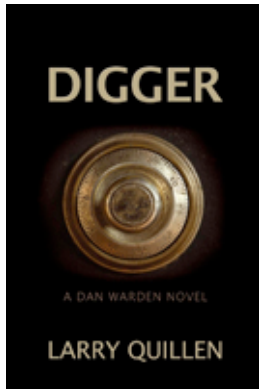


DIGGER



A DAN WARDEN NOVEL

LARRY QUILLEN



Deputy Dan Warden hunts for an elusive serial killer who leaves baffling clues. A woman who may be clairvoyant offers to help interpret the clues, but Dan's task becomes more difficult when a raunchy, homicidal ex-con shows up with his mentally challenged half brother. A personal agenda to reunite with his ex-wife and children adds to the pressure as Dan tries to close the case before the killer strikes again.

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BY

LARRY QUILLEN

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First Edition

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1

Monday, June 6

IT WAS THE FIRST WEEK OF JUNE and already hot and humid in North Alabama when Captain Dan Warden, along with other Chickasaw County sheriff's deputies, showed up at a small frame house near the Tennessee border in response to a 9-1-1 call about a possible homicide.

Dan shook his head but couldn't keep from smiling. As chief investigator, all his days were different, and so were the nights, including this one. After interviewing the suspect, Dan decided that the facts were straightforward and uncomplicated.

The body of Rafe Brown, an African-American male, mid-forties, about one-fifty, about five-ten, was lying face up on the living room floor. The only visible trauma was a small contusion on the side of his forehead. The suspect was his wife, Junie Mae Brown, same age, a few inches shorter, and almost two hundred pounds heavier. She had called 9-1-1, had freely admitted killing her husband, and was now in custody.

According to Junie Mae, her "good-for-nothing-black-ass" husband had come home drunk. It hadn't been the first time, but it would be the last. In addition to a bloody lip and a left eye that was swollen almost shut, Junie Mae's defense was summed up when she spoke in a vibrant contralto voice that could be heard throughout the small house as clearly as it could be heard from the choir loft of the African Methodist Episcopal Church each Sunday.

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“Yeah, uh-huh, I knowed what that man was doin’, runnin’ around, sniffin’ up them other women’s dresses, tomcattin’ around all night. Uh-huh, yeah, that’s right, I knowed what that good-for-nothing man was doin’. I done told him, yeah, uh-huh, I did, I say, ‘Next time you come home drunk, you ain’t gonna smack me round no more, you do, you be sorry.’ Yeah, that’s right, that’s what I told him. I say, ‘You gonna wish yo mama drop you on yo punkin head when you get born.’ Sho nuf, he come home, smackin’ me around, just like he always do, so I picks up my skillet and whomps him upside de head, yeah, that’s right, that’s what I done, whomps him good, puts him down on de flo, right where he belongs, that’s right, I sho did, right down on the flo. I says, ‘You wants some black tail, you gets some black tail,’ and I sets down on his head.” Junie Mae looked up at Dan with an embarrassed smile. “It took me a couple of minutes to get off. I ain’t as quick on my feet as I used to be.”

Dan smiled, trying to keep from laughing. “None of us are, Junie Mae, that’s for sure.”

The deputies now faced the daunting task of transporting Junie Mae to jail. The department van had been involved in a fender bender recently and was still in the shop. Their only option was to try to fit her into the back seat of one of the other vehicles. When they tried to handcuff her, they found out that her wrists didn’t come anywhere near each other behind her. They solved the problem by linking two sets of handcuffs together. Once she was handcuffed, they addressed the problem of getting the obese woman into the back seat of a car.

They quickly realized that they would need Junie Mae’s cooperation, so they removed the handcuffs from behind her and put one set on in front. After several unsuccessful attempts to fit the woman’s bulk into the relatively small rear door opening, one of the deputies suggested that they use the bed of Dan’s pickup to transport her. Dan glanced over at his new Chevy Silverado with a wry grin, assuming the man wasn’t serious. It would no doubt save everybody a lot of effort on a hot night, but the battered woman deserved better. “Let’s try to get her into one of the cars one more time,” Dan suggested.

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“Vaseline might work,” Lieutenant Jason Rampart suggested.

“Vaseline?” Dan asked.

“Yeah, we could smear Vaseline on her and sort of squirt her in.”

Dan smiled and nodded, “We might have to, but let’s wait on that.”

Eventually, after a lot of pushing from one side, pulling from the other, and cooperation from Junie Mae, they got her far enough in so they could close the door. The seat belt, fully extended, was a tight fit, but Junie Mae didn’t complain as they struggled to lock it around her. By then, every deputy was sweating from the exercise on a warm night, and laughing. So was Junie Mae. From early childhood, the woman had rarely known kindness from any man. For a few minutes tonight, she had gotten all she could stand.

With Junie Mae buckled in and the door closed, Dan gave the deputies the bad news. Because there was obvious trauma to her face, he told them they would have to take her to Helleston Memorial and have a doctor take a look at her before they could take her to jail for processing.

“Aw, man!” Jason moaned. “You mean we’ve got to unload her at the hospital, then load her back in again before we can take her to jail?”

“We don’t know how bad she’s hurt. We can’t afford to take the chance that she might have internal injuries.” Dan paused, grinning. “This is where all those workouts at the gym are going to pay off, right?”

“Yeah, right,” Jason said glumly.

Dan followed the other officers to the hospital and helped them get Junie Mae out of the car and into the emergency room. He didn’t have to help. It wasn’t part of his job, but, like the other officers, he was concerned for the likable woman’s welfare.

Thirty minutes later, the emergency room doctor informed the deputies that Junie Mae was being admitted for observation. After he had found multiple contusions on her thighs and torso, Junie Mae had told the doctor that her husband had kicked her several times. It was both good news

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and bad news. The officers' struggles with the woman's massive body were over for the night, but they felt bad knowing she might have serious injuries.

Outside the hospital, Dan met briefly with the other officers. "You know, a smart lawyer will put her on the stand and have her tell the jury how he was beating her up when she lost her balance and accidentally fell on top of him and couldn't get off because she was hurt so bad."

"If I was on the jury, I'd believe that," Jason said, looking at Dan. "Wouldn't you?"

