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Chapter One

August 1929

James Hastie wished to God he could ignore the telephone, but he couldn't. He didn't dare. Holed up in a dingy apartment with a baby crying in the background had set his nerves on edge, but worse than that, *much* worse than that, was the pressure of what might be on the other end of that jangling telephone line—the thought of it was pushing him to the brink of madness.

He stood over the coffee table, running a hand through his straight blonde hair, wondering how in the hell he could have gotten himself into such a mess. When he snatched up the receiver, the Devil spoke his name:

“Jimmy, Wilson Jennings still won't sell that goddamn brewery of his. He thinks I'm bluffing. Says he has friends in the Mob who'll track me down and cut me up into little pieces... What do *you* think, Jimmy?”

“It's only been a day. We wait him out and he doesn't see his grandson, he'll know we're serious. He'll sell.” Hastie hoped like hell he was right.

“Jimmy, I think you should cut off a finger and mail it to Mr. Jennings. I'd like to hear what he has to say with *that* bloody little morsel sitting in front of him.”

Hastie shuddered, and looked across the room at the bawling infant. “I don't think I can do that,” he said.

“You’re right, Jimmy. Whatever was I thinking?”

Hastie breathed a great sigh of relief.

“Just kill the little bastard and be done with it.”

“Wha— *what?*”

“You heard me.”

“Jesus, Mr. Pitch. Robbing and stealing, burning down factories and whackin’ out grown men is one thing, but I ain’t no baby killer... Jesus.”

“Jimmy.” The voice was calm, almost reassuring, “Jesus can’t help you now, you know that.”

“Please, I can’t. I won’t.”

“Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy, you really are starting to disappoint me.” The melodic voice, flowing through the line like sewer water, sent an icy chill down what was left of Hastie’s spine: “Look... Jimmy. *Relax*. Relax and think about all the money we’ve made these last few months. That’s it... yes, close your eyes and... calm yourself... yes, that’s it... close your eyes, and listen very carefully to what I have to say...”

Jimmy *Quick* Hastie grew up in a Mob family. He was shrewd, and light on his feet, a quick-witted thinker who knew how to get the job done, and done right—hence his nickname. Jimmy Quick had the innocent good looks of a choirboy. He had never been arrested, had rarely been so much as questioned by the police. He had lied and cheated, robbed and stolen. He was a cold-blooded killer who had never faltered, not even when given the order to whack his own best friend. But he had never killed a child, and didn’t think he could do such a thing.

Those were the thoughts running through his mind when he looked down and saw the telephone lying on the hardwood floor, alongside the cold, stiff, lifeless body of William Jennings' grandson.

Chapter Two

John Chambers leaned back in his chair, feet on the desk as his dark brown eyes scanned the newspaper. It was a hot day in the small West Virginia town—even for August. He put his feet on the floor and leaned forward to enjoy a comforting breeze from the oscillating fan sitting directly in front of him. Then he laid the paper aside and wiped a band of sweat from his forehead with the cuff of his uniform shirt. *Lord, this heat*, he thought, as he reached up and touched the sheriff's badge on his chest, an absentminded, reflective action he'd picked up his first year as a policeman, so many years ago.

Chambers sat in the sweltering heat, thinking about his sister, Mary, and little Tommy. He was tired. He'd spent the night comforting her as best he could: her, sobbing and swigging whiskey, screaming and crying while he held her, assuring her it would be all right, mouthing words he no longer believed to be true. "Thirteen years," he spoke softly, reverently. "He would've been twenty years old today."

This time of year was hard on her, and from here on out it would only get worse. August and October. He wondered how much more she could take, how many more birthdays and Halloweens before the pain and anguish forced her to end it all. It was coming; he knew sure as he was sheriff it was just a matter of time.

Last night had taken a toll on him, too. His stomach ached, he felt queasy, tired and weak. And even though it was stuffy and hot in the office, his forehead felt cold and clammy.

But as bad as he felt, he knew that she felt worse.

