

CHAPTER ONE

Pap walked along the edge of the road dragging a burlap tow sack half full of aluminum cans. The combination of cans colliding and burlap scooting across the coarse chip-and-seal surface made a noise not unlike a flat bastard file being pulled across a dull lawnmower blade. In his right hand he carried a wooden mop handle with a 16 penny nail sticking from one end like the point of a spear. He spied a beer can at the bottom of the shallow ditch and stooped forward to stab it. The nail pierced the soft metal and came out the other side as the can collapsed. Beer dripped from the point of the nail as he swung his catch around and raked it off into the sack at his feet. Sometimes he pretended he was spearfishing along some stream in Alaska instead of supplementing his social security on a dead-end road in Johnson County, Mississippi.

Television made Alaska look like a paradise, but he hadn't trusted TV since Walter Cronkite retired.

The sack followed him across the rough surface of the road as he walked back toward home. Up the slight grade he trod, until the road leveled off and he could see his Radio Flyer wagon on the shoulder. Dragging the sack was easier than pulling the wagon because the sack would follow him down into the ditch and up the bank on the other side if need be. When the sack was full he would empty it into the wagon and start again. The trick was in coordinating wagon location with sack filling, and that varied depending on what day of the week it happened to be. Monday mornings were usually his heavy haul days, but Friday mornings ran a close second because the factory handed out checks on Thursdays. Most days he parked the wagon where it needed to be. He had been at this for a long time.

When he stopped for another can he heard the monotone buzz of the factory, like a swarm of locust that never stops devouring the landscape. He removed his straw hat, looked up at the blue sky, and wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt. It shouldn't be so hot in May, but Pap didn't believe all the talk about the earth burning itself up. A breeze kicked up and felt good against his sweat-soaked shirt. Cans awaited, so he trudged onward.

Halfway to the wagon he heard a pickup approaching from behind. It was still a ways off, but he knew by the roar of its tires against the pavement it would be a 4x4. Probably some teenager who didn't know the road petered out just past his driveway. Deek Norton had lived just long enough to get the road named after him when Johnson County adopted the E-911 system years ago. By all rights the county should have named it Jones Road, after Pap, because everybody knew Deek Norton was in bad health and had no kin to speak of when the renaming commenced. But Deek probably hadn't called the supervisor a son-of-a-bitch for not dragging the ditches so the water wouldn't flood over the road every time it rained.

Had the road been named after him, Pap might be inclined to stab up some of the fast food sacks and cups the workers tossed out their windows. They were a dirty bunch and he wondered if they littered their own roads the way they littered his. Sometimes it seemed they brought their trash from home just to throw it out as they marched to and from the factory like worker ants in service to their queen.

Pap snickered at the thought of Davis Khane as a queen. Queen Khane, furniture magnate. He stabbed a Pepsi can and swung it into his sack.

The roar of the approaching truck intensified until it overtook him and sped past with a whoosh of wind. Something solid hit Pap in the left shoulder and sent him tripping to the ground, more from surprise than from the force of the impact. He landed on his hands and knees. A Bud Light can tumbled through the air and landed against the ditch bank with a thunk. Pap scrambled to his feet in time to see the muddy red Dodge disappear over the hill.

“Up your butt Bobby John!” He jabbed at the sky with the mop handle as he yelled. He knew the truck because he had climbed into the bed of it and pissed down the driver’s door one Tuesday afternoon in the student parking lot at the high school after he discovered it belonged to the young thug who had thrown the brick at him while he was mowing beside the Ag building. High school kids have no respect for janitors. Nor do principals and teachers, considering the lack of fanfare his retirement had generated.

But what did he care? Somebody else had to clean up after them now.

He crossed the ditch and scooped up the can, knowing by the wallop to his shoulder it was near full. He put the can to his lips and drained it dry. If he’d had a cell phone he would’ve called the sheriff and told him he had a drunk running the roads, but the only phone he owned was attached to his living room wall by a black wire, and that was almost a mile away. He picked up his sack and dropped the can inside with the others. At least the young hooligan had quenched his thirst.

