

True Creature

© 2019 by Steve Zell

Chapter 1

Paradise

Once you come to believe you have nothing more to lose, you'll lose one more thing.

The spring in your step. A few degrees of motion in your fingers, your knees, a measure of clarity in your vision. The loss is rarely sudden, more often something you become aware of gradually.

And, little by little, you'll begin to realize that at one time, youth firmly in hand, you lived in paradise.

But you had no idea you'd been there until you looked back.

And now you wonder if others who began this journey with you knew just where you were. You realize that many must have. They knew, and they took full advantage of it.

But for you paradise wasn't to be found in the "here and now." It was only to be enjoyed once you'd circumvented all the pretty traps and snares of the present.

Back then you dreamed of, and lived for, the future.

Paradise.

But every day you lost a little more.

And finally, weary of walking toward a future that seemed ever more uncertain; you decided you had walked long enough, far enough.

And only when you were tired and old did the truth become clear...that this very time and this very place...

This is what you sacrificed paradise for...

- Dark Warrior

Arizona

May 2, 1968

A breath! Air whistled down his sandpaper throat; another rattling and painful breath. *Awake.* His eyes were dry, his sight smoky, motes like large winged bats swirled across the narrow tunnel of his vision. *Cold.* His powder blue blanket, the one with the cowboy hats and lassos was gone.

Where was his bookshelf filled with picture books? Where was his fielder's mitt?

He saw that shelf now at the far wall of the room. But who moved it?

Where were the curtains printed with drawings of other kids playing – figures that often scared him at night...*because sometimes those kids seem to move...to really play.*

The windows on the south side of his room were gone; only one thin window high up that far wall and fogged white.

This isn't my room. It's not my bed!

"Ma-" A cry for his mom couldn't escape his parched, cracked lips. His tongue was a leathery, useless thing in his mouth.

The hand he raised was fragile, the fingers long and white with knobby knuckles, barely more than bones with skin; *not my hand.*

This isn't me.

A brittle scream that couldn't possibly have come from him and then...darkness.

He dreamed.

No. *He remembered...*

June 2, 1953

Choking dust. Deep sand sucked at his sneakers, slowed him down, weakened him. But he kept pumping his arms, kept running. The full moon led him up and away from the others, guided him past the cactus and the sharp, unstable rocks. But it couldn't *hide* him because the moon led *them* too.

They'd seen him, and he had no idea where he was running to but the lake. *And then what?* What would he do? Swim away from them?

He had never run this hard. He was hungry and cold – with nothing inside to fuel him but terror.

The boy's legs pistoned and pumped and finally, failed him. He wasn't fast enough; *he wasn't strong enough to escape.* He dropped to the sand.

The stench of decay, something dead nearby – a bird, a jack-rabbit...

"This way!"

Tommy! His friend stood atop a small mountain of boulders well-guarded by Cholla, what they called "jumping cactus" - the *worst* cactus of all – because Cholla needles were so long, so sharp, they were in your skin before you even knew you'd touched them.

"Through here! This way!"

Tommy waved his arm toward the awful stand of Cholla.

Joey stood, wiping the sandy snot from his face. He couldn't make it through that cactus. *No way.* But he could hear the pounding footfalls behind him. He had to go somewhere! In the blink of the eye, Tommy was gone.

Why did he come here, what did he expect to see?

Nothing like what he'd seen tonight, nothing like this!

He heard his brother shout, *"Joey, stop!"*

His brother would be angrier than anyone if he caught him.

Tears poured down Joey's cheeks. He sucked his lips into his teeth. *And ran for his life.*

Pain slammed his ribs. His fevered eyes saw only stars, and then...Chuck Webb, nearly twice Joey's age and massive - the fetid odor of sweat and something the boy was far too young to know.

"You didn't see nothin'! You hear me? You didn't see nothin'!"

The Lily Murders

May, 1968

Phoenix, Arizona

Charlie?"

