

SOUTHERN FRIED JAIL

(The Valiant)

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Smashwords Edition

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When I think of being brave, I think of the Scottish hero "Braveheart" who inspired his people to defend themselves and their homeland against the barbaric English armies in the face of overwhelming odds. He was captured, quartered and hung like a piece of meat but his "brave heart" lived on and became the cry for independence from tyranny. Joan of Arc was also brave and went into battle as a 17-year-old girl, leading the French to victory because she was inspired by visions from God. But what of the young girl from Iowa, whose battles were not so easy to see and must be fought alone in the heart and mind? Saving yourself is harder than fighting with a whole community, who as a group, forges alliances of strength and purpose to overcome. What of young ones, alone, unsure of where the battle is and how to fight it alone!

Somehow I always seemed to make my getaways at night, ending up on the highway to somewhere with my thumb sticking out. Feeling no pain and full of pizza and beer, I left my magazine sales adventure without much fanfare. When it's over, it is over! Destiny had brought me to the South, not a place that made me want to settle down and make pies. Time to head back north. I stuck out my thumb, watching trucks and cars that were actually going somewhere, pass me by. I wondered if I looked my best or my worst. I didn't feel much like Marilyn, my alter-ego, that night. Marilyn was the flirty, fun side of me, the one who saw the humor in everything. Tonight my serious personae took charge. Maybe I had a premonition my next adventure was going to be less fun and more like one of the life lessons I needed to learn but was trying to avoid.

A car slowed down and stopped. "Hi, where you going, Miss, Miss?" I put on my best Marilyn act, "Oh, just heading to I-20. I'm Marilyn."

"I'm Buck. I can give you a ride. Get in."

Buck pushed some things off the passenger seat onto the floor and motioned for me to get in. I sat down and off we went. While he studied the road, I studied his face. His pointy nose and greased back hair reminded me of a duck. What was his name? Did he say Duck or Buck? The collar on his shiny blue polyester suit was showing a little wear. Disco Duck? Disco Duck Buck. I started to laugh but cut my snort short with small talk.

"So, what do you do for work? I figured that was a fair trade for a free ride. But the conversation went south in a hurry. He asked me where my parents were. *Huh? Who was this guy?* I wasn't sure how to answer so I offered very little at that point. "They're in another state."

"Are you headed home? Is that where you are going?" *Cop. He must be a cop.*

"This next exit is perfect. You can just drop me off here." √

"You've been drinking? Are you old enough to drink?"

"Sure", I said. "I'm 18 and I can legally drink." I flipped my hair a little bit and looked at him sideways with my best Marilyn pout. "Maybe we could get together to have a drink some time." *Yeah, right. That will never happen. I'm blowing this pop stand as soon as I get out of this car.*

Then he laid it out for me. "Look Marilyn, I'm an off-duty cop and it's not safe for you to be wandering around the highways at this time of night. Especially since I can smell alcohol on your breath. You should be home or with friends or with a boyfriend. But

since you don't seem to have a real destination, I'm taking you to jail to keep you safe. Since you say you are 18, I can't force you to go home but I can treat you like one of the drunks and throw you into one of our lovely jail cells for the night. Maybe home will look a little better when you see daylight tomorrow.”

Looks like I wasn't leaving Columbia as quickly as I planned. I wondered if Buck had any clue how bad home could be for all the kids he picked up off the streets. Maybe he was saving them, maybe not, but I didn't fall into that category. This was an adventure. I wasn't lost, messed-up or in trouble. Maybe a little tipsy but come on, I'm not a 15-year-old runaway.

His threat of jail didn't frighten me because I had never experienced jail, had never been to jail, didn't know anyone who had been to jail and “Orange Is The New Black” wasn't even a thought in some TV producer's head. I had sometimes wondered what would happen if my mother had put me in a mental institution like she threatened during one of her many “episodes”. There they can give you a lobotomy and throw away the key. But with Mom dead, all her crazy ideas about lobotomies and strapping violin strings to my back to improve my posture died with her.

Buck took me to a rundown, hole-in-the-wall jailhouse. It looked something out of Cool Hand Luke, that movie with Paul Newman who was hunted by dogs and cops through the swamps and held in a dark, smelly jail. Only there weren't any dogs and the lights were too bright, way too bright and hurt my eyes.

