

A Killing in a Small Town

A novel

By Scott Fields



Outer Banks Publishing Group

Outer Banks/Raleigh

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All of the characters and events in this book are real, and any resemblance to actual events or actual persons living or dead, is unintentional.

FIRST EDITION

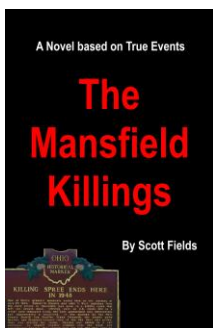
ISBN 10 - 0990679004

ISBN 13 - 978-0-9906790-0-4

eISBN: 978-1311327079

October 2014

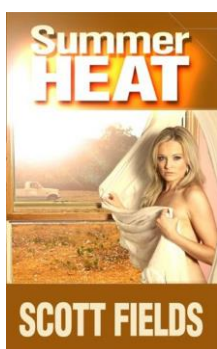
Also by Scott Fields



It was the worse two-week killing spree in Ohio's history. On the night of July 21, 1948, Robert Daniels and John West entered John and Nolena Niebel's house and forced the family into their car and drove them to a cornfield just off Fleming Falls Road in Mansfield. Robert Daniels then shot each of them in the head. The brutal murders caught national attention in the media, but the killing spree didn't stop there. Three more innocent people would lose their lives at the hands of Daniels and West in the coming week.

Scott Fields tirelessly researched the killings, the capture and trial of Daniels and even interviewed a surviving member of the Niebel family to weave this tragic story into a must-read novel bringing the reader back to those dark days in the summer of 1948. It has been more than sixty years since the tragedy, and, yet, the why of it all still remains unanswered.

The killing spree is not only remembered to this day, but is an important and dark part of Mansfield lore.



If you read Fifty Shades of Grey, you'll like Summer Heat! When she was 17, there wasn't a man alive she would let get near her, and when she was 18, there wasn't a man she would keep away.

Women universally hated her, men continued to hold doors for her long after she passed by - just to watch her walk away.

Ninety-nine point nine percent of the men in Steam Corners wanted her, but she only wanted one man, Spencer Deacon. The one thing that Spencer didn't want was Jessie, and his firm and undeniable rejections infuriated her.

What followed was a series of sordid events involving murder, deceit, betrayal and the conviction of an innocent man.

Both books are available on Amazon in print and as an ebooks as well as available from Barnes & Noble and fine bookstores everywhere.

CHAPTER 1

A late model corvette with faded paint jumped the curb in front of a white Victorian house. Carrying a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels, Harlan Steelman fell out of his car and stumbled across the perfectly manicured lawn. He sucked down the remaining contents of the bottle and tossed it onto the lawn. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, staggering backwards on the lawn.

A dark sedan backed slowly out of the garage and stopped at the end of the driveway. His hand still resting on the gearshift, the driver glared at the man standing in his front yard. Smiling defiantly, Harlan turned to face the man in the car. The driver dropped the gearshift into Drive and shifted his foot from the brake to the accelerator. He clenched the steering wheel as the car inched forward.

“You ain’t got the nerve!” shouted Harlan weaving from side-to-side.

The driver’s foot flinched. The car leaped forward and stopped with the two front tires resting on the grass.

Harlan laughed aloud. He bent over and peered into the car. “Come and get me,” he shouted as he taunted the driver. “For once in your life have a spine!”

The man leaned forward in his seat. His eyebrows were furrowed; his lips set in a straight line. “You son-of-a-bitch!” he shouted aloud. The car rolled forward and stopped. Moments passed. The two men stared at each other with only snickers from Harlan.

Suddenly, Harlan stood upright, unzipped his pants, and began to urinate on the lawn. “Hey, Dumbass!” he shouted. “I hear this ain’t good for your lawn!” He finished and laughed hysterically as he hopped on one leg across the lawn trying unsuccessfully to zip his pants.

The driver of the car slammed the gearshift into Reverse and floored the accelerator. The car careened into the street, stopped, and sped away.

Harlan watched as the car disappeared around the corner. “Need to slow down,” he muttered staring at the empty street. “Someone’s going to get hurt.” He turned and started for the front door tripping over the first step. “Shit!” he shouted.

The front door creaked open. “Get the hell in here!” shouted a hushed voice. Harlan did not move. “Hurry up and get in here!”

The young man got to his feet and grabbed the door handle to steady himself. He opened the door and fell inside. A young woman dressed in a nightgown and robe slammed the door behind him. “Damn, I wish you wouldn’t do that,” she said peeking through the curtains.

“Do what?” Harlan slurred.

The young woman turned and started for the kitchen. She was a slender woman with soft and ample femininity. “You can at least wait ‘till he’s gone to work,” she said covering herself with her robe.

Harlan closed his eyes and leaned against the wall. He was a tall man with slim features. He had a rugged-looking face that, except for a scar that ran from his left ear to his jaw, was handsome enough to win him rights to bedrooms all over town. "What makes the difference," he said staggering across the room. "He ain't gonna do anything to me anyhow," he said as he fell onto the sofa.

"He's going to shoot you one of these days," she said carrying two cups of coffee into the room.

"I don't think he knows which end of a gun to hold," said Harlan slouching on the couch. "Besides, he ain't got the nerve, and you know it."

The woman set one of the cups on a table and began sipping from the other. "Every man has his breaking point, Harlan, and you know it," she said sitting down beside him. "Lord knows there's enough men in this town who should be there because of you."

Harlan picked up his coffee, stared at it for a moment, and set it back down. "Damn, I'm tired," he said leaning his head back.

"By the way," she said turning in his direction, "what's got you so worked up? Can't remember when I've seen you drunk this early in the morning."

Harlan didn't answer. A raucous noise came from his open mouth, and he woke up. "What?" he slurred.

"What's got you drinking so early in the morning?"

"Morning? Hell, this is the end of last night," he said leaning forward and running his hands through his hair. "I ain't been home yet."

"Jesus, Harlan, aren't you getting a little old for this?" she said sipping her coffee. Harlan said nothing. "By the way, can't you at

least park down the street? The neighbors have enough to talk about without you giving them more fuel for the fire.”

“They’re just jealous,” he said with a smile. “They just wish my car was parked in front of their house.” He slid across the couch and put his arm around the woman. “Besides, I didn’t come over here to talk about your old man or the neighbor ladies. Give me some sugar.”

“No, Harlan,” she said getting to her feet. “Not today. You’re drunk and you stink like a hog.”

Harlan got to his feet. “Oh, come on, baby,” he said grabbing each of her arms. “You can’t tell me you don’t want it. You always want it.”

“Oh, yes, I can tell you that,” she said breaking his grip and stepping away. “I want you to go now.”

Harlan grabbed her tightly with both hands. “I don’t think you understand,” he said with determination. “I didn’t come here for any of your crap. Now, give it to me.”

“You’re hurting me,” she said struggling to get free.

Harlan wrapped his arms around her and began kissing the side of her neck. “Just want some lovin’,” he mumbled.

The woman lifted her knee and caught him in the crotch.

“Goddamn!” he shouted as he stepped back. He bent at the waist and held his hands between his legs. He glared at the woman standing in front of him. “You’ll pay for that, you bitch!” he shouted and started across the room.



The long winter had ended, and the warm summer winds blew. The young man of nearly sixteen years of age cocked the handle of his Daisy BB gun and searched the tall trees for a would-be target.

His eyes slowly scanned the foliage searching for any telltale movement of some unwitting prey. An unusually large blue jay came to rest on a branch of a maple tree nearly fifty feet away. The bird nervously jerked his head from side to side searching for some form of sustenance on the ground below. The young man studied the bird for a moment and then slowly lifted the weapon and carefully nestled the stock of the gun in his shoulder. He pointed the barrel of the rifle at his prey and moved it slightly until the sights were centered on its bright blue breast. He slowly squeezed the trigger. There was a dull report and slight recoil as the weapon fired its projectile. Just below the branch that the bird was resting on, there was a scattering of leaves as the BB fell short of its mark sending the frightened bird into a hasty escape.

“Shit!” shouted the boy. He cocked the gun again as he watched the bird fly out of sight. “Damn gun never did work right,” he muttered aloud. He shouldered the rifle and began to search the trees for another target.

Summer had finally come to the small town of Little Falls, Michigan. It had been a long and hard winter as most winters are in that part of the country. The warmth of summer was only a slight respite from the harsh and brutal winds of the long and cold winters.

Little Falls was a small mining town carved out of the thick pines of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Two trappers founded the town at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the discovery of gold. As the news spread through the lower part of the state, there was a frenzied exodus as would be fortune-seekers made their way to the northern wilderness. Shopkeepers, trappers, businessmen alike

abandoned their trades and began the arduous journey to claim their share of the bounty.

However, fortune and wealth were not to be found in this primitive part of the country. The quickly built mine yielded only a trace of the valuable ore and was soon closed after a collapse killed three men.

By then, hundreds of people had risked everything to make the trip, and there was no turning back. Construction of a new mine soon began while others panned the cold, clear streams that wandered, aimlessly, through this wooded country. Housing construction began, as did the erection of buildings for the purpose of trade, and soon a town was born. The dream of fame and fortune soon vanished, and the discovery of gold was soon forgotten in the small town of Little Falls. Fortunes would have to be made by other means.

The seemingly inexhaustible supply of pine trees became the source of revenue for the small young town. Fortunes were made by a few, and steady employment was enjoyed by many. Little Falls had been born and over the years would swell to over a thousand people. The lumber industry continued to be the only source of income for its inhabitants for nearly seventy years. Prosperity rose and fell with market prices, but the town continued to survive.

There wasn't much for a teenager to do in Little Falls. The nearest bowling alley and Movie Theater was thirty miles away in Bear Creek, and unless you had a driver's license and the loan of the family sedan, you were destined to create your own entertainment. The only television station whose broadcast could be received in Little Falls was located in Ludington over seventy miles away. Most nights, the

reception was good and the picture was clear. Yet, it seemed like every night when something good was on the picture was fuzzy and faded in and out. Reruns of The Lawrence Welk Show came in perfectly clear.

The young man sighted down the barrel of the rifle as he scanned the trees above. There were no birds. It was as if they had all disappeared for some reason. There was an eerie silence as if all living things had left the area.

Suddenly, there was a metallic clatter. The young man spun around to find a young black bear about fifty feet away bent over a metal trash can in search of food. He froze in his tracks as he stared at the animal. Apparently, he remained undetected for the animal continued to forage for food in spite of his obvious presence.

Slowly, he inched his way to a small sapling that offered partial concealment. He watched intently as the animal strew papers and cans over the ground. It would occasionally pause for a moment as it devoured some treasure it had found at the bottom of an open can or package.

Black bears were common for this part of the country. Over the past ten years their population had nearly doubled, and as their numbers increased, so did the frequency of contact with humans. In spite of their foreboding and ferocious nature, most black bears prefer to avoid any confrontation with people. Unless they feel threatened or feel a need to protect their young, most bears simply turn and run away.

However, not all contact with these wild animals was without incidents. There were stories of bear attacks that had been passed down from one generation to another that were grossly embellished

with each telling. As the years passed, the stories evolved into legends of incomparable feats and events. They were now dismissed as myth and fantasy by many of the townspeople but still regarded and lauded as a cultural inheritance by all.

Most children were taught at an early age to avoid confrontation of any kind. In spite of their usual docile appearance, bears of all kind are easily provoked, and in spite of their incredible bulk, they can easily outrun any human. Most children regarded their parents' admonitions very seriously and indeed acquired a deep and abiding respect for the animal. However, there were exceptions over the years, and from them were born the legends of yore.

"You're sure enough making a mess out of that trash can," muttered the young man. "Pop's going to kill me. I was supposed to bury that garbage."

By now, the animal had tipped the can over onto the ground and was using its claw to rake the contents from the container.

"You have got to go," he warned in a somewhat louder voice. He pointed the gun at the animal and squinted down the length of the barrel. The two notches were aligned and centered on the bear's shoulder. He gently squeezed the trigger. The gun fired, and the BB found its mark. The animal grunted and leaned back on his hind legs. The BB had not broken the skin but had produced a sting not unlike that which is felt from a wasp or a bee.

