

**The**  
**HUNT**

**A Novel**

**Written by Stephen Cheek**

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This book is fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents, either are the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, and resemblance to be actual persons, living or died, business establishments, events, or locales are entirely coincidental.

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# ***Acknowledgements***

I would like to thank former Attala County Sheriff Troy Steed for his interview and some of his detailed accounts of several cases in this book. *The Hunt* is a fiction story. Although many areas are actual places, they are used only to enhance the story. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Actual Attala County court depositions were used in part to glean the full account of the depth of corruption going on during the time period. I appreciate the use of them by former Attala County District Attorney Chatwin Jackson before his death. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

I thank an anonymous friend for his true account and witness to a bizarre encounter as a teenager while hunting in Happy Hollow. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

*THE HUNT, is a fiction book.*

*The Lobutchka is a real place and to be respected.*

## ***Special Edit Acknowledgements***

I would like to credit my dear departed friend Adrienne Allen Hawkins Wamble for her review of this book. While reading the book, she was undergoing treatments for a terminal brain tumor. With only two weeks of life remaining, she finished the last pages. Through her trailing handwritten notes, I could see the dedication of a loyal friend.

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## ***Preface***

**Sheriff Troy Stone**, the youngest elected sheriff of Attala County, had been in office for less than three months when he received his first call about a double murder in Happy Hollow. Now it was ten years later when he gets a tip about a missing person's case in the same area.

Winfred Lepard, a white man, had disappeared missing in 1957. He was last seen walking home along a country road in front of the Riley's store carrying a watermelon. Rumor had it that he was stealing moonshine and selling it. He was a seasoned moon shiner, who had made moonshine on and off for most of his life for the Riley twins. He was not a hard criminal but actually a rather decent man who enjoyed hunting and fishing. However, it was, as if he had dropped off the edge of the earth for no apparent reason. For over thirty years, no one had seen or heard from him.

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Sheriff Stone sat down at his desk and leaned back in his chair, holding the letter in front of him. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Was this a joke? His instincts told him no. Why would somebody wait this long to come forward with information if they didn't really know something? For himself, he was only seven when the disappearance happened and now a whole generation had passed with Lepard's name being brought up only a few times.

Wesley, Stone's deputy, asked him what was wrong. He could read the puzzled look on the Stone's face. Stone passed the letter to him over his desk. Wesley took the letter, read it slowly, and looked up at and asked, "Who is Winfred Lepard?"

Stone said he would tell him on the way.

The letter instructed Stone to go to Happy Hollow, a 2500-acre tract of land that was in the middle of nowhere in the extreme southeast corner of Attala County, bordering the Winston County line. Stone and his deputy headed in that direction. The letter stated to take the first left past the Riley's store, go 4.7 miles down a dirt road and start looking for blue paint on the side of the road.

As if they were following a treasure map, the deputy read out directions to Stone, who was behind the wheel. When they got to the dirt road, Stone stopped and reset the odometer to zero.

Slowly, they traveled along the dirt road with the sound of gravel popping under the car's tires. With windows down, they were both craning to see any sign of blue paint. With the odometer rolling over 4.3 miles, Stone told the deputy to be looking close. Wesley repositioned himself in his seat, indicating a tinge of apprehension. Then Stone saw it on his side of the car. From top to bottom was a clump of sage painted bright blue.

Stone knew this could be anything from an ambush to something real significant. It wouldn't have been the first time someone in his family had been ambushed. The

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Rileys had tried to kill Stone's dad when his dad was constable in the early sixties but the plan fell through. No one was arrested because it was too dark to make a positive identification, and the suspects ran. His dad, however, knew exactly who tried to kill him.

Sheriff Stone stopped the car and got out. Looking at the sage and touching it, he noticed a fishing line tied to a small sapling leading down into the woods. He and the deputy followed the line through thick brush and briars slowly for about 150 yards to where it stopped and made a 60 x 60 square around some trees.

"If this is where Winfred is buried then we are going to need more help," Stone told Wesley.

Word of the possible discovery traveled like wild fire through the community. By the time the county supervisor arrived with a backhoe two days later, a circus of people from Attala and Winston counties had gathered to watch. Even Fulton, Winfred's brother from Philadelphia, and his sister, Polly, from Jackson had heard the news and were there.

