

In the 1960s, widowed garbageman Joe Franklin raises his son, Michael, on the poor side of town. The community pillars cover up a murder in 1979 and decades later are blackmailed by the only witness – Michael Franklin, the boy from Tater Town. Michael ultimately must choose whether to fulfill his vengeful plans or save his father's life.

Tater Town Blood

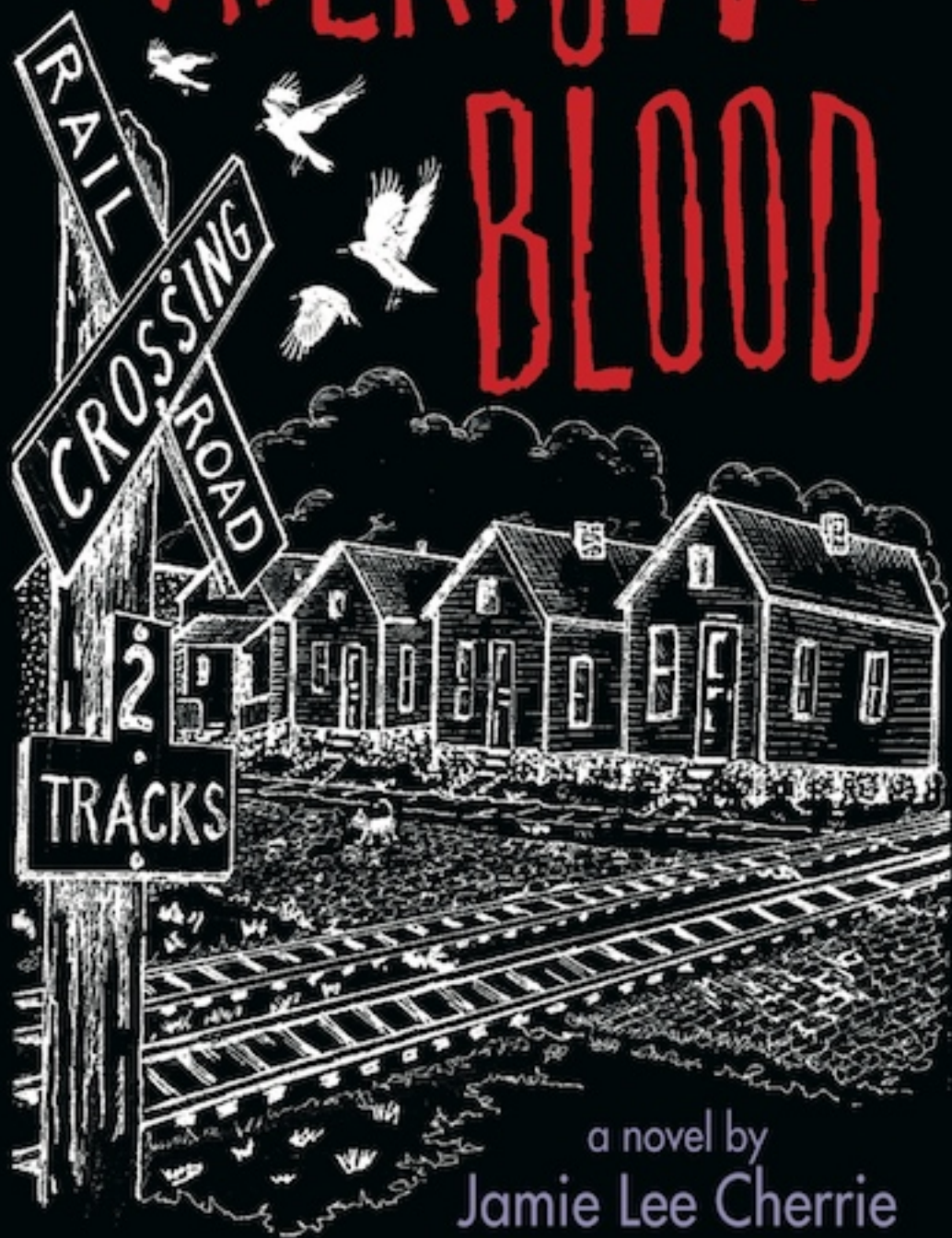
by Jamie Lee Cherrie

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TATERTOWN BLOOD



a novel by
Jamie Lee Cherrie

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This is a work of fiction except for Peggy Sue, a bird dog who loved to point at butterflies.

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PROLOGUE

MICHAEL FRANKLIN

November 4, 2000

9:00 p.m.

I've heard when death is imminent, God reveals chosen snapshots of your life. I abandoned my Catholic faith decades ago, but tonight as I speed through the darkened streets of my hometown, simple prayers form and long-forgotten images emerge from deep within my memory.

Life's hard blows taught me that God didn't care about the west side of Bryant, Illinois. I knew when I was eight years old that we stood alone in this world and relying on anyone else was foolish. The only thing my pop worshipped was my mother's memory, and her gravestone in Bryant Cemetery was the altar for his prayers. He paid his respects in other places, especially on Sunday nights at the local tavern, and with every bottle of whiskey he drank. To my knowledge, my mother never answered his inebriated prayers.

Somehow, in spite of himself, Pop tried to teach me right from wrong. He was a garbageman, the town drunk, and at times, a soulless bastard, but I know he did the best he could. My pop was merely human, full of faults, but also deserving of absolution. The irony

of this revelation does not escape me; I realize for the first time in my forty-one years of living that I need my father's forgiveness, too.

I don't know why time slows down when you're in a desperate need to be somewhere else. As I press down on the clutch and shift into third gear, the truck's engine threatens to stall again.