The bear turned in the boy's direction. It grunted again as it stared at the now fully exposed boy. Its fur ruffled giving it a much bigger appearance. Its face took on an angry look with eyes that were hidden in two deep caves of fur. It then gave forth a deep and menacing

growl that warned of impending attack, fell forward on all four legs, and began to run in the boy's direction.

The young man dropped his gun and started for the backdoor of their house. It was a fifty yard sprint, and he was pumping his legs as fast as he could. Huge legs pounded the earth behind him, breathing that growled with each gulp of air. The animal was gaining on him. He could tell it. He was nearing the halfway point, and already his lungs were on fire.

Suddenly, a voice boomed across the backyard. "Run, Travis! Run like you never ran before!"

The young man looked up to see his father standing on the back porch aiming a double-barrel shotgun in his direction. He put his head down and gathered strength to run even faster.

The man on the porch tilted the barrel of the gun into the air and pulled one of the triggers. An explosion ripped through the evening sky sending birds and animals fleeing in every direction. The charging bear stiffened his front legs, digging his front claws into the soft earth. He nearly tumbled forward as he skidded to a stop. Travis finished his flight with a ten-foot leap to the safety of the porch.

"Get behind me!" he shouted to his son.

The bear had completely stopped. It gasped for air as it stood motionless just twenty feet from the house glaring into the man's eyes.

John lowered the gun until the barrel was pointing at the beast in front of him. He pulled back the hammer on the loaded barrel and clicked it in place. The bear did not move. John took aim. Then, as if the animal understood the seriousness of the situation, it slowly but deliberately turned around and lumbered away.

When the animal finally disappeared from sight, John turned to his son. He leaned the shotgun against the house and placed a hand on the young man's shoulder. He bent over to look him in the eyes. "Son, do you know what you did wrong here?" he asked.

"Yeah, don't ever shoot a bear with a BB gun," he replied.

John paused as he stared at his son in disbelief. "You shot at a bear with a BB gun?"

"You mean you didn't know?"

John paused as he stared at his son. He slowly dropped his arms to his sides. "Why in the world would you shoot a 400 pound bear with a BB gun?" he asked.

Travis glanced in the direction of the trashcan. "I thought I might scare him away," he replied.

John leaned back and placed his hands on his hips. He was a big man nearly six and a half feet tall. A lifetime of hard work had left him with a lean, muscular body that was admired by many and feared by most. "You thought you might scare him away, did you?" asked John. "Tell me something, son. Did you learn anything today?"

"You're darn right I did, Pop," said Travis still gasping for air.

"And what is that?"

"Keep my mouth shut so I don't get in any more trouble."

"Do you know what you really did wrong, son?"

"I didn't bury the garbage like you told me."

"Guess what," said John with a smile. "With that correct answer, you won a free dinner. Now, go wash up."

The young man opened the screen door and let it slam behind him. "What's for dinner?" he shouted as he raced across the kitchen

floor. He began to wash his hands as his mother carried bowls of food to the table.

“We’re having chicken and mashed potatoes with gravy,” she announced with pride.

“Chicken!” he shouted. “That sounds great, but don’t we usually have chicken on Sundays? What’s the occasion?”

“No special reason,” she replied as she set a pitcher of water on the table. “Just seemed like we needed a change. You know what I mean, Travis? Sometimes, it seems like a body can get into a rut, and you need to do things different.”

Travis looked into his mother’s face. The smile was gone. Something was bothering her. He could tell. She had a forever smile that announced to the world that everything was all right, but today was different.

Kara was an attractive woman. She was just into her thirties but still maintained a youthful appearance. She had a robust and shapely figure that still turned heads and a certain twinkle in her deep blue eyes that had seduced more than one man in her life.

Today, she wore a faded and frayed dress that had been new longer ago than she could remember. It had buttons down the front that strained from the age of the garment opening gaps that revealed her soft skin.

“I smell chicken!” shouted John as he headed for the sink to wash his hands. “What’s going on? Did I miss something? Is it Sunday already?”

“Mom’s in a rut,” Travis announced as he poured himself a glass of water. “She needs a change.”

“So, momma needs a change, does she?” he asked as he dried his hands on a towel. “Well, I got news for you. We’re in for a big change and real soon.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked as she turned in his direction. “What kind of change?”

John’s eyes fell to her bosom. He studied the front of her dress. “You don’t have a bra on!” he exclaimed in a whisper. “What’s the matter with you? I can see your...your bosoms.”

“My only bra broke this morning when I put it on,” she whispered. “Besides, it feels kind of good to do without.”

“Have you gone crazy?” he asked in a louder voice. “You can’t go running around here like that. It ain’t normal.”

“Ain’t nobody going to see me,” she replied. “No one ever comes to this house. Don’t ever answer the door when they do for fear it might be a bill collector. Besides, it could be worse. I hear that Marge Cooper does her housework in the nude. Not a stitch on. Somebody said that it don’t matter if someone comes to the door. She still doesn’t cover up.”

“Good God, woman!” he shouted. “Marge Cooper is as crazy as a loon! They say she’s seeing some head doctor over in Bear Creek every Thursday. Something must be wrong with her if she’d marry that travelling salesman like she did. I don’t think she’s but nineteen, and that guy is old enough to be her father.” John dried his hands on a dishcloth and returned it to the handle on the stove.

“By the way, what was all the shooting about?” asked Kara taking her seat at the table.

John turned to the young man sitting at the table. Travis had a look of shock as he turned to his father. “Oh, nothing special,” he

replied with a wink to his son. “Just scaring away the crows.” John took his seat, and they all began to eat.

Minutes later, John finished his meal and gently pushed his empty plate aside. He carefully folded his hands and placed them on the table. “I have an announcement to make,” he said with a smile. “I’ve lost my job again.”

“You did what?” asked Kara.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said John. “But it wasn’t my fault this time.”

“It’s never your fault,” said Kara getting up from the table. She walked across the kitchen and stood in front of the sink looking out the window. “It’s always somebody or something else, isn’t it, John? What happened this time? Did your boss say something, or did you just get tired of working there?”

John got up from his chair and walked across the floor. “Don’t be like this, Kara,” he said easing a hand on her shoulder. “We’re going to be alright. You’ll see.”

“That’s what you always say, John,” she said bowing her head and leaning on the sink. “But it never does. It never gets any better.”

“Don’t be like this, Kara,” he said. “We’re doing alright, aren’t we?”

“Doing alright!” she said loudly. She turned to John. “You can’t be serious! We don’t own a thing. We rent this house and everything in it. We don’t even own our own sofa. So, don’t tell me we’re doing alright.”

The room became silent. John pulled back and leaned against the sink. He glanced over at Travis who was holding his head in his

hands. He turned back to the woman beside him. "I just wanted you to know that I have a plan," he announced.

"What is it this time?" she asked. "What kind of plan do you have in mind this time?"

"Tomorrow, we pack up the old Ford, and we're going back to Bear Creek."

Kara stood straight and turned to her husband. She stared at him with a puzzled look. "Bear Creek," she said. "You said we'd never go back there."

"I know that's what I said, but I think we need a new start, and I figure what better place to do it than in your own hometown."

Kara turned and leaned against the sink. She stared blankly at the wall. A smile soon appeared on her face. "Okay," she said still staring at the wall. "Let's do it."

CHAPTER 2

The morning sun was already high in the sky when the last piece of luggage was strapped to the top of the car. John walked around the old Ford one last time to check each knot for tightness.

“All right, everybody,” he said as he opened the driver’s side door. “Let’s go.” Kara stood for several moments and stared at the house. She was lost in a river of forgotten memories and dreams. She climbed into the car and turned to watch as they pulled slowly away from the curb. She would never see that house again, and she knew it.

It was only thirty miles to Bear Creek and was normally a quick trip. The only road to Bear Creek seldom had any traffic, but today it took John nearly an hour. He drove very slowly to avoid losing any of their belongings. As they entered the city limits, John slowed the vehicle even more. People stared as they drove down the neighborhood street. A small dog began to chase the car barking loudly as if to alert the others of the approaching sight.

“Things have changed,” Kara muttered as she glanced at the houses on both sides of the street.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said John. “There’s old man Henshaw sitting on his front porch just like he did fifteen years ago. He’s just a little fatter. That’s all.”

The old car came to a stop at a traffic light near the downtown area. Many of the people who were crossing at the intersection stopped and stared at the heavily laden car.

Bear Creek was a small town with just over a thousand residents. The business area consisted of two hardware stores, two grocery stores, one gas station, and several other small businesses. Nothing much had changed in the past fifteen years. Because of the economy, very few improvements had been made to the businesses or the homes. It was as if time had stood still.

“Why is everyone staring at us, John?” asked Kara.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Maybe, they’re trying to figure out who we are. Don’t forget. People in this town never did take to strangers.”

“I don’t like it, John,” she said as she covered her face with her hand. “Get me out of here.”

John looked up to see the light turn green and eased out the clutch. “Everything will be alright,” he said as he turned the corner that led to downtown.

“John, you never did tell me where we’re going,” she said turning in his direction. “You said you called Harry Miller. What could he possibly do for us?”

“Harry retired a few years back and closed his service station. He said it would be alright for us to park in back,” said John.

“In back of what?”

“In back of his service station.”

“Why? Why would we want to park back there?”

“For privacy. At least back there, most people won’t see us much.”

Kara grew silent. She turned and stared at her husband. A look of anger swept over her face. “Don’t tell me, John,” she said in a stern voice. “You don’t expect us to live in a car, do you?”

“It’s only for awhile. It’s just until I can find a job and a place to live. It’ll be all right. I promise.”

“You can’t be serious, John,” she shouted. “People don’t live in cars. We’ll be the laughing stock of town.”

“It will only be for a short time.”

“What’s a short time, John? Are you talking about days, weeks, or months? Where are we supposed to clean up? We can’t live in a car without staying clean. It just isn’t sanitary.”

“Harry said he would leave the restrooms unlocked,” said John turning down a side street. “We can use them all we want as long as we keep them clean.”

“Keep them clean!” shouted Kara turning in his direction. “Can you imagine what they must look like?” She folded her arms and turned away. “John, I refuse to use them filthy toilets.”

“Kara, don’t be that way,” said John bringing the car to a stop. “We’ll clean the restrooms. You’ll see. Everything’s going to be just fine.” He turned and looked out the window. “Besides, we’re home.” The two other occupants turned to see their new home.

It was the back of Harry Miller’s gas station. When it was open for business, few people stopped because of the condition of the building and surrounding area. It was a concrete block building that had never been painted. Vines climbed wildly on all sides of the

building, as they seem to take possession of the now deserted building. Rusted car parts were scattered over the lot partially hidden by the weeds that were now out of control.

“See, I told you we’d have privacy,” said John pointing out the window. “We got a big fence on this side and a church on the other. Ain’t nobody going to see anything except maybe on Sundays, and those people aren’t interested in seeing us.”

For a moment, the young woman stared out the window. She then bowed her head and began to cry. “John, you promised better than this,” she sobbed. “You promised that we would live like other folks. You can’t do this, John. It just ain’t right.”

Silence followed. John stared at his wife and then turned to the young man in the back seat. “Travis, why don’t you go take a look around?”

“What’s there to see?” he asked.

John turned and pointed out the back window. “You see that road over there?” he asked. “Just follow that until it takes you out of town. About a mile from here, you’ll cross a river. Best darn swimming hole in the county.”

“Sounds great, Pop,” he said as he opened the car door. “I’ll be back after a while.” He closed the door behind him and started down the road. He knew there would soon be a fight between his parents, and he would rather be someplace else.

It was a hot and lazy summer day. The cool sidewalk felt good to the young man’s bare feet. He slowly walked past the grocery store, the small pharmacy, and the library. Three older men sat on a bench in front of the Sinclair gas station. They whispered and pointed as they studied the young man walking by.

The sidewalk stopped at the edge of town, and Travis soon found himself on a country road that led out of town. The tall pine trees stood like sentries at attention. The young man passed an open field that had been carved out of the thick growth of trees. Green corn stalks stood nearly knee-high. Their elongated leaves seemed to softly bounce on the soft summer breeze and wave at the young man as he walked by.

