

A werewolf is shown in profile, howling with its mouth wide open towards a large, bright full moon. The scene is set in a dark forest at night, with the moon's light illuminating the trees and the werewolf's fur. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and supernatural.

G.R. JERRY

TOM  
AND  
LOVEY

UNDER THE MOON INTO THE WOOD

## PROLOGUE

**H**ERE I AM, ALONE, totally alone. Seven days ago, I cried from deep inside my lungs, “Kill it, kill it!” Since then my world has shattered beyond the remnants of what little world had remained in my life. Abandoned now, here I am, alone, totally alone, and nobody will talk to me. Not even my dead husband. From heads hung low, seeking shelter above slumping shoulders, their eyes look up to me, look down on me, and silently speak, “What is wrong with her?” Tom, our new, young, and most mysterious neighbor, is sitting in jail waiting for the same disease that pulled down Bill and those he had followed down that deep dark corridor. Fluffy is hobbling around on her three remaining legs, and Patty cannot pull her eyes away from her conversation-stained coffee mug to face me. Here I am, alone, totally alone.

I’m not rich and I’m not poor. I’m able to survive off Bill’s pension and a small business me and my recently estranged neighbor, Patty, run. I’m not a crazy old woman, and although most nights are dull and lonely, I’ve resisted the temptation of locoweed and my mind hasn’t wandered out of the pasture. I happen to be looking across one now while reining in grazing thoughts that I’m corralling here on this notepad. Beyond an abundant garden stuffed of garlic, herbs, spices, and salad fixings, bordered by a rickety old greenhouse—both tended by me and Patty—lie fields of tall grass that fade into thick woods concealing a stream you’ll not find scribbled on any map of Wrong, the county, or the latest edition of your favorite atlas. Oh, did I not mention that I happen to live at the outskirts beyond the southern edge of the Village of Wrong?

When Bill was alive, I crossed the river one day, barefoot as a baby, exactly ten years younger than I am today. It's more akin to a stream or a creek than a river, or a crick as Bill would have it, but it takes the shape of a river, come spring, and even sticks its broad body halfway across the pasture. Wading in water just above my knees, I took one fatal step that changed me and my life forever. Plunging down into water that flowed far above my head, I thought I had stepped on a bed of feathers harnessed by a sheet of nylon that stretched to its elastic limit. That's the techno man, Bill, stuck in me speaking now. Anyway, back to the thought. The nylon did not rip, it recoiled and shot me back out of the water above my waist, where Bill's giant fingers clutched my thin frame, and pulled me close to his chest. My straight long brown, wringing wet hair draped around Bill's neck as he whispered that next time I ought to watch my step. It should have been me whispering those words.

I couldn't understand how it could be so hot down below in that cool, cool water. If the nylon had torn, I believe that I might still be falling, burning. My eyes were shielded under closed lids, but the red-orange light on their backside down below was far too bright and the water was far too warm for a crick. Long gone is the blemish from the scalded big toe on my right foot. Maybe I didn't stop falling, and maybe that nylon *had* ripped. There at the edge of Wrong I had stepped on the border of hell, and now I'm living in it.

Just one day later, Bill struck a deer while cruising home in his big Lincoln back from business downstate. He had made the mistake of telephoning Sheriff Harrigut to report the accident. Calling himself Stargut, the monster of a man loves the moniker so much that he has it embroidered on the tall tan collars of his starched shirts. Big gold badge. Big bold gut. His dark soul retains its image in any mirror upon which his reflection is planted. A film of mist lingers behind on their surfaces and fades while his hard bottomed boots drag his mortal pieces along their wicked paths. I'd seen the ghostly image for the first time down there along the long bar's mirror at Richie's Tavern.

The afternoon following Bill's arrest, Stargut had telephoned to inform me that Bill had died in jail from some horrible affliction contracted from the dead deer. When I arrived at City Hall near sunset,

Stargut added that to protect the town folk, Bill was immediately cremated. A fire still burned behind Richie's Tavern, inside a circle of laughing, joking drunkards feeding flames while emptying bottles of Blue Ribbon in rapid succession. "The remnants of a barbeque," they said.

I've strayed from my story, so it's back to the stray. In Wrong, it is wrong to harm animals. Dead wrong. Oh, it's fine and dandy to eat meat and poultry or fish, you know, like at a barbeque. Such things are grown to be ate. But in Wrong, you don't mess with what comes out of those woods. No, sir. Don't matter if it's a squirrel, a muskrat, or a snake. These critters meant nobody no harm. You don't go hunting them down and if any of those critters, if they step across your path, you just go ahead and let them be. You don't harm no animal in Wrong. You do, you pay the price. Ask Bill, he paid the ultimate price. But when I stood on the porch and saw that mangy coyote attack poor little Fluffy, Patty's white poodle, well, maybe I just vented ten years of anger. This critter meant to do some real harm. I thought the scrubby beast had just strolled out of Audrey's Laundromat after spending one too many quarters on the wash cycle. Its matted hair was a mesh of grey and gold, and its demonic eyes were anything but eyes—within night globes of black they glowed red orange.

Buddy Miles' version of Down by the River played softly behind Fluffy's screams. I dropped my pen and paper, jumped out of my rocker on the back porch and found the coyote monster had chewed off her front right leg at its upper joint. The devilish looking thing was coolly nibbling away at the meaty section of the detached leg. No need to kill Fluffy yet; she wasn't going nowhere. Stepping out of the pasture, I screamed.

Seconds later, Tom entered the picture sprinting, wearing an open plaid flannel shirt over his clerical collar, with a towel wrapped around his left forearm and the same hand stuffed in a boxing glove. The other glove dangled from the tied strings. His right hand held a silver crucifix with Jesus stretched out on one side, but the bottom had been ground down wide and polished sharp as a meat cleaver. With his thumb resting over the statue man's head, Tom slammed the crucifix into the animal's

back. It howled so loud that I felt its hot breath slap my face. The mad thing left its dinner behind, turned on Tom, but had locked its eyes on my red cheeks. Using a ballplayer over the shoulder swing, Tom thrust the crucifix down into its chest, penetrating its heart. The animal roared a deafening howl and wavering, it dropped to the bed of its final breath and its red-orange eyes never left me even to this moment.

Now here I am, alone, totally alone, except for my silent friend resting here on my lap. I'm celebrating two anniversaries on the same day. I'm reminiscing ten long years with Bill's wandering soul and only three days without Tom, but he is scarcely one sliver away from a full circled moon and the wrath below. Time is chasing me, so I am obliged to set my scribbling pen down for awhile because you see, me and the shiny crucifix sitting here under this notepad must go and leave the rocker behind. The day is taking the sun down and we need to freshen up a bit. We'll put a little Buddy Miles on the record player, and play it nice and soft. I'll wipe the dust from my skin and dust the skin from the blade of this here crucifix across a rolling stone of marble. You see, we have a date, a date with Stargut.

We're taking him down . . . by the river.





## CHAPTER

# One

**T**HE BLACK STUFF. IT looked thick, slimy. *It couldn't be tar*, thought Tim, as he stood at the near end of the bar, closest to the front door between two stools, sipping a cool fifty cent draught and pondering the contents of the spittoon. The cuspidor was made of polished brass, but its sheen was hidden beneath stains and its struggle against age and neglect. And some of its contents were something other than contents. *It must have been that way in the old days*, thought Tim. What a job, cleaning hocker from the floor and hauling away spittoons filled with mixed mouth juice and tobacco jelly. *What did they do with the stuff?* Tim grimaced; it had all been tasted and spat into an elixir of slime. A sip of beer washed the rancid thought from his tongue.

The front screen door opened again and bled a few extra rays of the fading sun inside. Someone stood behind it, holding it open while a second large man dressed in worn out blue denim farmer's garb dragged in another rotting railroad tie. He paused long enough to send a string of chew toward the direction of the spittoon and cast an eager eye on the stranger. The black stuff struck the curved edge of the miniature dumpster's rim, and at least part of it landed home, another part slowly, deliberately oozed its way along the outer arc of the bowl. The man tipped his dirty tractor ad cap and followed the creosote laden scraps from his previous four trips through the bar, past the pool table, the

jukebox against the back wall, the john in the short hallway and out the back door.

Tim moved his ponder from the cigarette butts, beef jerky wrapper, and partially chewed dog bone floating on the black stuff to the broad shouldered man. He shuddered when drawing a link between the scraps and the black stuff. As the man behind the bar might say, it wasn't tobacco jelly. The tap of his beer glass on the bar by a foreign hand pulled his attention back to the news channel.

“Wur having us a fire,” reported the bartender, pronouncing fire in colloquial fashion— *fahr*—“a real live barbeque.” He pronounced it *burbeque*.

