

THE HONEYCUTTS OF BLACKTHORNE

By James Robert Campbell

Chapter Seven I Don't Want To, But I Got To

The news started spreading on the side of the bleachers near the outside door and wiggled like a seismic wave up and across to the other side: "Rita Honeycutt's been killed! They just found her body. I bet ol' White Eye did it or had it done. Oh, Lord, look at her! She has no earthly idea." Samantha Honeycutt, the lithe, fleet forward, was having another good game as the Lady Panthers led the Furlow Lady Wolverines, sixty-three to forty-seven, with two minutes left in the game. Blackthorne High School Principal Wilfred Owens walked in front of the bleachers and spoke to Head Coach Frank Fields, who sent a player in for Samantha. Owens told her to get dressed because she had an emergency at home, and she left with him and his wife in their car to the First Baptist Church of Furlow, where the minister, Ellis Cookson, was waiting at the front door. "Y'all tell me what's wrong!" the girl exclaimed. "Has something happened to Mama?"

"Come in and sit down, child," Cookson said.

Samantha began crying, and when she had sat down in a back pew, the preacher sat next to her, took her hand and said, "Honey, we don't know why this happened, but your mama has gone on to be with the Lord."

Sheriff Burkett was driving toward the other side of the county, and the dark heights of Taylor's Trees were in sight under the half moon when he got the call. Having happened outside the city limits, it was his case. A county ambulance and a justice of the peace's car were in front of the house with Coldstone's patrol car and a couple of other vehicles. "Ruby Daniels came by from the restaurant to check on her

and called it in because she looked through a side window and saw Rita's arm sticking out from around the door jamb on the kitchen floor," said Coldstone outside the yellow crime scene tape he had put at the front door. "Good thing the kitchen light was on."

JP Elsie Mayer came out under the tape and said, "It's nothing but murder, Booger. Looks like a robbery. I'll hang around here for awhile. Let me know when you get ready for the funeral home."

"How long do you estimate she's been dead?" he asked.

"Not that long. Five or six hours."

"I hate to go in there, Caleb," Burkett said. "She was a friend. I'd known her since high school."

"I know, sheriff," Coldstone said.

"I don't want to, but I got to," he said, scissoring his legs over the tape and going to the kitchen. Rita, fully dressed like she must have just come home from work, was lying on her back with her right arm splayed out, looking as though the bullets to her left cheek and left chest had interrupted her in mid-sentence. Her eyes were open but filmed over. Alone with her, he quietly cried. "I, I. . ." he started. "I'm sorry." He dropped to his right knee, took off his hat and bowed his head.

"Sheriff Burkett?" asked Coldstone, now joined by Rocky Rivas. "Should we go through the house?"

"Yeah, let's do that," he said. "Look for evidence and bag it. There may not be any because this was a pro job, double tap."

"I already looked for hulls," Coldstone said. "Looks like he either picked them up

or used a revolver.”

They saw that Rita’s purse was missing and that her and Samantha’s jewelry boxes were gone. Their dresser drawers and closets had been ransacked, but the officers remarked that it would be impossible to say what was missing until the contents had been inventoried.

“What do you think, boys?” Burkett asked. “A burglary that was interrupted or a contract killing made to look like one?”

“Considering the circumstances, I’d pick door number two,” Rivas said.

“Me, too, considering the low life bastard she was married to,” Burkett said. “What about you, Caleb?”

“I won’t say just yet,” Coldstone said.

“After we take the crime scene photos and have the body removed, I’m going to the office and call the Ranger. I had some experience with murder cases in the Army, but we’ll need all the help we can get with this one.”

