

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Lost Ones

Written by Ace Atkins

Published by Corsair

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

THE LOST ONES

ACE ATKINS



Constable & Robinson Ltd
55-56 Russell Square
London WC1B 4HP
www.constablerobinson.com

First published in the US by G. P. Putnam's Sons,
an imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2012

First published in the UK by Corsair,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2013

Copyright © Ace Atkins 2012

The right of Ace Atkins to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs & Patents Act 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either
the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any
resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events or
locales is entirely coincidental

All rights reserved. This book is sold subject to the condition
that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold,
hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication
Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-47210-184-8 (trade paperback)
978-1-4721-0658-2 (ebook)

Printed and bound in the UK

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

1

A COUPLE ROUSTABOUTS HAD BEEN ASKING ABOUT GUNS AT THE Tibbehah County Fair, but by the time the word had gotten back to Donnie Varner, they'd long since packed up their Ferris wheel, corn dog stands and shit, and boogied on down the highway. He'd tried for them at a rodeo up in Eupora and the fall festival over in Hernando, but it wasn't until he pulled off the highway into a roadside carnival in Byhalia, Mississippi, that he knew he had the right spot. It was late, past nine o'clock, and the edge of Highway 78 was lit up in red, blue, and yellow neon, the fairway spreading out past the gas station and into an open cow field, bursting with folks carrying popcorn and balloons, little black kids and white kids, Mexicans working the stands. The air smelled like burnt sugar and cigarettes.

“¿Dónde está Alejandro Ramírez Umana?”

A fat brown woman running a stick around a cotton candy dryer nodded to the flashing lights of a Tilt-A-Whirl called the Cool Breeze. As Donnie walked closer, he could see the little cars spinning and zipping up into a fake ice tunnel where folks would scream

when getting blasted with cold air and mist. Donnie's white T-shirt was already soaked through from his ride up from Jericho with no air conditioner in a busted-up Dodge van he'd borrowed from his church.

How the hell else could he have brought a sampling of the fifteen AK-47s, two Mossberg 12-gauge shotguns, three MAK-90 assault rifles, a Ruger Mini-14, and a .223 caliber AR variant rifle? There was a mixed bag of ammunition, scopes, magazines, and gun cases to show that he meant business and could deliver more.

A dark girl with long legs was taking tickets, black hair pulled back from her face with a pink scarf, wearing a white tank top and shorts, a fat pink belt around her small waist. She was tall and thin, with muscular brown thighs. She wore a pair of old cowboy boots.

Donnie smiled at her and repeated: "*¿Dónde está Alejandro Ramírez Umana?*"

"I speak English."

"Where's he at?"

"Who are you?"

"A friend."

"I don't know you."

A couple kids muscled by Donnie and handed the girl tickets. Both boys looked at the Mexican woman in the damp white tank top and smiled at each other. Their heads swiveled as they made their way up the ramp, nearly tripping over themselves into the Cool Breeze tunnel.

"I heard he needed some guns," Donnie said.

"That's not true."

"Fine by me."

"Don't talk so loud."

"I'll be getting a hot dog over at that stand."

“What is your name?”

“Donnie Varner.”

“Alejandro knows you?”

“Just tell him about the guns.”

Donnie pulled out a pack of Natural American Spirit cigarettes and thumped them forward, ripping open the box. He fired one up and strolled over to a clump of vendors selling Polish sausages, pizza, barbecue, and Coney Island dogs. He paid two dollars for a footlong and dressed it with mustard and relish, wishing he had a cold Busch beer to wash it down.

The best thing about going to Trashcanistan and coming back was enjoying every goddamn moment you got. In the good hours, the pleasures seemed more intense. He could smoke cigarettes on his dad’s porch all night long, watch the sun rise off the hay his father had rolled and baled. During the bad hours—maybe why he didn’t like to sleep—he’d think he was still over there, hearing that market bomb explode near three of his buddies, with parts of forty civilians getting shredded with them. How do you make sense of that?

He’d had three surgeries to remove all the shrapnel that had decorated his back. But the first words out of his father’s mouth on a cell phone call from back home was: “Y’all get the bastard?” He had to tell his dad, No. This wasn’t Vietnam. These people really didn’t have no objective besides blowing themselves to heaven and screwing seventy-two black-eyed virgins.

