

Terri scrunched behind the windshield retying her hair back with the red ribbon. She must have lost it during their previous tête-à-tête at the drive-in. Nick figured she had just found it somewhere in the car. As they approached the TB light, she edged up on the passenger seat and leaned forward, scouting around in the dark. Hands in her lap, straining to see, those full C-cups of hers pressed up against the dashboard almost out of that cute, scoop-necked, white cotton, midriff top. This blonde was something else.

“Say, you don’t think those guys are laying for us up here, do you Nick?” She voiced his silent fears but he said nothing. He didn’t want to alarm them.

Seated between him and Terri, Patti asked, “You don’t think they’d do that, d’ya Nick?” Patti’s new, trendy, shag haircut compensated for her freckles, making her look older than her sixteen, almost seventeen years. “I sure as hell hope not! Why would they? Wait for us for what, five hours in the middle of the night? What kind of creeps would do something like that?”

Both Nick and Terri turned to look at her, as she if she had just fallen out of the sky. Patti said, “Oh bull slop.” How could she forget how he had made fools out of those boys at Truley’s tonight?

Terri said, “These are bad boys Patti, muy malo.”

“Are they muy stupido, too?” Again, Nick and Terri turned to look at Patti without saying a word.

“All right, all right. I get it. I get it. I’ll shut up.”

Nick pulled his sleek Pontiac convertible up to the TB light. Truley’s Bar and Grill was right there, just where it had always been. Yep, right where they had left it about five hours ago on this late June evening, with the Buzzbee boys, oil-smearing, rolling in the gutter. Only the night was blacker and bleaker than before. The rain he sensed coming their way earlier, approached now in the form of dark clouds, finally began to sprinkle large, scattered, cold drops. Nick raised the convertible top and enlisted the girls to help him lock it down on either side of the windshield and roll up the back windows.

Humped over the seatback, winding up the back passenger window, Terri said, “Oh my gosh. Is that who I think it is over there?” She slid back into the shotgun seat, her face now pale. Nick had been admiring Terri’s awesome derriere humped over the seatback, but now he looked past her towards Truley’s. His heart started pumping harder, as it had during his earlier confrontation with those goons. Terri had fingered them. It was *them* all right. Sonovabitch! Arlo sat behind the wheel with his brother Alvin riding shotgun.

Waiting in Truley’s empty parking lot under the street light, they looked to be loaded for bear, sitting in a suped up, black and yellow, hot rod, pick up truck. The truck sported a giant bumble bee on the hood and smaller images of the insect on the doors. Looked like one of those funny cars they ran on weekends over at the Quasco speedway. Raising the convertible top must have caught their eyes. Southern Maryland’s bad boys recognized Nick and the Pontiac. They flipped him off, rained profanities at him out their windows and gunned their engine. Their jalopy jolted forward taking an angle across the empty parking lot that would cut him off. Nick didn’t wait for the light to change. Two in the morning and the highway dead, he turned left from the right lane, across four lanes of highway through the intersection and hurtled down Old Veer Avenue, curving right past the empty health clinic.

The Buzzbees fired across the two north-bound lanes into the grassy median strip. They fishtailed, escaping the median, giving Nick a moment to put some distance between them. Nick knew Old Veer as one of those winding, country, up and down affairs, with high-pitched banks on its curves and not much in the way of shoulders. A double yellow-lined, roller coaster where you always seem to get stuck behind a farmer on a tractor, unable to pass. And then, when you get to that one spot with spaced white lines where you can pass, oncoming traffic prevents you. Good, he needed a break. Despite his Pontiac’s three hundred and thirty-three horses, that suped up, drag racin’, hot rod of the Buzzbees might eat him up out on the highway.

