

# COL'M



D. KRAUSS

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*Dedication*

To the HHC, 3-16th, 29th Infantry Division.  
Keeping the Valley safe.

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# COL'M

BOOK THREE

D. KRAUSS



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

Col'm: Saint Columba, a warrior monk from Ireland who killed 5,000 men in a battle over a stolen Psalter. Banished to Scotland, Columba wrestled with the Loch Ness monster, fought the druids, opened locked gates by invoking the sign of the Cross, established monasteries, and converted the Picts to Christianity, often at the point of a sword.

# **Part I: Trampling Out the Vintage**

Middle of October  
This evening

A car was coming up the mountain.

Collier leaned on the rake and watched it, tracing its labored progress by the degree of black smoke belching from the jury-rigged chimney sticking out the back. Coal-powered, quite inefficient, especially for this steep ascent. Horses had a bad enough time with it, let alone a POS steam car. But, obviously, someone wanted to impress him.

Gee, I wonder who?

Collier looked across the valley at the opposite peaks, the setting sun turning them into black spearheads framed by fire. Dazzling, to the point he could no longer make out the glorious reds and yellows of the maples and oaks and sycamores putting on their autumn best. He could, though, see pinpoint lights bobbing about, marking the torches and the rare oil lamp of other 'posters still working their piles of leaves. One advantage of being on the east side of the valley: he got more daylight. 'Course, it also meant a later start in the morning, but he showed up pre-dawn anyway because he had other things to do, like measure the pits, arrange for deliveries, send the crews off and do his rounds before ending up here alone to tidy up the leaf lines and calculate loads and volume for tomorrow. At least, that's what he told the brigadistas, who might consider such individual effort a sign of counter-revolutionary impulse. If he ever told the truth, that he took on these late tasks simply to enjoy a moment of solitude, well, to the camps with him.

Which may be why the POS was struggling up the valley. To the camps with him.

Again.

He grinned. Wasting your time, fellas. Got the routine down pat. Endure a couple weeks of torture and sleep deprivation and then break down and cry and confess to error and I'm glad to be back in the embrace of the State and I will never, ever do that again ... and then he would go back and do it again. As they well knew. Their best bet was to simply shoot him.

Which may be why the POS was struggling up the valley.

He sighed and turned away and eye-measured the lines of leaves he'd sculpted. About two more weeks on this site, then spend the remainder of the season back in the valley. By the end of November, he'd have his last batches of



compost delivered, freeing up the pits for the new crop. Based on the quantity so far, he'd need to dig another set of pits before the snows arrived. Hopefully, his sons had picked up the last loads of manure and positioned them for mixing. He chuckled and whispered, "Pay your dues," in anticipation of his eldest's on-going complaint about doing the literal shit work.

Pay your dues.

The car had reached the flat right below this rise and it shuddered and coughed and belched an incredible cloud of black smoke before the fireman in the open back, sweating in this cold, threw dampers and cut off the steam. It looked like an old Buick, a car even Collier's dad would have found ancient. They'd probably found it stored in some old codger's garage, rust free and pristine and big and decadent and perfect for the cadre. Cut it apart to add boiler and pipes and there, a working car, so to speak. Best they could do after twenty years of enlightened rule.

The driver was bent over the wheel, probably throwing other switches and valves, and more intent on that duty (because one wrong move and the car blows up) than on Collier. The passenger, though, was not making that mistake.

He stared at Collier through the windshield. The sunset glow obscured him somewhat, but Collier saw and felt his scrutiny. He also saw the Party uniform, crisp and ironed and no worse for the cloud of cinders and soot it must have endured, major's gold leaves on the shoulders winking at him. The guy was not wearing his cap; black-and-gray curls swept back from his forehead and fell past his ears, definitely not within party regulations. So, this guy was a maverick. Or a favorite. Collier examined the apparatchik's pointed face, cheeks volcanoing to a prominent nose, and, after a moment, knew who he was.

"Hello, Deavers," Collier greeted the former Ghost, former soldier, and current traitor, as he slid out of the car, stood and brushed at the uniform. "How'd you survive Pemberton?"

Deavers smiled. "Hello, Rashkil. Same way you did." He paused. "I ran."

"Before the battle, if I recall correctly," Collier said and cast casual glances around for the best escape routes.

Deavers wagged a hand. "Before, after, point is, I made it. As did you."

Collier could belabor the point that running away from a battle was of a different character than surviving the onslaught, but decided it was a bad course. The Blues had lost that battle, lost the war, and anyone who'd been a Blue – much less a Ghost – was still, technically, the enemy. Unless you threw in with the winners, like Deavers had. Like Collier hadn't, so why compound his obvious troubles? Because Deavers, of all people, showing up here was trouble enough.

