

CHAPTER 1

My grip grew tighter on the hardened steel blade as blood began to drip from my trembling hand. I didn't feel pain until I saw the blood, gasping as I surveyed the damage. The razor-sharp blade had made a clean, effortless slice, exactly as it was designed to do. I had nicked a vein, and a substantial one at that judging from the look of the crimson river forking between my fingers. Grabbing a monogrammed towel that sat on the rack, I wrapped my left hand tightly with my right, my knuckles blanched white.

It was these unforgiving straight razors. This wasn't the first time I had accidentally cut myself with one and probably wouldn't be the last. The proper way to use a straight razor was the last thing my grandfather taught me before he died. My grandpa took pride in a good shave, and out of respect for the man I once loved, I carried on the tradition.

It was foolish of me to pick today, of all days, to use it, though. I had been rushing in the face of jet lag ever since my plane arrived just an hour before, and I was already late. I should've known just to play it safe with a disposable.

I turned on the faucet and ran some cool water over the cut, the shaving cream on my face getting colder. A little fllet of skin lashed wildly in the cold stream. In the mirror in front of me, I saw a man of thirty-eight. His face seemed old - tired beyond his years. He was not as in-shape as he once was. He thought he had come to peace with what he had done two decades before. He thought time healed all wounds. But now, being back here, those feelings had rushed back as they surely had for everyone who he'd soon be facing. It had never been his intention to hurt any of them. But he had come to learn intentions are meaningless.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket. It was my wife.

Are you on your way?, the text read.

Heading out the door in a few. Probably 20 minutes away, I replied.

I walked over to the bedside phone and dialed '0' to the

conciierge at the front desk. A few scattered clothes spilled out of my wife's suitcase, which sat on the edge of the bed.

"Hi, could I schedule a cab for this evening?" I asked. "I'm headed to the Clanton Grand. I'll be down in the lobby in five minutes."

The front desk operator confirmed my reservation so I thanked him and hung up the phone.

Throwing a bit of putty in my hair and a bandage on my hand, I adjusted my bowtie and checked my reflection in the mirror again. I closed my eyes and took in a big, slow breath of air.

"Ok, here we go," I muttered.

The hotel seemed surprisingly quiet. It wasn't until I reached the lobby and looked outside that I realized it had begun to storm. Violently. The cab was already waiting outside the automatic doors with its hazard lights reflecting the pounding showers all around.

"It's only going to get worse," the bellman told me as I looked out. "Are you ready for what's coming?"

His comment took me off guard as I didn't realize he was only speaking of the weather.

"Thank you. I'll be fine," I said, pulling my coat above my head to prepare for the dash to the waiting cab. The driver stepped outside with an umbrella and opened my door. It was pouring rain. Sheets of water blanketed the street, the taxi, and the mood.

"Evening, sir," I said to the driver. "The Clanton Grand, please." I had to shout in order to be heard over the pounding rain as I ducked into the car.

The storm was muffled inside the cab. We pulled out onto Windsor Avenue and then onto Milton Road, a familiar street that I hadn't seen in quite some time. Outside, the colors smudged and ran together through the taxi's window. The rainbow of lights streaked across the pavement, stretched and skewed by refraction as the car rocked gently over the old cobblestone streets of downtown. I rhythmically twisted my cell phone in my hand, one of my many nervous habits, while my mind continued to race. Lightning cracked from above. The storm was getting worse.

My phone vibrated a second time. My wife again.

Are you close? People have been asking about you. I felt my face flush and neck began to burn with pins and needles. This was really happening.

Turning into the Clanton Grand Hotel, my eyes seemed momentarily dazed, as if seeing it for the first time. It has always been a beautiful place - a southern guest house at its finest. Pristine white pillars and ivy-covered brick overlooked the winding river that carved its way through town. On summer nights, front-porch guests could enjoy a performance of crickets and fireflies from its nearby banks.

The taxi pulled up to the front steps, and when it stopped, I realized that I was nearly an hour and a half late. I took another deep breath, then thanked the driver and handed him a twenty. After opening the door, I quickly hopped a puddle and made it to the metal awning, the rain pounding against it like machine gun fire. One by one, I ascended the stairs and could already see them: my peers, my classmates. The ones I had known and the lives I had interrupted.

