

Like the sound of breaking glass, the bell above the door tinkled noisily as Mrs. Wadsworth stepped through the open door with her dead dog in her arms. Bringing with her a blast of cold air from outside, she walked down the aisle of canned vegetables and laid the animal on the store counter. She slammed the palm of her hand down hard on the counter causing the coins in the breast cancer donation can to jingle.

"Your boy did this," she said, her voice quivering with rage. "He's a murderer."

Tom stepped from behind the cash register and placed his hand on the lifeless white and brown beagle's chest. "He's dead, alright. What killed him?"

"Poison. Jonah poisoned him," she said.

"How did he do that?" Tom said. He ran his hand down the dog's body as if about to pet it, then remembered it was dead and pulled his hand away and put it in his pocket.

"He fed it some raw hamburger that he put poison in," she said. She tugged her heavy wool coat around her hefty frame.

"Did you see him do it?" Tom said.

Her eyes suddenly opened wide as if she had just been startled. "Of course not, but I know he did it. There was some hamburger by Chester's body when I found him in the yard yesterday and Jonah was in our yard petting Chester just a short time before that."

"But you didn't see him feed Chester any hamburger?" Tom said.

"No, but who else would do such a thing and as I said . . .," she started.

"You shouldn't make accusations you can't prove," Tom said.

"My proof is my poor dead Chester." She bent over the dog, almost laying her upper body on it. "Poor Chester," she whispered in its ear.

"I'm sorry about Chester," Tom said.

Mrs. Wadsworth raised up slowly and said in a controlled, threatening manner, "You're not sorry. Believe me, your boy won't get away with this." She scooped the dog into her arms and abruptly turned toward the door and walked out of the store, leaving the discordant jingling of the bells to fill the air.

Coming from behind the curtain in the doorway near the end of the counter, Jonah stepped out of the storeroom. "She's crazy," he said. "I didn't kill her dog."

"I know you didn't, son," Tom said. "It's sad about her dog, though."

"Yeah, it's sad," Jonah said. He turned and jumped up onto the counter, landing behind the potato chips display. "They have a band playing tonight at the Irish Gulch," he said as he grabbed a small bag of barbecue potato chips from the display and tore it open with his teeth.

"You're too young to be in there," Tom said. He took a tattered rag from under the counter and began polishing the keys of the register.

"Shoot, Rochford is so small that everyone knows me and no one cares how old I am," Jonah said. "I

just go in to have a Coke and listen to the music. It's not like I have any alcohol."

"A seventeen year old boy should be doing other things than going to a bar," Tom said.

"What else is there to do in Rochford on Saturday night?" Jonah said.

The bell chimed jarringly as Fred Dickens came into the store. He stopped at the door and clapped his hands, trying to warm them.

"Cold out there, ain't it Fred?" Tom said as he tossed the rag under the counter.

"Colder than a witch's tit," Fred said. He stomped his boots on the store's hardwood floor causing the bottles of salad dressing on the nearby shelf to rattle against each other. He walked down the aisle with the loaves of bread and grabbed a loaf of packaged white sandwich bread and shoved it under his arm as if he was carrying a football. At the end of the shelves he opened the glass refrigerator door and pulled out a large carton of whole milk. Letting the door close on its own he walked over to the counter.

"You going to graduate?" he said to Jonah as he walked behind him.

Jonah bit into a chip. "In June. I hope."

"What you going to do after that?" Fred asked as he placed the bread and milk on the counter.

"Maybe join the Army," Jonah said.

Tom turned the bread over and looked at the price and hit the keys on the register. "He's a bright boy. He'll be able to do whatever he sets his mind to." He smashed down the keys for the milk and hit the total key. The amount showed up on a card in the glass window at the top of the register and the cash drawer opened with a resounding ring.

"Five sixty-five," Tom said.

Fred took the bills from his wallet and the change from his pants pocket and laid it on the counter as Tom put the groceries in a brown paper bag.

"You heard anything about the mill being torn down?" Fred asked as he took the bag in one arm.

"Haven't heard a thing about it lately," Tom said. "I hope they leave it standing. The tourists like it."

