

DRIVE LIKE HELL

A NOVEL

Dallas Hudgens

SCRIBNER

New York London Toronto Sydney



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Designed by Kyoko Watanabe

Library of Congress Control Number: 2004056576

ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-6547-5
ISBN-10: 1-4165-6547-7

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With thanks to Joe Regal for his insight and unwavering belief, and to Brant Rumble for supporting this book and providing his editorial skill. I'm especially grateful for my friends Wendi Kaufman, Robyn Kirby Wright, Scott W. Berg, and Corrine Gormont, who provided help and encouragement from start to finish. Special thanks to Casey McKinney, Tom Jenks, and the Museum of Television and Radio's Jane Klain. I also want to acknowledge Paul Hemphill's *Wheels* as a resource on the history of stock car racing.

I may not have spent much time with Lyndell Fulmer, or have known him the way that some people think a son ought to know a father, but I understood him.

“If you remember anything,” he said, “let it be this. A real man eats pussy and drives a stick shift.”

He told me this when I was ten years old. He was drinking Lem Motlow as we skimmed along a blacktop outside of town in his ‘66 Chevelle Super Sport. Three in the morning.

I was the one behind the wheel, perched up at the edge of the seat so I could reach the gas and the clutch, edging up to 50 in a 45. Lyndell was riding shotgun and doing his talking, most of it about driving, like how to downshift and work your heel and toe on the brakes and the accelerator at the same time.

He was lean and dark, with kick-ass sideburns and a junior Porter Wagoner pompadour. A Kool snagged in his teeth and the pint of Motlow between his legs, he fiddled with the radio dial, trying to find something worth listening to, all the while letting me drive as if I were Cale Yarborough.

He pointed to an oak tree up ahead of us, sitting off a bend in the road. “That’s your entry point, right there,” he said. “When you get to that tree, squeeze the brakes and cut the wheel. Don’t jump on the gas again until you start to unwind.”

“Unwind what?”

“The steering wheel,” he said. “What else?”

“Well, what if I start spinning?”

“You ain’t gonna spin. Jesus Christ, don’t be so goddamn negative.”

He leaned back and mulled over the situation. “Of course, if you do spin, remember to turn into it, not against it.”

“Got it.”

“All right. Good.”

He dialed in a Charlie Rich song on the radio and turned it up nice and loud, so he could hear it

over the screaming engine. The Silver Fox was singing about what goes on behind closed doors. Lyndell closed his eyes and started playing the dashboard like it was a baby grand. He didn't appear concerned in the least that I might wreck his car. I pointed the high beams right at the oak tree and prepared myself to brake and downshift.

My baby makes me proud, Lord don't she make me proud.

She never makes a scene by hanging all over me in a crowd.

Claudia, my mother, was disappointed in Charlie Rich. She thought he'd sold out and forsaken the hard-core, gut-bucket country shit that she really loved. Claudia stood firmly in the corner of folk like Hank and Lefty and Lester Flatt, Faron Young, Webb Pierce, and Hank Thompson. She liked the twang and the heartbreak and people talking about killing their lovers. Sounding too smooth never saw well with her. She never had much good to say about "Gentleman" Jim Reeves or Eddie Arnold. "There's no place more boring than the middle of the road," she'd say.

She and Lyndell had the radio playing in the kitchen one night. They were smoking and fretting over my older brother, Nick, who was in the midst of a twelve-month prison term on account of marijuana trafficking. They'd been to see him that afternoon, and they were talking about his lawyer and his upcoming parole hearing. That's when Charlie Rich came on the radio. He was singing about the most beautiful girl in the world, prompting Claudia to forget all about Nick.

"He used to be good," she said, "back when he sang real country music."

I was eating a bowl of Pet vanilla ice cream, and Lyndell was tapping out the beat to the music with his Zippo. He shrugged and frowned. "It's only a song, Claudia. Why can't you just relax and enjoy it?"

"Because," she said, "the more you listen to that stuff, the more of it they're gonna make."

She looked down at me. "Do you like this song?"

I shook my head. "I don't like any of that country stuff. They all sound like a bunch of hicks."

