

BINDER

By David Vinjamuri

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bind•er

noun

1. a person or object that holds something together
2. a streak of impurity in a coal seam, usually difficult to remove

Prologue

Wednesday

John McCarthy knew they were in trouble before the hooded men boarded the bus. He saw the danger before dim headlights revealed muddy pickup trucks blocking the road, before a line of men carrying shotguns and tire irons emerged from the dark. John knew something was off the moment they hit a roadblock on Route 3 that hadn't been there the past dozen times they'd made the trip.

He'd noticed just one thing as they'd approached the detour, a single flaw that made him look for others: the man holding the yellow sign wore sneakers. He wasn't the teenager John had been the two summers he worked roads in Columbus, either. This guy was in his late thirties, and the arms poking through his reflective vest showed the kind of hard biceps that have to be worked every day to last at that age. His tan was a little light for a road guy too, but that wasn't the thing that caught John's eye. It was those white Nike cross-trainers. You don't wear shoes like that when you're working on roads because hot asphalt will burn right through the soles. And nothing white stays that way for long when you're around construction.

Then John eyed the two men standing in front of the striped barricade in the middle of the road. Both were lean and fit like the first, but younger. That was odd, too. Those jobs were the ones the union guys covet—much easier than bending over a shovel or driving a paver in the scorching sun all day. The guys who worked them usually had bellies that betrayed the beer and burgers they downed at the same pace they had in their glory days. And both of them faced the school bus. That was just wrong. Neither was watching the other direction for oncoming traffic. Road workers don't turn their backs on distracted moms in SUVs, even if there's another crew up the road responsible for stopping traffic.

But the bus driver didn't spot those warning signs; he only paid attention to the yellow diamond the guy in sneakers was waving. He swung the bus off the main road like a skipper steering a barge around a reef while John was still weighing the risks of bucking the chain of command. Tiny fingers of spiny leaves scraped the roof of the decommissioned school bus as it slipped under the low-hanging branch of a holly tree.

The detour put them onto a poorly paved road that didn't look like it would connect to anything. A half-mile on, after narrowing down to a single lane, they found two old Ford pickups blocking the roadway. A line of men in grubby clothes wearing hemp hoods with crudely cut eyeholes stood in front of the muddy trucks. Several of them carried torches, and John half expected to see a burning cross greet them as a tall man with a shotgun stepped forward and waved the bus off the road. The driver—a kid from the suburbs of Seattle—finally started to panic, but by then there was no way to escape. A white panel van had followed them through the detour and pulled up close behind them. They were boxed in. So the driver followed directions and pulled the ramshackle bus into the empty lot by the side of the road. It was a construction site of bulldozed earth. A grader sat next to a big yellow Caterpillar dump truck at the edge of the lot. *There's the construction equipment missing from the roadblock*, John thought dazedly.

The barrel of a shotgun rapped against old glass, startling the driver. Hands trembling, he leaned over and pulled the handle to open the door. Three hooded men smelling of sweat and bourbon came aboard, leaving prints of red mud on the ridged rubber mat that lined the aisle.

"Don't resist. They're just trying to scare us. They're not going to hurt us," Judy said. Judy's badge of honor was having been arrested at the G-8 summit in Glen Eagles. She was the designated leader in Roxanne's absence, but John knew she was wrong. He could smell the brittle pheromone that precedes violence on the hooded men. He badly wished Roxanne were with them. She'd have read the situation as he had but reacted sooner, perhaps even ordering the driver to run the barricade. If not, she might have cowed the hooded men into submission with words, a talent John did not possess.

But Roxanne was not on the bus and John knew that anything he might do would only make the situation worse, so he complied just like the rest. They were marched out and made to kneel down on the damp, scarred earth. A man spinning a baseball bat in rough hands approached them. His piercing blue eyes shone out from under the hood.

"We warned you. Stop interfering with our livelihood or face the consequences. Now's time for consequences." John had been sitting at the front of the bus, which put him at the front of the line. Two men dragged him forward. Throughout his life, John had always been clear in his convictions—not the type given to uncertainty. As the bat rose above him, framed for an instant by a luminescent cloud concealing the moon, he experienced a moment of doubt.

