

# ONE

SNAGGED (1967)

THOUGH HE WAS ONLY SEVENTEEN, LUX CRANFIELD knew some things about how to get along in life. He knew how to file and clean a horse's hoof, so he could ride his dappled gray mare for hours on gas pipeline roads and ridgetop trails without needing to call a blacksmith to have her shod. He knew how to scan the fields to judge where deer bedded down for the night, how to note dimples in the soft dark earth for fresh tracks, how to search saplings for ragged marks where bucks scraped the bark with their antlers, and how to crouch down behind a giant chestnut stump, remain perfectly still, and wait for dawn, so he could take a silent shot with his compound bow, then track it, bleed it out, gut it, and get it home before the local game warden left his driveway to go to work.

Some things came naturally to Lux and some he had to work at. He'd worked hard to learn how to throw a fastball to catch the inside corner of the strike zone, sinking as it sailed by the knees of a batter. He'd practiced this, just as he'd practiced downshifting his Jeep into second gear with his left hand while letting go of the steering wheel,

resting his right hand on the knee of a girl next to him, not lugging the engine or spilling an open can of Iron City. He'd learned how to drop a towering red oak by sawing a deep wedge across its base at the correct height and angle, then how to slice down into the wedge, so that the weight of the tree shifted gradually and gravity took over, trunk and crown falling where he wanted it to, downhill toward the skidder.

Lux knew he had a knack for some things and he had good aim, and that these skills had gotten him the job of his dreams, cutting timber for A-1 Lumber, but if that didn't work out, he could beat the draft by enlisting in the U.S. Army or the West Virginia National Guard and take a couple of years to figure out his next steps. This decision would be his to make in August, his eighteenth birthday, and he was keeping it to himself. But on an early spring morning in April 1967, after his left eye was cut open by a locust snag, Lux began to think his backup plan was no longer an option, and that he had to give serious thought to the course his life should take.

It couldn't have been a better morning to be out cutting timber. Dense, cool fog kept away the glare of the rising sun. On the forest floor, ferns and wildflowers had begun to leaf out. On the steep hillside, the ground was firm enough for good footing under his steel-toe boots, not slick or soggy like during the March thaw. Lux was out by daybreak as part of a five-man crew, clearing scrub timber that lay between County Road 57 and a stand of second-growth red oak on the steep side of North Fork, when a dead locust limb high above his head dropped out of a tangle of vines, bounced off his hard hat, and slammed into the left-hand side of his face, knocking him off his feet and pinning him on the ground. He came to hearing the scream of saws above his ears and the shouts of men working to get him out from under that mess.

On the hour-long drive to the Fairchance ER, with the left side of his face wrapped in his blood-soaked shirt, after realizing that this was not just a bad dream or something happening to some other guy, and

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after moving each joint and swelling finger to reassure himself that no bones were broken, Lux realized that some might call him screwed and some might call him lucky, but more likely what his mother had told him for the whole of her short life was correct, the Lord was keeping an eye on him. He'd been called to account, and he did not want to come up wanting. He had to quit running wild and staying out half the night, get more of a grip on his life, and settle down with someone calm and steady, the right girl who would keep him on the right track.

In the last straightaway before town, Lux knew who that girl should be. He sat up for a moment to catch his breath and clear his throbbing head in the passenger seat of Alan Ray's speeding Bronco. He wiped his brow with the back of his sleeve, brushed dirt and sawdust from around his good eye, and in the fierce, slanting light of the morning sun he saw Dessie Price leaning forward beside her golden retriever while she waited for the school bus at the end of her driveway. "Will you look at that?" Alan Ray called out, waving his A-1 cap at Dessie from the driver's seat, and Lux turned and squinted as Dessie waved back. He could swear she was smiling right at him. For two days in the hospital, through a haze of painkillers, as the doctors worked to try to save his eye, Lux held on to the memory like a secret keepsake: Dessie's sudden smile, her long blond hair, and her red sweater flashing by like a bright spark against the long pale green shimmer of her father's hayfield.

ON A warm spring afternoon a couple of weeks after the accident, when most of the swelling was gone from his face, Lux stopped by the high school. Below his rolled shirtsleeves his forearms were scarred and scraped, and purple traces of bruises could be seen along his left cheek and under the brim of his A-1 cap. He wore new black Levi's, a new pair of black cowboy boots, a plaid flannel shirt, and over his left eye a black eyepatch partially concealed a wad of gauze bandages. Thick black hair curled out from around his ears and below the rim

of his cap. After the last bell, Dessie Price and a few school friends gathered around him for the details.

“How’d it happen, Lux?” asked Billie Price, Dessie’s ninth-grade sister. Her dark hair hung around her neck, and she shook her bangs out of her dark eyes as she looked up at him.

“Well, I can’t say exactly, but I’ll tell you what I think happened,” Lux said, scratching the back of his neck, which had begun to sweat. “It felt like the woods was waiting, like it was set up like a damn trap, and I was the one who sprung it,” he said without a trace of a smile. This would be repeated around the schoolyard and beyond, he knew. He pulled back his shoulders, cleared his throat, stretched his long fingers out, cracking each of his knuckles.

