



# **TREEN ALEE**

The Awakers of Grevelton



Michael Van Clyburn





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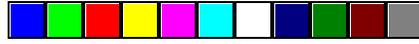
The Awakers of Grevelton

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## Prologue

The television shattered through the living room window then sank into the shrubs in front of the house. The blast echoed out to the curbside mailbox, where Treen Alee had been waiting for Shainy Billerson to return. Treen dropped their caramel sundaes, sprang off her bicycle, then sprinted towards the Billerson's often-turbulent home. When Shainy banged through the screen door and ran out to the grass, Treen embraced her in the path of the sprinkler system.

“What happened?” Treen shouted.

“He hit my mother again!” Shainy wailed, body trembling, “Now he's after me!”

Shainy screamed when her father kicked open the screen and lumbered out to the yard. He raised a bottle to his lips then puffed his cheeks while swishing bourbon around in his mouth. He glared at the two ten-year-olds and moved towards them. Treen pulled Shainy behind her.

“Get outta here, Treen!” he slurred, sprinklers splashing across his clothes and face. He wobbled closer. Treen moved her friend backwards.

“Leave Shainy alone!”

Mr. Billerson lunged at them, shoving Treen to the ground. He grabbed a strap on Shainy's overalls, yanked her towards him, then dragged her over the sopping grass.

“Treen, help me!”

Treen sprang up and circled behind him. As he reached down to adjust his grip on Shainy, Treen planted an upward kick right between his legs. After a raspy high-pitched squeal, he slowly descended until his knees squished into the lawn.

Shainy fled down Davagard Lane towards the orange glare of the Rocky Mountain sunset. “Get back here!” Mr. Billerson shouted, struggling to his feet to give chase until Treen grabbed the back of



his shirt. He thrashed about like a wild bull trying to shake loose the rodeo's best rider.

Still trying to free himself, Mr. Billerson whirled around swinging. Treen ducked his backhand, grabbed onto his wrist, then tried to pull him back. He flailed his flabby arm until her hands slipped away, then shoved her off the curb into the street. He laughed, swigged, then ran after Shainy.

Treen sat up and moved her headband from her eyes. As she struggled to stand, she noticed Shainy's mother crawling through the doorway, clothes torn, face bloodied. She realized the same could happen to Shainy and hurried over to her bike.

"Don't just stand there, help Mrs. Billerson!" she shouted to the bewildered spectators before she peddled away.

Soaring downhill like a heat seeking missile, Treen searched for Shainy and her explosive father. She had no idea how to stop him, but she'd do anything to protect her best friend.

Treen saw Mr. Billerson jogging in the distance then swerved onto the sidewalk. She peddled furiously until she'd rolled up behind him—close enough to see a squashed pack of cigarettes sticking out from his back pocket.

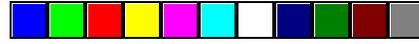
Although he wheezed like he'd soon collapse, he was alert enough to notice her behind him and shatter the bourbon bottle in her path. Treen didn't flinch, rolling right over the glass to ram the tire into his ankle. He tumbled. She veered around him. She pulled a wheelie off the curb then sped downhill again. Now she could catch up to Shainy and tell her everything would be all right.

It wasn't long before she could see Shainy's wavy red hair bouncing in the distance. Still, Treen had to stop her from running — especially now, before she reached the hectic intersection at the bottom of the hill. She stood on the pedals and tried desperately to get her attention.

"Shainy! Shainy, stop — I'm here!"

Too terrified to respond, Shainy continued to run towards the flowing cars. Treen pedaled faster, but Shainy ran into the intersection and disappeared into the traffic.

"SHAINY!" Treen screamed, longer and louder than the skidding cars that couldn't avoid hitting her best friend.



Treen gasped for air. Her legs and arms froze. The bike swerved to the curb, clanged off a garbage can, then hurled her from the seat. She rolled across the pavement and crumpled to a stop behind a parked car.

Resting her cheek on the gravel of an unfinished driveway, Treen shut her eyes and imagined Shainy safe — surrounded by the walls of books inside the Alee home library, where the two of them had studied the world and dreamed of the day they'd open Treen & Shainy's Family Fun Center. Treen would've driven the tour bus. Shainy would've flown the field trip helicopter.

None of that would happen now.

