

## PROLOGUE

*Corsicana, Texas January 10, 1969*

The sun was setting as Reginald Waverly drove his taxi down bumpy Beaton Street in the secondhand town. He adjusted his glasses again. They were ready to fall off.

How was he going to find his fare when it got dark? *Where is Golf Estates, anyway?* he wondered.

Reginald swerved into the parking lot of an old-fashioned Rexall drug store, next to a running pickup truck with a shotgun hung across its rear window. Fluorescent lights shined through the plate glass storefront. The store was open. He merely looked at his taxi's ignition to turn it off. Then he got out, walked up to the door, and pulled it open.

A big cowboy, about twenty-five, with long chestnut hair, handlebar mustache, and straw western hat charged out, drinking a can of beer. "Hey, watch it, Fuzzy," the cowboy said. He slammed into Reginald.

Reginald chilled when he noticed the cowboy's eyes as he passed. Where they would normally be blue or brown or green, the cowboy's eyes were only black. Not just dark eyes—pure black. Stunned by what he saw, Reginald straightened his shirt and stroked his crewcut as the cowboy pushed by.

"Never mind him, son," a man drawled from behind the counter inside the store. "Just Coy. One of them tough ol' boys."

"But those eyes—"

"Don't know what you mean, fella," the man said. "What about 'em?"

"That's right, I forgot only I—" Reginald could see many things mortals couldn't. But it was the first time he had seen those kind of eyes in many years. There was no doubt about it. They were pure evil.

“Coy’s one of them Klan fellas here in town,” the man said. “Better not fuss with him.”

“The Ku Klux Klan?”

The man nodded. “What else?”

“Maybe that explains—” Reginald put his index finger to his lip. “He certainly looked a bit flustered,” Reginald said. “Perhaps he’s going out to burn some crosses?”

The man shrugged. “Been known to happen.”

“Oh, I say,” Reginald said. “Where might the candy be?”

“Aisle two,” the man said. He looked at his worn old watch.

“Thank you, sir.” Reginald picked up a package of Junior Mints, and walked back to the counter.

Reginald felt the man’s eyes study his fifties style clothes and crewcut.

“Be fifteen cents,” he said.

Reginald reached into the right front pocket of his beige wash-and-wear slacks, pulled out a quarter, and put it on the counter. “Here you go, mate.”

“Mate?” The man looked up suspiciously. “Say, y’all aren’t from around here, are you?” He scratched his matted, curly white hair and squinted his eyes.

“This is my first time here,” Reginald said. “Oh, I need one of these kits to repair specs. Mine are ready to fall apart.” He laughed. The man didn’t.

“Specs? Hmmm. Help yourself, pardner.” The man pointed at the kits and looked away.

“Say, it’s a bit of a quiet town, eh?” Reginald said and smiled.

“Yep. Unlessin’ you count Oscar Sanchez’ annual holiday shindig for all them Coyote Brand folks,” he said.

Reginald laughed.

“What’s so funny?” the man asked.

“Werewolves around?”

“Don’t know nothin’ about that.” The clerk frowned. “Say, you mean you ain’t never heard of Coyote Brand Products here in town? Best darn canned chili in the whole wide world. Everybody knows that.”

“No, I’m afraid I haven’t,” Reginald said.

“Better ‘n homemade.”

“Perhaps I ought to purchase some,” Reginald said. The least he could do for the folks in the office was bring back a souvenir. The “main office” had sent Reginald to Corsicana to “pick up a fare,”—jargon for verifying that a soul passes successfully into the afterlife. It was a job Reginald had done for many years, since he had died of a premature heart attack at age thirty-five. He hadn’t aged at all since that day.

“There, fella.” The clerk smiled halfheartedly and pointed. “Aisle three,” he said. “Bet those Yankees go and spoil the damn company.”

“Yanks?” Reginald asked and walked over to Aisle three.

The man nodded. “That’s what I said, son. Some fancy corporation up there in Chicago bought Coyote about a year ago. Still the hot news around town. Made Mr. James Post a mint, that’s for sure.”

