

SEARCHING FOR FREEDOM

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(Alcatraz, 1937)

Ralph stared at the worn pages of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The once crisp pages from his favorite book were frayed and torn, its spine weak from his habit of bending the pages backward behind its cover.

The collision of Ralph's thoughts with the ruckus of the prison's mess hall made it hard for him to focus.

"Can I join you?"

A tray dropped onto the table in front of Ralph, startling him. Ralph looked up from his book, locking eyes with a pudgy man smiling from ear to ear. Ralph hadn't met him in person yet but he would have had to be stupid to not recognize the famous gangster from the newspapers. He was a short, balding man with a bulging nose and fat lips—Al Capone.

"Mr. Capone..." Ralph began, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"Please," he said waving him off and sitting down across from him. "Call me Al."

Ralph nodded and quickly glanced around the mess hall—the Gas Chamber as he and the other inmates liked to call it. The room was filled with the sound of chatter, utensils scraping trays, and regular yells from the guards. Everyone's eyes seemed to be on other things, no one seemed to care about Ralph's table guest.

"It's Roe, right?"

"Just Ralph," he mumbled, surprised Al knew who he was.

"Well Ralph, I've heard stories about you," he said stuffing a spoonful of pudding in his mouth. "About how you got here anyway. Bank robbing, fighting, trying to break out from McAlester. And your old partner, uh, what was his name again? William?"

Ralph locked eyes with Al, unsure of what he was getting at.

"Wilbur."

"Ya, that's it, Wilbur," he said with a smirk. "Mad Dog, I believe they called him. Had a bit of a temper, hm? Ya, I heard you shot him dead." Ralph slammed his book shut and clenched his hands into fists.

"I don't know what you're getting at but I'm no killer," Ralph said. "Wilbur got himself shot by police, not by me."

Al's smirk didn't fade as he held his hands back in defense. "Now, don't get all riled up, I'm just stating what I heard. You see, kid, I'm not here to accuse you of any-thing, in fact I would like for you and I to be friends."

Ralph tilted his head in question. He wasn't anyone of importance, he had a knack for thieving since he was a teenager and he robbed a few small stores, sure, but not out of complete selfishness. The Depression had hit Ralph hard, and there wasn't much money for a small town Oklahoma farmer who had a sick father to take care of. So when Ralph had met Wilbur Underhill and the pair successfully robbed their first bank, Ralph got a taste of the good life and never looked back. Ralph had always regretted it though. He had never wanted to be a criminal.

"In all honesty Ralph, I'm here to make a deal with you," Al said leaning in closer, their faces just inches apart. "I heard about you and Theodore Cole's plans."

Ralph stood up quickly, accidentally knocking into his food tray. Some guys nearby glanced at him but quickly turned away after seeing him next to Al.

"Now, calm down," Al said and motioned for him to sit back down. Ralph gulped and slowly sat back down. He hadn't told anyone about his plans, but he wouldn't be surprised if Cole couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"I ain't trying to stop you," he laughed, "hell, I'm rooting for you."

Ralph stayed quiet, fists still clenched and uncertain of what to make of Al.

"I know you and Cole are planning on making a break for it soon. And you see I don't mind you making a go for it," he said. "But you see, Cole and I have some unfinished business, my friend, and I personally wouldn't like to see him leave so soon. That is, unless it's in a body bag."

Ralph stared at him, confused. Ralph wasn't aware that Cole had known Al personally but then again, he hadn't known much about Cole at all. He did know, however, that he had a hankering for trouble.

"What did Cole do to you?" Ralph asked.

"Well, you came from McAlester with him, didn't you?"

“Ya, so?”

“Then you know that he stabbed his cellmate.”

Ralph’s eyes widened. Cole had murdered his cellmate at McAl-
ester. He had stabbed him and told the guards it was self defense, but Ralph
had known otherwise. Self defense didn’t fool anyone being as Cole had
stabbed the guy twenty-seven times. Ralph hadn’t particularly cared for
Cole, he was a killer, but both he and Cole had tried to escape from McA-
lester and, unlike Ralph, Cole had succeeded—before getting caught later.
Like him or not, Ralph needed Cole. Ralph was sentenced to ninety-nine
years and if he didn’t get off the island, he would die in there. “Who’s the
cellmate to you?” Ralph asked.

“That’s not important,” Al said.

“Well, what do you want from me then?”

