



SCARECROWS

BY DAVID A. ROLLINS

A BRIEF PREVIEW

INTRODUCTION

It would be a lesson in futility to try and explain the strange events that took place in Amberville in the summer of 1964, or at the very least, it would be useless conjecture. No one who knows the real truth is still around. After all, it has been many years since then, and most if not all of the older residents of Amberville are certainly dead by now. And as for the others . . . well, let's just say that they are conveniently missing.

The town doesn't even exist anymore, at least not on any maps, though some people claim that it's still there. However, they say you can't get within five miles of it now from any direction. All of the roads leading into the community have long since been ripped up and covered over, and the newer highways have been designed to go around the town so it can't be seen from the road. The reason for this curious deception has its origins with the Army, who cordoned off the area for what it said were "national security" reasons — top-secret matters — no civilian access.

It is true that the Army first entered Amberville after the "event" occurred, and therein lays the mystery, and why it is widely believed that the Army is hiding something. It's hard to know the truth. The Army won't go on record publicly. Every time an inquiry is made into what really happened to the residents of that town, the answer always comes back the same — they were "relocated". Exactly where they were relocated to remains the unanswered question, even to this day.

The only real evidence ever presented came many years ago during a secretive, closed-door, Grand Jury investigation when several anonymous people bravely came forward to offer their testimony about what really took place in that town. Curiously, after a month of intense deliberations, the investigating panel summarily dismissed those accounts as "*mere fabrications by people of questionable ethics and credibility*", after which they closed the investigation. Be that as it may, all of the names and testimonies of those courageous few remain classified.

Perhaps it can't be explained. Perhaps it's just some strange fluke of nature that boggles the mind of reasonable thinking people, like Crop Circles or UFO's.

Then again, maybe it's much simpler than that. Most truths are very simple, and are often found in the smaller details of the bigger picture, details that get missed because of the unusual nature of the event. Perhaps it was the *behavior* of the citizens of Amberville itself that caused these mysterious events to occur. That's something you will have to decide for yourself.

What follows here is an account of what might have happened, or at least a plausible reconstruction of those events as determined by some recently declassified documents and a few anonymous sources. Nonetheless, even with all of these hard-found facts included, it's important to remember that this story does not attempt to answer "how" these events took place, only "why" they took place, because anything else would only be useless conjecture.

PROLOGUE

THE RENFORD MILITARY PSYCHIATRIC FACILITY

BETHESDA, MARYLAND

JANUARY 24, 2006

The afternoon sky hinted of snow as an official looking black sedan pulled up in front of the Renford Psychiatric Facility, an American flag flying proudly from either side of the hood. The four-starred plate on the front bumper of the vehicle signified the rank and status of the officer inside. As the car came to a stop, a rather nervous looking man dressed in civilian clothes came running out of the building. At that point, a uniformed driver stepped out of the sedan to open the back door for General Frank Bower. Bower stepped out onto the sidewalk.

“Good afternoon, General Bower,” the man from the institute greeted him. “I’m Dr. Henderson. Come right this way please.”

Bower just nodded in return. The driver stayed behind, remaining beside the vehicle, while Dr. Henderson quickly escorted the General back inside of the building.

“Hold that elevator please!” Henderson called out as they rushed down the corridor.

Another doctor was preparing to enter the elevator just as the two men came running up. Henderson blocked his entrance and allowed Bower to step inside first. The other doctor, angered by their arrogance, reluctantly stepped back, totally befuddled.

“Excuse the hell out of me!” he exclaimed as Henderson also stepped inside the elevator.

“I’m sorry,” Henderson apologized. “You’ll have to catch the next one.”

He pushed the button for the seventh floor and the elevator doors closed.

“When did you first become aware of this?” Bower then asked.

“Just before ten this morning,” Henderson answered. “I called as soon as I found out.”

“Have the arrangements been made?”

“We’re making all the proper arrangements now,” Henderson assured him.

Bower accepted his assurances, though he remained dubious. “I want this done very quietly,” he insisted.

“You have nothing to worry about, General. It’s been so many years now that no one is even going to notice. No one even knows she’s here.”

“I still want all precautions taken.”

“Everything is just as you instructed, you have my word on it.”

The elevator doors opened and the two men stepped out.

“Down this way,” Henderson said, guiding the General along.

At the end of the hall they came to a caged door. Henderson reached down inside of his pocket to retrieve a ring of keys. He unlocked the door, allowing them access to the ward beyond, and then locked it behind them.

“This way,” he urgently said.

At the end of another long hallway, a uniformed woman stood waiting.

“This is Lieutenant Morris,” Henderson said. “She’s the administrative liaison for this leg of the operation. She’ll be handling the transfer.”

“Good afternoon, General,” Morris said. “Follow me please.”

They followed Morris through a set of swinging doors, down a hall to a private room. The name written on the wall plaque outside of the door read, “Catherine Bower”.

Morris unlocked the door. “Your niece is in here,” she informed him.

“Please wait outside, Lieutenant,” Bower requested.

“Of course, General,” she replied. “I understand.”

The two men stepped inside and closed the door behind them.

“Has the Lieutenant been cleared?” Bower inquired.

“Everyone working on this ward has been cleared. Total secrecy has always been maintained. Only our people are allowed up here, so there’s no possibility of this getting out. Anyway, you and I are the only ones who know the real story.”

Inside of the room, a middle-aged woman lay dead on a single bed, covered to her head in a white sheet. Bower stood next to the bed, solemnly looking down at her, his face devoid of emotion.

“Who else here knows about this?” he asked.

“Except for you and me and the ward nurse, no one yet, and all the Lieutenant knows is that she is your niece.”

“Let’s keep it that way. My people will be handling the autopsy. Have her ready to go when they get here.”

“It’s already being taken care of.”

Bower reached down and gently touched the woman’s face. Then he pulled the sheet back a little, revealing several black and blue bruises on the woman’s neck.

“You’re certain that no one got in here last night?”

“It would have been virtually impossible, General.”

“Why after all this time?” Bower mused. “It just doesn’t make sense.”

“She’s been here a long time,” Henderson said. “Forty-one years.”

Bower quietly nodded his head. “Yes, it’s been a long time. She never did speak, did she?”

“No, she didn’t,” Henderson, answered. “We were hopeful that the new therapies would work and bring her around. She wasn’t comatose, she just didn’t respond to outside stimulation, though there were no physical reasons for her condition. It’s purely psychological. The emotional trauma she experienced kept her locked up inside. Anyway, considering her impaired mental state, it’s highly doubtful that she would have been able to articulate anything coherent, even with the new therapies. Unfortunately, we’ll never know now.”

“That’s too bad,” Bower replied. “She was the only one who knew the real truth.” He gently pulled the sheet over the woman’s head. “How did you list the cause of death?”

“Advanced arteriosclerosis.”

