

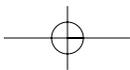
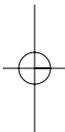
Prologue

**AN ORDINANCE CONCERNING
MOTORIZED VEHICLES**

Be it ordained by the Board of Trustees of the Town of Monte Vista, Colorado

SECTION 6: Every owner of an automobile used in the town of Monte Vista, except persons visiting with such machine for a period not exceeding one (1) week, shall register his name and address with the Town Recorder, and shall obtain from him a number, which shall be displayed from the rear of his automobile in a conspicuous place. The said number shall be furnished at the expense of the town of Monte Vista, and be composed of figures not less than three (3) inches high, and over or near the number shall be placed the initials "M.V." Upon such registration the Town Recorder shall collect a fee of Two Dollars (\$2.00), and shall issue to such owner a license to drive said automobile within said town, and shall also furnish such owner with a number to be displayed from his automobile as hereinbefore provided. Upon the transfer of ownership of any such automobile, the transferee shall likewise register with the Town Recorder, the same as the original owner, and shall pay to said Recorder the sum of Two Dollars (\$2.00) for such registration, which registry shall include the name of the owner and the number and name of such automobile.

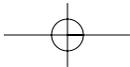
Passed and approved this 4th day of March, 1909, James H. Neeley, Mayor Pro. Tem.



Part 1

Something in Common

AUTUMN 1971



Chapter

1

The mid-October Mile High City air was dry, crisp, and rich with the home-again smell of burning leaves and the barest hint of ponderosa pine. It was a scent that at least momentarily suppressed the lingering smells of napalm, machine-gun oil, and jungle rot that CJ Floyd had lived with for the past two years. Hours earlier, after rising from another sleepless night, the decorated Vietnam veteran had decided to retrieve something he'd left behind before going off to war. Something from the past that he hoped would help him build a bridge to the future and outrun his demons.

Three weeks earlier he'd returned to Denver after serving back-to-back one-year tours of duty as an aft-deck machine gunner on a 125-foot navy patrol boat in Vietnam. Like so many of his generation, he'd seen far too much of the dark side of life, even though he was barely twenty years old. He'd killed people and watched people being killed. He'd had time to think about what it would be like to die, had eaten more C rations than he cared to remember, and more than once, in the middle of some humid Mekong Delta estuary, had washed the U.S.

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Navy's canned mystery-meat delicacy down with roasted swamp mushrooms and river rat.

While on R&R in Saigon he'd made love to delicate, beautiful, war-numbered women for less than the cost of a car wash in the States, often wondering as he did whether he would be the GI to finally crush what remained of his paid lover's spirit. He'd thrown up at the horror that was war, and every day of his two years in country he'd prayed that he'd somehow make it home. Now at least the physical side of his ordeal was behind him. There would be no more search-and-destroy missions for one-time gunner's mate Calvin Jefferson Floyd.

As he stepped off the number 15 RTD bus at the intersection of Colfax Avenue and Larimer Street to head for GI Joe's, a Lower Downtown Denver pawnshop, he took a long, deep breath. When the word *home* briefly crossed his mind, he broke into a nervous, uneasy smile, teased a cheroot out of the soft pack he'd taken out of the pocket of his peacoat, and toyed with the miniature cigar. He hadn't been a smoker when he'd left for Vietnam in the fall of 1969. Now he was. Slipping the cheroot loosely between his lips, he thought about the rare antique license plate he'd pilfered from a GI Joe's display case two years earlier and hidden behind three loose wall tiles next to the groutless seam of an electrical box. He'd uncharacteristically acted on this impulse three days before he'd shipped out for Vietnam, and he wondered if his hidden treasure would still be there.

He couldn't be certain that the Larimer Street pawnshop would even still be standing; many Lower Downtown buildings and dozens of neighboring structures for blocks around

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had been bulldozed as part of Denver's ongoing Skyline Urban Renewal Project while he'd been gone. But if the pawnshop was there, he had the feeling that the valuable porcelain license plate he'd stashed would still be there as well. There to soothe his fragile psyche, to offer him a belated welcome home.

There's undoubtedly substantial truth to the saying that you can tell a lot about a man by what he reads. However, you could learn much more about a man like CJ Floyd by taking a long, hard look at the things he had little or no use for and the things he saved. CJ saved ticket stubs from plays and movies and every manner of game. He still had his ticket stub from the Denver Rockets' inaugural ABA basketball game as well as two unused tickets to the 1969 Denver premiere of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Tickets he'd won by being the tenth caller to a local radio sports talk show but had never used because three days before the opening, and ten days before shipping out for his first tour of Vietnam, he'd come down with a flu that had kept him bedridden for a week.

