

## THE HONEYCUTTS OF BLACKTHORNE

By James Robert Campbell

### Chapter Five A Still, Clear Morning

Saturday was breaking when Rita pulled into the driveway, and she looked around nervously and hurried in through the front door. The garage door was up, and Samantha's teal blue Corvette was inside. Rita made coffee and started two pieces of bread in the toaster. Wearing her black and silver Blackthorne Lady Panthers housecoat, Samantha walked into the kitchen where her mother was smoking a cigarette. "Been out all night?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm seeing a man," Rita said. "Don't ask who."

"I don't care, really. Guess I'll find out soon enough. I know Daddy ran around on you for years, and he has a girlfriend, Darlene Atchley."

"I hate all this."

"I don't, really. Well, I do, but it has been a lot quieter. What I really hated was the fighting."

"I'm glad I got the day off. I need to sleep."

"I'm going back to bed," Samantha said. "I think I'll drive into town later and see if I can see anybody."

"You don't have a date?"

"No, I turned one down. Thought we could spend some time together. Haven't seen much of you lately."

"I'm not going anywhere except the grocery store. Give your mama a hug."

Samantha came to her, bent over and hugged her. "I love you, Sambo," said Rita. "Don't worry. We'll get through it."

“I’m looking forward to college and getting away from here. March 7, 1987,” she said, looking at the calendar of Texas road destinations. “Two and a half months to graduation. Got to keep my grades up so I can stay in the national ornery society.”

“Are y’all going to win district like we did way back when?”

“Maybe, if we can beat Ivanhoe again like we did last night.”

“I bet you can,” Rita said, winking. “What was the score?”

“Seventy-one to sixty-nine. I scored fourteen points.”

“I should have been there. I’ll go to the next one, I promise. I’m still a Lady Panther at heart. You know, honey, me and your daddy have both been poor examples, but you don’t have to let that slow you down. All you really have to do is decide what kind of woman you want to be and just be that.”

“You’re a good example. If I can be like you, I’ll be happy.”

“I appreciate that, honey. Why don’t you go back to bed now? I’m going to after I watch a little TV.”

“Okay,” she said, kissing Rita on the cheek.

Rita spread cherry jelly on her toast, poured another cup of black coffee and moved to the spacious western-style living room. She turned the TV on, setting the sound low, and tried to concentrate on an old movie, “Out of the Past,” with Robert Mitchum and Jane Greer. “Oh, Lord, what are we doing?” she asked.

Burkett went to the office, talked with Coldstone and drove home, rolling into the driveway and open garage on time at six-thirty. Adelaide poured coffee and put the cup in front of him at the kitchen table. “Do you want breakfast?” she asked.

“I am a little hungry,” he said.

“How did it go?” she asked, moving behind him for a kiss.

“Not too bad. Pretty routine.”

“Rezin, I can smell a woman on you,” she said.

“Rocky picked up a real dirty prostitute and brought her in just as I came in. She fought and got away from him, and I had to help with her.”

“I see. We’ve been married a long time, and I could understand if you made a mistake, that is if you could get a handle on it. But if you couldn’t, we could have a serious problem. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“Hell, no.”

“Take a word to the wise and end all foolishness. What else is going on at the office except dealing with crazy whores?”

“You know Skipper McCoskey?”

“Young farmer that went to the pen?”

“Yeah, we think he’s stealing tractors. The D.A. is going to the judge for a search warrant, and we’re probably going out there in the next day or two, get a couple of troopers to back us up.”

“You think he’ll fight?”

“He might. He’s on parole.”

“Be careful then.”

“I been lucky so far.”

“Yeah, you have, but you know the luck can run out.”

“We’ll be careful as we can, but sometimes you just have to face it and hope for the best.”

“You missed church last week. In your profession, you shouldn’t miss.”

“We’ll go this week.”

White Eye Honeycutt reached Blackthorne that afternoon and went to his apartment to sleep. He woke up at midnight and drove to Angleton’s to eat. He called his girlfriend, and they met outside. “How was Dallas?” she asked.