"So this is like the Mafia, right?" Collier observed, "Send someone I know to whack me?" Collier casually leaned on the rake and figured he could throw it at Deavers the moment the craphead reached for a weapon then off the cliff side – the one with all the boulders – and hope the darkness and steepness would cover him enough to prevent a bullet in the back. And hope he was still agile enough to avoid smashing his head into the rocks.

But, apparently, no need because Deavers laughed and shook his head and held up placating – and empty – hands. “I’m not here to whack you. I’m here to say hello.”

Uh huh. “A postcard would have been easier,” Collier said and gazed significantly at the still-smoking car.

“Mail isn’t reliable.”

Collier raised hands in mock horror. “After twenty years of the Five-Year Plan? How can that be?”

Deavers wagged a semi-serious finger. “Careful. Someone might consider that negativism. Which is an offense against the State.”

“Yes, I know,” Collier said, dryly, “Some of your best torturers have explained that to me.”

“Three times, I think.” Deavers fished around in his tunic – Mao-like, of course. Despots loved that look – and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He tapped out a couple and offered. Collier shook his head and Deavers lit one, puffing luxuriously and releasing a cloud of smoke and wondrous perfume into the air. Ah. Good stuff, that. Real tobacco, not that corn silk garbage the masses got. Man, what Collier would do for a pre-Event cigar ...

Collier savored the memory for a half second and then returned to reality. “What do you want, Deavers?”

Deavers feigned injury. “No small talk? No asking how I’ve been, where I’ve been, for the last twenty years?”

Collier brushed a hand at Deavers’s uniform. “You seem to have done all right.”

“And you.” Deavers brushed his own hand at the leaf lines. “Haven’t.”

The retort rising to Collier’s lips summarizing how sellouts like Deavers usually did better than the loyal almost broke out, but he suppressed it. Why compound your obvious troubles? “It’s a living,” he said.

Deavers shook his head mockingly. “Now, see right there? The language you use. ‘A living.’ How bourgeois. How ... counter-revolutionary.” And he gave Collier a hard stare.

Collier almost burst out laughing. Almost. A hard stare from Deavers was a gnat challenging an elephant, but why compound your troubles? “I see you’ve got the lingo down,” he said, coolly, “You always had a finger to the wind, didn’t you? Even before Pemberton.”

Deavers frowned. “I had the good sense to see how things were going.”

“And the better sense to run away before you had to fight.”

Compounding my problems now, Collier thought as Deavers reddened and his eyes narrowed. Never could keep my big mouth shut. Dad had repeatedly warned him about that, so did Mom, so did Rosa ...

Rosa.

In the woods between the creeks. Her desperate, clawing kiss, and a last glimpse of her as she led the remnants of the Ghosts away. Away.

Deavers’s anger visibly turned into weariness. Looked like a genuine

weariness, too. “I didn’t come up here to fight old battles. What’s done is done.”

“Why did you come up here, then?”

“Like I said.” Deavers drew another puff. “To say hello. See, I’ve been assigned here.”

“Really.” Suspicion clouded Collier’s face. “Lose a bet?”

Deavers chuckled. “No, nothing like that. It’s a promotion, actually.”

“To ...”

Deavers was neutral. “Case officer.”

Collier stilled. Case officer. Which meant ... “You’re Directorate,” Collier said quietly

Deavers said nothing, merely looked at him. Collier furiously went through the implications: a new Directorate case officer, someone Collier knows, a traitor, a sellout, who conspired with Colonel Caldwell (may he burn in hell) to destroy the Ghosts and the Blues and what was left of the United States, facilitating the rise of this godawful, murderous, quasi-Marxist regime; a case officer not from this area (New England somewhere, if Collier remembered correctly), who’d presumably spent the last twenty years climbing the ranks of the Directorate while torturing and murdering in the name of the People’s Republic, obtaining the powerful rank of major on a bloody stack of bodies, a rank far above what this pissant little backward District needed, just showed up.

Why?

“Why?” Collier asked.

Deavers looked puzzled. “Why am I Directorate?”

“Well, that is one question, but you can tackle it after you answer the question I meant. Why you, and why here?”

Deavers smirked. “You, former Sergeant Rashkil, wonder why orders make no sense?”

Good point. If there was one thing Collier had learned in his five or six years as an upstanding member of the late, lamented Blues, nothing ever made sense, especially orders issued by the jumble of idiots constituting the Blue command structure. It was endemic to the beast; Dad, who had served in the real US military – the one that had existed before the Event – had regaled Collier with similar tales of idiocy. How much improvement would a scurvy bunch of neo-Marxists bring?

“There is no such thing as a coincidence,” Dad whispered in his ears.

“Why are you really here?” Collier’s tone let Deavers know he wasn’t buying it.

