

DETOUR

By Chuck Hustmyre

Not every town is on the map.

"Daddy, I gotta pee."

Dale Thornton looked over his shoulder at his 6-year-old son belted into the back seat of their Jeep Cherokee. As the boy squirmed around, Dale looked at his wife in the passenger seat beside him. "Didn't he just go?"

Carol glanced at her watch. "That was over an hour ago." She twisted to look into the back seat. "Can you hold it?"

In the rearview mirror, Dale saw Jesse shake his head. His wife checked her watch again. He could almost see the wheels turning inside her head. She was the family mediator, she'd come up with something that made perfect sense. One of the reasons he loved her so much was her ability to change gears. In himself, Dale recognized his single-mindedness as a drawback. He admired her flexibility--in more ways than one. She was a good wife and a good mother.

"It's almost five," Carol said. "Let's stop at the next

town. We can all use the restroom and get something to eat."

Dale tugged his spiral-bound road atlas down from where he'd wedged it between the visor and the roof. They'd left Tulsa that morning, headed for Mardi Gras, and he hoped to be in New Orleans by ten P.M. Looking at the LOUISIANA page, his eyes traced the route he'd highlighted in yellow. They'd detoured down Old U.S. 167. Rural America was disappearing and Dale wanted his son to see something of it before it was completely gone.

They were somewhere south of Ruston. He couldn't remember if they'd passed Jonesboro or not, so the next town was either that or--if they'd already passed it--Winnfield. The gas gauge was on a quarter of a tank. They needed to stop anyway. "All right, honey," he said. "We'll take a break."

Carol laid a hand on his leg. "I'm glad we came this way. You can't see anything from the interstate."

Ten miles later they sprang upon a small town. There was an old-fashioned, carved wooden sign posted on the side of the highway. Dale read out loud, "Welcome to Batesville. Population eight hundred and seventy-five."

"What's that mean," Jesse asked.

Dale glanced at his son in the rearview mirror. "That's how many people live here."

"When somebody dies, do they change the number on the

sign?"

Carol smiled over her shoulder at Jesse. "I bet they change it when a baby is born."

Just like her. She didn't like to talk about death or dying. Instead, she liked to focus on the good things in life, babies, birthdays, and family vacations. She'd always been like that but more so since her grandfather passed away last year. She'd been very close to him, closer than she'd ever been to her father.

Dale sneaked a glance at her. She was his angel but an angel with dark secrets. She'd shared some of them with him but not all, probably because she knew the abuse in her life disturbed him so much. "That sign probably hasn't been changed in twenty years," he said.

"Why put it up if it's not right?" Jesse asked.

Good question. "I don't know, son."

As they got into the little town, Dale was impressed. The side streets that cut off of the highway were lined with neat wooden houses, most of them with white picket fences. A lot of the little towns they'd passed through so far looked run down and dirty, but not this one. Batesville was clean and pretty.

They came to the town's only traffic light. There was a business on each corner: a hotel, a gas station, a restaurant, and the Batesville General Store. Before the light turned

green, Dale pulled the Jeep beside the pumps at the gas station. A middle-aged man wearing oil stained coveralls stepped out from the office. "What can I do you for?" he asked. His tone was friendly, something you didn't hear at many gas stations these days.

As Dale stepped out from the driver's seat and stretched, he called to the man. "Need a fill-up and some food." Then jerked his thumb toward the back seat. "And my son needs to use the head."

The man wiped his hand on a rag he pulled out of his pocket, then shook Dale's hand. "Dudley Simpson. I can help you with the gas and the bathroom for your boy, but as for food, afraid all I got is potato chips and sodas." He pointed to the restaurant across the street. "Right over there is the best food in town." He laughed. "Only restaurant we got, but I wouldn't kid you. It's really good."

Jesse said he could hold it until they got to the restaurant, so Dale sent him and Carol across the street to get a table. When he reached for the gas pump, Dudley Simpson stopped him. "I don't charge extra for full service. Every car comes through here I pump the gas, look under the hood, and check the tires."

"Don't see that too much anymore."

