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Written by Rod Reynolds

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The Dark Inside

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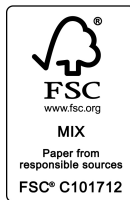
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To my mum, Margaret, my wife, Claire,
and my daughter, Elodie. My love always.

CHAPTER ONE

MARCH, 1946

I arrived in town four days after the latest killings. Tall pines lined the road in. They only petered out the last mile, where the Texas-Pacific line ran parallel to the blacktop, gunmetal rails running off into the distance. A sign at the town limits read TEXARKANA, U.S.A. is TWICE AS NICE. A dog cocked its leg and took a piss against it as I passed.

There were farmhouses sprinkled across the landscape. The road carried me close by one of them, a single-storey affair with unpainted walls. Alongside it was a dilapidated barn, bales of hay peeking out from inside; its lopsided tin roof sat atop walls constructed with red planks, and the gaps and missing boards gave the structure the appearance of a mouth full of broken teeth. A man in bib-and-brace overalls was driving a horse buggy down a track towards it. When the highway curled around the property and gave me a view of the far side of the barn, I saw a flatbed Ford from before the last war, rusting and covered in dried mud, sitting on blocks.

White clapboard houses with pitched roofs and narrow windows dotted the outskirts of town, the distances between them vast by Manhattan standards – patches of open country as big as city blocks. Some had swing seats and picket fences – signs of civilisation. But dirt tracks to shotgun shacks branched

right off the highway; one had no front door, and five shoeless Negro children sat outside it on a crumbling porch, watching my car as I travelled down the road.

Three days travel and a million miles from New York. A bullshit assignment.

Exiled.

Highway 67 took me downtown. A train horn droned somewhere in the distance, getting louder as I drove. I passed an out-dated war bonds poster still affixed to a telegraph pole; the print was faded and weathered, but legible: *Save To Beat The Devil! Buy Victory Bonds*. The image was Hitler's face, complete with pointed ears and red horns, looking worried. I'd bought two hundred bucks' worth of bond notes back in forty-four – my contribution to Uncle Sam's war effort. Seeing that poster now, after the fact, was like a rebuke: *did you do your part?*

I tried to slow my thoughts down. I'd flown from New York Municipal to Atlanta, my exit ordered with such haste that I'd had to organise my own rental car when I landed. From there it was still a six hundred-mile drive across three states – Tom Walters so desperate to run me out of New York he'd put me on the first flight south. It just underlined what we both knew: he didn't give a damn about the story he was sending me to cover.

Neither did I, for that matter. It wasn't that I had no feeling for the three that had been killed – it wasn't that way at all. Fifteen years of working crime beats – in Los Angeles and Chicago before New York – taught me that murder stays with you, and I could list out the name of every victim in every killing I ever covered. It just smarted that after clawing my way to the pinnacle – crime reporter at the *Examiner* – I was being sidelined onto this story as a punishment. More than that: as a

way to keep me out of mind while Walters worked on getting rid of me for keeps.

Walters was the news editor of the *Examiner*, and an up and comer in the Greenbeck Corporation, the company that owned the paper. We'd rubbed along fine until my accident in forty-three – an automobile wreck that shattered my legs and had me in and out of hospitals for a year. When I finally got back on the job, his opinion of me had soured, blaming me for what had happened. He took me to task over everything – my expense account, my word counts, the stories I filed; along the way, I found out he nixed three consecutive pay rises I was due. Never had the moxie to have it out with me like a man, though; scheming behind your back was his way.

Things had come to a head a month ago. One of the subs, Nelson Hunter, had spiked a story of mine. Wasn't his fault – he was just doing what Walters had told him to do, the boss man coming at me in his sly way like he always did. I'd stormed over to Hunter's desk, and matters got out of hand; a shouting match at first, getting rough when he shoved me. I swung for him in retaliation, busting his lip. He came back at me, and it was about to turn into a donnybrook, but the boys watching got between us and pulled us apart. When they did, I was still so hot, I picked up Hunter's typewriter and tossed it through Walters's office window. The memory of the glass shattering was still clear in my mind, as if it'd happened an hour ago. Ditto the silence that followed. Then the panic that rushed through my chest when I realised what I'd done.

