

Linda
Swift

*Winner
Take All*

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Presented by *Publishing by Rebecca J. Vickery*

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Dedication

For my good friend, Betsy McGee, with fond remembrance of our week at Indiana University Writers' Conference.

And with love and special thanks to Bob for his support, help, and technical assistance.

Winner Take All

Billy Ray Warren returns from Detroit to claim the old family homestead, but first he will have to destroy the intruder who has taken it over. He comes armed and ready to do battle with his hated rival for possession of what is now rightfully his.

Then an unfortunate accident leaves him a helpless prey for his ruthless enemy. With grim determination he fights for his life, knowing there can only be one winner.

Chapter One

Billy Ray almost missed the sign, grown over as it was with Kudzu vines. He eased his foot off the accelerator and his eyes strained through the thickening darkness to read the words "Tuka: Population 387". He grinned to himself. Ten years, and if anybody had died off or been added to the court house roll book, the sign didn't show it.

"Make that 388," Billy Ray said out loud. "Here's one ole boy who's come back from Dee-troit to stay."

He braked the Olds Ninety-Eight into the sharp curve, signaled for a left turn from force of habit, though there wasn't a living soul in sight. Billy Ray came to a stop at the railroad tracks and looked in both directions. He hadn't forgotten how often and how fast those long Southern freight trains came roaring through, carrying Mississippi cotton and soy beans up North where poor farm boys like Billy Ray Warren had gone to make a buck.

The maroon car bumped over the tracks hard, though Billy Ray had it in low, and he swore softly under his breath. Damn shocks, shot to hell. He should have replaced them before he left. But though he'd planned on leaving from the first day he'd set foot in the big town, his actual homecoming had been sudden. He had figured it would take him twenty years . . . well, fifteen at the very least, to save enough from his job on the line at GM to come back to the farm. Then he hadn't counted on cleaning up in a poker game.

Billy Ray smiled, remembering. *God! What a night.* He'd been red hot. They had tried to make him say he'd be there this week, give them a chance to get some of it back. He hadn't said he wouldn't. Actually, he'd been afraid to say that. But he hadn't said he would either.

He hadn't even gone back to work. No need to. He had his pay. And everybody else's. He grinned again, thinking of the bulging wallet in his hip pocket.

On the other side of the tracks, Billy Ray could see Willet's Store and he could make out three men sitting out front on the sagging porch. That would be Vern Willet at the checkerboard, and the fat one had to be Dan Mosley. The other one watching was probably Frank Acree. He slowed

the car and almost stopped to let them know he was back. But he wanted to make the farm before it got too dark so he kept moving.

He had to watch the ruts now as he drove past the Pentecost Church toward the wooden bridge that still had no rails. You'd think by now they would have a decent bridge, maybe even a blacktop road here in town. Across the bridge, he made a sharp right onto Sawmill Road. A little further on, as he slowed for a sizeable mudhole, he noticed a small shape ahead by a mailbox. A kid, catching lightning bugs. He could see it was a girl, and then even in the dusk, he caught a flash of her red hair.

When he was even with her, he said "Hi."

She was close enough he could have reached out and touched her, but she didn't answer. She just stood there holding the glass fruit jar with its contents blinking off and on. He eased the car slowly by her, staring at her face as she stared at him. Not a doubt about it. She was Mattie Lou made over.

His heart beat faster, thinking of Mattie Lou. So she lived on the old Riley place now. Guess her family got too big for the little gun-barrel house beside the store. This kid must be the oldest. There was already one more and another on the way when he saw her last.

He was driving faster now trying to beat the dark. Few lights showed in the houses along the road. He knew who lived in all of them, or at least he used to. After he passed the Suiter place, he turned onto the dirt road that would take him home. He noticed there were no lights at the Suiters. The place looked deserted. He wondered if old man Suiter had died.

It took all of his effort now to stay in the deep ruts of the road. In places, he could barely make out where the tracks were for the Kudzu vines – seemed like they were trying to reach across it and touch. Damned greedy bastards. Taking the whole country. Billy Ray thought of the cans in the trunk of his car and set his jaw. It was going to be one hell of a fight, and he'd win it if it took the rest of his damned life.

Chapter Two

The old homeplace stood at the end of the road, directly in front of him. Billy Ray felt the same way he always did at the sight of it, even though he knew there wasn't going to be anybody there. He drove right through the vines to get as close to the narrow front porch as he could. He left his car lights on while he carried in the metal suitcase and sacks and boxes from the back seat. Then he went to the kitchen and got a coal oil lamp off the pie safe and lit it. When he turned up the wick he could see that the kitchen looked just like it had the day Ma was buried, only now the table with its dusty red-checked oilcloth was bare, and the wooden benches had been pushed against the far wall.

Billy Ray set the lamp on the spool-legged table in the middle room and sat down in Ma's rocker. He was dead tired. He hadn't stopped all the way home from Detroit except to eat and gas up. *Well, what the hell?* He could sleep all week if he wanted to. He stretched his aching legs, sat rocking a few minutes, enjoying his thoughts. Then his mind turned to getting settled. He would sleep here in Ma's room. No need to sleep in the front room on the folding divan, and he sure as hell wasn't going to sleep on the floor upstairs no more.

