his teeth, across his cheeks, through every little corner and pocket in his mouth. It was so dry. He swallowed and harsh air raked his throat. His grip on the shotgun was tight, so tight that his hands kept shaking and he'd have to move them someplace else where they'd eventually start shaking again. Each time he let go, he rubbed the gun where his hands had been, as if he were smoothing out dents left behind by his fingers.

He stared ahead and tried to ignore the bristly rope wound tightly around his wrist. The road ahead wrapped endlessly up the mountain. On the left trees and slabs of rock competed for room in the ground, pushing each other into unnatural contortions as they reached for the peak. The right side of the road sloped toward the mountainside, an invitation to plunge into the valley below. Pines peered at them like spear-bearing guards, following them to the top and closing the

path behind them. Mac tried to think about the moment in the town hall meeting when he'd broken the silence and said he'd do it. He had just stood there, while every face in honest Walter stared him down, and then came the smiles and nods, the murmurs of approval. A sense of relief he felt he'd needed all his life had poured through him. Now that memory, only hours old, seemed uncomfortably far away.

The bus dipped through another rut and shook again. Mac braced himself and felt the rope scrape at his wrist. Lawrence Clemmons bounced around the driver's seat in a wrestling match with the wheel, spotty old face beaded with sweat and checkered shirt drenched. The rope tugged Mac's arm as the bus rocked, almost pulling him out of his seat. He grabbed at what length of it he could, helplessly following with his eyes as he reeled it in. The heavy coil ran out of his seat and down to the floor, down the serrated metal aisle, and into a seat just over halfway back, one of those uncomfortable ones over the rear wheel well, where it rose from the floor and twisted into the noose that hung around Jeff Barber's neck. Jeff was staring right at him. He looked half-awake or drugged, still wearing the flannel shirt he had on when they'd dragged him out of the bar two nights ago. His unwashed hair hung in a droopy arc and his eyes were wide open and wet-looking. They didn't seem to blink. Mac swallowed another hard crackle of air and tried not to think about the old days.

Jeff rolled his wrists around in their handcuffs. They were getting sore; he would have welts soon. Like that was the worst thing that was going to happen today. He slouched in the leathery seat and looked out the window. How many times had he hiked up this hill as a kid? He felt himself smile. Did Mac remember the egg dare? Neither of them had actually eaten anything from that nest; Mac threw each one Jeff gave him to the ground. They'd smashed up the whole nest. That was just one tree they climbed of what, hundreds, maybe? He was climbing a tree today—that was something to be excited about. He felt a little smile flicker involuntarily across his face.

The trees certainly seemed to be laughing about something. They would shake in the breeze until they laughed all of their needles away. But Jeff couldn't be sure they weren't laughing at him. Did trees take sides? The glass of the window was a little smudged. Perhaps the trees were not laughing but crying. Shedding tears and needles for an old friend and patron. He clenched his teeth and his face hardened. Neither thought was particularly comforting.

Perhaps Walter would find some comfort in his death. God, even thinking the words made him sick. His death. But the good folk of his hometown wouldn't have to worry about him ruining their national reputation. His reign of terror hadn't gone farther than the borders of South Dakota, where he merely dropped out of a couple technical schools before returning to Walter, where he could drink, gamble, and fight in a place that felt like home home. And had he been given the chance, Jeff would have challenged Walter to produce a single person who was sorry that Henry Gunn was dead. Gunn was a fight-picking, debt-dodging cheat, and Jeff was sure he wouldn't have stabbed him if the sonofabitch had just admitted he cheated.

They had asked if he was sorry. For killing that asshole? Had there been a single thing to cry about, he would have cried. He had tried to make himself look sorry, but his face was like

tire rubber. That whole town meeting—the “trial”—had left him feeling a peculiar distance from his face, his eyes wide behind a frozen mask. His reflection in the window glass seemed to say as much. Mac Simmons kept glancing back with a searching eye but wouldn't look right at him. Jeff didn't blame him. Mac hadn't been able to watch the eggs break on the ground, either.

Lawrence's belly squashed against the steering wheel in a way it hadn't ten years ago. His hands could gut a deer but were barely keeping the bus on the road. For God's sake, Jeff and Mac had ridden his bus when they were kids. Now they were grown, but they were still kids. Buckley had told him that there would be a clearing. That he would know the tree. The hanging tree, where Walter had resolved its most unsavory business for more than a century. Lawrence didn't want to see it. His eyes drifted toward the ceiling of the bus, and he wondered if something was watching them from the other side.

