

The Actress

INTRODUCTION

This story could be told only by me. My name is Martha McRae—publisher and sole writer of the *Gazette*, a weekly newspaper for Bethel County. I also run a boarding house in Solo, Mississippi.

You'll find us in the middle of the Mississippi Delta, ten miles north of Parchman Farm Penitentiary, thirty miles south of Greenlee. Solo has always been a speck of a town. A constant 310 souls. Births replacing death, which we had more than our fair share three years ago when Satan paid us a visit. You can read about those murders in *The Rector*.

But here we are again in the land of rich stories and good dirt.

This time, there's a celebrity in our midst.

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THE INTRUDER

A filthy windowpane separated the most famous actress in America from the dark silhouette outside her bedroom.

Inching toward the window, she steadied her pistol, took a deep breath, and eased a finger to the trigger. She leveled the barrel on the figure outside.

The intruder's hand touched the window. She squeezed the trigger. The bullet passed through the glass, into the darkness.

It was August 10, 1962. America's star, Tully Ivey, had shot local farmer and respected citizen Andrew Dawkins.

The Bethel County Sheriff's Department arrived an hour later. Four Hollywood RTO executives hovered around Dawkins's body. Sheriff Butch Turnbull made a mental note of Tully Ivey crying on a man's shoulder.

Turnbull knelt beside the body. He unbuttoned Dawkins's bloody shirt to inspect the bullet wound. It was dead center chest. He checked for a pulse. None. He noticed a note clenched in Dawkins's right hand and a pistol in the grass.

He slipped them both—the gun and the note—into a plastic bag.

The note would hold the key to Tully Ivey’s future.

How do I know these things? Because it’s my business to know. I’m the only reporter for *The Bethel County Gazette*. The *knowing* is easy. It’s the unknown that takes time to uncover. And in a small town like Solo, we know everything about everybody. It’s strangers who keep us up at night. And crickets.

I drove to the sheriff’s office in Greenlee. Shirley Dawkins had called me, sobbing and hysterical. She needed to know why her husband had been shot and killed. I felt sick for her.

I walked into the sheriff’s department at three in the morning. Tully Ivey was sitting across a desk from Sheriff Turnbull—a hefty man, built like a bull, with a crew cut and bushy eyebrows.

The famous actress was talking. “He was trying to open the window. What would you expect me to do?” She didn’t seem the least bit arrogant or irritated. She was calm and collected. I flashed back to her roles on the big screen—elegant, sophisticated, the star of every movie she made.

“It was dark,” Butch said. “And the window was dirty. How did you know it was a man?”

I walked closer. He was surprised to see me. “Martha, what are you doing here? You need to leave.”

“I’m here for Shirley. She needs to know what happened.”

Reluctant at first, he nodded in agreement and turned back to Ivey. “So, how did you know it was a man?”

“I didn’t know,” she said. “Like I told you, eventually I went outside to see if someone was still there. I was frightened to death when I discovered his body.”

She looked at me. “Wouldn’t you be? ... Who are you?”

I didn’t respond. Maybe I was star-struck. But it didn’t take long to comprehend the complexity of what Sheriff Turnbull would face, dealing with a star like this.

“Did you hear him say anything from outside your window? Did he call your name?” he asked.

“No, I only heard those crickets. They’re so eerie.”

“You said earlier you hardly knew Mr. Dawkins. Why were you crying over his body?”

“I was upset. Oh, I knew him a little,” she said, squeezing two provocative fingers together like Lauren Bacall. “He had a small role in the movie. I never thought of him as a bad person.”

“How do you explain the note? Sure seems like you knew him more than you’re lettin’ on.”

“What note?”

“The note in his hand.”

“Oh, I did notice something in his hand. I didn’t know it was a note.”

Butch handed it to her. “Here—here’s a copy.”

Tully,

I don’t deserve you. I will always love you. I just want you to know the proof of your innocence in the Rod Russell shooting is in safe deposit box 1949 at City National Bank. One day I will explain why I didn’t tell you earlier. The key is on the ledge. Andrew.

“Oh, my.” She pressed a hand against her chest. “How did he know I’m innocent of that awful Rod Russell murder?” She expelled a lung of air and placed the note back on Turnbull’s desk.

I stood to read it, but he took it away.

She reached in her purse and pulled out a silver-engraved cigarette box. Selecting one, she inserted it into a four-inch-long, shiny black holder.