Deavers sighed and shook his head sadly. “Wow. So much suspicion. Has anyone told you that you’re paranoid?”

“With good reason,” Collier intoned.

“Yes.” Deavers’s look darkened. “You do have good reason, don’t you?”

A slow pulse beat in Collier’s temple. “I would say so. I would say anyone with half a brain, even a smidgen of common sense, is paranoid these days. Because having half a brain, even a smidgen of common sense, earns you

Directorate attention.”

Deavers examined his fingernails coolly. “Other things do, too.”

Collier’s shields went up. “Whatever could you mean, Deavers?” he asked, maintaining the facade. “I’m just a poor, humble composter trying to improve crop yields for the State. Since we no longer have fertilizer. Or tractors. Or enough food to feed everyone.” Collier blinked slowly. “By the way, how ARE things in the Midwest? Heard there was some mass starvation.”

Deavers frowned. “Who told you that?”

“A little birdie. We get lots of them out here in the woods.”

Deavers was quiet for a bit. “Still on the wrong side,” he spoke low, dangerous, “Still getting people killed.”

Still?

Shields went to full power. “What do you want, Deavers?”

“I want us to be friends.”

Collier said nothing.

“Oh, no.” Deavers waved a hand. “Not in the old bourgeois sense, you know, hoisting a few beers together, playing poker on Wednesday nights, all that rot.” Said with genuine scorn. “No, I mean a friend in today’s sense. Someone harmless. Someone I can talk to from time to time, get a ... feel, for what’s happening. Someone who will then remain ... unbothered.” And he gave Collier another hard look. Another gnat.

“You know,” Collier said, softly, “that could be construed as a threat.”

Deavers shrugged. “Call it what you want. But consider the offer.”

Collier made an exaggerated show of considering the offer. And then rejecting it. “Be your ... friend.” He gave that last word its proper emphasis. “As you’ve defined it. Problem with that ...” Collier stretched luxuriously and gripped the rake for possible combat “... when I look at you, I see too many bodies. I see Swift getting blown to atoms by an exploding tank. I see the Wilson brothers getting plastered by an F-16. I see...”

Rosa. Jonesy. So many. Too many.

“... and I don’t see you by their side. I don’t see you at all.” And he prepared to hurl the rake.

Deavers said nothing, simply stood there with eyes half closed and arms crossed. After a moment, he said, “The war is over, Collier, has been for years. You lost. We won. You should accept that. You should help us rebuild.”

Collier made an exaggerated turn toward his leaf lines. “I think I am.”

“You know what I mean.”

Yes, Collier did. “The best I can do for you is just stay up here. I’m not bothering anybody up here. No one.”

Deavers quietly puffed the cigarette down.

Collier sighed and turned to the dying light, the mountains now stark and black against the blood red sky, the fireflies over there winking out as sane men went home. “You should probably head back now, Deavers. I don’t know how familiar you are with these roads, but your little Tinkertoy,” Collier made a

contemptuous gesture at the car, “might have trouble with them. Could be an accident.” And he gave Deavers a significant look.

Deavers’s crew standing near the car exchanged glances, their hands drifting toward their belts. Collier got ready to throw the rake.

“Perhaps we should,” Deavers said, raising a quelling hand to his crew, who froze. “After all, it is getting late.” He took a lazy glance at the deepening sky. “And I think we’ve said all we can say.” A pause. “For now.” A glance at Collier, a tossing of the cigarette butt into the dirt, and the three of them got back in the car.

“Be a stranger,” Collier called, and watched with some amusement as the firemen worked frantically to get the boiler back up to pressure, taking at least five minutes before there was enough steam for the driver to gingerly back up, obviously conscious of the drop-off, and drive the vehicle back down the slope. The days of fast getaways were long gone.

Deavers stayed on him as the car jinked and jerked, Collier still feeling his regard even as darkness and distance obscured the windshield. He followed the slow progress of the vehicle down the trail, the fire from the boiler marking its position. The light had fallen fast, the only illumination now the backscatter of sunset bouncing off a few clouds dotting the October sky. He took in a deep breath, the smell of leaf mold and turned earth and the coming winter flooding his lungs. He then walked over and picked up the cigarette butt, inhaling it deeply. Ah!

Collier melted into the dark, his feet finding a familiar trail on the edge of the leaf lines. He skirted one of the ridges and stopped about halfway up, probing a stone outcropping until he grasped a canvas bag. He pulled it to himself and felt his way back along the trail.

An hour or so later, there was a low whistle off to his front. Collier whistled back and nodded at the two shadows-against-shadows in the larch stand, and then slipped through the hedges and brake. A low rough building, barely discernible at the bottom of the hollow, had a single candle in a window giving it form.

