

TWIN FORKS

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and *Tomato Red*.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE ANDERSON

MORROW WONDERED if he might soon die because of a beautiful girl from his teens he'd never had the nerve to approach. This thought preoccupied him as he collected fees from campers at dusk and watched shadows on the hillsides for odd patterns, shifty movements, studied parked cars he wasn't sure he recognized, or looked into new faces for any intimation of treachery. He walked about quickly but fought the urge to assume a crouch when crossing open spaces. He was most concerned about ambush when he collected coins from the campground laundry and had his back to the door, or helped beach a canoe that arrived as the gloaming settled. Sometimes he made himself a target at twilight on the riverbank while looking downstream toward Spawt Mill, where in a single summery moment she became fixed in

his desires as the perfection of skin and laughter he would always yearn for, but on that day overwhelmed his senses, left him wordless and ashamed.

The sheriff had said, "You probably should've shot him while you could do it legal and get it over with. He might be back for you, or you might not ever see him again, who knows with meth heads. But you surely will want to be ready if ever he does come around for you, and that could be at any time from now on." Morrow had two employees, and after five days the younger one, a man named Sky, quit, saying, "I got a bunch of kids, man—I can't take the risk he'll shoot me thinkin' I'm you."

"I understand. Thanks for staying with me as long as you have." December past, when Morrow was shown the property, the sell-

er had been present on the grounds and having a meltdown. He wore a long rough overcoat and walked to each campsite with a target pistol in hand, shouting lamentations as he fired farewell bullets at trees and picnic tables. He said, "I guess God don't want me to have this place. I guess God's got other plans for me. I guess..." The pop-pops of the pistol seemed small, muted by the forest and the river, but his words were loud and his confusion painful to hear. Morrow winced whenever the man spoke. The realtor, Nan Colvin, a young country woman with ruddled mud on her boots and a no-fuss hairstyle, said, "I'm sorry. You shouldn't be seeing this." She took Morrow's arm and walked him away from the store, onto the one-lane bridge abutting the property. They stood near the center, leaning on the heavy iron railings to admire the river, a river fed by springs and running clear and cold, 56 degrees year-round. The seller had wandered farther, past the canoe racks and beyond sight, but was still shooting, shouting, possibly weeping. "He's such a good churchgoing man, you know, that he wouldn't sell beer, not at all. Not a can, not a bottle. Nor cigarettes. It's a real principled stand to take, I guess, somethin' folks ought to admire, but beer is about 40 percent of sales on the river. He's broke now."

"Things happen for a reason."

"You think?"

"I used to come here as a kid."

"Is that so? Must've been extra wonderful back then, I bet, huh?"

Morrow was down from Nebraska, escaping fresh memories by chasing after old ones, looking for something that might spark his blood awake, make it hop lively in his veins again. Nan had read his e-mails with care and selected this property for him, and he liked everything about the place; the steep hillsides of forest stripped for winter, the dour gray rock bluffs crouched near the river, the lonesome mumble of the passing wind, and these untamed people who shot at things to so plainly announce their sorrow.

She said, "I know this seems kind of wild out here."

"That's what I always liked about it."

"He'll listen to any offer."

Morrow made a lowball offer before supper that day, an offer that could seem insulting to both Nan and the seller, but a few weeks later the offer was accepted. He arrived at the Twin Forks Store and Campground in early March, driving a pickup truck with everything he expected to need stacked neatly in the bed. He intended to change his habits in new surroundings, give his system a shake, so he arrived without many of his once-favorite things: the antique liquor cabinet with the copper top his father had left to him; a box stacked with CDs that had once made his feet move but that he didn't expect to listen to again. He'd taken all of his golfing trophies down from shelves in the den and tossed



them into a trash can at the curb, then returned to drop four pair of handmade shoes and his wristwatch on top of the trophies. That same night he drove to downtown Omaha and placed a set of customized golf clubs on a sidewalk near the bus station and drove away with a raised hand blocking the rearview mirror so he couldn't look back. He did keep a stuffed buffalo head he'd bought on impulse at a garage sale in Lincoln because the eyes seemed to know him, his pump shotgun for hunting game birds, one box of favorite books. Several pictures of his daughters were saved and brought along, but none of their mother.

By late May he had acquired a routine suited to this new version of himself; wake above the store before dawn, walk to the river, hang his robe on a low limb, plunge in and swim upstream until his arms balked, then float back to his robe as first light began to raise the sky; there would be coffee boiling over freshened campfires, bacon sizzling, trout split and dropped into the grease, and as he passed the earliest to rise he'd wave and they'd wave back. He'd open the store early, skin numbed by the river and feeling tightened ten years younger, the smell of the outdoors drying into his hair.

