

THE HONEYCUTTS OF BLACKTHORNE

By James Robert Campbell

Chapter One Beautiful but Blue

Like a big black barge pushing upriver on a cold night, the SUV burred down the two-lane blacktop road, its mud-speckled headlights revealing nothing but the asphalt, gravel shoulders and power poles. With the sun showing up under the skyline, the looping wires and the birds on them were dimly discernible, and the spotlight the driver shone into tractors and barns on each side showed no movement except horses, cattle, chickens and hogs in fields and pens.

The road led to a four-lane highway with a truck stop and a liquid-looking green neon sign saying "Angleton's" on the left of the intersection on the other side. The road sign had arrows saying Blackthorne and Exeter were five and thirty-five miles to the left,

Fortner twenty miles to the right and Fort Caldwell twelve miles straight ahead. The driver stopped outside the truck stop, locked the Suburban and went in to greetings of "Hello, sheriff" and "Hi, Booger." The restaurant had twenty customers talking, waitresses carrying cups and plates and the scents of coffee, toast, eggs and bacon. The sheriff sat at a table in the center of the room, removed his white felt cowboy hat and spoke to a waitress who brought black coffee.

"Hi, Rita," he said.

"Where's Festus?" she asked.

"He went home early."

"Catch any rustlers or stage coach robbers?"

"Nah, but I'm out there. Have caught a few thieves."

"Herrell's gettin' hinky."

"Divorce?"

"Him and his daddy don't like it that I want half the farm, but we been married twenty years, two kids. I ain't ready to be a waitress the rest of my life."

"Has he threatened you?"

"Just said he'd kill me if I don't back off, that's all."

"When do you get off work?"

"Two."

"Why don't you come by the office?" he asked.

"Unh hunh."

"You know I got Cowboy in jail."

"I heard all about it," she said. "Guess he's trying to out-blacksheep his daddy."

"He may go to prison this time."

"Guess I'll see him while I'm there."

"It won't be visiting hours, but you can."

He drove through Blackthorne, a town of eleven thousand, and stopped at the Fitzhugh County Law Enforcement Center on the far side of town in the space for Sheriff Rezin (pronounced "reason") Burkett. A big man came into his office and said, "We didn't hear much out of you."

"Guess all the thieves and vandals took the night off, Caleb," said Burkett.

"Did Rocky run across anything on the south end?"

"Broke up a domestic is all. Had to whip a little ass, I think."

"What about Herrell Honeycutt I? Is he being a good boy?"

"So far," the deputy said. "He may figure he's done enough for awhile after running over Abner Alstott's pickup with a John Deere tractor with Abner and his boy in it and leading the Paschal County sheriff and most of the Fortner Police Department on a high speed chase."

"Old Gerald Markham and his boy held guns on him when he offered them five hundred dollars to bring him to town?" Burkett asked.

"They knew he was dangerous."

Wearing longish dark brown sideburns and a concentrated expression, Burkett rested his elbows behind a paperweight that depicted a dog pack over the maxim, "If you ain't the lead dog, the view never changes."

"I hated for Rita to marry into that bunch," he said. "They got money, but they always had a cloud over them, going back to the '70s when old Hound Dog was suspected of killing that farmhand."

"Do you think he did it?"

"Probably. They never could find the grave. The capper was when White Eye went to the pen for drug dealing when Cowboy and Samantha were kids. Some example."

Burkett went home to the village of Miracle on the northwest side of the county for a nap, and Rita Honeycutt came by at two-thirty after his return.

"Hi, Booger," she said, having changed into a turquoise pant suit. "I don't want to sound like a spooked ex-wife, but you got to realize this is not a typical situation. You ought to hear the way Herrell and his daddy talk sometimes. They just don't give a damn about people, especially those that cross them. They're mean as hell."

"I know it."

"He's been driving by the house before Samantha gets home from basketball practice. He don't stop, but he's working up to it. Could you come by tomorrow about three? I want him to see your van."

"I guess I could. I don't want anybody to get the wrong idea."

"You mean because of high school?"

"No, but you are a real good-looking woman."

"Does that mean I can't get protection?"

"No, but I have to be careful about appearances. Everything I do gets noticed."

"I just need you to stay till he sees you," said Rita, a brunette reminiscent of the middle-aged Rita Hayworth, beautiful but blue. She reached across the desk with her left hand for Burkett's right hand. "Please help me, Booger."

"I will," he said, covering her hand with his left hand. "Want to see Cowboy?"

"Sure, I brought some cigarettes."

Six foot four and looking a little like Robert Mitchum, Burkett took her to the green cinderblock visitation room that smelled of Pine Sol and left to get Herrell I. "Hi, Mama," the strongly built, black-bearded man said when they picked up the phones.