Sullins had angled down to Interstate 20 and was nearing Fort Worth, the approximate halfway point home, when it started getting dark. The only sound inside the dark blue Ford pickup was that of the engine. Sullins had used four of the six five-gallon gasoline cans he had brought in the pickup bed because he did not want to stop anywhere, and he had urinated in a tin bucket from the passengers’ side floorboard. On the way to Blackthorne, he had noticed a tree-lined country lane off the south side of the highway east of Dallas, and he took it now, hiding the pickup to change back to the legal license plates, refueling with a yellow plastic funnel and taking a shovel out of the

back. He dug between trees and threw the stolen Texas license plates into the hole. Then he took a large suitcase from the back and emptied its considerable contents into it, the jewelry, Rita's purse, cut glass bowls, a silver coffee set, a thirty-eight pistol with pearl handles and other items from the house. He also dropped in the nine-shot High Standard double action revolver he had killed Rita with, filled the hole and left it with a slight hump so it would settle down flat. He roughed over the surface with his hand and pulled and replanted weeds and grass to disguise it.

Sullins did not turn his headlights on until he was back on the dirt road a half-mile off the interstate. A car had gone by when he was burying the evidence, but he was sure it was someone who lived in the area and hadn't noticed him. He still had on the black suit, red tie and white dress shirt he had worn up to Rita's door at three p.m., unlocking it and walking in with the suitcase. He took care not to exceed the speed limit, so it was pushing eleven p.m. when he passed the Dove City sign, turned onto his street and parked outside the trailer house where he lived with his girlfriend Florinda Rose. "How'd it go, honey?" she asked.

"Oh, pretty good. They said they'd let me know in a few days."

"I hope you get it. I can see you selling oilfield equipment and making friends with those men."

"I thought it was worth a try," he said. "For sure, nothing's going to happen if you don't take the initiative."

Tractor was having a cookout the next day, and Sullins went to return the pickup,

which belonged to Ting-a-Ling Purity, as Florinda followed in their black Ford Mustang. After a couple of hours of eating barbecued brisket from the fifty-five-gallon drum Tractor had had converted into a grill, drinking beer, smoking pot and watching wrestling, Tractor caught Sullins's eye and pointed at the door with his head. Tractor followed him into the trees and asked, "How'd it go, Freaky?"

"Perfect," Sullins said. "I dressed up like a businessman in a suit and tie, carrying my suitcase, walked up to the front door and got in with the key White Eye gave me. She was coming out of the kitchen and backed up when she saw the gun."

"Did she say anything?"

"No, don't. I shot her under the left eye and in the heart and stole as much stuff as I could get in my suitcase. I buried all of it with the gun and phony plates in a tree grove this side of Dallas. There's one other thing. As I was going in the house, I heard somebody drive by behind me. I acted like I was knocking, but I didn't touch the door. I had the key in my hand. Then I reached down and unlocked it."

"So you killed her and got back clean?"

"I used the gas cans, the piss bucket and the Cokes and lunch Florinda packed so I wouldn't have to stop anywhere around people," Sullins said.

"That's good. You never know on one of these things. White Eye wanted it to look like a sex crime. I guess he meant use a knife, but that was bullshit. Made a lot more sense to make it look like a burglary because he will seem less guilty."

"That ain't my style, anyway. I like to do it clean as possible and not leave evidence. With a revolver, all they got is two twenty-two hollow point slugs that are probably deformed."

“You used gloves?” asked Tractor.

“Oh, yeah. Even if they dig up the stuff, there’s nothing there to lead them to me.”

“Well, the Texas Rangers will be all over it. You don’t want to underestimate them, but even if they come here, nobody knows anything but us.”

“You know I won’t spill.”

“I knew you were a bro to the end or I wouldn’t have called on you. You will be officially inducted in a couple of days, and I’ll give you your cut now, twenty-seven hundred.”

Tractor took twenty-seven hundred dollar bills from his right front jeans pocket and gave them to Sullins. “Thanks, brother,” he said. “You are a true Ghost.”

“Thanks, bro,” Sullins said, shaking Tractor’s hand and hugging him.

There were two important meetings on March 28, 1987, the day after Rita Honeycutt was murdered, the first one happening that morning between Herrell Honeycutt Jr. and his father and the second that afternoon between Sheriff Burkett and Texas Ranger Sgt. Ira Somerville, who was stationed in Blackthorne and had his office down the hall. “I see the job’s been done,” Herrell Sr. said, sinking into his couch.

