

HYDE'S CORNER TRILOGY

**BOOK II
IN THE NAME OF VENGEANCE**

1928 - 1946

by

J B Bergstad

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Smashwords Edition

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I offer the dedication of this Ebook to our grandchildren, Dustin, Whitney, Brandon, Letysha, Alec, Blake, Chase, Colby, Peyton, Danielle, Chad, Karma Alyssa and last but not least Amanda. This dedication should also include those who brought these treasures to life for my wife and me, our children: Tammy, Jeff, Mark, Caren, and Steve. All these loving, wonderful people, including our great-grand-children, most of whom we have not yet been lucky enough to see or hold, with the exception of Emily, we will continue to hold dear in our hearts. My wife and I have been truly blessed and we are thankful for the love and pride they have given, and continue to give, my wife and me.

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1

The Long Ride Home

Sundowner County, Oklahoma 1928

The roar of the 1924 Reo S6 engine, and howl of the wind rattling the door glass now and again, was deafening and filled the cramped space of the hearse's cab. Yet, the bass voice of Selmer Burks cut through all that calamitous racket, surprising Beaman; enough to make him jump.

"Up yonder there's a turnout, if I remember right," Burks said with a nod of his head. "It's sheltered enough we can relieve ourselves. After, I'll see to the boy whilst you stretch your legs."

"I could do with a rest," Beaman shouted. "I figure we're no more than ten, twelve mile from our turnoff. Should be home in another three, four hours. You agree?"

Burks pointed, his finger brushing the windshield. "There's the swale. Best slow up; it's a hard right turn to get us off the road."

The hearse rocked to a stop as Beaman stood on the brake and turned the key. A tick, tick, ticking sound replaced the engine's bellow as the six-cylinder motor cooled. The near silence almost made Beaman's ears hurt. The doctor gave a grunt and yanked on the door-handle, slamming it open. His shoulders, arms and cramped fingers ached from fighting the stiff steering mechanism. With the need to concentrate on the road and driving no longer necessary, his body urgently reminded him how badly his bladder needed attention.

"Better get to it, Burks," Beaman shouted. "I'll be over by the brambles."

"Hush, you'll wake the boy." Burks whispered and slid out the passenger door, easing the bundle of blankets and baby onto the seat.

"Hush?" Beaman said. "I'll wake the boy? Is that what you said? Hell, if he can sleep through this tin can's raucous commotions ... well, the boy can sleep." With a disgusted hiss of air, and shaking of arms and fingers, he ran around the front of the Reo's bumper and radiator grillwork, loping off toward a thicket of young saplings and whatnot.

Burks watched his old friend as he clamored along, clutching his crotch, trying not to start before he reached some privacy. He checked the boy once more before rolling down the glass and gently closing the door. What he was about to do weighed heavy on his mind, but there was no alternative.

Beaman would never allow the wanton murder of a defenseless infant while there was breath in his body. Burks knew that for sure. He knew the doctor wouldn't understand or believe that Hyde evil existed let alone in an innocent child. No one would believe it, but Burks knew it for truth ... the voice in his head never lied ... not once. That left only one option. Here, Burks would kill them. After, he would take the casket from the hearse and lay the body of his precious Laura Lee on her shroud. Beaman and the Hyde Seed would go into the bottom of the deep casket. With his daughter on top, the doctor and Hyde Seed would take their rest with his angel.

It was a fitting place for his friend, Beaman, but it would torment the Hyde Seed for eternity. Burks grinned, liking the sound of that ... poetic justice ... Burks Justice; and he would deliver it here and now ... personal.

Yes, the voice said, and its acknowledgment made him feel good ... right ... absolved.

Since the vote of 1900 elected Selmer Burks to the Office of Sheriff, Sundowner County, Oklahoma, many a cowboy, farmer and drifter woke in the county court house jail. All they seemed to remember from the previous night's festivities was the fist they threw at a mouthy sheriff. They couldn't explain their swollen eyes, broken noses and jaws. Some less fortunate souls stared at the cast on their arm or leg and asked: "What the hell happened?"

Burks was usually in a jovial mood the morning following his nights of keeping the peace. Busting heads. When asked, he would grin, his forehead knotted in amusement, and say: "I reckon you threw your punch at the wrong lawman."

Residents of Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma, the Sundowner County Seat and Office of the Sheriff, would brag to those who failed to witness the latest law enforcement activities of Sheriff Burks. "I've never seen the like, I swear. Those big farm boys come at him and before I could blink they was both unconscious on the floor. Burks is faster than a rattler's strike."

But someone else who witnessed the same event would claim: "Hell, a rattler's strike is slow if you're talking about Burks. He moves more like one a them Mongooses. They's an animal that goes about killing King Cobra snakes and such. I read about them in the National Geographic. Yessir, I did, too."

So, it was of little consequence for Burks to move quickly and silently until he was at arm's length from Beaman's back. He heard the doctor humming as he pumped a healthy stream into a puddle that had formed a short distance from his feet. Tears clouded Burks' vision, but he was resolute. His hands shot forward, surrounding Beaman's neck in half an instant. As he began to squeeze, he raised the shorter man's body off his feet and pulled him close and tight. Beaman's arms dropped to his sides. He uttered no sound. Burks would've thought him paralyzed, but his urine flow continued unabated.

Burks felt out of body. He watched everything happening from some other place. He was the one paralyzed. Only the thick fingers of his huge hands seemed to obey commands and those orders came from someone or something else. That was it. He refused to believe it could be him, Selmer Burks, killing his longtime friend. Yet, from wherever he watched, he was powerless to stop it.

A sharp, piercing sound, a baby's frantic cry, broke the spell and Burks was suddenly back in control. He dropped Beaman and ran back to the hearse. There he gathered up the boy, the Hyde Seed of moments ago, in his arms. "There, there," he whispered. "Grandpa's here, he'll take care of you."

He held the baby to his chest as he made his way back to Beaman. The boy greedily nursed on a bottle Burks clutched in his fist. He knelt on one knee next to the doctor who was massaging his neck and slowly regaining consciousness. Burks balanced the boy on his right knee and the crook of his right arm. Holding the bottle with the same hand, he pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket and gently dabbed the sweat from Beaman's forehead. He mumbled as he dabbed. "I'm sorry ... sorry ... I'm sorry

Beaman coughed, blinked and struggled to an elbow.

"Herman," Burks fairly shouted, causing the baby to jump and let out a gurgling cry.

"Herman, as God is my witness, I don't know what come over me. I'm sorry I done what I did. I was I don't know where I was, but that wasn't me. I been

Beaman blinked as Burks continued to dab at his forehead. He sat up and Burks pulled his hand back, stuffing the handkerchief back in his pocket.

"Madness," Beaman croaked. "Brought on by grief. My God, Selmer. The agonies you've lived through these past months, it's no wonder." Beaman gagged and turned his head to spit. "I know you're not yourself. Few men could've tolerated your pain. You've endured the death of your wife and only child; all in the space of a few weeks."

"Your one a the few close friends I can trust," Burks said. "I hope this Can you see your way clear to maybe Hell, I don't know what to say

"There's no need to say anything. Your mind had to find release. You're thinking doctors killed your Laura Lee. I'm a doctor ... I'm here. You snapped, but it was temporary, lasting only an instant."

A moment passed. Beaman gagged and spit again. "Ask me, I'll tell you this never happened. We'll keep it between you and me. That's my word on the matter," Beaman's voice was clearing, but still hoarse.

The baby squirmed and squealed. Burk noticed the empty bottle and shook his head. "Will you look at that? He had for that milk and he's sucking on air already."

"Well, get it off his mouth," Beaman rasped. You don't want his belly full a air. You got to watch him, Selmer. He's a Burks boy all right. Someday, he'll stand taller than you. See those fists, the size of his wrists? Help me up and let's get on the road, I'm ready for my own bed."

Burks stood and offered his arm. "He is a Burks baby. By God, Herman I can see it, you're right as rain."

Beaman pushed up, wobbled and leaned into the sheriff before righting himself.

"You sure you're in shape to drive?" Burks said, continuing to hold Beaman steady.

"Give me a minute, I'll be fine. You go on and change that child and I'll zip up and get me a drink of water."

Burks sat dead-faced in the passenger seat. Beaman drove, not by choice, for who in hell would relish the fight with a steering wheel connected to a Reo hearse for two hundred odd miles? Besides which, the doctor felt safer with the baby filling the arms of Selmer Burks. The sheriff, Beaman reasoned, would then be less likely to have a change of heart and reach over to snap his neck ... him driving or no.

Words between the two friends of many years came as rare as raindrops in a drought. Burks seemed mesmerized by the bundle of rambunctious life in his arms, but Beaman was having trouble forgetting the feel of the sheriff's huge hands, surrounding and crushing his neck. He couldn't dismiss it, as he so blithely put it to Burks at the turnout. Beaman was sure he would never get that horrible memory out of his mind.

Mile after mile of empty farm and prairie land rolled by in silence. During the tedious drive Burks wallowed in his own world of pain and loss. The weight of what he'd done to Beaman. The weight of what he'd planned for the innocent in his arms. He had to shove all that into the darkness, but how?

Let me worry about how, the voice said. Give me your burden, I'll put it away for you.

The bundle in his arms squirmed. He felt pressure as the baby's tiny hand squeezed his finger. The suggestion of life, cradled in the crook of his arm, pulled his eyes from the monochromatic landscape. The infant's face pinched in distress. Mouth puckered, his tiny curled tongue sought a food source. The sheriff's eyes flooded with tears and he reentered the world of living.

Hyde's Corner lay a bit over two hundred and ninety miles northwest of Oklahoma City General Hospital's morgue. The Reo funeral hearse Burks had purchased would do twenty miles an hour on good road. The two stone-faced men grew used to the incessant buzz of nubby tires on graveled pavement. Half an hour after leaving the rest stop they turned off the main highway. They were sixteen or so hours into their journey when they headed southwest.

The road, county maintained, went from patchy to worse than patchy. Cracked and broken tar and gravel gave way to dirt. Potholes and deep ruts appeared and disappeared every few miles. Beaman kept his eyes front, leaving the sheriff to his demons. Burks reached for the canvas bag at his feet and saw the doctor steal a glance his way. Burks locked eyes with the doctor and Beaman looked away.

A chuckhole caught the Reo's front tire and Beaman fought for control. Like priming a pump the crackles, creaks and groans of the Reo's chassis seemed to break the monotony of the mood. Beaman's hoarse voice struggled with the rush of wind and roar of the hearse's engine. "How're the bottles holding out?"

Burks grunted and sniffed. "Need to open a can pretty quick, they're almost gone. Damn ice is melted, newspaper's all mush."

Beaman grunted in return. "It don't make no never mind. Condensed milk is good for a day or more without refrigeration. Did you see the old Goswald place back a ways? I figure we're forty odd miles from home."

The pungent odor of hot oil laced with sulfur stung Burks' nose. "That's good news. Laura Lee's doing fine packed up in dry ice, but this child's swaddle is getting ripe. Lord, I never imagined something so small could shit so much."

Burks sat up, giving the bottle he'd pulled from the canvas bag a long look. Wrapped and taped the nipple appeared unsullied. Burks lifted the arm cradling the baby and shoved the fresh bottle between his legs. An identical container appeared in his hand and he held the glass to his cheek. "Ain't as warm as I'd like, but his hunger's coming quicker seems to me." He fumbled with the end of the tape.

Beaman swerved to miss another chuckhole. The sheriff's hand jiggled as he peeled off the nipple's wrapping. The old Reo's continuous jostling made feeding the infant a difficult task. It took all his concentration to keep the nipple in place.

"What do you expect to do with this hearse?" Beaman said. "You go to picking up malcontents in this rig you'll scare them to death."

Burks didn't look up. "I figured you might use it. Won't be a hard job turning it into an ambulance."

Beaman nodded. "Damn, Selmer. You never cease to amaze me. That's a downright generous thing to do. I'll tell you what ... you needn't worry about medical for your grandson. How's that? We'll make us a tight trade ... even up."

"Appreciate the thought, Doc. I accept."

The hearse hit a deep rut bounced and came down hard. It jerked to the right. Beaman wrestled with the wheel as the heavy van went into a skid. Burks watched the road to his right disappear. In its place a deep, rock strewn drainage ditch yawned up at him. The heavy vehicle

lifted tilting to the right. Burks slid to his left, crushing the doctor against the driver's door. The weight shift brought the Reo back to earth. It bounced once rocked and swerved coming back to the center of the roadway.

"Jesus Christ, Herman. Watch the Goddamn road why don't you?"

"Don't Jesus Christ me, Burks. You try fighting this stiff steering, hard riding son-of-a-bitch for fifteen hours and more."

"Well, you damn near made me drop the baby."

"I didn't make you do nothing. If you want to blame somebody blame the damn selectmen. The bastards won't give up a red cent of their graft to tar and gravel the roads."

Burks nodded and chuckled. "You ain't high stepping with that statement and that's a fact." The baby squalled and kicked in his arms. "Damn. I think he's messed himself again. I'm about to run out of swaddle. How much longer you figure?"

Beaman shrugged. "At the rate we're traveling? About two, maybe two-and-a-half hours."

Burks supported the baby on the muscled curve of his thighs. He turned the blanket back and unpinned the diaper. "Holy Moses. He's done it again."

Beaman cackled and shook his head. "What the hell you expect? He's a big strapping boy baby."

Natalie Owen wrestled the infant from the sheriff's arms ten minutes after he and Beaman arrived in Hyde's Corner.

"I got experience with infants," Burks argued. "How the hell you think I raised Laura Lee?"

The dispute ended fast when Natalie poked at his memory. "Your wife took care of that child mostly. Besides which, Selmer Burks, your tits don't make a lick of mother's milk now do they?"

The morning following their return, the sheriff gave up his daughter to a place of rest beside her mother. At a pause in Reverend Milburn's prayerful eulogy, Burks dipped his head, turned and walked away. He refused phone calls and his door went unanswered for several days. The sheriff set about packing the physical remnants of his wife and daughter. A small spark of survival instinct demanded this task be done to maintain his sanity.

Burks couldn't bring himself to touch Lorraine's clothes or personal possessions following her death. He had closed the door of their bedroom and installed a camp cot in his study. With the death of his only child, claws of madness tore at his mind ... at his soul. He sensed the need to create a new world. A world in which the ugliness of the past year would cease to exist. A world in which the memories of Lorraine and Laura Lee would remain with him ... in him ... and sacrosanct until he joined them.

In his private world Lorraine and Laura Lee would always be safe and happy. He could feel the presence of their spirits in every room. Burks could embrace their essence at the end of each day. In his grief-pillaged mind all material traces of his loved ones had to be excised. Anything physical, any item capable of collecting dust or falling into ruin, had to be removed. In this way their substance would remain untainted ... eternal. Within the confines of his home, Burks would always have his loved ones around him. His family would provide protection from the insanity that struggled to rule his life.

He shoved everything connected to Lorraine or Laura Lee into box after box. At times the dark loneliness threatened to consume him, but he pictured his grandson, only a few blocks

away. The new beginning promised by the infant kept him sober and close to sane.

In the months that followed, the sheriff found reason to drop by the Hula Hut several times a day. During the last blistering days of September, 1929 Burks became a pest. His ultimate indiscretion took place the first week of October on a Saturday afternoon. The arrival of his package made the sheriff forget the discomfort of September's heat, a holdover from the punishing summer weather.

His new grandson developed a cranky disposition along with his sore gums. Natalie and Hal Owen experienced nights of little or no sleep. The lingering heat compounded the volunteer caretaker's patience at times. Burks knew for sure he'd found a solution for his grandson's distress, thus giving little Thomas and Nat and Hal some relief. The ad copy he found guaranteed it.

While paging through home remedy catalogues Burks came across this advertisement: *Doctor Painless Pennerson presents his newest innovation in teething science: The New Teething Stick, guaranteed to provide effective results from the first day. This miraculous product relieves the torture of new tooth development in infants or your money will be cheerfully refunded.*

The sheriff left the post office excited to share his coup with the Nat and Hal. Crossing over a block he cut down a narrow alley running between Rhoda and Prairie Streets. As usual he gave no thought to calling before dropping by, but Burks did possess a few social graces. At the back of the Hula Hut Fellowship Hall he paused at the bottom of the stairs. His pocket watch read four-thirty. Hal would still be in the barroom preparing for Saturday night's activities. He would not be too late to interfere with dinner nor too early to intrude on its making.

Listening for cranky baby sounds, he only heard faint music from the Hula Hut barroom. Burks figured his timing close to perfect. The peaceful nature of the living quarters above indicated baby Thomas must be napping.

Burks thought he and Nat might sit on the balcony and enjoy the late afternoon air. He would explain how this wonderful product could soothe the child's nettlesome behavior. Burks light-footed his way up the stairs taking care to step on the outside of the risers. Avoidance of warped boards and rusty nails insured no squeaks or groans to complain of his weight.

Nearing the top, Burks heard Nat humming, her voice drifted soft on the hot afternoon air. The kitchen door stood open, as well as the two small windows on either side. The air, quiet and close, smelled of dust and dry prairie grass. The sheriff caught a faint whiff of baby powder and the odor brought a smile. He stepped over the top riser onto a large hooked rug Natalie had fashioned from old bar towels.

Burks pulled on the screen door and it opened on oiled hinges. He stepped into the kitchen and saw Nat at the breakfast table her gaze directed downward. Her soft voice, filled with sweet contentment, hummed a tuneless lullaby as she suckled baby Thomas.

Burks' eyes bulged with surprise and shock. Naked from the waist up, Natalie Owen's dusky golden skin glistened with a fine sheen of sweat. Piled loosely atop her head, her thick black hair left her long neck available to any vagrant puff of air.

She sensed a presence. Her head came up and she uttered a tiny shriek at the sight of the sheriff. In an instant her light amber eyes sparkled and she jerked to her feet. "Well?" she hissed.

The quick movement pulled her nipple from the baby's mouth. The child began to twist,

grunt and squawk at the interruption of his afternoon snack. Natalie glanced down and guided the baby's mouth back into position. When she next looked up her stare left no room for mercy.

"Selmer Burks. What the hell are you staring at? You've seen plenty of tits in your time, I'd wager. Mine ain't nothing special. They're getting a little saggy what with nursing your grandson. What's the matter? My brown skin bother you? Don't worry. It don't rub off and my milk won't turn him the color of that whiskey you drink, neither."

Face glowing red and hot he failed to notice how hard he gripped the cardboard box he'd carried from the post office. The top folded inward under the pressure of his fingers.

"Nat" he began. Burks raised his hands in supplication. He saw the partially crushed box in his hand and stepped forward dropping it on the table.

"Nat ... I'm so damn sorry." He pointed at the mashed container. "I ... I meant to give you that package. It only just arrived. It's for Tommy's teething. I thought it would help. I know he's been a hellacious bother these past weeks."

Natalie's hard eyes seemed a power unto themselves. Burks felt the need to move, to back away and be gone. "I mean no disrespect to you. You're Hal's wife, but more ... I value your friendship. I'm sorry for"

Natalie stepped around the table her glare never leaving the sheriff's face. Her eyes seemed to dance with ember fire and she spit those golden flames of anger at his feet. With the baby cradled in the crook of her right arm her left hand found purchase on her cocked left hip.

"Haven't seen enough?" She mocked. "Want to see more? I can get real naked for you if I put the baby in the bedroom. How about that, huh?"

Burks backed through the screen door and started down the stairway. Halfway down, she called his name. "You crossed the line today. From now on you call before you set foot in my home. If you can't act in a civilized manner, you can have your grandson. I'll take Hal away from here. We don't need you, Mr. Burks. We sure as hell don't need your bully ways."

Natalie Owen loomed at the top of the stairs holding the feeding baby. She made no move to cover herself and her skin-blazed gold in the afternoon sun.

Earlier embarrassment disappeared. Burks turned dead eyes on Natalie Owen. A cold emptiness filled him. Its threat was apparent in his vacant eyes. It smothered the fire of Natalie's anger as if it were dashed with a bucket of cold water. Burks saw gooseflesh pop out on her skin.

The sheriff's fingers rapped a rhythm on the handrail. "I done some wrong here today and I've apologized. That's all a body can do. You've got no call to flaunt your nakedness nor to accuse me of a nasty or mean interest in such. Friendship or no, I'll tolerate no further sass from you. You think on it and do what you will."

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1929 - 1938

Natalie told Hal the result of the sheriff's drop-in visit, but saw no reason to mention the state of her dress at the time. After that, even though she worked in the kitchen, Hal had to fetch the baby when Burks made his daily stop. The rift between Burks and Natalie raised the temperature of the Hula Hut's atmosphere with each visit. Hal felt like a man staring into a pot of boiling stew. He knew something was stuck to the bottom, but with no ladle handy, he couldn't scrape it off and bring it up.

On Thursday, October 24, 1929 a news report diverted his attention from personal concerns. Hal worked with practiced ease setting up the bar, the lunch trade would be drifting in soon. He finished locking the liquor cabinet and beer cooler and checked the back-bar one last time. Once the door opened for walk-in business evidence of fermented beverages earned a citation and fine. Satisfied with his results, he turned on the radio and began wiping down the bar stools and tables.

"We interrupt this program to bring you an important news flash. They are calling it Black Thursday here in New York City. In an unprecedented flurry of activity the Stock Exchange is trying to stem the flood of sales. Share values have plummeted at a rapid pace. The ticker tape is running over an hour behind. Stock sales cannot be reported and recorded fast enough."

The phone rang and Hal hurried around the end of the bar. "Hula Hut Fellowship Hall," he said and smiled into the receiver.

"Morning Hal. I'll be leaving the office in a minute or so. Thought I'd drop by and take Thomas for a walk." The sheriff's voice crackled with static.

Hal heard the rap of Natalie's heels on the stairs. "Nat's on her way down. Sounds good. Free us up for lunch. You listening to the radio?"

Burks blew what sounded like a weary breath. "Haven't had time to listen to anything but complaints. End of the month. The selectmen want a report on everything including the dust bunny count under the cell bunks ... why?"

"Sounds like hell's a popping in New York City. Big-time Wall Street folks is selling their shares of stock left and right. The man on the radio says it's an all out panic."

Burks laughed. "Same thing happened December, 1914 and few times before that I can recollect. Them high-hat cigar smokers run around claiming their paper is better than everybody else's paper. Next thing you know one of them has a bunch of fools believing their hogwash. It takes awhile before the idiots figure out paper is paper and then it all goes bust."

Five days later, October 29, 1929 the stock market collapsed. News reports called it Black Tuesday. Adding to the turmoil farmers of the 1920s suffered severe losses due to over expansion after The Great War. The mid west took the hardest hit. At the close of business on Black Tuesday, most of America's working men joined the ranks of dispossessed farmers. Businesses failed and the jobs they provided disappeared.

The stock market crash began after sixteen million, four hundred thousand shares of stock changed hands during the trading day. The volume unprecedented in the history of the New York Stock Exchange. By November thirteenth the market lost fifty percent of its value. The country's financial underpinnings collapsed and plunged America into a deep depression.

The Christmas holiday of 1929 found Tommy Burks thirteen months old. Weaned of Natalie Owen's breast milk, Burks thanked the couple for their help and took his grandson home. January 4, 1930, the sheriff hired a local woman, Nellie Older, as housekeeper and nurse. At five each evening Burks returned home. Miss Older put supper on the table, said good evening, and left. After the meal, the sheriff put Tommy in a large basket cushioned with blankets and placed it on the drainboard. Hands and wrists covered in soapsuds, the sheriff regaled his grandson with the events of his day and washed the supper dishes.

He lavished attention on the baby until feeding time. With a stomach full of warm milk Tommy Burks ended his day and Burks did the same. The Township of Hyde's Corner and its few drunks and malcontents found a warm jail cell. Accommodations courtesy of Sid Tassel, Deputy Sheriff, Sundowner County.

Snowfall remained light that year. Spring arrived, but the usual rains passed the Panhandle country. Storms raked the prairie with thunder and lightning, but little moisture fell. The summer heat turned brutal and winter when it arrived blew dry and arctic.

Nineteen-thirty-one promised nothing but harder times. Lack of financial irrigation wasn't enough. It appeared Mother Nature shut off her precious water spigot. The mid west and southern plains baked in cotton-mouthed drought. Winter came and prairie dwellers froze in cold so dry it turned spit to powder.

In years past, the fertile land fell victim to the plow. Overzealous wheat farmers destroyed the natural prairie vegetation including the buffalo grass. Fragile top soil, left with no moisture, had nothing but gravity to hold it down. The combination of nature, greed and bad judgment all took their toll. Soon, the words, "Black Blizzard," became part of everyday lexicon.

Nineteen-thirty-two passed leaving huge dust storms in its wake. The plains were razed with more than one black blizzard a month. The Hyde's Corner area seemed blessed for a while. The county suffered only a taste of the disasters plaguing neighboring regions. Nineteen-thirty-three brought with it an additional thirty-eight savage dust storms. More than three killer walls of dirt a month plundered the plains states.

Monday, April 15, 1935, Burks attended a special meeting of the Board of County Selectmen. John Mossburry brought the assemblage to order. "Gentlemen. I think we can all agree we are suffering through some difficult times. Our county has dodged most of the bullets. We can thank a good ground water table and healthy mix of cattle and dairy ranchers as opposed to an exclusive farming economy."

"You're stating the obvious, John." Joe Kleindist said. "We all understand why we've been lucky. What's the reason for this special meeting?"

Mossburry peered down the rostrum at his fellow selectman. "I'll be getting to that as soon as you quit interrupting."

Noble Olsen raised his hand. "Can we conduct this meeting without the usual bickering? Please?"

Burks listened to Noble's shy quiet voice and grinned. Neither Mossburry nor Kleindist would likely take the question of the diffident undertaker under consideration. He stood and raised a hand. "Point of order, Mr. President or presiding officer or whatever you're calling

yourself today, John."

Mossburry's face crumpled up like a dying flower. "President of the Sundowner County Board of Selectmen, Sheriff Burks, and you damn well know it. What is your point of order?"

Burks bowed. "I brought the information you're about to share with the board to your attention. Let's cut right to the problem we face. I believe there's a reasonable solution, and with the board's permission, Mr. President, I'd like to continue."

Mossburry dropped his head on the soft leather cushion of his high-backed chair and blew a stream of exasperation at the ceiling. Burks knew Mossburry didn't like anyone stealing his thunder, but Selmer Burks wasn't anyone ... like his campaign posters read: Burks is "The One" in Sundowner County for Sheriff.

Mossburry picked up his gavel and rapped one time. "It seems Sheriff Burks and his point of order has turned into a motion. Do we have a second at the rostrum?"

Lucius Peelman the only attorney on the board raised his hand. "I'll second Selmer's point of order or motion or both for that matter." He gave a nervous chuckle.

Joe Kleindist guffawed and that got Olsen, Smyth and Peelman laughing. Mossburry banged the gavel and raised his voice above the din. "If y'all are done with the comedy, can we have a vote please?"

A chorus of ayes preceded the sheriff's walk to the lectern. He folded his hands behind his back and made eye contact with each selectman. "Mr. President. Mr. Selectmen. Thank you for voting to hear me out. I received a telegram this morning from Oklahoma City. Yesterday, April 14th, a wall of prairie top soil, the like of which no one has seen, moved through the Cimarron Strip between Boise City and Hyde's Corner. The devastation is overwhelming. They're calling April fourteenth "Black Sunday." Geologists reckon at least eight hundred and fifty million tons of topsoil are gone ... lost during this past year."

Burks paused looking from one face to the next. "I can see by your stares you're asking yourselves: What the hell does that mean? It means upheaval, gentlemen. It means people picking up and moving out. It means loss of tax revenues. It means loss of businesses elsewhere and eventually Hyde's Corner will be affected, along with our neighbors. Those uprooted will water along the Little Santa Fe and see we have a passel of prairie grasses left. These Johnny-come-lately's will do what we did years ago ... stop and build a soddy."

"We could use some new residents hereabouts," Kleindist said.

Burks mentally shook his head. Kleindist owned the hardware store and saw no downside when it came to new customers. He brought his hands forward, hard palms slamming together. The crack of the trapped air sounded like a gunshot. "Who's home will they take to live in, Joe?" Burks said. "Who's going to provide a job of work? Who's land will they fence and till? Who's range will they take for their livestock? You understand where I'm going? We have enough to take care of our own, if we address the squatter problems that will plague us."

Noble Olsen held up his hand. "Excuse me, Sheriff Burks?"

Burks gave a nod. "Mr. Olsen, by all means, sir."

"I hope you're not going to suggest any type of forcible removals. I for one would not vote for posse funds. I believe posses only create violence."

Burks rapped the lectern with a fingernail. "Patrolling our county with a posse is folly. Too much ground to cover. No, gentlemen. My solution is much simpler and less expensive. I suggest we use strategically placed signs."

Mossburry jerked forward in his chair. "Signs? You expect to stop squatters with signs?"

Burks shook his head. "It's what we'll put on the signs, John. They won't stop all the squatters, but it'll keep most moving along. Those who can't read or are too dumb to understand can be moved with a bit of Sundowner County persuasion."

Kleindist called from the end of the rostrum. "What you got in mind for those signs? Smallpox epidemic, maybe?"

Burks listened to the polite chuckles until they died away. "Better than smallpox, Joe. The signs will read: Water Rationing Strictly Enforced. Violators subject to a five hundred dollar fine and ninety days on the county chain gang."

At the end of the third week in May, 1935 county prisoners had constructed and painted small billboards. Burks and Tassel took five-man chain gangs to the north, south, east and western perimeters of Sundowner County where they erected the warnings.

The billboards had their effect, but a few headstrong squatters always turned up. These hardy souls found life on the county chain gang most unpleasant. After ninety days even the most pig-headed vacated the State of Oklahoma. Sundowner County chain gangs were well known for that result.

Four years of drought marked a milestone in the Panhandle. October 5, 1935 marked a different, but no less important event for seven-year-old Thomas Silas Burks. The sheriff introduced his grandson to the reality of school. His incarceration in same would commence the very next Monday morning.

"School?" Tommy said his voice shaking. "You done taught me to read and write my letters. I don't need no school."

The drought continued through 1936 and 1937. Tommy attended Hyde's Corner School and learned to like his studies. He had to endure bullies on occasion. Homer Porter, Junior and his two younger brothers claimed the bully title at school. The two oldest Porter brothers took delight in beating on Tommy at every opportunity.

Homer, Junior, bigger stronger and three years older than Tommy Burks, handed out the most severe beatings. Byron Porter, two years older, lacked the meanness of his older brother, but not the delight of gifting Tommy with a black eye or bloody nose several times a week. Albert Porter, Tommy's own age lacked any advantages. What Tommy had to absorb from the older Porter brothers, he learned to give back in spades to Albert.

Sunday, October 2, 1938 marked a lazy day in Hyde's Corner. That quiet afternoon, Sheriff Selmer Burks lay back in his hickory swivel chair with his boots parked on the corner of the desk. Tassel smiled at the creaks, squeaks and groans of the old chair. Burks closed his eyes paying no mind to his friend or his chair.

Tassel laced his fingers and cracked his knuckles. "I think we'd best look for a couple of extra men ... keep in reserve. They's more and more wildcatters coming around. Those petroleum people got all worked up over the Mossburry place. Hell, you know what I'm talking about." Sid

gazed at the ceiling.

Burks scrubbed his face and twisted gnarled knuckles in his eye sockets. "You know how much sleep I've had this past week? Those oil people been nosing around Mossburry's farm ten months now. Mum's the word, old John keeps saying. Well if mum's the word, how come we've got all these strangers showing up this past week? I understand what you're saying. You're probably right, but one man's enough I think. You and I can handle most everything anyways."

Tassel crossed his arms on the desktop. His chin dropped on his forearms. "I ain't going to argue with you, but I'll tell you right now. You got an inflated idea of how many drunk wildcatters I want to handle. My wife's kin and me had friendly ties before she passed. Her brother's boy, Dick Massey, he's a big strapping youngster. He can take care of himself, too."

Burks gave a grunt. "If you think he might work out I'll talk to him. Right this minute I've got other fish to fry. Namely, I got to get Tommy ready and set up for school. They're starting up tomorrow morning already."

"I know." Tassel said smiling. "I'm bringing Sara in about time the cock crows. She's all excited about this being her last year. She's seventeen. My God, Selmer ... can you believe that?"

Burks saw his old friend's eyes fill up. "They get big fast, Sid. Hell, look at us. Seems only a day or so ago we were celebrating your bandages coming off."

The phone rang before Tassel could answer.

"Shit." Burks dropped his feet to the floor as he snatched up the earpiece. "Sheriff," he said his voice a grumble.

Tassel pushed up and walked to the front window. Burks glanced at him, seeing his head swing left and right as if searching the street. Most stores made it an early business day on Sunday. Little if any traffic, foot or otherwise, remained on Cedric Street. Burks wondered what the hell Tassel saw out there.

A woman's voice rose in pitch. "Selmer? you hear a word I said. We got to talk. I want you over here as soon as you can drag your ass out of that damn chair a yours."

"Damnit, Millie. Why can't it wait for tomorrow afternoon?" Heat flooded his face.

"Because I got bills to pay." Millie yelled back.

"Don't we all?" The sheriff's voice turned softer, a sign he had a short hold on his patience.

"Most of them damn bills I owe to you. You Goddamn bandit."

"Ain't that a shame, and you not making a dollar." Burks saw Tassel glance over his shoulder and waved him over. His voice lightened, he couldn't stay mad at Millie. "You ain't gonna take no for an answer are you?"

Tassel ambled back and plopped down in the ladder-back chair. Burks shook his head at Tassel's raised eyebrows. "Okay. Okay. I'll come on by."

"You need to come now, Selmer," Millie said.

What?" The sheriff leaned back and dug into his vest pocket. He consulted his watch and leaned forward. "I'll be there around five." The soft edge to his voice left no room for argument.

"You can't drag yourself away from Sid any sooner, huh?" Burks heard a touch of humor in Millie's sarcasm.

"No I can't, Goddamnit. I said five and that's what I mean." Burks hung up.

Pushing his watch into his vest pocket, Burks looked at Tassel. "You in a big hurry to get home?"

"You and Millie," Tassel shook his head and laughed. "The way you go at each other you'd think you hated each other's guts. Why you asking?"

"I need you to stay with Tommy for a bit. Millie's got business that won't wait she says."

What the hell you implying, Sid? Millie's got ten years on me."

"Ah. Don't go playing all innocent with old Sid. If Millie had that ten years back, she'd have you for breakfast, lunch and dinner. You know it, too."

"You don't know what you're talking about." Burks shook his head. "I'll be back no later than six-thirty. Can you help me out or not?"

"Don't get so touchy." Tassel nodded. "You go on. I'll call Sara and lock up. I'll be at your house in a few minutes."

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3

Medicine, Drummers and Dead Men

The Prairie Schooner Library and Reading Room 1938

You got to change your way a thinking," she said.

Burks peered at Millie Saint Jardine. She sat in a regal looking red velvet chair, elbows propped on a massive Edwardian desk. The mahogany finish glistened with fresh lemon oil her houseboy applied each day. The smell of the polish tickled the sheriff's nostrils.

Millie cocked her head and frowned. "You listening, Selmer?"

Burks nodded.

Millie leaned forward clasping her small hands together in a tangle of fingers. Martha and Germaine Saint Jardine flanked their sister. They reminded Burks of Centurion Guards he read about in the plays of Julius Caesar and the like.

The Queen a Sheba and her Court. Burks smirked.

"I see those crinkles and knots on your forehead," Millie barked. "You think this is funny? Well it ain't. We get men that follow the harvest. We get the casuals from Beaver and Boise City. We get the drummers passing through. Now we got wildcatters and oil company men. Some are dirty and they pass their dirt on to our girls. We don't catch it and it gets passed on to the locals. The locals take it home ... you getting the idea?" Millie's mouth twisted into a sarcastic knot.

The sheriff's eyes hardened. At sixty-eight Millie had ten years on Burks and her twin sisters, but age didn't mean a damn thing. He didn't like her tone. He didn't hold with pissy attitudes. Burks slapped the padded leather arms of the chair and pushed up.

"I get it," he said spreading broad, thick-fingered hands on her desktop. "I don't like it one bit, neither. You understand me?" The pitch of his voice remained conversational, but the tone lay flat and cold. A lifeless declaration in a velvet draped room.

Millie leaned closer and took a tiny fist full of the sheriff's beard. "You don't scare me one damn bit Selmer Burks. If you ain't clear on that yet there ain't no hope for you. Now stand up straight before you wrinkle that pretty black suit." She dropped back into her chair.

Burks grunted. His breath salted the air with the aroma of sour mash whiskey. He

straightened and tugged at his vest. The silver star on his chest grabbed the light, flashing in the mirror behind Millie's chair. "Seventy-thirty, Millie. That's Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Chicago, any big town's sporting house. Small towns go sixty-forty and we're the sticks. I believe in share and share alike long as everybody pulls their weight. We're fifty-fifty and giving room and board. You want me to pick up twenty-five percent of their doctoring, too? Horseshit I say."

"Hopeless," Millie said. "Can't you get it through your thick head? Clean girls. Clean locals.

Clean locals mean year round business. We get a safe reputation and we pull in top grade gamblers. We get the high-roller amateurs, too. You understand me? or are you too damn drunk?"

The sheriff's eyes went dead. "I ain't drunk. You or no man alive seen me drunk. You're same as family, Millie, but I won't tolerate your sass."

Millie dropped her head and nodded, but Burks saw the hurt look climb into her eyes.

The woman knows how far to push me and how far to play it. Well hell. She ought to have an idea, we been friends and business partners better than twenty damn years.

Burks opened his mouth to apologize ... a sound of shattering glass broke the tension. The shrill screech of a woman's voice filled the silence and hurried footsteps drummed in the hall. A rap of knuckles rattled the office door and Burks turned from the desk.

The bartender stuck his head in the room. A long cut above his eye ran blood down the left side of his face. "Sorry, Millie, don't mean to butt in. Some crazy bastard is hitting on Miss Lorene. I can't handle him, he's too damn big."

Burks crossed the room. "Come on, Lester. Let's take a look at this yahoo." Pushing through the door he heard Millie's shout, "This ain't gonna end good, girls. Let's clear the barroom before he gets in there ... shit." But Burks already felt the scratch of madness on the door of his mind and he kept walking.

The sheriff felt a tug on his arm. Millie, Martha and Germaine stood at his elbow. "Wait. It's Sunday, but could be there's locals hanging about. Let us clear the barroom."

Mouth tight, Burks nodded. Lester and the three women went through the curtain.

"Where you been, pimp? You think those whores going to help you? Only thing helping you is my money back, you pimp son-of-a-bitch." The color of whiskey belligerence painted the voice coming through the curtain.

Martha's tone sounded light and playful. "Phil? Norbert? How y'all doing tonight? Why don't you boys grab your whiskey. Germaine? Get that new picture book we got in. Phil and Norbert got to see that." Martha laughed. "You boys won't believe the pictures in that book."

"You best show me that book, whore." The whiskey voice went from shrill to loud. "This here little bitch ain't doing nothing, that's for damn sure."

"My name's Millie Saint Jardine. This here gentleman is Lester and he ain't no pimp. My sisters are Martha and Germaine. The young lady you misused is Miss Lorene. None of us bear the name whore. We cater to gentlemen here not hooligans. I'll thank you to take yourself out of my establishment. Don't try coming back, neither."

"I don't take back talk from the likes of you, bitch. I don't see my money, I expect I'll take my trade."

Burks heard a squeak and the wet smack of flesh on flesh. He stepped through the curtain as Millie yelled. "You miserable bastard."

At the touch of the sheriff's hand, Lester jerked around. He stepped aside and Burks had full view of the barroom. Miss Lorene lay on the floor. He recognized her as the newest addition to the Prairie Schooner Library and Reading Room family. Millie outlined the young girl's

background for him a week past. New to the sporting life, she had no experience in the ways of whiskey-belligerent men.

The customer, a tall slender man in a shiny blue suit, leaned against the bar. Burks felt his mouth fill with saliva. A drummer. Six-four, small boned, just like Leslie Hyde ... nothing for it.

The drummer blinked at Burks, Lester and Millie and wiped the sweat from his eyes. His hands were long fingered and delicate.

A wild rage raked its way through the brain of Selmer Burks and he didn't fight it. Part of the madness, the dark freedom he embraced the day Laura Lee died in an Oklahoma City hospital, took him. It swallowed him and its black achy feeling spread from his chest through his body. He moved forward, lighter than air. He would be incredibly quick ... insanely powerful.

"You've put this young lady to hard use and run a big tab," Burks said. "Turn around and put your hands on the bar, sonny boy."

The drummer pushed off the bar using his right hand. The sheriff took note and drifted left.

"What did you say old man?" The belligerent drunk's right hook came at the sheriff's head even as he stepped and spoke. Burks caught the man's wrist. Giving his arm a vicious yank, he jerked the arm to the side and downward. The drunk tried to pull away, but Burks continued to twist until the man's elbow popped.

The drummer's mouth opened to scream, but the force of the sheriff's own left hook smashed through his cheek breaking bone and teeth, cutting off screams or moans. Unconscious, knees folding, the drummer's head flopped backward. His neck hit the bar's hardwood rail and broke with an audible POP, his body melting into the floor.

Burks stared at the growing puddle of urine staining the drummer's shiny blue pants. A booming rush of blood roared in his ears and elation overwhelmed him. The urge to bawl a laugh wallowed in his throat.

Millie and Lester moved up beside him, but he didn't notice. A cold pressure pushed at the back of the sheriff's eyes. Looking at the fallen man, he visualized tearing him apart. Snapping his bones. A scene from long ago flashed before his eyes. Burks saw the broken and twisted body of Leslie Hyde.

He stepped back ... blinked and blinked again. He swallowed and took a deep breath, reining in the dark madness. His eyes cleared and he saw Lester crouching beside the drummer. Burks felt a stinging sensation. A burning pain gouged at his left knuckle.

Fighting for control tired him. He felt sluggish. Like lifting an anvil, he pulled his left hand up for a look. A tooth poked out of the soft flesh between the second and third knuckle.

"Selmer? Selmer. What's the matter with you? What're you doing?" Millie grabbed his hand and saw the tooth. "Jesus Christ ... Lester ... get me a bottle a whiskey."

Lester jumped up, grabbed a bottle and handed it to Millie, along with a damp bar towel. "Man's dead, Millie. Neck's broke, looks like." Lester said.

The old madam continued her doctoring as if she hadn't heard. Millie pulled the tooth out and poured whiskey on the wound. Burks frowned, but Millie shook her head. "Don't worry yourself. It ain't your brand."

Burks shook off the last of the darkness. The heavy tired feeling disappeared in a gradual manner. He looked up as Germaine came into the barroom. Millie followed the sheriff's eyes and turned. Raising her brow. "Well?"

"Martha and Lillian are with Norbert and Phil." Germaine pointed at the ceiling. They're upstairs with full glasses. They like the book." She grinned.

Miss Lorene rolled on her side and began to cry. Millie pointed. "Take her upstairs. Nobody

comes down. We need thirty minutes. You hear me?"

Germaine nodded and hurried over to help Miss Lorene to her feet. Burks waited until the women cleared the barroom. He stepped around Millie and crouched over the drummer's body.

"Big, but brittle. The son-of-a-bitch sure as hell is dead." He looked up at the bartender. "You got your car, Lester?"

Lester nodded. "Yessir, sheriff."

Burks rolled the body on its side and found nothing in the rear pockets. He lifted the coat and saw a large wallet tucked inside. "Get yourself a bar towel and take his wallet."

Burks shoved his hand in the right pants pocket. A gaggle of coins greeted his fingers. Burks added the coins to the wallet Lester cradled in a bar towel. "Fold that up and grab his feet, we'll take him out the back."

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4

The Return

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1938

Burks sat at the edge of the bed. The thought of a new expense gave him a headache. Medical examinations. He scrubbed at his face and pinched the bridge of his nose. Eight short years and Tommy would be ready for college. Could he afford another expense? Could he refuse?

Things were hard enough. Drought, dirt storms and crops blown away. Sundowner County had been lucky, but who knew when things would change. Burks went to the closet for a clean pair of pants.

That damn drummer. He grinned in spite of his bad mood. The bastard asked and Selmer Burks provided. Lester went off to Beaver City, a chore he handled for Burks more than once. The bartender knew where to throw the drummer's wallet and change. Any gutter on the southeast side of the city would do. Burks chuckled at the thought. Some street trash would grab up that wallet and change. When Beaver City law got hold of the street trash there would be no reason to come snooping around Hyde's Corner. Nor would there be grounds to examine the area beyond the Prairie Schooner Library and Reading Room's parking lot.

He shook out his trousers and sat on the bed. Burks had one massive leg in his pants when the pounding started. He pushed his right leg through and stood. The thumping continued as he struggled to fasten the waistband button. He shook his head in disgust.

Mashed potatoes and gravy. Pie-a-la-mode. Shit. No more.

The hammering continued and Burks roared. "I can hear. Damn your hide."

The racket stopped. Burks grunted, embarrassed in the stillness that followed. He'd been forced to shout. He cursed again as the button slipped away from his thick fingers. Pulling

leather suspenders over his bulging shoulders he checked his fly. Burks considered slipping on a shirt and dismissed the idea. He jerked the bedroom door open. Every muscle of his huge upper body twitched and rippled in anticipation of mayhem. The owner of the fist beating on his door at six in the morning best have good reason.

Burks considered it a failure of self-control to raise his voice. Over the years he had refined the use of his physical attributes and used his body to intimidate. He practiced a soft menacing speech that garnered immediate attention.

He walked barefoot down the hall. Passing the bathing room, he saw his grandson through the open door. Tommy stood at the washbasin staring, a smudge of toothpaste marked his cheek.

The boy's eyes were as big as dinner plates. Burks threw a glare in the direction of the front door. *Mister if you ain't got good reason for scaring my son you're about to get a whipping.*

Burks gave Tommy a smile and shook his head. "Don't you worry, boy. You get ready for school."

He continued down the short hallway, but stopped short of the parlor.

Damned if I didn't think of the boy as my son. Damn.

A new feeling of warmth hit him like a hot shower and the anger he felt for the intruding visitor vanished. Approaching the parlor, he heard Tassel's voice. "Selmer? Selmer? Hurry, please?"

Burks opened the door and the cold hit him with an icy slap. "What's got your drawers in a bother? Why ain't you taking Sara to school? Tommy's getting ready and you damn near scared the bejesus out of him."

Tassel had fear in his eyes something Burks never saw in his deputy's drunk days. Fear? Never. Only recklessness. A tear slid over the sharp angle of his old friend's cheekbone. "We got trouble, Jesus, it's bad. We got to hurry." His voice came out a wet sob.

Burks stepped out on the porch, pulling the door closed. The cold bit at his skin with icicle teeth. "Not Lewis and Sykes. Don't tell me it has to do with Harry and Clyde."

Tassel limped away. At the end of the porch he turned and pushed at his hat. He looked up and blinked. "I thought you killed her," Tassel shouted. "I thought you finished her back in nineteen and fifteen."

Burks crossed his arms. A thick mat of gray wire-like hair covered forearms that resembled felled trees. "Killed who, Sid? Who the hell you yammering about? I ain't never killed no woman."

"Well maybe you should've." Tassel retraced his steps and stopped in front of Burks. He pulled the brim of his hat down against the wind. "It's Trudy Hyde. She's come back and she's a crazy woman. Frank Parsons saw her get off the train. No luggage. No nothing. She started up Rhoda Street and Oh, God ... oh, God."

Burks glanced around. The street and surrounding prairie lay empty. The smell of dry buffalo grass and grit stung his nose. He leaned forward and whispered. "Buck up, Sid. Buck up old son. I can't set the grade less I know how deep to plow."

"My Sara and one of the Glower boys." Tassel coughed into a fist and wiped his eyes. "They crossed Rhoda Street taking a shortcut to school. They must have been the first kids she seen. She grabbed them up. Frank said she marched them right up Rhoda Street. When she got to the Stockmen and Growers Exchange she saw me across the street."

Tassel smashed a fist against a porch post and shook his hand in pain. "I got to the office early. She kept clear a me, but come up on the sidewalk next to the courthouse. She smiled and said: You see these tots? You know Sheriff Burks? Tell him Trudy Hyde wants the pleasure of

his company and I'll give him thirty minutes to show up. I'll be at my father's warehouse. That's what she said. She dragged them off and headed down toward the mercantile."

Burks felt like he'd been slapped in the face, but it wasn't surprise that took his breath. Hot talons of rage tore at his reason. He heard the voice scream for attention. Loud. The voice mocked and accused.

You gave her a chance. You let her live. You felt sorry for that Hyde bitch. You're weak, Selmer Burks. Weak and stupid.

The floating sensation came back and rocked him. The dark ache filled his chest. Derisive laughter hurt his ears. His vision narrowed and he squinted at Tassel. His old friend drifted away and Burks saw him as he would through the wrong end of binoculars.

Burks pulled a deep breath, sorely tempted to let the madness take him, but he fought off its attraction ... its dark freedom.

Let go, the madness begged, I'll make it easy.

His head throbbed as he fought to push it all away. Burks stepped forward, a frigid breeze burned his torso. He blinked back wind tears. "How many townies are about? You said Frank Parsons. How many more saw her take the kids? Anyone? Did she talk to anyone but you?"

A gust of October wind ran around the side of the house. Tassel grabbed at his hat brim as the icy blast hit him in the back. The deputy lived in a small frame standing five-ten. Six inches shorter than Burks. People swore he looked smaller, but his box-like body came with a low center of gravity.

A loose work-shirt, overalls and heavy coat made Tassel look fat, but hard muscle and sinew covered his meaty frame. Genes played a role in building Tassel's body, but hardscrabble farming on the Oklahoma prairie put bands of iron in his arms and legs. A self-inflicted injury at age twelve gave Tassel's walk a dip. Agitation increased his dip to a hobble. He tipped heavy to the left as he paced the porch.

Burks lost all patience. "Sid ... Goddamnit. Answer me."

Tassel turned. His face wore a mask of fear and anger. "I don't know, Selmer. I don't Goddamn know. I saw my baby girl. Her face all red as a damn beet. That fucking bitch had her fist twisted in Sara's dress collar. Choking her ... Jesus Christ."

Tassel jerked his hat off and crushed it between big hands. Tears rolled down his wind raw cheeks. "Oh, God. Sara. She begged me to drop her at the edge of town. She wanted to walk in to school alone. She wants to be growed up. Don't want her daddy hanging after her. She's all I got left, Selmer." Tassel lowered his head. His shoulders heaved and he shuddered.

Burks took a deep breath of cold air. He longed for a drink of whiskey, much like he longed to embrace the madness, but he gathered himself. Tommy, Hyde's Corner, his family, they depended on him. A grim thought battered his consciousness.

I failed my family again. I killed that Hyde cancer, but let one piece slip away.

Burks cursed his own weakness. "Sid? Sid. Listen to me. I'll be ready in five minutes. Pull yourself together. I need you up to the mark. Sara needs you. Hold together, old son. We'll make that bitch wish she stayed in England."

The Sheriff of Sundowner County disappeared into the house. He had to finish dressing and see Tommy to breakfast. So, she set up at the mercantile did she? He put the water on for oatmeal and set out a bowl and spoon. "Water's on, boy. You hurry on up ... hear?"

Burks returned to the porch in minutes. He nodded, satisfied with the dry-eyed look of controlled anger on Tassel's face. He indicated the house with a toss of his head. "Tommy's getting breakfast. I told him to wait for me. Now he's worried he'll be late for school. Don't that beat all? Last night at supper he bellyached about going back to school. This morning he didn't want to get ready and bellyached some more."

Tassel shook his head and stumbled down the porch steps. "Jesus Christ. Will you leave off the shit? God knows what that crazy bitch is doing to those kids. Let's get to moving."

Burks gave Tassel a hard look. "Listen to me, Sid. Listen good and hear me. We got to be calm and deliberate in our actions. We can't show fear and we can't show weakness. If we go off willy-nilly we'll get those kids hurt."

Burks stepped off the porch and put a hand on Tassel's shoulder. "Trudy Hyde ain't got no idea who Sara is. Even if Sara said her name, my guess is Trudy wouldn't remember. Trudy didn't have nothing to do with you. You were the hired winter help. Now, here's what we'll do."

The two men stopped at the rear of the courthouse. Burks bent close to Tassel's ear with a final word. Tassel nodded and hobbled off disappearing behind the courthouse.

The sheriff approached the warehouse through an alley between Lewis and Sykes Mercantile Co. and the law office of Lucius Peelman. The mercantile building stretched two hundred feet in length. Burks didn't begin to hear voices until he approached the back of the big general merchandise store.

The warehouse faced the rear of the mercantile, a hundred odd feet separated the structures. A tall board fence connected the two buildings with a Judas gate giving access to the supply yard. Burks tried the latch and found it locked. Further along he saw the big gates rolled back, a twenty-foot opening accommodated trucks large and small.

Burks snatched a look at the edge of the opening. A delivery van took up the middle of the supply yard and the driver's door hung open. Looks like a hasty exit. High-toned Trudy must be making an impression. Burks' jaw muscles bunched.

The murmur of several voices carried on the wind, but the breeze blew through and around the truck making the sounds run together. He couldn't guess the number of witnesses involved. The delivery truck's location made everyone's position impossible to pinpoint. Burks cursed the timing of the driver's arrival.

He consulted his pocket watch. Did Tassel have enough time? Was he in position? Trudy couldn't know about the new doors at the rear of the warehouse, he and Tassel agreed on that point.

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Trudy Hyde

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1938

Following the death of Jared Hyde and his two remaining sons, the Hyde Mercantile and Warehouse Company's perishable assets were sold off the buildings closed and bolted. Burks recalled his surprise in the early months of 1929 when he was contacted by a Boston lawyer. Hyde Mercantile and Warehouse Company buildings and property had also been sold. On behalf of the executrix, Trudy Hyde, the lawyer wanted copies of all Sheriff's Liens filed against the Hyde estate.

The sheriff had plenty of liens, but they were personal and involved his dead wife and daughter. He still wallowed in the darkest time of his life. He prayed Trudy Hyde might come from London and handle the property's disposition personally. His wishes went unanswered and then Clyde Lewis and Harrison Sykes arrived. The businessmen had purchased the company sight unseen.

The new owners didn't open for business immediately which surprised everyone in the county. The partners papered the showcase windows and began an extensive remodel. The store's upper floor came first.

Modifications of the living quarters and sales floor took seven months. Lewis and Sykes then turned their attention to the barn-like warehouse. Insulated interior walls and several coats of paint lightened the cavernous structure. New doors cut at the rear of the warehouse gave the building a new versatility. In bad weather trucks and vans could drive into the storage facility. Once inside the insulated walls, the unloading of goods and storage of same could be handled safely without the usual water damage.

Burks worked his way to the front of the delivery truck. In the empty cab a key hung from the ignition switch. He put the key in his pocket. A tire bumper lay behind the driver's seat. The thick eighteen-inch maple club could come in handy. He pushed it through his belt at the small of his back.

He listened to the coaxing voices coming from the other side of the truck. The sheriff recognized the pleading tones of Harrison Sykes and the haughty, demanding voice of Clyde Lewis his partner. The slurred exhortations of Frank Parsons couldn't be missed, but a woman's soft reassuring voice followed that of Parsons.

"Please, Trudy, please. These children have nothing to do with business you have. Let me take them on to school. You don't want to harm them ... do you?"

