Shoofly Pie
Prologue

Holcum County, North Carolina, 1975

Zachary Sloan stepped out of the Rayford ABC Package store and walked to the bed of his primer gray Ford pickup. Two eager dogs greeted him. The first, Sloan's favorite, was an aging Black Labrador, now walleyed and graying at the muzzle; the other was a spotted pup of questionable lineage but unlimited enthusiasm. The dogs nuzzled the paper package in the old man's right hand.

"Get back, mutt. That's for me, now." He slipped the bottle into the right pocket of his khaki hunting coat and took a crumpled sack from under his arm. "This is for you two no-goods." He tossed a fat pig's knuckle onto the rusty truck bed, then climbed into the cab. He revved the engine, coaxed the transmission into reverse and backed out onto Highway 29. The dogs took two quick steps back as he accelerated east.

Fifty yards away to his right the tracks of the Norfolk and Southern ran parallel to the road, the side of the towering embankment silhouetted grey-blue by the afternoon

sun. Sloan watched the telephone poles click by, each one clipping the hood of his truck with the tip of its shadow. Not far ahead, County Road 42 descended from the left through a vast, open expanse of fledgling corn and tobacco. It dipped down to cross Highway 29, then abruptly rose again to traverse the train tracks fifty yards away. There was no stoplight or sign at the intersection; none was necessary. Sloan could see vehicles approaching for miles in all directions—except from the right on County Road 42, where the Norfolk and Southern shielded the intersection like an ancient fortress wall.

Three miles away, a forty-foot flatbed trailer lumbered cautiously down a dirt road and passed beneath a brightly painted sign that hung across the exit to the Good 'N Plenty Orchards. Strapped to the bed of the open trailer was stack after stack of neat, white cabinets, each with a kind of oversize box top that overlapped at the edges. Each cabinet seemed to contain several drawers, expertly dovetailed at the edges. In the lowest drawer of each cabinet was a long horizontal slot stuffed tight with a rag and secured with twine. The drawers could not be opened, yet each cabinet was completely filled...

With 40,000 honeybees.

The dirt road ended with a sudden rise to join the county highway just north of the town of Rayford. The teamster cautiously eased the left wheel up onto the roadway. With one great gun of the diesel engine, the right wheel followed. The flatbed behind him rocked right, then lurched left. The beehives flexed and shifted uneasily like tottering stacks of cups and saucers. An angry murmur rose from within the whitewashed columns, then quieted once again as the flatbed settled onto the level roadway of County Road 42. With each grinding shift of gears, the diesel sent a plume of blue smoke into the sky, slowly gathering speed as it headed south toward the tiny town of Rayford.

Sloan spotted the long flatbed with the alabaster cargo approaching from far away to his left. He eyed the intersection, then the flatbed, then the intersection again. Their two vehicles seemed to be approaching at equal speeds. Sloan pushed steadily on the accelerator and the flatbed accelerated in kind.

"Grits-for-brains," the old man muttered. There was a common understanding in Rayford that commercial rigs should always yield to the locals--a common understanding, that is, among locals. The teamsters took a different view entirely. Their tariffs and duties had *paid* for these roads, thank you, and the meandering locals could kindly get out of the way.

Now Sloan had the accelerator pushed flat against the floor. Behind him, the dogs stood straight and alert, sensing a force of wind and a whine from the engine that they had never felt before. The pup stepped nervously to his left, stopped, then started right again. He began to whimper, and pushed his nose into the side of his more experienced companion. The aging Labrador slowly hung his head, circled once, and lay down.

High atop the railroad tracks fifty yards to Sloan's right, three bicycles raced side-by-side in a dead heat, clattering across the half-buried crossties of the old Norfolk and Southern railway.

Eight-year-old Andy Guilford suddenly veered to the right, forcing Pete St. Clair's bike up against the steel railhead.

"No fair!"

Pete jerked back on the handlebars and jumped the rail altogether. His back wheel spun wide and cut a deep arc in the loose gravel ballast.

"You can whine or you can win," Andy shouted back. He swerved left now and jammed his foot into the rear tire of Jimmy McAllister's rusting red beach cruiser. The bike lurched violently, almost throwing Jimmy onto his handlebars.

