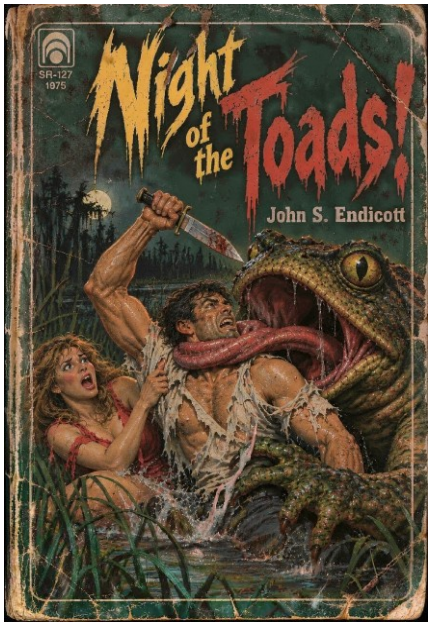


Night of the Toads!
by John S. Endicott

PART ONE

At midnight the asphalt on Route K was still soft enough to take a boot print.

Sheriff Callie Boone drove it with the windows down and her elbow out. The air conditioning in the county's Plymouth Fury had quit the second week of June, and the commissioners were still arguing over the invoice.

Under the dash, the Motorola hissed with nothing. Nobody in Knox County had anything to report, which was how she liked it.

Then the cornfields lit up. Green light blasted across them from behind her and above, row after row, bright enough that Boone could see every stalk clear out to the tree line. The stalks threw shadows across the road ahead, long and sharp and swinging.

Her foot came off the gas. Something passed over the car low enough that she felt it in her fillings, a burning point dragging a green smear behind it, headed for the timber northwest of town.

She counted without meaning to. One. Two. Three.

The concussion rocked the Fury on its springs. The rearview mirror jumped loose and hung by one screw. Out across the fields every dog in the county opened up at once, porch dogs and farm dogs and somebody's beagle chained behind a silo, all of them howling in the dark.

Everything else went silent. The bugs in the ditch, the crickets along the shoulder, whatever had been singing in the corn. Boone hadn't noticed any of it until it quit, and now the dogs were barking into nothing.

Boone sat with the engine idling and the radio mic in her hand, unkeyed.

"Okay," she said to nobody.

She eased the Fury onto the shoulder and got out. She stood beside the car with one hand on the roof and looked northwest, where the light had gone. Nothing out there but dark and the tops of the trees.

The dogs gave up one by one. For a while there was nothing at all.

Then a cricket started up somewhere in the ditch. Another answered it. A frog down at the culvert tried a note, stopped, tried again. Little by little the night filled back in until it sounded like any other July night in Knox County.

She got back in the car and drove home.

By six the next morning, the station out of Kirksville was calling it a meteor. Probably burned up before it hit, the announcer said. He sounded pleased about it.

Boone had already been out at first light. She'd walked the fence line where the corn met the timber and hadn't found a crater. What she'd found were dead birds. Sparrows and a couple of grackles, a dozen or so, lying in the grass along the ditch.

And then the smell.

It came up off the standing water in the ditch, sharp and metallic, strong enough that she tasted it at the back of her throat. She crouched and looked at the water. It was brown and still, same as any ditch in July.

She stood up, wiped her hands on her pants, and went back to the car. By the time she got home she'd almost stopped noticing it on her clothes.

* * *

Two weeks later, a man from the state parked a green Plymouth Valiant in the teachers' lot at Baring High. Every jar in his trunk was labeled in the same small, tight hand.

Boone found him in the science room. The school had been shut since May, but the formaldehyde from last spring's fetal pigs had soaked into the cabinets for good. He'd pushed two lab benches together and lined them with sample jars, each one holding a few inches of brown water.

"You're Mercer."

"And you're the Sheriff." He gave the word a little extra room, the way people did when they'd been expecting a man.

"Complaints came out of my county. Figured I'd see who the state sent."

