

*The Tomato Patch fills the gap between Roadkill and Jenny Cay and completes the six-book Dan Warden Series.*

# The Tomato Patch

by Larry Quillen

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# THE TOMATO PATCH



A DAN WARDEN NOVEL  
BY



LARRY QUILLEN

**The Complete Dan Warden Series  
In Chronological Order**

**Roadkill**

**The Tomato Patch**

**Jenny Cay**

**Digger**

**The Rogue**

**The Rampart Alert**

**Also by Larry Quillen**

**Snowbound**

**The Lost People**

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# 1

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SHORTLY AFTER DARK, three inmates from the Kilby Correctional Facility near Montgomery, Alabama, hurried into the trees beyond the prison's last row of razor wire. As they approached a secondary road on the other side of the woods, they saw a four-door sedan parked on the shoulder of the narrow road with its engine idling. The woman sitting in the driver's seat was constantly checking her windshield and rearview mirrors for other vehicles, ready to leave in a hurry.

One of the inmates yelled, "Let's go, Corrine!"

The woman looked at the trio of men running toward her out of the darkness of the woods, and grinned, "Roper! You made it!"

Roper hurried to the front passenger's door and climbed in while the other two men got into the back seat. "Let's go, baby. The next head count is going to be three short. We've got to get out of here before they sic the dogs on us."

Corrine flipped her cigarette into the roadside weeds, stepped hard on the accelerator, and the car roared away. All three men found brown coveralls, the kind auto mechanics wear, waiting for them on their seats. After a few minutes struggling to change clothes in the confines of the moving automobile, all three men were wearing the coveralls. Except for their shoes and underwear, their prison clothes were in a roadside ditch.

"Who're your friends, Roper?"

"Why do you want to know?" Roper snarled.

Corrine shrugged her shoulders. "I don't."

"Then shut up and keep moving."

"I will if you'll tell me where we're going."

"Where does this road go?"

"North, toward Birmingham eventually."

"We don't want to go north. Head east as soon as you can. Don't do anything stupid that might attract attention and don't go more than five miles over the speed limit."

"Hey, dude, what's happening up there?" one of the inmates in the rear asked. "Me and Lloyd want to get in on the action."

"Damn right, Roper," Lloyd said. "Me and Denzil have as much on the line as you do."

Roper looked at Corrine. "Did you bring my toy?"

"In the glove box."

Five minutes later, Corrine was on a two-lane county road when Roper said, "Pull over and stop."

Roper opened the glove compartment and took out a nine-millimeter pistol. As the car came to a stop, he turned and pointed the pistol first at Denzil, then at Lloyd. "Now, let's make sure everybody understands the situation here. I needed you two to help me get under the wire. I don't need either one of you now. You with me so far?" When both men silently nodded, Roper grinned. "I can pop you right now, or you can get out and walk. Your choice."

Denzil grinned at Roper and said, "I believe I'll get out and walk, if it's all the same to you, Roper."

"Same here," Lloyd said.

Roper smiled. "Have a nice walk in the country, boys."

Denzil and Lloyd slammed the doors and the car roared off, spewing sharp gravel in the faces of the two convicts suddenly stranded on the deserted, two-lane road.

"What the hell are we going to do now?" Lloyd asked.

"We've got to find some wheels. If we don't, we'll sleep in solitary tonight if they don't kill us first."

"I see a light," Lloyd said.

"Where?"

"Down yonder." Lloyd pointed. "In them trees."

"Oh, yeah, I see it," Denzil said, peering into the darkness. "Let's go see what they've got that we can use."

By the time the two men reached the driveway of the isolated house, Denzil and Lloyd had worked out a story they

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thought would get them inside. "Very nice," Denzil said as he glided his fingers along the fender of a Buick LeSabre parked in the driveway. "Yes, indeed. This will do nicely." As they approached the small porch, Denzil stopped at the bottom step. "Do your thing, man."

Lloyd slowly opened the screen door on its rusty hinges, then tried the doorknob. It was locked. He pushed the doorbell, heard a chime inside, then pushed it again. Shortly the porch light came on and a heavysset woman in her late fifties opened the door a few inches with the chain lock attached. As she appraised the two men through the narrow crack, Lloyd said, "Evening, ma'am. I was wondering if I could use your telephone."

"Well, I don't know if I should."

"Our tow truck broke down," Lloyd said, explaining their coveralls. "We were supposed to get somebody out of a ditch, now we need somebody to come and get us. I'd appreciate it if you'd let me use your phone."

"I thought you people had radios in those trucks."

"Yes, ma'am. We do, but it's busted," Lloyd said and sadly shook his head. Then, in the sincerest voice he could muster, he said, "Really, ma'am, I only want to use the phone for one minute to call our dispatcher. My partner will stay out here. I'll take my shoes off if you want me to."

The woman stared at the men for a moment, and then smiled. "I guess it'll be all right for you to come in, if the other man will stay outside."

"Yes, ma'am. He'll stay right where he is."

The woman closed the door, then opened it again. This time the chain was off. Immediately, Lloyd and Denzil rushed the door, shoving it hard, knocking the woman off balance. As the surprised woman staggered backwards, she watched in horror as the two men stormed past her. "What do you think you're doing? Get out of here! Get out of my house right now."

"Is anybody else home?" Denzil asked.

"There certainly is. My husband is downstairs."

"Better call him," Denzil said softly.

The woman, her face flushed with anger, turned her head toward the basement stairs and yelled, "Richard!"

“Yeah?” a voice answered from below.

“You’d better get up here!”

“What’s the matter, Irene?”

“There’re two men up here! You’d better come up and talk to them!”

“All right. Be right there.”

As the woman and Lloyd waited for Richard, Denzil silently walked into the kitchen. After a moment he returned, holding a long knife behind his thigh.

Richard paused at the top of the stairs, looking at first one man and then the other. With a frown on his face, he looked at his wife. “What do they want?”

Before the woman could reply, Denzil stepped close to Irene and slightly behind her. “It’s like this, Richard. We need the keys to the Buick. We’re going to need a few more things you might have around the house, too.”

Richard stared at Denzil, truly dumbfounded. They were robbing him. No one had ever robbed him before. He didn’t know anyone personally who had been robbed. Yet, it was happening to him, right now, right in front of his eyes. Every day of the week, newspapers and television stations carried news of violent crimes being committed against innocent citizens, but they weren’t people he knew. Their trauma had no effect on him. Now he tried very hard to convince himself this was real.

“Richard?” Denzil asked. “Are you with us, Richard? Do you understand what’s happening here?”

“You’re robbing us,” Richard said softly.

“Hey! All right, man! You figured it out all by yourself,” Denzil said. “Now, Richard, I’m going to ask you one last time. Where are the keys to the Buick?”

“In my pocket.”

Denzil grinned. “Would you give them to me? Or do you want me to break every bone in your body and take them? I’m willing to do it either way. It’s up to you.”

Richard slowly reached into his pants pocket, retrieved a ring of keys, then stepped forward and offered them to Denzil. “It’s brand new. I only bought it last month.”



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“Don’t worry about a thing. We’ll take good care of it, Richard,” Denzil said as he dropped the keys in his pocket. “Now, where’s your wallet?”

Without comment, Richard extracted his wallet and offered it to the men. Lloyd snatched it from the man’s hand and opened it. “We’ve got a couple of credit cards, an ATM card, and, let me see, about a hundred dollars in cash.”

Denzil glared at Richard. “A hundred dollars! Is that all you’ve got? What’s the ATM code? What’s the PIN number?”

“Why don’t you two take what you have and leave us alone, for God’s sake?”

“Can’t do that just yet,” Denzil said. “We need a couple more things before we’re done. First things first, what’s the PIN number, Richard?”

Richard stared at Denzil. “Get out! Both of you! Get out and leave us alone!”

Denzil stepped behind the woman, put his left arm around her upper chest and touched the knife edge to the side of her throat. The woman cried out in pain as the sharp blade cut a small incision in her neck.

“He’s hurting me, Richard!”

“No!” Richard cried out as he saw the blade pressing against his wife’s neck and the blood trickling down from it.

“Give it to me, Richard, give me the code.”

“Oh, please, don’t hurt her,” Richard begged.

“The PIN, give me the damn PIN number!”

“Six-three-eight-one.”

“Six-three-eight-one. Are you sure, Richard?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Oh, please don’t hurt her,” Richard pleaded once more.

Denzil moved the knife an inch or so away from the woman’s throat but kept her firmly in his grasp. “Calm down, Richard. Everything’s cool. That takes care of our shopping list, except one last item. Where are your guns, Richard?”

Richard paused for an instant, blinked his eyes, and said, “I don’t have any guns.”

“Now, Richard,” Denzil said, in an impatient tone a father might use with a recalcitrant son. “You don’t really expect me to believe that, do you?”

"I don't have any guns," Richard repeated.

"I don't want to hear it, Richard," Denzil said.

"Please, don't hurt her. We don't have any guns."

"Richard! The next time you say that I'm going to cut her head off," Denzil said as he pressed the knife to the woman's throat again. "Do you understand me? I'm going to cut this fat old sow's head off with this goddamn knife if you lie to me one more goddamn time! You hear me!"

Richard quickly nodded his head.