Dan nodded. "Involuntary manslaughter? Six months' probation. That sounds about right to me."

All the Chickasaw County officers looked at each other, then went their separate ways smiling and nodding their heads in agreement.

Captain Dan Warden started his pickup truck engine, then paused as he stared into the darkness beyond his headlights. If all the violent deaths in Chickasaw County, Alabama, were as easy to solve as this one, he might get a good night's sleep tonight, but they weren't. There was someone, somewhere out there in the darkness, who had already killed at least twice, maybe more. Dan had to find him, or her, before someone else was murdered, but at the moment, he didn't know how he was going to go about doing that.

2

Tuesday, June 7

BACK AT HIS DESK THE NEXT morning, Dan Warden took a sip of coffee and turned on his computer to start his day. Dan had been a deputy sheriff for over twenty years; most of those years had been spent just across the Alabama state line up in Creek County, Tennessee. Things had been going fine up there until a couple of years ago when the newly elected sheriff fired him, primarily because Dan had been his opponent in the election. After that, Dan had been out of law enforcement until last fall when the sheriff of Chickasaw County gave him a call and offered him a job as his chief investigator.

At the time the sheriff called, Dan was in the Caribbean, on a chain of islands called the Exumas, building a small cottage for a woman who called herself Jenny Smart. It wasn't the name she was born with. The Drug Enforcement Administration had given it to her years ago when she entered their witness protection program.

Dan didn't get a chance to finish the cottage. The American DEA, upset with his Rambo stunt with some Caribbean drug smugglers, had strongly advised him to leave the area and not return anytime soon. He had taken their advice.

Dan and Jenny had been much more than friends for a few weeks in the Caribbean. Maybe they would be again, if and when she recovered from the trauma she had suffered down

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there. He hoped so, anyway. He had left her in a Nassau hospital, in the care of the DEA, almost a year ago. She had promised to get in touch with him once she felt better. He hadn't heard from her since.

Jenny was one of the most fascinating women Dan had ever met, willing to try just about anything and able to accomplish most anything she tried. Her flying skills had been the impetus for Dan to do something he'd thought about doing for many years: getting his own pilot's license.

Last fall, he'd enrolled at a flying school at the airport in Huntsville, Alabama. The basic course could have been completed in less than three months, but, because of interference by his job, it had taken him almost eight months. He was getting awfully close to the end, however.

Two weeks ago, he had passed the test for his Private Pilot's Certificate. He was now a pilot. But there was one more step. He had recently purchased a one-eighth share of a Cessna 172 with GPS navigation. Before he could use it, however, the aircraft club's insurance agent wanted him to do a GPS navigation check ride with an experienced GPS pilot.

Dan was looking forward to flying the Cessna using GPS navigation rather than the old way using navigation radio signals. He had a trip in mind where it would come in handy, but he had to lay some groundwork with his ex-wife first.

Dan picked up the small framed picture on his desk and gazed at it. It was a picture of him, his ex-wife, May, and their two sons, Bobby and Bart, before she had divorced him and the kids had grown distant from him. It had been over six years since he and May had been together. Since then he had known other women and she had known other men, but she was still very special to him. If she ever offered to take him back on a permanent basis, he would take her up on it in a minute. Dan nodded. What he had in mind would help push her in that direction. At least, he hoped it would. It might be his last shot for the four of them to be a family again.

He picked up his cell phone and entered May's number. Over the years, they had maintained a cordial relationship, calling each other from time to time to stay in touch, partially because

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they both realized that it would be better for the boys, but also because they still liked each other. May had told Dan many times, "I don't hate you, Dan. I hate that damn job you do."

When May answered, the call began with updates on Bobby and Bart and what they were doing now that school was out, which led to May mentioning that her year-long affair with the school principal was over.

"What happened?" Dan asked. "The last time I talked to you, you seemed to think he was a pretty good man."

"I still do, but he's still in love with his wife."

"Oh," Dan said quietly, knowing the man's wife had died of cancer a couple of years ago. Some women were hard to get over. He could testify to the truth of that statement. Dan took a breath. Now was as good a time as any. "Did you hear? I've finally got my pilot's license."

"Yes, I heard. Congratulations! I would have come down and watched if I had known."

"I wasn't sure I would pass the first time."

"So, now that you're a real, honest-to-goodness pilot, where are you going to fly to?"

"Well, I thought I'd take a little trip around here, with you and the boys."

"You want to take us flying in one of those little airplanes?"

"Believe it or not, May, those little airplanes are a lot safer than the big jets. Even with the engine off, a pilot can land one of those airplanes just about anywhere."

"Well, I'm not sure. Maybe you could just take the boys up. I think they would like it."

"Come on, May. Try it. I really think you'll like it. I won't do anything wild and crazy and you'll really enjoy the view," Dan said, then listened to the silence on the other end of the conversation for several seconds.

"Let me talk to the boys. If they want to go, I might go along."

"Great. Let me know. Unless something totally unexpected comes out of nowhere and hits me between the eyes in the next few days, I'll be ready to go whenever you are."

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3

Tuesday, June 7

LATER THAT SAME DAY, an eighteen-wheeler stopped in the small town of Guymon, in the Oklahoma Panhandle, long enough to let the hitchhiking passenger climb down from the tall cab. After a wave of thanks to the driver, Sid Landers paused long enough to light another cigarette, then walked several blocks until he reached the street he wanted, then stuck out his thumb again.

It had taken him most of the day to hitchhike a hundred and twenty miles from Amarillo, Texas, to his old stomping grounds here in Guymon. The biggest building in the town was the Texas County Courthouse. The tallest structure was a grain elevator. From an airplane at thirty thousand feet, much of the high plains landscape around Guymon appeared to be covered with green or tan polka dots. On closer inspection, the polka dots became irrigated fields, a half-mile in diameter, drawing water from deep in the Ogallala Aquifer, to grow wheat, corn, and grain sorghum for the cattle and hog feedlots in the area.

A few minutes later, a pickup truck stopped for Sid and, a few miles out of town, dropped him off on the dusty roadside in front of the house where his half-Cherokee mama and his full-asshole stepfather, Al Woodward, still lived, as far as he knew. Neither had been down to see him in the ten years he had been inside the Texas state prison in Amarillo. With lips drawn

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tightly across his face, Sid nodded. He was sure Al, not his mama, was to blame for that.