Melissa Webb swirled the plastic sword within her frosted glass and stabbed another salty olive, plucking it from the bottom. The martini was sour and not nearly dirty enough. *Damn it.* Vermouth should only *touch* the glass, be swirled for a bit and dumped out. It was the olive juice, the salt she savored.

"Charlie..."

Charlie knew better. What was he thinking?

She slipped from her sandals, relishing the feel of cool marble beneath her feet as she crossed the kitchen floor to the patio.

Beyond the sliding door, rectangles of aqua light from the pool danced along the terrazzo, painted the wrought-iron benches, the meticulously clipped lawn, and high stone wall that protected their yard and their pool.

And there was Charlie himself. King of his castle. Lord of his pool, his rotund form distorted by the sheets of water sluicing down the faux rocks above him, those beefy white feet dangling in the churning water. His martini rested safely just beyond the flow.

Melissa downed the last of her far-too-sour martini, slipped the robe from her shoulders and dove naked into the warm pool. Her breath slipped away in silver bubbles as she glided effortlessly across its length.

Charlie had been a varsity fullback when they'd met. So powerful, *so handsome.*

That was fifteen years ago. And here he was now...

Things had changed...Charlie had definitely changed. He'd grown fat and bald. To be fair, neither of them had lived up to their physical expectations she supposed. She'd miscarried the child who had tied them inextricably together back then and picked up thirty pounds of sadness herself from the experience...

But she loved big Chuck today the same way she always had.

Through the churning surface, through the bubbles, there were those big feet, the sunrise tattoo on his ankle glowed a garish purple in the aquamarine pool lights.

She clasped his tree trunk ankles in her hands and began to pull herself up to him.

His feet slipped from the ledge. Charlie's body toppled headlong into the pool.

Ross Tennet worked *so hard.*

Jo Anne had cleaned the Burl & Tennet Agency office nightly for ten years, she'd long ago stopped counting the times she'd found Mister Tennet asleep at his desk.

She knew he had children. She knew he'd been divorced – at least twice. Outside of that, she knew he lived only for the agency.

He was a quiet man, but a good man as far as Jo Anne knew. He smiled often.

She clicked off the vacuum before she made her way down the hall past the stone waterfall that trickled softly, beside his office. There was no need to wake him. The man was meticulous. Anything she found there she could handle just fine with a dust cloth and pan.

The clock near the bookshelf read 8:13 PM.

At 8:25 PM Jo Anne had swept, dusted, and tidied everything but Mister Tennet's desk. It wasn't until she reached for his empty water glass that she realized Mister Tennet wasn't breathing.

-=-=-=-=-=-

Los Angeles, California

“What the fuck?”

Sara Poole raised her gloved hands. The rotund, naked form on the examination table before her settled slowly onto his back.

“Is that a rhetorical question?” Ben glanced up from his clipboard.

“This wasn't an overdose...” she said. “I'm thinking murder.”

Ben shook his head, and read the report back to her again. “The deceased, Richard Bilken, was found in bed by his roommate with a needle in his arm. He's a known heroin addict.” He added, “with an arrest and conviction record longer than your girlfriend's clit.”

Sara, a good four inches taller than Ben, her body molded by years of competitive diving and martial arts, smiled benignly at this attempt at humor from the squirrel-like twerp, as she usually did. In the macabre world of forensic pathology, you found humor where you could.

“I'm thinking he was drowned and placed.”

Ben tilted his chin toward the bags of clothing their customer had come in with, freshly bagged on the counter awaiting tags.

“His PJ's are dry.”

“Come on. Give me a hand here.”

Checking a customer's back for signs of trauma was a necessary part of the Medical Examiner's job, the “heavy lifting” part. Sara was strong enough, and with her natural leverage, a good steady pull of the arm was usually enough to roll a corpse, but Bilken was a large man. A large, dead weight.

“Take his shoulder. One. Two...three.”

With a gurgle and a moan, the dead man rolled toward her, a gory mix of water and blood sputtered from his open mouth and nostrils into the gutters...and just kept coming. Two liters or more by the time he was done.

“Again...I'm thinking murder. By drowning.”