Nick led the Buzzbees over a topsy-turvy, roller coaster north on Old Veer. Checking their lights in the rear view mirror, Nick could tell their reactions were slow, clumsy. They were swerving all over the road behind him. The boys must have been drinking or doping, another break for him and the girls. If those creeps weren’t careful, they would kill themselves. Wishful thinking. He only hoped they wouldn’t kill him and the girls in the process. They took a sharp curve. Behind him, the Buzzbees slid off the road. Nick turned his windshield wipers on and slowed down to take the first right angle in a long square-shaped, U-bracket turn. About a mile and a half long, the wide bracket was notorious for the accidents it produced. The Buzzbee’s foul-up and the sharp angle of the first turn caused him to lose sight of them for a minute. Spotting an up-hill, tree-lined rural

drive, Nick screeched to his right into the dirt lane and turned off his lights, hoping the Buzzbees would fly by, as the Spanish cavalry had when they had chased Zorro through the forest. That ruse had worked great for Ty Power up on the big screen. He hoped it would work for him now.

He inched the car further up the hill toward the white frame farmhouse. When he figured his engine was just out of earshot of the house, Nick made a three-point turn and parked, facing the road. He told the girls, they had the option of staying with him or getting out and going up to the farmhouse for help. Both girls said they wanted to stick by him. Pale and frightened, the girls suddenly child-like faces warmed his heart. Yessir, they were a pair to draw to, for sure. The three of them watched now as the Buzzbees careened off the right angle turn, speeding through the storm onto the straight-away. Shifting into high gear, they fishtailed down the base of the U-bracket looking for the Pontiac. Nick watched as the Buzzbees turned right again at the far right angle turn and disappeared behind some trees. He could follow their headlights through some gaps in the foliage.

“Thank God for big favors.” Patti said. “Come on Baby, let’s blow this place.”

Nick followed her advice. He drove down the dirt drive and retraced his steps over Old Veer. As he drove, he was praying again, asking for help, for wisdom, asking for a way of escape. He knew those boys would not let this slide. The girls were praying too, following his lead, heads bowed and lips moving silently. Terri was crossing herself repeatedly, over that solid, knockout chest of hers! The one he had explored in wonder and zeal back at the drive-in when Patti went to the restroom. No time to think of that now. He had to get his mind right if they were to survive. After he had passed back around the first leg of the long U-bracket turn again, Patti told him to “Turn the lights on. Floor it and get the heck out of Dodge.” Instead, he stopped. He didn’t know why. The rain coming down hard, drummed the top of the car. Something inside him urged Nick to – *TURN AROUND, WAIT* – Against his reason, Nick began to turn the car around. Patti asked what he was doing. She said they could escape if he kept on. Instead, he made a three-point turn in the narrow road, stopped for a minute and then started driving slowly towards their last sighting of the Buzzbees. He couldn’t explain why he did it. Something inside his heart encouraged him. Where were those creeps anyway? It rained hard now. The drops pelted the rag top, sounding like a machine gun bursting over their heads.

Terri was calm and reserved when she asked him, “What are you doing Nicholas?”

“I dunno, Terr. Gotta hunch, an answer to prayer mebbe. I dunno. Just feels like the right thing to do. If you know any good prayers, now’s the time to say ‘em.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing?”

“Oh, just being your lovely, gorgeous self, I guess.” He smiled and she relaxed visibly, as if he had lifted a weight from her shoulders.

Sitting between them, Patti whined. “What’s all this slop?”

Nick said, “Patti, why don’t you jump in the back Sweetie, and put a seat belt on.” Terri fastened her safety belt about her. Nick cinched his a little tighter.

“Like hell I will. Let Terri jump in the back like she did before.”

“Look Baby, I don’t have time to argue. Got no center belt up here, but there’s a couple in back.”

“Let Terri sit in the back.”

“She’s already buckled in, see? It’s nasty out. Could get rough, Baby. I can feel it. Go ahead now and be a good girl. Please?” Patti grumbled under her breath but she scrambled over the seatback. They buckled their safety belts tight.

The rain was pelting the car very hard now, one of those summer thunderstorms so prevalent in Southern Maryland after a long hot, humid day. Though he noticed, there wasn’t much lightning or thunder in this one so far. Nick stopped and turned his windshield wipers up full blast.

Patti leaned forward. “What the hell ya still doin’ with the lights off, *Nicholas*? I can’t see a damn thing.”

“Relax Patti, just be cool and relax. Nick knows what he’s doing, don’t you Nick?” She motioned Patti back.

