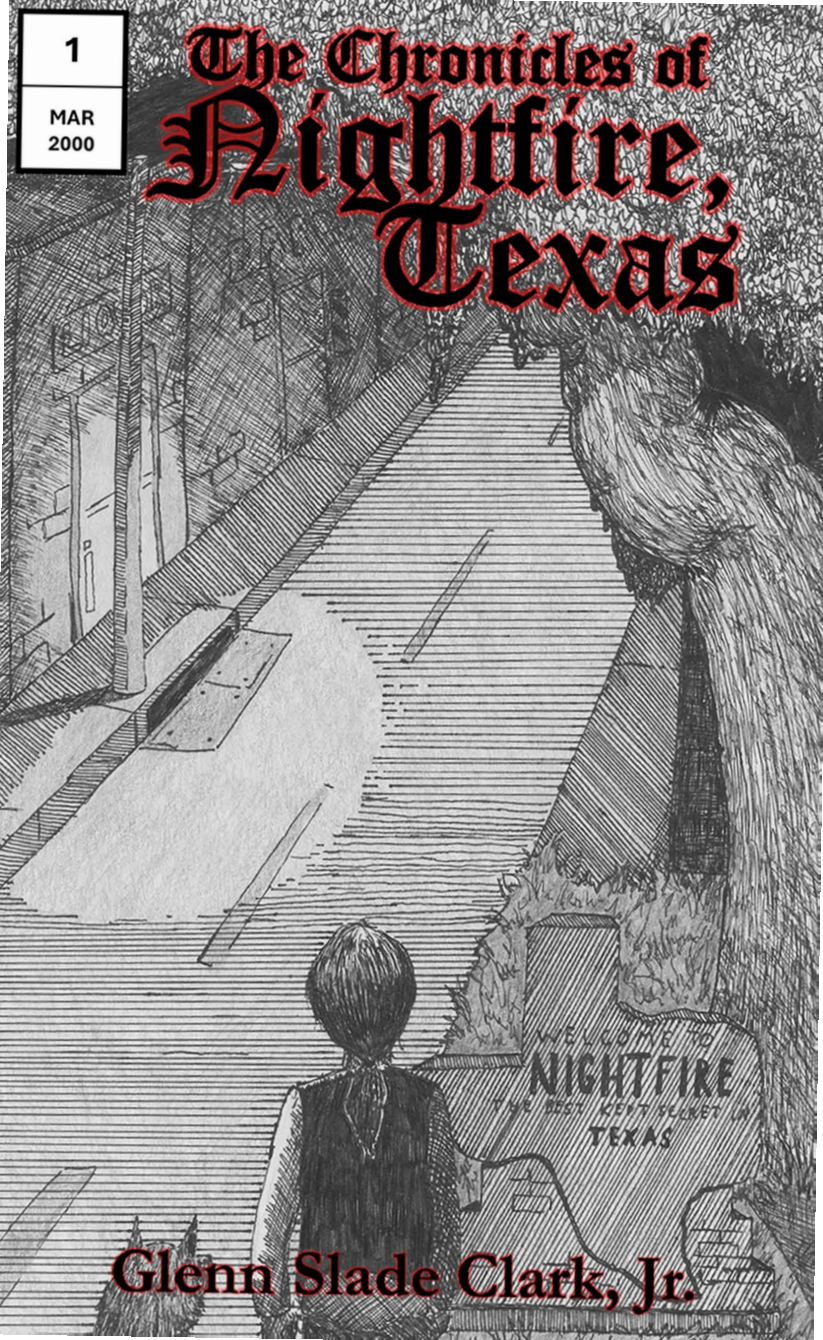


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The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas



Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

The Chronicles of
Nightfire,
Texas

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The Mech Valley Debacle

A Hero Before His Time

The Chronicles of
Nightfire,
Texas

CHAPTER 1

HOME COMING

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

CLARK
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2025

**The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas #1
“Homecoming”**

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First Web Fiction Edition: March 2000

Fourth PDF eBook Edition: January 2025

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Cover art by Ryan Fagan.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

ON THE CASUAL RACISM PRESENTED IN THIS SERIES

This is not an apology for the book you now hold in your hands. Rather, it is an explanation and an acknowledgement. It has become important to me, in these turbulent times, to make clear my viewpoints and my reasoning for the use of casual racism in the dialogue of the characters who inhabit this narrative.

The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas is a period drama. When I set the initial story in the mid-1970s, I delved into my own memories of that time. Though I was only a child, I still recall those years with crystal clarity. I wasn't old enough myself to follow the nuances of politics, but I had no illusions then that the White people all around me were not generally racist, or, to put it more

bluntly, more honestly, they were White supremacists, though they may all have denied it had they been put to the question directly; both to their accusers and to themselves. Racial slurs and unjust stereotypes peppered the vernacular whenever I left my house to play in the neighborhood or go to school. Racism was rampant, and it was treated as the norm. It was “casual.”

I feel fortunate to have been able to see it for what it was then, to be turned off by it even as a child, because in my own home, racism was not tolerated. It was not taught. White supremacy was never regarded as an acceptable viewpoint in my parents’ home. In fact, it was pointed out as an unforgiveable social evil whenever it was displayed in movies, television shows, literature, or interactions with openly racist relatives that my parents were there to guide me through.

The result of this was that my childhood was blessed with friends of all skin-tones and cultural backgrounds, and I never felt like anything was weird about that. But I did see the looks from some of my fellow White children, whose parents had raised them differently. I did

hear the slurs and the awful racist jokes and chants on the playground. It was, for me, an identifying characteristic of the 1970s and early 1980s. It was a characteristic that I saw less and less of as time went on, until, in the 1990s, I stopped seeing it altogether. Such are the blind and deaf gifts that come wrapped beneath the bow of cultural privilege.

It was important to me to illustrate this culture of open racism in my novels that were to be set in that time period. It was, and is, important to me to call it out; to not pretend that it never happened; to embrace the reality that people I otherwise loved and respected had a White supremacist view of the world, whether they recognized it within themselves or not.

In other words, even many of the people I looked to as the “good guys” in my childhood dropped racial slurs as though it were nothing; as though it had no power or impact on the world around them.

So, to the point of this author’s note, when I sat down to write what would become the first story arc of this series, I hadn’t heard these White

supremacist terms and viewpoints expressed so freely by anyone for some time. In my mind, it was a thing of the past that we were ashamed of as a society, and *everyone* knew it. In my privileged mind, putting these words into the mouths of my period-specific characters was a matter of historical accuracy that could never be misconstrued as condoning racism by *anyone*.

Then Barack Obama was elected president of the United States, and I woke up.

Suddenly, the attitudes of White supremacy, the irrational fear of Black people with power, was just as prevalent as it had been during my childhood, if not altogether more. It was the moment in history when I finally, truly, comprehended my own White privilege; when I saw that only through the eyes of White privilege could anyone possibly think we had ever been living in a post-racist society.

All at once, subplots I had mapped out for this series, regarding slavery and the civil rights movement, that I had earlier feared a modern audience would view as irrelevant, were more relevant than I had ever anticipated. These

subplots about the horrors of our racist past, I now saw as having the power to shine a light on our racist present.

Fast forward to today, and I would argue that White supremacy in this country is more openly rampant than it has been since the days of the American Civil War. Fascists and White supremacists have been given permission by a number of our recent political leaders to wave their flags proudly. In these times, it is clear to me that nothing presented in this work of fiction, regarding the casual racism I witnessed in the 1970s and '80s, “goes without saying.”

Anyone who has read the majority of my published work will know that the importance of human equality and diversity is a key element in my storytelling. It is a message that runs through almost everything that I have written over the past twenty-plus years. What sets this particular series apart is the fact that the racism is present, but it is never really addressed. It is never called out or condemned by the narrative. It simply is. The “bad guys” are racist. The “good guys” are racist. There is no distinction of this trait belong-

ing more to one side or the other, because that was precisely what I witnessed, growing up in Texas at that time.

This author's note is here for the sole purpose of calling the racist attitudes of the characters in this book out for precisely what they are meant to be. Again, I do not apologize for presenting history as I remember it. It is important to present as accurate a picture of our past as possible, so that we may learn from it, at appropriate times feel shame in it, and hopefully find ways to grow from it, which was always the goal with this series. The point, from the beginning, was always to expose the ugliness of our racist past, when White supremacy was a given and racism among White people was seldom counted as a vice.