His mama had written to him every few months. The letters weren't very long or cheerful but they always let him know that she had deposited another hundred in his prisoner trust account. Sid figured the deposits came from money his mama had squirreled away, a few dollars at a time, without Al knowing about it. It wasn't all that much, but, since Texas prisoners didn't get paid for doing work, and had no money to buy anything except what was deposited in their prisoner trust account by someone on the outside, it had been appreciated. When he was released this morning, all he had to show for ten years in prison were eighty-three dollars in his pocket, the clothes on his back, and some lessons learned the hard way.

As he stood on the hot, dusty roadside, gazing at the old, dusty house in the middle of a mostly empty landscape, Sid decided that nothing much had changed since the night he had stuck a knife in a cowboy down in Perryton, Texas.

His mama might be glad to see him, but he thought Al would be a problem. Since the day Al had married his mama twenty years ago and climbed into her bed, Sid hadn't hit it off with the worthless piece of horseshit. Sid shook his head. He never could see what his mama saw in that Okie or why she put up with him and the way he treated her. In a part of the country where millionaire farmers grew crops with computers and irrigation, Al was a short-order cook at the Steer And Beer. Even after the man took one of his occasional baths, the stench of burned animal fat surrounded him wherever he stood or sat.

Sid paused at an old Ford F-150 pickup parked in the driveway. It might have been University of Oklahoma crimson when it left the factory, but it was covered with rust and dust and dried mud now, so it was hard to tell. There was an empty gun rack in the back of the cab and a lock box across the front of the bed. Behind the lock box were a couple of bales of wheat straw and a bald spare tire. There were dents and scrapes and rust-through holes in the old truck's sheet metal, and the tires on the ground were about as bad as the spare. Sid nodded. It was the kind of vehicle Al would be driving. A piece of junk. Sid

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frowned. Al had been driving a Ford pickup ten years ago. Could this be the same one? It sure looked like it might be that old.

Sid walked up to the front door, started to knock, then changed his mind and tried the knob. It was unlocked. Sid smiled as he recalled his most recent cell mate, Yancy the Yegg. Yancy was a jewel thief and safecracker who had been in and out of jail, and in and out of people's homes and businesses, for the past forty years. Yancy loved unlocked doors.

Sid opened the door, stepped inside, and called out, "Anybody home?"

"Who's that?" Al called out from the interior.

"It's me, Sid!"

"Sidney? Is that you?" his mama called out.

Sid smiled. His mama was the only person in the world who called him Sidney. She was the only person in the world who was allowed to call him Sidney. "Yeah, Mama. It's me," Sid said, then watched them approach. They both looked a lot older than they had the last time he had seen them. Al looked a lot meaner. His mama looked tired, worn-out. She was what? Fifty? Jesus!

His mama hurried to him and gave him a little hug. "We're so glad you're out of that place, son."

"Yeah, so am I," Sid said gruffly, uncomfortable with the unexpected contact. Where he had just come from, bodily contact usually meant somebody wanted to play with your balls, or was about to stick a shiv in your gut.

"We got the letter, saying they were going to let you out," Sid's mother said, then paused. "Al had to work, so we couldn't go down and get you."

Sid glanced at Al, knowing it was a crock. The man hadn't even offered to shake his hand. "That's all right, Mama. I got here."

"How long are you planning on staying?" Al demanded loudly.

"Don't know, Al. Why? You in a rush to get rid of me?"

"I'm not going to let you hang around here, drinking all night and sleeping all day, eating us out of house and home like you

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used to. You're going to have to get a job, but an ex-con who's never done an honest day's work in his life ain't going to find one around here. You need to start thinking about moving on, the sooner the better."

Sid stared at the man, feeling the bile rising in his chest, the pressure squeezing his head. It had happened many times before. It was happening again. Somebody was about to get hurt.

While Sid was being processed out of the Texas state prison system, the prison shrink had one last talk with him. Once again, the overworked, underpaid psychiatrist had told Sid that he had a type of impulse control disorder, called Intermittent Explosive Disorder, that caused him to have episodes of uncontrolled aggression against objects or people that were grossly out of proportion to the situation that initiated the episodes. He recommended that Sid seek professional help and medication once he was released to help control his episodes of anger; otherwise, he would be back inside before his bunk got cold.

Sid shook his head violently, trying to clear it. Jesus! He'd just gotten out of prison and he was about to go back in for killing this bastard. He took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm down. It didn't help much. Then he realized his half brother wasn't around. "Where's Ronny?"

"He's down in the basement, where he belongs," Al said.

Sid frowned, puzzled at the man's comment, then walked down the hallway and yelled down the stairwell. "Hey, Ronny! Come on up and join the rest of us!"

"He's not allowed to," Al said.

Sid turned to Al. "What do you mean, he's not allowed to?"

"He has to stay down in the basement."

"For how long?"

"As long as he lives here."

"What?"

"It's for his own good," Sid's mother said.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Your mother and I are trying to do what we think is best for a kid who was born with some of his marbles missing. When he

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was ten, he was still acting like a six-year-old," Al declared.

"I remember him when he was ten. That's how old he was when I went inside. I don't remember him being all that slow. Maybe he's not the sharpest cactus in the patch, but he was always smiling and friendly. He wouldn't hurt a fly."

"You don't think so, huh? He tried to rape a little twelve-year-old girl down in the church basement bathroom."

"Jesus Christ," Sid muttered, shaking his head. "When did this happen?"

"Right after you left," Al said.

"When he was ten? I don't believe that."

"Ask your mama. She's the one who caught him at it. Thank God, it wasn't one of the girl's parents. He was on top of her, with his pants down and her dress up. Can you believe that? A ten-year-old moron trying to rape that little girl."

Sid turned to his mama. "Is that right, Mama?"

Sid's mama, with her head lowered, nodded.

Sid stared at the two other adults, not quite believing what he had heard. Then he pointed down the flight of stairs. "He's been down there ever since? For ten years? You're telling me you've got a twenty-year-old man locked up in your basement?"

"We don't let him out of the house, but we let him come up to eat with us, if he's been a good boy," Al said.

With a pained expression, wringing her hands, Sid's mother said, "It was for his own good, son. They would have locked him away in some strange place if we hadn't."