"Department of Natural Resources." He pushed his glasses up. "Fish kills, mostly. Three ponds and a stretch of the South Fabius. Nine times out of ten it's anhydrous runoff, or a hog lagoon letting go after a hard rain. Or dumping. You'd be amazed what people throw in a farm pond."

"Like what?"

"Paint thinner. Transmission fluid. A whole Frigidaire, once."

Boone lit a Winston. "Any of that explain why Walt Briggs's pond smells like a hot penny?"

He stopped with a jar halfway to the bench. "Hot penny. Okay. Copper, then? Some farmers dump copper sulfate in their ponds to kill algae, and if he overdid it that would explain the fish. Or iron. Iron bacteria in a spring-fed pond can put off a metallic odor. Or blood, technically. Blood's high in iron." He set the jar down. "When you say hot, do you mean warm, or more of a burnt quality?"

Boone looked at him for a while.

"I mean it stinks," she said. "Really bad."

Mercer didn't answer. He was looking past her at the county drainage map somebody had thumbtacked beside the periodic table. Blue creeks ran across it like veins, and a lot of them started up in the northwest corner.

"Let's go take a look," he said.

* * *

Briggs was at the sale barn in Edina, so they had the place to themselves. The pond sat at the bottom of a pasture behind a stand of cottonwoods, flat and brown. Along the near bank, a dozen dead bluegill floated belly-up, their white sides turned to the sun.

Mercer pulled on his waders. Boone stayed on the bank.

"Snakes in there," she said. "We got plenty of water snakes around here."

"I'm pretty sure they went somewhere else or died. This water seems pretty toxic."

He went in slow, feeling for the bottom, and pushed into the cattails at the shallow end. After a minute he stopped and bent over the water.

"Huh."

"What?"

"Toad egg mass. Or something close." He lifted a mass of jelly on his palm, dense and round as a fist. "Toads lay strings. Long ones. This is all packed together."

Boone came down the bank despite herself. The eggs were clear, each one holding a dark embryo, and tiny black specks drifted through the jelly around them. Pepper in aspic.

Mercer put his free hand flat in the water beside the clutch. Then he reached out and put it in the water a yard away.

"Feel this."

"I'm good."

"The water's warm around the eggs. Out here it's cool." He frowned. "This pond's spring-fed. It shouldn't be warm anywhere. Amphibians are really sensitive to water quality, so I'm surprised they seem to be fine."

He eased six eggs into a jar and screwed the lid down. Maybe twenty were left in the reeds. He looked at them a moment and left them where they were.

He was halfway up the bank when Boone said, "Mercer."

Out in the middle of the pond, the water bulged. A broad wake rolled across the surface, slow and heavy, and slid into the reeds on the far side. The cattails bent over and stayed bent.

Mercer stood dripping in his waders. "How deep is it out there?"

"Walt says six feet, tops."

They waited for whatever it was to come up for air. One minute. Three. Boone's cigarette burned down to her knuckles and she flicked it into the grass.

It never came up.

"Well?" she said.

Mercer shrugged. "Snapping turtle, probably. A big one can stay under for an hour. With all these dead fish, he's eating better than he has all year." He held up the jar. "I've got the eggs and a water sample. I'll run them tonight and see what turns up."

Boone was still looking at the reeds on the far side. She didn't say anything else on the walk back to the car.

* * *

That night, under a gooseneck lamp, Mercer watched the eggs in a ten-gallon aquarium and made notes. The rest of the science room was dark. Moths ticked against the window behind him, trying to get at the light.

The embryos sat in the center of each egg, dark and curled. The black specks around them wouldn't stay still. They twitched and drifted through the jelly, restless, working their way inward until they clustered tight against the embryos, as if something inside was calling them in.

Around midnight he noticed the smell. It was faint at first, a sour tang coming up off the tank. He lifted the lid and it hit him full on, sharp enough to make his eyes water. He siphoned off some of the water and replaced it with fresh water he'd dechlorinated.

He fell asleep at the bench around two with his cheek on his notebook.

When he woke, all six had hatched. By full light the tadpoles were as long as his thumb, gray-black and fat, circling the tank in tight loops. The sour smell had gotten into everything, the desks, his shirt, the pages of his notes. He dropped in a pinch of fish flakes. The flakes floated on the surface and slowly sank. The tadpoles ignored them.

