

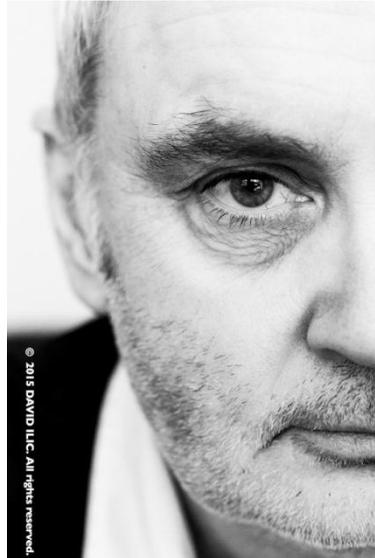
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On Lucky Shores

by

Kerry J Donovan

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Head shot image, David Ilic ©2015.

The city/town of Lucky Shores is a pure figment of the author's imagination.

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DEDICATION:

For her final proofread and unending support, I thank my special backstop and darling wife of thirty-nine years,
Jan.

She puts up with a lot and I love her to bits.

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Table of Contents:

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Part 1

Traveling man

Verse #1

*Snow capped peaks they tower high overhead,
Keep a-moving son, you're a long time dead.
Stretch out them legs, find a bed for the night,
The sun's your lead, got to follow the light.*

Chorus

*On Lucky Shores, On Lucky Shores,
Been through the wars, On Lucky Shores.*

Chapter 1

Autumn in the Colorado Rockies

The minute the thunderheads formed over the craggy eastern mountains, Chet Walker knew it was going to be a long afternoon and a longer night. He should have stayed on the highway and would pay for his mistake with a cold, wet night in the open. If he had any sense, he'd turn tail and head back to the valley, but he'd made his decision and no way would he quit. He was too damned stupid.

Walk and hitchhike.

Walker's way of life. At least, it had been for the previous eighteen months, but hitchhiking wasn't much of an option with no traffic on the road.

Not a single car had passed since he'd turned off the highway seven hours earlier. Where the hell were all the goddamned cars?

The harness of his backpack bit deep into his shoulders. It would be lighter without the guitar case attached to the pack with specially made straps, but dumping Suzy, his handmade six-string acoustic, wasn't an option. She was his meal ticket. Without Suzy, he'd have to jump back on the treadmill, and that wasn't going to happen. He'd made his decision on that front, burnt his bridges.

He tugged up the collar on his denim jacket, jammed his wide-brimmed hat down further, and clomped up the hill toward the jagged-toothed, snow-dusted Rockies.

Yep, he should have stayed in the valley, but he'd made up his mind and wouldn't turn back.

He kicked a golf-ball-sized rock. It skipped off the cracked and pitted asphalt, threw up a puff of gray dust, and buried itself in a clump of dry grass. Walker cursed. Kicking rocks wouldn't do any good. The way his luck was running, he'd likely break a toe. He funneled his anger into a faster, foot-stomping march.

The driving beat and fresh air cleared his head. A melody, dark and brooding formed. The tune's rhythm matched time with his footfalls. The creation of a song, raw but with potential, improved his mood. Without breaking stride, he took his notepad from his back pocket and jotted down the refrain to work on later. It wouldn't be ready for the next open mic session, but maybe for the next gig, or the one after that.

On the highway, down in the valley, the billboard offering *Open Mic Sessions at the Lucky Shores Saloon, Every Friday Night* had grabbed his attention, as was its intention. The painting below the words—a small town hugging the shores of an impossibly blue lake—promised much, but the line below was what sold him: *Lakeside Resort Only Twenty Minutes Away*.

Twenty minutes by car, maybe fifteen miles, should have taken no more than five hours to walk, even uphill. He'd taken the detour and had ended up in the middle of nowhere. The longer he walked, the more he grew to hate the memory of that sign. Damned thing should have read, *Twenty Minutes by Rocket Ship*.

After three hours of hard marching he reached the lower slopes. Two hours later, he reached foothills, rougher ground, but still no Lucky Shores, not even a sign post. An hour after that? Steeper slopes, rugged terrain, boulders, minor tracks leading off deeper into the forest, and the occasional flat spot overlooking a gorge or two.

Where in the name of God was this Lucky Shores?

He paused to take a slug of water from the bottle strapped to his backpack's belt and to soak in the view. The higher he climbed, the harder he had to work to pull in enough oxygen. The thin air took its toll, but the view was almost worth the effort.

Beautiful, but isolated, empty of humanity.

Scrub brush on either side of the road, bare of leaves, offered no shelter. Pine trees, the closest a couple hundred yards away, offered little promise. Further still, the yellow-leaved aspens on the lower mountain slopes added color, but were too far away to provide cover from the approaching storm. And it was coming. The angry clouds promised that.

He slid the bottle back into its home and marched on.

The wind picked up, changed from breeze to gale, and whipped dirt and pine needles into eddies at his feet. Pant legs flapped against hiking boots. The sky darkened into an early dusk and the temperature plummeted

faster than the Denver Broncos' hopes in the latest Super Bowl. At least they'd reached the grand final, unlike Walker's team, the Jets, who disappeared without trace, as usual. But as his father used to say, along with every other diehard sports fan on the planet, "There's always next year, son." Good old Dad. The tank's-half-full kind of guy, he'd made a success of his life—unlike his only son.

One day, Dad. One day.

The wind kept veering. It blew hard into his face one second and slammed into his back the next. At times, it made keeping his footing difficult. The open road, little more than a broken down track now, left him exposed.

Dime-sized raindrops hit the ground and turned the roadside dust into pockmarked mud—the clouds' warm-up routine for the main act to come.

Walker shrugged off the pack and checked the latches on the hard guitar case, making sure it was secure and watertight. He could put up with a little bad weather, but Suzy most definitely could not.

His lightweight raincoat, stored at the top of the pack, slipped over his jacket easy enough. He pulled the zipper all the way up to his throat, wrangled the pack back into place, and started up the hill again.

It had become his life. Forever walking, and recently, always upward. Heading west, he'd reached the Rockies, but the Rockies weren't part of his plan. He had no plan but to keep running from his old life. No way was he going back. No way in hell.