Collier walked in and strode down the pews as the congregation silently rose, the candles giving enough dim light for him to see his way. He stepped behind the podium, reached into his bag and pulled out the book, adjusted the candle next to him to give more light, then, without looking up, intoned, “Open your Bibles to 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy.”

Yesterday

“EEEEEEHAAAAA!”

Price almost burst into laughter as the call came up the hill. What city boys considered a holler was downright a joke, something they’d no doubt heard from some other city boy. Or TV. Price had a vague memory of some show ... Duke of Earl or something like that ... with actors pretending to be good ole boys and doing exactly the same holler the yutz down the hill had just done. Pap had taught him the real calls, offspring of the terrible Rebel Yell that Early and Ewell’s troops screeched as they thundered down on the Yankees, those calls, themselves, offspring of the ones used by Comanches and Celts and whoever else in misty times got their blood up that way. “EEEEEE OOOOOO, WOOOO EEEEEOOO!” Price screamed back. That’s how you do it, city boy.

Cass and Slickie, sitting beside him in the grass, guffawed their appreciation, whether of Price’s authenticity or the city boy’s silliness, didn’t matter. More that Price could still do the call after all these years, and that he’d actually gotten off his lazy ass and came out here with them to do the drop. Little things mean a lot, Pap had told him. You wanna keep your men’s respect, show ’em you can still do the job. And Price could still do the job. If he had his way, it’s the only thing he’d do.

“Want me to go get it?” Cass asked

“Nah,” Price said, “I’m gonna run this whole shebang. You two watch my back.”

With a petulant toss of her head, Cass nodded. Price grinned. Cass was a tough little thing. Nothing she loved more than a good fight, something you’d never know looking at her because she was slight and thin, a dove-like blue-eyed wispy blonde, closer to a porcelain princess than anything. But she was all cord and tendon and stronger than a lot of men, almost as strong as Slickie next to her, who was also nothing but ligament and muscle and so thin he could step sideways behind a tree and disappear, and so silent he’d swipe a wallet before the victim heard the first swish of jacket sleeve. He looked a lot like his sister, the same blondness and ivory skin, and some people thought him albino, but the resemblance stopped at his eyes, which were dark and fathomless. While Cass would fight for the sheer joy of it, her brother did so only when necessary, but with efficiency.

Just the kind of people you wanted at your back.

After the requisite five minutes, Price looked at them and said, "All right," then slid noiselessly around the stump, pulling the canvas bag with him. "Shouldn't be long."

"You sure you don't want me to ..." Cass bubbled up. Man, she was a bug!

"No, young'un, I can do this. I ain't that creaky." He paused. "Yet."

"But ...

"Just stay here unless it sounds like I need you."

Cass began another protest but Price shushed her. "And don't get any ideas about messing with those boys down there," he warned. "They're scared enough of us."

"Taking all the fun out of it, Uncle P," she grouched and glanced at her brother but he nodded acquiescence. Boy was all business, something Price appreciated. His sister could learn a bit of that. He gave her a warning look. "Make sure you do what I say. Don't want to tell your Daddy about it."

She paled a little at that and Price inwardly grinned and then crouched below the ivy and underbrush that sheltered the stump. He wasn't really her uncle because her daddy wasn't really Price's brother, but Price had forged ties so close with his gang that they all called each other by family titles. And while Brother Dinwiddie let his only daughter get away with everything up to and including murder, he would tolerate no disrespect of Price.

No one disrespected Price. No one.

Price sat for a minute longer and studied the terrain. Still pretty thick, even this late in October, with lots of reds and browns in the tangle as various leaves changed color. There was a lip on the slope that blocked his view of the hill base, but there was so much undergrowth between here and there that if anyone was doing anything untoward, the racket would alert him. City boys couldn't move through the woods quietly. Price could. He moved.

The bag was a bit of a weight, the three quarts of 'shine in there sloshing around but not enough to give him away. No clinking because he'd silenced them with some old newspapers he kept for that purpose. Silly things, all pre-Event with stories about wars in scumbag Middle Eastern countries that didn't exist anymore (or no one cared about enough to go see if they did), and some politician on one side complaining about some politician on the other. Every once in a while, Price showed the papers to the few people who could still read, especially the young'uns like Cass, and say, "You see how things used to be?" And she would look at him like he was from another planet and go, "Uh huh," and sidle off.

Damn kids.

He couldn't blame them. How many times had he rolled his eyes when Pap had regaled him with tales of an America made of bone and muscle where men were men and women were frightened? Price's America had been a marshmallow where MTV and video games defined your worth; that is, until the Event had turned it back into a place of bone and muscle. And Byzantine and murderous, and Corporal Price smuggled stolen goods for Colonels, who thought his talents

were best used enriching themselves instead of fighting Reds, a decision Price heartily seconded, until a Colonel stabbed him in the back and Price, in turn, stabbed him and got the gold ...

