

In his early days of law enforcement, Dan Warden is a Tennessee deputy sheriff. While searching for clues to a hit-and-run accident, he is torn between doing his job and his personal relationship with a suspect.

ROADKILL
By Larry Quillen

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ROADKILL



A DAN WARDEN NOVEL

BY

LARRY QUILLEN

The Dan Warden Series in Chronological Order

Roadkill

Jenny Cay

Digger

The Rogue

The Rampart Alert

Also by Larry Quillen

Snowbound

The Lost People

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First Edition

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Day 1 Wednesday, November 25, 1998

JIM AND MARTHA WORKMAN had spent a cool, overcast day in Pulaski, Tennessee, visiting relatives and buying sorghum molasses. On their way home, they had done some last-minute grocery shopping in preparation for their kids and grandkids showing up for Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow. The store was crowded, so they had gotten back to their small farm west of Bailey Springs, Tennessee, just before sundown. After helping Martha bring in the groceries, Jim built a fire in the fireplace. When he went outside for an armload of firewood it was already dark, and misty rain was getting him wet.

As he headed back inside, Jim saw the distant headlights of a vehicle coming from the north down the two-lane county road. When it was a couple of hundred yards away, it stopped momentarily, then turned into his neighbor's driveway. Jim watched the headlights flickering through the bare trees on his neighbor's property until the vehicle reached the house. The vehicle's lights remained motionless for a moment, then the vehicle vanished in the darkness.

That puzzled Jim. Hal and Bernice weren't home, as far as he knew. Bernice had called Martha yesterday and said they were leaving early this morning to drive down to Mobile to spend Thanksgiving with their oldest boy and his family and wouldn't be back until sometime Sunday. Jim continued to look down the road to his neighbor's house for a couple of minutes, expecting to see the vehicle leave. It didn't. Frowning, he went inside with his load of wood, wondering if he should do something about the vehicle. He had seen robberies on

television and in the movies many times, but the idea that he might be witnessing a real robbery and should do something about it was difficult for him to accept.

* * * *

When no one in the darkened house responded to the doorbell chiming and the sound of someone banging on the door several times, Randy Royel and Donny Channel hurried around to the back of the house, then up the steps to an open porch big enough for two cane-bottom rocking chairs and a swing suspended from chains attached to the ceiling. Randy knocked on the kitchen door, waited, and then banged harder. Hearing no sound from within, the two teenagers nodded to each other. Randy tried the knob and felt it turn, but when he pushed on the door it didn't move. The deadbolt was locked.

"You need this?" Donny asked, holding up a pry bar. They had found an unlocked utility shed at their first site. Inside the shed they had found the fifteen-inch tool made of forged steel and had used it to open the back door of the house. It had been with them since. They had learned that most people spent a great deal of money on a substantial front door, but any safety and security that a backdoor offered could usually be defeated with their pry bar.

"Not yet," Randy said, smiling. The door was made of solid wood, but the upper half was composed of six small glass panels that provided some sunlight into an otherwise dark kitchen. One panel was less than six inches from the deadbolt lock. "Piece of cake," he said as he took a roll of masking tape out of his jacket pocket, pulled a strip off, and applied it diagonally to the glass nearest the lock.

"What're you doing?" Donny asked.

"I read about it," Randy explained. "I cut myself last time. The guy in the story put tape on the glass before he busted it. It came out all in one piece for him."

"No shit?"

"I'm about to find out," Randy said as he continued to apply masking tape to the small glass panel, forming a large

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asterisk. When he was done, he tossed the roll of tape out into the yard and turned to his buddy. "I'll take that pry bar now."

"Let's do it," Donny said, as he handed Randy the tool.

"Number five," Randy said, grinning.

"Number five, man. Go for it!"

Randy paused for an instant, then hit the center of the tape star with the curved end of the pry bar. The safety glass shattered into hundreds of tiny chunks, but, although it was dented inward, it remained in the frame, supported by the tape.

"How about that?" Randy said in amazement as he gently pushed the shattered glass with the pry bar. The entire panel of glass fell inward, leaving only a few crumbs of glass around the edges.

"How about that?" Randy repeated. He gave the tool back to Donny then reached inside the opening, turned the thumb latch on the deadbolt, then opened the door and stepped inside. Donny, right behind him, found the light switch and turned it on. The sudden brightness of the kitchen lights startled them for a moment, but they had agreed to go for the lights this time. They had used flashlights before and were sure they had missed out on some good stuff in the darkness, while at the same time both had banged their shins in the unknown territory of a strange house.

They hurried into the master bedroom and jerked the pillowcases off the king-size pillows. With their loot bags ready, Randy opened the dresser drawers and dumped the contents onto the floor while Donny searched the walk-in closet, pulling everything down from the shelves and allowing it to tumble onto the floor. Donny was admiring a Konica 35mm camera when he heard Randy yell as he opened the drawer of a nightstand.

"All right!"

"What?" Donny asked as he turned to look.

"Paydirt," Randy said, holding up a Colt Cobra .38 Special revolver with a 2" barrel.

"Is it loaded?"

Randy flipped the cylinder open. "Sure as hell is."

Randy shoved the gun into his jacket pocket, then the two boys hurried from the master bedroom in search of other

prizes. In the living room, Donny unplugged a VHS videocassette recorder he found next to the television set and put it near the front door. In the second bathroom, he found a box of jewelry in a cabinet drawer. In another bedroom, Randy found an IBM ThinkPad laptop computer with a printer attached. He didn't have a computer and didn't know how to use one, but he closed the computer, unplugged the cables and cords, and added it to his loot bag. The printer was too bulky and heavy for his loot bag so he left it.

