

The background of the cover is a photograph of a gravel road that curves through a lush green cornfield. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

THE RAMPART ALERT

A DAN WARDEN NOVEL

LARRY QUILLEN



In this fourth book of the Dan Warden series, a woman kidnaps a baby from a shopping cart. In the weeks that follow, while others believe the worst, Dan Warden remains convinced that the child is alive. He joins in the hunt for the woman, while innocent lives for hundreds of miles around are devastated by the woman's action.

The Rampart Alert

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PRAISE FOR LARRY QUILLEN'S DAN WARDEN SERIES
By Amazon.com readers

JENNY CAY

Action! Adventure! I loved the fast action and believable characters in Jenny Cay. They managed to work their way out of dangerous predicaments in a reasonable fashion. I am looking forward to reading his other books

DIGGER

"Digger," the author's second book, is as well written and researched as his first book "Jenny Cay." Again, the author creates believable characters that fit into the locale. In this book he adds others that add to the story and plot that leave you guessing how it is going to end. An enjoyable read. I am sure the lead character, detective "Dan Warden," will be heard from again in another novel soon.

THE ROGUE

A near masterpiece of locale and character development and imagery. Quillen manages to draw one in to the personae of the principals as they face the threats posed by their adversaries and their struggles against them. Set in three disparate geographical locales, the action is fast and complex. One appreciates the craft of the author as the complexities of the story are finally unraveled and the good guys triumph - or do they? Definite screenplay material here.

Fiction by Larry Quillen

THE RAMPART ALERT
THE ROGUE
DIGGER
JENNY CAY

THE
RAMPART
ALERT

A DAN WARDEN NOVEL

BY

LARRY QUILLEN

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This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events or locales, is unintended and coincidental.

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First Edition

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To King

From the Alabama Department of Public Safety Website

The Alabama AMBER Plan is a voluntary partnership between law-enforcement agencies and broadcasters to activate an urgent bulletin in the most serious child abduction cases. AMBER is an acronym for **A**merica's **M**issing **B**roadcast **E**mergency **R**esponse.

The AMBER Plan was created in 1996 as a powerful legacy to 9-year-old Amber Hagerman, a bright little girl who was kidnapped and brutally murdered while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas. The tragedy shocked and outraged the entire community. Residents contacted radio stations in the Dallas area and suggested they broadcast special "alerts" over the airwaves so that they could help prevent such incidents in the future.

In response to the community's concern for the safety of local children, the Dallas/Fort Worth Association of Radio Managers teamed up with local law-enforcement agencies in northern Texas and developed this innovative early warning system to help find abducted children. Statistics show that, when abducted, a child's greatest enemy is time.

THE RAMPART ALERT

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Wednesday, July 1

Chickasaw County, Alabama

“NINE-ONE-ONE. What is your emergency?”

“He’s beating me up again! You better get here fast. He says he’s going to kill me!”

It was the first day of July, and the heat and humidity of North Alabama was having an effect on the population. The 9-1-1 dispatcher had heard similar cries for help over the years, but the volume of calls had increased recently. With the economy in the toilet, citizens who had been living reasonably happy lives now found themselves out of work, their credit card balances mounting, and their mortgages past due. Unable to vent their frustration on their former bosses, their banks, or the government, they committed acts of violence on their spouses and children.

Lieutenant Jason Rampart, a deputy for the Chickasaw County, Alabama, Sheriff’s Department, had responded to the call. While listening to the couple scream accusations at each other, Rampart felt a trickle of sweat run down his spine in the heat of the couple’s living room. He slowly shook his head. It was Wednesday. The Fourth of July weekend was coming up in a couple of days, and the temperature was already in the nineties. It was going to get worse before it got better. Rampart heard his cell phone chime, saw that it was a call from his wife, and answered it as the couple continued their tirade. “Hi, Patsy. What’s up?”

“He’s gone!”

Jason frowned at the frantic voice. “Who’s gone?”

“My baby!”

“Johnny? Johnny’s gone? Gone where?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where are you?” Jason asked as he ran to his vehicle.

“At The Big Bag! He was in my shopping cart. Now he’s gone!”

“Have you told the manager?” Jason asked as he started the engine and turned on his behind-the-grill emergency lights.

“He’s right here. I guess he heard me screaming for Johnny.”

“Have you called nine-one-one?” Jason asked as he turned on his siren and pulled out into traffic.

“You’re my nine-one-one!”

“I’m on my way. Have you checked all the aisles?”

“Yes, I’ve looked everywhere! The manager has people looking for him too.”

With a chill crawling up the back of his neck, Jason asked, “Have you looked outside?”

“Why would I look outside? He can’t walk!”

Jason clenched his jaws. She was right. A six-month-old child wouldn’t get that far, not without someone carrying him. “Go outside and look around anyway, all right? Ask anyone out there if they’ve seen a little blond-haired, blue-eyed boy.”

“Oh, my God! Oh, my God! No! No! Oh, please, no! I’m on my way out there now.”

Trying to keep his voice calm as he worked his way through traffic, Jason got on his radio, told the dispatcher where he was going and why he was going there, and asked her to contact the Helleston police and give them the information. Then he picked up his cell phone again. “Hang on. I’ll be right there. Now, tell me what happened.”

“It wasn’t my fault.”

“I didn’t say it was your fault. I just want to know what happened.”

“I was almost done. My cart was full. Then I remembered I needed some rolls from the aisle I had just been down. Instead of pushing that heavy cart back to the bread section,

I left it where it was. I was gone just a few seconds. It wasn't my fault!"

With lights and siren on, Jason eased through a red light after checking for cross traffic. "I didn't say it was, honey. Go ahead, tell me what happened."

"That's all that happened. When I got back to the cart, Johnny was gone. I've looked everywhere for him. He's gone!"

Jason turned off his siren. "I'm just a block away. I'll be right there."

Jason pulled up to the curb in front of the big grocery store, got out, and hurried to his sobbing wife. As several Helleston police vehicles converged on the store with sirens and lights, Jason wrapped his arms around the sobbing woman's shaking body.

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" she wailed again and again. "He's gone! My baby's gone! Somebody took my baby!"

As the police officers surrounded them, Jason looked directly into his wife's reddened eyes. "Johnny's not gone. All right? We'll find him. I promise you. We'll find him."

Her lips trembling, she tried to smile, but couldn't.

When he saw Detective Kelsey of the Helleston Police Department get out of his car and head his way, Jason held up one finger and escorted Patsy to his vehicle.

Kelsey nodded, then turned to a female officer, Sergeant Pillar, and pointed toward Jason and Patsy. Sergeant Pillar hurried after them.

