

PART ONE

Violent Sex Offenders' Unit

California State Correctional Facility - Malatesta

The Desert above Baker, California

June, 1976

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My name is Jim Mackay and I'm a psychologist. I came to this facility straight out of grad school, promising myself I'd stay only until I saved enough to go into private practice. I quit once to find a place with a professional future. Crawled back three days later, grateful my job was still here. Who says prisoners are the only lifers? Only difference between us is my chains aren't visible.

We don't cure anybody here. No digging into dysfunctional families, potty training, or sibling rivalries. I conduct eight sessions with each new inmate to determine if he poses a threat to himself or others. Despite the massive evidence of "recidivism," a euphemism for "we failed, the asshole did it again," I honestly believe that sometimes I've helped an inmate-patient; if not healed at least *helped* the man adapt to this merciless environment. Still, no matter what I think, he's assigned a cell with the other rapists, sadists, child molesters, and assorted wackos that the state warehouses at Malatesta .

Prison is like a small town where the neighbors know everything about you, warts and all. Even the cons know I've wasted my life in a dead-end job. The prison grapevine has it that the warden is riding my ass to get me out of here so he can give my job to his worthless bum of a nephew. How could I ever hold my head up after being forced out of a job as lousy as this one?

A kick in my middle-aged groin hit me when my twenty-two year old son, Rob, joined the army. Now, a widower, I live alone and wallow in self-pity

because with my job in jeopardy and my son gone it feels like there's nothing left for me.

Then, out of the blue, there comes an opening in the wall, a razor-thin crack that might offer me a way to save face in my wasted career—something to think about besides my empty house. Malatesta is going to take in a celebrity. Warren Charles, California Prison Number 1051, was dubbed “Choirboy” by the newspapers because he looks too innocent to have committed the heinous crimes he did. Not your everyday run of the mill misfit, he's a Christian. Good manners. A patriot, ex-Marine. Did time in Vietnam.

The incredible coincidence is that there's a book I want to write. The data I need is all around me. I see them every day. I thought I'd do it as a series of case studies on individual inmates I've worked with. Not just the pathology but how they get here—their social and economic backgrounds, then connect the dots to the American system of justice. Try to discover what community factors lead to violence and how our unequal system of justice treats differing groups.

I met the editor of University Press at a conference last year. He was crazy about my ideas for the book, but he said I'd need more variety in the cases. The monotony of a parade of psychopaths one after another will bore our readers, he claims.

That's where Choirboy comes in. He's so outside the norm that he's exactly what I need to make the book a non-fiction best seller. My mind reels with the possibilities. Me! Dr. Jim Mackay! On talk shows and a keynoter at professional

conferences. Maybe a best seller? That could give me a second chance. Now, I'm beginning to dream again about opening my own practice, to help people with emotional problems too big for them to tackle alone.

When the Choirboy's 5150 Work Order came through, I grabbed at the chance to work with him like a drowning man snagging a passing piece of driftwood. Fuck the Warden! If he thinks he can chase me out, I'll give him a lesson in the way civil service works. I can't give up Choirboy. He's my ticket out of here.

People who say a psychologist can put away personal feelings while working with a patient are full of shit. My work is going to be affected by my personal life no matter how hard I try to be objective. Example: Rob's disappearance still gnaws at me even while I review the case notes of this new prisoner, 1051 Charles, Choirboy. At times like this I think of Dr. Joseph Kramer, my mentor at the university who claimed that ours is a shame-based culture. "Americans use guilt as a method of control," he says. Is it really my fault that Rob decided not to go to college and lost his deferment? I tell myself I did as well as I could as a single parent, but part of me says I could have done more or did it better.

When I finish my analysis of the case notes, I lean back, hands laced behind my head, and wait for an officer to bring in the inmate. At exactly ten o'clock, I hear a loud banging on the steel door of my office. The hammering is

followed by LaTour, a gigantic, black officer who shoves a prisoner in orange coveralls and ankle chains into the room.

Pausing only briefly LaTour bawls out, “Another fish for you, Doc. It’s 1051 Charles.” He backs out the door, slams it behind him.

SESSION ONE

Date: September 2, 1975. Time: 10:00 a.m.

I’m alone with Choirboy for the first time.