Hardly a day went by that he didn't think of his nephew and the other children. And even though it had been nearly thirteen years, he had not given up hope of finding the person who had taken Tommy that Halloween night, Johnny Briscomb the night before, and little Frankie Stapleton the day before that. He wondered what had happened to them, why, and most importantly, who. John Chambers was sure it was somebody who lived here in Whitley, and he was determined to find him if it took the rest of his life. He kept a wary eye on damn near every man in this town, watching, waiting for some tiny telltale sign, like Jimmy Tomlin fidgeting nervously when Chambers brought it up in front of a group of men the other night, talking in circles when Timbo Ledbetter asked him who he thought had done it, averting his eyes when Chambers looked at him. Tomlin had something to do with it. Chambers could *feel* it. It was written all over his face.

He stood up, his stomach roiling on his way to the bathroom, his sweat-stained shirt clinging to him like fly paper as he entered the room, where he turned the cold water on, splashed some on his face, and dried off. Chambers looked at his pale reflection in the mirror, shook his head at the sight, and then tossed the towel across the sink and left the bathroom. By the time he returned to the office, Earl Peters was thumbing his way through the newspaper Chambers had left on the desk.

“Hey, Earl,” Chambers said. “How's it going?”

“Damn, Boss. You look like shit. You all right?”

“Rough night,” Chambers said, as he sat down behind his desk. “All's quiet?”

Earl set the paper down. “Alvie Ross told me somebody broke into Henry Walker’s Esso last night. Busted the lock off the back door. Henry said they stole some motor oil.”

“*Motor oil.*” Chambers shook his head, rubbed his chin, and then walked over and stood eye to eye with his six-foot-four deputy, something nobody else in town could do. “How you liking it so far? You moved in all right, had a few weeks to get adjusted.”

“Well, I gotta tell you, John. I was leery about comin’ over here.”

“Big change from Charleston, ain’t it?” Chambers smiled. “No bright lights, just a couple of taverns.”

“No library, no movie house, sub par school system.”

Chambers laughed. “Got that from Vonda, did you?”

“Well, she *is* a school teacher.”

“Know what else we don’t have? Robberies, rapes and murders. About the biggest crime around here is somebody—”

“I know, somebody breakin’ into Henry Walker’s Esso. Which, I might add, seems to happen far too often.”

“That very thought has occurred to me, too,” Chambers said. “Why do you think that is? Or better yet, what do you think they’re really taking out of that gas station?”

“Moonshine?” Earl hadn’t believed for a minute someone had broken in to steal motor oil.

“Bingo.”

“Why’s he reporting it to us?”

“Hell, he’s so mad about it he’s got to tell *somebody*. I believe he’s hoping we can figure out who’s doin’ it, because *he* sure as hell can’t.”

“But... shouldn’t we be doing something about that? Making shine *is* against the law.”

“Well, Earl, I allow folks around here to have a vice or two, long as they ain’t hurtin’ nobody. Jimmy Tomlin sells a shot or two of bootleg whiskey down at his beer joint, miners run their poker games over at the lodge. And Henry Walker?” Chambers laughed. “Folks ‘round here might lock *me* up if I bust up his still. I take it you ain’t had none of that shine yet.”

“Uh, no. That would be against the law, too.”

“Give it a try, son.” Chambers winked. “Pure as the driven snow and kicks like Jim Tilly’s mule. I guess what I’m saying is, long as nobody’s gettin’ hurt, we’re gonna overlook a thing or two. The rich folks up at that mansion do whatever the hell they want, drinkin’ and gamblin’ and doin’ God knows what else up there. The poor folks around here need somethin’ to take their minds off their troubles—God bless ‘em.”

Earl sat on the edge of Chamber’s desk. “About that mansion,” he said. “What’s a fine piece of architecture like that doing out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Pitch Place?” Chambers pulled a handkerchief from his front pocket and wiped it across his forehead—“Some rich industrialist showed up out of nowhere back in nineteen-ten.”—ran the hanky across the back of his neck and returned it to his pocket. “Built that baby and left town. Hardly anybody has ever seen him. I know *I* never have.”