A few minutes later, with Patsy in his car crying uncontrollably in the company of the woman police officer, Jason joined Kelsey and the other Helleston police officers gathered at the front of the building surrounding a clearly upset store manager.

Kelsey pointed to the manager. "Shut this place down. I want everybody out of there."

"Everybody?"

"Everybody! Shoppers, clerks, butchers, bakers, everybody! And I want to see IDs on their way out." He then turned to the uniformed policemen and pointed to a couple of shoppers pushing carts out the front door. "Stop those people! I want to see some ID from everyone leaving this store as of now! Do it!"

Then he pointed to the parking lot. "Block the exits! I want names, addresses, phone numbers, and plate numbers of everyone leaving here as of now." When Kelsey saw that his orders were being put into effect, he turned, looked at Jason, and extended his hand.

"How're you doing, Rampart?"

"Been better, Kelsey," Jason said as he shook the police officer's hand. The Helleston Police Department's jurisdiction was within the city limits of Helleston, Alabama. The Chickasaw County Sheriff's Department provided law enforcement everywhere else in the county except for a couple of small municipalities that had their own police force. Jason and Kelsey had never worked together, but they knew each other socially, and there was no territorial animosity between the Chickasaw County Sheriff's Department and the Helleston Police Department.

"What do we know?"

"I'll tell you what she told me," Jason offered. "We can start with that."

"Let's hear it," Kelsey said, then listened to Jason tell him what Patsy had said. The detective turned to the manager again. "You got security cameras?"

"Yes, aisles, checkout, doors, and parking lot."

"What aisle was Mrs. Rampart in?"

"Uh, I believe that was aisle twelve."

"Do you have equipment to view the video here?"

"Uh, yes, in my office."

"Great. I want to see every video from every camera, inside and out. I want to see aisle twelve first; then I want to see the parking lot."

"Uh, you want to see them right now?"

"I wanted them five minutes ago, but now will have to do."

"Uh, it'll take a few minutes to get everything set up."

Kelsey turned to another policeman. "Go with him. Give him all the help he needs. I'll be right there. Twelve first, then the parking lot. Hop to it!"

"Yes, sir," the officer said, and then followed the manager inside the store.

Detective Kelsey turned to Jason. "We're going to need Mrs.

Rampart downtown, you want to bring her?”

Jason looked at his car and saw Patsy wiping her eyes with a Kleenex and nodding. “Let me go talk to her. Maybe Sergeant Pillar could drive her down in my car and I’ll follow in Patsy’s car.”

“Sounds good. See you there, Jason,” Kelsey said, and then walked away, calling out, “Let’s go, people! We’ve got three hours, and the clock is ticking.”

A chill crawled up Jason’s neck. He knew what the policeman was referring to when he said they had three hours. Statistics showed that, when abducted by a non-family member, seventy-six percent of the children who were murdered were killed within the first three hours of their abduction.

Jason frowned as he watched the policeman disappear into the store without him. The man did the right thing. The store was within the city limits of Helleston. It was his crime and his crime scene. Jason had no right to interfere with either. He knew this might be the first of many situations to come in which he would feel like an outsider to an investigation that he wanted very badly to participate in. The Helleston police were not required to share information with him about an ongoing investigation. Only because he was on good terms with Kelsey, and the sheriff was on good terms with the Helleston police chief, would he be allowed access to information that was not available to the general public.

Jason walked over to his car and leaned over and looked in the side window next to Patsy. “How’re we doing here?”

Patsy sniffed and forced a small smile.

“Uh, Lieutenant,” Sergeant Pillar said, “we need to get back to the station and get an AMBER Alert set up for Johnny.”

Looking grim, Jason said, “This time it will be a Rampart alert.”

“Yes, sir. It will.”

Jason offered his keys to the county vehicle to the Helleston police officer. “You’re clear with Kelsey to take her to the station. I’ll bring Patsy’s car.”

“We’ll need a recent picture of Johnny, if you have one.”

Jason looked at Patsy, his eyebrows raised. “Father’s Day.”

Patsy nodded, understanding. They'd been out at Jason's parents' farm on Father's Day, less than two weeks ago, and had taken pictures of everyone with a digital camera.

"We have several on our computer, Sergeant. I'll download them onto a CD and bring them in as soon as I can."

"If they're on your computer, Lieutenant, it'll save time if you'll just pick one and attach it to an email to pillar at Helleston police dot com."

"Pillar at Helleston police dot com," Jason said. "Got it. Meanwhile, Kelsey is looking at security video. There's a good chance he'll have an image of the person and the car for you in a few minutes."

Sergeant Pillar started the car. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

Jason leaned into the window and kissed his wife on her mouth. She tasted salty. "I'll be right there, honey. Is there anything I can bring you from the house?"

Patsy sniffed and shook her head. "We're out of a lot of things. I was trying to beat the Fourth of July crowds." Suddenly, Patsy burst into tears once more.

Jason stepped back and silently waved to the police officer as she drove away. He looked about the parking lot for his wife's car, saw it a couple of aisles away, and hurried over to it as he dug his keys for the car out of his pocket. He opened the driver's door, climbed in, started the engine, and then looked back for traffic in the aisle behind him. When he did, he saw the base of his son's infant car seat still attached to the rear seat of the car, but his son and the detachable carrier were missing. As he stared at the empty space where his son should have been, an overwhelming sense of loss swept over him.

* * *

ON HER WAY to the Helleston police station, Sergeant Pillar reached for her shoulder mike, then glanced at the deputy's distraught wife and decided to use her cell phone instead. Parts of her conversation with the AMBER Alert Coordinator might not be suitable for the woman's ears. At the next red traffic signal, she pulled out her small flip phone and pressed a speed dial number. "This is Sergeant Pillar. Give me the AMBER Alert Coordinator."

THE RAMPART ALERT

* * *

“OFFICER STEELE! Sergeant Pillar on line two.”

“Sergeant Pillar? What does she want to talk to me about?” the young police officer asked.

“She wants to talk to the AMBER Alert Coordinator.”

“The AMBER Alert Coordinator? I’m not the AMBER Alert Coordinator. What is this, some kind of joke?”

“This is no joke, Steele. The sheet says you’re the coordinator.”

I don’t know anything about AMBER Alerts!”

“Then you’d better learn in a hurry!”

“Jesus,” Steele said softly as he answered the phone. “Uh, Sergeant Pillar, this is Officer Steele.”

“Steele, I want to initiate an AMBER Alert. Can you get it started for me?”

“Uh, well, actually, I’ve never done an AMBER Alert before.”

