

Rock Island Line

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By *Matthew Farrell*

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A Novella by

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The following chapters constitute a novella. Future revision will lengthen the project significantly, most likely converting the story into a full-length novel. The completed text will include a deeper investigation into the characters of Tom and Flynn, specifically their histories, but also Tom's relationship with Jeremiah Rutherton. Furthermore, the development of the Eisenhower Interstate System will be dealt with to a greater degree as the following pages only briefly touches on the Interstate's impact on the story.

Prologue

June 21 1957

The smell of rusted iron hangs in the air, but it's the sight that almost makes Donald Stratton retch. In the living room the bodies are lying near the back wall. Jeremiah and Carol Rutherton splayed out on the floor. The light from a table lamp casts odd shadows over their faces. Both bodies sport considerable cuts and gashes, mostly in the necks and stomachs. The white wall behind them and a cross of palm fronds from this past Easter season are both stained red. A vertical smear, irregular tracks, runs about three feet down the wall.

Don remembers the instructions—don't touch anything but the phone—and so stops short of shutting off the lamp. He will have to deal with the shadows. There is a radio in the corner; neither Rutherton ever bothered upgrading to the television, even though Donald had showed them the beauty of watching the news instead of hearing it as soon as his set arrived from Des Moines. The Ruthertons resisted technology like cows on train tracks. Jeremiah's stubbornness both infuriated Donald and garnered his respect. He wonders briefly what will happen to the town of Bennett now that Jeremiah's gone.

He has to step over Carol's body to reach the phone. Her eyes are still open, shocked, but her mouth is closed, tight-lipped. She looks just as disapproving and determined in death as she had while living. Jeremiah lies perpendicular to his wife, his head at her feet. Face down, and Donald wants to imagine a serene look on his neighbor's face. He wants to imagine Jeremiah accepting his fate and forgiving those who resigned him to it, but the face of Bennett's most ornery citizen would never display such a look. The face would be twisted: thick, black eyebrows almost touching, and mouth so small it would be almost imperceptible. Don picks up the rotary phone, fingers the hole for zero and waits for the operator.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Rutherton?" The voice is high-pitched, and snaps him out of his thoughts.

"Cindy. It's Don Stratton. Get me Sheriff Richards."

The conversation with Richards is brief, and soon Donald is back outside the Rutherton house, sitting on the porch, hands on his knees palm up. He stares at his finger tips, the tiny grooves and ridges, a graceful contour map of his hands. Every person on the planet can be identified by their unique set of fingerprints, he knows, and there are those who claim they can read destinies in one's hand. If that claim is true, he wonders where his actions today fit in. But Don Stratton hasn't found the answer by the time two out of Bennett's three patrol cars appear over the top of a hill, a jet of dust and gravel kicked in the air behind them.

I: Out the Door

June 22, 1957-Tom

The whistle blows, but the train is still out of sight. It jars me from my nap against the wall of the abandoned transfer station, the side hidden from view. I stand and bounce a few times on my toes to wake my legs. Give my head a shake, knock it into gear. In the darkness, all I see down the tracks is the sharp headlight of the train. Its silhouette appears as it draws nearer. The sound of metal on metal I'd almost forgot. Noise like that becomes natural after a time, but never the whistle. Its second blare makes me cringe, and it echoes in my ears. I heft my pack.

The engine passes, and I begin to run after it. It's been over a month since I've had to catch a train. It has slowed some after entering town, but still moves faster than I can. My eyes have adjusted to the darkness though, and I look for an open door, a handhold, anything sticking out. My breath comes heavy, uneven, and there's already a sharp pain in my side, red hot and cold at the same time. The handle of a door flies right by my face, missing by inches. I make for it, reach out, fingers around the cool metal, but a damn rock punches through the ratty sole of my shoe. It pokes hard into my foot, and I lose my grip and balance. I hit the ground and all I can see is the tall grass around

me. My heart, rattling in my chest, makes my whole body shake, sends tiny earthquakes into the black dirt. The train passes by. I pick my head up, but the black shadow of a caboose, my ticket out of this small town, is flying away

Only a month before, I had jumped off another moving train and landed, here, in Bennett, Iowa. It was a mistake, though I didn't know that at the time. I had been riding a train east from Idaho to Chicago carting potatoes, and I was tired of them. A day's labor in Boise had left me with some money, and I'd had enough in pocket for a couple of meals, maybe a room for a night. It was the promise of real sheets that made me hop from the freight car.

It had been chilly, that night, walking into town. In the Midwest, late spring usually meant sweltering days, muggy nights, if the rain has been coming regular. Instead, the breeze was dry and cool, and my shoulders rocked side to side in a shiver. I stood on the outskirts of the small town. Street lights didn't start until a few blocks up which gave the town a contained look from where I was, an area sectioned-off from its surroundings almost like a fort. I remember the tingle at the back of my head, which I should've taken as a warning, instead thought the place familiar.

Closer in, I noticed the transfer station, abandoned since I don't know when. It even had a passenger platform. I couldn't tell how old the building was in the darkness, and honestly, I still haven't figured it out. The brick platform was broken, uneven, and jagged. Tall weeds pushed through the cracks. I searched for a way inside the building, and found a broken window, figuring I would have a roof over my head until I could rent a room.

At least, that's what I had thought at the time. But a month's passed now, and lying on my stomach next to the train tracks, I watch the long shoots of grass bend away from my breath. I've got to get out of this place. Jeremiah's dead one day and it's all gone to hell. Bennett is not quiet or sleepy. Bennett is frantic, has been since the murders. The townspeople, they hunt me. I can feel it. They know I was there, working his land with him, living out of his corn crib, eating the food his wife, Carol, made for me. I could try and hit the road, but how far is it to the next town? I've seen the highway—no hiding, not for long anyway. It was hard enough to get back to the station without being seen, and that was before the bodies were discovered. Thought it would be easier to catch a train than it has been. Thought maybe one would actually stop here. Instead, they just keep on moving, barely even brake as they enter town. I'll try the next one that comes through. If I miss again, I'll hit the road tomorrow night, no matter what. One more night in Bennett won't kill me, I hope.

June 26, 1957-Flynn

This dream is a new one. First nothing, then a moonlit field. Next thing I know, I'm walking through it, and come upon a dead tree. Struck by lightning, it lies in two main pieces with smaller branches like shards sprinkling the ground around it. I bend to touch the dry wood, rough in some places, smooth enough to reflect light in others. How long has it been here? And how long will it continue here, not growing but decaying,

falling apart? Before I can answer myself, a train comes from out of nowhere, no tracks, and smashes into the dead wood. Blows it away. Splinters everywhere. And in its wake there is nothing. The field has become a black void and I'm falling, falling though I cannot hear the wind rush around me. The only sensory detail left is a loud ringing sound.

And now I'm awake.

God damn, it's dark as pitch outside and the telephone is ringing. I burrow under my blanket. The ringing is dampened under the cloth, but still pounding my ears, working them over hard. When it doesn't end, I pull the chain on the bedside lamp and snatch the phone off the cradle. A burst of light hits my eyes, forces a squint.

"What."

The voice is male, husky and altogether too alert. "Rise and shine, Detective." He sounds vaguely familiar.

"Who is this?"

"Richards. We need to go over a few things about the Rutherton case. You up for breakfast?"

Mike Richards. Sheriff of Bennett. Phone conversation the other day, before I came down from Des Moines. Apparently he's not noticed it's still dark out. I tell him.

"People in a farm community, Detective, they get up early. Come on, the restaurant opens in twenty." He explains how to get to the place from the Bennett Hotel. Two blocks over from Main Street on a Poplar.

I roll out of bed. Jesus, I'm going to mess this one up. Only an hour's drive down from the capital yesterday evening, but my nerves were shot. Worries from all over, pounding my brain from various points in my skull: *Why me? Oh, but I know why me. Captain back in Des Moines might as well send his worst man on this one, right? He's setting me up for a hard fall. Sending a message. Keep closing cases, or else. Out of my element here. I haven't actually solved anything in, Christ, how long?* It doesn't exactly make for a pleasant drive. No idea what time I actually went to sleep. Could have been hours ago, could've been minutes.

Not in the best mental state to meet the sheriff, but I'll do what I can. I start by scraping a toothbrush across my teeth. Yesterday's clothes will do, complete with shoulder holster and a second, smaller revolver in the jacket pocket. The time I carried only one gun passed long ago. And of course, there's no damn coffee in the room. A shot of gin leaves an awful, drunken toothpaste mess in my mouth, but also a head rush. I'm tired as all hell, but I'm out the door in eight minutes flat.

Smoking a cigarette on the way. Hopefully the nicotine kick will give me an edge. The buildings on either side of the street here in Bennett rarely top a single story. The ones that do stick out like the kid with a growth spurt in his class photo. The predawn light is soft, gray and blue, and casts the buildings in a picturesque light, but I can't make out what I'm seeing until I'm right on top of it. There aren't any cars on the street: only late-model Rambler parked along the sidewalk. The street is deserted, lifeless. I'm alone. An almost overwhelming calm hits, a peace I've not felt in, shit,

years. Living in Des Moines, it's never made sense why anyone, let alone twelve hundred, would want to call a town this size home, but damn, it's absolutely silent out here. Not even crickets are chirping right now. Working the underbelly of a large city, I've become acclimated to noise at all hours. This kind of quiet leaves me speechless, unsure of what to do and how to handle things. But then it comes, a flood—reassignment as demotion, inability to accomplish even basic duties, unsolved cases piling up—and I clutch for my guns and feel my heart beat against the flask in my inside jacket pocket. Gentle sloshes from the vibrations.

Disgrace. A bust back down to beat cop. That's what I have to look forward to if this Rutherton case doesn't go well. I'll have to wear the blue uniform and everything. Requests from small town departments are ill-received by the larger units. Tend to view them as milk runs. Plucking cats out of trees for old ladies. That sort of gig. Captain can't spare his good men, the ones consistently solving new cases, but there're always a few guys like me, dicks who've lost their edge, to go drive to a small town with a ladder for that cat. If I can't handle this milk run, it'll look bad. Career-ending bad.

I make it to the Bennett Transfer Cafe. Not sure what the name means. Several old wagon wheels adorn the outside of the building which produces a rustic, John Wayne-western type of feel. At least, it tries to. The inside walls are dingy white, and though no one is smoking, the large dining room is thick with the stale smell. A uniformed man is seated at the only occupied table. His back is to me. Strange position for a cop, unable to keep an eye on the entrance, and I can't decide if this is because he's not too bright or because he commands this space. He has gray hair, but then again, I

didn't expect him to be young. He hears me, or sees my shadow, when I'm a few feet away and turns around.

"Miles Flynn," he says,¹ already on his feet and hand outstretched. "Mike Richards."

We shake hands. Richards's grip is hard, fits his voice. The crow's feet at his eyes are there from smiling now, but I can tell anger brings them out as well. He's feeling me out physically with this handshake. An indication of how the conversation will go.

"Just Flynn," I say. I hate my first name. Haven't used it in years.

"Of course." He waves a hand at the chair opposite him. "Have a seat. You look like you've been through the ringer already."

"I don't sleep well." I leave off the part about strange places. I sleep like a goddamn log when I'm home behind three locks. And then it hits me that in my sleep-deprived rush, I forgot to rig my room door with a hair, tape, anything so I'd know if someone entered it while I was gone. Shit. Going to have to stop by the room before anything else.

Richards waits until the food arrives before getting to business. "Strange thing for a town like this," is how he starts. And I know Richards doesn't want me here. Guy who's been around this long can't feel good when the state sends someone else in. "You've read the report, I take it?"

I nod. The short answer shake-down looks like this: five days ago Donald Stratton, farmer, finds a calf belonging to his neighbor, Jeremiah Rutherton, in one of his

corn fields. He promptly calls Rutherton. The call is unanswered. Stratton goes to Rutherton's house, where he finds the bodies of both Jeremiah and his wife, Carol. Dead by stab wounds. Sloppy stab wounds. Fifteen holes in Jeremiah, twelve in Carol. Looks like from the same blade, considering the presence of Jeremiah's blood in Carol's wounds. Older couple, in their late sixties, childless and semi-retired. Leased half their land each season.

"I get that a county this small doesn't have much of an investigative wing," I say between bites of food. "But it seems like you have things under control." The eggs and bacon are greasy. They go down quick and warm me from the bottom up. This place has great bacon, weak coffee.

Richards sips at his mug. "We even have a suspect. For the month or so preceding the murders, the Ruthertons played host to a vagrant. Apparently he slept out back, worked for his keep. Some say he even took meals with Jeremiah and Carol. He was missing as of Don's discovering the bodies."

"Sounds promising. But not damning. How often did people see this guy? Anyone actually know his name? Any other possibilities?"

"Flynn, I've lived here my entire life. I know Bennett. Bennett isn't capable of a murder." Starting to get testy. Fierce pride for the town. Probably something I'll run into a lot here.

"Okay," I say. The eggs turn over in my stomach. Not quite nausea. Is it his tone that's doing this? "So assuming that the murderer is your drifter, you're also

running with the idea he's still in the area." Beginning to see why the state stepped in here, gave me that temporary reassignment. Richards is kind of fixed on this drifter.

Richards cracks a half-smile. "Yeah, Flynn. I'd bet good money on it."

What the hell does that mean? "Any particular reas—"

"Look, Detective. Like I said, this is my town." His voice has taken on a low undertone. Not a growl, exactly, but something. "I got a feeling." Richards trains his eyes on mine and keeps the crooked smile. They are the palest of blues, and, despite his graying hair, he looks formidable. Not someone you'd want to clash with.

Wasn't nausea before, but it is now. Coffee, eggs, bacon, all tossing about with that shot of gin, a giant mixing spoon in my stomach churning its contents around. On top of that, the sheriffs growl and eyes clear up any confusion as to how accepted I am here. We sit in silence, Richards finishing his breakfast while I push the leftovers around on my plate with a fork. The dining room has started to fill up. It's about half-full now—divided between farmer types and people dressed for town business. When Richards has cleaned his plate, I reach for my wallet.

He waves me away. "It's on me. What are your plans for the day?"

"Forgot something back at my room. Crime scene next. Then I guess I should get a feel for the town. I'm used to a different dynamic in Des Moines." Truth is, I don't want to be around this guy any more than I have to.

He puts a few bills down on the table. "I'll take you out to Ruthertons' farm." He stands up. "Meet me at the town hall when you finish your errand." He excuses himself.

I wait until his cruiser, an older Chrysler Windsor in bad need of a wash, pulls away from the curb before leaving the restaurant. Something's off about Richards. Too fixed on this absent fellow, for one thing. Can't prove it, but drifter doesn't feel right to me. If he'd been living with the Ruthertons for a month, why kill them? Bennett is too small for people not to know he existed. Or, if he did kill them, there's no reason for him to stick around. Either way, Richards is out for him, and won't hear anything from me unless it's airtight. Which means murder weapon, or a confession. For now, I'll operate below his radar. Like I said, I'll check the crime scene, then get a feel for the town through talking. Keep my eye on the prize, maybe it'll keep me from thinking about that blue stare of Richards's. It could be the paranoia but, Christ, that feeling's hard to shake.

First I got to make sure nothing's been touched in my room. I head back toward Bennett Hotel. It resembles a hotel in name only. The building is an upgraded boarding house. My room is small—cast-iron bed frame against the wall, and two windows. The toilet and shower are down the hall, shared with the other residents, but at least there's a sink in the room. Lucky for me it's summer time. Come winter, I bet both those windows doom the room to frosty nights. I'm only back for a couple things. From my briefcase, I grab the papers concerning the Rutherton case and a roll of tape. On the way out, my left hand stays jammed in my pocket, fingers lightly drumming the grip of the revolver. Piece of tape over the door frame. I'll know if anyone tries to get in here.

On the streets again. I head back toward the restaurant. If I'm not mistaken, Bennett's Town Hall should be pretty close to the Transfer Cafe. I turn the corner from

East Street to Main and come upon a giant clock tower, attached to the roof of Bennett's Masonic lodge. Together with the library, the First Bank of Bennett and the town hall, the clock tower creates what passes for a town square. These buildings are well kept. The bank and town hall are even marbled, almost stately. The library is a classy affair. Sign out front boasts that it's a Carnegie. Domed roof and walls of rose-colored brick. I guess most everything Andrew Carnegie did publicly was this fancy.

Up the marbled steps and through the glass doors into the town hall. Granite floor, vaulted ceiling. Reception area about ten feet from the door. The secretary at the desk, complete with graying, beehive hair-do, asks who I'm here to see, pages Richards. The sheriff appears, after a moment, from around the left side of the secretary's desk. Throws a quick glance at the receptionist and mutters, "Thank you, Susan," before acknowledging me.

"All ready, Flynn?"

Nod.

