

THOMAS A. TARRANTS

**CONSUMED**  
*redeemed*  
**BY**  
*by*  
**HATE**  
*love*

How a Violent Klansman Became  
a Champion of Racial Reconciliation

## PRAISE FOR *CONSUMED BY HATE, REDEEMED BY LOVE*

“As a kid in Mississippi in the late 1960’s, I remember the men of our church discussing the Klan’s bombing campaign against the Jews. The men did not disapprove. Later, I would use this fascinating chapter of civil rights history as the backdrop for my novel, *The Chamber*. Now, one of the bombers, Thomas Tarrants tells the real story in this remarkable memoir. It is riveting, inspiring, at times hard to believe but utterly true, and it gives some measure of hope in these rancorous times.”

—JOHN GRISHAM

“The amazing story of how God delivered my friend Tom Tarrants from racism and hatred and gave him a heart of love and friendship for people of all colors and backgrounds. This book gives hope for what God can do.”

—DR. JOHN PERKINS, PRESIDENT EMERITUS OF THE JOHN PERKINS FOUNDATION AND COFOUNDER EMERITUS OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION

“This gripping and inspiring story is as timely as today’s headlines. My friend Tom Tarrants is a trophy of God’s grace—and testament to how God not only changes our eternity but can transform our hearts and minds for today. So put on your seatbelt and prepare to enter into one of the most extraordinary true stories you’ll ever encounter!”

—LEE STROBEL, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE CASE FOR CHRIST* AND *THE CASE FOR GRACE*

“Most of us have never been part of a racist domestic terrorist cell. For all of us, though, the story of this book is our story. We were, all of us, alienated from God and hiding from him behind something, whether white supremacist hatred or career advancement, sexual promiscuity or self-righteous religion. The same Christ confronts all of us, and the same gospel can transform. This book, of the transition from a Ku Klux Klansman to a gospel Christian, is a riveting narrative. You will be gripped by the story and, I hope, by the Story behind the story. This is the path from burning crosses to the cross of Christ himself, from raging hate to amazing grace. How I love that story. You will too.”

—RUSSELL MOORE, PRESIDENT OF THE ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY COMMISSION OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

“The dramatic story of Tom Tarrants’s conversion from terrorist to advocate for peace is simply astonishing. It is also essential reading for these times. If you want to understand how the evil of extremist thought works—and how the gospel of God’s grace can overcome it—read this book.”

—MARK BATTERSON, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF *THE CIRCLE MAKER* AND LEAD PASTOR  
OF NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

“Reveals how easily a political ideology can grow into a radical, extreme, life-taking worldview, all the while masquerading as some supposed form of a ‘Christian’ faith. A powerful story!”

—ERIC C. REDMOND, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF BIBLE  
AT THE MOODY BIBLE INSTITUTE, CHICAGO

“A rivetingly told tale. Will America ever be free of its ‘original sin’ of racism? Tarrants goes on record against himself, shining the light on the dark workings of his own radicalization as a domestic terrorist. But in showing how grace and forgiveness broke into his own life to give him a second chance, he points the way for all who strive to rid America of this terrible scourge and the hatred that it breeds.”

—OS GUINNESS, AUTHOR OF *LAST CALL FOR LIBERTY*

“At a time when the blight of hatred, racial division, and tribalistic contempt spreads and seeps into our politics, communities, and churches, Tom Tarrants’s extraordinary, often horrifying, and miraculous story offers both insight and instruction. He shows the ways in which hate warps the mind and corrupts the heart, as well as the allure of scapegoating and rigid ideology and the human carnage left in their wake. But this is ultimately a story of amazing grace—how one blinded by hate learned to see, to love, and to reconcile. And it offers hope, showing the possibilities for the flowering of such grace, even on the cultural battlefields of our own riven land.”

—CHERIE HARDER, PRESIDENT OF THE  
TRINITY FORUM, WASHINGTON, DC

“When I met Tom Tarrants at Parchman prison so many years ago, I sensed him as a pleasant, well-mannered, and intelligent man. I wondered why he was there. I did not have any sense of how our lives would intersect. Only later did I learn the depths to which the demons of racism had driven him. This riveting story of a journey from darkness into light is about the total renovation that God’s grace can bring about—of mind, heart, and soul. What impresses me as much as Tom’s initial journey into faith is his renouncing the temptations of celebrity status and desire to live as a humble disciple of Jesus, quietly guiding others on the same path. This is a needed story for our time.”

