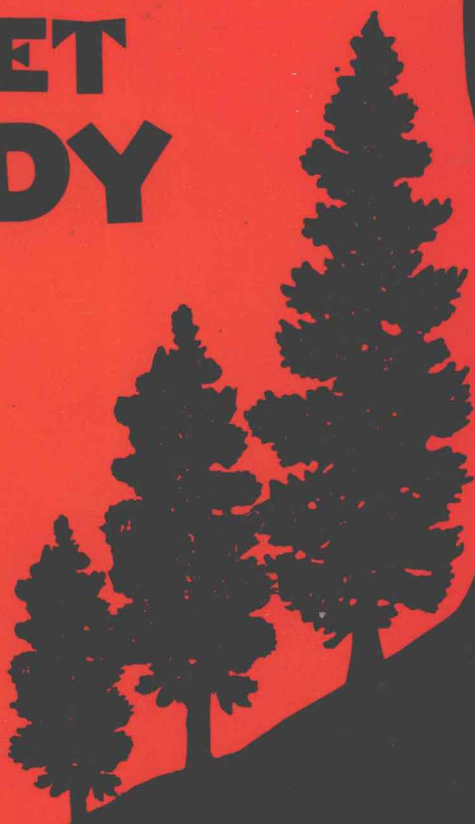


THREE TO GET READY



Hans Ostrom

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This novel is a work of fiction. All the characters in this book are imaginary, as are the incidents in which they are involved. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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First Edition

*This is for the family
and all of its mysteries,
for the memory of B. J. Jacks,
for Esther, Barry, Shelley, and Beth,
and especially for Spencer and Jackie,
with love.*

1.

Kim Burdette looked up at the stars. On a moonless July night in California's Sierra Nevada, a warm breeze moved through manzanita and buck-brush, stirring boughs of pines and firs. She stood on the old road that led to the Remington Mine. The man with her had walked down the road away from her, and she was waiting for him to return.

This is what the sky was like when Indians lived here, she guessed, and when the first trappers and miners edged into the mountains. No city lights, no pollution. Just stars and planets and swirls of light spilled across a black sky.

Maybe this was a sign, she thought. She wasn't sure whether she believed in God anymore, but still, maybe things happened that meant tonight would be the night she could always look back on and say, "That was my lucky night. That's when it all turned around."

She was only twenty-eight, but life had been hard enough on her to make her feel ancient. She was born and raised in Shreveport, Louisiana, the youngest of four children and the only girl. When she was eight, her mother and father had one of their terrible fights, and her mother threw a hot iron at her father, burning his forearm. Her father beat up her mother, knocking her against a china cabinet, bloodying her nose. Then he left, and that was the

last time Kim or anyone in the family ever saw him. Later it was the usual thing to say at family get-togethers that, well, hell, Jim Burdette is probably dead by now, the s.o.b. Then someone would say, shush, think of the children.

When Kim got a little older, she always thought bitterly about that phrase, think of the children. When in hell did they ever think of the children?

Her mother married again and during one of his drunken binges, the stepfather tried to rape Kim; she was a junior in high school then. So she ran away to live with an aunt in Bakersfield. She managed to finish high school and started waiting tables here and there. Then she met and married a diesel mechanic, and they had big plans for a house and a family, but he got to drinking and going out on her and finally beat her up.

She meandered up the Central Valley after the divorce, waitressing at truck stops. One day one of the older waitresses told her about Claytonville, this small town in the mountains where the woman had worked one summer. Kim drove up there and liked how peaceful it was, and now she was in her fifth year there. It wasn't like the end of the rainbow or anything, but she could always find work—at least eight or nine months out of the year, and then she could draw unemployment and make it just fine.

It felt more like home than any place ever had. She especially liked some of the other women in town who had taken some rough knocks, too. And it was a close-knit bunch that hung out at Red's Bar, drinking beer, playing pool, playing softball in the summer—just talking, mainly. She didn't like it so much in the summer when there were lots of tourists and the place didn't feel the same, but she loved it in the winter when there were just the locals and the place felt warm and cozy and to hell with the snow and the skimpy unemployment check.