“Then get me the officer who did it before you took over.”

“She’s, uh, not with the department anymore.”

“Do you know how to access the AMBER Alert procedures on your computer, Officer Steele?”

“Uh, I think so. She showed me the procedures before she left. I haven’t looked at them since.”

“Then find them and let’s get started.”

“Yes, ma’am, uh, Sergeant Pillar,” the young officer said. Soon, his nervous fingers found the opening page of the procedures. “I’ve found them.”

“Good for you. What’s first?”

“Uh, first we have to determine if the case meets the AMBER Alert Plan’s criteria for triggering an alert.”

“All right. Let’s do that. What’s first?”

“Law enforcement must confirm a child has been abducted as defined by 13A-6-40 Alabama Criminal Code.”

“That’s confirmed. Next.”

“The child is less than eighteen years old.”

“That’s also confirmed. The child is approximately six months old. What’s next?”

“The child is at risk of serious bodily harm or death.”

Sergeant Pillar glanced at the distraught woman beside her, then said, “That’s confirmed. We believe the child was

abducted by a stranger to the family. Next.”

“There is enough descriptive information about the child, abductor, and/or the suspect’s vehicle to believe an immediate broadcast alert will help investigators locate the child.”

“That is not confirmed at the moment; however, we expect to have the child’s picture and a possible image of the suspect and the suspect’s vehicle within a half hour. Next.”

“The child’s name and abductor and other critical data elements have been entered into the National Crime Information Center system.”

“We haven’t done that either, Steele, but we’re going to, just as soon as I get there.”

“Uh, okay, that’s all the criteria for an alert.”

“Fine. What’s next?”

“Uh, there’s a paragraph of instructions here.”

“Do you understand it?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Then read it to me.”

“Uh, after local Law Enforcement confirms that a child has been abducted, the designated person within the investigating agency will call the Department of Public Safety in Montgomery to advise them a fax is forthcoming. DPS will confirm that the criteria have been met for an AMBER Activation and issue an AMBER Alert via the state Emergency Alert System using the Child Abduction Emergency Code.”

“Okay, Steele, what that means is that you’re going to call the DPS and tell them that an AMBER Alert fax is on the way. When you do, they’re going to want to confirm that the alert criteria have been met. You’ll give them the answers I just gave you. That will get them set up to roll. As soon as they get the fax with the boy’s picture and info on the suspect, they’re going to send it to all the Alabama radio and television stations that have signed up for AMBER Alerts.”

“Uh, do you want me to call DPS now?”

“You got it, kid. Tell them we’ll have a fax for them in fifteen minutes. I’ll be there in five. Meanwhile, go to Administration and tell them Sergeant Pillar requests a phone line for an AMBER Alert hotline that we can plug multiple

phones into and carry on multiple conversations at the same time. And get that phone number! We'll need it to put on the AMBER Alert fax. Meanwhile, tell your boss you're going to need some part-timers to answer phones for at least the next twenty-four hours. Got all that?"

"Yes, ma'am, uh, Sergeant Pillar."

"Oh, and one more thing. I hope you put on clean underwear this morning because you're going to be living in it for at least the next twenty-four hours. Don't even think about leaving the station unless I say you can. Got that?"

"Uh, yes, Sergeant Pillar."

"Then, let's go, Steele! Let's go! Let's get things rolling!"

* * *

"WHOA! BACK THAT UP!" Detective Kelsey said as the jerky images in aisle twelve showed a large Caucasian woman grabbing the child out of the cart and walking away with him. They backed up the video until they froze on an image of the woman looking at merchandise on a shelf as another woman pushed a cart with a baby past her. "I want a copy of that. Right now!" Kelsey said. Another officer captured the screen image with his cell phone camera, then sent it to Sergeant Pillar's email address.

* * *

AFTER JASON EMAILED Johnny's picture to Sergeant Pillar, he called his parents and gave them the bad news, and then drove to the Helleston police station in Patsy's car. While he was there, he got the keys to his county car from Sergeant Pillar, arranged for a friend to drive Patsy's car home, and then watched as Sergeant Pillar assembled the AMBER Alert fax. She copied the image from the store's security camera into her photo editor, clipped the woman's image from the surrounding grocery store aisle, enlarged it, and then pasted the grainy, fuzzy image to the DPS fax next to a high-resolution image of a six-month-old boy sitting on someone's lap and smiling up at the photographer. While she was working with her photo editor, Sergeant Pillar got a call from Detective Kelsey informing her that the woman had gotten into a white midsize automobile. The parking lot camera's wide-angle lens covered such a large area, the tiny image of a

single vehicle was indistinct, but the officers thought it was either a Toyota or Honda.

* * *

LESS THAN THIRTY minutes after Johnny Rampart was abducted, an AMBER Alert began broadcasting on radio and television stations in Alabama every thirty minutes. Because Helleston was so close to Tennessee, it was quickly expanded into Tennessee as well. Shortly after the AMBER Alert began broadcasting, media representatives began to descend upon Helleston from Florence, Athens, Decatur, and Huntsville. An hour later, still more arrived from Birmingham. By then, local part-time reporters from the cable news channels had arrived or were on their way. Some camped in The Big Bag parking lot, looking for a sound bite from anyone walking out of the building; others had set up satellite relays on the Ramparts' lawn, waiting for either of them to show up; and others were at the Helleston City Hall, waiting for updates from the Helleston police spokesperson. They knew the parents were inside the police station and could not avoid them on their way out.

* * *

THE BIG BAG SUPERMARKET had security cameras in the rear of the store to watch for people stuffing small items into large pockets and bags. There were cameras above the checkout registers as well, watching for checkers bypassing the scanner with a friend's purchases. There were also cameras above the doors, recording people entering and leaving the store. Outside, there were wide-angle cameras watching the parking lot. Using the relevant images, the Helleston police were able to establish a timeline of the abduction.

At 2:23:02 Mrs. Patricia Rampart was seen in aisle twelve pushing her fully loaded cart toward the front of the store. There was a small child in an infant car seat carrier in the cart as well. At 2:23:20 she stopped the cart about halfway up the aisle, and then, leaving the cart in place, turned and walked quickly back down the aisle, passing a tall, heavyset, light-skinned woman wearing sneakers, jeans, and a dark-colored T-shirt. Mrs. Rampart turned into aisle eleven and

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stopped at the bread section at 2:23:41. The large woman in aisle twelve watched Mrs. Rampart walk to the end of the aisle, then disappear from view. The woman continued to watch for approximately ten seconds; then she walked toward the cart. At 2:23:49, while Mrs. Rampart was examining rolls in aisle eleven, the woman grabbed the car seat carrier out of the cart and hurried toward the front of the store. At 2:24:07, the cameras in the rear of the store showed Mrs. Rampart reappearing in aisle twelve while the camera above checkout fourteen, unattended at the time, recorded the large woman passing through with the child. As the door cameras showed the large woman leaving the store at 2:24:18, the aisle twelve camera showed Mrs. Rampart running to the end of the aisle, then stopping and looking left and right. The cameras in the back of the store then recorded Mrs. Rampart frantically searching for her son with her cell phone to her ear. At 2:25:03, the security cameras in the parking lot recorded the large woman stopped at a midsize white car. At 2:25:49, the door cameras saw Mrs. Rampart running out of the store as the large woman drove away in a white vehicle.

