

Flash Point

Speed B. Collard III



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One

As soon as he burst through the large double doors, the smoke hit him like a diesel locomotive. The acid pall stung his eyes and burned his throat. Ashes swirled around him and overhead; the September sun glowered red like one of those dissolving tablets used to color Easter eggs. Luther Wright pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and held it over his nose.

“Whew,” he said. “It’s even worse than yesterday.”

His friend Chet coughed. “Yeah. The winds must be blowing from the north.”

All around them, students spilled like whitewater down the front steps of Heartwood High School, eager to put distance between themselves and the school day. Almost all of them, though, paused to look up at the eerie orange-black clouds overhead. Their faces showed that even in Heartwood, fires like this were a major event.

The flames had been burning since the beginning of August. Ignited by Montana’s driest summer in more than

Speed B. Collard III

a decade, dozens of fires had erupted throughout the western half of the state. The Rocky Gulch blaze, fifteen miles north of Heartwood, had by itself charred 120,000 acres—an area larger than the sprawling city of Denver, Colorado. The inferno had been burning more than three weeks and Luther could barely remember the last time he'd seen blue sky. Today seemed the worst yet.

“Well, at least they cancelled afternoon football practice,” Chet said as he and Luther walked toward the bike racks. “Me and some of the other guys thought we'd go down to Sky Burger and hang out. You want to come?”

Luther was tempted. The year before, he'd also been on the football team—a solid freshman linebacker and, with his high-intensity play, a shoo-in to make varsity. But to everyone's shock, he'd decided not to go out this year. Already he could feel a distance growing between him, Chet, and the other players.

“Ah, I'd better not,” Luther mumbled, reluctant to disappoint his friend. “I've got to get out to Kay's to take care of the birds.”

Suddenly, a brawny Neanderthal with a crimson crew cut bulldozed his way through to them. “You and those friggin' birds!” the hulk said. “What kind of idiot takes care of pests anyway?”

Luther's jaw set. Warren Juddson was about the last person he wanted to have a conversation with. Warren was the third of seven kids in the Juddson clan, and, like the rest of his family, trouble followed him like smoke. His oldest brother Jack had landed in the state penitentiary at Deer Lodge for assault with a deadly. The second oldest,

Flask Point

Raymond, had somehow kept a job at the mill with their father, Knot Juddson—when the mill wasn't shut down or Ray wasn't sleeping it off in County.

Warren did his best to follow the family tradition. He'd already been suspended for fighting once this year, and rumor had it he was failing every class but metal shop and phys ed. Everyone knew that if it weren't for Warren's bulk and ferocity as a defensive tackle, the school would have booted him long ago.

Before this year, Luther hadn't had any particular problem with Warren. Since Luther had decided not to go out for football, however, Warren had been getting in his face on a regular basis. Luther was sick of it.

"Hawks and eagles aren't pests," he told Warren. "They're predators. They eat pests like mice and rats—and Juddsons."

"I don't care what you call 'em," Warren said, stepping closer. "I call 'em target practice."

A couple of other football players laughed, and Luther knew he couldn't just let this one slide. He straightened up and looked Warren in the eyes. Warren had thirty pounds on him, but Luther moved faster. Besides being on the football team, he had also gone out for wrestling the year before. If it came to blows, Luther figured Warren could probably take him, but then again, he might not. He stared down the bigger boy until he saw the flicker of doubt in his eyes.

Warren stepped back and raised an imaginary gun to his shoulder. "Just don't bring one of those birds in range of my 12-gauge—or *boom!*"

Speed B. Collard III

“Give it a rest, Warren,” Chet said.

Warren and Luther glared at each other for another second. Then Warren grinned.

“Aw, I’m just jerkin’ you around,” he said, his smile exposing two gaping holes where teeth should have been.

“Well, go jerk somewhere else,” Luther said, feeling the adrenaline pump through him.

“It’ll be a relief, birdbrain,” Warren said, shoving off with four others from the football team.

“Douche-bag,” Chet muttered.

“Yeah,” said Luther. “Does that moron ever think before he opens his mouth? If I had to choose between Warren and a raptor, I’d pick a bird any day. Raptors at least serve some purpose in the world.”

“Maybe you know that and I know it, but don’t forget you’re in Heartwood, Montana,” Chet said. “Some people around here, if they see a hawk or eagle or falcon, are going to shoot first and ask questions later. Admit it, Luth. Before you met Kay, you didn’t know a thing about raptors, let alone care about them.”

“That’s not true.”

Chet looked at him, eyebrow cocked.

“Well...maybe a little true,” Luther conceded.

“Besides, Warren’s just trying to rub your face in it because you’re not on the team anymore. It makes him feel superior.”

“I know.” But Luther also knew there was more to the bad blood between him and Warren than Chet or anyone else understood. He bent down and began dialing the combination on his bike lock.

Flask Point

“Hey, Luth?”

He straightened back up. “Yeah?”

“Uh, any chance you’ll join the wrestling team again? I know you said you didn’t want to, but I talked to Coach and it’s not too late. We could really use you in the 152-pound division. If you started training now, you’d be ready for the first meet.”

Especially after quitting football, Luther had often thought about going out for wrestling again. Most of his friends from the football team were also wrestlers. But the incident at the end of last year’s football season had pretty much killed his interest in sports—any sports.

“Thanks, Chet, but—”

Suddenly, Luther’s eyes focused on a girl in jeans and a turquoise shirt walking down the school’s front steps.

He nudged his friend. “Hey, Chet, do you know that girl?”