Billy Ray pulled back the thin pink chenille spread, folded it neatly, and put it on the trunk at the foot of the bed. He turned back the faded wedding ring quilt and sat down. He took off everything but his undershorts and laid it all in the rocking chair, with his boots on top.

Might be cockroaches running around over the floor and he didn't want to take a chance on mashing one in the toe of his new lace-up boots. They'd cost a lot of money, but he figured he would be wearing them a long time. And he needed sturdy shoes for the job he had to do.

He blew out the lamp and crawled between the rough sheets and doubled the lumpy bolster under his head. Just as he was about to doze off, the first close streak of lightning lit up the room and he heard the low rumble of thunder in the distance.

Chapter Three

When Billy Ray woke up, he couldn't tell for sure if it was day. Rain was pouring heavy down the steep tin roof and the wind was driving sheets of water against the dingy windows. He squinted in the semi-darkness to read the hands on his Bulova: 3:05 p.m. Boy, had he sacked out.

He got up, shivering as his feet touched the cold linoleum. Hell, a fire would feel good today. He pulled on his shirt and headed for the back porch to see if there was any wood. The wind was coming from the back and the few sticks he found were soaking wet. He considered making a run for the toilet. It leaned sideways by the weatherboard henhouse as if the weight of the Kudzu vines had got to be too much for it. There wasn't any path that he could see, and he remembered his bare feet. He settled for the rotted bottom step instead.

In the kitchen, Billy Ray lifted the cook-stove lid and found a few lumps of coal. He wadded up newspaper from between the jars he'd brought and stuffed it in the stove. After a few minutes, he had a fire going and put the old iron teakettle on the front eye then opened the instant coffee jar. Ma would have hooted at that. He looked at the granite pot and wished for a minute he'd brought some real coffee.

While he waited for the water to boil, he hunted in the sacks for oleo and bread. Then he got a skillet from the wall behind the stove and greased it and fried two eggs. He got a white plate with brown spiderweb cracks in it and a chipped white cup and set them on the table, then looked in the pie safe drawer for fighting gear and took out a wooden-handled knife and fork.

After Billy Ray finished eating, he propped his feet up on the back of the cook-stove and smoked a Lucky. It was already growing dark again and the fire was going out; the rain hadn't let up at all. He hunted in the trunk for another quilt and crawled back into bed. By dark, his heavy breathing kept time with the steady beat of the rain on the roof.

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Billy Ray had forgot to wind his watch so he couldn't be sure it was still morning when the thunder woke him up again. He tried the radio setting on the dresser, but the battery was dead.

They'd had a chance to hook on the power line just before Ma got sick, but Pa said there wasn't any need to. They had a good cistern, a big icebox, and a new coal-burning cook-stove with a flue drum for biscuits. And they didn't need electric lights because they went to bed with the chickens.

The thunder was closer now. It shook the window panes and Billy Ray could see jagged pitchfork lightning jumping around in the blue-black sky. He just made it back from the john when the rain hit. And it wasn't only rain this time. There was hard wind and then it started to hail; the pellets danced off the roof like machine gun bullets. The wind whipped a pear tree limb against the front window and a pane broke and scattered glass all over the floor by the bed.

"Sonofabitch." Billy Ray was down on his knees, picking tiny slivers of glass off the floor. He had stopped up the window the best he could with a pasteboard box lid, but he'd have to hunt something stronger. As soon as he got all the damned glass picked up.

It was the first time Billy Ray had been upstairs since he left home. When he'd come back for Ma's funeral, they'd set up in the front room all night. He almost forgot to duck at the top of the crooked steps and he could barely stand up now without hitting a rafter. He remembered when him and Lee Roy had measured each other, trying to outstretch one another. John Allen's head could already touch a rafter then. Billy Ray had slept with Lee Roy at the end by the stairway, and John Allen had the far end by the front window. But after John Allen had gone off to Korea, Lee Roy had took the front. Bubba had never slept up here at all.

Billy Ray lifted the lid on a small wooden footlocker. It had been John Allen's and had been passed to Lee Roy before it had finally belonged to him. It didn't have much in it now – a wine-colored sweater and a bottle of Old Spice cologne. He shook it but it was empty. There was a pair of white tennis shoes with no laces, and two pairs of white ribbed sox. He took out the shoes and put them on. No sense in wearing his boots in the house, but the damned floor was cold.

At the bottom was some post cards of San Diego, and under the cards was the tin calendar. It was a Pepsi-Cola calendar, with a Pepsi-girl on top. Only she wasn't a Pepsi-girl to him. She was Mattie Lou. She had the same red hair and laughing brown eyes, and Mattie Lou would have looked exactly like that – if she'd had a black bathing suit with no straps. He held it up, measuring it with his eyes. It ought to be a pretty good fit.

Billy Ray took the calendar downstairs and carefully fitted it into the broken window.

Chapter Four

The hail had stopped now and the wind died down, but the rain kept on falling. Billy Ray went out to the cistern and got a bucket of water and fished a skuttle of coal from under the back porch. Then he fried some potatoes and opened a can of pork and beans to eat with them.

