

SALVATION

A Novel by Kurt Corriher

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Chapter 1

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Junie and the boy fled the valley in the heart of night, stealing softly, like the river beside them and the mountain mist that crept around their shoulders and sheltered them from murderous eyes. When the boy's bad leg gave out, Junie hoisted him onto his back and hurried on, straining his ears for the snap of a twig, the rustle of a leaf, the muffled click of a hammer locking into place. Nothing. Only the murmur of the river guiding their escape.

By the time the sun crept up from the flatlands, Junie was near breaking. He was a strong man, but the boy was ten years old, and even though the child was slight, like his mother, Junie's back and shoulders screamed a silent protest. He slipped into the woods, and climbed the steep slope, far enough to remain invisible from the road.

He laid the boy softly on a shelf of moss and stretched his own aching body beside him. Autumn was drawing near, and the mornings had cooled. Nonetheless, sweat and exhaustion drenched Junie from head to toe. As the sun climbed, its rays filtered through poplar leaves, green still, but destined soon to flame yellow, a final jubilation before floating to death in the soil of the valley.

Junie reckoned he had made nearly fifteen miles in the night, downhill most of the way, stepping quickly with the bitter taste of fear in his mouth, not for himself but for the boy. The

boy was the reason for all of it. The boy—all he had left since Mary abandoned him in the spring, thrashing and cursing, uttering words he had never heard spill from her mouth, as the fever peeled away the layers of her life.

She lay on the mattress Junie had prepared for her, stuffed with his own hands to make her dying easier. Afterwards he burned the mattress and buried her in a wooden box made of slats torn from the corn crib. The box wasn't as pretty as he wanted, but it had done all right, he supposed, and now Mary lay under the ground behind the cabin, or rather behind the charred stone pilings rising from the square of ash where the cabin had been.

Junie squinted at the treetops and listened. The only sound was the boy's rhythmic breathing, interrupted now and then by the distant warble of a songbird.

Mary's box would rot away in a year or two, he thought, and then Mary would rot away too, and the soil would just be soil again, interrupted here and there by a stubborn white bone that used to be Mary. How many years, he wondered, until the bones were gone, until even her name and the memory of her vanished, and it didn't matter, in that unknowable world to come, that she had ever been?

But there was the boy. The boy was the thread that stretched past Mary's life and his own, and maybe the boy would have a child too, and that child would carry the thread another lifetime. Maybe that's how it went, until one day the thread would break. Or maybe everybody's thread would break all at once. Maybe the sun would explode. Miss Mayfield had said something about that back in school, hadn't she? That one day the sun would explode and everything would end, and the earth would be a cloud of dust again, drifting through space, as if nothing had ever been. Not even memory.

Junie turned his head and gazed at the sleeping face. The boy had Mary's features, fine lips and a dimple in his chin. He was thin like her too, thin and delicate, and Junie wondered if he would lose the boy, as he had lost Mary, slipping through his helpless fingers as she bled away, leaving him relentlessly, no matter how he cried and begged and clung to her, until at last her faint breath ceased altogether, and he knew that God had won.

He thought about the shotgun back up the road and wished he had it now, wished he hadn't thrown it looping, end over end, into the pool where the swirling white water suddenly went quiet and black and deep, like a man meeting death. But, no, he reminded himself, he couldn't carry the boy and the gun too. It had been the right thing to do. He needed the gun, would need it to kill some food, if not for protection from the Taggarts, but...no. He was strong and determined, but he was just a man, and the big double-barrel with the rabbit hammers and the oak stock was too heavy to carry along with the boy. They had a long, long way to travel, and the gun would attract attention, the last thing they wanted now.

Junie lifted his gaze back toward the brightening sky. He was a long man, stretched out on the moss beside the boy, long, with cords of muscle lining his neck and flowing down the brown arms that lay twitching beside him, like living ropes, ready at the need to snatch and strangle. The minutes dragged on, and the sun crept higher. The air grew warm, and the arms slowly stopped their twitching. The ropes softened and spread, and Junie slept.

The roar of an engine woke him. He watched through the leaves as a load of logs picked its way down the gravel road. When it rounded the bend out of sight, he turned toward the boy and found a pair of pale blue eyes—they too, were his mother's—gazing earnestly back at him.

“Where are we, Daddy?”

“Just in the woods, resting, that's all. You sleep good?”

“Uh-huh.”

Junie propped himself on an elbow, dreading the questions he knew would come.

“Can we go back now?” the boy asked.