He looked back at the road and felt himself tense up bad. Pain twisted through his chest. He tapped the brake pedal and squeezed the wheel tight. Lawrence exhaled and a rush of air spilled out. He'd been holding his breath. For how long? What was the matter with him? He knew Mac was watching him. Lawrence stared at the road. He coughed a few times, and then swallowed hard, bucking his chin as if making an effort to clear his throat. He risked a glance at Mac Simmons. Mac was staring at him like he was waiting for something.

“Are you all right?” said Mac slowly. Lawrence frowned back.

“I'm fine,” he said. Mac continued to stare at him, like he was scanning Lawrence for a lie. Lawrence tried to watch the road, but the whites of Mac's eyes were spilling into his vision like the harsh sunlight through the windows. He stole one glance back at Mac, and then another, more quickly. He wanted to spit. “What?” Mac stood up slowly.

“I'm going to go have a word,” he said, “with the prisoner.”

“Fine, do that,” said Lawrence. He nodded without looking at Mac.

“Lawrence,” said Mac, “the road thins out up ahead. Gets rougher. So you know.” Lawrence said nothing, but ground his teeth together as the bus shook along the road. The kid didn't trust him. Maybe for good reason. It was better people didn't know what he thought about things. Jeff and Mac were on his bus together for the first time in over a decade. Lawrence could see them, seven, twelve, sixteen years old. In the valley below, Walter sunk beneath the growing hills.

Mac laid the shotgun in the seat behind Lawrence and walked slowly down the aisle towards Jeff, coiling rope around his arm as he closed the distance. Each seatback he pushed over was a barrier he had to break through. He could feel Jeff watching him, and with each step, he remembered less and less why he had started down the aisle. When he tried to swallow the muscles of his face just seemed to stretch up and down. He sat on the other side of the aisle a seat away from Jeff and rested his rope arm in his lap. Jeff turned and looked at him with wide, unfocused eyes. There wasn't a thing to hold onto. It was like Jeff couldn't even see him. Mac looked at the floor and started to talk.

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"Guess you probably wish you'd left me in the bog." Mac tried on a smile. It didn't fit. "I never—"

"Don't do this," said Jeff. He slumped into the corner of his seat.

"Look, this isn't like, some thing that I—"

"Don't do this," said Jeff, sitting up, "Don't you fucking dare."

"Jeff, I need to—do what?"

Jeff closed his eyes.

"Apologize," he said quietly, "that is the worst possible thing you could do right now."

Mac didn't know what to say. He hadn't known what to say in the first place.

"I know you're a fuck-up," Jeff continued. "I know that Buckley only has you on to keep you from getting into all kinds of shit. But look: I'm about to die, and you're gonna kill me, so from one fuck-up to another: do your job. I promise it won't be easy for you, but my death is one thing you must not fuck up. Got it?" Mac looked at the floor. He wanted to get up but it seemed inappropriate. The quiet rattle of the bus filled the silence.

Then the rattle became a roar. The old bus groaned and bellowed. Dirt and rock crunched violently beneath it. The ripped leather seats vibrated spastically. Windows clattered like the china-cabinet chorus of an earthquake. The wind seemed to howl louder than before, and Mac was sure he could hear the cracks of trees bending over backwards. He and Jeff continued to stare at each other.

A colossal screech sounded through the bus and finished with a crash like a truck dropping out of the sky. The bus stopped. Mac looked to the front, where Lawrence was hollering something that had been partially drowned out by the noise. Mac swiveled back at Jeff, who watched him silently.

Mac was staring at Jeff like he'd just been smacked with a fish. Jeff flicked his eyes between Mac and the window. The trees were surely enjoying this little exchange. Mac looked like he was trying to say something. He licked his lips a couple of times.

"I'm going to see what's happened," said Mac. He did a kind of backwards dance up the aisle, his eyes fixed on Jeff, hastily uncoiling the rope and laying it down like an explosive fuse, bouncing away the minute it touched the ground. Lawrence Clemmons was yelling something about the damndest thing he'd ever seen, and was soon joined by Mac, who let loose a cascade of holy shits. Jeff pushed himself up in his seat, but could see nothing and slid back down. He felt himself smile strangely once again. Whatever was responsible for their delay was of little concern to him. He tried to make himself comfortable. In the front, Mac grabbed the shotgun and hurried off the bus with Lawrence.