“I’d like to ask you for a favor, kid. You see, I have a lot of con-
nections outside of this place, as you may know, and I also know that you
won’t make it two miles off this island without help. Those waters are too
tough, too cold, and you’ll get swallowed alive. So I thought maybe we
could come to an arrangement.”

Ralph studied Al’s face. He knew Al was probably right, but he
wouldn’t admit that to him. “What kind of arrangement?” Ralph asked.

“I want you to make sure Cole doesn’t make it off this island,” Al
hesitated, his eyes burned into Ralph’s, “alive.”

Ralph shook his head laughing.

“You’re kidding, ain’t you?”

“I don’t kid, kid.” Ralph’s smile quickly faded. “You ain’t good
friends with Cole anyway. You see, kid, I can read people. I can tell the
good ones from the bad ones and you ain’t a bad one, but Cole, now Cole’s
a bad apple, a cold-blooded killer, and I suspect you know that. I suspect
that you’re just using him to get out of here, nothing more. Ain’t that right,
kid?”

“Enough with the ‘kid’ shit alright? And why don’t you just off him
yourself since you’ve got so many connections,” Ralph said, irritated that Al
somehow knew so much.

“I thought you might ask that. But you see, ki—” Al began, “Ralph,
I ain’t got much time left in this place and I want no connection to Cole’s...
disappearance. I need stay clean.”

“And I’m not a connection?” Ralph said, glancing at the guard
nearby. Al glanced towards the guard and smirked.

"Tell me, did you once see the guards look in our direction? You don't know me, and I don't know you, and as far as anyone here knows, this conversation never happened."

Ralph sat in silence. Did Al really hold that kind of authority over this place? He didn't know, but he didn't put it past him either. He was Al Capone.

"So do we have a deal, Ralph?"

Ralph looked at his hands, now calloused, rough, and starting to bleed. He had spent most of his days the past month sawing away at the bars with a stolen hacksaw, doing most of the work himself while Cole kept watch. Cole stood by the mat shop entrance shooting glances outside the door every few minutes in case the guard came back early for head count. He ran his long fingers through his greasy hair.

"This has been taking longer than we planned," Cole said, chewing on his thumbnail.

"You wanna do this shit?" Ralph spat back.

"I ain't criticizing, I'm just sayin'."

Ralph rolled his eyes and continued to saw.

"I never did ask you," Cole said. "What are you gonna do when we get out?"

"Swim," Ralph joked.

Cole didn't laugh, he just stared out the door window.

"I ain't sure yet," Ralph said, but that was a lie.

Ralph had stashed cash not far from his farm—a lot of cash. His dad had died after he had gone to McAlester, Ralph had assumed he died of disappointment and as much as it hurt him to know he had no family left, he no longer felt obligated to take care of someone else. If he made it out, Ralph was gonna get his cash and start new, just like the *Count of Monte Cristo*. Count Ralph Roe—he liked the sound of that.

Ralph continued to file away at the bars, ignoring the cramp in his hand.

"Wrap it up for the day, Ralph, guard's coming back," Cole said coolly as he moved away from the door and tried to look like he was working.

Ralph quickly jumped back. Placing the hack saw on the floor, he

pushed the nearby shelf back into its place, covering the saw and the window. The mat shop grew darker afterward, his freedom disappearing with the window.

“Head count!” the guard yelled from in the hall.

Both Ralph and Cole walked towards the door.

“I’m gonna open a candy store,” Cole said smirking. “No one would suspect a man with a candy store of being a criminal, eh?”

Ralph nodded, but shivered at the idea of Cole owning a candy store. He didn’t seem like the kind of guy who liked kids, or people.

Ralph had met Cole when they were both at McAlester Prison. He had never really liked Cole but they were both from Oklahoma and like Ralph, Cole had started a life of crime at a young age. He told Ralph that he robbed a bank at fourteen and shot a cop. He was even supposed to get the death penalty but ended up getting only fifty, even after he killed his former cellmate. In truth, Ralph hated Cole. Cole only had fifty to life—nearly half of Ralph’s sentence—and Ralph had never killed anyone. But Cole had escaped McAlester Prison successfully once and Ralph’s separate attempt had failed. He needed Cole, and Ralph hated the idea needing someone.

Ralph was at it again the next day. He stared through the bars as he sawed at them, looking into the outside world. A thick blanket of gray covered the grounds and made it nearly impossible to see the ocean and anything beyond it. Ralph had never seen the fog so thick.

“Today’s the day, I think,” Cole said. “I don’t think I can take much longer in this shithole.”

