

Death in the Holler

By John G. Bluck

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CHAPTER 1

Loud country music vibrated windows and doors of the Holler Bar, disturbing the rural silence. The large cinder block tavern stood next to a gravel road in the small wooded Kentucky valley.

The last of the sun's orange rays had just disappeared behind the horizon that Saturday, October 20, 2029, and the moon was nearly full. *Crazy, uncertain things could soon happen*, Game Warden Luke Ryder thought. *Like how's my life gonna change, if I'm out of a job?*

Inside the jam-packed saloon, Ryder, a tall middle-aged man with black hair, sipped bourbon from a shot glass. His feet propped up on the brass rail near the floor, he sat on his usual stool at the rough wooden bar. A new backwoods tune pounded Ryder's head while cigarette smoke burned his eyes.

The night was still young, around seven, Ryder reckoned. It was going to be chilly. The bourbon warmed his throat and chest and relaxed him. Too

bad he'd have to bid booze goodbye forever, if he could actually do it. Alcohol was one of his only two good friends.

Though drinking would make him feel better for an hour or so, it had him in its clutches. He always drank too much. Then came the painful hangover. He told himself quitting was unlikely. He had to admit it. He was an alcoholic.

Yesterday afternoon Ryder's boss, Captain Ralph Axton, had told him to stop showing up half crooked during working hours, or be fired.

Ryder stared into the bourbon that remained in his glass. The deafening music seemed to mute. His surroundings began to fade. His view of patrons along the crowded bar wavered as if he were looking at them through a layer of disturbed water. He gazed down and observed his arm automatically lift his glass toward his lips. Someone tapped his shoulder.

Ryder turned with his shot glass halfway to his mouth. County Sheriff Jim Pike stood there, smiling. Stocky with brown, curly hair, he stood five-foot-eleven. He was fit but had a modest beer belly. "How's it going, Luke?"

"Could be better."

Pike slid onto the bar stool next to Ryder. "What's the matter, buddy?"

Ryder dipped his head toward the floor, then looked Pike in the eye. "I'm about to be out of a job."

"How come?"

"My boozing, of course. Axton told me if I show up lit on the job again, I'm done."

Pike rubbed his whiskery chin. "Yeah, but being a game warden, you're out on your own most of the

time, right?"

"Yeah, but Axton's making me check in at his office every morning."

"I thought you were thinking of getting into a program?"

"Yep, but I'm not sure it'll make a difference."

Pike signaled the bartender. "Joe, can I have a draft?"

"Comin' up, partner."

Pike turned to Ryder. "Long as I've known you, and that's a spell, I don't remember you giving up on anything. I think you can beat this."

"There's no way I can quit drinkin' that fast. I need another job."

"So, what do you think you'll do?"

Ryder slowly shook his head. "I'm not sure."

"Couple of years back you helped me with the Jenkins homicide. If it weren't for you, Becket would have gotten away with it. I know you really wanted to be a public affairs officer at Kentucky Fish and Wildlife and had to settle for a game warden job. But honestly you got real talent for police work."

"Yeah, but if I get fired for bein' a drunk, who's gonna hire me as a cop or even as a public affairs officer?"

Pike sipped his beer. "Don't give up on yourself. You're my best friend, so I know you won't get mad if I tell you something. Sign up for a program now. Tell Axton about it."

"Word has it Axton wants me gone yesterday."

"Check in at the office sober. Drink early in the evening. Limit yourself to a beer or two."

"Look, Jim, I won't last long as a game warden.

I'm an alcoholic."

Pike paused, looking at the large Saturday night crowd. "Okay, I'll risk giving you a chance. Except I'd want you to sign up with AA or something like it. Next time I get a big case, I'll ask Axton to loan you to me for a few days. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes. Thanks, Jim, but what good would that do?"

"I'll argue that I need another deputy — that you're the best fit."

"I appreciate the opportunity. I just hope I don't disappoint you."

"Soon as a good case comes up, I'll be in touch with you and Axton."

"But in this county there aren't a whole hell of a lot of big cases, are there?"

Pike stood. "You'd be surprised." He reached out and shook Ryder's hand.

"I'm much obliged, Jim."

"See you soon, Luke."

Ryder felt sweaty and jumpy as he watched Pike leave. Then he ordered another bourbon and a beer.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning at dawn, an old farmer, also a part-time hunter splashed his off-road utility vehicle through the creek that crossed his land.

He stopped the electric Intimidator UTV at a secluded spot on his acreage that bordered woods. On a small patch of land he'd planted clover, corn, soybeans, and winter oats and wheat in a food plot to attract deer. His head filled with dreams of killing a big buck for a trophy and a doe or two for meat.

