

TIGER DRIVE

a novel

**one family
too many secrets
four people who want to matter**

TERI CASE

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HARRY

Hello, my name is Harry.
—Sobriety meeting

Saturday morning, April 1, 1989

Harry opened his eyes and waited for his vision to clear. He was dressed and lying in bed—his bed. He recognized the quilt pattern on the damn twin mattress Janice had moved into their room six months before—and after seven kids and thirty years of marriage. The finality behind her action had made it one of the worst days of his life. They hadn't slept together since.

So he'd made it home, but how and when? He rolled onto his back and stared at the bedroom ceiling.

Another blackout.

What did he do last night? Or was it more than one night? He was no stranger to drinking binges and running blackouts that could last up to a week at a time. They had become part of his genetic makeup and bad habits over the past several

years, increasing at a disastrous rate. He looked at his watch: April 1. So one night was lost forever, and he was waking up on April Fools' Day.

He was a fool.

What had he done between the blackout and bed? Part of him wanted to know, and part of him didn't. Nothing good ever came out of being so drunk he couldn't remember a damn thing.

His head pounded, and his ulcerated stomach gurgled with acid, rushing heat up his esophagus and burning his dry throat. His breath smelled and tasted of vomit and putrid mistakes. Waking up from a time warp was the worst feeling; he dreaded putting the pieces together because they were always wrapped in regret and guilt. Without fail, he'd always said or done something he shouldn't have. Something he could never take back.

Why did he keep doing this to himself? To his family?

The last thing he remembered was drinking beers at the Creek Bar.

Harry lifted his hand to his chest and then curled his fist over his heart. The skin over his knuckles stretched tight and began to burn.

What in the hell?

His knuckles were busted wide open, and dried blood caked his skin. A trail of bruises and scratches ran from his wrist to his elbow. His other arm didn't look any better.

He fought escalating panic. What happened last night? Who did he hurt? He eyed his hand. His best-case scenario would be that he had hit something, and his worst-case scenario would be that he'd hit someone. The scratches on his arms indicated the worst.

Janice was asleep in her bed, and her blankets pooled around her waist.

He eyed the plump skin of her upper arm. No obvious bruises. What a relief. Leaning across the two-foot chasm between their beds, he shook her shoulder.

“Janice. Janice,” he said around small gasps of air. He cleared his throat and stroked her arm. “Janice.”

“Leave me alone.” She shrugged her shoulder away from him and buried the side of her face deeper into her pillow.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No, I was in bed when you came home and passed out.” She tensed and started to turn to look at him. “Why?”

He nudged her shoulder to keep her in place. “Nothing to worry about, go back to sleep.”

She tilted her head enough to squint at him. “Heard that before.”

He couldn’t bear to alarm her before he knew any details. Busted fists couldn’t be good news, and it’d be best to let her remain oblivious, at least for now. He lay back on his bed. He looked again at his right hand and flexed his fingers, opening and closing them several times. Both hands were swollen and aching, but his dominant right hand was worse. Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to remember. Waited. Nothing.

Think. Think. Think.

Okay. So he’d gone to the bar straight after work. He was stressed out, and he’d needed a drink because Janice would leave him for good if she found out about his gambling debt. And the damn debt had gone past due as of Friday morning. Anytime now, the asshole might call or show up on his and Janice’s doorstep and claim the roof over their heads and take their cars. His stomach tightened as if he had just gone from

cold to hot in that game his kids played. “Hotter,” they’d say as he moved closer to what he needed to find.

Was that it? Was he getting hotter? Did his injuries have something to do with the pawnshop owner and lost titles?

He’d have to call Scotty at the Creek Bar to retrace his steps, and he prayed he hadn’t brought more damage to his family than he already had. Had he gotten in a fight at the bar? No. He would’ve woken up in jail, or Janice would have heard about it. She was always there for the karaoke contest on Saturday nights. At one point, he’d thought he could scrape by and use her contest winnings to stay ahead of the loan, but she always told him she’d used the money to settle past due bills or buy groceries. He couldn’t say, “Oh by the way, honey, I pawned our home and vehicles in a poker game.” But one crisis at a time, he thought. First, what had he done?

Harry looked down at his T-shirt. It was splattered with reddish-brown stains. Blood—he hoped from his own damaged hands. His pants looked similar. He rolled over to the side of the bed. His top shirt was crumpled in a ball on the floor. He grabbed it, and an iron-like smell permeated his senses. Harry shook the shirt open. It was covered in dried blood—too much blood. He gagged and dropped it to the floor.