"Guess I'm kind of old-fashioned."

After Dudley finished, Dale added a couple of bucks to the bill. He felt a little awkward, unsure if he could tip the owner of a gas station without insulting him. But Dudley took no offense, just said thank you and asked him to stop again on their way home.

When Dale turned the key, nothing happened. He turned it again and still nothing happened. Just a click. No dash lights, the motor didn't turn over, nothing. Dudley told him to pop the hood again. After Dale turned the key a couple more times with Simpson's head buried under the hood, Dudley said he'd found the problem. "Alternator's shot. You must've been running on battery for a good while."

"Can you fix it?"

The gas station owner looked at his watch. "Not today. Parts store's closed 'till tomorrow."

Great, just great.

Dudley said that even if he had it towed to one of the bigger towns along the highway, there wasn't anybody who'd get to it until tomorrow. "But I promise you I'll do it first thing. Have you out of here by ten if I can get the part early enough."

Tomorrow meant spending the night in Batesville, Louisiana instead of New Orleans.

Dudley nodded to the hotel. "Mrs. Jensen has a nice place.

Got A-C, cable TV, and no bugs."

Great. No bugs.

Dudley said he could leave the Jeep right where it was. Told Dale not to worry about it. They had a town marshal but nothing ever happened in Batesville. So quiet the state police never even came by.

"Sorry I'm blocking your pumps," Dale said.

Dudley shrugged. "Other side's open." Then he looked at his watch. "Besides, it's five-thirty. I close in half an hour."

As he crossed the street, Dale remembered his gun. A Smith and Wesson, .357 revolver that he always brought with him on road trips. You never knew what could happen. Maybe break down on the highway, get attacked by a drug-crazed motorcycle gang. The gun was in the cargo compartment, wrapped inside a cloth, tucked between the spare tire and the wall. It would be safe enough.

At the restaurant he told Carol the news and in typical Carol fashion she looked on the bright side. "It'll be fun," she said, "stranded in a small town, who knows what'll happen."

"Do they have TV?" Jesse asked.

A cute young waitress served them. The plastic tag pinned to her blouse said her name was April. When she brought out their food she set Jesse's down first.

"That's the cutest little mark on your face," she said.
"Almost looks like lipstick."

Unabashedly, Jesse pointed to the red oval shaped birthmark set high on his right cheek. "It means I'm special."

She smiled. "It looks like a kiss."

"Really?" Jesse asked.

Dale saw a look of contentment on Carol's face. Jesse's birthmark was something she'd never wanted their son to be shy or embarrassed about.

The waitress set out the rest of the plates. "I heard a mark like that means that right before you were born an angel kissed you."

Jesse turned to his mom. "Is that true?"

Carol smiled at her son and nodded. "I think she may be right."

April bent down and kissed Jesse on the top of his head. "I'm not an angel, but there's a kiss from me."

Dudley Simpson had been right; the food was excellent. After they ate, Dale got up to use the bathroom. "You need to go again, Jess?"

The boy shook his head. "No thanks."

Dale handed Carol a credit card. "Let's save our cash."

She nodded. "All right, baby."

"Back in a sec," he said as he turned away.

* * *

When he came out of the men's room, Carol and Jesse weren't at the table. The waitress had been quick. Most of the dirty plates were gone; the only ones left were his. Dale looked for his family near the front door, then up by the cash register, but they weren't there.

Maybe Jesse had changed his mind and Carol had brought him into the bathroom with her. So Dale waited, but after several minutes passed and they didn't come out, he decided to check outside. They might have gotten cold or Jesse could've gotten restless and they were waiting out front for him. But they weren't out front, either.

Across the street the lights were out at the gas station--Dudley was closed for the night. The Jeep Cherokee sat at the pumps. Anxiously, Dale looked at the hotel. Maybe...but they wouldn't do that, wouldn't have gone without him. That wasn't like Carol. Smart and independent, but she liked her husband doing the man things, and in her mind, checking into a hotel was a man thing.

Back inside he knocked on the door of the women's restroom. No one answered, so he cracked it open. "Carol?" No answer. "Carol, Jess, you there?"