It was right before sunrise when he’d gotten to work, he said, and as the dawn broke he finished sharpening the chain on his saw. The crew spread out in the woods to start cutting. He was downhill, clearing a path for the skidder through an overgrown patch of woods and vines that had been clear-cut years earlier. “It was a nasty setup from the get-go,” he said. “I wanted to take down this one elm first off, so I could see what I was getting into. Set down the lunch pail, took a few steps uphill, and ripped into the tree.” He shook his head slowly, pulled down the brim of his cap. “Something didn’t feel right, the tree was half dead, but I didn’t pay it any mind. ’Bout halfway through the first cut, the damn elm started to shift and fall, way too soon, and that limb slammed down from above, dragging greenbrier, grapevine, Virginia creeper, you name it. Never heard it coming, with the saw so loud.”

He cleared his throat. As he spoke, the small group of students gazed at him, scanning the bruises on his face and arms, the eye-patch. Lux was six feet tall, and the boots made him feel like he was a head taller than the others. Usually height had given him an edge, but today it made him feel distant, more like an outsider, and suddenly the intensity caught him off guard. Talking about it made it more real.

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“Damn snag,” Lux said, brushing his forearm over the eyepatch. “A locust branch, maybe twenty feet off the ground, twenty, thirty feet long. It must have hung up there for years.” He took off his cap and rubbed at a shaved spot on his scalp, above his left temple. “It knocked me flat on my ass, jabbed into my eye and done my face up pretty bad. A stroke of luck I had that hard hat on. That thing is in pieces, and Doc won’t say nothin’ yet about my eye.”

He took a breath, turned his head toward his blind side, and noticed Tim Sutton, the varsity shortstop, a former teammate and a steady guy.

“Who found you? Did Alan Ray know you were down?” asked Tim.

“Alan Ray? Alan Ray was halfway up the hill already,” Lux said, nodding slowly. “One minute I was sawing, the next I was pinned on my back, my saw ten foot down the hill. I can’t rightly say who got to me first. Took them boys a half hour, more maybe, to cut me out, and that’s when Alan Ray got busy on the bleeding. I owe all of them guys.” His face turned in the direction of Dessie Price.

Dessie’s blue eyes were the level of his chin, focused intently on his good eye. He wondered whether she knew that he was in the red Bronco as it sped past her that morning. He wondered if he’d dreamed her smile, her return wave. She seemed to be visualizing each moment as he related it. “That’s what Dad says,” Dessie said. Then she blinked a few times and brightened up a bit. “So, what happened to your pa’s shell box from the war? Isn’t that what you carry for your lunch pail?” she asked with a bit of a grin.

His good eye settled on a small dimple in her chin. How many other times had he noticed that dimple over the last few years? Now, though, she was taller, her neck slimmer and longer, her hair curled around her collarbones. The school bus behind her, as yellow as if it had just rolled out of a crayon box, revved up its engine and pumped clouds of diesel exhaust into the air. Lux scratched at a scab on his forearm, set his A-1 cap back onto his head. “Oh, shoot. That damn

shell box,” Lux said, smiling back at her. “I been meaning to go back for that. I’ll bring it around the house if I can find it,” he said.

“I CAME by to show this to y’uns,” Lux told Bertram Price early that evening. Bertram was on the front porch of the white clapboard two-story farmhouse, sitting back in a sagging plaid recliner and listening to the Pirates game through the crackle of a transistor radio. He completely filled the La-Z-Boy. His legs had worn grooves into the raised footrest, and his thick fingers dwarfed a beer can. Cigarette smoke curled out from a dark green glass ashtray on a milk crate beside him.

Lux stood on the bottom step, eye-level to Bertram’s heavy scuffed work boots, the soles caked with clumps of reddish clay from walking the pipelines for Pennzoil. Lux had always liked the look of Bertram, his sonic boom of a voice, the odd bump in his nose where he’d broken it in the service, and he liked the way the tall man carried himself, the way people took him at his word. Bertram spoke his mind, whether or not you wanted to hear what he had to say. He’d been a play-by-the-rules kind of coach, a leader, and a no-nonsense competitor. He’d earned Lux’s trust by standing up for fair play and for the players on his team. Back when Lux was brought on as a pitcher, he knew how to hurl the ball fast and in the strike zone, and he’d thought that was all he’d need. But Bertram had taken him under his wing, teaching him how to size up a batter, drilling him on curveballs, change-ups, sinking fastballs. “Don’t throw your arm out the first inning,” Bertram advised. “Let ’em chase your bad ones. Keep your best pitch in your pocket, Ace, and play that card later in the game, when they ain’t expecting it.” These tips took Lux and the Harriers to the state semifinals, only the second time in the history of Fairchance High.

Lux knew that showing up at a man’s house was not the same as showing up for practice. He also knew that coaches, parents, teachers, all elders, needed to be handled just right. He’d have to get a feel for things. Sooner or later too, he’d have to deal with his pa, who’d mixed

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it up with Bertram one night three years earlier at the AmVets about a gas well right-of-way. Lux hoped there were no bad feelings toward the Cranfield family remaining on Bertram's side. His pa, on the other hand, still swore a blue streak whenever anyone mentioned Pennzoil, Bertram Price, or even the AmVets.

