

THE BALLAD OF LUCKY JONES

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Lucky had done dozens of interviews before with dozens of different people. He was no stranger anymore to the hot seat. His manager, Guy, would go over probable questions before the interview, so they could work on his responses. Guy was more of a personal trainer for lucky, except he trained people for dealing with the rest of humanity, not for looking good in the mirror. Lucky tried to be interested, but in the end, he knew what made him the number one country music star in the world, was that he was not some politically correct, carbon cut out, pop star dickhead that wore a cowboy hat, he was a real, blue-collar worker, with a voice. He called them like he saw them and the rest of the country music world obviously agreed with him. He was also not one to shy away from controversy. He hated social media but realized that it was part of the job. At times, his personal opinions became bigger than his music, which bothered him even more. Lucky wasn't just any country music star. *He was a practicing Satanist. Yes, that very same Satan.* He broke the mold, so to speak in more ways than one. He had a giant pentagram on his cowboy hat.

"This guy Van Johnson, he's smart. A total prick, but he's smart. I just hope you're smarter." said Guy in the car.

"He gets to ask the questions, of course, he's going to seem smarter. He always has the upper hand."

"It's not just that. He plays people and he does it well. Presses their buttons. Follows their tweets. He's a professional dickhead."

"Nothing I can't handle."

"Just don't let him bait you into a trap. If you feel yourself being cornered, get out of there."

"You want me just to cut and run? How's that going to look?" asked Lucky.

"We control the chaos my boy, not him. Our best move is to make this interview look as boring as possible. There are ten Van Johnson-type personalities out there that would love to do a sit-down with you. We want them to come to us."

"You know, I really hate this whole social media thing. It's gotten way out of hand. Every dumb ass with a tablet can now post their opinions for the whole world to see. The country was a hell of a lot better off before this crap."

"Technology does always default to the lowest common denominator. Always has, always will," said Guy.

"Right, you know, I'm thinking about reciting the Lord's Prayer backward at my next gig. That ought to give these bottom feeders something to tweet about."

Guy smiled.

"Lucky, just when I think I've got you read, you throw me a curveball. You're too good at this. You know, sometimes I think you were just born to do this."

"Be a country singer?"

"No.....I mean being born to piss people off."

"We have with us today, a man who needs no introduction. He is Lucky Jones. He currently has the number one country album in the United States and beyond, well, unofficially anyway as you won't find his music in any stores, just online. He has pulled in fans from non-traditional markets, like Mexico and Asia. He is also a practicing Satanist, as you can clearly see by the giant pentagram on his cowboy hat. Lucky, thank you for being with us today."

"Thanks for having me, Van."

"Lucky, tell us about yourself, for those of us with no internet access."

"Not much to tell really. I'm from a little town in Nebraska. Grew up on a wheat farm. Went to a small, rural high school, played football, chased girls, got shot down by girls. I left my hometown years ago, in search of a better life. I'd like to think I found it."

"Lucky, the Godfather of country music, Luther Watts, said last week that you are about the only person in country music worth listening to, except for all that devil shit. I think that's quite a compliment."

"I met Luther last year. He's a good old boy. I only hope I can be as good as he is one day."

"It sounds like he's a big fan."

"Great minds think alike I guess."

"Now, you certainly didn't have a traditional country music upbringing. In fact you have never even played in Nashville. I don't mean not just at the Grand Ol Opry, I mean anywhere in the city. Why is that?"

"Nashville ain't the country music capital. They made it very clear that my kind is not welcome there in that city."

"You mean Satanists?"

"No, I mean real country music."

"I would have thought it impossible for someone to have the number one country album and never have set foot in the city. Seems almost impossible."

"Look, Van, Nashville ain't the capital of nothing, except maybe the capitol of wannabees and never was's. They see a guy like me. A guy they can't control. See twenty years ago, a guy like me couldn't exist. Not before the internet. They thought, just cause they don't play my songs on the radio, that I will never go anywhere. They thought they can just fill the airwaves with hipsters in cowboy hats that ain't ever spent a day in the country in their lives. I mean look at these guys, just look at them. They aren't the country music stars of years past. Aren't fit to stand in the shadow of a man like Luther Watts. They look like they should be doing commercials for shaving cream or something."

"So you don't approve of the current country music scene?"

"There is no country music scene, Van. Hasn't been for years. It's all the same mindless, synthesized crap you hear everywhere else. No heart, no soul.....just like everything else nowadays."

"So, you are rebelling as much as you are singing?"

"You know I hate to quote Adolph Hitler, but when you're right, you're right. He wrote once that every act of genius is a rebellion against the apathy of the masses. That's about the most honest statement I've ever heard."

"He quotes Hitler and he's a Satanist. Lucky, you don't pull any punches now do you?"

"I just call them as I see them."

"Now, Lucky, how exactly did you become a practicing Satanist? I can understand the rest, but that just seems like it's out of left field."

"Well, that is an interesting story. I used to travel and harvest Wheat in the late summer. I was working in this huge field in Saskatchewan and my boss comes up to me and asks me to train this new guy. Some kid from California. So, we had to sit in this giant combine for twelve hours a day and I had to show him what to do. Ain't much to it, but there are some things you have to know. Well, he was a Satanist also. Now at first, we really went at it, but at the end of the day, he actually won me over. I mean look around us. The world is one giant insane asylum. We've been slaughtering each other for thousands of years. From the Roman Legions to the killing fields of Cambodia. Doing horrible, terrible things to one another. The whole time, praying to some God, who almost seems to condone us doing things that the bible says is wrong. We have thousands of nuclear weapons ready to unleash hell on the Russians. They do the same for us. What in the hell has a Russian ever done to me? What have I ever done to a Russian? Nothing. Not one damn thing and yet here we are ready to destroy one another. Seems insane to me."