Donny grinned when he found a Sony camcorder in a bedroom closet. He'd heard that the new Sony camcorders could, unintentionally, see through thin clothing. "I just might hang on to this," he said.

As Randy ran down the stairs to the den, Donny went to the kitchen and opened cabinets and, using the pry bar, began to pull everything off the shelves onto the floor. He knew there was nothing he wanted on the shelves, but it was a rush to hear the noise and see the destruction. When he was done, the kitchen floor was littered with pots, pans, cans, broken dishes and glass. As he walked back into the living room, Randy came up from the basement. "Find anything?" Donny asked.

"Found a Kodak slide projector," Randy said, holding up his bulging pillowcase. "The old TV down there ain't worth nothing."

Donny picked up the videocassette recorder and slid it down inside his pillowcase along with the pry bar and his other loot. "Let's go. I think we've got everything worth taking, unless you want to go for the big Sony TV over there. It's got to be at least 35 inches, so it's worth a few bucks to the man, but it'll take both of us to carry it out. It's got to weigh a hundred pounds at least."

"Let's do it."

* * * *

Jim Workman was watching television while waiting for supper, but he couldn't concentrate on the program,

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thinking about the vehicle he had seen pulling into his neighbor's drive. He mentioned it to his wife as she passed through the living room. She offered to call Bernice and he agreed. She waited for the four rings, let the recorder play its message, then said, "Hi, Bernice, it's Martha. Give me a call when you get back." She hung up the phone, then went to a window and looked toward her neighbor's house. Through the misty fog she could see lights on in the house. "I can see some lights, but Bernice didn't answer the phone. She always answers the phone after two rings if she's home," she said and turned to her husband, frowning. "Maybe you ought to call nine-one-one."

"I don't want to look like some snooping fool, sending the sheriff out on some wild goose chase."

"I'd want Bernice to call the sheriff if somebody was in our house when we weren't home."

Jim thought about it for a minute, then said, "I guess I'll call. Hal is going to give me a hard time about it, though, if it ain't nothing."

* * * *

The ringing phone startled the two teenagers. They stood still, frozen in fear while they listened to the voice of the woman on the other end. When the recording ended, they glanced at one another, then grabbed their loot bags and carried them out to the pickup. They hurried back into the house and carried the heavy 35" TV set to the truck as well. Randy leaned on the edge of the truck bed, grinned at Donny and said, "That's about it, except for the starter."

"I'll go check the garage."

"There's a kerosene heater down in the den," Randy said.

"Do you think it's got any kerosene in it?"

"In November? In Tennessee? You want to bet your share of weed against mine it doesn't?" Randy asked, grinning.

"No bet," Donny said.

* * * *

Sergeant Dan Warden of the Creek County Tennessee Sheriff's Department had finished with a nasty accident. A Toyota Corolla, hurrying home over the speed limit on the two-lane county road, had come over the crest of a hill to find a John Deere tractor directly in front of him slowly pulling a trailer with an oversized load of hay bales. In the other lane, a Dodge Ram pickup truck was rapidly approaching both of them. When it was over, the Toyota's nose was tangled with the trailer under bales of hay, the Dodge Ram and more hay were in a ditch, and the farmer was on his way to the Bailey Springs hospital after being ejected backwards onto the road when the Corolla smashed into his trailer.

As the first deputy on the scene, it had been his job to try to sort out what had happened, issue citations, and clear the vehicles and hay from the scene. He was on his way back to the sheriff's station when he got a call from the dispatcher on his two-way radio, asking him to check out a call they had received about possible prowlers at a vacant home on Murphy Road. The dispatcher knew Dan was already on the county road where the call had come from and was within a couple of miles of the location.

As Dan slowly approached the rural mailbox with the right name and number on it in his Chevy Caprice patrol car, he glanced into the foggy mist in his rearview mirror. Seeing no headlights in either direction, he stopped on the roadway in front of the rural mailbox and looked down the one-lane driveway from his side window. The driveway was at least a hundred feet long with a thick growth of trees on both sides. The lights were on in the house, the front door was open, and a small pickup truck was parked near the front door.

As he watched, two young men came out of the house, carrying a large television set. They loaded it in the bed of the pickup truck, paused for a moment, then hurried back inside. Dan turned off his lights, turned into the driveway, then called the dispatcher. He told her a possible burglary was in progress, gave her his location, and requested

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backup. He grabbed his flashlight, stepped outside his vehicle, closed the door, freed his weapon, and waited.

Dan knew there might be a legitimate reason for their actions. On the other hand, he also knew there was the possibility that these men might be the arsonists and burglars who had destroyed four vacant homes in the rural area of Creek County, Tennessee, within the past year. They had all been suspicious fires, but not much had been made of them until the third one. The volunteer fire department had gotten to it in time to save much of the structure and most of the contents. When the owner discovered he had been burglarized before the fire started, the first two fires were revisited, and a pattern was discovered that was confirmed with the fourth fire a month ago north of Bailey Springs. Someone was burglarizing houses while the occupants were away, then setting them on fire to cover their tracks. The sheriff's department was now taking any reports of prowlers around vacant homes seriously and responding to them quicker than before.