Junie thought for a moment, searching for words. “No, ‘fraid not, boy. ‘Fraid we ain’t going back.”

“Not ever?”

“‘Fraid not.”

The boy jerked up to a sitting position. “But...how come? You can build us a new house, can’t you, Daddy? Or maybe...maybe it ain’t all gone. Maybe you can fix it.”

Junie shook his head. “Ain’t no house left. Ain’t nothing left.”

“But...but, Mama’s still there. We can’t leave Mama there all by herself.”

“Mama will be all right, boy. Can’t nothing hurt Mama now. I told you about all that, remember? When you’re dead, you’re safe, and you’re all right forever. Remember? Can’t nothing hurt Mama now, and she can’t be lonely no more, neither. She’ll always be happy, and she won’t miss us ‘cause she’s always watching us. She’s always with us somewhere. Remember?”

The boy stared away sullenly and said nothing, and Junie knew he didn’t believe a word of it, any more than his father did. The boy was smart. Too smart. Life was going to be tough for him. It wasn’t good to be so smart.

“Anyhow,” Junie went on, “we can’t go back no more. People are looking for us now.”

“What people?”

“The people that burned the house. And other people too. The law.”

The boy's eyes widened. "You mean somebody did that on purpose...set the house on fire? You know who did it?"

Junie nodded slowly. "I know. I saw him running to his truck, him and the others, the ones that nailed the door shut while he was setting the fire. That's why I had to smash the window and throw you out the way I did. Your arm going to be all right?"

The boy flexed his left arm once and nodded. "Yeah, it's okay. Well...who was it then?"

"Don't matter. We ain't going back. We ain't going to see him no more."

The air continued to warm as the sun climbed, and Junie wondered if he should take the boy's jacket off. The boy stared at the moss between his knees where he sat, watching it with troubled eyes.

"What did you do to him, Daddy?" the boy asked softly.

Junie's fingertips toyed with the coarse cloth of his overalls. Poor little fellow, he thought. It ain't good to be so smart.

Chess Taggart

After we buried Paul, I drove into Tarnville to see Mac McBride. I thought he might have come to the burying, but I reckon he figured he couldn't do that, being a lawman and all. Anyway, he was just climbing into his car when I came up. He saw me and closed the door and leaned back against that big black car and spit a line of tobacco juice into the dust.

"Evening, Mac," I told him.

He just nodded and looked at me with those arms folded, about as wide as a door. Mac's a big son of a bitch. He always has been, even when we were kids. He never messed with any of the Taggarts, though. There were five of us boys, and we stood up for each other, like Mama taught us. "You don't never let nobody get in on family," she told us, waving a meat fork in her hand there at the stove, all mad and tight. "Y'all can whip each other if you're a mind to, but don't never let nobody whip your brother. Y'all hear me?"

And we did what Mama said, and I guess it was a good thing, because nobody messed with us. Of course we beat hell out of each other plenty of times. Paul especially. Paul always was kind of mean.

I waited for Mac to say something, but he just spit another line into the dust and wiped his chin with his thumb and looked back at me, his eyes kind of half shut. I glanced down at that big pistol on his hip.

"Well," I said. "What do you think about all this?"

"About what?"

"Well, about Paul and Junie and all. Y'all ain't found Junie yet, I reckon."

"Nope."

I waited, but he wasn't saying anything.

"Well, Mac," I said, "you going to tell me anything?"

"What you want me to tell you? I ain't got nothing to tell."

"Well, hell. Are you *looking* for him, at least?"

He nodded that big head. "We're looking, but Junie ain't in Taylor County no more."

"You was over to Oscar's place, I guess."

"Of course," Mac answered, "but he wasn't there. Oscar said he took off sometime Tuesday night."

"You suppose he's telling the truth?"

"I'd have known if he'd been lying."

"Well, you got to go find him then, I reckon."

Mac shook his head the other way this time. "I ain't got to do nothing, Chess."

I felt the heat rising in my cheeks. "Well, you ain't just going to let him get away with killing a man, are you? Smashed his head in, like Junie done? You going to do your damned job or not?"

Mac's eyes got real little on me then, and he stood up straight, and I wanted to take a step back, he's so damned big, but I didn't.

"Now you listen to me, Chess Taggart," he said. "I'm sheriff of Taylor County, not you, and if Junie McAllister shows his face here, I'll throw him in jail. But I ain't busting my ass over it. You burn a man's house down...nail the door shut on him and his boy...what the hell do you expect, Chess?"

He was antsy on his feet then, and I saw that he was real mad about what Paul had done. A lot of folks were, I knew.