While the characters' racism in this particular arc of the series is never addressed outright beyond the late addition of this forward, by *Volume II* the characters start to call it out and struggle with it openly, and by the forthcoming *Volume III*, the racial subplots of the series thus far will come to a head in a powerful way. But I

will never resolve these issues in this series. Racism will never be solved by these characters. Rather, they will be confronted by it, some of them will even wake up to it and struggle with it, and they will all make human choices, some for the better and some for the worse, because, even as we dip into a realm of vampires, ghosts, and supernatural horrors, this is, in the end, a story about humanity.

—Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.
Richardson, Texas
October 5, 2023

The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas

CHAPTER 1

HOME COMING

Nightfire, Texas
October 9, 1974
2:22 A.M.

“Ah. Home at last.” Valen took in a deep breath of the air in Nightfire, Texas, remembering. He put down his bags momentarily and turned around with a worried expression on his face. He spoke to his taller friend who stood on the opposite side of the little stone, Texas-shaped sign that read:

WELCOME TO
NIGHTFIRE

THE BEST KEPT SECRET IN
TEXAS

“Julius,” he said, “are you sure this is the best idea?”

“Absolutely. They’ll never be able to get to you here. This is the safest place in Texas, as far as they’re concerned.” He chuckled to himself. “As far as I’m concerned too, for that matter. I can already smell it, ever so faintly. You’ll be safe in Nightfire for as long as it takes.”

Valen seemed to ponder that. He then met Julius eye to eye. “Yes, I’m sure of that, but ... I meant ...”

Julius, knowing Valen as well as he did, understood what his friend was thinking, and a look of concern fell over him like a shadow. He stood for a moment, looking like a statue of some ancient god, his short, blond hair barely blowing in the slight breeze. “No,” he said at last. “You don’t need to worry about the people here either. It’s been too long. Surely you’re forgotten by now.” Julius smiled. “And even so, it’s not as though you’re going in alone.”

Valen locked eyes with the beast at Julius' side, and he smiled in spite of his apprehension. "What's the matter, girl? Not anxious to leave your Uncle Jules?" Valen looked up to see Julius rolling his eyes with amusement. The smile took on a somber tone. "I'm going to miss you, Julius. You've been a good friend. I'll stay in touch; let you know how things are going."

Julius nodded wanly. "Good. See that you do. But you'd better get going. It shouldn't be too hard to find your way in. The old Alexas mansion is still intact and in good shape, so I've heard. It may be in need of some minor repairs, but that's not bad, considering how long it's been unoccupied."

Valen nodded again, the wind a bit stronger now, as it caressed his long, dark brown hair. He reached into his pocket and removed a hairband, with which he easily pulled his elegant, wavy locks back into a ponytail. "I'm pleased to hear it." Valen looked over his shoulder at the town that awaited him, then he turned back to his traveling companion, with whom he was about to part ways. He chuckled with a fond recollection. "I wonder if this place has made up its mind yet."

Nightfire's always been somewhere on the line between a town and a city. Somewhere between urban and rural. Either way, this town's all Texas. That's one thing I've always been certain of. Take care of yourself, Julius."

"I've lasted this long, haven't I?" He grinned. "Godspeed, Valentinus. I'll keep you in my thoughts and prayers. And I'll send the rest of your things shortly."

Valen gave Julius one final farewell nod, then he turned, stooped, and picked up his luggage. "Come along, Raksha."

The wolf leapt eagerly from Julius' side, as she went to join her master. The pair walked into town, and Julius watched them until they had left his sight.

Mary Jean Donovan, better known to the people of Nightfire, Texas as "Mary the Witch," wandered out of her little, silver trailer home at the edge of town. It was the dead of night, and all was quiet to the ear, but there were great, distressing sounds to be heard by any with the sixth sense with which to hear them. Something

was not right. Something ominous had begun, and Mary Jean was restless. She needed to know what it was.

Mary Jean was fifty-two years old, and a hermit by choice. She had a very strong psychic gift, and she had eventually decided that living on the outskirts of town in a trailer home, seeing people only when it was for business, was much better than making actual friends. It was much better to see the fate of a business acquaintance than to see the fate of someone for whom she actually cared. And that's all there was to Mary Jean really, at this point. She saw precious little of her sister now, and even less of her sister's husband and daughter. Sadder still, she almost never saw her son, but she knew that he was on a worthy path, and that made it easier to cope with. Besides, she preferred things as they were. It was so much easier just being alone.

And as for her business, it all came quite naturally. Mary Jean told fortunes. She read palms and cards for show, but she could always see the future, at least in part, simply by gazing into a person's eyes. The people of Nightfire would mock her and tell outlandish stories about her,

she knew. But each in turn would come to her, seeking her insights; and Mary Jean would never lead them astray.

She listened for a sign. She watched for it under light of the stars. Nothing seemed unusual. Nothing out of place, save for that unsettling feeling that something was not right. Something ominous was in the works. Then again, it seemed to her that there was always something ominous in Nightfire. Sometimes, Mary Jean found herself thinking that surely the town must be damned. The land upon which it had been built, or the very town itself, must have been cursed at some point in its history. But the past was not her business, so she had never taken the time to research it. Though, many a teenager had claimed to have seen the ghost at the Witch's Tree—a famous tree from whence a witch had allegedly been hanged long ago—most dismissed it as an urban legend. Even to Mary Jean, it was simply an intriguing possibility.

Her eyes caught something moving on the wind. She reached out and pulled it from the air to examine it closer. "Wolf's hair. How strange." As far as she knew, there were no wolves in

Nightfire. Just then, a much more dynamic image caught her watchful gaze, fluttering through the dark night, taking a position on a bare tree branch not far from her at all. Suddenly, the feeling in her gut gave way to knowledge. “Butterfly that flies by night. In October no less. Yes.” She nodded to herself, before making the sign of the cross over her chest. “Vampire.” She backed away, never letting the colorful insect out of her sight, until she was safely back inside of her home, behind locked door and under the protection of many a magical trinket.

Twenty-three-year-old Raymond Don breathed a sigh of relief, as he fell down to the bed, clutching the hotel towel with which he had just been drying his hands and face. Now that he had buried his little treasure and cleaned away any evidence of his digging, he could at last take some time to process all that he’d been through, and how he’d been led back to Nightfire after so many years of traveling the globe. It seemed to Ray that he’d been everywhere. Everywhere except Vietnam. But the Vietnam conflict was

over. President Ford, just under a month ago, had offered amnesty to all of the draft-dodgers and deserters of the armed forces, under the condition that they serve in a civil capacity for two years. Ray could handle that. It wasn't Ray's style, and he actually felt that the amnesty should be unconditional, but he didn't have much choice. He'd needed to get far away from Europe. He'd needed to go home, and Ford's unpopular, conditional amnesty offer had made his retreat possible. So what were two years? He was young enough still not to be fazed by such things.

Ray was by no means a hippie. He liked to consider himself a stronger breed of rebel. He had no use for tripping out and running around stark naked in front of all his heavily sedated friends singing about peace. He was more about control. Ray had torn up his draft papers, because, like the hippies, he didn't believe in the war. However, unlike the hippies, Ray didn't see standing against an order to kill and die for a cause that wasn't his own as an excuse to waste away his life and destroy his mind. Ray had a sharp mind, and he was a seeker—always on the

prowl for things he wasn't supposed to know, always getting into trouble. The world was too full of places to see, things to learn and do. Why would anyone want to sit around and drop acid all day? It seemed a terrible waste to Ray.

On the other hand, it was his natural tendency to uncover things he wasn't supposed to, his natural tendency to get himself into trouble, that had sent Ray running home again after years of adventure. He refused to regret the way that things had gone. He would make up for the stories he couldn't tell with the abundance of stories that he could. He had been so many places and seen so many things. He especially couldn't wait to tell his friend Elizabeth Krandall all about it. He felt certain that he'd seen and done far more than even she now. Especially with his last little exploit. But he wasn't going to think about that one. Not now. Not for a while. Maybe later, when he could cash in on it. It was something that, for now, he *had* to forget. Not only because of the danger that might come to him, but also for the fact that thinking on the things he'd learned, the ancient secrets he'd managed to uncover, caused him to literally go

into screaming fits. He knew he'd need to think on it. He'd need to let it all out, process. But for now he would ignore it. It was literally buried where no one would think to look, and he would have access at any time. He would forget it and pretend that it hadn't happened for a little while. He would wait until Lee made contact. If Lee got out okay, then everything was going to be all right.