“Very good. Thank you.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have wanted me to mention that she was strangled to death, would you?”

Bower just stared back at him expressionless. “No, I suppose not.”

“Oh, by the way,” Henderson said as he reached down inside the pocket of his smock. “I’m sure you’ll want this!” He handed Bower a sealed specimen bag. “I cut these off of her myself this morning before I called you. I knew you wouldn’t want anyone else to see them.”

Bower took the bag and inspected the contents. Inside were several long bands of twisted straw.

“Do you really think *they* did this?” Henderson asked.

“You know I can’t discuss that with you, Doctor,” Bower cautioned him as he slipped the bag into the waist pocket of his uniform.

“No, of course not. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Now come on, let’s go. I have to get back. It looks like snow outside and I have a long drive.”

Lieutenant Morris stood waiting patiently when the two men came out of the room. “I’m sorry about your niece, General,” she said.

Bower half smiled and nodded appreciatively.

“You know, I never realized until I started putting her transfer papers together that your niece was born here in Maryland. I’ve lived here all my life, that’s why it caught my eye. Many of the military patients housed here are from out of state. I didn’t recognize the name of the town though. Where exactly is Amberville? I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it.”

Henderson looked at the Lieutenant as if she had just spoken the devil’s name himself. He looked nervously over at Bower, and then back at the Lieutenant.

“That’s not really important now, is it?” Henderson asked her.

Bower just smiled pleasantly. “May I see her chart please?”

“Certainly,” Morris replied, handing it over to him.

Bower opened the file and gazed at the page for a few moments, and then he looked up and glared at Henderson, who remained nervously silent.

Bower closed the chart again and handed it back to Morris. “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“You’re welcome, and my condolences,” she replied. “At least she’s not suffering anymore.”

Bower thanked her and bade them both goodbye. Henderson walked with him to the elevator, looking thoroughly embarrassed.

“I had no idea that her birthplace was on her chart,” he whispered. “It must have been written in when she first came here. I guess no one ever caught it.”

“Obviously *one* person did,” Bower replied irately.

Henderson just lowered his eyes. "Yes sir."

The elevator doors opened and Bower stepped inside, turning back to face the nervous doctor.

"I trust you know what to do," he calmly said.

Henderson just looked at him in confusion. "*Do?*"

Bower glared at him impatiently. "Change the address on her medical chart, Doctor," he ordered. "*Do it now!*"

CHAPTER ONE

AMBERVILLE

AUGUST 2, 1964

Not many people remember Amberville now, though it was once a thriving farm community, albeit an isolated community. The town, located on Maryland's eastern shore, slowly emerged in the years after the great depression of the 1930's, growing as more and more people moved in. Yet even with that steady influx of people, the population never exceeded four or five hundred residents, give or take a few. A more precise figure is no longer available.

The town itself seemed pretty self-sufficient. The people who lived there had done so for many generations. They were mostly farmers, except for the businessmen and women who ran the shops and public services in town, and even most of them had grown up on the farms in the area. If you didn't have business to conduct in Amberville, or family or friends, then you probably had no reason to go there. The only outsiders they saw were the occasional delivery drivers bringing supplies in from the big cities, or shuttling the vast bounties of fruits and vegetables grown on the farms off to market, and the residents themselves rarely ventured out beyond its borders.

It was a good life, a peaceful life, a quiet life, and everyone liked it that way. Towns often change though, and a change was definitely coming, not only for Amberville, but the rest of the country as well. It may have only felt like a whisper on the wind at the time, a feeling of restlessness sweeping across the country, especially among the youth. It began back in the 1950's, a growing sense of rebelliousness against the sameness that had always been. The prosperity we were enjoying as a country offered young people more opportunities than they had ever known. For them, the world seemed like an big open playground, just waiting to be explored, and for the restless youth of Amberville, that desire to get away seemed particularly desperate.

No longer would they be satisfied following in their parent's footsteps. The idea of spending their entire life in Amberville didn't hold the same appeal for

them as it had for their parents and grandparents before. Those lonely dirt roads and endless rows of cornfields paled in comparison to the bright lights of a big city. However, there were other changes coming, changes far more ominous than the naïve ramblings of youth, changes that would have a profound affect upon the citizens of America, even in tiny little townships like Amberville.

In 1964, American society sat on the edge of a huge revolutionary upheaval. The Vietnam War would soon explode across their television sets, the Civil Rights movement stepped up its fight for equality, and women continued their demands for equal rights. Before those events came to fruition though, another revolution began to emerge, one that greatly influenced all of the events that would follow. After years of having their voices dismissed by the adult establishment, the youth of America suddenly found their voice in the music of the pop culture. Almost overnight it seemed, that voice became unavoidably relevant.

It had been less than a year since the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas. A feeling of shock and disbelief lingered as we tried to cope with the senselessness of that tragic event. At the beginning of '64, the Beatles made their first of several appearances on the Ed Sullivan show. By the end of the decade, those four lads from Liverpool would come to epitomize the rebellious attitudes of the youth of this country and the rest of the world. At that point in time though, they were just four “mop-top” kids whose music filled our hearts with a joy and an exuberance that seemed to lift our spirit out of the ruins of *Camelot* and left us with a smile on our face.

The “British Invasion” had begun, spearheaded by groups like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and American kids were eating it up. They were being spoon fed a daily diet of quickly changing trends and fashions by the media and Madison Avenue, the likes of which had never before been witnessed. And just as it was back in the 50's, when they tried to ban rock and roll music, there were those who resisted the changes, even among the youth themselves. Those conflicting attitudes toward the changes that were taking place would be the catalyst for the horror that would be unleashed on Amberville that summer.

Of course, there are still those who argue that what took place in those golden cornfields of eastern Maryland was just some strange freak of nature, though

Robin Danaher knew better. So did Bobby Dillman and Jimmy Louden. They are all dead now, or at least presumed dead, as many of the residents of Amberville are thought to be. It's impossible to know. All of those people exist now only as names on a page from some forgotten government report, filed away years ago by corrupt politicians who are probably all dead themselves at this point, or as the Army is fond of saying whenever asked . . . "relocated".

Nevertheless, those three young people, Robin, Bobby, and Jimmy, were more than likely the spark that lit the flame in Amberville that summer. Still, a flame needs fuel, and the keg of fuel that they ignited had been ready to blow for a very long time. Some people think that it was Robin Danaher's good looks that lit the spark, or perhaps it was Bobby Dillman's gentlemanly charm that set the flame blazing, though the going consensus is that it was Jimmy Louden's fierce temper that finally blew the lid off in that unsuspecting town.

Robin Danaher turned eighteen that summer. She graduated high school at the end of May and planned to go to college in New York in the fall. She couldn't wait to leave. Robin had never been anywhere other than the occasional trip up to Baltimore to see the Orioles play at Memorial Stadium, or family vacations down in Ocean City, where she spent most of her time walking the boardwalk with her mother. All the same, this was no ballgame or vacation she had planned. She meant to leave Amberville at the end of the summer, and she had no intention of ever returning.