"So then you became a Satanist because you oppose war?"

"No, you're missing the point. Satanism is all about doing what is best for you. Not for someone else. Your life is not meant to be lived, so you can do someone else's bidding, fight their wars and make them rich. In America, we do all the work and someone else makes all the money. That's why we're so hated by the church. If everyone who fills those churches on Sunday started asking where the hell all their money was going, they'd blow a gasket. I hate to say it, but

nothing in the world will last very long unless it's making money. Legal or not. Churches aren't there to help us, they are here to line their pockets. The fag priests have done horrible things to children. Worst kind of people there are and yet we still go to their churches and continue to give the money. Hell, if I were at the pearly gates in heaven and some Christian came running up to me, I'd smack them and ask them how they could have supported something as evil as a church their whole lives. Dumb asses don't get into heaven."

"Well, lucky, not all churches are out there to fleece people. Our church goes to El Salvador once a year and helps the locals."

"They don't help the locals. They help themselves."

"What do you mean?"

"You ever seen a man of God help a Satanist? Hell, we could be drowning, fighting for our lives, and these assholes would just stand there and wave goodbye to us. I went on one of those missions once. Total waste of time. Those people don't need charity, they need a good smack across the face. We shit on all these poor people. Have been for years. Install out hand-picked leaders so they won't oppose us stealing their resources. They get rich, while the rest of their people starve. The people rebel and it's the same situation all over again. I would tell them, if they really want to progress, they should have nothing whatsoever to do with the United States government. They are not your friend."

"Lucky, I am sure what you are saying is true, but I don't see what political beliefs have to do with being a Satanist," asked Van.

"Remember earlier, when I said that Satanism is all about doing what is best for you, not somebody else?"

"Yes."

"What if just ten percent of the population did that? They stopped doing what is best for someone else and started doing what is best for them? Just imagine what would happen? They would stop paying their taxes, which is just legal theft. Stopped giving all this money to churches. Stopped going to their jobs they can't stand. Stopped supporting banks. Stopped supporting a lifestyle they detest, but can't figure out how to escape it. Just imagine what would happen? Imagine how society would change, almost overnight, just by doing nothing more than what is best for you and your family."

"What would be the difference between what you just described and a criminal?" asked Van

"The only real criminals are the people who came up with these laws in the first place. Who the hell ever thought this crap up? I can only hope the younger generations don't believe in the same lies we did. I hope they are smarter than their parents."

"Well Lucky, that's all the time we have today. You can download the complete interview from our website. This is Van Johnson, signing off."

Van shook his hand.

"I misjudged you Lucky. You're no dummy."

"Momma didn't raise no fool, that's for sure."

"Look, I realize society is...well.....it leaves much to be desired, but I do believe if we all did what you're describing, it would be much worse off."

"I guess we'll have to agree to disagree on that one Van. Thanks for having me."

"Anytime."

He and Guy stopped in at a coffee shop. Guy went to get the coffees and he stayed in the car. He nearly came to blows with two rednecks in Ohio last month over his hat. They didn't even know who he was. Guy made it clear that from now on, he would stay out of harm's way.

"If we can't control it, we don't do it." he would say.

"I ain't ever hid from anyone in my life." Lucky replied.

"You haven't ever been famous before, either."

Right now, Lucky unofficially had the number one and two songs in the country. His internet videos had over 100 million views. He hated the fact that country music now sounded just like the rest of the mindless, soulless, crap out today. He put the "country" back in country music. He might alienate as many people as he did make fans, but that just couldn't be helped. His song *"Down on the Farm"* was downloaded a total of fourteen million times. He wrote it one night after his neighbor's son in Nebraska killed himself. Fuck happy, he wanted to be real. Real people have real problems. Listening to a country music star who wrote his song from his college dorm room just didn't sound right to him. His next album was going to take him to the next level. He didn't want to be famous, he wanted to be number one. He wanted to rub it in their faces when he won his first Country Music Award. He'd show up on stage wearing a giant pentagram.....that would get the old ladies talking. Lucky was a country boy, but not like most. He had grown up in a dysfunctional household and was pretty much raised by his grandfather, God rest his soul. He hated how country people just bitch and holler about everything, but never actually do anything about it. People like him were considered the enemy by certain types in this country. Their way of life was constantly under assault on an almost daily basis by our elites and none of them seemed to care.

"Sooner or later son, everything comes down to the barrel of a gun. It's the only way things ever really change in this country." his grandfather once said. Lucky had come to realize, that unfortunately, he was correct, just like he had been about so many other things as well.

He spent whole days in the studio. The studio guys seemed genuinely hostile to him at first. Lucky had walked out twice, but he eventually won them over. The album was almost done and they now seemed genuinely excited.

"Lucky.....you know, the first time I heard Luther Watts, I knew he was something special. I haven't heard anything like him, up until now. Hell, most of the crap we record in here is just that, crap. Same as everyone else's crap. I haven't heard real country music in years. I miss it." said one of the sound engineers.

"I'll sign the first copy for you boys, thanks for everything," he said.

Lucky went back to his dressing room. He wanted to check his football scores and watch the game highlights on his phone. For what he paid for the damn thing, it better work. He opened the door and was surprised to see a well-dressed man sitting in his chair. Lucky just stared at him. The man turned and smiled.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

"My name is.....well, you can call me Gerald if you like Lucky."

"How'd you get in here?"

"Lucky, I know you are a very busy man, so I will be brief. I am a representative from the Church of Satan. We have much in common as you can imagine. We were hoping that you would accept us as one of your sponsors."

