

Cold Storage

The sign at the thick steel door said *Absolutely No One Under 21 Admitted*, but Gordon Ray paid it no mind. It was a great many years since it had applied to him. There was a large anteroom just inside the doorway, but it was already filled with quiet men who milled about, waiting for their turn to approach the gate. Ray turned his back on the crowd (he was a little bit claustrophobic) and instead studied the inside of the portal he had just entered. The heavy door was gray, with many years worth of paint flaking and peeling from the corners. It had a fairly large window in the center, but it was protected with a heavy screen mesh like all the outside windows in this building. Not quite like bars . . . but close enough to make the point. Someone grumbled something behind him and other male voices were raised in agreement, but Ray paid it no attention. The door opened slowly and another man entered. He was shorter than Ray, balding, with thick glasses. It would have been easy to classify him as a bookworm somewhere else, but not here. Why was *he* here? Why were any of them here?

Three more men entered and any benefit of staring behind him was lost. Gordon Ray turned back toward the gate. Fortunately, enough had passed ahead of him to lessen the crowded feeling with which he struggled. In a moment, it was his turn. There was another door here: a thick one with heavy steel plates riveted in strategic places across its face and a small round speaking hole about four feet from the floor. There was no knob visible. Gordon Ray leaned over to place his mouth close to the grate, and for the first time it occurred to him – we have to bow down, he thought. Praying for admittance.

“Ray, Gordon,” he said as clearly as he could.

“Again,” a voice commanded. He complied, and a moment later a buzzer sounded. He pushed at the door and it opened. He stepped in and allowed it to shut behind him. It was ridiculous, he always thought, with such a line of men standing behind him, to go through this ritual with every single one. Bow down, speak, push and enter, then close the door for the next supplicant. But the rules, he thought, *are the rules*.

There was a long hallway before him here, defended by only one more barred gate, but he immediately turned to his right and faced the desk and the entry clerk. It was more like a cashier in a convenience store, he thought. One in a very bad neighborhood. The desk was raised high enough that he had to look up (now gaze up to your master, he mused) at the uniformed guard behind it, shielded behind a thick panel of acrylic – bullet proof, no doubt.

“Ray, Gordon,” he said yet again. Ray’s skin wanted to crawl. He knew that he was being bombarded by a low-energy x-ray, and that his naked body was now displayed on a screen over behind the desk. He tried to suck in his gut. The guard studied the display for a moment, looking for metal objects and any contraband items, then he stared at Ray’s face suspiciously, comparing him to the photo on the computer monitor. Satisfied, he pointed down to the eye scanner. Ray tried to avoid actual contact with the heavy black rubber eye piece (he couldn’t help but think of all the sweaty faces pressed here already tonight) and waited while the red glare verified his identity.

“Okay,” the uniformed guard grunted. Ray heard something tinkle into the steel drawer under the window, and he reached in to retrieve his key. The barred gate to his left buzzed. He pushed it open, officially entering Government Safe Storage Facility 2201-14, and began his walk down that first long hallway.

All the floors here were concrete, painted some nondescript blue or green, faded and worn away in the middle pathway. On each side, he passed door after door, every one identical heavy steel except for a number stenciled in small black painted numerals just below a square window set at eye-level. The glass was that armored kind with the little wires in it, he noticed. It reminded him of pictures he had seen of a hospital for the criminally insane – the old, bad kind of hospital seen only in movies. No knobs, only heavy dead-bolt locks and a pull handle. On a sudden impulse, paused and stepped over to one and glanced in the window.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” an amplified voice demanded from overhead. Ray jumped back and looked around. Back at the gate, both the next entrant and the uniformed guard were staring at him.

