

## BURNING IMAGE

### A Story in Three Parts

#### TRAVIS

He eased the pickup down the tractor path and parked along the brook where he sat on the roots of a tree growing on the bank. They called it The Spider Tree because half the roots extended over the water before turning down into the sandy bottom. He'd sat on them as a child and later on when he needed to be alone. When they lived farther up the Branch, Malvina would walk him down here with Caleb in the backpack and she'd nurse Caleb while he bounced on the roots and teased the water with his feet. When they were old enough to fish she showed them how to push a worm over a hook and up the shank. Half the worm would hang down for the fish to suck and you had to wait before pulling up so the fish would take the hanging part and then the hook. In the spring they'd catch baby trout the size of the fingers he imagined tracing circles on Julia's belly ever since that day she came out in a bathing suit.

The tree roots still held when he bounced up and down, but today the usual respite provided by childhood memories was interrupted by the roar of a motor as a truck sped by on the high road with its cab light spinning, a first responder for sure. The sight of the truck as a consequence for what he'd done caused him to bounce harder, and now a town pumper appeared with a honking siren that struck him like a physical blow and soon they'd come from other towns with more pumpers and EMT trucks and the volunteers in slickers and breathing tanks and helmets. They almost never arrived early enough to save anything and by the time they found water they might as well have pissed on the flames, and even though Julia had a pond, the barn was probably lost. He'd been an idiot to believe her, mistaken to think he was more than he was, not just paid help but somebody to fill a gap in her life.

The fire didn't have to be set either because hay smoldered by itself especially when baled a little green and stored under the roof he'd tried to fix. You didn't need to be a professional firebug to fool Ted Scofield, just push a twine aside and jam a pry bar into a bale with spaces between the weed stems and do this while she was out with Betty Ridell in their boots and riding crops like back in England. Drop a match in there and let the stems catch and okay burn some hair off your arm where Ted would never think of looking then close the bale because you're not really sure what you want. If it catches it catches, so maybe if they hooked up to the pond right away he wouldn't have this feeling of his insides being ripped out like knotted rope.

He knew about her before they met. He was running the baler when she came galloping along the Branch Road on that gray Arabian with its tail up like a flag and her own pony tail flying behind so the whole outfit looked like two horses, one on top of the other. She'd come up from New York with the gray and then took a rescue horse from that pervert who moved down from Maine. So now she had two horses and a place on Newfane Hill that needed fixing up. She would need hay and help and he imagined a place for himself even before they exchanged a word. When she stopped and tried to wave him down he figured she wanted hay, but she'd have to see Malvina for that and he didn't stop or even wave back because he didn't want to seem too eager. So after she spoke to Malvina he showed up at her place in the dump truck.

He honked the horn and when she didn't appear he got out and looked around. The barn roof sagged on one side and a sign on the door said, *Forest Park Stables, Ride at Your Own Risk*. The horses were nosing wisps of hay inside the pen. One was the gray and the other, smaller and white, was the rescue horse, showing ribs and hanging back. He leaned over the fence and whistled and the horses stepped up, the gray first, the white a little spooked until he whistled again and they both came up and nudged for a treat so he let them smell the sweat on the inside of his cap, and when they began to nibble at the cap he pulled it away. He called out, "Hello in there!" and when nobody answered he went back and unlocked the release bar. One pull and the bales would fall and the rest would be her problem.

"I'm coming and don't dump that hay!"

She appeared at the door in a two-piece bathing suit, her skin wet as if she'd just been swimming and he realized about the pond behind the house. She was skinny and so white her skin looked transparent. Older for sure and a little spooky like that white horse as if they were images of each other, not young like she looked that day with her pony tail flying, not exactly blonde like he thought but a kind of white he didn't have a name for. Not ashamed either to come out in a bathing suit and with a rack of stomach muscles above the bottom piece. When she stepped into the sunlight his eye fell upon a curl of lemon colored hair spun around her navel before plunging straight down. The sight roiled him for its brazen display and the weakness he felt before a female trick so aggressive that he was tempted to just dump the bales and go home. He'd tell Caleb what he'd seen and Malvina could come for the check.