... the gold. Still safely hidden, still a legend and a rumor among his men and the target of other gangs (which ended up buried in dark woods in dark vales); a piece of it here and a piece of it there to buy checkpoint guards who overlooked what was on the back of pack mules or in the back of wagons, buying cadres and commissars who lost incriminating pieces of paper or who reassigned overzealous Directorate officers and tipped him about pending raids so the converging brigidistas found an empty barn or a clear spot in the woods instead of the expected loot. The world ran on gold, not slogans or philosophies. Price had built his country on it.

Price Land.

He chuckled. Sounded like one of those old pre-Event big box stores. And maybe it was. Price Land offered food to the starving, clothing for the naked, currency exchange for the speculator and precious jewels and art for the discriminating. In its back rooms and storage facilities and safes, Price Land piled up more coin and barter goods and promises and alliances and was profitable and a law unto itself.

So screw you, Reds.

Okay. Let's get this show on the road.

Price dropped to all fours and, carefully picking his way along the slope, low-crawled to the lip. He pulled up a bit of bluegrass and raised it above the edge, making little movements. If anyone had set up, an arrow should fly through the air about now. Or, a gunshot, if anyone were stupid enough or extravagant enough to use a rifle. No one had guns anymore except Directorate troops. At least, that anyone admitted. Hee hee.

No arrow, no slingshot, no spear, so Price rolled to his right and into a small tunnel cut under the blackberry stand and wiggled through, catching his back on the thorns from time to time and cursing them as appropriate. The things we do for safety. About ten minutes later, Price piled up at the end of the tunnel, winded. Man, he was getting old. What *was* he now, forty-three, forty-four? Something like that. No one knew the real dates anymore since the Directorate had abolished the bourgeois calendar and imposed some silly thing that marked the fall of the Blues as the First Year of the People. What nonsense. Some people did a thriving business producing illegal old style calendars, the more daring of them still listing holidays like Easter and Halloween, but business required knowing the People's dates, so Price had lost track. But he was definitely somewhere north of forty, which was a problem. These days, most people didn't live much past fifty. Thank you, People's Republic, and your systematic destruction of bourgeois concepts like health care and medicine in favor of your "People's" Clinics, waggishly nicknamed Roach Hotels because you don't check out. Fortunately, there were a couple of pre-Event doctors – well, an RN and a PA – living in Price Land with access to a well-stocked pharmacy that Price's boys kept up. But, they were



getting old, too, as were the medications, and their apprentices could only learn so much. Before too long, they'd be back to using wise women and voodoo for health care.

Progress, comrade.

Price peered through a surreptitious break in the brake and scrutinized the Drop Off Stump. There it was at the bottom of the slope, suspiciously clear of undergrowth; that is, if you were a country boy. The city boys that made up most of the local cadre wouldn't give a cleared area surrounding a stump in the middle of the woods a second glance. Price gave it third and fourth glances, looking for something wrong: a shape where there shouldn't be one, a gleam of metal off an arrowhead, dark where there should be light. Not that he expected an ambush, but circumspection was his middle name and you never knew when some idiots would get it into their heads to not only keep the product but keep their payment also. An old story, going back to the days of drug deals. Even Pap, who did not like to handle the drug side of the business, only the popskull (little pat on the canvas bag at this point), had to deal with the occasional idiot who got it in his head that he was smarter than he. Even Price, who *did* handle the drug side of the business because Pap considered it a young man's game (but still kept an eagle eye on it), had to, deal with an idiot or two himself.

Because people were, overall, idiots.

The proof was overwhelming. Pre-Event, the arrogant self-regard that made an entire country believe it was invulnerable, that it was smarter and better and oh so much more sophisticated than those backward narrow-minded generations that pre-existed it ... and what happened? Devastation on a global scale. Post-Event, the survivors believed they were so much more sophisticated and brighter than the dead around them ... and what happened? Breakout and civil war and more death and areas of the country still quarantined after all this time (like DC, which was a death trap: if the Flu didn't get you, the cannibals would). And the people today, putting their faith in a bankrupt system like gol'damned Commynism, as Pap called it, which left them starving and impoverished and enslaved.

So the chances of an idiot waiting for him down there by the stump were purty good.

The chances of idiocy popping up right smack in the middle of any given situation were so good that Price had made it an operating principle ...well, Pap had, and had beaten it into Price's brick-hard brain. He, in turn, had beaten it into his gang's brains. At least, he had tried. Some of them – I'm looking at you, Cass – suffered from an overabundance of confidence that made them dismiss idiocy as a motivating factor. That, in itself, was idiocy, and Price had imposed ironclad SOPs for every transaction, like always bring backup, keep your backup hidden, approach with great caution, and be ready to abort should anything even whiff of wrongness.

