

# DAREDEVIL'S APPRENTICE

BY

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MEMENTO MORI MYSTERIES

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Suppose this happens. The world looks  
tame, but it might go wild, any time.

—William Stafford



# 1

The wind always blows in Oklahoma. It's such a fact of life that we don't even need extra words for it like they have in other places—chinook, Santa Ana, sirocco. Here, we just say it's windy.

The day my friend Lucie Dreadfulwater killed Dale Nowlin, the November wind rattled the rafters of the barn in which they faced each other. Only the two of them could say what happened that day, and they're both dead. No one is left to tell their story except me.

I wasn't there, but now, after all this time, I think I know how it happened. If I close my eyes, I can see it playing like a B-movie at the drive-in. And no matter how often I watch, I can't change the ending.

The wind blew from the north, and its cold fingers crept through the cracks of the old building and pooled in the dark corners with the brooding disregard of a ghost.

The barn was Lucie's, and the middle-aged woman and the older man warily circled each other in the center of the floor. Lucie held a hoof knife low in her right hand; Nowlin gripped a two-by-four with both hands like a baseball bat. Other than the life-and-death drama under the loft, the barn was empty. Even the barn swallows had vanished.

Lucie Dreadfulwater's eyes were black pools. It was as though her ancestors had come up from the depths and watched through her. The war women of the Cherokee na-

tion. Her eyes flickered back and forth from Nowlin to the door beyond him.

She had been cleaning the left front hoof of her quarter horse when Nowlin walked through the door. Lucie steadied the pattern between her knees and leaned into the horse's shoulder. Bent to her task, she hadn't recognized the man's silhouette until he spoke.

She straightened and slapped the horse on the rump, signaling him through the open door into the corral. He shied away from Nowlin then rushed past him.

Lucie held onto the knife. Perhaps she didn't even think about it. Perhaps it was just a tool that she had been using. Or perhaps even then she knew where she and Nowlin were headed.

Lucie's black hair fell down her back in a thick braid. Her body was short and compact, and she moved with the grace of a panther. Was it that athletic menace that made Nowlin pick up the board? It had been propped against a bale of hay, as though it waited for his hand to choose it.

Nowlin's face was creased like old shoe leather, and his mouth twisted down like the mask a storyteller dons when telling tales of war and disaster. He walked with a limp, but his arms were powerful. Or maybe it was the bulk of his jacket that made him seem muscular. It was unzipped, and his belly stretched his knit shirt and hung over his belt.

What secrets did he tell Lucie? What words sealed off their choices one by one and turned the skirmish into a life-and-death struggle?

As they circled each other, the acrid scent of desperation filled the air. Every sound was magnified in the fierce concentration of the moment: the soft pad of shoes on straw, the creak of rafters, the moan of wind through the eaves.

Nowlin fainted once with the board as though he was trying to slap the knife from Lucie's hand. She jumped back, and they resumed their dance.

Nowlin had the advantage of size; Lucie, agility. He rushed at her, swinging the board. Lucie tripped over a piece of broken harness on the barn floor, and the hoof knife plunged into Nowlin's groin, the full weight of Lucie's body behind it. Bright red blood spurted from his severed femoral artery.

Lucie rolled away from Nowlin, the knife still clenched in her hand. The man dropped to his knees onto the straw-carpeted floor, clutched the wound and screamed, "Bitch!"

The blood pulsed between his fingers like oil pumping from the ruined fissures of Oklahoma's red earth.

Their eyes locked for one long moment. Lucie's were dark and calculating; Nowlin's were panic-stricken. Nowlin was a registered nurse, and as his heart pushed blood out of the deep gash, he noted that he was dizzy and light-headed. Clinical symptoms of a fast-falling blood pressure.

The knowledge that he was dying charged Nowlin's panic. "For God's sake, help me!" His voice was hoarse and broken. He lay on the floor, his legs drawn up in a fetal position.

He saw Lucie drop the knife and fold her arms. "You think we're even now," Nowlin said. "You don't know the half of it. You and your damned Cherokee ancestors. Damn you all to hell."

While Lucie hugged herself, the pool of blood spread and Nowlin grew pale and quiet.

## 2

I sat in the publisher's office at the *Green Country Journal* drawing squares in my reporter's notebook while David Menckle, my boss, droned on the phone. What a messed up, pointless life. I had left the daily grind of a small-town newspaper only to end up as a staff writer for a second-rate regional magazine that always promised more than it delivered—in both pay and content.

The weather didn't help my mood. The cheery woman on KTUL out of Tulsa had promised Indian summer, yet when I had left the house that morning, clouds blanketed the sky and a cold wind wove its way through my fleece jacket. The low gray sky silhouetted barren hillsides. Along the highway south toward Tahlequah, the Cherokee County seat, gray-shingled shacks settled into the muddy fields, and trash decorated the ditches.