The niggling twinge in his left calf had worsened during the day and reminded him of the injury. Not that he needed a prompt—the ugly-assed scar and the recurring ache were more than enough.

The words of his college wrestling coach floated into his head. "Pain is your friend, Walker," he'd say whenever 'Walker the Stalker' complained of an injury. "Use it to focus your mind."

His mind was focused, all right—focused on the pain and the rain and the water running down the drain. Walker repeated the phrase. It had a cadence that might work for the new song. He ran it through in his head, added the lyrics to the melody, and stored them away in his memory as a distinct possibility. The new song had promise. Despite the evil end to a long, hard day, things might be on the up. As his mom used to say, "Be positive, Chester. You'll feel better." An upbeat influence on his life—a saint. Didn't mean she was always right, though.

After twenty more paces, the clouds cracked and the real storm hit.

Great. You asked for it, Walker.

The jacket offered some protection, but the driving rain sought out every gap at neck, ankle, and cuff. It drummed on his hat and dripped from its brim. It beat on his shoulders and plastered his pants to his legs. His boots splashed in the runoff and before long, the sodden denim rubbed the inside of his thighs raw.

If his mom was around, she'd probably belt out a chorus of "Oh What a Beautiful Mornin'" even though it was late afternoon, and anything but beautiful. He inherited his singing voice from his mom. Something else to be grateful to her for.

Daylight faded as the storm increased in ferocity. Whatever he'd done to piss off the world, he could take it. He glanced up.

Bring it on, buddy. Throw it at me, why don't you?

The new song swirled through his head again, darker this time, and with a hint more thumping, grinding blues. The rain on his backpack augmented the rhythm section. He could almost feel Suzy hum. With work, he might turn the new tune into an anthem. An anthem to a stubborn SOB who refused to turn back.

A splash of yellow lit the road from behind, and the deep rattling growl of an engine with a leaky exhaust broke through the next rumble of thunder.

He spun around.

A car!

It sped toward him. The big old tank of a thing wallowed on soft springs and threw up a blur of spray in its wake. Headlights bobbed and dipped, showing bright in the half-light of dusk.

Excited, Walker shrugged off the pack, turned the reflective strip to face the car, and stuck out a thumb. He even raised a hopeful smile.

"C'mon buddy. Stop. Please stop."

The car flashed past. The driver, a blur of white face and long gray hair, didn't even slow.

"Asshole!" Walker yelled, and ducked his head to avoid a face full of gritty backwash.

His thumb hadn't worked, so he flipped the guy the finger. He hunkered down and glowered at the fading taillights. Walker's fault, not the driver's. It's what he deserved for taking the back roads.

Dumbass!

Brake lights flared and a percussive *bang* added to the dissonant beat of the storm.

The car shuddered. Its rear end fishtailed left, then whipped right. It straightened as the driver fought for control. He over-corrected the steering, and the old car slid sideways. Tires caught the verge. The car flipped. It bounced off a roadside boulder back onto the road and barrel-rolled twice.

Sparks flew as metal scraped on asphalt, screeching, squealing.

The car slewed and shuddered to a grinding, screaming halt in a cloud of spray and mud. It ended up on its roof, rocking.

"Christ Almighty!" Walker's voice sounded unreal in his ears.

He crouched, covered his face, and counted to five, waiting for an explosion that didn't arrive.

What you waiting for? Move, man, move.

Walker placed the backpack and Suzy on a mound of stones at the side of the road, and took off, feet and arms pumping. Uphill, but with the wind at his back, he closed the gap quickly, sucking in great gulps of the thin mountain air.

He splashed through puddles, breath ragged and loud, and fought the stabbing fire spreading through his leg.

Sweat dripped from his scalp and stung his eyes.

With one hundred yards to go, sodden clothing sticking to his skin, the wind took his hat. It bounced, flew, and disappeared into the brush.

Thirty yards from the wreck, his calf gave way, and his leg buckled. He pitched toward the asphalt, tucked in his chin, rolled to his feet with barely a break in momentum, and shuffle-hopped the final few paces.

He stopped, breathing hard.

Remember the protocol.

Safety first, check the scene. He wouldn't be of any use to the driver if he injured himself.

Despite the hammering rain, the whole area reeked of gasoline. The car's engine had died, as had the headlights, but raindrops hissed on a crinkling hot exhaust pipe.

No fire, but was it safe? How could he tell?

"Hello?" he screamed. "Can you hear me in there?"

Silence.

Nothing but the raging storm.

He dropped to his knees by the passenger's door and pushed through the shattered window. Glass chips fell from the window frame. Elbows crunched on shattered glass, and he bit back the growing, shuddering fear. As long as he could see daylight through the cracked windshield, he'd be okay. It wasn't too dark, not yet.

He'd be okay. There was a way out this time.

He kept reminding himself that he could breathe, he really could.

The passenger's compartment—a crush of leather, cloth, and broken glass—did a good job of hindering his progress.

Coffee, spilled from a crumpled travel mug, swirled in a mound of glass chippings piled on the inverted roof. The front passenger's seat, torn from its frame, lay across the driver's seat. No airbags in a car this ancient. Blood dripped into the puddle, its iron stench mixed with the harsh smell of coffee and gas.

From the displaced driver's seat, which hung at a forty-five degree angle, a man groaned. His torso was pressed hard against the door frame, his head craned at an unnatural angle.

"Hang on, buddy. I'm here," Walker called, and sounded more confident than he felt.

He bit back the growing terror—room, he needed more room—and tried to ignore the churning in his guts. As long as the daylight lasted, he'd be fine. No time to worry. No time to think about the crush, the lack of space, the restricted movement. He'd be fine, if he concentrated on the driver.

That's it, concentrate on the driver.

Walker edged further in, twisting and forcing his way under the broken passenger seat. He shuffled through the wreckage and squeezed past the obstruction.

Long gray hair hung in the air above the puddle of blood and coffee.

Walker reached up and pressed his index and middle fingers to the side of the man's neck. He found the pulse, weak, rapid. He slithered forward on his back, until his head bumped against the rear-view mirror. It broke from its mounting and dropped into the puddle below his head.