Burks frowned trying to place the voice. No answer from Trudy Hyde came to the sheriff's ear, but a moment later he realized the voice he heard belonged to Liddy Johnson. Liddy didn't get out much of a morning and her presence, pleading for the children's release, surprised Burks.

"You ought to do what the lady says, ma'am. It just makes sense don't it?"

Burks couldn't place the resonant Texican voice, but it had to be the truck driver, he thought. He removed his Stetson and crouched in front of the truck. A slow tick sounded from the cooling engine block. The radiator threw weak warmth on the side of his bearded face. He knelt and

ducked under the bumper. Looking up past the big front tire Burks saw what he guessed must be Trudy Hyde. The sight of the slight gray looking woman rocked him.

Trudy had the fingers of her left hand twisted in Bobby Glower's hair. The boy sobbed and hiccupped. The front of his overalls were dark with the stain of his urine. Sara Tassel stood on Trudy's right her arms tucked behind her. Sara wore only one shoe and her face shone brick red. Why was Sara standing so quiet? The answer came when he saw the scarf circling the neck of the seventeen-year-old. The other end was knotted tight to the belt of Trudy's dress.

As he watched, Trudy raised her right hand from behind Sara's body. She pointed a long stiletto-like Arkansas Toothpick at her small audience. "I'm growing tired of these sniveling brats. Someone better get Selmer Burks. His time's running out." Her voice had a hoarse quality. Her words, spoken softly, were filled with menace.

Burks stepped around the front of the truck's cab. "Hello Trudy. Long time. I thought you were done with Hyde's Corner."

Trudy's hand dropped to her side. Burks' impassive face hid his feelings of loathing. Hard to believe. Trudy couldn't be more than late thirties, yet there she stood with nothing to her. The wind could take her. Blow her away like an old mercantile circular. Burks almost laughed at the vision.

Trudy dressed in an old-fashioned wool garment. The sleeves ended in ruffles at her wrists. The hem of the frock brushed the ground. The skin of Trudy's face and long fingered hands was gray. She stared at the sheriff, her eyes, yellowed liquid orbs, bulged from dark gray sockets.

"Selmer Burks," she crowed. "You miserable son-of-a-bitch. So you're still alive." Trudy Hyde's laugh had the sound of a wet cough.

"I'm alive. In good spirits, too," Burks said. "I'd like to say you're looking fine. Course you'd know I was high stepping if I made that claim wouldn't you?"

Trudy's lips pulled back exposing teeth stained a tobacco brown. Her gray gums were several shades darker than her face. "You've been a high stepper, murderer, thief and rapist most of your life. I wouldn't expect a change of spots."

Burks stepped forward. Trudy's right hand came up. Her knuckles showing white on the dagger-like knife. "Remain where you stand, Mr. Sheriff of Sundowner County. You may have guessed I'm not in the best of health. I'll kill these two and thank you for the bullets that end my pain."

Burks lifted the sides of his long coat holding the edges away from his body. "I'm not armed, Trudy. No cause for anybody to get hurt this morning. These children are innocent. You don't know them or their folks. I've known you since you were born. You don't have a speck of meanness in you, never like your daddy and brothers." He kept a smile in his voice.

Trudy threw her head back and brayed. Each bawl screeched like the turning of a rusted wheel. Each inhalation gurgled like water rushing through a pipe. Harrison Sykes turned and clamped his hands over his ears. Frank Parsons pulled a pint bottle from his pants and chugged a greedy gulp. Clyde Lewis, Liddy Johnson and the truck driver stood frozen, staring with drawn white faces.

Trudy's laughter turned into a coughing fit. A clot of dark red mucus flew from her lips. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve. The long blade of the Arkansas Toothpick winked in the weak morning sun. "Your arrogance knows no bounds, Sheriff. You speak of meanness? Why don't you speak of evil you ugly bastard?"

Burks held his hands palms forward. "Trudy these children don't have nothing to do with you and me. Why don't you tell me what you want. I'll give you whatever that is and you can let

the kids go on to school."

Trudy leaned forward giving Burks a quizzical look. "My, my. Now that's a broad statement. You'll give me what I want? You don't even know why I'm here. I don't believe I have your attention. I don't believe you understand the importance of my visit."

Trudy jerked the Glower boy forward. As the youngster staggered in the dirt, she brought her knife hand down in a swift arc. The needle-like blade of the Arkansas Toothpick went through the boy's throat, side-to-side, like it would a square of lard. Bobby Glower's mouth yawed, but instead of a scream blood gushed between his teeth. Each pulsing stream matched the hammering beats of his dying heart.

Liddy Johnson buried her face in her hands and began to sob. Harrison Sykes dropped to his knees and vomited into the hard-packed dirt. The remaining men backpedaled until their heads bumped the delivery van's body.

Burks watched Bobby Glower die with a dispassionate fury. He wanted to kill Trudy Hyde where she stood, witnesses or no, but he couldn't risk Tassel's child. Sara's safety had to be the priority. For the time being, Trudy Hyde would remain alive.

She jerked the knife free and let Bobby Glower drop to the hardpan. The boy's body jerked in spasms and the final belches of his life's blood emptied onto the ground. Sara watched her schoolmate die. Tears streaked her face, but she remained silent.

Trudy grinned at Burks and slapped Sara's cheek with the bloody blade of the knife. She peered at her young captive. "What do you think of your school chum, dearie? He died rather well wouldn't you say?"

Sara looked at Trudy, eyes full of overflowing with tears. She drew a breath as if to speak and spit in Trudy's face. The shock of Sara's defiance froze everyone. The young girl lowered her head and stared at the body of Bobby Glower.

"Well now," Trudy wiped the spittle away. "Aren't you the cheeky one. I like cheeky girls. I'm a bit of a cheeky lass myself. I may let you live if your sheriff gives me what I want."

Trudy pointed the Arkansas Toothpick at Burks. "What do you say, Sheriff? Are you prepared to accede to my demands? They're simple. I'm dying so I thought I'd come for my pay. You pay your other whores, don't you? How is Millie Saint Jardine and her sisters, by the by?" A goblin's smile exposed her gray gums and brown teeth.

While all eyes watched Bobby Glower die, Burks made a slow advance. Trudy snapped a look at him and he gave her his country-bumpkin look. "Trudy, please. I don't understand your meaning. I'll move heaven and earth to satisfy you. Let Sara go, okay?"

Trudy's dry, skeletal face took on a parody of sad concern. "I don't want heaven and earth. I want confession. Confession's good for the soul wouldn't you say?"

Burks straightened. His eyes turned hard. A gust of wind blew the Stetson from his head. The sheriff's long silver hair and beard rippled, dancing in an icy prairie zephyr. "Whose confession would you like to hear, Trudy?" He asked. "Shall I give you the confession of your daddy? How about your granddaddy? There's so much you don't know, Trudy. You were too young then and too sick now."

Trudy's face imploded. A bitter lemon couldn't have caused a more astringent reaction. "You shut your vile mouth, Selmer Burks."

Trudy put the point of her knife on Sara's neck just below the earlobe. She drew the blade's tip downward. A thin line of blood trailed behind. "I want your confession and I'm through playing word games. You give me what I want or I'll cut this girl bad. I'll let her live, but I'll take her face."

Out on Cedric Street the loud clatter and backfire of a tractor's motor broke the stillness. A car's horn blared followed by a screech of tires. Trudy brayed her wet, rusty-wheel laugh. "I know what you're thinking, but you're wrong. Before you reach me, I'll cut her up. She'll wear a veil the rest of her days. I'll ruin her for you." Trudy leered. "Or have you already taken her?"

Trudy cackled and pulled the scarf tighter around Sara's neck. "I said I want your confession. These people should know how you mutilated my brother, Leslie, crippled him so bad he committed suicide. Tell your constituents how you murdered my brothers Edward and Richard. How you drove my mother to insanity, catatonia and finally death. Then you can tell them about me. I'm standing on the very spot or close to it. Remember? A summer's night in 1915 wasn't it? Oh yes. When I came to my senses, I shivered, naked, in your courthouse cellar. In that stinking metal box you call a jail cell."

Trudy's bulging eyes floated in tears. She moved to her left, pulling Sara along, putting more space between herself and Burks. She gulped back a sob. "I know you remember. You raped me twice a day for four days." Trudy turned and pointed the Arkansas Toothpick at her small audience. "I was sixteen when your upstanding sheriff took my virginity. One morning he opened the door and showed me a suitcase filled with clothes and shoes. He gave me a purse with two hundred dollars in it. He said I was to leave this town and never come back. Never write so much as a letter. He said if I defied him, he'd kill the rest of my family and come for me. He said he'd find me and rape me until I prayed for death."

Trudy gasped for air. Tears streaked her face. Her shallow breathing sounded like a water jug being shaken. She searched the faces of the townies.

Burks watched with dead eyes. She's looking for sympathy ... getting careless. He grinned.

She went on, her ragged voice a wet whisper. "Your sheriff made me write a note to my father. When I couldn't stop crying, he pulled me to my feet and shook me." Trudy glared at Burks. "You laughed. Remember what you said?" Trudy glanced at her audience, checking their attention. "I'll tell you what he said: Don't take on, little whore. You're old enough to bleed and that makes you old enough to butcher. What do you think of your fine upstanding sheriff? You elected yourselves a monster who rapes of children."

Burks drew the tire bumper from his belt. In one quick motion he threw it at Trudy's head. She never saw the heavy stick coming, but Burks hurried the throw. The thick club hit Trudy on the right shoulder, scraped her cheek and bounced away. Burks started moving even as the woman, stunned, backpedaled trying to catch her balance.

Sara's mouth gaped as Trudy's knotted scarf drew tighter. She didn't seem capable of keeping her balance or helping herself. The effective tether dragged Sara backward.

Trudy's foot caught in a tire rut and she fell pulling Sara with her. Burks saw Tassel explode through the warehouse doors. Trudy threw her hands back to break her fall. She sat down on the packed dirt as Tassel's fist connected with the side of her head. Trudy Hyde made no sound. She flopped on her back arms outstretched.

Tassel took a step forward and stomped Trudy's right wrist. Burks heard the sound of breaking bones, it reminded him of a child balling cellophane. Tassel stooped to retrieve the knife and Burks caught his arm. "Give me the knife, Sid."

"I've got to cut her loose," Tassel looked up his eyes wild. "Sara's choking." He tried to pull away from the sheriff's grip.

Burks leaned closer his voice a soft murmur, "I'll cut her loose. I'll tend Sara. I want you to take Trudy in the warehouse. You tend Trudy. Do you understand me, Sid?"

Tassel studied his old friend's eyes and nodded. "I'll tend her."

Burks cut the scarf from Trudy's belt. Tassel bent and scooped the woman up like a pile of loose clothes. He started for the warehouse and Burks said in a loud voice. "Watch her close. God knows what she'll do when she gets her senses. She's terrible sick and out of her head. She needs to stand trial for killing poor Bobby Glower ... watch her close."

Tassel glanced over his shoulder nodded and disappeared into the warehouse.

Clyde Lewis broke from the small crowd and followed Tassel. The sheriff's voice stopped him in mid-stride. "Clyde? Will you get Liddy and help me with Sara please? Harry. Will you help? Get this scarf off her neck. Take Sara in the store and tend her. I got to send for Doc Beaman."

Clyde Lewis hesitated gazing at the closed warehouse doors. Burks stood and helped Sara to her feet. He cut a shoelace binding her hands. "Clyde? Is there some kind of problem?"

"Is it wise?" the storekeeper shook his head. "Sara is Tassel's daughter. Is it wise to let him guard that woman?"

Harry Sykes looked at his partner as if he'd gone mad. "Clyde? Will you shut up and help us with this child?" Harry's voice had the sound of a choked scream.

Burks accepted his hat from Frank Parsons. He cocked his head and brushed at the black dyed beaver hide. "Sid is my deputy. He's a duly sworn officer of the law. Why would you ask a question like that, Clyde?"

Lewis dropped his eyes and studied his dusty boot tops. "I expect I'm a bit upset. All these goings on and all. I'm sure Sid will do his usual fine job." Lewis joined Sykes and followed Liddy Johnson and Sara into the mercantile.

Burks brushed a dusting of dirt from the knee of his black wool pants. He approached Frank Parsons and the truck driver who leaned against the delivery van, his face stiff.

Burks gave Frank's shoulder a pat before stopping in front of the driver. He pulled the ignition key from his vest pocket. "I took your key. Sometimes folks try to run. I don't expect Trudy knew how to drive, but you never know. What would your name be, son?"

The driver accepted the key and Burks noted the man wouldn't meet his eyes. "Name's Fleet. I'm Willis Fleet, Sheriff."

Burks nodded. "Pleased to make your acquaintance Mr. Fleet. If you've made your delivery, I believe this would be a good time to be on your way." He tapped the truck driver's chest. "Look up here Mr. Fleet. That's better. I don't trust a man can't look me in the eye. About this unfortunate business here this morning? Was I you, I wouldn't pass on any comments or hearsay nonsense you might've heard. You saw a sick woman here, Mr. Fleet. A woman who killed an innocent child she don't even know. It's my belief that woman is flat out crazy. Wouldn't you agree?"

Fleet nodded and mumbled, "I reckon she's flat out crazy. Yessir ... I do."

Frank Parsons stepped forward. "The woman's crazy all right. Yessir, Mr. Fleet, I can bear witness to what the sheriff says. Even as a child that woman acted crazy. She pranced up and down like she owned the town. Use to devil me something terrible. You remember, Selmer? I reported her nonsense to you." Parson's head bobbed forward and back.

Burks grinned and gave Parsons another pat. "That's right Frank. Slow down now. I don't want you getting an attack of apoplexy. I think Mr. Fleet's got the picture. Ain't that so, Mr. Fleet?"

Sweat dripped from Fleet's nose. "Sheriff? I'd appreciate not being called as a witness to anything. I didn't see a damn thing. I've heard tell you take care a your county and you're a fair man. I'd like to be on my way if you got no objection."

Burks put his hand on Fleet's shoulder and walked him toward the front of the delivery van. "I don't want to hold you up, Mr. Fleet. Appears your testimony won't help us with this tragedy. I see no reason to call you as a witness. I don't expect I'll be hearing from you again and I don't expect I'll be hearing any rumors, neither. That sound about right, Mr. Fleet?"

Burks watched the big delivery van back out of the supply yard. He waited until the noise of the truck's engine died away before getting Parsons attention. "Frank? Get on over to Doc Beaman's. Tell him to come a running. After ... you stop and tell Hal you need a bottle of my bourbon. Tell him I said so ... now git." He gave the old man a gentle push.

Burks watched the old drunk do his best to run down the alley. He glanced at the body of Bobby Glower.

The boy should be covered, but I got business in the warehouse. Eleven. Little Bobby Glower dead and only eleven-years-old. That child is one year older than Tommy. Burks shuddered with the thought.

The sheriff pushed through the warehouse door, his quick step to the side avoided a collision with Tassel. Burks saw what looked like a bundle of clothes lying in a mud-filled rut toward the middle of the building. Tassel moved around the sheriff and stared out at the body of Bobby Glower. The farmer and part-time deputy trembled and choked back a sob. "She's dead, Selmer. I turned my back for a minute and she tried to run."

The sheriff stared at his old friend's back for a long moment. Tassel's head dropped and his shoulders slumped. "Is it true, Selmer?" Tassel's question was voiced as light whisper.

"Is what true?" Burks asked.

"You know what I'm asking. Did you do what she said?"

Burks shook his head. "I killed Jared, Donald and Robert. The rest is imagination. I didn't touch her and I'm sorry you thought you had to ask me. So you turned your back and she ran huh?" The inflection of the sheriff's voice carried no condemnation. "You don't say."

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6

[The Artistry of Manipulation](#)

**Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma
1939**

A year passed in which Tassel returned to the bottle. Burks couldn't get his head around it. He and Sid had every reason to give thanks. The kids were safe and healthy. Rain returned to the prairie lands ... too much rain some complained. The oil strike at Mossburry farm brought new people and prosperity to Sundowner County. When the sheriff needed his deputy and friend the most, Tassel went about drowning in bourbon. Frustration simmered behind Burks' eyeballs and his mad went straight to the bone. He half carried, half-dragged Tassel toward the cellblock shaking him with every step.

"You've gone and lost your mind, boy." Burks grumbled. "You're drinking too damn much and back to your old ways. Your liver's going to rot away to nothing. Why do I waste my breath?" he muttered.

Tassel drooled and made other sounds using both ends. Burks manhandled him into the lockup. His slack body hit the cot and a snort punctuated Tassel's fragrant complaints. Soon his snorts turned to snores that resonated like a rip saw going through knotty lumber. Burks stalked out of the cell.

In the office he double-checked the desk ... locked and secure. The clock reminded him seven-thirty passed without a taste of supper. Burks made a face and his stomach rumbled in response.

Outside the late September wind blew cool off the prairie. Leftover leaves from the cottonwoods and elms scattered and swirled. The wind sang around the corners of the buildings pushing dry detritus along the newly poured curbs and gutters of Cedric Street. The gritty rasp of the leaves skipping along the fresh concrete made an ugly sound. Rats digging at a rotting wooden casket came to mind.

Burks glanced out the window.

Darker than a whore's heart. No, that ain't right at all. My ladies of the evening are entertainers. Each and every one carries a warm heart in her breast.

"Clean privates too, thanks to my twenty-five percent of the doctor fees," he grumbled to the thought. Burks figured his sporting ladies had warmer hearts than most any others in memory.

The rains made up for their absence and soon the long-lost moisture would begin to freeze. The prairie would go white with snow and the holidays would follow. With the Trudy Hyde incident long forgotten, Burks felt pleased and content. The Glower family had packed up their remaining two boys and moved east. Burks helped the family out. Bought them out of a nice piece of land. Life couldn't be better and yet?

He'd spent years developing resources. What he dubbed, "Capital Fees," started many a business in Hyde's Corner. Entrepreneurs accepting a Capitol fee soon learned Selmer Burks came with the deal. They hadn't expected a permanent silent partner in their enterprise. The sheriff's "Recommends" followed his Capitol Fee arrangements. Endorsements and advice on new methods of increasing revenues became the cost of doing business in Hyde's Corner. For his largesse he collected a conservative fee. These subtle methods of business involvement provided adequate side money throughout the years.

Now, Sundowner County crawled with new life. Oil companies, big and small, and independent wildcatters bid for lease rights. Burks saw it all with an entrepreneurial eye. He looked on the oil exploration bonanza as Hyde's Corner's answer to the Irish Sweepstakes. It took some folks awhile to realize the Sheriff of Sundowner County always held the winning ticket.

The Glower property still riled him. The claim turned up dry ... no oil, no gas, but he utilized his talents to create other new sources of revenue. When a gamble didn't pay off, Burks saw it as an affront to his intelligence. He had to admit he had it better than most. Elected county sheriff year after year offered advantages. But advantage meant nothing unless a man could take the hard road when necessary.

Burks got up and returned to the cellblock. Through the open cell door he studied the drunken remains of his old friend.

You never understood the principle, Three Toes. Difference between kings and paupers is simple. Men willing to do the necessary become kings. If a man don't know the meaning of necessary he ain't never gonna be fit to wear the crown.

Burks shook his head in disgust. To his way of thinking paupers wanted to live poor. Tassel stood at the head of the class in that regard. In the past year he'd volunteered for the job every damn day. Burks took a blanket from the foot of the cot and covered the cuddled form of his old friend.

The time had come to leave. His stomach grumbled another warning as he left the cellblock. The sheriff moved around the office turning off the desk lamp and overhead lights. Before pulling the shades, he peered at Cedric Street's shadows. The streetlights cast weak pools of light that seemed to shimmer in the wind.

The familiar scene looked full of gloom much like the thoughts that shouted, one against the other, for his attention. The alliance he would make this Monday night didn't appeal to him. William Chester Royster appeared a weakling, but something about the man bothered Burks. He sensed a slyness. An oily personality like that found in Washington politicians.

At this stage of the game his deadly enemy moved the hands on the clock face. Precious days slipped away while he hesitated. Important questions went unanswered. Now there remained no room for waiting or watching or checking and rechecking.

Burks pondered the effort spent on Lewis and Sykes. The digging took more time than he anticipated, but their secret paid big dividends. As time passed he enjoyed indulging his desire to tease and manipulate. He played with them like he would two kittens with a sprig of paper and yarn. The first time he dangled the teaser they went at it with both paws. The sheriff recalled the telephone invitation offered by Clyde Lewis.

The storekeeper invited Burks for an afterhours drink a week shy of the Trudy Hyde inquest. Clyde Lewis presented him with a cigar and indicated a bottle and glasses on the table at his arrival.

The sheriff's hopes for a taste of good whiskey died with a glass of red wine.

Harry Sykes raised his glass. "To new beginnings Sheriff Burks." He said and smiled.

Burks sipped. The wine, heavy and sweet, reminded him of cough medicine. He fought back a shudder and nodded. "Okay," he answered.

Sykes cleared his throat. Lewis ignored him and took the lead. "There's an election coming up. Harry and I want your endorsement to serve on the township council." Lewis swirled the wine in his goblet.

"I'm surprised." Burks said and set the wine glass on a side table. Sykes jumped up and produced a doily. From where Burks had no idea. He slipped it under the wine glass and resumed his seat. The sheriff stared at the smaller man for a moment. Sykes blushed.

"I ain't talked politics with you boys," Burks said. "Hell, I don't even know if you're Republican."

Lewis shook his head. "You don't understand, Mr. Burks. Our politics don't matter. You need something from us and we need something from you. As you have so succinctly put it to others: "We've got a mutual backscratcher going here." Did I get that right?" Lewis asked as he leaned back and sipped his wine.

The sheriff's eyebrows went up. He worked on satisfactory look of confusion. "You've got the saying right. I know what I can do for you. Suppose you tell me what the hell you think you can do for me?"

Clyde glanced at his business partner. When his gaze returned, his face wore a tired look. "I

don't believe we're being obtuse. Further I don't believe you're a dullard, but I'll spell it out. You need Harry and I to support your scenario for the death of Trudy Hyde. The cost will be two seats on the township council. Simple." He smiled that smile again.

Burks didn't reveal his hand until called. Something about Lewis and Sykes set wrong. He called in a few favors from Beaver and Oklahoma Cities. The most interesting information came from a source in Boston, proving his hunch correct.

Late one evening he played his hand, interrupting a very different sort of Lewis and Sykes business meeting. The surprise visit revealed more than he hoped for including candlelight, fine wine and bathtub sex that startled a sheriff that thought he'd seen everything.

Burks enjoyed being underestimated, though as Lewis had suggested, not thought of as a dullard. Sykes and Lewis imagined their homosexual lifestyle a well-guarded secret. The shock in their eyes brought a smile to the sheriff's face even yet. The storekeepers got a look at the Hyde's Corner Hen House that night. Burks delineated the pecking order on the roost in no uncertain terms. They would find township government demanding. Their cooperation would help insure the sheriff's eventual control of the entire council.

Phillip Lefford posed a different problem. Burks once described Lefford as a man who put a wet finger to the wind and moved in the dry direction. He'd given thought to backing Lefford for mayor. Standing in the darkness of the sheriff's office, Burks chewed on that idea again.

Lefford as mayor would be desirable, but would it work? Burks shook his head. It would soon be obvious who called the shots in the mayor's office and thus the township council. Though the reins of power would remain in the hands of the sheriff the constituency had to believe him to be nothing other than a passenger in the back of the wagon. He couldn't expand his business or operate effectively without full control of the power base. Burks rubbed his lower back and stretched and yawned. He knew his partners and their weak points. He brought his hands together putting thoughts of his partners away. Plan and exploit according to need. He would get her done.

Oil changed the game in Sundowner County. Hard men followed the oil strikes, wildcatter and company men alike. They worked long hours in the heat, grease and dirt. On payday oilmen wanted liquor, entertainment and female distractions in soothing surroundings. They wanted comfortable chairs and even more comfortable beds where aches, pains and the frustrations of their workday melted away.

Burks meant to provide those services and offer everything necessary. He meant to relieve each gentleman of his paycheck and send him along with a satisfied smile. The sheriff would control all such endeavors in his bailiwick come hell or high water. He refused to pass up God given opportunities. Hyde's Corner would be his home base and he would see to complete cooperation from all concerned. For more than thirty-nine years the office of county sheriff belonged to him. The job earned him a pocket full of I.O.U.s. Few men in Sundowner County passed wind without the consent of Selmer Burks.

He paced the room thoughts tumbling through his head. At the moment things were going well. The water ran cold, clear and sweet, but Royster wasn't on the team. Lewis and Sykes ... a sure bet? Harry feared losing the mercantile, but Clyde Lewis had more backbone than his partner. Clyde could prove a serious liability down the road.

Burks stopped at the window and checked the street, but the meeting dominated his

thoughts. The water would muddy up and turn bitter now and again. Taking a breath brought problems and surprises and Clyde Lewis came to mind again. Lewis will need a hard hand. I'm the man set up for the necessary. Burks grinned and closed the shade.

Phillip Lefford could prove his only real constant, he realized. Lefford's age matched his own. Lefford experienced a kick in the ass from irony's boot more than once. Lefford would not panic, he would follow. Burks must remain the leader ... simple. The sheriff grunted and gave his buttocks a rub. Irony paid him regular visits.

Decisions that create opportunities are like old dynamite. His daddy once told him. Treat them with respect and real gentle like.

The memory of his daddy and his lessons made him smile. He groaned, stretched and worked his back muscles one more time. I can deal with those boys. It won't be hard at all. Not when they see there's more to lose than a few dollars.

Happy with his analysis Burks glanced over his shoulder. Tassel's snoring sounded clear and steady. He set the wall heater on low and picked up the phone. Perched on the end of the desk, he paused before dialing home. Sara Tassel would be at the other end of the line. She helped Tom with homework and cooked his dinner most nights. Nellie Older could no longer handle her housekeeper duties. Nellie, like Tassel, had turned into a full-time drunk.

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7

Sara Tassel

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1939

Sara changed in remarkable ways since the Trudy Hyde incident. She began that cold October morning as a petite seventeen-year-old girl on her way to school. A year later she matured into a stunning young woman. It seemed every young man in the county drooled on himself when Sara came around, but she ignored the would-be suitors.

Trudy Hyde's actions erased Sara's ingenuous nature. Brutality's flame forged a cynicism and disdain for hope of mercy and goodness. Sara saw life as something to be used for pleasure and gain. She had no time for farm boys or cowboys.

Burks recognized the change and saw its beginnings in Sara's eyes. He heard it in her voice on the day of the county coroner's finding in the case of Trudy Hyde. Since that day he had noticed other signs. He felt his face go hot when he thought of the way she watched him. He tapped the phone's receiver against his thigh.

Good God. What am I thinking? I'll be fifty-nine before the year is out. Sara Tassel just turned eighteen.

He peered up into the gloom of the open beamed ceiling. *She's my best friend's daughter, but I can read sign. What the hell does she want with the likes of me? Damn, but she does make me*

sweat. The sheriff dialed his home.

"Hello." Sara's voice came through the line low in timbre, the sound soft and teasing to his ear.

Burks swallowed like a tongue-tied schoolboy before answering. "Sara? It's me."

"Hi, Selmer. You okay?" Sara's voice took on the sound of a smile.

Burks wiped a drop of sweat from his eye. "I'm fine. Running late as usual. Everything okay? You get supper?" He talked too fast and silently cursed his silly behavior. "I didn't have time to check the cupboard."

"We're fine. I fixed up leftovers for Tom. I'm having oatmeal. Are you going to be very late?"

"No. Listen. If you need to get home I can come right now."

"No, Selmer. That's

"No? Okay. I've got one stop."

Burks couldn't listen to the sound of her voice any longer. Sweat rolled into his eyes. "Usual township business. I'll be home by eight-thirty. That okay? How's the boy? All his homework get done?"

"Course it's done. First thing we work on in the afternoon," Sara laughed. "Can Tom wait up?"

Burks glanced back at the clock. "Okay. He can listen to the radio until I get home, but no later than eight-thirty. Thanks, honey. Okay. Bye."

Burks swore as he hung up the phone.

Honey. The word just slipped out. *She's like a granddaughter to me ... isn't she? God A'mighty man. You ain't gonna be no cradle robber.*

Burks shot a look at the cellblock doorway. Tassel's snores had turned to vague snorts and sighs.

Sara replaced the receiver and gave Tommy a quick glance. The boy lay on the sofa, his head propped up with cushions. "Call for Phillip Morriss" blared from the radio. The Lone Ranger program ended for another week. Sara felt a heat in her cheeks. She blushed even deeper, relieved only one lamp burned in the living room.

Almost a year to the day and the voice of Selmer Burks still excited her. Twelve short months since Trudy Hyde's actions changed Sara's life. Tethered to the mad woman she had watched the eyes of the sheriff as Trudy described wicked things. Trudy claimed he committed those wicked acts and he said nothing in his defense. Selmer Burks excited her. She wondered what the steel cell in the courthouse cellar felt like.

After her rescue everyone treated her with deference and sympathy. Sara could do no wrong. The brave young girl who spit in her tormentor's face. While her father took to the bottle, Sara began laying plans. She meant to make the Sheriff of Sundowner County her own. She started by developing a friendship with Millie Saint Jardine and her sisters. Sara knew Burks and the Saint Jardine's were old friends.

The sheriff's interest in the Prairie Schooner Library and Reading Room came as a surprise. Sara discovered her Daddy could be a fount of knowledge with a pint of whiskey in his belly.

It took less time than she planned to wake the mothering instinct in Millie Saint Jardine. Sara had matured into a young woman, old beyond her years, and Millie picked up on that fact. During the school term of 1938, Sara enlisted the Saint Jardine's in her conspiracy. Martha Saint Jardine was the only sister to remain aloof and a reluctant co-conspirator.

At eighteen Sara began her training. Her lessons included the fine art of pleasing men. Millie and Germaine taught Sara the most important principle of all: Extraction. There were tried and true ways to pry the last nickel from a well-oiled customer's pocket ... then there were the best ways. During her training Sara wondered aloud why Martha Saint Jardine disliked her. Millie and Germaine ignored her questions.

Throughout the term of her last school year, Burks remained her hero. In her fantasy he became her dream man ... her lover. Sara felt a tingle begin.

Am I finally getting through? Honey, he called me, honey.

The tingle grew to a throbbing pulse low in her belly. Sara saw Tom looking at her. "Your grandpa called. He said you can listen until eight-thirty." Her voice sounded weak to her ear.

"What time is he coming home?" Tom sat up. "Is he sober?"

"Of course he's sober," Sara laughed. "I think he has a meeting of the township council. How about some hot chocolate while we listen to Sherlock Holmes?" She smiled and touched his hair. Tom nodded. The boy looked sleepy.

In the kitchen Sara put milk on the stove to heat. She thought Burks sensed her interest, she could feel it and Sara smiled. He'd never make the first move. He thought of her father as family, but that didn't matter. She spooned in cocoa and sugar and added a few marshmallows from the cupboard. Stirring the mixture she thought about Tom. He wasn't that much younger than she and he grew like the wild buffalo grass. Sara decided she would make herself useful in as many ways as possible. Opportunity came to those who put themselves in its path.

Tommy definitely looked tired. He might go to bed early. What would Sheriff Burks do if he came home and found Miss Sara Tassel in his bed ... naked? She giggled and covered her mouth. She didn't notice the stir spoon dripping chocolate on the floor.

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8

The Meeting

**Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma
1939**

Burks wiped the sweat from his eyes and slipped off the desk. *God help me if Sara finds me drunk and alone at the Schooner.*

He stomped the floor as he walked to the cellblock, his foot had fallen asleep. Tassel lay on his side curled in a fetal ball. His snores returned echoing in the tiny cellblock loud and deep.

Burks took the pillows from two empty cell bunks and stuffed them behind Tassel's back and butt. Another accident couldn't be tolerated. One poor fool flopped on his back and drowned in his own vomit. Never again. Too much paperwork.

Hat and long coat in place, Burks locked the office. Outside he paused and looked Cedric Street up and down. Satisfied with his inspection, he headed for the Hula Hut Fellowship Hall.

Burks paid no mind to the cold as he crossed the street. His interest centered on the darkened storefronts. The gloomy alley running between the mercantile and Attorney Peelman's office held his stare. The sheriff had enemies and some would take delight in setting up an ambush.

Lights burned above Lewis and Sykes Mercantile.

At least they're listening to my suggestions. The storekeepers and Phillip Lefford have the same relationship gasoline has to flame.

That became evident at the first partner's meeting. Since that disaster, Burks kept them apart. Lefford had no clue as to the sexual preference of Lewis and Sykes, but when drunk the man made stupid comments. His ideas and opinions on the state of morals got more detailed with each drink of whiskey.

Burks wondered what Clyde and Harry were up to in their apartment. He shook his head and decided he didn't want to know. The contrived discovery of the storekeepers in their bathing room came to mind and he grinned.

A sign marked the street door of the Hula Hut: Membership Card Required-Ring Bell. Burks used his key and stepped across the small vestibule. Over antique batwing doors, he glanced into the barroom. Directly forward two large posts supported a platform above the entrance. On the platform a small upright piano remained from the old days.

The bar took the right side of the room and ran forty feet toward the rear of the building. Bill Royster and Phil Lefford huddled with Hal Owen near the kitchen entrance at the end of the bar. Fred Astaire sang Cheek-to-Cheek on the Wurlitzer.

"Selmer, come on down." Hal beckoned and moved along the bar looking for the sheriff's bottle.

Burks kept his eyes on Royster and Lefford. "That Fred Astaire is something ain't he, Hal? Sings. Dances. Pretty good actor, too. That song is from the new moving picture he's got with that looker, Ginger Rogers. You suppose he's getting some of that?"

As he drew closer, Burks watched Bill Royster squirm. The man's tentative, embarrassed smile made his soft features look pathetic. Royster, taller than the sheriff, lost his advantage to lighter weight and stringy build. He owned a pig farm a few miles outside Hyde's Corner Township. One of the largest oil and natural gas deposits in the county lay pooled beneath his land.

Most folks seemed surprised when Royster proved a shrewd businessman, but Burks thought it interesting. He made it his business to obtain and review the details of the pig farmer's negotiations. Burks found the man had bargained a comfortable living. The sheriff added Mr. Royster to his list of up and comers in his jurisdiction.

After the death of Mayor Jesse James Loops, Royster expressed an interest in filling the vacancy. Burks sensed the man's desires during their first meeting, he craved the job in the worst way. Burks made it his business to know what pulled a man's string.

Phillip Lefford slouched at the back corner of the bar. His expression was a sour and sickly one that never seemed to change. Short and skinny, he carried a large belly around with him.

Burks guessed Royster might've been in the process of courting support. If the pig farmer pegged Lefford for an easily swayed man, that would indicate yet another interesting trait he possessed. Hal would fill him in later. Burks thought his earlier conclusion looked good. Backing Lefford for the mayor's job would not be an option.

Burks liked to keep his manipulations below the surface. For the eyes of the voters, he created the image of a firm yet fair law enforcement officer ... a servant apart. Instinct honed by experience kept him away from hardscrabble county politics. The priority of Sheriff Selmer Burks and his tenure concerned the welfare and safety of the voters at all times. Farmer, rancher, townie alike. All residents of Sundowner County and Hyde's Corner had to feel they were important. The secret to the sheriff's success rested on that fact alone.

Burks knew as he walked the length of the bar, Royster must be his choice for mayor. "Gentlemen. You, too, Hal. Don't you ever air this damn place out?" He winked and nodded in Hal's direction.

Natalie Owen called from the kitchen. "That's cinnamon and coconut oil ... Hawaiian myrrh. You spend too much time at that sleazy whorehouse, Selmer Burks."

Burks grinned. The rift that developed between he and Hal's wife so many years ago had healed. That didn't stop Natalie from putting her fork in his hide from time to time.

"No sense arguing with Nat. I think you know that, Selmer." Hal filled a water tumbler with the sheriff's bourbon and left the bottle.

Burks nodded. He extended his hand to Royster and Lefford. "Gentlemen I expect you know why we're here tonight. I hope you'll excuse Mr. Lewis and Mr. Sykes. They're handling pressing business at the store. You boys freshen up your drinks. We'll take a table and get comfortable."

Burks didn't wait for agreement. He took his glass and bottle across the room choosing the table farthest from the bar. The three men followed and took chairs. The sheriff didn't waste words.

"All right then Bill, you're new to the mix so I'll start at the beginning. Hal and me are partners in this concern. We have a nice business taking care of folks thirst. On weekends we provide games of chance for our more valued customers. Phil, Clyde Lewis, Harry Sykes, they know about our enterprises. They know I have interests in the Prairie Schooner, the Corner's Hotel, and the Prairie Café, Cimarron Feed and Grain and various vacant properties."

Royster tried to keep his face neutral, but his body language telegraphed shock and surprise. Burks watched, amused. "Mr. Lefford, Mr. Lewis and Mr. Sykes along with Mr. Owen share in the profits our games of chance bring in. They realize the benefits of certain other services provided at the Schooner. Should you be elected mayor, my partners and I will welcome you to our exclusive club, so to speak." The knots and furrows on his forehead gave a clue to his amusement at Royster's expense.

Royster took a long swallow of his drink and dabbed his face with a freshly laundered handkerchief. He wore a brown wool suit, white shirt and black tie. His boots were shined to a high luster and reflected the colored lights Nat hung in the barroom. Burks thought he dressed well for a pig farmer.

"Essentially, you're telling me if I'm elected mayor, I'll dance to your tune," Royster's voice, a soprano tone, developed a squeak and he cleared his throat. He sounded like a young boy who's voice was lost in the transition of puberty's change. "Do I read you right?"

Burks pushed his glass aside and leaned forward. He stared at Royster and watched a muscle twitch at the corner of his eye. "Well now, Bill. I wouldn't put it so harshly. We enjoy a democratic association. Wouldn't you say that's so, boys?"

Lefford and Owen kept their eyes on the table and nodded agreement. The sheriff's gaze never left Royster's face. "Remember, Bill. What you say here tonight is going to be important to your future. With oilmen moving to our neck-of-the-woods there's need of expansion. Lot a money will be made in the next few years. Real soon now, Judge Hammersmith and County Attorney, Henry Stoner, will join our little group."

Royster jerked back in surprise. He waved a hand in front of his face his eyes going big. "Wait. Hold on. Let me get this straight," he squeaked. "You'll expand the gambling and whoring in the county, and we, the public officials, will take a place on your payroll?"

Burks settled back and drained his glass. "Again, I wouldn't put it so harshly, but you've got the main picture. We're not greedy folks. We believe in share and share alike long as everybody takes their turn at the plow, so to speak. You understand me, Bill?"

The sheriff filled his tumbler and capped the bottle. Lifting the glass to his nose, he sniffed. "You know, gentlemen. I don't think a willing woman smells as good as a well put together bourbon. Would you all agree?"

Silent nods came from Owen and Lefford as they busied themselves with their drinks. Burks watched the body language of his partners and nodded. Owen and Lefford knew the score. The pig farmer had two options, two ways he could avoid serving the sheriff's pleasure: Royster could sell out and leave the state or Burks would provide a hole somewhere on the prairie for Royster's rest. He would make his choice tonight.

"Hal? Could I have a refill please?" Royster held up his empty glass.

Burks nodded and Hal collected his and Lefford's glass as well. The sheriff slouched in his chair sipping bourbon and staring at the ceiling until Owen returned.

Royster emptied half his glass and mopped his face for the second time. "You're asking me to make a deal with the devil," he said. "To compromise my principles to become mayor of this township. Your asking price is too high, Sheriff Burks."

Royster finished his drink and Burks noted his shaking hands. He looked like a man stumbling along a mountain ledge in darkness knowing the next step might be his last. "I don't believe the people of Hyde's Corner want corruption," he continued. "I believe they'll respond to my vision for progress. Not gambling, whoring and fellowship halls that pour cheap whiskey. If I make the people aware of this meeting you'll be finished here and in the county. Hell. You'll be finished in Oklahoma."

Royster reached for his empty glass and noted his hand tremors had increased. Face scarlet with embarrassment he dropped them in his lap. Lefford and Owen looked elsewhere. The décor of the Hula Hut fresh and interesting.

Burks pushed his glass to the center of the table and stood. Moving behind Owen's chair, he put heavy hands on his shoulders. "You know, Bill. When I made the decision to back you for the mayor's job I had no doubt about the choice I made. All of us want a man of principle."

Burks patted Owen's shoulders and moved around the table. He paused between Lefford and Owen and smiled as Royster shifted in his chair following his every move. "You're right about a price. There's always a price. Life gives us opportunities and each one has a price tag. At the end of things we all tally up and pay at the till. Don't we? You bet we do. Now I understand you've come into some money. You've done yourself proud with those leases you negotiated."

Burks gazed up at the smoke stained ceiling. The wormy gray timbers looked like old brittle bones. "I got a few friends here and there. I hear things time to time. What I have to ask myself is this: What would a man like you need with a penny ante mayor's job? In a burg like Hyde's Corner? Big fish in a small pond maybe?"

He nodded and looked to his partners for confirmation. "Respect? Would that have something to do with it? Most folks don't take a man who raises pigs too serious. How about power? Feel good to have people doing what you tell them? I've watched you over the last few years. I'd say you crave all that and more. That's why you'll step up and do this job, Bill."

Royster stared at his empty glass. He wiped at his face, the once fresh handkerchief now a ball of damp, wrinkled material. "You're an arrogant bastard, Sheriff. I"

Burks raised a hand and shook his head. "Don't say anymore."

He stepped around Lefford and looked down at Royster. "You're right, I am an arrogant man, but I'm not a bastard. I resent the implication, son. I had a mama and daddy. I want you to listen close now ... you'll be mayor of Hyde's Corner because I've chosen you for the job. Ninety percent of the time you'll be your own man ... the other ten percent you'll belong to me."

Burks studied Royster's upturned face.

He don't look like much, squeaky voice and skinny as a rail, but the man has a strength about him. I missed something about this boy. Must be another visit from old man irony? He grinned.

Ambiguity. That's a wet stone for sharpening a man's intellect.

One problem remained. Royster had no fear of Selmer Burks and therefore he had no respect. The sheriff's face remained composed ... serene. Only his eyes changed, turning cold, empty and dead. His open hand came out of nowhere. The blow delivered so swift no one saw it. In the next instant, Royster lay sprawled on the floor and the sharp crack of the blow reverberated in the quiet room. Burks jerked Royster's chair upright and hauled the man into his seat.

Natalie Owen stepped out of the kitchen at the sound of the commotion. Burks looked up and their eyes locked. Natalie felt the same dread she felt long ago standing on her balcony with the sheriff's grandson suckling her breast. Natalie shivered and went back in the kitchen.

Burks bent low. He tipped Royster's head up, bringing his dazed face close. Burks spoke in a conversational voice. "Listen to me pig farmer. You'll make a deal with this devil. You'll deal because I'm the worst devil you'll meet in this life. All those little devils you've dealt with before, they's been in training, son ... look at me. Can you see? Now you're dealing with the real thing."

The sheriff hissed his message in Royster's face. "Let this be a learning time for you. You'll be Mayor of Hyde's Corner and you'll do as asked on occasion. You'll discuss our business with no one. If you make the wrong decision ... listen close, Bill. I will kill you. I will kill your wife and your children. There'll be nothing left of that pig farm, but black ash and your relative's tears. I mean exactly what I say. You understand me, boy?"

Burks straightened and stared at the still dazed Royster. "We're planning the future here and we take care a our own, no pig farmer is going to change that. Now you sit here and discuss strategy with your partners. Tonight, in your bed, you'd best pray you never forget."

The sheriff rolled his shoulders nodded and winked at Owen and Lefford and gave his vest a tug. "Look at the time. I've got to get on home and tuck my grandson in bed. Damned if it ain't a school day tomorrow. Goodnight gentlemen"

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Breaking the Rules

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1939

Tuesday morning dawned without the stifling heat of the previous weeks. In its place a balmy, Indian summer day greeted the residents of Hyde's Corner. Burks found Tassel in his cell perched on the side of the bunk. He jumped, holding his head as the sheriff boomed out his greeting. "Good morning, Sid. It's a beautiful morning. Just like spring. Good for that hangover you got there."

"Goddamnit." Tassel moved his head in a slow arc, first one side then the other. "Stop with the yelling. Let me out of this shit hole. Somebody puked all over the floor."

"You puked all over the floor. You ain't leaving until you clean it up, neither." Burks pointed toward the janitor's closet. "I've got coffee on. You get a couple of buckets, hot water and bleach. You're going to mop this mess clean." Burks gave him a stare.

Tassel glared back and Burks wondered how the man drew a breath. It looked like his blood supply lay pooled in his eyes. He went through the cell door and pulled Tassel to his feet. Burks fought an impulse to throw his friend against the wall and beat some sense into him. "Come on Sid get a move on. I got no sympathy for you."

On his feet Tassel turned dead white. Burks pushed his head to the side and he dropped a fresh load of vomit on the floor.

An hour later Tassel came out of the janitor's closet smelling of bleach. Sweat dripped from his hair and the angles of his face. He shook as if naked in a blizzard. Burks took pity and filled his coffee cup with bourbon. "Sheriff or sinner," Tassel smacked his lips, "every man needs a little hair-a-the-dog now and again."

Burks sent his part-time deputy home for a change of clothes and breakfast as the clock struck ten a.m. By mid-afternoon the stench of bleach still filled his nostrils. He wondered if Tassel would go home. The chances were next to zero. Tassel couldn't get that October morning of 1938 out of his mind. The sheriff knew his friend shouldered the blame for Sara's brush with death and he felt guilt for Trudy Hyde as well. Burks sighed. No wonder the man took up the bottle again. Tassel lives alone on a rundown farm on the prairie. He's surrounded by empty rooms and bad memories, what else is there for him? Burks squeezed his eyes and shook himself. He had memories of his own ... the thought of them made the pen in his fingers shake.

Burks braced his elbows on the desktop and held his head between gnarly fists. Lord I need a drink of whiskey myself. The combination of paperwork, Tassel and bleach fumes had started a headache knocking at the sheriff's temples. He thanked his lucky stars he had finished checking boxes and signing useless forms. The county nonsense got more idiotic each month.

The office door slammed open and Tommy stomped in fresh from school. "Hi, Grandpa. No homework today. What've you got for me to do?" The boy smiled, dropped his book-bag and

coat on the couch and tiptoed toward the cellblock. "Have we got any prisoners? Any desperate killers or bank robbers?"

The sheriff lay back in the hand-carved, hickory swivel chair. It creaked out its customary complaints. Burks rubbed his nose and mouth stifling a laugh. Sudden tears gathered at the corners of his eyes.

God. He looks so much like Laura Lee I want to hug him all day.

He shivered. A tremble took his hands and he scrubbed at his face trying to push the emotion away. Memories of Laura Lee only brought damning thoughts of weakness and failure.

"There's sweeping to do and your usual dusting. When you finish I've got letters for the post office." The English Tavern clock struck three. "Where have you been? School let out at two-fifteen. You get in a fight today?"

"Naw," Tommy hollered from the janitor's closet. "I told you Grandpa. I don't have trouble with the Porters no more. Byron ain't tried me in a long while. Homer, Junior beats on me once in a while. Course, now, I'm almost big as him. I give back pretty good. Most often he stays clear a me and so does Albert. Today I stayed to ask the teacher about some geography I didn't understand."

The boy came out holding his nose. "Somebody spilled bleach in here, Grandpa." The sheriff's thoughts were elsewhere. He needed a talk with Lewis and Sykes about the meeting. The afternoon would soon be gone, they needed an update, and Burks had a job for the storekeepers.

"Thank your Uncle Sid. He had an accident last night."

"Uncle Sid got drunk again, huh? Threw up in the cell, I'll bet." Broom and dustpan in hand Tommy whistled his way into the cellblock.

Burks, startled by the boy's remark, turned and looked after his grandson.

Smart boy. Sharp boy. I'd best keep a tight lip around the office.

"Right now, I've got business with Mr. Lewis and Mr. Sykes. After, I'll take a turn around town. When you're done we'll go have supper ... you stay busy hear?"

"Yessir," he heard Tommy say as he shut the office door.

On the way down the block, Burks stopped to have words with the voters he met. He buttered up the shopkeepers and town ladies with their shopping bags. The farmers, cowboys and ranchers took up his weekend with whiskey work.

Outside the mercantile, two bikes lay against the side of the building, both belonged to the older Porter boys. Homer Porter expected his sons home from school with no detours. On a dairy farm chores always waited. The sheriff wondered about Albert, the three boys usually stuck together. Burks took another look around, but saw no sign of a third bicycle or Albert Porter hanging about.

The sheriff walked into the brightly lighted store. Behind the big box-shaped sales counter Harry Sykes did busy work with a feather duster. The storekeeper looked up, saw Burks and gave a furtive glance over his shoulder. Burks read his nervous, ill at ease, body language. At the back corner of the store two ladies moved among the dry goods. No other customers prowled the store. "Afternoon Harry. Beautiful day," Burks said.

Sykes' face paled and he jumped at the sheriff's greeting. His eyes flicked in the direction of the stairs ascending the second story. The remodeled space now contained a small office and huge apartment. Burks approached the sales counter with all his law enforcement instincts on high alert. Something felt wrong. Had he walked into a holdup? This wouldn't be the first time he would rely on his hideout gun.

He moved passed the sales counter, watching the blind side at the back corner. The bottom of the candy rack came into view as he drew closer. The large gauge wire shelving attached to the wall rose six feet off the floor. A small shape crouched in the corner. Burks studied the hunched figure of Byron Porter. Balled up and head down, the boy counted jawbreakers in whispers, dropping each in a paper bag. His shirt looked askew and Burks saw the button's were mismatched with their proper holes.

"What in the world are you doing down there boy?" Burks said. "What's going on here?"

Byron looked up at the sheriff with big eyes and shook his head. "Nothing. I'm ... I'm waiting for my brother."

Burks pulled the boy up, turned and leaned on the counter. In a soft voice he called to Sykes, "Harry get down here."

The storekeeper looked up the stairs turned and glanced at the ladies in dry goods. The women went on asking each other's opinion on materials. Sykes hurried over. "There's nothing wrong here Selmer," He gave Burks a twitchy smile. "Byron and Junior came by to help Clyde and me out. Their daddy don't give them money for candy, so we let them earn a little now and again."

Burks stared at Sykes. "If that's the case what are Clyde and the boy doing upstairs? All the work's down here, ain't that so, Harry?"

Burks tapped the top of Byron's head. "You stick your shirttail in and button up right. Wait right there. You understand me boy?"

He didn't wait for an answer, but turned his gaze back on Sykes. "I need to talk to both a you gentlemen. You got customers, I see, so I'll get Clyde." He stepped around the boy and headed toward the stairs.

Sykes whispered. "No ... no ... no." He lurched forward in an attempt to intercept, but Burks continued several steps ahead. The storekeeper reached out in desperation, his fingertips snatching at the material of the sheriff's long coat.

Burks spun, his broad back blocking any view the ladies had of the storekeeper. His hand shot forward taking Sykes by the throat. He pulled him close. "Listen to me Harry. I'm going up there and get your partner. While I'm at it, you get rid of the ladies. Don't make me tell you twice." The sheriff pushed the storekeeper away and went up the stairs.

A door faced the top of the landing, its top half-frosted glass. The mercantile business office occupied the smallest corner of the huge upper floor. Burks stepped across the narrow landing and pushed the door open. A small roll-top desk took most of the north wall and three large filing cabinets dominated the east wall. Two floor lamps flanked the roll-top. One desk chair indicated this room saw few visitors. Burks left the door open and shoved a mounting rage back down his throat. The partner's apartment door waited at the end of the landing.

Burks put an ear to the door and heard the sound of running water. He jacked the door handle and stepped inside. His eyes swept the familiar remodeled living quarters. Three rooms made up the living space. The main room had a kitchenette alcove off to his right. A bedroom, sitting room and huge, ornate bathing room took up the area to his left.

Clyde Lewis had given Burks a personal tour after the remodel, proudly pointing out the "His and His" bathtubs. The claw-footed, porcelain clad monsters stood side-by-side three feet apart. On the facing wall a floor to ceiling mural portrayed a Roman bath. Lewis explained he and Sykes discussed their business each week. A good bottle of wine and hot scented water made decision making a pleasure. That tour proved useful later when Burks stopped by for an unannounced call.

The main room's furnishings were a step back in time. Victorian furniture populated the floor space. A huge sofa took up the wall opposite the entry. The overstuffed eight-foot wingback monstrosity dominated the room. At its side a towering breakfront stood guard. A heavy legged table and huge Tiffany lamp played sentinel at the opposing end.

In the middle of the sofa, propped on a bulging cushion, Homer Porter, Junior lay on his back. Leg poked skyward, he pulled on a recalcitrant boot. The fourteen-year-olds reddish blond hair stood on end, messy clumps stuck up at odd angles. A loop of his suspenders fell off the side of the cushion. His shirttail, balled up at his back, exposed several milky-white rolls of baby fat.

Junior and Burks made eye contact and the boy froze, leg hanging in air. Junior's hands dropped away and his face flushed with blood from the neck up. The sheriff trembled as he watched the implosion of the boy's features into a mask of tragedy. The fury he swallowed in the hall came thundering back to roar in his ears. The child's destruction by embarrassment and guilt made the watching too much to bear. For a moment Burks visualized Tommy lying on that huge sofa.

Clyde Lewis seemed to appear like a magician's magic trick. The rage pounding though the sheriff's head made him deaf to the man's footsteps. Lewis entered from the bathing room, adjusting his suspenders and oblivious of the sheriff.

"You'd better hurry up, Junior. I don't want"

The color drained from Lewis' face. His eyes narrowed and he sucked in a breath as his eyes caught sight of Burks. His mouth drew down in a thin line. "Selmer? Sheriff? What ... what are you doing up here?"

Burks avoided the urge of immediate confrontation. He didn't want to get close to the man. Control of his sanity was tenuous at best. If he looked at Lewis he would beat him to death. Burks crossed the room as Junior wailed. Great racking sobs shook the boy and his face pulsed a bright crimson color. Burks pulled him upright and did his best to tuck the boy's shirt into his pants. When he had Junior's suspenders in place he tried to smooth the boy's hair.

"Hush. Hush now." Burks spoke in a soft tone. "You go on in the bathing room there and wash your face. Comb your hair and buck yourself up son. You got to be strong now, Junior. Stop your crying. Everything's going to be fine. This is between you, Byron and me. Nobody will ever know ... okay? You buck up now. Get your brother and get on home."

Burks straightened and kept his back to Lewis. He waited. From the bathing room, Junior's crying slowed to a stop. A few loud hiccups broke the silence along with the sound of water running. A few minutes passed and the silence crackled with tension. Junior's footsteps crossing the room broke the spell. The soft opening and closing of the door came next followed by another minute or more of silence.

"S-Selmer? It's n-not what you" Lewis sounded tongue-tied.

Burks spun in place, his hands clamped behind his back. "You shut the fuck up." His voice hissed with suppressed rage. His breath burst hot from his mouth and his nails dug into his palms. "Don't open your miserable mouth, you piece of shit. One word ... one word ... I will beat you to death, right here and now. Harry will have to burn the place down to get the blood out of the walls and floorboards. You understand me?"

