

THE KILLER WHO WASN'T THERE

Chapter 1

Defiance, Oklahoma, February 1957

A Negro in a phone company vest sprinted onto the road, arms waving. I slammed on the brakes. He rushed over, pounded on my window, “A girl . . . a young’un . . . in the ditch! Ya gotta come!”

I flew out of my roadster and raced after the man scrambling through knee-high grass into a ravine.

“I was on a pole, workin’,” he hollered over his shoulder, “spotted an animal circlin’ somethin’ in the brush. Looked like a kid all rolled into a ball. I ran over, and a coyote skedaddled, jus’ as I heard your car.”

I gasped. A Negro girl lay on her side, whimpering, welts on her arms and legs. Her blood-splattered gingham dress—a dress like my kid sister used to wear—in shreds. She needed a doctor, fast. I bent down to her.

“Leave her alone!” a harsh voice hollered.

Startled, I glanced up the ridge. Two state troopers. One small and muscular, the other large and muscular. The small one started toward the girl.

“We’ll take care of it, fella,” the other said, shooting his hand up like a traffic cop. “Anything I can do to help?” I offered. “I’m the new Defiance police chief. First day.”

“That’s nice, but this is a family matter. You run along, she’ll be fine.”

What was he thinking? “She doesn’t look fine to me.”

“Hey, Chief!” he barked, his face grisly. “This isn’t your jurisdiction. Now take off.”

The small trooper lifted the little girl and started back up the ravine. The Negro whispered to me, “Ain’t no family matter. Was the Klan.”

The hairs on my neck bristled. I stared at him. The Klan? Here?

Chapter 2

I continued on my way to work and pulled up to a pump at the Texaco station. The image of the little colored girl and her bloody dress was stamped on my mind. The dress was even the same color as the one Cassidy had when she was, what? Eleven? My stomach knotted at the thought of the Klan being around. Geesh! Thought I’d left them back in Louisiana two years ago.

“Be with you in a jiffy, Bucky,” Marge, the attendant, yelled over from the next pump. I always liked the smell of gas fumes. She was cleaning the windshield of an old Dodge pickup. Behind the wheel, the driver read a newspaper.

“Fill ‘er up with regular,” I told her after she’d finished ringing up the other customer.

“Congratulations on your new job, Bucky. Twenty-one years old and chief of police.” She plucked a piece of sage from my sleeve. “Don’t you look handsome in your pressed blue shirt? Goes well with your curl”—she flicked the lock of hair poking out from under my hat—“Makes you look dashing.”

I couldn’t help smiling. “Try to always look my best. Say, what’s with the Klan being around?”

“Every few years they sprout like weeds. If they were any dumber, they’d have to be watered twice a day. Just yesterday, one of them tried to sneak an armload of recruiting posters into the women’s restroom. I told him to hightail it.” She shook her head. “The no-goodnik had already stunk up the place by plastering a poster above the men’s urinal.”

“Recruiting posters, huh?” That knot in my stomach got tighter. “Something’s got their shorts in a bunch.”

“Watch yourself. They don’t always take kindly to the law. Killed one of your predecessors—stabbed him through the heart.”

I opened the door to my new office. A small white box sat on the desk by a nameplate with big bold letters—Chief “Bucky” Ontario. The thing beside the box stopped me.

A Colt revolver.

I swallowed hard. Something told me that gun was calling my name. Goodbye carefree car salesman—hello police chief. And already I had the Klan to worry about. And the little colored girl.

I padded to the window beside the desk. A night rain had left the parking lot shining with puddles of gasoline rainbows. I turned back to the white box, then sat down and opened it. A silver badge. I blew a hot breath on it, polished it on my sleeve, and pinned it on my shirt. Not bad.

I was worrying about the little girl when a familiar face carved with humor around the mouth and eyes peeked from behind the doorframe. “Mornin’, Chief, I see you’ve found your gun and badge.”

“Hello, Sergeant.”

Hazelwood hobbled inside holding his cane. He stood like a bent nail, hunched over and chuckling. “There’s a dusty old picture down by the evidence locker you oughta see. It’s of Chief Wade ‘Cowboy’ Wallis. He’s sitting where you are, except he’s got a knife in his heart.”

“Kind of you to point that out.” I could only hope Cowboy Wallis was the police chief Marge had told me about. Didn’t want to follow a long tradition of stabbed chiefs. Well, with Parker killed by a dog and Harman shot by a killer, there was no predicting how I might go.

“A little humor for your first day, Chief. You’ll need it when I tell you who’s back in town, getting juiced up over at Uncle Lewy’s.”

“If it’s the ghost of Cowboy Wallis, he can have his gun back.” I tossed my hat over the revolver.

“Your former cellmate, Tyburn.”

A name to rattle people’s bones. I squared my shoulders. “Jail mate, not cellmate. And unfortunately, he was let go.”

Hazelwood rested on his cane and crossed his shiny black boots inlaid with silver. “But I heard you said he did it.”

“Oh, he did it all right. Told me so.”

Mrs. Rheingold chirped over the intercom, “Chief, a Mr. Oswald is here to see you.”

It took a moment to find the correct button. “Who?”

The door burst open, and a short, thick man with bushy white muttonchops and an owlsh face strode in and thrust out a business card. “Otto Oswald, National Insurance.”

I stood and grabbed the man’s card as Sergeant Hazelwood excused himself and shuffled off.

“I’m here to inform you,” Oswald said, tugging his blue-and-white plaid vest, “that I’m on the hook for a substantial sum of money.”

