

Kilmichael, Mississippi. Four people's lives are ended by a remorseless young man. The small town reacts with horror at this senseless crime. After five trials, a conviction still doesn't stick, so the victims' families take justice into their own hands.

RED RAGE

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/3723.html?s=pdf>

Red Rage

by
Jo Stewart Wray

Copyright © 2008 Jo Stewart Wray

ISBN 978-1-60145-657-1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2008

For more information:
Armadillo Publishing
P.O. Box 404
Kilmichael, MS 39747

Chapter One

In the middle of June, Hell ascended on Kilmichael, Mississippi. The rage one killer felt caused a storm to unfold on the hearts of most that lived there. The town of Kilmichael is ninety miles northeast of Magnolia on U.S. Highway 182. An hour after dawn on this June day, the scorching temperature rose to around eighty degrees. Some people came in to work early if for no other reason than to beat the heat. The downtown business district didn't open until nine o'clock. The weather forecast called for a chance of rain, but the tears happened before the rain and continued during the rain and years afterward.

At 10:21 AM, Chief of Police James Helm answered the call to come to Eden's Antiques. According to the caller, some people had been shot. He hurried to his car and turned on his blue light and siren to alert the public. He started the car and drove west, racing across the railroad and south down Front Street to the store. Chills ran down his back at the sound of his siren. The short distance from the police station to Eden's Antiques took about two minutes.

Chief Helm's muscles tensed; he squinted his dark brown eyes. Although he hadn't played football since high school, his tight, ebony skin glistened over the muscles on his five foot nine inch big-boned frame. A handsome man, he commanded attention whenever he entered a room.

The thrill of the siren passed and fright took its place. He went alone. He parked in front of Eden's. Sue Jones and Tom Smith stood waiting in the doorway of Poppy's hardware store. Chief Helm motioned for them to go back inside the store.

He got out of the police car, drew his weapon, and eased toward the front door of Eden's. He remembered coming to Eden's as a teenager with his mother to make payments on their antiques. Memories of his childhood usually calmed him, but not today. Scared, he pushed open the front door of Eden's Antiques; he waited for Mrs. Eden to greet him. He heard nothing except a gurgling sound.

“Oh, my God.” He saw four bodies lying on the floor. His hands shook. Aware that the intruder might be hiding behind some of the antiques or in the lower part of the store, he watched and listened. Then he walked down the aisle toward Beverly Eden’s office. The bodies of Karen Ruston, Jim Stellar, and Ronnie James lay toward the front of the store near the main horse-shoe-shaped counter, and Beverly Eden’s body lay toward the back. He knew all of them. Blood pooled near the victims, and Chief Helm smelled blood and death in the room. He backed out of the store with his gun drawn. Now, his gun shook as well as his hands.

Immediately upon reaching his car, Helm radioed the dispatcher, “Get an ambulance to Eden's Antiques immediately, call the District Attorney’s office, get the Mississippi Highway Patrol, and get me some back up. Four people are down inside. Something’s bad wrong.” Chief Helm saw no need to give an address, but did anyway. Everyone in town knew the store’s location. He secured the front door and stretched the yellow crime scene tape across the front of the store. Still he saw no one moving inside.

When Bart Elliott and his MedResponder Ambulance team arrived, they hurried inside.

Chief Helm pointed out some bloody shoe prints near the concrete ramp that lead to the lower part of the store. “Let me check your shoes,” Helm said to Elliott and his EMT team.

Appointed Chief of Police in Kilmichael, Helm had aced law enforcement school but hadn’t needed to use much that he had learned. Most of the problems he had dealt with were thieves and DUI or drugs. He seldom had to deal with murders. He looked at the bottom of each man’s shoes. He found no blood on their shoes.

Jim Stellar seemed to be the only person still alive. He lay face down in a large pool of blood. Bart Elliott checked his vitals. Jim took a breath. Elliott said that he felt a pulse. Although alive, Jim didn’t respond.

Two unspent bullets and a bloody shoe print lay a couple feet from Jim. “Don’t go near those bullets or those footprints.” Elliott

Red Rage

rubbed his mustache and cautioned his EMT team. They loaded Jim onto a stretcher.

They stayed clear of the visible evidence.

“We checked the other three bodies. They’re gone,” Elliott said. “Chief Helm, call the coroner. I can’t help them.” The MedResponder team loaded Jim into the ambulance. Rusty Stellar, Jim's father, crawled inside and it sped away to the Kilmichael Hospital. Sirens screamed. Lights flashed. Vehicles moved over on Front Street to let them pass.