Sid pointed down the stairs. "What the hell do you call that?"

"He's with us, his family. It's different," Al said.

"The hell it is!" Sid declared. "If I call the cops and tell them you two have had Ronny locked up in a basement for the last ten years, they'll throw both of you in jail! You know it and I know it!"

"You'd better calm down, boy," Al snarled. "That's what you'd better do. You're having another temper fit, ain't you? Just like you did before, screaming and kicking things around when you didn't get your way. I would have thought all that time in prison would have taught you something."

"I learned a lot of things in prison, Al," Sid said, glaring at

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the older man. "One thing I learned is that thirty days in solitary is about as bad as it gets. Ten years? Jesus! I'm calling."

Al shook his head. "You ain't calling nobody."

"You want to bet?" Sid snarled, then walked away, heading toward the living room and the phone he remembered being there, as Al turned and headed in another direction.

Sid hated cops. Always had. Always would. He had never ratted on anybody about anything. It wasn't his job. If the cops wanted to give somebody a bad time about something, they had to do it without his help. But this time was different. This time he would make an exception. "Ten years! Jesus!" Sid repeated, shaking his head in disbelief. He found the telephone in the living room and picked up the receiver just as Al came into the room with an old revolver.

"Put it down," Al ordered with the gun pointed in the general direction of his stepson.

Sid looked at the old six-shooter pointed at him and snorted. "You going to shoot me, Al?"

"I will if I have to."

"Well, you're going to have to," Sid said, walking toward his stepfather.

"Don't make me do something I don't want to do," Al warned as he took a step backward.

Without pausing, Sid walked up to Al, grabbed the gun by the barrel, twisted and jerked it out of the man's hand, then punched him hard in his gut. As the older man pitched forward in pain, Sid bounced the gun butt off his head. With a grunt, the man collapsed onto the floor.

Sid examined the old revolver, confirmed that it was loaded, then looked down at the unconscious man at his feet, shaking his head in disgust. "Al, one of the first things I learned inside: Don't tell a man you're going to do something if you're not going to do it. If you tell a man you're going to kill him, you damn well better kill him. If you don't, sure as hell, he's going to kill you." Sid looked around for something to tie Al's hands, saw the telephone cord, disconnected it from the phone and the wall, and tied Al's wrists behind his back.

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When Al came to, he began a stream of expletives that included every curse word he had ever heard and a couple of new ones he made up on the spot, all directed toward his stepson.

Sid kicked his stepfather in his ribs, pointed the revolver at the man's head, then looked up at his mother. "Mama? Is it all right with you if I shoot this son of a bitch?"

Wringing her hands, Sid's mother stared down at the man who had made her life a hell on earth. "I wish you wouldn't," she said softly.

"You sure about that?"

"It wouldn't be the Christian thing to do."

Sid gazed at his mother, then nodded. "Go get a suitcase and pack some of his things in it. I'm going to drive him to the bus station and put him on the next bus leaving Guymon for anywhere else. How's that sound to you?"

She silently nodded and left the room.

Sid knelt down beside his stepfather. "Is that okay with you, Al?"

"Go to hell!" Al snarled.

Sid grinned. "Most likely," he said, then smacked the side of the man's skull hard with the gun barrel.

By the time Sid's mama returned with the suitcase, Al had regained consciousness again. Sid helped his stepfather to his feet; then, holding on to the telephone cord binding with one hand and the old revolver with the other, he guided the dazed man out the front door.

With Al in the pickup, Sid took the suitcase from his mama, tossed it into the truck bed, then said, "Mama, while I'm gone, get Ronny out of the basement and fix us something to eat. I'll be back as soon as I get this piece of shit on a bus heading out of town."

"I was hoping you'd get here sometime today. I cooked some chicken and a few other things you like."

"Sounds great, Mama. I'll be right back."

4

THREE MILES DOWN THE ROAD, Al was still cursing his stepson at the top of his voice.

“Shut up! God damn you, shut up!” Sid yelled, then jammed the barrel of the old gun against the side of Al’s head. There was a loud ringing in Sid’s ears, a tightness in his chest, and his hands were trembling as he gripped the steering wheel with one hand and the gun with the other. He was about to blow the older man’s brains out right there in the truck; then he saw the old Cullman place in the distance.

Sid smiled as he eased off the accelerator. Killing this son of a bitch would be doing him a favor. He had a better idea. If the old storm shelter was still there, he would give Al a little payback for what he had done to Ronny.

TWELVE YEARS AGO, six tornadoes, two of them classified F3, touched down in the Oklahoma Panhandle late one afternoon in May. Although there were no deaths or injuries from any of the twisters, one of them destroyed every building on Joe Cullman’s place. Luckily, the entire family consisting of Joe, his wife, Shannon, their two kids, Randy and Patsy, and two mongrel mutts, Toto and Brownie, were in a storm shelter in back of the house when it hit.

Joe had dug the hole and built the shelter himself and had stocked it with a radio, water, snacks, candles and matches. It

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consisted of an eight-by-eight-foot hole with eight-foot-high cement block walls rising about a foot above ground level. Joe had attached a very low-pitched shed-type roof to the blocks with bolts buried in the concrete walls. There was an access door on the lower end of the roof that could be bolted shut from the inside, and Joe had bought a ten-foot aluminum ladder to get in and out of the shelter. A couple of boards on some leftover concrete blocks served as benches.

After a near miss a few days earlier, Joe had checked the storm shelter and found that the water tasted putrid, the food was moldy, the matches were wet, the radio batteries were dead, and the bare dirt floor had turned into mud. He removed all the survival items, intending to replace them, but hadn't got around to it. With the big tornado in sight and bearing down on them that day, Joe and his wife didn't have time to do anything but grab their kids and run for the shelter with their dogs right behind them.

Joe, his family, and their dogs survived the tornado without a scratch, but when Joe tried to open the trap door, he discovered that he couldn't. A large section of an exterior wall had landed on top of the storm shelter roof. The Cullman family was forced to spend the night in the muddy hole in total darkness with no food, water, or radio, and no means of communication with the outside world.