Travis stopped at the edge of the South Bridge. It was a slightly rusted steel structure that spanned the swiftly moving Clear Fork River. He walked down to the river's edge and watched as the muddy green water flowed by. It had been a rainy spring, and most of the rivers in the area were at their crest.

He began to walk downstream picking his way through bushes and undergrowth until he came to spot where the river had widened. The rapid flow of the water seemed to lessen as it spilled into this small pool. It was clear that the water was deep at this point. Currents of water flowed in all directions while swirling eddies created whirlpools that reached to the bottom of the river.

Travis leaned over and thrust his hand into the murky water. It was icy cold to the touch. He stood upright rubbing his two hands together. He looked one way and then the other. It was quiet. The only sound was the distant rushing of water. The young man paused as he listened. It sounded like a waterfall somewhere in the distance.

Travis stripped down to his underwear and carefully laid his clothes on a rock. He tipped-toed down to the edge of the water and slowly eased one foot into the murky slime. "Damn!" he shouted as he recoiled his foot from the cold water. The young man stared at the water for a moment. He glanced both ways and bent down in a

crouched position. “Here goes,” he muttered and jumped legs first into the river.

“Jesus, God!” he screamed as he body plunged into the cold water. He splashed the water violently with his hands as he jumped up and down. In a few moments, his body adjusted to the cold, and he became quiet, his feet resting on the muddy bottom.

Travis spun around as he surveyed the river. He couldn’t believe that his father described this as a great place to swim. It was dirty, and the current was so fast that he could hardly stand in one spot. It was so deep that in some places it nearly reached his armpits. It was primitive, but for some unknown reason, Travis considered it to be a place of beauty. Tall, maKaratic oak and elm trees crowded proudly together along the banks of the river. As if in a display of respect, they bowed their heads forming a vaulted arch ceiling that seemed to cover the river as far as could be seen. A small dead branch fell from its lofty home into the river below. Travis turned in the direction of the noise that echoed down the corridor formed by the banks of the river. The small branch seemed to come alive as it twisted and turned in the wild but steady current. “Oh, my God, it’s a snake!” he exclaimed as he studied the fast approaching object. He stared intently until he noticed several leaves that were stubbornly hanging onto a small twig growing from the back of the branch. The young man sighed and relaxed as he watched the floating piece of wood drift near the opposite bank and snag itself on a fallen tree that lay partly in the water.

By now, Travis had adjusted to the cold water and decided to take a swim. He leaned forward and began to paddle to the other shore. The current was strong, but the young man was able to maintain his

course. He soon reached the muddy bottom of the bank, turned, and pushed off. This time he decided to make it more challenging by swimming underwater. He took a deep breath and submerged under the cold murky water. He struggled against the strong current, paddling as hard as he could. After a few moments, he returned to the surface, gulping fresh air as he gained his footing on the river bottom.

From behind Travis came a voice that said, “Hey, kid.” He spun around in the water, and there standing at the river’s edge was a young boy about his own age. He was a handsome young man with dress pants and shirt. He was lean in stature, almost frail, and yet he had a wily look about him that was almost menacing.

“Who are you?” asked the intruder pulling a pocketknife from his pocket.

“I’m Travis Watson,” the young man replied. “Who are you?”

“You’re a part of that bunch that is living in a car, aren’t you?” he asked unfolding the blade of the knife.

“How the hell do you know that already?” asked Travis. “We just got into town.”

“The old man who owns that gas station is Harry Miller. I heard him telling my dad about you people.”

“You still haven’t answered my question. Who the hell are you?”

“My name is Melvin Steelman. Now, you answer mine. You live in a car, don’t you?”

Travis scanned the riverbank as if searching for an answer. “It’s just temporary,” he muttered.

"Your old man is out of work, and you don't have a pot to piss in," blurted Melvin as he began to clean under his fingernails with the small knife.

Travis grew silent. He glared at the young man standing by the river's edge. "Is there a point to all this, or are you just a natural-born asshole?" he asked.

"Who are you calling an asshole?"

"You. Who else?"

"You live in a car, and you call me an asshole."

"Let me guess. You're some rich faggot living in some big mansion. Am I right?"

Melvin leaned back. "My daddy has lots of money, if that's what you mean," he said returning the knife to his pocket.

"That's no surprise."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you're a snob. That's why. All rich people are snobs, and you're a snob."

"What would you know about snobs or rich people for that matter?" asked Melvin picking up a stone and throwing it in the river.

"My Pop told me," said Travis as he slapped the surface of the water sending a spray of water in Melvin's direction.

"Your Pop? Is that what you call your father? Pop? Somehow that figures. People who live in cars, I'm sure, talk like that. Besides, what would your old man know about rich people? I'll bet your mother could make more money on her back than your old man ever did."

"Why you son of a ..." said Travis as he started wading to shore. "You wait right there until I get out of the water."

Melvin leaned over and grabbed Travis' shirt and pants. He leaned back and hurled them into the river. Travis watched as the clothing sailed through the air and landed in the center of the river. The swift current immediately grabbed the clothes and dragged them away.

Travis turned to the young man standing at the river's edge. "You'll pay for this, you son-of-a-bitch," he said shaking his fist.

"You have to catch me first, asshole," said Melvin as he turned and began to run away.

"You're going to get the whipping of your life. I promise you. I'm sure your sissy ass never had an ass kicking from a junkyard dog like me.

Travis retrieved his clothes and got out of the water. He put on his soaking wet shirt and pants and started for home.

It was late afternoon when the young man returned to the family automobile. "What's there to eat?" he asked opening the rear car door.

"I fixed you a sandwich," his mother replied. "Get in and close the door."

"Great! I'm starved!" he announced as he grabbed the food.

"My God, son. What happened to you? Did you fall into the river?"

"I had a little problem. That's all," he said taking a bite from his sandwich. "Nothing to be concerned about." Travis looked into his mother's eyes. Something was wrong. She had been crying. Her eyes were red and she had been blowing her nose. "Where's Dad?"

"He went for a walk," she said without looking up. "We had a big fight, and he needed to get away for awhile."

"I wish you and Pop wouldn't fight," said Travis taking a drink of water. "Everything is going to be just fine, Ma. I just know it."

"I wish I could believe you, son. I really do," she said turning around in her seat. "It just seems that we are always taking one step forward and three back."

"We'll be ok, Ma. You'll see."

One of John's shirts was draped over the car seat. Kara took one of the sleeves and wiped her eyes. "I'm not asking for much," she said softly as if she were thinking aloud. "I just want a place to call my own. Some place where I can unpack all the boxes. Do you know what I mean, Travis? I want to buy furniture. My God, it ain't right to be my age and never owned any furniture."

"We'll get some furniture, Ma. You'll see. Things are going to be different here. I can feel it."

"You know what my real dream is, don't you, Travis?" she asked with a smile. "My real dream is to have a room all to myself. Can you imagine? A room for my very own and I don't mean a bedroom. I mean a room where I can go when I need to get away. A sitting room, I think they call it. The best part is that it would be all mine. Neither you nor your father would be allowed in there. Of course if you knocked and asked politely, I would allow you to visit me in my room, but you could never go there by yourself." Kara stared out the window of the car. Travis took another bite from his sandwich. It became quiet in the car.

"Oh, my," she muttered turning away from the window. "How I go on. How do you put up with me?"

"Everything is going to be okay, Ma. You'll see. You're just a little upset with Pop. That's all."

"I don't know what's wrong with me," she said as she straightened the bags of food and clothes in the front seat. "It's not just your dad and me. I'm not sure what it is." She turned and gave Travis a quick glance. "Besides, I shouldn't be talking to you about this."

"Why not, Mother?"

"It ain't right. That's all. It just ain't right."

"Do you still love Pop?"

"What?"

"Do you still love Pop?"

"Sure I do," she replied turning away. "I've always loved your dad. We might have had our differences, but we never stopped loving each other. I just seem to be a little restless lately. I suppose I'll get over it. I always do." She glanced out the window. "Now, off with you. Your father is coming back, and I need to talk to him."

Travis climbed out of the car and started running down the street. "Bye!" he screamed as he turned down a side street.

"Was that our son?" asked John as he opened the door and slid across the seat.

"Yes. He has something to do," she replied. "Where have you been?"

"I went for a walk," he said turning in his seat to face Kara. "I think I have good news. I think I have a job."

"Where?" she asked looking up.

"Do you remember Howard Bailey who owns the hardware store? He told me to stop down tomorrow morning. He said he might be able to use me."

"That's wonderful, John."

"I'm telling you, Kara, things are going to get better for us. Just you wait and see."

"I hope so," she said. "I really do." She glanced down at her lap and fumbled with the material on her dress. "You know, John, I've been thinking. Ever since daddy died, mother hasn't been doing so well. I was thinking that maybe I should take Travis and go and live with her for a while. You know. Just long enough until mother is feeling better." She paused and looked up at her husband. "What do you think?"

John turned with a frown. "You want to move away from here?" he asked.

"Just for a short time."

"No way in the world!" he shouted. "We are a family, and families stick together."

"It will just be for a couple weeks."

"No!" shouted John. "You're staying here with me! I won't hear of it!"

Kara glanced down at her tired hands. She sighed and turned to the window. A lone tear streaked down her cheek. "I know I should be a better wife," she said wiping her face. "I know I should be more supportive and understanding. It's just that everything seems to go bad for us any more. We don't ever seem to get a break."

John took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair. "Come on, Kara," he said placing a hand on her knee. "Things aren't that bad. We'll be alright."

"Things aren't that bad?" questioned Kara pushing his hand away. "John, look at us. You don't have a job, and we live in a car. That's not normal, John. Look around you. Do you see anyone else living in

a car? People don't live like this." She turned her head and began to cry.

"Things will get better, Kara," said John. "I promise."

"I don't even own a chair to sit in," she muttered without turning around.

Silence followed. John turned to stare out the window. Kara dried her eyes and turned to John. "What are we going to do about you and me?" she asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"Do you mean sex?"

"You know I can't go long without it."

"For God's sakes, Kara," he said turning in her direction. "We don't have enough problems that you have to invent one more?"

"Well, what are we going to do, John? We can't do anything with Travis there in the back seat."

John gave his wife a quick glance. "I don't know, Karas," he said turning away. "We'll figure something out."

The young woman slid across the seat. "What's wrong with right now?" she asked placing her hand on his.

John paused as he stared at his wife. He turned the door handle and opened the car door. "Christ, woman," he said stepping out of the car. "You need professional help. I have something to do. I'll be back later," he said and walked away.

CHAPTER 3

The next morning brought a bright orange sun climbing proudly into a blue sky. The air was crisp following the torrents of rain from the night before. Sunlight poured through the streaked window sending ghost-like shadows on the floor. A cool breeze sent the soft curtains swaying hypnotically in and out.

A young man reached down to the side of the bed and raked a match across the sideboard. It roared to life as he held it under the tip of a cigarette.

“Jesus, Harlan, I wish you wouldn’t do that,” said the woman lying next to him. She pulled the bed sheet over her breasts as she leaned over for a cigarette.

Harlan threw the spent match at a wastebasket across the room. He leaned forward as he began to cough violently. Mucous gurgled, and he expelled it onto the floor.

“My God!” shouted the woman sitting up in bed. “Did you just spit on my floor?”

Harlan glanced around the room. It was ornately furnished in Victorian décor. “You didn’t expect me to swallow that mess, did you?” he asked turning in her direction.

The woman settled back into bed. “You know if you’re going to spit on my floor and do what you did to me last night, I’m not going to invite you over here anymore,” she said with a smile.

Harlan inhaled his cigarette and smiled. “Mavis, I counted twelve orgasms last night,” he said expelling the smoke over his head. “God knows how many you really got.”

Mavis smiled. “I lost count somewhere along the way.”

“Honey, there ain’t no way you’re going to give that up,” he said as he turned and sat on the edge of the bed. Harlan was a young man just 28 years of age with a rugged face and a lean body. His upper lip had a slight upturn giving him a sneer that started more than a few bar fights.