The more than half-century-old Victorian home on Denver's famed Bail Bondsman's Row where he'd been raised by his alcoholic uncle had an earthen quarter-basement that he'd filled with coffee cans full of cat's-eye marbles, jumbos, and scores of rare and valuable shooter steelies. Stacks of mint-condition 45s and pristine, unopened LPs stored in dusty-sheet-covered tomato crates filled every corner of the musty underground room.

For most of his teenage years CJ had been a gangly, stand-offish, six-foot-two-inch black kid with closely cropped hair and the merest hint of a mustache. A kid with a strange inner

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sadness and seemingly nowhere to light, an oddly out-of-place young man who spent most of his free time checking out estate liquidations, antiques auctions, and an endless string of garage sales.

A collector in the old-fashioned sense, CJ considered himself a guardian of precious things from the past. Conspicuously missing from his collectibles, however, were report cards, family-oriented board games, and those all-too-human, follow-the-leader possessions that required interacting with other people instead of going it alone. For CJ Floyd, there were no albums filled with Pop Warner football pictures, first swimming lessons, or photographs of grade school field trips to the zoo. No yearbooks or kindergarten finger paintings for relatives to gush over at holiday gatherings. No mementos from debutante balls or long-forgotten souvenirs from the senior prom. CJ's collectibles were the ghostly, precious treasures of a loner, artifacts assembled by someone who'd spent his short lifetime honing a party-of-one image and running against the wind.

CJ's collection of antique license plates, his equivalent of Olympic gold, said more about him than any of his other collections. He'd begun the collection during his early teens, when his Uncle Ike's drinking had reached its peak and street rods and low riders had taken the place of family in CJ's life.

The pride of his collection were his 1917 New Hampshire plate and his prized 1919 Denver municipal tag. Both had been fabricated using the long-abandoned process of overlaying porcelain onto iron. Although his collection was impressive, it remained incomplete, and Ike, one of the few people who'd

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seen it, suspected that like CJ, abandoned by his unmarried teenage mother just a few days after he turned two, the collection would remain forever less than whole.

Most of the buildings in the 2100 block of Larimer Street, including GI Joe's, had escaped demolition during CJ's absence, but scores of buildings to both the east and west had been leveled, leaving behind a landscape that looked almost war-torn.

The long-established pawnshop shared a white, two-story brick building, erected in 1893, with Lucero's Furniture Store. The second-floor windows of the pawnshop had been bricked over and painted white, giving the building the neo-Gothic look of a mortuary. Harry Steed, a returning World War II veteran, had started the business in the late 1940s, and the shop, along with Pasternack's, a pawnshop next door, had a reputation for selling everything from college scholastic honorary keys to microscopes for medical students.

World War II veteran Wiley Ames, a recovering alcoholic, former Denver skid row derelict, and Salvation Army reclamation project, had helped Harry Steed manage GI Joe's for nearly two decades. Ames's left arm, a casualty of the war, was nothing more than a ten-inch-long stump. Over the decades, with the help of Harry Steed, he'd exorcised his war demons and strangled his alcoholism. Now, at age forty-six, he was a teetotaling, nearly psychologically whole physical fitness devotee whose street reputation was that of a no-nonsense straight shooter with a soft spot for hard-luck stories.

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The wind kicked up out of nowhere as CJ entered GI Joe's. Uncertain exactly how to proceed with his mission of retrieval, he stood silently inside the entryway of the dimly lit establishment, thinking and waiting for his eyes to accommodate to what could best be described as a giant, larger-than-life-sized box of clutter.

Moving purposefully into the musty bowels of the store, past glass-topped display cabinets and row after row of shelves chock-full of everything from slide guitars to roller skates, he had the sense that he was back in the Mekong River Delta, cruising through enemy territory well beyond the safety of his 42nd River Patrol Group's operations base.

His heart sank when he stopped to glance across the room for his remembered landmarks—the electrical box and a bank of loose tiles. Feeling suddenly defeated and, surprisingly, a little cheated, he sighed and took a hesitant step in the direction of what was no longer a wall of failing tile and cracking plaster but instead a whitewashed alcove, the back wall of which was filled with hanging art.

Hugging a photo album to his side with his stump, Ames, who'd watched his young customer's every move since he'd entered the store, surprised CJ by calling out, "Help you with somethin', son?" and quickly closing the gap between them.

"No. Just looking," CJ said.

The seasoned veteran, who now stood just a few feet from CJ, nodded and took a long, hard look at his customer. Recognition crossed Wiley's face as he took in the strangely vacant look in the young black man's eyes.

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“Well, look all you want, and let me know if you need some help. Been in before?” he asked as an afterthought, his eyes never moving off CJ.

“A couple of times,” CJ said quickly, fearful that anything but the truth might expose his motives.

