

## THE HONEYCUTTS OF BLACKTHORNE

By James Robert Campbell

### Chapter Nine

#### Give Us the Balm of Gilled

Vernon Doyle's funeral had been memorable for its uniformed attendance and sharp poignance, but Rita Honeycutt's took place at an even greater height of interest and emotion. The perception that her husband was responsible, his presence and that of their son the inmate, handcuffed to the sheriff, and the distraught, standing-room-only crowd made the proceeding an event of such grief and excruciating tension that it unfolded with the inexorability of a natural disaster.

The Rev. Dr. Willacy preached again, but the only music this time was hymns sung by the choir, accompanied by the church organist, Lucille Deaver. "We gather here again for the second time in a month to celebrate the life and mourn the death of another one of our number felled by criminal violence," Willacy said. "Rita Honeycutt, another faithful member of our church, murdered in her home, where each one of us would like to feel safe. Oh, Lord, give us the balm of Gilead, assuage the turmoil in our minds and the anguish in our hearts and help the officers entrusted with investigating this foul crime bring the culprit or culprits to justice!"

Ranger Somerville sat two rows behind Herrell Honeycutt Jr., who wore sunglasses and sat with his arm around Darlene. Samantha Honeycutt sat with her brother and his girlfriend, Dana Bollinger. All three of them wept and sobbed throughout the service, and Sheriff Burkett hid his tears behind dark aviator glasses. Samantha joined her father, Darlene and Dana at the cemetery east of town, but Burkett took Herrell I back to jail, explaining that he did not trust the security of the cemetery. "Who do you think did it, sheriff?" Cowboy asked.

"If we knew that, we would arrest them," he said.

"Do you think it was Daddy?"

"We don't know. We're just starting the investigation." "Whoever it was needs to die."

"Couldn't agree with you more."

"Looks like I'm getting four years, be out in two."

"That's what I understand."

Burkett locked up Herrell I and went to his office to hear a report from Caleb Coldstone about contraband being smuggled into the jail with the complicity of two jailers. "We got pictures of Dana Bollinger handing a package to Jerry Feemster, who has confessed that he and his supervisor, Todd Cleary, agreed to accept two hundred and fifty dollars each in cash from Dana to give Cowboy pot, meth, porno and a small yellow-handled lockblade knife," Coldstone said. "We recovered everything but the pot and the meth, which Cowboy had already ingested. We're going to arrest the jailers and Dana tomorrow and serve Cowboy with the charges."

"I didn't want to do it before his mother's funeral," Burkett said. "Call the Banner and KBTN and give them all the information, and I'll call a news conference to take the

responsibility and say we got it cleaned up. Nothing to do but man up and try to get it behind us."

"It ain't good, sheriff," Coldstone said.

"Little bastard's tricky, ain't he?"

"Him and the whole family. We were watching him like you said, and he still nearly put it over on us."

"I'll be really glad to get rid of him."

That Sunday afternoon after the Saturday funeral, Samantha came home from church to the house she now lived in by herself, changed into shorts and a T-shirt and drove to her grandfather's house, where her father's pickup was parked. She walked in without knocking and saw that they were watching a John Wayne movie, "Rio Bravo," while her shirtless dad massaged her granddad's neck and shoulders.

"Hi," she said, noticing that they were not surprised but did appear somewhat ill at ease.

"Hello, sweetie," said Herrell Jr., pulling on his black Confederate Railroad T-shirt. "Getting along all right? I've been meaning to make it by and check on you."

"Oh, I guess so, Daddy," she said. "I've been pretty upset."

"I don't blame you. I have been, too. I still loved her as much as ever. You seem more like her than ever. You sound more like her." "

"What about you, Paw-Paw?" Samantha asked.

"I been real tore up," Herrell Sr. said. "I would have gone to the funeral, but I knew we'd be well-represented."

"We were," she said. "The sheriff brought Cowboy, which I thought was nice of him. I'm trying to figure it out, but I'm not having any luck. What do y'all think happened?"

"We don't know, Sam," White Eye said. "Looked like a burglary, the paper said. Looks like we can't even count on the safety of our homes. I started locking my doors at night, and Daddy has, too, haven't you, Daddy?"

"Damn right," Hound Dog said, moving his head as if to dodge a bullet fired in the movie. "The cops need to put the scotch on these damn criminals. Your mama was a great woman, Sam. If they catch who did it, I'm for pouring gas on him and setting him on fire. I'd strike the match."

"You know some people think y'all had it done. I heard that at school."

"You just tell them we had nothing to do with it," White Eye said. "The only kind of people that would say something like that is sorry white trash, and you can tell them I said so."

"I said that was wrong," she said with her eyes tearing. "I don't know how to think anything else."

Taking her into his arms, White Eye said, "Don't ever even consider it, honey. It couldn't be farther from the truth. You'll see when they catch the one that did it."

"I hope so, Daddy," she said, crying. "Right now, I feel horrible because my mother didn't just die, she was shot and killed!"

Hound Dog glanced at them but kept dipping and crunching Doritos and drinking from his quart of Budweiser Light while watching the movie, in which Dean Martin and Ricky Nelson were singing "My Rifle, My Pony and Me" while Walter Brennan played

harmonica. "We didn't do it, kiddo," he said. "We don't know nobody like that, and we sure as hell didn't do it ourselves. I liked her fine, and your daddy loved her."

"We were getting a divorce, but it was being worked out," White Eye said. "Like Daddy said, I still loved her just like you and Little Herrell. Have you been to see him?"

"Yeah, I was over there last night," she said.

"What does he say?"