To those who grow up in Cherokee County, Oklahoma, it's like an imperfect baby you love because it's yours. Those of us who come here from other places find it grows on us, sometimes in slow increments, sometimes in quick bursts. My first quick burst was the green street signs in Tahlequah. The small town is the capital of the western Cherokees, and the street names are printed in their graceful alphabet in addition to the English translation. Goingsnake, Muskogee, Choctaw.

Then there's the state flower, the mistletoe—a parasite that grows high in the treetops—and the license plates, which modestly claim "Oklahoma is OK." What's not to love?



Well, for starters, there's David Menckle, who had moved here last year from Little Rock with his Junior League wife to start up the *Green Country Journal*. Menckle talked in a soft southern drawl and worked hard to fit into the good-old-boy network. He was a member of the Chamber of Commerce, the Kiwanis Club, the Echota Springs Golf Club and the American Legion. He's one of those guys who look at home in a Stetson and tie and can say "paradigm shift" without winking.

Our Friday morning meetings were an exercise in one-upmanship. I saw myself as the defender of journalistic integrity, and Menckle claimed to be the voice of fiscal responsibility. He automatically won the first round just by being the boss.

Today a third person disturbed the uneasy balance.

Menckle hung up the phone and motioned to the pale woman who waited outside the door.

"Viv Powers," he said to me, "meet Lisabeth Ellis, our new managing editor and designer. Y'all will have fun working together."

Menckle had told me the week before that he had hired her and that I hadn't been considered for the position because I was, in his words, "already doing what you do best." Right. Living on microwave popcorn and hoping my boyfriend Charley Pack would find some high-paying gigs for his band before the credit cards were maxed out.

I wondered if the fact that Lisabeth Ellis looked so young and fragile had anything to do with Menckle's hiring decision. Her long, blond hair, gathered in an elegant chignon at the nape of her slender neck, echoed the sophistication of her black linen dress. I didn't even own a dress.

She walked in the room and sat in a chair opposite me, her back ramrod straight. She inclined her head toward me in what might have been a nod. She looked as serious as a heart attack.

"We're all about fun here," I said, slumping deeper into the imitation leather chair. All Menckle cared about was creating

the proper showcase for his advertisers. All I cared about right now was paying my bills. Who knew what Lisabeth Ellis cared about.

Fun, right.

Menckle sat at his oversized walnut desk. A half-eaten glazed doughnut lay on a napkin near his elbow. We were probably the same age, but he seemed part of a different generation. He wore an expensive-looking gray suit, and the gel he used on his sandy hair left comb marks. His golfer's tan should have made him look healthy, but puffy eyes ruined the effect. Too much Johnny Walker Black Label on a daily basis.

He clutched my most recent offering, a story about adventure-canoeing on the nearby rain-swollen Illinois River. "Good stuff, Viv," he said. "Lisabeth will have fun putting this one on the page."

"I like this part." He settled his wire-rim glasses on his nose and read aloud. "Canoeing the flooded Illinois felt like riding the Screaming Eagle at Six Flags—full blast ahead, our skin stretched tight over our faces. I later learned we were traveling less than ten miles an hour."

He looked at me. "I like the way you set up the story, too. Tagging along after your friend Lucie Dreadfulwater. She's a bit of a celebrity around here."

Daredevil's apprentice, Charley had called me the morning Lucie and I canoed the flooded Illinois River. Lucie Dreadfulwater being, of course, the daredevil. In the few months we had known each other, Lucie and I had bonded while rappelling off the cliffs above Lake Tenkiller, making a tandem skydiving jump and bush-whacking on horseback in Arkansas.

Nevertheless, such actions should be undertaken by choice rather than for a magazine assignment. Choice somehow elevated risky behavior to a kind of heroism. At least it did in my own admittedly skewed ethical system.

"You'll have to get me life insurance before assigning another

story like that," I said to Menckle. "I'll kill myself on my own time."

Menckle smiled as though I had made a joke. "I thought you were an outdoors girl."

"Woman."

He didn't get it. Or he ignored me. Same difference.

"Your next assignment won't be as strenuous," he said. "In fact, imagine yourself digging through the dusty archives of the university library and the county courthouse."

Menckle paused, and when he felt the suspense was at its proper level, he said in a dramatic voice: "Unsolved mysteries of Cherokee County! People who disappeared without a trace! Lost treasures! Girl Scouts slaughtered! Our readers will eat it up."

I hated to admit it, but Menckle had a hot idea. Of course, by the time he was finished with it, the story would get the tabloid treatment, but it beat writing about the top ten barbecue joints in eastern Oklahoma.

