

Their convoy hit the militia checkpoint twenty minutes south of Hattiesburg. A barrier bisected the interstate, tree trunks on hinges. Up ahead, Nathaniel's pickup stopped fifty feet short of it, and the riflemen in its bed knelt low behind their weapons. In the passenger seat of the lead refrigerated truck, Vic set her notebook aside. Clyde blasted the truck's horn once and braked. The walkie talkie clipped to a beltloop of Vic's jeans crackled. She grabbed it. "Go ahead."

"Six. Armed. Long rifles." Nathaniel spoke in staccato, no useless words. Always he had been capable of efficiency under pressure, whether the pressure arose from a diaper change at three in the morning or a militia blockade on I-59.

Vic replied in kind, but as much because her breath had left her as because of the need for efficient communication. "Intentions?"

"Stand by."

The passenger-side door of his pickup opened and Nathaniel, a thin figure in gray denim, stepped onto the road. The riflemen in the truck bed moved as if to follow him but he waved them back. "The fuck he doing," Clyde said.

He was going to talk to them. Of course he was. Vic held the walkie talkie to her mouth but did not speak. Nathaniel approached the barrier with his arms extended, palms open. Rifle barrels followed him. A moment elongated and Vic heard herself breathing. It was eight in the morning and, back home, Lucky would have Sandy out working their garden plot in City Park, planting tomato seeds in the hotbeds. Maybe Gale had tagged along. Leaving her out of anything was impossible. She was three and saw everything. Lucky was hard on them but you had to be hard. Vic and Nathaniel were alive after so many had died but were they hard?