

The following is an excerpt from

Cowboy Town

A Novel
By
Rick Alan Rice

In this section Jake Jobbs sets out to complete the bargain he has made with the devil and the law, setting up a final confrontation.

"Did you hear somethin'?" Py asked.

Pete looked over at Joanne, then got up off the couch and walked over to the front window, looking out into the yard. The light of the lamppost only illuminated the area around the front of the house, and it was a dark night. Pete didn't see anyone. He looked at Jo and shook his head, indicating that he saw nothing. Joanne sat tensed in a chair at the dining room table, and she felt a frisson of fear as Py, who had been pacing back and forth in the living room, hurried to the kitchen and the back door. Pete saw what he was doing and said – "Py, don't go back there!" But he was too late.

Py went to the back screen and looked out the doorway. No lamplight shown into the backyard, and the area around the bunkhouse and the windbreak was pitch black. Still, he thought he could see dark shapes moving into the trees. His heart began to pound hard and for a moment he stood at the screen, thinking there must be something he should do – that was Jake out there, with a man who was carrying a gun – but not

knowing what. He suddenly realized that the dark forms were no longer visible, that they had melted into the trees, and Py found himself opening the back door and heading out into the night. He moved cautiously, crouched slightly, as he tried to avoid piles of brittle leaves and fallen twigs. He could hardly see his hand before him in the dark, but after a moment he reached an opening on the back side of the windrow. He heard the engine of a vehicle start up, and he looked at the county road to see head lamps light up on the now familiar faded red pickup driven by Jake's "handler." In the partially illuminated cab, Py could see the outlines of two men, and the distinctive features of the one seated on the passenger side left no doubt for Py that it was Jake. Slowly, quietly, the truck began to move up the road away from the house.

Py turned around and started back through the trees, picking his way among the low branches until soon he reached the back porch. He charged up the steps and went in the back door, hurrying to report to Pete and Joanne that Jake had just been picked up, and was gone.

When he barged into the living room, excited, hardly able to breathe, he saw Pete loading bullets into a long hunting rifle. Py stopped in his tracks, shocked. "I didn't know you had a gun," he said.

Pete grumped as he squeezed a couple more rounds into the magazine. "I don't like the damned thing," he said. "But I suppose we better have it handy."

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"Tom, this Wheeler. It looks like Jobbs has just been picked up and is heading your way. We've got headlights moving north on Country Road 12. Over."

"I copy that Ark," Bickering said into his walkie-talkie. "Over." He glanced over at Glenn Tyler, a dark form beside him on the ground. "Here we go," he said.

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Jake found his eyes drifting to his left as he and the heavy-set man bounced along the road, though he tried to keep his nose pointed straight ahead. He was noticing the guy's every move — exactly how he worked the foot pedals, how he positioned his hands on the steering wheel, how he worked the gear shift, and how he moved his weight in the seat — thinking any one of them could be a pretext to aggression. Inside the man's blousing jacket he could see the handle of a revolver, carried in a holster mounted under his left arm.

The driver looked over at him. "What's a matter? You look a little nervous."

Jake glanced at him, then again looked straight ahead. He was tight as a pressure cooker. "Not really," he bluffed, unconvincingly.

"Relax," the driver said. "It'll all be over soon."

Jake didn't like the sound of that. He gazed out the window on his side for a moment, staring out into the dark, then he looked over at the driver. "So what are you gettin' outta this? I know you ain't regular with Pico."

The driver shrugged. "A paycheck," he said. "Beats workin'." He looked over at Jake and offered a vaguely conspiratorial grin.

"You got a name?" Jake asked.

"Yeah, but you don't need to know it," the guy said bluntly. "You ain't ever gonna see me again."

"Why — you plan on usin' that gun you got in your coat there?"

The guy looked at Jake, disappointed. "What is it with you and this 'are you gonna shoot me thing?' Don't you trust people, Jake?" He shook his head. "Look, if it'll make you feel better you can call me . . . Earl. How's that?" he said.

"Earl?"

“Yeah, don’t you think I look like an Earl?”

Jake glowered, then shook it off. “Okay — Earl,” he said resignedly, then he resumed his nervous watch on the road, as the driver slowed the truck enough to make a left turn onto County Road 9 as they continued their progress toward Walker Ranch.

“I’d dance with you if you thought you wanted to,” Jarvis said, trying to imagine what he could do to break the ice between he and Lily. The ruckus in the armory had reached a level din, with the boisterous partiers lending their voices to the slightly overbearing rhythmic sensibilities of the Hadley Barrett nine. “You might have a better time if you’d just loosen up a little.”

Lily looked at him with obvious vexation. “Oh, would I?” she asked, unimpressed by his counsel.

“I’m not the worst dancer here tonight,” Jarvis semi-boasted, hollering into her ear. “You might be surprised.”

Lily leaned away from him, buckled by his roar. “I doubt it,” she said, grimacing. “I don’t want to dance, leave me alone.”