“Well, go on with your lookin’. I’m around if you need me.”

CJ continued staring at the wall of art, taking in the simple beauty of the black-and-white photographs, watercolors, and pastels, most of them depicting classic Western themes. There were scenes of rodeo cowboys, a photograph of two ranch hands on horseback chasing a steer, a painting of an angler shaded by a cottonwood canopy fishing in a remote mountain stream, and near the center of the collection a photo of a startled hunter, shotgun at the ready, mouth agape, watching half-a-dozen sage grouse flush. Once again the word *home* wove its way through CJ’s subconscious. Remembering his purpose, he walked over to the spot where the electrical box and loose tiles should have been. As he reached out to adjust one of the photographs, as if to make certain he wasn’t looking at a mirage, Wiley Ames, ghost-like and silent, reappeared.

“So, whatta ya think?” Ames asked, beaming.

“Nice.”

“I like to think so. I call it my Wall of the West. The boss let me do it. Said it gave the place a sense of character, and wouldn’t you know it, the damn wall even faces west.” He watched CJ’s eyes dart from photograph to photograph. “They’re not for sale if you’re lookin’ to buy. All of ’em are

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by local artists, most of 'em down on their luck. Mostly they're here for the enjoyin'. Sorta like life."

"They're great. How'd you get the idea?" CJ asked, thinking primarily about the missing license plate and electrical box.

Wiley chuckled. "DURA, them urban redevelopment folks, gave the idea to me a year or so back when they blew the Cooper Building over on Seventeenth Street to smithereens. The explosion nearly took down that wall you're eyein'. Had to just about rebuild the sucker. Bricks, mortar, a hell of a lot of tuck-pointin', and of course new drywall and electrical."

"I see," said CJ, imagining the hidden license plate flying out from behind the tiles and crashing to the floor, its delicate porcelain face cracking into a hundred pieces. "Find anything behind the wall?"

"Not really." Ames cocked an eyebrow and looked CJ up and down. "Least, not anything of importance. Sure you don't need my help with anything?" he asked, a sudden hint of suspicion evident in his tone.

"Nope."

"Well, then, admire my wall as long as you like. After a while it sorta grows on you. I'm around if you need me." Wiley sauntered back toward the store's only cash register on the counter up front. Halfway there, he glanced back at CJ, eyed the spot on the sleeve of CJ's peacoat where the first-class gunner's-mate stripes had once been, and thought, *Boy's got damage for sure.*

Realizing that the license plate was lost to him forever, CJ locked his gaze on a painting of two cowboys branding a calf. One cowboy had the calf's head pinned to the dirt with a knee

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while the other, smoke rising from his branding iron, seared the calf's right hindquarter. Thinking that all some people might see in the photo was brutality, unless of course they'd been to war, he turned to leave. As he pivoted, he caught a glimpse of a grainy black-and-white photograph near the bottom of the wall. Bending to take a closer look, he realized that the strangely out-of-place photo was the image of a World War II-vintage Sherman tank. Three American soldiers stood beside the tank's turret, one smoking a cigarette, one staring aimlessly into space, and one drinking coffee. Even after more than two decades, there could be no mistaking the face of the man staring into space. It was a slightly thinner, gaunt-looking Wiley Ames.

CJ stared at the photo for several more seconds before shrugging and walking toward the front of the store. When he reached the checkout counter, where Ames stood organizing a handful of receipts, he asked, "That you in that tank photo on the wall?"

"Yep," Ames said in response to a question he'd been asked hundreds of times.

"Thought so."

"Long time ago," said Ames.

"Bet it never goes away."

"Not really. But you move on."

"Guess so," a suddenly glassy-eyed CJ said, offering Ames a hesitant two-fingered, mission-accomplished salute and heading toward the door. "See ya around."

CJ was six blocks away when Ames left his post behind the cash register and headed toward a glassed-in display case near

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the center of the store. He wasn't certain why he'd made a bee-line for that particular case except that CJ's words, "Find anything behind the wall?" continued to resonate in his head. As he stooped to open one of the case's misaligned rear doors, intent on retrieving the 1918 California porcelain license plate that had been coughed up from behind his Wall of the West the day DURA had blown up the Cooper Building a year and a half earlier, he found himself shaking his head. Eyeing the flawless antique license plate, he had the strange sense that he and the young black man who'd just left were somehow connected. He couldn't put his finger on exactly why or how or for what reason, but he knew it had something to do with his wall of art and the look he'd seen in the young man's eyes when he'd first walked into the store. A lost, hollow look yearning for explanation. A look identical to the look in his own eyes all those years ago when he'd stood next to a tank turret, oblivious to the falling snow in a German forest, just hours before losing his left arm in the Battle of the Bulge. A look that told him he and the young black man had something very much in common.