

## Chapter 1

A cool breeze blew down Main Street as he approached the center of town. The bright lights and sounds of children's laughter coming from the city's downtown square echoed off the walls of old business fronts.

Folks had traveled from miles away to take part in the town's annual fall festival with carnival rides, music, face painting, bobbing for apples, and hordes of vendors, who sold everything from Christmas decorations to fried Twinkies and hot Texas chili. The chamber of commerce estimated that the annual event brought more 3,000 people into the small town square for the weekend, instantly tripling the town's population overnight.

Rooms in the town's two hotels had been booked for months and the RV park on the west side of town, where folks would park their recreational vehicles for the weekend, was so full the owners rented a farmer's field nearby to make room for all the overnights.

Yet Jimmy's mind was elsewhere. He headed down the sidewalk past the vendor's carts, sidestepping mothers and fathers with children in tow, completely oblivious to the mass of people surrounding him.

He turned the corner near Bob's Hardware Store and crossed the street towards the one place he had spent nearly every night since moving to this small Texas town last spring.

As he headed up the steps of the town's old Presbyterian church the smell of fried carnival foods filled his nostrils and he stopped for a moment and surveyed the crowd. He looked into the faces of folks passing him by and was instantly reminded of his intense loneliness.

Jimmy shrugged it off, turned and climbed the rest of the steps to the old church's heavy wooden doors. As he pushed the doors open, the sounds of the carnival faded away and were replaced by the sounds of an old jukebox playing a classic rock song.

Jimmy's sanctuary was empty this night. Just the way he liked it.

"Not enjoying the carnival tonight Jimmy?" asked a familiar voice.

Jimmy squinted his eyes as he looked across the dark room to see a tall dark figure silhouetted by the lights flickering through the old stained glass windows.

"Not tonight Pete," Jimmy replied. "I'd rather keep to my routine."

Jimmy walked past several tables and chairs and made his way to the bar that had been built along one side of the old Presbyterian sanctuary. While Jimmy had heard others express their discomfort about a bar and brewery in this former "house of God," he was always comforted by the glowing neon sign that hung on the far side of the room, "St. Peter's Brewery — a Sanctuary for All."

"What'll it be tonight?" Pete asked as he pushed a bowl of pretzels towards Jimmy. "We've got a new pumpkin spiced port that we made up special for the festival. It's the house special tonight."

"That'll be fine." Jimmy responded as he took his seat on one of the brewery's bar stools. "Light crowd tonight. Guess no else is interested in pumpkin flavored beer?"

"Hey watch it." Pete quipped, recognizing the jab right away. "You're not just talking to the bartender — you're talking to the head brew master himself." Pete stopped and looked around, disappointed at the low turnout. "I guess everyone either skipped town to avoid the crowds or they're out taking part in the fun — besides it's still rather early."

Pete filled a tall frosty mug with a cold dark beer from the tap. He sat it down on a napkin in front of Jimmy.

Jimmy reached for the cold mug and instantly the aromas of the spiced beer reminded him of holiday celebrations as a child.

"Well I don't know about the taste but the smell gives me a craving for some great pie."

“We’ve got that too,” Pete responded as he pulled a pumpkin and pecan pie out from under the bar. “I picked up a couple this afternoon at the bakery hoping to sell a few tonight. Looks like you may be my only customer tonight so enjoy a slice on the house. Pumpkin or pecan?”

Jimmy pointed to the pecan pie and Pete cut a piece for Jimmy and grabbed a second slice for himself.

Jimmy took a sip of his beer as Pete sat the slice of cold pecan pie down in front of him.

“Not bad. Not bad at all.”

“So everything going well?” Pete asked.

Pete always attempted to make his customers feel at home with conversation but he could always tell when Jimmy wasn’t up for it and tonight was one of those nights. His experience taught him to leave well enough alone.

The two sat in silence for several minutes as they ate their pie and Jimmy sipped on his cold beer. Jimmy appreciated Pete’s lack of gab and thought to himself, “Perhaps this is why Pete is the only real friend I’ve made over the last six months. He may be the only one around that at least partially gets me.”

Jimmy always liked his sanctuaries best this way. No forced conversation. No prying questions. No pretending things are better or worse than they actually are. Just cold beer, good music on the jukebox and tonight, cold pecan pie.

As Jimmy finished his pie and pushed the plate away, the heavy wooden door to the brewery opened and the light and sounds from the street broke through the soothing quiet.

A booming voice startled Jimmy as it cut through the silence he had grown so fond of.

“Pete!”

The newcomer startled Pete as well and he jerked his head up to see the new customer.

“Cousin!”

Pete made his way from behind the bar towards the newcomer and greeted him with open arms and a huge hug.