Jessica Tinsley was speaking with Aaron Sinclaire in the lobby. People I assumed to be their spouses stood by with drinks in hand. I sucked in one more big gulp of air, wishing there was someone beside me to help soften the nerves. But I had experienced loneliness before. My life was defined by it. There was no turning back now. They deserved an explanation.

I opened the doors. Jessica and Aaron stared; politely pretending my entrance wasn't surprising. They quietly smiled and nodded, as did I.

As I awkwardly moved past them and towards the main ballroom, the music and commotion grew louder. I began to see more of them. Their faces were different—worn and older. No one looked the same. Even more, I recognized those who were not there, those who would not dare return to this place, and those who were no longer with us.

Looking up, I saw the banner hanging directly above them. It made me wonder if this was, perhaps, a very bad idea. Perhaps this was a mistake all along. I had put this in the past, but now the past stood before me in bold, red Helvetica.

CHERRYWOOD CHRISTIAN ACADEMY CLASS OF 1996 20 YEAR REUNION

It was like a tombstone, its epitaph marking what had died and when it had passed. My high school had long since been put to

its grave and I was the one with blood on my hands.

"Sylas Ernst. I thought you'd be the last guy to come," a voice from my right stated. I turned toward it. An older Grady Sites just stood there, looking at me.

"Grady!" I stopped, fearing that out of all the people in this room, I could've wrecked his life the most. "How you been?"

"I'm ok. I'm going by Gradon now, but you can still call me Grady," He laughed. "Got two boys now, so I certainly can't complain."

"Oh, what are their ages?"

"Ten and seven," he replied.

"That's wonderful." I didn't know how to say anything else. There were so many questions I had for him, but no tactful way to ask them. We spoke pleasantries until he said something that caught me off-guard.

"I'm glad to see you're still alive," he stated.

"Yeah. Me too," I replied with a laugh, unsure if he was joking.

He nodded his head and, putting his hand on my shoulder, leaned in and whispered. "It's easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend." He leaned back away from me and squeezed my arm. "I'll see you around," he added with a smile.

If his quote by William Blake was true, then I knew I would be just fine. After all, it seemed that I had very few friends in the room that night besides Grady. I had really only kept up with one or two people from high school, so I knew very little about the aftermath and how it had affected everyone who had been involved. I had purposefully stayed off of Facebook and any other social networks when everything had come out; I just never developed an interest.

With hesitation, I looked around and began to survey the room. People were starting to notice me a bit more. They were murmuring and whispering among themselves, just like I had seen them do so often in high school. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a figure walking towards me. I turned to see a man my age with deep lines of worry on his face.

I recognized him right away and a lump formed in my throat. It was my old friend, Shawn. He approached me slowly, and I couldn't help but smile at him. "Man, it's good to see you!" I said, reaching out my hand for a handshake, I was relieved to at least

have one person there who I loved and trusted.

“It took you long enough to get here,” Shawn said, accepting my hand and shaking it. He then went one further and pulled me in for a hug. “How was your trip?”

“Long,” I answered as I unintentionally got a whiff of Shawn’s breath. “You drink scotch now?”

“Shhh,” he said in a joking fashion. “You want some?”

“No, thank you. Where’s - “

“Your wife? She’s over there somewhere.”

Shawn and I kept in touch every so often but I never realized how deeply he was bothered by what had happened. I didn’t really think it affected him that much at all. Or perhaps, more precisely, I never realized how much he drank to deal with his past hurts. I saw it in him then, though. It was in his eyes, a hazy sort of detachment that went hand in hand with the smell of scotch on his breath.

“People were wondering if you were gonna show tonight,” he said.

A tremendous crash of white light and earth-shaking thunder broke outside, causing the lights to flicker. I scanned the room and saw the back of my wife in her beautiful red dress. I could recognize her silhouette anywhere, even in a darkened room. A second bolt of lightning struck and at once, there was darkness. I closed my eyes as the voices grew around me, each person speaking louder to make their voice heard above the others. Chairs and dishes were clamoring together as some people stumbled toward the red glow of the exit signs.

My mind raced back twenty years to a scene of pandemonium much like this one. It was the night of our senior year homecoming. That night so many years ago would set in motion events that would change everything about me. It was the beginning of my story; the story of what made me who I am. I stood in the darkness and allowed the memories to rush over me. Time slowed to a crawl as my mind drifted away from the present and back to where it all began.