“Post? Indeed.” Reginald stopped and glanced at the name on the small piece of paper he held in his hand. Then he picked up a can and studied it as he brought it back to the counter. “Coyote Brand? Named after the founder’s pet—quite clever.”

“Sure,” the clerk said stoically. “Be all, mister?”

“Yes.” Reginald looked at the scrap of paper again. “Oh, I say, I meant to ask: Where might Golf Estates be?”

“Be \$1.05 for the chili.”

“Right-o. Where would Golf Estates be?”

“Oh. Be north o’ town. Take Second Street to the wooded road with the sign. Can’t miss it.”

“Turn right or left?” Reginald asked.

“Be a left. Only way you can go.” The clerk looked over the top of his glasses at the old cash register. His finger pecked a few keys and the drawer opened with a ring. He looked up at Reginald without lifting his head. “Why Golf Estates this time o’ night, son?”

“Oh. My assignment, you see. Gather a fare.” Reginald pointed out to his taxi, hoping that explanation would suffice. It usually did.

“Course.” The clerk eyed him and the car suspiciously. “Not many cabs around these parts no more.”

“Thanks, mate.” As Reginald picked up his bag and change, he knew this Texas man was studying him.

“Y’all come back,” the clerk drawled unconvincingly.

“Right, mate.” Reginald walked out hurriedly whistling “God Save The Queen.” He felt the clerk’s eyes follow him all the way to his taxi.

He glanced back, spooked by the clerk’s cool reception. He unlocked his car door with a look, pulled it open, and got in. He held the steering wheel and stared at the ignition switch. Again, without so much as touching his keys, the car’s engine roared. He opened his bag and pulled out the repair kit. He took the little wrench and tightened the screws on his glasses. Then he looked at his watch.

*Almost time*, he thought. Reginald always got to dislodgements on time. He backed out of his parking place and drove down Beaton Street, bumpy with inlaid brick. He looked around the strange little town: a diner, a Salvation Army store, a currency exchange, and boarded up storefronts.

*Smells like rain*, he thought. Reginald rolled up his window as he turned left on Second Street, passed

the Navarro County Historical Society, drove by a road that led to a cemetery, and headed north to Golf Estates.

Minutes later, across town, the thunder cracked.

“What?” James Post looked up from his desk.

*Drip. Drop. Drip. Drop.*

Across the hall from his office, in the ancient bathroom next to Mary’s coffee stand, the faucet dripped. Alone at Coyote Brand, Post heard the drip echo through the five rooms that comprised the little office building, despite the intermittent rattling of the old heater.

*Couldn’t someone fix that drip?*

The thunder boomed again outside. As he studied Coyote Chili’s sales results, Post puffed on his pipe. What more was there to do on a rainy Friday night in Corsicana? Go to Oscar’s damn party? Instead, as president of Coyote Brand Products, he had worked late, something he always did on Friday nights since the Yankees had acquired the company.

Seeming to ignore the impending storm, evening birds played outside the office in the fading orange dusk. Between the drips and the heater and the birds, Post fancied he had himself a kind of symphony. Maybe, for a change, it would serve as a backdrop for a breakthrough during one of his Friday sessions.

The sudden ring of the phone made him jump.

*Now, who’s that on a Friday night?* He picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Hi, Jim?” a low voice on the phone said.

“Yep?”

“Kyle Burghoff here.” It was the Food Division president at Allied Corporation in Chicago, Post’s boss since the acquisition. “I’ve been following your O. I., Jim,” he said. “Still down since just

after the sale.”

“Damn bottom line?”

Burghoff cleared his throat. “At headquarters we call it Operating Income or O. I. for short.”

“Right, I knew that,” Post said shakily. He knew Burghoff was in his forties and, at fifty-three, Post resented feeling intimidated by a younger man.

“Seems to be your merchandising spending. Those billback trade deals,” Burghoff said.

“Really? Well, shoot. Your man Hickman added ‘em right after he became sales manager. But I haven’t approved any for a while.”

