

The elderly white men of a small, southern community are all being brutally murdered, and an old black grandmother must sort through the tangle of her childhood memories to find the key to unlock the mystery and stop the killer.

Chickenbone Church Reunion

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*Anita Havens
and
Wendy Daughdrill*

**Chickenbone Church
Reunion**

*Justice is dished up southern style in this
hilarious murder mystery.*

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Chapter 1

Calhoun County, Mississippi—Spring of 1999

The knock on the door was loud and persistent. Joe Reynolds rose from his rattletrap old reclining chair and ambled across the room with a stride that had been shortened considerably by the ravages of time and hard living. He parted the short curtains and peered out at the face staring back at him from the other side of the glass. Opening the door, he smiled warmly. "What can I do for you?" His smile disappeared in a grisly explosion of buckshot pellets and bone fragments, and his body fell to the floor without so much as twitching.

* * *

Sheriff Dean Cole walked into Scott Griffin's cubicle and threw a manila envelope full of photos and crime scene notes on his cluttered desk. "You've been tellin us how bored you are with the way things happen round here...or don't happen. This is the first murder case in the county in over thirty years that doesn't seem to have been committed by a close relative or personal acquaintance of the victim. Hell, most of the time the suspect is the one who calls to report the homicide."

As he quietly slipped his electronic pocket-fisherman into his desk drawer, Scott looked up at the sheriff and asked, "What do you know about Joe Reynolds that isn't in this report?"

The sheriff thought for a minute and said, "Joe was one of the surviving members of a pretty exclusive club from years ago. He and quite a few other men in this area supported their families by making and selling moonshine whiskey during Prohibition and the Depression years--out of necessity. Corn in liquid form brought ten times more than on the cob, as Uncle Lester Parker used to say. A good corn crop amounted to about twenty gallons to the acre."

Scott whistled. He wasn't a country boy and didn't know how much shelled corn brought, but he could guess and come pretty close to what a gallon of moonshine whiskey would bring, even today.

"Anyway," Cole continued, "some of these old-timers continued to make whiskey all the way up into the 1970s, out of the pure joy of making it and the excitement of trying to avoid the law. My father told me that during the

Prohibition years this whole county was like a war zone, and since the bootleggers and moonshiners were related to most of the local law, the federal government hired folks from out of state to try and bust up the whiskey trade in this area. He told me they were mostly unsuccessful, and that it was not uncommon to see a man barefoot and in overalls, riding a mule back from some rendezvous with two or three thousand dollars in gold coins stuffed in his saddlebags."

"You think old-man Joe Reynolds was still involved in moonshine?" Scott asked in disbelief. That seemed really farfetched to Scott. Maybe dope, if he was that type.

"Not a chance." Sheriff Cole shook his head in denial. "Old Joe lived a quiet, respectable life since coming home from his last stay in the Atlanta pen back in sixty-eight. I can't imagine what he could have done to piss somebody off enough to get himself shot in his own living room. By all appearances, whoever killed him drove up to his house with nothing else in mind except to blow his brains out. It's a shame that kid that mowed his grass had to find him that way."

Scott did not answer for a moment. The sheriff's description of old man Reynolds's early years had gotten Scott daydreaming about whiskey stills, revenuers, and gun battles, just as he had often done when his grandmother told him similar stories on cold winter nights in the Chicago tenements where he had grown up.

"Scott, do all big-city cops start daydreaming while their boss is briefing them on a case?"

Embarrassed, Scott quickly shuffled a couple of papers and desperately groped for something intelligent to say. Finally, he blurted out, "Are you really sure it wasn't one of his relatives?"

Exasperated, the sheriff ordered, "Go over the case files. I'll call Terrell in. It's his day off, but you two need to hit the streets. I want you to concentrate on questioning Reynolds's family and friends and try to come up with a suspect and a motive before next week's edition of the *Monitor-Herald* comes out."

As he headed out of the office, Scott paused in front of the long row of old photographs, which represented every sheriff who had served Calhoun County since the mid-1800s. His eyes caught the photos of Sheriffs Williams and Wells. These two men had been sheriffs during the only particularly violent times the county had ever experienced. Sheriff Wells, in fact, had been gunned down on the town square in broad daylight. Scott longed for the ability to somehow reach into their minds and pull out the insight he needed to think on the same level as the old men and women whom he was about to begin visiting and plying for information.

