

# THE BEAUTIFUL DEAD END

A NOVEL

CLINT HUTZULAK

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*We're everywhere, all the dead of the world. Our final trick, becoming visible again in stone and root and leaf. Translating ourselves into words. Laid out in our dark cloth of letters, spread thin on white sheets, you can see us in any alphabet. Look closely: we are breathing in the spaces between the words.*

## DICKEY

THERE WAS A MOUTH-SHAPED OIL STAIN on the pad of newspapers beneath the gun rack. Dickey must have cleaned the rifle recently and left it to drain, muzzle-down, against the wall. On the workbench, a soft rag had been used to wipe the barrel clean of excess oil. The rag was from an old pair of women's underwear, cotton speckled with faded pink and green in a design that would once have been floral.

Stace took the rifle down from the rack and unbuckled the shooting sling, neatly rolled the strap and dropped it on the workbench. He heard the Jeep grinding up the driveway and the Dobermans in the house went crazy. He snapped the loaded clip into place, knocking it with his fist until it locked with a solid click. He pulled the bolt back and chambered a round.

He closed the garage door and moved back in the dark until he

felt the weight bench at the side of his leg and he sat down to wait with the 30.06 across his knees. Through the grimy side windows there was enough light to see cardboard boxes and tools piled along the workbench and the gleam of iron plates racked neatly at the weight machine.

He hoped the dogs would be left in the house. It would make what had to come next so much simpler.

The Jeep rattled to a stop outside the garage door and he heard the door creak open and the man shouted something to the dogs in the house and they shut up at once.

A key rasped in the lock and a crack of light appeared at the bottom of the roll-up door, and Stace saw Dickey's thongs and his bare legs and then the door slid all the way up and the man was looking right at him.

What the fuck, Dickey said, and Stace saw his arms tense and his face go still, his arms up over his head, still holding onto the garage door, like he was surrendering.

What the fuck, Dickey said again, and swallowed, getting his voice back. What the fuck are you doing here?

Stace got to his feet and the man backed away a step from the garage door, dropping his arms to his side, shifting his weight like he was going to run for it. He was a little guy, wearing a t-shirt with the emblem of a distillery on it, sweat pants he'd hacked-off into shorts.

Hey, Dickey, Stace said quietly.

What's it about? What's it about? The little man backed toward the Jeep, which was still idling. His eyes jumped around, all over Stace, around the yard.

Stace's hands were sweating inside the tan garden gloves, his shirt sticking to the small of his back.

Whatever you want, you got the wrong guy, know what I'm saying? The wrong guy. Dickey looked around but there was nowhere to go. His face was glazed, ashen, his hands closed tight around something invisible. He was about an arm's length from the front of the Jeep.

Stace released the safety. He could hear the dogs whining now from inside the house.

Don't do this, Dickey said. It's not worth it. He spat in the dirt, wiped his forehead with the side of his wrist, shaded his eyes against the glare of the yard to look in at Stace.

Did Steve send you here? he asked. Steve and me cut a deal. We cut a deal and worked things out, no problem. Everything is cool, right? I got cash in the basement of the house.

Stace could see it all slowed down, like in a movie. Everything slow and carefully done so he could concentrate on the last few moments, the details, before it would all speed up and get jerky and he wasn't sure how it was going to happen.

Come into the garage, Stace said, and stepped back with the rifle. Dickey squatted and reached under the Jeep and flung something at Stace, an empty beer bottle. It spun off Stace's shoulder, knocked to the garage floor without breaking.

The dogs started going apeshit again.

Stace stepped toward the front of the garage and Dickey rolled, jumped to his feet, not more than a dozen feet away, looking at Stace. Stace brought the rifle up toward his shoulder. Dickey's chest floated before him. He squeezed the trigger and the butt of the rifle slammed back hard against him, the ejected shell casing a blur. Blind, the black flocculent, dissolving, then the green after-image of the muzzle flash printed negative on his retinas. He was deaf in his right ear for five minutes.

\* \* \*

The yard was empty. Dickey knocked down like he stepped into a hole.

Stace lowered the rifle and his shoulder ached from the kick of the recoil pad. He took the clip off and laid the rifle on the workbench and found the shell casing where it had rolled beneath the bench, and he noticed his hands were shaking. Leave me, he thought, and when the shaking stopped at last and lifted off him he didn't know how much time had passed. Perhaps only a minute. He grabbed a knife and a roll of plastic sheeting he'd found with the hunting gear in the garage and went out into the yard.

It was late afternoon, June, the poplar tree's sweet green breath above the garage. It was snowing. Stace looked up and could see only white cotton drifting down from the tree into the light. Dickey was face down, the hair on the back of his head riffling in the breeze. Stace knelt beside him and he could smell a mist of blood in the air. At that moment he was not doing anything but thinking. He didn't know what he was thinking. Bright arterial blood was pumping from the exit wound in Dickey's back, fragments of bone and tissue at the mouth of the wound, the t-shirt soaked through with blood. He could have put three fingers into the hole. Stace unfolded the plastic and laid it out like a sheet and rolled Dickey over onto it. There was a tiny dimple in the front of the t-shirt where it had been driven into Dickey's chest by the bullet. Around the pucker a small spreading ring of red. Dickey looked up at Stace with his mouth open. Cotton fluff was falling on his damp face and sticking.

Dickey said, My dogs. Stace bent down with his ear to the man's mouth. What did you say? Stace asked. I'm shot, Dickey whis-

pered. There was blood on his teeth where he had bitten through his lip. The veins in his neck were corded with effort, his fingers jerking on the plastic. He stared up at Stace and there was something Stace should have done but he couldn't figure it out.

The cicadas started buzzing again, a high electric sound that faltered and then came on strong from all around. Stace put his gloved hand on the bumper of the Jeep and pulled himself to his feet. He walked around to the driver's door and reached in to shut off the engine. There was a kid on the passenger side, strapped into a carrier seat, the child's face shiny with tears. He turned the key and the Jeep went quiet. The kid blinked at him, pudgy fingers in its mouth.

In the shade of the garage, Stace leaned against the warm flank of the Jeep, closed his eyes and listened to the dogs barking wildly in the empty house.