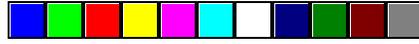
When Treen opened her eyes again, she began to gaze at a house across the street, which had lumber stacked against it. The firewood attracted her like a magnet and she rose slowly from the gravel. She ignored her scrapes and pains, wiping the pebbles stuck to her palms onto her jeans. Then, as sirens blared from every direction, she sprinted across the road towards the house.

After she'd scaled the wire fence and calmed the barking bulldog waiting below, she rushed over to the firewood, lifting an oddly shaped piece off the top. She glared at it; the crude baseball bat seemed to be waiting for her. She grasped the narrow end with both hands, took a practice swing, then hurried back over the fence.

Lumber in hand, she walked into the road to stare at the sickening chaos of flashing lights at the bottom of the hill. Trembling, she turned away from the accident, exhaled, then sprinted uphill to find Shainy's father.

A few minutes later, Treen could see Mr. Billerson two houses away. He was sitting right where he'd fallen, staring at the ground beneath the smoke that rose from his cigarette. He reached into his pocket for a tiny bottle, then raised his head to pour more booze down his throat. After he'd finished, he hurled the bottle into the road — too drunk to realize anything.

Treen stopped a few feet away, shivering as if standing nude at the center of a frozen lake. She couldn't feel the splinters stuck in her palms while wiping the sweat from her hands to her shirt. She thought of Shainy lying dead in the road then gripped the lumber tightly again.



Treen charged up to him. She planted her feet, raised the lumber, then swung at his lowered head. The blow launched the sweat off his face like fireworks and he shot backwards onto the grass.

For a moment, he lay sprawled out like a monstrous letter X. When he began to move around, Treen raised the lumber over her shoulder, ready to strike him again.

“Are you happy now?” she shouted, “You’ve killed her! You’ve killed her!”

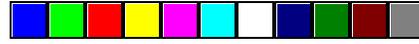
Treen slung the weapon downward — onto the grass next to him. She began to cry; she could’ve hit him a hundred times but it wouldn’t bring Shainy back.

She knelt beside him. She slid the cigarette from his fingers then smothered the butt in the grass. She wiped her eyes, glared at him, then stood slowly, before staggering uphill towards home.

The next day, the Mallyview Daily reported that Shainy Billerson had died instantly. A few months later, Mr. Billerson suffered a heart attack and died in his prison cell. Shainy’s mother left Mallyview and was never seen there again.







## Chapter 1

The Smile Center's aromatic collage of fresh cinnamon pastries, vanilla coffee and omelets might make you forget you'd already eaten breakfast. The tantalizing scent flowed from the center's café, where Samantha Ryde served the morning customers.

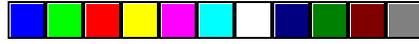
Samantha was a cheerful Jamaican woman. She often left people in doubt with an answer of twenty-seven because her creamy brown skin and shiny thick curls made her look much younger. She could've been the world's greatest server if Treen hadn't hired her as the Smile Center manager. Although Treen was only sixteen, Samantha looked up to her and they'd become as close as sisters.

Samantha put down a tray of pastries when Treen strolled by the Café. She dashed after her boss, snaring her attention near the winding staircase that led up to Treen's office.

"Good morning girlfriend!" said Samantha, "I have your schedule ready." She studied Treen's filthy pants. "How was your gardening?"

"Fantastic," said Treen, glowing. "It's a beautiful morning and I'm looking forward to the barbeque this afternoon."

"Then come with me," she said, taking Treen's hand, "Let me show you what little work you have today." They locked arms and walked towards Samantha's office.



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Samantha sat behind her desk to finish plans for the 12:00 barbeque while Treen paced, fiddling with her earring as she studied her schedule. Her three o'clock appointment — the last of the day — hooked her attention.

"The Wellbays? That name sounds familiar, but I don't remember counseling them."

"They never have been to the Smile Center, honey. Mrs. Wellbay called this morning and say the problems between her husband and son be way out of control. She say they must come today. On the phone with her, I hear a loud struggle in the background."

"Sounds serious. Maybe they can come over now. What's their son's name?"

"Russell," Samantha said, handing over the Family Info sheet.

Treen studied the page then called the Wellbays, who agreed to come straight over. "I'll run upstairs and change," she said, handing the phone back to Samantha then rushing out the door.