"Now, you'd better have a gun, Richard. Because, if you really don't have one, I'm going to cut her anyway. Any man who don't have at least one gun in the house to protect his family from bad boys like me should suffer the consequences. Are you listening to me, Richard?"

Richard silently nodded his head once more.

"Now, one last time, Richard, where are your goddamn guns?"

Richard licked his lips and coughed. "There's an old revolver in the bedroom nightstand. It's all I have."

Denzil turned and grinned at Lloyd. "Go with him. Look around in the closet for a long gun while you're at it. Richard might have a rifle or shotgun he forgot to tell us about."

Lloyd followed Richard into the master bedroom. In a moment, Lloyd returned, preceded by Richard. Lloyd held up an old revolver. "It's loaded," Lloyd said. "It's the only one I could find. We're ready to roll."

"Not yet. We need to wrap them up," Denzil said. Then he turned to Richard. "Where's your duct tape? I swear to God, Richard, if you tell me you don't have duct tape, Lloyd will blow your head off right now."

"It's out in the garage, next to the paper towels."

"I'll find it," Lloyd said.

"Give me the gun before you go. I need it to make sure Richard doesn't run out on us before you get back."

Lloyd paused for an instant, staring at Denzil. In prison, you learned not to trust anyone, but he and Denzil had a history of watching each other's back. They weren't friends, but they had mutual enemies. Lloyd offered the gun to Denzil, and he took it.

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When Lloyd returned with the duct tape, the old couple was sitting on the couch. As Lloyd took a couple of turns of duct tape around Richard's wrists, Denzil, with the knife in one hand and the pistol in the other, acted kindly toward the clearly distressed couple, obviously trying to placate them. "It's going to be all right, folks, really it is. There's no need to worry. We're not as bad as you might think we are. Does your neck hurt, ma'am? I'd put a bandage on it for you if we had time. It's only a little nick. It'll stop bleeding in a minute or two anyway."

As Lloyd continued to wrap tape around the old couple's wrists and ankles, Denzil kept asking them if they were too uncomfortable, apologizing for causing them discomfort. "Don't worry, folks. You've been real nice to us. When we get a few miles down the road, we're going to stop and make a call and let somebody know your situation. Okay?" When Denzil saw the couple nod, he smiled and looked at the woman. "Try to relax, ma'am. We're not going to do anything else to you. You have my word on it." Then he directed his attention to the man. "Don't worry about your new Buick, Richard. I promise not to go over seventy and we'll leave it up the road somewhere without a scratch on it. I promise. So, just try to relax for a little while until we call somebody."

Lloyd finished with the couple's wrists and ankles, then looked at Denzil. "I'm done. Let's get out of here."

"Okay, let me see now," Denzil said, then paused as if in thought. "We've got the keys to a Buick. We've got credit cards and an ATM card. We've got a PIN number Richard guarantees will work and an old six-shooter." Denzil paused, staring at the man with a forlorn look on his face. "Come on, Richard. It's not so bad. We're not taking anything you can't replace with a little money. Think what a great story you're going to tell your friends tomorrow about an escaped killer who let you live."

With a benign smile, Denzil nodded as he held up the big knife. "That's right, Richard, I've killed a few people, some with a knife like this one. When somebody pisses me off, I do a little slicing and dicing, and then I cut their throats from ear to ear to put them out of their misery." Denzil chuckled as he saw the look of fear in the old couple's eyes. "But you two have been so helpful to us tonight we're going to walk out of here and let you

live. How about it, Richard? Could I hear a thank you for not killing the two of you? Can you do that for me?"

Richard gazed up at the man, then lowered his head and mumbled, "Thank you . . . for not killing us."

Denzil grinned at the man. "How about a sir? Could you get a sir in there? It would mean an awful lot to me."

With his head bowed, Richard said, "Thank you . . . sir . . . for not killing us."

"Atta boy, Richard. I knew you could do it! I do appreciate the kindness you two have shown us tonight. We're on our way. As soon as the door closes behind us, you'll never see us again. Any concerns you two might have about me cutting your throats will be over. I promise. So, just relax. We'll make a call in a little while and somebody will come and set you free. All right, Richard?"

The man slowly nodded.

"Can I get a smile, Richard? Just a little one?" Denzil asked, and then watched the man raise his head as the corners of his mouth turned upward. "Atta boy, Richard. I knew you could do it. Oh, by the way, what was that PIN number again?"

"Six-three-eight-one."

"All right! You weren't lying to me before. Good man," Denzil said, then turned to Lloyd, smiling. "Let's go."

At the car, Denzil paused at the driver's side door, the revolver in one hand, and the big knife in the other. He grinned at Lloyd. "Go ahead and get in. I'll be right back."

Lloyd got into the passenger's side and waited as Denzil hurried back inside, leaving the door open. After a couple of uneasy minutes, Lloyd reached over and blew the horn. He was anxious to leave but couldn't. The other man had the gun, the knife, and the keys to the Buick. He had nothing except the wallet.

Shortly afterwards, Denzil hurried out of the house wiping his hands with a towel. He tossed the towel on the ground, climbed in the car, and turned to Lloyd with a broad grin on his face. "Oh, man!"

"What the hell was that all about? What did you do?"

Without answering, Denzil started the engine and they were soon out on the road. Since Roper was heading east,

Denzil turned west. After a moment, he glanced over at Lloyd, grinning. "God, what a rush! I'd almost forgotten how good it feels to kill somebody!"

Lloyd stared at Denzil. "You killed them?"

Denzil looked at Lloyd and smiled. "Have you ever seen a cat playing with a mouse it caught?"

"Yeah, so what?"

Denzil grinned as he stared out the windshield. "The cat knows the mouse is dead long before the mouse finds out, right?"

"Yeah, right."

"The minute I got that knife in my hand, everybody in that house was dead. They didn't know it, but I did. I had fun with those two old people, making them think I was going to let them live. Man, you should have seen the look in their eyes when I walked back in with that knife in my hand and a smile on my face. They knew what I was going to do to them."

"Jesus Christ."

"Lloyd, in this world, you're either a cat or a mouse. Which one are you?"

"Up yours, Denzil."

"I might've taken you up on that yesterday. Tonight I'm looking for something with big tits and smells good. You don't qualify either way."

The two men considered which direction they thought would be best, Canada or Mexico. They agreed Mexico would be safer, but neither knew the language. In Canada, they could understand what people were saying, but neither was looking forward to the ice and snow of a long Canadian winter. Lloyd pointed out that it was May. By the time it got cold in Canada, they would probably be somewhere else anyway. "Canada it is," Denzil said. "Question is . . . what's the quickest way to get there?"

"Interstate sixty-five is a straight shot north."

"All the way to Canada?"

"As far as I know, it is. I've never been up that far on it. I know it starts down in Mobile, goes through Montgomery, and then Birmingham before it heads up to Nashville. I'm not sure where it goes from there."

“We’re about to find out,” Denzil said. Shortly, Denzil found an on-ramp to I-65 and headed north. A couple of hours later, they were beyond Birmingham, near Cullman, when they decided to try Richard’s ATM card at an exit with a truck stop.

The PIN worked. Lloyd made two withdrawals of two hundred dollars. On the third try, the machine kept the card. They filled the Buick with gas, bought sandwiches, chips, and a six-pack of cold beer. They ate the sandwiches, chips, and drank one of the beers at the truck stop, then headed back out toward the freeway. While waiting at the traffic light to get onto the I-65 on ramp, they saw two Alabama state trooper vehicles speeding northbound with flashing emergency lights.

“You think they’re looking for us this far north already?” Lloyd asked.

“Maybe,” Denzil said softly.

“If they are, we’re taking a chance if we get back on I-65 for a while.”

“We need to keep moving, man.”

“The road we’re on right now is Alabama one-fifty-seven. It heads north, more or less. We could stay on it for a while until they get tired of looking for us on the freeway.”

“Sounds good,” Denzil said. When the light turned green, he drove over I-65 and continued on SR 157 toward Moulton.

Lloyd nodded as he opened a second beer for both of them. Traveling on secondary roads would take them longer to get where they wanted to go, but he thought they would stand a better chance of eventually getting to Canada this way as long as they watched for speed traps while passing through small towns. With no usable identification, Denzil said he would just shoot the hayseed cop and keep on moving. As chills crawled up the back of his neck, Lloyd turned and looked at Denzil, knowing the man meant what he said. Beyond Moulton, they turned onto SR 101 and headed toward the Tennessee River.

Lloyd sighed. “Man, I’d sure like to stop and see that woman of mine for a few minutes.”

“You married?”

“Not anymore. She split while I was inside.”

“Where does she live?”

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“Up in Tennessee, a little town called Bailey Springs, just north of the Alabama state line.”

“We’re heading in that direction?”

“More or less.”

“Is she good-looking?”

“Used to be. Haven’t seen her lately.”

“Well, hell, man. We’ll take the time. She got a good-looking sister?”

“No sister. Just that redheaded boy of mine.”

Denzil turned and grinned at the other man. “Well, since she’s not your wife no more, you won’t mind if I take sloppy seconds, will you?”

Lloyd glanced at Denzil, then looked away and shrugged his shoulders. “It’s up to her. It don’t make no difference to me.”