He hired two relatives of Nan's to wrangle canoes and help out in general, a blood uncle named Royce, and Sky, who he took to be a ceremonial uncle of some sort, while he tended to the store. The locals who came in were often people of a kind he hadn't truly believed still existed but found rewarding to meet: pioneer-lean old men who poached deer whenever hungry and wouldn't pay taxes, their wives wearing gray braids and cowboy hats, clasp knives sheathed at their belts; men with the beards of prophets who read the Bible at a certain slant and could build anything, their women smelling of lavender in gingham and work boots;

folks living hidden in the hills and only reluctantly coming into contact with the conventional world for want of baby formula or headache powders. A few of these customers lingered to chat, but most said all they had to say with a slow nod hello and a jerk of the chin on the way out. There were some he didn't want to linger, squint-faced men with cursive tattoos garbled in shades of blue, who cleaned his shelves of Sudafer and red matchsticks, then returned in a few days hoping to buy more of the same. Royce, who seemed slow in offering helpful advice to an outsider, finally said, "Mr. Morrow, them fellas is buyin' all that so they can drive over the hill, there, and hide somewhere to cook up drugs. The red part from the matches and grains from them pills both help make the recipe."

"There's so much I don't know."

"That's lesson one."

Campers with children preferred the picnic tables that had been shot because kids liked rubbing the holes, sticking their fingers inside while imagining exciting events that had led to gunfire erupting on this very spot. Not every table had been shot and adults wanted to have rights to that exotic detail in any recounting of their vacations, too, and would wait for one to become unoccupied, then rush the family over to claim it, which sometimes caused tensions between the quicker and slower families, a little squabbling, which Morrow usually went out to settle. Come winter he'd fix this problem by blasting every table in the campground, and the various signs nailed to trees, too, but for this season he'd walk among the tents of many sizes and listen, bob his head as he absorbed more or less the same old story, then offer the children of the losing family cold drinks and bags of chips to distract them from whining about bullet holes.

Sometimes he watched the children frolic with skin browning and bug bites lumped on their necks, so many years spread unopened before them, and have a strong sense that he knew the true reason he'd returned here without allowing himself to investigate his memories and make it plain. That changed one day when Sky had traffic court at the county seat, and Morrow was left to drive the van and canoe racks to retrieve floaters downstream at Spawt Mill. It was a festive spot in a deep gorge, hillsides heavy with forest, the green broken in spots by bare rocks that lunged into view. A pale dam backed the river into a giant pool, a huge and perfect swimming hole, the dam low enough to sit on with feet swishing in the water. A narrow opening in the dam at the near bank let water push into the old mill trace, but the wheel didn't turn anymore. Morrow watched kids swing on a rope and flop into the river. Girls roamed on top of

the dam and young men followed at a slight distance, drinking beer, shoving each other around. Hawks dragged their shadows across the pool, fish jumped and he was on this very spot at age fifteen, uncertain in all directions, gawking at a girl whose beauty stunned and terrorized him. She posed on the dam and didn't wear a swimsuit but an ankle-length hippie shift of some sort, thin cloth rich with Eastern patterns, mystic cubes, and squiggles, and nothing underneath. Light passed through the V of her legs so clearly he didn't have to guess. Maybe she hadn't intended to get wet, but walked the dam barefoot with the other girls until carried away by the view, the smell of river, the roiling of fresh water down the sluice to the mill, the roaring and the laughter. Morrow was as though paralyzed by her from first sight and she noticed, smiled his way, and stopped in the overflow on the dam, doing dance steps that splashed, then dropped her shoulder and looked rearward again, a gesture he never got over. Her eyes were brown places to romp, revel, rejoice, hair to her waist and deep dimples that opened when she smiled. She waved to him and he turned away, anguished by his attraction to her and her nearness, all words flown from his head. When he turned back, she was in the river, swimming toward him in that hippie shift, hair spread on the water trailing behind, her girlfriends watching with interest. She stepped out of the river standing tall, boldly revealed by the soaked cloth, walking straight to him. He spun on the gravel and took off before she spoke, but heard her say, "Are you kidding?" as he hustled with his head down to the store



in the old mill and found his parents. He spotted her when they left, lost his nerve again as she watched him from the pooled water, but that day released her into his emotions to stay—he'd carried her with him as a feeling more than a picture, a sunken feeling linked to all things lost or untried, but now he had her face again, blooming young and clear, that smile, the wonderful skin of July. He knew she would have been the beginner's romance teens should have, deserve, a magical summer of smitten days with moments of exploratory bliss that he could've savored all these years since instead of feeling wrecked by the pitiless regret that he'd been such a no-balls virgin coward when confronted with what he most desired.

He drank whisky that night, the first time since leaving Nebraska. So many of the campers had long tanned legs and bare bellies, cute flaking noses, carefree laughter, husbands fishing somewhere until dark. At the supper hour he'd wandered between tents holding a paper cup of Scotch on the rocks, sipping, eyes reddening, speech beginning to limp, enjoying the casual company of women who glowed and dressed for the heat. The sun was snaking brightly along the ridgeline, kids were diving from the bridge.