“Pitch Place?”

“Yeah, that’s his name, William Pitch.” Chambers leaned forward into the cooling breeze. “You might say he’s the man directly responsible for you coming here.”

“Oh yeah?”

“According to Mayor Levay, Pitch sunk a huge chunk of money into Whitley. Built this police station, provided a building for the fire department. New businesses sprung up: the Dime Store, jewelry store, apartment buildings, more mines are up and running, and now this little town’s fixing to get big. Ol’ Make-Hay Teddy Levay and the town fathers said we needed another policeman, and here you are.”

Earl laughed at the mayor’s cornball nickname.

Chambers grabbed at his stomach and winced.

“You all right?”

“Yeah, I’ll be okay.” Chambers stood up and crossed the room. “I’ve got to go take care of something.”

“Oh yeah? Business or personal?”

“Both,” Chambers said, as he lifted his Stetson off a set of deer antlers mounted on the wall, calling over his shoulder to Earl on his way out the door not to bother writing up a report on the break-in.

* * *

Jimmy Tomlin grabbed two bottles of beer out of the cooler, opened one for himself and handed the other to Johnny Mason, who tossed a couple of coins onto the counter, and said, “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Tomlin said. “Here at Jimmy T’s Bar and Grill, we aim to please.”

He picked up a rag and wiped up a section one of his Saturday afternoon regulars had just vacated, and threw the rag on top of the cooler. Then he walked into the kitchen, where he found Rita Mae Toler stooped over the sink. Hands in the dishwater, she looked up, smiling, and for the second time in the last five minutes, he asked her, “You almost done in here?”

“Just a minute,” she said. “Jeez, what’s the hurry?”

“I told you. I got shit to do.”

Tomlin returned to the bar, nervously drinking his beer. It was that time of year again, the time of the year he so dreaded. He wasn’t sleeping well, and he rarely had an appetite anymore. Before he knew it, *he* would be back, and that rich bastard would be looking for Jimmy Tomlin. Tomlin wondered how he had ever gotten mixed up with him in the first place. That part had always been a little hazy.

Thirteen years ago a man strolled in with his fancy clothes and big diamond ring, buying beers for everybody, tossing money all over the joint. He sat down at the bar and struck up a conversation with Jimmy. The next thing Tomlin knew he was driving his old jalopy up to the mansion with a thousand dollars in his pocket, and Jolly Stapleton’s little boy bound and gagged in the trunk of his car.

And Jolly wasn’t too damned jolly after that.

A day later, he took that other boy.

Why, he wondered, did I ever let myself get involved in this?

Tomlin noticed Johnny Mason signaling for another beer. After placing a bottle on the counter, he scraped the change from the bar and dropped it into his pocket. Then he picked up his own bottle, guzzled some beer and returned to his thoughts. He had

assumed all that was over with, a one-shot deal. After all, he had never heard from him again. Until last week when goddamn Teddy Levay comes in telling him about his *wonderful news*: Pitch is coming to town and the son of a bitch can't wait to see his old pal, Jimmy T.

No wonder I can't fuckin' sleep. John Chambers snooping 'round all these years, asking the same questions over and over, all of a sudden lookin' at me like he thinks I know somethin'. And now this!

Tomlin finished off his beer, slid the top of the cooler back and grabbed another, selected one more and took it down the bar to Timbo Ledbetter, who had just shown him his empty.

"Sure is a hot one," Ledbetter said, as Tomlin handed him his beer.

"You got that right, Timbo."

Ledbetter's empty clattered into an aluminum trash can beneath the bar as Tomlin tipped back his bottle, gulped down half its contents and placed it back on the counter. Then he walked to the front and looked out the window, and saw John Chambers coming down the street with a pissed off look on his face.