He dropped in a cricket from the jar on the windowsill.

The water churned white for a second and went still. There wasn't enough left of the cricket to find.

Mercer sat back and wrote down the time. When he looked up again, two of the tadpoles had a third one between them, pulling in opposite directions.

* * *

By evening there were four left, and all four had legs.

Mercer locked the room and walked two blocks to the café for a ham sandwich and a Coke he didn't finish. He was gone forty minutes.

The aquarium was in pieces when he got back. Glass all over the bench. Three specimens lay in the wreckage, torn open and half eaten. The fourth was gone.

He called Boone from the pay phone out front.

She checked the door and every window. Nothing forced. She got down on one knee with her flashlight and swept it under the lab benches.

"Mercer. You own a cat?"

"No."

"Somebody did." A big orange tomcat lay against the baseboard, belly split open, most of what belonged inside it missing. From the cat, a wet trail ran across the linoleum, glistening in the beam, and stopped in the middle of the floor.

Boone looked at Mercer.

Mercer looked up.

It dropped off the top shelf and landed on his shoulders. A squat, black-warted toad the size of a football, and heavy. Its mouth split open on rows of small hooked teeth. Its tongue whipped out and wrapped his forearm twice and squeezed until his hand went white.

Mercer went down hard. The thing rode him to the floor, working its jaws toward his neck.

Boone shot it off him.

It hit the wall and dropped to the linoleum, where it twitched for a long time.

She kept the .38 pointed at it. "What the hell is going on?"

* * *

He dissected it on the bench at nine o'clock, his forearm wrapped in gauze from the first aid kit. Boone watched from the doorway and smoked.

"Well?"

"Amphibian. Basically." He peeled back the skin along the hind leg. The muscle underneath was dense as rope, packed so tight the scalpel skidded. "That's why it's so heavy. There's no fat on it anywhere. All muscle."

"What's the black stuff?"

The specks were everywhere. Clumped in the liver. Threaded through the heart. Salted across the brain when he cracked the skull open.

Mercer touched one with the tip of a probe, then with his gloved finger.

"They're warm," he said. "The rest of it's gone cold. These are still warm."

Boone came in off the doorway. "How long to get this big?"

He counted back on his fingers. Counted again.

"Four days. From laying." He set the probe down very carefully.

Then he remembered the other twenty eggs.

* * *

They drove out after dark with the headlights off for the last quarter mile.

The egg mass was gone. Mercer waded in to his knees and felt through the reeds with both hands and came up with nothing.

The pond was dead quiet.

Boone swept her flashlight across the water. On the far bank, two yellow eyes shone back at her.

Then two more. Then a dozen. She moved the beam and they kept coming, pair after pair in the reeds, all the way around the shoreline as far as the light could reach.

"Mercer," she said quietly. "Out of the water."

He was already moving.

Every pair of eyes turned at the same moment to face northwest, toward the timber. Then they turned back and faced the two of them.

On the far side, something much bigger slid off the bank and into the pond without a splash.

They ran for the car.

Behind them the shoreline came alive. Splash after splash, dozens of them, as the things in the reeds went into the water all at once. Under that came a thick, wet gulping sound from out in the middle of the pond, like something enormous swallowing and swallowing and not getting full.

PART TWO

Boone's radio started before the sun was all the way up, and it didn't stop.

"Sheriff, this is dispatch. Walter Briggs called in. Says his chickens are gone. All of them."

"Hinkle place is reporting a dog missing off the chain."

"Mrs. Pruitt says her cat didn't come in. She wants Carl to look when he gets a minute."

"Sheriff, got a trucker says something big crossed Route K in front of him about four this morning. Says he about put it in the ditch."

Boone stood in Briggs's barnyard with the mic in one hand and a cup of gas station coffee in the other. The chicken coop was twenty feet away. Something had taken hold of the wire and peeled it back in one long curl, the way you'd open a sardine can.

"What'd the trucker say it looked like?" she asked.