"I've never heard of the Church of Satan."

"I never heard of you up until last month. Lucky, you are in a very unique position here.....very unique. Never before has one of our people become so famous and yet been so open about his beliefs as yourself. Even in this day and age, we never thought it possible."

"So, what do you want?"

"We want you, Lucky. We want to be your cheerleaders, so to speak. Think of us as your own pep squad."

"Gerald.....I've got more fans than I think I need. I appreciate the offer, but it won't be necessary."

"Lucky.....the more famous you become, the bigger that bull's eye on your back is going to be. I got in here very easily. Imagine how badly things could have gone for you if I were not friendly."

Lucky took a step back. Gerald did have a point. Where the hell was the studio's security?

"Gerald....I have my own security. Obviously, they blew it here, but when I'm touring, I'm well protected. Guy makes certain of that."

"Oh, yes....Mr. Guy. Lucky, did he happen to mention his little bet that he lost last month?"

"What bet?"

"Well, Guy has a little monkey on his back. Some men can control their demons, some cannot. He made one, tiny, little wager at that Indian Casino you played at last month, and well.....let's just say, he has accrued some very sizable debts. So, it is not a stretch of the imagination to say that you have accrued those debts as well."

"What are you talking about?"

"Lucky, here is my business card. Please take it." he said and handed Lucky his card.

"When you get tired of hanging around people who do not love you as much as we do, give me a call," he said. He walked out of his dressing room and closed the door behind him.

Less than a minute later, Guy came in and was carrying a small stack of papers.

"I got them! They've buckled. You're going to be playing in Nashville!" he said

Lucky said nothing and just stared at him.

"What?"

"Are you gambling again?" asked Lucky.

Guy looked like he had just been sucker-punched. He had the wind taken right out of his sails. He sat down on the couch and said nothing.

"How did you find out?"

"The hell difference does it make?"

"Nothing....I'm sorry Lucky, I really am. I know I have a problem. I should have been more careful."

"How much?"

"Not that much?"

"Don't bullshit me, Guy. How much?"

"A little over a hundred thousand. It's nothing, I can pay it back any time I want. I just didn't want my wife finding out."

"You think she's not going to find out? She'll castrate you when she does. You ought to just tell her."

"I haven't made a single bet in ten years. Ten freggin years and I never touched it. I never realized how bad off I was up until a few days ago. I know I've let everybody down. I'm sorry."

"You'll be sorry when that battle ax of a wife you got finds out. You are one dumb son a bitch, Guy. You lost more money than most people will see in a lifetime over a stupid bet."

"I'll call the casino today and square up with them. It won't happen again Guy."

"If it does, we're done, you understand? Finished, as in get the fuck out. I'd throw your clothes out the window if you had any in here."

"Understood. Look, can we just shift gears here for a minute? Nashville has buckled. They saw your streaming results and they want a slice of the Lucky pie. You can perform at the Opry, you just have to remove your pentagram."

"What? No way?"

"Lucky.....this is the break we've been waiting for. You're going mainstream. This means concerts. We've hit the big leagues."

"It means selling out."

"Would you sell out for twenty million a year?"

"No?"

"Forty million a year?"

"No.....you really think we can make that much?"

"I sure do. Lucky, you're great grandkids will never have to work a day in their lives. They won't have to wade through the same shit we did. We've paid our dues. It's time to collect."

"Sounds like they want to remake me into the next tattooed, millennial, carbon copy of everyone else."

"To an extent, they do."

"Well, Guy, I don't know if I can do that. I don't care how much money they throw at me."

"Lucky, we have a problem."

"What's that?"

"Somehow, these Nashville bigwigs filed a copyright lawsuit against us. Our streaming provider had to take down your songs until it is resolved. They won't win, but we can't sell a damn thing until the judge rules in our favor."

"Are you serious? So, what, they pull this crap, and the same day, they offer me a shot at Nashville? Quite a coincidence."

"Lucky, we don't have many good moves here. They're hoping that with the streaming service blocked, that your popularity will just fade away. That's what they want for you, to just fade away."

"Then, why would they give me a shot at Nashville?"

"Because.....they want to break you. They want the whole world to see how they broke you. If you appear on stage without your hat and star.....you'll look like the biggest sell out of all time."

"Guy, if that's the case, then why on Earth would you do this to me?"

"Because they are going to give us twenty million dollars to break you. You'll be a sellout, but a very rich one."

Lucky sat down. He didn't know whether he should be hugging Guy or punching him. Maybe he would do both.

"So, there it is, huh?"

"Yup, there it is."

"I wonder who else they've done this to. You know it's not just my hat or my star. Pretty soon, I'll sound just like everybody else out there. That's exactly what they want. A bunch of shit over the airwaves so they can corner guys like me and make sure we never go anywhere."

"They make the rules Lucky. We can follow them, or face the consequences."

"Guy, you're a smart man, but I don't really trust you sometimes. It kind of feels like I'm playing poker against somebody using a marked deck."

"I've never lied to you Lucky. Not ever."

"Yeah, but I don't think you've ever told me the whole story either. Is there a difference between a secret and a lie?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what did they offer you? Did they say they would take care of those gambling debts you have?"

"Jesus, Lucky, come on. I've made a few mistakes, but I would never sell you out."

"Not even for forty million dollars?"

"Well, maybe for forty million," he said smiling at Lucky.

"Well, then tell them to kiss my white ass. I ain't signing nothing. They want to play dirty, not a problem. I can play dirty too."

"Okay, it's your call. I just don't think guys like us are ever going to win against guys like them, no matter how good we are."

"We'll see about that. I got friends in high places too," he said.