He motions for me to follow, then leaves through the front door. His car is just around the corner. We're down the road and turned onto US Route Six, parallel to the train tracks, before we start speaking again. "What kind of vehicle do they have you in?"

"Ford Victoria, unmarked," I respond.

Richards raises his eyebrows as if to say, "nice." He's quiet for another minute, then says, "Given the size of our budget, we have to drive a vehicle 'til it dies. But we also don't have to abuse them as hard as you big city departments, huh?"

"I guess not." No more small talk after this. Too awkward. Obvious that we have nothing in common. Better start on case details—background, that sort of thing. "How long had the Rutherton family been around?"

"They've been here since before Bennett was founded. On that same property too. Each generation only ever had one male kid, even if there were a bunch of other little ones running around. You'd see two, three girls, and one boy. Made passing the land down easy: get all the girls married off, the son lives on the place."

"Anyone in the family still around?"

Silence from Richards for a minute. I begin to think he didn't hear me, but he starts speaking abruptly. "Unfortunately, no. Jeremiah was an only child, and he lived a damn long time. Any aunts are long gone, any cousins would be almost impossible to track down."

"What happens to the land, then?"

Longer silence this time. Like Richards is trying to figure out how to break up with a girl or fire someone. Finally, he says in a low tone, "We're trying to find any of Carol's relatives. She's from Cedar Rapids, so we're seeing if she has any other brothers."

I decide to drop it. Thought maybe *who* gets the land could be a motive, but looks like I can rule out some jealous relative. Might return to it later, though, when I've got some more information.

Besides, the Rutherton place is coming up. It's visible from the highway, US Route Six, but is only accessible from a side road. It's old, a blue hard-tinted with gray

and the curtains look like handmade lace. Carol must have been pretty good with a needle. The house looks strange as we pull up. A shiver. But I can't place why.

At the front door, it hits me. There's no police tape. No posting of any kind warning people away. The door is unlocked. Don't these people care about keeping the scene uncompromised? On my left there is a number of loose roof shingles scattered about the ground. It strikes me as weird because I didn't notice any gaping, unfinished patches of roof on the drive in.

Turn to Richards. "Did you guys rope off the house?"

"For a couple of days, until my report was filed. Then we figured the information was all in the report."

Mental head slap. Who was I dealing with here? Clowns? Christ, proper procedure. Got to calm down. Don't let this guy think he's too far under my skin. Through the front door is a brief hallway and then the kitchen: wood-paneled walls with white-speckled countertops. There's nothing unusual here except a general staleness. It's been almost a week since anyone touched this place. The next door leads to the living room, where the bodies were discovered by Don Stratton, the neighbor. I always hold my breath before I enter a crime scene. Don't know why. Maybe I'm afraid it'll smell, maybe it's something else.

There's no blood. In fact, the room is spotless. The lampshades aren't askew. There's not even any dust. Someone must've cleaned up. I pace around the room. It's useless now that it's been cleaned. Any prints are long gone. Of course, the police report clearly stated no prints were found apart from the Ruthertons', theirs and Donald

Stratton's on the telephone. Could have been footprints, though. The police report is accompanied by photos, and I mentally place the bodies on the floor.

"You cleaned up, too?"

Richards nods.

Dammit. Yeah, I can read the damn report, but Jesus, half the point of going to a crime scene is to see the shit first hand. "At least you dusted for prints."

"We know how to do our job, Detective."

"Didn't say you didn't, sheriff." But I think it.

Given where the bodies landed, a couple things don't add up to me. It was concluded that both Jeremiah and Carol were killed with the same knife. This implies a single murderer. Neither victim's throat was cleanly cut, meaning death wasn't from a jugular wound, rather bleeding from and trauma to the organs in the torso. That takes time. The murderer would have had to do one while the other watched. So why didn't Carol run while the murderer stabbed her husband? Probably would've had a decent head start. The most obvious answer is shock. The woman was elderly, and watched her husband digest a steel blade. Easily could have frozen up, resigned to her similar fate.

"You're sure the murders were committed by one guy?"

"That's the best we can figure," Richards says. "You see something we missed?"

He really doesn't want to give me a damn inch here. Warding off any ideas with a bullshit dismissal like that. Starting to get the feeling he doesn't want this thing done right. He's convinced of his drifter as murder crime. Doesn't want any other ideas. I should keep these thoughts to myself for now.

Farrelll?

One killer doesn't ring right with me. If I'd been Carol, I would've high-tailed it out of there. Put as much distance between myself and the knife as possible. There's a door to the backyard three feet from where the bodies fell. I'd have hit it and not looked back. Something must have kept her in the room. A second person, either physically holding her down or training a weapon on her as well. Meaning the whole thing was tailored to look like one man did it. The absent drifter.

It could go either way, one killer or two. I can't know which one's right, but I know what I feel. And I feel it tingling at the bottom of my spine. This idea of the one murderer stinks bad to me though. Like two rotting corpses. It's time to start digging. Hot damn.

II: Some Washed-Up Robin Hood

June 26, 1957 -Tom

I wake up in a ditch off the side of the road from sharp pangs in my stomach. I finished the last of my food from Jeremiah's yesterday. I'm stiff from sleeping on the cold, uneven ground. I'm starving, but it's there's no food in sight. I'm miles from Bennett. At least I hope I am. Truthfully, I have no idea where I am. I had not made the trains, and gave up a few days ago. So I sit in the ditch while I wake up. I try not to think of food.

A guy I met one night on the rails, he'd heard of these guys from Asia who sit with their eyes closed for hours. I said I'd have to see it to believe it. He said if I rode with him to San Francisco, he'd show me. But when I woke the next morning, he was gone, and so I picked up a freight car heading south and never paid it much mind. But here I am, wandering with no end in sight, so I try. Eyes closed, head straight forward. But all I can think of is food. A thick steak on a shining white plate appears in my mind, so perfect I can almost smell it. A ham sandwich, leafy green lettuce and slippery with mayonnaise. I snap my eyes open. It's too much. I've got to put something in my stomach.

My first morning in Bennett had started out similar. I awoke in the transfer station to a stomach growl. I still had some potatoes from the train, but I'd eaten nothing except them for a week and there was money in my pocket. So I wandered the streets of Bennett in search of a restaurant. Thing I noticed that I hadn't when I was coming into town, was how dirty the place was. I don't mean dirty like *the streets were dusty*. I mean dirty like everything was falling apart. The street this abandoned train station was on was home to a pile of other abandoned buildings. Old storefronts on one side, an empty, broke down brickyard on the other. Heading toward the center of town wasn't much better. Each occupied building was followed by an empty one. From the looks of it, there had once been three tanners operating in Bennett, and I only passed one still open. And the buildings that were unoccupied were physically falling apart. Bricks were missing. A discouraging first look at a town, to say the least. But then I hit the center. Like a pond in the middle of a desert. I thought I was seeing things. Two marbled, tall structures. Even the concrete sidewalk here looked whiter. I stepped close to one, to read the sign on the door. *First Bank of Bennett*, it read. Figures, I thought, of course the bank would look all pretty while the rest of the town went to shit.

The door then flew open and a man dressed in overalls burst through, not running but walking fast. He had his eyes turned down, and was muttering something. I could only make out his sharp breath behind the emphasized words. I stepped out of the man's way, but he bumped into my pack and it fell to the ground. It spilled all its guts there—a tin cup, bag of potatoes, blanket, jacket—and scattered on the bright sidewalk. The man

stopped three feet ahead, as if snapped out of his thoughts by the clank of tin against concrete. He came back to me and helped collect my things.

When we finished he stood first, and extended his hand to mine. "Jeremiah," he said. "What's your name?" He pulled me to my feet, stronger than I realized for an older guy.

Tom."

"Tom," he repeated, touching his hand to his black eyebrows. "Sorry about that." He turned to walk away.

"Hey, you know where I can find some grub around here?"

Jeremiah turned back around and looked me over, then motioned for me to follow him. We walked a couple blocks, turned the corner, and walked a couple more. We ended up in front of a small building, decorated by silhouettes of cowboys and cacti. The sign read *Bennett Transfer Cafe*. I thought it interesting, considering where I had slept the previous night. Jeremiah winked at the waitress as he grabbed a table and a menu. He gave me the menu. We ordered and I looked around. The place was packed. It was amazing Jeremiah was able to get us a table so fast. All types were in there too: old farm types, migrant workers and business people. Not a lot of women, apart from the waitresses. The food arrived and my focus shifted. I ate the BLT I had ordered in four bites.

I had to wait while Jeremiah finished eating. He was older than me by a good bit, white hair and his shoulders had started to roll. His face looked like someone took a wad

of crumpled newspaper and then tried to flatten it. Guess he'd stood out in the sun most his life. When he'd finally finished, he asked, "Where are you from, Tom?"

I smiled. "Small town outside of Lincoln, Nebraska. Is it that obvious?"

The skin above Jeremiah's eyes broke into large, arching creases. "I have lived here all my life. Never seen you around. Besides," he said, a smile of his own appearing as the skin on his cheeks rose. "Anyone from Bennett would know the only restaurant serving lunch in town. How long you been here?"

"Last night," I answered.

"Got work? Or just passing through?"

"Passing through."

"Where you staying?"

I wasn't used to this question. Most people who saw at my khaki pants torn and stained, my three-week growth of beard, and matted hair, didn't have to ask. So I didn't answer.

"I got a corn crib. You can stay there if you want to work. Can feed you too.." He extended his arm across the table.

I nodded. So I went home with Jeremiah and stayed there with him and his wife, Carol. Over the next month, I worked odd jobs around the house and helped Jeremiah feed and maintain the livestock. I slept in the corn crib with old blankets for cushion. Seemed kind of strange at first. The walls of Jeremiah's corn crib were made out of thin metal bars, criss-crossed, so it seemed almost like a large jail cell. At the same time, it was out in the open, and Jeremiah and Carol were far from prison guards. The meals I

took with them were the best food I'd had in years. I had wished then that I would never to leave their house, or those meals, behind.

But they're both dead and I'm starving on the side of a road in the middle of farmland. If I can make it to another town, I could find a dumpster. I just got to be quick. I pick my pack up and start down the road. When I left Bennett, I chose to take a back road, one that was unpaved. It was a snap decision, and the wrong one. I chose it for two reasons. First, these back roads are less traveled. Second, there are deep trenches lining either side of the road. I figured I could sleep in them and hide from passing vehicles. I was right about that, but I don't know how far I am from civilization, and it's only a matter of time before someone sees me and takes me unaware.

I walk fast, and try not to arouse suspicion. I hope I don't look too out of place, but know I probably do. The sun beats down on me even this early in the day. It's going to be a scorcher. Sweat beads up above my eyebrows and soaks into my beard, only a week's growth, as I had shaved at Jeremiah's. I keep my eyes trained straight ahead, and try not to focus on anything but the road.

A noise in the distance, behind me. It's approaching fast and I hop from road into the ditch, dropping to a crouch when I hit the ground. As soon as I do, I see the tell-tale green cab of a tractor pass. Even from my crouch, I see the driver's head, which means he could see me as he passed, maybe even before if he was sitting up high enough. Crud. Time to move.

I hop back up when the sound has faded. I don't walk, I jog. If I keep my pace consistent, I think I can go for awhile without stopping. There are no other hiding places,

so if that farmer did see me, I have to hope the ditch will cover me well enough. That's another problem with the road. I had thought that if worse came to worst, I could hide in the corn fields that line the road almost exclusively. But I hadn't considered that the corn wouldn't be tall enough yet to cover me. One always pictures corn as something that is perpetually tall, like it was planted at that height. The stalks on my right side are not even up to my knee yet.

I jog until the fire in my lungs threatens to consume both my throat and stomach. When I stop for a breather, I bend at the hips, sucking down gulps of stagnant air. I hope I've covered enough distance from where I saw the tractor, but still haven't passed another farmhouse yet, or an intersection with another road, so I probably haven't. My body can't handle any more running right now, though, not without food or water. I stumble toward the nearest ditch and my legs buckle when I hit the elevation shift. Next thing I know, I'm on the ground, still gasping for air.

Then, white space for a time. Maybe I doze, but mostly I'm caught between sleep and consciousness.

An engine's noise jars me from my repose. Shit. How long have I been lying here? I'm suddenly aware of the noise coming from my mouth when I breathe. I place a hand over it and don't dare move. The engine sounds like it's idling. A door opens and doesn't shut. Foot steps crunch the gravel, slow footsteps like the person doesn't want to make noise. The gravel-crunch continues, and I wonder how much of a chance I would have of hopping up quickly and rushing whoever it is. I guess it's worth a shot, so I scramble to my feet, leaving my pack behind, and dart forward.

It's a sheriff's cruiser, but the deputy is not near it. I make for the driver's side door. Maybe I can steal it. Just around the hood of the vehicle, I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. Then a voice.

"You should stop right there." It belongs to a uniformed man, youngish. A deputy with a crew cut. He stands, feet slightly apart, with his hands on his wide, black belt. His gun is drawn and leveled at me. "Sheriffs been look all over for you."

"I didn't do anything."

The deputy steps forward and moves his other hand to his handcuffs. Then he laughs, a loud wheeze. "You know," he says between intakes of air. "You didn't make it as far as we'd thought. Only about ten miles outside of town in, what, five days? Now, that's slow moving."

Silence from me.

The deputy stops laughing. "Why don't you turn yourself back around. Hands behind your back."

I do, and almost immediately feel the cold metal around both wrists. The sound of the handcuffs ratcheting together reminds me of the metal latches on the corn crib clanking together my first night at Jeremiah's. After that first dinner out there on the farm, the metal shelter had already had lost the jail cell feel. The sound of the latching had comforted me, and I had gone to sleep with the noise echoing in my mind. That night, I had a friend. Now, the metallic echo returns, but the friend does not.

June 26, 1957-Flynn

Like a grave robber on a cloudy night, it's time to start digging. If my theory is going to check out, I need to find out why someone would want these two elderly people dead. They weren't going to be around much longer. Why speed up the process? The difficulty of my job has just increased. The motive was almost in place when the perpetrator was a drifter—almost any explanation could stick. Now I need one, the real one, and soon. If the guy is still in the area, it's only a matter of time before Richards nabs him. And I have to do it without Richards noticing. Hard, considering he's in the same room as me.

Why do I care? I don't know. Not like I'm a champion of the down-and-out, some washed-up Robin Hood, even if Errol and I share a name. I've put enough of them away to know that some were innocent. And it never used to bother me. That's the problem: people want things closed, wrapped up. Doesn't matter how they get solved, as long as they do. So you plant evidence, invent witnesses, erase alibis. But you do that long enough, and what do you end up? A goddamn criminal with a badge and a couple of medals. Maybe someone calls you *hero* in the paper. But you're still a dirty crook. No better than the ones you spend all your time nabbing. And this is okay for a while, and for some, most even, it stays okay their entire career. I was good at it, outwitting the innocent. Told myself that no one was innocent. If Joe Blow didn't commit this crime, chances were he'd done something he'd got away with before.

I leave Richards behind and walk back into the kitchen. Check the side of the fridge for posted phone list. Nothing. I need some names, people I can talk to. I need a feel for the Ruthertons. And I need it to be quiet. Don't want Richards to know what I'm up to. Don't like him. That growl this morning and then he dodges questions about the crime scene. If I go the opposite way from him, I don't want to think about his reaction. I check the study next. The first desk drawer turns up the usual: pens, pencils, a ledger. The second one houses loose papers. Among those is a church directory. Bingo. No, really, bingo—Mrs. Jeremiah Rutherton served on the recreation and social committee. I jot the names of the others on the committee. All women, all sans-first name. I overturn the wastebasket. Crumpled papers fall to the ground, and I sift through them. Several of the envelopes are from the First Bank of Bennett, but the accompanying letters are missing. Nothing in the loose papers in the desk either. Interesting, a bunch of envelopes minus letters, but not really any help.

While sifting through papers, I'm vaguely aware of Richards in the back of the room. Watching me, but not asking questions. Not saying anything at all, like I'm a health inspector at his greasy spoon, and he doesn't want to point out the dirty spots he missed.

Upstairs is a hallway feeding into bedrooms. At the end of the hallway is a small table with a pitcher on it. A lone glass is there too. If either container held anything, it's evaporated by now. A window overlooks the roof and the front yard. On the roof, I can see that someone had been replacing shingles. Never finished, though. Some of the tools still remain and there's a bald patch about three feet wide. Strange to stop working in the

middle of the project. Could have been Jeremiah up here, but he was pushing seventy. Most likely, it was this mysterious drifter up here, but the order is all screwy. He would've started the job, stopped in the middle, and killed the Ruthertons. Why not kill them first?

From the bottom of the stairwell, Richards calls, "You find anything up there?"

I'm still looking out the window, but don't want him to think I've found anything, at least, not anything big. "Not a lot. Just a water pitcher with a glass. Both empty."

