

THE HONEYCUTTS OF BLACKTHORNE

By James Robert Campbell

Chapter Ten

Could that Have Been the Man that Did it?

Burkett was back in his office at four-thirty, reviewing a report on the jailers and the filing of charges against them, Cowboy and Dana, when a woman appeared at his door with Rocky Rivas. "Sheriff, this is Mrs. Regina Ragavoy," Rivas said. "She may have some information for us in the Honeycutt case."

Looking to be around eighty, Mrs. Ragavoy was very animated and somewhat owl-eyed behind big glasses in orange plastic frames. She sat down, put her blue leather fringed purse beside the chair and, staring at Burkett, said she had learned of his appeal for witnesses to anyone's being seen at the Honeycutt house on the afternoon of the murder. "I know you, Sheriff Burkett," she said. "I live close to the road south of Miracle. I voted for you in the last election."

"I remember visiting with you," he said. "I really appreciate your support. You say you saw somebody at the house?"

"Yes, I didn't think too much of it at the time, but I remembered it after reading what you said in the paper and hearing you on the radio. I'm afraid to ask, could that have been the man that did it?"

"That's what we're here to find out, ma'am. Excuse me a minute." He called Somerville's number and was relieved to get him. "Ira, can you come over here, please?" he asked. "We may have someone who saw a suspect at Rita's house."

Somerville came in less than a minute and sat with Mrs. Ragavoy across from Burkett, who introduced them. "Ma'am, could you tell us what you saw?" he asked.

"I was going to town to get groceries. I left right at three o'clock. I was going past the Honeycutts' on my left and noticed a dark blue pickup in front. A light brown-haired man in a dark suit went up on the porch and knocked. He was carrying a suitcase in his left hand."

"We don't doubt you, ma'am, but how good is your eyesight?" the sheriff asked.

"Real good with my glasses on," she said. "I been lucky with it. I can read one of them charts if you want me to."

"No, that's okay. We'll take you at your word."

"Thank you, sheriff. You're a nice man. You, too, Mr. Ranger."

"Did you see the man do anything else?" Somerville asked.

"I thought Mrs. Honeycutt must be letting him in because he opened the screen door. I went on past, and that's all I know."

"Don't guess you noticed the license plate number on the pickup."

"Oh, no, I didn't think much of it at the time," she said. "I have gone back in my memory to remember as much as I could because I knew you would have questions."

"Did you recognize the make of the truck, Ford, Chevy, Dodge?"

"I'd say Chevy. That's what my husband always drove. His name was Tom. We farmed. I'm a widow lady."

"Yes, ma'am. Can you remember anything else?"

"The suitcase was green."

"Very good, Mrs. Ragavoy. You're an excellent witness."

They smiled at each other, and Burkett asked, "Do you remember anything else about the man you saw?"

"Just an overall impression. I didn't like him much."

"Why not?"

"Well, his hair was on the long side. He looked skinny, disreputable like a drug user, kind of short. He was dressed up, but I wondered what she was doing having somebody like that over. Do you think he was the one that killed her?"

"We don't know what to make of it right now," Burkett said. "Could be it was somebody we can identify who had a reason to be there. Since you have been so good as to come in and tell us so much, I will tell you that some things were taken from the house, and it could be that that's what the suitcase was for. Can you keep that under your hat for us? I mean don't tell a soul?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I won't say a word to anybody."

"We would prefer that you didn't because we don't want it known that we have you as a potential witness," Somerville said.

"Do you think I'll testify in the trial when you catch them?"

"It could very well be that we need you," the Ranger said. "Would you be willing to do that?"

"I sure would. I'd be happy to. That poor woman and those skunks that murdered her."

"You say 'them,' ma'am," said Somerville. "Do you believe there were more men involved than the one you saw?"

"Why, sure," she said. "Him and those damn Honeycutts, White Eye and his low-down daddy, Hound Dog. Everybody in the county knows. They've been a blight for as long as I can remember, and that's a long time. If you could get rid of them, a lot of people would be grateful."

"Yes, ma'am," Burkett said. "Would you mind talking about this a little bit more?"