“Funny,” Burghoff said. “Our reporting system shows that they’re killing your O. I. more than ever.”

“I know our bottom line’s been shaky, but I never thought it was them deals,” Post said.

Burghoff continued, “And, Jim, I thought we agreed you’d advertise some other products, too, like that chili hot dog sauce.”

“Wait a second now. How can I do that if Hickman’s spending the budget on them billback trade deals?” Post asked.

“Hmmm,” Burghoff said, “maybe I can send somebody down to help you trim the deals and revise the advertising.”

“Nobody ‘round here’ll take real good to that.”

“Jim, come on. I don’t want to get off to a bad start with Coyote. There’s this young fellow, Marcus Ramsay,” Burghoff said. “Sharp young fellow. You might like him.”

“Wait, Kyle. Can’t I just sort out this billback thing over the weekend?” Post asked. The thought of surrendering to the Yankees within a year after the sale made Post quiver. *Next they’d be making the damn day-to-day decisions*, he thought.

“Sorry, I’ll need to put your last payment in escrow until you turn it around down there. A pretty penny—two million.”

“Shoot,” Post said.

“Listen, Jim. I can send Marcus down next week. Just for a few days. He can really help.”

“Sure. I guess.”

“He’s got a reputation up here for getting a handle on those trade deal expenses.”

“Right.” Post clutched the phone hard.

“I’m trying to be civil here,” Burghoff said. “How about if he got down there late Monday?”

“Fine, then, Monday. G’night.” Post hung up. He had skipped Oscar’s party rather than to attend his plant manager’s predictable holiday bash. That Yankee sales manager, Earl Hickman, would be standing in anyway—quite the social climber—his wife, too, the way she flashed that jewelry around.

Post thought back to how Hickman had started at the company humbly the year before: He drove a Plymouth and wore clothes from Sears. Now, less than a year later, Hickman drove a Mercedes and wore custom silk sports jackets made by some fancy tailor in Dallas—pretty strange. *Did the man had inherit a ton of money?*

*And now these billback deals are hurting the bottom line? Maybe I should check them out. Maybe Hickman’s made some mistakes.*

Thunder interrupted Post’s thoughts. The lightning was getting closer. He glanced toward the window behind his desk. Strange sounds like metal cutting and gravel scraping came from outside. He stood and looked out the window, but saw nothing in the faintly lit courtyard.

He walked over to the scratched-up metal cabinet where all of his red vinyl binders were stored. He pulled out the Budgeting Manual, walked back to his desk, and sat. He opened to the “Trade Deal” account, thumbed through a few pages, and studied the rows of numbers. With a flick of his old Zippo,

he relit his pipe.

He did a double take at the account ledger. Starting with the Dallas market, Post remembered how the billback deals—paid to each of his sales brokers after they submitted a performance certificate for approval—had begun just after Earl Hickman started.

The first of the deals on the list had been approved by Post himself. He specifically remembered that because they were new. For every case sold on “deal,” a per-case allowance was paid. A check was cut by Al and mailed to the broker who endorsed and passed it on to grocery trade accounts like Safeway, Tom Thumb, or Kroger. Post studied the ledger:

DALLAS MARKET

<u>\$/case</u>	<u># cases</u>	<u>product</u>	<u>Approved</u>	<u>Date</u>
1.50	4,102	Plain Chili	James Post	4/02/68
2.00	3,676	Plain Chili	James Post	5/30/68
2.00	3,011	Plain Chili	James Post	6/12/68
1.50	3,388	HotDogSauce	James Post	7/31/68

Then, still in the Dallas market section, Post noticed that at the end of September, the approval signature changed. Hickman had begun approving *all the deals* without Post’s OK. That looked fishy.