She signed for him to wait, then went back inside and reappeared in jeans and a loose tee shirt covering that yellowish swirl that continued to register as if time had stopped from the moment she appeared. She held out a bag of potato chips.

"Take some, you need salt on a hot day."

He ate the chips one at a time so they wouldn't break up. Something here was beyond his expectations. She was extra friendly with the chips and the open way she presented herself. Rubbing his chin, he realized he hadn't shaved and that bits of chaff stuck to his neck and arms from loading the truck.

"You need water too," she said. "Throwing bales around is hard work."

She came back with a jar of ice water. He drank slowly, not wanting to spill it and betray the hope for something that might happen in the future. Finished drinking, he gave back the jar then returned to the rear of the truck and gripped the release.

"Can you back up to the barn?" She gestured toward a hay elevator. "Then we can get the bales upstairs. Is your help included?"

"Hay won't keep dry under a roof like that."

"I can cover it later. Can the two of us do it? Is that extra? I'll pay you extra. What do you get an hour?"

He said, "I don't know," and that was the truth. What was he worth? His only measure was the road crew job he'd lost, minimum wage for the first year.

"If you have another job I'll pay what they pay. How's that?"

"My job right now is haying."

"So how much do you want?"

"Just pay me whatever."

She swung open the gate and he backed up, realizing he could have asked for a definite amount but this way might be better. He stopped at the elevator and said, "Let's get it done."

They sent a dozen bales up to the second floor then carried them to the far end of the barn where the roof was in better shape even though daylight still showed between the shingles. They worked in the heat and barn dust until the job was done and it was nearly five o'clock when she brought out a checkbook and two bottles of Switchback.

"It's beer thirty," she said. "You know about that, don't you?"

She might have asked the meaning of bacon and eggs. This was another sign, and as she popped open the bottles he studied her thin arms wrinkled at the elbows and biceps the size of baseballs. That she looked both old and young only fed his imagination. Old for experience, old for doing strange things down in New York or up on Grimes Hill with that guy from Maine. Why else would she come out like that with her

belly in the sun? Old but strong, and for the last two hours she'd matched him bale for bale and never slacked off. She told him the arm strength came from holding back horses and mucking stalls in a New York stable.

“Is that where the sign on the barn comes from?”

“Three years down there until they went out of business. That’s where I got the Arabian.”

“A horse like that costs quite a bit.”

“That’s Candy, she’s my sweetie, and let’s just say she wasn’t cheap.”

“How about the white one?”

“Loki’s an Icelandic, and I got him from a man who couldn’t afford to feed him.”

“You know what happened with him.”

“What they found has nothing to do with a horse he couldn’t feed.”

“The sheriff was up there.”

“But the stuff wasn’t his. He claimed somebody else left it on his property.”

“Whatever.”

“That’s right, whatever. Let’s just say neither one of these animals were cheap.”

He interpreted the remark as an invitation to secrets she would reveal if things worked out, and with the chips and the beer and the bathing suit and what she might have paid for the horses—something other than money—it wasn’t so crazy to imagine that his fingers like those quivering trout pulled from the brook might trace that golden swirl to its destination. And drinking beer with her, lifting the bottles together as they'd lifted the bales, confident from an alcoholic push, he figured that even he, Travis Forrett, unemployed and broke and without her education, just might work his way into a job and even a home and something he'd never had before; and he imagined his fingers alive on her belly and his body flecked with chaff tangled with hers in ways she would direct just as she convinced him to help with the bales.

His eye traveled to the house with missing clapboards and a barn door dangling on loose hinges, and from there to a fancy pickup and horse trailer.

"You've got a nice place here," he offered.

"It needs work."

Pointing at the truck and trailer with his beer he said, "That's a pretty fancy rig."

"I worked for that."

"I never said you didn't."

"But maybe you were thinking I have money because I'm from New York as if you want to hold it against me."