Then it began.

Thursday

It was a classic ambush, and I walked straight into it.

I saw the two of them when I kicked the screen door open. I had a duffel bag slung over my shoulder and a box in my hands. There was no room to maneuver, so I stopped dead in the doorway. I lowered the box carefully to the ground and dropped my bag before raising my hands in surrender.

“You’re not leaving...are you?”

“Of course he’s leaving. What else would he do?”

“That’s not helping.”

“He’s not helping.”

“That’s not fair. He dropped everything to come here.”

“Spare me. He’s only here because you blubbered on the phone. Mom doesn’t want him here.”

“How do you know what Mom wants?”

“Remember what happened last time?”

“That wasn’t his fault!”

“Oh that’s precious! Whose fault was it then?”

“Those men.”

“They were here *because* of him. Then he left, didn’t he, and he hasn’t been back since.”

“What did you expect? You told him not to come back. Then you didn’t invite him to

Gabe’s baptism.”

“Don’t you dare bring my son into this!”

“You brought him into it! Mikey is Gabe’s only uncle.”

“And now he’s leaving Mom in the hospital so he can go back to work.”

“I—” I tried to interrupt. Amelia glared at me and the sound died in my throat.

“He’s been here for five days. Mom is going to be recovering for a long time. What else do you expect him to do?”

“You don’t understand...” I interjected. Ginny laid a hand on my shoulder without looking at me.

“What do I expect him to do? Are you kidding? One of us needs to be with Mom around the clock. A nurse almost killed her the other night with the wrong ’scrip. They took her off the catheter last night but Mom still can’t reach the buzzer when she needs a bedpan. There are test results coming in every day and Dr. Kassavian doesn’t take time to call us when he gets them so I have to call the neurologist myself. Plus the shingles on the roof still need to be

repaired, the washing machine is leaking and there's a mountain of laundry. And by the way, I still have a six-month-old at home."

"So Mikey's supposed to quit his job to help us?"

"He can take more than three days of vacation to help the family when there's a crisis."

"He got in the car ten minutes after I called him."

"Because you're the only one he listens to—his precious baby sister."

"Maybe if you stopped trying to boss everyone around all the time..."

"Oh don't you start with me, Virginia Herne!" Amelia knocked my shoulder as she brushed past, muttering about Ginny being a freeloader and moldy bread in the pantry. Ginny scrambled after her, still bickering even though Amelia was no longer listening.

I was standing there, speechless, when I realized my third sister Jamie, who is older than Ginny but younger than Amelia, had been watching the argument. She was standing in front of a burnt orange 1995 Honda Civic parked on the street in front of my mother's house.

Every time I see that car I'm amazed that it hasn't been stolen for parts.

I grabbed the duffel and slung it back over my shoulder, then leaned down and picked up the box. As I approached, I saw that Jamie's lips were all bunched together in amusement.

"You like to stir the pot, don'tchya?" she said.

I made a face. It was the same one I'd first used when she was eight and I'd stranded her six feet up in a tree after she smashed a chocolate ice cream cone into my head.

She wrinkled her nose. "Are you really leaving today?"

"Yeah, but not for work. I have to help a friend. It's important."

She raised an eyebrow.

"For real."

"You're leaving an emergency for another emergency?"

"When you put it that way..."

"You can't fix this mess but maybe you can do something about the other one?"

I thought about that. "Maybe."

She pursed her lips and shook her head. I shrugged and turned my palms to face her and nearly dropped the box.

"So go," she said as she kissed my cheek, "and then come back."

Three of them came for me as I left the bar. The big one had a couple of inches on me. Worse, he was built like a bull and outweighed me by three or four sawbucks. He shoved me into the first alley we passed. The push was strong enough to lift me off the ground for an instant before I landed flat on my feet. The leader wore a Carhartt cap, a rough canvas shirt and boots that looked like they might have steel toes. He was skinny and sported an uneven beard that didn't mask his crooked teeth, broken nose and narrow, deep-set eyes. He slipped a hand into an outside pocket of his surplus Army jacket and emerged with a pair of brass knuckles.