Sometimes she looked at herself in the mirror behind the bar and got a little sad, thinking about how mean her family had been, thinking about some of the things she'd done just to try to find and keep the love of a man, any man.

That was the worst part about drinking at Red's—that and owing Gary Buck, the owner, money for drinks. Gary was so sweet, she thought, to let her run a tab even when she was between jobs. And he made her smile—with his red face and round body and T-shirts from sports teams.

And tonight, when things had gotten a little ugly, Gary Buck had been there to smooth things out.

She dropped her gaze from the stars and looked out over the dark expanse of manzanita that she knew lay below the road, sloping back down to the state highway. Even though the breeze was warm, she felt cozy in the flannel shirt she wore over the short-sleeved one.

She wondered why he had gone back to the vehicle. She heard him crunch-crunching back there on the shale and gravel of the old road. Maybe he had a lot of the money right then, in the vehicle.

Money, she thought. How strange it will be to have money. She was determined to have a plan for it, not piss it away like those ballplayers and actors she always read about, or like the loggers who got rich every summer and were broke by November. No, she would have a plan for her money.

Or maybe—was this too much to dream?—maybe he would say, Why don't you just stay with me? But maybe that wouldn't be such a great thing. For once, she thought, I'd like not to lean on a man, expecting things that would never happen. With her own money, she could spend a whole year—heck, lots of years—saying No to men—saying No to the thing in her that made her go all soft and needful when a man showed any kind of interest in her.

She heard him close the door.

What the hell was he doing back there? She wouldn't turn around. Let him do what he wanted. He knew where she stood on the matter. She wouldn't back down.

And she would not let herself think of it as blackmail. He owed her that money and probably even more, just as sure as if they'd both signed a contract. Blackmail was

when you took advantage of someone. This was different. This was not letting someone else take advantage of you.

She looked back up at the stars and wondered whether they'd moved any. She knew the constellations were supposed to turn like hands on a big slow clock, but she preferred to think of the sky as a stream of stars, flowing by like a big river. She remembered when she and her brothers used to stand outside in Shreveport and try to say, in unison,

*Star light, star bright.
First star I see tonight.
Wish I may, wish I might
Get the wish I wish tonight.*

She said it silently to herself. Was it get or have? she thought. Have the wish or get the wish? Oh well, she thought, to have it you first have to get it.

She heard him walking down the road towards her. Finally. She wondered whether he would come up behind her, maybe try to fondle her breasts. She would let him do that. Why not? As long as she got the money. That was the thing. And this was the night. He was walking so slowly toward her, crunching the shale.

When she was growing up, her brothers used to play tricks on her endlessly. It got to be where she would know instinctively that they were going to play a trick on her, so that even before they said, so mock-sweetly, "Kim"—even before they said that and she turned around to be scared by a snake or whatever they had planned, she knew it was coming. It was as if right before they said, "Kim," a voice in her mind said, "Here comes a trick." What she could never understand was why she always turned around just as if she didn't know it was coming.

And that's what she did now. She had a feeling he was going to pull some surprise on her—some silly joke that wouldn't be funny. Well, let him, she thought. Let him do

whatever the hell he wants to before he gives me the money. Wish I may, wish I might.

He was just a few feet from her now, and she dropped her gaze from the stars and pretended she didn't really hear him. Just before he said, "Kim?" she had that old feeling she used to have with her brothers.

He said, "Kim?" and she turned around. She saw the gun in his hand, and the last image her mind received and recorded was the flash from the barrel. The bullet hit her in the middle of the forehead, just off center, to the right. In the same instant, it knocked her down and tore through the back of her head. Her arms lay symmetrically at her sides on the road, and her dead eyes looked up at the stars.

It took several moments for the faint breeze to remove the smell of gunpowder, and by that time the dirt around her head was saturated with her blood, and he was steadily backing the vehicle down the road away from her body.

2.

For many reasons, Sheriff Keith Harding wasn't any more ready for Kim Burdette to die than she was.

