

COFFEY & HILL • 1

ANNABEL LEE

A COFFEY & HILL NOVEL

MIKE NAPPA



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Mike Nappa, Annabel Lee
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For Jan Hummel
who makes things happen!

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee . . .

—EDGAR ALLAN POE

1

ANNABEL

Date Unknown

Uncle Truck keeps a German shepherd on his farm that'll eat human fingers if you feed 'em to it just right.

I know this because I have seen that dog. And I have seen them fingers.

Truck keeps the dog—house and all—in a chain link cage out behind the big red barn on the property, just down from the winding, dirt-road driveway. The cage ain't very big, but it's long and narrow like a practice track, and it gives the dog a place to run. Except when the dog gets to the end. Then it has to almost stop and put its paws up on the corner of the fence so's it can turn around quickly inside that small space.

Sometimes I think that dog is crazy, runnin' up and down that grass-patched cage. Runnin' like no one is looking. Like it's got to run or else, well, or else it'll go crazy. It ain't the barking kind of dog, though.

I mean, *isn't*. Isn't the barking kind of dog.

I am an educated girl. I don't use words like *ain't*, not no more. Not anymore.

I'm not school-educated, no. Uncle Truck says that's a waste of time and taxpayer dollars. But he also says he won't have no stupid in his house neither. That's why I got books all over this place. Any kind of book I want, Truck'll get for me. He says that's my education and I better make the most of it. I don't mind, though. I like books. I like reading. I like that Truck makes time for me to read each and every day of the week, no matter what. I like that at least twice a week—and sometimes more—Truck pulls a language book off the shelf and drills me on German verbs or Arabic phrases or Italian fairy tales or whatever. I like knowing there's something else out there to discover beyond just the acres of this farm, outside the closed-up community of Peachtree, Alabama. And I like it when Truck says I'm real good at learning and a "supernatural" at picking up different languages.

What I don't like is that dog.

It don't bark at me, not ever. But it growls. I can almost feel the rumbling in its throat before I hear it with my ears. Whenever the dog sees me, the growling starts. Sometimes Truck'll tell it to shut-up-mutt and swat it across the nose. But most times Uncle Truck don't even hear it. Most times it's just the dog and me, even when Truck or one of his farmhands is there.

The dog looks me dead in the eye. Never wags its tail. Never moves off its haunches. Just looks at me and growls, low, deep, and regular. It reminds me of some story out of a fairy tale, except the magic here is real, and bad. Like that dog was once an evil warlock vanquished by a handsome prince, and as his punishment, he was transformed forever into a dog that eats fingers and lives in a cage. Something like that.

I make my hands into fists whenever I have to be near that dog.

I asked Truck once why he fed fingers to the dog. He looked

at first like he was gonna laugh. Then he got a serious layer onto his face.

“Just testing the limits,” he said. “Nothing for you to concern yourself with, Annie-girl.”

“But where’d the fingers come from?” I wanted to know.

Uncle Truck didn’t answer.

Kenny, one of Truck’s oldest hands on the farm, told me later that the fingers came from a medical research facility in Tuscaloosa, that they was from cadavers dedicated to science and that one of Truck’s old army buddies got ’em while he was working out there as a lab assistant after the second Iraq war. Kenny said Uncle Truck knows people all over Alabama, all over the world. And because of that, Truck can’t talk about everything he does or everyone he knows to a little girl with a big imagination. But Kenny said he only knew Truck and Peachtree, AL, so he could talk to whoever he wanted whenever he wanted, and that included me.

I like Kenny. But I worry about him sometimes. Even I know it ain’t—*isn’t*—good to let your mouth run off too much. Truck says that’s what killed my parents. I think he may be right.

Peachtree ain’t but a fourteen-mile drive from our acreage on the edges of the Conecuh National Forest, so that’s where we go to get most of our supplies and to find out the gossip of the world. I saw a man once, down at Kelly Supply store in Peachtree, who had two fingers missing from his left hand. His pinky and his ring finger both was gone down to the nub. Truck was over in the leather section looking at a saddle, so I took a chance.

“What happened to your fingers, mister?” I asked the man.

He looked down, grinning. “Well, aren’t you a cutie,” he said.

I find grown-ups like that annoying.

I got long brown hair, just enough curl to make it nice, I guess. I got green eyes and a lean, horse-riding frame that older women

tell me is gonna turn into a “man-kill” someday, whatever that means. I wear boots most days and a dress on Sundays. But I didn’t ask this man to judge whether or not I was cute. I asked about his messed-up hand. Seems disrespectful not to answer a person’s question when it’s asked straight on at you, so I tried again, pointing at his nubs for emphasis.

“What happened to your fingers?”

This time he raised his hand and looked at it like it was the first time he’d seen he was missing something there.

“Lost ’em when I was about your age,” he said. “Stuck ’em under a lawnmower by accident.”

“Did you feed ’em to a dog after?”

He cocked his head like he wanted to tell a secret but wasn’t sure if I knew it already. I decided not to make him spill something private, so I changed the subject.

“How you gonna get married without having a finger to hold the ring?”

He laughed at the question. “I guess that’s a problem,” he said, patting his belly, “but first I gotta find me a woman who don’t mind that her man eats too much and exercises too little.”

I seen Uncle Truck comin’ over then. I figured it was time to wrap up.

“Bye, mister,” I said. “Good luck finding your woman.”

“Thanks,” he said. Then he followed my gaze and saw Truck was headed our way. His whole manner changed. His eyes darted all over, looking for exits, and his back stiffened like he wanted to run. He didn’t wait around. He turned and walked the opposite direction, around a display of feed grain and then out the door of Kelly Supply. A minute later Truck was standing next to me, looking after the eight-fingered man.

“Who was that?” he said to me.

I shrugged. “Just some man.”

“What did he say to you?”

“Nothing,” I lied. But I was thinking about Truck’s dog.

“Good,” Uncle Truck said to me. “Come on, I need to get some rope before we go.”

Unlike that eight-fingered man, most people in Peachtree greet Uncle Truck like he’s their best friend. Wherever he goes, they call out his name, clap him on the back, and tell stories about off-the-wall adventures. But when Truck ain’t looking, I see them sometimes show a little something they don’t want him to see. They get this wary gleam in their eyes and fidget around a bit like they’s in a spotlight and can’t wait to get out of it again.

Afraid.

Makes sense to me.

Truck gets good deals on stuff wherever he goes. The man at Kelly Supply lets him keep a runnin’ tab for things he buys at the store. It’s listed under the name of Leonard Truckson. He runs up credit in the winter and then pays it off in the fall, after harvest. At least that’s what they tell me. I ain’t never seen Truck—or Leonard Truckson—pay for anything at that store.

Anybody who calls Uncle Truck “Leonard” or “Lenny” or even “Mr. Truckson” is from out of town. Everybody here knows that he’s Truck, period. That’s the way it’s always been, and I guess the way it always will be.

Funny how he’s so peculiar about his name, but that dog ain’t got no name at all.

That dog . . .

Uncle Truck keeps a dog that eats human fingers out behind his barn.

I’m afraid of that mean old dog.

But sometimes, if I’m honest, Uncle Truck’s the one who really scares me.