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In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead

Written by James Lee Burke

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JAMES LEE BURKE

**IN THE ELECTRIC MIST
WITH CONFEDERATE DEAD**



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CHAPTER

1

The sky had gone black at sunset, and the storm had churned inland from the Gulf and drenched New Iberia and littered East Main with leaves and tree branches from the long canopy of oaks that covered the street from the old brick post office to the drawbridge over Bayou Teche at the edge of town. The air was cool now, laced with light rain, heavy with the fecund smell of wet humus, night-blooming jasmine, roses, and new bamboo. I was about to stop my truck at Del's and pick up three crawfish dinners to go when a lavender Cadillac fishtailed out of a side street, caromed off a curb, bounced a hubcap up on a sidewalk, and left long serpentine lines of tire prints through the glazed pools of yellow light from the street lamps.

I was off duty, tired, used up after a day of searching for a nineteen-year-old girl in the woods, then finding her where she had been left in the bottom of a coulee, her mouth and wrists wrapped with electrician's tape. Already I had tried to stop thinking about the rest of it. The medical examiner was a kind man. He bagged the body before any news people or family members got there.

I don't like to bust drunk drivers. I don't like to listen to their explanations, watch their pitiful attempts to affect sobriety, or see the sheen of fear break out in their eyes

when they realize they're headed for the drunk tank with little to look forward to in the morning except the appearance of their names in the newspaper. Or maybe in truth I just don't like to see myself when I look into their faces.

But I didn't believe this particular driver could make it another block without ripping the side off a parked car or plowing the Cadillac deep into someone's shrubbery. I plugged my portable bubble into the cigarette lighter, clamped the magnets on the truck's roof, and pulled him to the curb in front of the Shadows, a huge brick, white-columned antebellum home built on Bayou Teche in 1831.

I had my Iberia Parish Sheriff's Department badge opened in my palm when I walked up to his window.

'Can I see your driver's license, please?'

He had rugged good looks, a Roman profile, square shoulders, and broad hands. When he smiled I saw that his teeth were capped. The woman next to him wore her hair in blond ringlets and her body was as lithe, tanned, and supple-looking as an Olympic swimmer's. Her mouth looked as red and vulnerable as a rose. She also looked like she was seasick.

'You want driver's what?' he said, trying to focus evenly on my face. Inside the car I could smell a drowsy, warm odor, like the smell of smoke rising from a smoldering pile of wet leaves.

'Your driver's license,' I repeated. 'Please take it out of your billfold and hand it to me.'

'Oh, yeah, sure, wow,' he said. 'I was really careless back there. I'm sorry about that. I really am.'

He got his license out of his wallet, dropped it in his lap, found it again, then handed it to me, trying to keep his eyes from drifting off my face. His breath smelled like

fermented fruit that had been corked up for a long time in a stone jug.

I looked at the license under the street lamp.

'You're Elrod T Sykes?' I asked.

'Yes, sir, that's who I am.'

'Would you step out of the car, Mr Sykes?'

'Yes, sir, anything you say.'

He was perhaps forty, but in good shape. He wore a light-blue golf shirt, loafers, and gray slacks that hung loosely on his flat stomach and narrow hips. He swayed slightly and propped one hand on the door to steady himself.

'We have a problem here, Mr Sykes. I think you've been smoking marijuana in your automobile.'

'Marijuana . . . Boy, that'd be bad, wouldn't it?'

'I think your lady friend just ate the roach, too.'

'That wouldn't be good, no, sir, not at all.' He shook his head profoundly.

'Well, we're going to let the reefer business slide for now. But I'm afraid you're under arrest for driving while intoxicated.'

'That's very bad news. This definitely was not on my agenda this evening.' He widened his eyes and opened and closed his mouth as though he were trying to clear an obstruction in his ear canals. 'Say, do you recognize me? What I mean is, there's news people who'd really like to put my ham hocks in the frying pan. Believe me, sir, I don't need this. I cain't say that enough.'

'I'm going to drive you just down the street to the city jail, Mr Sykes. Then I'll send a car to take Ms Drummond to wherever she's staying. But your Cadillac will be towed to the pound.'

He let out his breath in a long sigh. I turned my face away.

'You go to the movies, huh?' he said.