"Yeah," he agrees. "We saw that. It didn't turn up a clear fingerprint, unfortunately."

I join Richards back downstairs and we leave the house. I think it's time to get out. Hit the beat. But the sheriff suggests we try Don Stratton's place next. "It's _____, nearby," he says, even though I don't think he'll have anything to say apart from what's _____ in the report. Chances are, at this point, he will have become so used to that version of events that he can rattle it off like scripture. So we hit the road again.

The Stratton place is white and imposing. It stands in the valley created by two slopes. Jesus, it's big, like an old southern plantation without the columns. Old too. A woman, early fifties and wearing a blue housedress, answers the door. Richards and her share a glance, but neither says a word to the other. She leads us, winding through several rooms and a screen door, to the back porch. Two men out here, related by the looks of it, though differently shaped. The thinner one is dressed in blue jeans and a white t-shirt. The other wears a business suit, a large one, and a matching hat sits on the

bench next to him. Vertical stripes, they say, are slimming. If it's true, I wonder how large this guy really is.

The thin man looks at the opened door first. Must not see Richards behind me.

"Who's this, Martha?"

The woman glances at both men, thin one first, the suit next. "Detective from Des Moines."

"Detective Flynn," the suit says and jumps to his feet. He waddles the ten feet between us with his arm stuck out. A Foghorn Leghorn of the Midwest. "How do you do?" How do you do?" He grabs my hand and shakes it wildly. "Nice to have you in our fair community. My, you look peaked. Is the hotel treating you all right?" He hasn't taken notice of Richards yet, either.

Christ, there's no chance of getting a word in, so I don't try.

"Henry," the other man says. "Give him some space."

Henry drops my hand. "How silly of me. You have no idea who you're speaking to. Allow me to introduce myself. Henry Stratton, at your service. President, First Bank of Bennett and Mayor," he pauses, "extraordinaire." He points at the other man. "And this is my brother Don." Sweat pours down Henry's neck. Soaks into his white collar. Thin brown hair, receding hair line.

Shake hands with Don. Nod at each other. Before I can say anything, Henry starts back in.

"I must say, Detective, I was not expecting you out here."

"Sheriff Richards was kind enough to bring me out here to see the Ruthertons' house." I point behind me. Maybe he'll notice Richards now.

"*Of* course. And how are you this morning, Mike?"

"Just fine, Henry. Don." He nods to both men.

Henry continues. "I was just telling myself, and my good brother here, I hope ol' Flynn cracks this soon. I mean, what kind of message would it send to the rest of the state if an outsider comes here and gets away with murder? I tell you, we can't have any ol' person show up and think they can get away with something like this."

He thinks it's the drifter as well. Interesting. Just how thick are he and Richards? Chances are they're tight, in which case that line about not expecting me is complete horse shit. And what's with this "ol' Flynn" shit? Time to play along. Get this guy out of my hair. "Well, Mr. Stratton," I say. "I'll certainly try."

"Mind if I ask what you're next move is?"

Subtle, this guy. Can't see the look on Richards face. I glance at Don, who has stuffed his hands in his pockets and gazes out into the fields beyond the porch. "I figure I'll talk to the townspeople. Start with Don here, if he doesn't mind. See if anyone remembers anything out of the ordinary."

All smiles again. "Well, remember, detective," Henry says, and turns to pick his hat up. "There was that vagrant living with the Ruthertons." He turns to Richards. "Sheriff, if I may have a quick word with you before I head back to town." He and Richards step through the door. "Good day, Detective." He tips his hat to me and nods at his brother. "Donald."

Don nods back. Henry waddles through the screen door and the sheriff follows.

Don stares after them.

I figure the brothers' relationship to be strained at best. They hadn't been talking when Don's wife Martha led me out here. "He always like that?"

A short laugh. "Yeah. Always has been. Guess it's a good thing I got the farm." Don Stratton looks just like his brother, minus the all the fat. Though he looks like he's been thin all his life, from the physical labor I'd guess, his face is gaunt. Hollow cheeks make the face look longer than it should, like he has extra skin hanging there. "So, what can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to ask you about the day you found the bodies."

"It should all be in the police report, Detective."

"I read the report. I want to hear it from you. And it's Flynn."

He squints at me. Takes his hands from his pockets, then jams them back in. "I found the calf in my corn."

"How'd you know it wasn't one of yours?"

"Brand. Besides, were it mine, it would've had to walk a long way. Jeremiah's pasture borders my field. Anyway, I call over there, but there was no answer. Not like Carol not to answer the telephone, and she didn't leave the house much, 'cept for mass." Don walks to the other side of the porch and sits on the swinging bench his brother had occupied. He motions for me to join him.

"And so you went over there. You take the cow with you?"

"Yeah, hitched up the carrier to my pickup and hauled her over. At the house, all the windows were closed—which was weird for the heat we'd been having. But I didn't really notice that until I got inside."

"Door was unlocked?"

A nod. "But when I entered the kitchen, I noticed how still the air was." He stopped, scrunched his face up. "You know that feeling you get when you're somewhere familiar, but at a different time? So that it looks and feels different."

"Like a bar in the daylight?"

"I was thinking more like a church sanctuary outside of church services. Anyway, that's the feeling I got. Just felt off to me. I called out for Jeremiah and Carol. There wasn't an answer, so I kept moving." He stops and pats at the pockets of his jeans.

I hand him a cigarette and lighter.

Don nods back at me, keeps going. "At this point, I knew something was wrong. I hadn't seen Jeremiah out on the tractor on my in and Carol's car was sitting in the driveway, but the house was silent." As he speaks, smoke pours from his mouth as if the

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words themselves were gray and wispy. "And so I entered the living room, found the bodies, and called the sheriff."

"Nothing out of the ordinary about the scene?"

"You mean apart from the dead bodies of my closest neighbors?" It could've been an honest question, but the way Don speaks those words—flat face, deadpan voice like a rock—I know he's making a statement: *there's nothing more to tell.*

All right, he's glossing over the part of the story I need to hear the most. The actual crime scene. I have virtually no reference point for its appearance at the time of discovery. I'll try a different avenue. "There were a number of envelopes from the bank in the waste bin. But the accompanying letters were missing. You don't happen to have any idea where those could've got to, do you?" A long shot, I figure, but since Don's brother is the bank's president, maybe he'll have something.

Don laughs, responds immediately. "Probably tore them into tiny pieces. Jeremiah hated Henry. Carol did too. Likened him to a beached whale a number of times."

"Any idea why there were so many letters? Did Jeremiah owe money on a loan or something?"

"Noway. Least, not that I'm aware of. That land's been Rutherton land for almost a century."

"Maybe Henry thought he could solicit a loan. Try and entice Jeremiah into expanding."

"That's possible, but you'd really have to ask him about that." He drops the cigarette butt, stamps on it.

Doubt I'll do that. Henry and Richards look to be tight, and I don't want either of them thinking I'm digging their way. I thank Don for his time. When I make it back to the front of the house, Henry's gone and Richards is waiting for me in his car. I stand at the driver's side window.

"Find anything useful?" He squints up at me from the driver side.

"No," I lie. "Just rehashed what was in the report." But now I know that Jeremiah and Carol hated Henry Stratton. He seems to have a dizzyingly high opinion of himself. I may be able to use that when I interview some people in town, find out if everyone feels the same way or if Ruthertons were outside the norm.

We head back toward town. Soon as I get back to my room, I will call the operator, get the addresses to match these committee names. Highway Six, same one that runs by the Rutherton place, runs through Bennett, so it's a straight shot and only a couple of miles. When the first buildings appear, I notice for the first time how about half are abandoned, falling apart. The other ones are just dirty. Bricks are missing from the abandoned ones. Paint is flaking off in giant chips. The occupied buildings are covered in grime, like second-day snow—enough grit has mixed in so that it's still white, but no longer pure. What did the town look like when it was growing? It's boom phase, when did that end? When did it begin? The only new building on the outskirts of town is the Standard Oil station. It's really bustling. Attendants in uniform pump gas into beat-up trucks and wipe the windshields of nicer Ramblers and Chrysler sedans. In stark opposition: an old-fashioned railroad transfer station across the street. It's crumbling, holes in the walls and boarded up windows. I've not seen a train stop here yet, though the tracks cut straight through town.

Richards turns the corner and we're back at the town square. Compared to the rest of town, it's a royal court. Juxtaposed, the stately appearance of the Town Hall and bank—Henry's babies both—looks nice until you notice how pitifully small everything

else is, how out of place marble looks beside beige-painted brick. Richards turns the next corner and we enter the rest of town again, like crossing into a slum.

Bennett Hotel again. Richards drops me off outside. Before driving off, he suggests I hit the library for background information on the town. Doubt I'll do that. Not really my style.

Tape still in place on my door. Good, not even a maid came in. Not that I've seen one in this dump. The operator gives me some addresses. There were five names on the list. One in town, four out in the farm lands. In the interest of keeping things local, I start with town: Mrs. James Blanchard, wife of Bennett's only doctor.

I hit the Blanchards' house. It's not as large as I expected for a doctor's house, but immaculate from the outside. It's early in the afternoon. Hopefully the doctor won't be in. It's rarely good to interview someone when the spouse is present. Same principle as interrogating suspects: you get one alone, harder to show a unified front.

Mrs. Blanchard answers the door. Her name is Rose. No, her husband is not home. I get the preliminaries out of the way. The answers are to be expected: no, she hasn't heard anything, nor does she know why anyone would want to kill the Ruthertons. If she knew anything immediately pertinent, it would've come up in Richards's report. I'm looking for town background first. Specifically, her feelings toward Henry Stratton. I'll focus more on the Ruthertons in a bit.

Rose leads me into the dining room. We sit at a large oak table, stained dark and polished so I can see my reflection on the surface. She has given me a glass of water. She looks like late fifties, maybe sixty, but not much older. So, a few years younger than Carol and Jeremiah Rutherton. Better play it proper to start.

"Mrs. Blanchard," I begin, "how long have you lived in Bennett?"

Her hands folded in her lap, Rose's shoulders are perfectly squared and her elbows rest on her hips. She's practiced this pose before. "I was born here. But you're here to talk about Carol, aren't you?"

"It's my first visit here. I'm spending some time getting to know Bennett. What makes it tick, you know?"

She nods, looks off to her left. She's uncomfortable. But is it because we're speaking without her husband or because she's speaking to a detective, or because she's speaking to an outsider?

"All your life then. Bennett is a lovely town. A little smaller than what I'm used to, but lovely nevertheless." Complement it enough, Rose might start talking.

"But it wasn't supposed to be a small town."

"What do you mean?"

"Surely you've noticed the railroad." Rose says this as if it's the most prominent thing in town, a giant statue or something. Lips pressed together.

I nod.

"You can tell by the transfer station. They didn't build those just anywhere. If it were just a stop along the way, there would only have been a platform, maybe a small

house for ticketing, but a large building like that? No, Bennett was a *Major Division Station*." She places emphasis on the last three words like they're supposed to mean something. "And did you notice All Souls Church?"

"Can't say that I did."

"It's our Catholic church here in Bennett. It was immaculately built. There are very few Byzantine-style churches in the Midwest, you know." Her voice finds a rhythm. She's rehearsed these words, or at least, is very familiar with the subject matter. "Anyway, it was built because Bennett was supposed to become a large metropolitan area. If things had gone differently, it may've become as big as Des Moines."

"What happened? Des Moines houses nearly two hundred thousand citizens. The sign on the way into Bennett claims just over a thousand."

Rose smiles, as if I had asked her about her kid in the school play. "Bennett was founded in 1870, and just around the same time, the Rock Island Railroad laid tracks through the area, cutting west. Bennett prospered from the line, and we like to think that Rock Island benefited from the relationship as well."

"What do you mean by 'we'?"

Another smile, this one more private, with downcast eyes. "Oh, just us old timers. Anyway, Rock Island put a major division transfer station here in Bennett, and this town was really going places. Passengers coming through. A lot of business. You've seen the town hall? The bank?" Rose doesn't give me a chance to respond before continuing.

"The whole town was going to look like that. Back in those days, just after the brickyard was constructed, everything was a beautiful shade of rose, not that

beige most people got in their heads as a good idea a few years back. New businesses every week, it seemed." She trails off.

"So what happened?"

"The depression of 1893 hit the railroad hard. Ten years later, Rock Island decided Bennett didn't have the potential. So they moved the transfer station to a larger town. Meaning the passenger line would no longer stop in Bennett. A mistake, if you ask most of us—they didn't give Bennett a chance to prove itself—but everyone makes mistakes," Rose says, shaking her head, admonishing a child's bad behavior. "If Rock Island had only had some forethought, they would've stayed with us. It would have paid off. Mayor at the time, this would have been Henry Stratton's uncle—have you met Henry yet? Delightful man, always puts Bennett first—had plans for a fountain at the town square. There had been word the state was planning on a small college just next to town as well."

She doesn't look nearly old enough to have been around before all this happened.

"How old were you when Rock Island Railroad relocated the division station?"

"Only four or five at the time."

Doesn't make much sense to me. How could five year-old have such extensive knowledge of the town's development? "Then you only witnessed Bennett's decline."

Lips pursed. "Well, Detective, we still held our own for a few years after the passenger line started skipping Bennett. Besides, here in Bennett, we think positively. It's not decline, just temporary setback." Looks like I may've lost her good graces. The smiles are long gone. The wistful recollection too. "Now, will you tell me what this all

has to do with Jeremiah and Carol's murders? The way I understand it, it was that man they had living with them. Why they let a homeless person take up with them, I'll never know. What have you done to catch him?"

I sit up straight in my chair. Temporary setback. What is she talking about? From what I've seen, this town is going nowhere. But she's done with the topic. If she wants to talk Rutherton, I'll go for it. But not quite yet. And there's that goddamned vagrant theory again. "We're pursuing all avenues of investigation here, Mrs. Blanchard. Just making sure nothing has been overlooked." Maybe that'll put that idea to rest for a bit. "So, for the record, would I be correct to assume you and your husband both support Mayor Stratton?"

"Oh my, yes. Hard to imagine a better man to steer Bennett in the right direction."

"Would you say this is a commonly held opinion?"

She pauses before answering. "This seems an awfully strange question to ask. I was under the impression you were investigating the Ruthertons."

"I'm trying to get a feel for how similar the Ruthertons were to other citizens of Bennett. I'm sorry if the question seems out of place."

"Well, I would say that, yes, the town believes Henry Stratton is the right man for the job."

In other words, Rose Blanchard was either completely unfamiliar with the Ruthertons or she's lying. "You served on the social committee at All Souls with Carol. How close were the two of you?"

Rose shakes her head. Some of her hair, graying and tucked behind her ears, comes loose, falls out of place. "Carol was a few years older, and we were always friendly. But never terribly close."

That explains it. "How well liked by the community were they?"

"The Rutherton family has been in Bennett since the beginning. A lot like the Strattons. Not nearly so forward-thinking though."

"What do you mean by that?"

A prolonged pause follows, like Rose is trying to think of an answer on a quiz shows. When she does speak, her words come out slow, calculated, but not thought out beforehand. "Just that while Jeremiah's family has always been farming, the Strattons have the bank, the mayor's office. The Strattons plan, Jeremiah always reacted." Another pause, before she says quickly, "and sometimes quite negatively."

This is the sort of stuff I've been waiting for. Subject gets too comfortable and then slips up, tries to think of a response, but it comes out odd, too slow or fast, or worded strangely. "What do you mean by negatively?"

"If I recall, for example, Jeremiah's father opposed the town fountain idea all those years ago. Called it a vanity project, according to those present at the time."

"Mrs. Blanchard, that was years ago. And not the same person we're talking about."

"Right, well." Flustered now, words come out unevenly. "I was just giving an example on how the family traditionally has interacted in town planning."

"But you said it was Jeremiah who reacted negatively."

She tucks the loose strands of hair back behind her ears. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," Rose says with finality, punctuating the last three words like hammer blows. She has regained composure, and stares at me with wide eyes.

I'll likely not get anything out of her now. Window on that closed when she fixed her hair. Best not push the issue, especially without knowing where to go with it. I count the fingers on one of my hand. Make like I'm going over questions I meant to ask her, and then smile as if to say, This interview has come to a successful conclusion, Mrs. Blanchard. Now stop staring at me.

III: Getting Fresh Like That

June 26, 1957-Tom

The jail cell is clean and well-lit. I'd pictured something different from the name. At least damp, and maybe the smell of sweat and body odor. But no, the air is dry, cool even. Guess it'll be cold at night. These cells must not be used often. Not that any of this really matters, though. It's still a cell, and I'm behind steel bars. From the window I can see the train tracks, and around the corner, just out of view, I bet is the transfer station I had hid at. Maybe it's fitting—I was only free there in that there weren't actual bars. At least my stomach's given up on shooting pain. Now it's a dull ache, which is manageable. I only get a little pulse of something worse now and then. Apart from the noise from the street, the only thing I can hear in here is a constant tick-tock. A clock around the corner out of view, I guess. I don't even know what time it is, and that, along with the noise, is driving me crazy.