“I got to get going,” he said running his fingers through his hair. “I have business in town to take care of.”

“Oh yeah,” said Mavis drawing on her cigarette. “Just use me and run off. Just like a man.”

Harlan pulled a dirty white sock over his size twelve foot. “Who used who?” he asked. “Christ, I didn’t get no forty orgasms last night.”

“I feel so cheap,” she said rolling over on one side. “You could at least talk to me for a while.”

Harlan pulled on his denim jeans and stood to zip them. “Have you heard about the new super sensitive condom?” he asked buttoning his shirt. Mavis said nothing. “It hangs around after the man leaves and talks to the woman,” he said sticking his shirttail in his pants.

He turned to the woman still lying in bed. She smiled and then snorted in an effort to hold back laughter.

“You’re an asshole!” she shouted and threw a slipper in his direction.

“Yes, but you love me,” he said with a smile.

Mavis sighed. “Yes, you’re right there,” she muttered. “I truly do that. When will I see you again? Probably not ‘till you get horny again.”

“How long is the old man going to be out of town?”

“He’ll be back on Friday.”

Harlan paused. “I should be back before he gets home. Where is the Counselor this week? Is he in some legal battle defending all the good people of the earth?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” she snapped.

“Nice talk,” said Harlan starting for the door. “God knows where you’d be if it weren’t for the Counselor.”

Mavis jumped out of bed, the sheet falling to the floor. She was a mature woman having just turned thirty but had a youthful strut that still turned heads. She marched across the room and stood in front of the window. “You didn’t park in the driveway again, did you?” she asked pulling back the curtain.

“Mavis, if you don’t cover up, you’re going to start a riot.”

“Damn you, Harlan!” she shouted. “You parked in my driveway again! What are the neighbors going to think when they see your corvette out there all night?”

Harlan turned the handle on the door. “Tell them I’m fixing your plumbing,” he said and closed the door behind him.



On the other side of town, the late morning sun found the rain-soaked station wagon parked in the shadows of the abandoned

service station. John awoke his body aching from a night of sleeping upright in the driver's seat. He shifted his weight and stretched his legs by leaning back in the seat.

The woman next to him yawned and squinted out the window. "John," she said softly. "There are kids out there staring at us."

John turned to see three young boys standing near the car. He opened the car door and got out. "You boys go find something to do," he said over the top of the car. They did not move. "Go on, now. Get out of here." The tallest glanced at the others but still did not move. "Get the hell out of here!" John shouted. The boys scattered in three directions.

"Jesus, John," said Kara. "Can we at least get curtains for the windows? I feel like I'm in a fishbowl."

"I can do better than that," he said sitting back down. "I'm going to get that job at Bailey's Hardware, and we're going to find us a house. How's that sound to you?"

"It sounds like you're dreaming again."

"Not this time, Karas... not this time. We're going to make it this time."

"I hope you're right, John."

"Right now, I'm going to go see about that job," he said getting back out of the car. "Are you going to be alright?"

"I'll be fine."

"Wish me luck," he said and disappeared around the corner.

Bailey's Hardware had been in the same family since the 1920's. It was an unimpressive building with wood floors and tired, broken displays smelling of old rubber and cigar smoke. Howard Bailey was the last in a line of Baileys who had owned and operated the business.

Approaching retirement, Howard was actively looking for someone to operate the store for him.

John opened the front door and closed it behind him. He scanned the sales floor. At the cash register sat an older woman sipping coffee. "Where's Mr. Bailey?" asked John.

She peered over the top of her coffee cup at the man standing near the tools. "He's next door at Moonies," she said. "Who's asking?"

"John Watson," he replied. "Howard asked me to see him about a job."

The old woman sipped her coffee. "John, I think you should know that he's over there talking to Harlan."

"Harlan Steelman?"

"The one and only."

John glanced down at the floor. "That's just great," he muttered and turned to the door. "What are they doing in a bar this time of day?"

"Harlan owns it," she replied without looking up. "Like everything else in town." She set her coffee cup on the counter. "John, you be careful over there. It was a lot of years ago, but you can bet Harlan ain't forgotten."

John turned and studied the old woman. He wasn't quite sure who she was, but it was obvious that she knew him. He opened the door and closed it behind him.

Originally opened as a restaurant, Moonies failed within the first year. It reopened two years later as a quiet neighborhood bar and did well for over a decade until Harlan Steelman became the owner.

John slowly pulled open the front door. It was dark inside. He cautiously stepped inside and closed the door. There were two men sitting at the bar with empty bottles in front of them. "We ain't open yet," announced one of the men.

Mr. Bailey?" asked John.

The two men turned in their seats. One man whispered to the other.

"Is that you, John?" asked Harlan.

"Harlan Steelman?"

"Come on over here, John," said Harlan gulping his beer.

John slowly walked across the floor until he was standing near the men. Silence followed as he studied the two men.

"Want a beer?" asked Harlan draining the last contents of a bottle and opening another.

"No thanks."

"It's on the house."

John turned to Howard Bailey. "You said something about a job."

"Oh yes," said Howard. "That's right."

"I'm here to apply."

"Gee I'm sorry, John," said Howard. "I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to hire you after all, but I'll keep you in mind."

"But you said you needed to hire someone."

"Sorry, John."

John became silent. He turned to Harlan. "You can't let it go, can you Harlan? It's been over and done with for years, and you just can't let it go."

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Harlan.

“You convinced Mr. Bailey here not to hire me, didn’t you? What did you do, Harlan, threaten him?”

“Watch what you say, John,” said Harlan. “I was just sitting here having a drink with an old friend. Hell, I didn’t even know you were in town.”

“Bull shit, Harlan! You’re the first to know about anything that happens in this town,” said John turning towards the door. “You’re still the horse’s ass, aren’t you Harlan. You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Hey, I’d be happy to finish what we started way back when,” said Harlan with a slur.

“You keep me from getting a job one more time, and we will go a round or two,” he said opening the door.

“Anytime!” shouted Harlan. “Anytime!”

It was early in the afternoon when the young man slid down a small hill to the edge of the river. The water was rushing violently from last night’s rain. He stared at the currents of grayish murky water swirling by. There would be no swimming today. Carrying a pair of pants and a shirt, Travis followed the riverbank until he came to a small clearing. He stepped down to the water’s edge and thrust an arm into the dirty water. It took all his strength to fight the current. He pulled his arm out and stepped away. He then spread the clothes he was carrying on the same rock he had used the day before. He stepped back and stared at the scene. Everything was ready. He scanned the area and walked around a large oak tree.

Travis sat down and leaned against the tree. He closed his eyes and lifted his head, his face bathed in the warm afternoon sunlight. It had been a long, hard winter, and the warm sun felt good on his

ashen skin. He smiled as he thought about what he had done. Moments later, his head nodded as he drifted off to sleep.

It was nearly an hour later when Travis was awakened by the sound of laughter. He scrambled to his feet and peeked around the tree. There rushing down the swirling river was a tangled ball of clothing and a young man standing at the rivers edge laughing hysterically.

Travis charged at the man. Melvin looked up. His smiling face turned to shock as he started up the steep bank. As he reached the top, Travis hit him with a flying tackle. The two boys rolled down the hill and into a small clearing. Travis was getting to his feet when Melvin caught him with a right hook that sent him sprawling on his back. He touched his cheek and found it covered with blood. Anger washed over him. He glared at the young man standing over him. "You're going to pay for that," he warned and got to his feet.

The two boys circled one another their fists raised in a fighting posture. Suddenly, Melvin reached out and pushed Travis sending him back-stepping. Melvin turned and ran with Travis close behind.

Travis leaped forward and caught Melvin by the ankles. The two boys fell and began rolling on the ground. They reached the top of the bank and fell over the edge gathering speed as they rolled towards the water. The rain-swollen river was nearly twelve inches higher than normal, and the two boys plunged into the raging river disappearing under the surface. The swirling currents grabbed the boys and pulled them to the center of the river. They both surfaced gasping for air.

"I can't swim!" shouted Melvin. He was less than ten feet away. Travis began to swim towards the boy. He thrashed his arms against the violent currents until he was within an arm's length of Melvin.

Travis extended his hand. “Grab hold!” he shouted. Melvin stretched his hand until his fingers were nearly touching those of Travis, but the angry river would not allow it. The boys were pulled under their bodies spinning and tumbling out of control racing down the river for what seemed like an eternity.

Suddenly, a sharp current spun Travis around. He felt himself bump into something. It had to be Melvin. By now, his lungs were on fire. He reached out and grabbed him by the arm. With a firm grip on the boy’s arm, Travis kicked his way to the surface.

Then, miraculously, they broke the surface only six feet from the river’s edge. Their lungs exploded as they gasped for air. The currents were less violent in this part of the river, but they were being swept down river at a rapid pace.

Travis pricked his ears. He heard something in the distance. “Are you alright?” he shouted.

“I’m fine,” said Melvin.

“What’s that noise?”

Melvin paused. “Oh my God!” he shouted. “That’s a waterfall! We’re heading for a waterfall! We’ve got to get out of here!”

For a moment, Travis stared down the river as if he could see the impending danger. He gripped Melvin’s arm even tighter and started kicking towards the riverbank. He fought against the currents until he was within inches of reaching the soft dirt. He dropped his feet down and found the muddy river bottom. He tried digging his toes in the mud but with no success. He reached for a tree root that protruded from the riverbank, but it snapped from the weight.

Another strong current sweeping down the river at an even faster pace caught them. They brushed against the riverbank hitting rocks

and branches. They started to spin with the current both of them reaching for anything to slow their movement.

The falls was getting close. Travis could hear the roar of water cascading over the edge. He reached for a branch, but it was unattached and simply followed them down the river. Travis released it and turned to look ahead.

There it was. The falls was straight ahead. He had seconds to do something. He was near exhaustion but summoned enough energy to make one last try. He gripped Melvin's arm until his nails pierced the skin. He kicked towards the riverbank hoping to snare a large rock that was only a few feet from the falls.

"Grab my neck!" he shouted at Melvin as he released his grip on Melvin's arm. He now had the use of both hands. The swirling motion of the river stopped now as the depth of the water became much shallower, but the speed of the current was now faster than ever.

Travis wiped the water from his eyes. He held both arms out of the water with his hands ready to grab the rock. His temple throbbed as his heart pounded in his chest. There was no room for failure this time. It had to be perfect. He had no idea how much of a drop there was over the edge and if there was a deep pool of water waiting at the bottom or piles of huge rocks as was often the case.

The rock was only a few feet away. They were moving even faster now. Travis tensed his body. He dug his heels into the soft mud. He reached and encircled the rock like a lasso. Their bodies sped past the rock and then jolted to a stop.

Travis hung on as tightly as he could. The rock was slippery, but he held tight. Their bodies were now waving in the current like a

giant flag. Melvin was now holding onto his waist. He struggled against the current to plant his feet on the river bottom.

Travis strained to hold on. His muscles ached, but he fought to hold his grip. Melvin found the river bottom. He tried to dig his toes into the soft mud but slipped and soon found himself being sucked downstream again.

This sudden movement caused a jolt for Travis who by now was slowly losing his grip. Travis let go of the rock. He scratched at it until his fingers bled. They drifted slowly from the rock gathering speed as they headed for the falls. They were inches from the riverbank and the water was shallow, but they were completely exhausted. They swirled, lifelessly, towards the falls the water roaring in celebration of its victory.

As they reached the crest of the falls, two massive dark hands reached down and grabbed the two boys by the shirts. They were dragged out of the water, up the riverbank, and dropped on the ground.

Travis lay on his back desperately gasping for air. He opened his eyes and stared up at the monster towering over him. He was nearly seven feet tall with massive arms and chest. His dirty black hair fell down his back, his beard hiding all but two glaring red eyes.

“Who are you?” asked Travis sitting up. The man said nothing. Travis turned to Melvin who was staring at the man with his mouth open. “Well, I don’t know who you are, but you sure saved our asses.”

The big man stared at Travis and then turned to Melvin. Saliva dripped from his open mouth. His clothes were made from animal

skins and he wore no shoes. He stepped over the two boys and walked away.

“Hey, mister,” shouted Travis. “What’s your name?”