The three bicycles simultaneously crunched to a stop at the crossing of County Road 42. For a while the three boys said nothing; they stood straddling their bikes, panting and mopping their foreheads, staring up the road one way and then down the other.

"We did it!" Jimmy beamed. "We beat her!"

"And I beat the both of *you*," Andy chided.

"Like fun you did!"

Andy glanced to the left. He saw the great white flatbed barreling toward them, still a good mile away, and an old grey pickup streaking down from the left. Now he cupped his hand above his eyes and followed County Road 42 to the right. There was no sign of an automobile as far as the eye could see--no sign of *her* automobile. This is the way she would come--this is the way she came every Saturday afternoon when her father made his weekly drive into Rayford.

"We beat her all right," Pete said solemnly. "But she's bound to be along any minute. Better get ready!"

The three boys tossed their bikes aside and scrambled for position. Jimmy hoisted himself up on top of the big metal signal box beside the tracks. He steadied himself, then slowly stood aright and spread his arms out wide.

"This is where *I'm* going to be," he said proudly. "She'll see me before she sees either one of you!"

Andy stood eyeing the great gleaming crossing signal on the far side of the road...

"No way!" Jimmy shouted over to him.

"Just watch me," Andy called back. He shinnied up the silver post as far as the flashing red target lights, then pulled himself up and over. He climbed past the black-and-yellow Norfolk and Southern sign, up past the great white 'X' formed by the RAILROAD CROSSING signs, until he straddled the post cap like a skull atop crossbones.

"*Now* who's she gonna see first?" he shouted down. "She'll spot me a mile away!"

Pete peered up at Andy, then at Jimmy, then Andy again.

"Hey Pete!" Andy called down. "Maybe you could wave your hanky!"

"Or drop your drawers!" Jimmy joined in. "She's sure to see that!"

Pete stood gloomily for a full minute, saying nothing. Then he stepped across the railroad tracks onto the pavement.

He lay down in the center of the right lane--*her* lane.

"Are you nuts?" Andy called down. "Get out of the road!"

Pete lay motionless, staring at the sky.

"Pete!" Jimmy shouted. "She'll run right over you!"

"She won't neither," Pete said firmly. "When the car hits the tracks, it leaves the ground. She'll fly right over me."

"What if the car slows down this time? What if you're too far from the tracks?"

Pete said nothing.

"She'll never even see you!" Andy was almost screaming now. "She'll run right over you and squash you like a bug and she'll never even know it!"

"She'll know," Pete said under his breath. "She'll know I did it for her."

Andy looked up. Far down County Road 42 he saw a tiny blur coming over the horizon.

Inside that tiny blur, seven-year-old Kathryn lay on her back, sandwiched between the rear window and back seat of her father's crumbling green '57 Chevy Bel Air. Her left shoulder was wedged tight between the glass and vinyl and her nose just cleared the window as it curved up toward the roof above her.

She closed her eyes and felt the warmth of the afternoon sun on her full body. The wind from the single open window swirled around her and carried the smell of tobacco from her father's cigarette. She rolled her head to the right and studied the back of her father's head; the sun-furrowed neck, the leathery ears that protruded proudly into space, and the thick shock of auburn hair that always lay carelessly to the left. Last of all, she saw her father's emerald green eyes in the rear-view mirror. They were focused directly on her.

"Know what I think?" he grinned. "I think you wish you was a big ol' whitetail deer, so's you could ride strapped across the hood."

Her heart raced at the thought that somehow it might be possible--to feel the wind in her hair, to watch the road rushing to meet her instead of always disappearing into the past.

"*Could* I, Daddy?" she asked with childish hope.

He laughed. "Your momma would shoot me dead. Why, she'd tan my hide if she knew I let you ride without a seat belt."

He glanced again in the mirror at Kathryn's body stretched out atop the back seat beneath the rear window...

"You be careful back there, hear?"

He flicked his cigarette out the window and rolled it up, leaving just a hairline crack at the top.

"Are the tracks coming, Daddy? Are we there yet?"

"Almost! Get ready!"