* * *

Angela Woodard picked up Terell's phone on the third ring. It wasn't uncommon for her to answer. She and Terell had been an item for quite a spell. Sheriff Cole wondered when she would get tired of cleaning up after that two-timing slob. Of course, she didn't know that he was two timing, but she had to know that he was the messiest human being alive--at least the messiest in Calhoun County. In fact, Angela did know that. She had just scrubbed a week's worth of dirty dishes and washed a mountain of laundry for Terell. It was plain that his house had not been touched since the last time she had cleaned it; there was a ham in the refrigerator so deep in green mold that it could have been combed! But, she said to herself as she climbed over the laundry basket, piled high with neatly folded clean clothes, Terell worked hard down at the sheriff's office. As a matter of fact, today was Saturday, and he had left for work just after daybreak this morning.

Angela glanced at the caller ID. The Sheriff's office.

"Hi, Sugar," she said eagerly, as she picked up the phone.

Sheriff Cole coughed, embarrassed. "Angela, could I speak to Terell?"

"Sheriff Cole?"

"Yeah. Put Terell on the phone."

"I thought he was at work."

There was a long silence at the other end of the line.

"I guess that means you don't know where I could find him?" inquired the sheriff, sounding put out.

"He told me he had to work today."

There was another long silence. Sheriff Cole liked Angela. She wasn't just some token black woman whom he had hired to keep the NAACP off his back. She was a hard worker and deserved better than Terell. Hell, she was more than a hard worker; she was the best damned deputy he had. He should have thought of putting her on the Reynolds case with Scott instead of Terell in the first place.

"Who is she?" Angela asked, her voice sounding harsh.

"Who is who?"

"You know what I'm talking about, Sheriff Cole. Who is Terell with?"

"Angela, that is between you and Terell. But since we don't know where to find *him*, I need you to come on down to the office. There's been a murder out at Bentley."

"A murder! Who did it?"

"Don't know. I'm puttin you on the case with Scott. I want you two to go out there and see what you can find out."

"I'll be right there," Angela said without hesitation. She slammed down the receiver and snatched one of her uniforms from the pile of clean laundry.

This was the first murder in Calhoun County since...since she didn't remember when. But soon as she found out who Terell was seeing, there might be another one or two...real soon.

Angela dressed in front of the full-length mirror in the hallway. She examined her appearance with a critical eye. *Why would Terell be shopping around?* she wondered. Could it be that she was not as attractive as she used to be? She had been first alternate in the Miss Mississippi pageant two years ago. Her complexion was still a mellow coffee and cream, soft curls framing her face in a stylish bob. Her figure...well, she might have put on a pound or two, but basically, Angela saw the same girl who had always turned everyone's head. Her big, dark brown eyes went misty for a moment, to think that Terell would cheat. If the truth be known, though, she had always known that her relationship with Terell would never be a long-term proposition. The misty look in her eyes was replaced with a fiery, determined glint. Quickly, she dumped a hamper full of the clean laundry out onto the couch and threw in all of her clothes and the few personal items that she kept at Terell's house. The break would be as swift and as painless as possible.

She threw the hamper into the back seat of her patrol car and slammed the door. As she was about to climb into the driver's seat, she noticed the poison ivy vine that climbed and meandered up the big shade tree beside the driveway. Rushing back into the house, she returned with several pairs of jockey shorts and a pair of rubber gloves. Gingerly, she rubbed the underwear in the poison ivy and then returned them to the pile of neatly folded clean clothes.

Terell Stoddard would remember this for a long, long time. Maybe his girlfriend would too, whoever she was. Well, more than likely it would be easy enough to find out who...now.

Angela couldn't help but smile as she pulled out of the gravel drive by the small, white house. She was better off without Terell. Besides, that new deputy from Chicago sure was a looker. Scott's door had been closed to her, but maybe Terell had just opened it. *Maybe...* she thought, as she pulled into the parking lot of the new jail.

Angela rushed into the sheriff's office, eager to receive her instructions. Sheriff Cole looked up from the paperwork on his desk and said casually, "Just settle down and pour yourself a cup of coffee. Scott is going over the case file in his office now. I'll fill you in as soon as I finish this blasted form."

Angela poured a cup of steaming hot coffee and added sugar and a lot of cream. She went to her desk across from the sheriff's and sat down to enjoy it. Terell could go straight to hell.