“Sorry,” he said. He hurried on down the hallway, his face burning. At the end he pushed open another door (heavy steel with a small armored window but no lock) and entered a stairwell. Three flights up he pushed open another, identical door and entered the common room. He always speculated that this building had once been some kind of factory. There was a large open floor space here, with a high ceiling crisscrossed by large pipes and small conduits, wires, and steel girders. A harsh, yellowish-white light flooded down from big round fixtures hanging well above the floor. Rows and rows of steel tables filled the center of the room, while the walls were lined with individual cells, each with its own locked, heavy steel door and small, square armored window. Men were at many of the tables, opening the locked cabinets underneath and going about their own business. In the unwritten etiquette of the place (God knew there were enough *written* rules) it was considered rude to speak to another visitor, or notice what he was about. Men (and there were, occasionally, women here too) would sometimes grunt, nod, or speak a short greeting to a friend or acquaintance, but there was usually a unearthly quiet here, a faint background noise of rustling papers, squeaking hinges, rattling locks, the clatter of metal against metal and, sometimes, the *clicks*, *racks*, and *snicks* of well-oiled machines being carefully worked back and forth by familiar hands.

Gordon Ray ignored all of this and walked to his own door, number 3-022E, the twenty-second on the East side of the third floor, he always told himself. He used the key the entrance guard had given him and pulled it open. These doors did not have automatic closers and he always left his open because of the stuffiness of the small room (and his mild claustrophobia.) He was one of the lucky ones (the extra hundred dollar bill hadn’t hurt any either – slipped to the clerk along with his original paperwork and deposit) and his cell had a window: it was covered with the same heavy screen as the outside door and wouldn’t open, but it did help ease the closeness of the small room. He tried not to think of it and instead turned to his own two steel tables and locked cabinets.

Since this was a “private” space, he was not required to put everything away in the cabinets every time. His Thompson was still lying where he had left it on the heavy cotton cloth. He reached out and let his hands slide down the dark blue of the receiver, then he took it up and worked the bolt. He loved the smooth *snick-chack* sound it made as he pulled it and released it. The submachinegun was, of course, inactive. It had been a registered, taxed, and perfectly legal firearm twenty years ago, but progress had eventually ordered its deactivation. Even so, it was still required to be here under “safe storage.”

He returned the Thompson to its black plastic case and then put it away in one of the cabinets. Now he took out his Model 700, the one in 7mm Remington magnum. It was stainless steel, with a silver finish scope and a black synthetic stock and sling. He pulled it into his shoulder and turned toward the window, focusing out toward the mountains about forty miles

away. In his mind, he drifted back to many happy days walking those wooded hills. He worked the bolt – the action was as smooth as glass – and gently squeezed the trigger. *Click!* Not a hint of creep. No over travel. God what a fine rifle. He remembered that whitetail, the one on his last hunt more than twenty years ago. What a shame he hadn't gone back. You could still have signed one out for a weekend up until four years ago, he scolded himself. Reluctantly, he returned the rifle to its case. What next? One of the shotguns, maybe? A pistol? Maybe the Desert Eagle?

That was when the voices outside finally intruded into his consciousness. He had been aware of them on some lower level, a background noise that had risen above the usual rustle, growing until now it pushed its way into his little cell. He turned and stuck his head out into the common room. Something unusual was happening. Fifteen or twenty people were crowded around just outside his door and a conversation, it seemed, had broken out.

“– you all know what I'm saying is true,” an overweight, red-faced man was saying. Gordon Ray knew the names of only a few other “visitors” as they called themselves here at the safe storage facility, and this fellow was not one of them. Ray thought of him as Beefy. “We have a right to keep and bear arms. It's right there in the Constitution.” There were murmured sounds of assent. “So what's going on? I mean, why are we here visiting our guns like sick kids in the hospital?”

“Look around you,” someone said from over to the left side of the crowd. “This ain't no hospital. It's a prison. Our guns are in jail.”

“Yeah, I remember when you could take them out on furlough,” a fellow called Tucker said. “But, now all we get is a conjugal visit every now and then.” There were a few chuckles.

“That's the way it progresses, isn't it?” Gordon Ray saw that it was the short, balding man who spoke, the one who had entered just behind him.

“Holman, isn't it?” someone asked from near the door. “I used to see you on TV a long time ago, didn't I?” The short man nodded. “Yes, that was me.”