"Jesus takes your love for granted. Satan remembers every little kiss you ever gave him."

He was playing at the Iowa State Fair when he first noticed them. He wasn't sure why he noticed them, they just looked out of place. They seemed motionless at first.....*like something trying to mimic human behavior*. He probably would have forgotten about them completely had it not been for the fact that he saw the same two people the next night in Kansas City. The crowds were getting bigger. There were protestors now at most of his concerts. For every fan he had, he had an enemy. He had to be careful now. The way the world was headed, one could never be too lax about their safety. That's why he noticed the two of them in the front row. They weren't into the music at all. *They were just into him*.

Problem was, you can't jump the gun either. He couldn't very well stop the music, just because a few fans out of a thousand made him uneasy. Guy had hired a roadie, named Christian, who worked for some big-time performers. He didn't come cheap, but good help never does. The last thing he wanted was to be baited into some kind of a trap. Beat the hell out of somebody, then they sue him for millions. Happened before, it could certainly happen again.

He was getting calls from the major news networks. He never returned them, only passing the phone off to Guy. He hated being famous. Guy on the other hand seemed to relish it at the moment. He wanted everyone on the other end to know that he and he alone dictated who I spoke to and who I didn't. He wanted to believe he was in control, but when you become famous, you don't really control anything. The bigger you get, the less and less freedom you have.

Lucky was almost fixated on them. He never fixates on fans, even the pretty ones. You can't let one of them draw away your attention. As hard as he tried, he just couldn't stop looking at them. There was just something about them. They were wearing plaid and jeans like they were right out of 1992. Long hair.....*and those eyes. Those beautiful, cold eyes*.

When he was done and walking off stage, he had to look one more time. Something about them just wasn't right. They clearly were not here to listen to the music.

"How'd we do?" he asked rinsing himself off.

"We made ten thousand. Got a bus full of church ladies outside who want your head. Can't put a price on that." said Guy.

"I'll send them all a Christmas Card.....hey, did you see those two in the front row? Wearing all plaid. Creeped me the hell out."

"No, did they say anything?"

"No, nothing.....they just stared at me the whole time."

"Isn't that what you're supposed to do at a concert?"

"No, not that way. They weren't even listening to the music. It was like they wanted something else."

"Your autograph?"

"I think they wanted me and not in the way you think. I don't know, it was just weird."

"Eight hundred people out there and you notice two assholes? Must have really stood out. Come on, forget about them, that's what we have Christian for. He's busted quite a few heads in his time."

"Right....where we off to next?"

"We have to be in Florida next week for that music festival down in Jacksonville. You're getting to big to ignore now. Our fan base is growing by the hour, but so are our haters. I'm thinking about hiring you a bodyguard. Someone big, mean and dumb. Kind of like a two-legged pitbull."

"I can handle myself, Guy. I don't need a babysitter."

"That group out there tonight would have torn you to pieces if they could. I watched an 80-year-old church lady lose her shit when she said how much she despises you. Don't underestimate them Lucky. Nothing worse than a psycho who thinks God gave them a green light to do whatever they want. One bullet in you and you're done."

"Jesus, Guy.....you really think it could come to that?"

"If you saw that group outside tonight, foaming at the mouth.....you might see things the same way I do."

Florida, Texas, Louisiana.....little towns, big cities. He took work wherever he could get it. Sometimes the pay was good, other times it didn't even pay for gas. They had their first court date. All it did was give them another court date, so they set a real court date. Lucky knew their strategy was just to drag this out as long as possible. They wouldn't win, but the damage would be done. He wasn't a violent man, but when you screw with someone's money, well, all bets are off. He would have dragged those Nashville and Studio bigwigs out into the street and crucified them for what they have done to him. He never wanted their jobs or did anything to them. He just wanted a little slice of the pie. He wasn't greedy. He wanted to change country music forever. Clearly, he was winning, otherwise, they wouldn't have gone to these lengths. The more they tried to keep him down, the bigger he got. He was winning people over one at a time, everywhere he went. Every concert he played, every song he sang. He was making fans and that's why he had to be stopped. *In this day and age, if they can't control you, you're as good as dead.*

Guy was out in his car, having a screaming match with his wife. They traveled by a motorhome Guy had bought when they were just starting out. It was now way too small. They were going to need something bigger. Christian almost seemed to take up half of the motor home. He was alone in there when he heard a knock on the door. He checked to see who it was through the peephole.

He was surprised to see the same little man who was in his dressing room a few weeks ago. He unlocked it and opened it up.

"Good evening Lucky. I was in the neighborhood and thought I would stop by," said Gerald

"What do you want?"

"I want you Lucky. I thought I made that clear. May I come in?" asked Gerald.

"You've got two minutes, make em count," he said and let the man in the motor home.

"Lucky, have you given any consideration to what we discussed earlier?"

"No, what did we discuss?"

"About letting our church become your primary sponsor."

"No thanks. I don't do sponsors. I sponsor myself, not someone else."

"I heard you had some misfortune regarding your online music sales. Pity.....you know, we might be able to help."

"How could I help?"

"We have friends in very high places my boy. Men of means. People whose opinions matter. One phone call to the right person and things could quickly change."

"How the hell are you going to do that?" asked Lucky.

"Well, a certain federal judge got a little careless with a hooker in Florida years ago, when he was much younger. Killed her.....such a beautiful girl. He panicked and threw her body in a dumpster. His DNA is all over her. I'm sure you can see where I'm going."

"How the hell do you know this? How the hell did you know Guy made those bets?"

"As I said earlier, Lucky: we have friends in high places."

"Right....well, thanks for the offer Gerald, but I'm going to pass. Sounds like I'd be jumping headfirst into a giant pile of shit. Blackmailing a federal judge? I'd be biting off a little more than I could chew there."