Ray tried to think on other things. Nixon was gone, though pardoned. The long, national nightmare that he'd been evading was finally over. So what? As far as Ray saw it, the country was still falling apart. "The end is near," he spoke to himself groggily. He then chuckled shortly, because he really didn't care. After all, the United States of America was really such a small and trivial thing to be concerned with, wasn't it? Ray yawned mightily as his thoughts began to drift and muddle. His burning eyelids refused to stay open.

Consumed by an exhaustion that had been building in him for months, Raymond fell to silent dreaming; though his silent dreams were filled with screaming terrors.

It was a new day. The sun had barely begun to rise. Thirty-seven-year-old William Cody, Nightfire's new sheriff as of two months ago, had not even been able to enjoy his ritual wake-up cup of coffee before Beth Green had called the station. Now he was standing in the house across the street from hers, staring at a dead old woman, who was lying in a pool of blood. "This is too much," he said with a shake of his head. Nightfire's small police force was busily trying to make sense of it all.

Janie Alberts had been a sweet, eighty-year-old woman. No enemies, as far as anyone knew. It just didn't make sense. "So, what've we got here, boys?"

"Murder, Sheriff."

"I can see that, Earl." The sheriff took off his big hat, set it on the table, and ran his hands over his thick, brown mustache. He then let out an irritated sigh. "What I meant was, how did it happen? Do we have anything to point our pistols at? Come on, Earl, wake up!"

The officer looked sheepishly away. “Sorry, Sheriff. Looks like somebody ripped out her throat.” Earl’s voice began to quiver. “Ripped it to shreds, I ... I mean ... she goes ... went to my church, Sheriff. I’m not ... doing too ...”

“Aw, shit, Earl. Get outa here, boy. There ain’t nothin’ left for ya’ ta do.” Sheriff Cody patted his slowest officer on the shoulder and watched him leave the house. The man was clearly more of a mess than usual. This was not something that happened on a regular basis in Nightfire, Texas. Sheriff Cody shook his head. “Dirk? Beau? What’s goin’ on here? What are we lookin’ at?”

Dirk stood from where he had kneeled by the body. He was visibly shaken, but he was also much stronger than most men on the force. “Well, sir, it’s like an animal did this. I mean, Earl was dead on. She’s pretty badly ... ripped open. There’s no other word for it. And there’s something else here too. I don’t really like the impli—”

Dirk was interrupted by the sound of someone slurping.

Both Dirk and the sheriff turned to stare at Beau, who was drinking a steaming cup of coffee nonchalantly. “What?”

“Beau, what the hell are you doin’? We’re standin’ here with poor ol’ Janie murdered on the floor, and you’re drinkin’ the coffee she left burnin’ on the stove!”

“Actually, sir, she didn’t leave it. We made it when we came out here. None of us had time to get our coffee at the station. Sorry.” He added as an afterthought, “Want some?”

“God damn it, Beau! Try to show a little respect here! This woman is dead, and your dirtyin’ up her dishes like you own the place.” The sheriff sighed again, then added, “Now get me a cupa that shit and let’s get back to work here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now what’s all this you’re sayin’, Dirk? Somethin’ else you said?”

“Yeah. Take a look. I think we’ve got ourselves a serious wacko.” Dirk lifted something out of the old woman’s hand with a pair of tweezers. It was a card of some sort.

“Who the hell is that supposed to be?”

Beau spoke from beside Sheriff Cody as he handed him a mug full of coffee. “Looks like Jonathan Frid to me.”

“Jonathan Frid? Who the hell is that? Should I know him?”

“No,” came Dirk’s voice. “He’s an actor. Don’t you remember Barnabas Collins? The vampire character on *Dark Shadows* a few years back?”

“Oh yeah! Hell yeah. My wife used to watch that show all the time. Always made her want a bigger house.” The implications suddenly dawned on him. “Shit! So we’ve got some sick bastard, wantin’ us to think he’s some sort of vampire, rippin’ the throats outa helpless, old ladies. Shit on me!

“Well, we’re gonna find out who did this if it’s the last thing I do. Now that I’m sheriff, we’ll be operating under a strict no tolerance policy. In other words, nobody gets away with shit! And there’s only one thing I want this piece of shit murderin’ psycho to have in common with Barnabas Collins. Cancellation.” The sheriff took a sip of his coffee. “Damn! That is some good shit! What brand is that?”

“It’s Folgers, sir,” Beau answered.

“Well shit. I guess I’ll have to switch. This knocks the piss outa Maxwell House.”

Morning changed quickly enough to noon, which, naturally and without great notice, changed to *afternoon*. It was 4:45 by the time Bradley Stevens walked through the doors of Dan Parker’s. Dan Parker’s was a bar, grill, and arcade where Nightfire’s denizens of all ages tended to accumulate. It was near the center of what passed for downtown Nightfire.

Bradley was seventeen years old, a junior at Nightfire High School. His shoulder-length, brown hair hung loose and feathery, creating the perfect frame for his brandy-brown eyes and his glowing, white smile. He was just nearly six feet tall, and of course still growing. He wore a tight-fitting, long-sleeved shirt and blue denim bell bottom pants. He strode into the dining area of Dan Parker’s as though he were at home.

“Just look at him!” Ann said to the other girls at her table. “He is so adorable! I swear, he

looks so much like David Cassidy it's unreal! I'm so lucky he's all mine!"

"My ass he looks like David Cassidy! Nobody's that cute. Not in Nightfire anyway," Helen said.

Dori, who was one of the two older girls at the table, laughed at Helen. "Yeah. You're just mad that they took *The Partridge Family* off the air!"

"They're not totally off the air, Dori."

"Oh!" Ann said excitedly. "Do you watch that cartoon too?"

"Yeah!" Helen said, and the two girls broke into laughter.

Mati looked over to Dori. "Were we that silly when we were in high school?"

Dori grinned wickedly. "Not me."

Doris Gardener and Matilda Preston were both nineteen years old and enjoying their first year out of school. They had been best friends since the second grade, when Matilda had walked in on Doris French kissing Rubin Santana in the girls' restroom and vowed never to tell. It had eventually become the most innocent secret that the two girls had kept.

Annabelle Maryweather, while a year younger, had been their friend throughout high school. They had grown close through their involvement in the youth group at Nightfire United Methodist Church.

Helen Preston was the youngest of the four. She was only sixteen years old, but she looked much older. Senior guys were always asking her out, and Helen never complained. At the same time, however, Helen remained dissatisfied with the boys she dated. They were all just so immature.

Bradley's eyes searched the room until he found his prize: Ann. Bradley and Ann had been going out for a month now, and he was even beginning to think that he was in love. Of course, he had thought that several times in the past, but this time, he told himself, it was different. He walked over to the girls and pulled up a chair.

"Hey!" He grinned brightly. "What's up?" The girls all greeted him, and he took notice of Helen, eyeing the decorated bell bottom jeans and the bandanna in her hair. "So, Helen, you goin' for the Rhoda look or what?"

Helen wanted to be mad, but she just smiled. “Shut up, Bradley.”

“I don’t know. That theme song sort of fits you. Na na na na na na na na—”

Ann reached over and grabbed his lanky hand. “Stop picking on Helen, Bradley. Pick on me instead.”

“Hm. Maybe later. Grrrowl. You wanna go out tonight?”

“Sure, but where? What is there to do in Nightfire that we haven’t done already a million times?”

“Well, there’s always—”

“Don’t *even* say Hilltop! Oh, gag! That place may be fine for you and the boys, but I think it’s a total bore!”

Bradley seemed amused. “How ’bout a movie then?”

“There’s nothing playing here that we haven’t already seen! I’m holding out for *The Godfather, Part II* anyway.”

“Well then how ’bout...” the goofiest grin that Ann had ever seen suddenly corrupted Bradley’s beautiful face.

“What?” she asked.

“The Witch’s Tree. Just you and me, babe.”

“Hm. That could be pretty groovy.”

“Groovy my ass!” Helen interjected.

“Helen,” her sister scolded, “stop talking about your ass. And don’t curse in front of boys. It’s an official girl secret that we even know how.”

