

When Walt Montgomery takes a weekend of fishing, he doesn't expect to catch a briefcase containing \$150,000. Walt and girlfriend, Belinda, are then pursued by a psychopathic cop and a crooked lawyer, who will kill to reclaim the money.

Let the Dead Be Dead

By Joe Marshall Hardin

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Let the Dead Be Dead



A Walther PPK Montgomery Thriller

JOE MARSHALL HARDIN

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Chapter One:
Tail waters of the Nolin River Dam, Kentucky,
Wednesday, 6:30 am

Walt hadn't noticed the first hundred-dollar bill. It drifted past him and caught on the limb of a red oak that had crashed down across the tailwaters of the Nolin Dam sometime during one of last winter's ice storms. Walt was up to his hips in the cold water, focused intently on a black gnat imitator he was working in and out of a stillness where the current cut a deep pool against the limestone cliff.

Some people like company when they fish, but Walt generally fished alone. He preferred the rush of the river and the dry rattle of the September leaves to other people's voices.

Above the dam, the sun flashed its first orange on the lake. Below, shadows filled the riverbed. A gauzy mist swirled around Walt's head as he whipped the flyrod back and forth in a sweeping arc.

The second hundred-dollar bill was harder to miss since it wrapped itself around the left leg of Walt's waders and began to wave like river grass. Pulling the sleeve up on his flannel shirt, he reached down and plucked the bill from the icy water. After studying the soggy hundred for a moment, Walt folded it in half and stuffed it inside the pocket of his canvas chest pack.

Maybe the bill came from one of those idiots that had been fishing for stripers up at the foot of the dam yesterday. Most likely one of them had dropped it in the water while digging

around in his pocket. Perhaps it caught on a tree limb or a rock and just now shook loose.

“Well, happy birthday to me,” Walt chuckled. “The river gods are kind.”

The fishing trip had been Walt’s birthday present to himself. Business was slow at Walther Montgomery Investigations anyway, and since he was the sole proprietor and the only employee, he hung a “gone fishing” sign on the door of his office in Gurley, Alabama, and drove his pickup to Nolin Lake just north of Bowling Green, Kentucky. For three mornings he had fished for trout in the cold water below the dam, and for three afternoons he had napped on a flannel sleeping bag in the back of the pickup until dinner, which meant frying up whatever trout he had caught that day on the camp stove. Nights, Walt wrapped himself in a wool army blanket and sat in a lawn chair by the fire, breathing the cool night air, feeding the fire with logs from the riverbank, contemplating the phases of the moon, and watching the bats hunt mosquitoes in the lights of the parking lot.

Walt’s dad had been a detective and a firearms collector and had named his only son, Walther, after his favorite pistol: the Walther PPK semi-automatic. Because of its small size, the pistol was popular for a while with undercover police officers like Walt’s dad, who had a collection of pistols that included at least five Walther PPKs. Walt was never sure how his dad had gotten his mom to agree to name her only son after a pistol, but Walt’s dad could be pretty convincing. The Walther part had probably been easy, since it’s just the German equivalent for Walter, but the PPK had surely been a problem. At first, the

nurse refused to put PPK on the birth certificate as the baby's middle name, but Walt's dad eventually got his way with her, too.

Walt's dad was not alone in his infatuation with this particular gun. The Walther PPK was also the model that James Bond carried and was, purportedly, Elvis' favorite pistol as well. The story is that Elvis carried a silver-plated Walther PPK that was inscribed "TCB," which stood, of course, for "taking care of business." The Walther PPK was also the pistol Adolph Hitler used to shoot himself in the head.

Truth was that private detective Walther PPK Montgomery could use the hundred-dollar bill he had just found in the river. The detective business didn't produce much money—just enough to pay the monthly lot fee on the trailer he lived in and the rent on a tiny office in a strip-mall, with a couple of bucks left over for groceries and gas. Actually, a hundred dollars represented about ten percent of Walt's monthly income.

Walt really wasn't that interested in making a killing in the detective business anyway. It was just the easiest way to use the skills he had learned as a cop to make a buck without putting on a uniform and saying "yes, sir" and "no, sir" to some stuffed shirt. He generally worked only one case at a time—a standard background check, an employment verification, or the occasional surveillance job for a suspicious wife or husband. That made it easy to get away whenever he felt like it. Several times a year Walt would close up shop and drive the 200 miles from Gurley to just north of Bowling Green to fish the pools in the river below the Nolin Lake Dam and generally withdraw

from what little there was left of his life. And if he caught some fish, then so much the better. Fishing is not always about catching fish.