Cole’s left eye was risen and now a soft hue of blue and purple. He had hit an inmate with a food tray in the Gas Chamber yesterday, but the guards put a stop to the fight real quick, one of the guards fists meeting Cole’s eye—he wasn’t lucky he wasn’t put in solitary again. Ralph didn’t ask why Cole had hit the inmate in the first place, because he knew that Cole didn’t ever need a reason to fight.

Ralph winced in pain as the bar he was working on finally snapped and cut into his hand.

“Cole!” Ralph said, wiping his bleeding hand on his shirt. “I got it.”

Cole ran over to him to investigate, pushing Ralph aside. His eyes grew wide, “I don’t believe it, it actually worked.” He cast Ralph a wicked

smile. Together they dislodged the broken bars and Cole handed Ralph a towel. Ralph rolled his eyes and quickly wrapped the towel around his hand, smashing the glass of the window. Cole pushed himself through first, dropping a few feet onto the ground below.

Ralph swung his leg onto the ledge and looked back into the mat shop. When he and Cole were first given jobs in the shop, Ralph had asked to work in the library and the guards laughed in his face. In response, Cole had spit in the guard's face and told him off, leading to a week in solitary. After his time in solitary, most of the inmates started to call Cole Screw-loose. Ralph had never understood why Cole did that, but Cole's actions almost made Ralph like him—almost.

"What are you doing?" Cole asked, as he looked around anxiously. "We gotta go."

"I'm comin'," Ralph said. He lifted his other leg onto the windowsill and froze. "Damn," he muttered to himself. He remembered the wrench they left on the table and pulled his foot back in. Cole glanced back at the window where Ralph no longer was.

"God damnit," Cole swore under his breath. "Ralph," he said quietly, as he glanced in every direction to make sure they weren't spotted.

"Ralph!" he said a little louder. "Get your ass out here, or I'm gonna leave you!"

Ralph popped his head out of the hole and stuck his hand out showing a long metal object to Cole. They would need the wrench to get through the main gate. Ralph tossed it to Cole and then quickly hopped out of the window.

"You were supposed to grab that. This whole thing would be useless without that," Ralph said to Cole.

Cole nodded, he would never admit to his mistakes.

They made their way across the lawn, crouching down and moving fast. They approached the main gate and sighed in relief that they hadn't been spotted.

"This fog is a God damn miracle," Cole whispered. "I doubt the guards can even see us from up there."

"What if we run into one of them?" Roe asked.

"We kill 'em," he replied with no hesitation or remorse.

"Just open the damn thing," Ralph said, urging Cole to break the gate's lock. He didn't want to think about having to kill a guard. Cole twisted the padlock off the gate with the wrench, and both men sucked

in their breath as the gate slowly creaked ajar. Once it was open enough Ralph didn't hesitate and took off through the gate, ignoring Cole's order to wait. He ran as fast as he could and heard a yell in the background, he whipped his head back as he ran and suddenly smacked into something hard. Ralph's eyes grew large as they met the eyes of a guard. The guard opened his mouth but before he could speak, Cole hit him in the head with the wrench. Ralph stood frozen, gaping at the guard as he twitched on the ground. Cole bent down and bashed him on the head once more, blood spattering his face.

"God damnit Ralph," Cole said, his breath short. "You could have blown the whole damn thing." His voice was quiet but angry. Ralph stared at the blood on his face as it slowly trickled down.

"You killed him," Ralph said backing up slightly.

"It was either that or go back, and I ain't going back."

"But you killed him," Ralph said again.

Cole's expression hardened and he grabbed Ralph's shirt by the collar. "We gotta go now," he growled. "They'll be figuring it out that we're missing soon, the guard is dead, if he didn't die we would have been caught. So snap out of it and let's get the fuck out of here."

Cole dropped the wrench and began to move towards the cliff's edge. Ralph managed to move his feet and followed after Cole, glancing back only once at the dead guard. He hadn't killed him, but he may as well have.

Ralph turned his back to the prison and made his way after Cole. Cole had stopped on the cliff's edge and was staring down.

"What is it?" Ralph asked.

"This is the hard part," Cole said. He slicked his hair back and did a two finger wave at Ralph as he jumped down, landing with a thud on the ground below.

Ralph glanced down at the water, the beach below was small and bare and had to be fifteen feet or so down. Ralph shivered as the waves crashed onto the rock scattered ground, drift wood floating in and out as the ocean breathed.

"Jump, Ralph!" Cole said from below, motioning him.