No one has said a word to me since they locked me in here, since the bars slid shut. Deputy locked me in and then left. Not another person has made it down to the basement of the town hall since. Does anyone know I'm actually here? Did the deputy lock me up and forget to tell his boss? Will they check? / *could starve down here*. No,

they wouldn't do that. *You murdered two people. But I didn't. It doesn't matter to them. You fit the bill. You have no back story. You were staying with them.* Why would I kill Jeremiah? Carol? I hadn't eaten so well in years. The work even felt good. Not like other jobs I've tried. No, doing odd jobs for Jeremiah, helping in the fields—it felt like I was made to do that kind of work, like man was made to do that kind of work. *You think that sounds good to those people? All they know is that two of their own are dead. And you're going to take the fall, if they even let you live through the night.*

I need to calm down before I start talking to myself out loud. But that damned clock keeps ticking, and with each tick, I'm still alone down here.

So I yell. They aren't words, just sounds, like I'm reduced to animal grunts. The noises aren't from my throat, though. They're straight from my gut. All my hunger and fear joined together and exploding from my mouth. Then I stop and wait for footsteps. Nothing. I yell again and wait again. There's still no response from upstairs. I poke a hand through the bars on one end of the cell and run to the other end, my hand hitting each bar, one after the other after the other after the other. It hurts, the slapping beat on the palm of my hand, but a series of low, dull rings resonates from the bars. At the other side, I turn and start again, yelling this time. Back and forth, back and forth until I hear the echo of a metal latch. Then footsteps.

I stumble back to the thin mattress and sit. The metal springs slink together. Two men come from the right hand side of the cell. One uniformed, older man with graying hair short and slicked back. The other man is younger, arms like steel pipes, and is in

plain clothes—short-sleeved blue shirt, cut to allow his arms to fit through. His dark hair is longish, and falls in his eyes.

Now I know I'm dead.

I've seen the younger man before. I saw him at Jeremiah's house, the day it all went to hell. I had been re-shingling part of the roof. Jeremiah was too old to get up there. He and Carol never had children of their own. Never explained to me why, and I didn't press the issue. It was hot up there, that day on the roof. No shade to speak of. The humidity had kicked back up since the night of my arrival, and the air was so wet it felt as if he could drink from it. It was the kind of day where the sweat clung to your body, and there was no wind to whisk it away. I needed to borrow Jeremiah's razor again. I needed to think about getting my own. After only a few weeks, I'd already become used to a clean-shaven face, and my beard was driving me crazy. I stepped from the roof through a window into the second floor of the farmhouse to cool off. At the end of the hallway opposite the window, Carol had left a pitcher of water on a small table. The water, far from cold, was still wet on my lips and I guzzled two whole glasses. A few drops had escaped the glass and were dripping from my beard when I heard the crunch-pop of tires on gravel from outside.

I walked back to the window and peered out just as a gray pickup truck with one red stripe stopped. It must have been driving fast because the trail of dust still hung in the air above the road behind it. Both doors opened and two men got out. I didn't recognize either at the time, but one of them now stands in front of my jail cell, off to the side and behind the uniformed man.

"Now, what was all the racket about?" This comes from the uniformed man, annoyed, as if I had interrupted his nap.

I don't say anything. It takes all I have not to gape at the younger man. The silence stretches for a long time: fifty ticks from the clock.

The uniformed man says, finally. "All right. Maybe it is time to have a talk." He unlocks the cell door and motions for me to stand up. Instead of walking toward where the two men came from, they lead me in the opposite direction, away from the exit to the end of the hall. We walk single file: the uniformed man in front, the large man at the rear. At the end of the hall is a plain, wooden door, and after the uniformed man unlocks it, the young man shoves me inside. The large man stays outside while the uniformed man enters and closes the door behind him.

The room is stark, bare except for a hanging light bulb and a small school desk. The uniformed man pushes me down to the desk, and cuffs my right hand to it. He stands in front of me, his arms crossed at his chest. Brow furrowed, his forehead is dominated by wrinkles, like a monster.

"My name is Sheriff Richards. You would be Tom. Am I right?"

I don't answer.

"All right," the sheriff says after a few seconds. "You don't want to tell me. That's fine. We'll get to that later." From his back pocket, he pulls a folded piece of paper and holds it, still folded, out for me. "Why don't you take a look at this?"

I unfold it, but don't read it.

"Okay, Tom. I'll summarize its contents." If possible, more wrinkles cram onto the man's forehead. "You're here, Tom, because five days ago you murdered two of Bennett's most respected citizens. Now, you hold in your hands a confession. You're going to sign it. Do you understand?"

I don't move.

"Look, Tom. People saw you in town with Jeremiah on numerous occasions. People knew you were living with he and Carol. You're the last person to see either of the Ruthertons alive. And you're going to sign that confession."

"I don't have a pen," I say, and drop the paper.

"All right," the sheriff says, and the wrinkles vanish from brow. He smiles and knocks on the door behind him.

"Johnny here," the sheriff says, "has some arguments that may persuade you to pick that paper back up."

The door opens and Johnny, the younger man, steps through. His fists are clenched, and he nods at the sheriff, who nods back. Johnny crosses the gap between us, fist raised, and brings it down hard across my face.

June 26, 1957-Flynn

Back in my room now and bone-tired. Rose Blanchard, if nothing else, gave me one thing: Jeremiah and Carol Rutherton weren't universally loved. She clammed up

when it came to what Jeremiah disagreed with, but it had to be something big. At least big for a small town. Also, I tend to believe Don when he said Jeremiah was no fan of Henry. Stands to reason that Don would know better. Other than that, however, I don't have much.

Nothing. Jesus Christ, nothing. That theory about the drifter doesn't feel right, but everyone around here believes it. Even Rose, and she's almost completely unconnected with the case. I've spent all morning and some of the afternoon working this beat, but I've got zilch. Can just hear the captain's voice busting my ass for not nabbing the killer, especially if a vagrant could easily take the fall. This could be the end of my career, and then what have I got? Two guns, that's about it. And, goddammit, I'm hungry. I missed lunch. Keep this up, and I'll lose the gut I've picked up from take out food and beer. Tired too. Want to lie down, but if I do, I'll pass out and waste the rest of the day.

Aw, come on, Flynn, I tell myself. Keep it together. There's a lot of shit that doesn't add up here, but that's the case every time, isn't it? So Rose Blanchard wasn't as helpful as she could've been. I still got something from her. I know Richards isn't on the level with me, and if Henry Stratton was telling the truth this morning, he and Richards are tight, at least professionally. At least now I've established that the Ruthertons were not liked by everyone, as some would lead me to believe. There was also all that shit about the Rock Island Railroad and how Bennett's just seeing a setback in growth. I'll try and work that angle with the next interview. Just need to push on through.

So back to the list. Next one down is Mrs. Harold Stewart. Harold owns the general store in Bennett. But they live out of town. Four miles west, if the operator told the truth earlier. My watch reads four o'clock. Hopefully, Harold will still be at work. Time to kick it. Last thing I do before I leave my room again is check both my guns. Have to compulsively check that they are both still loaded and ready. Part of me wants to believe I won't need them here. The smarter part of me wins out, and both weapons stay. Tape on door frame and I'm out the door.

I hit the street. Car engine turns over, and I'm away from the curb and down the street before I know it. I take Route Six out of town, heading southwest. The rails run parallel to the highway for a couple of miles before the road takes a sharp dip and the railway crosses it by way of overpass. I see the road I'm looking for, Talon Drive, and take a sharp right from paved highway to dirt road. Rear wheels lose their grip on the small pile of gravel at the corner. Like hydroplaning on a wet road except crunchier. The Ford Victoria I drive has a straight-6 engine. It's not as powerful as the new V8s on the market but she still packs a punch, and so I pop out of the skid and shoot down the dirt path, throwing back dust in my wake. The gravel that flings up, though, I hear ricochet off the sides of the vehicle, and I hope they're not screwing with the paint job.

The dirt roads out here, like the blocks of a city, are generally straight and flat, a grid. This differs from the land on either side of the road. The fields and pastures are on rolling hills, waves of land. A few minutes on the road and I come to a painfully blue house. There aren't any outbuildings, and though I'm not used to being on one, their

absence seems strange for a farm. One car is parked outside, a white Lincoln, older style, at least twenty-five years old. From the look of it, it's kept up just beautifully. If this is what Stewart's wife drove, I'd love to see his vehicle.

Up the walk, I move to knock on the door, but there's already someone opening it, just a crack.

"Don't know why you came all the way out here. We don't take salesmen." The voice was stern but not without its warmth beneath the surface.

"Mrs. Stewart, I'm no salesman. I'm a detective from Des Moines." I hold up my badge as proof.

The door opens wider. A woman on the old side of middle age pops her head out. Her tight curls are done in a style I've not seen since I was a kid, curls blackened by dye, matted to and waved on her head. She has to be in her late fifties or early sixties. Looks like she found a hairstyle she liked before the Stock Market crashed and stuck with it. A fashion time warp. To see it now is just weird, especially this far out in the country. She peers at the badge for a long time, until she's satisfied, and then opens the door fully.

I follow her inside, and she points at a sofa. I sit. She disappears from the room and returns a minute later with a silver tray with crackers and cheese spread. She places it on the coffee table and darts out of the room again, only to reappear again with a silver pitcher and two glasses.

"Iced tea," she asks. Doesn't wait for my answer, though. She pours two glasses and puts one in my hand.

A bit uneasy. She must've had this tray mostly prepared. There wasn't enough time for her to get it all together in the time she left the room. But I thank her. Need to stay nice before I run out of leads.

"Oh, it's no problem at all. The pleasure is all mine. But aren't you thoughtful." It wasn't a question. "Mary Stewart, at your service."

"Detective Flynn. You know why I'm in town?"

She nods. "I had heard about the business up at the Ruthertons. It's terrible, terrible business. A real shame." She winks at me, as if telling me a secret. "I only saw them at erratic intervals. I don't get out much."

That much I can see. The house, while spotless, looks like a throwback to the years between wars. "Well, then, I suppose you wouldn't know why anyone would want them dead?"

"Oh, no. They weren't the easiest people get along with. Jeremiah had strong opinions, and Carol didn't suffer fools easily, you know." Mary takes a sip from her iced tea. "But it wasn't the kind of mean anyone would kill over."

Interesting, in keeping with what Rose had to say. "So, Mrs. Stewart—"

"Mary, you may call me Mary, Detective."

Weird lady, but that wink may mean she will tell me something more secretive.

"So, Mary, I got the impression from Rose Blanchard—"

"Rose? Hmm." Mary stops talking, turns her eyes to her knees.

Starting to get annoyed with this woman. "Yes, Rose mentioned that, when it came to town planning, Jeremiah often opposed —"

"Yes. Well. Like I said, Jeremiah had his opinions, which he would voice quite emphatically. Town council meetings, votes, and such, but if the rest of the town supported the measure, it usually passed." Mary stops, turns her head to the right.

Rose made it seem different, like Jeremiah had opposed something major, and had been the roadblock to its completion. "That's not exactly the impression I got from Rose—"

Interrupted again. "Rose's husband, Dr. Blanchard, almost always disagreed with Jeremiah. I was never sure what the reason was, but they seemed to be on opposite sides of every fence. Probably just macho foolishness, if you ask me."

"I guess it's a good thing I did, then," I say, chuckle. Proud that I finally got a sentence in without interruption. The tea is lip-puckeringly strong, but I try not to show it. The way Mary paints it, Jeremiah was just the town's crotchety old man. Cantankerous, yes, but harmless.

Mary speaks again, this time without prompting. "But I really must speak to Rose," she says, and folds her hands in her lap. "We can't have her giving out erroneous information to people, can we?" Another wink at me.

Why would she say this? Trying to convince me that Rose was colored by personal opinion? Or maybe she's closing this line of conversation. Strange way to do it, but I'll play along. Float this railroad idea. "I'd like to ask you about the railroad. Rose filled me in on Bennett's close relationship with the Rock Island Company and its importance to the town's early development."

"My, my," Mary says. "But Rose was a Chatty Cathy, wasn't she?" Her hands unfold, and she starts to smooth her white dress. Then she tugs at the hem, preoccupied.

"When Rock Island moved the division station from Bennett, that really crippled the town, didn't it?"

She looks at me. She purses her lips, the red of them disappearing for a second. If possible, her face loses more color, making the artificial rouge and lipstick shine brighter. A rag doll. "Bennett has never been crippled, Detective. Just set back for awhile. It's important to not see things in such defeatist terms. Mayor Stratton will see Bennett restored, and improved upon."

"I see. My apologies." There's that town pride again. "So, when will Bennett get back on its feet again? Is that date far off, in—"

"We'll see as soon as you catch our murderer, won't you? I will tell you this: that no good vagrant needs to be nabbed soon. As soon as he is, the auction can go forward. Then we'll see how long it takes Bennett to rebound."

The drifter again. Didn't take long for that theory to get passed around, even from a self-described recluse trapped in the twenties. Getting good at schilling to this sentiment, though. "Well, I'm certainly trying my best to get the guy." Then the next part hits me. This is first I've heard of an auction. "Auction? What auction, Mary?"

For a few seconds, Mary's eyes get wide. Jaw drops, then closes, then opens again, like noise is supposed to come out, but her vocal chords are as frozen as her eyes. She recovers just as fast. "Whatever do you mean, Detective?"

"You mentioned an auction, Mary, I just asked—"

"It's Mrs. Stewart to you, sir." Her face still pale, her eyes had narrowed. "What gave you the notion you could address me by my first name when we barely know each other? And frankly, I am shocked by the tone of your voice."

Well, that set her off. She's already revoked my privilege to address her in a friendly manner. Don't know how to respond, but the chances of her forgetting that she even mentioned an auction, or that I could call her by name, are about as good as Bennett ever recovering from its slump. Guess I'd better back pedal. "I'm, uh, deeply sorry, Mrs. Stewart."

"As well you should be. The idea, getting fresh like that. I'm not sure why you're here in the first place. Come to think of it, you should be gone by the time my husband gets home." Her color had returned, the natural red outshining the rouge on her cheeks.

I stand up, offer her my hand. She stands up on her own, and ushers me out the door. Never been kicked out by a woman this early in the day. Must be losing my damn touch.

In my hotel room again. Should probably touch base with Richards. Now's as good a time as any. I get the operator to connect me to his office. No answer. Maybe he's just out for a minute. Smoke break or something. I try again five minutes later. Still no answer and I'm a little on-edge. How am I supposed to do this alone? Ten minutes later, I try a third time, however the operator stops me in high, obnoxiously nasal

tones. "Detective, the sheriff is not accepting calls right now. He knows you're trying to get in touch, and he'll contact you when he's available."

What the hell? He tells me to call him, and then he's not taking calls. Jesus, what the hell is wrong with these people? All on some sort of power trip. Say what you will about large towns, at least in a city, you know your own relative size. It really burns me when I go to the effort of being nice, try and satisfy the man in charge of the investigation, and then get snubbed. And on top of that, this auction, whatever it is, is something I should have known about. I'm sure he knew about it. Why wasn't it in his goddamn report? This could be a key to the whole thing and he didn't tell me about it. *Goddammit.*

I have to calm down. I take a shower, hoping it will calm my nerves. It was early this morning. Maybe Richards thought I already knew about the auction. Maybe he forgot he was dealing with a city boy. Maybe he expected me to do some damn research before leaving Des Moines. It's not that big a deal. I'll just ask him when he calls back.

I'm toweling off, changing clothes when it hits me again. It's been maybe an hour since I tried calling last, and I can't keep my mind off it. Why an auction, what could it mean? But holy shit, maybe that's the point. Maybe Richards didn't tell me because he didn't want me to know. Mary Stewart isn't crazy—okay, she probably is—but she didn't forget about it. She wasn't supposed to tell me either. Why is Richards trying to suppress the knowledge of the auction? Who else is in on it? It's almost a sure bet Henry Stratton is, and if that's the case, I can count his brother Donald with them too. Jesus Christ, just what has this city boy gotten himself into and how deep does this go?

' IV: Thick as Thieves

June 26, 1957-Tom

I hadn't seen the murders, but I had heard them. It was strange because I always thought that murders would be louder. Maybe they were deafening to the people downstairs, but one floor above, the scuffle sounded mute, more like commas, not exclamation points. That's not to say the exclamation points weren't there, those were Carol's screams. I guess that was when the murderer, Johnny or that other guy, took care of Jeremiah. It was strange that between the two of them, they would only bring one knife, and kill only one at a time. The periods were there too, two of them, the thumps of bodies hitting the floor.