Pap walked on toward the wagon with a dent in his pride and a fire in his gut. It occurred to him that Bobby John had but one way out and that was past him. His eyes searched the ground until he found a nice fat rock he could ball his fist around. He bounced it in the palm of his hand a couple times to test its weight, then slipped it into the side pocket of his overalls. Once when he was a boy he had killed a squirrel with a rock, so he supposed he could hit a red Dodge.

Half a dozen feet from the wagon he heard the distant roar of mud tires again, like a swarm of honeybees coming back to the hive. He slipped his hand into his pocket and closed it around the rock. When the truck topped the hill he withdrew his hand and cocked his arm. Bobby John punched the accelerator as Pap hurled the rock with every ounce of his hundred and fifty pounds behind it. The truck dropped into passing gear and lurched forward, but it was too little too late. The rock hit the windshield just above the inspection sticker and shot so high up into the air Pap lost sight of it. Bobby John yelled something that got lost in the noise of his aftermarket pipes.

Pap's lips slipped back from his toothless gums and he snickered so hard his body trembled. Even Stevens, as his wife used to say.

* * *

Bodie Craig pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with the sheriff and chief deputy. They were a matched pair, those two. Like a married couple always agreeing and consulting. He hated them both. Hated answering to them. Hated taking commands from men who in a fair world would be sweeping up the jail instead of running it. Sam Gant was soft. Too soft to be sheriff. Lincoln Norris was over the hill and should have been put out to pasture years ago. In a few short days he would rock their world, but not today. There were still a few I's to dot and T's to cross.

"Wanted to see me, Boss?"

The sheriff stared at the Styrofoam cup cradled between his thick hands. "I've had another complaint, Bodie."

Bodie figured as much. Seemed every other day somebody was complaining because he hurt their feelings, or bumped their head putting them into the back seat of his patrol car, or didn't smile as he wrote out their citation. He offered no reply. None of it would matter in a few days.

"Howie Krenshaw says his daughter was in your car yesterday."

Bodie twisted his face into a concentrated effort of remembering and looked up at the ceiling. No way Marissa Krenshaw told her father about their romp in the back of his patrol car. She was too enamored with him to do something that stupid. "No, that name don't ring a bell. I can check my arrest log if you want."

"I already know you didn't arrest her," the sheriff said. "One of the Bell boys said he saw ya'll parked in the woods at the edge of their soybean field."

There were four Bell boys, as Bodie recalled, but the oldest was in Afghanistan and the youngest was too young to be out in the woods by himself. That left two. "Wasn't me." He drummed his fingers on the table.

"Good thing," Lincoln said, "her being only sixteen and all."

"Sixteen?" Bodie caught himself and forced a laugh. "Rumors like that could send a man to prison. Which Bell was it said he saw me?"

"Never you mind which one," Gant said. "I'm giving you fair warning, Bodie: if I find out that boy's telling the truth I'll see to it you never wear a badge again."

"I swear on my mother's grave I never touched that girl."

"Last I heard your momma was alive down in Florida," Lincoln said.

"Just see to it you behave yourself," Gant said. "You know I'm up for re-election. A thing like this could cost me the primary."

Bodie pushed back his chair. The smell of coffee had him needing a jolt of caffeine. "I may chase a few skirts every now and then, but I make sure they're legal." He stood and walked over to the counter and pulled a cup from the upside down stack beside the coffee pot. *Sixteen*. On top of being easy she was a liar,

and a good one. The sheriff was right about it taking down a campaign, but it wasn't Gant's political future he was worried about.

"This election's in the bag," Lincoln said. "Only two qualifiers this late in the game and nobody ever heard of either of them. A farmer and a school bus driver. Not a day's worth of law enforcement between them."

"Three," the sheriff said. "Don't forget there's a republican this time. Ex Highway Patrol."

