

A THOUSAND FALLING CROWS

ALSO BY LARRY D. SWEAZY

See Also Murder

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CROWS**

LARRY D. SWEAZY



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To Matthew P. Mayo and Jennifer Smith-Mayo

*“The crow wished everything was black, the owl, that
everything was white.”*

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

*“From childhood’s hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—[. . .] I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone—
And all I lov’d—I loved alone.”*

—Edgar Allan Poe, “Alone”

CHAPTER 1

JUNE 11, 1933

The farm-to-market road was vacant, the day's traffic settled and tucked away as the big red sun dropped below the horizon. The hard days of summer had set in early. The few clouds that had showed promise of rain in the past month had pushed east, rushing by in a hurry like there was some place better to go, like the stink of dry Texas ground had offended them. Tender young crops succumbed to the heat and lack of water quickly, and the farmers, who'd had a bad year the year before and the year before that, knew that things were only going to get worse.

Soft pink light reached up with long fingers from the west, poking at the coming darkness like there was a victory to be won. But that was not the case. Light never won over darkness. At least at this time of day.

A lone crow sat on the telephone wire looking down at the road. Blood never escaped the eyes of a crow, but the smell of death was a vulture's quest. A kettle of six curious vultures glided down to a dead oak tree that had stood next to the road for a hundred years, its gnarly branches offering a perfect roost for the coming night. The big black birds were not attracted to the spot for rest, but by the rage, the loneliness, and the empty heart that had fulfilled nature's cycle of life and death. The smell of blood had piqued their appetite. The prospect of drought offered them abundance, reason to celebrate their way of living. There would be even more vultures this time next year.

The vultures and the crow looked at the blood without judgment. That was better left to humans and their laws, their ways of setting things straight. There was no justice to a hungry bird. There was only the now, the knowledge of hunger, and the need to fly. Blood and

decaying flesh offered an opportunity, the concept of evidence and law foreign, useless. The crow was not disturbed by the vultures' presence.

The girl hadn't been there long. Her blood still pooled on top of the road and had yet to soak into the thirsty dirt. The blood glowed in the dusk, the pink fingers of the dying day reflecting off it like a mirror held up to the sky. There was no life left in the girl. She had been killed just before she was dumped from the speeding car, tossed out like an extinguished cigarette butt, left behind without worry or care. Her clothes were ripped and torn, and her face—what was visible of it—was plump with bruises and covered in blood. She was fresh. Not stiff. Flies had already found her. Joyful in the bounty, like the vultures.

Curiosity propelled the crow down to get a closer look. It didn't worry about the others. They were the least of its concerns. Coyotes would come soon. But for now the crow would claim the girl as its own. A feast to enjoy before darkness fell and the world turned black, black like itself, a twin without wings, but with far more secrets than it would ever tell.



The glass exploded out of the back window of the Chevrolet sedan like somebody had thrown a brick from the inside out. Once he saw the muzzle flash, it only took Sonny Burton half a second to realize that someone had taken a shot at him.

There was no question who was doing the shooting. Less than a year before, back in August, they'd killed a deputy in Stringtown, Oklahoma, launching a killing spree that had captured the nation's attention and made the pair as famous as the dead actor Rudolph Valentino.

Sonny had been alone, coming off duty in the small Panhandle town that had been his home for as long as he could remember. He was surprised at his luck, recognizing the two of them walking arm-in-arm to their car like they didn't have a care in the world, like nobody would know, or give two shakes, about who they were. Or maybe they just didn't give a rat's ass.

It didn't take them long to figure out that they were being followed by a Texas Ranger—the Cinco badge emblem and announcement that

it was a Ranger's car was plastered across the side of the black 1932 Ford in hard-to-miss six-inch white letters. Thankfully, the duo had turned off on a nearly deserted dirt road when the shooting started.

With no way to communicate with anyone back at company headquarters about his lucky find, Sonny was on his own to bring the pair of lawless gangsters in for justice—if that was possible.

The shattering of his windshield sounded like a bomb had gone off directly next to Sonny's ear. He was pelted with stinging shards of the broken glass, and it felt like he'd fallen face-first into a hornet's nest. But that didn't stop him. His fingers tingled as he gripped the steering wheel; the thrill of the hunt never got old. The skin above his chest burned like it was going to rip open, and his heart was racing a mile a minute. Blood trickled down from his brow, but his eyes were safe, not hit, the blood not blinding him. He could still see the Chevrolet swerving in front of him, trying to get away or to get a better shot at him—one or the other, he wasn't sure.

A bullet whizzed by Sonny's right ear, just a couple of inches away from its intended target: his forehead. Luckily, he had tilted his head in the right direction. The wrong way would have put him directly in line with the shot and it would have been lights out. Game over. A Texas Ranger added to their growing collection of law enforcement kills.