Deputy Cox, who’d been leaning against the doorjamb, pulled a Zippo from his pocket, strutted over, and lit it.

She smiled at him, tossed her head back, pursed her lips together, and blew out a smoke ring as big as my dinner plates. Cox grinned and dropped the lighter in his trousers.

“This note says he loves you,” Turnbull said. “Is that why he was at your window?”

“Why I haven’t the faintest idea.” She batted her Hollywood eyelashes. “Like I told you, I hardly knew him.”

“Had he ever been to your window at the Grater home before?”

“Heavens no.”

“By the way, should I call you Mrs. Ivey?”

“Please, call me *Miss* Ivey. All my close friends do.”

Dropping his head, Turnbull placed a fist to his mouth and coughed. “I’m not sure you should refer to me as a close friend. Please understand I’m investigating your involvement in a man’s death.”

“Well okaay. Go ahead, ask me anything,” she said, casting a polished white smile too bright to ignore.

“I should have asked if you’d like to have an attorney present.”

Motioning to the man next to her, she said, “Randall Carr here is not only my agent, he’s my attorney. He usually lights my cigarettes, too.” She sneered at him. “Don’t you, Randall?”

Randy Carr was yawning; his chin nestled in his palms. He reached in his pocket, pulled out a butane lighter and flicked it in front of her burning cigarette. She brushed him off and smiled at Deputy Cox, then returned her focus to Butch. “Besides, Sheriff, I don’t need a lawyer. He was breaking into my bedroom.”

“Did he break the window? Try to open it?”

“He reached for the window. I saw a hand. He was trying to break in.”

“Did he break the window?”

“No, but his hand was on it.”

“Tell me how the pistol ended up beside his body.”

“I took it with me. I thought someone might still be outside.” As if on cue, she gave him a stricken look. “Then I saw him. It was awful. There was blood. He wasn’t moving.”

Butch kept probing. And Tully Ivey kept repeating the same sequence of events—from when she first saw someone outside ... to pulling the trigger.

An hour more of routine questions and Sheriff Turnbull said, “I’m going to release you under your own recognizance. But you must not leave Solo without my permission. Do you understand?”

“Of course, Sheriff, whatever you say.”

Stamping out a third cigarette, she stood, as tall and regal as her reputation. She oozed grace and charm with the confidence of a queen, never expecting to spend a night behind bars.

Turnbull seemed enamored with her. Me? I was disappointed.

“Cox, I want you to drive Miz Ivey and Mr. Carr out to the Grater house.”

“Be my pleasure,” Cox said, spreading his cowboy legs.

After Tully Ivey left with Deputy Cox and Randy Carr, I asked the sheriff, “How come you let her off so easy?”

His response was lame. “If somebody was trying to get into your bedroom in the middle of the night what would you do?”

“I’d call you.”

He scowled. “Martha, I’d advise you not to get involved in this.”

“It’s too late. I’m doing this for Shirley.”

He walked away in a huff.

It was too late to visit Shirley. I phoned her from the sheriff’s department.

“Shirley, I am so sorry about Andrew. I believe it was just a terrible accident.”

I explained what Ivey told the sheriff, but didn’t mention the note. No sense rattling her nerves more than necessary.

“But, Martha, what was Andrew doing at her window? Why was he there?”

“I don’t know. But I’m going to look into it.”

“You will? Thank you. Thank you so much.” Her voice broke on a sob.

She deserved to know why her husband died.

Driving home, I vowed to root out any evil behind his death—if there was any. Maybe the shooting *was* self-defense. In the Mississippi Delta, we’re not sure who committed anything. Including murders. Maybe Tully Ivey had every right to shoot somebody breaking into her bedroom.

We all knew Andrew Dawkins as a good-looking, well-respected cotton farmer in Bethel County. Two years ago, we even thought he might marry Mary Grater after her divorce from Capp. But one day—*whoosh!*—he was gone. Turned up a month later with Shirley on his arm. He stayed out on his farm and did his churching—and everything else—in Greenlee, probably because he was too embarrassed to face our little Bible study group at church on Sundays.

Shirley Dawkins was his opposite. If Calvary’s doors were open, she was there. Mary and Shirley even became good friends in our Bible study group. I always thought it was very Christian-like, Mary holding no grudges against Shirley and all.

Still, the note in Andrew’s hand led to a series of strange discoveries nobody expected.