“Big and nasty like always,” he said. “I done my business and got back.”

“Get more supplies?”

“Yeah, I’m going to see my cooks tomorrow. That’s the great thing about meth. You don’t have to look for it or go to Mexico or nothing. Just get the stuff and make it.”

The next day, Hound Dog was eager to hear his son’s report. “How’d it go?” he asked.

“Real good, Daddy,” White Eye said. “I give the money to the gang and met the guy who’s going to do it. He’s a pro.”

“That’s good. I’m anxious to get her out of the way. Do you know when he’ll do it?”

“No, but I don’t think it will be over a month.”

“Sounds okay. You know I did kill that hoehand back in Seventy-three.”

“I always figured. What’d you do it for?”

“I was drunk and he back-sassed me. I shot him in the gut with my twenty-two pistol and chopped him up with the ax while he was still alive.”

“Pissed you off, hunh? What’d you do with the body?”

“Easy. He was already mostly chopped up, so I fed him to the hogs. They loved it.”

“What about the skull?”

“I thought they’d eat it, but they couldn’t get a purchase and kept rootin’ it around. So I put it in a post hole and busted it up with the fence post.”

“Ever kill anybody else?”

“Knifed a queer in the bathroom of a bar in Killeen when I was in the Army, but he might have lived. I never heard anything about it. Course, you seen me shoot them two wetbacks when they found our AK-47’s in the cellar that I was fixing to sell in Acuna.”

“I didn’t mind helping you bury them even if I was still in high school. They should have been minding their own business. It’ll be planting time in a few weeks.”

“Yeah, I think we ought to go cotton again. Sorghum is still down, and the soybeans ain’t working out.”

“I agree. Want me to rub your back and shoulders?”

“Yeah.” Herrell Jr. got up from the black leather couch and moved behind his father to knead his neck and shoulder muscles. Herrell Sr. said nothing but smiled slightly upon finding a John Wayne movie, “Cahill, U.S. Marshal,” on TV.

“You wouldn’t shoot a dead man, would you?” asked George Kennedy, rolling over with a rifle.

“No, but I don’t want a live one shooting me,” said Wayne, finishing off Kennedy with a couple of shots.

“John Wayne knew he was faking,” said Herrell Jr., rubbing the swastika through his shirt.

“He can really shoot,” Herrell Sr. said. “I like the sound of those old forty-fives, boom, boom, boom! We ought to get some.”

Burkett called a meeting of the deputies the next morning and showed a search

warrant for McCoskey's farm. "He'll know he's prison-bound when we drive up," Burkett said. "Put your vests on. I hope he don't resist, but he'll be a three-time loser and he probably don't want to go back. He might have sensed we're coming and got rid of everything, but I doubt it. I scoped him out with binoculars, and I think he's got too many tractors."

"Do we need backup?" Deputy Vernon Doyle asked.

"Jayson and Eberly are coming from the highway patrol. That gives us seven officers. Any more than that and he might think he's under assault. Be on your toes, but if he don't come to the door to be served, we'll just have to look around. If his white GMC is there, he's there. Let's have a prayer. Heavenly Father, please be with us and keep us safe during our dangerous duty today. We accept the risks our profession entails, but we need You to help us fulfill it and return to our families. Please find us worthy of your grace. In Jesus' name we pray, amen."

Burkett and Coldstone rode in the SUV while Rivas, Doyle and Bondurant followed in Rivas's patrol car. Seven miles northwest of town, they reached McCoskey's blond brick home and neglected-looking farm. They parked in front of the house but did not get out until two black and white Texas Highway Patrol cars arrived. The deputies and troopers waited at Burkett's SUV while he went to the door and rang the bell. McCoskey's wife answered, "Skipper just went to the barn. Did he get in trouble again?"

"We just want to talk to him and serve this search warrant," Burkett said, showing it. "Is he carrying a gun?"

"I didn't see one," she said.

“If he comes back in the house, tell him what I said.”