"Paul didn't mean no harm to Junie or the boy," I said, as loud and hard as I could. "He knew they'd get out. If he'd wanted to kill them, he could have shot them when they came through the window. Paul wasn't out to hurt nobody."

Mac swelled up all of a sudden, and I swear, I thought that big son of a bitch was going to smash me like a roach.

"Wasn't out to hurt nobody? Chess, what the hell's the matter with you? You burn a man's house down, burn everything he's got in this world, and you're saying Paul didn't want to hurt nobody? You ain't *that* damned stupid, Chess Taggart." He pointed a thick finger in my face. "Now, listen to me. What Paul done was first-degree arson, and that's a capital crime. If Junie hadn't killed Paul, the state of North Carolina probably would have."

He jerked his head off to the side and back again, like he didn't even want to look at me. "You want to know the truth?" he asked, stepping toward me, his eyes all afire, and this time I couldn't help it. I stepped back.

"I'll tell you the truth," he said, jamming his finger into my breastbone so hard it hurt. "The truth is, Paul asked for it, and Paul got it. He knew what Junie was liable to do. Well, Junie done it, and that means I've got to arrest him if he shows up back here, but I'll tell you straight out, I hope I never see Junie McAllister again. Now that's the straight truth, and you Taggarts can do with it what you like."

He jerked open the door of that car and drove off and just left me standing there in the dust.

Well, I knew he was only saying what a lot of people were thinking, and part of me didn't blame him. Paul was wrong to burn Junie's house. Paul was always prone to go off half-cocked when he was mad, and he was mad as hell at Junie over that corn.

And see...I can't blame Paul for being mad either. Paul offered Junie damned near twice what that corn was worth, and Junie wouldn't sell it? Well of course Paul was mad. It was an insult to my whole family. He wasn't selling corn to no bootleggers, Junie told Paul, no matter how much the price. Then he and Paul got into cussing at one another. Paul wasn't dumb enough to swing a fist at Junie McAllister, but he was mad. He came by Mama's house and yelled at me with the spit just flying from his mouth and said my old buddy Junie McAllister had yanked his chain for the last time.

After Mac left, I drove on back up the valley to Mama's house, twisting the wheel around all those curves and looking over at the river here and there where the trees got scarce enough for me to see. Funny how I still think of it as Mama's house, even though I've lived there all my life. I was dreading seeing Mama, because I already knew what she was going to say.

She was sitting on the porch in the rocking chair, shucking corn, what little we had, and I thought how Junie McAllister set fire to that whole crib full of perfectly good corn, just burned it out of spite before he took off.

Mama looked like an old skeleton, she's so skinny now, a gray old skeleton, pressed hard and dried up tough like she is. Paul's the fourth one of us Mama's buried, but the other three were all little. It's funny. I ain't ever seen Mama cry. Not even when those young 'uns died, or when Papa died, or now, when Junie McAllister stove in Paul's head. I've seen her mad lots of times, but never a tear.

I parked by the old buckboard with the weeds grown over it and walked up to the house. I'd have just as soon walked on up the river, because I knew how Mama was going to be, and I pretty much knew what she was going to say, and I didn't want to hear it.

“Where you been off too?” she asked when I came up the steps. She was wearing that old bonnet, tied up in a tight knot under her chin, and she didn’t even look at me, just ripped at those shucks in her hands as if they were the skin on Junie McAllister’s face.

“I’ve been to see Mac,” I said. “I was hoping maybe he’d found Junie by now.”

She dropped a clean ear in the bushel basket beside her chair, a runty little drought ear like all of them were that year, and she reached into the sack on the other side for a fresh one.

“And?” she asked. “What’d he tell you?”

“Said they were looking. Ain’t found him yet, though.”

She sectioned out a piece of shuck with those old dried fingers, as strong as they ever were, I reckon, and she stripped it down to the stem end as clean as if she’d done it a million times, which she probably had.

“Ain’t going to find him,” Mama said. “Ain’t never going to find him in Taylor County no more. Junie’s gone for good. Got no reason to be here, even if he hadn’t killed your brother. Got no house, got no wife, got nothing no more.”

“Well,” I said, “he’s still got that young ‘un.”

“That crippled little runt, you mean? That’s all he’s got, he ain’t got nothing, just like I said.”

Mama can be really mean sometimes. I didn’t say anything, even though I knew there wasn’t anything wrong with Junie’s boy except that leg, and it wasn’t the boy’s fault he had that polio.