The mangled steering wheel pushed against the driver's chest, but the folds of the man's sweater hid the wound. With great care, Walker stretched out an arm, pulled back the cloth, and took a deep, slow breath. It wasn't good.

How had the guy survived?

One of the steering wheel's spokes had sheared away from the grip and punctured the man's ribcage close to the sternum. It fixed him to the seat like a butterfly pinned to a display board. Without the seatbelt and the door column taking most of his weight, the spoke would likely have killed him outright.

The driver groaned again and his left hand twitched.

"Don't move," Walker said, taking the hand, and trying to keep the rising panic from his voice. "There's a piece of metal sticking in your chest."

"Hurts," the man said, his voice weak, rasping.

"I know." Walker pushed closer. He tried to ignore the shattered glass digging into his back—tried to ignore the cramped space. "Don't struggle. You'll make it worse."

Walker closed his eyes. What could he do in the middle of nowhere, but watch the man die? He couldn't think straight, his mind a screaming whirl of panic. He was stuck inside a coffin, as trapped as the driver was.

A heavy gust rocked the car. The man whimpered and turned his head to stare at Walker through pleading eyes. A neatly trimmed beard framed an agonized grimace. Seconds passed before the sideways-on face relaxed as the spasm subsided. Pale blue eyes tried to focus. He said something, but another whistling gust and a heavier downpour drowned out his words.

"Easy, I'm here. You're not alone." He surveyed the cab. "Don't suppose you've got a cell?"

"Huh?" The man blinked hard and frowned. Blood stained his lips. Pink froth bubbled from his mouth and his breathing rattled.

Walker recognized the signs of a punctured lung. "Phone. You got a cell phone?" he repeated.

"No."

"Great."

The man's blue lips and gray skin told of major blood loss. Walker doubted he had long to live.

Walker searched. A tan cloth poked out from beneath the rear seat. He reached up and tugged. A jacket flopped free and fell into his face. The reek of cigar smoke, whiskey, and saloon bars overpowered the other smells.

The driver barked a weak cough and groaned. A trail of blood and spittle ran from his mouth into his ear. He scrunched up his face and his eyelids fluttered. Walker wiped the trail clean with the sleeve of the jacket.

"Get me ... out." The driver paused to suck in a shallow, congested breath.

Walker shook his head. "Can't risk it. Don't know how far in that spike goes."

The driver snaked out a hand and grabbed Walker's wrist. "Please?"

Again, Walker shook his head. "No. Too dangerous."

Taking great care, he draped the jacket over the driver's shoulders and tented it over the steering wheel. Partial protection was better than none. He took the man's hand. "There's a phone in my pack. Hold on until I get back. Won't be but a minute. Okay?"

"Don't go!" the driver pleaded, eyes wide, head twisted as much as he could without moving his shoulders. He squeezed Walker's hand, the grip surprisingly strong.

The jacket slipped.

Walker readjusted it, then leaned closer. "Listen, if I don't get my cell, you're in real trouble. I'll be right back."

Without waiting for a response, Walker slithered backward through the opening as fast as possible. Once outside, he struggled to his feet and leaned his back against the wreck, breathing hard, absorbing the openness.

Move, for fuck's sake. Move. What's wrong with you?

Walker pushed away from the car and headed downhill. Cold wind and rain chilled his face. He expected to return to a corpse.

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Chapter 2

A Cold, Wet Night in Hell

Walker pressed forward, eyes watering, biting back curses for leaving his ‘emergency use only’ cell phone in the backpack.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

If this didn’t count as an emergency, what did? He couldn’t remember the last time he’d used the damned thing, or the last time he’d charged its battery. Would it even fire up?

The slicing wind drove freezing rain into his face and whipped his hair into his open mouth. Each step he took planted another spear of flame into his injured calf.

By the time he reached the backpack, he couldn’t feel his hands or face. He could barely feel his legs either, but that was probably a mercy.

Numb fingers took two attempts to release the slippery toggle clamp that secured the side pocket. He fumbled for the cell phone. Rain-slick fingers let it slip from his grip. It fell into the mud.

“Idiot!”

He grabbed the cell phone, wiped the face clean. Praying it would still work, he held down the power button for the full three seconds. The screen glowed white, the power bar registered four from five, but the signal strength came up empty. In desperation, he dialed 9-1-1 and pressed enter.

Nothing. No signal, no answer. Wonderful.

With the phone pressed against his ear, he hefted the pack onto his shoulders, and turned around. Stifling a coughing fit, he put one foot in front of the other and trudged back up the hill.

He slogged on, soaking wet, shaking from the cold and the fear. Walker pushed himself forward, although he could offer the driver nothing but company—assuming he could force himself back into the confines of the crushed car. Back into that cramped space in the gathering darkness? He shuddered.

No one should die alone.

The words echoed back from a time in his recent past. Would everything he ever did and everyone he ever met remind him of those horrific days and nights?

Concentrate, Walker. One thing at a time. This thing, this time.

Two hundred yards from the wreck, the cell phone became the focus of Walker’s whole being. The lightning and thunder barely made it through to his consciousness. He dialed again and again and willed the phone to respond.

“Come on, answer. Plea—”

“Lucky Shores Reserve Operator. Please state the nature of your emergency.”

“Hello?” he yelled and stopped dead. “Hello? Can you hear me?” He considered falling to his knees in thanks, but didn’t want to risk losing the signal.

“Yes, sir, I can hear you,” answered the calm, warm voice of an angel. “Please state the nature of your emergency.”

He’d never heard anything so beautiful. Her voice faded in and out, but was clear enough to understand what she said. He told her what happened in a rush and finished with, “Don’t know exactly where, but I left the highway at the *Lucky Shores Open Mic* sign.”

“Sir? You’re breaking up. Repeat—”

Thunder cracked loud and an arc of lightning clawed though the sky.

Then, silence.

“Hello? Hello? Can you hear me?” he screamed but met nothing but more silence. Walker scowled at the sky, pressed the cell harder against his ear, and stumbled on, moving as fast as he could. He dialed again and again.

Nothing but dead air.

He lost the fight against coughing and hacked his throat raw by the time he made it back to the wreck. The thin air didn’t give up enough oxygen. Dizziness hit him in waves.