Walters hadn't been in his office at the time. It was that and my friend Sal's intervention that saved me. Sal brazened it out and told a specially convened meeting of the board, including

Walters, that he saw Hunter throw the first punch, and the window got broke in the scuffle. They knew he was covering for me, to some extent or another, but Sal was a heavyweight, had enough juice with the Police Commissioner's office that they couldn't afford to get on the wrong side of him by calling him a liar. They sent Hunter and me home for a month, him suspended with pay, me without.

When they'd let me back on the job last Tuesday, the travel orders and airline ticket had been waiting for me on my desk, along with a memorandum from Walters: I was off the City crime beat. Didn't have guts enough to tell it to my face. Twenty-four hours later, I was on an Eastern Air Lines flight to Candler Field in Atlanta, via a stopover in DC.

I'd driven right through the night to get from Atlanta to Arkansas. I wasn't in a rush – the first victim had been dead for eleven days, and with no suspects for any of the murders, the story had gone cold. It just felt better to be on the road than pass another night awake in a strange bed, thinking about how bad I'd left things in New York. Truth was, the incident at the *Examiner* would never have got out of hand like that, save for the fact my marriage had just gone to hell. My wife, Jane, had turned me out of our apartment a month before the fight. It came as no big surprise; she'd been unhappy for a time by that point – ever since the car wreck. She said it changed me; that there was anger in me all the time afterward. She was right, but I wouldn't have it back then, and we quarrelled round the clock. Even so, it damn near broke me the day she told me we were through.

Four weeks later, on that first afternoon when they'd sent me home after the fight, I sat alone on an upturned crate in a two-room rental in a tenement on the Lower East Side; no

furniture, bare walls, a threadbare brown carpet and my belongings in five cardboard boxes piled in a corner – and that’s when I finally got wise. Damn temper had already cost me my marriage and my home; now it had cost me my career too.

I blinked and focused on the road. I stopped at a red light, the signal swaying on its wire above me, mine the only car at the crossroads. I pulled out the address Walters had given me, checked it again: *Texarkana Chronicle*, 315 Pine St, *Texarkana*. The boss man didn’t bother with a map. His one-liner, scrawled underneath: Ask for Jimmy Robinson.

I drove two more blocks then parked outside a coffee shop called Wendell’s, thinking to go in for directions. Before I got out, I reached into my jacket and pulled out the photograph I’d picked up on the newswires before I left, looked at it again: Alice Rose Anderson, the female victim of the first attack. The survivor. I turned it over in my mind, sorted through the little I knew.

I’d spent Tuesday afternoon culling everything I could off the wires, but the Associated Press stories were thin. The first attack had occurred the weekend before last, sometime in the early hours of Sunday morning. Alice Anderson and her sweetheart, Dwight Breems, were parked in his car on a rural road on the outskirts of town. He’d been killed but she’d survived. It mentioned the killer having a gun, but the cause of death wasn’t confirmed. The question that had stuck in my mind when I was reading through: did the killer allow her to live? If so, why?

A week later, sometime in the small hours of last Sunday, there had been another attack: Patty Summerbell and Edward Logan, murdered in what the story described as a lovers’ lane. Both of them had been killed, gunshot wounds stated as the

cause of death. A man and his son on the way to their hunting stand had stumbled across the scene the next morning. Police had appealed for anyone with genuine information to come forward. There was no mention of a suspect in either case.

The part that really stuck in my throat: Patty Summerbell and Alice Anderson were only seventeen years old.

I looked again at the picture in my lap. She was pretty, had fair, shoulder-length hair and an easygoing smile, her front teeth slightly apart. She was looking at something to the side of the camera, her eyes big and bright; a carefree expression, like nothing in the world could ever hurt her.

I set the photograph on the seat next to me and stepped onto the sidewalk.

*

‘Y’almost there already, hun – *Chronicle* building’s just down the street.’ The waitress smiled at me. Her name badge read *Martha*; she had dark circles under her eyes and her apron was covered with grease stains. ‘Take a left out the door and it’s three blocks down, on the Texas side. Behind the Hotel Mason. Can’t miss the Mason.’

‘Thanks.’

She didn’t move, kept watching me, wiping a semi-circle on the counter with a dirty grey rag. ‘You a reporter?’