"Not at all," she said, smiling at him. "I like talkin' to the tower of power."

"Good," he said, winking at her. "We sure do appreciate it. Would you mind going with Ranger Somerville to his office, please? I'm going to have him take down your official statement and write it up. We'll be out to see you in a couple of days for you to look it over and sign. Do you think that would be all right?"

"Sure do," she said, smiling again. "I'm more than happy."

Somerville took her hand to help her up, and Burkett stood as they went out, winking at Somerville, who smiled.

The sheriff left the office, and turning off the road to his home, he was pleased to see a bronze Ford pickup parked in front of the house, and on going inside he met the man he expected, former sheriff Joe Beauchamp, a medium-size, white-haired man with

high arching eyebrows and a barely suppressed jocundity. "I was hoping you'd make it today," Burkett said. "You said you might just come on up."

Beauchamp got up from talking with Adelaide to shake his hand and ask, "How in the world are you, Rezin?"

"Not too bad," he said. "We have been going through it around here, but we're handling it. I think we just got a break in the Honeycutt murder case."

"Good, good, I'm sure glad to hear it. Addie has been telling me about your deputy. I thank God that never happened in the twelve years I was here."

Burkett told them about the new witness over dinner and excused himself to take his nap, explaining that he tried to sleep from six to nine p.m. and then from seven a.m. to one p.m., although it had been less lately. "I'll head out on patrol about nine-thirty, Joe," he said. "Why don't you come with me? I can come back by and drop you off if you get sleepy."

"I'd love to," Beauchamp said. "Haven't done that in a long time."

Joe and Adelaide watched a video of a Sophia Loren movie, "Operation Crossbow," and talked until Burkett's alarm sounded and he went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. The men had not been in the SUV for long until Burkett began talking about his affair. "Does your wife know?" Beauchamp asked.

"Yeah, she caught me stinking and I confessed," he said. "I told her we broke it off, but we didn't. I guess we'd still be at it if Rita hadn't got killed. I know it was stupid."

"Now you got your tit in the ringer."

"I can't talk about it with anybody. Addie figured out who it was when she was murdered, but I'm afraid she'll get mad if I say too much. I knew it was wrong every way it could be, but Rita broke up with her husband and I couldn't help myself. It was like I was in a trance."

"Damn, Rezin, I thought you had better sense," Beauchamp said. "Y'all know Karen died last year, and I'm glad to say I never cheated on her. You're lucky that Addie is standing by you."

"So far, so good."

"What about the investigation?"

"We're making good progress, thanks to luck and the Texas Rangers," Burkett said. "Do you think I'll be able to keep it quiet? White Eye threatened me with it, says he knew all along."

"Do you think he had it done?"

"Yeah, looks like he hired that biker gang he joined in prison."

They had patrolled the main county dirt roads that Burkett liked to monitor and were heading down Highway 244 toward the east central side of the county and the city of Exeter in Hildebrand County when a white Mercedes passed them at over eighty miles an hour. Speeding up and activating his lights and siren, Burkett said, "I get this sometimes because I don't really look like law enforcement."

The car stopped on the shoulder, but the driver left it running with the lights on. It was after midnight, and the traffic was light.

"Be careful, Rezin," Beauchamp said.

"I'll let him go with a warning if he ain't been drinking," said Burkett, opening the

door. The Mercedes appeared to be carrying four tall men. The one in the back behind the driver exited with a MAC-10 machine pistol and sprayed the Suburban, tattooing the windshield and hitting Burkett's door as he hid behind it. "Get down, Joe!" he yelled unnecessarily because Beauchamp was already lying sideways on the seat. The shooter jumped into the car, which sped away as Burkett emptied his pistol at it.

"Reckon we ought to give chase?" Beauchamp asked.

"Naw, I'll radio ahead with their description and plate number. They're out of Arkansas, probably drug dealers. I got an AR in the back, but I'd have to get you to shoot and I don't want you to come up here and get killed."

"Can't say I disagree with you, Rezin," said Beauchamp, laughing.

"It is kind of funny, ain't it?" Burkett asked with half a grin. "Let's call it a night. I'll write my report in the morning and try to talk Addie down."