I was hiding, cowering in the linen closet upstairs. I wrapped myself in a white blanket and tried to slow my breathing. I hoped the killers wouldn't search the house, but thought I was dead meat. Then I heard the sound of a truck engine turning over, sputtering, and finally gravel crunching under tires as a vehicle pulled away. Then another engine fired and it too faded away. I left the closet. I thought about bringing the white sheets downstairs with me for the bodies, but that would only confuse things for the police. The two bodies, downstairs, were discolored already and looked strange,

misshapen, though they had to be the same shape they had been an hour previous. I stood and stared at them for a long time. Why did they die? There wasn't even a conversation, at least not a long one. The killers had come to this farmhouse for only this purpose. They had shown up in one truck, but took two, probably Jeremiah's. Nothing else looked out of place, but I didn't have time to look closer. I had to get out of here before someone showed up to find me with two dead people.

In the kitchen I grabbed some bread and some cheese. I ran to the corn crib and stuffed the food into my pack, added my blankets for padding. I didn't need anything else, so I walked down the gravel driveway to the road. Here I had an choice. I could head back to town, hop a train. With luck, I could do this before anyone realized what happened here. My only other option was to go the opposite direction, but that could take me anyplace, and anyone who found me would know exactly what to do with me. I chose town, and walked as fast as I could in the heat.

It took me the rest of the day to hike back to Bennett. Along the way, especially after I turned onto the paved highway, a lot of vehicles passed by: cars, trucks and tractors. Along the dirt road, I hid in the deep ditches on either side at the first sound of an engine. This was impossible after I hit the major highway. All I could do was hope that a grungy-looking drifter wouldn't set anyone off yet. It was dark again when I crossed into Bennett. I was reminded of the first night after jumping from the freight car. I wished I could go back to that night, tell myself not to jump, just deal with the potatoes and stay on until the next town.

This wish has been replaying itself in my head since then, and it continues now in my cell in the dark. My face hurts, a bone-deep vibration that won't feel any better tomorrow. There isn't a mirror in this cell, but I don't need one to tell me my cheeks are swelling already. Night fell while I was in the small room with Johnny. He hadn't asked questions. Neither had the sheriff. Johnny would pound his fists across my face and into my gut like he was chopping wood. He was real methodical. After a few minutes of this, I would be left alone with the paper and a pen. Then they would come back, find the confession unsigned, and it would all start again. The first few times, Johnny stayed pretty regular on my face. But after a while, he got scared of the blood. I guess he wasn't used to it. First time his fist came away all red, he backed up more than three steps and had a wild look in his eyes, like a spooked horse. After that, Johnny had switched to my gut, and now it feels like I've been doing sit-ups all day.

I still haven't had anything to eat. I probably won't get anything either. There is a sink in the cell, so I can get water, but it tastes rusty and unclean. I keep going back to it because it takes the edge off the hunger. It fools my stomach into think there's something in it. What I don't get is how the sheriff seems to know I'm innocent. Like I'm just here to sign the confession. He knows Johnny, or the guy who was with Johnny, is the actual murderer. Which means I'm dead in the water. Well, it's not like I was going to get much sleep in here without a blanket anyway.

June 26, 1957-Flynn

The phone rings an hour later. It's Richards. Good thing too, my room was so silent I thought it would implode or explode or that one would spark the other. Ashtray's been overflowing for a good fifteen minutes.

He's short on the phone. He doesn't apologize for not calling sooner. "Flynn," he says. "Glad I caught you. We got our guy."

That catches me speechless. When I finally find my voice, I blurt out, "He confess?"

A pause. "Not yet. We're, ah," another pause. "We're working on that."

Jesus, I've been through this enough to know what that means. I wonder how bruised his face is, or were they smart enough to hit him where it wouldn't show? "What about a weapon?"

"No, Detective. It looks like the man stashed it somewhere. His name is Tom, by the way." Richards sounds annoyed, like I'm asking too many questions. Might be a good idea to play his side.

"When can I see him?"

A sigh. "Tomorrow, Flynn. He just went to bed for the night." Then, after a moment he adds, "There wouldn't be anyone left here to let you in anyway." Which has to be bullshit. Why would they leave someone in a jail cell all night without a guard?

"I'll be there tomorrow morning, then. Bright and early." I hang up. If he's only going to shroud his hostility behind a veil so ragged it doesn't hide anything, I see no reason not to throw the hostility back in his goddamn face. I pace the room a couple of times. Richards thinks he's pulling something on me. Why else keep me waiting all this time? I can't take it in this goddamn quiet piece of shit room anymore.

Hit the streets. Wander around. Richards kept me waiting so long that it got dark outside. Very few streetlights. How can a town not have lights? They expect people to walk around in the damn dark? This place is the pits. I turn left, away from the more rundown part of town, toward the town square. Maybe something's going on over there. I need human contact. Can't spend another night with just my head. Liable to shoot myself, and then where would I be? Turn another corner. Is there nothing open in this town? You'd think monsters came out at night, to see the streets so deserted. Then I spot a light on the next block up with cars parked outside. So, people do come out at night here. Halleluiah, praise Jesus: it's a bar.

The sign on the place reads *The Waltz Inn...Stagger Out*. Can't help but chuckle. At least these small townies have a sense of humor. It's a dive. My kind of place. Smoke is so thick you need a flashlight to navigate the place. It's hopping too, but then again, it looked to me like the only place open. At least I can finally get some food in me, a thick burger with some more of that small town bacon. Like heaven in my mouth.

I've got three drinks in me when she walks in. She's taller than me. Wearing the blue jeans and a man's white-collard shirt. Can't remember the last time I've seen that

combination on a woman. It's refreshing. From a few feet away, I'd guess early forties. About my age. She sits in a booth along the back wall. Her eyes scan the crowd, land on mine, catches me staring. I look away and feel the blood rush to my cheeks. Next thing I know, she's sitting next to me at the bar

"You were staring at me," she says, eyes leveled on mine.

"First person worth staring at." Christ, that sounds bad.

"That was direct," she says. "But then you big city detectives must all be like that." I must look shocked because she laughs. "Oh, come on. The whole town is buzzing over the Rutherton murders, and you're the only person here I don't at least recognize."

I hold out my hand. "Flynn," I say.

She takes mine. Her name is Laura. She's the librarian in town.

"That's interesting," I say. "Sheriff Richards recommended I stop by to learn about Bennett."

"Sounds like he didn't want you to find anything." A smile shows her teeth.

"I'm beginning to think he didn't." A dead end. He fed me a dead end. "Good thing I decided against it." I order another drink, gin and tonic. "You want one?"

"Gee, how's that for tact? You treat all the girls this way?" She orders a whiskey and water.

I'm starting to feel the alcohol now. Mentally still working fine, but a slight delay when I move my hands. "Hey, let me ask you something."

"Shoot."

Don't want to talk Rutherton with Laura, but this auction idea still nags me. I give her an abbreviated version of what I've done. Maybe a mistake, but she's the first person I've felt comfortable around. Don't know why that is. Maybe I'm attracted to her, maybe not. I leave out the bit about Richards having caught the drifter, Tom. Finish with Mary Stewart.

"A weird old bird," I say after describing the Stewart's home—an homage to the 1920s. "But she slipped up."

"How's that?" Laura's stayed silent most of the story. She's got the look of a confidant on her face: privy to the knowledge and proud of it.

"She was getting excited about how Bennett would rebound—"

"Bennett? Rebound? Was she referring to the Bennett, *lowaV*

"Unless she's crazier than I thought," I say. "Yes. Anyway, she got too excited and forgot herself, mentioned an auction."

"What do you mean?"

"That's what I don't get. She said that as soon as I caught this drifter, the auction could go on as planned. When I tried to press her about it, she remembered she wasn't speaking to an old crony. It was like she was a different person after that." I look at Laura's eyes, which are locked on the wooden surface of the bar.

She keeps her eyes away from mine for a few seconds. You can almost see the gears turning in her head. Finally, she looks up, face in a frown. "Auction? Beats me, Flynn. I've never heard anything like that. But I'm not from Bennett originally."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Moved here with my husband, who was from here."

"Was?"

"Things went sour. We divorced. You'd have thought it the end of the world, the way people made it seem around here. Catholicism and town size didn't make for a welcome reception to all that. And of course, they sided with him." Her fingers grip the glass harder, and they squeak across the condensation. "Then he skipped out when his parents died. It's better that way, though. Easier to be the town pariah when the guy responsible isn't around." There it is. The connection. She's an outsider too.

"Why'd you stick around? I can tell you, in a heartbeat, I'd be out of here."

She looks off, over my left shoulder. "At first, I just didn't have the money. When I did I almost moved back, but...." She trails off. Silence for a minute. "But you know how peaceful it is out here. Quiet? You're from a big city. You know how loud things are all the time."

I nod. The rhythm of a city is dominated by traffic, neon lights, feet pounding concrete. Not day or night. Day and night don't matter under an electric glow, soft or harsh depending on the place. In a city you never stop and think of the small things—insects, for instance. In a city, you see a bug, you squash it. Out here, one step outside and the atonal symphony created by bugs overtakes you and though not exactly silent, the noise is manageable. As rhythmic as your heart beating.

"Anyway," she says and breathes out loudly. "Where was I? Oh, you hit a nerve with the town's reaction to the railroad leaving. My understanding was that the town was growing steadily until the transfer station moved. Then, all of a sudden, no passenger

trains came through. No visitors who didn't specifically mean to come here. Same story in about countless places along the railroad." She sips at her drink.

I rub my temples, which messes with the corners of my vision a little. "Yeah, I got that from both Rose Blanchard and Mary Stewart. When I met the mayor today, I got the feeling he thought real highly of himself. But then I get—from his brother, no less—that at least the Jeremiah hated him. I got to tell you, Rose and Mary seemed awfully fond of him."

"He's not had an opponent in so long that I think they've stopped holding elections for his office. It's bizarre, especially because it's obvious he's a fake. You notice how most of the town looks like it's gone to hell?"

I nod. "But I thought that was from the lack of growth. No new money, no new buildings."

"Yes, well. Notice how some buildings still look great? Why does a town like Bennett need a town hall with columns? A marbled bank? Sure, the railroad would bring new business into town. But the town's not dirt poor."

"Why haven't more people noticed this?" Apart from Jeremiah, who's dead, and maybe Don, no one has expressed dissatisfaction with Mayor Stratton. The way Mary Stewart said it, Henry Stratton was Bennett's fearless leader. Rose went even further, referring to the entire Stratton bloodline. The divine right of a Midwestern dynasty.

Laura puts her drink down so hard the table shakes. Her head drops so that she's looking at me with the very tops of her eyes. "Damn. Flynn, how many of those have

you had?" Her finger is pointing, I realize, at my glass. "Think. Where did you find the people you've met so far?"

Christ. I spoke to the ladies from the All Souls committee because I thought they would have known Jeremiah or Carol. Because they would know town history. Because they would be around the same age as the Ruthertons, but hadn't considered that they would also be in the same age range as Richards or Stratton. I had spent the whole day thinking the women would differ from their husbands behind their backs. The old power behind the throne idea. But if anything, their husbands would likely be the same. God damn, how did I miss that? I finish my fourth drink. Room starts to move a little. Everything in my periphery leave trails when they move. "How much of the town dislikes Stratton?"

"For starters, you should think about your phrasing. When you say *town*, you probably mean *community*. People in town, especially the older folks, they're all in Mayor Stratton's hands. Love the guy. Aren't too many younger people in Bennett. The ones that are still around were raised by the older generation, so they're likely to agree with the mayor as well." She stops for talking for a minute, pulls to cigarettes from her purse.

The smoke hits my lungs and I can't tell if it's going to make me less dizzy or more.

She starts again. "But then you've got the surrounding farmlands. And from what I can tell? Most of the farmers are indifferent. Farming is at least a full-time job. If Bennett were better off, it'd make their jobs a little easier—railroad might still be around

to pick up freight. At the end of the day, though, the farmers have too much on their plate to worry much about what happens in town."

Silence for a few minutes. I remember the smoldering cigarette in my hand, stub it out. Charcoal black stain on the crystal ashtray.

"But not everyone stayed so wistful for the railroad, you know," Laura says. She's waving her cigarette in the air like a pointer, the burning tip punctuating her points.

"There's a guy named Raymond Ellerby."

I look at her blankly. Belatedly, I say, "Supposed to ring a bell?"

"He retired about a few months back. He was the newspaper editor, and his father was the newspaperman before him. For an old timer like the people you talked to today, he's got an interesting perspective on the whole thing." She stops. Laura jots the name down on the napkin and hands it to me.

More silence. One of those situations where my mind is void of conversation but there's a desperate need to talk about something, or she might leave me here to drunken solitude. Can't figure why she's still here talking to me. Outsider kinship, intrigue in a small town, a craving for attention—any of those could be. Her eyes, green and always moving, dart to mine briefly and then to the pool tables. "Check out that guy."

Laura is nodding toward a large man at the pool table. Black hair and square jaw. The strong, silent type except he's wagging his chin like crazy at the moment. He's wasted and speaking to a scrawny guy in a white t-shirt and jeans. Flailing his arms everywhere. Upset about something.

"Who's that?"

"Johnny Stratton."

The guy doesn't look anything like either of the two Strattons I've met so far.

"Whose kid? Donald's or Henry's?"

Laura shakes her head. "Don raised his kids better. They're all out in the world, making a place for themselves. That's Henry's oldest. Meanest too. Was in Korea for a time, but that didn't last. I think about half the town wishes it had."

"I thought the mayor could do no wrong."

"One is able to forget about the son's transgressions if the father is so good at buttering everyone up."

Rose's repeating the tired apple/tree metaphor comes back. Funny how those tidbits of wisdom only fit when the speaker wants them too. Or maybe it fits here too. Look at Johnny Stratton again. He's upset now, angry at something, and taking it out on his friend, but I can see how with a smile and a better haircut this guy could schmooze with the best of them. "Who's the other guy?"

"Not real sure. I think he works at the Standard Oil place. Mechanic or something, but I don't drive much so I'm not by there too often. Anyway, it's never particularly mattered to me who is in Johnny's group and who isn't. He never gets in trouble on account of his father's relationship with Richards, so anyone in his little band gets free run as well." Laura turns away from them, but her eyes don't land on me, they focus on something behind my head. "Looks like you've got company." She lights another cigarette.

I turn my head and Richards is only four feet away. Goddammit. It takes a moment for the room to catch up with my eyes. Christ, I'm drunk. Shouldn't speak unless I have to.

"Flynn, my boy, how are you?" He's all nice and fake. Maybe he's forgotten the piercing smile he gave me this morning, but I doubt it. "Sorry, again, that it took me so long to get back to you. Busy day at the station, nabbing that guy and all. Then I get a call from Mrs. Stewart, lives a few miles out. Seems her cat got stuck in the tree."

Laura perks up, "Isn't that usually the fire department's job?"

Richards regards Laura for the first time. There's no greeting, no smile.

"Usually. But Mary and I go way back."

Mary Stewart called Richards after I left. God damn sheriff. Trying to intimidate me with this shit. If Mary was spooked enough to call him, she would've mentioned the auction. No sense in hiding it now. "Let me run something by you."

"What's that, Detective?"

"What happens to the Rutherton property after this is all over?"

Richards chuckles, looks over my right shoulder. "Why, Flynn, you plan on buying the property? Give up on the detective work and settle down?"

"Would the bank foreclose on it? Would there be an auction? If so, would it be public or private?" I feel a kick from Laura's side of the table.

Brief downturn at the corners of Richards's mouth. His eyes focus, and one closes slightly, giving me a cock-eyed squint. He stares at me for a lot longer than is polite. Same sort of stare as this morning, icy-hot and piercing. Can't figure out why I

would lay it out there. Finally, he says, "I don't rightly know, Detective. Hadn't put much thought into it. Mainly, I've been concentrating on getting our man."

I nod, and the room nods with me. "Just wondering. Picked the idea up somewhere, couldn't figure out what it might have to do with anything."

"If you find out, let me know," Richards says, and then immediately after: "Now, if you'll excuse me. I have business needs attending." He nods to me, then at Laura. "Have a good night, Miss. And, Flynn, try and stay off the road."

Richards walks behind Laura, thumps his open palm on the bar as he passes. He keeps going though, back to the pool tables, and taps Johnny on the shoulder. He keeps going, and disappears. Must be a back door. Johnny waits a minute, and then he staggers out the front door. The scrawny guy in the t-shirt stays behind. I turn my eyes back to Laura, who glares at me with straight, thin lips.

"What the hell was that, Flynn? He's not on your side."

"Give me the goddamn benefit of the doubt. That trash about the cat in the tree was an intimidation play. Mary called him. He knew she mentioned the auction. But that's the second time he's pulled that macho, intimidation bullshit."

Laura exhales audibly, stubs out her cigarette hard. "And now he knows you're working against him."