Sheriff Stone recalled from his childhood when Winfred went catfish grabbing with his dad, that Winfred had a gold tooth. Winfred was almost a neighbor back then, living only a few miles from the Stones' home. Knowing about the tooth, he first wanted to comb the area with his metal detector to find a place to start the search. With no luck, he told the supervisor to have his operator start digging. Within an hour, the entire area was pulverized but with no sign of a body. Confused, Stone leaned against a tree and looked at the area trying to figure out the puzzle. Wesley asked Stone what he thought, but Stone didn't have an answer. He knew the Forrest County Sheriff's Department should be there with a cadaver dog within a few hours. Maybe then they would find something.

By two o'clock, the cadaver dog had made several hits but kept going back to one particular spot, a spot about the size of a coffee table. They dug and dug but never

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found anything: not a belt, zipper, button, or anything. Stone walked back to the road and mentioned the tooth to Polly, but she said that Winfred's gold cap had come off during a meal at her house. Ironically, she had brought it with her and had it in her purse. She showed it to Stone. He walked back to the digging area and was approached by an older gentleman from the community. He told Stone that if he was looking for a body, then he was not going to find one. Confused, Stone asked him why not, and the man pointed to a four-foot earthen berm running parallel to the marked off 60 x 60 square. The berm was about forty feet long. The man said that area was once part of the old McCool property. At that time, the berm was the edge of a hog pen.

Not sure if the sheriff was following his point, the man asked Stone if he knew what hogs could do. Sheriff Stone told him he was not sure but wanted to hear what he knew.

The man and the sheriff walked around for about fifteen minutes in the area with the man pointing to specific places, as if he remembered the area well. He mentioned that the hog pen and pond were located a good way from the main house because of the stench the hogs created. Anyone could come over to the property at night without the McCools knowing. With that bit of information, Stone called off the search. He returned to Fulton and Polly and told them he regretted not finding anything. He couldn't tell them what he had just heard but assured them he would keep the case open and continue to follow any leads that came about.

On the way back to town, Wesley asked Sheriff Stone what the older man had told him. Stone gritted his teeth, as if somewhat reluctant to tell, and then explained in detail how a hog could devour a human corpse, skull and all, in less than two hours. He was told that the McCools had over forty hogs. He then told Wesley that they were not going to find Winfred. "That one spot where that dog hit so many times is about where Winfred last lay," Stone

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said. He shook his head and didn't say another word. Wesley turned and peered out the car window in silence as they traveled back to the office.

\*\*\*

# CHAPTER 1

## *The Sentence*

**The room was** quieter than a mouse tiptoeing across a bale of Delta cotton when the judge slammed his gavel on his podium and stated, "You are guilty as charged."

The sanctimonious Southern-speaking judge peered over his half-cut reading glasses and looked directly at the slender, six-foot two, broad-shouldered man standing before him. The man, in his late fifties, wore a dark brown pinstriped suit and stood silently, glaring back at the Judge with no expression. "Mr. Riley, I know you have eluded this bullet for a long time, probably for decades, but your hour has come today. In my opinion, you are a rotten man and a disgrace to this community. You should have been put away a long time ago."

Judge Chaply tilted back in his seat, scratched the side of his neck with the back of his folded hand, then

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nodded as if he had single-handedly caught the man. He then continued in a staccato rhythm, "But that's our legal system's shortcoming, nobody else's." He looked down at his notes and ran his index finger along a few rows of scribbled lines, then removed his glasses, held them in his right hand and rubbed his bottom lip with his left index finger. He contemplated his next remark from the bench.

"Today, however, Mr. Riley, the system has worked in the favor of your peers, and I am obliged, but regret to sentence you to five years in the state correction facility at Parchman, Mississippi, for only one of a series of crimes for which you should be charged. You are guilty of all. I know that; this court knows that; everybody in the county knows that; but your good fortune continues to run with you. Mr. Riley, mark my word. One day you will get what you deserve." The judge put back on his glasses and started writing the charge in his docket, never looking back up. "You will serve your time, and I hope the hell you see my face every day. You are getting only a small portion of what you justifiably deserve." Judge Chaply paused for a few seconds, then muttered in a monotone voice, "Bailiff, remove Mr. John Riley from my sight."

