

Buster

by Larry Strattner

Ronnie had his mouth open when Kyle held up his hand, "Wait."

"Wait for what?" Ronnie said, "You don't even know what I'm going to say."

"Maybe not; but let me guess. Something about how I should *care* more. How I shouldn't only be thinking of me. How we are all *in pain*. We need to help each other. Hold each other up."

"That's not what I was going to say."

"No? Something close though. Some shit about how we can't be *letting each other down*; letting each other drown. How we have to *be there* for that shithead. How *I* have to be there. The poor baby is *misunderstood*. He shouldn't suffer alone

"But you know, Ronnie, more important than what you say will be what you don't. Like Buster is irresponsible. Thoughtless. Stupid. Reckless. Heedless. Always has been; his nonstop all-about-me attitude eventually runs off even people so dumb they might think they still care. Like you, Ronnie."

"I was only going to say, Buster has no one to fall back on. No one to stand with him. No one to..."

"...sympathize because he got drunk and burned his goddamn house flat to the ground with everyone left of his entire family in it? He roasted them like a package of wieners and then stayed drunk so long he never even showed up for the service. Would that be why he's *alone*? People probably wonder about Buster's love. He can't even recognize anybody; unless they're on fire or splattered on his windshield."

"For God's sake, Kyle, you've got to forgive. He needs a chance to change. To get better. To survive."

"You been spending too much time deaconing at that damn church, Ronnie. Helping the faithful is one thing. Stabling the Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse's is something else."

Ronnie moved his boot in the dust of the street; toed a stone, turned it over; contemplated its other side. "Well," he said.

“And don't give me any crap about turning over a new leaf or shit about a stone comes to your mind kicking that rock either.”

Ronnie looked up into Kyle's narrowed eyes. He could tell Kyle did not have the best in mind for Buster. Not surprising as Kyle's younger sister had been a victim of the Coon River Road crash, along with Eustace Cawner in the shotgun seat. Up here in these two-track roads a reckoning would come. It wouldn't bring the girl back but it would even up the tally sheet.

“Far as I can tell,” Kyle said, looking down the dusty street, “Buster's the only one who manages to keep surviving. First the car wreck, next, the boat explosion, now the house. Everything he touches turns to shit or goes up in smoke. I'm sick of going to services for relations and friends where the undertaker had to superglue the deceased back together then putty and house-paint their faces just so they can leave the casket open. Everyone prattles on about all Buster's casualties are ‘at peace in the Lord.’ No one says, “Buster was driving drunk again, ran head on into the trees on Coon River Road, scratch off Eustace Cawner, riding shotgun. I'm not even going to mention my sis who never said a cross word to no one, nor ever hurt a fly.”

“You are so cold toward the boy Kyle...”

“Shit. I am not. I get hot every time I even think of the dumb-shit, drunked-up redneck. You be sure to tell him I've got a couple of double aught buckshot rounds in the Ithaca pump I keep by my front door. I see him anywhere near my property I'm gonna help a whole bunch of those pellets find their way up his ass.”

“And, Ronnie?”

“Kyle?”

“Tell him to wash up once in a while. If I'm unlucky enough to catch sight of him somewhere I don't want to have to smell him too.”