"We do the dirty work my boy. Leave that to us. All we want is for you to raise that giant pentagram every time you sing. Don't hide from it, embrace it. We want the whole world to know that Satan is their ally, not their enemy." said Gerald.

"Gerald.....I'm not really a Satanist, okay.....truth be told. I just do this to piss people off."

"Oh, Lucky.....you disappoint me. Here I thought we were on the same page."

"No, you thought I was on your page. Look, I really am grateful for your help, but I am my own man. Nobody's dick is ever going to be in my pocket."

"That's not realistic Lucky. We all have people we answer to, whether we want to or not."

"Gerald, Satanists do terrible things to people. Horrible things. I don't want to be associated with that."

"Lucky, compared to most Catholic Priests, we're saints. Remember the Crusades? That was one giant massacre with Jesus's seal of approval. The world is a horrible, sick place. That is not going to change, because you join our church. You might experience real love for the first time in your life. Wouldn't you like that?"

"Your two minutes are up Gerald. Thanks, but no thanks. I might not ever be on the same level as Luther Watts, but I have to look at myself every day in the mirror, too. I'd rather be dead than be a sell-out."

Gerald just put his head down and chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"Lucky.....you're the biggest sell out there ever was," he said smiling.

He was just about to leave the camper when he turned and spoke.

"You've met some of our boys, I hear. They've taken quite a liking to you. I think maybe it might be best if found out what real fans were. Good day to you sir." he said and left. He made certain to leave another one of his business cards on the seat. Lucky was going to throw it away, but he decided not to. You never knew what kind of favors you were going to need in this business.

A moment later, his backup guitarist opened the door and walked up into the camper.

"Did you see that guy?"

"What guy?"

"The guy who just left. Did you see him?"

"I didn't see anybody Lucky."

"He was right in front of you?"

"I don't know, I was on my phone, I wasn't really paying attention."

He had a backup singer and two other musicians. Guy kept them on a short leash. They were a necessary evil. He just couldn't perform without them. He had tried going solo for a while, but it just didn't work. He knew they were eventually going to want more money. Guy wanted to can them and just hire new ones, but Lucky had stopped him.

"We don't fix it if ain't broken, Guy."

"It's just a matter of time, Lucky. Pretty soon, they'll have us by our balls and we won't be able to say no to whatever they want."

"Yeah, I realize that, but I've never sounded better. They make me into a better musician. Can't put a price tag on that."

"We're losing our bargaining power by the day. What do we do if they refuse to play before a big gig unless we sign a contract? Don't underestimate people, Lucky. People get mighty stupid when there's money involved."

"That they do."

"Guy.....I'm going to ask you something here and it's really important you give me a straight answer."

"Fire away?"

"Who the hell is that Gerald guy?"

"Who's Gerald?"

"That weird little guy who was in here last night? That dude creeps me out. Make damn sure he isn't allowed anywhere near me."

"Lucky, I don't even know who Gerald is?"

"He's some guy from the Church of Satan. Says he wants to sponsor us. You don't know anything about this do you?"

"No, no I don't, honestly."

"I told him to fuck off. I think I pissed him off. You ever come across somebody who just creeped you out from the second you met them? I mean like you knew you were face to face with a real monster?"

"I kind of felt that way around my stepfather."

"I mean someone pure evil."

"Been around a few. This guy really got to you huh?"

"Yeah. He knew about your bets. He knows a lot of things he shouldn't know."

"How the hell did he know about my bets?"

"That's what I'd like to know. He's going to be trouble."

"What does he look like?"

"He looks like the devil in a nice suit," said Lucky.

The concerts became more frequent, the crowds kept getting bigger and bigger. He was just too big to ignore now. There were pirate websites still selling his music. If they thought they were going to stop him, it backfired big time. All they did was make him more famous.

He was beginning to feel the effects of constantly being on the road. Some of his gigs were small, others were not. He had heard about it from the old-timers, how the road changes you, wears you down until there's nothing left. He never took them seriously. Maybe he should have.

He tried explaining to Guy that he needed a break. He wasn't very responsive.

"Lucky, we're number one now, well, at least by our standards. We can't slow down. Christ, I have people from all over the world calling me wanting you to perform. This is a fast-paced business, one misstep and you can be knocked out of the game."

"I'm exhausted Guy. You have no idea how hard it is to give a hundred percent out there every night."

"Lucky, everybody has to pay their dues."

"Easy for you to say."

"Alright, I was going to surprise you with this. I can hardly believe it myself."

"What?"

"We're in. We're going to be playing at Sawgrass."

Lucky couldn't believe it. He heard it, he was just having a hard time believing it. Sawgrass was like the Woodstock of country music."

"Don't bullshit me here Guy."

"I wouldn't dream of it, not about something like this. You've done it lucky. We beat them. Those Nashville pricks won't have any choice now, they'll have to back down. You are going to be playing in front of seventy thousand people for two hours. Live streaming. This is it, kid. We're in the big leagues."

Lucky had to sit down. This was like going from the minors, for a chance to play in game seven of the world series. Huge would still not be the right word.

"You think it's a trap? Are they trying to set me up for something?"

"Seems the management team suddenly had a change of heart. Don't ask me why, but they did. They want you there."

"Lucky had a feeling, he knew why they had a change of heart. He didn't think it was strictly business either. Somehow. Gerald and his boys had gotten to them. Not that it mattered, he still wanted nothing to do with them.

"We got a few days off, let's take that time to relax. You're gonna need it."

