

He wasn't even 30. He had been promoted from deputy to Sheriff two weeks earlier due to the sudden, but not all that surprising, death of the previous Sheriff. It wasn't that Lincoln was a dangerous town. It was quite the opposite. The last Sheriff spent most of his time at the local Kentucky Fried Chicken. Cholesterol killed him, not the job. Fortunately for Billy, this meant a promotion. Unfortunately for Lincoln, he wasn't the most qualified replacement.

During his first two weeks on the job and during the three years he served as deputy, Billy never had to solve a crime more serious than shoplifting - and even that was rare. This missing persons case, this was his first real case, and he was excited. He was also a bit terrified, but he tried to push that part into the back of his mind. Being scared wasn't going to help anyone.

Billy arrived at the address given to him by his witness. The house had a metal roof and a mostly broken porch that wrapped around the front. It was small and old and, until recently, abandoned. Most of the houses on this block were. Billy was surprised to see that someone had taken the time to mow the yard and put a fresh coat of paint on the outside. This house certainly stood apart from it's neighbors.

He gave the door what he hoped was a confident knock and took a step back. If he was a bigger city cop, he probably would have brought back up or at least rested his hand on his pistol in case the suspect turned violent. But, instead, he straightened his belt and smoothed his hair. He also checked his breath. Billy was more concerned with being polite than safe. Being safe didn't really occur to him.

A woman answered the door. She was younger than she looked. Circumstance had aged her more quickly than years, but Billy didn't notice. It helped that she was black. In a small, white town like Lincoln, old black women weren't given much thought. Her clothes were faded but clean, they all looked hand sewn.

The Sheriff introduced himself and showed the woman his new badge. She barely even glanced at it before motioning for him to come inside. Curious about what he would find, he complied and took a seat on the cracked leather sofa that was just a few Part One.steps from the door and faced the fireplace.

The woman remained silent and returned to her machine. The house was wired for electricity but the old Wilcox and Gibbs didn't

need it. It was powered by a treadle. That and your foot. Billy's great grandmother had had one just like it. He recognized the design.

The old woman could feel the Sheriff eying the freshly painted walls and polished floors. She wondered if he noticed the photographs. She hoped he did.

The old brick fireplace was surrounded by built-ins that displayed yellowed photos of the woman's family. All of them were dead and had been for some time, but that didn't keep the old woman from talking to them. They were the only people she could confide in. No one else could be trusted. She had learned that when she was just a girl; when she was just learning what it meant to be responsible for bringing justice. Back then, what her mother did frightened her. She didn't understand the importance of it. She wished her mother had survived long enough to witness her change of heart. She thought about that often.

There was a closed door to Billy's left; he couldn't tell if it was locked. He wanted to try the knob, but thought the old woman would object, so for the time, he kept his seat.

Just as the women finished the last stitch on the suit, the Sheriff began to speak.

"I was hopin' I could ask you some questions, ma'am."

His politeness amused her.

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"Oh Lord, I knows why you are here better than you do."

She stood and placed the suit she had just finished tailoring in a small black bag that had been resting beside her machine. She threw that over her shoulder and grabbed a shovel that was leaning against the door frame. She motioned for the Sheriff to follow. Hopeful that his investigation was going somewhere, he followed her out the door and across the brick street and into the cemetery.

The old woman led the deputy about half way down the fence before tossing both her bag and shovel over to the other side.

"This here is where we cross over."

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The woman hopped over to the cleanly manicured white side of the cemetery and continued walking into the darkness. She did not wait to see if the deputy would follow. Afraid to lose his first (and only) real lead he anxiously hopped the fence himself. He grabbed the black bag and shovel the woman had left behind. He figured that whatever they were meant for, as Sheriff of Lincoln, he probably ought to know.

The pair made their way towards the front of the cemetery, to where the freshest bodies were buried. It was dark, and hard to see and the Sheriff would have walked into the newly dug grave if the old woman hadn't held out her hand to stop him.

The deputy took a flash light from his belt and turned it on. He was horrified by what he saw but couldn't make any sense of it. The old woman was kneeling before him. She had pulled a man's suit from her bag and was dressing a badly decomposed body in what had once been a pretty nice suit. It was modern and obviously new but had been altered. The suit was originally made for a man much larger than the one it was fit for now.