“Come on, Lily! This is supposed to be a party!” Jarvis yelled, and two people standing in the throng before them glanced back over their shoulders to see what poor soul it was who was having trouble understanding that.

Lily rolled her eyes, mildly embarrassed, and charged off to another corner of the hall. Jarvis, momentarily left standing alone in her wake, pursued her, walking up on the balls of his feet, craning his neck this way and that, trying to see where she had disappeared among the sea of Stetsons and big lacquered hair. Lily prowled away through the crowd like a stalking “injun,” bending slightly to make herself even less observable, as she moved beneath the level of male shoulders and feminine eyes.

CHAPTER 47

“Tom — we’ve got a vehicle approaching from the north. It looks like this is our guy. Over.”

Agent Bickering raised his binoculars to his eyes and looked in the direction of the ranch. He could see the headlights of a vehicle approaching from the far side. “This is Tom and we copy. Let’s get quiet. Over.”

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“Pull around over to the side of the house.”

Earl pulled slowly into the vehicle yard in front the Walker house, killing the lights on the pickup as soon as they began to shine on the surrounding structures. Frank had promised that the place would be deserted, to order all his crew to attend the party in town. Still, as the truck made a slow sweep of the yard, Jake watched for lights in windows or activity of any kind. He saw none. A yard light shown from the top of a mast planted in the center of the yard, casting the entire scene in a blue wash that seemed slightly inhuman. “Go on over around the far side of the house, where it’s dark,” Jake said, motioning with his hand.

As Earl slowed the truck to a crawl, bringing it to a stop under a huge overhanging Elm, Jake looked at him and asked — “Are you coming in with me?”

Earl glanced over at Jake, and then reached down and shut off the engine. “That’s what I’m paid for,” he said, with the depletion of a working man.

Jake stepped gingerly out of the truck, looking over toward the bunkhouse and keeping one hand on the door, in case, for some reason, he had to quickly duck back inside the cab. The habitation was dark, as were all the windows of the Walker home. “Let’s go around back,” he told Earl, who was also quiet about getting out of the truck. Both of them closed the doors carefully, so as not to make a sound.

“Do these people have a dog?” Earl asked.

“No dog,” Jake replied, just above a whisper. The question recalled his comment to Pete earlier this evening, about how every ranch ought to have dog, just to watch over things. The accidental irony of thing hit him as odd. In a part of the country where dogs are large and common — even revered — it just so happened that he had worked on the two spreads that didn’t have one.

Jake led Earl along the crowned picket fence that bordered the manicured garden and lawn around the house, finally coming to a small gate that adjoined a sidewalk leading to the back porch. He carefully reached over the fence, undid the latch, and pushed open the little swinging door, which Earl carefully shut behind him, once the two were inside the yard.

They walked up the walkway, between nicely contoured shrubbery’s that funneled them toward the back door of the house, then mounted the steps to the porch. Jake tested the door, grabbing the handle and turning it gently, finding it unlocked, as he suspected it would be. He gave a light push and door hinged inward, seeming to beckon them inside as it slowly and seductively swung open.

Py was doing his best to keep it from showing, but as he sat on the couch, preternaturally still, he thought that he might be about to explode. An awful, surreal fugue state had settled over the place, with Pete, his chair positioned in front of the radio console, rocking slowly back and forth, staring absent and glassy-eyed into space, like a dead man in a limbo of bare perpetual motion. Joanne was a still life, frozen in her chair at the dining room table, her gaze slightly elevated, as if she was receiving signals from a divine low frequency transmitter. Playing low in the background, the radio broadcast dreamy orchestral sounds from a fictional ballroom in a never visited city. Leaning against the door, muzzle up, Pete's loaded rifle stood sentry, exuding from its purposeful form and design more personality than anything else in the room. Py looked around, moving only his eyes, half expecting to see Death reclining self-satisfied in the shadows.

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“There you are!”

Jarvis reached out and grabbed Lily by the elbow, as she saw him and tried in vain to duck back into the sea of boots and blouses. “Let go of me!” she said, loud enough that a couple of the men around her turned to see what was going on.

“Come here so I can talk to you!” Jarvis said.

“Are you okay, ma'am?” a tall cowboy asked, leaning in close to her so he could hear her reply.

Jarvis gave a look of frustration and disgust. He tapped the guy with the back of his hand. “Her daddy asked me to keep an eye on her — and she keeps runnin' off!” He said sternly, letting his voice rise a little, for effect. The tall guy looked at him, then glanced back and Lily and turned his back on them both, returning his attention to the dance floor, which was packed with revelers. Jarvis leaned in close to Lily. “Okay, I don't mind if you don't want to dance with me, but you can at least quit runnin' off. I'm tryin' to do what I was told.”

“Oh — you mean you’re trying to do your job,” Lily said, indicting him through a twist on his own words.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Jarvis said, equally put-out. “The thing is, your daddy did tell me to stay with you — and I told him I would.”

“I don’t need you to stay with me,” Lily said.