"So who are they? Your slaughtered innocents and lost treasures?"

He handed me a sheet of paper that listed the usual crimes: The Girl Scout Murders, the Dora Doe Murder, the Little League Murder. Ho hum. They had all been solved to the satisfaction of the law. Did Menckle expect me to rewrite history? One item on the list jumped out at me: the disappearance of John Dreadfulwater.

"John Dreadfulwater? Is he any relation to Lucie?"

Menckle looked at his watch. "I'm the idea man," he said. "It's up to you to dig up the details. You can start with your history professor buddy, Dr. J.P. Durant. He probably knows about every crime that was ever committed in these parts."

"I'll hop right on it, chief," I said. If he noticed my lack of enthusiasm, he didn't show it.

### 3

I can't remember the first time I saw Lucie Dreadfulwater. As is the case with most people we come to know, the transition from stranger to friend is an almost invisible process.

I probably noticed her at one of the Cherokee storytelling sessions. The Cherokee Nation works at keeping its culture alive by hosting a variety of events: ceremonial dances, corn stalk shoots, powwows and art exhibits. When I moved to Tahlequah, I was fascinated by this culture that seemed so foreign, even though it had flourished here long before my own ancestors had set foot on this continent.

At a journalism conference, I once heard politician Pat Schroeder say thank goodness there were some Native Americans with a very liberal immigration policy.

In any event, Lucie Dreadfulwater and her traditional Cherokee tales were in great demand. The Cherokee Nation had named her a "Cherokee National Treasure," an honor the tribe reserves for those who work to keep its culture alive.

My first clear memories of her began several months ago, when David Menckle assigned a story about her for the first issue of the magazine. After that, we had the occasional lunch, and then as we came to know one another, a bond grew between us that seemed like blood shared.

It's not surprising that I sought her advice before writing a story that might involve her family. I thought of my visit to Lucie as a courtesy. She was my friend, and if I was going to write

about the disappearance of one of her relatives, she should be the first to know.

The Dreadfulwater house lay on the south side of Tahlequah at the foot of Park Hill Mountain. It was an imposing two-story Victorian, built of hand-quarried Arkansas limestone, painstakingly hauled by wagon and mule more than a hundred years ago. The arched windows were topped with carved keystones, and a wide veranda stretched around three sides of the house.

Lucie's parents had fled the old house for the central-heat-and-air comfort of a new split-level ranch down the road. But Lucie kept the family fires burning.

When I pulled into the circular driveway of the Southern Gothic Mausoleum, as I privately called it, Lucie's Explorer was parked in front of the house, and behind the Explorer was an unfamiliar blue pickup. A pang of disappointment hit me. I wanted to talk to her alone. Since I was here, I thought I would at least say hello and arrange for a time to come back.

When I rang the doorbell, feet pattered across the hardwood floor, and a barking dog hit the door. I peered through the lace curtains and saw Lucie's golden cocker spaniel, Custer.

Other than the dog, no one came to the door. I followed the porch around to the east side of the house and went down broad steps to a brick walk that wandered through the lawn.

Under the tall sugar maples and bur oaks that spread limb-to-limb across the large backyard, the light was like gun-metal gauze. The bricks led through an iron gate to a faded barn. When I entered the enclosure, a chestnut-colored horse whinnied nervously and trotted to the far side.

Lucie stood in the doorway of the barn, her hands gripping the doorjamb. As a storyteller, drama was her job, but I had never seen her like this. Her face was a changing tapestry of emotions: surprise, fear, indecision, anger.

"What is it?" Some extra sense drew me to the dark interior of the barn.

She grabbed my arm. "Don't go in there."

"What's wrong?" Images raced through my mind. The horses. Her daughters. Please, God, not Rachel or Anna.

"What the hell are you doing here? You shouldn't be here, dammit."

"Lucie, tell me what's going on."

She tried to pull me away from the barn, but I resisted, and we stood toe-to-toe, staring at one another.

The words came like small explosions. "I killed him."

"What?"

"I have to call the sheriff's office, but I..." She paused. "There's something I need you to do for me first."

"Is he in...in there?" I gestured to the dark throat of the barn. Even though it was midday, the interior seemed dim and sinister.

She nodded.

I now saw that blood was splattered like paint across the front of her denim shirt. An ugly gash puckered her left hand.

"Who is it?"

She hesitated so long I thought it must be Truman.

Women's friendship is rooted in confession, and Lucie and I had shared many confessions. Especially about men.

Lucie and her husband, Truman Gourd, for instance, fought constantly. Usually about money. Truman was poverty-conscious, Lucie said, while she had been raised in wealth in which the definition of poverty is cleaning your own house. But Lucie hadn't inherited the family fortune yet, and money was tight.