* * * *

The two teenagers hurried down to the den. The kerosene heater was full of fuel. Randy opened the filler cap and tilted the heater. He poured kerosene onto the shag carpet of the den as he carried the heater across it, then continued pouring as he went up the stairs to the master bedroom. He dribbled kerosene on the bed and the clothing he had dumped from the dresser drawers, then carried the heater down the hallway, trailing kerosene, into the other two bedrooms. In the living room, he dumped the remaining kerosene onto the carpet, then tossed the heater aside.

"Your turn to light it," Donny said.

"Get your ass out of here," Randy said as he pulled a small box of matches out of his pocket. "I'm going to do it right now." As Donny waited outside the front door, Randy grabbed several small matches out of the box, lit them and threw them toward the kerosene stain on the living room carpet. As he turned to run, he heard a low thump and felt the hot air of the burning

fuel as he ran out the door. Yelling and laughing in exhilaration, both teenagers ran toward the pickup.

“Freeze!” Dan yelled, turning on his flashlight and holding it and his gun side by side in his hands. As he flicked the light from one teenager to the other, he yelled, “Sheriff’s Department! Stay right where you are! Down on your knees!”

The two teenagers stopped short of the pickup and looked into the brightness of the deputy’s flashlight for about two seconds, then looked at each other, and then both turned and bolted into the woods, in opposite directions.

“Oh, shoot,” Dan muttered under his breath. He picked the taller one, simply because he had run into the woods on his side of the driveway. Soon, Dan knew he had lost the boy in the darkness, so he stopped, turned off his flashlight, and listened. Nothing. But it didn’t mean the boy had stopped as well. It had been raining off and on all day and the new layer of leaves was soaking wet. The boy could still be running and he wouldn’t hear him.

When he heard sirens approaching, Dan decided that, instead of going deeper into the woods, he would move a few yards to one side and wait for reinforcements. He had their truck blocked. The boys wouldn’t go far without it. At the same instant Dan moved, he saw the bright muzzle flash of a gun. Simultaneously, he heard the loud report of a handgun and felt flying bark from the tree behind him stinging his neck and the back of his head.

“Sweet Jesus,” Dan whispered as he dropped to one knee and aimed his gun toward the muzzle flash. In that instant, Dan knew he was as close to death as he ever had been or ever hoped to be and, at the moment, there wasn’t a lot he could do about it. As the high-pitched wail of sirens grew louder, Dan yelled, “You hear that? The whole department is coming to track you down. If you don’t give up right now, you won’t get out of these woods alive!”

There was a pause, then Dan heard a voice call out, “Don’t shoot. I give up.”

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“Walk back toward the house, your hands in the air,” Dan demanded. Shortly, he heard the muted rustle of leaves nearby and soon the boy appeared, then continued walking past him toward the house, apparently unaware he had passed close to the deputy. As Dan rose to follow him, he realized why the boy had come so close to shooting him in the darkness. He had been between the boy and the house. The light of the burning house had backlit his silhouette, offering the boy a target in the dark woods.

“Stop right there,” Dan growled as he turned on his flashlight and pointed it and his gun at the back of the teenager. The boy quickly complied. Dan made the teenager lie down on the wet leaves and spread his legs, with his hands behind him. With him in that position, Dan handcuffed him, searched him, found a revolver in his jacket pocket, then led him back toward the house, its interior now engulfed in smoke and flames. Another deputy had the other boy in custody. He was crying, cursing, and begging for mercy, all at the same time.

While keeping the two boys separated, first at the fire, then at the sheriff’s station, Dan learned that the boys had found a pawnshop owner who would take stolen property in trade for marijuana. The boys smoked most of their profits. What they didn’t smoke, they took to school and sold to their classmates for cash. They selected their burglary and arson targets by overhearing their parents, neighbors, and classmates gossiping about friends, neighbors, or family traveling somewhere for some reason. It didn’t take much effort for the two boys to find out if the house would be vacant while the family was gone. In total, the two boys had caused over a half-million dollars in property damage for a few hundred dollars of marijuana.

The younger one, Donny Channel, was only fifteen and lived on a farm west of Bailey Springs. His mother was usually there, but his dad was doing time for marijuana dealing. The older one, Randy Royel, was seventeen. He was the leader of a gang of teenage boys that had caused headaches for the Bailey Springs police and the Creek County sheriff’s department in

the past. Randy's dad had a roofing business and could afford good attorneys who had kept Randy out of jail so far.

* * * *

After returning the patrol car to the sheriff's station and writing his report, Dan headed home in his brown and tan Chevy pickup truck. Once inside the quiet darkness of his rented single-wide mobile home, he performed his usual security checks, then turned on the lights and glanced at his answering machine. He had two messages. He punched the play button, then walked to the kitchen, wondering what there was to eat, if anything.

The first message was a hang-up. The second was a familiar woman's voice: his estranged wife. "Dan? This is May. Elaine called and asked me to bring the kids to your family's Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow. If you want to come over around eleven and drive down with us that would be fine with me."

Finding only dry breakfast cereal, Dan put the bowl, cereal, sugar, and milk on the breakfast bar and sat on a stool. As he poured the milk on the cereal, he watched the carton shake noticeably. He put the carton down, closed his eyes and put his hands to his face. He felt like crying. He knew he wouldn't, but he felt like it. He took his hands away, opened his eyes, and slowly shook his head.