* * *

John Chambers whipped out his handkerchief, wiped his forehead and the back of his neck. He couldn't wait to get his hands on that little bastard. Chambers meant to find out what Tomlin was hiding if he had to beat it out of him, and he was in just the right mood to do it. His head hurt and his back ached; his stomach a bubbling jug of acid as he crossed the railroad tracks, nodding at a couple of old-timers sitting on a bench.

Once inside Jimmy T's, he spotted a half-full beer bottle sitting in front of an empty stool at the end of the bar. He slapped Timbo Ledbetter on his back and asked him how he was doing, and if Jimmy Tomlin was around.

Rita Mae Toler stepped up to the bar. "He ain't here, Sheriff," she said, while Johnny Mason said, "He's in the back."

"Well?" Chambers said, arms crossing his massive chest. "Is he here or isn't he?"

"He ain't here, Sheriff," Rita Mae told him. "Ain't seen him all morning."

Johnny Mason, rolling his eyes, nodded at the swinging doors at the back of the bar.

"Dammit, Rita Mae," Chambers said, and then hurried into the kitchen, where he found a sink full of glasses, knives on the table and a meat cleaver hanging beside the griddle, but no Tomlin as he made his way to the back door and pulled it open, stepped outside, and saw Jimmy Tomlin hurrying down the railroad tracks.

Chapter Three

Franklin Fletcher, fingers interlocked behind his head, leaned back in his chair and looked up at the spinning ceiling fan, wondering what exactly it was going to take to get Marty Donlan to change his mind. He'd offered Donlan twice as much money as his building was worth. Hell, he could build a brand new place and put his furniture store in *there*. But no, Donlan flat-out refused to sell, which was a royal pain in the ass, because the store sat right next door to Doc Fletcher's office, right where Fletcher wanted to put his pharmacy. Times were changing, the town growing, and Doc Fletcher was bound and determined to have Marty Donlan's building, come Hell or high water.

Fletcher opened his desk drawer and felt around for the bottle of Jack Daniels he kept stashed under an old hat. Bottle in hand, he unscrewed the cap and poured a generous amount into the waiting shot glass, and then drank it down without benefit of a chaser. "Shit yeah," he said. "Just what the doctor ordered."

Heavy footsteps thudding across the wooden porch drew Fletcher out of his chair, onto his feet and into the outer office, where he found his secretary greeting John Chambers.

"Howdy, ma'am," Chambers said, and when he saw the doctor, "Hey, Doc."

"John," Fletcher said. "What a surprise. Come in, come in." He led Chambers into his office and motioned for him to have a seat. "How can I help you?"

Chambers sat down and put his hat on Fletcher's desk. "Stomach's killing me, Doc. Head feels funny, light."

“Yeah, you are a little pale there.” Fletcher grabbed the stethoscope lying on his desk. “Come on over here. Take off your shirt and sit down on the table.”

Chambers stood up. Crossing the room in three long strides, he sat on the edge of the treatment table, his long legs dangling over the side, his feet resting on the floor.

“How’s Mary doing these days?”

“Not worth a damn,” Chambers said as he unbuttoned his shirt. “Today’s Tommy’s birthday, or would’ve been.”

“I know.” Fletcher sighed and shook his head. “Bad business there, John. Bad business.”

Chambers laid his shirt across the table. “I was up all night with her. She’s never gotten over it, you know, and to tell you the truth, I ain’t either.”

“No, I don’t think anyone *could* ever get over something like that.” Fletcher placed the flat-metal end of the stethoscope against the sheriff’s chest. “Take a deep breath for me.”

Chambers took a breath, and then let it out.

“John, have you got any idea who might’ve done it?”

“Gotta be somebody from around here, Doc.” Chambers drew another breath, held it for a moment and exhaled. “Wasn’t no strangers seen hanging around back then, and I sure don’t think somebody blew into town and snatched three kids on three different nights.” He gave his head a disgusted shake. “I just wish to God we could’ve given ‘em a decent Christian burial.”