The bailiff, a black deputy sheriff, walked to the center of the room, placed his hand on the defendant's forearm and gave a gentle tug. However, the defendant did not respectfully move with him. Instead, he stood looking at Judge Chaply. The bailiff pulled again, this time a little firmer, and again the defendant stiffened his arm, resisting the order.

The judge looked up and said, "What's your problem, Riley? Get the hell out of here! Bailiff, do your job!"

This time the powerful bailiff made sure the defendant got the message. He squeezed his arm with a more forceful grip, one meaning business.

As John Riley was escorted out, a small group of his relatives sitting in the rearmost corner of the courtroom could be heard whispering and sobbing. As he reached

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the exit door, he stiffened once again, turned and gave a cold, hard glare back at Judge Chaply, who was finishing his entries.

Once the door shut, Judge Chaply looked up and across at the spectators who were staggered by his harsh remarks. He was known to snap at the drop of a hat and blister anyone for not following court procedures. No one dared to look at him. They rather shied away from making eye contact. He had humiliated many interns, as well as seasoned attorneys during his tenure on the bench. Only 5'-3" in height, he had an intimidation factor the size of Goliath, commonly called "small man syndrome."

He looked at the prosecutor briefly to give him his assessment of a sloppy performance and then looked over at the defendant's attorney who immediately pretended to organize his paperwork by shuffling fragments of his closing remarks into his briefcase.

"Okay, boys. I think that's about enough for today. Everyone agrees?" he asked, staring down his nose at the two attorneys.

"Yes, sir. I'm okay...well...Yes, sir. I agree," said the prosecutor. Judge Chaply then put the other attorney in his crosshairs.

"Okay then...and you, son?"

"Totally agree, sir. Totally."

"Well, then. Let's break camp. Court adjourned." Chaply hit his gavel and stood up exhibiting his short frame. Then he gathered his information into a folder, tucked it under his arm and exited through a side door, leaving the two attorneys looking at each other with mutual relief that he had left the building.

## CHAPTER 2

### *The Prank*

**The phone rang** for the fifth time before Todd picked it up and answered. “Hello.”

“Man! I had the heck scared out of me last night,” Trent blurted out on the other end.

“What do you mean?” Todd’s ears perked.

“They got me good.”

“Who got you good?”

“My two brothers,” Trent added.

“What did they do this time?”

“I’ll tell you on the way up to McElroy’s. Are we still on?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m pulling my boots on now.” Todd loved hanging out on weekends from college with his friends in the Shady Grove community. Primitive gun season was just about to open and it was always fun each year in

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mid-October to get together and spotlight deer just before season to get an idea of what kind of game was out there.

“Okay, see you when you get here.”

Todd tugged his jeans over his boots, grabbed his coat, and headed out to his pickup, peering up at the stars and wondering what in the world Trent was talking about. Within a few minutes, Trent was sitting beside him and the pair was headed towards McElroy’s house on Highway 43 north of Kosciusko, the gathering-up-place when they hunted. Trent began lighting up a cigarette when Todd asked what he was talking about on the phone.

“Todd, I haven’t ever been so scared in my entire life. Last night I went up to McElroy’s house, and he and Mike said they were going to spotlight a while. Of course, I wanted to go too. They knew I did. So I said, ‘Yeah, let’s go.’ So we go in Mike’s truck and headed off in the usual places, down at Ellis’s field along the farm-to-market road to James Travis’ fields, finally winding up at Uncle Ezra’s bottom. The deer were just coming out, and we had seen maybe twenty. When we got down to Uncle Ezra’s, I ran my Q-beam across the barn, and Mike said he saw something. He told me to move the light back and I did. You’re not going to believe what I saw next!”

“What did you see?” Todd asked, caught up in the story and waiting for Trent to roll his window down a bit to let out the smoke.

“There was a man hanging by a rope in the barn.”

“Do what?”

“Right. A man was hanging by a rope, like he had hung himself.”

“What did y’all do?” asked Todd.

“Well, Mike thought we should get closer to see, but I said, ‘Hell no, I have my 30-30,’ so I got it out of the truck and put my scope on the man to see. I wasn’t about to go any nearer to that barn. As I zeroed in, I was pretty sure I could see blood on his face. Man, I’m telling you, I was freaked out. Mike took the gun from me to see, and he agreed that it looked to him like the man was shot. No

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sooner did he get those words out of his mouth, than we heard a high-powered rifle go off in the barn. It sounded just like it went right over the tops of our heads. It was all we could do to get back in the truck without having a heart attack. As soon, as we got in, Mike and McElroy fell out laughing and pointed at the barn, where no other than big brother, Harold Curtis, came walking out with a rifle in his hand. I'm telling you, they got me good."