There was an enormous stone in the middle of the road. Lawrence and Mac stood silent before it while the bus ticked in exhalation behind them. Lawrence had never seen anything like it. It was a rough bulb in shape, a thumb growing out of the earth. The dirt road rose around it and spilled onto itself. Like the rock had just climbed out of ground. It was as tall as they were. Lawrence stepped up to it, and placed a hand on its surface. He pressed closely and rubbed the

stone, feeling the dirt and grain, but also the smoothness underneath. It was a good feeling. Mac prodded the stone with the butt of the gun.

"This is no good, Lawrence," said Mac. His voice was strained. Lawrence squinted through the sunlight at him.

"It's a hell of a pebble, Mac," said Lawrence, "I don't know what you want from me." He stepped away from the stone.

"We gotta walk it the rest of the way," said Mac. He looked up towards the peak. "God damn it."

"We won't make it before dark," said Lawrence.

"I know." Mac turned away and kicked at a small rock. Lawrence walked to the edge of the road facing the valley below. Walter was a long way down there. A long tumble down. He turned back to the peak. A long climb up.

"You know," said Mac, "we could just shoot him."

"I can make it to the peak," said Lawrence. "And you, Mac, do you remember what it was you signed yourself up to do here?" Mac turned away from the valley to face Lawrence. "You signed up to hang a man," Lawrence hissed, "hang a man. Not shoot him. You will see the hanging tree tonight, and you and I will string that man in there to it." Lawrence felt his jaw jut out unnaturally. "Do you understand?"

Mac shouldered his shotgun and got back on the bus.

Jeff stumbled up the rocky hill on his hands and knees. He couldn't remember how long it had been since they abandoned the road. The last of the sun's light was fading fast above them. His wrists were purple and his elbows and knees were scraped from each fall he'd taken on the steep, gritty rock. His knuckles bled. The worst was his neck. Sweat ran down his face and the heavy, bristling noose trapped it and rubbed it in, leaving his neck red and raw. Mac led him by the rope, waiting at the tops of tall rocks while Jeff tried to scramble up them in his handcuffs. Lawrence Clemmons hobbled up behind him, levering himself over ledges on his knees, muttering things like "that's it, hoo-ah, get to the top, get to the top." The old man had seemed to be harmlessly encouraging himself until he started throwing in the occasional "that's it, Jeff," or "nearly there, Barber." It was like a death lullaby, and every time he heard his name Jeff would force himself to climb as fast as he could to get away from the sound, sometimes with success, sometimes only to fall right back down into the bus driver's oblivious cold comforts.

Mac lunged up a steep face of rock, reaching for the top with his left hand. His rope hand. He made the motion snap, and heard Jeff cry out below him. It hadn't been the first time, and the time before was supposed to have been the last time. He was tired. His hands ached from clawing at stone. He had tried to grab hold of a plant a ways back and had ripped it out of the ground, a choice that sent him tumbling down ten feet of stone. He was sick of the shotgun thumping his ass every time he took a big step. The light was vanishing.

Mac sprinted up a slab of stone for the hundredth time, nearly falling to his knees at the top. The shotgun bumped his ass. He panted and looked around. They were high up, on a

plateau of rock like the back of a tortoise. In the distance he could see the pines cropping up again. Founders Hill was like a bald head with a small but thriving patch of growth at the very top. The sky was purple and washing into black, but they were close. The distant trees rose in elevation. Soon they would reach the grove. The rope grew taut and Mac looked down to see Jeff on his knees at the bottom of the last climb, gasping for air. Mac jerked hard on the rope.

Lawrence followed Mac and Jeff breathlessly across the plateau. Pain curled through his knees with each step. Mac was eagerly leading the way to the trees, yanking Jeff along like a mule. It was sad to see these two boys like this. Everybody as old as Lawrence could remember the day when young Mac Simmons had disappeared into the cranberry bog, and how even with a search party made of every man in town, it had been Mac's friend Jeff who'd carried him out. Both boys were covered in muck, and Mac was limping with a broken ankle, but Jeff had somehow got him all the back to the men before the sun was down. Everyone who hadn't rushed to help the boys had burst into applause. It had been a sight.

Up ahead, Jeff fell to his knees, and Mac yanked him back to his feet without a moment's rest. Lawrence fumbled with the flashlight he'd taken from the bus and switched it on. Trees had begun springing up around them. The grove couldn't be far.

Jeff shuffled through a carpet of pine needles. Here the trees were still and silent. When he brushed one it sprung awake. These trees had lived hard lives, planted in a bed of stone and raised in a garden of death. They said nothing to him. The pale glow of Lawrence's flashlight played off of their trunks and needles. Mac was rustling his way to the center, and Jeff could hear the rope dragging along the ground like a giant snake at his feet. It navigated the forest floor for him, another pair of eyes in the darkness. And when he no longer needed to see, it would take him somewhere else entirely.