The shock of the sheriff's words seemed to embolden Lewis, the man's arrogance grew. He hooked thumbs under his suspenders. Lifting them, Lewis rolled his muscled shoulders and allowed the elastic suspenders to snap back on his tight chest. He dropped his hands in front of his body and produced a twisted smile.

"You've no business up here uninvited, Mr. Burks. You pulled that once and got away with it, but not this time. What happens in this establishment is the business of Mr. Sykes and me"

The speed of the sheriff's attack surprised and stunned the storekeeper. He had no time to put up his hands or attempt to retreat. In the space of a breath, two hammer-like blows were delivered to Lewis' back, just above the kidney. The storekeeper's left leg collapsed and he dropped hard.

Burks kicked the man on his back and knelt on his chest. Lewis gagged and tried to pull in a breath. For a brief moment, Burks thought he might lose control. A terrible coldness filled him. One that engorged his spirit with the joy of murder to be done. Burks willed his eyes to clear and when they did, he found his hand locked around Lewis' throat.

The storekeeper's eyes swelled, bulging in a face that had turned blue. Burks shook himself, stood and brought Lewis to his feet. The effort no more than if he had picked up a shovel or rake from the ground.

He pushed Lewis against the wall, his hand slipping from the man's throat to his chest. "Breathe, Clyde. Breathe. Listen and remember." The sheriff emphasized his point by tapping the storekeeper's forehead. "You've broken the rules, you and Sykes, and don't try to tell me different. I shouldn't have to explain how close you are to your maker, you're a smart boy and ought to have it figured."

Burks took a deep breath. The tightness in his chest threatened to overwhelm him. He needed the blood of Lewis. God. How will I sleep tonight? Is there enough whiskey? He knew there wasn't.

A picture of Tassel flashed through his mind. A slobbering, snoring drunk sprawled on a bunk in a jail cell. No. The image sobered him. He had business. Important business. His future. The boy's future. That had to remain first in his mind and reason calmed him.

He pulled another ragged breath. The tightness eased and the sheriff gave Clyde's cheek a light slap before taking a step back. A part of him hoped the man would make a move. He knew with trembling certainty he couldn't maintain control a second time.

Lewis massaged his neck and stared at the sheriff. Burks saw looks of caution tinged with contempt. Despite his distaste, he felt a grudging admiration for the man.

"All right. Pay attention. Last night we had a meeting. Royster will be the new mayor. He's a self-righteous little ass, but I think I've straightened him out. That doesn't mean he won't get out of line. When he does I'll expect you and Sykes to show him the error of his ways."

Burks felt in firm control again. He adjusted the lapels of his long coat and began to relax, but as he did, he felt the first pangs of guilt. Keeping silent about these two might lead to additional trouble. Lewis and Sykes were like an itch he couldn't scratch. He knew the two Porter boys were hurt. The fact they might not understand didn't matter. Burks tried to focus. Business was business.

"I want you and your partner to get together with Royster. No later than after church next Sunday. Comprehend?"

Lewis stared, standing as still as the spires of rock that dot the banks of The Little Santa Fe. Burks raised his hand and Lewis quickly gave a nod. Burks nodded in return. At the door he reached for the handle.

"Wait," the storekeeper's hoarse croak made him turn with a sigh.

Lewis leaned on an ugly wingback chair covered in a garish flowered material. An image formed in the sheriff's mind

Come out with the thirty-six. Two up his ass, two in the balls and the last one in the forehead.

"What do you want, Lewis?" He asked, a hard edge to his question. "You'd best let me be done with you for a spell."

The storekeeper cleared his throat. "What are you going to do ... about us ... about Harry and me?" He said, looking like a man awaiting a death sentence.

Burks shook his head. "Unlike you, and that piece of shit you call a partner, I keep my word. Your secret is safe for now, but if I find there are others or this is repeated?" He gave a derisive laugh. "You boys are going to disappear. Hal and me will own a nice little mercantile business. If you can't satisfy each other, you'd better do your hunting out of my county." The sheriff went through the door and it closed with a muted click.

His tread on the stairs echoed in the empty store. The Porter boys were long gone for home. He scanned the well-stocked shelves and gondolas. No one. Sykes stood behind the register. The man shook as if cold. Burks headed for the door, but stopped and detoured to the counter. Sykes backed away, his lips quivering. The sheriff's fist hammered the counter, the sound like the muffled thumps of a cannon.

"You'd best be shut for the day. You and Clyde got a lot to discuss and you need to get it right. You understand me?"

The sheriff's eyes searched the little man's face for a sign of shame. He saw only fear and hate. Guilt slammed his chest with the force of a smithy's hammer, but quickly slipped into the emptiness carved out of his soul. His eyes lost focus and he heard a voice ... "take this pain and bury it deep. Do it or we won't see the sunrise."

The whispered words had the desperate sound, like a cry from the lost to the lost. His eyes swam into focus. Sykes cowered at a far corner of the sales counter. The storekeeper's tear-streaked face shown a sickly white. Burks realized the whispered voice must've been his own. Embarrassment joined the cacophony of emotions battering away in his head. His fist slammed into the counter again. This time it was driven by his murderous frustration.

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10

[Into the Pit](#)

**Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma
1939**

Burks paused on the mercantile's stoop and filled his lungs with warm September air. Anger, disgust and self-loathing increased with each inhalation. He damned his weakness and stepped off slow walking along Cedric Street. He'd sold the best part of his soul and he knew it. Honor would come next and all for expediency, but he would not fail his family again.

There would be no dinner with Tommy tonight. A fury consumed him. Burks boiled in an oil of self-recrimination. He couldn't punish Lewis and Sykes, but alternate violence would provide a degree of relief. This pact made in hell and his act of omission placed him in the same wallow with Lewis and Sykes. He feared this time his culpability would not be washed away or drowned in bourbon.

Saturday night is what I need. A couple of big belligerent farmers or a drunken cowboy will do. It don't matter much to me ... just somebody to beat on.

That someone would serve to nourish the empty place in the midst of his being. Maybe then, whatever lived in that darkness would shut the hell up. The Prairie Schooner jumped to mind. At the office he called Sara and she laughed. "You'll have to promise a favor in return." The sheriff had no patience for flirtatious behavior. A fury seethed and bubbled in his head. It was held in check only by a tenuous skin of self-control. "I haven't got time for games Sara. It's one or the other. Don't play with me tonight."

A hiss of silence followed his impatient words and he thought the line went dead. "Sara?" His voice rattled with uncertainty.

"I'll stay with Tom." Her answer came back over the line in a monotone devoid of warmth.

Burks glanced around the office. The room and cellblock beyond looked empty. Tommy's in the cellar cleaning up filled his mind.

"Can you stop at the grocery?" He tried to sound conciliatory though he still fumed inside. "Pick up whatever strikes your fancy. Tom needs breakfast cereal. There's household money in the kitchen cupboard under the dinner plates. You may have come across it." His voice shook.

Burks heard a sound and turned. Tommy stood in the doorway of the janitor's closet. The boy had a face full of disappointment. The sheriff's guilt compounded itself and crawled through his gut like a thick, angry tapeworm. He gripped the phone tight enough that his knobby knuckles turned bloodless.

"Sara?" he whispered. "Help me out here. I'm working a bad problem."

"I'm leaving now," she said. "I'll stop at the grocery and meet you at the house. And Selmer? It'll be okay." She sighed.

His tongue stumbled. He knew Sara remained on the line. He wanted to apologize. Give an explanation at least, but Burks couldn't mouth the words. The silence grew embarrassing. He hung up and whirled around to face Tommy.

The boy leaned on the doorjamb, his attention focused on a dust rag. He turned one fist and then the other twisting the rag into a tight, rope-like spiral.

Burks sat forward. "I guess you heard. Sara's going to the grocery. She'll be cooking dinner tonight. It can't be helped, Tommy. I've got serious business and it can't wait."

Tommy quit working the dust rag and tossed it in the washtub behind him. "It don't matter, Grandpa. Sara's a good cook I guess."

"I'll tell you what. You can listen to the radio until nine, but the homework's got to be done first." He winked.

"I ain't got homework tonight, Grandpa," Tommy looked up with disgust in his eyes. "You don't remember, but I told you."

The boy's look felt like a slap in the face. "That's right, Tommy, you did. Your old grandpa's got a lot on his mind. Let's take a turn around town. We'll stop at the post office. Maybe run into Sara at the store. You can help her carry the groceries."

It broke the sheriff's heart to look at the boy, but the fury hammered at his gut. The more he delayed the bigger the explosion. Without violence his rage could have no feast. Only someone's

blood could cleanse the self-disgust. Burks knew he couldn't be trusted around the boy, his control was weakening. The sound of his teeth, molar on molar, echoed in his head and his jaws ached with the grinding.

They left the post office with Tommy jabbering about school and a new girl who kept pestering him. Burks tried to follow his grandson's story, but a headache thrummed like the deep bass chords of a fine cello. With each step the throb increased. Pain lanced between his eyes and a blade of misery sliced its way to freedom. Sweat stung his eyes even as a chill wind picked up.

Burks paused in stride as Sara stumbled on the step of the grocery. She carried two large brown paper bags. She laughed and said something to someone inside. As she turned up street she saw Burks and Tommy and her smile opened like a lustrous flower. The street and sidewalk shined bright in her glow.

No female had ever released the animal heat in Burks like Sara Tassel. She flashed hot in his mind like a bolt of heat lightning. A mature woman's body packed itself into a petite stature. Sara stood just over five feet and her hair drew your eye right off. Different shades of red trapped the light. Some reflected bright fire while others suggested dark auburn tones. Her natural waves and curls seemed to catch the barest illumination turning her hair to smoldering fire.

Sara rented an apartment above the apothecary. Young farmhands and cowboys had become a bother sniffing around the store. Liddy Johnson complained about loitering from time to time, but it did no good. Sara kept the boys guessing and that brought them back time and again. Hardly taller than young Tommy, what Sara lacked in height she made up for in feisty. On the young side of eighteen her manner and carriage spoke of a mature woman. People dealing with her for the first time were shocked to learn her age.

Sara's chronological age challenged the reason of Burks at times. He remembered a half strangled seventeen-year-old staring up at him. Though fresh from a terrifying ordeal her eyes shined like polished steel and at the same time looked as flat and hard as horseshoe nails. Burks recalled her comments following the inquest.

"My size comes from my Mama. The rest a me is pure Sid Tassel. Daddy's salty spirit put the spit in that bitch's face." While she spoke her eyes held those of Burks searching for what he didn't know.

Sara captured Burks' imagination that day as she stated her case. How would she react, Burks wondered, to the truth of her parentage. Would she show the same courage? What choices would she make? Maybe, Martha had it right, keeping the truth from Sara. Burks, like Tassel, couldn't make up his mind on the subject.

The grocery bags sat on the sidewalk. Sara crouched next to Tommy and laughed as he dug through them looking for his favorites. Watching Sara and his grandson brought back memories. Burks thought of the good times he and Sara's daddy shared so many years before. There were hard times, too.

In the spring of 1881 the Tassel family took a farming claim ten miles south of the Burks family and the Little B ranch. In the fall of 1882, Sidney Tassel came into the world. Burks saw

Tassel for the first time at school. Two years his junior Tassel had no brothers or sisters. When Burks first saw him, Tassel looked like a lost pup.

Rarely challenged because of his size, Burks suffered only one tormentor. For reasons known only to him, Leslie Hyde disliked young Selmer Burks. Two years older, Hyde took his pleasure with taunts and on occasion with his fists. Tassel on the other hand found himself tried every day. Tassel would fight at the sound of his name, but he lost most of the battles. Small in stature, the bigger boys overwhelmed him, but Burks noticed something different about Tassel. Of the boys he fought, none came back to challenge him again ... win, lose or draw.

Most folks thought Tassel stupid. Burks found nothing could be further from the truth. Tassel might indulge in dumbness now and again. Slack off on common sense and discretion on occasion, but he wasn't stupid. The kids spread a rumor at school. "You can hit Tassel in the head with a two-by-four until the board breaks. He'll bet with the crowd on the number of whacks it takes."

Burks used to laugh at the exaggeration, but his younger friend did have a high tolerance for pain. Tassel proved that during the winter of 1894. On that day the frigid air had a bitter voice. The icy wind's breath blew sharp enough to snap two-inches of tree branch. Eighteen ninety-four had been a disaster for farming and the Tassel family struggled. Bad luck added to the bad weather. Early one November morning, Tassel heard his mother cursing their misfortune. "And no damn firewood to boot," she finished and began to cry.

Abner Tassel, Sid's father, left early that morning in search of work. Anything to earn the few dollars his family needed for food. Twelve-year-old Tassel took it upon himself to fill the wood-box. He set off pulling a big sled and carrying a newly sharpened axe. Snow covered the ground like a thick feather blanket, layering the clumps of winter grass and small rocks.

The white blanket hid dangerous potholes and depressions. Stepping in one of the snow-covered ruts could break an ankle. Injured or wounded it didn't take long for man or boy to die on the prairie. The wolves, coyotes and buzzards cleaned up the mess in even less time.

Tassel didn't find much. The bad year for farming affected tree growth as well. After putting close to five miles on his boots, the boy found a likely stand of scrub oak and pinion. The wood looked dry and ready for the axe. He worked at a steady pace for two hours. A few more good logs and the sled would be full. He paused to test the edge of his axe and found the frozen wood had taken its toll. The boy had forgotten the whetstone and cursed himself for a fool. The wind picked up and Tassel having stripped to his long johns felt its icy burn.

There were rules for cutting wood in severe cold and sweating in your clothes wasn't one of them his daddy had lectured. Tassel remembered that sweat freezing on the skin beneath a heavy coat or shirt could kill you. Quick as a rattlesnake bite, his daddy had warned. The heavy work of woodcutting should be done in as few clothes as possible.

If you avoided turning yourself into an icicle, the frozen wood might do you in. Abner Tassel cautioned his son about icy knots and nubbins. These peculiarities would cause serious injury if ignored. Extreme cold, typical on the prairie in winter, caused wood to turn hard and slick. Anomalies like the bumps and lumps of broken branches and knots would deflect a dull axe blade. Young Tassel remembered rule one, but forgot rule two. He had been careful, but grew tired. As he cut the last thick limb, the axe hit a frozen knot. The blade caromed off the slick log and buried itself in the toe of his boot.

At first Tassel didn't realize what happened. His feet like the rest of him had turned numb with cold. The blade, embedded in his foot, registered at last and a throbbing ache ran up his leg. Without thinking, he jerked the axe free. Blood poured from the gaping hole. Tassel looked

toward home. Several miles separated him from the help he needed. He was in serious trouble and he knew it.

The boy carried nothing to work with but a little extra rope. He packed the wound with snow and cinched the rope up tight around the toe of the boot. Tassel found a sturdy branch and fashioned a crude crutch. Leaving the heavy wood-laden sled behind never entered his mind. He looped the rope tether over his shoulder and made for home.

Tassel couldn't recall the details of his five-mile walk. He only remembered pulling the sled into the farmyard and seeing his father ready to mount his horse. Silas, Selmer and Iona Burks sat saddled and bundled in heavy greatcoats. Hat's pull low and tied under the chin all were ready to accompany Abner in a search for his son. Tassel tumbled face first into the frozen mud and saved the neighbors and his daddy the trouble.

When the doctor arrived at the farm and got the boot off, he found the axe had cut off the two middle toes. Somehow the two toes nearest the outside of his foot and the big toe were spared. The joint of the big toe sustained minimal damage. The axe had split the body of Tassel's foot. Packing the wound in snow had stopped the blood flow. Leaving the boot in place provided a cast of sorts. Wrapping the foot tightly and using a crutch saved Tassel the pain of later amputation. It took a year for the appendage to heal and Tassel would suffer a limp the rest of his life.

The day the final bandages came off the two boys held a celebration. The doctor smiled as Burks slapped his friend on the back. "Sid, your foot looks like a darn slingshot. Ain't that something? Now on, I'm calling you Three Toes. Three Toes Tassel. Yessir-eee-bob."

"I hope that's okay with you, Selmer ... Selmer? You okay?"

Burks returned to the here and now. His headache beat like a second heart and little black dots danced across his field of vision. Tommy held a box of Corn Flakes and chewed his lower lip as he read the back of the box.

"I'm sorry, Sara. I wasn't paying attention. What did you say?"

"I just mentioned ... I know you want Tom to have variety for breakfast, but he loves the Corn Flakes so much. I hope it's okay I bought them." Sara's face bunched with concern. "Are you okay, Selmer?"

Burks nodded while jumbled thoughts rushed through his mind like a runaway train. It had to be the picture of Sara and his grandson on the sidewalk. The exuberance of youth might have something to do with it. What else could bring to mind Tassel's near brush with death? Self-preservation? Tassel learned a lesson at an early age and applied it well in his life. A lesson he should take to heart?

No. He dismissed those thoughts as extraneous. He was confused and unsure what to think. Confusion turned to disgust. I'll be damned trying to guess, I ain't no brain doctor. Burks tilted his head back and took a deep breath. The black dots disappeared and his headache started to drop away. The pressure eased a bit and he managed a smile.

"Corn Flakes are fine, Sara ... Thomas ... listen close now, you take one of those bags and help carry. I won't be late, Sara. I promise."

Burks did a quick about face and headed for the courthouse. He looked back once. Sara wore a frown, but Tommy waved. Burks turned away, but heard him call. "Goodnight, Grandpa. Nite."

A part of his mind told him he should acknowledge Tommy's call, but the darkness had its hold. In his mind, he had already entered the Prairie Schooner. He smelled whiskey and burned steak mixed with a cloying scent of sex. The bite of cheap cheroots burned his nose. He wagged his hand at Tommy's goodbye, and in a distracted manner, picked up his pace.

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11

Death at the Dairy Farm

**Sundowner County, Oklahoma
1939**

At the courthouse Burks started around back for the car, but a vision of Junior on that sofa, wailing, jumped to mind. The ugly sweet smell permeating the living quarters of Lewis and Sykes replaced the burn of cheap cheroots. The entire late afternoon scene flooded back in living color. The headache returned, pounding at the back of his eyes. His face burned ... sticky hot. He turned back and entered his office, hanging the long coat with care before heading for the toilet. The phone rang and he cursed the invention.

The grating sound went on and on as he splashed his face and neck with cold water. The hot pain pulled back. The phone's irritating jangle stopped and he took a deep breath of relief. Burks studied his reflection, reading his eyes. With a jolt the headache slammed back, racking him without mercy. "Control," he muttered. "Control right now or someone dies tonight."

The phone started its ragged jangling again. Burks snatched the receiver to his ear. "Sheriff. What is it?"

The voice coming through the line made choking sounds. Someone sobbed. Burks couldn't make out half the words, but recognized the voice of the caller. Albert Porter blubbered, "P-P-Please, S-S-Sheriff? F-F-F-rm F-F-Ff-ar P-P-P-le-e-ase"

A dull knife sliced through his heart. "What have I done?" Burks moaned the words, the sound, he realized, was audible. He clamped his lips tight shut.

Why did I send those boys home?

Fear screamed its warning in his head.

"I'm on my way, Albert," he shouted through the hiss of a bad connection.

Burks dropped the receiver in its cradle and closed his eyes.

If anything's happened to those boys. Burks looked in the direction of Lewis and Sykes Mercantile. *This will be your black day, boys. If those kids are ruined with their daddy.* The sheriff's eyes pulled down into tear filled slits. *I'll see you die slow and painful. Mark me ... mark me.*

Burks locked the street door and half-ran, half-walked around the corner.

A well-used 1932 Ford station wagon provided transportation for the County Sheriff's Department. Its faded black paint took on a blotched gray look in strong sunlight. The wooden sides were blistered where the varnish had worn off. The county logo, sheriff's star decals, red revolving light and fender-mounted siren were the only new pieces of equipment the county selectmen allowed.

Rain started as Burks left the town limit. By the time he turned off the main road, huge lazy drops rattled on the hood and roof of the wagon. The ruts of the dirt and gravel track he traveled filled with water. At the side of the road, fat drops made small craters where the dirt remained dry.

Burks came around a bend and saw the first farm buildings. They shuddered, blurred images in the failing light and heavy downpour. Along the right side of the road a tall, white picket fence stretched away to the driveway a quarter mile ahead. Reba Porter and her sons built the fence over a summer. She told Burks she planned to plant climbing roses and she did. Yet as hard as she tried, they never took a good root. Ahead Burks spotted a bright beam of a light. A shadow figure waved a flashlight round and round carving a faint, streaky circle in the gloom.

The sheriff reached across the seat to roll down the window. Albert Porter's face pulled in like a tightly drawn fist. His crying sounded like the growl of a sick dog. The boy pointed down the road with the flashlight.

"What is it, Albert? Albert?" he shouted.

The boy couldn't answer, he bordered on hysteria. The sheriff rolled up the window and continued on. The road turned slippery, the ruts a swamp of mud. Burks silently thanked the selectmen for at least providing a set of recaps for the old station wagon. He navigated a sharp bend in the slippery mire. To the right loomed a large copse of cottonwood trees. Burks eased the wagon around the corner. In the drainage ditch, his headlights picked up a big John Deere tractor on its side.

The sheriff left the car running, headlights illuminating the scene. Homer, Senior, Junior and Byron huddled around the huge rear tire. Homer and his sons turned as the wagon's headlights lit up the muddy landscape. Through the windshield their blurred faces looked like mottled cotton balls in the pale yellow glow.

The tableau made no sense as Burks stepped from the car. Neither Porter nor his sons appeared hurt. Why the fuss over a tractor in the ditch? He walked toward the huddle of father and sons. "Dumped her over did you?" he said.

Rain poured from the brim of the sheriff's hat as he tilted his head. The damp odor of the long coat's old wool filled his nostrils. At his feet he saw the top of a head. Wisps of hair were just visible beneath the big John Deere tire. He would have recognized the white-blond strands anywhere. Reba Porter lay crushed beneath the huge tire.

The cruel irony of this terrible day flashed across the sheriff's mind. A cry, barely audible, drew his attention. A misery of guilt haunted Junior's eyes. Byron wore a catatonic expression as dead as his mother's broken body.

Homer, Senior must have seen the certainty of death fill the sheriff's face. He collapsed against the side of the ditch and raised his arms. The dairy farmer's hands grasped at the rain-filled air in futility. Homer's gnarled fingers clawed at the weeping heavens. It looked as if he

hoped to pull God and his mercy down into that muddy ditch. Porter screamed and his sons joined him.

A few stern words and a slap brought Junior to a state of sullen sanity. Byron calmed and Burks coaxed the boys into helping with their father. Homer belched copious amounts of vomit as they half carried him to the station wagon.

Burks called Doc Beaman after returning to the dairy farm. His next call went to the garage mechanic. He told Pollie Knight to bring block and tackle or tow truck. Whatever piece of equipment would best lift a large tractor. Within thirty minutes, Doc Beaman arrived. He gave Homer an injection and the distraught dairy farmer surrendered to sleep. By eight o'clock the tractor was raised, Reba's body removed and on its way to Hyde's Corner. Doc Beaman slipped into his coat and stopped at the kitchen before leaving.

"I left pills with directions. They're on the bureau in Mr. Porter's room. If you need anything during the night you boys call me ... hear?"

The Porter boys, Burks and Homer's two part-time cattle handlers sat at the large kitchen table. The three boys mumbled a thank you. Albert couldn't stop crying. Doc Beaman said good night and left.

A young man sitting across the table looked at Burks with raised eyebrows. "Sheriff? If you think it might help, I can call my wife. I'm sure she'd be glad to come over and help out for a while."

Burks searched his memory for the man's name. "I think that would be a fine idea at least for tonight. If she's up to it tomorrow would be good, too. Your name's, Roan?"

The young man nodded. "Yessir."

"Okay. Why don't you make those arrangements. Meantime, I'd like to get an idea what happened today. The boys are off to school most of the day. You men have any ideas?"

Roan got up to make his call and nodded toward his partner. At the end of the table the remaining hired hand spoke up. "I can give you a little detail, Sheriff. My name's, Dick, Richard Massey. I believe you know my uncle, Sid Tassel?"

Burks nodded, remembering Tassel's mention of a family named Massey.

"Anyways I live over to Beaver County, but Uncle Sid calls me when he knows of extra work. Tough living these days, Sheriff. Anyways, Roan and me, we work the morning and evening milking. At night we help out with some of the processing. Depends how busy."

"Let's get to the point, Dick," Burks said. "These boys need supper."

"I'm sorry, I do tend to prattle on. Mrs. Porter came down to the barn this morning real early. She said Mr. Porter had a terrible attack of the flu. She worried about the north pasture. Afraid it wouldn't get disked before the rains started. Roan and I offered to spend the day, but she wouldn't have it. She went to leave without putting the tractor cab on. I warned her. I told her we'd have rain today, but she laughed: It's a gorgeous day, much too nice to waste. I believe I'll enjoy it. That's what she said."

Burks filled in more details later. Reba didn't handle the big tractor often, but she knew her way around it. She saw the beautiful Indian summer day and made the decision to disk the field herself. He learned she finished around two in the afternoon. An oilman driving the road saw her leave the freshly plowed north field. The man assured the sheriff he saw her guide the big John Deere back on the narrow road after he passed her.

Two miles farther along, just a mile-and-a-half from home something went wrong. Reba Porter and the John Deere ran into the ditch. Slippery mud couldn't be blamed for the accident. The rain had yet to start. By the time Junior and Byron found her, the heavy downpour had

obliterated any telltale skid marks. Burks drove away from the Porter dairy farm after nine o'clock.

Violence came in many forms. The carnage visited on Reba Porter appeased the sheriff's self-disgust. Now he could vindicate his actions. Now he could investigate, determine cause and slake his guilt. If Reba's death turned out the result of a reckless act. Burks would punish those responsible.

Wednesday afternoon the sheriff attended a brief court of inquest. Judge Hammersmith ruled Reba Porter's death: "Accident by Unresolved Means." Mystery surrounded Reba Porter's demise. Sheriff Burks didn't tolerate mysteries, they were like the hives, nasty little bumps that demanded picking and scratching. When Burks started his picking and scratching someone would turn up with the cure for the brand of hives Burks was investigating.

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12

The Investigation

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1939

Reba Porter would go in the ground on Saturday. The sheriff was notified of the funeral service on Thursday morning. "Two hellacious weeks," Burks muttered into the phone, "two damn sure hellacious weeks."

"It'll be mostly over by Saturday, Selmer. Don't get yourself all worked up."

"Are you gonna be there, Sid? Might be quite a crowd."

"Depends. Been without whiskey for a couple of days now, but I'll tell you true, I ain't sure I can keep it up. I'm sick and shake more than I don't. If I'm sober I'll be there."

"Damnit, Sid. I may need you. Don't that mean nothing no more?"

"Course it means something, but when the shakes come I'll try. That's all I can promise."

Burks hung up. He had used every available hour of the intervening days doggedly investigating the accident. He interviewed everyone in the area and close by. With the exception of the original witness statement he had nothing. Burks held little hope of improvement by Saturday.

Friday afternoon the sheriff got lucky. Parked at the side of the highway, lost in thought, his eyes roamed the dirt track leading southeast toward Porter Dairy Farm. The heavy rains had blown through, but the ground came back solid, thanks to the prairie's cold, dry winds. For the umpteenth time, Burks shuffled the facts in his mind. The physical evidence didn't add up. Not to the result he had on his hands: an overturned tractor and the devastated body of Reba Porter.

Frustrated, he started the station wagon. He would examine the scene and approaches one more time. Somewhere on that road a clue waited for discovery. Burks clutched that thread of hope in his mind's stubborn grasp, without it his investigation went nowhere. One thing felt as

certain as the rain falling from heaven. The sheriff would not see Reba Porter's death go unsolved or unexplained.

He drove past the white picket fence. Reba's dead and forgotten climbing roses gave the landscape an air of mourning. The twisted grey stalks were a sad commentary on a good woman's life. Their scattered remnants gave mute testimony of Reba's passion for all things living.

A feeling of melancholy came over him. His sorrow deepened as he remembered the faces of Junior and Byron. Pulling them from the muddy ground that night, he saw the helpless guilt in their eyes. Two innocents despoiled on the same day their mother died. Burks could understand the pain of the gnawing guilt they must feel. He knew it well, albeit for different reasons.

As he passed Porter's main drive, he found he couldn't draw a deep breath. A tightness grew in his chest. A vague aching pain wrestled a grunt from his throat. He continued up the road until well past the dairy farm and pulled to the roadside short of the accident scene. Burks dropped his head on the back of the seat. Closing his eyes he forced himself to relax, but the haunted look of shame in Junior's eyes came back to him. Burks recognized the look, he saw it daily in his own eyes as he passed each window or mirror.

Iona ... His sister's name tugged at his consciousness. *What does the Porter tragedy have to do with my sister?*

Burks stared at the tattered headliner of the station wagon waiting for an answer. Iona brought along other memories ... memories he'd soon forget. Blame for his father's death for one. Iona's certain death for another. He sensed his sister's presence. "Why do you bring me this lonely, black sadness?" he whispered. "I took our revenge. Can't you give me satisfaction for that at least?"

No answer came and Burks straightened and looked around. A deep breath and followed by a slow exhalation helped bring his guilt to heel. A venomous anger came from nowhere and took the place of guilt.

"Horseshit. This is all horseshit." His voice hissed through teeth clamped tight. Comparisons. Imagination. It always came down to comparisons and imagination. Depressive sorrow, a symptom of burdensome guilt. He'd read that somewhere. But that didn't explain the ever-persistent little voice screaming of his inaction.

What about the depravity in the apartment above the mercantile? it bawled. *What have you done about that?* it shrieked. *You're a drunk and a deadbeat failure, it cried ...* over and over again. Muscled fingers of remorse gripped his heart, twisting it like a wet rag.

As a young man riding the prairie in search of his father and sister, he tried and convicted himself of failure. His lack of control then led to the deaths of Silas and Iona Burks. Now because of self-interest, he failed his family again. A heinous crime against those he swore to protect would go unpunished.

The Porter boys will suffer, the voice railed in his mind. *Lewis and Sykes are free to continue their perversions,* it squalled.

"Bullshit," Burks whispered. "The business of the sheriff is more important than two dairy farm boys."

He opened his eyes and blew another lungful of air. The emptiness came to soothe him and one more piece of his soul scabbed over with the callus of indifference.

My decisions, he reminded the voice, *are not from inaction. My decisions are based on what is best for the situation at hand.*

Burks sucked in one more deep breath and the pain and tightness in his chest eased. The last remnants sorrow and depression slipped away like a summer mist rising off the Little Santa Fe river.

His mind burst free and opened again to stimulus. Cleared of self-pity his instincts sharpened. Burks realized he missed an important clue. The off-shift oilman driving by the Porter's north pasture. The roustabout said he was on his way to the Prairie Schooner, but the timeline for the accident indicated the roustabout was more likely headed back.

Reba Porter didn't just run off the road into a drainage ditch. A farm wife didn't swerve to avoid a rabbit or ground squirrel. Animals darted across country roads countless times a day. The rain didn't start until late Tuesday afternoon. Given the time the roustabout saw Reba leaving the field, she should have been home before the downpour began. The roustabout lied.

Known facts raced through the sheriff's mind. Mossburry farm had a gas well and two pumping oil wells. In the northeast corner of the leasehold, three platform rigs were set up for exploratory drilling. Burks knew at least three crews worked the site seven days a week. He made a note to check with Millie, but he guessed the drill crews worked two eight-hour periods. Daylight and swing shifts the most common during exploratory drilling.

Burks didn't remember seeing any new faces in Hyde's Corner, but Millie Saint Jardine had brought him up to date on the arrival of several new roustabouts, riggers and drillers. He remembered Millie's observations about the newest of three Mossburry crewmembers: "Those boys put them down hard, Selmer. They get a little crazy, too." Millie's schedule would help sort things out.

The sheriff started the car and headed for Mossburry farm. He cut speed at the sharp right turn and cruised by the accident scene with a foot on the brake. His eyes swept the road ranging ahead of the wagon's hood ornament. The chance he missed or misread the marks might be possible, but nothing new appeared and the day continued to slip away.

A dust plume in the distance drew his attention. Burks had been in the car too long, an achy, cramped feeling gnawed at him. Parking on the side of the road, he watched as a panel truck appeared at the crest of a dip in the prairie's rolling topography. He stepped from the wagon and stretched, bending to touch his toes a few times in rapid succession. The vehicle slowed as it approached.

"Afternoon. Got a problem with your car? Anything we can do to help?" The face, framed by the panel truck's square window matched its configuration. A red bandana ringed a bald, blistered head, the man's countenance offered hard angles and deep, knife-cut seams set in a leather-like skin.

"Howdy-do." Burks moved up to the truck, eyes scanning the front seat and as much of the interior as he could see. Next to the driver a passenger sat quietly. The man tilted his head and loosed a stream of tobacco juice through the window as Burks gave him a onceover.

"Goddamn, Carl. Thanks for waiting until we stopped." The voice came from the rear of the panel truck and several men laughed.

Burks pushed his hand through the driver's window. "I don't believe I've met you or your men. Sheriff Selmer Burks ... Sundowner County."

The oilman took his hand. The driver's palm was smaller, but proved just as hard and called as the sheriff's own. "Bobby Landsing, Sheriff. Pleased I'm sure."

The sheriff put his boot on the running board and dropped his crooked left arm on the hood of the truck. Done with the handshaking, he slid his right hand into the waistband at the small of his back. The thirty-six hideout nestled within easy grasp. "You boys work around here do you?"

"Yessir, we do," Landsing dipped his chin. "I'm Field Foreman for USA Petroleum. This is my day crew from Mossburry X-1. Doing a shift change."

Burks opened the panel truck's door and backed away. He gestured to Landsing. "Why don't you step on out. Open up the back and let the boys get a little air. You're not in big rush are you, Mr. Landsing?"

"Truth be told, Sheriff? I got men waiting for pickup. These men are tired and ready to call it a day. Tell me how we can help. I'd like to get on my way."

The sheriff detained Landsing and his men for thirty odd minutes. He questioned them in his casual, slow spoken way, a method he'd used for years. Burks promoted his country sheriff image. Appearing not too quick and easy to please.

Over the years he cultivated this slowwitted approach. The technique worked well with outsiders and proved one of his most useful tools. His bumpkin attitude put folks at ease. If an outsider intended mischief the sheriff's approach made him cocky and prone to mistakes. Landsing and his crew drove away and Burks sat for a while on the fender of the wagon. The wind picked up and darker, thicker clouds ran across the sky. The low rollers skimmed the dormant fields to the southeast.

Burks learned a great deal from Landsing and his men. Getting a whiff of the panel's interior put flesh on the bones of a supposition he made about the accident. More than one of the field foreman's crew carried a bourbon flask. Landsing seemed nervous. Especially when the sheriff asked about his men. The oilman's eyes spoke volumes as Burks made a casual observation. "I haven't laid eyes on any of your new people, Mr. Landsing. Why is that you suppose?"

The foreman's response came too fast. Burks watched his fingers tighten on the steering wheel. "Not hard to figure, Sheriff. I live in a trailer on site. Only leave when I'm making crew changes or picking up a new man. Course, some men got their own transportation. I can't vouch for those."

Burks gave a nod. "Course not. That would explain not seeing you around. What about your boys here?"

"The company's given strict orders, Sheriff. My men ain't allowed in Hyde's Corner. Out a respect for your township's peaceful nature. My men are limited to the Prairie Schooner and Beaver City."

Perseverance sometimes turned over the right rock. An accidental meeting on a country road provided part of the answer he sought. Determination brought him to the right place at the right time. Burks continued up the road to Mossburry farm, but he decided not to stop. Not with daylight running away to the west. Tomorrow Reba would be laid to rest and with luck the service would be completed in a respectable manner. The sheriff could hope for the best, but plan for a messy day.

The chinwaggers express made Burks aware of Homer Porter's drunkenness and hard talk. Porter's rants and tirades could be heard at the mercantile, the Stockman and Growers Exchange and even the Hula Hut Fellowship Hall:

"Who will be held to account for Reba?" Porter asked his audience "Why hasn't the murderer of my precious wife been arrested? What kind of investigation is Burks doing? It's him sits in a warehouse drinking whiskey with my wife's killers."

Burks chose to ignore the tactless remarks of his bereaved friend. The results of his investigation, while not conclusive were encouraging. A feeling of vindication swept through his mind as he turned the car around and headed for Hyde's Corner.

Elation filled him with confidence. A quick visit with Millie and positive confirmation of the schedules would tell the tale, but he had little doubt. Burks could feel it. Landsing lied and one of his crew had done manslaughter. Only one fact needed confirmation. Once he had a name to fix to the time, the next question would be the hardest. When and how much to tell Homer Porter?

Burks figured he would have to think awhile. The oil industry delivered important revenues to the area. Sundowner County's oil fields were average at best. It wouldn't take much to slow down or end development. Oil company personnel found guilty of vehicular manslaughter or a lesser offense in Reba Porter's death could spell disaster. Criminal charges. Wrongful death lawsuits. Public opinion. All were factors he had to take into consideration.

Burks breathed deep and sighed. Thoughts of his grandson came to mind and he smiled for the first time that day. Tommy would pull a face when told he must attend the funeral. The Porter boys and Tommy shared a mutual dislike, but Burks had an idea. He would use the funeral as a teaching tool. An excellent lesson in human action and reaction might develop during the service.

Burks slapped the steering wheel and hummed a snatch of lullaby learned long ago.

Mild weather blessed Saturday morning's service. To no one's surprise the church overflowed with mourners. Several people gave eulogies some tearful and some sadly humorous. Porter Dairy Farm had gained a well-known name over the past year. The milk and butter business grew exponentially with the population. People from outlying farms and ranches, as well as those from Beaver County, came for the funeral services.

Burks had read his grandson correctly Tommy wanted no part of the interment or church service. Still Burks insisted Tommy bathe, wash his teeth and comb his hair despite his protests. During the services the boy squirmed, sighed, hummed and scratched at every opportunity. Burks grew tired of Tommy's antics and delivered a swat to the back of his head.

The sheriff had little time to fritter away. Keeping order at the graveside with the number of people attending would be difficult. With Tommy in tow, Burks left the church before the service ended. Tassel followed Burks out and Dick Massey trailed close behind his uncle.

"Selmer?" Tassel called. "Looks like a good crowd to me. If you'd like some help, Dick and I can pitch in."

Burks was caught by surprise, he hadn't seen Tassel in church and failed to spot him before the service. For the first time that morning he felt relief. "I'll take you up on that offer, Sid. You know where I hide the key. Hell. You've locked yourself up enough times. Raise your right hands. Do you?"

"You bet." Tassel poked at his nephew and nodded.

"You say so, Uncle Sid." The young man smiled.

"Okay close enough. There's extra badges in the bottom drawer left side. Leave off the bourbon, Sid. You and Dick go on out to the graveyard. Take the best vantage point for the family. I'll bring up the rear and herd the rest to what's left. I got a hunch most of the Beaver County people will head for home. I doubt more than a few knew Homer and Reba personally."

Tassel nodded. "We're on our way."

Massey and Tassel left as the first of the congregation spilled out of the church. Burks and Tommy stepped to the side as the folks formed up on either side of the stoop. The sheriff looked

down at Tommy who pulled a sour face and studied the sparse yellow grass. "Okay Grandpa. Okay," the boy mumbled.

It took more than thirty minutes for the casket and the last of the mourners to arrive at the graveyard. Burks and Tommy watched Homer and his sons step out of a new Cadillac four door sedan.

Luck ain't been all-bad for them high-and-mighty Porters, looks like. The dark voice in the sheriff's head giggled.

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13

A Graveyard Lesson

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1939

The Reverend Millburn's morose voice fit the somber mood of the graveside attendees. Everyone seemed relieved as he finished his remarks. "May the Lord Jesus Christ keep you and hold you forever in the comfort of his love. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. So do we all complete the cycle of life according to God's Will. God bless us all. Amen."

The pastor stood with head bowed as a few people at the rear of the small crowd began to drift off. The sheriff's instinct proved correct. People from outlying areas bypassed the graveside service. Tassel and Massey stood by the cemetery gate moving people along. Those that stayed at the graveside hailed from Hyde's Corner and close in.

Homer Porter seemed hypnotized by the plain wooden casket. Reverend Millburn touched his shoulder and he blinked struggled up and shook his head. He looked more disgusted than sad. Burks wondered what thoughts rattled around in Porter's head. It seemed the poor man couldn't admit his cherished wife would soon go in the ground.

Porter looked up. He had an iron grip on the brim of a new Homburg hat. He glared at Burks and the Porter boys mimicked their father. Porter nodded as if he reached a difficult decision. Slamming the Homburg on his head, he moved around the casket and headed for the sheriff.

The dairy farmer came right up on Burks and Tommy. The man stood so close to the sheriff, he had to tilt his head back to see Burks' eyes. "What you're doing, Sheriff Burks? Have you bothered to look for the man who murdered my wife?"

Burks dropped his eyes to Porter's upturned face. He felt a great pity and sadness for the man. He allowed the silence to linger for at least a full minute before leaning forward to whisper. "Nobody done murder, Homer, but I'm working on it. Doing the best I can with what I got. There's no hard evidence. I ain't in a position to prove who's responsible for poor Reba's demise."

"That's a damn lie and you know it, Burks. A drunk running an innocent off the road is murder plain and simple." Porter's face glowed beet red.

The sheriff could smell the whiskey as Porter belched out his complaint. "It's them damn oil people. They're tearing up and down our roads. Driving like crazy fools and drunk half the time. I want the son-of-a-bitch who ran my Reba off the road." Porter moved closer and pushed until he stood chest to belly with the sheriff.

Burks thought the whole scene must look a little comical in a sad kind of way. At that moment he decided to invite Homer to the office. He would explain the facts as he knew them. Supervised private justice wasn't out of the question. In fact Burks liked that option. It would be simple, quiet and should satisfy all concerned.

Before Burks could utter a word, Porter made a noise in his throat, stepped back and slapped Burks across the face. Those who saw the blow gasped with surprise. The sheriff's black, flat brim Stetson hat went flying. It hit Reverend Millburn square in the face, bounced off the preacher's shoulder, and rolled in the dirt. Several in the crowd muttered, "Oh no."

Porter stared, a belligerent sneer on his lips. Junior smirked. From the corner of his eye, Burks saw Tommy tense up. He paid little attention to Porter. The sheriff's interest focused on Tommy's reaction to the blow and Porter's show of arrogant disrespect.

Junior stood opposite Tommy and a little behind his father. Burks thought he could read the boy's mind. Junior's obvious distain would be hard to tolerate. Sure enough Tommy leaned forward ready to move.

Porter's blow lacked strength and landed with little authority. The man teetered on total drunkenness. Burks saw Tommy take a step toward Junior and put a hand on the boy's chest. Inside, the familiar cold void engulfed him. The wildness begged for control and the sheriff's eyes mirrored the chilling emptiness that possessed him.

"We've known each other a lot of years, Mr. Porter. I know you're distraught today and so I'm giving you a pass. Just this one time mind you."

The soft purr of the sheriff's voice drew looks from those close enough to hear. Reverend Millburn made a move toward Porter attempting to offer comfort. Burks waved him away.

"I know we'll have occasion to speak again. When we do, I expect you to behave in a civil manner. You act any different. Lay hands on me or mine. I'll warn you now in the presence of our community. I will beat you within an inch of your life."

The sheriff's cold gaze took in the Porter boys. "The same goes for you boys. You cause me or Hyde's Corner any grief, You'll get the same beating I'd give your father. You take on men's chores you'll be treated as men. That's all I have to say on the matter. Now you'd best go home and get on with your grieving." Burks nodded and took a step back.

Porter began to shake. Controlling his emotions was an obvious effort. Homer turned and motioned his boys to follow, but after a few strides, he stopped and looked back. A large drop of sweat hung on the end of his nose. Porter pointed a trembling finger at the sheriff.

"Don't think I don't know your face, Selmer Burks. You're a hard man and vicious, I know. You're an evil man, I know that, too. I've heard tell about the deals you've made. About the oil people and others. I know all about the gambling and the whorehouses you and your lackey Hal Owen operate."

Reverend Millburn stepped close and put his arm around Porter's shoulders. He tried to whisper something in his ear and Porter shook him off.

"You're cock-of-the-walk around here and been so for a long time, but you can fall. Just like anybody ... you can be taken to task. You're just a man, Burks. You'd best not forget that ever."

Porter pushed Reverend Millburn aside and walked away, his boys following. Young Albert walked backward sticking his tongue out every other step. They reached the shiny new Cadillac, piled in and left in a shower of gravel.

Burks dismissed Porter's words and turned to the job at hand. Scooping up a handful of dirt he dribbled it on Reba Porter's coffin.

"A good woman deserves our attention and a bit of honor today," he said. Those remaining followed the sheriff's lead adding a handful of ground to the casket. Hyde's Corner said its final goodbyes to Reba Porter.

Ranchers, farmers and a few townies clapped Burks on the back as they passed. Most said he shouldn't worry, Porter didn't mean a word of it. Royster and his family, Clyde Lewis, Harry Sykes and Phil Lefford all passed the sheriff without acknowledgment. Burks took note they all kept their heads down. Had they made eye contact, they would've seen Burks walking them out of the graveyard with his dead eyes. The same eyes that sent Homer Porter home to grieve.

Hal and Natalie Owen were last to leave. They invited Burks and Tommy to supper. The sheriff murmured a thank you and declined. Burks thanked Tassel and Massey for their help and collected the temporary badges. With Tommy tucked in the station wagon they drove back to the office.

Burks locked the street door and pulled the shades. "Sit down, Thomas. Get that chair and bring it up to the desk there. Lord, it's almost time for supper, ain't it?"

Tommy pulled a ladder-back near the desk and sat. Burks opened the bottom drawer on the left and dropped the badges inside. When he pitched upright, he held a bottle of bourbon. Burks studied the whiskey bottle for a moment and glanced at his grandson. He turned the bottle in his hands and broke the seal. Like the focal point of a solemn ceremony, the opening of the bottle had become ritual.

After a long pull, Burks wound the cap tight and pushed it away. He settled back into the swivel chair with a satisfied sigh. A series of squeaks and creaks complained of the sheriff's weight. They were friendly noises and made Tommy think of security and safety. Burks wiped his mustache away from his lips. "Well now, Thomas. Tell me what you learned out to the graveyard today."

Burks watched the boy as he hung his head. He could only imagine what ran through his mind. The sheriff had an important lesson in mind, but it would surprise him no end if Tommy picked it up. Burks watched his grandson squirm. He stayed quiet and waited. Sooner or later the boy would have to say something.

Tommy looked up, eyes bright with a serious notion. "I think I learned not to let a man walk up on me like Mr. Porter did to you today?" His big eyes looked hopeful.

Burks sat forward. The answer pleased him. Tommy's response didn't strike the nail dead on, but clear thinking and common sense came through. He decided on another taste of the hair to celebrate, capped the bottle and moved it to the side. "Well now. That ain't a bad observation. Not the lesson I had in mind, but I like your thinking."

Burks patted the desktop and motioned his grandson closer. "Pull your chair around the corner there, boy. Your grandpa don't want to holler."

"That's better. Now here's the thing." Burks lay back, lacing his fingers over a belly still flat and hard. "Word come to me over the past few days Mr. Porter is drinking pretty good. Some say

he takes blame for being sick and not tending chores like he should. Word is he thinks I play favors. Thinks I'm not doing my job. I thought something might happen today and that's why you had to go to the funeral. Here's what I hoped you'd take from the day. There's a time to pick a fight and there's a time to lay back. The man with restraint wins the final battle. That's because the man with restraint chooses the time and place to settle up. You understand me, boy?"

Burks watched Tommy's face surrender to a pondering look. He guessed the boy didn't fully understand, but knew he would with time. He slapped the desktop. "Good. Let's go get supper. We'll go to the café tonight."

He laughed at the boy's sudden smile. Tommy jumped up, knocking the heavy chair over in his excitement. Burks laughed again, a tear pooled his eyes. He felt good. A rare thing since that rainy, pitiless Tuesday afternoon. It had indeed been a hellacious couple of weeks. The sheriff stretched, yawned and retired the bourbon to the drawer.

Outside they walked around back for the station wagon. Burks opened the driver's door and Tommy jumped up in the seat sliding under the steering wheel. "Grandpa?"

Burks pulled himself under the wheel. "What is it, boy?"

Tommy knelt on the passenger seat and watched a garter snake slither along the courthouse wall. "What's restraint?"

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14

Conversation with a Dead Man

Sundowner County, Oklahoma 1939 - 1940

Hyde's Corner settled in for another long winter. Homer Porter went into seclusion, neither seen nor heard from after the graveside incident. The following week, Porter's sons failed to report for school. Burks knew of the truancy thanks to Tommy and his daily reports of school gossip. Two weeks after Reba Porter's funeral the Hyde's Corner School Board appeared en-masse at the sheriff's office.

"Sheriff?" Lyle Mortenson said, his manner demanding and officious from the get-go. "We'd like a word with you."

Burks looked up from a pile of mail and wanted posters. "Mr. Mortenson. Ladies. What can I do for you folks?"

"We want your help." Mortenson took a piece of stationery from a small leather satchel and passed the document to Burks. "The Porter boys are truant. Been so since the death of their mama. We've been tolerant due to the circumstances. Now, we insist they attend classes."

The sheriff read the notification of truancy, the dates applicable and full names of the truants. The bill of particulars looked authoritative on its Sundowner County School District

letterhead. Burks tossed the paper on his desk, eyes dancing with amusement. "Well Lyle, I'd say that's an official truancy document you got there. What is it you'd like me to do about it?"

Alma Kleindist pushed forward, her perfume cloyingly sweet, the scent reminded Burks of Noble Olsen's funeral parlor. "We expect a service of truancy, Sheriff. Mr. Porter needs to understand his sons are required to attend school. We demand enforcement of Oklahoma State Law." A finger of her gloved hand pointed at the sheriff's nose.

"We're losing state funds daily." Mortenson said nodding in agreement. "The absence of those boys is costing the district much needed money. We want you to take immediate and appropriate action."

Burks stood taking a step forward in the same motion. The startled school board stepped back en-masse. "I'm not your truant officer folks. I can't waste my time chasing boys and girls playing hooky."

Grace Smyth stomped her foot. "We're not here to ask for your help. According to your oath of office you are to uphold all the laws of Sundowner County and the State of Oklahoma. Truancy laws are spelled out in specific form in our state and county statutes."

Burks carried his mug into the janitor's closet and emerged sipping freshly brewed coffee. "I can't argue your point of law, Mrs. Smyth. Leave your paper. I'll get to it when I have time."

Mortenson shook his head. "That's not good enough. We realize truancy isn't a major crime. Then again, we don't have major crime in Hyde's Corner ... do we Sheriff Burks?"

Lucy Olsen nudged Mortenson back. An assertive woman with a sharp tongue, she said, "You're too damned long-winded, Lyle. Let's get to the point. We expect you to handle this matter immediately, Sheriff Burks. If you refuse, we'll call a special meeting of the county school district. At that meeting we'll discuss and pass on the Sheriff of Sundowner County's lack of interest in matters involving education. I'm sure the voters of Hyde's Corner and the county will keep that in mind on election day." She stared at the sheriff with a tight smile.

Burks looked from face to face. They were smart these school board folks. The sheriff agreed to schedule a talk with Homer Porter. As luck would have it the county station wagon blew a head gasket that same afternoon.

The sheriff spent the next two days currying favor for Bill Royster. He approved campaign posters. Lewis and Sykes sent them to be printed. He helped display and distribute other campaign materials around the township. At the same time the storekeepers voiced their support of Bill Royster for mayor. Each mercantile customer went away with a Royster campaign ribbon, like it or no.

Lefford worked the cattlemen. They were the hardest group to convince. Some of the ranchers had nothing but contempt for the upstart pig farmer and his oil wells. Lefford reported slow progress. Considering their success in the township Burks liked the overall progress of Royster's campaign. No serious obstacles appeared on the horizon.

The school board on the other hand saw serious problems with Burks. Lack of follow-up with Homer Porter festered like an infected scab on the backside of the sheriff. The school board picked and pulled at that angry crust without letup. Three days following the board's demand for action, Pollie Knight called. The county station wagon would be ready at noon. Burks arrived as the mechanic closed his shop.

"You're four hours late, Sheriff," Pollie grumbled.

"Couldn't be helped son. The wagon ready to go?"

The mechanic nodded and said with sad eyes, "Suppose I bill the county again?"

Burks accepted the key. "You come by the office in the morning. I'll pay you and put in a voucher, okay?" He gave Pollie a wink.

The small, gnarly mechanic grinned. "Thanks, Selmer, them damn selectmen take forever to pay a man's bills."

"Don't forget Mr. Royster on election day." Burks shook a finger.

The mechanic slapped the padlock on the garage door. "Ain't got much use for that pig farmer, but if you say so I guess he'll do." He shrugged and kicked at the grease stained gravel before disappearing round back of the garage.

Burks drove away thinking a late afternoon call at the dairy farm would work in his favor. Porter would be in the middle of milking. Maybe he'd be too busy for bullheaded nonsense. A man could only hope.

The wagon's heater seemed to work better after the repairs. Warm air circulated around the sheriff's legs, something he found comforting for a change. Lately Burks noticed his knees ached a little. So did his right thigh. The old bullet wound, he guessed.

More exercise is what I need. Maybe a little less bourbon whiskey. He smiled thinking of Tommy and his looks.

As he turned off the main road matters at hand demanded his attention. Burks ran through the facts he had gathered. He knew how and why Reba Porter died. He knew who had caused Homer's wife to run off the road and where to find the lowlife. A driller, the so-called witness driving a borrowed car, caused the accident. Oil company involvement even though remote as in this case made the pudding tacky. The facts being what they were demanded action, but more importantly Burks made a promise to Reba's memory. A promise he intended to honor. The man responsible would toe the mark.

Negligence and irresponsible attitudes caused the death of a good woman. Burks would have justice for Reba Porter and satisfaction for her husband, but discretion played a role in his thinking.

Discretion ain't got nothing to do with holding back and you know it, the chiding dark voice echoed in his head. A sharp stab of pain hit him behind the eyes. *You kept Porter in the dark out of vanity and you know it. Pride ... selfish pride drove your actions and shaded your decisions. Admit it.*

"I deserve an apology," Burks whispered, "keep shut."

Porter's slap of disrespect at graveside rankled, that much couldn't be denied. Did he use Landsing as an excuse to hold back? USA Petroleum's field foreman wouldn't like "Burks Justice." Come down to it, Selmer Burks wasn't partial to liars, neither, so there you go.

He decided he would forget the apology and give Porter another chance. He would do it for Reba and he puffed a laugh. Giving Porter a hand in dispensing justice was the right thing in this case. He would be there to see things didn't get out of hand. He would be there to see the driller take his punishment like a man. Porter would have to agree, no lawsuits against USA Petroleum. That would be a given.

On a deeper level, one he could easily bury, he hoped his generous gesture would assuage his guilt. Lewis and Sykes should have faced punishment. Could his failure to avenge Junior and Byron disappear with his magnanimity?

"I'm going to see how it goes," he told the voice. "I'll start off with the school business and see what he says."

Burks noticed the picket fence right off. The dead and withering rose plants were gone. The fence, newly painted alternating red, white and blue, sported new gateposts on which a graceful

arch bridged the driveway. Centered on the flat of the arch the legend: Porter Dairy Farms Inc. had the same red, white and blue colors. Burks thought the color scheme represented Americana, but slammed on the brakes when he saw Union Jacks painted at either end of the sign.