A double flash of lightning showed him the rear of the rusted '75 Dodge Charger. He stuffed the cell into his pocket, rested the pack against the rear door panel—Suzy's case toward the protective metal—and knelt beside the open window.

Still breathing hard, but with a little more control, he found his flashlight. He threw the switch, the beam was a blessed salve to his terror.

With the light slicing through the blackness, he found the strength to push his head and shoulders through the window opening and past the shattered glass. His whole body shook. He fought the need to back out, fought the fear, and swallowed the bitter taste of shame.

Fuck's sake, Walker. A man's dying in there. Fight through. You won't be trapped. Not this time. Move.

The relative quiet inside the car helped. No rumble of falling rocks this time, like the ones in his nightmares. His shaking calmed to an irregular gut-rippling tremor.

The flashlight's LED bulbs threw out a sharp, white beam and cast deep, black shadows inside the shattered hulk. The harsh light showed what a wonder it had been for anyone to survive in such a mess—nobody built muscle cars in the '70s with safety high on the priority list.

Walker played the light over the driver's face. "Hey, buddy. You still with me?"

The man groaned and his eyes opened, clouded with pain. "Thought you'd ... left me."

"No way. I got through. Help's on its way," Walker said, forcing a half-smile through the words. "Be here any minute now."

A little white lie couldn't hurt a dying man.

Walker edged as close as he dared, blocking the window, acting as a shield against the weather. "How you doing?"

"Fine ... and ... dandy." The man wheezed. "Never better."

Walker grinned, stuck the flashlight into his mouth, and rubbed some feeling back into his fingers. He checked the driver's pulse. It felt stronger, slower. Maybe not. It might have had something to do with Walker's fingers being so damned numb, or his senses dulled from fighting his inner terrors. The blood seemed to have stopped dripping, although he couldn't be sure.

"Who ... are you?" The driver's voice trailed off in a quiet cough.

"Name's Walker, Chet Walker. Pleased to meet you. Don't worry about shaking hands. We've already done that."

The driver's head lolled closer to the pool of thickening blood and coffee. Walker stretched out his arm and eased the man's face clear of the debris.

"What's your name?"

"Huh?"

"Your name. What do I call you? If we're gonna be here until the rescue team arrives, might as well get to know each other."

The driver frowned as though having a problem remembering. "Michael," he said eventually. "Michael Dolan ... Mickey to my ... friends."

Michael? Christ no. No, not another Michael.

Walker closed his eyes and shuddered at the coincidence before gritting his teeth. This one, he'd save. This Michael, he *would* save.

"Mickey, you're going to be fine, okay?"

Mickey shivered. "Cold."

"Yeah, me too. I'll go dig out my bedroll."

"Whiskey," Mickey whispered. "Glove box."

"What? You serious? Why didn't you tell me that before?"

Walker scabbled at the plastic flap and found a half bottle of bourbon. He cracked the seal but hesitated. "Damn it. The books say alcohol isn't a good idea. Hinders coagulation, thins the blood."

"Give me a ... goddamned drink 'fore I rip ... you a new one."

"Scary," Walker said, twisting his lips into what he was sure looked more like a grimace than a smile.

"Please. I'm dying. A little fire ... in my belly can't do any ... harm."

“Don’t go shitting me. You’ve lasted this long. You’ll be okay until the ambulance gets here.” He raised the bottle and dribbled some of the amber liquid onto Mickey’s lips. “Don’t cough it back at me. I just had this jacket cleaned.”

Mickey leaned forward to follow the bottle as Walker pulled it away.

“Easy now. A little at a time.”

“Please?”

“Wait.”

Talking to Mickey took the edge off his own fears. Helped him concentrate. Helped Mickey, too. Walker had to keep him awake, keep him fighting.

Walker breathed deep and slow. Forcing his lungs to work against the restrictions of space and muscle-cramping dread. And the memory.

He took a sip of the whiskey. It burned his throat on the way down, but gave the illusion of warmth. He helped Mickey to another slug.

Thunder cracked again and another tremor tightened Walker’s guts. The panic surged, and he fought the urge to scream.

Air, need air. Jesus. Where’s that goddamned rescue team?

Did the emergency operator, the angel, hear him properly? He fought down the doubts. She had to have heard him.

He edged away. “Back in a minute. Gonna fetch my sleeping bag. Don’t move.”

“Don’t go. Need to ... tell you something ... ‘fore I pass.”

“You’ll be fine. Nobody’s dying on my watch.”

Not this time.

As the words left his mouth, Walker prayed they weren’t lies. He could do nothing but fight his own terrors and make this Michael comfortable until the emergency teams arrived, or for as long as possible. After that, it was anyone’s guess. He had no idea what sort of equipment would be available to volunteer fire crews in this backwater. But that wasn’t his immediate problem. He had get out. Out into the open. Into the fresh, clean air.

He wormed his way backward, ignoring Mickey’s calls, tearing a pant leg on a metal barb. Outside again, he stood, arched his back, turned his face to the sky once more, allowing the rain to cool his skin, wash away some of the grime and the fear.

The air, thin and clean, if wet, tasted of freedom.

Seconds later, the braying voice in his head returned. It called him a coward, demanded that he return to the coffin. It repeated the haunting words, “No one should die alone.”

Walker tried the phone again. Nothing, not even static.

Damn it.

Once more, he released the backpack’s toggle. The flap opened and the pack gave up his bedroll. The manufacturer’s handbook guaranteed the *Everest SleepRite* would keep the camper ‘happy and snug’ at temperatures down to twenty degrees below zero. He’d soon find out.

He unfurled the bag and worked it into the cab ahead of him by touch alone.

“Mickey?”

The man’s eyes glistened in the flashlight’s glow, and his breathing was ragged in the growing silence of the fading wind.

Struggling to avoid unnecessary movement, Walker unzipped the sleeping bag and formed a loose cocoon around both of them. He dragged stiff and painful legs inside the makeshift tent and scrunched into a shivering ball.

Protected from the wind and rain, it didn’t take long for the temperature to rise toward living room comfort. The sleeping bag was living up to its name.

“Cozy, right?” Walker said. “Now, if only we had some coffee and bagels.”

Mickey winced, but the rising warmth had further improved his color.