<u>\$/case</u>	<u># cases</u>	<u>product</u>	<u>Approved by</u>	<u>Date</u>
1.50	5,086	Hot Dog Sauce	James Post	8/7/68
1.50	6,339	Hot Dog Sauce	James Post	8/30/68
2.00	7,212	Chili w/Beans	James Post	9/10/68
2.50	5,923	Plain Chili	E. Hickman	9/30/68
2.00	5,016	Chili w/Beans	E. Hickman	10/07/68
2.50	4,925	Plain Chili	E. Hickman	10/23/68

2.50	5,128	Plain Chili	E. Hickman 11/15/68
2.50	5,431	Plain Chili	E. Hickman 11/29/68
2.00	7,936	Chili w/Beans	E. Hickman 01/29/68
2.50	7,009	Plain Chili	E. Hickman 12/15/68
2.50	5,127	Plain Chili	E.Hickman 12/30/68
2.50	6,203	Plain Chili	E.Hickman 12/30/68
2.00	4,177	Chili w/Beans	E. Hickman 01/3/69

*All these deals in the last three months?* Post wondered.

Post quickly flipped to other markets and saw no similar deal activity. He flipped back to Dallas.

Hickman had been approving all these deals just for the Dallas market. That was mighty peculiar.

When the allowance per case paid by Coyote Brand was multiplied by the number of cases sold “on deal” in Dallas, thousands of dollars worth of billback deals were being “earned” by the Dallas broker, and *supposedly* paid to trade accounts once they built end-aisle displays of Coyote Brand chili cans. That was assuming the billback check, approved by Hickman and made out to Frank Benedict, the Dallas broker, was endorsed and actually forwarded to the trade account.

Post had always been suspicious of that loosey-goosey payment scheme, but had never questioned it. He figured it was just more Yankee nonsense he’d have to get used to.

He looked at the list of deals again and shook his head.

*Wait a second!* How could Benedict’s band of salesmen have done such a great job that they suddenly earned thousands of dollars from Coyote for putting up displays? *Frank and his boys couldn’t physically set up that many displays*, he thought. With no safeguard to guarantee that the retail trade account was actually being paid, Frank could be pocketing the deal money, or kicking back part of it to, say, Hickman.

Post felt himself flush. He regretted not ever having seen this major loophole. He realized he should

have been cosigning the checks to verify that the deals had his approval, but he admitted to himself that he had done everything possible to avoid all that bureaucratic nonsense. *Wait, this could be the explanation for why Coyote's merchandising expenses had been so high!*

Post figured that if Frank and his boys were doing such a great job, sales ought to be way up.

*I'll just double check sales,* he told himself. That would reassure him that there was no hanky panky going on.

Post looked at the sales chart laying on the desk. He followed his index finger down the overall sales column and found Dallas. Sales were up all right, but only modestly.

*Shoot. This here's pretty convincing proof. All these displays and no change in sales? It all fits!*

Suddenly it was hard not to conclude that Post's long term Dallas broker was somehow in cahoots with Hickman, giving the Yankee a kickback. Sure, it was circumstantial evidence, but real convincing. Post shook with anger and fear at the same time.

*Is Hickman capable of this?* As Post thought back, he recalled that, since the acquisition a year before, Hickman had taken every opportunity to meet alone with Frank Benedict. And Post had considered that relationship positive!

Now the picture looked completely different. Hickman must've been scheming with Frank Benedict for several months.

Post slumped in his chair. He felt the very foundation of his company crumbling under the Yankees' influence. He admitted to himself that his own relationship with Frank Benedict had cooled over the previous year: short lunches, perfunctory phone calls, and canceled golf rounds. Frank had also attended only one of the quarterly broker review meetings, which he normally never missed. Post had thought all along that the man was just put out because Post hadn't awarded him the Houston market with all that commission.

*Maybe that's why he's been cheatin'!* More damn evidence, Post thought.

Wherever he looked, he found substantiation for his fears. It seemed obvious now. Irritated, he sat back and roughly flipped through the pages of his latest copy of "Agent," a local periodical that tracked the real estate market in Navarro County. He had begun receiving the little magazine since he moved into the big white house in Golf Estates.

The cover story got his attention. It explained how the Northern folk moving into Texas were affecting everything. He read how they were diluting the growth of Texas products. How per capita sales for Texas products actually declined as these transplanted Yankees chose not to purchase the same shopping basket that Texans did.