Buck started the booking process and gave a brief report of why he brought me in. “Marilyn, give them your I.D.” The woman behind the counter started looking through my backpack then looked at my I.D. “Your I.D. says Louise something. Who is Marilyn? Is this a fake? What's up?”

“Marilyn is my nickname.”

“And what is this?” She held up a baggie. She yelled it loud enough for the entire jail to hear. “It's pot, Buck! This is whole different thing. You know what we do with druggies! You may get away with this up North, but we don't tolerate hippies here in the South.”

“How did that get in there? It's not mine really. Someone must have put it in there.” I honestly had no idea where the baggie came from. I wasn't afraid or anything...too naive to be afraid. I just thought they would believe me.

“You better search her,” Buck said. The woman took me into the little search room and touched almost every part of my body. She made me take everything off and said, “Spread your legs.” She was about to search me “up-there” when I cried out, “What are you doing?”

“If we find any more drugs, you will never get out of here.”

“Well there isn't anything up-there!”

For some reason, she believed me. Maybe it was the look of utter horror on my face. Maybe it was the tears streaming down my face. Whatever the reason, she stopped and said, “Alright, put your clothes back on and come with me.”

She led me to a huge room with a cement floor. She gave me a bedroll, which was basically a blanket, to sleep on and told me to shut-up, lay down and go to sleep. As soon as she left, I surveyed the sparse surroundings. There was a lone wooden bench to one side of the room. In the center were some smaller cells. I could hear two voices coming from one of these inner cells. Besides those women, I was the only other tenant.

Here I was in jail in Columbia, South Carolina. I didn't know anyone, had no money and they had found a baggie of drugs in my backpack. It was too much for my brain to handle, so I unrolled my bedroll and fell asleep instantly, hoping it would all disappear in the morning.

During the night, I woke up several times, feeling the damp, cold floor, hearing some jive radio station in the other room, the lights still blaring. There was a new tenant, an old woman snoring like a trucker, sleeping next to me. I wonder if Buck had picked her up, too. Every time I closed my eyes, my mind went back to an old familiar nightmare. *A recurring dream that had been playing in my head as far back as I could remember. I could fly like Superman but never land. Every time I tried to, there were throngs of people shaking their fists and yelling at me so I had to fly higher to get away from them. I hadn't had that dream in months, but now it was back.* Not sure why. Maybe it was because I felt I couldn't stay around the same people for too long for fear the abuse would start up again. And here I was in jail, a place notorious for dishing out abuse.

At 5:00 a.m. I opened my eyes to see a huge guard hovering over me. He rapped his baton against the wall and told me to get up, roll up my barely-there bedroll and get ready for breakfast. As soon as he left I unrolled it and went back to sleep. It wasn't long before I woke up to an explosion of sound. The guard was back, smashing his baton on the wall just inches above my head. "GET UP! Ya'll is in enough trouble. If I catch you lying down again, Missy, you'll be in a heap more trouble.

His last remark shocked me into reality. I quickly rolled up my bed and shoved it in a corner. Now what? Breakfast, bathroom, coffee, then get back on the road. I knew they had to grant me a phone call, but who to call? The squeaking of the main cell door broke into my thoughts. Breakfast was served. One look and one whiff told me it wasn't from a five star restaurant. The food had so much pepper I couldn't eat it...beans, hominy, some gray stuff, everything was caked with pepper.

What I wouldn't give for some decent food. French toast with apples and cinnamon. Eggs and link sausage. Eggs. Eggs made me think of my brother, John. Lot of things reminded me of him. Now that he was gone, memories were all I had. *It was a year ago October, close to Halloween. John was driving our little red '64 Valiant. Sue, his girlfriend was sitting in the middle and I was in the passenger seat. I had the window wing open. This turned out to be a bad idea. It was cold and we were out doing what any red-blooded kid from Iowa did around Halloween. We were egging. Sue held the carton of eggs on her lap while John and I threw them at the cars parked along Washington, one of the two main streets in our small town. Zip! Splat! Laughter. Zip! Splat! Laughter. I took the last egg from the carton, took careful aim at a parked car and let it rip. The egg hit the car and ricocheted back in through the wing window. It happened so fast I didn't know what happened. I looked at Sue and she burst out laughing. Egg was dripping from my nose. And my eyes. And my chin. My face was*

covered with yellow yolk and quickly freezing. We were laughing so hard John had to pull over. It was hilarious. Being with John was always fun. No matter what was going on, he could put me in a good frame of mind. Being in jail is a state of mind. I know that now. Actually, I felt safer in jail than at home. Home had been a psychological torture chamber, worse than any gritty little jail in Columbia, South Carolina. John had been my savior, my knight in shining armor. But he was dead. And I had no delusion that any of my remaining family would come to my rescue. They never had before.