Bradley laughed and looked at disgruntled Helen. “What ass? Let’s see it. You’ve got me all kinds of curious now.”

Helen blushed, and Ann slapped Bradley playfully.

“What? I was just teasin’.”

“You’re always teasing Helen. I think you like her.”

“Hm.” Bradley took in the view of all the girls at the table. “I like all your friends, babe.” He then made a little barking sound and bit the air in Helen’s general direction.

“Stop!” Ann was trying not to laugh. “You can be such a goob sometimes! I swear! You’re starting to sound just like Jeff!”

“*Goob?* Is that the best you can come up with? *Goob?* Oh! Oh, I’m so hurt!” He broke out into laughter.

Ann was getting a little bit irritated. “You’re lucky you’re so cute, Bradley Stevens!”

“Oh, no! It’s Queen Beth!” Dori said under her breath. All of the teenagers turned to look in annoyance. Beth Green was always scolding them and calling their mothers to tell them what they did wrong and how they should keep a closer watch on their children. She honestly thought she was in charge of everyone’s affairs. And she was the biggest gossip in town, which actually said a lot, considering that gossip was Nightfire’s number one pastime.

“Did you hear?” Dori continued. “She found Janie Alberts murdered this morning! If the whole town didn’t know what a freako Beth was she’d probably be a suspect herself! She told Sheriff Cody that she noticed Janie didn’t get the paper off her porch at the usual time, so she got worried on account of Janie’s old age and all. Then, when Janie didn’t answer the phone or the door, Beth found an unlocked window and crawled into the house.”

“What a freak,” Bradley said in disbelief. “And she’s supposed to be a role model to all us

hooligans.” He considered. “I didn’t know Janie Alberts.”

“Well,” Mati put in, “she went to Saint Paul, and she was pretty old. I don’t think she did more than church. I think Ned probably knew her.”

Bradley grinned. “Hell yeah, Ned knew her. In the Biblical sense, I’ll bet. Ned’s shaggin’ all the old ladies in Nightfire! That old man’s crazy!”

“Anyway,” Dori continued, “she hovered around the murder scene all day and kept sending out reports via the gossip chain. Turns out somebody ripped Janie’s throat out and put a picture of Barnabas Collins in her hand.”

“Sick!” Bradley exclaimed. “Do they know who did it?”

“Nope. It could be anybody. And whoever it was is still at large.”

Helen looked terrified. “Oh my god! What if he gets one of us? Oh, God! I hope they catch him before I go to bed tonight. I get so scared by stuff like this!”

“It’s true,” Mati said. “I took her to see *The Exorcist* last year, and I thought she’d never

recover. She slept in my mom and dad's room for a month and a half."

"Oh, gosh!" Helen said. "Don't talk about that movie!" She covered her ears.

Bradley laughed. "Wouldn't it stink if Mati got possessed by Satan one night and went into Helen's room, and her head started spinnin' around, and—"

"Bradley! Stop it!" Ann scolded sincerely. "She really gets scared."

"Sorry." He looked at Helen. "Chicken."

"What is going on here?" All levity died with the sound of Beth's voice. "Bradley Stevens! What would your mother think! Young men do not frighten girls like that! That is entirely juvenile behavior! I just never!"

"Well," Dori spoke smartly, "maybe you should, Beth. It might knock that nail out of your—"

"Oh!" Beth wailed. "I have never been so insulted in my life! You just wait till your mother hears from me, Doris Gardener! You just wait!"

"I will, Beth. Don't sweat it. I'll probably smart off to her too, considering that I'm all grown up and all."

“Grown up my foot! Nineteen is not grown up, Doris! And you, most certainly, have some growing up left to do!” Beth stormed off, having finished whatever business she had at Dan Parker’s, and she headed home to her precious telephone.

“Oh my gosh!” Bradley nearly wheezed, before he broke into uproarious laughter along with the rest of the table. “I can’t believe you sometimes, Dori!”

“Well, she was asking for it. The bitch. She needs to mind her own damned business for once. What does that mean anyway? ‘I never!’ It’s something only old ladies say. I swear! And she’s not but five years older than your big broth ... er.” Dori thought better, all too late, about what she had just said. Everyone stared at Bradley expectantly. “I’m sorry, Bradley.”

Bradley laughed it off, unnerved by the awkward silence. “Guys! Come on. So my brother died. I know. It was hard. But come on, it was four years ago! I’m cool. You can talk about him in my presence for God’s sake. He was my brother. I *like* talking about him.”

“Gosh,” Mati ventured. “It seems so weird when you think about it. I mean, even though it’s been four years. Donny just doesn’t seem like someone who could ... die. You know? I mean, we were in youth group with him. He was just so ... alive!”

“I know,” Dori said. “He was always the life of the party. He was so funny. Remember how much trouble he and Ray used to get into together?”

“Oh, I know!”

The girls laughed, and Bradley tried to laugh with them, but all he wanted to do was hear them talk more. He missed his brother, and there was so much that he had missed out on. He had only been in Confirmation when his brother was a senior. He had never been in youth group with him like Dori and Mati. He loved to hear the stories they had. He loved to picture it in his head. He did remember all the trouble that Donny had gotten into with Ray though. He also remembered all the trouble that he himself had gotten into *because* of Donny and Ray. He sometimes wondered if it had contributed to his father’s heart attack.

When Bradley thought about the deaths of his father and older brother, he felt so much older than he was. It was a lot to have been through in seventeen years. More than anyone else he knew of. But then, he knew he wasn't the only person in Nightfire to have lost a loved one in Vietnam. He wished his brother had run away with Ray and Lee when he'd had the chance.

Helen thought about Ray, now that he'd been mentioned. She had only been eleven when he'd left the country, but she remembered him fondly. Eleven-year-old boys are still into cars, bikes, and baseball, but eleven-year-old girls are always in love. Helen had suffered the most ferocious crush on Raymond Don. She sometimes wondered if that contributed to why she never got very serious with any of the boys she dated. No one was Ray. No one even came close.

"I miss Ray, too," Bradley spoke solemnly. "It was always like I had two older brothers, and not just one. You know?"

"Yeah," Mati said. "Wow. It's like, everybody's gone. It's just so weird. To think that they were here, and it seemed like the whole town belonged to them at times, and now, just like

that, they're gone. They've been gone a while now, and they'll never be back."

Just then the door opened, and Jeffrey Mason burst in boisterously. "Woo-hoo! I knew I'd find you here! What's up, big B.S.?"

Bradley snickered without turning to face the senior football player. "I don't know," he muttered playfully to his female companions. "Should I respond to that?"

"It's your life," Ann said. She, however, was not at all amused.

Jeffrey came up to the table, sweat dripping down his long, black hair. Sweat causing the shirt he wore to cling to the sculpted muscles of his chest. He slapped the younger male on the shoulders, "You keepin' these bitches in line?"

"Shouldn't you be in practice or something?" Bradley turned his head slightly to see behind him and smirked at his sweaty friend.

"Shit. I don't know. Maybe so. So you wanna go hang out at Hilltop? Me an' the guys are gonna go up there an' puff the magic dragon, if you know what I mean." Jeffrey giggled mischievously.

“Nah, I’m gonna hang here for a while. Then I got a date with Ann. What the hell is wrong with you, man? You’re sweatin’ like a beast!”

Jeffrey laughed. “Yeah! Me an’ a couple of the guys just beat the shit out of three niggers.”

Bradley pulled away and turned his chair completely to face Jeffrey. “Jeff, man. That’s not cool.”

Jeffrey continued to laugh. “It was great! They were the three biggest niggers I’ve ever seen! And they took off blubbering like a bunch of fat-lipped babies! You should have seen it, Bradley! We were rolling!”

“So what did they do to you?”

“I don’t know. Looked at us funny.” He chuckled. “No, really. They started it. You know I’m not into all that racist shit, man. They started it, and we finished it! I swear!” He giggled some more.

Bradley shook his head. “And this guy’s going away to seminary next year.”

“You sure you don’t wanna go to Hilltop, man?”

“Yeah. Say hi to everybody for me. You sure they’re all gonna be there?”

“Of course they’ll be there.” Jeff shook his head as he walked away. “What else is there to do in Nightfire?” Jeff threw the doors wide open, as was his custom, and he almost ran into the man standing on the other side. As Jeffrey took off to join his friends at Hilltop, the man walked in, looking a bit perplexed.