Burks came close to knocking his head on the windshield. He couldn't believe his eyes. Porter lived in a country that took him from dirt poor to butter rich and he was giving his thanks to a British flag. "Another fucking Englishman," he snorted. "I might a known."

Old hates bubbled below the surface as he pulled up near the main house. Activity at the rear of the milking barn drew his attention. Two hundred yards away two men on horseback pushed the last of a dairy herd into a huge new barn. The horsemen saw him and raised their hands in greeting. Burks waved back. One of the men galloped toward him and he recognized Dick Massey. "Sheriff ... afternoon, sir. You're here for Mr. Porter, I expect."

Burks nodded. "That your friend Mr. Kind back there?"

"Yessir, it is. Roan and me are working full-time and we got four part-time men. Roan and me, well, we sort a foreman the place for Mr. Porter."

Burks rubbed his hands together. The cold turned their breaths to puffs of condensation. It wouldn't be long before the snow stayed on the ground. "Things must be picking up all right. Is Homer around somewhere? How about the boys?"

Massey indicated the house behind them. "They're all in there right now. Mr. Porter gives the boys their schooling in the afternoon. They should be getting done pretty soon. Got to help out with the chores of an evening. We'll be going until midnight tonight. Lots of orders."

The squeak of a screen door followed by the dull clump of several pairs of boots made the two men turn. Homer Porter and his three sons came down the porch steps. Porter pointed the boys toward the milking barn and they peeled off in that direction.

"Back to work, Sheriff," Massey said. "Nice seeing you. I'll be coming to town Saturday. Payday ... I'll get a little drunk at the Hula Hut, but I'm a happy drunk. Hope you won't have to thump me around too much. I got a lot of work next week."

Burks liked Dick Massey, he seemed a straight and clean young man. "Don't you worry, Dick. If I have to thump you, I'll do it real gentle like."

Massey nodded and threw three fingers at the sheriff before turning his horse for the barnyard. The animal pranced up between the boys and the group meandered toward the barn. Albert brought up the rear of the group. He looked back and slapped Massey's horse on the hindquarters. With every crack of Albert's hand the horse jumped and skittered sideways. Albert wore a tight, bitter smile on his face. Burks wondered if the boy liked inflicting pain and fright.

"This is the busiest time of my day," Porter said. "What do you want, Sheriff Burks?"

Burks looked the dairy farmer over. The man had lost ten to fifteen pounds. His face, fresh shaved and pink cheeked looked drawn, yet overall he seemed fit and clear-eyed. When the sheriff looked closer, he saw that jerky tics pulled at Porter's eyes. Those tics told another story. Porter's substance grew thin. Burks studied his old friend concentrating on his eyes. The dairy farmer didn't look quite right and the sheriff's scrutiny seemed to make him nervous.

"I asked you what you want. You're the last person I want to be around, let alone speak to, so state your business and get off my farm." Porter sounded like a petulant boy.

Burks settled his hat on his head and climbed into the station wagon, pulling the door closed. Porter stared at him, his face a combination of confusion and disbelief. Burks rolled down the window and rested his arm on the sill.

Porter's hollow cheeks turned red. "I don't have the time or the inclination for games, Burks. If all you got to do is come around and bother my help stay the hell away. You're not welcome here ... understand?" Fists clenched at his sides Porter moved his weight from foot to foot.

"Shut your miserable little peehole, Porter." The sheriff rumbled in a hoarse voice. "You ain't got audience one out here. You shut up or I'll wire you up, dead wife or no. I got matters for discussion, and Mr. Porter, we will discuss. I'm in my vehicle and sitting down in an effort to restrain myself. I take a notion to step out, you'd best make a run for it. Otherwise you'll likely be on the ground with a broken back ... you understand me?" Burks bellowed the words.

The timbre of the sheriff's roar was atypical. The volume of his voice startled a group of starlings in the barn's corral. The birds swooped up in the gray sky making several loops before settling back down. The flock returned to its frantic search for undigested seeds in the frost covered horse and cow dung.

Burks squeezed his eyes in disgust with himself. When he opened them, Porter had retreated several steps. The man looked shocked, but in spite of that he gave a weak show of bravado. "You can't come on my property and scream at me. Who do you think you're talking to, Mr. Burks?"

Burks choked back the irritation he felt at the sight of Porter's color scheme and Union Jacks and held up a placating hand. "I'm sorry, Homer. I apologize. I came out here for a civil discussion. The school board asked me to inquire after the boys. They want to know why they're not attending school."

Porter jammed his hands in his pockets. He took a deep breath. Burks thought he saw the man shutter and he seemed to deflate. Burks wondered if the pressure of carrying on normal life demanded too much of him.

"I've decided it's best to school my sons at home," Porter said. "I'm qualified. I'm a college graduate and I've researched the law. I can assure you, as long as my boys pass the tests covering standardized curriculum, I can school them at home."

"Okay, Homer. I'm not going to doubt your word. You're an intelligent and thoughtful man. I'm wondering though. Aren't you concerned about the social part of their education? The boys have a lot of friends at school. Aren't their friends going to miss them? You know ... the boy stuff?"

Burks saw something creep into the eyes and over the face of Homer Porter. The look, one of fleeting madness, held a murderous lack of inhibition. One autumn day in 1928 Burks saw that same deadly light in the eyes of Jared Hyde. Porter moved close up to the car window.

"You ought to know about boy stuff. Ain't that right, Selmer? You and your storekeeper friends." The dairy farmer leaned closer, his nose an inch away from the sheriff's face. Porter smelled of cow dung and sour milk. "Here's what I'd really like to know, Mr. Burks. Do you share in the profits from your queer whores? Do you get your pimp fee from them, too? You know. Like you do with the regular whores out there at the Prairie Schooner Library and Reading Room?" Porter slapped his knee. An attempt at a guffaw produced a flat hollow sound instead.

Burks didn't know what to say. Being caught off guard unsettled him. Homer knew about his sons and Lewis and Sykes. How he knew he couldn't guess, but later he would think about it. At the moment he wanted to know Porter's intentions. Burks didn't want to kill the man.

Porter backed off a step. A cold smile found a place on his lips. The murderous look vanished and a wildness hid behind his soft brown eyes. "Got you off color there did I? Let me tell you ... Sheriff." Homer spit the title like a piece of bad meat in his mouth. "I know everything there is to know about you and your dirty business. Oh I can't prove what I know in a court of

law, not yet anyway. That means I've got to keep my mouth shut. That's what my lawyers tell me. You're a clever man Mr. Burks."

Burks opened the car door and turned on the seat. He rested his feet on the running board. Porter backed away.

The sheriff shook his head. "No. Go on Homer ... go on."

All the man's bravado slipped away and he looked as if he might cry. "You could've brought those animals to me." A pleading tone crept into his voice. "You could've brought them out here." Porter turned and pointed. "See that little outbuilding off to the right? I would've settled with them right there. You know what else? There's a lime pit out there. Nobody would've found them. You could've done that, Burks. You've done that and worse. I've got detectives on you, I know how many times you empty your bowels."

Porter got him by surprise. Burks had nothing to say. He stared at the man he had known ten years and better. This Homer Porter was a complete stranger. "What do you want from me, Homer? If your price ain't too high, I'll pay it ... gladly."

Porter laughed. A shaky uncontrolled sound. "What do I want the man says. If the price ain't too high, huh?" He laughed again. "I'll tell you what I want. I want those two queers right here in front of me. I want their shriveled up balls and peters in my hands. I want to squeeze them until they're mush and jamb what's left down their ugly throats. Then I'll slice their gut open and make sure they swallowed everything okay." Porter's voice had come close to a scream.

Burks watched the dairy farmer do a two-step jig. My God. The man's going insane right in front of me. The sheriff laced his fingers tight and dropped his head to his chest. His own madness begged him to reach out and end this threat now.

"Oh ... oh." Porter giggled and said, "I guess my price is too high. That right Mr. Burks? Lewis and Sykes too important to your business interests right now? Township Council and all? They're helping you with Royster, too? Okay ... okay ... okay. I'll forget that for now. Maybe one day down the line we'll negotiate."

Porter moved closer bending to see the sheriff's eyes. "Look at me, Mr. Burks. Look inside. You're supposed to be good at that, had a lot of practice, ain't you?"

Burks met Porter's eyes. Homer nodded. "See it, Mr. Burks? Yes. You see it ... I'm dead. My boys are dead. Young Albert? He had a chance, but he saw his brothers come out of the mercantile that Tuesday. He heard Junior and Byron talking. He heard Junior descri He saw their faces. Albert didn't understand. I had to set him down and explain."

Porter coughed a broken sob into his palm. His knees buckled and he hung his head. Another silent sob jerked his thin body. He drew a breath and looked up. "That's what a father does ain't it, Burks? He sets with his boys and explains the facts of life? No one can hurt us anymore. You understand what I'm telling you? You want to know what I want? I told you what I want, but I'll settle for now. Bring me the man who ran my wife off the road. You bring him to me. Right here. I'll tie him to a post there and horsewhip him. After? You can do what you will. That's what I want, Mr. Burks."

Porter stood straight. His lips twisted. A grin or a grimace, Burks didn't know or care. Porter turned and walked toward the barn.

How far will he would go with his detectives? Nothing remains to say or do here.

Burks settled back in the car and hit the starter and Porter turned. "You know what she does? Reba? My wife? She calls to me every night. Screams at me for help. She can't breathe. You understand? It's crushing me, Hommie. That's what she used to call me: Hommie. Even when I'm

awake, she calls for me. I don't sleep much. You wouldn't know about that. You sleep like a newborn. It's okay, though. Dead men don't need sleep."

Burks watched Porter look off toward the copse of cottonwoods a mile-and-a-half away listening. His eyes followed the dairy farmer's gaze. "I know exactly what you're talking about, Porter." He whispered. "You don't know me as well as you think you do."

Porter gave the sheriff a little smile and two quick nods before he continued toward the barn.

Dusk moved in as Burks came to the main highway. He stopped. Put the car in neutral and got the door open ... not a minute too soon. The sheriff threw up a vile stinking mass that smelled of ham and goat cheese. He scrubbed his face in the icy razor wash of a prairie zephyr.

Lewis and Sykes again. Jesus. If Homer made known what they were ... he'd have to kill him before he had the chance. He couldn't have

Goddamn you. Goddamn you fucking que

The sheriff's stomach lurched and turned over again.

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15

[The Note and the Pistol](#)

Sheriff's Office 1941 - 1942

Tommy banged through the door, arms and legs flapping. "Grandpa? Hey Grandpa. Mr. Porter's got big trouble."

Burks looked up from his paperwork. "Calm down boy. Look what you're doing to my floor. Go out there and scrape your boots. Lord A'mighty."

Tommy returned looking sheepish. The sheriff watched him hang his greatcoat trying hard to keep a straight face. When the boy started for the janitor's closet, Burks took pity. "All right. All right. Suppose you tell me what's so damn exciting about Mr. Porter." He struggled to hold back a laugh.

The boy's eyes lit up. "The principal and my teacher were talking right outside the boy's toilet. I heard what they said through the door. Strange goings on with Mr. Porter and his boys the principal said. The school district ain't satisfied. Said they're fixing to take puna ... pin ... a Some kind of action is what they said."

Burks tapped a pencil on the desktop. "You're meaning punitive action, it's a fancy word for punishment. They ain't got a Chinaman's chance and that's too damn bad, ain't it." Burks turned his attention back to the pile of papers on his desk.

A few weeks later, before the Christmas break, Tommy arrived at the courthouse early. Ice-filled snow battered him all the way from the schoolhouse and a howling wind blew him through the sheriff's door. Burks saw the boy blink at the collection of county school board members gathered around his desk.

They all turned as Tommy slammed the door against the raving nor'easter. Burks was relieved to see his grandson. The boy's arrival caused a break in the debate taking place. This is a fine reason to send the school people packing. As it stood the sheriff teetered on the brink of losing what little patience he had left.

He disappeared into the janitor's closet for a cup of coffee and Tommy hung his dripping greatcoat by the door. Coming out of the janitor's closet, Burks pointed to the thick book on the desktop.

"There it is, Lyle ... ladies. Black and white ... read the damn section for yourselves. I'm tired of arguing and explaining. Porter is free to educate his boys as he sees fit. Read it and go about your business. I'd be pleased if you'd leave me be while I have words with my grandson. Just so there's no misunderstanding, here, I'm not inclined to speak of this again."

With that edict the day-to-day business of the township and county proceeded stoically forward. Taxes were levied and babies were born. Drunks got lumps and a night in jail. Life moved on despite the snow the cold the Porter controversy or the county school board.

The residents of Sundowner County had a lot to be thankful for that Christmas. The drought ended as 1939s fall season brought plentiful rain. Oil, not the huge economic boom expected, still provided new prosperity. Sundowner County's feelings of stability began to crumble, however, as 1940 exposed its surprises. European intrigue, at one time a world away, began to affect everyday life in Oklahoma's Panhandle. The butchery embarked upon in 1939 by Hitler and his German army began to make the Dust Bowl of the 1930s appear trivial.

The year 1940 proved notable for Tommy because of the sheriff's distracted attitude. Homer Porter and his sons took up a lot of his grandpa's thinking time. Nightly over the supper table, Burks questioned Tommy at length about the Porter boys. What did the other boys have to say at school? Had any of their friends seen the Porters of late? Tommy began to worry.

Burks generally put things away when done and over. Reba Porter's casket lay a long while in the ground. The boy wanted to ask why the Porters held the sheriff's interest, but he decided to say nothing.

Late one summer's evening Tommy couldn't hold back. "He's shamed, Sara. I can see it plain as day on his face. He can't find out what happened to Mrs. Porter and I think it's eating on him."

Sara Tassel put a cool hand on the back of Tommy's neck. "You shouldn't be thinking that way. Your grandpa's got no good reason to feel shame. Reba Porter died because of a stupid accident. No witnesses came to the mark and weather washed away the tracks. We have to be sensible about it. Your grandpa is only one man after all." Sara gave Tommy a smile.

Tommy caught a breath as the scoop neck of her blouse provided a full view of her breasts. He looked away, his face growing red and nodded. "I know you're right. I know I shouldn't

expect him to solve every mystery. It's just hard. Especially at school. Some of Junior's friends laugh and call him an old drunk who can't do nothing."

The front door slammed and the sheriff boomed a greeting. Tommy saw something like pain in his grandpa's eyes as he entered the kitchen. The boy's face turned a deeper shade of scarlet.

Did grandpa hear what Sara and me were talking about?

The Christmas holiday came and faded into the past. New interests overshadowed the old. Eleven-year-old Tom Burks found his grandpa getting back to normal. The air of distraction faded and the quizzing about the Porter boys came to a halt. Sitting down to dinner Tom found he had become the focus of the sheriff's attention.

"Don't you want to hear about Junior and Byron anymore Grandpa?" Tom said.

Burks laughed. "I'm more interested in you, young man."

Tom's face betrayed his disappointment. He wished things would go back the other way.

Porter Dairy Farms and its phenomenal growth became the main topic of conversation in Sundowner County. People said Porter put his wife in the ground and buried himself in the dairy farm. Books on bovine husbandry, agriculture and dairy production techniques came to the post office weekly. All packages were addressed and delivered to the attention of Homer Porter.

Word had it Porter used every penny earned to reinvest in livestock, equipment and land. Homer drove himself and his sons with little mercy. According to school gossip, the townies gave Porter Dairy Farms a nickname calling it, "The Monument." Rumor had it Porter meant to make the dairy farm a living headstone for Reba Porter's grave.

Nineteen-forty-one moved along at a hectic pace. Month after month Tom Burks heard only one subject discussed on the streets of Hyde's Corner and at school. Most argued against America's involvement in the European war, but a vocal minority clamored for the country's participation in the fight and the sooner the better. Young men barely eighteen traveled north to enlist in the Canadian military and fight the Nazis. America would come to its senses soon enough chinwaggers claimed ... going to war was inevitable.

Early on a Sunday morning debate ceased to be relevant. December 7, 1941 the Empire of Japan attacked the United States Naval Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Aircraft carriers of the American Navy were spared only because they were at sea on maneuvers during the raid. The bulk of America's Fleet were sitting ducks. For the first time in the country's history, a foreign power carried out a surprise attack on American soil. The death toll climbed to over twenty-four hundred men and women.

The day following the December seventh attack President Franklin Delano Roosevelt went before Congress. He asked for a Declaration of War against the Empire of Japan and its allies,

Germany and Italy. With the exception of one dissenting vote in the House the declaration passed unanimously. Jeanette Rankin, a Montana pacifist, saw fit to cast a no vote.

The Hyde's Corner Journal printed the congressional vote tally making note of Rankin's pacifist standing. Tempers grew short in Sundowner County and many favored the formation of a lynch party. The drive to Montana, people argued, wouldn't take long at all.

Folks were too busy to head out to Montana, a mad scramble was underway throughout Oklahoma. Young men lined up at the county draft boards ready for military service. Realities and priorities, however, had to be recognized. Farming, ranching and food processing were designated vital industries. A field couldn't be plowed without a farmer. A can of Spam couldn't be processed and made available to the fighting front without a rancher to raise the livestock.

The Porters and others like them had to produce milk, butter, cheese and other high protein products necessary to sustain the war effort. What previous obsessive hard work did for Porter Dairy Farms, Japan, Germany and Italy now quadrupled. Porter grew richer and more influential, but he took no pride in his accomplishments. Day by day he grew increasingly bitter and reclusive. He could not share his good fortune with the love of his life.

Talk of a world war made Tom all the more nervous about the growing dispute between the Porters and his grandpa. Tom thought keeping tabs on his nemeses might be a good idea. He knew two boys, both older boys, who were school chums of Junior and his brother, Byron. Tom's status as the sheriff's grandson gave him leverage of sorts. Over the years he'd tested his influence in trivial ways and mastered the necessary techniques.

Bad blood continued to grow between the Burks and Porter families and the wealthy Porter's were able to play a prideful game around Hyde's Corner. Tom felt sure some catastrophe would befall his grandpa soon. Like most thirteen-year-olds he thought he could solve the unsolvable and he set out to learn all he could about the Porters.

Before the death of Reba Porter husband and wife were socially active in the community. They maintained friendly acquaintance with their neighbors and made a trip to town at least once a week. Tom learned they had participated in most local events and played a lead role in yearly preparations for the Harvest Roundup Festival and Dance.

Following the tragic accident of 1939, Homer Porter withdrew from Hyde's Corner's society. He took his sons along and the people of Hyde's Corner were hurt and mystified. Tom's investigation ended there ... a dead-end.

He soon heard rumors making the rounds at school. Whispers told of something more serious in store for the sheriff. Tom practiced targeted arm-twisting and learned the Porter boys bragged of specific retaliations against Selmer Burks. Porter and his sons believed the sheriff protected those responsible for the death of Reba Porter. One of Tom's informants claimed Junior swore an oath: The Porters would see Sheriff Burks out of office and disgraced or in hell. Byron claimed it didn't matter which and Albert said they were all partial to Selmer Burks going to hell.

Tom wondered if he should bother his grandpa with such silly threats. He thought Junior, Byron and Albert were no doubt acting bold for their friends. After the death of Reba Porter, Tom felt a kinship of sorts with the Porters. They once had a mother to hug them and cook their

dinner. A real mother who would put iodine on their scrapes and blow the burn away. A mother who could always make all the hurts a little better.

Like a story in a horror book, their mama was taken from them. Killed, God only knew by whom, in a horrible accident. Tom understood how it felt to be without a mother. He had missed out on the hugs and iodine. The pain of loss Junior, Byron and Albert felt might be harder to bear, he thought, but then he found the note.

Tom didn't sleep well that night. Dreams of his mother had become a nightly occurrence and at times were strange. Often the dreams were pleasant and he would wake feeling warm and good inside. On rare occasions a nightmare would terrify him and that night one of those took his sleep.

In the dream his mother lay abed. She looked beautiful like the tintype grandpa showed him. She beckoned him ... come close. She smiled and said: Come ... I want to hold you. Come. I want to hold you. He saw that her lips didn't move and her voice really had no sound. It scared him silly, terrified him, because he did hear and understand each word. Yet, as he watched, his mother's beautiful lips faded away. There remained a withered red slash bisecting the lower half of her face.

He was drawn toward her as if immersed in a clear syrup. Blood seeped from beneath her body and a dark shadow appeared. The shadow began to eat his mother's body and she blanked out piece by piece. The shadow consumed his mother and came for him. The shadow gushed his mother's blood, spraying it everywhere. The shadow's long fingers reached for him

Tom bolted up in bed and shuddered in the cold room. He wiped a hand over his slick face. Sweat ran freely from under his arms. He threw aside the blankets and realized his bed was soaked. Tom cleaned up and changed the sheet, moving quiet so his grandpa wouldn't be disturbed. The sheriff got in late the night before. Another bad Friday night, Tom guessed. At five-thirty he left to start chores.

The thought of having the office clean and fresh coffee perking when the sheriff arrived pleased him. He grinned in anticipation of his planned surprise. Tom slipped from the house, his face pulling taut with the bite of cold wind. Another icy blast of February air cleared the last of the dream from his head. In the east he saw the first patches of gray light. Lacy, tendril-like fingers crept across Hyde's Corner's sky. He walked, huddled against the wind, blowing on his hands.

Nineteen-forty-two will be gone before I know it, he thought.

It had to be the war. People moved faster and got their jobs done more efficiently. Speed and yield played like dish soap commercials everywhere you looked. Daily goals of higher production output were commonplace. Productivity could save the lives of American fighting men. The change in everyone amazed him. The spirit of working together, pulling together, gave people a strong sense of community.

Speed and productivity seemed to have infected his body as well. Nature had thrown its switch and he'd begun to grow popping, out every which way imaginable. The boy never cared for exercise, but he watched the sheriff complete his routines each day. Tom found the grunt and sweat habit disagreeable. For the sheriff, a ritual of stretching, weights and heavy bag completed his day and Burks always ended his sessions with the skipping rope.

"You look pretty funny when you skip rope, Grandpa." Tom commented one morning from his perch on the cellar stairs.

"It may look funny, boy, but it's good for my balance, wind and speed. All things that could save my life one day. If you expect to work in the law business, you'd best start training your body." He gave Tom the admonition between heavy breaths.

Burks preached exercise to Tom at every opportunity. Now could be a good time to listen. Finding he lacked only two inches of reaching six-feet energized him. His voice, he'd noted, turned hoarse at times and changed pitch at odd moments. A little dark fuzz appeared here and there on his face. Tom's weight gain was the biggest surprise. He gained without trying and his body grew thicker. "Dense," his grandpa called it.

Tom had his head down as he walked around the corner. He was thinking that all these changes in his body must be part of growing up. He glanced down the street and saw the man. Tom only saw his back, a hunched figure huddled in the doorway of the sheriff's office. He wondered if the individual might be trying to break in.

He backed away, took a breath and leaned forward to peek around the corner. The man worked at something on the door. He fussed for a few seconds and then turned and looked down the street. Tom jerked his head back, but not before he saw the emaciated face of Homer Porter, Senior.

He waited a full minute, afraid Porter might have seen him. Working up his courage, he took a deep breath and looked again. To his relief, he saw Porter scurry up the street. The boy watched him stop to cough and spit in the gutter. Porter looked back once more before he turned and disappeared into the alley.

Tom ran up the street. He felt sure he would find damage or vandalism, but the office door seemed untouched. No broken panes of glass, no gouges or scratches were evident. Mystified, he got the spare key from its hiding place. As he opened the door a tightly folded piece of stationary dropped to the floor.

Tom left the paper folded and put it on the sheriff's desk. He went about his business, whistling tunelessly, and turned on the heat before hanging his greatcoat. He washed out the coffee pot and filled the canister. He turned on the hotplate, stuffed his pockets with dust rags and by that time he couldn't stand it any longer. He opened the note and pushed it flat on the desktop.

Blinking in disbelief he studied the standard sheet of stationary. Printed in block letters in the middle of the page the message read: MY BOYS WAIT FOR REVENGE. I WAIT FOR JUSTICE.

At first Tom felt sad. He knew how badly he missed his mother and father. He could imagine how he might feel had he the chance to know them. A chance to form a bond as Junior, Byron and Albert had with Reba. He left the note as is and went back to work.

The smell of lye soap stung his nose as he sloshed the mop up under the cell bunks. The more he thought about the note, the madder he got.

The Porter's got a lot of gall blaming the getaway of Reba's killer on the sheriff. A body couldn't hope for clues to show up. He couldn't expect things to happen by themselves. How could Selmer Burks be responsible for a rainstorm that washed everything away? Sara's right. It's damn, downright crazy.

Tom carried the mop bucket into the janitor's closet for emptying when the street door opened. "My God, boy," Burks called out. "You ought to have bad dreams more often, that coffee smells just fine."

Tom came out of the closet wiping his hands. Burks took his time shaking and hanging his soaked greatcoat. Tom glanced at the front window and saw snow blowing sideways. "How'd you know I had bad dreams last night?"

"You do your share of jabbering in those dreams, son," The sheriff's forehead bunched up. "Sometimes you damn near keep a man up."

Burks glanced at the desk and studied the paper, nodding slowly all the while. His demeanor remained stoic as he read the cryptic message. "Well now. Looks like we had us an early caller." Burks looked at Tom. "You around when Mr. Porter stopped by?"

Tom shook his head. "I come around the corner and saw him fiddling at the door. I didn't know what to think until he turned to look down the street."

"You didn't talk to him then?"

"No, sir."

The sheriff took a small key-ring from his vest and settled in his chair. He unlocked the bottom drawer on his right and Tom moved closer curious about the drawer's contents. Burks pulled it open and Tom's breath caught. A huge pistol gleamed blue-gold in the weak overhead light. Its butt, fashioned from dark walnut, glowed with loving care. The grips looked worn, but still took a good shine. The damn thing looked like a cannon.

"It must weigh a ton." Tom said.

"Quite a piece of firearm isn't it?"

Tom couldn't answer. His mind was frozen, eyes entranced.

"Well, hell, boy," Burks laughed. "Don't just stand there with your tongue hanging out. What do you think of your great-granddaddy's pistol?"

Tom couldn't think of a word to describe it. Nothing in his brief experience seemed big enough. He whispered, "awesome." It was a word he'd learned in a recent vocabulary test.

Burks threw his head back and roared, laughing so hard he began to cough. The sheriff wiped tears from his eyes and pointed at his grandson. "Awesome it is, Tom. Right you are, by God."

Burks gazed at the gun and Tom thought he saw love in his grandpa's eyes. "If you'd heard it fired, you'd damn well know it's awesome. That's a forty-four caliber Walker Dragoon son ... a 1847 Model horse pistol. That's still the most powerful handgun around."

The sheriff continued to stare at the weapon finally reaching down to run a finger over the barrel. "I saw your great-granddaddy kill a man with that gun. Eighteen-eighty-seven, I believe. On a warm summer's day. I was almost seven and I'll never forget the sound. My daddy, your great-grandpa, took me with him on the range that day. The cattle were calving and your great-grandma helped out with the births. Your Aunt Iona tagged along with her. My two brothers worked different sections that day. That left nobody to look after the baby." The sheriff pointed to his chest. "Me." Burks picked up the note and folded it in half.

Tom watched his grandpa, his eyes big. "Ain't you gonna tell me about great-grandpa and how he come to kill that man?"

The sheriff shook his head. "All you need know is he killed a rustler and got himself shot in the process. You remember this. Comes a time you pull a gun on a man make sure you don't hesitate. You shoot to kill." He tapped his sternum. "Right here ... no fancy stuff. You understand me boy?"

Tom nodded. "Yessir."

Burks pulled the drawer a little farther out. Another compartment took up the back half of the drawer. He reached behind the partition and pulled out a stack of papers bound with a rubber

band. The sheriff added the note and replaced the band. After he closed the drawer he gave Tom a sharp look.

"There's two things in this drawer son. You and me are the only ones know what they are and we'll keep it that way. You understand me?"

Tom saw his grandpa's eyes go flat and empty.

What could I have done to make grandpa mad? I don't know, but now would be a good time to use the toilet.

Tom nodded mumbled another, "yessir," and ran across the room.

Burks watched Tom disappear into the janitor's closet. The boy's eyes ... I saw fear. I shouldn't have let him see what's in that drawer. He shook his head. No. That can't be it. Couldn't be. I got too hard about what's in there. The notes and pistol. They ain't that important. Leastwise the notes ain't. Not worth scaring the boy. Best go soft, but Tom has to learn about his family and time is running short. Couple more years and he'll be coming on to manhood. He'll need to know it all. He'll need to be ready.

Burks reached for the bourbon bottle and tucked it away in the bottom drawer of the desk.

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[The Man from Monmouth County](#)

**Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma
1943**

Henry Stoner bustled into the sheriff's office wiping his brow.

Burks glanced over the top of the Hyde's Corner Journal and nodded. The sheriff appeared cool and immaculate in his snow white shirt and black vest. His hair and beard were carefully combed, eyebrows and nose hairs trimmed to perfection. The scent of Aqua Velva hung in the still, warm air of the room.

Stoner fanned his face with a handkerchief. "Been down to see Selkirk have you?"

Burks shook the newspaper straight. Halved it and dropped it on the desktop. His hard eyes fastened on Stoner. "That all you got on your calendar today, Stoner, my tonsorial habits?"

The county prosecutor settled into a ladder-back near the desk. "We've got wounded boys coming home to roost. The judge and I thought it might be good to have a welcoming ceremony. You got any ideas?"

"You're just full of questions today ain't you, Hank?" Burks said.

"Wouldn't have so many questions if I could get some answers." Stoner said and grinned.

"Touché, Mr. Prosecutor. Care to tell me how many we're expecting."

"Judge figures three from Sundowner County. The Pickett boy we know for sure. There's the Bowdery boy. He's from over Beaver County way, but he worked for Porter before joining up. Maybe we should count him a Sundowner County boy. What do you think?"

Burks settled back and put his feet up. "Hell, that's only four by my count. Why don't we shake their hands for now and put something together at the Harvest Roundup shindig."

Stoner slapped the desktop and stood. "That's mighty fine I'd say. Give us time to do something proper."

Stoner headed for the door, but paused in the doorway. He pointed a knotty finger at his temple. "Good thinking, Selmer."

The returning Sundowner County men sustained minor wounds compared to their compatriot, Richard Bowdery, who lost both legs in the war. Bowdery worked part-time as cattle handler before the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. Monday morning, as President Roosevelt asked for a declaration of war, Bowdery lined up to join the Marine Corps.

Homer Porter rehired Bowdery the minute his wheelchair hit the ground. The dairy farmer added to the surprise by making the young man a full-time employee. The people of Sundowner County were proud and delighted, but most couldn't figure what Richard might do on a dairy farm. When Bowdery appeared in Hyde's Corner and announced Porter had appointed him the dairy farm's good-will ambassador it surprised everyone.

For the remainder of the summer, he rolled up and down the sidewalks of Hyde's Corner regaling the youngsters with exciting war stories. When the children returned to school, he spent his days with the townsfolk, extolling the virtues of Porter Dairy Farms and their products.

Bowdery carried extra ration coupons in a pouch strapped to his belt. Everything worthwhile: butter, meat, poultry, cheese, chocolate, gasoline and tires for the family car couldn't be purchased without a ration coupon.

Bowdery made these coupons available to the elderly and less fortunate. He passed the hard-to-get books out free of charge and asked only a question or two in return. His interests revolved around the comings and goings of Sheriff Selmer Burks. If the recipient of a coupon book offered gossip, "Wheelchair Richard" as he became known, had all the time in the world to listen.

The sheriff and Tom heard about Mr. Bowdery's largesse. Burks had no doubts about the legless man's motives. Tom on the other hand didn't put two and two together until he overheard a whispered conversation at school ... and that's when he got mad.

It seemed a boy could earn a quarter or fifty-cent piece for gossip about the sheriff. Stories about drinking. Tall tales about the Prairie Schooner Library and Reading Room or Hula Hut Fellowship Hall were encouraged and paid a premium.

At supper one evening, Tom told his grandpa how dumb and innocent he felt. "I don't know how I had feelings of sympathy for the Porters. I forgot how they treated you at Mrs. Porter's burying."

Burks reached across the table and patted his hand. "That's near to four years in the past son. A young man your age? It ain't hard to understand your anger."

The next day Burks noticed a change in his grandson. Tom came to the office with a scowl on his face. He worked in silence except for a murmur under his breath now and again. Tom

normally jabbered to the sheriff's distraction or whistled and hummed while doing his chores. Burks didn't comment, but the following day Tom worked in silence again.

At supper that evening, Burks watched Tom soak up a puddle of gravy with a thick slice of bread. "I think it's about time you got straight with me, boy," he said.

Tom looked up and dropped the bread on his plate. "I feel like a fool, Grandpa. Here I been feeling sorry for Junior and the rest and all the while they're damning our name. The Porters is a bunch a sneaks. They don't have the courage to talk face to face. They're nothing but come-lately rich folks." Tom banged his glass of milk on the table.

Burks set his plate aside and eyed the apple pie on the sideboard. He got up to cut a piece. "I told you, son, there's no reason for you to feel ashamed. Best dab up that milk."

"It's a bother at school, Grandpa and I can't stand it no longer. I've been thinking on it. I can't fight Junior and Byron together without getting whipped. So I'll go after Albert. Him and me are the same age. If his brothers try to butt in Well. The whole town will know them as cowards. I'm gonna make them pay for their shenanigans."

Burks forked a piece of apple pie in his mouth and chewed his eyes thoughtful. "Well, Tom, I think it's a damn shame about those two young men, Junior and Byron." He swallowed and blinked. "Ummm. That's mighty tasty pie." He dabbed at his mustache. "Where was I? Oh. Junior and Byron. Those young men are going to turn out just as bitter and mean mouthed as their daddy. I think you're right not to take on those boys, but"

Tom dropped his fork in surprise, it set up a clatter on his plate. "But what Grandpa? Albert's my age, fact is, he's four months older than me. They butt in and the Porter's lose every bit of respect around here." Tom banged the table.

Burks sipped his coffee. "You're right about that part, but before you go looking for trouble hear this. Albert Porter is something else all together. He's got a different clock ticking inside him. Watch out for Albert, son. He's the odd polecat in the litter. He's the one with no stripe. He'll be the most aggressive. He'll be the meanest of the bunch and he'll fight to win at any cost. Remember what I tell you, boy."

With the dishes stacked in the drainer, Tom claimed the need to study for an English test. At his small desk, he could hear Burks pacing in the front bedroom. The footsteps sounded strange for evenings at home with his grandpa were scarce. On the rare occasions when Burks was home, he and Tom usually sat in the parlor. They listened to their favorite radio shows and at times discussed topics of the day. The sheriff and his grandson enjoyed each other's company.

Tom stared into space, his mind a jumble of questions unanswered and desires unfulfilled. He hated giving up precious time with his grandpa, but he needed the thinking time. He flopped on the bed and set to work on it. Lying on the goose down comforter, he studied the grain patterns of the tongue and groove ceiling. His grandpa had always been a hero in his mind. A fearless lawman with fists of iron. Tom had no doubt Selmer Burks was a deadly pistolero, too. He thought of his grandpa as honest and fair-minded in all disputes. He saw him enforcing the law in an evenhanded manner. Even the valiant men of the "Penny Dreadfuls" were no equal to Sheriff Selmer Burks.

Why does he need the bourbon whiskey? Tom couldn't figure that part. The previous night came to mind. Sara had cooked supper and helped him with homework. While waiting for the sheriff to come home, Tom blurted out his fears and frustrations. Sara stroked the back of his

neck. Most times all he could think about and feel were her cool fingers. On hearing Tom's complaints Sara made some scary observations. At first, Tom thought she must be exaggerating, but he wondered ... could she be right after all?

"Your grandpa has a demon," Sara said. "I can see by the look on your face you're bewildered. I had a hard time understanding myself. My Daddy has the same affliction."

"You mean Uncle Sid carries on with whiskey, too?" As soon as the words came out of his mouth, Tom felt young and foolish.

He remembered her smile. How does she read my mind and know how I feel? "Don't feel bad Tom," She'd said. "It took me a long time to understand. Right now you're too young. You can't know about men who embrace their devils. Selmer uses bourbon to calm his down. Daddy takes bourbon and tries to drown his out. I think Selmer accepted his demon. I think he believes it will help him achieve what his goodness can't attain. Daddy said your grandpa embraced his demon a long time ago. The thing was born from a terrible hate for the Hyde family. Daddy thinks your grandpa's living with "The One," the Satan that creates pure evil in the world."

Tom remembered how Sara laughed and cupped his chin in her hand. "Don't look so scared. Daddy talks nonsense most times. People can hate without being evil. Evil only wins if you permit it. It's not an easy thing to understand. Your grandpa is a remarkable man. Something horrible happened to him. It might've seemed like the end of the world for him. For some folks hate is all that keeps them alive. Daddy says it had to do with your grandpa's family and the Hyde's. Whatever happened, the whispers of hate were too insistent ... too loud. Daddy says until you came along, your grandpa had nothing but killing on his mind. Let's just stay faithful and love him and everything will be fine."

Tom visualized the look on Sara's face. She seemed so wise and grown up. She made him feel younger than his fourteen years. He wondered that night like so many nights before why Sara didn't have a steady boyfriend. He felt a strange happiness that she didn't. When Sara dominated his dreams the results sometimes proved embarrassing, but amazing.

"Let's just stay faithful and love him." Sara's words of love and faithfulness hovered in his mind remaining a tiny cloud of confusion. Yet Sara's use of words like devil, demon and Satan bothered Tom even more. He couldn't believe his grandpa carried Satan himself in his soul. The sheriff could be stern, but not evil. Tom always felt his love.

As much as I admire and think of her, Sara's got to be wrong.

After enough thought to produce a headache he decided to dismiss her ideas.

Several weeks later on a hot September morning the sheriff ordered Tom to stay home. "You finish the first half of that history report. You took on the chore. You get her done before school starts. The jail can wait."

The summer of 1943 had run away to the past. The new school term rumbled out of the future like a flash flood through an arroyo. At the end of the previous year Tom accepted an extra credit project. He'd made plans to go fishing with friends after chores, but the commitment to a school project came first. He couldn't argue grandpa's point. Tom buckled down and went to work.

By late morning, he'd finished the first half of the task. He gave himself until noon and finished part of the second half for good measure. The delay put him behind in his chores, but he

blamed his own laziness for lack of a wet fishing line. If he had completed the school assignment early in the summer, he would've been line trolling the Little Santa Fe with his friends.

Tom labored away, sweeping out the jail and office. Late summer always proved the hottest time of the year and Tom worked in his undershirt. The frayed cotton clung to him, soaked through. It itched where it stuck to his back and chest. He finished mopping the cells and walked out of the cellblock wiping his sweaty face with a dust rag.

The sheriff shrugged into his long coat. "I'm going to take a turn around town. I'll be about an hour or so."

Tom eyed his grandpa. "It's a bit on the warm side don't you think? You sure you need the long coat?"

Burks frowned and waved a thick finger. "Man in authority's got to dress with authority. I thought I taught you better boy. You remember what I told you? No man deserves respect? It's a gift got to be earned? One of the ways you earn your gift is to dress in a manner that commands respect. Missed that lesson did you?"

"No sir," Tom smiled and nodded agreement. "I remember all right. I just figured you'd earn more respect if you didn't give folks a whiff of that manly sweat of yours. You do get a bit ripe, Grandpa."

Burks stared at Tom for a moment. "So I get a bit ripe do I? He laughed. "Lord. Laura Lee what have you done to me? Well Thomas you could be right. I guess I'll have to try some of that new no-smell stuff. Clyde's been after me to buy some for a month a Sundays. You suppose Mr. Lewis is trying to tell me something?"

The sheriff paused in the doorway, his forehead crinkled up. "You finish your chores. I get back we'll spend time in the basement and see who gets ripe."

The basement sounded just fine in this weather. Tom nodded and went on with his work. Half-hour later he swept the last of the daily detritus into a pile by the street door. Broom in hand he made ready to give Cedric Street back its dirt and grit. He opened the door and a movement caught the corner of his eye ... he glanced up. Burks rounded the corner leading a tall, thin man by the arm.

Tom had a flash of unease. The sheriff's prisoner looked like a railroad hobo. He cringed inside hoping the man wasn't drunk. He just finished the mopping. Damned if he'd tolerate a liquored up bum puking on his clean cellblock floor.

The two men stepped off the curb and started to cross the street. Tom saw the sheriff wave him away from the doorway. He started to move when he saw the hobo say something. Burks nodded and stopped while the man went to one knee and began to fiddle with his shoelace.

The sheriff glanced away from his prisoner and Tom stepped out on the sidewalk, opening the door against the building wall. Burks waved and Tom relaxed. The hobo wasn't going to be a problem.

In the next instant the hot, lazy summer afternoon exploded into violence. The hobo seized on the sheriff's inattention and reached under his pant leg. Standing quickly, the prisoner took a step toward the sheriff. Tom saw something in the hobo's fist flash in the waning sunlight. The man had a knife.

Burks, caught off guard, stepped back. The hobo followed, his knife hand disappearing in the opening of the sheriff's coat. The next few seconds happened in that special time reserved for horrible acts and horrific actions. The big hand of Selmer Burks clamped on the hobo's wrist. Tom could almost hear the sound of bones popping.

The sheriff pushed, moving forward as he did. The hobo backed up, his eyes expanding and blowing up big and round. Burks bent as he moved, twisting the man's arm in an upward movement. The man tried to follow by bending forward, but couldn't keep up. The snap of bone cracked loud in the quiet heat of the afternoon. The hobo screamed. His cry like a cat with its tail in a slamming door.

Tom watched his grandpa lean to the right, holding the hobo's wrist in a fierce grip. Burks went into a crouch, curling his free hand into a fist. He drove up and into the man. From his stooped position the power of his legs and body moved behind his huge fist. Eleven square inches of broken knuckles and callused sinew landed under the hobo's chin with crushing power. The wet squelch of pulverized flesh and bone echoed off the storefronts. The sound reminded Tom of the time he and his friends dropped a watermelon off the courthouse roof.

The force of the blow raised the hobo off his feet. Burks let go and Tom watched big eyed as the man's head snapped back and his body flew in a low arc toward the gutter. He landed hard and slid toward the curbing. The top of the hobo's head slammed into the curb, his body weight forcing his neck to twist down and to the side. The ugly angle of the man's head made Tom think the hobo's neck must have broken. His stomach churned and he almost lost his lunch.

A knife came skittering into the curb, stopping at Tom's feet. It was a knife you would see in a fancy store window. The kind he pined for, but couldn't afford. Going on fifteen and earning a dollar a week didn't leave him much room for savings. The knife handle, fashioned of bone had a paper-thin six-inch blade. It would make the skinning and filleting of fish and game a snap.

Smears of blood covered the handle and blade. One of the sheriff's lectures came to mind and Tom knew he shouldn't pick it up. The raggedy hobo had stuck his grandpa. That the sheriff might be wounded by a railroad bum was too crazy to get his head around. Tom stared at the knife in disbelief.

An excited voice yelled, "You're bleeding pretty good, Sheriff. I'll get the doc."

Tom glanced again at the body. The man lay in a loose heap like a pile of shabby clothes attached to a pair of worn shoes. The sheriff brushed by holding his side and the knife lost its attraction. Tom's stomach turned over again and he ran to the janitor's closet for a mop pail. A few minutes later, Doc Beaman hurried into the office.

Burks sat behind the desk taking a long pull on the bourbon bottle. Tom sat on a stool in the corner holding the mop pail between his knees. His lunch had already come up and now the dry heaves had him. Beaman gave the boy a withering look and marched to the sheriff's desk. He snatched the whiskey bottle out of the sheriff's hand and banged it on the desktop.

"All right, Selmer," Doc Beaman said. "Everything off above the waistband. Let's have a look at that dead man's work."

Burks snarled something at the doctor, but Tom could only pay attention to his own discomfort. The sheriff pushed up and stripped away his coat, vest and shirt. Doc Beaman leaned in to examine the wound. He poked a little here and jabbed a little there. Tom saw his grandpa turn white and heard his teeth grinding across the room.

"Looks to me like that hobo went for a heart stab. Right through your rib cage, by God."

Beaman laughed. "That hobo had nothing but bad luck. The blade hit the clasp on your suspenders, dammed if that didn't turn his thrust away."

The doctor nodded, smiled, and motioned the sheriff back in his chair. "You're lucky, not many know how to kill a man that-a-way. This one must've had some practice."

Beaman chattered away as he cleaned and patched the wound. While he worked, Burks picked up the phone and dialed Noble Olsen. Beaman tore a piece of tape with his teeth. "Tell him not to do anything until I perform the autopsy."

Burks passed on the doctor's message and hung up.

Tom got up and poured his lunch in the toilet. By the time he rinsed the mop bucket with bleach water the smell of vomit cleared the room.

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The Demon is Loosed

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma

1943

Burks remained silent as he dressed. He locked his desk and left the office. He deserted Tom with his sickly stomach and Doc Beaman packing his medicine bag. The sheriff's ears roared with the sound of blood pounding through his arteries. The pain in his side throbbed with every thump of his heart against his ribcage. Each pulse sent a wave of joy through his being. He had to get away. Calm down and get his control back. The madness bubbled right behind his eyes and it screamed at him ... act.

In the past, after giving vent to his temper, he could sip a little bourbon and sleep. Giving a man a good beating gave him pleasure. Obliging a man with a killing he begged for brought ecstasy, but not this time. This time the killing scared him. The man he arrested looked like Leslie Hyde. Burks took his hated enemy into custody and Hyde stabbed him. With pleasure beyond description, he killed Leslie Hyde. This time he couldn't be stopped. This time he killed the bastard with his own hands, but in the darkness someone shouted, "You're bleeding pretty good sheriff. I'll get the doc."

Burks remembered seeing the pile of rags in the street then. He saw the broken body for what it really was ... a railroad bum. Leslie Hyde had disappeared as if Burks had lived a dream. He rushed to the office. To his desk. To his bottle of sour mash bourbon whiskey.

He steered the county wagon around the parking lot to the back of the roadhouse. The Prairie Schooner looked busier than normal for a weekday evening. The wound in his side gnawed away at him and his feelings of elation and joy dissolved in the pain. Burks caught Germaine Saint Jardine's eye as he stepped into the kitchen. She hurried across the room and grabbed his arm smiling up at him. "Selmer, honey, you look like shit."

Burks loved Germaine and her sister, Martha, almost as much as he did Millie. He covered her hand. "I'll be fine ... just fine. Take me to Millie and my bottle, will you sweetheart?"

Germaine reached up and pinched his beard. "I'll get you to the office and your bottle, but Millie's sick honey. She's got a terrible cold. Doc came this morning and gave her something. She's been asleep ever since."

In the office Germaine poured Burks a tumbler of bourbon. He settled behind the desk and allowed Germaine to fuss around, but drew the line when she tried to take off his boots. Pain set his teeth. "You're busy out there, darling. Tend to business. Later if you or Martha has time"

"Something bothering you, Selmer?" Hands on hips, Germaine looked him over. "You need a little sweet care, do you?"

The office door opened and Sara Tassel leaned into the room. "Germaine? Martha's looking for you. Go ahead, I'll keep the Sheriff occupied."

Burks saw a look pass between the women as Germaine brushed by Sara. "I expect you'll find something to talk about." She turned and smiled at Burks. "You watch this girl Selmer. She's a creature ... yes she is." Germaine's smile grew into a wide grin and she winked and closed the door. Sounds of a key engaging the lock hardly registered on Burks' consciousness.

Sara came around the desk, picked up the bourbon and topped off his glass. She capped the bottle and moved behind him. Burks felt the pressure of her hands on his shoulders and the warmth of her breath on his ear. "Let's get this old coat off. You look like you've been used up, tromped on and put out to trash."

"Don't start with me girl," he grumbled. "I'll be fine by myself." His hand shook as he brought the tumbler to his lips and he gulped like a man dying of thirst.

His eyes followed her movements as she hung his long coat in the wardrobe. Burks saw her frown at its weight. Saw her run her hands down the backside of the coat. Sara glanced over her shoulder. Her cheeks colored. Burks took another mouthful of whiskey and wondered if she would keep quiet about the hideout gun. His eyes strayed to her hips and breasts so clearly defined by the tight dress she wore.

She's a child, my best friend's daughter. He groaned and realized he might be beyond caring.

Sara turned Selmer to the side and placed her hands on the arms of the high-backed red leather chair. She leaned forward. "Remember how you saved me from that crazy Hyde bitch five years ago? Know what I thought about while she carried on about you? I wondered what it would be like to be naked in that steel cell ... waiting for you. I wondered what it would feel like to know you were coming for me."

Burks kept his head down not wanting to see what waited in her eyes. *She's talking silliness. She's Sid's daughter for God's sake.*

You want her, the darkness giggled. *You know damn well it's so ... you'll take her.*

He shook his head and took another pull on the tumbler. "Hush up Sara," his voice had turned husky. "You're talking nonsense."

"Don't think so," she whispered. "Five years is a long time. I never got to say a proper thank you. I've grown up since and I can't ... well, I can't just bake you a cake ... can I?"

His eyes moved of their own accord. He stared at the swell and curve of her olive skinned bosom. She smelled of soap and rain-barrel water. The movement of those full round mounds of flesh seemed to bid him welcome. Burks tried to concentrate on the tumbler of whiskey he held, he saw his hand trembling.

If he held no glass, could he resist the temptation to plunge his hands into her dress? Could he keep his fingers from the lacy undergarment restraining those magnificent breasts? Would he set them free and bring them to his hungry mouth? He couldn't be sure. Sara's voice brought him out of his stupor.

"Help me, Selmer." She said, releasing the buttons on his vest. Her quick fingers pulled at his belt and the buttons on the front of his pants. He watched, unable to move. She pushed his legs apart and kneeling on the floor, she wedged her body between his thighs. Sara looked up and held his eyes as she plunged her hand into the opening of his underwear. Her warm fingers groped for his penis. Blood raged through his veins, filling his ears. Her hands wrapped around him and he leaned forward dropping the tumbler of whiskey on the desk.

"Sara," Burks croaked. "Stop." But the voice coming from his throat sounded weak, even to him.

Sara didn't stop or did she look up again. He heard her muffled laugh; and then her warm, wet mouth swallowed his engorged member.

Dusk settled in and Tom started closing up. His nausea and flip-flops finally quit to be replaced with hunger pangs, his stomach snarling a warning. He made ready to lock the front door, key in hand, when Emmy Royster opened it and nearly bopped his forehead. Her face poked through the opening and she smiled when she saw him so close. "Hi, Tom," she said, her voice all soft and sweet sounding.

"Emmy? What in the world are you doing here?" He bounced the office key in his hand, hoping she would take a hint.

"Mama and daddy are talking to the judge upstairs. I said I'd wait outside. I kind a hoped you'd be here. Your grandpa saved me and Mama today. I suppose you know all about it, don't you?"

Tom shook his head. "I know next to nothing, I guess. Nobody tells me nothing around here." He grumbled the words sounding like his grandpa.

Emmy wet her lips. "I'll tell you, Tom." She spread her skirts and sat on the couch. "Mama wanted to go to the ladies apparel store. The one at the end of Rhoda? Mama was excited about a hat. This man came weaving around the corner. He stumbled and bumped up against the building and then he saw Mama and me: Well, howdy-do ladies, he says kind a sneerie like."

Emmy's face turned red and she looked over her shoulder as if her mama might be right behind her. Tom lost patience. "Well go on if you're gonna. Otherwise. I've got things to do."

Emmy whispered. "He reached in his pants pocket. Mama almost fainted. We didn't know what to expect. He came out with a crumpled pack of cigarettes." Emmy giggled. "He thumbed at the torn top of the pack and then shoved the dirty thing back in his pocket: Only two old bent up cigarettes left. You ladies ain't got a fresh pack a Lucky's on you, do you? I'm a vet you know. Could you maybe help me out a little?"

Emmy looked up at Tom with big eyes. "He scared Mama half to death. Me, too ... a little. Anyways. He moved away from the wall and came toward us." Emmy snapped her fingers. "Just like that your grandpa was there: Now, Emmy, what in the world's got you so scared? Hello, Mrs. Royster. Are you having a nice day? Who's this gentleman? Is he a friend of yours? Your grandpa says all nice and friendly like."

Emmy looked at Tom checking his attention. "The Sheriff stepped between Mama and me and that hobo: Good afternoon young man. What might your name be? Your grandpa said. The shabby trash mumbled something Mama and me couldn't hear. Your grandpa looked at me and said: Emmy? Why don't you take your Mama in the store there? I'm sure you'll find some ladies finery that'll catch your eye.

Tom? You listening? Your grandpa gave that stranger a look. I swear. He told him: I'll tell you what. Why don't you step over to that Chevy Coupe there and empty your pockets on the hood. Being the sheriff hereabouts, I've got to earn my keep now and again."

Emmy nodded and smiled.

Tom's stomach started to feel queasy again. He gave Emmy his impatient look. "Emmy I got to get home in case my grandpa needs me ... you done?"

Emmy pushed her lip out in a pout. "No I ain't, but if you're that persnickety I'll go on back to the judge's office."

Tom waved a hand in the air. "Okay. Okay. What else?"

Emmy pulled a smug face. "Your grandpa took that skinny man by the arm. The hobo went along and dumped his pockets just like your grandpa asked. He had a billfold, change and toothpicks and a comb and that dirty crumpled pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes. When the sheriff asked for a draft card, the man wouldn't show one: I'm just looking for work, he says. I heard there's a big dairy operation round here. I thought I might find some work that's all. Your grandpa nodded and pointed to the hobo's belongings: That's fine young man. Go ahead and load back up. We'll go on back to the courthouse. Maybe you'd best rest up before you leave us to seek better opportunities. That trash sure looked surprised when the sheriff said that, I'll tell you. Your grandpa walked that shabby stranger back along Rhoda and he sure walked a straighter step. I guess the company of Sheriff Burks sobered him up." Emmy giggled, covering her mouth.

The image of the tall, thin man strewn like a pile of rags in the street jumped into Tom's mind. "Yeah. Well. Thank you for the news. I guess that hobo won't be asking ladies for cigarettes no more. I guess he won't be sticking my grandpa in the belly no more, neither."

Tom wondered if the memory of the tall, skinny hobo would ever leave him in peace. He remembered Sara's revelations and conclusions and realized he might have seen his grandpa's demon that day. He witnessed a man's execution. There could be no little doubt about that.

The image he held of his grandpa had forever changed. Selmer Burks proved a brutal machine. He dealt mayhem and death quicker than the tap of a telegraph key. How could that much change on one hot, humid afternoon? Reality's hand smudged the hero's glitter, but more importantly, that same hand erased the innocence of Thomas Silas Burks.

He would have to think on things for some time. Something told him he'd lost a good deal of his childhood that day, life, death, trust. All those preconceived notions were looking for new definitions.

"Tom?" Emmy said. "Are you okay? You look a little green around the gills."

He looked at the young girl and shook his head.

The street door opened and Bill Royster took up the doorway. "There you are Emmy. Come on now, time to go home. I told you not to bother Tom when he's working. Sorry boy." Royster gave him a sour smile and stood aside for his daughter.