Chet followed Luther’s gaze. The girl carried a green backpack and wore her reddish brown hair tied back in a ponytail. Luther had seen her once before, but didn’t know her name—a small miracle in Heartwood, where you couldn’t empty the trash without a full account of it showing up in the local newspaper.

“Oh, her,” Chet said. “Her name’s Alexandra or Amanda or something like that. She just moved here from Billings. Her dad’s the new Fish and Wildlife warden. Why?”

Luther shrugged. “Just curious. Anyway, I’d better get going.”

Chet nodded. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see you then.”



Luther tied his handkerchief bandit-style around his nose and mouth, mounted his rusting ten-speed, and pedaled east on the old highway, away from school. Technically, with a Stage 2 Air Alert, you weren't supposed to even be outside, but no one let that stop them around here. In Montana, people did what they had to, forest fires or not.

As Luther rode, half a dozen cars and pickup trucks passed him, mostly filled with seniors whooping and celebrating the cancellation of after-school sports practices. Luther knew that most of them were headed to Ambush Point to drink beer. He did his best to ignore them. After about a mile, he turned right, at a sign marked "Elk Flats Road." He bounced across the Montana Rail Link tracks and arrived home a few minutes later.

Luther's mom called their white and green house a "work-in-progress." His mom and stepfather Vic bought it when they moved to Heartwood twelve years ago. It had only one bedroom then, but every time they'd scraped together a little money, his stepdad added on a room or pantry or something. Luther figured that in another twenty years, there'd be so many rooms and passageways, they could call it the Heartwood House of Mystery and sell tickets to tourists off the interstate.

A '96 red Neon sat next to the house when he rolled to a stop. Even before his feet touched ground, his Border collie Roadkill barked and came racing toward him from the field next door. Luther leaned his bike against the

Flask Point

garage and stumbled as the dog wriggled against his legs.

Luther crouched and pulled the handkerchief down to his neck. "How are you, crazy dog?"

Roadkill licked both sides of Luther's face and submitted to being petted for exactly five seconds. Then he jumped back and stared, full of expectation.

Luther laughed. "We'll go in a minute. I've got to put my stuff down and change."

Roadkill followed Luther into the house, where they found his stepsister Brenda and her girlfriend, Samantha, or "Sam," the owner of the red Neon out front.

"There he is," Brenda teased. "Heartwood's original rebel."

"Hey, Luther," Sam called. "What's happening?"

Brenda and Sam were both seniors and two of the most popular girls at Heartwood High. Besides banking some serious good looks, Brenda had made varsity cheerleader for the past two years and Sam headed the drill team. The two were sprawled on opposite ends of the living room couch, each holding a can of beer, while Oprah blared from the idiot set.

Luther shifted his backpack from one shoulder to the other. "Vic's going to kill you if he finds out you're drinking his beer."

"He won't," Brenda said. "If he ever gets home from fighting fires, he'll be too tired to notice anything. Besides, we'll get him a new six-pack."

"Come pop a can with us, Luth," Sam said.

"No thanks."

"What's the matter? Last year, you were a party animal. You too good for us now?"

Sneed B. Collard III

“I’ve just got other things to do.”

Brenda shook her head at Sam. “I try to bring him up right, but it’s no use.”

Luther couldn’t help cracking a smile as he led Roadkill to his room. Brenda tried to be a good big sister. When Luther was younger, he’d idolized Brenda as the coolest person on earth with her hip, beer-drinking friends and endless parties. He’d always felt proud when she invited him to do things or introduced him to her friends at school. When Luther had become a freshman a year ago, he’d launched full-throttle into the partying scene himself.

Not this year. Now it felt like he and Brenda—he and *everyone*—were orbiting different planets.

Luther flung his pack on his bed, then changed into his work clothes—old jeans and a plaid shirt, each stained with bird poop, and a pair of hand-me-down work boots that should have been in a museum. He went in the kitchen, fixed himself a bowl of cereal, and took it to the living room, where he plopped down in his stepdad’s ratty recliner.

Sam set her beer can on the coffee table. “Going to see the birds again?”

Luther nodded and shoved a spoonful of Wheat-Os into his mouth.

“Those birds have gone to his head,” Brenda told Sam. “He’s decided he likes them better than people.”

“Is that true?” Sam asked. “Do you like birds better than people?”

Flask Point

Luther took another bite. “Some people,” he said, shooting his sister a smart-assed look. “Some times.”

“Ooh!” Sam said, bursting into laughter.

“You better watch it, little brother,” Brenda taunted. “You’re still not too old for me to take you across my knee!”

“That sounds fun,” said Sam. “Can I help?”

“Naw, he’s wearing his smelly bird clothes. Besides, Luther isn’t interested in girls,” Brenda said.

Sam’s face suddenly grew conspiratorial. “Luther, you’re not in the closet, are you?”

Brenda almost choked on her beer, and Luther’s face turned cherry red. “No,” he stammered.

“So what’s wrong with girls, then?” Sam asked.

How could he explain it? He liked girls plenty. They just didn’t seem to like *him*—at least not the ones he was interested in. Luther didn’t consider himself bad-looking. He had a decent build, and his dark hair and deep-set eyes gave him a sort of gawky Johnny Depp look. It was just that he didn’t stand out. Even when he’d been on the football team, he never seemed to draw a glance from the really good-looking girls. And he never could think of much to say to the more interesting ones—the brainy girls or those with some personality.

“It doesn’t matter,” he told Sam, getting up from the recliner. He walked his cereal bowl in to the kitchen and then headed toward the front door. “Come on, Roadkill. Let’s get to work.”