

# Hit or Miss by Jeff Markowitz

## EXCERPT

Thousands of young people were on the mall, and more were streaming in by the minute. Willow, and her hippie friends staked out a spot near the Lincoln Memorial. Emily wandered the length of the National Mall, from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capital Building and back again, determined to take it all in. There was a buzz in the morning air. The President appeared unannounced on the Ellipse at dawn and chatted with a small group of demonstrators. He wished them an enjoyable stay in the nation's capital. Everyone Emily met on the Mall claimed to have seen him. The day was hot; the Mall was dry and dusty. There were crowds of people everywhere, an uneasy mixture of antiwar protestors, soldiers and police units, newsmen and onlookers. Protestors flashed peace signs and sang the fish cheer. Young Republicans responded with middle-finger salutes.

Emily didn't know most of the speakers at the demonstration, but she liked the message. End the Cambodian incursion. End the war in Vietnam. She located a pay phone and used her spare change to call Ben.

"It's amazing. You should be here." She had to yell to be heard. Demonstrators continued to pour into the Mall. "Is anything happening in Dutch Neck?"

"You need to come home."

"Don't be like that."

"That's not what I mean. It's your mother."

"What about my mother?"

Ben didn't answer right away. The phone line crackled with static.

A scuffle broke out on the Mall. Police moved in quickly, weapons at the ready, cutting the small group of protestors off from the larger crowd. The confrontation pulled Emily's attention away from the phone call.

"Your mother is dead."

Later, the news would report that there were more than one hundred thousand demonstrators on the national mall, but at that moment, amidst the pushing and shoving, Emily felt like she was alone in the world. Without more change to feed the phone, the line went dead. She dropped the pay phone and turned, nearly bumping into a cop.

“Stay back,” he ordered, his hand on his weapon.

“She’s dead,” she replied and kept walking.

He pointed the gun at Emily’s head. “Who’s dead?”

She could feel anger in the policeman, but also restraint. Days removed from Kent State, it was as if no one wanted to provoke the next shooting. The policeman holstered his weapon. Shouts of “pig” were replaced by prayers for peace. Emily breathed a sigh of relief and answered the officer’s question.

“My mother.”

“Do you have a way to get home?”

Emily told the officer about Miss Cooper and the apartment on C Street. He offered to give her a ride. If anyone saw her in the patrol car, she would tell them that she had been arrested.

No one answered when she knocked on the apartment door. The apartment manager was polite, but firm. She would have to leave.

“Do you need money for a bus ticket?” The officer reached for his wallet. “I’ll drop you off at the bus station.”

When Emily left Dutch Neck, her mother had been alive. If she got on a bus, she would be admitting that her mother was dead. She wasn’t prepared to deal with that. Not yet. So she decided to spend another night in DC. As long as she remained in DC, she told herself, she could pretend that nothing was wrong at home. And maybe, just maybe, she could help end the war.

With no place else to go, she retraced her steps.

The crowd at the National Mall was smaller. There was a chill in the air, the midday heat a distant memory. It was a tough night, out on the mall, trying not to think about her mother. Instead she thought about the American boys who were spending the night in rice paddies on the other side of the world, probably trying not to think about their mothers too, and she knew that this was a small price to pay to end the war. At four in the morning, an older man approached. He was dressed like an off-duty policeman heading out to play a round of golf.

“Are you here to end the war, miss?”

“Yes, I guess I am,” She took a closer look at the middle-aged man and jumped to her feet, “Mr. President?”

President Nixon chuckled quietly.

“But, what...”

“I couldn’t sleep. I thought some fresh air would do me good.”

“But...”

“You know, sometimes I think you young people actually believe that I like being at war.”

Emily didn't know how to answer the Commander in Chief. “Begging your pardon sir, but it does sometimes seem that way.”

“Let me tell you something miss... by the way, we haven't been properly introduced. My name is Richard Nixon and yours is?”

“Emily Bayard.” She started to raise her fist in protest, like Bug, during the demonstration, but couldn't extend her arm, not while she was standing face-to-face with the President. She looked around, grateful that Willow and her friends weren't there to see her pitiful attempt at protest.

“Well, Emily, let me tell you something. I think I hate this war more than you do. But sometimes war is the necessary thing to do.”

“But you could end the war, sir. You could end the war today.”

“General Westmoreland tells me we need two more years to achieve our goals. You wouldn't want us to leave now, without achieving our goals. Give me two more years Emily, and I'll end the war. You have my word on it.”

“I don't think I can do that, sir.”

President Nixon shook his head in sadness. “You young people can be so impatient.”

“In a few weeks, I'll be graduating from college.”

“Congratulations. And then?”

“I don't know. But I have classmates... friends... They've been called up. In two years' time, they could be dead.”

President Nixon didn't have an answer at the ready. “I'd best be on my way.” The sun was beginning to peek over the horizon. “Before my Secret Service detail realizes I've slipped out.”

President Nixon turned to leave. He took a few steps and then turned back to face Emily. “I've just had an idea. Are you hungry? Would you like to have breakfast with me?”

“You mean, like, in the White House?”

The President grinned. “I have the best chef. What would you like? You can have anything, anything at all. After all, I am the President.”

“This isn't some sort of photo op, is it? You know what I mean, *antimwar activist sees the error of her ways after breaking bread with the President.*”

“I see what you mean. It would sure look good in the papers. Lord knows I could use a good story in the papers.” The President chuckled. “No. No photos. No press release. You have my word.”

And so it came to pass, on Sunday morning, before taking a bus back to Long Island to bury her mother, Emily had breakfast with the President. Mr. Nixon had poached eggs and corned beef hash with a cup of coffee, black. Emily had blueberry blintzes and a cup of chamomile tea. And all the while, they argued about the war.

“Would you like seconds?”

But she had put it off long enough. “I’m needed at home.”