Invisible hands encircled Harry’s neck. He struggled for oxygen. Spots blurred his vision. He sat up, putting his feet on the floor and dropped his head low between his knees.

Oh mother. What did he do last night?

As soon as his vision stopped spinning and he could breathe like a normal human being, Harry grabbed the bloody shirt and stumbled to the bathroom. He shoved the shirt in the small trash can, whipped off his T-shirt and pants, and added

them to the garbage before tying the bag closed. He turned to the sink and scrubbed his face with soap and warm water. The yellow soap burned his wounds. He grabbed a towel from the floor and braced his hands on either side of the sink.

“What have you done?” he asked his reflection, a reflection he’d come to know as the self-sabotaging Jekyll to his broken-spirited Hyde. He reached for the glass of dentures on the counter. His upper teeth were soaking in the container. He ran his tongue around his toothless mouth. Where was his lower set of teeth? He shuffled toiletries around on the counter. They had to be there somewhere, but they weren’t. He couldn’t afford to lose those. Literally.

Damn it.

It wasn’t funny how the sight of himself without his teeth could bring him to tears. He used to be a handsome man. A man going somewhere. A man people stared at for all the right reasons as he walked by.

Not anymore.

He turned his face from side to side. He just looked tired and old. Worn out. In trouble.

So he had hurt someone, lost his teeth, and gone to bed in bloody clothes. He glanced at the plastic boats and toy cars deserted in the drained tub. *Please—not his boys . . .*

Morning light from the windows guided his way as he raced in his boxers down the hall and through the living room to look for his four children who still lived at home. No one had fallen asleep on the couch. He made his way toward the two rooms at the far end of the main trailer. Nineteen-year-old Lisa was asleep in the first room, and he didn’t see anything strange. He cut through the Jack and Jill bathroom to the second room.

His dog, Star, named after the white shape between her

eyes, was lying on the bath mat and growled at him—nothing new about that. Star had been growling at him since they'd brought her home as a puppy. He'd grown up on a farm in Minnesota and had once been a natural with animals, but that was a long time and too many bad decisions ago. He ignored her and stepped into the adjoining bedroom. The bunk beds his nine- and ten-year-old boys treated like a fort were empty.

Oh God.

He pushed on and stepped over to the bedroom window. His station wagon was parked outside. So, yeah, he had either hurt someone, lost his teeth, and driven home; or driven home, lost his teeth, and hurt someone he loved. Where were Justin and Tommy?

His self-loathing grew with every step.

His college-bound daughter, Carrie, was asleep in her room. As usual, she had cotton stuffed in her ears to block any noise.

No sign of the boys. There was nowhere left to look.

Oh, shit. Harry spun on his heel and headed back to the Jack and Jill bathroom.

Star was a terrier mutt with a white belly and caramel-colored coat. She was fifteen pounds if she was lucky, but she stood to her full height and then bared her teeth like a mama bear.

If dogs could talk.

He forced her to the side. Her bark had always been bigger than her bite. With his heart doing a *thump-de-dump*, he opened the vinyl shower curtain.

Justin and Tommy were huddled sound asleep beneath a pile of ThunderCats blankets in the porcelain bathtub. Their heads were on opposite ends of the basin and lying at awkward angles. Their bare, twig-like legs stuck out from

their cartoon-pic skivvies, and Justin's foot rested under Tommy's chin. Tommy hugged a yellow plastic Wiffle Ball bat to his side. A dying flashlight glowed under Justin's hand, creating a translucent pink glow between his pudgy fingers. The pajama shirt at Justin's wrist was smudged with blood.

If he had hurt them, he'd never forgive himself. Harry curled his lips and choked on a sob. "Boys? Boys. Wake up." He leaned over the tub and squeezed their shoulders.

His touch startled his children. Justin's eyes widened, and he shrank back. He hugged the flashlight to his chest, casting an eerie glance over his face.

"Get away!" Justin cried.

Tommy gripped the bat and struggled to his knees. Cocking his elbows, he lifted the bat just like Harry had taught him for Little League baseball.

Hell—they were scared of him.

Harry put up his hands and took a step back. "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. Justin, show me your wrist." He sat down on the toilet to be at their eye level. "Did I do that?"

Justin nodded and pulled back his sleeve.