Robin had one problem though, Jimmy Louden, her boyfriend, or rather her ex-boyfriend. She had already informed him that she would be leaving for New York at the end of the summer to attend NYU, an announcement that took Jimmy totally by surprise. Not that Robin had ever failed to mention it to him, in fact, she had told him many times of her plans. Jimmy just never thought to take her seriously. He would humor her whenever she brought up the subject, and then laugh inside at such a ridiculous notion, refusing to believe that she would ever really go.

As was common in those days, Robin and Jimmy had been going steady since the tenth grade. Jimmy considered Robin to be his "trophy girl", his badge of honor. In high school, she was the Captain of the cheerleading team, as well as

Prom Queen of her senior class, and in Jimmy's mind, being her boyfriend gave him bragging rights over all of the other guys in town who had earnestly pursued her. He always imagined that they would marry someday and stay in Amberville. It angered him that she wanted to change those plans now, plans that she had never agreed to in the first place, but then Jimmy never thought to ask her view on the matter.

Jimmy was considered by many to be the "bad boy" of Amberville, and that image is what originally attracted Robin to him. At first he was a lot of fun, when he wasn't breaking the law that is. Over time, that image gradually lost its original appeal. Robin's attitudes about life and love were changing as she slowly matured into adulthood. It eventually became painfully clear to her that Jimmy would always be Jimmy. They were different in so many ways. Where Robin embraced, even welcomed the changes that the evolving society offered her, Jimmy's view of the world was much smaller. He would spend his entire life in Amberville, inherit his father's money, and become just like him. Robin imagined a far different and exciting future for herself.

Jimmy was the son of Martin Louden. Martin basically owned Amberville. In fact, he was related to the Ambervilles, the family who originally founded the town. Martin's mother was the daughter of the last surviving son of the Ambervilles. When she died, all of her inheritances went to Martin. Not that it meant anything, except that he became filthy rich overnight, though he also had significant influence in the community because he presided over the only bank in town. Martin's bank held the mortgages on most of the farms in the area. He used that influence to his personal benefit. Therefore, many people who felt they were living unfairly under his thumb held a deep though silent animosity toward him.

Martin had two sons, Jimmy, the oldest at eighteen, and Phillip, two years younger. Their mother — a demanding, high strung sort of woman — just up and left them one day, never to be seen again, leaving Martin to bring the boys up on his own, so it came as no surprise to anyone why they turned out the way they did.

Undeniably, Jimmy stood out as the worst, though Phillip certainly ran a close second, if only by association. Sadly, Phillip always lived in the shadow of his

older brother's "cooler" reputation, and people who knew him well have said that he secretly resented it. Indeed, it seems evident that Jimmy's cool reputation started all of the trouble that summer.

When Jimmy realized that Robin seriously intended to leave, he nearly hit the roof, but in the end, there wasn't anything he could do. Nonetheless, Jimmy still had his "reputation" to think of. How would it look to his friends if they found out that Robin had dumped him, especially after he bragged that she couldn't live without him? Jimmy couldn't allow that.

Therefore, he turned the tables on her. Jimmy dumped her, making sure that everybody knew it was his decision, not hers. Still, that wasn't near enough to satisfy his huge ego, not by a long shot. He callously began putting her down in public, saying all sorts of terrible things about her. He even intimated that he had "popped her cherry" on graduation night, which was also a lie. All of this only reinforced Robin's desire to finally be rid of him. She would be leaving Amberville soon, and he could rot in Hell for all she cared.

Still, that summer would have been much better without all of the drama that Jimmy stirred up. By August, Robin felt totally depressed, yet she somehow managed to stay clear of him and focus on the more important matters at hand. As her departure grew nearer, the thought of leaving sustained her. Ironically, three weeks before she planned to leave for New York, something happened that she never expected or anticipated. Bobby Dillman came home from the Army.

Bobby was two years older than Robin. He enlisted in the Army after he graduated from high school and had been stationed overseas for the last two years. Robin remembered Bobby from school. She was a sophomore when he was a senior. He was the tall, good-looking, high school football star, very popular with the girls. Though she didn't know him personally, it seemed that everybody in Amberville knew who Bobby Dillman was.

In contrast, Bobby was the antithesis of Jimmy in almost every way. Bobby's good character embodied all of the qualities that Jimmy's so sorely lacked. He came from a well-respected family. Harry and Clara Dillman, his parents, owned a farm on the outskirts of town. They were well known around Amberville for readily and unselfishly lending a helping hand to anyone in need, often at the

expense of their own creature comforts. They were good, solid, hardworking people, and they raised their son in the same manner. Curiously, despite their differences, Bobby and Jimmy would come to have one thing in common, and that would be a mutual attraction to Robin Danaher. That volatile scenario had the earmarks of trouble for all of them, especially where Jimmy Louden was concerned.

On a warm, muggy, Sunday afternoon in August of 1964, Bobby Dillman stepped off the bus in front of Anderson's Department Store on Main Street, dressed neatly in his Army uniform and carrying his duffle bag on his shoulder. Robin sat across the street at the counter in T.J.s Diner enjoying a frothy root beer float with her girlfriend Denise. Denise had just taken a long sip of her tasty float when she caught sight of Bobby walking across the street through the large diner window. She immediately began tapping Robin on the arm.

"Mmm, mmm," she mumbled with her mouth full.

"*What?*" Robin answered, somewhat annoyed.

"Look what's coming across the street," Denise exclaimed.

Robin casually turned to look. She was used to Denise pointing out guys to her, guys that only Denise thought were sexy. Robin rarely shared her best friend's opinion though, as their tastes in men differed entirely. It really didn't matter to her who had caught Denise's attention anyway, because the last thing Robin needed, or even wanted for that matter, was to be involved with another farm boy from Amberville. All the same, when she turned to look, she didn't expect to see a tall handsome soldier approaching either.

"Who is that?" Robin asked sounding pleasantly surprised.

"I don't know," Denise answered, "but he sure is dreamy."

As Bobby crossed the street, it became evident to both of them that the diner was his intended destination. Denise was acting all giddy, but Robin preferred the coy approach. She gently tugged on Denise's arm as Bobby entered the diner.

"He's coming in," she whispered. "Don't look at him."

Denise just stared back at her in disbelief. "Are you crazy? How can you say that? He may be the best thing to come through this town in years. You can hide if you want to. I'm looking!"

Bobby walked up to the counter, sitting his duffle bag on the floor. Tom Coachman, the owner of the establishment, a pleasant man with a particularly large head, walked up to wait on him.

“What’ll it be, soldier?” Tom asked.

Bobby took his hat off and wiped his brow. “It’s really hot out there,” he said. “I think I’ll have some iced tea, lots of ice.”

