

Chapter Eleven

Don't Say Nothin' About White Eye

Burkett and Somerville left Blackthorne with the effulgent sun just above their visors, heading east between plowed fields, mesquite trees and ranches with their fences and cattle. Burkett had broken off his patrol at midnight to rest for the trip, and he put his window halfway down to let the scents of the countryside into the Ranger's car. They had ridden for about four hours when he said, "You got some good photos. Reckon Sheriff Connally will be able to help us?"

"I think he knows most of them that have been there for awhile," Somerville said. "If there's a new guy, he may recognize him, that is if we're lucky enough not to have his back to the camera."

They rode through Bobwhite and Ramrod before stopping for lunch at Hardesty's Barbecue in Hector, where, as usual, Somerville's small round Ranger's badge was noted. "Didn't bring your horse?" an old man in a sweat-darkened straw hat asked. "No, I won't need him this trip," Somerville said.

"Where you going?"

"East Texas."

Somerville began talking about the search for evidence when they were back on the road, saying a forensics team from Fort Worth had started outside Blackthorne and worked almost to Dallas, using a metal detector and inspecting the soil in tree groves and other possible locations within sight of the highway. "We don't think he went too far off the road simply because he would have used a place that he picked out on the way to Blackthorne," he said.

With Burkett relieving the Ranger after five hours, they reached Dove City at mid-afternoon and went to the Claxton County Sheriff's Office and Jail, a modest old two-story red brick building on the next to last street on the west side of town. Connally was a wiry old man with pronounced crow's feet around his blue eyes. "Hello, Ira, sure good to see you again," he said, shaking hands with both men. "Sheriff Burkett? I think I saw you from a distance at the last Sheriffs' Association conference."

"Yes, sir, I've seen your picture in The Lawman magazine," Burkett said.

"I guess you've got some pictures for me to look at."

"Yes, sir, we're hoping you can help identify the men in them. We think from overhearing part of what Tractor Green said that they were calling up Stonewall Jackson."

Connally threw his head back and laughed deeply and long. "I know it, I know it," he said, shaking his head. "They are some bunch." He led Burkett and Somerville into his office, took the big brown envelope from the Ranger and started going through the fifteen photos. "I know these old boys pretty well," he said. "I go visit with them every now and then, and I even recognize some of them from their backs." Calling Burkett and the Ranger to look down on each side of him, Connally talked and pointed. "You know Tractor. He's the one standing up. The guy there with him is Sweetwater Mike Barrington, his second in command. This here is Sleepy Rideout, Killer Bee Boone, Doug the Thug Mannheim, Pitchfork Whitecotton, Ting-a-Ling Purity, Wild Hog Cagle, Kabuki Fontenot and Bushmaster Deshotel. I guess I know every one of them except this guy," he said, putting the tip of his ballpoint pen on Freaky Frank Sullins, who was sitting by the fire and looking past Tractor with a fascinated expression. "He

must be fairly new because I don't recognize him. He must have also been keeping his head down or me or my deputies would have seen him around town. "Harry," he called. A tall man about forty came in. "Do you know this guy?"

"I may have seen him with a woman at the Gas & Vittles," Harry said. "Want me to check with the city water department?"

"Yeah, why don't you?"

"Let me take one of the pictures and I'll be back directly." The deputy left, and Burkett and Somerville went into more detail about the Honeycutt case than Somerville had given on the phone. "We wish we didn't have them here, of course," Connally said. "But they're been here for awhile and they have been pretty quiet. We have people all over the county smoking marijuana, drinking and riding motorcycles, so we can't get on them for that as long as they don't deal or hurt anybody. Actually, most of them hold a job. Sweetwater Mike got indicted on a case in Spartacus, may or may not have O.D.'d a guy they thought was snitching."

"Think we could turn him?" Somerville asked. "I'd like to infiltrate them, but DPS narcotics says it would be nearly impossible."

"Nah, you could never get a man in," Connally said. "Old Tractor'd smoke him out in a jiffy."

Harry returned, put the photo in front of Connally and said, "Steven Lee Sullins. He has a girlfriend named Florinda, but they moved three days ago. She came in, paid up and said they were going to be near relatives in Colorado."

"Would you call Tractor and tell him we're coming over?" Somerville asked.

"Sure," Connally said, looking up Green's number in his Rolodex and dialing it.

“Hello, Tractor? This is Sheriff Connally. A couple of friends of mine are here from West Texas. Would you mind if we come over? Give you about thirty minutes? Sure will. See you then.”

The Pine Needle room deodorizer on Green’s coffee table was unsuccessfully competing with the stench of marijuana, but the lawmen acted oblivious. “Civil War buff, are you?” Somerville asked, looking around.

“You could say that,” Green said.

“I have a lot of respect for the Confederate Rebels and their leadership, if not their cause.”

“It was their lofty principles and untrammelled southern manhood that made them glorious,” said Green, gazing calmly from one officer to the other.