The ruddy sun was rising. A brisk wind rustled a row of dried cornstalks. This second day of Kentucky's muzzle-loader hunting season had a crisp beginning.

Farmer Joe Ford felt lightheaded. His arm pained him. "Too much work," he told himself. He often talked aloud when he worked the land alone. Though sixty-eight years old, he was as strong as a jackhammer.

He glanced at a skinny tree. His expensive trail

camera was gone. It automatically took pictures of animals that visited the plot and sent the images to his cell phone via the Internet.

“Damn thieving Tom Bow!”

Sixteen-year-old Bow lived down the road on the next farm. He was troubled — killed cats and dogs, rumor had it. He even had set fire to an ancient shed his grandfather had built sixty years ago.

Recently, Ford had found a doe shot dead, out of season, on his back forty. He suspected Bow had killed the gentle creature. Ford had called Game Warden Luke Ryder, and told him that Tom Bow might have shot the deer. But Warden Ryder couldn't prove a thing except the doe had been slain illegally.

Ford clenched his teeth. His heart raced. Despite the cold, his body flushed, and he was oddly sweaty. He smelled the clean air, and he felt a bit better. He plodded to the deer feeding station he'd set up. Mounted on a tall pole, the feeder included a big plastic bin that held three hundred pounds of seed. The gravity-fed grain slid into four troughs.

Because the bin was still half full of dried corn, he didn't need to add more. As he turned away from the feeder and looked past his canvas hunter's blind, a patch of blue caught his eye. The blue color was barely visible behind a bush, between its leaves. He walked past the blind and around the thicket. A man's body lay sprawled on the ground. The old farmer's eyes widened.

The swarthy corpse was face down. Was he Mexican? Ford shivered as his eyes focused on the large, gaping wound in the dead man's back. Was it

caused by a big lead ball? Blood had soaked the dirt around the body and had thickened. The deceased wore blue jeans and fancy cowboy boots. Barefoot tracks ran across the firm mud between smashed cornstalks.

The farmer's fingers trembled. He tapped 911 on his cell phone's key pad.

"911. What's your emergency?"

Ford cleared his throat. "I found a dead man on my farm. I need the police out here right away."

"You sure he's dead?"

"Yeah. There's a big hole in his back. It looks like he's been shot. And lots of blood's all over the ground."

"What's your name and exact location?"

"Joe Ford. My farm's at the seven-mile marker on Kentucky Route 2910. I'm near the northeast corner of my place."

"The county sheriff is on his way. Stay at the scene."

CHAPTER 3

The irritating ring of Ryder's cell phone woke him early Sunday morning. The noise jabbed his brain like a sharp knife. That added to a severe headache that pounded his skull like a prizefighter. *Shut up, shut up*, he silently said, the phrase echoing in his brain. Nauseous from drinking too much bourbon Saturday night, he snatched the device to stop its racket.

"Hello?" He ran his fingers through his black hair, dragging his nails across his scalp, hoping to reduce his pain.

"Warden Ryder?"

"Yeah?"

"This is Deputy George Mills at the County Sheriff's Office. Sorry to call you so early, but there's been a fatal shooting."

"Uh-huh." Ryder's voice was slow and deep. The pain in his head grew more intense.

"Sheriff Jim Pike asked me to call you to see if you could join him at the scene. It happened at Joe

Ford's farm."

"Yep, I know the place." Ryder rubbed his mustache. A wave of nausea almost made his stomach erupt. "I'll go soon as I get dressed." Bitter bile spread through his mouth.

"I'll let Sheriff Pike know you're on the way. Goodbye."

Ryder struggled to talk. "Bye." His insides retched. He pushed the cell's disconnect button. "Damn me."

Ryder's face turned white. He hustled to the toilet, fell to his knees, bent his thin, six-foot-two-inch, thirty-eight-year-old body over the pot, and dry heaved.

He roared, "Crap!" The cry punished his brain. After his agony subsided, he willed himself to stand.

He wondered if he'd been cursed with a bad combination of genes from his Italian-born mother and his Kentucky father, who both had liked to drink. His mother had died from an overdose of cocaine. His father had passed when his liver had given out.

Ryder rinsed his mouth with cold tap water, then splashed it across his face. After rubbing his head with a stale towel, he put on last night's flannel shirt and pulled trousers over his briefs. When he lowered the toilet lid, it slipped and crashed down. Another surge of queasiness raced through his body. He sat on the seat and stayed still for thirty seconds. He yanked on his boots.

Staring into the bathroom mirror, he examined his unshaven face and black, unkempt hair. He shook his head. "I gotta stop this," he mumbled. He

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shuffled into the bedroom and took his holstered Glock handgun from a hook on the wall.