“That’s right, Terr. I can see in the dark but they can’t.” Besides, Nick hadn’t felt any heartfelt urges to turn the lights back on; only to – *TURN AROUND, WAIT*.

Patti groused. “*Nobody* can see in the dark.”

“Well, I can. Just be cool Baby and we’ll get through this all right.”

“I don’t believe you can see in the dark. Never heard of such a thing, have you Terri?”

“Saw some old war movie, I was watching with Gary on TV. Had some Indian marine scout in the Pacific, could see in the dark, but I thought it was just Hollywood stuff. You know, made for a good story.”

“Never heard of anybody could see in the dark. That’s for damn sure.”

Nick: “Well Patti, now you do.”

“Prove it.”

“Ever seen anybody with two-tone eyes like mine?”

“No, so what?”

“You, Terr?” Shakes her head.

“There ya go.” He winked at Patti via the rear view mirror. Nick thought talkin’ was good for them, occupied their minds ‘til the Buzzbee boys realized their mistake and came back this way.

“Just because you’ve got the weirdest eyes we’ve ever seen, doesn’t mean you can see twenty/twenty at night.” Nick made a face. “Never said I could see twenty/twenty. All’s I’m sayin’ is I can see better than most people at night. That’s all.” Terri said, “Well, let’s just hope you can see better than the Buzzbee boys.”

It was true. He could always see well in the dark, not 20/20 maybe, but a lot better than anyone else he knew, always could. Piece o’ cake. Patti said, “I don’t believe it. You wear glasses in class half the time for cripesake.”

“Them’s my readin’ glasses. Oh ye of little faith.”

Terri said, “Yes Patti, if you have faith as big as a mustard seed, you can move mountains.”

“All I care about movin’ is this car, turnin’ it around and *movin’* on home.”

Nick wasn’t listening to them any more. The rain had wet the road just enough to refresh old oil and fluid spills, but not enough to wash them off. The road was lifeless but treacherous, dangerously slick. Nick was waiting, following the command from his heart. The Pontiac was barely moving, inching along on a road void of life, enveloped in a pool of inky black. Absent the dashboard lights now, the black enveloped them inside, too. He could hear the girls beside him breathing deeply, anxious but trying to stay cool. Then, Terri praying the “Hail Mary” and the Lord’s prayer, Patti joining her and Nick, silently, joining in on the latter.

Nick edged the Pontiac closer to the first right angle of the U-bracket. He needed some fresh air. Nick rolled down his window halfway and cracked the vent window half open. Cool, refreshing rain splattered onto his cheek and shoulder. They were quiet now. Tension was high. Off to his left, he heard a funny, low-pitched, buzzing sound, a kind of a hum that sounded like high-voltage electricity. Turning back over his left shoulder, he spotted an oversized, electric transformer housed on a scaffold of double wooden telephone poles with heavy cable wires running into it from all directions. Kind of a loud hum for electricity he thought. He turned on the dash lights.

On their right, a line of shade trees bordered the road. Nick licked his lips and remained cool, calm, just as he had earlier at Truley’s when he had stuck it to those turkeys. Seemed like a lifetime ago instead of just hours. Then – *GO SLOW* – again, a silent command from inside. Nick moved forward slowly, peaking the speedometer at twenty miles an hour. Making the right angle turn on to the straightaway, Nick spotted some headlights between the trees, rounding the far bend in the U over a mile away. He could see a car or truck passing under a rare streetlight behind some sparsely planted, roadside, cedar trees. Couldn’t make out a bumble bee on the door, but he thought it might be them, but he couldn’t be sure. Looked like a pickup truck.

He watched headlights pass behind the trees ahead the other side of the far bracket turn. The vehicle turned left, rounding the turn, into the straight-away at the base of the bracket, heading towards him. Yeah. Looked more like some kind of a truck than a car. He thought it might be them, but couldn’t be sure. The vehicle had a tough time holding the road as it made the ninety degree left angle turn onto the straight-away from their side of the bracket. Again—the internal command– *STAY SLOW*. The approaching vehicle was moving much faster than his Pontiac. Heading right for him now like a Wild West showdown, he thought. Had to be them! The deep, distinctive rumble of the on-rushing four-barrel carb with dual exhaust confirmed Nick’s suspicions that it had to be the Buzzbees suped-up motor. Behind him, Patti cracked. She told Nick to turn tail and run but he couldn’t; it was too late now. A glance towards Terri’s wide eyes and white face told him, they all knew. Knew it was the Buzzbees. Knew it was too late to turn back.