"I wasn't thinking that. I didn't mean anything."

"Just to clear things up, I worked down there full time and saved up my money. Everything you see here I paid for and I'm easy to get along with. Tell me how much to write the check for."

"Just the bales."

"How about your labor?"

"You bought me a beer."

"I can't do that, you don't work for free. Besides that, we already agreed to pay you. Will you take minimum wage?"

"No problem."

"I could use some help around here. What kind of work do you do?"

"Just about anything."

"Can you fix that roof?"

"I can try."

JULIA

She should have listened to her horse friend, Betty, who told her all about the Forretts, how they hayed every field along the Branch, Travis and Caleb, Robert the father, and the mother, a big woman named Malvina who could throw two bales at a time onto the flatbed. The family lived in a sugar house when the boys were born and the story ran that Robert saw the chimney plugged with creosote and they decided not to clean it out. So after the house burned down they collected insurance and built a bigger place up in Wardsboro. The boys were like night and day, the young one had a steady job but the older one never settled. He'd been fired from the road crew after swinging a shovel at Ted Scofield and his fist fights with Robert during haying season were as perennial as the hay they cut and sold. There wasn't a summer when Travis and his father didn't get into it with Robert calling him lazy for daydreaming and it was lucky Malvina was there to pull them apart at least until the next cutting. Betty said they were basically good people and that everybody had stories about those old Vermont families, hinting they were all inbred and a little bit off.

She set these rumors aside because Travis was a young man she could use, simple as that. He seemed like a hard enough worker. She'd been riding on the Branch when she heard the *clack-clack* of the baler and he appeared further out in the field. Heat shimmered over the tractor canopy as the machine threw out compact bales which tottered and then fell over and lay in yellow-green blocks and she imagined her name on each one. Attentive to his work, Travis took off his cap and ran one hand through his hair to let the breeze cool him off, looking back to check the baler and forward to keep straight along the windrows. He never noticed her.

Unsure of himself with the chips and the ice water, so maybe a little slow when it came to asserting himself, but he was also a man without a job who would appreciate the work and settle for minimum wage which was all she could afford. She'd been watching from inside when he gave the horses his cap to sniff. He'd be gentle with them and that was important. But why did he ignore her that day when he was running the baler? Maybe he didn't stop because he resented people like her because he thought they had money, which she had, but that didn't mean she was rich. Okay, she had enough for the rest of her life but only if she was careful. And maybe she was a little testy about her

background and a little too bold when she came out in the bathing suit just to show him she wasn't some Girl Scout. What the hell, she didn't have much left anyway. It was a hot day and she'd taken a dip and didn't want to keep him waiting because he might dump the bales and leave. Then with the chips and the beer thirty she wanted to show him she was just a regular person. How could she know that a few beer thirties later he would stare into his Switchback bottle for the words he needed and say, "That first day," and stop dead.

"That first day what?"

"What you showed me when I brought the hay."

"In my bathing suit?"

"More or less."

"I'm just a stick."

"You were more than that."

"And therefore?"

"What do *you* think?"

"I think you're way out of line, that's what I think."

So was it her own fault for tempting him? Her own fault for not listening to Betty? Her own fault that a fire hose was stuck in her pond and smoke was pouring from the barn? A fireman shouted, "That hay's about to catch!" and with one giant breath the green smoke turned to flame and the fire like a starving beast began chewing its way through a roof repaired over the years with asphalt over cedar and just lately the tar Travis had spread but apparently in the wrong places. So much for the barn.

The fire would cost her the barn and a helper she'd need to replace, not so easy when she couldn't afford as much as Betty, whose man drove a truck bristling with rakes and shovels and packed with every power tool known to man. She looked over the volunteers in their slickers and breathing tanks and tried to find needy faces under their helmets. Would any of them work for what she could afford to pay? And here was Ted Scofield—fire chief and road foreman—asking if Travis had been in the barn and she

said yes because she'd left him to shovel out sawdust while she rode with Betty. When Ted suggested that a leaking roof might have wet the hay and cause it to "combust" she told him Travis had repaired the roof and he said, *Well that's the problem right there you've got people with a history and why isn't he here right now he must have something to hide.*

### MALVINA

The dump truck was too wide for the tractor path so she parked on the road then slid off the seat. She stepped carefully down into the sunken field, setting her foot each time before transferring her weight, minimizing the back pain that was only relieved by cortisone shots the doctor was reluctant to continue.

