

# **Hoodoo Harry**

**Bibliomysteries  
Hap and Leonard**

**by Joe R. Lansdale, 1951-**

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The sun was falling behind the trees as we came over the hill in Leonard's pickup, pulling a boat trailer loaded down with our small boat. We had been fishing and had caught a few. Our usual method was we terrorized the poor fish and threw them back at the end of the day, which for the fish, if you considered the alternative, wasn't so bad.

On this day however we caught about a half dozen good-sized perch and a couple of bass, and we thought we'd clean them and dip them in a thick batter and fry them in a deep Dutch oven full of popping grease.

I've cut back on my fried foods for years now, but once in a while a bit of fried fish or fried chicken sets me right for quite a few months and I thought this would be one of those times. But our intended fish fry was cut short before the fish so much as got cleaned for frying.

As we came over the hill, the trees crowding in on us from both sides, we saw there was a blue bus coming down the road, straddling the middle line. Leonard made with an evasive maneuver, but by this point the trees on the right side were gone, and there was a shallow creek visible, one that fed into the private lake where we had been fishing. There was no other place to go.

The bus seemed to come for us as we veered, and I saw right before impact that there was a black kid at the wheel, his eyes wild, working the steering wheel with everything he had, but it wasn't enough. He was out of control. The bus hit us with a loud smack and I remember suddenly feeling the odd sensation of the tires leaving the ground and the truck turning over in mid-air. I heard the trailer snap loose and saw the boat sailing along in front of us, and then it was out of sight and we were in the creek, the roof of the truck on the bottom of the creek bed, water coming in through the damaged windows.

I heard a slow groaning of metal and realized the bus was on top of the truck and the roof of the truck was slowly crunching down into the river bed and the floor of the truck was coming down to meet us. Another few seconds and me and Leonard would be pressed like sandwich meat.

I tried to get out of my seat belt, but nothing doing. I might as well have been fastened to that seat with duct tape. I held my breath as the water rushed in through the shattered windows, but the belt still wouldn't come loose. A little, cardboard, pine-tree-shaped air freshener floated in front of my face, a shadowed shape against the dying sunlight leaking in at the edges of the side truck windows. A moment later the belt struggle was too much and I passed out, feeling as if I were drowning. Last thing I remember before going out was Leonard had hold of my arm—

That was it.

When I came to, I was lying on the ground on my side by the edge of the creek. I was dizzy and felt like I'd been swallowed by a snake and shit down a hole. My throat was raw, and I knew I had most likely puked a batch of creek water.

I turned my head and could see the bus, which I realized now was a bookmobile. ROLLING LITERATURE was painted in large white letters on the side. It was sitting with its tires on top of Leonard's truck, the windshield blown out. I could still hear the groaning sound as the weight of it slowly squashed the truck

and shoved it deeper into the creek bed. Leonard was holding an open pocket knife in his hand, the one he had used to cut my belt loose. He looked exhausted.

“Good thing you come around,” Leonard said. “Mouth to mouth wasn’t going to happen, pal. Come to that, I was going to be walking home alone.”

“The kid?”

Leonard shook his head. “What’s left of him oozed out through the bus’s windshield. Glass worked on him like a cheese grater.”

“Shit,” I said, sitting up.

“I was you, wouldn’t go look. You don’t need that in your head. Bet he ain’t more than twelve years old.”

Books were floating out of the shattered windows of the bookmobile and were pushed along gradually by the current like dead fish. The water was either red with sunlight or with blood. Night settled in and the red in the creek turned black as ink and the bus looked like a small island out there in the shallow water.

## 2

Few days later, Leonard and I attended the funeral of the dead kid. We were fine after the accident, but a little stiff, and Leonard had a bit of a hitch in his git-along. That leg had been giving him trouble for years.

The funeral was attended by a half a dozen people we didn’t know. The kid was named James Clifton. He didn’t have any real family and had been brought up, or more accurately jerked up, in a variety of foster homes. He lived in a small community called Nesbit. Nesbit was named after the black man who founded the place back in the early nineteen hundreds. At one time Nesbit had been home to over a thousand black people, surviving after the Civil War in their own communities, selling pulp wood to the white folks out and beyond.

Over time the bulk of the community faded, mostly due to an attack on it in the late eighteen-hundreds by ex-Civil War vets and those that wished they had been Confederates. The mob decided to kill everyone in the place over the death of a little white girl. She had been savaged and cut up in a manner that didn’t designate any known tool or weapon, but it was immediately assumed that “a nigger done it.”

After the raid, only a couple hundred residents survived, and most of them hid out in the nearby deep woods and bottom lands for months. When they returned, the community was a shadow of its former self, with all the houses burned down, the businesses destroyed. Over time it built back up to some degree, but it was never the same. A thousand people may not sound like a lot to begin with, but in those days, it had been a sizable population for an independent black community. After the massacre, its independence was over. The surviving residents went to work for white folks. These days people still lived there, but they didn’t even have internet access. A cell phone, forget it. Nesbit was like the ash from a once bright fire.

As a side note, it was later determined the little girl had been savaged by a pack of wild dogs. No apology was made. And in fact there was a sign placed outside of

the community on a giant sycamore that said: DEAD NIGGERS ARE GOOD NIGGERS, AND IF THIS SIGN COMES DOWN, THERE WILL BE MORE.

Rumor was it didn't come down until nineteen twenty-five when it became so weathered it could no longer be read. When it was removed no one was killed, but within weeks a new sign with the same words on it went up. In 1965, it was finally removed and never replaced.

Nesbit was now only a post office and a general store, not too unlike the one of old that had been set afire. There were a few other little businesses along the street, a garage and tire shop, a small sawmill and lumber yard, a thrift store.

Our buddy, LaBorde Chief of Police, Marvin Hanson, had filled us in on most of this, and had ended it with, "Thing is, except for the county, maybe a Texas Ranger that wants to bother, there's no law in Nesbit, not even a constable. Well, no official law. Gardner Moost at the general store pretty much takes care of what can legally be done, and some that isn't legal. His wife runs the post office, which means she mostly sits there and reads books. As for Gardner, no one bothers him much if no one gets killed around the place."

"But the kid got killed," I said.

"Not in Nesbit. And not in LaBorde. Sheriff's office will poke around a bit, might find something, but they don't have a good record for that part of the county. There's people in that office that are descendents of the Confederates who burned the place down, killed all those people. Some of them are still fighting the Civil War, least in their minds."

"What about the bookmobile?" Leonard asked.

"Eighties bus. Small school bus refurbished to be a bookmobile. It made the route of a number of black communities for years, then disappeared fifteen years ago."

"Wait a minute?" Leonard said. "Jump back on that disappeared part."

"That's the curious part. There was a black lady named Harriet Hoodalay who drove it. Everyone called her Harry. One day she and the bookmobile disappeared. I don't remember all the details, but I remember the story. Anyway, her disappearing like that, like a haint, she came to be called Hoodoo Harry. Nobody calls her anything now. Subject doesn't come up anymore. Pretty much forgotten. And until you guys got run over by the bookmobile, it was forgotten as well."

"That damn sure does fall into the range of peculiar," Leonard said.

"Where's the bookmobile now?" I said.

"Police Department impound. Accident may not have happened in our jurisdiction, but we're the ones that have the storage. We're also the ones that are going to give it a once over and give the info to the county. Odd thing about the bookmobile is except for the window blown out, tires flattened, a few bangs and scrapes, it's in great condition, like it was the day it disappeared."

"What about my truck, the boat?" Leonard said. "Y'all took them in, too."

"Hope you got insurance," Marvin said. "You can collect what's left of them at the junkyard."