While Bobby waited on his drink, he glanced over at Robin and Denise.

“Hello,” he said with a friendly smile.

“Hello,” they both answered, giggling to themselves.

Bobby stared curiously at Denise. “Aren’t you Denise Gilford?” he inquired.

Denise almost fainted, hearing him mention her name. “How did you know that?”

Bobby chuckled at her. “You don’t remember me, do you? I’m Bobby Dillman. Your parent’s farm is right up the road from ours.”

It took a few seconds for Denise to finally recognize him. She had had not seen him in two years. He looked a lot different than he did back then — the better kind of different too.

“Oh my God! Bobby! Where have you been?”

Robin had to laugh at her giddy friend. “From the uniform, I’d say that he’s probably been in the Army, Denise.”

Bobby laughed and caught Robin’s eyes. Then he turned back to Denise. “So who’s your smart-aleck friend?” he asked in jest.

Denise rolled her eyes. “Oh, that’s just Robin. Don’t pay any attention to her. She’s leaving town in a few weeks”

“Robin?” Bobby mused. “Your last name wouldn’t happen to be Danaher, would it?”

Robin looked him up and down. “It might be,” she coyly replied.

“I thought I recognized you.”

“Have we met?”

“Well, kind of,” he eluded. “You were on the football cheerleading team in my last year of high school.”

“Oh, did you play football? Second string?”

Bobby chuckled at her obvious joke. "Yeah, I played a little football back then."

Denise had seen Robin play this game with guys before, that cute little "innocent" thing that she did, and she did it very well. All is fair in love and war though, as they say, and she wasn't about to let Robin get the upper hand without a fight.

"What are you doing back home, Bobby?" Denise asked, interrupting them. "Are you on leave?"

"Actually no, I got out early on a hardship discharge. My father passed away a few days ago. I came home to help my mom with the farm. I guess you didn't hear about it."

"No, I'm sorry, I didn't know. At least she still has the farm. My parents lost the farm last year. We're living over in Salisbury now. I just came over to visit Robin for the weekend."

"They lost the farm?" he asked in amazement. "What happened?"

"What usually happens around here. They had a few bad years and got way behind, couldn't pay the mortgage, and old man Louden took the farm."

"Is that old buzzard still around?" Bobby asked in disgust. "I thought he'd be run out of town by now."

"Yes he is, and he's worse than ever. You wouldn't believe it if I told you all of the people he's foreclosed on . . . the Miller's, the Perry's, and even the Wilde's out on Muddy Creek Road, and they've been here longer than any of us."

Robin remained very quiet during all of this.

"What about your folks?" Bobby asked her.

Denise spoke up before Robin could answer. "Oh, they don't have to worry. Robin's boyfriend is Jimmy Louden," she said with a snicker.

Robin looked shocked and surprised that Denise would say such a thing, and immediately smacked her on the arm.

"He is not, you big fibber!" she exclaimed in anger.

Denise just laughed. "Well, he used to be," she corrected herself.

"That's convenient," Bobby teased her.

Robin ignored his insinuating comment. "Jimmy Louden is a pig."

"Is that why you're leaving town?"

Robin looked at him scornfully. “Hardly! I’m leaving to go to school in New York, and I can’t wait to get out of here.”

“Amberville isn’t that bad, is it?”

She just scoffed at his question “And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you plan to spend the rest of your life in this boring little town too?”

“I don’t know. I was planning to go to college on my G.I. bill, but my mother can’t run the farm by herself, so I guess I’ll have to wait and see. Speaking of which, I suppose I really should be going. I just got back into town. She doesn’t even know I’m home yet.”

Bobby took his drink in hand and picked up his duffle bag.

“Nice seeing you again, Denise. Maybe I’ll see the two of you later.”

“Come back tonight,” Denise invited him. “You can go to the movies with us at the Strand. *A Hard Days Night* is playing.”

Bobby chuckled. “The Beatles, huh? I saw them in Germany.”

“You saw them?” Denise asked, all agog. “That’s so cool! I think Paul McCartney is so dreamy. Please say you’ll come.”

“I’ll see what I can do. What time does it start?”

“It starts at eight, but you can meet us back here at seven-thirty. ”

“I’ll try. I’m not promising though. I haven’t been home in two years, and my mom is pretty devastated over my dad. I might just stay close to home tonight.”

Denise looked disappointed. “Oh of course. I understand,” she replied.

“It was nice to see you again too, Robin,” Bobby said. “If I don’t make it back tonight, I hope I get to see you again before you leave for New York.”

“It’s a small town,” Robin replied.

“That it is,” he chuckled. “That it is.”

After he left, Denise and Robin just giggled at each other.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER

Michael Obee was the Editor in Chief of the *Amberville Sentinel*, the town’s newspaper. He could often be found out and about around Amberville with his

tape recorder strapped to his shoulder and his pad and pencil in hand on a fact-finding mission for a new headline or “exclusive”. Obee frequented Town Hall, where he loved to bother the town’s community leaders with hard-hitting questions about their intended policies. He made his reputation with his scathing editorials on their politics. The locals jokingly referred to him as the “Walter Cronkite” of the cornfields.

Yet even with all his misgivings, Obee still put out a very good newspaper. The Sentinel was actually quite popular in Amberville. Within its multiple pages, you could find all of the up-to-the-minute news relevant to the area, such as crop reports, or what the officials at Town Hall were proposing to do about the numerous potholes on Main Street. You could also read about how well the local high school teams were playing, or about what couples had announced their engagement or wedding plans, or you could check the obituaries to see who in town had died recently.

Clara Dillman sat at her kitchen table staring numbly at a new issue of the Sentinel, thinking about her life. She had the newspaper open to the obituaries. The two columns of the “Recently Deceased” were listed alphabetically by last name, including an unflattering black and white picture of each. The paper listed *Dillman, Harry*, Clara’s husband, as the fourth name down on the list, right after *Cobble, Dorothy*. The small box of text under the picture described him as a fifty year old resident of Amberville, adding that he was survived by his wife and son, Clara and Robert. It seemed to Clara to be a pathetically cold and lacking account of her husband’s life. Harry deserved much better as far as she was concerned. Clara sat the newspaper aside and gazed pensively out of the kitchen window.

Harry Dillman died suddenly six days ago when his truck rolled over in a ditch on Idelwilde Road while coming back from running errands in town. The Sheriff’s department concluded from the skid marks at the scene of the accident that Harry must have lost control of the vehicle in the gravel on the side of the road, which didn’t make sense to Clara. Harry had driven that stretch of road at least a thousand times. He knew every inch of it, which made it unlikely that he had lost control. She secretly suspected that there must be another reason, even if she couldn’t prove her suspicions.