Lux shifted around. His good eye squinted at Bertram's round face. He held out what was left of the green World War 2 army-issued shell box. The handle was ripped clear off one of the steel hinges, the square metal top was crushed down into the bottom like a ten-ton coal car had driven over it.

"Bring that up here, Lux, let's take a gander. Look at that thing! Made it all the way to Europe and back, and it gets done-in half a mile from home," Bertram said, shaking his head and looking Lux over. "I can still see the letters. U.S. Army. Must be infantry. Them poor grunt SOBs." He winked at Lux, who'd seated himself on the top porch stair. Standing up felt wrong, like he would be looking down on his old coach.

Bertram leaned forward, pulled the lever that slammed down the foot of the recliner, and turned toward the screen door. "Hey, Billie, you back there? If you can hear me, fetch us a beer," Bertram called. "After all, any boy that's been slapped across the face by a widow-maker and lived to tell the tale can have a man's drink, right, Ace?" The noise startled a small flock of red chickens scratching on the side of the house in a freshly planted flower bed.

"Jesus Christ!" Bertram swore, shaking his head, turning back to the house again. "Rose, get one of the girls out here to pen up these birds. I told you I wasn't going to be able to mind your flower bed and listen to the game." He stubbed out his cigarette, felt around for the volume dial on the side of the radio, exhaled smoke, and looked over at Lux. "Son of a bitch! Clemente's on deck."

"Hey, Lux," Billie Price said, swinging out of the screen door, her elbows sticking out of her blouse as she clutched the beer under her thin arms. She gave two to her dad and one to Lux. Her slim

face, dark eyes half-buried behind dark bangs, was all grin. Behind her, with a wooden bowl of table scraps and torn-up bread, Dessie appeared, wearing her sweater, skirt, and knee socks from school. Lux caught Dessie's eye, then turned to look at the side yard, where chickens scratched at the base of fruit trees and lilac bushes had begun to bloom; beyond, the garden had already been hoed into dark rows. Dessie's stocking feet trotted past Lux down the stairs, calling, "Come, chick, chick; come on chick, chick." Hens and roosters, clucking and flapping from all directions, followed her to their pen in the backyard. Lux caught himself staring at Dessie. Her blonde hair hung in waves down her back. Her hips looked soft and round, her legs seemed longer, her pale green skirt flared as she stepped past him. Cheeks flushed, Dessie returned to sit on a hanging swing on the far end of the porch next to her sister.

"Damn, them things are so stupid," Bertram said. He gave up on the volume and began shifting the antenna to catch a better signal from KDKA. Lux began to relax. "They sure is, Coach," Lux nodded. "Especially them purebreds."

Bertram held his hand in the air. It was a full count, and all went quiet while they waited to see if Clemente would come through for the fans. The screen door opened once more for Rose. She was a petite woman, her gathered light-brown hair was streaked with silver around the temples, and though she was more fine-boned and slender than her husband, she had the same ample look. Bertram had often said that if he ate too much, it was because Rose cooked too well.

"Luther Cranfield, how are you? The girls said they saw you at the high school," Rose said in a hushed tone; she wiped her glasses on her apron and waited until Bertram, disgusted, dropped his hand as the inning was over. "How's your father getting along these days?" Rose asked. Her eyes fixed on the eyepatch as if she were trying to decide how bad the injury was, and whether or not to ask about it. It made Lux want to scratch; he rubbed the cold can of beer back and forth between his palms.

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“Pa’s about the same as ever, Mrs. Price, thank you for asking, and I’m healing up fast, Mrs. Price, thank you. Another couple weeks, maybe, I’ll be good as new,” Lux said, his voice cracking more than he’d wanted it to.

“Well, it’s nice to see you up and about so quickly,” Rose replied. She looked over the steel rims of her reading glasses, gazing past Lux toward the side yard. She seemed to be taking stock of the flower bed below. She settled herself into the wide porch swing between her daughters and took two steel knitting needles and a tangled ball of pink yarn out of the pockets of her apron. Something about Rose’s round-rimmed glasses, her gray eyes, and the beige ruffles of the apron reminded Lux of a barred owl guarding her nest, plush yet watchful. To Lux’s relief, Rose held off on further questions about his eye and about his old man. Billie scanned the ammo box, passed it to Dessie, who turned it over, ran her index finger along its deep creases and folds, and shook her head in disbelief at the way the steel frame was crushed. She stood and handed it back to Lux, then returned to her place on the swing.

Bertram swore under his breath at the baseball score, then lowered the volume on the radio. He and Lux began talking about the chances of this year’s high school baseball team making it to the state finals, then switched to how A-1 had a great crew, and how impressive it was that the men had found Lux and cut him out from under that limb so quickly. Lux agreed, adding that he was grateful to Alan Ray, who’d had first aid training in the national guard.

“Tell you what,” Bertram said. “Every crew should have somebody who’s been in the service or took some first aid training. A fellow like that could save a life in a pinch. Not a bad idea to keep that hard hat handy, too. Not a lot of men would have the good sense to keep a hat on their heads when they cut timber.”

“I can thank my ma for that,” Lux said. “I gave her my word when I first started clearing timber.”