"He said a rock. A rock that jumped."

She clicked off.

Mercer had the drainage map spread across the hood of the Fury, the corners pinned under his thermos and her ticket book. He'd been marking it with a grease pencil while she took calls.

"Briggs," he said, tapping. "Hinkle. Pruitt. Route K where it crosses the Middle Fabius." Every mark sat on a blue line. A creek, a ditch, a culvert. Every one of them ran downstream from the pond.

"They're following the water," Boone said.

"They're following the food. The water's how they get there."

* * *

The calf lay on its side in the weeds along the creek, eyes open, flies already busy. Something had punched a dozen deep holes in its neck and then pulled, hard, and kept pulling.

Mercer crouched at the edge of the creek. The mud was printed with tracks, wide and splay-toed, heading into the water. He laid his hand flat inside the largest one. His fingers didn't reach the front of it.

"Gotta be almost twelve inches," he said.

"How big's the animal?"

He looked at the depth of the print. Pushed his thumb into the mud beside it to compare.

"Hundred pounds. Maybe more."

Boone squatted down next to him. Her knees popped. "What the fuck do you think we have going on here?"

"I don't know."

* * *

Walt Briggs kept a gas tank on a stand beside his machine shed, the kind every farm in the county had. Boone found four empty cans in the shed and filled them one at a time, watching the gauge roll.

"Sixty cents a gallon," she said. "Walt's going to bill the county."

"Walt's going to be glad he's alive to do it."

"You don't know Walt."

She loaded the cans into the trunk and wedged them with a spare tire so they wouldn't tip. Mercer wandered into the shed and came back out with a hunting knife from Briggs's workbench, eight inches of blade in a leather sheath. He clipped it to his belt.

Boone looked at the knife. Then at him.

"Don't," he said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You were going to."

"I was going to say you kinda look badass for a scientist."

"Oh. Okay, yeah. You can say that." He smiled. "Any luck getting us some help?"

Boone shook her head. "Tornado touched down east of here. Every spare deputy and state trooper is tied up over there."

"Nobody else?"

"I mentioned giant toads running amok. Didn't exactly move us to the top of the list."

Mercer glanced across the empty fields. "So it's just you and me?"

"Welcome to rural Missouri. Being out in the middle of nowhere has a lot of advantages. Just not when you come across a horde of giant chicken-eating toads."

She caught Mercer giving her a quick once-over. He looked away almost immediately, but she'd noticed.

Boone was quietly pleased. She liked to think she was still pretty attractive for a woman closing in on forty. Besides, it seemed like everyone worth looking at around here was already married.

* * *

By sunset the heat lightning had started up in the west, silent flashes behind a wall of clouds that turned the fields orange, then white, then orange again. Boone took the gravel road back toward town with the windows down and the radio muttering.

Half a mile out, she hit the brakes.

A toad sat in the middle of the road. It was the size of a Labrador, black and lumpy, its throat pulsing in the headlights. It didn't move.

"Holy shit," Mercer said. "That's big. Back up."

She got the Fury into reverse. The toad jumped.

It landed on the hood with a bang that rocked the whole car, and the metal buckled in under it. Its face slid up against the windshield. Boone could see the pale underside of its jaw, the rows of little hooks. The teeth scraped across the glass with a squeal.

She drew her .38 and fired through the windshield.

The glass blew out in a shower of green cubes. It went down both their collars and spilled into Boone's lap. The toad slid backward off the hood and hit the gravel.

Boone kicked the last of the glass out of the frame with her boot heel.

"County's going to love this," she said. "I just blew out my windshield because of a fucking frog."

"Actually, a toad."

She looked at him.

Mercer straightened his glasses. "Frogs generally have smoother, wetter skin and longer legs. Toads are usually stockier, with dry, warty skin and shorter legs."

Boone looked at the enormous carcass sprawled in the gravel.

"That's fascinating. Does knowing that make it any less likely to eat us?"

"No."

"Then I can call it a fucking frog."

The beast lay on its back in the headlights. Mercer knelt beside it with the hunting knife.