My mind returned to the present and I took a closer look at the newcomer. She was an old lady, probably in her 70's. She had some tobacco and papers and was expertly rolling cigarettes. Her wiry gray hair stuck out all over, like she had stuck her finger in a light socket. It reminded me of Einstein's hair on a bad day. Her thin arms looked like sticks poking out of her ragged I♥NY t-shirt. A pair of gray men's pants with a rope belt completed the ensemble. Her clothes screamed of life on the streets and the despair that goes with it, but her eyes told a different story. She had robin's egg blue eyes that seemed translucent. She looked my way and I saw a gentle soul who seemed to wonder which wrong turn had brought her to this point in life. Had she been in a mental institution when the government closed them and threw everyone out onto the streets? What had happened to her? She smiled and motioned for me to sit down beside her. She handed me some papers and tobacco and taught me how to roll. After a few hours, I got pretty good at it. Who says there's no rehab in jail?

While we rolled, she talked about herself and how she came to be a guest of the South Carolina justice system. Just like I suspected, Buck had picked her up. *He kept pretty busy for an off-duty cop.* She said she had a bad habit of getting snookered, then sleeping it off on top of graves. She had been doing it for years. All the police knew her and had dubbed her Graveyard Gertie. They would pick her up once a week and throw her in jail to sleep it off. Sleeping on graves. What had happened to this lost soul? A shrink would have a field day with her.

The sun was baking the jail now and the cell was stuffy. I was tired of rolling cigarettes and got up to stretch. When the female guard came to pick up the breakfast trays, I asked her when I was getting out. She pushed out a short staccato laugh. Her laugh made me nervous and I started pacing around the large room. The two black women in the inner cell were getting agitated and started talking loudly. As I passed by, one of them walked up to the bars and screamed, "Get my baby. Get my baby."

"Where is it?"

"It just ran through the bars."

I peered hard into the small cell and my eyebrows slowly raised as I understood what was happening. The second "woman" was just a wad of blankets. The one lady had been talking to herself; she was being held in the inner cell because she was schizophrenic. Reality hit so hard I think my heart skipped a beat. This was a lot like home. I had merely traded one cell for another; one crazy mother for another. I had to get out of here! My mind frantically searched for options.

The only person I could call was Harry from the magazine crew. He was it. I couldn't call Dad or my older brother who I hadn't heard from since John died. I asked a female

guard if I could make a phone call. She was friendly and sympathetic and led me to the phone. Harry answered on the second ring. I told him where I was. Fortunately, Harry felt somewhat responsible since I had disappeared on his watch. He would come to get me. Within two hours he was there and paid my fine for vagrancy. Thank heavens they didn't find any actual drugs, only seeds, in my backpack or I'd probably still be in jail.

Harry drove me to the bus station. On the way he gave me a stern talking to about taking risks and the dangers of hitchhiking. Then he softened a bit and said, "You just need to go back home, Louise. Things will work out. You'll see." He bought me a bus ticket to Des Moines and carried my backpack to the gate. Before leaving, he gave me a bear hug and wished me good luck. One thing I was learning was that strangers were nicer to me than my own family – and more dependable.

As I stood waiting for the bus, I took inventory of my current situation. I had no money, was hungry and definitely wasn't going back home. I pondered for a minute then came up with a plan. I found a short, thin guy working one of the ticket windows, approached him, laid my boobs on the counter, and started crying. *Thanks to the lessons I learned from the traveling magazine crew, I knew a thing or two about acting and manipulation.* Sobbing, I told the guy behind the counter that my boyfriend had just been in a motorcycle accident and I had to go to the hospital to see him. He was understanding and offered me a hankie. Then he gave me a full refund on the bus ticket. Voila! My immediate problems were solved. I had money, got lunch from the vending machine, walked to the highway and stuck my thumb out. After this serious experience, my next adventure was just what I needed - a ride with some fun, free spirits who let me drive their 18-wheeler on the great Salt Flats.