

THE HONEYCUTTS OF BLACKTHORNE

By James Robert Campbell

Chapter Two

The Only Man I Answer to Is My Daddy

Named after Rezin Bowie, Jim's older brother, who invented the Bowie Knife, Sheriff Rezin "Booger" Burkett got up in Miracle, a disheveled town of a few hundred people, put on Brut aftershave and drove south to Rita's big brick house. It was about two-thirty p.m. Greeting him at the door, she said, "Thanks for coming."

"No problem," he said, accepting a Coke in the living room.

"I feel like I'm getting behind the curve on this," she said. "I got this lawyer in Fortner to represent me. Herrell's hired Barney Biggers like they always do."

"I can't keep coming to your house all the time," Burkett said. "Wouldn't look right. Don't want to get me beat for re-election, do you?"

"No way. Remember after the game that time I was a sophomore and you were a senior? We won and you made a lot of tackles?"

"Sure do. I think about it sometimes."

"I thought you were great for not telling it around."

"Nobody needed to know."

"You're a good man, Rezin," she said, moving close to him on the blue velvet couch. "I need a hug."

He hugged her but turned away when she tried to kiss him. "I can't," he said.

"Come on, I'm scared. Just kissing ain't nothing."

He kissed her lightly on the lips but pulled away, saying, "That's enough."

"Please don't let them kill me."

"I don't think they'll go that far. Everybody would know who did it."

“Should that make me feel better?”

“I’ll put a close patrol on the house and watch for that red Ford. I’d get a restraining order if I were you, all the times he slapped you around and pulled your hair. That way, we can arrest him if he ever stops by.”

“I would, but he seems pretty calm right now. I don’t want to stir things up.”

“Here’s my card. Call me any time.” He got up, and they hugged again. But he avoided her upturned face.

Nearing the intersection, Burkett turned on the radio with Hank Williams singing, “You’re my gal and I’m your feller, dress up in your frock of yeller, I’ll look swell, but you’ll look sweller, settin’ the woods on fire. . .” He passed the truck stop and drove through Blackthorne, turning right between the Texas Health and Human Services Commission and Bois D’Arc Farm and Ranch Products. He passed Chief Deputy Coldstone on his way to the jail and asked, “What’s Cowboy up to?”

“We’re watching him the best we can, but he’s sneaky,” Coldstone said.

“Watch him on the cameras and see if he’s trying to solicit the guards.” Burkett approached the cell and asked, “Hello, Herrell, mind if I come in?”

“Not a bit,” Cowboy said. “Been out catching all the bad guys?”

“Few of them.”

Honeycutt told his cellmate to visit the commissary, and the older man looked grateful to be sent away.

“Why did you run, boy?” Burkett asked. “Do you know you’re prison-bound?”

“Maybe. I don’t deserve it anymore than Daddy did. He should have got probation, and so should I.”

“You Honeycutts are proud of that reputation, but there can come a time, like before the district judge, when it works against you. Nobody is above the law.”

“We don’t think we’re above it.”

“What are you, twenty-two?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s your daddy; you can’t help but be affected by that example. But he’s a wife beater and a drug dealer. It’s not my jurisdiction here in town, but I think he’s still cooking and dealing. You’re going to keep it up till you kill somebody and spend the rest of your life in prison or get lethal injection.”

“No, I won’t because if I kill somebody, everybody’ll know he deserved it.”

“I will be your enemy if that’s what you want, and if you think you can beat the law, you’re crazy.”

“I ain’t trying to, sheriff,” said Honeycutt, who was shorter and smaller than his father and grandfather.

“You can save your life before it’s too late, or you can throw it away,” said Burkett, leaving. “Do you believe in God?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you like to see a chaplain? We got Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, Pentecostal and Catholic.”

“No, I’ll work it out for myself.”

“Read the Bible, Cowboy. Take it to heart.”

“I’ll make it, sheriff.”

Burkett called Herrell Jr. and arranged a meeting in an hour at Angleton’s.

