

Morning Mist of Blood



A Novel by

Eric Wilder



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For Marilyn

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Prologue



Three men on horseback stared up at a stark sky and rustler's moon. Howling coyotes had spooked their horses and one of the men ran a calming hand down his mare's neck. The noisy creatures could do little harm to the big horse, but she didn't know it.

The man's loose denim jacket didn't quite fit around his barrel chest and did little to protect him from the cold. It didn't need to as his anxiety kept him warm. Removing his cowboy hat, he raked thick brown hair out of his eyes and wiped a bead of nervous sweat from his forehead with a red neckerchief.

Coyotes didn't worry the man but another sound did, riveting it along with the slow burning fire in his gut. Some tortured creature was crying out, its tormented moans echoing through the darkness. Agonizing whimpers of intense pain stopped abruptly following a muffled pop.

"What in the cornbread hell was that?"

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“Sounded like someone skinnin’ a hog that weren’t quite dead yet. Maybe we ought to do our business some other night.”

“Shut the fuck up, Shorty. It was probably just some kids spotlighting coyotes with a .22.”

Shorty wasn’t so much short as he was skinny. His scraggly black mustache didn’t quite hide his sunken cheeks, wracked with acne scars. He stroked his chin and shook his head.

“Didn’t sound like no coyote to me and that sure weren’t no .22.”

“Don’t matter. We’re here now so let’s get what we came for.”

He slapped his horse’s rear and she started forward, out of central Oklahoma’s thick underbrush and into a clearing leading to a neat fencerow. A grove of trees, an effective windbreak for some of the rancher’s cattle, occupied the other side of the fence. The man already knew this.

“Ready for me to cut the fence?”

The dark-haired man asking the question was younger than the other two and had a crooked frown that made him seem even more so. The worn Stetson pulled low over his forehead and his day-old growth of beard failed to mask his baby face.

“Don’t have to cut it. I rigged it so we can get in and out without anyone being the wiser. We may want to steal a few more head sometime and there’s no sense in tipping Clayton off to the spot where we’re gettin’ in at.”

Sliding off his horse, the man with the baby face found the reworked fence post. After pulling the section back and laying it on the ground, he remounted his horse and followed the other two through the breach.

The rustler’s moon provided all the visibility they needed and they soon found a small herd of special cattle situated for the night. Something had spooked

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them and they were pacing in a narrow circle. When the lead man spotted a darkened silhouette near the pond, he held up a hand and dismounted, not worrying his well-trained mare would bolt. He approached with caution what looked like the crouching silhouette of a man.

“What is it?” Shorty asked when he returned.

“You were right about the skinning, but it ain’t no hog. It’s a dead man in a pool of fresh blood.”

“Sweet Jesus,” the baby-faced man said.

“Stow it, Johnny. Let’s round up the cows and then get the hell out of here.”

Shorty and Johnny knew from the irritated tone of Garth’s voice not to ask any more questions. Skirting the little herd of cattle, they turned them toward the breach in the fence. Unusual for wintertime central Oklahoma, no wind was blowing. The cattle stirred, unhappy with yet another unexpected disturbance. Shorty slapped a cow on the butt with his hat and it started toward the breach. The others followed her, soon leaving only an owl as witness to the theft.

Shorty waited until the last cow had disappeared into the blackjacks before resetting the hidden gate, and then followed Garth and Johnny into the stunted undergrowth. He soon left the moon’s muted glow. It was then they heard another eerie sound—a marauding panther, coughing softly to let everything around it know he was on the prowl.

Shorty’s horse trotted forward, directed only by instinct as the earth began to drop downward into Skeleton Creek, a narrow canyon fully thirty feet below the area’s normal elevation. The deeply dissected gully disappeared into shadows as he hurried after Garth and Johnny.

Spooked, the cattle continued voicing their alarm, their hooves clattering against cobbles in the dry streambed and echoing against steep walls of the narrow canyon. No light penetrated the thick mass of

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tree limbs encasing the deep void that seemed almost like a dark tunnel. The three men had an answer, treading their way by the spare illumination of headlamps they wore on their hats. It was all they needed.