—LEIGHTON FORD, PRESIDENT OF LEIGHTON FORD MINISTRIES

“From racism to reconciliation. From Klan-inspired hatred to passionate love with understanding. Tom Tarrants’s story and reflections show that there is hope for our times, even in the midst of rancor and division. This is a must-read for the church in America!”

—DENNIS P. HOLLINGER, PHD, PRESIDENT AND  
COLMAN M. MOCKLER DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF  
CHRISTIAN ETHICS, GORDON-CONWELL SEMINARY



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Champion for Racial Reconciliation

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# INTRODUCTION

About fifteen years ago, former White House aide and Watergate figure Chuck Colson said to me, “You *must* get your life story back in print.” He was referring to a book I had written in the late 1970s that described the events of my life up to that point. It was an account of God’s grace and love to me when I was a hate-filled terrorist, and of how he miraculously spared my life on two occasions and brought me to faith in his Son. Chuck and I had been friends for many years, so I listened politely, but the idea didn’t resonate with me. I had had enough publicity to last two lifetimes, and the last thing I wanted was more.

But in the years following Chuck’s exhortation, at least half a dozen people who didn’t know one another said essentially the same thing to me, leading me to conclude that God might be trying to send me a message. So, after much prayer and reflection, I set out to revise the original book and update it to cover some of God’s additional workings in my life during the forty years since 1976, the last year the earlier book covered. Cardiac and neurological issues along the way slowed the process, but exceptional medical treatment and the prayers of my family and friends enabled me to complete the writing.\*

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\* At the request of my family, for which my past notoriety has not been helpful, I have not mentioned them in this book.

However, as I was finishing the book and exploring publishers, I began to see a significant resurgence of the racism, anti-Semitism, and political extremism that I had been a part of during the turbulent 1960s. This set off alarm bells in me not only for the societal impact but also for its seductive potential for some in the church. So, I decided to revise the book to be both an account of personal conversion and transformation and a cautionary tale for Christians today. It is also a story of hope. And yes, no matter what we may face in life, there is hope—hope in a loving and all-powerful God, for whom nothing is impossible.

The chapters ahead give a vivid and gripping account of how, in a period with similarities to our own, I was seduced by extremist ideology, became a terrorist, and in prison had a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ that took me in a very different direction. The book concludes with a brief look at three elements of America's current social upheaval and suggestions about how to avoid becoming ensnared and respond in a way that glorifies God.

*Part 1*

**SEEING GOD WORK IN  
THE EXTRAORDINARY**

1968-1976



# 1 AMBUSHED!

**O**n a miserably hot and humid Mississippi afternoon, June 29, 1968, Kathy Ainsworth and I met over dinner to discuss our plan to bomb the house of a prominent Jewish leader in Meridian, Mississippi. We had been introduced a couple of years earlier and were both dedicated to “the Cause”—the cause of preserving America and white supremacy. This meant fighting against the civil rights movement, the liberals, and the Communist-Jewish conspiracy that was trying to destroy our nation. We saw ourselves as patriots, fighting for God and country. Neither of us had any idea of what awaited us just a few hours later.

Meyer Davidson was a wealthy, successful businessman in what was then a city of some forty thousand people. Several weeks earlier he had spoken out with great indignation after the bombing of Meridian’s Jewish synagogue, Temple Beth Israel. Davidson publicly attacked Mississippi’s White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, described by the FBI as the most violent right-wing terrorist organization in the United States. He denounced

its members, calling them maniacs. He also launched a fund-raising drive that raised \$80,000 in reward money for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible for the temple bombing.

Even though I wasn't an official member of the Mississippi Klan, I might as well have been. I had good friends who were, and I shared their views and concerns. Davidson's denunciation infuriated all of us. Such a public attack and aggressive action against the Klan would have been sufficient provocation for a violent response. But other, more practical considerations had also influenced the decision to bomb his house and my readiness to be part of the plot.

Since mid-January that year, Klansmen in Meridian had conducted a reign of terror that garnered attention all the way to Washington, DC. They had firebombed or burned eight black churches and three homes (two black families and one white family). This was part of a larger terror campaign that had been going on for several months in Mississippi. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had ordered his organization to put a stop to it. A large number of federal agents were at work in Mississippi, assisted by state and local law enforcement agencies. Their initial efforts focused chiefly on Klansmen brothers Wayne and Raymond Roberts. Wayne had been recently convicted in the murders of James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, three civil rights workers who had been abducted in Philadelphia, Mississippi, in 1964. Even though Wayne was identified as the triggerman in those crimes, he was free on bond while his case was on appeal.