“So,” Walker said. “How we gonna pass the time? Too bad I don’t have a pack of cards.”

The old man’s eyes closed; his head lolled.

“Stay awake.” He pinched Mickey’s earlobe. “Come on, man. Wake up! You wanted to tell me something, remember?”

He spoke, but his words were quiet and mumbled. Walker shimmied closer and pushed his ear next to Mickey's lips. "What was that?"

"Tell Joey ... I'm sorry."

"Joey? Your son?"

"Daughter, Josephine. ... Tell her, ... tell her Daddy's sorry."

"You can tell her yourself over breakfast when we get you out of here."

"Don't bullshit ... I've had my ... last supper ... my last supper. Just ... just tell Joey I'm sorry."

The reference made Walker think of hard pews, dusty hymnals, and being dragged as a kid—kicking and screaming—to chapel every Sunday morning by his ever-devout mom. The saint.

"You want to pray or something?"

Mickey sagged. "Will you find her ... tell her? Please? She's ... all I have. All I ... had."

Walker studied the man once more. Pale skin, labored breathing. The signs weren't good.

"Where can I find her? What's her full name?"

"Josephine Claire ... Dolan. Lucky Shores. Promise me ..."

"Promise you what?"

"Tell her it wasn't me. Didn't ... do it, but ... tell her I drew snake eyes."

"What's that? You threw snake eyes?"

Not a bible basher. A gambling man.

"No ... drew, I drew snake eyes. Tell her that, will ya? Swear it ... and pray she ain't ... past caring about me ... got that, Chet? Not past caring."

"Yes. I got it. What does it mean?"

He's rambling. Losing it. No matter. Keep him talking. If he's talking he isn't dead.

"Joey ... she'll know. Tell her, Chet. Will ya?"

"I'll do what I can."

"And ... don't trust anyone. Understand? Trust nobody. I don't ... know how deep ... how deep it goes."

"How deep what goes? What did you say?"

Mickey coughed. Fresh blood bubbled from his mouth.

Walker squeezed a parchment-dry hand. "I promise, but you'll be able to tell her yourself soon enough. Stay with me, you hear?"

The wind roared again and the rain ramped up from heavy downpour to biblical deluge. It hammered on the underside of the car loud enough to mask the thunder. The darkness was near total, broken only by the narrow beam of his flashlight and the harsh glare of lightning.

Where's that goddamned emergency team? Let me out of here.

Walker curled into a tighter ball and fed Mickey dribbles of whiskey from the fast-emptying bottle.

"Hang in there, man. Can't be long now."

Chapter 3

The Lights of Hope

The inside of the Dodge lit up brighter than Rockefeller Plaza at Christmas. White, orange, and red flashes fought against two lightning strikes and simultaneous thunderclaps. The storm, angry at the competition, fought to show the newcomers its power.

Walker's heart tripped a paradiddle drumbeat, and the throaty roar of diesel engines accompanied the fast rhythm.

"Mickey, they're here! Wake up."

Mickey didn't move. Walker checked his carotid pulse once more—weak and fast, but still present.

"Hang in there, man," he said, before realizing how inappropriate it sounded. "They'll have you out soon."

For the final time, he prayed, Walker backed through the car window. He made sure not to dislodge the sleeping bag from around Mickey's shoulders. Outside in the driving rain, he danced and yelled at the approaching rescuers.

"Here! Over here!"

A fire truck led an ambulance toward them. The headlights illuminated rain as thick as javelins.

The elderly fire truck—*Lucky Shores Fire Department* stenciled along its yellow side panels—stopped a safe twenty yards from the Dodge. The crew leaped out and raced to unload gear from the back. Reflective strips on their uniforms shone bright, and gave them the staccato movements of stickmen. The ambulance, decked out in the same color and markings as the fire truck, pulled up a few yards further along, made a three-point turn, and ended up facing the way it came.

A man in a bright yellow uniform, a white helmet with the words 'Fire Chief' painted on the front, and carrying at least seventy pounds more than he needed, wobbled toward him. "What we got here?"

While Walker gave him the lowdown, shouting over the storm, the chief sunk to his hands and knees and poked his head inside the passenger's window.

"He lost consciousness about fifteen minutes ago," Walker said.

The chief grunted as he struggled to his feet. "Been in there, you say?"

Walker nodded and studied the fire truck. In his experience, fire departments in the boonies were usually shoestring operations manned by volunteers who seldom operated anything more sophisticated than hand-me-down Halligan tools and high-pressure hoses. "The car needs stabilizing before you do anything, sir."

The chief's eyes narrowed and the muscles beneath his heavy jowls bunched. "You don't say?" He turned his back to Walker. "Man inside here with a penetrating chest injury. Boys, break out the pneumatics and the jacks. Harrison, lay down some foam before you set up the lights."

The crew jumped into action. Three men laid out equipment. Harrison, a tall, well-built woman with a blonde ponytail poking out from under her helmet, ran to the back of the truck.

Walker tried to look suitably apologetic. As a hitchhiker, he'd been on the receiving end of enough prejudice in his time, and he should have known better than to try to teach them their jobs.

The fire chief turned to Walker, leaned close. "We'll take it from here, son. Go let Bernie check you over. That hand's a mess, and you look about half drowned."

"Huh?"

Walker raised his left hand to eye level and turned it to catch the headlights. Though he felt nothing, his fingers oozed blood. He stared at the hand while the rain washed away the worst of the blood and showed him the damage.

Parallel cuts, one inch long and a sixteenth of an inch apart, split the calloused tips of the first three fingers. His hand trembled as the abrasions started to sting. A guitarist with cut fingers? How was he going to earn a living?

His knees buckled as the world folded in on him.

The chief sneered. "Suck it up, boy. It ain't that bad. Couple of minor scratches. Bernie's gonna sort you out."

Walker made a loose fist, and hugged the hand to his chest inwardly cursing his bad luck. Bernie, a wide-hipped paramedic in leather boots and a green coverall, appeared at his side.

“Hi,” she said, her big blue eyes sparkling in the headlights, “Bernadette Radley. Bernie, not ‘Boo.’ You strong enough to walk over to the ambulance, or am I gonna have to carry ya?”

