

The County

By

T.A. Novak

This book is a work of fiction. Places, events
and situations in this story are purely fictional.
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dead, is coincidental.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the past and present members of Michigan's Oakland County Sheriff's Department and the police officers throughout the United States of America—men and women that daily risk their lives for the citizens of this country.

I would especially like to humbly dedicate this work to the two NYC Police Officers, Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu, who were ambushed and killed for just being police officers.

The names of the victims of the Oakland Child Killer were purposely withheld within this novel out of respect for the four children murdered, their parents and surviving relatives.

Requiescat In Pace.

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Chapter One

Jake sat behind the wheel of his 1975 Pontiac Bonneville with its four-barrel carb feeding the 250 horses that were rumbling under the hood. He was positioned on the Baldwin Road down ramp watching the approaching headlights of the intermittent nighttime traffic on I-75 that weaved south toward Pontiac and Detroit.

He wasn't looking for anyone breaking the speed limit. He had a purpose. Five minutes before, a radio broadcast had said two men in a white Buick were involved in a gas station robbery on Miller Road in Flint. Jake had jotted down the physical descriptions of the two black men and their car before taking up his position. Now it was just a waiting game—maybe even a complete waste of time—hoping a car fitting that description would be heading toward either city. Jake settled in to watch and wait anyway.

If the robbers were heading south, he knew he had just a short window of opportunity. Miller Road was about fifty miles north of where he waited. If he was right, he had about forty minutes or a bit more, depending on how fast they were driving. Jake figured he could afford to spend an hour of his midnight shift playing a hunch. He was glad to be on his own after nearly a month of working with a senior deputy. Some other guy might not want to take the time, but he liked the hunt. A cop was never sure about what he might run across while on duty—day or night.

He was watching the southbound traffic while his mind wandered. He had written two speeders when he first hit the road and that brought a smile to his face. Yes, he was writing traffic tickets. He thought about the time in Detroit that Lieutenant Orth chewed him out for only writing one ticket in 1967. Nine years later writing tickets was part of his job on the Oakland County Sheriff's Department. But now, as he straddled the shoulder of the down ramp, he was back doing what he liked most about wearing a badge—hunting bad guys.

The interior of his car, Three Seventeen, was not all that different from the Detroit-issued patrol cars he had driven, though his Pontiac had a bit more under the hood than the Plymouths and Fords. He was happy having a light bar overhead and a radio under the dash, even if his car was now painted black and white and had a six-point star on the door. Colors or the type of car made no difference to Jake. The main thing was: he was still a cop.

One other major change, beside the color of his uniform, was instead of a partner he had a Mossberg Model 590 riot gun with a twenty inch barrel locked in a rack next to him. Jake reflected on some of the partners he'd had in Detroit and smiled. The shotgun, even locked in the rack, was better than a few of them. Some were just like working a one-man unit. Then too, he missed great partners like Remington Southworth, Gunny Wynn, and Jesse Scott. Jake chuckled to himself as Jesse came to mind. He'd get about as much conversation out of the Mossberg as

he did Jess.

Jake's life as a deputy was drastically different from Detroit. For one, his road patrol duties in the county could take him anywhere within its 908 square miles, though the deputies mainly policed the northern end of the county. Most of the smaller communities like Troy and Oak Park had their own departments. The city of Detroit totaled only 143 square miles and Jake was mostly assigned to patrol only a portion of it—like his last job in the Fifth Precinct that covered about 11 square miles. Then too, in Detroit, if you looked hard enough, the bad guys were everywhere. Now, after a month, he realized that working in Oakland County meant there weren't so many bad guys and a lot of his time would be spent looking for an occasional runaway horse or pranksters who were knocking over mailboxes.

Jake's thoughts were interrupted by a light-colored GM product streaking south on the Interstate and he slammed his foot down on the accelerator. The 250 horses sprung to life as he flicked on his headlights. In a minute he was doing ninety as he closed the distance between his unit and the car that caught his eye. He hadn't yet turned on his overhead light bar. If anything, he wanted to look like any other car speeding down the freeway in the middle of the night. It took him three miles to close the gap enough to recognize that the car in front of him was a Chevrolet.

Still curious, Jake slowly passed the Chevy to get a glimpse of the occupants. *White factory workers heading home* registered in Jake's mind. Neither looked his way. A car with a star on its door was not a welcome sight at one thirty in the morning, especially when the Chevy was doing about ten over and the two guys inside probably had the odor of beer on their breath.

Jake took the next off-ramp to head back to his hiding place. He had burned up twenty minutes checking out the Chevy. His window of opportunity was closing.

Occasional static on the radio broke the silence. Unit Three Thirty-four reported two cows loose on Pontiac Trail and was looking for back-up. Jake heard another road-patrol car respond as he slid back into his spot on the down ramp. He didn't feel like chasing cows just yet.