“Who’s this guy?” Mati asked.

“He looks new to town, if you ask me,” Doris said. “And you know me. If I ain’t seen him, he ain’t from around here.”

Helen rolled her eyes. “What a slut!”

Doris only laughed at this, as she continued to stare down the new guy. “Hm. He looks kind of pretty.”

“Aren’t you seeing somebody, Dori?” Bradley asked.

“Sure. Lots of ’em,” she said with a sly grin and a wink.

Bradley shook his head, but he could not repress his smile.

“I leave no stone unturned. If you catch my meaning,” Dori said.

“I’ll just pretend I didn’t,” Bradley said with a smile. “And you keep your hands away from my stones, Doris.”

Dori laughed, and she continued to watch the stranger. He seemed unsure what to do with himself. He was just sort of standing there, surveying the room. “I don’t know. There is something familiar about him, now that I think on it. I can’t place it, though. He looks like ...” Dori studied him from the distance. She tried to place his fair complexion, his well-groomed, shiny blond hair, his large, blue eyes that seemed to sparkle even from across the room. It hit her suddenly, and a jolt of energy unexpectedly surged through her body, sending her instantly to her feet. “Ray!”

Everyone turned to look.

“Shit! Ray! Over here!”

The man suddenly lost his look of perplexity and replaced it with a glowing, white-toothed smile. “Doris? Doris Gardener?”

“You better believe it!” Doris ran to him then and flung her arms around him.

He laughed and returned her sweet welcome. He stood back. "Wow! You sure have grown up! How old are you now?"

"Nineteen." She spun around to show him every angle of herself. "And all grown up. We were just talking about you! Isn't that wild?"

The others at the table seemed not to have made up their minds that this man was in fact their Ray. When he lit up even more and began walking towards them, they made up their minds with great enthusiasm. They bombarded him with questions, wanting to know where he'd been, how long he'd been back, how long he was staying, everything.

Ray laughed at them. "Hold on, hold on! Let me figure this out first. He instantly grabbed Bradley and held him to his side. "You need no introductions, squirt. You look about the same, 'cept maybe a little bit girlier. What's with the hair? You goin' hippie on me?"

"What about you?" Bradley pulled back and nudged Ray on the arm. "I couldn't tell who you were at first without the rest of it!" He reached up and mussed the other's shining hair.

“Hey! I got old.” He grinned. “Actually, I just felt like a change a few years back. It’s hot in Africa, man. Can’t stand all that hair makin’ it even worse.”

“Africa? You went to Africa for all this time?”

Ray chuckled. “No, you little cum stain, I was all over the place.”

Dori broke in. “’Cept Vietnam, right, my Artful Dodger?”

A haunted look passed over him, and just as quickly fled. “That’s right. You don’t blame me do you?”

“Honey, you just keep on lookin’ like that, and I’ll never blame you for anything.”

“Oh please! You are such a tramp, Doris!” Helen all but shouted. She was on a very upsetting sort of mental rollercoaster at the moment, and she had no stomach for it. Ray Don had just walked through the doors of Dan Parker’s for the first time in five years, looking as romance novel perfect as he ever had, and Doris was already shamelessly trying to sink her hooks into him. She knew it wasn’t rational, but she felt a bit betrayed.

Ray glanced at the youngest girl without smiling, for only an instant, then he looked away and giggled. He saw Mati standing just beside the younger girl. He reached out and took her in his arms. "Mati, dear! You look astonishing!"

"Thanks," she said as she stood back by her sister and blushed. "You're not doin' too bad yourself. Do you still sing?"

"Ha! Not lately. I haven't really had the urge since ..." He looked to Bradley, "... since I left," he lied quickly. He didn't want to bring up Donny's death right then. Not in front of Bradley. He was still unsure whether Bradley blamed him for what had happened. He wasn't even sure whether or not he blamed himself for it yet. Matters for another time.

He looked at the young girl beside Mati. "Hi." He held out his hand. "Ray Don. Pleased to meet you."

Helen was horror struck! *He doesn't even remember me at all! He doesn't know who I am! I'm such an idiot!* She had no idea how to react. She wanted to throw up and feared that she would. *So stupid! How could I be so stupid!* She just stood there, staring at him.

Mati was quick to jump in and save her baby sister. She slapped Ray's hand away playfully and scoffed. "Don't play stupid, Ray! You know who this is!"

Ray looked at Mati quizzically. He really did not have any idea. "I ... um ..."

"Helen!" Mati said. "Don't you remember Helen?"

"Helen, Helen ... uh ..." He searched his brain for any Helen he had known in Nightfire, and his mind came up blank. "No." He looked very apologetically to Mati's hard gaze.

"My baby sister! Don't you remember my —?"

"Oh!" Ray slapped his forehead, not knowing how he could have forgotten. "Your little sister! That's right! How could I forget! We used to laugh about how she wet her bed until she was in third grade!"

Oh, God!!! Helen wanted to scream! She could not remember ever having suffered through a more humiliating moment in her entire life. She wanted to pull out her hair and run out into the street screaming like a mad woman. Instead, dumbfounded, she just stood there

stupidly, saying nothing, appearing to register nothing, looking to all the world around her like an absolute moron.

Ray whistled. “Wow, Helen. Wow. I would never have recognized you. You certainly have changed.” He seemed to drift, staring at her. “For the better, of course.”

Helen smiled. She didn’t know how much more of this up and down roller coaster she could take. She tried to avoid his stare, and her cheeks began to warm.

Ray went on, shaking his head and looking around at everybody. “I go away for a little while, and everybody gets—”

“Tits,” Dori cut him off.

Bradley laughed out loud, once again charmed by Dori’s blunt manor.

Ann rolled her eyes.

Ray looked over at the younger man, still standing at his side. “Yeah, you’re right.” He reached over and squeezed Bradley’s left pec sensuously. “Hey, sailor. Buy me a drink?”

“Hands off my man, man!” Ann said.

Everyone laughed at this, and the chattering continued for a long while. The six of them sat

down, and Ray bought everyone a Dr. Pepper and told them about the time he was in a camp that was attacked by lions. He told them about being thrown off of a ship and circled by a shark before Lee had managed to rescue him. He almost told them about being arrested in France, and how he had escaped. He stopped himself. He saw where his tales of adventure were going. If he told them about that, he would have to tell them *why* he had been arrested under false charges. He would have to tell them *why* he had been tossed off of a ship in the middle of the North Atlantic. He would have to tell them about Ireland and Rome.

“So why would someone just toss you off a boat like that, man? What did you do to tick him off?” Bradley asked innocently.

Ray’s eyes shifted nervously. “Well ... he thought I had something of his ... employer’s. But ... I didn’t.” *That sounds good. Don’t have to tell them that I had given it to Lee by then, or what it was.* “You know. Simple case of mistaken identity.” He looked at his watch. “Well, I’d better get going, back to the hotel. I have some stuff to do before tomorrow.” He stood up to leave. “But I’m here

now. At least for two years.” He laughed. “So I’ll see y’all around.”

Everyone said their farewells, and as Ray walked out, Bradley got up to follow him, leaving the girls to chat about the whole thing. “Hey!” He caught him at the door. “I’ll walk you back to the hotel.”

Ray smiled. “Good.” The pair walked on.

“So, anyway,” Ray said, “I stopped in to have a little chat with good ol’ Sheriff Gilespe earlier today. Turns out he’s moved on to other things.”

Bradley considered the whole story of Sheriff Gilespe’s nervous breakdown and subsequent commitment to the nut house for long term “rest.” He laughed to himself. “Yeah. I guess that’s one way to look at it.”

Ray gave the younger man a puzzled sort of look, but then he went on as they walked. “So now it’s Will Cody. I always thought he’d move to the top. So I said, ‘Hey, Willy! I’m turning myself in! Let’s talk about Ford.’

“Then he doesn’t even get off the phone to ask me how I’ve been. Dirk tells me he’s got his

hands full with a murder. So the good sheriff just waves me off, puts the phone down to his chin, says, ‘Welcome home. You got forty-eight hours to get a job, or I’ll shoot ya’.’ Then he went back to his call. So I left and came here. I guess I’ll go to the job placement office tomorrow morning and tell ’em my situation.” Ray forced a smile.