Walker stared at the diminutive woman and shook his head. “No thanks, ma’am. Wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble. I can walk.”

“Okay, sir. Let’s go sit in my office.”

From the bench seat in the back of the ambulance, Walker watched the fire crew work, their actions urgent but controlled. Harrison sprayed foam around the base of the Dodge while the other three operated hydraulic pressure pads and anchored them in place with webbing straps. The big-bellied chief stood over them, issuing calm instructions. One of the men popped out the cracked windshield and threw it to one side.

Once the chief confirmed the Dodge was secure and unlikely to combust, he nodded to the second paramedic, Bernie’s partner. A twenty-something man, who’d been kneeling near the wreck like a sprinter in the starting blocks, dragged an oxygen cylinder and medical bag behind him and slid halfway through the opening where the windshield had been. He left the passenger and driver’s windows available to the fire crew.

Sitting in the warm and open-door safety of the ambulance, his personal fears dormant, Walker replayed Mickey’s words in his head.

Snake eyes? What the hell was that all about? And the warning, “It goes deep, trust no one,” couldn’t have been more clear, or ominous. Trust no one but Joey, his daughter, Walker guessed. Did ‘trust no one’ include Mickey himself? Walker shook his head to clear the question. Double-guessing that way led to madness.

One thing Walker could understand—Mickey’s overriding need for forgiveness. Walker had his own demons to slay in that respect. If he did as Mickey Dolan asked, maybe he’d make some sort of amends to the other Michael, the one in Walker’s past—little Michael Duggan.

As if he could ever make amends. Ever.

“Name?” Bernie asked while she checked Walker’s temperature with an electronic ear probe.

“Walker. Chet Walker.”

“Well then, Walker, Chet Walker, how you feeling?”

“Cold and wet.” His teeth chattered.

“Saw you limping back there. Anything I should be worried about?”

“Nothing. Touch of cramp. An old injury.”

She broke a silver foil space blanket out of its bag and wrapped it around his shoulders. The back of the ambulance was warm enough, but he couldn’t stop shivering. His cut fingers and torn calf throbbed in time to his racing heartbeat.

Bernie’s blue eyes were huge behind the reading glasses she wore to write on a clipboard. Her skin tone and crow’s-feet put her in the ‘mature’ range.

She checked his radial pulse. “Heartbeat’s strong and there’s decent color to your face. Warming up nicely. Be okay soon as we get some heat into ya.” She smiled and added an encouraging wink.

Walker tried to return the smile, but his face wouldn’t cooperate. All he could manage was, “Thanks for dropping by.”

“Beats my job in the chicken factory. I spend most of my days wringing feathered necks.” She stood and rummaged through an overhead locker.

The rain eased back from tropical monsoon to power shower.

Firefighter Harrison, her foam-spraying task complete, erected three halogen lamps on tripod stands. The brilliant white lights lit up the crash site better than a night game at Yankee Stadium.

Walker scratched his beard. Something about the scene didn’t look right. Something was missing, but his fogged brain couldn’t come up with the answer.

No matter, it would keep.

The rescue work consumed Walker’s attention so entirely, he barely noticed Bernie’s treatment, until she sprayed his cuts with antiseptic. It brought tears to his eyes and a barroom curse to his lips.

“Easy, partner,” Bernie said, holding tight to his hand. “I’m trying to help. The cuts aren’t deep enough for stitches, but they do need cleaning and bandaging.”

“Sorry, ma’am. Took me by surprise.”

“Name’s Bernie, not ma’am. Easy enough to remember. Mind if I call you Chet?”

“Why should I? It’s my name.”

Walker clamped his teeth together as she applied translucent dressings to each fingertip, held them in place with tape, and covered everything with a cotton bandage.

The rain died as fast as if God had turned off a faucet, the chugging of the compressors made louder by the ensuing quiet.

Bernie said something and let go of his hand. “Well?” She tapped his knee.

“Sorry?”

“Are your tetanus shots up to date?”

He nodded. “Had a booster last year.”

“You get those cuts inside or outside the car?”

“No idea. Probably inside. Plenty of broken glass in there.”

She frowned again, the concern in her expression evident.

He anticipated her next questions. “Yes, the victim is bleeding badly, and yes, my cuts may well have come into contact with his blood.”

“We’ll have to check for cross-contamination. How long have you known the driver?”

“What time is it?”

Bernie looked at him sideways and slid back the cuff of her uniform to expose a large-faced sports watch. “Ten thirty-three.”

Walker struggled to believe her. It felt like the middle of the night. He did the math. “In that case, about six hours.”

He told her the full story, omitting only the stilted conversation he and Mickey shared before the old man passed out. A promise made was a promise kept.

“I guess the driver was lucky you happened along.”

Walker stared at her for a moment, trying to work out whether she was being sarcastic or sincere, but didn’t have enough information to make the determination. He then looked at his bandaged hand and wondered again how he was going to buy his next meal.

Eighteen months into his big runaway from the world, and he was close to losing it because of a couple of grazes no worse than those suffered every day by toddlers in kindergarten. Bernie turned away to fiddle with some equipment and Walker concentrated on the battle being waged at the wreck.

The flashing lights bouncing off the ambulance’s inner roof played havoc with his vision. He closed his eyes to fight the headache pounding at his temples, leaned back, and sniffed the air.

“Coffee?” he asked in hope more than expectation.

A steaming cup appeared in Bernie’s hand. She waved it under his nose. “Figured you might need some, after the evening you’ve had.”

Up close, the coffee smelled incredible. It tasted better.

Bernie placed a hand on Walker’s forearm. “Small sips,” she said. “Don’t worry about it getting cold. There’s plenty more where that came from, and try this.”

She handed him an energy bar. He tore open the foil wrapper with his teeth and munched on the sticky brown goo. It tasted of molasses and had the texture of grainy rubber, but the sips of coffee helped wash it down.

“Thanks Bernie, you really are a lifesaver.”

She attached a clip to his earlobe. “To check your blood oxygen levels.”

Walker craned his neck to read the monitor. “What’s it say?”

“You’re a little hypoxic, but it’s not serious. New to the high mountains?”

“You could say that.”