Without warning, another prayer intrudes into my thoughts, and I can't stop it.

Holy Mary, Mother of God...

If I had more time, I'd call Skip, my best buddy since grade school. I know he would have my back tonight, but I don't want to drag him into a battle between the town's sheriff and me. Skip is a family man now, and we're no longer two roughneck boys pushing the limits of our Tater Town reputations.

As I navigate through the alleyways, images of a young boy surface in my memory. I see myself peddling the 1956 Roadmaster bike my pop salvaged from the Dump. I would dare the wind to challenge my balance, but no one could take that feeling of power away from me during those moments. The kids who taunted me for living on the poor side of town, and even my father, who sometimes whipped me during his alcoholic binges, simply disappeared behind me as I rode the brick-lined streets of Bryant.

I had the same intangible sense of peace when I played in the fields that outlined the City Dump. I can still see perspiration soaking through Pop's shirt as he emptied the day's worth of garbage collected on his route. As I impatiently waited for his permission to go

through the discarded treasure, my dog Scout also circled the piles in anticipation of finding her own reward, usually a large rat. As childhood playmates are remembered and counted, Scout was my only other friend besides Skip.

Tonight, as I desperately race to the north end of town to save my father's life, I'm given my first series of snapshots. In the early spring of 1970, I was an 11-year-old boy who was unaware that his childhood, already tinged with hardship and grief, was nearing its end.

CHAPTER 1

1970

“Help me today, Evey,” he softly began. “And help Mikey grow up good.”

Joe Franklin concluded the brief prayer to his dead wife and shifted his stocky, muscular build. His tobacco-stained fingers parted the delicate lace curtains covering the kitchen window.

A steady thumping caused him to turn away from his heavy thoughts. The family dog scrambled into a sitting position, her tail steadily drumming against the kitchen table leg. The dry skin around Joe’s swollen knuckles cracked open as he rubbed the husky’s thick-pointed ears. Joe swallowed the remaining coffee in his mug and brushed his thermal sleeve across his unshaven face.

“Well, Scout,” he spoke in a raspy tone. The dog’s ears straightened at the gentleness of his voice, and Joe smiled as she waited for his command. “Go get your boy.”

Joe leaned back against the sink in anticipation. Scout’s legs ached to spring into action, but she hesitated. She whined and looked above Joe’s shoulder at the raven-black sky.

“He’s going with us today,” Joe explained to her before nodding his head. “Go on now. Go get your boy.”

Her paws scrambled for traction against the linoleum floor and made slanted strides as she rounded the doorway toward the boy's bedroom.

Today will toughen up Mikey, Joe convinced himself as he followed the dog inside the tiny room. *He needs to see where the money comes from.*

"Rise and shine," Joe ordered as he flipped on the light switch.

"Mikey, it's time to get up," Joe said a little louder and cleared his throat. As he shook his son's shoulder, he became impatient.

"You still want to go with me?"

Michael Franklin stretched and tried to lift his heavy eyelids. A single bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling cast a shade of amber throughout the room, and the 11-year-old pulled a cotton blanket over his tousled hair. Scout whined and burrowed underneath the cover. She licked the boy's face as she waited for his response. Michael groaned as the dog continued to coat his cheeks with saliva, and he finally pushed her away.

"What time is it?" he mumbled as his exposed feet sought the chilly air for the blanket.

"Four a.m., and it ain't gettin' any earlier," Joe replied.

The father bent with a groan and searched the cluttered floor for jeans and a flannel shirt. He tossed the clothes on top of the bed and issued a louder wake-up call before leaving the room.

"If you ain't up in five minutes, I'm leavin' without you."

Joe paused at the doorway and yelled, “You hear me, Mikey?”

“Yeah, Pop,” Michael answered as he swung his legs over the bed. “I hear you.”

The shock of smooth, cold wood met the soles of Michael’s feet, and he jerked his legs. As he dangled his feet over the edge of his bed, he gently tugged on Scout’s ears and struggled to remember why he was up before sunrise on a Saturday morning.

“Oh, crap,” the boy groaned as his mind cleared.

Michael nervously smoothed stray locks of black hair away from his forehead and then looked into Scout’s gold-flecked eyes.

“The report,” he whispered to her. “Oh, holy crap, Scout.”

His heart pounded as he recalled his teacher’s weekend assignment, a speech detailing the career of each sixth grader’s parent.

The four a.m. train thundered past the nearby rows of houses on the west side of Bryant, Illinois. Joe filled his coffee thermos as the kitchen floor shook underneath him. He noticed dried blood on his knuckles and reached for a tin of udder balm near the sink. As he massaged the thick petroleum into his skin, he spoke to a porcelain china rooster perched on the windowsill.

“Evey,” he whispered to the delicate figurine that once greeted his wife every morning. “I ain’t forgotten my promise. He’s gettin’ his schooling.”

Michael’s lanky frame sauntered through the doorway and landed clumsily in a chair.

“Mornin’, Pop,” he softly spoke.

“You gotta have somethin’ to eat before we go,” Joe mumbled as he removed a cast iron pan from the cupboard. “Guess I could rustle up some eggs real quick.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll just have some milk,” Michael offered, even though his stomach churned for sustenance. He slid off the chair and reached over Joe’s shoulder for a glass from the cabinet.

Michael’s dark brown eyes solemnly stared into his father’s surprised face.

“Hey, Pop,” Michael laughed as he compared their heights. “I’m almost as tall as you.”

“Ain’t that somethin’, Mikey,” Joe’s voice softened as he turned away. He filled the empty glass with milk and handed it to his son.

