

Your stay here will be like “rests” in music—where no notes are played but the silence is necessary for the composition. A time to appreciate the unspoken and less obvious qualities of life.

—Nat Burkhardt



Chapter 1

I had killed a guy. It was eating me. There's always death on the streets. Holes that have to be filled. This one was deeper than most.

People never bother to talk to panhandlers like me. For most, I'm invisible or, at best, repulsive street art. For the few who bother to look, I'm a homeless man, though I prefer houseless or property-challenged. Regardless, I am a roamer or free ranger ... on a spiral staircase to hell.

My old man was a preacher. He preached Bible, booze, and beatings. Not hard to guess in which order. I chose his two favorites.

This life of mine started when I killed my best friend. A guy named Ben Keller. He begged me—well, nearly begged—not to do it. I had to. I didn't listen. (Nobody ever listens to a panhandler, either.) Now I needed to find his wife.

I'd sidestepped the law, bondsmen, and bounty hunters for over three years. I was always looking over my shoulder because of the voices. Yeah, the voices. In my head. They

were always there. I call them the Vigilantes, capital V and plural. Nastier than tracking dogs, they stayed on my tail, toying with me, playing with my mind. I mean now ... right now, this very minute ... they're telling me not to talk about this. They say some strangers I shouldn't trust.

My name? Call me Chili. More habanero than the slushie. Sure, out here, I have other names, several really, but Chili works best. Target on my back. Voices in my head. Judge and jury, I have none. I met loneliness out here. For me, it wasn't an "eye for an eye" existence. It was all about motion, where "every action has an equal and opposite reaction." I took a life, so I had to give life back ... to the less fortunate. Loneliness dictated my penance which was to write letters for the other lonely souls, letters to return them home while I just kept on moving on.

At the ticket window in Jacksonville the pudgy agent with the Oliver Hardy moustache said the next bus out of town was headed to Myrtle Beach. I was on it.