Warmth from the coffee started working its magic, and his clothes steamed sauna-like under the foil. He opened the blanket and lowered the zipper on his weatherproof jacket.

“Give it a few days. You’ll adapt. Meanwhile, this’ll help with the headache.”

She fished an oxygen mask from under his bench seat and passed it over, before opening a regulator.

“How’d you know I had a headache?”

“Are you serious?”

“Sorry. I should learn never to question a medical practitioner. Thanks,” he said, held the mask to his face, and took a couple of deep, slow breaths.

Despite the oxygen and energy bar, the strength returned to Walker’s limbs with the pace of a geriatric crossing a street using a walker. He shifted the mask, drained the mug, and wondered how long to wait until he begged for a refill.

“I don’t recognize the car,” Bernie said, eyeing the Dodge. “Nebraska plates. Know who he is?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

Bernie nodded. “In any case, you’ll need to talk to Sheriff Boyd.”

Walker sighed. She’d given him the missing piece to the scene. A cop-free zone.

“The sheriff?” he asked, eyes wide in feigned surprise.

Until that point, Walker hadn’t even considered an involvement with local law enforcement. He foresaw the problems. As a stranger in town and witness to a serious accident, he’d be a target the moment the local law caught sight of his long hair and beard. He’d seen it all before in small town lawmen—a suspicious impatient bunch.

“He’ll want a statement,” Bernie said.

“Yeah, of course. I wasn’t thinking.”

She glanced toward the wreck before she leaned closer and lowered her voice. “Want my advice?”

A warning bell struck in Walker’s head, his mouth dried. “Do I need it?”

The vertical lines on her forehead deepened, and she tapped her temple with a forefinger. “Take care around Sheriff Boyd. He hates drifters and can be real mean. We don’t call him ‘The Ghost’ for nothing.”

“The Ghost?” The nickname didn’t give Walker much of a warm, fuzzy feeling. “Right. Thanks for the warning.”

Bernie leaned back and relaxed her shoulders. “You should be okay if you don’t give him any attitude. After all, it isn’t every day we have a real life hero stride into town.”

“Hero? Me? Didn’t do much. Didn’t do much striding either.”

He rotated his left ankle. The calf still hurt, big time.

“You did plenty.” She leaned toward the front of the ambulance to reach the industrial-sized thermos plugged into the electrical system. She held a mug under the nozzle and pumped the handle in the lid. Steaming coffee poured out, and she took an appreciative sip. “Lovely. Joey Dolan sure knows how to brew coffee.”

Walker’s heart lurched, but he tried hard not to show a reaction. “Joey Dolan?”

“Yep. Joey runs the Lucky Shores Diner and stands in as our reserve emergency operator.”

“She’s the one who answered my 9-1-1 call?”

She took another sip before replying. “Sure is. Times like this, when the power’s out, we route emergency calls through to the diner to free up the police and fire departments for rescue operations. The diner’s hooked up to the fire station’s generator, which helps keep us in coffee. Another?”

Walker shot out his mug. “Please. Hope I get to meet this Joey sometime. Does her food taste as good as her coffee?”

Bernie took the mug. “Breakfasts to wake for.”

“Excellent. That energy bar—grateful that I am for it—won’t keep me going for long. I’d love to thank her for being on the other end of the phone line, too.”

She gave him a refill, and they watched the progress of the rescue. He warmed his hands on the mug and took the occasional deep sip. Bernie kept studying him.

“We staying here until they get him out?” he asked to break the silence.

She nodded. “Have to. Lucky Shores isn’t a metropolis. The other volunteer team is busy.”

“You looked professional enough to me when your lights appeared out of the night. And they’re doing a first-rate job.” Walker raised his steaming drink. “I salute you all.” He handed back the facemask. “I’m done with this, thanks. Making me a little light-headed.”

Bernie stared at him for a moment’s appraisal. “I guess you’re here on account of that highway billboard? The open mic sessions?”

“How d’you know that?”

She ducked out the back and returned in a flash with Walker’s pack, and the attached Suzy. She placed it on the bench beside him. “This yours?”

“Sure is.”

“So, we have a guitar-toting hitchhiker on the old logging road. Doesn’t take Sherlock Holmes to work out what brought you here.” She chuckled. “Maybe I should volunteer to do some detecting for The Ghost. Whatcha think?”

Walker managed a real smile.

“Feeling better?”

He patted Suzy’s case. “I am now, thanks.”

“The Chamber of Commerce should have moved that sign years ago. But I never could get interested in town politics. I leave that to the mayor.” The glint in her eye dimmed.

“You telling me the saloon doesn’t host music nights anymore?”

The thought that he’d trudged uphill for hours on end for nothing was almost too much to take.

“No. It’s not that. During the holiday season there’s music most nights, but it quiets down when the tourist trade dies. No ski lifts up here for winter visitors, see. At least not yet. What I mean is, they should move the billboard down to the new road. That’s the main route into Lucky Shores these days. This here’s an old road, only passable in summer. You didn’t see the warning notice?”

“Nothing like that there this morning. So the saloon still has openings for singers?”

“Don’t know. You’ll have to take it up with Jean Hallibone, the owner. Most musicians phone in advance to book a slot.”

“Damn it. Knew I should have done that.”

“So why didn’t you?”

He shrugged. “No credits left on my cell phone.”

“Yeah well, you probably wouldn’t have survived the audition.”

Walker prepared himself for more bad news. “Tough audience?”

She barked out a laugh. “Saloon’s a bear pit. I’ve seen some young bucks break down halfway through their first song and scuttle out of town, tail between their legs.”

He nodded and took another sip. “Thanks for the warning.”

“It ain’t all bad. Good-looking boy like you’ll have the women on your side from the get-go. Be even better if you can sing and play that guitar worth a damn. Can ya? Play guitar, I mean.”

Walker held up his left hand and waggled his bandaged fingers. “Not for a while.”

She gave him an encouraging smile. “Not to worry, you’ll be okay.”

“Hope so.”