The canyon followed a straight line for almost a mile. No one, even were they near, would have detected the presence of the rustlers, their mounts or the lowing cattle thanks to the foliage-covered tunnel. As the three men herded the cattle up a steep trail, out of the creek, moon and starlight made their path seem like Broadway on New Year's Eve compared with the eerily lit tunnel they had just exited.

Up ahead, an oilfield tank battery's slow-moving pumping unit sang an out-of-key tune with its moving rods. A cattle trailer attached to an old Ford pickup awaited them, along with a newer Chevy and horse trailer. Shorty dismounted without bothering to tie his colt. Opening the trailer's rear gate, he yanked out a ramp so Garth and Johnny could begin herding the cows into it.

"We got too many. They ain't all gonna fit," he said.

Shorty's words didn't make Garth happy. "Then make 'em fit."

Shorty began pushing the cows into the trailer, trying to force them all in. The last cow just wouldn't go.

"Ain't gonna happen," Shorty said.

Garth dismounted, turning the cow away from the cattle trailer and out the breach in the fence.

"We don't need this one anyway. You can see it's the wrong color. Heeyah!" he shouted, slapping the beast with the back of his hand. "Get the horses in the trailer and let's vamoose."

"Won't that heifer tip us off?" Johnny asked.

"Nothing we can do about it now and she'll probably be a long way from here by morning."

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Garth and Johnny led the horses into the second trailer and stored their gear in its tack room. They watched as Shorty drove through the open gate and onto the section line road, not following until he had disappeared with a rumble.

As the truck and trailer drove away in a cloud of dust, the frightened cow glanced around, trying to decide what to do next. The low growl of a nearby panther did little to comfort it.

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Chapter 1



Buck McDivit exited the heavy glass doors of the Second Bank of Edmond, trying without success not to feel like someone had just kicked him in the gut. His banker, a man he had known all his life, had just rejected his request for a new truck loan.

“You got no steady job and not much in the way of assets. I can’t risk the bank’s money on this one,” he had told Buck.

Buck had stared at the little man with a voice much deeper than his size indicated and tried to reason with him. “I’ve never had a loan go south. You know as much, Jeb.”

“Things change,” Jeb Stuart Johnson had said, peering over his reading glasses. “The auditors would have my ass in a sling if I made this loan. Unless you put twenty percent down, that is.”

“I don’t have that kind of money.”

“Then maybe you don’t need a new forty thousand dollar pickup. You know what the monthly payments are on a loan that big? Hell, Buck, what’s the matter with the truck you got?”

“Two hundred thousand miles,” he had replied. “Maintenance is eating me up.”

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“Then lower your standards because you can’t afford a truck costing forty-two grand.” The little man whisked his hand through his thinning hair before glancing at his watch. “Now I got another appointment coming in right after lunch so I’m leaving a little early. Anything else I can help you with?”

Buck didn’t bother answering because Jeb Johnson had already grabbed his overcoat and headed out of the office. He pulled the collar of his jean jacket up around his neck and followed him through the front door to Broadway, Edmond’s main street.

Buck’s boots were old but always polished and well maintained. He had long legs and his jeans and Western shirt made him seem taller than he really was. Two women passing on the sidewalk turned to give the handsome young cowboy with expressive brown eyes and dark wavy hair a second glance. Still upset about his meeting with Jeb Johnson, he failed to notice.

Edmond, a former train stop had grown into a north suburb of sprawling Oklahoma City. No longer a bedroom community for the wealthy, it was now the home of the third largest university in the state. It was also the third largest city in Oklahoma.

The thriving little metropolis had traffic that didn’t quite rival Dallas but was on its way to doing so. It also had a hundred fifty churches and at least ten Starbucks. Cold gusty wind whistled down the street, chilling the back of his neck, as someone tapped his shoulder.

“Sorry to bother you, Mister but I ain’t ate in two days. Can you spare a dollar?”

The economy, as in other parts of the country, had begun collapsing in Oklahoma. It seemed beggars populated every major cross street in the City but this was the first one Buck had seen in downtown Edmond. The man was scruffy, his clothes dirty and torn, but it was his dog that caught his attention. The man held on to it with a short strand of rope tied around its neck.