The Roberts brothers had been able to handle the pressure until the bombing of Temple Beth Israel and the national outcry following the Meyer Davidson news coverage. At that point, the Mississippi Public Safety commissioner sent a special group of state investigators, known as "the goon squad," to Meridian to assist local police in pressuring the two men into cooperating. In an effort to cause them either to talk or make a mistake, this special squad followed them everywhere, watching their

homes around the clock, visiting their workplaces, and in an interesting role reversal, quietly threatening the Klansmen's lives.

The pressure soon took its toll. In mid-June Raymond Roberts went to Jackson several times to ask one of my friends for help. About a week later, my friend traveled to Meridian for further discussions with both Raymond and Wayne. They decided that something had to be done to relieve the pressure from law enforcement, and soon. They concluded the best thing would be yet another major act of violence against Jews, one consistent with the ongoing campaign of terror to make the act appear to be the work of those who bombed the synagogue. This time, however, the Roberts brothers, knowing in advance of the bombing, would have an airtight alibi—being seen publicly elsewhere with many witnesses. In theory, the focus of the investigation—and the harassment—would shift away from them.

Though I was not in Mississippi while these discussions were taking place, the choice of Meyer Davidson as the target was at least partly my doing. After his public comments about the Temple Beth Israel bombing, I had mentioned to other Klansmen that Meyer Davidson, because of his profile, would be a good target for some future operation. I saw it as a good opportunity to demonstrate what could happen to those who brazenly attacked the Klan. And it would also more generally send a message to Jews, who we believed were behind the civil rights movement. When I returned to the state and learned of the pressure being applied to the Roberts brothers, I decided to be one of two bombers for this attack, which was planned for a few days later at the end of June. Time was of the essence, the Roberts brothers said, because a grand jury was meeting soon and would probably indict them.

But my prospective partner in the operation was a well-known Klansman, and whenever a major act of racial violence occurred, the FBI went straight to his house to see if he was home. To avoid compromising the operation and to relieve some of the pressure on him, at the last

minute I suggested that he not go. That way he, like the Roberts brothers, would have an alibi when the bomb exploded and could greet the FBI when they came knocking on his door minutes later.

The only person who could replace him was Kathy Ainsworth, a trusted member of the Klan's inner circle in Jackson. Kathy was a smart, attractive brunette in her midtwenties who taught at a local elementary school and was not on the FBI's radar. Few people would have suspected her of Klan activities, as women were rarely involved in such things. She was proficient in intelligence gathering, clandestine operations, and the use of firearms. More important, she had experience in previous bombings. I drove to Kathy's house in Jackson to explain the situation to her.

When I arrived, Kathy was preparing to make the long, hot drive to her hometown of Miami for vacation. Her husband, Ralph, who knew nothing of her terrorist activities, was away at a two-week National Guard training camp. I described the plan for the Davidson attack, explaining the need to replace my prospective partner, and asked, "Can you go with me on this mission? If so, we can drop off the bomb in Meridian, and then I will drive you on to Miami."

"Yes, I can do it," she said without hesitation. "And I can introduce you to some patriots down there."

From my study of covert operations, I had learned that secrecy was the single most important factor in the success of terrorist activities. Information had to be tightly controlled and dispersed strictly on a need-to-know basis. Anyone not directly involved with an operation could not know about it. But in this case, that principle was not being followed. Although they would not be participating, both Raymond and Wayne Roberts knew the details of the operation. They were Klansmen—active terrorists themselves in the Meridian area. Part of the reason for this operation was to divert attention away from them. If anyone could be trusted, it was these two—or so I thought.

Kathy and I left Jackson and headed east toward Meridian. During the two-hour drive, we discussed our plan further. The bomb was set to detonate at 2:00 a.m. It consisted of twenty-nine sticks of dynamite and a separate, battery-powered timing device. It would do massive damage. By the time it exploded, we would be well on our way to Mobile. Kathy would spend the night with friends there before we continued on to Miami. I reassured her, "It will be a simple operation."

We reached the Meridian area at about eleven o'clock, stopping at a pay phone near a hamburger stand on the highway. I was all business now. "I'll call Raymond and be back in just a minute," I informed Kathy as I stepped out of the car.

I was now much more alert, and nervous tension was growing. Off in the darkness, a dog barked. The chirps of crickets and squeaks of tree frogs cascaded through the tall trees. The light from the phone booth dimmed my night vision, blinding me to all but the most overt surveillance that might be nearby. But that didn't matter; this wouldn't take long.

The restaurant was closed, the night was dark, and the air hung heavy with humidity.