The Kentucky locals spent most of their time fishing for stripers and catfish in the roiling waters at the foot of the dam and throwing their cigarette butts, coffee cups, and beer cans into the river, so Walt was used to seeing their trash float past. But a hundred-dollar bill? That was something else. He pulled the bill out of the pocket of his chest pack and examined it again just to be sure.

Yeah, it was the real deal. Ben Franklin and everything.

He pulled some line off the reel, let the fly float off down the current, pulled his Crimson Tide ball cap down low, and squinted his green eyes upstream toward the dam. There, winding down through the currents and eddies, were three or four more bills. He cranked the reel to bring the line in, hooked the fly on the eyelet of the rod, and tucked the whole rig up under his sunburned arm.

He started to speak, but he hadn't spoken all morning, and his voice misfired and barely sounded.

“Wha—.”

He cleared his throat and tried again.

“What the hell?” he croaked.

He rubbed the back of his wet hand against the three-day stubble on his face and plucked a third, a fourth, and a fifth hundred-dollar bill out of the icy water. He stood for a moment, pushed his cap back on his head and studied the bills with a weathered eye.

Truth was that Walt actually looked a bit older than his 48 years. Years of alcohol and depression had marked his face, even after he had recovered from both. Somewhere along the way, Walt had also developed the squint of a much older man, and he mostly used that squint to keep people away. Still, on the rare occasions when he did engage, Walt's face could open in a wide grin that pushed wrinkles up around his eyes and turned the squint into something a lot friendlier. In those moments, he was handsome in a kind of Tommy Lee Jones sort of way. At his most personable, he had the kind of face you want to listen to, the kind of face you want to talk to.

Walt wadded up the bills, shoved them all into his chest pack, and gazed back upstream. A dozen more hundred-dollar bills were clustered around a half-submerged, brown-leather satchel that was making its way around the rocks and bobbing toward him in the current. He steadied himself against the stream, dug his boots into the sandy bottom, and prepared to block the satchel with his body.

The bag was partially opened and filled with soggy hundreds, mostly wrapped in bundles and soaking in river water. Right before the satchel slammed into Walt's leg, he reached out and grabbed the handle. The momentum nearly pulled him off his feet, so he slipped his knee under the satchel and tilted it to pour out some of the water. A few more of the loose hundreds rushed out and swirled off down the current. He tightened his arm against his chest to secure the flyrod and pulled the bag up clear of the water.

He looked up to where his truck was parked, but he could see no one. He pulled his cap back down low to shade his eyes

and scanned the snarl of underbrush down along the banks of both sides of the river. Not a soul.

As if to highlight the peculiarity of the situation, sunlight broke suddenly over the top of the dam and flooded the river basin. Maybe there was somebody at the top of the dam. He couldn't make anything out in the glare, but something—no, somebody— was cartwheeling down the concrete face of the dam, tumbling through the air and rolling clockwise with arms and legs outstretched. Whoever it was glanced off the concrete slope at the bottom of the dam, crumpled, and splashed into the water below the dam.

A live person would have struggled to right himself before hitting the water, Walt reasoned. This was not a person falling. This was a body.

“Not a very bright way to dispose of a body,” he said to himself.

The hair stood up on the back of his sunburned neck.

He wished that he hadn't left his pistol in the truck. He had never needed a gun out here before, so there was no reason to risk getting it wet. It was where it usually was—in the glovebox of his truck up in the parking lot. He'd feel lots safer right now if he had it with him, though. Somebody had just lost a lot of money, a body had just come tumbling down the face of the dam, and fate had just made him a witness to whatever had just happened. And had left him holding the money.

“Holding the bag,” he said aloud.

That was all the time he had to consider the situation, though. What sounded like a small caliber bullet pierced the water next to him, and Walt let his rod and reel drop into the

river. The whole rig sank beneath the current and rushed away downstream. A perfectly good graphite flyrod gone—not to mention his best reel.

And then another bullet hit less than two feet away—a hiss and more bubbles. Walt tightened his grip around the handle of the satchel, stooped low to let the bag fill back up with water, and let the current pull both him and the bag down river.

Immediately, his waders filled with water and pulled him downward, so he unhooked the suspenders with his free hand and let the cold water pull the waders down around his feet. He kicked the waders free, and they sank in a heap on the sandy bottom.

Walt started adding up how much he'd already lost—a three-hundred-dollar rod and reel set and seventy-nine dollars for the waders.

The current quickly swept him and the satchel down past a cluster of fallen oaks and out of view, he hoped, of whoever was shooting at him from the top of the dam. He grabbed the end of a branch, pulled the satchel up to the surface, and hooked one of its handles over a jagged limb.