It's not that he was an incompetent law-enforcement officer. Quite the opposite: he was smart and experienced. But a bizarre election—bizarre in a way only small-county elections can be—had made him a sheriff before his time. And he wasn't yet used to being unmarried. And budget-making, a task new to him, nearly bored him unconscious.

So on the July morning just before the call about her murder came in, he had been on the job but six months, and was thinking of fly-fishing.

He sat at his oak desk sipping coffee, trying to concentrate on the previous year's budget, but thinking instead of trout. His office was on the first floor of a white, three-story county building in Claytonville (population 525), county seat of Tamarack County, California's second smallest. Since his office was in the back corner of the building, his window looked out over tin rooftops toward a canyon wall of the North Meredith River.

He couldn't actually see the river. It was obscured by the houses and by some trees, oak and pine mostly. But he knew what the water was like down there this time of year. Lean. Down a good fifteen feet from the Spring level,

with riffles full of rainbow and German-brown trout in the evening and hatches of bugs swarming everywhere.

He sipped coffee from a white cup that had an insignia from the California Sheriffs' Association on it. He set the cup back on the green blotter and swiveled his chair to get a better look at the canyon wall that rose up from the river to the state highway, which led in and out of town.

A year earlier his wife Karen had given him a pair of ankle-top waders for his birthday, the kind with the thick felt on the soles. He hadn't been able to use them until July of the year and by that time he had decided to run for sheriff, and she had decided to leave him.

He was young for a sheriff—thirty-five. The youngest in California, in fact. He kept his dark brown hair law-enforcement short, and one or two gray hairs had crept into the short sideburns. A thin, half-inch scar above his right eye got paler as he got more tan. He stood just a hair over six feet and weighed just a shade under a hundred and ninety pounds.

He thought back to that evening in the previous July when he waded into the river like a robot, casting without thinking, hooking fish purely out of reflex, releasing all of them. At the last pool before he quit to walk up the highway, he sat on a boulder as darkness came down and as mosquitoes swarmed unbearably, and he stared blankly at the North Meredith, knowing that her decision to leave was as real as the water rushing by him and that there was nothing he could do about it. He remembered staring down at his feet in the new waders. They seemed clownish.

A year ago, he thought. Hard to believe.

He returned to the budget and asked himself how his predecessor, the venerable and venerated Dick Cooper, had endured budget-making all those years.

Cooper had been more of a classic sheriff, at least when it came to avoirdupois. He had packed a heavy paunch through nearly twenty years of being sheriff and then had announced his retirement in January of his last year, giving

whomever wanted to run for the job a good ten months to do so, not knowing that he would set in motion a series of events that would put an unsuspecting Keith Harding in office.

Nearly everyone in the county (including Harding) knew, however, that if Cooper could pick a replacement, it would be Lloyd Bluestone, a quiet, capable deputy. Although Bluestone himself was only thirty-five, he had been in the business for almost fifteen years. Cooper had hired Bluestone when he was barely twenty-one.

And, in fact, when Bluestone filed his papers to run for office, no one was surprised. Until late May, that is, when a deputy named Ray Slater suddenly announced that he wasn't going to let Bluestone run uncontested.

Harding let his eyes fall to the budget line for "petty cash." He thought of the game show, Jeopardy. What question could "petty cash" answer? How about, "Why is Keith Harding sheriff of Tamarack County?"

He tossed his yellow pencil down, leaned back in his chair, locked his hands behind his head. He thought of how hot it was going to get that day: maybe ninety-five. He made himself admit again that the only reason he was in a cool office doing paperwork and not out getting a sweaty back in a patrol car was that Hal Winters had decided to toss a little petty cash around.

Winters, a realtor, was one of the first people Keith and Karen had met when they came to Claytonville. He was a lanky, arrogant man in his early fifties who wore dress cowboy boots and western-cut jackets. The story was that he'd made a pile of money in Florida real estate, thanks to a hefty allowance doled out by his mother, who was extant and esconced in a Fort Myers condominium.