"Man! I can't believe this," Todd said. "Who was the man hanging? Was it Harold Curtis?"

"Heck, naw! Harold Curtis had found an old mannequin in a dumpster and dressed it up. Then him and Mike put ketchup on its head to make it look like he was shot and hung it up. It was a setup, and I fell for it hook, line, and sinker."

"So they all got you good. I bet that did scare the crap out of you," Todd said, wanting to laugh, but holding it back.

"Yeah. They got me good, but guess what?" Trent spoke up with a fragment of mischief in his voice.

"What's that?" Todd asked.

"We're doing it again tonight. This time it's going to be Doug and Toby's turn."

"No kidding. Are they coming up to spotlight too?"

"Sure are, and it's going to be funny. Mike and Harold Curtis are not here, but we can still pull it off."

Within twenty minutes, Todd and Trent arrived at McElroy's house, and it wasn't much longer that they saw the headlights of Doug's old blue Scout coming up behind them in the drive, still covered with mud from the weekend before. They got out, began small talk for about fifteen minutes in the drive until everyone began shivering. Trent suggested they get going. Doug agreed, saying he couldn't be too late getting home. He had to take his wife to Jackson the next day.

McElroy made a point to tell everyone to leave their guns at his house. The game warden had told him it was okay to spotlight deer as long they were not being

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harassed and no one had intentions of shooting one. Heeding McElroy's suggestion, Doug removed his rifle from his Scout and put it in Todd's truck for safekeeping. Then they all crowded into the Scout. Doug and Toby did not realize that McElroy had a .357 magnum pistol in his coat.

Then, as a repeat of the night before with Trent, they started touring one field after another, stopping to survey each field with their Q-beams. McElroy mentioned that more deer were out than the night before, an occurrence that had puzzled everyone for years. The only explanation was that maybe a fuller moon had something to do with it. The deer were out some nights at 8 o'clock and other nights not until after 1 a.m. or not at all. It was usually a hit and miss thing. Tonight the night sky was picture perfect, and the stars were shining through the cold darkness, creating a sensation of hunting fever.

Inconspicuously, Trent and McElroy made a point of suggesting which field they should go to, arguing at times about which would be a better one to spotlight next, never mentioning Uncle Ezra's field. Finally, after spending most of Doug's allotted time for the night, Doug suggested they go on to Uncle Ezra's field and that would be the last one for him. "Good idea," Trent said.

Doug had been there dozens of times before and knew the way with no trouble. McElroy nudged Todd, and Todd nudged Trent, all wanting to laugh aloud. Doug and Toby had taken the bait flawlessly.

Even though Todd knew where Uncle Ezra's place was, he had never met him and really didn't know whose uncle he really was. Every time the name came up and no matter who said it, they always said, "Uncle Ezra." He did know though that each time they went into his field, there appeared to be a single lamp glowing in the front room of the house. There was never any movement inside, just stillness each time they passed within a few feet of the house. Todd supposed Uncle Ezra didn't care about people coming into his field at night, or maybe he was

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always asleep.

As they reached the bottom of the drive, they stopped. Toby sprang out of the front seat to open the metal gate latched with an old chain nailed on one end and looped around a leaning creosote post. He removed the link from the rusty nail and let the gate swing back on its own. Uncle Ezra had a few heads of cattle roaming somewhere in the fields so it required having the gate latched; it certainly was not for keeping out thieves. Toby stood motionless as Doug slowly moved through the gate and stopped. He watched in his mirror through the red glow of his taillights as Toby latched the gate back and returned.

Doug continued and followed the ever-winding road as it led to the back pasture, dodging what mud holes he could and blazing through others that he couldn't. Toby had one Q-beam out the front passenger window shining to his right, and Trent had one in the back shining to his left. By doing this, they were tracking across both sides of the road, not missing anything that may run from one side to the other. They had only seen one pair of eyes so far along the wood line. They were now approaching the notorious barn.

