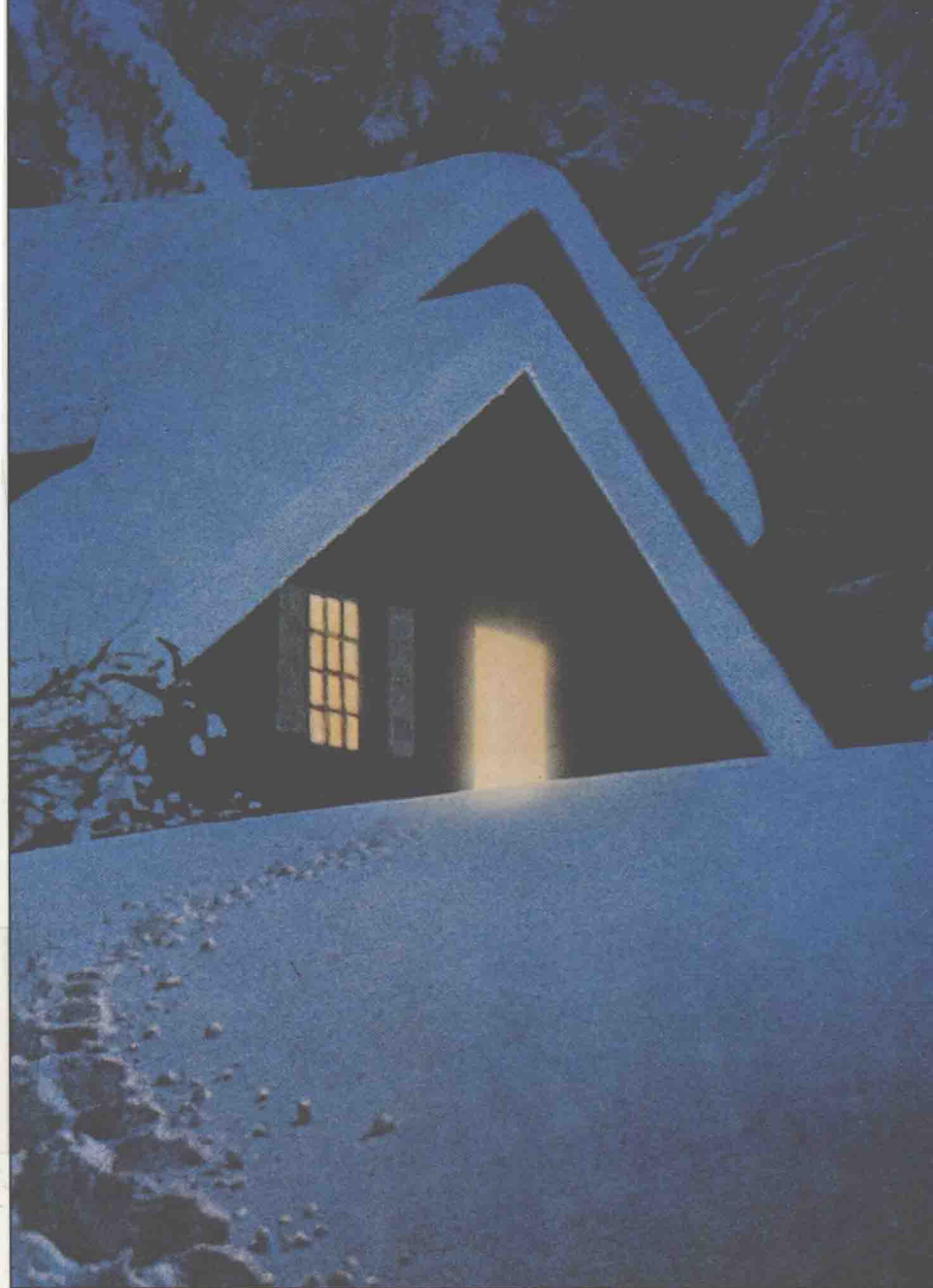


# THE TRAP



A NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF "CARETAKERS"

**TABITHA KING**

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THE  
TRAP

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## THE TRAP

for G. W.  
“by any other name . . .”