"Can I help you, sir?" It was their waitress.

Embarrassed, Dale forced a laugh. "I seem to have lost my

wife and son." He nodded toward the men's room. "While I was in there."

"Your wife and son?" She looked confused.

"When I came back they were gone."

She had a blank look on her face.

Annoyed, he said, "I ate with them."

The waitress furrowed her brow. "Sir, I didn't see you with anyone else."

Dale stared at her. For a second he thought that maybe he was wrong, maybe this wasn't his waitress. He checked her name tag, saw it said April. "You waited on us." Dale pointed to his right cheek. "My son has that little birthmark. You said an angel kissed him."

She shrugged. "I think I'd remember that."

He pointed to himself. "You remember me?" Then at their table. "We were sitting right there."

She nodded. "Yes, sir. I remember you, but you ate by yourself." She turned to the table where Dale's dishes still sat. "I was just bringing you your bill."

He raised his voice. "Is this some kind of a joke?" People began looking at him.

April took a step back and raised her hands. "You need to talk to Mr. Simms."

"Who's Mr. Simms?"

"The owner."

"Well that's who I want to see."

Mr. Simms was already scurrying over. "What's the problem?"

Dale turned to him. "I can't find my family." He pointed at the girl. "She was our waitress and she's telling me she doesn't even remember them."

Mr. Simms looked at April.

She shrugged again. "I'm sorry but he was alone. I've never seen his family."

Simms looked like he didn't understand. April tried to explain it again, but Dale cut her off and pointed to the table. "My family and I ate right there. I went to the restroom, came out, and they were gone."

Mr. Simms clapped a hand on Dale's shoulder. "Maybe they're outside waiting for you."

"I've checked outside," he barked. "They're not there."

Simms glanced at the waitress. "Why don't you get back to work. I'll handle this."

Dale grabbed her by the arm. "She knows where they are."

Everyone in the restaurant stared at him.

Mr. Simms jerked Dale's hand away from the girl. "Sir, she said she doesn't know where your family is."

April pleaded with her boss. "He didn't have his family

with him."

"She's lying!" Dale said, as he inched closer to April.

Simms stepped between them. Looking at Dale, he said, "Have you checked your car?"

He nodded. "It's broken down at the gas station across the street. We've got to spend the night at the hotel."

Mr. Simms smiled. "That's probably it."

"What?"

"I bet they're at the hotel."

"He was by himself," April said.

The restaurant owner snapped his head towards her and pointed to the dining area. "Go."

She looked at her boss for a second, a half-formed protest on her lips; then suddenly she spun on her heel and stomped away.

Simms looked back at Dale. "Have you checked the hotel?"

"They wouldn't do that."

"Have you checked?" Insistent.

Dale could feel himself losing control as the sweat dripped from his armpits. He took several deep breaths, trying to force himself to calm down. "No, I haven't."

"Maybe your kids got tired."

The deep breathing had made him light-headed. "Just the one boy." As Dale turned toward the door, Simms patted him on

the back. "I'm sure everything's going to be fine."

But things weren't fine. At the hotel, he woke up Mrs. Jensen. Turns out she and Mr. Jensen had an apartment behind the office. Dale had banged on the glass door of the office for five minutes before a light came on.

Mrs. Jensen had come out first. A white haired old lady, covered in a paper-thin pink housecoat, imprinted with blue flowers the size of a quarter. A minute later, Mr. Jensen, looking about seventy, dressed in a full set of dark green, silk pajamas and a pair of matching slippers, stumbled into the office, smelling like he'd taken a bath in Jack Daniel's.

Dale's heart sank. He went through the story anyway, but as he expected, the Jensens said that no one had checked in or even come by since mid-morning.

Walking back to the restaurant, he looked at his Jeep. Still empty and no one near it.

A marked police car was parked near the restaurant's front door. As he got closer, Dale read the decal on the side, BATESVILLE TOWN MARSHAL. Maybe now he could get some help.