Claudia could always get sidetracked by music. It might have even meant more to her than cars meant to Lyndell. They each had their Saturday-night destinations. Lyndell's was the dirt track, where he'd change the tires on the Chevelle, slap a pair of magnetized number 7's to the doors, and race in the hobby stock class. Meanwhile, Claudia would be working over at the fish camp, dishing out hush puppies and slaw in the serving line until the house band called her onstage to sing her two songs: "I Can't Help It If I'm Still in Love With You" and "Just Someone I Used to Know."

She'd be wearing her Wranglers and straw cowboy hat, her thin, blonde hair pouring out the sides of it. She always waited for some fellow from the dance floor to give her a boost onto the stage, and then she'd drop her apron and take her spot behind the mike, calling out "one, two, three" in an unsurprising voice, like she wasn't going to pull it off. Then the Green Lake Gang would start up with their plowin'

voice, like she wasn't going to pull it off. Then the Green Lake Gang would start up with their playin' and her voice would suddenly grow strong and run like cool water atop all of their twanging and banging. The men standing down front would stare up at her until their partners grabbed their shoulders and turned them back around to dance.

Claudia and Lyndell could have been one of those couples in a country duet, maybe something by Dolly and Porter, or Conway and Loretta. Verse one would have covered the early years, Claudia sixteen and living with a second cousin, just a quiet girl who'd been abandoned by her mother. Then Lyndell comes along, a good bit older, already been through one marriage and a stint in Korea, nursing a constant hangover while he fixes transmissions at a garage. He's got a glow that's not all whiskey, and Claudia falls for him. She turns up pregnant, they get married, and Nick is born. Life's sunnier than July.

Verse two would have to introduce the heartbreak; Lyndell drifting and drinking and fighting his demons, finally leaving and getting married to another woman. Claudia's all alone again, except for the kid. It ain't July anymore.

Verse three would provide the reconciliation, with Dolly doing the singing:

And then, eight years later, he called me out of the blue.

He said, "Honey, I'm with this other woman, but I've been thinking of you."

He said, "I'm the water and you're the moon, and if I can't see you soon, then I do believe my heart will turn to dust."

That would have been a good ending right there, Dolly taking him back and then fading things out with a nice refrain about lovers under the moon. But Lyndell and Claudia's story still had a few more verses to go, and they really weren't all that song-worthy. Of course, I still had to be born. And then Lyndell would run back to his wife, who'd eventually find out about the fling that produced me. She'd shit a brick, divorce Lyndell, settle up for possession of his GTO, and then burn it right in front of his eyes for spite. Lyndell would drift for several years, until he heard about Nick being locked up. And that would bring him back again. He was no longer the dashing drunk paramour. He was just a man who needed a place to stay. And so Claudia offered him the sofa.

I met Lyndell at two o'clock in the morning, when he slipped into my bedroom smelling of sweet liquor and cigarette smoke. I didn't know who he was. I only heard the floorboards creaking in the

liquor and cigarette smoke. I didn't know who he was. I only heard the floorboards creaking in the darkness, so I reached under the bed for my Rico Carty baseball bat. As soon as the tall, dark figure stepped into the strike zone, I took his ass to right field.

All the air rushed out of his body. He groaned, dropped to his knees, and fell onto his side. He looked like a wrestler who'd just been thrown from the ring. "My kidney," he whimpered. "Oh, God, think my kidney's ruptured."

The hallway light came on and Claudia swept into the room, still tying her blue bathrobe. I was standing on the bed with the bat cocked behind my ear, and Lyndell was lying on his back with his hands covering the top of his head.

Claudia rushed over and grabbed the barrel of the bat. "Holy shit, Luke. Don't kill him. That's Lyndell. That's your father."

My heart slowed to a trot. I pulled the bat off my shoulder and tilted my head to get a better look. My body felt warm and tight all of the sudden, like someone had rolled me up inside a big, heavy rug.

Ever so slowly, Lyndell's hands parted. When he realized I had no intention of smacking him again, he swiped his hand across his chest. "That's the take sign," he said.

I dropped the bat on the bed. "You oughta try knocking. I thought somebody was breaking in."

Claudia helped him sit up. He groaned and touched his fingers to his side.

"Jesus, boy. You swing like Willie McCovey."