I dropped my dime in the slot and dialed Raymond's number. He was expecting the call. We spoke only a few words, in code, signaling a meeting at a prearranged rendezvous point—a truck stop near Meridian.

"Is Bill there?" I asked.

"You've got the wrong number," he replied.

That was it. We assumed the presence of FBI wiretaps on our telephones. Therefore, we routinely employed countermeasures, such as the use of codes, veiled references, voice disguises, and especially short calls. This one had taken less than a minute.

I returned to the big Buick. It had bench seats and a powerful engine that made it fast—fast enough to outrun many police cruisers. Kathy and I drove in alert silence to the designated meeting place, a truck stop closer to town, where we waited in the parking lot.

Within a few minutes Raymond drove up. He came over to our car and got in the backseat, expecting to see me and another Klansman. Surprised at the presence of a woman, he demanded, "What's she doing here?"

"Don't worry," I replied. "She's been on missions like this before. She can do anything you can do and more."

After we talked for a few minutes, Raymond returned to his car. Kathy and I followed him to the nearby Holiday Inn, which had a late-night bar. Raymond parked his car and then got in the Buick with us to check out the Davidson house.

Meyer Davidson lived in an affluent, but not ostentatious, neighborhood. His house was a comfortable, ranch-style brick structure with a double carport, standing on a spacious, tree-shaded corner lot. Kathy, Raymond, and I circled his block twice and drove through the surrounding neighborhood, looking for anything that might indicate surveillance or the presence of a stakeout. Except for an occasional streetlight, the streets were quiet and dark—optimum conditions. I hadn't seen any problems and had no reason to expect any. I was nevertheless feeling tense and uneasy.

I knew that if anything went wrong, it could be disastrous. Because of the recent bombings and church burnings, tensions were high in Meridian. The police were in a heightened state of alert and under intense pressure from Chief Roy Gunn, a strong, domineering man with a temper, who was given to emotional outbursts and could be ruthless in achieving his goals. He was on a personal campaign to stop Klan violence in his city, no matter what it took, and he expected his officers to do whatever was necessary, legal or otherwise.

We drove back to the Holiday Inn and dropped off Raymond. It was now midnight. When the bomb exploded, he would have been in the bar for two hours with plenty of witnesses. We continued out to a secluded, wooded area several miles north of Meridian. There I retrieved the bomb from the trunk of the car.

With no witnesses other than the stars and the deepening darkness, in the dim glow of the trunk light, I connected the electrical detonator to the dynamite and set the timer for 2:00 a.m. I got back in the car and gently placed the bomb on the front seat between Kathy and me. I looked at her and asked, "Are you ready?"

Kathy looked down at the bomb, then replied with an almost imperceptible hesitation, "Yes."

We headed back into Meridian. As we turned south onto Davidson's street, we saw his house ever so softly cast in the pale-yellow light of the lone streetlamp. It was a scene of tranquility that would soon be shattered.

I slowed to a stop about fifty feet from the drive leading to Davidson's residence. It was almost 1:00 a.m. As near as we could tell, the entire neighborhood was asleep. The house was set back about forty feet from the street. On our left, directly across the street, was a five-foot embankment with trees and shrubbery that partially obscured a neighboring house from view. The embankment would shield that house from a large part of the bomb's blast.

Ever so quietly, I opened the car door and stepped out in the dimly lit street. The humid night air once again enveloped me. Kathy remained in the car. I tucked a pistol into the waistband of my trousers, then lifted the bomb from the front seat and cradled it. I gently closed the car door behind me. Any sound it made was drowned out by the cacophony of chirping crickets.

Full of tension, I walked silently around the front of my car and up the concrete driveway. I was almost there.

Then a gunshot pierced the night. And a man shouted.

More gunshots boomed. The bullets made whizzing pops as they passed me.

They seemed to come from every direction.

And they were all aimed at me.

I dropped the bomb, which should have exploded instantly but didn't. As I spun around and ran back to the car, the pistol in my waistband spun out and fell to the ground, unfired.

I had to reach the car.

I had to get away.

My mind began to race: *Did Davidson see us? Where are all the shots coming from?* We had to get away before police sealed off the area.

As I reached the front of the Buick, a hot, massive blast tore through my upper right leg. It was buckshot. The force of the impact stunned me. I grabbed the hood of the car to keep from collapsing. I didn't see the shooter, but he couldn't have been more than twenty feet away.

I was hit. I sensed pain that my amped-up mind didn't fully register. But I did fully register the continuing bangs and booms of gunfire. Bullets and buckshot were flying everywhere around me. Inexplicably, although I was completely exposed to the barrage, I was not hit again.