After supper, he lit the lamp and took a smoke. Then he opened the top dresser drawer and got out the album. There wasn't much in it. They'd never owned a Kodak. But Ma had saved back some school pictures and clippings from the paper. The first picture of himself he came across was his high school graduation, and there was Ila Fay right next to him. He grinned. She'd always said she sure was glad they hadn't been identical twins so she wouldn't have to be ugly. Her dark bangs made him think of the last time he saw her.

He remembered exactly the way it had happened. It had been Christmas Eve. They'd had heavy snow and the sidewalks were still covered with dirty gray slush as he had plowed his way through clumps of last minute shoppers. Ila Fay was coming out of Dave's Bar & Grill as he opened the door to go in and there was no way she could pretend not to see him.

"Ila Fay." He had recognized her at once in spite of her cotton-colored hair piled high on top of her head. He started to grab her, but something in her face made him stop and look past her at the man who was right on her heels. He backed a little away from the door and they stood looking at each other on the cold street, with their faces blinking bright and then dim in the neon sign light.

"Hi, Billy Ray." She smiled a quick nervous smile at him.

"Long time, no see." He grinned at her, taking in how good she looked. She had on black velvet britches and a black and white striped fur coat that made her look like a fuzzy bear, and he'd wanted again to hug her.

"Yeah." Her doll-face was nearly level with his as she stood there on her high platform slippers.

"How've you been?" He really wanted to know.

"Okay." She did not meet his eyes.

He looked a question at the guy standing behind her, who was wrapped around her with both arms now.

"Billy Ray, I'd like to make you acquainted with Mort." She didn't say Mort who, just like she never said that he was her brother neither.

Bill Ray stuck out his hand but Mort made no move to turn loose of Ila Fay, so he touched her arm instead.

"You living here?"

"Yeah." She didn't seem to notice the way Mort squeezed her.

"Been here long?" Billy Ray persisted because he didn't know what else to talk about.

"Too long." It was the first words Mort had said and his voice had some kind of foreign accent to it.

"We gotta go, Billy Ray." She met his eyes for just a second but she didn't smile.

"Well, take care of yourself." He tried to hold her look until he could read it, but she was fumbling in her purse now for a cigarette.

"You, too, Billy Ray." She found the cigarette and Mort unwrapped himself long enough to light it for her as they walked away.

Billy Ray stood looking after them. The last thing he saw was her cotton-colored curls bobbing in and out between the other heads. He had liked her brown hair better. He sighed and went on in Dave's then, to eat his supper and get a bottle of Old Crow to celebrate the season.

He had kept thinking about Ila Fay after he'd gone back to his third floor room that overlooked the alley and smelled like garbage in summer when the window was open. He'd wondered where she was living and if it was nicer than this. And he'd wondered if Mort lived with her or if she was sleeping around and Mort had picked her up at Dave's. He looked at the faded picture again now. Either way, it would have broke Ma's heart to know a girl of hers was living in sin.

There was a picture of John Allen at boot camp in San Diego. And under that, the clipping from the *Dexter Weekly* titled *Gold Star Service Men*.

In the back, he found a picture of Betty Grace's wedding. She was standing beside Charlie on the steps of the Pentecost church house and she had a bouquet in her hands. On the next page was a picture of Ma and Pa taken the same day. Pa had on his Sunday suit, and Ma and him had their arms around each other.

There wasn't any picture where he could pick out Lee Roy. He hadn't been old enough to go to Korea and he never graduated. He'd gone to Detroit. Billy Ray had tried to find him when he got up there and the address he'd sent them turned out to be a parking lot. Frank Acree said his brother had seen Lee Roy in Chicago and drank a beer with him. Later, Frank said he'd heard Lee Roy was doing time. But nobody believed much that Frank said.

There wasn't any picture of Bubba either. But Billy Ray guessed none of them would ever need a picture to remember what Bubba looked like. He closed the album and sat rocking, the chair's creaking sound reminding him of the nights he'd heard Ma rocking Bubba long after he'd gone to bed.

Billy Ray carried the lamp to the kitchen and got a bottle of Old Crow out of the pasteboard box. He poured a glass half full and finished filling it with a dipper of water. After a while, he put out the light and lay in the dark listening to the rain.

Chapter Five

The third straight day it began to get to him. He had things to do and he wanted to get started. He finished off the bacon and saw he had eggs for only one more day. He hated to think about dragging the Olds through them damned mudholes. He'd wait it out another day or two. He could always eat oatmeal and he had a whole jar of peanut butter and a box of crackers, and plenty of canned goods.

Billy Ray opened the door to the front room up in the day and looked in the library table where they'd always kept a deck of cards. He hadn't much wanted to go in there, but the divan was setting in the corner now where Ma's casket had been. He could see the back of the gold silk star pinned to the window shade. Betty Grace and Ila Fay had slept in here before Betty Grace got married. He wondered if Betty Grace still lived with Charlie's folks. He guessed that was the best Charlie could do, but he never was gonna get somewhere if he didn't get a piece of land of his own like Pa had.