“Lean over,” Fletcher ordered, and then rapped sharply on the sheriff’s back with his index and forefinger. He placed the cool head of the stethoscope on Chambers’ back.

“Cold?” he said, when his patient flinched.

“Feels good.”

“Gimme a couple more deep ones,” Fletcher said, listening for a moment or two before having Chambers lie down; after which, he took his pulse, and then felt around his chest, applying a gentle pressure here and there. “That hurt?”

“Huh uh.”

“How about that?” Fletcher said, and then pushed directly on the sheriff’s stomach.

Chambers, grimacing at the touch, said, “Yeah, that smarts a little, Doc.”

“Think you’ll ever find out who did it?”

“Thirteen years I’ve been waiting for somebody to slip up and give themselves away. Thirteen long years. And you know what?” Chambers smiled grimly. “I think somebody just did.”

“Oh, *really*.” Fletcher laid a cool hand across Chamber’s forehead. “You’ve got a bit of a fever.”

“I was in Jimmy T’s the other day and Henry Walker asked me how my sister was doin’. One thing led to another and we started talking about them kids.” Chambers continued, his anger and frustration more evident with each successive remark: “Jimmy Tomlin’s face went to shit, got all nervous acting, changing the subject and double-talkin’ out the side of his mouth when I asked him who he thought done it. That boy knows somethin’.”

“Maybe he just doesn’t like talking about it. Most people don’t, you know.”

“You do this job long enough, you get to know a thing or two about human nature.” Chambers looked Fletcher in the eye. “That boy knows somethin’, Doc. And I mean to find out what he’s hidin’. And you can bet your bottom dollar, one way or another, before this day is over I *will* know.”

“You can sit up now,” Fletcher said, and then put a reassuring hand on Chambers’ shoulder. “I think the stress of having to care for Mary, the kids, and you being all worked up over Tomlin is giving you an ulcer. Go ahead and put your shirt back on.”

Doc Fletcher walked over to his medicine cabinet, opened the glass door and removed a small jar. He carried it to a sink in the corner of the room and filled a glass half full of water, dumped in a generous amount of the jar’s powdery contents and stirred it with a wooden tongue depressor he had fished out of his shirt pocket. “Here,” he said, as he returned to Chambers. “Take this. Should give you some relief.”

“I sure hope so,” Chambers said, accepting the glass and drinking it down in one long gulp, complaining about the taste when the glass was emptied.

Laughing heartily, Fletcher said, “The badder the taste the better the cure.”

Chambers stood up, buttoning his shirt as he walked across the room, and lifted his hat from Fletcher’s desk. “Hey, Doc,” he said. “Have you and Marty worked anything out yet?”

“Hell no!” Fletcher called out. “That goddamn fool—”

“Doc, don’t use the Lord’s name in vain around me.”

“I’m sorry, John, but he’s got me so damn frustrated, I don’t know *what* to do. I’ve begged and pleaded, and offered him way more money than that place is worth. And he still won’t give in.”

“Well, his granddaddy built the place and passed it down to Marty’s daddy. Can’t much blame a man for wanting to hold onto his heritage.”

“I guess.” Fletcher sighed. Then he offered his hand to Chambers. “Sheriff, hope you get to feeling better.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Chambers said, giving Fletcher’s hand a firm shake. “Just send the bill over to the office.”

Then he turned and walked away, leaving Doc Fletcher standing alone in the doorway.

Chapter Four

Missy Thomas laid a hand across her stomach. She was late again, and wondered how long it would be before it started to show, and what Jason might do when he found out she was pregnant. She didn't love him, had never loved him. She'd only married him because he had given her daddy a bunch of money. It hadn't mattered that she had fallen to her knees, begging her father to change his mind, that she was only fifteen and didn't want to marry a fat old man like Jason. Missy could still hear his coldhearted reply:

'You'll learn to love him'.