Some punk teenage kid had almost killed him tonight. The muzzle flash in the darkness was etched in his memory. Even now, he thought he could see the bullet coming toward him in slow motion, the way they showed it in the movies sometimes. If he hadn't moved when he did, he would have been dead.

Five counts of burglary, five counts of arson, one count of attempted murder of a law enforcement officer, selling illegal drugs to minors, and a long list of other charges should put them away for a long time. Dan slowly shook his head. They would probably get away with it. The American justice system didn't know how to cope with children committing felonies.

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Dan took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. What he needed was to have May and the kids with him. He could hug his boys and tell them how much he loved them, and they would tell him how much they loved him. May would hold him, and he would hold her. She would tell him it would be all right and, somehow, he knew it would be.

But it wasn't what he had. Not anymore. Five months ago, May had gotten fed up with his unwillingness, according to her, to communicate with her about anything that went on in his life, either good or bad. She always got upset when something happened to him on the job and she didn't hear about it until she got it second hand from some other deputy's wife. May didn't understand that being a law enforcement officer was what he did; it wasn't who he was. When he came home at night, he wanted to be a husband and father. Reliving the crap that happened on the job was the last thing he wanted to do in the warmth and safety of his own home.

Now, she and the kids were living in their Bailey Springs house, and he had moved into a rented mobile home across town. Neither had filed for divorce yet, and May let him come over and visit the kids sometimes, but not as often as he would have liked. The phone call was an invitation for him to drive her and the kids down to his uncle's house in Helleston, Alabama, tomorrow for the big Warden family Thanksgiving dinner.

Dan thought it was awfully nice of her to do that, to let his family see the kids on Thanksgiving. Her family lived up around Nashville. She could have driven up there with the kids and spent the day with her folks, but she hadn't. He would have to remember to tell her he appreciated what she was doing for his family. What he wouldn't tell her, or anyone else at the family gathering, was how close he had come to getting his head blown off tonight. Sitting around discussing and dissecting the grim event wasn't his idea of an enjoyable way to spend Thanksgiving with his family.

He sighed, got up, opened another cabinet door, and retrieved a bottle of Jack Daniel's whiskey. She had the house and the kids. He had Jack Daniel's. Jack Daniel's was a good friend to have around when your wife didn't want you around

anymore. Ignoring the bowl of cereal, he got a plastic cup and took it and his friend to the couch and put his feet up on the coffee table. He poured a liberal amount of whiskey into the cup and drank it. The fiery liquid felt good as it burned his throat going down. You had to be alive to feel pain. Dan decided it felt wonderful to be alive. If only he didn't have to be alone.

Dan took another sip of whiskey and picked up the newspaper. The Iraqi disarmament crisis was heating up and President Bill Clinton's problems were still on the front page. He had been impeached by the House of Representatives last week for lying under oath to a federal grand jury about his affair with Monica Lewinsky, an unpaid intern with whom he had nearly a dozen sexual encounters in the White House in an area where there were no cameras. The President had already announced that he intended to finish his term.

He tossed the newspaper aside and took another drink. He thought about going down to Uncle Buck's Tavern for a couple of beers, but he knew he wasn't welcome down there, especially on a busy night like tonight. Junior wouldn't kick him out of the honky-tonk bar, but the presence of an off-duty deputy sheriff would put a damper on the evening's fun for everyone while he was there. He never wore his uniform and always drove his Chevy pickup truck when making a social call at the beer joint, but there was always someone there who recognized him and knew he was a deputy sheriff.

As the word got around the bar about the presence of an off-duty deputy, some of the customers would get up and quietly leave for reasons of their own. Dan had gone down to Uncle Buck's a few times since he'd moved out of the house, but he'd always gone with J.D. Montgomery or another deputy so he would have somebody to talk to, and they always picked a slow night so Junior wouldn't get too mad at them.

The noise of the ringing phone startled him. "Yeah?"

"Dan? J.D. The Square Deal Pawnshop down on Greenbrier is just outside the Bailey Springs city limits,

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which makes it our case. The owner lives above the store. We're heading down there. You want to come along?"

"You've got a warrant already?"

"We told the judge we needed to take a look tonight before the news about the kids hit the airwaves. He wasn't happy, but he signed it."

"When?"

"We're getting ready to roll right now."

"I'll meet you there. I'm going to stop and grab a hamburger."

"Ah, yes, the wonderful life of a bachelor, huh?"

"You can't beat it."

"It's still misty rain and it's starting to get a little foggy. How is it over there?"

"About the same. It wasn't too bad over on Murphy either, but it's usually worse on Greenbrier down toward the state line for some reason."

"You got that right! Man, I've been down there when the soup was so thick I couldn't see the double-stripes more than ten feet in front of my grill. I would drop down to thirty, hoping I could stop in time to keep from hitting someone going slower and praying some nut doing sixty wasn't coming up behind me."

"Been there; done that."

"The beer drinkers down at Uncle Buck's have tomorrow off, so there'll be a rowdy crowd down there tonight. Let's hope they stay between the ditches on their way home."

"They usually do. Lord knows how."

"Hey! I'm outta here."

"See you at the pawnshop."

2

Day 1 Wednesday, November 25

“HEY, JUNIOR! TWO MORE down here!” Jack Constone called out from the bar in a voice loud enough to be heard over the din of noise from the music and the other beer drinkers.

“Hold your horses,” the big bartender growled.