'Yeah, I always enjoyed your films. Ms Drummond's, too. Take your car keys out of the ignition, please.'

'Yeah, sure,' he said, despondently.

He leaned into the window and pulled the keys out of the ignition.

'El, *do* something,' the woman said.

He straightened his back and looked at me.

'I feel real bad about this,' he said. 'Can I make a contribution to Mothers Against Drunk Driving, or something like that?'

In the lights from the city park, I could see the rain denting the surface of Bayou Teche.

'My Sykes, you're under arrest. You can remain silent if you wish, or if you wish to speak, anything you say can be used against you,' I said. 'As a long-time fan of your work, I recommend that you not say anything else. Particularly about contributions.'

'It doesn't look like you mess around. Were you ever a Texas ranger? They don't mess around, either. You talk back to those boys and they'll hit you upside the head.'

'Well, we don't do that here,' I said. I put my hand under his arm and led him to my truck. I opened the door for him and helped him inside. 'You're not going to get sick in my truck, are you?'

'No, sir, I'm just fine.'

'That's good. I'll be right with you.'

I walked back to the Cadillac and tapped on the glass of the passenger's door. The woman, whose name was Kelly Drummond, rolled down the window. Her face was turned up into mine. Her eyes were an intense, deep green. She wet her lips, and I saw a smear of lipstick on her teeth.

'You'll have to wait here about ten minutes, then someone will drive you home,' I said.

'Officer, I'm responsible for this,' she said. 'We were having an argument. Elrod's a good driver. I don't think he should be punished because I got him upset. Can I get out of the car? My neck hurts.'

'I suggest you lock your automobile and stay where you are, Ms Drummond. I also suggest you do some research into the laws governing the possession of narcotics in the state of Louisiana.'

'Wow, I mean, it's not like we hurt anybody. This is going to get Elrod in a lot of trouble with Mikey. Why don't you show a little compassion?'

'Mikey?'

'Our *director*, the guy who's bringing about ten million dollars into your little town. Can I get out of the car now? I really don't want a neck like Quasimodo.'

'You can go anywhere you want. There's a pay phone in the poolroom you can use to call a bondsman. If I were you, I wouldn't go down to the station to help Mr Sykes, not until you shampoo the Mexican laughing grass out of your hair.'

'Boy, talk about wearing your genitalia outside your pants. Where'd they come up with you?'

I walked back to my truck and got in.

'Look maybe I can be a friend of the court,' Elrod Sykes said.

'What?'

'Isn't that what they call it? There's nothing wrong with that, is there? Man, I can really do without this bust.'

'Few people standing before a judge ever expected to be there,' I said, and started the engine.

He was quiet while I made a U-turn and headed for the city police station. He seemed to be thinking hard about

something. Then he said: 'Listen, I know where there's a body. I saw it. Nobody'd pay me any mind, but I saw the daburn thing. That's a fact.'

'You saw what?'

'A colored, I mean a black person, it looked like. Just a big dry web of skin, with bones inside it. Like a big rat's nest.'

'Where was this?'

'Out in the Atchafalaya swamp, about four days ago. We were shooting some scenes by an Indian reservation or something. I wandered back in these willows to take a leak and saw it sticking out of a sandbar.'

'And you didn't bother to report it until now?'

'I told Mikey. He said it was probably bones that had washed out of an Indian burial mound or something. Mikey's kind of hard-nosed. He said the last thing we needed was trouble with either cops or university archaeologists.'

'We'll talk about it tomorrow, Mr Sykes.'

'You don't pay me much mind, either. But that's all right. I told you what I saw. Y'all can do what you want to with it.'

He looked straight ahead through the beads of water on the window. His handsome face was wan, tired, more sober now, resigned perhaps to a booking room, drunk-tank scenario he knew all too well. I remembered two or three wire-service stories about him over the last few years – a brawl with a couple of cops in Dallas or Fort Worth, a violent ejection from a yacht club in Los Angeles, and a plea on a cocaine-possession bust. I had heard that bean sprouts, mineral water, and the sober life had become fashionable in Hollywood. It looked like Elrod Sykes had arrived late at the depot.

'I'm sorry, I didn't get your name,' he said.

'Dave Robicheaux.'