After several hours, Joe's voice was hoarse from yelling for help. His wife vented her frustration by yelling at Joe while the kids cried and the dogs barked. Eventually, the two muddy adults resigned themselves to spending the night in the darkness sitting on the boards, each holding one of the muddy children. The two muddy dogs had to fend for themselves.

The next morning, when Sid, Al, and others living in the area stopped to view the destruction, they heard the dogs barking. They pulled the broken wall off the shelter roof and helped the tired, thirsty, hungry, mud-covered family climb out of their dungeon prison. The experience was so traumatic for Joe's wife that she packed and left with the kids and dogs for her parents' home in Louisiana within days. It took Joe a few more days to put the place up for sale, and then he joined them.

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SID SLOWED AS HE approached the abandoned home site. He didn't see a For Sale sign. Either the place had been sold, or someone had stolen the sign along with everything else. When he saw the roof of the old storm shelter among the weeds, Sid smiled. This was going to be fun.

"What the hell are you stopping here for?" Al demanded as Sid pulled into the weed-infested drive.

"We're going to take a little walk, Al."

"The hell we are! I'm not getting out here."

Sid put the muzzle of the gun against Al's head. "Suit yourself, but I'm going to kill you right here and now if you don't."

"What the hell you talking about?"

"You're about to die, Al, if you don't do what I say."

Al snorted. "You don't have the guts to shoot me."

Sid cocked the hammer and wrapped his finger around the trigger. "You want to bet your life on that?"

Al glared at the younger man, then said. "Let's get on with it."

Sid smiled as he eased the hammer back down. "Yes, sir. We will do that very thing." Sid got out of the truck, then opened the passenger's door and waited for Al to climb down. When he did, Sid grabbed Al's right wrist with his left hand and jammed the barrel of the old revolver into Al's ribs with his right.

"Now what?" Al demanded.

"Head out that way," Sid said, pointing away from the highway with the gun. The two men worked their way around and through weeds, brush, rotten pieces of lumber and plywood, broken glass, and rusted metal. As they approached the storm shelter, Sid saw that the low roof was still on and the hatch closed. Sid nodded. This was going to work out fine. When they reached the shelter, Sid said, "This is far enough."

Al looked down at the storm shelter, then turned to Sid. For the first time, arrogance was missing in his voice. "You're not going to make me go down in there!"

"I sure am. Then I'm going to pull the ladder, close the door, and leave you down in there for a while."

"Like hell you are!"

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“Like hell I’m not! You’re going down in there, Al. Dead or alive, your choice. I killed a man with a knife ten years ago. If you want to die today, that’s fine with me. I’ll shoot you right here and now. I’m a bad boy, Al. I got a temper. When people piss me off, I do what I have to do. Seeing what you did to Mama and Ronny while I was gone really pisses me off.”

Al looked about them, for anything or anyone to save him. There was no one. He glanced down at his gun in the other man’s hand; then he looked into Sid’s eyes and saw something he hadn’t seen before the man went to prison. It scared him. “For how long?”

“Not long. A few hours. Just long enough for you to get a little taste of what Ronny has had to put up with all these years.”

“Then you’re going to come back, right?”

“You got it.”

Al stared at Sid, then snarled, “Let’s get it over with.”

Sid pointed down to the lower edge of the shelter roof. “Get down on your knees. I don’t want you running off on me while I’m getting the door open.” Sid waited until Al dropped to his knees facing the trap door; then, with one eye on Al, he pulled the trap door open on its rusty hinges and took a look down inside. The putrid stench of mold and rot assaulted his nostrils. The angle of the sun didn’t give him much of a view down into the bottom of the eight-foot hole, but he could see a couple of cement blocks surrounded by moldy trash and puddles of water. The ladder was gone. Sid nodded. Not a problem. He walked around behind Al and said, “Lean over, take a look. See if it suits you.”

Still on his knees, with his hands tied behind him, Al leaned over and looked down. “There ain’t no ladder. How do you expect me to get down in there?”

“Like this,” Sid said as he put his foot against the man’s backside and shoved as hard as he could. The man screamed as he toppled over into the storm shelter head first. Sid heard the thump and splat as the man’s body hit the muddy bottom, then waited for the harangue of curses to begin. When he didn’t hear anything for several seconds, he stepped over to the edge

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of the hole and looked down. Al was lying motionless in the moldy trash, his head at an odd angle against one of the concrete blocks, his open mouth in a puddle of muddy water. Sid watched the puddle for a moment, looking for telltale ripples that would show him that the man was breathing, but saw none.

Sid lit a cigarette, then looked down into the hole from time to time as he smoked. His plan had been to leave the worthless piece of cow dung in the old storm shelter for two or three days, until he was out of Oklahoma; then he would call his mama and let her know where her useless excuse for a husband was. As Sid continued to watch for ripples in the puddle without seeing any, he decided to forget the phone call.

Instead, he flipped his cigarette into the hole and began walking about, picking up anything and everything that hadn't been scavenged already. When he had two handfuls of rotten lumber and plywood, he brought it back and dumped it into the hole. Some of it landed on Al, some didn't. Sid shook his head. He was going to need a lot more to cover the entire body. Then he remembered the wheat straw and headed for the truck.

At the truck, he reached for one of the bales of straw, then released it as he looked at the lock box. Maybe he wouldn't need the straw. Sid opened the lock box and looked inside. There was an assortment of rusty, greasy hand tools, a jack, a length of chain long enough to tow or be towed with, a set of brake pads, and some other unidentifiable rusty metal parts. One of the tools was a claw hammer. He grabbed it and began rummaging around for nails. In the bottom of the lock box, underneath all the other tools and junk, he found a few rusty screws and six rusty nails of various lengths. Two of them were four inches long.

Sid returned to the storm shelter, checked once more for ripples on the puddle, saw none, then closed the hatch and drove all six nails at an angle from the door edge into the side of the access opening. When he was done, Sid decided it was good enough. Most anyone would assume that it had been nailed shut to keep kids and animals from falling in. Someone would need a crowbar and a good reason to want to get down in there

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to reopen it. In the meantime, the old storm shelter was as good as any other hole in the ground for that useless piece of crap. "So long, you bastard. See you in hell," Sid said, then walked away.

5

"SIDNEY? ARE YOU BACK ALREADY?"

"Yeah, Mama. I put Al on a bus and waved to him as it drove off," Sid said.