This time the sirens didn’t thrill Chief Helm. He was in shock and feeling sick.

As the ambulance drove away, Tom Smith returned to the store from Poppy's hardware. Chief Helm checked the elderly black man’s shoes for blood, too. Neither the EMTs nor Tom Smith had made the prints. Chief Helm had been careful not to step in any blood himself.

“I’m sure those footprints weren’t here a while ago,” Tom Smith said. Shock and horror showed in Tom’s expression, and his eyes looked glassy.

“Oh, my. That means whoever killed them was inside while you were here, Tom,” Chief Helm said. He shook his head in disbelief. “I’m going to need help here.”

Helm called the coroner, Joplin Holmes, the District Attorney Julianne Mitchell’s office, the Crime Lab in Magnolia, and the Piney Town Highway Patrol to come to Eden's Antiques in Kilmichael. Each time he repeated the same gruesome story of four people down in Eden's Antiques, and only one, Jim Stellar, was still alive. The Howard County coroner was out of town, so his substitute, Tom Childress or “Skenner,” from Big Black County had to come. Mark Thomas with the District Attorney’s office and Ches Eiland with the Highway Patrol soon arrived.

The sirens beckoned to the townspeople in this sleepy, Southern town. If today had been a normal day, they would have complained about the \$1.23 per gallon gasoline prices and bragged about the look of the new Mississippi car tags coming in the fall. They would have discussed the closing of Roberts Brothers Manufacturing and watched

the Olympic Games on television. A few might even have gone to the Choctaw Indian Fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi, but today's tragedy would change things forever.

The EMTs transported Jim Stellar to Kilmichael Memorial Hospital. Chief Helm felt like screaming. The sound of the ambulance siren didn't thrill him anymore. "Won't the people from D.A. Mitchell's office and the Crime Lab ever get here?" More and more frightened people gathered outside the crime scene tape around Eden's Antiques Store, so Chief Helm went back outside to help control the crowd.

The telephone circuits in and around Kilmichael and Howard County became busy as soon as people heard Chief Helm's calls for help on their scanners. The people around Howard County and other parts of Mississippi and even the United States often tuned in to the same channel as the police. Chief Helm had heard people talking about listening to a scanner as a form of entertainment. He figured that everyone from the Casinos in Robinsonville, Mississippi, to the Casinos on the Gulf Coast knew everybody else's business. Phones and scanners kept the rumor mill fed. Four people shot in broad daylight in a store in Mississippi would make national news.

The town of Kilmichael pretended to welcome everyone, but it had clear divisions-race, money and location within Howard County and a fourth division, terrain, separated this hilly town from the flat lands of the Mississippi Delta. Despite these divisions, people trusted each other. Often they trusted too much.

All local inhabitants had a smooth southern drawl that flowed like honey, and some of the people in the surrounding country areas used broken, country English. They said ain't, ya'll, and fix'in to. Other country people graduated from college with advanced degrees because of the Sumner Grant that enabled all in the county to go to college. People dressed according to their occupations from business suits and ties to cowboy boots, work boots, and faded jeans. Women dressed according to their ages and occupations.

Red Rage

Both Beverly Eden and Karen Ruston, two of the victims, demonstrated this tasteful way to dress, being careful to look flattering but not especially sexy or too young.

Some large antebellum or Victorian homes occupied the city limits, but in the country people lived in farmhouses or brick ranch houses. An elaborate church sat on every corner of town, and country churches dotted the county for all denominations and for both races, but rarely did they mix except in the public schools. This division would become more and more evident.

Other than the stately churches and the few antebellum homes, Kilmichael didn't have much to see. The older part of town was located near the railroad that transported freight. Front Street ran parallel to this railroad. Several stores on Front Street were closed with the exception of Eden's Antiques Company and Poppy's.

Most people in this small town of around five hundred to a thousand knew each other well, especially within the races.

The Projects house the population on Federal Assistance. These children go to the Kilmichael Public Schools along with those who live on Poorhouse Road, Bluff Springs Road, and Money Hill. These students ride buses to the public schools across Howard County. Both black and white and a few Hispanic students attended the public schools together without much friction if it was a good day.

Howard County folks usually abided by the law, but drugs such as crack and homegrown marijuana had inched into their habits, giving the local law enforcement something to do when they weren't chasing thieves. In the old days, men made moonshine. Some still had whiskey stills.

Then on this morning in June, gunshots changed things in this peaceful, small, central Mississippi town. Before that sweltering morning, townspeople went to work or to church, watched television, played recreational ball, sat on the front porch, and cooked out with their families. Some relaxed and slapped at the mosquitoes buzzing in their ears, fanned, and drank cold beer or sweet iced tea.