I looked up from the counter, nodded.

‘I knew it. Where you from?’

‘New York.’

‘New York?’ The rag stopped in front of me. ‘Lord, that’s a trip. I knew a fella went there once. Take you a long time?’

I went to speak, but she leaned in close, cut me off. ‘You here because of the killings?’

I took a sip of coffee. ‘Yes, ma’am.’

She straightened up, nodding. ‘Such awful business. Those poor young people.’ She gripped her side of the counter. ‘My daughter knew Patty Summerbell, you know, was in her class at Texarkana High. When she heard Patty and Mr Logan was dead, my Clara was just . . .’ A shake of the head to finish the sentence.

I fished a dollar from my pocket, slipped off my stool. ‘I’m sorry. It must be hard.’

‘It is. So hard. And that poor Anderson girl—’ She splayed her fingers over her mouth. ‘Jesus spare me for saying it, but there’s folks say she’d be better off dead, and I don’t know they’re wrong. I know I shouldn’t say it, but to go through that, I mean to live through that, must be . . .’

I turned back to her. ‘Mind if I ask what you mean by that, ma’am?’

She stared past me, hands working the hem of her apron, a world away. Something in her expression made me pull my notepad out.

As I set it on the counter, a bell rang and a fat counterman leaned through a swing door from the kitchen. He eyed me, then glared at the waitress. ‘Martha, you working today or aren’t you?’

She blinked, then in a quiet voice said, ‘Excuse me.’ I watched as she disappeared into the back. I gathered my things up, dropped the dollar on the counter and went back to the car.

*

The sun had dipped behind a low bank of clouds. The main drag was State Line Avenue; it ran north–south, following the state borderline, splitting the city between Texas and Arkansas. Businesses made a gimmick of it: The Lone Star Diner faced Arkansas Liquor. Traffic was light, but parked cars jammed the street, more than I'd seen since I first hit Dixie.

I hung a U-turn and headed south, past a cluster of hotels, and a theatre called the Saenger. It had a classic-revival facade, its sign framed with flashing bulbs – looked like a second-rate Broadway. Beyond that, the road split around the Federal Courthouse building, a granite monster sitting by itself on an island in the middle of the street. The Arkansas and Texas flags flew on their respective sides. When the road rejoined, the red sign on top of the Mason was an easy spot; the hotel must have run to ten storeys, dwarfed everything around it. I pulled up round back and spotted the *Chronicle* building across the street. It looked like a meat warehouse.

*

'Mr Robinson, this is Charles Yates, from *The New York Examiner*.' The secretary flashed me a tight smile, then retraced her steps across the newsroom.

Robinson was playing hunt-and-peck on a typewriter. He looked me up and down, then stood to offer his hand. 'Jimmy Robinson. Good to know you.' He had an oversized rectangular head with a thinning patch of blond hair on top.

'Charlie.' We shook. 'Tom Walters told me to look you up, said you'd be my contact.'

Robinson glanced over his shoulder to an office in the

corner; stencilling on the door read *S.J. McGaffney, Editor*. 'Yeah, Gaffy said something about it. Tell the truth, I thought he was joking.'

'Joking?'

'We don't get many visitors from New York is all.'

I shrugged. 'We go wherever the story is.'

'The story?'

'The attacks.'

'Long way to come for a story.' He flashed a sly grin like he knew it was bunk.

'Readers love a bogeyman,' I said. 'Long as he's on the other side of the country. Murder sells.'

His face changed. He crossed his arms.

I held up both palms. 'No offence—'

'Word to the wise: most everyone in town knows one of these young people.' His voice had turned gruff. 'Or their families.'

'I didn't mean anything by it.'

He didn't flinch or move. 'This ain't about selling papers. Not here.'

'Understood.'

He held my stare for a second, then turned around and went back to his typewriter.

I stood there for a moment like I had my thumb up my ass. Typewriter keys clattered all around me, and Robinson was working at his like I'd never been there. I shook his shoulder. 'There a telephone I can use around here?'

He pointed behind without looking at me. 'Girls at reception will fix you up.'