# PROLOGUE

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ONE AFTERNOON, while Travis and Sarah and Pat all slept naked under a blanket of August heat, Liv took a plastic bucket that once had held two pounds of Shedd's peanut butter and walked the half mile to where the road ended at Helen Alden's driveway. While out walking with her children in June, Liv had noticed the blackberry bramble so thick with white blossom it looked, at a distance, as if it had been snowed on. She had been waiting since for the fruit the flowers foretold. On first meeting Miss Alden she had asked permission to pick there. Miss Alden seemed pleased she had bothered to ask. Most people wouldn't, wild berries on anyone's property being widely, if not universally, deemed a kind of free fall to anyone with sufficient initiative to glean them.

Wearing a long-sleeved cotton shirt and jeans to protect herself from the brambles, never mind the heat, and an old straw fedora to shade her face and protect her head from the sun, she walked down the dusty dirt road listening to the insects, which seemed to be the only living things besides herself abroad.

She saw at once she was not the first to pick here; there were many empty calyxes in each bunch. Whoever it was—Helen Alden, perhaps, with her companion, Miss Betty Royal?—had picked their berries a few days previous, for a quantity of berries had ripened since then on the same branches. Not that what they had taken, or what she was going to take, amounted to more than a dent in the crop; the thicket was enormous, spreading back into the woods, and laden with enough to feed the whole neighborhood. As far as she was concerned, the thorns were entitled to their tithe of flesh and blood.

Hardly feeling them scratching her hands and face and hooking her clothes as she went deeper into the thicket, Liv quickly forgot almost everything—the fretful worry that had possessed her all this first summer in Nodd’s Ridge that Travis or Sarah would wake up unheard, Travis climb out of his crib, Sarah at seven become overconfident and enter the water alone, one or both children somehow slip out and drown in the lake, perhaps while Pat was napping, too, and she was out berrying—she almost forgot even that, everything except the clusters of berries with their fruity smell. The path she made for herself, carefully pinching branches between thorns and moving them aside, hooking them onto other branches, sometimes stepping on them, particularly if they were barren or old, closed up behind her until she was in the heart of the thicket, enclosed in a wall of thorns. But she was entranced and did not notice.

The bucket grew heavy. She wished she had brought two and then smiled at herself. Whatever would she do with a gallon of berries, let alone the two quarts she had already picked? The berries would be ripe and ripening for another two weeks. She would come back. Her straw hat was hot on her head. The straw even smelled hot and dusty. She took it off and fanned her face, then put it back on again. She was reaching into the brambles once again when she heard voices.

She stopped and listened. She could not make out what they were saying, but they were male, and sounded boisterous. And they were coming her way, up from the lake, through the woods. Making noise enough to alert the whole town. Feeling stupidly guilty, as if she were a thief caught in the act, but equally irritated at the interruption of her pleasurable solitude, she prepared to smile and be neighborly. And the voices died away.

Relieved, she fell to picking again.

“Fuck,” said a voice that seemed to be at her elbow. “It’s a fucking cat.”

Liv froze.

Other voices chorused *goddamn, shit, and fucking cat.*

She sorted out three voices. Locals, by their accents. The first voice was the deepest, the most authoritative—the voice of a grown man. The other two seemed younger. One was a nervous Yankee tenor, high and light, vague with swallowed syllables and air. The third, who spoke the least, was much like the first voice, but more

adolescent, thinner, less resonant. They were not really at her elbow, but only yards away, on the other side of the thicket, in the woods. The first man had sworn loudly, and some trick of the still air had made him sound closer than he was.

The obvious, sensible course was to announce her presence, step out of the brambles. Only then did she realize that that was not as easy as it looked; she would have to make a new path out. And spellbound by the violence of those first obscene words, she kept still, holding her breath.

There was a faint, wet, mewling sound. The cat they were cursing. It sounded hurt. She began to be angry.

"Hey," said the tenor giggling. "It's not dead yet."

"No shit," said the other two simultaneously. The younger one was interested. The other, older voice of the first speaker announced he already knew it.

"What do we do?" the tenor asked.

"Kill it, you asshole," said the arrogant first voice. "What do you think, we're going to nurse it back to health?"

The tenor giggled again.

"Let's leave it on the old dyke's doorstep." It was the third voice.

They all laughed.