“Well then what the hell are *you* doing *here*?” the same voice asked. Something in his tone caused Gordon Ray to stand on tiptoes to see him. It was an older man with white hair clipped short, and hard steely gray eyes. He looked to be in his sixties, but tanned and very fit, sitting on his steel table and cradling an M1 Garand in his muscular arms. Ex-military, Ray thought. While he was watching, the man hopped to the floor and carefully laid the rifle on the bench top, then turned and pushed through the crowd to get closer to the man called Holman.

“As a matter of fact,” he said, “It's been a long time, but I seem to remember you on one those panel discussion things, arguing that the private possession of guns was incompatible with a modern, civilized society, an anachronism.”

“Hey Cooper,” another man said stepping up behind the old soldier and touching him on the back. “Cut him some slack. And anyway, this ain't exactly the place, you know?” There were some nervous chuckles. Cooper grinned and seemed to relax a little.

“Let me show you something,” Holman said, stepping back to his table and then returning with a large canvas handgun case, opening it as he came. He drew out the last handgun Gordon Ray would have expected, an old Colt Government Model forty-five. He handed it to Cooper and the old man took it reverently into his right hand and gently worked the slide with his left. There was a gap in the crowd over to his right, and he turned and pointed the handgun that way, toward the bare concrete wall, and stood that way for a moment. Then he slowly lowered the Colt, eased the hammer down and studied it carefully.

“This is a ‘Government Property’ marked Colt,” the old soldier said. “World War II maybe.”

“It was issued to my grandfather in World War II,” Holman told the gathering. “He carried it at Normandy, in Belgium, and into Germany. He left it to me when he died. In a way, it changed my life forever.” There was some murmuring and rustling, and men started shifting around and getting comfortable, as they do when they sense that a good story is coming.

“You remembered me correctly, Mr. Cooper,” Holman began. “I was a rather well-known lawyer in my time. I assisted with arguments before the United States Supreme Court on behalf of such groups as the ACLU, People for the American Way, and the Center for the Prevention of Handgun Violence – although at that time it was known by its more accurate name.

“My opinions were known, and I was often called on to speak on those shows because I could argue them effectively and my education gave me credibility, but I knew, even then, that it wasn’t true. I knew what the United States Constitution said in the Bill of Rights, and I knew quite well what the founding fathers had meant when they said ‘shall not be infringed.’ I just didn’t care.

“I felt sure that, despite their good intentions, they were simply wrong when they designed their government to be held tightly under the control of the common armed citizen. Man had advanced, I was sure, to the point where modern civilization no longer needed the checks and balances they had designed. The despotism they had witnessed around the world and feared was impossible in the modern world of civilized men, I thought. The world of universities, computers and fax machines.” Holman smiled ruefully.

“Perhaps I will write a book someday (although it could never be published) detailing how my eyes were opened. It would take many hours to tell you everything, but I think I can tell you when my ivory tower first began to topple.” He nodded toward the pistol, still resting in Cooper’s hands. “My grandfather died when I was ten, and he told my father he wanted me to have that gun when I was old enough. The old man had told me stories about the war, but I honestly can’t remember any of them. When I turned twenty-one, I was in law school and I asked my dad to hang onto it for me. Then, I went to work for a law firm in Washington, DC for six years and of course, I couldn’t take it then. I kind of forgot about it until one night when I was forty-five years old.

“I had flown home to be with my father when he died of cancer. My mother had been dead for two years. I was an only child, and had never married. Now I was by myself in the world. I stayed alone in our old house that first night after the funeral, and I couldn’t sleep. I laid awake, listening to the wind, the grandfather clock down in the hallway, dogs barking miles away.

“About two o’clock in the morning, I heard glass breaking downstairs. The door opened and I heard men’s voices. I guess they assumed the house would be empty. They walked around, discussing what they would take, while I frantically tried to dial 911 on the phone. Then I heard them coming up the stairs. Do you know what I thought about? Me, the liberal attorney? The gun-hater?

