

THE KILLER WHO HATED SOUP

By

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Prologue

Defiance, Oklahoma, December 1956

The girl tore through the woods clutching her baby.

Panting and ignoring her bleeding feet, she slipped on loose leaves and crashed into a shrub. The newborn fell from her arms. Stunned, the girl lay still in the biting cold and listened.

Branches snapped and loud curses sounded behind her.

She scooped up her crying baby and pressed her hand to the infant's mouth.

"Shh. Daddy's not going to take you."

"Come back here!"

The girl struggled to her feet and clawed through tall brambles and prickly undergrowth, her bare legs stinging. At the road, she fell to one knee, sucking in air with loud, rasping sounds.

Can't keep going. She looked back. Have to hide.

She trudged through soggy ground and tall weeds toward her secret hiding place.

Out of breath, she leaned against a tree, her muscles sore and legs aching.

"I see you. Stay there!" Daddy yelled, tramping through the brush, arms flailing.

With her last ounce of strength, she flung herself through thorny blackberry bushes, pushing them from her scratched and bloody face.

She came out onto a narrow path and staggered on, ignoring her stinging cuts and bloody feet. Finally, her haven. She crawled inside a massive oak tree with a burned-out hollow, and wiped her nose.

She tried to quiet her breathing.

Through trembling lips, she whispered, “Here you go, baby.” She pulled up her nightshirt and pressed her infant’s mouth to her nipple.

Minutes ticked by. She bit her lip.

In the distance, the sound of crunching leaves. She hugged her baby.

The crunching grew louder.

She squeezed her eyes closed, then kissed her baby.

Silence.

“Come on out, Marybeth,” her daddy said crossly. “I know you’re in there.” His voice softened. “I won’t punish you.”

She peeked through tangled branches, tears flowing down her squat, compact face.

“You’ll take my baby.”

Darkness swept across like a curtain. Hands reached in and wrenched the infant from her arms.

“*No!* I know what you’ll do.”

She scrambled from the tree and clawed at her father’s shirt, reaching for her baby, held just beyond her grasp.

“God will forgive you, my daughter.”

Chapter 1

January 1957

Bucky grabbed his coat and camera, mounted his motorcycle, and headed toward the Chrysler dealership. The cold air stung his face like porcupine pricks. It felt electrical, energizing. He loved the outdoors and he loved Defiance. It was his kind of town—a town primed for growth. A town where folks were friendly and waved to one another. Where they drove fast in town to show off their cars or pickups and slow on the highway to save gas. Where a cashier would rattle on and on about anything from paving sidewalks to building racetracks, when a customer only wanted to buy gas and enjoy a Nehi pop.

Bucky stopped before his reflection in the Chrysler showroom window. He pulled a comb from a back pocket and, with bent knees and an upward turn of his wrist, set his blond hair into a front curl. He blew warm air into his cold, tingling hands, recalling how frigid he felt jumping off the Greyhound bus a year ago. He removed the lens cap from the camera hanging around his neck and padded into the dealership.

Drifting among the cars, he paused to examine a grille or three and run his fingers across slick leather seats. Would he ever be able to buy an automobile like these? Right now, he couldn't afford a new muffler for his bike. His gaze fixed on the eggshell-tinted Plymouth Fury. Lifting his camera, he back-stepped and clicked off a shot. Then he ran a hand down his pant leg and took long strides into the sales office, hoping to look professional.

Cal Alsop had been watching him, but that didn't bother Bucky any. He just smiled to himself.

Alsop jumped to his feet with a grin that flashed dollar signs. “Good morning, sir. I see you have an eye for fine cars.”

“That’s why I’m here.” Bucky threw out his dry hand. “My name’s Bucky, and I want to sell them for you.”

Alsop’s smile dropped like the price of last year’s Imperial. “Well, now, I—I. What’d you say your name was?”

“Bucky, Bucky Ontario.”

Alsop tilted his square jaw, squinted, and smoothed back his trim black hair. He seemed young, barely over thirty. About a decade older than Bucky, and with an inch more height, which put him at six feet. “Now I recognize you. You work at Gustafson’s Grocery.”

“Not anymore. I, um . . . I was fired.”

“Fired! That’s hardly a recommendation, then, is it?” Alsop sat down. “You might as well have a seat.”