“Never mind,” said Melvin touching his arm.

“Why?” asked Travis.

“He won’t say anything.”

“Why not?”

“He’s known as Lone Wolf, and they say he can’t speak. At least, nobody has ever heard him speak.”

“Where does he live?”

“Somewhere out there,” said Melvin pointing at the woods.

“What do you mean somewhere out there?”

“I mean he lives out there in the forest. No one knows where, but according to legend, he lives with the wolves. Nobody really knows his real name.”

Travis stared at the man as he disappeared into the woods. “Do you believe that shit?”

“What shit?” asked Melvin.

“Do you believe he lives with the wolves?”

“Why not?” Melvin asked. “He looks like an animal himself.”

Travis got to his feet. He stared down at Melvin. “Are you alright?” he asked holding out a hand.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” he said taking his hand. “Except, maybe, where you dug your nails in my arm. Ever thought about trimming those things back?”

Travis stared into the woods. “Have you ever seen that Lone Wolf before?”

“He’s been to town a couple times,” said Melvin brushing dirt from his clothes.

“What does he live in?”

“They say he lives in a tarpaper shack somewhere out there.”

“Come on,” said Travis starting for the woods. “Let’s go find out where he lives.”

Melvin paused. He turned to the woods and then back to Travis. “I don’t think so,” he said brushing himself again.

“Why not?”

Lone Wolf doesn’t like people, and he sure doesn’t like people who snoop around where he lives.”

“You know he doesn’t hate us,” said Travis. “If he did, he sure wouldn’t have saved our butts. Now, come on.”

“There’s something else you don’t know about Lone Wolf,” said Melvin with a soft voice.

“And what’s that?” asked Travis.

Melvin paused. He scanned the area and then turned back to Travis. “They say that he not only lives with the wolves, he actually turns into one.”

“What?”

“I’m just telling you what they say.”

“You mean like a Werewolf? He turns into a Werewolf?”

“No, nothing like that,” said Melvin. “He turns into a wolf. You know, the four-legged kind.”

“Did anybody ever see him do it?”

“No white people ever did,” said Melvin. “Other Indians say they’ve seen him do it.”

“Other Indians. You mean Lone Wolf is a real live Indian?”

“What the hell did you think he was?”

“I don’t know. I ain’t never seen a real Indian before.”

“Jesus, where have you been? There’s a whole tribe of ‘em over by Steam Corners.”

“Come on,” said Travis starting towards the woods. “Let’s go see for ourselves.”

“Okay, but I don’t like it,” said Melvin following behind.

“Besides, I owe you one,” said Travis.

“You owe me what?”

“I owe you for that lucky punch you gave me,” he said rubbing his cheek.

“That wasn’t lucky.”

“What do you call it?”

“I call it a great punch.”

“You can call it whatever you want, but I owe you one,” said Travis heading deep into the woods.

The two boys picked their way through the thick underbrush pushing deeper into the forest. Oak and maple trees reached proudly and maKaratically into the sky their leaves forming a canopy that let only the smallest amount of light to reach the ground below.

“I don’t like this,” said Melvin leaning against a tree.

Travis studied the area. “Why do you say that?” he asked.

“It’s so dark and quiet around here,” said Melvin. “Hell, you can’t even hear any birds I have never been anyplace where there are no birds. Something isn’t right around here. I can feel it.”

Travis paused. “You’re right about one thing. There are no birds around. Wonder why?”

"I don't know, but I get the feeling they're smarter than we are," said Melvin. "Now, let's get the hell out of here."

Travis slowly scanned the area. "There it is," he said pointing in the distance.

"There what is?" asked Melvin peering into the woods.

"The tarpaper shack that Lone Wolf lives in," said Travis. "Let's go."

"Oh Christ," said Melvin. "I don't think this is such a good idea."

Travis turned and stared at Melvin. "How could someone pack a punch like you do and be scared of a shack in the woods?"

"It's not the shack I'm worried about," he replied falling into step.

The trees in that part of the forest were nearly side-by-side their foliage creating an umbrella that seemed to hide that part of the world. The scant light that filtered through the leaves cast a greenish hue on the ground below. There was no wind. The leaves hung motionlessly as if petrified. In spite of the near absence of light and deep layers of fallen leaves, thick vine-like undergrowth spread across the forest floor like so many entangled serpents.

Travis and Melvin stopped a few feet from the crudely constructed building. The walls and roof were covered with tarpaper and the only opening was a doorway without a door.

"I don't like this," said Melvin. "There's something evil about this place."

"Come on," said Travis. "Let's see if your Mr. Lone Wolf is home."

"Travis," said Melvin grabbing him by the arm. "Somebody is watching us!"

Travis jumped. "Will you stop it? You nearly scared me to death."

"I'm telling you someone is watching us," said Melvin. "The hairs on the back of my neck are standing straight up."

Travis paused. He glanced at the structure and then back at Melvin. "You wait here," he said starting for the open doorway. "I'm going to check the place out."

"Not a problem," said Melvin. "I'm as close to that place as I want to get."

Travis walked slowly to the doorway and cautiously stepped inside. It was a small building not much larger than a bedroom. It was dark inside, but Travis could see that at one end a bed had been fashioned from straw and at the other end was a bench about waist high that ran the length of the wall. There was no food or cooking utensils, yet there was a stench of rotting flesh that filled the air.

"What do you see?" shouted Melvin.

"Nothing," Travis replied.

"Well then, let's go," Melvin suggested.

Travis walked to the back of the shack. He bent down in the dark. Lying in one corner was a heap of tattered and dirty clothing. He picked through the foul-smelling clothes and dropped them on the bed of straw. Hidden under the pile of clothes was a tree branch about the size of a baseball bat. Travis carefully picked it up and carried it to the light of the doorway. He rolled it over in his hands. It was covered with deep punctures.

"What did you find in there?" asked Melvin.

"I don't know," said Travis. "It looks like some animal has been chewing on this wood."

"That means just one thing to me," said Melvin.

"What's that?"

“It’s time to go.”

Travis reared his head. “I hear something,” he whispered.

“Oh Christ!”

“Something’s moving in the leaves.”

Melvin searched the area. “Wolf!” he cried. “I see a wolf!”

“Where?”

“Over there,” said Melvin pointing in the distance.

Travis became perfectly still. He searched the area. “Are you sure it was a wolf?” he asked with a hushed voice.

“It was gray with a long tail and red eyes! Is that good enough?”

Travis glanced up at the fading sunlight. It’s getting late, not much daylight left,” he said. “Let’s get out of here!”

CHAPTER 4

A lone woman walked down Main Street carrying a bag of groceries. She turned down an unpaved alley that passed next to Harry Miller's Gas Station. She turned the corner that led to the back of the abandoned building and stopped in front of a parked station wagon. She set the bag on the hood and turned to lean against the car. It had been a long walk and she needed a moment to catch her breath. Kara glanced up at the blue sky as she wiped her forehead. The afternoon sun was hot. She unfastened the top buttons of her blouse and turned to face the sun. Her soft white skin tingled in the bright sunshine. She kicked off one of her shoes and bent down to remove a stone.

Kara heard a car turn down the alley its exhaust sounding like distant thunder. A black corvette came to an abrupt stop just in front of her the dust rising and softly settling on the lacquer finish.

A tall young man stepped from the car and walked around to the other side. "How are you, Kara?" he asked leaning against the car.

"I wondered when you'd be coming around here," she said.

"The years have been kind to you, girl," he said with a smile. "I swear you look better now than you did back then."

Kara smiled. She slowly bent over to slip on her shoe her breasts swaying inside her open blouse. Harlan felt the blood pounding through his veins as he stared. He smiled as he watched her slowly stand up.

“Sorry,” she said fastening the buttons.

“My, my, my,” he said. “That’s one lucky guy.”

“Who’s a lucky guy?”

“John,” Harlan replied. “Who else?”

Kara glanced at the station wagon, her smile disappeared. “You call this lucky?” Silence followed. “You hadn’t ought to be here,” she said. “John should be here any time.”

“Ever been for a ride in a corvette?”

Kara smiled. “Can’t say as I have,” she replied.

“Come on. Let’s go for a quick spin.”

Kara paused. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“John should be home, and I ain’t fixed him his dinner.”

“We’ll only be gone for a minute. You’ll be back long before John gets here.”

Kara began to slide her wedding ring up and down on her finger.

“Sure is a pretty car,” she said.

Harlan stared at her as she played with her ring. “Wait ‘til you see how fast she can go,” he said as if aroused from a trance.

Kara paused. “No, I can’t,” she said. “Maybe, some other day.”

“Suit yourself,” said Harlan walking around to the driver’s side. “By the way, if you need a job, just let me know.”

“Well, as a matter of fact, we, or rather, John needs one,” she said.

"I'm not talking about John," said Harlan opening the door of his car. "I'm talking about a job for you. My dad needs someone to cook for him."

"Does he still live on the ranch?"

"Still there," said Harlan getting into his car. "What do you say?"

"I don't know," she said reaching for her groceries. "I'll have to talk it over with John."

Harlan started the engine. He revved it several times and let it idle. "Sure was nice seeing you again, Kara," he said looking out the window. "You think about that job."

"I will," she replied picking up the groceries.

Harlan stared at her for several moments and then slowly eased the car away.

It was nearly six o'clock when John slipped into the driver's seat of the car. Kara had just finished making sandwiches.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Starved," he said taking a bite of food. "How was your day?"

"It was alright," she replied pouring him a glass of water. "Did you find a job?"

"Not even close," he said taking the glass. "It's like I have some kind of disease. Everyone turns me down, and the thing about it is they won't even look me in the eye when they do it." John took a sip of water and set down the glass. "Of course, I know why all this is happening."

Kara bit into her sandwich. "Why is that?"

"It's that God damn Harlan, and you know it. He's got everyone in this town wrapped around his little finger. I never dreamed that after all these years he would be like this."

“Do you think he has spread the word not to hire you?”

“I’m sure of it. Even my old friends are acting strange.”

Kara set her sandwich on the dashboard and wiped her mouth. “John, maybe we should get out of here. Maybe, we should try a new start in another town.”

“Just because of Harlan Steelman? Not on your life. I won’t let the likes of him run me out of town. I’ll find a job. You’ll see.”

“Harlan was here,” she said softly.

John stopped chewing. He turned in his seat. “When was he here?” he snapped.

“A short while ago.”

“What did he want?”

“Nothing much,” she replied. “He just wanted to say hello.”

“I don’t like that bastard coming around here. Did he try anything?”

“Come on, John,” she said. “You don’t think that after all these years he’s going to come around here and try anything, do you?”

“You must not know Harlan Steelman as well as I thought you did.”

“He offered me a job.”

“Who did?”

“Harlan, who else?”

“Doing what?”

“Cookin’ for his daddy.”

“Ain’t no way in the world you’re working for Harlan Steelman!” John shouted.

“I wouldn’t be working for Harlan,” she said turning in her seat.

“I’d be working for his dad.”

“You’d still be working for the Steelmans, and I don’t like that.”

“We need the money, John,” she said. “Besides, it would only be for a short while. I would quit when you get a job.”

John became silent. He took another bite from his sandwich. “That son of a bitch has been a pain in my ass for all my life.”

“How would you get out there?” asked John. “The Steelman ranch is nearly a half mile out of town.”

“I can walk,” she replied. “I used to do it years ago.” John turned in her direction. Kara turned back and took a bite of her sandwich. “Sorry,” she said softly. “So, what do you think? Can I get the job?”

John paused. He searched her eyes for some kind of sign. I suppose so. It all don’t matter much anyhow,” said John his face turning to a smile. “I plan on finding a job tomorrow. There’s got to be someone in this town who isn’t owned by Harlan Steelman. Tomorrow, I will find someone who will give me a job even if I have to wash dishes.”



The next morning brought a gray overcast sky with clouds that seemed to touch the earth. Travis rounded the corner onto Main Street. He had agreed to meet Melvin by nine o’clock, and it was already past ten. He turned a corner at another side street and walked two blocks until he was standing at the base of the American flag in front of the Post Office.

“Where have you been, asshole?” said Melvin.