'Well, you see, Mr Robicheaux, a lot of people don't believe me when I tell them I see things. But the truth is, I see things all the time, like shadows moving around behind a veil. In my family we call it "touched." When I was a little boy, my grandpa told me, "Son, the Lord done touched you. He give you a third eye to see things that other people cain't. But it's a gift from the Lord, and you mustn't never use it otherwise." I haven't ever misused the gift, either, Mr Robicheaux, even though I've done a lot of other things I'm not proud of. So I don't care if people think I lasered my head with too many recreational chemicals or not.'

'I see.'

He was quiet again. We were almost to the jail now. The wind blew raindrops out of the oak trees, and the moon edged the storm clouds with a metallic silver light. He rolled down his window halfway and breathed in the cool smell of the night.

'But if that was an Indian washed out of a burial mound instead of a colored man, I wonder what he was doing with a chain wrapped around him,' he said.

I slowed the truck and pulled it to the curb.

'Say that again,' I said.

'There was a rusted chain, I mean with links as big as my fist, crisscrossed around his rib cage.'

I studied his face. It was innocuous, devoid of intention, pale in the moonlight, already growing puffy with hangover.

'You want some slack on the DWI for your knowledge about this body, Mr Sykes?'

'No, sir, I just wanted to tell you what I saw. I shouldn't have been driving. Maybe you kept me from having an accident.'

'Some people might call that jailhouse humility. What do you think?'

'I think you might make a tough film director.'

'Can you find that sandbar again?'

'Yes, sir, I believe I can.'

'Where are you and Ms Drummond staying?'

'The studio rented us a house out on Spanish Lake.'

'I'm going to make a confession to you, Mr Sykes. DWIs are a pain in the butt. Also I'm on city turf and doing their work. If I take y'all home, can I have your word you'll remain there until tomorrow morning?'

'Yes, sir, you sure can.'

'But I want you in my office by nine A.M.'

'Nine A.M. You got it. Absolutely. I really appreciate this.'

The transformation in his face was immediate, as though liquified ambrosia had been infused in the veins of a starving man. Then as I turned the truck around in the middle of the street to pick up the actress whose name was Kelly Drummond, he said something that gave me pause about his level of sanity.

'Does anybody around here ever talk about Confederate soldiers out on that Lake?'

'I don't understand.'

'Just what I said. Does anybody ever talk about guys in gray or butternut-brown uniforms out there? A bunch of them, at night, out there in the mist.'

'Aren't y'all making a film about the War Between the States? Are you talking about actors?' I looked sideways at him. His eyes were straight forward, focused on some private thought right outside the windshield.

'No, these guys weren't actors,' he said. 'They'd been shot up real bad. They looked hungry, too. It happened right around here, didn't it?'

'What?'

'The battle.'

'I'm afraid I'm not following you, Mr Sykes.'

Up ahead I saw Kelly Drummond walking in her spiked heels and Levis toward Tee Neg's poolroom.

'Yeah, you do,' he said. 'You *believe* when most people don't, Mr Robicheaux. You surely do. And when I say you *believe*, you know exactly what I'm talking about.'

He looked confidently, serenely, into my face and winked with one blood-flecked eye.

CHAPTER

2

My dreams took me many places: sometimes back to a windswept firebase on the top of an orange hill gouged with shell holes; a soft, mist-streaked morning with ducks rising against a pink sun while my father and I crouched in the blind and waited for that heart-beating moment when their shadows would race across the cattails and reeds toward us; a lighted American Legion baseball diamond, where at age seventeen I pitched a perfect game against a team from Abbeville and a beautiful woman I didn't know, perhaps ten years my senior, kissed me so hard on the mouth that my ears rang.

But tonight I was back in the summer of my freshman year in college, July of 1957, deep in the Atchafalaya marsh, right after Hurricane Audrey had swept through southern Louisiana and killed over five hundred people in Cameron Parish alone. I worked offshore seismograph then, and the portable drill barge had just slid its iron pilings into the floor of a long, flat yellow bay, and the jug-boat crew had dropped me off by a chain of willow islands to roll up a long spool of recording cable that was strung through the trees and across the sand spits and sloughs. The sun was white in the sky, and the humidity was like the steam that rises from a pot of boiled vegetables. Once I was inside the shade of the

trees, the mosquitoes swarmed around my ears and eyes in a gray fog as dense as a helmet.