The only thing to do was to go on downstream, at least for a while. Maybe he could float far enough to get out of range, pull himself out on the opposite side, make his way up the bank where he could cross back over, and hightail it back to the truck while whoever was shooting at him was trying to catch up with him downriver. And then maybe take the whole thing to the cops and let them sort it out. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

His hand went to the back pocket of his soggy jeans, instinctively checking for his keys and wallet. They were still there.

“Thank god,” he said.

Sure enough, he could already hear somebody thrashing through the low brush at the edge of the river. Whoever it was had obviously driven down from the top of the dam and had already made it down past the boat ramp on foot. They were talking loudly.

Walt unhitched the bag from the limb and drifted down to the next clump of submerged tree limbs on the opposite side of the river. A flock of Canada geese had been resting in the cluster of limbs, and they honked softly and paddled off in front of him. He peered back upstream just in time to see the body come swirling down through the current.

It was floating head first, or what was left of its head first, and face down. The arms and legs were splayed out just as it had fallen, and it twirled slowly in the river. Walt’s old police training kicked in, and he noted that this was, or had been, a middle-aged man dressed in khaki pants and red polo shirt. A red cloud of blood floated in the water around the body, and a school of little bluegill picked at the massive hole that had been the back of this guy’s head. As the body swirled toward Walt, its outstretched arm hooked loosely around the limb Walt was holding to, and the body swung around and bumped up against Walt’s chest. He shivered involuntarily, and the little fish scattered. Hooking the dead man's arm more firmly around the branch, Walt felt for the bottom and waded up onto the bank with the satchel. He sat it firmly down in the mud and waded

back out to the body just in time to catch it before it unhooked itself and floated off again. In the back pocket of the dead guy's khakis, he found a wallet and tucked it into the front pocket of his jeans. Then he let go and the body swirled off downstream.

Let the dead be dead.

He could hear whoever it was thrashing through the reeds and blackberry bushes along the bank and coming down around the bend. He waded back to the muddy bank and grabbed the satchel, then pulled himself up the bank and slid his long body into the tall grass alongside the river. Pushing himself down into a hollow place, Walt pulled his head down below a clump of grass just in time to see two men coming down the opposite bank.

"There goes Calvert," one of them said.

"Then let him go," the other said. "He's fish food now, and we can get him out later if we need to. What we need to do now is find that fisherman and that bag of money."

The first man was a skinny, scruffy-looking guy with overalls, no shirt, and a filthy University of Kentucky baseball cap. He carried a Winchester bolt-action Wildcat .22. The other guy wore a Kentucky State Police uniform and had some kind of a fancy .357 revolver strapped to his side. This was definitely not a police-issue pistol.

Great, thought Walt. A redneck and a bad cop.

Walt knew something about bad cops. In fact, the first thing he learned when he got out of the academy and on the job with the Alabama Highway Patrol was that dirty cops were everywhere. The second thing he learned was that there is nothing more dangerous than a bad cop.

So much for just giving the money back and promising to mind his own business.

Once law enforcement officers of any type turn bad, they are a thousand times more treacherous than regular criminals. Dirty cops still think like cops, but they also think like criminals. In fact, the psychological profiles of cops and criminals are often very nearly the same, so it's no surprise that some cross the line so easily. In Walt's experience, the only real difference between a criminal and a cop besides the badge and the uniform is the commitment to walking on one side of the line and not on the other. One thing for sure is that a cop who works both sides of the law is as deadly as a bear with a hard-on.

Walt pulled his cap off, tucked it under his chest, and hunkered down in the grass, hugging the ground and listening to the two men as they worked their way through the tangle of brush along the bank.

"Get in the water and float down after him," the trooper said. "We'll never catch him stumbling through these weeds."

Walt figured the state trooper must be the mastermind behind this piece of horror. He looked too put-together to be your average cop, for sure. You can always tell a bad cop if you know what to look for. They're always either too slick or too sloppy. This one was the first kind: slicker than goose shit on a wet rock. His head was shaved clean, and his uniform was still crisp. Somehow, his boots were still spotless in spite of the fact that he had just come down a hundred yards of muddy riverbank. Walt could see his pistol a bit more clearly now—a

Colt Python Elite. Big and mean and too damned expensive for a trooper's salary.

"You think that fisherman has the money?" Overalls-and-no-shirt said. He was covered in mud and sweat.

"Oh, hell, yes he's got the money. And even if he don't, at the very least he's a witness," said the trooper. "Now get in there and float. We can't come back without that money, and we are not leaving a witness walking around. No way in hell."

The trooper stood away from the edge of the river, his hands on his hips and his holster unbuckled.