Ralph glanced behind him, little bits of the wired fences faded in and out from the fog, Alcatraz barely visible. Ralph turned away from the prison and jumped. He landed with a heavy thud on the ground below, his ankle giving away.

“Shit,” he said.

“Hurry up!” Cole said, picking up a large piece of driftwood. He pushed his way into the waves with as much force as he could muster. Ralph found a large piece of driftwood and followed Cole’s path. The water was like ice, crashing over them and instantly soaking their clothes, biting its way into their skin. Ralph’s teeth began to chatter as he kicked and kicked his feet. He used all of his strength to make it out further and further, Cole trudging along next to him.

They kicked and kicked for what felt like hours, Ralph’s hands turning shades of blue as the water washed over him, the cliff of the island fading away as they moved. In the distance, sirens blared and both men stopped paddling. Cole smiled through chattering teeth.

“Sounds like someone’s escaped,” he said with a laugh.

Ralph laughed for the first time. “Sounds like it,” he said. He looked back at the island, little yellow spheres danced through the fog. Inside the prison, inmates hooped and hollered as they heard the sound of the sirens for the first time. The inescapable Alcatraz prison no longer deserved the name.

Ralph turned his head forward, telling himself that he was free. Even if he died now, it wouldn’t be in a cell.

A sudden gust of wind and a cluster of waves hit Ralph and Cole. They began to paddle again harder and harder, their prison soon swallowed up by the fog as they went. Their pace slowed the further they got out. They were far out now, the fog blocked the view behind them and in front of them. Ralph wasn’t sure how long they had swam, but his body felt cold and weak. More waves crashed into them as they went and Ralph wondered when they would stop.

He heard splashing behind him and glanced back in time to see Cole’s head become submerged under the water. Ralph didn’t realize how far ahead he had gone.

“Cole!” Ralph yelled, barely recognizing his strained voice from the cold. Cole’s head emerged from the water, bouncing up and down between waves.

“Cole!” Ralph said again and then he hesitated. The face of the dead guard flashed into Ralph’s mind, his mind asking if Cole was worth saving. Ralph thought of what Al had said, about Cole being a bad apple, a killer—and he was. Ralph knew that, Ralph saw that. But Ralph had told Al Capone no to his arrangement for a reason because Ralph was no killer.

Ralph reached Cole in a matter of minutes, he was just barely able to keep his head above the water. Ralph grabbed onto his shirt, pulling him onto Ralph's piece of driftwood. Ralph held on to Cole as he began to paddle outward. He wasn't sure why he was saving him, or why he was risking his life to help him, but he couldn't just allow him to die. Just like the guard, that was as good as killing him. Ralph paddled farther and farther out, Cole just barely kicking to help. The water finally began to soften, the waves receding as they paddled farther out.

"I'm losing too much steam here, Cole," Ralph said, his breath escaping him. "I can't push you anymore."

Cole nodded, "It's alright, I can manage now." He pushed Ralph's driftwood to-wards him, offering it back to Ralph.

"No," Ralph said. "You keep it, you need it more than me."

Cole looked Ralph in the eyes. Cole's hair was plastered to his face, his skin white as the walls of his cell contrasting against the purple of his blackened eye. His face drooped with exhaustion and there was no longer blood splattered across it. For the first time since Ralph had met him, Theodore Cole looked innocent, almost kind.

"I think it's time we part ways," Cole said, looking into the fog.

Ralph nodded. "I'll see you in another life, I suppose," Ralph said as he let go of the driftwood his body submerging up to his neck.

"Another life," he agreed with a smirk and turned his body away from Ralph. Ralph watched as Cole paddled away slowly, barely making a noise as he went, not even a splash. He grew smaller and smaller as he went until the fog swallowed him whole.

Ralph glanced around him and felt a sliver of regret for giving Cole his driftwood, but he started paddling farther and farther out without it.

Ralph continued onward but soon stopped to listen for sign of life nearby. He didn't hear the sirens from the prison any longer, Alcatraz was now completely out of view. It was just him and the ocean. He could no longer feel his legs and feet, and his hands and arms felt stiff. He looked up to see a small flock of seagulls fly above him, their bodies flying through a white blanket of fog. Ralph let his body float, spreading his arms and legs as he laid on his back, the ocean water clogging his ears. He thought of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and the freedom the character Edmund must have felt when he too escaped his imprisonment. Ralph's body no longer shivered and his eyes were no longer heavy. He felt relief in the gentle embrace of the ocean as it cradled him back and forth. He felt alive, he felt free.