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Opening Extract from...

Solitude Creek

Written by Jeffery Deaver

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JEFFERY DEAVER

SOLITUDE CREEK

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1

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FRENZY

TUESDAY, APRIL 4

CHAPTER 1

The roadhouse was comfortable, friendly, inexpensive. All good.

Safe, too. Better.

You always thought about that when you took your teenage daughter out for a night of music.

Michelle Cooper did, in any event. Safe when it came to the band and their music, the customers, the wait staff.

The club itself, too, the parking lot – well lit – and the fire doors and sprinklers.

Michelle always checked these. The teenage-daughter part again.

Solitude Creek attracted a varied clientele, young and old, male and female, white and Latino and Asian, a few African Americans, a mirror of the Monterey Bay area. Now, just after seven thirty, she looked around, noting the hundreds of patrons who'd come from this and surrounding counties, all in buoyant mood, looking forward to seeing a band on the rise. If they brought with them any cares, those troubles were tucked tightly away at the prospect of beer, whimsical cocktails, chicken wings and music.

The group had flown in from LA, a garage band turned backup turned roadhouse headliner, thanks to Twitter and YouTube and Vidster. Word of mouth, and talent, sold groups nowadays, and the six boys in Lizard Annie worked as hard on their phones as onstage. They weren't O.A.R. or Linkin Park but were soon to be, with a bit of luck.

They certainly had Michelle and Trish's support. In fact, the cute boy band had a pretty solid mom-daughter fan base, judging by a look around the room tonight: other parents and their teenagers – the lyrics were rated PG at the raunchiest. For this evening's show the ages of those in the audience ranged from sixteen to forty, give or take. Okay, Michelle admitted, maybe mid-forties.

She noted the Samsung in her daughter's grip and said, 'Text later. Not now.'

'Mom.'

'Who is it?'

'Cho.'

A nice girl from Trish's music class.

'Two minutes.'

The club was filling up. Solitude Creek was a forty-year-old, single-story building featuring a small, rectangular dance floor of scuffed oak, ringed with high-top tables and stools. The stage, three feet high, was at the north end; the bar was opposite. A kitchen, east, served full menus, which eliminated the age barrier of attendance: only liquor-serving venues that offered food were permitted to seat children. Three fire-exit doors were against the west wall.

On the dark-wood paneling there were posters and during-the-show photos, complete with real and fake autographs, of many of the groups that had appeared at the legendary Monterey Pop Festival in June of 1967: Jefferson Airplane, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Ravi Shankar, Al Kooper, Country Joe. Dozens of others. In a grimy Plexiglas case there was a fragment of an electric guitar, reportedly one destroyed by Pete Townshend of The Who after the group's performance at the event.

The tables at Solitude Creek were first come, first claimed, and all were filled – the show was only fifteen minutes away now. Presently servers circulated with last-minute orders, plates of hefty burgers and chicken wings and drinks on trays hovering atop their stable, splayed palms. From behind the stage, a miaow of tuning guitar strings and an arpeggio chord from a sax, a chunky A from a bass. Anticipation now. Those exciting moments before the music begins to seize and seduce.

The voices were loud, words indistinct, as the untabled patrons jockeyed for the best position in the standing-room area. Since the stage wasn't high and the floor was flat, it was sometimes hard to get a good view of the acts. A bit of jostling but few hard words.

That was the Solitude Creek club. No hostility.

Safe . . .

However, there was one thing that Michelle Cooper didn't care for. The claustrophobia. The ceilings in the club were low and that accentuated the closeness. The dim room was not particularly spacious, the ventilation not the best; a mix of body scent, after-shave and perfume clung, stronger even than grill and fry-tank aromas, adding to the sense of confinement. The sense that you were packed in tight as canned fish. No, *that* never sat well with Michelle Cooper.

She brushed absently at her frosted blonde hair, looked again at the exit doors – not far away – and felt reassured.

Another sip of wine.

She noted Trish checking out a boy at a table nearby. Floppy hair, narrow face, skinny hips. Good looks to kill for. He was drinking a beer so Mother vetoed Trish's inclination instantly, if silently. Not the alcohol, the age: the drink meant he was over twenty-one and therefore completely out of bounds for her seventeen-year-old.

Then she thought wryly: At least I can try.

A glance at her diamond Rolex. Five minutes.

Michelle asked, 'Was it "Escape", the one that was nominated for the Grammy?'

'Yeah.'

'Focus on *me*, child.'

The girl grimaced. 'Mom.' She looked away from the Boy with the Beer.

Michelle hoped Lizard Annie would do the song tonight. 'Escape' was not only catchy but brought back good memories. She'd been listening to it after a recent first date with a lawyer from Salinas. In the six years since a vicious divorce, Michelle had had plenty of awkward dinners and movies, but the evening with Ross had been fun. They'd laughed. They'd dueled about the best *Veep* and *Homeland* episodes. And there'd been no pressure – for anything. So very rare for a first date.