Bradley just looked up at him. “I’m glad you’re back, Ray. I’ve missed you.”

“Yeah,” Ray said. “I don’t know. It’s crazy. I went away and saw the big, wide open world, and still I managed to miss this place. In the dustiest corner of my heart, I really missed this messed up, little town. And everybody in it.” He was silent for a moment, then, “So how’s your family? Your mom, your siblings?”

“Mom’s fine. Still worries too much. Brendan’s always doing stupid shit. He’s nine now. And Kate’s gonna be seven tomorrow. She’s already boy crazy.” He thought for a moment. “You should go see Donny. We got him a real nice tombstone, you know? Right by Dad. We used some of the extra money Dad left us to put a nice, little bench out there. Just like Dad always

said he wanted, so we could go and sit with him for a while when we visited.”

Ray stopped walking, and Bradley followed suit. “Bradley,” he weighed his words carefully, “I understand. You know. If you hate me for what happened to Donny.” His eyes started to water. “If you ... blame me. I couldn’t *make* him leave. I couldn’t do anything.”

Bradley was touched on the deepest level by Ray’s offering; his willingness to be a target for Donny’s loved ones. “Ray,” he put a hand on his friend’s shoulder, “I don’t blame you. None of us do. Not even Donny. He loved you right up to the end. I know that because they took his last letter home right off of his body. We got it about a week after we got him home. So we hadn’t gotten it yet, when you called and we had to tell you what happened. But he talked about you in it. He talked about how much he missed talking to you, because he had so much to talk about, and he talked about how right you had been. How he should have gone with you, but he never would have known it had he not gone to Vietnam first. He quoted Rhett Butler. He said that if he got shot, that he would laugh at himself for being an

idiot. And he said that Ray better laugh at him too. He said you were all that kept him going. Thoughts of getting home and laughing with you about the whole, terrible thing. Turning all of the horrors he'd seen into tasteless and irreverent jokes as only you could help him to do. He never once said a harsh word about you for doing what you felt was right. Not once in any of his letters." There was a pain in Bradley's heart, but it was a warm pain. He felt the ache of his missing brother, but it was mixed with the tugging on his heart by the joy at having Ray back; knowing that Ray was here to stay, at least for a while. No tears left Bradley's eyes though, for he had cried as much as he could during the last four years in mourning for his brother. He was too happy now. He had the next best thing to Donny, and his world seemed more complete than it had in a great, long while.

Ray wanted to sob. He wanted to let go of everything and just break down, weeping, and crumble into nothing on the ground.

Instead, just as the excruciating emotion threatened to push all of his tears through his eyes, he laughed. He laughed hard. Without

warning, he grabbed hold of Bradley and hugged him as he laughed. "I loved your brother too." *And I love you*, he thought. *I'll be as devoted to you as I ever was to Donny.*

When the hug had ended, Bradley laughed too. "So who all knows you're back?"

Ray shrugged. "Well, just you guys and the cops I guess."

"Didn't you even let your parents know you were back in the States?"

"Yeah right! I really want *them* to know. My mother who cries in shame whenever I'm mentioned. My father, the W.W. II vet from Hell. I really want him to drive his old ass down to Nightfire and beat me into the ground. No. I'm through with them. They moved away, when I was seventeen! I tried talking to them before I left. No. I've got nothing left to say."

"What about Tom?"

"Tom." Ray looked suddenly defeated. "No. I haven't talked to Tom. I'm pretty sure he'll hate me too."

"You don't know that, Ray. I think you're worried over nothing."

"Really? Why's that?"

“Tom was like a father to you! A *real* father, not your biological father. He never turned on you.”

“But he thought I should have gone to Vietnam. He thought it was cowardly to run.”

“But did he damn you for it? No. He let you disagree with him. He never tried to hold you back from making your own choices. He never tried to threaten you. He let you be a man. He let you choose. So what if he would have done things differently? You can’t hide from him. He sees you as a son, you know? And he’s gonna know you’re back sooner or later. You’re gonna have to face him. He was always good to you. He deserves that. Don’t you think?”

“Yes.” Ray looked to the sky and groaned. “Oh, God! I can’t wait to have everything settled here! I can’t wait to have all this stress off my back!” He smiled at Bradley, and he sighed. “All right. I’ll go see Old Tom. I’ll go see him tomorrow. Does he still work over at the *Nightfire Chronicle*?”

“Yeah. And he’s still living on the ranch.”

“Good. Fine. Let’s go to the hotel.”

Bradley laughed at his friend's disposition. "Okay."

Just as the pair turned a corner, and the hotel was in sight, a scuffle caught their attention. A young Hispanic boy was yelling at a young Black boy. Bradley moaned. "Oh, shit. The Santanas. Fuck."

Ray laughed. "The Santanas? You mean like that scrawny little prick Rubin? Looks like he's up to no good, same as always."

"No." Bradley shook his head. "That's not Rubin. That's Herman."

"Ha! Herman! He looks just like his arrogant cousin!"

"I think you're gonna find that Rubin's changed. Well, physically. He's still arrogant. So are you. I think that's why y'all never got along. It does look like trouble though. It always is with them. They're always starting shit. Well, Rubin's not so bad anymore, and Juan actually tries to keep 'em all in line. It's just that little Herman creep!"

The two listened in on the heated debate. "I'm gonna cut you up, nigger! You better hand it over! I know you took it!"

“I didn’t take shit, bro! Hold up! Why you pickin’ on me?”

“ ’Cause you’s the only nigger in the store, so who else is gonna run off with my wallet!” Herman, big for fifteen, but scrawny nonetheless, shoved the other teen up against the Santanas’ green car and put a finger in his face. “Tell you what, Sambo. I’m gonna count to three, and you’re gonna hand me the wallet. Or else I’m gonna kick your Black ass all over the street!”

“Look, man! I don’t want no trouble ...”

“One.” Breaking his word, Herman punched the other boy in the face with all his might. The Black teen flailed his arms, obviously having avoided fights all his life. He tried to scramble away, but the stronger boy pulled him back and kned him in the groin. Then he punched him again. “You wanna tell me you don’t have it now, nigger? You want me to get Sheriff Cody on your ass?”

Bradley looked over to Ray, who was fuming. “So, what do you wanna do? I bet he’d love it if someone actually did call the cops.”

“Who needs cops? That kid’ll be roadkill by the time they get here. We have to stop this now.”

“Are you serious?”

Ray didn’t answer. He just walked forward, right into the middle of it.

“Oh, shit.” Bradley followed him slowly.

“Hey! Santana! You wanna tell me what this is all about?”

Herman stopped beating the other boy long enough to try and put a name to Ray’s face. He saw Bradley Stevens slowly easing up to Ray’s side. “Who the fuck is this, Stevens?”

“This is Ray. Now answer his question. What’s going on here?”

“None of your fucking business, gringo! This nigger took my wallet.”

“Yeah right, kid!” Ray said with venom. “I think you just felt like messing with a nigger. I’m rememberin’ the Alamo myself.”

“Fuck you!” Herman slammed his fist into the Black teen’s face.

Ray was through with words. He ran to the teenagers and pushed Herman off of the other. “Get the hell out of here, Santana! And take your

cocky cousin with you! I know you didn't drive here on your own, junior!"

Herman was furious. He lunged at Ray with his fist. Ray ducked and planted his own fist in the youth's slender belly, knocking the wind out of him.

The other boy slumped to the ground by the car, and Bradley went to him quickly and put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, man. You okay?"

"I've been better," the other said.

Bradley looked up and saw that Ray had not finished with the young Santana boy. "Oh, shit. Ray! Cool it!"

Ray was deaf to his friend's words. He saw only this young, stupid kid who had beaten a person for no reason other than the color of his skin. Herman was no longer even fighting back. Ray punched him again and again, and the boy fell over and held his face and his gut.

"Ray! Shit! You're a lot bigger than him! Stop it! Stop!"

The door of the drug store that they were all in front of opened, and Rubin Santana took in the sight of this man beating his little cousin to a pulp. He dropped his bag and just walked down

the steps. Ray was kicking the young man on the ground with an endless rage. "Hey!"

Ray looked up. He was amazed. It was Rubin. He knew the face. And when he looked this hulking, muscular beast in the eyes, he saw that he was recognized as well. "Rubin?"