Lucky was now seeing them everywhere he went. At the coffee shop, at the gas station. Always different people, but always the same face. Always the same cold, piercing eyes. Black, white, brown, it didn't matter what they looked like on the outside, it was who they really were on the inside. That's what made them so scary. They were watching him for some reason. It was as if Gerald was watching him through their eyes. One night outside of Tulsa, his bus had pulled into a truck stop. Lucky went inside to get some smokes and use a real bathroom. Christian never let him out of his sight. He was just a tad under 300 pounds. It wasn't all fat either. He had busted some heads when he was younger and could still brawl with the best of them. But, he never followed him into the restroom. That was going overboard as far as Christian was concerned. Lucky had his guard down as well. He had just finished taking a leak when he turned and saw the kid behind him. He always carried a switchblade in his back pocket. Had done it since he was a teenager after being jumped. He reached behind him and took it out, keeping it behind his back. The kid just stared at him, with this blank look on his face. *That smile sent shivers down Lucky's spine.*

"Can I help you?" asked Lucky, still holding the knife.

"You're that singer.....Lucky Jones, right?"

"Yeah, maybe. Who's asking?"

"I'm a big fan of yours. We all are."

"Who's we?"

"My church. We listen to you all the time."

"I'm glad you like my music, now if you will excuse me," he said moving past the kid.

"See you around Lucky." said the kid still smiling. His grin seemed to go from ear to ear. It was as if it was twisted and distorted. *This was no ordinary kid.*

He got back on the bus and found Gerald, who was half asleep.

"We got a problem."

"Does it involve women or money?"

"No."

"Then it can wait until the morning," he said and went back to sleep.

"Guy.....I'm being followed. That Gerald guy is following me."

"That weird guy? He's here right now?"

"No, not exactly. He had his Satan Church people following me. Keeping an eye on me. I just met one of them in the pissar."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"Just that he likes my music. He said his church listens to it all the time. His church, as it the Church of Satan."

"Lucky, get some rest."

"Guy, this is serious. I'm not making this up."

"Why would these people be following you?"

"I wouldn't do what they wanted. I told them I'm not really a Satanist. I guess they took offense to that."

"Next time you see one of them, let us know, we'll handle it. Right now, get some sleep, we got a big day ahead of us."

The rest of the band traveled separately from Lucky. That's what Guy wanted. He didn't want us getting too friendly with people we might have to fire them at a moment's notice. That meant it was the bus driver, Christian, Guy, and him. He didn't know anything about the driver, except his name and Christian was still fairly new. He wasn't certain if he could trust him yet. He still wasn't certain he could completely trust Guy, either. After Sawgrass, things would be different. He would be on another level. He would travel by plane instead of this old bus. He'd have people knocking at his door. He might have to get a new crew that answered directly to him and no one else.

He looked at the cowboy hat he had worn for years with the giant pentagram on it. He remembers the first time he performed at a roadhouse on open mic night wearing it. He had almost come to blows with some of the customers.

He remembers being so proud to wear it. It was his way of saying "F*ck You" to the rest of the world. Problem is, who you are at twenty-five, might not be the same person you are at 35. He could never take it off now, no matter how much money they threw at him. He would forever be linked to it. He wished he could just go back in time and never have worn it. It seemed like a good idea at the time, it just wasn't a good idea now. Not that it made any difference. He never believed in the devil, let alone worshiped him or admired him, or any of the things people assumed he was. Kind of like the skinheads that wore Nazi Swastikas. They had no idea what it meant, or what it meant to be a real Nazi. They were the biggest followers of all. Following something, they didn't really understand. Lucky was no different. It was too late to do anything about it. Was it his music that made him famous or the pentagram? He would never really know.

"We got one more gig before Sawgrass. We're playing in Little Rock at a music festival."

"Okay."

"You've had a few days off, how are you feeling?"

"Better than I have in years," said Lucky sipping his coffee.

"Good. Rumor has it the governor is going to be there. He personally wrote to the event organizers asking that you not be invited."

"So why is he coming?"

"Cause he likes your music, same reason everyone else does."

"Won't that look a little ridiculous? Saying he wants me banned, then showing up to see me perform?"

"I guess he is going to be leading some kind of protest or something. A chance for a photo op and make it look like he's against you. You know how this shit works."

"Yeah, I sure do," he said.

If the governor thought showing up was going to galvanize his troops against Lucky, he was mistaken. Lucky got the warmest welcome he ever had when he stepped on stage. Normally, it was half applause, half boos and by the end of the night, everyone was singing. This crowd loved him. He was about halfway through when he noticed about a dozen of them in the front row. Just staring at him, not moving, or anything. Just staring at him, like a hunter watching its prey through a rifle scope. He motioned for Christian to come over.

"That group in the front, at my ten o'clock. Keep an eye on them."

Christian looked at the group and then looked back at Lucky."

"What's wrong?" asked Christian.

"Them, they're wrong, just watch them."

Christian nodded and seemed somewhat confused, but he knew better than to question him.

He kept playing and tried to give it his all, but he couldn't stop staring back at them. They weren't singing along or moving with the music. They were just standing there, a dozen or more, motionless, grinning from ear to ear. *Watching.....and waiting.*

He had just finished his encore and was heading backstage when one of them ran up to him and gave him a big hug.

"Oh, Lucky, you are so awesome. We just love you. We're going to take a little piece of you with us, so we'll always be together." she said.

The girl was drop-dead gorgeous, which is why no one did anything. He quickly pulled away. Her eyes.....they just weren't right. It was like he was looking at an empty shell of a person,, with no one inside.

"Thank you dear, but Lucky is a busy man," said Christian as he pulled her away.

Back in his dressing room, he became irate at Christian.