Bucky made a nervous laugh. “It’s not the way it sounds.” He swiftly grabbed a chair, in case Alsop changed his mind. He sat straight, his hands on his kneecaps, hoping he wouldn’t sweat. At least not noticeably. He really needed this job—the vital next step in his dream of someday becoming the town mayor, a man of influence and value.

“Mr. Gustafson offered to promote me to manager, but I told him I couldn’t accept because now that I’m twenty-one—my birthday was last week—I’d be quitting soon. So he fired me. You see, I never intended the grocery business to be my life’s work.”

Alsop rubbed one hand on the back of the other. “Is that so?”

“It was a stepping stone to what I really want.”

“Mind closing the door?” Alsop withdrew a cigar from a humidor. “Don’t want the smell

to chase away any lady customers.”

He struck a match on the side of his desk near a picture of a blonde with a sparkling Doris Day smile. “You saw the sign in the window and figured you’d like to sell cars?”

Bucky’s heart fluttered with hope. “Mr. *Alsop*”—Bucky’s Louisiana accent kicked in—“it’s more than that. Working at the grocery, I got to know the townspeople and establish myself—I’m pretty sure—in a good light. Now I need to move on. Selling your cars on commission will make me a businessman, not just a salesman.”

A faint smile crossed *Alsop*’s lips. He sat back and puffed. “Tell me more.”

“There’s money to be made selling cars. Next to houses, cars are people’s most expensive purchase. On average, they’ll buy a new one every three years. Take that Belvedere.” On a roll now, Bucky pointed to the showroom. “Quad headlights, dual four-barrel carb. Your Fury beats the pants off GM’s Corvette and leaves Ford’s T-bird coughing dust. I don’t know about your agency, but nationally, Chrysler sales are down this year . . . due, of course, to lousy marketing and ineffective sales strategies. Fact is, Chrysler makes cars with style and quality.” Bucky placed both hands on the desk and leaned in. “Cars I can sell.”

Alsop twirled his cigar ash into a piston-shaped aluminum ashtray and smiled, but didn’t look too impressed. “What’s your idea of an effective sales strategy?”

“Statistically, eighty percent of new car sales come from repeat customers or referrals. If I consider every customer a friend, he won’t forget me. Volume’s the second thing. The trick is to sell more cars than just one at a time.” He gazed at his shoeshine. “Haven’t figured exactly how . . . but I will.”

Bucky met the man’s gaze. *Come on, Mr. Alsop. Say yes.*

Alsop leaned back and stared at the ceiling. He puffed his cigar. “Awfully young,” he

muttered to himself.

Alsop peered at Bucky with his squinty-eyed look. He slapped the desk. “Tell you what. We’ll do a trial basis. You sell three cars next week, and the job’s permanent. But I warn you, it won’t be easy.” He extended his hand. “Be here at ten o’clock Monday morning. You’ll work with Sam, an old timer. Been selling cars since the Depression.”

Alsop scribbled something on a pad and handed the note to Bucky. “Here’s my home address. If you’re free, drop by this evening. I’m throwing a little party for my shop foreman, Will Chambers. He’s just returning to work after having surgery.”

“Sure, I know Will. Thanks, Mr. *Alsop*. I’ll be there.”

A new job *and* an invite to the boss’s house the same day. This was going even better than he had hoped. His chest swelled with pride and anticipation. Businessman today, mayor tomorrow. He couldn’t wait to dress the part and be the salesman he knew he could be.

Bucky had a new job and a new sports coat.

He checked his fingernails for any grease after changing his motorcycle’s spark plug. The bike was actually a piece of crap with a busted muffler, but it got him around. It was small and had a cartoon quality to it, a wacky, poke-’em-in-the-eye sense of mischief. He threw a leg over the seat, and it creaked like an old saddle.

Off he rode to the bosses’ house—smiling, sports coat fluttering, and thinking about that bittersweet goodbye to his daddy and kid sister. But then he pushed the painful thought from his mind.

It was going to be great getting acquainted with folks in a social atmosphere, where everyone’s relaxed. Alsop’s wife should be a real knockout. That is, if she looked like the picture

on his desk. Dale Carnegie said in his book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, that a successful businessman is friendly to everyone, especially the boss's wife. It probably didn't say the wife part, but just the same, it was good advice.