The bartender meant what he said. The skinny unshaven aging man must have been chewing the same black stuff. The teeth that had survived his nail chewing youth were not only stained but puzzled as to which direction they should point. He wore the same overall denim clothing, but unlike the tie toting bare chested big man, he wore a dirty faded green camouflage T-shirt beneath. Tim thought that maybe one day the man *had* been a soldier. If so, most of him had been left somewhere out on a forgotten battlefield, abandoning the flesh and bone remnants of what stood behind the bar.

“There's some nasty stuff in that wood,” replied Tim, attempting to avoid direct eye contact with the rotting stuff in the man's mouth. “I'd like another beer, please,” he added, looking forward to his third. It had been a stressful business trip and he was on the way home, but the shore of Lake Erie was just too many yawns away. He had left the night before and driven all day. Twenty straight hours behind the wheel was enough. The motel at the edge of town was not the Ritz, but at least the bed had a mattress. The attendant behind the dilapidated counter in the office seemed as eerie as the barkeep; the old woman seemed weathered and worn, sister to an old stained and wrinkled leather boot, her skin crying for lotion to keep it from ripping open and spilling whatever liquid ran beneath it. He thought the woman might have been staked out in the sand beneath the Florida sun, forgotten and left to bake. *Snakeskin*, he had thought. Her lips had been stained black by something other than lipstick. The key to the room was bent, but it slipped into its slot

as smooth as a spoon fresh out of the dishwasher grabbing a scoop of ice cream. The room was dirty; the walls were drab faded pink and a single sheet-less bed stood beside a small stand bearing a tiny radio and a lamp void of a bulb, the room void of a toilet, television, or any other company. He could do his business behind the building or the first gas station he came across once out of Dodge. He tossed his dark gray pin striped suit coat and solid burgundy tie onto the bare mattress. He decided he would grab a bite to eat along with a beer buzz, bed down early and be gone before his inner alarm would wake the sun. *The people inhabiting this run-down town were a strange brew*, he thought, eyeing his near empty glass. He rarely traveled this route and could not recall ever passing through the Village of Wrong. Sleeping on the side of the road in the back seat of his car might have been a better choice. Whatever. Another beer or two, one burger and he would be history. Unaware, Tim meant what he thought.

The door opened again and three more farmer men passed by Tim, dragging more railroad ties. Possibly from the same family, they were as dirty and oily as the previous men. They all seemed hairy. Tim knew a man who bore an excess amount of hair, his back teeming with the black curly strands and his arms covered shoulder to wrist. He thought his buddy must have had an ape in his family genealogy. *It was rare*, he thought. There might be a circus full of hairy people somewhere maybe, but an entire town?

One of the new hairy farmer men also carried a five gallon can of gasoline. Tim thought he would skip the barbeque. The sudden rap of the fresh red meat patty on the hot griddle snapped Tim's neck back to attention. But the rap of the screen door against its jamb quickly reported his neck to right face. There was another man standing behind the settling black screen.

"One burger comin' up, mizzer," announced the barkeep. "You like some que on that? Nice night for a burbeque."

"Quiet, Sam!" ordered the silhouette from beyond the screen. Its hands were still resting at the shadow's hips, but the hand to Tim's left side balanced on the heel of a revolver. Tim was no gun enthusiast, but

he could recognize a big gun. And a big barrel. It poked at the loose screen, penetrating the boundary of ID recognition territory.

The screen opened toward the silhouette and the man slipped across the border. The heels of his black shiny boots were much harder than the dirty wooden floor. He was broad shouldered and slightly pot bellied, but not sloppy. He was big all over. If there was a hidden wrinkle to be found on his short sleeved shirt and matching tan pants, it would be singing the blues. The black belt tucked neatly under his proud gut, supported a long barreled pistol not listed in any service revolver catalog. The barrel of the gun jutted out past its holster as far as the shiny black leather pocket was long. The man was wearing a fully loaded forty-five caliber billy club. The belt also carried a bone handled bowie type knife on its opposite side, not as huge as the gun, but long enough to puncture through the two layers of skin enclosing Tim's lean but modestly muscular chest.

His tan wide brimmed Boss of the Plains felt hat curled upward on either side, and the black silk band wrapping the crown matched the man's carefully trimmed thick moustache. He greeted Tim as he proceeded to follow the trail of the burbeque men. "Enjoy yur meal, son." He passed Tim. His bulgy veined massive hairy forearms seemed to pulse from the thick dark fluid pumping beneath their curly black hair.

The shiny gold badge stuck at his left shirt pocket told Tim he was the sheriff in town. His face resembled Jackie Gleason, but it wore no smile and it was carried by no comic. Tim could smell no scent of humor in the large man. He seemed to carry much more business than any small print laden contract that had passed between Tim and any of his clients.

"We'll have a chat when yur done," the sheriff added after passing Tim.

The black stitching on the back of the sheriff's tall collar read Tim the law.

## STARGUT

Tim nervously turned his focus toward his beer and drew three long swallows, not quite understanding the cause of his suddenly rapid heartbeat. While the glass found its way back down to the bar, Tim watched Stargut's reflection march away in the long mirror that ran behind the length of the bar. He watched and listened to the methodical beat of the hard man's hard boots. A ghostly shadow of mist followed him. Tim's sharp vision acknowledged the stitching on his collar as its order was reversed in the mirror. Although a few letters were also backwards, his keen vision easily deciphered them.

## TUƆRATƆ

Before exiting the mirror, the ghostly image turned with Stargut's head, revealing a glimpse of red-orange pupils, one disappearing beneath the moist cover of a winking lid.

The scent of hot french fries and the whack of a plate on the bar wrestled Tim back from his trance. He must have been dreaming. It had been a long drive, a long, long drive. He was sleep deprived and his imagination was playing tricks.

"Enjoy yur . . . meal," said Sam the bar man. He meant to say last.



Lifting the bun slightly with his left thumb, Tim found that the burger beneath the unevenly sliced onion and fat tomato was charred beyond recognition. He dropped the bun and picked up his head.

"You must like your barbeque well done around here," said Tim, finding Sam, the man sharpening a long butcher knife with a hunk of stone.

"Sure do," replied Sam. He did not bother to look up as he dragged the knife across the stone that he held in place on the bar with his left hand. "Best eat that thar thing befur she gits cold. Ol' Stargut wouldn't take kindly to that."

“Stargut?” asked Tim, suddenly recalling seeing the image stitched on the shirt collar, but not actually speaking the word with that familiar voice inside his mind. It was the hard man with the hard boots.

“That would be me,” confirmed Stargut. His image now marched back toward Tim, ahead of the back screen door bouncing shut. “You get our friend down your throat now son . . . then we’ll have our chat.”

Tim listened to the pounding of the hard heels and the scrape of the sharp blade while he focused on the sesame seed bun. This was no time to mess with the law. “Can I have another beer?” he asked sheepishly, drowning the bare black stone patty with ketchup, hoping it would mask the charcoal.

“On the house,” said Sam, lifting the butcher knife and running his right forefinger across the clean edge “spect it might be yur last.”

“Quiet, Sam!” added Stargut as he stepped back across the border of Richie’s Tavern and out beyond the screen door. “Enjoy your meal,” he added ahead of another screen door slap.

Tim struggled through the meal, flooding the lip of the sandwich with ketchup upon each and every bite, while stuffing the pockets of his cheeks with fries. The crunchy stuff in between the condiments and bread was unlike any meat he had ever chewed. Tim thought that the combination of the chewy mixture and the bar man’s exuberance with a medium high hot plate saved him from the true flavor of the thoroughly burned meat. The fact that the burger was truly a crispy critter never entered his mind.

Tim’s taste buds persevered and after serving an undeserved penance in purgatory pungency, he swallowed the last bite and gulped . . . his last beer. He hoped to close his eyes and wake up somewhere else.



Escorted out the door by Sam, the mysterious bartender who seemed to be losing his hair on the griddle, Tim leaned down at the front left wheel well of his company owned 1962 dark blue Ford Fairlane. He picked at his teeth to remove the irritating follicles stuck between them.

The toasted meat was not just crunchy and stringy, it had been laced with hair. Tim struggled to put the experience behind him.

Stargut stood over him. His shadow was long and it would soon blend into the dark of night, replaced by luminary impersonations cast from bulbs hidden within street lamps.

“There,” pointed out Stargut. He retrieved his loaded gun, placing the barrel near the front tire, ten o’clock high. The stubble of hair imbedded in the tread seemed to match the color of the specimen he had just withdrawn from his incisors. It was light brown and somewhat short, just like that on the man returning to the bar. Tim did not recall running over the ugly man’s head.

Stargut pulled the gun barrel back toward the front bumper, adjacent to a sprinkle of dried blood.

“I see,” acknowledged Tim, “but I don’t understand.”

“It was a muskrat,” explained Stargut, “a friend of the wood.”

“I remember striking something, or running over something, just outside town,” countered Tim, “but I didn’t actually see anything. I thought it was a piece of wood or something, or even a pothole. It was just a little bump. Against the law? What law?”

