

**Murder in a Mining Town**

**Short Story Entry by**

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## Murder in a Mining Town

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It was just after midnight when I heard the shot tear through the cold night air of our gritty Pennsylvania mining town. My scruffy mutt King and I were making the rounds on foot. It was Saturday night near the end of a month that had been hell for me as the lone Coal and Iron policeman. An impending strike, violent competition between moonshiners, a mine cave-in and rash of cross burnings by the local Klan had the town on edge. On top of that there were the Halloween pranks like tipping outhouses while some poor souls were trying to do their business inside them.

I'd spotted a man staggering down the middle of Margaret Street and always assumed that no one was up to any good at that hour. He fell to the ground when I was a few feet away. King took off toward what must have been the shooter, and I knelt down shining my flashlight upon a face I didn't recognize. He'd been hit in the neck and didn't have a pulse. A large pool of dark liquid along with the metallic scent of fresh blood was everywhere. The hole coupled with the sound suggested that a hunting rifle had done all this damage to the man. It probably resulted from something as senseless as being accused of cheating in a poker game. I drew my pistol just as I heard a car door slam and take off toward Shantytown. I turned my light towards the screeching tires, but couldn't get a good look at the vehicle. I called to King who usually came instantly. I feared the little terrier mix had jumped into the car with the shooter. King was pretty full of himself and thought he was much tougher than his eleven years allowed him to be. He'd

considered himself my unofficial deputy since he showed up on our doorstep eight years back.

I moved the stranger to the side of the road and ran to the end of the block where Doc Meyers lived and had his office. I pounded loudly figuring that the old guy who'd delivered half the town was likely dozing. He came to the door putting his wire frame glasses on and smoothing his snow white thick hair. "Cal, was that a shot I just heard? Typical Saturday night in Grace." Mining towns often ended up with the inappropriate peaceful names of the owner's spouses. Go figure.

"Yeah, I think I got a corpse out there. No idea who it is."

Several people had gathered on their rickety front porches by the time we reached the dead man. I let Doc examine the victim and went around asking anyone if they'd seen or heard anything. As usual, everybody was mum. Most folks have enough trouble already and didn't need me looking into their private affairs. I was everybody's friend when I worked the mines, now I no longer was one of them. One old pal said folks saw me as a dung beetle that wouldn't go away. Nice analogy, but it still beat working in the dank dark four foot high caves twelve hours a day and chasing away the bold cat sized rats that demanded bites of your lunch. Jobs were hard to come by and being a lawman above ground in a nice crisp uniform suited me better than being crushed by a roof cave-in or smothered by methane or blown to bits by an explosion.

Doc closed his worn black bag. "We're gonna need the undertaker, Cal. This guy died instantly. I suppose you'll be putting the body in the window of the company store to see if anyone can identify him."

I nodded. The practice seemed pretty crass, but was what had been done around here for years and usually resulted in someone claiming the body. We put twenty five cent coins over the eyes and a grey wool blanket over most of the body so as not to frighten the young ones any more than necessary. "Can you handle this from here, Doc? I need to call the state boys and county sheriff to report this. Give me a call if you see King. Seems like he took off after our shooter. I'm guessing he jumped right into his car with him. The little dimwit."

"Any idea who fired the shot?"

I shook my head. "Didn't get a look at the shooter or the vehicle. I can't even be sure if the shot was meant for me or for this poor fellow."

I called to King as I walked home, hoping I didn't have to explain his loss to any of our six kids who loved the furry little canine. I was glad to see that Dot was still up and had a fresh pot of coffee and a slice of warm apple pie topped with cheddar cheese waiting for me as I entered our shabby row house. At five foot two, she was dwarfed by my six foot five inch frame, but we were like what some call two peas in a pod. Dot had been the love of my life since the fifth grade. She took care of the kids, cooked for the unmarried greenhorns who lived at the hotel and helped take care of families coping with tuberculosis. I was a lucky man to have such a great spouse. I made the necessary phone calls, then sat down to try to enjoy the snack.

“Slow night, dear? Most Saturday nights you’ve got someone handcuffed to our clothes line or I have to give up my half of the bed while you stand guard over some drunken miner until morning and haul them into the jail in the county seat.”