Jack thought about making a smart-ass remark to Junior’s back, then changed his mind. He knew Junior didn’t take crap from anybody. Instead, he turned to Billy Blakeley, his eight-ball partner, and complained. “You’d think he’d hire some help on a busy night like tonight.”

“Aw, man. He’s as stingy as Uncle Buck ever was,” Billy said, then pointed to a framed one-dollar bill behind the bar. “Hell, he’s still got the first dollar he ever made.”

“Come on, Junior, we’re up next!” Jack yelled. He turned to Billy and said, “We’re going to win tonight. I just know it. I’m hot, man. I’m making everything in sight. Just don’t leave them a good shot. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Think you’re going to take it tonight, huh?” Junior asked as he set two cold long-neck beers in front of the men, then helped himself to the money on the bar.

“Damn right,” Jack said. Then he and Billy grabbed their beers and turned to go.

“Big pot for the winners tonight,” Junior called out.

“You hang onto that pot, man, it’s ours!” Jack hollered over his shoulder as he and Billy headed back to the pool tables.

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“Yeah, right,” Junior called out. He watched the two regulars weave their way through the couples on the small parquet dance floor, then disappear into the crowd shooting pool and playing pinball and video games in the large room beyond.

* * * *

Organizing a Wednesday night pool tournament was the best idea Junior had since he bought the place. Like ABC’s “Monday Night Football,” it gave his customers a reason to drink his beer on an otherwise dull day of the week and low gross night for his bar. Tomorrow was Thanksgiving, though, and most of the men had the day off. It was still early, and he was already as busy as he usually was on a Friday or Saturday night. That was all right with him.

Junior had been a regular at Uncle Buck’s Tavern after retiring from the Army as a Sergeant First Class. He had worn a Ranger patch while participating in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He had gotten married a couple of times over the years but neither of the women understood that they came second to the Army. Both were taking a bite out of his retirement pay now but he still had enough left over to do pretty much whatever he wanted.

He had gotten bored with civilian life and was looking around for something to do with his time and money when he heard that Uncle Buck was thinking about selling his place. By then, Junior knew the Tennessee honky-tonk bar was a friendly place where a country boy could have a few beers, shoot pool with his friends, dance with other men’s wives, and forget his troubles for a few hours. Most of the regulars lived across the Tennessee state line, down in Helleston, Alabama, or one of the farming communities in Chickasaw County.

But Chickasaw County, Alabama, was dry; the sale of alcoholic beverages had been illegal since Prohibition. Uncle Buck’s Tavern was in Creek County, Tennessee, about sixteen miles north of Helleston. That was why there was a constant stream of traffic northward across the Alabama state line, especially on Friday and Saturday nights, to the Tennessee

honky-tonk bar. As long as he stayed out of trouble with Sheriff Johns and his Creek County deputies, and the dogooders kept voting down the sale of alcohol in Chickasaw County, Junior knew he would do all right.

Fights broke out frequently, especially on weekends. Junior didn't mind his customers having a good fist fight, as long as they took it outside, but anyone using weapons had to deal with him. He knew a man could get beat up on Saturday night and still be able to show up for work on Monday morning. Bruises, black eyes, skinned knuckles, and loose teeth never stopped a man from punching a time clock, but if Sheriff Johns ever had to come and haul away someone's son or husband with a bullet hole in his head or a knife in his gut, he knew the holier-than-thou hypocrites in the county would try to pull his license. If that happened, everything he had worked for would be gone.

* * * *

Thirty minutes later, Jack and Billy came back to the bar, whooping and yelling at the tops of their lungs. When Junior verified that they had won, he threw a stack of bills down on the bar in front of them.

"Hot damn, look at that!" Jack yelled. "That's got to be the biggest pot we've ever won."

"We did it, partner, we did it!" Billy yelled as the two men slapped their palms together in a high-five.

"Come on over here," Jack called out to the two men they had defeated. "Drinks are on us."

"Sounds good to me," one said. "It's raining too hard to leave anyway."

"And the fog's getting so thick you can't see where you're going anyway," the other man said.

"Then we'll sit here and drink all night," Jack proclaimed.

"Damn right," Billy said. "Hey, Junior! Four cold ones, right here!"

"Man, oh man. Is this a great night or what?" Jack asked no one in particular. He lifted the bottle to his mouth, drank

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long and deep, then banged the bottle down on the bar. “Hey, Junior! Keep them coming!” he yelled, then turned to the three other men. “Hot damn! We’re going to drink beer tonight until there’s not a dime left on the bar!” Jack watched the big bartender set the beers down amid the clutter on the bar and help himself to some of the money. “Hey, Junior!” Jack cried out in joyful enthusiasm. “Is this a great country or what?”

Junior looked at Jack, then snorted in disgust. “It used to be,” he said, then walked away.

* * * *

“What the hell!” Jack cried out as he stabbed his foot toward the brake pedal, missed, then tried again. As the brakes grabbed, all four wheels locked and the worn tires on the pickup truck began to slide on the wet pavement. With a hand that seemed only vaguely connected to his brain, he tried to keep the truck on the two-lane roadway as the rear end slid back and forth across both lanes. When the vehicle came to a halt, he stared at the large red hexagonal STOP sign that had suddenly appeared in the misty rain and fog ahead of him. “What the hell is that thing doing there?” the confused drunk mumbled.