Leonard sighed.

"Question is," I said, "how did that kid get the bus? I mean, hell, he couldn't drive. He was all over the place."

“He drove well enough to take it from where it’s been all these years, just not well enough to keep it in his lane,” Marvin said. “You boys are lucky you’re alive.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but poor James wasn’t that lucky.”

“Since it was us he run over,” Leonard said, “can we can take a peek at that bus?”

“Not legally,” Hanson said.

“How about illegally, but we don’t call it illegal?” Leonard said.

Hanson pondered on that. After what seemed long enough for all life on Earth to die off, he said, “Tell you what, if you’ll wear gloves and footies, and don’t touch anything—and I’m especially talking to you, Hap—we might can do that. Come to the impound around midnight.”

“I don’t touch things,” I said.

Leonard and Marvin stared at me.

“Sometimes,” I said.

### 3

Before it was time to go over to the impound, we did a bit of research, taking advantage of other friendships at the cop shop, the local newspaper, and the paper over in Camp Rapture. In some cases they gave us connections to people who had a bit of information they didn’t have. What we got when we put it all together still wasn’t much.

We discovered that James had been born in Nesbit. His father ran off when he was born, and his mother died of heart disease. Then his grandparents took him in, but when he was ten the grandfather died, and just six months before he ran over Leonard’s truck with the blue bus and got himself killed, James’s grandmother died. Since then, he’d been couch surfing with his relatives and friends of his relatives. Child Protective Services had missed a beat. No one knew where he’d been staying the last week. He had been out of sight and out of mind, and was now resting in a pauper’s grave in Nesbit cemetery. But before he was sent there, his body was examined and it was discovered he had been tortured with burns and cuts and pokes from sharp instruments. He was also malnourished.

Online we read some old newspaper accounts about the disappearance of the bookmobile. It originated out of LaBorde, but its driver, the aforementioned Hoodoo Harry, kept it where she lived. One morning folks woke up to find she was gone, and so was the bookmobile. And no one knew where either one of them were. Or at least no one admitted it. She was supposed to go off on a vacation to visit her sister that day, catch a bus, but if she left she must have left in the bookmobile, as her car remained at home. She never arrived at her sister’s.

I went over to Leonard’s apartment around ten p.m. and we had a cup of coffee to stretch our night out more comfortably, and then about ten minutes before midnight, we drove from Leonard’s apartment to the city compound, which was more or less just down the street. When we got there, Hanson’s car was parked in its place, and out back was the compound fence and there was light poking out of

the windows of a large garage tucked at the back of the property. The lot within the fence was filled with cars and trucks and even a couple of boats on blocks.

I pulled out my cell and gave Hanson a call. A few minutes later he came out of the garage and took his time strolling toward the fence.

"It's okay," Leonard called out to Hanson. "Take your time. We're going to set up camp in a bit anyway. We brought supplies."

As Hanson arrived at the gate in the fence, he said, "You're lucky I'm letting you do this. I'm putting my ass on the line."

"Bullshit," Leonard said. "You're the police chief."

"But I'm not Police God."

"In our book you are," I said, "and oh so precious."

Hanson let us in without whacking either of us on the head with a rubber hose, and we all walked over to the garage. Inside it was so brightly lit you could almost see germs crawling on the floor. A man and a woman in evidence protection gear were wandering about.

There was a motorcycle and a few cars inside, but at the back of the place was the bookmobile, mine and Leonard's Moby Dick. The window had been replaced and the side door was open, and water still leaking out of it. There was a small smear of oil visible to the side of it where it had run out of the bottom of the bus. They had either repaired or replaced the tires to make it easier to maneuver and examine.

A short man, who might have been thirty or fifty, wearing a protective gown, gloves and footies, was standing near the bookmobile. He had a gray face shaped like the blade of a well-used axe, and his build like a stack of mud. The mud flowed when he moved, but he moved very little, just enough to reveal his natural shimmy as we introduced ourselves without shaking hands.

When we told him our names, he said, "Stump. Get suited out."

In a back room full of fresh and folded evidence suits, we dressed along with Hanson.

"Stump isn't much for lengthy conversation, is he?" I asked.

"No," Hanson said. "Bricks in his presence have died of boredom."

"Aren't bricks already dead?" Leonard asked.

"I was reaching," Hanson said.

"You got any news on the kid, or the bookmobile's sudden appearance?" I asked.

"Nope," Hanson said. "You know more than I know."

He said that because while we dressed we informed him the bits and pieces we had discovered, not revealing that in some cases they were people in his department speaking out of school.

When we were dressed we went back to the bookmobile.

Stump was standing pretty much where we had left him. I think he had moved a few inches to the right. Maybe he had peed in the old spot.

"What can you tell us?" Hanson said.

"I can tell you don't screw up my evidence, which is the whole damn bus. They got to do this, Captain?"

"No," Hanson said, "but believe it or not, they have solved a few things in their time. They don't have as much to do as we do, and they are dogged."

“Yeah, well, I guess that’s some kind of reason,” Stump said.

We went up the metal steps of the bookmobile and eased our way inside. I stood by the steering wheel and looked back through the bus. Though water still leaked from the bottom of the bus, the inside had been dried out after evidence was collected. There were lights strung in there. The books were all gone, and the shelves had warped a bit. In the back there was a curved metal hull that had been put in, perhaps to house a larger fuel tank. A small door was off to the right of where I was looking. The toilet.

It was so clean, I said, “Looks like you’ve already collected evidence.”

Stump, who was behind us, standing on the top step into the bookmobile, said, “I have. But I don’t want you adding any evidence that isn’t evidence. Get me?”

“Yep,” Leonard said. “We got you.”

“That hull at the back,” Leonard said, touching on what I had noticed first off, “what’s it for?”

“Usually they put that kind of thing in to have a large gas tank, all the traveling they do out in the country. That was probably put in the minute it became a bookmobile.”

“I’ve never heard of that,” Hanson said.

“You an expert on bookmobiles?” Stump said.

“Point taken,” Hanson said.

“Actually, I only seen a few buses and such with that,” Stump said. “Sometimes it isn’t a gas tank, but a crapper tank. That way the toilet doesn’t need to be emptied out as often. Toilet works, by the way. Everything worked on this thing before it went off the road and took a swim. It has a bit of an oil leak that could be due to the wreck, but I don’t think so. From looking it over I think that’s been an ongoing problem, but other than the window and the original tires gone flat, it’s in remarkably good shape.”

I walked toward the back, looking left and right as I went.

“You two ace detectives find anything, please let me know,” Stump said. “I wouldn’t want to not learn a thing or two from the experts.”

“You don’t know our lives,” Leonard said. “We could actually be smart.”

Stump made a grunting sound. “I got a pretty good idea about your lives, and I’m thinking it isn’t pretty.”

“So you been over every inch?” I said.

“I might have missed a centimeter under the shitter, but yeah,” Stump said. “You see, it’s my job.”

I ran my gloved hand over the top of the backend section, the place where the tank would be contained. “What if it isn’t a tank in here?”

“What else would it be?” Stump said.

“Always ask questions,” I said, “that is the path to wisdom.”

“Fucking Confucius?” Stump said.

“Hap Collins,” I said.

“Look, I was about to take the bolts out of that thing. I was even going to lift off the top and look inside. Thought that up all by myself before you got here.”

“Now,” Leonard said, “don’t start selling yourself for more than you are.”

Stump grunted again and left the bookmobile.

“He seems to like you guys,” Hanson said.

A moment later, the man and the woman we had seen wandering the garage entered with battery powered tools, pushed past us, went to the back, removed the bolts, and lifted the top off the covering. They carried it away with them without even looking inside. Curiosity would not kill those cool cats.