"Female," he said. "And she appears to be gravid." He looked up at Boone. "Pregnant."

He cut open the belly. Eggs spilled onto the gravel. Hundreds of them, clear and round, each with a dark speck at its center, piling up around his knees. He picked one up. It was warm in his palm.

"Four days to grow." He set the egg down. "Maybe less to breed. The first ones are already laying."

Thunder came rolling in from the west. A fat drop hit the gravel beside his hand. Then another.

Mercer looked up at the sky.

"This is exactly what they want," he said. "Toads breed like crazy in weather like this."

* * *

The rain came down in sheets, straight through the hole where the windshield had been. Boone drove with her hat pulled low and water running off the brim onto her knees. Mercer held the map inside his shirt.

The lights of Baring went out all at once. The water tower, the streetlights, the Texaco sign. One second the town was there and the next it was a dark shape under the lightning.

The radio exploded.

"Caller on Maple says something came through her screen door, she's got kids in there..."

"...dragged Hollis's dog right off the chain, chain and all..."

"...rolled his truck in the ditch on Highway 15, says something landed on the cab..."

Gunshots popped somewhere across town, small and flat in the rain. Then more, from a different direction.

"Unit Two to dispatch." A young voice came over the radio. Carl. "I just got back into town. I'm at the Dempsey place on Tolliver Road. Mrs. Dempsey reported that there's something under her porch." A pause. "I can't find her, but I'm looking at this thing now and... Sheriff, you ain't gonna believe this."

Boone grabbed the radio. "Believe me, Carl. I probably will."

Another pause. Longer this time.

"I don't know what this thing is. But Jesus, Sheriff, it's fucking huge."

Boone and Mercer looked at each other.

"Carl, get back to your car. Now!"

Static.

"Carl? Carl, you copy?"

Nothing.

* * *

His cruiser sat at the end of a gravel lane, driver's door open, dome light burning. The wipers were still going. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Carl's revolver lay in the mud beside the rear tire. The whole driver's side of the car was painted red, and the rain was washing it down in long pink streaks.

Boone picked up the revolver. She wiped it on her shirt, checked the cylinder, and pushed it into her belt. Then she stood there in the rain looking at the open door.

She didn't say anything for a long time.

Mercer lifted his hand toward her shoulder. He stopped halfway and let it drop.

"His mother called about her cat this morning," Boone said.

Mercer didn't answer.

"Let's go," she said.

* * *

They heard it before they saw it, behind the last farmhouse on the edge of town. A low, wet clicking in the dark.

Boone killed the engine and they got out. Her flashlight found it in the yard between the house and the clothesline. A toad the size of a pony, squatting in the mud with rain beading on its warts.

Its throat began to swell.

The sac stretched and kept stretching, pale and veined, until it was bigger than the toad's whole body. The skin went so thin they could almost see through it.

"Cover your ears," Mercer said.

It croaked.

The croak hit them like a car door slamming beside their heads. Every window in the farmhouse rattled. Boone's ears rang so hard the rain seemed to disappear. Mercer dropped to one knee, hands clamped over his ears. The yard tilted beneath her, and she tasted copper as she fought to keep her balance.

The toad leaped.

Boone tried to move, but her legs weren't ready. She stumbled backward and hit the mud hard, the revolver still clenched in her hand. The thing landed and came at her.

She fired three times. She felt the revolver buck in her hand and saw the muzzle flashes, but couldn't hear the shots over the ringing in her ears. The third one stopped the toad a yard from her boots. It came down in a heap, its mouth hanging open.

For a second, before its eyes went dull, Boone thought she saw something deep in its throat. A faint green glow, way down in the darkness.

She blinked, and it was gone.

* * *

Back in the car, both of them soaked through, Mercer spread the map across his knees and held the flashlight between his teeth. Boone started the engine but didn't put the car in gear. Her ears were still ringing from the croak.

She said something to Mercer. He looked up.

"What?"

"I said, what are you looking for?"

Mercer pulled the flashlight from his mouth and traced a finger along the map. The Middle Fabius, its branches, the drainage ditches and culverts. His finger stopped, doubled back, then followed another creek.