Chapter 2

Scott strode down the corridor to the parking lot of the fancy, new, county jail that had already developed a reputation for its inability to contain any inmate with an I.Q. above fifty. Angela leaned sideways in her chair to admire his chiseled, six-foot form. *Just like a Solo Flex commercial*, she thought.

"Angela!"

She jumped at the sound of her name, splashing her coffee against the newly painted wall.

"Yes, Sheriff," Angela stammered as she tried to regain her composure.

"Since your eyes have already followed that smart-ass new kid down the hall, pull yourself together and go down there before he leaves. Tell him I said you've been assigned as his partner on the Reynolds case."

For unknown generations, it has been common knowledge that Calhoun County girls have a weakness for newly arrived outsiders, especially the ones that seem more sophisticated than the local farm boys and loggers.

Angela hurriedly grabbed her notepad and pocketbook, checking her appearance in the small, cracked compact that she carried. Only time to freshen up the lipstick, she thought regretfully. This she did on the run as she rushed down the hall and through the double glass doors at the front of the building.

Scott was already slamming the door to his shiny, new, spotlessly clean patrol car. When Angela jerked the passenger door open and plopped down on the seat next to him, Scott turned and looked at her. His eyes got big, and he blurted out, "What's the matter with your lips?"

She grabbed the rearview mirror and twisted it to her side to see how badly she had smeared her lipstick. Annoyed, Scott turned the mirror back to its original position and said, "Use the mirror under the sun visor. Why do women always have to go twisting these things around like they were put in cars especially for makeup mirrors?"

Angela, immediately on the defensive, said, "Sorry," in a sarcastic voice, and then said nothing at all, pouting, determined to wait for an apology that would never come.

Scott burned rubber, squealing out of the jailhouse parking lot as if he were on a high speed chase.

"Why do men burn the rubber off of expensive tires like they were meant to make a macho noise rather than to carry cars down the road?" Angela shot back, immediately sorry, but unable to recall the hot words.

After a few minutes of silence, Angela asked in a neutral tone, "Where are we going, Scott?"

"To the Reynolds place. Sheriff Cole wanted me to interview family and friends of Mr. Reynolds, but I want to go over the crime scene myself. Who knows, maybe I can find something he missed."

"The Reynolds place? You might want to pull in here at the courthouse and turn around. The Reynolds place is out south of town."

Embarrassed, Scott slammed on the brakes, turned on his blue lights, and wheeled around without a word, heading south. "You could have said something when I pulled out of the jail instead of just letting me drive halfway to Bruce!"

"I would have if you had bothered to fill me in on your plans. You know, Scott, if we're going to be partners on this case, you really need to start confiding in me. Now would be fine."

"Partners! You my partner on this case? I thought I was going to be working with Terell!"

"That's why Sheriff Cole called me in today. Seems Terell is *occupied*."

Scott whipped into the post office parking lot, dumping Angela across his lap in the process.

"You should buckle your seat belt," he retorted, all the more annoyed by the jolt of electricity that she had just sent coursing through him. With a vicious tug on the door handle, he jumped out, and she followed suit.

"What'd you stop here for?" Angela looked puzzled.

"To lose you." He jumped back in the car and jerked the door shut.

She realized what was happening in time to grab the half-open window with both hands. "You're just gonna leave me here?"

Scott answered by jamming the power window-button, and she leaped back just in time to keep her fingers from being crushed.

"Scott!"

It was useless. Muttering, she turned and saw her brother's pickle-green Pontiac parked in front of the post office. True to form, he had left it unlocked, and the key was in the ignition. *Good old Ted*. She climbed in and instinctively hit the radio tuner, directing it away from her brother's favorite rap station, and gunning the engine, pulled out into the road. Inside the post office, recognizing the sound of his V8, Ted Woodard turned just in time to see Angela speeding away. "Shit! Oh man, Angela!" Ted did a stomping

dance, right in the middle of the post office, and threw the letter he was mailing to the floor in a fit of temper. "That gal's ass is mine!"

"Sorry, bro." Angela floored the gas pedal and never lost sight of Scott's white Crown Victoria. With a vengeful smile, she wondered how far that stuck-up city boy would get before he stopped to ask directions to the Reynolds place. She caught a long stretch in the road, and Ted's old V8 shot around Scott's new patrol car just as they passed the jail.

Scott followed the green Pontiac through a network of backroads until they finally pulled up in front of a small, white, frame house. That woman was a nuisance, but he had to admit he admired her tenacity.