Mother and daughter ate a bit more artichoke dip and Michelle had a little more wine. Driving, she allowed herself two glasses before getting behind the wheel, no more.

The girl adjusted her pink floral headband and sipped a Diet Coke. She was in black jeans, not too tight – yay! – and a white sweater. Michelle was in blue jeans, tighter than her daughter's, though that was a symptom of exercise failure, and a red silk blouse.

'Mom. San Francisco this weekend? Please. I need that jacket.'

'We'll go to Carmel.' Michelle spent plenty of her real-estate commissions shopping in the classy stores of the picturesque and excessively cute village.

'Jeez, Mom, I'm not thirty.' Meaning ancient. Trish was simply stating the more or less accurate fact that shopping for cool teen clothes wasn't easy on the Peninsula, which had been called, with only some exaggeration, a place for the newly wed and nearly dead.

'Okay. We'll work it out.'

Trish hugged her and Michelle's world glowed.

She and her daughter had had their hard times. A seemingly good marriage had crashed, thanks to cheating. Everything torn apart. Frederick (never *Fred*) moving out when the girl was eleven – what a tough time for a break-up to happen. But Michelle had worked hard to create a good life for her daughter, to give her what had been yanked away by betrayal and the subsequent divorce.

And now it was working. Now the girl seemed happy. She looked at her daughter with moon eyes and the girl noticed.

'Mom, like what?'

'Nothing.'

Lights down.

PA announcements about shutting off phones, fire exits and so on were made by the owner of the club himself, the venerable Sam Cohen, an icon in the Monterey Bay area. Everybody knew Sam. Everybody loved Sam.

Cohen's voice continued, 'And now, ladies and gentlemen, Solitude Creek, the premier roadhouse on the west coast . . .'

Applause.

'. . . is pleased to welcome, direct from the City of Angels . . . Lizard Annie!'

Frantic clapping now. Hooting.

Out came the boys. Guitars were plugged in. The seat behind the drum set occupied. Ditto the keyboard.

The lead singer tossed his mass of hair aside and lifted an outstretched palm to the audience. The group's trademark gesture. 'Are we ready to get down?'

Howling.

'Well, are we?'

The guitar riffs started. Yes! The song *was* 'Escape'. Michelle and her daughter began to clap, along with the hundreds of others in the small space. The heat had increased, the humidity, the embracing scent of bodies. Claustrophobia notched up a bit. Still, Michelle smiled and laughed.

The pounding beat continued, bass, drum and the flesh of palms.

But then Michelle stopped clapping. Frowning, she looked around, cocking her head. What was that? The club, like everywhere in California, was supposed to be non-smoking. But somebody, she was sure, had lit up. She definitely smelled smoke.

She looked around but saw no one with a cigarette in their mouth.

'What?' Trish called, seeing her mother's troubled expression.

'Nothing,' her mother replied, and began clapping out the rhythm once again.

CHAPTER 2

At the third word into the second song – it happened to be 'love' – Michelle Cooper knew something was wrong.

She smelled the smoke more strongly. And it wasn't cigarette smoke. Smoke from burning wood or paper.

Or the old, dry walls or flooring of a very congested roadhouse.

'Mom?' Trish was frowning, looking around too. Her pert nose twitched. 'Is that . . .'

'I smell it too,' Michelle whispered. She couldn't see any fumes but the smell was unmistakable and growing stronger. 'We're leaving. Now.' Michelle stood fast.

'Hey, lady,' a man called, catching the stool and righting it. 'You okay?' Then he frowned. 'Jesus. Is that smoke?'

Others were looking around, smelling the same.

No one else in the venue, none of the two hundred or so others – employees or patrons or musicians – existed. Michelle Cooper was getting her daughter out of there. She steered Trish toward the nearest fire-exit door.

'My purse,' Trish said over the music. The Brighton bag, a present from Michelle, was hidden on the floor beneath the table – just to be safe. The girl broke away to retrieve the heart-embossed bag.

'Forget it, let's go!' her mother commanded.

'I'll just be . . .' the girl began and bent down.

'Trish! No! Leave it.'

By now, a dozen people nearby, who'd seen Michelle's abrupt rise and lurch toward the exit, had stopped paying attention to the music and were looking around. One by one they were also rising. Curious and troubled expressions on their faces. Smiles becoming frowns. Eyes narrowing. Something predatory, feral about the gazes.

Five or six oozed between Michelle and her daughter, who was still rummaging for the purse. Michelle stepped forward fast and went for the girl's shoulder to pull her up. Hand gripped sweater. It stretched.

'Mom!' Trish pulled away.

It was then that a brilliant light came on, focused on the exit doors.