For the Academy and one of its students, it was the beginning of the end.

CHAPTER 2

20 YEARS EARLIER

“Where is Roscoe!?” Shawn asked worriedly. “It’s already half-time!”

“Calm down, he’ll be here,” I said.

“I guarantee he’s trying to get with some girl.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be surprised. Who do you think he’s trying for this time? Donna?”

“What about that sophomore with the wooden foot?”

“Meredith?”

“Is that her name?”

“Yeah, it’s Meredith and she doesn’t have a wooden foot. She has scoliosis.”

We were in Mr. Wagner’s old tobacco field some twenty yards away from the football stadium. The field served as an overflow parking lot for the football games. It was set lower than the actual football field by about fifteen feet, a rather steep incline and a menacing fence separated the two fields. From the stands, it was nearly impossible to see the majority of cars parked there.

“Do you think anyone noticed the tarp?” he asked.

I looked over my shoulder to the tarp in question. It had been placed on the ground behind a row of cars, an eight-by-ten foot construction tarp, green to match the few patches of grass left in Ol’ man Wagner’s field. Surely, no one had given it a second thought.

“No one cares,” I answered. “It just looks like some landscaping work or a pile of mulch or something.”

Homecoming night was always my favorite time of the year, and tonight was no different. It was our senior year and the whole school had turned out for tonight’s game. The Cherrywood Saints were battling against their nemesis, the East Creek Devils. Perhaps it was the simple paradox between the two team names that began the rivalry, but time only served to make things worse.

The night was crystal clear. The bleach-white lights of the stadium made a stark contrast against the warm lavender glow of dusk to the west, the only light left in the nearly blackened sky,

while the moon was just a sliver of silver on the eastern horizon. The cool wind blew my hoodie gently as the smell of nachos and onion rings flooded the air. Even though I was never much of a football fan, which, for a Southern boy was almost as blasphemous as smoking in church, football season was still my favorite time of year.

“I’m going to go grab a hot dog,” I said, trying to take Shawn’s mind off of Roscoe’s tardiness and ultimately, our imprudent plan. “You want one?”

“I guess, but no onions.”

“Right, got it.” I said, starting towards the steep hill.

“You forget something?”

I turned around slightly confused until I saw what he was holding. It was my old SLR; a beautiful Canon Camera I had shot with for years. My family had never had much money but my mother still found a way to buy me that camera for Christmas a few years ago. Over time, working at Mr. Winter’s print shop, I had been able to purchase more and more lenses. As my skills grew and developed, so did my equipment. I never went anywhere without my camera, and although my friends teased me about it, they also respected me for it.

Photography was something that I was truly good at. This was not a thought created out of arrogance. I knew it in my heart, without anyone else telling me. Grabbing the camera from him, I checked the frame count to see how many I had left: seven.

I grimaced. Luckily, there were two more rolls of Kodak 400 in the front pocket of my hoodie—more than enough to capture tonight’s memorable events.

“Don’t start shooting and forget my hot dog,” Shawn called after me.

Shawn and I had been friends for years, and unlikely ones at that. His father was a distinguished lawyer, often handling high profile cases at the state and even national levels. Although too prominent to be on staff at Cherrywood, he was the first to be called if the Academy or its board members ever required legal services, which they often did. Cherrywood took pride on a stature of propriety and great expectations. It went without saying that in order to maintain a certain image, you gain enemies along the way.

The similarities Shawn and I shared were few, but the bond they gave us was strong. Intelligence and perspective were what

led us together. We thought of ourselves as free thinkers, not persuaded by what most people thought was cool. Shawn did have his limitations, though. He grew up privileged, and because of that, was not able to find joy in the more simple things of life. Camping, fishing, and hiking were all foreign concepts to Shawn and therefore I sought out other friends to fill in the gaps Shawn left. By all accounts, most would consider Shawn and me to be good kids, but when viewed from the conservative and legalistic standards of the Academy, we lived on the fringes. In this way, we were able to, at times, cheat the system and manipulate the odds in our favor, much like we were planning to do that evening.