Beauchamp left the next day, and Burkett went to work earlier than usual to see Somerville, who said he would use hypnosis to enhance Mrs. Ragavoy's memory and try to get the plate number of the pickup the killer had driven. "The plates were probably stolen, but there's no telling what else she might recall," the Ranger said. "I got the Ghosts' pictures developed and printed. I called Sheriff Connally, and he is expecting us day after tomorrow if you can go then. Heard you had trouble last night and Sheriff Beauchamp was with you. Everybody okay?"

"We're all right," said Burkett. "Hear anything about the suspects?"

"The highway patrol stopped them with a rolling roadblock the other side of Lubbock," Somerville said. "They were hauling three hundred thousand dollars' worth of cocaine and carrying a bunch of illegal weapons. They were all felons except the driver, who was a kid with a learner's permit."

"Are we going to interview this Tractor character?"

"That is my intention," Somerville said. "Won't be able to confront him with the photos because we don't want him to know they're being surveilled. We will show them to Sheriff Connally to see if we can identify the probable killer."

It was time for Cowboy Honeycutt's sentencing, and Troy Dodge had decided to sentence him and all the conspirators in the jail smuggling case at the same time. There was a good-size crowd in Judge Stone's courtroom on the second floor of the courthouse,

talking quietly until the judge entered and the bailiff called for everyone to rise. White Eye was there with Darlene, sitting toward the back, but Hound Dog did not attend, having said it might make things worse for Cowboy. Barney Biggers, a smallish, balding man with sharp features, represented Cowboy and Dana while the former jailers were with court-appointed lawyers. Calling Todd Cleary and Jerry Feemster to come forward first, Stone said, "The English language fails me in the expression of my disappointment in you men. You were entrusted to carry out the orders of the court in the incarceration of Herrell Honeycutt I, but you succumbed to the cajoleries of him and his girlfriend and here you are, pleading guilty to a third-degree felony that could see you imprisoned for ten years. Tell me this, was it worth it?"

"No, your honor," Feemster said.

"No, sir," said Cleary.

"Owing to the good offices of your attorneys, I hereby sentence you to twelve months each in state jail and fine you five thousand dollars each. I deny your applications for probation because you violated your oaths to uphold the public trust." Stone set them down with his gavel and called Dana Bollinger. "Miss Bollinger, I can understand your motives but not your reasoning," he said. "I also don't understand why you smuggled pornography to the man you love. Didn't that run counter to your natural feelings?"

"He said it was because we couldn't be together while he was locked up," she said. "He don't know the women in the pictures." " " "What about the marijuana and methamphetamines?"

"I brought it from home. I smoke pot, but I don't like the meth. He can have it for all I care."

"I don't enjoy sending anyone to prison, Miss Bollinger, especially not a young person, so I will grant your attorney's application for probation and sentence you to five years' probation and a three thousand dollar fine. You must clean up your lifestyle or you will be going to prison. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir," she said.

"Herrell O'Flaherty Honeycutt I, please come forward," the judge said. "Like the other defendants, you have pleaded guilty. Is that because you are guilty?"

Cowboy looked at Biggers, who nodded. "Yes, sir," he said.

"Do you realize that you could have spent the rest of your life in prison for these offenses against the peace and dignity of the State of Texas?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're still young, Mr. Honeycutt. I hope you will ponder your actions while you are incarcerated and that you will come out a better man and a productive citizen. May we have that hope, Mr. Honeycutt?"

"Yes, sir," Cowboy said.

"Do you regret your behavior?"

"Yes, sir."

"I hope so. I regret having to do this because of your age and the poor example you have been set. I hereby sentence you to four years for aggravated assault and for endangering law enforcement officers and the public when you evaded arrest. I also sentence you to twelve months, to be served consecutively, for bribing public officials and smuggling contraband into a correctional facility. I also fine you ten thousand dollars, payable under a schedule agreed to by the court after your release. Good luck, Mr. Honeycutt. I hope I don't see you in my courtroom again. If I do, I will be less lenient."

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: "Don't Say Nothin' About White Eye."