I hopped off the bed, dressed in my skivvies and socks. That's what Nick slept in, at least before he went to prison. He'd told me the socks were more important than pants—they took longer to put on in case you had to make a fast getaway.

"You're lucky I was choking up," I said.

Lyndell pushed himself to his feet. He was wearing his Wranglers, a blue T-shirt, and a gray Amoco jacket with his name stitched over the heart.

Claudia couldn't help but smile a little as Lyndell leaned against the wall, still hurting and doubled over from the blow. "So what's the word?" she asked. "Are you gonna live?"

"I think so." He laid his hand on his side again. "I might be pissing blood for a few days, but otherwise..."

"Well, what were you thinking, sneaking in here like that?" she asked.

He pointed my way. "I was gonna see if he wanted to take a ride."

"At this time of night?"

"Well, yeah. It's the best time. No cops. No traffic."

~~“Oh, Lord.” She was smiling, though, and Lyndell was looking over her shoulder. He was smiling, too. He even gave me a wink.~~

The next night, I was ready to make a fast getaway, wearing my Keds and my Toughskins under the covers. Lyndell was careful to knock. He stuck his head in the door and waved his hand for me to follow him.

We padded out of the house and climbed into the white Chevelle. It was long and low-slung, with a twin-bulge hood, a Muncie four-speed, and mag wheels. The front fenders were embossed with crossed flags and the words “Turbo Jet.” I’d never been impressed much with cars before then, but this one got my attention. It was the smell as much as anything else, the cigarette smoke and the leather and the gasoline. It smelled like the place to be at two o’clock in the morning.

Lyndell coasted down the driveway so the engine wouldn’t wake Claudia. He rolled halfway down the street and fired up the motor on the fly. *BA-WOOM, WOOM, WOOM, WOOM*. The big V-8 scared me. It felt like that engine was over us, under us, in front and behind us. I grabbed hold of the dashboard with both hands. Lyndell glanced over and smiled. I let go and tried to sit back like I wasn’t all that impressed.

We didn’t talk much at first. Lyndell drove toward town, playing with the radio as he steered us along the crooked roads, braking and downshifting and romping on the gas when it was needed. He drove faster than anybody I’d ever seen, and it took a while for me to relax and start to feel like the engine wasn’t so much surrounding me as a part of me. It made me feel fast, strong, loud, and hard to break.

We lived forty miles north of Atlanta in a town called Green Lake. It hadn’t even been a town before World War II, just an empty river valley. The Army Engineers drove in after the war and decided the valley would be the perfect spot for a huge dam to help water and electrify all the people in Atlanta. The result was Green Lake, a forty-thousand-acre pond, which had become, as I’d learned in social studies class, a “valuable water, power, and recreation resource.” Or as Claudia used to say, “Take away the lake, and there goes the Dairy Queen and the Holiday Inn.”

Lyndell wheeled the Chevelle past the Holiday Inn. It was a fairly impressive structure for Green Lake in 1973—a two-story job, all lit up, the parking lot filled with automobiles. Tom T. Hall was on the car radio, singing about heaven and how the water there tasted an awful lot like beer.

“Hmm.” Lyndell slowed the car and eyed the hotel’s lighted swimming pool. It shone like a bright, blue gem out in the middle of the parking lot. “I think me, you, and Claudia might need to come over here one night and take a dip in that thing.”

We passed the Krystal, the Big Star, and the Dairy Queen. The buildings glowed under the spring moon, their neon signs still flickering long after closing. The bank’s time-and-temp sign said it was 2:46 A.M. and 65 degrees.

Lyndell drove down to the end of the commercial strip and pulled into Wilson’s Auto Supply, an old cinder-block eyesore. He pulled around back, cut the lights, and stepped out onto the gravel. He

“You ever seen one of these?”

We were standing in the shadows at the back door of Wilson’s. Lyndell was holding up a greasy piece of metal.

I shook my head. “Uh-uh.”

“It’s a distributor cap,” he said. “I need a new one for the car. You think you could get in under that door and get me one?” He pointed to the dog door that was cut into the bottom of the door frame. It was small, barely the size of a dachshund. I knew it would be a tight fit.

“I thought you worked at a garage. Can’t you get one of those for free?”