The chief deputy snorted. "Highway Patrol my foot. You know good and well he worked at the Driver's License office. He won't get fifty votes. Besides, people don't elect republicans to local office. It just don't happen."

Bodie leaned against the counter and sipped his coffee, pretending not to listen. It was true what they said about republicans in local office. He didn't know why, considering Mississippi had only one elected democrat in all its statewide offices. Local politics belonged to the democrats, though, and to run as anything else was like conceding before the race starts.

"They'll split a few hundred votes tops and you'll win the primary outright," Lincoln said. "You'll see."

"I don't know," Gant said, pushing himself away from the table. The legs of his chair screeched against the tile floor. "That little gal at the paper's had it in for me these last couple weeks. She's right about one thing, though: it's been three pretty unspectacular years."

"Low crime rates don't sell newspapers," Lincoln said. "Just wait until we bring in —" The chief deputy stopped short. Both he and the sheriff glanced in Bodie's direction then back at each other.

Gant rubbed his right knee and grimaced.

"Knees again? I'd hate to be your knees, Sam. Damned if I could tote that belly around all day."

"We got a lead on somebody," Bodie asked, knowing the chief deputy had almost divulged information they didn't want him to know.

"Losing weight ain't easy at my age," Gant said, ignoring Bodie's question.

"Not the way you eat donuts."

The sheriff belched into his fist. "If I didn't need two more years to get my pension I'd drop out and back you."

Bodie had to bite his tongue to keep from telling Gant why he wouldn't get that pension, especially now that he knew they were leaving him out of something big. Big to them probably meant throwing out a net to collect on unpaid fines, not that it mattered. That little gal at the paper was on his team.

Debbie Purvis stuck her head in the door and waited for a break in the conversation. Debbie wore many hats at the sheriff's office but her primary duty was day shift dispatcher. She fielded calls at the switchboard and kept track of the deputies in the field. Hers was the face behind the glass when one entered the front door.

"Old man Jones is at it again," she said.

Gant sighed. "What's he complaining about this time?"

"He's not the one complaining," she said. "There's a kid out front says Jones threw a rock and busted his windshield."

Gant sighed. "Bring him back and I'll see what he's got to say."

Lincoln glanced at Bodie and frowned. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"Just finishing up," Bodie said, raising the coffee cup. Before the sheriff could chime in, the dispatcher reappeared with a scrapping young man who looked to be seventeen or eighteen. He wore a Hank Jr. Cap and held a Coke bottle in his hand. His bottom lip bulged with tobacco.

"Go to the bathroom and get that stuff out of your mouth," the sheriff said. The dispatcher pointed toward the bathroom down the hall, then told the sheriff she would be at her desk if he needed her. Half a minute later the young man returned, empty-lipped and without the bottle. The sheriff pointed toward an empty chair and told him to sit.

"We have a minimum age for buying tobacco products, son. You don't look to be quite there yet. What's your name?"

"Bobby John, sir."

Bodie recognized the boy as soon as he opened his mouth, and knew the *sir* tacked onto the end of his answer came hard for him. Bobby John was a hell raiser that ran with a group of boys he'd taken beer off of a few times. Bodie rarely had to buy his own beer anymore.

"Bobby John what?"

"Just Bobby John. John's my last name." He glanced at Bodie like he was wondering if he was going to tell the sheriff about the beer.

"Terrel John's boy," Bodie said. "Fights dogs with that Ramey bunch."

Bobby John looked at Bodie like he'd been slapped. "That ain't so. Terrel's my uncle. My daddy's Jerry. He works--"

"Khane Manufacturing," Lincoln interrupted. "I know him."

Bodie felt the heat in his cheeks as his face turned red. Bobby John wouldn't get off so easy next time he and his buddies circled their tailgates.

"My dispatcher tells me you got your windshield busted," Gant said.