It was a sobering thought, dying this close to the end of his career. Sonny wasn't sure what the future held for him, but up until a few minutes prior, he hadn't been too concerned about living to a satisfactory old age. He just wanted to finish what he had started—being a proud Texas Ranger and alive to boot.

The duo's older-model Chevrolet was no match for Sonny's newer Ford. The '32 Model B had a flathead V-8 engine and was fast off the start with sixty-five horsepower under the hood—an amazing thought considering Sonny had been born long before the invention of automobiles—when all of the Texas Rangers, including his own father, had ridden horses across the great state of Texas, pursuing the worst of the worst outlaws, like King Fisher and John Wesley Hardin. As a boy, Sonny wouldn't have been capable of imagining so much power in one vehicle. Times had changed all too quickly as far as Sonny was concerned.

He pushed the accelerator as far to the floor as it would go. His gun was loaded and in his hand almost magically, like a magnet had drawn it to his fingers. He aimed his Colt .45 Government Model automatic pistol with confidence at the busted out window of the Chevrolet and returned fire.

The Chevrolet swerved again, fishtailing on the gravel road and spraying the hood of Sonny's car with hundreds of pebbles—little pings and thuds that sounded like gunshots finding their target but posed no real threat.

A rifle poked out of the rear window, and a hot, orange flash exploded from the end of the barrel and did not stop at one. This was no riot gun or deer rifle, but a Browning automatic rifle, a fierce weapon that could empty a twenty-shot magazine in three seconds.

The noise was excruciating, metal piercing metal, ripping into the fenders, then shattering what little remained of the car's windows. Sonny could hardly take a breath or gather his wits about him. He wasn't ready to die.

The radiator exploded, sending a geyser of steam spraying upward to the heavens, clouding Sonny's vision. Bullets whizzed by his ears as he pulled the trigger of his .45, not stopping until every bullet had been fired.

He thought for certain he heard a tire explode, thought he saw a sign to his left warning that the road ahead was closed, under construction, that the bridge was out, but thoughts no longer mattered. He had been hit.

A bullet ripped into his shoulder, sending white-hot pain screaming through his body; blood sprayed out of the wound like a dam had been breached, an artery severed.

Another bullet hit him, not far from the other, and Sonny screamed with pain, with frustration and fear, as reality left him and his fingers slipped from the wheel, sending the '32 Ford careening into a ditch. He felt like he had been hit twice by a sledgehammer.

The last image Sonny saw before the car rolled and he blacked out was Bonnie Parker laughing like a maniacal child.

CHAPTER 2

JUNE 14, 1933

The volume of the radio was turned down low, the voices distant but decipherable. “The Nazi Party was made Germany’s only legal political party today. Any political opposition is punishable by law . . .” the announcer said in a droning voice.

Sonny reached over with his left arm and was about to turn the radio off when he heard the announcer go on to say, “And in local news, the manhunt for Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker continues after their car was found wrecked and abandoned just outside of Wellington. They are to be considered armed and dangerous. If you see the duo, or know anything of their whereabouts, contact your local police or the Texas Rangers. Bonnie Parker is reported to be injured.” The announcer stopped for a brief second, allowing the radio to buzz, then continued, “The identity of the girl found on the farm-to-market road leading out of Wellington is still unknown. Funeral arrangements are being postponed until a positive ID can be made. If you have any information concerning this case, please contact the Wellington Police.”

Sonny took a deep breath as he struggled to turn the radio off. His right arm was bound and unmovable. He was right-handed, and any coordination and strength in his left hand was lacking, to say the least. He really wasn’t supposed to move, but he didn’t want to hear any more news, even though he was reasonably interested in hearing about Bonnie and Clyde and what had happened to them after he had been shot.

It was the first time he’d heard they’d wrecked, too.

The idea that he had something to do with that settled easy on his shoulders, but it didn't make the pain, or the uselessness of his arm, go away. All he really wanted was silence.

He didn't know anything about the dead girl found on the road, and he let the information flutter away. On any other day, he would have been interested, probably involved in the case, but now his concern was distant, difficult to hold onto. He resigned himself to that fact, eased down onto the hospital bed, and stared out of the second-floor window.

Summer had set in with a vengeance.

The windows were cracked open, but there didn't look to be a breeze outside. Every tree he could see was still as a statue, their leaves droopy. The sky was clear, the color of a roan mare he used to know, and the sun was a red hot plate, beating down relentlessly on the earth, scorching everything in sight; the grass had already given up all of its green and browned out. The landscape out the window was desolate, hopeless, but familiar. Hot, uncomfortable summers were just part of the deal when you lived in Texas. Sonny knew nothing else.

The door to the room was ajar, and a murmur of low voices found its way to Sonny's ears. He couldn't make out the words. It was like a small group was consulting three or four doors down, all whispering in soft, professional tones. The hospital was nothing more than a large two-story house with an operating room in the basement and patient rooms, at most four beds to a room, on the top floor.