She met him halfway up the gravel driveway, dark eyes flashing. "Who do I look like, Barney Fife?"

He sized her up with a critical eye. "Nope. More like Halle Berry. But you sure do act like Barney Fife."

Angela thought of several appropriate responses but kept them to herself. She turned her back on Scott and started up the drive. It was all that Scott could do to keep up with her long legs. They stopped behind the shiny, gold Cadillac parked just outside the back door. The license plate was not local. "Leflore County," Scott read, and Angela could tell by his tone of voice that it may as well have been a county in Maine.

"It's down in the Delta," she supplied the information for him.

The gaudy, flashy car seemed in stark contrast to the simple, country house, badly in need of a new roof, its many layers of paint chipping and flaking. The man who opened the screen door and invited them in was, without doubt, the owner of the car. He was overweight, balding, and sported enough gold jewelry to pay the interest for a month on the national debt. A heavy, serpentine chain immediately caught Angela's attention, and she was repulsed by the mellow gold's contrast to the carrot red chest hair. She quickly looked down, and her eyes fell on his hands, graced by rings on four fingers. The diamond on his middle finger had to be at least two carats. For some reason, this immediately reminded Angela of her past-due rent. The tell-tale red veins and splotchy red patches of an alcoholic marred the pasty skin of his face.

"We just came out to look around the crime scene," Scott explained.

"Thought we might get to talk to some of the family members."

"I'm Robert Earl," the man offered freely. "Far as I know, Daddy didn't have no enemies. Finest, upstanding, churchgoing man in this community. When you catch the son-of-a-bitch that killed him, you let me know. I want to bail him out."

"Sir," Scott began, then stopped, puzzled. "Why would you want to make bail for the man that killed your father?"

Robert Earl looked at Scott as though he had just arrived from Mars. Angela gave him what she hoped was a discreet jab in the ribs and quickly shook her head, but he still did not catch on. "In any case," he continued. "I believe that bail for a murder suspect would be quite expensive."

Robert Earl ignored this little piece of well-intended information and insisted, "You just let me know when you arrest him."

Scott continued in a businesslike tone, "Mr. Reynolds, what can you tell us about your father's alleged murder?"

"Alleged, hell. He's in the morgue right now, and I just ordered out his casket from Pryor Funeral Home!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reynolds," Angela apologized. "What can you tell us about your father's murder?"

"Not much. I set my cruise on a hundred and ten and got here about fifteen minutes ago. Norma, my baby sister, called me about noon and told me Daddy'd been shot in his own living room. Said the boy that mows his yard found him. Uncle John, Daddy's brother, lives in that little house next door. He might be able to help you better'n me."

"Is he home?" asked Scott, looking across the hill to the other small, white house. The grass was clipped short on the hill between the two houses, and a well-worn path connected the back doors.

Robert Earl looked up to the afternoon sky. It was growing darker by the minute, although it was just mid-afternoon. Black storm clouds were building rapidly in the southwest, and an occasional flash of lightening streaked across the dark sky.

Robert Earl stood holding the screen door open as he talked. "Uncle John's afraid of storms. You'll probably find him in his storm cellar. See that unnatural-lookin mound of dirt in the clay bank out front?"

Scott nodded.

"In there. You'd better run. Looks like the bottom's fixin to fall out."

The rain did not start slowly. There was a sudden clap of thunder, and then a cold torrent drenched Scott and Angela as they slid down the red clay bank and into the storm cellar.

Uncle John seemed quite startled at first. Scott wasn't sure if the elderly white man was more shocked at having two cops in his storm cellar, or two *black* cops.

"Mr. Reynolds?" Angela spoke first. "Your nephew, Robert Earl, said that you might be able to give us some information about your brother's murder."

"I done told the sheriff everything I know," said the old man, matter-of-factly.

"We know you talked to Sheriff Cole this morning," Scott said, diplomatically, "and we really appreciate your cooperation. We were just hoping that maybe you had thought of something else that might help us after you'd had time to calm down and think about it rationally."

"I didn't need to calm down," said Uncle John flatly. "And like I done said, I told the sheriff everything this morning."

By now, the storm was well underway. The wind had picked up, and Angela was seriously wondering if it might not be a tornado. The old man got up from his seat on an old, wooden Coca-Cola crate and walked over to the open door. Angela noticed the musty odor of the underground room, mixed with the scent from the candle flickering over in the corner. It was not an unpleasant smell, she thought.