"Ray." Rubin looked down at his cousin, covered in blood and sobbing. He looked at Ray's fists, covered in blood. He looked over at Bradley and the other teen. He saw that the other was beaten up pretty badly as well. He saw blood on his cousin's fists, but none on Ray's face. He knew exactly what had happened. "Get the fuck away from him."

Suddenly Ray realized that he had spent all his rage. He had taught the kid a lesson. "Rubin, I ..."

"I know, Ray. I told him not to go after the nigger." He pulled a wallet from his left hip pocket and held it up for all to see. "Dumbass left it on a shelf." He dropped the wallet, and it hit Herman's bloody face, causing the boy to squeal.

Ray suddenly felt his anger return. He snarled, and he kicked the boy again.

Rubin made a monstrous face and grabbed Ray by the shirt. “Too far, Ray. When my little cousin acts up, I will handle it. Not you. I see what happened here, but next time you get *me*. No one puts the hurt on my family but my family!” He pushed Ray back slightly. Then, before Ray could even raise a hand to defend himself, Rubin slammed a powerful fist into his face. Ray stood dazed for a moment, and he felt like he was going to fall. Before he could decide whether or not he would manage to stay on his feet, Rubin’s other hand met his chest and shoved him to the ground. Ray landed flat on his back, and the world seemed to spin.

Rubin collected his fallen cousin and shoved him into the car. He then glared at Bradley. “He should have stayed away. There’s no room for him here. Not anymore. You best keep him out of trouble. If it can be done.” Bradley and the other teen moved out of Rubin’s way, as he got into the car and drove off, forgetting whatever it was he’d bought there on the steps.

“Holy shit!” said the badly beaten stranger.

Bradley went to Ray. “Ray! Hey! You all right? Can you stand up?”

Ray put his hands to his face. “Man! That Mexican grew up big! I swear it! He was all long hair and muscles! Used to be such a little chump. Like his cousin.”

Bradley helped Ray to sit up on the curb. He then looked to the other boy. He offered his hand. “Hi. I’m Bradley. Bradley Stevens. You must be new to town.”

The other took his hand and shook it once firmly. “Sam. I’m Sam Turner. I was born here, but I lived most my life in Houston. Just moved back. Livin’ with my granny. I sort of wish I’d stayed in Houston.”

Bradley laughed. “Don’t sweat it, Sam. It’ll get better. Now you have friends.” He nodded over to Ray. “That’s Ray Don. He just came home himself. Ask around. He’s a pain in the ass. Nothin’ but trouble.”

“That trouble saved my neck.” Sam smiled and reached over to shake hands with Ray. “Thanks, brotha.”

Ray took Sam’s hand. “Sure. Any time.”

Sam laughed at the three of them, sitting on the curb and nursing their wounds. Well, at least

he and Ray were. Bradley was funny in another way, as he sat between them fretting.

Bradley stood suddenly. “Be right back.” He took off running back to Dan Parker’s. When he returned five minutes later, he was behind the wheel of his car. He leaned out the window. “Come on! Get in. Let’s go for a drive!” Bradley knew that if he had said, *Let’s go see my mom, so she can patch you up*, Ray, and probably Sam too, would not have come. As it was, the pair rose quietly and got in the car. Ray fell into the back and stretched out. Sam, quick to forget the beating, turned on the radio and tried to find a decent station.

“Mom! Hello?” Bradley walked through the door of his house and left it open for his friends. “Look what I brought home!”

Mrs. Stevens, Audri to her friends, rushed out of the kitchen, as she toweled off her hands. She hugged her young son and kissed him on the cheek. She then looked up and gasped. “Ray? Ray! Oh!” She went and hugged the young man ferociously. “Oh! What happened to your face!

Oh! We'll have to fix you up! We can keep it from swelling too bad."

Just then Sam walked through the door. "Oh!" Mrs. Stevens said. "Is this a Negro? Did he do this to you?"

Bradley couldn't help but laugh, and neither could Ray. Audri Stevens was one of the most naive women on Earth, as far as either of them knew. And Ray was well traveled. "Yes," Bradley said. "This is a Negro. His name is Sam. And no, he did not do this. It was the Santanas that did this to both of them."

"Oh! Well what a horrible way to welcome you home, Ray! I don't like those Santanas. And they call themselves Christians. They go to church at Saint Paul every Sunday. Come into the kitchen. I'll get out the first aid box."

Ray knew that it was futile to argue with Mrs. Stevens. Bradley grinned triumphantly at the success of his trap.

When the three young men entered the kitchen, Mrs. Stevens had already taken some alcohol from the first aid box and was putting it on a rag. Ray's eyes went wide. "I really don't feel

that bad, Mrs. Stevens. I ... *Ouch!*” She put the rag to his face and started rubbing.

“Have to clean it out now, or it’ll get infected, Ray. Oh, those horrible people! Picking on my delicate little Ray!”

“Delicate? I would have taken ’em if—”

“Yes, dear. I know.” She patted his head and moved on to Sam. She repeated the process with a different rag. “Are you from Harlem?”

Sam looked at the woman as though she were crazy. “No. You?”

“Oh!” She laughed gleefully. “Goodness no! What a strange thing to ask! When I was a girl, there were lots of Negroes in Harlem though. My mother went there once, and she told me. I’m from Nightfire. That’s where we are right now.” She shook her head and laughed some more. “That is just so precious you asking me if I’m from Harlem. That’s one for the diary! Of course, Africa’s full of Negroes too. You aren’t—?”

“No. I’m not from Africa. I was actually born here, raised in Houston. Now I’m back. Livin’ with my granny.” Sam could not stop smiling.

Bradley and Ray were both turning blue. Ray was lost in countless memories of ridiculous things Mrs. Stevens had said and done in the past. The pair of them were fighting so hard to keep in their laughter, and the struggle was not going their way.

“Oh, yes. Of course we have Negroes here as well,” Mrs. Stevens said. “Why, when I was in youth group at Nightfire UMC, we would have what we called Negro Fun Night.”

Ray exploded, and Bradley followed. They laughed so hard that tears were streaming down their faces. “Mom!” Bradley got out between guffaws. “What are you talking about?”

Sam could no longer hold back his own laughter at this dingy White woman.

Audri looked around at the three young men, and she was really quite puzzled as to what was so funny. “Well, Negro Fun Night,” she was interrupted by more extreme laughter from the boys. “Negro Fun Night was when we’d go pick up all the Negroes and play games with them and sing songs.”

Bradley was still laughing, and Ray was wheezing silently. “Mom! You’re tripping! I swear!”

“Oh! Don’t swear, Bradley.” She looked down at her feet, to make sure that she wasn’t tripping. “Oh. I’m all right, dear. The tile’s been coming up there for years. I won’t trip.”

When the laughter finally died down, Mrs. Stevens served cookies and milk, and she joined the boys at the table. She caught up with Ray, and she realized that she knew Sam’s mother from the days of Negro Fun Night. Finally, the boys got up to leave.

“Son, when you get home, I’d like you to take your brother out to a movie.”

“Mom! I have a date.”

“Oh! Well, I’m sure Ann wouldn’t mind Brendan. He’s a good boy. She’s going to have to get used to little boys if she stays with you. Stevens men almost never have daughters.”

“Mom!”

“Well, you’ve been going out for a month now. Don’t you think she’s planning to get married some day?”

“Mom! This is the ’70’s! People don’t get married so fast—”

“Yes, Bradley. I know.” She smiled, as though she were humoring him. “Now can’t you take your brother? I think he needs some male attention. I found him wearing one of my nightgowns this morning when I woke him up for school. I tried to explain to him why little boys do not wear Mommy’s clothes, but he didn’t understand. He needs you. You’re his role model.”

“Apparently not.” Bradley rolled his eyes. Ray and Sam were laughing again. “I’ll do something with him next week. Okay? But I can’t take him out with me tonight. He’ll ruin everything!”

“All right, Bradley.” She seemed sad. “It’s just hard for him. He never really had a father. Not for very long.”

Bradley was irritated, but he knew it had been hard for his mom to raise sons by herself. “Okay. This week, Mom. I’ll take him for a boys’ night out this week. I promise.”

She lit up. “Oh, that’s so wonderful! He’s going to be so excited! I’ll tell him right away.”