Denzil grinned. “I think I can get her to see it my way,” he said as he stared out the windshield. “A redheaded boy, huh? Is she redheaded, too? I ain’t never had me a real redheaded woman.”

“It was brown the last time I saw it.”

“Big tits?”

“Not really.”

“Damn,” Denzil muttered quietly.

## 2

IN BAILEY SPRINGS, TENNESSEE, about thirty miles north of the escaping convicts as a drunken crow might fly, Red Black was sitting at a table at McDonald's, taking a break from frying meat patties for Big Macs and Quarter Pounders. The six-foot-tall, slender, red-headed teenager rested his elbows on the table and cupped his chin in his hands while watching Patty Johnson, another member of the evening crew, noisily suck the last few drops of her Diet Coke from the bottom of the big plastic cup. He thought there was something erotic about the way she did that.

Red grinned. It wasn't the first erotic thought he'd had about this girl lately. When Patty joined Red and the rest of the McDonald's evening crew a couple of weeks ago, it was the first time Red had seen her since he had graduated from high school last year. He liked what he saw.

Red smiled as he gazed at the girl's blouse, its buttons straining to contain her large breasts. Patty had changed, and he liked the change. She had been a little too chunky for him a year ago when she was a junior at Central High, but she had lost some weight since the last time he'd seen her. Most of what was left was in all the right places. He thought her rear was still a little too big but the weight she was carrying on her chest sort of counterbalanced it. Brown hair, green eyes, maybe five-four, with a mouth that was a little too small and skin that was almost white. Red nodded. There was something special about this girl that was more than skin deep.

Patty jabbed an index finger against the plastic bridge of her glasses, repositioning them higher on her nose. Smiling at Red, she asked, "So, you're really going to cut out on us, huh?"



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“Yeah, time to move on. I was talking to Donny Channel the other day. He’s working for Royel Roofing now. He said they’re looking for another man to help out, so I called Mr. Royel and got the job. I’m starting Monday.”

“I’m surprised Mr. Royel would hire Donny after that trouble he got into with Randy.”

“Donny’s cool. Randy’s still in prison for shooting at that deputy sheriff, but Donny says there’s a chance he might get out soon.”

“Those two sound like the kind of people I’d stay away from, if I were you.”

“Nah. Me, Donny, Randy, Bobby Ray, and some other guys ran around together when we were in school. We used to get into all kinds of stuff, but it was just for fun.”

“You call that fun, breaking into people’s houses, stealing things, and then burning the houses down like Donny and Randy did?”

“No, I don’t,” Red said, realizing the conversation had gotten off track. “Randy and Donny got a little carried away. I never did anything like that.”

“I should hope not.”

“Some people think I might, just because my daddy’s in prison. I guess you know about that, huh?”

“I, uh, heard somebody mention it. That’s all I know about it,” she said. The truth was, Red Black was a celebrity of sorts in school because his daddy was in prison, serving a long sentence for armed robbery. The teenagers assumed Red’s daddy had to be mean and tough to do something like that and, therefore, Red was probably just as mean and tough. Running around with Randy Royel and his gang was confirmation to most of them.

“He and some other guy got drunk and held up a convenience store down across the Alabama state line,” Red said, then paused. “He’s been gone for ten years now. I haven’t seen him since I was nine. I can barely remember what he looked like,” he said, staring out the window at nothing.

“We’re going to miss seeing you around here.”

“I’m not going to miss this place, that’s for sure,” Red said, and then paused. “Well, maybe there is one thing I’ll miss.”

Patty tilted her head to one side and smiled at him. "Oh, yeah? What's that?"

Red cleared his throat. "Hey, uh, I was wondering. Would you like to go see a movie tomorrow night? There's a couple of good ones down in Helleston."

"I can't," Patty said sadly. "I wish I could. Next Saturday might be all right."

"Uh, when will you know for sure?"

Patty paused, biting her lower lip. "Can I ask you something first?"

"Sure."

"Uh, what church do you go to?"

Red frowned, wondering what business his religion was to her. "Uh, me and Mama used to go to a Methodist church. We haven't been for a while. Why are you asking?"

"The first thing my dad is going to do when you come in the door is ask you what church you attend. The next thing he'll do is ask you if you've been born again."

"I'll tell him I don't need to be born again. My mama did it right the first time."

Patty smiled at his little joke. "Maybe I'd better not plan on going out with you."

"Why? What's the problem? What's the big deal with your daddy? Hell, I'll blow the horn and wait for you out in the car. How will that work?"

"It won't. Daddy won't let me leave the house before he meets you."

"Your old man keeps you on a short leash, huh?"

"He's a retired Army sergeant."

"Oh, yeah? Real gung-ho, huh? I'll bet he has you marching to breakfast in the morning."

"He's not that bad. Almost, but not quite. He likes to know who I'm out with, where we're going, and when I'm going to be home, that's for sure."

"You just turned eighteen. You're about to graduate from high school. You can run your own life after that."

"I live in my parents' house. As long as I'm living with them, I have to live by their rules. I may be eighteen, but they treat me like I'm fifteen."

“Get a place of your own.”

“On what they pay me here? Get serious.”

“Get a better job.”

“I’m thinking about it, but I’ve got to get through finals and graduation first.”

“You’re not worried about graduating, are you?”

“No, not really. I’m nowhere near the top of the class, but I’m not flunking any courses either.” Patty paused, glanced at Red, and then asked, “Would you like to come see me graduate from good old Central High?”

“I’ll let you know,” Red said evasively. “I didn’t even go to my own graduation. They mailed my diploma to me.”

With a look of despair on her face, Patty pursed her lips and slowly shook her head. “If you didn’t go to your own high school graduation, getting you into a church on Sunday is going to be a major problem, right?”

Red frowned at Patty. “Do I really have to go to church this Sunday if I want to take you out next Saturday?”

“Would it be so bad?” Patty asked as she unconsciously pushed her glasses up with her fingertip again.

“What’s the big deal about church anyway? Are your folks religious nuts or something?”

“Or something, probably. As far as I’m concerned, they’re hypocrites who think you’re a good Christian if you show up for church on Sunday morning and Wednesday night, no matter what you do to people the rest of the week.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t have a very good relationship with my dad and his current wife. They think they’re good Christians. I’m not sure I agree.”

Red frowned. It had never occurred to him that a cute girl who smiled a lot and seemed happy here at work might not have it so good at home. “Oh, it’s like that, huh?”

“I’d like to go out with you, Red, but it sure would simplify things for me at home if you’d come to church this Sunday.” Patty paused, then asked, “Please?”

Red was tempted to make a smart-ass remark that, he knew, might end their relationship before it got started. He decided to keep it to himself. It had been over ten years since

he had been inside a church. He really didn't want to go through the hassle it took to get up and get dressed for church on Sunday morning again. Red took a deep breath and exhaled as he looked at the cute girl sitting across from him. Maybe she was worth the aggravation. He would never know unless he tried it.

Red couldn't explain it, even to himself, but there was something special about this girl. The way she smiled at him, the way she talked, the way she laughed at his jokes when they took their breaks together, made him feel good for hours at a time. He had never told her or anyone else, but he had already made up his mind about something. If he ever decided to get serious about a girl, Patty would be the one he'd go after. But he wasn't even going to get to go out with her if he didn't go to church this Sunday. Red's shoulders slumped in resignation. "Maybe doing it once wouldn't be too bad. Where do you go?"

"Central Methodist. Do you know where it is?"

Red nodded. At least she wasn't a Catholic or one of those other weird religions. "That's the one we used to go to."

"Great. Please come this Sunday. I'd like to introduce you to my dad and stepmother."

"You think they'll approve of me?"

"They will if you give them a chance to see you the way I see you."

"Oh, yeah? How's that?"

"That you're a very nice, good-looking, intelligent, hardworking guy."

"Oh, yeah?" Red was embarrassed by the complimentary words. No one had ever described him in those terms before. "Damn, lady. Whose barn did you shovel that stuff out of?"

With a despairing look on her face, Patty slowly shook her head. Then, a small smile curled her lips. "You're just about hopeless."

"Some people believe that. Some people believe a convict's son will never amount to anything."

"Well, why don't you prove them wrong?"

"How?"

"Well, you could start by coming to church this Sunday."

## *The Tomato Patch*

“Like I said, I’ll try to make it,” Red said, not really sure if this girl was worth the effort. Like most Bailey Springs teenagers, Red had never done much formal dating. Usually, he would pick up a girl at one of the fast-food joints and find a dirt road beside some farmer’s field. Much later, Red would drop the girl off at her mailbox and was long gone before her father had a chance to stick his head out the front door to see who had brought his daughter home well past her curfew again.

Getting up on Sunday morning and driving almost ten miles just to go to church, so a girl’s daddy could give him the once-over before he was allowed to date her, was something new to him. It was a new ball game with new rules. He wasn’t sure he liked the rules or wanted to play the game. On the other hand, if this girl really was as classy as she seemed to be, maybe she would be worth the effort.