Sonny closed his eyes. He had a room all to himself and hoped for sleep to come and take him away from the reality he'd woken up to, but that wasn't to be.

The door pushed open slowly, along with Sonny's eyes at the noise. A Mexican man, his black shiny hair just starting to turn gray, entered the room. His skin was as brown and leathery as a hundred-year-old holster, and though the man was probably in his late thirties, early forties at the most, he looked much older. He'd pushed a mop and bucket into the room, trying to be quiet. He was unsuccessful in the attempt. The wheels on the mop bucket squeaked like fingers slowly scraping down a chalkboard when he pushed it inside the room.

The man wore a blue short-sleeved work shirt with a pack of Chesterfields poking out of the pocket. He had the largest collection of keys dangling from his belt that Sonny had ever seen.

It was tempting for Sonny to close his eyes again and let the man do his job, but he couldn't keep himself from acknowledging the janitor's presence. "*Hola,*" he said, his voice weak but steady as he stared directly at the man. The patch on the Mexican's work shirt said his name was Albert, but Sonny doubted that was really the case.

Sonny had startled the man. His shoulders jumped back, then he looked up, glancing over at Sonny sheepishly, then back to the floor, as he pulled the mop out of the water. "*Hola,*" he answered. "*Hablas Español?*"

Sonny nodded and tried to pull himself up. "Yes, I learned to speak Spanish a long time ago," he said, speaking fully in the Mexican's language.

The janitor smiled, relaxed a bit, then pulled up the mop and let it drain through the ringer. "You speak very well."

"I was raised by a Mexican woman."

"Really?"

"Yes. She was with me every day until I grew up and left home."

"What happened to your momma?"

"She died about a year after I was born," Sonny said, looking away from the man, out the window. At sixty-two years old, Sonny should have been long past the sadness of losing his mother and his nanny, if the woman who raised him could be called that, but Sonny still thought about Maria Perza every day. She had taught him everything he knew about being a decent, Anglo man, living in Texas. "What's your name?" Sonny finally asked.

"My name is Aldo," the Mexican said. "Aldo Hernandez."

Sonny smiled. He knew it wasn't Albert.

"And what is your name, *señor?*" Aldo said.

"Lester. Lester Burton. But everybody calls me Sonny. They have ever since I was four or five."

Aldo returned the smile. "You are that Ranger that was shot by Bonnie and Clyde aren't you? You are lucky you are not dead, *señor.*"

“Yes, I know.”

“Your arm, will it get better?”

Sonny shook his head. “I’ll be lucky to feel anything or be able to use my hand ever again.”

“Then you are done working. It is all over for you?”

“Seems that way. Times are tough all over. Another man can take my job. I’ve had my life, and it’s been pretty good up until now.”

“Yes, yes, times are very bad. This Depression seems like it will go on forever. I, too, am happy to have a job, happy that the doctor has kept me employed through this dark time. I have hungry mouths at home who depend on me. What about you, do you have children?”

Sonny nodded. “A son. He’s a Ranger, too, down in Brownsville. He’s married with a couple of little ones of his own.” A smile crossed Sonny’s face, then quickly fluttered away. He hardly ever saw his grandchildren. The distance between them was too far to encourage closeness, and that seemed just fine with his son, Jesse. They never seemed to see eye to eye on anything. It had always been that way, and Sonny didn’t expect it to ever change.

“You are lucky then. You will have someone to help you when you go home.”

Sonny didn’t answer. He looked away and stared up at the ceiling. There was no use telling Aldo that he’d be all alone when he left the hospital. The house was empty, a collection of dusty furniture and a clock that ticked for no one but him. Martha, his wife, had been dead for ten years, struck down in a single, unforeseen blow by a massive heart attack while she’d been out weeding the garden. The emptiness of the house was his sadness to bear and no one else’s.

Aldo didn’t broach the silence. He let it hang in the air knowingly.

Like his father, Sonny had always been tall and rangy, and he could only imagine how he must look to the Mexican—skeletal, gaunt, each breath a rattle on death’s short chain. He closed his eyes then, the strength not in him to push away the memories of the past. Maria, Martha, Jesse, his father, the good times and the bad.

When he opened his eyes again, it was dark and chilly in the room. Aldo was gone.



It was a slow ride from the morgue to the funeral home. No one had claimed the dead girl. She was lost in a world of darkness, with no name, no family, no one to love her as she was prepared for her final rest. More important news had drowned out the cry of the injustice of her death. A small corner on the front page, otherwise loaded with images of Bonnie and Clyde and the Texas Ranger they'd shot, was all the notice the murder had garnered. On any other day in Wellington, the discovery of the girl would have been great cause for speculation, fear, and locked doors.

Only the crows worried over her now. The crows and her killer. The crows watched from close by, then flew away as the hearse passed. They went on with their day, always watching, always listening. Would the killer offer the world more carrion? More of what it deserved?