You could smell the turn of the season mixed in the corn dogs and funnel cakes. Mississippi still had hot days, but there was a gentleness to those hot breezes, signaling fall was coming on, chillier weather. Cotton gins were running. People were turning over their crops and planting collards and harvesting pumpkins.

Donnie wiped the mustard off his chin and stood and stretched,

scratching his chest and lighting up another Spirit. Down the mid-way in all that neon glow, he spotted that fine Mexican woman, hands in tight pockets of those white shorts, wiggling down the worn path. Cowboy boots kicking up a bit of dust till she got near him and didn't smile but just pointed.

"And?"

"Go to the motel."

"Where?"

She pointed again to a little, squat two-level facing a cow pasture and Highway 78.

"Oh, there."

"Room 211."

"Do I look that goddamn stupid?"

"I'll wait with you."

"I don't know you."

"Or you, us," she said. "If you have a wire—"

"I ain't wearin' no wire."

"But if you are—"

"Alejandro will chimichanga my ass."

She raised her thick eyebrows and nodded, walking ahead of him, making Donnie sweat by the way she walked. He was enjoying the white shorts and cowboy boots, but he wasn't altogether stupid, reaching up under his T-shirt and making sure the .38 Special was tucked in his branded belt.

She had a key and opened the door on the second floor. Donnie hung back, waiting to hear something, blowing out a thin trail of smoke and staring down at the neon carnival facing the cotton fields, cars headed north to Memphis.

"Come on."

"I'm good."

"Come on," the girl said.

Donnie shrugged and wandered in, keeping cool, looking to other doors and then back the way he came. He walked back to the bathroom, heart jackhammering in his chest, checking behind the shower curtain and then strolling out nice and easy. He found the girl facing him, arms across her nice chest, but frowning. "Take off your shirt."

"Come on now, sweet thing."

"Luz." She had a slight bead of perspiration on her upper lip and rings of sweat under her arms.

"What kind of Mex name is that?"

"An old one."

He peeled off his T-shirt, fronting the girl so she couldn't get a glimpse of his pistol.

"And your blue jeans."

"Hell."

Donnie shook his head, took the lit cigarette out of his mouth, and placed it in an ashtray by the bedside. He reached behind him slow, grinning, and showed her the gun loose in his right hand. "OK?"

She nodded.

"Be a lot easier if you'd show me, too."

"You came to us."

"A fella can at least try."

She waited till he'd taken his jeans down to his cowboy boots and made a slow turn in his boxer shorts. Her face dropped when he looked at her, and he knew she'd seen the thick, rubbery scars on his back. He pulled his pants up and reached back for his .38, sliding it into his belt, and then slipped into his T-shirt.

She dialed a number on her cell and sat down on the sagging bed,

the cheap bedspread stained and sun-faded. She didn't say anything. She lolled her head in a shrug and crossed her legs, swinging her booted foot back and forth.

Donnie walked back to the front door and waited on the balcony, leaning over the railing while he smoked two more cigarettes. He'd heard about these bad dudes down in Biloxi from this fella in Jericho named Ramón, gangbangers from Mexico and out west that blew in after Katrina and decided to stick around and do business, run whatever they could back and forth to Old Mexico. He didn't know nothing about their politics or business, only that they paid in cash.

A Mexican man turned the corner from the stairwell and nodded at him.

Alejandro Ramírez Umana's entire face had been scrawled in jailhouse tattoos. He was short and muscular, with a shaved head and small mustache. The black scrollwork on his face showed numbers and letters and drawings of demon horns.

Alejandro said something fast and harsh in Spanish. Donnie caught about none of it, watching while he pointed out to the wide parking lot, already starting to empty out for the night. She nodded. "He wants you to bring them here. To the motel."

"Two miles down the road is a Walmart," Donnie said. "Y'all can meet me in the parking lot for a little look-see. I got a brown Dodge van. Just you and him."

She told him. He answered her, seeming like he was pissed off, keeping an eye on Donnie. Donnie Varner smiled and winked. Alejandro stared at Donnie, seeming kind of like he was an insect, before turning and bounding down the metal steps.

"He will want to shoot the guns."

"That can be arranged."

"First we see the guns. How many can you get?"

“How many y’all need?” Donnie grinned at Luz. The smile seemed to make her nervous.

“Many.”

“Baby, you’re too pretty to be at this freak show.”

She finally smiled. He handed her a business card.

“See y’all in Tibbehah County.”