Once more I strained forward, on a wounded and wobbly right leg, lurching toward the driver's door. Kathy leaned over from the passenger side to open it and pull me in.

Hot lead now tore through the heavy metal of the big Buick. The concealed shooters were pumping round after round of rifle and shotgun fire into the car.

I started the engine, dropped the car into gear, floored the accelerator, and sped away through the hail of gunfire. I could feel the warm blood flowing out of my leg and onto the front seat.

As I sped down the street, I heard Kathy say in a soft voice, "Tommy, I've been hit." I took a quick glance over at her. In the yellow glow of a passing streetlight, I saw a bullet hole at the base of her neck.

"I've been hit, too, Kathy, but we're going to make it. Don't worry. There's a doctor in Jackson who can help us."

When she didn't reply, I looked over again and saw her body slumped over on the seat.

I was careening south down Twenty-Ninth Street, toward the highway to Jackson. It looked as though we might get away. I experienced a bright moment of hope that both Kathy and I could find medical help and survive this night's disaster.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a police car zoomed up behind us. Its driver practically fastened his vehicle onto our rear bumper. I would later learn that it was a brand-new Ford Police Interceptor with a more powerful engine than the Buick's. I glanced up in my rearview mirror and saw an officer hanging out the passenger window, aiming a shotgun.

*Boom! Boom!*

The rear windshield shattered. I swerved to throw off the shooter's aim until he had to reload. I made a hard right at the next intersection, then another. But in that kind of turning chase, the Buick was no match for the lighter and nimbler Ford. The police car stayed right on my bumper, pumping round after round into the car. Once again, inexplicably, I was not hit.

In a last desperate effort, I turned again, this time to the left, putting the shooter on the outside of the turn. But I had taken the turn too fast and skidded to the right and off the paved street. With the big engine screaming, we smashed up and over the curb, coming to a rest half in the street and half in the yard of a corner house. The police cruiser was so close behind that it couldn't stop, and it crashed into the rear of the Buick.

For a moment there was silence. The smell of hot brakes and smoking motor oil and burned rubber wafted through the hot, muggy air.

But I wasn't done yet.

More reacting than thinking, I grabbed my submachine gun from under the front seat and jumped out of the car. The cop in the passenger seat of the police car had jumped out of his door, brandishing a shotgun, but I had been faster. I fired a sustained burst, spraying the stream of bullets between the two cops. The cruiser's windshield was destroyed. At least three rounds struck the first cop in the chest, and he went down.

The driver, his partner, dove beneath the dashboard, and my burst missed him entirely.

My ammunition magazine was empty, and the spares were in the car, so I dropped the empty submachine to the pavement. Suddenly, the driver stood up and fired a shotgun blast, striking me in the upper left leg and abdomen. But instead of firing again and killing me, the officer stepped back into his car.

Somehow, I managed to stagger away. I made my way to the backyard of an adjacent house, where some shrubbery partially concealed me. I tried to scale the chain-link fence, but it was topped with a strand of electrified wire. It delivered a surprisingly powerful electric shock that knocked me to the ground. Stunned, I tried to get up. I couldn't. My strength was gone. All I could do was lie in the shrubbery where I fell and hope I was hidden enough that the cops wouldn't find me.

A sensation of creeping numbness inched over me—as if I were in a rowboat drifting slowly into a foggy night. Somewhere out in the fog I could hear sirens. They seemed to be coming in from every direction. People shouting. Dogs barking. Police officers fanning out with their big, powerful flashlights.

A beam fell on me.

“Here he is, in the bushes,” said a voice from behind the flashlight.

Four armed men approached me with great caution, holding their lights on me each step of the way. I lay very still, with my eyes closed, lest some movement cause one of them to shoot. I heard footsteps stop a few feet away. Then the lights went out.

A moment of silence, then *Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!*

Four deafening shotgun blasts in rapid succession. Two loads of buckshot ripped into my right arm just below the elbow, nearly tearing it off. The other two hit the ground a mere inch or two short, kicking up dirt on my chest. I knew my right arm was shattered. And I was surprised I wasn't dead.

There was another pause in the fighting, but unlike earlier, this time I was quite done.

A flashlight beam shone directly in my face. I squinted against its piercing brilliance. A voice from beyond the beam asked, “Is he dead?”

A strong hand fastened around my wrist and began dragging me out of the bushes. A voice swore, “No, the son of a bitch is still alive.” The orders from Police Chief Roy Gunn had been “drop them,” no survivors. For the fourth time that night, I was at death’s door.