The spool and crank hung off my chest by canvas straps, and after I had wound up several feet of cable, I would have to stop and submerge myself in the water to get the mosquitoes off my skin or smear more mud on my face and shoulders. It was our fifth day out on a ten-day hitch, which meant that tonight the party chief would allow a crew boat to take a bunch of us to the levee at Charenton, and from there we'd drive to a movie in some little town down by Morgan City. As I slapped mosquitoes into a bloody paste on my arms and waded across sand bogs that sucked over my knees, I kept thinking about the cold shower that I was going to take back on the quarter-boat, the fried-chicken dinner that I was going to eat in the dining room, the ride to town between the sugarcane fields in the cooling evening. Then I popped out of the woods on the edge of another bay, into the breeze, the sunlight, the hint of rain in the south.

I dropped the heavy spool into the sand, knelt in the shallows, and washed the mud off my skin. One hundred yards across the bay, I saw a boat with a cabin moored by the mouth of a narrow bayou. A Negro man stepped off the bow onto the bank, followed by two white men. Then I looked again and realized that something was terribly wrong. One of the white men had a pistol in his hand, and the black man's arms were pinioned at his sides with a thick chain that had been trussed around his upper torso.

I stared in disbelief as the black man started running along a short stretch of beach, his head twisting back over his shoulder, and the man with the pistol took aim and fired. The first round must have hit him in the leg, because it crumpled under him as though the bone had been snapped in two with a hammer. He half rose to his feet,

stumbled into the water, and fell sideways. I saw the bullets popping the surface around him as his kinky head went under. The man with the pistol waded after him and kept shooting, now almost straight down into the water, while the other white man watched from the bank.

I didn't see the black man again.

Then the two white men looked across the flat expanse of bay and saw me. I looked back at them, numbly, almost embarrassed, like a person who had opened a bedroom door at the wrong moment. Then they walked calmly back to their boat, with no sign of apprehension or urgency, as though I were not even worthy of notice.

Later, I told the party chief, the sheriff's department, and finally anybody who would listen to me, about what I had seen. But their interest was short-lived; no body was ever found in that area, nor was any black man from around there ever reported as missing. As time passed, I tried to convince myself that the man in chains had eluded his tormentors, had held his breath for an impossibly long time, and had burst to the surface and a new day somewhere downstream. At age nineteen I did not want to accept the possibility that a man's murder could be treated with the social significance of a hangnail that had been snipped off someone's finger.

At nine sharp the morning after I had stopped Elrod T. Sykes for drunk driving, a lawyer, not Elrod Sykes, was in my office. He was tall and had silver hair, and he wore a gray suit with red stones in his cuff links. He told me his name but it wouldn't register. In fact, I wasn't interested in anything he had to say.

'Of course, Mr Sykes is at your disposal,' he said, 'and both he and I appreciate the courtesy which you extended to him last night. He feels very bad about what happened,

of course. I don't know if he told you that he was taking a new prescription for his asthma, but evidently his system has a violent reaction to it. The studio also appreciates—'

'What is your name again, sir?'

'Oliver Montrose.'

I hadn't asked him to sit down yet. I picked up several paper clips from a small tin can on my desk and began dropping them one by one on my desk blotter.

'Where's Sykes right now, Mr Montrose?'

He looked at his watch.

'By this time they're out on location,' he said. When I didn't respond, he shifted his feet and added, 'Out by Spanish Lake.'

'On location at Spanish Lake?'

'Yes.'

'Let's see, that's about five miles out of town. It should take no longer than fifteen minutes to drive there from here. So thirty minutes should be enough time for you to find Mr Sykes and have him sitting in that chair right across from me.'

He looked at me a moment, then nodded.

'I'm sure that'll be no problem,' he said.

'Yeah, I bet. That's why he sent you instead of keeping his word. Tell him I said that, too.'

Ten minutes later the sheriff, with a file folder open in his hands, came into my office and sat down across from me. He had owned a dry-cleaning business and been president of the local Lions Club before running for sheriff. He wore rimless glasses, and he had soft cheeks that were flecked with blue and red veins. In his green uniform he always made me think of a nursery manager rather than a law officer, but he was an honest and decent man and humble enough to listen to those who had more experience than he had.