The three boys left the Stevens house and walked to Bradley's car. "Man," Ray said. "Your mom hasn't changed a bit. She's still this *Leave It to Beaver* Mombot from another world! I mean, who serves milk and cookies? Really?"

"I don't know," Sam said. "I think it's great."

"Yeah," Ray agreed. "Me too."

Bradley just shook his head. "So what are y'all doin' tonight?"

"Just gonna go to the hotel and brood," Ray answered. "You know, think about where I'm gonna live. Where I'm gonna work. That sort of thing."

"I got a date too, man," Sam said. "I met her in school on Monday. She showed me around n' shit. Name's Mary."

They piled into the car again, same seats, only this time Ray sat up in the middle of the back instead of stretching out. Bradley turned on the ignition and drove. "The best place to go for alone time on a date," he advised, "is the Witch's Tree. Mary. Is that Mary Rhodes?"

"Yeah! She fine! And so sweet too."

Bradley smiled. "I tell ya', Sam. If I was gonna go interracial, I'd be all over that! Mary knows where the tree is. But don't go there tonight. That's where me an' Ann are going. There's another place though."

"Yeah?"

"The old Alexas mansion. It's been deserted forever! It's kind of creepy, but no one will bother you there. Take some candles or something and it's real romantic. Great place to talk. You know. It's real private. She'll know where that is too. It doesn't take too long to get the map of Nightfire down."

"Thanks, man. 'Preciate it."

"No problem, Sam. And we all usually hang out after school, either at Dan Parker's or at Hilltop. I'll show you around sometime. I'll make sure you're in with all the right people."

Ray contemplated the situation. It was amazing to him. Yesterday, they were three separate people, not at all a part of each other's lives. Now, it seemed they'd forged a bond, and would be together often. It was one of those groupings that just seemed to click.

He liked Sam, and he no longer saw Bradley as anyone's "little brother." Bradley was a man all his own. He was someone that Ray could respect. An equal. Ray felt like he was home. It was so different from the way he'd left it, but it was still so much the same. Some things, he mused, would never change. The faces may change, the people may grow older, but Nightfire itself was constant as the sun.

After dropping off Ray and Sam, going back home to get cleaned up, and finally picking up Ann for their date, Bradley parked the car at the side of the road near the Witch's Tree. No one else was around. "That's it."

"It sure looks creepy tonight," Ann said. "I've never been here without a big group. It's scary. Have you ever seen her ghost?"

Bradley laughed. "No. Never. I think it's just an urban legend. Let's drive over to it."

"Why?"

"Scare all the ghosts off!" Bradley turned the car back on and floored it. He sped right towards the tree and stopped at the last possible second.

“Shit, Bradley! You could have killed us!”

“Yeah, but I didn’t.” He looked at the giant tree. It was quite a spectacle from a distance. The only tree in a giant field. Up close, it seemed safe. It was so open. He could see all around them. That was good, considering what had happened to Janie Alberts the night before. There was a killer on the loose in Nightfire. No way that killer was going to sneak up on him. Not by the Witch’s Tree. He flashed his headlights and laughed about scaring the ghosts. Then he turned them off and looked at Ann.

“Aren’t you scared?” she asked.

“Of what? The killer or the ghost?”

“The killer.”

“Nah. Look around. He can’t be hiding anywhere around here. Not even in the tree. It’s bald. Then again, he could be really, really tiny.”

Ann giggled. She enjoyed Bradley. She didn’t love him. That she was sure of. He was just good for a fun time. She wanted to put him to the test. She wanted to see just how much fun he could be. “So what exactly did you have in mind for the evening?”

He shrugged. "I don't know. I thought we could talk. Maybe we could make out for a little while. Then I guess I'll take you home. I really just wanted to spend some time together. You know. Away from everybody else."

"We talk all the time though."

"Jesus, Ann. What would you like to do? I mean, you don't wanna go to the movies, you hate Hilltop, you don't like to talk. We can't just make out you know. If we don't do other things, we don't have much of a relationship."

"But that's just it! I want to do other things with you, Bradley! You're too nice! You never even grab my tits!"

Bradley was floored. "You ... you want me to grab your ... tits? Is that what this is all about?" He was thankful for the dark of night. He hoped she couldn't see how he was blushing.

"More, Bradley. I want you." She reached down and unbuckled his belt, "All of you."

Bradley pulled away from her. "Ann ... I ... I can't."

"Why not?" She leaned over and kissed him. Then she crawled over the seats into the back of the car and spoke from behind him. "Don't you

like me?" She giggled seductively, and she tossed her blouse up front.

Bradley was shaking. He wouldn't turn his head to look at her. "Ann, I just ... I want there to be more to our relationship. That's all." Her jeans flew into the front seat. Bradley closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He was sweating, and he thought that he would surely throw up. "I mean ... I just ..." Her bra landed on his head. He pulled it off and piled it on top of her other clothes.

"Turn around, Bradley. Turn around and look at me."

"No."

"Bradley!" Ann laughed at him. "Why not? Are you scared or something?"

Bradley held his breath for a moment. "Yes," he said at last. "I'm petrified. I've never ... done that before. I don't know if I'd be any good at it. And what if ... what if something ... happened? You know?"

Ann laughed affectionately, and she put her hand on Bradley's quivering shoulder. "Don't worry, Bradley. I won't get knocked up or anything. It's the wrong time of the month. I

promise. And I'm sure you'll be great at it. Because you're a great kisser. Now turn around."

"All right. All right." He turned his head slowly, and he forgot his fear at the sight of her. His body was suddenly on fire. All he felt was yearning for her.

"So are you gonna join me back here? Or do I have to put all my clothes back on so we can talk all night?"

"Just let me turn on the radio. It's kind of creepy with the silence and all."

The radio came on, and Bradley crawled into the back seat. His own clothes were quickly piled on top of hers in the front. As they took their relationship to the next level, Bradley found the song on the radio amusing. It was trying to relate a romance to Napoleon's surrender at the battle of Waterloo. Bradley almost laughed. *That's me*, he thought, *I didn't have a chance*.

When it was over, he held her and told her how much he loved her.

Samuel Turner crawled through the window of the old Alexas mansion. He turned on the

flashlight and looked around. “Wow,” he said. “They didn’t even take the furniture when they left.”

Mary Rhodes crawled in after him. “I know. And nobody wants to rob the place either. People say it’s haunted pretty badly.”

“That’s what you said about that tree that Bradley went to. Ain’t there no place in this town that ain’t haunted?”

Mary laughed. “Live here long enough, and you’ll begin to wonder.”

“So why didn’t we come here earlier?”

“Because you were off gallivanting and getting your face beat in earlier.”

He laughed at himself. “Yeah. Ain’t gonna do that again.”

“Good,” she said, “because you have the cutest face.” She grabbed his flashlight and turned it off. She kissed him gently on the lips.

“I may come to like this town after all,” Sam conceded.

Suddenly the pair heard a door creak upstairs. “Shit!” they both breathed out. There was the muffled sound of something making its way quickly across the floor and to the stairs.

“Go!” Sam said. “Let’s get out of here!”

Mary launched herself out the window, and she waited for Sam to follow.

The sound had gotten to the stairs. Someone was walking very fast. *The ghost*. Sam was horrified. He listened to the footsteps descending the stairs, and he heard a low growl. “Oh, shit! Shit!” He tried to get out the window, but the footsteps had gotten faster, the growl had become something closer to a roar. “It’s a fuckin’ demon! Fuck! Run! Run!”

Mary was screaming, and she was crying as she did just that. She could hear Sam screaming, and she could hear the demon snarling. She did not dare look back.

Sam felt the weight of the monster knock him to the floor. He felt its hot breath on his neck, as warm saliva gently dripped down from its fangs. He knew it had fangs. It had to. It was something right out of Hell. A demon. Sam wept silently in that instant. He thought about Mary telling him that the woman who’d been killed had been torn apart, as if by a wild animal. Sam lost control of his bladder at the instant the monster’s

cold snout finally connected with the flesh of his neck, and he knew that he was going to die.

Next: "The Mysterious Valen Alexas"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr. is the author of eleven books, including the novel *Cry, Wolf: Shadow of the Werewolf*, the short fiction anthology *The Great Debate*, the Gothic horror series *The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas*, and two fantasy series: *Metrognomes* and *The Legends of Nod*. He lives in Dallas, Texas, where he is currently hard at work on further chapters in *The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas*.

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