Post sat up. *Lord, that must apply to chili.* To tap into the Yankee population explosion, he would have to emphasize a new product mix and not assume Yankees would purchase the same things Texans would. Maybe Burghoff was right about pushing other products like chili hot dog sauce, a chili with a lower meat content formulated to make great chili dogs.

*Shoot, even Yankees must like chili dogs,* Post thought.

Come Monday, with or without that kid Burghoff was going to send, Post vowed to himself to reconsider what products were appropriate for his changing customers. Those would be the ones he'd push.

He tapped his pipe in the gold-bordered ashtray that he had received for service to the Corsicana Rotary. He looked outside and watched the darkness spread across the company's parking lot.

Again he heard that scraping noise, then a noise like something sliding through gravel. He glared out the window into the dark but saw nothing. Being alone in the office on Friday nights wasn't usually a spooky experience, but this night seemed peppered with weird sounds. He sighed as he looked out the window again and thoroughly scoured the courtyard. Nothing.

Even though he felt shaken by his discovery of Hickman's malfeasance and the need to change Coyote advertising to adjust for the Yankee boom, Post figured his Friday thinking session had gone particularly well. He sat down and leaned back in his chair, plopped his boots on the desk, and clasped his long fingers behind his head.

He glanced at the orange Grady Davis Garage receipt for new brakes the boy had installed over lunch. Post would certainly surprise Margaret when they drove to church that Sunday with quiet brakes. That darn squeaking had bothered her and most of Corsicana for months! But, not anymore, thanks to Grady. That boy could fix a car better than anyone!

Post sat on the edge of his chair and sorted his follow-up memos into piles. A small, folded page torn from a spiral notebook fell off the pile onto his desk. He picked it up and unfolded it.

Dear Mr. Post, You must be careful. This is not a joke.

A friend

*That's odd*, Post thought. Are Oscar and Harold playing games? Maybe someone else wrote this.

For a second, he thought about calling the sheriff immediately. On the other hand, maybe he could call tomorrow. Tonight, he would focus on summarizing his revelations, then head for home. Outside the storm clouds blocked the last traces of the setting sun. The birds had stopped their singing, conceding to the beat of a steady drizzle. Suddenly, lightning cracked and lit up the blinds.

Post sat up and reached in his drawer for the impressive silver fountain pen Margaret had given to him for their anniversary. He smiled fondly as he studied the "Dearest J.P. Love, M.P." which was inlaid in black oxide around the heavy barrel. Post pulled out his crystal ink bottle and filled the pen with his favorite royal blue ink. He tested it. Perfect as usual. That pen was the nicest present his little darlin' had ever gotten him. He would treasure it forever.

In sweeping blue lines, Post documented Hickman's likely culpability and Coyote's need to take

advantage of the Yankee population boom by pushing hot dog sauce. Having scrawled the better part of a page, he reached for the telephone, buried it in his shoulder for support, and dialed home.

“Hello,” a dainty female voice answered.

“Margaret!”

“What is it, James? You sound excited.”

“I am, sugar. I am.” Post tapped his pipe and picked up the summary he had just written.

“When you coming home?”

“Wait, Margaret, I have news,” he said.

“What?”

“For once I’ve had a wonderful Friday night session. It’s that damn Yankee, Earl Hickman.” He tapped his pipe particularly hard.

“What about him?”

“I had a feelin’ all along and now I’m sure. Looks like the polecat’s on the take.” He sat up straight.

“My Lord, James.”

“Yep. Getting a kickback from them damn billback deals he’s always pushing.” Post laid his pipe down and adjusted the phone.

“I thought he promised those billbacks would save the day,” she said.

“He’s in bed with Frank Benedict.”

“That Dallas ruffian,” she scolded. “Is he still bothering you about handling Houston?”

“Well, he would get a three hundred thousand dollar increase in commission, darlin’,” Post said.

“As if the man weren’t well-off enough. Shame!”