On that hot morning in June, someone changed the peacefulness of this town and not one witness would be able to tell what happened.

Still more and more shocked people gathered outside the store. No homicides had been recorded in Kilmichael in the last twenty years, but since June 14, the town had five. Chief Helm thought about the recent robberies at Mid-Big Black Loan Company and the Bank of Kilmichael. These added to the residents' apprehension.

People gathering outside the store acted frightened. "Chief Helm," one woman in the crowd standing in the street near the store said, "I hope these slayings wake ya'll up. Maybe now you will pay attention to the increase of crime here and out in Howard County. Maybe ya'll put a stop to it."

"Ma'am, I'm not asleep." Chief Helm said. He felt stung by what she had said. Why was it that folks would catch him in a crowd and try to embarrass him?

Chief Helm watched with interest and amusement as one of the local Baptist pastors led a racially mixed group of residents in prayer for the families of the victims and for Jim. They joined hands and prayed for James "Jim" Stellar, who by this time was being transported to the University Medical Center in Magnolia, Mississippi. The people standing around talked about this incident bringing the community closer together. According to someone, this senseless killing had already motivated neighbors of both races to come together

"I doubt it," Chief Helm said. "Hell will freeze over first." Then on second thought he realized the effects of his statement. "We will all do whatever we can to help."

Deputy Sheriff Tomboline was standing next to Chief Helm when he got a call from the plant manager at Garrett Manufacturing about Damien Fay's stolen pistol. The gun had been reported stolen one hour after the call came in about the murders. The Sheriff Ronnie Grisham had been injured in a car crash and was unable to investigate, so Deputy Tomboline took over. "Chief," Deputy Tomboline said, "Sally, down at the Sonny's Fried Chicken place heard something about a .380 pistol being stolen this morning from Damien's car at Garrett Manufacturing."

"Hey, that's the kind of unspent bullets I saw in there." Helm motioned with his head toward Eden's Antiques. "Hurry on down there,

Red Rage

Deputy. Take Patrolman James Lamar Tompkins with you. This may get solved before anyone from the District Attorney's office or the Highway Patrol gets here. We really need to solve this one. I'd like to take that call myself, but I guess I'd better stay here to secure the crime scene."

Deputy Tomboline and Mississippi Highway Patrolman James Lamar went to the car. Tomboline turned on his blue lights, and after he got the crowd to move out of the street, he backed out and left Eden's to go to Garrett Manufacturing.

Rusty Stellar worked in Attala County. Someone called him at work to tell him to meet the ambulance in Magnolia at the University Hospital. Jim was transported there from Kilmichael Hospital because they didn't have the means to take care of a gunshot wound to the head.

Chapter 2

Mark Thomas, Criminal Investigator for District Attorney Julianne Mitchell, had just walked into the District Attorney's office when the call came in. Thomas and District Attorney Mitchell hurried to Kilmichael and Eden's Antiques. The job of finding the killer and prosecuting him rested on Mark Thomas, Ches Eiland, the Highway Patrol, and District Attorney Julianne Mitchell and his Assistant District Attorneys Cyd Delta, Billy Blick, and Kelvin Hovas's shoulders. It took Mitchell and Thomas only twelve to twenty minutes to drive from District Attorney Julianne Mitchell's office in Big Black to Eden's Antiques Company in Kilmichael.

In law enforcement for twenty-four years, Mark Thomas had investigated many crime scenes, but he dreaded this one more than any other he remembered. Since he had been Chief of Police in Kilmichael in the past, he knew these victims personally. For his own reputation and for the victims' families, he needed to solve this one as fast as possible.

As soon as he stopped outside Eden's, he reached for his latex gloves. He reached for a documentation pad from the back seat. His job involved many questions: Who? How? Where? When? Why? Who had killed these people? In solving crime scene questions, Mark used his intelligence, intuition or gut feelings, and common sense. The first question would be easy for him to answer since he felt like he would know all the victims. Thomas had called Julia Janis, Acting Director of the Mississippi Crime Lab in Magnolia, Mississippi. Having four bodies in one store warranted expert help.