Boone watched his expression change.

"I've been looking at where they're coming from," he said. "I should've been looking at where they're going."

His finger stopped.

"Here. The Tolliver place. There's a pond out there."

"It's an old spring pond," Boone said. She looked at where his finger rested, then at him. "Nobody's lived out there since '68."

"Rain. A big pond. And no people."

Boone stared through the empty windshield at the rain.

"Sounds like toad orgy heaven." She reached for the gearshift. "We fucking need the state police out here."

"How long will that take, though?"

Boone didn't answer. She put the car in gear and pulled onto the road.

* * *

The Tolliver pond sat below a collapsed barn at the end of a rutted track. Boone crept the Fury down it with the headlights on high and the beams swinging across the shoreline.

The mud was alive.

Toads crowded the banks, hundreds of them, shoulder to shoulder. Some were no bigger than a fist. Some were the size of dogs. A few were the size of something worse. The water was black and thick with tadpoles, and in the shallows the egg masses were piled like spilled tapioca, glowing a faint green under the surface.

Every one of them was croaking. The same slow beat, all together. Boom. Boom. Boom.

"Boone," Mercer whispered. "Look over there."

The reeds on the far side parted.

Something pushed through them. It was the size of a cow, its hide scarred and knotted with warts, and its eyes were as big as hubcaps. It came down to the water's edge and stopped. Its throat began to swell.

Every toad on the bank turned to face the patrol car.

PART THREE

The croak rolled across the pond, deep and booming, and the whole bank seemed to move.

Boone couldn't understand what she was seeing. Then the mud erupted with toads. Dozens of them came bounding through the rain, bodies slick and black in the headlights, mouths open as they raced toward the car.

The first struck Boone's door with a meaty thud. Another hit beside it. Then they were everywhere. They battered the doors and hurled themselves against the car, teeth scraping metal.

One landed on the roof hard enough to buckle it inward over Boone's head. She ducked as another sailed across the hood.

Something wet and heavy shot through the empty frame and landed in Mercer's lap.

He screamed.

Boone caught a glimpse of warts, a pale swollen belly, and a mouth full of tiny teeth snapping inches from Mercer's face. He caught it across the head with his flashlight. The thing clung to him, hind legs kicking, until a third blow knocked it into the floorboards.

Mercer shoved his door open and kicked it out into the rain.

Another toad immediately lunged for the opening.

"Shut the fucking door!"

Mercer slammed it just as the creature struck.

"Hold on!" Boone yelled as she threw the car into gear.

She gunned the engine and cut the wheel. The Fury slewed sideways in the mud, tires spraying, and came around until the trunk faced the water.

"Now, get out! The gas cans are in the trunk!"

Mercer went out his door into the rain. Boone went out hers with Carl's revolver in both hands.

She heard the trunk lid bang and stick, then the thump of his hand on it and the pop as it came open. She didn't look back. Something big was coming up out of the reeds at her, and she fired at it. Fired again. Somewhere behind her a can cap hit the ground, and she caught the sharp stink of gasoline as it went spinning out over the reeds.

Carl's revolver clicked empty. She threw it into the dark and drew her own.

Lightning flashed. For one white second Boone saw the colony, the whole shoreline humped and crawling, coming at them in a wave.

"Mercer!"

"Last ones!" He heaved the final two cans past her, and gas sheeted across the cattails.

Boone pulled a road flare from her utility belt, struck it on the bumper, and pitched it underhand into the reeds.

The pond went up with a sound like a giant taking a breath. Fire ran across the slick in a bright orange sheet and climbed into the cattails.

Toads came out of the smoke screaming, a thin high sound Boone had never heard an animal make. Some were burning. Some of the burning ones kept coming.

A big one hit the side of the Fury. The car rocked up onto two wheels, hung there, and slammed back down.

"Go!" Boone shouted. "High ground!"

She ran right. He ran left.

The smoke rolled in between them and he was gone.

* * *

Boone crouched behind a rotted stump and fed shells into her .38 from the loops on her belt. The adrenaline rush was making her hands shake.