“Well, I don’t exactly have a job yet. I mean, hell, I just moved in with y’all yesterday.” He crossed his arms and scratched at his chin. “I’ve got a line of credit here. Me and the owner go way back. We used to race together and everything, so he doesn’t really mind me coming in and taking what I need.”

“Wouldn’t he give you some keys if he didn’t mind you coming in?”

Lyndell scratched at his head and looked back over his shoulder. My questions were making him awfully itchy, but I kept asking them.

“You really raced together?”

Lyndell shrugged in a dodgy sort of way. “More like against each other. We don’t get along too well.”

“How come? Did you beat him?” I imagined Lyndell standing in the winner’s circle with a big trophy.

“Sort of,” Lyndell said. “He ran me into the wall one night when I was leading. Two laps to go in the feature race. Came up underneath me and hit my rear axle.”

“And you still beat him?”

“Well, no. Not in the race, anyway. Hell, I couldn’t even finish because my car was so busted up. But after it was over, I wrapped a tire iron in newspaper and went after him down in the pits. I got in a good head shot before they pulled me off him. Split his scalp wide open.”

“That’d be a better story if you’d come back and won the race.”

“Yeah, I know. Funny thing is, I met his wife a couple years later in this bar.” He smiled and whistled, remembering the occasion. “I got him back real good then.”

We stood there staring at each other. “You mean you hit his wife in the head with a tire iron, too?”

He shook his head and scratched his shoulder. He wasn't used to telling his stories to kids.

He pointed to the dog door again. "So what do you think? Will you do it?"

I'd stolen some stuff before: candy bars and cinnamon toothpicks from Elmore's Five and Dime and a Hot Wheels car from a kid's desk at school. I'd actually felt bad when the kid started crying about his toy car. Nevertheless, I wanted to impress Lyndell.

"You need anything else while I'm in there?"

Lyndell smiled. "Now that you mention it, I could use a new oil filter. But that's all. There's no need to get greedy."

I had to wiggle my ass a little to get my hips through the dog door. Lyndell helped me along with a shove. "In you go," he said.

The stockroom was windowless and pitch black. It smelled like mildew and grape soda. I switched on the flashlight Lyndell had given me and made my way up front. The caps and the filters were exactly where he'd said they would be. I pocketed the goods and scrambled back to the dog door. I felt like Colonel Hogan on one of his nighttime scouting missions outside the stalag.

Lyndell had said he would time me on his watch to see how fast I could get in and out. I slid the distributor cap, oil filter, and flashlight through the door and wormed my head and shoulders out into the cool night air. I looked up from the ground, still half in and half out of the store. "How long?" I asked.

Lyndell had already retrieved the goods. He was reading something off the back of the oil filter box. He glanced at his watch and shrugged. "About two minutes, eighteen."

"That's bullshit," I said.

His mouth dropped open in a gesture of mild shock. "Does Claudia know you talk like that?"

"She doesn't care. As long as it's not at school." Of course, that was a lie. But I figured if he was going to ask me to steal things, I might as well get something in return.

He nodded like the deal made sense. "All right. I was just checking. But don't go overboard. If you cuss all the time, people won't take you serious." He went back to reading the package.

"I counted in my head," I told him. "There's no way I was in there two minutes."

He didn't say anything, so I craned my neck and tried to look him straight in the eye. "You didn't really time me, did you?"

He sighed and jerked his thumb back over his shoulder in the direction of the empty road. "Well, I had to keep a look out." He walked over to the car and tossed the stuff into the open window. He

turned my way again and waved his hand through the air. "Come on out of there."

turned my way again and waved his hand through the air. "Come on out of there."

I tried to slide the rest of the way through the door, but my ass was stuck again. This time I couldn't work it free.

"I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"I mean I'm stuck."

Lyndell grabbed my arms and started pulling. He pulled, and I wiggled. I tried holding my breath, blowing it all out, sucking in my stomach, tightening my butt, the whole nine yards.

"I can't move either way, now. I think my legs are falling asleep."

Lyndell stepped back and observed the situation. "Well, what the hell did you do, eat a T-bone steak while you were in there?"

He stood above me for a moment, thinking. He took a look at me and then the Chevelle. His eyes lingered on the car.

"If you leave me, I'll tell on you."