She has a point. The original idea had been to operate under his radar. "If he hadn't already, he was bound to figure it out sooner or later. Maybe I've given him something to worry about tonight."

"Well, at any rate, now he and Johnny are off on something. From the looks of it, I wouldn't be surprised if it has something to do with you. Any idea what that might be?"

"Beats me."

"You should watch out for the two of them. They go way back. I mean, Richards and Johnny's dad were childhood friends."

"I figured that from the way Stratton told me they were just colleagues." Why mention it, unless you assume that someone will ask questions if you don't? Thick as thieves.

We keep talking, though not really about the case anymore. My heart's not in it, and besides, the last time I chatted up a woman my age, she'd been a suspect. But at least Bennett has someone not immediately on the side of Richards and Stratton, even if it is the town pariah. Conversation dies off.

Midnight. Christ it's late. "I got to go," I say. "Should probably sleep tonight." I slap some bills down on the table.

"Be careful," Laura says. She waits until I'm a few feet away and calls, "drink some water."

Walking back through the streets to my room, things start to come together. I still know nothing about this auction, but I've proven for myself that Richards is in on a cover-up, and a portion of the townspeople are too, at least ones who've been around longer. Guess first thing tomorrow I'll talk to this guy Richards nabbed earlier. See what he's all about. How tight a case they have against him. Then this Ellerby newspaper

guy. Try and figure what the hell this auction could be about. It seems silly, one goddamn word, with no context, but it's important. Why else would Mary Stewart clam up like that and call Richards? Left hand stuffed in jacket pocket, I finger my gun. My list of friends are three—two inanimate objects and a librarian-cum-town pariah. Great.

I start up the stairs, take them two at a time, and I'm loud. Too bad for all the other boarders, though I've not seen any. I freeze at the door. Shit, the tape has detached. The door's still locked, but the tape is no longer stuck in the same spot. Handgun out of shoulder holster. It's a cannon, the M1 911. Got it from a down-and-out war vet. I turn the knob with my left hand, jam it into my pocket, and around the grip of the revolver. I lean into the door and it glides inward. There's no one in immediate sight, and I creep across the floor, slow as I can, until I find the light switch. Light floods the room. It's empty, but the room is trashed. I let out a deep breath.

My clothes are scattered in all corners of the room. My briefcase is emptied and the drawers from the bureau scattered about as well. This kind of job is too dirty for Richards to involve himself directly in. Could only have been that guy, Johnny. And he wasn't looking for anything, either. The stuff was thrown about the room too haphazardly for any sort of a search. No, this was intimidation, or a stab at it. I don't bother deep cleaning, instead gather the clothes in one large pile, and replace the papers in the case. He won't be back, but I fall asleep fully clothed and both handguns within reach.

V: An Interesting Change of Pace

June 27, 1957 -Tom

I might have been dreaming, but I don't remember. All I recall from the darkness is an extreme cold, a slap in the face kind of cold, and then a wet shiver. It's the dampness that wakes me up. The temperature doesn't bother me much. I've slept in train cars for years, but the chill that sets in from a thorough soaking, the one that seeps into the skin until it hits bone, that's too much. I gasp at the air and sit up straight.

Johnny and the sheriff stand at the foot of my cot. Johnny holds a metal pail, empty with a few drops of water falling from the lip. The sheriff has an odd smile on his face. Bastard enjoys it even though he knows he's not supposed to. And he likes that fact, that he likes something against the rules. Double pleasure.

"Wakey, wakey," the sheriff says. Johnny still hasn't said a word at all. The sheriff thrusts the paper, same one as yesterday, in my face, under my nose. "You know," he says. "We're building a case against you whether you sign this or not."

I look down at the paper, and at the edge, the tip of the sheriff's thumb. Quick as I can, I bite at it. Contact, but the thumb is pulled away before I can clamp down. The wind created from the paper flying backward with the thumb hits my chin lightly. Then

there's a shock of pain against my forehead and I hit the cot. Johnny's gorilla hands are upon my throat, pushing my adam's apple deeper in. I try to swallow instead gag. Black stars appear in the corners of my vision.

Then, from a distance, a new voice: "You treat all your prisoners this way, Richards? Or only those who can't afford a lawyer?"

The pressure around my neck is gone. My head falls against the cot and bounces off the springs. Air rushes into my throat like a dam bursting and fills my lungs fast. My sight returns last, but when it does, there's a third man in the cell. He looks younger than me, older than Johnny. The man wears suspenders and a seer-sucker jacket, and keeps one hand jammed in the jacket pocket.

"Well, shit, Detective. I didn't figure you the early-rising type." The sheriff is surprised, even though he's trying to sound friendly. I can tell because of the curse word. He didn't use any yesterday.

"People in a farm community, Sheriff, they get up early." The detective motions toward me. "I want to talk to him."

"By all means, Detective. You go right ah—"

"Alone."

The sheriff doesn't say anything for a moment. "Don't really have a private place here."

The detective nods in the direction of the small room at the end of the corridor.

"That one will do."

The sheriff turns to Johnny. "You heard him. Let's go."

"Keep playing dumb. You sore?"

I nod.

"That Johnny doesn't look like a softie. I'd hate to be in your place. Were you there?"

"Was I where?"

He stops pacing and puts his hands on the desktop. "Ruthertons'. Day of the murders. Were you there? Did you see anything?" Flynn's face is inches from mine. His breath reeks of toothpaste and coffee. His hair smells of alcohol.

I nod again. "Johnny and another guy showed up. I was upstairs. I didn't see anything except them arriving. I heard the shots, and then them leaving again."

"Scrawny guy?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. That's all I need for now. Like I said, play dumb. Do not, whatever you do, let Richards or Johnny know you saw anything." Flynn pushes off the desk. He knocks on the door, opens it, and leaves. The door closes behind him and, for a couple of minutes, I am alone

Then the door opens fast and both Johnny and the sheriff are inside. The sheriff looks at me. "My, wasn't that an interesting change of pace." It's not a question. "Now, where were we." Neither is that one.

June 27, 1957-Flynn

Down the steps from town hall already and hot damn I'm feeling good. Got an idea of who did this thing, uncorroborated though the accusation is. Still need hard evidence, but this is a start. Also, it wouldn't hurt to know why. Why would Richards and Henry Stratton—and it has to be them, with Johnny as the link—want Jeremiah Rutherton dead? But what really puts a spring in my goddamn step is the number I pulled on Richards by popping up. Not sure what he thought trashing my room would accomplish, but I guess he had me pegged a coward. I wish I'd had a camera back in that cell just to capture the look on his face. All gaunt and gray. A teenager caught playing with himself.

Strange to meet that drifter. Didn't know what to tell him, how much to let on. I figured it didn't hurt to give him a little. After all, he's been put through a shit storm, and it's not going to let up yet. But here's the strange part: a year ago, I'd have joined in with Johnny and Richards. Case closed, vagrant did it. Reel him in. Find a low-life no one cares about, everyone's happy. But not this time. Sense of justice can't have changed that quick. Is it because I felt personally slighted by Richards? Defiance to the entire town? One outsider helping another? Do I have something to prove to the goons back in Des Moines? They sent me here to insult and to ensure failure, but what if I nail this one? Can't place it, but I'm going to ride this one 'til the end. The goddamned end.

Walking to my car. The first thing after waking up this morning was to call Raymond Ellerby, the old newspaperman. Railroad has to be the key to this whole thing. That, or the auction, or both. But it seems like everyone in town either doesn't know anything about it, or is in on something. Out of luck whichever way it is. Ellerby agreed to meet me, and gave me directions to his place. From the sound of it, it doesn't sound like he lives anywhere near Bennett.

The drive is uneventful, but damn does Ellerby live far out. It's well over twenty minutes out of town. About halfway there, a sign on the side of the road says from here on out, the road is "class B," and that there is "minimal maintenance" on it. This puts me on edge, but there's no other way to get to Ellerby's place, so I keep going. Apparently, class B means that the roads are narrower, the hills steeper with deeper valleys. The color of the dirt here is darker, wetter. If it rains, I bet the roads take days to dry out. At the bottom of a particularly steep hill, I cross a bridge that looks like little more than wooden planks across the stream. There has to be some sort of support, engineering, something, but I can't see it, and the boards emit horrible groaning sounds as my tires roll over them. I'll have to ask Ellerby if there's another way back.

The house comes into view at the crest of a hill after a long gravel driveway marked by weeds growing on either side and between where a car's tires would roll. It is in bad need of paint. It looks gray, but it's because the white paint has mostly faded or washed away. The house is huge, though. At least three stories above ground.

I come up the walk and onto the front porch, the boards of which creaks under my feet. I guess the noise works as some form of alarm, though, because the door is open by the time I reach it. The man holding it open looks to be in his sixties, and is good foot shorter than myself. He wears thick glasses which cover most of his bald head and, with the help of blood red suspenders, his pants come up to the middle of his stomach. "You the detective?"

"Flynn," I say, and hold out my hand.

He looks down at it, cocks his head to one side, and then looks up again. "Well, come in," he says, turning away from the door and shuffling back into the house. There are stacks everywhere. Old newspapers, boxes, broken furniture—you name it. One room has so much shit in it that I really have no idea how large it is. There's only a footpath leading from one end to another, and it's so narrow that I have to turn my shoulders to fit through the walls of junk.

Once we're in the makeshift parlor, the man has me sit down. "Want a drink?"

I look at my watch. Eleven fifteen in the morning. Where'd the damn morning get to? It'd been eight when I was at town hall. "A gin, if you got it," I say. The drive out here was stressful enough for at least one drink.

"Got corn liquor. That is, if you're feeling hardy." Ellerby's eyes are huge through the glasses, and with his eyebrows raised, his entire head looks like a series of wrinkles.

Shrug my shoulders.

"Good." The wrinkles disappear with the formation of a smile at the old man's lips. "From '28. Good batch that year. Ever have some?" He disappears into another room and returns with a couple of glasses and ajar full of amber-colored liquid, like whiskey but darker.

I shake my head. I was only ten in 1928.

"Of course, wasn't as good as the batch from '22, but all the stuff we made during Prohibition was great. Strange, isn't it? Government says no one can drink, the bootleggers put all their heart into their craft. Liquor tastes better. Soon as the government says it's okay, get drunk all you want, bootleggers stop trying." He pours two generous glasses of the stuff, hands me one.

I clink my glass to his and bring it to my lips. Christ, the stuff smells. Smoked wood and turpentine. Tastes about the same. I can only handle a little bit at a time. Ellerby's slamming it back, though. Half the glass in one go.

I ask Ellerby about himself. Raymond Ellerby, Jr. ran the *Bennett Gazette* for forty-five years, until about eight months ago. Before him, his father, Raymond, Sr. ran the paper, which he had begun in the 1870s, then titled the *Bennett Locomotive*. Ray, Sr. had been a staunch supporter of the railroad, and had felt personally slighted in 1900 when the Rock Island Company moved the division station. He never got over it, but, to hear Ellerby tell it, his father always held out hope that the railroad would return one day. Ray, Jr., on the other hand, knew as soon as the station was moved that it was gone for good. "It was a damned fool thing to be so attached to the damn thing. I mean, faith in a company is dumb, like faith in the government. I've lived through two depressions, in

two different centuries, and no one helps anyone. Government doesn't do anything. Certainly, no corporation would do anything to help either. People in Bennett, they have to know it's over. Town isn't going to get any bigger. But instead of making do, realize it's over, they cling to the notion of Rock Island coming back through and rebuilding. Damndest thing I've ever heard." He's gesticulating wildly at this point, having finished his drink long ago. I doubt that it's had much of an effect on him, though. He seems as straight as he was when I arrived.

Me, on the other hand, I'm having a hard time stringing words together. At least, that's what it feels like. I don't think I've had something that strong in, well, ever. It's a good thing Ellerby likes to talk so much, because I can barely get a question out without stopping in the middle to construct the next part of the sentence. Finally, I get around to asking him about the auction Mary Stewart mentioned.

"Auction, you say? That's interesting. Now, why would anyone feel the need to—oh. Oh," he says. Ellerby falls silent. His huge frames pointed down to the ground, he brings a hand up and rubs the skin above his eyebrows for a full minute without saying anything.

"What does it mean?"

"Nothing much, Detective. Except 'auction' means it's a public auction."

Ellerby leans back on his couch, folds his arms across his chest.

Blank stare from me.

"That's why all you city folk should be made to spend some time out here in the country, working the land, learning the way life is for the people who, ultimately, are

responsible for your food," Ellerby says, his voice gaining a higher-pitched, holier-than-thou tone. "The Ruthertons didn't have children did they?"

I shake my head. Vision rattles around a full second behind.

Ellerby uncrosses his arms. "Well, did you not ask yourself what would happen to their land? Their property? Where does it all go?" He rotates his hands, prodding me along.

Jesus Christ. Of course. There's the motive right there. The land would be auctioned publicly. Someone wanted the land and Rutherton wasn't budging. "Why would they need the land so badly that they would need to kill two elderly people to get it?"

Ellerby takes his glasses off, points the black end of an earpiece at me. He remains silent for a minute, maybe more. He looks like a rodent without them, a bald mouse or ferret. I try to break the silence, but I can't think of what to say. Like the removal of his glasses has changed the air in the room so much that it wasn't the same room, or I wasn't speaking to the same man. And I was at a loss for words. Finally, the frames are replaced on his head, and he's Ellerby again. "Before I retired, I ran an article about the old town families. I think there's something in there you may find useful. Check the *Gazette* from about a year ago." And then, softer, almost to himself, "Yes, I think that's right. Around a year."

I stand up. I can work with this. "I've got to go," I say, but the old man puts a hand on my leg.

"Wait," he says, and pulls himself up tugging on my pants for leverage.

"Something else you ought to see. Come on." Ellerby wears a slanted grin on his shrunken face that stretches almost to one earpiece of his glasses.

I follow him to a massive back porch. Being on the crest of the hill provides Ellerby's house with a fairly expansive view of the surrounding countryside. From here, I can see, off in the distance, a paved road. "Is that Route Six?"

Ellerby nods. "You should know. It's still years from completion, but did you hear about the President's new-fangled interstate system?"

"Should I have?"

"Dammit, yes. Unlike my fellow Bennetteers, as I like to call them, I have opened my eyes, bespectacled though they are. You would do well to do the same. Now, I've already lectured you on history, but I'll be happy give you a current events lesson as well." He stops, takes a deep breath in so that his chest appears larger. "What relatively new industry has swept the nation by storm? And I don't mean that music the kids are into."

I shake my head. He'd had a cane, I think he would've rapped me on the head.

"Christ, Detective. The automotive industry. Ford! General Motors!"

"So?"

"So," and he draws the *o* out for an extended period. "The car is where things are going—both for transporting freight, and—." He trails off, or runs out of breath.

"And passenger travel. Oh." I say this quietly, almost to myself.

"Right. And Route Six, some day in the very near future, will be annexed into this highway system. But not all of it mind you, and that's the important part. Not the part that goes through Bennett. The new interstate will go in a different direction. It will bypass Bennett altogether." Ellerby starts to laugh, silent at first, but the wheezing chuckle starts soon after.

Christ. He's right. No matter what, even if the railroad is rebuilt, major automotive routes won't even come within sight of Bennett's town limits. The town of Bennett is as good as dead, if it thinks the railroad is going to save it. I look over at Ellerby, who is laughing, open-mouthed but silent. A smart old man, but gnarled and twisted by so many years and god knows what else that he's lost it. He continues that silent, coughing laugh while I shake his hand and let myself out. By the time I'm in my car, Ellerby has finally found his voice, and I hear his guffaws all the way down the gravel driveway and echoing in my ear halfway back to town.

Library after all, then. That's the only place I can figure that might keep archives of the newspaper. I hightail it back to Bennett. Real reckless through the back roads. That liquor Ellerby gave me was strong, and I almost careen off the road in a couple of places. Now, that'd be an embarrassing way to go. Death by gravel road. Hit Route Six. I wonder if the interstate will come even this close to town. There'll be no reason to accidentally wind up in Bennett. At least if you were traveling West on Six before, you'd have to pass through the heart of town. And who knew, maybe you'd stop for a meal, or

a night if you were tired. Won't be much of a point to that in a few years. That temporary setback people keep referring to won't be so temporary.

Braking in Bennett by one in the afternoon. At the library, I slide the car to a stop. Hop out and I'm up the stairs in a heartbeat. A desk is set up directly across from the inside door. It's unoccupied, but from one of the aisles comes a voice. "Be with you in a sec." Laura comes from around a corner created by a shelf. "Well, hello Detective. And how are you this afternoon?"

"I've been busy this morning. I need your help."

"How abrupt," she says flatly.

"Please tell me you keep back issues of the *Bennett Gazette*"

"Just so happens we do," she says. "And for a second I thought it was going to be a big favor." A smile.

