

INTO THE MAELSTROM by DOUGLAS CORNELL
EXCERPT

The gray stallion didn't care for the sound of the internal combustion engine any more than the man sitting upon the saddle. Nicker and shaking his head, the usually reliable beast threatened to pitch its rider to the dry, rocky ground.

"Easy there, Honcho. That dern machine isn't gonna cause us any harm."

The farmer piloted his massive tractor over the small rise, dragging a heavy contraption that tilled the scrubby land into soil that with luck, might yield a bit of wheat or corn.

"Probably just grow more rocks," the rider mused. He looked at the barren landscape and added, "Only a fool would plant crops in these parts."

To call the north-central region of Oklahoma "barren" was an understatement. The land, which was 99% prairie, had remained the last place in the state to be settled due to the poor soil. Formerly only inhabited by Native Americans and buffalo, the country was primarily occupied by those who earn their fortunes by sucking oil from the earth. But unlike Texas or other oil-producing areas in Oklahoma, the oil tycoons in Osage County were mostly Native Americans. In fact, scores of people from the Osage Tribe were among the wealthiest people in the United States.

There were farmers too, but there were signs that the topsoil would be blown away by the winds in the not-to-distant future. Prairie grass, with roots that ran up to six feet deep, kept the soil in place for thousands of years. Now the land was being used for other purposes and the soil was already beginning to turn to dust.

As the tractor and plow disappeared into the distance, Captain Jim Clarke, U.S. Marshal, returned to tracking the killer he was after. Clarke found the remains of a campfire early that morning, the embers still smoldering. Bobby Wright, a young negro who formerly resided in Tulsa, had escaped his captors while being transferred from the jail in Muskogee to the Tulsa County Jail. Clarke, who at 60 years old was in his last years as a lawman, had been tasked with capturing the man.

Wright's left footprint, with the unique missing heel, was imprinted in the dirt. Clarke thought, *there you are, Bobby. It won't be long before I have you back in jail where you belong.*

Clarke had known the young man before the massacre. Bobby ran with a rough bunch, and once or twice Clarke had used him as a source of information about people the government was after. Now Bobby was the one being hunted, and Clarke wasn't enjoying the task. *I don't blame you for killing that man, Bobby. After what happened to your ma and all those little ones, you were justified in murdering him. But you admitted to the killing and now it's my job to bring you back in.*

It was just the previous spring when a raging mob burned down the entire Greenwood district of Tulsa. The mob called the inhabitants of the neighborhood "uppity niggers," and it only took a small spark to ignite the flames that destroyed the homes and livelihoods of more than three thousand people. Bobby Wright was attempting to save his family's home, fighting off the gangs of whites who burned and looted as if it was their God-given right. But the modest house burned to the ground, and Bobby's ma and five brothers and sisters ran for their lives as Bobby was beaten to a pulp in the middle of the street. A few days later, as Bobby recovered in a make-shift hospital in the basement of a partially burned-out church, he heard that several people had been killed while hiding on the banks of the Arkansas River. Bobby limped to the yard where the bodies were awaiting burial and found that all of his brothers and sisters, of

which Bobby was the eldest, had all been brutally murdered. His mother, who survived the attack and was clinging to life in the home of a white friend, said to Bobby, "Find the men who did this - and kill 'em."

Clarke had no idea if the men Bobby had killed were the same ones that burned his home and butchered his family. But few whites in Tulsa were totally innocent, so Clarke figured that for the most part, Bobby had evened the score. Unfortunately for Bobby, the law said otherwise and there were folks in Tulsa who wouldn't be satisfied until the man swung from a rope.

Far in the distance, Clarke thought he could make out a line of scrubby bushes that grew on the banks of Bird Creek. *Eyes aren't worth a dang these days*, he thought. He reached into his saddlebag and brought out a pair of binoculars. He scanned the creek from right to left slowly, knowing that this would be the most likely place to catch an escapee. *It wasn't that long ago that I caught the Morse brothers right about here. What year was it? '12? '13? Of course, back then I was younger and didn't need binoculars to see further than a half-mile.*

He kicked Honcho in the ribs and got the animal into a fast lope to the right of where he thought Bobby would be. *If the boy has a gun, I'll play it safe and try to sneak up on him from the side instead of making a foolish frontal assault.*

Reaching the shrubbery, Clarke dismounted and tied Honcho to a small but stout cottonwood. He pulled his Colt revolver from his holster and checked to make sure all six bullets were loaded. He also grabbed his Remington rifle and headed up the creek bed as quietly as possible.

