

CHAPTER II, SECTION 2: JOHN KNIGHTON

John Knighton was a farmer.

He was proud farmer, whose people had been farming the same hundred acres, give or take, since before the Revolution. The land hadn't really come to them honestly—after all, settlement had been forbidden in the area by the British at the time—but that was long in the past, and John knew one thing for certain: just as his ancestors had passed this land down to him for over two hundred years, he'd pass it down to his.

He was a contrary farmer, too. Back in the 1930s, when many people in his particular section of the southern Virginia Piedmont were losing their farms to the bigger operators and the land developers, his family had held on to theirs. His grandfather and great-grandfather always said that that's how they became organic farmers; not because they didn't like chemical fertilizers and pesticides, but because they just plain couldn't afford them without mortgaging their land, something they refused to do. They kept on that way for decades, scraping out a living as best they could, and now that John had taken over they were doing pretty well, with the organic craze getting bigger every year. They'd learned from experience, and in the last few decades from science, how to get good yields and good crops without the chemicals that they really still couldn't afford; how to nourish soil and make it better while still utilizing it to grow nutrient-needy crops; and otherwise how to make a living without mortgaging the farm to the hilt. He enjoyed his job, all told.

On the fourth of May, John went into town for a bit. The town was Josephsville, Virginia, a town about ten thousand strong in the Piedmont. Once it had been a pretty strong industrial town, big into furniture and the textiles that go with furniture; the last twenty years or so had hit Josephsville's industries pretty hard, and it was difficult to find work. Still, people mostly stayed; small-town inertia tends to keep people rooted, and John Knighton was no exception. When his father died five years ago, when John was twenty-three, he didn't even think of leaving the area; he would take over the farm. Which he did.

John turned the beat-up 1984 Ford F-150 on Church Street, Josephsville's main thoroughfare, headed up to the feed store at the other end of town. He didn't buy much feed—his animals were mostly pasture-fed—but he knew some folks there and wanted to see them. He ran a hand through his hair and

reflected that he'd need a haircut soon, as well; but he didn't intend to stop at the barber's, at least not then.

An old friend of John's, Lenny Powell, was as he expected at the feed store when he pulled in. Rob's Feed, the dusty old sign read as John turned into the gravel lot. Despite the sign, it was really a general agricultural supply store; the building was filled with not only feed, but also farming implements, fertilizers, hutch parts, and piles of supplies arranged in what appeared to be no particular order. Rural life being what it is, hunting and fishing implements were also deposited in various parts of the store; poles, hooks, lures, scents, waders, and suits of camouflage cluttered the store, consisting of a single room, like the tidy but disorganized garage of a dedicated homeowner. It was a store that John was well used to, and walking in felt like walking into a second home.

"Lenny," John said nondescriptly when he saw his friend browsing at a case of hunting knives. "What's the good word?" Lenny looked up and nodded his head in greeting.

"Wish I knew it, Johnny." They shook hands. "What brings you up here?"

"Well, you do, believe it or not." The two men conversed calmly and naturally, their Piedmont accents lilting like New World brogues, with the air of men who had known each other for decades, as they had. "Heard you'd bought some bees." Bees were a hobby of John's; Lenny grinned and pulled the toothpick that had been hanging from one corner of his mouth out, holding it in his hand.

"Figures you'd hear about it before I'd even finished doing it," he replied. "You and them damn bees. Yeah, I got three hives, got a man bringing them in next week. Just enough to get started, you know; learn the ropes." The two chatted about bees for five or ten minutes like the old friends they were; then Lenny had to take his leave.

"Well, I'll see you later, Johnny," he said, and they shook hands. Just before taking his leave, though, a smallish Mexican man came and spoke to Lenny; his English was clear, but also clearly foreign. John knew him well as Ricardo Sanchez, who'd been working for Lenny's family's farm for at least five or six years. He was a loyal employee, and had always worked hard.

"This is the man I told you about," he told Lenny. "My cousin Juan." Lenny smiled at the Mexican standing next to Ricardo and offered him his hand, whom he and John both

(correctly) assumed to be Juan. Juan took the hand and shook it, trying to look positive and upbeat. But it was clear that Juan had seen better days; he was sweating, and his smile seemed forced, like a man compelled to go to a black-tie event when all he really wants to do is throw a screaming fit. And in fact, Juan *was* feeling pretty poorly; he'd had a roaring headache for several days, and lately his stomach had begun to pain him mightily. But still he smiled; this was his boss, and his family really needed the money. It wasn't so bad that he couldn't smile for a few minutes and make a good first impression.

"Pleased to meet you, Juan," he said, and Juan blinked at him. English was difficult enough for him when he saw it on television; Lenny's accent made it fully impossible.

"His English is not so good," Ricardo told him. "Don't worry though, boss; he's smart. He learns quick." Lenny laughed and waved a hand dismissively.

"No problem," he said. "If Ricardo recommends you I know you're good folk." He gestured to John. "Juan, this here's Johnny Knighton. You'll be seeing him around the farm

from time to time." He looked at John and smiled. "'Specially now that I got these bees I bought." John laughed and shook Juan's hand.

"You don't listen to him," John told him, gesturing at Lenny. "He's shovelled so much horseshit it's started coming out his mouth." Lenny laughed heartily.

"That's Johnny for you," he said. "All right, boys, let's get back to work. Good seeing you, Johnny." John nodded and took his leave, climbing back into his pickup truck and heading back to his own work, where there was plenty for him to do in early May getting ready to put down some of his biggest crops.

Juan, though, was sicker than even he knew; and when he shook Lenny's hand, he'd given not only a good first impression, but also a good, large fistful of feverish, bleeding death. The virus currently deconstituting the walls of Juan's capillaries spewed forth out of his mouth and nose, as well, dealing lethal doses to all twelve people in the store at the time. Within another day, Juan was dead; eighteen hours after that, so were Lenny and Ricardo. But they didn't die in bed; the group Tom Landry had assembled would see to that.

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