“My law!” answered Stargut, raising his voice, clearly angered. “He was a friend of the wood. And now that you’ve had a good taste of him, how would you like a little bump on *your* head?”

Tim dropped down on his right knee, catching himself on the Ford fender. His stomach turned three cartwheels. “Taste?” was all he could utter before the flood gutter down in his throat backed up and blew the muskrat patty and remainder of his dinner all over the tire. Recovering, Tim reeled back to upright himself just as a bump on his head was dispensed special delivery, courtesy of Stargut and the long barrel. Tim dropped down on the pavement, after bouncing off the tire, just as a rickety old green pickup truck pulled in front of the bar, ahead of him. Tim did close his eyes, and he would wake up somewhere else.

Two men dragged more railroad ties into the bar, while the third husky man who had been riding in the back having a chew hustled over to fetch the pit-ready pig. The man adjusted his tractor cap and then wrapped his extra large right hand around Tim’s left ankle. He lifted the

limp leg up to his waist and dragged Tim and his face across a gutter, up and over the curb, along the cracked surface of the sidewalk and into Richie's Tavern, while Tim's pant leg dribbled down past his knee.

Stargut returned his revolver club back to its saddle and raised the same hand, curling his cupped fingers in and out, commanding the tow truck in place. The two scrubby men toting black lips and grease stained coveralls strolled out of the tavern and quickly hitched Tim's Ford to rid Wrong of the pig man's garbage.

"Save the front plate from this one," spoke Stargut lowly, canvassing the otherwise empty street. "And collect his stuff from the motel," he added, tossing the black key holder he had pulled from the pig's pocket. Stenciled in between the words Wrong Motel was the bright white number thirteen.

The village was small and vacant most nights, besides the following that gathered at Richie's Tavern to drink beer and ignore Indians ball games trapped by a tall antenna atop the single story structure. The tavern was mostly active when the moon stood full. A high wooden fence bordered the property behind the bar, concealing a huge circular pit, itself bordered by eroded round boulders. A door on the right side of the fence led to an enclosed corridor that met the back wall of the city hall, which housed the jail, which itself housed a single cell most often vacant and bordered by Stargut's office. An alley the width of a man's arm span separated the two structures, although the city hall was wrapped in dark red brick while Richie's supported redwood siding. The alley met its dead end at the corridor, while men preceding Tim met a dead end passing through it.

Tim's face swept a strip of the bar floor clean as he was dragged out the back door and through the corridor past the long arm of the waiting jail cell door. His shiny oxford shoes were removed. They could collect a buck or two, or if nothing else, a good chew. For old time's sake, the socks that had been stuffed in them went along for the ride. Tim was left on the floor. He could find the bare cot when he woke. His upright left leg was draped over the lidless scummy toilet.

The rumble under the hood of the Ford truck left Stargut behind and faded as it purred over the long lazy curve that dipped south, out

of town to the Wrong Motel where it caught its breath momentarily. Then it screamed again while passing Patty and her neighbor on its way beyond the village limits and onward to the cemetery for wheels and automobiles, aptly referred to as The Boneyard. Once back home, the Ford motor carried Tim's vehicle deep into the yard of metallic bones and deep into the night where the pig mobile was stripped naked. Behind a counter buried under scraps of paper, oily rags, and a finger-operated cash register, down an aisle bordered by generators, starters, hubcaps, wheels, brake cylinders, and boxes of junkyard goodies, the license plate swayed in the greasy hand of the black-lipped passenger and met its fate at the back wall of the room, behind the swing of a claw hammer at a two penny nail set dead in the center of its heart. Number nineteen. Plenty of letters and numbers adorned them. Plenty of room remained for more trophies. The black-eyed man tacked Tim's plate to the right of the only vanity plate in the collection. But there was nothing vain or empty about its former owner. It read *LOVEY*. The latest edition, addition, teetered silently into its final resting place as the greasy-haired and black-lipped man spat a wad of chew over the nail while admiring his work of art.



Tim struggled to open his eyes through the pain shooting through his temples from the back of his head. The dull gray ceiling was unfamiliar. He surely wasn't home. Under the pain, his left heel felt a chill. He looked down past his chest while his right hand reached up to soothe his aching head. His right leg was planted on the wooden floor, but his left foot dangled in a dirty porcelain toilet. Tim suddenly remembered the muskrat cuisine and his stomach turned again, but there was nothing left to heave, so he rolled his way to a kneeling position and gagged air into the filthy pit surrounding the toilet water.

His right hand discovered drying gel at the back of his head. His fingers were painted dirty red. His eyes managed to focus enough to learn that he was in a jail cell. But he was not locked away, the door was wide open. Tim struggled to identify pictures racing through his mind,

unable to discern which were real and which were Memorex. Maybe he had fallen on the sidewalk and struck his head on the curb. Maybe the sheriff was just joking around with him. He managed to get to his feet, step to the doorway, and canvas the area. There were doors at each end of the dimly lit hallway and there was no noise penetrating in either one of them. *No harm in asking*, he thought. *Am I under arrest or at the butt end of a gruesome joke?*

Tim stepped out of the cell toward the door at his left, cautious with each individual step, raising his hands at shoulder height, just in case a gun with a man stepped through. The door opened from his left, so he reached for the handle with his right hand, raising his left arm ever higher. The tarnished copper handle resisted his counter clockwise rotation. Tim reversed his effort, holding his breath while listening for one from another chest. There was no motion and no other breathing, so Tim turned and traced his steps back toward the cell, hesitating momentarily at the cell door, pondering the thought of becoming a pending convict currently in the act of escaping.

He still could not understand the nature of the crime. Why was it okay to butcher, cook, and feed him a dead muskrat, but not okay to kill it first?

Tim bent down to peek under the cot, now wondering what had become of his socks and shoes. The blood rushing to his head overwhelmed him, taking his sight and balance away, but Tim's arms saved him from falling and pushed his head back atop his feet. He leaned against the gray wall to regain his senses. "*What happened to my shoes?*" he whispered aloud. Then Tim continued toward his escape, his exploration, his ultimate fate.

It made sense. This other door opened toward its opposite side. It must lead him out of the building. This matching tarnished handle did not resist the twist of his left hand. Tim cracked the door open. It was dark on the other side. Very dark. He opened the door wide, slowly. Again there was no breath on the other side and no light meeting the glow from the small bulb at the opposite end of the hallway behind him. Tim stepped through and the door closed slowly behind him, leaving the bulb and its light behind.

The wall at his left continued beyond the door. He followed it with both hands several steps until it met another wall directly ahead of him. His hands slowly walked their way to Tim's right but stopped dead in their tracks when Tim's ears collected a click, a snap, a bolt. It came from the door that had just closed.

Frightened beyond comprehension, Tim almost lost his last beer, but squeezed his eyes shut and squeezed the urine back into storage. He didn't dare turn back now. His fingers began to crawl their way along the wall again and after his left foot had taken three steps, the second wall came to an end. Tim's hands made a right turn and discovered another door. He moved his hands across the door, dropped his right hand and found another handle. It was greasy to the touch and wielded no resistance. Tim pushed, but the door would not yield. But then he pulled the door toward him, stepped back and met more of the same black. The same black stuff.

Tim stepped into the dark corridor, leaving the door open. The compulsion to urinate would not leave him alone, and he almost did when he stepped off a ledge and down onto bare earth. He threw his arms out to break his fall, and after two steps they struck another wooden wall. His arms spread out in either direction and his left fingers found nothing but more wall, although something floated past them to his earlobes. His right fingers met another dead wall. It must be another hallway leading to his left.

Tim held his breath again, as sweat ran down his temples. It was a thumping sound that he heard, possibly from drums or the rhythm of a pulsating bass guitar. And he thought there was laughter beneath it. It really was a joke. And there really was a barbeque. A burbeque. Tim cuddled the wall at his right side with his fingers and pressed onward toward the source of this party sound, feeling his way through the dead black open air with his left hand. Nearly at the end of a lifetime, Tim met the last door, and grasped the final handle he would need to turn. His fear, his apprehension, was beginning to subside. Behind this door there would be escape, surprises, fun, and joy. The inhabitants of this town were certainly strange and certainly had an oddball sense of humor, but Tim figured down here off the beaten track, they might be

a little weird but aside from all the grease and hair they were just as human as anybody else.

When Tim pulled the door open, moonlight met him square in the face, the sudden light partially blinding him momentarily. The urge to pee remained, but his anxiety had diminished down below the border of terror.

To his left stood the back wall of the bar and tall boards lined up side to side formed a wall around the backyard twice the height of Tim. Other boards holding them together were secured left and right diagonally across their faces. There was a huge pit toward the rear of the yard that must have been twelve feet or more across from rim to rim of the circle of boulders that surrounded it. Currently, several lanterns hanging on iron-angled bars aided the moon in illuminating the yard. The fire pit was currently idle but well stocked. Tim had not missed the barbeque, but just the same hoped that the gasoline was intended for some other purpose.