Everyone nodded, and Rose looked up from her knitting. “Lux, I believe Alan Ray saved more than your eye, he saved your life,” she

said. "It's one of those sayings that is said too often, but the Holy Father works in mysterious ways. He knows why you and Alan Ray happened to be working together that day."

Lux shifted his gaze from Rose to Dessie. "Just what Ma would have said, Mrs. Price. Not saying I ain't grateful, but they ain't saved my eye yet." Dessie had been staring down toward her dad's radio, as if the Pirates game was all that mattered, but now her blue eyes met Lux's. "They might not save it at all," he said. "I'll know more when the bandages come off." As soon as the words came out of his mouth, he wished he hadn't said quite so much. Christ almighty, he thought, last thing he wanted was anyone's sympathy.

Lux felt heat rising through his cheeks to the tips of his ears, the rush of the beer combined with an awareness that he had no idea what he should say next. He wasn't about to dwell on the accident. He didn't feel like talking about the Pirates or backtracking to his years on the mound. *You were the first thing I saw, so beautiful in the morning light, a sign that things would all work out* was too full of weight to toss out there. He wondered if Dessie was happy about him stopping by. They'd known each other for years. She was the girl with bright blue eyes and a ponytail, fun to talk to at practice, willing to set aside her homework, grab an oversized glove to fill in as an outfielder or catcher. At first, she could hold her own, but at some point the boys just got faster and stronger. He'd needled her about her baggy gym shorts, also about throwing like a girl. She could give it right back. If he blew through the signs or if he'd grumbled at an ump's call, she'd mention that kind of thing, not mean-spirited, but with a twinkle in her eye. She took after her dad that way. They both had the same effect, something made him light up, try harder. Lux took a gulp of his beer, wiped his warm face with the back of his sleeve, kept his thoughts to himself, and enjoyed the safety of silence. The hell with it, he thought. She could take him as he is, and that's what she should do.

Billie spoke up. "Hey, Lux, are you going to come back to school now? Varsity could use a good pitcher."

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“A one-eyed pitcher?” Lux stretched out his fingers and cracked his knuckles on his right hand, shaking his head, “No. Anyways, I don’t need to,” he said, looking at Bertram for agreement. “Pine’s coming in from Kingwood for framing, hardwood’s going out the door as fast as it comes in, cherry and walnut is up, and there’s plenty out there to cut. The mines need locust props, too. Boss says he’ll find something for me to do inside at the mill next week. That’s OK for now, but I want to get back into the woods.” Bertram nodded. Lux noticed Dessie didn’t look up. She was straightening out knots in Rose’s yarn.

Lux finished his beer. “I brung this for you to keep,” he told Dessie, setting the flattened ammo box beside her on the arm of the porch swing. He glanced at her; though she kept her gaze down, she had that little grin that was tricky to read. Then, turning toward the Jeep parked at the pull-off along the main road, he said, “Hey, Coach, could Dessie come out for a drive sometime?” The green Jeep stood high on oversized tires. Its top was off, and two squirrel tails hung from the roll bars. Despite sheet-metal patches on the body, it looked clean and cared for.

Bertram crushed the empty beer can between his palms and chuckled. The porch swing creaked as it swayed back and forth. The knitting needles kept on ticking against each other, but Rose lifted an eyebrow and gazed over her glasses across the porch at her husband. Dessie’s eyes fixed on the tangle of wool in her mother’s lap. Her cheeks had turned almost the same shade of pink as the yarn.

Billie looked at Dessie, smiled broadly, then glanced back at her Dad. “Hey, Daddy, can I go, too?” she asked.

“I believe Lux was asking Daddy about Dessie, Sis,” said Rose, “about whether we can spare her, come spring, one of these Sunday afternoons.” Rose kept her eyes fixed on Bertram, whose dimples had become more pronounced as his grin widened.

“I didn’t know you were allowed to drive with that eyepatch on, Lux Cranfield,” Dessie said. She stood, picked up the ammo box,

stepped into the house and disappeared. The porch swing rocked as Rose grabbed for her yarn.

Lux watched the screen door spring shut, and then looked back at Bertram. "Of course I can drive! I can even drive the front-end loader and the forklift at the sawmill," Lux answered, staring back at the closed door.

Bertram sat forward in the chair and nodded at Lux. "Well, then, I reckon you're a twice-lucky man, Ace," he said, tapping his cigarette pack into the palm of his hand.

"What d'ya mean, Coach?" asked Lux.

Bertram settled back in the recliner, stretched his legs out, and flicked up the cap on his Zippo lighter, striking the flint. "Well," he answered, "a man that can get work is a lucky man for one thing, and you didn't hear me tell you 'no,' now did you?"

LUX STEPPED over the planks on the Prices' swinging bridge, not wanting to look awkward by making a grab for the cable hand-rail. The boards swayed under his bootheels as he made his way to the pull-off. He gunned the engine, waved his cap, and headed for home. Instead of taking the blacktop, he cut over the hill on Chestnut Ridge, winding back and forth on a gravel road that narrowed as it climbed until it was little better than a tractor path over the ridge. He wondered whether asking Bertram was the right thing, a needed first step, or was it the wrong approach? He wondered what Rose thought. Now everyone in the Price family, and likely very soon everyone at school and in town too, would know. Screw it, he thought. He was glad that he asked Bertram, not that he planned it, but those words came spilling out of his mouth. Now they were as solid as the steering wheel in his hands, and he could not take them back.