Red had never admitted it to anyone, but he was pretty sure he would never amount to much. For as long as he could remember, he had worn old, sometimes dirty, clothes to school. Each fall, when the new school year began, most of the other kids showed up with new clothes and shoes. Red showed up with clothes his mama had bought at a secondhand store, or that someone had donated to her. Unless he had stolen it, he rarely had anything new to wear. But he was nineteen now and he wanted to be able to walk into a store and, if he saw something he liked, just buy it, without wondering if he could afford it.

He had already figured out frying hamburgers wasn’t what he wanted to do in life. He was pretty sure working for a roofer wasn’t much higher on the economic scale either. But, if he ever did find a way to make a decent living, he knew a redneck like himself could do a lot worse than having a good-looking girl like Patty running his house and raising his kids. If he could find a way to make enough money to afford her and all the other things he wanted, and if he could talk Patty into getting serious with him, life would be as good as it could get. Red sighed. First things first. He had to get out of bed on Sunday morning and drive almost ten miles just to go to

church. He really wasn't looking forward to it. "Should I salute your dad when I see him?"

Patty frowned, then giggled when she realized Red's question wasn't really serious. "No, he was a master sergeant. In the Army, you're only supposed to salute officers. He might like it if you say, 'yes, sir,' and 'no, sir,' to him, though."

"I'll try to remember," Red promised. The only times he had ever called a man "sir" was while he was sucking up to a cop or deputy sheriff who was giving him a hard time about something Randy's gang had done. Calling Patty's daddy "sir" would be for the same reason. "Well, back to the grindstone," Red said. "As soon as my shift ends tonight, I'm out of here."

"I'll be right back. I've got to freshen up a little."

"Better hurry, the boss lady will be yelling for you," Red said as he walked away.

\* \* \* \*

Patty smiled and sighed as she watched Red walk away. It had finally happened. Red Black had asked her for a date. She had adored him from afar since the day she found herself standing behind the good-looking senior at the Coke machine in the school hallway last year. The machine ate his quarter without giving him a can of Coke. He banged on the machine and cursed in frustration. When he turned to go, he almost ran into her. Smiling, she held out her hand, offering him her quarter. When his fingertips touched her palm, it tingled. Her quarter worked. As he walked away with his Coke, he thanked her and said he'd pay her back the next time he saw her.

He never did. For the remainder of the school year, whenever they passed in the hallway, he was always looking past her at something or someone else, but she always smiled at him anyway, remembering the tingle he had given her at the Coke machine.

# 3

AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME Patty was on her way to the ladies' room in McDonald's, Denzil and Lloyd crossed the Tennessee River on Wheeler Dam. Once they were north of the river, they turned onto US 72 and headed for Helleston. With his third beer in his hand, Lloyd gave Denzil directions to bypass Helleston. Soon they were north of Helleston on Greenbrier Road heading for Tennessee. Near the Tennessee state line, they passed a convenience store. The sign above it said, "STOVES MARKET." Lloyd motioned toward the darkened store and said, "I'll be back one of these days to take care of that bastard."

"Who?" Denzil asked.

"That's where me and Pig got our asses caught in a sling."

"You want to stop for a couple of minutes and let him know how you feel about it?" Denzil asked as he stepped on the brake and allowed the Buick to slow. "A .38 slug between his eyes might send a message."

"Naw, I got more important things on my mind right now," Lloyd said, amazed at the man's blasé attitude about killing another man.

"Your call," Denzil said as he stepped on the accelerator again. "If I had a knife, we could really have some fun."

"You had a butcher knife. What happened to it?"

"It was too wet. I had to leave it."

"Jesus," Lloyd whispered softly as he assessed his situation. He had the stolen wallet with less than five hundred dollars in it, but no weapon. Denzil had the keys to the car and the gun nestled between his legs. Lloyd now regretted the momentarily lapse of judgement that had allowed the other

man to have the gun. Staying out of jail might be the least of his problems at the moment. Staying alive in this man's company could be a much bigger problem. Lloyd had never killed anyone, nor did he have any desire to do so. He had been incarcerated because he had, unknowingly, participated in an armed robbery. He had spent many years locked up with men like Denzil and had survived because he had learned the rules.

Now he was free. Lloyd knew the rules had changed. Denzil, and other men like him, were capable of killing people they viewed as weak and defenseless. For the first time in a long time, Lloyd understood the need for prisons like Kilby.

Lloyd shook his head in silence, wondering how he had gotten in shit this deep. He'd never done anything bad, not really. Over the years, he'd taken a few things that didn't belong to him, but never anything big. It was usually something a rich man could replace with a few bucks. Then, one cold, rainy afternoon he and Pig had been working on a really good drunk at Uncle Buck's when they ran out of money.

The Tennessee honky-tonk bar, just north of the Alabama line, 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 worked in North Alabama and lived in Helleston or one of the farming communities down in Chickasaw County, Alabama, but Chickasaw County was dry; the sale of alcoholic beverages had been illegal since Prohibition. Uncle Buck's Tavern was in Creek County, Tennessee, fifteen miles north of Helleston. It was why there was a constant stream of traffic northward across the Alabama state line, especially on Friday and Saturday nights.

Pig had told Lloyd he knew where there were some easy pickings. A few miles south of Uncle Buck's, across the Alabama state line, was a convenience store. Within thirty minutes they would be back at Uncle Buck's with enough money to last them all night and then some. Lloyd had gone along when Pig told him all he had to do was stay in the car and be ready to roll when he came back out.

Pig hadn't been in the store for more than a minute when another car pulled up and the driver went inside. Lloyd didn't



know Pig had a pistol when he went into the store, and he didn't learn until later that the new customer was an off-duty Chickasaw County deputy sheriff. When the deputy saw Pig pointing a pistol at the woman behind the counter, the deputy drew his own weapon, identified himself as a deputy sheriff, and told Pig to drop his gun. Pig briefly considered his options, and then obeyed the deputy's order. Both Pig and Lloyd were sentenced to thirty years for armed robbery.

Lloyd glanced over at the other man. Denzil and Roper were lifers. They had nothing to lose by going under the wire today. Lloyd wondered why he had joined the escape. Alabama's prisons were overcrowded. Often the parole board released prisoners who had served no more than a third of their sentences. Lloyd had been in for ten years already. In another year or two, three at most, they probably would have released him on parole. Instead, right now, he was in manure up to his neck. He was an escaped convict who had helped another man rob and kill an old couple. Every cop in the country would be after him now. If they caught him, he would spend the rest of his life behind bars doing hard time, if they didn't kill him first.

Once over the Tennessee border, Lloyd and Denzil continued on Greenbrier Road toward Bailey Springs. By now, each man had consumed three beers. They were drunk and it felt wonderful. As they passed a honky-tonk bar, Denzil pointed to it and said, "Let's make a stop and replenish our beer supply. They might not appreciate me coming in there, but you might fit in around here."

"I'd better not. That's Uncle Buck's, my old stomping ground. Somebody in there might recognize me."

"We're close to your place, huh?"

"A couple of miles up the road."

"Well, hell, first things first. Let's go see if your woman is in the mood to satisfy two horny men." As he continued up the two-lane road, Denzil said, almost to himself, "Man, these red clay hills remind me of where I came from."

"Oh, yeah? Where's that?"

"Not around here, that's for damn sure."

Lloyd looked at the man but said nothing. Later, after they rounded a sharp curve to the right protected by a guardrail on

the outside, Lloyd pointed out some mailboxes along the right-hand side of the road. Denzil slowed. Then, seeing a narrow gravel road, he turned into it. Shortly after they passed an older mobile home, Lloyd pointed to another one, as old as the first, on the left side of the road. "That's it."

"You sure she still lives here?" Denzil asked as he pulled into the bare dirt front yard.

"Far as I know she does."

"Well, I see some lights and a pretty good-looking car. Somebody's home. Why don't you go in and find out?"

"You coming in?"

"Don't believe I will," Denzil said, then reached down for the old revolver with his left hand and pointed it at Lloyd. "While you're at it, let me have the wallet and all the money."

"What the hell is this?"

"This is where we part company. I'd like to pop you right now, but I guess I won't. If I had been Roper back there, I would have popped both of us. So, I guess I can do the same for you."

Lloyd stared at Denzil, breathing hard, his mouth tight across his face, knowing he had no alternative but to do what was asked. It occurred to him Denzil might be toying with him, like he did with the older couple. Maybe he was already a dead man and didn't know it. He opened the wallet and put his fingers on the money. "I'm going to keep half for myself."

Denzil shrugged his shoulders. "You can if you want to, but if you do, I'll blow your brains out and take it anyway. It's up to you."

Lloyd stared at the man for a moment, then closed the wallet and placed it on the seat between them, opened the door, and got out.

Denzil leaned over to look at Lloyd. "Tell your old lady I'll stop by for a little taste the next time I'm in the neighborhood."

In frustration, Lloyd slammed the Buick's door shut. He watched as Denzil backed out onto the gravel road, shifted into drive, and accelerated down the narrow gravel road in the stolen Buick. In a moment of silent rage, he gave Denzil a one-finger salute as the car disappeared down the road.