He knew it was just a wild stab in the dark that a car wanted for a hold-up in Flint would be going all the way to Detroit or maybe to Pontiac, but that's how he operated, imagining the possibilities. And there was a slim possibility.

Jake's eyes latched onto another light-colored GM engineered car heading south. He put his unit in Drive, turned on his headlights and stomped on the accelerator. Two miles later, he knew it was a Buick. He eased up on the gas to pace the car and get a rough read on its speed. The car was doing a nice, safe 55—the posted limit.

He closed the gap so he could read the plate and grabbed the mic. “Station Three, this is Three Seventeen. Can you get me a larceny check and registration on Mary Boy four-two-seven-six?”

Jake didn't need an answer. In less than ten seconds, the driver of the 1973 white Buick decided he didn't want to be driving the speed limit with a cop on his tail.

“Three Seventeen's in pursuit of...” Jake was shouting into the mic. The chase was on. He flipped on his overhead red and blue lights and started calling out the exit numbers as they flashed by. At the same time, he was hearing other cars from other departments that were using the same radio frequency, converging on southbound I-75.

Three-Twenty, another county unit, joined a Troy department car, then cars from Sterling Heights and Birmingham were heard over the radio slipping in ahead of the Buick that was now topping ninety-five miles-per-hour.

Jake smiled to himself. *You're not going to outrun my radio.* That's when he saw the flashers of the other police units ahead as the freeway took the bend under Big Beaver Road. In the blink

of an eye, the white Buick was skidding sideways and rolling. Sparks and glass flew and he caught a glimpse of what looked like a rag doll ejecting from where the Buick's passenger door had been a second before. A concrete abutment under Livernois stopped the Buick. Jake stood on the brakes and went from a near hundred miles-per-hour to nothing in just a few heartbeats. He knew his own heart rate had to be maxed. A chase would do that.

He picked up the mic that was hanging over his right thigh. "Station Three, can you send a couple of ambulances to..." Jake looked for a mile post for a reference point. There'd be no hurry. The Buick was unrecognizable, and if anyone remained in it, they'd be dead. The body that looked like a rag doll flying through the air would be too.

Corporal Mel Williams was picking a speck of lint off of his dark brown Stetson *Lawman* hat as he asked, "So what makes a cop leave the crime-laden streets of Detroit to start anew, patrolling the woods and waters of Oakland County?" Mel drew the short straw and was breaking Jake in. "You've been with me more than a week now and have to be bored to death."

Mel and Jake were taking a break at the Ram's Horn on Rochester Road after writing two traffic tickets and taking one accident report. Every shift, the same question came up, either from his partner or other deputies. A waitress came by and poured some coffee. "Menus?" She asked. Mel told her they'd be back later for lunch.

Jake's usual response to Mel's question was that it made his wife happy, but that did not stop the questions. It was as if he left the Catholic Church, shaved his head and became a Buddhist. A cop here or in Detroit was still a cop. They didn't seem to understand that. He watched his partner fidget with his hatband, then reshape the brim.

"It's the hat," Jake said. "I always wanted to wear a cowboy hat." Jake paused for a beat. "I even think I may have been a town marshal in my previous life." Jake smiled. "You believe in reincarnation Mel?"

"You serious?"

"Yeah. You know I can't sit with my back to any door. There's got to be a reason, right? Maybe I took a bullet in the back?"

"Reincarnation. You are serious." Mel stirred a little cream in his coffee while Jake measured out a bit of sugar and added it to his.

Mel barely met the five-ten height requirement for the county and maybe weighed 200 pounds. A thin mustache over his lip gave him something of a Clark Gable look, that, along with a constant smile. Jake was just a smidgen taller than Mel and his weight hovered around 205.

Jake continued the conversation. "The woods and lakes beat the hell out of the jungles of Detroit. I'll adjust to the cows and horses." Jake picked up his own Stetson and twirled it on his finger. He still wore his normal close-cut flat top and though weighing about the same as Mel, was Marine Corps fit. He kept in shape by using his basement gym every other day. Jake was not bulging with muscles, just fit. He took a sip from his mug. "What about you? How'd you end up becoming a deputy?"

Mel just smiled. "I like guns." The deputy carried a Smith and Wesson model 19 blue steel .357 Magnum with an eight inch barrel in a holster that hung low. The pistol, along with the thin reddish-brown mustache he sported, and the way he wore his hat, canted to the left, gave Jake the impression that Mel might have been a western gunslinger in his previous life; if he really believed the reincarnation bullshit he had been throwing Mel's way.

Mel checked his watch. "Time to get back on the road," pushing his empty cup to the middle

of the table. He let the door slam behind him before Jake could catch up. They were working Three Twenty in Avon Township. Mel was saddled with Jake for two weeks to a month break-in. Jake was hoping that there was more to do than tickets and accident reports as he slid in behind the wheel. Mel had him drive everywhere. “Best way to learn the roads,” he had said.

Jake inherited two sons when he and Edie tied the knot the past November. He had lost his first wife and four children three years, five months and seven days before he remarried. His family perished in a fiery crash on I-80 just outside of Omaha.