Coldstone came in, and they talked about the 1882 shootout in downtown Blackthorne between the Texas Rangers and a gang led by Ross Tanner. Ranger John Spenser, who became Fitzhugh County's first sheriff two years later, shot Tanner as the outlaw rode out, and Tanner died a few miles outside town, where the gang left him in a tree grove. Burkett had once handled Spenser's single-action Colt forty-five "thumb buster" pistol that killed Tanner, he said, musing that the means had been modernized, but the meaning of killing a man had not changed. He reflected that a history professor from Blackthorne Community College had been quoted in the Fitzhugh County Banner that this area of West Central Texas was at the front edge of the Frontier, where people made up their own rules until law was finally established.

"I have started watching Skipper McCoskey," Coldstone said. "Remember him?"

"Parolee, got out last year."

"He ain't doing it around here, but somebody has been stealing tractors and other farm equipment in other parts of the state and Eastern New Mexico and hauling it off in an eighteen-wheeler. He has one on his farm."

"Do we know where he's fencing it?" Burkett asked.

"No, not yet. Maybe the Rio Grande Valley."

"Keep watching him. If we get the goods on him, we better go out there loaded for bear because he's a two-time loser. You can drive by sometimes and hear him shooting a high-powered rifle at targets way down the field. I'm headed to Angleton's to meet White Eye."

"Him and Rita?"

"Yeah, I was just talking to Cowboy about straightening up, but I don't think it did

any good.”

Burkett walked into the truck stop to the usual greetings, but the habitués quietened and watched when they saw him sit with Honeycutt, who was pudgy, balding and bedraggled. Rather than looking mean, Honeycutt was just vacuous, albeit strange with his light blue right eye contrasting with his dark brown left eye. Diffidently, Honeycutt said, “All I said was that the stress of the divorce and contesting me for the farm couldn’t do her any good.”

“I think we ought to go ride around,” Burkett said.

They left in Burkett’s Chevrolet, and he said, “She told me you threatened to kill her.”

“No, that’s a lie,” Honeycutt said. “I offered to give her a real good settlement if she’d back off a little. I still love her. We just got to where we couldn’t get along.”

“We know all about it,” Burkett said, heading south and passing the Old West ghost town of Mile Wide. “We’ve been over there enough times. I want you to know that if anything happens to her, we’ll be on you like ugly on a hog.”

“You don’t have to worry about me, sheriff. I feel bad about the times I whipped up on her. You don’t know how mad some women can make you.”

“I understand, but a man who can’t control himself is no man, he’s an animal.”

“Are you calling me an animal? There are some things I won’t take off nobody, Booger.”

“We’ve known each other all our lives, Herrell. Some go one way and some go another. I wish you could wise up because your boy is going the same way you did.”

“Let me worry about my boy. How many real men do you know who didn’t go to

jail a few times when they're young?"

They reached Fort Caldwell, a village like Miracle but much better kept, and put the windows down to light cigarettes. "I've known quite a few, me for one, all my deputies and my dad," Burkett said. "We were both in the Army. You stayed a private who liked to get drunk, shirk, fight and run whores, and I was in the CID. I busted guys like you all the time. Each man lives his own life, and in the end we answer to God."

"The only man I answer to is my Daddy. I do what he says, and my boy's the same way. We run our own business. Besides, I'd rather rule in Hell than serve in Heaven."

"Nobody rules in Hell. It's pitch black, and the ones that aren't burning are screaming and biting each other. I'm telling you, let this divorce get settled by the court."

"You're kicking the wrong dog, sheriff. I have had my brushes with the law, but I am a law-abiding man."

"There is no restraining order, but I am advising you to stay away from her."

"You mean I can't go to Angleton's?" Honeycutt asked.

"You can go where you want to, but you could stay out of her section. I also advise you to stay away from her house. I know it was your house, too, and the divorce has not been finalized. It's a simple matter of discretion."

Burkett started the engine and headed back, focusing on the winter-burned countryside and ignoring his passenger. He turned on the radio, and a twangy guitar came on for Lefty Frizzell to sing, "In the darkness of the night while world around us sleeps, we keep a secret rendezvous where people like us meet. . ." He dropped Honeycutt at the truck stop just as Rita came out for a cigarette break. Honeycutt

walked by in front of her, but they avoided each other's eyes.

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 do, 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: "Me and Daddy Would Like It Better."