Harry and Clara had been married for a long time, ever since they were teens. Harry's father gave them several acres of farmland adjacent to his as a wedding gift. When his parent's passed away, Harry inherited their acreage as well. Since then, he and Clara had made a fairly decent living farming, prospering through the good years, while hanging on through the lean ones, like the last two years had been. Good or bad though, Clara would not have traded a single moment of her life, not for anything, not even for all of the riches in the world. She believed that riches come in many forms.

Clara was a farmer's wife, a lifestyle she knew well. Her mother and grandmother had been farmer's wives too. It could be a rough life at times, but a good life just the same, a life of responsibility, where you pulled your own weight because your survival, as well as the survival of your loved ones, depended on it. Harry had been a good husband to her. Clara missed Harry terribly. He was the only man that she ever loved. Maybe he wasn't the most handsome or romantic man in the world, but Clara never had any doubt that he loved her as much as she loved him.

They were childless through their first ten years of marriage while they were struggling to make a go of it, then Bobby was born. Bobby was their only child. Clara wanted more children, a daughter perhaps. However, she had such a rough time keeping up with her responsibilities around the farm during her pregnancy that they decided it might be better not to have any more children. Still, Clara had no regrets. Making those hard decisions was part of being a farmer's wife. So much work needed to be done back then just to survive that it was probably the best decision for everyone at the time.

The funeral of her husband seemed like a blur to her now, even though it had only been a few days. Regrettably, Bobby was still stationed overseas at the time. When the news of his father's death reached him, he was out on maneuvers. By the time they got word out to him and made arrangements to ship him back to the States, he had already missed the funeral.

Bobby tried to call his mother when his plane landed in New York, and again when he flew into Baltimore, though he was unable to reach her both times. He took a bus from Baltimore to Amberville. The farm was only a short walk from

town, twenty minutes or so. However, twenty minutes can be an eternity sometimes.

Clara stared at the *Notice of Foreclosure* lying on the table next to the paper. She dolefully picked it up and read it again. It seemed a very emotionless letter, stating simply that they had thirty days to bring their account up to date to avoid foreclosure, written by a very emotionless man, the President of the bank, Martin Louden. Unfortunately, that thirty-day notice had already expired, and Clara was at a loss to know what to do.

Harry and Clara reluctantly took a large loan out at the bank a few years earlier after two bad growing seasons left them financially strapped, using the farm as collateral. They hoped to pay it off quickly, though as hard as they tried to keep up, they seemed to get further and further behind instead. They still owed a considerable amount, well over two thousand dollars with interest. Clara had no idea where the money would come from. Harry's life insurance policy barely covered the funeral expenses, and their limited savings had long since been depleted. If only Harry had lived a little longer.

They were hoping that the bank would hold off until after that season's crops were in, at which time they could have easily paid down their debt to a manageable sum. In fact, that's where her husband was coming from the day he died. He had gone to see Martin to ask him for more time. Bobby wasn't aware of their financial problems. They never told him. Clara desperately wished that he were home with her right then. Maybe he could help somehow. She had not heard from him since he called her from Germany to say that he was coming home. All the same, even if she had the money, the due date for payment had already come and gone. Knowing Martin Louden as she did, and Clara knew him very well, that would be all the excuse he needed to take the farm.

The heart wrenching grief of losing a loved one is a big enough burden for anyone to bear without the added stress of financial problems. Even if she didn't lose the farm, what did she have to look forward to? Without her husband, it wouldn't matter anyway. The farm would go to Bobby. Maybe he would be able to make a better go of it than they had. Either way, she had no desire to stay there without Harry.

Clara got up from the table and walked out onto the back porch. Duke, the family dog, a lazy but loving bloodhound, lay comfortably sprawled out in the shade when she came through the door. He looked up long enough to give her an admiring glance and then returned to his nap. A lovely warm sunny day greeted her. Billowing white clouds filled the sky. The breeze gently caught the sheets on the clothesline, puffing them out like the sails of a ship. She stepped down off the porch and casually strolled out into the back yard. If Harry were still alive, he would probably be out in the fields today, preparing for the harvest that would have saved them from foreclosure.

Clara noticed that the barn doors had blown open. She headed across the yard to close them before going back to the house, tossing some feed from the pocket of her apron to the chickens clucking around her feet. When she got to the barn, she hesitantly peeked in. Harry's crumpled truck sat in there, next to his old tractor. Miraculously, the truck was still drivable after the accident. Suddenly, she became aware of the set of keys that she held in her hand. She didn't even remember picking them up off of the table. But then, she really wasn't planning to go back to the house anyway. She had come out there for a reason.

A decision was needed, another one of those difficult decisions that a farmer's wife has to make from time to time. She stepped inside of the barn and closed the doors. She walked over and started the engine to the tractor. It was a very old tractor and it burned oil, creating thick black smoke from the exhaust. As soon as she had the engine running, she got inside the pick-up truck and started its engine too. Within minutes, the old barn filled with the poisonous exhaust of the two vehicles. Clara sat quietly in the truck, longingly thinking about her husband. She leaned her head back on the seat, closing her eyes, and smiled contentedly as she waited to join him in the afterlife.

Outside, Duke jolted up out of his sleep. He raised his ears, carefully listening, while curiously sniffing at the air, as if he sensed something terribly wrong. He immediately jumped down off the porch, heading for the barn. When Bobby arrived home, he heard Duke's whining and howling long before he ever saw him. When he finally located the dog, he was surprised to find him clawing and scratching at the barn doors, desperately trying to get in.

CHAPTER TWO

Bad news travels fast. Amberville was certainly no different in that respect. The news of Clara Dillman's untimely death swept through that tiny township as swift as floodwaters from a broken dam. Everyone knew of her suicide, and it came as no surprise to most. Too many friends and neighbors were losing their farms. Those who feared the same fate held a deep suspicion of something dishonest going on. Without exception, all of their suspicions were aimed solely at Martin Louden.

On the morning of Clara Dillman's funeral, many of her friends and neighbors gathered at the Amberville Funeral Home to pay their respects, including, surprisingly enough, Martin Louden. Being a small town, everyone knew each other, so it came as no shock that Martin showed up, though most people considered it bad judgment on his part, especially since his bank's foreclosure on the Dillman farm caused Clara to take her life.

Robin and Denise attended the funeral too, as well as their parents. In the years since Bobby had been away, he had forgotten how kind the people of Amberville could be. It pleased him to see how many of them came to honor his mother. His parents had done a lot for their neighbors over the years. They would both be terribly missed.

Robin stayed right at Bobby's side. It made her sad to see him grieving, having lost both of his parents in such a short time. She tenderly held his hand while they sat and talked. The more they talked, the more they discovered how much they had in common. She sat enthralled while he told her of all the places he had been, places she wanted to see too. Before long, she found herself wishing that she had more time to spend with him before she had to leave town.