The cruelty of their proposed prank shattered Liv's trance. She began to struggle out of her prison, trying to do it silently, without dropping her bucket. She went in the direction of the voices, away from the road. She was furious. Nobody was going to kill any injured cats and leave their corpses on Helen Alden's doorstep or anyone else's if she could put a stop to it.

The thorns tore at her and she staggered. "Ow," she said involuntarily, and tore herself free.

Ahead of her there was sudden watchful silence, a cessation of movement. She had revealed her presence to the men. A wash of fear weakened her resolve only for a fraction of a second; she meant to declare her presence anyway, to stop them. All she had lost was the element of surprise. She broke through the edge of the brambles, which were taller than she was, and found herself on a ledge overlooking a little gap in the woods, where the granite rose too close to the surface, the soil too much to hold any green thing except the most tenacious moss and fungi. The three men were just below, a few



feet away, staring at her. Husky young men. One was bareheaded, one wore a Boston Red Sox cap backward. The third wore a headband, a leather strip like a phylactery around his head, tied over his right ear with a bundle of feathers and beads hanging down.

At their feet they had uncovered a trap, and a big old gray cat, badly wounded, in it. The cat was in fact nearly dead, its eyes glazed with shock and pain. Its fur was matted with blood. Bone and torn flesh and ragged fur were in the teeth of the trap.

"Oh my God," she said, and slid down the ledge in a crouch, reaching out instinctively with her free hand toward the mangled cat.

She saw the blur of movement out of the corner of her eye but could not avoid the man who grabbed her wrist. His foot was suddenly behind her heel, his hand around her wrist, as hard as a manacle. He jerked her backward. She lost her balance and flipped onto her back onto the rock-knobby ground, the breath knocked out of her. The pail flew up out of her grasp, raining berries as it arced over them and hit the ground with a thunk. What remained of her patient work spilled onto the mossy ground around it. For a moment she was stunned and disoriented. Gasping for breath, she managed to refocus her vision; above her was a ragged canopy of trees under the white hot sky, and the man, like the trunk of a tree, who had decked her, staring down at her. His eyes were the color of spit. The short cut of his blond hair emphasized the squareness of his jaw. He showed a quantity of carnivorously healthy white teeth. His lips were thin and the upper one was flawed just off the center as if someone had taken a stitch there. He stepped over her, one foot on either side of her knees, and crossed his arms.

"Who are you?"

Liv recovered her old fury with her breath. She sat up. He stepped back in surprise.

"Who wants to know?" she snapped. "And what the hell are you doing?"

The man laughed. He bent over her and offered her a hand.

She looked at it, then scrambled to her feet on her own.

The other two men stood staring at her. The one with the headband was a smaller, slimmer version of the man with the crooked lip, with the same blond hair, grown long. Most likely his younger brother. The other was shorter, round and stupid of face, heavy bodied. Very pink-skinned, he had small blue eyes and a snub nose,

so he looked like a pig in overalls, especially since he wore no shirt under the bib. Wisps of rusty hair showed at the edges of his backward baseball cap, sprigged behind his ears, and matted the back of his neck; on his bare arms and chest where the overall bib did not cover; and bunched from his armpits, even when they were not open.

"Look, lady," the man with the crooked lip said. "This god-damn cat blundered into our trap. We have to put it out of its misery."

She looked at the cat again. Its bloody bib heaved with an involuntary effort to take breath. She could see there was no hope for it.

"Okay," she said, though there was nothing okay about it. "How are you going to do it?"

The men exchanged amused glances.

"We don't happen to have a gun with us," the one with the headband said. "Do you?" He seemed to think this was very funny.

She looked at him in disgust. "This is your fault to begin with. You set the trap."

"Fuck you, lady," he said.

The man with the crooked lip interrupted. "We have permission to trap here. It's not our fault you summer people don't keep your cats in."

She glared at him. "I can't believe Helen Alden gave you permission to trap on her land. I heard you talking about leaving the cat on her steps. That doesn't sound like you're on very great terms with her."

The pink boy in overalls giggled.

The headbanded blond stared at him. "Shut up, Gordy," he said.

"Who the fuck are you?" the man with the crooked lip challenged her.