I shook my head sadly and explained what had taken place. Violence was common, but murders were rare in our town. She took the news about King hard. He was like our seventh child, and probably the best behaved one of the bunch. We were just about to head to bed when there was a rap on the door. Doc was standing there holding King. “He’s still breathing. My guess is that he got thrown from the getaway car. One of the greenhorns heard him moaning by the side of the road. He recognized King and brought him to me for help. King’s got a broken leg and some nasty gashes. Probably some internal damage too. I patched him up best I could for now. I think he’ll be okay. He’s a tough little guy.” King looked at me with pain mixed with a touch of pride and love in his liquid brown eyes. I gently patted his graying head and said everything would be okay, trying to convince myself as much as him.

Dot rushed to get some pillows and blankets and made him a cozy bed near the heat of the wood stove. I turned away to wipe a tear that slid down my cheek. “If I get my hands on that SOB...”

Dot wrapped her arms around me. “Thanks, Doc. I think we all need a good nights sleep. What do we owe you?”

“How about a slice of that pie to go?”

By the next morning the town was abuzz with news of the shooting. People crowded in front of the company store, but no one seemed to recognize the dead man. After being cleaned up and dressed in some fresh clothes, he looked to be in his mid twenties, with a rather dark complexion, six feet tall and of average build. Some folks speculated that he might be associated with organized crime or the gypsy encampment outside of town. The state police had pretty much taken over the investigation. I told them all that I knew, and then was readily dismissed to my usual routine of keeping the peace in our little coal patch.

I spotted my oldest boy James staring into the window of the company store. At sixteen he worked part time tearing old tracks out of tapped out mines. The rest of the time, I worried that he was up to no good. I nodded as he saw me approaching. "Ever see this guy? Anybody talking?"

James shrugged. "Some seem to think he might be a scab brought into work in the mines. Union's called a strike for the end of the week. Others say he's a German spy, undercover federal agent, escaped prisoner, or bootlegger from the South. Take your pick."

Near the end of the day, a woman wearing a long colorful skirt and scarf in her long black hair from the gypsy settlement came to our door claiming that the dead man was her son Ivan. She said he'd been seeing a woman from town but didn't know her name. I took her with me to the hotel where the state police detective was interviewing potential witnesses. Detective Sparks nodded, offering the woman his sympathy and

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once again dismissed me. I decided to walk back up to Margaret Street before it got dark.

The day shift was letting out and the street was busy with men covered with black soot wearily walking or driving back to their dingy company owned homes. I studied each one, paying special attention to the vehicles parked in front of the frame houses or duplexes. I paused in front of the home of the weigh boss. Paul Briggs was despised by most of the men who worked in the mines. He was known for cheating workers on what they got paid for a carload of coal. Even his wife had no time for the man who was known to beat her regularly and even brag about it. It was common knowledge that she shared her affections around town. I tried my best not to judge. I examined his new Ford and knew I had the killer. I called to him as he was about to enter his house.

“Care to tell me where you were around midnight last night, Briggs?”

“Home in bed. What’s it to you?”

“Funny, I don’t recall seeing your car in front of the house.”

“I’d had a few drinks and left it at the hotel...picked it up this morning. That okay with you, officer? Ask my old lady if you don’t believe me.”

“Paul, you shot and killed that man, and you almost killed my dog. You’re lucky that the state police are in town or I’d beat the crap out of you right now.”

“You’re crazy. You got no proof of anything. You’re just a big dumb flunky who couldn’t take it working the mines.”

I saw Detective Sparks approaching as I went for my night stick. “This guy’s your shooter, detective. Want me to handcuff him?”

The detective gave me an astonished look of disbelief. “And just what are you basing your accusation on?”

“For starters, Briggs doesn’t have a dog. No decent dog would live with this creep. See all those nose prints on the inside of his car windows? Those belong to King. He chased and jumped into the car with the shooter last night. I’d recognize the dog’s nose prints anywhere. I wipe them off my car windows on a regular basis. Nose prints are as good as fingerprints. No two are alike. If you examine Briggs, I suspect King bit the vermin a couple times too. King’s a good judge of character.”

I’m not sure what I enjoyed more...the look of panic on Brigg’s face, the look of surprise on Spark’s mug, or the look of relief from the woman peeking out the window of Brigg’s house.

Briggs ended up being sentenced to the next fifty years in prison. His wife moved on to live with relatives in another coal town named Desire or Rosie or something. But for a slight limp, King was pretty much back to his old self in a few months. He still lets out a low growl every night when we go past Brigg’s house while making our rounds. My oldest girl Lucy, made a little deputy badge to attach to the old dog’s collar. Despite the limp, I notice a new swagger in my partner’s step.