“I thought about Granddad’s old pistol! Where could it be? I asked myself. As quietly as I could, I crept around searching through drawers and cupboards. I didn’t find it, and the police showed up in time with sirens blaring. The burglars escaped of course, but I didn’t care I was so relieved. I found the gun later, unloaded, trigger-locked, and secured in a locked cabinet in dad’s office. Although that state had laws that were somewhat more liberal,” Holman chuckled for a

moment, “than Washington’s, they did have a ‘safe storage’ law and my father was a very law-abiding man.

“Well, then I had to have the gun transferred to me legally – this was after the ‘loopholes’ were closed and all private transfers had to be recorded. I remember how surprised I was when I failed the ‘instant’ background check! You see, I had been arrested once at a protest in my college days. The charges had been dropped, but it was still on the books somewhere or other. It cost me nearly six hundred dollars getting that cleared up, even though I was doing my own legal work!

“I’d like to tell you that the light suddenly shined into my mind and I turned around overnight, but it wouldn’t be true. I remember thinking, what about some poor guy who wasn’t a lawyer? How does he get his record cleared? But the truth is, I really didn’t care. I was busy, intensely popular with all the people that mattered, and I was making lots of money. But one day many years later, I looked closely at what our government had become, and I suddenly knew that I had been wrong. Dead wrong.”

“So why don’t we just take these guns and walk out of here,” Tucker asked. There was quite a bit of derisive laughter and profane comments.

“I’m serious,” he shouted. “We have a right to keep and bear arms, so why can’t we keep them and just bear them right out of here?”

“Try it,” someone said from the back, “and see what happens to you.” About the same thing that will happen to you anyway just for suggesting it, Gordon Ray thought to himself.

“You do not have any such right,” Holman said. There followed an immediate angry chorus.

“It still says it right there in the damn’ Constitution,” Tucker shouted.

“Do you think that the United States Constitution *gives* you *any* rights?” the lawyer asked. The room became suddenly quiet.

“I don’t know exactly when it ceased to exist,” Holman continued, “but there is no right to keep and bear arms in this country, no matter what words are inked onto a piece of parchment preserved up at the National Archives.”

“I remember the last new gun I bought,” Cooper said. “It was a Ruger .22 I got for my granddaughter. I remember filling out the papers and showing my identification and then waiting while the guy called in the background check. I remember thinking, I’m asking for permission! I’m asking the government for permission to buy a gun! What the hell kind of right do you have to ask permission to exercise?”

“They been getting us ready for this for a long time, ain’t they?” someone asked from the rear.

“Oh, there was always a good reason,” a skinny guy in an Atlanta Braves baseball cap said. “It was crime, or terrorism, or kids getting a hold of guns. They always have a reason for what they do, don’t they?”

“Yes, but it isn’t always the one you hear about,” said Cooper. “And that’s what started all of this. Did you know that the Gun Control Act of 1968 was passed because a President was assassinated? The killer purchased a gun from a magazine, and now suddenly there was this great need to keep criminals from getting guns. Well did that stop crime? Did that save Martin Luther King, or did it stop that nut-case girl from trying to shoot Ford? Or Hinckley from shooting Reagan? And of course that brings up Brady and the waiting period and background check and that all other bull—”

“Governments never willingly diminish their power,” Holman said. “They always expand it. And so our government takes every opportunity to grow. It seizes on some problem and suggests a solution – a solution that means more growth and power for the government. Of course the solution *never* solves the problem. Usually it makes it worse. So we need more of the same medicine that made us sicker. As I said, I finally woke up one day to realize that our government – *all* governments – are organisms, living creatures almost. And that their natural diet is freedom. And that they are never satisfied.

“Did you know,” he asked, “that before the first significant restriction on gun ownership was passed in this country, the National Firearms Act of 1934, anyone with the money could walk into a hardware store and purchase a Thompson submachine gun?” Gordon Ray’s ears perked up and there was some muttering among the crowd.

“I’m serious. And crime per capita was actually quite low, even though it was the gangster days of Al Capone. But it was as a reaction to the gangsters that they passed the NFA. Oh, they would have liked to ban machine guns but the opinion was still too strong (even among those in government) that the Second Amendment actually meant what it said, so they taxed them instead. A two hundred dollar tax that was, in those days, pretty much the same as banning them for virtually all Americans.”