Something thumped in the smoke to her left. Then again, closer. She held her breath. A shape went by six feet away, low and heavy, still smoldering along its back, and she heard it breathing, a wet click with every pull. It hopped on past the stump and was gone into the dark.

She stayed frozen behind the stump, the revolver pressed against her chest, and couldn't make herself move.

"Boone!"

Mercer, yelling for her from somewhere up the slope. His voice cut straight through the smoke and whatever had locked up inside her let go.

She went toward it low and fast, through smoke that stung her eyes and made them run. Her boot came down on something soft that squirmed. She didn't look.

"Boone!"

"Quit yelling, they can hear you."

He was standing beside a dead cottonwood at the top of the rise, soaked and filthy, the flashlight dangling from his hand. His glasses were gone, and he squinted at her like she might be one of them.

For a second neither of them said anything. Then the ground shook under her boots.

A giant toad came out of the smoke. One whole side of it was blistered raw from the fire, the warts split and weeping. Its hubcap-sized eyes found them, and Boone felt them settle on her.

She fired. The bullet took it in the shoulder.

She fired again. The flank.

It kept coming.

"Get behind me," Mercer said.

"Fuck no! I'm the one with the gun."

He stepped out anyway, waving and moving away from her along the ridge. "Hey! Over here!"

Boone watched the toad's head swing toward him and knew what was coming a half second before it did.

Its tongue hit him square in the chest like a baseball bat.

* * *

The blow folded him in half. Before he could fall, the tongue was already curling, whipping around his back and under his arms, once and then again. Boone saw it cinch tight and pin his arms to his sides. Then it yanked, and Mercer left his feet.

He hit the ground and slid through the mud toward that open mouth. He got one hand free and pulled the hunting knife and sawed at the tongue. Boone could see the blade skidding on it, barely biting. It slipped in the slime, twisted out of his fingers, and stuck point-first in the mud.

Boone fired. The bullet tore through the toad's cheek.

She fired again. It punched into the thick meat of its neck.

The toad opened its mouth.

"No," Boone said. "No, no, no."

The jaws closed over Mercer's head and shoulders.

She put a fifth round into its body. It didn't even flinch. Mercer's chest slid into its throat. His arms were gone. His belt buckle was going.

She fired her last round.

Click.

Mercer's boots kicked outside the toad's lips. The toad hunched down, blinked its enormous eyes, and swallowed.

No time to reload.

The knife stood in the mud where he'd dropped it. Boone ran, yanked it free, and kept running straight at the toad.

It tried to turn. It was still gulping, its throat working, and it moved slow.

She hit its side and climbed. The warts were slick and hot from the fire and she tore two fingernails getting a grip. She got a knee on its back. It bucked. She grabbed a fold of hide at the base of its skull and hung on.

She drove the knife into its left eye up to the hilt.

The toad heaved straight up. Boone hung on with one hand, wrenched the knife loose, and came down on the right eye with everything she had.

The toad threw her. She flew off its back and hit the mud flat, and every bit of breath left her at once.

* * *

The blind toad crashed through the burning reeds in circles. It ran into the dead cottonwood and bounced off. Its throat convulsed.

Mercer's boots started sliding backward out of its mouth.

The beast gagged. Then it vomited him into the mud in one long steaming flood. Slime, blood, chicken feathers, clumps of cat fur, a dog collar with the tags still on. A brown uniform boot, laced up.

Carl's.

The toad croaked once, loud enough to rattle Boone's teeth in her head, and bounded blind into the heart of the fire.

Boone crawled to Mercer. He lay on his back, coated in slime, and he wasn't breathing. She dug her fingers into his mouth and scooped it out. Rolled him onto his side. Pounded his back with her fist.

"Come on. Don't fucking die on me."

He coughed. Gagged. Dragged in a breath that sounded like it hurt all the way down.

She held him up by the shoulders while he threw up pond water into the mud.

"Can you walk?" she said.

He looked past her at the burning pond.

"I'd rather run."

* * *

The rain quit a little before sunrise.