There were at least a dozen of the hairy men dressed in overalls and coveralls scattered around and their focus was on another three. One of them was the large tractor cap man. He and the first man Tim had seen carrying the rotting railroad ties through the bar were lifting one of them and setting it across another. Square wedges had been cut in each beam, one cut at its middle and one near the top of the other tie, below an eyebolt that had been screwed into its top end. A tall hoist on wheels stood at the opposite side of the yard, above the working men. *They're going to burn someone in effigy*, thought Tim.

Tim looked toward the rear door of the bar. Stargut, the sheriff man, stepped out into the barbeque patio. This time he held an aluminum container of beer rather than his gun. Tim lifted his right hand to greet the sheriff and raised it further to his head, smiling and gesturing the pain he still felt. As Stargut drew near, Tim turned back away from the sheriff to close the door and join the party. His world went black once again.

Tossing the empty can of Pabst into the fire ring, Stargut had whipped out his forty-five and slugged Tim in the same spot he had already clubbed. "Yur right on time, son," informed Stargut.

The sheriff waved the gun barrel over his shoulder, signaling men to come and fetch the pig again. His favorite escort, tractor cap man, called off others who responded, and once again Tim's face plowed its way behind the man. This time its furrow led to the cross. Sam had just hammered home the final whack of the sledge hammer, fitting the two ties together.

"Might want to get that fahr started, Sheriff Stargut," suggested Sam.

A bed of sticks and branches had been laid down for kindling, over which three rows of ties had been carefully set, leaving room in the middle for the burbeque spit. A post hole three feet deep, formed from concrete had been set in the center of the pit. It wasn't meant for a staff toting Old Glory on Veteran's Day.

Tim was laid on top of the cross, his face bloodied and muddied from the escapade. The blood continued to run freely. Stargut stood over him and withdrew a red cowboy replica bandana from his left rear pocket and dropped it on the prisoner's chest. "Fix him up, Sam," he ordered. "We don't want him bleeding to death on us, now, do we?"

Sam rolled the supersized handkerchief, located the wound beneath it, and tied the cloth across Tim's forehead. "He'd make us a nice kitchen ma'rm," said Sam, marveling at his handiwork.

Having been done with stripping the skin from Tim's Fairlane, The Boneyard man pulled Tim's left hand onto the crossbar and set a twenty penny nail in the middle of his palm. The auto's skeletal parts were safely concealed and the balance of the vehicle would be cut apart come sunrise. Pulling the favorite claw hammer from a side pocket, he was interrupted by Stargut.

"What are you doing?" he asked. The chatter around him grew silent. "That would be . . . inhumane."

Stargut looked around sternly at his soldiers, the meanness glowing in his face. The men pulled their beer cans from their mouths and stood attentive. Stargut's straight lips began to curl upward, as his dark brown eyes grew black, revealing red-orange crosses in place of pupils. Then he began to roar in laughter.

"AH, HA, HA, HA, HA!" he screamed. "What the heaven . . . give the man a whack!"

The burbeque had officially begun.

“Set the fire and give the man a whack!” he added.

And the beers flowed. The men roared with their master. Gasoline was poured into the mouth of the fire pit. Rope was tied around the beams at Tim’s shoulders and his hands were served a couple of well deserved whacks. The hoist was wheeled over the cross. Tim was lifted upright, although his head and shoulders shrugged. Barely clearing the stack of railroad ties, the cross was positioned at the center where Sam climbed the hoist and guided the crucifix in place. It dropped down smoothly until Tim’s feet touched the ground and then another several inches, bending Tim at his knees. Now a head taller than Tim, Sam reached above his head and removed the steel hoist cable’s hook from the eye, and the eye from the post, making sure no hardware was unnecessarily wasted. As Sam climbed out of the pit, the cross drooped forward slightly. Tim’s head rose slightly for a moment and dropped back down.

“Wake him!” ordered Stargut. “Our friend of the wood was awake when this man ran him down. Wake him!”

Gasoline was poured into three plastic cups by Sam, tender of bars and burbeques. He tossed them at Tim’s face and bare chest, as others tore open his white shirt and partially ripped it away.

The pig of a man was revived. He lifted his head, discovering his dilemma, although his vision was so clouded he was uncertain of whether he was awake or living a dream. He pressed his feet down on the ground to stand upright and was suddenly reminded that he had been tacked to the tie. Tim shrieked, struggled, and pulled his left hand free, ripping it through the rusty nail, the palm of his hand purging spurts of blood with the rapid pace of his pumping heart. He screamed again, “What are you doing?” He pleaded through his cries of pain.

“It is wrong in the Village of Wrong to hurt our friends of the wood. Dead wrong,” explained Stargut. “You are guilty and you are condemned. Go to your heaven and leave us behind.”

Tim struggled through the pounding of his head and failing eyesight to focus on the lawman, his gushing blood pouring from the open wound in his skull. *His eyes must be lying*, he thought. The hair

on the sheriff's arms and his face was growing. Stunned to disbelief, Tim scanned the crowd that was closing in on him. The greasy, hairy people were also changing, their hair growing longer and their bodies evolving into terrible shapes and forms. The old dried up motel woman was teetering on her skinny legs, and her ugly face was supported atop a neck that had grown two feet in diameter, but this was no neck at all; it was the body of a blue racer, the bluish black snake revealing its white throat, which ran down the center of its body and into the ragged woman thing's legs. Other forms of mutating beings and animals limped, crawled, and hopped their way forward, drawn by the scent of Tim's blood and sweat. The crowd gathered about their master, bowing in anticipation.

The half man half black bear motioned with his right hand, twirling his forefinger in the air, commanding from Stargut's massive black chest. "Let it begin. Let it end"

And so it did. Sam the barkeep, his head now overgrown with stubby brown hair was sprouting a snout out of his nose and chin. He now bore facial features resembling both Sam and a huge rat. His human fingers struck a stick match and tossed it at Tim's chest. In an instant, Tim was consumed in flames, screaming under the howls and squeals of the mutant burbeque revelers.

Tim's soul went to his heaven, leaving the tribute of his body behind as banquet stuff for the throng of salivating killer demons.





## CHAPTER

# TWO

*LUMP, CLUMP, CLUMP, CLUMP, rap, rap, rap ..... , bang.* The

**C**Patty alarm rang at the back screen door. Four footsteps on the deck of the porch, and three quick taps on the door jamb as she passed through announcing her presence before the strained spring above her head seconded her motion. Her well worn path led her around the counter to her right side where it came to a dead end and made a left turn. The counter and her footsteps crept toward the double wash basin and the strainer that contained her coffee mug, rinsed of the cabernet sauvignon it had drained down her throat on several occasions the previous night.

“Mornin’, Bill,” she announced, without turning back, while she retrieved her cup and then reached for the coffee pot resting under the handmade farmhouse cupboards in the corner to her right. Patty’s thin frame was dressed and ready to dive into the garden; a day of garlic harvesting was planned. But she needed a blast of caffeine before she could face the rising sun. She wore dark brown cotton overalls on top of a faded pink T-shirt and bare feet. Her trimmed pink polished toenails turned to face Bill. “So what is our lovely Lovey up to?” she asked. She set her coffee down to trap her long dark blonde ponytail and stuff it inside her pink hair clip.

Bill was scraping the remains of his morning fried eggs and hot sauce with the last bit of rye toast wedged in his big right fingers. His dark brown hair was neatly trimmed and matched the loose tie straddled

around his big neck and unbuttoned white shirt. His brown eyes looked up as the toast was on a flight directed to the hangar near the back of his mouth. “She’s rubbing some cream on that sore toe she brought home from the crick,” he replied. The sauce-sogged rye landed safely. “She must have struck it on something down there in that crick hole.”

The triceps on Bill’s muscular arms both flexed, stretching the fabric of the shirt’s short sleeves as he pressed himself up from the bare oak table. His tie wiped across the crumb-laced plate and trace of refried beans. “Shucks,” he added, lifting the tie tenderly with both rugged hands. “Got me a trip down Columbus way. Folks got themselves a problem with a retort.” Bill licked his tie then bent down to retrieve the balance of the beans.

Patty was struggling to keep pace with the tall man’s short conversation. The man was beyond his sixtieth year but he was in good shape and religiously pushed iron three times a week. Lovey was her bestest of best friends and too many what ifs stood in the way of flirtation or something more sinister, but nonetheless, Patty enjoyed the appeal of his image, certainly as did other women twenty years behind him. However, his good looks were not currently her obstruction to comprehension. Patty struggled to get beyond the hole in the creek. Bill’s version of the toe touching incident was clearly a diversion from what Lovey had recalled, from what Lovey had said, from what Lovey had feared.

