

DEAD HAUL

A Novel by Philip S. Watson

[First Two Chapters for Website]

Chapter 1

"The guy's a sex addict, and that'll get him killed." Ray Benson down shifted, slowing for the turn, then tapped the pedal sending the shrill of airbrakes.

"His sex-wired brain builds its own snare trap," answered the man sitting in the passenger side of the cab. "A teenage whore as our bait, and she's not even pretty. Sloan's last screw job." The man made a sneering smile.

"What about when, you know, it's happening?" Benson gave the steering wheel a full turn. The cab and trailer formed a sharp angle then rolled awkwardly over the crumbling street

curb. Benson straightened it out, and the 18-wheel rig crept into the parking lot.

"We'll call in a gas station stickup. That'll tie up the local Barney Fife."

Benson braked to a stop, dust boiled around the seventy-foot rig. Two short rows of paint-flecked bungalow cottages stood in the middle of the cracked and potholed lot. Moonlight Courts, the neon sign read. A café, built out of stucco and carved up with heat cracks, had the faded red words "Home Cookin" stenciled over the front entrance where a small CLOSED placard stood behind the dusty window. The café and twelve cabins were squeezed between two farm crops, one cotton, the other tall corn. Each field made a thousand green rows.

"Guns are loud." Benson darted his eyes to the man then turned away. "Even out here in Hicksville."

"Don't worry about it. Your job is small, Ray," the man said with the flat tone of superiority. "Small part for a small man."

Neither spoke for a full minute. In front of the long red hood, dust hung like a filthy fog.

"I know," Benson said, absorbing the insult, trying to sound upbeat, acting like he was playing a game and guessing the next move. "Joe Sloan thinks he has a couple of hours to wait

around. So he keeps his eye out for a piece of ass." He looked at the passenger to see if he guessed right.

"And we serve him one." The man's lips tightened, the corners curled down. "His last."

Ray nodded and scratched the stubble on his chin with a blackened thumbnail, then laid his wrist over the wheel.

"Wonder how long it'll take someone to stumble on him?"

"Next morning," the passenger answered like he was having the same thought. "Farmer will drive by on the way to milking cows or slopping hogs."

"Feds will want to talk to all of us," Benson said, hoping he sounded like an equal player in the deal while knowing he wasn't.

"Killing Sloan was no threat to society at large. Any homicide detective will push it to the back of the file cabinet."

Not if someone rats, Benson thought. Or thinks one of his partners has crossed over. Then he said, "Sloan's got plenty of enemies."

"Bingo. When the cops start looking for someone who'd like to waste that piece of shit," the man said as he nodded to cabin ten, "they'll build a file thick as a library shelf."

The neon NO VANCANCY sign shone pale blue in the late afternoon shadows. A single car was on the lot, Joe Sloan's convertible, a '67 Corvette Sting Ray, perfectly restored.

The passenger barked a short laugh. "Sloan craved anything that was fancy or shiny. These old-fashion, beat-up cabins had to have been a nail in his ass."

Benson noted his passenger talked like Sloan was already dead. He half-turned toward the man. "Is it going to trouble you?" Benson's tone was weak. "I mean—"

"Trouble?" The man gave an exaggerated wince like the question was too stupid to answer.

"You know. Pulling the trigger?"

Benson watched him snort a half-laugh and shake his head. Ray wasn't sure if he was making light of the question or killing Sloan. Benson's palms were wet. He wiped them on his jeans.

"When Sloan looks you in the eye, begging." Benson's tone was apologetic, like he felt for someone who had the bad luck to perform a stinking, miserable job.

"I can't wait." The man's words were quiet and hard, the stare cold.

A feeling like vertigo came into Benson's head. "What about the hooker?"

No answer.

"What about her?" Benson's voice had the high pitch of alarm, afraid of what he would hear.

"Nothing. A dumb kid whore. Scared shitless. She'll run and not look back."

"She got no idea?"

"Fuck no. Hey, are you getting retarded here?" The passenger stared hard into Benson's face, his look cold, void of mercy.

Benson turned away and peered through the bug caked windshield toward the west, the sun was a yellow orb hanging a foot above the green sea of corn.

"Goddamn. I wish it hadn't come to this." Benson shoved the stick into neutral and let out the clutch. The cab shuddered and the big Cumming diesel clattered while idling. "Jesus H. Christ. What a mess."

"And I wish you weren't a part of the deal, Ray." The man gave a resigned sigh. "You don't have the right formula in your head or your balls. Never have, never will. You want the laughs and the good times, but when it comes to what's got to be done, you . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Screw you. I'm here ain't I?"

"Are you really with us? Huh, Ray?" The man squinted like he was trying to fake thinking through what he already knew.

"The way you're talking, asking stupid questions."