Just inside, near the cash register, Dale found April the waitress, Mr. Simms, and a heavysset man in jeans and a T-shirt, talking. As he walked up, all three stopped and stared at him. He felt like a freak in a boardwalk exhibit.

"Did you find them?" Simms asked.

Dale shook his head. "The people at the hotel haven't seen them."

The big man in jeans took a step toward him. "Mr...?"

"Thornton. Dale Thornton."

The man stuck out his hand. "Jerry Stillwell. I'm town marshal."

"Saw your car outside." Dale shook the marshal's hand. "My wife and son are miss--"

"I understand there was a problem here earlier."

"Yeah there's a problem. My family disappeared."

The marshal and Simms traded glances; then he looked back at Dale. "So I heard. What do you think happened to them?"

Something didn't feel right. "If I knew that, they wouldn't be missing."

Marshal Stillwell stuck his belly out. "No reason to get smart. You all ready scared some customers. Don't make--"

"Scared some customers. Is that why you're here, because I scared some customers? My wife and son are MISSING!" Everyone in the restaurant had stopped eating and was watching the soap opera at the door. With a sharp edge to his voice, Dale said, "What are you going to do about it?"

The marshal jabbed a finger at him. "You better calm yourself down or I'll do it for you. Now I need to ask you some questions," his eyes swept the customers, "and I don't think

this is the place to do it."

"I'm not going anywhere." Dale pointed to the completely cleaned off table where they'd eaten. "Half an hour ago my family and I ate right there. Now they're gone. Someone in here knows what happened to them."

The marshal dropped a big hand on Dale's shoulder and tried to guide him out the door. "We're going to find your family, but not here, not like--"

Dale pulled away. He pointed to Simms and the waitress. "They coming with us?"

"I don't see the need for--"

Dale reached out for April. "She's lying!"

With surprising speed, the town marshal slipped behind him and clamped a meaty forearm around his throat, sealing off his windpipe. Dale grabbed at the hairy arm and tried to twist it away as the marshal whispered in his ear, "Take it easy, son." Then something jabbed him in the kidney that sent waves of pain shooting up his back.

Seconds later, Dale was on the floor, his cheek pressed against the cool tiles, as the marshal handcuffed his wrists behind his back.

* * *

"She said it was the kiss of an angel, huh?" Marshal Stillwell asked. Things had calmed down some. Dale and the

town marshal were alone in his office. Dale was still handcuffed, but the marshal had moved them to the front. He sat in a chair in front of the lawman's desk, watching him fill out forms with a ballpoint pen. Stillwell touched his finger to his right cheek. "That mark you're talking about is right here?"

Dale nodded.

"That's strange."

The handcuffs were uncomfortable. Dale twisted his wrists, trying to get some circulation back. "What's unusual about it?"

"We had a preacher in town few years back with the same kind of mark on his face." Stillwell traced a small circle on his cheek. "Heard him say once during a sermon it was from an angel's kiss."

Dale stared at the marshal, his flesh suddenly crawling with goosebumps.

"But he was a strange one. Lots of rumors. Guess it goes with the territory."

"What territory?"

"Young, good-looking preacher. Single. Moves into town, starts preaching all hours of the night." He gave Dale a knowing wink, like they were sharing a secret. "Giving special counseling sessions to half the women in town."

Grasping at straws, looking for anything. Dale said, "Is he still here?"

Marshal Stillwell shook his head. "Church burned down."

"What about the preacher?"

"We never found his body."

"He was the only one in the church?"

Stillwell looked down at the form on his desk and pressed his pen to it. "He had six or eight ladies in there with him. Supposed to be some sort of social club. Fire was so hot, we couldn't tell one body from the next. That was when the rumors really started."

Dale flexed his fingers. His hands hurt. "What kind of rumors?"

The marshal laughed. "Just gossip. People 'round here are simple minded, superstitious, that's all."

"What kind of gossip?"

Stillwell looked up. "Not everybody you understand, but some people have been talking about how the preacher isn't really dead, about how he's gonna come back some day."

Dale needed to get out, to find Carol and Jesse. There was something terribly wrong here. "Am I under arrest?"

Stillwell nodded.