“What’s a retort?” asked Patty, as her mind struggled back toward the conversation. But it lost and fell back in time to the night just passed, and her blue eyes fell back and down into the Cleveland Browns souvenir cup where at the midnight hour the cool cabernet had begged Patty for another kiss.

“Ya see these here beans?” Bill replied with a question. “Now ya don’t!” he added stuffing the last forkful into his mouth. He spoke through his chewing. “Down in the canning plant they have to heat these suckers,” he began. He intended to provide Patty or anyone else within hearing distance a ten-minute introduction to steam generation and its application to the canning industry. He spoke as he slipped his

brown tweed jacket across his wide shoulders and swiped at the crumbs remaining on his tan pants.

Coffee that had replaced the wine slipped its tongue across Patty's and pulled her away while the retort recital rained silently around her.



I was still a bit shaky from my escapade in Bill's crick hole and knew I could never wrestle my body to sleep, so seeing Patty's kitchen light still on, I rung her up and asked her to meet me out at the back porch. Well, we had ourselves a good rockin' and I guess I did most of the talkin'. Ol' Buddy Miles, he played softly there behind us, so as not to wake Bill. He had himself a long drive in the morning, so he bid me a hug and kiss and jumped under the covers. I accepted that hug and kiss, but never figured it would be the last he would ever pass from those sweet lips he wore on that beautiful mug of his. We had us a good jump under those covers a bit earlier, but that's not what I'm here to talk about right now. Lordy, lordy, where was I? It's been almost ten years now, but it seems as though only one page has been torn away from that big ol' day calendar.

What was that, Bill? No, of course not, Bill. I could never be attracted to another man like that . . . and besides, that new man in town of yours has a name, it's Tom, and he's much too young for me, and I don't take no shine to no man, lessun' it's you. You know that. Maybe he'll take a shine to Patty. Lordy, Lordy, where was I?

Well, I broke out the wine and stuffed a couple bottles in a bucket with some ice and our coffee cups. We sure did a lot of talkin' between sips over the past ten years. Patty was no sports nut, but she sure did love that old Browns cup. Or maybe it just might have been the man that left that house next door, and that cup behind . . . along with Patty, her own self. She just kept on drinkin' and hopin'. But she never did much talk about that cup, or the man that come with it. Anyway, I laid it out what happened at that ol' crick plain and simple to Patty, as good and much as I could recollect.

After some genuflecting and knee bobbin' in church down south, Bill helped me spend the rest of that Sunday morning pulling some

weeds and stringing up tomato plants that were getting a bit long and heavy. It was such a pretty day, summer was under way and we just fell into the mood for a nice walk in the park. And since we had our own park sitting in the backyard, we decided to pack us up some sandwiches and lemonade and take a hike down by the creek.

Yes, I do remember, Bill. That big ol' monarch butterfly landed square on your left knee and sat there staring while you were gobblin' down that salami sandwich and those pepperoncini peppers. That was right about the time I decided I would wade a bit and dance myself across to the other side of your crick.

We done tossed a blanket down in a small clearing that let sunshine through the gathering of maple and oak trees and those tall stained white birches. We listened to the whistle of birds and watched the hawk that perched atop a dead pine. On our way there we even saw one of them eastern ratsnakes, black and spotted and lookin' longer than a freight train, and Bill tellin' me he was harmless as a daisy. That startled me, but with Bill at my side I wasn't scared or nothin'. But as I approached the stream, it suddenly grew quiet and then I got spooked by the ruffle of feathers. The hawk done swooped down on a tiny rabbit, dug its talons through its young skin and flew it right on away.

Yes, Bill, I remember how you pretended to cry over that poor wittle wabbit and that wascalwy birdie. But then you got real serious and said that we all have to let nature take its course. But sometimes nature's course ain't so natural, now is it, Bill?

I thought about that poor little rabbit and stepped into the crick. It was strange, because the moment my left foot hit the surface there was simply no sound at all, not even that sound you can hear late at night in the pitch of black down in a deep, deep cave. I thought maybe the batteries in my head was all disconnected, but I paid it no mind. The silence was refreshing, soothing. I took another step. My right foot struck the bottom of the crick and landed in mud. The water was halfway up my ankle. I looked back at Bill, his lips were moving, but nothing was coming out. He started speaking and I couldn't hear him and wasn't no lip reader.

I know you love me, Bill, but that's not what you said. And I'm sorry

I got short with you, but these ten years have really worn me down. Now where was I?

I turned back into the silence to what I was doing and looked down into the stream. The water seemed to be pooling in front of me, not really moving, but along the edges of the crick it was movin' along pretty good. That seemed strange. I dragged my left foot along the bed of mud, up and over a stone and lifted it beyond my right foot. That's when it happened.

I barely had time to react and can't recall whether or not I screamed. And though it seemed like I was down in that hole for an eternity, Bill must have been off his ol' butt in a heartbeat. He told me I popped outta that crick hole like I was flyin' off a trampoline on my way to a double flip.

Okay, Bill, a double backward somersault.

There was something mean in that water. It grabbed me by both ankles and just pulled me down. I thought I had bracelets of ice wrapped around my ankles, but it went away real fast and I just plunged straight on down. I managed to close my eyes nice and tight, 'cause you never know what kind of crud might be down there in that water, even though it was as clear as a windy day under a crystal blue sky. Just as soon as that ice around my legs thawed out I could feel the heat. It started down at my toes and run right on up my legs into my ass and there weren't no stoppin' that ol' train. And then that light got turned on, and it was so bright I couldn't get my eyes shut tight enough.

Yes, Bill. It was red and orange, both at the same time. No. I doubt if there was any heat lamp under that crick. What? Quit foolin' with me, Bill, I'm tryin' to be recollective here. What do you mean that ain't no word? If'n crick is a word, by golly I can make up some of my own. Hush up now and let me be!

So here I was, on my way down, lit up and heatin' up, dropping down like a big ol' rock. My hands were straight up over my head and I'll bet my hair was stickin' right on up with 'em, like if I was dropped right on outta the sky.

What do you mean pronounce my words? I am pronouncin' my words. I sound like a hillbilly? One more word from you, Mister

Webster, and I'll shut you on up for good. You hear me? Let me go on about my talk.

Okay. So here I am falling down lickety-split, and I start to think that if I don't hit bottom pretty soon that I'm gonna....., going to run out of air. I didn't have any time to react so I wasn't able to take a big breath before the big dive. And now my feet and ankles, they start to heat up real good. The water was getting brighter and hotter the more I fell. Just about the time I was going to start screaming and maybe just give up, I started to slow down. I could feel my body get lighter; the weight pulling at my shoulders was gone. And my toes came in contact with something, it was soft but real strong and stretchy all at the same time. Bill's got all the fancy words; elastic is what he would say.

Thank you kindly, Bill.

As I continued to fall, my momentum, as Bill would say, was absorbed by that nylon net or elastic or rubber band, or whatever got hold of my toes. And then I could feel myself coming to a complete stop. I thought that would be the end of me. I felt like I began to sweat; it was so intensely hot, hotter than a steam bath or one of those other fancy dry things. Why in tarnation would somebody want to lock themselves up in a room stuffed with steam or hot rocks? If you want to sweat, stop on over to the garden, and I'll make sure you sweat a drop or three.

And then I heard the screams. They were frightening and they were all around me, but mostly right down below, right on under my feet. They came from men and women and there were just too many to count. Just as I was coming to a dead stop down there on that net or trampoline I saw a hand, a huge black hand it was, with big long fingers and long nails that were sharpened to points. I saw this hand right on through those lock-tight eyelids of mine. And I felt my right toe slip through that net. The pain was so bad I *did* scream that time.

But I kept my mouth shut all the while, just like Bill, thank you kindly.

There was the screaming, the pain, the black hand, the bright red-orange light and the heat and the weight of my body that had finally caught up with me. I was preparing to open my mouth and let it all end, when suddenly I was thrust upward and my long floating hair took a

sudden detour as I sailed up through it and out of that water right on into those big beautiful hands of my man. And Bill whispered into my left ear, "Lovey, next time you ought to watch yur step."

And look who's talking about pronouncin'?

Now, when Bill says that I stubbed my toe or scraped it on a rock, you pay him no mind. I truly believe that somehow I got myself a round trip ticket straight on down to hell. Now I'm not the most church going lady and I can use some pretty fierce words now and then, but I guess I'm what you might call a generally good person. Well, I just wasn't good enough for that bright light, or that hand, those screamers, and all that fire, so they just kicked me and my scalded toe right on out of there.

Some people say their life is like hell on earth. Well, I got me a real taste.



Patty stared down into the coffee cup, recalling the glare in Lovey's eyes when she had confessed of her trip down to the depths of the strange world under the surface of the creek. Patty had no reason not to believe each and every word, and she herself dared not to step one foot past the edge of that water.

"Earth to Patty," announced Lovey, standing at her side, pouring her own cup of coffee. A Disney character band aid wrapped the damaged big toe of her otherwise bare right foot. Another wrapped the left big toe.