When they left the bus with the metal top, Stump reappeared and waddled down the aisle toward the now open container. He had a flashlight in his hand. He turned it on and looked inside, turned his head from left to right, said, "Huh."

We went over and looked. Stacked from left to right, six in a row, were oil-covered, time-withered little bodies, and one larger one.

"How about that?" Stump said.

"We told you that you ought to look," Leonard said.

"And I told you I was about to," Stump said.

"You say that now," Leonard said.

"I hate both you bastards," Stump said.

"You now belong to a sizable club," Hanson said.

## 4

You can bet that threw a wrench into things. Where before there was the problem of the long missing bookmobile and its return due to a twelve-year-old boy driving it for reasons unknown, not to mention his death by accident, now we had six oil-covered bodies to identify, tucked up in the back of the bookmobile.

Who put those bodies there? Where had the bookmobile been for all those years, and why did it look brand new? And while we're making a list, where was Hoodoo Harry? Was hers the larger oil-soaked body?

Well, I'd like to tell you it all came together, mysteries solved, but it didn't. In fact, a few weeks passed by. They examined the corpses and sent off DNA samples from the bodies, five off which turned out to be kids, but that was all they knew. No DNA matches. The sixth one was a female adult, but if it was Hoodoo Harry, no one had yet tracked down a relative to make the determination. But the search was in progress.

Complication on complication multiplied by more complications.

Me and Leonard felt pretty smart for a few weeks about the bookmobile container, but truth was, we weren't expecting bodies at all. And further truth was, Stump and his forensic crew were minutes from discovering what was there. So had we not shown up, they'd have found the bodies anyway.

As the weeks went by, I began to feel agitated, and had trouble sleeping at night. One night, lying in bed with Brett, I was tossing and turning, and she flipped on the night stand light, rolled over and lifted herself on one elbow and looked at me.

"What the hell, Hap? You been acting like a jumping bean for a week. Moan and groan all night."

"I moan and groan?" I said, sitting up in bed, looking at the beautiful Brett, her flame-red hair tied back in a pony tail.

"Yep."



"I'm bothering you?"

"Only when I'm trying to sleep. Or lie still. And you go to the toilet all night. What's up with that?"

"Poo-poo."

"Six, seven times a night?"

"Well, I go in there and read."

"Why can't you sleep?"

"I don't know."

"It's the kid, isn't it?"

"Guess it is. Think about him a lot. I close my eyes, I see his eyes, looking out of the windshield of that bookmobile."

Brett fluffed her pillow and folded it against the headboard and put her back against it.

"You been looking into it?" she asked.

"No. Hanson said it was his case to investigate."

"That's never stopped you and Leonard before."

"It hasn't, but, I guess we didn't know where to go with this."

Brett pursed her lips, said, "You know what? Just look up the old route of the bookmobile, and follow it."

"Marvin's done that."

"But he isn't you, Hap."

"No. He isn't. He's smarter and a good investigator."

"Yeah, well, you do have that going against you. But is he more dogged than you and Leonard?"

"Hanson used the same word. But I think he's the one that's dogged."

"More dogged than you and your bro?"

"I'm not sure how you measure things on a dogged scale. I'm not sure I know what a dogged scale is. I'm not sure there is one."

"I'll tell you right now, you are more dogged. You and Leonard need to get back on the trail and figure things out so I can get a good night's sleep. And here's another idea. How about you look up Cason Statler's friend, the one who runs the newspaper morgue in Camp Rapture. Have him check into things for you. He can find more in a day than the law can find in a month. That guy, isn't his name Mars, something like that?"

"Mercury."

"He has the mind for looking into conspiracies, or whatever is going on here. No one knows odd information and can evaluate it better than that guy. Or so you've told me. Get him to do some kind of... I don't know, chart about the route of the bookmobile, then look into missing persons in that area, on the route. Might be something in that."

"You're smart," I said.

"I know that," she said.

"Since you're awake, want to fool around?"

"No. And if you ever expect to again, you better quit tossing, moaning and groaning and talking to yourself."

"I talk to myself, too?"

"Yep."

Brett turned out the light. "Now, close your little Hap eyes and shut your little Hap mouth, and go the fuck to sleep."

## 5

Cason Staler is a Pulitzer Prize winning writer that works at the Camp Rapture newspaper. We've known him for awhile. Handsome and quirky, quick of wit, he can also hold his own in a fist fight. He's a guy with a bunch of odd friends. Including us. He's a big dog over at the paper. His friend, Mercury, works downstairs in the news morgue, sometimes known as the first level of Hell. Mercury is a kind of a genius. Cason told him about us, explained our problem, and left us to it.

Down there they have all the back issues of the paper, as well as all manner of stuff, stacked up this way and that. You have to wind your way through it all to find Mercury. Down there he was king. Of course, he was the only one that worked down there, so the job position was easily filled.

Mercury was blond and pale, but looked strong. His job was to put all the old newspapers on the computer, then send the originals off to somewhere where they were collected by someone for some reason unknown. In his spare time, Mercury conducted investigations of his own. Some of them were nutty. Crop circles. Flying saucers. The Kennedy assassination, involving everyone but Bigfoot, though in time he might work him in as well. But he was smart and helpful, if you could point his nose in the right direction. He loved a good mystery, and he had a way of calculating odd situations into a recognizable patterns.

After we wound our way through the stacks and came up on Mercury, he said, "Welcome to the center of the earth."

The overhead light was thin back there, but there was a bright lamp on his desk, and there was another on a table that was pushed up against it. Both lamps had metal shades over the bulbs, but those had been tilted so as to let more of the light leak out.

On the table were books, assorted newspapers, clippings, an old microfilm machine, and on a chair was a small TV and an old fashioned VCR. The VCR cord was fastened to the back of the TV and plugged into a plastic power strip on the floor. The wire from his computer was plugged to the bar as well.

"How are you men?" he said.

"We're fine," Leonard said. "Cason says you can help us."

"That depends. He told me what you're looking for, and I've pulled out a few things, got some stuff on the computer I can show you."

Mercury inched over to it, seated himself in front of it, touched a button. The computer lit up like a Christmas display. "There's not a lot here, but what's here is of interest. Here is the path of the bookmobile."

We took a gander at the place he was pointing, a map with a moving arrow.

"You can see that it covered quite a bit of ground, but most if it, the places where Harriet stopped, were right near Nesbit. Made a few stops in areas where there were neighborhoods, if you can call a half-dozen houses neighborhoods."

Folks wanted books, they either had to be in town at the post office at the right time, or they had to be at one of these stop areas. Six altogether. Last two stops were well out in the country. Wasn't like it was a money-making business, driving the bookmobile. Harry came once a week, three times a month, then there was a week off. When she wasn't making this run through Nesbit and the surrounding area, she was on other routes. She drove four days a week, three weeks a month."

Mercury showed us a few more routes around LaBorde, a spot or two out in the country that were destinations.

"Those are routes on days when she worked outside of the Nesbit area. Way I'd think about it is Harry was from Nesbit, so that would be the hub of everything for her. Also, there have been missing persons cases around Nesbit in the last few years, couple of kids, and Harriet Hoodalay."

"Quite a coincidence," Leonard said.

Mercury considered for a moment.

"Place small as Nesbit, you want to connect anyone to the missing kids, you could make the case for everyone there, the community being so small, being so few people. And the missing kids came from the area. Also possible none of what happened in and around Nesbit is related, but that's where you can make the case that there might be too much coincidence. The law of averages come into play. Someone in, or around Nesbit, is most likely responsible for the kids, but are they responsible for Harriet and the bookmobile? Still likely."