"He's as upset as me."

"Does he suspect us?"

"I don't think so. He says he'd like to kill whoever did it, but he didn't say anything about y'all."

"I'll go see him. He's got his sentencing coming up, and I thought I'd give him a few days to hisself since Booger let him go to the funeral."

"I just thought I'd come by. I'll be all right till graduation. I'll be going to summer school at Angelo State. I hadn't planned on it before, but I think I should get my mind on something else. I'm thinking about becoming a social worker."

"I'll probably move back in when you leave. I don't want to do it yet because of Darlene, you know, hold off on moving another woman in out of respect for your mom," he said, putting his head on her shoulder. "We really hate this, Sam, we both do, and we're doing everything we can to help the law."

"Okay, Daddy, I'll see you," she said, kissing him, and she went around the couch to hug and kiss her granddad. "When did you get that swastika?"

"I was having a few with some buddies, and I had one of them do it. Darlene says it's backwards. The spokes are supposed to go right, you know, like right wing? I don't think it makes any difference. I'm not like a Nazi. I just like it because it's way out there."

"Oh, Daddy, you just never grow up."

She left, and when White Eye heard her car start and back out, he asked his father, "What do you think?"

"I think she was trying to figure out if we did it," he said, turning the TV volume back up.

"Reckon we fooled her?"

"I don't know. Might ought to keep an eye on Little Herrell for awhile when he gets out."

South of Dove City, Tractor Green led a dozen Ghosts of the Confederacy to the circled rocks and heaped-up ashes of the site of many campfires of the past. Trees had been cut down to make a small circular clearing, and the Ghosts piled firewood onto the ashes, sprayed starter fluid onto the wood and lit a fire that became a blaze. It was a quiet night, chilly but not freezing, and they stood around the fire without warming themselves. Green wore a gray Confederate captain's uniform with black riding boots, a hat with the appropriate band and insignia and a sword and long-barreled cap and ball pistol at his left and right sides. Sweetwater Mike Barrington wore a lieutenant's uniform, and the others had on the uniforms of various other ranks, including Freaky Frank Sharp as a private. Green and Barrington stood while the others sat in a circle around the fire. Not too far away, an owl hooted, and a bank of clouds moved to expose the shining full moon. "Who are we calling up tonight, Captain Green, sir?" asked Sleepy Rideout.

"I'd like to see Nathan Bedford Forrest," Sharp said.

"He's a good one, but he would be disappointed that we're infantry, not cavalry. We like General Jackson because he was a winner, and he is very amiable."

Fifty yards back in the woods, Ranger Somerville and Sheriff Burkett lay flat and watched. They were too far from the campfire to hear much, but Somerville had been using a Nikon camera with a telephoto lens and special film and settings to photograph the Ghosts. The officers turned around and crawled away until they were beyond the sight and hearing of the bikers, and they stood up and walked to the Ranger's car, parked on a dirt road a couple of miles from the highway. When they were inside the car and moving, Burkett asked, "Was that one of their seances?"

"I think so," said Somerville.

"I didn't see a damn thing, just a bunch of guys in Confederate uniforms with the fat one acting like he was talking to somebody. I heard him say, 'General Jackson.'"

"Yeah, they thought they were seeing Stonewall Jackson."

"They must be higher than the Georgia pines," Burkett said.

"That and mass hypnosis. If you want to see something badly enough and you think all your friends see it, you can see it, too."

"Or they're communing with demons. The Bible says divination is no joke. Like it says in Leviticus, 'Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them.'"

"These guys have their own code," said Somerville. "We think the one who killed Mrs. Honeycutt was a prospect, and if that's the case, he is all but sure to have been there. So now we have his photo."

On Sunday afternoon, after church and lunch with some of her friends at Contreras's Mexican Grill, Samantha Honeycutt went to the Fitzhugh County Jail in a blue blouse, jeans and her letter jacket. Her brother greeted her morosely and asked how she could stay in the house alone.

"I couldn't," she said. "Every time I went in the kitchen. . . After I went to see Daddy and Paw-Paw, I went over to Ginger Hoyer's house. She's my best friend. Her parents said I could stay with them until I graduate and go to college this summer."

"I feel sorry for Mom, but I feel really sorry for you," he said. "Some graduation with Mom dead and me going to prison. So you talked to Daddy and Paw-Paw, hunh?"

"Yeah."

"What'd you think?"

"I hate to say it," she said. "It's hard enough as it is. Daddy denied it. Paw-Paw denied it, too, sort of. But he didn't seem to care at all. Mama didn't mean nothing to him. I guess you noticed that he didn't go to the funeral."

"Yeah."

"He made an excuse, but you know how they are. Whatever Paw-Paw thinks, Daddy thinks it, too. Daddy lied, but Paw-Paw didn't bother. I think losing his left hand and half his forearm when a car fell on it made him mean."

"I told Daddy I wouldn't like it if anything happened to Mama," Cowboy said.

"What are you going to do?"

"I ain't saying. I love them. I know they thought they were doing it for the family, but the truth is that Mama was a whole lot better mama than Daddy was a daddy or Paw-

Paw was a grandpa."

"I agree with you, Herrell," she said. "Why do we have to be in such a messed-up family? I think I'm going to see a psychiatrist. This is driving me crazy!"

"Keep it together, Sam. All you got to do is go to college. I'm going to the pen."

"I'll write to you, Herrell. I'll come see you when I get the chance."

"Hang in there, Sam," he said. "You're grown now. You can take care of yourself."

"You watch your back in there, okay?"

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: "Could that Have Been the Man that Did it?"