"You done a lot of talking back there," he said. That's what I managed to translate, anyway, as his accent was two shades denser than others I'd heard so far. The third man stood behind the leader and nodded. He looked like he'd been doing that for most of his life.

"We don't 'preciate strangers, 'specially them with a mouth full o' questions," the leader continued.

I retreated slowly to avoid being flanked. Then I reached a hand inside the breast pocket of my windbreaker while I held the other hand up, empty palm forward to try to forestall the skinny guy from throwing a punch with that brass-knuckled fist. I pulled a color photo from my breast pocket. It was oversized and printed on glossy paper that I had neatly folded in half. It was considerably bigger than the snapshot I'd flashed in the bar when I was asking if anyone had seen the girl it pictured. More importantly, she wasn't alone in this photo. The men slowed and squinted at the picture, which moved their thoughts away from beating me up.

"That's a happy family, right? The girl is the one I'm looking for. She was demonstrating at the Hobart mine. Maybe you don't like outsiders or maybe the demonstrations pissed you off? I get it. So ignore her. Look at the man standing behind her. That's her father. Do you see him? See the ribbons on his chest? That red one with the vertical blue stripe running through it? That's the Bronze Star. These two purple ones? Purple Hearts." This froze the three angry men in their boots. These days, everyone from a small town has a friend who lost a leg in Iraq or Afghanistan. The uniform means something in places where real people live.

"Before you raise a hand against me, look at one more ribbon on this man's chest. See the black one with the blue and red stripes on either end? That's a prisoner of war medal. This girl's father was chained to a wall in a North Vietnamese prison, and beaten to a bloody pulp

every day for two years before any of you were born. You may think his daughter is just some pampered college kid, and you might be right. But this man deserves your respect. He deserves to know what happened to his daughter.” I let a little indignation enter my voice.

The men looked at each other, suddenly off-balance.

In truth, I’d never met the man in the picture and didn’t know if he’d even served in Vietnam. But he was wearing an Army colonel’s dress uniform with a POW medal, so I guessed at the war from his age.

“Mister, I ain’t never seen that girl. And I don’t ’preciate you expectin’ I might’ve,” the leader responded. The other two just kept staring at the picture.

“Do you work at the Hobart Mine?” It was a question I already knew the answer to from the black dust under his fingernails, the rheumatoid arthritis evident in his walk and his difficulty hearing. Plus the fact that I’d asked the manager at my motel which bar in Hamlin the miners frequented. His first answer was, “All of ’em,” but he picked one when I pressed.

“Yessun,” he answered slowly. The other two men were still trying to decipher the medals and ribbons that soldiers call “fruit salad” on the chest of the man in the photo.

“Then you’ve seen her. She’s been protesting in front of the mine entrance since the beginning of last summer,” I explained. The leader considered this for a moment, looking thoughtful but still guarded.

“Listen, guys,” I continued, “you may not know much about this girl or what happened to her, but I guarantee it’s more than I do. I’ve never set foot in this state before today. I’m just trying to help a friend find his daughter. She came here with Reclaim—the group protesting at Hobart—but the hospital has no record of her being admitted last night after the attack. The only thing I care about is finding this girl. So let me buy you a drink. Even if you don’t know anything, you can pretend you do until my wallet’s a little lighter.” I’d been in Appalachia for less than six hours but already saw a story I recognized in the eyes of these men.

“Ain’t no such thing as a bad free drink,” the big man said hopefully, looking toward the leader. Silently, the question was resolved. The leader’s brass knuckles disappeared into a pocket. The big guy took a step away from me then turned. I followed the three miners back into the bar. It was a shabby, intimate dive that wouldn’t have felt out of place in Conestoga. Technically it wasn’t even a bar, just a private drinking club, but the membership only cost a dollar and you got that same buck off the price of your first drink.

The bartender did an honest-to-God double take when I walked back in. He must have seen the men leave after me and figured I wouldn’t be drinking in Hamlin much longer. There were a few raised eyebrows along the grooved oak countertop as well, but they quickly turned back to their own conversations. We sat down at a table and the leader looked at the bartender. “Four glasses a’ Buffalo Trace,” he said, not bothering to ask me what I wanted. So

I'd be paying for the good stuff, which was okay with me; anything that put them in a better mood was worth the money. The bourbon was smooth, but it wasn't until we were on the second round that the men relaxed enough to introduce themselves.

