

A HANGING IN TEXAS

East Texas, 1944

Spade to dirt. Every shovelful moved Will closer, rainwater edging off his hat, his jeans and boots red with clay mud; the only way he would be able to finish the grave was to not stop. His best friend Tanner said in the Mexican prison a man'd be shot in the head reaching for supper. Tanner had been his granddad's friend and ranch partner first, and now he was his. Tanner said, your granddad pushed the guards every time, but it was that bull not the Mexican War. You're hell-bent like him for loving Onnie, and more a man than your daddy ever could be in ten lifetimes. Spade to dirt.

Onnie leaned against the Siloam church wall. She was only six years older than Will, too young for a step-mother. Her hat was pulled low so Will could only see her mouth and chin. From the other side of the wrought iron fence, her horse shook, stirrups rattling, hooves set firmly in a wash of bluebonnets. Sweet gums reached toward the rain, limbs choked with holly and poison ivy. It was from the oak out front of the church where Will would hang.

Basics. Tanner answered an eternity, when he asked him how long it might take to strangle on the rope. Eight years Will had waited for his daddy to be released, but nothing was different when he came back. Then his daddy married Onnie and brought her to the ranch to live. It wasn't long and she said one day while running a new north line fence, "I don't love my husband." Said it like that rather than *I don't love your daddy*.

Spade to dirt. Tanner, drunk two nights ago, howled up into the black sky: if I wasn't a weak old man I would've shot your daddy myself.

But there was no time. Supper finished and Onnie asked his daddy, her husband, would he pick up some more wire in town and his daddy hit her. Her hands splayed on the cool tile floor where she'd fallen, fear on her face not surprise.

No. There had been plenty of time. A count of five before Will put his hand on his service revolver.

Spade to dirt. Rain hit the tin roof of the church and rushed off the eaves. Sweet green grass now level with Will's chin. Earthen walls too close around him stunk of mold and iron and clay, that would soon surround and cover him. His heart pushed at his throat. He stopped shoveling and closed his eyes, the smooth wood of the handle in his hands; the handle had been turned on a lathe by a thin black man, dogs at his feet.

That night it happened, he'd still been wearing his gun because of the double shifts at the department. The bullet fired made a hole in his daddy's chest and his daddy collapsed like an old horse put out of its pain.

The box was made from new pine lumber. The grave was deep enough.

Placing the shovel crossways at the edge, Will pulled himself up. Set cigarette to mouth and cupped a match, turning his back to the cars and trucks as though from a breeze, but his hands weren't steady. His mama's carefully tended grave was nearby, since his daddy had beaten her too hard eight years ago. His daddy's unmarked and still mounded.

At his granddad's stone was a small pile of grain some gone from mice. Tanner was half-Indian and believed his old friend rode a ghost horse in heaven that liked a little bit of grain. Next week, Tanner would gift Will's ghost horse, too.

Sheriff Mike stood at the cemetery fence.

"Folks are showing up."

The preacher and Deputy George moved to the big tree before the church, the preacher with his Bible and George with a rope twisted into the right kind of knot. Sheriff Mike was ashen, unshaved.

"I wish you hadn't wanted this, Will. It looks bad."

Did his boss mean dig the grave or hang here instead of getting the chair in Huntsville fifty miles south?

"Is it all right if I talk to her a minute?"

Sheriff Mike said, "Yeah, go ahead."

At the gate, Will had to study the latch though he'd worked it many times. George threw the rope over a heavy bottom limb and the preacher said there was a pail in the closet. The iron gate closed with a heavy rattle and now, Onnie raised her head.

"I'm getting real good at this digging," Will said to her, but it sounded stupid and he apologized. He thought to tell her how he'd ridden in the dawn rain while she slept,

but that was just as foolish. He could tell her he loved her and she would already know, and she would know it wasn't going to do any good.

Sheriff Mike called, "Okay Will."

He took two steps past Onnie, his back turned. He would not weep like he'd seen men do on their way to death row. He unbuttoned his pants, determined not to wet himself either, but Tanner had said it would happen and not to worry about it. Tanner had also said a human body at death was small and empty, and Will had seen that truth with his daddy on the floor.

The rain fell harder. He dropped the cigarette and closed up his pants, then turned to Onnie.

"I'm real scared."

She nodded, her eyes watering so that she looked away. When Will touched her face, her tears were warm on his trembling fingers.

"You oughta go on home, Onnie." His voice was only a whisper. Now he could hardly breathe at all.

"I'll be here," she said and he pulled her close, as though she could save him, as though together they could somehow overcome even death. They would have shared years and old age.

She whispered, "Will, I'll be right here."

Her words were what he needed. He let go of her, and he turned away.

Along the white wall of the church, the ground was soft; his boots were heavy with mud and water. At the corner Will saw the people under flared umbrellas and others just blinking in the rain. An overturned pail waited beneath the rope noose, his

first step to eternity. Sheriff Mike put the handcuffs on him, apologizing, saying it would be better. The preacher read the Psalms as the noose was set down over Will's head and brought tight. He was helped up onto the pail and George for some reason handed him his hat, so Will held to the brim and thought how all he had to do was stand.

The rain fell cold on his head like once when his mama and daddy took him to Corpus on the beach, she not happy it wasn't sunny but daddy said who cares we're wet anyway. Last fall, branding, Tanner's smile in the dusty heat, the sweet lather of horses and the stink of burnt hair.

That first time, Onnie's pale skin in dappled sunshine, her hands on his face. Sleeping that morning. Leaning now against the church wall, before her the plain wood casket and the mound of red sand.

Will closed his eyes and stepped off.

-- The End --