He played Solitaire and finished off the Old Crow by bedtime. He was glad he'd brought a good supply. No telling when he would have time to get down to the county line, and he sure as hell wasn't going to pay Dan Mosely's bootleg price.

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Billy Ray heated extra water in the teakettle the next morning and poured it in the washpan setting on the washstand just inside the back door. He shaved and washed and put on clean clothes, then poured some Vitalis on his palms and slicked back his hair. He didn't know what time it was, but he was pretty sure he had slept past noon. And even at that he hadn't quite slept it off. His head felt like a damned lead balloon.

It got lighter outside after he ate his sandwich of peanut butter and bread heels. He thought about trying to make it to Willet's, but when he went out on the porch, he could see it was coming up a cloud again, so he figured, what the hell. One more day wouldn't matter.

He couldn't see the road at all, for the Kudzu, but he knew the ruts were knee deep in mud and he'd sure hate to get stuck in it. Probably run the battery down. He might ought to wait a couple of days after the rain quit,

give the ground a chance to settle. He could make out. He'd fry some cornbread and open some of the canned stuff tomorrow.

Billy Ray had tuna fish and a can of beer for supper. He carried the lamp to the front room and turned back the bedcovers, and then went out on the front porch. It had stopped raining after that last cloud buster and now the sky was spotted with stars.

He sat down on the doorstep and breathed the good clean air. He thought how different it smelled than the smoke and stinking garbage on Habacker Street. Well, no need for him to go back there no more. This was his place now. Funny, that he should be the one to have it. Maybe it would have been different if John Allen had lived. Or if Lee Roy hadn't left. It was for sure Ila Fay didn't want any part of it. There wasn't any need to think about Bubba. And he'd be damned if he'd hand it over to that bastard Charlie, if Betty Grace never had a place of her own.

Billy Ray opened a fresh pack of Luckies, lit one up, and stared out toward the road.

"This old place suits me to a T," he said to nobody in particular. "All it needs is a few pieces of siding nailed back on, and the toilet set straight, and the damned Kudzu pulled out by its roots."

He might even hook onto the REA before winter. It could get kind of lonesome out here in bad weather. Maybe he'd buy him a second-hand TV.

Billy Ray thought about Pa staying on here after they'd all left. *I ought to have asked him to go back to Detroit with me*, he thought. *But he still had a cotton crop that spring*. That was the last year he guessed there'd been anything raised on the land. That winter Pa had started coughing and by the next spring he wasn't strong enough or sober long enough to put out a crop.

At least, that's what Betty Grace had told him when she wrote that they'd put him in the TB hospital. He'd lasted three years after that. They'd had the service there in the Veterans' Chapel at Mt. Vernon. Him and Betty Grace was all the children who was there. Billy Ray hadn't even come back to Iuka for the burial. He hadn't got but one day off; still, he ought to have come. Betty Grace took care of everything.

He could hear the bullfrogs grunting in the pond behind the stable and smell the wet earth. In the darkness, he could just make out the creeping Kudzu vines that covered the yard and pushed up through the cracks between the planks on the porch.

It was hard to remember whether they'd noticed the Kudzu first or Ma's coughing. Everything had started to go wrong about then. They had got the letter about John Allen. And then Lee Roy had gone off. He had stayed and tried to help Pa, but the Kudzu kept choking out the cotton faster than they could pull it up.

And then Ma had Bubba. She was too old to have a kid then. Maybe that was why he wasn't right. Ma never went to the doctor about her coughing. He guessed she knew what it was and she was afraid they would send her off to the sanatorium like they had her ma and there wouldn't be anybody to look after Bubba. Betty Grace was already married and having kids of her own. And Ila Fay always acted like Bubba wasn't there.

The summer he was seventeen, Billy Ray had gone to Detroit. He was nearly eighteen and he looked older. He'd sent them money until Ma died four years later. Pa couldn't take care of a seven-year-old kid that couldn't even put his clothes on, so they'd put Bubba in the County Home over at Dexter. He thought for a minute. Bubba would be nearly fourteen now.

Billy Ray shivered in the cold night air. He'd stayed out long enough. He wanted to get up early and get started. He had a big job ahead of him and not much time if he aimed to have a garden this year. He guessed the sun would wake him up tomorrow.

The weight of the two quilts felt good when he crawled into bed. He fell asleep to the sounds of the whippoorwills hollering.

Chapter Six

Billy Ray finished his oatmeal and rinsed out the bowl with a dipperful of water. He blinked in the bright sun as he stepped out onto the front porch. He had decided to unload the poison first and he was going to back the car up to the porch so he wouldn't have so far to carry the gallon cans. Trichloro Benzoic Acid, the label said.

"We guarantee it to kill Kudzu if you use it according to directions," they'd told him at the Home Guard Pest Control Company. So he had bought all his car trunk would hold.

He turned the ignition switch and held down the accelerator until it turned over. He eased the Olds in gear and turned the wheel, giving it plenty of gas but the car did not move. Then putting it in low, he floor-boarded it and could hear the back wheels spinning. He got out to see how deep it was setting before trying to rock it out.