Cars lined the street and clogged the driveway of Alsop's single-story redbrick home. Above the entrance hung a blue-and-white banner: *Welcome back, Will*. Bucky parked on the street's steep downhill slope behind a polished '52 Desoto the color of canned peas. A "for sale" sign sat in the back window. Not a bad looking car. Some day . . .

He tucked two gift boxes under his arm and jaunted up a walkway lined with flowers. Dean Martin, or maybe Perry Como music came from inside. A note on the door said *Come on in*. Bucky restyled his front curl and stepped inside the living room crowded with people and chatter. Toasty air carried the scent of sweet pine from the fireplace.

A woman approached him with a friendly smile that lit up her peach-colored cheeks. "Welcome to the party. You must be Bucky."

"And you're Mrs. Alsop." Talk about look-alike. She could be Doris Day's twin. He flashed his best smile and handed her a box of chocolates he'd bought at Woolworths. "The other box is for Miss Iris. A surprise."

"Why thank you, Bucky. How thoughtful. Call me Jo-Dee. I understand you know Will through his sister, Miss Iris."

"We live in the same building. We sit out back a lot, and I teach her birdcalls. She's really good. On Sundays, she cooks dinner for Will and me."

Jo-Dee looked at the camera hanging from his neck. "How nice—you'll take pictures. My ear tells me you grew up further south. Louisiana, maybe?"

Bucky nodded. "Gulf Coast. My daddy's a fourth-generation shrimper. I would've been

the fifth, but the big boys have about taken over the industry. That's why I left."

Despite his effort to look her in the face, Bucky glanced at his shoes, wondering how much she could read in his face.

"The way Daddy tells it, shrimping was so much into his and Momma's blood, she wore white fishing boots under her wedding dress."

Jo-Dee smiled. "I like it when men call their fathers daddy. I'm from Mississippi. How did you happen to settle here, in Defiance?"

"*Time* magazine had a list of the next six boomtowns. So I closed my eyes and picked." A gentle hand touched his shoulder.

"Howdy, neighbor," came a familiar high-pitched rusty voice, followed by a warm and hardy laugh.

Bucky turned to see Miss Iris, round faced and rosy cheeked. "Well, fancy meeting you here." He winked, kissed her cheek, and got a heavy dose of perfume that smelled like something he'd bate a hook with.

If Joe-Dee looked like Doris Day, Miss Iris looked like Ma of *Ma and Pa Kettle*. Brown hair parted down the middle and curled up in front. Her blue-flowered dress fit her five-foot-square body like a colorful gunnysack. As always, she looked full of good spirit. He handed her the box of chocolates.

"Why, thank you, Bucky."

She studied the label. Probably to be sure they were creams only. Didn't want her false teeth broken to bits on walnuts or anything.

"I'll share them with Sunday's Bible class."

Bucky read the Bible growing up, and it offered lots of good advice. So did his Dale

Carnegie book, which preached that the cornerstone of winning friends and influencing people is being honest and sincere. That was probably in the Bible, too.

Jo-Dee said, “Cal’s serving drinks at the bar, and there’s plenty of food in the kitchen.” She headed that way.

Miss Iris leaned in close to Bucky. “Will told me Cal was impressed with how you handled yourself in the interview this morning. Just hope for your sake that it sits well with Kansas. Oh, and don’t tell Cal this, he’ll find out soon enough, but just today Will bought a used car.” She whispered, “Private party.”

“How’s he doing? You know, his prostate operation and all.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “He’s doing fine. It’s his drinking I worry about. Oh, Kathy. Love your dress. Excuse me, Bucky.” She patted his shoulder and scooted off.

Bucky wandered into the den where Alsop poured drinks for an already juiced-up group. Maybe his booze had more kick than the backyard brew Bucky’s daddy whipped up at parties.

“Glad you could make it, Bucky,” Alsop said. “What can I do you for?”

“A Hamm’s would be great.” Bucky liked the beer commercial on TV and tapped out a drumbeat on the bar. With his beer, he ambled into the living room where Will had unbuckled his belt and was showing off his scar to a group of wary onlookers. Miss Iris was old, but her brother was *really* old.

“Lost a hellofa lot of blood,” Will slurred. “Picked me up a bladder problem along the way.” He grabbed his bulging crotch. “That’s why I wear this here diaper. No more beer for me, thanks. Already had ten.” He laughed with his mouth about as wide as it could go, and everyone lurched back like he was radioactive. He looked at Bucky but seemed too drunk to recognize him.