"I thought I told you to keep an eye on them? The hell would have happened if she had a gun or something?"

"Her? Jesus Lucky, she just wanted to blow you, relax."

"Don't tell me to relax. They're watching me. They are always watching me. Christian, you are all that's standing in the way of them."

"Who?"

"The people in the front row. I told you to watch them."

"I did. They got a right to watch the concert."

"Did you notice anything unusual about them? Anything at all?"

"No, they just seemed like they wanted to watch you play."

"If anything happens to me Christian, it will be your fault. Those bastards are stalking me.....circling me, like vultures. I don't know what they want. What the hell did that girl mean when she said *they wanted to take a piece of me with them?*"

"I think it means she wanted to get into your pants."

"No, Christian.....I think she had something else in mind completely."

He knew Guy would find him. He let him cool off, then they just happened to bump into each other. Lucky knew what he wanted and didn't beat around the bush.

"I'm sure Christian told you what I said. I wasn't pleased."

"Lucky, we have all been on alert, looking for the first person that looks the wrong way at you. No one has seen anything. Not me or Christian or the other band members. Not a thing."

"I'm not crazy Guy. They're out there. Maybe they are well hidden, but they're out there."

"Lucky.....I'm almost old enough to be your father, so if you will allow me to be the father I never had when I speak: we are so close to the finish line now. So close. Let's not blow it, okay? Not when we can see the finish line. You have worked too hard to blow it right now."

"I'm not blowing it. I'm not imagining these people, they're really out there Guy."

"Lucky.....I asked around. No one has seen this little guy you talked about anywhere around here. No one. Just think about how ridiculous this all sounds. I checked and double-checked. I cannot find an official Church of Satan. Lots of little whackos that claim they are, but no one like you described. Just think about it, okay? We got Sawgrass in two days. You need to be ready. You have to give the performance of your life out there. I need you to be ready."

Lucky was pissed, but Guy did have a point. The whole thing was kind of absurd. It was as if that pentagram somehow became like a magnet for all kinds of negative energy, pulling it in from the atmosphere and channeling it all down to him. He wished he could just take it off, but that's what made him who he is. The guy who isn't afraid to piss people off. *The guy who tells it like it is.*

He was backed into a corner and the only to get out of it was to step right on the new paint.

Sawgrass was pretty much the social event of the redneck world these days. Over a hundred thousand country music fans from all over descended on the town for a weekend of nonstop country music. You were pretty much a nobody unless you headlined at Sawgrass. For Lucky, this was it. This was his MVP moment. It was the culmination of 12 years of hard work. 12 years of paying his dues. 12 years of being a nobody. That was all about to change this weekend.

Not all the crowd would be friendly. Some would be downright hostile. It was his music that won people over. He was the only real country music artist out there and people were beginning to realize it. While most artists were churning out rehashed, boring garbage, he was making waves by going in the opposite direction. Sure, officially, his sales were still way behind others, but that could change.....and it could change quickly.

Guy came into the trailer, holding his tablet. He was about ready to burst.

"Lucky....holy Jesus.....you aren't going to believe this. Your last album was uploaded to a server in Denmark and people pirated a copy of your album for free."

"How is that good news?"

Because in only two days, your album was downloaded almost 13 million times! That's thirteen million fans. Thirteen million that will spend their hard-earned money to buy your next one."

"Wow.....things are changing so fast, it's hard to keep up."

"After tonight, we won't have to hide anymore. What is going to be your encore?"

"I was thinking *Standing Outside the Fire*. I really like that one."

"Yeah, me too. I find it interesting that they are putting you on first. They usually reserve that spot for the established stars."

"Maybe they saw the same report you did."

"Maybe," Guy replied.

It is hard to describe the feeling of standing in front of a crowd of a hundred thousand people who have paid money to watch you do your thing. It takes on an energy of its own. You don't control anything at that point, you only go along with it. It becomes its own monster.

Lucky and his band members were naturally reserved and maybe even nervous. None of them had ever played in front of a crowd like this. They had been thrown headfirst right into the fire.

He knew many of them were not there to see him. That was fine. There was a small demonstration outside by several local churches to protest his presence at the festival. Most didn't care about his pentagram. They were only there to listen to music and get high or drunk. Lucky could deal with that.

His first song *Mommas Boy* really got them fired up. His second and third songs only built upon the momentum of the first. The crowd wasn't just going along with it, they loved it! Lucky had finally arrived. This was his moment to shine.

He took a minute break to drink some water and that's when he noticed them. A large group of protestors had made its way to the front of the stage. They were holding up handmade signs. That's also when Lucky noticed his other group of fans.....the same ones who had been following him for weeks now. There were dozens of them, all in the front row, watching him, like a lion hiding in the grass. *There were so damned many of them!*

He walked over to Christian who was standing next to the head of event security.

"You guys got this, right?"

"We got it bud, just do your thing," said Christian.

He walked back over to the band members, making certain they were all on the same page.

"Standing Outside the Fire," he said. Everyone just nodded and smiled.

Lucky had written the song over ten years ago when he got fired from his job at a gas station for being an hour late cause he had a blowout on his way to work. He'd like to track down his boss who fired him and knock his ass out. Time doesn't heal anything, it just makes the wound scab over, but it's always there, as a gentle reminder of what had happened.

Lucky started singing. He poured his heart into the song. The crowd was going wild. He glanced over and could see police and security trying to contain a large group of people from rushing the stage. He looked away and concentrated on the song. Most of the crowd sang with him.

The situation only forty feet ahead was getting downright nasty. The police were screaming for more officers and dozens of event security were running towards the front of the stage. Just as head finished the last line in the song, two men broke through and climbed onto the stage. They were running right at Lucky, who barely had time to react. He just grabbed his guitar and was ready to take their heads off. He could see one of the men had a large kitchen knife in his hand.