# 4

THREE HOURS EARLIER, Lloyd Black had been behind the walls and electrified fences of a maximum-security prison. Now, for the first time in ten years, he gazed at the old single-wide mobile home where he had once lived. There were lights on in most of the windows. Someone was home. The bedroom he had shared with his wife was on the left end; his boy's smaller bedroom was on the right end. In between was a full bathroom, a utility closet, a kitchen area with a small dining table, and a living area—all within about six-hundred square feet of floor space. Many times during the past ten years he had wondered if he would ever see it again.

He looked at the unfamiliar Ford Escort hatchback parked next to him. It had a few years on it, but not as many as his old Chevy Caprice would have on it now. She had probably traded it in on the Ford. Too bad. He'd had some good times in the Chevy.

The little Ford looked like it could get him wherever he wanted to go from here. If his ex-wife didn't live here anymore, he would have to get the keys to it any way he could from whoever was inside. Without a weapon, he wasn't sure how he was going to do it, but he didn't have much choice.

He wouldn't hurt anybody unless he absolutely had to, but he would do whatever he had to do to keep moving. He was well aware of the consequences for what Denzil had done to those old people. There would be no parole if the law ever caught him. He would spend the rest of his life in prison. If they didn't strap him in the chair down at Atmore, he would die in prison anyway, as an old man. He slowly shook his head. "I couldn't take it," he said softly.

As Lloyd walked toward the mobile home, he realized his walk was unsteady. With a wry grin on his face, he recalled how, back in the old days, drinking three beers was just enough to make him feel good. Now, after ten years without one, he was just about drunk. Lloyd snorted as he grabbed the handrail to the steps leading up to a small porch and looked up. What the hell? He'd walked up these steps before, a lot drunker than he was now.

Holding the railing for support, Lloyd climbed the short flight of stairs to the small wooden porch and paused. The front door was open to allow the evening breeze to help cool off the interior, but the screen door was closed to keep the mosquitoes and gnats outside. He paused, listening for any sound beyond the screen door. He could hear the hum of a motor from inside somewhere. Other than that, he heard nothing.

Through the rusty screen, Lloyd looked into the mobile home and saw no one. He tried the screen door. It was unlocked. The rusted hinges squealed as he slowly pushed it open and stepped into the small living area. The humming noise had stopped. He slowly closed the screen door and looked around. It looked like the same furniture, in the same arrangement he had lived with ten years ago. To his left just inside the door was a small couch with end tables, and a coffee table. There was a lamp on one end table and a telephone on the other. Toward the back of the living area was his old club chair and footstool facing the television in the corner. Lloyd nodded. The mobile home and its furniture were rented. Just because he recognized the furniture didn't mean anyone he knew still lived here. He didn't recognize the Ford, that was for sure.

The door to the darkened bedroom to his right was ajar. He walked over, gently pushed it open, and took a quick look inside. There was an unmade bed, but no one was in the room at the moment. It used to be his son's room. Maybe it still was. Lloyd had named him Myron, after his granddaddy, but everyone called him Red.

Lloyd paused again. When he heard no one, he hurried past the couch and around the room divider to the kitchen area and opened the drawer where the knives once were. They were still

there. He picked up an old steak knife with a five-inch serrated blade and plastic handle. He palmed it upside down, cradling the plastic handle in his curled fingers with the blade up inside the sleeve of his coveralls. It wasn't much, but it was a weapon. He might need it to get what he wanted before he left here.

There was a small dining table with a couple of chairs against the back wall of the tiled kitchen area. Pepper, salt, mustard, and a bottle of ketchup were on the table. Lloyd walked out of the kitchen and positioned himself near the dining table where he could see down the hallway. To his right was the back door, down the hallway to his left was the open door to the bathroom. Across the hallway from the bathroom were folding doors hiding the clothes washer and dryer. At the end of the hallway was the open door to the master bedroom. If anyone was home, they had to be in the bathroom or the master bedroom. "Anybody home?" he called out.

"Who's there?" a female voice called out from the master bedroom.

"Lena? Is that you?"

"Yeah. Who's out there?"

"It's me. Lloyd."

"Lloyd?" Lena called out, and then came into view from the master bedroom, tying the sash around her bathrobe. She stared wide-eyed at her ex-husband. He looked much bigger and older than she remembered. "Oh, my god! It really is you!"

With a sloppy grin on his face, Lloyd nodded as he appraised his ex-wife. Even with a shapeless bathrobe on, she looked good to him.

Lena walked down the short hallway and stood near him. "Jesus Christ, Lloyd! You'd better get out of here before that deputy comes back."

"They've already been here?"

"About thirty minutes ago. He said you'd escaped, and they thought you might be coming up this way. Is it true? You broke out?"

"Yeah. Me and a couple of others went under the fence."

"Oh, my god!"

Lloyd looked about the familiar place. "Where's my boy?"

"He's working at McDonald's."

“Damn. I’d sure like to see that redheaded boy, but I’ve got to get out of here before that deputy shows up again.” Lloyd paused, and then said, “I need your car, Lena. I need all your money, too.”

“I can’t let you have my car, Lloyd. It’s all I’ve got to get to work.”

Lloyd walked toward Lena. “I need it, Lena. I’ve got to have it. I’ve got to get out of here before they come back. If they catch me, I’ll spend the rest of my life behind bars. I couldn’t take that.”

Lena stared at the big man. There was a time when she cared enough about this man to marry him. Now something in his eyes, in the way he looked at her, made her feel uncomfortable being alone with him. “My purse is in the bedroom,” she said quietly.

“Go get it. Hurry up!”

Lloyd watched Lena walk back down the hallway toward the bedroom, then he turned and hurried back to the end table next to the couch, grabbed the thin telephone cable into a loop and cut it. There. She couldn’t call somebody after he left. He looked down at the knife and decided he wasn’t going to need it to get what he wanted, and it would only scare the shit out of her if she saw it in his hand. He looked about for a moment, then stepped over to his old club chair, lifted the front edge of the cushion, and slipped the knife under it.

He was back at the dining table when Lena returned. She slammed her large purse down on the small table so hard it knocked over the ketchup. Ignoring the bottle, she rummaged through the contents until she found her keys. She threw them down on the table beside her purse and glared at her former husband. “There, you happy now? I don’t have a way to get to work. I’ll be out of a job again.”

“Everybody’s got problems, Lena,” Lloyd said as he grabbed the keys. “How much money do you have?”

Lena found her wallet, opened it, and threw the bills on the counter. “There! Take it all! Now, I can’t eat until payday.”

Lloyd picked up the bills, then looked up at Lena, frowning. “Twenty-seven dollars? That’s all you’ve got?”

“I’m not rich, Lloyd. Me and Red barely get by.”

*The Tomato Patch*

“Where’re my guns?”

“They’re gone.”

“Gone?”

“Me and Red have had it pretty rough since you’ve been gone. For a time, we didn’t have money to buy food or anything. I hocked your guns so we could eat.”

“Jesus Christ!”

Lena opened her wallet again and pulled out a credit card. “You want this, too? I owe so much on it; you might as well take it.”

“It wouldn’t do me any good. Every time I used it, they would know where I was. I need cash, Lena. It’s got to be cash, but I need more than this,” he said, holding up the money.

“Go see your daddy. He’ll give you some.”

Lloyd shook his head. “If they’ve already been here, they’ll be waiting for me over there.”

“You’ve got all I have. It’s the best I can do.”

“Where’s your ATM card?”

Lena pulled it out of her wallet and offered it to him. “Here take it, but it won’t do you any good. This close to payday, there won’t be more than ten or fifteen dollars in my account.”

“Damn!” Lloyd said, glaring at his ex-wife, focusing his rage on her. If Denzil had let him keep some of the money, he would be on his way to Canada now. If his ex-wife had a few more dollars in her purse, he could still be in Canada by this time tomorrow. If he had one of his old pistols, he could find a little mom-and-pop gas station somewhere along the way and get all the gas he needed and a few dollars in his pocket as well. Instead, he was running out of time and options fast.

Lloyd stuffed the keys and money in his coveralls. As he turned to go, he paused. Something had been boiling inside him for three years. Now was the time to vent his anger. He turned back to face her. “It really pissed me off when you divorced me.”

“What did you expect me to do? I thought you were going to be in there for another twenty years.”

Lloyd stared at Lena. She didn’t understand what she had done to him, and he didn’t have the time or patience to explain it to her. She didn’t know the day she divorced him was one of

the darkest days of his life. The one hope he had held onto all those years inside was believing someday he would get out and she would be standing outside the prison gate waiting for him. There had to be a way to punish her for what she had done to him. He pointed at his ex-wife in her bathrobe. "Open it up. I want to take a look."

Lena stared in silence at the man in front of her as she slowly backed away from him until she was at the back door. "You'd better get out of here, Lloyd," she said as she put her hand on the doorknob.

Lloyd pointed his finger at her. "Don't try it," he warned. "You won't get far barefoot. When I catch you, you'll wish you hadn't."

Lena stared at the man as he slowly approached her. It was hard for her to believe she had once been married to him. He was a stranger to her now, much older, a lot bigger, and with a mean look in his eyes that disturbed her. She released the doorknob and walked past him into the kitchen area. The idea of disrobing in front of this man made her feel uncomfortable. She turned and glared at him. "Why don't you just get out of here and leave me alone?"

"You'd better do what I tell you to do, woman. You know what happens when you get smart with me."