"Harry and the bookmobile could have come up missing on one of the other routes," I said.

"Merely saying the most likely scenario is it happened near her home, near Nesbit, and probably someone who knew her, and the two missing kids are related to it all, because that's who a bookmobile is specifically designed for. Anyone can check out a book, but it's bored kids, kids that don't have library access, that they are trying to appeal to. Thing is, now even poor kids have computers and the internet, and with all the lights and bells and whistles, books get lost to a time when we had more patience and less to distract us."

"We found more than two kids in the bookmobile," Leonard said.

"Can't help you there, but if you nose around a bit, you might find more missing than have been reported. I'm going to strongly guess they are all from the same area, and what you're dealing with is a child predator, someone who likes to stick close to the place he knows. Way it usually works in these cases. And one reason you may not know about the other kids, is they may not have been reported. Neglect is just the thing that puts them in a bad spot, causes them to fall between the cracks. Not the only thing, but a major factor."

"Think it could have been Harry?" Leonard asked.

"Could be, but then we got to ask, where has she been all this time? After she disappeared there were no more child abduction cases reported, so that leans toward her possibly being responsible, but she doesn't fit the profile, and nothing was known about the bookmobile until it nearly ran you over. The kid inside, that leans toward him being a victim as well, or a potential victim. An escapee. But I go back to what I said before. Just because we have a report of two children doesn't mean that's all there is. You found six bodies, and one not a child, that could be folks who haven't been reported, and the adult could just be Harry."

Mercury paused, tapped the keys. A new image came up. It was of a middle-aged black woman.

“Harriet Hoodalay,” he said. “What I found from looking through older microfilm. You know about her supposedly taking a bus trip to see her sister, I assume. Her not arriving?”

“Do you know who first reported her missing?”

“Gardner Moost.”

“General store guy?” Leonard said.

“Correct,” Mercury said. “Said he got that information from her husband, Tom Hoodalay. Tom didn’t report her missing when her vacation ended and she didn’t come back. Gardner asked why she hadn’t come home and Tom told Moost he figured Harriet had run off from him.”

“What’s Harriet’s sister say?”

“She never arrived, but she did buy a bus ticket. No one was doing a head count when it came time to get on the bus, and the bus line closed down its hub here years ago. Whoever worked there back then has scattered to the wind.”

“Maybe Harriet found out something about her husband,” I said. “Like how Tom was using her connection to children to do something he wasn’t supposed to. She decided to get away from him, go see her sister. He was afraid she’d spill the beans to the law, so he killed her.”

“Possible, but unknown,” Mercury said. “But Nesbit, that’s where you begin.”

## 6

We drove over to Nesbit in my car.

It was a nice drive and a nice day. Not too warm for the time of year. We cruised along the highway for several miles, and into an area where the trees grew thick and the houses were far apart.

Nesbit was off the highway, down a roughly paved road. As we came into the community we saw the post office on one side, general store on the other. Tire and mechanic shop, and so on, were all nearby. We were through the place before we knew it, and I had to turn around and drive us back. First place we stopped was the general store.

It was like stepping back in time. The place was chock-full of cool items, things that I forgot existed, like mule plowing equipment. Not a lot of it, but even some was surprising. There were long shelves of canned goods, prepared by locals, sold on consignment, and there were the sort of things you expected. High shelves with bolts of cloth. Tools. There was a series of bins in the middle of the store, stuffed with fresh vegetables, and according to a sign, locally raised.

There was a counter with a lot of old candies and soft drinks I had forgotten about. There was a break in the piles of goods on that counter, and there was an old fashioned cash register with a black man behind it, sitting on a stool. He was a big fellow, and though he was sitting, I could tell he would tower over both me and Leonard. He had shoulders as wide as a bank vault. He had a red tone to his skin, what in the old days they used to refer to as a red bone Negro, when they were

being polite. He had reddish freckles scattered on his cheeks. His hands, which were clutched around a hunting magazine, were about the size of catcher's mitts. He looked to be in his sixties, had a fringe of white hair around his head, just over his ears and nowhere else.

At the counter we greeted him. He put down his magazine and eyed us carefully.

"I help you fellas?" he said.

"Maybe," I said. "We work for a private detective agency out of LaBorde. We're trying to find out about James Clifton. I'm Hap Collins, and this is my associate, Leonard Pine."

"Gardner Moost," he said. "Yeah. Sad story. But what can be done for him now?"

"What we're trying to figure out," Leonard said, "is how he came by a bookmobile that had been missing for years, and what was he doing driving it?"

"Don't know what I can tell you. Poor boy was hard luck. Lost most of his family. Good kid, though. Had him a little part time job at the tire shop. You know, picking up things a couple hours after school. Old tires, this and that. He was sleeping at different homes. He slept in the back here a few times. I was thinking of letting him stay full time. Maybe give him a little work on the weekends. Tire shop didn't use him all week. As for the rest, I don't know. I don't think I saw him around the week he ended up gone. I doubt he was going to school. Was supposed to be, but I'd see him walking down the road, not really seeming to be going anywhere. An hour later, you'd see him walk back. I guess I saw him last on a Monday. Then the rest of the week he wasn't about. Didn't think much of it. Reason I know he was missing is because he finished up at the tire shop, he'd come over, buy him a pop and a candy bar. Every day. Next thing I know he's dead, and I hear he was in that old bookmobile. Beyond that, I don't know a thing about him or the missing bookmobile."

"Did you know Harriet Hoodalay?" I said.

That gave Moost pause.

"Yes. I did know Harry. Lovely woman."

"Do you know her husband?" I said. I knew he did, from what Mercury had told us, but I wanted to see where he'd go with it.

He nodded. "Yeah."

"We ask," said Leonard, "because Harriet used to drive the bookmobile, then she disappeared. Supposed to be going up North to see her sister but never made it."

"I never believed that story," Moost said.

"Oh," I said, "and why is that?"

"I think she might have meant to see her sister, but I don't think the bus took a wrong turn at Amarillo and let her out in a pasture, or some such. I think her husband killed her. Tom's a mean sonofabitch. Me and him don't get along. He shops somewhere other than here. I banned him from the store when Harry came up missing those years back."

"You say he's mean," Leonard said. "But how mean?"

"He beat on her from time to time."

"So you and her were close?" I said.

“Look, if you two are going to be snooping about, might as well tell you. Me and Harry, we had a thing. Went on for awhile. She told me Tom was brutal. I saw the bruises. She was going to take a bus and see her sister, all right, but the plan was me and her would get together later. She’d get a divorce and we’d marry. But she didn’t get a divorce, and she didn’t come back. At first, at least a little, I thought she had changed her mind, didn’t want what I thought she wanted. But deep down, always figured her husband did her in. Told the cops that, some sheriff’s deputy, but they didn’t find anything to prove it. They dropped it. I told Tom last time he was in here, years ago, not to come back, just because I didn’t like him. Later, I married. Still married. Happily. But me and Harry, we had our moment.”

“Slightly off the subject,” I said, “but the bookmobile. Did she like that work? Every have any problems?”

“She mentioned a bit of this and that. Kids stealing a book, acting up. But nothing special. She did seem tense days before she was supposed to catch that bus.”

“Tense?” Leonard said.

“Maybe her husband was worrying her. He didn’t know she wasn’t coming back, but I think right before she left, she might have told him. Couldn’t hold it in. Figure they got in a fight, he killed her, and she’s buried somewhere out in the woods behind their house.”

I didn’t say we thought she might have ended up in a compartment in the bookmobile.

“Anything special you remember about the bookmobile from that time?” Leonard said.

“That’s been awhile.”

“Anything?” Leonard said.