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Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1943

Two weeks of haggling produced nothing but frustration for the outraged of Hyde's Corner. As to a date of inquest for the man from Monmouth County, nothing was settled. District Judge Benjamin Franklin Hammersmith and County Prosecutor Henry Leonard Stoner could not reconcile their busy calendars. The continued quibbling between district court and the prosecutor's office increased the unrest of the constituency. Judge Hammersmith bent to the will of the voters and exercised the power of his office. He set a firm date of inquest.

In the interim rumors ran through Hyde's Corner as if dosed with Castor Oil. Wild and wooly stories made the rounds. Tales of a heroic veteran of the war stuck down by a drunken sheriff. Gossips described terrible wounds on the poor man's body.

Wheelchair Richard shocked townies with his comment. "I recognized the man right off," he said, face stiff with indignation. "The poor soul must a come here to see me. He saved my life in the Philippines. I'd a bled to death if he weren't Johnny-on-the-spot." Bowdery retold his story to anyone who would listen. This and other rumors drifted back to the sheriff's office.

Burks didn't mention the fingerprints taken during autopsy. No one knew of the special dispatches sent to the F.B.I. and War Department by Henry Stoner. The sheriff didn't talk about the telegraphed response that arrived three days later. Burks didn't share his information with anyone.

Tom couldn't help but listen to the rumors. He worried and watched the sheriff disappear into a bourbon bottle. In the afternoons, Burks made his rounds of the township. Returning around suppertime Tom listened to his grandpa's grumblings as he marked down friend and foe. No one seemed to suspected the dazed sheriff watched, listened and waited.

Fourteen days passed while Tom stewed in his own juices. He heard every wild story and complaint. Grisly tales of more murders found Tom's ears. "Selmer Burks is a monster," the most assertive citizens claimed. "He's killed prisoners and innocents alike," chinwags whispered. If a body believed what he heard around town, the slayings and bloody deeds went back years.

The two week period before the inquest passed as hell on earth for Tom. Most of the townspeople went out of their way to avoid the sheriff. Some were bold enough to treat him with open hostility. The fickle nature of the citizenry proved a revelation. Tom could cope with crazy stories and outright lies, but what he couldn't abide was the smell of whiskey in the office. It embarrassed him no end. Even on the sidewalk, he could smell the demon liquor on his grandpa's person.

In the office the sheriff sat at his desk like a statue. His dead eyes watched something Tom couldn't see. The boy's life had become flat miserable. Burks and his drinking wore his grandson right down to the ground.

Why isn't there a potion for boys my age? Some kind a magic drink I can use to deaden my loneliness. When Grandpa goes into that dark place, why do I have to be brave?

The thought of putting that question to the sheriff never crossed Tom's mind. *There's a limit to bravery. Especially mine.*

The day before the inquest the judge learned the courtroom couldn't accommodate all those wanting to attend. Hammersmith commandeered the Hyde's Corner Theater. To Tom's dismay the sheriff made him take a bath the night before and it wasn't even close to Saturday.

School reopened for the fall term, but Burks thought Tom's attendance at the inquest much more important. "There'll be more to learn in the hour or so you spend at the hearing than you'll learn all day at school," he told Tom. Burks voiced the same opinion on a visit to the school principal's office.

The sheriff bathed as well that Monday night. To Tom's surprise, he remained free of bourbon for the whole day. At supper he passed on his usual two glasses of whiskey.

Tom took this as a good sign. *Maybe grandpa's back to stay.* He prayed he might be right.

Tuesday morning Tom couldn't believe his eyes, it was downright exciting. "I didn't know this many people lived in Sundowner County, Grandpa."

Burks and Tom walked through the lobby of the theater. The glut of people parted as if on cue. "There's more than a few in my county, Tom. Unless I miss my guess there's some stayed home. I don't see the Porters for instance, do you?" The sheriff's eyes darted here and there.

Tom looked for a Porter face before climbing the steps of the stage. A dais for the judge and county officials filled the small stage area. As they approached their seats Tom looked at the front rows. "I don't see them, Grandpa. How in the heck could the Porters miss this fandango?" Tom asked and looked at his grandpa with raised eyebrows.

The inquest moved along short and sweet. Mrs. Royster was called and sworn. Henry Stoner walked around the dais to the witness table and gave Mrs. Royster's hand a pat. "Try to relax Mrs. Royster. Can you tell Judge Hammersmith and this assemblage what transpired on Monday, August twenty-third, at approximately five-past-four in the afternoon?"

"A terrifying experience that's what transpired," Mrs. Royster said. "My daughter and I went shopping ... Lucille's Boston Notions on Rhoda Avenue? She ordered a hat I had some interest in."

"Just for clarification, Mrs. Royster. That's the last shop on Rhoda before you come to the depot and grain elevators, is that correct?" Stoner consulted his notes.

"Yes," she said.

"Please go on. I'm sorry for the interruption."

"Emmy and I were looking in the window when this dirty, smelly man came shuffling around the corner, drunk as a gooney bird. He staggered and fell into the building. When he saw us, I nearly fainted dead away. I would have if it weren't for Emmy. He leered at us and shoved his hand in his pocket in a most lewd way. He asked if we had any cigarettes. Can you imagine? It wasn't cigarettes he wanted and that's for sure." Her voice broke.

"Would you like a glass of water Mrs. Royster? Take a moment?"

"No thank you Mr. Stoner, I'm fine." She cleared her throat, patting her lips with a lace trimmed hanky.

"Good. What did the man do after he asked for the cigarettes?"

"Well as I said. He came toward us with that leering look on his face, but didn't get a chance to do anything. That's when Sheriff Burks stepped between us. That degenerate shriveled up like last year's pumpkin patch." Mrs. Royster smiled a quivering smile.

A ripple of laughter tumbled through the auditorium. She nodded and went on to describe the arrest. When she left the stand the gallery buzzed with the sound of soft voices.

Doctor Herman Beaman came to the stand. Stoner buttoned his coat and stood with a fisted hand at the small of his back. "You performed the autopsy on the deceased. Is that correct Doctor?"

"Yes, Mr. Stoner."

"Can you describe your findings for us please?"

"Yes, I can. The deceased sustained four separate injuries. I found a broken right Humerus and wrist. Multiple fractures of the Mandible and a broken neck. The neck injury was severe enough to partially sever the spinal cord which resulted in instantaneous death."

Stoner paused and shuffled a few papers. He slipped glasses on the end of his nose and peered at one of the pages. "Did you come to any conclusion regarding how the deceased came by his injuries?"

The doctor let out a long sigh. "I did. I found finger indentations along with bruising around the wrist and forearm. The indentations matched the fingers of Sheriff Burks. Witnesses at the scene stated he gripped the prisoner's wrist and twisted his arm. They further stated he hit the deceased with an uppercut. The blow was characterized as 'wicked,' I believe."

Stoner looked up from the paper he studied. "And, Doctor?"

"And, Mr. Stoner. I concluded these injuries sustained by the deceased were inflicted by the Sheriff of Sundowner County, Selmer Carson Burks." Beaman's fingers caressed a new Van Dyke beard he was working on.

A clamor of angry voices rumbled through the audience. Judge Hammersmith banged his gavel several times. "I'll have quiet during these proceedings or you'll get your information on a street corner." The judge looked sternly over his makeshift podium and then back at Stoner. "Continue please." He poured water from a pitcher into a glass and drank in down in a gulp.

"Do you have enough information at this time to give us an opinion as to the cause of death?" Stoner stood with pen poised ready to make another mark on his checklist.

"I do." The doctor said.

Stoner stared at Beaman. Beaman stared back. The prosecutor pulled his reading glasses off and threw them on the tabletop. The doctor smiled. "Would you be kind enough to give us your finding?" Stoner said grumbling the words through his teeth.

"I'd be delighted, Mr. Stoner. My autopsy will show the death of Michael Leo Rullon to be a homicide at the hands of Selmer Carson Burks, Sheriff of Sundowner County."

The audience erupted. Judge Hammersmith lumbered to his feet. Pointing his gavel at the spectators and roared, "Quiet ... that'll be my last warning, folks."

The strident voices of the spectators hushed and stilled. Several groups of people who jumped to their feet regained their seats. The judge settled back into his leather chair and nodded to the doctor. "Continue please."

"Thank you, Judge. A finding of homicide means a person died at the hands of another human being, nothing more and nothing less. In this case the Sheriff acted in self-defense. The deceased attempted murder on the person of the County Sheriff and Chief Law Enforcement Officer of the Township of Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma. In short my report will conclude this death

to be a homicide performed in defense of the life of Selmer Carson Burks." Beaman sat back and crossed his legs.

Judge Hammersmith looked at Stoner. The County Prosecutor studied a sheaf of papers. The judge nodded. "Thank you, Doctor. Is there anything further you'd like to add relevant to these proceedings?"

"Yes. I think a description of the wound sustained by the Sheriff should be entered into the record."

"Is there any objection from our esteemed County Prosecutor?" Judge Hammersmith leaned forward, elbows and hands supporting his massive double chin.

Stoner looked up. "No. No objection your Honor."

"Well. I guess we can continue. Doctor?" Hammersmith shook his head.

"The deceased managed to retrieve a skinning knife from a sheath strapped to his ankle. He attempted to stab Sheriff Burks in the side." The doctor pulled his jacket aside and indicated a point on his shirt halfway between his armpit and waist. "About here. The skinning knife has a six inch blade. Had his thrust been successful, the knife would have entered between the fifth and sixth rib. With no deflection there's a good chance the blade would've pierced the heart. We would've planted Selmer Burks last week instead of Mr. Rullon."

"Is that all you have, Doctor?" Hammersmith said.

"Yes, Judge."

"Mr. Stoner? Do you have another witness or are you too busy with other matters?"

"Sheriff Selmer Burks, please." Stoner peered at the Sheriff.

Tom watched Burks walk around the dais. The auditorium remained silent. The Sheriff raised his right hand and swore the oath.

Stoner pawed through his stack of papers. Finding the page he sought he looked up. "Sheriff Burks. You've heard the testimony given this morning. Do you concur with everything that's been testified to so far?"

"Everybody has a pretty good memory, I'd say." Burks turned a little and crossed his legs.

"Do you have anything to add to the previous testimony?"

"Yes, I do, Mr. Stoner. Doc Beaman took fingerprints from the body during autopsy. I gave the prints to you for dispatch to the F.B.I. and War Department in Washington, D.C. You gave me the results last Friday."

Stoner nodded on cue. "Yes. I did."

"Who's the witness here, Mr. Stoner you or the Sheriff?" Hammersmith said in a sarcastic tone.

"Sorry your Honor." Stoner gave a small bow in the judge's direction.

"Continue. One witness at a time please." Hammersmith admonished.

"Sheriff?" Stoner smiled.

Burks looked into the face of the audience. "Based on what you told me, Mr. Stoner, we can put certain rumors to rest. The man who tried to kill me, Michael Leo Rullon, was wanted by the F.B.I. for kidnapping and by Monmouth County, New Jersey prosecutors for murder. Seems a family: father, mother, two daughters, fifteen and thirteen, two boys aged, eight and six up and disappeared. The family was last seen in the company of Mr. Rullon at a gas stop."

Another rumble of voices rolled through the auditorium. This time the judge made no move to quiet the crowd. The sheriff cleared his throat. "The girls were found in Maryland, barely clinging to life. Their story's nasty and hard for folks like us to imagine. They were raped sodomized and forced to do; let's just say other things." Burks glared at the assemblage. "Over

and over I'm told. The young ladies claim Mr. Rullon killed the rest of their family. Due to their understandable hysteria the exact location of the bodies is unknown."

"Is that your testimony Mr. Burks?"

"No, Mr. Stoner. There's more information from the War Department"

"Fine. Can you elaborate please."

Burks nodded. "The War Department and the Department of the Army are interested in Mr. Rullon. It seems he disappeared from an Army facility in New Jersey, high-tailing it the day his regiment got orders for overseas duty."

"So. To sum up, Sheriff. Mr. Rullon is a suspect in a kidnap and rape and he's a deserter in time of war? Is that correct?" Stoner's voice boomed in the auditorium.

"Don't forget the killing of the New Jersey family, Mr. Stoner." Burks added.

"Yes. Of course. Mr. Rullon is also a murder suspect. Your Honor I believe we can excuse Sheriff Burks. We have no further witnesses at this time."

"Very well, Mr. Stoner. I see no need to postpone a decision. The evidence is clear. The Sheriff apprehended a dangerous criminal and received a serious wound in the process. As a result of the attack on Sheriff Burks, the criminal, Michael Rullon, sustained fatal injuries."

The sound of the judge's gavel echoed hollow in the auditorium. "The finding of this Court of Inquest is Justifiable Homicide in the performance of lawful duties. Said duties being prescribed and lawfully set forth by the State of Oklahoma and Sundowner County."

Hammersmith banged his gavel again for good measure.

Tom jumped out of his seat. Loud cheering filled the auditorium. A lot of hooting and clapping followed, but one voice shouted the others down. "Hold on. Hold on please. I've got something to say." A man from the back of the room walked down the aisle waving his arms. "Please. Please. Quiet down. Give me a chance."

The room grew silent. The sheriff and Tom stood on the platform ready to leave. The man crossed in front of the stage. He looked up at the Sheriff and Tom. "I don't know if you remember me, Sheriff. My name's Milton Pickett."

When Burks failed to answer, Pickett faced the crowd. "Most of you know me. My family's ranched here since nineteen and two. These last two weeks I've heard a lot of tales about our Sheriff. I'm sorry to say I believed them and passed them on."

Pickett glanced back at the Sheriff. "Today we've all learned a lesson, I hope." He faced Burks and nodded. "You protected our community and our wives and children from a vicious criminal. I want to apologize, Sheriff. I'd like to thank you for putting your life on the line for our community. God Bless you, Sheriff Burks." Pickett began to applaud.

A roar went up from the people in the auditorium. Judge Hammersmith, Henry Stoner and the rest of the township and county officials surrounded Burks and his grandson. Tom laughed with pleasure as embarrassment stained his cheeks.

Tom squeezed his way down the steps of the stage. No one paid him any mind. He slipped out the fire exit behind the big movie screen. The boy walked on air as he headed for school. As far as he could see, nothing but good times lay ahead. The Sheriff turned out a huge hero. Now if he could put Reba Porter to rest their lives would be sweet milk, fresh churned butter and hot homemade bread ... yum.

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19

The Hero and the Shadow

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1943

Richard Bowdery held the receiver away from his ear. "Yessir. It's hard to believe all right. Unless you were there, I'm here to tell you."

"You saw it?" Porter screamed. "You ain't been drinking have you?"

"No sir, no drinks today, and yessir, I saw it all."

A loud cheer reverberated in the hot afternoon air. Richard Bowdery twisted in his chair, pointing the receiver toward the crowd noise. "Did you hear that, Mr. Porter? There's been hooting and hollering ever since the inquest closed. He's a damn hero."

"Damn hero my ass. He's an oil company whore." Tom could hear Porter's screaming voice from where he stood.

Bowdery glanced over his shoulder a second time. "Mr. Porter ... I've got to tell you true. I'm good as done around Hyde's Corner."

He shook his head in what looked to Tom like disbelief. The volume of Porter's voice seemed to blow the receiver away from Bowdery's ear, the words unintelligible.

"Mr. Porter? You've got to calm down, sir. It ain't nobody's fault. It's the way the cards fell. Like my legs getting hosed by that Jap machine gun. We done real good until we threw in the stuff about me knowing the guy. Saying he saved my life and all? We should've checked the depth before we jumped in that muddy pond"

"I'm not interested in muddy ponds or Jap machines guns," Porter cut in. "Understood? You'd best think of another way. You've been to war. Figure it out." The intensity of Homer Porter's voice had dropped in pitch, but came through clear enough for Tom to overhear. Wheelchair Richard held the receiver away from his ear and hollered over the din, "Yessir."

"Don't back talk me," Porter screamed. "I didn't hire you to make excuses did I? I want results ... now."

"No sir, yessir." Bowdery drew a handkerchief from his vest pocket and mopped his forehead.

"If you're not at the Exchange, you'd best get your worthless ass over there. I'll have more to say to you at the farm."

The call ended with an audible click and Bowdery hung up the pay phone's receiver.

Tom Burks stood just inside the door of the Panhandle Grocery Company. He had overheard the entire phone conversation. He watched Bowdery take out his pocket watch, a gift from the

President, to hear Bowdery tell it. That's why he saved the Purple Heart tag attached to the chain, he claimed. Tom figured if it was him got his legs shot off, he sure wouldn't need a reminder they were gone. The boy couldn't imagine why Wheelchair Richard kept that little tag.

Bowdery swiveled left and pushed off down the sidewalk. Tom guessed the amputee would head for the Stockman and Growers Exchange Building. The Porter truck always picked up its main gossip gatherer at The Exchange. Tom leaned forward and craned his neck to watch Bowdery roll away.

He stepped out on the sidewalk. Sure enough, Bowdery pumped in the direction of downtown. "You're right, Mr. Bowdery." Tom stared after the departing wheelchair. "When I spread the word about you and your lies, you'll be done in Hyde's Corner."

Tom took off running in the opposite direction. What's a wheelchair bound man to do around a dairy farm? Kill grandpa's reputation that's what. He couldn't understand the mystery surrounding the Porter-Burks feud at all. What made Homer Porter hate Selmer Burks after so many years of friendship? A strange mystery that got stranger by the day.

Crazy at best. Thank the Lord he stopped at the grocery to check for this month's comic books. Now he had new information. Important information. Tom couldn't be sure how his grandpa would use it, but he knew it had to be damned important.

The citizens of Hyde's Corner needed to know about Bowdery. People had to know he was a vicious liar and cheat. They needed truth even though Bowdery might be a wounded war hero. People should know the man Bowdery worked for, too. A man who encouraged lies and cheating behavior. Porter's dirty underhanded deeds couldn't go unchallenged. It wouldn't be fair in Tom's book. He took a roundabout way to the office not wanting to catch up with Wheelchair Richard.

Tom cut through the alley between Lewis and Sykes Mercantile and Attorney Peelman's office. Down Cedric and across the street, he saw Bowdery sitting under the porte-cochère, the ornate covered portico, of Stockman and Growers Exchange. The amputee watched the sheriff chat with several men in front of the courthouse. As Tom stepped onto the sidewalk, the men shook hands with Burks and drifted away. The sheriff stared at Bowdery a moment, nodded and entered the office without a word.

Tom felt Bowdery's eyes follow him as he walked toward the sheriff's office. His thoughts were cooking like butter in a hot frying pan.

If you only knew, Mr. Bowdery. I darn near stood in your hip pocket you lying cheat. I know all about your lying ways and grandpa will know in two shakes.

The long coat hung on the coat tree. The black Stetson Burks favored for everyday lay on the corner of the desk. Tom saw his grandpa eyes focus on him over the rim of a coffee mug.

"Tom? You ain't changed out of your good clothes, son. Can't do chores dressed like that now can you?"

"I know, Grandpa. I went straight to school from the inquest. I figured to change before coming in, but I stopped at the grocery for a minute. I wanted to see if the new comic books came in. I overheard something and I thought I ought to get right over here and tell you." Tom's eyes sparkled. He had trouble keeping his feet still.

"Slow down ... slow down ... take a breath," Burks said, putting his cup on the desk. "Sit, tell me what this almighty important gossip is about."

Tom stood in front of the desk. He could smell bourbon from where he stood and felt a pang of disappointment. How could a hero sit around drinking whiskey? It just took the wonder and happiness right out of the day.

"Have a seat, son," Burks encouraged. "Get to it. Tell me what you heard." Burks indicated a ladder back chair.

Tom plopped down and adjusted the chair. "I started out for home from the grocery. When I come up on the doorway, I heard a nickel drop in the phone outside. Wheelchair Richard was out there and had his back to me. I thought I'd go about my business, but I heard him say: Let me speak to Mr. Porter, please. When I heard that I figured to go ahead and listen."

"Bowdery calling his boss?" Burks laughed. "That's not surprising figuring how the inquest turned out."

"Anyway, Grandpa. When he told Mr. Porter about that Monmouth County man and you being a hero ... Mr. Porter went crazy. Bowdery had to hold the phone away from his ear. I could hear every word Mr. Porter screamed at him. Mr. Porter put Bowdery up to telling lies. I heard him admit it and Bowdery went and did it. I heard it all, Grandpa."

Burks nodded and carried his mug to the hot plate for more coffee. "That's mighty interesting news indeed. Very interesting."

The sheriff's chair complained louder than usual as he resumed his seat. "Thank you, Tom. You're going to make an excellent deputy one day. You keep honing your powers of observation. They'll serve you well all your life. Now. Get on home and change. Be quick about it. Sooner you get your chores done, sooner we go eat. I'm looking forward to supper this day. Yessir, I surely am." His forehead wrinkled up in knots.

Tom didn't move. He stared at his grandpa feeling his face grow hot. Burks put his mug down and leaned forward making a knot of his big hands on the desktop. "What's the matter, boy? Something's bothering you. Time you got straight with me, I expect."

Tom felt his eyes filling up. Frustration gnawed at him. "I just don't understand, Grandpa. I've had my trouble with the Porter boys, but you always been friendly with Mr. Porter. Why'd he change? Why does he hate you so much?"

The boy watched the sheriff look up at the ceiling. The raw oiled planking sloped to the west. Open beams supported the roof. On the west wall a long, narrow window looked out on the eves. In late afternoon the window caught the sunset and gave the office a warm golden glow. Burks enjoyed that glow of an evening. He told Tom more than once how the soothing afternoon light brought him peace.

The sheriff's hard eyes locked on Tom. "Some of what I tell you won't make sense, but it will in time if you have patience. What you don't understand now will come later, okay?"

Tom nodded.

Burks took a sip of coffee. It had turned cold. "All right then. I read one time about a thing called transference. It's a big word, but its meaning is simple. Sad, nasty things happen to folks now and then. Sometimes the bad thing is the loss of a loved one. Accident. Sickness. Don't matter which. Some folks make the mistake of blaming themselves for the tragedy. They don't come out and say: it's all my fault, but deep inside they surely think that's the case. When the guilt gets bad enough someone or something has got to get blamed. Homer got sick and couldn't do his chores. Reba went out to get them done and ended up killed."

"But, Grandpa." Tom sat forward and gripped the edge of the desk. "Mr. Porter can't help getting the flu."

"We know that, Tom. It's plain as day. Homer? He can't get it right in his head. I haven't given him a name or reason for the accident so he blames me. The Sheriff of Sundowner County ain't doing his job, Homer tells himself. He takes all the self-hate he's got built up inside and transfers it to me."

Tom watched as Burks picked up the coffee mug, sipped, made a face and put it down. Tom grabbed the mug, washed it out, and returned with fresh coffee. He was still confused. Things wouldn't get straight in his mind. The sheriff blew on the fresh coffee and Tom pushed on.

"Mrs. Porter had an accident. No one set out to hurt her on purpose. Mr. Porter's been leaving you notes for a long time. He says his boys want revenge and he wants justice. I don't understand. Why is he leaving notes? Why is he asking for revenge and justice for an accident? Why is he including his boys if it's him hating you?"

Burks chuckled and scalded his tongue on the coffee. "No one ever accused you of being slow have they? There's more to it. You're right about that. Transference. The word came from a book I read on psychological concepts ... don't look at me like that ... I read a lot. You'd be surprised."

Tom looked more confused. "What are psycholo ...?"

Burks laughed. "There are a lot of different ones. Psy-cho-log-i-cal concepts. Most I don't give a hoot or holler about, they don't apply here in Hyde's Corner. There's one though that I've got to deal with ... me being the sheriff and all. It's the hardest thing I've got to tell you." Burks studied his hands, seemingly lost in thought.

Tom hung his head. "You don't need to say if you don't want, Grandpa. I know you don't thin ..."

"You don't know much of my mind, boy." Burks growled, cutting in. "You just hold off a minute." He reached for the bottom drawer and brought up his bourbon bottle. Tom's head dropped.

"No need shaking your head. I know what you think," Burks grumped. "This is the way it is." He poured a good measure in his coffee, capped the bourbon and drank.

Tom's face glowed pink. He hadn't realized he'd shook his head.

"All right then." Burks sighed. "Hell. You may know some of this, you're going on fifteen. I keep forgetting you're close to a man. You probably know about men and women. Husbands and wives. Hear me out anyhow. After marriage, men and women share a lot, including intimacy that some call plain ... sex. Well, thinking along them same lines, there are men who practice sex among their own kind." Burks dropped his eyes and shook his head.

Tom went from white-faced to bright red. He jumped up. His chair tipped, but dropped back on all four legs. "Grandpa? if you're funning me. No. This ain't funny a bit. Men don't do things with men ... Grandpa?" Tom's eyes puffed up wide like tiny balloons. "Grandpa? Did you catch Mr. Porter with a man? Does Mr. Porter have some kind of sickness?"

Burks walked to the front of the office carrying his precious coffee mug along. His boots made solid thumping sounds on the pegged plank floor. He bent and looked out on Cedric Street. "Well, well. Looks like old Wheelchair Richard ain't got himself picked up yet. You didn't hear Mr. Porter fire our war hero did you?"

Tom shook his head unaware his grandpa's attentions were elsewhere. "He didn't fire him. He hung up on him. Grandpa? Is Mr. Porter ...?"

"It ain't Mr. Porter I'm talking about." Burks said, his voice soft. He looked at Tom with eyes full of sadness. "It's about Clyde Lewis, Harry Sykes and Junior and Byron." He stared at Tom, his cup tilting, splashing coffee on the floor. Burks failed to notice. "There. I said it. The hardest words I've ever had to say. Damn near choked me to death just getting them out."

Tom stared back and the silence between them grew loud. Tom felt shock and surprise. A spasm of pain clutched his stomach. He trembled and dropped his head between his knees. Ice like fingers of sweat squiggled over his face and neck.

Tom heard the sound of the sheriff's boots crossing the room. A wave of nausea passed and he sat up. Burks hovered above him, resting on the edge of his desk. He looked like a huge bear standing on its hind legs. "Listen to me, Tom. You got to take what I just told you and put it away. You got to lock it up and never let on to Sykes or Lewis what you know about them."

Tom's mouth wouldn't work, but his eyes spoke volumes. His steely-eyed hero couldn't hold his gaze. Burks looked away. "I know what you're thinking, son. Right now there's nothing I can do. Lewis and Sykes are important to my plans. I'd like to punish them. I'd like to give them to Porter, but I need them right now. They dance to my tune and without them you and I might not have much of a future. It's that simple, boy."

Tom felt dirty as if dropped head first into a pig sty. Anger gripped his throat turning his face crimson. He stared at this man he thought he knew and wondered where his hero had gone.

"What about Junior and Byron? They did things to Junior and Byron and you're holding back because of money?" Tom's voice shook with rage. A new wave of nausea swept through him. He squeezed his eyes in concentration. More than anything he wanted to keep the content of his stomach in its present location. Tom jumped when the sheriff's callused palm cupped his chin.

"Listen to me, son, there's things I can't explain right now. Besides, I've warned Clyde and Harry. Warned them proper. What they did won't be repeated. Right now it's best you trust me. This ain't just about money. You know damn well I've never lied to you. If it makes you feel better, I've read there are some who drift toward that sort of life at an early age. Junior and Byron could have those proclivities."

Tom stared at his grandpa. Could he trust him? He couldn't recall a time when he felt lied too. The sheriff held his eyes. What he saw drained away the rage. He searched for something to say. "What's ... w-what's proclivities ...?"

Burks moved around the desk and sat. He scribbled on a piece of paper. "Proclivities," he said. "I spelled it for you. Look it up when you get home. Now scoot. Go change and get back here. Your chores are waiting."

Tom left the office feeling numb. Like a gutted fish must feel. Was the sheriff corrupted like the preacher said of Cain? Tom's image of his grandpa as the hard, but honest hero disappeared from his mind. In its place, he imagined a dark, shadow-like figure. He had no desire to cast a light on that murky apparition. He feared he might see what he saw in his nightmare. He feared he might see what corruption really looked like.

Richard Bowdery remained under the porte-cochère of the Stockman and Growers Exchange. The man waved and Tom stared.

There's real corruption.

Tom amended the damnation of his grandpa. Bowdery had sold his soul and proved up a liar, a sneak and backstabber. At least his grandpa didn't take money to ruin people and their reputations.

Tom remembered the Monmouth County man. Not long ago on the very spot where he stood, Tom witnessed the violence hiding inside his grandpa. He watched the man he thought of as gentle and loving tear another man apart. He watched him kill with his bare hands. No remorse. No hesitation.

Tom looked back at the sheriff's office. He had no doubt his grandpa would continue to protect the storekeepers. They did things. Sex things. With Junior and Byron. No one explained the right or wrong of sex to him. If Mr. Lewis and Mr. Sykes had to be protected didn't that mean they did something wrong?

The sheriff gave Tom a glimpse of the back of his face. He peeled away a layer of his public mask. Tom wondered how many more layers remained hidden. He wondered if these revelations might be a lesson. A way to show him the grit of life. Expose the unpleasant parts. The sins. Unfairness. The ironies. Was this a test? Should he consider his grandpa's dealings as hard choices to be made? He had a lot to think on. For the time being he decided to trust along with his grandpa. The man who took care of him, loved him and protected him. Tom kept his head down and ignored the man with no legs. He hurried toward home.

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One Man's Death - One Man's Birth

**Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma
1943**

Over the next two weeks Tom saw little of his grandpa. He found notes at home and at the office. Instructions on do's, don'ts and chores. Weekdays Sara cooked Tom's dinner and helped him with homework.

Late, usually well after midnight, he would hear Burks return home. Tom could tell by the muffled sounds his grandpa made he carried a gut full of whiskey. Sober the sheriff moved with the barest whisper of sound. Later, loud raucous snores would confirm his conclusions. Grandpa, for reasons Tom couldn't imagine, had crawled back into that whiskey place. His fingers trembled as he wiped at his dry lips ... a worry worm had taken on a squirmy life in his head.

He worried about the strange behavior he'd witnessed. At times his grandpa appeared to talk to people who weren't there; was he going crazy? Tom thought of the whispered meetings he'd caught a glimpse of now and then. He thought of Lewis and Sykes and worried about how he could face them. Behind every worry whiskey lurked and he worried about the whiskey.

He stood on the porch and watched a cool rain pound the dirt roadway into mud. Worry wouldn't stop his grandpa's drinking. It wouldn't shine a light on whatever dark moods he fought. It wouldn't help with the storekeepers or the meetings or the ghosts his grandpa talked to now and again. He came to the realization worry would cure nothing.

The following morning, Tom stood at the parlor window worrying about the day's weather. At that point he realized worry dominated his life. Hyde's Corner people didn't waste time worrying over weather. Always a fickle mistress in Panhandle country, it could be blazing hot one day and snowing the next. Well, pretty near most would say.

The term hot didn't do justice to September thirtieth. The office chores were long done and the daily workout complete. Tom scrubbed his upper body, face and neck and dressed for business. The sheriff had purchased a new full-length mirror and it hung on the back of the closet door. Tom turned this way and that admiring his reflection in his new Big Hefty dungarees.

"Morning, Tom. Sheriff around?"

Tom slammed the closet door, embarrassed. The full-length mirror swung side-to-side and clunked and banged against the back of the door. Tom's face turned a deeper red. "Morning, Uncle Sid. No. He'd already left by the time I got in. I don't know his whereabouts for sure. Is there something I can help you with maybe?"

Sid raised his eyebrows. "Okay. Tell him the Porters are in town. If you see him pass it along will you?" Tassel turned to leave.

"Uncle Sid? Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Tommy. What is it?" Tassel had his hand on the doorknob.

"I'm kind a worried. Have you seen Grandpa lately? Talked to him maybe?"

"I haven't seen him. I'm sort a steering clear of him right now. I heard he taught manners to a couple of wildcatters out at the Schooner a night or two ago. Most folks are stepping lightly around him, I can tell you that much." Tassel turned to go.

"Why, Uncle Sid? I don't understand. What gets into him? Hell. He practically got crowned king back at the inquest."

Tassel opened the door a crack. "Listen, kiddo. I've known your grandpa since we were kids in school. I grew up with him. We're as close as two men can be. He's my best friend. He can be a good friend for the most part, but there's another part of him ... I've learned you don't want to be around when that other part's got a hold of him."

"I don't get it, Uncle Sid. Why does he want to be mean and nasty on purpose?"

"I doubt I can answer to that, boy. I can't even tell you when it started, but it didn't come on overnight. He's got something broken inside and its turned mean. Just remember when it takes him over it's best to stay clear. Sometimes I think hurting and meanness gives him a freedom-like feeling. I reckon I've said enough. Got to go. Say hello to Sara for me. Since she took her place in town, I don't see her much. Don't forget about the Porters, okay?"

"Uncle Sid ... hold up a minute."

Tassel held up his hand. "I can't tell you no more. What's in your grandpa goes back a long way. Long before I knew him. I know a few things, but it's best you get your information from the horse's mouth. I know this much. When your grandpa thinks it's time, he'll tell you what you need to know." Tassel waved and closed the door.

Tom plopped down in his grandpa's chair and stared at the bottom drawer on the right side of the big desk. He wondered about the Dragoon pistol and its story. Is that where the hate began?

Tom manned the office all day with no break for lunch. A few folks dropped by with simple questions. He answered most, but a few he told to come back. He thought about locking up and getting something to eat. His stomach munched on his backbone, but he didn't want to miss his grandpa. Tom wanted a talk and he would have one.

Quarter past four in the afternoon he dozed, feet propped on the desk. A shout startled him awake. The first sign of excitement all day pulled Tom off the chair and out the door. Down Cedric Street in front of Lewis and Sykes Mercantile, Tom saw Homer Porter, Senior and Junior.

They stood at the curb facing the Hula Hut Fellowship Hall. Junior said something to his daddy. Homer, Senior shouted again.

Burks remembered when the Prairie Schooner, Millie and his bottle acted as a refuge. That all changed the day he killed Leo Rullon, the Monmouth County man. He gave in to his weakness that day. He gave in to his insane passion for Sara Tassel. The Schooner no longer felt like a sanctuary he could use at his pleasure. Isolation overwhelmed him and this brought on rage-filled depression. Feelings of loneliness increased with each waking moment. Burks left the house at four-thirty that morning, escaping the demons that plagued his sleep. He'd sulked around the office, washing down aspirin with coffee. His stomach roiled with fire, but he had to move. He didn't want to face Tom's accusing eyes.

Burks spent most of the morning touring the county's boundaries. He waved when necessary. A rancher herding cows, a farmer plowing close to the road. He made no stops to jaw. Approaching the township again it occurred to him Hal might be working in the barroom alone. He checked his timepiece: 10:25 a.m. The bottle he'd brought along held one more good swallow. The morning had turned hotter than any hell he could imagine. He needed to get out of the station wagon and find a dark, cool place to settle for a time. Maybe he and Hal could have some time alone. If so, he could ask Hal for advice ... maybe ... if Nat wasn't around.

He was out of luck at the Hula Hut, he spotted Natalie working the kitchen already. Owens gave him a look when he waved away his bottle and turned to leave. Hal didn't understand and the sheriff couldn't tell him, not with Nat around. The pull of the Schooner yanked strong on him, but he knew what would happen. He would see Sara and he would commit a sin for which there was no forgiveness ... again. As each day passed, his feelings of isolation increased. How could he make this right? He drank until the voices came. When the voices spoke, the rational voice and the dark voice, his terrible isolation let him be for a while.

This morning plagued him more than most. Futility's teeth chawed at his gut like a stomach cancer from the time he opened his eyes. The voices mocked him. Burks didn't know how to deal with his burden of guilt. He knew righteous rage. It cleansed and brought peace of mind, but with this, he felt only shame. He recognized the emotion because he experienced it once before in his life. A deep shame he felt at the disappearance of his father and sister ... his fault.

That shame carved a hole in his humanity. A cavity yawning so deep and wide it couldn't be filled. He vowed he would pursue those responsible for his family's death and he honored that vow. At his hands, the Hydes paid the ultimate price. He knew relief, but the feeling left him much too soon.

Now, in the twilight of his life, he shamed his name again. He couldn't set foot in the Schooner without seeing Sara or she seeing him. They were like magnets of opposing poles and couldn't come together fast enough ... couldn't climb the stairs quick enough.

This sin with Sara is your fault alone, the rational voice said. You got to put a stop to it.

But, with the closing of Sara's door magical things happened. Their clothes disappeared as if cast off by a wizard's spell. Sara appeared between his legs. Beneath him. Astride him. In front of him. Beside him. The day and night vanished like a bullet from the barrel of a gun. With each dawn he revisited the shame of his actions.

A headache thrummed behind his eyes. Burks forced his thoughts to the problem at hand, namely, Tom.

What can I do about the boy? He has no care for our family. No care for Sundowner County or Hyde's Corner. The rational voice had no answer.

Tom filled his mind. He had to be told, had to know what the Burks and the family were up against. Burks couldn't imagine what Tom's reaction would be when he learned the entire truth.

What will he think ... about me ... about Sara?

He couldn't tolerate losing one or the other. The love he held for Sara and Tom was a pleasure so painful he couldn't catch his breath.

Old rage grew in the middle of his chest. With rage came the voice, back to haunt him. Why now? He hated that voice because it told him the truth. There were times a man didn't care to hear the truth.

You haven't told him about the Hydes, your fault, coward, the rational voice said.

Burks turned his back to the street and wiped the sweat from his face. His second handkerchief of the day, a crumpled wad in his hand. It looked like his insides felt ... squeezed, crushed down to a tight ball.

So you love the boy, do you? the rational voice teased. You sure as hell don't show it.

Stop your meddling ways, he raged at the voice. *I won't hear you speak his name again.*

The dark voice giggled and said, *How about we jaw on the subject of Sara? You like to jaw on Sara, don't you, Selmer?*

I won't have you putting your mouth on Sara, neither. You'd best shut up or I'll shut you up.

You can't shut me up without shutting yourself up, the dark voice said and giggled again.

You're in love with a twenty-two-year-old girl, your best friend's daughter. Go on say it ... you love her. Say it and I'll shut up. Maybe, I'll shut up for good if you get straight ... maybe.

Hot anger bubbled in his throat. Liar. Cheat. Labels he had to chalk up against his name. A proud name until he stained it.

I do love her, he admitted in the silence.

Every day in the mirror after workouts, Burks stared at a silly old fool. A vicious old fool.

How can I take advantage of a girl too young to know better? How can I do this kind of sordid damage to Sid?

Loathing for himself crawled around his gut like the bugs a man got from bad water. A craving for coffee hit him hard, but he couldn't go to the office. Not yet. He remembered the Prairie Cafe around the corner.

"Burks. What're you doing over there? Hunting down drunken oilmen, maybe? You know the ones ... run innocent women off the road? Or you looking for another war vet to kill. In the barroom over there? Burks? You hear me, Burks?"

The sheriff spun around. A fury screamed in his head. Homer Porter stood across the street shaking an accusing finger. Junior yelled something, but Burks didn't hear ... madness roared in his ears.

The sheriff pushed the soiled handkerchief in his pocket and jerked his vest straight. The bourbon he consumed still had his legs. He walked a slow pace, stiff legged, down the step and over the sidewalk and into the street.

Take control, his rational voice demanded. *Do it now. You can't kill this man ... not yet.*

Burks put one slow foot in front of the other. "You know the Hydes got their souls," he said to the rational voice.

Don't matter you fool. Hydes are Porters ... Porters are Hydes. Think. The rational voice said. *Look up the street. Tom's watching you. Don't do something you'll regret. You've done enough a that already.*

Seeing Tom shading his eyes in front of the courthouse cooled the killing desire. Like shutting off the burner on a boiling pot. Still, he simmered. Burks pulled in a long breath and squared his carriage. The silver star on his vest flashed a wink in the mercantile's window.

He stepped to the curb, forcing Porter and Junior backward. Burks followed his advantage and pushed closer to the frail looking figure of Homer Porter. The sheriff almost laughed out loud.

Tom pondered the whims of fate ... God's plan some called it. Had Homer, Senior concluded his business at the mercantile earlier or later. Had his grandpa stayed at the bar for one more glass of bourbon ... if only. These two former friends might have seen each other at a more opportune time. Since the killing of the Monmouth County man his grandpa had used up a goodly supply Hyde's Corner's liquor. With a skin full of whiskey, Burks couldn't be considered sociable at all. Around the dinner hour he could be downright hostile.

Tom marveled as his grandpa crossed the street. The sheriff dressed in his trademark undertaker clothes: black suit, vest and boots, the flat-brim, black Stetson he wore threw deep shadow across his face. His flowing white hair and full beard shimmered in the waning sunlight. A glowing western sky touched his starched white shirt and it sparkled like a golden field of fresh snow. The big silver star grabbed stabs of light as his body moved with each step. Tom decided Selmer Burks looked full of purpose and all business drunk or sober.

Porter stepped back as the sheriff pushed up to the man and his son. Burks seemed to inspect the small, thin man as if verifying Porter's identity. The dairy farmer was a ghost of his former self since Tom saw him last. The once squat and powerfully built man now looked like a starving dog. Tom saw his grandpa stick a thick, gnarled finger in Porter's face.

Mr. Porter's sickly. Mr. Porter's withered away to nothing.

Seeing the sheriff pointing a finger at the smaller man reminded Tom of Reba Porter's funeral four years past. A Mutt and Jeff comic book tableau came to mind then and now. Tom heard the hoarse strain of the sheriff's voice. It carried clear in the hot afternoon.

Burks peered at the small, spare man he once called friend. Porter looked sick. A weak, sad vestige of the man he helped welcome to Hyde's Corner ten years past. He drew a deep breath and let it out slow. He shook his finger in Porter's face. "I've swallowed all the pissey remarks from you I'm gonna. You got all the chances I've a mind to give. Now on, you shut your mouth round my county. You understand me?"

Porter's pale face suffused with color. Since the death of his wife the little man had lost most of his fat and muscle, but apparently his spirit and temper remained intact. Porter slapped the sheriff's finger away like an annoying fly.

Porter's audacity shocked Burks. Blood pounded in his veins and roared once again in his ears. In the next instant Porter lay on the sidewalk. The left side of his face swelling with the dark blue imprint of the sheriff's fist. The tanned, flat surface of his clenched fingers were unmarked. He smiled. No teeth decorated his knuckles today.

Tom drifted toward the corner moving without thought. Porter took a swipe at the sheriff's finger and he groaned, "Holy Jesus."

He took off at a run, heading for the corner. Tom didn't see the punch that knocked Porter down; his grandpa moved that fast. Junior's scream tore at the hot afternoon air and he jumped forward clutching at the sheriff's throat. Tom's terrified shout of warning sounded like an Indian war cry as he sprinted even faster.

He arrived as Junior fell to his knees, hands at his throat and gagging for air. Tom instinctively dropped to the sidewalk and pounded Junior on the back.

Burks didn't remember hitting Porter, but there the man lay at his feet. He studied his fist again and shook his head. His rage, having wolfed down the violence, left him like gas escaping the belly of a rotting corpse. Junior knelt on the sidewalk next to his unconscious father. Burks looked at the boy and a wave of remorse washed over him. "Junior?" The sheriff's voice went soft. "I don't know how this happened. I meant no harm to your daddy. Junior? I'm sorry."

Junior came off the sidewalk screaming. The boy's hands groped at the thick cords of muscle that made up the sheriff's neck. Burks slipped a stiff fingered hand between Junior's arms and stabbed his larynx. The boy's face turned a deep shade of red. His hands left the sheriff's neck and searched his own for a breath of air. Junior sagged to the sidewalk gagging. A puddle of vomit grew below his chin.

Burks blinked and Tom slid to a stop beside Junior, pounding him on the back. The sheriff smiled in surprise. Tom had things in hand. Right on top of trouble. Maybe it's not too bad. Maybe he misjudged the boy. Maybe Tom could handle the whole truth and then some. Burks put his lips close to Tom's ear and whispered.

The tickle of the sheriff's beard and whiff of bourbon breath brought a stop to Tom's ministrations. "Massage his throat, son," Burks said. "I tapped his larynx. It'll relax in a second or two."

Tom followed instructions and pulled Junior's hands out of the way. In no time Junior gagged, huffed and took a ragged breath. He slapped Tom's hands away, tears making ugly dirt tracks on his sweating cheeks.

Tom felt rather than heard a scramble of movement. Porter had regained consciousness. His eyes flared wide on seeing his son gagging for breath. Porter let out a howl. The sound loud enough to scare the bejesus out of everybody, even in broad daylight. Tom watched the dairy farmer grab the sheriff around the knees in an attempt to pull himself upright. At the effort Porter's face turned chalk white and he gasped, his mouth going wide. A convulsion seized him and his teeth snapped down tight on his tongue.

Shock paralyzed everyone as Porter struggled for breath. Burks recovered his wits first and went to a knee. He tried massaging Porter's neck and pounding on his back, but nothing seemed to help. His face went dark scarlet and a guttural sound rumbled deep in his throat. Eyes bulging from the sockets of a skeletal face, Porter's body appeared to deflate. He settled into the sidewalk and lay still.

A small crowd looked on in silence. Tom searched from face to face hoping someone would go for Doc Beaman. Porter's dead eyes stared and blood in a thin trickle ran down his chin. Burks and Tom saw the blood flow stop and looked at each other. Burks bent over the body and listened at Porter's chest. Burks whacked his breastbone a couple of times, but the futile endeavors produced nothing. He put an ear to Porter's mouth. When Burks looked up, Tom knew Homer Porter was dead.

Burks looked around and saw Lewis. "Clyde. Get Doc Beaman quick as you can, I think Homer's having a heart attack."

Junior heard the words "heart attack" and began to wail and scream, "Daddy. Daddy." He pushed at Burks and the sheriff gave ground. Junior fell on Porter's corpse and called to his daddy. "Wake up, damnit. You wake up ... hear me, Daddy?" Junior carried on for several minutes before, head hanging, he lapsed into silence.

The silence didn't last long. Junior's eyes came up, his face twisted with hate. Cheeks and lips coated with tears and snot, his countenance took on a gargoyle appearance. "Soon, you murdering son-of-a-bitch. One day soon. You hear me, Mr. Sheriff? You're gonna pay. For my Daddy. For my Mama. You hear me? You've killed us all, you"

Junior searched the crowd looking for what no one knew. He screamed. "This man is a dirty, murdering bastard and I'm going to kill him."

Tom went for Junior and Burks stepped between, putting a hand on Tom's chest. He shook his head.

Doc Beaman pushed through the crowd and the moment lost its tension. Beaman knelt next to Porter's body and pushed Junior away. Tom heard the doctor mutter. "Shut your mouth, Junior. Get up and let me tend your pa."

Burks waved the crowd away. "Get on with your business. Go on. Ain't nothing to see here. Git."

Harry Sykes joined his partner on the sidewalk. Tom saw a look of distaste cross his grandpa's face before he called out to Lewis. "Clyde? You and Harry take Junior inside. If you've got anything stronger than soda, give him a shot, he needs to calm down. Beaman will know what to do after Porter's on his way to the hospital."

Lewis nodded. He and Sykes got Junior under the arms. They walked him away talking in quiet tones as they guided him inside the mercantile. An ambulance pulled to the curb scattering the last of the hangers-on. The attendants put Porter on a gurney. After a few words from Beaman they drove away with red lights flashing. The doctor, Burks and Tom watched the ambulance disappear down Cedric Street the wail of its siren fading in the late afternoon heat.

Burks pulled Beaman to the side and walked him down the sidewalk a few steps. Tom followed.

"He's dead, ain't he?" Burks said.

Beaman nodded and made a face at the smell of the sheriff's breath, but Burks had turned and eyed the dispersing crowd. "Byron and Albert are either at the feed and grain store or down to the rail yard," he continued. "Can you send someone to pick them up. Take them to the hospital?"

"I'll see to it," Beaman said.

"Thanks, Doc. I appreciate your help." Burks pointed Tom down the street. "Come on, boy, let's get back to the office. Nothing here needs our attention."

Beaman stepped in front of them. "I think that's a good idea, Selmer. You get on back to the office. If you're smart you'll sober up right quick. This looks to me like a heart attack all right,

but you know well and good heart attack ain't going to make this fiasco go down any easier. The Porters got money and money is power. They'll be questions and unless I miss my guess ... hell to pay."

Herman Beaman walked away shaking his head.

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A History Lesson

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1943

Burks glared at Beaman, but said nothing. He would tolerate sass from a select few in Sundowner County and Beaman counted as one. Burks teetered at the edge of a precipice and he needed the doctor because a part of him wanted to give in to the madness. It ate at him like any addiction. The wild thing inside saw its opportunity and shouted in his ear:

It's easy to advise and criticize. That son-of-a-bitch don't live in here. He hasn't been where you've been. He can't know what you know.

Burks shuddered. This voice wasn't the one that told him the truth. This dark voice came from the emptiness. He had no desire to think on that place today. His thoughts turned to Sara Tassel. Sara with her soft voice and willing way. He'd come close to telling her about the savage void that wanted his mind. His spirit. His essence.

The day he killed the hobo, he wanted to tell her about the madness that controlled him. He stopped before he said too much. Despite a belly full of whiskey, he realized his emptiness would eat her alive and then he lost it. He gave in and took Sara driving deep inside her. Trying, he told himself later, to exorcise a portion of his hate. Instead, she moaned in pleasure and hot tears flooded his eyes ... he remembered his climax. His shudders and sobs. Sara cradled him as she would a frightened child. Her arms were warm and safe and he knew he loved her. Loved her in a bad, crippling way.

The damnable emptiness and its freedom to indulge helped him betray his best friend that day. He dishonored Sid in a most foul way. Sara's moans and his sobs echoed in his head. Burks clenched his fist as he approached a light standard.

This hell I live in. My hell. They don't know what it's like. Burks remembered the doctor's look, it said: *He's a drunk.* That's what they all thought, Beaman, Tom, Sara, Hal, Nat. Hell. Even Quincy Brinks. *They all look on me with pity, but Brinks has fear in his eyes, too.* That look of fear in his old friend's eye hurt. *As if I'd beat on a man too crippled up to defend himself.* The thought disgusted him.

Well, I drink. No doubt about it. I stayed drunk after the killing ... after Sara, too. Especially after Sara. I stayed drunk until I slept. That bitter irony overwhelmed him. He could sleep after

what he'd done. A spark of the old Burks. The young. The innocent, Selmer Burks wondered: *What kind of man have I become.* He smothered those thoughts with a deep breath.

The Monmouth County man drifted into his thoughts. *That hobo came to Hyde's Corner bringing old memories. I've lived those memories with every tick of eternity's clock. I can still see that son-of-a-bitch like it was this morning. That afternoon on Rhoda Avenue, I thought sure I'd dropped in the pit. Insanity had me at last. That hobo was Leslie Hyde ... he was that crippled, pathetic, son-of-a-bitch. He was supposed to be long dead by his own hand. At the time some said I loaded the gun by beating him so bad, but even if they were right it wasn't good enough for me. Seeing his ghost dressed in hobo's clothes rocked me, but the same rage consumed me. Just like that night so long ago. This time I'd kill him ... me. I'd kill him and no cowboys would be around to pull me off. But Lydia and Emmy Royster stood right there.* Burks drew a shuddering breath. *I had to take control. Ignore Leslie Hyde and do my professional duty.*

Burks forced his thoughts to the problems at hand. His reminiscence had put the hot pulse of joy beating in his belly again. He remembered the pain of the wound in his side and how it fed his power. The feel of his fist crushing the jaw of the hobo settled in his mind as more sweet pleasure. All those things fed the howling madness of his emptiness and made him stronger.

The dark voice sang of a freedom so sweet it made him ache. He wanted to listen. Let it take him at last, but he feared it. Yet, it affected him much like the drug laudanum had his wife. One small dose started the addiction. Over the years he'd given in to its pull. Its freedom. Its promise. Now, he found it more and more difficult to slam the door in his mind. To say no. To maintain control. He knew madness was his future, but it would have to wait until Tom claimed his manhood. Only then would he let go. Burks accepted the truth of his future as one accepts a diagnosis of fatal cancer. He renewed his vow to maintain control until Tom left for college.

If I manage to last that long, I'll end it myself.

"Are you okay, Grandpa?"

Burks jumped, startled by Tom's voice. He looked around and realized they were in front of the office. He remembered the doc telling him to sober up.

Must've wool-gathered my way down the street.

He blinked and looked around. Depression grabbed him by the ears. How could he get away from bourbon whiskey when he couldn't escape his memories? Were there really that many men resembling dead enemies? Could they be ghosts come to take his sanity? Burks unlocked the office door. As he walked through, he wondered if the madness could take control without his permission.

"I'm fine," he said.

Burks held the door and when Tom moved past he closed and locked it. The sheriff's depressive self-pity turned grim. Even the company of his grandson, the pride of his life, brought no joy. Burks recalled Beaman's parting shot: "they'll be hell to pay." The doctor spoke the truth. The Porter boys were young, but a big wealthy corporation stood behind them. They would indeed raise hell.

He pulled the shades and shrugged out of the long coat. Tom gasped when the sheriff threw the garment on the desktop. The coat landed with a heavy thump. The boy looked astonished. Burks laughed at Tom's reaction, to his disrespectful manner. He usually hung the long coat with care, but only to prevent the hideout gun from flopping on the floor.

Burks dropped into his chair and it groaned a complaint. He studied his grandson. Tom handled himself in an impressive manner. Porter's heart attack. Junior's puking, screaming and

carrying on. Tom remained calm throughout, proving he could act in a prudent manner and watch the sheriff's back along with it.

God only knew where this Porter tragedy would lead. The intelligence level of Junior and Byron didn't impress, but Albert? Albert Porter posed other problems. Those boys had money and lawyers behind them. If Albert turned out sly and quick, like Burks had sized him up, he would have Porter lawyers turning over every rock in the past life of Selmer Burks.

"Why are you looking so hard at me, Grandpa? I do something wrong? Go too easy on Junior? You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, Tom. Just distracted. A few things want to pester me, but you did fine out there. I'm proud how you handled yourself. Yessir, I am."

Now's the time. If I tell him everything, maybe I'll find some peace.

He unlocked the desk and took his bottle from the drawer. Tom continued to stare at the crumpled condition of the long coat. "Don't worry yourself with my coat. Let's go downstairs, boy." Burks opened the door and started down the narrow cellar stairs.

The area of the basement given over to the sheriff's office measured twenty by forty feet. The building rested on limestone block. A brick partition wall separated the sheriff's area from the rest of the building's coal furnace and storage area. The large room with its ten foot ceiling provided a secure place for the sheriff's pet projects and Burks had many pet projects.

For thirty-eight years an isolation cell sat black and cold in the right rear corner. It was his first project and Burks gleaned the idea from a reading of *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas. Coming down the stairs, he knew Tom's eyes would lock on the dark metal structure. It seemed to crouch there in the dim light. Waiting patiently like a panting predator.

Hell. After all those years, Burks still stared. The cell commanded your attention. Fashioned of solid steel it stood seven feet high and eight feet wide and deep. There were no windows. Only a small round hole in the door with a swiveled cover. The sheriff watched many a belligerent troublemaker cry like a baby when they first laid eyes on the cell. It gleamed in the reflected light of the sixty-watt bulbs overhead. It seemed to whisper in a cold, but joyful voice: *Yes, here I am. I'm the hell you've been asking for ... come on in.*

The rest of the basement was outfitted with weights, barbells, a speed bag and heavy bag. Several benches were scattered around the walls. Tumbling mats covered the stone floor at the rear of the room. Burks used tactics fair and foul to finagle the equipment out of the township council.