Price spent a good hard five minutes in scrutiny. Nothing whiffed. Okay.

Carefully extricating himself from the brake, Price slowly rose to his knees and waited for his movement to elicit a reaction. Nothing. Pulling the bag to

himself, he slipped its handle on a shoulder and boldly marched to the Stump. At this point, it was better to trigger the attack then go pussyfooting around, which would force the idiots to move before they were ready, and idiots, being idiots, were never ready. Price was. One hand on his throwing knife, he stepped up and pulled back the sheepskin cover. There was a canvas bag fit snug in the middle of the stump. He looked around one more time and then pulled it out and and looked inside.

Scrip. Sonofabitch.

Price almost threw the bag down in disgust, ready to stomp off because, goddamn, how many times did he have to tell people, we do not want any of that effin' People's Republic funny money? Price could print up as much of that crap as he wanted and in better quality, at that. His engraver was a true craftsman, had actually worked at the Mint and knew how to run a manual press to boot. Even the guy's apprentice could do a half-assed enough job to pass muster. So who did this city boy asshole think he was, trying to pay in it? Price was going to have words with whoever had found this customer ... wait. There's something else inside.

Price fluttered the scrip aside and smiled. Ah now, that's better. Reaching in, he pulled out a necklace. A sapphire one. Nice ...

Nice? It was freakin' awesome!

Price, who prided himself on never being impressed, gasped, because he was freakin' impressed. The stone was huge – had to be at least seventy karats – and cobalt blue, set in ... platinum? Wow. And not plain platinum, either, but dressed with an array of diamonds and smaller sapphires and ...

What. The. Fuck?

Price stared at the necklace, glittering and strobing in the sunlight. What the fuck? Even the dumbest of the dumb had to know this thing was priceless; even if it was fake, the craftsmanship alone marked it as pre-Event and, ergo, worth a whole helluva lot more than a measly three Mason jars of popskull. Heck, with this, coulda bought fifty cases, even your own still, bucko. So why in the blue blazing hell of Loch Lomond (thanks for that one, Pap) would you pay with something this exquisite?

Set up.

Price dropped the necklace and bag and flipped his own bag off the shoulder simultaneously, the shattering of glass followed immediately by the reek of almost pure grain alcohol gassing the area as he whipped around to flee, but he was too late.

“Halt!”

Followed by a sound that Price had not heard in decades:

Bolts on rifles being released.

Fuck.

He froze.

“In the name of the People's Republic of America,” shouted the same voice, “you are under arrest!”

Directorate.

Double fuck.

“Okay, okay!” Price yelled. “I surrender! Don’t shoot!”

“Put your hands on top of your head!” Halt Voice shouted and Price was happy to comply. He was happier to comply with the next order to drop to his knees because that gave him an opportunity to sneak a look around.

Five of ’em rose from deeply concealed strategic points so well done around the stump that Price hadn’t made ’em, all pointing black rifles that looked a lot like M-16s at him, all dressed in Directorate black, all wearing balaclavas ...

The Faceless.

Triple fuck.

A lot of things ran through Price’s mind as the perimeter closed on him, like how in the blue blazing Loch Lomond had this ambush even got planned without him getting word of it? What was he paying those guys in the commissar’s office for, huh? And how is it this ambush gets sprung on one of those rare occasions when Price himself showed a little bit of leadership by personally running the drop? That seemed to indicate Price had a leak somewhere, a conclusion shocking enough to make him almost forget the most important thought swirling around his brain:

What the eff was the Faceless doing here?

One of them – probably Halt Voice – stepped around to Price’s front and placed the barrel of the rifle against his forehead, giving Price an exquisite view of it. Yep, an M-16, and an old school one, at that, Vietnam era, if he was not mistaken. Talk about retro. Price was pretty sure his own M-16s, buried here and there in various safe stashes, were later variants, including numerous M4s, but this one ... duckbill flash suppressor and chrome carrier ... was an antique. And there was only one person among the Faceless who was a true aficionado of antique M-16s, the rumor being he would pay top scrip to anyone bringing him an AR-10, and that person was its commander, Maj Rickard Lawless.

Fuck beyond fuck.

“You blink,” Lawless said, “and I ventilate your skull.”

“But the sun’s in my eyes,” Price responded, because it was in his nature to be a smart ass.

In response, Lawless pressed the duckbill against Price’s forehead, no doubt leaving a mark. Price kept his eyes wide open past the point of comfort and endured the tears and the stinging because that was infinitely better than a ventilated skull. Infinitely.