As Jimmy turned to see the pair, he realized just how imposing Pete and the newcomer appeared in the darkened room. Both men were at least six foot tall and the newcomer was closer to six and a half feet in stature. Along with their imposing height, both were rather large men and Jimmy was glad he was meeting them in a bar and not a dark alley somewhere.

The stranger set down at the bar next to Jimmy. He wore a weathered army fatigue cap that appeared to be covering a bald or balding head. His long graying beard flowed from his chin and partially covered a similarly worn white T-shirt under a dark leather jacket. He topped off the ensemble with blue jeans and worn tennis shoes.

“Probably a long beard to make up for his lack of hair up top,” Jimmy mused to himself.

As he sat down, the stranger reached out his hand to shake Jimmy’s.

“G.T.” he said. “Gordon Tucker.”

“Uh, yeah, I’m uh, Jim. Jimmy Gaines,” he mumbled with his head hung low, never quite making eye contact with G.T. “I work over at the post office.”

He took G.T.’s firm handshake and thought to himself, “This guy is about to ruin the perfect quiet evening I had planned.”

“Jimmy Gaines eh?”

Sure enough, just as Jimmy expected, G.T. was here to make conversation and his voice echoed off

the sanctuary walls as he called out to Pete who had made his way back behind the bar.

“Say Pete, didn’t we know a Gaines family growing up?”

“Yeah, kinda remember a Gaines family up on Bakers Street. What were the kids’ names?” Pete paused as he worked to find the obviously faded memory. “Drats, I can’t remember their names at all.”

Both Pete and G.T. silent for a brief moment as their minds raced back to their childhood.

G.T. began scratching his chin and running his hands down his long beard.

“Gaines, Gaines, Gaines?” G.T. began thinking out loud. “Jimmy, Johnny, Tommy?” He paused as he looked over at Jimmy. “Yeah I’m struggling here. I’m thinking there were two boys and a girl. All younger than us. Boy that’s gonna bug me.”

Pete took another break from wiping down the bar top.

“I think Daddy Gaines worked over at the plant and the mom worked over at the five and dime,” Pete recalled.

“Mrs. Gaines. Yeah, I remember her. She had the curliest red hair I had ever seen,” G.T. said as he turned in Jimmy’s direction. “Man, that’s crazy that we can’t remember their names.”

He stopped as he mulled over several different names.

“Pete, why don’t you pour me an amber ale while we figure this out.”

Jimmy hoped the pondering would continue in silence as he returned to his beer. But, like most of his hopes for the night, they were quickly dashed.

“And Mr. Gaines drove that old ‘59 Dodge truck. Boy you could hear that thing coming for miles.” G.T. laughed. “I think he bought that thing when it was 10 years old and probably kept it for another 10 years or so.”

Pete and G.T. continued to mumble through several first names as Pete sat a cold amber beer in front of G.T.

“Perry and Lilly!” G.T. hollered out as he hit Jimmy on the back, causing Jimmy to choke briefly on his drink. “Yup that was their names. Perry and Lilly Gaines. And the boys were William and Henry and their little sister was Elizabeth. She used to ride up and down that street on her tricycle carrying all her dolls in that little basket up front. Yup. That was them. Perry and Lilly Gaines. So Jimmy, did you know Perry and Lilly Gaines?”

“Nope. Sure didn’t.” Jimmy mumbled in reply. Thinking about the names, he did remember his grandmother mentioning the name of a cousin Perry somewhere along the way but he hoped his lack of response would put the conversation to an end.

“Yeah, good ole’ William and Henry.” G.T. continued. “I think Henry went on to play basketball at some state school up north and William went off to work on the oil rigs in the Gulf.”

With that Jimmy stood from his chair needing a break from the conversation.

“Hey Pete pour me another one of those house specials while I run to the little boy’s room,” Jimmy said as he walked from the bar. He made his way to the restroom as G.T. and Pete continued their recollections. “Please — just give me a nice night of peace and quiet,” Jimmy thought as he walked away.

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Jimmy washed his hands under the cold water in the sink. As he finished rinsing his hands he noticed the paper towel dispenser had not been restocked. He grudgingly tried to shake his hands dry and then wiped his wet hands on his jeans.

He stood in front of the small mirror and stared at the face staring back at him. He ran his fingers through his short brown hair and thought to himself, “Jimmy you’re 26-years-old. You live alone in a one bedroom rental house and before long you’ll be forced to wear a cap all the time like G.T. to cover your own balding head. What in the world are you doing here?”

It had been nine months since he had been laid off from his tech job in Austin. The closest thing he had ever had to a real relationship, outside of his parents, had ended nearly a year before that, after his girlfriend admitted she was no longer in love with him. Turns out, she wanted to end their relationship so she could pursue a relationship with one of her co-workers. His life had simply spiraled downward since their breakup.