"None of your business," she said. "But I do have permission to be here. To pick berries." She looked at her pail on the ground, the berries around her feet.

"Sure," he said.

It occurred to her then that she was a woman alone with these men who were strangers to her. There was the sudden rush of the apprehension any woman feels alone in the midst of men she does not know. Until then, the adrenaline of righteous anger had carried her. She felt herself paling, and cursed herself.

The eyes of the man with the crooked lip glittered. Calmly, he stepped away from her, and without looking at it, still staring at her, he stomped on the cat's head.

"No!" she wailed, and felt her gorge rise. She turned away, and his arms clamped around her waist. She vomited into the bramble patch. Spitting the evil taste of her own bile, she jerked away from him. He tightened his hold. The pressure on her diaphragm made her feel ill again. She closed her eyes, fighting it. Then she drove her elbows backward into his diaphragm and he released her, swearing at her.

"Don't you call me names," she hissed. "You bastard!"

And the three men laughed.

She stood there with her fists clenched tight enough to cut the skin of her palms, panting.

"I know who you are," said the man with the crooked lip. "Miz O-liv-i-a Russell. Seen you at the post office. You never seen me, though. I'm just a local. Have to work for a living summertimes."

"Is that what you call working?" she snarled, gesturing at the dead cat.

He looked at the cat with mock surprise. "That? That's a mercy, ain't it, O-liv-i-a? What you wanted?"

"Get your goddamn trap and get the fuck out of here!" she shouted.

The three men looked at one another.

"Don't get your crack in an uproar, O-liv-i-a," said the man with the crooked lip mildly.

"Get the trap, Gordy," the one with the headband said.

"Do I have to?" Gordy whined, but he was already doing it, freeing the grisly remains of the cat from the metal teeth.

"Just don't get your pecker caught in it," the man with the crooked lip said.

Gordy snickered.

"Nice meeting ya, O-liv-i-a," the man with the crooked lip said. "Take care now."

He sauntered into the woods, followed by Gordy, who swung the bloody trap. The headbanded one idled behind them. He peeked at her from under womanishly long, nearly white eyelashes. He looked over his shoulder to see if the other two were out of sight yet. Then he unzipped his jeans, reached into his fly, and drew out his

penis. Fine blond pubic hair threaded out onto the metal teeth of the zipper.

"Oh for Christ's sake," Liv said.

He grinned and wagged his penis at her. "Hope we meet again, Miz Russell," he said.

He tucked his penis into his pants, zipped up, and ducked into the woods, following the others.

Liv shuddered. She looked at the cat and felt sick at her stomach again. She *was* sick again. When she stopped shaking, she found some sticks and nudged the body into some bushes. The soil here would be too thin to dig a grave, assuming she had a tool besides her hands to do it with. The plastic pail would never do. She would have to go home and come back with a plastic garbage bag and a spade and take the carcass to the apple orchard behind Helen Alden's house to bury it. She would tell Miss Alden what had happened. Miss Alden ought to know.

Liv picked up her berry pail and emptied out the last few berries. Her pants legs were stained with the berries she had knelt in, and more berries were crushed into the treads of her sneakers. Her hands were stained with them where she had supported herself, regaining her feet. From the splotchy sensation of wet on the back of her shirt, she knew there must have been some under her when she hit the ground. The berries were black, but when they were crushed, they bled red. Her scratches were beginning to sting. She trudged off around the thicket, feeling defeated.

Miss Alden was not at home when Liv finished burying the cat and knocked at her door.

She decided not to tell Pat anything about the incident. She didn't want him using it as an excuse to dislike Nodd's Ridge, to find it unsafe. It was supposed to be a refuge. She needed it, time away from her pottery business, which had become such a success since her sister Jane had joined her and taken over the marketing. Pat had gone along with the summer house because she had wanted it so badly, and she had paid for it, after all, with her own hard-earned money. But he was a country boy himself, raised in the grimmest kind of rural poverty. He brought a cynical eye to the beautiful countryside, quick to pick up the rusted-out automobiles, the shabby trailers, the galled and beaten curs. It made her uneasy to keep anything from him, but she didn't want to see the twitch of his mouth,

the tired unspoken I-told-you-so-babe in his eyes. She didn't want him going all grim and male and rushing off to get the shit beaten out of him in the name of her honor and his. They were new people in Nodd's Ridge, and she didn't want trouble right at the start.