Evey’s eyes, her smile, are everywhere I turn, Joe thought, biting his lip.

Joe cleared his throat and toughened his voice as he spoke, “Mikey, keep them thermals on. It’s still cold outside, even for late April. The wind will cut right through you.”

Moments later, Michael yanked the handle to the pickup truck and slid in beside his father. Joe took a quick drink from his thermos and revved the engine.

“Here, drink some of this,” Joe ordered as he handed Michael a cup.

His son accepted the liquid and sipped. As Michael began to cough, Joe let out a throaty laugh and tucked a bottle of whiskey underneath the driver’s

seat. He shifted the rusty truck into reverse and coaxed it out of the driveway.

“C’mon, give me one more day,” he begged the old Ford.

“This ain’t coffee,” Michael said as he smelled the contents of the cup.

“It’ll put hair on your chest, though,” Joe chuckled. “Ready to clean up Bryant, Mikey?”

He reached across the seat and slapped Michael’s knee.

Michael took another sip from the cup.

“Yeah, Pop,” Michael grinned as he found his voice and then peered out the back window. “Scout’s ready to go, too.”

Joe tuned the radio to a Merle Haggard song and sang along in a baritone voice.

Michael leaned against the passenger door, feeling his cheeks warm from the shot of whiskey. He watched the dwarfed houses in his neighborhood drift by as Joe shifted the truck into third gear, steering them toward the southwest edge of town.

Michael thought about the questions that he should ask Joe and the tone that would deliver them. After a few moments, he took another sip of courage from the cup and attempted a casual voice.

“Oh, I’m supposed to ask you some questions for my speech,” he suddenly blurted out, his voice raised slightly above its normal range.

“Questions? Well, it ain’t nobody’s business what I make, Mikey,” Joe responded gruffly, turning the steering wheel sharply to the right. The pickup

followed a set of curves on the back road as Michael tried again.

“I know, Pop,” Michael’s words trembled with the bumps in the road. “My teacher doesn’t want to know that. Just easy questions, like what’s your favorite part of the job?”

“Oh, all right, then,” Joe quickly said, relieved as they neared the City Dump entrance sign. “Quittin’ time.”

Michael looked at his father’s profile and smiled.

“Okay. That makes sense. What’s your least favorite part of the job? I bet it’s Bob Cornwell, isn’t it?”

“No, Mikey, it ain’t Cornwell no more,” Joe slowly responded as he thought about his co-worker. “It’s taken a few years to get used to Bob’s chatter, but he ain’t such a bad guy.”

“Well, what is it, Pop?” Michael prodded, genuinely interested in the answer.

Joe thought of the end of another day without his wife and coming home to a deafening silence inside the tiny house. Almost three years had passed since Evelina Franklin succumbed to pneumonia, and inside the Franklin home were small, bittersweet reminders of his wife’s beauty scattered within drawers and closets. Joe had tried unsuccessfully to purge the house of her memory.

Until Evey’s death, he had never given a moment of thought about the junk emptied into the belly of the dump truck each week. Bob Cornwell often commented about the items that fell from the collected

trash cans, but Joe didn't second-guess the townspeople's value decisions about their possessions.

After Evey's funeral, though, Joe felt out of place as his hands clumsily trespassed among her things, and he suddenly lacked the strength to sweep Evey's favorite night cream, a dime-store bottle of perfume and her hairbrush into a wastebasket. It would have been a merciful act that would allow a reprieve from memories, but he couldn't do it.

Joe thought again of the silence that welcomed him home every day, and he drew in a deep breath.

"I guess I'd have to say quittin' time," Joe finally answered his son's second question.

Michael looked over again at his father, unable to comprehend the truth in the reluctant answer.

"That don't make any sense," the boy finally said. "I don't think you can give the same answer."

"Well, it's the truth," Joe stated, sighing before he turned off the engine. He took the thermos cup from Michael's hand and finished the remaining whiskey.

"We're here, boy."

"Wait, Pop," Michael yelled as he leaped from the pickup and followed Scout up a steep gravel entrance.

"Good morning, fellas! Everybody ready?" Bob Cornwell yelled as he extended his arm to his son, Skip. "All aboard!"

Michael grabbed Joe's arm and hoisted himself up to a narrow ledge behind the massive steel truck. The engine backfired and sent a cloud of exhaust into the air before it settled into a steady rumble.

Joe swung out from the side of the truck and called out, “Go on up to the office, Scout!”

The dog paused a moment and then obeyed as she trotted through the open gate.

“Mikey! Isn’t this cool?” Skip yelled, grinning broadly at his best friend. His breath mixed in with the exhaust and he coughed, “It’s gonna be some report!”

“Yeah, cool,” Michael answered loudly, trying to mask his nervousness. He glanced into the truck’s empty pit and quickly turned from its odor. His arms began shaking as he gripped the short bar attached to the truck’s side.

“Hang on, Mike,” Joe yelled as the truck lunged backward into the street. “Don’t let go of that pole until we stop.”

Bob extended his free arm around Skip’s back and admonished his son, “No horsing around, Skip. If you fall off, you’ll just have to run and catch up.”

The City truck jolted as it slowed to the first stop on Elm Drive. Michael’s foot slipped off the ledge, but Joe held fast to his son’s arm as the truck bounced forward and halted. A brief wince of pain crossed Joe’s face as he landed on the brick street and collected the first can of garbage for the morning route.

The small trailer that served as the landfill’s office sat approximately fifty yards from the entrance. It housed the best of rejected furniture, including a table, mismatched chairs, and a rusty but working

refrigerator. The 4x4 bathroom contained a small toilet and cracked pedestal sink, both leaning with the unevenness of the trailer as it sank deeper into the ground with each passing year.