A short time later, a man and woman clad in dark business suits strolled through the foyer then stopped near Samantha's open door. Their loud, tense talk was not the public behavior you'd expect from a distinguished looking couple in their late forties.

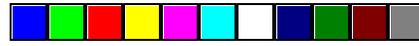
"What are we doing here?" the man grumbled, flinging his hands up. "This place isn't going to help us,"

"One way or the other, we are going to save our relationship with Russell," said the woman, adjusting her sparkling necklace. She tossed her short brown hair then added, "If it weren't for your rotten attitude — "

"Don't start with me Catherine," he said, pointing at her, "I've already been blasted enough by Mr. Blue for missing work again today..."

On and on he complained about Russell, work, and life in general, interrupting whenever Catherine tried to respond. She seemed weary of his tirade, rolling her eyes enough to convince anyone to be quiet — except him.

By now, Samantha knew they were the Wellbays. She'd stood from her desk, taken a bottomless breath, then murmured, "Well, here I go." She moved her long curls from her eyes, then marched out to greet the fiery couple.



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“Welcome to the Smile Center!” Samantha hollered, as if filming a commercial. Mr. Wellbay turned slowly to face her, then displayed a granite-like expression that made her wide-open arms fold gradually until her hands clasped together.

However, Mrs. Wellbay smiled and politely introduced herself and her husband. The two women shook hands and strolled towards The Café. Mr. Wellbay ran his fingers through his hair then surprisingly followed them.

Upstairs, Treen had changed into a different corduroy suit — a brown one with her usual matching corduroy headband. She applied eyeliner then brushed her long, tan-colored hair that matched her skin tone perfectly. Her dramatic green eyes and contagious smile often astonished people and they usually didn’t hesitate to tell her how pretty she looked. She’d always offer a polite thank you, but the compliments made her uncomfortable. She’d just never get used to that sort of attention — proof that family counselors also have hang ups...

Suddenly the office door opened. She thought it was Samantha showing the Wellbays inside, until a variety of young, disagreeing voices filled the room.

“April 26!” shouted one boy.

“Is not!” hollered another.

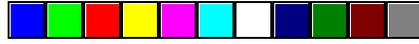
“If you would both listen to me you will learn something. It’s April 22 — end of story,” proclaimed the third.

“Can’t wait to hear what this is all about,” said Treen. She stepped out of the bathroom into the office area, where the boys had encircled her desk. They were loaded with books, papers, and pencils — even though school didn’t start for another two weeks.

Treen approached the lanky boy who towered between the shorter ones. All three wore window-sized glasses, matching brown blazers and faded jeans. Maybe they were brothers.

“What’s the problem here?” she asked cheerfully, fastening her headband.

“There is an argument about the correct birth date of William Shakespeare,” said the lanky boy, gesturing with his pencil. “Please confirm my answer of April 22, 1564, so we can end this discussion.”



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The other boys snickered when Treen shook her head in disagreement: “Shakespeare was born at Stratford on Avon, Warwickshire, in 1564, but the actual date is unknown. You see, he was baptized in the Holy Trinity Church on April 26 and since children were usually baptized a few days after their birth, his birthday is celebrated on April 23,” she added, as the phone began to beep.

The boys’ mouths hung open while Treen spoke to Samantha about the Wellbays’ arrival. “Send them up.” She then led the boys to the door and wished them good luck with their studies.

Treen stood outside the office as the Wellbays walked down the hall. Although Mrs. Wellbay approached with a warm smile and shook her hand, Mr. Wellbay kept his palms in his pockets and nodded through the doorway without making eye contact.

Mr. Wellbay walked up behind his wife, who’d stopped near Treen’s desk. She shook her head and whispered, “Beautiful,” while glaring at the mahogany wood floor, Cantera stone fireplace, and antique furniture. Mrs. Wellbay scanned it all as if she were window-shopping. She complimented Treen on the tasteful design, but except for the loaded bookshelves, Treen swayed all the credit to her mother.

“Can we get on with this?” Mr. Wellbay groaned.

“Yes,” Treen said politely, leading them to the couches near the fireplace. They declined her offer of a beverage — although Mr. Wellbay embarrassed his wife by suggesting a shot of Tequila. A huge gap separated the couple after they’d sat.

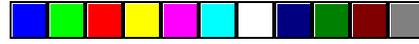
“Tell me about Russell,” said Treen, sitting across from them.