Miss Iris took Will's arm. "Let's get you some hot soup and then we'll head home."

Bucky followed them into the kitchen to take pictures. It smelled of clam chowder and fried chicken. Those drinking the most, mugged the most. He snapped a shot of a man with a chrome hook for a hand and still managing to hold his beer with it.

Bucky turned his camera toward Kansas, the fella Miss Iris warned him about. He knew more about Kansas than he cared to remember. The man stood near the back door, scratching his ass like a baboon.

"Get that goddamn camera away from me!" Kansas growled, stepping closer. "Who the hell are you to get up in my business?"

"Relax, Kansas." The man with the hook appeared at Bucky's elbow. "He's just taking pictures of the party."

"Well, he better take pictures of someone else, or I'll shove that camera up where the sun don't shine."

"Hey! It's not a big deal," Bucky said, refusing to let his own temper get the better of him. He couldn't get involved in a scene there at his new boss's house.

A fireplug-shaped man waddled up. "Don't worry about him none. He's always a pain in the ass. You must be Bucky. I'm Sam. Glad to meet you."

So, this fleshy, pink-faced guy was the salesman Alsop said had been selling cars since forever. He wasn't as tall as Bucky had imagined.

Sam threw out a hand that Bucky caught. The smell of whiskey wafted from his mouth on a stream of words. "Welcome aboard, son."

"Thanks, Sam. Some party."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet. Listen, young fella. I'll tell you a trade secret." He planted a

forearm, heavy as an iron bar, on Bucky's shoulder. "In the car business, there's no such thing as browsing." He downed a gulp of drink. "And another thing, comparison-shopping is counterproductive. So are principles. Try to keep those to a minimum."

Bucky felt embarrassed for Sam being so open about dodgy trade secrets, but what the hell—good stuff to know. "I'll do my best." He backed up, freeing his shoulder and trying to get away, but Sam kept talking.

"One more piece of advice, Buck. Never talk about the price of a car. Break the numbers into easy-to-digest monthly payments. Stating the price only weakens your position. And if the car's used, your position is already weakened by having to show it to the customer up close—don't make things worse."

Jo-Dee walked by, balancing a tray of empty glasses and said, "I'm sure he'll figure it all out, Sam."

Sam staggered toward Bucky with an eye on his shoulder. "Did you hear the one about the guy who goes into a bank and says, give me all your money, this is a—"

Banging erupted from down a hallway. "Let me outta this bathroom, goddamnit!"

"Oh, my goodness!" Jo-Dee burst, darting from the kitchen, Bucky at her heels.

The banging became violent. "Open this damned door," a thick voice bellowed from inside, "or I'll kick it open."

The door shuddered as if being throttled by a demon inside. Jo-Dee turned the knob and opened the door. "Josh! Are you all right?"

A bug-eyed man with hair like Einstein's grandmother came stumbling out. A woman appeared from the hallway, her face a mask of worry. She draped a gentle arm around his shoulder. "It's me, honey. You've just had too much to drink."

She turned to Jo-Dee. "He'll be fine," she said softly and led him down the hallway.

Jo-Dee leaned against the wall, hand to her forehead. "Cal has *got* to fix that doorknob."

The man with the hook spoke up. "Thought I fixed it earlier. Guess not. No surprise, though, that Josh doesn't take to locked doors. He served in the Marines. Korea. Spent six months in a hole."

Looking stricken, JoDee headed back toward the kitchen.

A shiver ran down Bucky's spine at the thought of being locked in a hole. He introduced himself to Kathy, Alsop's secretary, complimented her on her red dress and caught himself eyeing the top of her bulging breasts.

"We look forward to having you with us." She glanced at her watch and sighed. "Still early, but I have to leave. Nice to meet you, Bucky."

For a moment, he wondered if his quick peek had turned her off, but a woman like Kathy, dressed so invitingly, had to be used to them. He tore himself away from her and swung by the kitchen to fix a plate of fried chicken and potato salad before dropping by the bar for another Hamm's. Pretty good turnout. What would the backyard be like?

He opened the door and stepped out onto the moonlit porch.

Someone whistled. "Bucky, over here." Alsop was sitting by the garage with a bowl of soup.

"Oh, there you are." Bucky snagged a lawn chair and dragged it alongside.

Alsop lit up a cigar. "Care for one?"