Travis searched the area. “Where are you?”

“Over here, dumb ass,” said Melvin getting up from a park bench. “I can’t believe I waited all this time so that I can go tramping in the woods again.”

"I just want to talk with this Lone Wolf guy," said Travis starting down the street.

"Maybe, you didn't understand something," said Melvin falling in step. "What you heard yesterday and what I saw was not just any old wolf. That was your Lone Wolf, and when Lone Wolf isn't running through the woods on all fours, he still isn't the kind to be asking two young idiots like us in for tea. He really does frown on people snooping around his place."

The two boys crossed over the railroad tracks and started down a country road that led out of town. "I just want to talk with him," said Travis. "I don't think he's the monster you say he is."

"And I'm just fool enough to go with you," said Melvin. "You know this guy eats kids like us for lunch."

"You have nothing to worry about," said Travis.

"Why?"

"He wouldn't eat anything as ugly as you," he said with a smile.

Melvin turned and stared at the young man strutting beside him. He saw the smile on Travis' face. "Smart ass," he uttered.

They jumped a fence and started across a field. "What are you doing Saturday night?" asked Melvin.

"Are you asking me out?"

"No, asshole," said Melvin. "I'm asking you to help me out. The only way Linda Sue's mother will let me take her out is on a double date, and that's where you come in."

"Who is Linda Sue?"

"Just the most beautiful girl in the world and my future wife."

"Does she have big ones?"

"What?"

“You know, sweater meat. Does she have big hooters?”

“Jesus, you’re talking about the girl I love,” said Melvin. “That’s the kind of question you ask a guy about some tramp that he’s dating just to get some. A guy doesn’t mind talking about a chick like that, but this is different. Linda Sue is a goddess. She’s the woman of my dreams. She’s the woman I plan to marry and raise a family with.”

“Well, does she?”

Melvin smiled. “Yeah, they aren’t bad.”

“Well, we’ve got one problem. I don’t have a girl to take.”

“That’s all been taken care of,” said Melvin. “We’ve got you lined up with Linda’s best friend, Sara. You talk about big ones. Have you ever known a girl by the name of Sara who didn’t have big ones?”

Travis bowed his head. “I don’t know about this.”

“What do you mean?”

“What if she’s ugly?”

“I’ve seen her. She’s really cute. Besides, if you don’t like her, you can leave early. I’ll take her home.”

“I don’t know,” said Travis. “I’ve never been on a date before.”

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen. Kind of.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’ll be sixteen in a few days.”

“Then it’s time you entered the adult world,” said Melvin with his head held high. “It’s time you grabbed a little female flesh. You might even get your wick wet.”

Travis paled. “I couldn’t do that,” he said nervously. “I don’t even know the girl.”

“Hey, what you do in the backseat is no concern of mine,” said Melvin. “Don’t worry. There’s no way I would ever glance back there. I’d be too afraid of seeing you without clothes.”

“I’ve never been on a date before,” said Travis. “What do I do? What am I suppose to talk about?”

“I’m not real sure,” said Melvin. “I just know you’re supposed to try to get to first base, and if you make it there you try for second. Of course, the whole idea is to make it to home plate.”

“What’s at home plate?”

“You know.”

Travis paused. “No, I don’t know.”

“Ah, come on,” said Melvin. “Everyone knows where home plate is.”

“Well, I don’t,” said Travis turning in his direction.

“It’s getting laid, you dumb ass,” said Melvin. “It’s called getting some nooky.”

“What makes you such an expert?” asked Travis. “You’re the same age as me.”

“I just know about these things,” he said. “I’ve been around. Besides, my folks have a sex manual hidden behind the other regular books. It tells about everything. It even has drawings.”

“What kind of drawings?”

“It has drawings of women’s breasts and other things.”

“What other things?”

“You know.”

“No, I don’t know. What things?”

"You know, women's things. Drawings of women with their legs spread, and you can see everything. I'll bet you never even seen a picture of a naked woman."

"Yes, I have."

"Where did you see it?"

"National Geographic. They got lots of pictures in there."

"That don't count."

"Why not?"

"Those people run around without clothes all the time. It's not the same."

"I guess I don't understand."

Melvin stopped and turned to Travis. "Seeing some young blond-haired, blue-eyed babe take her clothes off in front of you is far better than seeing some old chick from Africa. Besides, their tits are saggy."

"Why is that?"

"They don't wear no bras. Something happens to 'em. All I know is they got tits that point at their shoe tops, that is if they wore shoes." They turned and started for the woods. "So, what do you think? Do you want to double date this Saturday?"

Travis paused. "Yeah, I'll go but tell me one thing. Do I kiss her good night?"

"Of course, you kiss her," said Melvin. "She owes you that. You show her a good time, and she owes you that much. Actually, you should get to feel her up a couple times. That's the least she can do for you."

Travis turned with a puzzled look. "Jesus, I don't even think I have the nerve to kiss her."

Melvin turned to his friend. "You sure got a lot to learn," he said shaking his head.

The two boys jumped another fence and were now at the edge of the forest. They turned and looked at each other and without saying a word began a slow march.

The forest closed in on them like a shroud. There was a dank wetness in the air and the light grew darker with each step. Silence fell on the forest like an open grave. The two boys slowed to a cautious crawl their footfalls crashing in the amber leaves of last year's autumn.

"Jesus, this place is scary," said Melvin his head moving in all directions.

"It's almost as if the forest is alive," said Travis, "and it knows we're here."

They both stopped and scanned the woods. "It feels like someone is watching us," said Melvin.

"There it is!" shouted Travis pointing in the woods.

Melvin jumped. "There what is?"

"Lone Wolf's shack."

Melvin strained to see. "I don't think I want to meet Lone Wolf again," he said turning around. "I think we wore out our welcome the first day we met him."

Travis grabbed his arm. "Come on," he whispered. "Let's go see the wolf man."

"I wish you wouldn't put it that way," said Melvin.

The two boys started for the shack their every step echoing throughout the forest. They stopped just outside the open door both searching the area.

“This place is scary,” said Melvin. “It’s too damn quiet.”

“Well, the one thing about it is nobody is going to sneak up on you,” said Travis. “You’d hear ‘em coming for a mile.”

“I still don’t like it,” said Melvin.

“Quit your whining,” said Travis starting for the door. “Let’s go see if anybody is home.”

“Have you always had this death wish?” he asked following behind.

The two boys cautiously stepped inside and looked around. There was a stench in the room like rotting flesh. Travis walked to the back of the room and knelt down. In the dark, he searched through the straw for the tattered clothes that just yesterday were lying in a heap.

“Wonder what happened to the nasty smelling clothes that were here yesterday,” said Travis standing up.

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” said Melvin. “I just know it’s time to get out of here.”

“Well, somebody has been here,” said Travis. “Somebody came and took those clothes, and if they are wearing them now, where were they yesterday without any clothes on?”

Melvin jumped. “I hear something,” he whispered grabbing his friend’s arm.

The two boys froze. “What did you hear?” asked Travis.

“I’m not sure,” he replied. “It sounded like someone in the leaves.”

They paused as they listened. “Come on,” said Travis. “Let’s go take a look.” Travis crept outside with Melvin close behind. They stopped just outside the door and scanned the area.

“See anything?”

“No, how ‘bout you?”

From inside the small shack came a deep, thunderous voice. “What you doing here?”

The two boys jumped. They spun around to see a nearly seven-foot tall Indian standing in the doorway of the building they had just left. “Lone Wolf!” shouted Travis.

“My name not Lone Wolf,” he said his eyebrows furrowed with anger.

“What is your name?” blurted Travis with a wide-eyed stare.

“You go now,” he said pointing into the distance.

“Come on,” said Melvin. “Let’s get out of here.”

“One more question,” said Travis. “Why did you save our lives yesterday? Was it because you like us for some reason?”

“Your bloated carcasses attract bear. That no good.”

Melvin leaned over and whispered to Travis. “So much for a new friend in our lives. Let’s go.”

“One more question,” blurted Travis.

“You ask too many questions,” said Lone Wolf.

“A minute ago you weren’t anywhere near here, and then all of a sudden you appear in your doorway. No matter where you walk out here, anybody can hear you, and yet we heard nothing. How can you explain that?”

Lone Wolf stood straight. A faint smile appeared on his face.

Travis glanced at Melvin and then back at Lone Wolf. “Some say you can turn into a wolf. Is that true?”

Lone Wolf said nothing. He brushed the long, dark hair from his face, turned, and reentered his home. He picked up the limp body of a freshly killed rabbit and dropped it on the wooden table. His hand

moved swiftly across his body producing a hunting knife over ten inches long. Travis and Melvin inched their way to the doorway and watched as the huge man began to skin the animal. Within seconds, he peeled the fur from the animal and threw it into the corner.

Lone Wolf walked back outside and fell to his knees a few feet from the shack. He broke small branches and dropped them into a pile on the ground. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a match. Snapping it with his thumbnail, it roared to life.

“I thought you guys used the sun or something,” said Travis.

Lone Wolf turned and stared, his match still lit. “Never did learn that kind of stuff,” he said setting leaves on fire. “Besides, much easier with match.”

The two boys smiled at each other. Not only was this man human, but he had a sense of humor as well.

“So, are you going to tell us or not?” asked Travis.

“Tell you what?” Lone Wolf asked getting to his feet.

“Your name. What’s your real name?”

The big man walked over and picked up the skinned, bloody rabbit. He stuck a small branch through the animal and fashioned a stand from two sticks to hold the makeshift spit. He broke several small branches into pieces and tossed them on the fire. Burning ashes rose with the smoke and settled on the meat.

“We’ll tell you our names,” said Travis. “My name is Travis, and this is Melvin. So, what’s yours? Must be Running Bear or something like that.”

“Why you want to know?” asked Lone Wolf sitting on a fallen tree near his fire.

“Why not?” asked Melvin. “We’ve never met a real live Indian. We’re just curious, that’s all.”

All eyes watched as Lone Wolf slowly turned the wooden spit over the dancing flames. “You forgot to gut that animal,” said Melvin. “You’re cooking the meat with its organs still inside.”

“No waste food,” said Lone Wolf still staring at the animal.

Melvin turned to Travis and then back to Lone Wolf. “What do you mean by no waste food?”

Lone Wolf stopped turning the spit. He looked up at Melvin. “Eat all rabbit.”

“You’re not going to eat the guts too, are you?” he asked.

“That best part,” Lone Wolf replied.

Melvin grimaced. “That’s sick,” he said.

“What sick?”

“Eating innards.”

“Which ones?”

“Which ones what?”

“Which innards sick?”

“All of them,” said Melvin. “My God, man, are you telling me you like eating all of the internal organs of small animals?”

“No like intestines,” said Lone Wolf with a frown. “Eat anyway.”

“Oh, my God,” said Melvin turning to Travis. He stared at his friend and said nothing.

Travis cleared his throat. “So, is it true what they say about your turning into a Lone Wolf?”

Lone Wolf gathered some sticks lying nearby and carefully dropped them into the fire. Lit ashes swirled into the air and settled

on the cooking meat. “What you think?” he asked without looking up.

“I think it’s true,” said Travis without hesitation.

“What make you think that?”

Travis paused. He studied the man who was tending to his dinner. “When we first got here, there was no one around besides us, then all of a sudden you appeared. There’s no way you could have sneaked up on us without our hearing you.” Lone Wolf said nothing. “Well, how do you explain it?”

“Look at me,” said Lone Wolf looking up. “Me Indian. We good at sneaking.”

Suddenly, he got to his feet towering over the two boys. “Now time for you to go,” he said pointing into the forest. “It time to eat food and want to be alone.”

“Not a problem,” said Travis getting to his feet. “If you’re about to eat a rabbit’s guts then it’s time for me to go, but you never did answer my question.”

“What that?”

“What’s your real name? Running water, right?”

The big man stared at the boys and then pointed once again. “Go!” he shouted, and the two boys disappeared into the woods.



On the other side of town a young woman slowly walked alongside of County Road 109. A soft rain began to fall but there was no turning back. She turned onto an unpaved drive that led to one of the largest farms in the state. For generations, the Steelmans owned some of the most fertile land in that part of the country, and until recently, every year was another record setting harvest.