Pulling two benches together he wondered if Tom remembered his carefree days of swamping the office and running errands. Burks remembered many rainy days when the boy and his friends would 'sneak' into the basement. Here they would challenge one another to try the isolation cell. Many times Burks sat on the top stair listening as the boys whispered taunts and dares. He smiled at their giggles and smothered a laugh when they penned each other in the cell. Burks knew what the steel box felt like. He had climbed in and slammed the door right after its installation. He wanted to understand the feel of it. The all steel fabrication, including the floor, felt like a grave must feel ... cold to the bone.

The cell had no bench or seat. For a toilet a hole in one corner served the purpose. When the door closed the prisoner's senses were turned upside down. Total darkness created a perfect void. After being locked in the cell, in the darkness and stink of their own waste, men learned the error

of their ways. For most twenty-four hours was enough. In the last few years, Burks had found little use for his pet project.

He indicated a bench for Tom. When they sat their knees touched and Burks rested the bottle of bourbon on his thigh. Holding it by the neck he gave the cap a twist. The seal crackled loud in the stillness. He put the cap on the bench beside him. Opening of a fresh bottle of bourbon had become a ritual and Burks performed it with reverence.

He studied his grandson's eyes. "You're just about there, ain't you, Tom? What are you now, fifteen?"

"Yessir. Fifteen in November."

Burks seemed lost in thought; then he offered the whiskey bottle. "Well, you're damn near as big as me. You've seen more than a boy your age should've seen. I think you deserve a drink if you've a mind to have one."

Tom hung his head and mumbled. "I thank you, Grandpa, for asking. I think I'll wait awhile if you don't mind."

"All right. That's fine." Burks took a long pull and digested the whiskey unsure of how to go on. "There's bad things happening in my county, Tom. Things are getting out of hand. People don't see the reason of my actions. Course I don't owe nobody an explanation, but the thing is Hyde's Corner is thriving"

He put the whiskey on the floor, shook his head and looked at Tom. He'd lost his place and then it came back to him. "Like I said thriving. The citizens of our county been enjoying a good, safe life. Most folks fail to understand a simple principle. A good, safe life has a price. You understand what I'm telling you, Tom?"

The boy shrugged. "I understand some of what you're saying, Grandpa. I'm not sure I"

"That's okay, boy, that's okay. You listen close to me. You'll understand for sure. I think I'd better tell you about your mama first. You haven't asked me about her in a long while. I think it's time you know."

Muffled thuds echoed down the basement stairs. Burks shook his head and looked at the ceiling. "Son-of-a-bitch," he said and pulled a breath. "You hold the fort, Tom. I'll be right back."

Burks shook off the foginess of the whiskey and climbed the stairs with a step solid and sure. In the doorway, he turned and glanced back. There was no doubt in his mind that was attacking his office door. A confrontation was in the offing and he wanted Tom to hear everything. The thuds grew louder as he reached the top of the stair. He left the cellar door ajar hoping Tom would listen close.

"Goddamnit. Stop that pounding. I swear. I'll be pounding on your head in a minute." Burks crossed the office in a few steps. He paused before opening the door. From below, he heard the scrape of boots on the stone floor of the basement. A thump on the stair and a whispered "damn," told Burks all he wanted to know. The pounding began again, but took the form of a more civilized knock.

Burks opened the door with a jerk and glared at the small gathering on his stoop. Mayor William Royster, Clyde Lewis and Harry Sykes squinted in the gloom. Burks hoped Royster's weak, squeaky voice would carry back to Tom in the cellar.

"What in hell have you done?" Royster started right in.

Burks stood aside. "Shut your mouth and get in the office. Clyde? Harry? You boys bring the rest of the town did you? You were there. Didn't you tell Bill what happened?"

Lewis and Sykes tried to speak at once. Royster cut them off. "I've had enough people call me. I've been told ... every little detail. You let Porter bait you. You pushed him and stuck your

finger in his face. He took offense and you knocked him down. The boy tried to help his daddy and you damn near killed him. Homer got his senses and saw his son in trouble. Had a damn heart attack. He died. Did I leave anything out?" Royster glared.

Burks couldn't stop the grin that tied his forehead in knots.

The mayor waved his finger. "You've no idea what you've done. Porter is the richest landowner in the county. Maybe the whole damn State of Oklahoma. Junior is talking lawsuit. The township. The county. God knows maybe the damn state. We're going to be the center of the biggest shit storm in history. We're going to have county investigators, state investigators. Hell, we'll probably get the federals to join in the fun. They'll be sticking their nose in every corner. They'll find out about our activities. Our business interests will be in jeopardy."

Burks slapped Royster across the face.

Sykes shouted. "Selmer ... Jesus Christ ... Selmer."

Royster backed away so shocked he couldn't find his voice. His hands went to his face and he shuddered pulling in a ragged breath. A deep red mark glowed on his jaw. "Burks, I"

Royster had tears in his eyes. He looked at the storekeepers who stood with mouths open in shock. "Clyde? Harry?" Royster threw up his hands. "This man's gone crazy."

Burks had a hard time not laughing out loud. Royster looked like he was about to bust out crying, but he glared at Burks. "You can't just slap the Mayor. I'll"

"My grandson's in the cellar." The sheriff's voice warned with a quiet rumble. "You want him to hear every little word out of your mouths. I don't know what activities you're talking about, Bill. Now, if you're talking about me running a clean, safe town. If you're talking about the township council coming around to show support. Well. If that's the case I don't think we got anything to fret on." Burks looked to Lewis and Sykes for conformation.

Harry and Clyde looked at each other. Royster stroked his jaw. The shock of the slap wore off and he stared at Burks like a man planning murder.

Lewis put a hand on Royster's shoulder. "Easy, Bill. Listen, boys. Why don't we all go home and settle down a little? I think we could all use a good night's sleep. Selmer, how about we get together tomorrow and have a meeting? We can figure some answers to possible questions they'll throw our way."

Clyde's suggestion came just in time. If the three stayed much longer things would deteriorate. Burks had a mean on. One that could turn vicious in a heartbeat. "Sounds like a fine idea, Clyde. Always the sensible one you are. How about ten o'clock? Give me a chance to have some breakfast. I've got to keep up my strength if I'm going to face all those fierce investigators. Don't you boys agree?"

Sykes and Lewis looked uncomfortable. Royster looked outraged. With a slight cock of his head Burks looked amused and contemptuous. When it appeared Royster might open his mouth Sykes opened the door. "Can we go? Please? Gentlemen?"

Lewis took Royster by the arm, but Royster pulled free and stopped in the doorway. "Don't ever strike me again, Burks. I'm the Mayor of this township and you'd best remember it."

Burks bowed low. "I would've been disappointed if you hadn't spoke up. You're dead right, Bill. That's a callous and disrespectful bit of behavior on my part. Please accept my humble apology."

Royster's hate danced like a living thing in his eyes. He slammed the door, rattling the panes of glass. Burks laughed, turned the deadbolt and returned to the cellar. He settled on the bench and gave Tom's knee a pat. "Well, boy. What'd you make of all that?"

Tom pulled an innocent face. "I didn't hear much, Grandpa. I heard Mr. Sykes holler your name. I heard him use the name of the Lord. That's about it." The boy's voice had the phony tone of a snake oil salesman's pitch.

Burks shook his head. "You heard a sight more than that, boy. If you didn't you're not half the young man I thought you to be. I'll tell you right now. This is no time to be lying to your Grandpa. You understand me? I never told you a lie. I avoided some of your questions that's true. Other times I left out parts, but I never lied to you. I'd say you're just about growed up. So I'm going to explain a few things."

Burks leaned forward and studied Tom's eyes. The boy met his gaze. Was that strength he saw? He thought so. In fact he was sure of it. The boy would need it. Burks looked at the bottle on the floor and reached for it and changed his mind.

"Those boys up there tonight?" Burks said. "They're right about a shit storm coming down on us. The Porters have a lot of money and don't ever doubt it, boy. Money talks loud everywhere. Now, if Reba had lived things might've been different. As it is Homer turned out a whiney little weasel. He raised them boys up to be the same and they're damn bullies besides."

Burks eyed the whiskey and made a grab for it. With his need satisfied he put the bottle back. "Lord knows I didn't wish Porter a heart attack. This afternoon he just hit me wrong. I decided to be done with his smart mouth and taunting manner."

Burks stared off to the side as he spoke. When Tom gave his folded hands a pat his head snapped forward a surprised look in his eyes.

"This ain't your fault, Grandpa. I'm sure everybody knows you did your best to find out the why of Mrs. Porter's death."

Burks laughed. He gave Tom's knee a pat for a third time and saw the boy's grin of pain. "I'm sorry, son. Sometimes I just don't realize. Now you listen close and keep your council. I know who run Reba off the road. Yessir. Found out a few days after it happened. Homer guessed right. One of the damn oilmen. Drunk as a preacher on Sunday night. He'd just had a roll in the hay at the Prairie Schooner to boot."

Tom sat up, eyes big as a new harvest moon.

"Don't you forget," Burks said. "Keep this to yourself, hear? Oh, don't look at me like that. I tried to tell Homer, but the man got crazy on me. He blubbered and cried. Kept blaming himself for being sick. If I'd told him ... well hell, he would've got everybody in the damn territory worked up. We'd a had ourselves a lynch party and if I couldn't stop them; then what? How long you think the oil companies would stay around? There's no big strikes here. Some of those wells just make expenses. Hyde's Corner needs those oil companies. We still do. Our livelihood depends on continued development. With the war going on that'll be the case, but ain't none of us getting any younger, son. We need to make that hay while the sun shines."

Tom's face registered shock. "But, Grandpa, you let that drunk get away with killing Mrs. Porter."

Burks sat back as if slapped. Did the boy think him a coward or worse? "I didn't let nobody get away with nothing. I got an inkling of what happened from a man named Landsing. I talked to Millie and a few others. I come up with names of possibles, but it turned out guessing games weren't necessary. The fool responsible got drunk at the Hula Hut if you can believe it. He bragged about scaring some old woman on a tractor. Flew by honking his horn. Thought he pulled a real funny." The sheriff's eyes were hard as prairie stones.

Tom shook his head. "I never saw anybody in the jail. I don't recall hearing about anybody facing Judge Hammersmith."

Burks gave Tom a look. "They's different ways to handle justice, Tom. I gave that boy a taste of Burks Justice. I found out which platform and shift the wastrel worked and paid him a visit"

Millie Saint Jardine's roster of oil field workers and their shift assignments was extensive. Millie liked to be prepared for her regular customers. She used her information gathering to cultivate new clients as well. Burks gave her the name and she looked him up.

Carl Temple showed up as a recent transferee to the Mossburry leasehold. He worked the swing shift at Mossburry X2. Burks thanked his longtime business partner for the information. The sheriff left the Prairie Schooner in an expansive mood. He enjoyed dispensing Burks Justice.

Burks drove back through Hyde's Corner and stopped for a leisurely lunch. Natalie Owen made the best Spam sandwiches around. Thick slices of reconstituted meat, goat cheese and onion, topped off with plenty of horseradish and mustard.

The sheriff offered payment for lunch, but neither Hal or Natalie would allow it. On the way back to the station wagon he managed several onion flavored belches. After having a good look around he passed a little gas for good measure. Burks flexed his shoulders and grunted his satisfaction. The time had come to call court to order.

A full crew worked X2. Burks stopped the wagon near the steps of the platform. The noise of the drilling engine drowned out any sound of the old Ford V8. As he stepped from the car, Bobby Landsing appeared in the door of his trailer.

Burks headed for the platform and Landsing came running. The foreman waved his arms as he ran and caught Burks at the bottom of the steps. "Sheriff? It's not a good idea to park so close to the well. Tools get dropped and we have blowouts all the time. Your vehicle could get damaged."

"Appreciate your concern, Mr. Landsing. I promise I won't be long. Can you point out Carl Temple for me?"

"I'm not sure he's working this afternoon. Why don't you move your car and I'll go check?" Landsing glanced up at the platform.

Burks cocked his head and barked a short laugh. "Mr. Landsing. I'm going to set you straight about me and my disposition. I'm a simple man. Mostly, I'm tolerant. I'll forgive a man lying to me, if I think there's good cause, but I don't tolerate a man lying to me twice. Is there anything you don't understand about what I just told you?"

Landsing backed away and shook his head. "He's working the drill bit. No shirt. Overalls. A red bandana on his neck. What do you want with him?"

"That'll be Sheriff's business, Mr. Landsing. I won't be long." Burks brushed by the foreman and went up the steps.

He saw Temple right away. The man worked the drill and was spotted with oil and grease. His hands were gloved and busy with a rope and chain. The smell of raw crude clawed the throat of Burks. The clatter and pounding hiss of the steam engine competed with the clank and screech of the drill bit.

Burks came up behind Temple in two steps. The man's shoulders were burned a deep red. He wore a hard hat cocked down and to the right at a jaunty angle. Burks grabbed the straps of the man's overalls pulled, lifted and twisted in the same movement. The driller was thrown clear of the platform.

Temple landed on the radiator of the sheriff's wagon. He flipped, rolled and bounced on the car's fender before dropping face first to the ground dazed. When the shaken Carl Temple rolled to his back he was looking into the face of Selmer Burks.

The sheriff jerked Temple to his feet and slammed two quick, short punches to the driller's rib cage. A satisfying snap of bone pleased the sheriff's ears. The man tried to scream, but his mouth filled with blood. Burks reached down and grabbed a handful of overall at the crotch. He raised the driller over his head and made ready to throw him against the wall of a tin shed housing the drilling rig steam engine.

The rest of the crew had run down the steps. Two of Temple's friend's grabbed the sheriff's arms making his throw come up short. Temple landed back first on a four inch discharge pipe.

"It was quite a fracas. By the time I finished with Temple's friends, I'd digested my lunch just fine." Burks saw his grandson's eyes sparkle and his cheeks flush pink with excitement.

"What happened then, Grandpa? I know you didn't bring them to jail, right?"

Burks picked up his bottle. The burn of the whiskey felt good. "I taught those two friends of Temple's a lesson about interfering with the law. Afterward, Mr. Landsing and I had a chat. Old Bobby was upset with me. Three of his five man crew were incapacitated. I took the time to explain Burks Justice and we soon agreed. My way worked better than Porter, the townfolk of Hyde's Corner and a thick length of hemp rope."

"What happened to the men, Grandpa? It don't seem right. Reba Porter dead and they get a few bumps and bruises."

Burks stretched and worked his shoulders giving some thought to his answer. He wanted to draw Tom out. Make sure the boy was ready to hear it all. "Those boys took more with them than a few bumps and bruises. I gave those three men till dark the next day to get out of my county. Mr. Landsing came to me the next morning. Temple had three broken ribs, a punctured lung and broken back. His two friends could at least walk with their cracked ribs and bruised jaws."

Tom looked disappointed. "It still don't seem right. Mrs. Porter's dead and these men? It just don't seem like enough punishment." His voice sounded sad.

Burks took Tom's chin in his hand and pulled the boy's face close. "Everything is relative, boy. You said it yourself. Mrs. Porter is dead. No punishment could bring her back. I understand Mr. Temple is spending his days in a wheelchair just like Bowdery's. I've heard tell he spends his days in a sanitarium down in Tulsa. Drools on himself. Jabbers a lot. Could be that's worse than being dead."

Burks searched his grandson's face hoping to see an understanding take root. He continued in a soft voice. "Those other men? They were only guilty of butting in where they didn't belong. Along with their bumps and bruises they lost their jobs. Here's the thing, Tom. Mrs. Porter is still cold in the ground. I warned Mr. Landsing. What with the men's injuries, I'd allow a couple extra days. If I saw any of their faces afterwards. I'd pack them off to Homer Porter." Burks brought his hands together. The sharp snap of his palms echoed in the basement's chamber.

Tom looked remorseful, but did he fully grasp the concept? Burks wondered. The boy stared at the floor for a full minute or better and he nodded. "I think I understand. I think maybe not having a mother made it harder for me to see. Mr. Porter lost his wife and those boys lost their mama."

The boy's answer satisfied Burks. "Good. Good. That's enough about the Porter problem. Now, I've got serious things to tell you. Some of it will stick in your craw. You've got to make me a promise, Tom. No matter what, you've got to swear you'll hear me out. Do I have your word on that?"

Tom thought a moment then tucked his head. "Yessir. You do."

"All right then; we may as well get to it. I told you your mama went to heaven the day you were born. That's the God's truth. What I didn't tell you is I killed your no-account daddy before you were born."

Burks watched his grandson's face go pale and he continued. "Take a breath and pay attention, boy." Burks held Tom's shoulders. "Since you can remember, you've carried the name Thomas Silas Burks. You got to know that ain't your true birth name. Your honest to God birth name is Thomas Silas Hyde."

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[And He Became a Man](#)

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1943

Tom couldn't breathe and he jerked falling away from Burks. His head bounced on the brick wall which kept him upright, but a bright stab of pain, like an electric shock, couldn't wake him from this bad dream.

Grandpa killed my Daddy. The words battered the caverns of his mind, the revelation bursting in his brain like a puss filled boil.

Burks made a grab for Tom, taking him by the shoulders. "Calm down, boy. You promised to hear me out. A man don't give his word less he means to keep it, remember?"

Tom saw his grandpa's mustache and beard moving, but the sounds coming from his mouth made no sense, they sounded like garbled noise. His head felt as if it were about to explode and he could stand it no longer. "Grandpa ... Grandpa ... you killed my Daddy? You killed him." Tom sounded hysterical, even to himself. Wild images swept through his mind. His world came to an end. All trust in his grandpa was betrayed in one moment.

I can't go on living with a monster who slaughters people at will ... even my Daddy. Did this animal kill my Mama, too? How can I ever be sure ... how can I believe a word grandpa says?

Eyes squeezed tight shut, Tom felt his grandpa's big hands shake him and engulf his face. He fought the warm, safe feeling those hard, callused palms promised. Burks leaned in and the smell of sour mash bourbon on his breath burned Tom's nostrils.

"Listen, boy," the sheriff said, his voice like sandpaper on concrete. "You listen good. This is the most important time of your life. What you do with the truth I'm about to give will guide you all your born days."

Something akin to an electric current coursed through Tom's jaws and into his brain. His grandpa's words were a shock ... a recognition. What he thought of as reality was instead illusion. Fantasy had ruled his life to this point. The sudden hate he felt for Selmer Burks gave him clarity and a sense of freedom. It gave him a feeling of wild power and it felt good.

Fear shot through his chest. Sara's speculative warning about the demon living inside his grandpa ... could it be true? Tom wondered if what he felt at that moment could be the demon gathering his soul. He wanted to fight, but his eyes stung and he began to cry. Hot tears dripped from his chin and he felt shame. He was too old to cry, but cry he did. Though his sobs were silent, he cried as though his heart would break. Tom kept his eyes shut tight, he didn't want to look at his grandpa.

Powerful arms lifted his body from the bench. Burks held him, his hard palm patting Tom's back in a clumsy manner. He murmured over and over. "Okay, boy. It's okay, boy. Get it out. Get it out."

Tom didn't understand the feeling of tenderness that swept through him. He felt safe enclosed in those big arms. At the same time, crushed against his grandpa's chest, he knew those arms and hands were the instruments of his daddy's death. Confusion filled Tom's mind. The smell of whiskey on his grandpa's breath, a puckering tang of lye soap on his skin. Faint odors of mothballs and starch mixed on his vest and shirt. Those ordinary things defined Selmer Burks, his grandpa, his family, the only family he'd ever known. Tom turned his face to his grandpa's ear and whispered, "I'm okay now. I'm okay."

Tom dried his eyes on his sleeve and sat up to straighten his collar. His runny nose demanded a handkerchief, but he'd forgot and left the house without one. Burks offered his and Tom blew his nose and handed it back.

The sheriff shook his head. "You tuck that in your pocket. Wash it good before you give it back."

Tom mumbled, "Thank you."

Burks offered the whiskey again. "You'd best take a pull on this."

Tom shook his head.

"All right, then. I'm sorry I hit you off the dime like that. I'm not one to be tactful. Mayor Royster will bear witness to that fact. If I got something to say I get right to it. I taught you the same. You understand me, boy?"

Tom looked his grandpa in the eye. "Yes, I do. Why'd you go and kill my Daddy? What in hell did he do that you had to go kill him?" Tom stared at the man he now realized he never knew. The longer he stared the madder he got. He pictured jumping on the son-of-a-bitch. Beating on him, but Burks had taught him well.

"Never go off half-cocked," he preached. "Mistakes are made by those who don't think things through." His grandpa drummed that lesson in well. Tom, though full of rage, remembered it and put its advice into practice.

Burks didn't respond to his outburst, but set the whiskey on the floor and stood. Tom's eyes followed his grandpa as he walked away stretching his back. He shook himself. "I expect it's time you know it all. I'll go back to the start and tell you like I learned it and lived it. Can you have patience with your old grandpa?"

Tom saw him turn waiting for an answer. He held his grandpa's stare, but his resolve weakened quickly. Tom was about to drop his gaze and let out a breath when Burks blinked and nodded. "Well ... all right then."

Burks studied the heavy beams of the ceiling, his eyes losing focus. Tom saw what looked like deep sadness settle on his grandpa's face. He listened as the lives of the Burks, the Hydés and Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma began to live again through his grandpa's voice

Selmer Burks relived the final chapter of the Burks-Hyde history lying on the padded bench. A towel Tom had fetched him earlier hung across his eyes. When Burks described the brutal rape of his daughter, Laura Lee, Tom grew sick. When he realized his birth was the product of that atrocity, he felt as dirty as the deed described.

Tom gaped at the prone figure of Burks. As he recalled the family's history, Tom began to understand the pain and loss his grandpa endured. Then came the horror of his own conception and birth. The truth filled him with loathing. The man he thought he loved had kept this secret from him.

For a fleeting instant his grandpa's duplicity was incomprehensible. How could his hero, his beloved grandpa, hide the truth from him? Fail to warn him of the disgusting circumstance that spawned him? He couldn't get his mind around it. The treachery, as he saw it, kindled a fury in his soul. Rage stamped itself on his face.

Bastard ... the name fit him. From the beginning his existence was predicated on violation. Every beat of his heart. Every breath he took. His life was an abomination. A criminal violation. I am an outrage called rape ... the accusation damned his existence.

Tom ran to the top of the cellar stairs in an instant. He loped across the office, but tears blurred his eyes as he reached the street door. Tom couldn't see to unlock it. He heard Burks call his name. Heard the old man's stumbling steps on the stairs. The key turned in the lock and Tom threw the door open. He glanced over his shoulder and ran into the gathering darkness.

Giving no thought to a destination, Tom cut down the alley next to the Lewis and Sykes Mercantile. He heard Burks call his name once more. Then, except for a few automobiles moving on Cedric Street, he heard nothing but the hammering beat of his heart.

Tom ran and ran some more. Ran until his legs burned like molten lead. Even then he ran. His breath came in ragged, sobbing bursts. His side clutched with a bright, slashing pain. He ran somewhere outside the township limits. In the velvet darkness his sense of direction eluded him. With Hyde's Corner's streetlights winking behind him he ran into a black hole of oblivion.

His lungs blazed like hell's own inferno. His heart felt like it would tear itself from his chest. He sobbed like a baby, snot running over his lips and down his chin. Without warning his legs disappeared and he flew ass over teakettle in the dirt. He had enough sense to turn his head as he fell and throw his hands out front. He hit hard and slid. Gravel raked and gouged the skin from his right cheek, ear and the heels of his hands.

He tumbled headfirst into a drainage ditch and rolled onto his back gasping for air. With throbbing hands, he tested the ground and found the ditch dry. As his breathing slowed and his senses returned, he considered himself lucky to be in one piece. Hiccups and dry heaves seized him and with no water they continued until ending at last in a fit of coughing.

Mad didn't define how Tom felt about his grandpa. In the rising moon's silver cast the ditch looked like a good spot to cuss Selmer Burks. It seemed a good place to spend the night, too. He figured he had some thinking to do. For a place to think a ditch along a quiet country road couldn't be beat. A warm dark night in a late prairie summer eased the mind. Tom thought he might remember this night for a long time.

The previous Sunday's sermon came to mind: "You can't lie to God. So tell me why, brothers and sisters," the preacher shouted, "would you lie to yourself." Tom wiped his eyes. No matter the cut, he was a bastard child. A bastard child made by rape and committed by a Hyde. The cruel and lawless act carried out because of hate ... one family for another.

"Damn them both." Tom shouted into the black night.

Time passed and the wind blew soft above him. Calming him. Little varmints grew used to his presence and rustled the grass around him. Tom turned his thoughts to some nasty, hard facts. He wasn't a wanted child, but instead the curse of a dirty crime. It got worse. Because of him a young woman died, a girl really, who had no wish to become a mama.

Tom pictured his rapist father, Robert Hyde. *That animal is worth carrying on about isn't he?*

Tom realized his grandpa, for all his hating, probably did the community a favor. A man who would defile a young girl didn't deserve to live. The killing of Robert Hyde seemed like an act of civic responsibility. Hyde. The name itself sounded evil. Like the monster in that Stevenson book. Tom's eyes filled up and he lay back in the weeds.

God. How grandpa must despise me ... I'm a Hyde.

He spent a good part of the night crying. The first steel colored streaks of dawn marked the sky when the answer came to him. He couldn't change what happened, but he might use the hate that bred him. Could he turn his misfortune to advantage? Of course he could. Tom drifted off to sleep turning that question over in his mind.

He surrendered to sleep in the middle of a hunting trail. Morning's light encouraged a hungry horny toad to seek out his breakfast. An obstruction blocking his hunting track made no impression ... his appetite was ravenous. The toad scampered up and over the obstruction, pausing on something warm and soft for a look around. Tom woke to tiny clawed feet on his cheek and blinked into the sunlight. The toad leaped to the ground and disappeared into the weeds. Tom sat up, scratched at his cheek and checked his arms and legs for chigger and spider bites.

He found nothing and counted himself lucky to come through the night in good shape. He brushed off and climbed out of the ditch. After a good stretch, he yawned. The bright morning sun climbed the eastern horizon. Tom made a vow to the new day. From this time on he would look at his life with new eyes. He would accept his past and thus allow acknowledgement of the future. A fresh start, that's what he needed. The time had come to work on his manhood.

Tom walked the side of the road enjoying the morning. As he sorted through new ideas, he caught sight of a shimmering image. A tail of dust followed the dark square shape coming from the direction of town. In another minute Tom recognized the county's station wagon. It crept along holding to the middle of the road. As it drew closer he could make out the sheriff looking off into the prairie first one side then the other.

Is he looking for me?

It didn't seem so until the driver's attention returned to the road, and then the brakes of old Ford wagon locked up. It slewed sideways on the gravel and Burks jumped out of the car, hitting the ground running, before it came to a full stop. He hollered as he came, "Goddamn you, boy. Goddamn you, boy."

Tom couldn't duck or run before Burks grabbed him up. The sheriff squeezed until Tom thought his back might break. He managed to squeak out, "Grannppaaaaa."

Burks buried his face in Tom's shoulder and neck. The youngster felt the hairy tickle of his beard. The sheriff carried him like a sack back to the car. The ease with which Burks handled him boggled his mind. Fourteen going on fifteen, he couldn't be mistaken for small at six-foot and two-hundred pounds. The sheriff kept muttering. "Goddamn you, boy. Goddamn you, boy."

Tom felt wetness on his cheek and neck. It occurred to him his grandpa might be crying. On the drive back to town, the sheriff kept looking at him and patting his knee. Tom thought it a miracle his grandpa could shift the gear lever. He waited for harsh words, but they didn't come. Burks parked the wagon in back of the courthouse and kept his hand on Tom's shoulder all the way into the office. He wondered if the sheriff thought he might up and run off a second time.

Tom made a beeline for the toilet. The image in the mirror surprised him. Streaks of dirt, snot and blood striped his face. He filled the basin with water, tore off his ragged shirt and took a spit bath.

Ten minutes of vigorous scrubbing cleaned the dirt and blood from his skin. He studied his face, teeth bared from the burn of his hands, cheek and ear. It felt as if a million bees were at him, but the sting was a good feeling. He was clean and he grinned in spite of the pain. He came out of the toilet surprised to find clean pants, shirt, socks and underwear lying on a chair.

Tom looked at his grandpa. He sat hunched over his desk and busy with the usual glut of county paperwork. Tom took the fresh clothes and stepped into the janitor's closet. A few minutes later he walked out feeling like new ... Burks swung around at the sound of the opening door. "Boy Tom, I " The sheriff dropped his eyes to his lap.

Tom couldn't remember a time when his grandpa looked beaten, but today he did. A big lump stuck in his throat and he shook his head, pulling a chair close by the sheriff's desk. "You don't need to say nothing, Grandpa. I stayed the night in a ditch and took my time working at things. I come to know myself, I think. I believe I understand a bit better about who and what I am. I don't blame you for my life, but I ain't thanking you, neither. The truth is you've been my Daddy and Mama all my days. The reason I'm alive is part of what come out of the Burks hating the Hydes and the Hydes hating back."

Tom studied his lap. He didn't have it right in his mind yet, but he decided to plow ahead. "I suppose I could rage over being a child of hate. Most everybody is a child of love, I expect. That don't change nothing, though. I got my chance at life and I'm going to make the best of what I got."

He looked at his grandpa, his mouth a tight line. The lump in his throat gone, Tom searched his grandpa's face with dispassionate eyes, looking for some reaction.

Burks leaned forward and squeezed his hand. Settling back in his squeaky chair he looked up at the ceiling. "You made us quite a child, Laura Lee. Yessir, quite a child."

Burks lowered his gaze and Tom saw his eyes had a soft, sad shine to them. He could almost feel the old man's pain.

"You've never been my grandson, Tom. You've always been a son to me. I know I let you down, but I've loved you hard, boy. Ever since I first laid eyes on you through that window at the hospital in Oklahoma City. I've loved you like I loved your Mama. Just like my darling, Laura Lee." Tears spilled across his cheeks and disappeared into his beard.

He moved around the desk and pushed his fingers into Tom's thick chestnut hair. Burks jerked his hand back as if realizing Tom was a man and in no need of such intimacy. He crossed the room to the window and Tom thought about the words of love spoken by his grandpa earlier.

To him they were only words. He couldn't be sure of the man's true feeling. He couldn't forget the powerful hate Burks held for the long dead Hydes. He watched as the sheriff bent down and looked out on the busy street.

His voice, when he began to speak, sounded tired and filled with what Tom thought of as relief. "Hate does terrible things to a man." Burks straightened and tugged at his vest. "I lost my soul to hate when I was about your age. After I got full grown, I helped build up this community. Someday, if you want it, Hyde's Corner will be yours. I've put a goodly sum by. When you're ready, I hope you'll find a good woman and make a family. I hope you'll see fit to take care of what I built ... Hyde's Corner and Sundowner County. It's like our family. You know that don't you, Tom?"

Burks dropped his eyes. "Tomorrow. That's when your real learning will start. We've been over a bad place in the road. We're passed it now and we'll never have to fix those chuckholes again." Burks returned to the desk, gave the blotter a whack and hooked his thumbs in his vest. "You hungry? Let's go get some breakfast."

When his jocular mood failed to get a response, Burks took a seat on the corner of the desk. He searched Tom's eyes.

My message is here if you can read it.

After a long minute Burks reclaimed his chair. "You got something more to say to me? Spit it out and get straight with me right now." The sad beaten look no longer had a place on the face of the man staring at Tom. Selmer Burks, Sheriff of Hyde's Corner and Sundowner County, had charge of the situation. He gave Tom a hard look.

Tom refused to back down. "I've seen the way you look at me sometimes. I never thought much about it until you told me who my Daddy was and how I come to be. I know you've been looking for the Hyde blood to show itself. How's that cut with that love you talked about?"

The sheriff leaned back in his chair as if Tom had slapped him. His face turned the color of his white beard. Tom thought he saw a look of fear creep across his face, but a quick blink of the sheriff's eyes chased it away. "Hell boy. Whatever Hyde blood ran in your veins died a long time ago. Look at you. You're Burks through and through. I don't ever want to hear foolish talk like that again. You understand me, boy?"

Tom leaned forward. "I'll take that as your word, Grandpa. If I'm a Burks, I figure we can't leave the past just yet. Not until I know it all. Tell me about the fight."

A quizzical look raised the sheriff's eyebrows. He leaned forward arms crossed on the desk.

"You know the fight I'm talking about," Tom said. "Tell me about the real note you sent off to Jared Hyde. The one Uncle Sid delivered. The one Hyde balled up and threw at you before you killed him and his boys. What happened to that note, Grandpa? Did Uncle Sid know what was in that note? You said there's no time for lying between us, but a way back you did. I can understand the reason for the lie, but it makes me wonder how many more are hid up inside you?"

"I wasn't lying to you," Burks turned a cold, dead eye on Tom. "I didn't think times was right, that's all. You've always been a smart one. A quick study. You figure I wrote two notes? You tell me. What the hell you think I put in that note? You should have it figured. You don't need to hear it from me."

"I think we need to start off fresh is all." Tom's eyes held steady.

A sparkle of life came back to the sheriff's eyes. He sighed. "Maybe you're right. You've got a lot to learn as yet, but I do believe you're going to be a hard one. Maybe harder than your Great-grandpa Silas and me put together."

Burks folded his big hands on the desk top. "You listen good, son. Listen and lock it up. We won't speak of this again, understood?"

Tom nodded.

"I wrote a second note, but it was a note for them dammed township officials. In the first note, I gave Jared Hyde the truth. Knowing his pride, I wrote it all down and I had no doubt he'd make a fight. I figured even a coward like him would get his back up. One way or the other, I meant to kill Donald and Robert. Jared knew that wasn't in doubt. I wanted him and Singh in the bargain. I wanted it finished once and for good."

The sheriff paused, his hands knotted into fists. Tom sat quiet eyes filled with a resolve to hear it all.

"I told Jared what he'd only guessed before," Burks continued. "I told him I killed his own. The mercantile robbery and Richard was my doing, not Texas men. I told him I waylaid Edward outside the store one night and poured a quart of whiskey down his gullet. Wasn't hard to haul him up to the hayloft and drape him on some feed sacks. By the time the whiskey worked into him, he'd made boot marks on the hay bales. After a time, I put him on my shoulder and tossed him out the loft door. A freight wagon parked below worked out perfect. Edward broke every bone in his miserable body. I just made it back to my bed before Beaman come banging on my door."

Burks stood and Tom watched him pace. He roamed the office and glanced at Tom several times. "I told Jared I would kill Trudy, too, but I wouldn't a done it," he said in a hoarse whisper. "Not then. She was a hateful, high-and-mighty girl all right, but she didn't need doing right then."

Tom sat fascinated, watching his grandpa's eyes. They seemed as dead as Tom's innocence.

"I took revenge, boy. I made them pay for my daddy and my sweet sister Iona. I collected what was due for my Mama and brothers. That's all of it. I expect to pay in the hereafter for my poor ways, but I ain't a man to throw my life away, neither. While Tassel walked down the street, I wrote a different note. A professional and proper note. I left it here in the desk. That's the one the mayor and judge and everybody saw. I've got no regrets, boy. I done what had to be done."

What his grandpa told him came as no surprise. Tom had given thought to many of his unanswered questions during the previous night. He drew conclusions of his own, but they were guesses. Now he understood the depth of hate Selmer Burks held inside.

He marveled at the bold vengeance his grandpa took on the Hydes. His lack of fear. Tom could only admire the tactics used to draw Jared Hyde into a fight to the death. It didn't take a genius to figure the sheriff would kill whoever defiled his only child. A hideous affront to the Hyde family pride played out as a perfect scheme. Tom felt a strange, heady pride. The draw of that dark pride scared Tom a little, but its magic made him feel powerful just the same.

He realized by the time Selmer Burks finished, Cedric and Rhoda Hyde were the only members of the family to escape his revenge. It was said they died a natural death and Tom felt sure that was the way of it. He got up and walked to the door. "What happened to Trudy Hyde? Did she come back after you killed her daddy and brothers?"

The sheriff brushed at the sleeves of his long coat. "She paid us a visit. You were about ten, just a tyke. Tassel come pounding on the door early that morning. Do you remember? It scared you silly. I'll tell you about it over breakfast."

Tom nodded. "Let's go, I'm starving."

Machinations

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1943 - 1946

Through the winter months of 1943-44, Tom witnessed the fickle nature of Hyde's Corner's politics. Those sympathetic to the Royster-Porter faction ostracized the sheriff and his grandson. Phillip Lefford, with wet finger high in the political wind, found the dry side leading him in the direction of the Royster-Porter agenda.

Mayor Royster called for secret meetings away from Hyde's Corner. He supported postponements of an inquest by Porter lawyers. The Porter brothers needed more time to gather evidence. Their fervent hope ... enough evidence to convict Selmer Burks of malfeasance at the least and something more sinister if possible.

Bill Royster saw the death of Homer Porter, Senior as a way to rid himself of the sheriff. Mayor Royster used all his influence to help the Porters and thus further his ambitions. Junior and his brothers looked for vengeance ... pure ... simple ... personal. With Albert's goading, Junior instigated investigations both legal and otherwise. The Porters brought local, county and state charges, but nothing stuck. The inquest into the death of the wealthy dairy farmer would be the linchpin. Vindication or resignation and disgrace awaited the Sheriff of Sundowner County. Naïve Tom Burks, with his limited political savvy, watched the double dealing and worried.

Burks sprawled in his chair, hands folded over his stomach and fast asleep. His peaceful slumber lived a short life. Tom rushed into the office, slamming the door behind him. The subsequent racket put an end to the first deep sleep Burks had enjoyed in three days.

"Grandpa. Grandpa? Holy Jesus. How in hell can you sleep with important goings-on right next door?"

The sheriff's eyes popped open and his boots dropped to the floor. A grunt and a lunge had his massive forearms flopping on the desk. Head tucked into his shoulders, he looked like a mad Brahma bull ready to charge.

"Thomas Silas Burks, how many times I told you? Don't come in this office like a braying donkey in heat. Go back and close that damn door proper." The rasp of his voice, heavy with sleep interrupted, sounded just above a whisper.

Tom pulled a contrite face. "I'm sorry, Grandpa. Don't you want to know how the inquest turned out? How come you didn't go up there? Boy, the liars."

Tom opened the door and closed it in a gentle manner. Deflated, he plopped down on the couch. Knee jumping, he glanced out the window chewing his lip. The mayor's shiny old

Packard sedan roared by on Cedric Street, horn honking at someone foolish enough to cross the street in front of him.

"Mr. Royster sure ain't happy. I just don't get it, Grandpa. Everybody's worked up, but you."

Burks got up and glanced at the table against the west wall. It now held the hotplate and coffee pot. He wandered over and peered in the pot, picked it up, shook it and made a face. "The coffee needs tending. Make yourself useful," he said and wandered back to his desk.

Tom marched the percolator into the janitor's closet and slapped the old grounds into the wastebasket.

"There wasn't a need for me to be there." Burks said, his voice stronger, but still sounding like gravel in a tin bucket. "Stoner didn't need me as a witness. The Hyd The Porter lawyers would've tried to get my goat ... make me lose my temper. Stoner took my deposition. That's my sworn testimony. What with the other witness testimony, I don't expect them Porter lawyers demanded cross examination. I expect the judge cleared me. Am I right?"

Tom came out of the janitor's closet a smug look painted on his face. "You were exonerated of all wrongdoing in the death of Homer Porter, Senior. That is the verdict of the inquest, Grandpa. Victim expired due to heart attack. Pretty fancy words and about time, huh?"

Tom watched his grandpa's face. He didn't expect a hardy laugh, but he thought a smile might be coming. The law had finally rendered its verdict, but Burks looked pensive. Tom brought him a fresh cup of coffee.

"The verdict is good news," Burks said, "but whatever you do don't get cocksure about it. The Porters got a lot of money and they got Royster behind them. Albert will prod Junior along. You can bet on it. They'll spend lots a money trying to hurt us in other ways. We'll be on our guard. We'll step soft around the town's business and take special measures with the side business. We'll watch our Ps and Qs." Burks sipped his coffee and nodded his satisfaction.

The days and weeks passed. Tom followed his grandpa's example, but couldn't help but wonder ... what came next? At times Burks confused the Porters with the long dead Hydes. The notion seemed crazy and that's what bothered Tom ... the crazy part. With a bottle at his elbow, and a dark whiskey mood on him, Burks could be capable of all manner of crazy behavior.

There were times when his grandpa thought he was alone and Tom overheard his murmurs: "Rich, high-and-mighty people ... Hyde people ... why don't you stay dead? You got to have your taste a Burks blood. I know it. I damn sure know it."

In sober moments, Burks put a heavy hand on Tom's shoulder. With fevered conviction burning in his eyes, Burks would whisper, "They're out to get me, Tom. Me and mine. I know I sound silly boy, but you trust your old grandpa. You're a Burks. They'll be coming for you, too."

Tom wanted to believe his grandpa exaggerated, but the existence of devious enemies couldn't be totally discounted. Tom knew Royster once shared in the profits of the side business. Now, the mayor wanted Burks out of office. Royster sought to ruin the sheriff politically and destroy his good name. Royster's goal seemed to be total control of Sundowner County and all its power and assets.

To accomplish his goals, he divested himself of all connections to the sheriff. Royster thought the rest would be easy, but the mayor overlooked one important detail. Tom knew his grandpa kept a record of side business expenses. In one of their basement conversations he said, "There's a safe at the house, Tom. I got a journal in there. I kept track of payments I made to all

my partners though the years. Royster and his cronies think they've come away clean, but I got a surprise for them."

Would Royster be surprised when he made his final move. Tom wasn't so sure. Suppose the mayor had a consensus of the township officials and that consensus went against the sheriff. Suppose he got his hands on that journal somehow? That's all Royster's would need. If the township council, the judge and county prosecutor joined Royster's conspiracy? Tom shuddered.

It all came down to economics, Tom figured. Royster only needed to offer a better cut of the pie. Would those Burks put in office betray him for money? All the sly sneaking around indicated the answer was yes. Each time Tom ran through the various scenarios in his mind, his palms turned clammy. Maybe the safe at the house and the journal were only part of his grandpa's whiskey dreams.

The balance of 1944 remained quiet. Christmas and New Year came and faded away without incident. The war in Europe began to wind down. Major victories in the Pacific had Japan on the run. By the end of January 1945, allied forces all but surrounded Germany and people claimed Hitler was trapped somewhere in Berlin.

Everyone thought WWII would soon be over. The mood around Hyde's Corner turned festive. The sheriff and Tom remained vigilant not trusting the calm and jovial atmosphere. To his credit, Burks left nothing to chance. No favoritism or dealings for kickbacks. Payments on Capital Fees and the collections for Recommends proved difficult. The atmosphere provided a new urgency for Tom's education in the ways of the private ventures.

On May 8, 1945 Germany surrendered. The war raged on in the Pacific until August. After explicit warnings to the Japanese government, atomic bombs were detonated over the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The United States accepted the unconditional surrender of the Japanese government on September 12, 1945.

November 19, 1945 fell on a Monday. Tom had no cause to remember his seventeenth birthday. No plans to celebrate with friends. He hoped the day would pass quietly giving him a chance to study the various county and township ordinances.

The fist of Tom's ambition held tight to one important goal. He worked toward a legitimate status as deputy sheriff. He had a year to go and his excitement grew. He would wear his star with pride. He planned to enforce the law like his grandpa, without a firearm. In the meantime he crammed. Local, county and state codes were dry reading, but he kept at it. He meant to leave no task undone.

Tom surpassed Burks in physical presence. He stood six-five and worked his big body hard. Tom responded well to physical exercise. He seemed to grow bigger on a daily basis. Tom and his grandpa had grown closer. The secrets they shared gave them a special bond. Their mannerisms were uncanny and they got on well together.

Tom and the sheriff were in agreement on important subjects like politics, law enforcement and church going. When it came to looks they parted ways. Burks claimed Tom took after his Mama with his thick blond hair and hazel-green eyes. He had a warm, innocent and friendly way about him until a breach of the peace turned him hard and cold.

On an errand to the Hyde's Corner Journal, Tom found a tintype of the Hyde family in the paper's files. The picture included his rapist father, Robert Hyde. It seemed obvious to him who was responsible for his fair skin and blond hair, the blood of his father provided it not Laura Lee

Burks. Tom feared old timers might see and guess the Hyde family tie. He shaved his head and took proper care of his beard.

The winter months of 1945-46 brought unwelcome change. Burks disappeared into his dark moods on a more frequent basis. He spent long periods away from the office. Tom got sick and tired of explaining the unexplainable. Self-destructive behavior in his book translated to a self-serving self-pity in his opinion. As if drunkenness and nasty temperament weren't enough, Tom saw a strange difference in the actions and attitudes of the Porters, Royster and others. The opposition's unusual behaviors added nervousness to Tom's worry worn, testy demeanor.

The Porters seemed to have pulled in their horns. They sent hired help to town. Supply orders for Porter Dairy Farms came by phone. Mayor Royster and township officials began making friendly calls at the office. The sheriff's enemies definitely had something cooking in the kitchen and Tom didn't like the smell of it one bit.

The cold gave Tom's shaved head the fits each time he took a turn around the township. His friends teased him without pity. By the middle of March, he thought the hell with the old timers. Remembering his head-full of long thick hair made him smile. Tom's grooming problems, however, were the least of his worries. He had no one to talk to about his suspicions. The few times he saw Burks his grandpa acted short tempered and downright mean.

Sid Tassel couldn't be found. Tom stopped by Sara's apartment above the apothecary, but Miss Tassel never stayed home. He heard a rumor Sara and her father had a loud, violent fight. When he tried to learn the truth people turned away acting embarrassed. He paid a call on Doc Beaman, the man who knew all Hyde's Corner's secrets.

"Sid's gone, Tom." Beaman said. "He's taken a winter job in Tulsa I understand."

Tom tucked his head and plowed on. "I've heard he and Sara had a bad fight, Doc. Is that why I can't find Sara?"

Beaman looked uncomfortable. "I ain't going to pass along gossip I don't know is true or not. Sara keeps her own council. I expect you'll have to ask her about family matters."

Tom was on the verge of having a showdown with his grandpa when Friday, March twenty second rolled around.

"Is that Thomas Burks I see?" The sound of a female voice crackled like heat lightning in the silence of the sheriff's office. Tom sat slumped in his grandpa's chair. He jumped, lost in a convoluted paragraph of township ordinance legalese. Sara stood just inside the door. She smiled, collapsed her umbrella and propped it against the wall.

Tom felt his throat close up. Sara looked too beautiful to take in with one look. Thick, soft looking curls of her red-gold hair poked from beneath a dark gray scarf. She wore a long wool coat that matched the color of the scarf. The coat buttoned to her throat, but cinched in at her tiny waist. Her choice of garment displayed her full, firm figure to perfection. Tom came to his senses and managed a greeting. "Hi, Sara."

Her laughter whispered soft, but carried across the room. The sound made him feel tingly and he began to sweat.

"Hi, Sara? I haven't seen you in a month a Sunday's and that's all you have to say? My oh my." Her lips formed a smile that nearly stopped Tom's heart.

He couldn't remember a time he wasn't self-conscious in Sara's presence. He stumbled up from the chair and indicated the small couch. "I ... we ... will you have a seat, Sara? Can I get

you a cup of coffee?" He felt like a five-year-old with wet pants.

Sara shook her head and brushed her gloved hand along the curve of her hip. "No thank you, Tom. I just had to stop and see for myself. You've cut off all your hair." She took a step to the side and cocked her head. "I think I like it. It makes you look older." Sara giggled. "You look a little like Eric Von Stroheim only handsome. Yes, I'd say handsome." She nodded, satisfied with her decision.

Tom couldn't think of an intelligent thing to say so he kept shut. He felt his face and neck grow hot. To his chagrin his mouth and tongue formed words on their own. "We've been busy around here. The Porters, the inquest, county politics" His mumbled words trailed away to an unintelligible whisper.

Sara smiled again. Her eyes seemed to expose him somehow. Tom wanted to grab his pants and hold on. "It's strange isn't it?" She said. "A small town like this and we don't see each other for weeks on end? Course Selmer doesn't need me to baby-sit these days." She gave Tom a wicked look.

His face flushed a darker shade of red and Sara laughed. "Oh, Tom. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply you were a baby. You were always so mature for your age. Look at you now. My God. Do you realize you're bigger than Liddy Johnson's two boys? I swear I believe you're bigger than your granddaddy." She smiled.

Tom edged toward the janitor's closet. "I believe I'll just get a cup of coffee. I'll be right back."

In the closet he ran cold water in the washtub and splashed his face several times. He dried off with a clean dust rag. His bright idea came to mind as he looked for the coffee.

Put it by the front door, grandpa, so voters can warm their innards.

Tom edged out of the janitor's closet and pointed at the table by the front window. His face grew hot with embarrassment once more. "Forgot," he mumbled.

Tom felt Sara's eyes follow him across the room. He reached for the pot and noticed the old dried grounds in the bottom of his cup. He shuddered and poured anyway. Tom didn't look Sara's way as he crossed back to the desk. He leaned on the edge and sipped his coffee. The sound of Sara's sigh shamed him into looking up.

"Are you going to ignore me, Thomas Burks? I haven't seen you in a coon's age and now you're going to ignore me?" Her words sounded angry, but her eyes told a different story.

Tom put the coffee cup down and gave Sara a nervous smile. He didn't know whether to swat the fly or leave the outhouse.

"Sara, I'll tell you true, I'm all tongue-tied and fumble thumbed around you. Any young woman for that matter. Hell, Emmy Royster makes me nervous." He managed a weak smile.

Sara narrowed her eyes down and scared Tom to death. "If it weren't for the fact you don't know better, I believe I'd swat you one. You never tell a young lady that other young ladies make you nervous. Young ladies want to know they're the only ones making you nervous."

Tom looked stricken. "Sara? I don't know what to say. I mean Emmy's just a baby. You're a woman full-grown"

Sara put her finger to her lips. "Now you're learning. You've just got to figure when it's time to shut up."

Sara cocked her head again. To Tom, it looked like she might be figuring a hard math problem or such. Sara brightened and smiled. "I know just the thing. Tonight you can take me to see that new Rita Hayworth movie ... Gilda? I think that's what it's called."

Sara turned and picked up her umbrella. As she opened the door, Tom started to stammer an

excuse, but she just nodded. "You be at the apothecary at seven-thirty. I'll teach you how to treat a lady on a date. Seven-thirty sharp, Thomas. A gentleman is never late for a date. That's the ladies prerogative and that's lesson number one." She winked and closed the door.

Tom stared at the office door.

What have I gotten myself into? Why would Sara come around and invite me to escort her to a movie show? Did Doc Beaman put a thimble on her plate? Old Doc Beaman is a smart man. He's known me all my life. Sara is a willing listener and she knows how to give good advice to boot.

Tom enjoyed the movie. After the show Sara invited him to her apartment. A little after two a.m. Saturday morning he left to spend the rest of the night on the couch at the office. Sara agreed his worries were real. The enemies of Selmer Burks were busy planning his destruction. Sara gave Tom simple advice.

"Use your youth. Royster and the rest will dismiss you. They see you as an ineffectual boy. Use that anonymity. Watch and see who meets who and when. Listen when you can and make notes. Your grandpa will come back. He always does. When that happens you'll be ready and you can get him ready."

Tom asked about Sid and the rumors he had heard, but Sara shook her head. "Daddy and me don't see eye to eye on a lot of things. We had a disagreement, but it's personal. It's over now and it won't affect my feeling for you or your grandpa."

Tom went to sleep that early morning trying to figure what Sara meant by her last remarks.

The morning of September 20, 1946, Tom overslept. He rushed around and arrived at the sheriff's office a half-hour late, but found the street door locked. Six-thirty had come and gone. He wondered where his grandpa got to. Tom knew the sheriff left the house a good half hour before he scrambled out the door.

Tom found the office cold and empty inside. Where in hell would he get to at this hour? He smiled and remembered Sara's prediction. Maybe his grandpa had come away from his dark mood. At least, he wasn't getting a talking-to about laziness. Tom went to work making the coffee and getting the wall heater going. A little after nine-thirty Burks walked in. Tom came out of the cellblock broom and dustpan in hand. Burks crossed to the desk with a paper sack under his arm. "Morning, Tom." His voice sounded wore down tired.

Tom's eyes narrowed as Burks sat the bag on the desktop. The resonant rattle of liquid filled bottles sounded familiar. The sheriff dug in the sack. "Bet you forgot what day this is didn't you?" He didn't look Tom's way.

Tom went blank. He stepped into the janitor's closet and consulted the calendar on the wall. "God A'mighty ... it's your birthday," Tom walked out with a red face. "Happy birthday, Grandpa. Lord, I haven't even got a card for you, I'm sorry."

Burks pulled a quart bottle of bourbon from the paper sack and put it in the desk. Tucking the bag under his arm, he crossed to the janitor's closet and took a wool blanket from the cupboard before opening the door to the basement stairwell. "Don't worry about no card and don't go feeling bad, neither. You understand me, boy?"

The sheriff's manner was grim and he had a distracted way about him. He stared at the floorboards as if he'd forgotten something. "I'm going to spend some time downstairs. I don't want to be bothered for any reason." He looked up and nodded in Tom's direction. "You handle whatever comes up. It's time you got your feet wet." Burks disappeared down the basement stairs.

Tom stepped over and looked down the stairwell. "How long you figure to be down there, Grandpa?"

Burks stopped at the bottom and looked up. "Until I come up, I expect."

Burks set the quart bottle of bourbon beside the door of the isolation cell. He doubled the woolen blanket and put it on the steel floor. During the past few months his visits to the isolation cell had become a ritual. Until today, he made his visits late at night. What he took from the cell, he had no intention of sharing. At least not yet.

Burks grabbed the neck of the whiskey bottle and stepped into the steel box. With a shuddering breath, he pulled the door closed. He settled on the blanket and put the bottle between his legs. Gently, he allowed his head to rest on the steel wall. The cold seeped through his hair like water through a sieve. His skull grew numb.

Burks stared into the black void. His fingers moved with practiced ease and the bourbon bottle opened. He drank with deep, greedy gulps.

I'm sixty-six and Tom ain't ready. He waited for an some acknowledgment of his assessment. He tipped the bottle again. The fiery liquid filled his mouth and he moved it around, forcing the woody, charcoal taste through spaces in his teeth. He swallowed in little trickles and listened to the solid thud of his heart. Burks sucked a great lung full of air. Whiskey warmth layered his gut and spread like seeping blood, sluggish and thick. He let the air escape in a slow, easy manner. Every fiber of muscle and tendon in his body relaxed.

He smiled as he heard the first faint whispers. A soft pressure surrounded him and Burks felt the warmth of their presence. Daddy and Iona.

They're here ... they're with me again. In the black void of this special place, Burks talked with his daddy and sister:

Take the boy in hand, Selmer. It won't be long and they'll come for you. You expect him to stand up beside you? Not unless you do what's necessary. The reckoning's coming. The Hyde's will kill you anyway they can, son.

Selmer nodded. "I know, Daddy. I know their coward's mind. How do I show the boy? He ain't ready. There ain't much time left. Royster's quit taking his share. He and the rest are getting clean."

Show him their treachery, honey. Then you take the fight to them. Let Tom help you kill them. You've got to kill them all. When it's done, the boy will be ready. We'll have our family back. That's how it's got to be

Burks felt tears streaming into his beard. He felt powerless to stop them when he heard his beloved sister's voice. "What should I do about Sara? I know I'm a fool ... loving her like I do, but Tom needs to know. It's a weight on my heart, Daddy ... Iona? How can I explain what happened with Sara? Daddy? Iona? Don't go ... please ... help me to know what's the right thing to do."