Just then, another man came running up. It was an ambulance driver. Had he arrived a few seconds later, the officer with the pistol would have already fired the kill shot. But with a witness—a civilian witness—he couldn’t risk pulling the trigger.

The police officers all shouldered or holstered their weapons. Without another word, they put me on a stretcher and carried me to a waiting ambulance, where Kathy had already been carried. They placed my stretcher next to hers, an FBI agent climbed in, and they slammed the door closed. The ambulance driver exchanged a few brief words with the attendant, turned on the siren, and began the race to Meridian’s Matty Hersee Hospital.

Hovering over me, the attendant saw how dire my situation was. I could feel the blood seeping out of my wounds. I tried to speak, but no sound came out.

“The girl is dead,” he said.

I closed my eyes. Bloody and battered, I was slipping deeper into the fog.

I remember hearing the siren. But that was all. I couldn’t think or feel emotion.

When we reached Matty Hersee Hospital, I opened my eyes, but just barely. Everything was blurry. I could dimly make out police cars and people waiting for me at the emergency entrance. It seemed as if police were everywhere.

As soon as the ambulance team wheeled me into the emergency room, nurses and doctors cut away my blood-soaked clothes. I lay naked while they swabbed me and inserted probes into the bullet holes to determine the extent of my injuries.

Standing right behind the doctors, uniformed police and FBI agents looked on. I was captured and helpless while my enemies gazed down on me with contempt. It was like a scene from my worst nightmare.

I don't know how long I lay there, but my mind began to drift. I couldn't recall how I had come to be there.

My mouth was as dry as a sunbaked salt flat.

"We can't give you anything right now," said a nurse.

At last the nurse placed a few small shavings of ice on my tongue. The relief was incredible.

Meanwhile a swarm of ER nurses buzzed about, prepping me for a surgery that no one expected me to survive. For some reason they were holding off on administering the merciful anesthetic that would render me oblivious to my condition.

Suddenly the nurses were gone, and what seemed like a squad of federal agents circled the metal examination table. "You're not going to make it," one said. "Why don't you make a confession and get all your crimes off your conscience before you die?"

The emergency room doctor had taken one look at my wounds and estimated I had perhaps forty-five minutes to live. These agents wanted me to deal a death blow to the Klan by linking the bombing to KKK imperial wizard Sam Bowers and revealing the identities of my accomplices. But faithful to the Cause and the Ku Klux Klan's code of secrecy, I told them nothing—not that I could have said a lot, even if I had wanted to. I could barely speak. Then, just as suddenly as they came, they disappeared.

The Matty Hersee operating room was a dingy, old-fashioned place where a single klieg light overhead shone directly into my eyes. It smelled

like Lysol and rubbing alcohol. A masked nurse fiddled with the IV drip in my arm and said, “Start counting backwards from one hundred.”

“Ninety-nine, ninety-eight . . .”

And then I was blissfully, blessedly unconscious.



# 2 AN UNDESERVED MERCY

The surgery to save my life began at about 2:30 Sunday morning and continued for several hours. During that time, my life hung by a thread. Somehow the surgical team had stanching the bleeding and mitigated the worst of the gunshot damage. But the damage to my body was extensive. There was the open question of how and whether to repair it.

I remained sedated for a long time afterward. Slowly, imperceptibly, I began to wake up. I first heard the nurses moving about, monitoring my vital signs and checking the circulation in my wounded right arm. I opened my eyes just a little. I struggled to focus. The first thing I noticed was that, like the operating room, this room was old and dingy. The next thing I noticed was an IV needle lodged in my left arm. It hurt. A lot.

Sometime later, a uniformed police officer escorted my mother, father, and girlfriend into the room. It was an extremely emotional reunion. They had made the long drive from Mobile, Alabama, where they lived. My mom was crying. So was my girlfriend. My dad looked like he was carrying

the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, and his eyes welled with tears. The three of them stood around my bed, each trying to touch me someplace I hadn't been wounded.

Over and over, they assured me of their love. They promised to stand by me no matter what. They promised to get me the best possible medical treatment. The near-certain prospect of my going to prison was never uttered. It felt so good to see them—to feel their love, their touch—even if only for a minute or two. I've never needed human love as much as I did right then.

Overcome with emotion, I summoned the strength to speak. "Mama, Daddy, I'm sorry . . . to do this . . . to you . . . but I had . . . to fight . . . for the Cause." Then I sank back into unconsciousness, leaving them to face what I had become and done—and to face all of the publicity, which had spread like wildfire across America and beyond by television, radio, and newspapers.