The music stopped abruptly. The lead singer called into the microphone, 'Hey, uhm, guys, I don't know . . . Look, don't panic.'

'Jesus, what's—' somebody beside Michelle shouted.

The screams began. Wails filled the venue, loud, nearly loud enough to shatter eardrums.

Michelle struggled to get to Trish but more patrons surged between them. The two were pushed in different directions.

An announcement on the PA: '*Ladies and gentlemen, there's a fire. Evacuate! Evacuate now! Do not use the kitchen or stage exit – that's where the fire is! Use the emergency doors.*'

Howling screams now.

Patrons rose and stools fell, drinks scattered. Two high-top tables tipped over and crashed to the floor. People began moving toward the exit doors – their glowing red signs were still obvious; the smell of smoke was strong but visibility was good.

'Trish! Over here!' Michelle screamed. Now two dozen people were between them. Why the hell had she gone back for the damn purse? 'Let's get out!'

Her daughter started toward her through the crowd. But the tide of people surging for the exit doors lifted Michelle off her feet and tugged her away, while Trish was enveloped in another group.

'Honey!'

'Mom!'

Michelle, being dragged toward the doors, used every muscle in her body to turn toward her daughter but she was helpless, crushed between two patrons: a heavy-set man in a T-shirt, which was already savagely torn, his skin red bearing scratch marks

from fingernails, and a woman, whose fake breasts pressed painfully into Michelle's side.

'Trish, Trish, Trish!'

She might have been mute. The patrons' screams and wailing – from fear and from pain – were numbing. All she could see was the head of the man in front of her and the exit sign they surged toward. Michelle pounded her fists on shoulders, on arms, on necks, on faces, just as she, too, was pounded by other patrons.

'I have to get my daughter! Go back, go back, go back!'

But there was no stopping the tide streaming for the exits. Michelle Cooper could breathe only an ounce or two of air at a time. And the pain – in her chest, her side, her gut. Her arms were pinned, feet suspended above the floor.

The house lights were on, bright. Michelle turned slightly – not her doing – and saw the faces of the patrons near her: eyes coin-wide in panic, crimson streaks from mouths. Had people bitten their tongues out of fear? Or was the crush of people snapping ribs and piercing lungs? One man, in his forties, was unconscious, skin gray. Had he fainted? Or died of a heart attack? He was still upright, though, wedged into the moving crowd.

The smell of smoke was stronger now and it was hard to breathe – maybe the fire was sucking the oxygen from the room, though she could still see no flames. Perhaps the patrons, in their panic, were depleting the air. The pressure of bodies against her chest, too.

'Trish! Honey!' she called, but the words were whispers. No air in, no air out.

Where was her baby? Was someone helping her escape? Not likely. Nobody, not a single soul, seemed to be helping anyone else. This was an animal frenzy. Every person was out for himself. It was pure survival.

Please . . .

The group of patrons she was welded to stumbled over something.

Oh, God . . .

Glancing down, Michelle could just make out a slim young Latina in a red-and-black dress, lying on her side, her face

registering pure terror and agony. Her right arm was broken, bent backward. Her other hand was reaching up, fingers gripping a man's pants pocket.

Helpless. She couldn't rise; no one paid the least attention to her even as she cried out with every shuffled foot that trampled her body.

Michelle was looking right into the woman's eyes when a booted foot stepped onto her throat. The man tried to avoid it, crying, 'No, move back, move back,' to those around him. But, like everyone else, he had no control of his direction, his motion, his footfalls.

Under the pressure of the weight on her throat, the woman's head twisted even farther sideways and she began to shake fiercely. By the time Michelle had moved on, the Latina's eyes were glazed and her tongue protruded slightly from her bright red lips.

Michelle Cooper had just seen someone die.

More PA announcements. Michelle couldn't hear them. Not that it mattered. She had absolutely no control over anything.

Trish, she prayed, stay on your feet. Don't fall. Please . . .

As the mass surrounding her stumbled closer to the fire doors, the crowd began to shift to the right and soon Michelle could see the rest of the club.

There! Yes, there was her daughter! Trish was still on her feet, though she too was pinned in a mass of bodies. 'Trish, Trish!'

But no sound at all came from her now.

Mother and daughter were moving in opposite directions.

Michelle blinked tears and sweat from her eyes. Her group was only feet away from the exits. She'd be out in a few seconds. Trish was still near the kitchen – where somebody had just said the fire was raging.

'Trish! This way!'

Pointless.

And then she saw a man beside her daughter lose control completely – he began pounding the face of the man next to him and started to climb on top of the crowd, as if, in his madness, he believed he could claw his way through the ceiling. He was

large and one of the people he used as a launching pad was Trish, who weighed a hundred pounds less than he did. Michelle saw her daughter open her mouth to scream and then, under the man's massive weight, vanish beneath the sea of madness.