"I'm a player—"

"You're a loser. You've proved it over and over. The only difference between you and that kid whore with Sloan," the man stiffened his arm, pointing a finger at the number 10 door, "you had a shot at the big time, something she never had. You eat and breathe and shit thanks to one person."

Ray Benson felt his pulse accelerate. He hated Joe Sloan, a sorry bastard who cared only about himself. Now he was about to die. Benson wished it was tomorrow already. Next week. A year from now.

"I don't want to be here when it happens," Benson said.

"Do what you're told."

"I should be with the truck. Over at Love's."

"Shut up. This thing is just now starting, Ray. Do you want to still be around when it ends?"

Ray swallowed. He felt a chill under his arms.

The man's voice turned mocking, like he was talking to a dumb kid. "Now drive this rig to Love's Truck Stop and park it. Got that Ray? Huh? Then come back in the rented pickup. If anything rolls down this road, anything—you listening, Ray?—pull the pickup across and block it.

"But, Ray, if no one comes down the road, then right after we leave, you go back, get in this truck, start the motor, drive due west, and don't stop till you see the blue Pacific." The

man's tone hardened, now giving an order. "Stay away and stay busy making hauls. Until we call you back."

Ray wanted to tighten his lips and give a fuck-you response but instead said, "How long you figure that'll be?"

"A month. Give or take."

Benson nodded and ran the back of his hand under his nose.

"Hearing me loud and clear, Ray?"

"Yeah, 'course I am."

"You better."

Twenty minutes later, Ray Benson parked the Kenworth 18-wheel rig at Love's Truck Stop and returned to the Moonlight Courts driving a dented and faded Ford pickup rented from the manager at Love's. He parked at the edge of the cornfield, next to a stalk-thrashing machine. The pickup blended in like another piece of idle farm equipment, while the location gave him a good view of the approaching road on the right. To his left was the motel and café, half surrounded by an ocean of corn and cotton.

Benson slumped behind the wheel. The sun was below the horizon, and in the darker shadows the blue neon NO VACANCY was getting brighter. Still enough daylight to watch a slaughter.

Five minutes later he saw a black Suburban roll over a lone hill in the flat prairie, traveling fast down the two lane road, gliding over the railroad tracks, then pulling inside the

courts. The black paint looked spit-shined, the windows just as dark. The big car nosed to number five, then stopped. Both rear doors opened. Two men got out. Heat waves rose from the hood.

Ray Benson froze. *Jesus*. His gut knotted.

The pair marched in front of the Suburban that crept along behind them. The men were disguised without looking it, dark slacks and shirts, black blazers, black ball caps, shades. Walking ahead of the Suburban, they drew pistols from their coats.

The barrels were long. Too long. Silencers. Benson fumbled a cigarette from a pack, put it in his mouth, but his hand shook too hard to light it.

The number ten door flew open. Joe Sloan ran out, right in front of the two men. He was naked except for black socks. He gripped his trousers in one hand, running in a panic, heading toward the dense corn field. Loose rocks cut into his feet, and he hopped in mid-stride.

In a single fluid motion, one of the men raised his arm, half-turned at the waist and fired. Benson heard no sound but saw Sloan's knee explode, the leg coming unhinged inside the white skin. His naked body slammed to the ground. The Suburban front wheels turned and it accelerated past the shooters, then stopped by the collapsed body. Sloan rolled on his back,

extended his arms toward the approaching men. Blood gushed and pooled under his right leg bent the wrong way.

The shooter approached, talking to Sloan.

Benson had never seen Joe Sloan without his trademark smug expression of arrogance and certainty or his high-dollar threads. But now his eyes were wide with horror as he moved his head back and forth trying to deny something in the conversation, and though Benson couldn't hear, it was obvious Sloan was pleading, unaware of his naked, bleeding body.

Then something moved at the corner of Benson's eye. He jerked his head to the side. A woman slid headfirst from a back window and dropped like sausage from a meat grinder, buck-naked. She got up and ran full stride into the cotton field. Benson winced at how her thighs and feet scrambled like those of a terrified animal. She went through a dozen or so cotton rows and dropped down, disappearing. Benson's eyes flashed back to the others. None of the other men had seen her.

Sloan gave a long, feral cry. The man in black stood over him, aiming down. The pistol spit and cut a finger off the outstretched hand in front of the face. The arms collapsed. A moment later the naked body twitched.

Benson's whole body jerked, and the cigarette flew from his lips. A cold panic took root at the base of his spine as he

watched one man casually bend over and pick up the empty shell casings like they were golf balls on a putting green.

The other went into the room. *Jesus God. They planned to kill the girl.* That lying bastard. Moments later the man came out. Then both men folded into the black Suburban. It u-turned next to the motel and rolled slowly past the café before rumbling over the railroad tracks, then speeding up and disappearing down the black ribbon of two lane road.