Bad news, Walt thought. This is the sort of guy who becomes a cop just so he can push people around—the kind of cop that thinks having a badge means that he can take anything he wants from anybody anytime he wants it. A big bully with a badge and a gun. And probably a killer, too, judging from the size of the hole in Mr. Khaki-pant's head. That Python Elite had blown away most of the poor guy's skull and half his brains.

"That freaking water's cold as a beaver's butt," Overalls-and-no-shirt said.

He was facing the trooper and holding the bolt-action .22 on his hip.

"Do not be pointing that peashooter at me unless you want to wind up like Calvert. You want to get paid for this job then you do as you're told," the trooper said. "You just catch up with him and hold him till I get there. And watch for the money in case he doesn't have it anymore."

Overalls-and-no-shirt stepped toward the river, slipped in the mud, and crashed into the cold water. A great blue heron

that had been watching the proceedings from a pine tree squawked and took off, soaring overhead and down the river away from the noise.

“Damn, it’s colder than frozen deer shit,” Overalls-and-no-shirt yelled.

“Quit yelling,” said the trooper. “Or he’ll know you’re coming. Now keep your rifle up and out of the water and open your eyes. We don’t know for sure who this guy is or if he has the money or a gun or what.”

“Oh, I have the money,” thought Walt. “I only wish I had my gun.”

Overalls-and-no-shirt began to move down the river, holding the Winchester over his head as he half-floated, half-waded past the fallen trees and submerged rocks. In a few minutes, he had floated off and the trooper had made his way through the bushes and down around a bend in the river.

Walt rose, grabbed the satchel, and picked his way quietly through the low brush up the bank of the river. His flannel shirt and jeans clung cold to his body, and his soggy socks squished with each step. He trotted carefully through the dense underbrush, and when it cleared out he loped up the grassy bank along the river, shedding his socks in the process. In just a few minutes he had made it back up the bank opposite the boat ramp and waded into the river holding the satchel of money over his head. He could hear the trooper and Overalls-and-no-shirt crashing through the underbrush about a hundred yards back downriver. From the sound of it, they were heading back up the bank toward him now. They must have heard him double back.

Walt pulled himself up on the sand bar below the parking lot and patted his hand compulsively against the back pocket of his jeans to feel his keys again. Thank god they were still there. He poured the rest of the water out of the satchel, and a few more bills fell onto the ground where he left them for somebody else to find. He ran up through the oak hammock to the parking lot, and when he reached his pickup, he noticed that there was now a Kentucky State Police cruiser parked at the end of the lot. He fumbled his keys in the lock of the old Chevy.

“Come on, come on,” he said.

He finally got the key into the lock, turned the handle, and flung the door of the truck open. He threw the dripping bag of money onto the dusty floorboard on the passenger side, jumped into the seat, stuck the key in the ignition, and brought the motor to life for the first time in three days. Grinding the shifter into reverse, he pushed his bare wet foot down on the accelerator, and the truck peeled backward, tires smoking. He threw the shifter down into first gear and screeched away up the access road and away from the Nolin River. That’s when the back-window glass popped, and Walt felt the bullet sting his right ear.

Chapter Two:
Top of the Nolin River Dam, Kentucky,
Wednesday, 6:20 am

Just before dawn, Trooper Desmond Pike wheeled his blue and white Kentucky State Police cruiser into the asphalt parking lot on the west side of the top of the Nolin River Dam. He killed the motor and lights and reached over to shut off the police radio. In the back of the cruiser, behind a cage of steel mesh separating the front compartment from the rear, sat a man dressed in khaki slacks and a red polo shirt.

“I don’t know why you had to bring me up here,” the man said. “You could have brought me the money later. I ain’t fond of riding around in the back of a police cruiser. No offense, but I’m not that excited about being seen with you either, Pike. You got a reputation, you know?”

“It doesn’t matter what other people think of me,” said the trooper. “I know who I am. Now sit back. I told you we have to meet the money man, and he will be here in a minute.”

Trooper Pike put both hands on the steering wheel and pushed his torso back against the seat. Jimmy, in the passenger seat, spoke for the first time since he and Trooper Pike picked Calvert up at the Super 8 Motel in Brownsville 20 minutes earlier.

“Yeah, Calvert,” Jimmy said. “Like Pike says, there ain’t nobody gonna see you with us, so you might as well sit back and enjoy this beautiful Kentucky morning.”