“And you’re wasting your time talking to Mac McBride,” Mama went on. “Mac ain’t never had no use for us Taggarts. You wait for Mac McBride to find Junie, you’ll still be waiting when they lay you in the ground.”

I started to say something, and then just shut my mouth because I knew it was no use.

“What you going to do about this mess?” Mama said. She was pressing her lips together in a tight line like she was holding something bitter in her mouth.

I thought, well, here it comes. “What do you want me to do, Mama?” I said, real quiet.

She looked up at me then, finally, and those old eyes were burning. “What you reckon you ought to do? The man killed your brother, and the law ain’t going to do nothing about it, so what you reckon you ought to do? What’s a family supposed to do? You’re a Taggart. What was it I taught you boys all your life about looking after your own?”

“Why have I got to do something about it?” I asked, and I know I sounded a little whinier than I wanted to. “How come one of the other boys can’t do something this time? How come the youngest one gets stuck with everything that nobody else wants to do?”

“Because you’re here, and you ain’t got no family, that’s why. You know that. The others can’t pick up and go like you can.”

I wanted away from those eyes, so I turned around and hunkered down on the top step. It had a nail working up, and I shifted a little to stay off it. I figured I’d get the hammer after a while and put it down again. Nails were working up like that all over the porch, and they needed hammering. Mama might catch her toe on one of those nails.

“Mama, Talbert’s the oldest,” I said, looking out across the river, looking at the old bridge I’d just driven over, hanging there lopsided over the river. That bridge needed work too. The river had run up over it too many springs now, and the old runners were half rotten. There were a lot of things going to hell on the old place now that it was just me and Mama. But I couldn’t keep up with everything all by myself. I just couldn’t.

“Talbert’s the oldest,” I said again, “and seems to me it’s the oldest ought to take care of something like this, not the youngest.”

Mama tossed another puny little ear of corn in the basket, and reached back in the sack. “Talbert’s got two boys off in the army now. Mr. Roosevelt’s going to get us into that war over yonder, and then they’ll get the other one too. Talbert can’t go running off after Junie McAllister. Besides,” she went on, and I could feel those eyes in my back, “him and Angus and Oather got the business to look after.”

“Business, Mama? You make it sound like they was running a general store.”

Mama was quiet a long while, and I knew I shouldn’t have said what I did, but I was just put out with Mama right then.

“You can look down your uppity nose at whiskey-making all you like, boy,” she said, “but it’s that old still that put bread in your mouth all these years, and it’s that still that bought those shoes on your feet. Don’t you forget that, and don’t you be laughing at your brothers that’s been feeding you all these years.”

“They ain’t feeding me,” I spit back, and I turned around and looked her in the eyes. “They ain’t feeding me nothing. They’re up there playing around with that still, and I’m working my rear end off keeping this old sorry farm going. It’s me that grows potatoes for them, and it’s me raises those hogs they eat on all winter, and it’s me even grows the corn they’re making whiskey out of. Most years anyhow. Ain’t nobody feeding me nothing.”

I turned around again and spit down beside the steps, not because I had to spit but just to let her know I was mad.

“That really what you think, boy?” Mama said real quiet and mean. “How much money you reckon you going to lose this year when it ain’t hardly rained all summer, and Junie

McAllister's little piece of flood land is the only field around that made more than a handful of anything? And what you reckon we're going to live off of until it starts raining again? You reckon you're going to go hungry, like the McBrides and the Caulfields up the valley that's going to be chewing on dandelions and hunting 'possum every night to try to get through the winter alive?"

I just hunkered there and didn't say nothing until one of those little corn ears hit me hard between the shoulder blades.

"Ow! Mama, don't be throwing them things at me. They hurt."

"They're meant to. I asked you a question, boy. How we going to live? You don't know? I'll tell you. It's whiskey money that's going to get us through this winter with flour in the bin and lard in the can so I can make you them biscuits every morning. It's the family business is what. It's the money Talbert brings me every couple of weeks that bought you that car over there. It's paid you a hundred times over for those little old sacks of potatoes you give the other boys now and then. If it weren't for that still, you'd have starved a long time ago, so don't go getting all briggoty about that business, boy. I won't have none of that."

I just sat there wishing I hadn't said anything, because I knew Mama was right about it. I hadn't ever really made my own way, as hard as I worked, and as hard as I tried. It was whiskey money I had lived off all my life, just like the others, and I reckon that's how come Paul got so riled up when Junie told him he wasn't selling corn to bootleggers.

"And anyhow," Mama went on, a little calmer, and I could hear the shucks rattling again in her fingers, "it wasn't Talbert's girl that Junie McAllister stole away, back all them years ago."