"Where's he going, son?"

"Don't remember, Mama. Either Hell or Texas, probably," Sid said. Then his head jerked and his eyes grew wide at the sight that had appeared in the doorway. The man was carrying about two-seventy-five on a six-foot frame, but his skin was almost white. "What the hell? Is that you Ronny?" Sid asked, frowning as he looked at the smiling baby face of the half brother he remembered as a chubby ten-year-old.

"This is me," the man said, grinning from ear to ear. "Mama say you my brother. Are you my brother?"

"Just about. Close enough not to argue about it."

"I'm glad you my brother," Ronny said with a wide grin. "I had a brother a long time ago, but he went away."

As Sid gazed at the benign grin on the man's face, he felt an empathy for him that he had never felt for another man. His half brother hadn't been outside this house in ten years. That was about to change, but the man wouldn't have the knowledge or skills he would need to cope with everyday life on his own outside these walls. If Ronny was going to survive he would need someone's help and protection. Sid nodded. The strange-looking man was his half brother. He just might be willing to lend a hand. "Well, Ronny, this brother ain't going away, you can count on that."

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“Are you boys ready to eat? I fried some chicken.”

“I’m ready to eat anything you’ve cooked, Mama,” Sid said.

“I like chicken,” Ronny said.

Sid chuckled as he appraised the big man. “I don’t doubt that for a minute.” Then he turned to his mother. “Mama? Is there any beer in the house?”

“There’s some in the refrigerator.”

Sid hurried to the refrigerator. When he opened the door, he yelled, “Hot damn! Lone Star! It ain’t Pearl, but it ain’t bad.”

By the time the two men decided they were full, they had demolished the chicken, as well as the mashed potatoes, gravy, peas, bread, and half an apple pie. Sid put his second can of Lone Star to his mouth, drained it, put it down, paused, then belched with his mouth open. “Mama, it was great, but I’ve got to be moving on.”

“Right now? Today?”

“Fraid so.”

“It’s a little late to get started anywhere today, son. I haven’t seen you in ten years. Why don’t you wait until tomorrow?”

Sid wanted to stay for a few days, until he got used to being outside prison walls, but if he was still in Oklahoma when somebody pried open that storm shelter door, the cops might want him to explain how a man he had put on a bus leaving town could wind up dead at the bottom of that storm shelter with his wrists tied and the door nailed shut. “I gotta go, Mama. I got to find something to do with what’s left of my life.”

Sid’s mama looked at her son and slowly nodded. “You go ahead and do what you think is right.”

“I signed my old Mustang over to that damn lawyer to pay him off, so I’m going to have to take Al’s pickup. You ain’t going to say I stole it if anybody asks you about it, are you?”

“Are you taking Ronny with you?”

“I was thinking about it.”

“Then, go ahead, take the truck.”

“You sure? You won’t have any wheels.”

“I’ll call Daddy. He’ll find something for me on his lot.”

“Is that old renegade still alive?”

“Sure is, and doing well,” she said, paused, then added, “He

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gave me the money I sent you while you were down there. I know it wasn't a lot, but it was the best I could do. Al's job don't pay enough for him to get ahead with the bills."

Sid nodded. If Al had been a millionaire, he still wouldn't have parted with a dime for his stepson.

Sid's mama pulled an envelope out of her skirt and offered it to Sid. "Daddy told me to give this to you. He said you might need it when you got out."

Sid opened the unsealed envelope and saw five twenties inside. He looked up at his mama and offered it back to her. "You'd better keep it, Mama. You might need it. Al might not be coming back for a while."

"I've got a little set aside. I'll be all right."

"You sure?"

"Daddy wanted you to have it. You go ahead and take it."

"Well, all right," Sid said, then stuffed the money in his pocket. "I'll stop and see him for a few minutes on our way out of town and let him know I appreciate him giving me a hand while I was inside."

"He won't be there. He's gone to a council meeting over in Tahlequah."

"Well, in that case, the next time you see that old war chief, you tell him I appreciate what he's done for me. Maybe I can pay him back one of these days."

"Staying out of that place will be pay enough for both of us."

"Don't worry about that, Mama."

"Where're you heading, son?"

"Don't know. Going to shake this Oklahoma dust off me, that's for sure."

"You think you might go see your daddy? He said he was starting up a landscaping business the last time I talked to him. He might have work for you if he's still in that business."

"I never was one for pick and shovel work, Mama, but I might go see that Alabama redneck long enough to put a bullet in his head for the way he treated you."

"It wasn't all him, son. Back then, people in North Alabama just weren't used to seeing an Indian woman living with a white man."

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“You’re only half Cherokee. Your mama was white.”

“I guess they only saw the Cherokee in me.”

“Well, if I decide to head that way, they’re going to see a lot of the Cherokee in me,” Sid declared.

“You be good, son, wherever you go. I don’t want you to get into trouble again.”

“I won’t Mama,” Sid promised. “Could you make up a couple of bedrolls for us so we don’t have to spend money on a motel?”

Sid’s mother nodded. “There’s a cardboard box in your old room that’s got a few things in it that belong to you. I’ll find some clothes for Ronny and some blankets.”

Sid found that his old bedroom was now a storage room for anything that was no longer needed but too good to throw out. He found the cardboard box in the closet, brought it out and looked inside. The first thing he saw were his kick-ass cowboy boots. He picked them up and looked at them. They were in sad shape. In the past ten years the leather had dried out, the toes of the boots had turned straight up, and the leather uppers had separated from the soles in several places. Too bad. He’d had some good times in those boots. He tossed them to one side. Next was his hat, smashed flat over the years by the boots. The sides of the brim were turned up and the front and back were broken downward. He beat it into shape, more or less, and tried it on. It still fit. Next was his wallet. He opened it and checked the contents. No money. He had over fifty dollars on him the night they arrested him. He knew who took the money.

From one leather pocket, Sid pulled out a small stack of business cards from various places and people, glanced at them, then tossed them on the floor, wondering why he had even bothered carrying any of them. In another pocket he found a credit card, long since expired. He tossed it away as well. The odds of renewing it weren’t good since he’d left a maxed-out balance on it when he went inside.