Now he was a dad and a husband again, as well as a rookie deputy sheriff after spending nearly ten years working the streets of Detroit. He loved the recent changes in his life—his wife, the boys and the move to the Oakland County Sheriff’s Department—mainly because he was still wearing a badge.

His step-sons, Hank and Sam, were eleven and nine. Jake soon learned that they were two peas from opposite ends of the same pod. He had met Edie and her sons at a Halloween party two and a half years before they got married.

Hank was the older brother who mainly went with the flow in life, while Sam seemed destined to be just the opposite—either by choice or predestination.

Edie had said that when Sam was about six, he questioned why his eight-year old brother was bigger than him. They lived in the same house, ate the same food, had the same parents, yet Hank was three inches taller. She said that didn’t sit too well with her younger son. He wanted to be bigger and stronger—right now. Sam’s competitive spirit became an obsession.

Jake saw a little bit of this one-way competition between Sam and his older brother when he had started helping to coach their Little League team. After Jake married the boys’ mother, he realized that Sam was pretty serious about catching up to Hank. If Hank drank a glass of milk, Sam would drink two. If Hank ate one portion of meat, he’d eat one and a half. When it came to vegetables, Sam hated them, but if Hank ate four Brussels sprouts, Sam was going to choke down five. Sam had a goal and he stuck to it like he’d never make his next birthday if he didn’t. Jake just thought Sam was pretty comical.

Hank never thought too much about the competitiveness his kid brother had. What he thought was fun wrestling matches with Sam were really major big-time “wrassling” bouts in his younger brother’s eyes. Edie had confided in Jake that one time, when Hank was about ten, Hank let Sam win one match while playing in a pile of leaves they’d helped their mom gather. That night, just before mom scooted them off to bed, Sam looked up at his big brother and said, “Don’t worry, Hank, if the guys at school start pickin’ on you, I’ll kick their ass.” He even gave Hank a little hug seconds before Edie fed him a bite of Dial soap. Edie said that Hank just laughed at Sam’s bubbly mouth and went off to bed.

Jake remembered that story, thinking no one could have that much competitiveness. Now, he was witnessing it first-hand. Jake had no problem at all jumping back into the father role. He had a wife who loved him and two boys who were now 10 and 12 and called him Dad.

Hank and Sam had latched onto Jake shortly after he started seeing their mom. It was the boys who asked him to help coach their baseball team. Their real dad, Gary Douglas, blew town with a girlfriend when the boys were four and two. They never saw him again. Hank barely remembered his dad and Sam didn’t at all.

Edie brought Jake up to speed on the boys once things looked like he’d be the man in their lives. She told him about two trips to school over Sam’s behavior. True to his word, if anyone

messed with Hank, there was this little bumble bee of a kid brother that'd be on some bully's back waling away at someone always bigger than him.

Jake tried to slowly mentor the boys about playground fights, but had a hard time trying to convince them as he remembered his own grade-school days and a fight or two he'd had.

Hank never let anyone bully Sam, but he was a bit more subtle. The word quickly spread by the time Jake married Edie that no one messed with the Douglas brothers—neither of them. What Jake had said to them about fighting didn't matter at all. The boys were the ones who drew the line in the sand and no one crossed it. But neither Jake nor Edie ever had to make another trip to the school since they got married.

Jake felt a twinge of disgust as he read a report he sought out after seeing a TV newscast the previous night. The story about a young boy found dead piqued his interest because he now had Hank and Sam in his life.

The copies of the report that he had gotten from the detectives stated that in the southern part of the county a 12-year old boy from Ferndale was last seen leaving an American Legion Hall on Sunday afternoon, February 15, 1976. The boy had told his mother he was going home to watch television. His body was found on February 19, neatly laid out in a snow bank in the parking lot of an office building at Ten Mile Road and Greenfield in Southfield. He had been strangled and sexually assaulted. Rope marks were seen on his wrists. He was wearing the same clothes he had on when last seen alive. There wasn't any more information available beyond the report. No one reported seeing the boy once he left the legion hall or anything prior to the body being found.

The Pontiac Mall opened its doors at precisely 10am. Ron Peck took off his tan windbreaker that he wore to fend off the light spring drizzle. He folded it neatly, then draped it over the back of the bench before he sat. His view was unobstructed, except for the occasional shopper who wandered by. The interruption was always short. Ladies shopping on a Saturday morning didn't waste much time in front of the arcade. A boy was squirming in front of the first pinball machine just inside the archway, trying to will the little silver ball onto one of the flippers he was ready to manipulate. That's what caught Ron's eye.

The man watching the kid wasn't interested in the bells ringing, or the horse's loud whinny on the game called "Ghost Town Hero" coming from the arcade. He was interested in the boy's tight Levi's and the way he moved his hips as he played. Ron liked little boy's asses. That is why he was there on a drizzly April morning in 1976.