As a kid he had never dreamed of living in a small town and the post office was the last place he would have considered working in — right at the bottom of the list with a janitor or a truck driver. But as his life in Austin continued to wear on him he made the decision to leave the big city and found a job with a salary that would cover his few necessities and give him the anonymity he now longed for.

He leaned over and splashed the cold water on his face. He reached for a paper towel again before remembering the dispenser was still empty.

“Gripes!”

He reached down and used the bottom of his T-shirt to wipe his face dry before heading back into the old sanctuary.

As he walked out of the restroom he paused as his eyes readjusted to the darkened sanctuary. He glanced around the room and realized that the bar crowd had doubled several times in the few minutes he was away.

“The carnival must be winding down,” he said under his breath.

Walking back to his spot at the bar, Pete spotted him and sat a second cold brew down in front of his bar stool.

He was glad to see that G.T. had found another customer’s ear to burden instead of his own. He hoped he could drown out the increased chatter in the room and disappear into a dark corner somewhere.

After several more drinks, Jimmy had increased his ability to tune out the growing crowd. By the time he had reached his sixth drink, the crowd was nearing 50-60 people and Jimmy thought the noise level might now rival that of the crowds that had gathered on the streets earlier in the evening.

Pete was busy keeping cold mugs full and G.T. was now making his way around the room, chatting with all the other customers.

As G.T.’s boisterous conversations with others continued, Jimmy learned he was a truck driver for a company out of Waco but lived alone in a small mobile home on the edge of town when he wasn’t on the road. Jimmy had trouble imagining how G.T. could manage on the road, all alone, with his compulsive, talkative nature.

He began to picture G.T. driving up and down the highway just talking to himself about the weather, politics, his family back home and Perry and Lilly Gaines. Perhaps G.T. would get on the C.B. radio and try talking to others before they’d all get mad at his rambling and tell him to shut up or change the frequency.

Yet, in some ways Jimmy envied him. It seemed as if he could talk to a door knob and likely never met a stranger. But as Jimmy sat alone in another crowded room, he felt very comfortable in his role as the quiet loner in the corner of the bar.

Around 11 p.m. Jimmy decided it was time to head back to his house. Luckily for Pete, the brewery was now packed. A couple games of darts and billiards were taking place around the room and a

group of guys were loudly arguing politics a few tables away from him.

He tossed a \$50 to Pete and thanked him for the evening.

“See ya around Jimmy.”

Jimmy stood and started to head to the door when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Jimmy! Don’t tell me you’re taking off without saying goodbye.”

Jimmy turned to see G.T. offering a handshake.

“It was good to meet ya buddy. Hope to see you around again real soon,” G.T. continued.

“Yeah. Sounds good. You too.”

Jimmy hoped that would be all and tried to pull away and head back towards the door.

“Say Jimmy,” G.T. continued. “Why don’t you come join us here at the brewery tomorrow night? The place is closed down on Sundays but Pete lets a group of us hang out here and we usually cook up an old fashioned potluck of sorts and just sit around and gab about life or whatever suits our fancy.”

Of course this was the least enjoyable thing Jimmy could think of at the moment.

“Yeah. We’ll see,” he said, hoping G.T. wouldn’t catch on to his utter lack of interest.

“Excellent! We’ll be looking for ya round 6 or so,” G.T. replied. “And don’t worry about bringing any food and such. Just show up and we’ll have a great time.”

G.T. reached out as if to give Jimmy a big hug Jimmy had seen him give folks gathered in the brewery all night long. He tried pulling away but quickly realized he was out of luck. G.T. wrapped his arms around Jimmy and gave him a huge hug and a firm, manly pat on the back.

Jimmy quickly pulled away. He was never one of those “touchy-feely free-flowing emotional type of guys” and he sure wasn’t a fan of any guys who were.

“Uh, yeah. We’ll uh see,” Jimmy muttered as he stuck his hands in his pocket and headed to the door.

Unfazed by Jimmy’s uncomfortable demeanor, G.T. hollered out to him as Jimmy reached for the door.

“Alright Jimmy. Great to meet ya man. Look forward to seeing ya again tomorrow night!”

G.T.’s words trailed off, along with the sound of the bar, as the large wooden doors closed behind Jimmy.

“Finally, some peace and quiet again,” Jimmy said as he walked towards home.

The downtown streets were now a stark contrast to the noise and activity that filled them just hours before.

A few vendors were closing up shop as the few remaining families trickled up and down the street. Jimmy guessed they were heading back to their cars or hotel rooms.

As Jimmy dug his hands deep into his pockets, the cool night breeze reminded him that a simple T-shirt may not have been the best fashion choice for the evening. He picked up his pace and headed back down Main Street to his small home on the south side of town.