In a plastic holder, he found a picture of a very sexy woman in her early twenties. Sid looked at the picture and nodded, recalling the good times he had enjoyed with her until that night down in Perryton, Texas. Then he pulled the picture out of the plastic holder and tore it into tiny bits of colorful chaff as

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he recalled her testimony at his trial. Her detailed descriptions of several incidents when his anger issues had resulted in injury to a person, damage to property, or both, was one of the big reasons he had been in prison for the past ten years.

The only useful things in the wallet were his Social Security card and Oklahoma driver's license. The driver's license had expired eight years ago, but it was better than no license at all. The remainder of the box was filled with his old jeans and Western shirts. He peeled off his prison issue clothes and slid into a comfortable pair of jeans. They were tighter around the waist than he remembered. He pulled on a long-sleeved Western shirt, then put his prison-issued shoes back on. They would have to do for now. He put the money he'd left prison with along with the money his mama had just given him into the old wallet, slipped it into his jeans, jammed the crushed hat on his head, picked up the box of clothes, and looked around. Time to go.

A few minutes later, their mother had a big trash bag stuffed with clothes for Ronny and another with blankets and pillows. Sid had set the remaining cold Lone Star from the refrigerator next to the cardboard box, as well as two warm six-packs his mama had found in the laundry room. Sid looked at Ronny. There was something missing. "Where's your hat?"

"Hat?"

"Mama, see if you can find Ronny a hat. He's going to need something when he gets out in the sun."

A couple of minutes later, she returned with a soiled red baseball cap with the dingy white letters "OU" interlocked on the front and set it on Ronny's head.

"All right! Crimson and cream! That'll work," Sid declared, then smiled at Ronny. "You ready to go for a little ride?"

Ronny frowned. "We go outside?"

"Sure. Come on, let's go," Sid said, then grabbed his box and the plastic bags and headed for the truck.

Ronny looked at his mother with alarm. "I go outside, Mama?"

Mama stepped forward and put her hand on Ronny's face, then took it away. "You go ahead, Ronny. You go with Sidney.

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He's your brother. He'll take care of you better than I can."

"I come back soon," Ronny promised as he hurried after his half brother.

"Stay as long as you want to, son," his mother called out from the porch.

At the pickup, Sid dropped his cardboard box into the truck bed, then tossed the two trash bags into the bed of the truck along with the bales of wheat straw, the spare tire, and Al's suitcase. The Lone Stars went up front. Sid turned and looked at his mother, standing alone on the small porch and pointed to the bales of straw. "You want me to leave this wheat straw?"

His mama shook her head. "I don't need it. I don't know what he was going to do with it."

"I'll take it with us then," Sid said, then paused. He wanted to go hug her for what she had done for him while he was in prison, but he knew he wasn't going to, for what she had done to Ronny for the last ten years. "Bye, Mama," Sid called out with a wave of his hand.

"Give me a call sometime when you get settled."

"I'll do that," Sid said, then suddenly realized he might have a problem doing that. "Oh, uh, I didn't bring the telephone cord back that I used to hogtie Al. You got another cord around somewhere?"

"I've got a phone on the kitchen wall I can use."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. That'll work," Sid said, then paused, looking at the woman who had given him life, knowing he might never see her again. "Well, so long, Mama. We've got to be leaving."

"I didn't give Ronny any money. Do you have enough for both of you?"

"Enough for now," Sid said, knowing his mother needed any money Al might have given her more than he did. He had a hundred and eighty-three dollars in his pocket. That should get them down the road for a few days before they had to look for a way to get more. He wished he'd taken the time to take Al's wallet. If there was fifty dollars in it, it belonged to him anyway. Any more would be interest.

"I was just doing what I thought was right for Ronny."

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Sid opened the driver's door, then turned to his mama. "Well, Mama, the State of Texas was doing what they thought was right for me. I'd say you two have something in common."

Sid coaxed the old engine to life, then turned around in the dirt front yard. As he turned onto the road, he looked back at the house once more. His mama was still on the front porch, waving to them.

AS THEY APPROACHED the old Cullman place, Sid told Ronny to roll down his window. "Now, when we drive by that old house place, I want you to hold up your fist, then stick out your middle finger, like this," Sid said, demonstrating what he wanted Ronny to do.

"Like this?" Ronny asked, emulating his older half brother.

"Yeah, just like that. Now, as we drive by the place, we're going to stick out our fingers and yell, 'Go to hell, you bastard!' as loud as we can. You got it?"

"Go to hell, you bastard!" Ronny yelled with his middle finger extended.

"That's it. Now, here it is, get ready," Sid said as he slowed the pickup to a crawl as they approached the wreckage of the old house. "Now!" Sid cried out.

In unison, both men, with their fingers extended, yelled, "Go to hell, you bastard!"

As Sid stepped on the accelerator, he laughed out loud and Ronny joined him.

"Why did we say 'Go to hell, you bastard,' to that place?" Ronny asked.

"It's what you say when you leave someplace you're not coming back to for a while."

Ronny smiled and nodded.

SID PAUSED AT AN INTERSECTION in the middle of Guymon for a moment, considering his travel options. If he got on US 54 and headed south, it would take him down to Texas, but he was done with that state for a while. North on US 54 would take him

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up to Kansas. He didn't care much for that state, either. Heading west on US 412 would eventually get them to California, if Al's piece of junk made it that far, but there were places in New Mexico and Arizona he'd rather not be stuck in if it didn't.

On the other hand, US 412 eastbound was a road he had traveled many times. He knew it would get him down to Oklahoma City, if he wanted to go there, then as far east as he wanted to go from there, maybe as far as North Alabama, to pay a visit to a man he hadn't seen in over twenty years.

Sid opened a Lone Star, gave it to Ronny, opened another for himself, took a couple of swallows, then turned east onto US 412. When he did, he noticed that Al's gas gauge was down to less than a quarter. Good old Al. His truck was running on empty, just like he was. Knowing that gas stations were few and far between in the direction he was heading, he began looking for a place to fill up.

The first gas station he saw had a sign out front with the prices of its gasoline. "Holy shit! Are you kidding me," Sid said as he stared in amazement at the prices. The last time he'd filled up his Mustang ten years ago, gasoline was about a buck-fifty a gallon. At the time, he thought that was outrageous. Now it was more than twice that. He was going to run out of money before they got out of Oklahoma at those prices. He decided to bypass the station and look for another farther out of town, hoping for a lower price if he did.