The young black and white Border collie wagged

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its tail and licked Buck's hand when he reached down to pet it. He fished out his wallet and glanced at his last twenty.

"What's your dog's name?" Buck asked.

"Ain't got no name."

Buck handed him the twenty. "I don't have anything smaller so I guess it's your lucky day." He pulled the bill back when the man reached for it. "You have to promise me part of this will go to feed your dog."

The little man snatched the bill from Buck's hand and stuffed it into his shirt pocket.

"He ain't my dog. I was gonna tie him to a park bench and be rid of the little pest. If you want him, you better take him cause he ain't staying with me."

Buck frowned, thinking for a moment he should take back his twenty. He took the rope instead and watched the ratty little man hurry away, probably to the nearest liquor store.

He squatted and rubbed the little dog's ears. The dog with no name wagged its tail and licked Buck's hand

"Maybe I can put an ad in the paper and find a good home for you."

Feeling suddenly depressed because of his loan rejection, he wondered if he should move north to Logan County and the less pretentious town of Guthrie. Someone he recognized exited the coffee shop across the street, interrupting his malaise. Waving, he crossed the narrow street, the dog wagging his tail as he followed him.

Unlike sprawling Oklahoma City, no skyscrapers jutted into the clouds in downtown Edmond. Few structures, if any, exceeded more than two stories in height, those mostly squat brick and native rock buildings. The people walking along the sidewalks moved at the slow pace of what was once a small town.

Clayton O'Meara, his ex-employer and the former

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husband of Virginia, the woman for who he now worked, had apparently not seen him and was heading in the opposite direction. He stopped when Buck called his name.

“Trying to avoid me, Clayton?”

Clayton grinned, showing a set of teeth a little too perfect for someone his age. He stood several inches taller than Buck, probably six foot four, and he sported a full head of silver hair, complete with expensive salon highlights.

“Hey, Buck. Nice leash you got. What are you doing up so early?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing?” he said, ignoring Clayton’s comment about the dog’s makeshift leash.

Clayton answered Buck’s question with little more than a wry grin and the word, “Business. Don’t you ever feed that dog?”

“He’s not really my dog.”

“From the way he’s wagging his tail, I’d say he thinks he is.”

A wealthy oilman, Clayton O’Meara owned a large cattle spread in southern Logan County. He rarely left the showplace ranch and Buck couldn’t recall ever seeing him in downtown Edmond. Despite the chilling temperature, the older man wore no hat, probably so as not to distract from his full head of hair. Only an unzipped orange goose down parka emblazoned with the letters OSU covered his designer sports shirt.

Clayton was at least thirty years older than Buck but the sparkle in his hazy eyes made him seem little more than a teenager. Glancing at his Rolex Commander, as if the expensive watch somehow held the answer to some unasked question, he pointed to his car down the street.

“I’m sort of in a hurry.”

Buck recognized a brush-off when confronted with one and said, “Didn’t mean to hold you up.”

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Clayton grinned and slapped Buck's shoulder. "Sorry to rush, but I got an appointment and I gotta get. We can catch up on things later."

Instead of hurrying away, he turned toward the door of the coffee shop he had just exited. Reaching for the handle as if he had forgotten something inside, he thought better of it. Pivoting on the heels of his polished snakeskin boots, he headed down the street to his awaiting vehicle. Buck watched as Clayton's chauffeur opened the back door of a big white Mercedes for him. With tires squealing, the car hurried away, around the corner.

Buck glanced at the door of Café Oklahoma, the coffee shop a fixture in downtown Edmond for almost as long as he could remember. He knew Clayton well enough to know he wasn't a coffee drinker. Curious, he opened the door and glanced inside.

Seeing a familiar face alone at a table, he completely forgot about Clayton as memories of a recent romance, ended too soon for his liking flooded his psyche. It was his former girlfriend, Kay Karson. Everyone called her KK. She turned around, as if expecting someone else. Seeing him, she folded her arms, frowned and glanced away.

