



## AND THEN THEY CAME FOR ME

A couple of county prowlers and a black sedan were parked in the turnaround beyond the front yard. The sheriff stood talking to two deputies. Willis watched them through the screen door while he chewed the last of the liverwurst sandwich he'd made for lunch. He swallowed and stepped out onto the porch.

The floorboards drummed beneath his boots as he walked to the swing that hung to the side of the steps. He sat and looked out over the yard. It was a testament to his wife's hard work—manicured grass, rainbow flowerbeds, and a white picket fence. An arbor was set into the fence. The sides and top of the inverted U were thick with bright blue morning glories. A chain with a sign on it blocked passage through the arch. The sign directed people to a gate at the side.

The sedan popped its doors and three men got out. They were small and dressed in black suits.

Brandt, the sheriff, broke off talking to his deputies. He ambled up to the fence, pushed his Stetson back on his head and said, "Morning, Willis."

"Morning, Brandt. Been a while."

Brandt nodded and gestured to the arbor with his free hand. He held a sheaf of papers in the other.

"Looks like you've been busy beautifying the place."

"That's Penny's work. She gets wound up reading about politics on her computer, then she blows off steam in the yard."

“Well it’s sure a pretty sight. Is...” Brandt looked around. “Is Penny here?” He had a nervous little tremor in his voice.

“No. She’s visiting her sister in Odessa.”

“Good for her. So, uh, are your cattle doing all right?”

“They’re fine, Brandt. Why don’t we jump to why you’re here?”

“Well, the truth is...” Brandt pointed to the men standing by the sedan. “These boys have some business with you.”

“What kind of business?”

“They say they own your ranch now.”

“They say? Aren’t they sure?”

“Judge Hofmire’s backing their claim. He sent me out here to...” The sheriff muttered a curse and shook his head. “I’m just following orders, Willis.”

Willis rocked back and forth in the swing a couple of times, considering, then he said, “So what’s got into Hofmire lately? I hear he’s making women wear headscarves in the courthouse.”

“They’re called hijabs. Muslim thing.”

“Why’s he doing that?”

One of the men at the sedan spoke up. He had a screechy voice.

“Is obvious, you dumb American! He being blackmailed! You system so easy to ramipulate. If someone say they tell secrets, everthing fall apart.”

Willis studied the men for the first time. They were oriental. He wondered what country they were from, and like reading his mind Brandt said, “China.”

Willis nodded and addressed the Chinaman who had spoken. He had a head kind of like a mantis, but with squinty eyes.

“How do you know the judge is being black-

mailed?"

"Because my bosses say so. Is way to do business now in Amelica. You country dead. This place dead now too. This ranch. Papers in sheriff hand say so."

Willis nodded and rocked. After a moment he looked at Brandt and said, "Mouthy little guy."

"Tell me about it. I've been listening to him all morning."

"So you've done this to other people today?"

"Two. Jack Scheer out at Three Corners, and ol' man Norstram at Crosshairs. Had to serve notice on them just like I'm doing to you. Yesterday these boys were in Druther County. Bobby Ray had to help them shut down some ranches over there."

"Bobby Ray Jewel's still sheriff there?"

"Yep." Brandt grinned and let out a little snort of relief at the change of subject. "And he's still telling those fish jokes. He told one yesterday about an eel that could twist around and stick his head up his ass, but he didn't because it made him look like he was running for office."

Willis laughed with Brandt. They laughed until mantis-head cut in.

"Forget joke! It not revelant! You picket fence Amelican Dream dead now!" He pointed to the arbor. "And this. . .ahhhbor. . ." He struggled with the word, stretching his neck while he said it. "This over for you too! Chairman Mao give us communism, and we marry it to capitalism. This Chinese century now. We the boss of you!"

"Well, I don't know about that," Brandt said to the Chinaman, then to Willis he said, "but we definitely have a problem here." He held up his papers. "I have to serve you with these."

"Is called lawfare," mantis-head taunted. "Is how we will destroy you. You wanna fight? Hire lawyer. Or two lawyer, three. Then you be broke

and we take land anyway.”