"What the hell?" Billy Ray just stood there staring for a minute, then shook his head. "Who would have thought that good-for-nothing sonofabitch could grow all over a car in this short a time?"

He decided he'd chop the tangled mess away from the car instead of trying to pull it out. Wading through the wet vines around to the car trunk, Billy Ray almost stepped out of his tennis shoes and swore in frustration as he lifted the lid. There on top of the cans was the ax he'd bought, its blade honed to razor sharpness. That ought to do the trick.

Billy Ray took hold of the ax handle and made a stab at a thick vine wrapped around the rear wheel. It bent, but didn't split. He gripped the wood handle and swung again.

* * * * *

Billy Ray didn't actually remember when it happened. The first thing he remembered was being sprawled out in the Kudzu vines and feeling the blood gushing out of his foot. He tried to sit up and passed out again. When he came to, he was able to ease up slow and get hold of his foot with his hand. He held on 'til his arms were numb, and then he got his shirt off and tied it around the cut.

Crawling, he finally made it into the house. His shirt was already soaked in red. He fumbled in the metal suitcase for a white undershirt. He knew he ought to wash the cut out. See how bad it was. He made it to the kitchen, but he couldn't lift the bucket off the washstand. His weakness scared hell out of him. Shaking, he managed to bring a dipperful down and slosh it on his foot.

He looked at it then, saw the skin laid open to the splintered bone with blood spurting out with every beat of his heart. He hung his head over the washpan and was sick. Really scared now, he knew he had to stop the bleeding and do it quick. He wrapped the clean shirt around his ankle, pressing as hard as he could where the throbbing was, and crawled back to the other room.

He finally got the bottom dresser drawer open far enough to work out a sheet. Too weak to tear a strip from the coarse brown domestic cloth, finally using his knife and teeth, he got a piece long enough to make a tourniquet.

After that he slept, and when he woke up he was thirsty and his whole leg was numb. The room was nearly dark and Billy Ray could barely make out the blood-stained bandage. He loosened the rag tied around his leg and rubbed his calf until some of the feeling came back into it. He felt in the suitcase for another undershirt and carefully peeled the sticky cloth away from his foot. Wrapping it up again, he waited to see if any blood showed through. He couldn't see anything, but felt a dull throbbing start up again, so he wound the rag around the outside of the bulky dressing and tied it as tight as he could. Then he rested again.

After a while, he thought he ought to eat something to help him get his strength back so he crawled to the kitchen. He tried to eat some crackers and peanut butter, but he felt sick at his stomach again. He opened a bottle of Old Crow and drank some straight. Afterward, he felt better and he crawled back to the other room, taking the bottle with him, and pulled himself up onto the bed.

Billy Ray dozed and woke up with a hard chill. He felt for the bottle in the dark and took a long drink from it, then covered himself with the quilts and slept again.

Chapter Seven

Bright sunlight was shining in his face when Billy Ray woke up again. He had to get up and get busy, he thought, before he remembered his foot. The bandage was soaked again and there were ugly stains on Ma's quilt. He started to get up, but his head felt so dizzy he had to lay back down. He was sick at his stomach again and his mouth tasted like soured whiskey.

He knew he had lost a helluva lot of blood, and he could tell he was too weak to try and get his leg seen about. So there was nothing to do but try to rest and eat and wait 'til he was better. He tried some crackers again but he still couldn't keep them down. His foot was swollen and hurting now, and he swallowed more whiskey to make the pain easy.

Up in the day, he crawled back to the kitchen and tried the crackers again. This time he kept them down so he brought the cracker box back to bed with him.

As it got dark, Billy Ray began to think about how stupid he had been. If he'd had his boots on this never would have happened. But he hadn't known he was going to have to chop the damn vine down to move his car. He'd left the car door open when he got out. Well, he would just have to wait until tomorrow to shut it. He should have stopped at Willet's that night he come in. Then somebody would be coming around looking for him, if he didn't show up once-in-a-while.

As it was, nobody had even seen him except Mattie Lou's little girl, and she didn't know who he was. He wondered if old man Suiter was dead or if somebody still lived there. No matter, it was about four miles to Suiter's place and he was doing good to make it to the kitchen.

* * * * *

Billy Ray woke in the night wringing wet with sweat. His whole body was aching and his tongue was dry and felt swollen. He threw back the quilts and reached around in the dark for the full bottle he'd set on the table. His damned foot felt like it was on fire and he lit the lamp to take a look. It was twice the size it ought to be and it looked almost purple in the lamplight.

He took a drink of whiskey because he felt queasy and then he lay looking at the bottle for a long time, thinking. They put alcohol on wounds. And

Old Crow was eighty proof. He screamed when the whiskey sloshed into the cut, but when it was over he was glad he had done it.

Billy Ray didn't blow out the light again. He lay there and looked at the red-haired Pepsi-girl. And thought of Mattie Lou. He hadn't seen her but once since he left – the day of Ma's funeral. He'd gone up to Willet's for cigarettes and she'd come out of the store carrying a sack in one arm and a baby in the other. A little red-haired girl with a sucker in her mouth was waddling along behind her.

* * * * *

"Hi, Mattie Lou."