“Did a lot of good, didn’t it?” a fellow called out from a table at the back. “Just like it keeps those drug dealers from getting machine guns today.”

“Twenty-five years later we get the GCA ’68 and an age-limit to purchase,” Holman continued, “no more mail-order sales, and the old form 4473 you had to fill out before every purchase. Every few years they kept amending it to add a little here and a little there.

“Then there was Volkmer-McClure, which was supposed to roll back some of those laws and restore those lost rights. And what happens? At the end of it they tack on a ban on the manufacture of automatic weapons! For the first time ever, our government had established that it had the power to ban arms for the people of this country. Do you realize how significant that was?”

“Yes I do,” Cooper said. “And it didn’t take them all that long to follow up on it, did it?”

“That’s right. Just a few years later they banned the manufacture and import of certain kinds of *assault weapons*. They had fun with that. Every few years there was a new amendment, creating a whole new class of banned weapon until you couldn’t manufacture anything semi-automatic any more.”

“And don’t forget,” Cooper said, “along the way there were new restrictions on giving a gun to a minor, having one ‘accessible’ or even letting one get stolen from your house.”

“It was a long time ago,” Beefy said, “but when my daughter turned sixteen and started driving, I taught her to shoot and had her carry a gun in her car when she was out alone.”

“And it was a federal crime, my friend,” said Holman.

“And here we are today,” Cooper said. “You’re right. We don’t have any friggin’ right to keep or bear arms.”

“That pretty much means all the rest are gone too, doesn’t it?” someone asked.

“I guess the time to defend your rights is *before* you lose them,” Tucker said. There was a nervous silence. A very long, very nervous silence.

Cooper was abruptly aware that he was still holding the forty-five in his hands. He stepped forward and held it out to Holman but the balding little lawyer stared at it for a moment and then shook his head. He held out the zippered case to the old soldier instead.

“That pistol is the only gun I ever owned and I suddenly feel as if I don’t deserve to have it. Why don’t you keep it for me.” Cooper took the case and slowly zipped the pistol back into it and then gently placed it back into the lawyer’s hands.

“Right now,” the old soldier said softly, “I don’t feel as if any of us deserve these guns.”

* * *

It had started raining. He couldn’t see too well at night and Gordon Ray drove carefully through the dark streets as he pondered everything he had heard that evening in Government Safe Storage Facility 2201-14. At home, he sat at the kitchen table and started composing his notes.

“Obviously Cooper and Holman are a serious problem and both bear watching. Holman has no doubt formed some persuasive intellectual arguments and I would not be at all surprised to find that he is already working on that book with an eye toward some form of underground publication and distribution. Cooper, on the other hand, has military training in addition to a moderate intellect and could be a catalyst toward violent action.”

Of course the entire exchange was digitally recorded and archived down at the department, and by now also at seven or eight other government facilities, but it was important to have a first-hand impression of the personalities involved. Dr. Gordon Ray, Bureau Psychologist, leaned back and stared at the ceiling. It was times like this that he especially missed his pipe, but his small supply of contraband tobacco was much too precious for a casual smoke. “However, we should not,” he continued, “be in haste to make too much of what was said tonight. After some reflection most, if not all of these men will acknowledge the truth of one thing that was said. There certainly is no right to keep and bear arms in this country or anywhere in the world today, and the means of changing that situation is now safely beyond their grasp. Recognizing this, we can expect their angst to subside eventually and as they,” (and I, he thought ruefully) “pass off the scene even the remembrance of such anachronisms will decline. We will then be able to dispense with these safe-storage facilities once and for all.”

Dr. Gordon Ray scribbled a few more notes and then started preparing for bed. Perversely, his mind returned to that hunt so long ago, and the whitetail buck he had downed with his old 7mm. It had dropped like a stone, but was still alive, trembling, when he walked up to it. It’s just the way it is, he thought. Survival of the fittest. Kill or be killed. He started singing quietly as he walked down the hall.

I’d rather be a hammer than a nail. Yes, I would.