Benson stared toward the girl, her naked back barely visible as she lay still between the long, straight green rows. He slammed the wheel with the side of his fists and felt cold drops fall on his ribs. He should try to help her. But Benson was a coward, a fact he had long ago accepted.

He started the motor, shifted into gear, and pulled onto the road. An impulse flashed. *Take Sloan's 'Vette.* He stopped the pickup, thinking about the fun of driving the classic convertible. Then his gut knotted, and he shook his head. He gassed the pickup and passed Sloan's body lying there with his mouth and eyes half open, looking goofy. He was no longer the egotistical bastard or driver of the silver Corvette with the blood-red leather interior, parked just a few feet from his dead, naked body.

Chapter 2

"Hey Lane, something's wrong with this picture. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

Lane Harper seemed not to hear as his eyes scanned across three computer screens scrolling with numbers and team names.

Jay Clark continued. "When I go to Vegas for Christ's sake, I'm a VIP. Orleans, Bellagio, Mirage. Hey man, the casinos limo me to and from the airport. Give me front row tickets to the shows. You should try to keep up with your competition."

"Casinos." Lane shook his head. "Not my competition." He got up and went to the counter and poured a cup of coffee before returning to the computer screens. Thirty-nine, six-two, trim, sandy hair long enough to hold a part, Lane Harper wore a crisp blue button-collar shirt, pressed cotton khakis, and slightly scuffed chocolate brown oxfords. No rings or other jewelry, his plastic digital watch had a cracked face and a torn band.

"Fly me first class," Clark added.

"Casinos write it off their taxes. Legitimate business expenses."

"Hundred dollar champagne in a silver ice bucket, waiting in my hotel room."

"Cost them ten. They buy in bulk. I provide gourmet coffee and fresh sandwiches you make yourself." Lane slid a yellow pencil from behind his ear and pointed to the office kitchen, his tone all business. "Right now I'm out of spicy mustard but got regular in the squeeze bottle."

"With you, I almost gotta kiss your ass to lay down a hundred grand."

"Casinos comp your room and meals to keep you coming back. They know you'll drop three, four times what it costs them. They, like me, Jay, know that gamblers lose."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this from my bookie."

Lane nodded at the computer screen. "What games for this weekend, Jay?"

Shaking his head and blowing out a resigned breath, Jay Clark slid a pocket book from his blazer, licked his thumb, flipped a couple of pages. "Just don't cut me off and refer me to Gamblers Anonymous. Like you've done to some of your clients."

"What games, Jay?"

"Okay, I'll name the game, you give me the spread. Ready?"

Lane pushed the pencil behind his ear, noting Jay Clark's expression. It was the same for all his gambling clients. That look of confidence, thinking they could actually predict the

score of a game. It was a mindset that Lane still found amazingly odd, and stupid.

"SMU and Tech."

Lane cursoried down the screen. "The Methodists plus fourteen."

"Gimme SMU. Twenty grand."

Jay will lose that one, Lane thought. "Next," he said, tapping the keyboard.

"North Texas and OU."

"North Texas plus twenty-one."

"Take UNT. Twenty grand."

Lane winced inwardly. "Next."

"Rice and Baylor."

"Rice plus seventeen."

Jay Clark groaned and formed a deep frown. "My ex-stepson is third string linebacker for the Bears. Good kid even if his mother is a bitch. We still talk. He's worried but won't tell me why."

"The line'll go to three to five by early afternoon. Then pull back later, but you'll never see seventeen again."

"Why's that?" Jay Clark asked, almost startled.

"Baylor's coach is going to resign," Lane said. "Fired. Recruiting scandal. Won't affect the game play. Assistant coaches got a handle."

"No shit?" Jay made a look of bewilderment.

"Be announced at noon today," Lane said without expression.

"Put me down for fifty on Baylor. You better be right, Lane."

"Fifty thousand on Baylor." Lane pecked keys.

Jay Clark scribbled on a page, clicked the pen closed, and dropped the notebook into his blue blazer pocket. He centered the gold cross hanging in front of his collarless pullover shirt. "I'll call tomorrow about the pro games. I plan to put a bundle on the pokes."

"Why the Cowboys?"

"Because their cheerleaders got big tits."

Lane shook his head. "Let the Cowboys' line settle. Info on cornerback injury won't announce till a couple of hours before kickoff." Lane printed a sheet and slid it into a file folder.

"Hey, you talk, I listen." Clark gazed at the ceiling, toward the metal rack that held six TV screens, each pulsing with different scenes of sports action. The walls were lined with team shots of Oklahoma Sooner and Dallas Cowboy football. Other pictures were of Lane Harper making bone jarring tackles and catching interceptions.