After entering the stadium, I trudged down the side steps and onto the field. I was allowed to be down there since I was often taking photos for the yearbook. No one ever thought twice when they saw me. I spotted my friend, Cameron Fosjord, warming the bench, and as I started to approach him, saw the football coming directly at me out of the corner of my eye. A player from the Saints snatched it out of the air, and immediately, one of East Creek's largest players, Topher Landau, tackled him to the ground.

"Nice hit," I said, barely loud enough to hear myself say it.

I had known Topher long before he had ever stepped onto a football field. We were childhood friends, but time had a way of changing people. For Topher, time had hardened his heart and numbed his need for education. He had become a bully, a selfish young man who won friendships and enemies from fear alone. My attempt at a compliment was due to a rumor that Topher would be transferring to Cherrywood.

A devil in saint's clothing, I thought to myself.

I turned my attention back to the bench.

"Cameron!" I shouted a few feet back.

Cam stood out easily enough, as his uniform was impressively white and clean. I was sure he had not played a minute in the game. Last year about this time he would have been covered in grass stains but this year, Cherrywood was blessed with some impressive talent. They were calling this year "The Dream Team" and businesses from all around the state were lining up to advertise at our events. Sponsors' advertisements had always hung from our bleachers or been printed in our bulletins but this year this space was prime real estate. Cam turned around to see me pretending to photograph the game.

“We still on for the fourth quarter?” I asked in a strained whisper.

“Yeah man, we’re still good. I’ll give the signal.”

“Cameron!” the coach shouted. “Cut out the chit-chat and get your head back in the game. You’re going in!”

“Right Coach!”

“Let’s go Cameron!” I shouted in the toughest voice I could muster. “Yeah, go our home team! Yay football!” I was clueless to the sport and everyone around me knew it.

I walked off the field and towards the concessions, along with dozens of other fans leaving their seats. The line for hot dogs stood about sixteen people deep due to the slaughterhouse occurring on the field. The Saints were up by thirty-four points with eight minutes to go in the third quarter. Boredom was starting to set in as the crowd was now focusing on the quality of the plays rather than the plays themselves. Short runs and passes were merely inducing a golf clap while only the long bombs and crushing sacks garnered school spirit. Saints fans had seen blowouts before so they were used to mingling and killing time during games.

Cafeteria Cathy, a spunky eighty-year-old school lunch lady with a smile held firmly in place by Polident, finally called for my order. Even here, getting a hot dog during the football game, it seemed it was impossible to get away from the faces of the staff you saw every day at the Academy.

The night had gotten into full swing and quite a few people were already leaving, which I knew would complicate our plan. None of us had expected a shutout of these proportions.

Hot dogs in hand, I walked down the embankment to the overflow parking.

“It’s about time,” Shawn stated from the hood of his car.

“Sorry, the line was really long,” I said handing him his dog.

“How much time left in the game?”

“The clock said 2:18 when I left and I think there is one more section to play,” I said also climbing onto his hood.

“Section? You mean quarter. So we’ve got what, like twenty minutes?”

“I dunno. Probably.”

Shawn was as clueless to the sport as I was. We both felt that football was a pointless sport to learn. It was a sport that you’d most likely never play again after high school or college, and if you

did get that far, you were left with a bad back, sore joints, and possibly the inability to perform long division. Sports like tennis and golf are mocked in high school but those are the sports you can play throughout your life. I liked tennis and smacking golf balls around at the Locksboro Country Club driving range, although I was not really that good at either one.

“Did Roscoe show up yet?”

Shawn shook his head, noticeably irritated, with a mouthful of chilidog.

Roscoe was an important part of our plan but if he went AWOL, like he had done before, Shawn and I could probably still pull this off by ourselves. Our idea for tonight was simple: to celebrate Cherrywood’s victory and the homecoming of our honorable alumni with a favorite display of the fans. We would gladly take on the task of organizing a grand celebratory event so our beloved institution would not have to foot the workload, the necessary paperwork, or the bill. Not to mention, many high level contributors and directors were at tonight’s game so we wanted to make sure they saw what a dynamite school this was. It was charitable and we loved to give....and blow stuff up.