The men darted right towards him. He avoided one of them and swung his guitar right at the other man's head, smashing his guitar in the process. He tried to use the microphone stand to block the other man, but he was cornered.

He saw several more fans climb on stage. It was them.....*The ones with the eyes*. Only they weren't coming for him. They grabbed the man with the knife and spun him around. One of them bit the man right in the side of his neck, severing his jugular, spurting blood everywhere on the stage. Another one ran over to the man Lucky had hit and instantly snapped his neck. Lucky stood in horror. He was only a few feet away from these people *and by people, he was using the term loosely*. Their faces were twisted in a way he had never seen before. Whatever these things were, they were not the same kind of people as Lucky and the rest of the world. These people were something else.....*something else entirely*.

Christian grabbed him and yanked him off stage, along with two police officers who had their weapons drawn. One of them fired at the man in front of him, hitting him in the chest. At that point, the excrement had hit the fan. People began to panic and made a mad dash for the nearest exit. Lucky's big moment had come and gone in a way he had never imagined. He was done.

Christian met Guy in the hallway and they immediately took him back to the bus and were escorted out of the arena by several police cars. Lucky was in shock. The whole thing had happened in less than ten minutes. Ten minutes and his life was in ruins. There would be no coming back from this one. His career was over. He was going to have to dust off his resume.

No one really said anything for the next couple of days. The other band members told Guy they were done. It was just too dangerous to be associated with Lucky. Guy understood. Even Lucky understood. No one wants to be around a marked man.

He had been interviewed by the police, as well as by the FBI. He had given several appearances on TV. The more he spoke, the worse it became. He was more famous now than he had ever been, just not for the reasons he had hoped. It took a few weeks for the dust to settle and when it finally did, the news was not good.

Two people were dead and over two dozen injured. Sawgrass was canceled. The event organizers lost their shirts and made it perfectly clear that Lucky's career in country music was done as well. Not that any of this had been his fault, but that didn't matter. His name would be associated with this horror show forever. There would be no coming back from this one.

He knew what Guy was going to say, he just hadn't figured out how to break it Lucky. Christian was probably in the same boat. They could see the writing on the wall. The three of them were sitting outside the bus near Amarillo, having a smoke. Lucky knew what was on their minds.

"Lucky, I'm going to have to leave. Not going to make a big, fancy speech. I think you're smart enough to understand why." said Christian.

"You've got to do what you've got to do Christian. No hard feelings here."

"By the way, thanks for not saying I told you so. I just never thought that anything like this....."

"Nobody did. Who the hell ever saw this coming?"

"Call me anytime," he said and went back into the bus.

"You leaving me too?" he asked Guy.

"Leave you? Where would I go? Back to a wife that can't stand me? Christ Lucky, before I met you, I was working at a bowling alley. I'm afraid my horse is hitched to your wagon for good. That is if you would still have me."

"Just wouldn't be the same without you, Guy."

"The hell are we going to do? Every gig we had booked for the next two months has been canceled. Everyone. You're like Kryptonite now. I hope you have a fallback plan."

"There's only one person who might be able to fix this mess. What I need to know from you, is how far are you willing to go? What are you willing to give up?"

"It's not fair Lucky. We were so goddamn close. We were there! We won! We were headlining at Sawgrass for fuck's sake! It's like we won and had the trophy snatched right out of our hands. It's just not fair. We did everything right and we still lost. You really think there's a way out of this?" asked Guy.

"There's only one way to find out," he said as he finished his smoke.

The mansion was tucked away in a very quiet part of the city. They were both greeted at the door by a well-dressed man. A very large and well-dressed man. He led them both in the house and he motioned for them to follow him down the hallway.

"Either that's a gun in his pocket, or he's very glad to see us," said Guy quietly.

The man led them into a study. Gerald was sitting in front of the fireplace, reading a newspaper.

"Mr. Lucky....and you must be his manager. Please, do come in."

They both stepped forward. Gerald might be small in stature, but in just about every other measurable category, he was a giant. He was calling the shots all along. Lucky wouldn't be surprised to find out he paid those guys to try and kill him. This was all his plan. They had walked right into his trap and there was no way to get out.....except for one.

"So sorry to hear of your misfortune, Mr. Lucky. People can be so.....unpredictable these days. So, what can I do for you?"

"Can you fix this? Can you get me back on top?" asked Lucky

"Ah.....I see. Well gentlemen, as you will soon see, Satan is quite a miracle worker. But, everything comes at a price these days. You're asking for quite a miracle. The price of admission is going to be very steep. I want you both to understand that once you cross this line, there is no going back. Not now, not ever. Are we crystal clear on that point?"

He looked over at Guy, who simply nodded.

"Yes sir." they both said softly.

"Excellent.....now kneel in front of me and kiss my ring. Come feel the power of our master! Let it flow through your veins." he said and held out his hand.

"This is really what it's come to, huh?" said Lucky as he turned to Guy.

"Yup. It's all about doing what is best for you, right?" Guy replied.

They both knelt in front of Gerald and slowly put their lips on his horned ring.

"Excellent my children. We have such big plans for you. We have such big, big plans for you. Satan has been watching you since the day you were born." said Gerald putting his fingers through Lucky's hair.

"Lucky us.....*lucky us. I just wanted to be a country music star;*" said Guy with tears in his eyes.

"You will be soon, my son." said Gerald. Lucky looked up and noticed that his eyes were jet black.

Cause there was no soul behind them at all.

Lucky had to wonder how many famous people were in his same situation.....and how many had to kiss that ring?