Tom kept his fingers crossed while his grandpa celebrated his birthday. When Junior and his brothers failed to show up in town for weekend entertainment, he thanked his lucky stars. The following September days were hot, quiet and lazy. Tom felt reassured and allowed his smug disposition to breed a bit of contempt. He began to believe the Porter boys might give up and get on with life.

Mayor Royster, and the rest of his backstabbers no doubt figured the truth, Tom surmised. Selmer Burks is too powerful. Folks knew a body should step around the Sheriff of Sundowner County. The Monmouth County man made a perfect example for that argument.

A few old-timers remembered the showdown with the Hydes back in '28. The tale of that gunfight grew with the telling. Those raised in Hyde's Corner knew the myth had a soul of truth. Tom gave thanks. Only he and sheriff knew everything.

~ 0000 ~

24

Ambush

Sheriff's Office

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1946

Moving in a slow circle Tom pounded the heavy bag. The long, tightly packed, leather pouch jerked and squeaked under his heavy left and right combinations. The sheriff worked with a thin waxed hemp that whistled as it whipped around his head and feet. Burks finished with a flourish and breathing deep, he watched his grandson work.

Tom made another circle on the heavy bag. He caught Burks wiping his face on the woolen poncho he wore. Burks winked, turned and charged up the basement stairs. Tom continued his attack on the heavy leather. The chattering clack of the heavy bag's chain sounded like squirrels in heat. He sent the big bag swinging with several rapid, digging hooks. From the top of the stair his grandpa's voice rose above the din. "I'll be about ten minutes, son. You'd best quit. Get ready for supper."

Tom gave the leather an overhand right, hooked with his left and picked up his towel. He knew his grandpa didn't take his worries seriously. Despite the sheriff's joking, Tom felt a strong bite of foreboding in his gut. Their enemies were too damned friendly. Business matters couldn't be better. The quiet was way too quiet. He gathered his socks and boots and went up the stairs barefoot. Passing the janitor's closet that housed the toilet, Tom heard his grandpa's off-key humming and paused to listen.

Burks waxed euphoric. Sometimes it worked that way coming back from the depressive dark moods. Humming, he peeled off the sweat soaked poncho and grunted in satisfaction. "Sixty-six and still no stoop to the old man," he said.

In the mirror above the sink, he admired his huge upper body, proud of its layers of thick, supple muscle. Too big ... he looked slow and awkward. Burks rinsed soapy water from his face and upper body and studied his reflection. "Them that tried me lived some a the time, but them that lived regretted their faulty thinking."

He laughed. He felt good and grinned at his reflection, happy to indulge his ego. Burks finished drying, slipped into a clean pair of black wool dress pants and leaned closer to the mirror. His face remained flushed, a scarlet reminder of his work in the basement. He saw the network of tiny veins on his nose and cheeks.

Damn them little boogers. There's a new one every damn day. He wondered what would happen if he cut back on the bourbon? He shook his head. *That would damn sure make Tom happy. Happy enough, maybe, to hear about Sara?*

"I'd sooner tie a bow in a donkey's dick," he muttered. Burks slipped leather suspenders in place and grabbed a hand full of towels. *Sooner or later, but it's got to be done before someone at the Schooner opens their yap.*

Tom heard the snap of his grandpa's suspenders and moved across the room. He set his boots by the horsehair couch and bent to stare out the window. From behind, he heard his grandpa's voice, "It's all yours, Tom. Let's change and get on to supper. I don't know about you, but I'm starved."

Burks gave his chest and underarms another wipe. The street door slammed open and Tassel limped into the office. Burks blinked in surprise. "Three Toes? When did you get back? That Tulsa town sure ain't Hyde's Corner is it?"

Tassel puffed, wheezed and swayed. His drinking habit had grown while in Tulsa. He stared at his old friend and Tom saw a mixture of emotion cross Tassel's face. Fear and something like hurt and disappointment lay scattered in his eyes. Burks didn't seem to notice. His playful mood had his forehead knotted up and he laughed. "Well? What the hell you staring at? Ain't you seen a man without his shirt before?"

Tassel's voice slurred with boozy excitement. "Sorry. Sorry. I didn't expect to find you so easy. You'd best get over to the Hula Hut. Junior's over there. He's pouring drinks for everybody in sight."

Burks pulled a fresh shirt from a small cardboard wardrobe and shook it out. "Ain't breaking no law if he uses his own bottle. What'd he do cut you off?" Burks winked at Tom.

Tassel lost balance as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "No, Selmer. You don't understand. He's pouring cause he's celebrating. He's telling everybody he's finally got you cornered, he says. He's claiming he can prove his mama got murdered and you covered it up. He's saying you kept quiet for the oil companies. He says you got paid big time for doing it."

Burks seemed unconcerned with the news and Tassel grew agitated. "Selmer? He's saying you're still getting paid for lots of illegal stuff. Says he's found proof. For one, a man named

Temple." Tassel stumbled over his words.

Busy tucking a string tie under the collar of his shirt, Burks stopped and looked at Tassel. He moved around the desk. "Slow down a bit, Sid," the Burks said. "Did you say, Temple?"

Tassel nodded, his eyes beginning to bulge. They looked like the cartoon characters Tom saw at the movie theater. "Jesus, Selmer. I got to pee something awful. Can I use the"

Burks took his old friend by the arm, his eyes hard, slate-green marbles. "Finish what you were saying, then the toilet."

Tassel swallowed. "Junior said he found this old driller named Temple. Said you broke the man's back a few years ago. He's got another fella named Landsing. He's supposed to be Temple's old drilling boss. Junior says he'll back up Temple's story."

The sheriff released Sid's arm and walked him toward the toilet. "So this is all going on at the Hula Hut?" He glanced at Tom and stepped in front of the gun cabinet. Using the glass as a mirror, Burks tied up the string tie.

Tassel didn't close the toilet door. The farmer and part-time deputy had a short hold and was too drunk to care in any case. The sound of his discharge splashed into the office. Burks shot another wink at Tom and looked away.

"I got a bad feeling about this, Grandpa," Tom said.

Burks ignored Tom's assessment and raised his voice. "Who's over to the Hula Hut, Sid?"

Tassel hollered over the last of his offering to the Hyde's Corner sewer system. "Well, there's Hal and Natalie and Junior for sure. There's Byron and Albert. Oh and Frank Parsons and Nellie Older, but they's drunk. I don't believe they'd know the time a day. Oh. There's me a course." Tassel's laugh sounded like a clearing of a throat.

Burks slipped into his vest. "Thanks for the news, Sid. I expect I best go on over there. If Junior's sharing his liquor, I'll bet I can get a free one before I have to arrest myself."

He laughed again and opened the closet door. The full-length mirror slapped against the wood, but Burks ignored the sound and checked his appearance. Satisfied, he unlocked the gun drawer, hooked up and pulled the gun belt's tongue into its familiar notch. The big, Colt Peacemaker settled in against his hip.

Tassel struggled with his buttons as he staggered out of the toilet. Tom grabbed Tassel's coat lapels and pulled him through the janitor's closet doorway. Before disappearing into the toilet himself.

"Watch it." Tassel mumbled. "Ought a teach your boy some manners, Selmer."

Burks gave Tassel a hard look. "He's got manners enough. Button your pants straight." The sheriff rapped on the toilet door. "You'd best stay here, Tom. Get a couple of cells ready. We might have a new prisoner or two before the day's out. It's getting on to suppertime. I'll take care a this. After, we'll go eat. I won't be long."

He crossed the room to the coat tree. "Sid? You come along with me." The sheriff's tone left no room for argument.

Tom followed Tassel and Burks to the doorway. The two men struck off in the direction of Prairie Street and the Hula Hut Fellowship Hall. The sun dropped away to the west. Overhead a deep purple-black turned the eastern sky to velvet. Pastel tones colored the western horizon painting it in violet, crimson and burned orange, smeared with streaks of yellow-gold.

Tom watched Burks move off with a measured stride. Tassel glanced over his shoulder and

blinked his eyes, darting to Tom's face and away before turning and trailing along after his boyhood friend. Tom swallowed a lump in his throat. He felt damn sure his Uncle Sid wasn't near as drunk as he appeared.

Burks and Tassel approached the corner. The Hula Hut Fellowship Hall and surrounding streets were quiet in the dusk of early evening. Most folks sat at the dinner table, home for the evening meal. Burks crossed Cedric Street short of the intersection. He stopped in front of Delbert Selkirk's Tonsorial Parlor and Tassel moved up beside him.

The sun settled into the buffalo grass. Night crept eastward on centipede feet, but the streetlights remained dark. Pools of gloom began their evening collections. Burks looked toward the courthouse. In the growing murk, the head and shoulders of his grandson were visible.

"Looks like Tom's a bit nervous, he's watching our backs."

A fleeting look of frustration clouded Tassel's eyes. "I expect he worries about you, Selmer. You're strong and mean as a sidewinder with arthritis, but they's vile, sad tales going around. I've heard them and I'll bet a bottle of your best bourbon Tom's heard them, too. You're getting old just like me. Can't watch everybody. I think we're both too old to be much good anymore."

Burks put a thick finger in Tassel's face. "I don't know what sad tales you're harping about. There's lies being told about me every damn minute. Here's some truth. I'm getting old, but I work my body. I take care to eat once in a while. You could do with a little of both, Mr. Tassel. Leaving off the booze wouldn't hurt, neither." Burks shook his head.

Tassel began a reply and Burks hushed him. "Listen close. There's going to be trouble in that barroom. When you left where were the Porters doing their drinking ... table or bar?"

"They's all at the bar enjoying big glasses of whiskey. They ain't moved. I'd bet on it." Tassel squinted at the sidewalk.

"Okay. You're a little drunk, but that ain't hindered you from watching my back before. I'm asking you to buck up and help me out tonight. I doubt this'll be fist and boot. Junior and Albert are the ones, Byron's nothing, a good slap and he's done. Now if a gun comes out, I want you on the floor. You don't move a Goddamn muscle. You understand me Sid?"

Tassel continued his study of the sidewalk. He nodded and sighed. "Junior's got a gun. I saw him check the loads in the toilet."

"Okay then, I'm going right for Junior. How about Albert? Byron? You see them with any pistols?"

Tassel wagged his head. "Albert came in the toilet with Junior. If he had a gun, he would a been checking. I doubt Byron has anything, but I'll watch him." His voice sounded steady and stronger.

Burks put his hand on Sid's shoulder and pulled him closer to the storefronts. "I ain't going to give Junior time to whistle or say please. When I take him, Albert will be on me like stink on cow shit. I want you to come behind him and club that son-of-a-bitch." Burks handed Tassel a leather-wound sap with a wrist strap.

Tassel whistled low. "By damn, Selmer, you don't miss a trick. That is one hell of a lollipop-looser ... where'd you get it?"

"Some drummer came through selling police equipment. I ain't had a chance to try it out, you're first choose. Now pay attention, damnit. We don't have all night. When we go through the door they'll lock on me. I want you to drift off to my left. Stagger and stumble. The more the

better, they'll discount you altogether. Don't forget what I told you. I don't want you shot just because you're standing up. Let's go."

Tassel put the sap in his belt under his coat. For the first time since leaving the office, Burks realized a cold wind had come up off the prairie.

A good sign. Might be a mild winter.

The two old friends entered the vestibule of the Hula Hut Fellowship Hall. Someone had put a nickel in the jukebox. The popular song, 'Five Minutes More,' came pulsing over the old batwings. Burks didn't hesitate, but pushed through the louvered half-doors into the barroom. Sid came close behind and caught the batwings before they snapped back. He drifted off to the left.

Byron Porter stood at the bar nearest the door. He saw Burks first and Tassel following. He smirked and stepped away from the bar. Porter stared at the sheriff with contempt in his eye.

"Well, now. Lookie here, boys. Look what just come in the door."

Junior leaned on the bar, staring into a large glass of amber liquid. Behind Junior, Burks saw Albert Porter straighten and move back. The youngest Porter brother kept his hands away from his body.

Burks slipped the loop from the hammer of the Peacemaker. "I hear tell you Porter boys are celebrating. I hear you're pouring free drinks. Thought I might come on over and join the party."

Burks saw Tassel move in close behind Albert. Tassel watched the tall young man's every move. Frank Parsons and Nellie Older sat at a table against the wall. Both drunk and staring at the tabletop or their drinks or both.

Junior blinked and jerked upright at the sound of the sheriff's voice. His eyes looked tired and boozy, but only for an instant. His gaze went from fuzzy to hard and focused when he saw Burks. Junior dropped his glass, it hit the bar top, splattering whiskey in all directions. Owen came down the bar with a towel. "Goddamnit, Junior, what the hell's the matter with you?" He gave Porter a disgusted look and wiped up the mess.

Junior's eyes locked on the sheriff. Burks saw the younger man's rage and thought of that day so many years ago. Clyde Lewis and Junior in the apartment above the mercantile. The secret of the old shame passed between the two men. Junior's rage in turn fueled a vicious elation deep in the being of Burks. He knew this confrontation was long in coming. Reba Porter's death wasn't the poison that drove Junior's malevolence. Self-hatred drove his need for destruction. Self-hatred drove Homer, Senior in the same manner. Burks knew this for truth because he recognized the symptoms. The same corruption tainted the life of the self-same Sheriff of Sundowner County and motivated his actions.

Junior screamed. "There you are, you murdering son-of-a-bitch. I got you now, you bastard. I told you didn't I? I said I'd kill you." He reached under his coat.

Burks expected such a move and stepped forward. He saw the small caliber pistol as Junior brought his hand up and the young man screamed again. "Stand still you bastard."

Junior moved faster than Burks anticipated and the sheriff took a quick step to the left as Junior squeezed off his first shot. The movement saved his life, but the bullet dug a shallow furrow, beginning at the corner of Burks' right eyebrow and ending just above his ear. Burks stumbled against one of the pillars holding up the old piano stage and dropped to one knee.

The twelve inch square beam gave little protection, but enough. Tassel let out a holler and clubbed Albert Porter behind the ear. Junior jerked, looking to his right as Albert screamed in pain. Albert dropped on a table, the legs splintered as Albert and the tabletop crashed to the floor. The noise reverberated like a clap of thunder in the room.

The sheriff blinked and struggled to his feet, his senses returning. Junior leaned into the bar

looking for another shot. The report of Porter's gun blasted in his ears as a second bullet buzzed by his right ear taking a nip from the top. Tassel let out another yell and whacked Byron on the shoulder. Byron shrieked and went to the floor.

Burks felt warm blood running down the side of his face. He'd given Junior all the rope necessary for his hanging. Eyes clearing, he yelled, "Drop the damn gun, Junior. Don't you fire another shot." Burks made his voice loud enough to be heard throughout the barroom, and hopefully, out on the street where Burks was certain some citizen had gathered by now.

Burks took a step back and to the right. Now, he had a clear view of Junior. The young man had tears on his face. Burks didn't know if they were tears of sorrow or rage, but it didn't matter. Junior brought his gun to bear for a third time and Burks drew the Peacemaker, thumbing the hammer as he brought the Colt on target. In that split second, he saw the awareness of death in Junior's eyes. Burks hoped Porter saw the joy he would take in this killing to be done. In that miniscule eternity of time, his eyes gave Junior the truth of his contempt:

You never mattered, boy. Your family never mattered. You're just another Hyde ... and it's them that put you here.

His thumb slid from the hammer and a forty-four slug slammed into Junior's face, entering below his nose. It expanded and fragmented on contact with a hard ridge of jawbone and exploded through the back of Junior's head in a mist of blood, tissue and brain matter.

Tassel moved up behind his old friend. "Selmer? Are you hit anywhere else?" He stepped around so Burks could see him. The loud report of the forty-four turned everyone close temporarily deaf.

Owen threw a clean bar towel to Tassel who offered it, but Burks shook his head. "Hal? Give Three Toes a pitcher of water."

Burks pointed at Tassel. "You wake that bastard up over there and lock him up." Burks handed him a pair of handcuffs. "I thought I told you to get on the floor."

Tassel started a reply, but Burks shook his head. He walked over and looked down at Byron Porter. The young man lay in a puddle of beer holding his left shoulder. He cried with quiet, stuttering sobs. Burks grabbed Byron's collar and jerked. "Get up, you weak-kneed son-of-a-bastard." Burks pushed Byron against the bar and cuffed him.

Owen inspected the sheriff's face and ear. "Selmer let me call Doc Beaman for you okay?"

"Never mind Doc Beaman right now," Burks said. "You still have that Kodak around here somewhere?"

Owen shook his head. "At least let Nat take a look, will you? She can clean it up so's you don't get infected."

Burks shoved Byron in Tassel's direction. "Hal, Goddamnit." The quiet rumble of the sheriff's voice gave Owen fair warning.

"I think Natalie took it upstairs for some fresh film." Owen headed for the kitchen.

"Bring that flash attachment thing." Burks hollered at his retreating back.

A small crowd had gathered on the sidewalk. The keyed entry kept them out of the barroom. Tassel held Byron and Albert in the vestibule while Burks took pictures of the shooting scene. Owen and Tassel wrote down what they saw and heard. Frank Parsons and Nellie Older wanted to know who the hell caused all the commotion.

Twenty minutes later, Burks thought he had his bases covered. "Now you can call Doc

Beaman, Hal. You might as well call Stoner, too. I'm taking these hardcases to jail. Tell Beaman I'll see him in the morning."

Owen nodded in the direction of the front door. "There's a crowd out there. You want us go with you?"

"I can't remember a time in the past forty-six years I needed help taking in a prisoner. Not that I don't appreciate the offer mind ... but I can't tolerate doubt when it comes to doing my job. The Hy ... The Porter boys will go fine. If they want trouble, I'll knock them silly and put one under each arm. Right now, how about a taste of my bourbon?"

Owen got the sheriff's bottle and poured a good measure. Burks raised the glass gazing at the color. He wanted everyone to see his hands; steady and without the hint of tremor. He drank the bourbon in one long swallow and rapped the glass on the bar. "Three Toes," he said. "Bring those boys over here. Albert, Byron and me are going for an evening stroll."

Tassel stepped in front of his old friend. "I'll watch your back, Selmer." He leaned closer and whispered. "I got Junior's gun."

"You hold on to it and keep the sap, too, he said. "I might need you tomorrow. Now go on over to the bar." He urged Tassel along with a pat on the shoulder.

"Hal?" He made a circle in the air with his finger. "Give everybody a drink on the Sheriff of Sundowner County. I think the old bastard's going to see another sunrise."

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25

Old Secrets - Old Scores – Confession

Sheriff's Office

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1946

A white faced Tom Burks met the sheriff at the door. "Grandpa?" He said. "Jesus, Grandpa. What the hell?"

Burks pushed the Porters through the doorway and gave Tom a look, "Shut the door and lock it. I'm going to put these boys in private quarters. Let them cool down for a while." Burks let go of the cuff chains and nudged the men forward. "Straight on back boys. You can cool your heels for a spell."

Byron kept his head down and shuffled toward the cellblock. Albert stopped and stared at Tom and the sheriff, eyes full of hatred. Burks took a quick step forward and gave the tall young man a shove that snapped his head back. "Best move, Albert. You won't like the way I move you."

"What kind of knockdown-drag-out did you get into over there?" Tom asked, following the

sheriff from the cellblock.

Burks said nothing, but fished a key from his vest pocket and unlocked the desk. He reached for the bottom drawer and his bourbon. His legs turned to water and he dropped to one knee.

Tom stood at the window checking the street. "It was fist and boot, right? Am I right?" His voice shook. "It was just a little head banging, wasn't it? We ain't looking at holy hell tomorrow. Ain't that so, Grandpa?" He dropped the curtain and turned.

Outside a dog's bark violated the evening's peace. After a short silence the cicadas resumed their love songs. Burks found his chair and laid his head back. Several moths danced around the soft wash of the ceiling light. He glanced at his grandson, but kept silent. The pop of a fresh seal breaking sounded loud to the sheriff's ear. He tipped the bottle of bourbon to his lips and drank deep.

Tom plopped down on the old horsehair couch. He hung his head and wagged it like a dog's tail. "You're something, Grandpa. Yessir. You are something indeed."

Burks continued to ignore Tom and took another pull on the bottle. He felt lightheaded and his breath came shallow and quick. He put the bottle down and lay back in the chair.

A little shock is all. Burks squeezed his eyes against the pain. *It's happened before. After I got shot.* He heard a sound ... like a weak laugh. *The whiskey will set me right ...* and he went blank ... oblivion.

The smell of blood brought him back. Burks looked over and saw Tom, his grandson's presence surprised him. He blinked.

Where's my bed? What happened to my bedroom? Damn head hurts like sin. He reached up finding the rough furrow cut by the bullet. The pain burned like a knife slice. A warm trickle of blood slalomed under his beard and tickled his jaw. Everything came flooding back and he remembered Junior and the fight.

Burks sat up. *I'm in the office, a course. The Porter boys are in their cells and Tom doesn't know the way of it. Not yet. How long have I been out?*

"What the hell happened?" Tom's voice had a quiver to it.

A wave of contempt washed through him. He pushed the emotion away ... ashamed.

Tom crossed the room. "Jesus, Grandpa that looks bad," he said. "You're still bleeding."

The boy's eyes got the look of a scared coyote pup. Burks grunted. "Never mind. We've got important"

"I'll get a wet rag and call Doc Beaman." Tom said and hurried across the room for the back of the office and the janitor's closet.

A flash of fury rushed through Burks. He slammed the flat of his hand on the desk top and creaked forward in his chair. "Get your damn rag and set yourself down," he whispered.

Tom appeared not to hear and kept going. "That's a bad gash. What the hell they hit you with a beer stein? Hell. Part of your ear's gone, too. God knows how often Uncle Hal changes that wash water he uses."

"Tom." The voice of the sheriff boomed, seeming to bounce off the walls, the tone as hard as a granite rock face. Tom stopped, turning to stare at his grandpa. He couldn't remember the last time Burks had raised his voice.

The sheriff shook his head and wiped a hand through long, tangled white hair. "I don't need your sass or backtalk." As quick as his anger came it disappeared. When he resumed his voice had a weary, sad sound. "Get your rag and sit down. We've got talking to do ... and shut that cellblock door."

Tom disappeared into the janitor's closet. A moment later, Burks heard the water's hollow

drubbing in the washtub. Burks tipped the bottle and drank again. His head thrummed with pain, matching the beat of his heart. He grumbled, coughed and set the whiskey to the side.

Burks tipped back and searched the beams of the ceiling. They rippled like fast water over creek stones. He wished the lights were off. His stomach rolled and he closed his eyes. He heard the wind whistle under the courthouse portico.

Those are words I hear. They're whispering out there. "That's Daddy and Iona," he murmured and grinned. "The time for the settling is here."

"Grandpa?"

Burks opened his eyes. Tom loomed above him holding a wet rag in his hand. The sheriff smiled. How proud he was of his grandson. His son.

Tom is big, bigger than me, but what's the substance that holds him straight? Is his mettle forged of fine steel? A legacy of Burks blood? Or has that vile desecration so many years ago tainted the steel with pig iron?

"Those weren't backfires I heard were they?" Tom said. "Those were gunshots. What happened between you and the Porters? Where's Junior? You brought Byron and Albert in. Where's Junior, Grandpa?"

Burks took the wet rag and held it to the side of his head. "Snag that chair and bring it up here to the desk, boy."

Tom looked scared, but he pulled the chair over. He settled in the hickory ladder-back and swallowed hard, dropping his big hands in his lap.

Burks pulled the rag away from his wounds. He studied the bloody surface of the material. When he spoke, Tom leaned forward, the sheriff's voice had the rasp of sandpaper on wood.

"You do fill out a chair, but alone that don't count for much. I need to know if you're ready and I guess we'll know soon enough."

Tom took a deep breath and raised his hands to the back of his neck. He exhaled and pulled his palms over the tiny stubble covering his shaved head. "He's dead ain't he? You killed Junior. Didn't you?" The question sounded more like a statement to Burks.

The sheriff threw the wet rag in the direction of the janitor's closet. It hit the plank floor and slid through the doorway into the darkness beyond. He fixed Tom with dead eyes. "If you know the answer why waste time asking the question? You're smarter than that, boy. Junior wanted to die and he shot me to get it done."

"Oh, Holy Christ. We're in for it now. Mayor Royster"

"Royster, Lefford, Lewis and Sykes." Burks sing-songed the names. "They'll do their damndest, I'm sure. Hammersmith will join the party before noontime tomorrow or I miss my guess."

Tom jumped up and went to the front window. He stood to the side peeking through the curtain and searching the street. He yanked the window shade down and hurried to the door to check the lock and slide the bolt home.

"Tom."

Tom's head jerked in the direction of his grandpa's voice. Burks saw the boy's cheeks looked slick with tears. Tom wiped a finger under his nose. "The street's empty. That ain't a good sign this early. What about troopers? Will they call in state troopers?"

Burks turned in his chair. Elbows propped on the desk. He put a finger to his lips and shook his head. "I've had a change of mind." He nodded over his shoulder. "Go on back there. Get Byron and Albert out here."

Tom looked uncertain. "What ...?"

Burks dangled the cell key from his finger and stared at Tom. "Been a rough, sad night for the Porter family. Best they do their grieving at home. Go on, boy. Do like I told you." He cocked his head toward the cellblock again.

Tom shrugged and took the key. Burks hung his head and listened to the rattle and snick of the cell door locks.

"What's ...? What's going on?" Byron Porter's question was soaked in the sweat of fear.

"Shut up, Byron," Albert said. "Don't give that son-of-a-bitch out there satisfaction."

Burks brought his head up. *The youngest of the litter popping off. The strong one. Since Homer's death, he's run the family business. Albert is the vicious one ... the canny one. He alone kept his father's hate for me alive. Now, with Junior dead, Albert will put the resources of Porter Dairy Farms at Royster's disposal. The mayor will use all that money and influence to run me out of office. Maybe into a jail cell. Burks smiled ... that's what they think. All these years, I've kept Junior and Byron Porter's scabrous secret. What thanks did I get? Nothing but hatred. Nothing but blame for the death of Reba Porter. In the end I've been vilified by those I treasure most: My Sundowner County. My Hyde's Corner. My people. My cherished family.*

Burks snatched up the whiskey bottle. The burn of two greedy gulps brought tears to his eyes. He listened to the shuffle of feet and rustle of clothes. Albert's petulant voice turned the sheriff's stomach. "Get your hand off me and don't manhandle my brother, neither."

"Then walk, damn you. Move along or I'll carry you out like the bag of trash you are."

Burks listened with pride to sound of Tom's words. *His voice sounds as hard as Quincy's anvil, there's no tremor, no hesitation. He answered Albert's insolence, that's for damn sure.*

Burks turned around and watched Byron shuffle through the cellblock door. Albert appeared in the doorway and stopped to stare. A second later he stumbled into his brother propelled by a hard shove from behind. Tom stepped through the cellblock door his eyes gleaming like the black metal surface of the isolation cell.

"I said move, Albert. You won't like the way I move you, neither. You'd best concentrate on your feet around me."

Albert Porter's face went white. He turned, but found Tom had stepped in close. "You go on ahead and make your move," Tom said. He and Albert were close in height, but Tom had forty pounds on the youngest Porter brother. "Go on, boy, do what you think best." Tom moved closer crowding Albert's space.

Byron Porter grabbed his brother's arm. "Don't, Albert." Byron pulled, dragging his brother away. "We've got to take care of Junior. We don't need any more trouble tonight, okay?"

Albert jerked away from Byron's grip and glared at Tom. The moment passed quickly and the anger went out of his eyes. Porter's face turned sly and mocking. He nodded and focused his attention on Burks.

"I see you've got your bottle handy. Enjoy it, Sheriff. If you think a little time in your jail has cooled our blood, you're a bigger drunk than I thought. We ain't never going to cool off. Blood, heels or nothing else. You'd do well to finish us here and now. If you don't, we'll kill you and that's a Porter Promise just like it says on our milk and dairy cartons."

Burks looked at the tall, lanky, dairy farmer and grinned, his forehead turning to knots. "My, my, you are intimidating, Albert. Blood still running down your neck is it?" Burks raised his eyebrows in Tom's direction. "That's what's making old Albert here so mean spirited tonight, I believe."

The sheriff speared Albert with his eyes and laughed deep in his chest. "That sap works good don't it, boy? Oh, that's right. You wouldn't know, would you? You were knocked

senseless, I forgot. How's the floor of that barroom smell? You ain't much Albert. You'd best shut your mouth. Take your brother and get the hell out a here. Go now or I might take you at your word. That's my prairie out there and it's God-awful big. You understand me, boy?"

Albert wasn't done, but Tom moved forward, pushing the Porters toward the door, his voice soft and reasonable. "You can't gain a damn thing, Albert. Just go and take care of your brother's remains." Tom walked the Porters into the night air.

Albert stopped after a few steps down the sidewalk. He turned and spit in Tom's direction. "I'm not through with him and you, neither."

Tom shrugged. "You'd best count your lucky stars, boy. Empty threats make you sound a bigger fool." He closed the door turned the key and put the emergency number in the window. After turning the night lamp on, a weary sigh slipped past his lips. Tom shut off the overhead lights.

Burks came back from the janitor's closet with a coffee cup. He dropped into his chair and picked up the bourbon bottle. Tom watched as he fill the cup to the brim. "You should get your head seen to, Grandpa."

Burks indicated the vacant chair. "My head will keep. Finish closing up and take your seat."

Tom turned off the basement lights and left the door ajar. Closed the doors of the janitor's closet and cellblock and returned to the ladder-back.

"You going to tell me what happened at the Hula Hut?" He said, dropping into the chair. "You had it in your mind to kill Junior tonight, didn't you? That's why you didn't want me along."

Burks studied his grandson over the rim of his cup. His old swivel chair groaned in protest as he settled back. "I didn't want you along because I wasn't sure you were ready. Did I set out to kill Junior? No, but I'm glad I did. What may come tomorrow started back in thirty-nine. In forty-three, when Homer had his heart attack, I knew it was only a matter of time."

Tom dropped his eyes to the floor. "Fist or boot, I fear no man. If you're wondering whether or not I can kill, you're right to doubt me."

The silence stretched out. Burks sat with his fingers tangled in his lap and digested Tom's remarks. He stared and waited and wondered. Tom stirred and the sheriff's brain buzzed with jumbled thoughts:

What more can I do? That night three years ago, I made it clear enough. Tom should've recognized the evil we got in front of us. Daddy and Iona promised he'd be ready. Is it the act of killing the boy fears or the aftermath? Daddy? Iona? Why can't you help me now? The time is here, I know it. We have to kill them all. We can't leave one of them above ground. We've got to finish it.

"If you can't help me," Burks muttered, "it's all been for nothing."

Burks brought his head up and his eyes snapped into focus. Tom leaned across the corner of desk staring like he saw a dead man. Burks saw the boy's lips moving, but the sounds coming from his grandson's mouth made no sense. Tom reached out and grabbed his shoulders, shaking him. The boy looked ready to cry.

"What's the matter?" Burks said. "Speak plain, boy. I can't understand a word."

"What's the matter, Grandpa? You don't look right. Everything's gonna be all right. Are you okay?"

The boys response hit Burks like a jolt of electricity. He laughed and slapped the desk top. "Damn boy," he shook his head. "You had me worried there for a minute."

Tom sat forward, "Grandpa I"

"Hush, boy, I understand how you feel. You're just getting to know them. Hell, they've been trying to kill me for more than fifty years and they still surprise me. This time we'll finish them for good, you and me together. When we're done, the family will be yours to care for and I can have my rest."

Burks searched Tom's face. He saw tears drip from the sharp angle of his lean jaw. *The boy thinks I've turned the corner.*

He leaned forward and gripped Tom's wrist. "What is it, boy? You think the whiskey's got me? A bullet graze addled my brain and turned me crazy?"

Tom shuddered. He stifled a sob, but he held the sheriff's stare. "The Hydes are long dead, Grandpa. Trudy died in thirty-eight, you told me so yourself. There ain't no more Hydes."

"Good God, boy. If I hadn't signed your report cards, I'd swear you might be slow. Have you forgotten your family's history? Have your ears been plugged up with wax for the past three years? Ain't you learned a damn thing I've taught you?"

Tom's voice continued to shake, but this time it carried a hard edge. "I've listened close and paid attention, Grandpa. I understand"

"Shut," Burks said and waved his hand in dismissal. "You don't understand nothing about the folks we're dealing with here. High-and-mighty, boy. The high-and-mighty that's strutting around this township. It's them that'll come for us. It don't make no never mind what name they go by. The Porters, Roysters or Hammersmiths. They're all the same ... high-and-mighty people. They think they have the answer for how everybody else should live. High-and-mighty people crave power and they use lies. They use people who love them, anybody or anything to get power. High-and-mighty people have been using and killing people like the Burks since Adam and Eve."

The sheriff stood and paced the shadowed room. His head and ear throbbed. He wanted to go home. He wanted the comfort of his bed. He wanted ice for his wounds and enough whiskey to put him out, but Tom had to understand. The boy had to be ready to act without question.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow could be bad. Tomorrow, Royster and his lackeys could try and take me down. I'll be ready. I'll kill them all, but Tom has to stand with me. The setup at the Hula Hut Fellowship Hall is a good example. When the Burks have served their purpose, they are reviled, goaded with lies and executed in front of their friends. Tom asked and by God I'll give him the truth.

Burks came back to the desk, sat and leaned forward. Fixing his grandson with a hard stare he said, "You remember what I told you about Junior, Byron and the storekeepers?"

Tom looked lost for a moment and then his face colored. "You mean what happened at the mercantile"

The sheriff rapped his knuckles on the desk top. "You remember. Good. I'll tell you what went on tonight at the Hula Hut. If that don't tell you what has to be done? Well, I guess that'll be that. There won't be no need for me to say or do more. I mean to see an end to it."

Tom shook his head. "Grandpa"

Burks put a finger to his lips and held Tom's eyes and told him how Homer Porter, Junior died

"That's all of it, son. They set me up from the start. They picked the Hula Hut to throw off any suspicion. At first, I swear I thought Three Toes had a hand in it. Now, I believe I've

changed my mind. You see? All that's gone before is meant to bring us here. Right here to this place and time."

Burks settled back, the chair's creak and groan seemed amplified in the darkened office. His eyes didn't leave his grandson's face. "You can see it now can't you, Tom? Damn it boy, you've got to get past flesh and blood. You've got to understand the spirit. Hyde evil crawls into every nook and cranny of my county. It's in the air, son. It waits for those of weak character and infects them like the Spanish Flu. You only need to think on the actions of Royster, Hammersmith and the rest. Think about the last three years. If the Hydes win, they'll be nothing for the Burks. Nothing but" Burks took a deep breath. "Nothing," he finished.

Tom folded up on his thighs, staring at the space between his knees. He murmured at the floor. "I don't know ... I swear, I don't know."

Burks stood and moved around the desk to the coat tree. His head felt all bright with a searing pain. His feet moved like heavy limestone blocks, his steps arduous and slow. He slipped into the long coat and each movement brought a new stab of misery. A flash of fire at his temple took his sight and gave it back with a throbbing fist.

It was over now. Burks could feel it in every fiber of his being. After fifty years of seeking vengeance for so many wrongs, tomorrow it would be over.

It's just as well. This boy will never be the man I hoped for all these years. It's my fault and mine alone. I loved him too hard and protected him too long. Burks squeezed away the tears that made his eyes swim out of focus.

"Tom?" Burks said. "Pay attention, son. There's one more thing you've got to know."

Tom started to rise and then sat back down. "I'm listening, Grandpa, but I can't kill nobody. I can't kill ghosts that live in your head. I know you want me"

"You need to close your mouth and open your ears a bit more, Tom. I can't keep this inside no more. I love Sara and she loves me. I know it sounds stupid, but there it is, stupid or not. We been We are It's no good, nobody needs tell me it's got to end, but we been lovers ... we've been to the bed ... more than once. I've tried to tell her, but she looks me in the eye and ... you had to know, son ... now you do."

Tom jumped from the chair and stared at his grandpa. His mouth moved, but no sound, no words came out. He caught his breath. "You and Sara?" Tom said, his voice sounding close to a moan. "You and Sara? Oh my God."

Burks pushed ahead determined to have it all said. "I'm telling you this because there's gonna be a lot a loose talk about my evil intent. I betrayed Sid, I've hurt you and my family. I don't believe Sid or my family will understand or forgive, but I hope you will. Don't have no bad feelings for Sara it ain't none of her fault ... the fault and weakness is all mine."

Tom said nothing. He turned his face away.

Burks turned the key in the street door and looked back, but Tom hadn't moved. "I'm going home, you come when you're ready. You can wake me if you've got something to say."

Burks stepped into the night and pulled the door closed behind him.

The drink the sheriff bought was long gone. Tassel hung around and finished a few more. He watched Owen pour Nellie Older and Frank Parsons out the front door. The glass he held was empty and he knew the time had come to head home. Tassel stared at the bar's top. Home. The last place he wanted to go. His eyes filled up and he grabbed a bandana from his coat pocket,

blotting his brow and cheeks with quick furtive dabs.

Tassel gave his nose a blow as Owen slapped him on the shoulder. "You coming down with the croup or something?" Owen said and laughed, circling round behind the bar.

"Naw. A touch a hay fever," Tassel said. "Can I buy a bottle for home?"

Owen turned off the barroom lights. He craned his neck and gave Tassel a look of mock chagrin. "You asking me to break the law, Deputy Sheriff, Tassel?"

Natalie came from the kitchen, ready to join her husband in a little friendly banter. "Did I hear right, honey? Sid wants us to" Natalie stopped short and her smile ran off her face like spilled water. "You all right, Sid?" She moved around Owen and came down the bar.

Tassel pushed up a smile, but it came off grim. "I'm just down, Nat. Bad ruckus here tonight what with Junior dead and all. Ain't seen Sara in more than a month. It all adds up."

Natalie reached out, cradling Tassel's hairy jaw in her palm. She smiled and turned to her husband. "Hal, hand me one of Selmer's bottles, please."

Tassel shook his head. "No. No ... I don't think that's a good idea."

"Don't be silly." Natalie shushed him. "If Selmer were standing here, he'd insist on you having at least one and maybe two. You took his back tonight. There's not many would."

Owen slid a quart of Ezra Brooks Sour Mash Bourbon whiskey in front of Tassel. "No charge, Sid."

Tassel dipped his head. "Thank you, I appreciate the kindness, I surely do." He tucked the bottle under his coat. "I'm glad to be back home. Didn't like that Tulsa town much." Tassel started for the batwing doors.

Owen called out. "You going to be okay, Sid? Driving I mean? I can run you home. Ain't no trouble at all."

Tassel's tight smile looked like the soul of dejection. "Brains on the wall tend to sober a man right up. I expect I'll be just fine. I still got my badge on, that makes me the law in these parts. Sure as hell ain't gonna arrest myself."

Owen and Natalie watched him turn to leave, but Tassel stopped. "Have you heard any talk? I mean" He took a breath, "Has there been tales going around about Selmer? Vile talk" Tassel's voice trailed away.

Owen and Natalie looked at each other and Hal shook his head, "We ain't heard any such talk. What kind of vile tales?"

Tassel turned and gave his friends a wave. "It's nothing. I figured as much. Thanks again. Nite."

Tassel disappeared into the vestibule. A second later the sound of the front door's heavy lock echoed through the darkened barroom.

Tassel passed the twelve mile drive to his farm in silence. Royster's phone calls brought him back from Tulsa. He and Sara fought over her friendship with the Saint Jardines before he left. Now, he knew she worked for them all along despite his objections. He couldn't believe Burks encouraged her. How could his best friend think his little girl should take over after the Saint Jardine's retired? He didn't believe it. Not with Owen and Nat in the dark.

I'll talk to Sara first. If I tell her the truth. If she knows who her real mama is that'll make the difference. Martha always refused to budge on the subject and I know that for a fact. She's rejected all my demands to tell Sara the truth for the twenty-four odd years.

Tassel vowed to break his pledge. Martha's refusal of help voided all promises. He had to steer Sara away from the Prairie Schooner.

What've I got to lose? I'm only afraid of one thing and that's Sara's connection with the Saint Jardines and that vile roadhouse. The rest? About Selmer Burks? That's the next thing to impossible.

When death stole his wife, Tassel accepted his lot in life. Without his wife, he was nothing. He lived up to his ne'er-do-well image and became a drunken one to boot. Burks was the only man who continued to believe in him. He kept him working as a deputy. He pulled him out of one gutter after another and gave him a warm bed to sleep it off. Then, Sara was born, and it was as if the Almighty tapped him on the shoulder. God gave him a beautiful baby girl to redeem his wasted life.

He blamed his weak will for Trudy Hyde. Burks saved Sara and gave Trudy to him. To guard ... to watch over. Instead, he turned into a damn killer. The bottle was next and it was so easy for him. While he was drunk, the Jardine's led Sara into a whore's life. Tassel's eyes clouded over. The thought of that tragedy broke his heart. Worse. He allowed it to happen and he would be damned to hell for sure.

He bounced to a stop beside the worn farmhouse he called home. Tassel stared through the dirt streaked windshield and made his decision. If he had to kill again to keep Sara from a whore's life; then by God he would do it.

The phone rang as he stepped into the parlor. He knew who it was and he thought about ignoring the damn thing. He set the bottle on the table. The thought that it might be Sara scratched at him. If he didn't answer, the lack of knowing would eat him alive. Tassel picked up the phone and recognized Bill Royster's high, squeaky voice.

"What the hell happened?" Royster yelled in his ear.

"Junior's dead."

"I know Junior's dead, damnit. I know Albert and Byron are in jail. I'll ask you again. What happened?"

"Why are you asking foolish questions? I been his deputy for more than forty-five years. I been his best friend for sixty. It's all instinct, you damn fool. Besides which I believe you been lying to me. I don't have to explain nothing to you. Just leave off me and go to hell. That's where you belong." Tassel started to hang up, but something in Royster's voice stopped him.

"Goddamn you, Tassel. You're wasting my time. I tried to do right by you. I didn't want to tell you the rest. I wanted to spare you, but"

~ 0000 ~

Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma 1946

He glanced at the English Tavern clock. The old timepiece dominated the west wall of the sheriff's office for as long as he could remember. Tom noticed cobwebs stretching from the top of the clock to the ceiling.

Those weren't there yesterday. Where the hell did they come from? Six-thirty-five and the sheriff is running late. I should've gone home last night. He cursed his bullheadedness. I shouldn't have stayed at the jail. Grandpa got shot and I let him go home alone. Well, I'm mad about Sara ... damn right and I ain't going home, maybe

He spent a restless night picturing Sara and grandpa together. At first he felt nothing; the shock of the idea too much to bear. Then jealousy set in. What did she see in an old man? An old drunkard ... a brawler ... a killer. Hatred for his grandpa burned deep. Then, as time passed, he blamed Sara and turned the hatred on her. Coming on dawn, he cursed himself for playing a fool. How could he think she would feel anything but friendship for a boy seven years her junior. I'm nothing to her. A silly, foolish boy. He put it all down right there and tucked his anger away. After, he slept for two-and-a-half hours.

Through the windows, the autumn morning gave the room a bright yellow look. Outside the air would taste crisp and clean. Tom wished he could feel like that ... crisp and clean. He leaned on the broom's handle and rubbed his grainy eyes.

Making coffee, he swore to set things straight with grandpa. There would be no hard feelings. What Sara and he did or didn't do was none of his concern. In the same breath he meant to speak his mind about the Hyde fantasies. Tom had to convince his grandpa the time had come to retire the Hyde ghosts.

Whiskey gave life to the evil his grandpa imagined. The Hydes were dead. Whiskey woke the demon and the demon brought life to the Hydes in his grandpa's head. That's the way Tom saw it or thought he saw it. He searched his mind.

Am I being honest in making these decisions? Did the affair with Sara have to do with my decision? He couldn't say yes and he couldn't say no.

"Shit," he muttered, "I'm back where I started.

Tom opened the door and stepped out on the sidewalk. He looked in the direction of home, a quarter mile down Donald Road. The wind brought the smell of dry grass and dust. Tom looked back toward the Hula Hut Fellowship Hall. Sometimes his grandpa stopped at the Prairie Café for coffee and flapjacks ... no telling.

A crawly thing came alive in his gut and it wouldn't leave him be. Bad enough being Monday morning. A chill in the air added fuel to his bad feeling. The wind off the prairie rattled his teeth. Of a sudden, nippy weather showed up. That's prairie living for you, he hoped that was all he had to worry about.

Tom slammed back inside, his mood turning cranky. A cold empty maw ate its way into his gut. Bad feelings had him good. He'd gone over every little thing he could remember about the last three years, but as he did, he had to force Sara out of his mind.

Something told him all his brain twisting was for nothing. No kind of logic would work on Selmer Burks. To the sheriff the Hyde evil was as real as the bite of a winter's wind. Tom remembered his case of the flutters, yesterday during their basement workout. Grandpa had laughed and said, "You got yourself a touch of second sight, boy? You got some kind of mojo

working maybe?"

Tom remembered his laughter and a chill ran up his spine. Later Burks went on to kill Junior. He asked Tom to help in the killing of Royster and his circle of backers. Then he spilled the beans about Sara. About them taking to the bed.

Sara ... that bastard ... but he loved him. Mojoes are plain bullshit. The Porters, Mayor Royster, Judge Hammersmith, the township council; those were the jaybirds in his crew. There were no Hyde ghosts, neither. Hell, he could go on all damn day. Putting names to his enemies made him feel better.

The killing of Junior ... self-defense, plain and simple, but a disaster all the same. The sheriff having to do with a twenty-four-year old girl? Well, Tom couldn't think of a way to explain that fiasco. Talking crazy about ghosts wouldn't help matters, neither. Add the fact, he hadn't learned a thing to help the sheriff fight his real enemies made things seem damned dismal.

If wishing was doing, I'd be in good shape. Tom felt plain disgusted with his efforts and everything to do with Hyde's Corner.

He wondered if he should talk to Sara ... tell her he knew.

That would be a conversation. Yessir. He felt close to laughing, but the gnawing deep in his gut kept at him with gnashing teeth. It was about to drive him crazy. *What could he do about it? Think. That's what he could do.* Tom went on with his chores.

He moved his grandpa's chair and swept under the desk. Whiskey air. He could smell sour mash bourbon whiskey. Why didn't he smell it last night? Imagination, he decided. He wondered if hatred of whiskey caused some of his crazy ideas.

A man could only blame so much on liquor, but his grandpa wasn't thinking right, damnit. Tom knew he was right about that. If he could get through to him, he swore he would speak his mind. Crazy talk or not it would get done and he scoured the floor with his broom.

Tom finished just as Burks walked in. The sheriff shrugged off the chill, his nose and cheeks a rosy pink color. The furrow along the right side of his head glittered angry red, the edges crusted black with dried blood. The tip of his ear looked about as sore as a festering boil. Burks closed the door and gave Tom a sidelong glance. "Morning, Tom. You didn't come home last night, slept in the jail, did you?" He stared at Tom while he pulled off his overcoat. "I heaped a lot on your shoulders last night, you want a talk?"

Tom leaned on the broom. "I want a talk, but I need to get my thinking straight first."

"Shouldn't mind me too much, boy. I got a bit wound up last night. Lord, I had no intention of getting into a fight with Junior. You know I always felt bad for that boy."

Tom sat on the couch he had used for a bed. He looked around the broom handle and watched his grandpa pour a bit of coffee in his cup. The man's hands looked as steady as a mother's love.

"There'll be hell to pay this morning. You know Royster and his crowd. They'll be screaming for your hide before sundown. If they find out about Sara or Uncle Sid finds out? What you got planned for that?"

Burks walked to the desk and slammed the coffee mug on the blotter. Hot liquid jumped all over the back of his hand, but his attitude had gone from jovial to black in an instant. His slate-green eyes turned as cold as the icicle in Tom's chest.

"We'll keep family with family. There won't be talk about Sara between you and me again. Sara don't want her daddy to know about our She don't want him to know any more than I do right now. As to that ... down the line I mean to tell him, but it'll come from me. If it comes from anyone else, I'll kill them. Far as Junior's concerned, he was drunk. That's the only thing makes

sense. Much as I I didn't want him dead." Burks opened the bottom drawer of the desk and came out with the whiskey bottle.

Tom shook his head. He didn't care if his grandpa saw him or not. The dark whiskey mood had crawled into his grandpa's eyes that fast.

"That bottle ain't gonna solve our problems," Tom said. "Why don't you leave off that stuff. Keep your head right?"

Burks poured a measure and in his cup. "This ain't none of your concern. Who the hell you think you are? You're a pup. You ain't fit to"

"To what?" Tom yelled. "To kill on command? Kill whatever"

Burks dropped his eyes and finished with his coffee business.

Tom's knuckles glowed white on the broom handle. He took a breath and pawed through his mind. He had no desire to build this situation into an all out fight.

"I'm sorry. You're right. What you do, what you drink, none a that's my concern. I'm sorry.

You're right about what you were about to say to me, too. I ain't fit to kill Royster, Lewis, Sykes or any of them others."

Tom felt sick. He watched Burks stare off into space and take a long pull on the coffee mug. The bad feeling scratched away in the pit of his stomach, but Burks had him wore down. Too tired to stay mad, Tom got up and moved the broom around ... busy work.

The sheriff finished the mug and poured another measure before going for more coffee. Tom glanced up and saw Burks giving him a look. The sheriff nodded, grinned and finished filling his cup. He stirred the hot brew with his finger. After a careful sip, he took a deep breath and sat down.

"I know I been hard with you. I don't mean it. I've had this vision in my mind, you taking over the family. You're a man now. From now on you're my deputy ... my partner." He waved his arm in an all-inclusive manner. "I'm talking about all our various enterprises. Now on, I expect I'll trust your judgment."

Tom came to a standstill. He didn't know what to say. In spite of himself, he felt a swell of pride fill his chest. Selmer Burks didn't hand out praise often. Tom couldn't remember a time he expressed trust in anyone. He opened his mouth, sure what would come out would be something stupid. At that moment, Judge Hammersmith hurried into the office, beating any response he might have had to the punch.

Burks looked surprised to see the judge, but Tom wasn't surprised at all. After last night Hammersmith seemed easy. *Hell. It'll be state troopers before dusk settles in, I'll bet.*

The sheriff recovered. "Lookie here," he said. "Good morning, your Honor. Can I get you a little coffee? A taste of the hair, maybe?" The sheriff's eyebrows went up.

Hammersmith held up his hand. "Thank you, no, Selmer. This isn't a social call. I'm here to suggest you vacate the duties of your office. Temporary action of course. I intend to schedule a formal inquest into the shooting of Homer Porter, Junior. I'd like to take custody of your badge and firearm at this time and"

"Pardon my interruption, judge." Burks said.

Tom held his breath and let it out when Burks didn't come over the desktop. The sheriff eased back in his chair. He looked calm, but Tom noticed the knots and wrinkles in his grandpa's forehead.

"Allow me to point out a few facts," Burks extended a finger. "First off, there's no need to waste taxpayer money on an inquest, formal or otherwise. Junior pulled a gun on a duly authorized officer of the law, namely me. He attempted murder on that officer. Me, in case

maybe you forgot."

Burks rose showing two fingers in the judge's face. "There's plenty of witnesses to what happened last night, but fact two is this; Junior fired first. Not once, but twice." He pointed to his head. "He would've killed me, as you can see, if I'd give him another try. Number three, I'll decline your request and you can tell Royster, Lewis, Lefford or whoever's pulling your chain this morning ... nice try. This nonsense ain't going to work ... not today and not while I'm an elected official of this county."

Hammersmith hung his head. He looked like he'd lost his best friend. "You're making a big mistake. Folks aren't going to let this pass, it's 1946 man. We're a modern, law-abiding community. The state's going to take notice, they can't avoid it. There's too much killing going on ... three violent deaths in the past three years? Two of them Porter family alone? Top it off we've got people gone missing. Traveling men, wildcatters ... I don't know what all." The judge's double chins quivered, his eyes darted around the room.

"I've heard enough, judge. I don't need you or anybody hereabouts lecturing me about killing. I don't need a lecture on the high-and-mighty Porters, neither. That family came here dirt-poor dairy farmers, just regular folks. Money don't make you royalty. Not even a lot of money ... not in my county."

Tom eased down on the couch. Burks called him a partner, but he still feared being asked to leave. That wouldn't happen, he meant to see this confrontation through. Burks settled back in his chair and it groaned its insistent complaints. "You and the rest of the town's cronies don't know a damn thing, you know that, judge? Hell, how could you know? None of you been around long enough. This town is named for English foreigners. Yessir, that's right. The Hyde's were a high and mighty breed, but they found out their shit had a stink. They found out they weren't nothing special, by God and neither is the Porters, you got my word on that." He gave the desktop a rap.

Burks was up and around the desk so quick, Hammersmith jumped and stepped back, startled. The sheriff enjoyed the moment and he backed the judge toward the door. "I'm going to give you a lesson in first come, first served history your Honor. The Burks family ran cattle in No Man's Land before the Hydies showed up. Those Englishmen come around with big wagons, big money and a snobby way about them. They built a general store and got a town named after them. The Burks and their labor helped build that general store and town. This Burks took Hyde's Corner and made it work ... made it law-abiding ... made it profitable. Hyde's Corner is safe for your women and children. I'm talking about you, Hammersmith, the council, the mayor and all the rest. I make the money you boys jingle in your pockets and stuff in those hide-out bank accounts." Burks leaned forward nose to nose.

Hammersmith glanced at Tom and pointed a finger in the sheriff's chest, his double chins waving back and forth, "You just hold on, Selmer Burks. You're talking out of school and I won't have it."

Tom held his breath, but Burks reached for the door and jerked it open. His face looked cruel, but his voice had gone soft, about the right time for a sensible man to start running.

"Who the hell do you and your simpleton cronies think you're fooling with?" Burks snorted. "Sneaking around holding out a town meetings. Hell, you boys is amateurs, thinking you're keeping everything on the QT ... well, not so's you'd notice." The sheriff jabbed his thumb at his chest. "I run this shebang. Been doing so for forty-six years. You think you can come in here and preach lawing to me? I don't think so, judge. You get the hell out a here and tell your friends they better be careful. You can try putting me out in the next election, but I'll warn you now ... you

boys better win."

Hammersmith didn't utter another word. Face crimson, he walked out the door. Tom went to the window, watching as the judge marched to the curb. The fat man looked up and down the street. Then, Tom saw Hammersmith do something he couldn't figure. The judge made a sweeping gesture with his hand, palm down and spread flat. After, he shook his head and trundled across the street. The big glass doors of the Stockman and Growers Exchange Building slammed back hard as he disappeared inside.

Tom started moving the broom around again. Every couple of minutes he stole a look at his grandpa. Another shift in behavior came over Burks. Tom feared his grandpa's whiskey mood wasn't far behind. Something smelled different this morning and Tom could taste it in the air.

I'm gonna get my chores done. I want the hell out a here. Tom almost moaned the words out loud.

Burks drained his cup and went for refill number three. The sheriff still wore his long coat and Tom wondered if he planned a turn around town. Speculation died when a racket kicked up in the street. A sudden squeal of brakes and blating of car horns drew both Tom and the sheriff's attention. Burks peered out the front window facing Cedric Street. He stood silent a moment, then sat his cup on the coffee table and shook off the long coat. At the coat tree, he hung the garment in his usual meticulous manner, each sleeve shaken clear of wrinkles and shoulder seams aligned over the hanger.