The three men sat in the cruiser and let the pre-dawn stillness settle in. Trooper Pike sat behind the wheel, staring straight ahead and slowly working his head side to side to loosen the vertebrae in his neck. Calvert sat in the back and fidgeted from one side of the bench seat to the other. Jimmy, a wiry man in filthy overalls and no shirt, rolled the passenger-side window down and spat out onto the asphalt. A small flock of sparrows quickly flew down to examine the saliva and then flew off.

Calvert leaned forward behind the cage.

“Roll a window down back here, too” he said.

Trooper Pike unbuckled the catch on his patent leather gun belt, exposing the butt end of his expensive .357 Colt Python Elite revolver. He ran his hand lightly over his bald head and sniffed.

“Calvert,” the trooper began, “you needn’t worry about the window. What you should be concerned with is our current problem.”

“Problem? We got no problem, Pike,” Calvert said. “The agreement was that I kidnap the judge’s wife, make sure she never comes back, and then I get paid. Tit for tat, simple as that. Your job, as near as I can tell, is to make sure I get my money. The rest I already worked out with your boss.”

Calvert stuck his forefinger through the steel mesh.

“In fact,” he continued, “I don’t know why we have to come out here to get me paid anyway. The first part of the job is done, but I’m going to need to get paid before I take care of the rest of it. I ain’t going down that road until I see the money.

Kidnapping is one thing, but murder is a whole ‘nother tangle of rats.”

He pulled his finger back through the mesh and sat back.

“And roll the damn window down back here,” he said. “No door handles, no window crank. There’s no need to treat me like a goddamned criminal.”

Jimmy rolled his window back up, moved his Winchester .22 rifle from between his legs and turned around to face Calvert. Jimmy had a two-day growth of beard and was missing most of his back teeth.

“That’s the thing, Calvert,” he said. “You *are* a criminal. You’re a kidnapper, and you have the intent to commit a murder. I just heard you confess to both of those crimes.”

He laughed.

“And another thing,” Jimmy continued. “I ain’t got no boss. I’m an independent contractor. Now Pike, here, he got a boss, but I get paid as an independent.”

Trooper Pike turned to Jimmy and snapped.

“Shut up, Jimmy,” he said. “Nobody cares how you get paid.”

The trooper adjusted the rearview mirror so that he could see Calvert’s face.

“Calvert,” he said, “we had to come out here because, in fact, it is we who cannot afford to be seen with you. Everybody knows you did 10 years in Green River Correctional for armed robbery.”

The trooper turned the mirror back to his own face and began to pick at his front teeth with a fingernail.

“Here’s the man with the money pulling up now,” he sniffed. “This will be over in a minute.”

A black Cadillac Escalade pulled into the lot and came to a halt three spaces over.

The lights went out on the Caddy, and the trooper put his hand on the door handle of the cruiser.

“Everybody stay in the car,” he said. “I’ll get the money.”

“Just for the record,” said Calvert, “that robbery charge was a load of shit. And tell your boy here to open the goddamned window. There ain’t no air back here.”

“I ain’t no boy, and them back windows ain’t fixed for rolling down,” Jimmy laughed. “This cruiser’s built for hauling criminals like you.”

“Roll your window down for him, Jimmy,” said the trooper. “Make the man comfortable. Ain’t no need to be an asshole about this.”

Trooper Pike got out of the cruiser and leaned back in through the open door.

“I’ll be right back. Ya’ll don’t go nowhere,” he sneered.

He shut the door and walked around in front of the cruiser and over to the Escalade. His uniform was crisp and clean, and he stopped to secure his broad-brimmed campaign hat to his head with the strap. He strode to the opened window of the Escalade, leaned in to talk to the driver for a moment, and then the driver handed a brown satchel out of the window. Trooper Pike stood next to the Escalade as it started up, then watched as it backed out of the parking space and pulled away across the top of the dam with its lights still off. He walked back

across the asphalt, got back into the cruiser, took off his hat, and laid it carefully on the seat.

“That’s the money in that bag, right?” Calvert asked.

“That is the money,” said Pike.

“Then give it to me and take me back to the motel,” said Calvert. “I’m hungry, and I ain’t had no breakfast. Plus, I got to finish the job now that I been paid to do it.”

Trooper Pike sat with the satchel on his lap, and then hefted it over to Jimmy.

“You’re not getting paid just yet,” Pike said. “Hold the money, Jimmy.”

Calvert hooked his fingers into the steel mesh, and Trooper Pike turned to face him.

“Calvert,” the Trooper said, “are you a philosophical man?”

“What the hell are you talking about, Pike?” said Calvert. “Give me my money, and let’s get out of here.”

“What I mean is this. Do you consider why things are as they are, Calvert?” Pike said. “The nature of reality and things like that. Life and death? The meaning of existence? The nature of the universe? Are you a questioner? A thinker? Or are you merely a monkey in a tree chasing after bananas and shitting on the jungle floor.”