But there was only one man she would ever love, and his name wasn't Jason Thomas. She would never forget the look on Elmer's face when she told him Daddy was forcing her to marry Jason, the way her heart broke when Elmer left to join the Army.

"Here you go, boys," Missy said, as she laid a plateful of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in front of her two children, smiling as Jason Jr. grabbed a sandwich and handed it to his three-year-old brother.

Such good boys, she thought. They deserve better than this. They deserve Elmer.

Even though she lived in a fancy house, wore nice clothes and had plenty of food, she didn't have love, and there would always be a slap in the face or a hard punch to the gut if she displeased Jason in any way. Missy's husband had always been cold-hearted and cruel, treating her like something bought and paid for, a slave. And even though he had never worked, and he stayed out to all hours of the night—Missy never knowing if or

when he was going to walk through the door—he always wanted food when he finally did come home, and if he asked for sex, she'd damn well better give it to him... *or else*.

She got pregnant the first month of their marriage, and again a month after Junior was born. Missy considered it to be a miraculous gift from God that she had gone the last three years without getting pregnant again.

“That’s a good boy,” Missy cooed, as she wiped a jelly smear from Tony’s face.

The telephone rang and she ran into the living room to answer it.

“Hello?... Oh, hi, Baby... I know. I miss you, too... I don’t know if I can get out tonight. I *want* to...” She smiled. “I love you too, Elmer. God, I love you so much... Bye, sweetheart.” Missy touched her belly, and said a silent prayer, thanking God for bringing Elmer Hicks back into her life.

* * *

Tomlin hurried to a bank of telephones lined up against the far wall of the bowling alley, and dropped a coin into the slot, grateful someone was there to answer his call.

“Hey,” he said. “We got trouble... Goddamn John Chambers knows somethin’... Like hell he don’t. I’m tellin’ you; he’s all over my ass...”

“*Relax?*” Tomlin said, and then lowered his voice to a whisper, “Don’t tell *me* to relax. He came into the bar the other night asking a bunch of questions, lookin’ at me like he *knew* somethin’, then started grilling the shit outa me...”

“I didn’t tell him anything, just a lot of double-talkin’ bullshit. But he’s on my ass now...”

“*You* listen to *me*. I saw Chambers comin’ down the street a little while ago. I didn’t want to take no chances so I hauled ass out the back door. I got halfway down the tracks and turned around and saw that big son of a bitch standing in the doorway, starin’ at me.”

Tomlin paused as the soothing voice of reason flowed through the telephone line.

“You think so?” he said. “Yeah, I gotta get outa town for a while, a *long* goddamn while.”

He hung up and stepped out of the booth, and then walked through the bowling alley, past the snack bar and out the front door, where he crossed the road and ducked into an alley. Eyes darting back and forth, sweat pouring down his forehead, he made his way past the back door of Natali’s Bakery, turning his face away when he saw Andy Natali watching him through the screen door. He was past the rear of the Dime Store, turning the corner on Third Street when a deep, baritone voice said, “About time.”

Then a meaty hand grabbed a fistful of his shirt, and Tomlin went flying through the air, bouncing off the redbrick wall of the Dime Store before crumpling to the sidewalk in a disheveled heap, where he looked up to see John Chambers towering over him, grimacing, sweat streaming down his pale face as he grabbed Tomlin and pulled him to his feet, and then slammed him against the wall, smiling when the frightened man grunted, and then groaned.

“Long time no see, Jimmy T.”

“What’d I do?” Tomlin whined.

“You’re gonna tell me what you know,” Chambers said, and then grabbed Tomlin by his shirt, lifting the shorter man off the ground, higher and higher, until his feet dangled over the pavement. “Start talkin’.”

“What do you mean?” Tomlin cried out. “I didn’t do nothin’!”

Chambers lowered him to the ground, and then punched him in the gut, doubling Tomlin over and then slamming him against the wall. “You know what I’m talkin’ about.”