At the spot where Trent knew Toby was in line to see the mannequin, he told Doug to halt for a minute to let him comb the field better. Doug stopped. Trent could have cared less about where his light was shining because the back seat crew was watching where Toby was shining his light. A couple of times Toby's light roamed by the barn without anyone saying anything, but Todd finally spoke up.

"Hey, Toby. Go back. I think I saw something."

"Where?" chimed in Trent. He moved his light towards Toby.

"Move back to the barn, Toby. Move up a little Doug," Todd said, trying not to give anything away and wanting to sound serious.

"Where? Where?" Toby asked, looking for a deer.

"No. Right there!" Trent had his light right on the

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mannequin.

“Crap! What is that?” Doug asked. By now, Toby had his light on the doorway of the barn too but not in a good enough line that he could see well.

“I don’t see anything,” Toby said, exasperated.

“Right there,” Trent said, holding the Q-beam steady out over the top of the Scout.

Then Toby saw the mannequin. “There it is. What is that?” he said with a puzzled voice, sensing possible danger. This was a place he had no intention to be.

“I don’t know. Let’s get out and see,” McElroy said.

“Heck, no, we’re not either! Let’s get out of here!” Toby expressed loudly with no hesitations.

“Hey, guys. We’ve got to check this out. That looks like somebody,” Trent added from the backseat. He knew that only twenty-four hours earlier he felt the same as Toby.

“Open the door, Toby. I’m getting out,” McElroy said, pushing against the front seat to fold it over.

Doug, frantically trying to size up the situation as fast as he could, concluded quickly that he really didn’t want to get out. However, with a moral issue at hand, he gave in and shut the truck off, immediately creating an eerie silence. He and Toby then peeled cautiously out of the front seats allowing Trent and the backseat crew to get out.

“Get me those binoculars, Todd, before you get out,” McElroy said, pointing from outside the truck. “They’re on the floorboard by your feet.” Todd began searching and finally emerged, holding them. He never handed the binoculars to McElroy but walked to the front of the Scout where everyone was standing against the headlights with their eyes fixed on the barn. The Scout was parked about one hundred fifty yards from the front door of the barn, still too far to define anything. With the binoculars in hand, Todd purposely rose the binoculars to his eyes, drawing out the animation to create a hair raising, almost paranormal intensity before finally exclaiming, “Oh sh...!”

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“What is it, Todd? Let me see,” Toby said.

“Man. I'm not believing this,” Todd said aloud, holding the binoculars steady a moment, then handing them off to McElroy without saying anymore.

Simultaneously, “What is it?” asked everyone at Todd, as McElroy put the binoculars up to his eyes to see for himself. McElroy then started to walk toward the barn as if the terrifying scene was drawing him to it.

“I don't know. Let's see what McElroy thinks,” Todd said, watching McElroy intensely.

By now, everybody was moving along with McElroy's short footsteps. As he walked, he tried to describe what he was seeing. Each step closer to the barn was killing Toby. Toby wanted those binoculars bad.

“Let me see, McElroy,” Toby pleaded.

“Guys. You're not going to believe this. There is a man hanging in the barn,” McElroy said, letting the words come out slowly, ignoring Toby's plea for the binoculars and continuing to hold them up to his own eyes.

“What!” Doug said.

“That's right. I think I see a man hanging, and there is definitely blood on his neck and head,” McElroy added, focusing the binoculars as he walked. Everyone was looking at McElroy's profile, trying to imagine what he was seeing through the glasses.

“Crap. That's what I saw too,” Todd said.

“Well, we have to go see who it is,” said Trent. Toby's eyes shifted to Doug.

“You're right, Trent. That might be Uncle Ezra. I just can't see enough here. Let's go see,” McElroy answered, dropping the binoculars down to his side.

“Let me see the binoculars,” said Todd.

“Take 'em. I'm going to see who it is,” McElroy said, handing the binoculars to him.

“I'm with you. I'll go too,” Trent spoke up. “Let's go.”

Toby watched in amazement as McElroy and Trent hurried off towards the barn through the dark, marveling at how they could be so brave. He was scared as hell.

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“Were the people from the country just born to be braver,” he questioned.

“Let me see,” Doug asked Todd for the binoculars.

“Just a minute, I want to see what they are doing.”

“Come on, Todd, let me see,” Doug argued.