“I know,” Jarvis reassured. “Just quit tryin’ to make things so hard on me.”

Lily thought about it for a second. “Okay, then if you’re just going to be hanging around me, make yourself useful. I’d like a soda.”

Jarvis winced. He looked over at the refreshment booth, which was packed. “From over there?” he asked, hoping otherwise.

“Where else?” Lily replied, like he was an idiot.

“Oh God,” Jarvis moaned. Then, pointing a warning finger at her — “You stay right here, okay?”

Lily wouldn’t pledge verbally, but offered a single quick confirming nod, and Jarvis grudgingly left her side and went to fight his way through the throng around the soda dispenser. When he came back, drinks in hand, Lily had once again disappeared.

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“Tom — our two guys have entered the back of the house. Copy. Do you want me to move closer? Over.”

“Copy on that.” Bickering sniffed and wiped at his nose, which was beginning to tingle in the ever-cooling night air. “Hold where you are, let’s keep the angle wide. Over.”

Glenn Tyler was starting to wish something would happen so they could abandon their post in the pasture. The moisture coming up out of the cold earth was starting to seep into his clothing, and he wanted to at least stand up and move around. "I would love to know what's going on in there right now," he said, staring hopefully toward the house.

"What time do you have?" Bickering asked.

Agent Tyler set his binoculars down and picked up a flashlight, which he shined on his wrist watch, careful not to aim the light so that it might be seen from the house. "I've got . . . ten thirty-eight," he said.

"They are right on schedule," Bickering said, appreciating their efficiency. "Jobbs estimated they'd be in the house twenty minutes, which would bring them out just after eleven. Let's keep an eye on the time." He didn't have to tell Tyler what he was thinking, that a delay may mean trouble of some kind, necessitating a decision around whether or not to move in. The bald artifice for such a divergence from what was planned would be to make arrest to safeguard the property of an honorable citizen. They both knew the actual impetus may be to save the life of one not so highly respected thief.

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"There are two safes. One is in an office on the first floor — down the hall there — and the other is upstairs in a den." Jake spoke in low tones as he and Earl moved quietly through the darkened house. "Let's do the den first. There's a linen closet up there. We'll need some pillow cases . . ."

Earl followed along, looking all around him at the cavernous interior, taking it all in like a visitor to a museum. "Man, this guy has gone some juice, huh?" he said, a little in wonder. Even in the dark he could see that he was lost in a higher tax bracket.

"Walker keeps the keys to his vehicles in the office," Jake said, continuing to strategize. "I saw our truck out in the yard. We can get the key last thing we do."

Jake was being careful not to tip his hand. The hope was that he could go through with this thing, with Earl watching, and never reveal that he was doing anything less than living up to his end of his deal with Pico, Earl's boss. He'd go into custody with everybody else, so even as the axe fell, Jake would appear to be just another perpetrator caught in a police sting. It would eventually be known that he was turning state's evidence — then he'd have to worry about the repercussions of his actions — but supposedly then he would have the protection of the authorities. The trick was getting to that safety. Doing this job with Earl was the major minefield he had to cross along the way. He had only to stay alive and deliver the goods. Then, perhaps, he could finally put an end to the horror and start the process of getting out of life what he wanted.

Jake and Earl climbed the staircase to the second floor, still being careful not to make a sound, though by now they were fairly well convinced that no one was going to surprise them by being home. As they reached the second floor landing, Jake motioned Earl to follow him as he crept along the wall until he came to the first door on his right. There they entered the den.

Once inside, Jake went over to the desk and switched on a little brass lamp that cast just enough light to illuminate the writing surface. He then moved around behind the desk and opened the middle drawer. The first thing he saw was payroll checks and an open envelope, stuffed with greenbacks. Jake took the money out and rifled through it once, as if it were a deck of playing cards.

"How much you think?" Earl asked ingenuously, as if he'd never seen that kind of cash before.

Jake just shook his head. "The linen closet is just down the hall on the left. Go get me some pillow cases," he said, but Earl shook his head. "No way, Jakey. I ain't lettin' you out of my sight." Jake gave a disgusted look, then pushed the cash back into the envelope and placed it down on the desk top. He moved quickly out of the room and went down the hallway, leaving Earl behind. When Jake came back, carrying several white linen pillow cases, he saw Earl standing over by the desk, leafing through the money, and he quickly went over and ripped the cash out of his hand, stuffing it, envelope and all, inside one of the cases.

"I was just lookin' at it," Earl said, none too happy with the treatment.

Jake ignored him, walking back around the desk and again shuffling through various other papers and things he found inside the drawer. He was looking for Frank's ledger — the one in which he accounted for every piece of property in his life, where Jake knew he would find the combinations to the safes. Not finding it in the middle drawer, he closed it and opened a side drawer, searched through it, and then opened and searched through another. Finally he found it.

“What's that?” Earl asked.

“Keys to the kingdom,” Jake said, carrying the book over to the heavy steel strongbox.