"Will you help me find a particular article from year ago?"

Laura turns and walks away, winding through a couple of aisles. Today she's dressed like a secretary. A long black skirt and white blouse. Her hair is bound behind her head in a tight bun. And glasses, thick black frames complete with a chain for her neck. She halts quickly at a bank of five filing cabinets, pulls one drawer out. "Now, if Bennett only put out a worthwhile paper, then this particular library service would actually do some good. Too bad no one ever has any reason to find an old article." She points at the drawer. "We've organized these by year." Little colored markers stick up between papers every few inches.

I tell Laura what we're looking for, and we both dive into newsprint. As a newspaper, the *Gazette* is a joke. Each issue has a line just under the masthead: "finest weekly in the tri-county area." Even if it were to carry news, none of it would be very current. Most of the stories are feature pieces. A citizen turns ninety. A wedding anniversary is announced. I start with the spring 1956, while Laura tackles autumn and works backward. She finds it first. Late August 1956. Front page, center, contains an article, about old, prominent town families. The Ruthertons are in it, but only briefly. The Strattons get the most ink. A little paragraph about each living member. Johnny is billed as a war hero. There's only one absence. At the time of writing, Henry Stratton, mayor, was unavailable for comment. He was away in Chicago. On business.

"So he's in Chicago. Big deal." Laura says. "This doesn't prove anything at all. Besides, what business would require the mayor of a small town to travel to out of state?" She leans back, away from the paper and breathes out loudly.

"Didn't say that it was going to," I say. Scratch the back of my head. She's right. Can't think of a reason Stratton would have to go somewhere else in his capacity as mayor. But Christ, the guy's also bank president. "Do you guys keep any other newspaper archives?"

"We get the *Chicago Tribune* on microfilm."

Hot damn. Laura finds a reel and she loads up a projector. She scrolls through the pages until she finds the week in question. We start scanning headlines. Buried on page fifteen of a Sunday issue, August 19, 1956, is a promising article. Headline reads: *Rock Island Railroad Execs, Investors Gather*. The article speculates that at this meeting

of executives and investors from all over the Midwest, the company may be ready to unveil a new passenger line that would run separately—but utilize some of the tracks—from their freight line. That's it. Maybe three paragraphs of inconsequential business news crammed at the bottom of a back page.

Need a cigarette and room to pace. I tell Laura I'll be right back. Practically run out the door and down the steps. The cigarette's lit and in my mouth before I know it. So I've got a town where nothing has gone right since the railroad dumped them over fifty years ago. I've got a bank president who is may be an investor in a rail company that may rebuild in the area. This bank president also happens to be mayor, and along with his pal, the sheriff, is covering up the murders of two prominent community members. To make matters worse, most of town seems fine just turning a blind eye to the whole deal. And, unfortunately for all of them, a large public works project is looming on the horizon, ready to crush their dreams.

Christ, it's hare-brained. A theory with no goddamned proof. I've spent a day and half concocting this damn thing, and there's no way to prove it. No murder weapon. No get away car. I have just a town full of people who don't want me to solve this thing, and a mayor who may or may not be lying to them. My two allies are the town outcast and an eccentric recluse, made bitter by what he perceives as a generation of stupidity. Amazingly shitty odds. But I believe the theory.

Time to prove this thing. Tired of talking to retirees and bystanders. Ready to do some god damn detective work. I'll hit the Rutherton place again. Mayor Stratton wanted the land, he'd have sent letters, most likely in his capacity as bank president. Hot

damn, if I could only find the letters that went with the envelopes in Jeremiah's wastebasket. Time to hit the road again. I'm a mile out of town before I realize I forgot to tell Laura where I was going.

The Ruthertons' house looks exactly as it did yesterday. I begin by walking around the house. Not really sure why. I just want to get a feel for the area. Back in the study, I rifle through Jeremiah's papers more carefully. The man was a compulsive record keeper. He had ledgers organized by year account for everything. A perfect record of his and Carol's spending habits. But there's nothing from the bank. I check the envelopes in the waste basket again. The stamps all bear a postmark ranging between November 1956 and May 1957. There's a bookcase in the room as well. I start tearing the books of the shelf, one by one, and flipping through them. I shake some out by the spine, hoping for loose letters. No idea why Jeremiah would actually put financial documents in these books, but I'm desperate. I give up after a few minutes. He was too organized for them to be stuffed between pages.

I step back outside, sit on stone steps leading up to the house. There's nothing here, nothing I can use. Don't know why I thought there would be. Too damned excited to do something than to think about what I should do. Just about to get up, head back to town, when I hear a voice.

"I sat there a week ago. Almost that exact same spot." It's Donald Stratton, wearing denim overalls and blocking the sun. He has a baseball cap in his right hand, and his left holds a blue handkerchief. "Hope you don't mind me stopping by. I was

driving into town and saw a car out front."

"No, not at all." Wonder how much he knows. Would he rat me out to his brother if I asked him about the railroad? I decide against risking it. Silence settles.

"Tell me something," he starts.

"What's that?"

"I've been wondering," he starts again, then stops. Like he doesn't know if he should proceed, or what he should say if he does. He takes a deep breath. "Jeremiah's truck. I haven't seen it around since," a pause, "you know."

Sigh. "As the story goes, the drifter took it." Strange thing to bring up now.

"Well, hell, Detective." Don laughs under his breath. "If that's the case, seems strange that he would've been picked up on foot. You know, he was only a few miles out of town."

Right. This I already know. "Get to the point, Donald." I don't need this goddamn kind of game right now.

"I guess the truck could've broken down and that's why the guy was walking." He says this almost to himself, and he's looking away from me, behind me. "But then," Don's eyes dark back to mine. "One would expect the sheriff to have found the truck when he found his man."

"Funny how that works." Christ, come on, either throw me the bone or don't.

"Sure is, Detective." He takes the baseball cap off his head. Looks it over like he's never seen it before. He doesn't say anything else.

Holy hell, am I going to have to pry the goddamn answer from his mouth? "You know where the truck is, Don?"

"No, Detective," he says and slaps the cap back on his head. "I've not seen it. Not since before the murders. But, I'd imagine there'd only be a few places to hide it where it wouldn't be found."

I look at him. With the hat on, you can't tell he's nearly bald. Brown hair sticks out from under it in tufts. Makes him look almost like a child, a somber child. He's an odd bird, that's for sure. But so is everyone else I've met since entering Bennett. He's right, though. I need to find Jeremiah's truck. Someone's sitting on it. And this town is only so big. Find the truck, maybe find the murder weapon. Find the truck, corroborate the drifter's story. "Why are you telling me this?" A gust of wind hits us. I feel my hair blow with it.

Don turns around, gaze directed toward Rutherton's barn. "You know, Detective, there's a rhythm, a cycle to farming." He stops, smiles downward. "I suppose there're cycles to most anything in life. But I'm a farmer, and that's about all I know. You plant certain times of the year, harvest certain times. Feed livestock sometimes, let them graze others. You understand that?"

I nod. "But what—"

"You also need patience, Detective. Farming, always active, is also marked by waiting. But that's beside the point. What I was saying was that the larger cycles in farming depend on smaller cycles. A seed's germination period. A field lying fallow to replenish nutrients in the soil. And we farmers affect the cycles. Try and manipulate

them. We'll fertilize and irrigate. Rotate crops. We milk cows closer to our schedule, not theirs. But there's one thing I know as farmer: it's impossible to break a cycle completely. If I try and harvest tomorrow, corn wouldn't be ready. I stop milking my cows, bad things happen. It's unnatural. And Jeremiah and Carol's cycles ended unnaturally. Maybe they would've passed on sooner rather than later, but not when they did, and not in the fashion they would've. You read me?" He turns his head back to mine. Squinting at the sun again.

I nod.

"There's your answer." He takes two steps away from me, toward his truck. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got cattle to count in my north pasture. Want to make sure mine didn't stray, get into the corn. Hasn't tasseled yet, you know. I'm a little worried about it." He tips his hat toward me. "Good day, Detective." And then he's in his truck and pulling away.

I stand there for god knows how long before realizing it. The presence that man exudes is amazingly heavy. Like you could listen to him talk for days without tiring of it, captivated in his voice. I walk around back of the Rutherton house. The sun is getting lower on the horizon, but there're still hours of daylight left.

Don said there were only a few places to stash the truck. Could be Don's own property. Call me stupid, but I believed him when he said he didn't know where it was. Richards and Johnny have got to be sitting on it, waiting to bring it out as evidence with Tom's fingerprints all over it. Probably along with the knife 'til the frame-up is in place.

I need that goddamned truck. A jolt, inspiration. My heart is beating faster than it has all day. It's about time.

VI: Steel Blade Shines Through Blood

June 27, 1957-Tom

I have no idea what time it is. I've been in this small room for what feels like days. Most likely, it's only been hours. The sheriff stepped out a few minutes ago. An urgent phone call, the secretary said, so it's just me and Johnny, and he's taking a break. He isn't talking, just staring at me. I guess glaring is a closer to the truth. Those steam pipe arms are crossed over that hulking chest. His eyebrows are so close they're almost touching, and the long hair mixing them together so maybe they are touching.

The door swings open, and the sheriff steps inside. He pulls it shut behind him hard. The door bangs shut, "That was your old man," the sheriff says to Johnny.

Johnny breaks his stare. "Oh yeah?"

The sheriff nods, then pulls Johnny's arm and turns him around. They speak in whispers. I catch only parts: "Donald talked to Flynn again." "Don't know how much he knows." I can't see over Johnny's massive shoulders, but the way he's tensed up, moving slightly, I can tell he's not happy. Maybe, he's even worried. Then they both turn around. Johnny moves to my side, unlocks the handcuffs and wrenches me from my seat. He shoves me ahead of him and down the corridor to my cell.

"Listen, you shit," the sheriff says as they lock me in. A tell-tale swear word. "We have some business to take care of out of town. You just sit here, and think about that confession. I want it signed by the time I get back. And with that, both Johnny and the sheriff have left the corridor.

I wonder what the detective has been up to. It must be something major enough to set both of these guys off like that. I hope he's all right, or I'm as good as dead.

June 27, 1957-Flynn

Got to find Rutherton's truck. They had to have stashed it somewhere safe. Somewhere no one would find it. First thought is the Class B back roads. Numerous places there, but no way am I going back there without a particular place to check. Besides, that's not secure enough. They need someplace private to stash a truck, especially if that truck belonged to a prominent farmer. Somewhere out of town. Somewhere safe. Keep repeating those two thoughts. I can rule out pastures and fields. A farmer is likely to notice a strange truck sitting on his property. Despite compliance by some of the townies, I'd imagine it'd still be too risky to keep the truck with one of them. Especially if they're going to slip up around me like Mary Stewart. Could be Don, but it doesn't feel right. He seems a little too detached from the situation for his brother to trust him with that. So, where would be out of the way enough? Laura's the only person I'd be willing to ask. Problem is, I don't want to drag her into this. My gut tells me this is

going to end up turning violent, if those bruises on the drifter were any indication. But there's no other way short of checking every inch of land between here and Des Moines. Laura's help it is, then. Just great.

Hit the library. Bound up the steps. Laura's at her desk, hands clasped in front of her. Her first words, "Sure do know how to keep a girl waiting, don't you?"

A blank stare from me.

"You said you'd be right back two hours ago."

Whoops. Too late now. "Sorry," I mumble lamely.

"Never mind. God forbid I expect anything from the important detective." She sighs and drops her hands to the desktop. "What can I do for you now?" Her voice is flat.

"If you were going to stash a truck, where would you do it?" I ask this, hoping to catch her interest and bypass any need for an apology. "Somewhere private," I add.

"Business as usual, I see." Another sigh, then Laura stands up. "Are you thinking in town or out?"

"Well, I'd suspect anywhere Bennett proper would be too obvious to anyone passing by. You have any suggestions?"

"Bennett's high school? No one would be there until September...."

I shake my head. "No, too open."

Laura crosses her arms over her chest. Laura drums the fingers of one hand on her other arm, thinking. "St. Mary's?"

"What is St. Mary's?"

"Old Catholic school. Closed about five years ago. It's just outside of town. A mile or two past All Souls Church. Building still stands, looking austere and creepy."

"All right," I say. "Let's check it out."

"And close the library early? It's only four-thirty."

"Is anyone actually going to come in, or are you just going to sit there until it's time to go home alone?"

Laura stares at me, mouth barely open. Shocked. Unsure whether she should slap me or let the line roll off with laughter. Then she cracks a smile. "Lucky for you I have such a good sense of humor." She stands up. At the entrance, she shuts off the lights.

"After you, Detective."

St. Mary's is a large building just outside of town. The closest building in town to it is All Souls Church. The town line must be the street separating the two structures. According to Laura, St. Mary's operated as a primary-through-high school until about five years ago, when lack of funding and dwindling enrollment combined. There weren't enough students to fill the building, and not enough funding to bus children in from neighboring communities.

"The property has been for sale since then," Laura says when we park in front. "But the property is too large for anyone out here to know what to do with."

Whatever I'd been expecting, the abandoned St. Mary's wasn't it. I'd imagined some cross between medieval cathedral and juvenile detention center—flying buttresses

with a chain link fence. Instead, the structure in front of us looks like the juvenile detention center minus the fence. The plant life outside used to be professionally kept up, but the bushes and trees have long since been overgrown by weeds and giant sunflowers. It's a two-story, gray brick structure with windows every fifteen feet or so. It's sprawling. Not that I'd expected it, but the truck isn't right out front.

"When was this place built?"

"No idea," Laura says.

"Must have been when people thought this town was going somewhere." Step up close to the building, peer in nearest window. Nothing inside that I can see, not even forgotten school desks. I turn back to Laura, who stands with her arms crossed, leaning against my car. "Where did they keep the school bus? Is there a garage?"

Her arms uncross. Palms up in an exaggerated shrug. "It'd probably be around back."

I start around back. This place doesn't feel right. Too random. Seems like a place young people might gather to vandalize or drink cheap beer. Hell, what better place to buck the system than outside of an abandoned religious school? Two authority figures, one stone. I would've been all over this when I was a kid.

The back side of the school is even more overgrown than the front. There's a broken-down playground back here. The seat of a swing hangs from one chain next to a lone set of monkey bars. A garage stands fifty feet past the playground. Beyond the garage is farmland, rolling hills cut in straight rows. The sun hangs lower in the sky, but dusk is still a couple hours off. I jog to the garage, peer through the window, but it's

empty as well. When I turn around, Laura's just rounded the corner around the back of the school building and looks at me. Her arms again in the exaggerated shrug. Shake my head. Her shoulders fall and her neck bends slightly.

We walk back to the car. Slow, unsure what the next step is. "Any other ideas," I ask. I start the engine, back out of the entrance to St. Mary's. I pause before choosing a direction to turn on the road.

"If you keep going west, there are fair grounds a few miles further. Only used during the autumn months."

"Anyone out there regularly? Would a neighbor be able to see anything?" I remember the farmers out of town would be less likely to be on Henry Stratton's side. More likely to find a random truck odd. "Wouldn't there be someone there periodically to make sure it doesn't fall apart during the down season?"

A nod from her. "Okay, then. What else..." Laura trails off, and looks down. All I can see of her face is her forehead, scrunched together. Her hands grip her elbows, tight enough that I can see the whites of her knuckles.

I pull out onto the road and head back toward town. "How about something that's been abandoned for so long that there'd be no reason for anyone to ever set foot around it? So old that it's part of the landscape." We pass All Soul's Church. Rose Blanchard had been right: the church's architecture—her word was Byzantine—makes it stick out in the middle of Iowa. Beautiful, but out of place. This side of town is the residential part.

A bit turned around, but the Blanchards' house should be somewhere near.

Laura still hasn't given another suggestion. I pass the town square, slow near the library. I glance at her, raise my eyebrows as if to ask: *you want out here?*, but she shakes her head and keeps her brow furrowed, so I keep rolling down the street and take a left toward the Bennett Hotel, the only part of town that feels familiar.

We pass the abandoned passenger platform. A slapping sound from Laura and I look over. Her forehead rests in the palm of her hand.

"What?"

"Flynn, turn around."

"Why? What is it?"

"You saw the old train station that we just passed, right?"

I nod. "But there's nowhere around there to stash a truck."

"You're right. But a little less than a mile past it, just outside of the town limits, and on the same road as that station even, was the train yard. It had berths to store train cars not in use."

"But it's close to town?"

"Well, yes, but it's private. No one ever has reason to go near there, except the sheriffs men on patrol, and most the time, I bet they steer clear of it too. Nothing ever happens here anyway, so why should they bother with it?"