Between us sits a low wooden chest where I keep my notes on current cases. I use the top as a desk. I hardly notice it any more but I realize that my office on the third floor of East Tower doesn’t look like much. Painted a dull gray, it has no windows, drapes, or the dog-eared magazines you usually find in a doctor’s office. It’s cold and barren, but the state doesn’t budget for comfort.

Silence hovers in the air as we study one another; my gaze calm and placid, his darting about trying to avoid my eyes. He’d crossed his legs, and the top one swung nervously.

We don’t see many clean-cut kids in the joint. 1051s skin is baby smooth and almost transparent. From where I sit, he looks a little taller than average. His hair is so blond it’s close to white. Clipped short by prison barbers. Patches of pink scalp show through. Frightened blue-gray eyes peer out of the dark circles above his cheeks. Thin lips with just the tiniest bit of a tremor make him look like he’s on the edge of tears. Even after seeing newspaper sketches of him

at the trial, I am still amazed by his appearance. I wonder: *Why would this young man choose the Marines and why on earth would the Marines accept him?*

Perhaps because Rob is in the Marines, I catch myself comparing the two young men. *Don't start personalizing this case*, I say to myself. *Rob's leaving hurts like hell, but this isn't the place to think about it. Keep focused on your job here.* I yank myself back to reality and point toward the other chair.

1051 Charles starts toward it, and stumbles as he misjudges the length of chain between his ankle cuffs. He'll need to learn how to walk in chains.

Once in the chair he looks around as though he expects to see cat-o'-nine-tail whips and manacles attached to the walls. The chairs are a ratty brown with most of the nap worn off the velveteen upholstery after two decades of prison therapy sessions. I bought them myself from a motel going out of business down in Baker when I first came up here.

I catch him scrutinizing me, the looks kids give me these days for my dark hair feathered with gray. The look says "old": don't trust him. To break the ice, I ask, "What brings you here, Charles?"

A momentary flicker of cold steel flashes from his eyes, startling me. It tells me there's some anger there after all. "The guard just came to my cell and got me."

"No," I say with more patience than I feel. "What happened to get you in that cell in the first place?" I grimace to think of this particular young man in the

hands of the old cons who run the place. They'll make short work of him. They know he's here. The old cons know everything long before the Warden does.

I lift a pencil from the file while I balance a lined, yellow pad on my knee. I want Charles to see by my show of note-taking that I'm paying attention.

"Charles, tell me about yourself."

"There's very little to tell, sir. I came back from 'Nam and enrolled at Sonoma State. I live with my grandmother where I've always lived. Nothing unusual about any of it." His voice and face are expressionless.

1051 displays none of the arrogant defiance of older, more jaded offenders. There's an uncommon softness about him. I've looked at his history. *What would lead a young man to commit such atrocities when he's never exhibited that behavior in the past?*

I write carefully and without looking up, I ask, "Have you noticed any unexplained weight loss? Insomnia? Headaches?"

"No," he says cautiously as if thinking about his answer. Brightening, he adds, "I've had terrible dreams since 'Nam. But I guess everyone does."

I nod. "Yes, many people do." *And some people repress the dreams, remember none of the horrors, recall only the adventure of war. This young man went to war and now he is here in chains. Could that happen to my son?*

To dispel the gloomy images, I change the subject.

"How were things going at home, Charles?"

“Oh, fine, sir. My grandmother is very religious. She took me by the hand as far back as I can remember and led me to the love of God. I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

Although he says it simply enough, almost solemnly, his face reddens. His cheeks puff out. There’s a decided tic in his left eye. *Does he truly not know or not remember what he did that night last spring?*

When Choirboy has been taken away, my thoughts scroll back to the session and his report of “terrible dreams” that seem clearly to be repressed memories of his experiences in Vietnam.

Until now and my son’s absence, I had considered my own military experiences in Korea to be some of the best in my life. But, I came home with both arms and legs – it could have ended very differently. My boot camp buddies, Smitty, Gonzales, and I, were convinced we were the hottest gunnery team in the whole United States Navy, friends bonded together for life. We served out our time on the light cruiser, the USS Manchester, the “Mighty Man,” in Wonsan Harbor, Korea. Choirboy has just given me another reason to worry about young men at war.

Today, Gonzalez lives not far down the coast from my inland desert home in Barstow, California, but I’ve lost track of Smitty. Now, because of Choirboy and Rob, reliving that time in my life takes me back. I wonder about Smitty. What’s become of that third member of the three Musketeers of the *Mighty Man*?