Rain was now running down the muddy bank and starting to back up into the cellar. Uncle John stood at the open door a few minutes, as if appraising the severity of the situation outside. He must have decided that it was code blue, because he firmly pulled the door closed and returned to his seat on the Coca-Cola crate. The candle did not light the space well with the door closed, and Angela began to feel claustrophobic.

"You know, ever time I come in here, I start wishing I'd made that door open to the inside instead of opening out."

Scott waited for further explanation, but Uncle John obviously did not feel that he needed to elaborate on the mechanics of the door. However, Scott still felt mildly curious. "Why is that, Mr. Reynolds?" he asked.

"Why is what?"

"Why do you wish you had made the door open to the inside? It doesn't seem to me that it would matter."

"Well, do you remember that big old blackjack oak tree just outside there?"

"Yes sir."

"If that thing blew down on this here cellar, we couldn't push the door open. But if it opened to the inside now, we could just climb right out. Sometimes I don't see no company for over a week. Ain't no tellin how long we'd be trapped in here before somebody found us."

Another loud clap of thunder made Angela jump. She could feel the earth tremble in their miniature dungeon. "Isn't it dangerous to be under a tall tree during an electrical storm? Isn't lightening bad about striking tall trees?" she asked, nervously.

"Yep, I reckon," said the old man, seeming rather unconcerned.

"Doesn't that bother you?" ask Angela.

"I ain't skeered of lightening like I am of twisters."

"Oh," said Angela, as if that explained everything.

"I believe it's starting to slack off," said Scott, pushing the door open a crack and peering outside. "Angela, you want to try to make it to the cars?"

Thank you Jesus, thought Angela. *Maybe the man has a heart after all*. She knew Scott must be able to tell that she was about ready to panic.

"Let's make a run for it," she suggested. "I don't mind getting a little wet."

"You're goin to get mor'n a little wet," the old man warned.

"We appreciate your sharing your shelter with us, Mr. Reynolds." Scott turned to the old man and shook his hand. "If you do remember something else, will you call us down at the jail?"

"I told Sheriff Cole I would."

Scott nodded, and he and Angela made a mad dash for their cars. Scott was dying to get behind the wheel of that green, souped-up hotrod. On the run, he pitched Angela his keys. "Here, you take the patrol car, and I'll drive yours back."

"Scott, wait!" But it was too late. Scott was already spinning out, slinging rocks down the gravel drive. "Men!"

* * *

Uncle John sat quietly for a few minutes. He did not get up to close the cellar door again. Slowly, he reached into his overalls pocket and pulled out an expended shotgun shell. Turning it over in his hands, he examined it closely. It was made of red paper, heavier than the modern plastic shells. Double-aught buckshot. The shell must have been at least thirty years old. It was a wonder the thing had fired, he thought, shaking his head. *They don't make nothin like they used to*. He had two boxes just like it under his bed. Ought to get them out and use them next deer season. Maybe he would call Sheriff Cole and tell him that he had found it under the rosebush by Joe's front door. Maybe he wouldn't.

Chapter 3

Angela and Scott were both still soaked when they pulled into the parking lot of the jail. Angela headed straight for the coffee pot and Scott to his desk, where he had left the Reynolds case file.

Sheriff Cole was on the phone at his desk in the cubicle next to Scott's. He hung up and called, "That was Mr. Reynolds's brother on the phone just now. It seems he's found the shotgun shell that killed Mr. Joe. Found it under a rose bush by the front door!"

"He *what?*" said Scott loudly. "We just came from his place. He said he didn't have any new information, that he'd told you everything this morning. I know he hasn't been out in this weather scratching around under rose bushes! He's bound to have already had it when we were out there, not more than twenty minutes ago."

The sheriff could see that Scott was upset, and rightly so. "Scott, you have to learn how to talk to these old people. To them, you're still an outsider. Hotshot city boy from Chicago."

"My family was from here," Scott protested.

"Yeah, I know. And that'll probably help you out...eventually."

Scott shook his head in exasperation.

"How about riding back out there for me and picking up that shell? Take an evidence bag with you."

"Do you think he'll give it to me?" Scott asked.

"Maybe," said the sheriff, smiling broadly.

Angela had changed into a dry uniform. "You want me to drive?" she asked, offering him a cup of steaming hot coffee. It smelled good.