“Gee, sorry to hear that. The bank robbery, huh? Have a seat.”

We sat. He took off his big curly cowboy hat, put it in his lap, and brushed back his hair, so white and fluffy it looked like a snowdrift. “Goddamn right. You should know, sir, that the man responsible is in your town.” He jabbed a finger toward the window. “Right this moment.”

“You don’t say.” I raised my eyebrows as high as they’d go.

“Tyburn Newgate’s a thieving scoundrel!”

“Lots of folks would agree with you, and if I had my way, he’d still be in jail. But a jury found him innocent.”

He smacked the desk with his palm. “Only because those nincompoops were bamboozled by his hotshot lawyer. A shyster trained to do things a rat won’t do.” He sniffed and rubbed his nose.

“It’s a darn shame, all right.” I got the feeling Oswald wasn’t finished, so I leaned back and folded my hands in my lap. “Anything else?”

Retrieving a gold tin from his vest pocket, he opened it and snorted a pinch of snuff into each nostril. He rubbed his nose again, this time with a lace-fringed blue handkerchief. “Damn right there’s something else. I expect you to see that justice is served.”

I raised my palms. “The jury gave its verdict. In the eyes of the court, justice has—”

Oswald’s owlish pupils got small and hard. “Don’t give me that horseshit. I’ve read the reports. If you had testified about how he’d confessed to you while you two chummed it up in jail, he’d have plea-bargained. The bank would have their silver back, and I wouldn’t be out ten thousand goddamn dollars!” He gave the desk another wallop.

Heat rushed into my face, and I leaned forward. “Wait just a minute! First of all, we weren’t in jail *chumming it up*. I was there under trumped-up charges. And I didn’t testify because I was in Louisiana helping my sick daddy. The fact is, Mr. Oswald, Tyburn is now a free man, and that’s that.”

“That’s not that. I want the silver back and expect you to get it.”

I clenched and unclenched my hands under the desk. “You can expect all you want, but I have no idea where it is. Tyburn had two accomplices, who slipped across the border into Mexico. For all we know, they have it.”

“They don’t. For two days I watched Tyburn in the courtroom, all smug as a fox savoring *my* company’s money. He has it.” Oswald lifted his pointed chin. “Twenty-eight years.”

A trickle of sweat itched my right ear, but I ignored it. “What, twenty-eight years?”

“More than a quarter century in this business, that’s what.” Oswald leaned across the desk, smelling like a stale cigar. “And I’ve never been wrong.”

I swiped the trickle from my ear, gripped the chair’s armrest, and stood. “Tyburn didn’t tell me where the silver was, so I can’t help you.”

Oswald shot to his feet. His hat slid from his lap onto the floor, and he planted his thick knuckles on the desk. His black eyes looked about to jump out and do something dangerous. “What I say next has an *or else* after it. You can, and you will.”

What the hell did that mean?

Oswald's eyes went back to normal. "Now look, Chief. I'm aware you got this job because of your fine work uncovering city corruption. God knows, it came at the town's most crucial time. Nevertheless"—his eyes turned scary again—"you've got until six p.m., Wednesday, day after tomorrow to come up with the silver."

Two days! He was off his rocker. "And what's this *or else* supposed to mean?"

"Or else you'll be back hawking cars." He collected his hat from the floor and pointed to a book on the shelf. *Textbook for the Modern Detective*. "Better bone up on that one. And fast!" He strutted out.

That was a fine how-de-do. Never even heard of the guy, and he's one to get me fired? I doubted that. On the other hand, if I were to get the boot I'd have hell to pay from Uncle Rupert. I came from a proud family of shrimpers and public servants. If I was to fulfill my dream of following my uncle's example by becoming mayor, losing this job was not an option.

I needed a drink.

"Mrs. Rheingold," I said into the intercom. "Call Sally's and have them deliver a chocolate malt."

"Right away, Chief," she said crisply.

I rocked in my chair. If I got fired, I couldn't even get my old job back selling cars. Also, I would've already replaced me.

I pressed the intercom again. "Make sure they don't forget the extra malt from the mixer."

"As you wish, sir. Incidentally, in your drawer are life insurance papers to fill out. The town foots the bill. Your relatives might welcome your having coverage. God knows, those of the last chief . . . well, those of the last several chiefs appreciated the benefits."

I paced across the room, hardly listening. Who'd that guy think he was? I stopped and inspected his card. *Otto Oswald*. Pretty damn sure of himself. Better check him out. But first, it wouldn't hurt to mosey over to Uncle Lewy's and pay Tyburn a visit. See how far he'd go to keep his secret secret.

I grabbed my hat. Mrs. Rheingold fluttered in, patting a giant wave of silver hair above her forehead. "Sally's doesn't deliver before lunch. Want me to run over?"

I shook my head. "No time. Have to see a man about some silver."

Mrs. Rheingold tossed a glance at the gun. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"No need to lug that thing around." I didn't like what those notches in the grip meant.

She picked up the pistol and slid it into a holster from the hatrack. "You'll get used to it."

I waved my hand. “Some other time.”

She studied me over her pink-rimmed glasses. “You never shot jackrabbits as a boy?”

“Huh?”

“Growing up. You nev—”

“Boars.”

“What?”

“I shot wild boars, not jackrabbits.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“No problem, just don’t need it, that’s all.” Damn, hated sounding whiny, but didn’t feel like explaining.

She dipped back her head as if sizing me up, then handed me my hat. “I know just what you need,” she said, her eyes sparkling. “But later. You run along.”