“Just that Turner, over there at the tire and mechanic shop, was going to fix the bookmobile up. Needed new tires, some general maintenance. Always leaked oil. No matter what they did to it, it leaked oil.”

“So her route was closed out for her vacation?” I said.

“They had another driver, and I think Harry was supposed to drive the bookmobile over to him, but then the bookmobile disappeared, and that was it. People out of LaBorde who had been paying for it decided they weren’t going to try and replace it, so that was all she wrote.

“Who was this new driver?” Leonard asked.

“Will Turner, works over at the tire shop.”

## 7

Will Turner was a skinny man that I judged to be in his early forties, dark of skin, almost as dark as Leonard. He had a pleasant face and skinned knuckles, probably from dealing with tools and tires day in and day out, though it was hard for me to imagine a lot of business in Nesbit.

“Yeah,” Will Turner said. “I took the job, but then the bookmobile got stolen, and that was the end of it. So I just work here for Donnie James. I been working here since I was a kid, started just like James did, doing odd jobs.”

“What kind of kid was James?” I asked.

“Quiet. Never said much, so you never knew much about him. Did his work, couple hours a day. Except for that, he was kind of wandering about, sleeping and eating where he could. I don’t really know much about him.”

We were standing inside the doorway of the tire and mechanic shop. It was one of those doors that was wide and made of the same aluminum as the building. End of the day you pulled it closed and padlocked it. It was a small building, and it was stuffed with tires, and there was an upper deck supported by a series of two by eights, and one in particular looked as if it was about to retire from the job. It looked as if insects had been at it. There was a long aluminum building out back of the garage. We could see it through the open back section of the shop. Having the doors open on both ends was a good choice, because a nice breeze was blowing.

“That post there,” I said, “it looks as if it’s about to give up the ghost.”

Will looked toward it. “Yep. I have to go up there and get a tire, mostly for older foreign cars, I’m always a little nervous. Take it slow and easy. Been on Donnie for a year to get it fixed. He can be cheap.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” I said, “you get a lot of business here in Nesbit?”

Will laughed. “Nope. Still, we got a reputation, and folks bring their cars in from miles around. We mostly make money on mechanic work, but we sell a few tires too. But a lot of business? No.”

“Moost was telling us you been working here a long time,” Leonard said.

“I have. That’s a fact.”

“Let me ask you something about Harriet Hoodalay and the bookmobile. She was supposed to pass that job to you, right?”

“That’s right. I was only a kid then, twenty-three, working part time here, and I needed extra money. Driving the bookmobile wasn’t much, but hey, it was something to add to the pot.”

“Did Harriet drop the bookmobile off with you?” I said.

“Was supposed to, that night. She didn’t show, though. Thought she might have got tied up with something and I’d find out about it the next day. Figured she could have left it for me here at the garage. We discussed that as an option and I was figuring maybe she got confused on what we had finally decided. Next day I found out she and the bookmobile had gone missing. And I was out some easy money.”

“Did you know Harriet well?” Leonard said.

“Not really. Nice lady, far as I could tell. Saw her around. Knew she drove the bookmobile. She brought it here to be worked on time or two. We talked a little. You know, small talk. Nothing special. I think she liked the job, liked kids. Never had any of her own.”

“Okay,” I said, “we’d like to talk to your boss, Mr. James.”

Will looked at his watch. “Back about two. On lunch break. Takes longer breaks these days.”

“What’s the building out back?”

“Oh, boss has a tractor, some equipment for this and that. He goes around and does farm work from time to time. Breaking up gardens, sometimes large fields. Side work.”

“Where would Donnie be having lunch? Home?”

“Naw. He’s not married and he’s a terrible cook. He can’t put a peanut butter and jelly sandwich together without it tasting like tar paper. There’s a little place down the road. Ethel’s. Not much to it, open for lunch and dinner. Used to be open for breakfast, but stopped doing that last year. Alright food. Ethel and her husband Bernard run it.”

“Thanks, Will,” I said, and me and Leonard went out.

## 8

Ethel’s was indeed small. A little, yellow frame house. What would have normally been the living room had been turned into a dining area. A few tables and chairs were scattered about. A counter had been put in, as well as an opening into the kitchen; a cut out in the wall where the food could be passed to the waitress, who I assumed was Ethel. She was petite, had a look on her face of perpetual worry, as if she feared forgetting a French fry order. Through the gap in the wall we could see a big black man, possibly Bernard, standing in front of an old fashioned grill, flipping burgers. He looked big enough to turn over the grill.

Waitress said, “Pick a seat.”

That was easy, the place was packed, except for one small table in the corner, and we took that. The table wobbled when I put my hands on it.

“Shall we eat?” Leonard said.

“Yep. Let’s hope the food is better than the furniture.”

“It’s packed here,” he said. “That’s a good sign.”

“Choices are limited.”

I looked around trying to spot someone I thought might be Donnie. That was easy. A man with Tire and Mechanic Shop written across the back of a khaki work shirt was moving toward the cash register, his ticket in hand.

I got up, went over, said, “Are you Donnie James?”

He nodded.

I gave him the synopsis version of what me and Leonard were doing convinced him to sit down with us, but not before I agreed to pay his check.

“I got to get back to work, fellas,” he said. “Make this quick. I don’t think I know a thing that could help. Thanks for lunch, by the way. I hope you find out who did what to those children. Saw in the paper about all those kids, and the woman in the bookmobile. Terrible. Coated in oil. Why would anyone do that?”

“Preserve the bodies a little,” I said. “I think whoever did it liked looking at them. Oil probably killed some of the stink.”

“I guess so,” Donnie said.

“How well did you know Harriet?” Leonard asked.

“Not too well. Except for driving the bookmobile, Tom kept her on a pretty tight leash. I was you, he’s the one I’d talk to. I figure he’s got her in a fifty gallon drum



under his front porch. Tom's a jerk. Always thought men were trying to take Harry from him. One time, right here, they got into it at supper time over something. He called her a bitch. She got up and went outside and stood by their pickup until he paid up and went out. I was sitting over there by the window. I saw him grab her arm and push her into the truck. He's a bully, even at his age, retired and always on his front porch or he's out back in the yard lifting weights. Old as he is, I seen him get into it at the post office with a young man over something. I don't know what. I'm sure it was Tom started things. But he whipped that young man like he was a heavy bag. Hit him at will, and finally dropped him. Gardner Moost stood up to him, though, about how he treated Harry. I mean, hell, everyone here knows everyone else's business. Gardner's owner of the General store."

"We've met," Leonard said.

"Then you've seen Gardner. Tom's afraid of him, and with good reason. When he was younger, Gardner cleaned out a few bars down Houston way, or so I've heard. But Tom is no slouch either. Got a bum knee, but I think Gardner could take him. Someone like you two, he'd run you together so hard he'd make one of you."

"We talked to Moost," Leonard said. "He told us about Tom, how he banned him. Another thing. James Clifton. What kind of kid was he?"

"Didn't say much. Did some little clean up jobs for me. Knew he had it rough, so I was trying to help him out. That's about all I got. Who works for who, here? You the boss, white man?"

"I want to be, but he won't let me," I said.

"And he won't let me," Leonard said. "Brett Sawyer is our boss."

"Who's he?"

"She," I said.

"Ah," he said. "Well, good luck finding out what happened to Harry. She was good people. Like me, she cared about children. That's why I fixed that bookmobile on my own time, even donated tires. It was mostly children got something out of that bookmobile. Me, I was never much of a reader. Always figured by not being I missed out on things. Might be doing something other than a tire shop if I'd gotten a real education. Then again, folks need tires and they need cars fixed."

"No disagreement there," Leonard said.