"Oh no," Harry said.

Justin's small wrist and forearm had bruises matching the sizes of Harry's thumb and four fingers. "Does it hurt? Rotate your wrist for me."

Justin stuck out his lip. He wiggled his wrist and flinched. "You scared me."

It took Harry a few minutes to find his voice. Every time he tried to speak, an anguished keen threatened to escape, and he'd have to clear it like a bad cough. "I'm so sorry. What happened, Tom?"

Tommy's scrawny arms were shaking, but he tightened his hold on his bat. His lips quivered. "You said if we didn't

get out of your way, you'd kill us. We ran, but Justin tripped. You grabbed his arm and swung him over there." He pointed across the room.

Harry leaned forward until he was kneeling next to the tub. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it." He tried to take the bat, but Tommy wouldn't let go.

"Okay, keep the bat until you feel safe. That's your right." He turned to Justin. "Did I do anything else?"

Justin nodded. "My shoulder hurts."

"Nobody hates me more than I do right now, son. It won't happen again. I swear on my life."

Star started to whine, and she put her front paws on the bathtub.

Harry smoothed the hair between her ears and looked at his sons. "See, I know how to be gentle and nice now. Star's forgiven me this time, and she doesn't even like me. Tom, I'm real proud of you for sticking up for your little brother. Now, how about we go to Winchell's and get some hot chocolate and donuts? Just us boys. Will that help?"

"With sprinkles?" Justin asked.

"Anything you want. Come on, let's get dressed."

The boys crawled out of the tub and shied away from Harry's helping hands.

As soon as Justin's bloodstained pajama top hit the floor, Harry wadded it up and shoved it under his arm.

Tommy asked, "What did you do that for?"

Harry couldn't look him in the eye. "I'm going to get him a new pair of PJs."

"But I like my Superman jammies," Justin said.

"I will get you new ones. Let's get your shoes on." Harry took Justin's foot and pushed the tennis shoe past his heel. He was tying Justin's shoe when Tommy spoke again.

“You had blood on you last night.”

Harry cringed and focused on Justin’s shoe. His poor sons deserved so much better. “That was wine, not blood. Maybe I should get a Superman shirt to replace mine.”

Justin giggled. “You’re too big for one.”

Harry brushed the bangs off of Justin’s forehead. *So forgiving.*

Crossing his arms and shaking his head, Tommy said, “It wasn’t wine. I know what wine smells like.”

“I know you do,” *Jesus Christ, he was the worst dad ever,* “but let’s not talk about it anymore. It’s our secret, and we have some donuts to eat. I think I’ll have sprinkles too.”

Justin laughed again. “You’re too old for sprinkles.”

“No one is too old for sprinkles,” Harry said. “Let’s go.”

Two hours later, Janice was waiting for him on the back porch when they returned with full stomachs and Kmart bags.

Harry could tell by her pursed lips she was annoyed. He slowed his pace. There’d been a time when she looked at him as her hero. He’d sunk so far. Man, if she only knew how much trouble he was in. He wished he could tell her about the title to their trailers, but he couldn’t until he came up with a solution. And he still couldn’t remember last night.

“What have you three been up to? What’s in the bag?” she asked.

“The boys and I went out for breakfast, and I bought them a gift.”

“Why didn’t you take the girls too?” she asked.

Because he hadn’t scared the crap out of the girls.

“Boys, go in the house,” Harry said.

The bags bounced off their skinny legs as they ran up the steps.

“You, Lisa, and Carrie were sleeping like angels,” he said.

Janice squinted and looked hard at him. He hated it when she did that; it felt like she could read his mind. And after thirty years, she was damn good at it too. Drinking made him too predictable.

“You asked me earlier if I was okay. Did you black out last night?” she asked.

He nodded.

Janice rolled her eyes and reached for his injured hands. “What happened?”

It was the first time she had touched him in weeks, and he hated himself for needing to break the contact and pull away before she touched the sores. “I don’t remember, but don’t worry. It wasn’t you, or the kids. But I scared them last night. I just wanted to make it up to them.”

“By buying them breakfast and a present? Jesus, Harry. You didn’t hit them? Can you even remember? You better be honest with me. I’ll ask them anyway. Unlike you, they don’t like to lie.”

Harry was ninety percent confident he’d bought the boys’ secrecy, but they were kids after all. “They’re okay,” he said.