Through the uncut brush along the brook she saw him at The Spider Tree doubled over in pain. The memory of their old innocence choked her speechless when set against the scene at Julia's house. She'd just been there, and as the volunteers poured water through the second floor windows the popping sound from the hay and the smell of burning shingles cut right through her. Julia was standing in a small crowd of onlookers sobbing into a tissue with Betty Ridell hugging her by the shoulder. Then Ted Scofield came over with sweat running down his face and asked, *Where's your son? Where's Travis?* If only she could turn it all back. How she'd been young and slender, how life was hard but easier, how she could mow a lawn with one of them in the backpack, walk the mile from the sugar house to the brook and watch Travis ride the tree roots like a hobby horse. She could have done more with him, made him talk for example.

Once on level ground beyond the uncut brush the walking was easier. Robert had mowed this part but it wasn't worth haying, not with carpets of cut goldenrod among the ferns and bedstraw. The cows wouldn't eat it and no sense bringing down the rake and baler because there was plenty of hay from the other fields along the Branch. The people who owned this little field never came up. The Forretts had mowed it for two

generations as part of the haying rights to the ten acres across the road, a thousand bales there and they might get five dollars a bale. That was a big part of their cash flow. To hay the big field you had to mow the little field so it wouldn't grow over with weed trees. Fair enough. Haying was better than owning, you kept the hay and paid no taxes.

So now he was bouncing on the roots like a kid. What to do with him, thirty-eight years old and fired from the road crew after he got into it with Ted Scofield, who'd call the state inspectors for sure. Then what? Jail for arson? A grown man with no job and Julia his only source of income and now he'd messed that up. He'd been a problem from the start, two weeks late, hung in her stomach like lead and almost toppled her forward when she walked. That was when her back pain started along with other complications she didn't like to think about. When her water broke he still wouldn't come out, but when he did she was almost split wide open. A ten-pound boy who wouldn't take her milk and they had to get formula from the Drop-In Center. Wouldn't talk until he was three and she thought there was something wrong with him. Never at peace when he grew up, not like Caleb who would have nursed until the grave. He'd been this way since high school, scratches on his arms he said were from the cat, then one day she saw one a good six-inches long and close to a vein. *That's no damn cat, that's for crazy kids why did you do it? I don't know.* She took him to a counselor but he wouldn't talk to her either. Was somebody supposed to open his head and look inside?

He'd always been vulnerable, and when offended drew into his shell and punished himself. He only opened up to Caleb—who reported to her—telling her what Julia had shown him, as if any woman who did that didn't know what she was doing. Caleb said Travis was so excited you'd think he'd seen a wonder of the world. Caleb was the smart one, he saw through it and told her everything.

“He thinks there's a reason she showed him.”

“So do I.”

“She was up there with that guy from Maine, and down in New York too.”

“So he thinks she did something for those horses.”

“And she might do something for him.”

“She liked that he worked cheap, that’s what she liked.”

No need to stick around the fire after telling Julia she was sorry about the barn, a half-truth, the other half related to the wages of sin. Wages alright. Betty gave the eye sign for her to leave, and why watch a burning barn when Ted Scofield had the Forrett’s history written all over his face? He’d been there years back with that sugar house burning from the top down, the cupola spitting hunks of red hot creosote like there was a volcano inside and the old cedar shingles curled up with age and crying *Welcome* to the flames. The old place was smaller than a trailer. For septic they dug a hole and filled it with stone. When it smelled bad Robert poured in a few gallons of muriatic acid that burned out the spaces between the stones and a nose-hurting smoke arose like some angry genie down there with a message. Which was to get the hell out of there because you can’t have two boys into their teens sleeping in the same bed and going outside to pee every morning. It wasn’t natural and that had an effect on Travis she couldn’t explain.