He returned to the store, called his oldest daughter at school in Palo Alto, but went to voice mail and left a message, "Don't be stingy to yourself, babe. Overall, I mean, don't be . . . I'm fine." When he dropped the phone, Royce took the cup from his hand and set it beneath the counter. He said, "No misery gets sweeter dipped in Devil Juice, Mr. Morrow. Looks like you got customers."

Out the window he saw a cloud of dust rise from the parking lot and watched as it grew wider and higher and spread over the nearest tents. People trying to eat or rest started hacking in the cloud, spitting, shielding their eyes as the dust swooped over them. The car was a sedan, a dented beater, branch scrapes in the paint, mud blown to the door handles, and music blasted from inside. The driver cut figure eights, gunning the engine then slamming the brakes to slide and swerve until the dust cloud enveloped the store and all of the tents. People began to stand and shout, then the car stopped. The cloud continued to rotate and obscure while the music played.

Morrow went down the steps, waving dust away, and approached the car. He could see four heads inside. "What the hell you think you're doing?"

The music was silenced. The engine ticked. The front doors squeaked when slowly opened. The driver said, "You cussin' at me?" Both men were tattooed in script, and held machetes with arms that were stark and taut, long hair, narrow faces. The groans of women carried from the backseat. "I'ma cut you up'n down for cussin' me in front of bitches."

The other raised his machete, said, "We'll both of us cut on him."

The campers had quieted but stood watching, unmoving witnesses powdered by dust, and Morrow backed toward the front steps of the store. He said, "Just drive away. Get in and drive away."

"Not till I hack me a piece of you to take along."

"I've asked you to leave."

"That might mean shit to somebody, but . . ."

On the top step Morrow paused. His legs felt softened at the joints and waggled a little, and something inside had plunged. When he raised his hand toward the advancing men, his fingers shook. "Just get," he said, but they kept coming, though not quickly, unsteady in their own legs, too. Royce eased up from behind and handed Morrow his bird gun, a twenty-gauge pump meant for quail and dove. He said, "Them boys are Langan's—they ain't

playactin'—you might need to shoot the two of 'em."

The women climbed from the beater and stood beside it, the elder subdued and expectant of the worst, the younger dark and expressionless, staring at Morrow. He looked back and could not believe how pretty her eyes were—what color is that?—then couldn't believe he'd noticed. He abruptly fired into the air while yet lost in her eyes and presence, and said, "One more step."

The men halted at the sound, looked at each other, laughed till they bent in the middle and had to lean together. The machetes fell to ground. The driver turned to the staring girl, "Toss me keys to the trunk."

Royce said, "Don't let them open that trunk. You won't want that."

"You open that trunk and I'll kill you." Morrow didn't know where these words were coming from, but he let them come, hoped for them to continue, wondered where they'd been all his life. He could feel her watching. "I'll shoot you where you stand."

The girl bent into the car and took the keys with her as she walked toward the bridge in plastic sandals and a dress that didn't fit her body or the season. She did not speak but looked back at Morrow twice, glancing over her shoulder. She had muddy hands and unbridled hair, and her face suggested she'd yet to be pleasantly surprised by life.

The men stood beside the car, and the driver said, "Man, I'm diggin' you a hole already in my head."

"Just don't move."

"I hope it's dug to fit you, 'cause you're goin' to be dead in it a long time."

"Lower your voice, you're scaring the children."

When the sheriff appeared at the top of the hill, the driver fled into the woods. The other man sat on the dust and held his hands behind his back. The sheriff took charge, called the man by name as he hooked him into cuffs. The women gave short statements of no value, and the sheriff removed three long weapons and a dynamite stick from the trunk before he let them drive away. He sidled near, hat in hand, and warned Morrow in whispers. As the sheriff departed, the crowd of campers burst into applause for Morrow, sincere clapping and broad smiles, before returning to their tents while telling slightly or largely different versions of what they'd all just seen.

The woods had grown dark and Morrow went inside, rested the shotgun against a handy wall. He began to shake in every limb and had to sit down. Kids stood in the doorway staring at him. He kneeled behind the counter and puked below the cash register.

Royce went to the utility closet and selected a mop. He stood in the shadow cast by the buffalo head on the wall, then shoved the mop into the mess and began to swab. He said, "Langan'll probably scramble over to his grandma's house. That's where he usually goes to hide. He may well have forgot about you by the time he gets there. But maybe not."

"You go on home," Morrow said. He stood and took the mop into his own hands. "I've got it."

That night he paced near the big window, watching for the man, keeping his bird gun near. Whenever headlights passed the store, he opened the door for a clear view. He paced and kept a lookout for the man, but was thinking of the girl, the girl he'd seen long ago and the girl he'd seen in the dust. Somehow they became the same girl, there was a blending of then and now, her and her, and a combination of fresh excitement and release kept Morrow awake until at dawn he leaned the shotgun against the tree his robe hung from, and dove into the river to swim upstream. ■