I sighed. "Mary Lowder wasn't my girl, Mama. Don't start that now."

“Don’t you tell me what to start and what not to start,” she said sharp. “You sot up to her reg’lar back then, and Mary Lowder would have married you if Junie hadn’t took her away from you. And him your best friend, too,” she finished under her breath.

I sat there just wishing I could disappear like that fellow in that comic book Talbert brought back from a whiskey run down to Raleigh. I was thinking how nice it would be if I could fly like that fellow, just stretch my arms up and fly up in the air and over the top of the ridge and just not be there any more. Even after all those years, Mary Lowder was a sore spot. I tried to put some starch in my back and come back at Mama.

“I took Mary courting a time or two, that’s all. She was never my girl, and I didn’t have no hold on her. She just liked Junie better is all.”

“Don’t make out like it was nothing, boy. You were so sweet on that girl you couldn’t hardly eat. And when she ran off and married Junie McAllister you were down in the mullygrubs for half a year. Got skinny as a fence rail. That’s what Junie McAllister did to you. And if that ain’t so, then how come you weren’t ever friends again after that?”

“He was married, Mama, that’s why. And I was still a single man. And if Mary had married me, then I reckon I’d be a widow man now instead of Junie.”

“He wouldn’t have been a widow man if he’d took care of that woman. When she got peaked I told Junie McAllister to boil her up some wild cherry and poplar bark, and I gave him a pint of whiskey to mix it with because I knew he wouldn’t have any around his house. He just laughed at me and pushed that jar away. Said that was just old woman talk. Uh-huh. And when she took that fever, I went over to his house with a grain of corn in my apron. I could have cured her, just like I could have cured your brother Harlan, only back then we couldn’t find a black hen to feed it to. Old Scratch had hid them all in the woods. Then the day after Harlan died, a black

hen hopped right up here on the porch, bold as brass, and I knew that was Old Scratch bragging how he'd outsmarted me. But when I heard that Mary McAllister had took sick, I penned me up a black hen in a coop down yonder to the wood shed before I went over to Junie's house. Then Junie wouldn't let me prick her for a drop of blood to save her life, and her just a'laying there mis'ryin'. Well, I reckon he learned different when he buried her, and her not forty years old yet. No sir. If you hadn't let Junie take that girl away from you, I'd have kept her fat and fed over here. The poor woman half starved on Junie's place. I expect she wished many a time that she hadn't took her ducks to such a poor market."

"That ain't so, and you know it, Mama. Mary never stopped mooning over Junie, not in all those hard years she had down the valley yonder. She wouldn't have married me, anyway."

"She wouldn't after Junie McAllister filled her head. He always could talk when he'd a mind to."

"Mama, you're talking like you never liked Junie nohow, and that ain't so. You used to love having Junie come over, and you'd feed him a chicken when him and me was still tarryhooting around together. You always said he was a good fellow, and I ought to be more like him."

"Well, he was, when he was a boy. But that's all water under the bridge now."

I heard the rocker creak, and then I heard her foot on the boards. When she talked again, she was standing right beside me.

"That was before he stole your girl. And now he's killed your brother too. Now you do one thing right in your life, boy. Go find that man and do right by your brother and right by yourself too. If it hadn't been for Junie McAllister you wouldn't be out here wasting your life with an old woman like me, and you a grown man, forty-some years old."

“Forty-three, Mama.”

“Pack you a case and go take care of it. That’s all I’ve got to say.”

“Mama,” I said, and it came out a real whine this time, “I don’t want to go.... Go where, anyhow? Junie could be anywhere in this wide world. The law can’t find him. How am I going to do it?”

“He’s got that crippled boy with him, that’s how. Junie knows we Taggarts look after our own, and the first thing he’ll try to do is get that boy to somebody who can raise him before a Taggart catches up to his daddy. And the only place he’s got to take him is down to Wilmington to Minnie. She married a brick layer down there, and she ain’t got no young ’uns of her own, and she’s Junie’s only kin now, except for Oscar, and Oscar can’t help him, because Oscar ain’t got nothing neither. That little cripple means everything to Junie. He’s taking that boy to Wilmington. You go on now. And don’t you come back here until it’s done. If you can’t do it, then you ain’t no Taggart, and you’ve got no more business here. I’ll pack a case for you. You go feed the hogs. You’ve got to get out of here before dark.”

“Mama....”

But she was pulling on the screen door, and she wasn’t going to listen no more. She was done, and I had to face it.