“Oh, don’t fret. Frank’ll get tired of hearing no on Houston. Fact, now he’ll probably lose all his

Coyote business!”

“Why can’t he just leave you be and do his job?” she asked.

“It’ll be OK soon. I caught both them foxes in the hen house now,” Post said.

“I never did like that Hickman, James. Thinks he’s a southerner because he’s from Baltimore—such nonsense.”

“Have to let him go is all.” Post picked up his pen and tapped the back end lightly on the desk. “Then I’d cut those billbacks and have enough money to push other products. Burghoff likes hot dog sauce. Thinks the Yankees movin’ down would go for it,” he said.

“James, why don’t you forget about all this nonsense and head home. Henrietta’s making chicken. And, I have a mighty big surprise.”

“Your tests?”

“I’m not sayin’, Darlin’,” she said.

But Post heard a smile in her voice. She had just received the results of tests that monitored the status of her cancer. The doctor had been optimistic and ordered the tests to see if the disease had been arrested.

“OK. In a few minutes. Oh, and Margaret?” he said.

“Yes,” she said softly.

“I do love you.”

“Oh, James, you sweetie.” She giggled. “I love you, too.”

“You bathe in that rose blossom scent today, Sugar?”

“Yes, James.” She giggled.

“Good.” He smiled. “Be home soon. Just need to jot some notes for the boys.”

“You and your silly notes! I swear! You do run that place with those notes, don’t you.”

“I’ll be quick about it, Darlin’. I promise. G’bye.”

They hung up.

Before he left, Post picked up his pen, looked over his revelations once more, and added a few scribbles. Then he reached for his little white notepad. He routinely used it to send instructions to each of his managers so they would take specific steps to improve the company’s performance. By jotting the notes, which they all hated, he found he could communicate with each of them in the language that they best responded to. For instance, Harold Hudson, the Quality Assurance Manager, had a great sense of humor. So, when the company had experienced a product recall the year before, Post rallied Harold’s enthusiastic support by implying that the recall was inevitable since Coyote Chili was such a wild-tasting concoction to begin with.

But Oscar Sanchez, the Plant Manager, was a proud man, so talking about the recall in grave terms, had given Post a certain power over him. It encouraged Oscar to put in the extra effort to save the day.

Post realized that his note-writing bordered on manipulation of the boys, like chess pieces on a board. But he undertook it with the best of intentions so, over the years, he began to view it as his secret weapon for managing Coyote, and he became quite good at the technique.

After he finished his notes, Post stabbed them onto a nail pounded into a four-by-four-inch piece of half-inch plywood. Lenora knew to look there first thing Monday to gather the notes for distribution to each manager.

Post carefully laid his pen back on the wooden carrier in his middle desk drawer, and rose. Large drops spattered the north-facing windows as he switched off the heat and turned out the last of the office lights. Monday, with Puritan’s token help, Post would begin to weed out the effects of Hickman and his billback deals. With a little luck, the Ramsay kid could actually help. At least Burghoff seemed to have a lot of faith in him.

Post's boots thumped over to the wooden hat rack. He picked up his black felt hat and stuffed it under his arm. He left the office, pulled the door shut, and locked it.

Outside, rain sprinkled the dust-covered asphalt and dripped on Post's thinning hair. He put on his hat. Suddenly lightning zapped a block away.

He knew that Margaret would want to hear about his ideas for the company. She would be supportive, but would also infuse him with skepticism, gently challenging him as always. Post smiled. He loved his dainty Margaret so.

He looked around the company courtyard, lit only by the eerie blue of mercury vapor light. *Allied Corporation might own this place*, he thought, *but it'll always be mine in spirit.*

Crack! The thunder made him jump.

He stopped and looked up. The stars struggled to show themselves through puffy intermittent storm clouds.

*How beautiful this is!* Post felt exhilarated by his discoveries. Earl Hickman would get the ax for his fool-ass, money-skimming ways. Cecil, who had been there for a decade, would stay, always mister reliable. Al, the backbone of Coyote, would also stay. Maybe Oscar too, if he could douse his career obsession and focus on his job. Coyote's Dallas sales broker, Frank Benedict, would have to be reassessed.