She'd looked up then, startled, like she was surprised to see him. "Hi, Billy Ray," she said almost like a whisper.

"How you been?"

"Okay." She looked down, not meeting his eyes.

"Long time, no see."

"I'm sorry about your ma, Billy Ray."

He cleared his throat. "These all yours?" He looked at the two kids.

Color rose in her pale face as she nodded. She shifted the sack and he saw for the first time that she was wearing a maternity dress and he turned red.

"You live close by?"

"Over there." Her head jerked toward the weatherboard gun-barrel house between Willet's and the pool hall.

"I'll take that sack for you." He started to reach out for it but her sharp "No!" stopped him. He guessed old Gus must be drunk or else at the pool hall where he could see her coming with him in tow. She was probably afraid of Gus. They said he'd beat the hell out of his first wife every time he got drunk.

She took a step to go and Billy Ray said quick, before he could change his mind, "I've missed you, Mattie Lou".

"I've missed you too, Billy Ray."

"I think about you a lot."

"I think about you too, Billy Ray. Nearly all the time."

Before he could say anything else, she had turned and was walking fast across the gravel road and the little girl was stumbling after her, crying as she tried to keep up.

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Billy Ray thought the lamp was getting brighter and then he saw that it was the sun lighting up the room. His whole leg was swelled now and he couldn't lift it off the bed without moving it with his arm. He tried to stay calm and not let his mind run wild. He knew he'd have to think clear and make every move count.

He managed to get to the kitchen and get the coal oil can and the wash pan and the peanut butter jar. Then he made another trip and pushed the half-empty box of Old Crow back as he went. He had to rest a long time after that. He thought about getting a bucket of water from the cistern but didn't think he could make the back steps and he wasn't thirsty for water anyhow.

Still worried about the open car, he later pulled himself to the front door to check on it. The door was still open and that damned Kudzu was hanging over the front seat and sticking through the steering wheel. Billy Ray crawled back to bed and lay there a long time trying to get up his nerve to doctor his leg again. But he was dreading it all for nothing; he never felt a thing when he poured the whiskey on it this time.

Billy Ray lost track of time after that. He couldn't even tell if it was day or night sometimes. And the stink from his leg made him too sick to eat much. It didn't hurt anymore, but he knew it was in bad shape. And for the first time he considered that he might not make it.

He thought about trying to get in the Olds and setting down on the horn 'til he ran the battery down. But he figured if he got a little better he could chop enough Kudzu away to drive it out and that would be his best bet. He thought about setting the car on fire one night to try and call attention to the fix he was in, but he knew the Kudzu would block the flames from being seen anywhere down the road.

Finally, he thought about trying to crawl to Suiter's, or on down the road, but he knew he'd never make it. He was damned if he was gonna die all tangled up in Kudzu vines.

Chapter Seven

It stormed one day and the wind blew the tin Pepsi-girl out of the window. She fell on the table and Billy Ray reached out and touched her and smiled.

"Hi, Mattie Lou. Long time, no see." After a while, he spoke to her again. "I'd hoped you'd come to see me. I knew your little girl would tell you I'd come home."

He shifted closer to the edge of the bed and looked more closely at the calendar. "How have you been, Mattie Lou?"

After a while, he added, "I've missed you." Then he began to cry and he asked her over and over, "Why didn't you wait for me?"

Later he drank from the bottle beside the calendar and then he thought he was in Lee Roy's car over at Dexter. Mattie Lou was sitting with him in the back seat.

She giggled. "We ought not left the picture show. What if Mama finds out?"

"How can she with her over at Iuka and you here in Dexter?" He put his arm around her.

"Billy Ray." She moved away, but just a little.

He'd kissed her then. And after a while, they'd kissed some more. Then he'd moved his hand down and closed it around her breast. It had felt like squeezing a ripe peach.

Mattie Lou started to cry and he'd asked her if it had hurt and she'd said, "Mama told me never to let a boy do that to me or I'd get a baby like Rosie did."

He began to cry again. Mattie Lou was standing there with the little red-haired girl and the baby and her bulging maternity dress and she was screaming at him. "I don't want no baby, Billy Ray! I don't want no baby!"

Lee Roy came back for his car, but the Kudzu vines had grown through the wheels and it wouldn't move. He got a brand new shiny ax out of the trunk and started chopping at it.

"Don't, Lee Roy! Don't!" Billy Ray screamed at him but he acted like he couldn't hear him and went on chopping.

* * * * *

The sun grew hotter and the pear tree bloomed. Billy Ray could hear the bees swarming around it. He sometimes thought he smelled the blossoms, too, but it was hard to smell anything but his leg. The flies bothered him some crawling around over him. He'd run out of clean clothes and he lay naked now on the soiled bed.

There wasn't much Old Crow left, but he guessed it would be enough. If it wasn't, he would go to Dave's Bar & Grill and get another bottle. Just to be on the safe side, he'd go anyway.

He met Ila Fay as he was going in. She was by herself and he hugged her hard.

"Where you been, Billy Ray?" she asked him. "I've been looking all over for you."

"I went home."