Willis said, “Why don’t you come up here, Brandt, so I can look at the paperwork. Use the gate beside the arbor.”

The sheriff went to the gate and Willis got up and walked to the edge of the porch. The two met there and Brandt handed the papers up.

The stack was fairly thick. Willis leafed through it and Brandt said, “Half of that stuff’s in Chinese, but what I saw in English talks about tax violations, health codes, international treaties. It’s a real stew.” Willis continued leafing. Brandt said, “I don’t know what to do. Hofmire told me to follow whatever instructions these yahoos gave me. I promised Scheer and Norstram I’d try to slow things down, but I’m not sure I can.”

“Hey, Willis!” mantis-head shouted. “If you give us problem, maybe kiddie porn show up on you wife computer!”

Brandt gave him a cautioning look and said, “I wouldn’t threaten his wife if I were you.”

“Well you not me! I say what I want, and you can do nothing! You Amelicans think you so superior, but China laugh at you! You nothing!”

Willis finished with the papers. “You know,” he said to Brandt, “you don’t have to do this. As sheriff you’re the ultimate authority in this county. You can just ignore Hofmire.”

“I know, but that won’t stop these Chinamen. Bobby Ray said they have control at the county, state and federal levels. They’ll beat you no matter how high up you go in the courts.”

Willis was disappointed in Brandt, but he understood. The man honestly didn’t know how to deal with the situation.

“Well, I’ll drive up to the courthouse later and talk to Hofmire. See what I can find out.”

“Good. And can you hold off telling Penny? I hate to think how angry she’ll be.”

“Can you blame her? This isn’t right, Brandt.”

The sheriff hung his head, toed the grass with his boot and said, “I’ll fight it if you can help me figure a way. On the drive out here I thought of that old saying about how they came for other folks first and I didn’t do anything, then there was nobody left to help when they came for me. I have to do something before it gets to that. For myself and the people of the county.”

“What you two talking about?” mantis-head demanded.

Willis’ patience was wearing thin. He said, “We’re talking about how supelior China is.”

The Chinamen jabbered among themselves, then mantis-head screeched, “You mocking us! We come in yard! Is our yard now!” They started toward the arbor.

“Use the gate,” Willis said, but mantis-head ignored him. He led the others to the arbor and unhooked the chain that blocked it.

And a pail hidden high up in the morning glories dumped gasoline on the men.

Then an igniter set them on fire.

They shot into the yard. There was lots of screaming—from the Chinamen and the sheriff’s deputies—as the burning men fanned out. They ran in circles and squiggles and zigzags. One even did a cartwheel across a flowerbed. It was chaos for a minute or so, but then, one by one, the men fell to their knees and keeled over. Willis wasn’t sure but thought the last one to go down was mantis-head.

One of the deputies hustled up to the body and hit it with a blast of white fog from a fire extinguisher. When the fire was out he ran to another body. The other deputy used an extinguisher on the burning heap that had been the arbor. After the officer tending to the bodies got the big fire under control, he walked around

dealing with small ones as they burst forth here and there. He doused an ear fire, and an ass fire of blue flame, but when he got to a groin fire Brandt told him to let it burn.

“Can I have those papers back?” Brandt asked Willis.

Willis handed them down from the porch and Brandt walked to the body with the groin fire. He laid the sheaf on the flames.

“Okay,” he said to his deputies. “You witnessed me give Mr. what’s-his-name his papers back. Those are the documents for Willis, Scheer and Norstram. I’d estimate it’ll take you boys, say, three weeks to generate new ones.”

When the paper was burning nicely, Brandt walked back to the porch. He was about to set a foot on the bottom step, to climb up to join Willis, when Willis said, “I wouldn’t do that.”

Brandt stopped.

“Do what?”

“Use those steps. Penny rigged them with shotgun shells last week, after she read a story about Joe Biden bussing terrorists in across the border.”

Brandt took a step back. He and Willis looked at the smoking bodies. The papers on the man’s groin were nearly burned away, and one of his eyeballs was swollen to the point of popping.

Brandt shook his head and said, “I’m just glad that Penny’s not here. Things could’ve gone a lot worse for those Chinamen.”