But eyeballs demand blinking and, right at the point Price decided he’d opt for ventilation, Lawless stepped back as another barrel pressed against the back of Price’s neck and still another into his ribcage. Squeezing his eyes shut, he made a show of extreme discomfort as he took stock of the situation.

It wasn’t good.

Two of the Faceless were at his back, pretty much covering him except for his right side, which could have been an opportunity except another Faceless stood

there about three yards away, watching him, while the fifth one was doing perimeter security. Maybe, if Price was lucky, he could swipe the guy immediately behind him with the blade and then twist it into the leg of the guy on his ribs, but he'd never get past the guy watching and the guy on perimeter. Much less Lawless. Best to stall for time until Cass and Slickie came to his rescue – a dim prospect given that this was the Faceless – or something else occurred to him. Like something else would.

Okay, time to punt.

“Bit out of your jurisdiction, aren't you, Rickard?” Price said.

Yep, good, the surprise he was hoping for on Lawless's face, caused by the fact that Price knew his first name, much less who he was. Had to be a bit disconcerting to hear some pissant gangster out in the boondocks greet you thusly. Maybe it would disconcert him enough for Price to try the blade swipe.

Good luck with that.

Because surprise almost immediately gave way to coolness in Lawless's intense, neon green eyes, made all the more terrible by his almost invisible eyebrows. He silently studied Price for a moment before reaching down and grabbing the necklace, the barrel of his lovely old M-16 not wavering a smidgen as he did so. Guy was under control, that's for sure.

“Henry Price,” Lawless said.

Now, whose turn was it to be surprised? Outside of the gang, nobody knew his name. Further proof he had a rat somewhere in the basement.

“For violation of the People's Antiquities Act,” Lawless flourished the necklace, “you are hereby arrested and immediately forfeit all rights and privileges of review within the beneficial courts of the People's Republic.”

Well, that certainly came out of left field. “Um, wha'?”

Lawless held the necklace up in the air, a look of admiration crossing his face. Couldn't blame him. Even the most ascetic of murdering, cold-blooded Faceless assassins would be dazzled by it. “This is the Bismarck Sapphire.”

Price's blank look told Lawless all he needed and the guy actually smiled; at least, Price thought he did because the corners of his mask turned up. “It is a property of the State, stolen from the Smithsonian and therefore, outlawed in anyone's hands other than the Secretary's.”

Hmm. Price wasn't sure what Bismarck, North Dakota had to do with something like this, but out of the Smithsonian ... let's see, if Price was accurately recalling the murky events immediately post-Event, that meant one of the quarantined groups systematically looting DC had grabbed it and probably sold it to a collector like Colonel Leideig (may his soul burn in hell) and, from there, who knows? Point being, it was a rather valuable piece of jewelry that the Secretary Himself, Lord and Master of Us All General Frederick Santos Kant, would want to keep in the hands of “the People.” Which was him. Hence, the effrontery of a pissant like Price gaining possession was enough to get him shipped *toute suite* to the coal mines farther south. Do Not Pass Go. Do Not Get the Benefit of a Briable Jury. Go Directly to Hard Labor for Life.

"I must point out," Price said, mildly, "that you're the one who gave it to me."  
"So!" There was a note of triumph in Lawless's response. "You admit, in front of witnesses, that you possessed it."

"Well." Price remained mild. "Hard for me to deny that when you, yourself, were the one who gave it to me to possess. Which, of course, begs the question of where you got it from?" Price raised mild eyebrows.

Lawless waved that away. "Immaterial. The State may use its resources to prove the guilt of a social criminal."

"The word you're searching for here is entrapment."

Lawless cocked his head, clearly amused. "They said you were a cool one. And you're obviously stalling for time but you shouldn't waste any more of your breath because no help is coming. And won't be any trial, so your entrapment defense won't get the time of day." He let that sink in. "Let's go. I'm very eager to have a conversation with you before the mines claim you. I'd really like to know how you know who I am." He nodded at the Faceless behind Price.

Crap, Price thought, as the two rifle barrels jammed viciously into his ribs. That's a discussion I don't want to have. That's a job I don't want to have, coal mining, that is, although it's supposed to be honorable work. If you live through it. And Lawless is right, there is no help coming so let's go down fighting, shall we? Price made an exaggerated lurch forward off the gun barrels, like he'd been pushed too hard, his hands slapping the ground in front of him and ready to pull the first of the throwing knives.

*Thwap! Thwap!*

Followed by, "*Erf! Oogh!*" The sounds usually made by targets of Slickie's two crossbows, in this case, the two Faceless behind Price.