Smoke drifted low over the Tolliver pond. The water was black and still, scummed with ash. Burnt toad carcasses lay heaped along the shoreline, curled and cooked, and where the egg masses had been there was only gray paste.

Somewhere back in the woods, a few survivors had gone quiet. Boone had heard them crashing off into the brush around four. She hadn't followed.

Mercer sat on the trunk of the Fury wrapped in a horse blanket that had ridden back there since Briggs's barn. He'd opened his shirt to look. His chest was purple from collarbone to belt, bruised in a wide spiral where the tongue had been.

"Thanks," he said. "For coming after me. Turns out that being swallowed by a toad sucks."

Boone lit a cigarette. Her hands were steady now. "I wasn't going to explain to the state police how I let a state-approved scientist get eaten by a giant fucking frog."

He laughed. It hurt, and he grabbed his ribs, and laughed anyway.

Her hand was on the trunk lid beside his. His hand found it. She didn't move hers.

Neither of them let go.

After a while Mercer got the tweezers out of his kit and walked down to the nearest carcass. Boone watched him pick through the burned belly. He came out with one black particle, no bigger than a pepper grain, and held it on his palm.

"Still moving," he said. "These things are fucking tough. I've never seen anything like this. No clue what kind of pollution would have caused this."

Boone came and looked. "Two weeks ago I saw something come down from the sky. Green light. Lit up the corn like noon. A comet or something."

"Where?"

She pointed northwest, over the tree line.

Mercer went to the trunk and unfolded the drainage map. Boone leaned over his shoulder while he traced it with his finger. Briggs Pond. The Middle Fabius. The Tolliver place. They'd been following the water downhill all this time. Now he traced it back up, and she watched every creek, every ditch, every branch run together into one patch of woods.

She remembered the eyes at Briggs Pond, every pair turning at once. Northwest.

Mercer folded the map.

Boone reached for her keys.

* * *

The Fury bumped down a logging track. Branches whipped in through the empty frame. Mercer held onto the dash.

The trees got worse the farther they went. Snapped off halfway up. Scorched black on one side. Then flattened, laid down in a ring, all pointing away from the same spot.

The track ended. They got out and walked.

The crater wasn't much. Thirty feet across, maybe, and full to the lip with black rainwater. The woods around it were silent. No birds. No bugs. Not even the drip of rain off the leaves.

They stood at the edge and looked down. The water was too dark to see into.

Then it moved.

Tadpoles. Thousands of them, packed so tight the whole surface rippled like muscle. Down in the dark, black specks glowed a faint and steady green.

A deep croak sounded from the trees behind them.

Another answered from the left. A third from the right. Then more, and more, until the woods on every side throbbed with one slow, booming beat. Boone felt it in her teeth and in the soles of her boots.

She opened her revolver and thumbed through the loops on her belt. She loaded what she had and snapped the cylinder shut.

Mercer stared at the gun. "How many do you have left?"

"Four."

"Four." He laughed, high and cracked. "Okay. When's your backup coming? Call somebody. Call anybody. We can't do this."

"I tried from the car. Nobody's answering."

"What does that mean? Did they get hit too?"

"I don't know."

"We can't fight off all these things with your four fucking bullets!"

"Nope."

"Then what's the plan?"

Boone looked out at the trees. The croaking was getting closer, and under it she could hear branches giving way.

"I plan on taking as many of them with me as I can."

Mercer stared at her. His mouth worked, but nothing came out. Then he shook his head and ran.

"Mercer!"

He didn't look back. She watched him crash through the snapped timber, arms pumping, the white of his shirt flashing between the trunks. He was almost to the tree line when two black shapes came down out of the woods on either side of him, huge and fast.

He screamed. The second scream broke off in a thick, wet gurgle.

Then nothing.

In the silence, something heavy began pushing through the brush toward her. Then something on her left. Then behind her, near the water.

Boone planted her feet at the edge of the crater, thumbed back the hammer, and raised the .38 in both hands.

Four rounds. She'd make every one of them count.

And she wouldn't scream. She promised herself that.

END

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