With a squeal, Kathryn wedged herself even tighter against the glass. She was in her favorite place on the best of days, and now she was coming to the best moment of all--when they came to the sudden rise in the road where the Norfolk & Southern crossed County Road 42. When no train was in sight it was agreed--it was *expected*--that her father would accelerate up the rise just as fast as the aging Chevy could possibly go. As they crossed the tracks and the road dropped suddenly away beneath them, the hulking sedan would magically lift from the ground like the pirate ship rising from the Blue Lagoon. Then, for one eternal moment, Kathryn would float weightless above the seat, above the car, above even the gigantic town of Rayford itself. It was the longest two seconds in the universe, an entire world within a world, a glimpse of eternity--and Kathryn was not about to let her father forget about it.

"Faster, Daddy! Faster!"

The signs flashed past like confetti now, and the code of dots and dashes on the pavement blurred together into yellow and white ribbons streaming out behind the car.

She heard the growling complaint from the aging engine and the rising pitch of her father's voice.

"Here it comes, sweetheart! Get ready!"

Zachary Sloan glared at the center of the intersection and shot defiant glances at the great white blur closing fast from the left.

Two hundred yards...

One hundred yards...

Fifty yards from the intersection Sloan slammed his hand down on the horn in a final act of anger and defiance and was instantly answered by the shattering bellow of the diesel's great air horn. Both vehicles went raging, shouting, screaming into the center of the intersection.

The Ford arrived a split second before the flatbed. The left headlight of the pickup smashed into the right fender of the diesel just behind the bumper. The hood sprung open and was instantly ripped away in the wind. The pickup spun right across the front of the flatbed, heaved onto its side, and continued through the intersection amidst a shower of sparks and the deafening scream of metal on concrete.

The force of the impact spun the diesel cab fully to the left, jackknifed at a right angle to the flatbed behind it. The aging retreads of the diesel skidded, then stretched, then exploded into shards of smoking rubber. The bare metal wheel rims dug into the pavement and the cab slammed onto its side with astounding force. The flatbed trailer, sheared from its shattered cab, lurched right, then left, then right once again--and then flipped side-over-side down the middle of County Road 42.

The hives that were not strapped down seemed to float in the air for a split second before crashing to the roadway below. Those that were bound to the bed of the trailer were whipped to the pavement as the flatbed began its roll. In both cases, the hives did not seem to simply break, or crush, or fall apart; they literally exploded. Eighty-five hives had lined that trailer, each weighing almost a hundred pounds. As each hive struck the roadway the brittle drawer-like supers separated, then splintered into a thousand pieces, vomiting a tangle of wood, wire, wax, and honey. At first, the bees seemed to spill out from the wreckage like pouring gravel. Then, slowly, the million-or-so that survived the crash began to rise into the sky in a black, boiling, living cloud of venom.

Pete sat upright in the center of the road.

All three boys stared wild-eyed, gawking at the carnage spewed out on the road behind them and the slowly rising cloud above. Almost simultaneously they remembered--and they turned back again to see the flash of the green Bel Air less than a quarter of a mile away.

Andy and Jimmy dropped to the roadway and Pete scrambled to his feet. All three boys stood jumping, shrieking, and waving their arms in frantic, futile arcs.

"There they are!" Kathryn's father called to the backseat. "All three of them, waving their hellos!" He lay on the horn and shoved the accelerator to the floor.

The nose of the sedan tipped upward as they reached the rise. Kathryn heard the whine of the engine as the wheels spun free of the ground and she felt the *lug* of the tires as they dropped away below the car. Then at last came the glorious moment when she

floated free of the car--or was the car falling away from her? It didn't matter. To Kathryn, it was the sacred moment when she rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

For an instant, Kathryn's father saw only clouds and sky through the windshield of the airborne sedan. But as the weight of the engine forced the nose of the car back to earth, a hellish landscape rose into view. In the left lane lay a broken and twisted flatbed; to the right, the crushed shell of a diesel cab and the smoldering undercarriage of a gray pickup; straight ahead, a graveyard of crumpled and shattered white bones. And above it all was a massive, swirling black cloud of...