As his brain tried to process the weaving and wandering images in his truck’s high beams, Jack looked at the four-lane highway beyond the stop sign and tried to figure out what it was doing there. He didn’t remember an intersection like this on his way home to Helleston, Alabama. As he listened to the slap-slap of his wipers clearing away the drops of misty rain collecting on his windshield, he tried to understand what was happening. Forcing his eyelids wide open, he tried to focus on the double image of a rectangular road sign beneath the stop sign. Finally, he closed one eye and squinted. BAILEY SPRINGS 1 MILE.

“Bailey Springs? Why in hell am I going to Bailey Springs, Tennessee?” he mumbled as he looked at the vague shapes of buildings on either side of the road. He didn’t recognize any of them. “Hell, I can’t even remember leaving the goddamn bar!”

He squinted at the clock on the dashboard but couldn't focus well enough to tell the time.

"God damn it!" Jack yelled. He knew Bailey Springs was about eleven miles north of Uncle Buck's, which meant he had been driving in the wrong direction for ten miles. Now, he would have to turn around and drive ten miles back to Uncle Buck's. Once there, he would head down to the Alabama state line and then to Helleston, a fifteen-mile trip that he'd made a few dozen times before. Tonight, it was going to be a thirty-five-mile drive. He didn't need the hassle.

With his pickup heading south once more, Jack stomped on the accelerator. The worn tires spun uselessly on the wet pavement until he took his foot off the accelerator for a moment, then pressed down again, this time more gently. With his left eye closed to eliminate his double-vision, he tried to see the road ahead through the fog and rain. When he did, he saw a rectangular white sign: SPEED LIMIT 50.

Embarrassed at what he had done, he hurried to undo it. If anyone saw him up this way tonight, they might think he had gotten too drunk to know his way home. They wouldn't let him live it down at Uncle Buck's for a long time. Aggravated that he would have to drive an extra twenty miles tonight, and embarrassed that he had turned the wrong way when he had left Uncle Buck's, he pressed the accelerator down until he was doing sixty.

It never occurred to him to wonder how he had driven within a mile of Bailey Springs, Tennessee, tonight with no memory of how he had gotten there. After driving several miles on the winding, hilly, two-lane county road, he began to anticipate reaching Uncle Buck's again, fully intending to stop and have another beer or two while he tried to figure out what was going on tonight.

He could count on one hand the number of times he had been to Bailey Springs, Tennessee, with a couple of fingers left over. He tried to recall the last time and couldn't. He thought it might have been a year or so ago. He couldn't remember why he had been up this way, but his vague

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recollection of the road was that it wasn't much different from the two-lane county roads in Alabama. Like Alabama, the road was posted at fifty, but most drivers drove at least sixty even though there were dozens of private home driveways, small businesses, and secondary roads intersecting with it.

The only section of the road that stuck in his mind was a curve down toward the Alabama state line. It was so sharp it had a guardrail on the outside of it to keep vehicles doing sixty from launching themselves off the road and down a steep embankment.

As Jack continued south for several minutes, he became aware that the fog was getting thicker. Without being aware of it, he slowed to fifty while trying to see through the fog. He tried switching from high beams to low beams and found he could see better. Then, while passing through a hilly section with trees on both sides of the road, a yellow diamond-shaped sign with an arrow bent to the left suddenly appeared out of the fog with a rectangular sign below it advising: SAFE SPEED 30 MPH. He had found the curve.

He glanced down at his speedometer and saw he was doing fifty. He was in trouble. If he went into the curve at fifty, he wouldn't make it. If he slammed on his brakes, his worn tires would probably hydroplane, and the truck would slide like it was on ice into the curve. He downshifted into second, hoping his transmission would slow him down, so he wouldn't have to use his brakes. As the roaring engine complained about the sudden increase in revolutions per minute, the truck's speed dropped to forty-five as the guardrail on the right shoulder suddenly appeared in his headlights.

Breathing rapidly and gripping the steering wheel with both hands, he squinted to keep his left eye closed as he gently touched the brake pedal. Forty. So far; so good. As he entered the curve with his left-side tires riding the double yellow line, he applied more braking. Bad idea. He felt his rear tires lose traction and slide toward the guardrail. In response, he turned his steering wheel to the right to compensate, then quickly steered back to the left again when it felt like the rear of his truck was heading in the same direction as the front again. By then the right-side tires were riding the white stripe on the

outer edge of the road surface and the side of the truck was inches away from the guardrail.

He came out of the curve with his tires still riding the right-hand edge of the pavement. Suddenly, his low-beam headlights lit the dark form of someone standing on the narrow right-side shoulder of the roadway with his arm extended and his thumb up. Jack's panic reaction was to slam on his brakes.

With detached curiosity, as if watching a scene in a movie, he felt his hydroplaning tires sliding uselessly on the wet road as the truck bore down on the man. Jack heard a loud thump and felt the truck shudder momentarily as it slammed into the man. As the truck continued, the body became airborne then hit the side of the cab before it bounced away into the darkness.

"Jesus Christ Almighty! What the hell was that?" Jack continued to brake hard and had to fight his truck to keep it on the road until it stopped. He got out and peered into the foggy haze behind him. "Hey, anybody back there? Anybody hurt?" When he heard nothing, he walked unsteadily around to the front of his truck and immediately noticed his right-side headlight was out. On closer inspection, he saw that the clear plastic covering both the headlight and side light was broken and some of the pieces were missing. Some of the yellow plastic for his turn signal was missing as well. The rectangular chrome frame around the light group was damaged and the sheet metal around it was dented. He had hit something, that was for sure.