"Yes sir. I drove out to the plant to put my old man's lunch in his truck and was on my way back when that crazy old janitor threw a rock and busted my windshield. He was dragging a sack behind him. Probably fetching a possum for supper." The boy grinned big, flashing his tobacco-stained teeth, and looked around for the chuckles that didn't come. He dropped the corners of his mouth and drooped a bit at the shoulders as the sheriff stared him down.

"Do you know his name?"

"He's a janitor at school. Everybody calls him Pap. People say he's touched in the head."

"People say a lot of things," Gant said. "I don't suppose you did anything to provoke him?"

"No, sir." Bobby John shuffled his feet. Bodie knew he was lying.

“Didn’t ease over a little close just to scare him?”

The boy shook his head.

“Yell anything at him?”

“No sir.”

“He just up and busted your windshield for no reason?”

The boy nodded. “My dad just had that windshield put in last month. Cost him almost four hundred dollars.”

Bodie tossed his coffee cup into the trash and straightened himself. “Want me to take a ride out there, Sheriff?”

“No, I’ll go out there myself,” Gant said. He looked hard at Bobby John. “You bring your daddy by when he gets off work and we’ll go from there.”

“You’re gonna make him pay for it, ain’t you?”

“That’ll be up to the judge, son.”

“You mean I gotta go to court?”

“Justice court,” the sheriff said. “You both tell your side to the judge and he’ll decide who he believes.”

“But it happened just like I told you.”

“If Oscar Jones tells it the same way then you got nothing to worry about. Now you run on home and come back this evening with your daddy like I told you.”

Bobby John rose to leave, hesitated, then said, “There’s no telling what that crazy old man might say.”

“No telling,” Gant said.

When the boy was out of sight Lincoln slapped the table with the flat of his hand. “Betcha ten bucks he don’t come back.”

“That old man’s crazy as a duck,” Bodie said.

Gant looked over at him and frowned. “Go patrol something, Bodie. And stay out of the soybean fields.”

* * *

The furniture factory wasn’t just an eyesore to Pap. It was a noisy, dirty, sawdust-belching invasion of his privacy. Davis Khane had planted a single steel building in the pasture adjoining his two acres and nursed it into the county’s largest industrial complex in less than five years. At any given time Pap could sit on his porch and count two dozen trucks and trailers waiting to ship cheap sofas and love seats all over the world. Every time a truck moved it raised a cloud of dust that, more often than not, drifted over the chain link fence and into Pap’s yard. The wind always seemed to blow in his direction. Like smoke follows you no matter which side of the fire you stand on.

Sam Gant’s white Crown Vic shot the gap between the factory and Pap’s driveway like a cork popping from a bottle. He hadn’t heard it coming over the drone of saws and diesel engines. One minute he was alone with his thoughts and the next minute he had company. Sam was friendly enough, but his visits were

never social. Pap watched him turn into his driveway and roll toward him like he had no place else to be.

His driveway was long and straight. In spots it needed gravel, but a lifetime of coming and going had left it packed solid. A casual observer might mistake it for a dirt path. Grassy down the middle. It was exactly five hundred and thirteen feet from his culvert to the stump in his front yard where he smashed cans. He had measured it with a fifty foot length of chain, though he couldn't remember why. Perhaps because he had measured the chain. It was fifty feet and change from the stump to the corner post of the chain link fence Khane had thrown up after his second expansion. The fence ran south along Pap's driveway, then east for farther than he could see from the porch.

The sheriff's brakes squealed as he stopped behind Pap's rust-speckled Ford pickup. Dust washed over the trunk of the car then dissipated from lack of momentum. Pap dug at the plank floor with the yellowed nail of his big toe as the sheriff wrestled his squat body out the door and spat into the dirt. A turnip with legs, he thought, as he watched the sheriff hitch up his britches and start toward him.

"Wondered when you'd show up, Sam," Pap called from his rocker beside the screen door. He crossed his foot up onto his knee and picked at some dirt under the nail of his big toe.