"No greeting for an old friend?" Buck asked as he approached her table.

KK crossed her shapely legs, black lace hose and ankle-length boots the only concessions to the outside chill, considering the short leather skirt she wore.

"You're really full of yourself, aren't you?"

Before Buck could answer, an employee said, "Sir, you can't bring your dog in here."

"I'll only be a minute," he said.

Buck and KK had been an item for almost a year. She liked line dancing, prancing horses and ice-cold Coors beer. Her slender legs looked great in tight blue jeans and cowboy boots. Honey blonde hair draped her shoulders, framing her slightly less than perfect but

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unforgettable face. She was, in fact, a beauty queen, having amassed three titles before the tender age of eighteen. Buck soon learned she thoroughly realized the effect she had on men. Now, at twenty-nine, she could focus her power on the opposite sex like an ICBM, with the same explosive result. Buck had found his dream woman. At least he'd thought.

KK's father was a medical doctor in Tulsa, her mother a college professor at Tulsa University. She had never wanted for anything. Looking at her now, Buck could see she had acquired a few very expensive trinkets he doubted even her doting dad could afford. A diamond pendant graced her slender neck. The large diamond in an expensive setting had good color and was no fake. It was a companion piece to the diamond ring on her finger sporting an even larger and more ostentatious stone. Mink lined her gloves and the expensive jacket draped across the back of the booth.

"Just saying hi to an old friend," he countered.

KK tipped over a half-empty coffee cup with her elbow. Dabbing at the spot with a napkin, she continued frowning.

"You call yourself an investigator. You don't have a clue. I imagine you must have thought all you had to do was smile at me and I would jump back into your bed like a horny teenager. Well, we're not in college, and you are not the star quarterback and campus heartthrob anymore. You don't even have a real job. You may have a nice ass but it doesn't compliment your lousy future."

KK didn't wait for his reply, brushing past him and appearing not to hear when he said, "Guess tamales and dancing Saturday night are out of the question."

As she disappeared out the door without looking back, he wondered what he could have done to provoke such a display of anger. With a shrug to the employee still looking at him and the dog, he followed her outside, watching as she entered a brand new white Mercedes

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sports car, pulled out of her parking place and gunned away down the street.

“No problem,” he called out at the disappearing vehicle. “I can’t afford a date Saturday night anyway.”

Two rejections and a brush-off before noon, he thought as he considered where she had acquired the Mercedes and her expensive mink jacket. Their relationship had not ended badly. It had simply flickered out and died.

Buck had attended college for a time at OSU. He had dropped out to sign on with the OCPD. One of his friends there had left to become an oil and gas lease broker during one of the many oil booms, and he soon followed him. His lucrative job ended during an unexpected, at least to him, reduction in oil prices. Since then, he had supported himself in many different jobs such as club bouncer, skip tracer, process server, and private detective. His opportunities for gainful employment had recently narrowed and he found himself using his meager savings to pay his bills. It didn’t help that his aging Dodge pickup needed repair almost weekly.

“Come on, Buddy. Let’s get you something to eat.”

When Buck reached his truck and unlocked the door, his cheeks burned hot. He’d never had an ego problem, even though gorgeous women often became speechless when meeting him. It didn’t matter because now he needed a drink, preferably something with whiskey in it. Shaking his head, he remembered he couldn’t afford one.

It was past lunchtime, his stomach growling. After stopping at a convenience store, he began searching for change in the truck’s console.

“You wait here. I’ll be right back.”

He returned a few minutes later with a hot dog. Giving the meat to the young dog, he ate the bun. The little border collie gobbled down the wiener then curled up and went to sleep in the passenger seat.

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Buck had not reached the horse ranch where he lived and worked part time when he received a call from the Logan County death investigator. One of his many jobs included assisting the investigator whenever a suspicious death occurred. He did not care for the often-gory work. It didn't matter now. Because of his current financial situation, he could ill afford to turn down a job, no matter how distasteful.

A cowboy had discovered a body at a nearby ranch. Clayton O'Meara's ranch. Buck pondered the coincidence as he turned his truck around and headed north, along with his sleepy passenger.