Jack found his flashlight in the glove box. When he turned it on, he discovered the batteries still gave him a weak beam of light for a few feet. He lurched and stumbled along the road back toward the curve, his flashlight alternately sweeping across the foggy road and then shining down into the darkness of a steep embankment that became much higher as he approached the guardrail. "Damn, I'm drunk," he mumbled. "If a deputy comes along now, I'm in real trouble."

He had walked almost back to the guard rail before he found what he had hoped he wouldn't find. A man wearing

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jeans, sneakers, a blue jacket, and a blue backpack was lying on his left side against the brush and dead weeds at the bottom of a steep ten-foot embankment. "Hey! Hey down there! You all right?" There was no answer.

With his flashlight in his right hand, Jack stepped off the narrow shoulder in his high-top work shoes onto a layer of damp leaves and wet clay with his right foot and felt it move down the steep slope several inches before it came to a stop. He aimed the dim light of his flashlight down toward the man. The arms and legs looked unnatural, bent at awkward angles to the body. Trying to see the face in the weak light, Jack cautiously stepped off the shoulder and onto the slippery slope with his left foot. With both feet on the steep slope, he reached out and touched the slope with his fingers to balance himself as he took another step downward with his right foot.

"God damn it!" he cried out as both feet slid down the steep embankment, pushing clay mud and leaves along with them. His feet, and the mound of mud and leaves underneath them, came to a stop against the man's legs and feet.

Bracing himself against the steep bank with his left hand, he pointed the flashlight at the man's head. It was turned away from him, but he could see blood. Trying to get closer to his head, he moved cautiously, one slow step at a time, on the steep slope above the body. However, each time he took a step, the loose soil and leaves gave way, pushing more clay mud and leaves against the body.

When he was near the head, Jack turned the flashlight beam onto the face. "Jesus," he whispered. It might have once been the face of a man, it was hard to tell, it was so mangled and bloody. He took a few more steps until he was closer to the man's head. Then, switching the flashlight from his right hand to his left, Jack reached down and pressed his fingers against the sticky wetness on the side of the man's bloody neck to check for a pulse. There was none. "Oh, my god, what have I done," he said, looking down at the body. Then he looked up at the steep slope. "I'm as drunk as I've ever been. I'm going to jail tonight if I don't get out of here."

He switched the clay-smearred flashlight from his left hand back to his right and looked up at the steep slope of wet clay.

He shook his head, knowing he wouldn't be able to climb up the slippery surface. He pointed his flashlight toward his truck, saw that the bank wasn't nearly as high in that direction, and headed that way. He worked his way through and around brush and dead weeds until the slope was no more than waist high. Holding the flashlight in his right hand, he grabbed a bush with his left and pulled himself up and onto the shoulder of the road.

He stomped and scraped his feet on the road, trying to clear the clay from his high-top work shoes, then he walked back toward the body. He was surprised at what he saw in the dim light of his flashlight, or rather, didn't see. By walking on the steep slope of soft clay above the body, he had pushed a thick ridge of mud and leaves against the body so that it was now almost hidden from view from the road. The only thing he could see was some of the blue backpack and the bare hillside where his shoes had dug holes in the bank above the body.

He looked up at the oak trees above him. In a few days the rest of those leaves would be on the ground, covering the slope again. It would look as though nothing or no one was down there. He frowned as he turned and looked across the road. Above a five-foot clay bank was a steep slope covered with hardwood trees that disappeared in the fog. He wondered if there might be houses up on top of the ridge. Then he smiled. It didn't matter. If someone was up there, they couldn't see him down here any better than he could see them up there.

Jack opened the door to his truck, tossed the sticky flashlight onto the floor, then paused for a moment, wiping the mud, leaf particles, and blood from his hands onto his shirt and pants. Then he got in and drove away. Staring into the rain and fog with only one headlight to show him the way, he shook his head in a moment of remorse. "I gotta tell somebody he's down there. I can't just leave him there! That's a human being. It's not like I hit a stray dog or coon or something," he cried out in frustration, then frowned as the reality of killing a man while driving drunk came to him. "But, if I do call somebody, I'll go to jail." He stared into the

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fog for several seconds before shaking his head. "I sure as hell don't want to go to jail."

Maybe it was somebody who was passing through and wouldn't be missed. Even if it wasn't, it was probably some Tennessee hick from around Bailey Springs. Nobody he knew would be walking along that road this time of night. The body could lie there for weeks, months . . . maybe forever. After a few days, new leaves would cover his tracks down there. Anybody walking past wouldn't see anything but that backpack, maybe not even that.

Jack nodded. He knew one thing for sure, he was as deep in it as he could get right now. It couldn't get any worse if he kept his mouth shut. If he reported it tonight, he would spend the rest of the night in jail and who knows how many more. If he didn't report it, as long as no one found the body, he was clear. He might go to jail eventually, but by then maybe he could come up with a good story.

Having decided not to report the body, Jack slowly nodded his head. "Until somebody finds the body, it never happened. I can live with that." Then he smiled as another thought came to him. There was an alternative. He'd wait a few days until he got his story straight about what happened to his truck, then he would make an anonymous call to the Creek County Sheriff and tell them about the body at the curve. There was nothing down there that could connect him to the man, no one saw him doing it, and by the time he called he would have a good explanation as to what happened to his truck.