Mac stood at the edge of the clearing and stared. The hanging tree twisted out of the earth before him into the night sky. Bone-white and dead, it was not a pine; it was no tree Mac had seen before in his life. Its branches were fingers with curses at their tips. The clearing was a perfect circle. Mac tugged the rope and took a reverent step in. He squinted at the tree.

"Lawrence," he called. "Get over here with the flashlight!" He heard Jeff shuffle up behind him. Lawrence followed, breathing heavily. "Shine the light up the trunk and let's have a look." With a trembling hand Lawrence passed the light from the base to the top and up and down the branches. "Stop. That's it." From the lighted neck of the tree a lone, thick branch unlike its siblings curved out into a sturdy and muscled appendage. On the ground beneath it a large section of a pine trunk lay tipped on its side.

Jeff began to take deep, difficult breaths. He knew it wasn't the cold. Lawrence and Mac were conferring, pointing at the branch they would hang him from. Jeff shook involuntarily. That expression, "die with dignity," had passed through his head several times during the day. What did that mean? He was afraid. It was certainly going to hurt. What did he have to gain by

hiding that? He didn't have any cards to play from the end of a rope. Better that they had to watch every awful minute of it just as it was, better he kick and twitch all he wanted, better he cry like a goddamn baby so they had to try and sleep with that memory ripping their skulls apart. He hoped he'd be able to cry up there. He wanted to feel something besides his neck snapping.

Mac handed the shotgun to Lawrence, who nodded vigorously. They slowly walked to Jeff. Mac took a moment to look him up and down. Jeff couldn't see Lawrence's face.

"All right, Jeff," Mac said patiently, "hold still a minute." He lifted shaking hands to Jeff's neck, and he loosened and removed the noose. The barrel of the shotgun was level with Jeff's waist. Mac took the noose and walked back to the tree. "A little light, Lawrence."

Lawrence drew out the flashlight and turned it on. What was he doing? If the people down below could be up here with him, maybe they would have second thoughts. They might even admit they'd made a mistake. Mac was swinging the noose back and forth, preparing to throw it over the branch. Lawrence dropped the flashlight on the ground, where it rolled a few inches. It was easier to think in the dark. The small light shined on Mac and the trunk of the tree. Mac threw his head to one side, looking up into the darkness as he whirled the rope. Lawrence wished it hadn't come to this. The barrel of the shotgun fell into his empty left hand.

Mac swung the rope into the air and missed. He felt suddenly self-conscious. Don't fuck this up, he could almost hear Jeff say. He swung and missed again, and imagined Jeff offering to do it himself. It was sort of funny, and he hated himself for having a sense of humor. Soon it would all be over. He'd never forgive himself for it, but he was going to do his duty for Walter. The light suddenly dropped and the branch disappeared. If Lawrence did a single thing right he'd be damned.

Jeff heard a click.

"Lawrence," Mac called, "shine the light up! I can't see the branch—"

The shotgun blast cracked through the air like thunder. Mac was thrown off of his feet and into the shadows, and a splash of red and black painted the tree. Jeff stared into the darkness. Lawrence approached the tree, reloading the gun as he walked. He stepped around the trunk of the tree and out of sight. There was another shot and a flash of white. Smoke filtered into the light, and something heavy hit the ground. There was some unhurried rustling behind the tree, and Jeff heard a jangling noise.

Lawrence stepped around the trunk of the hanging tree. The noose lay piled before him, and he nudged it with his toe, as if checking for signs of life and finding none. Jeff felt a freezing dread run through his limbs. Lawrence walked slowly back to him. His hands were covered in blood, and he held a ring of keys.

"Your hands," Lawrence said. Jeff raised them. Lawrence unlocked the handcuffs and they fell to the ground. Jeff stared at them. He looked up at Lawrence, who cracked a slight smile. A filling flashed. "You're free, kid. Second chance."

Lawrence placed his bloody hands on Jeff's shoulders. He was talking, about Walter, and how nothing mattered anymore, and they were both free. Jeff tried to force expression into his face, something Lawrence would be able to see. He might as well have been invisible. Lawrence was going on about Jeff's future, somewhere far away, something about California license plates and a new name. It was all becoming rabid noise. Jeff looked hopelessly at barren branch. He could have been swinging in the noose right now. It would have hurt, but it would have been over. Lawrence hugged him. Jeff listened for the trees to say something, but heard only the wind creeping up from the valley.