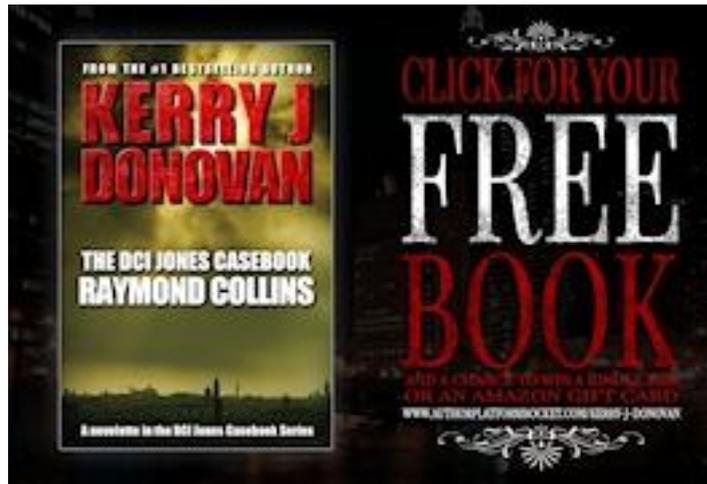
“Sit right there while I report to the hospital.”

Bernie climbed through the opening that separated the back from the driver’s cab, and Walker watched the rescue efforts from his elevated position. He intended to follow the fire crew’s every move, but his lids grew heavier inside the increasing warmth of the space blanket.

Despite not being able to relax fully due to his new mission, Walker finished his coffee and dozed to the rhythmic pump of compressors.

To read on [CLICK HERE](#).

This is a sample—please distribute.
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Biography

Kerry J Donovan was born in Dublin. He spent most of his life in the UK, and now lives in the heart of rural Brittany with his wonderful and patient wife, Jan. They have three children and four grandchildren (so far), all of whom live in England. An absentee granddad, Kerry is hugely thankful for the advent of video calling.

The cottage is a pet free zone (apart from the field mice, moles, and red squirrels).

Kerry earned a first class honours degree in Human Biology, and has a PhD in Sport and Exercise Sciences. A former scientific advisor to The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, he helped UK emergency first-responders prepare for chemical attacks in the wake of 9/11. This background adds a scientific edge to his writing. He is also a former furniture designer/maker.

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Other Works

CRIME THRILLERS

The DCI Jones Casebook: Sean Freeman

Veteran cop, DCI David Jones, is tough and uncompromising. His Serious Crime Unit has the best arrest record the Midlands Police Service has ever seen and Jones wants to keep it that way.

Locksmith turned jewel thief, Sean Freeman, is the best cracksmith in the UK. He's never been caught—the police have never even come close. When Freeman's boss forces him to break into the Stafford Museum, the UK's most secure premises outside of the Bank of England he's in trouble—the Stafford is in the heart of David Jones' jurisdiction.

Someone's record is going to suffer.

The DCI Jones Casebook: Raymond Collins

A 70-page novelette to introduce Detective Chief Inspector David Jones: Birmingham, England, a sunny day in the city park. Children play, adults walk—and a man lies dead in a pool of blood. His terrified fiancé screams for help.

The assailant smiles, waves goodbye, and strolls away into the city.

DCI David Jones and his protégé, Detective Sergeant Phil Cryer, are called to investigate the most difficult of crimes—an apparently motiveless and random attack. Hampered by a lack of resources, Jones and Cryer have to act quickly to prevent a murder spree.

The DCI Jones Casebook: Ellis Flynn

When fourteen-year-old Hollie Jardine fails to return home from school, her terrified parents call the police.

It doesn't take DCI David Jones, head of the Midlands Police Serious Crime Unit, long to discover a link between Hollie and convicted sex-offender, Ellis Flynn.

With Hollie's chances of survival fading, Jones and his colleague Alex Olganski risk their careers when they ignore protocol to follow Flynn's trail across the Channel into France.

What they discover in an idyllic backwater will stretch Jones' detection skills to the limit, and Alex's loyalty to heartbreak.

ACTION ADVENTURE

On Lucky Shores

In an action-packed tale of secrets and lies in small town America, Chet Walker is a man forced to make decisions that will affect his future and the life of the woman he loves.

Witness to a car crash and in receipt of a cryptic message from a dying man, traveling musician, Chet Walker, reaches the picturesque lakeside town of Lucky Shores. He faces hostility and suspicion from the locals and learns that the information he carries could unlock an eight-year-old mystery—it could also get him killed.

Josephine Dolan, owner of the Lucky Shores diner, wants to bury her past. When Walker arrives with a message from her father, she doesn't want to hear it. She cuts him cold.

When his life is threatened, Chet Walker learns the truth behind the saying, “no good deed goes unpunished.”

FANTASY THRILLER

The Transition of Johnny Swift

Before the accident ...

Frank Brazier has the perfect life. A contract to drive for a Formula 1 team. A supportive family. A stunning girlfriend.

On the surface, everything is great, but Frank keeps a secret. On race days, Shadow-man visits. He sits on the nose cone of Frank's racing car, or floats above the grandstand, waving, taunting, distracting, eating away at his concentration. An accident in the making.

After the accident ...

Frank starts hearing voices. Strange voices. Impossible voices. He's losing his grip on reality and Paula, his sister, is dying. Doctors say she is brain dead. They want to pull the plug, but Frank knows she's still in there, fighting. He can hear her calls.

One day later...

Shadow-man speaks. He says Frank can save Paula, but can Frank pay the price?

SHORT STORIES

The Collection

The Collection includes over two dozen stories ranging in length from fifty word micro shorts to a full-blown novelette. Comedy, drama, crime thrillers, romance, true-life tales, gory horror, historical epic—you'll find samples of each.

The hauntingly evocative semi-autobiographical tale, *Sweet William*, and the poignant, *The Phone Call*, are stories to tug the heart and bring tears to the eye.

In *The Long Wait*, Ryan Chisholm has spent seventeen years waiting to avenge the death of his father.

A Father's Tale is a heart-warming story of family life told in short vignettes.

At over 7,000 words, *The Chamber* is the longest in the book, and perhaps Kerry's most gruesome tale. Psychopath Porter Robinson holds Robert Forbes captive in a cellar and tells him a tale from Porter's childhood. Will Forbes survive, or will he go the way of countless other victims? This is definitely not for the people of a timid disposition.

If you enjoy your fiction in short bites and read across many genres, *The Collection* is certain to delight.