She admired the gracious and unselfish way he took time to ease the grief of those who came over to offer their condolences, while silently dealing with his own sorrow. She could see that Bobby was a good man, a gentleman, confident, self-assured, the kind of man most people admire, while others despise them for the same reasons.

More importantly, Bobby was the kind of man who attracted women like Robin. Women like Robin are drawn to confidence like a moth to a flame, especially when compared to the other alternative, like Jimmy Louden. Bobby also felt the same attraction for Robin. Those amorous feelings were a problem that would soon rear its ugly head, a problem neither one of them saw coming.

The ugly head it reared belonged to Jimmy Louden. As with his father, everyone there was asking themselves why Jimmy decided to attend the service. His father was at least an Elder in the church and he knew the Dillman's well, though they weren't the best of friends. Jimmy had never even been to church. He wouldn't know the Dillman's if they were standing right in front of him. The only reason he could possibly have for being there was to see Robin Danaher, who had been avoiding him for weeks.

Unfortunately, Robin didn't see him until it was too late. It's funny, but when she saw Jimmy approaching, she immediately let go of Bobby's hand. Not out of guilt, to the contrary, Robin wasn't doing anything wrong. And since she and Jimmy were no longer a couple, she couldn't care less about what he thought. She let go because of the way that Jimmy was glaring at Bobby. She could tell as he approached that his well renowned temper had already begun to flare, and that could only mean trouble.

Jimmy had no idea who Bobby Dillman was when he walked up. All he knew is that Robin had been holding his hand. He saw Bobby all decked out in his dress uniform for the funeral and contemptuously looked him up and down. Robin just sat there shaking her head, waiting for what she knew would inevitably come.

"What are you doing here?" she asked with disdain.

Jimmy, in his typical arrogant fashion, spoke first without thinking of whose company he was in. "I came to pay my respects," he answered. "So who died?"

Bobby didn't know Jimmy either, nor did he pay much attention to him until Jimmy made his heartless remark, which certainly got Bobby's attention. He immediately stood up and got between them.

Jimmy didn't even flinch. "Who's the soldier boy?" he sneered.

Robin never got a chance to answer, Bobby answered for her, his voice echoing his anger.

“My name is Bobby Dillman, and the woman who died was my mother,” he informed him. “I don’t know who you are, but unless you’re as stupid as you look, I’d think twice before making another comment like that. In fact, maybe you should leave before I really lose my temper.”

In all the time that Robin had known Jimmy, she never saw him show any fear. Yet even as he stood his ground, smiling that arrogant smile, he couldn’t hide the fear in his eyes.

“Bobby Dillman, huh?” he scoffed. “I’ve heard of you. Weren’t you some kind of hometown high school football hero a long time ago? What happened, hero? Weren’t you good enough for the majors?”

Bobby’s jaw tightened. For a moment he nearly forgot himself. Luckily, Robin stepped in and tried to calm the situation.

“Jimmy, don’t start, please!” she pleaded. Unfortunately, her plea fell on deaf ears.

Suddenly Bobby realized who he had standing in front of him — the son of Martin Louden — the man who foreclosed on his parent’s farm. Ironically, even as angry as that made him, Bobby couldn’t help but chuckle.

“This is Jimmy Louden?” he asked, trying not to laugh.

“That’s him,” Robin replied despondently.

Bobby got back up in Jimmy’s face. “Well now, I heard that you were a real bad ass. I must have heard wrong. You’re nothing but a punk kid.”

Jimmy never blinked. He causally reached up and brushed Bobby on the shoulder.

“Nice uniform,” he said with a smirk. “What did you get all the medals for? Kissing the General’s ass?”

An elderly man nearby, who had been eavesdropping on their conversation, had finally heard enough. He interrupted their argument, speaking directly to Jimmy.

“That patch on his arm is a Special Forces insignia,” the old man said. “Only one man in ten gets to wear that patch. If you can’t be respectful of his mother, then you might try to be a little more respectful of him, otherwise, I suggest you both take this outside where it belongs.”

Jimmy stepped back, mocking his surprise. "Well, well. We have ourselves a real killer here." Then he leaned in close, whispering so only Bobby could hear. "I got news for you soldier boy," he said in a menacing tone. "I'm a killer too. Stay away from my girl."

Jimmy backed away again and smiled that same disingenuous smile. "I'll be seeing you around," he said. And then he walked away.

"I can't stand him," Robin grumbled under her breath.

Bobby didn't hear her. His eyes were still on Jimmy. He watched with curiosity as Jimmy walked up to his father and whispered something into his ear. Martin turned and glanced back over at Bobby. A moment later, he came walking toward him.

Robin saw him approaching too. "Now what?" she mumbled wearily.

"Robin! How good to see you," Martin greeted her as he walked up. "We never see you around the house anymore. Where have you been keeping yourself these days?"

"As far away from your son as I can get," she replied with disgust.

Martin politely ignored Robin's insult, turning to face Bobby instead. "You must be Robert," he said with the same counterfeit smile that his son had obviously inherited from him.

Bobby reluctantly shook his hand.

"I'm pleased to meet you," Martin said, "though I wish it were under happier circumstances. I can't tell you how sorry I was to hear about your mother, and so soon after your father passed away too. Please accept my heartfelt condolences for your loss."

Bobby wasn't about to stand and trade pleasantries with Martin Loudon, especially knowing the kind of man he was. However, being that Martin seemed so eager to talk, Bobby did have one thing he wanted to say.

"I'll be coming to see you about the farm," he informed him.

"I expected you would," Martin replied. "Why don't you stop by the bank tomorrow and we'll talk."

"There's nothing to talk about," Bobby replied. "I'm just coming in to pay off the loan."

The smile left Martin's face. "Well, this is neither the time nor the place to discuss that matter, so I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"You can count on it," Bobby assured him.

And so, the very next morning, when the bank opened, Bobby stood waiting outside, and just as promised, Martin eagerly awaited his arrival. Martin politely escorted Bobby back to his office where they could talk in private. Bobby wasted no time getting right to the point.

"Okay, let's get this over with," Bobby bluntly said. "What do I owe you? I want to settle up."

"You don't owe me anything," Martin calmly replied. "That matter has already been settled. The farm belongs to the bank now."

Bobby expected him to take that position before he even arrived. "You're not going to take my parent's farm, Mr. Louden. So just tell me what they owed you and I'll write you a check."

Martin tried to be sympathetic to Bobby's plight. But even if Martin wanted to help him — which he didn't — the situation was a bit more complex than Bobby understood. Martin had already made concessions to other parties for that land, parties who took their "business" very seriously, men who would not be very understanding if things didn't go their way.

"I didn't take anything, Robert. Your parents lost their farm because they failed to pay their debt, even after they were given ample opportunity to do so. That window of opportunity is now closed. I'm really sorry that you had to come home to this, but I've done everything I can do."

Feeling his anger build, Bobby lowered his head in frustration, taking a calming breath before speaking again.