The Buzzbees must have spotted the Pontiac even though his lights were off. Even if they hadn’t, there was no time for Nick to make a three-point turn now. And he had passed the farm lane he had used earlier. Nick

didn't know why he was going so slowly, when he wanted to go faster and challenge 'em, chicken 'em right off the road. But he proceeded slowly as instructed, compelled by the mysterious, heartfelt, inner Voice to proceed cautiously. Even so, his speedometer crept up to thirty, with the Buzzbees increasing their speed on the straight-away, running probably twice as fast as Nick. They had to be doing sixty. Nick thought he saw the bee on the hood, but how could he with their hi-beams damn near blinding him? Must be his imagination.

The truck closed in on the halfway point of the straight-away. Flashed its high beams twice and surged right toward Nick. The pickup crossed over the center white stripes, heading straight for Nick and the Pontiac. Yeah. They knew he was here. Sure they did. Placing his left hand on the light switch, Nick flipped on his lights. This was it. They were going to try to run him right off the road. Even better thought Nick, even better.

Patti cracked and yelled, "No! Don't play chicken with 'em Nick. I don't wanna die. I don't wanna—" Terri reached back over the seat and backhanded Patti's thigh hard, shutting her up, earning even more of Nick's respect. He checked Patti in the rear view mirror. She shut up and sulked.

Terri apologized. "Sorry Nick." But he couldn't be bothered, not now with their lives hanging in the balance.

Pulling his shades off the sun visor while pushing the visor down, Nick jammed on his dark glasses, trying to shield his eyes from the blaring car lights ahead that were nearly blinding him. Nick stomped his left foot over the high beam switch on the floor board to block out their brites but it didn't help much. Terri shoved down her visor too and threw up an arm to screen out the onrushing, bright lights. Checking the Buzzbees coming on faster, Nick said, "'S OK. Ya did fine, Terr. Patti?" He checked her out via the rear view mirror. "We're gonna be fine, Baby. Trust me." Patti nodded and whimpered. Terri turned back and repeated Nick's encouragement to Patti. Patti said nothing. Then Terri also faced front, the road ahead. She rolled down her windows as Nick had done and seized the vent window bar. She half-turned her head to Nick and managed a hopeful simper. Staring dead ahead, Nick nodded as they both focused on the road before them.

Seconds seemed like minutes. Rain fell in sheets now. Windshield wipers beat a fast but steady rhythm though they could not match Nick's wild heartbeat or fully clear his line of vision. He flipped on the air conditioner with the fan on high to knock down condensation forming inside the windshield. Sweaty hands, dry mouth. Could feel the tension Mann, what a ride. Rain fell in torrents. Seconds seemed like hours. Nick couldn't wet his lips. Inside, except for the dashboard lights, the car was dark; outside, the slick road was black. He strained to peer through the ink and the driving rain. Two hundred yards away, the Buzzbees sped up. Assholes. Their high beams, dead on for him, loomed larger. Still no spit. A hundred yards out. Please help me, Jesus. Blinding white light now, swallowing them up. Nick switched on his hi-beams. Seventy yards. Fifty. Thirty—twenty – *LEFT*. Patti screamed. Nick swerved left. The Buzzbees did the same. They *missed* each other. Both cars skidded toward opposite sides of the slick road, tires shrieking.