"Iuka?" She threw back her head and laughed. "Don't no good ever come from that place." She took his arm. "Don't go in there. Come home with me and I'll fix you some supper."

"I want to get a bottle," he told her. "Wait for me."

He went into the dark room and pointed toward the shelf behind the bar. "Old Crow," he told the man standing there. He took the bottle and turned around and saw John Allen sitting at a table in the back. At least, it looked like John Allen.

He took a step toward him, but the door opened and Ila Fay called him

"Billy Ray, it's hot out here! I'm not waiting another minute!" She slammed the door.

"Ila Fay! It's John Allen!" he called after her, but she'd already gone. And when he turned around, he couldn't see John Allen anymore either.

He started to cry.

"Ma," he sobbed. "Ma, it's dark in here. Where are you?"

Billy Ray reached out and his trembling hand touched the bottle. It was nearly empty. His mouth felt hot and dry. He knew this time would be the last. His fingers closed over the Old Crow and pulled but the bottle did not move. And then he saw it. The Kudzu vine that was holding it from behind, and the leafless shoot that curled into and sealed its top.

"You damned greedy little bastard," Billy Ray said softly. "You win. Take it all..."

About the Author:



Linda Swift divides her time between her native state of Kentucky and Florida. She is an award winning author of published poetry, articles, short stories, and a TV play. Linda holds an Education Specialist Degree from Murray State University with post-graduate work from U. of Alabama and was a teacher, counselor, and psychometrist in public schools in three states. She credits her husband and adult children for providing encouragement and technical support necessary for survival in the cyberspace world.

Linda's first two books were published by Kensington. She currently has ten e-books (also in print) available from the publishers below. Additional books of fiction and short stories are scheduled for 2012.

For more information, please visit her website at
<http://www.lindaswift.net/>

Works from other publishers by Ms. Swift

This Time Forever Champagne Books

To Those Who Wait Whiskey Creek Press

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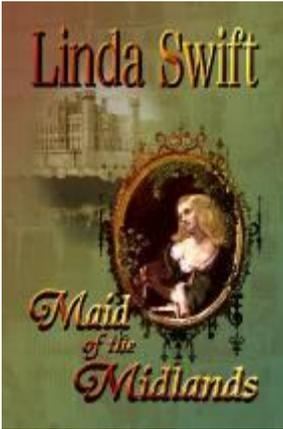
Circle of Love The Wild Rose Press

Humanly Speaking (Prose Poetry) Willow Moon Publications

Song of Every Season (Haiku) Willow Moon Publications

Ms. Swift's works available from *Publishing by Rebecca J. Vickery*

Maid of the Midlands



In Matilda's sixteenth summer, two events change her placid life at Hafton Castle. She falls in love with the handsome guard Jondalar, and she is chosen to be waiting-lady for the Queen of Scots who is brought to the castle as a "guest".

When Matilda learns that Jondalar has deceived her, as he plots against the queen, she must choose between her love and betrayal of the woman she is obliged to serve.

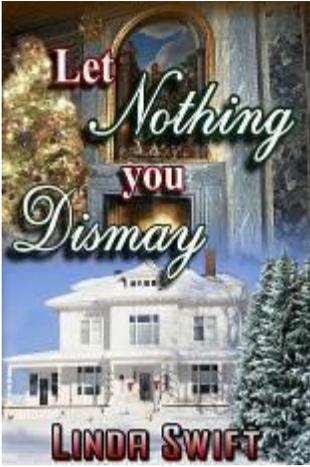
Resurrection



Charlotte Timberlake wants to write a book comparing past and present treatment for mental illness and persuades a doctor to have her admitted to a state hospital as a patient. When unforeseen events make it impossible for her to leave, she finds herself unable to convince those in charge, her children, or ex-husband that she doesn't belong here.

Charlotte soon realizes it is up to her to find a means of escaping the nightmare of her self-condemned prison.

Let Nothing You Dismay

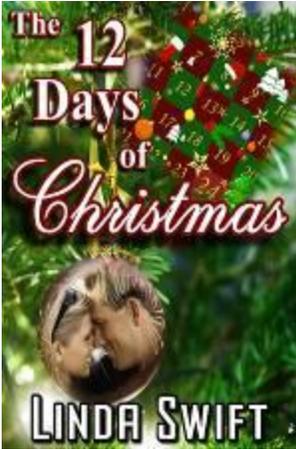


Kala's position as tour guide at a Kentucky Welcome Center isn't enough to cope with huge debts left by her late husband's illness, but she manages to make ends meet, until she has car trouble. To save on future repairs, she enrolls in a basic auto-care class.

Rex is a handsome, part-time instructor whose broken heart needs repairing, too. After recently losing his important job and family, he has sworn never to get involved with another woman.

Kala discounts her growing attraction to Rex when she learns he is years younger, until the winter storm of the century throws them together. When the Interstate closes down, Kala opens her home to a houseful of strangers. Despite fire, flood, and friction, she creates an old-fashioned holiday rich in the true spirit of Christmas. In the process, will Kala and Rex discover the greatest gift of all?