Joe didn't know which was worse, and at times he didn't care, but after years of breathing in refuse, trying to distinguish between the trailer's odor and the acrid stench of the Dump was impossible.

"Look at those two scoundrels, Joe," Bob Cornwell chuckled at the end of the day, gesturing outside the open office door.

Bob placed two fingers in his mouth and blew, sending a shrill whistle outside to Michael and Skip as they sorted through the day's bagged collection of discarded treasure. The boys' heads jerked and turned toward the office.

"Watch out for glass!" Bob called out. He spotted Scout on a nearby hill and laughed out loud as the dog jumped in the air. "You got a jackrabbit for a dog, Joey."

"Yeah, I know," Joe answered as he filled a chipped cup with whiskey. He glanced out the trailer window as Scout slammed her front paws across a rat's tail. "Probably got some coon dog in her, too."

A flatbed truck drove through the entrance and crept toward the office.

"We got a customer," Joe announced as he pulled his suspenders up and took a quick drink from his cup. "I'll take it."

As Joe rounded the back of the truck to check its contents, a pair of watchful eyes from the passenger side followed him.

“Nice truck you got here,” Joe sarcastically remarked to the driver.

“Oh, it’s not mine,” the man quickly corrected him. “Just borrowing it from a customer – I mean from a friend. He let me borrow it for the day.”

Joe fixed his laser blue eyes on Rolland Podinski, president of Bryant Community Bank. He silently smirked as Rolland leaned out the window in a crisp, pressed red flannel shirt.

“Nice shirt,” Joe nodded, trying not to laugh. “You borrow that, too?”

Rolland sunk a little in his seat as his cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

“Well, no. My wife bought it for me the other—”

Joe mustered his grumpiest voice as he interrupted Rolland. “You got anything else there to claim besides this washer and dryer?”

“No,” Rolland answered, somewhat shaken by Joe’s gruff exterior. “Just what you see there.”

“Uh-huh. All right,” Joe said, savoring the reversal of authority as he dug his hand into his pant’s pocket. His hand gathered the loose change, and he guessed it totaled around 75 cents. He would need more whiskey before the end of the weekend, and he quickly tallied the amount of money necessary.

“Four bucks, Mr. Banker. Take them all the way back there,” Joe pointed to the appliance section in the southeast corner.

Rolland's head turned as he tried to follow Joe's hand. He craned his neck and shook his head in confusion.

"Just keep following this road to the left. You'll see the spot," Joe said impatiently, holding out his hand.

Rolland plucked four bills from his thick leather wallet and extended his arm out the window. Joe accepted the money and noticed that the passenger was now staring at him.

"Matthew, turn around," Rolland sharply ordered his 12-year-old son. "Thank you, Mr. Franklin."

"Yeah," Joe answered as he returned the boy's piercing gaze. "You just follow this road here to the left."

Joe lit a cigarette and watched the truck slowly wind its way between the mounds of debris.

Matthew Podinski cocked his head to the side and asked his father, "Who was that man?"

"Joe Franklin," Rolland answered tiredly as he prepared himself for a litany of questions. He came to a fork in the lane and pushed down on the brake pedal.

"When was he born?" Matthew began. "When was Joe Franklin born, and do you know *where* he was born?"

"No, son, I don't," Rolland answered as he looked in his rearview mirror. Joe waved his arm and pointed, and Rolland turned the steering wheel left.

"That's why I got copies of records from the county clerk, remember?" Rolland continued, relieved

he found the correct section of the Dump. "I brought you all the information that you wanted."

"No. No! I don't know the answer!" Matthew screamed. "Dad, I don't know the answer because the records you brought me begin in 1965! I need more years!"

Rolland stopped the truck again and grabbed his son's arm.

"I'll get you more records, then. When I go to work Monday, I'll stop by the courthouse and get Joe Franklin's information," he said, attempting to calm Matthew. "Okay, Matthew?"

"Yeah," Matthew said as he began a slow, methodical rocking. "Yeah."

Joe watched as Matthew kept his balance at an angular slant, as if the sky had slipped to the boy's side.

Rolland called for him to help push the dented washer from the truck's bed. Matthew remained motionless for a few seconds, waiting for an internal cue to respond. Exasperated by his son's catatonic state, Rolland yelled Matthew's name again. This time Matthew stiffened, awakened by his father's command.

"Skippy, don't you be putting any stinky stuff in them pockets now!" Bob yelled behind Joe.

"Damn it, Bob, don't do that to me," Joe muttered as he watched Matthew climb into the back of the truck.

“Well, I guess things could be a hell of a lot worse, Joe,” Bob answered as he peered around Joe’s shoulder. “At least our boys are right in the head.”

“Ain’t that right,” Joe answered, nodding toward Matthew Podinski. “I need a drink.”

A few hours later, a lopsided footstool rested underneath Joe’s swollen feet as he reclined in the office and cradled a cup of whiskey.

“You think Mikey and Skip learned anything today?” Joe wondered out loud. “I mean enough for this school report?”

“Yep, I sure do,” Bob said as he gulped from his own mug. “But Skip’s mother is gonna put up a fuss today, for sure.”

“Why’s that?” Joe asked detachedly, his eyes closed to the whiskey’s numbing peace.

“Hell, Joe, we picked up garbage at Andy’s Place today. You know I hate the smell of food garbage, and the wife hates it even more,” Bob relayed to his coworker. “I thought I’d get used to it by now, but I still feel the heaves rise up in me every time I toss them bags.”