"I'm not going to let you hit me again. You're not my husband no more."

"Oh, yeah?" The big man reached out and grabbed a handful of her robe between her breasts.

"Damn it, Lloyd! Let me go and get the hell out of here," Lena cried out as she tried to pry his hands away from her robe. "You're drunk! I can smell it on your breath. You always liked to hit me when you were drunk, didn't you? Not anymore, you hear? You ain't got no right."

"The hell I don't," Lloyd said. While holding on to her robe with one hand, he slapped her hard with the other, then he flung her down onto the tile floor like a rag doll.

Stunned, Lena shook her head, trying to clear the cobwebs. It had been a long time since anyone had treated her like this, not since the last time this same man had done the same thing to her. Rage began to boil within her.



Lloyd looked down at the woman at his feet. "I've got the right to do anything I want to do to you, you got that?" Lloyd said, glaring at the woman. "Just because you got some piece of paper saying we're not married don't mean shit to me. I'll decide what I've got the right to do, not you! You want some more? I used to give it to you pretty good when you needed it. I still can. It's up to you."

Using the table for support, Lena pulled herself up from the tile floor, her ear ringing and her face stinging. She stared at the man who was once her husband and slowly shook her head. She was taller than most women, but she knew she was no match for a man as big as Lloyd. She glanced at the back door behind the man, knowing the exit was now closed to her. She turned and walked quickly toward the living area.

"Hey, come back here," Lloyd called out. He followed her into the living area where he saw her standing beside the couch, the telephone handset against her face. Smiling, he walked over to his old club chair, sat on the arm facing her, and watched her frowning. He pulled the zipper of his coveralls all the way down to his crotch, then pushed the garment over his shoulders and pulled his arms out of it. Wearing nothing but a T-shirt above his waist, revealing arms covered with jailhouse tattoos, he watched her dial a three-digit number again. "What's the matter? Nobody home?"

Lena looked up at him, then grabbed the telephone base, lifted it, and saw the severed cable. "Damn you to hell!"

"Most likely," Lloyd said. He stood, pushed his shorts and coveralls down to his ankles, then sat on the arm of the club chair and spread his legs. "Now, you drop that robe and come over here and show me what you're good at. I've about run out of patience with you."

"No!" Lena cried out and unconsciously pulled the top of her robe closer together as she looked at her ex-husband's genitals. "Take what you've got and get out of here! I ain't interested!"

Lloyd leaned back, slipped his hand underneath the seat cushion, grabbed the knife, and showed it to her. "I don't give a damn whether you're interested or not. I haven't had a woman in ten years. I'd say I was due. Now, take the damn robe

off and get over here and do what you're told. I'll use this to make you wish you had if you don't."

"You've changed, Lloyd," Lena said as she opened the sash on her robe and pulled the edges of the garment aside. As the man stared at her nakedness, she looked at the screen door across the room.

Lloyd stared at the woman and nodded his head. "You look good, Lena. You look damn good. Gravity is starting to work on you, but for an old broad, you still look good. Now, come here and show me what you're good at before I have to use this knife on you."

"No!" Lena yelled as she turned and bolted for the front door.

Lloyd, his feet restricted by the clothing around his ankles, lunged toward her and reached out for her. As he landed hard on the thin carpet, he grabbed the hem of Lena's robe, causing her to stumble and fall as well. As he struggled to pull the woman back to him by pulling on her robe, Lena tried to get rid of the robe as she kicked and crawled.

"God damn it! Stop fighting me," Lloyd yelled.

"No!" Lena yelled as she extracted herself from the robe and headed for the open door of her son's bedroom. "Get away from me!" the naked woman screamed as she slammed the door shut and locked it.

"You'd better come out of there! Don't make me bust down the door," Lloyd growled as he pushed himself off the floor. "No man is going to want you when I get done with you if I do."

Lena turned on the light and looked about the small bedroom. Then, in one corner of the room, she saw the old rifle her son used for squirrel hunting. He had been shooting at cardboard targets out behind their mobile home one day when she had joined him out of curiosity and had shot the rifle a few times. She walked over and picked it up. It was her only hope. As she looked at it, she remembered that it had an ammunition tube underneath the barrel that could hold several bullets, but she couldn't remember how many. The bolt was closed, so she didn't know how or where to look to see if there were any bullets in the tube. She hoped she wouldn't need to find out.

“Hey! Get out here before I bust down the door,” Lloyd called. He pulled his shorts and the coveralls back up to his waist and held them there with one hand while he picked up the knife. He glared at the closed bedroom door, then shuffled over to the couch near the front door. He noticed a bowl on the coffee table with individually wrapped pieces of butterscotch candy in it. Candy had been hard to come by in prison. Butterscotch was his favorite. He missed it. He reached out, grabbed a handful, and stuffed them in a pocket.

Lena opened the bedroom door and pointed the rifle at her ex-husband. “Get out of here, Lloyd.”

“What the hell?” Lloyd said in bewilderment as he looked at the rifle pointed at him in the hands of a naked woman. For ten years, he’d fantasized about seeing this woman naked again, but never like this, not while she was pointing a gun at him. His sense of self-preservation urged him to put some distance between him and the gun. He slowly rose from the couch and, with the knife in one hand and holding up his coveralls with the other, he slowly backed away from the woman toward the rear of the living area. “I thought you said you hocked my guns!” he accused.

“This is Red’s squirrel rifle.”

“That’s not Red’s gun. That’s my old Marlin 60. It’s good for squirrels, but all it’s going to do is piss me off if you shoot me with it. I’ve got a better idea. Why don’t you give me the gun before you hurt somebody with it?” he asked, then took a step forward.

Lena pointed the rifle in the general direction of her ex-husband. “Get out of here, Lloyd. You’ve got my money. You’ve got the keys to my car. Just go. Leave me alone. I swear I’ll pull the trigger if you don’t.”

Lloyd grinned as he took another step. “I don’t think you will. I don’t think you’ve got the guts.”

Lena squeezed the trigger. The gun didn’t fire, but it did make Lloyd stop in his tracks. She tried again, and then again, becoming so frustrated with it, she was jerking the whole gun, trying to get the trigger to move.

Lloyd laughed out loud. “You stupid broad. You’ve got the goddamn safety on!”

Lena looked down at the rifle, frowning, and then recalled Red showing her how to push the button behind the trigger. In her panic, she had forgotten about it.

“Bring it here. I’ll show you how to shoot it,” Lloyd said.

Lena quickly pushed the button, then pointed the rifle in Lloyd’s general direction and pulled the trigger once more. The noise of the rifle shot was loud in the confined space of the mobile home.

The impact of the .22 Long Rifle bullet striking Lloyd’s stomach caused the surprised man to stagger backwards until he hit the back wall. With his coveralls down around his ankles again, Lloyd looked down at his white undershirt and saw pink fluid oozing out of a small hole near his belly button. He looked up at Lena. “You shot me,” he said, a look of confused amazement on his face.

“I told you I would,” Lena said, tears in her eyes. “You just wouldn’t listen to me.”

“Say your prayers bitch. You’re about to meet your maker,” Lloyd said as he took a slow, unsteady shuffling step toward Lena while holding his stomach with one hand and the knife in the other.

“Leave me alone!” Lena cried out in anguish. With the gun pointed in the general direction of the man, she bowed her head, clenched her teeth, squeezed her eyes shut, and jerked the trigger of the rifle. She continued jerking it as spent cartridge shells ricocheted off the ceiling and nearby wall until the rifle no longer responded when she pulled the trigger.

In the quiet aftermath, she opened her eyes and saw the big man staring down at the pink and red fluid oozing out of several holes in his white undershirt. Then he looked up at her, a look of pain and confusion on his face as he dropped to his knees, and then fell face-forward onto the carpet.

With her ears ringing, an acrid smell in the air, and spent .22 Long Rifle cartridges scattered about the room, Lena watched and waited for any sound or movement from the man.

After several minutes of silence, it occurred to her to check and see if the man was still alive, but doing so would require her to touch him. The thought was revolting. When she saw no movement nor heard any sound from the man for several more

minutes, she dropped the rifle on the couch and picked up her robe. After wrapping the garment tightly about her trembling body she picked up the rifle and returned it to her son's bedroom, having no idea where more ammunition might be or how to load it if she found some.

She returned to the living area and stared silently at the man's body, intent on running out into the night barefoot to escape him if he suddenly rose from the floor. There was no movement for as long as she watched.

She needed to get dressed, but to do that, she had walk past the man to get to her bedroom. She still wasn't sure if he was still alive or not. If he was playing possum, he would grab her as soon as she got anywhere near him. She slowly approached the man, ready to turn and run at the first hint of movement. Once around his body, she hurried into her bedroom where she dressed and put on shoes. On her way out of her bedroom, she stopped at the nightstand next to her bed and found a partial pack of stale cigarettes.

Once again, she slowly approached Lloyd, watching for movement. When she saw none, she hurried past him and out of the house onto the small front porch. Her hands were shaking so badly, she had to hold the match with both hands to light the cigarette.

As she drew the smoke deep into her lungs and slowly exhaled, she turned and looked back through the screen door at the man's body lying in the living area. The right thing to do would be to walk down the hill to Homer Jones and ask him to let her make a call. What would she tell the sheriff if she did call? She shook her head in dismay. They might believe she had been forced to shoot him if she told them he had threatened her with a knife, but would they believe she needed to shoot him a whole bunch of times?