With thorny, overgrown bushes and stubby trees virtually growing over the narrow creek, making progress was a step-by-step affair. He had to stoop for nearly the entire walk, which put a strain on his aging knees and back. Sweat dripped down from his thinning white hair and ran into his eyes. He was just beginning to think, *the hell with this! I'm too old...* when he reached a small glade where the brush wasn't so thick. Bobby Wright was sound asleep under a large scrub oak, oblivious to the world. Without making a sound, Clarke crept silently towards Bobby and tapped the young man on the shoulder with his rifle.

"Wake up, son. I'm here to take you back to Tulsa."

"Huh? Wha?" Bobby slowly awoke with a yawn and saw that his escape had not succeeded. "Dang it all to hell," he muttered. "I never figured you to put so much effort into bringin' me back in."

After seeing that Wright was unarmed, Clarke shook his head slowly and grimaced. "You could've made it harder for me. After all, I'm an old man and they might've let this one slide until they could get someone younger to do the job."

"Shoot, Captain. Those white men in Tulsa would never let me be. They won't be happy until they kill the last of us Wright's."

"Your ma isn't doing so bad," the Captain replied. "Last I heard, she was expected to make a full recovery."

"Maybe," Wright replied. "But after they hang me she won't last long. The woman's got nothin' left to live for."

Clarke threw down a pair of handcuffs. "Put those on and let's get goin'. We'll make it most of the way back to Tulsa before we have to make camp."

Bobby did as he was told and the two men returned to Honcho, walking in the tall grass instead of the much more difficult creek bed.

"You only got one horse?" Wright asked. "There's no way I'm walkin' back to Tulsa to get hanged."

"Sorry I didn't arrange a luxury carriage, your highness."

With Clarke on Honcho, he led Wright by a short rope at a slow walking pace. After about two miles, they reached a dirt road where a truck and horse trailer sat. After loading Honcho in the trailer, he said to Wright, "Climb on into the passenger seat and sit still. I know you don't want to give me any trouble, but I also know you value your freedom. I'll tell you what – if you make this easy on both of us, I'll do my best to put in a good word for you at the trial."

"Like that'll do any good," Bobby complained. "I'm gonna hang and that's all there is to it."

"You'll get a fair trial. Maybe some on the jury will believe that what you did was for a worthy reason."

"The hell they will! I'm just another stupid nigger that they wish had never been born."

"Just sit still while I start this machine."

It took Clarke two tries, but he was able to crank the old Model-T truck's motor to life. At first, black smoke blasted from the exhaust, threatening to asphyxiate Honcho, but eventually, the smoke cleared and the motor purred with only the occasional sputter. The vehicle belonged to the mayor of the City of Tulsa who frequently loaned it to Clarke when he had to travel more than 30 miles for his work. "Anything I can do to help enforce the law!" the mayor said every time Clarke showed up to borrow the truck.

Clarke ground the gears on each shift as he reached a speed of nearly 20 miles per hour, which was fast considering how poor the two-track road surface was. Huge mud pits were scattered every 50 feet or so, forcing Clarke to try to keep at least the tires on one side of the truck on dry ground.

"You want me to drive?" Bobby asked, smirking.

"I didn't know you knew how."

"I did a bit of driving for that rich white attorney before the fire."

"You mean Boggs?"

"That's right, Mr. Boggs. 'Cept I called him Mr. Big since he thought he was so important."

"I didn't know that he used a colored driver."

"Sure he did. Shoot, most of the white folks, at least them with money, can't be bothered to drive their fancy automobiles. I not only drove his car, but I washed it and did most of the maintenance myself."

Clarke was certain that he was going to get hopelessly bogged down in the mud, but fortunately, they turned onto a gravel road that was used by the oil drilling crews. It was beginning to get dark, and Clarke didn't trust his eyesight well enough to drive at night, so he pulled the truck to the side of the road. "Let's stop here. Go ahead and take a piss if you need to. I'll make us dinner and then you can sleep here in the front of the truck. I'll lay down in the back."

Bobby, who'd resigned himself to his situation, did as he was told. After an uninspiring yet filling meal of canned beans and bacon, Clarke locked Bobby's cuffs to the steering wheel. "You grab some shuteye now."

Clarke climbed into the open back of the pickup and laid down on a blanket and was soon sound asleep.