“Furniture, mattresses, junk – that don’t bother me,” Bob added. “Food garbage, though, there ain’t nothin’ nastier. That’s just one of the reasons why I put in my application to the County. They’re looking for good men with experience, Joe.”

Joe ignored Bob’s chatter and took another drink of whiskey. At 37 years of age, parts of Joe’s body

now felt decades older. His fingers reacted to the cold April wind, and he noticed that his knuckles once again were swollen and bleeding. He cupped his hands and futilely blew warm air on them.

In late 1949, with a forged birth certificate in his pocket, cardboard lining the bottom of his worn boots, and a constant hunger in his stomach, 16-year-old Joe left the family farm in Paducah, Kentucky, and joined the army. It was not a difficult task to persuade the enlistment officer that Joe was 18. As the eldest Franklin boy, Joe had worked years on the farm and gained a muscular build from lifting bales of hay. Most importantly to Joe, his departure from the family home meant more food for his younger siblings.

In 1953, Joe was discharged from the Army after serving in the Korean War. He never disclosed his service for fear of being accused of fraudulent enlistment. The frostbite he suffered left him with an uneven gait, but when asked about his limp, he simply attributed it to childhood polio.

Upon his return to the U.S., Joe quietly worked in the steel mill industry of Chicago and soon met his future wife, 20-year-old Evelina. His Sicilian bride was the only person Joe confided in about his war experience, and even then, Evey did not push her young husband for details. She convinced Joe to make a fresh start away from Chicago, and the young newlyweds packed their meager belongings and moved west to Bryant, Illinois.

He remembered how his shirt collar tightened around his neck as Evey rested her head and dreams

upon his shoulder. At some point, and Joe's memory didn't recall the actual movement, his hand flipped on the truck's signal, and he made a right turn off Main Street toward the rest of his life in Tater Town.

It didn't matter to Evey that their tiny, two-bedroom house was made of cheap lumber. The neighbors were friendly and quick to lend a hand to the young couple. The neighborhood's shared vegetable gardens were plentiful, and Evey soon became good friends with Bob Cornwell's wife, Rosemary.

Joe also couldn't remember the exact moment when he realized leaving Bryant would never be an option – maybe it was after his wife sewed curtains for all of the windows, or when their son was born in 1959. A part of Joe felt trapped by his family's happiness, but even after Evelina died, he still couldn't leave Bryant. He couldn't leave his Evey behind in Bryant Cemetery.

Bob's voice pulled Joe from the flood of memories.

“Anyhow, Joey, I haven't heard nothing back from the County yet. But they've got my application now. It's just a matter of time, you know.”

Joe opened his eyes and stared out the window from his resting place. He spoke slowly as he allowed the whiskey to temper his emotions.

“Here we go again. The County ain't gonna hire you, Bob. Don't know why you bothered.”

“Says who, huh? I stand just as good of a chance as anybody else. I got experience driving these trucks,

don't I?" Bob prodded Joe, waiting to hear an affirmation. "I show up for work every morning, right?"

"I ain't getting into this with you today," Joe answered tiredly. "I ain't getting into it."

"All I'm saying is I stand a chance," Bob continued to delude himself. "Yes, sir, they'll call me. And when they do, I'll try and get you in, too, buddy. And in a couple years, Joe, we'll both be workin' for the State. You know Illinois is talking about its own transportation department. Then we'll really be making good money."

"I'm not listening to this today," Joe snapped, knocking over the whiskey bottle as he attempted to stand up.

Joe noticed Bob's right eyelid drooping further down, giving him a sleepy-eyed appearance.

"You ain't gonna get the County job because in a few years, you ain't gonna be able to see past your nose," Joe sputtered as he blotted whiskey off the carpet scrap with his handkerchief. "Why do you always make me say it? I don't want to, but you make me say it every single week."

"I can see just fine," Bob snapped. "Don't matter what the doctor says. If I raise my eyebrows, I look just as normal as you. Look here, Joe. C'mon, look."

Bob raised his eyebrows up as far as he could.

"See? Look at me straight on and tell me I don't look normal."

“You look like an idiot,” Joe answered softly, resenting Bob for making him speak the truth. “And you need to start wearing them glasses.”

“What the hell do doctors know, anyhow?” Bob looked out the window, his attention now drawn away from the boys.

As Rolland Podinski drove his emptied truck past the office, another vehicle entered through the gates. Bob waved to the driver and then removed a pair of thick, black-framed glasses from his shirt.

“The doctors know more than you and me,” Joe answered. His eyebrows met as his tone softened. “You got that sugar disease, and it’s taking your eyesight.”

“I know, but Joey – ” Bob Cornwell nodded and began to argue, hoping that somehow his friend would finally agree they wouldn’t be trapped in Bryant’s City Dump for the rest of their working lives.

“Okay then,” Joe continued. “Your *granddad* had it, your *dad* had it, and *you* got it now. And raising up your eyebrows ain’t gonna cure it, Bob. It may help with how you look, but it ain’t gonna cure your eyesight.”

A honking horn interrupted the silence that fell between the two men as they stared at each other. Joe felt an uncharacteristic pang of guilt hit him, and he attempted to soften his tone.

“You gotta take your medicine, Bob. For God’s sake, workin’ for the County, or even the State, is just a dream. You gotta give it up,” Joe said as he

attempted to lighten his tone. “Just be glad you *got* a job, buddy.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Damn it anyhow,” Bob answered, sliding the thick frames onto the bridge of his nose. “Who needs the stress of a County job, anyway?”

A pounding suddenly came from the other side of the door.