Tomlin gasped for air and Chambers pounded a fist into his face, drawing a gush of blood that poured down his face and onto his shirt. He wilted, and Chambers stood him against the wall. Tightening a hand around the frightened man’s throat, he said, “Don’t make me ask you again.”

Tomlin stood there, shaking, his teeth chattering, holding a bloody piece of pulp that mere seconds ago had been a well-constructed nose, as he looked into John Chambers’ hate-filled scowl. “Please,” he said, and Chambers drew back his fist.

“Okay, okay! It was Teddy Levay and Judge Croft!”

Chambers gasped.

“He made ‘em do it! He *made* ‘em do it!”

“You liar,” Chambers sneered.

“No, no... it’s true,” Tomlin said, his body shaking while his hands trembled. “He made ‘em.”

“Who’s *He*?” Chambers asked, and then stooped over and grabbed his gut, clutching his stomach and staggering to the wall as he cried out with pain and grabbed his gut again; rivulets of sweat tracking his face while foamy-white slobber bubbled up from

his throat, frothing from his mouth like drool from a rabid dog. He clutched his belly, and then stumbled and pitched forward, a ragged gash splitting his forehead when he bounced off the red-brick wall and fell crumpling to the ground beside Tomlin, who stood wide-eyed before him—blood running from his shattered nose as Chambers bucked, heaved and convulsed; as his eyes bulged and his hands clawed at his throat, until all movement stopped, and Jimmy Tomlin took off up the alley as fast as his legs could carry him.

Chapter Five

Word of John Chambers death spread quickly, drawing people from all over town to the alley, where they were sent packing by Earl Peters and Alvie Ross Huckabee. A cropping of afternoon thunderclouds appeared on the horizon, pushing a much welcomed breeze into the valley as Doc Fletcher arrived on the scene to find the two solemn-faced policemen standing over the sheriff's corpse. Giving a reassuring smile to Earl Peters, he shook hands with a tired-looking Alvie Ross, and then knelt down to examine the body, touching the cold, stiff flesh of its arm as he looked at the pained expression frozen onto Chambers' face. Then, lifting his hand and placing his palm against Chamber's neck, he said, "He's been dead a while. Has anybody called the funeral home?"

"Yeah," Earl said. "They're on the way."

Earl and Alvie Ross watched as Doc Fletcher poked and prodded. Finally, Earl asked the question everyone in town would want answered, "What in the hell happened to him?"

"Looks like he's had a heart attack." Fletcher gave Chambers' chest a gentle pat. "Rest well, old friend," he said, and then stood to face the two policemen.

"He looked like shit this morning," Earl said. "Did he come see you like I told him to?"

"No. I haven't seen him today. Wish to God he had, maybe I could've prevented this."

“Here comes Ezra, now,” Alvie Ross said, nodding at an old black hearse rumbling down the alley, eventually coming to a stop a few feet from John Chambers, where Ezra and Charlie Butcher hopped out and opened the rear doors, and then pulled out a stretcher, hurrying over to Chambers just as Teddy Levay and Judge Theodore Croft rounded the corner.

Croft’s hair was gray, the neatly-trimmed beard covering his face as white as snow. He had small, beady eyes, and the thick, hooded lids of an owl, and even though he stood only five-foot-five, his powerful standing in the community trumped the slight stature his physical attributes presented to all who stood before him.

“The hell happened here?” he bellowed, but before anyone could reply to his question, he nodded at a group of children running down the alley. “Get him covered up, for Christ’s sake.”

Ezra Butcher reached into the hearse, grabbed a sheet and used it to cover the body. Then, while he and his son lifted John Chambers onto the stretcher and loaded him inside, Alvie Ross stepped into the alley and shooed the children away.

“Well?” Croft held his hands before him as if they were weighing-scales.

“What?” Fletcher said. “Are you blind? Our sheriff is dead.”

Croft gave the young doctor a scornful look.

“I, I’m sorry, Judge,” Fletcher stammered. “It looks like he had a heart attack.”