Jimmy made a noise like a monkey.

“That’s what I mean,” said Pike, glaring at Jimmy. “That’s the only difference between us and the animals. We have the ability to realize that the things that happen to us are really just the byproduct of our own actions. This is what might be called self-awareness. You know what I’m talking about, Calvert?”

“I think about things as much as anybody,” Calvert answered. “I’m no philosopher, but I’m not a monkey, either, if that’s what you mean.”

Pike sniffed, and Calvert squirmed in the seat.

“What does this have to do with anything?” Calvert said.

“Well, before this thing happens,” said Pike. “I want you to have time to know it’s coming, so you have time to realize that you, yourself, have brought this on. This is not on me, and I want you to know that.”

“What do you mean, Pike?”

Trooper Pike pulled the big .357 out of his holster, turned, and leveled the gun at Calvert.

“This situation, as it has played itself out, leaves me no choice but to shoot you and dispose of your body where no one will find it,” said Pike. “The truth is that you sealed your fate when you embarked on this plan, and I’m really just an instrument here. This gun might as well be in your own hands, as you, yourself, are the cause of what’s going to happen now. When you accepted the job of kidnapping the judge’s wife and killing her, you also decided to put your own life at risk. You had to know that. And now, the cards have fallen against you. That’s all.”

Calvert sat back against the seat and wiped his hands on his khaki pants.

“You’ve seen too many movies, Pike,” he said. “I made a deal with your boss. You guys just can’t back out of a deal I already made.”

Jimmy twisted around to face Calvert now.

“I told you I ain’t got no boss,” Jimmy said.

“Shut up, Jimmy,” snarled Pike. “I’m talking to the man.”
He turned back to Calvert.

“I am sorry about Jimmy here, Calvert,” said Pike. “He does his little job and you give him a reward. Like you give a dog a cookie for shaking hands. It doesn’t go much deeper with him. He’s exactly what I’m talking about. A monkey in a tree.”

“Go to hell, Pike,” Jimmy spat. “That badge don’t make you no better than me. You ain’t no great criminal mastermind. You’re just an ordinary crook like the rest of us.”

“Look, Trooper,” Calvert sat on his hands. “I made a deal with the judge and that lawyer. All you got to do is give me the money, and then I take care of the judge’s wife just like he wants me to, and then we’re done. Tit for tat...”

Pike pushed the barrel of the gun up against the steel mesh, and Calvert pulled back into the corner of the back seat.

“It’s not as simple as that,” said Pike. “What’s going to happen is that I’m going to shoot you now, put you in the trunk, take you off somewhere and dispose of your body, and then take the money and the judge’s wife for myself. That’s what I have to do, and that’s what I’m going to do. No offense, but you stand in the way of what I want—of what was meant to be.”

The blood rushed to Calvert’s face.

“I’m getting paid to take care of the judge’s wife,” he insisted. “I’m the key to this operation. You know, you’re going to be in big trouble with the judge and that lawyer, Carrington, if you don’t do what you were told to do. That money is mine. I get paid to do the kidnapping and to do the judge’s wife, too. Not you.”

“You aren’t the key to this operation anymore,” Pike said. “Now you’re simply an obstacle. This is the way it was always supposed to happen, anyway. The judge’s wife belongs to me now, as does the money. All of it.”

“’Cept what I get,” said Jimmy.

“You’ll get yours, Jimmy,” said Pike. “Now, Calvert, I’m afraid I have no choice but to shoot you.”

“We can make a deal, Trooper,” Calvert said. “You do have a choice.”

He wiped his hands on his pants and squirmed against the seat.

“You can have the woman, and you can keep the money,” he said. “No problem. Simple as that.”

“Too late,” Pike said. “Jimmy, get the keys out of the ignition and we’ll put that money in the trunk.”

Pike looked at his teeth in the rearview mirror and ran his hand over his head.

“Calvert,” he said, “here’s how it’s going to go. I’m going to unlock this door, and you’re going to get out and walk around to the back of this cruiser and give me the key to the motel where you have the judge’s wife secured. If you don’t make any trouble, then this will at least be over quickly.”

“Shit, Trooper,” Calvert said. “This ain’t enough money to die over. The woman sure ain’t a big enough deal to die over. I’ll walk away from this whole thing right now. You can have the woman if that’s what you want, and you can have the money, too. I won’t say a word to anybody.”

Pike got out, closed his door, and opened the back door. He leaned in the car and pointed the gun at Calvert.

“In this case,” he said, “you don't get to decide what happens to the money or to the woman. It's already decided. Now get out of there and come around to the back of the cruiser.”