“Hey in there! Are you fellas working today?”

“Oh, Christ,” Joe quietly said and briefly closed his eyes. He took in a deep breath and muttered, “Tell me it’s not that deputy.”

“I’ll take care of him, Joey,” Bob volunteered as he opened the door. He suddenly felt lightheaded, and he grabbed the doorframe for balance. “This is why I don’t like wearing these damn glasses. They make me dizzy.”

“Just let me do it,” Joe spewed as he impatiently brushed past Bob. “Go drink some juice or something.”

Harlen Nordstrom stood dressed in his deputy’s uniform near the truck, his attention drawn toward a section where Skip and Michael sifted through discarded junk.

As the sun descended in the western sky, Joe stepped outside and looked beyond Harlen to the edge of the landfill. It was Joe’s favorite part of the day when rays of light streamed across jagged pieces of bent chrome and steel. The sun’s reflection gave the brief illusion of diamonds shimmering in the distance,

and during these few moments each late afternoon, Joe imagined himself as the wealthiest man in town.

Harlen turned his long frame and interrupted Joe's view.

"Can I help you, Deputy?" Joe asked, lowering his eyes as he shoved his hands into his front pockets.

Harlen nodded and then slapped the bed of the truck.

"Yeah," he answered. "I've got some old carpet here. How much?"

Joe quickly walked around the back of the truck and tallied the rolls. He looked at Harlen, suddenly uncomfortable with the deputy's stare.

"Oh, no charge," Joe began to say. "Just take it back there —"

"No," Harlen answered firmly as a breeze carried a stench of whiskey from Joe's breath. "How much?"

Joe involuntarily shivered and dug his hands further into his pockets. "Well, okay, a buck fifty."

Harlen pivoted around as he heard the sound of paws trotting steadily toward his backside. Scout stopped as she locked eyes with the man.

"What kind of dog is that?" he asked as Scout remained in her place. Harlen's eyes narrowed as the dog held her gaze.

Joe spun around and bent to grab a metal chain near the office. He squatted down, holding the clasp in his dampened hand as he carefully answered.

"Oh, she's just a mix....Husky, mostly. My son found her a few years ago, out there in one of them

piles. Just a scrawny little pup somebody dumped – can you imagine that? Come here, Scout.”

“I noticed those kids out there,” Harlen gestured toward Michael and Skip as he waited for the dog to obey. “They belong to you?”

“Yeah, one of ’em is mine,” Joe responded with a forced smile as he motioned again to Scout. “They went with us on the route today. Have to do some school report about our jobs.”

The dog studied the small beads of sweat that popped across Joe’s forehead, and she hesitantly stepped forward. Joe offered his hand as the metal clasp dangled between his fingers. Scout positioned herself between the stranger and her master, willfully ignoring Joe’s silent command.

Harlen Nordstrom had first met Joe two months earlier, on the approaching third anniversary of Evelina Franklin’s death. The young deputy had spotted Joe’s rusty Ford truck weaving its way up Pleasant Street, and as he listened to Joe’s drunken ramblings about his deceased wife, Harlen issued a warning and let the intoxicated widower walk the remaining few blocks home. It was a decision the 29-year-old deputy regretted the following week when Joe’s truck jumped the curb and landed in a neighbor’s front yard.

“So is this what you do all day, Franklin?” Harlen asked, his voice deliberately low. “Sit in that trailer all afternoon, drink whiskey, and let your son play in garbage? Looks like jail hasn’t done you any good.”

“I’ve been drivin’ sober, Deputy,” Joe answered in a subdued voice.

It wasn’t a complete lie; on the weekdays when Joe consumed too much whiskey, Bob gave him a ride home from work.

“You needn’t worry about that no more,” Joe quietly assured him.

“Is that right?” Harlen’s voice rose as he folded his arms across his chest. “Then how come I can smell the whiskey from here, Joe?”

“Well, Bob and I were just having a little nip before closing time, that’s all,” Joe answered lightly with another forced smile.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Harlen snapped as he shook his head. “Bad enough your boy has lost his mother. Looks like all he’s got left is a selfish drunk for a father.”

Scout stared as Joe clenched his teeth together. He cast down his eyes, and Scout made a slight whimpering sound.

Perspiration dampened Joe’s shirt, and the smell of Joe’s fear and anger invaded the dog’s senses.

Scout turned to the strange man and growled.

“What the hell,” Harlen whispered as his neck hair stood on end.

“Hey, Mikey! Look here!” Skip yelled, holding up a rusty cap pistol. “Aw, cool! It still has the ammo strip, too!”

You're lucky," Michael said as he climbed over to Skip's pile of treasure. "I haven't found anything except magazines and those love letters."

"They'll come in handy. One man's junk is another man's treasure," Skip exclaimed, his ruddy cheeks chapped by the wind. "That's what my dad says, anyhow."

"Yeah, I guess," Michael answered, envisioning his classmates' reactions to his speech on Monday.

During the first few months of grade school, Michael's peers had made fun of his second-hand clothes and neighborhood. Skip befriended Michael and had informed him that Franklin's home, nestled between two streets filled with small houses, was located in Tater Town.

Skip stated matter-of-factly that living on the northwest edge of Bryant was a mixed blessing. *Mikey, it's like my dad says – you'll find out who your real friends are real fast. I'm a 'Tater,' but we eat more than potatoes. You should taste my mom's cooking! And names don't bother me. Heck, no. We're gonna be best friends, you and me.*

Michael knew some of the students would laugh at Joe's career, and he would have to regain his tough-guy reputation all over again.

"So what are you gonna say in your report?" Skip asked as he tore open another bag of garbage.