“He’s a pain in the head and I’m sick of it,” said Mr. Wellbay, looking around the room.

“What exactly is he doing that’s causing your...migraine?” asked Treen. Mrs. Wellbay giggled.

“All summer he’s done nothing but smoke cigarettes and roam the streets — looking for some rock band to join,” he said, flinging his hand up. “When school starts, he’ll skip classes. If he doesn’t skip, he’ll find a way to get thrown out of Mallyview High and I’ll miss more work trying to get him back in. To sum it all up, he’s a loser.”

“Walter, please don’t call him names,” said Mrs. Wellbay.



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“Catherine, stop defending that little punk. He walks all over us!”

“If you would stop insulting him constantly, maybe he would respect — and listen to you,” said Mrs. Wellbay.

“He only listens to me when I call him a jerk.”

“Mr. Wellbay, you can’t extinguish your son’s fire with gasoline.”

“I want him to realize how stupid he’s behaving. I’m a busy man. What’ll I do, hand him flowers and sing a lullaby?”

“That’s better than degrading him,” said Treen.

“He’s a good boy. He just has different interests than his father,” said Mrs. Wellbay, glancing at him.

“What are your interests, Mr. Wellbay?”

“I’m an engineer,” he said, staring at the pen he clicked nervously under his thumb. “Robotics and money are my interests.”

“That’s where I’ve seen your name before; I read your article in the Mallyview Daily about the future use of androids in Blue Neptune’s factories. Very interesting.”

Mr. Wellbay finally smiled. “Thank you, but it’ll be more interesting when it actually happens — and it will. That’s why my boss pays me so well.”

“Garrison Blue is a generous man,” said Treen. “He’s donated all the computers for my father’s Bookvilla, which opens in Grevelton next week.”

“So I’ve heard. But why would your father open a bookstore in grimy place like Grevelton? Mallyview Bookvilla not doing so well?”

“Mallyview Bookvilla is doing wonderful. He’s opening the Grevelton bookstore to help the city. Maybe other businesses will follow. Right now it’s too dangerous for the kids to play outside.”

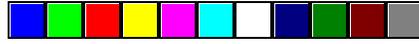
“Maybe you could tell that to my only child,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I suspect Russell has been sneaking off to Grevelton — to buy drugs.”

“When did you start having problems with Russell?”

“He was eleven,” Mrs. Wellbay said quietly. “He was involved in a terrible street fight and seriously injured another boy. He’s been



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different every since.”

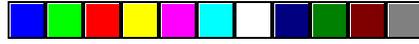
“Yeah he’s different but he’d better snap out of it because I’m about to — ”

“May I meet Russell this afternoon?”

Mr. Wellbay stood abruptly. “Listen, I’ve heard all about your accelerated education and superior knowledge of *everything*. But frankly, your college degree won’t help a rotten kid like my son. You can’t repair something that you don’t have the parts for.”

Treen stood and smiled. “I’d still like to meet with him.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that,” said Mrs. Wellbay, standing. “I’ll bring Russell here *myself* this afternoon.” She then glared at her husband, who’d shut his eyes and slowly shook his head.



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### Chapter 2

Shades of yellow, red and green foliage surrounded the Smile Center's cozy backyard. The scent of pine and burning charcoal in the crisp, August air, made the atmosphere of the afternoon barbeque even more pleasant. The long grill stood packed with steaks, hotdogs, hamburgers, and Treen's favorite, grilled catfish. Everyone danced and played volleyball in such a lively manner, it appeared they could party well into the night!

Amongst a shroud of roses and lilies, Treen and Samantha sat on the Flagstone patio overlooking the festivities. As usual, they sipped coffee, held their stuffed bellies, and swore never to eat so much again. Samantha glanced at her wristwatch. "Time for the last appointment. I go and sign him in."

"Please call a tow truck to pull me up from this chair," Treen moaned.

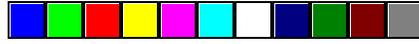
On the other side of the Smile Center, a white BMW pulled into the parking lot and stopped. With the engine still running, Russell Wellbay opened the rear door and slowly stepped out.

He slammed the door. He stared up at the square yellow smiley face painted high on the brick building and got whiff of barbecue smoke. He could hear loads of laughter from behind the facility. His frown quickly vanished when *Jimi Hendrix's* version of *All Along The Watchtower*,<sup>2</sup> echoed through the air. Grooving his head to the distant beat, he followed the cobblestone path towards the entry.