A week or ten days later a starveling gray kitten appeared on the Russells' doorstep and they put out some milk for her. Of course, she would not leave then, and they gave up and took her in. The vet shook his head over her and muttered uncomplimentary things about summer people who kept a cat for the season and then, come Labor Day, turned it out, along with its kittens. Though, he admitted, he usually didn't start seeing the feral survivors until late in September. Liv did not tell him she thought she knew what had happened to this kitten's mother.

By then, in the store in the village, she had encountered the three men again in the presence of an older man who looked too much like the two blonds, balding and too fat, to be anyone except their father. They were extravagantly polite to her, and laughed as if at a dirty joke as she was walking out. The next time she was in the store, she asked the storekeeper who they were. He told her the brothers were Rand and Ricky Nighswander and the other boy, in overalls, was their stepbrother Gordy Teed. The older man, their father, with his military haircut and surly expression, was Arden Nighswander.

George Fogg leaned confidentially across the counter, over her milk and eggs and orange juice. "I don't like to say it, Missus Russell," he had said in a low voice, glancing around nervously, "but I wouldn't take that fellow's check. And I wouldn't leave nothing lying around loose either."

# Part One

Deliver me, O Lord . . . from the violent man;  
which imagine mischiefs in their heart;  
continually are they gathered together for war.

—PSALM 140. 1, 2.

. . . the dark places of the earth are full  
of the habitations of cruelty.

—PSALM 74. 20.



# CHAPTER 1

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## FIREFIGHT

### Rough Cut #1

Here in a patch of jungle, blasted and torn as by enormous machines, a terrible battle has been fought. The jungle is winning now: a ruined bulldozer, seemingly big enough to clear a runway for a jumbo jet all by itself, rusts on its side like a huge ugly sculpture; a helicopter troop ship, stripped and savaged, is smashed into the smooth boles of trees only yards away. Vines are groping over both machines. Soon they will no longer be visible, even from each other, yet both bear a military insignia that is still identifiable. It is an open mouthful of canine teeth outlined in red that has faded to the color of dried blood. A lurid tongue lolls over the bottom row of incisors. Block letters—US XIIIITH CAV—identify the symbol like a studded collar.

Against the background of the jungle, uncorrodible green against the rusting mechanisms, a man in a camouflage uniform marked with the same insignia as the wrecked dozer and chopper stands like a totem in the clearing. Pocked and seamed, his face is that of a Mongol



warrior. Under his visored cap his coarse, straight black hair whips cruelly into narrow, slanted eyes that show no white or anything except their own black fire. He stares at the body of a woman, tied to the rotor blades of the Huey, a razor-edged catherine wheel. The mottling on the blades may be rust—or blood. The woman's body is pallid blue. Her face is a Noh mask, pouting open lips black against her bloodless skin. She is an Oriental, almond-eyes blank. Dust motes have settled on the silvery black irises like tiny grains of snow. Her black hair is plastered to her finely shaped skull. The delicate bones of her face are disappearing as her tissues swell and tighten the mask of her skin. A fly lands on her cheek and crawls across it. For a long time. Someone has scrawled a symbol on her naked belly, in her blood. It is the same symbol the man wears on the shoulder of his uniform, the jaws of a ravening beast.

Then she is gone. The jungle becomes a rainy city street at night. Streetlights reflect over the wet surface of the pavement like the glaze of dead eyes. The red fangs of the XIII<sup>TH</sup> CAV insignia, just seen on the dead woman's belly, bubble in lurid neon over a honky-tonk bar across the street. The barbaric-looking man cradles a shotgun. He watches the bar, people going in and out. Mostly men, a few women. The women are cheap and whorish-looking and drunk. The men wear bits and pieces of military uniforms with their civilian clothes, as if unable to give up their military identities. They are young, tough-looking, drunk or stoned or both.

A camouflage painted Trans-Am, jacked, with a glass-packed muffler, screeches around the corner and brakes violently in front of the bar. Its front grill and bumper have been transformed into a mouthful of canine teeth.

A lanky blond man, with the small but prominently boned features of Appalachia,