The Jeep's tires skirted the flinty creek bed and climbed toward the ridge. Whenever the road leveled, through stands of sumac and flowering dogwood that had not yet leafed out, he could see fields set back against steep hillsides, homesteads in the full flush of springtime,

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a few cows or a draft horse or two, pale lilac bushes, a barn, a home, a chimney with smoke trailing upward. The gravel lane crested the wooded hilltop and dropped into a steeper, narrower valley. Further out from town, the road was rougher, folks had moved on. Hand-hewn log cabins and small barns stood empty in fields, siding boards curling away from the framing. Some homes had burned, and some had rotted once the roofs had begun to leak. All that remained were stone chimneys or the barest glimpses of flower-lined paths to sheds or outhouses that had long since sagged into hillsides.

Driving the county back roads, taking it slow, opening another beer, Lux thought about what it took to hold a homeplace together. Some folks seemed to know more than others about making their way on the land. His dad's elder brother, Uncle Ron, pushing sixty now, his sons and their kin, they knew. They could cut lumber, mill boards, put up hay. They had it all, right there, a flock of chickens, a cow for milk, they could butcher their own hogs, set out traps or hunt for meat, even a pond for bluegill and bass. If a man wasn't scared of a little hard work, Lux thought, that man could find himself a piece of land set back on some quiet country lane and have just about everything he needed.

Lux turned down a steep cutoff and wound his way toward his pa's place, shifting into low to crawl the Jeep across the water bars and head onto an unpaved lane. Once he'd started working full-time, Lux had thought he'd help fix things up, maybe cut some locust posts, pick up slab wood and framing from the mill, and build a garage or at least a tall toolshed with a wide enough roof overhang to park under and keep out of the weather while working on cars, hang shelves for tools, but Everett had shot that idea down, saying, "I don't want to see a bunch of no-account poles sticking up out of the ground once you figure out you got a real job on your hands," then adding, "I won't have you starting nothing you ain't man enough to finish."

Lux held his tongue. It was risky to take up for himself. The old man's gray eyes turned as flat as the heads of steel tacks. He wasn't

above reaching for his belt if he thought he was being crossed. Since Mother died, his old man dug in over the least thing. Well, let him be the ruler over his own sad kingdom. Pa seemed to have let everything go, his tools, his things, his own self. Things don't need to go like that, Lux thought. He had no one to blame but his own prideful self when rain rotted the handles of the tools left strewn in the yard, or when the tractor brakes rusted and seized to the rotors.

No truck was in the yard. That meant Pa's old Ford had started, and he'd taken himself to town, stopping at the ABC store for Rebel Yell and a carton of Pall Malls. With a sense of peace that came over him when he had the place to himself, Lux started on evening chores. He fed the two coonhounds, cleaned their runs, and drew fresh water from the spring. Next, he had to fill the wood box with split firewood. All the while his thoughts circled back to Dessie. When she didn't say no, did that mean yes? What would it take to get her to talk straight to him, he wondered. Usually girls chased him, a working man with money to spend and time to waste. But he was not that man anymore. That man had been staying out too late, wasn't clearheaded at work, had almost got himself blinded, or worse, killed. That man got schooled, got lucky, got a chance to do it right.

However things worked out with his eye, Lux was pretty sure Bertram would take up for him. Marriage was in the air this spring, and a few school friends had summer weddings planned. In some ways, Lux had a head start as a workingman, not a schoolboy. He'd worked part-time at A-1 for three years; he was full-time since the first of the year. Though some of his salary went to his pa, each week Lux added to a roll of bills stashed in a tobacco tin in the eaves. After his injury, the Workmen's Comp paid the hospital, and his boss had handed him sixty dollars in cash. If his eye did get better, he wanted to cut the largest trees for veneer wood, where there was some real money to be made. But even if he'd have to work inside at the mill, it would be steady work. Dessie by his side, and a place of their own, he could make it all work out.

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In the dim light of dusk, Lux stood back a good thirty feet from the wheelbarrow and tossed splits of stovewood from the log pile. Aiming with one eye he did just fine, hitting his mark with almost every underhand toss. Lux pushed the full wheelbarrow up the muddy path, stacked stovewood in neat piles in the wood box beside the pantry door, and returned to the woodshed for a final load. The moon was rising. The air was still and warm. With luck, he'd be out with his coonhound before Pa got home.

Damn his old man, and damn what he says about Bertram, Lux thought, setting the wheelbarrow back behind the woodshed. Bertram was a pipeline inspector. He had nothing to do with Pennzoil putting in a right-of-way. What man in his right mind would bite the hand that feeds him? The gas company saved his ass by leasing mineral rights, and Pa spent most of his time in a slat-back rocker on the front porch, swigging whiskey, living off royalties. Plus, Bertram was twice Pa's size and twice as fast. After Pa got up in his face, Bertram pushed him out the backdoor, set him on his ass in a muddy alleyway beside the dumpster, and told Pa that if he didn't watch himself, the law would show up to keep the peace the next time Pennzoil brought a crew up to check the lines.