"Yeah. Why don't you."

* * *

Angela pulled out of the jailhouse parking lot and headed south towards the Reynolds place, past the Ag Center, where a livestock show had drawn a fairly large crowd, for Pittsboro. Scott reached for the manila folder that contained the Reynolds case file and pulled out an odd assortment of papers. This was Angela's first glimpse of the evidence.

“What all you got there?” she inquired, unable to conceal her curiosity.

“Well, let’s see. Here’s the coroner’s report, his billfold...” Opening it, Scott counted out twenty-three dollars. “A driver’s license, Medicare card, his latest Social Security check. Geez! Two hundred and twenty-five dollars. That wouldn’t even pay my electric bill!”

He looked at Angela. She shrugged. “Mine either. Most old people around here haven’t ever known anything but hard times. I guess, maybe, they don’t know the difference.”

“Man,” said Scott, obviously shocked. “I had no idea.”

“Well, city boy, you’ve still got a lot to learn.”

Scott seemed to take no offense at her comment.

“What else you got?” she inquired, drawing his attention back to the file.

“Well, just wait a minute. Here’s his will.”

“Did he own anything worth mentioning?”

“Just wait a minute. Let’s see here...Norma got the acre of land her mobile home is sittin on.”

“That’s his youngest daughter,” Angela put in. “What else?”

“Ruth got the acre of land her trailer is on and her Mama’s weddin ring.”

“That’s his oldest daughter.”

“Whoa! Robert Earl, that guy we met this afternoon, he got a hundred acres, the house, Daddy’s old pickup truck, and the tractor.”

“He’s the baby of the family.” Angela paused. “You don’t think that’s enough to kill somebody over, do you?”

“Well, I don’t know. Seems like baby brother has a pretty rich appetite.”

“Yeah, but...” Angela said, shaking her head doubtfully.

“You got any better ideas?”

“Not yet...but didn’t Robert Earl say that Norma called him at home in Clarksdale to tell him about his dad? That gives him a perfect alibi, you know.”

“Maybe it does, maybe it doesn’t,” Scott said, pulling out the coroner’s report. “The coroner said the time of death was about three-thirty yesterday afternoon. Poor old man must have lain there all night before the yard boy found him this morning.”

“Yeah?” said Angela. “Oh, okay. You’re sayin that Robert Earl had time to...do this...get back home, get a good night’s sleep, and be there to answer the phone when Norma called.”

“Sure. Why not?”

“I just don’t think so.”

About that time Angela pulled up in the gravel drive. The Cadillac was gone. So was baby brother.

They parked in Mr. Joe's drive and walked across the well-worn path in the rear of the house to John Reynolds's back porch. Scott knocked loudly on the screen door.

Mr. John opened the door and just said, "Humph. Thought maybe the sheriff would come." He just stood there, looking at Angela and Scott as if trying to decide whether to hand over his evidence or not.

"Mr. Reynolds, Sheriff Cole sent us out here to get a shotgun shell," Scott prompted. "You did call and tell him that you had found one--*under the rose bush?*"

Mr. Reynolds didn't answer. He just shoved his hand into his overalls pocket and produced the expended shell.

Scott took it and examined it carefully. "Doesn't look like any shell I've ever seen," he said. "What's it made out of, red paper?"

"Yep."

Scott waited, but Mr. Reynolds didn't elaborate.

"How old is this thing, anyway?"

"Spec it's at least fifty, maybe sixty year."

"Probably the last one of its kind," Scott commented, casually.

Mr. Reynolds just shrugged.

Scott handed the shell to Angela, who dropped it into an evidence bag. She wrote a short note, which she attached to the bag.

"Mr. Reynolds, you *will* call us if you find anything else?"

He nodded, turned, and went back into the house, leaving the two deputies standing on the back step.

Scott just shook his head.

"I'll drive back," he said, as he headed for the driver's side.

As Scott pulled onto the main gravel road that led back into town, he slammed on his breaks, almost throwing Angela into the dash.

"I thought I told you to keep your seat belt fastened," he said sharply. "What the hell is that?"

"Where?" snapped Angela, irritated. "I wouldn't need a seat belt if you weren't such a reckless driver!"

"Up there," he said, ignoring her remark.

Up at the forks of the gravel road, a big bonfire burned, right smack in the middle of the left fork.