Thomas looked around for someone from the Crime Lab in Magnolia, but no one had made it yet. Melanie, with the Crime Lab, and Dr. Strong Whitaker at Rankin Medical would be responsible for "how" the victims were shot. Thomas knew he didn't have to be concerned with that, but he had learned quite a bit about blood splatter patterns from previous experience. The answer to the question "Where?" was Eden's Antiques, Kilmichael, Mississippi. "When" could

Red Rage

be pinpointed to be between nine and ten o'clock this morning. The last two, "Why?" and "By whom?" would take considerable amounts of Thomas's time and effort to solve. Later, it would be said that he spent more hours on solving this crime than any other he had ever investigated, but he felt as if his job and reputation depended on it, not to mention his feelings of sympathy for the victims families all of which he knew personally.

Making their way through the crowd, Thomas and D.A. Mitchell crossed the yellow crime scene tape to the front door of the store. Thomas stood about one foot taller than District Attorney Mitchell. Above their heads the words Eden's Antiques in large red letters stood out against the beige aluminum. The red letters matched the red of the brick on the storefront.

The two entered the store. It looked as it had all Thomas's life. He felt somewhat out of sorts since he personally knew the victims, but he knew how to be professional. If at all possible, he would keep his emotions in check.

Chief Helm greeted them. "Am I glad to see you folks."

Mark Thomas and Chief Helm worked together often. Mark Thomas, his wife and son, and the rest of his relatives lived in Kilmichael and Howard County. Like other small, southern towns, everyone in the Kilmichael knew everyone else.

Soon after Mark Thomas and District Attorney Mitchell reached Eden's Antiques, Ches Eiland and David Milner with the Mississippi Highway Patrol arrived ready to help with the investigation.

"Hey, where is the man who found these people?" Thomas asked Chief Helm. He wanted to get his attention focused on the task of gathering crime scene evidence, figuring out who shot these four people.

"That would be Tom Smith."

"I want to talk to him." Thomas tried to sound as professional as possible. He didn't want to show the emotion that he felt.

Chief Helm motioned for Tom to come to where he stood with Ches Eiland, District Attorney Mitchell and Mark Thomas.

“Tom, I’m Mark Thomas, Chief Investigator for the District Attorney, and this is Ches Eiland with the Highway Patrol and Julienne Mitchell, District Attorney for this district in Mississippi. Can you tell me what happened to you today? Start whenever you got up this morning.”

Ches Eiland looked questioningly at Thomas, but didn’t interrupt. Thomas’s size demanded respect. So no one questioned his methods as he did his job.

“Yes, Sir. My wife called me to the telephone a little before nine o’clock this morning. Mrs. Beverly Eden wanted me to come to the store to train some young men about how to load and unload antiques, so I said ‘Yes, Ma’am, Mrs. Beverly, I can be at the store about 9:30 this morning.’ I hung up the phone and began to eat the breakfast that my wife had cooked. She poured my coffee and then she asked me what Mrs. Beverly wanted today. My wife wanted me to help her with some tomatoes. She didn’t think Mrs. Beverly should still be calling me to come in to the store since I had retired from there.”

Thomas let him ramble. It seemed to be calming him. Often he got more details out of an emotional witness that way, but he knew from his demeanor that Eiland thought this method of questioning was a waste of time and preferred the straight question and answer technique.

“Beverly Eden wanted me to teach two young men about delivering antiques. I told my wife that and then I told her, ‘Mrs. Beverly did a lot of favors for us over the years. I feel like we owe her.’ My wife had laid my clothes out on the bed earlier that morning like she knew I was going to get a phone call or at least go to town, so I got dressed and went out to my truck.”

Thomas noted that Tom wore pressed khakis and a plaid shirt. He shoes were black lace-ups with nylon looking dark-colored socks. No visible blood showed on his clothes or shoes.

“I drove my old Ford pick-up truck to Poppy's workshop behind Eden's Antiques. When I pulled up to the workshop, Carson McGee came out to see what I wanted. I told McGee about the church’s air conditioner compressor. I really wanted to see Mr. Mathis, but he was

Red Rage

out on a call. I had the air conditioner in the back of my truck, but I didn't want to unload it since it was so heavy. McGee didn't either, so that boy climbed up in the back of my pick-up truck to look at it. Then I asked him if I could leave my truck back there at his shop while I went to the Antiques store? I told him that I'd walk through the alley to see the folks I used to work for at Eden's Antiques because Mrs. Eden just hired herself two new boys to do my old job.

Well, when I reached Front Street and looked up at the store's name in tall, red letters, I remembered the day those letters got put up there. I'd helped. Then I saw the flag hanging on the pole outside the store. Hanging the flag had been my job for fifty years. I walked to the glass door and pushed it open. I looked at my watch. It read ten o'clock and I was late.