"My name's Caleb. You can call me Cale. This big man's Seth and this'n's Braden," Caleb said as he pointed to his agreeable friend who nodded warmly to me, his suspicion having disappeared with Caleb's approval.

"My name's Michael. Michael Herne." I stuck out my hand and Cale grabbed it, squeezed it hard.

"Where y' from, Michael?" Cale asked.

"Virginia—the other one." My GTO still carried a set of the state's stark white plates with blue letters. But I was actually living in the District of Columbia. Still, "Virginia" sounded a lot closer to "West Virginia" than D.C. I'd lived there for almost a decade, so it wasn't much of an exaggeration.

"You know this girl you lookin' for?" Seth asked.

I shook my head. "Never met her. I'm doing a favor for her father."

"These hippie chicks all look the same to me," Cale said. I wondered if he was talking about the blue streak in her hair, the nose ring or just the fact that she was protesting. Staring at the photo, I had to admit she was as mysterious to me as she was to Cale, though I met a few like her in college after I left the Army. "Every one a'them thinks we're tryin' to kill the planet just 'cause we need to feed our kin. Some of the local kids are nicer, but those from up North all think we're damn stupid hillbillies here jus' 'cause we do a day's work."

"People think the same thing about my hometown," I observed. You wear the dirt under your fingernails forever.

"A mine town is a place that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily," Seth, the big guy, said somberly.

"Are you quoting Flannery O'Connor?"

"Paraphrasin'. We may be miners, but it don't mean we ain't readers," Seth replied, his face dead serious. He held that expression for a moment before starting to chuckle. The sound rattled in his chest and rolled around his throat until it was real laughter that shook the faded green paint on the wooden panels of the room. Braden laughed more at Seth than the joke and after a moment, Cale joined in. So did I.

We started talking for real then, trading stories of small town life. I found myself liking Cale in spite of how quick he'd been to pull a pair of brass knuckles on me. By the time we hit our fourth refill, I was starting to get hazy even though I'd been to the bathroom twice to stick a finger down my throat. It seemed like the right time to ask about the girl again.

"Cale, why did things get out of hand with these kids? Isn't it normal to have protestors at a big surface mine?"

Cale had a warm bourbon glow and I could tell he wanted to help me. He waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "It warn't miners done that. I'm not sayin' we loved those eco-nuts. They tied up things pretty good the last coupla' months, that's for sure. Ain't been no layoffs, though, and as long as they got you clocked in, they got to pay you whether you can get to your rig or some dumbass teenager is all laid out on it. They may think we're hillbillies, but nobody hates those kids 'cept management. And no-fuckin-body likes management." They clinked glasses to that. "I'll tell you the God's honest truth: if we got a call from upstairs tellin' us to tweak up those kids, we'd'a done it. But nobody got that call or I'd'aknowed about it."

"But you were ready to rough me up for asking about one of the protestors."

"A man comes inta' my damn drinking club askin' damn stupid questions, I'm gonna tweak him up. But I'm not gonna stomp on some soft college kid just 'cause she thinks we're killin' the damn planet. You look like you'd go a round or two jus' for the fun, anyways."

I knew the truth when I heard it, but even if I hadn't, I would have taken Cale at his word. He wasn't showing the caution of a man wondering if the law was about to come down on him and his friends. I know something about company towns and I suspected that if a bunch of miners assaulted those kids, a man like Cale would have heard about it. But that left me with more questions than I had when I was sober.

"Do you know where those kids are staying?"

Cale looked stumped but Braden spoke up. "I heard they camped up in a holler 'tween here 'n' the site. Which'n was that?" he asked himself. "Stone holler?" Seth nodded agreement. Or maybe he was just drunk.

An hour later I walked carefully back to my motel, grateful that I had chosen one that I could reach by foot from the bar. I inhaled slowly to steady myself, dragging in the smell of burning wood fires. A damp wind was blowing in my face, threatening rain but delivering only a cold chill. It was that time of year when fall tips toward winter and the world feels more dead than alive.