Pa wasn't hurt, but he was sore. He told anyone who would listen that someday he was going to drop a tree across the right-of-way to keep Pennzoil vehicles off his land. The old fool ought to know enough to let go when he was licked. But he held onto that anger, talking about how he sure showed them, didn't he. When it came to his old man, reason flew out the window. Sooner or later, Pa would find out Lux had his eye on Dessie, but for the time being, the less said, the better. Lux could almost hear his Pa's voice, raising the stakes, saying, *Boy, y'ain't got no business starting nothing y'ain't man enough* . . . Yes, he'd heard it all before. One thing was certain, he was not about to tell his old man that the steel ammo box had found its way to the Price family. Some things Lux couldn't control, and some he could.

IT WAS almost too dark to see, but Lux had saved the best chore for last. Passing the corncrib, Lux took a handful of sweet feed as a treat for his mare and put it in his shirt pocket to see if she could smell it out. With a long, loud whistle, he headed to the paddock. When Uncle Ron had offered him Calamity Jane, right off Pa said, “There ain’t no such thing as a free horse,” adding that the only thing more useless and wasteful of money than owning a horse was owning one that was ornery and skittish. “Your uncle’s only giving you the damn thing ’cause he can’t do nothing with her hisself.” Uncle Ron had taken up for Lux, saying since Lux’s mother Aletha had just passed, it would be good for Lux to have the mare to care for, and that he’d take CJ back if it didn’t work out.

That was a couple of years back. At first the mare hung back, hard to catch, and even harder to mount, but she’d just needed some daily attention, and a few treats. Now, one whistle and she came trotting over with her colt Dakota, both of them eating out of his hand. Lux stroked the slender nose of the mare, rubbed her neck under her mane, and gently worked a burdock burr from her forelock. Jealous of the attention, Dakota butted his slim chocolate-brown head between them. Slow and steady, ain’t that the best plan, Lux thought, enjoying the night air, the sweet smell of warm horse.

Lux took a final glance to make sure the horses were safe for the night, and gazed up toward the eastern sky, where Venus shone as bright as a searchlight and the almost full moon had begun to rise above the ridgeline. It all felt so right, like there was a reason he saw Dessie, her smile, her wave that morning after the accident. He’d felt something, like that little tug on the crown of his head, like that sense his mother was beside him. Aletha would tell him to pray for guidance and allow the Lord to help. He needed some time alone with Dessie, not standing-around-being-stared-at-on-the-porch time, not even Sunday dinner time. Just the two of them, do a bit of straight-talking, get her to trust him. It was a matter of timing, of figuring out the right thing to say, the right time and place to say it.

## GOSHEN ROAD

THE NEXT day was clear, with a warm breeze that smelled of the richness of summer. Town boys wore shorts as they raced outside after school. Lux sat on the post-and-rail fence at the edge of the parking lot beside the school buses, waiting for junior and senior dismissal. He took a note out of his pocket, unfolded the lined paper, and reread his own tight scrawl.

Hey Good Lookin',

It's past midnight, and I've got Hank Williams running through my mind! I couldn't sleep and I thought about coon hunting but the doc says no shooting, so I went out tonight just to see the moon. It was almost full, there was a silver ring around it, and it took me a while to figure out what I was thinking about. I was thinking about you! I drove up the old logging road beside the gas well to where Lester treed a coon for me last week. Do you know what happened? As I was getting ready to leave, out came that old she-coon from the edge of the woods. I sat there, and soon it called and two twin kits came running out behind it, looking all tiny and squirrely, running sideways, and I could see it all in the light of the moon. I wished you was there to watch this. Would you come out for a drive? I won't take you anywhere you don't want to go.

Your Friend,  
Lux Cranfield

PS. Can I come around for you tonight at dark?

Lux looked up as Dessie came out at last bell. He could see her right off, wearing a yellow-and-white flowered skirt, smiling about something. She looked older somehow than last night, more like a town girl. He began to wave at her, but then he stopped. She was halfway back in the bus line, talking to Jerry Higgs, the teacher's boy with the gold Nova, a senior who'd won a scholarship to WVU. Lux's

jaw set, and he turned away. His hand clenched as he crushed the note into a tight ball. He pulled his A-1 cap down low on his face, rubbed at his eyepatch, then headed in the opposite direction. When Billie Price walked over to the fence, Lux had almost reached the Jeep.

“Hey, Lux,” Billie called. “Want to give me a lift home?”

“Not today,” Lux said. He stared once more at the bus line, turned toward the Jeep, and then stopped. The note felt solid in his right hand. He gripped it and then threw it hard enough to hit Billie on the top of her dark bangs. “Give that to your big sister, will ya?”

“Sure, Lux.” Billie fumbled to keep her schoolbooks from hitting the ground as she picked it up. “Nice throw!” she called, but he started up his Jeep and didn’t seem to hear.