In two minutes, the child was gone.

At one point, when the officers were reviewing the tapes, they froze the tape as the woman reached toward an item. One of the officers turned to the store manager and asked, "What's she reaching for? What's on that side of aisle twelve?"

"Knives," the manager said quietly.

Detective Kelsey turned to another officer. "I want every knife on that row checked for prints." Then he turned back to the manager. "Do you fingerprint your employees?"

The manager shook his head. "They have to pass a drug test, that's all."

Kelsey turned to another officer. "I want fingerprints of any store employee who might have touched those knives."

After the police officers viewing the tape agreed that the vehicle was probably a Toyota, they brought in the service manager of the local Toyota dealership to view the poor quality images of the abduction vehicle backing out, and then driving away from the parking lot. The service manager said the trunk and tail light configuration was probably that of a

ten-year-old Toyota Camry. An hour after the abduction, the Helleston police issued a BOLO to all law enforcement agencies in North Alabama and southern Tennessee, to be on the lookout for a white Toyota Camry, approximately ten years old, being driven by a large light-complected female with a six-month-old light-complected male passenger. At the time, they knew it was a longshot at best. The Toyota Camry was the most popular midsize sedan on the road, and white was the most popular color.

* * *

AFTER LIEUTENANT KELSEY interviewed Patsy Rampart, he asked her to allow them to fingerprint her. Patsy readily agreed after being told that a child's shoe had been found in her cart with two good impressions on it. They needed to eliminate her and her husband, whose prints were already on file, as the sources of the impressions.

The Helleston police station didn't have a waiting room or visitors' area as such, but because Jason was a fellow law enforcement officer, Sergeant Pillar found an empty office with an empty desk and a couple of empty chairs for them to await word about their child. The sergeant pointed out the restrooms and the coffee machines and left them on their own.

Jason left the police station for a while at the invitation of Kelsey when they got a call on the hotline about a white Toyota parked on a dirt road out in the county near Greenbrier Creek. It turned out to be a fisherman's car. When Jason came back in to the station, he put his arm around his wife, and she leaned her head on his shoulder. There had been several other calls on the hotline, but, so far, nothing of substance.

Jason glanced at the clock, and a knot formed in his stomach when he realized that it had been more than three hours since Johnny had been abducted. According to FBI statistics, there was a good chance that Johnny was already dead. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, trying to fight the tears of frustration welling up in his eyes. "Are you about ready to go home, honey?"

Patsy sniffed, and then looked up at Jason. "Can't we stay

a little longer?”

“If you want to,” Jason said.

“I’d like to be here when they find him.”

“All right. We’ll stay for a little while longer,” Jason said softly, trembling with rage. Someone out there had stolen his son, and he was forced to sit here doing nothing because The Big Bag supermarket was inside the city limits of Helleston, Alabama, and therefore outside the jurisdiction of the Chickasaw County Sheriff’s Office. He wasn’t used to sitting on his hands while others did his job for him. He didn’t like it at all.

Jason decided to do something constructive with his time by making a list of those who might have done this as revenge because he had put them or someone in their family in jail. During the years he had been in law enforcement, several times he’d heard someone yell, “I’ll get you for this!” Jason knew they were mostly empty threats, but there were a few people that, given the opportunity, might carry out their threat. Kelsey would want those names. Now was as good a time as any to give the list some thought. He found a pen and paper in the desk and had written two names when he paused. Then he frowned, nodded, and wrote, “Charlie Cooper, Bailey Springs, Tennessee.”

Bailey Springs, Tennessee

AFTER A LONG DAY as a mechanic in the service department of an auto dealer in Bailey Springs, Tennessee, Charlie Cooper opened a cold bottle of beer and settled back in his recliner while waiting for his wife to finish cooking supper. He glanced at the clock, saw that it was time for the news, punched the remote, and turned to a Huntsville, Alabama, channel. Although Huntsville was in Alabama, the little town of Bailey Springs, Tennessee, was only ten miles or so north of the Alabama state line. The Huntsville TV stations were closer to Bailey Springs than any TV station in Tennessee.

The lead story of the day was the abduction of a small child from a Helleston grocery store. When she heard the

opening statement from the talking head, Charlie's wife came into the room to hear more. Speaking live from the empty grocery store parking lot, the reporter described the abduction of Johnny Rampart, the infant son of Patricia Rampart and Lieutenant Jason Rampart of the Chickasaw County Sheriff's Department. The newscast then cut to a woman, identified as the spokesperson for the Helleston Police Department, who gave a brief summary of what was known at that point. With the AMBER Alert image displayed on the screen, the TV reporter read the Johnny Rampart Hotline number and encouraged the station's viewers to call the number if they had any information on the whereabouts of the child.

"Oh, that's so sad."

"Serves him right," Charlie said.

"Why?"

"Ain't his daddy one of them sons of bitches who got our boy killed?"

"I don't remember."

"I'm pretty sure he was," Charlie said, then got out of his recliner and headed down the hallway. In his bedroom, he went to a chest, opened the top drawer, and pulled out a two-year-old newspaper. The front-page headline read:

METH RAID KILLS 3

The lead story described a raid conducted the previous evening on a suspected meth lab in a mobile home in rural Chickasaw County, Alabama. The raid was conducted by members of the DEA, Alabama State Police, and the Chickasaw County Sheriff's Department. It had gone terribly wrong. According to Chickasaw County Sheriff Dwayne Thomas, the mobile home had exploded as the law enforcement officers approached the building, killing two adult men inside, identified as Bryan Haller and Jesse Cooper. The explosion had also killed Jesse Cooper's young son, Toby. The boy's mother, Stacy Jones, had survived the explosion, but was currently in intensive care at Helleston Memorial Hospital with extensive second- and third-degree burns. Sheriff Thomas said the explosion was in no way due to any action by the lawmen. Instead, he claimed that it was

due to the highly volatile chemicals being used inside the mobile home to make methamphetamine. The article also noted that several law enforcement officers had also suffered chemical burns. Farther down in the article, it noted that DEA Special Agent Marion Callas had been in charge of the meth raid, but members of the Alabama State Police and the Chickasaw County Sheriff's Criminal Investigation Division, including Captain Dan Warden and Lieutenant Jason Rampart, also participated.