In the corner stood a single holding cell, the door gaping open, waiting. "What's the charge?"

The marshal jerked a thumb in the general direction of the restaurant. "Disturbing the peace."

"What about my family?"

The man tapped the pile of forms in front of him. "I'll forward these missing persons reports to the state police in the morning; then I'll call the judge and try to get a bond set for you."

Dale sprung to his feet. "I've got to find my family tonight!"

Marshal Stillwell eased out of his chair and stood up. "Just calm down. Soon as I get this information to them, the state troopers will be on the lookout." He jerked his thumb toward the south. "Their office is just five miles down the road."

Dale nodded at the phone on the desk. "Call them now."

The marshal shook his head. "Can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I got procedures to follow."

Dale Thornton squatted and shoved the desk into Stillwell. The marshal's chair rolled back on its casters but snagged on something and tipped over, spilling Marshal Stillwell onto the floor. Dale scrambled over the desk, knocking papers, pens, and a near full cup of coffee on top of the lawman, then dropped a knee into the man's big belly. The marshal curled into a ball and moaned.

Stillwell didn't have a gun on him, at least not one Dale

could find. The way he was dressed it looked like he had been called out from home. Maybe he forgot his gun, or maybe he just didn't carry one. Dale grabbed a handful of shirt and dragged the marshal into the open holding cell, then kicked the door shut. It locked automatically.

By the time Stillwell staggered to his feet Dale was searching his desk. The marshal tried to rip the steel bars apart with his bare hands. "Let me out of here, you crazy bastard!"

Dale ignored him. In the bottom right hand drawer he found a gun, a .38 caliber, five-shot Smith and Wesson. Stillwell started shouting for help. Dale leveled the gun at him. "Shut up."

Stillwell quit yelling.

Dale kept searching.

A few seconds later, the marshal said, "You'll never get away with this."

Holding his wrists up, Dale rattled the handcuffs. "Keys?"

The cop pointed to the desk. "Bottom left."

After he got the handcuffs off, Dale finished going through the desk, then did a quick search of a filing cabinet that was set against the wall. There he found keys to the holding cell and a roll of duct tape.

As Dale approached the cell, Marshal Stillwell backed

against the far wall. "What are you gonna do?"

Aiming the revolver at Stillwell's belly, Dale ordered him to lie on the floor. A few minutes later he relocked the cell door, leaving the marshal with his hands cuffed behind his back and a strip of silver duct tape wrapped around his head that sealed his mouth shut. On his way out of the marshal's office, Dale tossed the revolver back into the desk drawer and kicked it shut. That was trouble he didn't need.

The state police. "Their office is just five miles down the road," the marshal had said.

Darkness had settled over the Batesville. How long had he been in the marshal's office? Everything in town was closed and locked up tight. There wasn't a light to be seen, and not a soul on the street. He didn't see any payphones.

He had to get out of town. Which way had the marshal pointed when he mentioned the state police? Thinking about it, Dale decided it had to be south. They'd driven in from the north and he was sure they hadn't passed a state police troop.

The night had turned cold. If he was going to walk for five miles he needed a jacket.

It took just a few minutes to make it to the gas station. His Jeep was right where he'd left it, but when he reached into his pocket for the keys they weren't there. An image flashed through his mind. A close up shot just like in a movie. His

hand reaching toward Dudley Simpson's, and in his hand, his keys.

Damn!

He looked into the rear window, saw their luggage lying in the back. Dale thought about breaking the window and getting a jacket, maybe his gun, too. Not the gun. He was in enough trouble all ready for what he'd done to the town marshal. Assault, kidnapping--maybe not kidnapping, he hadn't taken him anywhere, just locked him in his own cell--but something like kidnapping. Desperation had driven him to it. That's the only reason he had done it. Because he had to find Carol and Jesse.

He could make it without a jacket.

Old Highway 167 south. Dale Thornton started walking. Ten minutes later he saw headlights behind him, coming from town. He crouched in the bushes beside the highway, but the beat-up pickup glided to a stop next to him. An old man sat behind the wheel, alone in the truck. "You need a ride?"