Reading the warning labels on fireworks is important. Not that you're going to do what they say but because they'll tell you what the firework does. For example, "Warning: Emits Showers of Sparks" might leave you disappointed. But "Warning: Explosive" will definitely not. Teenagers living in North Carolina know full well that the fireworks in our beloved state leave a lot to be desired. We have the sparklers, black snakes, crackling balls, and those little tanks, but if the most a firework can do for you is give you third degree burns, it's not good enough. Luckily, there is a solution and it's as simple as a car ride to the state's southern cousin.

South Carolina has the good ones, the ones directly from China where not all of the warning labels are in English. The ones where just lighting the fuse alone can send you running for the Neosporin. And you can get them anytime you want, not just two weeks before the Fourth of July from some little roadside pop-up shack. They've got the huge firework stores that are open all year—the ones that are painted bright yellow, have a huge attention grabber like a life-sized fiberglass dinosaur. These are the stores that are always running some sort of 'Buy 2 get 1 free' deal and stock

enough explosives to level a small city.

Two weeks prior to the homecoming game, we made a road trip to Big Tom's Fireworks Emporium in Lewisville, SC. We used Cam's fake ID to buy a sizable collection of pyrotechnics. Then we grabbed a piece of plywood and some cardboard tubing to create a rather impressive self-contained fireworks display. We spent all of last Saturday in Shawn's mom's garage carefully designing a network of interconnected wicks to create a domino effect that would allow all our fireworks to be ignited with one simple fuse. The display would be timed to go off right at the game's end to add another level of excitement to the already enthusiastic atmosphere. It was a stunt that involved illegal explosives, crowd endangerment, disturbing the peace, and a whole slew of other charges, but it's not like we had malicious intentions. We were just teenagers with time and creativity.

"There he is!" Shawn exclaimed.

Roscoe waved from atop the embankment, on the other side of the fence. A sigh of relief came over both of us. Shawn waved back and we both hopped up from our perches and made our ways towards him.

"Way to cut it close!" Shawn exclaimed when Roscoe joined us.

"Sorry guys. I was talking to Tracy," Roscoe replied.

"Traaaacy!" Shawn and I replied.

"Sylas thought you were with Meredith," Shawn said.

"The girl with the wooden foot?"

"Unbelievable." I replied.

"Are you guys still doing this?" Roscoe asked.

"You mean are *we* still doing this?" I asked. "Yeah, it's still on."

"How much were those hot dogs?" he asked.

"Three bucks. Chili is free."

"Crap."

Roscoe never had any money. He was famous for bumming money off friends but always managed to pay it back. If you lent Roscoe money, you could never tell when you would get it back but when you did, you would always get the exact total down to the penny.

"Did you guys talk to Cam?" Roscoe asked. "Are the fireworks here?"

"They're here. Everything is set up and Cam is good to go.

Looks like he finally got some playing time.”

“You don’t think we’re gonna get caught, do ya?”

“You can’t even think like that,” I replied. “We’re good.”

“Well, we all probably shouldn’t be standing here looking all sketchy,” Shawn observed. “Can you see Cam from here?”

Roscoe took a moment to spot number 77. “Oh yeah, he’s sitting on the bench again.”

“Ok, we’re gonna go. Where are you gonna stand?”

Roscoe moved around to get a good visual on Cam and the parking lot. He studied the area before saying, “I think right here is good. Is there enough light here to see me?”

“Yeah, you should be fine.” I said. “You know the signal, right?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Ok, we’re gonna go,” I said. “See ya on Sunday.”

“Good luck guys,” Roscoe said holding two thumbs up.

We all tried to conceal our mischievous grins as we returned to our respective posts. We had this all planned out. Cam was the inside man. He would let us know the perfect time to engage. Roscoe was the messenger, I was a lookout, and Shawn was the detonator. Once the device had been activated, we’d split up and not see each other until church on Sunday or school on Monday. There were a lot of eyes around so maintaining our innocence with solid alibis was crucial.

When we left Roscoe and headed for the woods, there were about ten minutes left in the fourth quarter. The score was 59 to 17 and people were already leaving. The stands would have been nearly empty by now if it weren’t for the crowning of the Homecoming King and Queen after the game.

We had set everything up along the woodline, just on the edge of the field. It was close enough to the stadium to have the effect we needed but still disguised enough to be overlooked. I waited behind some cars, close enough to be within whisper range, while Shawn hurried over to the device.

“You’re clear,” I whispered.