It had been a lifelong dream of Nolan Steelman to retire and pass the operation of the farm onto his two sons. For the past fifty years he had cared for and tended the sprawling farm having reared a family from the generous yields that were harvested each year.

For nearly all his life, Nolan Steeman had been an important part of the community. Everyone knew that no one with a problem was ever turned away by Nolan Steelman, but all that changed. A major heart attack and the loss of his wife had left Nolan a recluse.

Kara stopped just in front of the walk that led to the massive front porch. It was a large two-story white farmhouse with black shutters. The barn and out buildings spread out like a small village, but something was wrong. There was a feeling of death in the air. Weeds grew where once there were none. Peeling white paint speckled the ground like freshly fallen snow. A small tree had fallen in the front yard partially hidden by the weeds.

Kara stepped onto the porch her feet leaving prints in the thick dust and lightly tapped on the eight-foot high front door. She heard a faint voice directing her to come inside.

Kara slowly opened the door letting the morning light pour into the dark interior. A fog of dust particles floated in and out of the light. She squinted as she peered into the darkness. Smells of rotting wood and stale cigarette smoke rushed from the room.

“Who are you and what do you want?” someone asked from the darkness.

Kara stepped to the edge of the light and studied the outline of a man sitting in an easy chair. The red glow from a cigarette seemed to hover near the chair. “My name is Kara Watson, and I’m here to see about the job,” she said softly.

Silence fell on the room. The old man reached over and turned on a lamp. The dim glow from a 25-watt bulb did little to illuminate the room. Kara quickly glanced around the room. The walls were covered with faded flower print wallpaper with dark stain woodwork. Her eyes fell on an old man sitting in a torn cloth chair. He reached over and snubbed out his cigarette and quickly lit another.

“How did you know there was a job opening?” he asked.

“Your son, Harlan told me,” she replied still standing in the open doorway.

The old man leaned forward as he studied the young woman. “I only knew one Kara my whole life,” he said squinting to see. “You ain’t Hal Stewart’s daughter, are you?”

“That’s me,” she said taking a step forward.

“Oh, my God! It is you! Come on in and sit down,” he said pointing at the sofa. He was an old man with snow-white hair and beard. His face was weatherworn with eyes that drooped. He wore dark clothes with a dark gray sweater, and he wore a wicked frown that seemed to be etched in his face.

Kara sat down on the side next to the old man. “Nothing bad happened to your cook, I hope.”

“I fired the dumb ass woman!” he shouted. He pounded his fist on the arm of his chair knocking ashes to the floor. “She wouldn’t fix what I wanted. God, I hated that woman.”

“What was it that you wanted her to cook?” she asked.

“I wanted fried eggs and bacon for breakfast and fried potatoes and sausage for dinner. You know, the good stuff. She kept feeding me oatmeal and salads and all that healthy stuff. I warned her, by

God. I warned her that I would fire her if she didn't cook what I wanted."

"Sounds like she was only doing it for your own good," said Kara. "They say you'll live a lot longer if you eat right."

"Kara, I'm in my sixties now. How long do you think I'm going to live? When you get to be my age you might as well eat what you want and enjoy life. Don't you agree?"

"Well, I suppose..."

"So, what can I do for you?"

"The job," said Kara. "I'm interested in the job."

"Oh yes, the job," he said inhaling his cigarette. He paused for a moment. "You used to come around here years ago, didn't you?"

"Yes, I used to date Harlan."

"Now, I remember," said Nolan. "God, it's great seeing you again. Yes, indeed. You always were a pretty one. He sure let a good one get away. Seems to me you never were completely sold on Harlan. Weren't you dating someone else as well?"

Kara glanced away. "I was dating John Watson too," she said softly.

"Oh yeah. That's right," he said smiling. "I remember that name. God, how Harlan hated John Watson. I swear if I hadn't stepped in, he'd have killed that man. Wonder what ever happened to him."

"I married him," she said looking up.

"You married him! Oh, my God! Does Harlan know about this?"

"Yes, he knows."

"You married John Watson," he said looking away. He paused as he thought for a moment. "You know, I don't know whether to congratulate you or kick you out of here. Harlan turned mean after

he lost you. I never knew at the time just why he got that way, but in time I pieced things together from things he said. It just seemed like he wanted to take it out on everyone he ever knew. To this day I don't know whether it was because he lost you or lost to John."

"I don't understand," said Kara.

"Harlan is very competitive. He don't like to lose to nobody, and you were the biggest prize of all. Oh, don't get me wrong. I know he loved you. Fact is, I think he still does. It's just he can't stand to lose especially a prize rose like you."

"Well, thank you, Mr.Steelman."

"Call me Nolan," he said as he smothered his cigarette in the ashtray. "Ain't no need to be so formal. Hell, if things had gone a little differently, you might be calling me your father-in-law."

Kara gave a polite smile.

"You did the right thing, you know. He's an evil man, now," said Nolan lighting another cigarette. "I can say it because I'm his father, but I can tell you he ain't no good. He lives here with me. He's supposed to be running the farm, but you can see he's just running it into the ground." Nolan expelled a cloud of smoke into the room. "I can't stand to see what he's doing to this place, but what can I do? I'm too old, and my old ticker is just about worn out."

Kara said nothing. Nolan leaned forward. "So, tell me about yourself. How's it going with you?"

"Everything is fine," she said looking down at the floor.

"No, it's not," said Nolan.

Kara looked up. There was a look of sadness in her eyes. "What?" she asked.

"I maybe old and I might not be too smart, but I know people, and you've got troubles," said the old man.

Kara turned away. She paused for a moment and then turned back with a smile. "We're just having a little financial setback right now. That's all."

Nolan said nothing. He waited as if he expected her to continue. "Can you start next Monday morning about eight?" he asked leaning back in his chair.

"I'll be here," she said getting to her feet. She walked across the living room and stood in the open doorway. "I'll see you in a couple days, Mr. Steelman."

The old man leaned forward. "You mind yourself around Harlan," he said with an ominous voice. "He's not to be trusted."

Kara stared at the old man. It seemed strange to hear a man speak of his own son in such a manner. "I'll be careful," she said and closed the door.



It was Saturday night, and the little town of Bear Creek was turning out for the event of the year. Every third weekend in June, the downtown area was blocked off and a travelling carnival set up rides and games spreading down Main Street from the hardware store to the school.

Travis was sitting in the backseat of the car. He pushed his shirttail into pants and ran his fingers through his hair. "Where's pop?" he asked leaning over to look into the rearview mirror.

"Looking for a job," said his mother without turning around.

"Why is he looking for a job on a Saturday?" asked Travis. "Nobody hires on a Saturday."

"I don't think your dad wants me to get a job," she said. "I think he's trying to find one before Monday so I won't have to go."

"Why?" asked Travis leaning back in the seat. "What makes the difference who earns the money?"

Kara turned and stared out the window. "Your father is a man," she said softly. "Any man worth anything at all has more pride than to let his wife support him." She turned in her seat. "Your father is just trying to restore his pride. That's all. Besides, I don't think he wants me working for the Steelmans."

Travis paused. "Why? What's wrong with the Steelmans?"

His mother turned to the window. "It's something that happened a long time ago. It's something that should never have happened."

Travis stared at his mother half expecting an explanation. "My friend's name is Steelman. Melvin Steelman. In fact, he's the one I'm going with tonight."

Kara turned in her seat to face her son. "You be careful around that boy. You be careful around any Steelman. They're rich and powerful, and they take whatever they want."

Travis said nothing. There was something in his mother's voice he had never before heard.

"God, I'm so nervous," he said twisting in his seat. "This is my first date, and I really don't know what to do."

"You'll be fine," said his mother with a smile. "Just be nice to her. All girls like to have someone treat 'em nice. I guess that's one thing guys never seem to understand. It ain't money that we want or big houses and things; it's just someone to treat us like a lady. That's all. You open the door for her and tell her how pretty she is, and you won't have no problems." She paused and smiled at her son. Her

eyes glowed as the memories washed over her. “Doesn’t seem possible that you’re going out on a date. You’re so young.”

A red convertible came to a stop next to the station wagon. Travis peered out the back window. He could see Melvin at the wheel and a girl in the front seat and one in the back. He paused as he studied his date. She leaned slightly forward and quickly shook her head sending her long flowing blond hair cascading down back. “Got to go,” he said getting out of the car.

“Have fun,” said his mother.

The young man walked over to the car and stood by the door. “This is my friend, Linda Sue,” said Melvin pointing at the girl next to him. He then turned to the girl in the backseat. “This is Sara.”

Travis turned and smiled at the girl. “Hi,” he blurted.

“Hi,” she returned as she shifted to one side of the seat. She shyly glanced down and then back to the young man her hair falling gently into her blue eyes.

“I told you she was a beauty,” said Melvin. “Now, get in, so we can get going.”

Linda pulled her seat forward as Travis stepped into the backseat. His foot caught the doorsill, and he fell forward his head landing in Sara’s lap. “Oh, my God!” he exclaimed his head still resting on her legs and his feet dangling out the door.

Sara stared down at the young man her hands in the air. “Glad to meet you,” she said with a smile.

Melvin turned in his seat. “Atta boy,” he said turning back around. “Go get ‘em, Tiger.”

Travis scrambled to his feet. “I feel so bad about this,” he said taking his place at the far end of the seat. “I’m so sorry.”

“What was that you were telling me about this being your first date?” asked Melvin slowly driving away. “Anybody as suave as you has been around. Don’t kid me.”

Travis glanced at his date and then turned away. She was wearing a long, white summer dress, and her blue eyes seemed to glow against her soft fair skin. “I really am sorry,” he said softly. “I’m not usually this clumsy. Really, I’m not.”

“It’s okay,” she said sitting back in her seat.

Travis glanced at the Melvin who was smiling at him in the rearview mirror. “My name is Travis,” he said extending his hand.

“I’m Sara,” she said shaking his hand.

“Sara. That name sounds familiar,” said Travis.

Sara rhymes with Tara. You know, *Gone with the Wind*,” she said. Travis looked puzzled. “You know. Tara was the plantation in the movie, *Gone with the Wind*.”

“*Gone with the Wind*?” he questioned. “Never heard of it. I just meant that I once had a lizard named Sara.”

“Oh,” she said turning away. She turned with a puzzled look. “You never heard of *Gone with the Wind*?”

Travis looked away. “We don’t get to see many movies,” he said.

“Actually I’ve never seen the movie either,” she said. “It was made a long time ago, but I did read the book. Did you ever read the book?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

“I read *Tom Sawyer* last summer. Have you ever read that one?”

“Everybody has read *Tom Sawyer*.”

“Not my dad,” blurted Travis. “Of course, I’m not real sure he can read. Never really did see him read anything. Seen him looking at a map before, but I’m not real sure you need to read to figure one of them out.”

“What does your father do?”

“Nothing. He’s unemployed right now.”

“Oh,” said Sara turning away. “Where are you living?”

“In that car back there.”

“You’re living in a car?”

“It’s just temporary,” said Travis. “We’ll be moving in a house as soon as Dad gets a job.”

“Wow,” she muttered. “I don’t think I ever knew someone who was living in a car. Where do you take a bath?”

“We’re almost there,” said Melvin over his shoulder.

“Why didn’t we walk?” asked Travis. “The carnival was just around the corner from where I live.”

“I wanted to take my new car for a spin,” said Melvin turning down a neighborhood street. “Besides, I thought we might go for a ride after dark and find someplace to park, if you know what I mean.”

Travis sat back. He glanced at Sara. She was blushing and covering a smile with her hand. “Why would you want to park someplace?” he asked. Sara looked away. Travis looked into the rearview mirror and saw Melvin wink at him. “I don’t get it.”

Melvin brought the car to a stop. “You don’t have a clue, do you?” he asked getting out of the car. The others snickered.

“About what?” asked Travis getting out of the car. The three laughed aloud as the bewildered Travis fell in step. “I have a feeling

this has something to do with dating, and everyone knows what you're talking about but me."