"I got to go. Good luck."

Donnie got up and went out.

Leonard said, "Tom Hoodalay seems to get a lot of bad marks."

"Maybe we ought to check Tom's report card personally," I said.

"Not until I get a burger. I'm so hungry I could eat the ass out of a menstruating mule."

## 9

The burgers were good. Much better than I assumed the ass of a menstruating mule would be. We ate, and found out from Ethel, who was indeed the waitress, where Tom Hoodalay lived.

It was a small house not far off the road near the center of Nesbit. It was a down a narrow, cracked, concrete drive, and at the end of the drive was a small, dilapidated house with an old brown pickup in the yard.

Weeds grew waist high on both sides of the house, out to the edge of the drive, and the drive seemed to be fighting a losing battle against the weeds growing up between the cracks in the concrete. Another few months, you could film a Tarzan movie out there. There was a small overhang porch, and there was a long wooden bench on the porch, and on the bench sat a man I took for Tom Hoodalay. He was crouched there like a frog on steroids.

We parked in the drive next to the pickup, got out and walked up to the steps. There were chunks of concrete breaking off in the drive next to the step. Leonard put his foot on a chunk and wobbled it with his boot.

“Who the hell are you?” the man said.

Up close I could tell he was in his sixties, but it was a powerful sixties. He had a head like a soccer ball. It was shaved and smooth as an oiled doorknob and glistened in the sunlight. He had a lot of white teeth and his eyes were both red where they should be white. His pupils, swimming in the middle of all that redness, were chocolate colored. He had very little neck and was almost as wide as Gardner Moost. I thought the two of them went at it, it might be a close fight. Nesbit seemed to have a lot of large people.

“We’re Avon,” Leonard said.

“The hell you are,” the man said.

“Naw, just messing with you,” Leonard said. “You Tom Hoodalay?”

“What if I am?”

“Might be a prize involved,” Leonard said.

This had already gone south. Leonard obviously didn’t like the guy on sight. I wasn’t fond of him either, and all he had said so far was “Who the hell are you?”

“We work for a private detective agency out of LaBorde,” I said. “We are looking into the death of a child, James Clifton.”

“That worthless little nigger? Shit, he better off dead.”

“Why would that be?” Leonard said.

“Ain’t got nobody, ain’t got no future,” Tom Hoodalay said.

“He wrecked a bookmobile that had been missing for fifteen years, one your former wife used to drive,” I said.

“Heard about that,” he said.

“Any idea where the bookmobile was all these years?” I asked.

“How the fuck would I know? I been asked that already. Years ago.”

“Your wife used to drive it,” I said. “I thought you might have some clue.”

“I ain’t got nothing to do with where she went, or where that damn bookmobile went. I ain’t got no concern about neither.”

“You’re saying the kid was better off dead, huh?” Leonard said.

“What I said, ain’t it?”

“Cause you wouldn’t want James to end up... Like you?”

“What the fuck you talking about, nigger?”

With that, Tom Hoodalay stood up. He was even bigger than I thought.

“Way we got it figured,” Leonard said, “is you used to slap your wife around, because you could. What happened Tommy? Wife catch you with your dick up a kid’s ass?”

Tom actually yelled. More of a bellow really. He turned, and slammed his fist down on the long bench. It shattered, some of the fragments hitting me in the chest.

“Damn,” I said.

“You showed that bench,” Leonard said.

My man Leonard is never one to use common sense in an excitable moment. He’s more akin to the guy that throws gasoline on a fire, then goes to get more.

Tom Hoodalay was coming off the porch. He limped a little, an old injury was my guess. He brought a leg of the bench with him, and he was swinging it about, and he wasn’t all the way down the steps yet.

Leonard picked up the chunk of concrete under his foot, cocked it back, said, “Bet you flinch,” and threw it.

The sunlight caught the white concrete and made it shine, and then it hit Hoodalay right between the eyes. He staggered, came tripping along and collapsed to his knees. David had just knocked the shit out of Goliath.

Hoodalay loosened his grip on the bench leg. Leonard sprang forward, grabbed the leg, said, “Give me that.”

And then Leonard swung the leg, caught Tom Hoodalay right upside the head, causing him to go face down into the driveway.

“There’s your prize,” Leonard said.

“So much for asking questions,” I said.

Leonard tossed the bench leg away and looked down at Tom’s unconscious body. “He wasn’t gonna tell us anything anyway.”

“You hit him pretty hard,” I said. “Maybe too hard.”

“I just stunned the hippopotamus,” Leonard said. “Wakes up, he’ll wish he hadn’t torn up a perfectly good bench.”

“Or got hit between the eyes with a piece of concrete and then battered with a board.”

“That too,” Leonard said.

## 10

As I was driving us away, Leonard said, “I don’t like that bastard, but I don’t think he killed the kids. Call it instinct, and also the fact that though he’s big, he gets around like a pig on stilts. Maybe he killed his wife, but a guy like him strangles his wife, then tells the cops it was self-defense. She came at him with a paring knife, or some such. I don’t think he’s smart enough to plan what to do with the body, and certainly not smart enough to stay quiet about it all these years. He’s the kind of dumb ass brags about a thing like that.”

“Maybe,” I said.

I drove us around a bit, nothing really in mind. We tossed out an idea or two, but we arrived at nothing. Anybody we had spoken to could have done it, and none of them could have done it.

I finally convinced Leonard to let me drive back to Tom's place, just to make sure he wasn't collecting vultures.

"He might shoot at us this time," Leonard said.

I drove back there anyway, and as we came up the drive, I could see that he was no longer lying where we left him. Fragments of the bench had been gathered up and stacked by the porch steps.

"All right," I said. "He lives."

We backed out, and I drove us back to LaBorde. There wasn't anything else left for us to do. I dropped Leonard off at his place, and then I called Brett. She was at the office, finishing up some paperwork on a divorce case she had been working. I hated that kind of stuff, but frankly it was the sort of business they kept us in biscuits.

When I arrived at our office and parked in the lot, the bicycle shop lady downstairs was wearing her shorts, as usual. I noticed, as usual, because I'm biologically driven to do so, then I went upstairs and saw the only woman that really matters to me in that kind of way.

Brett said, "So, find out anything?"

"Found out we don't know anything."

Brett was sitting behind the desk with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was working on some papers with a pen. She was dressed in jeans and an oversized tee-shirt, had on slip-on, white, tennis shoes.

"I got a little bit of paperwork left, then we can get something to eat. Nothing fancy, obviously. I want to stay sloppy."

"LaBorde doesn't have much that's fancy," I said.

"True," she said, and got busy on her paperwork.

I picked up the newspaper on the edge of the desk, started reading. The bookmobile and the murder of James Clifton weren't even on the second page. Third page, at the bottom. The article was thin. James had been driving, he ran off the road, hit a truck (occupants unnamed, but unhurt), and there was an investigation into his death and into the mystery of where the bookmobile had been all these years. Some bodies had been found.

By the time I had finished reading the rest of the paper, which didn't take long, Brett was up and we were out. We traveled in my car. After dinner, I would drop her back at the office to pick up hers.

We went to a small joint that served Ecuadorian food. It was off Universal Street, and it was good. After I dropped Brett back at her car, we met up at the house. It seemed a little empty when we first came in. My daughter Chance had been living with us, along with a rescue mutt we named Buffy. Actually, Leonard had rescued her, but I had ended up with the dog. Now Buffy was with Chance. Until last year, I didn't know I had a daughter. I missed her. I missed Buffy.