She stared at him for an eternity, then she looked away and crossed her arms over her chest. Her stance reminded him of Tommy’s defiance a few hours before. “They looked happy.”

And he thought he’d gotten away with one more bad day, but he hadn’t. Janice moved on to another topic he wished he could avoid.

Extending her hand, palm up, she said, “Give me the rest

of your money. Our lot rent is due this week. And we need groceries.”

Harry hesitated. “Um, did you win anything at karaoke last night? Can you use the money for groceries?”

“Harry . . .”

He looked at his feet because they were the safest place to look.

“Damn it, Harry. You promised. I knew I shouldn’t have trusted you with your paycheck yesterday, but I didn’t have time to swing by the shop and pick it up. I was going to take it last night, but you left while I was singing. Please tell me you didn’t blow it.”

“Honey, I needed it for something else—”

“What for? Poker? Is that it? You never learn. What kind of a man are you? You want us to live on macaroni and government-issued cheese for the week? Don’t you care if your kids have a roof over their heads? We need that money, Harry.”

She was too close to the truth because, no, in the heat of the moment, he hadn’t cared enough about a roof over their heads or food in their bellies. He’d been playing to win and to break even or at least catch up with the loan. He’d thought he’d win and nothing would be an issue. He clenched his jaw only to be reminded that he’d misplaced half his dentures. He hated how he looked without them. Nothing felt shittier than shame, and he felt what few hairs he had left on his balding head and the back of his neck rise like a damn dog who has been backed into a corner and is ready to fight his way out. His heart rate quickened, and sweat gathered on his forehead. “I can’t handle this right now. Get out of my way!”

“Get out of *your* way?”

He didn’t like the way she said “your”—like he’d been

keeping her from something better than her life with him. Because he knew he had been, and that he'd done so for years. She'd always deserved better. The truth hurts that way. He couldn't handle any more truth right now.

"You've become a pathetic excuse of a man, do you know that? I wish I'd never met you!" Janice yelled.

And he definitely couldn't handle that.

Over the years, they'd argued more and more, and they often said stuff they didn't mean, but dammit, her eyes told him she meant it this time. She did think he was pathetic. He snapped. He grabbed her neck, slamming her against the side of the trailer, creating a rumble and vibration through the thin metal. It echoed, and shouts and running footsteps told him the children had heard. The folds of Janice's chin were like silk under his bruised and calloused hands, and he felt her throat spasm as she tried to swallow and suck in air all at once. As she struggled with him and his hands tightened, images of another person flashed through Harry's mind. A different struggle. He shook his head to try to clear his thoughts. *What was happening to him?*

Janice clasped his hands and raked her nails across his injured knuckles.

Harry swore, released her throat, and slapped her. The force of his beefy palm threw her off balance, and she landed on the porch with a scream and a thud. Harry jumped back. Appalled by his own actions, he cried, "Janice. No, Janice." He took three steps back and looked from his hands to his wife.

He'd never forget Janice's expression, his betrayal radiating from her blue eyes. The set of her lips and jaw spoke of a finality that far surpassed any divide between a set of twin beds. He'd never laid his hands on Janice's neck before.

She'd made him promise not to touch her neck years ago because it made her feel vulnerable. He'd never known her reason, but her fear had been reason enough for him. And now, he'd broken his promise to her.

A fragmented memory of his two hands choking some man flashed again. Was it from last night? Had he strangled someone? Shit. What had he done? Was he both a murderer and an abusive husband now? His forehead was dripping sweat now. Janice and his home swam before his eyes. His anxiety almost overwhelmed him.

“Janice, I need your help—”

“Leave. God help me, but I never want to set eyes on you again.” Janice curled her lip in a sneer and climbed to her feet. She rubbed her hand over her neck and then her cheek. “You promised never to touch me like that.” Her voice reverberated between clenched teeth. “Never. Come. Back.” She walked away from him, and without sparing him so much as another glance, she went into the trailer and slammed the door behind her.

Harry heard the distinct click of the lock, and Janice's voice carried through the cracked window as she called the police. Numb inside, he turned and stumbled to his car. He drove around town for a few hours in a daze and then began to retrace his steps from the night before. With each step, he knew he had lost his family forever. He registered for a kitchenette on Green Street, his usual location of exile and the one place that would let him pay in arrears.

A day later, there was a restraining order in place to stay away from his family, and Harry had figured out he'd beaten a man into a coma.