Jack smiled as he pulled into Uncle Buck's parking lot. Getting the man's body out of the woods within the next few days appealed to him. He hadn't meant to kill him, so it was almost as if he was doing the man a favor, helping to get him out of the woods before the meat-eating birds and animals found him. Jack nodded, feeling good. Beer would taste good right now.

Then, he looked down at himself. His shoes and clothes were wet and covered with mud and bits of leaves. Someone would want to know where he had been and what he had been doing. They might remember later that he had left the bar, then came back looking like he'd been wallowing in a hog pen. Going

in for another beer might not be a good idea. Jack started the engine, shifted in reverse, then glanced at his outside rearview mirrors out of habit.

“Damn!” The right-hand mirror was missing. He hadn’t seen it on the road. It had to be down the embankment. He would have to go back and try to find it in the dim light of his weak flashlight. “No!” he whispered. The last thing he wanted to do was to go down that bank again tonight. “Goddamn it!” he cursed as he slammed his fist onto the seat beside him, knowing his plan to call the sheriff about the body wouldn’t work. They might find his mirror down there. If they did, they might be able to match it with where it had been broken off his truck. “Damn!” As much as he wished the man didn’t have to stay down there in the woods, he knew he couldn’t call anyone. It might get them looking for the truck with the missing mirror that had hit him.

As he headed south at a moderate speed, the fog seemed to dissipate a bit, giving him a much better view of the road ahead. As he neared the Alabama state line, with the anonymous call no longer an option, Jack reminded himself that nothing had happened, no one had been hurt, and no one was dead until someone found the body, which might never happen. As long as no one had seen him there, he was never there; he wasn’t the one who did it.

Then he remembered his broken headlight and glanced at the space where the right-hand mirror should have been. How would he explain it? Someone would notice in the next few days, Cathy probably, Billy for sure the next time they rode together to work. How could he explain the damage? He was in a little accident. Yeah. A little fender bender. Where? When? Was anybody else involved? Jack shook his head as all the unanswered questions came pounding on his head.

At a time when he desperately needed to be sober, Jack knew he was still very drunk. As he neared the Alabama state line, driving around a familiar curve, at a speed he knew would take him safely around, he saw a big oak tree

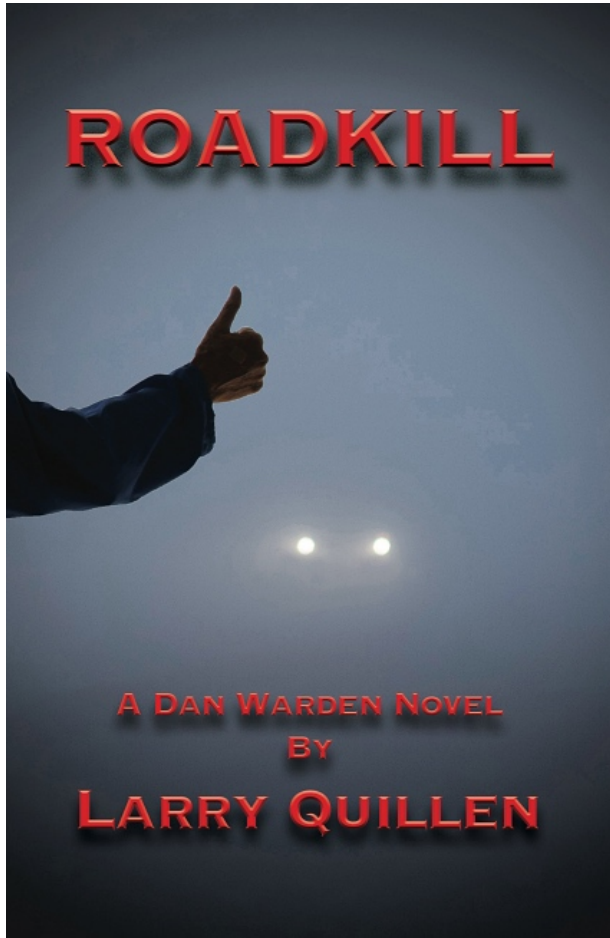
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a few yards off to the right. "That's it!" The big oak was the answer. This would be where he had his accident.

If he could sideswipe the tree just enough to obliterate the damage that had already been done, then no one would ever know he had driven north instead of south when he had left Uncle Buck's tonight. If he did it right, he could get the lights and fender fixed next week, the insurance company would pay for it, and the Creek County sheriff would have to go looking somewhere else for the hit-and-run vehicle.

Jack pulled into a farmhouse driveway, turned around, drove a hundred yards past the curve and turned around once more. The 1993 F-150 didn't have an airbag and Jack never wore his seatbelt, but now he snapped the buckle in place, then tugged on the loose shoulder strap, wondering if it would work like it was supposed to when the time came. Wishing desperately for a crash helmet, he knew it was too late to wish for anything. He would have to be good enough to barely sideswipe the tree instead of ramming it head-on. "Just peel the paint, buddy," Jack muttered. "Just peel the paint."

As Jack approached the curve, he tried to guess how fast he should be going. Fast enough to get the job done without killing himself at the same time, he decided. Jack almost changed his mind, but at the last second, he jerked the truck to the right, aiming it at the left edge of the big tree. However, as the truck pitched over the low embankment, the front end slid to the right and headed toward the center of the tree. Jack screamed and jerked the steering wheel to the left just before impact.



In his early days of law enforcement, Dan Warden is a Tennessee deputy sheriff. While searching for clues to a hit-and-run accident, he is torn between doing his job and his personal relationship with a suspect.

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