"Mr. Louden, my grandfather was farming that land before you were born. He left that land to my father when he died. It his by right. I don't know what kind of sleazy deal you made with them on this loan, nor do I care, but their due date was less than two weeks ago. Now you're the president of this bank. I find it hard to believe that you can't make some kind an accommodation for me considering the circumstances. Have a little sympathy. I just got home. I didn't know about any of this."

Martin showed no remorse. “Just to keep the facts straight, that due date you speak of was one of several extensions I gave them on the loan for a payment that was long overdue. The bank is a business, Robert, and as such, I have certain responsibilities as the President. If I chose to accommodate everyone whose account was in arrears then we would soon be bankrupt. Certainly you can understand that.”

“All I know is that this is bullshit! I hope you don’t think I’m going to take this sitting down. I have rights too. You can’t just take someone’s home. I’ll fight you on this, Mr. Louden. I’ll go the newspapers or call the district attorney if I have to. I’m not going to let you get away with this.”

“Robert, I’m no lawyer, but unless your parents willed that land to you, I don’t think you have any legal rights to it at all. Furthermore, I’m not even sure a Will would stand up in court against a foreclosure. Feel free to check it out though if you wish. Until then, the farm is the property of the bank. I can give you till the end of the month to move out. You’re quite welcome to take any of your parent’s personal belongings. The farm equipment must stay on the property though. That was part of the deal.”

Bobby saw no use in arguing further. He wasn’t going to change Louden’s mind. Martin was just being heartless. It seemed like a nightmare. What in the world happened while he was away? Why didn’t his parents tell him they were having problems? Maybe he could have helped. One thing seemed clear though. If this was just “business”, as Louden claimed, then there had to be other parties involved, parties who stood to make a handsome profit. Whoever they were, Bobby promised himself that he would not rest until he uncovered everyone who had their hand out for a piece of the pie. He angrily got up and left the office without saying goodbye.

ONE WEEK LATER

Robin Danaher sat on the front porch of her parent’s house, drinking a tall glass of her mother’s home made iced tea while watching the sunset and enjoying a soft evening breeze. Off in the distance, white hot flashes of heat lightning lit up

the evening sky, giving warning of an impending storm moving in from the west. Fortunately, the farmers in the area gave little heed to such warnings, as rain was always welcome in Amberville that time of year, though for Robin, the approaching storm seemed to mirror the emotions building in her heart.

Robin felt restless. As much as she anticipated her departure, she dreaded the day just the same. She couldn't stop thinking about Bobby. Robin knew that if she left now, she would never see him again. Why does life do that to you, she wondered? Why, when you finally think that you know what you want, does life throw a distraction at you and make you doubt your own mind? It didn't seem fair.

Still, she couldn't deny her attraction to Bobby. She had never felt that way about anyone before. It left her feeling very confused. Her heart ached over the thought of being separated from him. She didn't want to leave, and yet how could she stay in Amberville now? With so much she wanted to do, with so much of the world she wanted to see, she knew if she didn't leave now, if she hesitated even for one day, she would be trapped there forever.

A week had passed since the funeral. She and Bobby had been spending most of their time together. After his fruitless meeting with Martin Louden at the bank, Bobby called to tell her what happened. He sounded lost and lonely. Robin knew how devastated he felt. She invited him to call her if he needed to talk, or even if he just wanted some company. Bobby took her up on that offer, and since then they had become inseparable. They would sit for hours out on her porch at night, talking about the future. All the same, she had not seen him now for a couple of days. Just when she thought that they were getting closer, he quit coming around and stopped answering his phone, which also confused her.

Time was growing short. Plans needed to be made if they had any chance of staying together after she left Amberville. Robin couldn't wait for him to contact her. She had to know how he felt, even if she had to bring the subject up herself. Good or bad, she couldn't leave without knowing the truth. She decided to drive over to Bobby's house and settle it once and for all. Ironically, Robin feared both scenarios equally — that he did share her feelings, and that he didn't — though such is the nature of love, especially when one is only eighteen.

Bobby was at home, sitting at the kitchen table, pondering his situation. He too was running out of time, and he still had no clue about what to do. He only had two weeks before he had to be out of the house, not nearly enough time to plan a move. Where was he supposed to go? What was he going to do with his parent's belongings? He couldn't just leave them behind. The problem frustrated him. This was certainly not what he expected to find when he came home.

While he sat there pondering those unanswered questions, the wind began to pick up outside as the storm grew nearer. A grumbling of thunder could be heard off in the distance. Bobby got up from the table and walked to the back door, staring through the screen door up at the sky. Duke had been sleeping at Bobby's feet under the table. He got up, stretched and yawned in the middle of the kitchen floor, then gave himself a good shake as he followed Bobby to the door, hinting that he needed to go out.

Bobby turned on the back porch light and opened the screen for him, then went back to sit down. An issue of the *Sentinel* was lying on the table, the same issue that contained the obituary of his father, the same issue that his mother had been looking at the day she took her life. Bobby glanced at it for a minute, quickly browsing the front page, when a headline suddenly caught his attention.

There was a long article on the front page about a heated meeting at Town Hall. From what Bobby could gather, a united assemblage of angry farmers had gathered at Town Hall to protest a recent zoning change, proposed by the *Amberville Businessmen's Association*, to lease some available farmland to an outside developer for the intended purpose of turning it into a business district, thus expanding the Amberville town boundaries by encroaching on their farmlands.

But what really caught his attention was the surprising revelation that the Amberville Bank owned the properties being considered for the project. It all began to make sense to him. It looked as if Martin Loudon was purposely foreclosing on certain farms in the area, guarded by shady legal protections, and then leasing that same land to the developers, all with the knowledge and the approval of the officials at Town Hall, who without a doubt were getting substantial kickbacks for looking the other way.

Bobby angrily slammed his fist down on the table. His parents had died for Martin Louden's greed. Suddenly, a terrible thought entered Bobby's mind. He remembered something that Jimmy Louden said to him at the funeral home, when he whispered *I'm a killer too!* Bobby wasn't stupid. He had heard all the gossip around town about his father's "alleged" accident since being home, and how some folks in town were saying that it really wasn't an accident at all. But even if Martin were involved in a scheme to scam the local farmers, a scheme that would surely be worth thousands to him and his business associates, would he be willing to send his son out to commit murder over a land deal?

Bobby sat and pondered that question for a moment. Suppose his father had caught wind of what Martin was doing. What if he then confronted Martin about it? The bank was well within its rights, in a legal sense that is, to take the farms, but what if someone started asking a lot of prying questions, the kind of questions that Martin would prefer not to answer. The mere impression of any impropriety by the President of the Amberville Bank would certainly be enough to ruin that institution financially, and if the bank went under, then so did the development deal. What would a man like Martin Louden do when faced with a situation like that, he wondered?