I tramped back to the front desk wondering what the hell

his problem was. When I got there, the secretary fell over herself to be helpful – took her all of two minutes to get me a line to New York. The telephone was on a counter behind the desk, looking out onto the main newsroom. I pressed the receiver to my ear and waited for Sal to pick up.

'Examiner, this is Pecorino.'

'Sal, it's me.'

'Charlie?' Static crackled down the cable. 'It's a bad line, where are you?'

'Dixie.'

'What the hell?'

'Walters sent me.'

'Nuts to that. What happened?'

'I came looking for you yesterday. Walters didn't tell you?'

'You're kidding, Walters wouldn't tell me the time right now if I asked him. I just assumed—'

'I'm someplace called Texarkana.'

Sal whistled. 'Jesus, Charlie, that somewhere past nowhere? You screwed up good this time.'

'Goddamn Texas, Sal. I'm in trouble.'

Sal chuckled to himself. 'Yeah, sounds like it. Then again, you had to see that coming, right?' He sniffed, waiting for me to disagree with him, but I couldn't. 'What story you working?'

I picked at a splinter on the wooden countertop. 'Two bodies in a lovers' lane last weekend.'

'Cross-country for a couple stiffs?'

'Yeah. Possible link to another murder a week before. Same thing, man and his girl in a car – except the girl survived that time. Something and nothing.'

‘Sounds like a whole lot of the latter, you ask me. Dead bodies in Dixie . . .’ There was a rustling sound as he changed ears, buying himself a second. ‘You anywhere near New Orleans?’

‘Why?’

‘Just thinking out loud. You can work a voodoo slant into it, you might get it to play. Otherwise . . . I mean, what’s your angle?’

‘Right now, I don’t know. What am I supposed to do, Sal?’

‘File some copy, I guess. Better to keep Walters sweet than sit on your thumbs down there.’

‘Yeah, I know it.’ I turned away from the secretaries at the front desk, feeling like I had something to hide. ‘Sal—’

‘Here it comes.’ He exhaled a deep breath.

‘Hold on, would you? All I was gonna ask is you keep your ear to the ground, clue me in on what Walters is saying about me. I’m really worried, Sal.’ I had a nasty sensation as I said it, the feeling like I was holding onto a ledge by my fingertips, about to fall. It was all slipping from my grip – my career, my marriage – and there wasn’t a thing I could do to pull myself back up onto that ledge. Especially not stuck on the other side of the country.

Sal must have detected a note of it in my voice. ‘Just work the story, you’ll be back before you know it.’ It was a throwaway line – no conviction in it.

I glanced out over the main newsroom. No-one was in earshot, but it felt like everyone was listening to my conversation. I tried to quash it, told myself this wasn’t New York – no-one knew my business here. ‘I’m serious, Sal. I think he’s trying to get me to walk so he don’t have to push me. Why the hell else did he send me all the way to Texas for three bodies?’

There was a pause before he said spoke again and I knew he'd been distracted by something at his end. 'You worry too much, Chuck; you're getting paranoid because you're at arm's length. Forget it – what's done is done.'

We both knew there was more to it than that. 'Look, just let me know what you hear, would you?'

He muttered something away from the receiver, his attention fully elsewhere now, then came back on the line. 'Sure, sure, Chuck. Listen, I gotta go.' He hung up.

I couldn't blame Sal if my credit line with him had run out. Already, I felt like yesterday's man.

I made my way back over towards Jimmy Robinson's desk, wondering if this town could manage a hot shower and a decent bed. When he saw me coming, he picked his hat up and jammed it onto his head. 'C'mon, I'll take you out to the scene,' he said. A changeup – the willing tour guide all of a sudden. I couldn't get a handle on the man; I wondered if he was a drinker.

'Now?'

'Before the light goes.'

'My things are in my car. And I need to get a room—'

'All taken care of,' he said, heading for the doors.