"How was it?" Clark leaned back staring at the action photos of Lane in a Cowboy uniform. "Playing in those packed stadiums?"

"Wasn't play. It was work."

"How many years?"

"Two and a half. Back up safety."

Jay Clark moved his gaze to Lane. "Ever pop one of those Cowboy cheerleaders?" His tone had a hushed, conspiratorial edge but he was grinning like a lunatic.

"I met the club owner once. He was drunk and couldn't recall my name."

"C'mon, Lane. What about the glamour? Those super elite parties." He punched his fists up and down. "The hot babes throwin' themselves at you."

Lane rolled his eyes. "For me it was about as glamorous as changing a flat tire on the shoulder of a freeway in my underwear."

Clark blew out a breath, acting deflated, like the power had failed in the middle of a porn flick. "Let's get lunch. Barbeque. Sonny Bryan's."

"Why not get our shoes and shorts and get in a forty minute jog, then lunch?"

"Slap my grandmama's face." Jay whined aloud. "I ain't gonna break a sweat unless I'm palming a pair of hooters the size of cantaloupes."

Minutes later, the two men strolled the three blocks from Lane's office to the downtown West End. A ragged man approached, asked for money, and thrust out a palm with black lines of grime. Lane offered a coupon held between two fingers. "Free meal at the new homeless shelter." The man turned away and cursed.

Sonny Bryan's was packed with seats available only on the sidewalk. Jay headed to check ESPN on the TV at the bar, while Lane went outside to the table. Reading the lunch special on the chalkboard, he paid little attention when a cab stopped in the street. A man emerged from the backseat. Ray Benson came straight for the table and sat across from Lane.

Lane narrowed his eyes.

"I know what you're thinking. But I ain't been gambling."

"Ray, you're suppose to be driving cross-country."

"Yeah, I know." Benson turned his gaze away.

"What? Someone want to break your fingers?"

"Swear to God, Lane, I ain't held a playing card, dice, pool cue, not even a lottery ticket in nine months."

Lane gritted his teeth. "Where's my truck, Ray?"

Benson whined, almost crying. "I got a bad feeling, Lane."

"Habitual gambler with a feel means he's wrong."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. But I got hard information to go with it." Sweat had beaded on Benson's upper lip and forehead. They were inside deep shadows of tall buildings with a comfortable breeze, it wasn't hot.

Lane heard a yell and looked toward the restaurant window. Clark was pumping a fist in the air. A couple of guys at the bar had turned and scowled. But Clark was oblivious to their irritated stares, his huge grin showed lots of white teeth.

"Looks like you're lunching with a high roller," Benson said. "He feels the adrenaline rush. Football gambling. Damn, I miss it. I really do."

"Why aren't you on the road?"

"Lane, I . . ." Benson stopped. His eyes turned away. "I've been in deep before. You know that." Benson rubbed the back of the hand holding the cigarette with the palm of the other. "But this is different."

Lane could hear trouble in Benson's tone. "Ray, I owe the bank three hundred G's for those eighteen wheels?"

Benson slid a flat palm across the table, then lifted his hand. Underneath was a key. "Hundred grand. Cash. Take your regular cut. Every week I'm not back, take out another ten percent."

Lane eyed the key. It was to a locker.

"Where's the key to my truck?"

"Lane, listen to me." Ray Benson looked around, obviously nervous. "Stand back and just let it roll. For damn sure don't tell anyone I came to you. It'd be bad for me and you." Benson stared at Lane like an animal in a trap.

"That truck is my ticket away from bookmaking."

"Trust me, Lane. It's toxic. Let it go. For now."

When Jay approached the table, his smile fell. "Hey Lane, who's this? Another street bum you're offering a free meal?"

"I got to go." Benson stubbed the ashtray with the barely smoked cigarette. "Compulsive gamblers are superstitious. He'll blame me for losing his next bet."

"Beat it, asshole," Clark growled.

"Wait, Ray." Lane grabbed Benson by the shirt sleeve, but he jerked away and hurried down the sidewalk.

"Who was that loser?"

Lane stabbed a finger toward the TV through the window. "What was on ESPN, Jay?" His tone was hostile.

Clark pasted a weak grin on his face. "You were right, Baylor's coach is gone. Vegas line adjusted fast. Hey," he shrugged sheepishly, "love those numbers you got me."

Lane turned back and watched Ray Benson hurry across the street and disappear around the corner.

"Let's order." Jay Clark opened a menu. "I'm buying."

Lane continued to stare down the street, squinting into the sunlight, listening to the horns honking and people shouting. He felt a chill riffling through him, knowing that he'd staked far too much on hunch and gut-feel, a malignancy in risk-taking, violating his own code of strictly adhering to cold efficiency of mathematical probability.

"Another time, Jay. I've got to deal with some negative numbers."