Calvert moved to the opposite side of the seat. Jimmy reached over, took the keys out of the ignition, opened his door, and dragged out the satchel of money.

“Come on, Calvert,” Jimmy said. “Don't make this hard on us.”

Calvert pulled himself up against the inside of the passenger-side door.

“Look, Pike,” he pleaded. “We can make a deal. This ain't enough money to die for. I'm telling you.”

“Jimmy, come around here and pull him out,” Pike said. “I'm afraid he's going to be trouble.”

Jimmy set the satchel on the trunk of the cruiser, walked around to the driver's side backdoor, and leaned in. He grabbed Calvert by the collar of his red polo shirt, dragged him out onto the asphalt, and punched him hard in the face. Calvert's head snapped back, and a trickle of blood ran from his lip down to his chin.

“Come on, asshole,” Jimmy said. “You know how this is going to end.”

Jimmy dragged Calvert around to the back of the cruiser, and Calvert sat in the dirt, dabbing at the blood flowing from the cut on his lip.

“You got that tarp spread out in the trunk, Jimmy?” the trooper asked.

“Yeah,” said Jimmy. “It’s in there just waiting on him. You at least get to ride with the money, Calvert, even if you don’t get to take it with you.”

He laughed, and Pike pointed his big .357 at Calvert’s forehead.

“Get up off the ground, Calvert,” he said. “Unless you want to die cowering like a dog. It’s time to take it like a man. Stand up and give me the key to the room.”

Calvert wrapped his arm around the bumper of the cruiser and sobbed.

“Loosen his grip on the car and stand him up, Jimmy,” said Pike.

Jimmy placed his dirty work boot against Calvert’s upper arm and pressed until Calvert let out a short scream and let go of the bumper. Jimmy wrapped his hands around Calvert’s neck and pulled him up against the trunk of the cruiser, but Calvert regained his footing and took a swing at Jimmy. Jimmy ducked and threw him face-first hard against the back of the cruiser, knocking the air out of him. Calvert gasped and rolled over.

“Now,” said Pike coldly. “Give me the key to the room, Calvert. Or do you want me to take you into those woods over there and work on you until you give it to me? Is that what you want? Cause I would be happy to do that, too, if you like. Nothing would please me more than to take a knife to you. I’ll take your fucking scalp.”

Calvert slumped against the cruiser.

“Keep the money and keep the woman, too,” he sobbed. “I’ll disappear, and you’ll never hear from me again. You don’t have to do this, Pike.”

“I told you,” said Pike. “It’s your actions that have brought this about. It’s not me. You never should have gotten yourself involved in something that wasn’t any of your business in the first place. Now give me the key, or we can step over into those woods.”

“I won’t tell anybody, man,” Calvert said to Jimmy. “You talk sense to him.”

“It ain’t none of mine,” Jimmy said. “Pike’s gonna do what Pike’s gonna do. Always does.”

“You’ll talk if we leave you alive,” the trooper said. “You might keep quiet for a while, but eventually you’ll need to show off to somebody, and you’ll start talking. It’s just human nature. You might tell yourself you won’t say anything, but one day you will. You’re a show-off and a big talker. I can tell.”

“Pike,” said Jimmy, “there’s a car coming.”

“Who the hell is out here this early?”

Pike hid the pistol behind his leg.

Sensing his one chance, Calvert grabbed the satchel and swung it hard against Jimmy’s chest. Jimmy stumbled backward and up against Pike, and Calvert ran wildly out across the sidewalk over the top of the dam.

“Damn it, Jimmy,” Pike spat. “Go after the son-of-a-bitch. Now he’s got the money. I’ll handle this.”

A white Chevy station wagon pulled up behind the cruiser and the window came down.

“Trooper Pike?” the driver of the car said. “Everything all right?”

The driver was smoking a cigar and wearing a bucket hat covered with fishing lures.

“Yes, everything’s fine. We have a vagrant here is all,” said Pike. “Jimmy will catch him.”

“Think he’s the one who’s been stealing from the back of Starling’s gas station?” the driver said.

“Could be,” said Pike.

“You want me to call somebody when I get to work?”

“No,” said Pike. “We’ll take care of this. Look, Jimmy has him already.”

Halfway across the top of the dam, Jimmy had caught up to Calvert, and they were scuffling on the sidewalk.

“See?” said Pike. “Jimmy’s got him now, so you can head on to work. No need to think another thing about this.”

The driver nodded, cranked his window back up, and rolled away. Pike trotted out across the dam where Jimmy and Calvert still grappled with each other on the concrete sidewalk that ran alongside the road over the top of the dam.