I glanced around the newsroom again, seeing maybe thirty people. The *Chronicle* was one of dozens of newspapers owned by the Greenbeck Corporation, but had almost nothing in common with the *Examiner*. The outfit in Texarkana was small, everyone on one floor; the whole operation would have fit into the canteen back home. There was a single row of rewrite men, telephone receivers jammed against one ear as they scribbled on notepads, and the rest of the desks were only half-filled – the beat writers out on the street. Size aside, it was just

like every other newspaper outfit I ever saw – cramped by necessity, every man within shouting distance of the rest of the room, the different departments arranged in rows. A factory assembly line, churning out newspapers instead of cars. The editor's door was ajar now, and a man with a thick moustache was watching me. Everyone else was business as usual – typewriters and telephone calls, a weird intensity, like they didn't want to make eye contact. It felt like they were talking about me, snatched whispers – but I nixed the thought, put it down to being today's feature attraction. The stranger from the big city. I buttoned my coat. 'Robinson, wait up.'

Robinson was out front climbing into a black Ford by the time I caught him up. 'Get in,' he said, waving me over from behind the wheel. 'And call me Jimmy.'

*

A mile outside of town, Robinson pulled off highway 82 onto a dirt track hemmed in by trees. The sky behind us was already getting darker, deep blues turning black, like a creeping bruise. He followed it for a short way, then stopped in a small clearing, turned the engine off.

I squinted through the window. 'This is the place?'

He nodded. 'Last Sunday. Sometime in the early hours.'

He climbed out and lit a cigarette. He walked a little way, the tip of his smoke glowing in the dusk. I stepped out onto soft mud, my heel sinking down. I stood so the car was between us, a barrier. The temperature had dropped and I felt my skin gooseflesh. The headlights threw some light across the ground.

'Patty Summerbell and Edward Logan. Car was parked right

about where you're standing. That's where they found them.'

I sidestepped like I was standing on a grave. A bird screeched, a jagged sound in the quiet clearing, and a cold wind blew through, carrying the smell of pine and wet earth. Robinson squatted down, elbows on his knees. 'Logan was found in the front seat, and she was face down in the rear. Killer shot them both in the back of the head.'

'What were they doing out here?'

'They's courting. Lot of young folk come round here to park up together.' He flicked his smoke away into the dark and reached down, scooped up a handful of dirt. 'Didn't kill them in the car, though. Soil over here was soaked with blood. The sum'bitch shot them then stuffed them back in. Then he stuck Patty in the gut with a piece of broken glass. Three times.' He let the soil run through his fingers. 'Why'd he do that, you think?'

'I don't know. Maybe . . .'

Robinson walked behind me. I turned to face him, but he pushed me back round again.

'I mean think on it.' He put a finger to the back of my head. 'I pull you out of your car, put a gun to your head, and say, "Go".' He shoved my shoulder, motioned for me to walk in front of him. 'Go on, go.'

I started towards the patch of soil. Cold sweat trickled down my back. We walked slowly, his finger touching my skull the whole time.

'The girl's screaming, crying, begging. And Logan, he's . . . what? He's bargaining, trying to make a deal? Or is he begging too? Trying not to piss his britches?'

'What's your point, Robinson?'

'Just want your perspective, New York.'

My pulse thundered in my ears.

‘Then we stop. Right here.’ He leaned in close. His lips brushed my ear. ‘Then . . .’

A click.

‘. . . I blow your brains out.’

I jerked and spun around, heart thumping.

He was holding a revolver, but he wasn’t looking at me. His eyes were glazed over, focused on something beyond the trees. The gun was by his side, pointed to the floor.

‘I mean, can you imagine the terror?’ he said. ‘Your last seconds, stumbling in the dark, nothing but black night and screaming hell . . .’ His jaw was shaking, veins popping in his neck. He looked at me. ‘Eddie Logan was a war hero. Navy discharged him two months ago. Fought the Japs for his country, and this is what it got him.’ He stepped closer, his hot breath on my face. ‘Patty Summerbell was seventeen years old. A goddamn kid.’

I backed up, watched his hands. I felt trapped, the trees a cage.

‘This ain’t a story, Yates.’ He hacked his throat clear, spat on the floor between us. ‘This ain’t filler for you sum’bitches to read over your eggs in the morning.’

‘I never meant to—’

‘Some goddamn madman killed our kin like dogs and he’s still out there. How the hell you think that makes us feel?’ His face verged on purple. His eyes glistened with tears.

‘I never meant to disrespect them, Jimmy.’

He lifted the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger two, three, four times. All clicks. ‘Don’t worry, it’s empty.’

He turned and walked back to the car.