He pulled back the tarp and folded it. It was a masterpiece. Cardboard mortars stood in perfect alignment, resembling a lethal pipe organ and all were intricately connected to each other through a series of interwoven wicks and fountains. The full sheet of OSB plywood was thirty-two square feet of colorful rockets,

Roman candles, mortars, fountains and other flammable propellants ready to dance and scream with the kiss of a flame. It was a contraption Wiley Coyote himself would be proud of.

Shawn could see me, I could see Roscoe, and Roscoe could see Cam. Cam would be the one to initiate the operation by holding his helmet in the air above his head. It was a gesture that we felt would be easily dismissed by the crowd but one that was unmistakable to notice. As we waited for the signal, a car making its exit from the lot flashed its lights in our direction. For a split second, both of us were completely illuminated. We froze, petrified. Nothing happened. The vehicle completed its turn and left. We nervously waited for what seemed like half an hour but it was probably only a few minutes. Then I saw Roscoe's fist high above his head. Cam had given the signal from the field.

"Ok, go!" I exclaimed in a whisper.

Shawn flicked his lighter and ignited the cigarette. We had done some extensive experimentation on cigarette burns and discovered that it takes about eleven minutes for a cigarette to burn down to its filter. Confident with this knowledge, we stuck one of Shawn's stepdad's cigarettes on the end of the main wick. With the amount of timeouts and plays in the game, this should put the first fireball over the stadium at about the time the clock reached all zeroes.

Shawn darted back from his position. "It's going!" he exclaimed.

"Ok, see you at school," I replied tapping Shawn on the back.

"Get some good photos," he said.

"Ha! I'll try!"

Shawn hurried to his car and I made my way towards the main entrance. I looked up to see if Roscoe was still at his post. He was gone.

I gripped my hand on my SLR to keep it from swinging back and forth from my neck. My pace was much faster than I wanted it to be. A steady stream of people were leaving the unguarded stadium entrance, their hands full with fold-up stadium chairs and Saints paraphernalia. In the distance, Shawn pulled his white '94 4Runner out of the lower lot. I pushed my way through the main gate and immediately started to make the crowd my alibi by doing what I don't like to do; spurn people on to give the yearbook a big smile. I much preferred candid snapshots to keep my photos

looking different than every other family scrapbook and the interior of every girl's locker. But I needed those people to see and remember me. Stumbling through the crowd, I wildly snapped one shot after another, giving little thought to composition or focus.

Cam was warming the bench again and, from this side of the stadium, I had a perfect view of his face. I snapped a picture of his anxious expression in front of the dwindling time clock, knowing our masterpiece would detonate any second. Every so often he'd look around to try to spot one of us. He never saw me.

After making my way back down to the front row of bleachers to grab a seat along the field, I asked a man to pardon me so I could squeeze by a few spectators to the vacant middle of the bench. I had annoyed everyone around here enough to be remembered. Now it was time to enjoy the festivities. Cam was watching the clock even more frequently now. I grabbed a few more shots of the game and, after a Saint interception, the ball was now back in our possession. The Devils called a timeout, which received grumbles and some chants for the Devils to warm up the bus.

I looked at my watch. It had been roughly ten minutes since Shawn had lit the fuse and there were still several minutes left in the game. Cam was now focused exclusively on the time clock and the sky above the stadium. Zooming my lens in to try to get a reading from his face, I could see a mix of nervousness and a devilish smirk on his face. Cam and I had been friends for years so I knew by his face that he had underestimated the amount of time left in the game. If East Creek hadn't used their timeouts, which I'm sure Cam didn't think they would, his guess probably would've been pretty close.

I turned back to the crowd, and in an instant I saw her. Natalie stood at the very end of the stands close to the marching band. She rocked back and forth blowing gently on her hot chocolate. I couldn't help but grab a quick photo. Her big doe eyes blinked gracefully, and then almost instinctively she looked in my direction, as if feeling my eyes on her. I was completely flustered, waving at her nervously with a smile, putting my head down in embarrassment. For that one moment I had completely forgotten about our-

SHHEEW, SHEEW, BACCACK!

Our bottle rockets were the first to go. The stadium paused for

a moment, wondering what exactly they just heard.