Patty stumbled out of her daydream, her night-dream. "You burned them both?"

"No," Lovey replied, "the other foot felt left out. And it wasn't me doing the burning."

Through the screen door, Lovey watched the big black '57 Lincoln roll across the black cinder drive and curl around the side of their farmhouse toward the highway and out of view. Above the roof of the car, Bill's left hand waved as it and the vehicle left her eyesight behind. She would not see that hand again.

"Where's Bill?" stumbled Patty.

"You still sipping on that wine?" Lovey asked in reply. "You were

standing here when Bill done kissed me goodbye.” Sitting in Bill’s chair, she waved back through the kitchen wall and window, although Bill and his Lincoln were already gone.

“I must have been daydreaming,” Patty said. She lifted a sip of coffee to her dry bare lips. “The story about the creek; I felt like I was actually *in* it.”

“Believe me, Patty, you don’t want to be in it,” Lovey ratified. “There’s something evil down there. Maybe you and me can do our self a little fishing sometime, but right now I’m going to take Bill’s advice and watch my step.”

“And I’ll be a couple steps behind you, Lovey,” she added, setting her cup down on the counter. “Right now we ought to step out to the garden and put our minds to the garlic that needs tending. Our day is going to be a lot deeper than that there crick,” she suggested, borrowing a word from Bill. “You stay away from that place.”

Lovey lifted her feet in the air, flexing her thighs under her tight jeans and staring at the matching band aids. “I wonder,” she said and sighed. “I guess Bill will be looking forward to some garlic taters tonight.” Then she jumped up and out of wonder, into the familiar haven of her garden.



“Yes, Sheriff,” spoke Bill into the greasy mouthpiece. “I’m there right now, The Boneyard.”

Bill looked for a rag or cloth on the counter. There was nothing but carburetors, two generators, an array of electrical odds and ends, and one headlight. He pulled a wrinkled receipt from under the pile and wiped the earpiece, then put it square to his left ear with the same large hand.

“No,” he explained. “I *was* being careful. It just jumped out into the road out of nowhere.” He listened again. “No, I was not speeding.” Bill’s head bobbed impatiently as he listened to more interrogation. “Yes, it was a small deer.”

The conversation seemed to be jumping about just as the deer had

been doing when it hopped into the front grill of the big Lincoln, which stamped *LoVEy* into the deer's left side with its front license tag.

"No, I don't believe I killed a baby, it was a fawn, a young deer. It was an accident, and there was something terribly wrong with it." He listened and interrupted the sheriff, "No! It was not a baby!"

Bill drew a deep breath. The sheriff he was speaking to was clearly distraught. But he was not the person involved in the accident, the one that had nearly collided with a huge oak tree attempting to avoid the collision. He was not the person being stared down by those evil black eyes with the glowing red-orange bulbs planted in them. Bill, with his tweed jacket already removed at the scene, had loosened his tie and unfastened two buttons on his shirt. Now he pulled the tie off and tossed it on the counter.

"I used a big rock," he explained, "it looked rabid and was mortally wounded."

Bill listened again, becoming increasingly aggravated. For crying out loud, he had hit a deer, not Grandma Moses. "You would have put it out of misery too! It was dying!" argued Bill's elevated voice.

With a finger held vertically across his lips, the ugly man behind the counter cautioned Bill. The man's hands and forearms were not only greasy, they were hairy.

"What do you mean he?" asked Bill. "Where is he? Where is who?"

Bill pulled the phone away from his face and looked at it, puzzled. The sheriff was clearly three cards short of a full house. "You mean the deer?" he asked, then explained. "I left it at the side of the road, a mile or south of The Boneyard."

Bill listened again. "No, I don't recall seeing anybody else. I got tied up working down south and it was getting dark. It was just about dusk when the accident happened." Bill paused. "Yes, I had my headlights on." Bill was ready to curse. "No, I didn't blind the . . ." Bill took a deep breath, finishing, "him."

Bill listened impatiently again and then extended the handset to the clerk behind the desk, trying not to pass his eyes over the man's foul looking mouth. "He wants to talk to you," he said.

The man wiped his right hand at the chest of his overalls. He

was even bigger than Bill and muscular, no doubt regularly pressing automatic transmissions above his head between engine transplants. Bill was about to comment on the mental status of Sheriff Stargut, but the man cautioned him again with his dirty left forefinger and then ran the filthy hand through his mussed black hair, paving way for the earpiece at his right ear.

“Uh, huh,” he acknowledged. “Yup, sheriff.” The man listened as he focused on Bill and intermittently chewed at something. “Yes, sir. It’s about that time of year.” He listened carefully. “Yup, we’ll clean him up real nice.”

The man smiled at Bill, but his incisors were covered with a ghastly brownish-black fluid, possibly the remnants of a crankcase. He raised the left forefinger, indicating that he was on the one minute countdown.

“Yes, sir, we’ll skin her right up nice and neat,” the man replied to Stargut.

Bill was exasperated. After all of the third degree and indignation, Sheriff Stargut was going to harvest the booty.

“Yup, sure will . . . yes, sir.”

The man set the handset in its resting place, while thinking of other resting places. “Sheriff would like you to come along with me.”

“Where to?” asked Bill.

“Back to the scene,” he responded, cutting off three more words of the sentence.

“Okay, I can follow you.”

“Nah, you can ride aside me,” he instructed Bill. “We’ll take care of yur Lincoln, yes, sir.”

“Is that necessary?” asked Bill.

“Came from Sheriff Stargut, so I reckon, necessary it is.” The large man took twin large breaths through the twin nostrils of his solo large nose. “Sheriff will be there.”

“Maybe I should lock her up,” Bill suggested, reaching into his right front pants pocket.

“No bother,” the big man explained, “she ain’t goin’ nowhere.”



Bill preferred the elbow room in his comfortable Lincoln to the pickup truck. Even though its shock absorbers were worn out it did not shake one bit as much as the steel cage in which he was now trapped. A ride in the Lincoln was a journey on cotton ball clouds. It just rolled along on a bed of air. The fix or repair daily heap in which he was sandwiched screamed from a plethora of moving parts, none of them, however, drawing the attentiveness of a caring ear. Bill thought that the clerk with the dirty mouth was driving in the wrong direction. Nevertheless, the man maneuvered the bucket of failing bolts down the lane bordered by white birches, stuttered at the highway and after a gear grinding downshift into first, he wheeled it to his right and pulled out onto the highway.

The other junkyard man that had joined them and penned him in the single bench cabin was just as large as the clerk that had been kind enough to let him use the telephone to report his encounter with the deer. In hindsight, Bill had second thoughts. He could have dragged the deformed deer into the brush on the side of the road as fodder for scavengers. Garlic potatoes had a much better aroma than the breaths of the two beasts escorting him back to the deer, or the scene, as the man had pointed out. It was not really necessary for Bill to lead them there, or for that matter for him to ID the dead animal. It was nothing more than a dead deer, although somewhat mutant. What's all the fuss about? It was dark, his stomach was churning and his taters were growing cold. He was eager to get this ordeal done and get back to life with Lovey.

Sheriff Stargut's siren was silent, but the twin red flashing lights atop the roof of his shiny new Ford revealed his presence behind them. As he sped past them, Stargut could not resist an ever so swift short blast, a confirmation, a reminder of just who was in charge of this investigation, just who held the badge of authority.

But the rickety bucket could never keep pace with the flying Ford; it would have disintegrated into a million fragments by the time it approached sixty miles per hour. The flashing lights ahead suddenly died and the taillights beneath their fading glimmer were evaporating as Stargut flew down the highway. Bill thought that the insane sheriff

was going to blow by the deer on into the next county, or country for that matter, but Stargut startled him.

The brake lights lit up and the car slid sideways, its rear end swinging around to the right. Then in a heartbeat, the cop car was headed back toward the pickup, but behind startle door number two it quickly pulled off the unlit road and disappeared under the shadow of night.

Another gear grinding shift down to the lower left corner of the Hurst floor shift dropped the pickup down to a turtle sprint as it approached Stargut's vehicle. Under the beam of the lone working headlight, Bill found Stargut taking charge of the scene.

Bill had never talked to the man in person before; he had not ever felt the need to meet or speak to the man. He paid no mind to village politics or the village itself. There was not very much to the village anyway, other than a laundromat, a run-down vacated gas station and a couple other buildings that somehow sprung up overnight near Richie's Tavern. Lovey and Patty did their shopping up north. He had no clue how Stargut got into office; it was supposed to be an elected position. Perhaps it was the sudden heart attack suffered by his sole opponent. No one had chosen to run against the man in the last five terms, if indeed there was anyone in the county who would want to run for the office. Bill had no clue what authority had hired the sheriff or for that matter who paid his salary. He had never heard of any election in the village and had never seen any political office campaign posters. The job came through county taxes he supposed. The man did his job well.