When I woke up, they were gone. A nurse came in to check on me. Heavily armed law enforcement officers stood guard outside the door of my room. After watching them for a while, I got the distinct feeling they cared little whether I lived or died. Surely some preferred the latter.

The shotgun blasts that ended the gunfight the night before had mangled my right arm. The emergency surgical team had cleaned out the gaping wound, removing bone fragments and splinters. A four-inch section of my ulna bone just below the elbow had been completely blown away. The surgeons had initially considered amputating my arm. However, there was a slight chance of saving it with the help of an exceptionally skilled orthopedic surgeon.

Fortunately for me at that time, Meridian, Mississippi, was home to one of the best orthopedic surgeons in the United States. Dr. Leslie Rush, the man who headed Rush Foundation Hospital in Meridian, was a pioneer in the design and manufacture of the first generation of stainless-steel pins and screws for traumatic bone repair.

My parents went straight to see him. After coming over and examining me, Dr. Rush agreed to treat me pro bono. On July 2, 1968, three days after my capture, a large, heavily armed police convoy transported me from Matty Hersee Hospital directly to an operating suite at the Rush Foundation Hospital. Police were everywhere. They surrounded the building, guarded every entrance, and patrolled the corridors and stairwells inside the building.

As I was being prepared for surgery at the Rush Foundation Hospital, I considered myself extremely fortunate. For starters, I was alive. Plus, I was about to have my shattered arm fixed by one of the best surgeons in the country—for free. Although I was a prisoner, I was being held in far better conditions—at least for the moment—than I would have dared to hope. I was young and I was clever. And one day I would be strong again, strong enough to escape. Freedom beckoned. So did the Cause.

The last thing I remember is the anesthesiologist asking me to count backward from one hundred.

“Ninety-nine, ninety-eight . . .”

The facilities at Rush were much better than at Matty Hersee. After surgery the orderlies wheeled me into a private room—at a time when most hospital inpatients were doubled up in smaller rooms. That part of the floor was designated off-limits to all but members of the massive police garrison and a few select doctors and nurses. Police officers stood watch in my room and in the hall outside around the clock. Other officers waited in the room across the hall. No one was going to get close to me without passing a screen of Meridian police.

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While I was in surgery at Rush Hospital, Kathy Ainsworth was being buried in Magee, Mississippi, a sleepy little town about halfway between Jackson and Hattiesburg. I had asked my parents to send a large spray of

flowers to her funeral, and they did. Against her husband Ralph's wishes, the Ku Klux Klan had turned out in full strength wearing their signature white robes, memorializing her as a martyr. In full sympathy with the Klan, Kathy's mother described her as a martyr for the Cause.

Kathy was raised in Florida and attended Coral Gables High School, graduating with honors. She babysat often for Adon Taft, the religion editor of the *Miami Herald* newspaper, whose family loved her and thought she was the ideal example of a young woman. Kathy went on to attend Mississippi College, a Baptist school in Jackson, Mississippi.

At the time of her death, Kathy was teaching fifth grade at the Lorena Duling elementary school in Jackson. She was loved by her husband, her students, and their parents, and was well respected in her community. Her Klan involvement and death under such circumstances was a shock that sent her students and their parents into heartbreaking bewilderment and disorientation. How could such a kind, genteel schoolteacher also be a secret terrorist? They could not reconcile the Kathy they knew with the person they discovered she was.

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When I awoke from surgery, I discovered another IV drip in my left arm. My immobilized and heavily bandaged right arm was searing with an unrelenting, sharp pain even worse than before.

A nurse came and delivered a dose of narcotic mercy that quickly returned me to painless and peaceful unconsciousness.

It was the first of many such shots.

For the first few days at Rush Hospital, I was fed intravenously and kept heavily sedated. I was given regular injections of Demerol, a potent painkiller. Gradually, however, I developed a tolerance to it, which meant increasing the size or frequency of the dose—and the risk of addiction. My doctors decided against increasing my dosage. For more than two

weeks, I endured excruciating pain in my right arm. This was aggravated and amplified by the awkward and uncomfortable position in which I had to lie. Night after night I suffered through agonizing hours of intermittent sleep and intense, throbbing pain.

Nonetheless, the hours turned into days, and my condition stabilized. The IV drips were disconnected. I began eating solid food again. I quickly learned to write and eat with my left hand. Until then it had never occurred to me that I would have so much appreciation for such a simple pleasure as eating. And what a good feeling it was when the orderly shaved me each morning!

I gained strength with each passing day, and despite the horrible wounds in both my legs, the nurses were soon walking me around the room and down the hall. “The danger of blood clots or pneumonia far outweighs the risk of getting up and walking a little each day,” they said. With a nurse on each arm, I took my first, short, unsteady steps toward recovery. The unspoken question was, recovery to what?