Just missing the Buzzbees after swerving left, Nick tried to straighten the Pontiac out as he applied the brakes ever so slightly. The slower traveling Pontiac skidded hard to the left, across the road. Turning quickly into the direction of the skid, Nick glimpsed, in his rear view mirror, Arlo had jerked the hot rod violently to his left also, just missing Nick's right rear fender. The faster moving pickup truck shot across the road, catching the opposite, shallow, gravel shoulder with its driver's side tires. Nick thought he had the convertible under control for a second and started to brake when the Pontiac slid right and he reacted, letting up on the brakes steering that direction. He fishtailed sharp left again and skidded again wildly back to his left, steering into a second, correcting turn, breaking hard when he felt the front tires catching the narrow left shoulder. The rear tires shrieked, but he broke hard to keep the car from going off the rode down a slope into an adjacent file, fearing the thing might flip over. They skidded hard right creating that terrible, fatal, highway sound. Patti screamed again. But the Pontiac screeched to a halt half across the gravel shoulder, back end more than perpendicular to the road with the back bumper, jutting out over the asphalt, their front end pointed downhill towards an open field, stopping before they could flip. Nick twisted quickly to his left to watch through his half-open window the Buzzbee's careening truck.

Either Arlo panicked or he was too drunk or tired to react properly. Nick watched as the truck, unable to stop, steered sharply off the opposite, left shoulder, then back to the right to regain the road, but Arlo must have overcompensated. Because then, trying to hug the asphalt, the hot rod turned sharply left again, still sliding right across the road out of control, into and through the right corner angle of the U. They were going far too fast to hold such a severe angle. To Nick it looked as if Arlo lost his nerve by braking too stiffly, too

long. The hot rod, tires shrieking horribly, slid up the sharp-banked slick asphalt right through the corner of the bracket. Too late, the truck turned in the direction of this second, longer skid. The sound of their shrieking tires gave Nick goose bumps. The hot rod truck vaulted up, out and over the steeply down-pitched bank of the curve, crashing sidelong into the double telephone poles holding the transformer Nick had heard humming minutes ago. Striking those poles about ten feet up, the velocity of the truck cracked the poles in two, causing the pickup's stinger end to sway to the right. The big bee crashed to the ground on the driver's side, with the top half of the telephone poles and the scaffolding and the huge, electrical transformer smashing down and squashing the passenger side of the bee. Starlight white, electric sparks showered into the black, rain-filled night above the crash site like so many holiday sparklers. Looked to Nick, as if The Fourth had come five days early this year. Within a matter of seconds, the electric sparks met what have been leaking gas fuel from the pickup. A huge, fiery explosion erupted into a black, yellow and red mini mushroom cloud, floating up into the black night. Stupefied, Nick removed his sunglasses to watch appalled. The terrific explosion catapulted the truck's hood skyward behind the flames and sheared off the roof. The roof danced and bounced end over end along over the ground, as if it had a life of its own. The wood scaffold flamed yellow atop the wreck.

Seconds later, a secondary explosion insured the demise of the notorious Buzzbee boys. Exposed by the now missing roof to the sight of Nick and the girls, the Buzzbees, the cab and remnants of the jalopy caught fire. The boys were still, limp. Nick figured the Buzzbees were either unconscious or dead. With the truck on its side now with the cab roof gone, Nick watched in shock as flames consumed their heads and torsos, the boys next to each other, lying sideways in the wreck. What a gory, gruesome sight. The brothers burned in silence. If they weren't dead a minute ago, they were now. "Could have been us," Nick mumbled under his breath. "Damn, it could have been us, if I had gone as fast as the Buzzbees or hadn't swerved left." That inner Voice he had felt in his heart had saved their asses. If he had gone a little faster as he had wanted, the convertible might have flipped over down the slope. It damn near had anyway.

Awed, in speechless terror, Nick and the girls watched this horrific spectacle through the heavy rain from the distant safety of the convertible. Flames engulfed the wreck. The Buzzbees fried. White electric sparks sputtered sporadically from the downed transformer like a never-ending sparkler, evidence that it may be down but not out. One sparking wire whipped out of control like an unmanned fire hose. Through Nick's open window, they could hear the staccato buzzing of the felled grotesque electric monster, gasping its last breaths. Nick sat motionless, mouth open, as did the girls, to witness a premature Fourth of July fireworks display, not to mention a gruesome, double execution by electrocution. A sight Nick wished he had never seen. They sat, watching in awe and horror and in thankful reverence that they had been spared.