The Twelve Days of Christmas



Once in love, Leigh and Russell are maneuvered into spending time together during the Christmas holidays. Recovering from a tragedy, Leigh vows never to be responsible for a child again while Russell faces deciding custody of his two daughters after his ex-wife remarries.

Even as their attraction flares once more, how can they possibly overcome the obstacles life has placed between them? Then toss an arsonist, a lovable Labrador, and an unwanted stepfather into the situation...

Will the twelve days of Christmas be time enough to sort it all out?

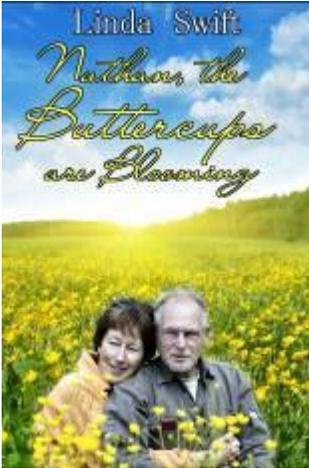


A 99 cent Gallery Short

When a power failure traps an elevator full of tourists on their way down into a deep cavern, a small boy's life hangs in the balance. With his arm caught between the open grillwork and rock wall, he faces certain death if the cage drops. His parents, already waiting below, try to save him by seeking an alternate route out of the cave and back to the top of the mountain.

Above ground in the lodge, a young man, unaware of the consequences, tries to return power to enable the elevator to move while a man and woman try desperately to prevent that happening. In this race against the clock, who will win? Who will lose?

Special Sneak Peek



A 99 cent Gallery Short

Nathan, the Buttercups are Blooming

Nathan Bradford is a prosperous man who always provided well for his wife Esther and their eight children. Now blind with glaucoma, he listens with helpless fury as his beloved wife lies dying while his children respond in their individual ways to the evolving crisis they all feel helpless to prevent. Will Nathan change the seemingly inevitable course of events?

Chapter 1

At first, when he heard her faint gasps for breath, Nathan thought they were back at the farmhouse in the big front bedroom. Sitting upright as quickly as he could manage, he reassured her.

"It's all right, Esther. I'll get your oxygen and you'll be breathing fine in no time."

Groping in the dark, his arm hit something solid and it fell clattering to the floor. Cold water splashed against his pajama-clad legs and before he could wonder why Esther had left a pitcher of water on the dresser, he heard Sarah's cross voice.

"Papa, what have you done now? Here, let me ring for the nurse. Do you want the bedpan?"

"Sarah, why are you here?"

"Because I stay with you every night. What are you trying to do, Papa?"

Why would she stay at the farm? Didn't she have a home anymore?

"Oh, nurse." Sarah spoke to the nurse who had come at the sound of the pitcher falling. "Papa has knocked his water pitcher over. We'll have to change his pajamas. But first, he may—"

"It's Esther!" he said urgently. "I was getting her oxygen. She's not breathing right and—"

"Well, why didn't you say so, Papa?" The stout figure turned toward the other bed.

"Mama, can you hear me?" Sarah's voice was on the other side of the room now. "The nurse is getting your oxygen. Just try to relax."

Nathan strained to hear Esther's shallow breaths, coming farther and farther apart now. *Please hurry, nurse*, he begged silently. For a long moment he didn't hear anything except his own heart pounding in his chest. *She's gone*, he thought, and closed his eyes, letting the tears spill down his wrinkled cheeks.

"Nurse! I don't think she's breathing," Sarah's urgent voice confirmed his fears.

Quick sounds of a bed being cranked up, the oxygen tent made ready. "There now, Mrs. Bradford. Breathe deeply. That's the way. Take a deep breath."

"Is she...?" Sarah's voice began, then stopped.

"Just breath in now, Mrs. Bradford. That's a good girl. You're okay now." The nurse lowered her voice. "We nearly lost her that time. She was turning blue."

Chapter 2

We would have lost her if I hadn't waked and heard her, Nathan thought. And for a moment, he felt blind anger for Sarah who was supposed to be watching over them and who had obviously been asleep. Then he became angry with himself. If only he could see, he would watch over Esther. But as it was, he was more hindrance than help.

The nurse spoke again to Sarah in a low tone and he strained his ears to hear. "I think I'd better call Dr. Gordon. Her pulse is awfully weak."

"Whatever you say, nurse."

"Just watch her closely 'til I get back. If there's any change in her breathing, ring for someone quick."

"Sarah?"

"Don't bother me now, Papa. I've got to watch Mama."

"Sarah, is she—"

"Hush, Papa. She's all right. Go back to sleep now. It's not even daylight."

Nathan pressed his lips together to keep the angry words from pouring out. *Go back to sleep*. Esther might be dying and his oldest daughter was ordering him to go back to sleep. He wanted the other children here. But he was afraid to say anything more. Sarah had to watch her mother 'til the nurse got back. He could only lie and wait. Wait for the nurse, the doctor, the other children – for Esther to die. His legs were cold, but he was afraid he'd knock something over if he tried to find his blanket. And Sarah had to watch her mother.

Suddenly his legs felt warmer. Nathan put his hand on his pajamas and they were wet higher up now. And then he knew why he had waked and heard Esther. He had been looking for the bedpan.

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