"Looks like you done stepped in it this time."

"Maybe Daddy or Paw-Paw can get me out of it."

"Maybe."

"Are you and Daddy still getting a divorce?"

"Yeah, I don't like him knocking me around. He'll kill me one of these days if I don't get away."

"No, he won't, Mama."

"You ain't been on the receiving end, at least not in a while."

"He knows I'd whip his ass."

"I left a twenty and a carton of Winstons at the commissary."

"Thanks. How's Samantha?"

"She's fine."

"If I could get out, I'd go to one of her games."

"She always likes to see you, son. She wishes you would stay out of trouble. So do I. Does your dad have a girlfriend?"

"Yeah, it's Darlene Atchley, you know, the little blonde?"

"I think I've seen her."

"Rita," Burkett called from the door. "White Eye's here."

Rita glanced sidelong, looked back to Herrell I and said, "I love you, son. I'll be back in a couple of days."

"I love you, too, Mom."

Rita and White Eye passed each other in the hall with Burkett watching from the end. "Hi, Rita, how are you doing?" Honeycutt asked.

"About like I'm face down on the back porch of Hell with my back broke. How are you?"

Herrell Jr. kept going and sat down to talk with his son. "Barney Biggers says the judge will back the JP up on the bond denial because we're getting a bad reputation and he don't want to look too easy," he said.

"That's about what I figured," Cowboy said. "Can you get Dana to smuggle in some pot and a lockblade? I got a couple of jailers that will bring it for two-fifty each."

"Yeah, she'll do it."

"Have you talked to Paw-Paw?"

"That's where I'm going right now."

"You ain't going to do nothing to Mama, are you?"

"Aw, naw, son, Barney's taking care of it. He's a good lawyer."

"I wouldn't like it, Daddy."

"Don't worry, son. If anything happens to her, it damn sure won't be me or Daddy. But I guess you understand she ain't as safe now as she used to be, living with me, and she's probably telling Booger she's scared of me. Ex-wives always blow you up into a big nut case, especially when they're talking to the law."

Herrell Honeycutt Jr. drove his new red Ford pickup down Highway 244 past Angleton's, turned north and reached his father's farm seven miles up the farm to market road. Herrell Sr., a large, stooped man whose carriage was like a bear's, was in the kitchen making a sandwich, somewhat hampered by the stumpy of his left forearm. "Hello, son," he said.

"Hi, Daddy," said White Eye. "I been to see Little Herrell."

"How's he making it?"

"He's all right. He wants out, but they ain't letting him."

"He needs to cool off for awhile. Don't have good sense when he gets het up."

"Barney says he'll probably go down for eighteen months. We got to plead it out because he could get ninety-nine if it went to trial."

"Won't hurt him none, kind of like going in the Army."

"You need to lose weight, Daddy. You don't want to get diabetes or have a heart attack."

"I will if you will."

"I ain't old enough yet where I have to. We need to talk about Rita."

"I been thinking."

"Yeah?"

"We got to get rid of her," Herrell Sr. said. "Y'all was married a long time. I think she could get it."

"I think you're right."

"Can you get somebody through them boys, the Confederate Ghosts?"

"I expect. We'll pay the gang and they'll send a prospect."

"You mean a recruit?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wouldn't it be better to get somebody experienced?"

"Theoretically, I guess, but that's how it works to make sure we don't get ratted out," Herrell Jr. said.

"Seems to me like thirty-five ought to get it."

"Yeah, they won't try to hold us up because I'm a member."

"Well, you better get on it. No need to fart around."

"Okay."

"Women ain't loyal no more. Your mama never bitched when I had to grab somebody and beat them in the face with my stumpy, and she stuck by me when the hoe hand disappeared and everybody was talking. I know she never cheated because I had her watched when I went on trips. I had a friend of mine try her out, and she turned him down flat."

"How're we doing with the farm?"

"Real good. The wells all have plenty of water, the oil wells are pumping the most the Railroad Commission allows and we just fertilized to plant. You're welcome to come help out if you get the time."

"I might," said Harrell I. "I like working the irrigation, setting the tubes and all."

"Come on, boy. It'll be here for you."

"I think I'm going to go ride the Kubota."

"Take off. It's out there by the barn. I was on it yesterday."

Herrell Jr. went through the back door to the barn, started the little green tractor and spent the next hour riding it down the turn rows, past the water and oil wells and around the distant borders. He ran flat-out and got dusty, and he stopped with the engine running angrily and looked at the barn on the hill.

"Hell fire, Rita," he said.

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