“They thought they had to have slave labor to maintain their cotton economy, but the war didn’t change anything except to bring in the Radical Republican reconstruction,” Burkett said. “Freeing the slaves lowered their production expenses because the cheap farm labor actually cost less than slavery. In other words, the Civil War was a national exercise in stupidity. Another proof is all the frontal assaults the Confederates made when the Yankees were entrenched on high ground.”

Green looked at Burkett with annoyance but made no reply, and Connally said, “Tractor, this is Sheriff Booger Burkett from Fitzhugh County and Texas Ranger Ira Somerville,” Connally said. “They’re investigating the murder of a woman named Rita Honeycutt. They’re not accusing you, but they are interested in a man you may know, Steven Sullins, who just left town. Do you know him?”

“Sure, we called him Freaky Frank. He was a prospect for our club, the Ghosts of the Confederacy, but he decided to take off, said he didn’t like the little bitty town, the woods and all.”

“What was your impression of Freaky Frank?” Somerville asked.

“Oh, he was okay. We got him from a club called the Evil Adolfs. The Ghosts are not for everybody. Some people take us for a motorcycle gang, but we are law-abiding. Some of us have been to prison, but we learned our lesson.”

“You did three years for manslaughter,” Burkett said.

“It was a bar fight,” Green said. “A drunk cowboy started it. I hit him with a pitcher, but I didn’t mean to kill him.”

“Can you tell us where to find Mr. Sullins?” the Ranger asked.

“Said he has a cousin in Littleton, Colorado, you know, a suburb of Denver, who can help him get a job as a motorcycle mechanic.”

“That could be helpful. Did he ever say anything about coming out our way back in late March?”

“No.”

“Did he not have money and then show up with a noticeable amount?”

“No.”

“Do you know a man named Herrell Honeycutt, nicknamed White Eye?”

“Yeah, we were in prison together, and he is a member of the Ghosts. But I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“He hasn’t been to Dove City recently?”

“No.”

“That’s all we have right now, Mr. Green,” Somerville said. “We appreciate your time.”

When they were driving away, Burkett said, “He was lying like a mangy egg-sucking dog.”

“We think Honeycutt was here about three weeks before his wife’s murder, but we don’t have any evidence yet to place him here,” Somerville said from the back seat. He handed Connally a mug shot of Honeycutt and asked, “Could you ask your deputies to show this around town and see if anybody remembers him?”

“Sure thing,” the sheriff said. “I bet they call up another general tonight. Want to stick around for it?”

“What do you think, Sheriff Burkett?” the Ranger asked.

“I can go for another one,” Burkett said.

“Me and the boys have watched a few,” said Connally. “Of course, you can’t see anything. We thought they were fairly harmless, but now with Sweetwater Mike’s case and yours, they bear more scrutiny.”

The Ranger and the sheriffs were lying low about where Somerville and Burkett had hidden the first time when the Ghosts trooped up. They lit the fire and made a circle with Tractor and Sweetwater Mike again taking the lead roles. “Who are we calling up, Captain Green?” asked Pitchfork.

“Colonel John Singleton Mosby, leader of Mosby’s Raiders,” Tractor said. “They called him the Gray Ghost because he was so elusive and deadly.”

“Don’t remember seeing him before, but it’s high time we did, seeing he was the Gray Ghost,” Bushmaster said.

“We always favored the generals, but Colonel Mosby’s not to be forgotten. He was a great southerner and a very great leader. He was a genius.”

“Who were the cops looking for?” Sweetwater Mike asked.

“Freaky Frank. I said he was gone, but I didn’t say where he went. I also said he was still just a prospect.”

“What did they want him for?” Sleepy asked.

“They think he robbed a convenience store.”

“Good Ghost,” Sweetwater Mike said. “I was surprised when he took off without seeing the rest of us.”

“I think he’ll be back when he cools off.”

“That would be good,” Killer Bee said, lighting a cigarette in the fire. “He seemed to like it here.”

“He said he did,” Tractor said. “He came by with Florinda and said they were going to Montana to camp out.”

“Don’t sound like a bad idea,” Bushmaster said. “Be hard to find them.”

“Don’t say nothin’ about White Eye if anybody asks you. Tell the women. The fuzz asked after him for some reason.”

The lawmen watched the bikers talking but could not understand more than a word here and there. They turned around and crawled until they were far enough away to get up and walk to Connally’s car. “I bet they were talking about Sullins,” Burkett said. “I thought I heard one say, ‘Freaky.’”

“They probably were, but old Charlie didn’t look like he was saying much,” Connally said. “If it went down like you think, it could be that nobody knows the details

but him and Sullins.”

“It makes sense that he wouldn’t tell the whole group,” said Somerville. “I wonder if Barrington was in on it.”

“Maybe,” Connally said. “I’ll talk to the D.A. in Spartacus to see about making him an offer if he’ll turn. I don’t think it’s much of a murder case. The guy who died was a snitch, but he was also a junkie. It would be hard to prove he didn’t just O.D. on his own.”

“Why don’t you try it?” Somerville asked. “He’s been away twice, so he’ll be concerned about life as an habitual criminal -- the big bitch.”

“That’s probably why he killed the snitch,” Burkett said.

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