"Holy… *Hold on, Kath!*"

Less than a second later the sedan smashed into the first of the hives. The tires lost all traction on the sea of honey and insect parts and spun helplessly to the right. The right fender struck the twisted chassis of the diesel and the sedan lurched onto its left side. To Kathryn's astonishment she found herself standing perfectly erect, still pressed between the rear window and seat, as if she were suddenly back home standing in front of the storm door, watching the back yard rushing towards her. Just as suddenly, the car flipped onto its rounded top, and Kathryn was thrown face-forward against the window glass. Six inches below her nose she saw a yellow dash streak by, then a dot, then a much longer dash, and then at last the car came to rest.

For a few moments Kathryn lay perfectly still, unable to move but perfectly aware of everything around her. Above and to her right she heard the engine cough and sputter and die. She heard the wheels somewhere above her continue to spin a full minute

longer. She detected the acrid stench of burnt rubber, the thick, sweet smell of diesel fuel, and--strangely, more than anything else--an odor like smashed bananas.

She lifted her head a few inches and saw a spatter of blood from her nose on the glass below her. She watched as tears began to fall straight away from her eyes, splash, and run down the window to her right. Out of habit, she rolled her body to the right--but this time she found herself lying on the crumpled ceiling of the car amidst paper cups, floor mats, cigarette butts, and coins. She slowly turned to look at the back of her father's head, and through a wash of tears saw his body still hanging behind the wheel, suspended by his seat belt. His shoulders sagged against the ceiling with one arm extending straight out to either side, and his head was tucked under like the ducks she had seen on the pond behind her house.

But she had never seen her father's neck bent at an angle like that.

She reached out to touch her father's arm, but then she heard a shout from somewhere outside the passenger side of the car. She turned to the window--all of the glass was still intact. She looked out to see an old man in a khaki jacket standing not more than twenty yards away.

Far beyond him, still atop the rise of the railroad tracks, stood the figures of three helpless boys.

The left side of the man's face was covered with blood, and he stumbled toward a motionless black form on the ground ahead of him. He dropped to his knees and buried his face in the dark fur. Beside him, a mottled gray pup paced anxiously back and forth.

Suddenly the pup started, then spun to its left and snapped at the air. It jumped again and whirled back to the right. In another moment it was leaping, whirling, and kicking like the wild horse Kathryn once saw at the State Fair in Raleigh.

The man staggered to his feet. He swung at the air around his face with one hand, then both. He began to duck and weave and flail at the air like a boxer facing some menacing shadow. Now he began to wave his arms frantically around him and pulled his jacket up over his head, running a few steps one way, then the other.

For the first time Kathryn looked up into the sky. She saw a great, swirling black cloud that seemed to be slowly descending around them like a plague, and a single word screamed out in her mind: FIRE! She saw no flames, but she remembered what the fireman once told her class: *The hottest fire is the one you can't see.* It was like watching Hell itself. The man and his dog were being tortured by flames but were never consumed.

A wave of panic swept over Kathryn. *Daddy! Wake up! We have to get out of here!* She twisted around and put her feet against the window glass. She pulled back and with all of her might kicked out against the glass.

Nothing.

She kicked again and again as the cloud outside grew thicker and darker and closer. She began to weep hysterically, but stopped with a gasp. She saw the man, now barely visible through the whirling cloud, begin to stagger directly toward her. His face looked swollen and blue with patches of black and gray, and his hands clutched at his throat. He bent forward, then straightened and threw his shoulders back and his chest out, as though he were straining to draw each breath through a long tube. He stumbled

forward two steps, then suddenly stopped and dropped his arms limp at his sides. For a moment he stood perfectly still, as if somehow at peace with this unexpected fate, and then fell headlong on the pavement not more than ten feet from Kathryn's window. Kathryn screamed and scrambled back from the glass. There were no flames, yet the man's body grew steadily darker--and the black patches seemed to be *moving*.

Kathryn's eyes were fixed in horror on the blackened figure before her. She crawled back, back, until she was flattened against the opposite window glass, her arms frozen down and out to her sides. She felt a tiny tickle on her left wrist and frantically jerked it away. She turned.

Near the ground, her father's window was still open just a hairline crack. The crack was lined with the wriggling heads, legs, and wings of a thousand enraged bees struggling to squeeze through. Behind them, a thousand more pressed forward. Both windows were completely covered with a shifting, throbbing, crawling mass of black and yellow insects.

Seven-year-old Kathryn took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and screamed.