

YELLOW STONEFLY

## Prologue

Randy Mullins knew full well just how lucky he was to have a stable job. As human resources director for the Old Dominion Furniture Company plant east of Sherwood, Virginia, he'd been reminded of his good fortune too many times to take it for granted. He was the one who reviewed the job applications and conducted the interviews with men and women hoping desperately for employment that might at last provide some sort of dependable livelihood. He was the one who filled out the paperwork and conducted the compulsory exit interviews with workers being laid off or let go because a line was being shut down or a portion of production outsourced overseas. His memory was heavy with their faces. He knew how well he had it, with a job he could count on to provide for him, his wife, and their two children. And he knew as well as anyone how quickly that could change. Randy Mullins wasn't about to take any chances.

So when his wife took the kids over to Kentucky for a few days to visit with their grandparents, he pursued this particular episode of his occasional faithlessness with the same caution and appreciation he brought to the other aspects of his life. He kept his car a notch below the speed limit all the way to Bluestone Bottoms Adult Superstore, across the state line in West Virginia. Randy Mullins knew, of course, that a world of pornography was readily available online with a few clicks of the mouse, but that would involve credit cards, receipts, a digital trail on the home computer he shared with his wife and children, and the threat of suspect spam in the email inbox of that computer, of a stack of lurid junk

mail in the mailbox at the end of their driveway. Thirty-five miles away in Bluestone Bottoms, he wasn't apt to be recognized, and he paid cash for the three DVDs he selected. He decided against a fourth DVD, entitled *Totally Rampant*. Three should be more than adequate.

Halfway home it began to rain, so he drove still more cautiously, decreasing his speed and training his vision directly on the wet pavement unrolling ahead of his low beams. The road shimmered before him in the damp night. The straightaway two-lane now began its shift into the tighter curves of the final twelve miles of the road that would feed eventually into the backside of the subdivision where he and his family lived on the outskirts of Sherwood. Before leaving for Kentucky, his wife had stocked the refrigerator with prepared food, so he'd be properly fed in her absence, including a chicken casserole and Randy's favorite, her special sausage lasagna. As he slowed further into the curves through the close hemlocks and pines that fed down the adjacent slopes nearly to the road's edge, something approaching a beatific smile teased the corners of Randy Mullins's mouth at the thought of his steadfast wife's casseroles. He'd have some of the lasagna tonight, maybe with a beer, before slipping into his terrycloth bathrobe and settling in with his new DVDs.

What leapt across the road in front of his car appeared so suddenly, disappeared so quickly, that Randy had no time even to register what in the world it might be before he mashed his brakes. A muscular, tawny flank flashed across the watery blur of his windshield for a split second. Not a deer. Perhaps a large dog, a massive coyote? Before whatever it was vanished into the night, he could see only enough of it to know it was there. And that it had a very long tail.

The car bucked. Its wheels turned into the curve and fell into a skid across the slick pavement. Randy Mullins's knuckles grew white wrestling the steering wheel as his car slid over the outer edge of the curve, rasped over the gravel of the road's berm, collapsed into the two-foot-deep drainage ditch beside the road, and stalled out. He gasped frantically, trying to catch his breath. He seemed to be uninjured, save for a crease of soreness across his chest from the seatbelt harness. The air bags had not deployed. His breathing, shallow and rapid, began to slow gradually. The three DVDs on the seat next to him had flown out

of their blue plastic bag and lay scattered on the floor of the passenger side. It was raining harder now. The interior of the car resonated from the rain pelting the roof. What had it been?

Randy collected the DVDs from the floor, returned them to their bag, and stuffed them under his seat. He released his seatbelt, held his door open with his right hand, and struggled to push himself up and out of the car with his left hand. His foot slipped on the wet vegetation in the ditch, and he fell to his knees on the gravel berm, yanking his right arm out of the way just as his door slammed back down on the tilted vehicle. His smooth-soled shoes slid over the wet gravel and grass and slipped from under him again as he stumbled around to the front of his car to view the damage. All things considered, it certainly could have been worse, but it was bad enough. In the reflected glow of his headlights, fortunately still on, he could see well enough the right front wheel buckled in on a broken axle.