As he left, he eased the apartment door shut, more to minimize his head pain than to be polite to neighbors. He had a half-hour drive to the Holler, but less if he stepped on it.

CHAPTER 4

Ryder's head ached even after he had chewed four aspirins. He stopped his timeworn Dodge Ram pickup truck in the driveway of the Ford farm. He looked around but didn't see police activity. He muttered, "Where the hell are they?"

Ryder snatched his cell phone and called Sheriff Pike.

Pike answered on the second ring. "Luke?"

"Jim, where the hell are you? I just pulled up at Ford's house." Ryder's mind flashed back to visions of going to school with Pike. The two of them had been best friends ever since they had met in Mrs. Skinner's seventh grade class. Ryder had few friends then. He was ashamed to invite his classmates to his dilapidated home that he shared with his alcoholic, Baptist father and his Catholic, Italian-born mother. Her foreign accent and mannerisms seemed strange to the folks who lived in the Holler.

Pike's voice shot out from Ryder's mobile phone,

startling him. "Take the dirt track by the barn. The scene's at the northeast corner of the farm."

The phone was plastered to Ryder's ear. "Be there in a few." He disconnected the call and guided his truck along the crushed rock driveway toward the barn and a rutted dirt trail. Birds sang. *How could they be happy and oblivious when someone lay dead on the cold ground?*

Dried cornstalks and old soybean plants stood on both sides of the track that led to Ford's food plot. The morning's low-angled sunbeams somewhat blinded Ryder as he drove. It wasn't long before he noticed old man Ford's white hair. He was talking to Pike. Now Ford pointed at his deer feeder and then at a nearby skinny tree by a hunter's blind.

Ryder eased out of his vehicle, and a cold breeze struck his face. Pike turned and glanced at him. Though usually even-keeled, Pike could get irritated at times. Nevertheless, he always recovered and made amends to anyone he had offended.

Pike grasped Ryder's hand. "I'm glad you could help me so soon after our talk last night. I would've asked for you anyway, this being black powder season."

Ryder squeezed Pike's hand. "Thanks for the break."

Ryder caught sight of the blue cloth of the dead man's shirt through bush leaves beyond the deer feeder. He turned to look at Ford. "Sorry you got to deal with this."

"I'll get over it." Ford paused and studied his boots. "When the sheriff told me you'd be here, too,

I told him you might have some insight because you investigated after that doe was killed here out of season. I still think Tom Bow shot it.” A bead of sweat rolled down Ford’s temple, in spite of the frigid wind. His hand quivered. He grabbed Ryder’s hand and shook it limply.

Ryder noticed the old farmer’s down-turned lips. Ford squinted and then clutched his left arm.

Ryder cocked his head. “You hurting?”

Ford forced a smile. “Too much work.”

A perky woman with blond pigtaails who wore a crime scene technician’s vest was tying yellow police tape from tree to tree. She was creating a box around the body. Pike said, “Luke and Joe, this is Alice Strom.”

She looked up. “Hi, y’all.” She glanced down and then knotted the bright tape to the wire fence that ran along the east side of the farm. That created bounds around the body. She looked back at the men and smiled.

“Pleased to meet you,” Ryder said.

“Me, too,” Ford said in a feeble voice.

Pike blinked. He pointed at the crumpled body that lay sprawled behind the bush. “Joe, why don’t you tell Luke where you were when you spotted the dead man.”

Ford took a few steps toward the body. “I was here when I seen his blue shirt through that shrub. I walked around the bush. I saw he was dead. There’s a hell of a hole in his back. Looks like a big caliber bullet hit him.”

Ryder’s headache was better. The out-of-doors freshness was helping to wipe out his pain. He caught Ford’s eyes. “Since this is the second day of

muzzle-loader hunting season, maybe he was hit by mistake. You hear a shot real early this morning or maybe yesterday?”

“Nope. Me and the missus was away a few days at my grandson’s wedding in Cincinnati. Got home last night about nine.”

Pike cocked his head toward the body. “Let’s take a better look.” He led Ryder and Ford around the bush. “Be sure to stay behind the crime scene tape. We’ve got booties and gloves we’ll have to wear, if we get any closer.”

Now Ryder saw the corpse more clearly. The deceased looked like a big rag doll on its stomach with red paint splashed on him and on nearby weeds. The dead man seemed peaceful, harmless, like a discarded puppet, just an object. *Seeing him as a kid’s doll is my defense mechanism kicking in*, Ryder thought.

Pike stared at Ryder for a moment. “You feeling under the weather?”

“Just a tad.” Ryder realized his breath smelled bad. He looked down at the soil and hoped Pike hadn’t guessed that he wanted another drink right then and there. Ryder felt like Pike’s eyes were probing his thoughts.