Inside the store, I noticed streaks of leftover dust in the aisles between the antiques. Apparently someone dust-mopped the day before, but the mop head needed changing. I figured the new boy or Ronnie James was too shy to ask where they kept the clean mop heads. I dreaded teaching someone else how to do what I couldn't physically do anymore. I'm getting old and slow. I'm seventy-six. Maybe that's why I got there later than I meant to be getting to the antiques store this morning. Mrs. Eden didn't greet me when I came inside the store. Usually she had a kind word to say to all her customers, even those that she had to call to remind them that they owed a payment and that their antiques might be repossessed if they didn't come in to make that payment. If Mrs. Eden didn't greet customers, Mrs. Karen usually did."

A tear rolled down Tom's face. "No one said a word." He became silent.

"Tom, why did you think no one came to see who was there?" Thomas asked. He had to get him back to what had happened.

"I thought that perhaps Mrs. Karen hadn't come back from the bank or the post office. She always went the first thing in the morning, but she couldn't have been gone unless she had walked. I saw Mrs. Karen's gray Pontiac parked in its usual location beside Beverly Eden's Mercury near the median between the two sides of Front Street. Since no one greeted me, I started back down the aisle of the showroom

toward Mrs. Eden's private office. Near the front counter, I stumbled upon Mrs. Karen, Ronnie James, and that young boy, Jim Stellar, lying in blood on the showroom floor. All that blood."

Oh, my God. Thomas thought. He was glad that he had let Smith tell the story his way. He felt sorry for this old man. Thomas respected Tom Smith. He could imagine coming up on people that he had worked with for all those years and finding them fatally injured.

"I heard Jim making a gurgling sound and gasping for breath. He lay in a pool of blood. With each breath, blood spurting out of a hole in his head. When I looked closer, I saw the bruised or torn part of Jim's head and red, bloody stuff where the blood came out and matted in Jim's dark hair. Every time he breathed blood came out the hole in his head. I saw more blood shoot out and cover Jim's white tee shirt and inch its way toward his blue jeans. I had never seen so much blood. I felt sick. I didn't know Jim, except from what I had read in The Kilmichael Times about his being an All Star baseball player, but I knew I had to get help for him."

"What about the others?" Ches asked.

"Then I looked toward Mrs. Karen. She lay face down with her right hand pointed out in front of her and her car keys wrapped around her little finger. I figured that she had just got back from the bank. Her fingernails looked freshly manicured and polished with pink nail polish. She was always very neat. I had seen her keys many times before. She must have already been to the Post Office. Her make up was in place including the black eyeliner that she always drew on her top lids next to her eyelashes.

One of her hazel eyes seemed to be looking at me, so I said, 'Miss Karen?' She didn't answer. I felt very strange, but I didn't touch her. I had seen dead people before, but only in their caskets. I was frightened. Very scared. Could I be dreaming? I asked myself. I hoped so. Then I heard Jim make another gurgling sound. I stood up and turned around to go get help. Then thinking of using Mrs. Beverly's phone, I glanced toward the back aisle outside her private office. I saw Mrs. Beverly Eden lying on the floor, too. I had talked to her on the

Red Rage

phone only an hour before. She didn't move or make any sounds like Jim had. So I had to get help."

"Tom, did you see anyone else? Did you see anyone inside the store or in the alley?" Thomas asked.

"No. I didn't see anyone, but when I decided it wasn't a bad dream, I called out to them. No one answered. Nobody came into the store. I didn't see anyone outside on the street. Then I ran to the door as fast as I could and up the street past the alley and the empty Lott's grocery store to Poppy's to get help."

"Tom, how old did you say you are?"

"I'm seventy-six," he replied. "All the way up Front Street I said to myself, 'Mrs. Eden won't ask me for any more favors or do any favors for me. I wonder what my wife will have to say about this. If I hadn't stopped at Poppy's workshop to see about that air conditioner, they might still be alive, or I might be dead. Lord, I still hope this is all a bad dream.' Tears glistened as they ran down his prominent, cheekbones. "Sue Jones at Poppy's phoned the Kilmichael Police Department for me and told me to stay in Poppy's with her until the police came."

"Thank you, Tom. I'm certain that we'll have more questions for you later. I'm sorry that you had to see this. Why don't you sit here for a while until you feel like going home?"

"Thanks, Mr. Thomas, but I'd rather go back outside with those other folks. It feels creepy in here with these bodies."

Kilmichael, Mississippi. Four people's lives are ended by a remorseless young man. The small town reacts with horror at this senseless crime. After five trials, a conviction still doesn't stick, so the victims' families take justice into their own hands.

RED RAGE

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/3723.html?s=pdf>