'I got the autopsy and the photographs on that LeBlanc girl,' he said. He took off his glasses and pinched the red mark on the bridge of his nose. 'You know, I've been doing this stuff five years now, but one like this—'

'When it doesn't bother you anymore, that's when you should start to worry, sheriff.'

'Well, anyway, the report says that most of it was probably done to her after she was dead, poor girl.'

'Could I see it?' I said, and reached out my hand for the folder.

I had to swallow when I looked at the photographs, even though I had seen the real thing only yesterday. The killer had not harmed her face. In fact, he had covered it with her blouse, either during the rape or perhaps before he stopped her young heart with an ice pick. But in the fourteen years that I had been with the New Orleans Police Department, or during the three years I had worked on and off for the Iberia Parish sheriff's office, I had seen few cases that involved this degree of violence or rage against a woman's body.

Then I read through the clinical prose describing the autopsy, the nature of the wounds, the sexual penetration of the vagina, the absence of any skin samples under the girl's fingernails, the medical examiner's speculation about the moment and immediate cause of death, and the type of instrument the killer probably used to mutilate the victim.

'Any way you look at it, I guess we're talking about a psychopath or somebody wired to the eyes on crack or acid,' the sheriff said.

'Yeah, maybe,' I said.

'You think somebody *else* would disembowel a nineteen-year-old girl with a scalpel or a barber's razor?'

'Maybe the guy wants us to think he's a meltdown. He

was smart enough not to leave anything at the scene except the ice pick, and it was free of prints. There weren't any prints on the tape he used on her wrists or mouth, either. She went out the front door of the jukejoint, by herself, at one in the morning, when the place was still full of people, and somehow he abducted her, or got her to go with him, between the front door and her automobile, which was parked only a hundred feet away.'

His eyes were thoughtful.

'Go on,' he said.

'I think she knew the guy.'

The sheriff put his glasses back on and scratched at the corner of his mouth with one fingernail.

'She left her purse at the table,' I said. 'I think she went outside to get something from her car and ran into somebody she knew. Psychopaths don't try to strongarm women in front of bars filled with drunk coonasses and oil-field workers.'

'What do we know about the girl?'

I took my notebook out of the desk drawer and thumbed through it on top of the blotter.

'Her mother died when she was twelve. She quit school in the ninth grade and ran away from her father a couple of times in Mamou. She was arrested for prostitution in Lafayette when she was sixteen. For the last year or so she lived here with her grandparents, out at the end of West Main. Her last job was waitressing in a bar about three weeks ago in St Martinville. Few close friends, if any, no current or recent romantic involvement, at least according to the grandparents. She didn't have a chance for much of a life, did she?'

I could hear the sheriff rubbing his thumb along his jawbone.

'No, she didn't,' he said. His eyes went out the window

then refocused on my face. 'Do you buy that about no romantic involvement?'

'No.'

'Neither do I. Do you have any other theories except that she probably knew her killer?'

'One.'

'What?'

'That I'm all wrong, that we *are* dealing with a psychopath or a serial killer.'

He stood up to leave. He was overweight, constantly on a diet, and his stomach protruded over his gunbelt, but his erect posture always gave him the appearance of a taller and trimmer man than he actually was.

'I'm glad we operate out of this office with such a sense of certainty, Dave,' he said. 'Look, I want you to use everything available to us on this one. I want to nail this sonofabitch right through the breastbone.'

I nodded, unsure of his intention in stating the obvious.

'That's why we're going to be working with the FBI on this one,' he said.

I kept my eyes flat, my hands open and motionless on the desk blotter.

'You called them?' I said.

'I did, and so did the mayor. It's a kidnapping as well as a rape and murder, Dave.'

'Yeah, that could be the case.'

'You don't like the idea of working with these guys?'

'You don't *work* with the feds, sheriff. You take orders from them. If you're lucky, they won't treat you like an insignificant local douche bag in front of a television camera. It's a great learning exercise in humility.'

'No one can ever accuse you of successfully hiding your feelings, Dave.'

* * *