“Get him up, Jimmy, and turn him around,” Pike said.

Jimmy wrestled Calvert to his feet and threw him up against the railing. Calvert stood, huffing and clutching his side. He still held the satchel.

Pike pointed his gun at the center of Calvert’s face.

“Now give up that money and the room key,” he said.

“Keep back, Pike,” Calvert huffed. “Or else.”

Jimmy laughed.

“Or else what, Calvert?”

“Or else this.”

Calvert spun around with the satchel in his outstretched arm and released it. The bag sailed out over the edge of the dam and down toward the river below. They stood at the railing and watched the bag hit the water and drift off downstream.

“Well, now you’ve done it,” Jimmy said.

“We’ll get down there and get the bag before it goes too far,” Pike said. “In the meantime, Calvert, there’s this.”

Calvert’s mouth flew open to say something, but before the words could come out, Trooper Pike fired a round from the .357, and the bullet blew into Calvert’s forehead, turning the back of his skull and half of his brain into a confetti of red and grey and white. The momentum of the headshot pushed Calvert over the railing, and he disappeared over the side. His arms and legs flailed for a moment in mid-air, and then his body began to wheel down the face of the concrete dam like a red and khaki pinwheel.

“Dammit,” said Pike. “I didn’t mean for him to go over the edge. Why the hell didn’t you catch him, Jimmy. Watch where he goes and keep your eye on the money.”

Pike holstered his pistol and checked his uniform to make sure he was still clean. The front of Jimmy’s overalls was splattered with blood, bits of skull, and brain.

“Damn, Pike,” Jimmy said. “You got that shit all over me.”

He brushed roughly at his chest and flicked a piece of bloody skull off his forearm and over the side of the dam.

“Never mind,” Pike said. “Just make sure you get it all off before we get back into the cruiser. I don’t want any of that on the seat.”

Pike shook his head and looked over the railing in time to see Calvert’s body in the roiling water at the foot of the dam.

“We have to go down there and retrieve the money and what’s left of Calvert,” he said.

“Look over there, Pike.”

Jimmy pointed down toward the tail waters.

“Who’s that out in the river?”

Trooper Pike could see the fisherman looking up toward the dam.

“I think he’s seen us,” said Pike. “Can you hit him from here with that popgun of yours?”

Jimmy raised his rifle, took aim, and fired a shot.

“Shoot again,” Pike said. “But hit him this time.”

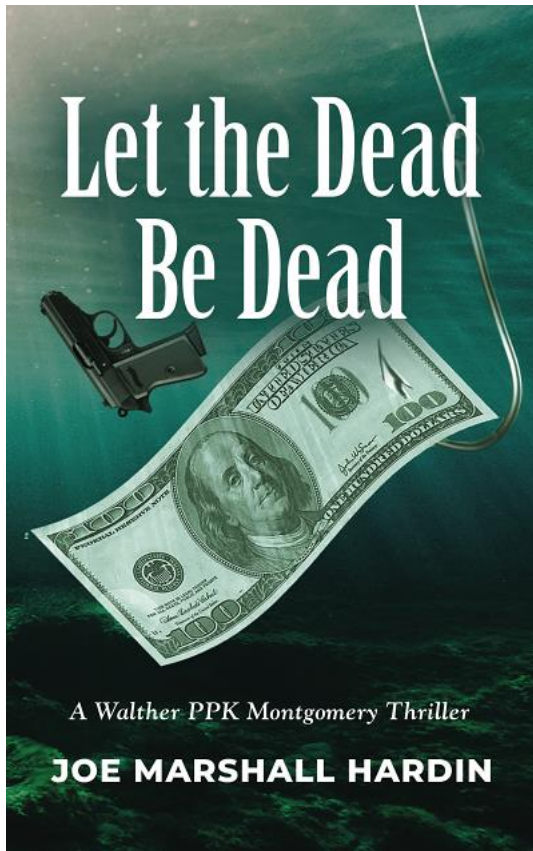
Jimmy knelt, put the barrel of the .22 against the crossbar of the railing, and fired again.

“It’s too far for that .22, even for you,” Pike said. “We’re going to have to go down there anyway.”

Jimmy stood up and smiled broadly.

“You blew the back of Calvert’s head off with that .357,” said Jimmy.

“Let that be a lesson to you,” said Pike. “The unexamined life is not worth living.”



When Walt Montgomery takes a weekend of fishing, he doesn't expect to catch a briefcase containing \$150,000. Walt and girlfriend, Belinda, are then pursued by a psychopathic cop and a crooked lawyer, who will kill to reclaim the money.

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