"I thought so," Charlie said, then looked up at the framed picture on top of the chest. It was a picture of his only son, Jesse; his girlfriend, Stacy Jones; and their son, Toby, in happier days. Jesse and Toby had died in the fire. Stacy had held on for two days before she died from her burns. Charlie blinked back the wetness from his eyes. They were all gone now. All because somebody wearing a badge had killed them. "Someday, son, someday..." Charlie quietly promised, and then put the newspaper back in the drawer, shaking his head.

Back in his recliner, with clenched jaws, Charlie nodded. There was no doubt about it, Hound Dog and his puppies were killing people down in Chickasaw County, Alabama, then covering their asses and getting away with it, plain and simple. Not only did they get away with killing his family, everybody knew their story about how Mike Landers died was a cover-up. Mike had a big landscaping business down there and was well thought of by everybody in the county. He didn't deserve the kind of treatment he got from the cops. Charlie's relatives down there had told him that Mike's widow, Martha, and her daughter were trying to hold the business together, but that damn sheriff had run Mike's son, Sid Landers, out of town just because he'd spent some time in jail somewhere. That wasn't right. Just because a man had spent some time in jail didn't make him a bad person as far as Charlie was concerned.

Ocala, Florida

AFTER LEAVING HIS dad's landscaping business near

Helleston, Alabama, two years ago—and avoiding a possible murder charge at the same time—Sid Landers had wandered about the Southeast along with his half brother, Ronny, who preferred to be called Digger. Recently, they had been looking for work around Ocala, Florida, but hadn't found much in a state where there were more foreclosures than new building permits each month. Digger had harvested oranges for a while back in the winter. The simple man enjoyed working outdoors in the mild Florida climate, but Sid held out for an administrative position.

When nothing came his way, Sid tried running an industrial mower for a landscaping company and found it was something he didn't mind doing. He didn't have to get his hands dirty, it wasn't hard backbreaking work, and it was almost like the kind of work the big boys did with their cranes, Cats, and front-end loaders. That work lasted until he showed up late one time too many to suit the boss. Since then, he had made a few bucks playing poker and shooting pool for money. Penny-ante poker was legal in Florida, but Sid liked to play the illegal, high-stakes Texas Hold'em poker games where a man could walk away with a thousand more in his pocket at the end of the night than he'd had when he came in.

When he was on a winning streak and had a few thousand in his pocket, Sid and Digger lived in a mom-and-pop motel and ate at Denny's and Shoney's. When Sid was down to his last five hundred, they joined the homeless for free meals and slept in his black Ford F-150 pickup truck, which he called the starlight motel. Like many homeless, they avoided the shelters unless it was bitter cold outside, because the rules didn't allow alcohol or drugs.

Digger was happy anywhere, anytime he had food. If the simpleminded man was sitting in front of a television set while eating, he was content. The man-child didn't care what program was on, just that it was on. Digger rarely shaved or bathed more than once a week or so, but Sid bathed and shaved every day he could, and didn't wear clothes more than two or three times before he took them to a laundry, because the people who played high-stakes poker didn't like it when a

man who stank of stale sweat sat in on their game.

Sid and Digger usually didn't stay in one place for more than a few weeks. Sid knew all card players had telltale signals, whether they intended to or not. Every smart card player learned to read those signs from other players while masking his own. After spending ten years in a Texas prison for killing a man, Sid thought he was pretty good at hiding his emotions, but he had since learned that no man could do that all the time while sitting at a poker table. It usually took other card players a few times to learn to read Sid; then it was time to move on.

Another thing Sid had learned was that it was hot in central Florida in the summer. Today was the first day of July, and the temperature was in the nineties, as it had been yesterday and was supposed to be again tomorrow and for several days after that. Tired of the heat and humidity that made him break out in a sweat anytime he stepped outside, Sid decided to head north of the Mason-Dixon Line for a few months and try his poker skills where the weather might be cooler and Lady Luck kinder to him.

To get ready for a few thousand miles of driving, he had the oil changed in his pickup truck. As he took his receipt and change from the attendant, Sid looked at the man in his early fifties with gray hair at his temples, and a tired look that said life had been rough on him. Sid decided he "looked right."

It would have been hard for Sid to explain what it meant for a man to look right, but what it amounted to was that Sid thought the man might know of an illegal poker game with an empty chair.

"You know if anybody plays poker for money around here?"

The man looked at Sid for a few seconds, and said, "We have a little game here sometimes. Just a friendly game, nothing big time about it."

Sid shrugged. "That's all I'm looking for, just something to kill time tonight. Nothing on TV, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean. You live around here?"

"Just passing through, on my way north. It's that time of the year."

"I hear you."

“What’s your game?” Sid asked.

“We like to play the old standard, seven card stud.”

“That would be fine with me. I’ve never figured out this thing call Texas Hold’em anyway.”

The man chuckled. “I’m the same way,” he said. “Like I say, we’re just a bunch of old boys who like to get together and play cards, but to make it interesting, everybody is expected to bring a hundred dollars to the game. Does that sound like something you’d be interested in?”

“It’s a little steep, but I think I can handle it.”

The man smiled and nodded. “Fine. The way we usually play is that every player has to buy a hundred dollars’ worth of chips, and all the chips stay on the table until we call the game at midnight. You can buy more chips during the game, but they stay on the table, too. At midnight, everybody cashes in and I take my percentage for being the dealer and running the game.”

“How much is that?”

“Ten.”

“What happens if I’m busted?” Sid asked with a grin.

“I’ll take 10 percent of nothing.”

“Sounds all right to me.”

“Good. Be here by eight. Park around back and bang on the door. I’ll save you a seat. Bring whatever you want to drink. No smoking at the table. One of the players is a doctor and he won’t let us. There’ll be six or seven others so we should have a good game tonight.”

“I’m looking forward to it. It’ll sure beat watching that motel TV.”

“I hear you.”

“See you later,” Sid said, then climbed into his truck and drove away, smiling. With seven hundred dollars on the table, he thought he could turn a hundred-dollar investment into at least three, maybe four or more, before the night was out. Not much, but enough to keep them heading north without dipping into his reserve to pay for gas, burgers, and motels.