“Okay, here,” he said, handing the binoculars to him.

It didn’t take long for McElroy and Trent to be out of sight. McElroy went around one side of the barn and Trent the other, disappearing into the dark. Everything was now deathly silent, and a bad feeling was closing in. Toby stood by nervously, looking around to his sides, behind him, and then back to Doug every few seconds. Todd kept telling Doug surely they were wrong, trying to confuse the issue about what they were seeing. Finally, Toby demanded the binoculars. He couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Give me the dang binoculars, Doug. Let me see.”

“Hold on just a minute, I can’t tell . . .”

“Darn, Doug, give them to him,” Todd said.

Doug handed the binoculars to Toby, and Toby frantically tried to focus so he could see what was going on. As he did, Todd moved behind Toby so he could get an idea of what was going on with Trent and McElroy. The timing was perfect. Just after Toby focused the binoculars, McElroy fired his .357 magnum pistol. BANG! BANG! The sound was terrifying as it split the night. Everyone jumped, stunned at what had just happened.

“GET OUT OF HERE!” a voice shouted from the barn. A figure instantly appeared in the Scout's headlights. It was Trent running at break-neck speed back towards Toby. Toby’s eyes got wider than the binocular lenses that he was holding. “RUN, I SAID!”

“Where’s McElroy?” Todd hollered from behind Toby.

“HE’S DOWN!” Trent hollered, lowering his back as he ran to make a smaller target. “RUN.”

Those were not the words Toby wanted to hear. His instincts kicked in at full throttle, throwing the binoculars at Doug and bolting for dear life. When he

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turned, Todd was standing in his path of retreat. It didn't matter. In full motion, Toby knocked Todd to the ground, and he ran for the Scout. Doug was right behind him. Todd picked himself up and ran too. Within seconds, everyone was in the Scout hollering to get out of there.

"Where's Toby?" Trent asked, as he resisted closing the door behind him.

"Shut the damn door! I'm back here. Each man for himself!" Toby shouted from the rear of the Scout where he had managed to duck in behind the rear seat.

"Wait, Doug, here comes McElroy!" Todd shouted. McElroy was holding his side. He appeared wounded. He was tumbling and struggling. "Get in McElroy." Trent held the folded seat down long enough for him to get back in. "GO!"

Doug gunned the Scout, stomping his foot to the floor. The motor was screaming as the truck cut a donut in the road. All four tires were spinning so fast that they were slinging mud and grass to both sides of the truck.

"Stop for the gate!" Trent shouted as they barreled up the road toward the gate.

"We haven't got time! Ram it!" came a voice from the back.

"Hell no! Stop! I'll get it," Trent said, pleading for Doug to stop.

"Are you going to make it, McElroy?" Todd said in a panicked voice.

"I don't know. I'm hurt bad. I'm bleeding."

"Mother of Jesus. Help us all," a voice came from the rear of the truck.

Doug slammed his brakes as he approached the gate, sliding ten feet or so. The front tires buried up to the rim in the mud. Trent, without delay, jumped from the door and ran to open it. However, when he opened the gate, he turned to Doug in slow motion, exposing a wide grin. He flicked his lighter a couple of times to fire up a cigarette. For an instant, Doug couldn't figure what Trent was doing. Then his mind slowed to process the situation and

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he realized what had happened. They had been set up.

“Man! Y’all had me.” Doug put his head on his steering wheel and let his emotions drain, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

“What’s going on?” came a voice from the rear. Toby rose from behind the back seat and saw Trent walking unceremoniously back to the truck with a cocky grin. “What? What’s going on?”

“Toby. It was a joke. They were all in on it,” Doug said in a slow monotone voice, shaking his head from side to side.

“Aw! Man... you’re kidding me,” Toby said, feeling like a fool. “Crap! Take me home, Doug,” he sounded off in a perplexed, but exhausted tone. McElroy and Todd were bent over laughing and trying to catch their breaths. So was Trent. As Doug pulled through the gate, Trent hung the chain back across the rusty nail and got back in the passenger side with the sweet taste of victory. This would be one night they would never forget.

As the Scout began rolling back onto the paved road, Todd looked out his window at the spine-chilling barn and the faint single light still shining in Uncle Ezra’s house. He was so relieved they hadn’t pulled the trick on him.