Five miles later, Sid had driven beyond Guymon without stopping for gas. He clenched his jaws and nodded. No problem. He had enough to get to Balko. Surely the price would be less there. He pushed down hard on the accelerator. As the old engine complained loudly about what it was being asked to do, Sid learned that the front end of the old pickup would begin to vibrate at about sixty and would shake so badly at seventy that it was hard to hold it on his side of the road. He slowed back down to sixty, wanting to go eighty.

The farther away from Joe Cullman's storm shelter they were before they stopped tonight, the better he would feel. He hadn't meant to kill Al, and, with some time to calm down and

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with his stomach full of his mama's home cooking, he felt bad knowing he had, but he wasn't going to lose sleep over it. It was like shooting a horse with a broken leg. It wasn't something a man enjoyed doing, but it had to be done for the horse's own good, or, in this case, for a jackass named Al.

With the setting sun in his rearview mirror, Sid watched the old pickup's gas gauge move toward empty as they approached Balko, a wide spot in the road about forty miles east of Guymon. He would have to fill up in Balko, but it would put a dent in his wallet if he couldn't figure out something. Then he remembered that there had been an old mom-and-pop gas station in Balko that let him fill up before paying the last time he was there. If those trusting souls were still running it using the same old pumps, he might save a few bucks on gas tonight.

When Balko was close, he stopped on the side of the road, poured a little beer on the ground, mixed it up with his foot, then threw the mud at the truck tag. With the numbers and letters obliterated with spattered mud, Sid slowed for the old service station. When he did, he saw the sign with the price of gas on it. "Jesus Christ Almighty," Sid muttered. Gasoline was higher here than it was in Guymon.

Sid pulled up to the gasoline tank, with the tank between him and the small building. There was a sign on the pump: PLEASE PREPAY AFTER DARK. It was almost dark, but when Sid lifted the hose and flicked the lever up, he heard the pump begin running. So far, so good. He put the hose in the pickup, locked down the lever, then looked over at the building and saw an old man watching him through the front window. Sid waved and smiled at him and the man returned the greeting.

Sid wasn't sure how big the old Ford's gas tank was, but when the meter hit fifty dollars and kept on running, he began to worry. Finally, when the hose shut off, the meter showed Sid had pumped over seventy dollars of gasoline into Al's pickup. "Damn," Sid muttered in astonishment. That was almost half his money and they had barely gotten out of Guymon. He took another look at the building and saw the man still watching him. Sid was still trying to decide whether to pay or drive off without paying when a big SUV pulled into the station fast and

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stopped hard, blocking the man's view of Sid.

Sid saw the driver was a woman. She hurried into the store and began talking to the man, her arms waving frantically about. Through the windows of the SUV, Sid saw the man leave his counter and walk back into the store with her.

Sid nodded. That was his cue. He quickly got into the old pickup, started the engine and, as quietly as possible, drove slowly away with his eyes on the rearview mirror, waiting for someone to come after him. A quarter-mile down the road, with no headlights in his rearview mirror, he coaxed the old truck back up to sixty again.

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, they were beyond Woodward, but still west of Cleo Springs, when Sid realized that drinking three cans of beer after not having any alcohol for ten years might have been rushing it a little. He turned off US 412 and followed a dirt road for about a mile until he found a place to park near the Cimarron River.

"Ronny, we're going to stay here tonight and sleep in the truck, all right?"

"We eat soon?"

"No, you're going to have to let Mama's chicken last you until tomorrow. We should have stopped in Woodward and got a bag of burgers, but it's too much of a hassle to go back and do that now. Besides, I don't have a lot of money. We've got to make it last until I can figure out a way to get some more."

Ronny looked into the darkness about them. In the pale moonlight he could see the buttes and mesas of the Glass Mountains in the distance, rising a couple of hundred feet above the arid landscape of mesquite, and cottonwoods around them. He could also see the moonlight reflecting off a few inches of water along one edge of the wide, usually dry, channel of the Cimarron River. "It's a nice place," Ronny declared.

"Well, I'm glad you approve," Sid said. "Now let's see what we can do about sleeping accommodations."

They cleared out the bed of the truck, putting the clothes in the cab and everything else on the ground. Then they opened

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the bales of wheat straw and spread it around in the bed of the truck. After spreading blankets on the straw, the men tried to make themselves comfortable.

After a couple of minutes, Ronny said, "I don't remember so many stars. They're awfully pretty."

Sid silently gazed upward. This was the first night in ten years he had been able to lie in his bed and look up at the stars. They weren't all that pretty to him. He had the sensation that he was about to float up into the night sky with those damn stars. Then he knew what his problem was. He wasn't in his cell. He wasn't safe and secure behind thick steel bars with guards walking around all night, taking head counts, making sure he stayed where he was until morning.

Sid sat up. "Ronny, you stay here. I'm going to get in the cab of the truck."

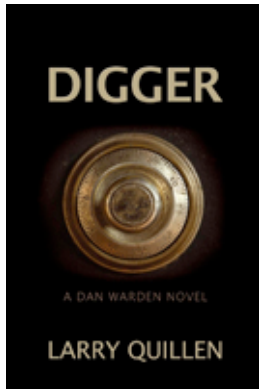
"Are we leaving?"

"No, we're staying. You go back to sleep."

"I wasn't asleep. I was looking at all the pretty stars."

"Yeah, well, you keep on looking at them. I'm going to get in the cab."

The bench seat of the old pickup wasn't quite long enough for him to stretch out, but, after pushing the seat belt buckles out of the way, Sid made himself fit as best he could with his knees bent slightly. There. He felt better, being surrounded by the metal cab. Then he raised up and locked both doors. Much better. After another moment, he opened the glove box and got Al's old revolver, checked to make sure it was loaded, then lay down and wrapped his arms around it. Much, much better.



Deputy Dan Warden hunts for an elusive serial killer who leaves baffling clues. A woman who may be clairvoyant offers to help interpret the clues, but Dan's task becomes more difficult when a raunchy, homicidal ex-con shows up with his mentally challenged half brother. A personal agenda to reunite with his ex-wife and children adds to the pressure as Dan tries to close the case before the killer strikes again.

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