Sid took Digger to Pizza Hut, ordered a big one, ate two slices, and watched the big man devour the rest and chase it with a big mug of beer. Afterwards, he checked them into a

mom-and-pop motel, turned on the TV, and left Digger with a big bag of potato chips and a six-pack of the cheapest beer Sid could buy. Sid and Digger had been together since they had left Oklahoma, more than two years ago. Somewhere along the way, Sid had discovered that beer didn't seem to affect Digger. He could drink as much as he wanted, for as long as he wanted, and it didn't seem to affect him. What was the point of buying a man good beer if he didn't get a buzz on?

Helleston, Alabama

"PATSY, IT'S NINE O'CLOCK," Jason said. He had found his wife in the same seat at the same desk in the Helleston police station where she had been when he had left her two hours ago to join Kelsey in a search of an old farmhouse in the county north of Helleston. The search had turned up nothing. "We need to head home, honey."

"Oh, please, let's stay just a little longer."

"We need to get something to eat. When's the last time you had anything to eat?"

"I don't know. Breakfast, I guess."

"I'm hungry. Let's go get something to eat, all right?"

"Why don't you go get something if you're hungry? I'd like to stay here. You can bring something back for me."

Jason looked at Patsy and felt sad. He thought he knew what her problem was. As long as she stayed here, she was safe, protected from reality. People here were manning phone lines, checking out leads, focused on finding her son, giving her the thinnest strand of hope that she might be reunited with Johnny before the day was over. Outside the police station was reality. The moment she walked into their home without her son in her arms, she would be forced to admit to herself that he was gone and she might not ever see him again.

"I've got to hit the john. I'll be back in a minute," Jason said, kissed Patsy on her forehead and left. He went in search of Detective Kelsey and found him in his office, looking tired from the day's activities.

Kelsey looked at Jason and shook his head.

"I know you're doing everything possible, but I do have one favor to ask," Jason said.

"What's that?"

"Would you kick my wife out of here? She needs to get something to eat and go home, but she's going to hang around here as long as you let her."

"I'll take care of it."

"Five minutes?"

"You got it."

"How bad is it outside? I had to fight my way back in a while ago with cameras and microphones stuck in my face."

"Some have gone home for the night, but there's still a few out there. I can get a couple of big officers to escort you to your vehicle, if you want me to do that for you."

"I'd appreciate that. The sheriff's got a couple of deputies on duty at my house to keep them from breaking down the door until I get there."

Kelsey snorted. "You're news, Jason! This is your fifteen minutes of fame. The public has a right to know. Get used to it."

"I can live with it, but Patsy's going to have a tough time."

With a somber face, Kelsey nodded. "I'll get your escort. Be right back."

When Jason walked back into the vacant office, he asked, "Anything new while I was in the john?"

Patsy shook her head.

After a few minutes, Jason and Patsy looked up to see Detective Kelsey walk in. "Hello, Mrs. Rampart. How're you doing?"

Patsy smiled. "Just sitting here, waiting for you to bring me some good news."

Kelsey shook his head. "Not yet."

"No?" Patsy asked, disheartened once again.

"Mrs. Rampart, let me tell you what we've done so far. We've put out an AMBER Alert for Johnny for all of Alabama and Tennessee. We've put out a BOLO...that's police language for 'be on the lookout' for the woman in an older model white Toyota Camry. That means we've got police officers, deputy

sheriffs, and highway patrol officers looking for that white Toyota. We're also getting help with the investigation from the Alabama Department of Public Safety's Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and the FBI's Child Abduction Rapid Deployment team is on its way.

"We've put the information about the woman and her car in the NCIC—that's the National Crime Information Center computer database, which makes it available to every lawman in America. We've posted Johnny's picture and information on the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children website and the Alabama AMBER Alert website as well. Within minutes after they received it, they reformatted the AMBER Alert and sent it electronically to all wireless carriers, who then automatically sent it as a text message to all subscribers with Alabama and Tennessee zip codes who have signed up to receive AMBER Alerts." Kelsey paused.

"So far, we've gotten thirty-four calls on the hotline. They're from all over the place. Athens, Florence, Huntsville, Birmingham, Nashville, Chattanooga, and everywhere in between, including here in Helleston, and we're chasing down every one of them. None of them sound very promising, I can tell you that, but we won't know for sure until we check them out, and we will check them out, every one of them." Kelsey paused again. "Mrs. Rampart, we *will* find your son. I have full faith and confidence that we will find him and bring him home to you, but it may not be tonight."

"What about the fingerprints you found on his shoe?"

Kelsey smiled. "They were your prints, Mrs. Rampart. You were probably the one who put his shoes on this morning, right?"

Patsy nodded. "Can I have the shoe?"

"We'd like to keep it for a few days, Mrs. Rampart, if you don't mind," Kelsey said. "In the meantime, I'd like for you to take Jason home and leave this to us. We'll call you if anything changes."

"Can't you let me stay, just for a little while longer?"

"I wish I could, Mrs. Rampart, but visiting hours are over."

"Visiting hours?"

"Yes, ma'am. Eight o'clock. All civilians are supposed to be

out of the building by eight. It's way past that time. Go home, and take Jason with you. Let us do our job, Mrs. Rampart, and you do yours. Take Jason home and see that he gets a good night's sleep. We may need him bright and early tomorrow."

Patsy slowly rose from the chair and walked to the door of the office. "You'll call, won't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. We have Jason's cell phone number and your home phone number. I promise you we'll call."

"How about my cell phone number? Would you like to have it?"

"Of course," Kelsey said and withdrew a small notebook from his pocket. He jotted down the number Patsy gave him, then looked up at her and smiled. "Got it. Thanks, Mrs. Rampart. I'll pass this on to the folks monitoring the phones."

"Thank you."

"Good night, Mrs. Rampart."

"Good night," Patsy said and allowed Jason to steer her toward the front door where three very big uniformed Helleston police officers were waiting for them.

Jason pointed to the doors and said, "Patsy, there's going to be cameras and microphones out front and people are going to be asking questions. You don't have to answer them, all right? Just keep your head down and hang on to me. These police officers are going to be running interference for us, so just follow my lead. Once we get into the car, we'll be safe. All right?"

Patsy silently nodded.

"But we need those reporters' help. They're the ones who're going to spread the word about Johnny. We need to give them something." Jason looked at the officers. They nodded. "So, I'll say a few words once we get outside. You don't have to say anything. Then, we'll let the officers escort us to my car. All right?"

Patsy nodded again.