We watched a couple TV shows, then we went to bed. I fell asleep quickly. I didn't sleep long. When I awoke it was still solid dark. I had dreamed I was reaching for a butterfly that kept fluttering out of the way. I had an uncomfortable feeling that butterfly was representative of me having knowledge I didn't

understand. A common problem. Then again, I might have merely been dreaming about butterflies. Thing was, now, I was wide awake.

To keep from tossing and turning, I slipped out of bed, went downstairs and made an early breakfast. After I finished my oatmeal, I sat and sipped coffee, glancing out the kitchen window at the darkness. I tried to collect my thoughts, tried to catch my butterfly. I thought about all of the people we had talked to, thought back on that poor kid's face as the bookmobile barreled down on us. I thought back to finding those oily bodies in the container in the bookmobile. And then I thought, wait a minute.

I called Leonard on my cell. He was none too happy to hear from me.

"It's dark outside," he said.

"All the better for clandestine activity," I said. "Get dressed. I'm coming to pick you up."

"You don't dare come this way for an hour," he said. "I'm going to eat and shower, but right before that, me, and the extra-nice Officer Carroll, are going to play rodeo."

Officer Carroll, as we both called him, was Leonard's new love interest. Nice guy and a nice cop, one of Marvin's people.

"Don't get any rope burns," I said. "But an hour is too late. It still needs to be dark when we get where we're going."

"Twenty minutes, then," Leonard said.

"Bring protection."

"We use protection."

"No. Bring it, and I don't mean the kind you're talking about. You show up with a Trojan and I'll beat you to death."

"I use one of those big garbage bags, you know, something that'll hold the meat."

"Yeah, right."

I had another cup of coffee, took a quick shower, wrote Brett a note, dressed and drove over to Leonard's apartment. Officer Carroll was coming out as I arrived. He's constructed like a large artillery shell.

"I hope you boys aren't going to get in trouble," he said.

"Us? Heaven forbid."

"Don't tell me anything. I know it's best I don't know."

After I got Leonard hustling along, a granola bar in one fist, a cup of coffee in the other, I told him what had come to me, and then I drove us back to Nesbit.

## 11

It was still dark, and in East Texas, wandering about near people's homes and places of business during the night is the sort of thing that could get you shot. Growing up I had been able to walk to people's houses if the need came about and ask to borrow their phone, or some such, without expecting to be shot into Swiss cheese by some fearful and angry home owner. The days of close neighbors had

almost passed, and in its place was a cloud of anger and suspicion and a lot of hardware of the killing kind.

Still, we parked to the side of the General store and chanced it, walked between the store and the tire shop, wandered out to the big building at the back of Donnie James' place. There was a night light in front and back of the building, and we stood out like bugs in a porch light. I took out my handy little lock pick kit, and easily defeated the padlock. Once we pulled the door aside, there was yet another door, and its locks were a little more difficult.

"Hold it," Leonard said. "Alarm system."

Leonard had discovered a little black panel on the inside of the second door fastened to the wall. He took out his pocket knife and popped the cover, used the blade to cut a wire.

"Might as well have been on the honor system," he said.

We got that door slid aside as well, then closed it behind us. I took out my penlight and flashed it around. There was a big tractor in the center of the building, some farm equipment attachments, and not much else.

We walked around for awhile, but no clues jumped at us.

"Okay," Leonard said. "What are we looking for?"

"I don't know exactly, but I have a strong feeling it's here."

Leonard pulled out his own penlight, and we split up and went around the building looking for whatever might look like a clue.

Reason we were there was I had thought about Donnie James. He had mentioned the boy's and the woman's body in the bookmobile, but then reading the paper, where he said he got his news, I realized that the bodies in the bookmobile had not been mentioned. Marvin had most likely not revealed those things on purpose, to have one up on the killer, so how had Donnie James known about it?

It was possible someone leaked the information, but if they had, I doubted it went all the way to Nesbit and to the owner of a tire shop. Again, possible, but not likely. Marvin ran a tight ship.

We met up by the tractor, turned off our penlights and stood there a moment.

"Nothing," Leonard said.

"Same."

After a brief moment, Leonard turned back on his penlight, said, "Place looks bigger on the outside."

"Yeah."

"Because it is," he said.

I turned on my light again, flashed it around. On the right there were windows in the wall, and on the left there were not. That could have merely been a builder's choice, but something didn't seem right.

I started over to that wall, and Leonard went along with me. When we got there he tapped on it with his fist.

"Okay," he said. "Pretty sure it's hollow."

"No doors. No windows, but a hollow wall means another room."

"Uh-huh. And this aluminum looks fresh, like it's been added lately. Maybe after the kid stole the bus and ran off with it."

That got me excited.

We walked along the length of the wall, and near the front of the building I thought it looked a little odd. I pressed against it. The wall moved a little. There was a separate piece of aluminum that had been used to fill out the wall; it looked all of one piece if you weren't paying attention. I worked with it some more and it slid aside on rollers. It left a gap big enough to walk through, but there was a chain and lock through it and the main wall. We could have slipped under the chain, but I decided to make it easier.

I took out my lock-pick kit and snapped the padlock open. Once that was done, we were able to push it wider. We slipped in behind it.

Using my penlight, I found a switch and flipped it. Lights came on along the stretch of hidden chamber. It was a full twelve feet wide, and maybe forty feet long. On the concrete floor was a dark oil stain, and at the far end of the room was a metal chair bolted to the floor. There were leather straps on the arm rest and at the base of the chair. There was a freezer behind the chair, and off to the side a metal box with air holes in it.

It was pretty obvious then. Recently the wall had been put up to hide what had formerly been in the open. Unlikely anyone was ever let in, but after James escaped, paranoia set in, and the wall was built to hide where the bookmobile had been parked, where the kidnapped boys were kept, and obviously tortured. I felt sick to my stomach.

Leonard walked over to the freezer and looked inside.

"Empty," he said. That caused me to let out a sigh of relief.

I went over to the box and lifted the lid. It too was empty. At least there weren't any others.

The bookmobile had been setting here for years, part of Donnie's murderous ritual, that and the oiled bodies that he had eventually put in the tank in the bookmobile, along with Harriet Hoodalay.

"Fits," Leonard said. "Donnie has a bad thing for boys, somehow Harry must have delivered the bookmobile here one night, night she was supposed to drop it off at Will's place, got her wires crossed about where, and in the process of leaving it at the tire shop she must have seen something that got her killed. Donnie hid her body and the bookmobile in here. Must have dug up those early bodies, oiled them all down and put them in the bookmobile with Harry's corpse."

"Sounds right," I said.

"Kept the bookmobile running and in good shape, checked on the bodies from time to time, see how they were marinating."

"Jesus," I said. I could visualize Donnie sitting in the bookmobile, starting it up, listening to the motor hum, feeling the thrill of being in control of the machine that brought children to it; that struck me as something the sick bastard might enjoy thinking about.

Leonard was still piecing it out. "He grabbed James, had him here awhile, but somehow James got loose while they were out, opened the door, stole the bookmobile and got away. Or tried to. Goddam. Donnie is one sick fuck."

"Not sick, just different," a voice said.

We turned, and there was Donnie standing near the open section of the wall. He had slipped in quietly. He was holding a flat, black automatic.

"I thought I was pretty clever," he said, "way I built this room after the kid escaped. Lucked out he killed himself. If only you two had been killed, that would have ended my problems."

"You almost had me convinced it was Tom," I said.

"What was it, the newspaper?"

"Yep," I said.

"I thought about it later, hoped you wouldn't think about it too hard. You know, I don't mean to do the things I do, but I can't help myself."

"Yeah you can," Leonard said. "You don't want to."

"You could be right," Donnie said.

"There's another alarm, ain't there?" Leonard said.