"If it falls down while some tourists are climbing around inside it no one's going to like it very much," Fred said.

"I'd like to put a match to it and make a big bonfire of it," Jonah said as he stuffed several chips into his mouth.

"Just what we'd need," Fred said. "Burning down the old mill while burning down my house right next to it along with all of Rochford and probably starting a forest fire."

"He was only kidding," Tom said. "Weren't you, son?" he said to Jonah.

"Sure, Pop."

Fred walked down the aisle and out the door, his head bent as he walked into the wind.

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Tom lazily rearranged the boxes of cereal on the shelf while glancing out of one of the four rectangular windows at the front of the store. The wind was stirring up the dirt on the street and blowing it toward the direction of the Irish Gulch saloon on the other side of the intersection. Although never busy, there hadn't been a vehicle pass by the store for over an hour. He took a box of Lucky Charms from the shelf and went to the window and looked out. The windows in the three houses across the street were dark. He opened the box, ripped open the inner bag, reached into the cereal, and searched around until he found one of the dehydrated marshmallows. He pulled it out and for a moment stared wistfully at the green clover marshmallow he was holding between his fingertips then put it in his mouth.

"What are you doing there?"

Tom turned. His wife was at the other end of the aisle, a look of bewilderment on her face.

"Just seeing what's going on outside," he said.

"I thought you and Jonah were going to do inventory today."

"It can wait," he said. "He had some other things he wanted to do and I told him it was okay."

"You let him get away with not doing enough around here," she said, crossing her arms.

Tom searched around in the box and pulled out a yellow moon. He held it up and showed it to her. "That remind you of anything, Beth?"

"I can't see what you're holding," she said, not moving as if rooted in the spot where she was standing.

"It's a crescent moon," he said. "Just like the name of that motel we used to go to before we were married."

"That was a long time ago and the motel was the Starlight."

"Oh, that's right. There's stars in here also," he said as he looked in the box and began pushing the cereal around.

"I don't have time for this," she said. "I have a pot roast in the oven." She walked away, opening the door that led into their house attached to the back of the store.

Tom pulled out an orange star and held it up and then realized she was no longer there. He put it in his mouth just as the store's door opened and the bell clattered.

The county sheriff, Mike Ramsy walked in, holding his cap in his hands. As the door closed he looked around, saw Tom near the window, and said, "We might finally get that snowstorm we've been expecting."

"Looks like it," Tom said. "How are you, Mike? You haven't been around much lately."

"This is a big county and you folks here in Rochford don't cause much trouble." He walked over to where Tom was standing and looked out the window. "Other than this store you could drive through this town and not even know someone actually lived here."

Tom shook the box of cereal and peered into it. "Since the Thewsons moved away the population's at a new low, eighty-four."

"I had heard that," Mike said. "The dog population is getting smaller also I hear."

Tom reached into the box and pulled out another clover. "So, Sylvia Wadsworth called you, did she?"

"Hers was the third call," Mike said. "Three pets poisoned in a town this small requires looking into. Mrs. Wadsworth seems to think your boy, Jonah, is poisoning the animals."

"She came in here carrying her dead dog and made that accusation," Tom said. "But she has no proof and everyone knows she has never liked me or Jonah."

Mike ran his hand over his balding scalp. "For all the good being brought up in a small town like Rochford can do, it can also do some harm."

"What are you saying, Mike?" Tom said.

"Only that one of the other pet owners also said they think it was Jonah who poisoned their cat," Mike said.

"I'd stake my life on it, Jonah had nothing to do with poisoning those animals," Tom said. He closed the box. "Was there anything else you wanted, Mike?"

"We've known each other for many years," Mike said. "I'm just doing my duty."

"Did you tell Mrs. Wadsworth and whoever else accused Jonah of killing their pets that in all these years you've never had one problem on account of Jonah?" Tom said.

"It sometimes takes a bad seed a long time to sprout."

"Unless you have proof that Jonah killed those animals and you've come to arrest him, I'm going to ask you nicely to leave my store, Sheriff," Tom said.