"I'm gonna say my pop works hard to keep the town clean," Michael thoughtfully answered. "And if they give me shit, I'm gonna kick their butts after school."

“Yeah, me, too,” Skip added, shoving his arm into the bag. His cheeks expanded with air as he held his breath against the odor. As soon as his chubby fingers brushed against another foreign object, he grasped it and quickly withdrew his hand.

“Aw, just an old doll head,” he exhaled, throwing the toy over his head. “Enough of this. Hey, Mikey, let’s set up the Apollo 13! We can lay out mattresses for the Pacific landing. Do you wanna be Lovell or Swigert?”

“Yeah, whatever,” Michael answered distractedly as he looked down at the trailer office. He leaned forward as he spotted his father.

“Fine, I’ll be Swigert,” Skip announced as he yanked a mildewed mattress toward a cleared area.

Michael ignored Skip’s dramatic dialogue, and instead shook his head in confusion as he watched Joe kneel in front of the deputy.

“Corny, what’s my pop doing?” Michael asked in a tense voice. “It looks like – it looks like he’s begging that deputy for something.”

Skip quickly stood up and squinted to get a closer look. The burnt orange freckles on his cheeks deepened to red as he realized what was happening.

“Huh-uh,” Skip mumbled as he stared down into the valley below. “Your pop ain’t beggin’, Mikey. Don’t freak out, but he’s trying to call off your dog.”

The dense black fur lining Scout's back rose in objection to the deputy's intimidating presence. She remained in her place, frozen in determination.

Joe decided to let her snarl a few more times as she vocalized his unspoken hatred, and panic intensified in Harlen's eyes.

As Bob Cornwell opened the office door, he involuntarily jerked at the dog's warning.

"Hey, what's going on out here, Joey?" Bob called to him as he fumbled for his glasses.

"Nothing. Just trying to get the dog, that's all," Joe tried to answer lightly. "Okay, Scout, that's enough now."

He confidently reached for Scout's collar, but she stepped backward. Her eyes now watched Harlen's quick breaths.

"If you don't chain that dog right now—" Harlen began to say, his hand slowly moving to his waist.

Now certain that Harlen meant Joe harm, Scout issued another warning.

"Oh, wait a second, now!" Joe yelled out. The dark humor suddenly was gone from the situation, and his heart began to pound as he recognized the deputy's stance.

"What do you want me to do, Joey?" Bob asked as he grasped the stair railing.

"Please," Joe forced the word as a sickening wave of dread overcame him. "She's a good dog. She watches over this place. If you just get in your truck, I'll tie her up. Please, Deputy, just get back in your truck. She'll back off."

“I’m not going anywhere,” Harlen answered, his fingers now covering his holstered gun. He studied her tall, slender legs, short ears, and golden eyes.

“You really don’t know what you’ve got there, Franklin?” Harlen quietly asked. “You know it’s against the law to own a hybrid wolf.”

“A hybrid? What are you talking about!” Joe exclaimed. “Wait a minute. I told you already – my son found her out there in one of them piles. We thought she was dumped. I didn’t know.”

Joe stood up and spoke firmly, “I swear to God that’s the truth. Just wait. *Scout, you come here. Get over here!*”

Michael saw the deputy’s hand resting on his gun, and he screamed from the hill, “Scout! Come here! Scout!”

Skip joined Michael’s plea, but the wind drowned out their unison voices. They stood side by side, terrified as the dog continued her protective stance.

Scout now stood defiantly with her front teeth bared, sobering Joe into the reality of the situation. Joe watched in disbelief at the dog’s continued disobedience.

“Scout, easy,” Joe whispered. “Easy now. What’s gotten into you, girl.”

Harlen slowly unsnapped his holster.

“Move away, Franklin,” the deputy ordered.

“No,” Joe begged as he reluctantly took a few steps backward. “For the love of God, put away your gun.”

Despite Joe's orders, the dog would not retreat; no command would make her obey. To be chained meant surrender, and Joe would be at the mercy of this angry man's control. Scout continued to issue her position as a steady rumble escaped through her clenched teeth.

Silent bargaining came from deep within Joe's soul and traveled through his body. *I'll do anything, God, anything. Just let her obey.*

"Jesus, no. You can't do it," Joe's words tumbled out as he raised his hands. "No —"

"Stay back, Franklin," Harlen warned him again.

As soon as Harlen spoke, the dog seemed to understand his command. There was a natural order, and this stranger was challenging it. As her instincts took control, the decision to protect her small family was made. Above the rumbling and snarling of her final judgment, Michael's screams grew louder as he slid down the steep embankment and neared the dog.

In the boy's approaching voice, Scout heard the high pitch of fear, and the wailing sound propelled her into action. Before charging the man, she raised her head, as if to memorize the fear in Harlen's face. His reaction took her by surprise. Within three quick strides, Harlen closed the distance between them and fired his gun.

The sound of the blast ricocheted throughout the steep cliffs of the landfill, and the intensity of the shot filled Michael's ears. He let out a fearful cry as he stumbled down through jagged pieces of broken furniture and lumber.

The force of the bullet entering Scout's chest sent her tumbling a few yards away from Joe. In a state of shock, the dog scrambled to her feet and began to sway. As Joe turned around, he watched in horror as the gravel turned red underneath her.

Harlen stepped in between the dog and Joe. He slowly raised his gun again and centered his aim at the dog's head.

"No!" Michael yelled as he ran in front of Harlen. "Leave her alone!"

Joe watched as the dog slowly raised her head and stared at him. She focused on his anguished face as her legs collapsed beneath her.