*Man's gotta prove that he and Hickman aren't schemin' together.*

Post beheld his massive yellow Cadillac with its cruise control and automatic windows. It sat there, bathed in the blue light. Looking up, he stretched out his long arms, catching the rain drops. The car worked perfectly now that Grady had fixed her up. *Margaret will be so pleased.*

*Shoot!* His retirement of leisure was only a heartbeat away now. He dreamed of it being an idyllic adventure, maybe even in the South Seas. His thirty years of hard work had finally paid off, and no

cheatin' Yankee was going to spoil it. Instead, Post wanted his last five years as president—part of the Allied deal—to be the best of all.

He rubbed his belly, realizing how famished he was after his long day. He couldn't wait to get home to Henrietta's scrumptious chicken dinner. *It sure is nice living in that big white house with the breezy porch*, he thought. A might pretentious, but thank the Lord it isn't one of those boxy tract homes across the field from Golf Estates.

Post opened the car door. He heard gravel crunch. He looked left, then right. Not a sound.

*I must be goin' nuts*, Post thought as he got into the automobile. Putting his keys in the ignition, he thought about how Collin Street Bakery over on Seventh Street, makers of the world's finest fruit cakes since 1896, seemed to operate successfully year after year, even though Gus Weidmann and Tom McElwee had personally stopped supervising production of the famous Christmas cakes years before. *Maybe things worked out for those boys because they didn't have any know-it-all Yankees spending their money*. Post decided he would ask Gus and Tom at the next Rotary meeting if they ever had to deal with a Hickman. *Maybe they could give me some advice*.

A young man suddenly jumped up from the shadows in front of the car. The intruder turned and ran out the open chain link gate toward the field across Main Street.

"Hey, you!" Post blurted out as he jumped from the car. He shook his fist at the escaping interloper. His heart pounded.

The young man, probably in his twenties, was tall, muscular, and quick. Long brown hair flopped under his straw, western-style hat, which he held as he ran across the partially lit field, thrashing stalks of weeds and kicking loose stones. He sped toward the railroad tracks a half-block away.

Post stared at the disappearing form. As the boy passed under a streetlight on the edge of the field, he glanced back, revealing an obvious mustache. Post squinted, but still couldn't recognize him.

His stomach relaxed as the patter of the boy's boots faded. A distant engine revved and tires squealed.

*Sounds like a truck*, Post thought. Then he sighed. The trespasser was gone.

Post glanced back to the distribution wing next to the chili plant. As usual, the large door had been left open. He looked over at the plant, then back at the sales office that used to be the old men's shower building—the same size as the little front office building. They were all lit by the purple security light. Everything looked normal around the compound.

Post got back into his car, closed the door, turned the key, and revved the mighty V-8.

After a dusty exit, he rolled down Main Street through deserted downtown Corsicana. His wipers pushed away the increasing raindrops. He hoped he'd run into the boy at some stoplight. Then he could at least get his truck's tag number and report it.

When Post got home he planned to tell Margaret all of the details of his crazy day. How the strange boy had leapt from the shadows. How that Yankee Hickman had hurt Coyote's profits with the billback deals and was undoubtedly getting a kick-back from Benedict. How the company could push hot dog sauce to take advantage of the Yankees moving in.

He calmed down as his car approached Second Street on the east side of town. As he turned left, passing the road to Pioneer Village and the cemetery, he noticed his brakes were quiet, all right, but they felt mushy. He had to press his foot halfway to the floor before they engaged.

*Not good. Better have Grady check 'em out again.* Post rolled out of town to the sign that marked the wooded road leading to Golf Estates. When he turned left there, his brake pedal depressed too easily and didn't slow the car effectively. Post gulped.

He pumped the brakes several times before he got a response. He decided he would definitely take the car back to Grady's in the morning.

*Unlike that boy to foul up.*

Anticipating the winding road ahead and shielded from the rain by the old trees, he lowered his window and proceeded carefully. He whiffed the faint odor of manure. *Fresh country, all right.* Enjoying the moment, Post lost himself in thought.