The sheriff walked past the wagon and the smashing stump and stopped at the foot of the steps. He hitched up his pants again and eyed the three-step climb like it was a mountain. "I came to get your side, Oscar."

Pap raised an arthritis-crooked finger to the point of his chin and frowned. Sam never called him Oscar unless he was irritated. "What'd I do now, Mister Sheriff Gant?"

"I've been out here three times already this week."

"Two. Yesterday you sent that big galoot with the cowboy boots. He threatened to smash my fingers in the screen door. Next he'll be wanting to load a boat with cement blocks and sink me in the swamp."

"Sometimes I'd like to sink you myself," the sheriff said, "but the department only has the one boat and we're a little short on swamps around here."

Pap opened his mouth, slapped his leg, and snickered without making a sound. He knew the sheriff's threat had no meat to it. Sam Gant wouldn't hurt a fly. He couldn't say the same for the deputy, though.

"Why keep a man like that working for you, Sam?"

"Bodie ain't all bad, Pap. He'll be a good cop once he settles down a bit."

"Phooey! After he kills somebody."

The sheriff set his jaw. "I had another complaint against you this morning. A kid by the name of Bobby John claims you busted his windshield with a rock."

"I don't suppose he told you he had it coming."

"No, according to him he was just idling along, minding his own business. That's why I drove out — to hear your side of things."

"You really interested in my side, Sam?"

"I always listen to your side, Pap."

Pap had to agree Sam gave him a fair shake more often than not. "He knocked me down with a beer can."

"Knocked you down with a beer can?"

"Full. Would've run me over, too, if I hadn't fell in the ditch."

"Was that before or after you threw the rock?"

"I didn't throw the rock until he came back through." Pap grinned. "Busted his windshield, did I? Good. I was afraid it had too much of a glance to it."

"You're lucky he didn't stop and settle things himself, Pap. You ever thought of that?"

"Phooey! I'd a'put that boy on the ground, Sam. Faster'n a cat can lick its ass." He slapped his palms together and snickered at his profanity.

"Or maybe he'd put you on the ground," the sheriff said. "And maybe you wouldn't be getting back up by yourself. You're too old for this stuff, Pap."

Pap folded his hands across his lap and rocked. "There was a time, Sam. How about a glass of cold milk?"

"No thanks." Pap saw him cut his eyes toward the end of the porch. Rosemary had wandered up and started munching on a weed sticking out from between two boards.

"Fresh squeezed."

The sheriff pulled against the railing and started up the steps with a grimace. "They sell perfectly good milk a the Piggly Wiggly in case you don't know."

Pap raised his finger to his lips and shushed him. "You'll hurt her feelings."

Sam conquered the second step. "My grandmother had a milk goat. Awfullest stuff you ever had in your mouth." He put his foot on the final step and twisted his face into a determined scowl. "Made us kids drink it every Sunday after church." He stepped onto the porch and made for the swing that hung by chains from the overhead rafters.

"Rosemary's milk is sweet as cream," Pap said. "She mows the yard and keeps me in milk. If I could teach her to lay eggs I'd never have to drive into town."

Sam chuckled as he eased part way into the swing then let his weight drop. The chains jerked tight and the roof of the porch shuddered. Rosemary jumped and trotted away.

"When you gonna lose that belly, Sam?"

"Easier said than done, Pap."

"Phooey! I bet you eat more for breakfast than I eat all day. What'd you have this morning?"

"We're supposed to be talking about a busted windshield. You got any proof he hit you with a beer can? If it knocked you down it must've left a mark."

Pap unsnapped the galluses of his overalls and let the bib fall down into his lap, then worked at the buttons of his shirt until he could slip his collar down over his

shoulder. The sheriff leaned forward and studied his shoulder blade. "Looks like the makings of a bruise. About the right size for a beer can. Mind if I take a picture?"

"Why?"

"Evidence, if it comes to that. I think if I show that boy's daddy something to back up your story they'll think twice about swearing out a complaint against you."