Tom's mouth went dry. He hurried to the janitor's closet, dumped the dustpan and put the broom away. He stepped back in the office proper and saw Burks at the desk with his back turned. Tom hung his head when he saw the gun belt settled around the sheriff's hips. In his experience the long coat came off for office or gun work. It didn't take a genius to figure which job a work Burks planned to take on.

"You can't stop a pack of fools from doing foolish things." Burks muttered more to himself than to his grandson.

Tom felt the bile back up in his gullet. He stumbled to the nearest seat. His body heavy and clumsy as if he walked under water. His legs refused support and he collapsed on the couch. Burks turned, eyes seeking. Tom felt like a cornered mouse watching the cat approach. The sheriff looked hard and about to mean business. Something in those eyes made even the toughest Texas men think twice in years past and now the look terrified Tom.

Burks crossed the room to put a hand on Tom's shoulder. Knots on his forehead indicated a smile, but it failed to drop off into the sheriff's eyes. "Remember this, boy. Your gun is for serious business. Hereabouts we've had our share. Yessir, we certainly have." Burks gave the boy's shoulder a shake. "Looks like we've got more serious business today."

He returned to his desk to pour more whiskey. Outside the horn honking faded to silence. Tom's curiosity drove him off the couch. He looked through the window and couldn't believe his eyes.

Byron and Albert Porter stood on the sidewalk facing the sheriff's office. Both men were dressed in their Sunday best. Tom's mouth dropped open. The fools. They're dressed to die is all. The Porter's open coats made things clear. Each man carried a pistol and the grips protruded above the waistbands of their pants in plain sight for all to see.

The Porters ... damn their foolish hides. Tom's temper flared. *They're breaking every*

township ordinance written down and county law as well. Tom stared goggle-eyed and wondered if his grandpa saw the pistols, but of course, he knew the answer to that question.

Another car came around the corner. This one revved its motor. Albert turned and looked over his shoulder. His right arm came from behind Byron's body. Tom saw a sawed-off shotgun clutched in his fist. Albert used his brother's bulk as a shield for the weapon.

"Albert's got a shotgun, Grandpa." Tom's voice came out shaky.

Burks came up behind. He stayed well back not giving himself to the window. Tom glanced over his shoulder. "He's got it down behind his right leg. Byron's standing close so's you can't see it."

"Well now, ain't they the tricky ones?" Burks went to the gun cabinet and took down two pistols. He checked the loads and stuck the extra guns in his waistband front and back. Burks finished off the whiskey-laced coffee and wiped his mustache with practiced fingers. "What're they doing out there, Tom? Still just Albert and Byron?"

Tom nodded. He couldn't drag his eyes away from the two Porter boys. He grew up with them. He'd known them all his life. He felt sad. I'm looking at two more dead men ran through his mind. Tom dropped his eyes and turned. What he saw made his stomach turn over and his knees turn to water again.

Sheriff Selmer Burks looked as if he had stepped back in time. The holstered Peacemaker lay snug on his hip. The spare pistols jutted from the waistband of his pants. His eyes and tilt of his head had a cruel look. The sheriff's flowing silver-white hair and beard seemed thick and shining once more. A dazzling white shirt sparkled in the light of the window. His string tie lay like a black cross on a field of snow. Burks looked surreal ... bigger than life. Tom stared and resisted the urge to shake his head and blink.

His grandpa's eyes burned with a wicked joy. Tom remembered the Monmouth County man and shuddered with a chill. The sheriff's spirit overflowed and his eyes reflected the pure joy of killing to be done. Tom realized Sara was right ... grandpa, his grandpa carried the seed of pure evil. The demon leered at him for the second time and the truth hit Tom like a hammer's blow. How could Sara love this demon? This Selmer Burks? The answer must be that Sara was possessed by the same evil demon. That thought ripped the breath from Tom's chest.

~ 0000 ~

27

[Long live the Monster](#)

Sheriff's Office

**Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma
1946**

Tom shuddered like he was gripped with a palsy. He dropped his head between his legs as a wave of nausea hit. He drew in huge, greedy, gulps of air.

"Thomas ... Tom, boy, what's the matter?" Burks said, shaking his grandson's shoulder as he brushed by and stood to the side of the window. Tom picked up his head. His grandpa scanned the buildings across the street with care. Apparently, satisfied with what he saw, Burks stepped back and hovered over him.

"Calm yourself, son," he said. "This ain't the time. We're not ready yet and these two pups ain't worth a bullet. Not today. I spoke with Daddy and Iona. Before the years out we'll take the Hyde's to task. We're gonna take our family back and be safe again. Not today. Just not today." He stumbled over words like every other one eluded him.

Tom felt no surprise on hearing the sheriff's words. He realized the madness Selmer Burks suffered must be part of something, that demon something, that had no definition. Cold terror gripped him. He finally understood the evil his grandpa struggled to control. That he could do or say nothing that would stop the carnage about to happen shook him. The peace Tom sought-after, hoped for, was shattered ten short days after his grandpa celebrated his birthday.

What happened? He shook his head in wonder.

Junior lay dead in the county morgue. Now, his two brothers stood on the sidewalk outside, one step away from the same fate. Byron and Albert sported pistols in their belts. Albert had a shotgun. What fools they were to think they stood a chance against Sheriff Burks. Tom's string of good luck had run headlong into the Abyss and all his nightmares were about to come true. He couldn't get his head around the whole damn thing. How had it come to this?

He laughed, a dark, brittle laugh, and it startled him. How had it come to this? Corruption bred its inevitable results. He saw that now. The Hydes were gone, but now the Porters had taken their place and would pay a Hyde price for the privilege.

Who will be next? That dark, empty place in Selmer Burks will always need vengeance.

A fist of nausea pounded Tom's middle. *As long as my grandpa lives, I'll bear witness to death.* He laughed again and Tom recognized the sound for its hysterical quality.

Burks remained at the window assessing the scene one last time. He glanced over his shoulder at Tom's laugh. "That's the ticket, son. Daddy and Iona said you'd be ready, but this time you stay in the office. This ain't the fight, this is nothing. I can't afford to worry about you. I might be busy for a spell. You understand me, boy?" Burks eyed Tom waiting for an answer.

Tom couldn't nod ... and he wasn't about to try and speak. His throat and mouth felt dry, like the Dust Bowl he remembered as a child. He looked up to see Burks nod.

"Okay, then. I'm going through the courthouse. They're looking to see me come out a the street door, but I'll come at them from above. That'll rattle them and I'll take their guns. You have the cells ready. We'll see if these boys have any sand in their gullet or not."

Burks backed away from the window and bending at the waist moved right and left. He nodded his satisfaction again. "Albert will give it up. He's a sneak and sneaks are cowards. He wants to kill me all right, but he don't have the bottom. Those boys'll come peaceable. Don't forget now, you stay here. Don't come out that street door for nothing, comprende?"

Tom bowed his head. *How can grandpa think I'll swallow that story?* Tom wondered. *Arrest the Porters peaceably?* If he could've smiled

Burks didn't wait for a reply, the itch of anticipation was there to see. The sheriff couldn't wait to open the ball. Tom watched him disappear into the cellblock. Seconds later the door to the courtroom's staircase opened and closed.

During construction of the courthouse a holding cell was secreted at the rear of the main

courtroom. A steel door separated the holding area from the sheriff's jail. For court appearances prisoners could be escorted up a few stairs and held in security until the court and their attorneys were ready for them.

Tom found the strength to stand. At the window he hoped to see Byron and Albert shucking their guns. Instead, he saw no pedestrians and no cars moving east or west on Cedric Street. The lack of pedestrian sounds and traffic unsettled him. Something wasn't right. Tom could feel it. Panic crawled around in his throat. "It's so quiet. Too God-awful quiet." His voice came out a croak he didn't recognize.

He had the mad urge to run up the stairs and warn his grandpa, but he had no keys for the security door. Panic grew fingers that squeezed his throat. Outside, Byron stood fidgeting. Albert remained ramrod straight. Tom pushed his face close to the window glass, but neither Porter noticed him.

Lord. It looks like they're staring right at me.

He looked for his grandpa

Burks lifted a corner of the Venetian blind on the courthouse door. Standing close to the wall, he had a clear view of Byron and Albert Porter. Byron was sweating, shuffling his feet. He shuttered and worked his mouth. Burks blinked and blinked again. Byron Porter had morphed into the image of Robert Hyde. Robert Hyde, all twitchy, wiping his hands on his pants.

The rapist is scared and he has cause. I'll kill him again ... slow ... and it'll be fun.

Closing his eyes, Burks took a breath and looked again. He felt like a small child seeing his first Christmas tree with bright colored packages shining in the tree's soft rainbow glow of lights. Burks knew the answer before he focused on the man next to Robert.

It has to be Donald Hyde. Yes, it is. Burks grinned ... ecstatic. The second half of the rapist team stood rigid beside his brother. Laura Lee would be so happy, avenged again. Burks could imagine the fight ... picture it ... live it.

He would take Donald first. Nothing fancy. Two in the chest and the bastard would go down quick. After, he would have time to concentrate on Robert. Watch fear wash his face white. It would be like young Porter. Junior saw death leering at him from twenty feet away. Complete terror filled his pants with shit before the sheriff's forty-four caliber bullet carried his brains out the back of his head.

Burks slipped through the courthouse door and down the steps without a whisper of sound. A Peacemaker filled each hand. He carried them alongside his legs, cocked and ready. Donald and Robert remained fixed on the street door of the sheriff's office. Now, he would give them his surprise.

"Carrying firearms in township limits is against the law, boys." Like a whip's crack on a silent morning, the sheriff's voice reverberated off the storefronts along the street. The Hydes jerked as if hit by an electric shock. Donald turned first, the shotgun dangling from the fingers of his shaky right hand. His face twisted with effort, but he couldn't bring the weapon to bear.

Burks could hear a hollow sound of laughter. The emptiness bade him: *Come in ... show these boys a good time and feel the freedom.* Burks grinned and opened the door in his mind.

"Take them pistols out and drop them on the street. I SAID DROP THE GUNS. RIGHT NOW. Your under arrest ... I mean what I say, boys."

Robert tugged at the sleeve of Donald's coat, urging his brother to aim the shotgun. Burks

brought the Colts up. "Why don't you go ahead and give that sawed-off a try, Donald? You may get one off before I kill you. Hell, you might even nip me a little. Old Robert can finish me off if he don't pee his pants first. Go on. You can save your little broth"

A hammer's blow hit him high on the right chest. A bright streak of pain burrowed all the way back to his shoulder blade. Burks lurched to the right and struggled to regain his balance.

What the hell was that? More pain hit and it was hot like a hornet's sting.

Burks looked around. Everything had a strange shimmer to it. He wavered outside the office on the sidewalk.

What am I doing? I've got a job a work to do. What is it? His eyes cleared. The weight of the Colts made his arms ache. He saw the Porters ... *what ...?*

The roar of two heavy rifles echoed in his head. Something hit him mid-chest and he staggered backward, turning in a half-circle to catch his balance. The sound of the Colts clatter on the sidewalk sounded funny and he wanted to laugh, but fluid filled his mouth ... hot, thick, salty fluid.

Burks saw Tom's white face in the office window. God, how he loved that boy. Tom's eyes bulged in their sockets. His mouth yawed wide like a cave he remembered from his youth. Burks could see the boy's palate flutter as his breath rushed by. *Was he yelling something?*

He was about to holler at Tom to speak up, but a bright, blinding light

Tom saw Burks twitch and lurch to the right. A sharp crack like the snap of a dead tree branch made him flinch. Gunshot screamed in his head as Burks staggered in a half turn. Tom saw his grandpa's back and the satin fabric of his fancy vest and pounded on the window frame. Murder being done flashed through his consciousness, but the idea was inconceivable.

Tom couldn't except what his eyes claimed as reality. Two more booms. Deeper eruptions of rifle fire rattled the windowpane. Bullets smashed against the outside wall. Tom felt their solid thumps vibrate through the wall and into his fingertips.

He watched the satin fabric of his grandpa's vest puff and explode leaving a trail of shredded material and blood. The Colt Peacemakers dropped from the sheriff's hands and bounced on the cement sidewalk. Burks staggered in a half-circle and his eyes locked on Tom's.

Grandpa's clean white shirt's got blood all over it. Tom tore his eyes away from the horror and saw a bewildered look on his grandpa's face. He heard screaming and realized it came from his own mouth. His lips pushed up against the window glass. The air sucked from his chest as he screamed again.

In that instant, the sheriff's head exploded. Long, silver-white hair fanned out in a halo of red mist. Blood, bone and bits of brain matter splashed the window glass. The forehead and eyes of Selmer Burks seemed to disintegrate and the Sheriff of Sundowner County fell forward to the sidewalk.

Tom's feet found root in the pegged wood flooring. He couldn't move ... couldn't look away, couldn't breathe or call out. He stared at the pile of flesh and clothes he once called his grandpa. Everything winked black ... and he pulled a lungful of air. Sensation returned to Tom's legs. He saw Phil Lefford and Ben Hammersmith hurry across the street. The men stopped in front of Byron and Albert. Tom's brain recorded their nods and body language, but shock still paralyzed his mind's ability to process.

When the councilman and judge walked away, the Porter brothers pistols were gone. He

collapsed on the couch. *The shotgun's gone, too.*

Ambush raced through his mind. The bastards had set him up. Tom looked at the desk and thought of the Walker Dragoon and vengeance of his own.

He lost all track of time, sitting with his head between his knees. Tom relived the horror of the murder over and over. The door slammed opened and his head came up. Royster, Lefford and the judge trooped in. Their clothes carried a bitter tang of cordite and its stench burned Tom's nostrils.

The men had their story. Outraged at the killing ... blah ... blah ... blah. They would find the murderers. Hyde's Corner wouldn't tolerate slaughter in the streets. They claimed the sheriff had enemies. They said there would be no rest until the killers were caught and punished.

Tom listened and nodded and didn't say two words. The men turned to leave and Royster couldn't resist. "Why do you suppose the sheriff threatened Byron and Albert? We talked to them. They came to apologize for their brother's attempt on the sheriff's life."

Tom straightened his back and looked Royster in the eye. "Byron and Albert came to this office with pistols in their belts. Albert had a shotgun. They meant to shoot my grandpa down."

Judge Hammersmith stepped forward. "Surely you're mistaken, son. We found no firearms on the Porter brothers. You've seen murder done. We understand you're upset. You lock up and go on home. We'll take care of things from here on out." The fat man rubbed his hands together.

The men left and Tom went about closing the office. He wondered at the arrogance of the ambush killers. These same men watched him grow from boy to man. Did they believe him to be slow? Or stupid? At best, he decided, they figured him for a naïve kid.

Tom found an old canvas duffle in one of the cupboards of the janitor's closet. He gathered the personal items both he and his grandpa accumulated over the years. The would-be deputy knew he wouldn't be coming back. The finality of it all made him sadder still. The weight of his losses this day mocked him and he felt impotent. He loved this township and his place in it. What would his future hold without Selmer Burks.

As he stood at his grandpa's desk, Tom realized his grandpa had the right idea all along. There would always be prideful, arrogant people out there. High-and-mighty people who would take from the Burks. There would be jealous people to slander and tear down the Burks. When high-and-mighty folks tired of taking and tearing down, they would go to killing Burks.

The pain of his grandpa's loss finally forced him to understand the depth of hate festering in Hyde's Corner. Now, everything his grandpa told him seemed clear. As sharp and bright as a prairie morning in spring. For the first time in his life it all made sense. His grandpa had it right all along. Names made no difference. To a Burks man, the enemy would always be a Hyde.

With a key Burks had given him, Tom emptied the desk. He heard an ambulance arrive as he lifted the Walker Dragoon from the bottom drawer. Doc Beaman's voice carried loud, angry sounding through the window as he directed the loading of the sheriff's body. Tom slipped over and locked the front door. He had no desire to listen to a bunch of townie hypocrites and Royster cronies mouth their sarcastic words of sympathy with smug sad looks and crocodile tears.

When the knocks started, Tom hid in the janitor's closet, sitting with the smells of dirty cleaning tools and bleach filling his nostrils. He wrapped the Walker Dragoon in clean dust rags and blocked out the pounding at the door.

Refusing to let his mind focus Tom went on a wool gathering expedition. He recalled a crazy dream from the night before. Junior, the dead man, pounding on the office door and demanding to see the sheriff. Tom thought the dream had to be a precursor to the horror of what happened in front of his eyes.

It wasn't fair. Junior took his sleep, but Tom got up at first light to make coffee anyhow. He did his chores. Did everything right just like always.

Grandpa shouldn't be dead.

All manner of crazy thought raged through his mind and his head began to ache. The pain brought him up short and reason called him foolish. From this point on, he realized, he had to think. He had to be smarter than those who did murder.

Tom trembled. Visions of his grandpa's face all blown to pieces played in his mind. Over and over and over again the images flickered on a macabre movie screen in his mind. The grotesque images threatened tears until they couldn't be held back any longer. Sobs defined his feeling of desolation in the confines of the janitor's closet. Between gulping breaths Tom screamed, "They killed him." Hate took its root in his soul ... and it began to grow.

It took time, but he pulled himself together. The cold emptiness he feared earlier, he now welcomed as a guest.

How can I prove murder? That was his first rational thought. Every township official it seemed had a hand or pulled a trigger. How can I prove my case for a conspiracy in the coming days? Impossible.

His big fists beat at the plank floor in frustration. Tom blinked and sniffed. Smells of bleach and dirt disappeared from the air. He closed his eyes and drifted, his big body loose and relaxed. The distinctive aroma of sour mash bourbon whiskey filled his nostrils. A warm pressure surrounded him. Tom felt a prickle of facial hair brush his ear. He heard a whisper he knew well.

When faced with facts you can't prove, shut your mouth and wait a spell. You understand me, boy?

Tears rolled over Tom's cheeks and dripped from his chin. He nodded and the rough cedar planks scratched at the back of his head. Eyes closed, his own voice sounded surreal to him.

"I've done a goodly share of waiting. I know how to do that, Grandpa. I'll wait a while. Yessir."

The feelings of nausea, weakness, frustration and anger disappeared. He thought he might be grinning, but he didn't want to open his eyes to see. Tom sat rock still, afraid to move and disturb the wonder of his grandpa's presence. Time ceased to exist.

Sometime later he became aware of sounds ... cars passing on the street and an occasional voice: "You think he's still in there?"

When he opened his eyes the pressure and warmth were gone. He looked around confused. Had he slept? Was it all a dream? The carpetbag sat to one side. The Dragoon pistol lay swaddled in dust rags. He wondered about the time of day. Above him the soft golden light of late afternoon filled the janitor's closet. Tom grinned.

His grandpa's physical presence faded away, but the golden glow that brought peace to Selmer Burks now did the same for his grandson. Tom yawned and stretched and something winked in the weak light. On the splashboard of the washtub another glint of light beckoned him. Tom wiped at his face and felt gritty dust captured by his drying tears. He pushed off the floor thinking his eyes played tricks on him, but as he approached the washtub he shook his head in disbelief. A piece of silver, polished bright, poked from behind an old scrub brush.

With trembling fingers, Tom reached for the object, rationality telling him it would disappear at his touch. It failed to vanish. Instead, the gleaming silver metal felt icy cold to his

fingertips and weighed heavy in his hand. Across the middle of the star the word Sheriff was stamped, the letters filled with black enamel. Smaller engraved words above and below read: Sundowner County, Oklahoma.

Warm pressure surrounded him for the second time that day. A puff of whiskey breath rolled across his face. The prickle of whiskered lips scratched his ear once more.

Put that in your pocket. We'll need to get you ready, but our time will come. It's here inside you, just like Daddy and Iona said. We'll wait a spell and let the emptiness teach you. You understand me, boy?

Tom's eyes glittered like hard, hazel-green marbles. Grinning into the gathering gloom, he ducked his head in acknowledgment.

A final look around brought his deep sadness back. It lunged at him like a coyote pouncing on a crippled rabbit. Tom took a deep breath. He would remember the odors and the atmosphere. He would carry it all with him no matter what the following days held. Overwhelming sadness hit him hard and he felt the need to move ... get out and away. The silver star burned hot in his palm and Tom pushed it in his pocket as he crossed the room.

Mayor William Royster poked his head through the attic storeroom's door. "Jesus Christ. You were supposed to be out of here," he whined. The shooter had closed the window and pulled the shade down over the windowsill at least. Royster sucked in a breath of relief. "You were supposed to get gone while all the hullabaloo went on. What the hell's the matter with you?"

Sid Tassel looked over his shoulder, the expression on his face an exposition of incurable pain. He pushed up from the old trunk he had used as a shooting rest and peered at the fifty caliber rifle leaning against the wall. "I guess I'd better go," he said.

Royster saw the bourbon bottle Tassel clutched in his right fist. It sloshed close to empty. "Goddamnit, Tassel. You been sitting up here getting drunk? This ain't no child's game. Burks has friends, you'll fuck around and get us all hung. Goddamnit." Royster started into the room.

Tassel crouched, pulling his head into his shoulders. "You just stop where you stand, Royster." His voice a rumble in his throat. The part-time deputy, farmer and lifelong friend of Sheriff Selmer Burks set the whiskey bottle on the trunk and retrieved the old Sharp's breech loader. Tassel gave Royster a hate-filled smile. "I loaded up a cartridge some time ago. I figured to use it before I left. Maybe I'll just use it to open the back of your throat, huh? You're the one brought me the news. You're the one told me my best friend turned my little girl into a whore. You're the one told me my best friend fucked my baby girl day and night." Tassel choked out a sob.

Royster backed away. "Calm down, Sid. Calm down. Everything's going to be all right. Sara will be all right. Now he's gone, she'll come around. Sara will be your baby girl again. Ain't that what I promised?" Royster's face ran with sweat. A twitch jerked at the left side of his face.

Tassel's mouth pulled down in a sneer. "Don't make the mistake of thinking me a fool. I'm a drunk, but I ain't stupid. I ain't one of your lackey's, neither. You soft-soap Lefford, Sykes and the other queer, don't try it on me. Now get out of my way. I'm going on home."

Tom locked the door of the sheriff's office. Reality hit him with a hard knuckled fist.

It's really over.

He studied the key in his hand and considered dropping it in the sewer grate. He shrugged and dropped it in his pocket. Drying rivulets of water marked the sidewalk. Someone tried to clean the last traces of murder from the concrete. A quick glance showed Tom the bullet scars and one big gouge in the limestone near the office window.

His gaze followed the water's flow over the curb and into the gutter. A few strings of blood clung to the curb's rough edge. He swallowed hard and his stomach turned over. At the same time something urged him to look at the courthouse again. Inspect the window glass where he had pressed his face and watched his grandpa's assassination. Ignoring the temptation, Tom turned in the direction of home. He had taken only a few steps when she came around the corner.

A chill rattled his body and a centipede tingle ran down his spine. Sara Tassel, with the dying sun over her shoulder, made a picture for the postcards. She was dressed in a pale yellow sundress trimmed in white lace. The colors of the dress set off her smooth brown skin. She looked like a home-baked ginger snap, all wrapped in a yellow and white ribbon. Sara came right up on him and her eyes swallowed him. In that instant the pain of his loss intensified.

Tom dropped his gaze to the swell of her breasts. He wondered if his grandpa was as captivated as he was with the rhythm of her breathing ... the rise and fall of that magnificent chest. What would happen if she took a deep breath. He face burned with embarrassment. In that moment he hated her. An image of his grandpa and Sara, bucking and grunting, moaning in the throes of sexual pleasure, flashed in his mind. Sara traced the line of his jaw with her fingertips. Tom came close to screaming ... whore.

"I cleaned up at the house," she said. "I thought that's where I'd find you, but people said you were holed up in the office. You're going to be all right, Tom. You have to take your time. I'm here always whenever you need me ... anytime. Selmer will always be with us. You and I know that best." She tried a smile, but it died a quick death.

"I know what you done ... you done." His voice barely registered in his mind, it sounded muted, tiny, like he was calling from far, far, away.

"I loved him, Tom," Sara said and stared into his eyes. "He was the only real man in this whole damn state."

"Oh, I know you say you loved him," That faraway voice sounded full of hurt and disgust and treachery. "Just shut up ... shut up. How could you love an old man? You couldn't, you only loved his power. He was ashamed. Did you know that? I knew. I could tell by the sound of his voice when he told me. He was ashamed by what he'd done to Uncle Sid and I'm ashamed, too."

Sara's eyes bored into his and a smile danced at the corners of her mouth. "Why are you ashamed, Tom? What sin have you committed?"

Tom held her eyes though his had filled with tears. He loved her ... damn her. He would hate her the rest of his life. He wanted to shout his hate for her. Tell her how much it hurt to know she'd laid up with his grandpa, but he knew he would choke on the words. A familiar voice saved him from acting the fool.

"Evening, Sid. Where the hell you off to with that big gun?" Frank Parsons' question rang clear in the hot quiet of twilight. Sara turned and Tom looked up. Parsons leaned on his canes, pausing as he made his way up Rhoda Street from the direction of the depot. Tassel came from the alley that cut behind the Stockman and Growers Exchange Building. He turned and saw Sara first, then locked eyes with Tom. He hesitated a few seconds, shook his head and crossed the sidewalk, ignoring Parsons.

Tom heard Sara's breath catch. He watched Tassel step around the front of his battered Ford

pickup. He opened the driver's door and glanced at Tom before tossing a Sharps fifty into the truck bed.

Tears glistened on Sid's cheeks. He shook his head once more, climbed in and slammed the door. The old Ford turned over several times before belching to life in a cloud of oily black exhaust. It bucked and jerked away from the curb and disappeared around the corner.

Frank Parsons shrugged and continued his slow, shuffling way toward the Stockman and Growers Exchange Building.

"Oh, my God," Sara moaned, a hand covering her mouth. She backed away from Tom. Her beautiful face all tanned and glowing a minute before had gone bone-white. Tom saw tears blossom in her eyes and she sobbed.

All the hurt and sorrow of the afternoon ignited a rage in Tom Burks. Tears ran in streams over his jaws. It would have been so simple to reach over and break Sara's neck, but his rage felt as dead and cold as what was left of Selmer Burks.

Sara made a choking noise that sounded like his name, but what she saw in his eyes made her back away and turn and run.

Tom pulled a sleeve across his face and turned for home. One day the Tassels would pay for their betrayal, and if he were blessed with luck, Uncle Sid would die by his hand. Only a fifty caliber could've splattered his grandpa's head like that. Only a fifty would've left a hole the size of a fist in the limestone block beside the window.

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28

Herman Beaman's Surgery

**Hyde's Corner, Oklahoma
October 14, 1947**

Doctor Herman Beaman cradled his head in his hands. Tom Burks boarded a bus for Oklahoma City that very morning, he knew that much.

"Off to the Army" that's how he put it. Well, that was just fine and dandy for him. Why me? Why trust me with this damming information? He left it with me because he knew I wouldn't use it. Ledgers, bank passbooks, account records, deeds and those damn guns. And what was I supposed to do with a safe combination? I don't know where to find the damn safe. If I knew, would I want to see what's in there? Hell, no.

Beaman thought about the guns. He didn't bother with the larger parcel. He knew that contained the Peacemaker and holster Burks hooked on his hip when he was set up to kill. The second parcel was the one that scared him. He finally gave in, earlier in the evening. He couldn't resist the pull of that package, but before the wrapping fell away, he knew what it contained and he sure as hell wasn't disappointed.

A freshly cleaned Walker Dragoon .44 caliber horse pistol winked at him in the kitchen

light. Beaman knew he'd been fooled again. His arrogance, like that he practiced when diagnosing his fiancé, Unity Roarke, colored his finding in the death of Richard Hyde on that cold Christmas eve morning of 1913. The Walker Dragoon fired a .44 caliber bullet capable of producing a wound, especially to the head, which could mimic damage done by a .50 caliber slug from a Sharps rifle say. That was especially true if the doctor performing the post-mortem didn't look closely. Didn't take his time evaluating all the circumstances surround the entry and exit wounds.

How was I to know Selmer Burks owned a Walker Dragoon horse pistol? I should've have guessed. I knew the Hydes and the Burks meant to kill each other and I did nothing to stop it.

"Stop." he almost yelled the word. He waggled his aching head exacerbating his headache. The journal ... how could he forget the damn journal and the depraved horror story it contained.

Beaman knew he should've burned it. Never opened it, but again, curiosity got the best of him. *Damn me for the old fool I am.*

He was overwhelmed. The letter and a legal documents gave Beaman more responsibility than he wanted at his age. Executor of the Burks estate. It would only be until Tom reached the age of twenty-one. A couple more years ... still it rankled his hide no end.

Beaman peered at the checkbook. He could accomplish so much good with just the money part. But he would feel like a thief sending out checks to pay his bills.

What if I only spend Tom's money on medical stocks and pharmaceuticals for Hyde's Corner's small hospital and such? But the hospital belongs to my practice.

That fact weighed heavy on Beaman's sense of propriety, but he meant to go ahead with it. He knew in the days to come he'd have to reread Tom's letter, if for no other reason than to salve his conscience. I can live with that as long as I can do some good around here.

The doctor sighed and pushed up from the table. His buttocks had gone numb and his right knee popped in protest. Beaman rubbed, feeling pins and needles. He swayed, a momentary feeling of lightheadedness gripped him.

Too much excitement for an old man in one day. Goddamn you, Selmer Burks. And Goddamn you, too, Thomas Burks. Giving me this damn burden. From now on, you listen to your instincts, Herman, they're right more often than wrong.

Now, he knew a great deal more than he ever wanted to know. The insane hatred between the Hydes and the Burks had destroyed both families. He'd be willing to bet that wasn't all it corrupted, neither. Selmer Burks hid his madness well. I wonder if he passed it on.

The doctor's stomach rumbled. His eyes felt gritty and dry. He checked his watch and was surprised to see it was close to nine o'clock. Bedtime. He hoped he'd be able to sleep, at least for a few hours, he didn't want to take more pills.

Beaman stretched and yawned with a shudder. He rewrapped the Dragoon and found some twine to tie it up tight. He thought about taking the gun out on the prairie and burying it deep, but that would be thinking for tomorrow. Now, he needed something in his stomach. The wind whistled and whined under the eaves.

Nothing heavy, he decided. What do you think, Unity?

Beaman found he spoke to his old sweetheart more often of late. The older he got, the more he thought of her. He hoped when the time came he might see her on the other side. He prayed each night she might forgive him. His misdiagnosis cost her life and a part of him died with her. He pulled a ragged breath.

A can of soup would do the trick. That what you think, Unity? Let's just see what we got.

Heavy pounding on the front door jerked him around. His head banged against the cupboard

door. "Now, what? Damnit."

Beaman shoved the oilskin package under the sink. Rubbing at his forehead he hurried through the parlor-waiting room and jerked the door open. Acting County Sheriff Delbert Mossburry shivered on the stoop. "Doc? Sorry to bother you, but I need your help."

Beaman stepped aside. "Well get on in here, Del."

Herman closed the door shivering himself. "What's the problem? I'm about to cook up some soup."

"I need you to come on out to Sid Tassel's place." Mossburry shifted from foot to foot.

Beaman's face went slack. His heart jumped in his chest and he felt cold all over. "Jesus Christ don't tell me."

Del Mossburry pulled a wrinkled piece of tablet paper from inside his coat. He handed it to Beaman who unfolded the single sheet and read the penciled message:

Dear Sara,

There's nothing I can say that will make any of this right nor better so I won't say much at all. I will say I'm sorry. I'm most terrible sorry I failed you so bad. I ain't looked at my mirror since taking a hand in Selmer's killing. I ain't blaming nobody but myself, but I got to be done with it and there's no back door to this. I hope it ain't you that finds me. I know I won't be a pretty sight. I can't say more than I love you. Please. Always remember you were the best part of me. I helped Selmer run hell in Sundowner County. Now I figure to see if I can help him run the real thing.

Your loving daddy

Beaman handed the note back to Mossburry. "Let me get a few things together. That damn heater of yours work?"

Herman hurried away not waiting for Mossburry's answer. From the closet in his bedroom he pulled on his winter coat. In the Surgery, he checked his medical bag, but he wouldn't need much. The doctor paused at the door to the parlor-waiting room. He could hear Mossburry pacing. This would be the Acting Sheriff's first death investigation.

"I wonder if this is just the beginning." Beaman muttered and looked in the direction of the kitchen. The last line in letter Tom Burks left came back to him.

"As anyone can see, most of what I put down I can't prove so what can I do? Nothing but wait awhile."

Beaman shook his head. *That ain't Sid Tassel's handwriting on that note, but it's a good try. I've seen his writing, drunk and sober, for too many years. You just might have pulled it off, Tom. I'd say Goddamn you to hell, Selmer Burks, but I know you're already there.*

"I'm coming, Del," he called out. "Got to find my hat."

~ 0000 ~

Endnotes and Excerpts

Hi, and thank you for your purchase of Book II - In the Name of Vengeance. My name is

Jim Bergstad. I hope this Ebook provided you with a memorable reading experience. If you came away thoroughly entertained, then I know I achieved my goal. Perhaps you might even be encouraged to spread the word by writing a short review and posting it on the smashwords.com website and Amazon if it's not too much trouble. Spreading the word among your friends and family is another great way to help us get to know each other.

I'd like to take this opportunity to persuade you to email me with questions or comments regarding my Ebooks or writing in general or what's coming up in the future. You can contact me at woodsidepubgroup@gmail.com, but perhaps a better way to start the process of building a relationship with you, my invaluable reader, would be to tell you a little about me. I like to characterize myself as a writer, sometime novice oil painter, husband of 50 + years and father of five, grandfather of a dozen wonderful grandchildren and five great-grandchildren, all of which my wife and I are very proud ... yeah, I know ... whew.

I've enjoyed a varied working career including trucker, firefighter, Supervisor of the Guest Relations Department of a major television network and thirty years of management and entrepreneurial pursuits in the field of transportation and logistics to name a few. I retired for the last time in 1998 and began to seriously consider a new career writing genre fiction. To that end, I have studied and worked hard to improve my craft.

Late in 2006 my wife and I escaped to a small community in South Carolina where I hoped I would spend my days writing, painting and playing a little golf. After five years of heaven, however, I've been dragged, kicking and screaming, back to California where my wife and I have renewed our relationship with our three sons and eight grandchildren. Our two daughters remain in Florida with their families which include four more grandchildren who in turn have produced two great-grand children. Four additional great-grandchildren reside in Arizona with their families.

My work has appeared in Literary Journals like: The Jimson Journal, Midwest Literary Magazine, The Quill, Indie Searchlight, Scissors and Spackle, Pedigru Review, The Monarch Review and The Feathered Flounder.

If you haven't already, I hope you will take a look at Book I - No Man's Land, the first in the Hyde's Corner Trilogy series, The New Revised Edition of the Award Winning, Screwing the Pooch and the just released collection of dark short stories, Doors to Perdition. All my books are available at smashwords.com and Amazon.com as free downloads. This promotion will end August 15, 2013.

Book III, tentatively titled A Study in Retribution will complete the Hyde's Corner Trilogy. I hope to have it ready for release in late 2013 or early 2014, but please keep checking in for updates. Below, I've included a rough draft excerpt from Book III to give you an idea of what is to come. I have also included a rough draft excerpt of Rainy Days and Deadly Ways, a new mystery-thriller in process. A website where those interested can obtain more information, join in contests and ask questions on fiction writing or upcoming projects will be available soon.

Excerpt from Hyde's Corner Trilogy Book II - A Study in Retribution

It was Saturday night, close to midnight. Burks had begun to sweat, yet, the van was freezing. He refused to run the engine for heat, aware they might be noticed. Juno, their inside man, was getting into his role, but Burks feared his Private was getting too cocky.

"What do you think, Mosher?" He asked his second in command. "Is he trying for an Academy Award tonight or am I worrying too much?"

"He's doing okay, Sarge. They're serving him all he wants, four big steins by my count. That's potent stuff they put out. It sounds like they're buying his act so far."

The MP's listened as Juno began slurring his words. The barmaid was attentive, like she was taking an interest in Juno's ramblings. Burks and Mosher could hear some of her remarks and Mosher picked up on several exchanges in German between the barmaid and KellerKlub owner. The two felt confident enough, it appeared, to speak as loud as they pleased in their native language. The deep, sharp voice of the owner-bartender was easily translated by Mosher as it came through his headphones, but the barmaid's voice was lighter and harder to pick up at times. Nevertheless, Burks and Mosher were excited ... the transmitter and mike on Juno worked better than anticipated.

Burks and Mosher held their breaths as the barmaid came back to Juno's table. "How you doing, soldier?" She asked, her English heavily accented and hard to follow. "Still with me?"

"I'm with you, baby," Juno slurred, "alla time. Listen, did I tell you what I got to put up with, huh, sweetheart? I ain't appreciated, that's what. How can a man do his job and get his sleep with an asshole Sergeant around, huh? That Sergeant thinks he's something, boy. Well, let me tell you, I'm the only son-of-a-bitch in Weapons Logistics with experience. I'm the only one trained in protocols. That's right, baby. I'm the only one who knows how to store and maintain a nuclear bomb."

Mosher winked at the Sergeant. Juno had just the right stutter and slur to his words. "When the bomb comes to Berlin, baby," Juno continued, "I'll be in charge, not that asshole Sergeant."

"I'm gonna kick his ass when this is over," Burks said and laughed. Mosher joined him and some of the tension of the surveillance drained away from both men.

"Take it easy on him, Sarge," Mosher said, "he's probably shitting his pants if I know Juno."

The men sat silent for a time and listened to each other's teeth chatter. They heard a rustle of clothing and Juno muttered, "Got to take a leak. Don't go away, baby. Your Mario will be right back."

Burks and Mosher heard Juno's shuffling steps and the whisper of his clothing. A door squeaked open and closed and the mike picked up Juno's zipper.

"Jesus," Burks said. "I can't believe that mike is picking up this stuff."

The sound of Juno relieving himself filled the ear phones of both men. Burks shook his head.

"Get ready, boys," Juno whispered. "I'm betting the next beer will be a Mickey for Juno." Juno zipped up and shuffled back to the booth.

"One on the Gotts, by God," The owner's voice was loud and jovial coming through the earphones. Only a drunken man, however, could fail to note the phony good cheer. The bartender laughed again, loud and long. Burks could almost picture Juno weaving at his booth, holding on to the seatback and smiling drunkenly.

Silence ... Burks and Mosher looked at each other. "You think they're on to him or are those German bastards slipping him the Mickey." Mosher said.

"I'm not sure," Burks said. "It sounds like Juno had to turned away. Wait, he's whispering something."

"The guy behind the bar is Gott and he's one big bastard. The fucker's at least six-four and 300 pounds."

"You get that Mosher? I've made the acquaintance of Mr. Horst Gott. He's one of the brothers I interviewed," Burks said. "The man has hands as big as tennis rackets with fingers. "Juno's right. Gott is one big son-of-a-bitch."

Juno's voice broke in loud and clear. "I think I'd better go back to barracks. I'm getting drunk, I think."

"No No, no, no, no ... you must not think of leaving." The barmaid's said, her voice sulky, with a sexy sounding giggle to her words. "Oh. See what I found? Oooh ... you got a sausage in your pocket, maybe? We close soon. You not going to go and leave me all alone, are you? I can make you happy. See? Mmmm, I already make you happy, ya?"

"Okay, baby," Juno managed to stay with his slur. "Just you and me ... closing time, okay?"

"Next time," Mosher said, and punched Burks lightly on the shoulder, "sourpuss or not, I've got dibs on the decoy job."

Burks nodded as they listened to the sound of a wet kiss. The transmitter and mike continued to perform above expectations.

"Drink the beer, big Atom man," the barmaid whispered. "I'll be back to ... what you say? Polish your bomb, ya, ha?"

Sergeant and Corporal looked at each other. "I'll never let Juno live that one down," Burks said, "Atom man ... I love it."

"Stand by, boys," Juno whispered quickly. "Won't be long now."

Silence and the occasional rustle of Juno's clothes were the only sounds for a good two minutes. Then, Burks and Mosher jumped at the sound of a loud thump.

"Yeah," Gott's voice almost shouted. "Good, Goddamn beer, ya?"

Juno produced an excellent belch. He sounded sleepy, his words heavy with slurring. "Hurry up, baby, my bomb's about to go nuclear."

Burks and Mosher picked up their Thompsons and opened the van's slider. They heard Juno's weak laugh.

Juno let his head drop on the tabletop and allowed his body to sag, collapsing against the damp wall of the bistro. He used his arm to mask his eyes and squinting through slits, he watched the bartender and barmaid whisper with their heads together. They carried on for a few more minutes, every few seconds, glancing in his direction.

Juno thought it was time for some sound effects. He tried a snore, soft at first, and as he gained confidence, let it build into a loud, steady burring sound. Gott and the barmaid watched and waited, looking as if they were holding their breaths.

Apparently satisfied, Gott slapped the bar top once, then again with more force. Juno didn't react to the noise.

"He's gone," Gott said. "Joli, go find Fedor and Dima, hurry. I can't carry him alone, he's too big."

Joli disappeared behind the bar and through the curtain. Based on Burks' earlier visit and descriptions of the interior of the KellerKlub, Juno figured the curtain hid the storage and change area. *Maybe, its more than just a storage and change place*, Juno thought.

He hoped the wire was still working. If Sergeant Burks and Corporal Mosher weren't outside the door by now, he was in big trouble. No one figured on two additional men. Counting Gott

and Jolie, the barmaid, the MP's would have four kidnapers and possibly killers to deal with now.

Faster than Juno anticipated, Joli returned with her friends. As they pushed through the curtain, Juno felt a tingle of excitement. He'd seen the uniforms plenty of times. Fedor and Dima were just what their names implied, soldiers in the Russian Army.

Gott nodded to the men and led the group from behind the bar. They approached Juno, the Russians not attempting to cover their rapid exchanges in the Cyrillic dialect or their laughter. Juno didn't move, but remained slumped in the booth.

"Fedor ... Dima," Gott said with a whine in his voice. "Help me with his feet, I hurt my back today with damn beer barrels."

"Complaining, always complaining, you lazy piece of German shit." Fedor growled in excellent English.

Juno heard more grumbles in Russian, and then they had his feet, pulling him roughly out of the booth. Juno opened his eyes and yelled, "Halt."

Halt was the agreed upon code word. Juno wasn't disappointed with the result of his shouted command. The KellerKlub's thick wooden door slammed against the inside wall. The planking almost splintered in half. Sergeant Burks burst into the room, a Thompson Sub-Machine gun sweeping the area and covering Gott and friends.

Mosher deployed with equal speed to the Sergeant's left, his Thompson braced under his right arm, finger on the trigger. "Make a move, assholes," Mosher said. "I haven't had a chance to fire this Thompson ... not once." The Corporal grinned.

The big bartender's face lost all color, its pallor matching his white apron. The two Russian soldiers dropped Juno's feet and he slid back in the booth. Joli made a break for the backroom, but Burks shouted, "Halt." and the barmaid skidded to a stop, throwing her arms in the air.

The Russians raised their hands as well. The taller, skinnier one tried to smile. "You have made a mistake, Yank," he said, his English suddenly heavy with accent. "I am Fedor Borosovich Petrov. I and my comrade, Dima Doscovich came only to help. We are told the American is sick. We will go and you can finish your business with these, Germans, maybe?"

Burks gave Juno a nod and he stepped out of the booth. The Sergeant handed the Thompson to Juno, stepped close to the skinny Russian and grabbed a fist full of coat. Burks jerked Fedor Borosovich forward, head butting the bridge of the man's nose. The sickening crunch of broken cartilage was loud in the quiet barroom.

He kicked the man's legs out from under him and the Russian dropped face-first onto the floor. Burks brought his foot down on the soldier's shoulder blades. "You suck the stones, Fedor," he said. "Do as you're told. Keep shut or I'll twist your head off and stick it up your ass. Da?"

Burks looked at the second Russian and pointed to the floor. The soldier hesitated and Burks slapped him. A small tear opened at the side of his mouth. The Russian sank to his knees, but not fast enough. Burks hammered the back of his head. The soldier's face slammed into the gritty floor and he laid still, blood pooling to the side of his whiskered face.

"Mosher ... Juno ... either of these Russkees move, shoot them in the foot. I know a few Germans who'll pay well for a couple of live Russians."

Gott watched Burks throughout the exercise, his big hands held shoulder high. He grinned at Juno and Mosher. "This is your Sergeant, ya? He's tough man with two little Russians. What you think he does with big man like me?"

Neither Juno nor Mosher got a chance to answer. Burks was within arm's length of Gott and he spun in a half-circle, hitting Gott in the mouth with a short, brutal left hook. Gott sat down, banging his head against the back bar. Blood and shattered teeth spilled on the apron covering his belly and lap.

"Get up, you tub a rotten sauerkraut, I've got questions for you. We got six missing soldiers, last seen here in this dump. Burks kicked him in side, I said get up." He grabbed Gott by the hair and dragged him to his feet. The big German, dazed, but eyes round with fear, shakily put his hands up.

Mosher and Juno were seeing a side of their Sergeant they had not seen before. There was a look in the eyes of Burks, one they'd hoped never to see again. Mosher and Juno glanced at each other. For the first time that night, they began to sweat.

Burks pushed Joli toward the bar and dragged Gott behind him. The bartender stumbled, trying to keep up. Burks, the barmaid and Gott disappeared through the curtained doorway.

"Juno," Mosher said. "Keep your eyes on the Russkees."

Juno checked both men, they were still unconscious. He looked at Mosher. "It's too quiet. What do you think's going on?"

Outside the wind picked up. They listened to the loud, strange, howling sound created as the flow of air rushed through the skeletons of surrounding burned and bombed-out buildings.

Somewhere behind the curtain a weak light came on. Juno and Mosher heard Tom's whistle. The Sergeant's voice was just audible. "Open it ... I said open it." A wet snapping sound followed and Joli, the barmaid, yelped.

The skinny Russian groaned and tried to look up. Mosher let him turn over as he pulled in a ragged, deep breath. Juno said, "What do you think the Sarge will do if he comes back and

Fedor began to cry and Juno kicked him in the side. "Shut up."

"That's enough." Mosher said.

Mosher and Juno turned their attention to the curtain at the echoing sound of a door slamming against a rock wall was followed by two hollow thumps.

"Gott. Pay attention," Burks growled. "I'm going to ask questions and you're going to answer."

"No," the German bellowed. "I break your back for you, Yank asshole."

Sounds of a scuffle followed by fists smashing against flesh. Boots scraped at the grit of the stone floor. All the sounds carried clearly through the curtain into the barroom.

Juno saw Mosher about to jump the bar. "Hold on, Corporal," he said. "Listen."

Silence. Ten seconds of silence with Mosher and Juno staring at each other. They were startled as three hollow thumps were followed by the voice of Burks. "Got your attention now, Gott?" Burks laughed. A meaty crack of fist connecting with flesh. "Mr. Gott?" Burks asked.

"I answer no question from you, Goddamn, Amer"

Gott screamed and Juno flinched at the horrible sound. He came close to pulling the trigger on his Thompson. The scream died away to silence, but the men heard their Sergeant slapping the German back to consciousness.

"What the hell do you suppose he's doing in there, Mosher? I mean, shit. Did you see his eyes, that fucking smile? Jesus. Are we abiding by the Geneva Convention? What's he doing in there?" Juno wiped the sweat from his eyes, his perspiration starting a reaction with the battery taped at the small of his back. He began to itch and burn, it was worse than a case of poison oak.

"I don't know what he's doing," Mosher finally answered. "I don't know any more about him than you do, Juno. I met him the same time you did. He's our Sergeant and he's interrogating."

That's all we need to know. These assholes kidnapped six of our guys. Fuck the Geneva Convention, okay?"

Moans came through the curtain. Then, another sound, something alternating loud and soft, like the sound of a European police siren. Burks could be heard asking his questions, but his voice and the German's answers were muffled and unintelligible.

A few more muffled words were followed by louder moans. Another strangled scream followed, louder than the first and this time the cry stopped abruptly.

Juno jumped; his back on fire, but his terror was almost stronger than the pain. Juno felt the need to urinate and worried he might wet his pants. "Mosher, watch them, will you? This battery pack ... I got to get it off."

Mosher nodded and stepped back, giving himself a field of fire. "You bastards move, you're dead. Stop sniveling. Fedor ... tell your buddy, if he moves, I kill you both."

The Corporal sneaked a look at the curtained door behind the bar as Juno struggled with his shirt, the tape and battery pack on his back. Mosher was scared, too, but he couldn't show it. Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer. "Sarge? Sarge?" He shouted "You okay, Sarge? Goddamn it ... what the fuck's going on?"

Burks pushed through the curtain. His tie pulled loose and askew, his lower lip and chin smeared with blood. His eyes were large and glittered in the dim light.

He stepped close to the bar and tossed two large objects on the bar top. They looked strange, like gnarled pieces of a tree branch, but twisted. They thumped softly as they landed and came to rest.

Mosher saw that the Sergeant's hands and the cuffs of his field jacket were covered in blood. "Jesus Christ, Sarge, are you okay, man? Tom? Christ you're all full of blood."

Juno still worked at the tape on his hairy back, but that discomfort disappeared when he looked at Sergeant Burks.

Burks smiled at his men through bloodstained teeth. "The Kraut was tough. He didn't say shit until I took off his second thumb." Burks nodded at the objects on the bar top. "His right thumb was a bitch, lots of callus. I had to tear some of the skin with my teeth."

The Sergeant spotted a bar-towel and turned on the beer tap, saturating the towel. He scrubbed his mouth. "Can't be too careful with Kraut blood," he mumbled through the wet towel. "We've got a long night ahead of us ... who's up for a beer?"

These excerpts are from my next project, a novel in progress titled, *Rainy Days and Deadly Ways*. I hope you enjoy and look forward to its publication as much as I look forward to publishing it for your reading enjoyment.

**Excerpts from *Rainy Days and Deadly Ways*
A Novel in Progress**

**South Albany County, Wyoming
March 12, 1996
3:12 p.m.**

Muffled strains of the Door's "Light My Fire" jolted Nina Tahlman from her reverie. Kettledrum thunder accompanied her cell phone's ring-tone and pounded the gray sky. She jerked the wheel of the Bronco in defense while blue-white flares, like arc weld strikes, stitched the smoky gloom. Nina groped in her purse for the cell phone as several fat drops of rain exploded on the windshield. With a suddenness that shocked her, a full-blown gully washer engulfed the Bronco.

The phone went to message. Nina gave up her futile search to concentrate on driving. The relentless torrent was claustrophobic. Dry, cracked blades screeched and scratched the windshield, etching zigzag streaks in front of her eyes. The twisting two-lane highway melted into a blur. Gauze-like swirls of mist set her teeth on edge and a shuddered breath closed her throat. Jack forgot. She'd told him the wipers were bad two weeks ago and he promised to replace them. Now it was too late.

Goddamn him, she raged, her head beginning to ache.

In spite of the rain, a crust of ice had formed on the narrow highway. The road disappeared to the right, a turn she knew well, but today eluded her. The Bronco slid to the left and Nina let out a terrified yelp. Her eyes saucered as a huge tree raced toward her window. She took her foot off the brake and tapped the gas. The rear wheels caught traction in the soft shoulder of the road and the Bronco lurched to the right, fishtailing on the pavement.

Nina drew a deep breath, slowing the Bronco to a crawl. She knew the road well between Laramie and her home, but storms like this changed everything. A darkness like twilight filled the canyons and folds of the mountain highway. Peering through the pouring rain, her eyes pulsed hot with strain.

Should've paid attention to the weather reports, she fumed. *Would weather reports have mattered? No. Today was the day. Everything depended on today and now what? Could she hope?*

"Shit," Nina hissed. She had waited in vain at an obscure cocktail lounge in Laramie, sipping club soda after club soda. The missed call ... it had to be them.

More thunderous explosions gave applause to brilliant bursts of white light. Creeping down the last hill, the road and surrounding forest flashed and flickered in negative-like relief. Nearing the bottom, the road hooked in a sharp curve. The mountain fell away to the right forming a deep fold in the landscape. "It won't be long now," she mumbled and blew out a breath.

Nina dropped the transmission into low range, allowing the engine's compression to slow the speed of the Bronco. Coming into the tight corner, she kept her speed below thirty-five. Nina tapped the brake, the Bronco slid left. She tapped the gas; the tires gripped the slick pavement.

Coming out of the turn an indistinct shape took form in the road. Backlit by hi-beam headlights on her left, the looming figure blocked the middle of her lane.

Where can I go? flashed through her mind.

Everything happened too fast. Jim Morrison's voice erupted from deep in her purse: "Come on baby light my fire."

The shape grew larger and began to move. Like a materializing apparition, the form seemed to unfold. Nina squeaked. It looked like a huge bat, spreading its wings for flight.

She hit the brake with both feet. The Bronco nosed into the pavement. The bat-like figure turned and Nina Tahlman screamed as the Bronco went into a slide.

Morrison's guttural voice screamed in her ears: "Come on baby light my fi ... yore. Come on baby light my fiii ... yoore."

Later

Tahlman heard a click and a dial tone. "Damn guy still thinks he's my CO." he muttered rubbing his eyes, "looks like we're going to California."

His back had stiffened up talking on the phone, Tahlman got up and stretched. At the window, he stared out at the snow falling in lazy swirls and drifting as the wind pushed it. It was a beautiful sight.

Inside the tree line, Tahlman saw a dark shape. A puff of snow blossomed from a tree branch followed by a pop and chatter of breaking glass. He heard a loud boom just as the sting hit his forehead; it felt as if he'd been smacked with a handful of pea gravel. There were bright stabs of pain and a burning sensation covering the right side of his face.

Tahlman's right eye blurred, it felt wet. He realized, in the seconds that followed, the deep, booming crack was the report of a heavy rifle. His fingers groped the warm stickiness blinding his right eye. His fingers came away slick with blood. His last thought was one of anger.

Some son-of-a-bitch is shooting into my home.

The intervening years disappeared and Marine training took over. Tahlman threw himself to the floor and rolled. To him his shout of surprise sounded like a squeak, but Nina heard his yell loud and clear in the kitchen.

Tahlman's instincts were still there and the floor was his best friend. The right side of his forehead was numb and he bled profusely into the carpet. He took a quick inventory. Despite the head wound, his body seemed intact. In the brief moments following the shot, he was terrified. Now, his fear had turned to rage and he realized he must've been hit by flying glass. The bullet shattering the windowpane didn't miss by much; however, he heard its angry buzz.

Nina came through the door and Tahlman yelled at her to get back. Instead, she crouched beside him and took his head in her hands. "You've got a big chunk of glass in your forehead, Jack," she said in a matter-of-fact voice.

There was another loud boom. Jack cringed. Nina jumped. But the report sounded farther away. No other bullets hit the house. Nina stood and held out her hands. "Come on. Let's get you in the bathroom. I can't see a damn thing in here."

Jack managed to get to his hands and knees and then he exploded. "You're awful damn cool and calm. Somebody just took a shot at me ... son-of-a-bitch. I can't believe it, some asshole put a bullet through my window ... he damn near killed me."

Don't forget ... I love questions, comments or even a little friendly banter, you're welcome anytime. Drop an email to: **woodsidepubgroup@gmail.com**