Once outside, the three police officers stood close to the couple as Jason and Patsy held on to each other. As the bright lights blinded them, several microphones were thrust toward them as hyper reporters and newscasters crowded

around them and fired questions. Jason held up his hand. When the questioning stopped, Jason said, "Thanks to the news media, we have had several calls on the hotline and we expect more. We want to thank all those who have called, and we encourage others to call if they have anything to report. This has been a very trying day for the Rampart family. We ask that you respect our privacy. If anything breaks, you will hear it from the Helleston Police Department spokesperson." Jason looked down at Patsy. "You ready?"

"I just want to say," Patsy said, her voice hoarse from crying, "Johnny, we love you, and Jesus is watching over you."

"Thank you," Jason said, then looked at the policemen and nodded. With the officers forming a wedge around them, Jason and Patsy hurried down the steps, shielding their eyes from the bright lights of the video cameras, and ignoring the questions being shouted at them from the darkness behind the cameras.

As Jason pulled away from the Helleston city hall, he heard Patsy say, "Oh, God. Thank goodness that's over with."

"It's just started, Patsy. They'll be at the house, and anywhere else we go."

"Why?" the distraught woman asked.

"A child's abduction by a stranger is news, Patsy. This time, it's our child. We're news."

"Oh, my God," Patsy moaned softly.

* * *

AS JASON APPROACHED his house, he saw three vans with satellite dishes parked in front of his house. When he pulled into his driveway, he saw a deputy that he didn't recognize standing guard at the front door. Jason nodded. It was probably a part-time deputy volunteering his time, showing his badge to protect one of his fellow deputies. Once inside the garage with the door down, Jason turned to Patsy. "It's going to be all right, honey."

Patsy looked at him with a forced smile.

"I'm going to find him and bring him back, all right?"

Patsy silently nodded.

"It wasn't your fault. You've got to believe that."

Patsy nodded again.

"I love you," Jason said softly, gazing into his wife's eyes.

"I love you, too," Patsy said softly.

Once in the house, Jason asked, "You want something to eat?"

"I'll just have a little wine," Patsy said as she headed for the kitchen cabinet.

"I'll join you just as soon as I take a shower," Jason said.

"Do we have to say something to the people outside?"

Jason shook his head. "Let them get used to the idea that we don't give interviews from our front porch. It won't keep them all away, but it will help thin the crowd."

"Leave your cell phone with me, please. Just in case."

"Sure," Jason said, then handed her his phone. When he was done with his shower, Jason found Patsy sitting on the edge of the couch, her wine glass in one hand and the TV remote in the other. Jason fixed himself some bourbon and branch and joined her in time to watch the ten o'clock news.

The lead story, once again, was the abduction of Johnny Rampart. It began with a reporter standing in front of The Big Bag grocery store, giving an overview of what had happened earlier in the day. Then the station switched to an updated statement from the spokesperson for the Helleston Police Department, saying there was nothing new to report. Then the hotline number was repeated as the newscast showed Johnny's AMBER Alert photo and the fuzzy image of a large Caucasian woman who was seen driving a ten-year-old Toyota Camry.

When the newscast switched to a commercial, Jason looked over at his wife and saw tears running down her face. He closed his eyes and said a silent prayer. When the newscast was over, Patsy hit the mute, but continued to watch the AMBER Alert message crawl on the bottom of the screen.

Jason finished his drink and then reached out and rubbed her shoulders and back. "You want something to eat, honey?"

"No, thank you. I'm not hungry."

"I'm going to hit the sack. You coming?"

"I'll be along as soon as I finish my wine."

“Could you use a little hug?”

“Oh, yes,” Patsy cried, then turned to Jason.

They held each other for a long while; then Jason pulled his head back and tried to smile. “We’ll get through this, Patsy. You, me, and Johnny. We’ll all get through this, and when it’s all over, we’ll be together again. I promise you.”

Patsy sniffed, and then asked, “What about Mom and Dad?”

Jason frowned. Good question. Patsy’s parents were Baptist missionaries on Madagascar, an island in the Indian Ocean off eastern Africa. They were usually in some tiny village out in the boondocks. Jason and Patsy could only communicate with them by writing letters that took weeks to reach them, or by email if and when they were in a town that provided public Internet service. “I don’t know, Patsy. I’m sure they would want to know, but I think it would just make them worry about something they can’t do anything about over there.”

“I think you’re right,” Patsy said. “It wouldn’t do any good to worry them while they’re doing the Lord’s work over there. I’m sure they’re already praying for him and all the other lost children in the world. Besides, he’ll probably be back home before we could get a message to them anyway.”

Jason smiled at his wife’s optimism. “Sounds good to me. See you in a few minutes.”

“Be right there.”

As Jason lay in bed, wide-awake, he knew from his years in law enforcement that he had probably given his wife false hope. Today might not ever end. Their son might never be found alive. Ever if he was, their lives would never be the same again. He closed his eyes, knowing he wouldn’t be able to sleep. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, envious of those whose lives were less trying than his tonight.

Ocala, Florida

SID LANDERS MADE IT BACK to the oil change shop in Ocala before eight, parked in the back, and was soon admitted. Two oil change bays took most of the floor space in

the building, but along one side was a small office area in front and a customer waiting area in the back. Most of the furniture in the customers' area had been moved out to make room for eight chairs and a round table with a piece of green felt spread over the top. The oil change man was sitting at the table with a yellow plastic fishing tackle box beside him.

Sid gave the man a hundred dollars and then watched him open the box. Inside were chips, money, and decks of cards. He took Sid's money, dropped it in the tackle box, and gave him a selection of chips. After Sid was introduced to the other six players, he took the last seat and the game began.

After a few hands, Sid smiled as he looked around the table at the other players, recalling the old saying: "If you don't know who the patsy is after ten minutes, it's you." It was obvious to him that the doctor was the patsy. He seemed to know it, and didn't care. This was his night off from his wife, kids, and patients, and he enjoyed playing cards with these men. If the simple pleasure cost him a hundred dollars, so what? According to him, it was a lot less than his wife spent at the mall every week.

The other five players were a mixed bag. There was a hyper young man in his twenties who claimed to have won a lot of money playing poker on the Internet and said he had plans to try his skills at the Seminole Hard Rock Casino down in Tampa. The other four were obviously old friends who had known each other and the dealer for a long time. From what Sid could tell, they weren't bad, but if the cards fell his way, he might have the whole pile of chips in front of him by midnight.

When they took a break at ten, Sid's chip count was over three hundred dollars. He felt good. This was going to be a fun night. On his way back from the john, he saw the dealer and his friends talking among themselves over in a corner of the oil change bays. When everyone came back to the table, two of the players swapped seats.

"Hey, that's my lucky seat!" one of them complained.