“Yes, sir,” said Herrell Jr.

“How come it don’t look like a sex crime?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I told him. He agreed to it.”

“I don’t, either. I wanted it to look like a nut did it.”

“I may have a chance to ask the top dog some time. Don’t guess the shooter and me should see each other again. I hear he made it look like a burglary and even took some

of Samantha's stuff."

"I don't know why we couldn't get what we paid for. I'd shoot the son of a bitch if I could."

"I know they wanted the money. Looked like they're not too prosperous."

"We got the damn bitch out of the way, at least. I guess he got away clean."

"He knows what he's doing if he comes as advertised," said White Eye. "I got some bad news about Herrell I. Barney thought we had a deal for eighteen months, but now Dodge says four years. Something happened. Barney don't know what."

"It's disappointing. What does Little Herrell say about it?"

"He's jumping up and down, says they're trying to make a jailhouse queen out of him."

"Have you explained how it is?"

"Yeah, he just needs to join the Ghosts when he gets there. He'll be all right."

"Was she carrying on with Booger?" Hound Dog asked.

"Yes, sir, I watched them coming out of Taylor's Trees a couple of times. She probably thought he could protect her."

"The first chance you get, explain to him that you were aware of the situation, and if he tries to implicate you, you'll confirm what half the county already suspects, especially if it goes to trial."

"Okay. Might just call him cold and tell him."

"Don't matter, but make sure you do it in the next two weeks," Hound Dog said, going to the bar and making Crown Royal whiskeys and Cokes. "The Ranger won't take it to the grand jury unless he agrees. In the meantime, we don't have to worry

about the farm anymore. Why don't we drink to it? Good job, boy!" he exclaimed, clapping his son on the back.

"Thank you, Daddy."

"We're farmers. We do what we have to for the land and family, blood kin. If it ain't blood kin, it don't make a damn."

Ranger Somerville walked into Burkett's office on schedule at two o'clock, putting his white felt cowboy hat on the desk as he sat down. "I know you had a lot of investigative experience in the Army, Sheriff Burkett, but the Rangers Service does stand ready to help in any way you deem appropriate," Somerville said.

"I appreciate that, Ira," said Burkett. "I will be looking into Mrs. Honeycutt's murder myself, along with my deputies, but I would like to run a parallel investigation with the Rangers and compare notes at some point."

"Sounds good. I guess you'll be looking at her husband."

"Of course; considering his character and the financial motive, he is an obvious suspect."

"Isn't he a member of that prison gang, the Ghosts of the Confederacy?"

"He sure is. I guess he could have hired one of them."

"It may not be that hard to determine if he made a trip to meet with some of them. The key will be to retrieve the items taken from the house and locate the gun. Do you think it could have been a burglary?"

"I doubt it, given the circumstances. I think the killer tried to make it look like

one.”

“It happened in broad daylight?”

“Looks like it. He had to get in fast, kill her, take the stuff and get out. Maybe somebody saw him.”

“That sure would help,” Somerville said. “Would you be willing to go to the newspaper and radio station to ask for witnesses?”

“Sure am. I’ll do it Monday.”

“Did you know the victim, sheriff?”

“Oh, yeah. We were old friends. I know nearly everybody in the county, but we had been to their house on domestic calls, and I’d been talking to her at Angleton’s, where she worked, you know.”

“Yes, sir. I guess there’ll be an autopsy.”

“I’m having the coroner and Gerther’s Funeral Home take her to Fort Worth”
Burkett said. “I don’t expect it to show any more than what we already know.”

“Probably not. We’ll get started and keep you apprised. It may resolve itself quickly or take years, but I’ll bet we see the end of it.”

“I have my second re-election coming up next year, so sooner would be better.”

“Yes, sir; we will move as expeditiously as possible,”

Somerville said. “This poor woman can no longer speak for herself, so we’ll speak for her. She has two children?”