"No thanks. Tried one once on my daddy's shrimp boat before heaving over the side. He said I turned green."

Alsop chuckled. "He gave it to you, did he?"

“I was nine.”

A coyote made a long sad-sounding cry in the distance. Alsop rolled his cigar between his thumb and finger, staring at the glowing tip. “Sorry about Kansas giving you a hard time in the kitchen. Heard the ruckus even in the den.”

Bucky was used to Kansas. The way he’d limp into the store with Marybeth, his young teenage daughter, who he always parked in the magazine section. Bucky shook his shoulders just thinking about him and then forced the jerk from his mind.

Alsop puffed his cigar and blew out a thin stream of smoke. “He had his hopes on becoming shop foreman.”

A coyote howled again. Bucky took a swig of beer. “Don’t tell me he was hoping Will would die from his prostate cancer.”

“Was counting on it. Made a bet with Josh, another mechanic, that he’d be gone by this Thanksgiving.” Alsop eyed the camera hanging from Bucky’s neck and nodded. “That’s a quality camera you’ve got there. Don’t see many. Mostly everyone has Brownies.” He tapped an ash from his cigar. “You any good with it?”

“I’ve had lots of practice. Had a paper route when I was in junior high and saved up. Bought this camera, and been taking pictures ever since.” He smiled. “Won a photo contest once. Even have my own darkroom.”

Alsop scooted his chair closer. “Listen, it’ll be the state’s fiftieth birthday soon, and the mayor and I are planning a special ceremony. It’s not official, and I haven’t cleared it with the other council members yet, so I can’t divulge details. But if you’d be interested in documenting the event with photographs, I’d front your costs.”

Bucky’s heart pumped like a piston. “Absolutely.”

“We’re meeting on Monday. The entire plan hinges on selling it to my council cohorts.”
He put a finger to his lips. “Not a word. But I’ll tell you this, if my resolution passes, your pictures will be famous one day.”

Bucky leaned back, looked up at the stars, and sipped his beer. Yes siree, his future was looking real bright.

The rear porch light came on, and a screen door banged open.

“*Cal!*” Kathy shrieked. “Are you out here?”

Alsop jolted from his chair. “What’s wrong?”

Kathy scurried into the yard, her cheeks streaked with black from eye makeup. “Miss Iris and Will . . . an accident! Down the hill!”

“My God!” Bucky jumped to his feet, throwing aside his chicken and beer.

“I was right behind them,” Kathy cried. “We’ll take my car.”

“I’m coming too,” Bucky said, and they sprinted around the house toward the front.

A woman hollered from the porch, “I’ll call an ambulance.”

They climbed in with Kathy. “Oh, those poor souls!” she wailed, leaning over the steering wheel, eyes fixed on the narrow road. “I think they’re dead! The windshield . . . God, please, no.”

Bucky gripped his armrest. *Don’t let them be dead. Don’t let them be dead.* He squinted, searching ahead for car lights.

They rounded a bend. Ahead, a car’s taillights glowed in the dim moonlight. Will must’ve missed a turn and went straight off the road and into a tree. Bucky’s stomach shriveled. Could they have survived such a wreck?

Kathy pulled over. They all scrambled out into the cold night and ran to the scene.

The engine, its radiator hissing a dying breath, had rammed into the passenger compartment, filling it with steam. Bucky peered through Will's window. Oh, my God! He turned away.

Will's skull was bashed against the Desoto's cracked steering wheel.

Bucky swallowed and tried to see Iris through the steam. She was upright. Maybe she's alive!

He ran to the other side, but couldn't see through the steam and bloody window. He tried the door, but it was jammed. He glanced at Alsop opening Will's door, then Bucky grabbed the passenger door handle with both hands, put his foot on the frame, and yanked.

The door flew open and Miss Iris fell onto the ground.

"Jesus!" He jumped back and Kathy screamed.

Miss Iris's face was an unrecognizable glob of bloody flesh and shattered bone.

"Oh, God!" Acid crept up in Bucky's throat. "How could this happen?"

Kathy wheeled around and threw up on her red dress.

Bucky's swirling stomach made him think he might barf, but it went away.

Feeling faint, he shuffled to the rear of the car and put his foot on the bumper. He lowered his head and closed his eyes. Moments later, he opened them and stared at the tire tracks in the dirt. *What the . . . ?*

He crouched for a closer look.

Holy shit!