About that time, a late-model, white Ford pickup came barreling around the fire, taking the ditch and slinging gravel and dirt everywhere.

Scott hit his blue light, and the pickup voluntarily pulled to the side of the road. A middle-aged man stepped out. The driver's side of the truck was shot full of fresh holes with what looked like buckshot!

Angela tried to intervene, "Scott, this--"

“What the hell is going on here?” Scott demanded.

The man remained perfectly calm as though nothing were out of the ordinary. “I was just tryin to get through--borrowed my father-in-law’s truck. Thought they wouldn’t shoot at it. We’re fryin chitlins over at Big Creek tonight. Just decided I didn’t want to miss it.”

The man seemed to think that this explained everything perfectly.

“What do you mean? ‘tryin to get through.’ Who’s built that fire in the middle of this road?”

“Scott,” Angela said firmly. “It’s okay. Mr. Reynolds, you can go. Hope you enjoy your chitlins.”

“Thanks, Angela. I will,” he said casually, as he climbed back into the shot-up truck.

Scott looked at Angela as if he expected an immediate explanation.

“Another Mr. Reynolds?”

“Scott, I’ve been trying to tell you. We don’t need to get mixed up in this. The Reynolds have been feuding amongst themselves for sixty years. The local law just stays out of it. It never lasts too long.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No, I’m not.”

“That man’s truck was shot all to hell, and you say we need to let them settle it amongst themselves! Feuds went out with the last century.”

“Not around here. Nobody’s ever been seriously hurt as long as I can remember. Mr. Joe’s death doesn’t have a thing to do with this.”

“And just how do you know that?”

Angela didn’t answer.

“Well, how do you know?”

“Because, if the Reynolds had done it, they’d have said so.”

“Is that right?”

“That’s right,” she said firmly, climbing back into the patrol car. “You can ask Sheriff Cole as soon as we get back, if you don’t believe me.”

“I intend to.”

Angela really didn’t believe that the feud had anything to do with Mr. Joe’s death. There had been one killing, but that had been more than fifty years ago, and she knew about it only through old tales told around the supper table. She really didn’t know how much of it was truth and how much exaggeration.

The story was that a Reynolds had hidden under one of the old wooden bridges, waiting for his brother to pass by. He had his shotgun barrel stuck through the plank floor of the bridge. When the older brother passed over, walking home, the younger brother shot him dead. No one even remembered why. The children and grandchildren of these two brothers had been fighting

ever since. But like she had said, if any of the Reynolds had done it, they would have said so.

Chapter 4

Scott came in early Monday morning. He definitely wanted to talk to the sheriff about this feud situation.

Sheriff Cole just laughed. “Angela’s right about this one, Scott. Ain’t no way it was another Reynolds. The *Monitor-Herald* comes out first thing in the morning, though. We’ve got to come up with at least some kind of a lead before then. What else you got?”

The telephone rang. Sheriff Cole picked it up. “Sheriff’s office.”

“Yeah, Sheriff Cole, it’s Terell. I need two or three days off.”

“You need what?” Sheriff Cole said angrily. “I’ve got a murder case on my hands, and you need two or three days off?”

“Sheriff Cole...I...I...I’m not feelin well.”

“Terell, you got about fifteen minutes to get yourself down here, or you can just drop that badge off the next time you feel like coming by.”

“Sheriff, really, I’m sick.”

“What’s the matter with you?”

“Sheriff...I...I...I really can’t say.”

“Terell, fifteen minutes.” Sheriff Cole didn’t even give Terell a chance to reply. He slammed the receiver down, grumbling something about how Terell wouldn’t hit a lick at a snake until it bit him.

Angela had been typing an accident report, and she had overheard the telephone conversation. She could not keep a hint of a smile from playing around the corners of her mouth.

About ten minutes later, Terell pulled up out front. The sheriff could see his car through the big, plate glass window. He watched with a critical eye as Terell got out.

Terell was only twenty-five, but as he made his way up to the front door of the jail and ambled down the hallway into the sheriff’s office, he walked like an old man, broken down by arthritis. Each slow step seemed to cause him pain. Finally, he stopped in front of the sheriff’s desk, standing very straight, clenching and unclenching his fists. After only a few seconds, a heavy sweat broke out on his forehead, and without saying a word, he whirled and made a mad dash for the men’s room.

Sheriff Cole's eyebrows raised, and he shot Scott a quizzical look. "Scott, go check on him."