Walking was easy on the level part, the weeds already drying under new growth, the near transparent top layer of ferns yet to surrender their moisture. Even with a hayed field, a good fire every so often burned out the chaff and weed seeds and added lime in the ash, like rebirth, like something almost religious. Burn this field in the fall and you’ll get some hay next summer. Burn a barn and you’ll get a better one from the insurance, everybody knew that. So maybe there was an upside.

Now there would be gossip to add to what she already knew, all the news on the Branch and up in Wardsboro. Did Travis do it or not? They’d never be *that* specific. Julia’s barn was a fire waiting to happen, case closed. So there in the Price Chopper parking lot standing at their four-wheelers she chatted with Betty and certain women who liked to talk as much as she did. She knew the couples having trouble, the kids who were wards of the state, the men both weak and strong. She and her friends would look up to the sky or off in another direction as if the scandalous talk came from somewhere else. After all they minded their own business. Guess who’s cutting every tree on his land for firewood that’s all he knows how to do and he doesn’t have enough driveways to plow because he pushes the snow right up against your garage. The daughter took off,

the one with so many piercings she looked like a Christmas tree not only on her face but places too private to mention. Can you imagine people who want to hurt themselves? Left the kid with the father who never helped out anyway and nobody can find her and in a way she can't be blamed.

She knew what they said about her too, about the Forretts—even though she herself wasn't a Forrett—about their old place with a chimney fire from a family burning wood all their lives who knew better. Well it was true and that house fire waiting to happen wasn't much different than hay bales under a poorly repaired roof. Behind her back they would say that she and Robert had set an example, that the apple didn't fall very far.

Maybe Julia did go up there and do more than buy that rescue horse. Maybe they did watch porno together and do what they saw on the computer. He was a strange one, no job—which meant he sold drugs—one of those braided beards hanging from his chin with a little bow at the end, lived in two trailers nailed together as one unit so he wouldn't violate the zoning. Last spring a turkey hunter found his backpack in a hollow tree stuffed with magazines and videos and who knows what else. He fessed up and the sheriff let him go because none of it was kiddie. What people did these days. All this online business. A few years back Robert met some slut online and came home with STD's and she bore with that. She'd seen it all on his computer before she threw it out and before they all got arrested, women with boobs like pillows and all shaved between the legs. Next thing you know they'd shave their heads too, then men and women would all look the same and you had to see close up to tell the difference. That was how the world was going all of it sicker than shit. She almost threw up when she saw what Robert had been looking at and maybe Travis and Caleb too. *If she hadn't thrown the computer in the landfill after taking a hand sledge to it just in case, he might be in jail because there could have been little girls on it. She wouldn't put it past him.*

What was it coming to? How would they get along, what with Robert driving a gravel truck part time, the best he could do, paid in cash, no social security. *Caleb was* lucky enough to work for a tree service. He was small and a good climber, but how long before he fell off a pine or cut off his leg with a chain saw. Then what? Unemployment?

Food stamps? They had those already but Robert didn't know it. Now their only cash flow would be from hay because Travis and Julia were finished.

So there was Travis bouncing on the roots like a little kid. She approached through the soft grass, aware of a humming noise coming out of him with each spider bounce as if the roots expelled sound from his lungs. The poor fool was a barrel of hurt with his imagination run wild.

"What did you do to that woman?"

"Nothing."

"What did *she* do then?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie. Do you think I don't know what she showed you?"

"I didn't see anything."

"Don't try to fool me. What did you do to her?"

"Nothing."

"Did you touch her?"

"I didn't touch her."

"And you think Ted Scofield isn't going to ask you some questions after that hay lit up? And what made you think...."

She didn't need to finish the thought. He was bouncing, off somewhere.

"You're going to break those roots, then you'll be sorrier than you already are."

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