BA-BA-BA-BA-BAPP... firecrackers emulated the sound of machine gun fire from below the field. A few teenyboppers screamed while the rest of the crowd attempted to locate the small infantry unit that had apparently just opened fire. Players on the field slowly stood from their crouched positions. Forcing a straight face, I kept snapping photos.

THHUUB, THUB – the sweet bass sounds of mortar ignitions. Then, *BOOOM, BA-BOOM...* color bursts and pounding explosions shot through the goal posts filling the sky high above the end zone. The stadium was stunned with awe and confusion. I thought of Shawn and how he would have loved to see the grandeur of this rebellion. Cam was wearing a huge smile, as was I. Roscoe probably was too, wherever he was. A baby cried, to which I responded with laughter. Whispers filled the crowd as fans struggled to figure out what was happening. No one knew if they should be excited or fearful.

I was bursting at the seams as I listened to the stream of conversation around me.

“Was this supposed to happen?”

“I don’t know.”

”I think it’s a prank. I don’t think they’d be doing this in the middle of the game.”

As others began to reach the same conclusion, Larry Bellfield, a marching band trumpeter and junior class clown, playfully blew out the notes to “Stars and Stripes Forever” which caused a chuckle to run through the crowd. Some even started to applaud. The reaction was exactly what we wanted, even though it came in a roundabout sort of way. The moment, however, would become very short lived.

On the other side of the distant fence, Donald Fench, a janitor at the Academy and volunteer at the football games, dropped over the embankment wielding a shovel. He was headed towards our launch pad but from my angle, that’s all I could see. In less than a minute, the mortars that had been exploding high above the stadium dropped within feet of the crowd. Fireballs were now firing directly overhead. Explosive color and ash peppered the stands. Our homecoming game was now a warzone.

The whistling mortars were deafening as a firestorm blasted its way through the chainlink fence sending sparks everywhere.

The crowd was in an uproar, running and seeking shelter wherever they could. Rockets pounded the Will Call booth. Mothers raced for their children while some fans dove under the bleachers for cover. A lone child stood in the grass simply wailing and wetting himself. I was also in tears, but from laughter. This was a photographer's dream and I couldn't change rolls fast enough. I wish we could have all been together for this. Shawn would be furious that he wasn't here. Roscoe was probably freaking out somewhere but I knew Cam and I were having the time of our lives.

Donald had tried to extinguish our creation using the only resource he had around at the time. Destroying the set-up may have worked if we had not so carefully instituted a multitude of fail-safes. Each mortar had been rigged by at least three fuses, ensuring that each and every rocket, mortar and fountain would fire successfully. We had no intention of our device ending up like a string of Christmas lights where if one goes out, the fun stops. Apparently, all Donald did was dislodge the device putting himself and everyone else in danger.

BWEEP, BWEEP, BWEEP... a rocket hit a car, sounding the alarm. The dry autumn leaves of a decorative shrub caught on fire. Screaming mothers overpowered the high-pitched shrieks of whistling rockets.

I had blasted through all rolls of film in my hoodie and at this point, could merely watch and enjoy the chaos as everyone suddenly recalled techniques from every action movie they'd ever seen and attempted to utilize them to their best physical abilities. Old people maneuvered their Power Scooters down the single handicap ramp like a Tokyo raceway, while fat people ran faster than I'd ever thought was humanly possible.

The night's final bombardment came from a single firework nicknamed "Armageddon". It cost us a pretty penny and certainly lived up to its name because the firestorm it showered upon Clanton Stadium was truly apocalyptic. The bombardment of explosives shot through the fence and lit up the field. It was as if an army had taken over Old Man Wagner's tobacco field and was advancing towards higher ground. Blasts that shook your core fell from above, and showers of colorful hellfire continued endlessly as ash pelted the crowd below.

My smile quickly faded as I began to realize this prank had

gone too far. The joy of the event had quickly begun to darken as the unrelenting thunder of rockets pounded overhead. The once jovial crowd was now truly terrified - some injured. Then as quickly as it started, it was all over.

An eerie silence filled the stadium. A high pitch tone rang in my mind. I looked down to see Cameron who was still wildly laughing, not realizing the change in mood. His expression dampened quickly when he finally began to look around and observe what I had noticed. Our senior prank had gone too far, and the horror was written on everyone's face. This had never been our intention, but as I would come to understand, intentions are meaningless.