Pike searched Ryder’s eyes. “I’m glad you’re here on such short notice on a Sunday.” He stared at the sky and then back at the body. “Sometimes I wonder why I ever chose to be a policeman instead of a psychologist. Does anybody even care that this guy is dead?”

Ryder paused for a few seconds, and then blinked. “This dead man is important to someone. He was his mother’s son. When he was three, he

was probably cute. Was it a bad decision a long time ago that eventually led him here? Was he mostly bad? Mostly good? Everybody has some good in them. At least one person loves him for that goodness. At least a few folks need to know why he died and to have his killer found.”

Pike patted Ryder on the shoulder. “Thanks for that. Our duty is to get to the truth about his death, accident or not, for the sake of his friends and family.”

Ryder peered at the victim’s back and nodded.

Pike scratched his ear. “What kind of a weapon would make such a nasty wound?”

“I think Joe’s right,” Ryder said. “It’s gotta be a big bullet, probably shot from a black powder weapon. Looks like the kind of damage I’ve seen on many a dead deer.”

Pike nodded. “I reckon you’re right. The coroner will be here soon. He should be able to tell us for sure after he does an autopsy.”

At that moment Dr. Mitch Corker arrived in a white, electric-powered van with “County Coroner” painted on its sides in gold lettering.

“The meat wagon’s here,” Pike said. He walked to the vehicle to greet Corker.

CHAPTER 5

Coroner Dr. Mitch Corker gingerly slid out of his van near Farmer Ford's food plot.

Ryder noticed that Corker's familiar face appeared older than the last time he had seen the man. The doctor had a scraggly, gray mustache, a creased face, and light blue eyes that had seen countless bodies over more than thirty years.

Corker reached into the van's cab with an arm that trembled a little and removed a leather medical bag. He walked with a slight limp toward the sheriff and Ryder. Corker nodded at Ryder, and then grasped Pike's hand. "What have you boys got here?"

"Not sure if it's a hunting accident or murder," Pike said. "Guess you know it's the second day of muzzle-loader deer hunting season?"

"Yep, and some of them old smooth bore muskets are dangerous as sticks of dynamite."

Ryder's mind flashed through a series of memories of dead deer with ugly black powder

wounds.

Pike gestured toward Ford. “Dr. Mitch Corker, this is Mr. Joe Ford who discovered the body.”

Corker shook Ford’s hand. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Ford.”

“Likewise,” Ford said, his voice shaky.

Corker tilted his head, looked at Ford for a second, then nodded. “Let’s take a look at the deceased.”

Pike pointed. “He’s behind that bush among the corn stalks.”

Ford said, “I was checking the grain supply when I found him just after dawn.”

The wound on the dead man’s back was just below his left shoulder blade. Ryder thought the deceased was in his twenties. He wore decorated boots. They — along with his jeans and bright blue, long-sleeved denim shirt — made him look like he could be from Texas along the Mexican border.

Pike caught the attention of the crime scene technician. “Alice, how far along are you with processing the scene?”

“I’ve cleared a path to the body. I’ll mark it so you guys can get closer.” She took a roll of yellow crime scene tape and a handful of tent stakes from a cardboard box and marked a path.

After slipping white protective covers over their shoes, Ryder, Pike, and Dr. Corker followed the path with caution and stopped near the victim. Ford remained outside of the yellow crime scene tape.

Pike glanced aside at Alice who had crouched by a patch of plaster of Paris she’d poured into a depression in the ground. “What did you find?”

Alice stood. “A barefoot print. Someone with small feet made real good impressions in the mud. It’s dried enough that it’s almost like modeling clay.”

“See any other tracks?”

“Yeah, boot prints, from the deceased.”

Pike smiled. “Keep up the good work, dear.”

Alice scowled at the sheriff, then smiled. “Aren’t you a little over-the-hill for sexist talk?”

“Sorry, sweetie,” Pike said.

Alice shook her head. “You may be a male chauvinist pig, but anything to take my mind off the job for a minute is good.” She chortled, and removed the cast of the footprint. She bagged it, grabbed a clipboard, and began to sketch the layout of the crime scene.

As Pike, Dr. Corker, and Ryder walked out of the cordoned area, Ryder noted that Ford was pale, upset, even nervous. A drop of sweat rolled down his temple, though the air was frigid. Ryder figured Ford might be faint because of the ghastly body, but then again, Ford had discovered the stiff a while ago. “You okay, Joe?”

Ford groaned. “No. I got a pain . . .” The old farmer grabbed his upper left arm and stumbled.

Ryder seized Ford before he could fall and eased him onto the ground.

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