Feeling like a complete fool, Dale stood. "Yeah, I guess."

"Where you headed?"

"You know where the state police office is?"

The old man nodded, then jerked his head toward the passenger side. "Hop in."

As he climbed into the pickup truck, Dale shot a glance at the old man. Probably at least seventy, with long ghost white

hair and a bushy mustache, wearing a stained undershirt and a pair of denim overalls. Dale scanned the dashboard for a clock but didn't see one. "What time is it?"

The old man shrugged. "Haven't worn a watch in thirty years. Do things as quick as I can. A timepiece strapped to my wrist ain't gonna make me move any faster."

The drive was torture. Never did the old man go over thirty-five miles an hour. Only good thing was that he didn't ask any questions. Just dropped Dale off in the parking lot of the state police troop. As he walked through the door into the police station, Dale glanced over his shoulder and saw the old man's pickup rumbling down the highway.

Inside, sitting behind a chest high counter, was a uniformed trooper, sergeant stripes on his sleeves. Mid-40's, with an iron gray crew cut. "Can I help you, sir?" the sergeant said.

Dale spat out the story as fast as he could, leaving out the part about how he'd handcuffed the town marshal and left him gagged in his own jail cell.

The sergeant's face had remained inscrutable while Dale talked. "What was the name of that town again, sir?"

"Batesville."

The sergeant wheeled his chair over to a map hanging on the wall. "And where'd you say it was?"

The state cop demonstrated the same bureaucrat mentality as the town marshal. Any minute now he'd break out a sheaf of forms and start filling them out. Dale pointed north. "Five miles that way."

"What'd you say your name was again?" The sergeant glided the chair back over to his work area and pulled a pen from his shirt pocket.

"Thornton. Dale Thornton."

As soon as the sergeant finished jotting Dale's name on a pad, he looked up. "There's no town named Batesville."

"I was just there!"

The sergeant stood up. "Take it easy, sir. I'm sure you just got the name mixed up."

Just like in the restaurant.

"...get to the bottom of it." The desk sergeant was still talking, but Dale hadn't heard everything. He felt dizzy. Was everyone around here crazy? "We ate dinner there," he mumbled. "I left my car at the gas station. Dudley Simpson's gas station."

The sergeant nodded as he walked around the counter. A big man, at least six feet, with the beefy build of a weightlifter. "I know Simpson's place. Old 167 and Highway 90. But there's no town there, just the gas station."

"The gas station's smack in the middle of the town."

There's a restaurant, a general store, and a hotel, too."

The sergeant closed on him, his body bladed, his gun side away from Dale. "I need you to put your hands on the counter, sir."

"What?"

With his right hand resting on his holstered pistol, the state trooper took hold of Dale's wrist with his left hand and pushed it to the top of the counter. Dale's other hand followed. The sergeant said, "Pull you feet back."

"What are you doing?"

"You have any weapons on you?"

"No! Of course not." Glad he'd left the marshal's gun, glad he hadn't gotten his own out of the Jeep.

"I'm just gonna pat you down."

"Why?" Dale said. "I haven't done anything. My family's missing?"

The sergeant slid his hands over Dale's waist and the outside of his pockets. "It's for safety, sir."

"Whose?"

"Yours and mine," the trooper sergeant said as he stepped backward a few feet.

"Something's happened to my wife and son. I came here for help."

"What happened to them?"

"I don't know," Dale said. "That's why I need your help."

"Mr. Thornton, I've worked this area for nineteen years. There is no town called Batesville."

"I don't care what you call it, but there's a town five miles away and we need to go there right now."

"Closest town is twelve miles from here and it's south."

The gas station. At least the sergeant knew about the gas station. Dale looked over his shoulder at the big cop. "Can I stand up?" After getting a nod, Dale pushed away from the counter and stood straight. Arguing wasn't getting him anywhere. "Look sergeant, maybe I seem a bit confused, but I know my wife and 6-year-old son are missing. Our car broke down at Simpson's gas station. Can you drive me there and help me look for them?"

The sergeant took his hand off his pistol and relaxed a little. "How'd you get here?"