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Beth placed two plates with pot roast, boiled potatoes, peas and a roll on the counter. The aroma of the food wafted in the air, mixing with the store's scents of floor polish and age. The panes of glass in the windows rattled as they were battered by the wind and pelting rain.

"Jonah should be here," she said. He sat on a stool behind the counter and faced her plate of food.

"I told him he could go hear the band down at the saloon," Tom said, standing at the counter on the aisle side.

Beth turned her head and looked out the windows at the rain slashing sideways on the street. "I can't believe the saloon is going to be open in this storm." She put her fork into a potato and raised it to her mouth and bit into it.

"Why are we even open?" Tom said as he cut the pot roast into smaller pieces.

"We're practically always open," she said. "Ten in the morning until ten at night every day of the year except Christmas and Thanksgiving. It says so on the sign on the door." She bit into and swallowed the rest of the potato.

"If we weren't we would have closed up for good a long time ago," he said. He put a piece of pot roast in his mouth.

"Maybe closing up and moving out of Rochford would have been a good thing," she said.

"I've lived here my entire life," he said. "Where would we have gone?" He pushed several peas around on his plate with his fork.

"Maybe somewhere that would have given Jonah a decent start in life." She cut into her pot roast and put a piece in her mouth.

"Rochford is a decent place," Tom said. "Nice people live in this town."

"It's been slowly dying for years."

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Still in his pajamas, Tom opened the door leading into the store.

Jonah was at the counter on the side of the aisle. He turned, surprised, and said, "Pop, what are you doing up so early?"

Tom looked at the windows and saw the snow falling in the early morning light, then looked back at Jonah. "I was going to ask you the same question."

Jonah pushed aside a large plastic container on the counter and leaned on the container to hide it. He shoved a plastic baggie in his coat pocket. "I was going to go over Jake Harley's and see if he was going to get his snowmobiles out."

Tom walked toward him. "What are you trying to hide there?"

"Hide? I ain't hiding anything Pop," Jonah said.

Tom gently pushed Jonah away from the counter. He picked up the container and read the label on it. "Gopher bait. Strychnine." He stared at it for several moments before saying anything. "Where did you get this?"

"I found it in the abandoned Winslow house," Jonah said.

"It's poison," Tom said. "This stuff can kill cats, dogs and even people."

"I had no idea," Jonah said.

"Whatever you put in your pocket, hand it to me," Tom said angrily.

Jonah pulled the baggie out of his pocket. "It's just some leftover pot roast. I was going to take it with me in case I got hungry."

Tom grabbed the baggie from Jonah's hand. "Did you put poison on this meat?"

"No, Pop, why would I do that?" Jonah said.

Tom started to open the baggie. "What if I ate some of it?"

"No, Pop, don't," Jonah said. "Okay, I put the gopher bait on the pot roast."

"Why?" Tom said.

"I was going to kill a few of the rats that are always getting into the saloon's dumpster. That's all, Pop. I thought you'd get angry at me for playing around with poison."

Tom felt his throat tightening as he said, "It would kill me if I found out you were lying to me, Jonah."

Jonah looked around him, as if looking for an escape route. "I ain't lied to you in my entire life, Pop."

"What about the animals around town that were poisoned?" Tom said.

"It wasn't me that did it, but they're just animals, Pop. I don't know why everyone's so angry about it," Jonah said as he backed toward the store front door.

"They're living things, pets, animals that people care about."

"If it was me that poisoned the animals, I'd be graduated and enlisted in the Army before anyone figured it out anyway," Jonah said. He dashed toward the door and grabbed the knob and pulled the door open making the bell rattle noisily. Standing in the doorway as snow blew in, Jonah said, "You know the folks who live here. Dumb as a bag of rocks, every one of them."

He ran out, and out of sight, leaving the imprints of his boots in the snow.

Stunned, Tom watched the large flakes of snow fall on the store's floor. Almost mechanically he walked to the door and closed it, then went to a window and stared out at the snow covered street. It was as empty as he felt.

He opened the baggie and reached in and took out a handful of the pot roast. He stared at it for several minutes before he put it in his mouth.

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