How many times had she shot him? She had no idea. It was all sort of a blur in her mind. She was just trying to stop him from coming after her with the knife. Would the sheriff accept the explanation when he found out how many times she had shot him? She wasn't sure.

Maybe the sheriff would take the man's side. He might tell her that, if she'd gone along with Lloyd and done what he

wanted her to do, he'd still be alive and long gone by now. She nodded her head. If she had to do it over again, she probably would, knowing how it would end otherwise.

She didn't know of anyone, family or friends, who had killed someone. Some of her family had spent time in the Creek County jail for doing things they shouldn't have, and some of Lloyd's kin had, too, but none of them had killed anybody. She had. A cold chill crawled up her spine. After she told the sheriff what she had done, she might spend the rest of this night in jail, and a lot more nights after that. It bothered her that she had shot her ex-husband. It might bother the sheriff, too.

She took another drag from the cigarette, and then sat in one of the chairs on the small porch. She slowly nodded, making a decision. She wouldn't walk down the road just yet. Red would be home soon. Between the two of them they could decide what to tell the sheriff.

# 5

RED BLACK PULLED INTO the bare dirt front yard in his old 1990 Chevy Caprice and saw his mama sitting on the small front porch, smoking a cigarette. "I thought you said you'd quit smoking," he called out as he walked up the stairs to the mobile home's small porch.

"I had. This is the first one in almost four months," Lena said. As Red reached for the screen door, she added, "Wait a minute, Red. Don't go in there."

"Why not?"

Lena took a deep drag from the cigarette in her trembling hand, exhaled, and then said, "Lloyd came home a few minutes ago."

"Dad's home? They let him out?"

"He broke out. A deputy came by looking for him. No sooner had he left than Lloyd showed up."

Red looked into the living room through the screen door and saw a man lying prone in the back of the living area near the television set. "What's he doing on the floor? Is he asleep?"

"Lloyd's dead, honey. I killed him."

"You killed him? You killed Daddy?" the confused teenager asked as he stepped closer to the screen door.

"I guess so. He ain't moved since I shot him."

"You shot him?" Red asked with look of anguish on his face. "Why'd you do that for?"

"I had to, honey. He didn't give me no choice. I gave him the keys to my car and all the money I had, but he came after me with a knife, so I got your gun and shot him. I don't know how many times, but I kept shooting until the gun wouldn't shoot no more. He hasn't moved since."

“The tube was full, Mama. There were fourteen shells in it.”

“Fourteen? Oh, my God! I don’t remember shooting him that many times.”

“Oh, Jesus, Mama! Have you called the sheriff?”

“He cut the telephone cord. I thought I’d just sit out here and wait for a deputy to show up again.” Lena turned her head up and looked into her son’s eyes. “The thing is, if a deputy comes back tonight and finds him in there, he might put me in jail.”

“They wouldn’t do that, would they?” Red asked, believing it was a real possibility. It suddenly occurred to him that he might never see either of his parents after tonight. “Can’t you tell them you had to because he had a knife he was going to use on you?”

“I guess I could. They’re going to wonder why I shot him so many times, though. How many bullets did you say were in that gun? Fourteen?”

“That’s what the tube holds, but sometimes I put another one in,” Red said, paused, then added, “I still don’t see why they won’t believe you had to shoot him to keep him from hurting you. It would be called self-defense, wouldn’t it?”

“It might if I hadn’t shot him so many times. They might think shooting a man once or twice would be enough. From the way our folks talk, you can’t trust the law around here to do right for people like us. You’ve got to be a rich man to stay out of jail these days.”

“I know. That’s what everybody says,” Red said, then slowly shook his head in confusion and frustration. Ten minutes ago he was feeling great. He had a good-paying job waiting for him Monday morning and the sweetest little girl in the whole world had told him she wanted to go out with him next Saturday night. Now, his daddy was dead and his mama might go to jail for killing him. It couldn’t get much worse. “What are we going to do, Mama?”

Lena looked up at her son, tears in her eyes. “It’s up to you, honey. Lloyd cut our phone cord, but you can go down the road and tell Homer Jones you need to use his phone to call the sheriff if you want to. I don’t have the heart to do it myself. Or we can just sit here and wait for a deputy to show up again. I



know they're going to lock me up and throw away the key when they see how many times I shot him."

With his lips drawn tightly, Red shook his head. He felt sad about the death of his daddy, but vague ten-year-old memories of the man couldn't match the closeness he felt for his mama. They had always been close through thick and thin, bad and good, since his daddy left. "I'm not going to let anybody lock you up, Mama."

"They might as soon as they find Lloyd in there. If I try to tell them I did it just because he came at me with a knife, they're going to wonder why I didn't run off instead of shooting him so many times."

"Maybe we can take Daddy down the road somewhere and then call the sheriff and tell them where he is."

"As soon as they find him, they'll come knocking on our door, asking us questions. They'll know for sure we had something to do with it."

"He's my daddy! I'm not going to throw him in the woods and let him lay there and rot while the animals eat on him! That's what happened to the body I found down at the curve. I had nightmares about it for a long time. I don't want my daddy looking like that when somebody finds him."

Lena nodded her head, remembering the troubled sleep her son had experienced after finding a body several years ago that had been exposed to the elements and animals for several weeks. "I don't want it either, Red. It wouldn't be the Christian thing to do to anybody," Lena said, then paused. "I guess we might as well leave him where he is, wait for the deputy, and let me take my medicine."

Frowning, desperately looking for a solution that would keep his mother out of jail, Red asked, "Couldn't we bury him somewhere around here and not tell anybody?"

"Are you sure you want to, Red? They might come after both of us if they ever find him."

"Mama, I'll do anything to make sure you don't go to jail, and I sure don't want Daddy laying out there in the woods where the animals can get at him. They might come after me someday for burying my own daddy, but if we bury him deep enough, maybe they never will find him."

Lena gazed at Red. "It's up to you, honey. The Lord knows my family and Lloyd's family haven't had much luck with Tennessee judges and juries, so I'm willing to bury him around here somewhere, if you are. But if we're going to do it, we need to do it now. They might come back anytime looking for him."

Red paused. It wasn't right, burying his own daddy in the backyard and hoping no one would ever find him. Maybe he had done some bad things, but nothing so bad that he deserved to be buried in an unmarked grave. On top of that, there was probably a law against doing something like that. Red shook his head. It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that his mama might go to jail for killing his daddy. He wasn't going to let that happen if he could help it. "There are some tools out in the old shed. If there's a shovel and a pickaxe, I'll get them and get started digging."

"We ought to get Lloyd out of the house, in case that deputy does come back."

Red silently nodded and walked inside. The first thing he noticed was the spent .22 cartridges scattered about on the floor. "We'd better pick these up before a deputy sees them. He's going to wonder what we've been shooting at if he does."

"I'll do it, but let's get Lloyd out of here first. Get that old blanket from over the washing machine. We're going to need it."

Red walked over and looked down at the body of his daddy as conflicting emotions washed over him. He sniffed as tears welled up in his eyes, then he turned and walked away down the hallway.

With hands that were noticeably shaking, Lena picked up the knife near Lloyd, put it in the kitchen sink, and then checked his pockets. In one pocket she found her keys and money. In the other, she found some pieces of butterscotch candy. She took the keys and money. She left the candy. With Red's help, she wrapped the body in an old blanket, and then they struggled to drag their cumbersome burden across the floor, out the back door, and down the back stairs.

While Lena returned to the house to clean up, Red found a flashlight and headed for the old woodshed to search for tools to dig a grave.

## *The Tomato Patch*

For many years, there had been a small two-bedroom house with a fireplace where the mobile home now stood. About ten years ago, the old house had burned to the ground and the landowner had replaced it with a used single-wide mobile home. The woodshed in the back of the clearing had escaped the fire and still had a small pile of firewood beneath it, as well as pieces of moldy carpeting, rusty cans of paint, a couple of well-worn tires, and several pieces of warped and moldy plywood and lumber too big to throw away.

With his flashlight, Red swept away spider webs, and then pulled aside long-discarded pieces of plywood, scrap boards, and other junk until he found a shovel, a pickaxe, a chopping ax, and other tools in the dry space underneath. All the tools had been protected from the weather by the plywood. They were rusty and dull, but they would have to do.

There was an ache in Red's chest as he looked at the blanket-shrouded body of his daddy lying in the moonlight. He wished he could have seen him alive tonight long enough to talk to him for a few minutes. Red pressed his lips together as tears welled up in his eyes. He couldn't remember what his daddy's voice sounded like. Now, he would never hear it again. It made him sad.

In the light of the moon, Red made three attempts to dig a hole in the rocky clay soil behind the mobile home. Each time, after digging only a few inches down, he struck huge rocks, too big to move. In desperation, he moved to the right side of the property and found a small area of soil toward the back of the clearing that would give to his shovel and pickaxe. For the first few inches, he had to cut through roots with the dull chopping ax. After that, he used the pickaxe to break up a few inches of the clay soil before switching to the shovel to clear the loosened dirt out of the hole before going back to the pickaxe again.