Well ..... , he did his job. He apparently brought in an ample amount of income for the unincorporated village patrolling the sole passage in and out of Wrong. And usually, daytime travelers not acquainted with the sudden reduction in the speed limit passed out of town a bit lighter at the purse strings than the moment they had entered. Enter the shiny new Ford with the bright flashing lights.

Bill recalled images of Sheriff Stargut standing as he was now, collecting bounty from drivers with blank faces, alongside automobiles that made the Wrong move at the Wrong time at the Wrong place. On one occasion he had even witnessed a vehicle being towed away from a scene, as the sheriff would have it, and at the driver's expense no doubt.

But he had never witnessed the actual culprit, the actual offender, the actual creator of the scene. The backseat cell of Stargut's vehicle had been empty, or so it seemed. The vehicle was undamaged, so it was apparent there had been no accident involving another vehicle, and Bill had not noticed anything, or anybody, lying dead on the side of the road.

Stargut stood in his gleeful way, solid and stiff, legs wide apart, left hand at his hip, his right hand tapping at the butt of his cannon gun. The barrel was directed at the heart of the scene, the head of the fallen deer. At the end of the day, Stargut appeared as though his uniform and headpiece had just checked out of the dry cleaners, his body intact throughout the entire process.

The coughing pickup rolled to peace diagonally in the oncoming lane, its solo light beam projecting Stargut's shadow across the back end of the deer and beyond, into the wood from which its powerful thighs had launched its final spring out into LOVEY's embrace.

The eyes of the dead animal remained open, but did not appear to be dead. Through the reflection of the headlight beam, Bill saw the glimmer of the deep black orbs of the deer's eyes that had stared him down as he lowered the rock in between the deer's second last and final breaths. The red-orange slices were missing.

"I'm sorry, little critter," he repeated, softly enough that it did not penetrate the ear drums of the sheriff's posse.

And then Stargut turned his head back over his broad left shoulder, just as the pickup evacuated its last belch. The orphan light beam remained on course as the two men lifted creaky door handles. For one brief moment, terror replaced Bill's hunger. For one brief moment, once again, the eyes of the deer, and the eyes of Stargut stared him down.

Stargut's eyelids removed the glare as his left arm raised and his forefinger waved Bill into the scene. There was no smiling comedian painted on his face. Bill removed himself from the disgusting odor of the cabin out into the bizarre world of the dead deer scene.

Bill approached Stargut, who had returned his gaze to the dormant body of the wood. There was no blood on its body.

"The wounds are on the other side," explained Bill. "I had to put him out of his misery."

“He was a friend of the wood,” replied Stargut, as the two men approached the deer.

One of the men had retrieved a large sheet of plastic from the back of the pickup. They laid it down and gently rolled the deer over. Its lower left abdomen was drenched in red. The crown of its head was fractured, but there was little blood.

“And how would you like to be put out of your misery?” asked Stargut. He suddenly whirled around, pulling his gun from its holster and swung a roundhouse at Bill’s head.

An accomplished boxer in his day, Bill threw his left arm up in defense, shattering his forearm in the process, but then landed a right cross square beneath the left eye of Stargut, ripping away a mass of skin.

Stargut twirled in the opposite direction, but quickly caught his balance, while Bill cradled his wounded arm. The other two men dropped the deer and charged the wounded offender. Stargut turned back at Bill and roared. It was a beastly howl that Bill knew could not possibly come from the chest of any man. Bill raised his head in anticipation of a wounded bear charging from the woods just as the two men were about to engulf him in a mass of muscle and grease. The growl had not been a bear or an animal or even an apparition; the eyes of the deer and the eyes of the beast standing inside of Stargut’s shell were one and the same, something most evil and deadly.

The friendly clerk grabbed Bill’s injured arm and twisted it in a direction arms were not meant to be twisted. The other man collared Bill under his right arm and rammed his right knee in a place too private to mention its parts. Bill screamed publicly in pain while the dead eyes of Stargut stared him down and the hard steel of the monster’s gun barrel took him down even further, into a realm of darkness.

The seemingly empty backseat cell of the shiny new Ford hauled away another unconscious offender of the wood. The hard plastic covering the upholstery had never been removed from the year old vehicle’s rear seat, but on occasion it was wiped free of debris and blood. The deer was removed and prepared. The scene was cleaned; now it was no longer a scene, only a script that had never been written, but not soon forgotten. Once he regained consciousness, the offender would be

served a fitting last supper and then, just like the deer, ceremoniously he would be put out of his misery.



Bill opened his eyes and reached for the radiating pain at his left temple, currently running a nose ahead of his mangled left forearm. His otherwise brown hair was matted and covered in blood. Even the hair was almost too painful to touch. He was uncomfortable lying over his stomach on the concrete floor, so he rolled over onto his back and struggled to sit, while wondering why all this had happened and where was this room in which he woke. His improving vision struck the cell door bars. They were open. His thoughts moved to Stargut, the roar of what he thought had been a bear, and those eyes. Those evil eyes. Lovey had spoken of seeing such a color when she had taken her step down by the river.

Bill moved his head to the right and found a blanket-free cot, upon which sat an aluminum platter. Upon the platter sat a cheap bar plate, upon which sat some type of sandwich. It appeared to be charred. Next to that was a clear glass mug filled with flat beer. Bill thought that the stagnant liquid was probably warm as well, but his right hand charged for the drink in a spurt of natural instinct. Anything to ease the pain.

Bill carefully maneuvered the hand of his pulsating left arm to investigate the sandwich, its fingers removing the upper half of the sesame seed bun. It was some kind of meat; the hand's forefinger pressed at the center of what was posing to be a patty, but not having much success. The finger told him that the meat was not cold, but that it was not griddle warm either. It also told his forearm not to exert too much pressure; it might explode and suffocate the fingernail. In between, the hand overruled the finger and went for the gusto, plunging it down into the center of the patty imposter.

Bill struggled to swallow the room temperature beer from the mug in his right hand while the lone finger explored the contents of the meat. The outside had been burned, but the inside was moist, greasy, and there were splinters of some sort in the mixture. It had been assembled

in a rush. The fingertip wondered if the splinters were fish bones. The hand rejected that thought; the texture was wrong. The hand made a command decision that it would take a whiff, so it hauled the patty upward as Bill's nose converged. The good ol' sniffer Bill wore on his face had always been reliable in the past.

Venison.

"Well, I'll be . . ." began Bill, ready to curse again before being interrupted.

"Enjoy yur meal," began Stargut, nursing the bandage at his left cheek.

"You don't waste any time, do you Stargut? Or should I say Scargut?" replied Bill sarcastically.

"You gave me no choice," Stargut informed Bill. "You killed him, you ran him down. He was a friend of the wood and you murdered him. To you, I am Sheriff."

"I told you it was an accident," answered Bill angrily. "What is this friend of the wood crap all about? Are you insane?" Bill's hand abandoned the sandwich and struggled with his other body parts to get the man back on his feet where he belonged at this particular moment.

Stargut had other plans. "It is you that lacks the sanity of sight. You do not see. You do not understand. And now your misery will be removed."

The sheriff's eyes lit up again, the entire balls initially turning solid black, and then bright red orange horizontal slits opened from side to side, as well as a short vertical cross. Bill missed the coming out show while climbing up off the floor, but witnessed another short glimpse of the dead deer eyes as Stargut dropped his gun barrel across the right side of his head. Stargut would not give the man another opportunity to inflict more damage.

The beer mug shattered when it collided with the floor and the unconscious right hand slapped Bill's last supper off the platter when his body ricocheted off the cot, back down to its earlier resting place.

When the right hand regained consciousness with Bill and his other appendages, it found that it could do no more investigating. Along with its arm, it had been tied to a railroad tie, and then it was pinned to a

wooden post through the middle of its palm by a long large nail. The hand felt itself being lifted along with Bill from a horizontal position, but it was not his legs that were accomplishing the maneuver. They, too, had been bound. The hand sensed that Bill could not move freely; he was planted on a cross in the same fashion as the man across which its fingers passed when Bill prayed. And the man at the opposite end of the hand was praying again.

The right hand pleaded with him. “Can you help me Bill? I am, oh, so sore. And it is, oh, so hot. Please, Bill. I want to touch Lovey. Please. Just one more time. Before we all die.”



Patty’s footsteps and hand raps announced her presence in the country kitchen. She hardly noticed Lovey hunkered down over the table in Bill’s favorite spot. But when she found that the coffee pot was empty she turned back around.

“You running on empty this morning, Lovey?” she asked.

Lovey lifted her head up from her crossed forearms to Patty and then ran her gaze across her, the counter and sinks, then back behind her to the stove, still bearing the dinner she had made—pork chops and garlic potatoes, along with string beans. She also still wore her battle dress from the previous long day in the garden.