The rain had soaked through his jacket and shirt to the skin, and he began to shiver as he tried to bumble his way up out of the ditch to retrieve his phone from the car. The odds were slim he'd be able to pick up a signal for his cell phone in this ravine the road snaked through. The damp quiet of the night along the road was broken by the rumble of an engine, then the waxing glow of headlights rapidly approaching the curve behind him. In his rush to be seen and hopefully helped in his moment of distress, he again stumbled to his knees on the gravel at the edge of the road. Groping for the left front fender of his car for support, Randy Mullins pushed himself upright and began to raise his arms to flag the vehicle down. The large, extended side-view mirror of the pickup caught him squarely in the ribs and knocked him to the ground on the edge of the wet road.

THE truck stopped, promptly but with precision, giving no sign of panic by the driver. For a few seconds, nothing moved in the night along the road but the rain falling through headlight beams. A few seconds further and the truck shifted into reverse, the back-up lights came on, and the pickup rolled calmly backward and off to the side of the road by the man down on the pavement. A man stepped slowly from the cab of the truck

and paused, drawing in a long, slow, deep breath, as if to scent the night. Moving without haste, he reached behind the seat in the cab, withdrew a rain slicker, and put it on over his work shirt. He flipped the hood of the slicker up over his head. His face, within the hood of the slicker, remained shaded from any view. Like a shadow, he walked with steady, composed steps to the man down on the road.

Shoulders steady, his hooded head bent forward, the man from the truck looked down at the man on the road. After a few motionless moments, the hooded head turned to the side and spat casually onto the pavement. The man on the pavement lay on his back, crumpled in a heap, gasping for air, his lips trying to form the words he would speak if only he could draw a breath.

“Heh . . . heh . . . help me.”

The hooded head cocked to the side for a moment, considering the subject on the ground, and then the man from the truck pushed his glasses up his nose, squatted, and looked into the eyes of the man on the ground. The fallen man’s eyes fluttered, trying to focus on the image leaning over him.

“Puh . . . puh . . . please.”

The man from the truck rose and turned his hooded head up, into the night, and sniffed. Once. Twice. Three, four, five times. He found the scent of something recently passed. Something fresh, yet ancient. Something indescribably wild. The man from the truck drew one long inhale through his nose, held it, then exhaled slowly as he squatted again, slid his arms under the neck and knees of the fallen man, and lifted him from the pavement. The man on the pavement found his voice and howled in pain.

“Shhhhhh,” said the hooded man.

The hooded man slid the other man lengthwise into the bed of his pickup beside two battered plastic coolers, something covered with a muddy blue tarp, and a dog kennel. Save for its pink tongue, the dog was invisible within the dark hollow of its kennel. A mild, eager whimper issued from the kennel as the man in the slicker settled the other man’s body into the truck bed.

“Shhhhhh,” he said softly to the dog.

The hooded man lifted the blue tarp, revealing a gas generator and two red plastic fuel cans. He spread the tarp over the other man and gently tucked it around his injured body. The other man groaned and whimpered. After a long look in each direction along the road, the hooded man climbed back into the truck cab and turned the ignition. As the truck idled, he leaned across the seat, opened the glove box, and felt among its contents until he located what he sought. The rear window glass of the truck cab was missing, and he leaned his hooded face through the opening to look down on the man gasping in his truck bed. After a moment he reached his right arm through the open window. In his hand he held a small-caliber pistol. He held it to the top of the other man's head and fired one round into his brain. The head of the man under the tarp jerked slightly, then his body fell limp. The kenneled dog yipped briefly at the report of the gun.

"Shhhhhh," the hooded man said to the dog, then pulled the hem of the tarp over the man's face, settled back inside the truck cab, returned the pistol to the glove box, and drove his truck back out onto the road leading south toward Sherwood.