By the time the woman had finished her work, the body was laid out neatly in the coffin below. Bones peeked out of each jacket sleeve and a cracked skull sat where the head should have been. The woman, seemingly pleased with herself, closed the coffin lid and began pushing dirt back into the hole she had dug up earlier that night. Billy couldn't believe his eyes.

"Where's the body that was meant to be here? The one they buried here this mornin'."

Without responding, the woman picked up her things and motioned for him to follow. He was pretty sure he was in over his head and was starting to wonder if this crazy old woman had anything at all to do with his missing person's case.

"Listen here, you're gonna tell me what's going on or we aren't goin' any further."

The old woman let out a sigh. She was anxious to continue her work.

"Oh Sherrif, if you're wantin' answers bad enough, you'll follow."

And he did. She wasn't surprised.

When they reached the fence, they hopped over, back into the weeds and unkept graves that characterized the black side of the cemetery. Inequality didn't end with life for these people, it literally followed them to their graves.

After walking for a while, they reached the edge of another grave. This one had no headstone. A man, clean and shaven and mostly naked lay at the bottom in a pine box that was much older than he was.

Billy raised his flashlight to the woman's face. Her black, wrinkled skin was barely illuminated by the light. Only her eyes shone clearly. She had no remorse for what she had done. The Sheriff was sure of it. It was time for those answers.

"So, ya dug up this po' man an' dumped him in this makeshift grave?"

"There ain't 'nothin' make shift about it. Why's it good enough for that black man, but not this white fella'?"

"Ma'am, this idn't about race. It's about decency. It's about lettin' people be after they die."

"It wasn't my aim to disrupt his sleep. I'm just trying da put right what's been wrong for so long."

"The way I see it, the white man had 'nough comfort in life to give up a little in death."

The Sherrif was beginning to feel uncomfortable. He felt for his pistol. It was still in it's holster. He probably should have brought his deputy along. Too late for that now.

After filling the second grave, the old woman patted the resulting mound of soil with her shovel.

Billy had gotten side tracked and he knew it.

"Listen here, this grave robbin'... swappin'. Whatever it is you're doin' here, it ain't why I came."

"You here about the boy."

At the mention of the boy, Billy's pace quickened. Perhaps this wasn't a crazy goose chase after all.

"Yes, ma'am. You seen 'em?"

The old woman's head dropped slightly.

"Yeah, I seen 'em. Come on."

The woman grabbed the shovel and began walking towards the woods that occupied most of the black side of the cemetery. The deputy followed, anxious and excited to be getting closer to solving his first real case. He put his fears and bad feelings aside and made his way towards the woods with the old woman as his guide.

A half of a mile in, they reached a small, flat patch of grass surrounded by trees. Empty beer bottles littered the ground. This is where the local kids came to drink. Billy had been out here before, keeping the high school kids in line. He knew the place fairly well. They were far from town. The woman's pace was slowing. He felt like they were getting close.

"Did ya see the boy here? Did ya see Justin Evers?"

She had seen the boy. She wished he hadn't wandered so far away from his friends. She wished he had listened to her tell him to stay back, but he didn't.

The woman motioned for the Sherrif to follow and he did. Solving the mystery of a missing teen was a great way for a young Sheriff to make a name for himself, especially in a small town like Lincoln.

They stopped after another quarter mile or so. The old woman held her hand to her ear.

"Shhh.. Listen"

The Sheriff froze when he heard it. A soft whimpering. A few yards away at most. The deputy sprinted forward. The old woman stayed where she was.

"That you, Son?"

The woman watched the Sheriff run to the edge of the grave she had dug the night before. Her hand, sweaty with anticipation, tightened around the shovel's wooden handle.

She wasn't fast, but she was strong, and the shovel was sharp. The sheriff fell head first into the grave. The woman was surprised and disappointed that he didn't break his neck. It would have been a much nicer way to go.

She wiped the blood from her shovel and began filling a grave for the third time that night. She was tired but couldn't leave the job unfinished. She would be gone by morning.

The woman hoped it wouldn't take too long for the boy and the sheriff to suffocate under all that dirt. She wasn't a monster. She didn't want them to suffer. She just couldn't have them interfering with her work. When she was done, and all the screaming had stopped, she prayed. And, when she was done with that, she headed home.

The next morning, the woman boarded a bus headed to Fairhope, a small town in Alabama. No one on the bus noticed her or the old rusty shovel sticking out of her bag. She wasn't surprised.