He pulled his Kools out of his jacket pocket and smiled. "You wouldn't rat out your old man, would you?"

"Does a hobby horse have a hickory dick?"

Lyndell laughed. "Hey, where'd you hear that one?"

"From Nick."

He shook his head, still smiling. "I bet you didn't know he heard it from me. Ain't that a kick in the ass?"

"It'd be a bigger kick if I wasn't stuck in this door."

"All right, then. Just hold your damn horses."

He went to the car and grabbed his tire iron from the trunk, then he walked back over and sized up the problem. The tire iron dangled at his side.

"I guess this guy, Wilson, hates to see you with one of those."

Lyndell gazed down and chuckled, then he squatted and went to work. By the time he'd finished hacking up the door, a good-size hunting dog could have scampered through the hole. I crawled right out, stood up, and brushed off my jeans.

Lyndell held the tire iron up in the air and grinned. "Now that's what you call an all-purpose

Lyndell held the tire iron up in the air and grinned. "Now that's what you call an all-purpose tool."

We ended up on Green Lake Road that night. It was a crooked two-lane running along the banks of the lake. There were no other cars out, so Lyndell took it upon himself to double the speed limit. We were doing 90, the pine trees streaming past us like fence posts. Every now and then there'd be a break in the trees, and I'd catch a glimpse of the lake.

Lyndell plucked the cigarette lighter out of the ashtray and held the orange tip to a fresh stick. He glanced my way, smoke filling the air.

"You like cars?" he asked.

"They're all right."

"Well, you don't sound too committed."

"It's not like I can drive."

"Says who?"

"You ever heard of the police?"

Lyndell waved his hand through the air. "You don't need a damn license to be able to drive. I know plenty of drivers who don't have a license. Most of them can drive better than the people who do have one. Even when they're drunk."

He flung us around the curve, pressing me up against the door. He caught a little bit of the shoulder coming out. The tires thumped like we'd run over a squirrel. Lyndell dropped the Muncie into fourth and jumped on the gas again.

"Well, what else?" he asked. "What do you like to do?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you gotta like something."

"I don't like school, if that's what you're getting at."

"Shit, no," he said, "that's not what I'm getting at. I just mean for fun. If you've got a day to kill, what would you do with it?"

Only one thing came to mind. "I'd probably watch TV."

Lyndell smiled, nodded. "You get that from Claudia. I remember when we bought our first Emerson. Hell, I couldn't get her out from in front of it. She'd sit there all day with Nick in her arms."

Emerson. Then, I couldn't get her out from in front of it. She'd sit there all day with Nick in her arms watching those soaps."

"She's still like that," I said.

"*General Hospital*?" he asked.

"Every day at three, watching those Quartermaines."

He laughed. "I never cared much for the soaps. I do like that *Love, American Style* show. That's good one. That, and *Flip Wilson*."

He asked what shows I liked best. I took him down the list, starting with the eight o'clock programs. *Gunsmoke*, *Bonanza*, *Mod Squad*, *Emergency!* I also made sure I mentioned *Georgia Championship Wrestling*, which conflicted with one of Claudia's favorites, *Hee Haw*. Sometimes, she'd blackmail me and force me to sing that "Gloom, Despair and Agony" song from *Hee Haw* just for the privilege of watching wrestling. For some reason, she got a kick out of hearing me sing it. I thought the whole thing bordered on psychological abuse.

"Who's your favorite wrestler?" Lyndell asked.

"I like Buddy Colt. Him and Mr. Wrestling Number Two."

"What about the Funk Brothers?"

"They're all right. They can do some damage."

Lyndell nodded. "That stuff's fake, you know."

"Yeah, I know. Claudia met one of those guys at the fish camp."

"Who? A wrestler?"

"Yeah. His name's Rowland, but he wrestles as Big Boy Brown. He's not on TV, though, so you wouldn't know him."

Lyndell frowned. He didn't speak for a moment, but he kept glancing over at me like he was hoping I'd say something.

"So is that her boyfriend?"

"Who, Rowland?"

"Rowland. Big Boy. Whatever the hell he goes by."

"Nah, Claudia only went out with him twice. She said he'd landed on his head one too many times."

Lyndell nodded. He was staring out over the hood again. "So I guess she meets a lot of men at the fish camp."

