

Chapter Six

Messing with Another Woman's Man

Cops from fifty miles in every direction came to Deputy Doyle's funeral in the First Baptist Church. Most of them stayed stoic through the service with the Rev. Dr. Jerrod Willacy's elegy and the choir's singing of traditional funeral hymns like "Farther Along" and "No Tears in Heaven." But as the minister announced at the end, Doyle, like most people, had had dimensions to which few had been privy.

"Vernon left some instructions for his last rites," Willacy said. "He knew, as all officers of the law do, that his last day could come without warning. It is the result of sin and the insanity that can grow from man's willful disobedience to God. The man who did this, fighting his arrest and imprisonment, has also gone to meet the Father, and knowing Vernon, a faithful member of this church, as I did, I can say with perfect certainty that Vernon and the man who ended his life will meet quite different judgements in the world to come.

"Vernon asked us to play a song for him, and we will do that now," Willacy said. A guitar sounded the opening waltz notes, Patsy Cline sang "If I Could See the World Through the Eyes of a Child" over the church's excellent sound system into its acoustically perfect auditorium, and one by one many of the officers wept. Some sobbed near the end and roughly wiped their faces. "Deputy Vernon Doyle, we will miss you," the preacher said. "You were a tremendous man and officer, and if any of us find ourselves in a state of rebellion

against God today, I know I speak for you in urging them to repent now before it is too late. The Father will forgive, but you must repent.”

After the graveside rites at Celestial Borders Cemetery, Burkett went to the office to meet with Rivas and Bondurant about the sentencing tomorrow of Jerry Ray Chudd, who had pleaded guilty to murdering Ronald White in the case involving White’s mother. “I’ll still be sleepy from night patrol, so I want both of you to help the bailiff,” the sheriff said. “Feelings are bound to be running high.”

“What if the two old men fight?” Rivas asked.

“Be quick to move in and discourage it. We don’t want to arrest anybody if it can be avoided.”

The deputies left, and a minute later the phone rang. “Rezin,” Rita said.

“I’m glad you called,” he said. “We need to talk. We got to call it off.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m fixing to get in trouble with my wife. I shouldn’t have let it go this far, but we always had a thing for each other. I’m sorry, Rita.”

“How about one last time at the trees?”

“Can’t do it. There ain’t no good way to quit, kind of like dying.”

“I’ll really miss you,” she said. “You’re one of a kind.”

“So are you.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. Goodbye, Rita.”

“Goodbye, Rezin.”

He hung up and sighed. He walked past the dispatcher, the dark-haired Jaretta

Bertozzi, on his way out, and said, "I'm going home. Call if you need me. I'll be on patrol tonight as usual."

There was a fair-size crowd in district court with Chudd's friends and relatives on the right side facing District Judge Elijah Stone and White's people on the left. Reporters from radio station KBTN and the Fitzhugh County Banner were in the second row. Stone, a short, stocky man with bushy white hair and a full, heavily wrinkled face, came in from the right, everyone stood at the bailiff's command, "All rise," and the cue ball bald district attorney, Troy Dodge, rose to say a plea bargain for eighteen years in prison had been derived with court-appointed defense attorney Dal MacGleish. The Chudd and White clans were led by their patriarchs, front and center in the adjoining sections, Vester Chudd and Dakin White. The judge read Jerry Ray Chudd's confession, saying the two men had left Jolene White's trailer house that morning to get more beer in Blackthorne. "Ronald jumped me out about me and his mom," Stone read. "He said I was causing a divorce. I told him to shut up, and when he wouldn't, I pulled my Glock 19 and shot him four times. He was still breathing, so I took out my lockblade and finished him. Jolene held me back when Ronald went out and said I should put him out of his misery. I thought it was unusual for a mother to say that, so I figured if she would say it, she must have a real good reason. I whupped Dakin the night before in the front yard for messing with us, but when Ronald came over later, he never said nothing about it. So I guess he cared more about his mama."

Standing in front of the bench with MacGleish, Chudd answered, "Yes, your honor," when the judge asked if that was a true statement

“Don’t plead guilty, son,” Vester Chudd called out. “Make them prove it.”

“He rates the death penalty,” Dakin White said. “Low-life white trash beat me with a shovel and liked to kill me.”

“You made him that way, Dakin,” Vester said.

“Fight like a man!” said White, a tall, frail man using a cane to move toward Chudd. Chudd, a big white-haired man with a pony tail, also stood up.

“Order in the court or you’re both going to jail!” ordered Stone, whapping his gavel.

Rivas moved in behind White and locked his arms around the man’s midriff while Bondurant stepped in front of Chudd with both arms out. The elderly bailiff moved up to watch the rest of the crowd of about sixty people.

“Mr. White, Mr. Chudd, sit down!” the judge ordered. “I know this is emotional, but we will have order one way or another. Do you understand?”