"Works for me," I say, and check the rearview mirror. No one behind me, so I brake quickly. I turn the wheel hard. The Vic just barely makes the U-turn without going off the road, and we're heading the opposite direction. I drive slowly, mostly so I can think on how I want this to go down. An abandoned train yard is not the place for

any sort of confrontation. I definitely don't want Laura around if there is a showdown. Truth is, I don't want to have a confrontation with Richards, Henry, or their goon Johnny. But I can't figure out any other way to slice it. I can't call Des Moines directly. The case is still officially handled by Richards' department. Don't have backup here, unless you count Laura or Ellerby. It's not like I can arrest Richards and Stratton either. Not without a reaction, and there I'm back to the showdown. With any sort of luck, I have some element of surprise on my side. Failing that, I've got guns.

My Vic passes the Standard Oil station, still bustling in the late afternoon light. The buildings taper off soon after that, and then we come to the train yard. Its main feature is a large, brick structure that is indistinguishable from any of the other abandoned brick buildings on the fringes of Bennett except for its size. The building is huge, like a warehouse in a larger city, but with gaping holes built into the walls. The holes are about five feet apart and about fifteen feet wide apiece, and deep enough so I can't see the back wall of each berth. Five total, and each has tracks leading out of it. I stop the Vic, turn off the engine. We both sit in the car, staring straight ahead. Only sound is two people breathing.

Laura speaks first. "How do you want to go about this?"

"Just check them. One by one." Grab a flashlight from the back seat. I open my door.

We start with the berth farthest from the car. Doesn't really matter, I guess, but I feel better starting there. What amazes me is that no one thought to board these up like they did the passenger platform and station. Or maybe they did, but then thought that

these might serve a better purpose uncovered. If the first berth is any indication, this is a great place to hide something. It's at least thirty feet deep, and the back half is completely dark. A quick pass with the flashlight doesn't turn anything up. A lot of dirt, especially toward the back, and some assorted garbage. One corner looks like it once housed a campfire—smoke stains on the wall. No truck, though.

Same story goes for the next two berths. Laura is antsy. Wants to move a lot quicker than I'm ready to. As soon as I move the light beam across to reveal nothing, she's already starting toward the next tiny tunnel. A couple of times I have to grab her arm to stop her. If the truck is here, I'd rather us find it together, in case there's a surprise waiting.

Pay dirt in the fourth berth. The truck, gray and old, dinged up, sits against the back wall. Heart beats faster. I still have the flashlight out, and keep it trained on the truck as I move closer. My other hand stays jammed in my jacket pocket, around the grip of my service revolver. The revolver is small, a five-shot .38, all black. Cleaning it is a religion, so it should be well-oiled. Cool metal against my skin is calming, and I remember to breathe deeply.

"Is that it?" Laura's whisper is high-strung.

I nod and keep moving closer. Laura hesitates. I ask, "You coming?"

"I've never seen a getaway car before. Is there going to be blood?"

"The Ruthertons were killed with a knife, unaccounted for. There was a lot of blood, and I'm sure the killer didn't stop to wash his hands."

"So, the answer is yes?"

"Yes, Laura. There will be blood."

She stays close after that, as if the presence of blood made this situation more dangerous. I start at the truck bed. It's empty. Cab next. The light beam reflects off the window, so I try the door. Thankfully, it's unlocked. I wrench the door open and let go. Trying not to leave many prints on the vehicle, or disturb any that might be there. The light reveals dried blood on both the passenger seat and the steering wheel. A white towel bunched up on the floorboard is bloodied as well I lean over, and with the tip of the flashlight, poke at the towel, try to unwind it without touching it. But that's not going to work. I hand the flashlight to Laura.

"What's with this?"

"I need you to train the beam on the towel while I unwrap it."

"You're going to touch that thing?"

"Got a better idea? It might have the knife in it."

She points the light at the towel, and I reach for it. I grab a corner that is relatively untouched by blood and lift it up. Something heavy falls from the towel as I raise it. The light drops to the object, now resting on the vinyl seat. The light bounces off the blade of the knife. It's bloody too, but the steel blade shines through the blood spots. In the dim light, looks like the blade itself were red. Like it was made that way.

All I can think to say is, "well, here it is." I turn back to Laura.

Stricken, she stands with the flashlight. She's not aiming it at anything in particular, though. Her eyes are trained at the entrance to the berth.

"What is it," I ask in low whisper.

"I saw something move out there."

"Get on the other side of the truck." She hands the flashlight to me and I shut it off. We both move to the very front of the truck, and crouch behind the hood of it. We don't speak, and breath as little as possible. I draw my service revolver. Keep it close to my chest. I Strain my ears, trying to hear something, anything, but nothing comes. Peer around the side. Beyond the entrance to the berth is light so bright it hurts my eyes after having been back here in the dark. "Nothing out there," I whisper. "Do you think whoever it was could've made it in here already?"

"I don't know."

We sit there for a few minutes more. My legs start to cramp up. Then I see a silhouette dart from behind a pile of trash and move quickly across the mouth of the berth before ducking behind the wall on other side.. I motion for Laura to stay behind the hood of the truck. From my crouched position, I inch forward, keeping the .38 pointed toward the roof. A second figure darts from the same position as the first. I fire at it, but with no time to aim, the shot goes wide. I fire again at the place where both figures were before disappearing again. The bullet hits the brick and the sound of crumbling stone comes a second later.

Then two giant lights appear at the mouth of the berth and I'm blinded. A voice says, "Drop the weapon, Detective."

My eyes open a peep, and then fly back shut from the bright light. Both are trained on my face. Shooting pain courses through my head. "Shit."

"Like I said, Detective. Drop the gun. Put your hands in the air."

I drop the gun, hold my arms above my head. Can't believe I walked into that. Christ, I've lost my edge. Eyes still squeezed shut. I see the blood red inside of my eyelids, so I know the floodlights are still trained on me. "Could you maybe turn those off?"

Laughs, more than one, but I can't tell if there're two or three of them. "You know, Flynn. Next time you are conducting a secret search, you shouldn't park your car directly out front." The lights stay on.

Damn damn, goddammit. Knew it was a bad idea to take the car.

"Now," the voice says. It has to be Richards. "Let's talk about this. I don't want to shoot you. But I can't have you turning over anymore stones. We found our man already. And it would just look bad for us if your version differs from ours. So, I need you to do something for me."

"What's that?"

"We'll let you go, and your girlfriend here too. But you have write up the report the way I want it. This Tom. He killed Jeremiah and Carol Rutherton. And you've got to agree."

So I lie, I go free. If I agree, officially agree, with his conclusion, I can't ever go back on it. Would professionally ruin me. But I've got the evidence to nab Johnny, at least, and make life difficult for Richards and Stratton. "And what if I don't do it, sheriff?"

Another chuckle. But only one, so I can hear where it's source is. This one comes from in front of me. "Well, Flynn, it'd sure be a shame for the drifter to murder the big city detective sent to bring him in."

Shit. Of course Richards wouldn't have officially booked Tom yet. Would wait for a confession to make it kosher. Can't see another way out of this one. They have me pinned down. "Okay," I say. "I'll bite. Now, please turn off the lights." My eyes fly open as soon as the lights go down. Takes me a minute to adjust, but I'm looking at three silhouettes. Can't see their faces, but Richards' voice came from the middle. Large one on my right must be Johnny. The last one I can't make out. It's not Henry Stratton; the figure's much too skinny for that.

"Come on, Flynn," Richards says. "We don't have *all* day."

The other two snicker at this. They haven't noticed Laura yet. She stayed behind the truck, out of sight. They were only looking for me. Must not have thought anyone else would help me. As I approach three men, my other gun, the M1911, weighs heavy in its shoulder holster, so heavy it almost makes me list to my left side. Heart is beating in my chest hard enough for the vibrations to shake my chest. I get closer and the third guy becomes clear. It's the scrawny guy from the bar. He's dressed now like a grease monkey—Standard Oil nametag on his khaki jumpsuit. He must've seen me as I passed by and parked at the train yard.

Of the three of them, I figure I can take Richards and the grease monkey easy, though the latter is probably quick. Don't want to think about Johnny, but if I play my cards right, I won't have to. In front of the three of them now. They've moved closer

together as well, about three feet apart, and standing in a single file line. All three face me. Johnny doesn't have a gun drawn, but Richards has his own service revolver out and held below his waist. He tips his hat to me. "Detective."

I tip an imaginary one back. "Sheriff." Then turn to the scrawny guy. "Don't believe we've met." I hold out my hand.

The scrawny guy eyes me. Unsure of what to do. He's weaponless too. His eyes dart to Richards, who nods back at him. He finally extends his right hand to mine, has to lean forward to reach me. Doesn't have very long arms. Before he can say anything, I grab his hand with mine and pull him into me. His body hits mine and I bring my left arm around to pin him to me. Drop his hand from my right. Grab the M1911 from its holster, put the end of it to the scrawny guy's head.

Richards raises his revolver so that its pointing at my head. "I guess I should've anticipated that. But stop horsing around. Drop it." His voice has assumed the same snarl it did yesterday morning at the restaurant. Can't see his eyes, but I'm sure the same cold gleam is there in the iris. "Or I'll drop you."

Johnny hasn't moved. He remains behind Richards. The floodlight is no longer in his hands and both fists flex. Strange that he doesn't have a gun. Maybe that's not his strong suit. Richards' arm is fully extended now. He thumbs back the hammer on it.

"Actually, Sheriff," I say. Thumb back the hammer on the M1911. "I'm thinking maybe you should drop your weapon."

Richards doesn't move.

I start again. "I'm also thinking I'm a little past tired of this shit. I'm thinking I've solved the Rutherton murders, got the guys right here, but can't do anything because the whole situation was orchestrated by the mayor and his cronies. The Ruthertons were done like a mob hit, despite how sloppy these boys here are with a knife."

"That's no reason to point that piece of artillery at Jay's head now."

"Seems perfectly reasonable to me, Sheriff."

Johnny's still frozen to his spot. Confused or waiting for orders, I don't know.

Richards starts talking again, barrel still on me. "Now, Henry's a much better orator than myself, but let me see if I can explain this. You've heard the line about making an omelet and cracking eggs, right?" He doesn't wait for me to respond. "That's what this was all about. Rock Island—"

"Cut the bullshit, Richards. I know about the passenger line Rock Island wants to build. I know that the people here in Bennett think their town would've 'really been something' had Bennett stayed a prominent stop along the line." I don't tell him that I've no proof to this conjecture, just speculation and a couple of newspaper articles. "I also know the proposed line would cut through a piece of Jeremiah's property and that he wasn't willing to sell." I have even less proof about that. Best way to get confirmation is to throw things out wildly though. "So you can stop feeding me this noble shit about rebuilding Bennett. I don't care."

"Detective, don't you find it at all interesting that the people of Bennett are so willing to cover this up, look the other way?"

"Not everyone."

"The people who helped you weren't Bennett's people. Not really. You've got that librarian, but she's not from Bennett originally. And then Raymond Ellerby, right? Well, technically, he lives outside of town's limits but you know as well as I that he hasn't felt properly toward Bennett his entire life. Am I missing anyone?" He's got a smug smirk on his face, like he just won a prize.

"Donald Stratton gave me this truck. He's not savvy to this." A little exaggerated, but maybe it'll throw Richards off.

"Oh, Don. Well, there's a reason why he's the farmer, and not the man his brother is." This gets a chuckle out of Johnny.

"Anyway, Flynn," Richards says. "Point is, you should put the gun down. Let Jay go. We'll take care of this stuff down at Town Hall, and you can be on your merry way back to Des Moines.

We stand in silence. I don't want to let this guy go. He's my only leverage. Can't figure how to play this without a fight, though, and Johnny is too close to me for comfort. If I drop Jay, Johnny would be on me in a flash. And Richards wouldn't hold back either. Eyes keep darting back between the two of them. Richards still wears a ridiculous smirk and Johnny is expressionless. Christ, what am I supposed to do?

Richards again. "At any rate, Flynn, I'm tired of this. Johnny," he says, looking at him. "Go for it."

Johnny rushes me. Quick as I can, the barrel of the M1 911 leaves the grease monkey's head and I point the cannon at Johnny. No time to aim, and I fire two rounds

at the approaching mass. First shot stops Johnny in his tracks. Second one drops him, leaves him crumpled on the ground.

I whip the scrawny guy back around toward Richards, amazed Richards hasn't fired on me yet. Turn my attention toward the sheriff, find him frozen. His revolver is still pointed straight ahead, eyes shut tight against a light beam which has landed on his face. I throw a glance in that direction. Laura has left her hiding place and picked up my .38, which, along with the flashlight, is trained on Richards.

"Laura," I say. "Why don't you turn the light off? Let the sheriff here see what's what."

Light goes off. The sheriff blinks a couple of times. His eyes find Johnny first, me with the cannon on Jay second, and Laura with the .38 on him third.

"Richards. Drop the gun. Or I drop both of you like I did Stratton's kid."

A thud of metal hitting earth. My cuffs are out and around Jay's wrists. I kick him to the ground and focus on Richards. Cuff him with his own set. Ratcheting sound of metal on metal. Never sounded so good.

Epilogue

October 28, 1957-Flynn

Needless to say, shit hit the fan in Bennett. It's not every day two outsiders bust into town hall with the sheriff in handcuffs and the mayor's kid bleeding to death in the backseat of a Ford. Short form looks like this: Tom cleared on two counts, murder. Jay charged with two counts, murder. Sheriff Mike Richards and Mayor Henry Stratton charged with conspiracy to commit murder as well as aiding two known murderers. Johnny interred at All Souls Catholic Cemetary, north side of town. Though Presbyterian, the Protestants didn't want anything to do with the body of a murderer. Catholics said they'd bury him, but as he never received the first Blessed Sacrament, they buried him the section reserved for the un-baptized children. Don dodged punishment, on account of his helping me during my investigation. Got off with a slap on the wrists, a warning.

Been back in Des Moines for four months now. Captain here, of course, welcomed me back with open arms. No harm done. And a medal from the Governor for busting a corrupt sheriffs department. From the way he spoke, you'd have thought I saved the State of Iowa from certain doom. Maybe there was something to that bit about

being a washed-up Robin Hood. Iowa is a far cry from Jolly England, but if there's a Sherwood Forest, Bennett could be the Midwestern equivalent. I'd drink to that.

Still see Laura on occasion. She comes up to Des Moines every couple weeks or so. Seems Bennett still treats her pretty much the same. The younger citizens are ambivalent toward her, but the ones who were with Richards and Stratton, the *old timers* as Rose Blanchard called them, they're more hostile than ever. I asked her what she expected, and she answered, "Not a thing. Just a royal pain in the ass. Good thing most of 'em don't read." I've been eating better since I've been back. Mostly it's because of Laura, but it'd be nice to look good in a suit again. People tend to lose their guard when you're dashing. Eventually, we'll have to consider moving one place or the other. I'd get out of Des Moines in a heartbeat, but if the people of Bennett are hostile toward Laura at all, I perish the thought of having to deal with them myself on a daily basis. There's always someplace else, but it's hard, you know? To uproot and re-establish.

Last thing I did before leaving Bennett, after getting Richards, Henry, and Jay squared away, was to give Tom a ride out of town. We ate lunch at Stratton's farm, where Tom had been staying since his initial release. Baked chicken casserole, and it was delicious. Don and his wife, Martha, were nothing but cordial the whole meal through. When we finished, Tom and I stood up to go. Don walked with us to the door.

"Tom," he said. He rubbed the bald spot on his head. "Now, remember what I said. You can stay here as long as you want."

"Thanks, Don," Tom said. "But I don't think Bennett is the right place for me." Tom's bruises had mostly healed. Only marks left were a couple of discolored patches that hadn't quite gone from sickish green to its natural color.

As we drove away from Stratton's farm, I asked, "Where you want me to drop you off?"

"I been thinking on that for a long time, Detective." Tom stared out his window, his whole head angled away from mine.

"And?"

"Well, I've been traveling a long time. Years, you know."

"You w^rant to keep going? After this experience?"

"What doesn't kill me, Detective." He laughed after this, the first and only time I ever heard him laugh. "But, you're right. I think I'm done with freight cars."

"That brings us to my original question, Tom. Don't make me beat the answer out of you." I smiled as I said this.

Tom didn't return the smile. "I'm going to head back home. I came from a town outside of Lincoln. Suppose that's as good a spot as any to restart."

I couldn't think of a better place, so I made for Des Moines. I dropped him off at the bus station on the west side of the city. Last thing I saw of him as I pulled away was him standing there under the street lamp, bouncing on his toes and shaking his head all around. Wasn't sure what it meant, but he looked peaceful.

Laura and I talk about him every once in awhile. We both hope he's doing well. I should've given him my address, so he could write or something. But whenever I say

this to Laura, she laughs and says, "Flynn, you wouldn't have known what to write back. And that's assuming you'd even get around to it." Guess she's right. Guess it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to think on the past or what might've been. You start doing that, you start trying to change things until it seems like that past actually happened. And as Don Stratton told me, that sort of thing just isn't natural.