My heart gave my rib cage a little *tap-tap-tap*, just to let me know this might be a good time to play dumb.

“Not many,” I lied.

He cast a suspicious glance in my direction. “Claudia’s an awfully pretty woman,” he said. “You might not have noticed that, seeing how she’s your mother. But other men notice.”

“Lee Gordon said she reminded him of a young Angie Dickinson.”

“Who’s that?”

“She was in that John Wayne picture, *Rio Bravo*, and the one with Burt Reynolds, *Sam Whiskey*.”

Lyndell shook his head. “Hell, I know who Angie Dickinson is. I mean, who the hell is Lee Gordon?”

“Oh, he’s the manager at the Big Star. He plays that stand-up bass in the Green Lake Gang.”

Lyndell was getting all puffed up, like he wanted to fight somebody. He was squeezing the steering wheel extra tight.

“I don’t know him, but he’s a damn idiot. She don’t look a thing like Angie Dickinson, I can tell you that. She’s got prettier hair than Angie Dickinson.”

“You jealous or something?”

He snorted, but without a whole lot of conviction. “Hell, no, I’m not jealous. Me and Claudia have an understanding about these things. I just wanna make sure she doesn’t get mixed up with the wrong guy.”

“She said there’s a lot of men who are lucky she’s not a big singing star.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because she could sing some real mean songs about them.”

Lyndell got quiet for a moment. He switched off the radio in an agitated way. Roger Miller, one of his all-time favorites, had been singing. Even Claudia liked Roger Miller. Hell, even I liked Roger Miller.

“Well, I sure hope she wasn’t including me on that list,” Lyndell said. “I might not be perfect, but I’ve always had her best interests at heart.”

We never got around to swimming in the Holiday Inn’s pool. Lyndell and Claudia were hardly ever

we never got around to swimming in the Monday kid's pool. Lyndell and Claudia were hardly ever together. Lyndell eventually found work at a garage. He had a habit of going in late and coming home even later. I don't believe Claudia ever saw much money from him, but she was always friendly enough toward him. They played gin sometimes in the evenings, Claudia whipping Lyndell's ass time and again while the radio played.

"Goddammit, this game ain't nothing but luck." Lyndell fired his hand down on the table after another futile effort. He turned in his chair, crossed his legs, and lit a cigarette.

Claudia smiled and winked at me. I'd been sitting there pretending to read one of my schoolbooks.

"Poor Lyndell," she said, "he's lost his touch."

Lyndell had his arms crossed. He was sulking and drawing the life out of his Kool.

"The thing is," she said to me, "he's the one who taught me to play this game. Taught me years ago, and now that I'm better than him, he doesn't like it much."

Claudia never stopped seeing other men while Lyndell was staying with us. Sometimes, on fish camp nights, she wouldn't come home until five in the morning. Lyndell would have stumbled in long before her, a quart of Schlitz in his hand, his face and clothes caked in the red powder from the dirt track. We'd fall asleep together on the sofa, watching the TV in the dark, James Brown's *Future Shock* and then the monster movies on channel 17. Lyndell was a big James Brown fan.

One Sunday, I woke up to Lyndell and Claudia arguing. It was the only time I ever heard them raise their voices at each other. Lyndell was back in Claudia's bedroom.

"You're just doing this to get back at me," he said. "It's nothing but spite."

I tiptoed down the hall and gazed through the crack in the doorway. Claudia was standing there wrapped in a towel, still wet from the shower. Lyndell stood in front of her, dressed in his racing clothes from the night before. Claudia flicked the towel with her thumb and let it fall to her feet. She stood there in front of him naked. I turned away as fast as I could.

"It's not spite," she said, her voice cool and measured. "It's called blowing your chance. And you blew it twice. So, take a look, Lyndell. Get your eyes full. Because all you're gonna have is a memory."

Lyndell didn't have anything else to say.

We kept up the late-night car rides. Lyndell would come in and wake me a couple times a week. At school, I would daydream about the Chevelle, the smell and the feel of the engine when it threw my head back against the seat. I drew pictures of it in my notebook. I pictured myself on the dirt track, behind the wheel, banging fenders on the last lap. Lyndell had taken me to the Green Lake Speedway

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