Not long after I met her, she told me she had decided to leave Truman. He had yelled at her once too often. She went to the bank, cashed in a CD and walked away with a thousand dollar bill. That night, while they shared a bottle of after-dinner wine, Lucie pulled out a cigarette lighter and lit the bill. It burned with a smoky cedar smell, and as it was consumed, the bill curled to cover Grover Cleveland's face. Truman went crazy, she said.

He tried to snatch it away, and failing that, he gave her a black eye.

For some reason they had stayed together, despite Truman's drinking and violence and despite Lucie's baiting.

So now I asked, "Truman?"

A ghost of a smile crossed her face. "Not this time," she said. "Someone you probably don't know—Dale Nowlin."

I had never heard the name. "But what happened?"

"He came to discuss a business deal and ended up attacking me." Lucie held out her slashed hand as evidence. "I'm lucky to be alive."

"Are you sure he's dead?" I almost whispered the question, as though he might hear me.

"He's dead."

I pushed past her restraining hand into the barn. Next to the hay manger, a man lay on his side, his knees pressed to his chest. He was very still.

It's strange what you notice in such situations. It's as though your brain can't deal with the whole picture so it just accepts small pieces. I focused on Dale Nowlin's hair. It was gray and had the synthetic texture of doll's hair. I had a crazy impulse to touch it.

Trails of blood led from his body like a medieval map of doom. A pair of flies landed on a red pool. I stopped before getting any closer, realizing I had already seen too much.

Lucie pulled me back to the light of the doorway. Her makeup was smudged under her eyes, giving her a bruised, vulnerable look. She spoke very fast, and I had trouble keeping up.

"You were sent here today for a reason," she said. "I tried to do it myself, but I can't. Truman took Rachel to a horse show in Wilburton. They won't be back until tomorrow. Who knows where Anna is. My father is too frail. You're the only one who can save me."

"You need a drink, Lucie. Let's go get a drink and figure this

out.”

She grabbed my shoulders and shook me. “You’re not listening, Viv. I need your help.”

“Anything,” I said. I meant it in the raw emotion of the moment. The wind had picked up again, and it seemed like a creature that whispered secrets and pushed us toward its own blind ends.

“I may be arrested, and someone needs to make sure Custer and Cricket are fed tonight.”

Cricket was the chestnut-colored horse. I had forgotten his name until Lucie reminded me. “I can do that.”

“There’s something else.”

Lucie picked up a two-by-four from the ground. One end was wrapped in plastic. She handed it to me plastic end first, stared into my eyes and said, “Hit me.”

Her eyes were dark pools. I said, “Christ, Lucie.”

She thrust her injured hand toward me, forcing me to look. “How do you think it’s going to look to the sheriff if I claim self-defense with this puny injury? Remember what happened when Sarah was raped?”

I stared at the massive bulk of Park Hill Mountain, not really seeing it. I was remembering how Sarah had been alone in her shop after dark when a man came in the back door, held a knife to her throat and raped her. The man who was arrested and charged with the crime said that Sarah had been a willing participant, and the defense attorney did his best to put her on trial. Because she had suffered no physical injuries and because there were no witnesses to the crime, the rapist had walked. Sarah closed her store, returned to her parents’ home and withdrew from the world.

Oh, yes, I remembered Sarah.

The board was about the length of a baseball bat. I hefted it, looked at Lucie and dropped it on the ground.

“I can’t.”



Lucie picked it up, shoved it back at me and said, "There's no other way. My life is in your hands."

The legal repercussions of what we were doing didn't even register at that moment. All I could focus on was the image of wood striking flesh. I felt sick to my stomach.

Lucie's entire body grew tighter as though she were gathering herself. "Who joined you in that stupid canoeing stunt?" she shouted. "Who pulled you out when we were dumped in the river? Who tore you loose from that tree that was drowning you? Did that hurt?"

I nodded, conscious of the bruise in the middle of my back—the result of our wild ride on the river a few days earlier.

"Did I care? No. I just wanted to save your life. That's all I'm asking of you. Save my life!"

I had never seen Lucie so angry, and it triggered anger inside me. Fear, too. I tightened my grip on the board and slapped her upper arm with it.

Triumph flashed in her eyes. "Not there," she said. "Hit me on the back of the head."

I tapped her head, a knot of dread growing in me.

"Harder!"

I drew the board back and swung. The wood connected with a sickening thud. Lucie sprawled on the ground, and I dropped the board as though it had struck me.

She put one hand to her head and rose to her knees, then, slowly, to her feet. I should have helped her up, but I felt rooted in place.

"Thank you, Viv," she said in a suddenly calm voice. "Now go. Please."

I hesitated, unwilling to leave her alone with this disaster.

"Just go!"