Then freshly painted lines appeared on the asphalt. It signaled the curving road that led into Golf Estates. The road's sudden changes reminded Post of the way Coyote could now focus on a new future despite being owned by Allied. *Maybe that Ramsay kid can help get things cleaned up.* Post promised himself he'd try to be receptive to the boy's ideas.

Meanwhile, he gently swerved down the winding road. He noticed that with the momentum of each turn, his large car began to rock from side to side, gaining speed uncomfortably. As he approached the entrance to Golf Estates, he saw the long entry marker, a freestanding brick wall. Post pressed on his brakes.

Nothing.

*What?*

He pushed the pedal to the floor three times. No response. He downshifted and the gear broke cleanly. He was in neutral. Post's heavy Cadillac lurched into the dip just before the entrance and gained momentum. "Holy Lord!" The long wall and the words "Golf Estates" loomed at him in apparent slow motion. He pumped the brakes again. The car swerved to the right, out of control.

"No-o-o!!"

Margaret Post was standing beside Henrietta in the kitchen of the Post home when the explosion rocked the neighborhood.

"Oh, my. What's that, Miss Margaret?" Henrietta asked. They both turned away from the chicken

on the stove and ran to the front door.

Outside, Margaret Lassiter Post rushed through the rain to the end of the street. There she pushed through the murmuring crowd. Henrietta followed close behind. Empty eyes and shaking heads greeted them. Margaret approached the bloodied body by the brick wall, surrounded by bits of broken glass. Her James had been thrown from the car. His eyes remained open; his body was deadly still. She dropped to her knees next to him, splashing the mud. Behind her, Henrietta hugged herself as the crowd jabbered.

Margaret closed James' eyes and dabbed the side of his bloodied face with an arm of her housecoat. She traced his cheek with her fingers.

“Oh, my James.” She shook, straining to control herself. She leaned over and kissed him, vaguely aware of approaching sirens and flashing red lights. In a broken voice she prayed, “Dearest James, may the Lord keep you.”

Then the voices faded and Margaret disregarded large drops of rain that splattered on her own coatless body. “Dream sweetly, my love,” she whispered. The first lady of Coyote Brand rose to her knees. Her bottom lip shook uncontrollably as she looked up and saw the silhouettes of what seemed like a hundred heads framing the stormy sky.

Then Margaret's muted cry joined Henrietta's and, with the others' voices, sounded an eerie siren.

At the same moment, barely visible in the faint illumination of porch lights, a taxi was parked down the road. The driver, Reginald Waverly, sat there, eating candy from a little white cardboard box with green letters. He shook his crewcut head. “Too much—this death. The hateful ones need to pay.” He popped a little minty chocolate circle into his mouth and chewed.

He scoured the crowd and stopped when he eyed his “fare,” lying there against the wall,

surrounded by neighbors. At Post's side, his wife Margaret knelt and cried.

Then Reginald gasped as he saw the spirit of James Post suddenly rise from the lifeless body. It grew into a multi-pronged swirl of colored sparkles— beautiful, yet terrifying. “My Lord!” Reginald exclaimed. “I’ll never get used to this part!”

The vapor shot from Post's body, flew throughout the area, and surged into the sky. In an instant it occupied all the heavens; in another, it returned and entered all the plants, animals, and bystanders—all living things. As quickly as it had come, the sparkling swirl disappeared.

Reginald clasped his hands together, patted his chest, and sighed. “I say. One of the most spectacular dislodgements I’ve ever seen.” He picked up his pen and recorded a few notes on his clipboard. He popped another Junior Mint and thought about how he loved his job, particularly avenging wronged spirits. He knew he was the best in the office at handling those particular kinds of assignments, so he considered himself lucky when such an assignment came along. “Rest now, spirit of Mr. James Post. In time, you shall have your day.” Then, by merely glancing at the ignition switch, his car's engine started. The taxi slowly turned around and headed down the road that led into the woods.