Just outside the door, Russell noticed a silver plaque encrusted into the wall that read: *Welcome to the Smile Center, Thank you for stopping by.* The plaque had the same smiley-faced logo at center.

Russell knew his parents were watching him from the car. He also knew they weren't driving away until he walked inside. "Alright, I'm going," he grumbled, yanking the door open.

Inside the foyer, he stopped to scan the spacious and cool looking surroundings. "Man, it smells good in here." He tucked his hands in his back pockets, then began his own tour.



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Every colorful wall he passed was decorated with a painting, photograph, or ceramic creation. The hundreds of shelved books reminded him of the school library where he'd spent many afternoons in detention. If there'd been any more plants, or big windows, the place could be a greenhouse.

As he walked by the recreation room, he noticed some kids surrounding a huge plasma screen, cheering as they watched a *Dumbo* film. As Russell looked on, he muttered, "Funny how Dumbo's father never shows up..."

Russell saw the Information Office and walked over to peer through the glass. He studied the rear view of a shapely woman who battled the folders in the top drawer of a tall file cabinet. He quietly pushed the door back and admired her blue jean curves a bit longer before announcing his arrival.

"Hey, where's this Treen girl I'm supposed to be talkin' to?" he asked loudly, causing her to spin around and fling up a folder full of papers.

"You- scare- me- to- death," she said, her hand pressed against her wavering chest. After the last sheet of paper had floated down between them, she asked, "Are you Russell Wellbay?"

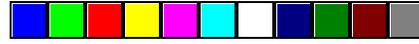
"Sometimes."

"I am Samantha," she said giggling. She reached down to pick up one of the papers — a sign in sheet that she asked him to sit and fill out.

While Russell completed the paperwork, Samantha studied his appearance from behind her desk. Although he looked like he'd been rolling in the dirt, she could see that a good-looking boy lingered beneath the grime; he had high cheekbones and clear blue eyes like his father. The cigarette tucked behind his ear was partially shielded by his shaggy blond hair that looked surprisingly clean.

Russell dropped the pen on the desk and leaned back in his chair. He studied the captivating peach walls of Samantha's office, which looked like the happy section of some museum.

"Those Jamaican paintings are cool," he said, staring at the spectacular landscapes and crowded street markets that looked so real. Samantha sparkled. She was proud of the artwork and impressed that he knew where they'd come from.



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“Wow, thank you. They are paintings of my village.”

“Maybe after I’m cured you can find me one,” he said politely.

“Your own village?”

Russell grinned. “No, just a painting.”

Samantha laughed. “Oh yes, I do that for you.” She glanced at her watch; “Where is Treen?”

“It’s Saturday. She probably went home,” he said, standing, “I’ll come back some other time — ”

“No you won’t Russell Wellbay!” She stepped around the desk and grabbed his hand. “You come with me upstairs and wait for Treen there.”

After Samantha had taken Russell upstairs, she searched for Treen, who she found in the parking lot talking to Russell’s parents. As usual, Mr. Wellbay gestured wildly, while his wife just twirled her pearls. Samantha returned to her office without interrupting them.

Treen hated to be late for any kind of appointment. When the Wellbays finally drove away, she ran inside to meet Russell. She could see Samantha inside the Info Office, pointing at the ceiling, and realized that she’d already taken Russell up to her office.

Midway up the stairs, Treen stopped moving and took two whiffs: “I smell smoke,” she whispered, and it wasn’t the pleasant aroma of the barbeque.

The scent grew stronger as she ran up the remaining stairs. She jogged down the hallway and stopped near the open office door, which revealed exactly where the nasty smell had originated.

Russell was lying on the couch puffing a cigarette! Treen stood in the doorway and shook her head. Yet, even though his smoking was inconsiderate, she walked in and shut the door without a word. She knew there’d be plenty of time to discuss his bad habit.

Russell continued to blow smoke at the ceiling, ignoring her when she took off her blazer and moved towards her desk. With no ashtrays in the office, she watched to see where he’d been tapping his burning butt. To her astonishment, he took a drag, then flicked into his palm! Yes, it was gross, but at the same time, strangely considerate.

On the same hand that held the ashy mess, he licked his thumb and index finger, then used the moisture to pinch and extinguish

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