They turned the corner and stopped just in front of a steel structure standing in the middle of Main Street. "Look at the size of that Ferris wheel!" exclaimed Melvin. "I think it's bigger than last year's." No one said anything. It was as if the entire downtown had disappeared, and these giant structures from another world had dropped down from the sky. "We'll see you two back on this spot in two hours. Okay?"

Travis nodded his head and began to walk. He watched Melvin and Linda Sue disappear into the crowd. "Can I ask you a question?" asked Travis turning to his date.

"Sure."

"How well do you know Melvin?"

"I've known him all my life. Why?"

"I don't know," said Travis looking away. "He's a good friend, but there's something about him I can't figure out."

"He's a Steelman," she blurted.

"What's that suppose to mean?"

Sara paused. "Nothing," she said.

"What do you mean by nothing? Why does everyone become so mysterious when they talk about the Steelmans?"

"It's because of Harlan. Harlan is the town bully. He gets whatever he wants, and everyone knows not to get in his way."

Travis stopped in front of a large circular structure. It slowly began to spin quickly gathering speed. Travis grimaced. "What about Melvin?" he asked turning to his date. "Melvin doesn't seem so bad."

“Melvin’s dad is Harlan’s brother, but that’s where the similarities end. Forest became a lawyer. In fact, he’s considered a very good one. How those two came from the same seed is beyond understanding.”

Travis turned to the ride that was now spinning at full speed. The passengers were screaming as the seats spun in a blur.

“What about the old man?” he asked. “How did he become so rich?”

“Nolan Steelman was the biggest farmer in these parts. He was a tough and hard man but was fair and honest. Unfortunately, he’s too old to run the farm anymore, so Harlan is in charge now, and Harlan is too busy with the women in town.”

“My mother is going to be working for the old man,” said Travis.

“Yeah, I know,” she said looking away.

“How did you know?”

“It’s a small town. Everyone knows everyone’s business.”

Travis paused. “What’s the matter? Is there something wrong with my mother working out there?”

“You don’t know, do you?” she asked turning in his direction.

“Don’t know what?”

Sara paused. She glanced at the ground and back to Travis. “Everyone in town knows it, so I suppose you should know it too.”

“Know what?” shouted Travis.

“Years ago when your mother was a kid, she dated Harlan,” said Sara stopping in the middle of the street. “The story goes that they were quite an item. Some say they were even planning to get married. Then your dad came along and pretty much swept your mother off her feet. She left Harlan and married your father. Happy ending to a

romantic story? Not hardly. Harlan is still carrying a torch for your mother. Not likely he's forgotten what your daddy took away from him either."

Sara paused as she studied Travis. His face showed concern as he stared at the ground. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this," she said softly. "I really am, but when you mentioned that your mother was going to work for the Steelmans, I just thought you should know." Travis said nothing. He didn't move. "Travis, are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said looking up. "Yeah, I'm fine." The ride just in front of them had stopped, and people were falling in line to get on. "Come on," he said taking her by the arm. "Let's take this thing for a spin."

Sara's face went blank. "I don't think so," she said following behind.

"Come on. It will be fun," he said pulling her along.

"These things make me puke."

"You'll be fine," he said stepping into the last empty car. They both snapped the safety belt in place and grabbed the steel bar in front of them. Travis glanced up as the car began to move. A thin chain connected the car to one of many arms protruding from the center of the ride. "Jesus," he muttered as he turned to Sara. "Whose idea was this anyway?"

The cars started spinning gathering speed with each lap. Within moments, they were spinning sideways like a giant fan. Travis struggled to turn his head. Sara's face was frozen with fright. He felt his stomach turn as the cars spun even faster. He wondered how anybody could find pleasure in such an experience.

After what seemed like an eternity, the cars began to slow. As they did, they fell from the sky until they were sitting upright spinning slowly in a circle. “And they call that fun,” said Travis staring at the spinning ground until it finally came to a stop. “Let’s get off this thing,” he said unbuckling the seatbelt.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she muttered as she bolted towards a trashcan. Travis politely turned away as she retched uncontrollably. He glanced in her direction to see her wiping her mouth with a tissue.

“Wanna sit down?” he asked.

“As long as the seat doesn’t move,” she said without looking up.

Travis led her to an empty park bench. “Sorry,” he said taking a seat. “Just my luck. My first date, and she pukes. “

Sara breathed deeply and let it out slowly. “Got any gum?”

“No.”

“Mints?”

“Sorry.”

She held her hand to her face and exhaled. “Oh, my God!” she exclaimed wiping her mouth again. “My breath is so bad!”

Travis handed her his handkerchief. “I’m really sorry about this,” he said. “I guess I haven’t made much of an impression on you, have I?”

“Oh, you’ve made an impression, alright,” she said wiping her face.

Travis turned away. He could see that she was upset. He cursed himself for taking her on that ride. Not even an hour into his first date and she’s thrown up her dinner and thinks he’s a jerk.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asked.

She dropped his handkerchief on the bench between them. She turned and stared at him with a strange look on her face. "You've done enough," she said with a smile.

"You're not mad at me anymore?" he asked with a puzzled look.

"I wasn't mad at you in the first place," she said. "After all, I didn't have to go on that ride."

"I promise that if we go on any more rides, it will be your idea," he said. Silence fell on the couple as they watched the people walk by.

"How late will your parents allow you to stay out?" he asked.

"I can stay out until eleven," she replied. "It's just my mother, you know. I live with just my mother."

"Are your folks divorced?"

"No, my dad is dead," she said softly.

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Travis. "I've done it again, haven't I?"

"What's that?"

"Said something I shouldn't have."

"Oh no, not really," she said glancing at the ground. "In fact, I'm really quite proud of what he did that cost him his life. My dad was always my hero even before this happened."

"Do you mind telling me what happened?"

"It was last winter," she said looking up. "In fact, it was New Year's Eve, and Mom and Dad were coming home from a party. Dad had been drinking. Seems strange now because Dad didn't drink. To this day, Mom cannot figure that one out. Anyway, it had been snowing all day, and the roads were slippery. Dad was driving too fast and taking chances he shouldn't have."

Do you know how Old Plank Road has that drop-off? Well, Dad took that corner a little too fast and put the car into a spin. They went through the guardrail and the car came to rest with the backend teetering over the edge of the cliff. Mom said it was perfectly balanced. If they moved even a little bit, it made the car rock.”

“That’s incredible,” said Travis. “What happened then?”

“They sat there for several moments but could feel the car slipping. There was only time for one of them to get out. They couldn’t go together because as soon as one of them would get out of the car, the loss of weight would cause it to fall backwards over the cliff. They knew that one of them was going to live and one wasn’t. The real shame was they had no time to say good bye. The car was slipping and would soon fall taking both of them with it. They argued for several moments, but finally Dad forced Mom out of the car.”

“My God!” muttered Travis.

“When my mother’s foot touched the ground, the car began to slide,” said Sara with a stone face. “She said that she nearly didn’t get her other leg from the car when it plummeted over the cliff. Mom said she glanced back as the car began to fall away and for a brief moment in time she saw my dad’s face staring back at her. She said my dad was smiling at her.” Sara wiped her eyes with a tissue. “She said it was a smile unlike anything she had ever seen. She said it was Dad’s way of saying good bye and don’t worry about him, and I believe her. That would be just like Daddy to do that. That smile during that brief moment in time still haunts her to this day.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Travis. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard a story quite like that one.”

Sara wiped her eyes and smiled. "I'm the one who should be apologizing," she said. "What kind of story is that to tell on a first date?"

Travis turned. There was a commotion coming from the crowd. He took the young girl by the arm and got to his feet. "Let's go see what's going on," he said weaving his way through the people.

At the heart of the crowd, a space had been cleared in the middle of the street. Travis elbowed his way to the center of the disturbance. "It's Lone Wolf," he said turning to Sara, "and he's got Harlan in his face."

"So you're the famous Lone Wolf," said Harlan standing in his way. The big man stepped aside to pass, and Harlan moved as well. "I hear you can turn into a wolf. Let's see ya do it. C'mon, what's the harm? We're all here for entertainment, and what could be more entertaining than to see you do something like that."

Lone Wolf stood his ground, his face expressionless.

Harlan inched forward, nearly touching Lone Wolf. "C'mon, tough guy," he said bumping him with his chest. "Do it! Turn into a wolf!" Lone Wolf froze. He dropped his hands to his sides. "That's just what I thought," said Harlan with a loud voice. "You ain't so tough after all. All that talk about you being a wolf and all. Hell, you're just plain yella, and that's a fact.

Lone Wolf glanced down at the ground and took two steps back.

"Where are you going, Mr. Wolf Man?" shouted Harlan. "I don't remember giving you permission to walk away." Harlan pushed the big man in the chest, and he stepped back to gain his balance. "We're all still waiting to see you change into some kind of animal 'er something," he said pushing him once again. "Do it, big man!"

shouted Harlan pushing Lone Wolf again. He pushed him again and again with Lone Wolf stepping backwards each time. The crowd moved with each step.

Finally, Harlan shoved Lone Wolf with both hands sending him sprawling onto the ground. The crowd grew silent. They watched intently, certain of the fight that would most certainly break out as soon as Lone Wolf could get to his feet.

Lone Wolf slowly regained his footing and stood straight, towering nearly a foot over Harlan's head. He stared down at the young man; his face was like stone. Harlan's smile disappeared. The crowd grew silent. Harlan braced himself for what he thought was sure to come. An eternity passed. Harlan began to twitch, his legs visibly shaking. His face paled as he stepped back.

Suddenly, the big man turned and walked away, the crowd clearing a path for him to pass. All eyes watched as he disappeared down the street and then turned to Harlan. "I guess I taught him a thing or two," Harlan announced and walked away.

"Come on," said Travis grabbing Sara's arm. "Let's go catch Lone Wolf." They weaved their way through the crowd until they were at the outskirts of town, soon jogging to overtake the big man.

"Lone Wolf!" shouted Travis as he began to run. "Stop a minute! I want to talk to you!" Lone Wolf didn't miss a stride. Travis finally overtook him and grabbed him by the arm. "I just want to ask you a question," he said catching his breath.

Lone Wolf stopped in the road and turned to Travis. "What you want?" he asked.

"Why did you do that back there?" asked Travis.

"Why I do what?"

“Let Harlan push you around. You could have squashed him if had wanted to. Why did you let him get away with that?”

“He do nothing to me.”

“He pushed you around,” said Travis. “You can’t let him do that.”

“Why not?” asked Lone Wolf. “He not hurt me.”

“That’s not the point. He’s a puke and he’s a bully. That’s more than enough reason to pound him.”

Lone Wolf turned and started walking again. “Sorry, but he no hurt me, then I no hurt him.”

“Stop!” shouted Travis grabbing the big man. Lone Wolf stopped and turned. “Make me a promise,” said Travis still holding his arm. “Promise me you will kick his ass if ever does that again.”

“He no hurt...”

“I know. He didn’t hurt you,” said Travis releasing his arm. “This isn’t a question of self defense. This is a question of pride. A big guy like you shouldn’t have to take crap from a weasel like Harlan. Promise me you’ll pound him if he ever does that again to you.”

Lone Wolf stared at the young boy for a moment. He turned to Sara. “Who that?” he asked.

“This is Sara,” said Travis turning to the young woman. “Sara meet Lone Wolf.”

“Nice to meet you, Lone Wolf,” she said shyly.

Lone Wolf stared at her and then turned to Travis. “She your woman?”

Travis glanced at Sara. “No, not really. It’s just our first date.”

“You having what you call a blind date,” said Lone Wolf.

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Travis. “It is a blind date, but how did you know?”

“She too pretty for you,” said Lone Wolf with a smile.

“Oh, that’s funny,” said Travis shaking his head. He turned to Sara who was laughing aloud. “Now I’m getting the business from a guy who hardly speaks English.”

“I go now,” said Lone Wolf jumping a fence beside the road.

“Wait a second,” said Travis. “I want to ask you something.”

“I must go!” he shouted and disappeared into the woods.

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SCOTT FIELDS

THE AUTHOR

In 1966, Scott turned down a contract with the Detroit Tigers to pursue his lifelong dream of becoming a published author by earning



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