"Complaint against me? I'm the one oughta be swearing and complaining."

"You do enough complaining as it is," Sam said. "I'd say a busted windshield is a fair trade for a bruised shoulder." Sam aimed his cell phone at Pap and snapped a couple of pictures. "There now. If he shows up with his daddy today I'll show him these pictures and see how fast he crawfishes."

"They can't make me pay for that windshield can they?"

"That's what the boy wants, but I wouldn't worry too much about it. If he insists on pressing charges I'll write up an assault charge against him. He'll drop it pretty quick."

"Suppose he don't?"

"I wouldn't worry about that. He won't risk jail time just to make you pay for a busted windshield."

"You saying you'd have to throw him in jail if I pressed charges?"

"Long enough for his daddy to bail him out," Sam said. "It'd be up to the judge after that. He's a minor, though, and I don't recall him being in trouble before, so I doubt he'd do more than a few days if that."

"Let's file 'em, Sam."

"How about we call it even and I tell Bobby John if he comes near you again he'll answer to me?"

Pap studied it for a minute then nodded. He couldn't argue that he'd come out ahead with just the bruise. Last windshield he'd bought set him back three hundred dollars. When Sam rose to leave Pap saw the agony in his eyes as he pushed his weight up out of the swing.

"I hear tell they make knees out of plastic these days."

"Something like that. I went to an orthopedic surgeon over in Tupelo last month. He wants to replace the right one now and give the left one another year or two. Maybe after this election's over with."

"Know what I saw last night, Sam?"

The sheriff sighed. "No, but I suppose you're gonna tell me."

"Headlights."

"I see headlights every night, Pap."

"About midnight." Pap pointed beyond the chain link fence at the edge of his yard, toward the rear of the furniture factory, intending to finish his story whether the sheriff liked it or not. "They pulled right up to that back dock and stayed there for four minutes and thirty two seconds. I timed it."

"Midnight's kind of late for you ain't it?"

"I bet that whole place is full of drugs. Probably that methanol they're making nowadays. If that place blows it'll knock my house clean off its blocks."

“Crystal methamphetamine, and I don’t think they’re cooking it in Davis Khane’s factory, Pap. Somebody would notice.”

“Maybe they don’t wanna notice. I bet that deputy of yours is in on it, too. I’ve seen him over there with Davis Khane’s boy. They run together you know.”

“Marcus Khane’s in law school at Ole Miss. Davis buys the boy anything he wants from what I hear. He don’t need to sell drugs. Besides, you can smell that stuff cooking a block away. No way they hide that in a factory with five hundred people working.”

“Cocaine then,” Pap said. “Rich people bring that stuff in from Mexico all the time.”

“Love thy neighbor, Pap. Can’t argue with the Good Book.”

“Neighbor! You call THAT a neighbor? Hear them saws? The trucks? The constant yelling? It goes on five days a week. Sometimes six.” Pap raked his finger across the arm of the porch swing and jabbed it toward the sheriff. “Dust on everything! Inside and out. Sawdust and dirt dust. Get sawdust in the crack of my butt some days.”

“We need rain,” Sam said. “You can’t blame the draught on Davis Khane.”

“Tell him to pave his parking lot. He’s got plenty of money.”

“I can’t make him pave his parking lot. Even if he did it’d just be something else. Like that sawdust pile. You complain about the pile but when he burns it you call the fire department to come put it out.”

“You should try sleeping with all that smoke blowing in your windows. I turned him in to the EPA but all they did was fine him. What good’s a fine to Davis Khane? Might as well piss on his tires and bark.”

“He employs a lot of people around here. Good honest people that need the work.”

“My Janey was good and honest, Sam.” Pap felt that familiar anger well up in his gut as he thought about his wife’s constant dusting until she took to bed and never got back up.

“I’m sure she was,” the sheriff said.

“She was beating it, you know. Getting stronger every day, until,” he pointed at the monster in the lot next door. “Until that!”