According to Claytonville gossip, Winters had been thrice married and as many times divorced and liked to be thought of as a playboy.

Once the Hardings had said, no, they probably wouldn't like to buy a house from him, they steered clear of him. And

that's the way it stayed until Winters decided to muddy the waters of the sheriff's race and back Deputy Ray Slater.

Nobody had to be a genius to see that Winters backed Slater not just because the deputy was a Camel-smoking, law-and-order guy, but also because Lloyd Bluestone, the supposed shoo-in, was half white and half Washoe Indian. Winters and Slater knew how to insinuate that, well, Lloyd was a darn good deputy who should stay a darn good deputy. It was good-ol'-boy politics at its basest.

To hell with it, is what Keith Harding thought when Slater entered the race and Winters huffed and puffed his way around the county, buying rounds of drinks, hosting barbecues, doing a bad imitation of J.R. Ewing and Lyndon Baines Johnson. To hell with it. Let Slater be a bother to Lloyd and let Lloyd win eventually and let Winters look like the ass he is.

Staring blankly at the canyon wall, Harding played Jeopardy again: "Instincts," he thought. What didn't Keith Harding follow when he should have?

Then he thought of Marc Verblein. Petty Cash, Jr.? No, that was probably unfair, even if any outsider would say that Hal Winters and Marc Verblein were the resident big fish in a backwoods puddle.

Claytonville had gossip on Verblein, too, and the Hardings soon found out about it: Verblein was in his late thirties and not just comfortably heeled, like Winters, but loaded. His parents had owned a large import/export business in San Francisco, and when both of them perished in a light-plane crash near Yosemite, their only child inherited not just the business but also a million dollars of life-insurance money.

So in 1969 Marc Verblein was just eighteen and a fabulously rich orphan, and the Claytonville version of his biography had it that he partied hard for three years straight—in Puerto Vallarta, Honolulu, Los Angeles, Paris, Sydney, and home turf, San Francisco, where he also backed rock bands, painters, writers, and exotic political parties.

Until the minority partners of the business got edgy and questioned his sanity, at which point he sold his stock for more than it was worth and headed for the hills, namely Tamarack County.

He built a big lodge of a house on an abandoned ranch several miles above the small town of Tamarack, near a summit of the Sierra. The ranch lay two miles off the state highway behind a barrier of thick timber. Verblein sprinkled six cottages in the woods surrounding the lodge, and his estate, which he dubbed "The Source," soon became known as a counter-culture hang-out, or a "commune" (if you talked to one of the "members"), or "a goddamned nest of hippies" (if you talked to a county resident those days).

Around 1975, though, the county noticed that the people winter snow drove out stayed driven out and that Verblein had apparently wearied of the various gurus, free-loaders, hangers-on, and drifters. His house became his home alone. The hand-carved sign "The Source" stayed on the big pine tree where the ranch road met the highway, but below it was appended a manufactured metal one that said "Private Property."

So the Verblein the Hardings met in the early eighties was very much a former flower child. He kept the wire-rim glasses, but his light-brown hair, parted in the middle, barely spilled over his ears, and he usually wore wide-wale corduroy, chamois shirts and vests from L.L. Bean or Eddie Bauer, and the latest in high-tech walking boots. He converted communal politics into liberal advocacy, and undaunted by his parents' fate, he purchased and learned how to fly his own small plane. This let him frequent Sacramento and take the good fight to the halls of state government as well.



The day had grown hot enough to begin to warp the view of the canyon like a mirage. Harding thought of the visit Verblein had paid Karen and him about a year earlier.

"I've known the two of you long enough to get right to the point," he'd said. "And I think you know where I'm coming from. So I'll get down to it. Keith, I want you to run for sheriff."

Harding laughed and looked at Karen, who wasn't even smiling.

"You've got to be joking," Harding had said. But Verblein's pale blue eyes were filled with passionate political light.

"I'm not. Not as long as Winters and Slater aren't joking. What they're doing to Lloyd is unforgivable—it's like goddamned Arkansas in the Fifties."

