

## The Jukebox

By Dianna Hatfield Clemenson

“What in the Sam Hill happened here?”

“What the hell you think?”

The Sheriff’s eyes narrowed as he surveyed the damage. “Don’t tell me it’s Paul Hatfield again.” The Sheriff’s voice was low and quiet, almost like a growl. He cased the joint. God, what a mess.

Four tables were knocked over, the beer cans and ashtrays which had occupied them were strewn across the floor. Cigarette butts were ground into the wooden floor as if someone did a tap dance on them. High ball glasses were smashed to smithereens. The jukebox... what was the deal with that?

The bar wasn’t in any better shape. The pickled egg container was shattered, its contents lying dead on the bar, a bar stool and the floor. The juice was drip, drip, dripping, joining its former comrades on the floor. The smell of pickled eggs mixed with booze, sweat, cigarettes and decades of grime was gag-worthy. This was the smell of rage.

The Sheriff re-positioned himself, adjusted his sidearm and perched on a bar stool that might be steady enough for his weight. “Give me a shot and a beer, Burt, and tell me what happened.”

“Well, I didn’t see the whole thing, just the ending, like. I was in the back getting another case of beer. I heard a thud and breaking glass and thought, ah shit, here we go again. I looked out the door and sure enough, Paul had some guy by the neck and everybody was heading for the door.” Burt stopped sweeping, pulled a rag out of his pocket and mopped the sweat from his face.

Burt went on. “It’s payday Friday, ya know, so Paul’s in here looking for some dumb-ass to fall for his ‘just a friendly game of pool’ bull shit.

The Sheriff downed his Jim Beam. “Go on.”

A funny look came across Burt’s face. He got interested in the eggs he was picking up.

“Shit Sheriff, don’t I help the department all I can?”

“What are you getting at, Burt? Just tell me what happened.”

The Sheriff’s voice was low and quiet again. Burt knew he had to spill it, but he gave it one more try.

“Cain’t you just give me a pass this one time? Paul will figure that it was me that talked. I don’t need that kind of trouble. I don’t deserve it.” Burt picked up a chair, avoided the Sheriff’s hard stare.

“Just answer my damn questions! What time was this? How did the State Troopers get here before me?”

“How in the hell should I know! I got enough to keep me busy when Hatfield is here. You expect me to watch the damn clock too?”

“Well, then how did the State Troopers get here before me?”

“I do not know, Sheriff. I reckon it was their usual Friday night walk-through. Since they fount that fella from Kentucky in here I guess they got a big pat on the back for takin’ in a felon. They seem to come by a little more since then.”

Burt stopped cleaning up, went behind the bar and got himself a shot of Canadian Club. *Ah, to hell with it.* He’d had about enough for one day. Burt was about to take a stool a few spots away from the Sheriff but decided he needed a beer chaser too.

“Give me another beer while you’re back there. Go on with what happened, or do I have to drag it out of you?”

Burt pulled two draughts and decided he’d stay behind the bar. The Sheriff was getting pissy now.

“So, Paul was wailing on this guy, all Golden Gloves-like. I seen him punch a coupla guys the last year or two but I never seen him like this. I cain’t explain it, but this was different from his usual fights over gambling or pool.”

Burt looked over at the juke box. He shook his head, looked into his beer mug and took a swig. If Paul figured Burt told the Sheriff anything that would get him in more trouble, Paul would come after him for sure.

“I gotta get a different job, Sheriff. Can you help me with that? I’m getting too old for this shit. And I ain’t lying...you know it too. If Paul comes for me I could end up like that guy.”

Burt nodded toward the jukebox.

“I’ll see what I can do. Just tell me the rest. Which hospital did the ambulance go to? And what in the hell happened to the jukebox?”

“I don’t know which hospital. Where do they take folks who’s knocked out and cain’t talk? St. Mary’s or Cabell County?”

“The guy couldn’t talk? You mean he was unconscious?”

“Yes, sir, that’s what I mean. Paul knocked him out cold.”

The two men let that hang in the air for a minute or two.

“Alright, so, what’s the deal with the jukebox and what is this poor bastard’s name?”

“The jukebox? After Paul beat on the man he threw him head-first into the jukebox. If the Troopers had come just a minute earlier they mighta saved the guy. They came in just after it happened. The guy was jammed inside the jukebox, the front glass busted up by his head. Paul was standing there looking at him like he didn’t know what happened. One Trooper grabbed up Paul an’ the other went to call an ambulance. When the ambulance guys was trying to get him out of the jukebox I heard one of them say he’d be surprised if the poor bastard makes it.”

“Okay Burt, lock up and go home. Oh, one more thing: Did you get the guy’s name?”

“I never seen him before. He was an older fella. I think I heard someone say his name was Clay”.

The Sheriff was stunned. Did he hear that right? “Did you say Clay?”

“Yep, I just overhead two guys talking about him before the fight broke out. Why? Sheriff, you look like you just seen a ghost”.

“Burt, Clay is the name of Paul’s stepfather, the man who beat Paul when he was a baby.”