ALL THAT afternoon Lux drove with the Jeep’s top down, sipping beer out of a grocery sack, listening to Top of the Country, WKKW. He passed the A-1 mill, where for almost a quarter mile irregular boards, cutoffs, and slabs were stacked on the side of the road for the taking. He passed the giant sawdust pile at the south end of the chipper, then headed toward the ridge and turned off at the muddy logging road that ran along North Fork into the deep woods. He felt like a green kid for letting himself get torn up. He should’ve seen that dead limb. Anyone who knew anything would have looked in all directions, including up, and once he’d seen it, he should have planned his cuts before he started up the saw. But hey, Lux thought, bad luck is bad luck, and sometimes your number comes up. Soon he’d find out more about his left eye. From what he could feel, it seemed like the stitches had healed. If he had his way, he’d kick off the cowboy boots and trade them for steel-toe boots, be back in the woods with Alan Ray and the crew.

And then there was Dessie. She must’ve seen him today at the school fence. Didn’t she want a ride home? What was she smiling about with that pissant Higgs? Where were his old teammates? Were they at practice? Last year it would have been him pitching, laying on

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the gas to see how much heat they could take. Now that was something to look back on, but not a part of him, not something to look forward to.

Lux shifted the jeep into first gear, then second. The sun was slanting lower in the west. He wondered if any girl was worth this trouble, but then again, he'd known Dessie all his life, she was as straight as an arrow, raised right, respected. Bertram wouldn't let her get away with much. Lux popped open a can of beer. As the warm alcohol stung his lips, he remembered how he felt last night, his breath steaming in the cold air, the far-off barking of farm dogs and baying of coonhounds, the light of the full moon, the shadow of the bare branches; then later, staying up all night, how many times he tried to write that note, trying to figure out what he wanted to tell her, trying to get each goddamn word just goddamn right.

He guided the Jeep along the gravel road, stretching out his arms and fingers, missing the weight of his chainsaw, the way it ripped into oak and cherry, the sweet greasy smell of burnt sawdust mixed with chain oil. Most of all he missed the work, the task at hand, each felled tree its own kind of puzzle. Lux killed the Jeep's engine beside a logging cut to listen for the distant whine of the saws, maybe to catch a glimpse of his crew, maybe say hey. But all he heard was the tick of the manifold cooling, the creak of trees in the wind, the cries of distant crows settling in to roost.

THE RISING moon lit the edges of clouds in the east when Lux parked on the wide shoulder of CR 57 and walked over the Prices' footbridge. The golden retriever came out of the doghouse and half-way growled, but when she saw who it was, she yawned quietly and wagged her tail, watching from the end of her run. The house was dark downstairs, but upstairs light glowed in several windows. Bertram and Rose's room, probably, was on the uphill side of the house, back from the road, where a single shaft of dim light slanted back toward the chicken pen. In the front, facing the road, could be the

girls' rooms, but where was Dessie? Lux picked up a small handful of gravel, then squinted, stood back in the shadows. He felt like a relief pitcher who'd been called to the mound but wasn't sure which direction to throw the ball. One or two small stones could tap at the base of a window frame, but which window?

There was a way to get closer, and he pulled himself up into the lower branches of a large flowering crab apple tree between two shaded windows. He held onto a branch above his head, straining to listen to the noises in the house. From his perch in the tree, the moon dimmed behind dappled layers of clouds, the air around him was so fragrant he was almost dizzy. It smelled like girls. What was he thinking, he wondered. He was afraid to let go and rub his eyepatch, afraid he might take a sneezing fit. He wondered whether he should get down and leave, just cut his losses. He shifted his weight to get more comfortable, and the limb creaked under his feet.

Suddenly Billie's shadowy profile appeared near one of the shaded windows. She said something to her sister somewhere in the house. Lux focused on the window frame, and even though Dessie was nowhere to be seen, he tossed a couple of small stones at Billie's head, then winced as they clattered against glass. The shade flew up and the window lifted. Billie stared outside, craning her head toward the road. "Hey, Lux, is that you?" she called into the night air.

"Good God, girl," said Lux, "You're loud enough to be heard halfway to town! Where's your sister? Did you give her that note?"

Billie gestured at the next window. "She's a-waitin' for you." Billie's overly loud whisper was like something from a school play. He turned to his left, inching out to get a better look. As he neared the slender end of the limb, the slick soles of his new boots began to slip, the limb bent, then it snapped. He slid down, his boots thudding into the soft dirt of the flower bed below. "Ah, shit!" he said, trying to keep his voice down but not succeeding.

Chickens begin to cackle and cluck from their pen, and a second window opened. A blonde head stretched out. "Lux?" Dessie said.

“Where are you?” Lux waved his cap toward the light above his head. He was afraid to raise his head and see Bertram or Rose. He prayed that they would keep doing whatever nightly things they were doing. He wished the chickens would shut the hell up. He wished his blood would stop hammering at his forehead and temples. Standing there, he saw his pa’s face, darkly shaded, but somehow right before his eyes. “*Now who’s the old fool?*” his pa cackled.

“Go away!” he finally mumbled.

“Lux, I’m coming down!” Dessie said quietly. “Me too,” said Billie from the next window. “You just stay put up here and watch for Mom and Dad,” Dessie told her sister, and despite it all, Lux grinned.