“My you look like forty miles of bad road, sweetie,” concluded Patty. “Bill never came home last night,” she replied. “I feel like forty miles of bad road.”

“He run into car trouble or something?” asked Patty.

“I don’t know, he never did call.”

“That sure ain’t like your Bill,” validated Patty. She began preparing a pot of coffee. “Maybe he did have car trouble down on some country road somewhere where he couldn’t get to a phone.”

“He carries tools in the trunk and some spare electrical parts, so if it was something simple, he could have fixed the car himself. It had to be something big. He would have called if his work had kept him down

there. And he was looking forward to his potatoes. Nothing and nobody would get between him and those garlic taters, not even me.”

“We all know Bill has eyes for only one lady, Lovey, so don’t be getting foolish ideas,” remarked Patty. She continued pouring water from the pot into the coffee maker.

“I hope he didn’t get into no accident,” said Lovey. “I mean *an* accident or *any* accident. I don’t want Bill to hear me talking like no hillbilly.”

“You’re a couple steep hills short of that, Lovey, and it’s just you and me right now,” Patty confided. “So you just pick out any old words that fit between those lips of yours. And country talk is a bit different than hillbilly lingo. You have to *look* like a hillbilly to talk like one, and I think you’re about one or two shades too dark for them folks.”

The two women managed to fit a good giggle into the current crisis and afterward kept their eyes on the telephone that hung on the wall just inside the screen door. Lovey’s skin was the benefactor of life’s ancestral bag, a mixture of Creole on mama’s side and Navajo on Poppy’s blended genes, and there was very likely a spot of darker blood along the way. How they wound up in the back hills of Kentucky was a mystery of misery Lovey cared not to ponder. Buried in the backyard of her mind were tales of magic, torture, voodoo, and sacrifice. Distilled through it all, generations above Lovey left her skin a permanent tan—beige cream it was, Bill had told her, smooth and sweet. And he would drink it all day long and even longer into the night. Patty placed a black coffee in front of Lovey. What she really needed was a cup of her man.



What followed was a spark, igniting the strange course of events over the next ten years that led to Lovey’s isolation. Patty had initially been the glue that held Lovey together, the crutch that kept her from falling into an abyss of depression. She provided her with purpose and reason to wake, fill her cup of life each day and drink from it. Clues to the underworld of the village found their way to Lovey’s doorstep. While those around her slept, blinded by Stargut’s aura, his power, his spell;

Lovey's eyes remained open and wide apart. She witnessed events that others, even Patty, could not see, could not hear, could not comprehend and dismissed with other forgotten memories. None questioned Stargut's gift of youth. The man had not aged a minute since that fateful day ten years ago when he had murdered her man. His youthful looks simply ran in the family. Lovey knew otherwise—it was evil and death that ran in his family. She had witnessed this herself in living, dying color. There were no *real* people in the village; the whole place was a façade. One day, she would have her way. In the meantime, she slipped further away, quietly observing the society that existed around her. She sadly watched as Patty slipped out of her reach. Patty could gather Lovey's carefully constructed words, but they filtered through her, just as silent breezes blown through leaves in a sun-starved forest. Hidden, they remained stored away, should Stargut call for a change in the weather. Patty was incapable of comprehending his evil; she was his captive and subconsciously became a watchful eye over the wood. Lovey could no longer hold Patty as her confidant. During daylight hours Patty was the same vibrant, energetic person she had always been, but at night she was as dormant as a hibernating ground squirrel. And with the emergence of the full moon Patty was unreachable, a mindless troll.

Patty was away on a day trip, hauling herbs, spices, and veggies to restaurants up north of Wrong. She was driving the same pickup truck she had used to haul Lovey into town for a face to face accounting of Bill's demise with Sheriff Stargut, when together they had hoped to gather Lovey his ashes. But now she had Saturday's shopping and errands to run, so she had left as the sun blinked its eye open and was not expected back until late afternoon. Neither of them ventured to town alone, or together, out in the dark. Lovey made her swear that she would not enter the village limits once the sun had set. If delayed, Patty could turn around, head back north and find a motel along Lake Erie or even nest in a beaver dam before she made any attempt at driving through Wrong in the dark. Patty could not understand, because she often felt drawn there, but she agreed to Lovey's request, her plea, Lovey's demand.

Morning had blended well into afternoon and it was sunny, with

plenty of puffy clouds about to contrive images of fantasy. Patty and Lovey had been helping their new neighbor, Tom, with several projects, renovating the property that sandwiched Lovey between him and Patty. The young man usually dressed in black and he wore a collar, explaining that he was a preacher ....., of sorts. The adjacent property had been vacant for years, except for the brief appearance of the coffee cup man; rumors of a ghost and its remote location kept it that way. Bill recalled stories about the property being a hub for the underground railroad, a safe haven for runaways. Bill, Lovey, and Patty tended to yard work to keep the vacant property in reasonable condition, but the buildings were in dire need of new skin over their weather beaten and peeling siding. Painting Tom's barn had been moved to the top of the current list of things to do. Both Tom and Lovey were spotted with white primer. Tom also wore a Cleveland Indian's baseball cap over his long dark blond hair and above his blue eyes. Well marinated in time and use, the faded blue cap seemed odd worn backwards atop the skull of a preacher. He was a handsome man to which feminine parishioners would most certainly flock and bore the look of a man whose religion had ventured him far into worlds preachers dare not go. Lovey was still pondering what particular sort it was that Tom preached. He had just shown up one day with his pickup truck, explaining that he would be renting the place from a trust that had been established. It seems that the timing of the trust and the coffee cup man was perhaps coincidental. And no, he was not considering converting the barn into a church and had no plans for renovating it into some kind of retreat for the conversion of lost souls, choir groups, or miracle miners. He was not a preacher of that sort.

It was Tom whose lips were the first she had ever seen pass the words strange and Stargut in the same breath. For ten years the words had been mutually exclusive, especially when words came from Patty. The sheriff is not unusual. Stargut has his way. He is not odd. The man is unique. What shadow? The man carries no shadow. She had known the preacher man for possibly three weeks or more, but Lovey sensed that the mysterious man, Tom, might be able to carry something that these days was far too much a burden for Patty. And that was Lovey's trust. Why not? He was a preacher ....., of sorts.

Tom settled into Patty's rocker. Lovey sat at his left in Bill's padded rocker, and in between them rested two pails filled with ice surrounding bottles of burgundy, compliments of Tom. He was building a third rocker in which, he told the women, he someday might preach to them under the moon and stars, God's cathedral. Tom poured full portions in both coffee cups. Lovey's was stenciled with Bill's first name, while Tom's read One Night Stand Motel.

Tom's muscles bulged from his spotted dark blue T-shirt. He grasped Lovey's thoughts and read them out loud, wasting no time with weather chatter. "Now that Patty is away," he began, "maybe you can open up a bit about your Bill. Preachers have good ears, you know, and I'm one that keeps his lips together tighter than a football seam." Close enough, he leaned to his left and patted her right hand that rested on top of her coffee-wine cup.

"You mentioned that you had taken a drive into town and met with Sheriff Stargut," she replied. "You said he was strange. Why was that?"

"You're testing me, ma'am," he replied in return, "but I can understand why. I stopped in to ask him about what kind of critters we might find in these parts. I plan to fix up that old chicken coop, tear it down and build another actually. I thought I saw a wolf back near the edge of the wood; odd for these parts, I thought. He didn't take it so kindly when I asked him about the laws in town if you need to shoot some wild animal to protect your livestock."

"I'll wager he done read you a mouthful of Wrong ordnance this and Wrong ordnance that," said Lovey. "Darn! I hope Bill didn't hear that. Sometimes I slip with my hill talkin' verbs and what not." She paused and then added, "Darn! There I go again."

"Some of the things that run out of my mouth can get a lot higher than hills and bills, Miss Lovey," Tom chuckled.

"Oh, Tom. You can just skip the ma'am and the miss and get right on to the Lovey part. My Bill won't pay no mind. Oops."

"Then I will get right on to it, Lovey," Tom said in a serious tone. "Have you seen the shadow that follows him?"

Lovey was simultaneously shocked and thrilled at Tom's point-blank approach. When he had used the word strange, he carried much more

than a canary's butt to back up the statement. Tom had seen Stargut's shadow. "I've seen that and a lot more, Tom. There is something wrong in that village and it's not just the name. It even took hold of Patty. I'm the only one around these parts that's not some kind of zombie. The town is full of his men, some of 'em women, but all of them his soldiers, I expect. They just seem to be growing one by one, and every one of those people just tends to whatever it is Stargut goes on and tells them to do. Something is wrong with every one of those people. I don't even think they are people. Maybe that's why the place is called the Village of Wrong. The sign just went and popped up one day." Lovey drew a double swallow from the wine. "It's been going on for the better part of ten years. Where do I begin?"

Tom knew exactly where to point Lovey. "The day after Bill died."