Lena came out to check on Red's progress and to bring him a glass of water. When he stopped to drink, Lena picked up the shovel and scooped the loose dirt from the shallow hole. When she was done, she stepped away and let her son back into the hole with the pickaxe.

They continued to alternate between digging and shoveling until well past midnight. From time to time, when the teenage

boy became exhausted, Lena allowed him to rest for a few minutes while she took the pickaxe and dug into the clay earth herself. After over an hour of adrenaline-fed digging and shoveling, a lot of water, and a lot of sweat, they had dug a hole almost three feet wide, almost six feet long, and about five feet deep. Large rocks prevented them from making it any deeper, wider, or longer. While they were digging the hole, both had anxiously looked toward the front yard many times, expecting the headlights of a Creek County Sheriff's vehicle to appear out of the darkness.

When the hole was dug, the two struggled mightily with the heavy bulk in the blanket as they pulled it across the backyard to the hole. Pulling that much weight across the backyard upslope after the exhausting effort of digging the hole was too much. Both collapsed on the ground, gasping for breath. After several minutes, they forced themselves to rise.

They rolled the body into the hole. Luckily, it landed on its side in the bottom of the hole and, more or less, fit the space that was there. However, the blanket had pulled away from the head and a rock had twisted the face upward.

Red gazed down at the face of his daddy for a moment, then walked over to a small tree and grabbed a branch. As he leaned forward, his diaphragm tightened and a partially digested Big Mac with cheese, an order of fries, and a large Coke spewed out of his mouth and nose onto the ground. He spat a few times, blew his nose holding a finger to each nostril in turn, then wiped his mouth and nose on his shirt sleeve. He paused for a moment, took a deep breath, coughed a couple of times, then turned back to the hole.

"Are you all right?"

Red spat and then said, "I ain't used to doing something like this."

"Neither am I, honey," his mother said with a sad tone in her voice. "I'm sorry to have to put you through it. I just don't know what else to do."

Red spat again, blew his nose again, wiped them on his sleeve again, then said quietly, "Ain't nobody going to put you in jail if I can help it."

"We'll get through this somehow. We always have."

Red looked down at his daddy's face once more. "We've got to cover him with something."

Lena nodded as she chewed on her lower lip. "Wait right there. I'll be right back," she said and hurried off.

"I'll be right here," Red said softly.

Soon, Lena returned, holding a camouflage hunting jacket. "Here, let's use this. It was his favorite jacket." They spread it open and, holding it above his head, dropped it into the hole. It covered his head and shoulders. Close enough.

"There, that ought to do fine," Lena said gazing down at the man's body in the shallow grave.

"Don't you think we should say a prayer or something?"

Lena tilted her head to one side. She was surprised at her son's request. She and Red hadn't been to church in a long time. "That would be nice. Would you like to say a prayer?"

"The only one I know is the Lord's Prayer."

"Well, then, why don't we say that one?" They bowed their heads, clasped their hands, and intoned the prayer together. Then they lifted their heads, looked at each other, and smiled. "That was a nice thing to do, Red."

Red shrugged and looked down at the man in the hole. "He was my daddy. I don't remember much about him, but he's the only daddy I'll ever have." Red turned, looked at his mother, and sniffed. "What was he like, Mama?"

"Lloyd was an old country boy, honey. He was a hard worker, but he never found anything he liked doing enough to work at it long enough to get good at it." Lena gazed down at the grave, sadly shaking her head. "Lord knows he was a hard man to live with sometimes."

"I remember he took me hunting and fishing sometimes."

"Hunting, fishing, working on old cars, and drinking beer with his friends was about all he was good at."

A cold chill coursed down Red's back as he realized his mother was describing his own life up to this point. Was this where he was going to end as well? "I'm going to find a way to make some good money," Red vowed. "I ain't going to waste my life living on the crumbs the people around here throw me."

"Well, honey, I hope you find something you like. It's awfully hard to find a good job around here."

“I’ll figure out something,” Red said, then tossed a shovelful of dirt into the hole. Both Red and Lena heard the soft thump as the dirt landed on Lloyd’s body. The sound sent chills through them. Red sniffed again. “I’m not going to let somebody bury me like this,” Red said, then began shoveling in earnest.

Lena watched her son at work in the pale moonlight and felt sad for him. She had never told him, and she knew this was neither the time nor place to tell him, but she was fairly sure Lloyd wasn’t his daddy.

She had been a wild girl when she was a teenager. She was sixteen and a high school sophomore when she had crashed an unauthorized party for graduating high school seniors. A combination of beer and marijuana made her memory of the night hazy, but she was sure she’d had sex with at least two of the boys, maybe more. A few weeks later, when she discovered she was pregnant, she told one of the boys, a high school senior, that he was the father. He told her it wasn’t his, for her to pick on one of the others who had screwed her that night, and to leave him out of it. When she told Lloyd, a nineteen-year-old high-school dropout who had also crashed the party, he shook his head and said, “I ain’t ready to get married, but Daddy will horsewhip me if he has a bastard for a grandchild on account of me.”

After Red was born, his red hair was startling to everyone in both families. Thankfully, they found a second cousin of Lloyd’s father with red hair. It seemed to satisfy most of the curious relatives. Lena was the only one who knew the other boy had red hair himself. From reading about him in the local paper over the years, she had learned that the boy had graduated from the University of Tennessee and now lived with his wife and two redheaded girls in a big home in a nice part of Bailey Springs. As far as she knew, Red had never met his real father or either of his half-sisters.

Lena walked over to her son, wrapped her arms around him, and held him close to her. It had been years since she had hugged her son, but this seemed like a good time to show her only child how much she loved him. “It’ll be all right, Red. Really it will,” she assured him, having no idea if it would or not. “We’d better hurry up and finish before they come back,”

she said, then picked up the pickaxe and began to rake the dirt into the hole with the broad end of it while her son used the shovel.

When the hole was filled, there was still a considerable amount of loose dirt scattered about the hole. "I'll go finish cleaning up the living room and take a shower. I'll never get all the blood out of that damn carpet. I took a bathmat and put over it for now," Lena said. "You'd better come in and take a bath yourself. If anybody sees how dirty and sweaty you are, they're going to wonder what we've been up to for sure."

"Mama?"

"Yeah, honey?"

"What about the grave? Anybody can see it when they drive up. If the sheriff comes looking for Daddy, they're going to wonder what we've been doing back here."

Lena looked at the freshly dug clay soil piled around the gravesite. Unconsciously, she stuck a finger in her mouth and began to chew on the nail, something she hadn't done since she was a teenager. "Well, I guess we'll have to find something to plant there so it won't look like a grave." Suddenly, Lena's face brightened. "I know. The store got a big batch of tomato plants yesterday. If we spread the dirt around a little, making it a little wider and longer, we could have us a little tomato patch there. How does that sound?"

Red silently nodded. "Yeah, Mama, tomatoes would be fine. I saw a hoe and a rake in the shed. I'll go get them."

Using the garden tools, they spread the loose clay dirt around until they had a rectangle about six by eight feet. "There," Lena said. "That looks fine. I'll get some tomato plants first thing tomorrow morning."

"I told Bobby Ray I'd come over and help him work on his car tomorrow. You want me to stay around?"

"That's all right. I can plant a few tomatoes by myself," she said, then frowned. "How many bullets did you say were in that gun of yours?"

"It takes fourteen to fill the tube, but sometimes I stick one more in there . . . so, fourteen, maybe fifteen. I don't know for sure."

"I could only find thirteen of those little shells."

“There should be one or two more around somewhere.”

“Well, I hope we find all of them. Some deputy might wonder what a rifle shell was doing in our living room if he found one.”

“Then, keep them out of there!”

“I’ll try,” Lena said. “Whether it was fourteen or fifteen, I guess I didn’t hit him with all of them. There are some holes in the window screen and some little splintered holes in the wall. It’s a good thing we had the window up. There would have been hell to pay if I’d shot out the window.”

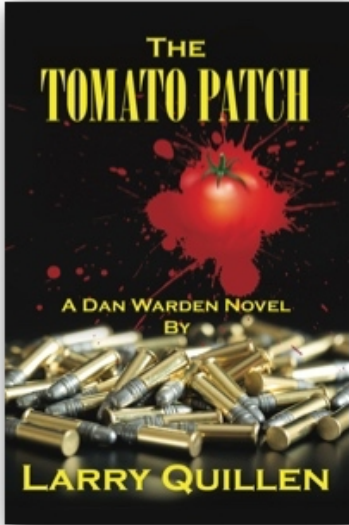
“You need to find some way to cover up those holes, Mama.”

“I’ll think of something,” she said then suddenly gasped. “Oh, Jesus! I’ve got to get a new telephone cord.”

“Get one that’s long enough so I can take the telephone into my room.”

“I’ll see if the store has one that long. Hurry up! Put those tools away and get inside. There’ll be hell to pay if the sheriff shows up and sees you out here this time of night,” Lena called out as she walked away from her ex-husband’s grave. “I’ll go get some tomato plants first thing tomorrow morning. If the sheriff doesn’t send a deputy out again tonight, he sure as hell will send one out sometime tomorrow.”





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