Out on the back porch, Duke suddenly jumped up and started barking. A moment later, a pick-up truck pulled into the back yard. Bobby was already feeling paranoid after reading the *Sentinel* article, especially considering the fact that his father may have been murdered. He didn't have any idea who might be outside, nor was he taking any chances either. He ran into the living room to get his father's shotgun. When he stepped through the door out onto the back porch, the bright headlights of the truck blinded his eyes, leaving him at a disadvantage to the intentions of whoever was out there, whatever those intentions were.

Bobby took a brave stance and raised the gun to his shoulder, pointing it at the driver's side windshield. "What do you want?" he yelled across the yard.

All at once the headlights died and a lone figure exited the truck. He tightened his grip and took a direct bead on the shadowy stranger.

"Don't shoot! It's just me," a scared little voice called out.

It was Robin Danaher. Bobby immediately lowered the gun and let out a sigh of relief. He stepped down off of the porch with Duke close behind.

“That’s a good way to get yourself shot,” he scolded her.

“I didn’t think you’d mind if I dropped by,” she replied. “I didn’t expect you to point a gun at me though. Is this always how you greet company?”

Bobby chuckled. “I’m sorry. I suppose it wasn’t very hospitable of me. I wasn’t sure who was out here.”

“I thought you would be happy to see me,” Robin pouted.

Bobby really was happy to see her. In fact, when his thoughts weren’t all cluttered up with his problems, he found himself thinking about Robin a lot. What would be the point in pursuing it though? Robin would soon be in New York, and he had no idea what his future held. That’s why he hadn’t called. It was a no-win situation. Neither of them needed to be involved with someone right now. Just the same, it delighted him that she cared enough to come by.

“I am happy to see to you,” he said with a smile. “I could really use the company.”

“You should have called then,” she chided him.

“I wanted to, really. It’s just that I’m not very good company myself right now. I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“I understand,” she sympathized. “Have you decided what you’re going to do?”

“Not yet. I just can’t figure out where to go. What am I going to do with all this stuff? I thought when I came home that I could work on the farm while going to school. Now I don’t even have a job.”

Robin looked at him compassionately. She understood his sorrow and she wished that she could help him. It’s human nature to want to help someone in need, though sometimes in our urgent desire to help, we occasionally make hasty decisions that sound good at the moment without having really taken the time to think it through. Robin suddenly saw an easy solution to her dilemma, and she ran with it without ever considering the consequences.

“Just forget all this then,” she said. “Come to New York with me. You can go to school up there, and I’d have a friend to hang around with. It will be better for both of us.”

Bobby seemed surprised by her unexpected suggestion. In fact, Robin seemed a little surprised herself that she had even suggested it.

“I don’t know, Robin.” he replied, wavering. “It’s not that simple. I can’t just walk away from all this.”

“Why not?” she challenged him. “What could possibly be keeping you here now that your parents are gone? You said yourself that the only reason you’re here is because your mom needed help with the farm. Well, your mom is dead and they’ve taken your farm. Louden is running you out. Let him *have* the farm. Amberville is not the whole world. Staying here is not living, Bobby. It’s dying, and you know it. There’s so much life rushing by us. We’re wasting away in this town. Let’s just get out of here.”

“I can’t leave,” he insisted. “I have something I have to do first, and I don’t know how long it’s going to take.”

“What?” she asked impatiently. “What’s so important that makes you want to stay?”

“I think I might have stumbled onto something,” he told her.

“What do you mean?”

“Come on inside. I’ll show you.”

Robin followed him inside. Bobby showed her the article and explained to her what he thought it meant. Robin really didn’t care about any of that though. All she wanted to do was get away and leave Amberville to itself.

“So what? What do you care if Martin Louden is ripping off the farmers? Let them fight that battle. It’s not your problem anymore.”

“Not my problem?” he asked in disbelief. “Don’t you realize my father might have died over this? The worst of it is, my parents did a lot for these people around here. Where were they? They all knew what Louden was doing, yet nobody offered them any help. Do you know why? Because they were afraid that he would do the same thing to them. I can’t let him get away with that.”

“And how are you going to prove it? You can’t even afford a lawyer. All you’re going to do is to create more problems for yourself. You can’t win. Nobody in this town is going to help you either. Louden has money, power, and the law on his side. Let it go! Getting back at him won’t bring your parents back, or the farm, so

what have you got to gain? After everything is said and done, you'll still be standing here wondering what to do next. It's not worth it."

"I've got to try. I just can't walk away without trying."

Robin had hoped that he would come with her. It seemed obvious though that he meant to stay. She finally had her answer. Now she had to make her own decision. She could either stay there and fight his battle with him, or leave him there to fight it alone. In that single moment, Robin learned that no matter how much you love someone, sometimes you just have to let them go.

"Fine! You stay here and fight. I'm going to New York." With that said, she got up from the table and started for the door.

Her abrupt exit took Bobby by surprise. In that moment he learned something too. He realized that the thought of her leaving was more painful than any problem Martin Loudon could throw at him. Robin was right. Amberville wasn't his problem anymore. The people had no honor or courage. They were cowards and hypocrites. The only one brave enough to stand up had been his father, and when he died they still did nothing except to watch him die. So let them have their town, it didn't matter, because in the end you reap what you sow.

"Robin?" he called to her.

She stopped and turned around without saying anything.

"When are you planning on leaving?" he asked.

"I'm ready to leave tonight," she replied.

"What about your folks? What are you going to tell them?"

"Don't worry about them. I'll take care of that. My mom and dad have been pushing me to go anyway so I can get settled before my classes start. I'll sneak away after they are asleep and leave them a note saying that I didn't want to go through all the sad goodbyes. They'll understand. I can't take another day in this town, Bobby. I've been waiting to get out of here for as long as I can remember. I have to leave here before I go crazy like the rest of these people."

"I can't leave tonight. We'll have to wait till tomorrow. Give me till then."

"Okay, if you're really serious, I'll pick you up after dark. We can be out of here before anybody even knows we're gone. Just don't tell me you'll go and then change your mind. All I want is the truth."

“I’ll be here,” he assured her.

Robin smiled sweetly at him. Bobby walked her back outside to her truck and opened the door for her. She turned to him before getting in, looking in his eyes.

“I can’t wait,” she said.

“It’s just one more day,” Bobby assured her. “What can happen in one day?”

“Let it go by quick so we can get out of here.”

“It will,” he promised.

Robin kissed him tenderly, and then she drove off.

As she turned out of the driveway, she never noticed the other truck sitting in the shadows across the road with its lights out, nor did she notice the driver and his companion. Jimmy and his brother had been out drinking all evening. Jimmy was crazy with jealousy. He still hoped that Robin would change her mind and come running back to him, though now with Bobby back home, he knew that would never happen. He suspected that Robin was seeing Bobby, and he had secretly been following her around for a week, hoping to catch them together. And now he knew for sure.