As Price threw himself flat, he saw Lawless whirl and drop his barrel on the blackberry brake and cut loose on full auto, the roar of .223 rounds not heard in this Valley since the War, startling, loud, and deadly as Lawless systematically mowed through the underbrush. Two more full autos joined him as the two other Faceless added their firepower, more intent on the hidden threat in the bushes than on Price.

Move.

Spinning to his knees, Price side handed the first throwing knife at the closest Faceless, catching him neatly in the upper right chest. Without stopping to examine his handiwork, he flipped the second knife underhanded at the farther Faceless. Not as good a throw, but it caught the rifle and threw the Faceless off balance enough to send his bullets wild. A second later, another crossbow bolt blossomed in the middle of that one's chest.

Four down, one to go.

Continuing his spin, Price had the third knife up and behind his ear and ready to split Lawless's back with it when he saw that he wasn't facing the assassin's back. No, he was facing the barrel of Lawless's lovely antique-but-definitely-in-working-order rifle, pointed directly at Price's lovely head. One skull ventilation, coming up.

*Wham!*

Cass had burst out of the brake and, with the jodo stick in her right hand, slammed the barrel of Lawless's rifle down to the ground, where it ventilated a lot of ants. She then slapped him across the forehead with the jodo stick in her left hand, the two moves so simultaneous and fast that Lawless was on his back, stunned, as Price sat there, equally stunned.

"Come ON!" Cass shrieked at him as she continued her momentum around and headed pell-mell for the brake.

Price was about to raise an objection, that, instead of running away, they should take advantage of this situation to finish off one of the most notorious assassins of this regime, one who had, somehow, managed to penetrate Price's once-thought-impenetrable organization and gained a lot of information on him, but there was a lot of shouting and crashing coming from down the hill. Of course. Reinforcements. And not Price's.

Leaping to his feet, Price hit full stride in one run, slipping another knife in his hand as he came alongside Lawless. Hate to cut and run, but ... Lawless, though, rolled away and all Price managed to do was catch him deep in the shoulder. Lawless's grunt of pain would have to satisfy and Price hit the edge of the brake at full speed, diving through to avoid the majority of the tangle and gain the tunnel. Low crawling at the speed of light, he emerged below the lip. A big push and he was standing on the other side where Cass crouched, panting.

"What the hell—" began the impromptu chewing out that would emphasize the foolhardiness of taking on a superior fighting unit like the Faceless but, then, thank you, when she fell flat on her face. "Get down!" she yelled. You didn't have to tell Price twice; he hit the dirt.

Dien Bien Phu.

The entire lip and the brush behind it exploded as about ten thousand various rounds from various automatic weapons shredded the area into hay. Price swore he heard the deeper sound of something bigger, 7.56 or even .50, helping shred the area into hay.

All for me?

As Price puzzled over this extraordinary display of very rare firepower dedicated to a little pissant like himself, Cass crawled up the protected side of the slope, as protected as a little bit of rock and overhang could be under such an onslaught, and Price followed. After what felt like a year, and under the serenade of what sounded like every last round in the People's Republic inventory, they crawled around the stump and fell, gasping, into the little depression behind it.

Better protected here, because even the lip of the slope couldn't keep all the rounds out, especially the big ones but Price was disturbed to see some of the trees on either side of the stump splintering under the assault. "We need to get the hell out of here," Price said.

"Way ahead of you," said Slickie as he appeared on the back of the dip, crossbow strapped to his back, four jars of popskull in his hands.

"Go now," Price urged, "Drink later." And he gathered his knees to flee.

Slickie set the four jars down, grabbed one, and hurled it against the trees on the right, shattering it. He did the same to the trees on the left, and then the front of the stump leading to the lip. He then knelt, pulled out a striker, and threw sparks into his tinderbox.

“What the hell are you doing?” Price said.

The tinder caught and Slickie blew it into full flame and lit some sticks he was carrying and tossed them into the underbrush.

*Whoosh!* The popskull, splashed across the terrain, caught immediately. Good batch, that.

“What the hell are you doing?” Price repeated.

“They can’t follow us,” Slickie explained as the flames caught at the dry, thick underbrush, suddenly roaring all along the slope, making for the lip. And for them, if they didn’t get their butts in gear.

Didn’t have to tell Cass twice; she was already beating feet up the opposite slope. Slickie squatted there, waiting for Price’s old man’s brain to catch up and spur him into action. “Sure wish I’d grabbed that necklace,” he grouched and ran for his life.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

D. Krauss resides in the Shenandoah Valley. He's been a cotton picker, a sodbuster, a librarian, a surgical orderly, the guy who paints the little white line down the middle of the road, a weatherman, a door-kickin' shove-gun-in-face lawman, an intel analyst, a school-bus driver, and a layabout. He has been married over 45 years to the same woman, and has a wildman bass guitarist for a son.

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