A door opened at the rear of the house, and Dessie appeared around the corner. “Hey, lumberjack!” Dessie said as she stood beside Lux shining a flashlight into his good eye. “It looks like you fell out of your tree!” She motioned him away from the windows and toward the darkness.

“Worse than that,” Lux said. He shook his head and focused on Dessie, trying to see her eyes. Dessie’s face seemed scrubbed and bright, and the rest of her was too dark to see. He pointed her flashlight away from his face toward the crab apple. “I might have broke that bottom branch. And I flattened some of your ma’s flowers, and there’s some kind of prickly plant.” He held his hand under the beam of the flashlight. “Feels like I run my hand into a hill of red ants. I wanted to brush ’em off, and they latched onto my face.” The back of his hand motioned upward; fine gold cactus needles spread from his cheeks to his mouth and glinted on the dark of his eyepatch.

“Oh, for the love of Pete, Lux, you got into the prickly pear,” Dessie said. She scanned his face. Then she stepped back inside through the back door. As Lux waited, afraid to scratch or move in any direction, she returned with a washrag, a bottle of witch hazel, and a pair of tweezers. Under her arm, she had a can of beer. “Where’s your Jeep at?” she asked. “Never you mind,” said Lux. He poured the soothing witch hazel onto his hands and splashed at his face. “You just

help me out here, and then I'll be going. I'll come back in the morning to help clean up."

Dessie shone the fading flashlight up at Lux's face; his good eye blinked. He wished he could see, he wished the pounding in his head would ease, he prayed that the next sound he heard would not be Bertram busting out the back door. He took a deep breath and instead heard Dessie's hushed tones. "Quiet, Lux," she said. "Set that beer under your shirt and stoop your head down. Hold this light right here. And be still, we better get these spines out first thing." Her hands smelled like the nurse's office. Lux tried to keep his arm from shaking as she worked with the tweezers. Hopefully, Billie was keeping watch. Dessie pulled at thin spines on his cheekbone and along his jaw. Recalling a trick that eased his nerves before a game, he began counting backward. "Ninety-nine . . . ninety-eight . . . ninety-seven," he said, taking a breath between each number.

"What are you going on about, Lux?" Dessie asked, and then, "Can you please hold still?" she said again, holding his trembling hand firmly, for a couple of spines on his knuckles, easing them out. "Ninety-four . . . ninety-three . . . ninety-two . . ." Lux muttered, staring at the outline of the back door in the stark moonlight. Dessie turned off the flashlight, brushed off her slacks, and set the supplies behind the back door. "Let's get going," she said softly. "We can't stay here," she said. "We'll have the whole family out here."

Lux shook his head and started to speak, but Dessie put her index finger up to her mouth. She led the way down the walk to the doghouse beside the footbridge. The hammering in his temples became less noticeable with each stride. The cool dampness of the air near the creek washed over the skin on his arms and eased the sting on his cheekbones. The dog thumped her tail and then let out a whine, but Dessie stopped to quiet her, stroking her on the head. "Do you think we should take Lucy up into the woods with us?" she asked, looking up at him.

She stood on the edge of the field. She looked up from the dog's bright eyes into his good eye. Her face was washed in moonlight, her

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eyes full of life, the hayfield furrows behind her a patchwork of light and shadow; like the sight of her after the accident, but more like a dream in black and white. Lux stared hard at Dessie to match this image with his memory of her.

He collected his thoughts. “Don’t worry. There ain’t nothing to be afraid of out there, and anyways, I’ll look after you,” he said. He stared at her, hoping she would believe this, and then he reached for her hand.

“You’re sure about that, Lux?” she asked, her eyes wide with a sense of adventure. A warmth shot through her firm hand into his. Lux nodded. “I am. You’ll see,” he said. Though he was trying look as serious as possible, a smile played across his face. He took it all in. At that moment, he felt like the future was as clear as the moon, so round, so bright, so close he could almost reach out and touch it.

Dessie paused and nodded, then with a slight grin she spoke up. “Well, I guess I should’ve brought along a broom,” she said. Lux stood back a step, trying to catch her meaning. “What? Why in the world did you say that?” he asked. He dropped her hand. Was she worried about taking the Jeep up into the woods? About getting the Jeep dirty? Was she worried about him? Did Bertram tell her to do that kind of thing?

“OK, not funny, I guess. Uhm, I was trying to make a joke,” Dessie said. “You know, a broom? So you could sweep me off my feet, of course.” She shrugged, holding back a smile.

Lux smiled back, and looked over at the tall white shape of the Price farmhouse against the dark hillside. “OK, OK. I get it,” he said. “Hey, we won’t need any old broom.”

Dessie laughed. “You sure got off to a good start, Ace,” she said, her phrasing an exact imitation of Bertram’s cadence and drawl.

Lux looked at her, catching on. He cleared his throat, swallowed. “Hey, I’ll give it my best shot, you’ll see,” he said. Then, reaching out for the thick twisted cable, partly to steady himself and partly to figure out where to set his feet, he took several unsteady strides onto

the footbridge, making his way from plank to plank. With a sweep of his arm, Lux waved at anyone, real or imagined, who might happen to be watching them. It was all he could do to catch up to Dessie as she raced over the bridge, caught the roll bars, and swung herself up into the passenger seat of the open Jeep.