"An old man in a pickup gave me a ride."

"You get his name?"

Dale's mouth opened but nothing came out as he realized he couldn't remember a thing about the old man or his truck. No details at all.

"What's the matter?"

Dale shook his head. "He...he just gave me a ride. I didn't get his name."

The trooper sergeant held up his hand. "Stay right here. Soon as I get someone to cover the desk, I'll give you a ride back to Simpson's."

Ten minutes later Dale climbed into the passenger seat of the state police car. The sergeant looked over at him. "Put your seatbelt on." Dale strapped himself in but noticed the sergeant didn't.

On the highway the trooper asked him to go over the story again. As Dale repeated what had happened, the sergeant asked several questions about Simpson's: what time of day, what was wrong with the car, who had the keys; but he asked nothing about what happened in the restaurant. The restaurant that wasn't there, according to the sergeant.

A few minutes later the police cruiser's headlights lit up the darkened gas station and Dale's Jeep parked at the pumps.

There was nothing else--absolutely nothing else.

The sergeant slowed down as he turned into the parking lot. "That your Cherokee?"

Stunned, Dale couldn't answer. Staring out the window, struck dumb by what he saw, or didn't see. No restaurant, no hotel, no Batesville General Store--no town. Just empty farmland and a few trees surrounding the gas station.

The trooper pulled his car up behind the Jeep, leaving a car-length gap between the two of them. "Stay here," he said as

he pulled a flashlight from a charger mounted to the dash.

Dale leaned his head against the window and watched the sergeant creep up to the driver's door of his Jeep Cherokee, flashlight held out in front of him, his other hand on the butt of his pistol. The state cop opened the door--the locked door--and poked his head inside the passenger compartment of Dale's Jeep. The trooper backed out and held up his hand, Dale's keys dangling from his fingers. "Keys were inside," he shouted.

With legs quivering, Dale stepped out of the police car. He couldn't understand this. The Jeep had been locked, Dudley Simpson had the keys. He stumbled toward the trooper.

The sergeant shined his flashlight into the back, into the cargo compartment. Suddenly, his face turned to stone. He dropped the keys, drew his gun, aimed both it and his flashlight at Dale. "Don't move!"

Dale stopped dead. What the hell was...

"Get on the ground!"

Not comprehending, Dale just stood there.

The trooper screamed at him, "Get on the fucking ground--now."

Dale Thornton dropped face down onto the pavement. From the corner of his eye, he saw the sergeant side-stepping around him until he was behind Dale and to his left.

The trooper said, "Turn your head to the right."

Dale did as he was told. Then the sergeant closed in and cuffed his hands behind his back. Just the second time in his life Dale had been handcuffed, both on the same night.

After backing up a few steps, the sergeant keyed the radio clipped to his belt and called the state police troop. When the dispatcher answered, the sergeant said, "I need back up units," Dale heard him take a deep breath, "and notify the corner."

The tinny voice from the radio said, "What you got, sergeant?"

"Homicide," the trooper answered. "Suspect is in custody."

Homicide?

The sergeant hooked Dale's elbows and jerked him to his feet, then picked up the keys and opened the tailgate of the Jeep.

Lying in the back, in the cargo space, arms and legs twisted into a torturous configuration, was the naked body of his wife, Carol. At the back of her head, her golden hair was tangled and caked with dried blood. Her face chalk white, her forehead blown out where the bullet had exited. On the carpet next to her was a .357 revolver--Dale's .357 revolver.

She was alone.

"Jesse!" Dale screamed at the dark and empty fields.

* * *

In 1885 the town of Batesville, Louisiana burned to the

ground. Scores of people were killed in the predawn fire that swept through the town. Among those reported killed in the blaze was the town's only minister, but many bodies were so badly burned that positive identification was impossible.

The fire started in the Batesville church and was allegedly set by a preacher from a nearby town. The preacher, a God-fearing and righteous man, was said to have been outraged at the evil deeds going on in Batesville, which he had called a modern-day Sodom.

The town of Batesville was never rebuilt.

THE END