"Find another one."

"Okay, but if I start losing, I want it back."

Sid frowned at the men, wondering what was going on. He

had never seen a man give up his lucky seat at a card table to another man without an argument, sometimes involving fists. Ten minutes later, Sid had figured out why the players had swapped chairs. They were passing signals. Maybe they thought they were good enough to get away with it in front of a rube from out of town. What they didn't know was that Sid had practiced the art of reading a man's telltales for many years. It came in handy in a card game, but it was essential to staying healthy in prison. Without being aware of it, people's facial expressions, body movements, and tones of voice were different when they were lying than when they were telling the truth. Cops knew that, and so did Sid. At a card table, and in prison, it served him well to know when a man was lying and when he was telling the truth.

Sid realized he was in a losing situation and couldn't do anything about. He had a small knife in his pocket, but his stepdad's old revolver was in his truck, too far away to do him any good at the moment. He also had a metal baseball bat in his lockbox. Sid had never used it to hit a baseball but, like the six-cell flashlights that some bikers carried, the bat was a weapon the cops wouldn't arrest you for having in your possession because it had a legitimate purpose.

As Sid's temper rose, his stack of chips dwindled. He couldn't cash in until midnight and there was no point in the new guy accusing the old gang of cheating. By eleven o'clock he was tapped out. The dealer offered to sell him more chips, but Sid said there was no way he could beat a deck as cold as that one was. He smiled, said his good-byes, and left.

Sid's first stop was at an all-night Walmart where he bought a red plastic five-gallon gas can and picked up a free real estate advertising tabloid. His next stop was at a gas station where he filled the can and put it in the bed of his truck. He drove back to the oil change shop, turned down the side street next door to it, made a U-turn, and parked heading out with a good view of the oil change building through some tall oleander bushes. He grabbed the gas can and tabloid and ran to the building.

He poured gasoline all around the bottom of the building, leaving a small gap at the back door, and then lit a ball of

paper from the tabloid and threw it at the gasoline and watched it ignite. As the flames raced around the perimeter of the building, Sid ran back to his truck, started the engine, and waited. Less than a minute later, he saw men boiling out of the back door and running toward their vehicles.

The oil change man was the last to come out, carrying the tackle box. As the others drove away, Sid watched the man climb into a Dodge Dakota and drive off in a hurry. Sid followed him with his headlights off. A couple of miles later, the Dakota turned off the main road and into a subdivision of small, older homes on tiny lots. Sid followed the other truck until he saw it pull into a driveway, and then pulled in close behind it. The oil change man got out of his truck with the yellow tackle box in his hand, then stopped and stared at the darkened truck in his driveway.

Sid got out of his pickup truck and walked toward the other man, holding an old revolver down by his side. "Hold it right there, hoss."

The man watched Sid approaching him in the dim light of a distant street light. "You!" he cried out when he recognized Sid.

"You didn't think I was going to walk out of there with my tail between my legs, did you?"

"Did you set that fire?"

"Now why would I do that? You think I would do something like that just because you and your pals stole a few hundred dollars from me?"

"We didn't..."

"Bullshit! I've played a few thousand hands of poker. I could read your buddies' signals as well as you could." Sid pointed with his revolver. "Put the box down, hoss."

With his eyes on the gun, the man slowly lowered the tackle box to the driveway beside him.

"Step away from the box. Get over on the grass, face down. Arms and legs out wide," Sid demanded. When the man complied, Sid walked over to the tackle box. "You stay right there while I take what's mine."

"How much do you figure we owe you?"

"I haven't decided yet," Sid said, then picked up the tackle

box and walked over to the oil change man. He squatted next to him and let him see the gun again. "You know, your buddies aren't going to believe you didn't take the money yourself, or they're going to be pissed at you for giving it up so easy if you don't have something to show them."

"Show them? Show them what?"

"This," Sid said as he brought the barrel of the old revolver down hard against the side of the man's head. He heard the man grunt, then watched him go limp. Sid took the tackle box to his truck, opened it, grabbed all the money inside, and then threw the box, cards, and poker chips out onto the lawn. "There's your cut, spread it around to the other bastards who thought I was their patsy tonight."

A block later, Sid turned on his lights and headed back to Digger at the motel. Once there, he counted the money. Eight hundred dollars. His hundred and seven more. "Not bad," he said. "We're in business again."

He went inside the motel room, hit the john, and then shook Digger. "Hey, time to go."

"It's morning?" the sleepy man asked.

"It is for us. Let's go. We need to get on down the road."

Fifteen minutes later, they were on I-75 heading north. Sid looked over at his half brother and grinned. "Just like Willie Nelson, we're on the road again!"

"We come back?"

Sid shook his head. "Not for a while. Not for a long, long while."

As they passed by a thick stand of pine trees on both sides of the freeway, Digger lowered his window, stuck his hand out with his middle finger extended, and yelled, "So long, asshole!"

Sid snorted. He'd taught Digger to say that phrase on their way out of Oklahoma. It was the right thing to say at the time, but it had gotten them into trouble a couple of times since then. Sid smiled as he headed north on I-75. They'd stop somewhere and spend the night in their starlight motel, and then he'd see if the cards were any kinder to him in Atlanta than they'd been in Florida lately. From Atlanta, he'd head up into Tennessee, maybe over to Memphis.

Sid grinned. But he would avoid crossing the state line into Alabama. There was a deputy sheriff in Chickasaw County, Alabama, named Warden, who suspected Sid had done some nasty things in his county and would love to hang him by his balls if he could prove it. Then Sid frowned in thought. But another deputy down there, Rampart, had given him a break when he didn't have to. If he ever had a chance to return the favor, he would if he could.

Helleston, Alabama

JASON RAMPART AWOKE from a fitful sleep. In the moonlight shining through the curtains, he could see that the other side of the bed was empty and the pillow unused. He looked at the digital clock. Just past three o'clock. His son had been missing for more than twelve hours already.

He got out of bed and went into the living room where he found the TV still on mute and Patsy curled up on the couch, asleep, holding onto a cell phone. Jason slowly shook his head as tears welled up in his eyes. He found a blanket and spread it over her, then gazed down at the sleeping woman for a long time. Soon it would be another day for everyone else, but for his wife, the first day of July would never end until their son was back with them. He returned to his bed and lay there, eyes wide open.



In this fourth book of the Dan Warden series, a woman kidnaps a baby from a shopping cart. In the weeks that follow, while others believe the worst, Dan Warden remains convinced that the child is alive. He joins in the hunt for the woman, while innocent lives for hundreds of miles around are devastated by the woman's action.

The Rampart Alert

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