Scott pushed open the door to the men's room and saw Terell standing at the urinal in his jockey shorts. Huge, watery blisters extended from his buttocks down the backs of his legs. Scott could also see the same blisters around the waistband.

Scott let out a long, low whistle. "Man, Terell. Oh, man. What's the matter with you?"

Terell just stood there, tears rolling down his cheeks. "Scott, bro, you ever seen anything like this? You coming from Chicago and all. You reckon it's some kind of venereal disease?" He bawled like a baby.

Scott's eyes went big, and he took a step or two backwards. "It's all over...you...like that?"

Terell just nodded, tears still rolling. "Does syphilis or gonorrhea itch?"

"Hell, I dunno, Terell. I ain't never seen nothin like that! I'll tell Sheriff Cole you need the week off. Go to a doctor, man!"

Scott was gone, and Terell just stood there, rubbing himself hard, trying not to claw the blisters into a bloody pulp.

Angela would never forgive him if he had gone and caught something...contagious.

"Sheriff Cole," said Scott, hesitantly, "I think you probably need to give Terell the week off."

The sheriff exploded. "A week! When he called a few minutes ago it was two or three days."

Scott glanced over at Angela, who was still busily typing away on her report. He just raised his eyebrows at the sheriff and nodded with a terrible grimace on his face. He doubted that a week would even be enough, but he dared not say this to Sheriff Cole.

"What the hell's the matter with him?"

Scott glanced back at Angela and decided against a direct answer. "Believe me, Sheriff Cole, Terell's really sick. He needs to go straight to the emergency room."

About that time, Terell came back out of the men's room and stood in front of the sheriff's desk, waiting for his answer. He stood with a rigid stance, his teeth clenched, and stared straight ahead.

Angela stopped typing and asked casually, "You sick, sugar?"

Terell didn't answer; he just stared at the sheriff.

Sheriff Cole bet he hadn't even stood at attention like that when he graduated from the police academy. "Get the hell on outa here. I'll let you know later if you still have a job. Go on. Get yourself to the doctor."

“Angela, you remember that fellow’s name that was in here last week lookin for a job? Wanted to transfer from the Derma City Police? I gotta have some help--at least somebody to see after the routine stuff til I can get a lead.”

About that time, the sheriff noticed the reporter from the *Monitor-Herald* standing just inside his office door. Wonder how long he’d been standing there and just what all he’d heard?

“I guess you’re here about the murder,” Sheriff Cole addressed him, unable to keep the frustration out of his voice.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I need to know all the details you can give me. You know, this is the biggest story we’ve had in quite some time.”

“Well,” said Sheriff Cole firmly, “I’ve got no comment.”

Pete Sheldon raised his eyebrows, a surprised look on his thin, ferret-like face. He waited a few seconds, and when the sheriff still stared at him, unblinking, he finally realized that the sheriff was serious.

“Surely, you have at least one suspect? A motive? Was there anything stolen?” he asked, still hoping that the sheriff would give him enough information for some semblance of a story.

“I said, I have no comment,” Sheriff Cole repeated firmly.

“Don’t you know anything at all about this case?”

“Maybe if you would get off my back for five minutes...”

Sheriff Cole glanced out the plate glass window by his desk. Sheldon’s new, silver Lexus was parked there. At least it was new to Sheldon. He had bought it at the used car lot in Calhoun City about a month before. To tell the truth, the sheriff envied Sheldon that car. If he had just seen it first, Sheldon would not be driving it today. It only had 20,000 miles on it and even still smelled new inside.

“I see you’re still driving on them Texas plates.” The sheriff reached in his desk drawer and pulled out a ticket book. “I believe you have an appointment over at the courthouse--or should I just go ahead and write you a ticket? You know, a ticket might be cheaper than them tags, at that. Of course, you’ll still have to buy the tags.” He chuckled as he watched Sheldon’s face turn beet red.

The phone on the sheriff’s desk rang. He picked it up on the second ring, still chuckling at Sheldon.

The chuckle turned into a long groan. “We’ll be right there,” was all that he said.

“Angela! Scott! They just found Mr. Luke Reynolds. They’re pretty sure he’s dead--shot. Y’all follow me in Scott’s patrol car.”

Sheldon just stood there stuttering.

“Remember, Sheldon, you’ve got an appointment at the courthouse. Too bad you can’t come with us.”

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