

Billy dozed in and out of sleep, hoping his mother would come—and dreading the arrival of his wife. A few hours later, he woke up to see two men in khaki uniforms hovering by his bed. Both wore wide-brim hats.

“So your name is Billy Dalton,” said the older, fatter one. Billy noticed a big gold star hanging from his chest while the younger man wore a smaller silver star.

“Who are you?” asked Billy.

“I’m Sheriff Huck Harkins from Kane County. This here is Deputy Holloway. He found you by the burning car. He saved your life.”

“Is the little girl okay? And her mother?”

The sheriff ignored the question. “What were you doing in my county late at night?”

“I was driving back to my home in Durham, returning from a business trip to Lumberton.”

“You’d done some drinking, didn’t you, boy?” asked the deputy.

“I stopped for a few beers in Fayetteville, that’s all.”

“More than a few; you smelled like a brewery when I found you.”

“How fast were you going?” asked the sheriff.

Billy was confused. “What do you mean? I always drive under the speed limit in Kane County.”

“From the tire marks on the road, it looks like you were traveling mighty fast,” said Deputy Holloway.

“What? I stopped my car to help the woman and the child.”

“Your head must’ve got messed up in the crash. There weren’t any other people there except you. The way I see it, you were drunk and speeding. That’s why you veered off the road and smashed into the tree. The gas tank caught fire, exploded, and threw you a far distance to the

middle of the road, which is where we found you. Once you're able to get out of here, we'll be taking you back to Kane County to face charges of drunk driving and reckless speeding."

"You got it all wrong. The Packard I was driving never caught fire. It was the other car on fire, the one with the woman and child."

The two men exchanged glances. "There was only one car there—the one you were driving, the one you smashed into the tree."

"But the woman and the little girl . . . ?"

"There weren't nobody else there, son."