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During my time at Rush, the only visitors I was allowed were members of my immediate family. My father and mother, though separated at the time, worked together and came to see me as often as police would permit—almost daily at first. My brother, sister, grandmother, and girlfriend faithfully accompanied my family on the many trips but were made to wait downstairs and rarely got to see me. I was amazed at their love and support. How could they still love me in light of all that I had done? I had ignored my family’s warnings about getting involved with extremists and as a result had brought shame and disgrace on our entire family. That was a big deal in a traditional Southern town like Mobile. But that didn’t matter to them now. There was no finger-pointing, no saying “I told you so.” Far from disowning me, they were doing everything

they could to help me, at great personal and financial expense. Their love was healing.

One afternoon about ten days after my transfer to Rush, I received a surprising visitor. In a major exception to the no-visitor policy, an attorney from Laurel, Mississippi, was permitted to visit with me. Percy Quinn had been sent by Sam Bowers, imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, to see how I was doing, to reassure me of Klan support, and to learn the details of the police ambush. Quinn was not the most sought-after of the Klan's roster of lawyers, which confirmed to me that my situation looked hopeless. But he offered to represent me and try to arrange bond. He later confided to my family that there was nothing he could do to get me released on bail.

A few days later, I was scheduled for more surgery on my arm.

Early on the morning of my surgery, a nurse woke me up for an injection. A few minutes later two orderlies came in and placed me on a gurney. At least half a dozen policemen with submachine guns and sawed-off shotguns surrounded me. They wheeled the gurney to the elevator and down to the operating suite. When we reached the operating room, where a number of other officers were waiting, my escorts seemed noticeably relieved.

The surgery went well, and in a couple of days I was back in my routine. Then, one morning, a couple of new nurses came to my room. They were physical therapists and had come to teach me how to exercise the fingers of my right hand. I obediently flexed and exercised my fingers several times a day. Little by little I regained near-normal use of my hand.

During those long days and nights of recovery, I read from a Gideon Bible that was on the bedside table, looking for encouragement, hope, and maybe some answers. But as I tried to read the New Testament, I found it difficult to understand, especially in the Elizabethan language of the King James Version. And the few verses I had used to justify hatred of Jews and blacks and my fight for "God and country" were of scant

comfort. So I gave it up and concentrated on getting answers to the questions that had most needed me since the ambush.

How had the police discovered our plan?

What had gone wrong?

Unlike other Klan groups, our team operated in a well-organized, sophisticated, professional way. We took the strictest security precautions. We had made only one exception—allowing the Roberts brothers to be part of the planning of the operation without being present for it.

Day after day, as I lay in bed with my eyes closed, I would catch snippets of conversation between the policemen guarding me. Sometimes the officers would discuss the incident with me. Overall, that was a mistake, because their comments and questions only succeeded in giving me clues about what they knew. It soon became clear that the Meridian Police Department had obtained considerable inside information on the Meyer Davidson operation. As I put the pieces together, it appeared that the Roberts brothers were the most likely source.

I also learned that around four thirty on the afternoon before the bombing attempt, someone had telephoned my grandmother, asking to speak to Thomas Tarrants III. He said he had to get in touch with me right away. My grandmother told him I wasn't there. The caller then asked if I had gone to Mississippi. My grandmother replied she didn't know where I was but that she would "give anything in this world to know." Like the rest of my family, she had not seen me for several months.

Before hanging up the phone, the caller emphasized, "I've got to get him right away!"

I'm sure someone had called to warn me of the ambush in Meridian. Was it someone on the Meridian Police Department? Or someone else who had learned of what was about to happen?

Then, toward the end of July, during my last week in Rush Hospital, a stranger in civilian clothes walked into my room and announced that he was Officer Mike Hatcher. Officer Hatcher was the police officer that I'd

blasted with my submachine gun after he jumped out of his car. I hit him three times in the chest, once in the heart. He had undergone open-heart surgery that saved his life. Despite near-fatal wounds and the major surgery to repair them, he looked healthy and fit.

I didn't know what to say, so I asked, "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," he said. "And I want to let you know that I'm a better man than you are." And then he left.

Since then I have wondered: What did that mean—his strength and stamina in surviving a more serious wound than mine? Or that he recovered before I did? Or maybe that the police had finally won?

About midmorning on August 2, after a month of hospitalization, Sheriff Alton Allen came to my room and said, "Gather up your stuff. You're going to jail."