“Well, don’t that just take the goddamn cake!” Croft turned to Mayor Levay.

“The hell’re we gonna do for a sheriff?” he asked him, as if the tragedy of John Chambers’ death was not his passing, but the inconvenience it was causing the county.

“Earl, Alvie Ross,” Teddy Levay said, as the hearse pulled away. “Get the word out. We’re havin’ an emergency town council meetin’.” He looked at his watch. “It’s four o’clock. Let’s say eight o’clock at the Baptist church.” Then, nodding at Croft, “C’mon Judge, Doc. We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

“You’re goddamn right we do,” Croft said, as he and Franklin Fletcher followed Teddy Levay down Third Street.

“Hey Earl. I’d better get out to Mary Wright’s house.”

“Mary Wright?”

“Yeah, John’s sister. She ain’t gonna take this too good,” Alvie Ross said, and then took off down Third Street, leaving Earl Peters standing in the alley, staring after him.

Chapter Six

William Pitch stared out a window from the twenty-second floor of his suite of offices high above Wall Street. Good news travels fast, and as soon as Teddy Levay got back to the courthouse, he was on the phone with Pitch, telling him about John Chambers. All these years he had worried about that Bible-toting sheriff, and now he was dead. All those years he had worried for nothing.

When Pitch came down the mountain that first night, he had no intention of ever going back. The sack full of gleaming diamonds had provided enough money for him to live like a king for the rest of his life, and the more distance he put between him and the mountain, the less real it all seemed. And after enough time had gone by, he had almost convinced himself that it *wasn't* real. But the mirror didn't lie, and his never-changing reflection and the fear of what might happen if he didn't return had drawn him back.

He built his mansion and stuck around long enough to choose thirteen people to help him conduct his business. After all, he couldn't just pop in every thirteen years and snatch up three children. Not without help. He recruited the crusty old judge and the physician, and used his money to turn a worthless bum into the town's mayor, trusting that unholy triumvirate to pick out the rest. He made all of them wealthy beyond their wildest expectations, and then took control of that idiot bartender and forced him to bring the children to him.

But it was Pitch who had done the dirty work.

He changed the night he fled into the mountain: his hair, the color of his eyes, even his name. A deal with a demon saved his life. He left a part of himself behind, but something left with him, something strange and magnificent... something evil. Those first thirteen years, he had kept it in check, using it to his advantage, but now whatever had left the mountain that night had grown stronger, and Pitch could feel it taking over.

The first thirteen years, he'd spent drinking and gambling, carousing. After all, he had been a gambler by trade, and that was the stock and trade of a gambler's life. The last thirteen years had been spent robbing and raping, pillaging and defiling... killing.

Pitch wondered what the coming years might bring his way.

Before that first night, he had been selfish and greedy, but he had never been cruel. Sure, he'd killed Albert Martin and his wife, but he hadn't *enjoyed* killing them. He'd done it out of necessity, to save himself. He doubted he would ever have killed again had he not run into Scratch. Then again, had he not run into Scratch, he would have died on the mountain that night. There could be no doubting that. Sometimes he wondered where he might have ended up had Albert not caught him in his marital bed.

Certainly not in New York City, staring down from a vast mountain of wealth.

Pitch walked over to his bar. Laughing softly, he poured himself a shot of tequila, and then turned and looked at his reflection in the mirror, the black hair and dark blue eyes, his piercing gaze. Once, he had been frightened by what the mirror revealed, but now he marveled at the forty-one year old face that had not aged a single minute in the last twenty-six years. In all that time he had never been ill, nor had so much as a headache, and he realized, as he ran a finely manicured finger down his clean-shaven face, that he could barely remember what he had once looked like.

He wondered if Jonathan Smith would still be waiting for him in that cave.
Somehow he knew that he would be.
Pitch bit into a lime wedge, and tossed the liquor down his throat, picked up
another piece of lime and poured another drink. He was going to have to get over to
Whitley and make sure everything was under control. With stakes this high, he couldn't

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