"Scout," Joe's voice cracked as he lowered himself to the ground, resting on his hands and knees.

He half-crawled toward her and stroked the side of her muzzle. As he pulled his bloodied hand away, the air seemed to disappear, and he gasped for breath.

"Lord, Joe!" Bob yelled out as Skip rushed into his father's arms. Skip buried his head against Bob's chest.

Joe's fists shook with fury; his muscles twitched as he stood up on shaking legs. He watched as Michael rested his head against Scout's chest.

"She's dead," Michael cried out. "Pop, Scout's dead!"

"No," Joe whispered as he held his head. The ground began to spin as his son's grief surrounded him. As he took in quick, uncontrolled breaths, he looked over again at Michael. The past came flooding back as Michael screamed for his father to help.

“Ma ain’t breathing! Do something, Pop!” Michael’s voice called out from the bedroom.

Joe’s legs went weak as he ran through the house and called for Evey.

“Please wake up, Ma!” Michael sobbed as he threw himself across Evelina’s body.

“Evey!” Joe shook his wife’s lifeless body and then rested his ear against her chest. “Evey, can you hear me?”

Within minutes, Joe was carrying his wife into the hospital and begging for a doctor.

Pneumonia, he was later told by the physician. It would have been treatable if caught early enough.

How long was she ill, Mr. Franklin?

Why didn’t she see a doctor?

“Evey should have lived,” Joe mumbled, hanging on to his sides. He tried to take in slower breaths, but he couldn’t. “She should have lived.”

As Joe’s lungs begged for relief, Michael’s voice shouted in his head.

You knew Ma wasn’t no better. She said different, but Pop, you knew she wasn’t feeling better.

Joe suddenly spun around.

“This ain’t right, Nordstrom!” Joe sputtered. “You son of a bitch!”

“Joey, don’t!” Bob yelled as Joe charged Harlen. Bob grabbed Joe’s arm and warned him, “Don’t do it.”

Joe struggled against his grip, but Bob refused to let go.

“Don’t do it, buddy,” Bob pleaded with him. “Please, Joey, it’ll only make things worse. Don’t do it.”

Harlen shook his head and reached for the truck door handle.

“You’d better listen to him, Franklin. Don’t make things worse for yourself.”

“You just murdered my dog,” Joe managed to say between gasps for air. His fists tightened, and Bob felt his hold on Joe’s arm give way.

“Think of the boys, Joe,” Bob answered quickly. “Don’t settle it like this.”

Michael rose up from his bloodied knees and wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve. He waited for Joe to break free of Bob’s hands, but Joe ceased his struggle and turned away from Harlen. Michael’s heart sank as he witnessed his father’s retreat.

“No,” Michael yelled out, his frame a blur as he ran past his father. “No!”

The boy’s fists pounded on the side of Harlen’s door as he screamed, “Why? She didn’t mean you no harm!”

“Mikey,” Joe called out in a defeated voice. “Come back here.”

Joe held the back of his neck as he saw the fearless rage in his son’s eyes. For the second time that day, his breath disappeared as Michael’s emotions exploded.

“She was just protecting you, Pop,” Michael’s voice cracked. His eyes blackened with anger as he glared at Harlen. “Scout was just protectin’ her

territory! This ain't your place! You don't belong here. Get out of here!"

Harlen leaned out the driver's side window before starting the engine. His voice was low and shaky as he spoke, "Go and get your son a *real* dog, Franklin. It's your own damn fault."

Michael screamed, "She was a real dog, you bastard! You're nothin' but a yellow-bellied pig!"

Fresh tears left a downward path on Michael's dirty cheeks as he kicked the front fender of the truck.

"You better watch your mouth, boy!" Harlen yelled as he threw the truck into first gear. "I'm not going to tell you again. Get out of my way."

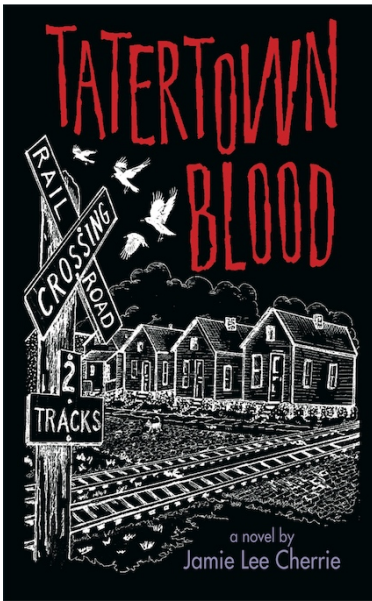
Joe turned away from Michael's rage and took a few steps toward Scout. He crouched down and slid his hands underneath the dog's limp body.

As Joe gathered her into his arms, Scout's wet nose pressed in against his arm. His breaths became even as he cradled her.

Michael's fists continued to pound against the rear of Harlen's truck until he could no longer compete with its speed. As he futilely chased the vehicle through the open gate, Joe stood up on shaking legs.

His fingers slid through Scout's fur; her thick undercoat was soft and cool.

Joe stared through narrowed eyes into the distance, his jaw set at an odd angle. As dusk settled over the landfill, a tremor broke through his stoic expression and parted his tight lips. A sob finally escaped through his clenched teeth as the mirage of diamonds faded from the hills.



In the 1960s, widowed garbageman Joe Franklin raises his son, Michael, on the poor side of town. The community pillars cover up a murder in 1979 and decades later are blackmailed by the only witness – Michael Franklin, the boy from Tater Town. Michael ultimately must choose whether to fulfill his vengeful plans or save his father's life.

Tater Town Blood

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