“Yeah, one of them is in my jail. He’s following his daddy’s and granddaddy’s footsteps, but the other is a real nice high school senior, pretty as her mother. She’s real tore up.”

“Do you know when the funeral will be held?”

“Probably next Saturday.”

“I plan to attend to get an impression of everyone.”

“That will be the second one this spring. We just buried my deputy.”

“Yes, I was there.”

“All hell has broke loose.”

“We’ll get a handle on it.”

Burkett had not seen Herrell I yet, so he went into the jail and found him staring back wild-eyed. “Yeah?” the youth asked.

Burkett opened the cell, went in and told Honeycutt’s cellmate to go to the recreation area. “Have you seen your dad?” he asked. “Yeah, I seen him.”

“Is there anyone else you would like to see?”

“I don’t know. I guess my girlfriend.”

“I’ll call her and ask her to come over.”

“Barney told me I got to do more time.”

“I heard. I didn’t ask for it.”

“What do you know about Mama?”

“She was shot, didn’t appear to suffer.”

“Where at?”

“Under the left eye and in the heart. We don’t think she was molested. Whoever did it was either robbing the house or wanted it to look that way.”

“So it wasn’t Daddy?”

“He was in Ruidoso with his girlfriend, but we don’t know yet what happened. I hope he didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“If he did and I find out about it, he’ll wish he hadn’t, him and Granddaddy both.”

“Has he said anything to make you think he might have been involved?”

“No.”

“Don’t try to take the law into your own hands. Would you like to attend the funeral?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll take you. You’ll have to sit with me.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry, Cowboy.”

Burkett left Honeycutt, who was leaning back against the beige cinderblock wall, and drove home to rest before his patrol. Adelaide was watching a video of “Ghostbusters,” and she got up to make him a sandwich. “How is the investigation going?” she asked.

“We’re just getting started,” he said. “I talked to the Ranger. We don’t know up from down yet.”

“Was she the one?”

“Yeah,” he said, looking ruefully at her across the room.

“I feel bad for her family. Will it mess up the investigation?”

“I hope not. I haven’t told anybody.”

“Can’t, hunh?”

“No.”

“You might ought to call Joe Beauchamp. He was sheriff for a long time. You can confide in him, can’t you?”

“Yeah. That’s a good idea. He’ll endorse me, too.”

Burkett went out at nine-thirty, sleeping later than usual, and caught some high school boys stealing gasoline from a farmer’s elevated tank on an isolated farm away from the home place on the north central side of the county. He poured out their beer, confiscated their can, took them to jail and called their parents.

He drove by Taylor’s Trees, shined his spotlight into them and drove out a high school couple. He went five miles past the trees and came back, finding them empty and going inside to park there himself. He clicked off his police radio and turned on a country music station. Carl Smith came on singing, “O Heaven, help me on this foggy river, help me find the distant shore. . .” Burkett reached in to turn off the radio, leaned against the warm hood and looked at the moon high among the stars. He began crying, dropped to his knees and sobbed. He cried hard for a couple of minutes, composed himself, looked up and then bowed his head. “Heavenly Father, I have kept going to church, but I have not prayed for some time because I was ashamed of my adultery,” he said. “I knew it was wrong, but I couldn’t stop. Even as great a man as King David fell prey to this sin. I don’t think my wife is going to divorce me, and I thank you for giving me such a good wife. I know I have to be punished just like David, whose kids went crazy. My deputy has been murdered, and so has my girlfriend. I don’t feel that the Holy Spirit has abandoned me, but I know he is grievously offended. I am suffering bad, I’m really suffering. I’m miserable and scared. I humbly ask that no one else around me suffer, and if it is your will, I ask that you help me solve this case without a scandal and help me be re- elected. I have in the past been a faithful Christian,

and I hope that in the end I will be redeemed. I repent from my sins and ask in Jesus' name to be forgiven. In Jesus' name I pray, amen."

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