Neither man answered, but both sat down. Stone passed sentence, and Jerry Ray Chudd, who had not taken his eyes off the judge, finally looked around at his family and friends on his way out with the bailiff. “I love y’all,” he said with a half-smile.

The courtroom cleared, leaving Stone on the bench and the D.A. by themselves. “Do you know if Jolene White has gone down?” the judge asked.

“Oh, yes, the sheriff had Deputy Bondurant take her to the diagnostic unit at Gatesville right after you signed my application to revoke her probation,” Dodge said. “We thought it best to get her out of here.”

“I agree. Can you imagine? I wonder what her evaluation will be.”

“Human depravity can take astonishing turns. They get pretty far gone on that meth.”

“It’s only for five years for DWI, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but it will be two or three years we won’t have her in our community.”

“Were those two partners in a string of armed robberies?”

“We think so,” Dodge said. “They started out as best friends.”

“Lord Almighty,” Stone said. “There is another subject I would like to talk to you about in general terms to stay inside the ethical boundaries if you don’t mind.”

“Yes?”

“If you have a group of people, a family, that always has one foot, or maybe both feet, over the line, and even though they have been rather severely punished a few times, if the public sees them as a successful ongoing criminal enterprise, I think it puts people

like you and me in an uncomfortable position, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, your honor, I feel the same way, although a D.A. doesn’t want to look like a martinet and a judge doesn’t want to be draconian, even in a conservative county.”

“No, you must always be cognizant of the danger of abusing your power. But on the other hand, you have been entrusted with that power for a reason. There can be the tendency to excuse or lightly punish a series of abecedarian malfeasances and then fail to respond appropriately to more serious offenses. That’s how they manipulate the system, don’t you think?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“When you have a person like this, even a young one, belly up, shouldn’t you go

ahead and try to knock some sense into him? I mean, how much nonsense should we take?”

“A limited amount.”

“Let me ask you about something else, and I can be more specific. Have you had any reason to question the dedication or probity of the Fitzhugh County Sheriff’s Office or the Blackthorne Police Department?”

“Not yet, your honor. We have had good relationships with them. Deputy Doyle was an example of the kind of men we have, I believe.”

“That was a sad one. I almost broke down myself when they played that Patsy Cline song. If you ever hear anything of substance, something you could get evidence of, all you have to do is bring it to me. The state constitution gives me broad powers to impanel a grand jury and give it specific instructions about what I want looked into.”

“Yes, your honor, I will let you know if I ever have any such concerns.”

“Thank you, Troy. I trust you will keep this conversation in the strictest confidence.”

“I will, your honor, the strictest.”

Burkett had gone home to take a nap, and he called Rita when he returned to the office. “Honey baby,” he said.

“Hi, Rezin,” she replied. “I just got off work. Hated to hear from you yesterday.”

“Well, I guess we knew it couldn’t last forever. But I agree with you that this isn’t the right way to end it.”

“You want another roll?”

“I think I can get by with just one more if you’ll meet me at the Draggin’ Inn motel in Fortner so I can take a shower before I go home.”

“It ain’t very flattering.”

“A man can love two women just like a woman can love two men.”

“Do you love me?”

“You know I do. We got to say goodbye, but we should do it the right way.”

“There ain’t no right way, Rezin. The whole thing was wrong. That’s why it couldn’t last. I didn’t want to hurt anybody. I just wanted a little love.”

“I know.”

“I’ll meet you,” she said. “I think Herrell knows what we’ve been up to, but I saw him last night and he said he was going to Ruidoso with Darlene. Maybe he doesn’t care.”

“Prob’ly don’t. Sure never acted like it. I’ll park my vehicle behind the sheriff’s office in Fortner, and we can go from there in your car. About one? That’ll give us five hours till I have to go.”

“Okay. It’s going to be hard seeing you at Angleton’s and trying to act normal.”

“What’s normal?” he asked. “In my line of work, I don’t ever expect to see normal again.”

They rendezvoused as planned, and after making love on the creaking, somewhat dusty bed, they lay in each other’s arms more like a married couple than an illicit one running risks. “It makes all the sense there is even if it don’t really make any,” he said.

“I’m sorry I got it started, messing with another woman’s man,” she said. “I

fantasized about high school for so long. It was such a good memory, compared to my marriage. I thought maybe we could recapture it.”

“It’s like you can’t go home again. You were younger than me, and I didn’t want to come back messing with a high school kid after I was in the service. Wish I had.”

“So do I.”

Copyright 2024 by J.R. Campbell “The Honeycutts of Blackthorne” is on sale as an eZine for 99 cents from Amazon and other major retailers. The novel is an exercise in naturalistic super-realism with nothing but what the characters see, say, hear, taste, feel and sense so that the reader may experience the story on the level of a character. This is work of fiction. Any resemblances to organizations or people who are living or dead are unintended and coincidental. Next week: “I Don’t Want To, But I Got To.”