

## DEEDS

Garnet found the syringes and tourniquet in the ditch by the pasture gate. At first, he thought the length of pink rubber was a hair ribbon and he smiled, thinking of a girl playing near the field, the ribbon falling from her ponytail as she crossed through the weeds. When he knelt to pick it up, though, he saw that it was no ribbon and also that the gate wasn't closed right. In fact, it wasn't closed at all, only propped up against the two young walnut trees that stood on either side of where the posts had been. The posts themselves were flat on the ground, the gray wood busted, the jagged stubs that were hard set in the dirt poking through the grass. The chain and lock dangled off the side of the gate, still connected.

Inside the field were ATV tracks, the lines stretching out like veins across the crushed blades of fescue. The tracks were no surprise. He and his wife heard the motors at night, buzzing along the creek bottom. Even with the line of trees along the bank to filter it, sound traveled for miles across the farm. Garnet's wife, Linda, had grown up there and she could recognize the growl of a car coming from all the way over on the highway. It had taken him a while to become accustomed to it, but he'd learned that if you kept still long enough, all the sounds in the world seemed to drift over the hills and settle into the wide valley. He'd grown up in the Ozarks, too, but on the Arkansas side in a rocky holler so deep, it stayed shaded and

dark most of the day, and the silence there was enough to make you think you were the last man left on earth.

Garnet went to the truck and found his cell phone on the seat. He called Linda. “Don’t pick it up,” she said. “That needle could have diseases.”

“I wish I had a plastic bag or something. I’ve got my work gloves on.”

“Leave it for the sheriff. If he even cares to come see.”

Garnet didn’t put much stock in the sheriff, but he called anyway. The cell reception was better there on the north side of the farm. From the top of the next hill, he could look down over the entire valley and see his own house, the barns and fields around it divided by barbed wire so they made a patchwork of green. He kept the sheriff’s number saved on his phone, something he never would’ve done before, but people were more afraid these days and he guessed he was the same way. The receptionist answered and, rather than put him through to the sheriff himself, she took the message. “We get these calls everyday,” she said. Garnet thought she sounded bored. “I give him all the messages and he comes out as he can.”

“I wouldn’t want a child to get ahold of this needle,” he said.

“Are there children just out walking around?”

“There could be.” The next farm over belonged to a younger family, one of the few left, but he hoped the mother didn’t let her children wander the roads by themselves. There were too many stories.

“I’d just take it and throw it in the trash, it was me,” said the receptionist.

“I might. You got my name and number?”

“Yes, sir,” she said. “I’ve got it all down, Mr. Clark.”

When Garnet ended the call, he knew he’d wasted his time. Nobody liked the new sheriff, but they hadn’t liked the old one, either. It was no honor to be the law. He didn’t care

one way or the other, but he wished there might be a little help offered on something like this. He hesitated to move the gate and drive into the field, but there were two barns and his own small herd of steers in the next pasture and he needed to check on both. The gate was too heavy to lift now that it was off its hinges and he thought about calling Linda again to see if she might drive over, but Linda wasn't strong like she used to be. Neither was Garnet.

He pushed at the gate to slide it over, digging his heels into the dirt, but it was long and tipped and fell, just missing his feet. Now that it was flat on the ground, he could see the gate was bowed at the center from having been rammed into and driven over. He got down on his knees and shoved it clear of the path. Tomorrow, he'd come fix it, though it would probably be work done in vain. Whoever had been there didn't care about gates or locks, and wouldn't they likely return? He could electrify the whole farm if it weren't for the cost. He had a portable electric fence he moved around to direct his steers to fresh grazing and give them what protection he could. Linda had been angry about the expense of it. "It's not even our farm yet," she'd said, but Garnet thought her objection had more to do with the method than with the money. Her father and grandfather had never used anything more than barbed wire and the threat of their name to shield what they had, and she saw no good reason to change.

It was a dry fall and a haze of dust hovered over the field. Garnet went to the nearest barn first. When he slid the door open, he could tell that no one had been inside. There were no needles, no tourniquets. Not even a beer bottle. He put his boot heel to a rusted tractor seat and gave it a shove, a young black snake revealing itself, hissing as it uncoiled and retreated to a hole in the floor. The second barn was the same, with no evidence of trespassers.

Garnet drove to the creek where the steers had gone to be in the shade and drink. The water at the edge was mossy and the mosquitoes swarmed. He followed the curve of the bed

to where it met the branch and there he saw the remnants of a campfire. Beer cans and cigarette butts were scattered beside more syringes, two of them planted needle down into the rocks. He couldn't think of a worse place to have a party than by a creek full of mosquitoes, but it was the seclusion the trespassers wanted. Linda's family, the Dawsons, had lived on the farm for seven generations and she told him that the first ancestors who settled there had passed on stories of how frightened they were at night in the isolated Missouri wilderness. Indians lived on the land then, too, and they camped on the creek bank where they sang and hollered late into the night, their bonfires burning until morning. "Wouldn't that like to have scared you to death?" she'd said. "I don't know how them old people hardly stood it."

Though he'd nodded in agreement, he didn't feel sorry for the Dawsons. You moved into somebody's territory, you had to deal with the consequences. Maybe the Indians were just trying to scare off them and the other white people, maybe they were just trying to give them fair warning? Linda's family had been the intruders, but those days were gone and the Dawsons were the natives now. He looked closer at the blackened rocks surrounding the campfire. There used to be arrowheads all along the creek, but they'd been picked clean by people who snuck down and filled their pockets with relics. Still others came at night to hunt game, shining their flashlights into the trees to catch the mirrored eyes of coons and possums. If it wasn't one thing being stolen, it was another, and you could never let your guard down.

Garnet walked back to the truck. Three of his steers had gone off somewhere on their own and he needed to find them. He turned the truck around on the gravel bank and headed to the neighboring pasture.

The next morning, Garnet set to work welding a disc on the hay mower. Linda's brother, Jody, had run it over a hunk of rock and knocked off a blade. This was the way of it: Jody

broke things and Garnet put them back together. He wouldn't have bothered with it right then except the late drought had left just enough grass for a final cutting of straw, which he needed for the animal shelters in the winter. He lifted the faceplate. Was somebody calling? He wiped his face on his sleeve and stuck his head outside the door of the shop. It was Linda yelling for him from the back porch. She waved the phone in front of her.

"It's the sheriff calling you back."

He took off the helmet and left it on the floor of the shop. He hadn't expected to hear from the sheriff and now he wasn't sure he really wanted to talk to him.

Garnet was breathless by the time he made it up the steps of the house and his fingers were too greasy to be touching the phone. Linda saw his hands and grimaced, but gave him the phone anyway.

"Yes, sir," he said into the receiver.

"Got a message here you found some interesting items on your land."

"I guess that's what you could say," said Garnet. "A bunch of needles and such. There was more at the creek. Guess somebody was having a party."

"It wasn't the vet might've left it all?"

"No, sir, I hadn't had the vet out since winter. And she don't usually hang around and make a bonfire." He could see already it was no good talking to the man.

"You got 'no trespassing' signs along your property?"

"I do. Now this over across the creek is my father-in-law's place, but I keep the signs up for him."

"So you're calling me about somebody trespassing on land that isn't even yours?"

It was hard to explain the situation with the land, and it embarrassed Garnet to be put on the spot. Linda's father, Leland, was in his eighties, but he refused to sign over the deeds.