"Yeah. You killed the obvious one, but there's another. You tamper with one, it sets off the spare. Goes off at the house. Somehow, I figured it was you two. That newspaper slip I made."

Will glided in through the gap in the wall and came up behind Donnie. For a brief moment I thought we had lucked out, but he walked up and stood by his partner.

"Took you long enough," Donnie said to him.

"Came fast as I could," he said.

And then I got the rest of it. Will had worked for Donnie for years, been groomed, and then he became part of the operation. Donnie had created Will in his image. It was the two of them doing the torturing, the killing. I was waiting for the inevitable.

That's when a gun went off. I expected I had been shot, but that's not what happened. I watched as Donnie sagged, slightly. There was another shot, and he went down on one knee and dropped his gun. Blood seeped out of his right shoulder and out of his right leg, splashed onto the floor, looked orange in the harsh light.

Will had darted out of the gap at the sound of the first shot.

I turned. Leonard was holding a little revolver in his hand, an old-fashioned snub nose twenty-two. I looked back at Donnie. He was trying to pick up his gun.

"Nope, nope, nope," Leonard said, "or the next one gives you a hole in the head. Did you see that, Hap? I didn't miss either shot. Course I was aiming for his head with the first one."

I had forgotten I told Leonard to bring protection, and hadn't noticed the gun tucked beneath his shirt. I was glad, that for once, he had listened to me.

"Go get Will," Leonard said. "I got this one."

I raced past Donnie, kicking his gun to the side as I went, then I darted out the gap in the wall, through the front door and into the crisp night air. I could see Will running toward the tire shop. He was almost there. I jogged after him.

When I got to the shop, Will had already opened the door and slipped inside. I eased into the dark building and fetched up behind some tires on racks. There was a shot and a chunk of rubber flew out of one of the tires and hit me in the face, hard. That shot had missed me by inches.

I kept moving behind the rows of tires. The son-of-a-bitch had run in here to get a gun, and I had followed him inside, the way he had wanted. I was a duck in a shooting gallery.



There were three more pops, but all they did was ruin a couple more tires. At least he was a bad shot. I bent down behind the tires and tried to peek between a gap in them. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, and I could make out his shape on the landing above, framed by the moonlight slipping past a little window up there. He was squatting, the gun pointing in my general direction, waiting for me to stick my head out.

I pushed a tire loose from the top rack. It bounced when it hit the floor, and when it did Will popped off a nervous shot. I was already moving, back along the row of tires, and then under the landing above. I rushed my way along until I was pretty near under him. I glanced at the sagging timber that helped hold the top floor up. I charged it, hit it with my shoulder, heard it crack; the board, not my shoulder, though I was certainly feeling pain. I hit it again, and I could feel it move this time, and then a third time and it came down in an explosion of lumber, tires, dust and unidentified crap. I tried to get out from under it, but I was too slow. I don't know anyone could have been fast enough.

Junk was lying on me. It was heavy. I was trapped. Looking out from under the debris, I saw Will rise up from the floor uninjured. I had only succeeded in making him fall, and pinning myself under the wreckage. He looked about, spotted what he could see of me under the junk, and lifted his gun. There was a shot, and Will did a bit of sideways dance, then toppled to the floor.

I heard Leonard say, "Got 'em Boscoe," and then I passed out for awhile.

## 12

Leonard dragged me outside and propped my back against the tire shop. That's where I was when he slapped me awake.

"Damn, quit that," I said.

"How do you feel?" he said.

"Like a bunch of lumber fell on me and then my brother started slapping my face."

"I enjoyed that a little," Leonard said.

"Did you kill Will?"

"Boy did I."

"Donnie?"

"Yeah. I went ahead and shot him too. He kind of died in a gunfight, but I was the only one shooting. Wasn't like I could tie him up. I knew you needed help. I could hear the gunshots."

"Jesus, Leonard."

"Wasn't like he needed a room with a bunk for the rest of his life, sitting in some cell breathing stale air and making turds. He needed a bullet. You dumb ass, you should have took his gun with you."

"I didn't want to kill anyone."

"That's all right," Leonard said. "I did it for the both of us. I'm going to go back down there and fire off his gun a few times to make sure it looked like he put up a fight."

“That’s cold,” Leonard. “He was unarmed when you killed him.”  
“Yeah. He was.”

## 13

A crowd of people showed up, due to all the shooting. A light was shone in my face.

Before their arrival, Leonard had fired off Donnie’s gun so he could claim there was a shootout and that he had prevailed. The noise, along with all the other racket we had made, stirred the locals. By the time they arrived, Leonard was leaning against the wall next to me, his gun lying on the ground six feet away. Donnie’s gun was back in the formerly secret room, probably firmly placed in his hand by Leonard.

The county was called out. We ended up in the back of a deputy sheriff’s car, watching the car hood shimmer in the red-and-blue from the light bar. In time they brought us in for questioning and locked us up in county for a few days. Leonard at least had a conceal carry license, so illegally carrying a firearm wasn’t added to the list.

Brett came to visit. They let her give us food she brought from outside. I don’t think they’re supposed to do that, but once the county realized what Donnie and Will had been doing, they treated us well. They had discovered photographs of the kids that dated all the way back to the first murder, and the photos had been ugly. The poor kids’ dead and rotting bodies had been stacked in seats in the bookmobile and a timer on a camera had snapped away with Will and Donnie posing beside their wrecked remains like hunting trophies, which, in a way, I guess they were. There were all manner of things found on internet files. There were torture devices in Donnie’s house. It was a pretty slam-door case. I don’t know if they believed Leonard’s story about the shoot-out. But if they didn’t, no one said a word. There was also the fact that Donnie and Will had kept records of who the boys and how long they had kept them, as well as all they had done to them. Their records solved all the murders. The victims, with the exception of Harriet, (a relative’s DNA proved it was her) were unwanted kids, lost and forgotten, tossed out like used condoms.

I guess Tom Hoodalay still remains an asshole, and Nesbit needs a new owner for the tire and mechanic shop, not to mention some renovation.

We were back home pretty quick, though there was a bit of talk about us getting into trouble for breaking and entering, maybe a fine, a little jail time. That idea got shuffled and forgotten, thank goodness. No one really wanted to punish us for what happened to those two, not even for the lesser charges.

I brooded for a few days over Leonard shooting Donnie in cold blood, stayed home and didn’t go visit with him, didn’t even take his calls. Then Brett said, “Get over it. Leonard saved your life. And it isn’t the first time.”

“I know,” I said, “but I got to get right in the head. Killing doesn’t bother him. Me, I feel different.”

“You’ve killed, Hap, and if you had to, you’d do it again. Quit feeling sorry for yourself. I’m glad Leonard made sure you came home. Stop being a jackass.”

She was right. I called Leonard later that day. He answered, said, “You been pouting, haven’t you?”

“I have.”

“Yeah, well, I knew you’d get over it.”

“When it involves you, I always do.”

“Yep.”

“One question,” I said. “After all that, after all the things we’ve done, the deaths, how do you sleep?”

“Deeply.”

“I don’t.”

“I know.”

“But, thanks, Leonard.”

“You’re welcome. Still sore from all that crap falling on you?”

“A little. Nothing serious. Thanks for pulling that off of me too.”

“Welcome again. But you owe me. We working out today?”

“I need another day to feel bad about who I am.”

“How about you take this day to know that there won’t be anymore kids abused and murdered by those two, and you don’t have a hole in your head and about six feet of dirt over you? Want to do that?”

“That’s exactly what I’ll do,” I said.

“Alright, then. And Hap?”

“Yeah.”

“Go fuck yourself. Talk tomorrow.”

“Goodnight,” I said.