“All right. I think he’s in the barn. You can probably just go on out there.”

Burkett returned to the others and said, “She says he went to the barn. Let’s move the cars and see if we can see him.”

“Sheriff, do you know if he’s armed?” asked Trooper Eberly.

“She says not so far as she knows, but I’m not prepared to assume that.”

They moved the vehicles and were standing outside them looking at the barn when Coldstone said, “I saw some movement at the right side window.”

“Skipper, this is Sheriff Burkett!” he called. It was a still, clear morning, a little cold and very quiet. There was no more movement at the window. Then there was a rifle shot from inside the barn, and Doyle, hit in the neck just above his bullet-proof vest, collapsed by the left front of Rivas’ car. The others jumped behind the car and SUV as more shots were fired into the air and car. Burkett and the deputies started shooting back with their pistols, and the troopers got AR-15 assault rifles from their car trunks and fired a fusillade at the barn. After the officers had fired over a hundred shots and Doyle’s body had been dragged behind the car by Rivas, they realized that it had been a while since McCoskey had fired. “Mr. McCoskey, you have killed my deputy!” Burkett yelled. “We have called for help, and it will be here shortly. There is no reason for anyone else to die. Put down your rifle and come out with your hands up. I give you my personal guarantee that you will not be harmed.”

There was no sound. More troopers got there, and Burkett called for a SWAT team from Exeter. “Does the barn have a back door?” Rivas asked.

“I doubt it, but there’s probably some other way he can get out,” Burkett said. “I

don't want anybody to expose himself to move one of the cars or watch the back. I guess we should have had somebody back there, but who knew? He might have got shot, too. Poor old Vern," he said, looking at the body. "Wife and how many kids?"

"Three, I think," Bondurant said. "I hate to just sit here, son of a bitch!"

"Yeah, I'd like to kill him, too, but he stopped shooting and I don't want anybody else to get hit," the sheriff said.

"He's going to lose today, one way or the other," said Trooper Jayson. "We'll see to it."

"What did it sound like to y'all?" Burkett asked.

"I'd say about a two forty-three," Bondurant said. "Pretty zippy but not too heavy."

"Sounds about right," said Rivas.

"Bigger than an AR," Eberly said.

"Then he can hit from three or four hundred yards at the furthest," Burkett said.

"About that," said Coldstone.

"When SWAT gets here, I'll tell them to set up sandbags five hundred yards behind the barn. What're they shooting, three-o--eights?"

"That's it," said Eberly.

"Then we got him out-gunned. We'll back off, get out of the way and block the road on both ends. We better get his wife out, too. If he won't surrender, we'll have SWAT open fire on the barn, see how he likes it."

"Sounds good to me, the lousy bastard," Coldstone said.

They heard a shot from the barn, but no bullet came out.



“Killed himself,” Bondurant said.

“Maybe,” said Burkett.

They waited for twenty minutes, and the SWAT team drove up in its heavy olive drab van and stopped between the house and barn. The leader got out and called, “Sheriff Burkett?”

“We heard a shot,” Burkett said. “We think he killed himself. I was going to ask you to set up behind the barn some distance back. We think he’s got a two forty- three.”

“Okay, sheriff, can we do anything for your man?”

“No, he’s gone.”

“Sure hate to hear that.”

“No sorrier than us.”

Mrs. McCoskey appeared behind the house, walking toward the barn in slippers and a housecoat. “Mrs. McCoskey, stop!” Burkett yelled. “It ain’t safe!”

She turned to respond, “I’m going!” and started running. Her slippers came off and she continued barefoot.

“Ma’am, please stop,” Burkett cried. “Cover me,” he said, starting after her. Coldstone followed, and the others raised their weapons. Burkett, Coldstone and the woman found McCoskey sitting against a post with his rifle across his chest muzzle up and his finger in the trigger guard. He had been hit by four or five bullets in his chest, abdomen and legs. He had short blond hair.

“Damn it, Skipper!” the woman screamed, crying. “I told you, I told you!”

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