Patti asked, "Did you see that?" Terri and Nick simply turned and looked at her. She'd dried her tears by now. "Yeah, I guess you did."

Terri said, "Do you think they can survive, Nick?" Her full bosom heaved above the scooped hem of her top, but the voluptuous sight didn't excite him the way it had earlier.

Patti said, "You gotta be kiddin'. Can't you see their heads fryin'? Most gruesome thing I ever saw."
"How can you say that Patti!"

"Very easily, cuz I see 'em fryin' there with my own two eyes. You want me to say it again so you can read my lips? Those were two bad boys, 'muy malo'. They deserved it. You said so yourself, Terri."

Terri whispered, more to herself. "Never said they deserved it. We all deserve to die but nobody deserves to die like that, nobody." She spoke louder. "That could have been us down there. If Nick had sped up or turned the other way, it could have been us. There's another transformer like that over here." She pointed to her right up toward the left side of the road near the other right angle of the U by a lone street lamp. "Only not as big as that monster." She shuddered. Funny, thought Nick, the Pontiac didn't get so much as a scratch. Terri voiced what Nick had been thinking. "Thank you Lord that that is not us." She nodded toward the wreck.

"Amen to that sweet prayer," said Nick. Patti concurred.

"You girls all right?" They nodded they were. "Yes. Thanks for asking Nick." Terri patted Nick's shoulder.

"Yes. Thanks for asking, Nick." Patti, mimicking Terri. "Sounds like you two are scum-suckin' in love all of a sudden. What happened when I went to the restroom anyway?"

Nick and Terri ignored her. It came to Nick again, those simple, direct internal commands.

TURN AROUND, WAIT – GO SLOW – LEFT

He had felt those silent commands inside his heart and he had obeyed. Those commands and his obedience had saved them, but he kept this to himself. They sat watching the pickup burn for a few more minutes until the girls said the sight of the crash was making them ill. Through the trees, up on the hill above and behind them, Terri said she saw what appeared to be flashlights twinkling as they moved. Probably from the farmhouse up there, the one he had turned into earlier, but the house itself was dark. Then he heard voices float down to them off the hill. He backed up and steered the Pontiac back onto the road, turned left and headed home.

* * *

Nick drove slowly through the rain. After a few miles he stopped at the Surrett Road intersection. He waited at the blinking yellow light, though he did not have to. He was thinking what he should do. The storm still raged and they were still the only car on the road. He rolled up his window but kept the vent window cracked. Terri followed his example.

“We have to turn back Nick.” Terri reading his mind again. They thought alike, another thing he liked so much about her. The car idled but he said nothing. “Nicky? We have to go back. You know that, don’t you? I know you do.”

“Like hell we do.” Patti said, leaning forward from the back to catch Nick’s ear. “Let’s get the hell out o’ Dodge Nick. Nobody saw us. Nobody knows. The Buzzbees sure won’t be sayin’ anything. I guarantee that. Let’s go.”

Terri said, “What about those lights and those voices. That old farmer and his wife might have seen us.”

Nick thought about it. They might have seen him but it was unlikely. Through the trees? With flashlights, from that distance in the rain? No. But if he heard their voices, they must have heard his engine driving off. Terri placed her hand gently on his right forearm. He turned right onto Surrett Road, taking them out to the main highway that ran parallel to Old Veer.

“You just can’t leave the scene of an accident like that Nicky. You know that. It’s against the law.”

From the back, “Shut-up Terri, Nick knows what he’s doin’, don’t ya Nicky?”

Nick drove in silence. Terri turned around, asking Patti for support, but though she had been sobbing softly into her chest, Patti was defiant. When Nick reached the main road, he stopped, hesitated and then turned right, south.

“That’s my boy, Nick. You’re doing the right thing. We’ll back you up, won’t we Patti? Those guys were drunk, had to be. They just messed up, that’s all. Isn’t that right Patti?”

“Judas Priest. Is that our story? That’s it?” Patti sniffled and wiped her nose with her forearm. Nick didn’t speak. “Nick turned around and laid for ‘em back there like, like ... like Crazy Horse waited for Custer at the Little Big Horn.”