"So how is Keith running going to change that?" Karen had asked. She seemed to Keith then to be both weary and furious.

"That's exactly the question to ask," Verblein had said, shifting forward in his chair. "Here's how I figure it. If Slater and Winters go after 'the white vote,' fine. We will, too, only we'll split it and Lloyd will win in a walk."

"So I'm a kamikaze candidate?" Harding had said.

"Don't get me wrong. I think you'd be a great sheriff—and will be some day. That's the thing. The worst that could happen is that you'll win."

"You're right," Karen had said. "That is the worst." She walked back to the kitchen.

"Christ, Marc, then I'd be doing what Slater wants to do, stab Lloyd in the back."

"Look," Verblein had said. "I don't want you to take this wrong, but I don't think you have a chance of winning. You haven't lived here long enough. But I can tell you that when I go over to the valley to fly to Sacramento, I sniff around. And there's this sentiment against Lloyd, some of it racist, some not. Some of those people think he's too quiet. Not a real presence."

"That's racist, too."

"You're right, fair enough. But we have to play hardball to do Lloyd any good. We can't just be right. What I'm saying is there're votes against Lloyd over there, and on this side of the county, too. But I think support for Ray Slater's just as thin. Face it. He and Winters are jerks. We're talking about an election where ten votes can make or break you. This is county politics. You can do unbelievable things in small counties. We can knock Slater out of the way."

Harding had had an uneasy feeling that he was being convinced. He'd said, "What if my running helps Slater? Or what if I win? What if I win, goddamnit?!"

Harding ran, believing that he was helping Lloyd Bluestone—even telling Bluestone so. Bluestone had merely looked at him with a sardonic grin and said, "Well, Keith, we'll see what happens."

What happened was that Harding won just over fifty per cent of the votes, preventing a run-off, winning outright, stunning himself and Verblein and Slater and Winters and a lot of other people. The best explanation anybody put on it was that maybe people wanted a real break from Cooper's regime and maybe Slater was just such a jerk that Harding had suddenly become a logical alternative, provided "logical" belonged in the vicinity of politics.

On a chill, rainy Wednesday in November, he was suddenly the youngest sheriff-elect in California and his wife was making her final arrangements to leave. How mechanically she had answered the phone calls from well-wishers and from newspapers all over the state.

Two days after the election the two of them sat at the kitchen table in the dim light of late-autumn dawn. They sipped coffee and talked as if their marriage weren't ending.

"I still can't believe it," he said.

"The election? Oh, I can. Remember? I called it."

"No, I mean that you're leaving. I can't believe the election either, but I really can't believe you're leaving."

"Keith, let's not . . ."

"Don't worry," he said, putting his hand up. "I'm not going to try to talk you out of it again. I'm just saying it's going to be hard."

"I know," she mumbled. Tears welled up in her brown eyes, and she looked down hard at the steaming cup of coffee.

He could see that her light brown hair was still damp from the shower. It hung shoulder-length. She had let it grow out in the last couple of months. He thought of all the times they had hugged and he had leaned down to smell her hair. He wanted to smell it now, and then he realized this was probably the first in an endless number of ways he could torture himself with memories.

They both sighed, nearly in unison. The room was getting lighter.

Their house sat on a hill that rose rapidly up from the North Meredith about a half-mile from the county building. Piety Hill it was called, one of several ironic names left from the Gold Rush, when the hill was known mainly for its whorehouses. Their place was a two-story farmhouse (without the farm), built in the twenties. The window they sat next to that morning looked out on a thicket of brush and blackberry vines that smothered the bases of several large pines.

He remembered her saying on the last morning, "Keith, I know I've said this before, but I want to say it again. Your running for sheriff—and winning—that's not why I'm leaving."

"But it was the last straw."

"The last straw? Well, maybe, but I've never known what that meant. I think it means that whatever was going to happen was already going to happen."

"I want you to tell me—exactly—why you're leaving."

"Keith..."

"Please."

She sighed. "I'm leaving because this place is like death to me. I'm afraid of becoming like some of the women here. Bored into petty meanness. And I'm—I'm out of