Terri twisted around to face Patti: “It wasn’t like that all Patti and you know it. Nick was protecting us as best he knew how. He didn’t make those boys try to run us off the road. They made their choice, a poor one, but it was theirs, not ours. That’s all there is to it Patti.” She turned back to Nick, “Isn’t that right, Nick?”

Nick said nothing because he feared Patti was right. But he sure had not possessed the overwhelming odds Crazy Horse had. Then he recalled the Voice and thought may be his odds had been even better. He turned right again at the intersection near Truley’s, retracing their earlier route over Old Veer.

“Well OK, if that’s the way you guys want it. Sure, had ta be, I guess.” Patti didn’t sound convinced. She said, “Don’t let it be said Patti Slater ain’t a team player.” Nick drove slow, saying nothing.

Took nearly ten minutes of silent riding to reach their destination. As they approached the crash site, they became aware of sirens and flashing lights. There were a couple cars stopped in front of them. A police squad car was sprawled across the road. A policeman in rain gear was directing traffic with a flashlight to make, inducing the cars to make three-point turns and retrace their steps. The rain poured down on the poor guy. Up ahead Nick could spot an Achen fire truck putting out the remnants of the blaze, raining water from its hose down onto the wreck below the street. The fire truck lay across the road blocking traffic both ways. Nick knew the Achen fire department was less than ten minutes away, the same fire department that had filled the Anderson’s pool, Nick had helped install a week ago. The fire truck had sucked water from a nearby pond and filled the customer’s pool with green algae, snakes and frogs and turtles and every other damned thing that lives in a pond. They even managed to spray some pond water into the pool for good measure. Sheesh! Could

this be the same truck? He wondered and waited for his turn to meet the traffic cop. Crazy, how your mind works at a time like this. He watched the last car in front of him make a three-point turn and head back the way it had come. Nick drifted the Pontiac up to the policeman and stopped. He rolled down his window and rain splashed in on him.

“You gotta turn around here son, the road is blocked ahead. Bad accident. Go ahead now.”

“But Officer, I gotta get up there. I can help,” said Nick.

“Everything’s bein’ took care of son. There’s nothin’ you can do for those boys now. So turn around and head on back. You can use 5A to get to where you wanna go.”

“No, no, ya don’ understand sir, I— ”

“I understand ya better move your butt, boy. You’re holdin’ up the show.”

“But Mister, I know what happened.”

“So do I. Them Buzzbees got what they deserved. And the name is Dodgett, *Officer* Dodgett, not ‘Mister’, for future reference. Now, if ya don’t move out right pronto, I’m gonna give ya a citation. You aren’t gonna impress these young ladies here any by showin’ em a couple o’ fried corpses. So get out o’ here. NOW! That means pronto.” The officer rapped his fist against Nick’s door as if he meant it. “Let’s go.” The officer waved his flashlight with one hand and pointed Nick’s way with the other. Nicky looked at Terri held up his hands and shrugged. Then he turned the convertible around, rolled up his window and left that mess behind.

“Well, at least ya tried Nick,” said Patti, her tone indicating she was on board all of a sudden but none too sorry to get off scot free. “Nobody can say ya didn’t try. I’m sorry about the way I acted. I hope you don’t count it against me too hard.”

“No problem Patti. Forget all about it. Right, Terri?”

Terri sighed. “Forget all about it? Forget seeing those two men burn to death? Yes, of course, no need to mention it again.” Her tone was clipped and sarcastic.

Nick turned to observe her. That wasn’t what he meant. She had to know that. She held her shaking hands in her lap and studied her long fingernails, the ones that had dug into his back in passion earlier at the drive-in. Considering they just escaped death, Terri didn’t look too happy. Her face was ashen. Despite the downpour, Terri rolled down her window and stuck her head out of it; a panting dog. Patti slumped in the opposite corner of the back seat and frowned. It just dawned on him. He had *killed two men*, even if they were the low-life Buzzbee boys. He started to feel sick. Following Terri’s example, Nick rolled down his window again for some fresh air. He drove them home like that, hoping the cold rain splashing in on him would wash away his sin.